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#### WHITE WOLF HOCKEY SPECIAL T'HANKS

Chad "1 GF" Brown (#14, Wing), for getting his goal of the season, right at the end of the 2003 winter season.

Brian "One Win" Glass (#84, Goal), for finally getting a "W" at the end of the 2003 winter season — in the last game of the season.

Matt "Whew" Milberger (#7, Wing), for being spared the punishment of the 2003 winter season.

**Fred** "Traitor x 2" **Yelk** (Defense), for going back over to the side of light, just in time for the crippling 2003 winter season.



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Check out White Wolf online at

http://www.white-wolf.com; alt.games.whitewolf and rec.games.frp.storyteller PRINTED IN CANADA



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# PROLOGUE: NURDER SHOWS

The package was wrapped in brown, nondescript paper. There was no label on it. Only a note: "You owe us. Watch the tape."

It was signed, "Rose."

Another job. They wanted something. They *always* wanted something. Then Lupe thought of her father. Weak, skin like wax paper, but alive. Mercifully so after what had happened, when she failed him....

As always, *they* had been there to help pick up the pieces — the Rose Foundation. Pulling her ass out of the fire. Their checks never bounced, and they always managed to cover her expenses. Hospital bills, rent, bullets. She unwrapped the package and looked at the tape, turning it over in her hands. She saw no identifying marks.

Sucking in a breath, she put the tape in the VCR.

#### \*

Lupe got home an hour before the tape was left at her apartment door.

She went to the bathroom and washed the grime from her hands and face. Living in the city, driving a cab, her skin accumulated dirt like an unwashed sink. The water from her tap was cool and refreshing. She wouldn't drink the stuff, but it would do for washing. She looked in the mirror and wondered when she'd gotten so old.

Lupe called her father and apologized for not keeping in touch as much as she should have. She was busy. He wondered one more time why she moved out in the first place.

"The life of a cab driver," Lupe said. "You know how it is."

What she couldn't tell him was the truth. A bloodsucker's bitch tracked me to my home, to your home,

and shot you. It was no burglar. So, I figured it was best if I moved out to keep you alive. That, and he always asked about the bruises or the blood on her clothes.

They talked for a few minutes and then hung up. Outside, the wind shouldered against the windows loud enough to drown out the honking, sirens and yelling. Lupe felt sad, like she wasn't doing enough. Then there was the pride issue. Dad should be proud. *But he's not*, she thought. She was supposed to rise above everything, be the daughter who would escape the city. But what did she do? She stole, got caught, went to jail and wound up a cab driver. On top of that, sometimes she killed things that were already dead and stuffed them in dumpsters.

That's when there was a knock at the door. She answered, and there it was on the tattered hall carpet.

#### \* \*

Lupe turned on the TV. At first there was just static. The top-loading VCR, an ancient beast bought from a gated pawn shop two blocks down, clicked and whirred. Finally, a picture came up.

The sound was loud and scratchy. The image looked like it was filmed with a camcorder older than her VCR. The picture quality was for shit. It took a minute for her to tell what she was seeing. Like one of those magic-eye posters, it came to her suddenly. It was a girl. In a tub. Bound somehow. The girl faced the camera, eyes wide and wet with tears. Lupe gnawed absently at her lip. This wasn't going to be good. She thought about getting the vodka out of the freezer, but then her stomach lurched. Vodka wouldn't help.

The camera stayed on the girl for two, maybe three minutes. Her mouth was gagged, but with what Lupe couldn't tell. It was too fuzzy, too blurry. Something was

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going on in the background. Somebody was moving around. A door opened and closed, and then opened again. Finally, someone stepped into view and the camera zoomed out.

It was a man. A big motherfucker. Bare-chested, with some kind of mask on. A Halloween mask. He turned toward the camera, and Lupe saw clearly — it was a Bill Clinton mask. A goofy caricature grimly out of place with the rest of the scene. The man slid a pair of fingerless gloves over his massive hands, and began to beat the girl. He hit her in the face. Slapped her, openpalmed, on the ears. He tilted her head back gently with one hand and punched her in the throat. She gurgled. He ripped the gag out and hit her in the jaw.

Whoever she was, she tried to speak, tried to cry out. The only sound that came was a slow, anguished mewl. A bubble of spit and blood inflated from her blackened lips. The rest of her face looked like gray meat. Lupe felt sick. Was this happening here? In her city? Her hands balled into fists.

Then the big man laughed and reached for something off-camera. He rustled around for a few seconds, then produced an object and held it in front of the camera. A spectacle. For the show of it. It was a screwdriver. In one motion, he stabbed her in the mouth. Then in the eye. Then in the throat. The girl was dead a few moments later.

There was something in the back of Lupe's head. A buzzing. A *hum*. Not in her ears, but somewhere within. It started to numb her, and her eyelids fluttered like the wings of a dying moth. It felt warm, hypnotic. She had to close her eyes for a moment to recover from dizziness. Then she ran to the bathroom and threw up.

After Lupe cleaned up, she left the apartment. She drove around the city, windows down despite the cold. While the air wasn't fresh, it was better than the puke smell of her apartment. She tried not to think about what she'd seen, about what it began to do to her. A few hours later, she went back and watched the tape again.

This time, she looked.

The second time was worse. It was the *knowing*. The anticipation of the girl's pain, her death.

At first, the sight showed nothing.

This man *was* a monster. So was whoever held the camera, but they were *human* monsters. Not bloodsuckers or rots or the walking dead. They were people, bad people. That made them someone else's problem. She would turn the tape over to the police and leave it at that. They had their job, she had hers.

But then the sight flickered. Not on the man or the girl. The whole screen shifted and for a moment the image didn't look attached to the television. Behind the screen, like a single frame spliced into a filmstrip, she saw things moving. Crawling.

#### Then the phone rang.

#### \*

"Yeah," she answered, the image still lingering in her mind's eye.

"Cabbie," someone said. Female. A soft voice, like cotton.

"Okay," Lupe said. Whoever it was, she knew Lupe's hunter-net handle. Someone from the foundation. "So you know me. Talk."

"You got the tape?"

"Who is this?"

"What did you think of it?"

"It makes me sick. Why would you-"

"So you'll help, then."

Lupe paused. Despite there being no *things* on the tape, regardless of the weird image she got, she couldn't debate. Without the people behind this "Rose Foundation," whoever they were, she wouldn't have a place to stay, money to pay her bills or lawyers to bail her out.

"Yeah," she said.

"You hesitated."

"No, it's just... I don't understand. Is this about *them*? Isn't this something for the cops?"

"How did you feel when you watched it?"

"Strange." Lupe remembered the numbness. "Something I can't—"

"We don't understand the tapes. Where they come from. What they are. But there are more. We need you to handle this. We're transferring more money to your account. How is your father, by the way?"

Lupe understood the implication. "Still weak, but better. Thank you for—"

"No thanks necessary. We're contractual. You help us, we help you."

"I don't know if I can handle this by myself. I want to bring in others."

"We only trust you."

"But, I don't know if I can—"

"No others. Take care of this for us."

Lupe blinked away tears. She thought of the city, choked with people whose necks were in the noose and they didn't even know it. She thought of the girl, of the sound she made when the screwdriver pierced her throat. Finally, Lupe thought of her father. He'd never know. He'd never be proud, but in some small way she could still try. She would get involved. If the things were involved, too, then good. They were something she understood, or at least she thought she did.

She had an idea of where to start.

#### \* \* \*

He called himself Zip, and he punished his body with heroic amounts of heroin. At least half his day was

spent riding the horse, a dirty needle dangling out of his arm in some tenement or motel bathroom. It was amazing that he hadn't died yet. He looked like a prisoner from a death camp, his skin jaundiced and covered in sores. He was old well before his time.

Like Lupe's father. Like you, a voice said in Lupe's head.

One of Zip's greatest regrets in life was that heroin, however sweet, was never free. And so, when he wasn't on it, he was making money to get it. He ran little "businesses." He was a fence, he was a snitch, he was a prostitute, and he sold movies.

VHS cassettes, to be specific. He had movies that hadn't even hit the theaters yet. Porn, too. Everything from bootleg action flicks to tapes of people puking on each other for fun.

Lupe knew him. She didn't like him, but she knew he'd do anything for money.

Zip always moved his stand. Anytime he caught whiff of a cop, he packed up and hit another block. Today, he was down by some kitschy trinket shop. Trash blew up out of the gutters onto his feet.

Lupe pulled up in her cab and got out.

"I don't need a ride, bitch," Zip said. It was an attempt to be playful. He grinned.

"Cut the chatter, asshole," she said.

He held up his hands in mock fear. "Whoa! Don't get all pissed off!" He winked, showing his teeth. "You want something?" he asked. "New movie to watch? I got one of the Matrix sequels. Or if you're into some weird shit, I got a few girl-on-girl tapes. Strap-ons, DPs, you know? I think you'd like that, huh?"

"Normally I'd say 'Go fuck yourself,' but I'm looking for something a little more extreme. A tape where people get hurt. Killed, maybe."

Zip raised a pencil-scratch eyebrow. "Oh, yeah? A snuff flick, eh?"

"That's what they tell me."

He laughed. "Don'tcha know? They're a myth, sister. Like the Easter Bunny!" He shifted nervously. "So go bark up another tree, okay?"

"How much?" she said. Why mince words?

"I told you, those things aren't real, they're just-"

She reached into her jacket and pulled out an envelope. She flipped out twenties, one by one. She stopped when a hundred dollars sat flat in her palm.

He snorted. "I'm telling you, if that sort of thing existed, a hundred bucks sure as fuck wouldn't buy it."

Another five twenties joined their brothers.

"Two hundred," she said.

He sucked air between his teeth. "Yeah, okay. For two hundred, I'll tell you the tapes exist, but that's it, *chica*, nothing else." "Fine," she said, her lips forming a tight line. "Here's my last and final offer. I give you two hundred bucks, and you point me to your supplier. Not the guy who sells you the mainstream stuff, but the cocksucker who gives you the murder movies. And if you *don't* show me, I'll will wait till you're not expecting it and I'll run you the fuck over. It'll be awful hard to shoot up with two broken arms."

"Lupe, c'mon-"

"No. Tell me and you can pay for your fucked-up habit. Don't tell me and I'll be mad for a long, long time."

She saw it on his face. His eyes seemed to search the contents of his brain and found only one thing: hunger. He wanted heroin. Needed it. His lips worked silently, like he could already taste it. Finally, he nodded.

"Give me a pen," he said, pulling a slip of paper out of his army jacket. "I'll tell you where to go. But the money first. Gotta have the money."

Lupe was happy to oblige.

-

The address was for a hotel. A penthouse suite at the Crowne, down on Streeterville, by the river. The area was familiar, but Lupe didn't go there often. It was a nice place — too nice for her. Trees on the streets. Pressurewashed sidewalks. It wasn't her style; these weren't her people. Too rich, too different. *Probably like the people from the Rose Foundation*, she thought.

Apparently video murder was a lucrative business. Before going inside, she took a deep breath and *focused*.

On the elevator, she idly watched the numbers tick upward: 10, 15, 20. She stared at her reflection in the brass fixtures. Sometimes, she looked nothing like her father, but now she caught glimmers of her father looking back at her in the strange reflection. The severe cheekbones. The dark eyes. He looked better, though, at least when he was well. Softer, brighter. By contrast, her face was grim, hard, unaccustomed to smiling. What was there to smile about? She lived in a world where being close to her father almost got him killed. Where girls died on tape. Where monsters broke into homes and prowled the streets. Hopelessness and anger nagged at her.

Absently, she touched the spot on her cheek where the tear tattoos once were. When she realized she was doing it, she pulled her hand away.

The elevator bell rang on the 44th floor and she stepped out tentatively.

Lupe stopped at the only door on the floor. It was half-open. She heard a dull, throbbing bass inside, like a heartbeat.

She nudged the door with her foot and slid in silently. Mouth dry, she took a deep breath and held it. Her fingers curled around a closed switchblade in her jacket pocket. She hoped the elevator bell hadn't alerted

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anyone to her presence. Hopefully, she thought, the music was loud enough.

The lights were off, but the glow of at least two dozen televisions gave the suite an eerie blue radiance, like light shining up through pool water. There were TVs everywhere. One on a glass table. Two on a black-corner shelf. A few suspended from the ceiling by steel brackets.

Every screen showed a scene of torture and murder. No sound. Only video.

On one, a woman in an apron had her fingers broken with a nutcracker. Her mouth worked a silent scream. Another showed an old man, jaws held open as draincleaner was poured down his throat. On a third, a teenager was raped while a gun was pressed against his temple. The gun went off. So did most of his head.

Television after television. Atrocity after atrocity. And in every image, she saw the big man in the Clinton mask.

Lupe's head was spinning. The horrors contained in this room alone were more than she'd ever had to bear. She was dizzy with fear and revulsion, and anger built inside her chest with enough pressure to make a diamond out of charcoal. Little voices spoke inside her. This is happening in your city. You can't stop it. You're weak. Your father almost died. Run. Run away.

She stumbled, hand flying out of her pocket to catch herself, and she dry-heaved while leaning against a bookshelf.

"Can't handle it?" someone said.

Lupe jumped. The words came from a man, little more than a thin twig with bleach-dyed hair, lying on a sofa. He laughed and pulled a comforter up to his chin. A small hand-held television sat near him on the coffee table. She couldn't make out the image, only movement and then the color red.

"You?" she said. "You're responsible for this?"

He laughed. "I'm just the catalyst," he answered. "I make it possible." There were black shapes all around him, on the blanket, at his feet, under his hands. *Tapes*, Lupe thought. VHS tapes. Thirty, maybe more, all over. "They come to me. I don't know from where. If I do it for them, if I feed them, they make me... *happy.*"

He grinned. The glow of the room reflected off his white teeth, and the sight started to show her things. The man looked sick, like a water stain on a wall, but it was more than that. Lupe couldn't understand, but the tapes themselves seemed wrong. She didn't know how objects could stand out, but then she thought she saw them *move*. Like liquid shadows. Like dark insects. They seemed to slide across him and suddenly she felt like puking again. The inky blots drifted across his body, and he groaned in ecstasy. Lupe backed away.

"I don't understand," she stammered.

The man's eyelids fluttered. "Me either, but it's incredible. It just *hums* inside. This is what they want, they tell me. All filled up with pain and sorrow. Some-

times they get empty, though, and they want to be full again, and we have to make more tapes."

We? Lupe thought too late as something crashed into her back. Her chin hit the floor, snapping her teeth together. Thick arms curled around her waist and began squeezing the air out of her lungs. Her world went red. Blood rushed in her ears. She whipped her head back and something crunched. The arms loosened. She squirmed out of the grip and crawled away, scurrying to a crouch.

There he was. The big man in the Clinton mask. Blood ran from the nose-holes down his plastic face.

The sight revealed him — nasty, brutish, *wrong* but it flickered on and off like a bulb not screwed in properly. Shifting. Lupe didn't understand. He didn't look wrong on the tape. Some blood slaves looked this way, didn't they? Like they were almost human? Almost alive? Or could she even see such things through a camera and on a recording?

"Ah, Argento," the man on the couch cooed. "Make the bad lady stop."

The hulking freak took a juggernaut run at Lupe. She turned and darted for the door, but the big man was fast. He came around in front of her and tried to grab her again. Grunting, she jabbed a thumb into one of the mask's eyeholes. Soft tissue gave away, yet the man seemed unfazed. He grabbed her thumb in his meaty hand and bent backward, snapping it.

Lupe screamed. The man screamed with her, mocking her. With her other hand, she reached out wildly. Her fingers found something and curled around it. It was a lamp. She felt it vibrate in her grip as she swung. The lamp cracked against his jaw, shattering both plastic and bone, and the man toppled into a glass table. But as soon as he was down he lurched back up again, wrapping his arms around her legs and howling. He stared up at her, broken glass sticking in his chest, and she brought the stump of the lamp down on him. His skull gave way. He stopped moving.

Everything hurt to Lupe. Her thumb. Her guts. Her head. Her mind.

Anger burned her insides like acid. *Control*, she thought. But the word was a faint child's voice. She marched over to the thin man, who stared sadly at the broken body on the floor.

"Y-you killed him. I..."

Lupe began stomping on the tapes. The shadows crunched beneath her boots. The man began weeping as he batted uselessly at her. He was so out of it that he could barely move. His touch only made her more furious. She kicked tapes off him and crushed them, too. They cracked and shattered and were no longer shadows, just bits of broken plastic.

"I don't understand," the thin man bawled, his eyes unfocused. "You can't kill them. Can't stop them! I did what they wanted. This can't be!" He tried to grab at her





legs, but his arms were limp and feeble. When the last tape had been smashed, Lupe went around his suite, swinging the remnants of the lamp into television screens, their vacuum tubes popping sharply. When the lamp was ruined, she used a candlestick. Then her feet. She destroyed every piece of equipment in the place, leaving smoldering, static-snapping debris.

The man crawled halfway across the floor on his belly. He wasn't even speaking words anymore. She wanted to put her foot on the back of his neck and press down until he snapped. Instead, she took the last tape, grabbed him by the hair, and jammed it in his mouth. Then, taking out her cell phone, she called the police. She told them there had been murders, gave the address, and said there was evidence jammed in the killer's mouth.

Cradling her broken thumb to her chest, Lupe left the building and went to the emergency room.

#### \* \*

That night, Lupe slept fitfully. The cast on her hand and the horrors in her head kept her hovering in a world of half-consciousness.

Around 3 AM, she got up and looked at herself in the mirror again. She remembered the anger that ran through her earlier. It was gone now, leaving only sadness. The world was a broken place. There were things, horrible things she hadn't even conceived of. How would she protect people like her father from all the madness? As she headed back to bed, the phone rang. It was the same woman as before.

"You did well," the caller said, "but it's not done." "What?"

"There are more tapes out there. Other addicts."

"Jesus. What the hell is going on?"

"Hard to say. Will you handle it?"

Lupe paused. "Yeah. I always handle it."

"You'll hear from us again."

"No shit." She hung up.

Outside, the city was almost quiet this early in the morning. There was the occasional siren and little more. Lupe imagined herself calling her father, waking him up, and telling him everything. That was her thing lately. She'd go to bed and resolve to tell him everything in the morning. Just ring him up and spill her guts about the monsters, about the secrets, about everything. She would never do it, of course. It was all hers, all the pain, all the suffering.

Finally, she slept.

As Lupe dreamed of gunshots and monsters and fathers dying on videotape, the VCR in the other room rattled. A black, tenebrous blot birthed its way out of the tape player and crept over to the heating duct. It pushed its way through into darkness and was gone.



## NTRODUCTION

When you do not know a thing, to allow that you do not know it; this is knowledge. — The Analects of Confucius

## Unconscious Fears

Myths, fables, legends, fairy tales and rumors. Gods, titans, champions, beasts and lurking horrors. Humanity has always brought imagination to bear. We've created stories throughout history to explain the unknown, to rationalize bad fates, tragic events and the things that go bump in the night. Myths, legends and stories have arisen from all cultures to explain where we come from, who created us and what our purpose is on Earth. Those creations have been used to define us, sometimes becoming the basis of religions and civilizations, be it Greek, Norse or Christian. Humanity's ignorance about our origins has compelled us to fill in the blanks to make sense of ourselves, our world and our existence.

Just as myths, legends and folklore have been the source of gods, creators and benefactors, so have they been the basis for evil entities, defilers and darkness. While there have always been stories about mankind's champions — Hercules, Thor, Beowulf — there have been whispers of the things that seek to destroy us — the Hydra, the World Serpent, Grendel. Just as we have sought explanation for our being, we have sought explanation for the threats we perceive, be it severe weather, unfortunate accidents or death.

In ancient times, these stories offered answers to cosmic questions. They addressed the big picture of Creation, fate and life. Some cosmologies, like civilizations, were accepted and spread. Others died out and were forgotten. Where explanations of reality took hold and prevailed, questions about the big picture became less urgent. Accepted answers were put in place. Accidents were brought about by this god's mischief. A civilization prospered because that spirit was venerated. In time, people could look to their immediate lives and survival, seeking explanations for issues or fears of smaller and smaller scope. The need to answer the overarching questions of the universe diminished once "established truths" were in place.

The result was an evolution of the stories that people told. They started on a sweeping, epic basis with myths of gods. As ideas were digested and the focus became more specific, smaller tales — legends — emerged as explanation. These stories dwelt less on deities and more on powerful heroes and the threats they faced. This hero created a mountain when he buried a rampaging monster. That lake was formed from the blood let by some vanquished beast. But in time, even the need for legends diminished. Still more specific answers were sought, whether to particular questions or about precise regions. Why did the nearby stream run dry? What caused the cattle to reproduce so fruitfully last year? With the magnitude of the unknown shrinking, so did solutions to it. Where myths or legends were once required, folklore and wives' tales now took hold. Local spirits were angry, but could be appeased with a simple offering. Ghosts of the dead overlooked their progeny and smiled upon their legacy.

And so it went throughout society and civilization, with mankind developing, sharing and spreading answers to the questions that plagued him. And so it continues today. We look back on many myths, legends and folklore in mockery, deriding it as ignorance or superstition. But in fact, many such creation stories persist and are accepted now. Look at any religion. It's basically a long, complex tale about how everything came about and began (a myth). It involves dynamic stories about individual heroes who blaze trails for humanity, or who shape the world as we know it (legends). And finally, the religion offers up parables, allegories and metaphors to help us through our day-to-day lives, providing insights and truisms to adopt and live by (folktales). Despite our modern civilization, we're still people and we still seek answers to the unknown.

And yet, intertwined with the meaning that we seek are dark forces, threats and monsters that embody the bad things that we know can happen. They're the antitheses of the gods, heroes and morals that our cosmologies uphold. We seem to invent these dangers, too, because just as we seek direction for our lives, we acknowledge that hopes, plans, events and people can go awry. The Devil, evil spirits and bogeymen that we devise all represent evil, and punishments for offenses, bad choices and ill behavior.

The modern, industrialized world has its own versions of these stories and the (real or imagined) dangers that loom before us. They're called urban legends explanations for strange things that happen in our modern lives. Farfetched stories about events that may or may not have occurred. Essentially, these tales capture and perpetuate our apprehensions, giving them form. They might be about aliens, giant alligators in the sewers, a killer with a hook for a hand, an undiscovered disease that waits to wipe us out, or insidious government conspiracies. Call them a product of millennial tensions, collective unconscious guilt or a general lack of spiritual fortitude. But these stories proliferate, and among them are modern ghosts, beasts and creatures that people fear.

These stories might be dismissed as fiction in the real world, but in the World of Darkness, they're real.

Urban legends are not only the products of overactive imaginations, they're a result of genuine dangers, threats and entities that haunt the world. Aliens (or strange beings that might be mistaken for them) are real. Giant alligators do lie in wait under the city. A deformed killer with a hook for a hand does claim anyone who wanders too far from the beaten path.

These beings exist, and hunters know it. They're awoken to the truth of bloodsuckers, shapechangers, witches and ghosts. But imbued awareness doesn't end there. While vampires, werewolves and mages are perceived and only partially understood, other beings exist that escape notice, that escape understanding and that escape hunter comprehension. They're the mysterious, inhuman stalkers of inner cities. The unsubstantiated beasts that lurk in dark forests. The beings that linger at places people now fear and avoid — for good reason. And while the imbued struggle to contend with the monsters that they at least partially understand, now they must deal with bizarre, fantastic beings, the stuff of urban legends.

#### MODERN NIGHT MARES

Hunter: Urban Legends explores hunters' ordeal when they face the legendary, superstitious, half-imagined and wholly real creatures that lurk among us. This book illustrates the confusion, misunderstanding and paranoia that arise when the chosen discover the subjects of modern wives' tales. Perhaps it's phantoms that appear "on a night just like this," or things that mankind has never known before.

Ideally, **Urban Legends** helps you as a player understand the reactions that your character may have when these fables come true. The book also answers many of the questions about rare, unique and new entities that plague hunters. Possible truths of monsters' origins and goals are revealed. Yet, the fact that these "disclosures" are made by hunters struggling with their own ignorance, and by the very stuff of legends, makes such insights 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.

Urban Legends also helps Storytellers understand how folktales might become real, and how their monstrous subjects could respond to the imbued. The book helps you select and elaborate on myths, legends, fairy tales, modern fears — and plumb your own imagination — to create all-new and surprising creatures for the imbued to face. Storytellers can find all kinds of story ideas. A killer who is conjured one night a year, and who leads hunters to better understand who they are and what granted them the imbuing. Contact with a vanishing denizen of the world might show the chosen that now is humanity's time, or that even mankind's days are numbered. This book rounds out all the *other* possible monsters of the World of Darkness so they can all appear in your **Hunter** game.

Chapter 1: Contact from Beyond demonstrates how baffled and overwhelmed the chosen can be in their pursuit of the hunt. It reminds us that false assumptions, erroneous guesses and arrogance in dealing with "known" monsters can lead to a horrible end.

Chapter 2: Morbid Curiosity illustrates how little hunters really know about the other side. Rare, fleeting and bizarre beings exist that have rarely been encountered before. Recently exposed to the truth, the chosen can't possibly know or grasp the full complexities of such monsters that have existed for ages.

Chapter 3: Once Upon a Time explores the range and depth of monsters. Human culture may have glimmers of understanding about some creatures, while others utterly defy comprehension. Yet they still arise to challenge the imbued.

Chapter 4: The Sea-Born Darkness confronts the fact that not only monsters are touched by the supernatural. Whether hunters know it or not, settings and places can be tainted, too, and be a threat to what the chosen hold dear.

Chapter 5: Rules and Storytelling is intended for Storytellers alone. It offers tips and guidance on how to understand and portray confusing, rare and completely new monsters in your game. It also explores introducing mystical or haunted places for your characters to explore.

Ultimately, this book allows you to portray unusual or new monsters and threats in your **Hunter** chronicle. Some inspiration for this book comes from the littleknown entities of the other Storyteller games, but you don't need those games to introduce these creatures. This book offers everything you need to try out new possibilities in your game.

#### SOURCE MATERIALS

A lot of stuff is available about the weird, rumored or imaginary creatures that society creates. We've tried to avoid silly or over-the-top sources, or ones that everyone knows (the Freddy Krueger movies, or *Candyman*). Hunter is about regular folks facing a suddenly monstrous world. They're scared, yet they do something about it. We've tried to pick books and movies that emphasize such resolve and bravery — Hunter's themes. These are sources that may inspire new ideas and directions.

The Ring/Ringu: Both the original Japanese and the recent American horror film are exemplary of the urban legend mood and spirit. The film comes up with its own style of modern myth, complete with friend-of-a-friend tales about a videotape that, once viewed, kills a viewer in seven days. It captures a subtle, investigatory **Hunter** vibe as protagonists seek to unravel the mystery of "The Ring" tape before it kills them.

The books of Jan Harold Brunvand: Brunvand is an expert on urban mythology and writes detailed retellings and analyses of contemporary legends. His books include *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*, *The Baby Train* and *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends*. Storytellers can use these stories (some are truly horrifying) in their games for a twist.

Lullaby, by Chuck Palahniuk: This novel (by the author of Fight Club and Survivor) features a weirdo road-trip narrative that blithely connects haunted houses, fairy tales, an ancient African "culling" song and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. While featuring a mood that's perhaps a little bizarre for many **Hunter** tales, it combines seemingly mundane events with monstrous legends.

Stinger, by Robert R. McCammon: While this novel ultimately devolves into an "Us versus the Alien" plot, the first half nicely portrays a town's struggle to identify and combat an unseen and unknowable menace. The creature, "Stinger," could easily be presented in the World of Darkness and be mistaken by hunters as a possessing spirit or demon — but it's something completely different.

Jeepers Creepers: The monster in this nasty little independent feature initially comes off like a serial killer and has a favorite song, which adds an evocative detail to its rampage. Plus, the movie features a certifiable Hermit character who knows more than she's able to tell.



# CHAPTER I: CONTACT FROM BEYOND

All statements are true in some sense, false in some sense, meaningless in some sense, true and false in some sense, true and meaningless in some sense, false and meaningless in some sense, and true and false and meaningless in some sense.

— Principia Discordia

#### HE'S CALLING FROM INSIDE THE HOUSE 7-3

Well, I haven't kept a diary since that creative writing class in junior year. I tried to keep it up after the class ended, but I'm not sure why I stopped. Just got out of the habit, I suppose.

I moved into the new apartment today. My own place for the first time since graduating. Spent most of my savings on the security deposit, first month's rent, and all the odds and ends I needed. But I start my job this week and I think I've got a good budget worked out. Besides, I don't expect to be "living large." I don't need much to get by.

This sure isn't what I expected to be doing after graduation. It isn't what I imagined. I always wanted to make something of my life. Instead my life has been made into something else. By something else. Ha ha. Joke's on you, Claire.

Poor me. Such self-pity. I sound like I'm in a soap opera. I should use this diary to remind myself that what I'm doing is important. What's more important than helping people? I'm doing good, right? Let my classmates go off and get their great jobs and become famous and successful. They'll never know what it's like to look someone in the eyes who's forgotten what it means to be human, and find the humanity buried deep down.

My apartment is nice. Tiny, that goes without saying. But nice. Clean. I'm on the third floor of a fourstory brownstone. The block is mostly filled with rows of apartment buildings, but there's a deli around the corner, a dry cleaner, a florist. Washington Street is just four or five blocks away, jammed with funky shops and restaurants, always bustling with people. There's noise all the time here. Cars, alarms, dogs, air conditioners, people. Always people. **7-5** 

-3

First day working at the book store today. The people there are nice, mostly. The boss is a little standoff-ish. It didn't take me long to learn how to work the register. It's not that different from the one at the campus bookstore. Which reminds me to call Mr.



Richardson and thank him for the recommendation. Can't call yet, though. Phone isn't hooked up yet.

I also need to get in touch with Essa and Nancy. Haven't checked in for a while. They might be worried about me. We promised each other we'd never do "business" without consulting each other. I need to give them my new address. Maybe they'd like to stop by and talk. Now that school's over, they're really the only people I know around here.

I should call home, too, but I don't know. That argument we had at graduation, mom and dad were so upset. I have a feeling they're still mad at me. I wish I could tell them why I'm not coming home. I can understand why they're angry. I always said I'd come back after school, that I missed living in a small town, that a farm girl like me could never settle in the city. Of course, I believed all that when I said it. Now everything's changed.

I can't bring the "business" back home. And I don't what to shine any light on whatever might be hiding there. I couldn't bear what I might see.

#### 7-11

God, I really am an idiot. I made such a jackass of myself at work today.

I needed to call the phone company and get my service turned on. It was a sunny day so I decided to go outside on my break and use the payphone in front of the store. So I'm standing there, and I remember something somebody told me once and I'm just staring at the phone. This guy Geoff, one of the associates, happened to walk by and asks what I'm doing. I say, "Well, I heard how gang members put poison on the inside of payphones, and I was trying to figure out the safest way to pick it up." He looks at me for a second and then just bursts out laughing. I mean, his face turned totally red. Then he said how that was just a stupid rumor that's been spread for years, and it's just bull. He apologized for laughing, but I could tell he wasn't really sorry. Later, when I was back in the store I could hear the others laughing behind my back. Great job, Claire. Make everybody think you're a small town hick. What's the matter with me?

Anyway, the phone company says they'll have the phone working tomorrow.

#### 7-13

Home again. Nobody to talk to but the spider in the corner. I won't squish you if you promise to keep the bugs away. Out my window I can see a beautiful full moon floating over the buildings. Maybe Mom and Dad and Chris are looking at the same moon back home. Somebody's standing in the street, saving a parking space. Parking is terrible here but I don't have a car.

It's 3 a.m. I have to write this down quickly. I'm getting sleepy again. I was asleep when I felt my whole body jerk, like when you're running in a dream and you trip. Then I realized there was a noise. It took a while to realize that the phone was ringing. If I'd thought about it, I would have been scared. A phone call in the middle of the night always means bad news, right? But I just reached out and fumbled for it and had it to my ear before I was really awake.

It was a really bad connection. The static sounded like wind blowing down a tunnel. I wasn't sure who it was. I didn't even say "hello." I just listened. I almost fell asleep, I think, or I would have, except I was finally startled by a voice. It said, "Cut the strings."

I think I grunted something back, probably, "What?" Whoever it was said it again, "Cut the strings," and then, "I can't."

"You can't what?" I asked.

"Forever" was the only word I could make out. Then the sound cut out. The phone was totally dead. Not even a dial tone.

It was definitely a man's voice, but no one I recognized. Can you believe it? My first phone call is weird.

#### 7-14

So tired at work today. Waking up in the middle of the night really threw off my schedule. The phone still doesn't work and I forgot to call the phone company. There's a pay phone down the street, but I don't feel like going out. I'll call tomorrow from work.

Struck up a conversation with Monica at work. She asked me if I wanted to go to a club tonight with her and some of the others. I actually considered it, but then made an excuse. I can't go to a place like that. I'm bound to see something, to see one of them. Who knows what might happen?

#### 7-15

All I really want is someone to talk to. I realize that now. But on the other hand, I can't have a real conversation with anyone, because if we start to connect and talk about what's really meaningful to us, I either have to lie or come off like a crazy person. I suppose I could walk to the library and try logging onto hunter-net. But those people aren't exactly a social club. I should get in touch with Essa and Nancy. Essa I know nothing about, really, but Nancy gave me her phone number. We could meet somewhere and chat or something. The spider in the corner has spun quite the web. I'm proud of him.

The phone's still not working. Still haven't called the phone company. This job at the bookstore is starting to get tedious. I spend most of my time at the register and the rest putting away books. All I really need to know is the alphabet and 1-10.

Okay, Claire, let's stop feeling sorry for ourselves and go to sleep.

#### 7-16

Finally got around to doing some laundry today. There's a washer and dryer on the first floor. Most people go to the laundromat down the street so they can do a bunch of loads at once, but I don't have much to wash. I walked in the room and there was this guy standing there. Real tall, long hair, bushy eyebrows. Very unique looking. I said "Hello," but he didn't answer. He just stared at me, almost through me. So I kept going. He didn't have any laundry in the machines. Then I felt kind of bad, being unfriendly, so while I was putting my clothes in, I said, "Hi, I'm new in the building. My name's Claire." I thought I heard him say something, but when I turned around he was gone. That was weird. He must have run out of there in the two seconds I was looking down at my basket.

I mentioned it to the superintendent, just to be sure. He said that there's a homeless guy who sort of hangs around the building and maybe that's who I saw. He says Tommy — that's the homeless guy sometimes acts weird, but he's totally harmless. In fact, he's kind of helpful. He sort of keeps watch over the building, so nobody can hang around and sell drugs or break in. He helps people carry their groceries and he'll hold a parking spot for you or watch your car if you're double parked. I don't know. This guy didn't look homeless. If I remember right, he was wearing a button-down shirt, a jacket, maybe a tie.

#### 7-17

Well, the phone company really annoyed me today. I called (from a payphone) to tell them that my phone worked for exactly one night and then died. They told me they never even turned it on! They said they were waiting for a call from me to set up a time for their guy to come and upgrade the jack or something. According to their records, there's been no activity on the line. I started to argue with them, but I was going to be late for work. I hung up without even arranging a time for the phone guy to come over. Good job, Claire! Oh well, maybe the phone is working all by itself, like free cable or something. That would be a break.

#### 7-18

Talked to Mrs. Glass, the lady who lives down the hall from me. She told me that the building's had phone problems for years. She says her phone rings, she picks up, but no one's there but weird static. I guess it happens several times a day for like a week, and then there's no problem for months. According to her the same thing happens to everybody. The phone company can't find the problem. It seems to come and go and you just get used to it. When it happens, people just let their machines pick up.

I met Tommy today. He's a nice enough guy once you get past the smell. He's clearly not all there, but I don't get a threatening feeling from him. He's almost charming in a way. I have to admit he adds color to the neighborhood. He told me that if I ever need him to just call out the window. He says he's always ready to assist a "damsel in distress." Kind of sweet, but he's definitely not the guy I saw in the laundry room.

#### 7-21

I met Chandra, a grad student who lives on the fourth floor. She said she'd like to have me over for dinner sometime when she's done with her thesis. She seems interesting. She's been living in the building for 10 years. I told her about my experience in the laundry room, and she nodded. She says there have been stories about a tall stranger in the building for years. Sometimes someone sees him in the stairwell. Or they look out the window and he's there on the street looking back at the building. She said something about her last building having a rumor about an old lady who died there and haunted it, even after 50 years. She said something about it being interesting how these stories come up and "perpetuate themselves." I laughed with her and agreed. I had to say something.

I thought about it afterward. If she thinks these are just stories that get passed around, does that mean she thought I was lying to her about what I saw? Or that she thought it was my imagination? Or that the person I saw was just some random stranger who gets rolled into a rumor?

She doesn't know that sometimes these things aren't stories.

To: triage.list@hunter-net.org

From: mouse374

Subject: Jumping at shadows

I get one freaky phone call in the middle of the night, I get a glimpse of someone who may be a ghost that's supposedly haunting my apartment building, or may just be some weirdo, and all of a sudden my mind is working overtime. How am I supposed to figure out if this is a real problem or if I'm just being paranoid? **From:** helper355

To: triage.list@hunter-net.org

Re: Re: Jumping at shadows

Mouse, good question. And I think this is a case where just raising the question is a sign that something bears investigating. It may turn out to be nothing, but it's better to waste time on a wild-goose chase than to miss a chance to make a difference. If your gut is telling you that there's something wrong, follow up on it.

To: triage.list@hunter-net.org

From: ashram242

Subject: Re: Jumping at shadows

I think we have all struggled with the issue you raise, Mouse374. But there is no need to worry. If you are meant to play a role here, it will happen. Conserve your strength, remain alert, and see what happens next. Eventually, and with the gifts you have been given, the truth will become clear.

To: triage.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Re: Jumping at shadows

From: essa317

Hello, Mouse, long time no hear. I hope all is well. It sounds like what you need is to gather more data on the potential problem. You're quite right to be cautious at this point. Jumping in without knowing what's going on can lead to all sorts of problems. Email me privately and let's discuss.

From: helper355

To: triage.list@hunter-net.org

Re: Re: Jumping at shadows

I don't want to start a debate because your points are well taken, Ashram, but I have to disagree with the tone of your comment if not the substance. You can't always sit back and wait for the truth to become clear. For example, the old man who was sitting in the back of the bus I was riding just had a troubled look on his face. I only saw him for a split second as he got off. It didn't occur to me to look at him\_that\_way. But the expression on his face stuck with me.

The next day, I got off at that same stop and walked around the neighborhood for hours. I finally spotted him, followed him, and long story short, a friend and I were eventually able to put him to rest. If I had shrugged it off or gone about my business, I might never have seen him again. Sure, it's nice when you get one of those unmistakable senses that point the way, or you take a close look that tells you there's something off. But let's not forget that we've always been ordinary people. We have our own instincts and feelings that can be as helpful as anything that's been given to us.

To: triage.list@hunter-net.org

From: mouse374

Subject: Ghost post

Okay, thanks for your thoughts, guys. I'm going to try and follow up on this somehow. Helper and

Ashram, I won't go overboard and waste too much energy. But here's something I wonder about. Suppose this turns out to be a genuine haunted house I'm living in. Then what? As far as I can tell, this possible spirit isn't doing anything wrong aside from screwing up phones. I've dealt with angry ghosts before (once), but why tamper with something that seems harmless?

To: triage.list@hunter-net.org From: ashram242 Subject: Re: Ghost post

Mouse, the key word is "seems." Let's remember that the ghosts of the dead, if that is what this is, do not walk the earth by choice. They are invariably tormented souls. Otherwise, they would move on to where they are meant to be. Some spirits are weak and cannot do much harm. Others are quite capable of hurting the living, and some can cause injury that's so subtle you may not trace the cause to them. It is much safer to work on the assumption that this ghost is dangerous than to presume it is not.

From: helper355

To: triage.list@hunter-net.org

Re: Re: Ghost post

Actually, this goes back to your first question about separating perception from reality. If we go in presuming that there's a threat, we invariably find one. Ghosts were people once, and people can have all sorts of motivations. Some are bastards, some aren't. I do agree that it's not "normal," whatever that means, for ghosts to be present. Otherwise the streets would be crawling with them, right? So odds are your ghost is dealing with some sort of heavy crap that compels it to be where it is. It's probably in pain. Some people lash out when they're in pain. Others collapse in on themselves. The same probably applies to ghosts. Yours may need help, Mouse. Approach with caution, but approach.

To: triage.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Re: Ghost post

From: essa317

Wait a minute, let's back up. How do we know we have a ghost here? All we know is that there was some kind of phone call, and some unknown person was seen. I think that we should also remember that whatever gifts we've been given, we're still subject to the biases, failings and fears that we've always had. Our imaginations can get the better of us, firsthand experience with the supernatural notwithstanding. We're subject to the power of suggestion. But sometimes the thing that goes bump in the night really is just the wind. Sometimes a ghost story is just a story.

#### To: triage.list@hunter-net.org From: mouse374 Subject: false alarm

Hey guys, I think I may have jumped the gun on my "ghost" that I posted about before. It's been weeks and I've had no more phone calls or sightings. Also I've talked to more people in the building and not everyone's convinced there's a haunting going on. Some people have never had any strange encounters as long as they've lived here. I think I was just overreacting. But thanks for all your help.

8-10

I saw him again today. The tall man from the laundry room. Only this time I was walking down the stairs when I saw someone standing at the bottom. He didn't move, he just stood there, and when I was just a few steps away I started to get really nervous. I said hello, but he didn't even look at me. There's one of those red "exit" signs just down the hall from the stairs. From where I was standing it looked like it was over the guy's head, and I saw the letters change to "trapped." I swear. I closed my eyes and looked again, and then I realized that he was staring straight at me. He looked sad. I could see right through him. He was barely there. I went to say something, but he disappeared.

#### 8-11

Budget problems. I don't know what I was thinking, but this job is barely covering my expenses. I'll be okay if I don't spend so much on food, but as it is I can't get the phone on at all. Maybe that's good.

I'm not telling the others about the spirit I saw yesterday. Not yet, anyway. I even told a lie on Triage so nobody would bug me about it. Maybe this is something I can handle myself. Maybe it's something I should handle myself. I keep thinking about his sad eyes. I know that look very well. It's loneliness. 8-12

It happened last night.

I've always loved thunderstorms. I used to watch them from my bedroom. You could see the clouds coming from way across the cornfield. Chris was scared of them, but I loved them.

Not long after I got home last night there was a whopper of a storm, and it made me think of home. I couldn't bear to look out the windows. It wasn't the same, but I kind of liked hearing the rain and the rumbling. I fell asleep as the storm was dying down.

When I woke up, I was confused. I looked at the clock by my bed. My lamp was still on. The clock was blinking on and off, and then the 12:00 changed to letters: <u>listen</u>. Then the clock, lights and everything went dead.

I could still hear some thunder rumbling outside, so I guess the storm wasn't completely over. I looked out the window and the streetlights were out and there were no lights on in any of the buildings. The only light was the moon shining through a break in the clouds.

Then the phone rang.

I realize now that it wasn't a normal sort of ring. It's hard to describe, but it was more like a buzzing insect than a phone ringing. I guess that doesn't make much sense.

When I picked it up, I could hear breathing on the other side. Not the heavy panting that you expect from an obscene phone call, but just breathing, slow, heavy. I wasn't sure if I should say anything. I was afraid my voice might break the connection somehow. Then, quietly, I said, "Hello? I'm here. I'm listening."

The voice on the other side was the same I heard before. It was very faint, but there was no static this time. "I can't remember," he said.

"Can't remember what?" I asked.

"Where am I?" he said. Even though I could barely hear him, he sounded heartbreakingly sad.

"It's okay," I said. "I'm here. I hear you. Keep talking. Can you tell me your name?"

"Spiders."

I took a deep breath and pictured my grandmother. It helps me focus. She was the steadiest person I've ever known. Thinking of her helps me ask the hard questions. I asked, "Who are you?"

Almost immediately the voice started to moan. There were no words, just moaning. Then it sounded like crying, but I'm not positive.

"I shouldn't have done it," he said. His voice was louder now. "I shouldn't have done it and now I'm trapped. I'll never get out. I've failed everyone."

"Where are you?" I asked. "Can you tell me where you are?"

I think he said something, but then the static got loud. I noticed that the streetlights were coming on outside. Then the light in my room came on.

"Can you still hear me?" I asked. "Where are you?"

I thought I heard something just before the phone went dead. "Basement."

### A Friend of a Friend

To: essa\_10@worldlink.net

From: nanceemt@quicknet.com

Subject: The country mouse

Hey, Essa, have you heard anything from Claire recently? She hasn't gotten in touch with me since March. I'm getting a little worried. To: nanceemt@quicknet.com

From: essa\_10@worldlink.net

Subject: Re: The country mouse

Nancy,

I haven't had any real contact from Claire, either. She did have a few posts on Triage earlier this month. I responded and asked her to contact me, but she never did. My guess is she's caught up in her move to a new apartment, new job. I expect she'll be in touch soon.

To: essa\_10@worldlink.net

From: nanceemt@quicknet.com

Subject: Re: The country mouse

I have a bad feeling about this. We shouldn't have let her drop off like this. Remember after L. went missing, we swore we'd watch out for each other?

I made a phone call to Claire's college, pretended to be her mother, and was able to find out where they're forwarding her mail. I'm going to be out of state for a few weeks. Can you go over there and talk to the girl? Do it ASAP, will you?

To: nanceemt@quicknet.com

From: essa\_10@worldlink.net

Subject: Re: The country mouse

Nancy,

I don't know when you'll be back online so I'll keep sending you updates and you can read them whenever.

The good news is that Claire seems fine. I found her apartment yesterday afternoon. She wasn't home, but it was close to five, so I decided to wait and see if she might be back from work. Her building is in a decrepit neighborhood, but it seemed safe enough to sit on the stoop in the daytime. (I did get harassed a bit by a homeless man, but other than that the time passed uneventfully.)

Eventually Claire came walking up the street. She was surprised to see me, of course, but seemed pleased. She invited me up to her room. I won't bore you with the details of her little apartment. The cracking paint, the leak in the ceiling, the smell of a century's worth of cigarette smoke. She made some tea and we talked.

I asked her about the posts she made. Something about a ghost possibly haunting her building. She told me that it turned out the "ghost" was just a combination of tall tales and overactive imaginations. I reiterated to her that the three of us pledged not to do any "investigating" without the others. I reminded her of the importance of what we do, and how cooperation improves our effectiveness. I could see that she needed to hear it. She seemed distracted at first, but ultimately seemed to come around.



I left after about an hour. She walked me down to the street. (No elevator in the building!) When I stepped outside and turned to say good night, I saw someone standing behind her, at the far end of the hall. It was gloomy, hard to make out any details, but the sight of a tall man disturbed me. I focused and saw it for what it was, an apparition, I think. Transparent, unnatural. It seemed not to react to my staring and was gone in seconds.

I said nothing to Claire. I need to think about this.

#### To: unity.list@hunter-net.org Subject: Ghost stories From: essa317

It seems that a colleague of mine is experiencing phenomena that match the standard "ghost" scenario, if there is one. Recurring apparition, mysterious voices in the night. The sight tells me there's something to it, but I'm undecided on what to do next. (It seems there's no hurry to decide, since this spirit apparently does little but startle people.) So in your opinions, what are ghosts anyway? And what's the best way to deal with them? To: nanceemt@quicknet.com From: essa\_10@worldlink.net Subject: Re: The country mouse

Nancy,

I visited Claire's apartment again today. I purposely went in the middle of the day, knowing she wouldn't be home. The door to the lobby had been propped open by someone moving furniture, so I slipped in and made my way to Claire's room. The lock wasn't difficult to open. Thank you again, cousin Frank.

I gave her apartment a thorough look for any signs of trouble. Fortunately, nothing out of the ordinary was brought to my attention. Aside from the fact that Claire's diet consists chiefly of ramen noodles, carrots, macaroni and cheese and cereal. Appalling.

Next, I went back to the lobby and stood where I'd seen the apparition. Nothing unusual was shown to me then either. There was a door there, not an apartment door (no peephole or number). It was locked. I was trying to decide whether to pick it when I heard someone coming down the hall. It turned out to be the homeless man I'd seen before. (For the sake of thoroughness, I looked at him, too. Nothing of note.)

#### HUNTER: URBAN LEGENDS

He was staggering drunk. Even from several feet away I could smell the alcohol on him. He recognized me as Claire's friend.

I told him I had been to her apartment, but she wasn't home.

He confirmed that she had gone to work, and had given him a sandwich. Apparently she can feed the neighborhood but not herself.

I realized this might be an opportunity to gain some information. I asked if he knew a tall man who lived in the building — long hair, beard, big hands. The image I had seen before.

He seemed dumbfounded. He raised a hand and I could see track marks along his forearm. He wanted to know how I knew about that.

I tried to sound non-threatening and find out how he knew about the being.

He said he saw the man in his dreams, for what it's worth, and that he avoided sleeping in the hall because of it. He called the figure "The man in the spider web."

To: nanceemt@quicknet.com

From: essa\_10@worldlink.net

Subject: Re: The country mouse

Nancy,

I've gathered some more data. First of all, I ran into an upstairs neighbor of Claire's. She asked me how Claire was doing and I jokingly mentioned that Claire had told me the building was haunted. I thought I might get another anecdote about strange goings-on from a more reliable source than a drunken squatter.

As it turned out, our discussion was quite fruitful. She's a graduate student working on a thesis in folklore, and she had some interesting observations. In her time living in the building, she's collected many stories from the residents. Footsteps at night, tapping at windows, shadowy figures in corridors, phones that ring in the middle of the night with strange voices on the other end. She claims to have noticed that the stories are 1) the same ones told just about everywhere, and 2) wildly inconsistent. Her thesis claims that such stories can be described mathematically, as information that's altered or "amplified" as it's passed from one teller to the next. In effect, the stories perpetuate themselves. They're passed on almost like a virus from one "generation" to the next. I'd dismiss it completely if not for what I've witnessed firsthand. Her conclusion is that any stories in the building should be considered highly suspect.

On the other hand, it seems there is something happening here. I confronted Claire about what I saw in the hallway, and she admitted that she had also seen the apparition, and confirmed its nature herself. I asked her why she hadn't come to me earlier, and why she downplayed her story online. She was evasive, but said something to the effect of wanting to handle it on her own. She said she's concerned that since it was her who the spirit reached out to, she is the one who should help it.

We talked further, and Claire astonished me by admitting that she's been in further contact with the entity. Apparently it communicates regularly with her using the telephone! As you might imagine, I was almost overwhelmed with indecision about what to protest first, the fact that she'd hidden this information from me, or the improbability of spirits using telecommunication equipment. I asked her how she knew there wasn't an ordinary explanation for the calls, and she took offense. That's when she told me her phone isn't connected and hasn't been since she moved in.

I checked. There was no dial tone. I suppose it's still possible that someone with the know-how could connect the line intermittently, but that seems like a stretch.

By the time I left, I had convinced Claire that it was in her best interest to let you and I work with her. She insisted that I promise to work for a solution to this entity's apparent torment, not for a way to destroy it. I said that if it does turn out to be a suffering spirit, and it's possible to ease its pain, we would do so. But I cautioned her, of course, that if the entity turns out to be a danger to anyone or is the cause of any harm, that we'd have to treat it accordingly. She seemed all right with that.

To: nanceemt@quicknet.com

From: essa\_10@worldlink.net

Subject: Re: The country mouse

Nancy,

Lots to report. At my suggestion, I've been staying over at Claire's. It enables me to watch for manifestations while she's at work (except for an hour or so when I dash home to take care of things). I've also taken the opportunity to attach an answering machine to her phone, connected or not. The first few days were uneventful, but on the fourth night I woke at about 2:30 a.m. to the sound of Claire whispering. I slipped off the couch to Claire's bedroom, where I saw her sitting on the floor with the phone to her ear.

She had turned on the "record" feature of the answering machine. Here's the transcript of the conversation.

CLAIRE: Hello, hello, can you hear me?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE: Someone... somewhere... (Note: the second voice on the tape is extremely difficult to hear. There is significant static. To: unity.list@hunter-net.org From: designer386 Subject: Re: Ghost stories

The traditional answer is perhaps that ghosts are spirits of the dead. Every culture has tales of the deceased haunting the living. Until my eyes were opened, I always had a problem with the idea. If ghosts exist, why do they keep themselves hidden? Why jump out at some stranger in a haunted house instead of saying a friendly hello to the loved ones you left behind?

Now that I know better, I have a few different explanations. The first is that, wherever ghosts come from, traveling from there to here is incredibly difficult. Those that do are somehow weakened or damaged by the effort, to the point that most of them are mindless, or focused only on a single goal. If that's true, it follows that the best way to rid yourself of a ghost is to try to figure out what its "purpose" for coming here is and help it achieve that. I think many of us, myself included, have found this to be an effective strategy.

Another possibility is that while ghosts can communicate with the living, there's some sort of law or edict that prohibits it. Perhaps this is a natural (supernatural?) law in the sense of time, gravity or inertia, and only the strongest ghosts can get past it. Or perhaps it's some rule passed down by God, the universe, a higher power or the grim reaper. Maybe the ghosts we see are the ones who dare to flout some cosmic authority. If so, they're desperate, amoral, unafraid of punishment, belligerent or very powerful. Our group once encountered a troublesome spirit, and I'm afraid violence seemed to be the only solution.

I've transcribed it as best I can. You can hear the tape for yourself. Maybe you'll have better luck.)

C: It's all right, I'm here. Just talk as best you can. UMV: Never get out... Goes on and on.

C: I know, I know. You sound so alone. You must feel like no one can help you. But you're not alone. You just have to reach out.

UMV: (Static for several seconds) Tainted bones... net (?)... anywhere.

C: It's all right. Don't be afraid. I know you're there. (Pause) You told me before that you're trapped. What can I do to help you?

UMV: Mirror... other side... crawlers (?).

C: Listen to me. You're not alone. (Pause) Tell me why you're trapped.

UMV: They're coming.

At this point, there is a loud scream that I can only describe as an animal in pain, and then the line goes dead.

We then had a long conversation during which I accused Claire of intending to keep this phone call a secret from me. She had turned the phone's ringer to its lowest setting and hadn't tried to wake me when it rang. I again reminded her of the importance of communication, of not relying solely on her own point of view. At first she claimed she'd picked up the phone right away and didn't want to wake me. But in the end she confessed that she'd been considering keeping the phone call a secret. It's fortunate that she had enough presence to turn on the recorder.

In my opinion, Claire has developed an unhealthy fixation with this entity. I believe she identifies with it on some level, because she feels isolated from her past and uncertain about her future. She may feel that "saving" the entity will solve her own problems. In effect, she wants to write it the happy ending that she hopes for herself. She's taking the entity's alleged suffering so personally that she's conflicted about letting us get involved. I think we need to keep her on a short leash until the situation reaches some kind of conclusion.

Claire has told me that the entity claimed some connection to the basement (of this building, presumably, though it could be "calling" from Timbuktu for all we know). Tomorrow we'll look into it.

To: nanceemt@quicknet.com

From: essa\_10@worldlink.net

Subject: Re: The country mouse

Nancy,

I think we're onto something. This morning, Claire and I spent a significant amount of time on "business," and came up with some interesting pieces to this puzzle.

First, I had Claire ask the superintendent if she could store some boxes in the basement. He turned her down, explaining that the rooms down there are offlimits to residents. Apparently there's some disputed property there that belonged to a previous tenant who skipped out on his rent. I don't think I mentioned this, but the front half of the first floor is occupied by a shoe store. According to the superintendent, it was a cellphone store several years ago. It seems the store went bankrupt and the owner vanished, leaving behind inventory and equipment. The building's owners sold off some of the stuff and moved the rest into the cellar. The door to the basement turned out to be the very one I considered opening the other day, where I saw the apparition of the tall man. (Which has no established connection to the voice on Claire's phone, by the way. I'm not assuming they're the same entity until we gather more data.) After some difficulty, I was able to pick the lock. (I'm starting to realize that I'm not as good at it as I thought. I need another session with my cousin the locksmith.) Behind it was a small landing, a door leading to the shoe store, and a staircase leading down.

The basement was rather small and not organized. Cartons and boxes were strewn everywhere. It looked like a slaughterhouse for technology. The floor was littered with pieces of wire, parts of circuit boards, broken computer keyboards, partial cell phones and other components. The dust and cobwebs make me doubt anyone's been down there for some time. There was no furniture or shelving, and no sizable objects except for the cartons and, oddly, a large floor-to-ceiling mirror leaning against one wall. The room smelled of rust. I won't even talk about the cockroaches.

I told Claire to stay near the bottom of the stairs and listen for anyone coming. It was my way of keeping her quiet and out of the way. I stood in the center of the room, used some controlled breathing, and looked back.

At first there was nothing, but then I felt the telltale itching. I stood still as the room changed around me. Now, instead of the weak glow of a hanging bulb, it was lit by halogen floor lamps. The cartons were gone and a set of shelves along one wall held neatly stacked books, CDs, coils of wire and electronic devices I couldn't identify. Against the opposite wall was a long table with a series of computer towers, monitors and keyboards. At least three of the monitors were lit, but I couldn't make out the text on the screens.

A man walked through, pausing to look over the monitors. He nodded briefly, then bent down to reach something underneath the table. He pulled out a large black bag, easily the size of a sleeping bag, though apparently made of some thick plastic or vinyl. He dragged it out to the center of the room. It required some effort for him to pull it. Then he left it there and began walking toward me.

He passed no more than a foot away. When I turned to follow him, the vision broke and I was back in the present.

When it was over, I walked to the spot where the bank of computers had been. Most of the cartons there were sealed shut, but one box on top had no lid. It contained mostly broken cell-phones, but at the bottom I found what seemed to be a laptop with the screen missing. I brought it back to Claire's apartment, but so far I can't get it to function.

I'm fairly certain that the man I saw in the vision is the same man I saw in the hallway. In the cellar, he was well dressed and shaven. His hair was cut short and neat, while the apparition was much more disheveled, with longer hair. The apparition in the hall seemed taller than the man in the cellar, but I may be misremembering. I got a good look at his face. It was the same.

#### To: unity.list@hunter-net.org From: ladder334 Subject: Re: Ghost stories

Personally, I consider ghosts to be somewhat low on the list of priorities. Of course, spirits that are obviously dangerous have to be dealt with, as do those that possess people. But the ones whose primary activity is to make the stairs creek at night are not, I would say, the reason why we have our talents. Not when there are monsters that pose a much more immediate threat. Perhaps there will be ghosts as long as there are people. One might even say they're a "natural" consequence of the cycle of life and death. Unlike blood drinkers and others, their very existence doesn't seem to necessitate human suffering. Better to put time and resources toward other things.

To: nanceemt@quicknet.com

From: essa\_10@worldlink.net

Subject: Re: The country mouse

Nancy,

Not surprisingly, the laptop I found didn't have any power left. So, I decided to take it to a friend of mine and see if he could restore it. That was several days ago. Nothing of note has occurred in Claire's building since, but today my friend informed me that he recovered some files. Not much, but I've pasted in the most legible parts.

To: fanggrrl\*\*\*BNF898F##

From: peNFY\*ter197@g&&&9vec.com

**Re:** The NN%&)&f9R

Sharon, I reYYTTYN think this is going to work. 938078F777BB&&&^ know as much about the web as 48RUR084OIFO\*&#@ers, but this is 3887)(&^%\$\$ century. S987DFLDFDSP7JH)()(&^%@\$! don't know about you but JKSDJHY\*\*&^@)LL renown. We need a better 9808DLNEH \*\*\*\*\*00 the web and I've (&\*(d^YODOIYFD **To:** peter\_1()097@Glo\*\*()(%\$87ec.&^%5 **From:** fang(&)(S(\*&SOFYD **Re:** the pro888ject, cont'd

Please 3874YKLDFHo reason. S:LDKUF90874omoril XXX%^D KGGre you really thinking 3843466&(^ GHDPL The patt48574#\$#^& 608\*(KD M web is 4987\*09KLIDH9NNN. Trying to SSKIDF(\*&D978en it with 498d9\*^ \$taint is like DKDLH()#\$#\$\*&ting fire with fire —it 497987DLFHENODS)( \*S&^EHHH still get burned. And if the \*sit#\$4643%^\$65\$ &SIUDHTU SDB find out you're me\*DKFHIF&\*sing with S ) S & D OUEr SD(S\*&DODYHF\*\*&^XXXDLKDKFKGHOI To: fa\*()889DL\*&6--(9999

From: LDKFJYT870\*)(&97ter&&^))(&E))) 000000000

Re: KDHFct, conLKD&\*776689900

I know what I'm doing, Sh##ril. Yes, the web is SKIHD(\*&S9s86v \*(&SHDOHD)awlers and Yes, if they find out such. what (\*KSJDY867978%\$# doing, I'm in deep shit. )S\*#(EWPUI)))DLKJD8 (\*But, the 378taint will S(SDIL\*\*&^6738 in a S\*(D&SODYD)98&\$@ carefu))(ly ar^^&ranged network, cancelling out ()S()S)(7dverse ((\*&DHDHY(^6871web. (\*D&S^ust sideways step and crossS\*&D)(&S)\*S))\*SLHD\*8986SOSO^S())SO you don't even kSSILDK(\*\*now where I am, so you won't get in any trouble if wS(S)&D99ord gets out.

**To:** LDJFYORUF839874\*(7LDKFDter@ **From:** fan555666ggr(D\*OOD&(&970

Re: The \*\*77=DKJ^&&778999IUSYD&\*^^^^

SLDKS\*()\*&^283HH need to talk. I did some cheS)\*DPOSOD\*\*876d6cking and several SLKDH\*\*&^8976d that S(\*D&S((8DPPCLGH could backfire, stimulating the weavS S) \* D H P)) ( \* C L H and making(S\*D&^::DDLKH(&363846 web even tighter to contain it. Get back to me ASAP. ) D ( & S O S ODOFYOLL))(\*(0#interrupt99&^509807 To: p)))(0897(&%\$#PPSKD]\*&%43 From:faKDJ(\*&(^9875754758KIUSY&&^%\$NNN KDIHFIYF&999d78\*\*&^&

Peter? Where(S(D&SOOODLDKDD you been?S)D(&LL happened? Please )S(\*DOU SDOS)))007)KDMN(997587687 6SK < < SI97987(&(\*&6\*%^ 9 8) () () \$ 4 5 \$ \$ 3 4 3 2 \$ # @ 54&776%&6576}}}{P}{}{:>>:">KJ HKG(\*&(\*&765765\*&6\*5653#@\$7^%9 87uyHGVJjht

That's about all there is so far, though my friend says he'll keep trying. In the meantime, we've learned that the owner of the electronics store was indeed named Peter. Apparently he did resemble the man I saw in my vision and, to a lesser extent, the tall apparition Claire and I have both seen. Claire is convinced that this is the ghost who's been contacting her, that perhaps he committed suicide when his business failed (or, as the emails suggest, he was involved in some shady Internet venture). She's thinking his body may be hidden down in the basement, and that until it's found he can't "move on." Tomorrow we're going to search the basement more thoroughly. It's the superintendent's day off, and no one else has reason to go down there, so we should be able to work undisturbed. I don't expect to find a body. Claire's theory is a bit of a stretch. But hopefully we'll gather more information.

To: unity.list@hunter-net.org From: loss381

Subject: Re: Ghost stories

Couple of things.

First, just because we can see things others can't doesn't mean we have to accept 2,000 years of superstitious bullshit. Yeah, entities that seem to correspond to traditional notions of ghosts do exist. But does it follow that they're really spirits of the dead? Maybe they're the subconscious manifestation of undiscovered psychic ability in people. Maybe they're our own desires, memories or fears somehow given form and kept in operation by our belief in them. Or maybe ghosts are the remnants left behind when a soul passes on, like the skin of a snake. And that's just off the top of my head. Any one of us could spin out more theories.

Second, don't ever assume a ghost is harmless. Look through the archives and you'll find plenty of stories of ghosts pulling some nasty tricks, tormenting people, or inspiring fear and madness because they seem to get off on it. If the powers that be didn't want us messing with ghosts, they wouldn't turn up on our radar along with rots and leeches and the rest. If you see a ghost, deal with it, because somebody somewhere is getting fucked by it. To: essa\_10@worldlink.net From: nanceemt@quicknet.com Subject: Re: The country mouse

Essa, I just got back and read through all the mail you sent. Frankly, I don't know where to start. I have to say I'm freaked out by the casual way you've invaded Claire's privacy — literally breaking into her apartment. Pretty sneaky stuff, and hypocritical, considering you won't tell her or me your real name, let alone your address or phone #. It also pisses me off that you're so quick to dismiss her viewpoint, so sure that she's withholding information and so keen on using those persuasive pep talks of yours to bring her around to your side. Remember, we decided that we would be democratic? I don't mind so much when you turn your debate-club tactics on me. I can handle them. But Claire's just a kid. I think you should drop all the psychology and back off.

To: unity.list@hunter-net.org Subject: Re: Ghost stories From: essa317

Thank you all for your thoughts.

Designer, I think you're right in that, whatever the reason, it takes some wherewithal for ghosts to communicate with the living (or to try to). It suggests that when it happens, it's not a casual thing, but the result of some significant effort on the part of the spirit (even if it can no longer recall why it's doing so). Finding out the reason behind the manifestation would seem a logical step in assessing the best way to deal with it.

Ladder, your comments intrigue me. Should we think of ghosts as the far end of the human spectrum? After all, every ghost was a human once and every human will eventually die. Maybe they need to be considered in a different light than the other things we encounter.

Loss, you're right, there are multiple possible explanations for ghosts. In fact, more than one may be true. There may be different sorts of ghosts. But it seems to me that a ghost = departed theory is the front runner. It's an almost universal belief, and using it as a working assumption seems to have worked for many of us who've posted to this list. And while ghosts can be dangerous, that doesn't mean they have to be. The history of this entity suggests little overt danger. Proceeding cautiously with our eyes open will, I think, enable us to gather more information without significant risk. Anyway, we can discuss that later. As far as this spook situation goes, my first impression is that it's much ado about nothing. If some ghost is condemned to stand around the lobby of this building for all eternity, I say let him. Doesn't seem to be hurting anybody. We could be putting our efforts toward more important things.

Call or email me if you get this tonight. If you two are hell-bent on checking out this cellar tomorrow, I should be there, too.

#### Nancy THIS IS A TRUE STORY

To: fanggrrl@roachnet.com

From: peter\_s@roachnet.com

Re: The tape

Sharon,

Here's a transcript of that videotape I told you about. I finally managed to get something from it. The visual track is shot. Nothing comes up on screen, but here are my notes from the audio.

Woman #1: Okay, it's 8 a.m. in the fucking morning, the sun's barely up, and here I am with my two friends about to investigate the famous ghost of Elbridge Avenue. Wooooo.

Woman #2: Please don't make fun of this. Someone is suffering and we have a chance to put things right.

Woman #3: This isn't superstition. We've both seen evidence of some type of manifestation.

Woman #1: Okay, okay, you're right. I'm sorry. I'm... I admit I feel a little twitchy about this. It's been a while.... I guess I'm trying to keep my courage up.

Woman #2: It's okay. We're all nervous.

Woman #1: The camera's running. At least we won't get any arguments about who did what this time. Where do we start?

Woman #3: I... I'm not quite ready to do any looking back just yet. Maybe we should look through some of these cartons.

Woman #2: No, I think we should check that out. The mirror.

Woman #1: Why?

Woman #2: He said something about the other side of the mirror, remember?

Woman #1: Looks normal to me.

Woman #3: Let me check my notes.... Yes, there was something about a mirror. I didn't think of it last time we were down here.

Woman #1: Be careful, girl! That thing must weigh a ton. Don't push it over. Here, let me put this on the tripod.

#### CHAPTER1: CONTACT FROM BEYOND

Woman #2: Look at that.

Woman #3: What is it? I can't see.

Woman #2: It looks like... There's a door behind it. Nancy, help me pull it aside.

(I'll skip over several tedious minutes.)

Woman #1: Okay, I'm zooming in on the door, the frame, the knob. Don't see anything unusual. Here's the floor in front of it, pretty dusty. The dust's undisturbed except for the track where we pushed the mirror aside.

Woman #3: Let's all make sure we're focused first. All right?

Woman #2: I'm ready.

Woman #1: I've been good to go from the beginning. Is the door locked?

Woman #3: One way to find out. Nope, the knob's a little stuck... but... there. Bring the camera forward.

Woman #1: Shit, it's dark in there. I guess there's no window. Essa, grab the flashlights on my belt.

Woman #3: Are you getting this? I see a short hallway. Then it looks like it turns off to the right. Wait, here's a switch.

Woman #1: Bulb's probably burned out. All right, keep the flashlights in front of us. Maybe one of you should take the camera and let me go first.... Okay, have it your way.

(Voices too faint to make out at first, presumably not close enough to the recorder.)

Woman #1: Okay, I don't know if the camera's getting everything in this low light, so here's what I'm seeing. Another — shit — another small room. But this one's filled with....

Woman #3: Let's stay back. Don't disturb anything.

Woman #1: What are those? There's like... strings. They're everywhere. They're hanging from the ceiling, attached to the walls, the floor. What the fuck?

Woman #2: It's like a giant spider web.

Woman #1: Shine a light over that way. They're... it looks like they're wires. Look, at that one there. It's coaxial cable. And there's a phone cord. That one... some kind of electrical wire? Wait... don't touch it!

Woman #3: I think... I think they're in some kind of pattern. Get the camera over here. Can you see those shapes, closer to the middle of the room?

Woman #1: Yeah... there's... things hanging in the wires. Are they tied into them? Shit!

Woman #2: Sorry.

Woman #1: I said don't touch anything! You made the whole damn thing start shaking, not to mention giving me a heart attack.



Woman #2: It was an accident.

Woman #3: Bring the camera this way. There's a path you can walk through. Is that what I think it is?

Woman #1: Oh Jesus. And look over there.

Woman #3: They're... bones?

Woman #1: Yeah, bones. This is a femur. It's human.

Woman #3: You're sure it's real?

Woman #1: I've seen the real thing. I spent enough hours in Anatomy to know what I'm talking about. Look there — a skull. I don't know how much detail the camera's getting, it's so dark in here, but that is a human skull. Somebody... somebody's got human bones strung up all through this room. Jesus Christ.

Woman #2: What does it mean? I don't understand.

Woman #1: Wait a minute... this is....

Woman #3: What?

Woman #1: I'm putting the camera on the tripod. Look at these things! They're wrong.

Woman #3: They are. I can see it.

Woman #1: Oh God! Look at this one! This is an ulna... an arm bone, but it's twisted like a corkscrew. Is that another skull? It's got three eye sockets! These things are all deformed... and what is that? It looks like a hipbone, but... this is fucked up.

Woman #3: This room is bigger than I thought, now that my eyes are adjusted. I think there's empty space in the center. We just have to figure out how to get there. It's like a maze!

Woman #1: It's a goddamn spider web and we're three fucking flies! There is some seriously fuckedup shit. This ain't no Casper the Friendly Ghost. I say we back off! I have a feeling your spook was some kind of killer or cult member or something.

Woman #3: Let's not jump to conclusions. He could have been the victim of someone like that.

Woman #2: We should bury them. Maybe that's what's trapped the spirit in the building. The bones need to be buried. He said something about them on the phone.

Woman #3: Okay, but-

Woman #1: Whatever. Let's just get out of here and think this through before we make our next move.

Woman #2: We can't! This spirit reached out to us. Nobody else can help him. He hasn't hurt anybody. We should at least try to make contact. You see? This is why I didn't want to tell you guys. You just don't understand. Woman #3: Okay, calm down. I don't think we should leave, either. Not just yet. Let's proceed with caution. I'd like to take some of these... some of these bones down. Take them with us. Get them examined. Maybe someone online has encountered something like them.

Woman #1: You two are out of your minds!

Woman #3: Go if you want to!

Woman #1: You know I'm not going to leave you down here by yourselves. Just hurry up and do whatever you need to do.

Woman #3: I don't think we're in immediate danger, based on the way this entity's behaved so far. We'll proceed slowly, and if the spirit manifests, we'll stop what we're doing and reassess. All right?

Woman #1: Well, let's get a move on then!

Woman #3: Claire, help me with this. I'm going to cut this wire with my pocketknife. You hold the bag underneath to catch, uh, that thing.

Woman #1: It's a jawbone.

Woman #2: Ready.

Woman #3: Okay, there it is. Now let's go for— do you hear that?

Woman #1: The whole web's shaking. Some of the bones are knocking together.... It sounds like—

Woman #2: They're falling!

Woman #3: Look out!

Woman #1: The whole thing's coming down! Cover your heads!

Woman #2: Look! Over there! It's him! It's him! Woman #1: What is that?

Woman #2: Can you hear me? Can you understand me?

Woman #1: Get behind me! It's getting bigger! That's not—

(End of recording.)

Like I said when we talked the other day, I don't have any real memory of my time sideways. Apparently, the only reason I got out is that these three stumbled into the Wyrm-taint array I erected. Once it was disrupted, the Weaver spirits calmed down and, well, the details don't matter. By the time I came out of frenzy, two of the women were dead. I don't know what happened to the third. I didn't even know there was a third one until I heard the tape. Between the delirium and I'm guessing some severe injuries, she's probably not going to cause any trouble. In any case, if anybody comes sniffing around the place there's nothing left to raise any suspicions.

I hope you'll stand up for me when I go before the elders. I realize now that I rushed things. But if we don't experiment, how can we ever learn anything? I'm not tainted, no matter what anyone says. To: fanggirl@roachnet.com

From: peter s@roachnet.com

Re: <no subject>

Sharon, I can't come see you. Not yet, anyway. I'm hurt more than I thought I was. I've been having nightmares. Threads, puppets, spiders. Webs under my skin. Sometimes I wake up and for a few seconds I can't move or breath. I panic.

Lately, I'll be walking down the street and I get the sense that someone's watching me. Sometimes I'll get a glimpse of a familiar face, always the same one, just for a second. But when I look, there's nothing. Sometimes my phone rings in the middle of the night and there's nobody there. I want to hang up, but I can't. It feels like hanging up would be the death of me.

Even now, right now, I have the feeling that there's someone in the room with me, someone I can't sense, no matter how hard I try. Watching me. And the face I can almost see — a woman's face. Could it be one of those women I killed?

Is it possible I'm being haunted by her ghost?



# CHAPTER 2: MORBID CURIOSITY

Then the vigor of our eternal knowledge was destroyed in us, and weakness pursued us. Therefore the days of our lives became few. For I knew that I had come under the authority of death.

 The Apocalypse of Adam (Old Testament Apocrypha)

January 19 Jenny Otto,

You don't know me, but I know you. I also know <u>about</u> you. You have a penchant for unraveling mysteries. I have a mystery that needs your attention. Perhaps you d care to help me with it?

I ve included some documents for you to look at. Read the report and see my accompanying notes. If you want to discuss this further, call this number 555-976-3782. It's a pager.

Thank you for your time, Strictly Anonymous

## DETECTIVE WORK

#### EVIDENCE REPORT

Summary of Forensics

Serology, Fingerprint and Shoeprint Analyses

Investigating Officer(s): Det. C. Fenton Matawbha County Sheriff's Department Incident ID No.: 19580-00016D-2003

Case Description: Homicide, Elizabeth "Betsy" Rausch

#### Serology

Samples of all suspect stains were collected and sent to the State Crime



Lab. Any samples that tested positive using the presumptive phenolphthalein examination were analyzed initially using the ABO blood-typing kit. DNA analysis of samples positive for human blood is currently in progress. Should be complete by next day.

What about non-human blood?

"Item 19580-01: One (1) Kitchen French Knife Tested both sides of the instrument's blade and all areas of the handle for blood. Found two samples of human blood, as evidenced below. Please note anomaly on second type of blood.

Blade Side #1 (A): A+

Blade Side #2 (B): A+

Handle (C): A+

Handle (C): typing inconclusive

Handle Bottom (D): typing inconclusive Typing inconclusive because it's not human blood. It's from <u>something else</u>, isn't it?

\*Item 19580-02: One (1) pair Rubber Kitchen Gloves Gloves found in plastic trashcan in kitchen.

Exterior of Glove (A): A+

Interior of Glove (B): typing inconclusive

\*Items 19580-03 through 10

Forensics team uncovered eight (8) individual locational blood stains, none more than 10 feet from the body. All samples positive for human blood.

We re not so sure about that, are we?

Locations: 4 ft SW of body, on linoleum. 3 ft SW of body, on linoleum. 2 ft SW of body, on linoleum. 1 ft SW of body, on linoleum. Rim of plastic trashcan, 4.5 ft SW of body. Corner of silverware drawer, 4.5 ft SW of body. Doorknob of door leading to exterior of house, 8 ft W of body. Concrete steps exterior of house, 9 ft W of body.

Here's a note in the same folder. I attached it to the document, as you'll find that it's relevant.

#### tenton,

I read your report. I see you chose not to mention the fact that the second type of blood doesn't look like it's human? What the fuck are you going to tell the captain? It looks like my fault if I couldn't get a conclusive type. I got the type, Detective, and it looks like goddamn animal's blood. Goat. This is my lab, and I'm asking you not to ignore my results. I'll be sending a memo upstairs to make sure I get credit where it's due.

#### Acer

Goats blood? Maybe this is a shapechanger, and the lab results are off because the blood can't be typed precisely, or perhaps some kind of ceremony or ritual was performed and an animal (goat or sheep) was sacrificed. Given my past experiences, I lean toward the first theory. Your thoughts?

#### Fingerprinting

A variety of methods were used to discover and develop latent fingerprints. Methods including Amido Black, Diaminobenzidine and Cyanocrylate Fuming. From development, only two full fingerprints were recovered, and no partials. Prints were compared with all officers and persons contaminating the scene, and were then run through the Automatic Fingerprint Identification System.

#### Print 19580-AA: Doorknob

Print 19580-AB: One (1) Hotel Key for Hare and Stag Inn in Newthorpe

Neither print was consistent with Rausch's. After computed through the AFIS, no formal identification could be made. Prints are as yet inconclusive.

The hotel key is useful information. Check that out, if you're interested. Prints are ultimately inconclusive, because, as I said before, I don't believe we're dealing with a human entity.

#### Shoeprints

Two relevant shoeprints (i.e., not consistent with Rausch) found: labeled 19580-Z and 19580-Y. Prints found off cobblestone walkway, in dirt by the gravel driveway. Identification of brand from lab came up with Orthowear. Orthowear is an orthopedic shoewear company out of Delaware. Shoeprint is consistent with orthopedic sneaker tread - back end of print is unusually wide, as if the ball of each foot is swollen around by more than an inch. The shoeprints appear to be from a shoe size 14.

More than an inch? Does that mean round at the back, too? That's bizarre. Consistent with a shapechanger?

#### Conclusions

Victim, Betsy Rausch, bears three wounds. The first, located an inch to the left of the spine and approximately four inches above hip, five inches across, angled in a downward cut. The second, located an inch to the right of the spine and approximately four inches above hip, is five inches across, and also angles in a downward cut. These two wounds are where the perpetrator removed the victim's kidneys. The organ removal, however, was not the cause of death. The third and final wound was a serrated cut across the throat, measuring six inches across, and is consistent with the time of death. All cuts appear to have been made with the kitchen knife (see 19580-01).

Ill need help on this one. This is not open and shut, as they say. I don't know what we're dealing with. The kidneys were taken out of her body, and then her throat was slashed? Why? Some kind of food? Perhaps some bloodsuckers' eat organs. Shapechanger may suggest cannibalistic traits, which combined with other indications may allow us to extrapolate? If this is the work of a shapechanger, it's not like one I've heard of before.

As I said, I need help on this one. Call me.

#### GAME FACE

ANONYMOUS: Thank you for paging me. JENNY: I'm recording this conversation.

ANONVA (OLIC, LI

ANONYMOUS: I know.

JENNY: Are you watching me?

ANONYMOUS: No, I heard the recorder.

JENNY: I see. So, why me? Why give me this now? We... I haven't heard from you in weeks.

ANONYMOUS: Two reasons. The first being, as you know, all the others are dead. Hiram was

#### HUNTER: URBAN LEGENDS

executed at the underpass on Stonekiln Pike, shot in the face. The teenager, Jay, was also shot, this time in the chest. They found his body in the dumpster at Morecroft Middle School. And Shelley was hanged in her basement.

JENNY: Shelley hung herself.

ANONYMOUS: Not true. She was hanged. Homicide, not suicide.

JENNY: That's not what the papers said. How do you know—?

ANONYMOUS: I know what the papers don't print, because I know what's really out there, just like you do. Look, I'm your friend—

JENNY: "Friend"? The others were killed because-

ANONYMOUS: Not because of me, Jenny. I always helped your group. Hiram was a good man. He trusted what I could do for you — what information I could offer. He and the others didn't get killed until they went off and followed their own leads. Fortunately, the thing that found them never made the connection to you.

JENNY: So now you're contacting me? Am I next in line to get killed?

ANONYMOUS: I hope not. You've been on your own for six months. That's my other reason for coming to you now. You're off your game. You've forgotten your calling, and you were once excellent at it. I appreciated that about you. I helped find your friends leads, and they followed up, but you always looked outside the box. You asked questions that none of us could answer. From what Hiram said, you made most of the successes possible. Their deaths were tragic, but so was you turning your back on it all.

JENNY: Why should I listen to any of this?

ANONYMOUS: You're right. You could hang up. I want to continue to help. You could turn your back on me, too. But then you'd have to live with that decision.

JENNY: How am I supposed to trust you after everything that's happened? You don't even show your face. You know everything about us... me, but I don't know anything about you.

ANONYMOUS: Hiram and I had an arrangement. I could get information, but I couldn't risk being identified. I still can't. What I have to offer is too important. You trusted him, and he trusted me. I'm sad and angry over what happened to him, too. But if he could trust me, all I can do is ask that you try to do the same.

If you need proof, look at page four of that report. It's the page with the fingerprint evidence.

JENNY: Yeah, so?

ANONYMOUS: Look on the back.

JENNY: You drew this?

ANONYMOUS: Yes, with the same pen I wrote the notes with.

JENNY: What does that prove?

ANONYMOUS: I can tell you what it means. It's not just a symbol, Jenny, and you know it. It means "us." People like you and me.

JENNY: It's not enough.

ANONYMOUS: There's more-

JENNY: Look, I'm out. I'm done.

ANONYMOUS: I have reason to believe that Betsy Rausch's killer is the same thing that killed our friends.... Jenny?

JENNY: How... how do you know that?

ANONYMOUS: There are too many similarities at the crime scenes. Things that the police wouldn't — *couldn't* know to look for.

I want to see justice done, but I need your help. Think about it. I'll be in touch.

#### WITTNESS

Jenny,

I mincluding a clipping from the coroner's report from the Matawbha County office. After that, see the attached eyewitness report. Have you found anything out? I hope me sharing this new information is enough to convince you. I have no one else to turn to.

OFFICE OF THE CORNER, MATAWBHA COUNTY INTERNAL EXAMINATION, SUMMARY:

Both kidneys were removed from the body. No surgical precision evident (removal left damage to juxtaposed organs). No other organs were removed.

Indications of semen inside vaginal canal and rectal passage. No indications of semen or other foreign fluids in mouth or other orifices. Semen typed against DNA; results inconclusive.

Toxicological examination does not indicate presence of drugs or alcohol.

Body temperature and state of rigor mortis indicates an approximate time of death of 3:00 A.M.

Kidneys were taken, and the victim was raped. Before or after her death, I have to wonder. I hope the police will take that into account, but I have to be realistic and accept that this will not be the most thorough

#### CHAPTER 2: MORBID CURIOSITY

investigation. There are too many factors involved that they can't understand.

#### Witness Interview

Margaret Cuthbert, Hotel Day Manager 9:20 A.M.

Witness interviewed post-crime scene, as follow-up investigation conducted by Detective Carl Fenton. See associated incident report, 19580-00016D-2003.

CF: For the record, could you please state your name and address?

MC: Maggie Cuthbert. Uh, I live at 4224 Lower Quarry Rd. In Newthorpe.

CF: And how old are you?

MC: 27.

CF: This key. What room does it belong to? MC: Uh, you guys took the one for room 188. CF: Did you know the victim, Betsy Rausch? MC: No.

CF: You never saw her before?

MC: No, okay? I said so before.

CF: Who booked that room the week of the 20th and 27th?

MC: I gave you that list already. Lots of people. Nobody I know.

CF: Yes, but there are blanks on your register. There are no names for some of these dates, and yet payment records show that someone stayed there.

MC; I don't know. It's not a perfect system.

CF: Thank you for your time. We'll call you if we need more information.

Do you think she s telling the truth? A preliminary DNA analysis came back. One test is consistent with the dead woman, Rausch. The other didn't show anything. Again, inconclusive. And from what I can understand of the report, the test didn't even work properly. Once again, they don't know what to look for, or why.

Here's another, photocopy from the follow-up coroner's report. It's a note, actually, directly from the chief coroner to Detective Fenton.

Carl,

Found something that we missed. It's not that we're getting sloppy. We just haven't dealt with anything like this before. There were traces of skin, hair and blood under the victim's fingernails. All consistent with the irregularities found at the scene. The blood couldn't be typed. Skin appears human, but the hair is distinctly animal. Could he have been wearing a fur coat? Seems crazy, but it's the only thing I can think of. Guess that's why I deal with dead folks and you're the detective, huh?

See you at the softball game this year? Roger

I couldn't include a copy of the external examination, so I tried to get you this, the next best thing. The blood-typing was inconclusive, but the results of the hair examination suggest fur. More indications of something animal and human.

#### DISCLOSURE

JENNY: So, are you a cop?

ANONYMOUS: No.

JENNY: Who are you then?

ANONYMOUS: A friend... but I'm not with the police.

JENNY: How do you get this information then? ANONYMOUS: The detective and I have an arrangement.

JENNY: I'll go to him. I'll find out who you are.

ANONYMOUS: You could, but he'll deny everything. It's in his best interests to remain inconspicuous, too. Really, you have nothing to—

JENNY: Save it. I went down to that hotel, the Hare and Stag.

ANONYMOUS: So, you-

JENNY: Look, do you want to hear this or not? ANONYMOUS: Of course.

JENNY: It's down at Thorpe and 91, outside of town. Looks like a bed and breakfast, all Victorianlike, but bigger. It isn't cheap. There was a fat lady behind the counter. I guess she's the one from your interview. Maggie Cuthbert? She's the day manager, it seems. I talked to her, she talked to me. She told me a lot more than she told the cops.

ANONYMOUS: Really? Like what?

JENNY: So you don't know everything. Interesting.

She knows who the guy is. She knows who the killer is, and she told me. The room is rented maybe once every couple weeks by this big guy. The way she described him, he's good looking and dresses like he has money.
ANONYMOUS: So how do you know it's him? JENNY: He rented the room just last week and had a woman with him. Apparently, he's big on banging lonely housewives.

ANONYMOUS: And why did Maggie Cuthbert tell you all this when she wouldn't tell the police?

JENNY: I can be pretty persuasive.

ANONYMOUS: What do you mean?

JENNY: We went back into the breakfast room so she could get a donut. I took a knife, grabbed her hand and threatened to cut off her fingers if she didn't tell me something.

ANONYMOUS: That's too extreme.

JENNY: No, it isn't. If this guy really did kill my friends, I want him. I wouldn't have done it, but she had soft hands with those long, fake nails. It just struck me as the thing to do.

ANONYMOUS: She could call the police.

JENNY: And risk getting in trouble for not telling them the truth? Also, I think he was banging her, too.

ANONYMOUS: Oh?

JENNY: She didn't say so. Not with words, but her eyes said enough. She must have had a pretty good reason to cover for a killer.

ANONYMOUS: So, what's his name?

JENNY: Emmett Snow.

ANOMYMOUS: Excellent. Thank you for your help. Does this mean--

JENNY: Don't go looking too hard for a meaning. Click.

#### MR. SNOW

ANONYMOUS: Thank you for calling again.

JENNY: I don't like this. Why don't we just meet? ANONYMOUS: I can't. Like I said before, I can't—

JENNY: Yeah, yeah, you can't reveal your sources or whatever. You know it means I can't trust you....

ANONYMOUS: I understand. I only hope that comes in time. So, what have you learned?

JENNY: [Pause] All right. Emmett Snow doesn't have a job. At least, not in the past five years that I could find. I did go to his last known address, though, up in Troutsville. He lived in this rebuilt little farmer's loft. He doesn't live there — or rent there — anymore. The landlady was this old farmer's wife whose husband died. I guess she sold off most of the land and made the barn into these slick apartments. She remembered Snow. Described him like Maggie Cuthbert did — big, long hair, charming, but rough around the edges. She said he was probably in his mid-30s. She hasn't seen him in a year. ANONYMOUS: How did you find all this out?

JENNY: You have friends, so do I. A friend of my sister's one county over is a notary, and she works for the state. She's hooked into their computer system. She can find out things about people. She'll track down "ex-boyfriends" if she thinks they've done me wrong.

ANONYMOUS: So what do you think Snow is?

JENNY: Hold on, I'm not done yet. The landlady told me something else. She said that he hung out at this road bar down on 91, some place called get this — the "Old Souls Tavern." It's not even two miles up from that Hare and Stag Hotel. The place is apparently a hangout for different people. College kids from up the highway, truckers taking a break, sports fans watching the game, and, in her words, "housewives looking to get away from the husband and kids for an evening." What does that tell you?

ANONYMOUS: Did you go down there? To the bar?

JENNY: No. We never went places alone before. If I did something like that, I usually went with Hiram. I went to the apartment, because I didn't expect there to be trouble. I wasn't going to get too close. But to go into a bar looking for one of them...?

ANONYMOUS: No, don't go there. We'll talk about that later. At least all of this information is consistent.

JENNY: What do you mean?

ANONYMOUS: With a new police report. There's been another murder. Is there somewhere I can fax it?

JENNY: Yeah.

ANONYMOUS: Good. Look it over. Meanwhile, we need to know exactly what this Emmett Snow is. Determining his breed will help us distinguish his strengths... and his weaknesses. Think on it. On our next call, we'll go over it. Don't do anything for the next week. Leave it alone. Drop the investigation until you talk to me again.

JENNY: What? Why? You said he might be the guy who killed my friends! He's killed again and you want me to drop it just because you say so?

ANONYMOUS: And if you want him, you'll wait. Rushing in will get you killed. You were never impetuous before. You were cautious, deliberate. Find those instincts again. Don't do anything before we talk again, okay?

#### EVIDENCE REPORT

Summary of Forensics

Serology, Fingerprint and Shoeprint Analyses

Investigating Officer(s): Det. C. Fenton Matawbha County Sheriff's Department

#### Incident ID No.: 20620-00022B-2003 Case Description: Homicide, Dinah Carroll Serology

All suspect stains were collected and sent to the state crime lab. Any samples that were positive using the presumptive phenolphthalein tests were analyzed initially using the ABO blood typing kit. The DNA analysis of samples positive for human blood is in progress.

#### Once again, what about non-human blood? \*Item 20620-01: One (1) Claw Hammer

Tested both sides of the tool's handle and all dimensions of the instrument's head. Found one sample of human blood on the item, as evidenced below. Sample was distributed across the instrument. Clawend of hammer bears bits of both human skin and bone.

Hammer Head Side #1 (A): 0+ Hammer Head Side #2 (B): 0+ Handle (C): 0+

Handle Bottom (D): 0+

Has this Snow become more careful? There's none of his blood here, it seems. The woman didn't fight. Not like the previous victim appears to have fought. I presume that's why she had blood, hair and skin under her nails. She scratched him.

\*Item 20620-02; One (1) pair Rubber Kitchen Gloves

Gloves found under living room table. Blood type matches victim.

Exterior of Glove (A): 0+

\*Items 19580-03 through 22

Forensics team uncovered nineteen (19) primary individual, locational blood stains, none more than 7 feet from the body. All samples positive for human blood, and match the victim. No list provided, as there were also seventeen (17) secondary stains around the room. Staining was severe, indicating massive blood loss.

He was more careful about spilling his own blood, but messier with the victim s. I wonder where he cleaned up. Since there's no mention of blood found in a bathroom, I presume he did so elsewhere. Somewhere secure. A safehouse. If we find it, I'll bet we find him. Could be the hotel, or the bar he hangs out at.

I m skipping the fingerprinting and shoeprinting. Nothing notable among either. No footprints, and fingerprints were all partial and inconclusive.

#### Conclusions

Victim, Dinah Carroll, found in living room on couch. Forensics team indicates two primary wounds. The first was on the front of the forehead, approximately 1.4 inches above the bridge of the nose. Wound size is consistent with head of hammer. Autopsy will indicate if this wound was the killing blow, though initial findings suggest that this injury was not the one that killed the victim. The second wound was in the center of the chest, about the size of a softball. Wound indicates damage (and removal) of both skin and breastbone. The heart was removed, and was not found at the scene. Preliminary observation indicates that claw-end of hammer was responsible for causing most if not all of the injury.

Her heart was removed! First, Rauschs kidneys. Now, Carroll's heart. It stands to reason that shapechangers as predators are cannibals. Could they perform sacrificial rituals of some kind? Who or what demands that kind of thing? Old gods? Other shapechangers?

#### HEART AND SOUL

JENNY: You fucking liar.

ANONYMOUS: Pardon me? I never lied.

JENNY: You've been giving that cop the information I'm digging up.

ANONYMOUS: How does that make me a liar? JENNY: You never told me you were sharing it. You never said anything about including him.

ANONYMOUS: That doesn't make me a liar. What did you think I was going to do?

JENNY: Not that! You could get us all caught!

ANONYMOUS: Hardly. I want this solved as much as you do. Yes, I've shared what you've told me, just like I've shared what he's provided. That's part of my agreement with him, and that's what I've been doing with you. That's not lying, it's prudent. The police may not understand what they're investigating — and I don't give all the details that we

have — but they can still discover things that mean something to us. I'd be a fool not to share.

JENNY: If Snow gets picked and locked away, how will I get to him? You think I'm doing this for you or the police? I'm doing it for my friends. There was a time I thought we could do some good with what we've been shown, but now I see it all comes down to death theirs or ours.

ANONYMOUS: I wouldn't worry about Snow going to jail. The police have circumstantial evidence at best, and nothing that will add up to make sense to them. If anything, they'll distract Snow and buy us time.

JENNY: Yeah, well, I'm not so sure.

ANONYMOUS: You called me a liar, but it seems that you're the one who lied. You agreed not to do anything more until we spoke again. Obviously, you did something.

JENNY: I can't just sit by while this thing rapes and kills women.

ANONYMOUS: How did you know Detective Fenton has your information?

JENNY: [Pause] Because Snow said a cop talked to him. A detective.

ANONYMOUS: You talked to Snow.

JENNY: Yeah.

ANONYMOUS: You're jeopardizing everything. Do you realize that? What happened to you? You need to start using your head, again, not your heart.

JENNY: Like Dinah Carroll?

ANONYMOUS: You know what I'm saying. Confronting the thing before you know anything about it is suicide. You're lucky that you aren't dead, with your organs harvested. You're smarter and better than that. [Pause.] Jenny?

JENNY: At least I didn't try to kill him.

ANONYMOUS: You went to the bar, then?

JENNY: No. If I did, I think I would've taken him out.

ANONYMOUS: Then how did you talk to him? JENNY: I called the bar on Friday night and had the bartender put him on.

ANONYMOUS: Did you at least record the call? JENNY: I'm not a total ass.

ANONYMOUS: I want to hear that tape. Can you send it to me?

JENNY: Snail mail or email?

ANONYMOUS: You have it recorded into your computer?

JENNY: No, I don't know how to do that, but I typed it up as best I could.

ANONYMOUS: I'll send you my email address. I'll call you back when I'm done reading it. In the meantime, I'll fax you Fenton's report on the interrogation.

#### INSTINCT

SUSPECT INTERVIEW

Barrett Gitler, aka Emmett Snow

Stenographer: Haley Fraser

Interviewing Detective: Carl Fenton 18:22 PM

Suspect: What's with the girl in the corner?

Detective: She's taking dictation. Police procedure.

Suspect: Tape-recorder broken?

Detective: Tell me where you were around 9 p.m. on the 27th.

Suspect: Do I need an alibi for something? Detective:Just answer the question.

Suspect: At the bar.

Detective: What bar?

Suspect: The bar you just picked me up at. Detective: The name. Just say the name. Suspect: The Old Souls Tavern, okay? Detective: And someone can corroborate

that?

Suspect: A shitload of people. Ask the bartender, Missy. Or talk to the owner, Carlos. Or ask any dumb fuck in there. They'll remember me. I got a pretty face.

Detective: How about 3 a.m. on the 20th? Suspect: Like I can remember back that far?

Detective: I suggest you remember real fast. It was a Saturday night. Think hard.

Suspect: If it was a Saturday night, then I was at the bar again. Oh, excuse me, the Old Souls Tavern.

Detective: Don't take that tone with me. You're in deep shit. A murder rap is no small thing.

Suspect: [Laughs.]

Detective: Go to the Hare and Stag Hotel a lot?

Suspect: The Hare and what? Ah, wait. That creepy hotel down the highway? No, I don't go there. Detective: What if I told you we had a witness who placed you there, who claims you go in there frequently?

Suspect: Then I'd say they were lying. Detective: Did you know Betsy Rausch? Suspect: Who? No.

Detective: Did you know Dinah Carroll? Suspect: Let me guess, these are murder victims. Hoping to throw their names at me and make me pee my pants and confess? I didn't kill nobody.

Detective: You're in a lot of trouble, Emmett.

Suspect: No, I'm not. Call the bar. Ask them.

Detective: You really think that'll hold up?

Suspect: [Audibly sniffing.]

Detective: What, I smell bad?

Suspect: Nah, you smell afraid. Under that shitty aftershave. Afraid, and a little angry.

Detective: I think I'll go make that call now.

Suspect: You do that.

[interrogation pauses]

18:40 PM

[interrogation resumes]

Suspect: So, you going to charge me with something?

Detective: Don't fuck with me, Emmett. It's time to fess up.

Suspect: Charge me or release me.

Detective: This isn't a joke. Take responsibility for your actions. Do the right thing.

Suspect: I'll say it again. Charge me or release me.

Detective: Get out of here. But you'll be seeing me. This isn't done.

Suspect: It's done, all right.

Notice Snow smelling the air? Thoughts on that?

There's another report, but I won't bother faxing it to you. Detective Fenton made the call to the bar. He talked to the bartender and the owner, as the suspect suggested. Both remembered Snow being there on both nights, without question. They claimed he was there all night, each night. I m under the impression that this tavern is not a friendly place. I suspect now more than ever that it's the safehouse" that we discussed earlier.

#### Conclusions

Emmett Snow (real name: Barrett Gitler) is hiding something, but his fingerprints don't match any of the full or partial prints that we picked up at the murder scenes, although his blood is also strangely inconclusive. The lab tech, Vince Acer, says that some blood types elude easy classification, but that applies to about 1 out of every 650,000 people. That suggests he's the perp, but it's not conclusive proof. His alibis more than cover for it. I'll ask the judge to see if I can get a search warrant.

He wont get a warrant. Not enough evidence. The system seems designed to keep monsters on the wrong side of bars. The police can't do anything. It's our job.

### T'RASH T'ALK

From: jotto@mindfyre.net To: anonymous@freewords.com Subject: Phone transcript

I've attached the file.

[attached file: bsnow\_01.doc]

{view file: BSNOW\_01.DOC}

BARTENDER: Old Souls. Missy speaking.

JENNY: I need Snow.

BARTENDER: Who?

JENNY: Emmett Snow.

BARTENDER: Don't know him.

JENNY: Yeah, you do. Tell him it's one of his suburban house-sluts.

BARTENDER: Hold on.

SNOW: What is it?

JENNY: Murder anybody under an overpass lately? SNOW: Who is this?

JENNY: I know about the murders, Snow. All of them. I even know about the two new ones. Dinah and Betsy. Ring a bell?

SNOW: This another cop?

JENNY: What?

SNOW: Fuck off, bitch. Tell Fenton he can kiss my shitter.

JENNY: He's been to see you?

SNOW: Let me guess: You're the good cop, he's the bad cop? You a pretty cop, too? I like pretty cops.

JENNY: Oh, you want to go for a tumble?

SNOW: Only if you got an ass I could eat off. JENNY: Is that what you do? You eat their organs?

First a kidney, then a heart? What's next? Liver? Brain?

SNOW: Baby, there's only one thing I like to eat on a woman.

JENNY: Do you eat their organs for power? What are you?

SNOW: I'm hanging up now. Bye.

JENNY: I know what you are.

SNOW: Sure you fucking do.

JENNY: You're an animal — and a man. You think they didn't find hair where you killed Rausch? And whatever they find, I find. You're a beast-man. You know it and I know it. What's down there at your little bar? A bunch more just like you? Do you go out after you kill a woman and howl at the moon? Piss on the shrubs and sniff each other's butts?

SNOW: You don't know what you're talking about, honey.

JENNY: I know enough. I see right through you. I know you killed my friends, and I know you killed those housewives. I can't abide someone like you. I want to see you suffer. You're an animal that's gone rabid, and we put rabid animals down.

SNOW: Sounds like you're threatening me.

JENNY: Then you heard me right.

SNOW: You're not a cop.

JENNY: Bingo.

SNOW: Come for me and I'll fuck you, then I'll gut you like a trout. And if I find you before you find me, it'll be worse. I'll make you my toy. My human toilet. I'll chain you up and use you like a fucking dishrag.

JENNY: Goodbye.

#### TAXONOMY

JENNY: Yeah?

ANONYMOUS: I read it.

JENNY: And?

ANONYMOUS: You're very angry over this.

JENNY: I know, I know. I was stupid.

ANONYMOUS: Good. Keep believing that. It'll stop you from making a mistake like that again.

JENNY: I just want to get him. I want him to pay. ANONYMOUS: He will, but we need to understand what he is first.

JENNY: Well, what do we know?

ANONYMOUS: He's some kind of shapechanger. We know that much. JENNY: Why do you say that for sure?

ANONYMOUS: Animal hair found on the scene. An atypical blood type. Rots don't bleed. Neither do fangs. They're both already dead. As something between human and animal, it stands to reason that shapechangers have unusual blood, and the animal hair bridges the gap for me. Finally, the thing has taken organs. Maybe because there's power in certain ones. Native Americans used to eat their enemies to gain power. Maybe there's something to that myth.

JENNY: I don't buy that. The organs were removed sloppily, but not to indicate hunger. Wouldn't he just have chewed down to them and tore them out?

ANONYMOUS: Good point. But let's remember that shapechangers are part human as well as animal. That would suggest they keep a human perspective at least part of the time. Maybe they can overcome their instincts to perform delicate rather than purely savage acts.

JENNY: I'm not really convinced, but I guess I don't have any other answers.

ANONYMOUS: Well, what do we know about shapechangers?

JENNY: Jesus, enough with the questions. I don't know. They can turn from man to wolf, and maybe to something in-between, like in the movies? They have a connection to the moon? Reports I've read on the net say they come out at night, and not just during the full moon, so maybe that's total bunk. That's all I know. Oh! Silver! Silver hurts them.

ANONYMOUS: That agrees with some of what I've heard, though I believe they can turn into more than just wolves.

JENNY: What do you mean?

ANONYMOUS: Any predatory animal might be fair game. Big cats, bears.

JENNY: They found goat hair at the scene of the first murder, but goats aren't exactly predators.

ANONYMOUS: I think goat hair was just the closest match. Maybe fur from a beast-man isn't precisely human, but isn't precisely animal, either. It might have confused the forensics people, so they made an assumption.

JENNY: I guess I better get some silver jewelry or cutlery — to melt down into bullets or something.

ANONYMOUS: You know how to do that? JENNY: No, but I'll figure it out.

ANONYMOUS: [Pause.] How does it feel?

JENNY: What?

ANONYMOUS: To be back. To be focused again.

JENNY: Are you kidding? It feels like shit. [Pause.] But I'm better than I was.

#### FLYING BLIND

From: jotto@mindfyre.net To: anonymous@freewords.com Subject: WTF are you?

I've been paging you all day. Where are you? I know you're not at my beck and call, but we need to talk. You're all "in the know" about everything, so I assume you've already read this in the paper, but just in case you haven't, I've scanned and attached it. Call me. This is important. Did I get her killed? Did \_we\_ get her killed? I feel like shit, but I'm trying to keep my head. I want the police report on this. The paper doesn't say what happened. I want to know if it's connected. It has to be.

[attached file: CUTHBERT.TIF] {view file: CUTHBERT.TIF] BODY FOUND IN LOCAL HOTEL

By Rory York, Staff Reporter

The Matawbha County Sheriff's Department was called to the scene of a local woman's murder early on Sunday morning.

Officials say deputies responded to an anonymous 911 call directing them to the Stag and Hare Hotel Sunday morning. Investigating officers arrived at the scene.

Public Information Officer Sandra Wu said in a prepared statement that the body was discovered in Room 188 at the Stag and Hare on the floor next to the bed. The victim has been identified as Margaret Cuthbert, age 27. Official autopsy results are pending, but initial indications are that Cuthbert died from a blunt trauma to the head. Answering questions from the press, PIO Wu said that Cuthbert's homicide appears to be unconnected to the recent homicides of Betsy Rausch and Dinah Carroll. Wu said detectives are currently ruling out the possibility that there is anything linking the crimes.

Margaret Cuthbert was an employee at the Hare and Stag Hotel. Family members and friends are expected to arrive in Newthorpe to make memorial and funeral arrangements.

#### T RUTH AND CONSEQUENCE

JENNY: You got my email.

ANONYMOUS: I read it in the paper this morning. But yes, I did get your email.

JENNY: We killed her. I killed her.

ANONYMOUS: No-

JENNY: Bullshit! If I hadn't opened my big mouth and blabbed about her to you, she'd still be alive. I got her killed. I practically bashed her skull in myself. ANONYMOUS: Listen to me. You're thinking with your heart again, not your head. Margaret Cuthbert—

JENNY: Maggie. She told me her name was Maggie. ANONYMOUS: She made a mistake. She knew about Snow. She didn't know precisely what he was, no. She never had the information or knowledge that we do, but she knew that two women were murdered. Not only did she know it, she covered it up. She erased all records of Snow from the hotel books. Then she lied to the police.

JENNY: Yeah....

ANONYMOUS: You said yourself that she may have been involved with Snow sexually.

JENNY: That was just a hunch. I thought she was, but now....

ANONYMOUS: How many women has he killed? Two that we know of, but there may have been more. How many murders could Maggie Cuthbert have prevented if she had said something? One? Two? Ten? She didn't say anything, though, did she? She kept quiet, and people died.

JENNY: Oh, God.

ANONYMOUS: Jenny, actions have consequences. I'm not saying that she deserved to die, but she did bring it upon herself. You don't need to feel guilty. You're not guilty. Besides, we don't even know that she was murdered by Snow.

JENNY: The police report should give us some clues. Things that weren't printed in the paper. Were her organs taken out? Or did he just kill her? Can you fax me a copy?

ANONYMOUS: There is no report.

JENNY: There has to be. It was a murder.

ANONYMOUS: Let me rephrase that: I don't have the report, though I'm sure there is one.

JENNY: Well, call Fenton. Get it from him. ANONYMOUS: I'm afraid I can't do that. JENNY: Why not?

ANONYMOUS: Our arrangement has ended. JENNY: Did he find out about you? About us? ANONYMOUS: No. I can't say. I have to go right

now. We'll talk later. Be ready for anything. JENNY: What are you talking about? If there's a problem, we need to solve it. Your relationship with that cop is important. Can't we fix—

ANONYMOUS: I have to make a phone call. JENNY: Wait!

#### ACTION/REACTION

ANONYMOUS: Hello, Jenny.

JENNY: Is everything all right? What happened? Did you make your call?

ANONYMOUS: Yes. JENNY: Did you fix things with Fenton? ANONYMOUS: That's not who I called. JENNY: What? Who then?

ANONYMOUS: I hope you're ready for this, because lately you haven't been thinking things through, and I need you to be in control now more than ever.

JENNY: What are you talking about? ANONYMOUS: Fenton is dead. JENNY: What? ANONYMOUS: Snow killed him. JENNY: Oh, God! This is our fault.

ANONYMOUS: This one is my fault and mine alone. I called Snow last night. I found him at the bar and spoke to him. I told him I was a friend, an anonymous ally, and then I gave him Fenton's home address.

JENNY: You what? ANONYMOUS: I didn't expect Fenton to die, but I knew it would be an acceptable loss if it happened. I had to know more about Snow. We know some things about him, but we don't know everything. So I gave him Fenton's address, and then went there to wait for him to show up. And he did.

JENNY: I don't believe this. ANONYMOUS: Stay calm, Jenny. I did it for us. Fenton wasn't a good man. He was no great loss. He cheated on his wife, was addicted to porn and painkillers, and took bribes to lose evidence.

JENNY: Who are we to judge?

ANONYMOUS: Listen. Snow showed up, alone, and I studied him. There's a thing inside him. A literal beast under his skin. It was like he had two faces. It didn't take him long to get to Fenton. He tried to get away, tried to get to his closet where I presume he had a gun. But he kept tripping, falling down and stumbling, as if over nothing at all. Snow laughed — and then he changed.

JENNY: What do you mean, "changed"?

ANONYMOUS: He shifted into some kind of thing. Half-animal, half-man. I couldn't see everything, but huge horns came out of his head. Before Fenton could get to the nightstand, the TV slid across the floor and smashed into Fenton, knocking him over.

JENNY: You didn't do anything? You were right there!

ANONYMOUS: Even if I wanted to — which I didn't — I couldn't.

JENNY: You killed Fenton.

ANONYMOUS: No, Snow killed him. Then he broke a window, cut Fenton up with a piece of glass, and removed his tongue. And then Snow... Snow ate it... and left.

JENNY: You're lying! Why wasn't it in the paper? A detective is butchered in his house and no one says anything? That's bullshit!

ANONYMOUS: I had the body removed.

JENNY: What? You what? Well, this just keeps getting better. Sweet Jesus.

ANONYMOUS: C'mon now, we don't need more police muddling this up. Fenton served his purpose. No other police were needed.

JENNY: You set him up!

ANONYMOUS: I thought maybe Fenton might kill Snow, but that didn't happen.

JENNY: You sick bastard!

ANONYMOUS: Think what you want, but now we know. Snow is a shapeshifter, plain and simple. He's very quick. He has tricks. Like the one that made Fenton fall, and the one that sent the TV across the room. It's some sort of psychokinesis. Remember that. Did you get the silver bullets made?

JENNY: What? You think I want to have anything more to do with you?

ANONYMOUS: There's a reason I'm telling you this.

JENNY: Really, what's that?

ANONYMOUS: I gave Snow your home address tonight, too. That was the call I had to make.

JENNY: You what? Why?

ANONYMOUS: Because you can get him. You can stop him. Fenton couldn't, but I was able to learn more and be sure about Snow. Now we know. Now it's time to take him out. It wasn't long ago that I called, but it won't take him long to get there.

JENNY: You motherfucking--

ANONYMOUS: Get the silver ready. Page me when it's done.

#### BAD DREAM

ANONYMOUS: Jenny, is that you?

JENNY: I'm breathing, aren't I?

ANONYMOUS: You're alive!

JENNY: I don't know who you are. You think you're smart. You think you're calling all the shots and every one of them is on the money.

ANONYMOUS: What are you talking about? I helped you.

JENNY: He wasn't a shapeshifter.

ANONYMOUS: Of course he was. I saw it with my own eyes.

JENNY: Whatever you think you saw, you were wrong.

ANONYMOUS: You're certain?

JENNY: Yeah, I'm certain.

ANONYMOUS: Tell me. Tell me what happened. JENNY: You mean after the part where you stabbed me in the back and sent a monster to my house?

ANONYMOUS: Can you please tell me the facts?

JENNY: Yeah, I can do that. It didn't take him five minutes to show up. He rang the doorbell like he was a guest or the goddamn UPS man. I looked through the peephole and saw him standing there, smiling. I opened the door and before he knew what was happening, I jammed a butter knife in his neck — a silver knife. Down to the handle.

ANONYMOUS: Good. I imagine he still put up a fight, though?

JENNY: You could say that. It didn't faze him! It didn't do shit to him!

ANONYMOUS: Then it wasn't real silver.

JENNY: Yes, it was. It was part of a set and cost me a fortune — and Snow didn't give a shit! He tackled me back inside.

ANONYMOUS: He was strong. I know that.

JENNY: He was more than strong. He was fast. And huge. He practically carried me into the kitchen, then slammed me onto the table — laughing!

ANONYMOUS: What happened next?

JENNY: He started making threats. Sexual threats. He told me what he was going to do to me while he had me pinned there.

ANONYMOUS: What threats, exactly?

JENNY: You'd like that, wouldn't you?

ANONYMOUS: I'm just after information. Anything that shows what he was, what his purpose was, especially if wasn't a shapechanger like you say.

JENNY: I don't care what you want, not anymore. I just want the satisfaction of finishing this.

ANONYMOUS: Then finish.

JENNY: He was still talking his talk, and he tried to hit me with a chair. I got away before he did, but it was like you said with Fenton. I got as far as the living room when it felt like there was something around my feet. Like ropes or a twisted up blanket. I fell into the fireplace screen.

I turned and I finally saw the real Snow. It was the first time I had some distance from him. It was like there was another face under his. It wasn't human. That's when he changed for real.

ANONYMOUS: He shapechanged.

JENNY: Yes... and no. Not like you think. He... flickered. I could still see the human part, but that second face came out. He grew.

ANONYMOUS: What did he look like?

JENNY: Like... the Devil from your worst nightmares. Round goat horns. His legs bent backward. He had hooves! And his eyes — they looked like holes.

ANONYMOUS: But you say he wasn't a shapechanger...?

JENNY: I don't know how to say it, except that it's not like he actually became that thing. It was like he was only halfway. I could still see Snow in there. It was like one side traded places with the other.

ANONYMOUS: I don't see how-

JENNY: I know what I saw. He wasn't a shapechanger! He was something else. A demon. I don't know.

ANONYMOUS: Well, at least your description explains the goat hair. What happened next?

JENNY: What do you think? He came after me again. He was fast, angry. I grabbed for the nearest thing I could find and hit him in the head with the fireplace shovel.

ANONYMOUS: But he kept coming ...?

JENNY: No, he fell against the fireplace, screaming.

ANONYMOUS: What? What happened?

JENNY: It was horrible. It was burning him. Where I hit him, there was a cut, really deep. He turned to me, and he had this kind of sorry look in his eyes, like he realized what he was doing.

ANONYMOUS: What did you do?

JENNY: I hit him again. In the legs, in the back. Then I drove the corner of the shovel through his hand and pinned it to the floor. His skin was smoldering. His big, clawed hand ate away right in front of me....

You still there?

ANONYMOUS: I... I don't know what to say. JENNY: What's there to say? You were wrong. ANONYMOUS: There's nothing to say— JENNY: You were wrong! Silver didn't do anything! ANONYMOUS: What's your fireplace set made of?

JENNY: How the hell am I supposed to know? It hurt him. It hurt him bad, and that's what counts.

ANONYMOUS: This is important.

JENNY: No, what's important is that I got what I wanted. We had a little chat.

ANONYMOUS: You talked to him?

JENNY: He wasn't going anywhere.

ANONYMOUS: Did he explain why he was taking organs?

JENNY: No, but he had a lot of pills on him. Three bottles. Looked like steroids, and a bag of something white that smelled like cat piss.

ANONYMOUS: Methamphetamines.

JENNY: I think he was some sort of junkie. Not just on drugs. Sex, pills, whatever. Maybe eating people gave him some kind of rush.

ANONYMOUS: What did he tell you, then?

JENNY: He confessed to the murders. More of them than I knew about.

ANONYMOUS: Good. I hope his guilt was clear.

JENNY: Yeah, except for one thing. He didn't know anything about Hiram, Shelley or Jay.

ANONYMOUS: He was probably afraid you'd kill him if he confessed to those.

JENNY: He confessed to murders all over the place. He didn't know what my connection was to those three. Why confess to other murders, but keep those ones secret? I was rocking the shovel back and forth. He would have told me anything.

ANONYMOUS: You believed him. That's what you're telling me.

JENNY: Not right then. I was angry at him for lying to me, so I killed him, but I got to thinking...

ANONYMOUS: Is that what you're-

JENNY: Hey! You almost got me killed, asshole!

I did some thinking, and I think you've been lying to me. I think you lied about my friends. Snow was never involved with those three. The murders didn't match. He killed out of passion, but my friends were executed. I think they were killed by someone else, and then you come along knowing all about the—

#### TWISTING THE KNIFE

From: jotto@mindfyre.net To: anonymous@freewords.com Subject: Last Words You hung up on me and you haven't answered my pages.

You were right. I was off my game before. For a long time I felt sorry for myself. I was trying to hide from the truth. I couldn't face how things were or who I was.

But now I'm back. I feel strong. In fact, I did some checking on you.

Now you have a name, Wallace Vender, and a face, a home address, and a social security number. I went down to the police station, just to see what I could see. I asked around about Detective Fenton. I played like I was an old friend. They were curious about me, I guess because he hasn't checked in for a few days. They'll find out the truth sooner or later.

I talked to the officer at the evidence desk. I guess she didn't like him much. Said he was always hitting on her. I used that to get on her good side. You know what she said? She said Fenton talked a lot to the janitor. That they went out for coffee. Sometimes lunch. That's when I knew.

She said you quit about a week ago.

So, I gave what I had to my friend working for the state. She probably thinks I'm some kind of slut now, but she came back with everything I need on you.

That's not the end, though. Some of Snow's friends came looking for me. I think they were from the bar. They had faces under their faces, too, but different from Snow. I don't know what they are. I didn't put up a fight. Yeah, I'm kind of in rough shape, but I pointed them like a gun — in your direction. I gave them most everything, even your license-plate number. I said you hired me to take out Snow. That interested them. Suddenly more than I did, anyway.

I know I won't get an answer, but I have to ask why, Wallace. Why set up my friends and me with all that information, and then turn on us? What did you have to gain? Did you start out on the level and flip? Were you afraid to put your own life on the line, so you used us instead? I guess it doesn't matter. All that matters is that you're on the line now, whether you like it or not.

Try silver. I hear that works.



CHAPTER 3: ONCE UPON A TIME

> They ask the soul, "Whence do you come, killer of men, or where are you going, conqueror of space?" The soul answered and said, "What seizes me is killed; what turns me about is overcome; my desire has come to an end and ignorance is dead." — Apocalypse of Mary (New Testament Apocrypha)

### DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

Subject: Souls in the balance From: anon52 To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

I've been thinking on the subject of souls, and how much pain there is in them. All of them. Every one of us has a soul — yes, even the monsters — and they all scream out in a chorus of pain. It's deafening. A cacophony if ever there was one. But therein lies our job. We stand in the way. That's our purpose. Mankind doesn't know the corruption it faces. They can't even sense the stain that waits to smear their souls, but we understand, and we step in the path of the bullet. Our job is to take the hit so they don't have to. Our hands are soiled. Our souls are muddied so they can continue on, oblivious and alive and karmically sound. Isn't that right, Roshni?

I've been absent from the list for a long time. I haven't been home and haven't been near to a computer for a while. I tracked my son, Tommy. I found him in Tulsa, at a late-night grocery store. His mind wasn't his own anymore, I'm afraid. He spoke mostly gibberish and he'd already drunk the blood of two clerks and a woman by the frozen-foods section. I took his head, and now I have it.

Some say the soul is contained in the heart, but that doesn't make sense to me. The heart is an organ. It pumps blood. It's merely a means to an end. Blood needs to circulate, to enter the heart. Animals have hearts but animals don't have souls. However, the brain, the mind, is a higher creation, an element of man that speaks of sentience and intelligence and wit. That's where the soul lies. Animals don't have that. They have no cognitive capacity. But man has a mind, and in the mind is the soul. The mind rests try it — the thoughts don't come from your stomach. You don't hear them in your feet. The words are in your head, because that's where your mind is. Like I said, the mind contains the soul. That's why I took Tommy's head.

His soul is still in there, like jewelry in a box. I'm going to bring him back. I'm going to go into the

underworld with his soul and bring him back from wherever he went. I'll give up my soul and my life to do it, if I have to. That's what we do. We give things up so that others may have them. I'm Dante. Orpheus. Izanagi. I'm Alice down the rabbit hole, drowning in her pool of tears.

Only my underworld is in the present, here on Earth. I'm going into the Pine Barrens of southern New Jersey, where I'll find a wicked witch. She'll tell me how I can get my son back. I'll give anything — everything — to make it happen. I write this not to be prideful, but merely to show the path that we must all go down one day. I'm lighting the way. This is how it's done.

There's no time for play. There's no time for fun. There's no time for games. There's work to be done. **To:** hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: cabbie22

Subject: Re: Souls in the balance

Oh, good. Another one bites the dust.

Subject: Come on, people From: memphis68

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Tell me you remember this guy. A real selfish ass? Kid turned into a bloodsucker because he didn't have the smarts or guts to take care of business? So now you took care of business, 52, and you want to renege on the deal, right? Guess what, it doesn't work that way. Your kid is gone. Save yourself and us all this soul crap.

Subject: Re: Souls in the balance

From: bookworm55

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Anon52, I admire your intentions, but you seem awfully close to the brink. I understand. I've been there myself, and I'm afraid I get closer every day. I have my own mission, but we have to try to stay calm and sane at the same time. Your son is lost. I'm not trying to tell you that you can't get him back. No one knows that. Strange things — miracles and nightmares — can happen. That's why it's important that you listen to me. I lost track of a vampire and in the process I lost my legs. And now I have them back. But that doesn't mean you can make it happen, too. I'm not even sure how it happened. One of us — Fyodor — did it to me. What he did was a miracle, but I don't know that it could ever be done again. Maybe it shouldn't be.

I'm not trying to dissuade you from doing what you feel is right. But I am cautioning you that sometimes things aren't as clear as we think. Sometimes it's not our souls that are lost, but our perceptions. Please just try to clear your head about this before you do anything. We've seen too many people on this list go astray.

It's good to hear from you again. I hope we continue hearing from you.

From: blackbellamy240 To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org Subject: The Underworld

You know, just the other day I was bouncing around the net reading old-school myths and fairy tales. Something you wrote piqued my attention. Orpheus and Izanagi? Interesting that you mention those names. The underworld myth, that's what you're getting at, tight? Just remember that things worked out bad for both of them. Orpheus was impetuous and lost his head (quite literally). As for Izanagi, he worked very hard to rescue his bride from the land of the dead only to find that she had been gone too long, and was now a demon. Sometimes you can't go home again.

## THE WASTELAND

Subject: Heart of Darkness From: anon52

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

I don't understand your problems. We're in the business of saving souls. Why shouldn't we start with those nearest and dearest? All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put my son back together again. It's up to me now. Why the resistance? I'll ignore it for now.

I'm here in the Jersey Pine Barrens, writing from a motel. It's a strange place. They say it is 1.1 million square miles. The trees are different conifers, tall, black-bark evergreens in the thick of summer, in soil that's half sand, with rivulets of salt-water running between the trees. We think we've conquered the world, populated every corner and delivered it through civilization. We haven't. A few dark places still exist. I think this is one of them.

That's not to say there aren't people here. There are — they even have their own nickname. Like gypsies or pikeys, these people are called "pineys." They're considered hicks, the New Jersey equivalent of rednecks. Not entirely off the mark, I suppose. Few of the people I've seen have all their teeth. They live in trailers and clapboard shacks tucked away under the pine trees. Fishing in murky holes and blowing off fireworks and bottle rockets all night long. They stare at me like I'm just another tourist. Somebody heading down the shore for the weekend who stopped along the way. They don't know that I'm here, that I'm staying until I see this through.

They have no idea that I'm carrying my son's head in a bag, drying up but still containing his wet soul. Tomorrow morning I'm going out, and I'm going to start asking around. I'll find this witch-woman and she'll help me get his soul back. I'm not sure of the process. Will she get it out of his head and put it into a new body? Can he regrow his body, like Bookworm's legs? I have a bad feeling that maybe she'll just bring the head back to life. Then what will I do? Then he'll be just as wrong as he was when I killed him. But I'm confident that there's a solution to all of this.

I've read what you're all saying. I'm not here to start a discussion. Your opinions, however interesting, aren't going to dissuade me. I'm just writing this as something of a travel log. People write them to show where they've been, like Gulliver. Through them, one reveals his experiences on a journey and shows how others can follow the same path and see the same things. That's all I'm doing. I'm following the road less traveled, and I want you all to know how to get there in case you really need to sacrifice something to save someone.

Bookworm, thank you, but I'll be fine. Why should you have the secret of life and death? Blackbellamy, you've read your books, but there's a difference between reading and doing. I hadn't thought of the decapitated head parallel in the Orpheus story, and I appreciate that you pointed it out. It's really quite appropriate.

I have to get some sleep. They say no rest for the weary, but tonight I'm making an exception.

## TALES OF THE TAPE

Subject: What the Thunder Said From: anon52

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

There are so many stories running through this place. Like blood in arteries. For every trickle of salt water that snakes through the sandy dirt, there's a story, or a variation on a story, or a variation on a variation. I've been all over the Barrens today, up and down highways and off exits and around and around New Jersey's circles. If you've been to New Jersey, you know the highways circle in a demented spiral. If you don't get off at the right time, you're doomed to continue circling, like something straight out of Dante.

I've been in diners, in parks crowded with mobile homes, through campgrounds, and in grim little neighborhoods with gray, acid-eaten houses. All under the shadows of the pines that hiss when the wind blows.

I asked about the witch. No one knew what I was talking about, but they had other stories.

Everyone knew something about the Jersey Devil. It's the prevailing legend, the reigning king out here. I've heard the name, though not the story. (Isn't there a sports team named after it? Hockey, I think.) Here's the story as I understand it.

The legend has been around for some 200 years. The creature itself has many origins, with everyone giving a slight variation, like a story told through Whisper Down the Lane. It ends up being entirely different from how it started. Some say the creature came from Hell to punish sinners who had come from England, that it fought in the Revolutionary War. Others say it was a gypsy curse put on a bad family. Others say that it was the 13th child of a 13th child, born to a woman that cursed it because she was raped by an English soldier.

Everyone describes the creature differently, though some characteristics are consistent: A long, equine face, the skull of a deformed horse. Bat wings. A leathery belly filled with sulfur and blood. Long reptilian legs ending in massive black hooves.

Was it born of a human mother? Was it a human man cursed by a gypsy? Or did it come screaming out of Hell to punish the wicked? Was it in 1735? 1782? 1810? Even as late as 1880? The mythic sightings are constant, beginning centuries ago and carrying through to present day. One of the first apparently came from the brother of Napoleon, Joseph Bonaparte. It was the early-19th century, and he was staying at a local village called Bordentown. He saw it in the forest. The story varies, of course. Some say he shot holes in its bat wings and was amazed when it still flew off. Others say that he found the Devil eating a deer, and Joseph was shocked and appalled and brought in an exorcist.

I even met one woman who swears she saw the creature less than a year ago. She said one night her dogs, tied up out back, barked furiously at something. She went out to see what was going on and said she was "chased back into her house by something tall with red eyes." That morning, the dogs were gone, the chains broken, and there was blood about a hundred feet away on a couple of flat rocks. In the dirt and sand were large hoof prints, bigger than a horse's, that led off into the woods and disappeared, "As if the Devil took off with my fucking dogs," she said. She was unable to show me the prints or where the dogs were tied up, but she seemed scared nevertheless.

There are other, lesser-known folktales, too. A man at a gas station in Chatsworth told me two stories — one about a white stag and one about a black doctor. Both good creatures, this time. The stag apparently appears from time to time to warn people from danger — collapsing bridges, car accidents, even appearing to frighten intended rapists or murderers. The black doctor was apparently a real man named James Still who was one of the country's first African-American physicians. He worked in the 1830s and 1840s, and it's said people preferred his methods because he didn't subscribe to the practices of other doctors - bloodletting, amputation. He died some time later and supposedly appears to people as an omen of good fortune. He turns up — black coat and hat — and those who see him come into money, find love or miraculously recuperate from some illnesses.

Still nothing on my witch, though. I'm thinking of looking for either the stag or the doctor to see if they can help. Did this place ever have actual stags? I thought we had deer or elk, and only Europe had stags. It's probably nothing but a story, anyway. The doctor, however, may be able to help cure my son. I'll find something, somehow. I'll keep at it until it's done.

# **RING AROUND THE ROSES**

Subject: Which witch, which? From: anon52

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

The path is a little brighter. Slowly the light grows. It's been a couple weeks since 1 last wrote. This deserves mentioning, because someone finally knew something about the witch. I was going from store to store, talking to clerks to see if anyone knew anything. And then enlightenment came at a bait shop off Route 72, near Wharton State Park. A few men were sitting on the front porch, two younger men and one, mostly bald. He wore suspenders, which I didn't think anyone did anymore.

As I pulled the car into the parking lot, a few children ran by. I love children. They were running and playing in the "rosy red fingers of dawn," as it were. It was humid out, making me break a sweat immediately. As I approached, the older man was just finishing up with the other two. He was teaching them, I think, about fishing — making sure they had the right lures or reels or whatever. I've never fished. It always seemed so selfish.

The kids ran by the porch, laughing and squirting each other with water guns. The man looked at me as if to say, "You don't look like a fisherman, son." When the kids ran too close and some water hit the man, he yelled at them. "I'll tan your hides if you don't leave me the hell alone!" He pulled out and waved around a wooden paint stirrer. He looked like he might whip me with it, too, but I persevered.

I explained what I was looking for, and he said he might know something, but the heat was driving the fishermen away and business hadn't been so good lately, and he was old.

I paid him. Money means so little to me anymore. Provided I can eat, put a roof over my head and some gas in the car, I'll always get by. Money's just a tool. He wanted it. I had it. He told me about a woman. *The* witch in all the Pine Barrens. He called her "The Leeds Witch" and said that she lived up in the Forked River Mountains, near the coast, up county route 539. I didn't even know there were mountains in New Jersey. He said there were a lot of things that people didn't know, and more importantly "a lot of things folks don't ever want to know."



He leered over the money. He touched it almost sexually, rubbing his thumb in circles over it. His mouth hung open and I saw his tongue. It was split down the middle near the tip. Forked, just like the mountains where he said the witch lived. I was content and didn't need to know anymore. He was my Charon. I'd placed a coin under his tongue and on both of his eyes and it was time to see what was at the other end of the river. I already know what's there, though. At the end of the journey lie the fires of purgatory, and I'll reach in and pull out my son's soul.

I went back to my car. The two kids came up and looked in, mischievous looks on their faces. They stuck their tongues out at me. Forked, too, just like the man's. I wondered. These "pineys" really are like gypsies, or at least legendary gypsies. I've never met any personally, but I'll assume there's some truth to the myth. These people seem almost tribal. And their tongues — I know there's a way to create it by slicing down the center and keeping it from healing. They do it in Africa. It's just another way of marking those who belong with you. Interesting. I wish I had more time to think about it, but I can't be distracted. Slowly but surely, I descend to where the wild things are.

# BELLY OF THE WHALE

Subject: Wicked Words of the Witch From: anon52

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

They're not real mountains, these "Forked River Mountains." More like hills needled with pines. It's like the pine trees and hills pop up right from the beach. The place smells like salt water, and worse, there's the smell of dead and dying fish. Seagulls circle overhead, and there's sand all over. There are even shells lying around. It's a conundrum. A mixed place, confused. Like nothing else I've ever seen. All around, those black-barked pines jut straight up to the sky. Here I am, I thought, where the sidewalk ends.

The witch's house was right where the forkedtongued man said it would be. His directions were unusual — he cited natural landmarks instead of roads or houses. There was nothing up this way, just a steep hill to climb. Turn left at the double boulders, he said. Go north to the salt eddy. Climb the hill until you see the ruined foundation of a sewing factory that burned down in the mid-1800s. Then, he said, the house would be in sight further down the hill. He was right. I found the factory. The jagged remains of its red walls still pushed up through the dirt like monster's teeth. Further down was a long row house, a wooden shack that looked like the walls weren't connected, but were merely leaning on one another. I had to laugh. I half expected a gingerbread house. Or maybe I thought there would be a yellow-brick road, or some poor woman's shoe sticking out from under the foundation. Maybe I read too much.

I went inside to meet the Leeds witch. She was waiting.

Was I stepping into the mouth of the beast? Probably. Maybe I still haven't come out the other end. That's why I'm writing this to all of you, to pull you along and show you that these sacrifices are our gift, not our punishment. We give everything up so the world will have more. I think the witch understood, for some strange reason. I felt an instant connection with her.

She was old. I can't say how old, but she looked like a skeleton with a white tablecloth thrown over it. Still, she had all of her teeth and her eyes were bright and alive. (Magic, I believe, has kept her alive for an unnaturally long time.) Her house had the odor of rotting food and flowers. I saw why. A slab of ground beef lay on a cutting board. Flies were on it like raisins with wings. Violets were everywhere in small terracotta pots. The woman started talking, telling me that she knew why I was there, and that she knew what was in my bag. I've decided to write out the conversation as I recall it. I'm not attempting to show off. It's just that we have to get close to the monsters, to almost become monsters to make our work worthwhile.

HER: You were a good father.

ME: Am. I am a good father.

HER: Then why's your son's head in that bag?

ME: Because I need you to get his soul out. It couldn't be saved in the body it was in. He tried to kill me. I just wanted to talk. So I had to kill him.

HER: And you took his head. As a souvenir? ME: No!

HER: A memento.

ME: I saved it because it's what he needs. Can you help me?

HER: You were a terrible father. A real gollykeeper if ever there was one. A terrible husband, too.

ME: Yes. Yes, I was.

HER: Where is she now? The wife? Carol.

ME: How do you know her name?

HER: I know all sorts of things. Where is she?

ME: I don't know. Home. I haven't been there in a long time.

HER: A terrible father, a terrible husband. Probably a terrible son.

ME: I am terrible. A monster.

HER: Not yet, but maybe you will be.

ME: I don't want to be, but I'm willing if it's necessary.

HER: I don't properly believe you.

ME: You have to. I need your help.

HER: Can't say that I will. Why should I believe you? I have something that needs doing. Something a foreign man like yourself wouldn't much gather.

ME: I'm not foreign.

HER: You are to me. To this place. You think you're pretty middling smart, don't you? You want to be the real hero behind the stove but you haven't convinced me to help you yet.

ME: I'll do anything. Anything you ask. Tell me and I'll do it, as long as you promise to help my son. Forget me, but my son needs you badly.

HER: Are you sure you're not some lazy shackling? Some shell-grabber from the mainland?

ME: Yes. I'm willing to do what I have to.

HER: Good. I need two things before I do this. One is for you, one for me. For you, find me a woman. She's got to be ready with child.

ME: A pregnant woman?

HER: Yes. Ready to burst her seams proper. Second thing is for me. You'll do it after getting the woman. There's a devil — the Devil — haunting these woods. I can't rightly see you killing it, but that's what I'm telling you to do. Kill it, and bring me its heart.

ME: I will. I'll find it and cut out its heart. But the woman—will she be hurt? I won't hurt a woman. I can't.

HER: There'll be no pain for the woman. She'll be alive and well after all of this, but I still need her to make your miracle happen. Are we of an understanding?

ME: Yes. I'll get you the woman. And I'll get you the creature's heart.

HER: You might. You might not. This is a real jagged one. The devil is weak now, but that don't mean it wants to die. It'll have a real kenning for staying alive. It has a congregation, too. People who protect it. You may die.

ME: I'm ready to die.

HER: Well, just remember, dying won't get your boy back. Only the heart will, and the woman.

ME: I understand.

HER: Let me draw you a map. There are parts where the devil does his business more often than not.

She drew me a map and told me where to look. I guess I'm really on the hunt now. I'm looking forward to this. It's as if through all of the terror, there's a light at the end of the tunnel. I'm offering salvation to my son. I love him. I look forward to reading to him. The two of us can write stories together.

I've thought this through very carefully. I'm sure there are those of you out there who think I've really lost it. That I'm listening to voices or have some messiah complex, but everything is clear. We live such a short time. Every moment counts. My moments all ended when I became what I am — when we all become what we are. It's over for us. We've been chosen to be scapegoats. I mean that in the historical sense, not the common one. We're the animal that the tribe takes and places its sins upon. The sin-eaters, the sacrificial lambs, whatever you want to call it. We're not people anymore. We don't have wills. We only have tasks, duties. That's all I am here. I'm the thread in the sewing needle. I'm pulling it all together.

# BEDTIME STORY

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: cabbie22

Subject: Light at the end of the tunnel

Ever hear the phrase, "The light at the end of the tunnel is a train"?

Subject: Re: Wicked Words of the Witch

From: memphis68

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Danger list. Put this guy on the Danger List. He's gone off the reservation. He has his son's head in a bag. He passed up an opportunity to run the sight by those freaks with the forked tongues. He's making deals with witches. He's going on some half-cocked Jesus crusade. And he's about to kidnap a pregnant woman — a citizen, a civilian, the very people we're trying to protect? Witness? I propose that we deal with this guy before he gets innocent people hurt.

From: blackbellamy240

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Re: Heart of Darkness

(Witness hasn't reported in for awhile. Anybody notice that?)

This is all too fun. Why are we worrying? It's probably a big pile of steaming bullshit no matter how you cut it. Come on, it's a classic mish-mash of pop mythology. Charon, the Underworld, Jesus, Orpheus, blah blah blah. On top of that, he's basically painting himself as some weirdo modern-day Hercules. And then on top of that are references to children's literature!

The final splash of grease in the pan is this talk about a monster that's stupider than Alien Big Cats in England or Bigfoot Skunk Apes in the Everglades.

Hell, a few years ago some people pulled a radio stunt saying they had caught the Jersey Devil. It was some animal with wings duct taped to its back and antlers glued to its head.

Anon52, please, by all means, continue to amuse us with this bedtime story.

# QUITE CONTRARY

Subject: Little Lamb From: anon52 To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Her name is Mary and I won't hurt her. Nor will I allow her to be hurt. I am a monster. We're all monsters. My soul is stained, but it's intact. She's very beautiful.

For the record, this isn't a story. It's very real. The Devil out here is also very real. I haven't seen it yet, but why do you think there are so many stories about it? Stories hold truth. That's why people tell them. They're seeking truth, just like we are here. Mythology, novels, even children's stories all come from kernels of truth. Same with stereotypes. Do you think there have been stories and sightings of the Devil in New Jersey for the last 250 years because people enjoy being scared? There are also ghost stories and vampire stories in every culture of the world. Is someone brave enough to tell me that all that is just children's stories? I don't think so.

This stuff is real. We've all seen it. Who says that there isn't a Loch Ness Monster or Skunk Apes or UFOs or goblins? There might be a Yeti, a Bigfoot, or aliens, or talking coyotes, or gravity hills or anything that people tell stories about. Do we think we wrote the book on evil? I promise you, there are things out there that we haven't even begun to conceive. Things that the stories haven't told yet. Don't be blind. Don't think that any of us is smart enough to know everything. Just as you have to be willing to sacrifice yourselves, you'd better be ready to sacrifice your beliefs. I'm here to tell you, everything we know is wrong.

I didn't want to do that. I told myself I wouldn't. That I wouldn't get upset and argue. I'm not here to argue. I'm not even here to make conversation. I'm just here to tell my story. I have to go cool down. When I get back, I'll write more about Mary, which was my original intent.

### Mother of My Child

Subject: Where Does Her Garden Grow? From: anon52

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Mary's a good woman. Smart and practical. She's eight months pregnant, a single mother. This will be her first child. She went to community college and planned on becoming a paralegal but got pregnant by the wrong man, who left without so much as a forwarding address. Now she lives off welfare in one of the trailer parks I visited while trying to find the witch. That's where I saw her originally, and I remembered her, so I went back and offered her money. I pretended to be rich. She has no idea that I'm practically cleaning out my bank account to get her involved. I have about another week's worth of motel rooms for the both of us, and for food. I'll eat little. She needs to keep up her strength. There's great sacrifice ahead.

I told her that I'd pay her unconditionally to stay in another room until I needed her. She thinks I'm a photographer and that I'm going to take pictures of her. I made up some business about wanting to capture her "matriarchal form," the motherly image, that sort of thing. She bought it. At least, she's agreed so far, probably just because of the money. I said when I'd found the right location, I'd take her into the woods and we'd take the shots. I'd better get myself a camera on loan before that happens, because she won't believe me if we go out without equipment. She's already leery of me, but thankfully money buys just about everything.

You know what's interesting? She wants to name her first child Aristotle. She took a philosophy class once and the teachers told her, correctly, that Aristotle was a smart man. She seems to assume naming her child after someone smart is certain to make the child smart. She said that there's "a lot in a name." I can't help but agree.

I have to reiterate: I'm not going to allow this woman to be hurt. If the witch tries to hurt her, I'll break the deal and take Mary to safety. If the need arises, I'll hurt the witch. I haven't gone to the other side. I am, however, willing to take myself to the limit. If the situation demands, I would flay my skin, cut out my tongue, burn out my eyes and damn my soul a thousand times a thousand. But I won't ask others to make that sacrifice for me. The witch says she needs a pregnant woman for the magic to work. That's all. She won't get hurt. She won't get hurt.

I've noticed something, too. Mary looks a little bit like Carol.

# DEVIL'S HALF-ACRE

Subject: The Devil From: anon52

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

I've looked over the map that the witch drew for me. I've cross-referenced it with sightings I pulled up on the web. I've always been a planner. I like to get into things with as much knowledge as possible. It's hard here, because I don't know what I'm dealing with. But as I said, there are stories for a reason. They reveal some small part of the truth, so I'll go through it and find it, even if it's like finding a needle in a haystack.



The map she drew has a place on it called Bamber Lake. Checking the sightings, it looks like there are a whole lot of them around that area, especially since about 1993-94.

— A hunter was after deer back in November of 1995, alternating between sitting in a tree stand and stalking trails. He took a shot and hit one but it kept running. He followed the blood for hours, and just before sundown he saw the deer across an open field. The Devil was there, eating it. I picture it crouching like a gargoyle, ripping out intestines like ropes of sausage. But that's just me.

— Two girls, age 9 and 13, were taking their dog for a walk by the lake. They said something came down right out of the sun and took the dog into the air, leash and all. The newspaper article said there was blood on the rocks. The parents were quoted as saying it was the Jersey Devil, and sometimes at night you could hear it screaming. That was in 1997.

— Later in 1997, a man who ran a pig farm about 10 miles north of the lake said he heard something outside late at night, attacking his fence. He said it might have been coyotes since they had been introduced into the area recently. So, he grabbed a shotgun and went outside. That's when he saw the Devil smashing his fence (the report didn't specify how). He fired at it, and it took off, flying. On one website, the man had taken pictures of hoof prints and scanned them in. They were blurry, but they looked bigger than a horse's.

— In March 1998, a woman claimed that the Devil swooped down and tried to take the baby she held in her arms. Said when she jerked away, the Devil "pulled her hair," but flew off. Also in '98, a police officer found 11 mutilated animals in a cul-de-sac of trees in the pines by the lake. One cat, two ducks, seven chickens, a groundhog and a Jack Russell Terrier. Torn apart, as if by an animal, but arranged in a line, as if by a human.

There are countless other reports. All over New Jersey, and some in Pennsylvania and New York. But recently, many of them have been in the Bamber Lake area and near the Forked River Mountains. A lot of them have been about eating. The Devil is hungry. Maybe its soul is weak, if it has one at all, so it tries to fill the emptiness by eating. Not natural eating, either. Gorging. Gluttony. Hark, hark, the dogs do bark, it looks like we have a real monster on our hands, mark my mark.

Slowly, it builds. Things, imperceptible things, are happening. I have the woman. Now I just need the creature's heart. I don't know where to begin, but I don't have any choice but to make this work. It's going to be difficult. Iknow that. I know I may put everything on the line for this, but my son needs my help. I can almost hear him calling. Tomorrow, I'll buy a gun. Something simple, a shotgun. No waiting period that way. I didn't bring one because I didn't think it was going to be that kind of situation. I thought it would be all about salvation. Perhaps it is. The kind thing to do would be to kill this creature, especially so another may live. Sacrifice, surrender, forfeiture. After I get the gun I'll talk to people again. I want to learn more. And soon, I'll conquer the beast, tear the sword from the stone, and dash its head against the table like Beowulf.

## Doubt

Subject: Snakes, snails, puppy dog tails From: anon52

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

I had a terrible night, but I think you need to know about it, because it'll help you all later.

I woke up around midnight from a nightmare, but I couldn't remember much about it. It was like sand slipping through my fingers. I couldn't hold a single image or memory for more than a few seconds, and then it was gone. But for all I couldn't touch about the dream, one overwhelming feeling remained. Doubt.

Suddenly I couldn't believe that any of this was real. I knew my son was dead, that much was clear. And I was sure that I really did have his head with me, that at some point I had cut it off to bring it with me. But the rest was unclear. Mary didn't feel real. She felt like a ghost. And the people with the split tongues? What were they? Serpents in this sick garden? Were they real? And the Jersey Devil became nothing more than a stupid old story, a folktale passed around from fool to fool and eventually to me. I was truly like Alice lost in Wonderland. I couldn't tell what was real or what was fake. Didn't she wake up at the end of it all and realize that it was all just a dream? I can't even remember the whole story now, how bad is that? I know she wakes up from it as if it's a dream, but does she get proof that it may have been real?

I have my proof, no matter what happened to Alice.

I lay there, wondering what I was doing, who I was, what had happened to me and my son. That's when I found the source. I remember feeling it when all this started, when that thing took my boy. It drove me to act, and I felt it kindle now, too, like a fire. I focused on it and I remembered what I was doing. The fog of the dream cleared. It was all real again.

Sometimes, I guess this happens to us all. Our mission gets colored by doubt. Don't give in. Uncertainty will destroy us. Move deliberately and finish the task in due course. Slow and steady wins the race.

### SITTING IN A TREE

Subject: Mary From: anon52

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

I made love to Mary tonight. It happened just a few hours ago. I'm a little conflicted about it. I'm still married. I have a child with Carol. I've never been with anyone besides Carol, you know? She was my one, first and only true love. I can remember being at our high school prom. I was a senior and she was a junior and there was so much love. I thought to myself, "I'll never love anyone else ever, ever, ever again."

But here I am, with Mary in her room, me in mine. I'm still covered in sweat. How did it happen? It's silly, really. I was over there, drinking a little, talking a little, and somewhere along the way it was like I snapped into autopilot. I didn't give away what I really do, but I started rambling on about sacrifice. And surrender. I didn't name names and I don't even know how I bumbled onto the topic in the first place, but I went into it pretty hard. I said sacrifice was necessary in all things. We put ourselves on the line. I'm the shoemaker without shoes so my children can have the finest footwear of all. I started talking about parenting, which is where I think it happened. I said that to be a parent you lose your identity and you give everything for your child, whether it's money or happiness or a kidney. Mary cried and said that was how she felt. Somewhere along the way we began hugging. We held each other for a long time. Then we kissed. From there, it was a slow progression, like a roller coaster climbing a hill, with that apprehension about what's going to happen when you go rocketing down. That's what happened.

I feel guilty, yet at the same time I feel totally liberated. Isn't that strange? What a dichotomy our lives become. I love Carol, but she was never part of my new life. She couldn't be. I met her before I became the creature that I am today, and there was no way to bring her into my world without hurting her. My son was dragged into the darkness and I had to go in and get him — and I'm still there.

Mary, on the other hand, is in the darkness with me. She doesn't know it yet, not really, but she's a part of what's going to happen here. She's tied into my new life. She's already through the door, whereas Carol could never be. Making love to a pregnant woman is interesting. I think I want to do it again. Maybe I'll go back to her room. I'm sure neither of us can sleep in this heat. I want to make her happy. Isn't that weird? I hate myself. I'm not happy. The guilt that's pressing me to the floor is like a weight I've never felt before, but it's a good weight. Solid, firm, constant. I made her happy tonight. She said as much. She said she hasn't been happy in a long time. I was gentle. She liked that.

And so I've decided that I want to make her happy, even at the cost of my own self-worth. Together, the two of us will go into the underworld together, and we'll come out as one. I'm going to go back to see her now. I just have to remember not to call her Carol.

# Deeper

Subject: Oh, the Places You Will Go From: anon52

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

The week of what I can afford is almost up, at least as far as the motel goes. Mary doesn't know it. It didn't help that I went out and bought her some fresh fruit and a ring. There was a man at a roadside stand selling a strange assortment of things. I saw the ring. It's not precious or anything. I doubt it's even silver. It'll probably turn her finger green. I'm not even Irish. But I thought she would like it. And she did. At this point, even \$10 is a sacrifice. But it makes her happy.

The man had information, too. (Actually, he also had another of those tongues — forked — like a local gene trait. Incest?) I asked him about the Devil. He told me he'd seen it, that everyone in the area, even through most of New Jersey, has probably seen it or known someone who has. Around here, it's not a myth, he said. My questions offended him, I think. He started to get defensive. He told me that I wasn't born around here, "So how would you know jack shit?" He started to get agitated, and then there was something strange. He called me a "foreign man," just like the witch did. Am I missing something?

The man was clearly upset, so I left. I spent the middle of the day with Mary. She's beautiful. I'm so glad she's with me in all of this. When it's all over, I'll tell her what was really going on. In fact, I'll tell her everything. We have no baggage, not like Carol and me. It's like there's a new door waiting to be opened here.

After Mary and I were done eating lunch in the motel room and making love next to the air conditioner, I went out around the lake. There's a small community of modular homes just up the road a ways, and two of the sightings I wrote about earlier were from people who lived there. One was the hunter who saw the Devil eating his deer. The other was the girl who had her dog stolen by the Devil creature.

I went door to door. There are other stories about the Devil, all right, all near this lake. One was about the monster drinking from the water. Another had it grabbing fish like a bird or bear. One housewife said she thinks the thing has been laying eggs in the woods on the far shore. Devil eggs and ham, I would not eat them, Sam I am.

From: blackbellamy240

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Campfire Stories

Hey, everybody, it's Jesus! Now he's got Mary with him. (Though are we talking Magdalene, Mother or the girl with the little lamb?) You captured her and now you're with her, just like Hades nabbing Persephone. Have I mentioned I'm still reading mythology online? Dickhead.

Another thing, "Foreign Man." I checked Google, and so should you. Found it along with other terms — "gollykeeper" and "hero behind the stove" and half of the other lingo you say the witch used. It's very old turn-of-the-century terms. Slang used by the people of the Pine Barrens, the Jersey islands, Barnegat Light and all of those places. You've done some interesting research to keep us all on the hook.

Let's keep a close eye on this one.

### RECOLLECTION

Subject: Baa, Baa, Black Sheep From: anon52

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

I'm just trying to do the right thing. Piece by piece. We walk this life in inches, not miles. One second at a time. I get the feeling that very few of you fully understand the nature of loss. If you lost someone close to you — especially if you could have prevented it — you'd be amazed at what lengths you'd go to make amends. The places you'd go. The things you'd do. Just to make things right one last time.

I have my son's head out. It's dry. His cheeks are papery like an old library book. I'm afraid to touch his skin. It might crumble away. I don't know. Would his soul escape? How tangible is a soul? Is it trapped inside the skull like butterflies in a net? Is it associated with the head, or maybe the eyes, as dried as they are? I wish I knew. But I'm confident that all will be well. If we meet God halfway, he'll meet us the other half. I'll have my son back.

My boy was always smart, but always so angry. Even as a child, the slightest thing set him off. He punched walls, grit his teeth until you could hear them grinding, or sometimes he'd just stand there, shaking, turning red. As a teenager, he was a cutter. He thought we didn't notice. They say cutters do it to get attention, to be noticed, but that's not it. I understand the process. It's about hurting yourself, about feeling pain and letting it remind you that you're alive. You know if we never felt pain, we'd never feel happiness? It's contrasting, I know, but that's the whole point. We wouldn't know good without evil, and couldn't appreciate light without darkness. It is what it is. That's what Carol used to say to our son. He would complain about something or be upset that he didn't get his way, and she would just shake her head and say, "It is what it is." She had one of those embroidered Bible passages in a frame, too. "Lord, grant me the strength to accept the things I cannot change...."

I don't agree with that prayer anymore. There's nothing I can't change.

Subject: Loss

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org From: god45

> Loss is necessary. And the soul is in the eyes.

### PERCHANCE TO DREAM

Subject: Stag and Doctor From: anon52

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

I dreamed again tonight. Laying next to Mary, smelling the jasmine shampoo in her hair. Feeling the rise and fall of her belly.

Two figures came to me, walking side by side. I was out in the woods, though I don't know what I was doing there. I felt agitated, like something was eating at me. It was the feeling you got when you knew there was homework you didn't do, or a test that you forgot to study for.

The first was a white deer. A stag, maybe. For the sake of completeness, I'll call it Aslan. It was strong and proud. Pure white with red eyes, like some white rabbits have. Next to it was the black doctor I'd heard about. A dark hat covered his face. He carried his bag. The doctor stood perfectly still, but the deer seemed agitated, too. The two of them shook their heads together, as if to say "no."

And suddenly, all my anxiety disappeared. Gone. How wonderful is that? They were telling me to let go of my fear, because soon it will all be over. That's the feeling I got, anyway. They looked sad for me, but I told them not to be. After all, they helped me see the light. There's so much I have to give. Wasn't it Campbell who said that the hero goes into the underworld to fight evil, and must sacrifice much to complete the task? And then the hero returns with enlightenment, delivering a message to the world. That's me. I dismissed the white stag and black doctor. They went away, but for a moment I saw a lingering pair of eyes, one red like rubies and another black like volcanic rock. Then I woke up next to my true love. In the corner, I had my son's head. Everything was in place.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: cabbie22

Subject: Re: Stag and Doctor

I don't think that deer and doctor were saying what you think they were saying.

### SACRIFICE AND BLISS

Subject: Ding Dong, the Devil is Dead From: anon52

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

l did it. It's done. The witch has the heart, and she has Mary. More importantly, she has my son and his soul. I'm back at the hotel now. I've bandaged my wounds and am waiting.

Part of me doesn't want to revisit what happened so soon, but I will. Carol always used to tell our son, "Sometimes you have to do things even though you don't want to." So that's what I'm doing. Plus, it'll help me pass the time until later, when the witch told me it would all be ready. By then, she said my boy's soul will have returned.

I can't get rid of the smell of blood.

Anyway, I went out this morning to hike around the lake. Like a fool, I didn't take the gun, but I had no interest in getting caught by some park ranger or something. I circled the area for hours. All beneath those black pitch pines, dark sap running down their trunks. At some point, I'm guessing it was near 1 or 2, I found something. A small game trail lined with poison ivy. I almost passed it by, but on one of the leaves were three red dots - blood. Still wet. I went through thorn-bushes and sharp branches, and finally came to a little clearing. There in the sandy earth was a hole, bigger than a manhole, but not by much. It wasn't covered, just dark and disappearing into the earth, like a big yellow-jacket hive. Next to the hole was a cement birdbath, chipped and broken around the edges. In the birdbath was somebody's dog. It looked like some sort of beagle or hound. It was dead, its head drooping over the side, and tongue hanging out with flies on it. Its throat was slit. Old blood oozed over the rim.

I was about to get closer and see what was down the hole when a little boy stepped off of an opposing trail. It took me a minute to realize he was one of the children I had seen the day I pulled into that bait shop. The boy looked scared. I put my hands out to show him that I didn't want to hurt him, and asked what he was doing there. He said, "Grandpa is teaching me. He said I'm ready to learn." I heard the snap behind me too late. If there's ever a lesson I can share here (if anyone will listen), it's that you need to pay attention at all times. I didn't. A hand cupped over my mouth and I felt a sharp pinprick, I believe from a syringe. By then it was too late. As I passed out, the boy stuck out his forked tongue at me. Again.

I woke later. I expected to be tied up, but I wasn't. I smelled mold and salt water. My eyes swam back into focus. I was in a small cave with a sandy floor, and trickling down over the rocks were thin streams of water that collected in puddles. It was half-light in the cave, with sunlight filtering in from a hole high above my head, at least 30 or 40 feet up. I guessed I was in the hole I'd found. A rope ladder hung from the opening. There were people around me in the shadows, a dozen maybe. One person stepped forward and I saw that it was the old man from the bait shop. He smiled.

"Been asking a lot of questions," he said. He told me that he knew I wasn't writing some book like I'd told some people. That I was looking for that Leeds witch for a "worser" reason. I said I didn't know what he was talking about, but he didn't buy it. The others came away from the wall toward me. The boy from up above was there, as was a woman I'd spoken to from the neighborhood near the lake. Then there was the man from the fruit stand who'd sold me the ring. Others that I'd never seen before were there, too. They leered at me like they were hungry.

The little boy offered me his hand and smiled. He said that I could finally see what I was looking for, that I just had to go with him. I asked, "Do you mean the Devil?" and he nodded. I took his hand and we went down a tight corridor, a smooth-rocked passage, slick with water. It stunk of rot, like dead crabs. Behind me, the people followed in a shuffling line. The corridor went downward and opened into another cave. That's where I found the Devil.

I felt sick seeing it. The beast was close to what the sketches had suggested, but was far worse to really see. There were some differences, too. It was smaller, for one thing. It only came to my shoulders. Its body was almost human, not as impish as the drawings indicated, but its head did look like a deformed horse's. Its legs ended in black hooves far too large for its body. It was naked, staggering around the room, splashing in shallow pools of dark water. Leathery wings, torn and tattered like a moth-eaten tablecloth twitched uselessly on its back. The thing looked drunk or hurt. As I watched, it lurched suddenly to the side, slamming into the wall. It let out a howl of pain or rage. It was an awful sound.

Hands shoved me forward, and I fell into the shallow water. The forked-tongues filtered in behind me and around me, but they weren't really looking at me. They were staring at the creature. Hungry.



"We keep it weak," the old man said, and he snapped his suspenders with his thumbs. That's when he said I had a choice. That I knew too much, and that I could either be a part of it or I could be at my road's end. I shook my head. I was still groggy from the drugs. When I tried to speak, it came out slurred. I asked him what he was talking about, that I didn't understand. He grinned. "I'll show you," he said. And sure enough, he did. He snapped his fingers, a loud sound that echoed off the granite walls, and the people moved forward. All except the boy, who stayed by the old man's side. I'm guessing the old man was the grandfather, and this was what the boy had to learn. We were both learning, I suppose.

Each person took something that looked like an icepick out of a bag that lay off to the side. They circled the Devil. It moaned and shrieked, swaying away from the wall, grasping at its horse face with sallow arms as if trying to brush away invisible flies. The old man explained that they fed it animals in the birdbath, and pumped the carcasses full of tranquilizers to keep it docile. Then the forked-tongues closed in on it. I felt my vision change and I saw how horrible the people were, greasy with stain and taint. The thing of it was, they were more horrible than the Devil itself. They bore the mark of corruption, but it just bore the tarnish of an animal gone wrong. I heard the puncture sounds as they pierced it. Wet, grisly sounds like someone stabbing a frozen ham. I winced as they put their mouths to the holes, drinking its blood. They lapped at it like dogs. The creature teetered left and right. The old man said, "That's enough," and the people pulled away, mouths smeared with black blood. The creature fell down on its haunches, whimpering like a kicked dog. One by one, the people began changing.

I don't know if it was a trick of looking or if it was really happening, but they transformed. Their faces grew long and terrible. Fangs curved up out of malformed jaws. Thin, bony ropes of skin tore out from their shoulder blades, and the leather of bat wings unfurled almost like flags. The old man helped me stand up. He said, "When they feed, there are more sightings. More belief to keep us and the Devil alive." Then he said that I had a choice: Drink the Devil's blood or die there and then.

It wasn't a choice at all. I knew what was happening. This creature wasn't the real monster at all. It was some poor, cursed thing that they used to change and become monsters. I wouldn't be a part of it. Even if I wanted to, I had a job to do. A son to save. A woman to love. I shook my head and said that I wouldn't do it. When he said that I had to die, I shook my head again and said that I wasn't going to do that, either.

I showed them all how serious I was. We can be powerful, our kind, when we want to. We can open our souls. They thought I wasn't willing to sacrifice my life and theirs, but they were wrong. I showed them. I ripped the cover off my purpose and showed it to them. Out of my mouth came the black cloud, like a swarm of flies, bound and determined to show them just how serious I was. They couldn't handle it. They couldn't stand my purpose. They backed up against the walls and became sick, some of them even throwing up on themselves. I revealed everything to them. They were all hurt, even the old man and the boy. "You're parasites!" I screamed, grabbing a pick and stabbing it into the old man's neck. I knew it would break the spell, but I didn't care. They came at me, angry, but every time they tried to hurt me I took their pain and gave it right back to them. They underestimated me. No one should underestimate a man who sacrifices himself willingly. He knows more about the bliss of life and death than anyone.

I killed them all except the boy. I don't know how far gone he was, but I sent him away. He looked wrong, but I couldn't bring myself to kill a child. I saw my son at a younger age, and I can't abide the death of someone who can still be saved.

Afterward, bodies lay around the cave, some still twitching. After the boy climbed up and ran away, I was left alone with the Devil. Once I imagined it to be a terrible fiend, but it wasn't. It was an abused child. I knelt by it as its jaws opened and closed, a bubbling hiss coming from somewhere in its throat. The smell was awful, a musky odor. The thing was covered with fleas. Black blood clouded the water around it. I don't know what the thing really was, or how it came to be.

But here's something terrible, something that I'll never forget. It looked at me with human eyes. They rolled around in the sockets, barely able to focus on me. I felt sick and sad. How often was this creature harmed? How often did those things come and take from the poor creature? Its body was pocked with healed-over stab wounds, telling me that this certainly wasn't the first time, and if it hadn't been for me it wouldn't have been the last. The creature pressed its head against my thigh. An overwhelming sense of mercy swelled inside me. It had to die. It wanted to die. And so I killed it and took its heart.

Now here I am. I brought the heart back, cleaned myself up as best I could and then went to see Mary. I never exactly went out to get the photography equipment, and I supposed I was a sight. She looked scared of me. She wanted to know why I was hurt, and what happened. There was no time. She would understand later. I had taken the syringe from the old man, with some of the tranquilizer still in it. I hoped it wouldn't hurt her or the baby. I was okay after it was used on me. She was part of me, she and I were together, and if I was willing to sacrifice, then so would she.

I know she'll be happy with all of this. Happy with her new purpose. She can be my son's new mother, since Carol would never understand, and now my son will be on the outside of the fence just like me. He'll never be able to sit across from his true mother and tell her that he was a vampire and that I had to take his head to save his soul. So it is with these things.

I have to go for now. I'm glad you're reading this, going with me on my journey. It's almost over. I'm about to take our calling in directions we never thought possible.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org From: cabbie22 Subject: Danger List

Where are you, Witness? We have to do something. This lunatic needs to be on the Danger List. He's hurting innocent people. He said he wouldn't, but he did. How do we know this isn't all some delusion? Blackbellamy suggests that he's telling us a story, but how do we know he doesn't believe it? We have to do something!

Subject: Re: Ding Dong, the Devil is Dead

From: memphis68

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Fuck it. If Witness isn't going to come out of his cave and make this happen, I will. I respect you, Witness, but you're too quiet lately. We don't need quiet. We need action. I'm calling for the Danger List on this wacko. From: blackbellamy240

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Interesting

This is all too fucked up. It sounds sick, but I find it fascinating.

### Return

Subject: Family From: anon52 To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

I'm not worthy of the Danger List. Please, call off the hounds. I know what you're thinking but we're all okay. Perfect, actually. The sacrifices have been made. We all made it through and now I have my son back. It's not like I expected, and at first I was upset and had to kill the witch for not telling me the whole truth. But that's the nature of it. Our calling only permits mercy where it's due, and after I learned the whole truth, mercy was the only thing due to the Leeds witch.

When I arrived in the morning, Mary was giving birth. I went into the witch's shack and there was the smell of blood in the air, along with that flowery smell. Mary was laying on her back on the floor, with the witch behind her, liver-spotted hands cooling Mary's forehead with a damp, tattered cloth. Mary was screaming, and the child was coming from between her legs. At first I was horrified. The thing that was coming out of her body didn't look like a child at all. When I saw the caul come off like a fleshy mask to reveal a long, equine face, I wanted to die. The child came out and upon hitting the floor already began crawling away as a pair of wet wings rolled open from its slick, pink back. The witch began chanting and laughing and calling the thing "her son." I couldn't understand what she meant, so I pushed her away. I picked up the squealing thing from the floor and was about to dash it against a table, but then I saw - it had human eyes, just like the Devil in the cave. But more importantly, it had my son's eyes. Blue as water, just like my boy's. Human and loving and good. This was not a monster, but my own child, reborn. My son!

The witch was on me, slapping me and scratching, but I pushed her away again. I said she couldn't have my son. She said he was ours, not mine, that she used me to put her other son to rest so she could have another, a stronger one. I didn't know what she was talking about. She was ranting. So I set my boy down next to Carol and smothered the witch. Whatever she did drove her insane.

I gathered up my boy and wife, and we went back to the motel for the last night. No one saw us come in. Carol had wounds from giving birth, and suddenly I knew I could help her, and I did. I just took the pain away from her, and it happened to me. Blood came from my nose and mouth. Cuts ran up and down my thighs. But that was okay. I sat in the bathtub for most of the night, enjoying them. I relate it to the feeling you get after working out, after pushing yourself that extra mile and how you feel invigorated. That's how I felt, like I'd just done something no one else had done before, and was better for it. In the other room, I heard my son crying. I knew he was hungry so I fed him a little blood from a cut on my finger. Maybe I should've fed him a cockroach instead, or maybe a little mouse caught from the floorboards? I don't know. This is all new to me. My finger hurts a little, but I'll pay any price to keep my family happy.

I am filled with such love. Inside, my little star twinkles. There is no wondering where I am. I will take my child soon and read to him, write for him, and whisper to him,

God bless Mummy, I know that's right

Wasn't it fun in the bath tonight?

The cold's so cold and the hot's so hot.

Oh! And God bless Daddy - I quite forgot!

We'll grow old together. Safe and sound. Father and son.

And so I beg you, again, stop all this talk about putting me on the Danger List. I'm okay. Everyone's okay. You can't know the right thing if you haven't gone where I have. Until you're willing to go down into Hell yourself, you don't know a damn thing about what we're here to do. I rescued us. I saved everyone. I delivered mercy to the Devil and the witch. I gave salvation to my son. My own soul suffered, as did my body and perhaps even my mind, but we're all okay now.

It's been a few weeks, and Carol is talking to me again. She's not speaking English, not properly. It's mostly gibberish, but she'll get along okay. She's learning to feed our son the right way, with her mother's milk, so that's a good thing. And speaking of that, it's feeding time. I have to go. The journey is over, so I don't imagine you'll need to hear from me again anytime soon.

Subject: Opinions?

From: bookworm55

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Anyone have anything to say about all of this? Actually, I'm referring to discussions apart from the Danger List. I'd like to see some ideas as to what exactly Anon52 encountered. (And Anon, please come back to the list and give us your opinion, too. I imagine we would all find it very enlightening.) To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org From: cabbie22

Subject: Re: Opinions?

This one seems pretty off-kilter, so who knows what's really going on? His perceptions aren't really something I trust, so it could be anything.

Subject: Re: Opinions? From: teacher193

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

There are a lot of catalogued creatures out there. This one could easily fall into one of these groupings. Let's examine.

First thing that comes to my mind are the animal features. Hooves and equine aspects? The man describes the creature as having human eyes. Immediately it suggests to me some kind of shapechanger — there are creatures on record that can "become" other types, so perhaps this is one of those cases. Also, bat-like wings were described, which leads me to believe the creature is more bat than horse. Imagine a massive bat-creature's head elongated, and it's easy to picture a slightly deformed horse's head. There are records of large bats in South America, with sightings as public as Rio de Janeiro.

However, if the thing is not a shapechanger, then it could be a creature commonly referred to on this list as



a "nightmare." (I've never met one, but there are enough mentions to warrant such conclusions. Does anyone agree?) These beings, as I understand, are a type of "demon," and the visage seems infernal. Hooves perhaps lend it the "Devil" title.

Subject: Nightmare From: bookworm55

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Nightmares are uncommon, and we're not entirely certain what they actually are. There have been enough reports of creatures that this could warrant the title, I suppose. But most of the nightmares we've been told about — and that I've seen — are grim, ugly things. Think Gollum breaking into hospital nurseries and looking for children. Calling them demons seems hasty, but also maybe not too far off the mark. **From:** the plague383

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Disgusting

Why do we care? Do any of us really believe that somehow it matters if we have a name for it? The name is Legion, for our enemies are many. The name is the Adversary. The name is witch, demon, dog, bitch, bastard. We can't save these things by cutting off their hands. We can't save them at all. We destroy them, so we ourselves are not destroyed. Our name is Death, and its name is Dying. This madman did not destroy the enemy. Not properly. And now it haunts him. Murder is the only way.

I was one. I was two. Now I am three. The flood is coming.

- On A Pale Horse

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org From: tarjiman220

Subject: Judging

I am concerned here that we jump to conclusions. To a point, I agree with some of what you say. Cabbie22 is correct in her statements that this man's perceptions are not necessarily trustworthy. And Teacher, you are correct when you claim that the ability to define these beings allows us to respond to them.

We also must keep our minds perpetually open to new things, however. If we close the door on the possibilities of new beings, we run the risk of dealing with them incorrectly, of applying presumed vulnerabilities to them that in truth have nothing to do with them at all.

Take my word. There are many things in this world that are not so easily defined, if able to be defined at all. Here in the Middle East are beasts that disregard any of the conventions that we have laid down. In Iran, I hear tell of an army of men with hollow eyes and decaying flesh who still live and breathe. These men claim allegiance to a creature known as Zohak. Zohak is from Persian myth, but am I to believe that he is a true being? I have no idea, and until I confront these things myself, I can assume nothing. Even I have seen things that fly in the face of our definitions. It was only a few short months ago that I tracked a murderous thing from Jalut to the necropolis outside of Vardanli, and there I found a creature composed of whirling sand. It had stolen the skin of a farmer, but I watched as it left the skin behind like a costume. I called it "djinn" before it disappeared, but does my naming it mean anything? Do I know what a djinn truly is? Did that help me find it again? I am afraid not. Since then, I have not seen or heard of the creature, but I am confident it shall appear again.

Please do not assume anything. Teacher suggests possibilities for what this man claims, but are the answers all encompassing? Do we have answers for what was wrong with the people who tortured this presumed being? What about the case of Anon52's new child? How can we explain away such strange deformity? We don't know. I only say that it is good to have labels and names for the beings we confront, but we should not be limited by them.

From: blackbellamy240

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: The Truth Is ...

The truth is, this story can't be real. How long have we all been on this list? Long enough to know that there are certain categories, certain types of creature that exist out there. Some are a little different than others, but they can all be lumped together into particular groups. There are white, black, yellow and red people, but have you ever seen a purple one? A blue one? For monsters, we know there are rots, fangs and beast-men. Yes, there are some that defy categorization, but has anyone ever heard of horse-headed, bat-winged, half-men? The Jersey Devil is a bullshit East Coast folktale.

I'm still cross-referencing this guy's posts through Google and other search engines. They're full of stuff pulled from myth, folktale and kids' books. Quotes from Alice in Wonderland. Message headers referring to the Wizard of Oz. That poem he wants to "read" to his new kid? It's part of an A.A. Milne poem. We're debating messages from a guy quoting Winnie the Pooh! How can be possibly put any faith in anything he says?

If you ask me, one of two things is going on. He's really just lost his marbles and he's sitting by an old computer, whittling lies out of his own insanity. In other words, it's all made up. That, or he's still nutty, but he's outside and nutty, believing that what he's writing is actually happening. Maybe he really did kidnap some woman and she had a baby, and he thinks it's his son reborn. If my second pick is even close to true, I vote for the Danger List.

P.S. Nightmares? Are we talking goblins and gremlins? Give me a break.

Subject: Re: Opinions? From: bookworm55

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Maybe we do need to put him on the Danger List, but I'm hesitant. Maybe this all wasn't real. Blackbellamy is right. He is quoting A.A. Milne, Lewis Carroll, L. Frank Baum and others. But then, how different is what we face? How would ordinary people look at us and what we talk about here? I feel terrible for Anon52. We all should.

Anon, please, can we talk about this? Maybe we can meet.

Subject: Announcement (Was: The Truth Is...) To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org From: witness1

rom: witnessi

I've been busy. I apologize for the absence.

I can't speak for the veracity of his claims, but for now, Anon52 is banned and considered to be a dangerous individual. He's now officially on the Danger List. Let me know if you need an official reiteration of all the listers on it. For now, Anon52 should be considered dangerous.

Subject: Life, what is it but a dream?

From: anon52

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

It's all over now. So please leave us alone. We are going to live happily ever after. Our time here is short, let's all live it as best we can. This is the end.





# CHAPTER 4: T'HE SEA-BORN DARKNESS

And in like manner also the sea cried out, saying: The sons of men have profaned Thy holy name; command me, and I shall rise up and cover the earth, and wipe out from it the sons of men. — The Revelation of Paul (New Testament Apocrypha)

# CASTAWAY

From: manfred313 To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org Subject: Devil in the Deep Blue Sea

Land is trustworthy. You put your feet on it, and with the exceptions of maybe quicksand, snow or mud, you stay where you stand. You can count on land. It's immovable. Reliable. They say I'm a Taurus, so I'm an "earth sign," rooted to the firm and dependable real world.

But then there's the ocean. The ocean is deep and dark. It's like a hungry mouth. It seems ravenous to me, and the waves are always crashing like big teeth. One big betrayer. It fools you, I think. One minute you're on calm water, flat as glass as far as the eye can see. The next minute there's a squall or wave and everything changes. It can swallow you up, quick as lightning or slow like honey. Even the biggest boat is a small speck compared to the enormity of the ocean. It makes me nervous just thinking about it. So why the hell am I out here? What am I doing, floating around the Atlantic on such a dishonest form of geography?

Alameda is on this boat. That's why I'm here. I have to confront him. I'm not looking to hurt him, but there's this sick thing I have where I'm forced to deal with him. Let's call it a moral obligation. Confront your demons. That's what they say, right? Phobics meet their fears head-on. Alcoholics cure themselves by coming to grips with their addiction. I'm going to meet Alameda. Finally. After all this time of tracking him, sniffing him out after he took everything from me. All the good things are gone. But that's all right, because when you hit rock bottom, a weird confidence hits you. You can go no lower. The only place to look is up, to the sky, to the stars. Sometimes the only way to fix things is to break them, and a year ago, I was a very broken man.

So, Alameda. I can't believe it. It's like it's not even true. That's why I'm on this bullshit cargo ship. For him, I'm willing to accept the fact that the ocean wants to drown me, swallow me. There's a price for everything, I guess.



Subject: Re: Devil in the Deep Blue Sea From: bookworm55

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Manfred, it sounds like you're in a pretty precarious situation. I know we haven't heard from you before, but if you need anything, ask. There's a lot of information still going around, and not all of it has been posted to the list, yet. We're here to help.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: cabbie22

Subject: New members?

Newcomers to this list are welcome, but I'm a little suspicious here. You open your mail like we're supposed to know what you're talking about, and on top of that, you're online. On a boat. Care to explain how that's possible?

From: manfred313

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Details

I'm doing this because I feel very isolated out here. I'm on a Portuguese cargo boat. Nobody speaks English, and I barely speak Portuguese. I'm on the boat with an enemy. It's lonely. It's relieving to be in contact with someone. Most of the people I used to email back home are dead or gone, thanks to Alameda. In the past, I've lurked on this thing, but I've been out here for 10 days now and I'm going a little bit stir-crazy. The food is horrible and the people are foreign, so I've turned to this list. I've read your messages for a while now, but never had anything to contribute because I never experienced anything. I stayed away from it. But now I'm in it. I want to be in it. I'm tired of sitting on the sidelines. I only wish that didn't mean being trapped here.

As for my connection, I'm on WiFi. IEEE 802.11 High Rate standard, working on an old junky MMX laptop that barely supports the whole deal, but I'm managing. It's got Internet and Excel. There's a delay in sending and receiving, so by now, maybe I'm dead. Wouldn't that be a kick? Either way, provided you people don't mind listening to me, I'm going to keep talking. It makes me feel a little better. A little less isolated.

From: blackbellamy240

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: WiFi

Check out big tech out there on the big ocean. To get a signal way out there, that's pricey. Color me envious.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: profesorgeo160

Subject: Alameda?

If you need any help speaking to the crew, I am very capable with Portuguese.

Am I correct in saying that you seek vengeance against this one you call Alameda? You follow him on the boat to receive vindication? You should be very wary of falling prey to that way of life. I have seen so many fall to the wayside of their own minds after stepping onto that path. Soon everything is a perceived ill that requires justice.

From: manfred313

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org Subject: Justice?

I'm sorry, you've misunderstood. I don't have much of an interest in justice. That eye-for-an-eye stuff never impressed me, nor have I found much use for it. You take my eye, I take yours, now there are two one-eyed people and nothing's been accomplished. I'm not looking for Alameda to hurt him, or out of some twisted revenge plot. It's hard to explain.

I'm just a dumb Jew from Maryland. I lived a pretty sheltered life. I got a business from my uncle, selling books (expensive, old ones) and I was pretty comfortable. I had a wife, cats, some business acquaintances in the industry, a nice shop down near the boardwalk, and that's it. Everything was in place. Or so I thought. One day I woke up, and you know what I mean by "woke up." Life was different then, but I stayed out of most of our dirty deeds. I read a lot, at least as much as I could stomach since I really don't like to read much (ironic, I know). Then Alameda came along and everything changed.

I had a book. He wanted it. I wasn't willing to sell it. It was old. Stuff written in Sanskrit, a few pages in Hebrew, and if my contact in San Diego told me true, a few lines in Aramaic. That's old business, worth some big cash. I wasn't about to pawn it off on this jerk in a herringbone suit. I was aiming for Smithsonian-level buyers. The museum racket pays in spades. But this guy, Alameda, wouldn't back down. Eventually, he grew tired of making offers. He started taking things away instead, and eventually got what he wanted. When everything changed, it was as if everything else was a lie. Just a big, comfortable TV show with me at center-stage. But now I know. Now I know how dark the world really is. But I also know there are a lot more options than I had ever considered.

What Alameda did, I can't forgive. I hate him. The last thing he took was my wife. He didn't kill her, he broke her mind. She's still back home, but not with me anymore. Her family takes care of her. I don't think she even keeps her food down without coaxing from her brother or father. They all hate me. They think it's my fault. They don't know about Alameda.

Well, it's slop-time. They chow down on here the same time every day, and let me tell you, it's no picnic. I feel like I'm in prison. Metal trays, army food. It tastes funny. This isn't exactly a vacation, but it feels like the right thing to do. We have to confront our demons, find out what makes them tick, I guess.

Hell, it's starting to rain. It's always gray out here.

And P.S. Yes, blackbellamy240, the wireless connection is nice, but I had to blow out the last legs of my savings to get it, so don't be too jealous.

From: manfred313

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Cold, Wet, Nasty

Thank God for Wellbutrin. I'm glad I got an extra bottle of this stuff, because I'm chewing it like gum. It helps to ease the nausea. I know that's not what they're for. I have them to help calm me down and keep me from smoking cigarettes like they're going out of style. One does what one needs to get by. I've learned that much. Plus, this rain is depressing me. It's pouring down in sheets. The ocean looks like color-bled nothing, and it's rocking the hell out of the boat. Which, by the way, is called the "Saint John the Baptist." I knew it was the Sao Joao Baptista, but now I know what that means. I can't say why, but that doesn't thrill me. Didn't he lose his head? I haven't read the New Testament.

I went out looking for Alameda after chowtime. He's on this boat somewhere. I opened my mind and tried to see if the boat had any memory of him, but all I saw were some receding shadows. They were his shadows, though. He's here, and I think he has my book. I would've stayed out longer, but I was afraid I was going to get blown overboard. The ocean looks hungry, gnashing its teeth like some great beast. It makes me nervous. I wonder if anyone has worked up numbers on how many people drown each year. Probably less than it used to be, but I bet there's still a lot that aren't reported. I saw that movie "The Perfect Storm" just three weeks before I came out here. It almost turned me away, but I have to find Alameda.

My wife used to love the ocean. Living near the beach, she wouldn't hesitate to go in, no matter how cold the water was, no matter what kind of freakish jellyfish were washing up on shore. They had reports of medical waste coming in one year. Sharks the next. The undertow pulled some kid out to sea the year after that. Did that ever stop her from going in? No. I would go to the beach, but never in the water. I'd sit on a chair or blanket and go over numbers, or more recently I'd surf eBay or other auction sites looking for new items to help draw in the bibliophiles. But now, here I am in the middle of it all, like a fool. This had better be worth it.

### ADRIFT

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org From: profesorgeo160 Subject: Where?

Where are you, Manfred? I know on a boat, but where in the Atlantic? **To:** hunter.list@hunter-net.org **From:** cabbie22

Subject: Re: Where?

No locations, okay? What's important is not where he is, but why he hasn't taken care of this Alameda yet. I'd be very mad if someone came and took away the people I love. Very mad.

From: manfred313 To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Re: Where?

I don't mind sharing where I am. I already told you the boat's name, didn't I? We're out here on some Atlantic shipping lane. I would guess we're halfway to Portugal by now. Lisbon, I think. But to be honest, if I look outside, you know what I see? Fucking water. Miles and miles of choppy, gray water. I could be in the Pacific, the Mediterranean. I could be on the moon for all I know. It's like another world out here.

It would probably be easier if I spoke more than pidgin Portuguese. Or Spanish. But I don't. Then again, I don't think the crew would really have much to say to me. We come from such different worlds. I know it's paranoid, but every time I walk by and they're chattering away, I get a sidelong glance and they start laughing. I always figure they're laughing at me. Talking about me. I can't help but wonder if they're on the take. What if Alameda has done something and made them his somehow? I've read posts that say it's possible. It makes me want to get off this thing and swim for shore, but then I remember the ocean.

I have to face him. I'll look again tomorrow morning. He might be up and around during the day. For a while there I thought he was a bloodsucker, and from what I hear about them, he fits the bill — manipulative, money-hungry, always came to the shop after dark. And I could tell by looking at him that he had passions, you know? Beyond what we would consider normal. But then, following him to the boat that day, it was four o'clock in the afternoon! The sun was shining, the sky was blue. He's not a bloodsucker. He's something else, and I have to know what. It compels me. I want to know what makes him tick, what he wants, why he had to destroy everything I was just to get a book.

Curiosity killed the cat, I know, but curiosity is what motivates us. Without it, we wouldn't have electricity or the combustion engine. We'd still be living in caves, wondering what was making that "light" outside. Maybe it makes you and I what we are.

So I hope that answers your question, Cabbie. I have to know why he did it all. It's like a box I'm not supposed to open.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: cabbie22

Subject: Morbid Curiosity

You've heard of Pandora's Box, right? I keep out of bad business until bad business comes to me.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: profesorgeo160

Subject: Re: Alameda

I am myself curious as to what you hope to achieve. Do not think I am dissuading you. I am not. I just wish to know why you are so compelled? Are you looking to save this Alameda? Make him to confess his sins to you and refuse his monstrous nature? I do not ask to be rude, I ask because that is a noble intention, but one that must be handled very carefully, yes? It is hard for a beast to remember how it is to walk on two legs again like a man. **From:** manfred313

From: manfred 313

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Apologies

Again, I apologize because I guess I'm not making myself clear. I don't want to hurt him or gain some sort of revenge on him, but that doesn't mean I want to elevate him up and emancipate him from what he is, either. Here's the thing, and I know this sounds strange, but don't you all get the feeling that there's a big puzzle out there? An interlocking chain of events or people or monsters? Alameda barely scratches the surface, but that's where everything starts. You can't get deep down without starting somewhere. That's what I think Alameda is for me. I've had my eyes opened to the truth for a while now, but I haven't done much with it. I felt compelled to stay safe and sane for the sake of me, my business and my wife. But now it's all gone, and I have a chance to peel back the layers. What else do I have to lose? I think it starts with him.

I was outside earlier. It's a gray day, very depressing. It made me want to have a cigarette, but I was afraid we'd get hit by a big wave and I'd go overboard. I paid to be a passenger, but it's not like anyone knows who I am or why I'm here. If they didn't see me, would they go looking for me? Would they ever know I was gone? My allergies are kicking in, too. I feel my throat tightening up from all the nasty smoke belching out of this ship. The irony is my smoking. Coffin nails, they call them. Apropos.

No matter what, I don't feel right out here. I feel very tense. I can't get my heart to slow down. I sweat, I feel sick. My head spins. The only time I get some relief is when I'm looking for Alameda. I feel a little calmer then, like I have a center, a focus. But then it comes back. The dread crawls back into me.

I think I have a lead on where he's staying. This is a big boat, so I knew he could be anywhere. He never wore particularly nice suits, so there's nothing saying that he has to be in an opulent cabin. I doubt this boat even has those. It's carrying barrels of something. They're marked with hazard labels. Alameda could be staying in some small hold somewhere like I am, cramped up, reading the book.

After talking to a boy on deck, I think my theory might be right. The boy — a teenager, really — told me in broken English that there was another American onboard. Alameda had an accent, but I believe he was American. The boy showed me a chess piece. A bishop. He said the American gave it to him after beating him in some match just the night before. That sounds like Alameda to me. Only a cold-hearted snake like him would play chess against some foreign deck-boy and win. At least he gave him a piece as some consolation. But that gives me confidence. Alameda is here. The boy says he sleeps on the other end of the ship. "Aft" I think it's called? Tonight, I'll find him. I have to psyche myself up for this.

From: blackbellamy240

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Another funeral

This is big-league stuff. It may not seem big to you, Manfred, but let's be real. You're on a boat in the middle of nowhere. You don't speak the language. You're not a sailor. You probably don't even know how to operate a fucking life jacket. And you're going to confront some thing all by yourself? Have you lost your goddamn mind? Hasn't anyone heard of "hunt with a group" anymore? You confess to have done very little regarding them, so let me do you a favor and draw you a map. They. Are. Bigger. Than. Us. We think we're all hot shit because we can do some inexplicable things, but then we end up dead just like anyone else. Still don't get the picture? Let's go with the ocean metaphor. You're a tiny fish in a massive bucket of water. If you get this before you go face your monster, take my advice and don't do it. Stay away from him. Wait until you're on land, contact some others and do it up right.

From: manfred313

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Re: Alameda

It wasn't him. I'm both disappointed and relieved. Disappointed because I still haven't found him, and relieved because I've met another American onboard! He wasn't in a small hold like I am. He actually has a cabin, the kind I didn't think would be here. It's not a palace, but it's got a nice bed and a desk and a mini-fridge and microwave. He seems to eat more like we do on the mainland. Not the slop that the crew gets, but he eats mostly meatless dishes, low fat and low cholesterol. He seems concerned about his health and well-being, and he keeps very clean. A welcome change from the stench that floats about most of the crew.

His name is Seth McCart. He says he's a qualitycontrol inspector for the Magadon drug company. Apparently the boat is carrying failed product and waste to dispose of in designated areas. He said Europe has greater control over disposable goods and a more strict environmental policy, and they're sure not to let it pollute some place. It doesn't matter much to me, I guess. He's interesting, though. He says that he's not a scientist and has no interest in all that medical stuff, but that he's out here alone, making sure the job gets done. That seems reasonable, but there's something else.

He appears wrong to me. There's something about him. A dark haze. Like heat vapors coming off a road. I didn't see it until we'd talked for a while. I asked him if he knew anyone onboard named Alameda. He said no. Maybe he's lying. Maybe he's working with Alameda. And yet, there's something about him that makes me want to trust him. Am I making a mistake? I don't think so. It's not him that I'm looking for.

It's peaceful tonight. Cloudy, but no rain, and you can see some stars. I'm going to go out and walk around. I wish I had a cigarette.

From: blackbellamy240

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Worse and worse

Hey, do what you want. Ignore my advice. I'm trying to help you, and you meet a second monster. That makes one of us and two of them onboard. Your best bet now is to lock your cabin door and find religion.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: profesorgeo160

Subject: Re: Worse and worse

Do not be so negative. Not all beasts are dangerous. All carry some core of darkness, but that can be shown the light. Perhaps Manfred is doing good work. Who are we to dissuade? What if he can free this McCourt? Perhaps he is affected merely by proximity. Perhaps something worse has touched him and left a mark. I think it is too soon to judge.

### Sinking

From: manfred313 To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org Subject: Chaos

Tonight was a strange night. At sundown, the boy came to me. I found out his name is Carlo. He told me that Seth wanted me to join him for dinner in his cabin.

How could I turn down company, any company? I'm going stir-crazy.

While I could, I looked at him. That vapor look was still there, but when it gave me a headache and I got tired from trying, I went out on a limb and trusted him. He hadn't done anything that I could see, and never tried anything when I let my guard down.

Dinner was surprisingly good. He said he's not much of a cook and there's not a whole lot one can do with a microwave, but he made this excellent corn chowder and tuna casserole. Said his mother taught him to cook because it would eventually net him a bride, but he said he was still single and getting too old to keep up the hunt. He appears no older than in his late 40s. We talked about nothing much, just stories about growing up, and the ocean. He doesn't like it, either, which gave me comfort. He had maps of the Pacific and Atlantic on a wall with red and yellow lines sketched across them. I asked him what they were for, and he dismissed it, saying it was just "shipping lane information." I didn't see anything that said any different.

He saw me take a few Wellbutrin and said the stuff was junk. He said Magadon made some really good antianxiety and anti-depressant medication, and that when we got back to America he'd get his people to write me a prescription.

It was on the way back to my room that things turned strange. I was walking by the cafeteria when a group of men wheeled out a table. There was a dead man on it. He had a tablecloth pulled over his face, but I could see blood soaking through around his head. It was right there, right in front of me. And then they passed and were gone. I threw up my dinner over the railing. The boy Carlo was in the cafeteria. When I asked him what happened, he said one of the navigators went "loco" while he was eating. He said the man didn't look good - pale, sweating, even trembling so much that his fork rattled against his plate. Then the man lost control. He started yelling about "bad dreams" and some other things that Carlo couldn't translate. Apparently he attacked another man, and then went after the cook with a knife. Somehow, the knife got turned against him.

You know what Carlo said to me then? This will stick with me forever. He said, "Sometimes the ocean makes people sick," and he tapped his temple with his finger.

He meant the ocean makes people go insane, and I believe it. I had to take more pills, since I probably threw the others up. I'm going to try to sleep now, but who knows how that's going to go? My head's going a mile-a-minute. The worst part is I think Alameda is behind all of this. From: manfred313 To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Dreams

I guess it's only fitting that I would have bad dreams. I was in the water. Under it, really. I was pretty deep, I think, and everything had this moldy green look to it, but there was light filtering down from above. I wasn't swimming or sinking, I was just hovering there. It was very, very cold. Then I saw them. Shapes. Big shapes, below me, like whales or submarines but with less definition. They were nothing more than big blots of shadow easing past one another, and then I felt the water constrict me, pressing inward. Hurting me. Crushing my lungs. I felt veins popping. And then I started to sink toward the shapes. I couldn't stop it, couldn't move. My lungs filled with water and then something whispered to me. It was in another language, but somehow I understood it. It said it was hungry.

I think the boat's stopping. Why would we stop?

## FEEDING T'IME

From: manfred313 To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org Subject: Seth McCart

McCart may be a threat, after all. I still suspect Alameda is onboard, but now I believe he and McCart are together on this. There's no other explanation for what I saw. If anyone has any information on McCart, please send it to me.

I went outside to find out why the boat was stopping. As I left my cabin I heard a sound like an anchor being dropped. It was windy out. Salt mist blew into my eyes so I couldn't see, but I heard voices and followed them.

There was a group of men working under electric lights. It was McCart and four others in raincoats. McCart was standing, watching as the others hauled big blue barrels off of a forklift, uncapped them, and pushed them overboard. I stayed hidden a long time and watched. One man would bring another load over as the last was emptied. I don't know how many barrels they threw over. At least 30. Probably more. Even as far away as I was, the smell made my eyes burn. It was like sewage mixed with cough syrup. I had to stop myself from dry heaving to keep from being found.

But it gets worse. Much worse. After the last of the barrels were gone, the four men stood there. And then he shot them. McCart shot them! He had a pistol. Each shot barely made a sound. The first three were taken by surprise, like me, but the fourth attacked him. McCart is old enough where he shouldn't be able to move like he did. He handled the man like he was a child, and finally shot him, too. I almost cried out. I'm glad I didn't.

McCart threw each of them overboard.

What's happening? Is Alameda behind all this? Please, someone out there has to help me. Give me advice. I'm sorry I ignored what you said before. I'm way out of my league. I don't know what's going to happen next, and I am really afraid.

### DINNER BELL RINGS

From: manfred313 To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org Subject: Anybody out there?

I haven't received any messages. Is anyone out there? Are my messages getting through? I still have a connection, but it's jumpy. It takes 20 minutes to pull up anything. I keep getting faults if I try to get anything more than a basic web page. Please help. I wish I'd never come out here.

From: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

To: manfred313

Subject: Delivery Notification: Delivery Failed

Received from

mtaut.vr3.wns1.daemon.msngr. | | \*&\$\_\_-

dfn \}hun)))ter-net.o-rg

Date: Unknown

Subject: Anybody out there?

Content-Type: multipart/alternative/MIME 6.0.2600 Your message contained fatal errors. Could not be delivered to recipient %@@@<;h/ u | | nter.list@hun#ter-net.o0000rg::>. smtp;550;unknownuseraccount.Connection terminated. ))(7; ..>,..<alar^m{-\_\_\_|d#!ea+d 42^^\\ exp(\*)../ ire#@#@

Attached: hnet-att009989.dat (324 bytes); Anybody out there (4.14 KB)

From: manfred313

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Delivery Failed?

Please don't tell me it's true. Is anybody receiving this? I still have my connection! You must be receiving! Sometimes back home I got rejections from recipients and it wasn't true. The message still goes, right? I hope that's happening here. I may not be receiving anything from you, but I'm praying you can still get mine. I'm going to keep writing. If you're receiving, keep replying, maybe I'll get something.

It's been a full day and the boat hasn't moved. On top of that, I received another dinner invitation. Carlo came and told me that McCart wants to see me. I don't know if I can do it. Everything made some kind of sense before. But now? I guess I chose this. On some stupid crusade to "know thy fear." I guess I have no choice but to continue. I'm afraid of McCart, but I'll go. From: manfred313

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Magadon Corporation

McCart knows. He didn't let on at first, but he knows. I went to dinner, and everything seemed fine. I was nervous as hell, sweating like a pig while he made something in the microwave. We sat and he opened another bottle of wine. He pretended to be worried about the boat stopping. "They say there's a storm ahead. That's why we haven't gone anywhere yet," he said. That's how he explained it. I stayed quiet while he made small talk. I could barely pay attention as he went on and on about the stock market, the pharmaceutical industry, health care. I couldn't focus. I just kept flashing that scene over and over again. Dumping barrels. Dumping bodies.

Then it happened. It just spilled out of my mouth. He was blathering on about something when I blurted it out. "What are you?" He just smiled. His grin and goatee made him look sinister, and I started shaking.

Then he said something like, "I know you saw everything last night." He apologized, said it was a shame that I had to see that. He started talking about duty and responsibility, and described murder like he was getting an oil change. Simple. Clinical. Then he looked disappointed. He stopped eating and said, "I don't know why we haven't started moving yet. The deal is done. I fulfilled my part. Quality was assured, so we should be moving." He said he makes this trip every year "for an old friend."

I wanted to run. Even the ocean would be better than this, I thought. But I decided not to move. Or maybe I was just fucking petrified.

He explained that he was familiar with infectious diseases. Said that some of the barrels he dumped over had waste that would decimate a town. Barrels of blood tainted with HIV. Shit full of bacteria that causes diseases like Ebola. Strains of flu, smallpox, cholera. All dumped in the ocean — and he emphasized — or were they?

He looked at my plate and I knew what he was suggesting. That I'd been poisoned. I pictured myself sick for days, puking blood in a toilet while my skin became covered with pus-laden sores. I didn't say anything. His smile vanished, and he told me he didn't do that. Not this time. He said that what I witnessed was just a "man keeping a bargain for the good of the company." He wanted me to understand that. Godforsaken monster.

Then he told me to leave. Said if I wanted, he'd get me a job with Magadon when we reached Europe.
Anything I wanted. Cushy office, secretary, books I could cook. I didn't answer him. I just left.

That was hardly the worst part of the evening. It was dark and deathly calm. The only sign that there was an ocean out there was the moonlight reflected off the water. I stood on the railing, practically daring the sea to take me. I wanted a cigarette, but I chewed my fingernails instead. Then I heard something. A voice. I wonder now if it was them. They'd been silent since that first time. Even so, I worry that it wasn't them, that it was the ocean.

I heard, "THE LAND IS DEAD." I felt nauseous and my vision changed. I didn't make it happen. It just did, and that's when I saw.

Everything was wrong. I stared out over the ocean and all I could see was sickness. Black. Oily. Like moldy coffee. Even the sky seemed broken, like it wasn't even attached at the horizon. It wasn't just McCart or Alameda, it was the whole sea.

Subject: Manfred313?

From: bookworm55

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Has anyone heard from Manfred313? He came on strong last week and seemed in the middle of some strange business at sea, but I haven't seen anything from him since. Did he mail anyone personally? Manfred, if you're there, speak up. Let us know you're okay.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: profesorgeo160

Subject: Re: Manfred 313?

I am afraid not. I was hoping he had mailed you. This makes me worry. Surely his troubles could not have ended? Perhaps his wireless connection to his Internet is no longer functioning correctly? Do they really have this?

From: blackbellamy240

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Requiem for Manfred

Face it, guys. Manfred's gone. He was up against some major odds. What are the chances he's still alive? Or, if he is alive, he's probably still on his ship, tied to a chair with that corporate monster doing who knows what to him? Hate to be pessimistic, but I call it realistic.

I did a little research, though. There is a Sao Joao Baptista in transit across the Atlantic right now. It's actually over that Continental Shelf thing, if I read this correctly, meaning that below it are two big drop-offs that are deeper than just about anything we know. I got a hold of the shipping manifestos (don't ask me how, let's just say it cost me), and no Magadon shit onboard. No listing of a Seth McCart/McCourt/Mc-Whatever. Who knows what's really going on? I bet we never will.

# Sea Legs

From: manfred313 To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org Subject: The Boy

Carlo came to me today. It had been a few days since we'd seen each other. He said he thought I'd be hungry, and he was right. He gave me a tray of cornbread and watery stew. I devoured it.

I'm sick to my stomach from worrying, though. We still haven't moved. Carlo told me rumors. He said that there are less and less men at mealtime. Some are supposedly sick. Others are missing. The captain has locked himself up, and no one has tried to get in. Carlo himself doesn't look so good. He's pale, with dark rings around his eyes. His voice is weak. He speaks with more of a groan now than anything else. He shrugged when I asked him about it, and said something about boredom. I asked him about the ocean. Did he like it? What did he think of it? He shrugged at that, too. He said something very profound, that water is for fish, air is for birds, and land is for men. He fidgeted with his chess piece and then left.

I've had more dreams. Now they mean something, though, don't they? I keep dreaming of the ocean, of being deep down while things swim around me. The water feels alive, like it's trying to pry open my mouth and flood my lungs. At the end of each dream, I feel like I've almost got my fingers wrapped around the water, like I can somehow make it solid with my will, but then, nothing. I wake up, sweating, yelling, until I realize that I'm out of the imaginary nightmare and back in the real one.

All of this because of Alameda. I thought he was a big piece of the puzzle, but he's not. McCart is bigger. For God's sake, the man is part of one of the biggest drug companies in the world. Monsters with their fingers in Big Business? That makes Enron and Worldcom seem petty. And now I'm shown that there's something wrong with the ocean? I said before that I was afraid the ocean was hungry. I didn't know how right I was. That's the big part of the puzzle there. We have to start filling in these blank spaces.

I say "we," but there is no "we," is there? Nobody is listening. I've never felt more alone.

After what Carlo said, I'm going to find the captain and find out what's going on. This boat needs to move. I want my feet on solid ground again.

From: manfred313

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: The Captain

There are monsters everywhere now. I have bruises around my throat where they tried to kill me! What's

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happening here? This can't be real. I've spent almost a year lurking on the list and I haven't heard of anything like this.

I went to see the captain. I worked my way to the front of the boat, found the steps up to his cabin below the stacks. I'd seen him once, when I made the deal with his first mate. He was a big man, soft and all smiles, with a Yankees cap. I pounded on his door. Nothing. I yelled, kicked, and still no answer. I went to look in a porthole, but the glass was all steamed up. All I could make out was a shape crouched over on a bed.

That's when I was grabbed and pulled to the floor. Two men held me. One started choking me while the other sat on my legs. But they weren't quite men. Not anymore. The dark color of their skin had faded, turned sick and gray. Almost green. But worse were their eyes. They weren't human. In the sockets sat clumps of jelly, like caviar. They had no lids. Everything started going black when I heard a pop, and the one choking me slumped against the captain's door. There was blood everywhere. Another sound and the one holding my feet had no head. McCart was standing there, gun in hand. He just nodded and left. I lay there a while and coughed, but I was afraid to stay. I came back here and locked the door. The room stinks of puke. From: blackbellamy240 To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org Subject: Mysterious Stranger

I did some more research on behalf of our friend at sea. Seth McCart? Seth McCourt? Wrong on both counts. Seth MacCartt. He's some quality-control person for "special projects." Supposed age is 51. The real corker? He's been working there since 1961. That means he was working there when he was somewhere between the ages of 10 and 15? The records were a pain in the ass to hack, so it's not like anybody at Magadon has a clue. If they did, I'm sure they'd chalk it up to a computer error or errors in their records.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: profesorgeo160

Subject: Re: Manfred313?

I still have not heard from him. I hope God hears his prayers.

## SEA MONSTERS

From: manfred313 To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org Subject: Theories

We don't know anything. Oh, we think we do. People on here claim they know what we are and what we're doing. What we're up against. But then when this kind of stuff happens, where is all our knowledge then? It's just like me — floating adrift, isolated and absolutely useless.

More importantly, all this makes me realize we've only uncovered the tiniest part of what's out there. It's like archaeology. People dig shit up and judge it by what they see. They get initial impressions, write them down and suddenly they're "facts." All we see is the tip of the iceberg. I've read here that vampires die when you shove a wooden stake through their heart, and then I've read posts that say they don't die that way at all! Some people say bloodsuckers can turn into wolves or bats, and some say they can't, and everyone says they're right. Is anyone? How can we be sure of anything?

I've already seen things out here I can't explain. I can barely hold onto an Internet connection, so I can't check the archives. Is it the ocean alone? Has it affected the boat, and that's why the crew is different? How does McCart figure into this? Alameda? How can everything around me be turning wrong? Does that mean I am, too, and I don't know it?

I haven't been out in a couple days. I'm starving. I'm going to find some food. At least it's daylight.

From: manfred313

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: The Crew

Something's happened to the crew. All of them.

The big metal door to the kitchen was wide open. I had a chance to grab dry bread and other stuff. I took a butcher's knife, too.

It was raining when I came out, and cold. I wish I'd brought warmer clothes, but how did I know? But I do know the crew is different, and not just the ones that attacked me. I don't know what happened to them. I saw some on deck, shuffling around like I imagine shamblers do from what I've read. They were pale and had those same eyes. Their mouths seem wider, and their hands are broad and thin. They didn't seem to notice me, or even care this time. They just made jabbering noises, almost like they were talking to each other.

I got angry. I don't know why. I thought about killing one. I pictured myself grabbing one and using the butcher's knife. What good would that do, though? I couldn't kill them all, could I? That might make them notice me again, like before.

I was tempted to go to McCart. I don't know what he is, but he's the only one I can think of who isn't turning into something or hasn't disappeared. I'd like to talk to Carlo again, but I haven't seen him. I have some food now. Someone will come for us eventually. They have to. This is a ship. It has to have a GPS or something and be able to send out a distress call. I could try for the bridge, but I'm afraid. From: manfred313 To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org Subject: <no subject>

Is it the food that changed the crew? I ate it, and nothing happened to me, but I'm still anxious. I can't sit still and I'm constantly sweating. It was cold a little while ago. How can it be so hot now?

Why am I even writing? You're not getting this. You can't be. There's no traffic. Barely a connection at all. I'm sending and getting errors back. It's some comfort, though, that maybe you might be getting this. Or will get it. I keep thinking about all of this, and how fucked up it's become. Those things outside and what they've become. Sometimes I look, concentrating to see what I'm shown, and I feel a little better. Could that be saving me from changing?

From: manfred313

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: \*&\*&^C^CghyTheories>^(\*&\*

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To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: cabbie22

Subject: Re: \*&\*&^C^CghyTheories>^(\*&\*

What was that?

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: profesorgeo160

Subject: Manfred313

It is a message from Manfred313, I believe, but I'm sure that was clear to you. The message was broken up. Why? Witness, do you have any answer for us as to why this might be the case? Are we receiving part of an earlier message? Is there a time or date to help us know what is happening with our friend?

From: blackbellamy240

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Re: Manfred313

Let's count Witness out of this. I mean, come on, when was the last time he answered one of our questions with a straight answer?

I'd try to dig deeper into the email thing. Maybe run some IP addresses, ping that wireless DNS he's got going on. But if it's all the same to you, I really don't feel like trying to crack hunter-net's server (or servers or brains or whatever this thing runs on).

What I did find: The Saint John the Baptist hasn't been heard from in days. Radio contact is dead. I assume that means they'll send someone to look for it, but I don't know how long it has to be out of touch before they'll do that. The last recorded position was in the middle of nowhere. They have some way of establishing position, so they know it hasn't sunk. I figure they'll find it and learn that our friend snapped and tried to kill everyone onboard, they'll find his body stuffed in a steamer trunk, or they won't mention anything about him at all.

# TEMPEST IN A TEACUP

From: manfred313 To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org Subject: Gone to Hell

Alameda was onboard after all. I'm so angry. I missed my chance to talk to him, to confront him, and all this happened. I was afraid, but what am I supposed to do now? I'm still terrified.

I'm in McCart's room. He's sleeping while I'm on my laptop. He thinks I'm keeping some kind of journal about all this. He doesn't even give a shit. He just shrugged and said that it's not like anyone would believe me. Then he went to bed. He said he'd explain everything in the morning.

I guess I have some explaining to do, just in case this makes it through. I feel like I need to sort out the pieces, but every one just makes the whole picture seem bigger. It makes me wonder if what all we do is the right thing. I don't know that it's about walking dead people or bloodsuckers. I think it's way bigger than any of that.

It was late and I couldn't sleep because of a big storm. The ocean was really rough. Lightning was flashing. Thunder was pounding. Sometimes in the lightning flashes, I'd see one of them from my porthole. One of the crew, shuffling by, sometimes stops to stare into my little round window with those horrible eyes. But then I heard it: a kind of moaning sound. The same sound that the crew was making before, but now it was together, in unison, and it was getting louder. I shouldn't have gone out. Every fiber of my being told me not to, but I had to.

Not far from my room, near the topside bay, I saw them. I think it was the whole crew. I hadn't seen some of them in a week. There had to be a hundred of them. All changed. Amphibious, almost, like salamanders. They were squatting in the pouring rain, hands limp on the deck, all at the edges of the ship, looking inward at something. The sound was terrible. Inhuman. I tried to find what they were looking at. It wasn't a thing it was a person. Alameda.

He was standing on top of the pilot's station on a crane, his ugly jacket flapping in the wind. He had the book in one hand and was tracing lines with the other, shouting something I couldn't hear. With everything happening, I still got mad that the book was getting wet. Stupid, I know.

I didn't know what to do. I could only really catch what was happening when the lightning flashed, and honestly it did more often that I wanted. I didn't know what was happening, but before long the moaning stopped. I look at the crew when, one by one, they got



up and threw themselves overboard! Suddenly I heard words echoing in my ears, like the thunder was talking to me. It said, "DARK WATERS AWAKEN!" Was it them again? It must have been, because I started seeing that way. That's when I saw what was really happening. As each thing fell, the ocean rose to meet him, coming right up to the deck. It was black water, almost like a massive hand. It caught them and pulled them down. It was like the ocean was collecting them, eating them, and Alameda was making it happen.

I turned back toward him, knowing that I had to do something, but I was frozen. What was I supposed to do? Attack him? Steal the book? Turns out that anything I had in mind wouldn't have mattered anyway. In the next flash, I saw someone standing behind him. It was McCart.

I saw three flashes, but not lightning. Later, he told me that he shot Alameda point-blank. Not that it mattered. Alameda didn't seem to care. He turned into I don't know what. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Maybe I imagined it. One minute he was staggering backward from the shots, and the next he was in the air, big wings flapping from his back in the pouring rain. I don't know if you'll believe me, but it looked like he had another pair of arms. He attacked McCart and the two fell and hit the deck, splashing around in a halffoot of water, beating the hell out of each other. I couldn't see much. I stayed back, but it wasn't long before Alameda was down and McCart shot him over and over again. One second his head was there, the next it wasn't. McCart threw the body overboard, and the book with him.

He didn't waste any time. He came straight to me. I guess he knew I was there all along, that he could "smell me." I thought he was going to kill me. I cried like a baby. My fear had the best of me, like it's had for days. I let it rule me, and it kept me from ever doing anything. I don't know if it was pity, but he let me be.

I don't know if I'm ever going to get off of this ship. McCart says we will. I guess I believe him. Not because he's a good man, or a man at all, but because he seems important. He's so sure of himself. Someone will come for him and I'll just happen to be here. Maybe they'll let me go, or maybe they'll kill me for everything I know. But why wouldn't he just kill me now? Unless he needs me for something. That's a scary thought.

There's something else, too. After McCart killed Alameda, he had this burn on his shoulder. It went clean through his clothes. His skin looked red, blistered. He said something about acid and got something from his nightstand. It was a syringe, a big one, filled with black stuff. He put it right into his neck and grimaced while he injected himself. I almost threw up. He said to stay, that everything was going to get worse before it would get better, that he'd explain everything in the morning. And now I'm watching him sleep. He is face-up, arms lying like a corpse in a funeral home. I thought about taking a pillow and smothering him, but I can see his shoulder from here and it's mostly healed.

From: blackbellamy240

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Thank You, MSNBC

You all hear the news today? Magadon being investigated for cooking its books? Some fuckload of money. We're talking billions misreported.

I downloaded a PDF of the Magadon Manual for Modern Pharmaceuticals. Shit, these people have more than just their hands in the big drug pie. They have their arms buried up to the elbows. They make everything from over-the-counter buffered analgesics to anal-itch cream to antibiotics that could probably make AIDS run and hide. (Yes, I know that HIV is a virus.)

I did some more hunting on Seth MacCartt, but didn't find anything else unusual. I'll tell you what, though, if you want conspiracy theories, Magadon is a good place to look. Here's just some of what I found.

1.) Magadon has reverse-engineered a pre-historic virus that makes Ebola look like the common cold. What they plan to do with it, I have no idea. There's other story linking them to a half-dozen biological weapons, so maybe they plan on taking out the whole world in some massive suicide pact.

2.) Magadon has cures for cancer, HIV and the common cold, all sitting around in some basement office somewhere, but they won't release them because they make too much money from temporary drugs and treatments. It's like the theories from the '80s about Exxon building a gasoline-free engine and hiding it because it would put them out of business.

3.) GHN, a Magadon subsidiary, makes "addictive" sports drinks, nutrition bars and fat-loss pills (and a related story says that these products help to fund abortion clinics). Next thing you know, they'll be making addictive chapstick.

#### Subject: Magadon

#### From: bookworm55

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

I actually think the way they mishandled their stockholders' money and the dent that'll cause in our already shaky economy is probably their biggest crime, but we all suspect that monsters pervade even the highest levels of business and government. That doesn't mean business or the government itself is corrupt. Or, at least, corrupt from a monstrous standpoint. While there may be some upper levels that are tainted, like this individual on the boat with Manfred, everyone should remember that these companies are made up of real and regular people like you and me. Legitimate people trying to feed their families. Not every shadow hides a boogeyman.

#### CHAPTER 4: THE SEA-BORN DARKNESS

From: memphis68 To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org Subject: Bullshit

Here's a story you won't find on TV. Kids from the projects in Richmond were going missing. Not a lot, but a few here and there. Every couple of months, another went missing. It went on for about a year before I got there. The cops didn't give a shit about was going on. A couple little "negroes" missing? A few "spics" taken from their mami and papi? It didn't matter to them. They were white and on the take.

After a few weeks, I figured it out. I saw what was happening. A van pulled up and stole kids. They'd inject them with all kinds of shit. Bad stuff. It would fuck them up and they'd dump them out of town at this out-of-the-way trashpile that went on for acres. The kids would be there, feeding off of garbage, trying to eat one another. I had to stop the kids, but it went beyond that. Stopping the kids didn't matter. Even the trash — the very ground — was wrong. I had to burn the whole place, and even then I don't know how much good I did. But that's not the point. The point is this, the two men I gutted and killed out of that van? They had Magadon security badges.

Big Business means big monsters. It's as simple as that. You could do worse than to walk into your local Magadon office and start some shit. You work for them, you're not innocent. I don't care who you are.

## Deeper and Deeper

From: manfred313
To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
Subject: <no subject>

This morning, he was healed. McCart. Not a mark on him. He changed shirts, put on some coffee and got out frozen bagels from the freezer. If I didn't hate him so much, I could've hugged him.

Over breakfast, he told me what he knew. It was a lot more than I had any grasp of. It goes deep. I asked him why he was telling me and he just smiled. He said it amused him to watch my face. Once again, who would believe me? I'm not sure I believe.

He started off by telling me that some parts of the world are "alive." I thought he meant like "teeming with life," but he says it goes deeper than that. The very ground, sky or water is alive in places. "Sentient" was the word he used, but I don't buy it. He said that he's part of a group that wants to kill a lot of these living places for the "good of the world," but apparently other places can be harnessed and used. I don't know what for — he wouldn't tell me that — but I guess these living places can be made useful somehow? I didn't quite understand. McCart and his people have been "cultivating" the ocean here above the continental shelf since the '70s. He said they've been "waking it up" with a yearly dose of chemicals and disease that keeps it under control. When I asked him what good that would do, he danced around the question, giving me some crackpot answer and citing "duty" and "obligation" again.

Then he jumped right into Alameda, that he didn't know anything about him. He called Alameda some "rogue agent" who was looking to wake up the waters early for his own purposes. Now McCart said that everything they've worked toward is ruined. Apparently Alameda deserved what he got. I pursued it, trying to get him to tell me what Alameda was. I said I saw the wings and the arms, and that he himself had healed. McCart just laughed and finished off his coffee in one big gulp. Then he left, saying he was going to go try to use the radio. He was awful cheery for someone whose plans were ruined by some other monster.

I feel sick, like I'm trapped between a rock and a hard place. And last night I had more dreams. This time I wasn't underwater. I was on top of it. Walking across it like it was glass. I could feel it breathing, and I felt it watching me. It whispered that it was awake, and it was going to eat us all. Then I woke up. I realized I left my pills in my cabin. They probably won't do me much good now, anyway. This anxiety isn't fake. Drugs aren't going to beat it. The dream is staying with me. I keep thinking about that water. Black. Bottomless. Cold.

The ocean is alive. McCart called it "Mother Ocean," except he said it in this snide way. It, she, whatever, is definitely awake now. I can see her when I turn on my sight, like a bruise. I went out this morning after McCart went to the radio room, and saw hundreds of dead animals floating out there. Most of them are fish. There are a few birds. And way out, I think I saw a whale. But the sailors weren't floating. Their bodies are down there somewhere. Down real deep. I don't know what the ocean wants with them, or if they'll show up dead eventually. I don't think so. I think the ocean wants them, needs them somehow. I should've stopped them. Maybe if I could've killed those men, stopped them before they went in, I could have hurt her. Too late now. I missed my chance. But if I can still hurt her, I will.

From: manfred313

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: "New Project"

McCart came back from the radio room and the captain's quarters. I wish he hadn't. He brought Carlo back with him. The boy barely looks human. He's a disgusting color. He has eyes like the others. His neck is fat and bloated and lined with fleshy slits. I tried talking to him but he didn't even seem to hear me. Then I

noticed that he didn't even have ears. Just lumpy knots where they used to be. I could have cried.

McCart said that the captain didn't go overboard with the rest. He killed himself before he changed all the way. He was probably smart. I keep thinking of the others and how they changed, and at Alameda's "reading" how the ocean grabbed them. Or maybe it just was calling them home. It was wrong, whatever happened.

The good news is, McCart got on the radio and said there's already a helicopter heading out to get us. The bad news is, he said Carlo and I are his new "projects." Apparently, McCart likes to manage some of the more important things that go on at Magadon, which makes me wonder why he's only some quality-control manager. Maybe he's more than that. Probably is, knowing my luck. He said I'll be treated well. Better than well. I can have anything I want. He describes his mansions (another indication - not a quality-control manager) with a light in his eyes. Pool tables, digital paintings that change on a command. He said I could be a part of that. But then he followed it up with something like, "You can have anything you want, as long as you're in the care of Magadon." He said their wallets run deep, so I had nothing to fear.

When I asked about Carlo, he repeated that he didn't know anything about science or medicine, but he figured Carlo would make a good subject for company researchers. He joked that maybe they'd find a cure for color blindness or hepatitis. I didn't laugh. The poor boy doesn't even seem to know that we're talking about him. He just stares, occasionally whispering into his hands. I noticed that his fingers are webbed together. They don't even look like they have bones anymore. It makes me sick.

We played a few games of chess, McCart and I. I played along. He was missing his bishop, but he still beat me. He owns me at this game, and he thinks he's going to own me at Magadon, too. Guess again. I'm not going to be some Magadon test subject. Fuck him. He says I'll be comfortable. Forget that. I had that before Alameda taught me it's all a big illusion.

I feel close now. I think I'm beginning to understand that the world is a big riddle with a thousand answers. I've glimpsed some of them, and I won't give up. He thinks I'm just going to give in. He doesn't know what I am — what we are. He doesn't know just how deep I go.

I heard something a minute ago and got up, but now I'm back. I don't know what it is. It's echoing through the boat. A loud thumping. I think it's against the hull! Where did McCart go? He said he was going back to the radio room, but is he doing this? Maybe he's trying to kill me. It can't be him. It sounds deep underwater. Carlo isn't even fazed. It's like he doesn't notice. I'm going to go check it out. I have to see wha From: manfred313 To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org Subject: No!

I don't knw if anyone can hear this but plese please tell someone. We're sinkng!!!!! The boat is leaning & something damaged the hull! I don't know what. I dn't know where Mccart is, I'm going to take Carlo

## INTO THE DEEP

From: manfred313
To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
Subject: <no subject>

It's her. It's the ocean. Mother Ocean. I think she's attacking the ship. We're not going anywhere. The waves are crashing against us from both sides, rocking us back and forth. I think it's trying to break the hull. I don't know how that's possible. What can I do? What does the ocean want? McCart? Me? Carlo? Is he the last one and she wants him? I won't let her have him.

I took him and we're up in the captain's quarters because they're higher up. We're leaning. Sinking. There's no way I'm going to survive in the water. The ocean will pull me down. Or maybe I'll become like Carlo. I don't even know where McCart is. Maybe it got him. Maybe he was by the railing and the water reached up and took him. It wouldn't matter. We're dead.

I've heard stories that drowning is a peaceful way to go. I don't buy it. Thinking about it is driving me mad. Pulling all that water into your lungs. Gagging, coughing. Then what happens? What happens after? I should have practiced. I should've gone to synagogue. Then maybe I'd have some answers.

I was blind. Ignorant. I thought I knew it all. I didn't want to see anything more than what I let myself. Then Alameda came, and I followed him. Why did I think I could solve this puzzle? I never even confronted Alameda, whatever he was. He's just another corpse now. Like I'll be soon. Like Carlo will be. Like McCart may be.

We're all doomed. I've read the stories on the list. Nobody ends well. We go nuts or we die. Why do we bother? What's the point? I just wish I had one last cigarette. That would be the best thing that ever happened t

There's a sound now. The boat is leaning harder. Things are falling. Carlo's upset. He's rocking back and forth like some autistic kid. It's getting louder. It sounds like a heartbeat. Her heartbeat, pounding through the hull, making the air

From: blackbellamy240

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Nightly News Update

It's amazing how "behind the scenes" we are sometimes. The news is a good example. You watch it one night and they show some warehouse on fire, people running and screaming. A reporter or the anchorperson says it was some kind of accident. Then you hear online that one of us set it because things were hiding there.

We see the man behind the curtain. We hear about one of us like Manfred, and then the news tells us how his boat sank in the middle of the Atlantic. Anyone seen it? There's no footage or anything, but the report is the boat sank, crew, cargo and all. Nobody knows why. It was just a blip sandwiched between stories about kidnapped children and pit bulls biting people again.

I think Manfred has been buried at sea. To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org From: profesorgeo160 Subject: Re: Nightly News Update

Despite what our friend here thinks of Manfred, we have seemingly lost another one of our number. No matter who they were or how they acted, that is worthy of a moment of silence, so please, when you read this, bow your head and say a silent prayer. May his spirit be rested finally. Ours are certainly not.

# TURN OF THE TIDE

From: manfred313 To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org Subject: Re: Nightly News Update

It's been over two months since the ship. Since everything. I haven't had time to read through everyone's messages, but it looks like for most of the time I was yelling into the void, and none of you could hear. My emails went unreceived, and so has my story, I guess. Suffice to say, a lot has happened, but I don't have time right now. I'm here to ask for help.

There was a helicopter from Magadon. It had a corporate logo, for God's sake. McCart was there. He wasn't dead. He came for me — for us. Carlo and I went with him. I didn't know what else to do. Then the boy began to scream. It was a terrible sound. The waves kept hitting and the ship kept leaning harder and harder.

I don't know what would've happened if I'd gotten onboard that helicopter. Would Magadon have me? Would they really have tried to hire me? Or would they have imprisoned or murdered me? It doesn't matter, because I wound up in the water after all.

Carlo fought his way loose. He got to the railing and jumped overboard, like a frog. I didn't think. I don't know why, but I went after him. It was like he was the last one being called, and I didn't want the ocean to get him. I knew I couldn't save him, but maybe I could cheat the sea. It was cold. I tasted blood from a cut in my mouth. I didn't even try to make it happen, but I could see again and it was as if the water was lit from below. I could see Carlo between waves. He was changed even more. His body swelled. His neck split into something like gills. I reached for him and he beat at me. His tongue was all wrong. It shot out and I think it cut me. I grabbed hold of him and swallowed a lot of water. Somehow, I don't know how, I made it back to the surface with him fighting. I got us to a floating crate top. Once he was on it, he went limp, like all the strength was out of him. That was my chance, and I choked him. I held on until I thought he was dead, and let him slide back into the water.

After that, I remember a screaming sound. Maybe it was the wind. I don't know. It was like the water was trying to pull me loose, but I wouldn't let go. I screamed back, and finally everything went quiet. Did I win? Did I hurt her? I don't know.

I had dreams. I thought I'd died and gone somewhere. Not so much to Heaven or Hell. Maybe the Jewish idea, Sheol? Just an endless, nothing afterlife, like a prison? Or worse, to a big bleak ocean. I somehow knew that I had been in a poisoned place. It needed something to live, to wake up, and it was frustrated that it didn't have what it wanted. It was denied.

Obviously, I didn't die. The dreams stopped and at some point I was rescued. I don't know how. I guess when an important boat sinks, people come pretty quickly. The Magadon helicopter and McCart were long gone. Another ship found me floating on that piece of crate. I don't know how I survived.

We got to Porto Santo and they treated me. They wanted to know what happened. I pretended to be confused, like I couldn't remember. What was I going to tell them? So, I snuck away as soon as I could.

I'm in an Internet place now, and you know what I keep seeing? Vans. Trucks. Men in uniform. I don't know what kind. They look official. I think they're looking for me. McCart knows I'm alive. The news didn't say anything about it, but he knows.

I first chose my name online from a book by Lord Byron called "Manfred." There was a quote that opened the book, and I thought Byron had written it, but turns out that it's actually Shakespeare. "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." That sums it up for me. We're clueless and stupid. We don't know a fraction of what's really out there. I've seen some of it and I still don't understand.



# CHAPTER 5: Rules and Storytelling

You have been in heaven, but all the mysteries had not yet been revealed to you, and you knew worthless ones, and these in the hardness of your hearts you have made known to the women, and through these mysteries women and men work much evil on earth. Say to them therefore: You have no peace.

- Book of Enoch 16:3-4

# Host of Horrors

Many unlit corners exist in the World of Darkness. That's self-evident, really. In a world of gloom, shadow and mystery, little is actually as it seems — or reveals itself at all. The truth is a stifled murmur in the deafening quiet of the unknown, a mere glimmer of light in an oppressive void. Entities and even places exist that dwell in the shadows, striving to remain hidden and out of mortal sight — or escaping notice by virtue of their inherent nature or violation of nature. There are things and locales steeped in illusion. Walking nightmares with names unheard and faces unseen.

While hunters are awoken to the existence of monsters, their awareness only pierces so deep. They are confronted with the supernatural where they were once blind to it, but that doesn't mean they see into every last corner or hiding place. Indeed, the imbued actually encounter and deal with the most superficial layers of the unknown world. They run afoul of the monsters that already walk among men. They seek to liberate corrupt sites where taint is clear and obvious. But so recently exposed to the truth, the chosen can't even begin to guess at the depth and enormity of monstrous influence. The supernatural has existed for ages, perhaps since the beginning of the world or the dawn of time. Hunters have no idea how deep the sickness runs, how pervasively it reaches. Despite their eyes suddenly being opened, the imbued are still the proverbial babe in the woods.

And yet, amazingly, some hunters are ignorant, presumptuous or complacent enough to assume that they understand the supernatural. They actually believe that their very limited experiences with the unknown encompass the enormity of it and its denizens. Some hunters conclude that monsters are confined to what is seen, and accept that what they have learned on the hunt is all that there is to know. Vampires have a weakness to fire. Lycanthropy is passed through the bite. Ghosts remain to resolve things left undone in life. Sometimes that information, those assumptions, are correct. Other times, they're fatally wrong.

The truth is that most hunters are more ignorant of the other side than they could possibly guess. The monsters that live, breathe, eat and kill are not so easily quantifiable, or cannot be quantified at all. These things aren't detailed in any textbook. They don't abide by labels. They are the embodiment of the unseen and

unknown — biological anomalies, deviants produced by occult experiments, cruelties that spring straight from folklore and legend. Some can look like ordinary people, so mundane that they're never given a second thought until it's too late. Others can be gibbering monstrosities that lurch forward from some primordial age.

Oh, hunters would *like* them to all have names. The chosen would like to be able to visit the local library to find out what these monsters eat, what they want, and what can hurt them. Do they drink blood? Can silver kill them? Are they able to operate in sunlight, or only in complete darkness? Can they be saved, will they communicate, or do they have to be shot in the head and left in a shallow grave?

There are no hard-and-fast answers, though. No supernatural creature can be taken at face value or ascribed to be this or that, out of hand. Each is a unique threat, impossibility or being crying out in need. Hunters who accept this reality, who respect each entity as a new and different threat, and who take nothing for granted about the other side may survive the experience. Those who jump to conclusions, who take beings at face value, or who sweepingly brand the unknown wind up broken or dead.

Hunter: Urban Legends helps teach the imbued hard lessons. It begins to plumb the depths of what the supernatural might be. It shows the confusion, misunderstanding and miscommunication that can occur among the chosen when they deal with monsters even ones assumed to be familiar — and teaches them by hard knocks that the unknown world *cannot* be known.

In preceding chapters, players get a chance to witness the hunter condition in dealing with misunderstood, alien or inconceivable creatures. You get to see what can happen to the imbued when they go up against beings to which they know nothing, but assume everything. You get a chance to play your character in groping ignorance as he also wrestles with the World of Darkness, as he struggles *without* your knowledge of the other Storyteller games. And even then, there are things in the world that not even you know, that not even other games have codified or explored, so your character is left completely in the dark.

The wise hunter recognizes that he knows next to nothing. The only thing most are really *certain* of is that monsters exist. Everything else — weaknesses, abilities, identity — is up for debate. Even "established" creatures have traits that make their identities hazy. *Did that vampire just breathe? Did that wolf drink that man's blood? I just shot that warlock and it didn't seem to faze him!* For as much information (and misinformation) that has been shared and spread among hunters, there are no guarantees that putting a stake in a monster's chest does a damn thing. The smart hunter recognizes that he doesn't know squat, and is scared as much by his own ignorance as by the things he faces.

For Storytellers, this book helps you turn your Hunter chronicle on its ear. Urban Legends shows and teaches you what can be done to keep hunters on their toes, to shock them out of their complacency, and to defy players' expectations about just what hides in the shadows. This chapter, in particular, offers guidelines on breaking the "rules" about "familiar" monsters such as vampires and werewolves. It helps you bring strange and unusual creatures - things that might not ordinarily interact with humans - out of the deepest depths. You can present bizarre denizens or entities, or create monsters from folklore, pop culture or your own imagination. And finally, this book explores how not only creatures but places can be touched by otherworldly powers. Urban Legends helps break the mold of what's gone before in the World of Darkness, and possibly in your game. It's designed to remind hunters of what it means to be afraid.

As a precursor to this chapter, it helps to be familiar with the creatures and powers in the **Hunter Storytell**ers Companion. (Abbreviated here as SC for page references.) The "Building Better Monsters" article in the **Hunter Storytellers Handbook** is also useful.

#### MONSTER OF THE WEEK

It might be easy to look at all the different monster possibilities posed by this book and see a gamut of new critters to throw at your hunters. Yes, you can mine these pages for more enemies to face, but it's meant to be more than just a long wandering-monster list. Each antagonist, whether a new definition of an old being or something never seen before, offers options for mood, theme and plot. Different and mysterious creatures help you make different statements in your game, whether that appearances can be deceiving or that not all monsters are ravening beasts.

Throwing weird new bogeymen at the characters every game can become tiresome and frustrating, and ultimately makes all your monsters dull. While each antagonist is different, stories wind up playing out the same. "We face it, we win." The point of creating new creatures isn't to shock players (although that can be a rewarding side effect), but to open doors to new possibilities and stories, and to defy preconceptions. Remember that you're creating monsters that can be unique, interesting and frightening, and as such, they should have their own motivations, history and needs. Those are what make them each a challenge. You can do more than concoct new monsters based on cool powers and weird physiology. There's a big difference between saying to players, "You see a giant worm breathing fire!" and, "Something passes under the boat. Do you hear that sound? It's like a voice! Is it... trying to communicate?" Monsters don't have to be freaky to incite fear. They can be terrifying for the acts they're prepared to commit, not necessarily for how they look. It's hoped that this book assists you in making sure that every creature with which hunters contend is interesting and terrifying.

# **Red Herrings**

This section is intended to help you purposely blur the lines between the canonical creatures of the World of Darkness. While players' characters may make dangerously erroneous assumptions from time to time, other times they may be on the money - their assessments of what creatures are prove correct, and all the pieces of dealing with those beings fall into place, predictably so. That's where you and this section come in. What aspects of a vampire could you reveal that make hunters think they deal with a werewolf? How can you take a seemingly simple creature like a shambling, shuffling zombie and sufficiently confuse hunters into thinking they deal with a possessing spirit, witch or something else altogether? In short, how can the subjects of the other Storyteller games be confused, misidentified or misunderstood, not only by hunters, but also by their players?

Actively throwing hunters off the mark with certain perplexing details helps enliven the mystery and general threat-level of your game. Imbued encountering easily identifiable creatures may grow comfortable and probably cocky when it comes to dealing with beasts. They basically go through a checklist: "We're dealing with a vampire. Let's see. They hate sun, don't like fire, and we'd better bring a stake. We'll deny him access to his blood source, and then sit down to have a little chat." But what if the characters are wrong? What if one tries to use the Balance edge to deny the creature power from blood, and the edge doesn't do a damn thing? What if the stake stabbed into its chest just pisses it off even more? Hunters won't feel so sure anymore when they're licking their wounds, still trying to figure out just what kicked their asses.

Denying players information that allows them to make informed guesses on their characters' behalf also keeps them from getting bored. The point of your chronicle may not be to throw players and characters off the path, but it *is* one element that helps keep games exciting. Sometimes players familiar with the other Storyteller games unconsciously project their knowledge onto their characters. Mixing things up defies players' expectations and puts them on par with their fumbling characters.

### TIPS AND TRICKS

The following are tricks you can pull before a game when creating your story and its cast, and during the game when characters are living the nightmare that you've created. These ideas aren't the final word on how you can confuse players and imbued. They're just meant to get you started.

#### Exchanging Features

Monsters can bear certain features or qualities that might give them away. Weaknesses, supernatural capabilities, certain appearance peculiarities. Hunters typically try to use these to identify and label creatures, and then turn that knowledge on a target. But what if these "certain identifiable qualities" get mixed up or confused? You can intentionally give one type of monster an element of another, whether it's "supposed" to be that way or not. A werewolf can shapechange from man to beast, but so can other monster types. Vampires can become bats or wolves. Warlocks can use magic to change themselves into just about anything. One type of creature does something for which another type is "known." You play the established monsters of the world against type.

Alternatively, say characters consistently see vampires going into a club, using mind powers on bouncers with the wave of a hand. A precedent is set for what a vampire can do, and therefore what a vampire is: a manipulative, social predator. Now defy that precedent by showing the hunters another kind of creature, maybe even similarly dressed, that performs the same kind of trick. Perhaps a nightmare also has intentions for the vampires and uses its powers over the mortal mind to close in on its targets. An unknown is thrown into the hunters' observations and plans, whether they know it or not. If they act against all the "vampires" in the club based on the false information they've gathered, it may backfire on them. There's at least one thing in there that's not like the others, and it may turn on the imbued based on their false assumptions.

A werewolf has fur behind his human ears and sometimes sniffs the air like a beast? Maybe a feral vampire does the same thing. A warlock shakes a Zuni fetish before she performs magic? Couldn't a pagan goblin do something similar?

The Storytellers Companion provides all kinds of powers that you can "switch around" among the various monster types. Those effects are defined fairly generically on purpose. So what if a vampire is stated to have access to one power and a warlock another? Assign any monster that you create any trick from throughout the book. Just swap the Trait that "fuels" the capability, say from Blood to Quintessence. Or you can fuel all powers with Willpower alone, no matter what your monster is and from what list it gets its powers. If a desired power has no systems appropriate to the being that you're creating, make those rules up to suit your needs. Maybe it's just the effect of the power that you're after, not the specific published mechanics. Feel free to change them.

Perhaps the only rule of thumb that you might observe in mixing and matching powers for a creature is make sure they make sense or work together. A water-borne shapechanger probably can't breathe fire, for example, unless you come up with a plausible reason for it doing so. (And then, characters and players should be shown that reason in play for it to make sense to them. They should get some idea of why such a combination is possible and how the creature makes sense.) A monster with a buffet of improbable capabilities can intrude upon the absurd rather than the cool and scary. Going too far mixing rather than matching can create silly monsters. Focus on a basic theme for combined powers such as "manipulate shadows," and select tricks based on that focus. The result is a consistent being that might look like a bloodsucker but possesses powers previously encountered among shapechangers, ghosts or wizards. So, what are hunters dealing with?

#### TWISTING PERCEPTIONS

Hunters are granted miraculous powers of observation by virtue or curse of being chosen. Second sight and edges such as Discern, Witness and Illuminate are all significant advantages in the classification of creatures, right? Sometimes. Other times, these "powers" are major weaknesses, especially for imbued who use them like crutches when it comes to ID-ing entities. These observation powers aren't foolproof. In fact, they can raise more questions than they might provide answers.

Use of second sight is far from conclusive in identifying monster types. The effect confronts the user with impressions and sensations, and not always visual ones. An imbued might be struck with a nauseating odor, hear a shrill sound or may spontaneously taste blood just as easily as he could see something decayed walk toward him. Most likely, a chosen senses that a subject is "wrong" or "off." It doesn't belong or is unnatural, but the effect doesn't indicate *how*. That's for the hunter to decide based on the sensations he receives and his own experience.

The confusion of second sight can be compounded further. What if two or more hunters get different impressions of a creature? Say, a shadow looming over it in bright sunlight, and a pungent, musky smell. Does more information help add up to suggest what the entity is, or does it conflict? These signs might point to a shapechanger or to one of the walking dead. Who can say for sure? Unfortunately, it's up to the imbued to find our for sure through further observation or possibly through direct contact. And what if more signs and impressions gathered from second sight conflict with the first gained? What do hunters do then?

Perhaps they resort to observation edges. But they may be of little help.



Discern tends to convey physical signs and empirical evidence — details that are real, that a hunter can see, smell or hear. It may reveal that a creature's chest rises and falls, as if breathing. Its veins may look pale blue-green, suggesting that there could be a pulse. But these details are open to interpretation. Maybe that rising and falling chest isn't a matter of autonomic breathing, but of a dead creature's determined effort to take in and exhale air in order to talk. That "pulse" may actually just be the way the thing's veins looked before it went over to the supernatural, and they've looked that way ever since. Ultimately, Discern shows the user trees. It's up to him to make conclusions, based on previous experience or intuition, which reveal the forest. That deduction may lead to a correct assumption that a being is, say, dead, but does that make it a vampire or one of the walking dead?

A hunter using Witness may receive a short, jarring vision about or involving a creature. This capability offers possible insights into a subject's possible nature and relationships with people. Images received might show rage or torment, indicating the worst that a subject is. But is having a "dark side" grounds for persecution or punishment? Who doesn't suffer moments of weakness when we do things we know we shouldn't, and regret later? That's called being human. Yet, can that truism be ignored when looking at a monster with this power? Is a monster automatically malicious for being a monster? Can it still be human, too?

Images received that involve people might involve obvious violence or benevolence, killing or protecting a human. Images can be confusing, though. By no means do they have to be clear or complete. A scene might be hazy or smoky, whether it was at the time or not. Only a part of events might be revealed. A creature could be covered in blood and a person might be shown horribly mutilated. Maybe the being killed the person. Or maybe the blood is other monsters' and the subject of the scene tried in vain to protect the fallen human.

A wise user of Witness doesn't make snap decisions about an entity's intent based on one "viewing." He gathers impressions from a thoroughly informative use of the edge, or from multiple uses, to learn as much as possible. And yet, how often do the chosen have the luxury of time to ascertain the motives of a beast, especially one bearing down on them?

And even if Witness does show a bestial demeanor or violence toward one or more people, what does that necessarily say about the kind of creature at hand? A monster stooping over a body, feeding, can be anything — a vampire, skinchanger, goblin, zombie. Just because a character turns Witness on a monster doesn't mean he automatically senses what kind of being it is.

Illuminate can be even more confusing. Here's a power that surrounds creatures in halos or auras to

hunter eyes. As far as indicating the presence of monsters goes, it works fine, but its utility can be tested thereafter. Who says there are rules for the colors that different beings show? Why does a vampire have to bear a pale aura? Maybe different kinds of vampires have different auras, based on their allegiance or attitude or on whether they've fed recently. Indeed, each hunter might perceive a different light even when looking at the same subject. The same ghost might appear red to one hunter and yellow to another, even in the same moment. Perhaps onlookers' minds simply digest the images perceived differently, based on primary Virtue, or their different origins or cultures associate varying colors with varying creatures. The point being, Illuminate can convey so much information under so many different circumstances that categorizing and making sense of it all is extremely challenging. Consistently identifying monsters by type can therefore be extremely difficult.

Even an edge such as Pinpoint, useful for suggesting a fiend's weaknesses, doesn't necessarily provide a positive ID of creature type. Unless the player gets a high number of successes on an edge roll, you're allowed to be a little elusive about a target's vulnerabilities. A vampire's weakness might be "the sun," but you could be more evasive by answering "time," "hunger" or even "itself." Allowed enough exposure to any of these "vulnerabilities," what being isn't harmed by them? Hell, ordinary people are. And thus, hunters and players learn how challenging it is to conclusively identify creatures, even with the very tools they're granted by the imbuing.

#### MASQUERADING MONSTERS

It's possible that monsters may inadvertently display features associated with an entirely different type of being. Take a feral, animalistic vampire that seems like a beast-man. It's hard to say just what the thing is. But who's to say that some fiends don't actively disguise their monstrous identities? Many creatures try to appear human, at least at some point. If they don't, they can stir up a witch-hunt. People could see the creatures for what they are or the beings might create such an unconscious disturbance among the masses that someone attuned to such phenomena might suspect the truth. Monsters such as ghosts and vampires can also seek to bear human semblance to better find sustenance, whether emotions or blood.

Yet some things may take it further and attempt to appear as creatures that they're not. A warlock could use magic to pass himself off as a vampire. A bloodsucker may try to appear like a werewolf, especially in a locale dominated by shapechangers. Why would any creature do this? It might throw off enemies. While a creature may not be specifically aware that hunters are after her (or even that the imbued exist), she probably has enemies that she can avoid by appearing as something other than what she is. Think of those butterflies with eyes-like patterns on their wings that help avoid predators. Or a creature may hope to blend with other creature types. A witch appearing like a vampire may hope to integrate herself into the rot community to learn their secrets of immortality. Sure, there are dangers to monsters that "cross over," but among the rewards is being misunderstood and perhaps underestimated. When hunters stalk such an individual, they think they have one target in their sights, and abruptly learn that it's something else entirely.

#### SHOWING, NOT TELLING

Finally, when it comes to misleading hunters and players, no matter how you do it, the law of "show, don't tell" applies. Why? Whatever you tell them they probably accept as a rule, because the Storyteller tends to speak the truth when he actually tells players something. If you say, "It appears you're not dealing with a vampire," they probably take that statement at face value, whether you're sincere or not. Besides, telling them something like that inserts a notion into character minds (by way of the players) that isn't their own. You, as Storyteller, making a statement like that is akin to God or the Messengers talking to the characters, reassuring them that they don't have to concern themselves with this unknown or that. (In the case of the Heralds, you may want them to deliver a message like that, but you present it as part of the setting, not as part of the metagame experience.)

#### MACGUFFINS

A "MacGuffin" is a term popularized by Alfred Hitchcock, one of the directorial masters, and a master of red herrings. A MacGuffin is a plot device used to create motivation. It's not supposed to mean anything; it's just supposed to be there. It's an object in a story that drives the plot but ultimately has little to do with what makes the story interesting. Look at Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*. The MacGuffin is the briefcase that Jules shepherds after. What's in it? It doesn't matter.

But if you really want to mess with hunters' heads instead of presenting a creature that looks like a vampire but then turns out to be a warlock, give them a monster that looks like a mage, *then* turns out to look like a vampire, but was really a mage all along. Say a wizard deals in death and draws life from the living to fuel his magic. He demonstrates ghoulish behavior, may actually consume blood or flesh, and has a dull aura to onlookers using Illuminate. That'll turn player and character perceptions — and faith in them upside-down.

But if you show hunters that they might not be dealing with a vampire, it not only calls the identity of the being into question, you might give the characters enough rope to hang themselves. Hunters have to decide for themselves what the truth might be. You can show them by saying, "Last night you saw the creature guzzling the blood of that homeless man, but tonight you see it puffing on a cigarette." There's an implied one-two punch here. It could be a vampire, but smoking requires breathing, and vampires don't really breathe, do they? Suddenly, the hunters are confused. You don't tell them anything, but you show them something that is left to their interpretations. Now, not only might they question the identity of the creature they contend with, but they might also question the entire body of knowledge they accept about certain monsters. And the best part is, you've just presented information. You haven't declared any of it to be true or false.

## THE DEVIL YOU DON'T KNOW

What are some specific ways that one established World of Darkness creature can look like another? Some general guidelines are offered above, but what are the particular details that befuddle hunters? What powers can one creature manifest that may make it look like something else entirely? Here are some ideas.

#### VAMPIRES

Vampires are dead, which comes with some assumptions. They don't breathe, eat or shit. But what if those assumptions are wrong? A rare few vampires have special capabilities that allow them to appear as if they breathe or eat. (Don't ask about the shitting.) A vampire with extreme muscle control is able to exert her lungs to inflate and deflate, thus giving the appearance of respiration. Those capable of eating don't digest their food, but muscle control allows them to work it down their esophagus without immediately puking it back up through undead peristalsis.

Vampires can also look like beast-men. Some rots exhibit powers that could seem to be reserved exclusively for werewolves. Beast Speech, Claws, Summon Animals and Shapeshift are all capabilities from the **Storytellers Companion** that indicate a werewolf, not a vampire, but they're specifically *vampire powers*. Meanwhile, a really ugly or deformed bloodsucker might appear to be a battered zombie. The undead could be mistaken for nightmares, too (and vice versa). Both might wear antiquated clothes, depending on origins and personality, and exhibit mind-control powers over unsuspecting mortals.

#### WEREWOLVES

Werewolves can demonstrate certain traits that might seem obvious and exclusive to their "breed," and sometimes that's true. But there's quite a lot you can do to make a werewolf seem like something else.

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A shifter that appears to blink from existence or that uses Blend (SC, p. 45) to effectively avoid human notice may throw the chosen into uncertainty. What kinds of beings can do that? It seems like sorcerous behavior. Could the thing be a wizard? If the changer remains in human form, that's a likely guess. A beastman might demonstrate mental suggestion among ordinary people, reinforcing the wizard possibility, but such command could also be rumored among vampires. Tricks such as Persuasion, Staredown and Slander (SC, pp. 48-49) might seem part and parcel of leech tactics. (Some cannibalistic man-wolves might even eat the flesh or drink the blood of their victims, as might a vampire or zombie.) Finally, werewolves have a "war form" in which they are big goddamn beasts that could panic any hunter, but more importantly these creatures could be interpreted as some kind of demon.

Some werewolves are "deformed," a product of a forbidden mating between two full-blooded shapechangers. Even in their human forms, offspring of such fornication may exhibit bizarre features. They may be hermaphroditic, they may be hairless or they may have withered limbs. Goblins can also seem deformed to imbued eyes, with unusual height, odd proportions or discolored skin, and some vampires are so misshapen that they might be mistaken for these prescribed beastmen (or such changers might be mistaken for vampires). Indeed, if a hunter encountered all three of these kinds of beings, she might assume they were all of the same hideous variety.

Finally, a simple way to muddle hunter perceptions is to present an atypical shapechanger. Its animalistic nature suggests a feral quality, but a well-groomed monster in a business suit stalking the halls of Corporate America doesn't really sound like a werewolf. Neither does a suburban housewife in an apron and rubber gloves. They don't scream "feral beast-man." If it's never occurred to characters or players before, shifters that assume forms other than wolf are possible, too. The whole animal kingdom is your playground, but predatoranimals are your best bet.

#### MAGES

Witches and warlocks tend to be the most confusing of the World of Darkness' entities. Part of this misunderstanding stems from the fact that mages have such a wide variety of tricks up their sleeve that not only do they share very few powers among themselves, many of their "fundamental" capabilities are shared or mimicked by other creature types.

Mage powers are damn near infinite in scope. With the right combination of elements, a witch can run fast, jump high, erase memories, command animals, shapeshift into any number of beast forms, teleport, jump into different bodies, tell the future or rip the skin from a hunter's body with the snap of her fingers. Add to that the tendency for mages to be rare among monsters, meaning that some hunters just don't even know they exist. One of the chosen watching a mage change forms probably thinks "beast-man." When a mage whispers a command to a banker who in turn hands over two bags brimming with cash, the hunter could suspect "vampire" (or at least "vampire slave"). A wizard capable of leaping into other people's bodies and ejecting their souls looks like a possessing ghost, demon or nightmare.

Pick any power from any other creature. With the right combination of magic, you can have a manipulator duplicate it. Turning into a wolf requires Secrets of the Body 4 (SC, p. 56). Switching from body to body requires a powerful mage with Secrets of the Mind 5 (SC, p. 57). The presence of some ghosts may cause the temperature to drop in a room. A warlock merely needs Elements 2 (SC, p. 54).

There are a few characteristics that help a mage stand out, but even those are unreliable for perceptive hunters. Many are reliant on "focus items" such as fetishes, computer devices or religious icons when performing magic. These items help channel a witch's concentration and energy. But shapechangers can wield an array of fetish items, too, and some ghosts and possessing spirits are bound to specific objects (so much so that carrying and keeping those objects might be a goal).

Some mages look eerie and strange due to the counterbalancing punishment inflicted upon them by abuses of magic, but goblins and demons can look pretty bizarre, too. Even use of Illuminate can confuse matters, since every mage power confers a different aura (The Spellbound, pp. 107-111), many of which might look like the halos of a whole other monster types (see p. 84).

#### SPIRIT'S AND THE WALKING DEAD

A hunter might assume that a spirit is an easy mark — easily recognized. After all, it's dead, with a specific set of characteristics marking it as a ghost. It's insubstantial, may not be able to affect the physical world and has some unfinished business left to attend to. But there's a whole host of things a spirit can do that may confuse even the most experienced of chosen.

The most obvious is that many spirits either possess the living or end up stuffed in corpses. Possessing spirits are easy to overlook or misunderstand. A living host implies that the monster isn't dead, while second sight or observation edges may show "another soul" beneath the mortal's skin. Such conditions might indicate a completely different type of being. Demons, nightmares and body-jumping warlocks may all demonstrate similar qualities.

Meanwhile, spirits that possess corpses - the walking dead - are, well, dead. But so are vampires, or at least vampires could look post-mortem when they haven't fed or if they bore injuries when they were turned and those injuries persist afterward.

But even incorporeal ghosts can confuse hunters, despite that telltale insubstantial quality. Consider the power Half-Life (SC, p. 22), which allows a ghost to temporarily assume physical form. So, is the thing a human, a vampire, a mage? A ghost using Obliterate Animal (SC, p. 22) can take over a beast's body, and might come off as a shapechanger. Furthermore, spirits might perform their tricks from afar or at least while invisible. They could move objects, create phantasms, read minds, control emotions and cause other ghastly events. Hunters not able to see spirits (or who aren't looking in the right place) may think they're being manipulated by some warlock from afar, or by some vampire with considerable manipulation capabilities. A spirit using Gremlinize (SC, p. 21) to take over a hunter's computer probably gives the impression of some hacker cutting through the net, potentially even appearing as a mortal or even another hunter online. Ultimately, spirits with the right combination of tricks can appear like anything but a discorporate wraith.

#### DEMONS

Demons are tricky. They have a pretty wide array of powers, and it wouldn't be too far off the mark to open the Storytellers Companion to any page, pick a power and assign it to a demon. Infernal beings, like werewolves, have distinct shapechanging abilities. Sometimes they can turn into animals (or assume animalistic form), or sometimes they can transform into hideous, awe-striking abominations of biblical proportions. (Something akin to nightmares, perhaps, or to wizards who gained their power from the Underworld?) Also, demons rank up there with mages and vampires in terms of mind manipulation. If a hunter sees a monster command a crowd of onlookers, but has no other indication of the beast's nature, what does she think? Does she watch a vampire sway the populace, a mage harness their thoughts or a demon attempt to cultivate worship (if such is even possible)?

Also consider that demons might be easy to confuse for a possessing spirit. A hunter with the right observation tool (second sight or Witness) may see the second "face" in the very soul of the creature, beneath or superimposed upon the host's image. Since the imbued tend to find restless spirits more commonly than they do demons straight out of the void, it's likely that the chosen would mistake a possessing demon for a possessing ghost.

Perhaps even harder and more frightening to imagine, demons have the capacity to charm and strike bargains that allow them control over a body, whether it's that of a bloodsucker, a warlock or even a hunter. What happens when some ragtag imbued have followed

#### SLAVES AND MASTERS

Don't forget to include monsters' servitors in your quest to confuse players and characters. The slaves of a certain type of creature may not appear as such to second sight or observation edges, but as masters. A blood slave may bear an aura similar to her vampire "owner." The blood relative of a shapechanger, who may not even know he's related to a monster, may show characteristics (excessive body hair, feral eyes) similar to a werewolf. Almost all types of monster have some sort of lesser, servile counterpart - vampires with their puppets, shapechangers with their kin, manipulators with their acolytes, and demons with their worshippers. A hunter may encounter any of these pawns and mistakenly assume that the slave is really the master, and act erroneously. After all, a slave can come and go as he pleases, hiding in plain sight among humanity. Perhaps he's the one with an agenda, and the more overt monster is his attack-dog.

Slaves are also a good distraction to throw hunters off the true masters. Servants are humans, often bestowed with special supernatural gifts. Maybe they bear their own identifying marks based on those gifts, without pointing to the kind of entity that granted them in the first place. Hunters may have to confront or deal with a slave to learn of and find her master, and that may mean playing their hand to the real supernatural threat at work. Consider what happens when a hunter encounters a demon's enthralled cultist, but the imbued confuses the servant with a vampire blood-puppet. Perhaps the hunter sees an occult mark branded on the agent's hand, and has associated that kind of sign with occult vampires in the past. Or suppose the hunter uses Illuminate and observes a gray, lifeless luminescence around the servant - similar to one the hunter had seen surrounding a vampire's slave. Stakes and garlic won't accomplish much against a creature straight from Hell.

a witch for the better part of a year, only to find that she's given her body and soul over to a possessing demon? All that research into warlock vulnerabilities goes right out the window. (See **Hunter: Fall from Grace** for the possibilities of demons possessing the chosen.)

#### CONSEQUENCES

So, a hunter makes a false assumption about a creature. She thinks it's one thing — a ghost — and it turns out to be something utterly different — a wizard projecting his spirit. What happens then? The most

obvious and unfortunate possibility is death. A hunter blasts away at a thing with a gun loaded with silver bullets, but the vampire is unfazed and snaps the hunter's neck like a toothpick. Or a hunter tries to jam a chair leg through a creature's heart and the warlock suddenly turns the makeshift stake into a cloud of poison, which the hunter promptly inhales. Once again, death results.

But the death of characters over every case of mistaken identity isn't particularly fun for players. You don't want to declare characters DOA lightly. In fact, you probably want to avoid that fate altogether unless under extreme circumstances — a hunter sticks his head in the lion's mouth with careless abandon. So what other consequences can result when one of the chosen wrongly identifies a monster as one thing when it's really another?

Consider the swell of misinformation it could inspire. If a hunter's conclusions aren't completely refuted, denied or proven wrong, she may perpetuate her false assumptions to other chosen. Her entire group may think it tracks a manipulator when it really stalks a demon. And what if a character takes her misinformation all the way to hunter-net or to the imbued at large? The Internet is a great place to spread the seeds of false facts, and the consequences could be staggering. Desperate for any advantage against the supernatural, other chosen may try out the poster's tactics, strategies or weapons with tragic consequences. Alternatively, a poster might denounce a genuinely valid strategy against, say, a goblin, because her effort to use it on a presumed goblin failed. Now, legitimate tools to bring to bear on the hunt are discounted and the imbued in general suffer.

If you want repercussions for false assumptions to fall squarely on the characters' shoulders, but don't want to kill them outright, there can be a price for misunderstanding. A hunter might be hurt, even severely, but survives the experience, learning a hard lesson. Suppose a character attacks werewolves in an effort to get to the one she's tracking, and it turns out that the target was really a vampire all along? Now he's made enemies among shapechangers and has all the wrong information on his intended prey. A hunter playing her hand to deal with the wrong kind of creature may make herself known to it, and be subject to its attention thereafter. The imbued might try to defeat the "walker" she's after, only to find herself subject to a warlock's interest. The manipulator could use the hunter as a pawn thereafter, a tool at his disposal to pit against rivals.

Ultimately, there should always be dire consequences when a hunter realizes the error of her ways. The most fun to roleplay are the ones that characters are reminded of every day of their remaining lives, be it with the memory of victimized allies, lost loved ones or personal suffering from that "one hunt that wont wrong."

#### THE GLUTTON (DEMON)

Quote: You gonna eat that?

**Prelude:** Eshtoreth's new vessel was once called Glenn Dombrowski, and lived in this world as a walking, talking bag of flesh, blood and fat. Glenn lived a good life as a popular chef with a radio show in Beverly Hills, but then one day his canned-ham heart gave out and left him for dead — at least, until Eshtoreth came screaming out of Hell and nestled into his comfortable skin.

Since that point, Eshtoreth-as-Glenn has lived it up, mostly in the food department. Glenn was already a big boy, so why not maintain the status quo, at least for appearances' sake? Eshtoreth still had the memory of all the things Glenn liked to eat. The tastes of caramelapple cheesecake, sautéed asparagus, couscous, all commingled on his tongue, and the demon was capable of conjuring those memories any time she desired.

Over time, her infernal masters — already liberated from the iron chains of purgatory — found her and recruited her back to the team. Since that point, Eshtoreth has acted behind the scenes, carrying out her new orders, most of which are aimed at achieving the eventual goal of global annihilation. But for now, it's one death at a time. As soon as Eshtoreth-as-Glenn gets the poison mixture *just* right so that nobody can taste it, the plan will be in full swing.

**Concept:** The Glutton looks predominantly like a possessing spirit, both to second sight and observation edges. They might reveal a normal body, but some *other* entity living behind the flesh, lurking among the bones. Observers might see the Glutton gorging himself, as ifhe hasn't eaten in a month — another potential sign of a possessing spirit back for some home-cooked mortality. It's possible that hunters could confuse the Glutton for a nightmare, which may be another type of creature



reputed to have a "second soul," and who may also indulge insatiable desires. Of course, the Glutton is really a demon, arguably the most fearsome being that hunters could encounter.

Roleplaying Hints: You enjoy being back in the world, among humanity. You don't necessarily despise or dismiss people. Without them, who would provide you with faith and power? Without people, how would you enjoy the food and other delights that you explore now that you're back? Your masters may command you to prepare for widespread destruction, but you don't necessarily have to be diligent in your duties. In fact, the longer you can procrastinate and avoid punishment the longer you get to enjoy yourself. If some mortals even prove capable of opposing your lords, who are you to stop them? Imagine if they succeeded!

Equipment: Butcher knife, stained white shirt

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 1, Stamina (Robust) 5, Charisma 3 (5 in demon form), Manipulation 2 (4 in demon form), Appearance 2, Perception 3, Intelligence 3, Wits 2

Abilities: Computer 2, Crafts (Cooking) 4, Expression 3, Leadership 1, Linguistics (Italian, Polish) 2, Performance 2, Research 1, Technology 1

Backgrounds: Allies 1, Contacts 3, Resources 4

Powers: Empassion (SC, p. 63), Lockjaw (SC, p. 51), Terrify (SC, p. 34)

Willpower: 6

Faith: 4

#### THE LONER (VAMPIRE)

Quote: I got an idea. Why don't you get the fuck away from me? That way I won't have to tear your throat out.

**Prelude:** Caleb Kinsey moved far away from his family, his old life and any chance at ever having to deal with that time and place again. He wasn't going to be a college boy. He knew that from the start, and he didn't have any sweet jobs lined up. It was just time to get the hell out of Dodge. So he up and moved to Taos, New Mexico and got a job as an assistant at a dingy little emergency-vet clinic. The pay was crummy but it afforded him a place to live, and he didn't have to talk to too many people.

One night, about six months into the job, a trucker brought in a "dog" he had hit out on Route 612. But it sure didn't look like any dog Caleb had seen. It looked more like a wolf. The vet was out on a supply run, so Caleb tended to the animal's wounds, which were miraculously better than they'd been when the animal was brought in. Suddenly the creature was up on the metal table, snapping and foaming red at the mouth. Before Caleb knew what was happening, jaws clamped around his neck. Caleb knew he was dead. He just didn't know that he'd wake up again in a half-lit almost-life.

He was in the desert and watched as a man walked away, toward the Sangre de Cristos Mountains, and then dropped to all fours as a wolf. Caleb found his way back into Taos, wondering what in God's name had happened to him. When he saw a girl by the 7-11, he felt the hunger stir. The world went red. He took her without meaning to, and left her struggling for life near a dumpster, his craving satiated. Soon afterward, with barely a thought, he found himself in wolf form, too. That's when he left town altogether, trying to figure out what he'd become.

**Concept:** The Loner is a vampire, but he might not realize it. Yes, he drinks blood. No, he has no heartbeat. But he can turn into a wolf since being bitten. So what is he? Any hunter might ask the same question. Any surveillance using observation edges could reveal a creature that appears more like a shapeshifter than a vampire predation of animals in the wild, extended bouts spent in animal form — despite the truth of the situation.

Roleplaying Hints: You're a survivor, an outsider. You don't want to have to deal with anybody, because you might hurt them. You're angry at yourself and anyone who approaches, but you don't want to hurt them. You just know you might not be able to stop yourself. How long will it be before you come to grips with that?

#### Equipment: None

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity (Fast) 4, Stamina 3, Charisma 2, Manipulation 1, Appearance 3, Perception (Hawk-eyes) 4, Intelligence 2, Wits 2

Abilities: Alertness 3, Animal Ken 3, Brawl 3, Dodge 1, Intuition 2, Investigation 1, Medicine 1, Stealth (Shadows) 4, Survival 2

Backgrounds: Contacts 1

Powers: Beast Speech (SC, p. 33), Shapeshift (SC, p. 37), Speed 2 (SC, p. 32), Summon Animals (SC, p. 34) Willpower: 5

Blood: 7



6

#### THE SUIT (WEREWOLF)

Quote: I think you have the wrong guy. I'm just a businessman.

**Prelude:** Those other werewolves have it all wrong. Living in the forest like animals? Nesting among their own filth and discarded bones? That's not how Jonathan Eggers thinks it should be done. Since his First Change when he was 12, he's tried to maintain control of his feral instincts. He decided early on that if the world's corruption is to be undone, it has to be from the inside out. Cities are havens of taint, so that's where he decided to start.

Eggers and a few others of his kind with similar mindsets have integrated themselves into the world of high-tech big business. Software, hardware, handheld solutions, digital-phone technology. Any and all of it. He's able to expose corruption, run a spotless company and make some big bucks. When the time comes to unleash his beast, he does so either in the privacy of his top-floor suite or way out in East Bumblefuck, where nobody knows any different.

**Concept:** The Suit is hard to peg. He may be a werewolf, but he doesn't reveal that side of himself to anyone. He strives to contain the telltale signs of his bestial nature. Any excess hair is removed, any wild musk is dampened with heavy cologne, and he reins in his wild sprees whenever possible. He's ingratiated himself into the world of high-tech corporations, and seems to "get his way" more often than not. Aren't some bloodsuckers involved in that world? Ah, but a hunter might note that the Suit breathes and goes out during the day. Maybe he's some kind of techno-head mage. He seems to rely on his PDA and high-end digital phone, and he drives a Jaguar. Werewolves don't care about nice cars, do they?



Roleplaying Hints: Just because you're a beast inside doesn't mean you have to be one on the outside. You look good, smell good and behave more civilized than most humans. You frown upon most of your kind; they just don't have your vision.

**Equipment:** Personal organizer, laptop, digital phone, several neatly pressed suits, Glock 10mm pistol in briefcase

Attributes: Strength 3 (5/7/6/4), Dexterity (Fast Hands) 4 (4/5/6/6), Stamina 3 (5/6/6/5), Charisma (Smooth) 4, Manipulation 3 (2/0/0), Appearance 3 (2/0/3/3), Perception 3, Intelligence (Problem-solver) 4, Wits 3

Abilities: Alertness 2, Athletics (Gym) 4, Brawl 2, Bureaucracy 3, Computer (Laptop) 4, Drive 2, Finance 3, Leadership (Teamwork) 4, Politics 1, Science 1, Security 1, Subterfuge 3, Technology 3

Backgrounds: Allies 3, Arsenal 1, Contacts 4, Resources 4

Powers: Blackout (SC, p. 45), Inflict Malfunction (SC, p. 46), Slander (SC, p. 49)

Willpower: 8 Rage: 8

## RARITIES

To a hunter, even the most common, human-seeming monster is a chilling enigma. Something as "simple" as a newly turned bloodsucker is a fearful being all on its own. It drinks blood, it's dead yet it walks and talks, it maintains some semblance of humanity (and is an appalling mockery of what it means to be human), and it can perform inexplicable feats. The existence of monsters invades hidden, forgotten corners of the mortal mind, reminding people of how they once were (and still are) prey. A monster doesn't have to be 12 feet tall and covered in scales to be terrifying. A mere ghost — something that should not be — is enough to terrify the imbued simply by exceeding the boundaries of accepted reality.

Yet sometimes, the "common" monsters of the World of Darkness—ghosts, bloodsuckers, skinchangers and wizards — don't fulfill a story or Storyteller's needs. It's possible that a group of hunters has encountered each of these kinds of beings and has some useful tricks to turn against it. You may have explored many of the themes that these different entities present. Or your players may just know the other games too well and you really want to catch them and their characters off-guard. In any of these cases, you may want to try something new. A new threat to pose to hunters. A new kind of mystery to unravel. Or a new direction for your chronicle that's never been explored before.

One option under these circumstances is to introduce a rare creature of the world, a variety that doesn't

often appear among nightcrawlers, man-beasts or witches, or a kind that's a monster apart, something unique unto itself. There are all kinds of odd, unlikely and bizarre creatures in the World of Darkness, things established in other published books and games. These creatures might be so mysterious, hidden, careful, reclusive, overlooked or dismissed that the imbued can only guess or can't even fathom that they exist — until now. Examples might include gargoyles, mummies and even goblins (the last of which can be so diverse and strange that the imbued have no clue what forms they might take).

"Rarities" immediately pose the question: What is this thing? If hunters have managed to survive many encounters and learn a thing or two about the other side, rarities force them to go back to the basics of understanding a monster. Such beasts keep the chosen humble. They don't know everything about everything out there, and here's "in your face" proof. These oddities remind characters and players that monsters don't exist merely for hunters to discover and understand. Some entities are so remote or cautious that they can't be understood. They're utterly inscrutable, yet they've been at large since before the imbued were awoken, and avoided notice until now, seemingly when they have allowed themselves to be recognized.

All those notions combined, rarities make for daunting new enemies or allies, or something in-between.

#### PRESENTING RARE CREATURES

Exceptional creatures require exceptional stories. That's the nature of an "exception" — something that's outside the norm, that's different from all others and demands special attention as a result. An exceptional wine becomes ordinary when it litters the shelves of liquor stores across the country, and the same goes for rare creatures in the World of Darkness. Their impact and story possibilities are diminished by overuse and accessibility. If you want to introduce one of these singular entities to your game, there are factors to consider.

How do hunters cross paths with such a distinctly unusual being? How could they run afoul of one another? It's important not to make the encounter random. These creatures aren't gimmicks, they're characters on par with the players that have wants, needs and urges just like everybody else. If something as strange as a rat-man emerges, there should be gravity and purpose to his appearance, which hunters, once they get over the amazement of their discovery, can research and puzzle over. Characters shouldn't just walk down the street when a rat-man leaps out for no apparent reason. *Everything has a reason*. The rarity may attack hunters because they've stumbled upon its "warren." Or it may have been attacked and left for dead by another enemy, and now it's battered, scarred and desperate to murder anything that comes too near. Hunters may not immediately recognize the reasons for a rarity's appearance, but you should know what those reasons are and be able to reveal them bit by bit.

Hunters have to be made aware of the creature somehow. Do they catch a glimpse of it in the wake of a scene caused by the being? Do they discover traces of its passing, evidence like nothing they've ever seen before, such as a dumpster filled with gnawed-upon human bones? What's it up to? What motivates it to come out of hiding now, or do anything that could reveal its existence?

Is it possible that the characters attract the thing's attention? While unlikely, it's possible. Perhaps the hunters track a witch to her apartment and stage an attack that leaves her as little more than a vegetable. What happens when the witch's ally, a rarity, investigates and tracks the imbued down? What does it make of them? What does it want from them, and how much is it willing to reveal itself to get what it wants?

Once an initial encounter or two occurs, the story begins to take shape. Explore the motivations of either side to continue to meet or investigate one another. It might be as simple as a need to redirect, seize, stop, harm or kill each other. Don't hesitate to go further, though, making for complex motives to interact. A creature may continue to stalk the characters because they somehow remind it of its once-held humanity. Maybe it longs for human contact but has given up hope that any human can understand — until these people come along who apparently can see and contend with the being.

Are the characters compelled to try and salve the creature's injured soul, or do they spurn it outright for any perceived crime or blaspheme? Maybe the entity is curious about hunters, which could be explored from afar or with one of the chosen on an examination table.

In the end, just as the "common" creatures of the World of Darkness require motivations and a sense of plausibility, so do the baffling and vanishing creatures. Ask yourself what they need or want, and why they would risk or invite discovery by hunters to get it.

#### CURIOSITIES

The following are some samples of unusual, uncommon and elusive creatures in the World of Darkness. These are just a start. Feel free to plumb the other Storyteller games for more beings, from snakepeople to automata.

#### MUTANTS

Human mutants don't usually know or understand what they've become. Maybe they lived on the wrong land, never thinking that drinking the tap water down river from the fertilizer plant would have a horrific effect on them. Or maybe they were part of one of those "Get money for taking drugs" studies. Some even invite mutation through gross abuse of science or through gruesome corruption of the soul. One way or another, these people are poisoned, and not just in the "get sick and die" way. Their bodies can suffer fates far worse than cancer, their very cells rebelling against nature and transforming into things never seen before.

And so these people develop *abnormalities*. Their minds bend and twist as their alterations become harder to comprehend and hide. They manifest new limbs, physiological features and weird capabilities. Is it evolution or de-evolution? The vulgar gifts that emerge could be anything, from a capacity to regurgitate food in an acid blast to developing gills and surviving underwater to growing a chitinous carapace like an insect's exoskeleton. Or deformities could be subtler, such as extra fingers, a barbed and venomous tongue or a third eye growing on the back of the head (and covered by hair).

The key to understanding these malformed humans is that they didn't necessarily mean to become what they are. They probably didn't invite it or even ask for it, and may not want it. They're sick, they're victims, but perhaps deranged or angry ones who look to blame anyone for what's happened. Should a hunter put one of these things out of its misery just because it seems wrong? Could a hunter punish one of these monstrosities even though it's a 10-year-old boy who made the mistake of drinking from a poisoned well? Over time, these poor people suffer immense psychological trauma (some acquire derangements). They resent what's happened to them. They resent others who remain normal. They want answers about their condition and want them now. They become dependent on drugs (legal or otherwise) that slow their rate of change somewhat, or that temporarily diminish the pain. And some end up as homicidal maniacs driven by blind rage.

It's conceivable that there are even mutants who trigger or welcome their change. They can revel in their metamorphoses. Perhaps they ingest a chemical, shoot up with an experimental drug or petition for the blessings of spirits or demons. These beings are likely to be aggressive toward hunters from the outset, or at least dangerous and in need of being put down. Do they invite their transformation for the purpose of facing hunters? Probably not. They undergo such torture for their own reasons — to gain power, influence or revenge. Hunters might just get in the way, or follow up on a mutant's campaign once the purpose for the change has been fulfilled. After that, what does the creature have to live for? With nothing left to gain or lose, it can be the most dangerous kind of enemy that the chosen can face.

#### OBSERVING MUTANTS

Recognizing mutants for what they are — or even as inhuman — can be challenging. Their deformities may be hidden by clothing or capable of being concealed biologically, such as bone claws that retract or excretions that can be contained until needed. These people might pass hunters by without drawing any special attention. Second sight and observation edges can reveal more, depending on the circumstances, but only if there's call to use them on the subjects.

The sight may confer very little information beyond a sense or glimmer that a person is wrong. It may reveal a few other insights — perhaps a jaundiced pallor to the subject's skin or a faint black or green vapor emanating from the flesh — but may not really be much help. How a hunter responds to a being after that is up to her, based on what little information she has and on what more she can gather.

Illuminate can reveal a brown, rusted-out aura that could imply sickness, perhaps establishing the idea that a mutant is more diseased than monstrous. Witness can suggest illness or disease, too, maybe with a flickering image of boils, scabs or lesions. Whether that means the entity suffers from these signs or can pass them is up to the onlooker. For its part, Discern tends to reveal signs of the physical features that a mutant bears or tries to hide. A bulge under a coat from a tail. Odd bone structure of the head from a jaw that can unhinge like a snake's. Strange, wide pores that allow acidic juices to flow. Ironically, Discern can also reveal a mutant's weakness, too — that a creature could be utterly mortal. It still breathes. It still has a heartbeat. It can be killed — or healed.

#### MUTATIONS

Presented below are some of possible supernatural deformities found among these poor, diseased humans. A mutant may possess a single one of these disfigurements, or the whole lot of them, depending on its level of "infection." (Also check out the list of werewolf mutations in Hunter: The Moonstruck. Those can be applied to mutant humans of the World of Darkness, too.)

Venomous Bite: A subject may discover that her teeth inject poison, and that her saliva becomes toxic to others or that poison sacs develop above her gum line. However it happens, her bite is poisonous and does Strength in lethal damage, in addition to any bite attack. Furthermore, for every hour afterward, the victim loses another health level to lethal damage. A mutant's venom tends to mimic that of a living creature, such as a rattlesnake or spider. Hospitals may have an antidote that cures the problem and stops hourly health level loss, if they can identify what kind of "animal" poisoned the victim.

Stomach Pumper: The mutant with this capability may look normal, but it can disgorge its stomach lining into an acid blast from its mouth. The mutant can use this ranged attack only once per scene. It does lethal damage equal to the mutant's Stamina rating. It cannot be soaked without some sort of armor or heavy clothing.

Glue Hands: The mutant secretes a gummy substance (similar to rubber cement, but with a worse smell) from her hands and sometimes feet. It allows her to stick to any surface, climb walls at walking speed or faster, and grapple a hunter with a nigh-inescapable grip. If grappling, the mutant and hunter make contested Strength rolls — the mutant's difficulty is 6, the hunter's is 8.

**Barbed Tail:** A tail hangs from a nub at the base of the mutant's spine, and is lined with barbs. The creature has *some* control over its appendage and can use it as a weapon with a successful Dexterity + Brawl roll. The tail does Strength in lethal damage. There are some variations on tails. Those without barbs inflict bashing damage, while some with barbs ooze toxins. Damage from the latter is Strength +2 and is lethal.

#### STORY POSSIBILITIES

Why tell a story involving a mutant (or mutants)? What use do they have beyond being weirdo monsters built to beat on hunters? The thing to remember about these beings is that they're exceptionally close to being human. Many still think of themselves as human, perhaps only unfortunate, different or improved. They can still look largely human, and have comprehensible goals. They still search for love, watch TV and have to go to the store for bread - unless, of course, their mutation requires them to eat something horrible for sustenance such as blood, bile or human flesh. Beyond the changes these people have undergone, they can seem normal, which might strike a chord for sensitive hunters. On the surface, characters may sense that hunters and mutants are somewhat similar. Both are everyday Joes who've been gifted (or cursed) with a new existence, replete with inexplicable capabilities and looming madness.

Then there are mutants who willingly offer themselves up to gross bodily transmutations, but even they reflect the inherent self-interest of ordinary people. Mutants who "ask" for their change don't necessarily do so just to be "evil." Their reasons are usually personal. A weakling is tired of being picked on. A morbidly obese woman cries every time she sees a Victoria's Secret ad on TV. A paraplegic wants to walk, run and jump again. These mutants are people who are willing to push themselves to horrible lengths to become more than they already are. Unfortunately, they often get more than they bargained for, and not more of what they wanted.

How could hunters encounter these physically perverted beings? Mutants are largely human, and may still attempt to live some semblance of a normal life (at least until they begin going mad or are collected for "use" by the government or by corrupt corporations). They may be found on the periphery of populated areas where they're still able to partake in humanity, but not be so immersed in it that their deformities are revealed accidentally. They may live in slums, trailer parks or out in the country. Hunters passing through might catch glimpses of local features that are wrong or corrupt — streams, the wind blowing from the factory, trees — and that "infection" eventually proves to have taken root in people.

It's possible that mutants might seek out hunters. If there is any sign that one of the chosen is somehow "in the know" about monsters, or can look upon a mutant and not condemn her immediately, she might sense a kindred spirit. Or, an insane mutant might see competition for its local supply of infant flesh.

#### NEW RECRUIT (MUTANT)

Quote: Hey, I just live here, okay?

**Prelude:** The Blossom Valley Modular Home Park was cheap for a reason. The power lines hummed like motorcycles, the water tasted like bitter almond, and the whole place was downstream from the Kane Industries pigment plant. Even the air smelled bad, like sour milk mixed with weed killer. But Artie McCoy didn't have any options. His credit was in the hole and his part-time job at that mall kiosk barely allowed him to buy soup, much less pay rent. Blossom Valley was his home.

One night, Artie got out of bed, ran to the bathroom and puked his guts out. His vomit was as red as blood and fire, and a few minutes later he heard a sizzling. He watched as the seat and rim of his toilet slowly ate away. Fearing that he had cancer or Ebola or something, Artie rushed to the emergency room. The doctors referred him to a private office the next day — one attached to the Kane Industries plant. The people there told him that all he was experiencing was a hyperactive version of acid stomach, and gave him a prescription to stop the vomiting. The next day, Artie got a flyer in the mail, inviting him to an "informational assembly" at the Kane plant.



He went and recognized others from the trailer park. Many were told that they had "unique" conditions, and could work for Kane Industries, a company that "takes care" of its employees. Some turned down the offer and were never seen again. Others, like Artie, joined and found themselves with a salary, a company car, and mysterious instructions delivered in the mailbox about once a month. Artie doesn't have to hurt anybody, not really. He just has to do little things. Kill some cows from the farm next door. Make himself throw up in people's wells. Nothing too big. And the salary sure is nice. Artie doesn't even care if they cure him anymore.

**Concept:** The New Recruit is a "wet behind the ears" employee of one of the country's major manufacturers. The mutant is mostly untrained, a little confused and probably eager. Sure, the Recruit has questions. Who wouldn't? But there are enough perks to staying with the program that by the time he realizes what he's done and what he's become, it'll be too late.

Roleplaying Hints: You don't like what you've become. Your new "skill," as the company puts it, is pretty goddamn gross. But it's not really hurting anyone that you can see, and they're taking care of you. You tend to approach every situation with a calm naïveté, knowing full well that it's best not to be in on the full story. Anyone who asks too many questions or gets in your way, well, you just work here. You can refer any troublemakers to your superiors and stay out of it.

Equipment: A .38 snubnose revolver given to you by "the company," and a metal bucket in case of accidents

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 1, Stamina 3, Charisma 2, Manipulation 1, Appearance 2, Perception 3, Intelligence 2, Wits 2

Abilities: Academics 1, Alertness 1, Brawl 1, Computer 2, Drive 1, Firearms 2, Intimidation 1, Investigation 2, Subterfuge 2

Backgrounds: Contacts 1, Resources 1

**Powers:** Endurance (three extra dice on Stamina rolls), Stomach Pumper (see p. 93)

Willpower: 4

#### THE UNDYING

"Undying" is a bit of a misnomer, because these individuals have already died. And yet, they still live and breathe. A mortal dies, but in dying, is offered another chance at life. This resurrection does not come without cost, however. The mortal must choose to serve as host to an ancient spirit and be its agent for what amounts to *all of eternity*. If the mortal agrees, she is bound up in ritual cloth and led through an elaborate rite to seal the two souls (mortal and ancient). While the cloth wrapping doesn't remain, it does give credence to the Undying's other name: *mummy*.

And so the mortal becomes immortal. Her weaknesses are compensated for by the strengths of the ancient spirit. There is a flood of strange memories from a different time and place, and the mortal's own mind is constantly shadowed by the "other" presence. And after all is said and done, a charge is laid upon the pair. They have a task, a purpose in this reborn life. There is evil out there, they are told, a great imbalance that needs to be righted. That's when the sweet gift of immortality seems more like a bitter curse.

#### OBSERVING THE UNDYING

A hunter using second sight on a mummy may interpret the being as apart from the world, like a person standing in front of a painting or a movie character acting against a blue screen. Something appears amiss when looking upon the subject, even though he or she otherwise seems normal.

Some edges may provide better (or more confusing) insights. Illuminate highlights the creature with an aura of burnished bronze or sun-glinting copper. The colors are bright and vibrant, not washed out like the auras of some entities. Witness can first and foremost indicate the dual souls present in the monster, perhaps causing a hunter to mistake the thing for a demon or otherwise possessed human. If the edge reveals a mummy's last significant dealings with humanity, a hunter might see the creature actively aiding mortals or see it perform some kind of grisly necromantic spell on an unsuspecting victim. Discern can suggest the conflicting nature of the mummy's health — that it is alive, revealing that the creature breathes and sweats, but also that it bears signs of being dead — revealing dark veins or sunken eyes. Interestingly, Pinpoint can show in a vision that the creature is vulnerable to everything that a mortal is: fire, bullets, blades, poison. Yet enough successes on the edge roll may display another vision in which the creature rises again from such injuries.

#### UNDYING POWERS

While some of an Undying's powers are close to a witch's in appearance and use (see the Hunter Storytellers Companion and Hunter: The Spellbound for more information on mage capabilities), they have some gifts that are distinctly their own.

Word Magic: The Undying have a gift with words. Somehow, they're able to tap into the underlying connection between the intonation of spoken words and the mystical nature of the soul. With a Willpower point and a successful Manipulation + Linguistics roll, (difficulty 7), a mummy can do a whole host of things. It can command unwitting subjects, inflict levels of lethal damage just by speaking an individual's full true name, summon common objects from miles away, and even change or erase another's memory. The good news is, any chosen with Conviction active defies any attempt to control or influence body, mind or soul, as is usual with second sight. Conviction must be active, though. Necromancy: Some mummies are capable of commanding the world of the dead with magic, which can be revealed in a variety of horrible ways. With a Manipulation + Subterfuge roll, difficulty 7, a mummy can summon a ghost or zombie that obeys its command. (These summoned creatures appear no different to second sight or observation edges than do other spirits or walking dead.) A mummy can also touch a living thing and make it rot, wither or atrophy, simply with the expenditure of a Willpower point. Health levels equal to the mummy's Stamina are lost to lethal damage. Finally, the Undying can use necromancy to disappear from this realm into that of the dead — not that hunters ever know where a mummy goes. It just disappears to their eyes.

Amulets: The Undying are fond of using and making amulets to hold and channel spells. These spells can essentially emulate any power found among the other denizens of the World of Darkness, stored for a mummy's future use. See the Storytellers Companion for examples of powers that a mummy might "capture" in a mystical talisman. The items can be elaborate and jewelencrusted, or as simple as a stone of lapis lazuli on a leather cord. The former might be able to store multiple spells, while the latter could retain only one. Whatever the case, one of these amulets shows up to a hunter's second sight as being distinctly "off."

**Immortality:** That's right, mummies are immortal. That's not to say they can't be killed, though. A bullet to the temple still kicks a mummy off this mortal coil. But the Undying will be back. It may take a year or may be as quick as a single day (your choice), but you can count on the creature returning. Plus, mummies are physically protected. First, their healing cycle is accelerated (use the Defense edge Rejuvenate as a model). Second, they have five *extra* Incapacitated health levels, meaning that just when someone thinks he must have killed a mummy... *whoops*, he hasn't.

#### STORY POSSIBILITIES

Mummies, as legend suggests, are perhaps most prevalent in Africa and the Middle East, but they certainly aren't restricted to those regions. They can theoretically come from all regions, ages, races and walks of life, usually in places or cultures that have long, deep traditions of ritual and mysticism. Hunters can find them anywhere, but what does that mean for your story?

Of all supernatural beings, the Undying are ostensibly the most on par with hunters and their goals. In theory, the imbued are a force that opposes evil. Whether the imbued know it or not, they are basically dragged into a bargain with unseen powers and made to serve by resisting corruption and abominations. Mummies are also held to a bargain by a cosmic power, and also oppose the darkness that strives to bring about the End Times. Generally speaking, it's not impossible for the two groups to see eye to eye and accept that their motives are loosely similar. Can they be allies? Absolutely. Do they usually end up as allies? No.

Why not? There are many reasons. Mummies are exceedingly rare. They account for less than one percent of one percent of the world's population. They exist in numbers so slim, it would be mathematically improbable for them to come in contact with a hunter accidentally. (Although that's not to say a mummy couldn't seek hunters out purposefully if he felt there was something to be gained from doing so.)

Mummies and hunters may share goals in theory, but the practice can be altogether different. In general, the hunter condition trains the imbued to expect the worst from the supernatural, rather than the best. Some chosen might have hope for monsters and seek out the worthy among them, but even these optimists can't deny that many monsters are simply monstrous. A hunter may spot a mummy battling a bloodsucker and see an opportunity to bag two targets for the price of one. After all, both look wrong. Or imbued, as onceordinary people with ordinary mindsets, might see a foreign-looking creature and compound its supernatural status with racism. For its part, a mummy may not see a hunter as a potential ally, but as just another bag of flesh who gets in the way. Or the Undying may witness a hunter's capabilities and misconstrue that the imbued serves dark forces and needs to be destroyed. It's even possible that a mummy seems to agree and cooperate with the chosen, but just uses them until their value is exhausted.

So yes, it's true that the Undying tend to be less openly monstrous than, say, vampires caught in the throes of bloodlust. But mummies can be distinctly coldhearted. If killing one human can save 10 others, a mummy may accept that loss and carry out the single murder. These entities are immortal; the weight of time can distance them from mortal compassion and forgiveness. Should a hunter see one of these creatures in the act of carrying out a gruesome part of its calling, the imbued may not give the target a chance to show its "good side."

#### T'HE SHADOW (UNDYING)

Quote: I smell the corruption of your soul.

**Prelude:** Before her resurrection, Ella Reese was a drug counselor, convinced of her own imperfections and loathing of her worst desires. Remarkably, however, a car accident afforded her a new perspective on life.

As one of the Undying, Ella (now sometimes calling herself Nekhbet) indulged in all the things she missed out on before: food, wine, sex, violence. She explored every activity that she denied and repressed during her previous incarnation. Her urges gradually grew dark and bestial, and that's when she heard the voice thundering in her head.



Her cravings, the voice said, had to be brought to bear. Any yearning for violence could only be carried out in the struggle against corruption. At first, she couldn't abide such strictures. Here she was, given a second chance, and she was supposed to stifle her desires again? The voice was unyielding, though, and soon Ella summoned up every ounce of resolve to deny her base impulses. Over time, she learned to mitigate her cravings and taught herself to release them only against those who deserved to suffer.

**Concept:** The Shadow fights a war on two fronts. The first is external, where she battles the forces of corruption in the world. The second front — the more difficult of the two—is within. The Shadow's soul is laid bare to the darkest and most depraved compulsions, and she wants to give in at every turn, like an addict. But her calling is eternal and she *must* learn to leash her cravings or suffer the consequences from the force that brought her back in the first place. The Shadow's only solace is the time when she gives free rein to her inclinations and unleashes them upon evil.

**Roleplaying Hints:** You take to life with a grim *joie de vivre.* You are capable of being happy, angry and sad, all in a single, manic breath. Like an animal pacing back and forth behind bars, you always seek those who deserve your wrath, and you unshackle your soul when you find them. You're acutely conscious of your need for restraint, which stops you from forming any permanent bonds.

Equipment: Kukra curved blade, long coat, amulet made of hematite and gold

Attributes: Strength (Resilient) 4, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3, Charisma 3, Manipulation 2, Appearance (Athletic) 4, Perception 3, Intelligence 2, Wits 3

Abilities: Academics 2, Alertness (Paranoid) 4, Awareness 3, Brawl 3, Bureaucracy 1, Dodge 3, Intimidation (Vicious) 4, Intuition 2, Linguistics (Egyptian) 1, Medicine 1, Stealth 2, Survival 2

Backgrounds: Allies 2, Destiny 3, Mentor 1, Resources 2

**Powers:** Immortality and Necromancy (see p. 96). Necromancy may include but is not restricted to Command the Dead (SC, p. 35), Soul Suck (SC, p. 37) and Zombie Servitors (SC, p. 37)

Willpower: 8

#### NIGHT MARES

Nightmares are exiles from humanity. In truth, they are only part human. Their other "half" is something that not even they fully understand. Like the Undying, their souls are divided between the mortal soul and the soul of a creature from a different time and age, and it often seems impossible to reconcile the two. To the untrained eye, these creatures look human, but they have an eerie manner or vibe that unnerves others. To the gifted eye — that granted to hunters, other nightmares and other monsters — these entities are capable of manifesting alien forms ripped straight from the pages of mythology and grisly fairy tales. Some look like the goat-men called satyrs. Others have bruised and tumorladen flesh and look like goblins or trolls straight out of bedtime stories.

These creatures are born this way, though many don't realize it. Even as infants, these poor individuals are forced to forever share a half-consciousness from another place. Over time, they either awaken to their "second self" or go helplessly insane and are locked away. Those who find and accept their shared soul are in for no less of a struggle (some might say that simply going insane is easier). They find that they need humans to survive, but most people don't like being around them. They hunger for more than just ordinary food. Their second soul urges them to consume the abstract matter of dreams, inspiration, and worst of all, fear. This intangible "sustenance" can be cultivated through great effort and difficulty, or it can be raped from others using ghastly supernatural gifts. The first way is very difficult, vielding few results for the amount of time it takes, but the other way destroys the source and often reduces a victim to an empty, senseless husk.

This race of creatures is only half-aware of its identity, and is thus dying, soon to vanish from the mortal world. This impending extinction makes nightmares sad, desperate and sometimes very dangerous. The scent of their expiration is in the air, and there's no telling what actions they might take to forestall their inevitable demise.

Nightmares and goblins are exceptionally rare. While hunters have encountered these things before (or *believe* they have), running afoul of these creatures happens much less often than it does with ghosts and bloodsuckers. Nightmares' various bizarre forms also make them difficulty to understand and identify. They can appear as almost anything from human imagination, and often as things beyond. That makes them highly misunderstood and rarely recognized. These truths make nightmares rarities among the beings that hunters might face.

#### **OBSERVING NIGHT MARES**

Second sight shows a nightmare to be an irregularity that should not exist, as with most monsters, although it can reveal more about goblins. The sight can suggest that nightmares lurk behind some kind of haze, as if viewed through a distorted lens or through heat waves rising from a road. Like possessing spirits, they can seem to be faint images superimposed upon normal-seeming people. More often than not, however, these entities seem just plain "weird." Human, yes, but off-putting and inexplicably peculiar, as if they don't or can't belong among ordinary people, and don't understand why or can't make themselves fit.

Illuminate can show these creatures to radiate with a confounding, coruscating aura of oddly matched colors. The shades tend to be pale, not vibrant, and can look washed-out or sick.

Use of Witness electrifies the alien weirdness conferred by the sight, and may provide a clearer image of the "second mind" present (whether it's considered parasitic or symbiotic is up to the observer). Multiple successes with the edge may show encounters between the nightmare and humans. The onlooker may see a satyr-like being sexually ravage a victim and leave him in a catatonic state. An imp might suck the breath from a child. Some freakish thing might loom over an artist while she stares glassy-eyed at a blank canvas.

Discern can reveal a goblin's legendary form as if the creature assumed it willingly. This edge may peel away the creature's illusion of humanity and show the phantasmagoric deformities that the nightmare exhibits (black, gnarled horns or a mouthful of massive yellow incisors). It might be that the creature's façade simply cannot stand up to the hunter's look.

#### NIGHT MARE POWERS

Information on nightmares and their strange magic can be found in both the **Hunter** core rulebook and in the **Storytellers Companion**. Due to the alien nature of their powers, however, feel free to choose from the capabilities listed for any of the denizens of the World of Darkness.

#### STORY POSSIBILITIES

There's great tragedy to be had in telling a story about nightmares. A dichotomy exists in these creatures that may appeal (or repulse) hunters. Nightmares are human, but only part so. Other people instinctively mistrust or avoid them, unwittingly fearing the primal nature of these beings' other halves. Nightmares are also creatures of myth and legend, but again, only half so. Their mythical side is suppressed by the human, and is barely aware of itself. On top of that, the magic required to truly sustain such a legendary soul is lost in this world, so such beings become withered and go insane. Nightmares therefore don't really belong to anyone but each other, and as their numbers dwindle, so does their capacity to interact peaceably with the material world.

As with mutants, such conditions could be familiar to hunters. The imbued never request their paradigm shift and sudden powers. Nor do nightmares. It simply *happens* to both groups. Those who resist become repressed and broken figures, and those who accept the change can go too far and lose all sense of self and reason. Both nightmares and hunters exist in relatively small numbers, and both are on track to dangerous lunacy or a quick end.

Do these similarities make hunters and goblins natural allies? Not necessarily. One important difference that hunters may quickly discover is that the imbued don't require "food" stolen from people. Hunters don't eat dreams. They can't feast on hope or dine on someone's fear. Nightmares can - and must. Some go about it delicately in an effort to preserve their food sources and victims (perhaps even out of compassion more so than pragmatic considerations). Indeed, these creatures may give the Merciful or Visionary vindication in dark times. Other goblins rip the dreams right from the tapestry of the mortal soul, though, inspiring terror, pain or hardship on which they can feast. How would a hunter deal with a creature like that, a seemingly depraved being whose thirst for sustenance pushes it to greater acts of atrocity? Can the Merciful turn the creature around? Can Visionaries learn from it or use it? Or do the Zealous have to put it six feet under to stop the thing from raping humanity?

Hunters may discover the depredations of a nightmare, which could inspire them to track the creature down and learn some small part of its needs or desires. Characters may come across a poor soul (even a friend or loved one) who has suffered an attack by one of these creatures, and who has been left a hollow shell ready to stuff a shotgun barrel in his mouth. It's also possible that nightmares may learn of hunters and seek them out. Why? Nightmares may simply seek a kindred spirit and understanding soul. They have only each other, and generally live a lonely existence. A hunter may provide a bulwark against the banality of the world. But it's also possible that a nightmare wants to steal a hunter's dreams. After all, the imbued are people, but their extrasensory powers may make them seem unique morsels, possibly able to sustain nightmare hungers more so than a "regular" person could.

#### OLD GRANDMOTHER (NIGHTMARE)

**Quote:** It's a right awful shame about that Dillard boy down the street. Have you seen him?

**Prelude:** The children love Florence Grozny or "Grandma Flo," as she's called. Why wouldn't they? She's been around for decades, inviting the kids inside, giving them candy cookies to eat, and old bottlecaps and marbles to play with. The parents trust her; she's practically a fixture in the neighborhood, more permanent than some statues.

Of course, Grandma Flo isn't exactly human, nor should anyone exactly trust her. She's a goblin, an old lady who's long thrived on the spirit of children. She doesn't seek to harm anyone. Quite the contrary - she loves them, adores them with every ounce of her otherworldly soul, and in return they love her. Their affection feeds her, keeps her alive, stops her bones from ossifying and her blood from coagulating. The children come over, they eat candy and chips and watch cartoons while lying at her feet, and the love flows to her like water rushing downstream. Sometimes, Grandma Flo takes too much, though. It only happens once in a long while, but from time to time a child's soul gives up more than it can, and the little spirit withers. It doesn't take long for the child to die after that. Sometimes it's cancer, other times the youngster simply expires in his sleep.

Grandma Flo hates it when that happens. It tears her up inside, and she wears the stamp of those lost children on the fabric of her very soul. But that's the price she has to pay. It doesn't take her long to find new children. It doesn't take her long at all.

**Concept:** Old Grandmother is connected to both the mortal world and the world of nightmares. She knows everyone in her neighborhood, especially those families with multiple children. She's alarmingly well-



connected in goblin society, too. She's been around for so long, how can she not be? She knows a great many things and can share a wonderful wealth of secrets to those willing to pay the cost — to leave her alone with her little friends.

Roleplaying Hints: You're all sugar and spice and everything nice. Very little can crack your "adoring grandmother" image, except meddlesome people who shouldn't stick their nose in your business. You love people, children, and woe to those who don't believe that you're the innocent that you claim to be. You tend to be very accommodating, even overly so. And you mean it; you're genuinely a nice old lady. Except when you're mad.

Equipment: Rolling pin, large supply of candy, cakes and cookies

Attributes: Strength 1, Dexterity 2, Stamina 2, Charisma (Engaging) 4, Manipulation 3, Appearance 3, Perception 3, Intelligence 2, Wits 3

Abilities: Alertness 2, Awareness (Supernatural Powers) 4, Crafts (Knitting) 1, Etiquette 3, Intuition 3, Linguistics (Russian) 1, Performance 1, Subterfuge 3

Backgrounds: None

**Powers:** Enslave (SC, p. 63), Forget (SC, p. 62), Go Seek (SC, p. 61)

Willpower: 7

## ANOMALIES

If you really want to throw your players and their characters for a loop, confront them with an antagonist that can't be found on the pages of any other Storyteller book. Something that's not a ghost, not a bloodsucker, not a witch. Give them something *new*. These creatures *are more than rare* — they're unclassified impossibilities straight from the ether. Here's a chance to let your demented imagination run wild. It's an opportunity to think outside the already expansive box of the World of Darkness. Don't be limited by what has come before. This is the meat and guts of this chapter — the true "urban legends" that the imbued can face.

#### INSPIRATION

You already have a hundred ideas for new types of creatures or encounters brewing in your head, or maybe you have a big empty space where you want ideas to be. Either way, you might need help honing your idea or actually coming up with something that you consider worthwhile to include as an antagonist in your story. We therefore offer a few places to look for inspiration in creating your own "unclassified" entities. You may want to use these sources directly, literally lifting the creatures within, or you may find new themes and moods that you hadn't considered before. Appearance of these creatures (or types of creature) may offer your hunters

whole new perceptions on monsters, the world and themselves. Anomalies can show that creatures can be altogether more weird, horrific or tragic than the imbued ever imagined. If there's one thing that a complete newcomer teaches characters, it's that *hunters don't know a goddamn thing*. That, and players will learn to never take creatures at face value again.

**Folklore:** Tales, legends, superstitions. Every culture's got them, from the mountains of Tibet to the hills of wild, wonderful West Virginia. Whether it's a case of, "Don't forget to leave a dish of butter by the doorstep so the house-fairy will spare the sleeping children," or, "If you see lights in the sky, that means the Mothman is coming to steal your soul," it's all just an incarnation of folklore. The collected beliefs and stories of an area are a great place to find antagonists for your chronicle.

There are various ways to explore folklore. Check out some books or use an Internet search engine and you'll tap into a vast reservoir of local legend, from Gaelic fairy tales or Asian superstitions to strange American myths, such as the previously mentioned Mothman.

Hunters themselves may encounter elements of folklore by talking to people. Sure, they might track a bloodsucker through a small town in North Carolina, but they might also hear rumors of Jack Bedlam, some old hermit who comes out of the woods from time to time to steal pies cooling on window sills — and Jack Bedlam supposedly died 70 years ago! Your characters can run into seemingly rational people who bring their dogs in at night just because rumors of Bigfoot have circulated, and strange footprints have been found. Or people might keep horseshoes nailed above their doors, because the iron keeps spirits from stealing their breath at night.

The point is, folklore is pervasive, and can easily be used to enhance your stories, especially ones set in rural or isolated places. Complete tales exist, with entities replete with their own history and motivation, which you can transpose or revise to suit your needs.

Urban Legends: Technically, an urban legend is a subset of folklore, and it's largely an American phenomenon (although it's become common across the Western world). One of the primary differences between it and traditional folklore is that it's literally a more urban/ suburban development, and it tends to reflect modern, almost millennial fears.

Take kidney thieves, for example. One urban legend tells of a man who goes to a convention in another city. He cheats on his wife with a prostitute, they drink a little too much, and he wakes up in the morning with his back hurting and little memory of the night before. And he's in a tub full of ice. And a note has been left for him that says, "Look at your back in the mirror and call 911." When the man looks, he sees two scars, neatly and surgically stitched up, and learns that his kidneys have been stolen for sale on the black market.

The legend is totally unprecedented. There's no evidence that such an event or phenomenon ever occurred, but the story persists and people believe it. It preys on our weak moral compasses. This example teaches that if you cheat on your wife, and/or consort with a prostitute, you could pay the price — a veritable pound of flesh. Most importantly, this kind of story sheds light on mankind's anxieties and primal fears. Guilt over sex, perhaps. Or anticipation that no matter where we turn, bad things will happen. Or that our own desires will destroy us in the end.

Fortunately, you can turn these repressed tensions into **Hunter** stories. On the surface, imbued may suspect that these "kidney thieves" are monsters, known or never encountered before, perhaps succubus-type entities, but a danger nonetheless. Deep down, the chosen might sense that the world is just *asking* to be violated, that no one is safe, that pleasures such as sex are rife with horrors. Yes, monsters are real and are a threat, but they might not be if people at large were better, were made of stronger moral fiber. And yet they aren't, and the predation continues.

If you want to check out urban legends that can be twisted into stories, the Internet (particularly www.snopes.com) and books (anything by Jan Harold Brunvand) are the best places to look. And, of course, you can keep an ear to the ground or listen to the grapevine. That's the whole point of urban legends. Sooner or later, you'll hear about people punished mysteriously for committing crimes, or victimized in bizarre, inexplicable ways by the sins of others.

Mythology: Mythology is slightly *bigger* than folklore. It rises above a purely local belief and becomes a religious or spiritual story that illustrates both cultural ideas and universal concepts. On a personal level, myths are literally the religious stories of a culture, a country or a group of people. Legends like those of Loki, Jesus and Coyote all constitute the myths of different societies from different periods of time. However, psychologists like Sigmund Freud and mythologists like Joseph Campbell hold that myths are actually a socio-cultural watermark. The stories told through myth represent the collective trials and tribulations that we all go through as individuals.

Whatever your take on the subject, myth is a fantastic place to pull ideas for **Hunter** games. First and foremost, mythology has a world-class sense of history and character. Rarely do you find a pantheon of gods who are cardboard cutouts. People have had centuries to embellish nitty-gritty details about gods' personalities and exploits. As of our era, their characters are almost soap-operatic in attention to detail. On top of that, gods are terrifying and strange, almost alien beings with human motivations and not-quite-human powers.

All in all, that makes for great story and monster fodder. Imagine a modern-day incarnation of Loki (or any of the trickster gods — Anansi from Africa, the Polynesian Maui) whose sole desire is to wreak havoc in Chicago, because that's how he fosters belief and stays "alive." Maybe it's not even the god itself, but merely some creature that *believes* itself some sort of divinity. The hunters have to scour myths to find out the thing's supposed origins and weaknesses. Those tales might be accurate, only partially so, or completely wrong. A being that can change people to stone with a look? Is it some kind of modern-day Medusa? Is seeing its own reflection its bane, or is its vanity targeted by other means? Where does myth end and reality, created by the characters, begin? Fiction: Pop culture is full of threats and creatures to borrow for Hunter. Hell, check out any given episode of *The X-Files*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or *Smallville* and you're likely to find some new style of monster or villain to throw at characters. Be sure, however, not to fall into the trap discussed earlier, which those shows sometimes do. Don't let your game suffer from the "Critter of the Week Syndrome."

There's more to turn to that just TV. Books, movies and comics can all sow the seeds of cool ideas for new creatures. While we don't necessarily recommend stealing characters directly from these sources — players might know them, too — you can take elements of concepts and mold them to your needs. Perhaps look to the comic *Hellboy* to gather ideas on a resurrected Rasputin, golems or severed Nazi-heads that still live and practice sorcery. The *Wild Cards* series of novels

#### THEMES

Introducing altogether new creatures, whether cobbled together from books, fairy tales, movies or your own twisted imagination, can take your chronicle in whole new directions. The characters can learn new concepts (or have old ones painfully reinforced), and players can feel that important challenges are posed. Below are two general themes that a story about anomalies might emphasize. With more specific creations, you may point to more specific themes.

Hunters are dumb. It's one of the guiding principles of the game, but introducing new creatures is sure to remind the imbued of their limitations. Just as characters begin to hope (or arrogantly proclaim) that they have a grasp on the secret workings of the supernatural, you can throw something new at them and kick them right in the confidence. Hunters are ignorant individuals, sometimes due to their own shortsightedness or prejudice, other times due to their humanity or to misinformation that's been fed to them. Being confronted with the truth of monsters' existence makes them somewhat informed, but certainly not much. They don't know that vampires are embraced into clans, what werewolves' relation to caerns is (or what "caerns" even are), and they have no idea how to define a mage's "paradigm." Pitting hunters against new entities therefore helps reinforce that the chosen really don't know dick about the other side.

This fallibility injects a grave and crucial desperation into the game that is possibly its backbone. Characters say, "Okay, vampires exist, and we think they have a hand in big business," but then you show them some executive at a manufacturing plant who's secretly using employees to grind down children into meat and leather products. He's not a vampire. He looks human. He has no noticeable mutations — and yet second sight reveals him as supremely wrong. What now? Whatever course the hunters take, their ignorance about monsters is thrown in their face.

The end is nigh. Part of Hunter's general theme is that the world is a bad place, and that it's very possibly coming to an end. Exposure to the existence of monsters and the seeming proliferation of them looks pretty Apocalyptic. If you want to emphasize the fatalistic side of the game, new creatures can help. Hunters might think they know who and what various creatures are. Hunter-net is full of individuals writing about the largely known denizens of the supernatural world. Basically, the "Hunters are dumb" theme is at work, because what many imbued assume to be true and share as gospel is simply wrong. Posters don't necessarily know that, though. They continue on with false assumptions and hope.

Then new posters ramble about some "dream-ghost," or about a "serpent living beneath the city," or about a "clan of farmers who are kidnapping city-folk to sacrifice to their dark fertility god." Suddenly, the focus turns from "Everything you know is wrong" to "The End Times are coming." The introduction of new creatures (whether they've been here all along or are new is irrelevant) sends the chosen into a flurry. It doubly convinces them that the world is broken, and is only becoming more so. At what point will it break?

Odd as it sounds, think about the climax of *Ghostbusters*. New York is filled with all kinds of hideous spirits and creatures. What do people think? In their panic, they're convinced that Armageddon is here. It's right now. Hunters are humans, and react with the same kind of panic. Introducing new creatures allows you to play on that fallibility and fear, because how can things not be going to Hell when they just keep getting worse and worse? involves a whole gamut of monstrous "supervillians," each with a thought-out backstory and set of wants and needs. Turn to pretty much any horror/fantasy/sci-fi piece of fiction and you can import parts of it into your game. The Ringwraiths from Tolkien's world, for example. Use their image, their general motivation, but call them something different. Maybe instead of looking for a ring they seek a magical book, which the hunters coincidentally found in the lair of a vampire-sorcerer that they defeated months ago. Maybe these modified Ringwraiths don't even intend to hurt anybody, but try to protect humanity from the devastation that the book can unleash. Once you have the beginning of a new antagonist, stories about it might present themselves.

## Q&A

When "designing" your new creature, there are lots of things to think about. Considering that this beast (or kind of beast) is a unique, never-before-seen entity, it's worth spending some time on. Ask yourself the following questions to help you cement details to give your players a full experience.

Where did it come from? In essence, this is the monster's "origin story" - its history. As humans, we're born and we go through the stages of life, one day at a time, with seminal events here and there that change us forever. A monster is no different, whether it's a oncehuman incubus sucking dreams from people's heads, or some hyper-intelligent gas cloud that causes people to act violently. The question is: Where did it come from? Was it once human? If it was, what kind of a person was it before its transformation? Did it have a childhood, parents, loved ones, a job? What were they all like? If it's never been human, what birthed such an unclassified thing? Is it biological in nature? Perhaps it's some ecohorror-response to deforestation, or a spore released by Mother Nature herself to infect townspeople. Or perhaps it's supernatural or occult in origin. Some sorcerer/ scientist hell-bent on punishing a rival conjures a creature straight from the depths of darkness. Monsters do not occur without some reason. If they're created, they're created with purpose. If they're made, there's always some sort of design behind it, some plan (whether the monster knows about it or not). Focus on actions, reactions and reasons to create an interesting "origin" for your anomalous being.

What does it need? Everybody requires something. Humans need food, water and shelter. Bloodsuckers need, well, blood. Some ghosts feed off of certain emotions. Your creation should have needs, as well. If you want to go simple, decide what it eats. Maybe it's a basic carnivore (including humans in its diet). Perhaps it *must* eat human flesh. Or it digests something more abstract — thoughts, names, fear, hate. It could have other demands. It may be driven by stranger, darker urges. The compulsion to breed, or worse, its very existence necessitates some sort of sexual violation. Maybe it has to exist in darkness and can't stand the light. Maybe once every new moon the creature absolutely, positively *must* sacrifice an adolescent by burning the victim on a pyre. Puzzle out the creature's undeniable needs. It might even help you answer the next question.

What does it want? If your creature is even the least bit intelligent, it wants something just as we have wants. Now, this is different from needs. Those are necessities of survival. Wants are desirable goals or possessions, but they're ultimately optional. We might want a new car, someone to love or a juicy cheeseburger. Many creatures want things just like we do, but theirs can be twisted reflections of ours. After all, monsters can be twisted reflections of us.

A man who falls into the sewers and becomes some feculent, pustule-ridden fiend may want nothing more than to be reunited with his wife and little girl (which they probably resist, since they might not even recognize him anymore). Or take the same man and put him in the line of fire of some witch's sorcery gone awry. Twisted by dark magic and consumed by a strange jealousy, perhaps his "want" is to kill his wife and little girl. After all, if he can't life a normal life, why should they?

Straightforward creatures have straightforward desires. Some half-wit hobgoblin may want something that can be summed up in one or two words. Destruction. Entropy. Pain. Suffering. The more facets you give a creature, the more intricate its web of desires. A dark, cruel god who has escaped his prison from another reality may want many or unusual things. Say, a drop of water from each of the seven oceans on Earth so he can complete a ritual to help free his one true love (a goddess trapped in the same prison). Then, together they can wipe out this pesky breed called "humanity" and start a new life in an empty, unpolluted paradise. When you know your creation's cravings and wishes, you have a more complete picture of how the thing fits your game, and how the hunters can interact with it.

Also remember that a monster's desires are often its weaknesses, as well. A vampire desires blood, but a lack of blood can cripple the creature. How might the hunters interfere with these desires and exploit them as vulnerabilities? Can they use its wants as bait? If you know in advance how wants can be turned against your creation, you can anticipate the hunters' gambits during play.

What does it look like? Your creature's appearance isn't necessarily its most important facet, apart from being able to tell hunters what they see (or don't see). As previously stated, monsters can be more frightening for the things they do rather than for what they look like. Appearance is still worth establishing, though. What do characters see when they confront the being for the first time? Does it look human or are there subtle differences? Red eyes or long, metallic nails that it scrapes across walls to taunt its prey? It could look mammalian, like a tainted dog or big cat with matted skin and glistening teeth. Maybe it looks like nothing anyone's ever seen before — a tentacled monstrosity birthing fluids and screaming like a choking infant.

When you describe the thing to players, don't just tell them, show them. Instead of using flat language such as, "Uh, it has black leathery skin and bat wings," use descriptive language. Say, "You see the light glint off its obsidian hide, and from behind it you see a shadow and hear the leathery whisper of wings." Being descriptive and elusive about specific details evokes mood in the players' minds, allowing events to unfold as if in a movie rather than in a technical manual.

What does it look like to second sight and observation edges? One of the most important defenses hunters have against monsters is the capacity to see through supernatural façades. You therefore need to decide what your creation can look like under imbued scrutiny. The great storytelling feature about second sight and observation edges (Discern, Witness and Illuminate) is that while they're detection tools, they're unreliable enough to keep players guessing. Varying sensations and perceptions make it difficult to get a fix on just what one monster might be compared to another. And just when characters think they've made a correlation between some input and some beings, you can throw them a curve with your new creation. It might bear familiar features, but it sure as hell isn't what the hunters think.

Second sight and observation edges help make your monster to be alien or frightening. Don't just say, "The creature looks wrong." Get into it. Suggest what the characters might glimpse, but also what they feel, hear or smell (as appropriate to any edge used, anyway). The sight can suggest more than just the creature is "off." What does its skin look like? Does it smell like a sickly, elderly person? What physical evidence is revealed to Discern? Scaly skin? Hair that's falling out? Bruises on the backs of its legs where blood has pooled? What color aura emerges when Illuminate is used? Is it unusual enough to confuse onlookers, but familiar enough to fool them into thinking they deal with a certain kind of creature? What "bestial" or "horrific" features emerge under Witness? Are they animal-like? Otherworldly? Inhuman? What relationships with humans are seen and suggested? Are images only partial and confusing, or do they show irrefutable malevolence or benevolence?

One of the first things that characters are likely to do is turn their powers of observation on your creature. That's your opportunity to confuse them, create a false impression or show them just what you want them to see. That first impression will significantly color how the hunters respond to the being thereafter, and making the wrong statement up front can take your story in directions that you never intended and don't want.

One of a kind, or a species? The walking dead exist in multitudes. The same seems true for shapechangers. They are essentially "species-oriented" creatures. It's also possible that creatures are so individualistic that they are not duplicated anywhere else in the world. Take the Name-Eater, a sentient rock that demands a blood sacrifice from local townsfolk. Or the Russian witch Baba Yaga. These inimitable beings are one of a kind. Which suits your game more, and what does each option mean? The unique creature suits aggressive hunters, assuming you want to encourage a fight. The characters become involved solely with this one creature, whether it means "Detonating that rock to loosen its grip on the town" or "Showing that witch the terrors she's wrought." The being simply has to be potent enough to stand up to the combined might of the imbued. It might be an even fight, or either side could be tested to the limits.

Individual monsters can also lend themselves to the efforts of the Merciful or Visionary. It's far easier to save or comprehend a single entity than it is a whole tribe of them. The characters can focus on one subject (a character in and of itself), honing your game to that one overriding purpose.

If more than one of the creatures exists, you can inspire a different kind of horror. There's the dreadful knowledge that more of those things are out there. What happens when the characters discover that there are other "infant eaters" in other cities, and they may in fact be breeding? If you throw a whole new species against the chosen, you capture another of **Hunter**'s primary themes: paranoia, and the determination to rise above it. "We're outnumbered, but we're going to do what we can."

If there are more of those things out there, are the hunters "responsible" for tackling them all? Should they go in search of the others? Are the imbued obligated to communicate what they've learned to others? Can they trust other hunters to do "what's right" in regard to these things? Does introducing a whole new breed of creatures mean opening a can of worms in your game? Will the characters feel duty-bound to close it? Is that how you want your chronicle to proceed?

What does it think of humans? Hunters? It's possible that your creation is completely autonomous, never interacting with the world enough to form opinions of it, but that's pretty unlikely. One way or another, the creature may have lived in the physical world, and has opinions or makes judgments as a result. For one, what does this antagonist think of humans? Are they nothing more than food? Slaves meant to serve it? Potential worshippers who should honor it? Or does the

creature consider humans to be something better, elevated to a level that the monster "could never attain"?

Then there are hunters. Does the creature know about the imbued? Probably not. They seem like other ordinary people, except the odd one might be able to do some pretty strange things. So, how might the characters and the thing discover each other? Who seeks out or finds whom, and why? Do they have similar needs or wants that coincide or clash? Repeated exposure to hunters might give your creation food for thought on who these unusual people are. How does it react then? Is it angry? Curious? Interested is forging bonds or using these people for its own ends? Or are hunters as dispensable as the rest of the human herd, at least until their interference can no longer be tolerated?

Can the creature be sympathetic? Few creatures are so black-and-white evil that the only option is to destroy them. Not every monster is Avenger-bait, so you have to decide how hunters might interact with the beast in other ways. Not even other Zealots (Defenders and Judges) automatically try to destroy a creature if they don't have to. So what options exist? The Merciful tend to seek a way to reach a sympathetic creature. Vision-based hunters can seek a way to see the creature in a new light, to understand it in relation to the "big picture." If you create a monster that doesn't do anything but assault the hunters with tooth and claw, you essentially remove Visionaries and the Merciful from the equation, not to mention any other characters who don't walk around with clenched fists.

Give all characters something to do regarding your creation. Mercy-based hunters may do research to learn a being's history in an effort to uncover elements of its past that may be used to get through to it. Visionaries may try to observe the creature, study its habits, and learn anything from it or deduce a way of integrating it into their goals on the hunt. Hell, even Judges might decide that a being should be left to its own devices if it doesn't prove harmful. And Defenders may keep a creature at arm's length if it doesn't endanger anyone or anything being protected. Such "tolerance" of a creature buys time for potential understanding between hunters and monsters.

You may decide, based on your creation's origins, needs, wants and assessment of humanity, that it has feelings. It can be sympathetic to others, and be sympathized with. It might even be *tenuously* helpful to hunters at times. The emphasis on "tenuously" is important,

though. While your creature might have the best of intentions and even seem benevolent, it's a monster. Like an animal, it should have a breaking point. It should snap under the right circumstances, possibly hurting or betraying any hunters who dare to trust it. Decide what it takes

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to make your monster snap, be it the sight of blood, hearing a woman's scream or walking out under a full moon. Building such flash points into your antagonist reminds hunters that they can never fully put their faith in the supernatural.

Can hunters communicate with the creature? Communication is vital in coming to terms with a creature. Even an Avenger may want to talk to a beast before sinking a fire axe into its head. Mercy- and Vision-motivated hunters *need* to communicate to accomplish the missions they set for themselves. Your decision is based on the needs of your story. If you want a killing machine, giving it a voice and personality might get in the way. As soon as you give the thing an identity, characters can interact with it, and that can mean complications in how they deal with it. (To which we say "Good." Monsters shouldn't be completely dispensable, especially unique ones.)

Communication doesn't have to mean, "Speaks the native language," though. If your story demands discourse to proceed, then that's the way to go. But a common language makes understanding awfully easy. Maybe you want characters to work to grasp what the thing is and wants. That could mean finding some form of mutual comprehension. Did it used to be a deaf child, and could sign language be the key? Can it understand pictures scrawled in the dirt on an alley floor? Are there trigger words or gestures that could temporarily stop the beast from attacking? Allowing for some kind of interaction makes a thought-provoking story possible. Communication indicates intelligence, and once hunters realize that a target can relate and think, they know that it could be a truly dangerous opponent or they can find means other than violence to deal with it.

And then, of course, there's the fun of communication going wrong. What the hunters interpret as "stop" might mean "eat later" to a monster. Who knows where that kind of misunderstanding might lead?

#### OTHER ELEMENTS

Once you've decided the basics of your creation its nature, purpose, goals and identity — it's time to make them a part of the game. You know who and what your anomaly is, but maybe not how it will function in the rules and just how hunters and their edges, tools and tricks may interact with it.

#### CHARACTER SHEET

A monster is more than just dots on a page. It has a history, motivations and hungers, like a player's character. In figuring out the possibilities and limitations of a creature, it can't hurt to draw up a character sheet. Ask yourself if it uses a character sheet similar to **Hunter**'s in that the creature is mostly human? Or does it require its own "style" of sheet with new Traits and powers? (And if it has new Traits, what does each dot in each new Trait mean?) If it's a limited creature that's more "animal" than "human," you might get away with filling in only Attributes and a few supplementary scores (Survival, Brawl, Stealth).

#### DICE POOLS

Whether you actually write up a character sheet or not, one thing that might provide a good watermark of the creature's strength (physical and metaphorical) is its lowest and highest dice pools. It's a good idea to get your mind around how many dice you plan to be rolling for this antagonist — three to five is probably a standard hunter antagonist. That range allows for moderate success (and in combat, even moderate success with lethal damage can put hunters in an early grave). Six to eight dice per pool indicates a dangerous foe, a challenging monster capable of a whole host of tricks. It could be walking with little sound (high Dexterity + Stealth), manipulating a hunter's memories with occult powers (a high supernatural capability pool), or mesmerizing mortals with unearthly beauty (high Appearance + Performance). Anything that consistently musters more than eight dice pools is likely to present deadly competition.

#### DAMAGE AND ATTACKS

What kind of attacks is the creature capable of? Does it have natural physical attacks aside from standard punching and kicking (claws, teeth, a razor-whip tail)? Does it rely on subtle supernatural effects (mind rape, magical assaults)? Or is it human enough that it carries a gun or a straight razor? Next consider how much damage it can do, and what kind. Does its tail have a blunt end that inflicts four dice of bashing damage? Maybe it has a sucking "tubule" tongue hidden from sight that lashes out to drink brain matter, and as such does Strength +1 dice of lethal damage as it punches a hole in a human skull. If your creation carries a weapon, is it a standard one detailed in the rulebook? Or is it something special and unique to the creature that's, say, capable of poisoning a hunter for a short time after striking? (Maybe that poison automatically inflicts two dice of bashing damage every turn for five turns after a successful attack.)

#### HEALTH LEVELS AND SOAKING

Let's be honest. At some point your hunters might try to beat the shit out of your creature — or maybe they just attempt to wound it to "scare it off." Even the most hopeful Innocent could be forced to inflict damage when backed into a corner. You therefore need to decide how many health levels your antagonist has (along with accompanying wound penalties). Probably the easiest thing to do is start with the health level chart on the **Hunter** character sheet, and revise from there. Maybe no changes are necessary. After all, most "standard" monsters in the World of Darkness abide by the same chart. But if it's a physically hardy creature (or less so), you may want to add or remove levels. Or you might keep the same number of levels, but change the wound penalties assigned to them. Maybe the entity doesn't suffer dice penalties until Crippled, or maybe the beast is seemingly unstoppable and ignores would penalties altogether.

Once you've assigned health levels, you have to decide how the being deals with damage. Is it so human that it can soak bashing but not lethal injuries? Or is it so resilient that it can soak lethal damage? Maybe bashing damage is ignored wholesale. Is it vulnerable to special attacks that can't be soaked (fire, extreme cold, silver or iron)? Such extreme vulnerabilities can be accounted for with aggravated damage, explained throughout the **Storytellers Companion**. There are many variables possible regarding a creature's health (and what hurts it), so be sure to devote thought to the subject.

#### FOOD/ENERGY

Vampires drink blood. It animates their bodies, minds and supernatural gifts. Mages steal the fundamental energies from all things and use that to power their strange magic. Your antagonist may also have some kind of energy source that is capable of depleting, which may fuel capabilities and be a form of sustenance. A simple way to track this energy is a 10-point pool. It fills up when the beast feeds, and drains when it uses powers or performs taxing feats. A more complex approach might involve a permanent rating and a temporary pool (similar to the way Willpower or Conviction functions), the former of which may or may not increase when temporary points reach 10.

Of course, you need to decide what this energy/food source consists of. Does the creature feed on something concrete and tangible (brains, blood, bile, flesh, seawater) or something insubstantial and abstract (emotions, thoughts, spiritual belief, self-confidence).

If you want to skip creating special energy points altogether, just use Willpower as the beast's fundamental fuel. There should be *some* cost associated with using its powers, to impose some kind of limitations and needs on the creature. (Also, hunters may be able to deny the creature of this source as a tactic in negotiating or torturing it. Every potential story hook is worthwhile.) **VULNERABILITIES** 

Classically, monsters have weaknesses. Whether we're talking Dracula or the bloodsuckers of the World of Darkness, vampires have a host of vulnerabilities. Unless you intend to frustrate players with an indestructible antagonist (which isn't recommended), it's important to know what hurts your creature. This is addressed to a point under "Health Levels and Soaking," above. The bane could be something mundane such as fire, a chemical or sunlight. Maybe it's a specific circumstance — caught outdoors when a clock tolls or confronted with a certain root. A monster's weakness can be more abstract, though, making for unusual story possibilities. Consider a monster whose weakness is the memory of its dead infant son. What can hunters do to affect the creature through that? Show it pictures of the baby? Cite the child's name to hold the creature at bay? Is that a key to the entity's redemption or destruction?

Don't assign vulnerabilities arbitrarily. They're meant to be focal points of stories when hunters research and identify these failings. They also need to make sense based on who or what your creature is. Why would a fire spirit be subject to harm from light, for example? Hunters should be able to consider and explore possible

#### SOMETHING FOR EVERYBODY

Players create complex characters. Their hunters aren't (or at least, shouldn't be) two-dimensional. They're driven first by personality, then by creed designation, and then by a hundred other little considerations that are the building blocks of a fully rounded character. When you create a creature (or a whole new race of creatures), you may be tempted to be somewhat self-motivated and decide that whatever you want is whatever the characters will face. But it's not as simple as that. You need to make concessions and help tailor-make antagonists or allies that correspond to or counterbalance the hunters. If you create some horrible, murderous abomination and your players all have Mercyinspired characters, they'll have nothing to do and will feel useless in your story. Or if you create some weepy, tragic entity, a bunch of Zealous characters will scoff at the speedbump you've created.

Even harder is accommodating a group that has a mix of character types, and you're the only one who can really strike a balance with the creature. Take, for example, some spirit that's capable of visiting people's dreams and living there, controlling victims through sleep. The Zealous may believe the thing harms and enslaves people and is unworthy of existence. A Mercy-motivated character may believe that the poor spirit is hiding and needs forgiveness, or that the creature truly is horrible, but that its host bodies should be preserved and healed. Visionaries might consider dreams a whole other realm, and that something could be learned from such a spectral dream-master. Maybe dreams are a realm to which humanity could escape monsters. The point is to give each character something to chew on when dealing with your creation. Otherwise, you may find that your "new addition" is tedious rather than invigorating.

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weapons against the monster based on what they observed about it. If its bane is completely nonsensical, how could hunters ever figure out what it is? If a creature shuns daylight, maybe there's a biological reason for it (hyper-sensitive skin or eyes). Or the reason might be more psychological. Maybe the "doppelganger" was murdered in the tropics and the memory of light and heat drives it mad with pain and rage.

How can hunters learn about such weaknesses? These soft spots could be accidentally "revealed" to the characters. (When spying on the creature, perhaps they see it recoil from a tanning bed or heat lamp.) The characters should never be told directly about a weakness, though; a failing should never be that obvious. Otherwise, how would your creature exist at all? Show characters hints of what the monster's vulnerability is, and allow them to run with it. Hunters may note that a certain word triggers a shudder across the creature's flesh, or that faint tendrils of smoke leave its skin when one of the chosen spits on it. Alternatively, any rumors or legends of the creature might indicate what hurts it, as might exploring the thing's origins to learn where it came from and where it might be forced to return.

Finally, Pinpoint is always good for suggesting vulnerabilities. Decide how the edge must convey such information to users. Perhaps the kinds of hints suggested above might be revealed to the edge user. An onlooker might have a vision of a body part or behavior that the monster favors or protects. Or an application of Pinpoint might simply give a hunter an intuitive sense of just what's wrong with your creation.

#### SUPERNATURAL POWERS

What your monster can do — the miracles or blasphemes that it can perform — is a significant part of its identity as something "inhuman." Being able to fly or secrete venom just isn't within mankind's capabilities, and that makes the being frightening, awe-inspiring and monstrous. Granted, powers aren't the only things that make a monster — people can behave horrifically without any magical capabilities — but in a game in which supernatural creatures prevail and manipulate the world, powers are a must.

Just as vampires can mesmerize mortals and witches can cause ill fortune, your creation should have some capability (or capabilities) that distinguish and enhance its identity. Feel free to borrow powers that are already affiliated with other denizens of the World of Darkness. The **Storytellers Companion** offers a whole array of gifts from which to choose. You can take one power from bloodsuckers and another from shapechangers. Your players won't know the difference. The danger there, however, is painting your unique being with colors associated with other inhabitants of the world. "If it can do what man-beasts can, maybe it is a man-beast," hunters might think. That confusion could be good, but maybe you want the characters to recognize the being as something completely new and different.

Another option is creating new tricks specific to your monster. That means figuring out the dice pools, difficulties and other parameters of its gifts, which can be demanding. Your monster can also become "freaky" if you're so pressed to create new capabilities that the ones you devise are wildly diverse or extreme. A possible solution is to mix and match new and established powers, to save you time and to help maintain a consistent theme for your beast. No matter what your decision, the following are some guidelines to help you assign and create your monster's supernatural powers.

Powers should reflect character. A creature's preternatural capabilities should reflect the context of its identity and nature. In other words, the whole package has to make sense. It might not add up if a seductive, fear-eating serial killer wields an awkward fire-breathing power. It's too random. It has no explanation or rationale. That kind of creature's powers might be mental, allowing it to hypnotize and enthrall. Or if its powers are physical, its fingers could become like razors that flay the skin from victims. By constrast, a mostly mindless, gibbering thing straight from Lovecraft's fiction isn't unlikely to have seductive powers. It might have some power to chew voraciously (as in "eating hunters two at a time"). So, consider the identity, origin and motive of your monster and assign it effects that derive from those sources.

Don't overdo it. Hunters are only one rung up from humans on the supernatural food chain. They're still relatively weak and vulnerable, and (perhaps through no fault of their own) ignorant. Yes, your creature can pose a challenge in all arenas — physical, mental and social. The Merciful and Visionary shouldn't have an easy job of comprehending or curing it, but shouldn't throw up their hands when trying to get through to it. Otherwise, what's the point? The Zealous should be able to square off against the creature, but maybe shouldn't be smacked down in the first turn of combat. Players should feel that their characters are tested, but not automatically confounded.

It's hard to know when you've achieved that balance. The best thing you can do is watch and listen to your players. They'll let you know if they're happy or not. If they're not, it's time to reduce or increase stats and dice pools on the fly. Maybe you can adjust the creature's difficulties enough to give the characters a hard but not impossible time. Lethal damage might be revised to bashing, or bashing to lethal. Storyteller fiat allows you to tailor events to help the players get the most enjoyment possible from your game, unless you want a creature to be weak to lull hunters into a false sense of security, or surprisingly potent to teach the chosen a lesson.
Keep it subtle. It's okay if you want to create some dragon-winged chitinous hulk, but remember that this thing may have existed for some time, possibly millennia, before the characters discovered it. The more extreme or absurd its powers and look, the less likely that it could have survived so long. Powers aren't much good if they attract attention.

Overt powers also tend to diminish horror in a horror story. The monster in a horror movie is most frightening when it isn't shown, when its capabilities are mysterious. Show the thing from head to toe on screen and it no longer strikes at the audience's deepest fears. The same applies to players as the "audience" of your game. Subtle powers establish a monster's threat, but don't reveal everything that it might be capable of. They make your monster scary for what it hasn't shown of itself. What's more frightening, some big lizard busting into a room and taking off heads, or a human-looking incubus that plants desires into sleepers minds and causes them to act violently during waking hours? Subtlety is the key. Insidious effects — what can't be seen — raise more alarm than what can be seen.

### RESEARCH

Since you've gone to all the trouble of creating an origin and backstory for your monster, giving it motivations and needs and urges, it's time to figure out how to convey all that to your players and their characters. Doing so helps them understand the creature and make sense of the story and their part in it. If the whole background and purpose of the being is kept hidden, its behavior seems arbitrary and is frustrating. Showing what your monster is about is part of storytelling.

The problem is, you can't just recite the entity's origins to the troupe. "The monster is in town because it needs to collect souls on which to experiment back in its shadowy realm." That would be like reading the last page of a book first, with the author appearing in his own narrative. You have to tease the players, give them information and insights that their characters ascertain or uncover, and just enough that they get part of the picture, but not all of it. It's the proverbial rope with which to hang one's self.

The secret here is to let the characters figure out your monster for themselves. Encourage the hunters to learn about your creation through their own clever devising. They've discovered its existence but now need to better understand it before acting — and before it kills or appears or disappears again. Maybe it has something the imbued want. Maybe it can be a source of information, if only the characters can negotiate on its terms. Either hope means comprehending the being. "Tricking" the hunters to explore your creation makes them active rather than reactive. They take the initiative, whether you've goaded them into it or not. And characters being proactive always beats the "supervillain" explaining his sinister plan.

In general, most information probably comes from research. It's not necessarily easy or particularly factual research, either. Information on the "standard" monsters of the World of Darkness isn't simply available and at hunters' disposal. No one whom the characters know has categorized what creatures are. (Even if some scheming cast member has, she probably isn't willing to share.) The same logic applies to looking into a unique monster. A book doesn't just fall open to the right page. A website about your beast doesn't just wait to be accessed. If this thing is rare or truly unprecedented, any clues on its nature are exceedingly difficult to find. That means legwork, study and perseverance. It's your job to decide how those efforts pay off.

Just as there are myths and tales about vampires, werewolves and witches, there might be similar legends regarding your creature (or others similar to it). That's always a good starting point — a place to allow hunters a kernel of truth, but also a great place to throw a dozen red herrings at them. They may find an old fable that claims the monster is some kobold living in the coal mines of upstate Pennsylvania, and that these things were once "helper fairies that protected miners from danger." Maybe the first part is true - these things live in mines — but maybe they never protected miners. Maybe they led intruders into danger, and maybe they're not "kobolds" at all, but the corrupted bodies of other miners who died in some horrible cavein. For every piece of information you allow the hunters that's true, feel free to throw out two or three that are partially true or patently false and even contradictory. That way characters never quite feel certain of what they're dealing with.

So, where do hunters find information? The players probably steer your hand. They say their characters go to the local library or check out the Internet or even go door to door and interview locals about "strange sightings in the area." However the players do it, let them. Reward their ideas with mismatched pieces of information that only add up — or conflict — after lots of effort and investigation. Think of all those "investigative" episodes of *The X-Files*. Mulder and Scully don't just fall into the truth — they research, check books and old case files, and perform autopsies to gather evidence about the multifarious things they deal with. Maybe the imbued find strange footprints or odd-colored blood where a particularly unusual murder occurred. Give them clues and let them follow up on them researching as they like.

In game terms, information gathering is represented with the Research Ability and system. You can allow players to make rolls as their characters study (or better yet, make rolls on players' behalf), but don't feel bound by mechanics. Research shouldn't be watered down to a single roll. It can be fleshed out and roleplayed in a series of scenes that are accentuated with various types of rolls. Almost anything in the Knowledge category can be built into a system of research. If characters look on the Internet, call for Intelligence + Computer rolls, the difficulty being dependent upon the nature of information they're after. If they look for a simple address, maybe the difficulty is 5. But if they look up articles from the 1940s about cattle mutilations, they're in for a challenge maybe a difficulty of 8. From that starting point, they could find an old photo online in which an arcane symbol is carved into a tree next to a field of dead cows. An Intelligence + Occult roll might identify the sign or at least suggest where else it might be found. If characters go to the scene of the mutilations, Perception + Investigation might be rolled to find the same tree.

Alternatively, one or two successes on any roll might not confer direct answers, but give partial ones that point to other leads. Maybe they don't find a description of the monster, but the name of a person who *could* describe it if they tracked him down. Three to four successes might give more direct results. If the characters study the occult symbol, they may find a few sources on it that offer varying explanations. Five successes can indicate a very direct answer, but even then it shouldn't close the door on the investigation. It should raise other questions. Perhaps the monster is called a kobold, and appears to be straight out of Germanic folklore, appearing in mine shafts to scare off workers. But why have they suddenly started appearing in upstate Pennsylvania?

Don't hesitate to have fun with botches, too (one of the reasons to make research rolls on players' behalf so they never know when their characters' information is reliable or not). If a roll botches, characters seem to have found a valuable clue that is actually absolutely false, useless or dangerous.

If you do make rolls on players' behalf, it's best to do so when an investigation gets underway. That way, players aren't certain of the foundation of their characters' insights. Evidence that seems to add up could fold like a house of cards when a basic assumption is later proven false. Once research gets underway, you can let players make more and more rolls of their own. It isn't fun for them to have all awareness of their characters' progress taken away, but later successes are still only as good as previous successes — or failures.

### **OBSERVATION EDGES**

Hunters, of course, have their own "built-in" investigation tools. Their "observation edges" such as Discern, Illuminate and Witness allow them to sense (albeit vaguely) the supernatural, and glean pieces of information that might not be available through regular research. These edges allow a hunter to detect clues about monsters' identities, goals, origins and needs, and you should be prepared for characters to use them to get a better understanding of your monster.

Illuminate does little more than surround a creature in a nimbus of light and/or color, an "aura" that may help a hunter identify that specific being as apart from others. This input can aid her later ("I see that horrible black glow again. It must be that same thing we fought earlier"), but it can initially confound the hell out of her ("I've never seen anything with a black glow before. What the fuck are we dealing with?"). Illuminate can therefore help hunters classify what your monster is, although you can twist observations gained to further confuse rather than enlighten characters. (See p. 85 for more information on how to diffuse the effects of Illuminate.)

Witness is useful because it helps reveal the truly bestial or aggressive side of your new creature. (Whether or not the monster is repentant doesn't matter. The extent of its monstrousness is still suggested.) Beyond that, you can describe little "vision" plays about your creature that may give characters a greater sense of who this monster could be in a show-don't-tell manner. Instead of announcing, "The creature needs to steal body parts to make itself whole," you can actually show it doing that very thing, perhaps plucking the eye from a fallen woman and placing it in its own moist, puckered socket. Now, that vision might not tell the whole story of what your creature is, but hunters can act on the information as they choose. The effects and "evidence" provided by Witness can be filtered or skewed just as that of Illuminate can be.

Discern tends to reveal physical details about a subject to potentially offer information on what it is and what it wants. It may show that a being walks strangely because one leg is longer than the other, or that the line at the back of its neck is actually a *seam*. Once again, the deductions that characters make from such observations are their own, but Discern offers input that might be found in no book or on no web page. As with all observation edges, the signs indicated by the effect can be made as open-ended or as clear as you like.

Beyond these three advantages, there's second sight. It's also useful for gathering information on your new creature, but not to the degree of the detection edges. Second sight is essentially hunters' trigger or first foray into information gathering. It hints at trouble or suggests where attention might be directed when the supernatural is at large. The capability doesn't allow for much more research, though. It's usually the first step in a greater, more precise effort, like starting an archeological dig with a bulldozer before the delicate scalpels and picks are brought out.

In anticipation of characters bringing these capabilities to bear on your creation, it's wise to have a list

### HUNTER: URBAN LEGENDS

of possible insights that can be gathered about your entity. You know which edges the characters possess, and which need to be dealt with. You might go into a game session with three or four possible insights prepared for each kind of edge, some useful and others confusing or conflicting. The range and possibilities of such insights are discussed earlier, under "Twisting Perceptions." Having this input ready in advance gives players confidence in what their characters observe or appropriately undermines faith in their characters' capabilities, as you see fit.

### THE WAPSU

Quote: What's wrong with me? Please, help me. Help me!

**Prelude:** Jefferson Hawk cared little for his Indian heritage. His father was a lecherous car salesman, his mother a depressed housewife, and neither cared for their Leni-Lenape tribal ancestry. Only his grandmother, a wizened raisin of a woman, kept up with the politics and stories of their "people." The only thing Jefferson kept up with was the latest videos on MTV2, comic books and a burgeoning love of suburban heroin. School didn't mean shit. Neither did chores or any of that crap.

Jefferson and his friends tied off in the little caves up on Buckingham Mountain. They'd sit around in the half-light, get high and listen to Slipknot on the boombox. One day, the others couldn't make it, so Jefferson decided to ride the horse all by himself. While high, he stumbled further into the depths of the caves, remembering some half-baked story about stolen gold hidden by turn-of-the-century thieves. Jefferson didn't find any money, but he did find a small cache of Indian junk. A little coyote fetish, some broken bead necklaces, polished stones and a tiny clay bottle, corked with a wooden stopper. Jefferson opened the bottle and smelled



a sweet aroma, like honey. It was all useless junk, though. When his high wore off, Jefferson went home.

Life proceeded as usual over the subsequent week, until something happened. His skin began losing its burnished bronze color and turned pale. His back teeth loosened. Patches of hair fell out. The doctors thought it might be cancer, but couldn't find any evidence. His parents blamed drugs. Jefferson's grandmother said it was something else: He had been cursed and was turning into Wapsu, one of the "blighted people."

Things only got worse from there. The changes became so painful, so twisted, that Jefferson ran away. Now he lives in the forest on Buckingham Mountain, searching the caves for the relics. He can't seem to find them, though, not even where he left them. His skin has become almost see-through, and what few teeth remain have grown sharp and yellow. He's hungry, too. Hungry for meat. Raw, bloody meat. At first, Jefferson hated what he'd become, but slowly he's beginning to like it.

**Concept:** The Wapsu are unlucky people cursed by contact with spirits once trapped by the original peoples of North America. The "vapors" might have been contained to alleviate a village from disease, or to put an end to bad luck. The "blight" isn't necessarily permanent if caught in time (by returning the offending spirit to a specially prepared container), but after a period of five or six months, there's little that can be done. Human memories recede and feral cravings for raw meat (animal *or* human) take over. The longer a victim is able to hold onto his humanity, the better, but the more he gives in to the grim urges, the worse they become.

**Roleplaying Hints:** You're both terribly sad and bitter over what's happened. You don't understand what's become of you or why you look so ghastly. Can anybody be trusted to help you? Who can you turn to? And what about the smell of their skin and how it makes your stomach growl?

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity (Quick) 4, Stamina 2, Charisma 2, Manipulation 1, Appearance 0, Perception (Smell) 4, Intelligence 2, Wits 3

Abilities: Alertness 3, Brawl 2, Dodge (Nimble) 4, Melee 1, Investigation 2, Stealth 2, Survival 2

Backgrounds: Allies 1, Resources 1

Powers: Gluttony (Hunter, p. 270), Speed (SC, p. 32) Willpower: 5

### CORPORATE CULTIST

**Quote:** Back off. I have to face enough obstacles as a woman in the business world.

**Prelude:** Being both Cuban and a woman guaranteed that Ewha Calderon would never be accepted in big business. It didn't matter that she attended one of the best and brightest schools in the nation. It didn't matter that she had a mind like a sharp tack and could cut through numbers and red tape without a second thought. What mattered was that she didn't look good enough in a skirt to get a secretary's job, and her skin was a little too dusky for the white, fat-cat managers for whom she interviewed. But then a friend turned her on to these sessions downtown called *Female Empowerment and You* — meetings held at an upscale bookstore. Ewha decided to go, loved it and joined the group after her first visit.

After attending several meetings every Tuesday and Thursday, Ewha got a great job as an account executive for a national neckwear company. It wasn't long before she hit the "glass ceiling," though, and couldn't get a promotion to save her life. She expressed her frustrations at a meeting, and was told that she could shatter that ceiling "if she played by the book." It required some pretty strange stuff — blood, a tattoo on her lower back, and some ceremony about something called Lamashtu. Ewha was at her wits' end, and the other women seemed normal (and successful) enough. So, she decided to try it. Two months later, she shot through the ranks like a bullet and was promoted to Vice President of Merchandising.

Now Ewha is a devotee of this "Lamashtu," even if it all seems odd. Even stranger, men and women alike seem to do whatever she says, and her once-blemished face has become smooth and flawless. Plus, an opening has opened up in Marketing. The session leader says that if Ewha just makes a few more promises and gets another couple of tattoos, that position will be hers.

**Concept:** The Corporate Cultist isn't evil, just selfish. While she might become an egomaniacal monster in time, for now she's just a self-interested person forever in search of more. She may or may not know that it could cost her soul.

Roleplaying Hints: You're tired of working twice as hard as everyone else to get mediocre assignments. Now that you've tasted success, you won't rest on your laurels.



You're aggressive, charming and forceful — except when it comes to participating in meetings and deferring to the other members who've lead you down this bright new path. Anyone who isn't on your "team" is little more than a tool to be used and discarded.

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 2, Charisma 3, Manipulation (Convincing) 4, Appearance (Radiant) 4, Perception 2, Intelligence 3, Wits 3

Abilities: Awareness 1, Bureaucracy (Red Tape) 4, Computer 1, Drive 1, Empathy 2, Etiquette 2, Expression 1, Finance 2, Intimidation 3, Intuition 2, Law 1, Leadership 3, Performance 2, Research 1, Subterfuge (Honey-Tongued) 4

Backgrounds: Allies 2, Contacts 2, Resources 3 Powers: Command (SC, p. 33), Hypnotize (SC, p. 34), Secrets of the Mind 1 (SC, p. 56)

Willpower: 8

### BUG MAN

Quote: Oh, God! It's happening again! I'm chaaanngrbblph...

**Prelude:** Pete Johnson was a normal guy, once. He was employed by the state as a sewer maintenance manager, meaning he went down into the bowels of the city to make sure that feces, piss and contaminated water didn't come out of people's faucets. He had a wife, two kids, a dog and a little duplex in the suburbs. Life wasn't great, but it certainly wasn't bad.

Then, one day he was down in the depths, checking one of the pipe valves for leakage, and he found some shit-cobbled nest hanging under one of the massive pipeline elbows. Crawling all around the nest were these iridescent beetles, chittering their mandibles at one another. Fascinated, Pete leaned in for a closer look. One of them took flight and bit him on the cheek. Pissed, Pete knocked the nest down with his flashlight and stomped on every last one of the damn things.

Now Pete's not such a normal guy anymore. Oh sure, he wants to be, but a recent "problem" has made a normal life harder and harder to maintain. Without warning, Pete's body disintegrates into a horde of those shiny beetles, and everything goes black. He wakes up hours later, naked, with no memory of what happened, and a funny, coppery taste in his mouth. Even worse, just last week he found the bones of the dog out in the garage, stripped clean. He doesn't know when he's going to change, or what he does when it happens. What if someone finds out?

**Concept:** The Bug Man is a perfect example of a normal life gone wrong. A poor bastard with an uncontrollable "power" (if it can even be called that), the Bug Man is a foe that doesn't know what he really is, and he certainly doesn't intend the horrible things he does. He's a twist on the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde story.



**Roleplaying Hints:** When in Pete-form, you're a normal, run-of-the-mill family guy who likes hockey, Mexican food and horsing around with your kids. But now you're afraid and not sleeping very well, because you know it will happen again. You're having problems concentrating at work and your wife knows something is up. Thankfully, she doesn't know *what*. How long can you go on before someone you love gets hurt?

Attributes: Strength 3, Dexterity 2, Stamina 3, Charisma 3, Manipulation 2, Appearance 2, Perception 2, Intelligence 2, Wits 3

Abilities: Alertness 1, Athletics 2, Crafts 2, Drive 3, Intuition 2, Investigation 1, Leadership 1, Science 1

Backgrounds: Allies 1, Contacts 1, Resources 2

**Powers:** In Pete-form, none. Bug Man shapeshifts into "swarm form." The swarm has Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3 and Brawl 3, and 15 health levels that impose no wound penalties when lost. (Turning back to Pete imposes human wound penalties, which could mean his Incapacitation or death if seven or more levels were lost in bug form.) The swarm can heal by drinking blood, regaining one level lost to any kind of damage per point of damage inflicted by biting. The swarm also has Venomous Bite (see page 93).

### BAD PLACES

Shirley Jackson said it best in her story "The Haunting of Hill House": Some houses are born bad. Well, same goes with some locales in the World of Darkness, whether they're houses, factories, long stretches of road, apartment buildings, stone circles or just about anything else. Any place is ripe to become a "character," or more specifically a "monster," in and of itself — corrupted and changed into a dark reflection of what it once was. But why would you want to introduce such a setting in your game? What kinds of stories can be told with a bad (or good) supernatural location?

Such a setting allows for the unexpected. Most hunters anticipate and dread encountering monsters. A tangible creature that they can at least face. A place isn't so easily quantifiable or identifiable. A location as "antagonist" can confuse players and enlighten hunters to the bleak realization that there are more dangers in the world than they ever thought of. Instead of using another vampire or ghost, you have the chance to tell a complex story that can demand the attention and contribution of imbued of all Virtues. Hunters don't just investigate, pursue, defeat or redeem a being. They contend with a place (big or small) with a history and background all its own. It has personality, but not such that characters can just walk up to it and confront it. How do you try to intimidate or reason with a lake, for example? These are challenges to which hunters don't know how to rise, and have to improvise to overcome. Whole places gone awry? Entire locations broken and twisted?"How is that possible?" The chosen may ask this question. But more important is the question, "What can we do about it?"

This section helps you create and introduce supernatural sites to your **Hunter** chronicle, and starts with some concepts borrowed from other Storyteller games, along with some new ones.

### HELLMOUTHS

The notion of Hellmouths didn't start with Buffy the Vampire Slayer. They've been a part of Christian mythology

### ON DANGEROUS GROUND

Having trouble thinking of a physical location to use for your "bad place"? Here's a whole slew of potential settings, some of which seem obvious, others less so: houses, hotels, apartment buildings, sewers, cemeteries, abandoned mines, quarries, lakes, old government bomb shelters, factories, entire neighborhoods or towns *like Twin Peaks*, college dormitories, hospitals, mental institutions, greenhouses, long stretches of dead forest, desert canyons, abandoned subway tunnels, a clock tower, museums, a boat in the middle of the ocean, or a long stretch of closed-down highway.

Pick a location and follow the tips and tricks provided in this chapter to make an impact on your players and characters. If you want to go the extra mile, you might take pictures of the type of location you want to use, or pull them from books or the Internet. Show these to your players as a visual aid to put them in the mindset of your nightmare locale.

### CHAPTERS: RULES AND STORYTELLING

since before the medieval period. They were once ingrained into universal cosmology, even to be used as stage settings in Elizabethan theater (as a trapdoor from which actors dressed as demons or devils could assail the protagonists of a play). Hellmouths exist in the World of Darkness, too, and in essence are very much like their theater counterparts. They're portals leading to the multifarious Hells where evil comes out, but nothing goes back in. Think the Cenobites from Hellraiser. This doorway may open because one particular creature (some kind of demon or someone damned to a place featuring grueling torture) escapes, and the Hellmouth is his passageway back. The problem is, it doesn't end there. The monster comes through, and the surrounding area is tainted thereafter. You therefore have two foci for stories — the escapee and the region twisted by his flight. It may be possible to return the demon. It may be possible to close the door, but can the corruption that has affected the place ever be erased?

To second sight, a Hellmouth can seem cloaked behind a heat haze or a thin cloud of tiny flies. Illuminate may show it to radiate with the lambent glow of fire. Witness could reveal the escape of any creatures responsible. Discern might indicate the precise point where things come from or the source of the local decay. Perhaps there's a pulsing light, or trees, rocks and telephone poles bend to point the way.

Hunters may decide they want to close the Hellmouth, but it's up to you to decide how (and if) one can shut the maw to another dimension. You may also want to marry the concept of a Hellmouth with that of a new monster. What happens when human souls, once punished in a hundred different tortuous realms, escape? These twisted perversions may want a hundred different things, from tasting a pizza again to slaughtering everyone in Times Square. Does damaging the Hellmouth damage them? Could a hunter heal them or put them back?

### DEAD ZONES

Some places cause the dead to forget that they're dead. Shamblers and rots spawn in these places with an alarming frequency unseen elsewhere. There could be any reason for this supernatural procreation. Say, a powerful witch died there and her blood infused the local graveyard with a potent necromantic rush. Or the explanation could be similar to that of a haunted house. A horrible event occurred there (a mass murder, disaster or a supernatural curse) and now the spirits are restless. They can't leave their bodies or are quick to assume any bodies that have been buried in the region. No matter what, the living dead are legion, but remember that in these places, zombies are only the peripheral threat. It's the place itself that's the true monster. Wiping the zombies out may be a temporary fix, but when the source spawns more, it may occur to hunters that there's a bigger problem at hand.

Second sight does little more than amplify the decay of a particular area. The signs may not be obvious — buildings appear cracked, the asphalt seems fractured and pockmarked, trees are withered. Taken together, these indicators suggest that the locale is dead. Illuminate may reveal a pale-gray aura (like a dark cloud with a light shining through) that hurts the eyes. Witness could confront the user with tormenting and constant flashes of death and dying. Discern can show the region's physical "deathmarks": Plants look brown and rotten, things seem to be crumbling to dust, and even living creatures are sallow and sickly. Discern might also show signs of the walking dead (traces of dead skin and blood left everywhere, discarded and rotted clothes left about).

Dead zones allow for many different types of stories and encounters. You may want to tell a tragedy, for example, involving all hunter types. The walking dead are often poor, deluded figures who wander around in borrowed corpses seeking realities that are denied to them. Merciful hunters can help these beings recognize the futility of their ongoing existence. Zealous hunters might learn lessons in futility, when their efforts to wipe out zombies go in vain as whole new batches arise. What cost did the characters have to pay to win such a hollow victory? Visionaries might search for answers to the existence of the local undead, only to learn that it was all tragically self-induced. That realization might strike a chord for her situation. At one point in the distant past, locals may have sought the truths of God or science and defied laws of faith or nature, for which they're still paying today. How close does a Visionary come to defying the same prohibitions now in her study of the supernatural?

### BLIGHTS

Modern industry is wonderful. We have cars to drive, sodas to drink, and a billion plastic widgets to make our lives convenient. Unfortunately, the byproducts of industry tend to ruin everything they contact. Lakes glisten with the rainbow gleam of oil. Suburban sprawls are rife with cancer. Sewer systems back up with toxic sludge. And there are other, subtler side effects, too. Side effects of the monstrous sort. Blights are locations that have been more than just poisoned by industry, they have become supernaturally toxic. Animals at these sites can be twisted and hungry. People who live on or near a blight become freaks, with extra limbs or tails, or with babies that belong in formaldehyde jars. It's also possible that the effects could be subtler, and non-physical - psychoses, psychic capabilities or any of the powers listed in the Storytellers Guide could manifest among the locals. As with dead zones, hunters soon realize that the freaks aren't the real problem. Wipe out the mutants and the very soil still breeds corruption.

Second sight may not suggest much about a blight, except to reveal the area as "wrong." The landscape may seem slightly "melted" or "sagging," for example. Illuminate could show a corona of poisoned, diseased colors (puke green, ochre bile). Witness may give a hunter a distinct sense of ambient corruption, and enough successes may point to the cause of the pollution. Discern shows specific instances of contamination that may have been missed, such as a complete lack of insects, a mutated (and probably dead) bird, or even signs of a mutant human in the area.

Blights are often excellent lead-ins to games about tainted corporations, eco-terrorism or mutants (see page 92). The landscape is broken, as is every inhabitant, and someone is to blame. Could it be that factory up the hill? Maybe hunters discover barrels bubbling forth some sort of malodorous fluid into the lake. Do they find some form of identification on the barrels? And how exactly do they heal or destroy such an impure site?

### HAVENS

Many havens are nothing more than the places where bloodsuckers rest their head during the day. Some, however, are corrupted by a leech's constant presence, and accumulate dark energy. A vampire who is particularly ancient or who tortures victims in his sanctum may build up corruption in the very brick and mortar of the place, and it could manifest a cruel sentience much like any other haunted locale. Consider the fact that blood has power, and that some vampires have no problem spilling a hell of a lot of blood in their havens, and you understand how a place like that might resonate with evil. Not to mention that some magicpracticing bloodsuckers might protect their havens with dark spells. Doors close and lock on their own. Hallways confuse and befuddle until the uninitiated end up sobbing on the floor. Opening the wrong book might burn the hand or invoke a temporary derangement. Ultimately, rots aren't big on maintaining havens in public places. "Out of the way" best describes a bloodsucker's domain - a secluded penthouse apartment, the basement of a closed-up restaurant, a water tower, a clapboard house under an old train trestle. Anything that affords the privacy to commit undead transgressions is viable.

It's unlikely that second sight or observation edges show anything unusual about a vampire haunt unless one of two conditions is fulfilled. Either great evil has taken place there, or the vampire has engaged in long bouts of dark magic. If either (or both) is the case, second sight and the edges may reveal the evil that has bled into the walls and floor, suggesting many of the same characteristics as a vampire held under scrutiny.

Havens are rarely the focus of a story involving a vampire, but can certainly be important. Finding a vampire's haven means gaining an advantage over the creature. The hunters now know where it hides, how it "lives" and where it may flee when endangered. Will the imbued risk an alliance with another bloodsucker to learn the hiding place of a specific enemy? Could they follow a trail of victims back to a haven with their own edges and ingenuity, and lay in wait or close in on the creature while it sleeps? Havens can also be easier to destroy than some other bad places. Fire or explosives can wipe out an apartment better than, say, a valley.

### CAERNS

"Caern," by the technical definition, is just a pile of rocks signifying a grave. To shapechangers, it means a lot more. A caern is a place of spiritual energy, a nexus where primal powers reign supreme. Humans worship in temples and churches. Lycanthropes tend to worship at caerns. These sites are usually distant from humanity — glens in an ancient wood, desert caves decorated with paintings, mountain retreats. As civilization encroaches further and further upon the wilds, however, caerns emerge in urban sprawls, too, though even these tend to be relatively remote (in rusted-out factories, the bowels of old subway tunnels, or even on the top floors of skyscrapers).

One clear danger of caerns is that they're heavily protected by shapechangers. Wandering into one of these "holy places" is sure to get a hunter killed. But even if there aren't shapechangers around, these sites have signature powers all their own. You might be able to convey a "man versus nature" theme in one, as the landscape may very well come to life to protect itself. Vines force themselves down throats to choke. The earth opens up like a mouth to eat invaders. In cities, you might find that trash piles suddenly become animated to smother trespassers. Some caerns are also corrupted by blighted spirits, and may be polluted with toxic waste that oozes with a life of its own, or they may be protected by shuffling gremlins that exhale acid.

Second sight may cause a caern to stand out to a hunter like a thumbprint on a glass slide — seemingly pronounced or odd against the surrounding landscape. Illuminate can radiate the area with a warm yellow (almost holy) light, unless the place is somehow corrupted, in which case any aura seems tarnished. Witness may reveal scenes of shapechanger worship, with human sacrifices or no, which could send Mercy- and Visionmotivated hunters into a curious flurry, but which may inspire the Zealous with a message of unholy veneration. Discern can point out any specific holy objects or focal points of the caern — a statuary, a "blessed" knife, an ancient tree — the focal points of the larger locale.

As said, hunters barging into a caern probably get stomped. Unless, of course, they find an abandoned one or one that recently suffered great loss in some battle or catastrophe. Caerns probably seem somewhat suspicious

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to hunters in implied meaning. One may not seem like such a bad place, and may in fact be quite beautiful. Yet beast-men protect it and offer it their bloody reverence, so it may be tainted, after all. So, should the site be preserved, left alone or defiled?

Nodes

Nodes, like caerns, are points of power for the supernatural. Witches, in particular, gather at such places to collect energy to use in their rituals and magic. Nodes aren't so much about nature, though. All in all, they're much *weirder* than that. Nodes are simply odd — seemingly normal places that project strange displays, sometimes almost appearing to be haunted by poltergeists. A library might have books that whisper to passersby. A water tower in the center of town might appear to breathe at night, and if you listen you can almost hear a heartbeat. Caerns tend to be protected by shapechangers, and appear to be holy places, while nodes are hotly contested locations that are less about worship and more about exploiting the power that washes from them.

Hunters who come across a node might not only discover weird occurrences from time to time, but be caught in the crossfire of warring supernaturals who seek to harness the site's energy. (Although, what happens if a Visionary decides that he wants to harness the energy for *himself*?) For a good example of a node, check out the one Hannibal protects in **Hunter Book: Defender.**  Nodes viewed under second sight can cause headaches and eyestrain; the angles and curves of the area may not be natural or right, twisting in directions they shouldn't like a hastily penned drawing. Illuminate may highlight an area with a faint purple luminosity, much as it does a mage. Witness can show the connection between wizards and the place as warlocks "feed' from it or do research upon it. Discern can reveal objects that have been altered or warped by weird energies. Or, reality as the onlooker understands it may simply be askew. Shadows may not be directly tied to the objects that cast them, for example.

To a hunter, a node is both a curious and terrifying place. Curious because it seems so odd, unusual, and terrifying because if the place "acts up," the hunter is in for a pretty strange ride. Nodes are also hotly contested and sought after. Should a hunter find one, it won't be long before mages (or other creatures) arrive to study and harness the local energy. Do the characters protect the site? Or could they use the site as bait for a trap?

Nihils are *really* bad places. They're pinpricks in the fabric of reality, and each shines clear through to the

land of the dead. A nihil is a breach in the dam between worlds, and there's no telling what might happen at one.



### HUNTER: URBAN LEGENDS

There are a few possibilities, however. The haunting level could increase tenfold. Deeply tormented spirits rise and wreak total hell upon the surrounding world. Humans caught near a nihil might grow corrupted or simply go mad, inflicting violence and lunacy upon themselves and others.

Nihils are pretty rare, but when they manifest, terrible things happen. Look at the incidents that took place at New Dijon, for instance. While New Dijon was a case of a *massive* nihil at work, and was an exceptionally rare occurrence, it could be used as a model for a potential opening in your game.

Second sight shows these access ways to be dark and wrong, giving the impression of a black cloud. The intensity of those images and impressions is only heightened by using Illuminate. Witness may overwhelm a hunter with a sense of death and depression that hangs in the air. Discern is likely to reveal instances of things that have become tainted by the nihil, such as humans, spirits or even inanimate objects.

Nihils can be sources of several and various stories. They are spirits that escape and become trapped in this world and are worthy of a series of game sessions. Destroying the spirits is a difficult task, but so is cutting through their madness to learn what ails them. On top of that, humans in the area develop derangements. Locals might be subjected to a rash of suicides or murders. What can hunters do about these events that outwardly seem mundane, but are not? And once the characters realize that there's a hole straight through to the underworld, how do they strive to close it?

### **Q&A**

The following questions may help you decide the identity of your supernatural locale. These questions are tailored specifically for creating settings, but you can also look to the questions on p. 102 for creating new monsters and see how they apply to antagonistic places.

What does the place look like? A location's appearance is important both in establishing its mood and helping to define its character. A forest that teems with primeval life, almost glowing with natural radiance, sets a different tone than does a malodorous sewer tunnel deep beneath the urban sprawl. How big or small is your setting? Small might be an alleyway that eats and digests homeless people. Big might be a 20acre stretch of field where a battalion of Civil War soldiers was destroyed. You might even want to go so far as to draw a map of the place. If it's a building, sketch out what each floor and room looks like, and how it's used. If it's a natural spot, fill in the details of what paths cut through it, or where there are trees, a lake or a rocky coastline. Establishing the imagery of the place sets the visual flavor of your story.

What is the place's relation to other supernatural beings? Many supernatural locations are intrinsically linked to some kinds of monsters. A "living library" may not have become such a horror if it wasn't created and controlled by some lunatic warlock. Some monsters create magical places. Others are simply drawn there to absorb the locale's energy. Decide what your place means to the denizens of the world. Is it important to them as a place of power? Will it recharge their spiritual batteries (Willpower, Rage, Gnosis, Quintessence or even blood)? Or does the place call monsters to it in an effort to feed on their energy, sucking it from them instead of giving it to them? Do creatures live there? Can the place hurt or help monsters in any other way? Maybe it helps them because it's ultimately defensible, like a tower, or it hurts them because it imposes maddening nightmares.

After you've established monsters' relationship with the place, don't forget to anticipate how hunters might respond to this information. If an Avenger learns that a place empowers other creatures, could she lie in wait and destroy unsuspecting creatures as they come to feed? Could a Redeemer attempt to cure a fiend's dependence upon a location? Could a Visionary draw a connection (whether genuine or imagined) that shows how a bad place actually makes the monster population stronger, hungrier or altogether more dangerous?

How are hunters attracted to the place? The players' characters have to learn about your supernatural site somehow. Otherwise, what's the point of creating it? But how do they discover the locale? Do they track a monster there? Maybe the Messengers point them to it. Is it possible that the location preys on the minds of locals, and hunters (with their Conviction down) are vulnerable to the site's allure? Hunter-net is always a good lead-dropper, too. Maybe a list member rants about some "abandoned factory with laughing walls" or an "old garden down the road that's been eating the neighborhood pets." Alternatively, a poster gives details on his next investigation and is never heard from again.

No matter what, your characters need an "in." Corrupted settings are sufficiently rare that hunters shouldn't just stumble upon them. The characters' connection has to have meaning and be motivating, making the imbued want to go and understand the place.

### HISTORY

The history of a place, whether it's a cathedral or a sewer tunnel, is the crux of its identity. A location's history gives it reason to exist, a reason for "going bad," and a reason for hunters to explore the setting. It's your job to establish this history, to write it (or at least think real hard about it) so you have a detailed vision of the true darkness of the site. Your best tool for doing this is a timeline. Whatever the place is, it had to "start" somewhere. A church in the Deep South might have been built in 1870. Start there. A twisted mountain path known for disappearing climbers may have a far earlier origin date, from 200 to a thousand years ago. From that point, jot down every year that something important happened, something crucial to the place's existence and current "badness."

It doesn't have to be that one event triggered a location, either. You can stack layer upon layer of events to build an encompassing whole. Take an orphanage. Maybe some men died in its construction in the 1960s. They were crushed by a load of bricks and their blood seeped into the foundation. There's step one. Step two: There's a scandal 20 years later. Turns out the orphanage nuns have been abusing children, locking them in closets and whipping them with clothes hangers and rulers. Maybe one or two kids die and it's covered up. The anger and torment of the children... accumulates. In the third step, in 1989, one of the boys snaps and he burns the whole place down. Nuns, children, himselfeverybody perishes. The event leaves a mark. The building already had blood ingrained into its foundation. Now it has souls and passion — and a reason to be angry.

And there you have it: A location, seemingly "alive," that perhaps attracts new children to its brood of pentup souls, and that murders them so it can become stronger. That's what a timeline does for you. It allows you to glance back over your location's existence, giving you the general background of your setting. When you're done, you'll see places to fill in gaps. The sample timeline, above, has a few. We could go back in and add some more events about the boy who burned the place down. Or detail how the scandal played out in the courts and newspapers. All of these past events are hooks that the hunters can grab to immerse themselves in the story you've prepared.

While you can feed the characters morsels of history through coincidence and roleplaying, also encourage them to do research. A bad place is likely to have a dismal pedigree that may be revealed only when the imbued pursue information through library work, interviews or even on-site investigations. Research is key to discovering the history of a location, so feel free to nudge the characters in that direction.

### OBSERVATION

Just as hunters can bring their powers of observation to bear on the creatures of the World of Darkness, so can they on places.

Fundamental to being imbued is the Messengers' involvement in a hunter's existence. Of course, the chosen have no idea who or what opens their eyes to the supernatural, or inflicts wondrous capabilities upon them, but the chosen sense that something is at work behind

### GOOD PLACES

Okay, it might be the World of Darkness, but it doesn't have to be all doom and gloom, does it? While they're certainly in the minority, there might be places that are transformed and come out more on the positive side than the negative. A location and its history may reflect something that helps instead of hurts. Imagine a church where a congregation fought valiantly against a possessing demon in the 19th century. They banished it, but all died in the process. Perhaps this church - now burnt out - still stands, ghost-like, between the hours of dusk and dawn. And maybe the spectral church affords visitors some small solace. It may calm a hunter, soothing his deranged mind or perhaps bear enough resonant energy to ward off any monster that seeks to harm him inside its "walls."

Now, it's true that some hunters (say, hard-line Zealots or a Wayward) might still see this place as an aberration and may try to destroy it. That's up to them. The point of this example is merely that not all locations are poisoned by their history, and may be uplifted by it instead.

You may want to introduce a "good place" like this to empower the Mercy creeds, or as a lesson for the Zealous. And what would a Visionary think of a place like this? Would he see it and determine that the world may be filled with good *and* bad places, or could he think that the good place is nothing more than an illusion and must be destroyed?

In the end, a place like this sheds a ray of hope in your game. The world can't be all bad if good places exist, right? It might even give characters something to protect, or a place to come back to for rest and recuperation. Could they often return to be invigorated? What happens when they return to find that it's been pillaged or destroyed by monsters? Or destroyed by other hunters? A series of stories could be told about the seesaw nature of a place like this, and the hunters could become an integral part of its history.

them when unmistakable signs and portents of abomination are made apparent. Such intervention can occur with bad places. When the tangled branches of a tree above a corrupt cemetery bend together to read, "THE DEAD ARE MANY," hunters get a pretty good sense that something is wrong there, and can investigate. Previous experience may suggest that a being of some kind is responsible, but learning that the *place* is the source of the trouble only adds to their repertoire of encounters and awareness. Herald intrusion can also take the form of odors, perceived sounds, inexplicable

### HUNTER: URBAN LEGENDS

lights and visions in the mind's eye that all indicate something unusual about the current setting. What works is pretty much any indicator that you can think of to alert hunters to trouble without forcing their hand to discover the source.

Obviously, second sight can tell characters that a place is strange, odd or off by some means. Hunters might not think to use this advantage on objects or places, though, never having known them to be "wrong" before. You can therefore "trick" them into looking by suggesting that there may be another danger in the area. While characters expect it and keep their eyes peeled for monsters, they discover that the true offender is the landscape itself. Hunters' sight might also be activated spontaneously by the Messengers, without Conviction cost, as a "suggestion" from above to look at the region rather than at any individual. Thereafter, characters have a better idea of what their senses can truly reveal.

As with monsters, second sight can suggest more than just that a place is "odd." The trick is in explaining how things look odd. What features are twisted or warped to suggest danger or otherworldly influence? Perhaps the angles of the house seem skewed, as if the building leans in on itself even while it stands upright. Maybe the place looks gray and dead, or colors brighten and seem chaotic in the case of a node or caern. In some particularly potent places, it's possible that veins of black run through the ground or behind the wallpaper. And, of course, these visions don't have to be consistent from hunter to hunter, increasing the confusion among the group. One hunter may see a dead gray in the air itself, while another sees pulsing arteries that seem to run right through the floor. So, what does all that diverse information mean?

Hunters may also use observation edges to find out more about a place. Discern can show minor details about a location that could hint at a sinister background: a rusted smear of blood on the tile, the walls expanding and contracting ever so subtly, as if the building breathes and lives. Or perhaps it points out dead and dying plants barely poking up through patches of bleak soil.

Witness is a great tool with which to learn more about a place. Parts of the landscape might take on a hideous appearance, rocks looking like giants, trees seeming to have gnarled, reaching hands, walls running blood. The myriad fates of people — good and bad who've entered the region might play across a hunter's mind in a distorted, soundless movie. A child may be seen washed up dead on a shore, or literally saved from drowning by branches that pluck her from the water. The "dormant" third rail of an abandoned subway tunnel might electrocute a victim, or prove dormant one moment and let a person pass only to fry a stalking vampire the next moment. While it's unlikely to reveal the distant past of a place, Witness might show recent history — at least enough for the characters to get an impression of the place, accurate or assumed.

Finally, there's Illuminate. This edge allows a hunter to see the aura of a location, an emanation that can be used (by each individual hunter) to identify the place as being "broken" somehow. The very air can seem to glow. A nimbus might surround objects. But Illuminate is open to other possibilities, too. A place associated with a particular monster (a vampire's haven or a shapechanger's holy site) may actually give off the same color as the monster itself. Does that mean the site is tied to a specific individual or to a breed of monster? Or might aura cast a light based on the last creature type to draw energy from or hide at the locale? These are decisions for you to make in advance, and for your hunters to try to understand during the game.

### TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS

Okay, so your hunters have identified the place. They know it's wrong. They have some (or all) of its history in hand. Now what? It's not like dealing with monsters. You can't just put a bullet in a field and kill it, or talk a bridge from diverting traffic into a river. Nor can you necessarily burn down an apartment building on a whim, or backfill a quarry. It might be possible to raze an isolated structure, but besides the legal ramifications of destroying public property, it takes more than just a few hunters with sledgehammers or Zippos to do real damage.

So, hunters are always going to have to figure out Plan B (and C through Z, actually). They have to be clever and devise alternate ways of dealing with a bad place. A Judge might learn what "hurts" the site, which could be something other than destruction. Perhaps getting the place condemned when it needs people inside its walls to "feed." An Innocent may do her best to put all the souls trapped in the walls to rest by calming and appeasing them, allowing them to pass to their final rewards. A Visionary might spend a month sleeping at the locale to learn what makes it tick and how she can learn from it. What if she discovers that the power offered by inhabitants' despair is a perfect lure for monsters? Then perhaps the Visionary can trap and question monsters for even more insights.

Ultimately, each place bears the burden of its history. How can the events of all that time be reconciled? Can the place be saved at all? Can its nature be changed from negative to positive, or is it a hopeless endeavor? If characters opt to destroy the place (check out the demolition rules in **Hunter Book: Avenger**), does it even help? Does destruction solve the dark dilemma? Does that diminish it, or does the disturbance outrage the place so its nature grows ever more horrific and threatening?

Go into your game armed with a few ideas on hunters' options for dealing a place. Try to anticipate

### CHAPTERS: RULES AND STORYTELLING

what the characters might do in response to your site. Of course, they'll come up with things you never thought of, but aspects of what you did anticipate could apply. While you don't want to make appeasing, destroying or understanding the locale easy, you should also reward players for thinking creatively. If the imbued come up with some lunatic notion that they can feed a hungry forest with the blood of monsters, and you never anticipated that, don't reject it outright. It's their story. It's your job to make it challenging and rewarding.

### OTHER EDGES

Bad places are obviously a unique phenomenon, and are dealt with differently than your standard, walkson-two-legs monster. That immediately raises the question of how edges can be applied. Can someone use Cleave on the front door of a haunted house and do extra damage? Ultimately, the answers to these questions are up to you, based on how far you want hunters' "weird capabilities" to take them against your setting. If you want them to think their way out of a problem, edges might not be much use at all. But if swinging and smashing is a legitimate answer for you, powers come in very handy. Some ideas for useful edges are proposed here and can be elaborated on as you like.

Can the Defense edge Lock (see Hunter Book: Defender) be used to actively seal a "fouled" location from further supernatural influence? Can the Judgment edge Balance cut a poisoned place off from any of its subtle supernatural powers? And does the edge stop the flow of energy from the place to any beings that feed on it? What kind of weakness is revealed when a hunter uses Pinpoint? Can a field or a lake have a vulnerability?

The Visionary edges Delve and Augur could allow a hunter to perceive the in-depth history of a place, to see its character beyond its structure or landscape. If someone wants to "lift the curtain" on a corrupt place and show the masses, the Judgment edge Expose could reveal the horrible nature of the region to occupants and onlookers. What happens if a hunter uses Suspend? Does the setting lose all supernatural qualities?

A quick review of the characters' edges before your session helps you anticipate the efforts they may make or the tricks they may pull. That way, you can decide if Cleave is worth a damn on those old stone carvings.

### GREYEL ROAD

Gretel Road is a local legend. It's a gravel strip (little more than a driveway, really) that connects two other, larger roads. A few old farmhouses stand in the tract of woods that runs along the mile stretch. About halfway down there's the burnt-out carcass of an old schoolhouse. During the day, not much goes on there. But at night, things change. It becomes unusually dark; light seems unable to penetrate the surrounding woods. Traffic from the main roads can't be heard. Everything seems

### HUNTERS AND THE WORLD

For the most part, hunters can't see beyond the physical world. Nor can they travel beyond there. The "powers that be" preclude almost everyone from reaching across that barrier. Presumably, anything beyond the physical realm belongs to the supernatural and is anathema to being chosen. Or maybe hunters' physical-world limitation is what keeps them human. Without it, the imbued might blur with the creatures with which they contend.

So, when creating a "monstrous" setting, remember that if hunters are going to see it and deal with *it*, it has to be firmly rooted in the material world. If they see a spirit or explore a house with labyrinthine innards, be sure it's all grounded in the physical plane. You can tweak that principle, of course. If a haunted highway suddenly seems to go on forever despite real-world distances, maybe it's the characters' perceptions that are warped. Just remember that the place has *somehow* been crammed into the real world. If hunters travel it, it can't be a roadway into the heavens, the spirit world or any ethereal realm. (Obviously, however, the Golden Rule applies. If you think that hunters crossing over into other realms suits your game, then go for it.)

dead silent. The place has an eerie stillness, as if it's somehow transported from the civilized world into a realm of loneliness and death.

Rumors abound that the stretch of road is haunted. Local myth says that to see the ghost light that frequents the strip, one must park, turn off the lights and wait. After five minutes have passed in silence and stillness, the ghost light appears — a green, ethereal glow that passes through the trees and across the road. The ghost is reputed to be one of a variety of things, depending on whom you talk to. It might be the severed head of a little boy whose father killed him in one of the old farmhouses. It might be the lantern of the old schoolhouse headmaster as he still looks for lost children. Or it might be the Devil himself, looking for people willing to sell their souls.

This general weirdness brings high-schoolers in some weekends. Kids occasionally bring other kids as a weird initiation. Other times, students come to get drunk, high and purposefully scared. Most of them try the trick of turning out the lights and waiting in the dark to see the ghost. Some see it. Most don't. But everyone is creeped out.

And from time to time, a kid goes missing. Nobody worries too much about it. Kids go missing all the time. At least that's what the news says. Most of the kids who go missing aren't so important, anyway. Dropouts, druggies or general miscreants. Who would miss them? They probably just ran away.

### HISTORY

In 1906, Gretel Road was a small stretch of road with a few farms and the Gretel Road Schoolhouse for grades one to 12. Six families lived on that road, and all of their children attended the schoolhouse, under the tutelage of the headmaster (and only teacher), Tobias Scarborough. No more than 20 children attended school there at any given time, most of them learning simple skills such as reading and arithmetic, with occasional lessons in science and agriculture.

Most of the parents didn't like or trust the headmaster. He was an old man when they were young. Now that they were older, Scarborough was still around, an ancient phantom of a man, with skin like the vellum pages of a hymnal. He was harsh, and some parents speculated that he was bad for the children. But no other options were available, and Scarborough went to church like everyone else, so what could be done?

In truth, Scarborough was nearing the end of his existence. He could feel his bones aching and he had pleurisy in his lungs. His time was drawing to a close, but he wouldn't have it. He would defeat death. As a reading man, he learned that he could offer his soul to the Devil. It required him turning away from God, but the Lord wasn't going to grant him eternal life, was He? Yet immortality came at an enormous cost, one that Scarborough didn't know he could pay. He had to sacrifice his children, his students.

At first, he refused, but a few weeks later, he started coughing up blood and he knew he had only one choice. One day, toward the close of session, Scarborough stepped out of the schoolhouse, locked all the doors and set fire to the building. The children's screams were louder then the roar of the fire, and the headmaster watched as the building burned. One of the children escaped through a window and ran into the woods. The master, fearing it would ruin his deal, went hunting after the boy and was never able to find him.

That night, Scarborough died. The following night, he returned to life.

### THE TRUTH

Nineteen children died in the schoolhouse fire. They didn't return as spirits, not precisely. Their tortured souls came back as a poison saturating the very earth. The land itself is tainted with their suffering and inspires an eerie, discomforting sensation.

The "ghost light" that people sometimes see is in fact the spirit of the single escapee. The child did manage to flee into the woods, and struggled home to his farm, but his burns were too severe and he died along the way. Now his spirit haunts the woods and the road. He still thinks he's escaping, still trying to get home and back to the safety of his family.

Scarborough still lurks in the area, too. He's not a spirit; he's actually one of the walking dead. He was granted the immortality he so desired, but not in the manner in which he expected. His body is falling apart, as is his mind. He's been stalking the woods and hiding in the schoolhouse for close to 100 years. Sometimes he ventures out to look for the missing child, convinced that he can still find the boy. Other times, he thinks he's found the escapee. In truth, he's found a teenager who's come to Gretel Road on a dare, but for a time Scarborough believes that he's finally managed to capture the last student and can complete his deal with the Devil. When he realizes that he hasn't found the right child, he murders his latest victim and buries the body deep in the woods.

### INVOLVING HUNTERS

Local or even not-so-local hunters may hear about Gretel Road in several fashions. People, especially teenagers, talk about it from time to time. Hunters may overhear a conversation at a school, gas station or convenience store about something worth looking into. Kids have also gone missing. There have been police investigations, but none so in-depth that anything has been discovered. Police reports exist, and some of them may be hinted at in newspaper microfiche archives. Hunters might also discover Gretel Road on the Internet or in some books as a "famous" haunted place. Occasionally, amateur ghost hunters or just curious people post their findings online, or may include a snippet about the locale in small-press books.

Should hunters actually go to Gretel Road, they may experience a variety of things. Second sight doesn't reveal any particular details, but it does give a sense of discomfort and imbalance — and it's spread out across the whole area, from one end of the road to the other. The sight can lengthen shadows and dim lights, allowing characters to feel the presence of *something*.

Observation edges may suggest more specific clues (though never any hard-and-fast answers). Discern may point hunters to the schoolhouse. The remains include still-standing walls, but a burnt-out husk. The edge may indicate that the building should no longer be able to stand at all, with its fractured structure, yet there it is. Children's handprints might be seen impressed into ashen walls, still remaining to this day. Discern could also reveal strange footprints (Scarborough's) or bits of the schoolmaster's dead flesh hanging from branches.

Witness may reveal an even greater depth of information. Visions of children's tormented faces may be seen in trees, leaves and brush. The edge can show flashes of something stalking the woods, or an unspecified entity pulling a child into darkness from behind the cover of trees. The user may receive staccato bursts of visual information from the place's dark history, as well — scenes from the fire, or a snapshot of a man reading a book about "diabolical deals."

Illuminate may provide scant information about the region. At the very least, the hoary aura that pervades the place suggests how big an area is affected. The eerie glow persists from end to end of the road and into the surrounding woods, encompassing almost a full square mile of "wrongness." Illuminate may also flash auras indicating the presence of spirits or the walking dead, giving characters some small clue into the nature of what's going on.

### SOLUTIONS

Hunters have several options on how to deal with the place, some of which are addressed here, although your players will probably come up with others.

One simple solution is to hunt down and destroy Tobias Scarborough. Doing so lessens the actual threat of the area, as he isn't around to kidnap kids anymore, but it doesn't diminish the haunting itself. Not only are the souls of the children still trapped in the very land, there's the single escaped child still roaming around, feeding off the fear perpetuated by the teenagers and others who visit. Zealous hunters may seek to find the child's spirit and destroy it, but what about the other spirits that are unable to escape the fabric of reality? Zealous hunters have a hard time destroying the entire road, though enterprising ones may be able to have it closed off.

The spirits of Gretel Road — even Scarborough, to a degree — can all be saved or redeemed, though not without effort. Scarborough requires more work than the souls tied to the land, as he is so fraught with pain and anger that to cut through it requires a great deal of research into his character to use "against" him. The souls of the land could be soothed more easily. A hunter might play soft music that appeals to the spirits, or read a children's book aloud to the forest. Any small token of interest could curtail the anger and sadness of the disparate souls, at least for a time.

Characters may be able to set up shop on the road (as many ghost hunters have done) in an effort to learn more about the situation, gleaning information that may help them or others further down the line. While children have gone missing — and may still — it's a common occurrence in the world and hunters (such as Visionaries) may consider it an acceptable loss if they're able to take useful knowledge from the region.

Encourage the chosen to come up with their own solutions. Any one should be roleplayed, not just reduced to simple dice rolls or edge manipulations. Ideally, hunters should seek solutions that make sense of the place for themselves, and hopefully those answers transfer over to solving the mystery of Gretel Road.

### T'HE PERTH HALCYON HOTEL

The Perth Halcyon Hotel is a Victorian-style inn tucked away in the mountains. It's a seven-story monstrosity with two wings, 96 rooms, and a staff in the dozens. Rooms feature brass fixtures, wrought-iron screens in front of dark stone fireplaces, and king-sized beds. These days, however, the money isn't coming in like it used to, and the old building is falling into disrepair. Pipes rattle and leak, floorboards groan underfoot, and the elevator (once a major attraction) has been put out of commission.

And yet, the hotel turns decent business. It may not fill all rooms at all times, but it's not vacant, either. That may change in the coming weeks and months, though, because strange things have begun to happen. Guests look in mirrors and see faces looking back that aren't their own. Patrons and staff alike hear their names called, and turn to find no one or nothing but a fleeting shadow. People have terrible dreams of being tortured, burned and flayed. Many guests have cut their visits short, deciding that the hotel's grand old charm and close proximity to the ski slopes and river just doesn't compensate for the discomfort of staying there.

To make matters worse, one of the hotel's long-time visitors, a wealthy venture capitalist named Edgar Gilroy, killed himself there. Gilroy, a seemingly successful and happy man, smashed a mirror with his bare hands and cut his own throat with one of the shards. Another guest — who actually lives in the top-most suite — hasn't come out of her room in weeks. Lydia Jewel James answers questions through the door at night, but says nothing else and won't leave her room. She's been an eccentric antiquarian throughout her almost-10-year stay, but she's never been this strange.

The last and most recent problem has been severely damaging to business. The hotel night manager, Vishram Patel, ran screaming through the halls one night, pounding on people's doors and pleading with them to leave. He got to three floors before the police were called, but Patel was nowhere to be found by the time they arrived. Several patrons fled the hotel that very night, and news of the scene couldn't be kept from the newspapers. **History** 

The hotel was opened in 1872 as a small inn between bigger and better places. By the early 1900s, however, several mines opened nearby (primarily coal), and miner barons invested in what was then called the Perth Hotel ("Halcyon" was added to the name in the 1950s).

Over time, the hotel grew, with additions to accommodate the needs of new guests and the desires of investors. When the coalmines began losing money in the mid-20th century, the hotel sought new investors, but was unable to find any. Its guest list dwindled as its coffers emptied, and the business came close to going under.

### HUNTER: URBAN LEGENDS

It found new life in the early '70s when the hotel was purchased by an "anonymous" art-gallery owner. Not long afterward, the area grew into a popular vacation spot in both summer and winter, and soon the hotel was back on top as a topnotch luxury resort.

About 10 years ago, reclusive antiquities dealer Lydia Jewel James arrived and more or less purchased the uppermost suite, claiming to be a friend of the hotel's owner. Since she knew his name and other pertinent details, it seemed fair to give her the suite and designate another room as the hotel's "master suite." James was an unconventional guest, never calling for room service, and rarely coming out of her room, except for moonlit walks. And yet, she was charming to the staff and made sure to donate reasonably large sums in her name and the name of the owner, which was all in an effort to keep the hotel running smoothly. Recently, she has acted strangely amid other odd events, locking herself away more than usual. And all the while, more and more rooms go empty every night....

### THE TRUTH

The Perth Halcyon Hotel is a vampire's haven, but also suits the concept of the "Hellmouth" as proposed earlier in this chapter (page 112).

The vampire is the peculiar Lydia Jewel James. An art dealer and antiquarian of some repute, she exists in and does business out of the hotel. In her time there, she's managed to make blood slaves of at least 15 members of the staff, including the aforementioned Vishram Patel.

About a month and a half ago, a book came into James' possession. It was an ancient text, dating back to the early 1600s, if not earlier. She believed she had found a copy of the *Grimoirum Venum*, or the "True Grimoire," an ancient text containing many secrets regarding alchemy, the occult and demonology. She also believed that added to the book years later were pages from the *Heptameron*, a volume reputed to be the recorded lifeline of the ancient King Solomon, an infamous conjurer (and obviously a Hebrew king). James, unwilling to resist her nagging curiosity, performed some of the rituals, with unfortunate results.

A rite freed 12 demonic spirits, invisible imps that the text identified as *dyubbuk*. These spirits are now at large in the hotel, intruding upon guests' dreams and distorting perceptions during waking hours. These apparitions feed off the misery they cause, and seek to bring each victim's personal suffering to a phantasmagoric climax — such as the one perpetrated against Edgar Gilroy. The *dyubbuk* also had their hooks in the mind of Vishram Patel, who went mad and escaped the hotel before anything more could be done to him (or before he could be coerced to do anything else).

The devious spirits cannot leave the grounds of the Perth Halcyon. They therefore look for ways to widen the gateway through which they escaped, to allow more of their malevolent brethren into the world. Their goal is to make the hotel a nightmarish breeding ground for their kind, with the human clientele serving as food and fodder.

As for James, she's trapped in her room by three of the *dyubbuk* that wear down her already eroded mind. Indeed, all of the infernal spirits grow in power as they cause further suffering.

### INVOLVING HUNTERS

The Perth Halcyon already has some small fame as a place to stay in a prominent vacation spot, and as a historical landmark. Any occurrences that are out of the ordinary may therefore get some press that hunters might hear, if they have their ear to the ground. Characters may also hear testimony from someone who stayed at the hotel. Guests who come and go don't all kill themselves (so far), but the dreams had there continue to haunt them for some time. Should a hunter overhear or be told directly about such problems or fears, she might investigate. It might be unusual in your game, but imbued looking at even a picture of the hotel might catch odd glimpses of the building - perhaps of human shadows in the windows, or of a veritable "spirit hotel" superimposed upon the material one. Or simple Abilities such as Awareness or Intuition might suggest that something odd is going on there.

Observation edges used in person reveal some, but not all, of the hotel's current state. Discern may indicate that the building collapses in on itself as if the "mystical" foundation cannot hold, with walls and supports all leaning inward. Witness can portray the sudden entry of the *dyubbuk* into the world, but it may just as likely show people's past interactions with the vampire inhabitant, or with her slaves. (And then, the latter glimpses are confusing, because James' activities with guests aren't usually violent, if she can avoid it. So, what part does she play in the hotels' corruption?) Illuminate may cast the entire place in a hellish red-orange glow. But because the hotel is also a haven for a bloodsucker, it may seem discolored with faint lines of gray, dead light.

Any of these factors combined are sure to suggest that something is wrong, but none of them may directly state what is going on. One or two cards on the table are overturned, but the others remain facedown.

### SOLUTIONS

Most hotels are big places, and the Perth Halcyon is no exception. It takes resourceful (or malicious) hunters to demolish the entire building. Should they manage to accomplish that, it *still* doesn't fix the problem. The imps are bound to the wreckage and can spread chaos over a wider area.

Zealous hunters might focus on taking out some of the key contributors to the problem. Tracking down James and eliminating her doesn't make the problem go



away, but it may expose the *dyubbuk* and the book that summoned them. Destroying the book is one option, but how long does that banish the demons? Destroying the *dyubbuk* themselves is a challenge, though not impossible with a combination of ingenuity, Conviction and edges. Finding the escaped hell-spirits is probably the hardest part, and requires far more than a baseball bat.

The Merciful also have options. Several people have been subjected to the depredations of the maleficent demons. Not only do these patrons (and staff members) need some degree of counseling, but their nightmares and hallucinations may also provide clues on what's really going on. Then there's James, who's certainly responsible for some suffering — she has fed on guests and employees — but she's not a rampaging beast. She tries to avoid killing. Indeed, she currently suffers herself as the three dyubbuk torture her mind while she lays trapped in her room. And then there are James' blood puppets, who may grow hungry for their mistress' power or who gain some sense of self in her absence and seek forgiveness for what they've become or done. They might be forthcoming with secrets if visitors can help them in turn.

The solutions available to Visionaries are wide open, too. A hunter might kidnap James and force her to perform another ritual to help banish the imps and seal them back in Hell. Or a character might seek to study the phenomenon of the Hellmouth, since it may have never been encountered before. A Hermit may watch the situation from afar, or even send in a team of hunters to deal with the circumstances using information she's gained. A Wayward might track down Vishram Patel, torture him to learn everything the poor man knows, and then arrange to stay at the hotel as a guest all the while offing the other blood puppets until a bigger target emerges.

Obviously, these are just some possible approaches (rewarding and not so) that your characters might explore. Allow the players opportunities to attempt any and all resolutions, and decide how some can work and others can't. That's when you encourage the imbued to look harder or try other means to do something about this supernatural locale.

### NEW STORIES

Perhaps the most important point of this book is the kinds of stories you can tell with urban legends. That's the ultimate goal, isn't it? To tell horror stories? To enliven your game with a fresh, new feel? To invite players into an interactive ghost story filled with dread, hope and bewilderment? Ideas for new kinds of stories are suggested throughout these chapters, but specific concepts for taking your game into uncharted territory are presented below. Each option can stand alone, or they can be combined into an episode with a variety of themes and attractions for different characters.

### MYSTERY

Hunter is about horror and mystery. The horror derives from the monsters that hunters encounter, and mystery arises as the imbued try to identify and understand the things they face. It's hard to maintain mystery in a game, though; it's threatened on two fronts. One, players may know too much about the antagonists you introduce. They can't forget what they know of other games, as hard as they try to feign ignorance. Two, the characters have resources at their disposal (other imbued, hunter-net) to gather what seem to be easy answers to hard questions.

Urban Legends helps you reinstate player and character ignorance. Total lack of knowledge about a nightmarish fiend or poisoned place forces players and hunters to start from scratch and do their own exploration. Neither goes in forewarned, and neither can find easy answers to the questions posed to them. Mystery is therefore ensured as characters scrabble to piece together whatever they can find to understand what's going on around them.

Maybe bodies start turning up skinless and without eyes. Or townsfolk sink into a deep depression and wipe each other out in unprecedented murder-suicides. The characters are forced to ask "Why?" Why did their neighbor take a butcher knife to her husband and 11year-old daughter? Why did the sight reveal her as "infected" when the police took her away? The hunters may not pursue the situation right away, but when it starts happening all over the place, they feel obligated to get involved, to solve the mystery.

That's when you can drop clues. Someone ducks into an alley just as the Messengers blare a grim announcement. The woman who went to jail is suddenly free and walking the streets like nothing ever happened, *and she still looks wrong*. Another murder occurs. Whatever the sequence of events, the hunters should be made to feel like they're delving into the mystery, and yet explanations remain elusive. They gain real insights — "We heard the woman talking on the phone through the wall, and she was speaking some bizarre language" and fake leads — "I think I saw her drinking blood in that alley. Doesn't that make her a vampire?" The result is a frustrating and frightening, yet compelling, mystery.

### LOVECRAFTIAN EVIL

Hunter games don't necessarily suit the feel of the old pulp-horror tales of H.P. Lovecraft. His characters were often intellectuals faced with the insurmountable evil of other dimensions. The imbued are more like average people who face the evils of this world. You can, however, use Urban Legends to mimic Lovecraft's feel without reducing the "everyman" theme of the game. Creating your own creatures is the best way to capture this mood. Lovecraft's monsters were alien gods from the deep reaches of space-time or the gurgling bowels of the ocean. These gods had servitors on Earth, monstrosities that infected and manipulated whole towns. Sometimes they appeared human. Other times they were unnamable things. All the suggestions and rules you need to create such beings are here.

Most importantly, it's the mood or atmosphere of a Lovecraft story that you can capture. It's different from just a mystery. Sure, the hunters pursue clues and information, but the consequences of this search are damning. Information is discovered only when hunters get too close. It's not a trail of information that hunters follow, but a string of nightmares that plague humanity and impart information through bad dreams and dark tomes. The quest for knowledge drives people insane. Mankind was not meant to know the "insane geometry" of the universe, and when hunters begin to glimpse the big picture, they can't handle it. (Conviction may protect their minds for a while, but how long can they search for answers before their Conviction runs out and the truth still comes to bear?) Ultimately, the search for answers culminates in an oppressive hierarchy, with alien evil looking down on puny mortals. Yes, this style of game is probably even bleaker than a "standard" Hunter story, but its charm is undeniable.

### EPIC TALES

Hunter may not immediately lend itself to "epic" stories. It tends to focus on low, fallible heroes — the imbued. They're ordinary people caught in abnormal circumstances, with hope running short. The game doesn't necessarily dwell on wild powers, mythic events, godlike antagonists, heroic deeds or flashy confrontations. But **Urban Legends** might help you make a "working-class epic" out of your chronicle. This book helps you create monsters that cast the imbued as ordinary people who rise to the challenge of dangers greater than themselves. While hunters' actions or accomplishments might not be mythic, they can sow the seeds of stories that evolve into myths.

It's true that the imbued face vampires, werewolves and ghosts, which are far from "ordinary," but other, even more bizarre kinds of threats may emerge. A demon has awakened or a chimerical beast is loosed upon the city. Suddenly, the characters have a new, fearsome and perhaps mind-numbing foe to face. While the new creature may be difficult for hunters to encompass, making it the stuff of legends, it should still have wants and needs that inform its behavior. It should have desires that are comprehensible, and on which hunters can hone in. Zealots may try to hurt the thing through its desires. Visionaries could hope to use and exploit those needs to better identify the being. The Merciful may hope to understand the creature's requirements or

### CHAPTER5: RULES AND STORYTELLING

hungers, which is all the better to sympathize with and get through to it.

While a new creature may be staggering in scope at first, and prove to have vulnerabilities later, so should the creature remind the characters of their own failings. A titanic creature demands that titanic heroes face it. Since all we have are the imbued, a monster's weaknesses should remind hunters of their own. Maybe characters can sympathize with a desire to see lost loved ones. The chosen could understand the need to reclaim an item that was important in a previous existence. The imbued still have a dangerous and strange being to face, but they do so on the human terms that define their own existence. At no point do they become super-heroic. They remain ordinary people in a flawed Creation. Not even the bizarre or terrifying monster they confront is utterly impervious or invulnerable.

An "epic" **Hunter** story could lead to a grim confrontation between the imbued and your creation. On the flawed basis that defines all participants, the struggle probably doesn't go well for either side. Myths might deal in the resounding victories of heroes over villains, but in the gritty, small-scale realm of the chosen, a hunter victory over a daunting new creature probably leads to tragedy. Prevailing costs the imbued their own lives, or those of ordinary people or loved ones. The world isn't necessarily any better after the creature is dealt with. The only glimmer of hope that emerges is knowledge that the world continues at all, and has been spared at least one bad fate. Who knows what other threat looms, however, and what sacrifices or efforts will be required to save the world again.

If your players and their characters have grown blasé in dealing with the "known" monsters of the world, you can create a new one that draws an epic spirit out of the imbued. The characters are taxed to the limits. Their mettle is tested. They're reminded of everything they care for, and why. After a wake-up call like that, how can they ever take even "ordinary" monsters like vampires and zombies for granted again? Every victory or success they achieve thereafter is appreciated, thanks to the knowledge of what it could have cost.



# HE TRILOGY FHE FALLEN

By Greg Stoltze

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They soon have other concerns, however, from mad Earthbound who want to eradicate all the world, to the pangs of human conscience they can't quite suppress.

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**Urban Legends** offers whole new possibilities for **Hunter: The Reckoning** as creatures of modern and ancient myth are explored as hunter foes. The limits of the Storyteller System are tested as bizarre creatures and beings never portrayed before emerge to perplex, plague and prey upon the imbued.





