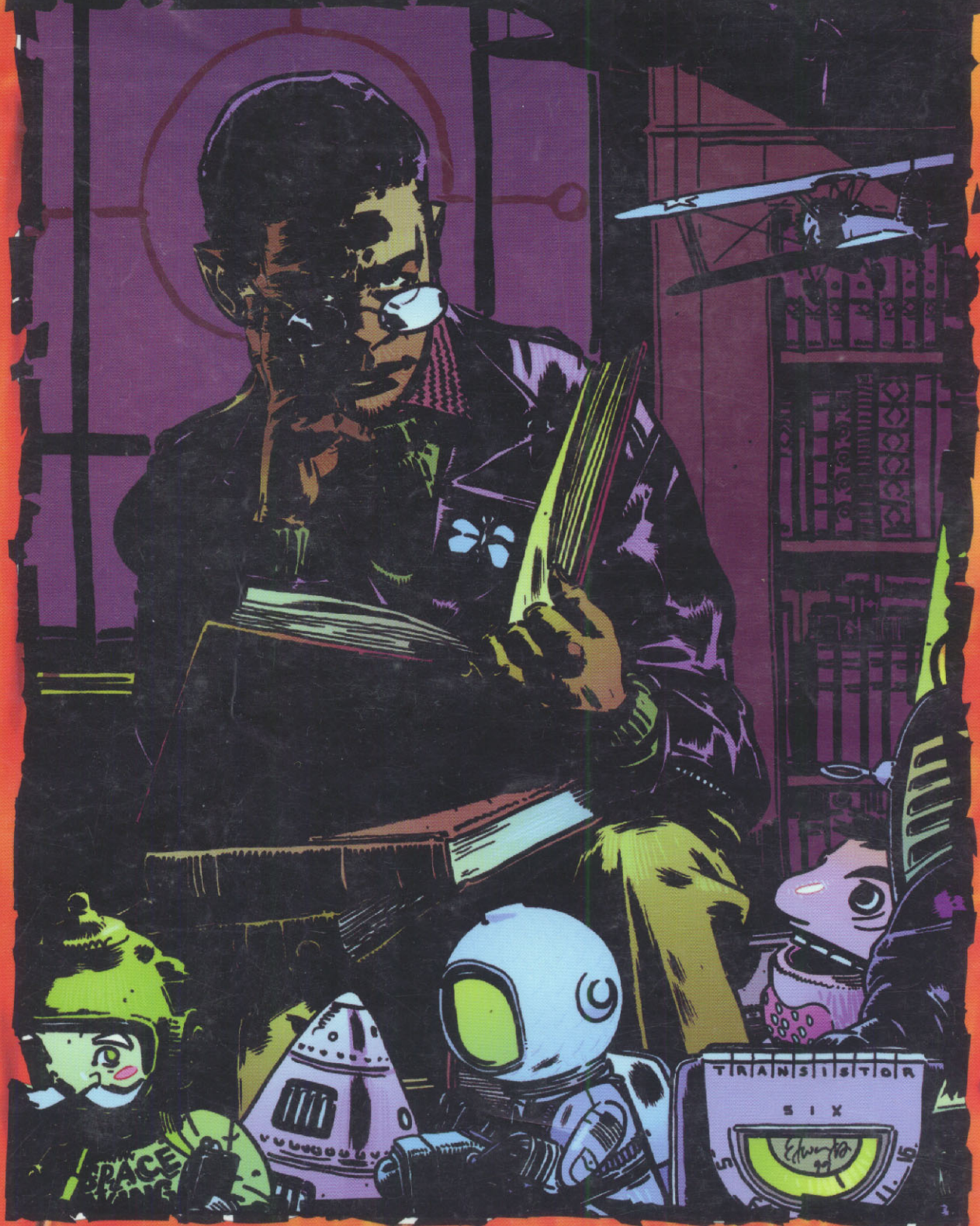


HUNTER-BOOK INNOCENT



A Character Book for Hunter: The Reckoning™

THOUGHTS AND VIEWS ON THE MISSION

by [Bookworm55](#)

NEWS & RECENT UPDATES

• **(06/15)** — Well, if you check the [Etc.](#) page you'll see that I won't be updating Vitalis for... well, for a while. I hope you've all found something good about this page and its [mailing list](#). Please continue to use it. Take care.

• **(06/13)** — Thanks to all those who've passed on offers to help Oracle171. Witness1, as always, you're the best. I won't really respond to the rest of the mail, but death threats really cross the line. I wonder if hunter-net is where I should be....

• **(06/12)** — Okay, what the hell is the problem? From the email I'm getting, it looks like Oracle171 is being shut out by *us!* Crusader, if you look up from your bloody shrine to Timothy McVeigh or Ted Kaczynski, you'll see you just screwed one of your own. That's worse than any "monster" you can name. If this is how we do what we do, what's the God damned point?

• **(06/09)** — A few new things on the [Mission](#) page. Thanks to Nurse216 for the help with the [Do's and Don'ts](#).

• **(06/08)** — I heard from Oracle171 today! She's all right, but scared out of her mind. Please, anyone who can, she's gonna need all our help. With her permission, I've put up some of her [comments](#).

• **(06/06)** — Okay, I've set up vitalis.list@hunter-net.org because of the sheer load of email I'm getting from this site. Joining is pretty simple, see the [Etc.](#) page.

• **(06/05)** — Sorry there haven't been any updates. This [Montreal thing](#) has sapped a lot of my... resolve, I guess. I did manage to polish up the [Etc.](#) page a bit.

• **(06/01)** — Not much to say, but I guess we've all heard what happened up in Montreal. It's certainly been all over the main list. I put up a [page](#) about it. Please comment.

This page last updated on **06/15**. Send comments to [Bookworm55](#).

MAIN

WELCOME

WHY?

THE MISSION

"THEM"

MONTREAL

ETC.

HTML site: <http://www.hunter-net.org/vitalis/welcome.html>

WELCOME TO VITALIS

WHAT IS THIS SITE?

I guess in some ways, this is just the product of my own little net-addictions. I've handed the reins of the main hunter-net back to Witness1 (who started it all), but my site-manager instinct is too strong to just sit back.

There's been a lot of new sites popping up under hunter-net, too. The [Survival Guide](#) site, [Firelight](#), [Vigil](#) and a bunch of others (I'll have them up on the [Etc.](#) page ASAP, promise). I guess I wanted a page that sort of summarized how I felt about the mission and what we're all doing. I don't know if I'm really the most qualified to be pontificating, but Witness1 seems to think people listen to me.

Anyway, I've organized my thoughts into a few different pages: [Why I Do This](#) (my own motivations and the reasons), [The Mission not the Hunt](#) (my take on what we should be doing and how), and [Us vs. Them?](#) (some more thoughts about the other side). [Etc.](#) has a bunch of links and stuff.

WHAT IS "VITALIS"?

Vitalis is a Latin word that basically means "life-force" (actually the full term is *vitalis* or "vital energy," but this ain't a first-year Classics course — thank God). About 150 years ago a lot of people called themselves "vitalists" because they thought that no simple biological process could create life, reproduction and evolution. A good chunk of the folks into herbal medicine and homeopathy still believe this.

I picked up the name from ProfesorGeo160 who used it once when talking about the imbuing. The whole vitalist thing makes sense to me to explain the good and bad mojo we now know is out there. To me, *vitalis* is what we've been imbued with — some sort of universal life energy. In some way, we're trying to defend the living Earth. Like some sort of white blood cells, even.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Many of you probably remember my caveat from that [mega-post](#) I did on "the enemy." Well, all those basic facts, if not my sentiments at the time, still apply. I'm a kid in a wheelchair, not a modern Van Helsing or Indiana Jones. I just share what I feel on this site. Take it for what it's worth.

BTW, thanks to everyone who's checked on my progress. The physiotherapy is going pretty well, and I'm now in a much sleeker wheelchair and back attending classes. I still get really tired and stairs are just evil, but things are a lot better than they were.

This page last updated on **05/22**. Send comment to [Bookworm55](#).

MAIN

WELCOME

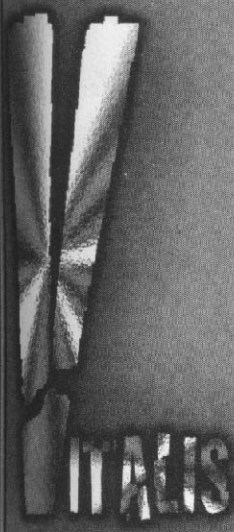
WHY?

THE MISSION

"THEM"

MONTREAL

ETC.



MAIN

WELCOME

WHY?

THE MISSION

"THEM"

MONTREAL

ETC.

WHY I DO THIS

We're all different people. Besides maybe the color of my skin, what do I have in common with Shaka74? Or Memphis68? We've all heard a call and that builds something between us. We don't all answer for the same reasons, but it might help us if we knew why we did at all. These are the answers for me:

FOR MY FAMILY

I'm sure I just lost a big chunk of you, but it's true. I keep going for the sake of my mother and sister. I grew up in one of those places you don't want to, and my dad decided that gambling was better than raising my sister and me. So it was just Mama and us. When the kids up the block decided to beat me to a pulp, she was the one who picked me up. She kept me going. She worked two jobs and still helped me with my homework. My winding up in college (and my sister is on the way) is thanks to her.

I always thought I'd pay her back by getting us all out of the ghetto. You know, get a good job and move somewhere safe. Make sure mom could retire — waitresses don't usually retire. Now I've got other ways. I see that the world is in worse shape than I ever imagined, but I can make it better for her. This time I have to pick her up, and I'm happy to do it.

Corny, I know, but true.

BECAUSE THERE'S HOPE

Maybe you can back me up on this one. Now that I see some of things behind the violence, the drugs and the dirty cops, I feel I can make a difference. Before, it seemed like no matter who did what, nothing would ever change. The Man always got stronger and the neighborhood always got worse. Now I understand why and that's the first step to making things better. To steal Witness1's thunder, we *can* inherit the Earth.

For me, that's hope.

BECAUSE I HAVE TO

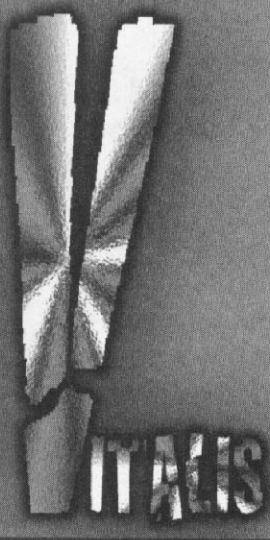
I guess this is the most basic reason. What choice do I really have? Am I really going to just close my eyes when I see a ghost or a vampire or something? If I see a zombie about to kill someone and I know I'm the only one who can help, what else am I going to do? I have to help, unless I want to become a monster myself.

COMING BACK TO THE MISSION

Okay, I know all three reasons sound really simplistic and maybe even childish. But remember, I got my legs torn off and spent months stuck in a bed with tubes in me. I had a lot of time to reflect. I went through some dark times, I thought about giving up, just closing my eyes and forgetting I ever heard the call. I almost did.

I didn't because of the three things I just listed. My mother and sister were by my bed every day, and I knew I had to be there for them. I knew the future could be better. I knew I had to do something.

I'd like to think we all feel that way. We disagree on specifics, but we know we have to make the world better one way or another. We're in this together.



MAIN

WELCOME

WHY?

THE MISSION

"THEM"

MONTREAL

ETC.

THE MISSION NOT THE HUNT

I call what we do "the mission" or "the call." There's a bunch of other terms I could use — obligation (maybe), good deed, the cause — but what I absolutely *won't* use anymore is "the hunt."

Witness1 and I strongly disagree on this, and I almost didn't keep the hunter-net name when I restarted the site. The only reason I did was not to lose any subscribers, and out of respect for Witness. Still, I think calling ourselves "hunters" starts us off on the wrong foot. Hunters stalk and kill. Are those the only things we should be doing?

Being a "hunter" is all part of the extreme behavior that's growing on the list. I want to make the world better, I want to help, and I'll fight if I have to. But redneck militias and godhead cults just aren't part of my take on positive action. If we go that route, how soon will it be before anyone who isn't just as "dedicated" starts looking like a monster? I mean, there are people on Firelight who probably think a Democrat is more dangerous than a vampire.

Before things get out of hand, we need to take a step back and get back in touch with what counts. We want to heal the world, not burn it.

BOOKWORM'S DO'S AND DON'TS

Most of you know I wound up in a wheelchair after dealing with a woman who was a vampire. She thought I betrayed her, and I wasn't thinking straight. Keep these rules in mind. — BW55

- **Do work together:** Not only is there strength in numbers, but we all need friends who understand us. Only other people on the mission truly qualify.

- **Do stay safe:** Always remember that the "other side" can be very dangerous. Be very careful who you tell about the mission and which other imbued you tell your real name to. The other side has a way of following these leads.

- **Do stay sane:** What we do is harsh. Take time off, talk about things, try to build a little bit of a life into your mission.

- **Don't discount normal folks:** We call them "bait" and "gawks," but just because they haven't answered the call doesn't mean they're worthless. Listen to them, talk with them and protect them.

- **Don't kill on sight:** "Monsters" are not just plain evil. Some are victims that need help. Shooting first may just escalate a situation, instead of resolving it.

- **Don't trust blindly:** I paid for this one. Remember that what we do is dangerous, so be cautious. Do trust, but also be careful.

- **Don't lose perspective:** We're doing this to help people, not to make ourselves gods. If you're pounding a pulpit, you're in this for the wrong reasons.

Us vs. Them?

After I posted my big review of information on what I called The Enemy, I got a whole lot of email. Most of it was flattering (thanks for that, BTW), but a few people sent me some good criticism. Nurse216 and Potter116 both told me I had missed some important distinctions; that I was forgetting about motivations and effects. I was lumping everything into one category — “enemies.”

So I guess you could call this some extra notes. When I wrote my post I was still hooked up in the hospital, and I wasn't the most positive person in the world, believe me. A person I trusted had hurt me and I really started buying into the us vs. them mentality. I called them the enemy. I thought of them as monsters. That was wrong.

SOME PERSPECTIVE

As far as I can tell, the “other side” is still human, at least by a loose definition. They seem to interact and react like humans, getting angry, using seduction, being full of ego. These are not gods or wild animals — even the shapechangers seem to think like people, just really angry people. I'm not saying that they're happy or well-adjusted people, mind you, but I haven't seen or heard of anything that's any more monstrous than Ted Bundy or the slave trade.

We call these people monsters, I think, because they're different from us. They have weird powers and can do amazing — and disturbing — things. But some of us can turn baseball bats into torches and vomit killer fog. I'm not sure we're in any position to call the other side monsters.

I guess what I'm saying is that we should spend more time seeing what these people — not things — are doing, instead of what they can do. I've heard of bloodsuckers who don't kill people they feed from. That says to me there's some ethical decision going on. My warlock friend — or former friend, I guess — never really hurt anyone.

To an outsider, everything we do looks psychopathic. Maybe that's true for how we look at “monsters,” too. Food for thought.

REACHING OUT

In practice, I think we need to explore some non-violent ways to interact with the hidden. My own experiences show that it's dangerous, but it can be worthwhile. Like I say, the warlock Purple taught me a lot without hurting me at all.

Now, before I move on, let me be very clear here. My rules still apply: be very careful. Going out and getting yourself killed is not productive, regardless of how open-minded you are. When trying to communicate with the other side, start very small. Always make sure you have a way out and (preferably) people to help you if things go sour. You do *not* want to be alone with an enraged vampire — trust me. On the other hand, make sure anyone with you is on the same wavelength. If they're there with murder in mind, they're only going to provoke violence.

The best situation you can hope for is finding a “monster” that isn't outright violent when you encounter it. When I first saw Purple, he was drinking coffee. I watched him and developed a relationship. So watch, then attempt communication, and always be careful. You should know, of course, that some of the nastier people out there — both human and not — will lure you in to hurt you. Caution, always.

I guess I'll start with warlocks like I did before. Looking over some of things that others have said on hunter.list, at Coach41's account of his experience with the warlock he calls “Father X” on vigil.list, and considering my own experience with Purple, I think warlocks are probably the most approachable of the hidden. I know there's some really antisocial and scary ones, but at least a good number seem to like to talk. And debate. And argue. We can use that to establish a rapport and learn something (I did from Purple).

Okay, ghosts. I haven't had too much experience with outright spirits, but it seems like at least some of them are also open to communication. Poltergeists aren't talkative — more like bursts of anger — but some of the other types are capable of talking. Nurse216 knows more about them than I do, but from what she's told me, there's an emotional need in a lot of ghosts. If we can tap into that, we might actually be able to establish some sort of dialogue.

[<- last](#) / [next ->](#)

THE MONTREAL "BODY SNATCHER" TRAGEDY

It's hard for me to really talk about what happened in Montreal, but we all need to think about it. We lost some good people there. The following is culled from a number of different places. I've put some of my own comments in italics to give you some context. Anyone who has anything to add, just [email me](#). — BW55

THE "FACTS"

I got this off the Canadian Press wire service. — BW55

Bodysnatcher Cult Commits Mass Suicide

MONTREAL (CP) — Investigators for the Montreal Urban Community Police uncovered the disturbing remains of what they are calling a "death cult" during a raid of a heavily fortified building on Ontario Street East last night.

Investigators responded to an anonymous tip that the occupants of what had once been a bunker occupied by the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang were linked to a rash of thefts in city morgues and cemeteries. Police did indeed find at least 20 stolen corpses in the building, along with the bodies of six people police call "cult members."

Police spokesman Réal Beaulieu: "It seems to have been some sort of survivalist cult. We have found writings that refer to an imminent apocalypse. We believe the cult was responsible for the theft of corpses over the last several weeks. It seems they were bringing the bodies back to their compound to perform rituals of some sort. Many of the corpses were burned, torn apart or cut post mortem. Others were shot with a variety of high caliber weapons."

The cult members themselves appear to have turned on each other at the end. "Three of the cultists were ritually drained of blood and another was cut to pieces with some sort of sharp weapon. The other two seem to have shot themselves," Beaulieu said. He added that the cult was heavily armed.

Authorities have yet to release the names of any of the cult members, although they have revealed that all were male. Locals said they never saw much of the cult members, except for one man who occasionally bought cigarettes from a local convenience store. The store owner, who wishes to remain anonymous, thought the man's name was Henessy and that he was American, apparently because he frequently requested Marlboro brand cigarettes.

SOME TRUTH

Traveler72 posted this on the main [hunter.list](#) pretty quickly. For those of you who don't know, the "New Dijon thing" he refers to was an outbreak of shambles and spooks in a small town near Montreal. You can get his full report in the [Survival Guide](#). — BW55

MAIN

WELCOME

WHY?

THE MISSION

"THEM"

MONTREAL

ETC.

HTML site: <http://www.hunter-net.org/vitalis/mtl.html>

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: traveler72

Subject: Montreal shitstorm

Things just went in the crapper for some good people up in Montreal. CNN just ran a story about a body snatcher cult suicide up there. They said a cult was in a former Hell's Angels bunker. That was a group of us. That bunker belonged to one of the guys I was at New Dijon with (I won't name him in case he got out alive). I even stayed at the bunker when I was up in Montreal last time. The news report said one of the dead cultists was an American named Henessy. That's Mythmaster10. He sent me an email a few weeks back saying he was heading up to Montreal to see what he could do about that whole New Dijon thing. I put him in touch with my contact. Now they're all dead.

It sounds to me like they were royally fucked by a bunch of shamblers. But the news also said Henessy was drained of all his blood, and that sounds like a vampire to me.

The only good news I can see is that they said all the "cultists" were guys. Oracle171 also let me know she was heading back there after Greece, so maybe she got away. Oracle, you out there?

ON THE RUN

I picked this up off a law-enforcement site. Traveler72 confirms that this is Oracle. She needs our help, people. — BW55

Wanted by the Sûreté du Québec



Name: Béatrice Marie Louise Tremblay

Height: 5'7" (1.70 m)

Weight: 125 lbs. (57 kg)

Eyes: Brown

Hair: Dark Brown

Distinguishing Marks: none known

Notes: Béatrice Tremblay is a known member of the Montreal "body snatcher" cult and has been linked to multiple homicides at the cult compound, the theft and desecration of two dozen cadavers, possession of illegal firearms and aggravated assault. She is considered armed and extremely dangerous. It is likely she will flee to the United States.

I just got some mail from Oracle herself! She's still alive, but on the run. She asked me to pass this along. — BW55

Subject: Montreal

From: oracle171

To: bookworm55

Hello Bookworm,

I cried with the angel when they all died, up on Rue Ontario. The angel knew their way was only going to lead to death and I tried to warn them, but they couldn't see the light. I _had_ to try something and the angel suffered for it.

MAIN

WELCOME

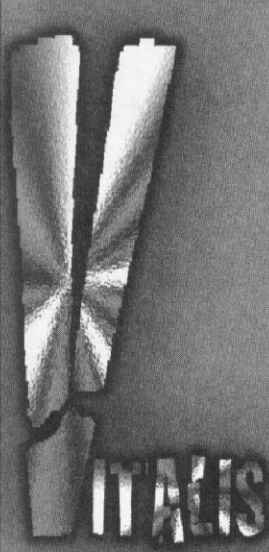
WHY?

THE MISSION

"THEM"

MONTREAL

ETC.

HTML site: <http://www.hunter-net.org/vitalis/mtl.html>**MAIN****WELCOME****WHY?****THE MISSION****"THEM"****MONTREAL****ETC.**

When I swam through the day and night, I met a man named Valois. The angel told me he was dead, but I needed to try. He lied and I ignored the angel and now everyone is dead.

I'll never make that mistake again. The angel never lies.

I can feel the minutes running backwards, Bookworm. The light is coming.

A bientôt,

— Oracle

Okay, I'm not crazy about posting this, but it has to be seen to be believed. She's one of us and this is how we treat her. What's the matter with us? — BW55

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: crusader17

Subject: Some Truth about Oracle171

Okay, enough of this "poor Oracle's runnin' from the law" business. Traveler isn't the only one who got mail from Mythmaster10 about Montreal. He sent me a few messages once he got up there, because he was worried that some of the people I had hooked up with couldn't cut it and would get them all killed. He was worried about Oracle171.

Apparently, they were hip deep in shamblers and other rots, including a few fancy Mythmaster and the others were getting ready for a holy war — setting up the bunker, getting the weapons they needed, figuring when and where to strike — all the right stuff. Meanwhile Oracle's talking about getting to know the devils. She wants to understand *why* and wants to *communicate*. Mythmaster was worried that she'd get them all killed and it sounds like that's exactly what happened. Both Traveler and Mythmaster10 told me that bunker was near impregnable — so it sounds like little miss communication let the enemy in.

Let me put this as clearly as I can: The woman is poison. She got everyone killed either because she's incredibly stupid or she's working for the other side. Now she's bait on the run. If we help her, we become the next targets. If anyone sees her, my advice is to put her down so she can't betray us any more than she already has.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

I didn't include it in the post from Oracle, but trust me when I say that she's running scared. She's seen the only people she could trust killed, and now people on this side treat her like a monster herself. Maybe she did say too much to someone. Maybe not. But she doesn't deserve to die. Refusing to help her will kill her. We know she won't survive if the "authorities" get her. She was chosen, just like the rest of us. We have to help. Or else, what's the point of all this? — BW55

This page last updated on **06/13**. Send comment to [Bookworm55](#).

HTML site: <http://www.hunter-net.org/vitalis/etc.html>

ET CETERA

TAKE CARE, FOLKS

I'm out of here.

This whole body snatchers deal with Oracle171 has been turning around my head for the last week. I don't know what to think. I've been talking about being open minded with the other side, but has that just gotten six of our own killed? Is Oracle a danger to us all? Am I?

I remember before I lost my legs — everything seemed easier. Now, I'm separate from the world, even on good days. I'm just a crip with a mouth. Half a man.

I have to find out what happened with the vampire who hurt me. Maybe I'm just deluding myself and I should pick up an M-16 and join Crusader17. Someone's offered to help me find out, and I guess it's time to take him up on it.

Feel free to use the list and send me some mail, but who knows if I'll be back. If this list falls apart, could someone get Witness1 to shut it down?

Thanks,

— Bookworm55

MAILING LIST

I started this list as a place for people to comment on my site, and so I could respond to people all at once, but it seems to be have evolved into a running discussion of the mission.

To subscribe, just fill in your hunter-net handle below and hit SEND.

LINKS

Hunter-net has really grown. Having had a hand in its revival, it's a real joy to see so much stuff. You'll want to poke around yourself, but here are some highlights:

- [hunter.list](#) The big thing, the master list with all the "general interest" stuff. This was hunter-net at first, but several sub-sites and special interest lists have popped up.
- [The Enemy](#) This is my old mega-post about the other side. Make sure to read my new [disclaimer](#) (on the [Us vs. Them?](#) page) first.
- [The Survival Guide](#) Lots of very good information on us across the world.
- [Firelight](#) This site (and its associated [firelight.list](#)) is pretty hard-core and I think there's way too much redneck/survivalist BS on it, but there are occasional instances of real insight. Just ignore Crusader17 and you'll be okay.
- [Vigil](#) This site is pretty new, but it's got some good stuff on it. A lot of the people on [vigil.list](#) seem to be what some of us call "hometown heroes," and they're certainly worth listening to.
- Beyond hunter-net, you can find out some good info if you know where to go. I check [CNN](#), the [Department of Justice](#) and a bunch of other sites regularly.

This page last updated on **06/15**. Send comment to [Bookworm55](#).

MAIN

WELCOME

WHY?

THE MISSION

"THEM"

MONTREAL

ETC.



PROLOGUE: SECOND CHANCES

If you're an 18-year-old virgin, you pay attention when a supermodel brushes by in the library stacks. You drool, actually. And walk into things like the shelves.

She turned when I dropped the bound copies of *Applied Sociology*. When I knelt to pick them up, I got a chance to confirm that I wasn't daydreaming. She really was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. She smiled at me — suppressing a laugh, maybe, but it was a smile and I was sticking to it.

An hour later I was sitting at my carrel and had barely made it through one journal. I just couldn't concentrate, even on an article supposedly documenting the "recurrent mass hysteria" of supernatural events. I knew that was bull, of course. It had been three weeks since my eyes had been opened to a whole other world. I still got the shivers thinking of the lonely little dead girl who'd come up to me that night. Thinking of her dredged up recriminations, too. Couldn't I have helped more? Couldn't I have stopped the pain before she was dead?

I shook my head to return to the present. I hoped to focus on the article in front of me. Instead, I dwelled on that woman.

She was reading Walt Whitman when I found her. She was mesmerizing, sitting in one of the plush chairs tucked away in the back of the library, so focused on her book. Books were my passion, but standing there watching her eyes flick from word to word made me feel like a part-time reader, one of those Sunday browsers at Barnes and Noble who wanders through the aisles but ends up buying *Maxim*.

I didn't even notice my sight shift. I just slowly became aware that something was wrong with her. It was as if she was sick or out of place somehow. Like a Shakespeare folio stuck between issues of *Popular Mechanics*.

"Excuse me, miss? Are you all right?"

I couldn't believe what I was doing. In high school I could barely look a girl in the eye, and here I was trying to strike up a conversation with someone who could have walked off the cover of *Elle*. Then again, during high school I didn't see dead people walk the streets or warlocks eat cheeseburgers in diners.

When she didn't look up, I thought of walking away. But I couldn't just hide anymore. Things were different now.

"Um, I'm sorry to bother you..."

"Oh, yes?"

She didn't sound angry or confused or anything, but my head swam for a second. Part of it was that 18-year-old virgin kicking in again, but mostly it was that sense of her being off. I couldn't reconcile the conflicting feelings, and I just stared.

She should have ignored me or told me to get lost. Instead, she motioned for me to sit. "My name is Phaedra," she said, smiling with perfectly straight white teeth between burgundy lips.

It wasn't until later that she showed me her fangs.

* * *

The Footnotes Café wasn't what I would qualify as wheelchair accessible. Sure, it had a ramp outside to help me get around the three concrete steps to the door, but then the door had a half-inch lip. Inside, the decor was just shy enough of trendy not to be passé, and didn't leave me much room to maneuver. The bookshelves were packed tight so I could barely make the turn at the end of an aisle, and anyone larger than a Chihuahua blocked my chair.

The café part of the experience was literally above someone like me, on a mezzanine accessible only by an expensive wrought-iron spiral staircase. It was set up just right, so the beautiful people could look down at me struggling while they sipped their double-latte chai.

I didn't really pay too much attention to the freshly caffeinated cream of the Harvard-Radcliffe crop. Instead, I went under the mezzanine to where the real books were. The first-editions room.

I hesitated a second before pushing my wheelchair through the door. It was just as I remembered it: Glass-fronted bookcases lined every wall, filled to the brim with leather-bound tomes dating back to the early 19th century. A small counter was at the back, where the owner served a client.

The whole room was a rebuke to the hipper-than-hip café culture that surrounded it. Henry Foote had let his daughter take over the shop — and turn its finances around — on the condition that he got to keep this room as he liked it. He told me that in better days, when I didn't have any trouble getting around the place.

I waited for the client at the counter to turn around. She looked down at an open book. Just as enthralled — and enthralling — now as she was so long ago in that library. I knew she wouldn't break away from the page, so I executed that most cliché of "notice me" cues. I coughed.

When she turned, Phaedra looked as beautiful as ever. When she saw me, she did something I didn't think was possible. She got paler.

"Jackson," she said, half a statement, half a question.

"You know I prefer Jake, Phaedra." I wheeled in closer. "It's good to see you."

"Jackson suits you much better. It's more gentle. More poetic."

"I don't think I have much poetry left in me these days."

She looked down at my lap where my legs used to be. "Perhaps I should go."

"Not without me. We need to talk." I got closer still. "You owe me that much."

Something in me triggered when her eyes turned hard. I focused my sight and saw the blood-red glow pulse around her, almost as if it was fighting to get out. I'd just hit a nerve.

"Let's go." Curt, cold and callous. Like the predator she was.

* * *

When I walked to the bed, part of me knew I was in over my head, but most of me didn't care. I was about to learn something about vampires — and maybe get laid.

I rested there and looked up at the moon through the loft's skylight. Phaedra moved like cat, crawling on top of me and straddling my lap. I couldn't see the moon anymore, but I really didn't mind.

"Is this your home?" I asked. The walls were lined with bookshelves, each one with a fine collection of leather-bound books. We'd already established that she was a collector of American authors. My eyes fell on *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*.

"Yes, it is."

That was a lie. There were a lot of books here, but nothing rare. If she was a collector, she'd keep her favorites where she really hung her hat — just like I'd never let my first edition of *The Big Sleep* out of my sight. She was a bookworm, like me.

I didn't call her on it, probably because she was unbuttoning my shirt. Her thighs were pressed against my sides and I knew full well I couldn't move, but her hand on my chest just felt too good for me to muster up much concern.

"Very nice," she said. Her hands passed over my nipples, eliciting an immediate reaction. "You trust me."

"Um... of course," I stammered as my pleasure centers hit overload. "But, is this really necessary?"

She pinched my left nipple and pleasure bounced into pain for a second. She leaned over and put her lips to my ear. "I said it was, didn't I? It's the way these things are done, Jackson."

Her cold tongue moved up my earlobe, barely touching the skin, sending shivers down my spine. Then she sat up and reached behind her back to pull off her top. The lacy thing underneath was off a heartbeat later. "Just relax, let me take care of you."

"Okay." I was barely thinking anymore.

She leaned forward again, this time playing her tongue across my neck and down my sternum. Then she moved to my nipple, which was still throbbing from the pinch. She bit.

I was aware of two needles piercing my skin and *that feeling* rising in me, trying to keep me focused. I suppressed it, giving in to the moment. The rush took over. I felt hot and cold, weak and strong, all at once. I guess I don't really have a frame of reference, but to me it felt like sex. Really, really good sex.

An eternity later she moved back and I looked at her, my own blood still on her lips. Her hand moved slowly and seductively to her own breast and then her wrist flicked faster than I could see. A red-black bead formed on her nipple and I couldn't take my eyes off it. She moved back just slightly, reached forward and pulled me to her.

"Your turn, lover."

Her blood was cold and rich, and I drank gladly.

* * *

"How did you find me, Jake?"

She was walking alongside me as I rolled toward a nearby park. The sidewalk was a pain, full of cracks and enough debris to make maneuvering that much harder, so I didn't answer for a while.

"I saw the post on booksbyfoote-dot-com. I knew you'd never be able to resist a copy of *Usher* with notes by Baudelaire."

She smiled. "I've never been that great an admirer of French literature, but *Les fleurs du mal* is truly exceptional. And of course, his translations of poor Edgar's works are sublime. The chance to glimpse at his thinking when he worked on *The Fall of the House of Usher* was—"

"Seductive?"

She smiled. "I was going to say miraculous, but perhaps you're right."

We got to the park and entered. My wheels didn't do too well on the dirt and gravel, and Phaedra moved to the back of the chair.

"No handles, Phaedra." I pushed through the last of the gravel and onto the paved path. "Some things I've got to do for myself."

"Yes, I suppose so." The coldness was back, like a frost on the air between us. "So before we venture into another discussion of literature, why don't you tell me why you sought me out. Is this some sort of trap?"

I set the brake on my chair. "Do I look like I came here for a fight?"

"Just answer my question."

The world reduced to her eyes, and my tongue started to move before I could think. I'd almost opened my mouth when the sight came back and broke the spell. She was strong, but so was I. "No tricks, Phaedra."

She shifted her stance and I could see muscles tensing under cold flesh. I'd just stepped on the tiger's tail, but figured the truth might keep it from pouncing.

"I found you because I wanted to talk to you. To ask you 'why.'"

"I... I don't want to talk about that, Jackson." She stepped back and turned around, as if dismissing me. Like a pet. I snapped.

"Too fucking bad, Phaedra! I need to know!"

"For what?" she spat. "Your little reports and projects?"

"No! For me!" I could feel my eyes starting to water, and I hated myself for it. "We had something, Phaedra. I... I cared for you and you nearly killed me. And then—"

She didn't let me finish. "You lied to me, Jackson. You brought that maniac with you."

"Goddamn it, Phaedra! You know I had nothing to do with that. I didn't know he was following me. I never would have betrayed you."

"I... Maybe, but at the time..."

"Do you have any idea what the past few months have been like? Forget that I'm a freak. Forget that I sleep with a gun beside my bed. I spent months in the hospital trying to even remember why the fuck I wanted to live! You lose your temper and I lose my life!"

We stared at each other for long moments. I was breathing heavily, trying to regain some composure. She wasn't breathing at all.

"You treated me like a thing. Like a piece of meat. That was wrong."

It was like a dark cloud came over her. Shadows seemed to play over her features and I felt more than heard a rumbling in her chest.

"How dare you tell me what's right and wrong! Your little morality plays don't interest me. I am what I am. You're nothing but a meal!"

That's when the tiger pounced. She was on top of me in a second, knocking the chair over and sending me onto my back. But before she could lay a hand on me, I could hear the voices whisper. By the time I hit the ground, I was glowing. She leaped back.

"You can't hurt me anymore, Phaedra. You *have* to talk to me."

For several seconds she didn't. She circled me, her features predatory. Two long fangs extended from her ruby lips and her eyes seemed black as night. She tried to move forward but couldn't and growled.

"There's nothing left to say." She stepped back from the glow and straightened up, suddenly utterly civilized again. "Goodbye, Jackson."

She turned and walked away, but not before I saw a red tear run down her cheek.

* * *

By the time I walked into the loft for the third time, I'd gotten to know Phaedra's mood swings. This was a dark one.

"I thought you'd never get here." She walked up to me quickly, without much of the sensual sashay I'd come to expect. She was angry. "A blue-blooded bastard cost me a Thoreau manuscript tonight. He burned it out of spite."

She reached me and her hand was between my legs and her mouth was at my neck. "Mmmm, yes," she purred and then shifted her hands to hoist me over her shoulder. "I'm thirsty."

She threw me onto the bed without much delicacy and started taking off my clothes with little more.

Then the door exploded and everything went crazy.

"Time's up, demon!" The man who came through the smoking wreck of an entrance was wearing army fatigues and a flak jacket. He had a gun in a holster, but he was swinging a tire iron, instead. A red-hot tire iron.

"Andy?" I said it before my brain could tell me to shut up. Phaedra looked down at me like I was fly in her soup.

"You know him?" she demanded. She was mad.

Before I even sat up, she was tangling with Andy. He took a good swing and caught her on the arm. The blow made a sound like meat sizzling, and she sprang back into a low, animalistic crouch. She bared her fangs and growled. I started to move.

"That's it, bitch," Andy said, "feel the burn."

I took a few steps toward them, hoping to defuse the situation, but it was too late. Phaedra ducked left and Andy came down with the tire iron again — or at least tried to. Phaedra's right hand moved faster than I could see, catching Andy's wrist mid-swing. She clamped her left hand around his neck, twisted her body and pulled.

There was a wet popping sound. The tire iron was still glowing when it hit the ground along with the pounds of meat that had been Andy's arm. I ran out trying to put the slaughterhouse sounds behind me. I darted down the hall and through an emergency exit into the alley behind Phaedra's building.

"No so fast, lover." She grabbed my shoulder and spun me around like a rag doll. She was covered in gore, beautiful and terrible like a cobra.

"It's not polite to run away." She pushed me up against the wall, held me against it with one hand and grabbed my left leg with the other. "You should never run away."

Then she twisted. And pulled. I blacked out.

*

*

*

"I told you she would not speak to you, *da*?"

I was wheeling along the hallway of my apartment building. Fyodor was waiting by the door. As usual, he was stroking his Karl Marx beard and smoking that god-awful pipe.

"It wasn't the conversation I was hoping for, no." I got out my keys — right next to the taser — and fumbled with the locks. They were awkwardly high up the door, and the super refused to do anything about it.

"What else do you expect from a creature who stole your legs? Who tried to kill you?"

"It's more complicated than that." I hoped Fyodor would get the hint and drop it, but I knew he wouldn't.

"You think you were in love with the beast, *da*? You think she loved you." He sucked on his pipe again, sending blue-gray smoke billowing. "You are just like young William. So set in your ways."

"You mean Violin99?"

"Very good, Jake. I'm glad to see that you've been paying attention. I wonder, though, if you can see *that*, why can't you see the self-evident truth that this creature is vile? She dismembered you, did she not? She left you to die."

I turned the chair to face him. "You haven't figured it out, have you? Yeah, she crippled me and left me there. But I didn't die. I woke up in a hospital and they patched me together."

"The Messengers protect their own, Jackson."

"Bull! I should have bled to death in that alley. But I didn't. The cops told me they found me crawling into the street. There's no way I could have crawled anywhere, especially not *around a building*!"

"Amazing things are possible, Jake."

"Sure, like cops and doctors just writing off my injuries as a 'car accident'? My legs were twisted off by *hand*, for God's sake! All the medical reports I saw said I was in a car accident. That the driver's insurance was covering my care. Someone made sure I was found and that no one asked too many questions."

"The devil?" He puffed more blue smoke. "Surely it was just protecting itself..."

"If that was true she would have let me die. She *saved my life*."

"Yes, that does change matters, doesn't it?"

"Yeah. Whether she admits or not, she's no monster. I have to find her."

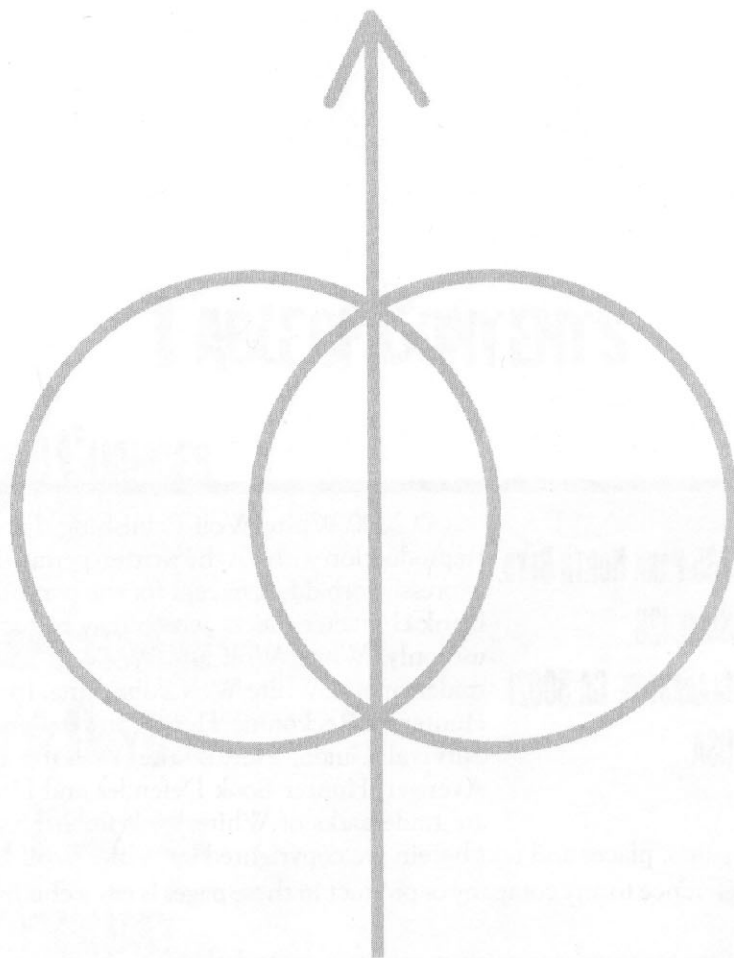
"We can do that together." He puffed again. "You may help me with my endeavors. I will be glad to help you with yours."

I didn't say anything. If he could help....

"Jackson, trust me."

I did, of course.

HUNTER-BOOK INNOCENT™



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WHITE WOLF HOCKEY SPECIAL THANKS

Tim "The Kid" Avers (Defense), for doing all the running on the old farts' behalf.

Andrew "Chrome Dome" Bates (#6, Defense), for distracting the other team with something shiny while everyone else tries to score.

Phil "Two Periods" Boulle (Wing). "Next time I promise I'll make it to the third."

Chad "Ghost" Brown (#14, Defense). "There was another season?"

Brian "Hip Check" Glass (#84, Defense), for finally realizing that he should use his size to make other teams wear the boards.

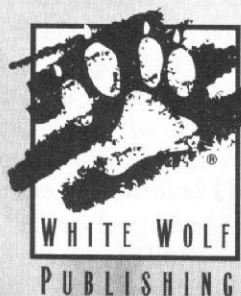
Rich "Fighty" Thomas (#13, Defense), for going after other teams' families in the parking lot.

Mike "Pipes" Tinney (#11, Goal). Pads: \$1500. Stick: \$500. Having knees like kindling: Priceless.



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HUNTER-BOOK™

INNOCENT



TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROLOGUE: SECOND CHANCES	10
INTRODUCTION	18
CHAPTER 1: HEARING THE CALL	22
CHAPTER 2: DAY IN, DAY OUT	34
CHAPTER 3: IN IT TOGETHER	48
CHAPTER 4: ANOTHER DAY	56
CHAPTER 5: NEW RULES	68
CHAPTER 6: BABES IN THE WOODS	84



INTRODUCTION

*I am clean without transgression, I am innocent; neither
is there iniquity in me.*

— Job 33:9

WITH HOPE IN THEIR HEARTS

Hunter Book: Innocent is a sourcebook that helps you develop a better understanding of the Innocent creed and its emerging role in the world of **Hunter: The Reckoning**. As an Innocent, you respond to the supernatural with empathy instead of outrage. Even the vilest monster deserves some consideration, some compassion, or else what's the point of the imbuing? Brushing off fear, cynicism and hate, you offer an open hand to the nightmares. This path is by no means an easy one — most other "hunters" dismiss you as a fool bound to get yourself killed (never mind that those same zealots are happy to accept whatever assistance you provide). So, what makes you tick? What spark of hope allows you to be optimistic in a world of despair? This book helps you decide, to determine who your Innocent is, before and after the imbuing — and all the creed's new powers and rules don't hurt, either.

But just as you need to better understand your own Innocent, you must understand imbued society as it emerges; the two are inextricably intertwined. As each of the newly imbued struggles to understand her new world, origins and purpose, she inevitably compares experiences, philosophies and fears with others she encounters on the streets or

via the Internet. At first, the recently awakened latch onto anyone who understands them; this new world is just too terrifying to contend with alone. In time, however, as more and more imbued dare meet and make overtures to find each other, individuals with similar attitudes and theories are attracted to one another and develop like-minded circles. These founding social groups are the foundations for what ultimately become the creeds.

Yet, in these early days, many various imbued can seem to have common goals. As the chosen make contact, try to understand their mutual condition and strive to work together, *similar* goals and *comparable* experiences can hide fundamentally different philosophies, whether about imbued purpose, the nature of the Messengers or the necessary fate of the supernatural. All imbued agree that the other side's hold on humanity must be broken, but not everyone agrees on how to accomplish such a thing. Mutual experiences and mutual values turn out to be two very different things. Imbued can therefore be taken by surprise when a fellow "Innocent" really proves to be a militant Defender or a distracted Visionary. Sometimes, the chosen aren't even sure of their *own* ideals until they become immersed completely in the mission.

It's only after the imbued become fully devoted to or even obsessed with the calling that their approaches to it become purposeful and refined. Some become determined to save monsters' souls. Others want to see these creatures utterly destroyed. When this distillation is complete, the creeds as social classifications finally arise. Innocent recognizes Innocent and Avenger recognizes Avenger, all through the creeds' codified values, intentions and goals in the hunt.

When will the imbued achieve such social structure? It could take months, or years, as they struggle to understand themselves and then each other. The fact that so many edges seem to be shared by the chosen of various perspectives and personalities doesn't help, either. When creeds as institutions are finally acknowledged, however, the mission may finally gain the momentum it needs to save humanity, once and for all. Or perhaps such cumbersome and fractious divisions will be the mission's undoing, as imbued fall to infighting and politics rather than upholding their higher purpose.

Ultimately, the course of your chronicle and your Storyteller's vision decide when the creeds become widely recognized in your game. In the meantime, your Innocent's fully developed identity helps define his own society.

PERSPECTIVES

The opinions, theories, information and outlooks expressed in this book are presented in three distinct "voices." These Innocent narrators typify the spectrum of personalities across the creed as a whole. Each of these people presents his or her own take on the origins, tactics, relations and ultimate fate of Innocents, and on the imbued in general.

The creed and its members' views evolve constantly as Innocents try to define themselves in a world they no longer understand. With no other frame of reference, the chosen often resort to the ideas, virtues and philosophies they possessed before their transformation. No two Innocents have the same thoughts about their origins, for example. Thus, the *questions* the imbued ask of themselves and their world — not any specific *belief system* — best illustrate their individual and collective identity. After reading this book, you should have a sense of the drives and hopes that inspire and motivate various Innocents. You should sense what keeps the spark of hope alive in their hearts, and what influences their relations with other imbued. We also hope that you're inspired to fully develop your character's identity and beliefs, to make him just as compelling in his work for a better world.

How to Use This Book

Hunter Book: Innocent shows you the World of Darkness through fresh eyes. Each chapter deals with one broad theme.

Chapter 1: Hearing the Call depicts Innocents' struggle with their origins. They express theories on the supernatural, the imbued and the Messengers.

Chapter 2: Day in, Day out explores how Innocents attempt to follow the Messengers' plan. They discuss general theories and offer specific advice about touchy situations, such as creatures who respond to an open hand with tooth and claw.

Chapter 3: In It Together addresses Innocents' relationships with others. They discuss their feelings toward the community at large and toward various other imbued.

Chapter 4: Another Day focuses on Innocents' perceptions of and hopes for the future. Just where does the mission take the imbued?

Chapter 5: New Rules provides expanded systems and advice for playing Innocents, including new edges, guidelines for gaining Conviction and how your character can create charms.

Chapter 6: Babes in the Woods details some prominent Innocents and provides ready-to-play character templates.

LEXICON

Innocents have something of the awkward teenager about them. They tend to be at a loss for words, and the loaded language of other creeds — "hunt," "monster," "bloodsucker" — only frustrates them. Many have tried to develop other ways to describe their topsy-turvy lives, and these terms slowly filter through Vitalis and hunter-net at large. Innocents without access to the Internet may make similar efforts to change the perspectives of any fellow imbued with whom they work. They probably have their own terms for the other side and the calling in general. Ultimately, it doesn't matter. Any communication, whether with another imbued or a world of them, furthers Innocents' cause.

bully: A supernatural creature that takes pleasure in causing fear or pain.

burnout: Any imbued who has seen too much of the mission and suffered psychologically. Innocents apply this term to mean those who display extreme derangements, those with violent tempers, and to those who drop out of the hunt altogether.

call, the: The imbuing. Innocents say they "heard the call." Sometimes "the voice."

DADT: "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." A label for the Innocent attitude toward discussing harmless supernatural creatures with militant hunters; an informal code of silence intended to stop other hunters from going after the creatures Innocents discuss or make contact with.

game hunter: An imbued who targets specific types of creatures. Innocents see game hunters as destructive to the mission as a whole.

godhead: An imbued person who leads a cult of personality or who maintains the pretense of divinity. Sometimes used to mean Martyrs, but it can and does apply to others as well, including some Avengers and Redeemers.

headshrinker: An overly analytical imbued who spends her time trying to categorize rather than accept. Often applied to Judges, but it can also refer to others — including some Innocents.

hidden, the: Euphemism for the supernatural.

hometown hero: An imbued who pledges herself to defending a specific place, typically the neighborhood where she lives. Often synonymous with Defender.

honcho: An imbued who must always be in command. Sometimes used to mean Visionary or Judge. Stronger variations include “head honcho” and even “headest honcho.”

loner: An imbued who refuses to cooperate or associate with others. Innocents perceive this as key sign of burnout.

other side, the: Euphemism for the supernatural.

plan, the: The mission, the hunt

pup: A harmless supernatural creature who either remains contained or fades away if left alone.

shark: A supernatural creature who consciously takes advantage of an Innocent's optimism and trust to do her or others harm, usually by luring the imbued into a lair or trap of some sort. Derived from other imbued nicknaming Innocents “bait.”

soldier: A hunter who approaches the mission as a war, imposing martial discipline on those around him and typically sporting military weapons. Often used to mean Avenger.

tough: A hunter whose self-image depends on being undefeated and unstoppable. One who reacts violently to most situations. Often used to mean Avenger or Defender.

AFTERSHOCK

The premise of **Hunter Book: Innocent** is the fallout from events on the Vitalis list and from events in this book's prologue. The Innocent extremist Oracle171 runs scared from monsters and imbued after the murder of her allies at the hands of the walking dead. Some consider her a victim on the run, while others believe her a traitor. Bookworm55, the closest the creed has to a spokesman, also vanishes during this crisis. Imbued using Vitalis try to make sense of events. Ones who contribute to the list tend to agree with Bookworm's optimistic outlook. Vitalis thus slowly becomes the “Innocent homepage” linked to hunter-net.

SOURCE MATERIAL

Who says Innocents are too naïve to experience the world? Or too simple to know the difference between right and wrong? Innocent people can change the world, just like any others. Here are some examples of

A NOTE FOR STORYTELLERS

Events in this book's website introduction affect developments throughout. **Innocent** picks up on Oracle171's story from **Hunter: The Walking Dead** and puts her on the run from various enemies. The fate of Bookworm55 also unfolds.

These narratives make **Hunter Book: Innocent** more than discussion from disparate narrators and more than a resource for new rules. This book carries forward the **Hunter** meta-plot, the ongoing plot of the game. Don't feel compelled to adhere to these developments in your chronicle, though. Future supplements will continue to follow Oracle and Bookworm's experiences, but you can make of them what works best for your game. Other developments, such as events in Montreal and the details of Oracle's encounters with other hunters (or the exact outcome of her expedition to Greece in **Walking Dead**) can be developed by you completely. Feel free to change events or locales to make your troupe's characters directly involved. This book is not an Unchangeable Plot Element, it's a string of story hooks. Use it as you like.

movies and comics with innocent protagonists, who impact the lives of everyone they know.

Forrest Gump: A quintessential American (if politically conservative) fable, this is probably the ultimate representation of optimism triumphing over all odds (and of the applications of the Fool's Luck edge). Make Forrest's whole life like the Vietnam sequences, and you have the world of Innocents.

Brooklyn Dreams: This comic, written by J.M. DeMatteis, follows a grown man's recollections of growing up in 1970s Brooklyn. Amid drugs and teenaged foolishness, he discovers the simple divinity within. Much of DeMatteis' work deals with that same divine and universal love, but *Dreams* does so in the most mundane context.

The Jam: Bernie Mirreault's quirky comic about a regular guy who happens to dress as a superhero. The mood is too light-hearted for **Hunter**, but the attitude of the main character — who stays focussed on the pleasures of going out with the guys, living with the woman he loves and walking the dog, despite fighting the agents of Satan — is pure Innocent.

The Professional: Luc Besson's film about a “slow” but deadly killer and a precocious girl who find a bond of hope in a world of double-crossing father figures and hyper-violence.

The Sixth Sense: A little boy goes from fear to understanding to acceptance of the ghosts who haunt him, a journey all Innocents struggle to make.



CHAPTER 1: HEARING THE CALL

*Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the
ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the
seat of the scornful.*

— Psalms 1:1

ONE MORE STEP INTO MADNESS

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: nurse216

Subject: What's wrong with everyone?

Someone threatened to kill me today. He wasn't a puppet or a vampire. He was one of us, a friend, I thought.

I don't think I've ever mentioned this before, but I spend a lot of time with a few others who've heard the voice. They don't live in my neighborhood or anything — actually it's a good two hours of freeway to get there. One of them (I'll call him Daniel) is something of a hometown hero and I convinced him to set up a place for us to meet and stay. What those spy shows call a "safe house," I guess.

I won't name anyone who uses the house, but I know that at least one other person is on this list. I think Daniel is, and probably others (if you're reading this, please email me — we need to talk). I know this because of what happened today.

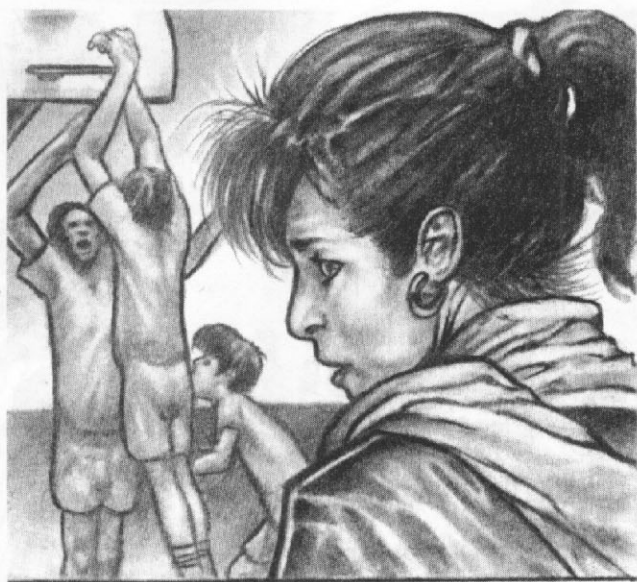
I guess I should start at the beginning. It was three days ago, when I was coming home from work at the hospital. It's a big hospital. I work in the ER, so you can imagine how tired I was. (No, it's not like on television.) On my way home every night, I pass by a school and usually there are kids playing basketball, even late at night. This time, like many others, I decided to stop and watch for a few minutes. It may seem silly to you, but I really like seeing the boys having fun.

It took me several minutes to realize that I wasn't alone. There was a niño, a little baby, standing in a corner watching the boys too. I used the Messenger's gifts to see and knew that it was *different*, so I tried to get closer. When I did, I saw that it wasn't alive. It was pale and looked very sick — a walking dead. When I tried to get closer, it ran off, sort of crawling like a crab or an insect. I tried to follow, but it got away.

That sad little baby who has died but can't rest made me very upset. It still does. It just doesn't seem fair that such a thing could be. I needed to talk to people who would understand and maybe help me find the child and help it. So I went this morning to see my friends up north.

When I got there, they were arguing with each other. They were yelling about this thing in Canada that Bookworm has talked about — the people who died and what happened with Oracle (that's how I know at least one other person is on hunter-net). They were screaming so much I was afraid they'd start fighting. Especially John (that's not his name, but I'll call him that). He was getting violent. I wanted to give them something else to talk about so I told them about the baby. At first it seemed to work. He and Daniel started talking about heading down to my area and finding the zombito — the little zombie.

It was only when we were about to head outside that John said he was going to hurt it — to "put a bullet between its eyes." I was shocked. I told him no, that we had to help this little baby. It was



what some have called a pup. It hadn't hurt anyone. John looked at me like I was crazy and reached for a gun.

He was screaming. Telling me to get out. Telling me I was "just like Oracle and Bookworm and Potter." He said I was a traitor and told me he should kill me. John can be violent but I had never seen him like this. Daniel, who owns the house, stopped him and calmed him down, but told me I should leave. He told John that I deserved to live, but not to "hunt."

This is crazy! Bookworm is gone, Oracle is on the run, and everyone seems to be turning on everyone else.

John, Daniel, if you're reading this, you know who you are (and who I am). Please get in touch so we can stop this. Anyone out there who can help, please do.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: nurse216

Subject: My reasons (if you care)

A lot of people sent me mail after my last post, some saying that they had experienced similar things — Dictatrix I I, get well

CHAT SESSION

<nurse216>Hola, is anyone here?

Wonderful.

So much for getting anything constructive done.

Excuse me?

The army of the righteous doesn't have a place for Judases or Pharisees.

Judas?

Listen carefully and perhaps you can understand: we don't need or want your kind. Traitors and weaklings will get us all killed.

I haven't betrayed anyone. Neither has Oracle.

So you're a stupid cow instead of a treasonous cow. I don't have time for either kind.

How much does 30 pieces of silver get you these days?

Is all you can do is insult me? This is a "chat room," sí? Let's chat, then.

She wants to chat. TO FUCKING CHAT!

What? What's wrong with you?

What's wrong is that we are in a war for our lives and the lives of everyone around us. What's wrong is that our world is being held hostage by beasts and horrors. What's wrong is that some of you seem unable to accept that *this is a war, not a social occasion.* Do you get that?

But it doesn't have to be a war.

Do us all a favor and get yourself killed.

>god45 has left the room<

You understand that it can't be a war, don't you?

>crusader17 has left the room<

Hello?

Anyone?

>chat session has timed out<

soon — others telling me I was a traitor. Very few people seem to understand what I thought we all understood. That frightens me.

I actually thought of leaving hunter-net altogether today. I mean, if no one sees what I see, I wondered, what's the point? But I guess I'm not ready to give up so easily. I think we need to communicate better if we're ever going to cooperate, so I guess I'll go ahead and speak first.

I've decided to use Bookworm55's vitalis.list to email my thoughts on what we are, what we do and where we're going. I'll try to take my time and really explain what I mean. I hope many of you will come by and see that I am not a traitor or a fool.

Those who want to ignore me, I guess you can ignore all of this, too.

— Nurse

ORIGINS AND EXPLANATIONS

To: vitalis.list@hunter-net.org

From: nurse216

Subject: Where do we come from? (my views, part I)

Beginning is always the hardest part. I'm staring at the terminal here in the records room, thinking to myself how do I start? How do I say what I *feel*? This is very difficult.

Before I even begin I guess I should tell you I don't really know how often I'll be able to send these messages (other people use the terminal) or even how long this project of mine will take. Just thinking about this gives me even more respect for Witness I. Maintaining all of hunter-net must take *so much* time!

Yes, enough delays. If I don't start this, I'll never get finished. Let's see, the first thing I guess is *us*. Who are we, anyway?

ACCEPTING WHO WE ARE

I haven't been on hunter-net very long, but it looks like a lot of people have spent a lot of time talking about where we come from, about what we are, about how we came to be. Everyone seems to say we've been "imbued" but no one agrees by who or what.

For my part, I don't think these questions are very important. The question we're all really asking is who we are, but we already know the answer to that. I'm the same person I was before I heard the voice. I haven't changed. My world has changed, but I am the same person. We've all gained the ability to do extraordinary good, to make the world a better place for our children. This is what every parent strives for, and I for one am not going to look this gift horse in the mouth.

When I was 17 and a new mother, and I heard my baby cry for food at two in the morning, I didn't stop to wonder how he learned to cry. I got up and took care of my son. This is the same thing.

THEORIES AND CONJECTURE

Of course, I do wonder about just who was speaking that night when they wheeled my dead son into the ER. I can remember sitting there, my only child's body cooling while the doctors tried to save the boy who shot him. I gave in to the despair then, I think. My boy had been in gangs for a few years and had been in jail twice already — so young to be a criminal. Now he was dead after a stupid argument. I was crying and my hope was dying. Then the voice came.

To: vitalis.list@hunter-net.org

From: profesorgeo160

Subject: Vitalis is energy — an explanation

Hola, amigos.

Several weeks ago, Bookworm asked me to provide an explanation of "vitalis" for others and here it is. I've been away at a conference so could not post any messages, but let me tell you that Santiago Chile still has many many problemas. I will write to hunter-net itself to tell you about that.

So, vitalis and vitalismo. I believe in vitalismo because I am a man of science. I must believe that there is an explanation for all the problemas I have seen since I became llanero. The things I can do, they require energy and so do the things the beasts and lost ones do. Everything requires energy.

I call this energy vitalis. You can think of it as electricity in batteries, except the batteries are people. The ghosts and beasts, they do not have energy of their own and so they need to take it from others. Yes, when a vampire drinks blood, he is taking energy. When a demon-wolf eats a farmer, it is taking energy. I even think that when a ghost is scaring you, it is taking energy.

Sí, sí. Emotion is energy too, verdad? When we are angry we can hit very hard, when we are in love we can do many things. But when we are scared we lose energy. We can run, but not very far. Usually we stay where we are and hope no one will see us. The generalisimos have always used this and the beasts do too.

We llaneros, we do not steal energy. The Messengers or the world as a whole has given us the energy of hope, given us much vitalis. If we use it correctly, we can share it and make everyone stronger. Maybe we can stop the lost ones from needing to steal energy. That is vitalis.

Oh, yes, I forgot. This vitalis, this energy of hope, we have to keep it as hope. If we create fear, then we are just stealing energy like the lost ones. We cannot do that.

Adios.

I've always thought of it as an angel. Padre Diaz said that the angels of God watch over us and can do His work when we need His help. I needed it and I got it.

But angels are just what I call the voice. Others have called it the voice of God Himself, the spirits of nature, the ghosts of the dead, or aliens from outer space. I think these are all the same. This voice, this force, comes from elsewhere and guides us. Call them Heralds. Call them Messengers. Call them angels. The important thing is that we listen.

If we could understand the voice of God, I don't think we would need to hear it in the first place.

NEWS FROM THE ROAD

From: sixofswords29
To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
Subject: Bookworm55

Those of you worried about our bibliophile friend since his decision to quit the hunter-net list and hit the road will be glad to hear that I received a letter from him this morning.

I hope he won't mind, but I intend to post it to the Vitalis site he created. While I don't entirely agree with many of the sentiments espoused on that separate list, it seems appropriate.

Head over to <http://www.hunter-net.org/vitalis/index.html> if you want to subscribe.

WHO GET'S CALLED

To: vitalis.list@hunter-net.org
From: nurse216
Subject: Why me? & why us? (my views, part 2)

I'm realizing that this a good thing I'm doing here, because it is making me ask questions I never would have. Like "why me?" Do you know that I've never really wondered. Why the plan involves me, why I heard the voice and not someone else. It never even occurred to me to ask until now.

Putting it into words is difficult because it seems like such a silly question. Like why is my hair black? Or why am I my mother's daughter? But I suppose it isn't that simple — not everyone is like this and for many years I wasn't either. So there must be an answer. The only one I have is very simple: I heard the voice because I was needed. Because I am still needed.

When I heard the call and looked up to see my son as a ghost, I wasn't just a random person suddenly endowed by chance. If the orderly next to me or the bus driver waiting for stitches or anyone else had heard the voice instead of me, they couldn't have stopped things. They would have seen a ghost, not my son. I saw mi hijo and I talked to him and I stopped him from becoming a murderer.

No one else could have done that and that is why I heard the voice.

SOMETHING TO GIVE

I do not think that my own experience is exceptional. We hear the voice because we have something to contribute, something no one else can. The messages we receive are not random. We see things and hear things that have meaning to us. There is a plan to all of this and we must each have a role in it.

Sometimes I wonder what I would have done had it not been my boy I saw as a ghost. What if he was still alive and I saw the other child's spirit trying to kill him? Would I have understood that I could convince him otherwise, that things did not have to end in another death? I hope so, but I think that I would just have tried to defend my child — with violence.

From: hope123
To: nurse216
CC: vitalis.list@hunter-net.org
Subject: My family

Nurse,

You say you wonder what would have happened if your son would have been in danger. This happened to me. My son and I were in Tel Aviv during a bomb threat. People were running down the streets and the army was there. (Bomb threats are very serious in Israel.)

My boy was running with me and he runs faster, yes? He is young. I saw a man take him and then I saw he was not a man, but a monster. I ran faster even than when I thought there was a bomb and tried to get to my boy. I caught the man-monster before he got away and I screamed and kicked him hard, like when I served my two years in the army. He dropped my boy and we ran.

It was later that I went back and found the monster again. But he was not a monster, really. More a scared man and we even talked briefly. He said he had lost control during the bomb scare, that his hunger had made him go after my son. He might have been lying, but he did nothing to try to harm me, so maybe I believe him. So you see, you can still listen to the ones who want to talk, even after a thing like that.

But I watch my boy very carefully now. I listened to the sad creature, but I won't let anything like it near my son.

Shalom,
 — Hope

FIND WHAT YOU HAVE

I wish everyone could have an experience as clear as mine. I know that for many of us it seems so much more complicated. All the things we face seem powerful and angry and you think you can't do anything at all. Except maybe lash out and hurt them back.

But is that the only thing you can give? If the only thing you can do is hurt, maybe you haven't understood why you heard the voice. Many people here on Vitalis and on hunter-net (and more across the world) have helped people, saved children, healed the wounded and the "monsters." You can do that too. Just remember that the thing at the end of your gun has a heart as well.

We have been blessed because we can stop the pain that makes the world so horrible. The "monsters" and the crime and the drugs, all these are just symptoms of a problem of the heart — a cycle of abuse and suffering. We can break that chain. That's what we're here for. That's why we've been chosen.

I could go on a long time about this, but I must go. Next time.

COMMON CAUSE

From: sixofwords29

To: vitalis.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Bookworm55's thoughts on us

Hello there. While I don't pretend to share the same views as most of you Vitalis subscribers, I hope most of you know me from hunter-net as a fairly open-minded fellow.

We do have one thing in common, I think. We all hold Bookworm55 in high regard. He's been out of contact some weeks now. Well, much to my surprise I received a letter from him this morning. To be frank, some of what he says worries me greatly. So, I'm going to break his confidence and post the letter to the list. I would value your opinions.

Apologies for not doing it as soon as I got the letter, but I'm not the world's fastest typist. The sooner someone invents a scanner capable of OCRing handwriting, the better.

Dear SoS,

I shouldn't really be doing this, you know. Fyodor wouldn't approve. The whole point of this road trip he's taking me on is to isolate me from other chosen for a while, so I can get to know myself again.

But here I am, scribbling down my thoughts on paper, instead of to a computer screen. It's quite a refreshing change, actually. I've always loved seeing words on paper, as I guess my hunter-net handle makes obvious. I just hope you use that post office box for more than picking up the books I manage to track down for you.

I guess that I miss expressing my thoughts in my own way instead of in the extended question-and-answer sessions Fyodor puts me through. While his interest is flattering, he's very intense. He's never interested in the details, and sometimes the details are what reveal the most interesting facts.

Like the first thing I think of each morning. That's interesting. I thought of her this morning, as I woke up. I think of her every morning, you know.

I opened up to her and she opened up to me. I'd never met anyone so beautiful to me in mind, body and soul. We talked through the night, the three nights we spent together. She opened my eyes to a world that was like nothing I'd experienced or suspected existed, even after I was chosen.

Sure, Purple had talked to me about some of it, but it was always abstract to him. It was an intellectual experience, not one of passion or involvement.

Anyway, Phaedra lived this life every night and it infected her every move, her every decision. Everything she did was a move on the chess-board of life's possibilities. Experiencing it through her was like living it for real, not through the pages of a book.

And, each night, as we made love in our unique way, I became part of that life. Part of her. Now it's over. Gone. I don't know how to go on any more.

Well, actually I do.

When I saw her again a couple weeks ago, all the feelings came back after the months I spent trying to squash them. She hurt me but I still love

her. I know that she's a good person deep down. I've seen that part of her too often to believe anyone who tells me otherwise.

Listen to me. Talking like I'm some normal kid with his heart broken by his first love. I've seen enough friends go through it, listened to them pour out their hearts, say how hurt they are, how they can never trust anyone again. I've held them and comforted them, and six months later they're madly in love again.

Me? I'm not one of them any more, am I? The minute the Messengers first spoke to me, it all changed. I tried to go on as before, caring for those I could. Then came Phaedra.

My first love was a vampire and she hurt me, all right. She tore both my legs off with her bare hands and left me bleeding on the sidewalk. And yet, I still want to forgive her. I want to help her maintain the humanity that she showed me. That's what I'm doing out here — searching for her to let her know that I forgive her. Fyodor is a friend and one of us. He's offered to help, though he seems more interested in me and what I believe than in anything to do with Phaedra. Still, he's willing to help me search for her, and I can certainly use it in my condition, despite my determination to do things myself.

THE CHOSEN

Why did the Messengers choose me for all this? Who the hell are they to inflict this life on me?

There's all kinds of theories out there about who the Messengers are. There are probably as many as there are chosen, I guess. Some of them seem utterly ridiculous. Aliens? No, I don't think so. The idea of aliens versus "monsters" is just too much like a bad sci-fi movie. Government experiment? Why use college kids instead of soldiers? If the government really is fighting a secret war against the supernatural, it wouldn't use the likes of me.

If any one theory appeals to me, it's that the Messengers are some sort of manifestation of the human race's subconscious, rising within each of us to say "no more" to the things that feed on the life force, the vitalis, within each of us.

It's a frightening thought, isn't it? There's no supernatural omniscient deity behind the imbuings, just human nature. We all know how fallible we can be. Every time Witness1 does a roll call on hunter-net and a few more of us fail to reply, we see how fallible human nature is. Every time I look down at the space where my legs used to be, I see how fallible we are.

THE "ENEMY"

To: vitalis.list@hunter-net.org

From: nurse216

Subject: The other side (my views, part 3)

I started talking about this the last time, and I'm sure many of you want me to get on with it.

(For those wondering where I've been — muchas gracias, ProfesorGeo — for the last few days, I have been looking for the baby I talked about before. I had a dream about it two nights ago and knew I had to search. There is a large construction site near the playground where I saw the zombito, and I went looking there. The first night I found nothing, but the next day I found Daniel — or he found me. I was afraid for a

second, but he lowered his gun and we talked. I won't go into many details, but maybe I can go back to the safe house soon. Gracias, "Daniel." We never found the little baby. I will have to continue to search.)

Yes, now back to the point. What of the bad things? The zombies and ghosts and vampires? The ugly things that some of us claim to "hunt"? Where do they come from?

I've seen many posts from Bookworm55, Doctor119 and others talking about the "biology" of these "monsters," but I haven't seen much discussion of why. Why do some people come back from death? Why do some creatures want to hurt people while others don't even seem to care about us at all?

My son is a ghost, so I have thought of this very much. The only answer that makes sense to me comes from my own experiences. Let me tell you.

My father was an angry man. He drank too much and beat my mother, my sister and I. My mother just accepted it as God's will and let it happen. My sister ran away and now lives in another city. I visit her when I can and have seen the same bruises on her daughter that I once saw on her. I do not know if it is her or her husband who does the beating.

Instead of running, I got pregnant. I met Carlo when I was in high school and I thought he was the best man I had ever seen. So tall muy hombre. I told myself (and my sister and my mother) that he was everything my father was not. Of course, he was more like mi padre than I would ever admit to myself. I was five months pregnant when he got mad at the television and decided to break my jaw.

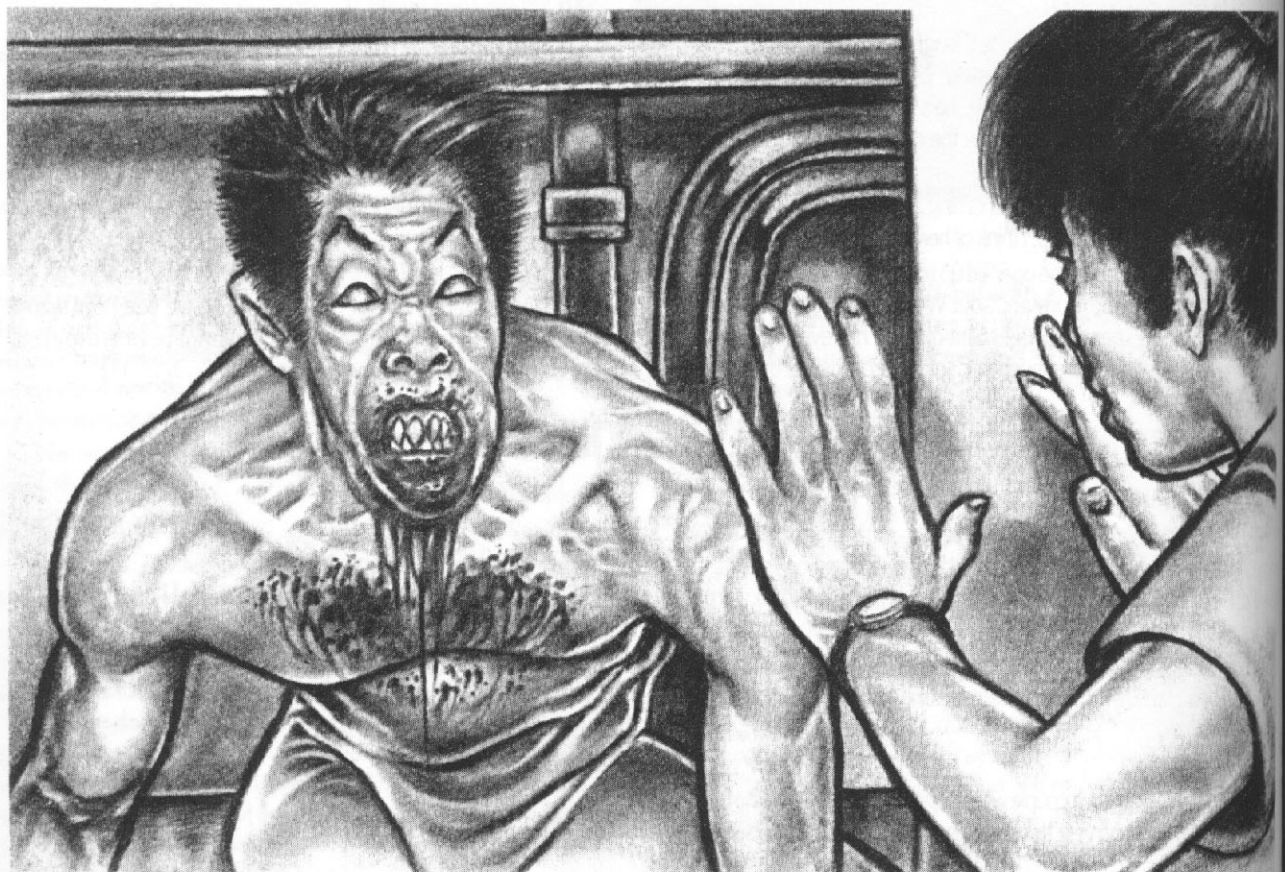
I left Carlo then and my grandmother took me in. My mother cried that I had a child and no husband. I decided I would never be beaten again and I certainly did not want to beat. Carlo was in and out of jail when my son was a baby, and I raised mi hijo as best I could and built a home for us. I went back to school and became a nurse and hoped to make a good life for my little boy. But instead he is dead.

In our home, I made a beautiful little world for us, but outside other things touched him. Drugs and gangs were everywhere, on the streets, in the schools and on the television. Carlo got out of jail and insisted on getting to know his son, trying to teach him "how to be a man." By the time he was a teenager, my son idolized Carlo and wanted to be tough like him. He began to smoke and drink and take drugs, and eventually he died.

Bad things make other bad things. Drinking and anger in my parents' house made my sister hurt her children, led me into Carlo's bed, and took root in my son. Even with me caring for him, others showed him ways to make that hate grow and he began to act like a monster.

If a little boy with a mother who loves him can become a killer of other boys and a dealer of drugs, why should we be surprised that others can be so filled by hate that they walk even after death. These "monsters" are, I think, that full of violence and despair.

Abusers are not born, they are made. It doesn't matter if they use a belt or a curse as their weapon. Their hate comes from hate they have received. If we treat our mission like a war, we only make this cycle of violence worse. If we use care and compassion, we have a chance to help *all* the victims.



To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: rigger111

Re: This may all be bullshit...

I hooked up with a Chinese guy out here for a while. Bit of a flake, but you take what you can get sometimes. Anyway, I showed him some stuff from the list — trust me, he's one of us — and he wanted to say something. He doesn't have a computer or nothing, so I said I'd post his message for him. It took him hours to punch out this fucking post and it strikes me as pansy-assed crap, but I said I'd do it so I'm doing it.

* * * *

I came to this country in a ship. For many days we sailed. I had paid a man a large amount of money and he told that it would be easy. He lied.

On the third night, a storm hit and many people were very sick. My cousin went mad. Fan was an angry man and he yelled at the sailors and hit one of them with his fist. Soon many sailors were hitting him and his bones were broken and he was bleeding. That night my cousin died and my hope to ever see my destination died too.

I pleaded that they not dump my cousin's body in the sea and so they kept it in a small room to rot. Days later I awoke in the middle of the night. Not to the rumble of my empty stomach or the pleading of another sick passenger. I heard a strong voice and it said "THE DEAD RISE." In the dark I went to the room, trying not to be seen by the sailors who would beat me. I heard them screaming and went forward like a mouse.

They were pulling on the door, trying to keep it closed, but it was opening. I watched and saw Fan come out of the room. I knew it was him, but his body was pale and dead. He had terrible claws instead of hands and long fangs instead of a mouth. He attacked the sailors like a savage beast, biting at their necks and tearing out terrible chunks of flesh that he swallowed. One tried to run and Fan cut him in half with his hand. I was very scared and did not move.

But then the voice spoke again. "ALL WILL DIE," it said, and I knew Fan would not stop at the sailors who had killed him. When he began to move toward the hold, I stepped forward and he saw me. I was very afraid but I spoke anyway. "Cousin, you should not have come back. You cannot hurt those who have done you no harm."

For many moments, Fan just looked at me. He did not breathe or move and blood dripped from his mouth. Then he turned and ran up to the deck of the ship. I followed and saw as he ran toward the edge of the ship. He stopped and turned and looked at me one last time, as if to say good bye. Then, he jumped and the sea swallowed him.

So you see, these are not mad dogs. These are people and we must treat them like people.

* * * *

Like I said, mostly lovey-dovey bull. Anyone run into anything like "Fan," though? Sounds like a rot to me.

NATURAL SELECTION

Why have we been chosen? What unites you and me and Fyodor? The topic obsesses him. In the time we've been traveling together, he's asked about it over and over. My opinions. My thoughts. My references. Ah, yes, he's very interested in those — places where I might have read about us.

For a while I thought we were there, on paper, in the pages of history or mythology. We're the Greek heroes and Beowulf and Arthur, reborn. Back to fight and slay the monsters once more.

Hurray for us!

Fyodor certainly seems to think that way. He keeps going on about that document Violin99 posted to the list months ago. (He apparently knows Violin99 and alludes to him from time to time. I'm obviously not the first of us Fyodor has taken under his wing.)

I think he's wrong and I've told him as much. I guess he doesn't mind, because he just smiles indulgently and strokes his beard. I'm not convinced by this Karl Marx shtick of his. His accent slips occasionally. It's almost as if he's become what he thinks he needs

to be to deal with me — something out of Chekhov. God, I hope that's not too accurate a comparison.

Anyway, he's wrong. We're not the heroes of old. That way of thinking might suit the toughs, but it doesn't much suit me. I'm just a kid in a wheelchair who's never had a girlfriend. Well, not a living one, anyway. Not much chance of getting one now, either. Having to help your date wheel himself into a restaurant isn't most girls' idea of a romantic night out.

I'm not and I'm never going to be a mighty hero. The first so-called monster I met was a dead girl who I helped by hugging. How many heroes of old do you hear doing that?

I'm no fighter. It's not in my nature to run screaming at an undead thing with a tire iron in my hand, as I've seen others do. As Andy did before she tore him apart.

The only answer I can give is that I care. I always have. I've been the nice guy that friends turn to in their hour of need. Some of the hidden just seem to need to talk, or at least to be listened to. I can't forget that sad little dead girl who just needed to tell someone about her murderer and feel that they cared.

The others may laugh at us and call us bait, but I know we were chosen for a reason. I just don't know if we will achieve anything in the end.

The best precedent I can find in history is in the saints — the ones who preached tolerance and understanding. The ones who turned the other cheek, rather than take an eye for an eye. How many of them were slaughtered before anyone listened to their message?

You know, I used to blame Phaedra for the loss of my legs. Now I don't think she was to blame. Maybe Andy was. After all, he attacked first. Could she have just been protecting herself?

Fyodor dismisses the idea. Actually, he dismisses a lot of my ideas about our origins. When I ask him why, he just points out that I'm working from the wrong frame of reference, whatever the hell that means. I've never pressed him on it. He doesn't seem to like me doing that. Better not to, I guess.

Still, he's got me working the book and antique dealers of the cities we pass through, trying to find really obscure old papers. He's looking for something. I guess I am too. We might as well look together.

THE OTHER SIDE

As for the other side, they're there and maybe always have been. I love ProfesorGeo's vitalis theory. I wouldn't have named my website after it if I didn't. I wonder if the good Professor ever got around to posting it to the list? I do hope he's all right. Hunter-net could do with a lot more subscribers with his attitude on what we do.

I've read enough myths and folklore in the months since my imbuing to believe that most of the hidden have been here for centuries. There were what seem like pretty clear reports of werewolves in Eischenbach, Germany, in the late 17th century. The engravings I've seen seem a lot like the shapeshifters others on hunter-net have described, as well as the one I encountered.

There are more vampire legends in more parts of the world than I can compile. But so much of the advice that myths give on them is so utterly contradictory that it's useless. They seem to be there, though. Right back through history, in the shadows. From what Phaedra implied — although she was always fairly evasive — there seems to be a society of them of some sort. They play powers games with each other, perhaps to offset the boredom of long life.

So, maybe they're not lone predators. Maybe they're intelligent. They might have a society and customs — perhaps not that different from us.

Perhaps asking where the hidden came from is like asking where animals came from. There's no simple answer. They evolved from some primordial slop just like the rest of us. Which means they might have as much right to exist as you and me.

Some call them monsters, but are they really any worse than us? Look at Phaedra. Sure, she drinks blood to survive. I love a nice, juicy steak from time to time. Phaedra can feed without killing. I'm living proof of that. Every steak I enjoy means that a cow has been killed. I guess most of us like to forget that little fact, don't we?

Which of us is the monster, then? Returning to ProfesorGeo's vitalis theory (If he hasn't explained it yet, do e-mail him. It's fascinating stuff), yes, they feed off us but they can do so without killing. A ghost that scares us doesn't actually harm us. Blood can be given willingly.

So, they're just part of the food chain. Same as us. Same as the wolf, the deer or the slug, for that matter. That doesn't make them good or bad,

Subject: Hello?

From: oracle171

To: bookworm55, vitalis.list@hunter-net.org

The angel lets me slip through time very often now, Bookworm. Even driving down the autoroute, I can see the dead in Greece. Last month, today, last week, next year, it's all the same.

The angel allows me to see things from so many perspectives. I understand why others hate so much. It's easy to look at the other side and think that we have to kill them all. And we do, I think, when there's no other way. But the ones that are alone and calm — the angel says we can help them. And they can help us.

Isn't that what we all want? To help?

We can help so many people....

though. I was bitten by a dog when I was 10. I had my legs ripped off by a vampire when I was 18. Shit happens, I guess.

(I'm not quite sure where that leaves warlocks, though. From my time with Purple, he didn't seem to need vitalis.)

Can't the others see it? Ghosts are just dead people. Warlocks are people with powers. Perhaps even shapechangers still have some link to us. I can't say I really understand them, but as I said before, they do seem among the most natural of the supernatural.

Too many people just see them as the enemy though and, God forgive me, I helped foster that idea. As I lay there in my hospital bed, I wrote a long piece of bitterness called "The Enemy" and now the soldiers are out there, using what I wrote to hunt and kill.

I hid my feelings behind emotional detachment and scientific enquiry. Just look at how I wrote about my relationship with Phaedra. If you read behind the lines, you can see the bitterness and hurt still, I guess.

Maybe Carpenter169 was right. Maybe we were created to put the walking dead back where they belong. But the day I start taking the word of a twisted soul like him as gospel is the day I walk away from the calling and maybe from life itself.

Even if he is right, is destroying them the way to do it? It comes back to that little dead girl again. She was the first of the hidden that I encountered for a reason.

Look at the others I've met. Purple. A Merlin to my Arthur? Maybe I should call my wheelchair Excalibur. Do me a favor would you? If the hidden ever finish me off, find a lake and chuck it in.

Still, he and I talked. We communicated. We reached an understanding. If I can do that with him, I can do it again. I was doing the same with Phaedra, until Andy interfered.

This has given me a lot to think about. Fyodor is in for some surprise in tonight's discussion. Speaking of which, I ought to wrap up this letter. He's due back any minute now, and I want to get this into the mail. I'll write again when I get the chance.

Your friend,
"Bookworm"

From: sixofswords29
 To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
 Subject: Help needed

If any of you have any information on one of us called Fyodor, please contact me privately. I know at least one member of this list has already been contacted by him. Violin99 or anyone else, please post me immediately.

I don't know who this fellow is, but I don't like what Bookworm says about him. Our friend is perhaps too trusting for his own good. He may not see that his greatest danger could be his traveling companion.

THE FORLORN

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
 From: xxx289
 Subject: This List

What the hell are we thinking? Does any one of us have the slightest clue what's going on in the world? I sure don't, and from what I've read here, neither do any of you. Hunter.net or whatever this place is called is just as clueless and erratic as any other email list I've seen. A says "Kill, kill, kill." B says, "No, no. Save the gorillas." C has his dick up his ass, but has plenty to say about it.

What a huge fucking waste of time! I stumbled across this website hoping desperately for some answers about what happened to me. The life I knew was over. Nothing I took for granted - what I based everything on - was real. So I'd sneak away from work, from it, to look for answers. For some kind of meaning. At first, I was so happy I'd found this place. I wasn't alone. This thing had happened to someone else, and here was a support group, like AA or something. Well, I hope AA helps its members better than this list does, cause there are nothing but fuck ups here, just like the rest of the internet.

Yeah, yeah, "So why post if you hate it so much?" you bitch. You think I want to? You think I want any of this? I don't know another real person who's going through this. For all I know, this whole list is just a bunch of drama queens, and I have no desire to read your "re: re: re:" opinions. (In fact, please don't respond to this post, even though the ones out there who are truly clueless or have absolutely nothing better to do, like survive, will.)

Problem is, I don't have anywhere else to turn. It's right outside my door, passing my window and expecting to see me work. The times I don't just "disappear," I sit here and read this crap. That's not enough, though. If I'm not typing or doing something, it knocks.

It wants to talk to me - give me that look like it knows that I know. So here I am typing - saving my ass just by doing this, not writing for your benefit.

CAUSE AND EFFECT

It's taken a lot to force me to come forward here. I don't care about your opinions, and I don't expect you to care about mine. People are shitbags - always have been. Always will be, I fear.

That to me is the heart of it. The human race is so pervasively and extensively crap that it's all come down to this. You have your opinions on where the monsters come from. I have mine: you are all the cause. People are so lazy, greedy and pathetic that everything that's worst (and sadly most common) about us has taken form. Or at least, existence in such a reprehensible state has turned the worst of us into the very embodiment of everything bad.

All the monsters out there aren't born from devils. They aren't devils from Hell. There is no such thing as Hell. The fact is they're us consumed by our worst nature. A "vampire" is the greediest person alive. He can't even exist anymore without stealing from others, even their blood. A "ghost" is the most jealous person - so much so that his life simply faded and now he watches others, still jealous of what they have. A "zombie" is the laziest and most directionless person turned into the epitome of sloth. He can't hold onto a job, let alone his own life. That, or he's so apathetic that he can't even die properly, rising again like nothing ever happened and he can still be as aimless as always.

What's become of our world hasn't been foisted upon us, we've created it. It's always been like this because people have dominated for too long. We're our own worst enemy because only a very few of us have any ethics, dignity, pride or determination. The human common denominator is an absolute idiot, and everyone below that becomes the very embodiment of his worst qualities. For the remaining few, who struggle above the masses, there's only suffering and disillusion. We who try so hard are just pulled down, because the others won't have anyone rise above them.

How do I know all this? I don't. How could I? How could any of us know what's really going on when we've apparently just woken up to it? But consider the possibilities. Is it really likely that the world has been populated by monsters from the dawn of time, and we've never really seen them because they "hide." In this age of high-tech and mass communication, could fairy tale monsters remain hidden? Or is it more likely that people are essentially crap, and those of us who haven't succumbed to our worst natures yet simply can't or won't recognize what's in store for us all?

THE WORTHY

I don't say all this out of arrogance. I don't particularly hold myself so highly that I think of myself as the cream of the human crop. I've made mistakes and stupid decisions.

I've fallen down and done some things I'm ashamed of. I'm not foolproof. The difference is, I've worked all my life to do the best that I could. I studied. I did what my parents told me was right (because they were good people, too, thank God). I thought about the things I did and chose the ones that seemed right and proper — not out of religious belief or anything, just from gut feeling.

After growing up under those rules and living by those ethics, they stayed with me as an adult. Only then, as I saw more of the world did I realize how rare all that work and struggle was. Most people were slobs, lazy and pathetic. They didn't strive or work for anything, or even care to. They just occupied space and intruded on those of us who did make an effort.

That's why most people aren't worth their own skin. If you've ever worked for something and been dragged down by the incompetence of someone else, you know what I'm talking about. If you don't understand or if you think people are basically good, you've never made a serious effort in your life and are the problem, not the solution. You're the beginning of the end of those people who become the things that torment us now.

So what's changed that makes us actually see the monsters now when they stayed "hidden" before? How come we witness the worst of humanity when we just unconsciously understood that it existed before? I really don't know. I don't have the answer, and I'm probably the most honest person on this list for it.

I read about you all claiming to hear voices or read weird things or smell stinks when you're exposed. Okay. I can't comment on that. I know what happened to me and it changed my life. I'm not going to talk about it because it's personal. My life isn't meant for you to gawk at. What's important is that we're finally able to look at the very worst of the things that are wrong and do something about them. It's like our minds or souls have had it with the crap that we've endured for so long and have finally said "Enough!" You might have heard a voice say something ominous, and then your boss stood in front of you like nothing you'd ever seen before. But maybe that was just the best thing deep down inside you finally saying, "For the love of God, put an end to all the wrongs." Like the world has had enough and needs you to undo the damage.

Then again, I don't think that can be true, either. Like I say, I see opinions expressed on this list that make me think most of you are little or no better than the majority of people. You call yourselves "imbued" like that means you're special or chosen, but maybe you're just the best that could be found because the pickings are so thin. Look hard at the next post to come along that reprints three pages of emails and then adds "I agree" at the bottom. Is that guy really so special as to be "chosen." Are you?

If you were so special, your awakening really shouldn't have come as much of a surprise after the fact. Sure, what you're exposed to and how you know the world afterward is terrifying, but once you gather your wits, you can look back and simply know why you were picked. You busted ass all your life, earned everything you got, and raised yourself above the shit heap despite its efforts to drag you back down. You knew you were something better all along.

Only now, thanks to what's happened to us, we know the shit heap stands a lot taller than we ever thought, and the most decayed, fetid parts of it can reach up to grab you even at the top.

THE DIFFERENCE

People on this list write about their "Divine Imperative" to fight the monsters. Or to reach out a hand to the dregs. Or to understand them and commiserate with them. Think about it. If we're people and they're people (or at least things that used to be people), why do we have a purpose or obligation to deal with them at all? If struggling to stand above the worst of humanity now means being able to recognize them, maybe our prerogative isn't to interact with them, but to get away from them!

Maybe what some interpret as an obligation or a mission is actually a warning to stay away from the things and their behavior. Animals

To: xxx289, hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: nurse216

Subject: Anger

To the poster XXX289,

I do not understand your anger toward the rest of us and to people in general. Yes, I would agree that many on this list are abusive or misled. I do not usually write here any more, myself. But that does not mean the loud or vicious speak for us all or reflect upon all people.

We can only hope to do our best in this life. What other choice do we have? It seems, now that our lives have been changed, we must still do our best. That to me means understanding the others. If they are people only misguided, as you say, why can we not undo the change that they've undergone? If a person can become the hidden by embracing the worst in him, maybe we can show him the best and hope he embraces that, instead. Could it be that we chosen once pursued the worst in life ourselves and have seen the light since, or may falter in the future?

I personally welcome you to the list, despite your feelings for it. You may find belonging and maybe even hope here yet.

instinctively know when danger is imminent. They sense when predators are in the vicinity and get out of there to save their skin. Early on in life, people learn from their experiences and mistakes to hopefully avoid them in the future. The most obvious is touching fire. You get burned! Do you do it again? No!

Could it be that those of us who are worth a damn have now touched fire again? Were we in the presence of the worst humanity had to offer, our deepest senses recognized it and our instincts said, "Get away from that. It can destroy you"? Maybe that's what this "imbuing" is all about. No voice from above. No God. No aliens. Just those of us most deserving to recognize the worst of the world's dangers finally catching on to what so many others have ignored.

Fire? Bad. Leave it alone. Humanity? Bad. Get away from it.

Or maybe now that we can see the monsters, perhaps we're not so much supposed to run from them like animals would from fire, but

to use them as tools like we do with fire. All my efforts to do the right thing in life have gotten me this far. Perhaps my determination has even made me receptive to this awareness. Like I've undergone some kind of "graduation." If that's true, why should I change the way I lived my life before, or change what I did? Apparently I was doing something right. Now that I recognize the "new" fire, I can work around it, use it to accomplish what I must to achieve even more. Maybe our purpose now is to continue as we did, not run away, because now we have more knowledge, more strength. Maybe our purpose is not to fight or pity or console, but to continue on as who and what we were, now even better than before.

That's why I'm back here in my office, working exactly where I saw it in the first place. I'm not sure it knows who or what I've become, but I know it. I can use it to my advantage for once, instead of the other way around. I just have to be careful not to get burned.



CHAPTER 2: DAY IN, DAY OUT

*For such as be blessed of him shall inherit the earth; and
they that be cursed of him shall be cut off.*
— Psalms 37:22

DO NO HARM

To: vitalis.list@hunter-net.org

From: nurse216

Subject: What are we doing? (my views, part 4)

It's amazing how much this exercise is forcing me to think about the plan, and me, and us. I'm realizing that, yes, I was taking things for granted before. It was silly of me to expect everyone to understand me without knowing me. So John, Daniel, thank you for giving me this chance.

I think I should talk about the plan itself, now. It doesn't really matter, I think, where the Messengers or the other side come from. In the end, what matters is what we do with the gifts we've been given. For that, I can only trust my own heart and the voices themselves. Let me explain.

I've told you a bit about what happened when I first heard the voice. I saw my son as a ghost in the hospital. But I haven't told you what the voice said. That is very important, I think. When I was crying and afraid and thought my son was gone forever, the voice spoke. The voice was like nothing I'd ever heard, deep and beautiful like a church choir. I know other people have said they heard their own voice, or that of a loved one. But this wasn't me. This was definitely someone else.

What this beautiful voice said was "YOU ARE NEEDED." Not "Your son must be destroyed." Not "You must kill." The voice told me that my son, dead and a ghost, was still a person who needed help. The voice didn't threaten or warn me. It *asked* me to help and I was glad to.

When I looked up to see mi hijo standing with the doctors, he almost looked like he was made of smoke. He seemed to be reaching into the other boy's chest and causing him pain. Instead of screaming or becoming violent, I called to my son. To calm him. I felt the voice, whoever it was, smiling as I talked to my child.

Some of you will probably say this makes me a fool, but that experience has colored everything I have seen since then. When I saw that zombito, I knew it was somebody's baby and I wanted to find out whose. It wasn't even hurting anyone — it was a pup, not a wolf.

HEALING, NOT HURTING

The most basic thing my son's fate taught me is that we can help at least some of the people on the other side. Some of the "monsters." I am not a fool and I know we can't help them all. Many are too far gone into their own abuses to get any real help and we have to think of the people they are hurting. Bullies who take pleasure in hurting have to be stopped. But a lot more actually need us. The voice told me that I was needed, and so are we all, I think.

If we think of ourselves only as soldiers, then we cannot heal. Soldiers kill. Maybe we should think of ourselves as police, or at least as police *should* be. We try to help, to get hurtful people to places where they won't hurt anyone. We take care of the community. We listen to their concerns. Only when we have no choice do we draw a gun and fire.

(Yes, I know that many policia are like soldiers and few are like I describe. It is just an example.)

When you see a "rot" or a "monster," ask yourself the questions: What is it doing? Is it hurting? Do not think "How can I kill

it?" because that will close off any hope in your heart. Look at this man or woman and try to understand. What could make you go so far as to do what he or she does? What kind of help would you need to make you stop?

Once you have an answer, you can try to provide this help. I will take some examples from my own experiences in a later post, but sometimes it can be as little as a smile. Sometimes it needs to be more.

THE LAST RESORT

If there is no answer to the question and it is clear that this thing is hurting people, then violence can be a solution. But only as a last resort and in the extreme circumstances (yes, I know we live lives of "extreme circumstances").

If a thing is about to kill someone or is torturing someone and you have no way to get through to it, then you may need to reach for a weapon. Some of us are better at this part of our lives than others. I'm sure Crusader17 could teach a course on weapons. That is fine as long as it is at the right time.

If we use violence too quickly, something horrible is going to happen. If you aim your gun at everything you see, you'll never know how it would have reacted to open arms. If you don't care, ask yourself what the difference is between you and what you hunt, because I don't really know.

One last thing about violence. Even if you can't understand a creature and can't make it stop, take a second to ask if you need to stop it. If all a ghost is doing is wandering around an abandoned building, what harm is it doing? Is killing it (if that's even the right word) going to make things better?

THROUGH THE EYES OF INNOCENCE

From: sixofwords29

To: vitalis.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Further news from Bookworm55

Another letter from Bookworm. It seems that he is truly on the move. Efforts by some folks here to find him have failed. No word from Violin99 or anyone else about this Fyodor person, either. Violin, if you're just lurking, drop the holier than thou attitude you've demonstrated before and help us help a friend.

Dear SoS,

It's been a tense few weeks since I last wrote. Fyodor is getting more agitated and demanding. It's as if he expects something of me and I've yet to fulfill his expectations. We're searching for Phaedra together, but it seems like my effort is as much a part of his goal as is finding her. I guess he's as frustrated by our failure so far as I am. What a disappointment I must be.

He was very quiet today. We sat in silence in our rental car as we drove around the city. He didn't seem to want to talk, so I used my sight to just look at the world as we went by.

In a way, it was both reassuring and frightening. The misguided aren't everywhere. But they're out there. I saw what I think were ghosts and walking dead, mainly. I caught a brief glimpse of something that could have been a warlock, but he slipped into a car before I got a chance to take a proper look.

No vampires, of course. From what Phaedra said, that whole daylight thing is no myth. I felt like such an idiot the first time I suggested we meet the following lunchtime. She just laughed.

There were a couple of bruises, I think. One of them was a cop. That was interesting, I thought. If the vampires have friends in the police force, it might explain how Phaedra was able to do such a good job of covering up what really happened to my legs.

Details. Always the details. Fyodor doesn't see that. He can only see the big picture.

Still, the big picture has merit. Over half a dozen hidden in a day's driving. They can't be some strange aberration at the fringe of society, can they? They seem to be woven into the very fabric of the world — as much part of it as we are. So, how do we go about reconciling the natural and supernatural worlds, if that's really what we're here to do?

FINDING THE PATH

It was all so easy at first. Sure, it took me a while to come to terms with the fact that there were supernatural creatures out there. Do you know what, though? I was excited.

Suddenly my life after so many years of struggle was something special found hunter-net and I found others hunters — Andy, Eric, Sophie and Jen — right there in Boston. We were all pretty young, none of us older than our late twenties, anyway. We were full of enthusiasm, too. We had been chosen. We were special and we weren't going to throw away the chance to make a difference.

What would the younger me think of me now? Sitting crippled in a hotel room, watching the hidden but not trying to do anything about them?

We were a regular Scooby gang, out there exposing monsters. I fell into a role, I suppose, as information gatherer. I was able to watch and learn about the other side. Like Doctor119, I started to catalog and define the hidden that we encountered.

I'm not sure why or how Purple came into my life, but he started the process that taught me that this was more than a game.

I'd forgotten the lesson of my imbuement in my joy at having fellow imbued to be with. I tried too hard to be one of them, not myself. Talking with Purple made me aware that there was more to being chosen than the hunting and judging that the others talked about.

I started to spend more time with Purple and less with the others. Only Andy really seemed to resent it. He accused me of selling out, of siding with the enemy. He couldn't see that I was learning far more about them through talking than he was through killing.

In retrospect, they were playing me for a fool. I suspect Andy and the others had been using the information I gathered to hunt and kill for months before the Phaedra incident, without telling me. The only reason I found out was because Andy had decided I was part of the problem.

I suppose I had let my need for answers and a sense of belonging blind me to my own feelings. I didn't like what they were doing.

I wonder how many others out there have let more aggressive chosen ride roughshod over them? After all, the vision some of us share of communicating with and understanding the other side can seem feeble in the face of others' demands that we destroy the "monsters."

Fyodor seemed impressed when I asked him about this. He didn't answer my question. He just congratulated me on taking an important step and suggested that we get some dinner.

FAMILY VALUES

My mistake, I think, was relying on the others to the exclusion of my real friends. We need our friends and family before we are chosen, and nothing the Messengers gift us with takes away that need. That's another mistake I



made. My mother, my sister and I supported each other through the difficult years after my dad ran out on us. Once I was imbued, I stopped having time for them and started hanging around with other chosen.

I think there's a real danger in forgetting who we are. Isolating ourselves from others is no way to live. That just makes us part of the problem we're trying to deal with. We lose track of the effects our actions have on others. Once that feeling of responsibility is gone, you're walking the path toward evil.

Maybe that's what's happened to Oracle. She's become so caught up in being one of the chosen that she's lost sight of what we're here for. I know it's what happened to me when I wrote that post about The Enemy.

Maybe I should be out looking for her, not searching for Phaedra and playing 20 Questions with Fyodor.

I don't advocate revealing the truth to other people just yet, though. Too many of them would react with the same fear and anger as soldiers do. That's why we need contact with our own kind. That's why I'm here with Fyodor and why I'm writing you these letters. (Well, that and the fact that you're the only other imbued whose address I have.)

I couldn't do this alone. I tried for a while, but what we have to deal with is too difficult for any of us to bear by himself. Other imbued are the only ones who can understand, but you have to choose the right ones.

My mother doesn't know anything about my other life. In the beginning, she thought I was caught up with college friends. She thinks I'm on a trip with college friends now, rather than touring America with a curious Russian.

To be honest, I'm not sure if I've got the right to tell her. I find it hard enough to sleep at nights, knowing what I know, even if I do have the means to defend myself. What would it be like for my mom if she knew what was out there? Or my little sister?

Would they even believe me? Without our sight, they probably wouldn't.

God knows people have enough problems of their own without us thrusting the supernatural into their faces. Sometimes I wonder if I wouldn't be better trying to put my gifts to work against murderers, rapists and pedophiles. My gifts don't pick them out of the crowd, though. I have no more power against them than any other person does.

I suppose rehabilitating them falls to social workers. My task, if I've got the guts to return to it, is dealing with supernatural predators. If I can make them see the error of their ways, I'll achieve something. Only once we make the supernatural ready to deal with humanity can we make humanity ready to deal with them.

Otherwise, people will just be lambs to the slaughter. Like I was.

PERSONAL CONCERNS

Not only did I give up my family, I gave up my studies. Not officially, of course. I showed up for class enough to avoid getting kicked out.

I was going to get qualifications. I was going to get a good job. I was going to make enough money to get my mother out of that hole we call home. They say the best way to make God laugh is to tell him your plans for the future.

I don't see any of that happening now. Can I really go back to studying my books when I know what's out there? I tried for a while after I got out of the hospital. That's when I set up Vitalis. I distracted myself with the site and list. But I couldn't stop thinking about Phaedra.

I'm digressing. No, I suspect my college opportunities are over. Luckily, my sister's bright. She can do that job for my mom as well as I could. Probably better.

I've been living off the insurance money from my "accident" (Phaedra's doing, I suspect), as well as on Fyodor's resources. What am I going to do when those run out? Is what we do compatible with a nine-to-five job?

That's not a question I can answer yet. One day, though, I'm going to have to.

EDGES

If I answer the call again — if Fyodor agrees that I should — things are going to have to be different. I relied too much on my own brain before and didn't use the gifts I'd been given nearly well enough.

Look at the abilities I have now. I can't strike one of the hidden down easily, but I can stop them from hurting me again. Phaedra found that out. I'm not an idiot. I have been in the past, but I've learned from it. Supernatural creatures can be dangerous, and I'm running out of limbs.

If I do answer the call again, I have to do it more cautiously. Study the misguided from a distance for a while before I approach them. I can do that without them seeing me. Well, most of the time, anyway.

Only once I begin to understand their motivations can I risk approaching them.

Until I'm sure they've heard and understood my message, I have to stay on my guard at all times. I let it down with Phaedra and it cost me. If it happens again, these powers give me a chance to defend myself.

In a way, we have a wonderful opportunity. The lost seem to isolate themselves from humanity for whatever reason. Perhaps it's fear. Perhaps it's a feeling of superiority.

We have a chance to get close to them and bring them back into the fold. The fact that we have been given the tools to get close can't be a coincidence, can it?

Or am I still fooling myself? Are our tools merely a way of getting close so we can find out their weaknesses for the more militant chosen to exploit? That's how I was treated last time.

Yours,

"Bookworm"

THE MISSION IN THE WORLD

To: vitalis.list@hunter-net.org

From: nurse216

Subject: What are we fighting for anyway? (my views, part 5)

You don't hear a lot of "why" on hunter-net. There's a lot of "who." Who are we fighting? Who are we? There's lots and lots of "how." How to kill this. How to kill that. How to get explosives. Especially on Firelight, there's a lot of how. But no "why."

Why are we fighting? What's the point? These are not stupid questions. This is important.

I know for some of you the answer is very big. Because God told us to, because we have to fight evil, because if we don't no one else will. That's all fine, but for me the answer is smaller.

I do this thing we do because of the people I care about. Because I want my niece to grow up happy, despite her parents. I want Mr. Chen to run his store without wearing a gun. I want my neighbor Señora Juarez to be able to continue doing her crosswords and watching Eric Estrada on television. I want the children at the school down the street to grow up in a world where they aren't abused by people they can't even see.

I do these things — yes, I even fight — to help my friends and my family, my neighbors and the people I work with. For the community.

This is why I can't stand it when I see people telling us that we shouldn't stay with our families. That we have to live alone, in bunkers or on the road. That's fine for some, maybe, but I would burn out without the people I know. They're what keep me sane, and what good is being loca in the middle of all this?

HOPE AND FEAR

To: vitalis.list@hunter-net.org

From: profesorgeo160

Subject: Re: Further news from Bookworm55

Hola, amigos. Now I am a worried llanero. I do not like the way this Fyodor might be treating our Bookworm. He has had many encounters with the misguided ones, yet this man treats him like a child.

I do not think this is good.

From: sixofswords29

To: vitalis.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Re: Further news from Bookworm55

I'm worried, too. However, we have precious little to go on at this point, besides Bookworm's letter and the postmark on it. Let's see if I get another letter. At the moment, Fyodor could be doing Bookworm some good. He appears to be facing up to the reality of his situation, perhaps the first time since he lost his legs.

Something about Fyodor's apparent attitude still worries me, though, not least the fact that he may have intentionally isolated Bookworm from us and his friends in Boston.

We have to stay grounded. Despite what some say, I really don't think we are gods or angels or saints. We are people and we have to be with people. The point isn't for us to fight a guerrilla war in the shadows, destroy some "hidden army" and then fade away like in a movie. We want to stop people being abused, expose the abuse and help them free themselves. We want the abusers to realize what harm they're doing. We want everyone to have a better life.

Right?

COMMUNITY DUTY

We all have a responsibility. There is something in us that makes us able to deal with the terrifying things out there. We can see the abusers and what they do to us. We have gifts that allow us to do something about it, even. I agree completely with Memphis68 that we have to act on that ability. Hiding in the mountains like Pancho Villa or moving from city to city isn't the way, though. I mean, who will protect your people when you're gone?

The community supports us and we have to support it. Trust me, I've seen the worst Southern California has to offer — the barrios where every second boy on the street has a gun. Do you think that's all there is, the men with guns? No, for every angry gangster there are dozens of us, regular people going to the bodega after a long day of work to get a few vegetables to make a meal. We watch out for the gangsters and police who treat our community like occupied territory, but we also check on our neighbors. We laugh with them and cry with them. When they need our help, we help.

This bond doesn't change just because the abusers are even worse than we thought. In fact, the bond becomes *more* important. What is more human than the community and the family? If we give that up, we might as well give it all up.

Subject: Re: What are we fighting for anyway? (my views, part 5)

To: nurse216, vitalis.list@hunter-net.org

From: lotus19

Nurse, I'll say right off that I agree about keeping some connections. But you can take community too far. I recently ran into one of us hiding out in the countryside. He had a little clutch of chosen with him. I saw three others, but I think there may be more. He is building a community of his own where he wants to await the "great flood" and reemerge like a new Noah. That's his language, not mine.

"Noah" tried to recruit me into his little ark and was quite resistant to any arguments I made about fighting the monsters or protecting the blind. He said that in the Old Testament, Noah didn't waste time saving the blind. He just built his ark. He takes the ability to hide from the monsters as a sign that that's what he should be doing.

I got away from him eventually, but he seemed convinced that I'd be back. Part of his community, as it were.

Gave me the bloody shivers.

My friends, my neighbors, they are not expendable. They depend on me and I depend on them.

SAFETY

I'm sure some people will call me some very nasty names for saying we need to keep in touch with our community and our loved ones. I stick by it. Without that connection, I really think you're on the road to burnout. And what good is that?

Still, I don't want people thinking that I suggest telling everyone what you know and not taking any precautions. I have an open heart, but we've all heard the stories of what some of the locos on the other side will do to your family. There are sharks out there who will take your trust and use it to hurt your family. So, yes, be careful.

Like everyone else, your family has been victimized by some of the abusers. Most of the time, even if they saw some of the nastier things, they wouldn't understand. I saw enough abuse to know what it's like — you ignore it long enough and you just forget, or convince yourself that you have. It's a vicious circle, but you have to be very careful with it. If you come right out and tell your sister that you see vampires in the grocery store, she'll think you're the one who needs help. Eventually she'll call someone. Pretty soon that will make both of you targets.

So you have to play a careful game with your family and friends. You *should* turn to them for help if you absolutely need to, but even then try to use words they'll understand. I know that before my son died, if he had told me some gangster wanted to kill him, I would have protected him. If he told me a devil was after him with a flaming pitchfork, I'd have called a doctor.

When you're not in immediate danger, you should try to help your friends and family wake up. You don't want them walking into the arms of a zombie bully, after all. Warn them about things threatening your community. Tell them signs to watch out for. I should say that I tried using the signs we've developed for this, but it doesn't really

From: hope123

To: vitalis.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Safety for all

One of the things that bothers me most is why only we can see what is happening. My son, my husband, my friends — none of them realize that there are dangerous things, more dangerous than Palestinians or Syrians. I know some of you will think this is crazy, but knowing that the dangers are there, I'm glad I can see them. The voices from above, they may have shown us fearful things but we do have ways to fight back and stay safe. When I see a drunken man in the street, I know to look at him and see if he is a golem or other creature. If he is, I know how to avoid him or deal with him — or at least I can try. Before, I was helpless. The rest of the people I love still are.

But I have found a way to help them. Of course, I do what everyone does. I've told people that they should tell me if they see something strange. I try to keep my son in sight when he is home from school. But I cannot be with him all the time and I cannot leave him defenseless. Now, I think I have found a solution.

It isn't easy to understand, but I think there is a way for him to take part of me with him. You all know the signs we use? I've seen them here online and they are the same in Israel. Well, I put one on a patch on my son's jacket and told him it was a gift. It thought that if something happened maybe another one of us would see the sign and help.

Instead, a few days later I got a premonition (that's the word, yes?) that something was wrong with him. He was at school and I drove very quickly to get there. It isn't far away from our home, so it only took a few minutes. I was very afraid the whole way. My son was hiding in a corner, behind a big garbage bin, and ran out when he saw me. He said a man had scared him.

I never saw this man, but I *know* it was a creature of some sort. I cannot explain why, but I know. Just like I know the patch helped protect my son.

The next day, I started working on a new gift for my son. Last year we went on a hike in the hills. It was a very happy time for us and we both remember it and still talk about it. My son kept a branch he found as a souvenir, and that is what I used to help him. Many years ago I used to carve a great deal and I still have the tools — every year I make dreidels for my son and my nieces and nephews — so I started carving the branch. I was hard because the wood had cracks in it, but I eventually turned it into a necklace of beads. Each bead has a symbol on it and my son now wears it.

Twice this necklace has helped my son to escape from "bad men." It has given him an idea of what is out there, or at least the sense to avoid the dangerous things. I do not know if I could make such a thing for another person, but I sleep better knowing he is protected.

I will provide more information by private messages, if you wish.

Shalom,

— Hope



work. I tried to show my friend Maria the one that means "danger" but she could never remember it. It was like when mi hijo had so many problems in mathematics. It just never made sense to him. Maria said all the signs I showed her looked alike. I find this very frustrating.

I've also learned that you have to be careful when you go out to look for *them*. One of the first times I met John and Daniel, we ended up in the canals of Los Angeles — you know the ones for when it rains too much. It was very bad. We found a nest of rats deep in the tunnels. Some of these rats were very big and we even saw three that walked upright. They were all *wrong*, if you know what I mean. I was watching when they saw John. The rats swarmed after him — hundreds of them! — and the rat-men came after him, too. We all ran and John and Daniel used their guns. It was very bad but we managed to get away. It was only later that John realized he had lost his wallet while in the tunnels.

Three days later, John called me from a pay phone and asked if I could help him. When he got to his apartment that evening, the entire building was full of rats. He just drove away, knowing they must have gotten his address from his driver's license.

SANCTUARY

It was after John lost his home that Daniel set up the safe house I've mentioned. I think we should all do this if we can. Daniel knows people who allowed him to get an especially good place that would not attract attention, but it's important that we all try to have a safe place like this.

I think these places are so important for a couple reasons. Most obviously is the safety involved. Having a shelter from the other side can be very important. And, although it has not hap-

pened to me, there are some of us who need places to hide from police or other authorities. A safe house could be the answer.

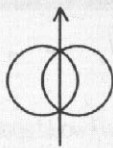
Even more than safety, though, I liked Daniel's place because it allowed me to talk to others. Yes, I have hunter-net, but it isn't the same as face to face communication. No one on hunter-net can laugh — even with all the :-) and other clever things — one there can hold my hand. Talking is much easier face

STAYING IN TOUCH

Even without the safe houses, it is important for all to keep in touch. Hunter-net is a wonderful tool for that (thank you, Witness!). It's not the only one. The call sometimes leads us to meet one another in person. When we do, we should establish ways (safe ways) to communicate. One of Daniel's friends knows a great deal about telephones and he has used them many times. The key is to have ways to get help when you need it and pass on warnings and information.

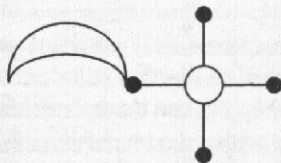
One of the greatest tools we have for this, of course, is the symbols we all seem to use. I know there are many in my area, because I have seen symbols I did not put up. It's amazing and wonderful that we all seem to understand the same messages. To know that someone in Hong Kong or Cairo sees these symbols as I do is a great comfort to me. It means we have an overall plan, even if we do not perceive it.

A friend has shown me how to use a computer scanner. I have sent a picture of some symbols to hunter-net. To see them, [click here](#). These are symbols I have used and I know Daniel has used them, too (without me showing them to him). Has anyone else? Hope I23, are any of these on your boy's necklace?

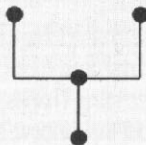


NURSE'S CODES

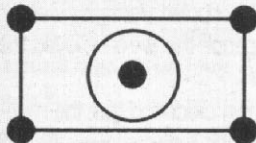
Open heart or mind: I personally feel some identification with this symbol, as if it means me. None of the other chosen I know have felt the same, so it can't apply to us all. Essentially, it seems to represent the importance of community, communication and maintaining contact to help each other. Does anyone else on Vitalis have the same feeling?



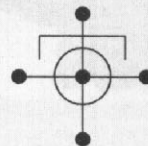
Friendly: This is the symbol I wish my son could wear. It means that a "monster" is known to one of us and we have a relationship with it. Never harm a "friendly" unless there's no other choice! (I should mention that John had a very hard time understanding this symbol when I showed it to him. I wonder if being so angry made it difficult.)



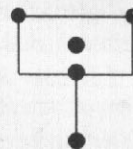
Harmless: I use this to mark areas where there are ghosts or other things that aren't dangerous to anyone — what some of us call "pups." If you see this symbol, please keep out or leave the occupants in peace.



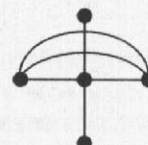
Help: Daniel showed me this symbol. Any one of us can put this up if we have a serious problem. If you see this, it must become your first priority to find the person in need and see what you can do. If we can't count on each other, we're lost.



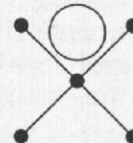
Lost/Burnout: This sign also means that one of us needs help, but in a different way. It means one of us is becoming excessive in the mission or is losing spirit for it. People like this can be very violent or just hiding, but they need your aid. If you use this sign, be careful because some burnouts can take it as an attack. Thankfully, my experience is that the most violent ones don't seem able to understand the symbol, so they may not know you "insult" them.



Shark: Some people call anyone who is friendly toward the other side "bait." That's led us to call people and things who appear friendly but who are really intent on hurting "sharks." They go for the bait. If you see this symbol, be very cautious when dealing with anything or anyone you meet. Don't put this sign up lightly.



Talker: This sign means a "monster" is open to communication, to talking. If you see it, you know that at least one other imbued has talked with it. (Again, John had a very hard time with this one.)



Death: This symbol makes me grieve, at least in the few times I have seen it. It marks the place where someone has died, I believe, because I feel remorse and loss in its presence. Perhaps I feel this way because there's so much anger and violence between the other side and us. Death is usually pointless and might have been avoided if we had sought other paths. John has no trouble understanding this sign and actually seems to be invigorated by it.

MISTAKES

From: sixofswords29

To: vitalis.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Alarm bells

All right people, it looks like our worst fears about Fyodor may be justified. I've had another letter from Bookworm. I think this one confirms what we've suspected. Those of you who wish to do something to help Bookworm, please contact me directly and we'll try to organise a search instead of these piecemeal efforts.

Dear SoS,

I've been doing a lot of thinking thanks to my traveling companion. Fyodor's latest little kick is not repeating the mistakes of the past. He keeps asking me about what I'm prepared to do and absolutely won't do while answering the call.

The tragedy up in Montreal has really made me rethink my attitudes. I made a mistake. I got hurt. So did Andy. Okay, it was partially his own doing, but I bear some of the blame.

Did Oracle make a mistake? Did her actions lead to all those chosen dying?

I can't be the emotionless observer who wrote The Enemy post anymore. I can't be the cocky advisor of the Vitalis page anymore, either. I've got to start being myself and that means accepting limits.

LIMITS

We can only go so far, do so much. We're not gods, whatever some people's hunter-net handles claim. I'm not giving up my life like I've given up my limbs. That doesn't help anybody. With each one of us that dies, the balance swings a little more toward the soldiers, and that would undo anything we achieve.

That's why I created my rules and posted them on Vitalis. We can't afford to be gung-ho about the way we do things. However, thinking back over them, they apply more to the imbued as a whole than to me and others like me.

What am I prepared to do? Would I steal or hurt someone to help bring the misguided back onto the right path? No, I couldn't. If I have to behave in evil ways to bring out the good in someone else, I haven't actually done any overall good, have I?

Am I prepared to let one of the other side hurt a person? No. Am I prepared to let one of us hurt one of them who doesn't deserve it? No.

There is good and there is evil and it's in all of us. Trying to turn people to good isn't much use if you aren't prepared to stand up to evil too, whoever's doing it.

That's why my Enemy post weighs so heavily on my conscience. I know I addressed some of the mistakes I made there on Vitalis, but all this time alone has allowed me to do some more thinking. How could we deal with the other side in a more positive way?

Hey, SoS, do me a favor will you? Post this next bit to hunter-net for me. It might undo some of the damage that my last attempt did.

VAMPIRES

I bet you thought I'd start here, didn't you? I talk about one particular vampire rather a lot, don't I? I know I sound like a lovesick teenager, but that's what I am, at least for the next few months. Sometimes I feel a lot older than that.

Phaedra showed me the way, though. Yes, vampires need to drink blood. No, they don't need to kill. If we can make them see that, then we have done some good.

Think what they can offer the world. The memories and knowledge of ages! Phaedra had held books that I can only dream of. Think of the perspective hundreds of years of life offers. If their long-term views played a part in the decisions that governments make, how many mistakes could be avoided?

Fyodor says that I'm obsessed. "These vampires are monsters," he insists. "One took your legs and you wish to give them more control? Are your senses gone, too?"

No, they're not. Just because I can see what could be doesn't mean that I ignore what is. If I believe what Phaedra told me, then vampires are a manipulative, secretive lot. We have to teach them to trust. Think how hard it would be for them to unlearn the lessons of centuries. We have to give them that chance, and they'll need help.

WARLOCKS

I've commented before that warlocks seem the most like us, the most accessible. I think we have a long way to go before we understand them, though. They seem extremely self-obsessed.

Perhaps their power makes them think they're above the run of us "mere mortals." They seem to face the same danger that some of us do. By isolating themselves from humanity, maybe they forget its value.

Look at the way some soldiers and hometown heroes behave. Suddenly they're better than the rest of us. They have this great mission and nothing can stop them.

That was the same impression I got from Purple. He was too caught up in his own concerns to think about the world around him. He paid for our coffee by making money fall from someone else's wallet. He only thought about his own immediate needs and not the effects on the person he stole from.

I guess that I pandered to his point of view. When I talked with Purple, I viewed him as a warlock first and as a person second. I was wrong to do that.

If I was given a second chance now, I would approach him as a person first and foremost. Then I might have a chance of making him see my side of things.

Think of the good these warlocks could do, if only they worked for all of humanity and not just themselves. Think of how Merlin led Arthur and his knights to Camelot. Oh, to have that happen for real.

GOBLINS

You know, I'm still not convinced that these things aren't just a misunderstood kind of ghost. I don't know anything more about them than I did when I wrote *The Enemy*, so I don't feel I can say any more here.

WEREWOLVES

I've only seen one of these, and it scared me senseless. It was so "outraged" seems such an inadequate word to describe it. My guts tell me that I never want to see another one, but my brain tells me another story.

There's something so primal about them. Perhaps they can help me prove my theory that we're all part of the same world, one that just needs to understand itself again. Perhaps we can help deal with the menace they seem to exude.

Perhaps I'll have to seek one out. The idea terrifies me.

GHOSTS

Now, I can't claim a lot of personal experience with ghosts, either, but all those posts from Carpenter 169 and Ichmail on hunter-net have fired up my curiosity again.

Fyodor has done his best to discourage me. "You're not ready," he said last time. He locked me in my hotel room the next day. He claimed it was an accident, but I'm not so sure. Thanks to my wheelchair, I wasn't exactly in a position to climb out the window, so I had no way out.

Still, if any credence can be put in what Carpenter had to say, most ghosts have a reason for being here. They have unfinished things that keep them tied to our world. What better way of dealing with them than by helping them?

What if they're still people? I'm sure death changes you, but then so does the imbuing or being crippled. Perhaps if we start treating ghosts like people, like the spirits of people that we once loved, they will start acting like people and not monsters.

I know from my own childhood that the more you're abused, the more you want to strike back. If we can break the cycle perhaps we stand a real chance of bringing them around to our point of view.

What worries me is the danger. Some spirits seem to be utterly malignant, like Carpenter himself. How can we tell which is which? I wouldn't do anyone any good by getting myself hurt again.

END OF INNOCENCE

What do we do when the other side won't listen? If I'm going back out there I have to accept that possibility.

Just as with humans, there will be those on the other side who won't listen, who don't care, who are, by anyone's standards, evil. Then there are sharks, the ones who try and use our trusting natures against us.

They have to be dealt with. In the end, fighting evil is part of trying to do good. In human society, the answer is easy. You turn them over to the police and let the justice system deal with them.

How and when do we make that decision with the being we deal with? And how do we act on it?

I don't know. Perhaps this is where the other imbued have a role. I need to think through a bit more. Perhaps I should raise it with Fyodor. Maybe then he'll think I'm "ready."

Yours,

"Bookworm"

SICKNESS

To: vitalis.list@hunter-net.org

From: nurse216

Subject: "Us" vs. "Them"? (my views, part 6)

There are people on this list who've done a lot more than I have. I've never been on a midnight raid in the Mexican desert or anything like that. So maybe what I'm going to say sounds silly. I'm just a single mother who's seen her life turned inside out and is trying to do right by her family. But just maybe that gives me some insight that all you soldiers don't have.

What I keep wondering is if we aren't making a mistake in dealing with the "monsters" out there. We all know they exist. They're bizarre and they seem to be doing a lot of bad things. I guess I can understand the urge to use a gun and start shooting. But I think we're paying too much attention to *what* these things are, not to *why* they are. We're looking at symptoms and not causes.

I mean, we call them "monsters." In stories, heroes slay monsters and that's that, right? But what if there's more to it?

About six years ago (that seems like a very long time ago, now) I did a rotation in the mental ward. I was doing the stuff that makes people hate nurses — taking temps, giving meds, adjusting beds. I always tried to do it all with a smile because it's very easy to treat patients like numbers. So I got to meet all the patients of the ward, and I will be honest, they scared me.

Some were friendly and happy and even made me laugh. But there were people there who looked at me like I was from another world. I could feel their stare move through me and to somewhere else. One woman kept muttering and her breath smelled so bad that I had to fight not to vomit. It takes a lot to do that to a nurse. Part of me wanted to run away and never see those people again, even to hurt them for being different and frightening. Two things kept me sane. First, I knew hurting them was wrong. Second, I knew they were sick.

That's what I think is going on here. These people — these "monsters" — are sick.

USED AND ABUSED

We have to start thinking of the reasons these things do what they do. And then we have to make distinctions based on that, not on what people look like. Judge by actions, not by appearances.

Three months ago, I walked into a little coffee shop and saw what no one else ever did: the waitress with no legs who was standing there, endlessly refilling a coffee cup that even I couldn't see. I'd been in this place off and on for years and I realized right then that I'd never seen anyone sit at the corner table she was "serving."

That's the extent of the harm this "monster" was doing, filling a coffee cup. I got up and sat at that table and looked at her. Really *looked*. Not at the fact that her body faded into nothing below her waist, but at her eyes and face. She was about my age and had the most beautiful brown eyes I'd ever seen. Everything else about her looked faded and worn, but not her eyes. There were bruises on her face. Like my sister had. From a belt. Her name tag said Angela.

I didn't think about destroying this "monster." I saw a woman, a person who'd been hurt and used and probably killed by someone she loved. She was stuck in that diner, with even the flies ignoring her, because it was the only place she ever got away from him. I reached for the invisible coffee cup and whispered "Gracias, Angela. That's fine."

VITALIS CHAT SESSION

<sixofwords29> Is it all right to start talking?
Sorted. The chat room is as secure as I can make it.
Thanks. Right, we all know why we're here?
Sí. We are all of us worried about Bookworm.

Right then. The first thing we need to do is find him and then we can work on getting him away from this Fyodor. His last letter was postmarked Detroit. Any of us within striking distance?

Anyone?

Great.

Perhaps we could try to recruit some sympathetic hunters from hunter.list? I mean, I don't share the same views as you guys, but I'm helping, right?

That's a good idea. Let's leave God45 and his sort out of it, though.

Perhaps we ought to bring in Witness1. He could help us find some hunters with the right attitude on the main list who might be close enough to follow up the lead.

I'll invite him. He's usually online.

Done.

>witness1 has entered the room<

Thanks for coming, Witness. I need to ask a favour of you. I presume Dole7 has filled you in on why we're here.

Yes, he has. I'll do what I can.

Could you put out a general call on hunter-net for all posters within traveling distance of Detroit to contact you?

We're worried some of them might try to go after Bookworm like they're hunting Oracle.

Sí, sí, we want to weed out the angry ones that might want to hurt our friend.

Let me think about it. I'll get back to you.

>witness1 has left the room<

It's not good, is it? Poor Oracle and Bookworm both out there, beyond our reach.

I know, Nurse. But we'll do what we can.

She stopped pouring and looked at me. "He didn't mean it. The gun wasn't supposed to be loaded." Then she cried a moment and disappeared.

Angela was not a monster. She was a victim.

The next week Daniel, John and I met a businessman with rotting skin who began following us. John used a shotgun on him. And then gasoline when he kept coming. I wondered who had hurt this man so much that he would become a walking corpse.

HATE AND ANGER

I can already hear the voices out there. What about the nasty things, the "bullies" or "sharks"? They kill babies and rape women. They enslave us all and kill us when we stand in their way.

Yes, these things exist, too. The abused often becomes the abuser, as I've said before. Several weeks ago, I saw three women killed in the most horrible way before John, Daniel and I could stop the beast. If we hadn't stopped him, he would have killed again. He told

us so! He growled like a dog and said to us that he was "culling the herd." He sounded proud. I closed my eyes when the gunfire started.

There are monsters, but their actions make them so. The others called the monster we killed "the troll" because he had long claws and long hair. But he was a monster because he took joy from killing young women. He stalked them and tortured them and ate their hearts. There was nothing left in him but hate, anger and power.

I wish we could have done something else. That we had to kill him hurts me. I don't even know what his name was. When I asked, all he did was howl and gurgle. He was one of the people who is so sick that you have no choice. We couldn't let him kill again. But I wish there had been another way.

It scares me that some of you don't wish that.

TYPES OF SICKNESS

To: vitalis.list@hunter-net.org

From: nurse216

Subject: Ghosts and others (my views, part 7)

Okay, I suppose I will have to talk about the different kinds of things on the other side. Some of you were not happy when I said there was too much talk about "biology of monsters" on hunter-net. Yes, Doctor119, I will tell you what I know.

I should say up front that much of the following discussion is about ghosts. They are the people on the other side I have the most experience with. I've mentioned meeting walking dead and rat-men and the troll, but it is only with ghosts that I have managed to have a real conversation. So please take what I say seriously, but understand that it only comes from what I have lived myself.

UNMOURNED AND ALONE

I've told you about my son, how he died and how I stopped him from killing that other boy. I still see him. He comes home — or even finds me other places — every few nights. We talk when he comes and I try to see if he's okay. It's not easy, but I think we talk more now than we ever did the year before he died and all this happened.

He doesn't like to talk too much about the way things are for him now. Mostly he sits there and listens to me and we talk about when he was a boy. We remember the good times we had, and sometimes the bad. About his father and my father. Most times, I cry.

I think it all makes him feel better, though. He likes to remember when he was alive because he's lonely and cold. That's what he said to me the first day at the hospital. "Mama, I'm so cold."

I think people like him who are dead are very alone and very afraid. I think about what it would be like to die, to lose everything but still be there. I imagine just being in my home, without any Heaven waiting, watching life go on. New people would move in, my things would be sold off or thrown out, my photographs and diary would be lost. Those I loved would go on with their lives, find someone new and slowly forget about me. I couldn't do anything but I'd have to watch. Can you think of something more sad?

This must be why some ghosts are angry. They've lost everything and been forgotten and they get mad. Most don't want to hurt anyone, I think. They just want attention. If we answer back with violence, it just tells them that anger is the way to get what they want. Listen to them. Try to understand what they need from you. Maybe it's just to tell them you've had enough coffee.

Subject: A further observation

To: vitalis.list@hunter-net.org

From: doctor119

I must confess that I have perused this message board almost exclusively for the insights on spectral behavior that I hope Nurse216 will provide. She has personal experience that I think will help complete my own research, or at least further it. I see little of value in her endless moralizing without any empirical backing.

In the interest of cooperation and the exchange of information, however, I believe some of my evidence may support the contention that the preternatural subjects we have uncovered suffer from conditions that may be comparable to human diseases. The strongest corollary I have detected regards the blood-consuming subjects some refer to as "vampires." Their desire for plasma seems to function very much like a severe addiction. One subject I tracked earlier this year exhibited all the classic mannerisms of a true junkie, including nightly efforts to find his "fix," obvious euphoria from ingesting blood and (when we he was cornered in a cellar for several hours) signs of withdrawal.

It is possible that this blood-addiction is the result of some thus-far unidentified pathogen. If such is the case, then perhaps other kinds of monstrous behavior and abilities have similar origins.

I will update you on my research.

From everything that my son has told me, I don't think the categories Bookworm established really have any meaning. "Poltergeists" and "possessors" and "ghosts" are all the same thing — people who have died and not passed on. Being a ghost, I think, means it is an effort to continue to exist and be in the world. When a ghost gets weak, it only appears sometimes, or only remembers part of its life, or one thing. They get to feel so alone that they just do one thing again and again. That can be hammering a nail or smashing a mirror.

The thing you have to understand is that ghosts change. I've seen my son look exactly like he did in life. At other times I can see right through him. Another day I can see the three gunshot wounds that killed him. Once I came home and he was jumping on the bed like when he was a little boy. He vanished as soon as I turned on the light. I've seen him three times on the street corner where he was shot, just lying there. The poltergeist you face one night could be the weeping phantom you console the next day.

WHAT TO DO

Now I look out for ghosts wherever I go. I suggest you do the same.

They usually hide in corners and watch us. Or stand out of the way and just stay there. People don't notice them, but I've almost never seen people actually walk through them. We unconsciously avoid the dead, I think.

When you find a ghost, ask yourself if you have to do anything just yet. This is a phantom of someone who lived and died and is suffering. Reaching for a weapon is not appropriate. Watch the poor soul and see what it wants, what it needs.

When you want to make contact, do that. Make contact. Speak to the ghost. Try to touch it, but do so gently. Treat this person as you

would a child. The ghost is scared and alone and may have given up hope. Try to befriend it and see if there's anything you can do for it. Or just talk. Most of them welcome conversation and a smile.

Some of us apparently have gifts that can hurt or scare ghosts away. Only use these if you absolutely have to, to save a life or prevent a tragedy. I've met several violent and nasty ghosts (one of them destroyed my kitchen and living room in a fit, and even threw knives at me), but even they seem desperate for communication. They are like children having a tantrum. If you can ride it out, you can usually get through to them.

One thing it took me a while to realize is that it's *difficult* for ghosts to reach out to us. Some may want to speak, but all they can do is cause fear or move objects. I think they can often hear us, though, so speaking is still worthwhile. I think that if you show that you are open to talking, it may be less difficult for them to reach out, but it's never easy. If a ghost talks to you — even if it's screaming — it has expended a great deal of effort to do so. Listen.

WALKING WITHOUT END

I think I should tell you about the zombito now. (John, Daniel, I hope you are reading this. Remember, this is the creature you wanted to shoot and kill.)

I went again to the playground a few nights ago, hoping to find the little baby "walker" (to use Bookworm's name for it) that I saw several weeks back. I'd returned a few times without luck, but this time it was different. I saw it there moving in the shadows and I tried to get closer. The angel's voice was strong, so it didn't see me come near.

It was crawling — still like an insect. It looked very strange because it appeared to be a normal baby, but moved very oddly. It's skin was pale but its limbs seemed to work differently now — it moved around on its toes and fingers with its joints bent at the elbow and knee like a bug. Its head seemed to go all the way around, too.

It moved around a bundle about its own size. It would nudge the bundle and then crawl back, nudge it and crawl back. After a few minutes, it started pulling at the cloth wrapping with one of its hands. It took a great deal of time, but it finally got one of the sheets off and exposed what was inside: another baby. This one was blue and truly dead.

I screamed and the zombito finally saw me. It scurried off in a rush, but I went after it, this time running with all my might. I saw it go into the construction site and I followed.

(Yes, even I wondered if it had killed that baby in the playground. But please keep reading before you jump to conclusions.)

It took me several hours of walking around quietly to find it. It must have lost track of me (thanks to the angels for that). It crawled out of a drain pipe and went back to the playground. I let it go and crouched down to enter the pipe. It was very big for the baby, but quite small for me. The smell was horrible and I only understood why once I used my flashlight.

There were other baby corpses there. I stopped myself from screaming again and counted. Six bodies, still in bundles, and the sheets for one more. Along with the poor child left back at the courtyard, that made eight — including the zombito.

I was about to turn back when I heard it coming. I pressed myself up against the edge of the drain and it scurried past, not even noticing. I watched it then. It unwrapped another baby and started nudging it, trying to get it to move. It just kept doing that, first to one body, then another. I finally left.

But I understood something: movement is life. I think that little baby wanted its friends (siblings maybe?) to move — and live.

SOME THEORIES

I think that these "walking dead" are just like ghosts in some ways, except maybe they're in more pain. They have come back into their own bodies but somehow know they have died. I think they do things so that they feel more alive — moving, running, fighting. Anything to *feel*.

I cannot know for sure, but maybe the three types Bookworm told us about (hidden, walkers and shamblers) are more like three stages. The deader a person is (if you understand me), the more extreme things he must do to feel alive. When he is least dead (like a hidden), he does complex, normal things like having a job. When he is most dead (like a shambler), all he can do is yell and fight to feel alive.

If these are stages, I wonder what direction the evolution goes? Do they become more or less dead as time goes on? What can we do to make them more alive?

In the case of the zombito, I'm sure part of the answer lies in what happened to it and the other babies. I recognized the blankets from the hospital maternity ward, so I am going to find out what happened. I think I will find an abuser of the worst sort.

WILD AND UNBOUND

The dead do not scare me as much as the wild things, and I am not sure why. The swarm of rats and the hairy troll-thing have colored my view, I guess.

The feeling I get from the ghosts and zombies is loneliness and sadness. From the few beast-people I have seen, I get anger. I wonder where this anger comes from and I hope to find a time when one will tell me.

The only advice I can give for these is to be aware that they are full of rage. Try to be as quiet and careful as possible if you see one. If one does speak to you, be polite and friendly (but be cautious too!).

I wish I could offer more insight.

BEGINNING THE HUNT

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: xxx289

Subject: What to do?

I worked hard all my life and did all the right things. I believed that if you put your nose to the grindstone and pulled your weight, you would be rewarded for your effort — almost karmically, if you believe in that crap. That's the way the world is supposed to work. It's just that most people don't recognize it because they're too busy pulling their puds, being useless and riding the coattails of the few who are better.

That's what I thought was true, anyway. That all changed when I discovered my boss wasn't the person I believed him to be, but a thing. That's when my understanding of the world — and myself, I guess — changed.

Well, my understanding of the world changed and it was reinforced, really. I always knew most people weren't worth the air they polluted. Now I had concrete proof that it was a lot worse than I ever imagined. Apparently all my hard work had done me good, but it hadn't won me the success and rewards that I thought it would. Instead, it won me the right to remain a redeeming, worthwhile person instead of devolving into a freakish nightmare that only paid

lip service to being good and decent. I guess you can't look the gift horse in the mouth.

Problem is, what do I do now that I know the truth? Everything I've always measured myself against is out of whack. Apparently the life I've lived has been the right one, because it allowed me to become aware of the real truth, but where do I go from here? I keep coming in to work and watching the thing that works only a few doors down from me. I try to stay out of its way, but sometimes I have to pass it in the hall. I try to hide behind closed doors as much as I can, but there's only so long you can cloister yourself away, trying to stay alert, before you have to go out and just eat or piss.

The really scary part is, now I'm seeing them on the street, too. I even saw a thing on TV last night on the news. "My" monster isn't the only one I've seen any more. What am I supposed to do, hide from them all? I'd have to hide in my home all day, avoiding even the TV or radio because I might see or hear one of them. Is that what happened to Howard Hughes when he went insane? He was an achiever. Did he learn the truth, too?

So far, I can't let myself acknowledge or focus on the other ones that I've seen. When I'm in traffic on the way here, I just keep my eyes focused on the road ahead of me. I don't turn my head at stop lights, because one of them might be right beside me, waiting to bring a better person down with it.

I think what I have to do is watch and wait. If I'm going to continue to become stronger from what I know about the world now, I have to see how truly bad these things are. I'm going to watch my boss and see what he does, how far he's really fallen. Maybe then I'll know how far a person has to slide before he finally dies inside.

THE PLAN

Amazing. I don't know why I never saw it before. After several days of keeping my head down and watching out my window into the main office, I've discovered that my boss leaves - a lot. I never even considered it before, and no one around seems to care or pay attention, either. Obviously I'm the only one who's woken up to it. I mean, he spends only minutes

at a time in the building, like he's got an agenda elsewhere and isn't really doing anything at all here anymore (assuming he ever did).

I guess that means I have a lot more freedom than I thought. If he's gone most of the day, I can use that time to do things in my own favor, learn more about what it's been doing here, and maybe what it's up to elsewhere. Its weakness is my strength. Who knows, maybe I can even show some of the others what this thing really is.

EXPLORATION

I did it. I took a chance, I did it and I got away with it. It was out of the office again. I waited till lunch when most of the staff was out and I snuck into the office manager's petty cash drawer. I know stealing is wrong, but this is stealing from the worst of all people, so how can that be wrong? Besides, I had a plan. I took the money - several hundred dollars - and stashed it in my boss' office where the cleaning staff would find it.

It wasn't long before the OM discovered the theft. When the boss arrived, I suppose she told him, because he raised a stink about someone stealing. Things turned for the better - better than I ever planned - when an office-wide search was conducted. No one expected to find anything. Who would be dumb enough to leave the evidence to be found here? Well, who except a person who would expect to be above suspicion? The boss invited others to search his office as a protocol, I guess to suggest that he was no better than they were. Imagine the amazement when the cash turned up hidden under a chair cushion.

There was a major buzz. He claimed innocence and insisted that someone had planted the money. He was the boss, he claimed. Why would he need to steal from his own company? That might have made sense, but suspicion had been raised. What was the boss really up to? And hey, how come he hadn't really been in very much, anyway? Has he got some habit to support? Slipping some things into the rumor mill was easy. Everyone was eyeing him sideways after that.

I don't think he noticed me smiling.

DISCOVERIES

I found something out today. I think I have a weird way of looking at the things that reveals their true faces - not just the ones they show to the general idiots. I was in traffic, feeling confident after what I'd done to him, I guess, when I took another chance. I let myself look around at the other drivers.

It took a while. Most of them were the regular crap that I've always known - cutting each other off, turning without signaling, doing their make-up behind the wheel. The idiots that abuse the world simply by existing. But then I pulled up next to one. He was a teenager, I think. Not someone I expected to be one of them. At worst, I expected him to be one of those useless kids who doesn't pay attention in school, who does drugs and drinks all the time, who listens to rap and pretends to belong to a culture that was never intended for him. At first I simply knew that he was wrong. When I looked harder, I recognized that he had this weird blue-black glow to

Subject: The Angel's love

From: oracle171

To: vitalis.list@hunter-net.org

Doctor119, the angel glowed when I read your junkie-theory. I remember dealing with addicts too and the parallels are so clear. Just like addicts, we need to give them support but also not give in. Tough love.

In this new city, I found (with the angel's love) a group of addicts. They were blood-drinkers, taking hits from a dying creature they kept in a cellar. I saw its past and saw it cry. It was the victim, so I showed them the light.

They burned because they could not give up their addiction. I freed the imprisoned soul and it thanked me and went into the city.

I feel such joy.

him. I'd never seen anything like it. I watched him for a few moments. I don't know what he really was.

That's when it happened. Just before the traffic light changed, he seemed to sense that someone was watching him. He glanced in his rearview mirror, then out his passenger window, then right at me. I was smiling. Our eyes met – and he looked scared. He tore off when the light changed. I let him go.

The experience gives me an idea. More like an inspiration. Did that kid see the same light I did when I made the change? Could he understand that I was his complete opposite, one of the truly good people versus his absolute corruption? I felt the same energy then that I did the first time, in front of my boss that day. My boss never seemed to notice the change, but I did. This time, when I actually tried to draw up the same feeling, the kid knew I was there and was scared. Could I do the same to my boss – let him know that I know and put him on the defensive?

I think I need to try. I've worked here for years. Who knows how long I've been torn at and held down by it, not wanting me to rise higher than it has. Envious of me for being strong on my own and not at the expense of others. Maybe it's time I put him on the run.

CONFRONTATIONS

I did it! I put him in his place!

The police were at the office today, interviewing people about the money. I guess the boss

called them to deflect guilt from himself, as if he wanted to prove his innocence by being pardoned officially. He might have been innocent of theft, but he was guilty of a lot worse.

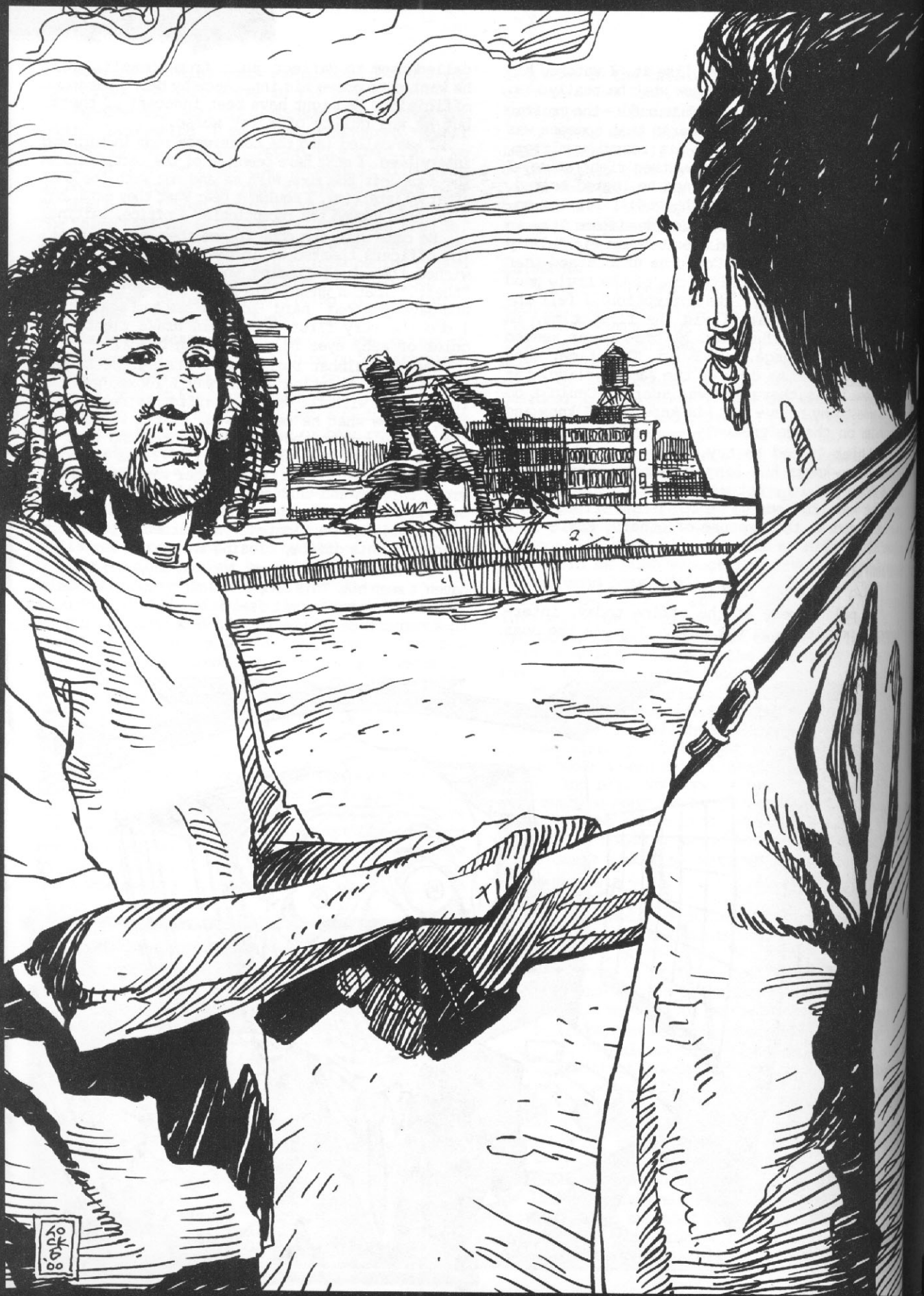
I was called into the conference room in turn and interviewed. I must have been one of the last, because the cops left the room with me and met with the boss after my interview. I couldn't hear what they said, but I loitered around the receptionist's office, waiting.

He came with the cops to see them out the door. The officers thanked me in passing for my help. I wished them luck finding whoever was behind the "theft." That's when I did it. I turned to my boss and gave him that hard look. I saw him again like I did the very first time: skin drawn tight, the color of ash, eyes bulging, teeth black.

My eyes almost burned as I stared. He seemed taken aback, startled at the way I looked at him. It was like with the kid in traffic. He recognized that I knew what he really was, that I was one of the people rising above the dung heap and that he was at the very bottom. It was like I was a living reminder of everything he no longer was. That he was wrong through and through. I think the shame of it overwhelmed him. He didn't face me long and didn't even challenge me. Instead, he turned quickly and headed for his office, closing the door behind him.

I'm about to leave work for the day, and I still haven't seen him. This time I've left my door open while I type. This time I don't feel like I have to look busy to avoid notice. Maybe there's hope yet.





CHAPTER 3:

IN IT TOGETHER

He that is first in his own cause seemeth just; but his neighbour cometh and searcheth him.

— Proverbs 18:17

ALL FOR ONE

To: vitalis.list@hunter-net.org

From: nurse216

Subject: Getting together (my views, part 8)

Great news! Daniel let me back into the safe house last night. John wasn't there and no one could tell me where he was, but there was a whole group of others. A dozen in all, some coming from much farther away than me. (If anyone else on the list was there and wants to send me a message, please go ahead.)

The bond I felt with Daniel (and that I'd shared in the past with John) spread to the other people. I won't share any names or details for safety's sake, but we talked like old friends. It was very much the same thing as when I meet nurses from other hospitals. We don't know each other, but we know each other's lives and we can commiserate and laugh together. It's like hunter.list but more so, and without the attitude.

Don't get me wrong, WitnessI and Bookworm55 have done wonderful things with hunter-net. The ability to communicate with others from many countries is simply fantastic. But it's not everything.

Like I said, I think there were other list members there, but most people in that little house had never been online at all. They had no access to a computer or no desire to use it. If not for my job, I doubt I ever would have ended up here, either. We forget that on the list, I think. For each one of us who has a computer, there must be dozens without them. And that's just in my little corner of the world. What must it be like in Africa or South America? My cousin in Mexico has never used a computer and she is relatively well off.

The other thing this meeting gave me was a true sense of community. Here, I know there are people who will be willing to talk about many things, to share their views and give advice. In that small house, I met a man I know will protect me from danger and come to my aid when I call. I found a place where I can run to and a woman I can call when my son says angry things to me. It's a community and we need more of them.

Daniel's safe house has gone from being a place where a friend lives to a sort of "town hall" for all those who have heard the voice. I hope others will do the same. I know it's risky, but try to organize meetings with others like us. Make friendships and connections. I think a whole series of these sanctuaries, along with hunter-net, could really make us into a community across the globe instead of isolated people on the internet.

If we can stick together, surely we can change the world.

BURNOUT

Even if you think the chances of us really cooperating on a large scale are slim, getting together in groups is still worthwhile. It's really the only protection we have against burnout.

Following the plan is very, very difficult. It hurts and it's dangerous and sometimes we have to do things that we never thought we would. I can still see the troll dying when I close my eyes. I didn't say so before, but I shot it the last time, in the head. I did.

Without the support of others, that would eat away at me completely. I couldn't function. Some people think they're stronger than that and bottle up all the hurt from killing and running and everything we end up doing. They just set their jaws and walk back into the world, telling themselves they can handle it. Sound familiar? If that's you then you are very, very wrong.

Every time you bottle it up like that, you chip away at your soul and sanity. Pretty soon, you're bottling up everything. When was the last time you laughed? Cried? Or felt anything at all?

If you're having trouble answering those questions, please, *please*, email me or someone else on this list. Find one of us in your town or just talk to a friend who hasn't heard the call. You need to open up what you've been holding in.

If not, one of two things can happen. Either you'll explode and the next time someone cuts you off in traffic you'll reach for a gun. The line between nightmares and the unwary becomes too thin. Or, you'll stop feeling anything at all. You'll see defenseless people getting hurt and won't care. Eventually you'll stop everything because nothing matters. Our friend XXX289 strikes me as this sad person.

Let me give you some other examples.

I've received several disturbing emails about the troll I described. One of us seems fascinated by the creature. He even said:

>wish that I could have been there

>with you. That would have been quite the notch

>in the old post, worth twenty rots at least. What

>did you do with the pelt?

I hope this person is alone in his practices, but he has hinted that there are other such "game hunters" who seek out specific types of hidden to collect "kills," as if they were shooting ducks. This seems the ultimate reduction of these souls into mindless creatures, useful only for bragging rights.

This type of mentality strikes me as a defense against the horrors some of us face daily. Perhaps game hunters have already lost their way and seek out new nightmares to awaken their own emotions. I do not know, but it worries me.

I also worry about loners, those who reject any contact with others. (Violin and XXX, we only want to help.) Being alone in our life is not a good thing and it leads to despair. I know many of us have to flee our families and lives. The solution isn't to hide from the world, but to seek out others who understand. Traveler72 is a good example to follow. I think, if you need to move from place to place. In his stories on the survival guide page, you can see that he almost always finds others on the mission. He has no home, but he is never alone, is that the way to stay grounded, even on the run.

I suppose the ultimate loner is the person who cannot act when he hears the voice. I've heard some call them "bystanders" or even "duds," but I think they're just people. It isn't always easy to understand what happens to us, and they are trying. Let them take their time.

I will end this email with a personal note to the man I call John. John if you are on this list, please listen. (Daniel, if it's just you on the list, please get this to John. Gracias.) I'm very worried that you are burning out. I know you've seen some very bad things and lost your home, but remember that you still have friends.

CREEDS AND OPINIONS

From: sixofwords29

To: vitalis.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Bookworm's friend

Another letter from Bookworm. It looks like we've been beaten to it. He's hooked up with another hunt... sorry, chosen. I don't know quite what to make of her yet, but she's got to be a better influence on him than Fyodor.

Subject: Changing...

From: oracle171

To: bookworm55, vitalis.list@hunter-net.org

I arrived in a new town today. Or was it yesterday? The angel's voice is strong here and I can feel everything shifting around me. The gas station changed places twice in the first hour.

I remember having questions before Greece. Things like why and what and how... That all seems so pointless now. He'll want to put a gun in my face, that man will. I've lived it before/after/again. The angel knows.

I don't have any questions anymore. I don't need to know anything. Everything has already happened.

To: oracle171

CC: vitalis.list@hunter-net.org

From: nurse216

Subject: Stay with us!

Oracle,

Please stay with us. You have people here who will help you. You don't have to hide from us.

— Nurse

I think his other comments in the letter will be of interest to those following Nurse216's recent posts on the same subject.

Dear SoS,

I've met one of us. I was in the bus station buying us some tickets for our next trip when I saw her.

Bus stations are terrible places — full of lost luggage and lost souls. It was unseasonably cold. The folks waiting for friends and loved ones to arrive all looked washed out, bored and frustrated.

She'd just gotten off the coach from ("I have removed the name to protect this lady — SoS29"). I was watching the crowds while I was in line, and I saw her bag. It was a battered old case with enough airline tags on it to suggest some serious traveling. That wasn't the interesting thing, though. It had our symbol for ourselves sewn onto it.

I pushed out of the ticket line (no mean feat in a wheelchair) and went to intercept her. As I got closer, I could just make out the sign for "alone" next to the first sign. It looked as if she'd sewed it on too and had tried to remove it since. The stitch marks remained.

I'll say one thing for being in a wheelchair — women are less likely to think you're a creep when you strike up a conversation.

It took a fair amount of effort, but I eventually convinced Sally ("Name changed — SoS29") that I was one of us. She was overjoyed. I didn't think she'd stop hugging me. I wasn't sure I wanted her to.

She'd only ever known one other of us, a headshrinker from her neck of the woods. They worked together for a while, then had a disagreement over the best way to deal with one of the walking dead. While Sally was at work, the headshrinker dealt with the zombie permanently.

They haven't spoken to each other since.

Anyway, Sally is here on business. She was reluctant to tell me exactly what she did, though. She wanted to hear about other chosen, so that's what we spent the afternoon talking about.

COMPROMISES

Discussing others of our kind with Sally has really made me think about my relationships with other imbued. The group I used to hang with in Boston always looked down on me to some degree. I didn't have their drive for what they insisted on calling "the hunt." That's why I got more and more caught up in my personal research projects, I guess.

For a while I withdrew from other imbued. Once I'd lost my legs, I didn't feel like being reminded of what I'd been. The others tried to visit me in the hospital, but I turned them away. Then I weakened a little and joined the new hunter-net and lurked for a while. Eventually the bitterness and anger became too much and spilled out into my post *The Enemy*.

Perhaps I was trying to fit in with the others, again. Listening to their cal instead of my own. Others' recent treatment of Oracle has made me wonder if there's really any point to hunter-net at all, anymore. When it started we were all in the same boat. Confused, scared and uncertain.

Now that we've had a while to be like this, the cracks are showing. There's a dozen broad categories of posters on hunter-net these days, unless things have changed dramatically since I left.

To: vitalis.list@hunter-net.org

From: nurse216

Subject: We're all different (my views, part 9)

I think we spend much too much energy trying to categorize things. We lose track of what those things are. Bookworm tried to categorize the other side by what they could do, calling them vampires and ghosts and warlocks. When he did that — and when the rest of us accepted his categories — we lost track of why the hidden were hiding. We didn't understand that some hide because they're in pain, not because they're waiting to kill us all. Maybe if we had understood that earlier, some recent tragedies wouldn't have happened.

Well, the same thing is happening among ourselves. We're starting to categorize ourselves by what we can do, by what gifts we've received, instead of by what we believe. Just because two of us can do some similar, amazing things doesn't mean we see the world the same way. For now, the only time we notice differences in belief is when people start sending angry messages on hunter.list.

We need to work together, to help each other and to help others. To do those things we need to learn to accept each other's points of view. We all have something to contribute to the plan or else the voice wouldn't have come to us. Let's listen.

I'll start with myself. I don't really feel I belong to a "group" or anything, but I do believe in some things that others might not. I believe that community is our greatest asset, both among those of us who have heard the voice and those who haven't. I believe in compassion and understanding over violence. I believe that many (if not most) of the hidden are victims in their own way. I believe that alone, none of us can fulfill the plan. I believe that alone, we risk becoming worse than any of the hidden.

That is what I believe. But others don't believe those things and I want to learn from them. There are many other beliefs, and I've given them names only to organize my thoughts.

MARTYRS AND REDEEMERS (GODHEADS)

I am Catholic. I know deep within me that the plan is God's and that the voice is His or His angels'. I am not selfish enough to believe that I have the only understanding of the plan. God has chosen to show Himself in many different ways to many different people, either through His Son or in other forms. I accept this and

it makes me happy. The Pope and the priests have an understanding of God I do not, and I have an understanding they do not.

Some of us believe they have the only understanding. We've all heard stories of strange cults and seen the signs on this list. I know that there are people on hunter-net gathering followers and calling themselves divine.

This is wrong. I wish I could be less judgmental, but to present yourself as a messiah is reprehensible. Too many people will believe it and abandon their own views for yours. We cannot afford to squander ourselves this way. Each of us must contribute.

Those of us who set themselves up as godheads may actually have insight to share — they do believe strongly, at least — but they choose to convert instead of exchange.

I'm sorry, but these people who preach about giving of ourselves to help inherit the Earth are idiots. Give up your legs and see how you like it. What's the point of sacrificing your own future to give others one when we can work to bring about a better world together?

Sorry guys, but if we're going to inherit the Earth, I still want to be around to receive my inheritance.

I suppose in some ways these guys are worse than the toughs. I don't like the fact that some of the other side have to be destroyed, but some do.

I refuse to go forward accepting that we have to suffer to succeed. That's just too cynical. Fyodor disagrees, of course. "In any struggle, sacrifices must be made," he says. "This is true of struggles of the mind as much as struggles of the body. Surely you would still have embarked on your meeting with the vampire even if you'd known that you would lose your legs?"

I don't know the answer to that one, but I suspect it's "no," and that's why I'll never understand a lot of people with this attitude.

And yet I can sort of see where some of them are coming from — the one's who aren't godheads through and through. Potter 116 seems to sum up this attitude and she seems nice enough, if a little flaky. Like us, they want to bring the other side around to a better way of thinking.

Still, I can't help feeling that they're too caught up in the whole "monster" thing. They go at the calling under the assumption that the other side has done wrong and must be taught the error of its ways.

Let's face it: Going up to something with the power to rip you in half and telling it that it's evil and must repent is hardly the way to get it on your side.

JUDGES (HEADSHRINKERS)

I've said it a few times before, but this effort to put into words how I feel about our new lives has been very good for me. It's forced me to think about many things that I hadn't considered before. Actually, I believe it's made me think like a headshrinker does.

What I call headshrinkers (that's what we call the psychiatric ward doctors at the hospital, by the way) are those of us who are always asking questions about the mission. Often, this is good. I feel much better with someone who is curious about things than with a tough who always resorts to a gun. Talking about motivations is very healthy.

I worry about some of them, though. So many questions can become a trap, especially if you can't accept having no answer. I wonder why this is all happening, but I have to have faith that there is a reason. I wish I could clearly see who on the other side I could help best (and who among us, too), but I can't so I have to do my best.

Searching for answers is a reason to go forward, not to stop.

I've tried to hide behind the analytical attitude that people like Doctor 119 show, but it's too dispassionate for me. These guys are cold. I know. I've been there. What's the point in taking the risks we do if we don't do it out of passion?

I'd rather try and turn the other side around to my point of view than assume responsibility for deciding who should be destroyed and who should live. But some of the hidden can be purely evil. I'm not sure I'm qualified to make that decision. Maybe these guys are.

Sophie, back in Boston, thought this way. She was always picking our next targets from the information I dug up. She made the decision to tell Andy about Phaedra, I suspect.

DEFENDERS (HOMETOWN HEROES)

I've read about many of these on hunter-net and met a few at the safe house. Daniel is one, I think. They've heard the call and don't really care too much about the message for the world. They know what their task is, and that's to keep what they know safe. The woman I met who defines this belief told me that she "didn't give a rat's ass about what's going on in Borneo, Bolivia or even Buffalo." She just wanted to keep her husband safe and their home intact. Another man, a janitor, said he spent most of his time in a large local high school. He wanted the kids to be safe, and going out to do more meant he couldn't do that. He only came to the meeting because Daniel had helped him with a situation at the school.

I understand this local attachment very well, obviously. My family, my friends, my neighborhood, I love them all. They are what keep me sane and enable me to participate in the plan at all. The janitor's case, though, frightens me somewhat. His attachment seems to make him less sane, rather than more. I imagine him watching the children from hiding, guarding them against monsters and molesters, but not playing with them. He sleeps in a storeroom and almost never goes home, never sees anybody. What kind of life is that?

Love for the community is a beautiful thing, but we cannot become separate from it. I need to receive love as well as give it. Thankfully, Daniel is more open and participates in the community and protects it too.

Now, Heaven forbid my mother or sister might ever be threatened by the other side, but if they were I'd turn to one of these guardian types in a second.

Dole7 comes across as being a little too paranoid from time to time. Eric, one of my former colleagues from Boston, had a similar mindset.

Jen was something special. She would watch my back while I went to talk to the other side. She kept quiet, stayed in the background and, if they made any move to hurt me, she'd deal with them.

She's dead now. One of the walking dead tore her head off while I was in the hospital. I miss her. I wish she were here now.

VISIONARIES (HONCHOS)

Being in charge is a very difficult thing, I think. It's good to have someone who can make decisions and move on them when necessary, but the burden must be tremendous. In the hospital, there are times when a doctor or head nurse has to say what the whole team will do and the rest of us have to do it. When following the plan, it can be even more important. If we don't all move in the same direction, we can't keep each other safe.

But all this depends on trust and cooperation. Someone has to lead the way in a crisis. But for everyone to respond together, they have to feel they are respected and have something to contribute. In the hospital, I follow the head nurse's orders because I know she can do her job and I know she'll let me do mine. It's happened many times that stupid egotists calling themselves doctors have bossed us around



Subject: A special bond? (an observation)

From: witness1

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

I hope no one will take umbrage if I jump in here with something of an observation. Part of why I maintain hunter-net is that it allows me to learn a lot about us. (Not our real lives — unless you're being careless in your posts — but on how we relate.)

Looking through the various posts here and on some of the sub-lists about how we work together, I can't help but notice that something special seems to happen when a protective hunter and a real optimist get together. It's sort of like a natural bond or something. The protector compensates for the optimist's foolhardiness and seems to get a good dose of hope in return. From what I can tell, hunters who end up in this sort of relationship are less likely to end up as defenseless bait or hardcore dead-eyes.

I wonder if there are other personality types that match up like that. Food for thought.

ItE!

without knowing us or what we can do. This always compromises the patients' health, because the doctor doesn't know what we are best at and because we end up having to pick up things he missed. A hospital is very complex and it only works when everyone works together.

The mission is the same thing. Those of you who volunteer to be leaders, who try to tell others what to do and how to do it (what I call honchos), have to be careful how you do it. If you don't respect the rest of us and listen to us, we won't listen to you and you will make mistakes. I think this happens more than anyone admits.

Now Witness1 is the head honcho of hunter-net (and of us all in some ways) and I'm glad for it. Witness has always listened to us and made suggestions instead of issuing orders. I'm sure he's the same way with people he is close to (and while I'm at it: Witness if you're reading this, it would be great to meet face to face if we can find a safe way to do so). There are others I worry about.

I wonder if what happened in Montreal could have been avoided. If Oracle made a mistake, maybe it was because whoever was the honcho there wouldn't listen to her concerns. Ignoring others is no way to lead.

You've got this attitude, haven't you SoS? Fyodor, too. Lots of listening, lots of questions and lots of silence. Then, when you talk, you just don't stop.

My time with Fyodor is a perfect example. He's either interrogating me, lecturing me or sitting in sullen silence.

Still, you and Witness1 were pretty instrumental in getting me back onto hunter-net regularly when I was in the hospital, and in getting me to think about answering the call again.

Sure, we don't always agree — look at my war of words with Witness1 over the use of the name "hunter" for us — but you always make me think and question my own attitudes, which has to be good.

Lots of us look to guys like you for leadership. I'm not sure that's the right thing for you guys to be doing (no offense intended). There's a difference between guiding and leading. I personally am not willing to submit to anyone else's vision of the hunt again. It doesn't matter whose vision it is: yours, Sophie's, Fyodor's. I'm beginning to understand who I am and nobody will take that from me. I'm also beginning to think that's what Fyodor has been after this whole time.

BYSTANDERS (THE LONELY)

Sally's isolation before our meeting paints a whole other picture of our mission. I think we list subscribers forget how lonely our existence can be. I wonder how many of the imbued have never found their way to hunter-net, or even found another of our kind.

There may be whole bands of us out there, convinced that they're the only ones who know about the other side. I just can't imagine having spent the past months like that. I don't want to die, but if I do I know there will be others out there to take my place.

How do you stay sane if you think you're the only one who has any chance of dealing with the hidden? How much worse must it be if you're trying to do it alone, with no one to talk to or fall back on?

It's been too long since I spent any time with others of our kind, barring Fyodor. He seems more interested in us than he does in the other side.

That said, I guess I really don't know if I should introduce Sally to hunter-net or other chosen. My own experience with others hasn't always been good.

AVENGERS (SOLDIERS AND TOUGHS)

Some of us can't seem to get past the idea that we're at war. It's a natural enough reaction when you suddenly hear the voice and gain the sight. You might well see the hidden everywhere. Corpse-like people in the police or government. Ghosts in your bed and other things in your house. You could believe that we've been invaded, taken over. That we must fight back.

But the idea of the plan as a war just misses too much. It ignores hope for reconciliation and understanding. It says "us or them," never realizing that there may not be as much difference as we like to think.

Soldiers in this "war" see everything as a battle and expect everyone else to fall in line. They are constantly talking about being prepared and organized, about tactics and counterstrikes. This is their great strength and the reason they are very important to the plan. They know how to be ready, to keep us safe, to train us. The man I call John is a soldier. Even though we often disagreed, I was always happy to have him around. I never would have survived my encounter with the troll if not for him.

But all this preparedness can come at the price of compassion and intuition. For them, every new situation is a new threat and *only* a new threat. They miss opportunities for insight and growth. If the rest of us stand with them, we can help them see and feel and they can help us be safe and ready. Not a bad compromise. If we don't stand with them, they'll just become what we call toughs.

A tough reacts to *everything* with violence. The people who want to kill Oracle. The people who post long exposés on explosives and assault rifles. The people who threaten others on the list because they disagree. These are the toughs.

Toughs miss a great deal about the calling. They see enemies where I see victims. They have no patience and must always know they are stronger than others. Toughs don't listen to any other opinions. Before they realize it, they turn into casual murderers. Gangsters on the street behave this way and it gets them killed. It turns them hard and destroys their hope. It seems worse among toughs.

I hate to say it, but if he was in my position, my son would be a tough. Ever since he started thinking he was a gangster, power and violence became important to him. Even now, as a ghost, I know he thinks in terms of who is stronger and fiercer. He is my son, but part of him is lost.

I've almost deleted that last paragraph three times. It's too personal, I tell myself, but then I realize that everything I say here is personal. You have a right to know why things bother and scare me. So I'm leaving it in.

This "hunter" mindset is almost as misguided as anything on the other side. Soldiers just can't see beyond the need to kill and destroy. Sure, I know there are things out there that are evil. Sometimes putting them down is the only way to protect the greater good. In the end, though, I'd rather pick up a gun and do it myself than let this kind do it. At least I wouldn't take pleasure in it.

Andy was a soldier. He saw the world in simplistic "us" and "them" terms. Once I started spending time with Purple and Phaedra, I crossed the line in his eyes. By attacking Phaedra, he turned a constructive relationship into a destructive one.

That's the problem. As long as they take so simplistic a view of the call, they're only making things worse rather than better.

CHANGING VIEWS

You know, I was about to send this message, but I realized there's something else I need to say on the subject. (I never knew I could write so much.) It's important that we all realize that our views and beliefs can change. Just because someone acts like a soldier today doesn't mean he can't change his ways. This is my hope for John.

The fact that we can change is both hopeful and a reason for caution. Hope because we can always find our way back when we become lost. If we start believing that we are the voice of God or some such, we can come to our senses. Friends can help us become ourselves again. This is wonderful, verdad?

On the other hand, change also means we have to be careful that we don't slip into ugly behavior. In the hospital, I saw this many times. People arrive on staff full of enthusiasm and energy, but the hard work and the suffering slowly eats away at them. They become cynical and doubt whether it's worth it at all. This has even happened to me a few times, but thank God others were always there to help me through my doubts.

I read some of the other posts here on Vitalis — from Bookworm, Oracle and XXX289 on hunter.list — and I know that same process happens for us, as well. Bookworm, if your heart tells you to follow this man, then do so. But always remember that there are other people here who care for you and who want what's best for you. Please don't shut us out.

WORKING TOGETHER

From: sixofwords29

To: vitalis.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Turning around?

Yet another letter from Bookworm, hard on the heels of the last one. This "Sally" certainly seems to have done him some good, but I'm worried about how Fyodor will react to the events described here.

Those of you searching for the two of them, please redouble your efforts. We may not have long left.

Dear SoS,

What a night. Sally turned up unexpectedly at the hotel. Luckily, Fyodor was out. She said she needed help.

It was a long way to the café where she was meeting her "friend." Wheeling myself around all the time is giving me the definition on my arms that I used to dream of as a kid — while everybody else was getting dates and I was being ignored.

She filled me in on the way. In her hometown, Sally apparently has something of a reputation among the spirits for being helpful. I must say, I never realized they communicated so much with each other. Something to bear in mind, perhaps.

She's been burnt once or twice — spirits that she tried to help have turned nasty on her unexpectedly. But she's avoided serious harm so far. When I asked her how, she says things have just worked out for her. An escape route turns up or someone stumbles across the rot chasing her and it runs away.

I wonder if that's another of the Messengers' gifts? It's certainly not one I've heard about.

She's maintained her optimism. She keeps trying to help. It seems to be working for her, too. One or two spirits in the area have apparently taken to warning her about the untrustworthy ones. I'm not sure I'd have remained so committed. Let's face it, I didn't.

Anyway, she'd agreed to help an artist who'd "come back." He said he wanted the chance to see his final work on display. She agreed to help him break into a private collection to look at it.

I really wasn't sure about it all at first. Breaking and entering? Not long ago I said I wasn't prepared to do that in the name of the call. Maybe I got swept up by Sally's optimism. It reminded me so much of how I used to be back in the beginning.

With our sight it was easy to spot the walking dead in the café. He was looking down at his coffee with an expression of regret. "I did so enjoy a double espresso when I was alive," he complained.

Sally introduced me and he filled us in on the painting. "You just want to see it? That's all?" I asked, suspiciously.

He stared at me. "Yes." Somehow, I didn't believe him. Still, Sally seemed to know what she was doing, so I kept quiet.

Sally, it turns out, had hung around with the wrong people at one time, because she clearly knew a thing or two about breaking in. I was the look-out. Sally had a pager. I was supposed to call her if security or the police showed up. They disguised me as a beggar, covering my chair with an old blanket, so it wasn't so obviously new. We'd picked up a shabby outfit for me from thrift store.

Before she headed off, Sally kissed me. "It's so nice to finally meet someone who understands what I do and why I do it," she said.

To cut a long story short, they broke in okay. The police didn't turn up, but the alarms went crazy after about ten minutes. Sally came running out, cursing the rot's name. "Bastard lied to me. He didn't want to see it. He wanted to destroy it. Didn't think it was worthy of him or something."

At times I appreciate being in this wheelchair. The police tend to assume that the crippled guy and his girlfriend aren't involved in a break-in.

INNOCENT INTENTIONS

The incident with the artist and the problem with Oracle have made me think. What if Oracle did cause the deaths in Montreal? I don't for a second mean that she did it intentionally. However, by trusting a little too much, she may have given too much away.

Sally trusted the dead artist a little too easily. She might have been right — he could have been a basically a decent guy, but he wasn't telling the whole truth. If I hadn't been there, she'd probably be in jail right now.

I'm beginning to think that people with an attitude like mine or Sally's need to stick together. We're the only ones who really understand how our minds work, so we're the best bet for stopping each other from making mistakes.

I think I need to find Oracle. I have no idea how I'm going to do it, but I'm going to try.

PARTINGS

I didn't go back to the motel room I was sharing with Fyodor. I went back to Sally's room, instead. She was scared by her narrow escape. I comforted her

The next morning, when we woke, Fyodor was sitting at the end of the bed. He was holding a copy of the morning paper. The break-in had made page four.

"Would you and your friend know anything about this?" he demanded.

I nodded mutely, feeling defenseless on the bed. Fyodor had moved my wheelchair out of reach. God knows how long he'd been there.

Anger flashed in his eyes. "What have I told you? You don't do the Messengers' work until we agree you are ready! There's more at stake here than you can possibly realize!"

He was on his feet now, ranting and punctuating each remark by shaking a fist.

"You don't understand the risks we face. Not to our bodies, but to our very souls. Would you become what we face? Would you serve Hell?"

I started to back up on the bed, in fear. Then I felt Sally's hand on mine, reassuring me.

"I don't know who you are," she yelled at Fyodor. "But [Bookworm] is a good man. Together we helped a soul find peace last night. How could that beserving Hell? Yeah, some rich bastard's property was damaged. Boo hoo. Nobody got hurt and we did some good. What harm is there in that?"

Her words were persuasive, but their effect on Fyodor seemed profound. He calmed down immediately. After a moment's silence, he glanced at the newspaper and then at us.

"I think our time together has ended," he said, finally. "May you learn as much from her as I have this moment." Then he left. I was stunned. I'd seen him change his train of thought or go off on a tangent during another conversation, but never to such an extreme. I don't know what came over him. I guess I never will.

Anyway, we're not staying here. We've just changed hotels and are leaving town tomorrow morning. I hope Fyodor will leave us alone, as Sally seems to believe he will — despite never having known him. I'm not so sure she's right.

Yours,

"Bookworm"

BETTER OFF WITHOUT

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: xxx289

Subject: All of you

You people are a joke. I read your posts about how the monsters are disease victims, how we have to all hold hands to work together, how a shotgun is preferable to a pistol at short range. It's all bullshit, yet you can't see it.

Have you ever considered that you may be as much to blame for the state of the world as any of the monsters? Look at all the horrible things people have done over the ages. Wars. Holocausts. Pollution. Don't you think the world would be better off without us? We treat each other and the Earth with so much abuse that it's come back to bite us on the ass. Now our own corruption is corrupting us. Why bother working together or making friends or striking alliances? Those are the very things that

Subject: Gunplay

From: oracle171

To: bookworm55, vitalis.list@hunter-net.org

Bookworm, I hope you're reading this. The angel says that we need to be purified and it showed me proof today. I'm in a new city. When I got here, I knew I would be meeting some of us. The angel let hours slip around me to show me the way.

It was in a shopping center that I saw one of us. A little man with glasses. He was wearing a leather jacket with a few patches on them and some of them were the angel's symbols. I felt happy to see one of us, so I went up to him.

He wasn't happy to see me. Instead of smiling, his face got hard and cold, just like a monster's. He reached into his jacket and the angel showed me he had a gun.

"Witch," he said. "You got them all killed in Montreal and now you're here for me, aren't you?"

I smiled and said I was just following the angel's voice. Like in New Dijon and in Thessaly. He glanced around at the shoppers. I think that if we had been alone he would have shot me.

"Keep away from me!" was all he said. He disappeared into the crowd and the angels smiled, understanding that I now knew Crusader17 feared the light, too.

nations have always done in the name of peace and goodwill. But wars still break out and agreements are broken. Even when they're maintained, alliances often mean countries' mutual greed or hatred allows them to assault another smaller guy.

Maybe we're better off keeping to our individual selves, struggling to keep ourselves alive. Maybe if we work for our own betterment and allow others to do the same without intervention or envy, people in general will be better off.

I'm new to this whole "hunt" experience. I choose to stay to myself, though. And I'll bet I'm better off than many of you who worry about "allies" stabbing you in the back or ruining your plans by forcing theirs on you. You know why I'm better off, too, because the "chosen" people you turn to are still people, the worst thing in the world. Don't expect the leopard to change his spots just because he's been shown stripes.

Rather than expect the best from people and try to work with them in hopes of getting rid of the monsters, be realistic. Expect the worst from people and anticipate it at all times. That way you can cover your own ass and won't be surprised when your "ally" shits all over you and leaves you for dead.

If you need to look for hope, look for it in yourself. You can only get better from there. I did, even though the world lied to me and did everything it could to destroy me.



CHAPTER 4: ANOTHER DAY

But the eyes of the wicked shall fail, and they shall not escape, and their hope shall be as the giving up of the ghost.

— Job 11:20

MIRACLE

From: sixofswords29

To: vitalis.list@hunter-net.org, hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Fwd: Get up and walk

People, I just received an email from Bookworm. I really think you should read this. Perhaps we were wrong about Fyodor, though I'm not sure I can believe what I read here. Yet Bookworm seems to have his senses about him.

—Forwarded Message—

SoS,

I can't believe what's happened. I was there, it happened to me and I still can't believe it.

I woke up this morning to find Fyodor standing at the foot of our bed again. Thankfully Sally was still asleep. He was grasping the stumps where my legs used to be. His eyes were shut and he seemed to be concentrating intensely.

I was about to pull away or shout or something, when I felt a warmth wash through me. It took my breath away. It felt a bit like my imbuing, I guess, but somehow different. It was pleasurable, *right*, in the same way that the other side feels *wrong*. I lay back and lost myself to the sensation.

I don't know how much time passed. Minutes? Hours? I don't know. The next thing I really remember is hearing Fyodor's voice calling my name softly. "Look down," he said. I opened my eyes.

I had legs!

I gaped, I guess, my mind refusing to accept what I saw. I looked at the wheelchair in the corner and then at Fyodor. He was smiling. I mean, *really* smiling, with a genuine pleasure I'd never seen in him before.

And then he returned to leave. He paused for a second before he went. "Thank you," he said. I had a thousand questions I wanted to ask, but didn't say a word.

The door shutting woke Sally. She looked around, confused. Then she looked at my legs and jumped out of bed. "how?"

I still don't have an answer to that question. Unless I go looking for Fyodor again, I doubt I ever will.

I filled Sally in on what happened as quickly as I could. Then, with her help, I got to my feet for the first time in months. The legs felt weak, bruised and strange. I fell after only a few steps, but I walked. I'd never thought I'd do it again.

I just sat there, on the floor, crying and staring at my legs. *My* legs. The scar where that dog bit me was gone, but they were *my* legs. I could walk again. I could dance and run and jump and do all the things a normal person could.

I must have cried for a good while. Sally just held me until I stopped. Then we started making plans. Plans that didn't involve a wheelchair.

Sally has managed to get me a pair of crutches from somewhere (I didn't ask — DADT applies in all kinds of situations) and she's been helping me practice walking. We're heading for ("her home city — SoS29") in a few hours. We've got a lot of talking to do and some decisions to make.

This is going to take some getting used to.

I'm not sure when I'll be in contact again.

Yours,

"Bookworm"

ONE STEP AT A TIME

To: vitalis.list@hunter-net.org

From: nurse216

Subject: What about tomorrow? (my views, part 10)

One of the first things I said when I started this whole project was that I thought some of us spent too much time asking where we came from. I said — and I still believe — that we exist to make things better and that we don't really need to know more than that. In fact, I don't really think we can know more than that.

Until I started this project, I felt the same way about where we are going. It all seems so simple: we're all working for a better world and that's that. But I'm coming to realize that it's not that simple. Everyone sees the "better world" differently and that means we act differently. Just like it's important to understand and appreciate what each of us believes, it's important to accept all our goals.

For that to happen, I know I have to make my own vision of the future more clear. This email is my attempt.

I think the best way to put it is, I see the future as a sort of promised land. We've all heard the voices, verdad? To Witness they said "Inherit the Earth." That is a sign of hope to me. It means we are all part of the future, our inheritance. The old ways of pain and abuse will pass on, and we will receive the peace that follows. That is the Messengers' promise to us all.

But an inheritance has to be earned. We can't just sit back and wait for the promised land to come to us — we have to start building it here and now.

I think I'm getting ahead of myself. We can't build unless we know something of the house. The promised land is all about peace and equality, a place where we can live free from the pain that surrounds us. It is not a specific place or a specific time. It is a way of living.

I think the greatest components must be respect and acceptance. When we live with respect, we cannot hurt each other. When we live with acceptance, we cannot breed the hate and anger that destroys respect. Under these conditions, we can be different and still live together. Bigots, batterers and bullies have no place in this promised land — not because they have been exterminated, but because the anger they feed on has vanished. This is why I think talking and cooperating are so important. These things help justify our claim to our inheritance.

TWISTING PATHS

Respect and acceptance can never be one-sided if we want to build a real future. If a person accepts another, but the sentiment isn't returned, there is no equal relationship. This is just a form of abuse, one I've seen too many times. Acceptance is not about sitting back and being trampled by an abuser because "that's the way it is." It's about building equal and understanding relationships. I cannot accept bullies who treat people like prey, and I cannot sit by while others on hunter-net belittle my views as childish.

Toughs like God45 can't seem to post more than a few lines before words like "extermination" appear. Don't they know that a future built on that kind of extremism isn't going to be any better than what we have now? What kind of standard do we set if our

only answer to a problem is murder? Do any of us really think we'll be able to put down our guns after using them so long without question? Once the vampires and ghosts are gone (or even before), won't we just turn on ourselves?

It's just as bad to think that one person has the only answer about where we're going. I can't give anyone explicit instructions for finding the promised land, and those who do offer them delude themselves. Godheads who tell us that we have to follow them — to worship them — in order to complete the mission cannot accept other views, so what kind of world will they build? Anyone who disagrees with them will become the new monsters to be hunted. In the end, only the godhead will be left and that's no inheritance at all.

The point I'm trying to make is that if we want a world of equality, we have to start building it now. If we play our cards right, we can get to the promised land.

GOING OUT OF STYLE

And what about us, who've heard the voice? In the promised land, what will happen to us? I don't really know. I hope that all our capabilities and sights and voices will fade — or stay only to keep things in balance. We have been blessed because we are needed. Once that need passes, our blessings may go away. And we can finally be with our loved ones again.

The other side should fade, too. Or at least change. In a world of trust and honesty, anger and fear are impossible. Once we've broken the cycle of abuse and found ways to live together, the dead will sleep again. The warlocks and vampires won't lust for power and blood. The "monsters" will lose their hideousness and just be the people they really are.

I for one look forward to the day when I can go back to just being me, and my son can go to his reward.

BACK IN BUSINESS

Subject: Bookworm Redux

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: bookworm55

Well, I'm back. Thanks to Sixofwords29 for posting my letters to the Vitalis list. It never occurred to me that he might be so thorough. Still, I'm glad he did it. I hope they've given people something to think about. I'm not sure "Sally," or Ticket312 as you'll soon know her, will appreciate everything being made public, but what's done is done.

Thanks to those of you who wanted to "rescue" me. As I'm sure you know by now, I didn't need it.

Fyodor has saved me in more ways than one. I still don't know why he did what he did, or how he restored my legs, but my mother always taught me not to look a gift horse in the mouth. Heaven knows I've had very few chances to.

All I know is that I can walk again and return to answering the call. I may not have found Phaedra yet, but I will. Ticket312 and I are going our separate ways for now. She's staying home, while I have other things to do. Finding Phaedra is one of them, but there are others.

I can't return to Boston. How do I explain to my family the fact that I've "regrown" legs? I won't abandon them — my mother and sister have been through too much in their lives to have me disappear on them. But I can't see them, either. Legs are difficult to hide. I'm gonna have to come up with

a story that satisfies them and keeps them from worrying. If you have any ideas, let me know, but I'll find a way without hurting them. Ceasing to care about those around you is one mistake the other side makes, and I don't want to walk that path. I'll write my family whenever I can.

And, my fellow imbued, I'll write you. I know many of you will never agree with me and the way I view the other side, but I forgive you your lack of understanding. And I intend to do everything I can to help you understand.

You might not hear from me as often as you did in the old days, as I'll have to use cyber cafes and the like, but I'll keep posting.

I'm meeting up with Sixofwords29 in England later this week, and we're going to see if we can find and talk to this "Noah" that Lotus19 talked about.

After that, I'm meeting up with Ticket312 again and we're going to find Oracle. If anyone wants to join us, please contact me directly.

Oracle needs our help, not our suspicion. She seems to be deeper into our calling than most of us. It may be that she's gone too far. On the other hand, perhaps she has something to teach us, just as Fyodor has taught me.

TRUE ACTS

To: vitalis.list@hunter-net.org

From: nurse216

Subject: The way to the future (my views, part II)

Hope123 sent me a message that got me thinking about my last email (I've copied it so you can see it, too). Hope is right that the future isn't going to be as simple as I said, but I don't think we can know exactly what form it will take. Any big plan to get to the promised land ends up being flawed and leaving some people behind. Hope says we should concentrate on the here and now and trust that the rest will take care of itself. I agree except that we can't make the mistake of ignoring opportunities when they arise. We have to be ready to make the world better when we can.

I can hear your question now: How can we know what we do is right? I can't give you an easy answer, but the key (I think) is to listen to your heart.

Can you remember moments in your life that just felt *right*? Like a perfect kiss with your first love? Or a perfect relaxed afternoon? In the hospital, we all talk about those cases that made our hearts soar. My first one was a child who had swallowed drugs her mother had left around (stupid woman!). We fought for days to keep that little girl alive and it looked like we had lost many times — it was very hard. But when she finally got off the respirator, I cried with joy. That day the sun was so bright. Saving that child was right, was true.

I think those moments show us the way to a better future. It's as if the universe says, "Yes, this is what you are here to do." We have to look for these true acts and follow them. Exactly how they lead to the future, I don't know. I just know that they do.

SEARCHING FOR TRUTH

Okay, I wasn't sure I wanted to say this, but I think I can give you a real example of the "true acts" that I'm talking about. I suppose that the truest one for me happened when I first heard the voice and helped stop mi hijo from killing that other boy. That felt completely right and I am so proud of that moment.

From: hope123

To: nurse216

Subject: promised land

Nurse, here in Israel, the words "promised land" have a very special meaning. The Torah says that God promised this land to the Jews and that is the foundation of our state (and of the Law of Return, which allows Jews to come to Israel freely).

Of course, the last fifty years of history show that this promise is not easy to fulfill. Not everyone accepts the promise, and it has very troubling implications. The Arabs certainly do not accept that this is Jewish land, and I'm not sure I do either. I want the state of Israel to be secular and modern, a democracy, not ruled by ultra-orthodox rabbis. Secular Jew fights ultra-orthodox, Arab fights Jew, Islamic Arab fights Christian Arab, all over this land of milk and honey.

Israel is my home and I love it, but it has taught me the dangers of a promised land. Nurse, you make it all sound so easy — a bright future we can all share. But not everyone will want to share and not everyone will see the future the same way. Grand plans are never so simple as you make out.

It is best to start small. If I can co-exist with an Arab neighbor, maybe there is hope for peace. If I can keep my family together and happy in a world of monsters, maybe there is hope for the future.

Telling us everything will be wonderful creates false hope. Concentrate on what you can accomplish and trust the rest to fate. It's all any of us can do.

Shalom,

— Hope

In fact, I'll confess that I had a hard time after it happened. I suppose we all do right after we see the truth, si? But it was more than knowing there were dead people on the streets. I had trouble because acting to help them (or stop them) didn't feel as right, as true as helping my own child. I needed to feel that confidence again, that clarity, and I was afraid it would never come. The stories I've told you, about the troll and the rat-creatures — I never felt that same truth in them.

Looking back, I think my strong reaction to what happened in Montreal and to Bookworm's life came from my own desperation to find that same truth.

Well, I found it again, and I did thanks to John and the zombito.

GOING ON INSTINCT

You remember what I said last week about the zombito, si? Something told me that the answer to what this little walking dead baby wanted was in the maternity ward. I recognized the linens the little corpses were in. They came from my hospital!

So I went to find out what was happening. Even without the Messenger's gifts, it is not very hard to sneak around a big hospital. I believe some other people on hunter-net itself may

To: vitalis.list@hunter-net.org
 From: profesorgeo160
 Subject: special times

Hola amigos,

Listen to Nurse. These special times are more proof of vitalis. When everything seems just right and you understand that your actions are correct, that is when you are moving with vitalis. The universe changes with you.

Yes, this is wild and crazy. But it is true.

have talked about such things, but a person in a nurse's uniform who acts like she knows where she is going can go many places unchallenged. We do have security, but I do actually work there, so that was not a problem.

I went first to the maternity ward and looked around, in that special way we can. Nothing seemed wrong. The little babies were in their cribs. A nurse I knew was working and we chatted. I went to the neonatal care ward in ICU and it was the same. It was much rougher, seeing these little niños in incubators and with monitoring devices, but everything seemed normal.

Then, I began to think like a nurse. Too much of nursing is about paperwork. We spend a lot of time entering things in computers and filling out forms. And any nurse knows that you can tell a lot about a hospital or a ward by looking at those records. So off to records I went.

I don't really want to say how many hours I spent at the same computer (from which I'm writing this, actually) looking at nursing reports. Eventually I found what I was looking for and it was really nothing. Working in the neonatal ICU is not easy work. It seems that one of the babies is always coding or there are desperate parents. It's very taxing, much like the ER. But there was one nurse — Raymond Lucerne was the name he used — who never had anything to report. All his night shifts were perfectly calm. No code-99s. Meds always right on time. No accidents. That just doesn't happen in nursing.

MONSTERS AND PAIN

Two nights later, I visited the ward again, but on Lucerne's shift. I used the Messengers' gift this time, calling on them to hide me. My name badge got me past security and the Messengers got me to Lucerne. He was *wrong*, very wrong. I just stood there and watched and it was clear he thought he was alone. I wasn't sure what he would do, so I waited.

Twenty minutes later, after I had seen the security guard slip off to the men's room, Lucerne went straight to a little girl in an incubator. He just *ouched* the monitor and it froze. He lifted the cover on the incubator and there were no alarms or even readings. He was reaching in when I had to step forward.

"What are you doing?" I said and tried to sound like a boss. I was curious, angry and afraid, all at once. Lucerne looked very surprised. He swore and ran, pushing me out of the way.

I am not an athletic woman and he was halfway down the hall by the time I reacted. I couldn't leave the little niña, so I had to make sure the monitor was working and that she was all right. That took forever it seemed, and I was sure he would be gone by the time I got into the hall.

Instead, I almost ran into him. Lucerne had stopped in his tracks. John was at the end of the hall, holding a gun in one hand and a bundle in the other. I was very surprised.

"He's not going anywhere," John said. "I've got something for him."

That's when the bundle moved and I recognized what John was holding — the zombito. For an instant I thought John had killed it, but it was still as alive as when I had seen it, if I can say that.

John told me later that the zombito had led him to the hospital — apparently it became more excited the closer they got. It was squirming and hissing now, trying to get at Lucerne. The nurse himself was almost crying.

"No," he was saying. "Leave me alone! The children are mine."

I came around and asked him what he meant. Lucerne seemed relieved to talk to someone without a gun — his face almost brightened. He said he needed the children to keep memories alive. He even showed me some small old pictures of other children. He remembered them all, he said. He loved them all, he said. He thanked them all for the gift of his life.

John and I understood at the same time. He was stealing the lives of these children to extend his own. I think he was a warlock or maybe a vampire of some sort and was stealing the children's life — their vitalis, I suppose. He wanted sympathy from me, and I gave it to him. I knew he was afraid of death, so afraid that he had taken that of sweet children. I told him he had to stop, that he was causing so much pain that it couldn't go on. He had killed many, many babies and even created the zombito, a walking dead who seemed to exist only to stop him.

Lucerne cried. He said he wanted to stop, but he couldn't. He couldn't face what he had done. He begged for help. I knew what had to be done and I stepped aside. I took the zombito from John and nodded.

His gun had a long tube on it to muffle the sound, but it still seemed very loud to me. I turned around and watched as the stolen years caught up with Lucerne. He withered into a dried husk and eventually turned to dust. The zombito calmed and rested in my arms.

John looked at me and simply said: "I'll see you at the house."

SEARCHING STILL

When John turned and walked away, I realized what he had done. He had accepted me back into his trust. When he found the zombito — following my posts, I believe — he hadn't killed it, but instead listened to it in his own way and found the source of all that pain. He let me speak to Lucerne and uncover what happened. And he left me with the zombito. A few days later we met at Daniel's safe house and talked like friends. John, if you are reading this, muchas gracias, mi amigo.

That night at the hospital was a true act. Even though I had watched Lucerne die, I knew what we had done was right. I have found a safe place for the zombito, where I keep an eye on him and see what is happening with him. In the last few days he has become very sluggish, and I think he will soon fade away. He can rest now, I think.

The future we all hope for is going to be built on small acts like this. We must all have the simple courage to follow the truth we feel in our hearts. When I first saw the zombito, I knew it needed my help and I never gave up on that. Even when John threatened me, when it seemed like my friends were abandoning me, I had to follow what

I knew to be true. John ultimately followed that truth too, and I can only imagine how much harder it must have been for him. Alone, neither of us could have accomplished the simple act of salvation that became possible when we were together.

All of us following the hope we feel inside and putting aside our own differences to do so. That is how we will get to the promised land, one true act at a time.

ONCE BURNED. . .

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: crusader17

Subject: Re: Bookworm Redux

Forgive us? Hear this, you sanctimonious little dupe. We'll find that traitor Oracle before you do. Whatever she did to me, she won't get another chance.

ONE FOR ALL

Subject: Re: Bookworm Redux

From: bookworm55

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Thanks for that, Crusader17.

You realize what you're doing, don't you? You're helping tear us apart. As far as we know, none of us has been imbued for much over a year. What have we done in that time? We've helped some of the other side. We've killed others.

Have we really made any strides in organizing or understanding ourselves since Witness1 founded this site? If we hope to survive, we need to support each other, not tear each other down.

I was really touched by Nurse216's story of her reconciliation with John. It reminded me of the relationship I had with Jen, a hunter from Boston who's dead now. She and I had different views on the calling, but we worked together and each did our part.

If we're going to build a better world from this one, we need to start listening to each other and stop hating. How on Earth are we going to be able bring the other side back into the fold if people like you insist on isolating yourselves from basic human values?

Subject: Truth and light

From: oracle171

To: bookworm55, vitalis.list@hunter-net.org

The light is growing inside me, I can tell. I hear the angel's whisper-songs all the time now and things float in and out of time. A candle flickers in my eye and it shows me where the light needs to go.

I was in the future yesterday and it was beautiful, just like Greece after the purity of the angel's wing.

I wish we could all see what the angel has shown me. I know everyone would understand. Bookworm, I can feel you around, looking for me and your own light. Listen to the voices. They will set you free.

I'll be gone when you read this, but so will we all, the angel says.

What we don't need is encounters like the one Oracle171 had with you a while back. Isn't the other side enough for you? Do you hate so much that you're prepared to turn your back on us?

Crusader, we can't afford to war with each other. We're too new. We know too little about what we're facing and what we are. Do you really understand what's happened to Oracle? I sure don't. I recently had an experience that proved to me beyond doubt that the Messengers can grant gifts beyond anything we can imagine. Perhaps there are consequences to our life we have yet to comprehend. Surely you want to know the answers to these questions for your own sake, if not for Oracle's.

I intend to help Oracle. I'm going to bring her back into the community. Others are better qualified to try and work out what's happened to her. But I understood her once, as did Nurse216 and Professorgeo160 and others. Perhaps I can reach her again.

Do you really think that killing one of us on the suspicion that she made a mistake is the right thing to do? What happened to the concept of "innocent until proven guilty"? Do we throw away all the benefits of a civilized society just because the world isn't what we thought it was?

Do you really think you and your kind can kill every single one of the other side? If that's what we're here to do, why have others been imbued in different ways?

And do you really believe that you have the right to slaughter the hidden? It appears that the other side has been here as long as humanity, if legends are anything to go by. That's why I don't believe we should simply wipe them out and claim the world for us alone.

Inherit the Earth. If there's any phrase that defines the chosen, it's that. Yes, we've lost the world to the other side. They're taking what should be freely given, hiding from us, manipulating us and preying on us.

We need to take back the world, not for ourselves, but for everyone. Once the misguided learn to understand us again, we can start to understand them. Once we can understand them, we can start to educate the rest of humanity.

Perhaps when the truth of the hidden world stands exposed, they will put aside their petty concerns and work with us for a better place. Then, and only then, will we inherit the Earth.

And when we do so, what then? We chosen will still have a role. There will always need to be police. Perhaps by then members of the other side and the chosen will work together to deal with any who can't accept each other and live in peace.

This all sounds pretty far-fetched, I know. I admit that achieving this goal is a long, long way off. Every journey starts with a single step. Perhaps I should propose how we might take ours.

. . . TWICE AS ANGRY

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: crusader17

Subject: Re: Bookworm Redux

You're talking nonsense, book-boy. I've met your precious Oracle. You know what? She's mad. Lost it. Ga-ga.

It's guilt if you ask me. If I'd caused the deaths of as many good people as she did, I'd lose it too. You know what, though? You want to know why I've got no sympathy for that witch? She turned her powers on

me! She burned me with some light of hers and it still hasn't healed.

So don't you talk to me about some great worldwide love-in. I know the truth. Under all those fancy words and ideals, you're just the same as the rest of us. You destroy what you don't like.

I'm not starting a war with that lunatic. When I take her down, it's going to be for my own protection and no other reason. You go the same way she did, book-boy — which you might be from the way you're talking — and you're next.

And another thing, are we really supposed to believe that you *grow* another set of legs? I think you never lost them in the first place and have been lying all this time for sympathy.

AT THE EXTREME

Subject: Re: Bookworm's Retaliation

From: Bookworm35

To: hunter-list@hunter-net.org

I'm going to ignore your attack on me and focus on Crabe's intention to be constructive.

You could be right, Crusader. Crabe could be mad. I hope you're wrong through. Okay, she hurt you. My belief is that you attacked first, just as Andy did with PPachira.

I'm not going to approach the assailant as an enemy. I'm going to approach him with hope and understanding, not a gun.

She was always one of the most idealistic among us. Utterly committed to the cause. Perhaps she isolated herself from the world for too long and has lost perspective. Perhaps she's just been too much. I know all that stuff. I've read about it in New Order and Greece would leave me of balance.

If this is the case, I'll treat her exactly like I would any of the other side. I'll try and show her what she's doing is wrong and bring her back to our way of thinking. If I can't do it, only then will I consider your way.

Perhaps it would help you to understand a little better if I explained her other methods and to her state using rather than pointing out the Vitalis list. I doubt you'll go there with our encouragement, and you might stop judging us so harshly here.

ANOTHER APPROACH

Subject: Re: Hello

From: Bookworm35

To: hunter-list@hunter-net.org

Thanks for posting, Ticket312.

Of course, as I'm sure many of you realize, the approach proposed that the other side is basically benign. Most of us know that just isn't the case. How should we deal with those that can't see the way they're living is wrong?

Simple. Show them. I've started that process with the vampire that attacked me. Once I find her again, I'll continue. Some of us have the ability to stand before the other side with minimal risk of being hurt. We have to use that to confront them and let them know the error of their ways.

The misguided have separated themselves from us — humanity. They no longer see the consequences of their actions. We must show them. We can be a light that casts the darkness from their soul.

I can hear the replies already. "Suicide." "Traitor." I've lost my legs once. I'm not going to do it again. I've lost a friend through my carelessness. I'm not going to do that again, either.

If I take the message to the other side, I need some of you to stand beside me and protect me. I need some of you to tell me when I'm wrong. And yes, I need some of you to decide which of them cannot be brought back, and some of you to destroy those that cannot.

IDEALS AND HOPES

Subject: Our Aims

From: Bookworm35

To: vitalislist@hunter-net.org

FIRST STEPS

To: hunter-list@hunter-net.org

From: ticket312

Subject: Hello

Oh, great. I sign on the list to find out everyone knows about my love life. Now I /really/ need to fill you in on how I answer the call. Thanks, SSS9.

Bookworm asked me to say a few things about the way forward with the other side.

I feel a little bit rude doing so. I'm kind of new around here compared to you guys, but I've been talking to the dead a while, so maybe I'm qualified.

Here goes. There's been lots of talk from what I've seen on the hunter-net site about the best ways to kill the lost ones. I've never killed anything, but I've dealt with as many of the walking dead as some of you. I hear.

Sometimes, it's just as simple as listening to what they want and helping them achieve it. Believe it or not, the last part is often tougher than the first. If you deal with something unfinished, wouldn't you want someone to help you tidy up your affairs? I know I would.

I'm not saying trust every hidden blindly. They can be as selfish and manipulative as living humans. But if you don't try to listen, then you'll never hear anything, will you?

Okay. You do what they say and what happens? They leave. Go on to whatever it is dead folks go, maybe. They don't seem to know any more than we do. It just seems better to them than hanging around here. Sometimes I can see why. I hope you read more like that Crusader guy. Waaaaay too upright.

To: hunter-list@hunter-net.org

From: professor60

Subject: Re: Hello

Hi, Ticket312. No, lots of us are nicer than our angry friend. Welcome! Your South American friend is glad to have you here!

My "road trip" gave me a lot of time to think about what I'd like to see the world become. In the last months, some of us on this list have opened lines of communication with virtually every form of hidden that we know of.

We *can* talk to them. We *can* bring them back into the community. It's going to be a long, hard road, and some of us will suffer along the way. Together, though, we can do it. We can achieve the world I discussed on the main list.

We need each other. I need you on this list to support me in what I'm doing, and to reaffirm my take on the calling.

I need people like Fyodor and Sixofwords29 to give me a perspective outside my own, to tell me when I'm venturing down the wrong path.

I even need toughs and soldiers to deal with the misguided ones who won't step away from their chosen path.

Once we've really learned to communicate among ourselves, then perhaps we can really communicate with the other side and finally begin the long process of creating a better world from the mess we have now.

We've made too many false starts over the past months. I hope now, through experience and through the wisdom that Nurse214, Ticket312 and Profesorgeo160 have shared, that we can now move forward and bring hope, bring vitalis back to the world.

There must be light in the darkness. We must be that light.

TELLING IT LIKE IT IS

Subject: Our future

From: bookworm55

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

This is likely to be my last post for a while. I'm on a plane to England first thing in the morning. (Thanks for arranging the flight, Ticket312!)

I do have one last thing to say to you all, whatever your beliefs on the calling. My previous message to this list was not well received. Many of you immediately assumed that I was talking rubbish and that your way was better. What I was saying was that all our ways have some use. We are all the chosen. We all have that in common. Why are we so consumed with finding differences?

You've become obsessed with trying to prove that your way of viewing the calling is better than anyone else's. Look at the growing proliferation of sub-sites: Firelight, Vigil, my own Vitalis. We're in danger of losing track of what we have in common as we become obsessed with our differences.

However, I won't do what I've done in the past and let others' views overwhelm mine in hopes of cooperation. I've made that mistake too many times. That's why I'm not getting rid of Vitalis. We all need a place where we can communicate with like-minded people. We just have to remember that there are other perspectives and all of them have some validity.

Like Nurse216 said, if we're to inherit the Earth we need to do it together.

DANGERS AHEAD

To: vitalis.list@hunter-net.org

From: nurse216

Subject: bumps on the road (my views, part 12)

The zombito died tonight. He just stopped moving and I hope he's gone somewhere better. I know it's for the best, but it has still been hard to see this child who suffered so much grow still and cold. It has made me depressed and got me thinking about darker things.

I think this will be the last email in this series. It has gone on longer than I expected and has been good for me, but I have other things to do, and I think after tonight I will have said what I need to.

So, for my last message I will do what I don't like to do (and what I've been putting off): talk about problems with us. There are dangers we all face in the plan. We have to be aware of them if we're going to make a better future.

The fact is that the only thing stopping us from getting there is us. I know a lot of us talk about how many of the monsters there seem to be. How tough the odds are in this "war." But you're not thinking straight when you talk like that. I mean, yes, some of the things out there are very nasty and very strong, but we do not have to fight them strength against strength. If this was about good and evil trying to kill each other, it would be over by now. I mean, for all we know, zombies and ghosts and vampires have been around forever. And yet here we are, still alive, still able to love and live and keep an open heart. That means evil is a long way from winning any war, I think.

The way I see it — and maybe I'm wrong, but I don't think so — what we need to watch out for is what will make us lose our way. If we don't keep joy in our hearts, then what's the point?

WE'RE NOT BETTER

Something that worries me a whole lot is people who decide that the plan makes them better. There's a preacher in Tijuana who calls himself Padre Enero. He has a little wooden church among the strip clubs. He's a faith healer and the locals say he hears the voice of the Virgin Mary.

I went to see him a while ago and I'm pretty sure he's one of us, a godhead gone very far into dangerous territory. He preaches

SEEDS OF DOUBT

Subject: Hell

From: bookworm55

To: ticket312

Dear Liz,

I can't help thinking about what Fyodor said to us that morning when he found us together. What did he mean about "serving Hell" and the risk to my soul? Is there something to this "angel" that Oracle keeps talking about?

She certainly seems to have more contact with the Messengers than the rest of us. In fact, she seems to be in almost constant contact with them. I don't know if that's a good thing or not.

My business here in England is nearly done. SoS isn't nearly as easy to get along with in the flesh as he is on the net, but he's been a good friend, so I can put up with it a while longer, I think.

I can't wait to see you again. Together, I'm sure we can help Oracle.

Yours ever,

Jake



about freedom from devils and invokes the Virgin and the Saints with every second breath. To me, he looked sort of silly, like a Catholic priest melded with one of those crazy anglo televangelists. But some of his literature had scrawls that looked like the code. I couldn't quite read them, but they felt like "fire" and "slave" to me. I also heard stories of him healing people on stage and using the "Virgin's breath" to banish evil.

He frightens me. According to Padre Enero, going to Heaven means accepting the Virgin's word that only he can deliver. Everyone else will be eaten by devils and their eyes will be used to make garlands in Hell. (He was very colorful, I'll give him that). Other preachers speak the devil's words, he said, and their faithful are devils. When I left, the crowd was cheering.

We're regular people who've been blessed, not gods or saints or angels. We all have to remember that. It is not only godheads like Enero who make themselves better than everyone else. There are headshrinkers and honchos on hunter-net who talk about "leading the masses." God45 talks about mass killings of the unworthy. This is all crazy! XXX289 even seems to look forward to the end and his part in it.

We can all be tempted to feel superior to everyone else, but we have to resist those urges. Do we want to be dictators instead of liberators? I hope not.

FORGETTING THE VOICE

Another very serious problem for all of us, I believe, is losing our sense of purpose. It's easy after seeing horrible things to decide that everything is horrible and that the world is doomed. We have

to remember that we were chosen by the Messengers and that we have something to contribute. We can't give up hope.

If we start seeing everybody and everything as a monster or potential monster, we lose track of the whole reason for the mission. It becomes more a war, and not one that we can win. What made me so happy about that night at the hospital with the zombito was that John showed me he hadn't lost hope. He is what I've called a soldier, but not a tough. He remembered his heart that night and we all need to do that.

If we don't, if we become so jaded, then we will lose our moral center. I'm afraid that this has happened to too many of us already. When I hear suggestions of mass killings to eliminate monsters, I wonder where our spirits have gone. We can't sacrifice our friends

Subject: such beauty...

From: oracle171

To: bookworm55, vitalis.list@hunter-net.org

Tomorrow, I stared at the sun for three hours. Then I came back to today and I cried tears of fire with the angel. People ran away when I came up to them, but that doesn't bother me anymore.

The angel says that no one can understand the light unless they've seen it up close. I danced on the surface of the sun with him and now I know.

Everything will be wonderful after the fire.

and families. We can't sacrifice others on the mission and not lose track of the very reasons we fight.

If we build a future out of hatred and violence, that is all we are going to get. The promised land has to be about hope and truth, not anger. You remember I talked about the hidden as abused and abusers, si? Well, when we engage in easy violence, we fall into the same trap. We are like the battered child who can only respond by growing and battering his own children. Once we've exterminated the "monsters," we will become new ones.

FORGETTING OURSELVES

I've talked about this before, but I think it bears repeating: the worst burnout, the failing that will stop us from ever achieving what we must, is forgetting who we are.

The mission can be intoxicating to some, it seems. The truth I talked about in my last message can be almost like a drug. That feeling of acting in a way that is *right* is so wonderful, we want to do anything to get it back. We ignore dangers and alienate our friends when we seek it out. We have to remember that we are only humans and cannot be foolish. We have to remember that we have loved ones who depend on us. We have to remember that other imbued who know us have shared a sacred trust that we can't violate. If we don't, tragedy is sure to result.

Oracle, I'm sorry but this is directed at you. I know you feel your angel and you are sure you are doing right, but you are not. You have left us behind and I don't understand why. We care for you, and we want to help you. Please don't shut us out.

Don't you see that you have lost your connection to life? Your angel can't hold you at night and it can't laugh at jokes with you. You need friends. Please listen.

Everyone else, please try to help Oracle. Also, I hate to say this, but use her as a warning. We could all be where she is if we aren't careful. Confidence is a wonderful thing, but we can't be reckless or selfish.

Remember who you are and who has put their trust in you. Think what your actions will mean for those who come after you. We are trying to build a new world for everyone, not for ourselves alone. Does understanding or even victory have any meaning if you leave everyone else behind? A promised land with a single inhabitant is no promised land at all.

SIGNING OFF

I guess that's it, at last. Please, everyone be careful to stay on the right path. I know it's difficult — these warnings are all for me, too — but we can get through it together.

I will, of course, still be online when I can, and I'm happy to answer emails.

Hasta la proxima, amigas y amigos.

REALIZATIONS

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: xxx289

Subject: I'm fucked

Pardon all the typos and misspellings, cause I'm drunk. That's about the only way I can be here right now, but I don't think it'll be for long.

I think I'm fucked, and I have no one to tell it to but you. God, this is the lowest day of my lief.

I thought I was so smart. I was a clever sun of a bitch. I was, but I guess I wasn't ruthless enough to make it the way I hoped. Maybe all those years of kicking ass really didn't pay off, cause I never learned how to fuck someone over as well as the things we deal with now.

I left work a few days ago, all smug that I'd screwed my boss — the thing — over. Well, I guess I did, but it looks like he got back at me and now I'm done. The morning after I gave him the look, I took it a step further. I've been doodling a lot unconsciously lately — on the phone, reading this list, whatever. One symbol keeps turning over in my brain that I feel some kind of connection to. I've read about these things from others, so wondered if the same was happening to me, like these things were part of us finally resign above the rest of people.

So I get this idea: I'll draw it real big and pin it to my boss' seat. That'll make him shit his pants! He hasn't come in yet, so I do it. I never see him all day and think I've won. He can't even come in anymore for fear of me. Or so I thought.

When I come in the next day, there's a piece of paper pinned to my chair with a bent paperclip. It was a few lines of numbers written on it. My social security number, my checking account, my pin number, and underneath it all is my signature, at least what looks like it, though I never signed anything like this that I remember. I turn over the page and on the other side is my symbol.

He might be afraid of me, but not so afraid he won't threaten me back. Maybe I should have foreseen that. He has all my legal info as my boss, after all. I handed him the rope and he put it over my head. It doesn't stop there, either. I checked my account today. I have exactly half of what I did yesterday, when I went to the bank to check. It's like he's calling my bluff, and has all the cards. Now I just sit here and sweat.

I think I'm beaten. For the first time in my life. I know he's everything wrong, the worst that we can become. Have I worked so hard and tried to do the right thing so long that I stand no chance against him and everything like him? Has he had so much time to do wrong and manipulate the good people that I'm a fish on a line? If that's the real way of this world, I don't want apart of it. I mean, I worked so hard before to make it and be somebody for my own reasons. Maybe all my effort was in vain because that's not really how the world works at all. You can't try to climb out of the shit heap, but the shit heap won't ever let you go. You will become one of them.

CONCLUSIONS

If that's true, I have only a few things to say. Maybe they're worth shit cause the way I've lived and thought all along has been as wrong as rain.

The only hope I've ever taken from life is that you do your absolute best at all times and everything will work out. Okay, different

people's takes on what's best may differ, I understand that. But if you really work hard and try to respect things, you'll turn out okay and everyone will get along. The fact that so few people give a shit about anything but themselves is what wrecks the world. All the crime and poverty and abuse isn't a product of government or economics, it's a result of people just not giving a damn for anything and taking it out on each other.

Like what your neighbor has? take it. Think that woman is sexy, but you're married? Go out with her anyway. If she won't have you, rape her. Not want to work a day in your life, but want everything that you expect from life? Scream and cry to the government till you get welfare. Get caught for doing something wrong? Blame the system, the president or anyone else who everyone else like you can blame, too, taking the real responsibility off you.

I read your posts about how to make the world whole again, to take it back from the monsters. I've got news for you. It can't be taken back. It's theirs because it's ours. Maybe if people were paragons of virtue who were afflicted by these living embodiments of evil, the world could be saved when all the evil was wiped out. But it doesn't work that way. As long as human beings are the things that you champion and fight for and defend, the world is going to remain fucked up. We might have deserved to undergo a change, but most people don't. Otherwise, they'd have been "picked" too. Well, they haven't. And if not, that means one thing: You're all looking to wipe out the latest crop of monsters only to save the breeding stock for the next.

It'll all just happen again. Maybe it happened before and were just the latest round. If it does happen again, will anyone be around to stop them?

You wanna know my answer for a better world? Well, let me explain with a recent disappointment. The year 2000 was coming up not long ago. Everyone was afraid that the world would come to an end. The water would be cut off, power would fail, and all the Russian nukes would detonate throwing us into a nuclear winter. Everyone was afraid, buying bottled water, heading into the woods, staying home with guns across their laps.

Know what I was doing? I was looking forward to it! That's right. Here was a conscience free opportunity for a shitload of people to literally get wiped from the face of the Earth. Suddenly no more squabbling over square feet of land. No jockeying for position on the freeways. No more shit being dumped into rivers and lakes. Finally, our ridiculous population would be reduced to something reasonable, like what it must have been hundreds of years ago. Maybe all of us left over could actually have lived in peace afterward, because we'd all need to struggle for ourselves to survive. It wouldn't be too hard, though, cause all the technology and water and electricity would get running sooner or later. We'd be a community of people with a mutual need, not a conflicting one: survival. It's hard to covet

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org, vitalis.list@hunter-net.org

From: nurse216

Subject: XXX289

My friend John and I have just returned from Knoxville. It's the furthest I've ever been from home. After reading XXX289's—I'm sorry, Glen's—last post, we felt we had to go. Glen was exposing himself to too much danger; he was all alone and could barely ask for help.

At least that's why I went. John said he knew that it was too late for Glen, but that someone had to "take care of business." I wish I could say he was wrong, but he wasn't. When we got there, Glen Morrison of Knoxville, Tennessee was another digit in the suicide statistics. According to the local paper, he was found dead in his office after putting a gun in his mouth.

John said Glen had been killed by his boss. I'm pretty sure that Glen pulled the trigger himself in a last attempt to have control over his life—a last desperate act alone in the world.

Alone. That's the word that keeps coming up when I think of Glen. He was so angry that he pushed all of us away, without seeing the harm he was doing. He was right in many ways—there are many problems with people, whether or not they are those we see as monsters. There are reasons to feel anger and despair, to be bitter. Giving in to those feelings just lets them win, though.

Glen found hope when he confronted his boss, his "monster." But he forgot that we can't do this without help. He had no one to help him, no one to advise him. He had no one to laugh with. He could only brood and lash out. When he lashed out he gave in to ego—he challenged his boss on his own territory. He didn't risk hope but didn't leave himself a way out, either.

John and I faced his boss the night we left and found he would not change. John had to use his gun, to avenge Glen.

If only he had trusted another, he could have made it out alive and maybe there could have been another solution. Now all that is left is for us to remember him and learn from his death.

Rest in peace, Glen.

your neighbors wife when you need to kill an animal and start a fire to eat tonight.

See, that world wouldn't need to reconcile monsters with good people. The good people are the ones who've worked hard all their lives. Adversity isn't such a challenge to them. We've been through hell—put ourselves through it, no less, just to see what we could accomplish. Meanwhile, the worst of the worst

have grown soft by feeding off the stupid people. They never worked hard or earned anything in the first place, then they fell completely into being something that isn't even really a person anymore.

The fate of things would be clear. The monsters wouldn't survive because they couldn't survive. Too many of the stupid people would be gone, and not all of the survivors would survive for long. The best people would carry on and thrive, because they would know how to carry on and because no one would be left to drag them back down to that common denominator.

But of course, none of that happened and the world carried on along the same self-destructive path that it's always been on. Or at least that people have been on. So where does that leave us? Nowhere.

I used to have a glimmer of hope. It wasn't much, but I thought there was a chance for people to turn around, whether they wanted to or not. Now it's gone. Worse, the monsters are still here and we're still breeding like rabbits to increase their number even further.

I used to have hope. I hoped that I could turn the tables of my boss-thing and put him under my thumb for a change - break the grip of the worst people off of the best for once. Obviously I didn't have it in me. I was too good at being good and he was too good at being bad.

I know what all this means for me. Now you need to ask what it means for you. Where are

you people going? What do you hope to accomplish? I mean, realistically? Do you really think you can change the world without changing the fundamentals of the way the world is. If, as I've read here, monsters have been around forever like humans have, how do you expect to change things without changing the very way we understand the world? It'd be like deciding that all plant life is bad and wiping it out. Sooner or later that'd kill everyone and everything.

Imagine the monsters like wolves. Maybe they're predatorial actions on humans actually keep the sheep people in check to some degree. Now imagine wiping them all out. Suddenly the sheep population goes wild - higher than it ever was before. That just means more monsters in the future when our greater numbers birth more. Or assume that you fail to wipe out all of the monsters. They go into hiding while the sheep population explodes. Then, when the wolves are ready, they pounce from the shadows to feed on the herd, better than any of their ancestors did before. The reign of terror would be greater than ever.

Is the future really as hopeful as you people seem to believe? Do any of you really stand a chance against the weight of millennia of human evil? I don't. Neither do you.

My name is Glen Morrison, I live in Knoxville, TN and my buzz is waering off.



CHAPTER 5: NEW RULES

Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him.

— Luke 17:3

Innocents don't look at the world in quite the same way as any other imbued. Instead of seeing monsters and terrors, they recognize the potential for a better place. Instead of battle-weary hunters, they see people struggling to make things right. Instead of mean streets and apathetic blind masses, they see a community looking for hope and managing to survive. They see possibilities and small joys, not deterrents and despair.

This chapter is dedicated to the basic concepts of Innocent character creation, and to the common and new Archetypes, Backgrounds, edges and rules that apply to Innocents. These unique Traits define who these people are. Their inclusion here does not mean that these qualities are exclusive to Innocents — members of other creeds can have them, too. The following guidelines and mechanics are simply indicative of the wide-eyed and are probably passed on by them to other imbued as Innocents seek to create bonds among the chosen.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

When portraying an Innocent, there are a few cardinal rules to keep in mind above any game Traits or edges. These qualities define your Innocent more so than any trick or capability. Although every character

is different, these guidelines apply to almost all of the creed's members to one extent or another.

- **There's Always Hope:** Every Innocent, no matter how cynical or jaded, is an optimist at her core. She believes in the inherent goodness of the universe and that things will be better in the future. Innocents have an uncanny capacity to discover the faintest ember of hope and fan it into a flame. The city is infested with murderous vampires? Well, at least now what's wrong is clear. Ghosts are going crazy and scaring children in a day care facility? The dead must be lonely and need help. Innocents understand that to make things better they have to work at it — if they didn't, they'd just stay at home — but the mere fact that they *are* working is proof enough for them that things must be getting better.

- **Look, Don't Judge:** Innocents don't believe that they know any profound truths about the nature of the "other side." Obvious conclusions that putrefied zombies are monsters to be killed aren't so obvious to them. What if these things are just sick? Shouldn't the imbued help them instead of hunt them? Innocents spend a lot of time watching the "enemy," trying to understand it, trying to find the glimpses of humanity and morality that they just *know* are buried there somewhere. The only thing they know for sure is that all the imbued have a lot to learn about what they face.

• **Hate Breeds Hate, Love Breeds Love:** If there is one universal rule, it must be that you reap what you sow. Abused children grow up to be abusers. Kind people attract kindness. To one extent or another, this golden rule of "Do unto others" shapes how all Innocents undertake the mission. Some abhor violence completely and see any act of destruction as incentive for more bloodshed. Others walk a line, participating in some "hunts" and avoiding others. They try to ensure that destruction is a last resort, used to save lives. All Innocents try to relate to "monsters" as human beings at least once, talking to them and offering compassion. They go into the night with one cheek already turned.

• **Optimism, Not Stupidity:** Innocents are not suicidal, and those who flout caution completely end up dead more often than not. Innocents can and do carry weapons, keep their mortal friends safe and hesitate before walking into a vampire's den. Their perch is precarious, however, as caution erodes their central optimism. The more danger to which they're exposed, the more distant hope seems. An Innocent's dwindling hope determines his course through the various camps of the creed (see below).

• **Strength in Numbers:** Many hunters believe in the advantages of working together, if only for superior firepower. Innocents see it as the only way to work — and not for militaristic reasons. They look around and see the toll the mission takes on those who hear its call. Without the support of fellow imbued, a hunter can quickly become a killing machine. Without the support of the everyday people she loves, even an Innocent forgets what it's all about. Community is the key, the one antidote to the creeping insanity inflicted by the mission.

Now, if only everyone would realize these cardinal rules, everything would be much better....

CHARACTER CREATION AND DEVELOPMENT

The Innocence path is not easy — or obvious — to follow when confronted by the supernatural. The Avenger's desire to strike back; the Redeemer's desire to reform; the Visionary's desire to understand: All of these reactions leap to the imagination more readily than does Innocents' unique faith, their belief that all is for the good in the long run. An Innocent character must therefore be of a particular sort.

NEW ARCHETYPES

The following Traits can be added to your game as Natures and Demeanors. They are particularly appropriate to Innocents.

EXPLORER

The Explorer knows deep down that there is a better way out there somewhere. Until he finds it (and even

then), he is always in search of the new and unknown. He breaks down barriers and enters hidden lands in search of knowledge, understanding or benefit. He challenges established assumptions (such as the evil of "monsters") and ways of acting in search of new ideas. He knows the place where he is would be better if he could bring back something from elsewhere. Travelers, dreamers and college students are examples of Explorers.

— Regain Willpower every time you make a major discovery about the mission that expands your understanding of it or the other side (Storyteller's discretion).

OPTIMIST

Even in the face of sheer inhuman horror, the Optimist finds a glimmer of hope. That the world is filled with monsters only means that humans, freed from their bondage, can create a better life for themselves. The Optimist has a seemingly bottomless reservoir of cheer and refuses to believe in the worst-case scenario, to the point of antagonizing more pragmatic acquaintances. A terrifying poltergeist that can be eased through conversation is evidence that humanity persists among the other side. Teaching a bloodsucker that it can feed without killing means there's hope for peace between people and the hidden. The devoutly religious, the downtrodden-yet-undefeated and problem-solvers can be optimistic.

— Regain Willpower whenever your optimism is rewarded by an unlikely good act or outcome (Storyteller's discretion).

PARAGON

The Paragon knows that others watch her actions, so she keeps herself to the strictest code of behavior and morality. For her, ethics are not immaterial words, but the superstructure of life, the only things that keep her sane in the face of the missions' horrors. By acting rightly, she hopes to inspire others to do the same. This road can be a hard one, especially if others refuse to follow her example. Leaders, teachers and the puritanical can be Paragons.

— Regain Willpower whenever you inspire ethical behavior in others or resist overwhelming temptation to compromise your morals (Storyteller's discretion).

PRELUDES

Characters in **Hunter: The Reckoning** are very much who they were before their eyes were opened to the supernatural. Their reactions to the call and to the creatures of the night have everything to do with what and where they came from. It's critical to lay the foundation of each character, especially an Innocent, in the prelude if you want to capture the trauma inherent to a **Hunter** chronicle.

LIFE BEFORE THINGS GOT WEIRD

At your discretion, anyone can become an Innocent. Indeed, the trauma of the imbuing could compel a violent bully to take up a completely different way of life, even of Innocence. Playing a creed member is most fulfilling if your character's origins incline her to that

FLIRTING WITH INNOCENCE

Always remember that **Hunter's** creeds are more convenient groupings of personalities than they are identifiable movements. Innocents don't label themselves as such. Nor do they look at their fellows and see Avengers, Defenders or Visionaries. Any character with the Mercy primary Virtue could well have some of an Innocent's psychological make-up. They may have some of the same experiences and identify more with particular Innocents than with other Redeemers, for example. As you get to know your character, she gets to know herself under fire and she fine-tunes her outlooks and beliefs. The Storyteller could therefore allow your Merciful character to switch over to the Innocence creed early in your chronicle.

path naturally. The following three qualities or experiences can make for budding Innocents.

- **Love and Hope:** Your character's life *before* involved sources of love and hope. People were there to listen to his fears, and he was there to listen to theirs. These people taught him that things could get better and that he wasn't alone. Such a past doesn't mean an Innocent has to have grown up in an election-campaign stereotype of "family values," just that there was probably someone who cared for him. A single mother struggling to make ends meet can teach love and hope, as can a fellow street kid. The love need not even have been plentiful or recent, but the seed should be there.

- **Thick and Thin:** People who've known only loving relationships and happy endings are woefully unprepared for the mission. They often find their optimism fades fast, because they have no real confidence that they can overcome hardship. Individuals who have faced tough times — unemployment, foster care, incarceration, serious illness or injury — and gotten through them know they can do so again. They know their friends will stick by them.

- **Faith:** Not necessarily religious, an Innocent's faith in herself and the nature of the universe is central. She must have some confidence that she can pull through and that the universe is ultimately just and true. Even if hellish suffering seems all that's in store, she must persevere in knowing that a brighter day awaits. Religious faith can be a powerful means to maintain that outlook, but so can the faith that a mother has in her child, or that a person has in her own heart.

THE IMBUING

A character's first exposure to the supernatural — her imbuings — is pivotal to how she pursues the mission. In the first days and nights of her new life, it's the foundation for how she deals with the nightmare world she uncovers. Later on, it remains a formative event, colored but never quite overshadowed by subsequent experiences. To make the rather fragile Innocent outlook viable, elements of the

imbuings must reinforce your character's idealistic beliefs or perspectives. If not, your character's optimism is likely to become a bad joke as play progresses.

Depending on your style of play, your character's imbuings may be completely in the Storyteller's hands or a cooperative narrative. In either case, one or more of the following factors should apply for a would-be Innocent to become a reality. You can pursue behavior appropriate to these points or your Storyteller can stage events to invite your character to react accordingly.

- **Communication:** An Innocent imbuings almost always involves some form of dialogue between the character and the monster. Innocents are generally not martial, so they tend to deal with the other side with words. In these imbuings, they are at least partially successful. They may convince a zombie to leave a place or talk a warlock out of his haughty rage. In more extreme cases, they might just convince a bloodsucker to leave before everyone is dead. Regardless, the Innocent understands that talking can change things — perhaps more so than fighting.

- **Not So Evil:** Innocents often get a glimpse into the nature of the other side during their imbuings and learn that a monster is not wholly evil. They may see the regret in a vampire's eyes or hear the fear in a ghost's wail. This insight becomes the source of their optimism in a world of terrors. They see that even the most twisted creature is capable of regret or compassion, and that gives them hope for the future. It also leads them further away from violence and toward seeking understanding.

This perception doesn't mean that an Innocent's imbuings cannot be violent. Indeed, that glimmer of light can come in a sea of darkness. An imbuings in which a berserk vampire tears through a crowd of people, snaps out of it amidst the carnage and flees into the night could just as easily create an Innocent as it could an Avenger.

- **A Greater Evil:** Something of a variation on the previous point, this element involves perceiving differences among monsters. If a would-be Innocent sees rots cowering before a towering serpentine monstrosity, she may understand that they are its pawns, controlled by fear. The serpent-man is the real monster. If there can be degrees of evil, there can be degrees of good. The most extreme form of this imbuings involves the Innocent actually saving one "monster" from another.

- **Recognition:** Probably the most powerful and most uniquely Innocent imbuings involves the character knowing the "monster." Perhaps he encounters his missing lover who is now a vampire, or his father rises from the grave. Perhaps he just recognizes something in a monster, like a common motivation or mannerism. Either way, the connection creates empathy between the character and the supernatural. Once this bond is established, it takes a great deal for the Innocent ever to see "evil monsters" instead of unfortunate people. Obviously, the more personal the connection to the creature, the more powerful

the empathy is. Such recognition doesn't mean that the creature is necessarily *good*; a jaded Innocent struggling with the fact that his ex-girlfriend has become a blood-thirsty vampire can make for excellent roleplaying.

CAMPS AND COURSES

Innocents have very little sense of groups to which they belong. They recognize common tendencies among others — toward aggressiveness, fanaticism, self-destructiveness — but they don't consider themselves to be a faction, much less to have internal divisions. Nevertheless, practical groups form within the creed that can help you better define your character and her relationship with others. Keep in mind, however, that these camps are not organized movements; they are nothing more than trends in thinking.

IDEALISTS

The most *innocent* of Innocents, idealists truly see the world through rose-colored glasses. They aren't fools, but the ember of optimism within them is more like a bonfire. They walk through the world convinced that things will be better if only they (and others) act with everyone's best interests at heart. They don't believe in necessary sacrifices, the lesser of two evils or compromising their morals. They do believe in communication at all costs, trusting others and working together.

Views on the Mission: For an idealist, the mission is all about hope. In a world of despair and anonymity, the struggle to "Inherit the Earth" gives everything purpose. That there are benevolent forces out there and a chance to make the world better fills idealists with joy. The road may be hard and long, but it has a bright destination. Setbacks and false starts are inevitable, but so is the eventual outcome as long as no one gives up. Idealists are the strongest proponents of the "vitalis theory," which proposes that the imbued carry parts of some universal life force. How they use that force determines the future.

Views on the Other Side: Idealists don't hate anyone. They know there are people and things that deserve to be called monsters, but labeling anything out of the ordinary "evil" doesn't make sense. Many of them have seen — or think they have seen — evidence of good people who just happen to have fangs or be dead. They think of the supernatural more as a disease afflicting these poor souls, and hope to cure them instead of destroy them. Violence is their last resort.

Appropriate Archetypes: Idealists often have Natures and Demeanors that are the same or that complement each other, such as Penitent and Caregiver. Common Archetypes include Caregiver, Child, Dreamer, and the new ones, Explorer, Paragon and Optimist (see p. 70). Some idealists have a substantial self-righteous streak, for which the Pedagogue, Perfectionist or Traditionalist Archetypes may be appropriate.

Common Traits: Idealists often have high Mental and Social Attributes, as well as considerable levels of Empathy and Intuition. They rarely have any capability for Intimida-

tion or Subterfuge. Common Backgrounds include Roots (see p. 75), Bystanders and Patron (the latter two of which may be sources of their optimism). Virtues and edges are almost always concentrated in Mercy and Innocence.

Possible Future: Idealists tend to go one of two routes. Their idealism is typically undermined by the vicissitudes of the mission, and they eventually drift into the doubter or even jaded camp. Others hang on to their idealism like a mantra until it evolves into fanaticism; they are likely to suffer from the delusions of high Conviction (see p. 77).

DOUBTERS

Doubters are Innocents caught in the nebulous uncertainty between shining idealism and near cynicism. They still want to set the world on the road to recovery, but something keeps them from trusting their optimism fully. Perhaps they've seen a friend die in the hunt, they just can't quite bring themselves to let go of their fear of the dark, or something tells them things might not turn out right, after all. Such uncertainty or nagging doubt often translates into confusion and hesitation on many levels, with the chosen never quite sure what to do or say. If idealists are the bright-eyed kids of the world, doubters are the nervous, teenaged virgins.

Views on the Mission: The mission scares doubters. Every time they venture into the night, something is bound to happen to make them question their direction and purpose. Nevertheless, they know they have no choice (sitting back while others go off to fight just leads to different doubts), so they act. They're rarely sure what they should be doing and tend to treat every situation as unique. They look to other imbued for guidance.

Views on the Other Side: Doubters still try to see the humanity in the "monsters" out there. They approach each one as different and hope that a peaceful resolution is possible. Each time it isn't, their doubts grow a little stronger. The other creeds' methods seem more effective, and so they often defer to others.

Appropriate Archetypes: Doubters are less prone to action than are most hunters, so they gravitate to Demeanors such as Conformist, Penitent or Traditionalist. Deep down, they truly want to help and act so have Natures such as Architect, Caregiver or Dreamer.

Common Traits: Like idealists, doubters tend toward Mental and Social Attributes, although some explore their physical sides as well. Their Abilities tend to be diverse as they seek answers to their nagging questions. Knowledges such as Academics, Occult and Research may derive from that quest. Awareness and even Streetwise may also develop. Common Backgrounds include Allies, Contacts, Exposure and Continued Exposure (see p. 74). Doubters may also have diversified Virtues and edges, often having one point of Vision and the Foresee edge as part of their mission to understand.

Possible Future: It's difficult to sustain a life of constant doubt, although it may actually be the healthiest course. Most doubters eventually come across something



that either confirms or refutes their uncertainties. Such a turning point is often a traumatic encounter with the other side involving something deeply personal — the ghost of someone they knew in life, for example. After this event they become idealists or jaded, depending on the outcome. Some doubters cannot stand the uncertainty of the calling and eventually drop out altogether, becoming lurkers on hunter lists and guilt-ridden shut-ins in general.

JADED

Jaded Innocents walk a very difficult path. In many ways, they are the opposite of doubters. Instead of being generally optimistic with nagging doubts, they are mostly cynical except for a spark of faith that refuses to die. They wear masks of derision, anger and even despair, but deep down they hope and pray that things can get better. They are always looking for a sign of hope, but refuse to admit it. Even worse, they tend to punish themselves for not giving up entirely. After all, any rational person knows the world is irrevocably screwed up. Why can't they?

Views on the Mission: The jaded tend to see the calling as a lost cause. They go through the motions because of that quiet little voice that says things might be better tomorrow, but it all seems relatively pointless. They are the Innocents most likely to treat the mission like a hunt and follow in the footsteps of an Avenger.

Views on the Other Side: Jaded have few illusions about monsters in general. They are dark and sick and

99 percent evil. Monsters may be diseased victims of some supernatural cancer, but by the time the jaded see them they're more like tumors than victims. Yet, jaded Innocents often hold exceptions to the rule: one type of monster with which they can empathize, or a single creature that they're convinced can be saved. Such holdouts are often the source of their fragile optimism.

Appropriate Archetypes: The jaded don't look very innocent at all on the outside. Demeanors including Bravo, Curmudgeon, Gallant or Survivor are appropriate. Inside, they still have some hope, so different Natures, such as Dreamer or Penitent, are appropriate.

Common Traits: The jaded tend to behave more like Zealots than the Merciful, so Physical Attributes and various martial Abilities are all appropriate. Other Abilities, such as Awareness, Intuition and Streetwise, are also common. Typical Backgrounds include Exposure, Continued Exposure and Roots. Mixed Virtues and edges are also common, with dots in Mercy and Zeal.

Possible Future: The jaded are one step away from lost innocence. Enough signs of hope and perseverance can make them doubters, but enough abuse or failure can make them fall out of the hunt altogether. Individuals who persevere over the long run have another problem as their inner conflict grows: In game terms, rising Zeal and Mercy Virtues can lead to conflicting derangements.

THE INNOCENT'S COURSE

Innocent camps are not organized factions or strict philosophical groups. They're more like stops along a particular Innocent's course through the mission. Only very rarely does an imbued maintain the same outlook.

You and your Storyteller should consider the path your character takes through the chronicle. Of course, hard-and-fast decisions are difficult to make without knowing the events to come, but some idea of where you want to go allows you both to tell a better story and have more fun. None of these courses is easy, although the rise in Virtues that comes with them is a real reward (unless it ultimately proves self-destructive).

The most common course an Innocent takes is to start as an idealist, move slowly toward doubt, and then become jaded. The harsh realities of the World of Darkness can and should erode your character's optimism. Most Innocents spend their entire careers fighting to preserve their hopefulness, and they slip back and forth along the idealist-doubter-jaded continuum.

Starting out as a doubter is another viable option. The most common path here is one of vacillation, spending time as an idealist, then as jaded and back again. Original doubts are rarely resolved completely and the path becomes a "sine curve" of outlooks.

The slow crawl from jaded toward idealism is another option. Although most Innocents face this battle later in their careers (after faltering), some start at the depths of cynicism and somehow find hope in the hunt. This option should probably be considered "advanced" in that it is quite difficult to portray and requires that you and the Storyteller work together to create small, almost intangible in-character rewards for nurturing hope. Your character must feel that her efforts are not in vain, but she cannot be sure they are worthwhile, either.

TRAITS

Innocents' uniquely optimistic outlook leads them to contend with the mission in very different ways than do other imbued. The following Traits help quantify some of these differences. Although these Traits reflect Innocent mentality, they are not exclusive to creed members. Hunters of any path can possess these qualities, as long as the Storyteller approves and individual characters remain unique in the group.

BACKGROUNDS

CONTINUED EXPOSURE

Don't mention the smell, *Mitch thought to himself*. Whatever you do, don't mention the smell.

He squirmed on the booth's cheap vinyl seats as "Frank" ordered a cheese steak with extra mushrooms, and a chocolate shake. The waitress didn't seem to notice the puss running down Frank's cheek or the sickly green stuff growing in his hair. She just clicked her tongue and took the order without saying much. She turned to Mitch.

"Um, just coffee." She clicked again and turned.

"Whatever happened to service with a smile?" Frank said as he watched her pink-polyestered butt swing back toward the kitchen.

"I... I didn't know you could eat. Normal food, I mean." Mitch kicked himself for stammering. It was the third time they'd met this way, and he was still nervous.

"I can't, really. I mean, it doesn't do anything for me and I just sort of shit it out whole later. But goddamn, I loved a good cheese steak before all this crap happened. I can still sorta remember what it tasted like, so I keep stuffing them down. Makes me feel better than what I gotta eat these days, if you know what I mean. Whatever they tell ya, it don't taste a fucking thing like chicken."

Mitch swallowed. He decided he had every right to be nervous, cheese steak or no.

Your character has ongoing and relatively peaceful contact with someone from the other side, what other imbued would call a monster. The contact is not a supremely powerful entity or your character's friend, but the two of you have reached some sort of understanding that allows for continued contact which is not overtly hostile. Your character doesn't try to kill it, and it doesn't try to kill him. Over the course of the relationship, your character can gain a certain amount of insight into his contact's existence — something of what's it like to be a ghost or bloodsucker — although it also gains insight about him, as well. There is no guarantee that the contact won't lie, try to manipulate your character or eventually sell him out to something higher up on the "food chain." If he plays his cards right, however, your character may be able to keep his contact relatively congenial. This supernatural associate might be the creature your character "understood" during the imbuement.

All contacts are "low-level" creatures, neither very powerful nor very influential in their own circles when play begins. Background rating indicates the frequency and reliability of meetings. At the Storyteller's discretion, you may choose to have several one- or two-point connections rather than a single multi-point one.

- Contact with a barely civil creature once a month or less.
- A nocturnal (and at times dangerous) acquaintance you run across every few weeks
- You feel relatively safe in your encounters every couple of weeks or so.
- You have a clear understanding with the contact, which ensures mutual safety in encounters every week.
- Perhaps foolishly, you consider the creature a friend and see it every few days.

EVERYMAN

"What do you mean, 'no'?" The district attorney's rage was like a billowing cloud, and three black flies took the opportunity to fly down his throat. His assistant didn't notice.

"Well," the little man whined, "we haven't been able to find anything yet... and...."

"But I gave you a partial plate number! EZ9, a blue Toyota Camry. How difficult can it be for the police to find that car?" The district attorney was not in a good mood. Actually, he hadn't been happy at all since he'd come back from his fatal accident six weeks before.

"Well, the police say it's not that uncommon. Blue was the big color for Toyota two years ago, but then they were all recalled for a minor technical repair. And some of the records were jumbled up. I think there was a computer crash at the license office."

As the little man droned on about how difficult it was to find this woman who had gotten away, the district attorney wondered what his assistant's fear tasted like.

Despite being imbued and actively pursuing the mission, your character retains a great deal of normality. She has a knack for not doing anything in her everyday life that draws special attention to herself. She pays her bills on time, her AmEx card has no bizarre charges for AK-47s or cordite, and her neighbors wave every morning and never ask questions. All this makes it very difficult for her enemies to track her down. Hidden zombies or vampire manipulators with access to the police department or hall of records tend to hit a bureaucratic wall when trying to identify this lowly creature, the one who walked into the haven and made off with a prized artifact. After all, there are just so many of these pathetic humans....

Whenever someone tries to find your character through records searches, talking to witnesses or any other means besides physical tailing or tracking, each dot of Everyman counts as a +1 difficulty penalty on the attempt. Also, Storytellers can assume that characters with at least two points in this Background can take care of most mundane bureaucratic details — paying the bills, renewing a driver's license — "off-stage," by subversive, covert or simply innocuous means. Exceptional events (such as the character's home being destroyed or her being forced to flee to another state) cannot be avoided with this Trait. It might help establish her somewhere new, however, without attracting attention, leaving a formal record or creating a paper trail.

Note that certain Backgrounds, careers or origins cannot be taken with Everyman unless reconciled in your character's history. It's hard to have Fame and Everyman at the same time, for example, unless your character disappeared from the limelight and assumed a completely new identity.

- You have a good credit rating and nothing out of the ordinary in your various files.
- You are so average that it would baffle a statistician... if he ever noticed you.
- Your files and records haven't been examined since they were established.

- The mailman overlooks your house.
- You could stop paying your taxes and no one would notice for years.

ROOTS

Inez smiled when old Mr. Henry shuffled into the waiting room. His gray hair was tousled as always, and his gait had that particular awkward rhythm caused by too many years of carrying the heavy burden of life. He slumped into a chair, looked around and unclipped the sun shades from his old glasses.

That's when she saw the bruise around his right eye.

"Mister Henry," she said after rushing over, "what happened?"

He looked down, slightly embarrassed. "It was nothing, Miz Inez. Just the new tenant in number eight. I knocked on his door to collect the rent, and he got mad. He hit me. I... I think he might be sick or crazy or something. He had blood coming out the corner of his mouth."

Blood. Inez got off at nine and knew where her next stop would be.

Your character has especially deep ties to her local community. Neighbors see her as a sort of benefactor and protector, even if they don't know the nature of her new life. They may simply think of her as someone to whom they can tell their problems, or they may expect reliable help from her. They look out for your character in return, as long as she stays there for them. Your character cannot expose them to the realities of the mission or monsters without them assuming her to be insane. This Background could be combined with Allies, Bystanders and/or Contacts to create a truly "connected" character. Alone, this Background represents broad ties to a community (and a corresponding obligation), not specific useful people in the right place at the right time.

Neighbors might come running if your character is attacked on the corner. A store owner might hide your character in his back room while police go door to door in search of her. The little old lady down the hall might make your preoccupied character some soup in thanks for fixing her dripping faucet last week.

- You watch over a small group, such as a single family or group of friends.
- You protect a specific community, such as the residents of a housing complex or the students at a high school.
- You are the patron of a small neighborhood, no more than a few blocks square.
- You are the patron of a large neighborhood of several dozen blocks, or of a small social or ethnic group.
- You watch over a significant ethnic or social group in your city.

THE HIGH COST OF COMMITMENT

As an Innocent pursues the mission, she faces untold horrors and calls upon the Messengers' gifts over and over

again. This repeated trauma has deleterious psychological results reflected in the transition from ideological camp to camp over your character's career (see above). In game terms, these hard knocks are generally represented by Conviction and the three Virtues. Exactly how you choose to use and spend Conviction shapes the direction you wish to take your Innocent. Similarly, the Storyteller awards Conviction based on your character's actions and how much they reflect the Innocent mind set.

SPENDING CONVICTION

The choice of whether to cash in accumulated Conviction for increased Virtue is a hard one when playing an Innocent. Your character's quest to understand and "make a connection" with the other side depends in no small part on the benefits of Conviction — empathy is difficult to come by when you run screaming through the night or become the automaton of some unliving master.

Remember that the decision to conserve or cash in Conviction is not actually the Innocent's to make, but yours. Conviction and the Virtues reflect your character's sense of purpose and understanding, not a conscious "fuel tank" of hunter power. Even if the imbued are dimly aware of this cashing-in process as an influx of determination leading to a moment of insight, trying to exert control over this process is antithetical to the Innocent outlook. These imbued tend to take what the universe — what "vitalis" — gives them and not to question it.

You may therefore hang onto your Conviction unless an appropriate circumstance exists for a Virtue increase. Appropriate circumstances include the following:

THE INNOCENT PERSPECTIVE

Gaining, spending, losing and cashing in Conviction are game mechanics that ideally reflect emotional ebbs and flows in your character. Conviction is not a simple fuel, it is how your character feels about the nightmarish world she's discovered. How a character experiences those feelings and the benefits of Conviction depends on her outlook — and her creed.

Many Zealots (along with some other imbued) sense Conviction as a surge of righteous confidence, the sheer belief that they can triumph. Second sight is a willful piercing of illusions. The resistance Conviction grants to fear and mental powers is a mighty suppression of base instincts or a deflection of invading arcane abilities. Conviction is armor.

For Innocents, Conviction is a pair of glasses. The blurry world of fear and hatred clears into one of people and empathy. Innocents do not pierce illusions; they allow themselves to see the truth. They do not deflect attacks or suppress fear; they put aside the pettiness that makes them vulnerable. Innocent Conviction is joy, not rage.

- Your character moves toward a new understanding, reflected by a raised Virtue. If he realizes that violence is sometimes necessary, a point of Zeal might be appropriate. A point of Mercy would work if he has slowly convinced a "monster" to leave its prey alone.

- The sudden manifestation of a new edge rewards and emphasizes the Innocent's efforts. If your character gains 10 Conviction by helping and protecting his extended family from a haunting, it's appropriate to suddenly develop Ward when the ghost strikes again.

It's up to you to judge whether spending or keeping 10 Conviction is appropriate when the opportunity arises. The Storyteller shouldn't veto your decision (the rewards of the mission are too few and far between), but he may lower subsequent experience point or Conviction awards for roleplaying if he feels you opt for a quick fix.

REGAINING CONVICTION

As with any Hunter character, you gain most of your Conviction by risking it on edge-related rolls. The Storyteller does award other points for roleplaying, though, and some circumstances apply specifically to Innocents. Storytellers should grant players one additional point of Conviction under these conditions. Doing so more than once per game session is usually excessive; the Innocent doesn't feel a surge of accomplishment for everyday acts.

- Gain a point of Conviction if your Innocent convinces a violent hunter to attempt understanding of the other side (in this particular case, at least).

- Gain a point of Conviction if your Innocent convinces a supernatural creature to change its ways (for the time being, anyway) or helps a ghost or other creature voluntarily pass on from the mortal world (resolving a ghost's anchors or passions as described in *Hunter: The Walking Dead* qualifies).

- Gain a point of Conviction if your Innocent helps establish a lasting cooperative effort between imbued (such as a new website or a safe house).

- Gain a point of Conviction if your Innocent uncovers proof of humanity and morality in a seemingly vile monster (your character must previously have believed this creature to be beyond the pale).

- Gain a point of Conviction if your Innocent successfully assists a normal community by restoring its confidence and sense of safety.

- (Optional) Lose a point of Conviction if your Innocent suffers grievous harm or betrayal at the hands of a creature she trusted.

- (Optional) Lose a point of Conviction if your Innocent fails to stop her fellow imbued from killing a creature she knows to be moral.

ALLOCATING VIRTUES

Once you've decided to cash in your hard-earned Conviction, determine what Virtue to raise and which

creed's edges to buy, if any. Mercy and Innocence are obvious choices, but secondary options are always possible. Those other Virtues or paths generally depend on where your character is on his course for the mission.

Idealists tend to hyper-specialize, raising Mercy alone and typically developing edges from their own creed. Some Vision may develop, and even a bit of Zeal (usually focused on Defense) is possible, but these are distractions from the ideal world of optimism and empathy.

Doubters dabble in all Virtues and creed paths. Mercy remains primary, naturally, but Vision can be a close second, with Zeal in the running. Edges associated with Martyrs, Redeemers, Defenders, Judges and Visionaries crop up. Doubters tend to have many low-level edges.

The jaded try to back up their faint optimism with plenty of pragmatism. Zeal often runs neck and neck with Mercy, with edges associated with Vengeance and Defense (as well as Redemption) being popular. Vision runs third in the Virtue race of the jaded.

THE PRICE OF MERCY

Rising Virtues have deleterious effects on the imbued. As hunters experience the horrors of the hidden world, they become increasingly disassociated from everyday existence. This problem can be especially grave for Innocents, whose very self-image depends on a sense of normality.

Idealist Innocents tend to become most quickly deranged and suffer the worst for it because they take their normality for granted. The first time a hunter's derangement makes someone (especially a normal person) react poorly to the Innocent, she may go through a serious crisis of conscience. It may well put her on the path to doubt or even make her jaded. After all, she did everything right and treated everyone fairly, so why is she alienated?

Doubters and the jaded often raise Mercy and other Virtues at similar paces. At high levels, this conflicted nature can lead to derangements such as multiple personalities, schizophrenia or paranoia. These conflicting ailments can become paralyzing and force the Innocent toward idealism as she gives in to her optimism, blinding herself to all other possibilities.

Innocents tend to seek relief from psychological trauma by turning to trusted friends among the imbued. They cannot talk freely to oblivious friends or family, so they must unburden themselves on their fellow travelers in hopes of catharsis. They may also attempt to take "time off" from the hunt and to lead normal lives in hopes that getting away from trauma will offer some perspective. Recovery by the latter method is difficult, because the imbued cannot confide in anyone and the supernatural is rarely so forgiving as to leave them alone. Some Innocents indulge in classic denial, refusing to admit that they have a problem. In all cases, Willpower probably has to be spent frequently to maintain self-control.

The emerging edge Ease (see p. 79) also offers Innocents who confide in fellow creed members a chance to deal with derangements in the short term.

The following are new derangements specific to Innocents. Like those in the rulebook, they start manifesting once a Virtue score (in this case Mercy) reaches 7 or when the Innocent is subjected to extreme stress — such as watching a loved one die. The Storyteller can decide whether your character ever suffers an experience-induced complex, based on the events of the story. You may also decide that your character falls victim to such effects, based on her encounters and hardships.

The following derangements are mostly refinements of some found in the rulebook (particularly schizophrenia), but they are especially appropriate to Innocents.

CHARMED-LIFE COMPLEX

Innocents who have experienced grave trauma sometimes protect their own minds with an ironclad belief that "somebody up there" likes them. Some higher power has taken a personal interest in their fate and keeps them safe, no matter what. Of course, the Messengers *have* taken an interest in the Innocent, but this derangement translates that event into a much broader sense of protection and importance.

The Innocent usually creates a detailed fantasy about this protective higher force, sometimes a shining guardian angel, sometimes a faceless and silent companion. The Innocent may start talking to this guardian at any moment, listen to its advice or even go on strange "missions" for it. The Innocent has an unshakable belief that the guardian keeps her safe. As with megalomania, this ailment allows you to add an extra die to Willpower rolls because of the sheer confidence it engenders.

FANTASY WORLD

Upon the Innocent's imbuing, a layer of the world was peeled back and she was forced to glimpse its underside. The chosen learned of ghosts and vampires and Messengers. Now, she firmly believes she has peeled back another layer and found yet another set of factors that explain the course of her life. Unfortunately, this time it's all in her head — but she displays an amazing skill at tying actual events to her fantasy construct.

The exact nature of the creation varies wildly from person to person, but is usually all-encompassing and benefits from the fact that it has no clear manifestation (much like the "truth" of the supernatural, actually). Some sufferers believe that everyone around them has been replaced by robots, others that the CIA is watching them through pinhole cameras hidden inside soda bottles. These types of delusions tend to have a broad explanatory power, which leads the sufferer to rely on the fantasies to indicate appropriate courses of action. Thus, the robots are designed to test the hunter, which is why some act like cops chasing him, others like victims that need his help. If she can go through the motions of the test, she might find the command switch to turn the robots off....

When your character is confronted by a fact that contradicts her fantasy construct, make a Willpower roll

(difficulty 7). Success means that your character immediately integrates the new fact into her fantasy world (e.g., the robots are actually nanomachines controlling biological constructs, which is why the one at your feet is bleeding all over your shoes). Failure creates a panic attack during which all actions suffer a +3 difficulty penalty; the attack lasts for an entire scene (after which your character integrates the new fact). A botch causes a more severe panic attack during which no action is possible at all.

SELECTIVE AMNESIA

The mind can react to trauma by compartmentalizing it so thoroughly that the conscious mind is unaware of the event. This derangement occurs in Innocents above all others, because hurtful experiences are extremely damaging to their optimism. They sometimes react simply by forgetting the pain inflicted upon them and carrying on with their cheerful outlook. An amnesiac is not able to remember events and, unless forced to attempt to do so, simply glosses over the gap in his memory. He assumes an ordinary day went by once he has suppressed a vampire's tortures, for example. Only physical evidence or the testimony of trusted friends forces him to acknowledge that moment in his life, and even then he doesn't remember fully—perhaps leading him to discount evidence and distrust friends.

Exactly what event the Innocent suppresses is up to you and the Storyteller, but it should be the most troubling trauma in your character's life. Amnesia should also have side effects as the victim's mind trips over details and reminders. Seemingly innocuous things associated with the event—the part of town where an attack occurred, the music playing in the background, the attacker's name—may trigger panic attacks or nausea. When the Innocent is exposed to these stimuli, all actions suffer a +2 difficulty penalty. Spending a Willpower point can overcome this penalty for a turn or even the remainder of the scene.

It is possible to regain memories and resolve a trauma, but it takes long psychological care available to the imbued only at great risk. Confronting events also proves a serious blow to the character's optimism and could lead him to become jaded, to abandon the mission altogether or even to commit suicide.

EDGES

Edges seem to arise from a combination of need and inclination. During her imbuing, a hunter who must get out of harm's way can develop a different edge than one who decides to fight a shambler. Inclination plays a roll in that those needs arise from the exact same situation differentiated simply by the varying personalities involved. Innocents generally gain abilities to avoid or counter supernatural creatures and to affect positive change.

The Innocence edges outlined in the **Hunter: The Reckoning** seem to be the most common displayed by creed members. With the growth of the Internet com-

munity and more frequent face-to-face meetings of imbued, word of various and different gifts spreads. The following five edges come to light in this increasing exchange of information.

Thus far, all these edges seem to be specific to the Innocence creed. At the Storyteller's discretion, hunters of other creeds could learn them. The Storyteller should decide on a case-by-case basis, allowing an edge only if it's specifically appropriate to a character's concept. So, a Martyr or even a Defender might learn Ease, for example, but perhaps not Fool's Luck.

• Fool's Luck

Some Innocents believe that the universe or vitalis is on their side, and this edge seems to confirm that belief. In times of grave danger and high stress, the courage of the imbued is affirmed when small but significant events go her way. An escape route presents itself or a weapon is at hand with which to defend herself. "Good karma," some hunters call it. To activate this power, imbued tend to make an everyday sign for good luck, such as crossing fingers, crossing themselves, whispering a prayer or rubbing a lucky charm. Such acts are indistinguishable from the signs for fortune that any normal person might make, even to second sight. The Innocent using the edge feels a brief surge of optimism when the "fortuitous" event transpires.

System: If the hunter's life or ability to carry on the mission is significantly and immediately at risk, he may use this edge. The risk may come from mundane or supernatural sources, but it must be real; attempts to invoke the edge when there is no threat fail automatically. Roll Wits + Mercy, difficulty 8 (the Storyteller may wish to make this roll so that the player is not entirely certain of the power's effectiveness).

Success indicates that a small event or development occurs in the character's favor, helping him escape his dire fate. The nature of this occurrence is up to the Storyteller (examples and suggestions appear below). It should neither end the threat altogether nor provide a direct combat bonus (no convenient Mack trucks to crush that werewolf or lucky punches to a nerve cluster). The factor should only open up new possibilities or give the hunter breathing room so he can get himself out of danger. The universe helps only those who help themselves. If the lucky event results in a die roll (such as to catch a convenient ledge after being thrown out a window), the difficulty is equal to 10 minus Fool's Luck successes. Other possible effects include the following:

Successes	Possible Results
1	A nearly imperceptible change: You gain a few feet on the creature pursuing you.
2	A lucky break: A door in a blind alley is unlocked, allowing you to keep running.
3	A total fluke: A chopper from <i>Eyewitness News</i> shines a spotlight on the guy about to shoot at you, making him hold his fire and allowing you to run.

- 4 One in a thousand: A cop is actually around when you need him.
- 5+ One in a million: You were just thrown against a shatterproof window, not through it.

Invoking Fool's Luck takes one action and can be done once per scene. Fool's Luck aids only the imbued who uses it, not his companions — imbued or not. A lone Innocent's lucky break may be to run into her fellow imbued if they have become separated, however (Storyteller's discretion).

**EASE

Innocents are very concerned with the struggle to remain sane in the face of the horrors revealed to them and other imbued. The extreme behaviors and mental problems that seasoned hunters often display worry Innocents greatly. They are always looking for ways to counteract this mental breakdown. This edge allows them to do just that by "talking down" extremists. The Innocent must be able to engage the target in conversation and the subject must be able to listen, although he need not be a willing listener. To all outward appearances, the edge seems to involve nothing more than a conversation. The words seem especially powerful to the listener, though.

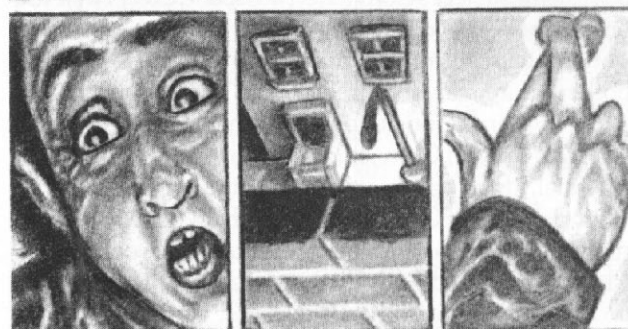
System: The user must speak for at least three consecutive turns and can do nothing else (other than gesture or move about while speaking) for the edge to function. Make a resisted roll. You roll Manipulation + Mercy, difficulty 6. The subject's player or the Storyteller rolls a number of dice equal to the target's primary Virtue, plus one for each other Virtue that is 5 or higher, difficulty 6. Thus, a Judge with 7 Zeal and 6 Vision receives nine dice (7 + 2).

You can risk Conviction as normal, but the subject's player cannot. If you win the contest, each success suppresses one of the subject's derangements for one scene. Decide how to spend multiple successes: suppress additional derangements, suppress derangements for a longer period of time or a combination thereof. If the listener wins the contest or a draw occurs, the edge has no effect.

Using this edge is challenging in deleterious circumstances. Your roll suffers a +2 difficulty penalty if the subject does anything other than listen (such as fight, or if she is unwilling to participate) while the edge is used.

Subjects of this power cannot invest Conviction in their rolls given Innocents' purpose; they seek to help fellow imbued. Other hunters' inability to forcibly resist such help with Conviction is evidence of Innocents' seemingly ordained role.

If an Innocent has ample time and a willing subject, this edge can be more effective and become a sort of imbued therapy. In this case, the edge must be used in a quiet, peaceful place that's free of distractions. Neither party can do anything else. Using the edge takes an entire scene, but each success suppresses a derangement for a day. Die rolls are the same as above.



Regardless of how she applies this edge, your character cannot use Ease on the same person more than once per day. Ease affects only other imbued, not bystanders, normal people or supernatural creatures. It cannot undo the panic or hysteria imposed upon hunters who have encountered monsters such as spirits or shapechangers while Conviction is inactive.

*** INSPIRE

Most Innocents believe very strongly in the imbued working together to free the masses from supernatural abuse. This edge makes that goal a reality, allowing an Innocent to transfer some of her own confidence and protection to others through her comforting touch. For other imbued, an Innocent becomes a store of resolve, proof that hunters aren't alone in their struggle. For the masses, the Innocent offers reassurance and a respite from despair and terror. The Innocent cannot actually imbue another person, but she can grant some temporary advantages.

System: No roll is necessary. The Innocent simply touches the beneficiary and concentrates, which usually counts as a reflexive action. You may spend your Innocent's Conviction on a subject's behalf while physical contact is maintained. For other imbued, this expenditure works exactly as if the subject's Conviction was spent, except that you control its use. Your character may activate another's second sight and self-control, you may spend Conviction so that another hunter can activate her own high-level edges, or you may even risk Conviction on another player's edge rolls. In the last case, all Conviction risked is lost if the roll fails, as normal. If the roll succeeds, only the subject gains an additional point of Conviction; your character does not, he simply retains the points invested. Note that if your character has already risked Conviction in an edge roll in this scene, he cannot do so for others thereafter. Similarly, if your character risks Conviction in another's edge roll in a scene, you cannot risk it again on your own character's edge rolls or anyone else's for the remainder of the scene. The recipient of Conviction may also risk his own Conviction in a supported edge roll at the Storyteller's discretion. If an invested Conviction roll is botched, all of the Innocent's Conviction is lost, and the subject's might be, too.

Imbued subjects understand the basics of what happens when they are "inspired." Their companion is the source of their strength and courage. Whether the Innocent is the sole source of inspiration or his presence simply bolsters a subject depends on the situation. An exhausted hunter (with little or no Conviction left) might be supported completely by the inspiring Innocent. A hunter with Conviction reserves remaining might simply find the Innocent's support supplementary to his own determination.

In the case of normal people, Conviction can be used to grant only protection from supernatural fear and mental control. Second sight and edges are not conferred. In these cases, the benefits of spent Conviction last only as long as physical contact is maintained. Normal people do not

understand what happens when they're "inspired." They simply feel fears fade or their minds clear. They understand emotionally that the Innocent is somehow responsible. In most cases, however, the unimbued tend to forget what they might have witnessed or encountered after the event. Their minds gloss over the displays of a raging poltergeist, for example. It seems that Inspire is not meant to expose normal people (and hunters without active Conviction) to the horrors of the world, but simply to control the dementia that humans normally suffer in the presence of creatures and save them from excessive harm or trauma.

Inspire may also be applied to bystanders as it is to normal people. There are rumors, however, of the edge temporarily granting some bystanders second sight.

An Innocent may affect multiple targets at once if they all join hands or make contact. The maximum number of subjects equals the Innocent's Mercy rating. You can risk your character's Conviction in only one other hunter's edge roll, and may do so only once in any scene. Any Conviction spent to help multiple people must be spent on them individually. If three normal folks are protected from supernatural fear, one Conviction must be spent on each of them; one point is not spent to affect them all.

Inspire does not affect supernatural creatures. If the Innocent is Incapacitated while in contact with others, the effects of any Conviction spent on them terminate.

**** BOND

As Innocents become more experienced in the mission, they can dedicate significant energy to ensuring the safety and sanity of their fellow imbued. They seek to foster cooperation between the chosen and make sure others have a place to stay and someone to talk with — to some hunters, Innocents thus become the mother hens of the imbued. This edge allows Innocents to keep a watchful eye on their imbued allies.

After getting to know and care for another imbued, an Innocent can create a powerful bond with him. Then, when she wishes it, the Innocent can concentrate and gain a sense of the other's state of being, like a mother peering in on her child. The subject of the edge gains no overt advantage from the Innocent's attention, although he may feel a slight surge of confidence.

System: The Innocent must have been acquainted with the subject for at least a month before this edge can be used. The Innocent touches the subject to create the bond, which requires one full turn. Roll Charisma + Mercy, difficulty 6, at that time. The connection persists based on successes rolled, as follows:

Successes	Duration
1-2	One Day
3-4	Three Days
5-6	One Week
7-8	Two Weeks
9-10	One Month

from the attention of a vampire or walker. Even more zealous hunters (who might give a bloodsucker a well-deserved shotgun wound) can't do too much for the blind when the latter are apart from the imbued.

No real solution to this problem presented itself until the prospect of charms arose recently. Hope123, an Israeli Innocent, seems to have developed a way to invest objects with a glimmer of her own edges and pass them on to normal people. These charms create good luck for and offer protection to friends who might otherwise be lambs awaiting slaughter. These small objects are created by hand or have significant meaning to the people involved and are offered to normal, everyday people. Hope123 reports that creating them is neither easy nor quick, but she is convinced that recipients benefit from them. She has shared her technique on hunter-net, along with her thoughts on protecting the defenseless.

(Creating good-luck charms is exclusive to the Innocence creed. Other hunters can possess edges in the Innocence path, but they cannot fashion protective charms like these, unless the Storyteller decides otherwise.)

METHOD

The key to creating a charm is to find an object that binds the imbued and the subject. That object is central to the charm, and the imbued shapes or modifies it by hand until the item is just right. The object should make each party think of the other — the two must know each other very well.

An ideal charm is a finished item that has meaning for both parties, such as their wedding ring, a photograph of the two, an article of clothing (given by one to the other), a souvenir from a trip together or a postcard from one to the other. The Innocent then alters and embellishes this thing for a great deal of time. Hope123 carved a cypress branch she found with her son during a nature hike. She slowly transformed the branch into wooden beads strung into a small necklace, each bead bearing a character from hunter code. She gave the necklace to her son as a charm after many weeks of work.

Other Innocents experimenting with the process have reported a variety of other techniques. One placed a photograph in a cameo, which he then worked with a soldering iron. Another wrapped wire and other elements around a 1955 quarter. The permutations seem to be endless.

Once the recipient has the charm, he benefits from a certain amount of protection. This benefit is significant but not infallible. Hope123's son managed to walk right past a violent shapechanger but suffered nightmares for weeks afterward.

LEARNING THE TRICKS

Despite Hope123's good intentions, it takes more than an Internet post to create charms. Her messages have pointed interested parties in the right direction, but they've had to invest time and effort to get it to work. The

process involves creating a charm for a person such that the effort is a labor of love. Most Innocents end up trying several objects and abandoning the efforts halfway, because the process does not capture the full emotions that the imbued feels for the subject. Once the Innocent manages to make her first charm, it becomes easier to sense when and how it's appropriate to make others.

This experimentation process is represented in game terms by acquiring two dots of Crafts (in an appropriate field). Characters who already have appropriate Crafts must still experiment for around 20 hours (one week, part-time). In the latter case, you don't have to spend any experience points.

SYSTEM

To create a charm, an Innocent must feel the need to protect loved ones quite deeply, enough that it causes genuine distress. In game terms, this means she must have at least 3 Mercy. She must also care deeply for the person upon whom she intends to bestow the charm. The recipient cannot be imbued or supernatural in any way, although he can be a bystander. The Innocent then obtains an object with meaning to both and begins work on it. The nature of the project is not strictly important, although it must transform the object visually and be done completely by hand or with simple tools. The work cannot be haphazard as the quality determines the effectiveness of the charm (again, your character must have the appropriate Crafts at level 2).

The duration of the effort varies from case to case, although it requires a minimum of 10 hours. In game terms, the Innocent invests Conviction into the object. For each hour or so spent working, he invests one point of Conviction, if it is available. The work ends when he has invested 10 points. Eliminate invested Conviction from your pool (but keep a record of points set aside for the creation). Conviction points set aside for the creation of a token are considered unavailable to your character thereafter. They cannot be spent to activate second sight and supernatural defenses, to activate edges or to invest into powers.

Once the charm is complete, roll Dexterity + Mercy, difficulty 6. Willpower cannot be spent to get an automatic success; this project is based on Conviction. Further Conviction can't be risked on the roll, either; Conviction has already been dedicated to the creation process.

The number of successes achieved is the number of "points" you get to spend on the charm's benefits. A charm can have multiple powers, although each success can go toward only one.

If your Dexterity + Mercy roll fails, the charm develops an imperfection during creation, your character's attention is distracted or the process goes slightly awry. Roll Dexterity + Mercy again. Approximately five more hours must be spent working on the item to perfect it (although no more Conviction need be spent). The Storyteller may decide that your Innocent's effort fails utterly if three consecutive failures are rolled.

If you botch a Dexterity + Mercy roll, the charm breaks completely. The creative process must begin all over again. Half of the Conviction points set aside for the project are lost (round up for odd numbers) and must be replaced before your character may try again.

You cannot elect to re-roll Dexterity + Mercy if the result isn't as high as desired. The result is what your character is capable of, and he lacks the will and inspiration to try again.

Charms work only if they're carried by the recipient and only if they remain whole and undamaged. A single person can benefit from only a single charm. A single Innocent can make multiple charms, up to her Mercy rating (but can make only one at a time). She may grant these to anyone with whom she has a sufficiently close relationship. Charms can never be transferred from one recipient to another, even if both are close to the Innocent.

If an Innocent dies, her charms cease to function. If a bearer dies as a result of a supernatural attack, the

Innocent suffers a form of psychic trauma. This suffering should generally be reserved as roleplaying fodder, but it may impose a derangement on the Innocent, at the Storyteller's discretion.

A lost charm may restore protection to a subject when the item is returned to its proper owner. If it is not returned, your character can revoke the protection offered by the device and create a new one to replace it. If a recipient is ever killed, her charm can be revoked as well, allowing your Innocent to create another for someone else, to the limit of her Mercy. All Conviction dedicated to a revoked charm is lost.

Charms appear to be just slightly *special* to second sight, but not *wrong* in the same sense as the supernatural. Edges such as Discern, Witness or Illuminate detect a warmth or aura to a charm — one a viewer instinctively associates with the glow surrounding some Merciful during their imbuing. Only the object's maker can identify its specific abilities.

The Storyteller should pay close attention to the ongoing relationship between creator and beneficiary. Charms depend on deep feeling. If an Innocent doesn't behave in ways appropriate to those feelings — she disregard's the bearer's needs or ignores him completely — the charm becomes useless. In these instances, the Storyteller may also impose a Conviction loss or even rule (in cases of extreme neglect) that the Innocent loses the ability to create charms altogether.

CHARM CAPABILITIES

- **Call** (minimum cost: 1 point): The Innocent is immediately aware if the bearer is subject to supernatural mental powers (not edges), is scared or harmed by the supernatural, or if the charm is destroyed. The Innocent gains a vague idea of the extent of the trauma and the subject's location, but can neither communicate nor aid him through the charm. If only a single point is spent on this effect, its range is about 10 miles. Each additional point increases range by a factor of 10 (100 miles with two points), rapidly making it effectively limitless.

- **Calm** (minimum cost: 1 point): The bearer remains abnormally calm in the face of supernatural terror. The Storyteller rolls the recipient's Willpower, with the difficulty equal to 10 minus the number of points invested in this effect. A successful roll allows the bearer to remain calm, although he still understands the danger posed to him. He seeks to get away calmly and quickly forgets supernatural details thereafter. At the Storyteller's discretion, the subject may suffer nightmares or even a derangement if the sight was truly horrific.

- **Hide** (minimum cost: 3 points): The bearer gains a mitigated and unconscious version of the Hide edge (see **Hunter: The Reckoning**, p. 148). The edge works as normal, except no actual Wits + Mercy roll is made for the bearer. Rather, he is always considered to have received two successes on such a roll for every three points spent on this effect during creation.

- **Hint** (minimum cost: 1 point): The bearer effectively gains an additional dot of Awareness for every point spent on this effect, allowing him to receive hints about dangerous supernatural situations. This benefit is useless if the bearer himself already has 3 Awareness or more.

CHARMS VERSUS TOKENS

Hunter Book: Defender addresses the concept of tokens, small objects given by Defenders to their charges. These items bear a more-than-passing resemblance to Innocents' charms. In fact, the items represent the two creeds' respective spins on the same basic concept, and they reveal the similarities and differences in the creeds' outlooks.

Defenders are straightforward, zealous guardians who see the world as a series of threats to their charges. They protect against aggressive and violent enemies intent on harming the people they've sworn to protect. Defenders' tokens result from hard work and offer physical protection (extra soak dice).

Innocents want the people they care about to live without fear, and trust in a benevolent universe to help others enjoy this freedom. Innocents' charms thus vary in effectiveness based on good intentions and kindness, and grant psychological benefits instead of physical ones. They stave off terror, keep charges hidden or grant insight.

The difference between tokens and charms is therefore the difference between Defenders and Innocents: one of perspective.



CHAPTER 6: BABES IN THE WOODS

The righteous shall inherit the land, and dwell therein for ever.

— Psalms 37:29

It takes a certain kind of person to become one of the imbued. You must be instinctively, emotionally and intellectually prepared to respond in the face of monstrosity when the Messengers play their unseen hand. It takes a truly unique person to respond to that truth, not with outrage to punish a seeming crime, not with manipulation to change the creature's apparent ways, but with unblemished forgiveness and understanding — the desire to reconcile what's wrong, as opposed to destroying it or imposing a penance on it. Innocents are the proponents of cooperation, peace, understanding and community, whether among monsters, humanity or the chosen. Theirs is perhaps the most challenging path — compassion is much more difficult than confrontation or condemnation.

The following character templates give you a starting place for playing an Innocent hunter. Each of them is ready to play, but can serve as inspiration for your own characters. The templates isolate some basic concepts of the creed (the three camps, ties to the community, the struggle to maintain optimism) and personify those qualities.

COMMUNITY MATRON

There's nothing we can't accomplish if we work together.

Prelude: Your neighborhood was never posh or upscale, but you always loved it. The little gardens your father and others carved out of the fenced-off yards not big enough for parking a car. The kids screaming gleefully when a fireman opened a hydrant on a hot summer day. Playing stickball with the boys in the street while your little brother watched for cars. It was joyous.

Ugly things started to happen once you grew up. A crack house appeared where Mr. Jackson used to run his corner shop. Little Lucia died in a drive-by and the police didn't seem to care. Even your father, who had helped build this little part of the city, talked about moving to the suburbs, even though he didn't have the money to do it. When he got sick, you stayed with him. The two of you watched things get worse and worse outside his window. The night the cancer finally took him, he asked you to leave and find a safe place to live. You couldn't say no.

Three weeks later, you were still there, not quite sure where to go or what to do with your life. You'd packed up half the kitchen and couldn't go any further. Something deep in your heart told you this wasn't right. Then you heard the scream.

A girl's voice, crying out from somewhere down below. You looked out the window, then ran for the stairs down to the street and searched for the source. It came again, a whimper this time, from the boarded-up tenement across the road. You hesitated — that place was dangerous — until you glanced up and down the street. Every traffic light in both directions was green. The message was clear: "GO!"

You pried back a loose board and went in, looking for the whimpering girl, as you delved farther and farther into the abandoned building. You finally found her: little Tasha Felk from 13B. She was crying and huddled in the corner, trying to

get away from a man. You stood in the shadows and watched for a moment. He was pale and wore tattered clothes. He whispered, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, it's going to be okay...."

You stepped between him and Tasha before he knew you were there. You saw his yellowish eyes and caught the same smell you did when your father died. This man was dead. There was no doubt in your mind. "You can't have her," you said, your voice wavering.

"I... I'm sorry." His voice was slow, like he was drunk. "I didn't want to hurt her. I just wanted to play and she... she fell...."

"I know you didn't mean it, but you have to leave." You braced for him to lash out.

He left, instead.

Concept: Ever since you saw the dead man, things make more sense. You've seen others and figured out that they're somehow linked to the decay in the neighborhood. That means you can stop it, so you've decided to stay. Little Tasha has recovered, and she said the "smelly man" and she were just playing. You've talked to her mother and to other people in the community. Everyone's pulling together to find the "smelly man." You also know you're going to need help from other people who see the dead. In the meantime, you've set up sort of a neighborhood watch to keep Tasha and her friends safe.

Roleplaying Hints: You don't have any children of your own, so the local boys and girls are your surrogates. You look at them and their parents and see all the good things about growing up in this corner of the concrete jungle — the things that made your father happy. You'll do anything to make the neighborhood like that again.

Equipment: Walkie-talkie, modest apartment



HUNTER BOOK INNOCENT

NAME: NATURE: Architect PRIMARY VIRTUE: Mercy
 PLAYER: DEMEANOR: Caregiver CREED: Innocence
 CHRONICLE: CONCEPT: Community Matron STARTING CONVICTION: 3

ATTRIBUTES

PHYSICAL	SOCIAL	MENTAL
Strength ●●○○○	Charisma (Approachable) ●●●○○	Perception ●●○○○
Dexterity ●●○○○	Manipulation ●●●○○	Intelligence ●●○○○
Stamina ●●○○○	Appearance ●●○○○	Wits ●●○○○

ABILITIES

TALENTS	SKILLS	KNOWLEDGES
Alertness ●●○○○	Animal Ken ○○○○○	Academics ○○○○○
Athletics ○○○○○	Crafts (Knitting) ●●○○○	Bureaucracy ●○○○○
Awareness ●●○○○	Demolitions ○○○○○	Computer ○○○○○
Brawl ●○○○○	Drive ●○○○○	Finance ○○○○○
Dodge ●○○○○	Etiquette ○○○○○	Investigation ●●○○○
Empathy ●●○○○	Firearms ○○○○○	Law ○○○○○
Expression ○○○○○	Melee ○○○○○	Linguistics (Italian) ●○○○○
Intimidation ○○○○○	Performance ○○○○○	Medicine ●○○○○
Intuition ○○○○○	Security ●●○○○	Occult ○○○○○
Leadership ●●○○○	Stealth ●●○○○	Politics ○○○○○
Streetwise ●●○○○	Survival ○○○○○	Research ○○○○○
Subterfuge ○○○○○	Technology ●○○○○	Science ○○○○○

ADVANTAGES

BACKGROUNDS	EDGES	VIRTUES
	NAME CREED LEVEL TRIGGER	Mercy Vision Zeal
Contacts ●●○○○	Hide Innocence ●○○○○	SCORE SPENT SCORE SPENT SCORE SPENT
Everyman ●●○○○	Illuminate Innocence ●○○○○	1 ● X 1 0 1 0
Resources ●○○○○		2 ● X 2 0 2 0
Roots ●●○○○		3 ● X 3 0 3 0
		4 0 4 0 4 0
		5 0 5 0 5 0
		6 0 6 0 6 0
		7 0 7 0 7 0
		8 0 8 0 8 0
		9 0 9 0 9 0
		10 0 10 0 10 0

DERANGEMENTS

CONVICTION

● ● ● ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○

WILLPOWER

● ● ● ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○

□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □

EXPERIENCE

HEALTH

Bruised ☐
 Hurt -1 ☐
 Injured -1 ☐
 Wounded -2 ☐
 Mauled -2 ☐
 Crippled -5 ☐
 Incapacitated ☐

RECOVERING BURNOUT

One day at a time. One day at a fucking time.

Prelude: You were born ready for trouble. Someone looked at you funny and you'd introduce them to your fist, usually five or 10 times so they'd remember it. Someone made a crack, and your boots or maybe a pipe would get involved. People knew to back the hell off and that suited you just fine.

So when you and your buddies staggered out of a bar at 4 AM, and that prissy little shit in black didn't move, well it was too bad for him — or so you thought. Jack swung first, his ham of a right hand targeting the little shit's face; those stupid nose rings were going to hurt coming out. But the kid caught Jack's fist, looked at you, smiled and twisted your buddy's forearm off like a drumstick. Teddy lunged right away, but the kid moved fast — *too fast* — and caught Ted by his ponytail. One yank and an unholy crack, and Ted turned into a human Pez dispenser, giving out bloody chunks of bone from his neck.

You should have swung at the little shit. Or maybe you should have just run away. But you saw the neon sign outside the bar glow red and green. It read, "STOP AND LIVE. MOVE AND DIE." So you froze. If you moved he'd see you.

The slick little killer reached over to Jack, who was whimpering, clamped a hand on his mouth and proceeded to suck at his arm's bloody stump like a baby on a tit. Then he had some Ted-Pez. You almost puked, but you still didn't move. This was all two yards away, and the little shit didn't even see you. Because you didn't move.

That's when another one showed up. A woman this time. A black girl, maybe 20. She wasn't right. She looked hungry for Pez, too. But instead of joining the buffet, she just spoke: "Stop." And he did. Her voice was calm, quiet even, but it burst

through you like a cannon. "Go and wait for me in the park," she commanded and he did. He didn't want to. You heard him hissing and swearing, but he obeyed. Then she dragged the bodies away and left. She never even saw you.

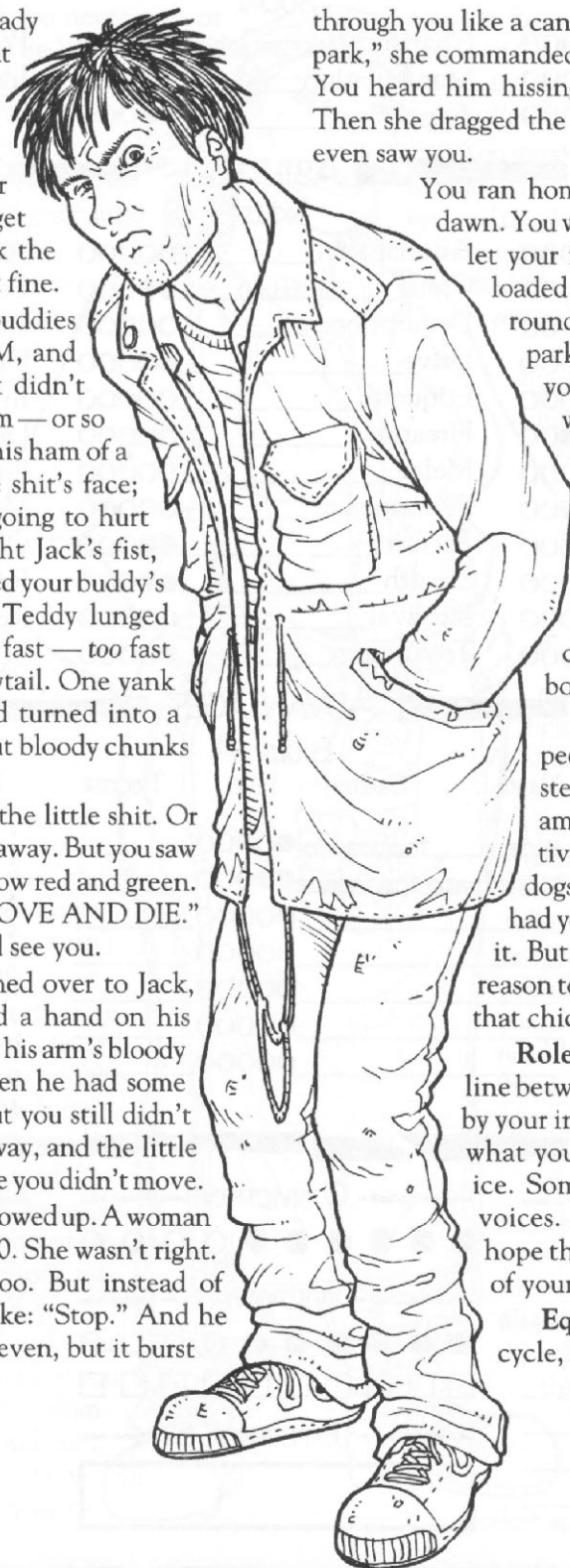
You ran home and hid like a little girl till dawn. You were freaking out and knew you'd let your friends die. You had a gun and loaded it. You were going to swallow a round, until you thought about the park. Maybe if you could find them, you could make them pay. So you went, scared out of your wits and wanting to either kill or die.

When you got there, there was nothing to be found — except a bloodstained leather jacket covered with gray ash. You knew then. She'd taken care of the other one, and the bodies, too.

Concept: You've found other people who've dealt with the monsters, but you feel like an outsider among them. Some are full of positive outlook. Others fight like wild dogs. You're stuck in the middle. You had your chance to fight and you blew it. But maybe, just maybe, there was a reason to watch. Maybe, if you could find that chick with the voice....

Roleplaying Hints: You walk the line between despair and rage, consumed by your inability to save your friends and what you can't help but see as cowardice. Some of the others say they hear voices. All you've got is an ember of hope that you can make something out of your survival.

Equipment: Street clothes, motorcycle, handgun



HUNTER-BOOK INNOCENT

NAME:

NATURE: Survivor

PRIMARY VIRTUE: Mercy

PLAYER:

DEMEANOR: Curmudgeon

CREED: Innocence

CHRONICLE:

CONCEPT: Recovering Burnout STARTING CONVICTION: 3

ATTRIBUTES

PHYSICAL

Strength ●●●●●
Dexterity ●●●●●
Stamina ●●●●●

SOCIAL

Charisma ●●●●●
Manipulation ●●●●●
Appearance ●●●●●

MENTAL

Perception ●●●●●
Intelligence ●●●●●
Wits ●●●●●

ABILITIES

TALENTS

Alertness ●●●●●
Athletics ●●●●●
Awareness ○○○○○
Brawl ●●●●●
Dodge ●●●●●
Empathy ○○○○○
Expression ○○○○○
Intimidation ●●●●●
Intuition ○○○○○
Leadership ○○○○○
Streetwise ●●●●●
Subterfuge ○○○○○

SKILLS

Animal Ken ○○○○○
Crafts ○○○○○
Demolitions ○○○○○
Drive ●●●●●
Etiquette ○○○○○
Firearms ●●●●●
Melee ●●●●●
Performance ○○○○○
Security ●●●●●
Stealth ●●●●●
Survival ●●●●●
Technology ○○○○○

KNOWLEDGES

Academics ○○○○○
Bureaucracy ○○○○○
Computer ○○○○○
Finance ○○○○○
Investigation ●●●●●
Law ●●●●●
Linguistics ○○○○○
Medicine ●●●●●
Occult ○○○○○
Politics ○○○○○
Research ○○○○○
Science ○○○○○

ADVANTAGES

BACKGROUNDS

	NAME	CREED	LEVEL	TRIGGER
Arsenal ●●●●●	Hide	Innocence ●●●●●		
Contacts ●●●●●	Cleave	Vengeance ●●●●●		
Resources ●●●●●			○○○○○	
			○○○○○	
			○○○○○	
			○○○○○	
			○○○○○	

EDGES

VIRTUES

	SCORE	SPENT		SCORE	SPENT		SCORE	SPENT
Mercy	1	● X	Vision	1	○	Zeal	1	● X
	2	●		2	○		2	○
	3	○		3	○		3	○
	4	○		4	○		4	○
	5	○		5	○		5	○
	6	○		6	○		6	○
	7	○		7	○		7	○
	8	○		8	○		8	○
	9	○		9	○		9	○
	10	○		10	○		10	○

DERANGEMENTS

CONVICTION

● ● ● ● ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○

WILLPOWER

● ● ● ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □

EXPERIENCE

HEALTH

Bruised ☐
Hurt -1 ☐
Injured -1 ☐
Wounded -2 ☐
Mauled -2 ☐
Crippled -5 ☐
Incapacitated ☐

STREET KID

Shut up! I am not crying! Get offa me!

Prelude: Life was a series of foster parents and group homes until you figured out how to get the hell out of that scene. You hit the streets and hit them good, squatting with other kids and some older folks. Sure, some of them were motherfuckers, but there were some good people, too. You just had to be strong, to stand up to the assholes and find the folks who'd share space. You carried stuff for 'em, did things for 'em, but they gave you a place to stay. At least they didn't pretend to love you like those foster-morons.

You were 14 when things went from bad to outright fucked up. You and the old man had found an old house to squat in. Part of the place was burned out, but some rooms were in good shape — they even had some furniture. Not three nights later, things started happening. You heard voices, screaming, things started moving and shit came outta the goddamn walls!

The old fart pissed himself and ran when the roaches swarmed out of the fireplace. He pushed right past you and stepped into the hole in the floorboard. He fell all the way to the basement and made an ugly sound when he broke. You were all alone, and the house was *laughing*.

Behind the laughing, though, you heard a voice: "IT SEEKS SLAVES." You knew you were next. Sure enough, the roaches parted and he appeared. A hunched over man with black smoke coming from his eyes. He looked like he was *made* of black smoke, and you could sorta see through him. He was the one laughing. He held a chain tied around the neck of a boy,

who looked like he was made of fog. The smoke-man had another chain ready — for you.

You crossed yourself like the priests showed you in that Catholic school years ago, calling out to God or whatever to help you. That's when the floor gave way under you.

Instead of dying, you fell on an old couch on the ground floor and got to your feet. You heard the roaches swarming through the walls — like the jingle of thousands of little chains. You ran for the door. "Please," you whispered to no one in particular, "get me out of here."

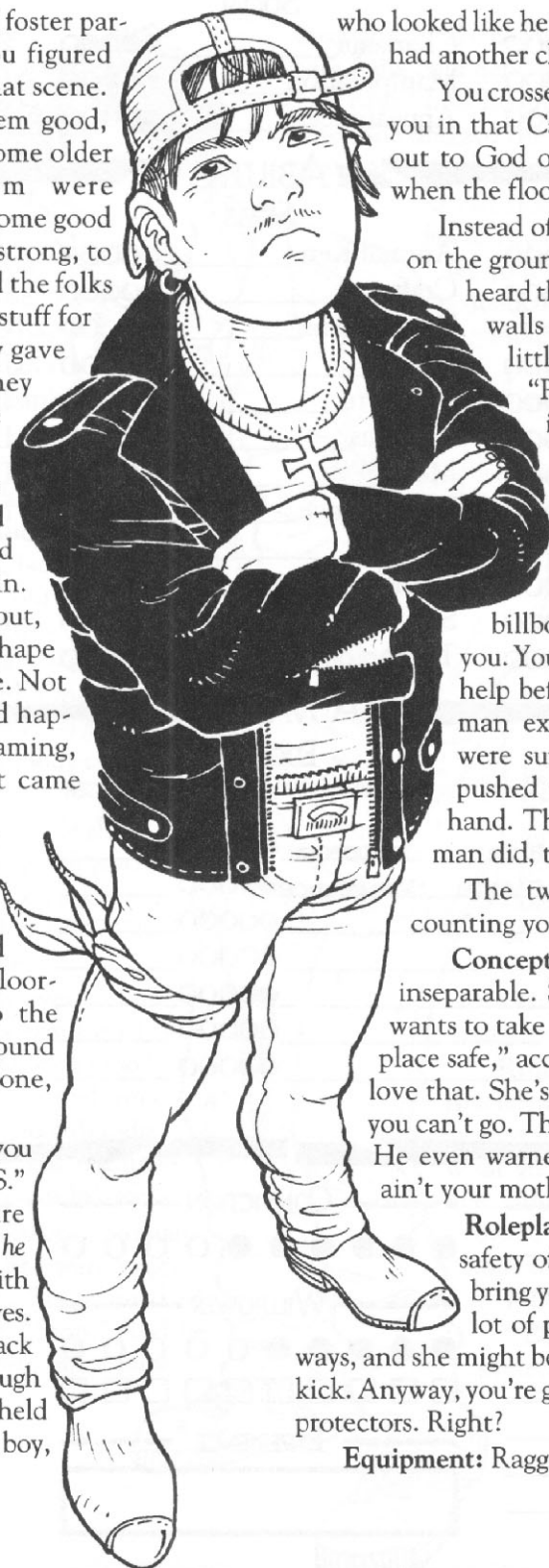
You threw open the door and ran right into Valerie, another one of your crowd. Tall, with fiery red hair and green eyes like you'd only ever seen on billboards, she looked shocked to see you. You didn't even have time to beg for help before the roaches and the smoke-man exploded through the door. You were sure that was it. Instead, Valerie pushed you behind her and raised her hand. The roaches stopped. The smoke-man did, too.

The two of you backed out of there, counting your blessings.

Concept: You and Valerie have become inseparable. She's got this great old car and wants to take you across country — "to someplace safe," according to her. Part of you would love that. She's so cool, ready for anything. But you can't go. That kid in the chains was hurting. He even warned you, didn't he? Anyway, Val ain't your mother or nothing.

Roleplaying Hints: You long for the safety of your guardian's arms, but can't bring yourself to trust her completely. A lot of people have used you in a lot of ways, and she might be just another sicko with another kick. Anyway, you're grown up now and don't need any protectors. Right?

Equipment: Ragged clothes, personal trinkets



HUNTER BOOK INNOCENT

NAME:
PLAYER:
CHRONICLE:

NATURE: **child**
DEMEANOR: **Survivor**
CONCEPT: **Street kid**

PRIMARY VIRTUE: **Mercy**
CREED: **Innocence**
STARTING CONVICTION: **3**

ATTRIBUTES

PHYSICAL

Strength ●●●●●
Dexterity ●●●●●
Stamina ●●●●●

SOCIAL

Charisma ●●●●●
Manipulation ●●●●●
Appearance ●●●●●

MENTAL

Perception ●●●●●
Intelligence ●●●●●
Wits (Anticipate Trouble) ●●●●●

ABILITIES

TALENTS

Alertness ●●●●●
Athletics ○○○○○
Awareness ●●●●●
Brawl ●●●●●
Dodge ●●●●●
Empathy ○○○○○
Expression ○○○○○
Intimidation ○○○○○
Intuition ●●●●●
Leadership ○○○○○
Streetwise (Homeless) ●●●●●
Subterfuge ○○○○○

SKILLS

Animal Ken ○○○○○
Crafts ○○○○○
Demolitions ○○○○○
Drive ○○○○○
Etiquette ○○○○○
Firearms ○○○○○
Melee ●○○○○
Performance ○○○○○
Security ●●●●●
Stealth (urban) ●●●●●
Survival ●●●●●
Technology ○○○○○

KNOWLEDGES

Academics ○○○○○
Bureaucracy ●○○○○
Computer ○○○○○
Finance ○○○○○
Investigation ●○○○○
Law ●○○○○
Linguistics (Spanish) ●○○○○
Medicine ○○○○○
Occult ○○○○○
Politics ○○○○○
Research ○○○○○
Science ○○○○○

ADVANTAGES

BACKGROUNDS

Contacts ●●●●●
Everyman ●●●●●
Mentor ●●●●●
 ○○○○○
 ○○○○○
 ○○○○○
 ○○○○○

EDGES

NAME	CREED	LEVEL	TRIGGER
<u>Fool's luck</u>	<u>Innocence</u>	●○○○○	
<u>Hide</u>	<u>Innocence</u>	●○○○○	
<u>Discern</u>	<u>Judgment</u>	●○○○○	
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	○○○○○	
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	○○○○○	
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	○○○○○	
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	○○○○○	

VIRTUES

Mercy		Vision		Zeal	
SCORE	SPENT	SCORE	SPENT	SCORE	SPENT
1	● <u>X</u>	1	○	1	● <u>X</u>
2	● <u>X</u>	2	○	2	○
3	○	3	○	3	○
4	○	4	○	4	○
5	○	5	○	5	○
6	○	6	○	6	○
7	○	7	○	7	○
8	○	8	○	8	○
9	○	9	○	9	○
10	○	10	○	10	○

DERANGEMENTS

CONVICTION

● ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

WILLPOWER

● ● ● ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □

EXPERIENCE

HEALTH

Bruised		□
Hurt	-1	□
Injured	-1	□
Wounded	-2	□
Mauled	-2	□
Crippled	-5	□
Incapacitated		□

PROMINENT INNOCENT'S

The following Innocents have already gone through the first traumas of the mission and lived to tell the tale. They have gained some reputation among fellow Innocents for embodying some of the central tenets of their creed, and they have gained reputations among the imbued in general. Members of other creeds tend to see them as the archetypal "bait" — examples of hunters with too much empathy for their prey. These characters can serve as contacts, allies or even rivals in your game.

ELIZABETH THORNTON, AKA TICKET 312

Even as a child, Liz Thornton yearned to explore and travel. Her mother had to keep an eye on her constantly for fear that the girl would just wander off.

Stuck in the dreary suburbs of Durham until she could escape to college, Liz did the best she could to entertain herself by dating "dangerous" guys (which all too often translated into petty criminals). Still, she made her way through college and then landed a job with a travel agency. She took advantage of her staff discounts to get away for long weekends and holidays as often as she could.

It was during one such trip that the Messengers contacted her. The words "EASE ITS GRIEF" seemed whispered to her as she visited a new city. Stunned, she realized that the seemingly lost girl nearby on the sidewalk was actually a walking corpse.

Her curiosity more powerful than her fear, Liz found the courage to approach this "person." They were both travelers, after a fashion, and Liz felt a kinship for the girl's haunting needs. Eventually, Liz helped the lingering soul break into her old apartment and retrieve a letter to a

boyfriend that was never mailed. The moment the letter was dropped in the mail, the zombie fell to dust.

Liz returned to Durham and tried to get on with her life. Then, one evening on the way home the voice spoke to her again. Liz found herself in the presence of a ghost seeking penance for his crimes in life, and she helped him find peace.

After some time, Liz seemed to gain a reputation her helpfulness among what could best be termed "local" spirits. Her job allowed her to travel cheaply all over the United States, and occasionally abroad, to help spirits deal with unfinished business from life.

She often wondered if there were others like her out there, but her tentative contacts among the dead never revealed anyone with similar abilities. Then she met John Rodgers, another imbued, who was evaluating a particular zombie when it approached Liz for aid.

Rodgers observed the connection and approached Liz himself, offering his assistance in dealing with the being. Liz was overjoyed to find that she was not alone — that others had heard the call, too. She shared everything she knew with the newcomer, and even introduced him to one of her deceased associates.

Then, while Liz was at work, Rodgers blew up the zombie in its car and fled town to avoid the police. Liz made no further efforts to contact other chosen after that.

More recently, as she arrived at a bus station in Detroit, Liz was approached by Jake Washington. This man was different from the other chosen. He was more open and receptive to ideas and compassion for the other side. The two hit it off immediately and became lovers.

Liz steadfastly refuses to give up her job for the call, much to Jake's disappointment. She maintains that the Messengers' work is only part of her, that her travel and friends are just as important.

BEATRICE TREMBLAY, AKA ORACLE 171

Béatrice heard the first angel several months ago. She was driving a truck for *Dans la rue*, delivering hot meals to Montreal's homeless when she heard it. It had her father's voice: "AIDE-LES, MA PETITE BÉATRICE" — help them. At the next corner, she saw a ragged little man leaning over Pierre, one of the people she had come to help. Was he... feeding off Pierre? She stopped the truck and caught the blood-drinker in her head lights. It looked straight at her, hissing and shielding its eyes. The angel spoke again: "REGARDE" — look. She saw the expression on the thing's face and recognized what she had seen in countless famished street-people and strung-out junkies: hunger, fear and shame. It ran into the night, but she had learned two things about the "creature": it felt human emotion, and it feared the light.





Over the next few months, she found more of the blood-drinkers, along with ghosts and others things. Her angel always guided her. Using her old account at the university, she found hunter-net and learned that she wasn't alone. She adopted the name Oracle, because she talked with an angel.

It was only a few weeks after she first logged on that she heard the *second* angel. This one whispered like a lover. It told her secrets and ways to "better help people." It told her she had to leave Montreal and find out why things were so wrong in the world. It helped her get strong enough to do just that, bestowing more gifts upon her, just as her father's angel had done.

The new angel compelled Béatrice and her companions to the little town of New Dijon. Ghosts, walkers and shamblers were rampant there. It was horrible, but the angel helped as promised. It made the light strong enough to push the dead away and send them back to where they belonged. Driving around town with the others and armed with a spotlight, they healed the place.

Shortly thereafter, Béatrice left for Greece where she discovered a place that made New Dijon look like a park. It was okay, though. The second angel was with her, and time flowed like a river. She went into those dark woods and returned. The angel assured that she would know what truly happened there when she was ready. Béatrice always trusts the angels.

After Greece, it was back to Montreal to pick up the pieces. A nice American man had put some of her story on hunter-net, and others arrived to help her and her friends. But the second angel knew it wasn't going to be easy — things were bad in Montreal, and they needed even more assistance. So she went to see a blood-drinker named Valois, a creature the angel said would

help her. He was very nice and very polite and listened when Béatrice told her story.

Two days later, everyone was dead. All her friends, old and new, were gone. The blood-drinkers tried to get her several times, but the angel's light protected her. On the run, she went south hoping that some of the Americans she knew through the Internet would help. Some sent messages and offered help, but the one she actually met face to face intended to kill her.

Béatrice is still on the run, but the second angel is with her. He says this is all part of a greater good and that she'll be able to show them all the truth soon — whether blood-drinkers or mad hunters. *Everyone* will see the light.

Béatrice sometimes wonders why she hasn't heard from her father's angel since before Greece, but the second angel is constant and says everything's okay. Béatrice always trusts the angels.

Always.

INEZ VILLAGRANDE, AKA NUSE216

Inez has spent her whole life in San Diego, California, never having the means for anything other than trips up to Los Angeles or across the border to Tijuana. She followed a typical pattern by fleeing an abusive father to live with an abusive boyfriend, but broke out of the vicious circle when she became pregnant. Awareness of an innocent life growing within her snapped her out of her complacency. She wouldn't make the same mistake her mother had, bringing a child into a home where it would just be victimized. She couldn't deny the joy of motherhood, though. She had only one choice: to leave.

Inez stayed with her grandmother while dodging her boyfriend Carlo's efforts to reach her and "teach her a lesson." By the time little Jaime was born, Carlo's temper



had gotten him into trouble with the law, and he served time for aggravated assault. Inez's grandmother Roberta saw in the 17-year-old single mother all the hopes she had had for her own children, and dedicated herself to making sure Inez and Jaime had a genuine chance. Thanks to Roberta and help from friends and neighbors, Inez was able to complete high school and begin nursing school at night. By the time Jaime was 10, Inez was a registered nurse working at a major San Diego hospital.

Saved from the life of a victim that her mother had led, Inez tried to help those around her. Instead of becoming disheartened by the stream of drug- and gun-related cases she dealt with in the hospital, she became a friend to the poor who used the walk-in clinic. They came to her not only with medical problems, but for advice and help. Roberta, in her 80s, gained confidence that her granddaughter would assume the role as matron for their little part of San Diego.

Not everything was easy, though. Carlo didn't stay in jail forever. Despite the fact that Inez made it clear she wanted nothing to do with him, he didn't stay away. His insistence that he have access to Jaime finally wore her down, and she hoped against hope that contact would be good for father and son. Unfortunately, Jaime seemed to learn all the wrong things from his father and talked about "strength" and "respect" by the time he was 13. Inez never knew when it was that Jaime first got a gun, but he was arrested for possession of an illegal firearm at 15 and spent three months in a group home. A year later, he was back in for another two months.

Inez's life of simple triumphs and obstacles shattered on the night of Jaime's 17th birthday. Working a shift in the emergency room, she ran to assist paramedics and doctors as they wheeled in two young gunshot victims. She was headed toward the second one until the paramedic pronounced him dead. She was about to turn away when she recognized the boy's shirt — she had bought it for Jaime at Christmas.

Staring at the body of her son, Inez felt her world crumble and her head swim, until she heard the voice: "YOU MUST RESPOND." Through a glass partition, she saw the doctors hard at work to save the other boy. She also saw Jaime attacking the boy and no one was trying to stop him. That was when Inez Villagrande came to believe in ghosts.

The doctors, nurses and technicians thought she had lost her mind when she came in speaking to her "son," but Jaime listened. Her little boy, grown up to be a killer, let go of his intended victim. Her colleagues saved the other boy.

In the months since that night, Inez's life has transformed. She sees the dead everywhere. She discovered hunter-net by fiddling with a hospital computer,

and has found other imbued in the San Diego and Los Angeles areas. She has even killed one creature and repelled many others. Jaime's spirit visits her every few days, and she is glad for it, but their conversations end with her in tears. Jaime seems satisfied by them.

Inez remains determined that her life will be good. Where others see monsters, she sees abusers and victims, people who might be receptive to help. The imbuing is another challenge, and she tries to use it to help herself and her community. Most of all, she tries to keep Jaime's ghost from becoming one of the wailing angry specters that she has encountered.

PROFILE

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 2, Charisma (Communicative) 4, Manipulation 3, Appearance 2, Perception 3, Intelligence 2, Wits 2

Abilities: Academics 2, Alertness 1, Awareness 2, Bureaucracy 2, Dodge 1, Drive 1, Empathy (Bedside Manner) 4, Firearms 1, Investigation 2, Leadership 1, Linguistics (English) 1, Medicine 3, Science 1, Streetwise 2

Backgrounds: Allies 2, Contacts 1, Continued Exposure 5, Resources 2, Roots (Neighborhood) 3

Edges: (Innocence) Hide, Ease, Illuminate

Mercy: 5, **Conviction:** 7, **Willpower:** 6

JAKE WASHINGTON, AKA BOOKWORM55

Jake Washington celebrated his 18th birthday by attending his first lecture at Boston College. He celebrated his 19th birthday by leaving the hospital in a new wheelchair. For his 20th, he plans to go dancing.

After spending his high school years as a geek, his nose always in a book, Jake tried to relish the college experience. No one there would judge him, save by what he did. Although he was still a bookworm, he found it less of a hindrance in a place where most people were cramming for one test or another. It looked like life was turning around. Until he saw the dead girl.

She was just a kid, maybe 12 or 13, stumbling across the campus late at night. He approached her to see what was wrong, when he heard a voice as if someone were nearby. "IT IS BEYOND LIFE." The voice sounded like his third-grade teacher's. By the time Jake crossed the lane to the girl, he could see her bulging eyes and slightly decayed flesh. The jagged wound across her neck wasn't bleeding anymore. Part of him wanted to run, but the better part wanted to help. He reached out tentatively to touch her. She looked sadly up at him and her lips started to move. Only when she put her hand to her neck did a raspy voice come out of her dry mouth, "Mis'er Wendel. He hurt me."

Not really knowing what else to do, Jake held the little dead girl. She sobbed once and crumbled to dust.



That night, Jake broke into the school's employment records, found a J. Wendel and an address, and snuck into the nearby home. There he found pictures of the dead girl and a half-dozen other victims. He called the police anonymously and watched on the news as the cops took the man away.

Of course, the weirdness didn't stop. Jake attacked the problem of seeing dead people like anything else, with research. He found the first hunter-net and became a primary contributor. He searched Boston for others with the sight. He met the warlock he called Purple, who taught him a lot about the other side, and then he met Phaedra, the vampire who truly changed his life.

For a while their relationship was fantastic, romantic and sexual. They shared blood, and she talked openly about inhuman affairs. Jake was almost happy. Then, during their third tryst, another Boston-area hunter arrived to "purify" Phaedra and Jake's blasphemous relationship. The man met a horrific end and Phaedra, enraged, tore off Jake's legs when he tried to run.

He woke up in the hospital, lucky to be alive after a dangerous "car crash." Angry and bitter, he dropped out of hunter society for several months while he healed. When he returned, he still teetered between denial and rage, and he wrote a long guide on "the enemy," complete with tips on how to hurt monsters.

The fact that people now use that post to commit what Jake considers murder weighs heavily on his con-

science. After writing the post, a revelation dawned on him about his dismemberment: He'd been told that he was found crawling from an alley after a car crash, that his survival was miraculous. Jake recognized the details as convenient fabrication and realized that Phaedra must have recovered from her rage to save his life, to leave him where he could be found — and under false circumstances that were not simply to her advantage. Jake knew then that he had to find her and reawaken the care she'd shown for him, to prove to the rest of the imbued that "the enemy" was still human.

In his search, Jake has received considerable aid from an older chosen named Fyodor. The man *seems* to hope to aid Jake reconcile his role in the mission, and has become almost an adopted father. Taken across country by Fyodor, Jake begins to believe that his eyes are being opened to the potential of the calling. The most glorious example occurs when Fyodor, harnessing the very strength of the Messengers, restores Jake's legs. Jake barely remembers the experience — a rush of air, a flash of light and then unmitigated joy. It doesn't matter. He is *whole* again! Yet, an explanation of this miracle might never be forthcoming as Fyodor disappears.

Jake, however, realizes that his gift comes with a price. He can never return to Boston or his family again. How would he explain his condition? No one would understand. He therefore becomes a wanderer, searching for both Phaedra and for other imbued in hopes of spreading word of his *vitalis* for the calling.

PROFILE

Note: Ratings in parentheses represent Bookworm before the restoration of his legs. Beyond his lower ratings, there were many things that were outright impossible for him to accomplish then.

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 3 (1), Stamina 2 (1), Charisma 3, Manipulation 2, Appearance 2, Perception 3, Intelligence (Book-Smart) 4, Wits 3

Abilities: Academics (Authors) 4, Awareness 2, Brawl 2 (0), Computer (Website Design) 4, Dodge 3 (0), Empathy 3, Firearms 1, Investigation 3, Occult 3, Research (Libraries) 4, Security 1, Technology 2

Backgrounds: Contacts 3, Continued Exposure 3, Destiny 4, Everyman 3, Mentor 4

Edges: (Innocence) Hide, Illuminate, Radiate; (Redemption) Bluster

Mercy: 7, **Conviction:** 6, **Willpower:** 6

Derangement: Obsession (prove that Phaedra has a soul)

HUNTER BOOK INNOCENT

Let He Without Sin...

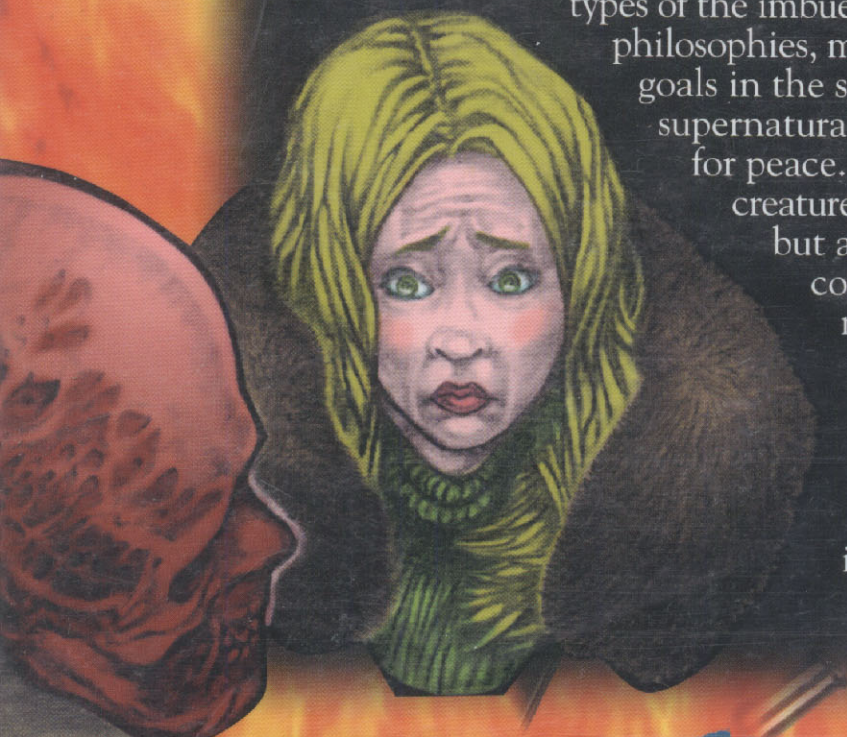
"Monsters exist. What's so hard to understand? The hard part is *helping* them. If we don't, we're no better than they are."

Innocents: the unabashed, direct and accepting among hunters. The Innocent recognize that these creatures were people once, that there's a fine line between human and inhumane, and that even hunters can cross it. Innocents naïve? No. Assuming all monsters are evil — *that's* naïve.

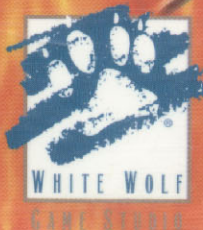
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