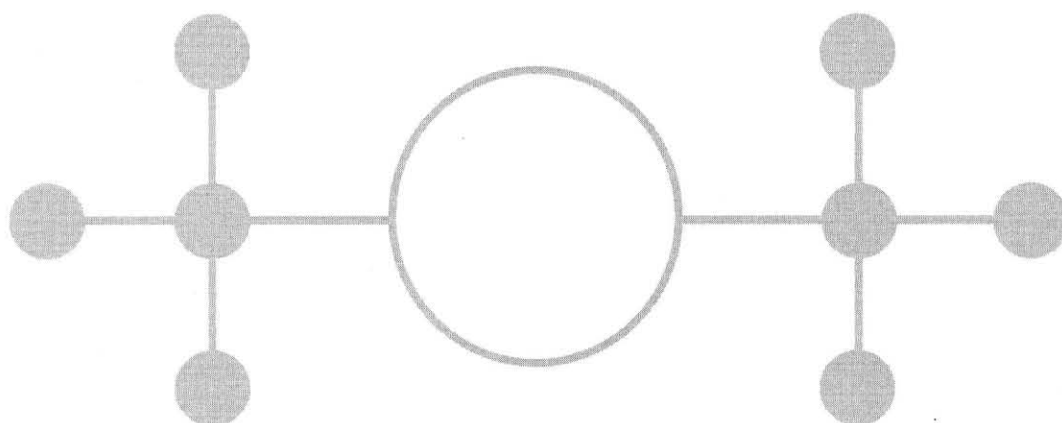


UTOPIA



A Chronicle Book for Hunter: The Reckoning®

UTOPIA



By **PATRICK O'DUFFY, GREG STOLZE AND CHUCK WENDIG**

CREDITS

Authors: Patrick O'Duffy, Greg Stolze and Chuck Wendig. World of Darkness created by Mark Rein•Hagen.

Storyteller Game System Design: Mark Rein•Hagen

Developer: Ken Cliffe

Editor: Ed Hall

Devil's Advocate: Adam Tinworth

Hunter Roster Manager: John Meehan

Art Director: Pauline Benney

Layout and Typesetting: Pauline Benney

Interior Art: Steve Ellis, Brian LeBlank, Drew Tucker, Kieran Yanner

Front Cover Art: Jason Alexander

Front and Back Cover Design: Pauline Benney

WHITE WOLF HOCKEY SPECIAL THANKS

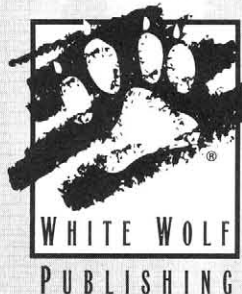
Chad "Third Man in" Brown (#14, Wing), for getting his first full-game suspension.

Brian "Toe Save" Glass (#84, Goal/Wing), for throwing up a wall in the first game of the 2002 winter season.

Matt "I Hope I Make it to the Third" Milberger (#7, Wing), for needing to leave a game at a moment's notice in case the water breaks.

Mike "I Can Play Hung Over" Tinney (#11, Goal), for testing the powers of the Hockey and Booze Gods.

Fred "Sit, Gay Dog" Yelk (#56, Defense), for bringing his own "undeclared" mascot.



735 PARK NORTH BLVD.

SUITE 128

CLARKSTON, GA 30021

USA

© 2002 White Wolf Publishing, Inc. All rights reserved.

Reproduction without the written permission of the publisher is expressly forbidden, except for the purposes of reviews, and for blank character sheets, which may be reproduced for personal use only. White Wolf, Hunter the Reckoning and World of Darkness are registered trademarks of White Wolf Publishing, Inc. All rights reserved. Hunter Storytellers Companion, Hunter Survival Guide, Hunter the Walking Dead,

Hunter Apocrypha, Hunter Players Guide, Hunter Storytellers Handbook and Hunter Utopia are trademarks of White Wolf Publishing, Inc. All rights reserved. All characters, names, places and text herein are copyrighted by White Wolf Publishing, Inc.

The mention of or reference to any company or product in these pages is not a challenge to the trademark or copyright concerned.

This book uses the supernatural for settings, characters and themes. All mystical and supernatural elements are fiction and intended for entertainment purposes only. This book contains mature content. Reader discretion is advised.

For a free White Wolf catalog call 1-800-454-WOLF.

Check out White Wolf online at

<http://www.white-wolf.com>; alt.games.whitewolf and rec.games.frp.storyteller

PRINTED IN THE USA.

UTOPIA



TABLE OF CONTENT'S

PROLOGUE: FLIGHT	4
INTRODUCTION	12
CHAPTER 1: HOPE	16
CHAPTER 2: RISE...	44
CHAPTER 3: ...AND FALL	68
CHAPTER 4: FALLOUT	90
CHAPTER 5: STORYTELLING THE REVOLUTION	102



PROLOGUE: FLIGHT

It was a long trip to England. A lesser mind would have let the pressures of escape — literally, flight to avoid federal prosecution — prey upon it. But Dr. Carleton Van Wyk flattered himself that he was above such counterproductive worrying.

"Most people," he thought, "would be unable to appreciate the irony. After all, of all the powerful enemies I've made, what is it that forces me to flee? Justice. Pursuit for the murder of a mortal man—for the one murder I actually committed."

He sat, confident in his calm self-control. Eventually, he even relaxed enough to sleep.

He didn't really scream when the nightmare woke him. The same dream again, with Jared and Laura and Duane, and this time Leaf was in it. He gave a short, strangled cry, but it sounded very loud in the first-class cabin of the plane.



Everything was planned very carefully. He had escaped from Chicago one step ahead of an FBI manhunt. He didn't have to de-plane in New York. Instead, he waited in his seat until the plane refilled for its trip to Heathrow. In London, a fellow hunter holding a sign that read "Regis" would meet him at the airport. The hunter — a Brit called "Teacher"

— would draw a special symbol for him so he'd recognize that she was like him, that she had seen the truth. She would give him a forged British passport, acquired via the Belgian black market. As "Harlan Crandall," he would fly to The Hague, where an embassy worker named Reginald Clark would send him on his way to Belgium. In Belgium, he would meet "Achtzehn," who would introduce him to "Warden" — quite possibly the most influential of Europe's imbued.

Van Wyk knew who would wait for him if Teacher couldn't make it. He knew the number to call if anything went wrong. He knew the secret Internet sites where he could connect if any of his contacts abandoned him or if he got separated. It was a good plan.

London was hidden under a thick fog when his flight was supposed to land. After circling for an hour, it diverted to Manchester.



Van Wyk's mouth felt fuzzy. So did his brain. Not enough sleep and too much recirculated air. He went to the water fountain and took two concentrated caffeine pills. He had decided long ago that self-prescribing stimulants was likely to get him unwanted attention. Now, of course, he had no medical license to lose.

"This is not a disaster." He narrowed his eyes and looked around the airport. "Good. None of *them*. All I have to do is call."

He went to a payphone, used a disposable calling card and dialed.

"Yeh?"

"Hello. This is *the doctor*."

"Wha?"

"My flight was redirected to Manchester."

"Mate, I think you've got the wrong number."

Van Wyk gently removed his glasses and set them on the top of the phone so that he could massage his temples.

"Is this 0207-555-2824?"

"Sure is."

"I'm looking for Teacher."

"Sorry. The only Teacher around here is Teacher's Fish 'n' Chips."

Van Wyk hung up the phone and took an aspirin.

"The number is wrong," he thought. "That's not critical. All I need to do is log on to hunter-net." His laptop was in his carry-on bag, but as he thought about it he realized he had no access number for Europe. Looking around, he could see "cyberkiosks" where travelers could log on to websurf and check email... but they were on the other side of the customs checkpoint.

He went into the restroom. "Perhaps my officer won't pay much attention. He won't know my name."

As he thought it, the world spun around him and he was forced to lean against the wall of his stall to keep his balance.

Van Wyk didn't like it when he glimpsed the future. Other hunters, he heard, had visions of possible futures as if they were skipping ahead to the last page of a book. But for him, the idea of violating time — or it violating him — was so alien to his rational, scientific perspective that he hated when it happened, let alone when he had to *try* to look forward. In some times of need it sneaked up on him, blindsided him with an unfolding line of multiple, dizzying what-if possibilities. Or at least, that's what he thought they were.

This time he saw flashes of himself going through customs lines, and each led to his arrest. He suddenly just knew with cold certainty that he could not rely on a careless official letting him into the country.

Gritting his teeth, Van Wyk contemplated other ideas. The dizziness and nausea increased until he was forced to vomit, but eventually he had a plan.

Not a good or encouraging one, but a plan all the same.



Van Wyk burst out of the airport, panting, sweating, a vicious headache throbbing in his skull. He spotted a cab and lunged into it, shoving a young couple out of his way.

"Trafford General Hospital," he gasped. "Hurry! My meeting starts in twenty minutes!"

"You're not gonna make it, mate."

Van Wyk had waited in the customs line until he was opposite the inspector. He'd held out his passport left handed, with his hand over his name. When the customs officer reached to take it, he punched her in the face with his right hand and ran.

He had needed a few more uses of his "precognition" to slip through the police dragnet, but doing so somehow seemed less unpleasant as he was running for his life.

He'd chosen Trafford General Hospital because it was one of the few Manchester locales he knew by name. He planned to jump on a train or bus to further confuse police pursuit.

"Probably a good idea to change clothes, too," he thought distractedly.

The thought of 'change' reminded him of something. "Er... I didn't have time to change my money, I'm afraid."

"What?"

"I can pay," he added hastily. "But in U.S. dollars."

"Mate, this ain't no bank!"

"Look," he said, "I'll give you the equivalent of the fare, plus twenty dollars for your troubles. Is that all right?"

The driver sighed theatrically. Just then Van Wyk said, "Here! Pull over here!"

"This ain't Trafford, mate."

Van Wyk had spied a familiar symbol in the window of a storefront church.



Four days later, he kept his rendezvous with Warden. Sporting a scruffy beard, new eyeglasses in an uncomfortably hip style, and a dye job that turned his thick, silver hair a rather brassy red, he certainly bore little resemblance to the blurry image captured by the airport security cameras — or to the driver's license photo that the FBI had provided to INTERPOL.

"Herr Crandall?" The speaker was a thickset man with flat features, a single eyebrow that stretched above both eyes, and large hands with a dusting of coarse hair on the knuckles. But his baritone voice was cultured and articulate.

"I prefer 'monsieur,'" Van Wyk said. It was the first part of a pre-arranged identification exchange.

"You're sure 'Mac' wouldn't fit you better?" The prepared response.

The men shook hands.

"Call me Emil," the heavyset man said.

"Certainly. But if you don't mind a little... paperwork... first?"

"But of course."

The redheaded fugitive produced a small notepad and wrote a symbol on it. The other man nodded at it, drew a sign of his own and handed it back.

Satisfied that each was imbued, the two men relaxed somewhat.

"I understand you had an unpleasant flight," said the heavy man — whose name was not "Emil."

"Indeed. I never did recover my luggage."

"Ah so? The leather trousers then, they are not yours?"

"Certainly not," the doctor said, looking at his creaking pants with distaste.

Hours later, after a shower and a change of clothes, Van Wyk told the story of his escape over drinks in a small, quiet pub.

"The church turned out to be utterly ignorant of hunter-net," he said. "A new group. They thought they were the only ones."

"You must have seemed like an angel Heaven-sent," the warden said with a smile.

"They were certainly impressed with my files, and with the site."

"Yes, I have asked one of our colleagues — the Six of Swords, yes? — to contact them." 'Emil' frowned down at his stein of beer and said, "Six has had a hard time of it. It is my hope that this group can... er, re-light his confidence."

"I must say I'm impressed with the degree of organization you seem to have here in Europe. All you get in the U.S. are mavericks with guns and 'frontier spirit.'"

The large man waved his hand dismissively. "Ach, our 'organization' is smoke and mirrors. We play at being the OSS in World War II, but we are mostly a collection of frightened, confused amateurs. Amateurs who die too soon and often for nothing. You have heard of the Communauté?"

"A little."

"They are gone now. They were twelve in number, and now only three or four remain alive and free. Some of the... how do you say, *ärgerlich*?"

"Mm... angry?"

"Yes! Yes, the angry ones, some from Norway and some from Spain, and one American, your 'Ripsaw.' They get the name 'Louis Piquet,' one of the infiltrators of NATO. A fang." He pronounced the word "fang." "They get guns from Basque separatists, explosives from the former Soviet republics. And they attack him when he's on the train to Paris. And their target, he kills two of the Norwegians and one of the Spaniards, but the hunters kill him. Or so they think." Idly, one of the warden's thick fingers traced a ring of condensation on the table. "Only the Piquet they kill, he is not the real Piquet. It was a fang, but one who only looked like him,

yes? Like Saddam Hussein with his body doubles. This fang, this vampire, he has hundreds of years to find a man who looks like him. He makes this man a vampire like himself and uses him as a distraction. And it is this *distraction* that kills three of our finest."

"Is the vampire still in NATO?"

"No. That, at least, was accomplished. He has gone to ground. Perhaps he will re-emerge in 50 years... or a hundred."

"The mission was a success then."

The warden smiled. "It does me good to hear you say so. You are very respected here, yes? Achtzehn was so sorry to not have meet you."

"I don't know how much good I've really done."

"You have taught us much. You have given us a great store of knowledge."

"I look back on my old files and wince. I was so mistaken about so much..."

"Even so. You have taught us, if nothing else, that they *can be known*."

The two men sat for a while and drank some more.

"So," Van Wyk said at last. "What now? I become Harlan Crandall?"

"Ach, you cannot pass for English, not for long. No, the forgery will not stand forever. It does not much look like you anyhow." He leaned forward. "What you need now is a *genuine* passport."

"From where? If I can't pass for English..."

"From America. Or, better perhaps, Canada. Yes, a nice Canadian passport for you. That would be the ideal. With that, and with our friend in The Hague, you could stay in the Netherlands indefinitely, and travel unrestricted throughout Europe."

"Or even return to the U.S.," the doctor said quietly.

The warden's face was still for a moment. "Yes, possibly." His voice was carefully neutral.

"You think that's a bad idea."

"I think you would be of great use here. This... adds a shade to my opinions. But the FBI are good at their job. You could be found, and quickly. You must, of course, follow your heart."

The doctor smiled wryly. "No one has ever accused me of doing that. This is all academic, however, unless you have a way to get me a Canadian passport."

"Well... it is not impossible. It would not be me. There is a woman who calls herself 'Jennifer Vidisania.' On hunter-net she is 'Flame,' though she posts only rarely. I believe she is in possession of Canadian and United States passports."

"In possession of?"

The warden sighed. "Jennifer is in Istanbul. She has a group there, large and organized and... religious. Some of her followers are Canadian and American, I

believe, and I suspect they would — if asked — give up a passport to aid you. They, like you, are fascinated by study of the... what would you call them? The *unwirklich*."

"Them."

"Them. It sounds as if her followers will do as she asks. The last person I had look into her group said she read your posts with great interest."

Van Wyk scratched his forehead briefly.

"And why would you ask someone to look into her group?"

"Well... there we have it. If this Jennifer is who I think she might be, she is rather not a good woman, I'm afraid. A criminal."

"What sort of criminal?"

"A black marketeer. Drugs, contraband, forged properties, pirated software, guns. Also war profiteering. Prostitution. Many stories. So I asked one of our people, a young man like Achtzehn, to go and see what her group is. And he tells me that only she is allowed to use hunter-net, that they have a compound out in the wilderness... and then he dies. Killed in action against a vampire." For 'killed' the warden said 'kilt.'

Van Wyk scratched his chin.

"So... I go, I act friendly, I get my passport, find out what's going on with them, then come back here and report?"

"That is generally correct."

"You want me to spy on other imbued."

The big man blinked once, calmly. He said nothing. Two days later, Van Wyk was on a train to Turkey.



Jennifer Vidisania didn't look like a supermodel. Her features, including a broad mouth and jutting nose, were too big and coarse to be pretty on their own. But her gaze was intense and direct. An air of impatient command seemed to roll off her like waves of heat.

Even if she had lacked the arrogant, still demeanor of a messiah, Van Wyk would have been hard-pressed to miss her at the train station. She wore a long, hooded robe, completely covered with finely embroidered symbols of the imbued private language. It was magnificent. The robe itself was white, and the symbols were picked out in green and black. Looking at it, Van Wyk instinctively knew that the symbols had been copied — not sewn by a hunter, but by people who had seen the symbols without really comprehending them. They were just diagrams to him and held no inherent meaning.

"Jennifer Vidisania?" he asked hesitantly.

Her smile was radiant. He felt small in the warmth of her regard, uncertain even. Awed. She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him on each cheek.

"Heaven has led you on a long path, Doctor."

"Yes, I..." He gently pushed her back. She let go with a small laugh. "I suppose I ought to prove my identity."

"If you wish."

Van Wyk produced his notebook, which still showed the symbols drawn by himself and the warden.

This time, he drew a simple cross tipped with dots — a general symbol that signified their kind. She smiled, nodded and drew a more complex figure of intersecting circles, dots and a bracket.

It meant something along the lines of "hope of safe haven."



The same symbol adorned a sign above a 20-foot-high fence in the middle of the hilly scrubland south of Istanbul. The fence was electrified, and Jennifer openly cautioned that the hillside was mined. Past a second fence — this one topped with razor wire — was a broad hilltop with seven large Quonset huts.

"Welcome to Safe Haven," she said as they drove through the gates.

Van Wyk looked around with a growing sense of unease. He could see that there were none of the *unwirklich* around, but the people there... the way they looked at Jennifer as she returned, the way their faces lit up... Like children when Mommy enters the room. It wasn't right. It didn't seem appropriate for grown men and women.

Jennifer led Van Wyk by the hand, taking him to the center of a rough courtyard among the buildings. She called out in Turkish, clapping her hands loudly over her head. Then she repeated her words in Italian and finally in English.

"Gather and rejoice! Another holder of blessings has come! Another who was chosen by the Pantheon!"

Her words only increased his unease. Or perhaps it was the stares of adoration that the others focused on him.

The inhabitants crowded close. They were mostly Turks, but here and there was a European or African face and voice. They wore robes like Jennifer's, only without the elaborate symbols. Some robes were black, some were white and some were green.

"Welcome to your true home," said a blonde woman in French-accented English. She gave him a hug, and as if that was some sort of signal the others began doing so as well.

"Er... Please, I... er, yes, please... could you please allow me some room? Please!"

When he raised his arms, they fell back instantly. More than one face looked hurt and puzzled — like a kicked puppy.

"Please, my flock," Jennifer said, coming to Van Wyk's side. "He has traveled far and is weary. Let him

rest first, and then he will be more receptive to our joy." She repeated herself in a language Van Wyk didn't know. Her followers nodded, relieved.

Jennifer took his arm and led him into one of the buildings. The light inside the first corridor was dim, a welcome relief. His eyes were quite sensitive, and the bright sun had been almost painful.

"So they..."

"They follow me, yes. And you. Once you're initiated, you too will lead them."

"Oh?"

She turned and looked at him. "Harlan, you were chosen. You were selected by the Fourfold Pantheon to cleanse this world. Who am I to gainsay their choice? I realize you've done some terrible things, but so have I—"

"Wait a minute!"

"Oh, I didn't mean any offense! You probably don't realize the full extent of your sins." She spoke openly, without guile. "I was a criminal, but at least I knew what I was doing was wrong." Her eyes held a deep, warm pity. "But working as a medical doctor in the Western world.... You and those like you were the keenest tools of the corrupted, and you didn't even know it."

"Doctors? I know that vampires sometimes lair in hospitals or use blood banks...."

"No, no. The night walkers, the spirits, the howling ones — they're only the most blatant signs of the corruption. The real problem, the source of it all, is impure medication."

Van Wyk was momentarily speechless. Then something caught his attention. Sounds from both directions down the hall. Looking ahead, he saw a short, stout man approaching, palms forward, eyes ready. Van Wyk turned in the direction from which they had come and saw a second man closing with much the same posture.

In hospitals, he'd seen other men move as these two did — usually in psych wards. It seemed to be the instinctive way to approach someone who might do something unexpected and dangerous.

"What are you doing?"

"Don't worry. These men are also chosen," Jennifer said.

Van Wyk drew his pistol.

"I don't want to hurt you," he warned as the two lunged. He tried to fire, but one of them cried out and the shot went wide. The other seized him in a painfully tight hug. He fired again, but the bullet ricocheted off the floor. The skin on his finger was raked and torn by the trigger guard as they wrestled the gun from his hand.

"Once you've been purified, it will all make sense," Jennifer said kindly as his struggles became more constricted and desperate.

To Van Wyk, her words were a terrifying threat.

❖ ❖ ❖

"In the beginning, humanity was in harmony with the four deities of the Pantheon," Jennifer told him. "Through the four sacred plants, we could commune with the gods and know their will."

"You're insane," Van Wyk said calmly. It was ironic, he felt, that he was the one in the straitjacket while she was at liberty. She gave him a kindly nod.

"Sanity,' as it is typically construed, is a lie from the corrupt. After all, every sane person knows there are no risen dead, no ghosts, no monsters.... And in the beginning, that's how it was. But we went too far. Ages ago, humanity grew proud and wanted more wisdom than the Pantheon was ready to share." As she spoke, a strange sort of hood was pulled over Van Wyk's head and secured. It seemed to be made from an army-surplus gas mask, but the backs of the lenses had been padded to push the wearer's eyes shut. Van Wyk struggled, but only in a desultory fashion. He knew he could never overpower the other two men, and he told himself that trying would only weaken his resistance.

"Our ancient ancestors took the marijuana plant — sacred to the Green Goddess of growing things — and pressed the seeds to make hashish oil. When they took the hashish, they stole from her what she would not give voluntarily, and with their new knowledge, they began growing crops on farms, instead of simply accepting what nature gave them. Mankind's population rose, but nature struck back at our corruption by plaguing us with the howling ones — violent form changers whose purpose was to thin our ranks."

Van Wyk was pushed forward and turned around. He could feel a pole pushing into his back, and his captors quickly and efficiently bound him to it.

"What is this, may I ask?"

"We call it the Cradle of Enlightenment. It's like a swing. It responds to your movements in every direction. It's to help you enter an altered state of consciousness."

"You're putting me on a swing until I... what? See god? Break down into tears? Repudiate science?" As he spoke, he could hear chains clank and feel a shift beneath his feet. Apparently he was on some sort of platform that was attached to the pole. He shifted to keep his balance and felt himself sway in response. He tried to remain still, but the sense of floating was somewhat nauseating.

"You will see the Green Goddess. The cradle will help, but mostly you just need the touch of her sacred breath."

Acrid, dense smoke poured into the gas mask. Van Wyk tried to regulate his breathing, but the mask was airtight. He took the shallowest breath he could, through his nose, and immediately began to cough. Inhaling, he felt clean air again.



As his head began to spin, he told himself it was just the sensory depravation, just the swinging, just the effects of tetrahydrocannabinol. As he caught his breath, another blast of smoke came up the pipe.

"The Green Goddess gave us a world of adequacy, which we scorned in our greed for abundance. That was the first evil we unleashed — from green to greed. Our pride created the anti-goddess of greed, who was green with envy, not plenty. And we've paid for it ever since."

After an hour, Van Wyk couldn't remember the name "tetrahydrocannabinol" any more.

After the second hour, he wept and screamed and promised them he could see the goddess, could hear her, that he would do whatever she wanted.



When Van Wyk wasn't in the cradle, they took him to a cell with a steel door and no lights. Periodically, a slot near the bottom of the door opened and a large bowl of rice or buckwheat gruel was slid inside. Periodically, someone would come and bang on the door loudly, sometimes for ten minutes at a time. This seemed to happen most often when he slept, and he wondered whether there was some sort of sensor in the bed.

At first he tried to keep track of time, figuring that he was being fed twice a day. He made scratches on the concrete walls, but without tools he couldn't make them very deep and he lost track. He tried to do it in his

head, but it was very hard to think between the cradle and the darkness and the hunger. He was very tired.

He did pushups and sit-ups and squats to stay in shape — to break the monotony — but he became exhausted on his low-protein diet. The exercise helped him sleep, though — until the banging started again.

When he lay in the dark, tired, while they banged on the door, he repeated things to himself over and over. His name. His past. Things he thought were true. Things he would do if he ever got the chance.

In time — Van Wyk had no idea how long — he began to look forward to the cradle treatments, simply because they were something different. He started to crave Jennifer's voice, because it was the only human voice he heard.

"The second great fall took place in Central America. The Aztecs were the favored people of the White Goddess, whose sacred plant is coca. Do you know how they sinned?"

"They... they made it into cocaine?" he guessed.

"Very close. Actually, they reduced it to a liquid and used it in enemas. The White Goddess is the principle of action and boldness. What do you think happened when they stole her secrets?"

"People became violent?"

"Exactly! The Aztecs invented warfare and slavery and human sacrifice. And out of that strife and cruelty

and victimization arose another supernatural scourge: the vampires."

"Because we'd learned to shed one another's blood."

"You're becoming enlightened."



One day, they didn't take him to the cradle but to a dimly lit room where he sat on soft cushions with Jennifer. She had pipe full of marijuana. She took a puff and handed it to him. He took some.

"No swinging today?"

"No, you've moved on to the next stage of your training. I think you have, anyway. Can you tell me about the Black God?"

"His holy plant was the opium poppy," was Van Wyk's prompt response. "When opium was refined into heroin, it prompted a worldwide religious crisis."

"Why did that happen?"

"The Black God was the lord of peace and acceptance, of willingness to be ignorant and to leave some secrets alone. When his sacred plant was violated, he responded by withdrawing certainty from our lives. Without belief in their destination, some humans who died became trapped in this world and became ghosts."

She smiled. "And the Rainbow God?"

"The patron of creativity and free thought, whose plant is peyote. It remained inviolate until very recently. No one knows what happened or who found a way to abuse his... his largesse."

"That's a very good word."

"Thank you." He took another hit. "When the last of the four gods was corrupted, the zombies arose. At the same time, human culture seemed to run out of creativity and new ideas. Now people no longer think for themselves. They just get their ideas from TV and newspapers, which makes it easier for all the corrupted to hide their existence."

"Soon, I think you'll be ready to leave your room and help us with our work."

Van Wyk started to cry. "Thank you," he said, gratitude suffusing every part of his soul. "Thank you so much."

She moved next to him and put her arms around him. He could do nothing but cling to her and weep.



Not many days after that, he was allowed to put on normal clothes — a green robe, indicating that he was a disciple of the Green Goddess. He was brought to a room with normal lighting, and after a while his eyes adjusted. He sat at a table with Jennifer on the other side.

"This is your last step, Carleton." He had long since confessed his real name, his history — all about Leaf, and Jared and Laura. For some reason, he'd left out Duane.

"I'm going to ask you some questions, and you need to tell me the truth."

He nodded.

"Would you ever hurt me?"

"No, never."

She looked into his eyes. Then her face dropped a little and one tear fell from her eyes.

"Oh, Carleton. You shouldn't have lied. I can tell when you lie to me."

He went back to his cell for a long time.



The next time they let him out, it was into the same room. When she asked him whether he would ever hurt her, he looked at her with love in his eyes and said he never would. She smiled.

"Carleton, what is your greatest weakness?"

He thought carefully and told the truth.

"I have always pushed people away. I didn't want to let people get close and hurt me. I was cold. I bottled up all my emotions, and sometimes they would burst out. I hated that, so I bottled them more. That was wrong of me."

"Why was that wrong?"

"It left me... incomplete."

"What do you need to be complete, Carleton?"

He looked deep into her eyes and told her the absolute truth. "I need a woman who is kind and generous and who believes she can save the world. I need her because she is my best friend. I need her because she forgives everything. I need her because she would never hurt me, no more than I would hurt her."

Jennifer's smile, even with its imperfections, was radiant.

"Carleton, why don't you come with me to meet your new family?"

She gave him a firm hug and took him out into the fresh air for the first time in months.



INTRODUCTION

The small and great are there; and the servant is free from his master.

— Job 3:19

Utopia: *any idealized place, state, or situation of perfection; any visionary scheme or system for an ideally perfect society*

— Webster's New World Dictionary

INHERIT THE EARTH

Downtrodden, defeated, doomed. Hunters' fate seems sealed in a world filled with monsters that operate from the shadows, creatures whose grip on the world appears unshakable. How can isolated, confused and terrified individuals hope to rise against the unknown to win freedom for themselves or humanity? Most imbued barely understand the true world to which they are awakened. Most are driven mad or killed simply in trying to understand it. So, how can the chosen rise above their own ignorance and isolation to achieve any kind of movement that throws off the yoke of the supernatural?

The short answer is that most can't. Despite their glimmering awareness and desperate efforts, the world's few scattered imbued barely make a ripple in a sea of otherworldly entities. These people thrash about and may scream their discoveries at the top of their lungs, but their efforts go unfelt and unnoticed in the grand scheme of things. It may be due to the general apathy and disbelief bred into the human masses, to the sheer weight of the supernatural's influence over the world, or to the passing efforts of the creatures themselves to keep any resistance quashed. As a result, although

hunters' efforts to strike against monsters or reconcile with them are valiant and may achieve some minor success, those efforts leave the greater World of Darkness largely unaltered.

That, at least, tends to describe a world in which hunters' awakening, awareness and activity occur on a limited scale. Even though the imbued are empowered, they're crippled by their own fear and ignorance. The imbued don't have to be so hamstrung, though. It's possible that individual chosen make small but successive victories against monsters. Through extensive effort, they overcome the very creatures whose depredations awakened them to the truth. Or they learn just a fraction of what inhuman existence might be like, come to appreciate monsters' needs and find some common ground with the creatures. Or they perceive glimmers of hope for a changed world, either with or without the supernatural.

Thanks to such successes, the imbued begin to see possibilities for a better life, a better reality. They begin to hope that greater goals can be achieved beyond their night-to-night survival. If family, friends or even a small neighborhood can be preserved, maybe a town, corporation, government, state or even the world can be saved. It might just be possible for hunters to take their small-

scale achievements and project them onto a larger canvas, bringing salvation or damnation to more people and more creatures.

Doing so means daring to come out of hiding, though. It means taking the chance of looking for hunters at work elsewhere, whether in the next town, the next county or across the world, and making them part of a larger campaign. Pursuing a greater hunter goal risks attracting the attention of mortal authorities and influential monsters, just by virtue of people's efforts being coordinated toward a common end. And aspiring to a sweeping plan means risking acceptance or condemnation by people in general, who, with eyes clouded by monstrous deceptions, might never understand hunters' true efforts or recognize the good that they can do.

But what if these efforts are worth the risks? What if hunters can organize, plan, work and sacrifice to win significant successes against the Other Side? What if some imbued can cleanse their town, break monsters' grip on a government, or make creatures understand that harmony can be achieved alongside humanity rather than at its expense? What if hunters can achieve a "Utopia" of their own devising, that perhaps only they among mankind can see? What kind of world can they create for themselves, even if it exists only within their tiny grid on the map?

Is it possible for the imbued to rise above their inauspicious beginnings and actually "inherit the Earth"?

THE FIRES OF REVOLUTION

Hunter: Utopia seeks to show you ways in which hunters may climb from their initial isolation and uncertainty to unite, cooperate and fulfill potentially lofty goals against the unknown. This book can help take your game and characters from the imbuing to some overriding achievement that requires an entire chronicle to tell, and that challenges the very control or existence of monsters. This book is meant to help you play games that allow hunters to make their mark on a neighborhood, city or even country in a personal or epic story. If you ever wondered what hunters' existence could lead to once extrapolated to its furthest potential, this book can help bring that dream to the gaming table.

Understand, however, that by the definition above, this book makes a "what if" proposition. The **Hunter** line has and continues to assume that the imbued are a minor, disenfranchised, uninformed smattering of people who individually do what they can about monsters (and some even fail to accomplish that much). Calling the hunt a "grassroots movement" would be an overstatement, because the label implies even a little coordinated direction and agreeable communication for the chosen. With all their confusion, misunderstanding and conflict, hunters are assumed to remain fractious and disparate. That's the "official" status quo for the calling

as portrayed in these books and the foundation upon which most **Hunter** games begin (and may remain if troupes enjoy the experience).

Hunter: Utopia offers "what if" because it invites you to change the nature and achievements of the hunt as you please, and helps you do so, *but for your chronicle only*. You can up the ante of the struggle against the supernatural, but other books for the game presume less auspicious achievements by the imbued. Your chronicle takes its own direction, as should any chronicle. You decide your troupe's path hereafter. From here on, you may pick and choose elements of other **Hunter** books that coincide with your direction. And you can dispense with whatever doesn't suit your troupe's vision. The game truly becomes what you make it.

All that said, only a fraction of the events detailed here are necessarily "canon" for the game and its ongoing storyline. Readers of **Hunter Book: Avenger** may recognize Jennifer Vidisania and her hunter-based following in this book. In her previous appearances, her movement was small and disorganized — merely an inchoate benefit (or threat) to the hunt. In this book, we see how it could explode into an active force with a potentially clamorous voice to name the supernatural publicly. That's what the group *could* become in your game if your Storyteller decides to allow it. That's what the group becomes if you decide to make that story true in your game. Otherwise, the **Hunter** line assumes that Jennifer's efforts remain relatively low key, as posited in **Avenger**.

Similarly, Carleton Van Wyk's association with the group may or may not extend to the lengths proposed in these pages. The prologue "Flight" is considered canonical; Van Wyk visits the Church of the Fourfold Truth, is tortured and brainwashed and seems to succumb to it. But with his conditioning comparatively weak, he is able to regain his senses while the church is still small (before the events of this book unfold). He steals a passport and flees back to Europe without the help of Angus McCrae (as you'll see). Those events **Hunter** assumes to be true with respect to ongoing story threads, and which you may embrace or ignore in your game as you please.

The rest of this book shows you what can happen in a "Utopian" story for **Hunter**. You get to see what could happen by example, and you're offered advice on how to accomplish something similar.

Chapter 1: Hope illustrates how independent imbued can see beyond their immediate survival and surroundings to recognize that greater goals might be pursued against the supernatural.

Chapter 2: Rise... shows how the imbued can organize and initiate movements, whether successfully or not, to make a difference in the world.

Chapter 3: ...And Fall indicates the lengths to which the chosen might go, and the sacrifices they might have to make, to see their Utopian goals fulfilled.

Chapter 4: Fallout reveals what can result from even a successful revolution against the supernatural. Loss and punishment can arise even in victory, and the World of Darkness continues to turn.

Chapter 5: Storytelling the Revolution offers all kinds of advice and guidance to Storytellers for establishing, orchestrating and overseeing a chronicle in which characters see beyond themselves to create something bigger than even they might imagine.

SOURCE MATERIALS

All kinds of documentation, stories, movies and books exist out there about people who rise up against tyranny or who fight the powers that be. Hell, history is founded on that kind of stuff, from the fall of Rome to Napoleon's rise and defeat to the civil rights movement of the 20th century. Of course, all those efforts are considered public knowledge now, but in their time (and perhaps even to this day) information about participants often was misunderstood, narrowly known or even actively misrepresented. Hidden intrigue and shadow plays unfolded. Conspiracies were at work to achieve the Utopias (or not) for which participants struggled. Is hunters' resistance so different? If they're victorious, can they write history too? And if they're defeated, do their efforts ever become known?

"The Search for the 'Manchurian Candidate'" by John Marks — A primary resource on brainwashing and how it can be used to fuel or suppress a movement. A good read if you want to be really, really scared about where your tax dollars go.

Vampire\$ by John Steakley — The movie based on this novel is dubious... but the book is a great example of potential hunters making a name for themselves by fighting the forces of darkness. In the novel, a bunch of

guys stalk and kill vampires — and they just happen to be endorsed and funded by the Vatican. They're blue-collar, foul-mouthed men with real problems, all bound by a sort of war-torn friendship.

Moby Dick by Herman Melville — Again, the book, not necessarily any of the movie adaptations. The crew of the *Pequod* is led by a mad sea captain on an obsessive quest to "kill the white whale." They're not out fishing or making a living. They have a goal — a whale of a goal. Finding their target in the vast oceans of 1851 doesn't make for a quick jaunt. People are lost or killed or lose their minds, and their leader gives everything in the struggle against his adversary. It doesn't end happily, but who says **Hunter** games have to, either?

The Sopranos — Although not expressly about a group striving to create any sort of idealized society, this show does detail the necessities and dynamics that coincide with operating a (mostly) covert organization. The New Jersey Mafia suffers all kinds of internal and external conflicts. Members work in unison and against one another, and they police their own for corruption and infiltration. On top of that, the show echoes **Hunter's** blue-collar theme. Despite all the influential business at work and the gobs of money up for grabs, these wiseguys come across like real people who need to visit marriage counselors, to decide how to care for aging parents, and who struggle to rear sons and daughters.

Red Dawn — This movie is kind of cheesy, but it works as a reference for a Utopian **Hunter** game. Communists invade the United States. A gaggle of teenagers witnesses enemy troops parachuting in. The kids flee into the woods and form a guerilla band hell-bent on defending their home, despite their youth and naiveté.

Survivor — This novel by Chuck Palahniuk, the author of *Fight Club*, offers a reasonable look into the weird, self-destructive nature of a cult. It illustrates (through a remote, pop-culture lens) the surreal inner workings of the group, its goals and its ineluctable end.



CHAPTER 1:

HOPE

What is my strength, that I should hope? and what is mine end, that I should prolong my life?

— Job 6:11

CONFESSIONS

Dear Marianne,

Nothing I say to you here can tell you how sorry I am. There's just no way to do it. No way to express how truly sad I am over what I've done. Thing is, and I know it's sick to say, all the things that I've chosen to do, all the nightmares that I've either seen or maybe even caused — they wouldn't feel so bad if you were here right now.

But you're not. Nobody is. I'm absolutely alone in this goddamn hotel room, waiting for them to come in and find me. They think I have kids in here. They're outside with guns and walkie-talkies and SWAT guys and men in suits with ear pieces. They probably think I'm some sort of maniac. Some wacked out radical who's sitting here with a bunch of kids who I'm willing to kill if the authorities get too close. I'm shit to them. Right up there with those guys who blew up the Oklahoma building, or who flew the planes into New York.

They don't have a clue. I already let the kids go. Put them in the van with one of the others, sent them across the border to Ohio. I couldn't get children involved. They shouldn't have been here in the first place. That was all Conrad's doing. But if those guys outside think I still have them here, that's fine. It's

keeping them away long enough for me to write this, and that's okay with me.

How's Jimmy? Yeah, I know, you probably don't think I care. That's fair, I guess. I left you two pretty high and dry. Maybe you've found someone new by now, someone with more money and who didn't have all the problems I did. Someone who'll stay with the two of you and give you all the good things you deserve. Whatever happens, I hope he's doing all right. Buy him one of those train sets for me, will you? I loved those as a kid, and he had that kind of look in his eye. Tell him it was from me.

Jesus, they're all over outside, waiting to see what I'm going to do. I can hear the noise on their radios. They're probably getting ready to call again. They'll offer me things if I release one of the kids. What do I do? I don't have anything to bargain with. Just some bullshit to hopefully buy me a bit more time. A night, maybe. A day. I don't know. These FBI guys and cops, they're stupid. Blind. Maybe Conrad was right to be paranoid about everybody. Could be that they're all puppets, like he said. Who knows? Conrad said a lot of things. Still, these government types, maybe they even have the things among them. Maybe in the highest ranks.

I always wanted to explain that to you. There are things out there. Not people. More like monsters. And

I don't just mean human monsters, like guys who beat their kids or some killer who ties up girls in his basement. Those guys are real, but there are others, too. It goes pretty deep, I think. I don't even know what they are. I just know we once tried to clean house, burn out the real bad ones and supposedly save all the ones that need saving, but somewhere along the line the focus changed.

I guess what I mean is, don't trust anybody.

The phone is ringing. I want to laugh, yell out "Will someone answer that?" but everybody else is dead. Two are in the hall right outside my door. They're still holding their guns. One of them's practically a boy.

I guess I'll answer the phone now. I'll come back and write some more.

I love you, Marianne.



The first thing I saw was, I don't know what you'd call it. We had names for it, but I don't think you'd really understand. Let's just say I think it was dead. But still walking. It smelled bad, like road-kill, but it mostly looked human. If you got close, it sort of had this yellow skin, and its eyes were all dilated and blood-shot. It didn't have any fingernails. Kind of a weird detail to notice, I guess, but they were just missing.

It was during the day, around noon. I was down at the construction site about to do some more blueprints, and I saw this guy hanging out by the entrance. Maybe you remember the place. It was where we were putting up that gourmet grocery store across the street from the ice cream shop? Anyway, the sun got real bright for a second and I had to close my eyes because they were burning so bad. You know when you look at a light bulb and then close your eyes and you see colors and shapes and stuff? Well, I saw words. Real words. They said something about how people are afraid to sleep. Or rest. Something like that. When I opened my eyes, there was the guy. But this time he was sort of... sharp. Real in focus or something. And suddenly I knew what I had to do. You ever get that? Like something just becomes clear?

That's what happened to me. I went up to the thing, the guy, and talked to him. He was confused. Lost. He could barely remember his own name. I took him out, got him a burger and fries, and talked for a while. He didn't get many details consistent. He thought he had a wife, then later he wasn't sure. At one point he knew he had a son, then later it was a daughter. I felt bad for him. For him and for whatever put him here that way, whatever kept him dragging himself around. So I took him down an alley and I put him out of his misery. I tried to smother him, but he was already dead.

Christ, you don't need to hear about this. The details are pretty bad, but I did what needed to be done. I put him to sleep. Like you'd do to an old dog.

It wasn't long before I realized that the guy wasn't alone. There were more of the confused things. So, that's kind of what I kept doing for a while. Putting them out of their misery. I know that doesn't really tell you much. Maybe that's good. You probably think I'm some sort of monster or that I'm crazy. I don't think I'm either. Maybe it would be easier if I was. I wish I could show you how it feels to be on the right track. Jesus, I don't know, to be doing your part. I had to do something. It was the right thing to do.

And that whole time I was still with you and Jimmy. That's why I was late all the time. I took long lunches from work. Those weekends spent fishing? I wasn't fishing. I was doing this. That time I missed out on Jim's play, where he was dressed up like broccoli? I was at that old broken-down grocery store up in Hopesburg. As ridiculous as it sounds, there was a spirit that needed to be shown the way. The poor thing was stuck there or something. So, I talked it out. It looked like it was caught in a strong wind, and then it was gone. I set it free, I guess.

I don't want you to think I was hurting people. They weren't people. Maybe they were once. But not anymore. I was never in this to hurt anybody. But I guess I have.

I've made a big freaking mess of things. Somewhere along the way, I just sort of stumbled and fell off the path. Once I got involved with Conrad, I started feeling like I was off track. Now it's too late. There's no turning back.

It's almost sundown. They're going to want a hostage. What'll I give them? What am I going to do?

Will any of the things come for me?



They thought I had six kids in here. Now they think I have five. Sure enough, they wanted a hostage. They met one of my absurd demands. They got me this blue prison bus, loaded with gas and enough food to feed thirty people. I should've asked for something really stupid. Next time I'll ask for the space shuttle.

Just a joke. I doubt there'll be a next time.

So they got me this bus and they wanted a hostage. I told them it wasn't enough. That I wanted a yellow bus. I tried to sound crazy. Maybe I am. I took Fitz's body. He was already dead. I held the smug bastard up against the window. The spotlights were on me right away, and I shot him. I know it's sick, but he deserved it. God help me.

I got back on the phone and told them the next time they screwed me over I'd kill another one.

The whole world probably thinks I'm some sort of maniac. Some wacko terrorist who pisses on the Bible and kills kids. I'm not. I'm here with everybody. They're all dead. It's like some kind of dream and I can't wake up. I feel terrible. Across the hall, just across from my room, Cecilia's laying on the floor. Such a pretty girl. Blonde

hair like a doll's. She shouldn't have been mixed up in this. She was young, naive. I don't want you to get the wrong idea. There was nothing between us. She was so young. Maybe eighteen. She could see and do things like the rest of us. Conrad was happy to have her in the group. I only wanted you and Jimmy in my life, but then all this happened.

I don't want to talk about that. I just want to explain myself. Let you know what happened. Tell whoever you want. I'm not writing this to the world. It's to you.

I hooked up with Conrad somewhere around last March. After the miscarriage. After Jim broke his thumb playing tee-ball.

I guess we met at the library, the one at the community college down on County Line, though I didn't pay him any attention at the time. I told you I was working, but was actually getting books on weird stuff like ghosts, UFOs, Dracula. I didn't notice the librarian. Everything was confusing back then. When I got home, one of the books had this symbol drawn on the inside cover, and a phone number. The drawing was mostly just circles and lines, but it made sense to me, like I could get help. That doesn't make any sense, I know. Later I learned that no one else really understands them. But I called the number all the same.

Conrad was the librarian. So we met a few times. Then we did some work. It felt good having someone else who understood. Like I wasn't the only one. That sounds like I'm gay or something. I'm not. It felt like I was a cancer victim who knew another person with the disease. We could relate.

Conrad had some good ideas. He was dead on with what he wanted to do. What he wanted to carry out. He told me there were a bunch of us out there. You wouldn't know it. They don't show up on the news as what they are. If we're on the news, we look like lunatics or criminals. But we're not. We're not crazy.

Well, Conrad was. But not at first. At first he was real focused. Said he'd been doing this for a while, at least a year, and he was tired of just going out, night after night without making a difference. He wanted a whole lot of us to get together and make an impact. Pendleton may not be the biggest town, but it's close enough to Pittsburgh and it has enough industry and low-income housing that it attracts some pretty rough elements. The corruption gets here, trust me.

So he wanted to clean the place up like Giuliani did in New York (though I don't think he's one of us). We wanted to make Pendleton a safer place to live. He was all about cleanliness and order for the town. Said we all had to want it, had to want it real bad. And I did. God help me, I wanted to make this place better for you and Jim and everyone. But we screwed up.

Have you ever got caught up in something you just couldn't get out of? I mean, even something simple, like saying yes to a telemarketer at the wrong time or signing up for one of those stupid book clubs and all of a sudden they won't leave you alone. This was like that. One minute I only wanted to take care of you two. The next minute everything changes. I'm doing a different job, and Conrad offers to do the work as a group. How could I say no? How could I tell him, "No, thanks. I won't accept my American duty. I'd rather just stay home and play with my kid"? That's how he put it, too: American duty. Like I'd be some sort of traitor if I didn't do what I could.

I should've said no. I should've turned him down and come home that night and stayed there forever. Maybe everyone should just try to protect their own. How could I have thought I could save the world if I wasn't even helping my own family?

We started meeting at the library. Conrad had a key. We got together in one of the back conference rooms after hours, kept the lights low, and talked about what we knew or what we thought we knew. Most importantly, we talked about what we were willing to do about it.

He knew two other people who were like us, who had been charged with this big thing, this big plan. They came down and joined us. Part of me doesn't want to say who they are, but they're dead now, so it probably doesn't matter. This one woman, Helen, worked for some park service up in New England somewhere, keeping bears out of campsites and whatever. She was a big woman. Real friendly. She liked to laugh a lot, at least at first. Maybe that's how she hid what she was really going through. The other was this slacker dot-com guy (couldn't have been older than 26, 27). He'd had made some money. His name was Bryan Fitz. Yeah, the same guy I just shot.

I guess those first meetings were more like support groups. We didn't do much in the beginning, mostly just talked. Like finally, there was someone who'd listen. I love you, Marianne, but how could I tell you this stuff? These people got it. They had the same kind of experiences, most worse than I'd had. We'd sit around the table and hold hands or grab each other's shoulders for comfort and we'd just spill the beans. Everything we'd seen and what it meant to us and the nightmares we had. Most of us didn't sleep well and weren't eating too good. But after that, we started to. Conrad pointed that out. Showed us how we felt better being together. How right it felt. He led the meetings. I was always a listener. Helen was loud and funny and real gung-ho about stuff, and Fitz... he just sort of lounged and made sarcastic jokes.

I hear voices outside. Doesn't sound like the FBI or cops. They've been pretty quiet. I guess it's the media. They have tents and vans out there. Lights, camera, action. Looks like a carnival. I guess I'm the star attrac-



tion. You're probably watching this on TV. I'd wave, but someone would probably shoot me.

I guess I'm not against that, but I want to finish this. I want to stay long enough to write all of this down for you and Jim.

Sometimes I feel good about what I do. In the beginning, that was enough. I guess you'd call it energy. Like I took a long nap and woke up feeling refreshed. I don't feel so good now. Like I'm off track.

I'm going to sleep for a few minutes. Hopefully they won't catch me napping.



Sleep doesn't help much. I remember back in college when we'd nap together our senior year, before class, and then wouldn't end up going to class at all. We'd just lay there. God, I miss that.

Anyway, I'm off topic.

The first meetings were all talk, but we eventually started acting on our plans. We wanted to clean up the town, and Conrad told us how. He said we'd make a place for ourselves, that we'd be heroes. We went out every third night. Two nights of planning, of talking and making sure of the set-up, and then a third night of going out there and getting our hands dirty.

We all had different ways of doing things and at that stage it pretty much worked out well. Later it didn't, but

I'll get to that. Fitz paid for just about everything. We didn't have an unlimited bank account or anything, but he got us some flashlights, supplies and guns. He even came up with a pair of infrared binoculars. Except when you looked through them, it was green, not red. Helen was always first to go in. I was backup. I was the talker. You know I always liked talking. I mean, I wasn't ever some psychologist or anything, but I always liked talking to guys at the bar or to people at the daycare when I picked up Jim. Sometimes the things wanted to be talked to. Half the time they responded well and we figured out what to do from there. Other times they didn't, and Helen had to do her thing.

Conrad was always the man with the plan. He had ideas about the things. He looked at them like the mentally ill or criminals. Maybe they couldn't help what they did. Like addicts. People who can't stop. They're driven to bad behavior. Addicts could sometimes be helped. Others were hopeless. Some you got unhooked. Others had to be put away. No matter what, they couldn't be out on the streets, because they weren't in control. Conrad said people out of control were dangerous and couldn't be trusted with anything.

So those were the monsters to him, and it made sense. You see some dead thing, some spirit, and it wants something. It's jonesing for something like some guy who can't get off heroin. But maybe it wants a wedding

ring or gift it once got. We'd try to get it away from that thing. Teach it self-control. If that didn't work, we'd destroy whatever it wanted and it would just... disappear. There'd be a sound like a sigh, maybe a scream, and then it was gone. I think we were putting them to sleep. Laying them to rest.

But that's what Conrad wanted. To help the addicts, the patients. If they couldn't be helped, they were just going to go on, feeding off people, terrifying folks for fun or just plain being angry and dangerous. They all had their demons. It was our job to get the demons out or to put them in the ground.

Those were the times when things felt better. I know I wasn't good to the two of you, and I wasn't there enough. How many times did you accuse me of cheating? I wasn't. Really, I wasn't. When I went to stay in that motel off Route 676, that was just before things started getting bigger. And that was the first sign things weren't what they were supposed to be. The movie thing with Conrad. I don't know. I should've known right then that the whole deal was taking a turn for the worse.

Helen and I went to see this movie. It wasn't a date. Helen's funny but she's more of a buddy. She was all beer drinker and deer hunter and she told the dirtiest, funniest stories. Anyway, there was this bank robbery movie out? We went, had a good time. It was a short vacation. Like pretending for a little while that things were normal again.

Conrad didn't approve. We saw him that night and told him and Fitz about this movie. He just shook his head and said nothing. The next night, he brought out one of those tabloid newspapers and showed us pictures from the premiere of that movie. You could see some of the actors and actresses were, well, they were wrong. Like the addicts. Like they were broken.

He told us we shouldn't go see movies anymore. Or watch TV, unless it was the news. He said that maybe the monsters could affect people's minds. Kind of a crazy idea. You know I like to see some proof before I dive into anything. But Helen was nodding, saying he was probably right, and Fitz was just smiling real easy like it all just confirmed some kind of suspicion he had. So I nodded, too.

Speaking of the TV, I wish I had one. I'd like to turn it on and see what everyone's saying. It's late. I have them working on a new ransom, some weird stuff like a plane with a full fuel tank and some fundamentalist Christian pilot. I don't care much about who's Christian or not, but it's a strange enough request where it might take them more time. And I need time to finish this. Eventually, they're going to realize I don't have any hostages. Not a damn thing to negotiate with. I figure they'll just come for me then.



What Conrad said about TV and movies, I don't know if that was true or not. But the picture in that paper was right. The things are all over the place. They make movies. They run factories. Hell, here's two outside, right now. With the FBI, or helping them. They look like FBI guys. Suits. I made this mirror tube, you know, so I can see out the window without looking? These two guys are standing by this gray SUV, and they don't look right. They look dirty. It's as if they're outlined funny, like the ring of dirt around the tub. They're breathing, so they're not dead.

Regardless of the weird stuff that Conrad wanted, we were making a difference. There was this one place, down off Coleman Street. The one with all those blue spruces out front. It was old and kind of creepy, like something out of a movie. Ironic. It looked like it should have been haunted, and it was. One of the things inside was kind of in charge over the others. It was black. Darker than the night sky. You could see its eyes, though. Hollow. It would send others out to do some bad stuff around the neighborhood. Small stuff like shorting out computers and some not so small stuff like getting in people's heads and making them do things. I think one of them even killed a dog. That's what Helen said.

We had a blueprint of the house from the Pendleton Historical Society. We had a plan and we had equipment. The whole thing was lined up. We did the job without a scratch. The black thing, that was the one to handle. I talked to the others, the weaker ones, and kept them quiet while Helen and Fitz confronted the thing. Once it was gone, the others just gave up, I guess. There was a light just for a moment, and then wisps of smoke that smelled like food burning. Then nothing.

"We cleaned this house," Conrad told us. Then he said we could clean the whole town. Wipe the slate. But he said to do that, we needed more help. He said he knew this place on the internet where others like us could be reached — but that we shouldn't ever go looking for it. He said there was a lot of bullshit on there. Myths, he called them, and that we didn't need to go filling our heads with that or mess with people who weren't on the same page as us.

A week later he said he had people coming from all over to see us. Four, maybe five. Some guy from Viet Nam, two from South Carolina, one woman from Nova Scotia, and some girl from a little town called Collbran, Colorado (that was Cecilia). With more people, Conrad wanted a bigger space. He didn't want to slum around at the library anymore. He quit his job and encouraged us to do the same. With some money help from Fitz, Conrad put some cash down on a modular home and had it built on a plot of scrub land just outside the Gavinchy's Camp Ground up off of York Road. And there it was. Our new home, he said. Base of operations, HQ, whatever. He said he didn't care if we had water or power. In

fact, he seemed to think not having them might actually help us focus, concentrate on the task at hand.

What he did want, though, was for us to work. He wanted the place to be protected. We drove metal posts in the ground, zip-tied them to a chain-link fence, put up barb-wire, put up a gate and lock, and even got scraps of metal from the junkyard to plate the sides of the house. Nobody really asked many questions. We just did what we were told. We trusted that Conrad knew what he wanted done, and that there was a point to the whole thing. We worked like dogs for him for a good two weeks. The whole time he walked around, surveying the scene like a foreman, telling us that "work was good for us." His theory was that monsters didn't have to work. They were either given what they had or they stole it. We were human, and humans worked. Made sense at the time.

I was out working with the guy from Viet Nam, this kind of thin guy who had a real serious attitude. Everyone called him Lou, but I guess he had some longer, oriental-type name. He was all about dedication and devotion and duty (the three D's, he said), and that what we did was the most important thing. Everything else was gravy. He put it differently, but that's what I got from him. Cecilia overheard and came over. She was sort of this flaky, weird religious person. She was real excited by what she had been shown and what we were doing. She said we were building a home for ourselves, and how she read this book about having your own room, your own space.

And I guess that's what it was. A room — a whole house of our own. We were making a place for ourselves. That sounded good. It felt good. But it wasn't. We were way off course. It's easy to see now, sitting here, but I couldn't see shit then.

❖ ❖ ❖

Yeah, I know what you're thinking. This is all too crazy, too screwy to make any sense. But I need you to keep reading. These things are real. I'm writing everything down as straight as I remember it. If you think it's bad already, it gets a hell of a lot worse. The kind of things I'm going to tell you will make you want to take Jim and hide him away, and I don't even know if that's such a bad idea. There's a bad, bad world outside your front door. That's all I'm saying.

This whole time, I didn't even know how bad it was. I wish I could've stayed stupid. Not that I'm saying you and Jim are stupid. You just don't see what we did. What I do. I wish I didn't get involved with these people, that I didn't have a reason to. Christ, just a few months into this thing and I was jobless, sleeping on a cot in some creaky double-wide house with people I didn't know, and was surrounded by hunks of scrap metal in case some monster tried to get in. And I didn't think that was weird? What the hell was wrong with me?

It just got weirder, too. Conrad told us what to eat (mostly just vegetables and protein — no carbs, no sugars). He budgeted our money whether we made it or not. He even made up these black baseball caps with our symbols on them so we could tell who was friendly and who wasn't, in case one of them tried to infiltrate us. Plus, we always had these assignments. We had to sign in on this clipboard and we'd get jobs to do. Different ones each day. Mostly, Conrad wasn't even the ones giving the orders. Fitz was the guy with the clipboard. Sometimes the jobs were easy — set up a bulletin-board and maps with pushpins. Other times they weren't so easy. One time Lou and I had to go down to this dingy rat-hole of a bar where a bunch of guys from the Endron plant hung out. We had to find the shift supervisor and convince him to quit. I still dream about that night in the bathroom stall with Lou and this guy. The guy wasn't like you or me, I know that, but he needed help. I just wanted to talk to him. Lou just wanted to cut him up. He said fear and pain made people do the right thing. I think he just liked to see them scared. I was scared. Lou pinned me up against his van and told me that I had to be more serious. That I couldn't show Conrad how I felt. "Your weakness," he said. Weakness. God damn.

It felt like things were getting out of control. And they were. I can't lie. But I didn't do anything about it! I felt wrong, like I wasn't even doing what I was supposed to anymore. Yeah, if someone couldn't be talked down, you had to put them out of their misery, but we weren't supposed to go around torturing these things!

So one day I decided that if there were others out there like us, I needed to find some of them. So I went to the library, got on the internet and spent probably six hours trying to find the place Conrad talked about. I don't know squat about the internet, but somehow I got up into this place. I put my little codename in there and whatever, and just read messages. I even asked a few questions, figuring I'd come back in a week or two. The others on there. I don't know. Everyone was different. They were real confused, not like our group, not as organized. It made me almost proud to be a part of Conrad's deal, you know? Like maybe we were on the right track, like maybe I should stop whining. By the time I was done it was dark and I went back to the house.

Turns out I forgot to do one of my chores. I was supposed to go scope out this place during the day, this old schoolhouse down by the Neshaminy Bridge. I guess there was supposed to be a nest of something down there. Blood-addicts, Conrad called them. But I didn't go. I spent my time at the library. So when I got back, everyone was waiting. Conrad was out front. Most everyone else stood around him. There was a dead girl at his feet. Pretty. Young. Her throat was torn open. She looked pale.

I was speechless. I didn't know what to do. I wanted to run. But I don't know what they would've done to me if I had. Conrad told me in a real calm voice that I killed the girl. That because of my laziness, because I wanted to do my own thing, this girl died. Helen spoke up and was real angry. She looked cut up, too. She said that her and Lou and Jack (one of the South Carolina guys) went out to the bridge looking for me, because they were afraid I'd been attacked. The sun had already gone down. They found the girl, already dead. Then they got attacked. They barely made it out, I guess.

They punished me that night. All of them. Everyone got a kick in. Conrad said that's how the Indians did it, like running a gauntlet. I had my hands tied behind me and each one got a chance to kick me in the side. Cecilia didn't kick too hard. Helen almost broke my ribs. Fitz and Conrad didn't participate. Fitz just watched, smiling. That smug son of a bitch. I'm glad I shot him. Conrad looked down at me like a disapproving father. I felt like I failed him.

Seems I'm pretty good at failure.

I didn't sleep well that night from the pain. It was like one of those nights where you feel hot one minute, cold the next, and my brain wouldn't shut off. Normally I slept pretty hard. Doing this work keeps you busy. Drains you fast.

This is going to sound corny, but every time I'd grab fifteen, twenty minutes' sleep, I'd dream. Real vivid stuff, too. Dreams where you wake up the next morning and you feel off-balance or something, like what happened during your sleep might have been real.

I had dreams of you and Jim. It wasn't at our house, at least not our real house. It was in some other, bigger, better place. Jim was playing with a train set. You were in the kitchen. Jesus, I don't remember. Making drinks or something. Jim looked happy, running the train through these felt-covered tunnels. You came out, we had some drinks. The way you looked at me, it seemed like you were proud of me. Like maybe you were the only one. I know it's not true, don't get me wrong. I know I left you and Jim behind and now I don't even really know what's happened to the both of you, but I can't tell you how good it felt.

Somewhere along the way, that dream went spinning away and I felt alone for awhile. I don't remember any images. Just loneliness. But then there was this wrecked city block. It looked kind of like downtown Pittsburgh if it were hit by a bomb or flooded. Buildings were hollowed out and the streets were all torn apart. But I was there. So were the others — Conrad, Helen, Cecilia, everyone else. And we were kings of the place. It was ours. We owned it. We were responsible for it. My face was hot from a fire that burned in the distance. The

wind kicked up hard. Conrad waved his arms around like he was showing us all some kind of grand estate with a mansion and a rose garden. Everyone looked happy. I even felt kind of happy, surrounded by wreckage.

I still don't quite know what that dream meant. I have a few ideas, though.



After that whole ordeal, I wanted to do better. I threw myself into Conrad's plan. I wanted to show everyone how dedicated I was. Most of them gave me space and forgave me. Even Lou told me that sometimes people don't realize how hard you have to be, the commitment you have to make. Helen, though, she didn't want to hear anything I had to say. The smiles and jokes were gone. She hated me after that.

Conrad brought more people in. Some kid named Gavin from the east end of Pennsylvania. He said the boy had driven out some demons from his hometown. A few others, too. This artist from Arizona. A physical therapist from San Francisco. Some big Nordic-looking guys from Hungary or something. There were about a dozen of us by then. They're all dead now. Most of them are near me, in the halls or in other rooms down the hall. Dead of self-inflicted gun shots. Some went out firing at the Feds outside. But they're all dead.

Some also died the day Helen went out. The day everything really changed for us. I don't know what she was thinking. I guess maybe she wanted to show Conrad how good she was. How she took care of business. Maybe she just had anger toward the things that murdered that girl and scratched up Helen's face. Too late to find out now. She went out one Wednesday to take care of them. She went by herself. We weren't supposed to go out alone. She grabbed gear, a shotgun, one of our hats, a fire axe, and then she was gone. She didn't come back. Well, no. She came back. But not alone.

Night came and no one knew where she was. Conrad was all concerned, questioning each of us as if we knew what she was up to. He knew the shotgun and axe were missing. He lingered longer on me, I think. Maybe I'm just being paranoid. But we were all in there, and everyone was starting to argue while Conrad and Fitz were off in the kitchen. Then Lou started freaking out, saying that something was coming, something was here, and then everything just went nuts. The door to the house — which was pretty damn heavy with a crapload of locks on it — blew down like tinfoil. They were on us, filling the house. I don't remember it all like I want to. I remember that there were claws and teeth, and all of them looked like people except for one. That one was real horrible looking. All deformed like its head had been beaten in with a shovel or something.

They were faster and stronger than any of us. The whole thing probably took less than five minutes, but I

remember that it was like forever. We survived somehow. Cecilia definitely helped. She held them away from us just by saying some kind of Sunday school prayer. Lou was a machine, going at them with lamps and a table leg and anything he could get his hands on. I saw Conrad. He was up and sticking parts of a broken chair in through these things' chests. Stakes. For vampires. Wish he'd told us that trick before. Fitz was nowhere. Two of the Hungarians were dead pretty quick, their heads mostly gone. South Carolina Jack was in the corner, half-alive, both his legs broken. I was yelling and out of control, and I guess the things thought I was a lunatic because they didn't get near me.

Doesn't matter. It was over, just like that, like one of those storms that comes in low and quick and hits hard. Then it's up and gone, no warning. The things were dead or dying (though they were already dead, right?). We were the same. Outside there was a car, a plum-colored Cadillac. It was still running. After the mess, when Conrad took stock of everyone, we took the bodies outside and burned them. He looked in the car.

Not much, a few guns, maps, a thermos full of blood. Then we checked the trunk. Helen was in there.

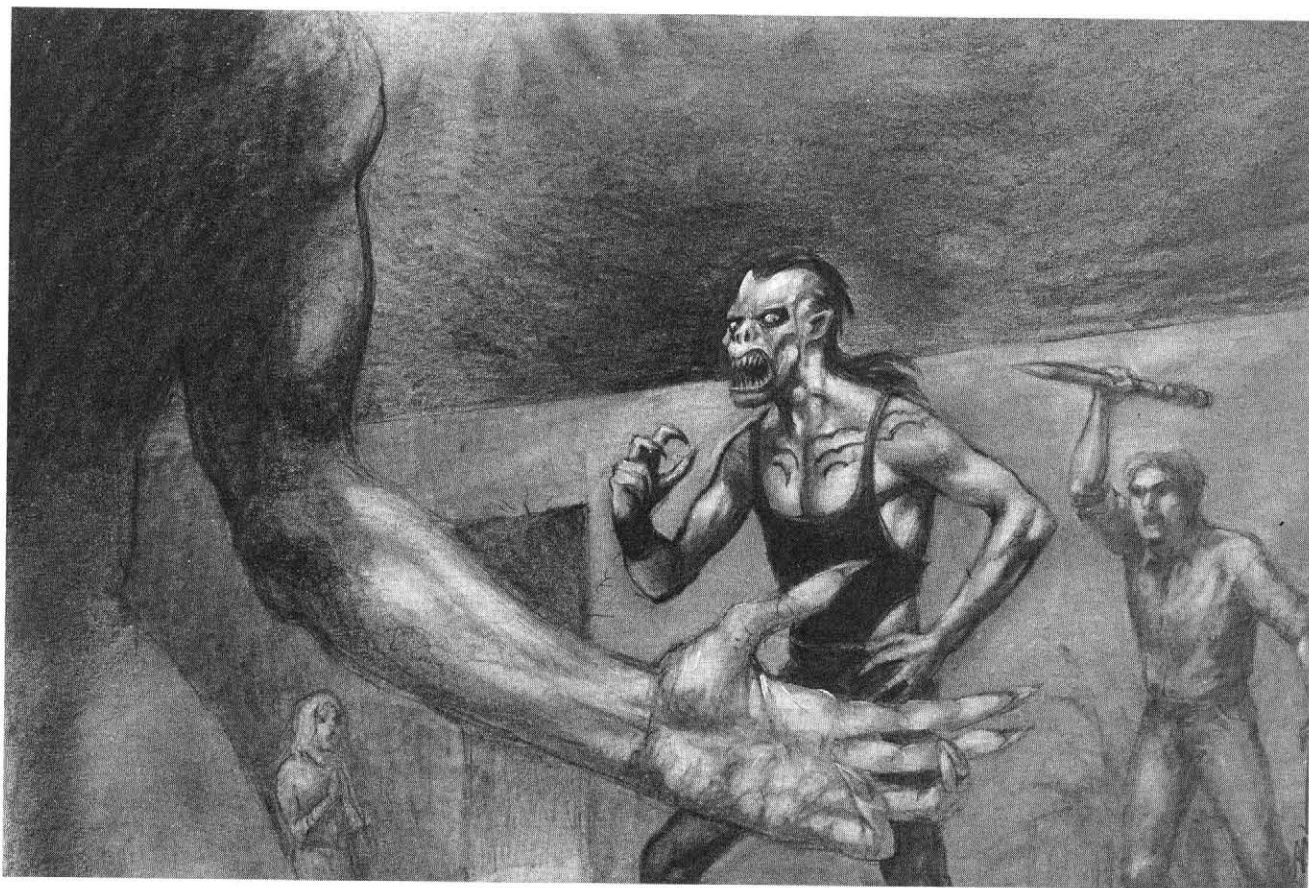
Jesus, Marianne, she barely had any skin on her. They left her face so we could recognize her. I still have that image burned into my brain. It was like something out of a horror movie. She was tied up with twine, and

you could see her muscles and they were all wet. I got sick. I haven't thought about that stuff since it happened. I didn't want to.

Early that morning, around 3:00, Conrad told us to pack up all our stuff and we got out of there. He said that if those things found us, there would be more. He said there were always more. Before we left, he said that we were being punished for our pride. Our ignorance. Everyone nodded. Sage wisdom or something, I guess. He believed we were babes in the woods who played at our job like it was some kind of game. Lou really nodded at that one as he nursed a broken wrist. Conrad felt that we weren't ready, and that it was time to stop. Time to stop fucking around.

He was right, in a way. We weren't ready. We were naive and stupid and patting each other on the backs for it. He thought we'd go and find a new place and more people like us and suddenly we'd be in the clear. Like we were going to be heroes, gathering up all the monsters and throwing them out of town. He was wrong. Heroes don't end like this. We were monsters. No better than criminals or terrorists. I wish I didn't have to end like this. But you know what they say about wishes, right?

The phone's ringing again. I don't know what time it is. I figure the sun will come up in a few hours. I can't say whether that'll matter to the things outside or not. Probably not. Every time I think I know what kind of



monster I'm dealing with, ones does something totally different. They're probably going to want a hostage. I wonder how long I can hold them off, how many hours it'll be before they're onto me. Then it's over. I have to stall them for more time.

Just got off the phone with a Fed. He said he's trying to figure me out. Said that there are some pieces of this puzzle that don't quite fit. Called me a "militant," wanted to know my religion, why I was trying to "bring down the government." I know what they're thinking. They think I'm some David Koresh, Bin Laden, Charles Manson all rolled into one. If they only knew the half of it. And the half that guy does know, he's got wrong.

I needed time, so I acted all crazy, like I was ready to shoot someone. People will jump through some hoops when they think you're going to kill a kid. I told him that I wanted an interview with Barbara Walters. Something big. I wanted to talk about my "agenda" with her. He grunted and hung up. I guess since I don't hear any windows breaking or doors coming down, they're thinking it over. Otherwise, they'd be in here already.

I love you, Marianne. I'm going to take a few minutes. I'm not done with the story yet. There's still some more things I have to say. I'll write more soon. I promise.

SMALL BEGINNINGS

AUDIO TAPE TRANSCRIPT FILE

THIS MATERIAL IS PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL

THIS TAPE HAS BEEN LABELLED "#1" BY THE RECORDER

TAPE BEGINS WITH IDENTIFICATION STATEMENT

This tape is the property of Brian Lydecker and its contents are the copyright of Brian Lydecker. If found, please mail this tape to 142a Camford Street, Clarion, Pennsylvania, and your postage costs will be reimbursed.

RECORDING BREAK

WHILE DEFINITE IDENTIFICATION OF SPEAKER IS IMPOSSIBLE, TRANSCRIPTION PROCEEDS ON THE ASSUMPTION THAT THE SPEAKER IS BRIAN LYDECKER. ALL STATEMENTS ON TAPE ARE MADE BY "LYDECKER" UNLESS NOTED OTHERWISE

This... this is difficult. Christ. Where do I start? How the fuck do I make sense out of what happened yesterday?

I, um... I need to talk to someone about this. But there's no one I can talk to. My parents, my friends... they won't understand. Hell, who could understand?

Mom and Dad bought me this recorder for my birthday last year, for me to record script ideas and stuff. I got excited for a few days — even recorded my

address details on the start of all ten tapes. But then I guess I lost interest.

Now, though... I have to talk to someone about this. Maybe just myself.

Last night, I was working late at the mine, trying to get the warehouse paperwork up to date. There were some tools outstanding — a case that was checked out to a fitter named George Harmon. He'd been working in Shaft Four. I could have left it until morning. I wish now that I had. But instead, I went over to the shaft.

Turns out Harmon was working late too, fixing a haulage cart. I told him I needed the tools right there and then. He'd left them at the bottom of the shaft, so I had to convince him to take me down there so we could get them. The shaft... I work in the warehouse, and this was the first time I'd been down that far. I tried not to think about all the tons of dirt and coal over my head. Tried not to think about cave-ins and poison gas and all that.

When we got to the bottom, Harmon started collecting the tools. I polished my glasses and looked around. And that's when we saw it.

RECORDING BREAK

Had to stop for a minute. Even a day later, it's hard to think about. To accept it. But I know it wasn't a dream. Dreams don't tear at you and hurt people.

I'm getting ahead of myself. I have to talk about the... thing.

It was camouflaged or something — we didn't see it until we were almost standing on it. A black — I don't know — a bug, like a centipede, but about six feet long, legs everywhere. It looked like... it looked like it was eating coal. Fist-sized lumps kind of moved through it and came out the other end, like it was shitting them out.

I said, "What the fuck is that?" to Harmon. Then the thing hissed at us and wriggled off into a tunnel that I swear wasn't there two minutes earlier. Not a hole, a damn tunnel in the rock.

This part makes even less sense. I know it's impossible, but it felt like a wind started blowing down there. I looked at Harmon and he seemed confused. He must have felt it, too. And that's when I heard a voice. Not Harmon's. Not mine. I don't even know if it was out loud or I imagined it. It... it sounded like it said, "They poison the world." I don't know what it meant or who "they" were.

Harmon and I didn't talk. We just headed down the tunnel after that thing. It just seemed like we had to. We came into this chamber, maybe the size of my apartment. The room was full of... full of eggs. I mean, I think they were eggs. They were the size of basketballs, and sort of a spotted, fleshy color. And here's something crazy — I could see down there. No

light, but I could see — and see more clearly than I have since I was a teenager.

At the time down there, I thought Harmon was scared. That's why he fell behind so quickly. But now I realize that he went back to get a light, and I didn't even realize that I never had one. That didn't even sink in until a few hours ago — and then I threw up all over the bathroom. I don't know what's happening to me.

But... but this cave was crawling with centipedes, like dozens of them, crawling over these giant fucked-up eggs. It was horrible. I mean, it was just wrong. There's a fucking centipede a yard in front of me, and it's the most disgusting thing I've ever seen. Covered in boils and sores, all leaking pus. And fuck, I swear the thing had a face. A little, fucked-up, human face.

That's when Harmon went nuts and started smashing the eggs with a wrench. He just snapped, and I swear I could hear a sizzling sound when he hit the things. It smelled like burned hair in there.

I could have run. Maybe I should have. I still don't know why, but I grabbed a rock and started smashing the things, too. I just... just knew that I had to help.

Then the bugs came after us. They had pincers — whatcha call them... mandibles — three, four inches long. And they were fast. They got Harmon. Took a big chunk out of his arm. They would have got me too, except — fuck, this is so crazy — I knew they were coming. I could imagine them getting close to me and I got back in time.

That doesn't make sense. It doesn't make any sense.

There were a lot of them. I grabbed Harmon and pulled him back down the tunnel. I didn't look back, didn't want to see, but I could hear them behind us, clicking and hissing. We got back into the lift and punched it back up to the surface. The things couldn't or didn't follow us, thank God. Harmon looked pretty bad. His arm was bleeding and he was woozy, maybe in shock. When we got to the surface, I drove him to the hospital. I told them he'd cut his arm on a machine. What else could I say?

Then I came home and killed a six-pack instead of thinking about it. But I'm sober now, so I have to think about it.

I called in sick today. I need to work this out. I called the hospital. Harmon's still there. I think I'd better go see him.

*****RECORDING BREAK*****

<WHISPERING> I'm sitting on a toilet in the men's room at the hospital. I need to think before I talk to Harmon. Talking into this thing... helps.

I could just drive away. I could just forget about it and go back to normal.

But goddamnit, that thing had a face.

I've been thinking. I'm going to keep this recorder on in my pocket and tape what Harmon says. I need... I need proof that I'm not crazy. I need to be able to play this back at three in the morning and hear someone else's voice tell me that what I saw and did was real.

And if he tells me I am crazy... well, I'll have proof either way.

*****RECORDING BREAK*****

*****SOUNDS ARE SOMEWHAT MUFFLED IN THIS SECTION*****

LYDECKER: Uh, hey, George. Is it all right if I come in? How... how's your arm?

MALE VOICE, IDENTIFIED AS GEORGE HARMON: Still here. That's good enough for now.

LYDECKER: Uh... okay. Um... I wanted to talk to you about... you know, last night?

HARMON: It's all I've thought about since I woke up here.

LYDECKER: Right, right. Well, what do you think happened?

HARMON: Do you believe in God, Brian?

LYDECKER: Well... no, I don't. Sorry.

HARMON: That's all right. Myself, I'm one of the Society of Friends... Quakers. I believe in the Lord. I believe that he works in ways we can't understand, and that it's our duty to shoulder the burdens He gives us. To accept His calling without question.

LYDECKER: So... so you think God... was there in the mine last night?

HARMON: You saw those things. You heard the voice?

LYDECKER: Well... I think I heard something, but I thought it might have been you.

HARMON: Wasn't me, and there you are. Those things were there. We went down there and we saw them because God wanted us to. He asked us to shoulder a burden and we did.

LYDECKER: I... okay. Okay. I guess that's one way of looking at it. So what do you think we should do now?

HARMON: Now? We go back down and finish those things. We started it and we need to end it. It may take more than just us. Maybe a group. Maybe we'll have to seal the shaft. We'd better talk to management tomorrow.

LYDECKER: Uh... see, I'm not sure about that. I've been thinking about this a lot. Why hasn't anyone seen those things before? Four's not the busiest shaft, I know, but it's still operational. You've been working down there. Have you ever heard people talking about, well... what we saw?

HARMON: No.

LYDECKER: So why not? Maybe the company knows the things are there and they're covering it up for

some reason. We weren't supposed to be there last night. There's no night shift anymore. Maybe that's because the company doesn't want anyone down there while those things are around.

HARMON: That seems... a little paranoid. I've been working for Pennmine for more than twenty years. They're not like the CIA or something.

LYDECKER: But still, it's possible, right?

HARMON: <PAUSE> I suppose. So what do you think we should do?

LYDECKER: Well, I don't think we should do anything until we know more. We need to find out about those things. Maybe see if they've spread to other shafts or attacked other miners. If the company isn't covering it up, we can talk to management. If they are... well, I guess we cross that bridge when we come to it.

HARMON: <PAUSE> Hmm. You've got a point. Anyway, I'm probably going to be stuck here for a while.

LYDECKER: Yeah. Last night your arm looked... well, pretty bad.

HARMON: It sure isn't good. I heard someone say something about poison and toxic... something. Doesn't hurt that bad — kind of numb — but I can barely move it.

LYDECKER: Jesus.

HARMON: Mind the language, son.

LYDECKER: Sorry.

HARMON: Look, Brian, I'm pretty tired. Might have to ask you to leave for now. Why don't you come back tomorrow? We can talk about this some more.

LYDECKER: Sure. You get some sleep.

RECORDING BREAK

Well, that went okay. At least I know I'm not crazy... or that I'm not the only one who is. Not if Harmon saw the same things.

Did he hear the same thing I did? Damn it, I should have asked him about the wind.

He thinks it's a message from God. I... I can't accept that. I don't know what the explanation is, but it can't be that. I forget sometimes that this town is full of Quakers. They're not the kind of people to stick their religion in your face, which is good. But they're everywhere in Clarion. I think they settled the town or something, way back when.

So what can explain those things, if they're not, what... demons or signs from God? Weird bugs? Some kind of mutation? Fuck, I don't know.

Have to go back to work tomorrow. I told Harmon I'd poke around to find out more. Easy to say, but how do I do it? If this were a movie, I'd just stumble onto big clues. I wish this was a movie. I understand movies, scripts. Real life is too complicated. Too real.

I guess I can talk to some of the miners, see if they've seen anything weird. Maybe poke around after

the mine closes for the day. Look through records. I'll think of something.

I'd still like to turn my back on all this. Just forget about it all. But I can't forget. The burning smell down there. I can still smell it.

And there's something else. Just sitting here in the basement talking into this recorder, I didn't notice how dark it got. A minute ago, I polished my glasses — and when I put them on, I could see in the dark. Just like in the shaft.

Whatever sent us that message, I don't think it's finished with us yet.

BACKGROUND SOUNDS IN FOLLOWING SECTION INDICATE A PUBLIC PLACE

Might not be smart to talk into this thing at a bar. But I needed a drink, and then I needed two or three, and I have to talk about this while I'm drunk enough to still keep thinking about it. Anyway, I'm in a booth on my own. It's not like I'm sitting at the bar in front of everyone.

It... it just keeps getting weirder.

PAUSES. TAKES A DRINK?

I asked a couple of the guys at the warehouse about Shaft Four — whether there had been any accidents there. Accidents other than Harmon's, of course. I heard management sent him a card and put him on leave — probably want to avoid any kind of compensation claim.

Anyway, Shaft Four. No one could tell me about any other accidents — but plenty of the guys told me that there'd been a minor collapse in Four about five months ago. I was on vacation then, in L.A. failing to sell any scripts, so I didn't know about it. Apparently there was a small cave-in about halfway down one weekend. Management closed the shaft for a week while they did repairs.

Maybe that's when those things got in. Maybe they tunneled in from inside the mountain or something.

But all that was before I saw the symbols.

After work, I hung around for a while and went out to Four. I found these little doodles — line and circle drawings — around the shaft platform, and in a few other places around the mine site. Painted on walls, scratched onto workbenches. Meaningless little figures — except that they meant something to me. I just knew one meant "watch out" and another meant "failure" or "betrayal" or something. How do I know these things?

PAUSES

It isn't just around the mine. It's all over town. Walking to the bar from home, I saw three or four different ones. There's one in front of me right now, scratched into the surface of my table! It means... "meeting place." And that opens a whole new can of

worms. Because that means, I think, that someone in the same situation as Harmon and I sat in this very booth! There are others who've seen what Harmon and I did. I'm sure of it. I need to find them. Find out what the hell's going on. I need to find them now.

RECORDING BREAK

Well, it's close to midnight, and I'm about to commit an act of vandalism. I don't think anyone's watching. I bought a can of black spray paint, and I'm standing in front of the Burger King billboard near the mini-mall. Every miner in town drives past this sign on the way to work, and plenty of other people see it every day.

I'm going to draw one of those symbols—big. Then, on the back of the billboard, I'll use marker to draw a different symbol and write my post-office box.

PAUSE

There. I think it somehow means "look here" or "pay attention," but I don't know how. God, that scares me.

SUDDEN SOUND OF RUSHING WIND

RECORDING BREAK

There must be a storm coming in, but there's something weird. The wind keeps changing, coming from different directions.

I put my details on the back, but I've been hanging around. I don't know why. What could possibly happen out here? God, I'm going—

I think someone's coming. Maybe I should hide... shit, they've seen me.

PAUSE

FEMALE VOICE: Hey... hey you. Did you do that?

LYDECKER: Uh... why do you want to know?

FEMALE VOICE: Did you make that symbol? Do you know what it means?

LYDECKER: Uh... yeah, I think so....

FEMALE VOICE: Then tell me right now!

LYDECKER: What? Shit, please put the gun down! I'm not a... rapist or anything, I'm just—

FEMALE VOICE: Did you call me here? Are you one of us?

LYDECKER: One of... one of what?

FEMALE VOICE: Tell me what the sign means! Right fucking now!

LYDECKER: "Come here!" It means, "come here!"

FEMALE VOICE: <PAUSE> Okay. Sorry. I'm just... I can't trust anyone. Not since the mine—

LYDECKER: You were at the mine? Did you leave the symbols? Have — have you seen the things in Shaft Four?

FEMALE VOICE: <PAUSE> No, but I know who has. Look, this isn't a safe place. Anyone could be watching. Come to the bar tomorrow night. There's a booth—

LYDECKER: With a symbol. I know.

FEMALE VOICE: Fair enough. Meet us there at eight. <PAUSE> I have to go. Don't follow me, understand?

LYDECKER: Yeah, okay. I'll just... sit here for a while. <PAUSE> Jesus Christ.

RECORDING BREAK

I want to say it's getting easier. That I'm getting used to the shocks, that it's started making sense. I want to say that, but I can't. The best I can say is that I'm starting to become numb.

Tonight, Harmon and I met with the others. The survivors. I wish I'd brought this recorder with me. Maybe listening to it now would help me deal with things. But I was afraid they'd find it. That woman — Yvonne — was pretty paranoid last night. I didn't want things to go wrong.

Anyway, I met with Harmon this morning as he was being checked out of the hospital. I told him about last night. He was suspicious, and so was I. I mean, she pulled a gun on me. I think if I hadn't been able to tell her what the symbol meant she would have shot me.

We went to the bar early. Harmon's arm in a sling, with a pistol hidden under the cloth. I don't think he would have used it, no matter what happened — I know I couldn't have — but it made me feel better knowing it was there.

The others showed up at eight. Just two of them — the woman I met last night and a man in a wheelchair. His name is Neil Briscoe. She's Yvonne Jackman. And here's something crazy — I sort of know her. Well, I've exchanged emails with her. She's a director at the radio station. She's the one who turned down my application to do movie reviews last year. Small world, I guess.

Anyway, it wasn't exactly a relaxed chat. It took ten minutes before they'd even tell us their names. I can't blame them for being cautious after what happened to them. I was right — there are others like us. But Briscoe and Yvonne are the only ones left. All the others are dead. They were killed in that "collapse" in Shaft Four.

There were three others, and they'd all had similar experiences to Harmon and me. They'd encountered something twisted, wrong. Things changed for them after that, too.

That was the thing I latched onto right away — whatever it is that's doing this to us. I wanted Briscoe to have the answers, to know the truth. None of them did. Briscoe and Yvonne still don't. It's like we've been thrown in the deep end of the pool without being taught to swim.

The five of them discovered that Clarion was crawling with things — what they think was tainted by whatever is in the mine. Mostly it's animals — dogs, birds, even plants. Maybe the bugs Harmon and I saw. But this is the worst part — they say it affects dead



people! I can't believe that, but they swear it's true. They've seen corpses walking around — straight out of *Night of the Living Dead*. Briscoe said they were mindless, violent and tough, but easy to outsmart. Yvonne... she said that one of them was able to talk and seemed less aggressive, but Briscoe didn't back her up. Don't know who to believe there.

But Christ — zombies? How the fuck can this be real?

PAUSES. TAKES A DRINK?

So anyway, the five of them were doing things for a while. They found changed things and destroyed them... killed them. But they wanted to find out where it was all coming from. One of them tracked the creatures to the mine. Briscoe explained, but I didn't understand how. Four of them went down the shaft with guns and explosives in bottles, with Yvonne keeping watch above. I don't know how they got past security.

The things down there... killed three of them. Not just bugs. Briscoe said there were other, stronger things there. He didn't say what. He only managed to escape by sheer luck and broke his back in the process. Maybe whatever it was thought he was dead, too. Now he's paralyzed from the waist down. God, is that what's going to happen to me?

Harmon told them we wanted to do something about the things in the mine. Briscoe got pissed off at that. He said we were too weak, too few, and that Harmon and I didn't know what those things were capable of. All a small group like us could hope to do was pick off weak creatures like the zombies. The mine chews people up, he said, and it would kill us for sure.

That kind of talk... didn't sit well with me. Yeah, I'm scared. Yeah, I doubt we can do much right now against whatever these things are, at least not without more information and weapons, I guess. But running away... that's just not an option. We have to do something about these things — if only to find out why we seem to have been chosen to know what's going on when no one else does.

I suggested trying to find any more people like us in town. Harmon and I weren't the first, after all. Yvonne said I could try painting more signs around town, drawing people out like I did with her. I can't say I like that idea. I mean, I didn't even know what I was doing. Okay, maybe it attracted her somehow, but what else might be attracted too? Did I cause that wind? Like in the shaft...? I guess she's right. I don't know any other way to find some others.

We talked for about two hours. At the end, we exchanged phone numbers and split up. I told them I'd contact them before I tried making any more symbols. I want someone with me next time.

This recorder helps in its way, but having someone else to talk to who understands... I feel less scared. I

mean, I'm still scared, but at least I'm not terrified any more. At least I'm not crazy. Well, apart from thinking I should do anything more than just hide. That's pretty crazy in itself.

But crazy or not, it's doing something. Suddenly I realize that I've been doing nothing for years. Dangerous or not, insane or not, this has meaning.

*****END OF TAPE*****

*****THIS TAPE HAS BEEN LABELLED "#3" BY THE RECORDER. LOCATION OF TAPE "#2" UNKNOWN.*****

We managed to find one more "gifted" person in town, maybe two. For a change, it wasn't me who found them. It was George.

One guy is Dan Olsen, the ex-union rep. Now he's running for mayor in next month's election. Apparently he and George have known each other for years. They go to the same Quaker church or something. They met up to have a beer, and somehow Olsen worked out that George knew about the dead and the things from the mine.

Turns out that Olsen had a run-in with the horrors a few weeks ago. Now, for some reason this guy doesn't seem to know all the things we do. He says he saw something once and never has again, but has known about them ever since. When he had his encounter he was with another guy, and this guy is more like us. He admits to doing some pretty bizarre stuff that Olsen doesn't seem to understand. Why is Olsen different? Can other folks be shown the things so they'll understand? Could we go to the cops with what we know? Briscoe says they won't understand and that we'll become suspects, instead. But why is that true?

I met the two new guys earlier tonight. Olsen seems okay. He's pretty sharp, and he seems prepared to throw a lot of time and resources into protecting the town. The other guy, Cole Simpson, I'm not so sure about. If anything, he's too eager — lots of talk about "holy fire" this, "Book of Revelations" that. Man, I thought Quakers were meant to be low key but Simpson's all fire and brimstone. Worse than George.

So that makes eight of us now: Me, George, Briscoe, Yvonne, Angie Fielding, Sam O'Connor, Simpson and Olsen. None of us knows how all this works or what we're supposed to do. So far, we've been doing our own thing without any kind of plan. I'm surprised no one's been killed.

I was hoping Briscoe might try to be a leader, but he doesn't seem interested. Losing his other friends... I think he's frightened of telling people what to do now.

Is it egotistical of me to think that I could give us direction? I've never been the leader type before. I've wanted to be one, but I've never had the nerve to try. It was easier not to try. Things are different now,

though. We seem to have different, what... blessings... gifts? Yvonne might say curses. It seems like I can see things clearly, and I can attract others with those symbols, but I can't really hurt the things directly like George or Angie can.

Does that make me good as a leader, a planner? Am I meant to be? I don't know, but I do know we're not going to accomplish anything unless we come up with a plan and work together. Someone has to make that happen. Otherwise, we're like a bandage on cancer.

Why couldn't it be me?

*****RECORDING BREAK*****

We just had a fight with some things at the cemetery. I'm still scattered, and I didn't even really get involved.

For the last week I've been going around the town, looking for trouble. Not actually getting into any. Just watching for signs of... contamination. It only makes sense. I can see better than the others for one thing, even in the dark. Maybe more importantly, I'm happy to back off once I see something. Simpson or Angie would jump in and start hitting things, without a plan or knowing what they're up against.

I've been gathering information. It's not that hard to spot the things once you get some practice. I'm taking notes: What I see. What a thing might be. What it's doing. I'm trying to get a sense of what we're up against so we're not just fumbling around. These tapes are just for me. They're my therapy, my thinking process. But my notes are for everyone's benefit. Okay, technically it was Briscoe's suggestion, but I'm the one actually going around being spotter.

I think Mom and Dad are wondering what I'm doing at night. They haven't said anything, but I can tell. Still, they were the ones encouraging me to get out and meet people, so they can't complain if I seem to be developing a social life.

But anyway, tonight. I've been driving by the cemetery every night. That's where most of the dead people seem to be coming from, as far as I can tell. Last night I saw, well... a zombie. I mean, I saw one earlier, the one I talked about on tape two, but it's not like I'm used to them now or anything. It still gave me the screaming shits, seeing that thing sort of lurching around the graveyard. I think it was kicking at the other graves, trying to break in.

I called George, Simpson and Angie and told them I'd found a thing. They all wanted to get to it right away, but I convinced them to wait a night. We can't just jump in. We need to plan. Get it right in our heads before we go in. I wanted to call Yvonne, too, to let her know what was happening. She's becoming uncomfortable with the "shoot first" attitude of the others. She thinks she might be able to talk with some of the dead. I told her that if the thing didn't seem violent, I'd hold the others back.

Whether or not I actually could.... Well, in the end I didn't have to. The thing came out swinging and the guys attacked it. It was all fucked-up and strong, but kind of slow, like Briscoe described when I met him. The real danger came after. I looked around for any sign of where it came from or what it was doing. I found a big hole in the ground at the back of the cemetery, near the tree line. It smelled bad. It was almost like a wound in the ground. I forced myself to take a closer look, and that's when another thing came at me.

It was like... fuck, I don't even like trying to remember. I screamed. Somehow, I knew it was coming, like back at the mine. The others came running and attacked it. It was stronger than the zombie. Everyone was shouting and getting in each other's way. Simpson got some bruised or broken ribs, but they put it down. Like the other ones, it rotted away pretty quickly. Nothing but a stinking grease spot after a couple minutes.

But here's the thing: We never would have found that thing if I hadn't checked out the graveyard after the fight with the zombie. And we wouldn't have fought the zombie if I hadn't spotted it and organized the others. This is what I've been telling them again and again — we need to get together as a group, not just a bunch of loners. We get more done and do it more effectively when we're organized and operating on solid plans and information. Plain and simple.

I mean, I'm not saying we need a clubhouse and a list of rules. We just need to cooperate. But there's so much resistance — Briscoe's depression, Simpson's paranoia. Not to mention that Angie and Simpson don't really get along with Yvonne or Sam — or me, for that matter. Simpson gave me the dirtiest goddamn look tonight, like I wasn't pulling my weight unless I had a bat in my hands.

Fuck him. I'm doing what I think is right and he's gonna have to like it.

RECORDING BREAK

LYDECKER AUDIBLY DISTRAUGHT

Oh shit! Oh shit! Her fucking eyes....

I gotta get everyone to Simpson's place now.

RECORDING BREAK

FOLLOWING SECTION MUFFLED BUT AUDIBLE

HARMON: What's the emergency, Brian? I skipped out on dinner. Marjorie will have my hide!

LYDECKER: Believe me, this is serious. Look, everyone sit down.

SOUNDS OF MOVEMENT

LYDECKER: Okay. We've all been operating under the assumption that whatever the thing at the mine is, it's not able to affect people directly. It can contaminate animals, even dead bodies, but it can't affect living people.

MALE VOICE, IDENTIFIED AS NEIL BRISCOE: Well, no one's seen an actual person affected.

LYDECKER: I have. This afternoon.

COMMOTION AND RAISED VOICES FOR SEVERAL SECONDS

BRISCOE: Who? Where? How did they act? I need details!

LYDECKER: Please.... Please, everyone calm down. Okay. I was at the post office this afternoon to check my box. I was about to buy some stamps, and that's when I saw her.

JACKMAN: One of the customers?

LYDECKER: The woman working the desk. Mrs. Halverman.

FURTHER COMMOTION

MALE VOICE, IDENTIFIED AS DANIEL OLSEN: That's impossible. I've known Trish Halverman for over twenty years! I had lunch with her last week, for Pete's sake! She's not like those things—

LYDECKER: No, she's not. She's smarter, and she hides what she is. No one else could see it. Just me. She had spiders running around on her! Shit, I can't even describe it!

OLSEN: I can't believe this.

LYDECKER: Look, Mr. Olsen, I'm sorry. But you can't see what we can, all right? Believe me, she's not human. Maybe she was once, but not any more. You'll just have to take my word for it.

MALE VOICE, IDENTIFIED AS COLE SIMPSON: Don't talk to him like that. Show some damn respect—

HARMON: Sit down, Cole. Don't be a fool. None of us can see the way Brian can. He's the one who goes out at night, putting himself in danger. Not you. Not me. If he says Trish is... one of them, I believe him. I don't want to — I've known her just as long as Dan has — but I know the truth when I hear it.

LYDECKER: Thanks, George.

FEMALE VOICE, IDENTIFIED AS ANGELA FIELDING: So the old lady's a freak. What do we do?

MALE VOICE, IDENTIFIED AS SAM O'CONNOR: That attitude isn't helpful, Angie.

LYDECKER: Come on, now.... I think we should watch her for a while. Find out what she's doing. What she can do. Stuff like that. Maybe next week we can decide what to do.

HARMON: Sorry, Brian, but I can't agree to that. We're not talking about a... thing. This is someone I know. I want to find out what's going on now, tonight — not a week from now. We have to go to Trish's house right now.

BRISCOE: Without solid data? That's just stupid!

LYDECKER: Yeah, I agree. You're right, George, this is something different, and that's exactly why we need a good plan before we do anything.

FIELDING: We don't need a plan. We know what we're doing now. Mr. Briscoe paralyzes the thing, the rest of us beat it to death. I mean, where's the flaw in that plan?

LYDECKER: You're not thinking this through!

*****COMMOTION FOR SEVERAL SECONDS. DIFFICULT TO MAKE OUT INDIVIDUAL VOICES*****

JACKMAN: Are you all finished? Can we talk about this like adults for a minute? Just hear Brian out before people starting flying off the handle.

LYDECKER: Thanks, Yvonne. Look, there's a very big difference between Mrs. Halverman and the other things we've seen. They've all been unintelligent — animals, zombies, creatures. They're smart enough to hide, but that's about it. Mrs. Halverman isn't mindless — she seems completely normal. She hides out in the open. Mr. Olsen, you had lunch with her last week. Did she seem different to you at all?

OLSEN: <PAUSE> No, she didn't. Same old Trish.

SIMPSON: So, whatever she is, she can disguise it. It doesn't matter if we know the truth—

LYDECKER: It's not about how well she can hide, okay? She can think. She — it — seems like a normal person with a mind and maybe even feelings. But if she's cooperating with the things in the mine, she's one of them.

FIELDING: So?

BRISCOE: I see where Brian's going with this. We've always assumed that this... phenomenon is essentially mindless. Malevolent, certainly, but basically something undirected, accidental. A force of nature. But if it can corrupt a human being, and that person willingly stays corrupted — that means there's an intelligence behind it all. Something is controlling the things and is acting deliberately.

LYDECKER: Exactly! If she was just a creature, we could jump in. But she may mean that we're facing something... something that can affect living, thinking people and make them work willingly for it.

OLSEN: We don't know that she's willing.

LYDECKER: Then why does she hide the truth? Why is she still running the post office, still pretending to be normal?

O'CONNOR: Maybe she doesn't know. She could still be normal inside, just infected.

LYDECKER: Maybe. But that's another reason why we need to watch her, not just confront her. Maybe she isn't the only one, either. If one person is different, there might be others. We need to watch who she contacts, who she works with—

HARMON: No. I don't disagree with anything you've said, Brian, but it doesn't change how I feel. I need to know right now if someone I call a friend is a monster. I need to find out what happened to her before it happens to any more of my friends — any of us. I'm going to her house tonight, and that's that.

LYDECKER: But you can't!

HARMON: I'm going.

SIMPSON: So am I!

OLSEN: Me too.

LYDECKER: But—

FIELDING: I'm with you guys. Let's go!

LYDECKER: It's a bad idea!

HARMON: Maybe so, but it has to be done.

*****FURTHER ARGUMENT. DIFFICULT TO MAKE OUT INDIVIDUAL VOICES*****

OLSEN: Listen. You can't stop us from going over there. Just settle down and come with us. We'll go with or without you — but if you come with us, there'll be strength in numbers.

YVONNE: I think he's right, Brian. I don't like the idea of them just bursting in and starting a fight — but if Neil's there, maybe he can paralyze the creature. Then you can ask questions and get the information you need from the horse's mouth.

LYDECKER: It's still a bad idea.

HARMON: Maybe so, but it's happening anyway. We could use your help, son.

*****PAUSE*****

LYDECKER: Okay, okay. Just hold on a minute and let's figure out a quick plan, all right?

HARMON: Okay....

LYDECKER: Just give me a second. I've got to piss.

*****RECORDING BREAK*****

I just burned everything. My screenplays, my stories, my notes — all of it. My old life is gone. There's no going back, even if I wanted to. Before now, we were just fighting things. Animals.

Tonight we killed a person. Or at least, something that used to be a person.

*****PAUSE. TAKES A DRINK?*****

All of us went straight from the meeting — the shouting match was more like it — out to Halverman's house. Luckily, she lived on the edge of town. She has — had — neighbors, but their houses were still pretty far away.

Olsen went and knocked while the rest of us waited in our cars. Since he was a friend, she wouldn't suspect anything if he came over to talk about his campaign for mayor. They talked for a while, then he went inside. We waited about a minute, then got into position — some at the front, some at the back. Someone got it started, and then we all rushed in.



She was fast — really fast. She reacted instantly. She tried to run out the door, but Olsen tackled her. That's when she... well, she changed. Or maybe we just saw the truth — I know I'd polished my glasses before we went in. God, I still can't think about how she really looked — like a bag of skin stuffed full of spiders.

She kicked Olsen away, spit this sort of webbing over Simpson and Sam, and tried to burst past them out the back. But Briscoe wheeled himself into the room and froze her in place just by staring at her. Freakiest goddamn thing, how he does that. No matter how many times we use these abilities, I never get used to them. They always scare the shit out of me. What else can we do that we don't know about?

Anyway, Halverman was stuck, but she was hissing and screeching, trying to break free. I sure as fuck couldn't talk to her. But Yvonne came forward. I gotta give her credit. She looked scared as hell, but she didn't back down. She started talking to Halverman, asking questions — and it worked! Something about Yvonne's voice, her attitude — it soothes the monsters sometimes.

I wonder if she knows how I feel about her.

PAUSE

When Halverman was calmed down she seemed more... human. Not fully human — she was still a thing — but she was crying, and only people cry, right? She answered our questions then. I think she wanted to answer them — like the secrets had been a burden for a long time. Yvonne did most of the talking, along with Olsen — but he couldn't look at her. He had to look away. The rest of us just watched. Briscoe never took his eyes off her.

Whatever's going on here, it's been going on for at least five or six years. That's when Halverman was... changed. Before that she was human. But one night she was kidnapped and taken to the mine, and something was put inside her. Something that made her like a spider, a monster. It wasn't just a physical change, either. She said it got into her mind — that it made her enjoy what she had become. Sometimes she could fight it, but never for long.

They — whatever they are — took her so that they'd have some control over the town's mail. She said she's not the only one. There are changed people all over. In the school, the city council, the fire department. Maybe dozens of them.

They're not the only ones who were taken, either. Kids run away from Clarion all the time. The town's notorious for it. But some of them aren't runaways. Some... Jesus... some are taken to the mine. Not to be controlled. To be... food.

She said she was sorry. Sorry for not being strong enough to kill herself after it hap-

pened. Sorry for helping them poison the coal...the town. That's what they want — to poison things. To taint everything, living or dead. To turn the whole place to shit.

We were all pretty shaken. Learning the sheer scale, the evil of what was going on. I think Briscoe got distracted for a moment — because suddenly, Halverman went from crying and talking to slamming into Simpson, her fingernails like claws. His blood was everywhere. Then Briscoe froze her again. And we... we beat her to death.

It was mostly Angie and George doing the beating, but almost all of us got involved — everyone but Yvonne. Hell, even Sam got some licks in. Me... yeah, I hit her. And I'd do it again. Shit, I think she wanted to die.

I think.

After it was over, Olsen said we had to make it look like an accident. Murders don't happen in Clarion. So we tipped a big, heavy cupboard onto her to make it look like she'd been crushed. Then we turned on the gas stove and set fire to the couch.

We all got out real fast. Sam and Olsen took Simpson to the hospital. They said they'd work out a way of explaining his injury. The rest of us drove off in different directions.

I dropped Angie off near her house. We didn't say a word.

PAUSE

It's only been a few weeks. That's the strangest fucking part. This all started when I worked late one night. Now we've killed someone, and we're going to try to fight some kind of evil thing that's controlling the town.

That has to be the next step. For some reason, it's very clear to me. We can't just run around without a plan any more. There's something big and powerful behind all this, and we have to stop it. We're the ones who were chosen.

I wish I'd had the chance to ask Halverman about the voices, the symbols, us. Maybe she would have known something.

Working piecemeal, attacking one of the tainted things here and there, that's nothing. It's worse than useless, like... like trying to stop a forest fire with a fire extinguisher. We have to get it together and go to the source. Whether that means blowing up Shaft Four or learning who's behind it all.

We have to save Clarion. Just us.

PAUSE

But we don't know if we can trust each other. Sure, we're not tainted... yet. But Yvonne and Sam obviously aren't as bloodthirsty as Angie or Simpson. Hell, I'm not as fired-up as those two. But I know that something has to be done — and it's going to take all of us to do it.

There's too much tension right now. We could disintegrate at a moment's notice. The way we yelled at each other in that meeting... I let them pressure me into going through with that tonight. Into acting rashly, into... murder. No, not murder, but... ah, whatever you want to call it. I lost control of them and I can't let that happen again. Not when the stakes are this high, not when we have this goal.

Whatever it takes, I have to keep them together.

END OF TAPE

THE BOOK OF THE FOURFOLD TRUTH

BOOK OF CHRONICLES, CHAPTER 1

Heed well these words, for they can be your salvation as they were mine, as they were the salvation of the BLESSED PROPHET, as they can be for all humanity. I am Mila Delmonico, and this is my testament of how I was saved and saved others.

18,

Here's something alarming that you might want to pass on to Warden. We've got a refugee from this "Fourfold Truth" cult here in Athens, and when he's well enough we're going to try to move him on to Rome or Naples or even Valencia. There's already been one attempt on his life, probably because he stole part of their holy books. They aren't complete. There are at least three sections to their "holy scripture," and what we've got jumps around a lot. There's "Chronicles," covering their history. There's "Doctrine," which explicitly states what they believe and how they operate. Unfortunately, the second and third chapters of Doctrine are missing — I'm guessing one is some kind of primer for how they treat their members. Chapter 4 assumes the reader knows what a "purification session" is and what "education labors" are. There's also a book of "Secrets," which — as you might expect — is the really scary shit.

I've started to get reports of Fourfold Truth evangelists from other Greek friends. They're mostly visible in airports during the day, wearing robes with embroidered symbols — ours — but the emblems aren't genuine, if you know what I mean. They weren't sewn by one of us. Which means these guys may have something like a dictionary of the code somewhere. God help us if that falls into the wrong hands.

One more thing — our refugee's been pretty delirious all week, but he keeps muttering about "the doctor." You have any idea what that might mean?

C.

Once, like you, I walked in darkness and ignorance. I was shallow and foolish and a sybarite, and even though my search for pleasure had left me empty and hollow, I continued my fruitless pursuit because it was all I knew and because I could imagine nothing greater. I sought no TRUTH because I could not imagine that TRUTH existed.

Even the GREAT FOURFOLD PROPHET, even the GREAT LIVING FLAME, was ignorant and sinful. She was not as she is now. She was no fount of holy wisdom. She was no pillar of strength and purpose. No, she was a common criminal, a doer of dark deeds, a pawn — unknowing but effective — of the GREAT CORRUPTIONS.

The veil was cast aside on the first day of Year One — the day that the PANTHEON returned to humanity. The day we struck back.

I had come to Istanbul by train, backpacking, looking for a place with sun and sand and exoticism. A place where I could stretch my lire and live well on little money. THE PROPHET — who went by the name “Jennifer Vidisania” — had come to the same blessed city (which at that time had no blessing, had none of us, and was as darkened by THE CORRUPT as the rest of the stained Earth). She came for worse reasons. She came to steal and to betray and to defraud and to direct her minions in their deceptions and treacheries and thefts.

Behold, how great is the wisdom and mercy of the FOURFOLD PANTHEON! In their goodness, they stooped to raise up the lowliest, the most mean and desperate and polluted of humanity! They raised her up and showed her the TRUTH. They blasted away her sins in a blaze of their righteousness, making her the greatest of their servants!

And I — most blessed among women, save for THE FOURFOLD PROPHET herself — I was present for it, for the turning point of human history. I, most unworthy, most useless, selfish, blind, insignificant — I was there and felt too the touch of the PANTHEON when the great evil was revealed.

It was night and I had gone to “2019” — at that time, merely a dance club recommended by the guidebooks. Before the night was over, it would be transformed into one of the holiest sites of THE FOURFOLD TRUTH. It was there that the veil was lifted from our eyes and we saw reality for the very first time.

I had gone to dance and drink and paint myself with the aimless pollution of my life. THE LIVING FLAME was there in pursuit of Georgette DuPage. Even then, THE BLESSED PROPHET was planning to found a church — but only a church of lies and thievery. She had no inkling that she would reveal to the world the only TRUTH it had known in six thousand years.

Georgette was rich, and greed for her money drew the CORRUPT to her — not only the then-impure

PROPHET, but also a vile creature that seemed to walk with the legs of a man, while in truth it slithered on its belly like a worm, leaving behind a trail of vice and degradation. This creature went by the name “Cobra Juan,” and it sought Georgette for the same reason as THE PROPHET — it lusted after her wealth. But unlike THE LIVING FLAME, the inhuman creature had a further agenda: It longed to slake its vile bloodlust on Georgette’s flesh and very soul.

When the miracle occurred — when Heaven touched Earth — I was wrapped in my own selfish thoughts, wasting myself on the dance floor, abandoning myself to vanity as I sought to draw the eyes of all men present. But it was my eyes that were drawn. As if the finger of a GOD pointed to the dim corner where Cobra Juan worked his sick wiles. I was unable to look away as his eyes flared golden and his forked tongue wound down her throat and between her breasts. Did no one else see? But how could they, blinded by apathy and egotism — just as I had been, as THE PROPHET had been, as Angus McCrae had been — until we three, we holy few, we the blessed trinity, were shown the truth.

“CORRUPTION FEEDS ITS LUST.” The words stung my ears, resounding with implacable command. I fought my way through the sweaty mass of bodies toward the beast and its victim. But before me, and greater than I, came THE PROPHET. I could see her wreathed in the white flame of heaven as she shouted at the creature and drew a gun.

When she fired, the grunts and sighs of forced passion became screams. Most of the patrons ran for the doors, crushing one another in their heedless flight from the gunshot — and who knows? Perhaps flight from the TRUTH as well — flight from the PANTHEON that would reveal what lies they lived. Some of the men in the club drew weapons of their own, but in the chaos and noise they were unable to see where the first shot had originated.

I saw, however. I saw as Cobra Juan — shot, injured but barely slowed — spun to face his attacker, and with the speed of a striking serpent, knocked the weapon from her hand. So great was the force of his blow that THE BLESSED PROPHET was flung backward, crashing into a table.

Then came Angus McCrae, blessed be his name. Up to that moment, a clubgoer like me — drugged, drunk, trying to convince himself that artificial passion was the point of life. After that moment, he was the second of THE CHOSEN. Suffused with the power of the BLACK GOD — with the willingness to accept death rather than face unrighteousness — he flung himself on the monster, matching the swiftness of sin with the might of heaven.

Being but newborn in the BLACK GOD’S power, Angus could not overcome the beast himself, but as

Cobra Juan struggled to fling him aside, THE LIVING FLAME rose once more and the glory of the WHITE GODDESS was upon her as she seized a chair as a weapon. But, like Angus, she was not yet fully adapted to her holy role. The monster was quicker, flitting onto her like a shadow, great fangs poised to strike at her neck, when I felt my own power move within me.

As the crowd cleared, I had rushed to the scene, thinking to pull Georgette away from the battle. Indeed, I had my hands on her shoulders when I felt the GREEN GODDESS call out with my throat, and with a word the beast was cowed. It was a pause of but a moment, but it was sufficient. THE BLESSED PROPHET struck him with a mighty blow, the white fire of a GODDESS coursing through her, power sufficient to shatter the chair upon the cowering back of the loathsome creature.

Cobra Juan cringed, humbled by the glory of the WHITE GODDESS and her CHOSEN PROPHET, but even in his defeat he had one last cowardly trick. Though we did not understand it at the time, we now know he used an inversion of the holy white energy — the flame of action and courage. His corruption of it was a black miasma of concealment, seeping out like fog to hide his form from our sight.

I was weak and afraid, and to me he seemed to fade into shadow.

Angus, too, was baffled by the creature's unholy concealment.

But no trick could hide it from the sight of THE PROPHET. Casting aside the weapon she'd destroyed, she seized another. With her new and sacred strength, she struck the creature and bathed its dark designs in the inexorable fire of TRUTH. The fog around it blew clear, and before our astonished eyes, the thing known as Cobra Juan crumbled into tarry ash.

BOOK OF CHRONICLES, CHAPTER 2

As we stood, jaws gaping, struggling to understand what we had seen, THE PROPHET spoke the first words I had ever heard from her lips.

"We've got to get out of here."

A simple statement on its surface, but — like all she does and says — it contains a deeper meaning. This was her FIRST LESSON: That we must not waste time contemplating mysteries when there is physical peril at hand.

Under her guidance, we disposed of her pistol and played the part of confused and frightened clubgoers when the police arrived. Injuries were easily explained — Angus and THE PROPHET said they were injured in the panic. When asked if we'd seen who fired the gun, Angus, Georgette and I said we did not know, but THE BLESSED PROPHET described Cobra Juan.

At the time, I thought she was terribly clever to send the police after a well-known man who could

never be found. And at the mortal level, she was being very clever. But another wisdom acted through her as well, as I was to learn.

The police took us to the station house to hear our statements, frowning all the while at what they took to be a motley collection of Eurotrash sensation seekers. Up until an hour earlier, that assessment would have been perfectly accurate. How were they to know they were in the presence of four saints — three picked to be the first new acolytes of the PANTHEON, and one selected to be the first witness to our power, the first one to be saved by our hands?

THE PROPHET was waiting for us as we left the police station, and when the four of us were gathered together — even though it was nearing dawn — she insisted forcefully that we discuss and understand what we had seen and done. She also had a question for us: *"Didn't something seem odd about that police inspector?"*

Here, she taught us her SECOND LESSON: That one must never be distracted by the ordinary and ignore CORRUPTION.

At her insistence, we went to her home — the apartment now revered in secret as THE TEMPLE OF THE FIRST WORSHIP. She made us coffee and we tried to understand what had happened.

It became clear that the CORRUPT influence on Georgette had not faded with the creature's death. Ignorant of the PANTHEON's power, Georgette had convinced herself that Juan had simply tried to molest her, and that he fled when THE FOURFOLD PROPHET shot him. She was so convinced that had I not seen the WHITE GODDESS myself, had I not felt her power, I would have believed her rather than THE LIVING FLAME's story of serpentine monsters. But while I was weak and wanted the comfort of lies, only the truth would satisfy THE PROPHET.

She demanded that Georgette explain why there was no blood at the scene if Cobra Juan had been a normal man. Georgette suggested that perhaps THE PROPHET's gunshot had missed. Then THE PROPHET asked how — if Cobra Juan had fled unharmed — she and Angus had come to be injured. The Frenchwoman said it had been in the panic after the gunshots. But then — asked THE BLESSED PROPHET — how could the ruined chairs be explained?

To that, Georgette had no answer. No answer but her tears, for she was confused, and afraid, and the wiles of the CORRUPT had left their marks of pain on her mind.

THE PROPHET comforted her with kind words and understanding, as did I. We were all so tired that we became quite over-emotional, and there were tears from all of us but Angus. He was so exhausted that he could only sit and stare.

Then THE LIVING FLAME suggested that we smoke some marijuana to calm ourselves. At the time we had

no idea what would happen, but as the sweet, sacred vapor hit our lungs we all felt the warm embrace of the GREEN GODDESS. A sense of calm and camaraderie fell upon us, and we all fell asleep.

All except THE PROPHET.

BOOK OF CHRONICLES, CHAPTER 3

When we awoke in the morning, only the testament of our injuries seemed to confirm the truth of the previous night's events. That, of course, and our presence within THE TEMPLE OF THE FIRST WORSHIP. Alone and unguided, we might have fallen into Georgette's error and let the training of CORRUPT society pull the gentle wool of forgetfulness over our eyes.

But THE PROPHET was there to save us from error, blessed be her eyes! As she made us breakfast, she explained that during the previous night, the answer had come to her — not in a dream, but in a revelation from above.

"I have had a vision of what we fought, and it was not human. It was a judgment on us all. Our own bloodiness, amplified and thrown back in our faces... it was... the walking figure of violence. And it was... is... not alone."

While we, weak and afraid, had slept, she had remained awake and prayed — prayed fiercely to those shapes and voices that had shown us the truth of Cobra Juan. For her faith, she was rewarded with an answer.

"We have been blessed by the old GODS — we are being given sight to see the CORRUPTION in our midst, and the strength to root it out. With us as their leaders, all of humanity can come to see the ABOMINATIONS that move, unseen, among them. See them — and destroy them!"

"Do you really think there are... more things like him out there?" This question came from Georgette, but such fearful talk could have come from my own lips as well.

"I have no doubt. Indeed, I sensed the TAINT upon the very police officer who questioned us!"

We doubted, because we did not want to believe. But she took us to the police station and we watched. At first, we saw nothing, but when THE FOURFOLD PROPHET guided our eyes, they were opened once again, and we saw an officer whose very soul was stained.

All of us saw, save Georgette, who had not felt the caress of the PANTHEON, and no matter how we tried to awaken the SACRED SIGHT in her, we could not do so.

"Perhaps this, too, is the doing of our AWAKENERS," said THE LIVING FLAME — for the identities of the FOUR GODS had not yet been revealed to her. *"In our quest against the BEASTS, there will be many like her, who cannot see unaided and who do not want to be shown."* She turned to Georgette and said, *"You are blessed and wise for believing, even when you are not shown directly. You will be our guide. From you we will learn how to reveal the TRUTH to all!"*

In this, she taught us her THIRD LESSON: That the aim of our struggle is not solely to eradicate the BEASTS, but to educate mankind about them.

Angus asked about attacking the policeman — or the other CORRUPT officer from the previous night — but even I knew it was a bad idea. Then THE BLESSED PROPHET suggested that he was of more use to us alive than dead.

"Cobra Juan was not the only one. If there are more they may well associate. By following this one servant of evil, he may lead us to others. If he is unaware of our secret sight of him, he may lead us to many others. When we know them all, we can decide how to deal with them."

She recommended that we return to our normal lives, while keeping our eyes open for signs of TAINT. Should we succeed in spotting any ABOMINATIONS, we were to learn all about them that we could — their habits, their jobs, their names, their residences — while staying safe ourselves. At the suggestion that we split up, Georgette became upset and in her mercy THE PROPHET agreed to stay at her side. We exchanged phone numbers and went our separate ways.

I was unable to enjoy my day, however. Having seen what I had, having the TRUTH in my mind and heart, all my petty pleasures seemed hollow and false. But I need not have worried. The serious and real world held more wonders for me, and I was to see them myself that very night.

While Angus and I had struggled with the weakness of our souls, THE PROPHET struggled with the mysteries of the PANTHEON. When we met for dinner, she showed us a hand lettered sign — the first CALL, the first figure written in the SACRED SCRIPT, the first letter of HEAVEN written by human hands. Angus and I both instantly saw its meaning, and — as if recalling something we had never experienced — we were able to produce other sigils, other signs that we the CHOSEN could comprehend. Sadly, poor Georgette remained utterly ignorant of their importance, which frustrated her, but once again THE LIVING FLAME had words of comfort for her.

By the mysterious power within us — power we now know comes from the PANTHEON — we knew what the symbols meant. And yet, when a symbol was copied mechanically, its message was lost. Undeterred, we copied hundreds of handbills and then drew in the symbols by hand, calling for a meeting. Angus and I had little hope that this would bear fruit, but THE PROPHET felt that where there could be three, there could be thirty — or three hundred.

Over the next week, she was once more proved right, while Angus and I were wrong again. Three more CHOSEN called the number on the posters, three more blessed by heaven presented themselves to THE PROPHET. These three worthies were:

Adil Soylu, a carpet merchant, had been visiting Topkapi palace with a European friend when they were set upon by something malevolent and unseen. The spirit raged at all who visited, striking them with invisible fists that raised bruises. None of them could see their attacker — until Adil, like me, heard a voice from the PANTHEON. It told him that the creature could not leave *Kafes* (the section of the Palace known as “The Cage”) and that they would be safe once they fled that area. After that, he could see the phantom of an enraged man in costly robes, sweeping through the room on black wings. While his blows passed through the spirit without harm, he was able to fix it in place with a blessing while he and the others fled to safety.

Cahir Özbayoglu, like THE PROPHET herself, had felt the touch of the White Goddess. A beggar, he had seen a group of tourists set upon by mindless walking corpses as they emerged from the Archeology Museum into Gulhane Parki. Seizing his begging bowl, he struck one of the dead things and battered it into stillness. Some of the tourists also seemed to fight back against the ABOMINATIONS, but of those who struggled, only Cahir survived. Bitterly, he told how those whom he had saved fled from him, not pausing even to look at his wounds.

Fadime Kubal, a woman who worked with her husband in the Misir Carsisi bazaar selling cigarettes, had the saddest story of all. Like Cahir, she had seen the walking dead. Unlike him, she saw her husband and young son die by their hand. She tried to protect them, and with holy blessings was able to hold them back — but not long enough. When her son tried to escape past them, fleeing his mother’s protection, he was overtaken and killed. Her husband, overcome with anger, tried to kill the ABOMINATIONS with his pistol and, when that failed, his bare hands. He was no more effective.

We seven met and talked long into the night, discussing the BEASTS we had seen and their differences.

The being seen by Adil seemed most like a SPIRIT, as described by stories and mythology. Its invisibility, ability to move through the air, and antique appearance (when it could be seen at all) seemed to indicate it was some relic of the past.

As for the walking dead seen by Cahir and the sad Fadime, neither of them had any idea what they were. Adil said he had heard old stories of the risen dead wandering the hills of the Göreme Valley and skulking around the pillars called “fairy chimneys” near Ürgüp, but nothing concrete — only tales told to children. Cahir and Fadime were sure that these ABOMINATIONS could never pass for human — not like Cobra Juan. Also unlike him, they did not speak or seem to plan.

Cobra Juan seemed to be a different (and more dangerous) type of being altogether — physical, but capable of becoming unseen. Unlike the Topkapi

CREATURE, Cobra Juan could move about the city freely — but was, at the same time, vulnerable to physical attacks. With a shudder, Georgette said she had a hazy memory of something touching her... of a sting that was painful, but also full of CORRUPT pleasure. I told them what I had heard, and we agreed that whatever Juan was, it somehow drew its strength from people. Perhaps a *ghul* or vampire of legend, perhaps a spirit that had possessed a body, or perhaps even a more powerful version of the shambling things that had killed so many in the Kubal family.

THE BLESSED PROPHET shared her wisdom with us — and, humbly, the shames of her past.

“I have moved in unclean circles and I have dealt with evil men. I may, in the past, have encountered these things unaware. I have heard stories. I heard of a band of mercenaries strong and fierce enough to overcome any resistance — as long as they could attack at night. I have heard of corpse-eaters among Kurdish terrorists. I have heard of the Black Temple Triad, whose members are ruthlessly fierce against their enemies — but at the price of serving something CORRUPT in a desecrated Buddhist temple. I believe there are enemies of all humanity, and that we have been CHOSEN to battle them. I hereby swear to forsake all my evil ways and dedicate myself to their destruction. Will you swear with me?”

One by one, we took the oath.

Beyond that great decision, we made lesser choices that night.

First, we decided that we should go to the *Kafes* in Topkapi and see if the CREATURE was still there.

Second, that we should continue to carefully follow the two unnatural policemen and see if they led us to more of their kind.

The BEASTS that had so cruelly attacked the Kubals, however, were our most urgent goal.

With that settled, we agreed to meet at the ruined Kubal stall in the bazaar the next day after the first call to prayer. In her kindness, THE BLESSED PROPHET also offered her home to Fadime and Cahir.

BOOK OF CHRONICLES, CHAPTER 4

THE PROPHET had yet more surprises in store when we met her at the Misir Carsisi — a full *chador* (a women’s garment that covers everything but the eyes) for me, to match those already worn by THE FOURFOLD PROPHET, Georgette and Fadime. She explained that wearing these would make us much harder to recognize, should the police be summoned by reports of violence.

In this, she taught the FOURTH LESSON: That even when dealing with a supernatural threat, one must keep one eye on ordinary dangers.

I — in my unworthy weakness — asked if she thought violence was likely. That was when she handed me a pistol.

"If we can reason with these creatures, we will. But if they are as violent and mindless as Fadime says, we must be prepared to meet them with violence — and mindfulness."

I admitted that I had never fired or even held a gun before. THE LIVING FLAME gently explained to me how I could take the safety off and chamber a round.

"If you are inexperienced, it is best to push the barrel right up against your target before you pull the trigger," she said.

Then we set out through the bazaar.

It didn't take long for Fadime to lead us to the wreckage of her family tobacco stall. The entire area was a shambles, and roped off. The people nearby had conflicting stories. A gunfight between police and Kurd terrorists. A drug buy gone awry. A madman with a scimitar. What no one said was THE TRUTH.

The CREATURES' trail of carnage was not hard to see. They had entered at the westernmost corner of the bazaar, destroyed a half-dozen stalls (killing several people and wounding others in the process) and then left heading south, toward Cagaloglu.

At first, we were baffled. How could these stumbling, mindless BEASTS vanish in the middle of a bustling city? How could no one know where they were?

We wasted much time asking people, getting more and different delusions for our trouble. We only found them when Cahir pointed out an area of small, twisting streets where no one seemed to go.

It was not that the mindless ABOMINATIONS had hidden themselves. It was that the people of the area either ran and hid from them or were killed. In that strangely quiet knot of narrow, winding streets we smelled them before we saw them.

The building was not exceptional. An ordinary storefront, dark and closed up. But when we peeked within, when we looked through the gap between the blinds and the wall, we saw what had happened to many of the people of the neighborhood. We saw why it was so quiet.

The sight of the ABOMINATIONS feasting on dead human flesh was nauseating, but THE PROPHET focused us with her whispered words. We would array ourselves at the door and window and, at her signal, open both and shoot, taking the creatures by surprise. With more than double their number, we hoped to destroy the cannibals before they knew what was happening.

From beneath her *chador*, she produced a shotgun. We took our places and prepared ourselves.

With a powerful blow from her body, THE PROPHET smashed open the wooden door. I was with Cahir, Georgette and Fadime by the window, and when THE PROPHET struck, I fired through the window, then reached through the large, jagged hole to tear down the blinds within. Fadime and Cahir both fired, their noisy blasts seeming to come at the same moment. When the light



fell upon those UNCLEAN within, Georgette began to scream. Dropping her gun, she crouched beneath the windowsill, huddled in a ball.

All three CORRUPT stood and began shambling forward, but Fadime was filled with the spirit of the GREEN GODDESS. She demanded that they stay back, and two of them stopped — pushing forward against her HOLY WILL, but unable to overcome her. The third was strong enough to approach, even as we saw bullets slam into it from the doorway. THE PROPHET's shotgun blast had caught it in the midsection, leaving a gouge in its side, but still it lunged forward and raked her face and neck with its filthy nails.

Cahir cursed, slapping his gun and trying to pull the trigger again and again, but nothing happened. With an oath, he used its metal nose to clear more broken glass out of the window, then started to haul himself inside. I tried to hold him back, but his courage was too great and he pulled away from me. Then I was struck with a gout of blood as THE LIVING FLAME pushed her weapon into the MONSTER's chest and fired into it.

The two within were unable to approach, but Cahir rushed them, even as THE BLESSED PROPHET cried out for him to stop. I saw one lunge at him, and again the GREEN GODDESS spoke through my voice, stunning the creature and saving Cahir from its jagged teeth.

Cahir swung his jammed gun at it and missed, but I could see and feel the HOLY FIRE flowing through him into it. I pulled Fadime down to the ground just before the bullets within his weapon exploded.

When I looked in the window again, all three of them were badly hurt, but only Cahir seemed to feel his wounds. The Corrupt were upon him, tearing and biting.

"Stay back!" cried THE PROPHET. "Fire upon them from here!"

We obeyed, all of us who could. We did not stop until our guns were empty. The room was filled with a choking haze of gun smoke, but nothing moved inside.

"Wipe the guns and leave them here!" THE PROPHET demanded, demonstrating with her own weapon. "Then run! Split up! If anyone stops you, tell them it's the PKK!"

We obeyed as best we could. I had to lead Georgette by the hand, and — unworthy — I resented having her hold me back. But she repaid my unkindness with wisdom, pointing out the spatters of blood on my chador and encouraging me to turn it inside out. In this fashion, we reached the Misir Carsisi without incident.

Only THE PROPHET was stopped by the police, and seeing her injuries they took her immediately to the hospital. In her cunning, THE PROPHET slipped away after being disinfected and bandaged, but before anyone had asked for her papers.

The day was August 9, Year One. That is the day we remember SAINT CAHIR — the first of our number to die for the cause. Blessed be his name.

BOOK OF CHRONICLES, CHAPTER 5

We were all saddened and disturbed by the death of Saint Cahir. Some of us — certainly myself, and I think Angus as well — were disturbed that even with superior numbers and the protection of the PANTHEON, we were unable to secure a complete victory.

THE BLESSED PROPHET, of course, saw deeper. Her sorrow and regret was greater because Saint Cahir's death could have been avoided. She made us all swear to depend on one another, not to foolishly let our natural anger at CORRUPTION lead us to squander our lives.

She then proposed that the cure for our depression was more action. She suggested that the next day, three of us should make an attempt to follow the POLLUTED police officers, while others should visit Topkapi and see if the CREATURE there was still active.

None of us agreed. In our foolish weakness, each one of us defied THE FOURFOLD PROPHET.

Georgette complained that without the HOLY POWERS the rest of us held, she would be of no use.

Adil said he had to get back to his job, and that the death of Cahir had, in any case, left him too shaken to act effectively.

Fadime, too, said that she needed to see to her ruined business — not to mention tending to the funerary needs of her husband and child.

Angus showed the brutal, hand-shaped bruises on his arms from his fight with Cobra Juan and asked if he could not be excused from heroism "for one day."

And I — weakest of all — simply said that I could take no more. I had seen too much, I thought.

For a moment, THE LIVING FLAME was silent. Then she turned to Fadime.

"You would bury your dead at the price of letting others die? For those IMPURE that remain will have their victims as surely as did those we slew. If we six had paused for funerals today, would your son be avenged?"

Then she turned to Georgette.

"Because you lack our powers, you think there is nothing that can be done? If you, who have seen the EVIL that walks this world firsthand, say so... then what hope can there be? For we are but five. Five against the DARKNESS... unless those like you can find their courage to act. You and yours are the key, Georgette. It is people like you who can change us from five to an army."

Her next words were for Adil.

"You wish to return to your old life — selling carpets, gathering money, idling your time away in a café smoking and chatting? You have slain the dead. You have seen the UNSEEN. Do you really think you can return? Easier to put an infant back in the womb. Easier to put a sound back in a bell as it rings."

She turned to Angus then.

"You have taken wounds for the cause, and for that you are to be commended. But every day you rest is a day someone else dies. I cannot force you to aid us. But knowing what you know, I pray you will reconsider your choice."

I earned her final glare. But for me, she had no words. She simply shook her head, sorrow written plainly on her holy visage.

"I go now. I'm setting out to continue our mission. Any who wish to join me are more than welcome, but if I must, I go alone."

All of us found the strength to go with her.

BOOK OF CHRONICLES, CHAPTER 6

It was decided that the wounded — Angus and THE PROPHET — would try to find and follow the police officers. Georgette would join them, since she could see and pursue public targets as well as any.

The rest of us — Adil, Fadime and myself — would return to the Topkapi Kafes in search of the CORRUPT.

By the end of the day, all of us had discoveries to report.

The three who went to Topkapi saw no UNCLEAN SPIRIT, but Adil learned much that was of value.

Adil, blessed be his charming voice! At that time, my Turkish was very poor, and some native Turks were impatient with questions from a woman, even a western woman. Adil, however, was a man among men, and after an exchange of cigarettes and jovial words, he learned what the tour guides there said was "only an amusing story."

Adil (unlike myself) had already known the history of "the Cage." Kafes served as a prison (albeit a luxurious one) within the Harem for the younger brothers of sultans. (Before that, younger brothers who might challenge the throne were killed.) These honored captives were freed only when their older brothers died, allowing them to emerge and take the throne. Many who spent years in Kafes emerged sick and twisted, if not actually insane.

The most interesting part of this story was the tale of Deli Ibrahim ("Ibrahim the Mad"). He spent 22 years in the Cage, and when they came to free him, he was so sure he was to be executed that he had to be dragged out by force. In the course of his rule, he had all 280 of his concubines drowned in the Bosphorus over a mere hint of harem intrigue.

All of this was historically documented. A legend claims that on every full moon, Deli Ibrahim's ghost returns to the Kafes and struggles to reclaim the Cage — the only realm he ever truly controlled. Others say that on the anniversary of their murder, his drowned odalisques emerge from the Bosphorus seeking revenge. And if that day should happen to fall during the full moon... The teller of the tale shrugged his shoulders and let his voice trail off.

A quick look at a calendar showed that the day Adil had seen the CREATURE was, indeed, of a full moon.

When we met back at The TEMPLE OF THE FIRST WORSHIP, the others told us that they had made similar gains — slight, but significant, and without appreciable cost. They followed one of the police officers for close to two hours. He seemed to work on a day shift (as opposed to the officer who questioned THE PROPHET, Angus, Georgette and myself after the destruction of Cobra Juan). A CORRUPTED woman was seen talking with him before the followers lost track of him.

This, combined with our information about Deli Ibrahim, left us content that we had done our duty for the day. THE FOURFOLD PROPHET invited us to partake in her marijuana again, although this time Fadime and Georgette demurred.

After a short spell of smoking, THE LIVING FLAME began to cry.

"I'm sorry," she told us. "I'm sorry if I was mean to any of you earlier. I have no place to accuse others of laziness or selfishness or wrong action. Compared to me, you're all saints, you're all perfect."

All of us sought to comfort her.

"You are too kind, kinder than I deserve... and the AWAKENERS, whoever gave me these powers... THEY are too kind, too. I have been... evil... for so long. You, who never sank to the lowest, darkest depths... you can't imagine how good it feels to rise up into the light!"

One by one, she told each of us that she would understand completely if we left her, if we tried to go back to our old lives, or tried to forget the HORRORS we'd seen, or tried to fight CORRUPTION on our own, without associating with a woman who had been a smuggler, a confidence trickster and a seller of whores.

One by one, each of us swore to stay by her side. And to give her comfort, each of us shared shames of our own.

We talked through the night. By morning, we were closer than family. Georgette agreed to dedicate her wealth to our MISSION, saying that it was all she had to offer... other than her loyalty. Fadime said she would sell her possessions, slight as they were, and devote herself to avenging her family. Angus and I promised to abandon our homelands and stay in Turkey, doing what we could for the cause.

Only Adil said nothing.

BOOK OF CHRONICLES, CHAPTER 7

Over the next few days, each of us set out to follow the MISSION as best we could. Adil went to the library to seek out more stories of the mad Emperor Ibrahim. Angus, Fadime and I learned what we could of the two CORRUPT police — whose names were Artaç Dörtlük and Soykan Kayar. We also followed the CORRUPT woman that THE PROPHET had spotted. She was foreign, an Egyptian named Tuya Sabry.

While we did these things, Georgette and THE PROPHET went off on their own. When we asked where they had gone, Georgette said she was attending to financial matters, while THE BLESSED PROPHET was contacting some of her old acquaintances by phone and computer. THE BLESSED LIVING FLAME added that there had been another call from someone who had seen our posters, but that this individual — who would leave neither name nor information — seemed as afraid to meet us as to leave us alone. He called himself “the Mukhfi,” which Fadime said means “The Secretive” in Arabic.

Regardless of secretive strangers, we saw the fruit of her other efforts when we met once again at THE TEMPLE OF THE FIRST WORSHIP. THE PROPHET had guns for all of us.

“These are Norinoco Tokarevs,” she said, handing a pistol to each of us. They were smaller and lighter than the guns we had used against the BEASTS of Cagaloglu. “They cannot be traced to us. They are fully loaded, and there are no fingerprints on the clips or bullets. Use them only if forced to. Once you are out of danger, wipe them off and leave them behind. If you think the police are going to search you, wipe them and be rid of them.”

Uneasy as I was with carrying a weapon, I could see the wisdom of her words. Little did I know that the Tokarevs were only a small part of what she — with blessed foresight! — had acquired.

I was to see the other guns two days later.

I had returned to my youth hostel, at the encouragement of THE PROPHET, who said it might be wise for us to not concentrate ourselves in one place, in case one of us was discovered and followed by the CORRUPT, just as we had discovered and followed them. It was evening, and I was in the middle of a light supper when THE PROPHET — dressed once again in full *chador* — walked straight in to the hostel dining room and seized me by the arm.

“We must catch the sea bus to Yalova,” she said, her eyes full of urgency.

In my weakness and sloth, I hesitated. “Right now?” I asked.

She slapped me.

One of the men in the dining hall stood, but THE PROPHET glared at him and he turned pale and backed away as she pulled me to my feet and out the door.

“Should I get my... my gun?” I asked.

“No time. Besides, you’ll need more than a handgun. Get in the back and get changed.”

She climbed into the front of a van — an old yellow vehicle I had never seen before. In the back, Georgette and Fadime were already dressed in *chador*. Adil and Angus sat in back as well, looking thoughtful and afraid. As they pulled me in hurriedly, I saw why.

Sitting on the floor was a crate containing automatic weapons, alongside shotguns that were cut and

wrapped with tape. Next to them was a small box with hand grenades. “You’re to put this on,” Angus said. “If we’re searched, try to hide the weapons inside it.”

“I don’t even know how to use these!”

Angus just shrugged and went back to checking a complicated-looking video camera. It was Georgette who showed me how to change a clip and prep the weapon to fire. “If worse comes to worst, we can just reload and hand the weapons to Jennifer,” she said. She sounded like she hoped it would not come to that.

Fadime and Adil were praying — though, at that time, they had no idea who to really pray to.

When we got on the ferry to Yalova, THE PROPHET came back and explained that she had seen a vision, a vision of terrible devastation to the south of the Sea of Marmara.

“The UNBURIED,” she said. “The bodies still unfound from the great earthquake: They will walk again! I have foreseen it and we must be there!”

Adil took the wheel and drove over a concrete parking barrier in his haste to get around the line of cars coming off the ferry. At THE PROPHET’s command, he headed south into the region of small towns devastated by the past earthquake. The destruction was still clear to see in many areas.

After almost an hour of driving, THE PROPHET clutched her head and cried out. “Here! They are here! Hurry!”

As soon as we were out of the van, we heard screams — screams so high and terrified that one could not tell if the person producing them was female or male. As one, we ran forward, impelled by our dread duty.

Turning a corner, we saw more of the CORRUPT — the same sort of decayed, ravaging corpses that had killed Fadime’s family. There were other corpses on the scene — unmoving bodies whose bites and fresh blood showed that they had been living not long ago. We paused only a moment in horror, watching the corpse-things seize the people of the village and tear them open like fruit. Then THE PROPHET raised her gun and opened fire.

We all did so, but it was not enough.

The bullets, the shrapnel, the explosions — they destroyed two, maybe three of them, but the others only turned on us and shambled forward, arms and mouths open.

“Behind you!” shouted Angus — still filming as he threw a grenade. A second group of MONSTERS had flanked us, either by low cunning or simple luck. I tried to fire at them, but couldn’t make the complicated gun work, so I simply handed it to Adil and took his empty one. I focused. I concentrated everything on remembering how to slip out the empty clip, put in the new one and prepare it to fire again. When I looked up, the UNHOLY were upon us — too close for grenades and full

fire. Some held back, shuffling around a few meters away. Perhaps they were baffled by Fadime's powers. But they got close enough to strike Georgette and bruise her pretty face. Close enough to claw bloody ribbons down THE PROPHET'S arm even as her weapon barked death into their bodies. Close enough to fell Adil with a single crushing blow to his ribs.

I saw more coming still, a group of at least five stumbling down an alley toward us, and my shaking hands fumbled the pin from a grenade. I threw it, it exploded and not one of them stopped. Chunks of foul meat were blown from their legs and arms, rotted flesh hung in strips from their torn faces and bodies, but still they came, groaning and mewling with hunger and rage. An arm mostly bone struck me to the ground and I heard THE LIVING FLAME cry out in agony.

"Get back!" shouted Angus — and in his voice I heard POWER. Our UNHALLOWED attackers felt it too, and they cringed away from him. Adil invoked Allah, but it did no good. It was no false prayer, but it was the machine gun in his hands that drew a line of destruction across the reeling ABOMINATIONS. They fell, still moving, in tattered pieces.

"Jennifer!" cried Georgette. "She's hurt!"

And it was Georgette — who had no HOLY GIFT, who had no SACRED SIGHT, who heard not GOD or GODDESS — Georgette took up the mantle of leadership from our fallen Prophet. She called for Fadime and my unworthy self to pick up THE PROPHET and run back toward the van while Angus held back the CORRUPT and Adil shot those who overcame his HOLY POWER.

"Be prepared to run," she said, dropping grenades to the ground — all but one. As soon as Fadime and

I had THE BLESSED PROPHET around a strong stone corner, Georgette cried for the men to run as she did. I did not look back, but I heard the explosion and I felt the earth tremble as her grenade set off the others she had dropped.

Back at the van, Fadime and I could see that THE PROPHET was in great danger. She had suffered a terrible blow to the head, and even through the sheets of blood on her forehead, we could see that the bones there were not in the proper shape.

While we tried what little first aid we knew, the others arrived. They told us how the BEASTS had stumbled forward as they retreated, walking right over Georgette's trap.

"There are probably more," Georgette said. "Mila, you drive Jennifer to the nearest hospital. Or, better, you Adil. Where's the closest? Yalova? Orhangazi? Gemlik or Bursa?"

"Adil can shoot," Fadime said, "And I can push them back. You should go, Georgette."

"I want to stay and film," Angus said. "I want the world to see this."

"I'll go," I said. Was it cowardice that spoke through my mouth? Or simply the desire to get THE BLESSED PROPHET to safety? I suppose it doesn't matter. I drove off with her, took her to a hospital and left her there — though doing so broke my heart. I wanted to stay by her side. I wanted to hold her hand and weep, but at the same time I knew my comrades in TRUTH were battling and my place was at their side.

When I returned, the village was cleansed and there were two others with my friends, drawing the SACRED SYMBOLS in the dust of the road.



CHAPTER 2:

RISE...

Build you cities for your little ones, and folds for your sheep; and do that which hath proceeded out of your mouth.

— Numbers 32:24

LOSING THE WAY

I'm figuring you want to know about the children.

It was about three months after Helen and the Hungarians were killed. We all went our separate ways for a few weeks, with a bunch of cheap motel rooms rented by Fitz under a bunch of fake names. Fitz would check in every night around seven. We weren't supposed to make any moves on anything, not even to do any kind of surveillance. Couldn't even go down to 7-11 to get a Dr. Pepper. I stayed in, ordered in and watched bad TV and movies until we got the heads up. Every night I watched the news, looking for signs of us or any of the bad stuff we were caught up in. Nothing. It was like nobody cared or nobody knew anything to care about. It was all news about Pittsburgh, or weather bullshit or human interest stories.

Just before cabin fever really set in, Conrad called. It was the first I'd heard from him directly for a while. Everything else had gone through Fitz. Good thing, too. I was about to climb the walls in that dingy place. Conrad said he'd bought a place and we should meet him the next day at a specific address, early in the morning.

I don't know where they got the money for it, but here was our new place—a hotel. This hotel, the one I'm in now. The place that finally put us on the news. It's not

a big place. Private-owned, kind of like a bed and breakfast that got too big for itself. Would have been nice once upon a time, but it's pretty ratty now. The carpet's all torn up and frayed, and springs poke up through the mattresses. Still, crappy or not, buying up a piece of real estate just a few miles off the highway like this doesn't come cheap. I knew Fitz had to have pulled something off. The dot-com revolution doesn't buy freaking hotels.

Come morning, there we all were. Conrad, me, Fitz, Lou, Cecelia. South Carolina Jack wasn't there, and nobody really asked where he was. Rumor had it that he went to the hospital. He might've been in jail or worse. We should've asked. Someone should've asked. But there was the kid, Gavin, and the woman from Arizona and the balding therapist from California. The rest were dead. That amazes me. Most people go through life knowing a few people who've died. The people you know aren't supposed to start dying until you're in your 60s or 70s. I'm not even 40 yet.

Fitz did most of the talking at first. The jokes and sarcastic tone were gone. He was all business, like he was in some boardroom talking to a bunch of low-end suits who'd screwed up and lost the company money. He talked down to us without using the words to talk down to us. It was all in his attitude, the way his voice sounded

patronizing and disappointed. He didn't say much, really, before introducing Conrad.

You could already see that he'd changed. His eyes were bloodshot and it looked like he wasn't eating well. His muscles kind of hung under his skin. He didn't look good.

He just started talking. Almost rambling. He told us that before, we thought we were "in the light," helping clean up the town, helping carve our names into something. But he said we were wrong. Before, he said, we were just playing a game, like children putting on Daddy's ties and Mommy's make-up, pretending to be grown-ups. What happened at the other house, with Helen, with that attack, that was our "rite of passage." "Like circumcision," for Christ's sake. Trial by knife.

It was time, Conrad said, that we got serious about our work.

There were more coming. We would live here at the Come On Inn, and we would plan for our future. And this wasn't the future we were talking about before. Before, we just wanted to get out there and clean up the addicts and put down the ones who strayed too far. We were out there to help people, to help the town. Now Conrad said people didn't understand. That they never could and would label us "fanatics" for doing our "duty." He talked about people like they were slaves, like they would lock us up just as quickly as the monsters would. Maybe, he said, monsters existed because people allowed them to, and at the time — Jesus, it didn't sound totally off base. I was confused, having been stuck in a motel room and after seeing what they'd done to Helen. It was hard to make heads or tails of everything. I wanted to do right by Conrad, especially since it looked like this whole business was taking a real heavy toll on him. So I didn't speak up.

He went on to say that everybody would have a part to play, and that would be our specific job until he or Fitz told us different. If we screwed up our jobs, we'd have to pay. This wasn't a game. This was life. And in life, there were rules and laws. To break a law was to ask for consequences. Consequences we didn't want to think about.

He and Fitz went off into another room, behind the front desk. Fitz would come out, call us in one by one. Lou went in, then that artist woman from Phoenix. Then the kid, Gavin. Jon, the physical therapist, asked them what their jobs were when they came out. They said they weren't allowed to tell. Telling meant dealing with the consequences. There was that word again.

Finally, Cecilia was called. She went in and came out about fifteen minutes later. She looked at me real hard, just staring right through me. Like she was scared of me. But there was something else. Pity, maybe. Then Fitz called me in.

Conrad sat on a nightstand, looking like he'd just been through the ringer after a long night of tying one on. He was pouring aspirin into his mouth, and then

looked like I'd just caught him doing something wrong. He scowled at me and told me that he could take aspirin because he was strong and he knew what was in them. We weren't supposed to, though, because the beasts put poisons in there to control us. I didn't argue.

This is going to be hard for me to tell you. I can't tell you how much this hurts me to say, but I promised myself going into this letter that I'd give you the whole deal. Every last bit, no matter how awful it is to hear. Conrad had this theory about how our kind was special. Like angels, or maybe like people with better evolution. And that if we were to breed with one another, our children might be like us. Or even better. That's what he said. Then our war, our mission would truly begin. They were some loaded words, but I listened.

He told me that I wasn't meant for the fight, not like others like Lou. He said I wasn't built for some of the harder, meaner work. I just nodded. At that point I knew what was coming from the way Cecilia looked at me. Then he told me. We were supposed to you know. Have a child. Part of me was furious about it. I mean, I had Jim. I had you. But then there was this other part of me, this little voice that said you weren't like me, and Jim wasn't a part of this life.

How can I explain it? Whatever I say, I know I'm stabbing you in the heart. The only way I know to tell you is that some part of what Conrad was saying felt like it was a good thing to do. It was about making life. It was about creating something and saving something and making up for all the bad decisions I'd made. Save myself. Help the world.

That sounds bad. It's coming out all wrong. I can't write it like I want to. I can't explain it in a way to make you understand. I hope someday you will. But I don't expect you to.

So there was my job. On the way out, Fitz whispered to me and called me a "prize stud." He was smirking. I went out and went over to Cecilia as Fitz called another name. We didn't say anything. We just walked away together. I'm so sorry.



After two months' time, Cecilia still hadn't conceived. It was like a bad dream. We weren't making love. It was mechanical. I mean, we were just going through the motions. It was a job, a pretty strange one, I know, but it was just work. I can't stress that enough.

By that time, everyone was doing their jobs, and nobody really saw much of each other unless they were supposed to. Sure, we passed each other in the halls or in the stairway up to our rooms, but we all kept our eyes to the floor. We were told to stick to our own business, and we did. Everyone sort of operated apart from each other, like the right hand didn't know what the left was doing. We reported our "progress" to Fitz (which in our case consisted of leaving him with a bi-weekly pregnancy test, and I had to leave him samples of my own). He never said

a word good or bad about what we were doing. He just smiled in his own pain in the ass way and took the report.

At the two-month mark, we had a meeting. An evaluation, Fitz said. Conrad would be there. We hadn't seen him since we moved into the place.

The meeting was downstairs in the communal area. I hadn't been down there too often. The place was real different. The lounge and dining area were gone. There were maps all over the place with pins in them, showing places as far away as Harrisburg, Philly, even Columbus. There were pictures, too. Mostly black and white. Pictures of people in suits. Black cars with silhouettes behind windows. Someone getting out of a taxi. Another going into what looked like city hall. It didn't take much to realize that these people weren't people. They were them. If I focused hard, I could see even in the B&W shots that there wasn't color to their cheeks. And it was nighttime. I did the math. I didn't know what the end result was going to be — fire, guns, bombs — but I knew they were targets. Did they correspond with the pins in the maps? I still don't know what it all meant.

Conrad was in the center of the room, surrounded by people I had never seen before. Some had tattoos or markings on their sleeves. They were like us, I guess. They were wearing our signs. But I didn't know them. Neither did anybody else by the looks around the room. Fitz cut through those guys, talked quietly with Conrad, then came back out and cleared his throat. That's when the evaluation began.

Fitz started calling people up, and they went inside the circle. We all stood and watched as Conrad called out their successes or failures. Gavin went first. Conrad pointed us around the room to the photos on the walls and said they were the boy's doing. He'd done all right. He got to sit down. Then he brought up Jon, the therapist. Conrad rolled up his sleeve to show a wad of cotton under a bandage. Said that he'd been giving blood samples. Jon was supposed to get tests done on the blood. Jon stood there and balked, looking nervous. He held up his hands and said that while he wasn't a real doctor or anything, he snuck into the hospital and got some tests done. Conrad asked him what he'd found, and Jon just shrugged. Conrad said, "You found nothing?" Jon said no, he didn't find anything.

Then Conrad's mood changed. His face got hard, dark somehow. He started railing against Jon, saying that Jon obviously believed that we weren't any different than anybody else, that he wasn't willing to work hard enough to show how our biology proved how much "better" we were. He said Jon wasn't interested in being superior. The poor guy just crumbled. He didn't cry, but he looked like he wanted to. He started mumbling that he was just a physical therapist, not a real doctor. Conrad snapped his fingers and Fitz came over with a knife. They held Jon down (he struggled real hard) and sliced an 'X' in his forehead. Conrad said it was to mark

him, because until he learned, he was choosing to be inferior. Blood ran into his eyes.

They pushed him away. Then they called me and Cecilia.

I knew what was coming. I wasn't even smart about it. As soon as we went up, I started babbling, saying that I knew we could conceive, that it was only a matter of time and that it would work in the end. Conrad just looked sad. Not angry. He held my shoulder then, and for a minute I thought it was going to be okay, but then hands were on me and my back was to the floor and my legs were pinned hard. They pulled my shoes off. Socks, too. They cut up my feet. Pretty bad... nothing so deep that I couldn't walk again, but they slashed at the skin and there was so much blood. Jesus, it hurt. Conrad said that maybe this way I'd spend less time on my feet and more time in bed with the woman. He didn't even say her name. Just "the woman." And he didn't even look at her or punish her. That was that. Someone, I don't know who, dragged me away and propped me up in a corner. Cecilia shrank to the floor, knees to her chest. The evaluation continued.

Them cutting my feet wasn't the scariest part of it all. It got worse. I wish it ended with my punishment. Then maybe I could've held onto hope.

Conrad brought up Tasha, the artist from out West. She looked rough, like she hadn't slept. She nodded at somebody and two of the guys I hadn't seen before brought in the children. Six of them. Four boys, two girls. They couldn't have been more than seven or eight years old. Conrad said Tasha had done a good job. She said she succeeded where Cecilia and I failed. If we couldn't have children, then we'd have to see if we could change these ones. "Make them evolve," Conrad said. His eyes were wide. I'd never seen him look more frightening. Tasha got to sit down. The kids, crying and shaking, were pulled from the room. As an afterthought, Conrad added: "And if they can't evolve, we'll have to find other uses for them."

Then Lou got up with a big bundle in his arms. Conrad asked him to put it down and unfold it. There were guns inside. Ones like the army uses. Black. Automatic. There was a bayonet and a grenade, too. Lou said in his broken English that he had a lot more where that came from in a mini-van outside. Conrad applauded. So did the rest of us, though I don't know if we knew why. We followed the leader. That's all.

Conrad asked Lou to sit down, then invited the others up, the ones I hadn't seen before. That was the beginning of the end. It was bad enough that Tasha had gone out and kidnapped children. I know it was a big red flag when Lou got all those guns, however he got them. But these new guys dragged out a long pine box from the other room. Like a coffin. They kicked open the lid, and inside was this guy. We knew right away that he was wrong. As they dragged him out and dropped him on the floor I could see that he was breathing. He was alive,

not dead. He was still wrong, though. Was he one of their slaves or something else? I don't know.

What I do know is that they had already worked him over. The suit he wore was torn. It looked like they'd hacked up his legs and at the back, at his Achilles' tendon. He was missing teeth.

Turns out he was from the government. He was a senator's aide from Ohio. Conrad called him a blood-sucker. Didn't look like any bloodsucker I'd ever seen. Then Conrad went into this speech about how the government is the ultimate slave market, and we were the cattle, and how if we wanted to make any difference in the world we have to bring the fight to them. Weaken them. Whittle them down to nothing so they'd loosen their grip. And this guy got the brunt of it all. I don't know if he deserved it. Maybe he was a child molester or a baby killer or worse. But he looked real sad. Like he didn't understand what was happening. I think that maybe we all sort of looked that way. We didn't understand at all.



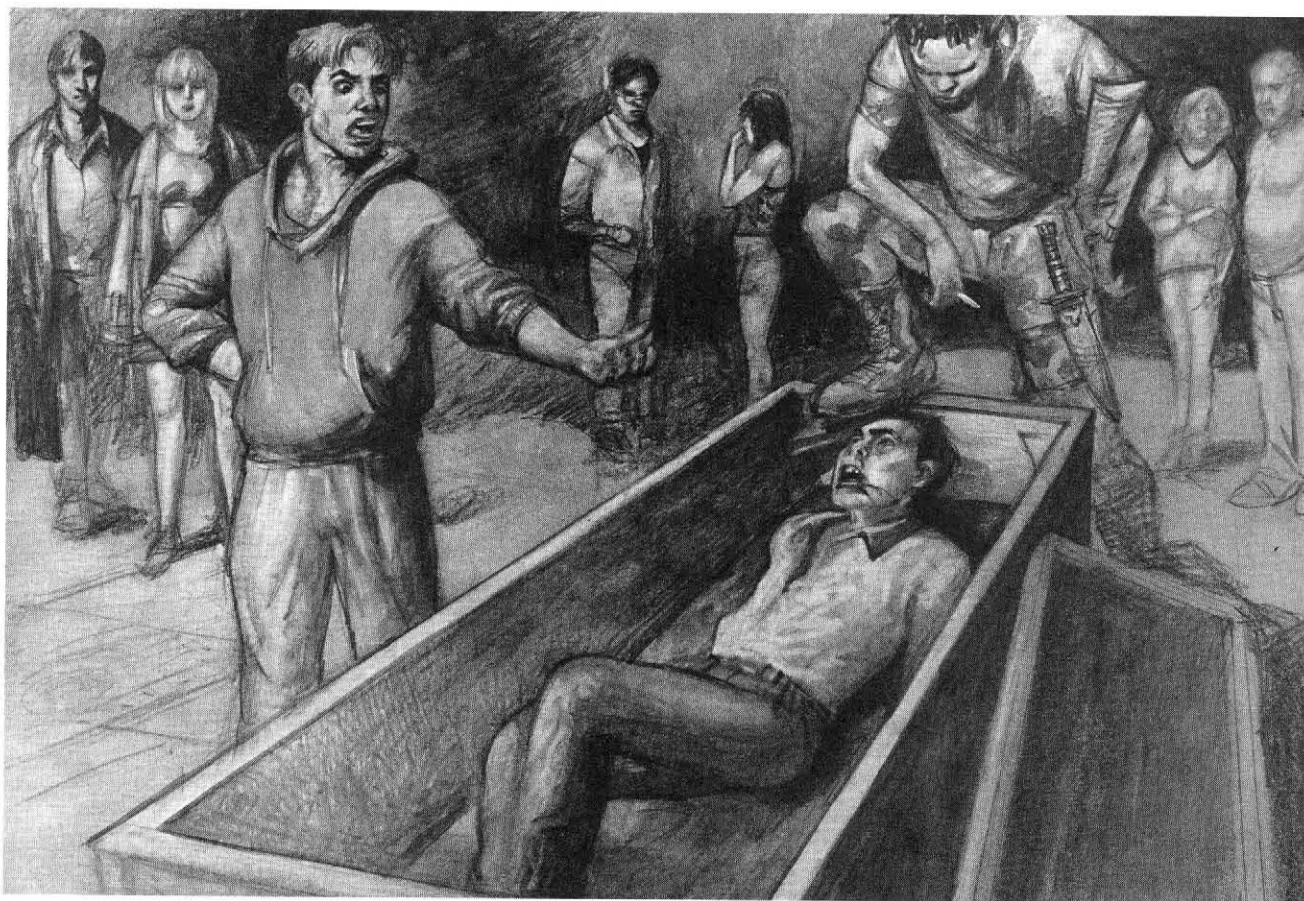
That was it. The end. The meeting was over and we all went back to our jobs. People carried me back to my room and Cecilia followed like a loyal dog, and even that night she tried to do her job. I couldn't do it. Couldn't make it happen.

It didn't matter, anyway. A few days later, the authorities were going to start crossing wires on three key cases that

had just sprung up out of nowhere. First the senator's aide. From what I hear, they left him on the doorstep of the senator's house with his hand taped over something in his mouth. When they pulled the hand away, they found out the hard way that it was attached to the pin of a grenade. Killed four policemen, and I guess fucked up a butler or something. I don't know. But they connected the dots. Missing children, missing guns, the senator's aide. I'm sure they thought we were something we weren't. Islamic militants or crazy conservative Christians or something. They had no idea what we were. But they'd find out, wouldn't they?

Did someone forget to cover up a detail? Leave some little scrap of evidence behind? Is that how they found us? Conrad thought we were playing the majors now, that we were some efficient machine. But we weren't. We were still kids playing a game. Someone got sloppy. Maybe everyone was sloppy. Who knows? What matters is that there were plenty of trails for the bloodhounds to sniff, and every trail led to us.

I knew it was going to happen. I could see the whole thing getting ready to crumble. I didn't leave, though. And no, I don't know why. Maybe my life before all this was past and gone. I'm sorry if it's hard to read that. It damn well felt that way, like I'd died and been reborn and this was the life I was made to lead, like it or not. It was the wrong feeling. I should've come home, closed my eyes and prayed for you to forgive me. They say hindsight is 20/20.



Either way, I knew the shit was going to come down. It had to. Jon saw it, too, and I had him come up to my room. Lord knows I couldn't walk anywhere right then. He was supposed to go out and take more samples to the hospital to get checked out. He took Lou's van to do it, so we made up a plan for him to get the kids out of the house that night. Which was a good thing, because of the next morning.

What you're seeing on the news is what happened. A bunch of cars and trucks and this blue SWAT van came swinging in from the highway. It was like you see in the movies, I guess. People yelling on bullhorns, snipers visible and then not. Lots of tense silence. It didn't take long for the Feds to get here. We might've had kegs of smallpox or some kind of bomb or whatever. Home-spun terrorists.

Someone here started the shooting. Not me. Maybe Lou, Tasha, Conrad's "new friends," or even Gavin. We had firepower and so did they. The place sounded like a war movie. I can still hear it, ringing in my ears. Glass breaking. People yelling. I saw Fitz stalking the halls. He didn't even look scared. Like this all proved some big theory of his. He didn't flinch. Not a worry in the world. He passed the door to my room, looked in and winked like this was all part of his plan.

I wish I knew why I did what I did. I pushed Cecilia off the bed and crawled into the hallway just as Gavin was shot. His head dropped backward and a pistol fell out of his hand. Without realizing it, I picked it up.

Fitz was walking away from me, his back turned. I shot. I missed the first time. He fell after the second one. I turned and saw Lou crouched by a window, the long barrel of his rifle sticking out through the glass. He looked confused for a second. Maybe he didn't believe he saw what I had done. I shot him, too.

I'd gone too far to stop. I crawled, hands and knees with the gun, and shot anyone who wasn't already dead. Some had been hit from outside, but the others I killed. It wasn't some kind of suicide pact. I wish I knew why it felt so goddamned right to do it. Like I was saving souls or something. I hate myself for doing it. For leaving you, for leaving Jimmy, for getting involved, for killing these people.

Cecilia came running out. She was crying and hitting me. I just pulled her real close and held her as I put the gun to her and pulled the trigger.

And now here I am. That's what happened. I never found Conrad or his body. Maybe he's out there, finding more people like us, taking them on some kind of crusade. Maybe he's dead or in jail or the monsters found him. It's all such a waste. He had so much vision at first, but things got off track somewhere.

There's not much else to say. As soon as I'm done, I'm going to call them on the phone and tell them that the kids are gone, sent over to Ohio and let go, and then I'm going to take care of myself.

I keep thinking about the phrase "slippery slope." It's like you take one step in the wrong direction and you

find that the path gets steeper and steeper and you can't stop going down. Your feet slide, you lose your balance and then you're falling. I'm falling now.

I miss you. I miss Jim. I hope you don't hate me. Somewhere in here you might be able to understand what happened. How I took one misstep and lost everything. Take care of yourselves. Stay as pretty as you've always been, and don't forget to get Jim that train set I talked about.

Love you both,

James

TRIAL BY FIRE

***THIS TAPE HAS BEEN LABELLED "#5."
LOCATION OF TAPE #4 UNKNOWN.***

***FOLLOWING SECTION MUFFLED BUT
AUDIBLE***

***BACKGROUND SOUNDS INDICATE
BAR OR RESTAURANT***

LYDECKER: <WHISPERING> Here she comes.
<LOUDER> Yvonne, hi. Thanks for coming.

JACKMAN: Well, thanks for inviting me.

LYDECKER: Do you want a drink?

JACKMAN: No, I'm okay. What did you want to talk about?

LYDECKER: Well, um... I wanted to check in and see how you're doing. We haven't really talked since that thing with the ghost in the mall last week.

JACKMAN: Yes, I've... I've been avoiding you. Sorry.

LYDECKER: Hey, I understand. It was pretty horrible. I'd be reluctant to talk to me if I were I in your shoes.

JACKMAN: Not you, exactly. But some of the others...

LYDECKER: Yeah, I know. That's why I wanted to talk to you here, alone. No aggravation. No aggression. Just, you know, dinner and talking.

JACKMAN: Uh huh. <PAUSE> I don't know if I can be a part of this, Brian. What we did to those ghosts, to Mrs. Halverman—

LYDECKER: You saw what that ghost was, though. You heard what she did to people. To kids.

JACKMAN: I'm not arguing any of that. But she didn't choose to become what she was. I can't believe that the dead choose to come back. Maybe if we'd hold back, we could find a way to... to help them back. To put them to rest instead of just killing them again.

LYDECKER: <PAUSE> Okay, I understand what you're saying. That's a good point. And look, I agree that we've been hasty. Remember, I didn't want to go out to Halverman's house that night, or to set fire to that store. I want to move carefully and work out exactly what's going on. But the others... they want to lash out. You can appreciate that, right?

JACKMAN: Well, yes, but—

LYDECKER: I think we're all freaked out by what's going on, and some of us are letting those fears get the better of our common sense. But I've been doing a lot of talking with the others, and I think you'll see a different attitude from now.

JACKMAN: I don't know if a "different attitude" is enough.

LYDECKER: Yvonne, we need you on our side in this. Think of it this way. Maybe some of these creatures — the people who've been taken over — can be saved, brought back to normal. I mean, I was there with you in the junkyard. I saw how you calmed that zombie down. You "put him to rest" just by talking and listening. I know it can be done in some cases. But that isn't going to happen unless someone's there to make sure it does. Someone who can calm things down, think with a clear head and make the others consider something other than permanent solutions.

JACKMAN: And this "someone" has to be me? Why not you? Like you said, you were there, you know it can be done.

LYDECKER: Well... because I don't know if I agree with you. I think some of these creatures do need to be destroyed. Those things in the mine are monsters, pure and simple. Some of the dead — most of the ones I've seen — can't be talked to. They just attack and destroy until they're taken down. I don't know if I believe that some of the tainted people can be saved, or should be.

JACKMAN: If you don't agree with me, why do you want me there?

LYDECKER: Because I might be wrong! Because we need different opinions and angles on this. Because we need to protect each other. I know that you've had some luck with more peaceful things. But what if one of them isn't peaceful and attacks you? We need to stand together now, for all our sakes. For the sake of the whole town.

JACKMAN: <PAUSE> You make a good argument.

LYDECKER: I've had practice. I've had this conversation with all the others.

JACKMAN: That must have been fun.

LYDECKER: Oh yeah. Simpson and I had a great time.

LAUGHTER

LYDECKER: <PAUSE> Listen, can I ask a favor?

JACKMAN: Sure.

LYDECKER: Do you think you can find some sort of volunteer after-school job for Angie at the radio station?

JACKMAN: What? Why? To keep an eye on me?

LYDECKER: No! Not at all! I need some way to keep in contact with her. People are going to notice if a 16-year-old girl is hanging out with a 25-year-old man. She says her parents are already pretty suspicious about what she's doing at night.

JACKMAN: Fair enough, but still—

LYDECKER: And that's not the only reason. Angie... she's got a lot of anger and no one to really help her deal with it. She doesn't have many friends, and parents are never much help. I think she could benefit from having someone like you around. Someone who'll listen and try to understand.

JACKMAN: <PAUSE> You're just a big den mother for this group, aren't you?

LYDECKER: Shh. You'll ruin my reputation.

JACKMAN: No promises, but I'll see what I can do.

LYDECKER: Great. <PAUSE> Um... I've got some new notes and stuff about the sightings I've made around town. I, um... could give them to you now, if you like. Or we could, um... you know, just have some dinner first, maybe talk about something other than monsters. If, you know, you want to....

JACKMAN: <PAUSE> Sure, why not?

LYDECKER: Great!

RECORDING BREAK

What a day. What a night. Before all this happened, I used to slave at work all week, try to write at night, and spend most of the weekend drinking and hanging out at bars and the movie theater. Now I'm still slaving, but all my free time is spent directing the others and watching out for the things.

We spent two hours today in the forest learning to shoot, being trained by Sam and Olsen. We were all there, even Yvonne. I think the others are finally starting to accept her. Simpson's still dragging his heels, but that's typical. I admit, I'm pleased with myself for getting Angie and Yvonne to hang out. Not only is Angie getting a mentor and role model, but Yvonne benefits from getting "approval" from one of the aggressive members, so the others take her more seriously.

I'm a better planner than I am a shooter, though. I just can't seem to get the hang of it. Olsen said to keep working on it, and that he'd arrange a shotgun for me. You don't need to aim a shotgun, he says, you just point it in the right direction and pull the trigger. He says he'll have guns for all of us next week — all unregistered and without serial numbers. Mr. Olsen has made some rather shady contacts as a union leader — and probably managed to divert some union funds for his own use. Not that I'm complaining. The money, the guns, the political backing — it's all stuff we need, and Olsen's happy to provide it.

We finally have a real synergy going. Emotional support for those who need it. Financial support for the rest. Olsen's helping out with George and Simpson's medical bills, and he's paying Simpson a reasonable amount to work as an assistant — meaning "chauffeur," I think — for his election. I don't like Simpson — he's a hothead and a Jesus freak — but this way he doesn't starve to death and we have someone on hand to protect Olsen if necessary.

We've got training going on — not just guns, but first aid, self-defense, driving, the works. Every day or

two we coordinate our sightings in the town — contaminated people and areas, ghosts and zombies. It's still tricky with the dead ones. Sam and Yvonne want to take a kinder, gentler approach with them if possible, while Angie and the others want to take them down.

I still don't know where my sympathies lie on that one. The zombies may be a result of the contamination — I mean, they didn't just start coming back to life, did they? And most of them are just bastards that need to die a second time, anyway. But I've seen for myself that some can be put away without resorting to violence — and anything that reduces the risk of one of us being hurt is worth trying. For the moment, I'm keeping notes on all of them, no matter how they act. Anyway, once we take care of the taint they shouldn't be an issue any more.

Tonight, we're heading out to destroy a tainted dog I saw a few days ago. I know that sounds a bit lame, but this thing was nasty looking. It hangs around the elementary school. Bad enough that there were creatures at the high school before Angie took care of them. I don't even want to think about monsters getting ahold of little kids. So it's got to go. Still, shouldn't be too difficult — Briscoe can freeze it while Angie and George finish it.

Afterward, I might have to have a heart-to-heart with Sam. He didn't look too happy about Olsen's unregistered guns. Have to appeal to his sense of justice, not necessarily obeying the law. Hmm. How about "to serve and protect, Sam — to serve and protect the people, not the letter of the law." Yeah, that sounds good.

*****RECORDING BREAK*****

We're not alone! It's not just Clarion, it's the whole world — and it's not just us who are fighting back.

Today, at work, I met a guy. His name's... actually, maybe I better not say. I mean, I make these tapes to help me think, but maybe someone might get ahold of them. Hmm. I have to think about that.

So I'll call this guy... Salesman. Because that's what he is, a crane salesman. His company has a contract with Pennmine for cranes and dragline parts. I've met him before — he visited the mine last year.

So anyway, Salesman comes to pay his annual visit, talk about parts and wear — all that sort of thing. I met with him — it's my job — and we have this really boring conversation about cranes. I'm not really paying attention, just looking around, and then I see it on his briefcase. A line symbol, one of the ones we use! It means "one of us." I must have stared or something, because he looks up from his notes and sees that I recognize the sign. He shakes his head, puts his finger to his lips — like even though we're alone in the office, we might be overheard. I did my best to keep my cool and finish up the sales talk. On the way out, he shakes my hand and passes me a note saying to meet him at the bar as soon as I finish work.

I went straight from work to the bar and spent about an hour talking to him. He's just like the rest of us — he

saw something, heard a voice like I did, and he's been doing something about them ever since. Salesman said there are maybe hundreds of people like us across the country — he calls us "imbued." There's a whole network out there, communicating through the Internet, mailing lists, post-office boxes. I asked if any of the others know about what made us this way, where it all came from. He said no one knows. Lots of theories but no answers. So we're still in the dark!

I told him about the monsters and the taint in the mine. He said he'd never heard of anything like that before. Christ, that threw me for a loop. It was bad enough, scary enough, when we thought this was all there was. But it seems that there's all kinds of stuff out there, and no one knows where they come from. I mean, he's talking about witches and vampires and ghosts and it just never stops!

Guess we were wrong about the dead and infection being related. Now maybe Clarion has two different kinds of monsters.

Anyway, Salesman gave me details on how to find something called "hunternet" online. He also wrote me a list of addresses, all P.O. boxes or anonymous mail services — places I can write for help or information. I was bitching a second ago, because it's kind of overwhelming — but really, I can't believe how lucky I am running into someone who can help like this. And to know that we're not alone — it helps, it really does. Wait until I tell the others!

Salesman wanted to know if he should stick around. He's got more business meetings around the state, but he said he'd skip them if we needed him. He sounded almost hopeful that I'd ask him to stay — like he wanted to find a reason to blow off his schedule. I thought about it. I told him I appreciated the offer, but that we were doing okay. I think he was disappointed. The guy's got a job to hold down, and I... I mean, we are holding our own.

I have to start taking this recorder with me to work. It would have been good if I could have recorded our conversation. Right now, I better get online and see what's out there.

*****RECORDING BREAK*****

*****LYDECKER'S SPEECH SLIGHTLY SLURRED IN THIS SECTION*****

So, um... I found that website Travis... the salesman told me about. Spent about three hours reading archives and looking at people's messages.

I'm... I'm not going to tell the others about this. I'm not going to look at it anymore.

There's too much, okay? How are we supposed to stay focused if there's all this other stuff to worry about? Monsters running the government and the media — that's all bullshit! It's a distraction, that's all! And hey, some of these people are crazy — totally whacked, like that woman in Canada. That's who we're supposed to look to for help — psychos and rednecks? Forget it!

PAUSE. TAKES A DRINK

Ah, shit. That's not the real reason I have to hide this. It's because it all makes us unimportant. Makes me unimportant. And I can't have that.

They need me right now. They need my planning, my sight. They need me for information and answers. What the fuck am I supposed to do if they can just pull the answers from some stupid website? That's all I can do — see what's going on and give directions. I can't make weapons like them or heal injuries or trap things just by looking at them. I see things, I work out plans and I lead the others. Yeah, I'm the leader — me! Not some fucking crane salesman and his stupid net-geek buddies!

None of these "imbued" knows shit about what we're facing in town! That's why the others need me to make the hard decisions, to co-ordinate the fight. And I'm doing a fucking good job, too! It's like a war out there — people dying, buildings exploding, crazies and madmen running the show. Well, no one's died on my watch, in my town, and they're not going to! And none of us are crazy — Simpson's a bit tense, but he's going to be all right. It's all going to be all right, 'cause I've got it under control.

PAUSE. TAKES A DRINK

I'm not gonna be a small fish in a big pond again. I've been a small fish all my fucking life, and I'm not gonna be one again. I'm important now and I'm going to stay that way.

RECORDING BREAK

Just listened to the recording I made a couple days ago. <LAUGHS> I shouldn't drink when I make these tapes. But it's okay. I know what I'm doing. I do.

It's Sunday. I should try to make notes more often, but I've been so busy. What with work, and looking for trouble and seeing Yvonne again. I think... yeah, that might work out. I don't think the others know I'm interested in her. Don't know if they'd approve. But to hell with them.

Anyway, I should focus. Yesterday was a big one — we did a lot on Saturday, and I think we're getting a really good hold on the problem. I spent the day doing mailbox work for Olsen — putting campaign stuff in people's mailboxes. Boring, but useful. If he becomes mayor, we'll be the ones controlling the town, not the things.

More to the point, I went by the houses of some of the tainted. Clark Holmes, the mall manager. The janitor at the high school. Fire Chief Jarrolsen — who I'm pretty sure spends half his time setting fires, not fighting them. I dropped off pamphlets and kept an eye open. I seem to be able to pick up a lot more detail than I used to. I see things like weak locks, open windows, keys under flower pots. I've also been taking a few pictures with the digital camera Yvonne got me. All good stuff for later.

<PAUSE> You know, I just dismiss it sometimes. "I see more than I use to." It's easy to say, but it still scares me shitless. I'm not the same person I used to be, none

of us is. It makes we wonder just how normal we still are. I mean, we have these abilities and we need them to be any use against the things. But we never get used to them. They still feel like something outside us. Something that was given to us to use — or maybe even forced on us — and that can be taken away just as quick.

I think we've become accustomed to these weird abilities, but not comfortable with them. I don't think we ever will.

Anyway, I went back to campaign headquarters — a fancy way of saying Olsen's house. His wife was there, but she didn't say much. She never does. Talk about your ghosts. She just drifts through the background, waves and disappears. Anyway, Olsen took me over to our headquarters — Simpson's place. Not the nicest place in town. Simpson seems to be losing interest in things like cleaning, throwing out garbage, that sort of thing. If it was just him, it wouldn't matter, but uncut lawns and rotting trash attract attention that we don't need. And I really don't enjoy kicking aside empty cans to get to my chair. I should speak to him. Maybe we can arrange a housekeeper or something. If we can find a housekeeper who won't notice the guns and the traps, that is.

Getting distracted again. Maybe because last night was intense.

It went well, but I still get queasy thinking about it. We lured Wally Osgood out to the mountains. Osgood managed two of the bars in town, and Sam says the police suspect him of being involved in a lot of petty crime in Clarion. Dealing pot, burglaries, mail fraud. What matters is that he was tainted. Sam convinced him that he was a crooked cop who wanted to offload some impounded drugs and guns, and set up a meeting on the mountain.

When Osgood showed up, we were waiting — me, George, Angie, Sam and Briscoe. When Briscoe froze him, he went nuts, thrashing around — and broke free. I didn't think that was possible. At least, I never saw it happen before. We chased him up the mountain and found out he had help — two weird bug kind of things. It was a close call, and Briscoe got knocked right out of his wheelchair. But we had guns and other weapons that made the difference. We buried the bodies up there, and I called Yvonne on my cell phone. She visited Briscoe today and did her mouth-to-mouth thing on him. Lucky bastard.

We're like a well-oiled machine now. Pretty soon — maybe in a month or so — we should be ready to take out the nest in the mine. All on our own, with no outside help.

Got a call from Olsen a little while ago. He wants to see me at his office at five. Wonder what's up?

RECORDING BREAK

FOLLOWING SECTION MUFFLED BUT AUDIBLE

LYDECKER: Sorry, I don't follow. You want me to do what?

OLSEN: It's pretty simple, son. I pulled a few strings and got access to Nelson's office tonight. You go in there to her desk, use that 20-20 vision of yours, and see what you can dig up. See if there's anything we can use in the campaign.

LYDECKER: You mean see if she's involved with the mine creatures?

OLSEN: Well, if she is, it'd be good to know. But I mean something a bit more useful — under-the-table deals, drug habits, kinky sex secrets. Something I can hold over her next week.

LYDECKER: Are you serious?

OLSEN: Of course. Here's the key to her office. Clyde cut me a copy on Friday.

LYDECKER: Are you nuts? I'm not going to do this! It's unethical, not to mention illegal!

OLSEN: And since when have you been so concerned with the law, son?

LYDECKER: Don't give me that. This is different. We were given these gifts to save the town, not to help ourselves.

OLSEN: That's what this is about, boy. The best way to save the town is being in charge of the town. It's in our best interests for me to win the election. And if we can use our blessings to make that happen... well, God helps those who help themselves.

LYDECKER: Let's leave God out of this. Okay, sure, you've got a point, but this is—

OLSEN: Cheating?

LYDECKER: Well... yeah.

OLSEN: This is war. You can't "cheat" in a war. You can win or you can lose. And whatever you do to win is the right thing to do. End of story.

LYDECKER: But still....

OLSEN: How old are you, Brian? Twenty-five? You lived in town during the big strike of '81, right?

LYDECKER: Yeah.

OLSEN: The mine was closed for three months. Three months, with not a man making a dollar. Do you remember?

LYDECKER: Yeah.

OLSEN: But no one starved. Because every day, the union fed its members. Nothing fancy, sure. Powdered milk, white bread and hamburger meat. But we kept you going until the company backed down and the men went back to work.

LYDECKER: So I owe you my life, is that it?

OLSEN: No, son. I mean that when you're in a union, you do whatever you have to do. Even if it means not working for three months. Because the men in that union are your brothers, and you trust them to stand by you. Just like they trust you to stand by them. No questions, no hesitations. And when you're needed, you



do whatever it takes to fulfill your duty. Not just the things you want to do. Not just what you're comfortable with. You do whatever needs doing.

LYDECKER: <PAUSE> Yeah, okay. I'll do it. But if she's clean, she's clean — got it?

OLSEN: Sure thing, son. Sure thing.

*****RECORDING BREAK*****

Just came back from breaking into Jo-Beth Nelson's office and reporting to Olsen. I'm not very proud of myself.

I got into her office without any hassles, thanks to Olsen's help. My plan was to go through her desk, her files, her computer and see if anything leapt out. Instead, after a few minutes, I started getting visions. I've had quick ones of what I thought were the future before — but this was a longer one, of the past, I think. Kind of a stream of images, five or ten seconds long of Nelson in her office. Her working on the computer, talking to people, having meetings. Nothing sinister — no collaborating with the things.

But in one, she was making out pretty damn hard with Ian Rall, the local stringer reporter for CBS. And when I say "making out," I mean.... Never mind.

When it ended, I got out of there. I didn't want to be there any longer, acting like a voyeur. I went back and told Olsen that I didn't find anything incriminating — but when he pressed me about it, I told him about what I saw. He was pretty pleased.

I feel like shit about this. But I also know that Olsen's probably right. Like they say, you have to break a few eggs to make an omelet. Having one of our own in the mayor's office — hell, that's half the battle. It's worth a few sacrifices. Right?

But Nelson didn't do anything to deserve this. She had an affair. Big deal. Do we have the right to exploit that — even for a good cause? How many other innocent people are we allowed to hurt? Is it like in Vietnam — "We had to burn the village to save it"?

We have to win this. If only to justify what we've done.

*****END OF TAPE*****

*****THIS TAPE HAS BEEN LABELLED "#7" BY THE RECORDER*** LOCATION OF TAPE #6 UNKNOWN.**

*****FOLLOWING SECTION MUFFLED BUT AUDIBLE*****

LYDECKER: You wanted to see me, Mr. Dalgliesh?

MALE VOICE, PRESUMABLY

"DALGLIESH": Yes, come in. Brian, right? Close the door behind you.

LYDECKER: Yes, sir.

DALGLIESH: How long have you worked here, Brian?

LYDECKER: Just under two years, sir.

DALGLIESH: Two years, yes. And your father — he worked here too, right?

LYDECKER: Yes, sir. He worked here over 20 years.

DALGLIESH: Good, good.

LYDECKER: What, ah... what can I do for you, sir?

DALGLIESH: Hmm? Oh, I'm sorry. I was miles away, looking at my paperweight. It's very unusual, don't you think?

LYDECKER: Um... I guess so, sir.

DALGLIESH: It's very old. Almost an antique. See the way the light seems to get brighter around it?

LYDECKER: Um... yes... sir....

DALGLIESH: Has an amazing effect, this paperweight. Seems to hypnotize people at the drop of a hat. Don't you agree?

LYDECKER: Yes... sir....

DALGLIESH: I thought you might, maggot. You don't mind if I call you maggot, do you Brian?

LYDECKER: No... sir....

DALGLIESH: I thought not. Now, maggot, things have been getting strange recently. People have entered the hive in shaft number four. Our servants and children are being attacked in the streets. That's not good, is it?

LYDECKER: No... sir....

DALGLIESH: No, it's not. And the thing is, maggot, you smell very much like some of the people who've been irritating us. And we don't like being irritated, nosiree.

*****HEAVY SOUND. PRESUMABLY BODY HITTING FLOOR*****

DALGLIESH: Oh get up, maggot. Don't go weak in the knees yet.

LYDECKER: Sorry... sir....

DALGLIESH: And put your glasses back on. Look at me when I'm interrogating you.

LYDECKER: <PAUSE> Yes... sir....

DALGLIESH: So, tell me — and no lying — have you been going places you shouldn't? Interfering with our servants? Getting into trouble?

LYDECKER: No... sir....

DALGLIESH: You're sure now? No naughty little secrets you want to tell mister mine manager?

LYDECKER: I've... um... started seeing... this girl, sir....

DALGLIESH: Stop, stop! I don't want to hear about your maggot fucking. <PAUSE> Well, then. I guess you're off the hook. Must have been someone with a similar scent. I won't kill you now after all.

LYDECKER: Thank you... sir....

DALGLIESH: But just in case... go back to work. In a few minutes you'll wake up and you'll forget you ever saw me today. But come back on Saturday, around three o'clock. The children are hungry. You're as good a meal as any.

LYDECKER: Thank you... sir....

DALGLIESH: Now get back to work.

RECORDING BREAK

Oh my God!

Oh my fucking God!

PAUSE

If my glasses hadn't come off when I fell... It'd all be over now. They'd know who we were, where we lived, what we were doing. Lucky. Fucking lucky.

But now I know who's behind everything — or, at least, one of them. Dalglish looks human, but with my glasses on, it's a whole different thing. Like he's half man, half... I don't know what. Just wrong. I get the feeling he's different from the tainted people we've seen. Something more powerful maybe.

And he wants me to come back on Saturday. That's election day. It's earlier than I'd wanted to move, but we might have to—

SOUND OF KNOCKING

MALE VOICE: Brian? Are you down there?

LYDECKER: Dad! Um, sure. Just a second.
<PAUSE>What's up?

FATHER: Got a minute, son?

LYDECKER: Sure, I guess. Sit down.

FATHER: Brian... your mother, you know, she's a bit concerned. You haven't been home much lately, and you know how she worries.

LYDECKER: I've, well, been pretty busy. I've been doing... volunteer work. With Dan Olsen's campaign.

FATHER: I didn't think you had much interest in local politics.

LYDECKER: I'm trying to take more. You know, we've talked about how I was having problems getting used to being back in Clarion. I thought it might help.

FATHER: I see. Well, good. I'm glad you've found something to take an interest in. I'm surprised you're campaigning for Olsen, though. I thought your politics were a bit more liberal.

LYDECKER: Well, they are... on a larger level. Yes, I'm liberal on a state and federal level. But when it comes down to your hometown... well, I guess I'm protective of this place.

FATHER: That makes a change. <PAUSE> So, are you and Olsen friendly?

LYDECKER: Um... not especially. I mean, I work with him, and I respect him. But we're not close.

FATHER: I went to school with him, you know.

LYDECKER: Really? Are you friends?

FATHER: Once. A long time ago. Not any more.
<PAUSE> I don't want to slander the man, don't get me wrong....

LYDECKER: But?

FATHER: I think — I know — that Dan Olsen can be utterly ruthless if he has to be. He's very smart, very charming, and I think he genuinely wants the best

for Clarion and the miners. But he'd do anything to get what he wants.

LYDECKER: Yeah, I've seen a little of that.

FATHER: He can use people, Brian. If you're useful to him, he'll tell you what you want to hear. But he's prepared to throw you away the minute you become inconvenient.

LYDECKER: Uh-huh. <PAUSE> I need to think about that for a while, Dad. Maybe we can talk about this again later.

FATHER: Sure. And you're sure you aren't using drugs or joining the militia?

LYDECKER: Dad!

FATHER: Just kidding! The things your mother frets about. I'll see you at dinner.

LYDECKER: Okay. <PAUSE> Maybe Dad's right. I don't want this group to get caught up in internal politics. That's why I've been juggling the Quakers and the rest of us, trying to keep everything on an even keel. But Olsen... he's tricky. That shit he had me do to Nelson.... She dropped out of the race this morning. Press statement said she wanted to focus on her family, instead.

We need to meet right away to work out what to do about Dalglish. And if Olsen wants to get in my face, I'll get right back in his.

RECORDING BREAK

Yvonne has quit the group. She wasn't kicked out, not exactly. But she was certainly... encouraged. Those idiots!

We met at Simpson's place, and I told them about Dalglish. George, Simpson and Angie want to go in on Saturday, guns blazing. I said that's too risky, that we need to get more information. What we should do is use Sam's stealth abilities to get close to Dalglish, and steal that paperweight from his office. I'll see if I can get some insights from handling it, like I did in Nelson's office. Something that points out what he's up to, what he can do, that sort of thing. We play it cool until Saturday — and if we know enough, then we go in guns blazing.

Some grumbling from the hotheads, but they knew I was right. Olsen backed me up, saying we need information before we go into a dangerous situation. Maybe Dad was wrong — or maybe it's not convenient for him to throw me aside yet. I wish I knew.

Then everything went to shit.

Last week, we earmarked a few of the ghosts and zombies to be Yvonne's "patients" — ones that she could try and communicate with, that weren't to be attacked or targeted by the rest. Well, Yvonne told us that two of the dead had gone missing in the last couple of days, and that her last "client" had gone into hiding. She told us all this very calmly, not being accusational, but I could see where it was going. Then she asked, straight out — were any of us hunting "her" ghosts?

I probably could have smoothed things out if Simpson hadn't started screaming at her — calling her

a traitor, a pagan, a feminist, a weakling.... I guess all those are synonymous in his mind. Yes, he was destroying "her" dead — and he didn't regret it! They all had to go, every last one, he said — and if she didn't like it, then maybe she was corrupt herself, blah blah blah.

Olsen managed to shut him up, but it still fell apart. George and Briscoe admitted that they'd also been in on it — that they'd been working from the notes and details I'd been collecting! I told Yvonne that I hadn't been involved, and that this was the first I'd heard about it, but I don't think she cared. She was furious and the others were getting wound up, too. Briscoe and George seemed a little ashamed of having gone behind our backs — but only a little. They sure as shit weren't ashamed of destroying those two ghosts, and they said they'd keep doing it.

Yvonne walked out and said she wouldn't be back. The idiots looked pretty pleased with themselves — until Angie tore into them. That girl's got a mouth. She called them names Tarantino never heard of, and went after Yvonne. I guess those two have bonded pretty tight.

With the women gone, we got into a shouting match of our own, but it didn't last long. I made it goddamn clear that my notes were not to be used without my permission, and that unauthorized "missions" were not in the cards. I came home after that. I've been trying to call Yvonne since, but she's not answering her phone.

Fuck! Those idiots! With Angie gone, we've lost a hitter and a tracker. With Yvonne gone, we've lost the only person with a chance of putting the things at ease — and without her healing ability to fall back on, things just got a lot more dangerous.

We're so close to winning, but this kind of bullshit jeopardizes everything.

Come on, Yvonne. Answer the goddamn phone.

RECORDING BREAK

LYDECKER'S SPEECH NOTABLY SLURRED IN THIS SECTION

Neil Briscoe is dead.

They came for us just after dusk. Me, Briscoe, Sam and George. We were driving back from Simpson's place — Briscoe and I in my car, Sam and George in another. I was about to split off and drop Briscoe at his place. We stopped at the light near the bridge, and that's when they hit us.

At first I thought they were just bums coming to clean the windshield. We have a few bums in Clarion. But then one guy pulled a shotgun from under his coat and it all went to shit.

PAUSE

I don't... don't remember a lot of the details. It's not a concussion or anything — I don't think so, anyway. It's just that it was all so confusing. I could probably remember more if I was sober. But I got drunk so I wouldn't remember.

They shot at us, at both cars. Not just guns, either. One guy slammed into George's side door and ripped it off with his bare hands. Not that it mattered. George blew his fucking head off right away.

I crashed my car right into a cement buttress. It's fucked. It'll never run again. We left it there and got away. We left it there with Briscoe's body beside it, torn into pieces. The dogs got him. Things covered in boils. They pulled him from his wheelchair.

No, that's all wrong.

It's real simple. They tracked us down and attacked us. We got them — got them all, I think, with guns and other stuff. I pulled the trigger a bunch of times. I didn't run.

I didn't run.

I stayed and fought and watched Briscoe die, and there wasn't a single fucking thing I could do about it. There were just too many of them.

PAUSE

Sam says he can fake a paper trail. Make it look like I reported the car stolen last night. The police will ask me questions, he says, but it should be okay. Whatever. Fuck it. I don't care. Take me to prison. Get me out of this fucking town.

Briscoe might still be alive if I'd stood up to Dalglish on Monday. I mean, he would have killed me. But he wouldn't have been able to put his dogs on the scent of the others, or of my car or whatever they used to track us down.

At least if I was dead, I wouldn't feel so guilty.

They trusted me to lead them, and now someone's dead. Yvonne and Angie won't work with us. Olsen just wants to win the election. Simpson's psychotic. Great bunch of people. Great fucking leadership.

PAUSE

Fuck waiting. Fuck gathering information. It's not like they'll let us just waltz in there and steal that paperweight now. Now we do what they do. We wait until Saturday, and we go in for the kill.

With any luck, I'll be killed quick.

RECORDING BREAK

The media's all over Briscoe's death. The cops found a lot of stuff at his house. Guns, chemicals, bombs. The media's saying it's a militia arms deal gone wrong. Works for us.

The cops asked me a few questions about my car, but Sam showed me the report he'd written up, so I sounded convincing. Cars get stolen all the time. It's the only thing for drunk high-school kids to do on a Friday night except screw.

That's not all, though. George called me earlier. Briscoe left us a present at Simpson's place. It's amazing. Homemade napalm, nails, timers, detonators. He knew what he was doing.

I can't go to the funeral. Can't show that I had any kind of connection to him. But that's okay. We'll give him our own kind of send-off on Saturday.

RECORDING BREAK

FOLLOWING SECTION MUFFLED BUT AUDIBLE

LYDECKER: Did you fellas vote?

HARMON: Sure did. You?

LYDECKER: Nah. I'll do it after this is over. Plenty of time then.

HARMON: Glad to hear you're so confident.

LYDECKER: Actually, I'm shitting my pants.

HARMON: I know. Me too.

LYDECKER: How you doing back there, Simpson?

SIMPSON: Fine.

LYDECKER: Can't say fairer than that. <PAUSE> There's Sam's cruiser. Any word from him?

HARMON: Not yet. That's pretty much what we expected, though. Cell phone signal can't reach the bottom of the shaft.

LYDECKER: What time we got?

HARMON: 2:55.

LYDECKER: Okay.

PAUSE, SOUND OF CAR DOORS OPENING AND CLOSING

LYDECKER: You know, Simpson, you're a braver man than me. I mean, Briscoe was a smart guy, but a homemade flame-thrower... that's just a bit too risky for me.

SIMPSON: You're right. I am a braver man than you.

HARMON: Settle down, Cole.

LYDECKER: It's okay, George. Anyway, we need the firepower. The four of us might not make a dent without it.

HARMON: Actually, Brian, it's five.

LYDECKER: What? I thought Olsen had to stay in town for the election.

HARMON: He does. There they are.

LYDECKER: Who's that with Sam? <PAUSE> Angie! Hell, girl, good to see you!

FIELDING: Yeah, whatever.

LYDECKER: How's Yvonne doing. Is she okay?

FIELDING: Leave me alone.

LYDECKER: What? What's wrong?

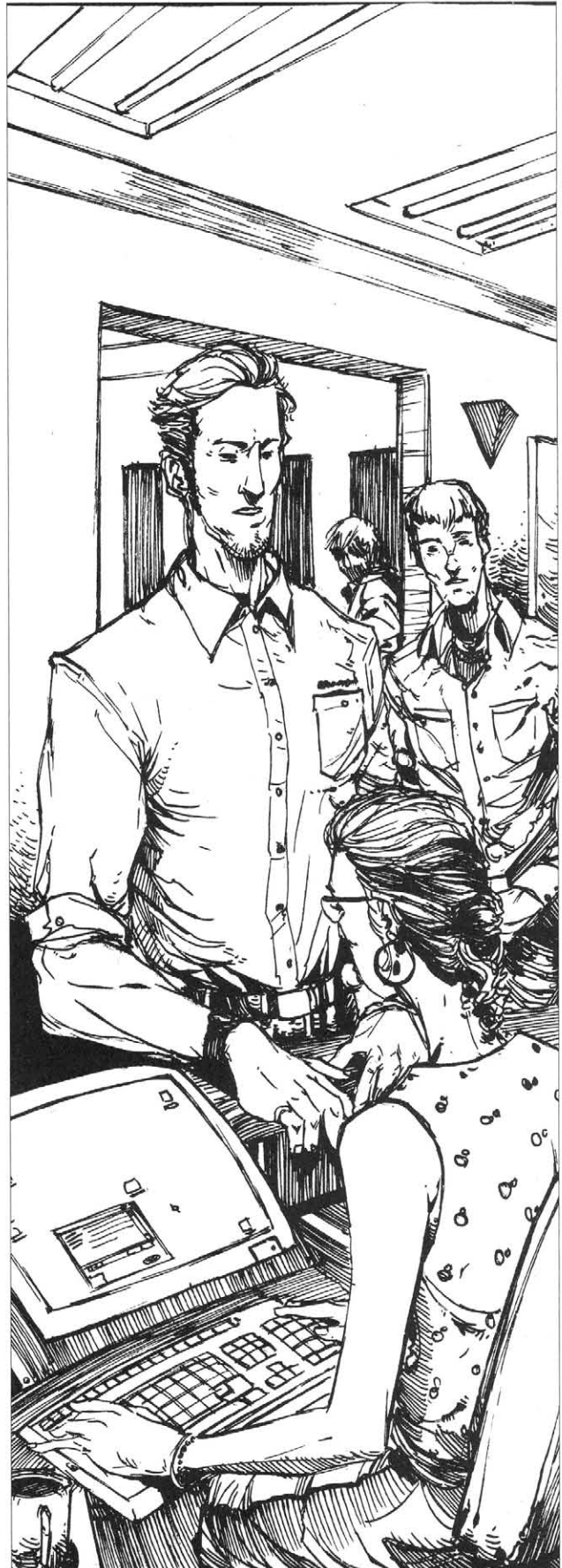
O'CONNOR: Forget it, you two. Let's get this out of the way. What time do we have?

HARMON: 2:58.

O'CONNOR: Let's get upstairs then. We don't want to be late.

PAUSE. SOUND OF ELEVATOR IN OPERATION

FEMALE VOICE: Can I help you? Do you have an appointment?



LYDECKER: Uh, yes. I have an appointment to see Mister Dalgliesh....

SOUND OF IMPACT

LYDECKER: Jesus, Simpson! You didn't have to hit her so hard!

SIMPSON: She's one of them. They all go down.

LYDECKER: She's not one of them, you asshole! Look, she's normal!

SIMPSON: Says you. I say if she works for them, she gets the same damn treatment!

O'CONNOR: Settle down, for Pete's sake! We'll make sure she gets first aid afterward.

LYDECKER: Yeah, okay. But come on, guys — let's save it for the monsters, okay?

HARMON: Okay. Give me that sledgehammer. <PAUSE> Ready?

SOUND OF BREAKING WOOD. DOOR BEING BROKEN DOWN?

DALGLIESH: What the fuck is this?

LYDECKER: Here for my appointment, you fucking piece of shit!

SOUND OF AN EXPLOSION — MUFFLED, BUT STILL VERY LOUD AND PROLONGED

DALGLIESH: What have you done?

FIELDING: Jesus Christ, look at him! Look at him!

A FIGHT SEEMS TO BREAKS OUT. IT IS DIFFICULT TO DETERMINE EXACTLY WHAT OCCURS FROM THE AUDIO TAPE

LYDECKER: Get down! Get down! Get—

THIS OUTBURST IS FOLLOWED BY THE SOUND OF BREAKING GLASS, AND A SHARP REDUCTION IN THE VOLUME OF THE STRUGGLE.

THE SOUND OF AN OBJECT IMPACTING A METAL SURFACE AT SIGNIFICANT VELOCITY, FOLLOWED BY A SECONDARY, LESSER IMPACT

THE REMAINING SEVEN MINUTES OF TAPE CONTAIN ONLY MINIMAL, NON-SIGNIFICANT BACKGROUND NOISE

END OF TAPE

THE BOOK OF THE FOURFOLD TRUTH

BOOK OF CHRONICLES, CHAPTER 8

The fall of THE PROPHET was a terrible blow to all of us, and even the discovery of two more of the CHOSEN — Galip Eroglu and Vahide Dincer, thrice blessed be their names! — was insufficient to raise our spirits. Galip and Vahide said they would stay in their hometown and remain vigilant for more CORRUPTION. Adil, Fadime and Angus returned to Istanbul, with vague plans to follow the two POLLUTED police Dörtlük and Kayar.

Georgette and I could not abandon THE PROPHET. The radio and TV dismissed the UNHOLY destruction we had seen with a skein of barely plausible lies. Rather than describe the ANGRY DEAD, they claimed that an abandoned building — weakened by the past earthquake — had finally collapsed, possibly from the vibrations of a heavy truck on a nearby road. Then (in this unlikely theory), the collapse of that building knocked over others, like a line of falling dominos. That was all the explanation people needed. People were dead and there had been no seismic readings, but they were used to hearing about crumbling structures, so no one asked, no one investigated. Galip told me later that he had tried to tell the truth to the television producers, but that they ignored him or suggested that he “calm down.”

Sitting in the hospital, we knew none of this, of course. Georgette and I knew only that THE PROPHET lay unwaking, and that the doctors evaded our questions about her condition.

See now, how out of great sorrow, great glory can arise. For one night, as I was by THE PROPHET's bedside, I felt a surge of tremendous love in my heart, overwhelming me, pushing tears from my eyes and forcing a great trembling onto my limbs. I leaned in and kissed THE BLESSED PROPHET's hand.

In that moment, I was seized by the POWER.

Before my very eyes, I saw her bones shift behind her bandage. Her eyelids flickered. Dizzied both by what had happened and by my desire to see her well again, I prayed — prayed to whatever had given me this BLESSING — and tried again.

This time the flow of sweet healing was stronger, a confusion of ecstasy that culminated when I heard her voice. “I have seen visions.”

I called for Georgette, but I was so dazed by the POWER that shook me, I could only cry out, inarticulate.

Georgette heard nonetheless and ran into the room — stopped only by her amazement as THE PROPHET sat up and began pulling herself free of her tubes and monitors.

“I have to get out of here,” she said. “Hospitals are poison. That's where THEY come to get you, when you're weak and can't fight back. We have to go! Now!”

A nurse had heard the commotion, but Georgette's pistol convinced her to back into the bathroom and donate her uniform. At first we thought of putting it on THE PROPHET, but Georgette said it would fit me better — and that my *chador* would hide THE LIVING FLAME's injuries, which were still visible if no longer grievous.

We fled the hospital — Georgette needing to help both of us along, for THE PROPHET was still wounded, and I was nearly stunned by wonder.

As we drove away, THE LIVING FLAME told us that while she had been in a coma, she had seen and heard HOLY things.

Status: U

User-Agent: Microsoft-Entourage/9.0.1.3108

Date: 13 Aug 1881 13:28:09 -0700

Subject: Bad Connection Help?

From: flame61

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Mime-version: 1.0

I've been reading the files of Bookworm55 and Doctor119 with a great deal of interest, but also frustration. I'm in a non-European country and the phone lines are unreliable. Rather than spending hours at a cybercafe trying to download this stuff, is there any way I can talk someone into sending me a diskette with the text-file archives? Or a printout, if you're willing to do that? It would be a big help to be able to read this in private.

Thanks. If you want to do this, send me private mail.

"I stand on the threshold of a great revelation. I will need some time by myself, but when I return, I shall have PROFOUND TRUTHS to share with you."

I wept, selfish, unwilling to let her go when she had just returned to us, but she kissed my forehead and told me that her fast would not be long.

We paused only to show the new miracle to the others. Then THE PROPHET set off alone, into the wilderness, to seek the GODS directly. We waited anxiously for her return. We did not have to wait long.

BOOK OF DOCTRINE, CHAPTER 1

Behold THE TRUTH, which was revealed to THE BLESSED LIVING FLAME on August 20, Year One. Blessed be THE PROPHET! Blessed be THE FOURFOLD TRUTH!

THE PROPHET saw beneath the disguise of the CORRUPT Cobra Juan. THE PROPHET led vengeance against the slayers of the Kubal family. THE PROPHET foresaw the ravages of the UNBURIED, and THE PROPHET overcame them at the risk of joining them in death. Great is her courage! Great is her wisdom! Great is her name!

To find more wisdom, THE PROPHET went into the wilderness, taking neither food nor water. For us, she suffered. For us, she prayed. For us, she was given THE TRUTH.

On the first day, she partook of the GREEN HERB, for she had perceived its value. Through its intercession, she saw the GREEN GODDESS, who arose from the ground like a plant, and like smoke, and like the rising sun.

"Lo," said the GREEN GODDESS. "YOU HAVE FOUND MY SACRED PLANT, THE HERB THAT I LOVE, AND IT HAS LED YOU TO ME. I AM THE MOTHER OF ALL, THE SUSTAINER, THE SOURCE OF LIFE — YET MANKIND SCORNE ME AND FELL FROM MY GRACE. INVOKE ME TO RECOVER FROM INJURY, FOR

PROTECTION FROM HARM, AND TO REPEL THE CORRUPT. MOVE IN MY LIGHT AND YOU SHALL TRIUMPH."

The GREEN GODDESS touched the sky with her hair and sweet rain fell, collecting in a hollow stone that THE PROPHET might drink. Then the GODDESS told THE PROPHET about the SHAPE-SHIFTERS who hated her, along with other secrets. Most important among these was the name of the RAINBOW ROOT.

On the second day, THE PROPHET ate of the RAINBOW ROOT, and by its power she saw the world fold, and the sky bow down, and the lights of the heavens shimmer and change, forming the body of the RAINBOW GOD.

"BEHOLD," said the RAINBOW GOD. "YOU HAVE TASTED MY SACRED PLANT, THE ROOT THAT CLEARS THE FOG FROM THE EYES OF THE WISE AND THE CHOSEN. BEWARE, FOR IT IS ALSO THE TRICKSTER ROOT, THAT DOUBLES THE FOG WHICH BLINDS THE FOOLISH. TO THOSE WITH EYES TO SEE, IT SHOWS TRUTH. TO THOSE WHOSE HEARTS ARE WEAK AND WHOSE MINDS ARE IMPURE, IT PROVIDES ONLY SHADOWS AND DISTRACTION.

"I AM THE FATHER OF THOUGHT, THE INSPIRER, THE GIVER OF KNOWLEDGE — YET MANKIND HAS BETRAYED ME AND SCORNS MY GIFTS. INVOKE ME TO BE FREE FROM THE LIES OF THE CORRUPT, TO SEE WHAT IS HIDDEN AND TO FIND WHAT IS LOST. FOLLOW MY FREEDOM AND YOU SHALL KNOW ALL."

Then the RAINBOW GOD kissed her forehead, and she felt the SECRET EYE within her open wider. He told her of the WALKING DEAD who hated him. He also shared other secrets with her, including the name of the WHITE LEAF that she would need for the next leg of her journey.

Though she felt great joy at the mysteries she had seen, she also felt sorrow, for she had no WHITE LEAF. Yet she did not despair, for she had felt the touch of the WHITE GODDESS without the HOLY LEAF. So great was her wisdom that she realized the other call of the GODDESS — that she could be invoked through action and effort. So great was her dedication that she danced in a frenzy, hoping for the favor of the WHITE GODDESS. Though hungry, though weary, though marked by the wounds of the IMPURE, she still danced her dedication and love. From sunrise to sunset she danced, and as the light failed, the WHITE GODDESS burst forth, appearing like the flare of dawn, like the first note of song, like the flash of lightning and the thunder's crack.

"HEED," cried the WHITE GODDESS. "EVEN WITHOUT MY SACRED PLANT, YOU HAVE DRAWN ME TO YOU, FOR YOU ARE MY FAVORED MORTAL, WHOM I LOVE BEST, WHO SHALL BE MY SCYTHE AGAINST THIS WORLD'S CORRUPTION. I AM THE MOTHER OF COURAGE AND THE LIVING CALL TO ACTION — YET MANKIND HAS TWISTED MY MESSAGE, TURNING GOOD TO EVIL ENDS. INVOKE ME FOR STRENGTH, FOR BRAVERY, AND FOR THE FIRE THAT CLEANSSES THE WORLD. OBEY MY COMMANDS AND YOU SHALL LIBERATE HUMANITY!"

Then the WHITE GODDESS led her through the darkness until she came upon a sheep that was lost. With the strength of the GODDESS, she fell upon it, and

with the fire of the GODDESS she cooked its meat. While she filled her belly, the WHITE GODDESS told her of the DEATH DRINKERS who hated her. She also shared other secrets, including the identity of the BLACK FLOWER.

The next day, THE PROPHET took the BLACK FLOWER, and by its virtue called the BLACK GOD. He came upon her in silence, and in stillness. He came like the drifting smoke, and like the fall of night.

"HARK," said the BLACK GOD, "YOU KNOW THE CARESS OF MY SACRED PLANT, WHICH EASES PAIN OF BODY AND SOUL ALIKE. USE IT WITH CARE, FOR SOME SORROWS MUST BE HEARD AND SOME AGONY WILL NOT BE DENIED. TO THE WISE, IT SETS ASIDE DISTRACTIONS FOR WHAT IS IMPORTANT. TO THE FOOLISH, IT SETS ASIDE THE VITAL AND BECOMES ITSELF THE DISTRACTION."

"I AM THE FATHER OF FAITH, THE MESSENGER — AND THE FINISHER. ALL THINGS MUST END, AND AT THAT END I WAIT. GREAT IS MY WISDOM — YET MANKIND FEARS MY TEACHING AND IGNORES MY GIFTS. INVOKE ME FOR STILLNESS, CONCEALMENT AND TO SHARE YOUR KNOWLEDGE. ACCEPT MY TEACHINGS AND THE CORRUPTION WILL END."

Then the BLACK GOD led THE PROPHET as she bared her flesh and cut a SACRED SIGN into the skin above her heart. By his power, she felt no pain, even as her skin burned, for her knife was infused with sacred fire. When she had completed his mark, the BLACK GOD told her of the UNDEAD SPIRITS that hated him. He shared other secrets with her, then told her she must return to us, her loving followers, and pass on the great wisdom she had gained.

BOOK OF CHRONICLES, CHAPTER 9

When THE PROPHET returned from the wilderness, she was changed, and all of us who looked upon her were astonished. She had always been the bravest of us, understanding the most and leading us through our trials. But now there was something else in her powerful gaze. Though still injured and weakened by her fasting, she had more force in her words, and more deeds than the rest of us put together.

She returned not only with THE DOCTRINE, but with plans — many plans. Each of us was given a task. THE PROPHET set out to purchase the lands on which the PANTHEON had spoken to her, with Georgette assisting. Galip and Vahide were set in pursuit of Dörtlük and Kayar, since there was no chance that the CORRUPT police would have seen them before. Besides, the blessed Galip possessed a gift from the RAINBOW GOD to aid him in pursuing the CORRUPT. Only he and THE LIVING FLAME possessed this gift, but it turned out to have no effect on the TAINTED policemen.

Angus and Fadime would take the tape of the UNBURIED to TRT-1, NTV, CNN Türk and any other TV news station that might show it. Adil and I were assigned to watch Tuya Sabry, the TAINTED woman who had been seen with one of the IMPURE policemen.

Adil found this work very distasteful, for Sabry seemed most at home in the Aksaray district — a rather

shabby suburb noted for its numerous Moldavian, Russian, Ukrainian and Romanian prostitutes. Collectively known as "Natashas," these women — often illegal immigrants who fled the collapse of the Soviet Bloc — made a shameless spectacle of themselves at night, and were sometimes loudly audacious during the day. As we followed Sabry, more than one Natasha propositioned Adil — and more than one Turkish man in the region made rude comments to me until I began once more to adopt the costume of *chadhor*.

Tuya Sabry seemed to know many of the Natashas, though to SACRED SIGHT they were not POLLUTED. Tuya herself did not have the obvious CORROSION of Cobra Juan or the UNBURIED, but there was a shadow of EVIL on her that even her makeup and expensive western clothes could not hide.

Even to normal vision, Tuya Sabry looked ill. A striking woman whose full lips and wide eyes got their share of comments, she seemed tired. Her skin had an unhealthy, waxy look to it, and her hands trembled slightly when she was distracted.

After some discussion, Adil finally agreed to approach some of the Natashas to whom Tuya had spoken. Muttering prayers for forgiveness to "Allah," he asked them who Tuya was — feigning interest in hiring her sexually. (His obvious nervousness and distaste for the Natashas perhaps made him more convincing in this role than he might otherwise have been.)

Initially hesitant, one whore (goaded by a bribe) told him she was asking after Cobra Juan. When Adil asked who that was, the hooker laughed and said he was a gigolo, notorious for seducing rich western women. He was also a pimp, renowned for arranging elaborate and sinful delights for the wealthy and powerful. She herself had "served" at one of Cobra Juan's orgies. Before she could give him the full details, Adil disengaged himself and returned to me.

We had briefly split up — him talking to the Natasha, me following Tuya. I had watched her enter a small store, but had stayed outside smoking a cigarette while I waited for Adil. I didn't want to get too close to the UNHOLY and let her recognize me, and I was also reluctant to leave the area where Adil had left me.

Adil and I re-convened by a disreputable looking food vendor and ordered mediocre *lahmacun* while he passed on his new information. He then asked where Tuya was, and I gestured at the store. He decided to walk by and look casually inside to see if she was still there.

She was not. While he was looking into the store, and I was watching him from across the road, I was taken unaware. The first hint I had of Tuya's presence was when I felt something hard and sharp poking into my side.

"Who are you? Why are you so interested in me and Juan?" Her voice was low and desperate.

I looked across the road at Adil, but Tuya's eyes were on him too.

"Don't you dare," she hissed in my ear. "You call your boyfriend and I'll pump you full of enough poison to kill a horse. The two of us are just going to step back into the alley."

I followed, but not for the reason she thought — not from fear, but from cunning. Adil was still looking away, but I felt the mighty roots of the GREEN GODDESS growing into my soul, infusing me with courage, showing me the way to resist the CORRUPTED ONE's threats.

We retired as she demanded, but as soon as we were away from prying eyes, the POWER flowed forth. I cried out with the GODDESS' voice, invoking THE PROPHET's holy name. Tuya Sabry tried to strike me with the syringe in her hand, but she was confounded. Again she made to plunge the needle into my flesh, but as my words stymied her obscene designs, I felt the power within me grow. Twice defeated, she turned to flee — and now we resumed our natural roles, EVIL fleeing helplessly and JUSTICE in righteous pursuit. I paused only to free my weapon from its holster beneath my *chador*. The baggy garment was an impediment, but soon I had the barrel of my pistol poking out through a finger hole in the sleeve.

Running and fumbling for my gun should have slowed me, but I was in the full flush of health, while Tuya was sluggish and drained from her debauchery and decadence. I raced after her through clouds of flies in the garbage-strewn alleys behind restaurants and bordellos, gaining

steadily — until her foot struck a piece of filth and she stumbled. Her momentum broken, she glanced over her shoulder as I came upon her. For the first time, she saw the pistol in my hand. For the first time, I saw fear on her face.

"Stop," I shouted. On her back, she scuttled away.

"Cobra Juan will kill you for this," she said.

"Cobra Juan is already dead."

"You're lying!" she cried — but I could see her face turn ashen. She saw THE TRUTH in my eyes.

Rather than face it, she plunged the syringe into her own arm. I tried to pull it out, but I was too late. She convulsed, and I think she tried to scream, but her throat was already closing. Only a hiss emerged.

At first I thought it was a trick. But I smelled it when her bowels and bladder let go, and her eyes remained unblinkingly open, even when I prodded her with a foot.

I was lost, at first. Baffled and confused. Was I to be glad that another enemy was destroyed? Sorry that she had died before revealing her secrets? Looking at her, I could see only the face of an unhappy woman who died feeling she had no choice.

I took her purse, slipped it under my gown and tried to find my way back to the intersection where I had left my colleague. I got lost. By the time I found him he was almost frantic with worry. I told him what had happened, and he said we should go back and search her pockets. But I was unable to find the corpse again.



Adil could have been angry with me for not searching her more thoroughly, but he was angry at himself for not protecting me, instead. He still did not understand that I was sheltered by the PANTHEON.

We returned to Adil's apartment and looked in Tuya's purse. It contained money, pills and a white powder. There was also an address book. I could not read it — it was in Arabic — but Adil could, and he began making an English copy. In the weeks that followed, we would investigate its every address and phone number in Istanbul, Bursa and Gebze. Over the course of months, we would travel as far as Ankara and Izmir, tracking Tuya's network of pimps, whores, drug peddlers and other scum. Some were CORRUPT. Some were merely vile. But slowly, the names in the book yielded their rotten fruit.

The next day we read of "an Egyptian businesswoman" who died of a heroin overdose.

Angus photographed her funeral with a telephoto lens. Few people came.

THE BOOK OF CHRONICLES, CHAPTER 10

Remember the day October 1 and keep it holy! Remember the first of October and rejoice! Remember it as FOUNDING DAY, for it was on that date that we finalized our purchase of SAFE HAVEN, the glorious GREAT TEMPLE!

Like THE PROPHET herself, the GREAT TEMPLE had to be humbled, had to know failure and dismay and the humiliation of a lowly fate before it could be raised up to glory by rededication to the FOURFOLD PANTHEON. It had been nothing but a family farm, raising sheep and a few groves of olive trees, about fifty kilometers from Istanbul. The family sold it after going bankrupt, and the new owners put up Quonset huts and tried to renew the land. But they had bad fortune — until the day THE PROPHET slew a lamb on their land, at the behest of the WHITE GODDESS. That day they were blessed to become, even unwilling, a part of the salvation of humanity.

On October 1, THE PROPHET dedicated the new temple and placed within it two sacred objects. One was the GREEN BASIN — the rock in which the GREEN GODDESS had sent water for THE PROPHET when she labored in the wilderness. The other was the WHITE FLEECE — the skin of the sheep she killed at the behest of the WHITE GODDESS. With these upon her altar, she preached to her followers.

"Here we make our home — and here we make our stand! For our safety is in the countryside, but our destiny is in the city. Today, we claim this sacred land for the FOURFOLD PANTHEON. Someday, we shall claim Istanbul — and then, all of Turkey! And all of the world!"

At her command, we took down the posters in Istanbul with the SACRED SIGNS. Now that we had a community, we could not afford to expose ourselves so much. Besides, many of the people who answered the

advertisements were unable to draw SACRED SIGNS in return, leading us to fear discovery by the ABOMINATIONS.

Before we took the signs down, however, two more of the GODLY had found us.

Sezen Akkale saw the CORRUPTION in one of her husband's business partners. She tried to poison him, but it had no effect. When she led us to the ABOMINATION, we recognized it as one of the UNBURIED, but far more cunning and quick than those we had encountered before. Even with Galip, Angus and Adil attacking, it was able to escape. But she told us it had fled Istanbul, and we all swore to be vigilant against its return.

Ferdi Çiller was quite different from Sezen. A young man who claimed to have no parents, he had worked near the ferries as an *avcılar*, guiding tourists to cheap lodgings (or, more often, hotels that gave him rewards). He was CHOSEN when he saw the ghost of a dead colleague. He would not, initially, tell us much about that matter, but he was very interested in finding others who could see what he could.

By this time, we were perhaps twenty in number. We would have been more, a great multitude, were it not for the skein of DECEPTION laid upon the eyes of humanity. For even when THE TRUTH was set before them they hid their faces in fear.

Angus and Fadime had tried every news station within a hundred miles of Istanbul, and other stations besides — every TRT station, ATV, Kanal D and Saman Yolu and others even less likely. At every turn, they were turned down — not by MONSTERS, not by agents of CORRUPTION, but by ordinary people who complimented them on their "special effects" or castigated them for their crass hoax. In no case were they believed for a moment.

When Angus was in despair that his tape would have no worth, Vahide Dincer came to him and asked him to show it — not to men in suits in the cities who could deny it as a fantasy, but to the people who were in it, the villagers who were seen within, fleeing from and falling to the UNBURIED.

Even these people — people who were there, who had seen the HORROR firsthand! — had trouble believing THE TRUTH. But they could not deny that they appeared on the tape, and once they admitted that, the veil of DELUSION fell. Like Georgette, they were afraid at first, without the direct protection of the PANTHEON. But THE BLESSED PROPHET, in her great goodness, comforted them and swore to their protection. So great was her love that she opened SAFE HAVEN to them — as to the rest of us — and set them to work restoring the farm, tending the sheep and performing other needed labors. Much work was needed, for THE PROPHET had seen more and revealed new wisdom to us all.

We of the CHOSEN joined her at the TEMPLE as well — all save Adil and Sezen. We worked to restore the land and raise fences. We built places to hide our weapons and

places to practice firing them and places to fire on intruders from safety. Through all this, Adil and Sezen remained in Istanbul, tending to his business and her marriage.

BOOK OF DOCTRINE, CHAPTER 4

The Prophet called together all who knew The Truth and shared with them more wisdom and deeper revelations.

"Each of us — every woman and man — was meant to live in the light and peace of the FOURFOLD PANTHEON, but humankind became weak, greedy and angry, and for that reason we are plagued by ABOMINATIONS of our own making.

"In their goodness, the FOURFOLD PANTHEON could not leave their beloved humanity unprotected forever. By their HOLY POWER they have made some people — ordinary people, weak people, people who deserved no measure of sacred love — into the CHOSEN. I am the first of the CHOSEN, and Angus is the second, and Mila is the third.

"The CHOSEN have powers and protections that others lack, and for that reason, they are to be honored and obeyed above all others. It is not that we are deserving! I, weak, sinful, a criminal, was less deserving than all of you, yet I was given the greatest of our gifts! Take heart from this — for if the PANTHEON can love me, who was a liar, a deceiver and a panderer, how much more worthy are you who till the soil? Who raise children? Who are the very stuff and fabric of ordinary life? Do not envy our power, for it is a burden and a great responsibility.

"You — the UNTOUCHED, the simple folk who have heard not the call of a GODDESS or GOD, but who remained pure of CORRUPTION nonetheless — you are more important than the CHOSEN! Yes, you are more important than me or Adil or Angus or Fadime — or all of us together! For when the ordinary people are roused against EVIL, and when they — they who are just like you! — see THE TRUTH, then the day of cleansing will truly be at hand!

"There are others who are neither UNTOUCHED nor CHOSEN — those who are not themselves CORRUPT, but whose lives are entwined with CORRUPTION and who, if forced to choose, would defend the EVIL that warps them. These DARKENED souls — weakened by a life of luxury and consumption and tainted medicines — deserve not our scorn or anger, but our mercy. Georgette, whom I love and owe my life, was once DARKENED, but she has become UNTOUCHED by the mercy of the FOURFOLD PANTHEON. It is to them — to the westernized, modernized, anaesthetized DARKENED — that we must reach out now. But the stern tools we used to teach you — the tapes, the purification sessions and education labors — these are too strong for the DARKENED. When we bring them to the TEMPLE, they must be showered with love and patience. Treat them as you would a child, for in truth, their souls are those of infants. They have dwelt their entire lives in the shadows of EVIL, and their eyes cannot quickly adapt to the LIGHT OF TRUTH as you have done.

"When the DARKENED try your patience, save that rage and hatred for the truly CORRUPT — for those ABOMINATIONS that lurk behind every hungry child, behind every unjust judge, behind every war and famine. The DARKENED know no better,

and for them there is mercy. The CORRUPT are the source of all this world's ills and for them there is no mercy."

BOOK OF CHRONICLES, CHAPTER 11

Not all who joined us were the common folk of the village. One who came to see THE PROPHET was another westerner — not one of the GODLY, like Fadime or Galip or myself — but an anthropologist and student of human belief. His name was Ethan Lormier, and though he was a doubter at first, he was destined to become one of the RIGHTEOUS. He came to us after hearing distorted and jumbled versions of our preaching from the unbelievers in the region — some of whom had seen Angus' holy tape and still remained in doubt.

Altogether more wondrous was the appearance of Johann Mies, who had come all the way from Austria. Johann, praised be his name, was one of the CHOSEN as well, but was strange and secretive. He declined to stay at SAFE HAVEN, preferring a hotel in Istanbul instead. By the order of THE PROPHET, we kept him at arm's length. She chose to deal with him personally, wisely understanding how his imperfect understanding of the PANTHEON might confuse the UNTOUCHED at the GREAT TEMPLE.

The mysterious Mukhfi — a man who seemed to be CHOSEN but unwilling to join us — contacted us once again. Like us, he had been following the CORRUPT in Istanbul. Amazingly, this one hidden individual had learned almost as much about them as we — a dedicated group of twenty! THE PROPHET was very suspicious at first, thinking that perhaps this Mukhfi was being manipulated unaware — or even directly — by some ABOMINATION. He sent her messages in the SACRED SIGNS of the BLACK GOD, but she wisely remained concerned about his information as long as he refused to show his face.

Mukhfi claimed that the CORRUPT police Dörtlük and Kayar were both servants of a greater EVIL — of creatures like Cobra Juan, DEATH DRINKERS who could not move by day. He said that Cobra Juan had been a member of one group of DEATH DRINKERS, but that Kayar was controlled by a different group — one that concerned itself less with vice and illegal trades and more with the military and the customs service. Mukhfi gave us names and addresses, and when we looked with SACRED SIGHT we found that much of what he told us was true.

In her thirst for righteousness, THE PROPHET longed to purge them all, but Angus cautioned her against the pride and bloodlust that can cloud true judgment. They were as abominable to his sight as to hers, but he said that we ought to reach with caution and proceed with care. "A man can come to a mountain and be unable to leap it in one bound. But with many small, careful movements, he can surmount it safely."

THE PROPHET smiled upon these words and hung her head, saying, "In truth, your words are wiser than mine." In this she taught the FIFTH LESSON: Even the wise must

listen to others, for even the wise can speak foolishly, and even the fool can sometimes be wise.

As we learned more of the DEATH DRINKERS, we came to be troubled by one of the DARKENED — a police officer who had no TAIN'T about him, but whose cynicism and reactionary beliefs made him a great threat and obstacle to us.

This man was named Edouard Çölgecen and he resented our efforts to show THE TRUTH to the DARKENED. He called us a "cult" and a "scam" and suspected us of tricking the weak for their money and service. Yet his supposed concern was really hypocrisy, for he made no mention of our efforts to recruit the UNTOUCHED. No, he had no complaint when we preached to the down-trodden and poor! But when we gave our message of salvation to tourists, to wealthy Turks or to those who had the power and resources to really do something with their knowledge — then he became concerned for their "weak minds and souls."

Hear now how THE PROPHET, in her wisdom, saw good where others saw only ill. Had I, in my unworthiness, been called to lead I should have seen an array of enemies on all sides. THE PROPHET, however, realized that some of our enemies were only allies who had not been approached properly.

Officer Çölgecen, for example, was easily dealt with. All we needed to do was find what THE PROPHET called a "cut out" — a person to be used for our purposes. This cut out, a deeply DARKENED soul peripherally attached to Cobra Juan's clique, was maneuvered into providing money to Officer Dörtlük, while Çölgecen watched from concealment. We are still not sure of all the results of this charade, but within a week Çölgecen was hospitalized — injured and infected from being stabbed with a dirty knife. But before his attack, he arrested many of Dörtlük's associates.

With this weakening of their cabal, THE PROPHET decided it was at last time to strike at one of the filthy roots of the CORRUPTION. One of the vile DEATH DRINKERS made its lair on the island of Büyükada, two hours from Istanbul by boat. With the destruction of Cobra Juan, more of its agents seemed to be coming to Istanbul, staying longer and doing more.

Attacking a MONSTER in its lair, on an island far from the city was a daunting task. Büyükada provided challenges of its own, for the thing's nest lay to the south of the island, in an area where motor vehicles were prohibited. Thus, even if the strike was successful, a safe escape would be difficult.

Adil was of great use, being familiar with boating. He arranged to borrow an associate's yacht for two days during the assault. THE PROPHET arranged for motorcycles to be smuggled onto the island for the use of the group, which she initially planned to lead. Again, it was Angus who cautioned her against such a foolhardy risk,

and Fadime agreed. "You cannot be replaced," she said. "I can. Send me in your place!"

"No," said Angus. "I should go. As a westerner, I'll look less suspicious in such a tourist place."

"Let me go!" said Galip Eroglu. "My powers have grown, and I long to show this scourge the fire of the WHITE GODDESS!"

Soon, all of the CHOSEN were clamoring to go, myself included. Then those UNTOUCHED who had their confidence begged to help as well. But THE PROPHET showed her wisdom again. For the attack she named Galip, Fadime and Ferdi, with Adil on the boat. Then she made a strange addition, saying that Johann Mies should go as well. Angus, Georgette and myself complained, asking why he should be sent instead of us.

"It is a fool that loses what he has by reaching for more — a lesson I learned well in my old and shameful life. Angus, you and I are warriors of the WHITE GODDESS, and we shall stay at SAFE HAVEN to protect it against attack. Sweet Georgette, your spirit is strong but your body is too frail for such a mission — and you can serve us better here. The same holds for you, Mila, favored of the GREEN GODDESS. For you have the gift of true healing, and with you lost, we should all be diminished greatly. Vahide stays here as well, in case we need her shielding POWER."

As for Johann, perhaps this mission is the trial by fire that will show him the FOURFOLD TRUTH of our mission. Let us all pray that his eyes are opened fully."

Alas, Johann gained great glory and honor, but at great cost to us, for we were denied his future heroism. Praise and blessings to Johann Mies, the second martyr to the FOURFOLD PANTHEON. But his death was not in vain. He died as the sin-palace of the DEATH DRINKER burned, taking its UNHOLY mistress and her CORRUPT servants with it.

Henceforth, October 25 is the day of SAINT JOHANN.

BOOK OF CHRONICLES, CHAPTER 12

Saint Johann was not the only one hurt in the attack, though — Green Goddess be praised — he was the only to die. My blessings were taxed to their utmost with Fadime's burns, and though I could close the great bite upon Galip's shoulder, it took days for the venomous fever to leave him.

As I rested, exhausted by my efforts on their behalf, The Prophet and Georgette came into my chamber.

"Mila," asked The Prophet, "If I asked you to give your life for our cause, would you?"

My mouth was dry, but looking into her eyes I said I hoped I would be able to give myself to the Black God, as Cahir and Johann had.

"What if I asked you to tell an untruth? Or to steal? Or to give your body to a man — for the greater good of the PANTHEON? For know that this is not a test, and you may be required to do any or all of these things."

Then I was afraid, but my trust was greater and I said I would do anything required. Georgette hung her head.

"I can do no less," Georgette whispered.

THE PROPHET held her close and I heard her say, *"Your beauty and wealth are your blessings. Believe me, if I could go in your place, I would spare you this duty — compared to the filth in which I used to lay my soul, the embrace of Ethan Lormier is nothing. But it is you he craves, and his knowledge is essential to us."*

As Georgette wept, I learned the SIXTH LESSON: That right and wrong are different for those who know THE TRUTH.

But by Georgette's generosity, Ethan came to live on the compound. He taught us many legends about the CORRUPT, some of which had great use, and some were useful only to show which lies they had spread about their weaknesses. His Peace Corps experience was of great use when it came time to build the hydroponic gardens for the HOLY crops. But his greatest contribution was his vast knowledge of religion, ritual and initiation. With his aid, THE PROPHET was able to break down the resistance to THE TRUTH in an UNTOUCHED or DARKENED soul much more rapidly. Once we built something he called an "altered state of consciousness inducing device," also called a "witches' swing," initiation into the mysteries of the GODS and GODDESSES became much easier. Praise to Ethan who, all unknowing, taught us how to build the CRADLE OF ENLIGHTENMENT.

At the urging of Georgette and THE HOLY PROPHET, Ethan spent almost an entire day in it — for they told him that he could never truly understand our beliefs until he had experienced the REVELATIONS we had. He saw the RAINBOW GOD and emerged a passionate believer in the FOURFOLD TRUTH. These powerful new initiations gave greater insight to Ferdi, who finally told us the full story of his AWAKENING. Even better, with them we finally convinced Sezen that her true place was with us at SAFE HAVEN. There was much rejoicing when she joined us, and there will be more when her divorce becomes final.

Following Johann, another man arrived from Europe, Harlan Crandall. Although he is one of the CHOSEN, THE PROPHET has placed him in ideological quarantine because he is a medical doctor. Now that we have received the doctrine against impure and artificial medicines, we can recognize how much damage they have done throughout history. But due to his training — brainwashing, really — he is resistant to the truth of the GREEN GODDESS. We all pray for the day when his initiation succeeds.

By November, with Ethan's advice, our ranks had swelled to forty UNTOUCHED and fifteen DARKENED, in addition to THE PROPHET's closest disciples — the eight CHOSEN, Georgette and Ethan.

Ethan's quick rise to a place by THE PROPHET's side might have inspired envy in some, but what is the favor of a mortal

woman — no matter how great, BLESSED and inspired! — next to the favor of a GODDESS? It is true that Angus and Ethan had words on occasion, but it was never personal. Ethan was simply more eager to assault the UNCLEAN.

Nevertheless, THE PROPHET was more inclined to hear Ethan's words of aggression than Angus' words of caution. Merely human, perhaps THE PROPHET made an error in this case, for who would listen to the counsel of a normal man when one favored by the BLACK GOD and the WHITE GODDESS was on hand? But Ethan's research indicated that November 4 might be the day when the mad ruler Ibrahim had drowned his concubines — and this year, the anniversary fell on a full moon. (He could not be sure of the exact date due to conflicting historical sources and some uncertainties about the calendar.) THE PROPHET declared that on November 4, she personally would go to Topkapi palace, accompanied by Vahide, Ferdi, Angus and Adil. Again, I asked permission to fight by her side, and again I was told my gifts of healing were too precious to risk.

Unlike the vampire of Büyükada, this frontal assault did not destroy its target. But by the same token, no one involved was killed. Still, Ferdi was taken by the police and he has not yet been returned to us. There is little hope that he can avoid being convicted, but we have much hope that he will not name our names or tell them that the FOURFOLD CHURCH is involved.

I have watched Angus' tape of these events and heard the stories of those who were present, and I can say with pride and honesty that no one acted shamefully. But the ghost of Deli Ibrahim is old, powerful, angry — and above all, cunning.

The women, as was usual, wore *chadhor*, but no one carried guns. THE PROPHET had seen in a vision that ABOMINATIONS like the mad Sultan might be able to make guns fire of their own accord — and that mere pistols would be of no use against it in any event.

When they spied the EVIL SPIRIT, they began to discuss it in mocking tones, speaking of how impotent his reign was, that his mother ruled in truth while he was distracted by the fancies of his weak mind.

This taunting had the desired effect of forcing the spirit to show itself, but its wrath was great. The tape became confusing, but one could clearly see a foreign woman's purse fly through the air, its strap becoming a garrote to be used against Vahide until she used the GREEN GODDESS' power to stop the ghost before it reached her. (The ghost could not be seen on the film, but all the CHOSEN said it was visible.)

Unable to approach Vahide, it struck at Adil. On the tape, one could hear him shout and see him begin clawing at his wristwatch. He told me later that it began to spark and burn him, numbing his entire arm before he got it off. As he was distracted, the walls of the room

began to bleed, sending the other tourists fleeing in panic. Hearing their cries, a security guard rushed into the room and that was when things became very bad.

Vahide and THE PROPHET both saw the FOUL SPIRIT fly to the man and enter him through the mouth. He drew a pistol and immediately shot Vahide in her belly. Next he fired upon Adil, but missed. Then Ferdi — brave, blessed Ferdi! — tackled the possessed man and began wrestling with him for the gun, calling for Vahide to push away the EVIL. Injured, Vahide was unable to overcome the spirit, but brave Angus had grown in the POWER of the GREEN GODDESS too, and like Vahide he was able to force the BEAST back. As Ferdi had hoped, this expelled the foul entity from the guard, but more security guards were coming. A second guard was possessed and fired on Angus, while the rest — unprompted by the mad ghost, but seeing their colleague under attack — also drew their weapons and restrained Ferdi.

All blessings to THE PROPHET, who once more saved a group whose members could not save themselves! Invoking the BLACK GOD, she called forth a great cloud of black smoke, which poured out of her *chadhor* like rain from a thundering sky. The cloud was dense and blinding on the tape, but it seemed that all of the CHOSEN could see through it. They carried Vahide to the waiting van and fled back to the GREAT TEMPLE.

The mood was very bleak at SAFE HAVEN. The BLACK FLOWER eased Vahide's pain, and the merciful GREEN GODDESS had already begun closing her wounds before I could, but the loss of Ferdi left us in great sorrow.

It was THE PROPHET who brought cheer again, by showing us Angus' tape. True, it showed Ferdi attacking the guard — but only after he had drawn his weapon and fired on an unarmed woman. She hoped that with the pressure of this tape, the charges would be dropped — and perhaps the guard could even find THE TRUTH.

BOOK OF CHRONICLES, CHAPTER 13

Even as we planned to free Ferdi, DARK FORCES made plans around us. They moved with silent patience, but when they acted they struck as swiftly as lightning.

In the course of one fell day — November 28, Year One — two of our members were killed, five arrested, three hurt and three simply vanished.

In reverence, we remember SAINT TOMRIS RODITI, one of the UNTOUCHED, who saw the truth and praised the PANTHEON only to be cut down by the cowardly CORRUPT who hit her with a car and drove away.

This same dishonorable strategy was used to kill SAINT OMAR AKURGAL, another of the UNTOUCHED. Only two days earlier had he completed a lengthy praise labor for the RAINBOW GOD. Blessed be his name.

One other believer was struck by a car but escaped with a broken leg. Of the others who were hurt, one was stabbed in a so-called "mugging," and the other was

gassed unconscious on a commuter train and beaten with a metal stick. He surely would have died had not a policeman — fortunately not CORRUPT! — happened to have been passing through from the next car.

Those who were seized by the police were taken under a variety of false charges — two on drug trafficking, one accused of stealing a passport, and one on charges of public drunkenness. Most heinous, THE PROPHET herself was arrested, accused of fraud and smuggling.

At the GREAT TEMPLE, there was much fear and discussion of what to do. It was clear that there was an organized conspiracy against us — that our days of moving unobserved among the UNHOLY were finished. Adil suggested disbanding SAFE HAVEN and "going underground" — continuing to operate in secret and never meeting in groups of more than two or three. But Fadime and Vahide were unwilling to abandon what we had worked so hard to build. Angus felt that our first priority should be to find those who had simply disappeared, but Ethan questioned how important they really were. Were they worth risking the lives of the CHOSEN? Sezen said our first task was to free THE PROPHET, and Georgette and I both agreed. Then Galip said we must also free those who were hospitalized — for, as THE PROPHET had taught, hospitals were the source of the CORRUPTION.

In the end, we decided to pull all the UNTOUCHED out of Istanbul. The DARKENED were told to be cautious, but our enemies had shown little inclination to imprison those who could actually hire lawyers, or to attack westerners who might make trouble. Ethan and a few other select DARKENED would search for the three missing believers, while Georgette and Sezen would get a lawyer for THE PROPHET. Angus said he would try to contact the *Mukhfi* and see if that recluse knew anything about this sudden pogrom. I said I would go to the hospitals and treat our people until they could be released, and Galip came with me.

As we were leaving the first hospital, where I had healed a righteous UNTOUCHED named Aysel Gürsa, Galip softly informed me that one of the CORRUPT had been in the room with us, invisibly watching our injured colleague. He had used his blessing on it and would be able to follow it — but for now it was following us.

I told him we would be foolish to fight it when it was prepared — that we should do our best to evade it and track it later. He disagreed, saying we would be foolish to let it report on our powers to its UNHOLY allies. Instead, he proposed that we split up in a crowded area, meeting up again in half an hour. It could only follow one of us. The other would call the CHOSEN at the HOLY TEMPLE for aid. Then we would meet up again and lead it on astray until the other GODLY arrived. We thought of sending back Aysel, our UNTOUCHED ward, but what if the Abomination followed her instead of us? No, Galip would keep her with him, as he was better able to protect her.

It followed me.

It was silent, invisible to all but me and could move inhumanly fast when I tried to get away from it. I bought some food and tried to act unconcerned, but its nauseating visage ruined what appetite I had. Somehow, its dead face was more ghastly when it did something normal — like calling on a cell phone. I was more chilled thinking of what it might be calling.

When Galip returned he was followed by another of the CORRUPT — not one fully UNHOLY like our pursuer from the hospital, but a POLLUTED mortal, like Tuya Sabry or Soykan Kayar.

Seeing Galip relieved me, even as the sight of a second enemy honed my fear. But I could reveal neither emotion, and I wished I had worn *chador*. Uncomfortable and hot, yes, but behind its veil I would be free to let my horror show.

Galip immediately began talking strangely to me — speaking about “our masters in Athens” being displeased with our recent losses. “If any more operatives are removed, they may stop sending us the drugs,” he said. Then I realized: He was deliberately speaking in a misleading fashion, in case one or both of the creatures escaped.

“If that happened, we’d truly be at their mercy.”

“Don’t worry. They won’t find us. After all, they still think our masters are their friends. If they’re too foolish to realize they’re being betrayed, they’ll never uncover us.” He even managed a fairly realistic laugh.

At that moment, we spotted Adil. He raised an eyebrow at me and ducked down an alley.

“I’ll just be happy to be back at the hideout,” I said as I went after Adil. Galip and our UNTOUCHED ally followed, and the UNHOLY pair skulked behind them.

It had been more than an hour since Galip told me we were being watched, and the anticipation was almost unbearable. But the end was brutally quick.

I remember very little. Adil shouted and drew a weapon. I turned to face our foes, and suddenly I felt the SACRED POWER swell within me. Overcome by the fury of the WHITE GODDESS, I reached out at the hidden BEAST and simply drew its noisome energies into myself with a single breath.

Hissing with rage, it drew a large weapon with a silencer. Its first shot was at Adil, and it shattered his shin, dropping him to the ground — but he never flinched, keeping the CREATURE locked in place with the gaze of the BLACK GOD. Its second bullet went through my belly.

As I fell, I saw Angus with a stake in his hand. I saw Galip seize a piece of scrap lumber. I saw Sezen — once a meek housewife! — charge the creature with a sword held in both hands. I saw the vampire’s minion draw a silenced pistol, and I saw Aysel throw her arms around him to keep him from firing. Then I knew no more.





Steve D'Amico 2002

CHAPTER 3: ...AND FALL

*So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption,
and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be
brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed
up in victory.*

— 1 Corinthians 15:54

HOPE IN DEFEAT?

***THIS TAPE HAS BEEN LABELLED “#8”
BY THE RECORDER***

I'm told I was in a coma for 17 hours. I guess. I sure as hell don't remember anything. They say my hip and leg are broken in a lot of places. It's better than being dead, I suppose.

It's been almost two weeks since we confronted Dalglish. I've been laid up here in the hospital ever since. But I'm finally about to get out. I'm learning to use a wheelchair, and I'm making these tapes again. I just have to pick my moments, when nurses and other patients aren't around.

My memory of things is pretty shaky. When we burst in on Dalglish, he changed right in front of us. He actually became the thing I imaged before. There was a lot of shooting, but it didn't seem to do any good. He threw his desk at us — just picked it up and threw it! I tried to get out of the way, but it caught me and I went right through the window. Three stories up.

Even in that moment, I want to say I saw options — ways things could go. Weird. I guess this was the best one. I may never walk straight again, but it beats the alternative.

I talked to Olsen this morning, trying to catch up on things. I should say Mayor Olsen. He won the election by a landslide after his major competition dropped out. And that's not the only change that's happened. Simpson is dead. I feel bad about that — he was one of us. But it's not the same as losing Briscoe. Sam O'Connor's a hero to the town thanks to the explanation George and Olsen cooked up, and I seem to be popular, too.

They said Simpson was a disgruntled former employee with emotional problems. He set bombs in Four, shot Dalglish and threw me out the window. Sam went to the mine “on a hunch,” and got there just in time to shoot Simpson before he could do more damage. There are inconsistencies there — such as Simpson being cut — but Olsen managed to get them glossed over.

I got a few visitors here. Mostly reporters wanting to hear my version. I toed the party line. Came off as an innocent employee in the wrong place at the wrong time. Somehow, that makes me almost as much a hero as Sam. Crazy.

Shaft Four was completely destroyed by Briscoe's bomb — set on fire, then collapsed under its own weight. Whatever was down there was destroyed, I hope. The whole mine was shut down for a few days, with everyone on full pay. Management never gave the real explanation

of what happened. They said it just collapsed. Maybe they didn't know. Maybe they're covering up. I have to think the latter. Safety inspectors came in and made sure the other shafts were safe. The rest are back in operation now like nothing ever happened.

But that's not true. Because we won. Clarion is ours.

*****RECORDING BREAK*****

I spent today at home, getting things into some kind of order. It's a pain in the ass getting around the basement in a wheelchair, but Dad's helping out with the stairs.

Had a visitor today. George came by to see how I was doing. Filled me in on things. He and Angie have been doing cleanup; looking for the last of the contaminated people and creatures. Apparently a lot of them just sort of fell apart when the mine collapsed. The ones that are left seem directionless, confused.

If there are still ghosts or zombies in town, they're laying low. That kind of worries me. I mean, I know that there's no connection between the taint and the walking dead. They wouldn't have been affected by what happened at the mine. So why are they being quiet?

Maybe Yvonne knows something, but she's still off on her own. Anyway, with Simpson gone, the others seem to have lost the urge to go after the zombies. George... I think George would like to, but he's prepared to let it go. He's got a big streak of "punish the wicked" in him, but he's laid back enough to keep it under control. Angie isn't sharing her thoughts with the others. I don't know why she came back. She doesn't seem to be getting anything out of it.

I told George that as soon as I got back on my feet, I'd start scoping out the town, finding new targets, making new plans. He seemed... well, a little amused by that. I guess Olsen told him there was no hurry, that Clarion was under control. But there's bound to be more out there. We aren't finished by a long shot. I don't think George really wanted to hear that.

I'm going to meet with him again tonight, along with Olsen, and explain where I'm coming from.

*****RECORDING BREAK*****

*****FOLLOWING SECTION MUFFLED BUT AUDIBLE*****

OLSEN: So what exactly are you saying we should do, son?

LYDECKER: Start looking for the source of things. Dalglish was an executive, so we start looking at the company. We head over to their offices in Pittsburgh, do some checking, look out for contamination. If we can get into Pennmine, we can get data, and we work our way up until we find the source. It must be there. Why else would they cover up the explosion?

HARMON: Okay, and then what?

LYDECKER: Destroy it. Bring it down. Kill it dead. Company, creatures, infrastructure, the works. End of story. End of it all.

OLSEN: <PAUSE> Again, and then what?

LYDECKER: What do you mean?

OLSEN: I mean, what happens once you destroy this "source" you think is out there?

LYDECKER: I don't think it is. I know it is!

OLSEN: So you say, even if you don't have any evidence. But in any case, think it through. What happens to Clarion if you shut down the company?

LYDECKER: Well, um...

HARMON: It dies. The mine is the only reason this town exists. It employs 80% of the people who live here. If the mine shuts down — if the company that owns the mine goes out of business — Clarion shuts down.

LYDECKER: <PAUSE> But... but it's still out there—

OLSEN: So you say. But while it might be out there, it's not here. Not anymore. Clarion is safe, and it'll stay safe. But if we follow your theory, we'll be the ones killing this town. Doing more damage than the monsters ever could.

LYDECKER: "More damage?" Are you insane? They kill people! They were poisoning this town, remember? Maybe they're poisoning other places, too.

OLSEN: But not Clarion. Not anymore. As mayor, the safety of this town — and the continued employment of its workers — is my top priority.

LYDECKER: So you'll stand by and watch while they endanger other people, other towns, as long as your precious fucking home keeps working nine to five?

HARMON: Brian, calm down. There's no need for that kind of language—

LYDECKER: Yes there fucking is! We have a responsibility here. Shit, you two think that God gave us this duty. Does God want us to stand by and watch innocent people get killed?

OLSEN: God helps those who help themselves. We look after our own.

LYDECKER: And fuck the rest of the world, is that it?

HARMON: We're not saying that, Brian. But there has to be an answer that doesn't involve closing down the mine or the company. We need to think about this for a while.

LYDECKER: Bullshit! This is straightforward, George, and you know it! Our work isn't done. Everything else is just window dressing. We have a responsibility to finish what we started, and we're going to.

OLSEN: No, we're not.

LYDECKER: Excuse me?

OLSEN: Even if you're right — I'm not saying you're lying, just that you might be letting your emo-

tions get the better of you — it doesn't change the facts. We're not here to chase smoke and run around Pennsylvania looking for monsters. We're here to protect Clarion. And we're not going to do anything to jeopardize the town's only reason to exist.

LYDECKER: <PAUSE> You fucking coward.

HARMON: Brian—

LYDECKER: You worthless piece of shit. You think it's enough to just sit here and nursemaid a little postage-stamp town while the rest of the world rots away? Fine, do what you like. The rest of us have the guts to do what has to be done!

OLSEN: Is that right?

LYDECKER: That's right.

OLSEN: Get out of my office. And don't come back until you grow the hell up and start being sensible.

LYDECKER: Fine by me. George?

HARMON: I'll, ah... I'll catch up with you, Brian.

LYDECKER: Whatever.

RECORDING BREAK

FOLLOWING SECTION MUFFLED BUT AUDIBLE

JACKMAN: So how are you doing?

LYDECKER: Okay, I guess. The leg hurts. But when I think of what we accomplished... I don't mind so much.

JACKMAN: Very noble of you.

LYDECKER: I try. <PAUSE> You, um... never visited me when I was in the hospital.

JACKMAN: I know. Sorry. I thought about it. But the odds of running into Olsen or one of the others... not something I wanted to do.

LYDECKER: Maybe you should start thinking about that. You can't stay on the outside forever.

JACKMAN: Jesus, Brian. Don't start on me.

LYDECKER: I have to, Yvonne. You can't stay on your own. It's too dangerous. It only takes one thing going crazy and you're in trouble.

JACKMAN: I'm not worried about talking to the things out there. I know the risks, and I'm ready for them. But I don't trust the others. They lied to me. They used you. And you keep defending them.

LYDECKER: Okay, sure, they lied. They went behind my back, too. The point is, it doesn't matter. They're all we've got, Yvonne. It's them or nothing.

JACKMAN: I'm okay with nothing.

LYDECKER: Bullshit you are! I know Angie's still backing you up. I'm not stupid. You like it fine when you can pick and choose your help on your own terms. Why not ask yourself why Angie's still working with the rest of us? She realizes that she can't do it alone, either. She knows what there is to gain—

JACKMAN: What? Are you serious? Are you actually so blind that you don't know why Angie came back?

LYDECKER: What... what do you mean?

JACKMAN: She's not working with you because she wants to, Brian. She came back because Olsen forced her to.

LYDECKER: Forced her?

JACKMAN: He told her that if she didn't come back, he'd take it out on her family. If he became mayor — and hell, the writing was on the wall — then her father would lose his job. That she'd fail school. That maybe drugs would turn up in her mother's desk at work.

LYDECKER: You're kidding. You're kidding!

JACKMAN: I fucking wish. She told me all about it. She was on the verge of tears half the time. On the verge of beating Olsen's brains out the other half.

LYDECKER: This... this is crazy.

JACKMAN: Welcome to the real world, Brian.

LYDECKER: Well, it's over now! If Olsen thinks he can manipulate everyone.... If he thinks I'm just going to sit here and watch him use people for his jollies, he's fucked in the head. I've had enough of him and his Quaker bullshit! He's not even one of us, for fuck's sake! He's out! I'll get the others together tonight. I'm going to lay down the law on this.

JACKMAN: I hope you're right, Brian. I hope you're right.

RECORDING BREAK

Good, that'll be Sam to pick me up. I want to ask him some things, so I'll leave the recorder on.

FOLLOWING SECTION MUFFLED BUT AUDIBLE

LYDECKER: Come on down, Sam. I'm almost ready. Just give me a hand with the stairs and... <PAUSE> Oh, I, um... I thought you were someone else.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE: Sorry to disappoint you.

LYDECKER: Look, ah... can I help you? Did my parents let you in?

FIRST MALE: The mayor sent us to let you know that your presence won't be required tonight.

LYDECKER: Excuse me? He told you what?

SECOND MALE: What, are you deaf and crippled?

FIRST MALE: That isn't necessary. We don't need to go there yet.

LYDECKER: Is this some sort of joke?

FIRST MALE: No. The mayor would like to thank you for your assistance in the past. You did a lot to help Clarion, and we're all grateful for that.

LYDECKER: Who's "we"?

SECOND MALE: Don't be fucking cute. We're all in the same little club. You just didn't know about us.



LYDECKER: That's impossible.

FIRST MALE: Lots of things are possible. It's entirely possible that if you start acting more sensibly and work with the mayor, you'll be welcome to rejoin the rest and protect the town. But that depends on you getting a clue.

LYDECKER: Fuck you.

FIRST MALE: Fine.

SOUND OF SCUFFLE. SOUND OF CRASHING METAL.

FIRST MALE: You're supposed to be a smart guy. Listen to reason.

SECOND MALE: Make any more trouble and we'll "talk" to your parents next time. Got it?

FIRST MALE: We'll see ourselves out.

SOUND OF FOOTSTEPS RECEDING. SOUND OF HEAVY, PAINED BREATHING CONTINUES FOR SEVERAL SECONDS

RECORDING BREAK

This is usually the time when I get drunk and babble. But maybe that's just one of several habits I need to break.

After those two beat me up, I just stayed on the floor for a while, angry and sore — and scared. My folks didn't even know they came in. I called Yvonne and asked for help. She used her healing gift on me. The bruises cleared up and I can actually put some weight on my hip now. Her kiss... led to a little more. I'll leave it at that. But I think there might be a future there.

Future. Right. If Olsen will let me have a future.

I want to get back at him. Take the bastard down and teach him a lesson. But how the fuck do I do that? Run over his foot with my wheelchair? He's got money, power and backup, and the will to use them. I've got nothing — and I'm afraid. I don't want to be beaten up again. I don't want to be in danger. I don't want to put my parents in danger.

<PAUSE>No one called to ask why I didn't come to the meeting. Not even George. Maybe Olsen told them I cancelled it. Or maybe they're all laughing at the loser in his parent's basement, and they're glad I was taught a lesson.

I want to hit back. But maybe I need to accept the possibility that I can't hit back. That the rest of the group is siding with Olsen now. Maybe I need to accept that he's right.

We did our part. We saved the town. If the rest of them can be content with that, maybe I should be too. I can be part of the group — if I toe the line, help out, don't make waves. I can still make a difference.

Why does that make me sick to my stomach?

RECORDING BREAK

It's been a week since I used this thing. I thought it might be better to talk to other people for a while, not just myself. Get some things out in the open. Get stuff done.

Well, stuff is done. Plans have been made. And it's time to bring things up to date.

I started a new job at the mine — a promotion, to reflect my new status as victim and hero. It's middle management, doing admin. I'm pretty good at it. I could probably stick to it for years if I wanted to. But a week was enough to make me realize that I don't want to.

I'm out of the wheelchair, which is good. Every time I looked at that thing I thought of Briscoe. Of my failures. No wonder I was thinking of giving up and falling in step with Olsen and his gang.

Being with Yvonne has helped. Things... things are going well there. Real well. I've been with her on some of her "outings," talking with ghosts and the dead. It's really strange, seeing her sitting in the cemetery, giving advice to a rotting person. But it seems to work. They stay calm. They don't attack her. Beats facing things that throw you out windows.

One of them had some disturbing news. The destruction of Shaft Four didn't affect the dead. I knew it wouldn't. If anything, there are more ghosts and zombies coming back since the shaft blew. But they're not getting out and causing trouble — they're laying low. Yvonne says something is hiding them, holding them back.

Of course, that's not my problem — it's Olsen's.

Communication between me and the others is strained. I called George every hour of the day until he'd finally speak to me. God knows what his wife thinks is going on. We had a drink and pussyfooted around things for a while until I came straight out and asked him what the fuck was going on.

He's in a bad spot. He and Olsen go back years — they're friends, they're both Quakers, they both worked with the union. Hell, I think they served in Vietnam together. And George thinks Olsen's right — that Clarion is the top priority. That we can't do anything to jeopardize the town, or the mine.

But at the same time, he and I have become friends. And he really doesn't like what Olsen's goons did to me. He's not that fond of the newcomers, period. Their names are Fiddler and Renwick. Olsen kept them hidden from us. Two "secret weapons" held in reserve if he needed to throw some weight around. Olsen told the group that I'd threatened him and he'd acted in self-defense, but it sounds like none of them believed him.

I told George I couldn't work with Olsen, not now, not ever. That I wouldn't work against him, that I was still here to fight the things — but on my terms, not his. George understood that. I think he'd like to get away from Olsen as well, but it's too late — he's in too deep. Olsen isn't going to allow any more defections.

As a gesture of good will — and a way of getting things done — I told George about what I'd seen at the mine at the beginning of the week. Two guys came up from Pittsburgh to speak to the new manager. I looked at them that way as they went into his office and saw that they were wrong. I passed the info I had to George — where they were staying, the license number of their car, all the facts I could dig up.

He called me yesterday and said it was taken care of. Sam and Fiddler pulled them over outside town, with Fiddler wearing a spare police uniform. All straightforward, just checking their license. Then they pushed shotguns through the car's windows and blew the bastards to pieces. They dumped the car and the remains in the forest. That's good, I guess.

But that's what worries me, and why I haven't started making my own plans yet. Olsen knows what he's doing, and he is protecting the town. Clarion is safe, and he's keeping it safe. If I work against him, if I start trying to take things further, I could jeopardize that. I could counteract all the good work that the bastard is doing — all that we've done.

Do I have the right? Is this just my ego lashing out? I've been thinking about it all week. And I've come to a conclusion.

Fuck him.

A town is more than buildings and businesses. More than geography. It's people. And if the mine closes, people won't die. They'll be hurt, sure, inconvenienced. They'll need to move to a new town, find new jobs, build things from the ground up. But they'll be alive. And that's more than can be said for the people who've died so far. More than can be said for the world once they finish poisoning it.

It'd be easy to roll over and let Olsen have his way. Hell, I want to let it go. I don't want to be hurt or killed! But we were given this job for a reason. I was given this job for a reason. I know it. And while I might not know what that reason is yet, I do know that we're not done. And that means I can't let it go.

I've been checking the mine's records after work for the last few days, examining accounts and running numbers. Pennmine used to be a major independent mining company, years ago, but it dwindled over time into a fairly minor and shaky one. It was bought out in the early '90s by Eastern Mining Limited. That's owned by Consolidated Coal and Slate, which is controlled by Allied US Metals, blah, blah, blah. I think it goes all the way up to the international level with Endron. I don't know if Endron is owned by another company.

Somewhere up the ladder is the source of everything. We need to find it. Destroy it. And then we can work out how to cope with the consequences.

I don't know if I can do this without help. Olsen's money and influence made a lot of things possible. I have no backup. No muscle. Apart from a shotgun, I don't have any of the tools or equipment that Olsen supplied. But fuck it, I have to try.

Yvonne says she'll go with me. I might be able to get Angie, Sam and George on my side, too. If that's not enough... well, I'll think of something. I have to.

I've spent the last week living like an escaped prisoner. Head down. Trying not to attract attention. Now that I'm actually doing something, I feel like I can breathe again. I have to believe that means I'm doing something right.

END OF TAPE

THIS TAPE HAS BEEN LABELLED "#9" BY THE RECORDER

BACKGROUND SOUNDS INDICATE BAR OR RESTAURANT

It's about 4:30 and I'm sitting in the bar, waiting for one of the things. Jesus Christ!

Ever since last week, I've been trying to gather any information I could on the taint, Pennmine, the town... anything that might give me an edge. So far, I've got nothing. I was hoping I could interrogate an honest-to-God monster, but there don't seem to be any tainted people around anymore.

A couple of days ago, this guy came into the main office. Stood out like a sore thumb. People in Clarion don't wear Armani suits or drive Lexus convertibles. This guy was all East Coast flash. He asked if the manager was in, which he wasn't. He didn't leave a name or make an appointment. He just said he'd come back. So as he was leaving, I polished my glasses. Straight away, I knew he wasn't normal. I decided to follow him.

It's hard to trail someone when you walk with a limp and don't have a car. But Clarion's not a big town, and there are only so many places out-of-towners go. I kept an eye out for his car and found him staying at the better of our two hotels. I asked around some of the bars and stores to see if Mister Armani had been in. Turned out he'd been asking questions himself — about the mine, about any "strange events" that had happened. Odd behavior, for a monster.

I took the next day off. Lingering injuries are a good excuse for sick days. I kept an eye on the guy. He spent a lot of time driving around town, looking at the sights. I borrowed Yvonne's car. Toward the end of the day, he started up the mountain, heading into the woods. I took a shortcut, got to a good vantage point and used my binoculars to watch him. He parked off the side of the road and headed into the woods. That's when I lost him. Or I thought I did. But then I saw a gray wolf running through the trees — in an area where wolves were wiped out decades ago. I headed back home. I don't think he saw me.

Before I read that "hunter-net" site, I wouldn't have made the connection. I don't want to live in a world where animals pretend to be people. But since I do, I need to use what I know. It's the only weapon I've got. So the guy's a wolfman. Fine. I can't ask how. I just need to use that.

There was a time I would have contacted George or Sam about this guy, but not any more. They would just try the same routine they did on the last lot of freaks — and what good would that do? Like it or not, I'm a rival to them now, to Olsen. If I know something they don't, that gives me an advantage. If this thing can give me information, it'll be worth letting it live.

Today I left work at midday. It won't look good come promotion time, but I don't much care. I found the Lexus parked out in the woods again, in roughly the same spot. I left a note under the windshield wiper. It said "Black Nugget, 5 pm."

And now I'm waiting, shitting my pants. I've got a gun under my jacket. Hopefully the creature's too smart to start something in public. Hopefully.

RECORDING BREAK

FOLLOWING SECTION MUFFLED BUT AUDIBLE

LYDECKER: <WHISPERING> He just came through the door. Looking around... I think he's sniffing the air. Now he's coming over... <NORMAL VOLUME> Hey. You want a drink?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Turn off the tape recorder.

LYDECKER: Um... what?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Don't be cute. Turn off the fucking recorder now, or I walk.

LYDECKER: Okay, okay, just a second.

RECORDING BREAK

Holy shit. That was... interesting.

The thing wouldn't give me a name. So I told him he was "Mister Gray," like in *Reservoir Dogs*. I don't think he liked that much.

We danced around things for a while, trying to talk things out without saying anything. I mean, it wasn't a normal conversation, really "So, you're a werewolf, huh? How's that going for you?" But after we got tired of pussyfooting, we put some of our cards on the table.

Gray is a wolfman of some sort. I didn't press him for details. But he's not the same sort of thing that Dalgliesh was — or at least, not exactly the same. There's some sort of feud or war between Gray's people and Dalgliesh's. He came here on "the scent." I told him about the corruption, and that we'd destroyed the lair or nest or whatever in the shaft. He was surprised by that. I don't think he's used to thinking of normal people as anything more than scenery — or maybe food. He wanted to ask questions about us, but I blew him off. Whatever Gray



is, I don't want him knowing more about us than is absolutely necessary.

Once I filled him in, he seemed to lose a lot of interest. He had a mission, I guess — and with the mission already done, he wanted to get back to New York or wherever. I told him that I thought there was more corruption somewhere up the Pennmine chain. I said that I was trying to work out the connections and the money trail, and he dismissed me. Said I should leave that to him, since he had an MBA. Yeah, but you don't have access to the Pennmine accounts and files, I said, which took him down a peg.

Don't get me wrong. This wasn't hanging out and having a beer with a friend. More like two gunfighters with their pistols on the table, or generals at a cease fire. I think we were both looking for a reason to grab our weapons and blow each other away. Gray was a smooth talker, spoke clearly and had a goddamn MBA — but he wasn't human. Raw meat on his breath... he was an animal walking upright, a predator in a fucking designer suit.

But the enemy of my enemy, you know?

He says he's leaving Clarion in the morning. I got a contact number from him, just in case. Said that if I found anything interesting, I might give him a call. Crazy. I'm networking with a monster. But hey, he's out of Clarion, there's been no violence, and I came away with a bit more information than when I started. Yvonne'll be proud.

*****RECORDING BREAK*****

In my quiet moments — down in the basement, when Yvonne's not visiting and my parent's aren't upstairs, when all I have is a laptop and a stereo — I've been putting together a plan. I can't say for certain that it's a good one. I can't say that I know what will happen to Clarion if it works.

But this is what I'm supposed to do, so I may as well get on with it.

I stayed late at work today, to "catch up on paperwork." Once the office was cleared out, I started going through the place. Dalglish's computer was destroyed in the raid, and whatever files and letters he had on the network were forwarded to the head office. But that's okay. I wasn't looking for hard copy. I was looking for visions. I'd gone about as far as my job and computer skills would take me. It was time to go the extra mile. To ask whatever-it-is for a helping hand.

I spent an hour or so looking through files, accessing the server, handling bits of furniture... anything that might have Dalglish's traces on it. It was all just guesswork. I didn't even know if it would work. But eventually, I lucked out. I found a disk in the manager's drawer. It was blank, but it must have held data at some time, and it must have been useful at that. I had a vision of the last time Dalglish handled it — I think.

For a few moments, I saw him and some other guy cut from the same mold. Business suits, briefcases, tumors and corruption. They were in some kind of room with concrete walls, like a sewer maintenance station — but with a desk, and a filing cabinet, and a couple of network servers humming in the background. But the floor was slick with shit and blood, and something was moving in the corner, something... alive. The other freak was giving Dalglish the disk. They were talking, but I couldn't hear them. Everything was quiet.

I watched for a little while, and then things started to waver and lose focus. I concentrated as hard as I could, and the scene blurred around me, like a fast scene change in a movie. When it stabilized, it was still fading — but I was looking at the outside of a building, a small office in an industrial area. I had enough time to see a street name, and that it was a Pennmine office. Then I was back at the mine.

There can only be so many Pennmine offices in the state. It shouldn't take me too long to work out where it is. And once I know, I'm going.

RECORDING BREAK

FOLLOWING SECTION MUFFLED BUT AUDIBLE

JACKMAN: So what is this place?

LYDECKER: It's a small Pennmine office in Pittsburgh. Not the main one. Just one of the little regional development branches.

JACKMAN: And you had a dream about it?

LYDECKER: Sort of. I think it's another source of corruption, but a smaller one. And they've got computers there. I think if I can get access to those servers, we can get some solid information — names, addresses, sites. Places to target.

JACKMAN: Assuming you can get in there. And that it's not guarded. And that whatever monsters that are down there won't kill you.

LYDECKER: Assuming they don't kill us.

JACKMAN: Excuse me?

LYDECKER: I need your help. I can't do this alone. I need you. I need your brains and your abilities. And just, you know... your support.

JACKMAN: I kind of figured you'd ask me. I'm not saying "no." Not yet. But face facts, Brian. You and I aren't exactly Bonnie and Clyde here. We're not the best in the world at facing things that fight back.

LYDECKER: I know. But I didn't say it would be just the two of us. I'm going to talk to Sam. See if he's in. Maybe Angie, although I doubt her parents will let her get away. And there are a couple of people from outside Clarion that I think will help.

JACKMAN: What, that crane salesman?

LYDECKER: Yeah, hopefully. And maybe one other guy. I'll fill you in on him if he agrees.

JACKMAN: Keeping secrets from me now?

LYDECKER: Just waiting for the right moment. I'd never keep secrets from the woman I love.

JACKMAN: <PAUSE> That's the first time that word's come up.

LYDECKER: Yeah, well... no matter how much I plan, this is going to be dangerous. Seems like you should know where I stand before we get in too deep.

JACKMAN: Oh, I knew. I guess there's nothing like the threat of dying to make everyone honest.

RECORDING BREAK

FOLLOWING SECTION MUFFLED BUT AUDIBLE

HARMON: Thanks for seeing me, Brian.

LYDECKER: George... I respect you. You know that. You're a friend. But Olsen....

HARMON: Look, forget about Olsen for a minute. This is just you and me.

LYDECKER: Okay. Want a beer?

HARMON: Sure. <PAUSE> I was talking with Sam yesterday.

LYDECKER: Oh yeah?

HARMON: He told me about the conversation he had with you about this plan.

LYDECKER: Great. Nice to know he can keep his mouth shut.

HARMON: He wasn't ratting on you. He's concerned about you, and he told me because he knows I worry about you too.

LYDECKER: Still pretty damn presumptuous of him. He knows that Olsen has me on his shit list.

HARMON: Like I said, forget about Olsen. This doesn't involve him and he doesn't know I'm here with you.

LYDECKER: Really?

HARMON: Don't get me wrong. I agree with Dan on a lot of things. I think he's doing a good job keeping the town safe — even if I don't like some of his methods. But that doesn't make you my enemy. Having his... his men beat you up was totally out of line.

LYDECKER: That's.... I appreciate that, George. I really do.

HARMON: Anyway, Sam told me about this plan of yours. You're really going to go through with it?

LYDECKER: Yes. And don't give me that argument about how it'll hurt the town. That's not going to stop me.

HARMON: I'm not trying to stop you. I'm just trying to get it all on the table. Sam also told me some disturbing things — like you getting help from them. Tell me he was wrong!

LYDECKER: No. I've... made contact with someone. Not the sort of creature we've been fighting. Let me make that clear. But he's not like us, either. What's important is that he hates the tainted things as much as we do, and he'll work with us if it means hurting them. Remember, the enemy of my enemy—

HARMON: Is still an enemy. I can't believe you'd do something this risky, this stupid! How can you trust this... whatever it is?

LYDECKER: I don't have to trust him, George. I just have to work with him. I was able to work with Olsen and Simpson without trusting them.

HARMON: That's not the same.

LYDECKER: Isn't it? At least if Gray tries to take advantage of me, I'll be expecting it. It won't be a stab in the back from someone I thought was an ally.

HARMON: <PAUSE> When are you planning on doing this?

LYDECKER: We'll drive over to Pittsburgh on Friday and go into the site on Saturday night. We should be back by Sunday night if all goes well.

HARMON: Doesn't leave a lot of time for us to prepare.

LYDECKER: What do you mean, "us"?

HARMON: Do you seriously think I'm going to watch you put your life on the line? You need help. We've been together from the beginning.

LYDECKER: But... but you don't want the mine to be jeopardized!

HARMON: No, I don't. But I don't want you to get killed, either. And anyway, the things are still out there. Whether or not we agree on what the final solution should be, right now there's evil that needs to be dealt with. And that's the task God charged me with.

LYDECKER: I... I don't know what to say.

HARMON: Just help me come up with an excuse for the wife about why I'm going to Pittsburgh.

RECORDING BREAK

It's Friday evening. I'm standing in the men's room of a gas station on the way to Pittsburgh. It stinks in here. Someone kicked in a toilet and there's piss, brown water and used condoms on the floor. But none of that means anything to me, because I'm happy.

We're driving in George's van — me, him and Yvonne. We started out pretty strained, lots of tension. But you drive for an hour and that sort of thing starts to give. You've got to talk to other people just to stay sane. So we talked and we listened and the ice broke. Tonight we're staying at a motel, and we'll meet Mr. Gray and the salesman tomorrow.

I'm realizing that for me, this is the best part, this is the point — putting together a team to go after a goal. Getting these people together and finding common

ground, making a plan and working with them. Actually going through with it is important, of course, more important — but this is the part that I'm best at. Where I feel like I have a purpose.

Nothing can stand in our way when I feel like this.

RECORDING BREAK

FOLLOWING SECTION MUFFLED BUT AUDIBLE

HARMON: It doesn't look like much.

LYDECKER: Trust me. All the bad stuff is down below.

SALESMAN?: Where's Gray?

LYDECKER: He parked a few blocks away. Said his car would be too conspicuous on the street. I agreed. He'll be here soon.

HARMON: Sooner he's here the better.

JACKMAN: You want his help that bad?

HARMON: I want him here where I can see him.

JACKMAN: I don't know, George. He seemed pretty sincere about this.

SALESMAN: I have to admit, I lean a little toward what George is saying. This "Gray" is the odd one out here. We need to be cautious.

LYDECKER: Cautious is good, Travis. Paranoia isn't. I don't much trust him myself, but I think he's playing fair.

HARMON: You better be right, Brian, or else we're all in a world of trouble.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE. GRAY?: You always were.

LYDECKER: Jesus!

TRAVIS: For God's sake, don't sneak up on us like that!

GRAY: Get over it.

HARMON: Watch your mouth, mister.

GRAY: Or what? What?

LYDECKER: Lose the attitude, both of you! We're here to do a job. Gray, is the coast clear?

GRAY: Yes.

LYDECKER: Let's get across the street and under cover.

SOUNDS OF MOVEMENT

LYDECKER: Okay Gray, you said you can deactivate the security system and the locks?

GRAY: Being done as we speak. <PAUSE> All clear. Lead the way.

HARMON: How'd you...?

LYDECKER: Through here. I think... there should be a set of stairs at the side.

SOUNDS OF MOVEMENT

HARMON: We still clear?

TRAVIS: Quiet as a mouse. No sign of anything moving up here.

LYDECKER: Okay, here's the stairwell. Gray, maybe you better go first.

GRAY: Don't get any ideas, old man.

SOUNDS CONSISTENT WITH DESCENT OF STAIRS

JACKMAN: God, it smells awful.

TRAVIS: Try not to step in the stream. I think it's raw sewage.

HARMON: I see a light up ahead. This look right to you, Brian?

LYDECKER: Yeah... I guess....

GRAY: You were right. Office and servers.

TRAVIS: Where's this tunnel go?

GRAY: Probably down to their hive. That's our next stop, after we finish with these computers.

JACKMAN: Brian, you okay?

LYDECKER: I don't know. Something's not right.

HARMON: Everything's here, just like you said.

LYDECKER: Yeah, but... if no one is here, why are the lights on?

SOUND OF A SUDDEN, EXTREMELY LOUD HOWL, AND OTHER UNDESCRIBABLE NOISES.

TRAVIS: Jesus, get down!

SOUND OF A CONFLICT AND GUNFIRE.

HARMON: Yvonne, use your shotgun!

LYDECKER: There are more behind them, a lot more! We have to get out!

GRAY: <DISTORTED AND GUTTURAL> Not yet! Pull the guts out of those servers!

TRAVIS: I can't hold them all back! There's too many!

HARMON: Oh god! My leg! My leg!

LYDECKER: George!

GRAY: Get the fucking server, you idiot!

JACKMAN: George, stay there!

TRAVIS: No, stay down!

LYDECKER: Yvonne!

SOUNDS OF STRUGGLE.

LYDECKER: Let me go! Fucking let me go—

RECORDING BREAK

LYDECKER'S SPEECH NOTABLY SLURRED IN THIS SECTION AND OFTEN DISTORTED BY SOBBING

Dead. I think they're all dead.

PAUSE

No matter how much I drink, I can't forget any of it.

They were waiting for us. There were so many of them, all corrupt and... They swarmed out of the tunnel. And there were... were....

PAUSE

They're all dead. I keep coming back to that. George. Yvonne. Oh god, Yvonne....

Gray... I don't know how he did it, but he got me out of there. He grabbed me, and then he was running. Last I saw, Travis was following us. I don't know if he made it out. The next thing I knew, we were at George's van. Gray threw me and the servers in the back and drove back to the hotel.

If I had my gun I would have killed him or myself, or both of us. I tried to fight him, but he hit me. When I came to, I was in the hotel. Gray was gone, along with the servers. It was way too late to do anything to save them.

I can't get it out of my head.

Oh god, Yvonne....

RECORDING BREAK

Don't ask me why I came back to Clarion instead of just throwing myself in front of a truck or something. Maybe I'm a coward — too scared to die, even if it's what I deserve. Or maybe it's because I still have a job to do and I can't just quit, no matter how much I want to.

Something's going on in town. There were roadblocks along the access road coming in. Cops said there was a motorcycle gang on a rampage. That sounds pretty unlikely for Pennsylvania. Maybe the things are on the loose or something. Maybe there's more I can do before I leave. A chance to make up for my mistakes.

Time to go and see Olsen. I did a lot of thinking on the way back from Pittsburgh — thoughts I didn't want to have. I think I know why things went wrong — and Olsen better have the answers I want.

RECORDING BREAK

FOLLOWING SECTION MUFFLED BUT AUDIBLE

RENWICK: Keep your hands where I can see them.

LYDECKER: No problem. What's going on? Seems like things are pretty tense around here.

FIELDING: The things are on a rampage — lots of 'em.

RENWICK: Don't tell him anything!

FIELDING: Fuck you, Renwick. You don't order me around.

RENWICK: Do as you're fucking told! Mayor's orders!

FIELDING: <SOFTLY> Asshole.

LYDECKER: Oh, hey. Good morning, Mister Mayor.

OLSEN: You stupid goddamn little bastard. You just couldn't leave well enough alone, could you?

LYDECKER: Guess not.

OLSEN: Are you happy now, you little prick? Are you happy now that you've gotten people killed?

LYDECKER: I'm guessing Sam told you about what we were up to.

OLSEN: O'Connor's a good man. He cares about this town, which is more than I can say for you.

LYDECKER: And you care about it so much that you'd sell us out to the monsters.

OLSEN: <PAUSE> You better watch your mouth, boy.

FIELDING: What are you talking about? You're the one teaming up with that thing in the first place.

LYDECKER: <PAUSE> Gray didn't betray us. He left when he had what he wanted, but he didn't warn them that we were coming. That had to have come from someone else.

OLSEN: You two wait outside. Get ready to hit the junkyard.

FIELDING: But—

OLSEN: Now, damn it!

*****SOUND OF MOVEMENT, DOOR SLAMMING*****

LYDECKER: You can't intimidate Angie for much longer, you know. She'll kill you if she gets the chance.

OLSEN: Go to hell.

LYDECKER: I don't know, but I can make a guess. I think that Pennmine sent a few more "investigators" up to Clarion — but that this time, you had a little audience with them. You did that whole negotiation thing you're so good at and cut a deal. Leave Clarion alone and we leave you alone. Keep the mine running, the people employed and we'll look the other way when you poison the rest of the entire fucking state.

OLSEN: You can't prove any of that.

LYDECKER: I don't need to prove anything, you worthless prick. You fucking murderer!

OLSEN: You think you're so smart, you little cocksucker. I did what I had to do to protect this town! We're the only thing keeping these people from contamination and bankruptcy. I won't have worthless scum like you and Jackman hurting Clarion!

LYDECKER: You including George in there, too?

OLSEN: <PAUSE> I didn't know he was with you. He should have been smarter than that.

LYDECKER: He was smart. He was brave, too. They all were. And now they're dead, thanks to you!

OLSEN: Don't try anything, Lydecker. You're outnumbered here.

LYDECKER: Don't worry, I'm calm. Calmer than you. Having a zombie problem, huh? Sorry to hear that.

OLSEN: We can deal with it. We've dealt with everything else.

LYDECKER: Back when you had someone to play spotter. Back when you had someone who could actually talk to the dead and find out what was going on. But you don't have either now, do you? All you have now are guns and no ideas.

OLSEN: You think I don't know what you're doing? You want me to have you killed, don't you? Alleviate all your guilt. Make you a martyr. Prove that I'm the bastard. Well, tough shit. When the rest of the

world crumbles, Clarion will still stand. I'll make whatever sacrifices I have to, and I'll face my God with pride.

LYDECKER: Face Him now, then.

*****SOUND OF GUN BEING COCKED*****

LYDECKER: Your boy Renwick isn't anywhere near as competent as he thinks. He should have searched me a lot better.

OLSEN: Don't be an idiot. You won't leave alive if you shoot.

LYDECKER: Whatever you say, Mister Mayor. <SHOUTING> All of you, get in here, now!

*****SOUND OF MOVEMENT, DOOR OPENING*****

RENWICK: What the fuck?

LYDECKER: Tell them, Olsen. Tell them what you did or I'll blow your fucking head off.

FIELDING: Brian, what are you doing?

OLSEN: You don't have the guts, boy.

LYDECKER: You think I have anything left to lose? Tell them what you did to George and Yvonne, what you did to all of us, or I swear you'll die before I do!

FIELDING: Yvonne? What's happened to Yvonne?

OLSEN: I... I, uh—

RENWICK: Fuck this shit!

*****SOUND OF GUNSHOT. RENWICK(?) SCREAMS*****

OLSEN: John!

FIELDING: No!

*****SOUND OF A SCUFFLE*****

LYDECKER: No! Come back here, you bastard!

*****SOUND OF GUNSHOT*****

LYDECKER: Shit! Angie, help me get out of here!

FIELDING: Fuck you!

LYDECKER: Shit! Shit!

*****SOUND OF RAPID MOVEMENT, FORCED BREATHING. SOUND OF CAR STARTING.*****

*****RECORDING BREAK*****

"Inherit the Earth."

That was something I read on that hunter-net website. I don't know exactly what it means, but it stuck with me. I'm not inheriting the Earth, though. I'm not inheriting anything. The only legacy I'm leaving is failure.

Once again, everything turned to shit. Olsen got away before I could force him to confess to the others about what he'd done. I didn't kill Renwick — Christ, I hope I didn't kill him — but there's no way they'll listen to me now. I just ran out of there as fast as I could, got in George's van and got away. I went home to grab a few things, but there just wasn't time. I didn't even get to say goodbye to Mom and Dad. All I managed to do was throw some clothes in a bag, grab

about half of my tapes, and get out of town before the police found me.

Right now, I'm sitting in the back corner of a diner on the way to Philadelphia. There was a picture of me on the news a while ago. I'm a dangerous lunatic working with the "biker gang" that tore up Clarion. But I shaved my head last night in the van, and I'm not wearing my glasses. I look old and tired and dangerous — not like bright, hopeful "gunman" Brian Lydecker.

I don't know who that guy is anymore, anyway.

So, here's the plan. I'm going to finish this tape and have a cup of coffee. Then I'm putting this tape and the others I grabbed in an envelope, and dropping them in the first mailbox I find. I don't have the list of addresses Travis gave me anymore, but I think I remember a couple of them. Hopefully they'll end up someplace where they'll do some good. If I get the address wrong — well, shit happens.

I think back and all I can see are the mistakes. Mistakes that slowed us down, that screwed us up, that cost lives. I should have told the others about hunter-net, the truth about the dead. I should have paid attention to relationships rather than convince myself that we'd all pull together. I should have been a lot more careful about Pittsburgh. Should have considered the possibility of a trap, or that we were biting off more than we could chew. Should have spent less time planning and more time thinking.

But the worst part is, I'd do it all again.

We were given our abilities, our mission, our sight for a reason, even if we don't know what it is. But it's not a small reason — not "protect a town" or "kill a thing." Those are human goals, human objectives. Whatever's behind it all, its goals are a lot bigger and a lot harder than that.

That doesn't mean we shouldn't make our own goals and purpose. We have to. Without goals we can understand, we're not doing anything. We have to aim for something — but when we reach it, we have to aim for something new. We have to keep going further and further, because stopping at a small success means failing to reach a bigger one.

PAUSE

I miss George... and Yvonne. I'm sorry. I'm... sorry I couldn't save you. Sorry I wasn't able to die next to you.

Sorry that love wasn't enough.

PAUSE

I don't know what I'll do when I get to Philadelphia. I might keep going till I hit Jersey or New York. But at some point, I'll stop. I'll paint a symbol on a wall and wait for the wind to bring me allies. Maybe I'll find Travis. I know I'll fuck it all up again — but not as bad. Not this time. I'll find the source. And when I bring it down, I can rest for a while.

And then work on something new.

END OF TAPE

THE BOOK OF THE FOURFOLD TRUTH

BOOK OF CHRONICLES, CHAPTER 14

They tell me that I woke more than once as they moved me out of the alley and into the van. I remember none of it.

The first thing I remember was waking to Galip's mouth upon mine. But this was no amorous advance. He was breathing the sacred smoke of the BLACK FLOWER into my mouth, to ease my pain, which was very great. Behind him, I could see vague forms, and I could hear the voices of Ethan and Angus, arguing with the man I knew as Harlan Crandall. Ethan was saying that I would rather die than even risk violating doctrine — or that, in any event, I should prefer it, and that they should impute to me the noblest desires. Harlan was adamant that I needed antibiotics. More, he insisted that operating on me would be dangerous enough even with what he deemed "proper anaesthesia." To do it only under the influence of opium (he said) would be to double the risks to my life.

Angus argued doctrine with Ethan, saying that using refined medicines to save a life was not the same as using them impiously, simply for knowledge or pleasure. As they argued, I could see Harlan scrubbing his hands and looking upon our meagre medical equipment with open disdain.

"I suppose it's really too late in any event," he said. "There's no time to get her to a hospital now. Does anyone know her blood type? No? Does anyone know their own blood type? She's going to need transfusions. Lots of them."

Then I felt his cold hands on my side, and the pain took me away once again.

When I came to once more, I saw THE BLESSED PROPHET kneeling by my bedside, praying to the GREEN GODDESS for my health. When my eyes opened, she began to weep with gratitude. She praised Carleton Van Wyk — for that was Crandall's real name — loudly and long, saying that she would give him any boon within her power to grant.

His request was that she build a proper infirmary at SAFE HAVEN, and that she pray for guidance about the use of some medicines for those who were REDEEMED. After much prayer (and much argument from Angus and Ethan), THE PROPHET revealed that it was only CORRUPTED versions of the HOLY plants that were damning. Total anaesthesia was permitted for use on others by initiates of the GREEN GODDESS so long as they were not opium derived. Antibiotics were also deemed appropriate for fighting fevers.

As I improved, THE PROPHET came often to my bedside to beg my forgiveness, for she blamed herself (not Ethan) that the medicine to fight my fever had been withheld as long as it was. I told her not to blame herself, but rather to blame me — for my connection to the Green Goddess was so weak that I could not heal myself as Vahide did.

"Do not think this way," she told me. "For know that Vahide cannot heal others with the speed you can. That gift is yours alone. This does not make Vahide strong and you weak, nor her selfish while you are generous. In truth, you simply have different gifts, and no gift is to be scorned."

In this, she showed me the SEVENTH LESSON: That all are needed, and none are lesser or greater.

As she sat by my bed, THE PROPHET brought me many glad tidings. The first and most blessed was of her own release from prison. Carleton had (it seemed) some wealth hidden in Swiss and Cayman accounts, and he had applied it through Sezen's friends in Istanbul to get the false charges against THE LIVING FLAME dropped.

Second, noble Ferdi had also been freed. None of the witnesses could recall clearly what had happened, and when the guard was shown the tape, he changed his testimony as we had predicted. Indeed, so terrified was he by seeing the spirit's invasion of his person that he has forsaken his DARKENED ways and come to SAFE HAVEN! Unfortunately, he has lost his position at Topkapi, but he now guards a greater treasure — the GREAT TEMPLE and the believers within.

Third, and more amazing still, the DEATH DRINKER who injured me so grievously has been imprisoned. Brave Angus, acting on the visions of THE PROPHET, was able to render him helpless with a stake through his heart. According to his identification, he was named Mustapha Aziz. Ethan had proposed his capture (rather than destruction) as a "bargaining chip" to secure the release of THE PROPHET. But by our dedication and cunning we had accomplished that without trading him, leaving him available for other purposes.

Most amazing, however, was the capture of Aziz's servant, Ali Sallaseh. It was not, by itself, incredible that he had been rendered unconscious and bundled into the van. No, the truly wondrous thing was that he had succumbed to THE TRUTH of the PANTHEON. It was a hard-fought victory — Galip and Fadime exhorted him to change for a month straight. Ali has confessed that he still craves his master's blood, and still has an unnatural love and loyalty to Aziz, but he now knows THE TRUTH and is eager for us to free him from his odious slavery. To show his true willingness to change, he revealed many of Aziz's secrets to us, including the best method the DEATH DRINKERS have of corrupting the DARKENED. By feeding a "mortal" their polluted blood, the DEATH DRINKERS gain an UNHOLY grasp upon the human soul — a grip we hope the PANTHEON can break.

Ali also consented to have his first fingers taken off, that he might never again raise a weapon in anger against the CHOSEN, no matter how compelled. How great is his insight, to reduce his strength of body until it matches his weak spirit!

BOOK OF CHRONICLES, CHAPTER 15

As I slowly regained my strength, I came to be involved with the Aziz project. With Carleton's inestimable aid and Ali's inside knowledge, we have learned much about the nature of the DEATH DRINKERS — how rapidly they can heal, what their particular strengths and fears are, how much of their UNHOLY nourishment they require, and what the connection is between their ingestion and their abilities. Aziz was greatly weakened by our experiments, of course — not only in body (as we removed one limb to see if it would disintegrate to ash on its own when separated from the heart — it did) but also in spirit. He quickly went from threats and cajoling to pleading. I confess that I, in my weakness, found pity for him in my heart, but THE BLESSED PROPHET assured me that, unlike Ali, Aziz could never be saved. For him, there was only death — but in this case, death in the service of the PANTHEON.

With redoubled efforts, Ethan and Georgette searched for European DARKENED who might be willing to see THE TRUTH. Sezen and Ferdi did the same among the wealthy but weak of Turkey — even to the point of leaving Istanbul for Izmir and Ankara. All in all, we found twenty DARKENED curious enough to come to SAFE HAVEN under promises of revelation.

Revelation they had. We started our ceremony at midnight, telling them THE TRUTH of the PANTHEON (at which some giggled and made mock, even in the sight of the WHITE FLEECE, even as they drank from the GREEN BOWL). Each of us testified to what we had seen, what we had felt and to what we had known — starting with our UNTOUCHED followers and leading up to the CHOSEN. By this point, the DARKENED began to believe a little, perhaps. That was when we demonstrated the blessings of the PANTHEON. With the fire of the WHITE GODDESS, Angus and Galip snapped chains and broke iron bars. THE PROPHET summoned the BLACK GOD's fog of concealment, and we all showed how easily we could see through it. Finally, Fadime allowed one of the DARKENED to fire an arrow at her, which she deflected with a word from the GREEN GODDESS. All these things, Angus and Carleton and I caught with video cameras.

Having seen these miracles, they believed — at that moment. But we knew enough of the deceptions of CORRUPTION to foresee that the next day would lead them to doubt their memories. The fog would be machine produced, and our guidance from night vision goggles, not from DIVINE sight. The arrow (they would believe) was halted by a concealed wire, and the chains broken with acid.

No, we had opened their minds, but they had not yet stepped free of them. They needed sterner proof. With this in mind, we gave them the WHITE LEAF to eat, so that they might be alert for what we showed them next.

We took them to the courtyard, where Aziz's CORRUPT body, naked and unrotting but transfixed by the stake, lay handcuffed to a table. Many of them did not want to approach and look at it, but we insisted, and even made them touch him and the stake to see the truth of it. They were shown that the stake went all through him, that he was still and dead. Many began to weep and moan and even scream aloud, but we were steadfast in their instruction.

We circled Aziz as THE PROPHET tied a rope to the stake. Standing back as the tapes rolled, she demanded that they watch as she pulled free the imprisoning wood.

Immediately, the DEATH DRINKER howled its wrath and struggled down off the slab. Both Carleton and Adil tried to hold it in place, but it was too strong for them. Mad with hunger, it lunged at the screaming DARKENED crowd around it. The heavy table followed it like an anchor.

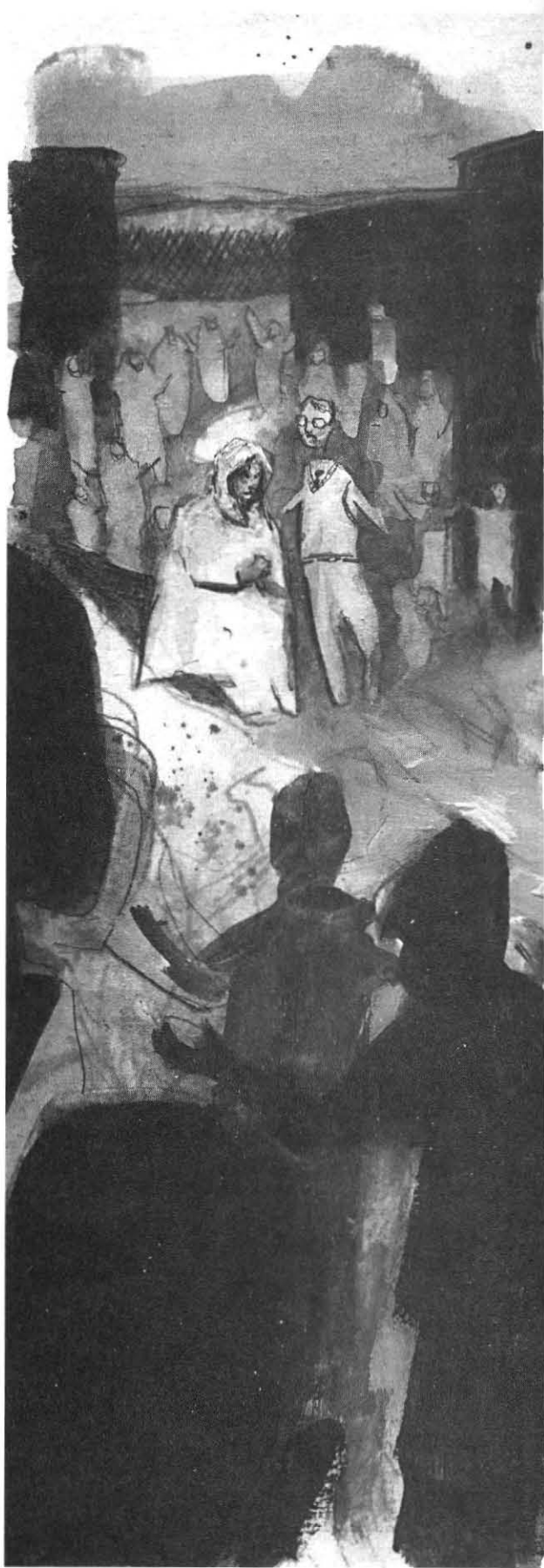
Fadime, Angus and Vahide all had the gift of the GREEN GODDESS' wall, and with this they were able to keep it back, thrashing in its frustration. Many of the Darkened were crazed too, insane with terror, but we forced them to watch, forced them to behold the MONSTER that had moved, unseen, in their midst. We made them watch as the sun's rays kissed the earth and as, with a moan truly DAMNED, Mustapha Aziz burst into flames and was utterly consumed.

All of us, CHOSEN and UNTOUCHED alike, had our hands full trying to control the DARKENED and to nurse them through their hysteria. The calming smoke of the GREEN GODDESS was given, and in some cases even the breath of the BLACK GOD was needed to restore them to their senses. But we gathered them into the central chapel and, once calmed, explained again what they had seen. None of them — not one — could deny THE TRUTH.

BOOK OF CHRONICLES, CHAPTER 16

By destroying Mustapha Aziz, we gathered twenty new DARKENED followers into the bosom of the PAN-THEON. With our old followers rapidly progressing through their initiations, we were now at unprecedented numbers — sixty full initiates in addition to the CHOSEN and the twenty newcomers. But with their wealth and prominence, the newly redeemed brought danger as well.

We had grown too large to conceal ourselves, and now our only hope of safety was true strength. Two of our new members were connected to the military, and though they longed to live in the peace of SAFE HAVEN, they were brave enough to see that their true duty was to protect us by staying, concealed, in their old positions. Galip and Ferdi were hired into their employ under false pretexts — Ferdi as a valet, Galip as a



chauffeur — but their real purpose was to conceal and protect our new members from the CORRUPT.

Though we were, for the time being, shielded from military or police investigation, we had sadly overestimated our ability to withstand a supernatural assault.

The first intimation I got that anything was wrong was when I felt a tremor in the earth, but since I was sleeping it was easy to ignore. A few minutes later, THE PROPHET shook me awake. I tried to ask what was wrong, but I was silenced by UNHOLY powers. The same force of silent CORRUPTION kept me from hearing her answer, but wide-eyed, she shoved a rifle into my hands and yanked me bodily from my bed, pulling me toward the women's sleep chamber.

Within, women screamed soundlessly as two MONSTERS raced among them, shooting here, biting there. The very walls were spattered with blood. Yet, bizarrely, a few still slept, unaware of the utterly silent carnage, until perhaps awakened by warm drops of blood falling like rain.

The CREATURES were DEATH DRINKERS in black garb, carrying silenced guns. Eyes bright with an evil lust for blood, they would seize a woman and use her body as shield, sinking their fangs into her neck even as they fired at others.

Sezen, Vahide and Fadime were awake and fighting. Vahide fired on them with rifle — apparently she had been sleeping with it under her cot. Fadime had a gun as well, a pistol. Sezen had seized a piece of furniture and was striking one with it — smoke rising from her hands to attest to the power of the WHITE GODDESS as it flowed through her.

THE PROPHET immediately called on the BLACK GOD for protection, and he responded, sending his fog to shield us from the sight of the BEASTS. I drank in the breath of the GREEN GODDESS, purifying the essence of one of the ABOMINATIONS. This transformation harmed it horribly — for CORRUPTION cannot abide PURITY. At the same time, it strengthened my faith.

Yet these MONSTERS were fiendishly strong, for even as we struck them their wounds closed. Even as blessed Sezen broke her weapon on the back of one, it grabbed her and pulled her close. In an obscene parody of lust, it bit her throat while firing its weapon into her belly.

THE PROPHET, recognizing Sezen's fate, fired her gun into the creature, shooting through her beloved disciple to cleanse the world of her killer. But this only staggered the beast. Even after that mighty blast, it took both Fadime's gunfire and my purifying breath to finally halt its rampage.

While we felled its companion, the other BEAST lunged to the window — wounds still closing, but no longer moving with preternatural speed. One of the UNTOUCHED had recovered her wits enough to seize a gun

and fire upon it, while Vahide fired into its back. Even then, it labored to move itself through the window before THE PROPHET smashed her rifle butt through its back, the WHITE GODDESS' ire potent enough to twist the weapon into splinters as the CREATURE turned to ash.

With its demise, the air suddenly filled with the screams of the injured and dying. But there was no time to tend them.

"The men!" cried THE PROPHET. "My vision! They're being attacked too!"

We who could still fight grabbed what weapons we could and raced to the men's dormitory, arriving just in time to relieve a beleaguered Carleton and Angus as they bravely fought two similar ABOMINATIONS.

The carnage was incredible. Fadime and Vahide were both shot, but their GREEN GODDESS blessings protected them and offered some measure of healing to the others. Carleton was badly hurt, but insisted that his healing was accelerated as well. Chewing the WHITE LEAF, he had the strength to staunch the wounds of those who had been so brutally injured for the cause. For those who were beyond him, I had the GREEN GODDESS' breath of life. And for those beyond even my power, there was the soothing smoke of the BLACK GOD's embrace.

There were twenty-four of us injured that night. There had been five attackers against us, an armed and alert group of more than sixty. One of the CREATURES had been killed by a land mine, but the other four had entered unobserved. Before their destruction, the CREATURES had killed — in a matter of minutes — seventeen of the RIGHTEOUS.

This cold, joyless day shall be remembered always. January 14, Year One. The Festival of Seventeen Martyrs. Blessed be their names.

Saint Sezen Akkale
 Saint Pietro Aldovari
 Saint Birol Cetin
 Saint Cidem Chibber
 Saint Turgut Çindörük
 Saint Ilke Çosar
 Saint Armande DePalma
 Saint Leonippus Emre
 Saint Frank Jones
 Saint Selda Karadeniz
 Saint Faso Miras
 Saint Satif Osman
 Saint Kadi Ozal
 Saint Brian Pulaski
 Saint Harika Sinan
 Saint Nour Yenin
 Saint Demir Yilmaz

BOOK OF CHRONICLES, CHAPTER 17

Mourning and great sorrow were our constant companions after the MONSTERS' attack. Yet we remained unbowed and unbroken, our purpose steadfast. Galip and Ferdi were appalled that they had not been present to defend their GODLY brethren, but THE PROPHET assured them that their duties were to protect us as surely as Angus and Carleton had protected the sleeping UNTOUCHED. As if to make up for their absence, they pressured their patrons to send the *jandarma* — the military police who oversee the law in rural areas — on patrols closer to SAFE HAVEN.

It was not long before another organization offered protection as well.

It was less than two weeks after the loss of the SEVENTEEN HOLY MARTYRS that THE BLESSED PROPHET called her closest disciples — Georgette, Angus, Fadime, Carleton, Vahide, Ethan and my unworthy self — and asked us for advice.

"We have been given a dangerous opportunity," she said. "I have received a message from one of the UNHOLY."

This prompted much discussion and curiosity. Who had sent this message, and how, and what was the body of it?

It emerged that the messenger was POLLUTED — a servant of the blood, like Ali Sallaseh — only this woman's vile master had sunk low enough to put its disease in a young girl. The girl had come upon THE PROPHET while she walked by daylight in Istanbul, offering her a sealed message, which was written in English.

"We offer you our sympathy and condolences in this time of sorrow," the letter read, "But a greater consolation may, perhaps, be found in learning the truth about your attackers — and in gaining the power to avenge yourself. You are not alone in your fight." Below that was a phone number, and the signature "Friend."

"I dislike this," said Vahide. "Why would this 'Friend' send its message by CORRUPT hands, unless it knew of our ability to see CORRUPTION? This is a trap, and we would be fools to step into it."

"Yet can we afford to ignore it?" asked Fadime. "The last attack was nearly the end of us all! Had it not been for THE PROPHET'S warning, we would all be dead in our sleep, the MONSTERS fat with our blood. If a starving man is offered food, what does he care if it is given by dirty hands?"

"Why would they offer to deal with us if they did not respect us?" asked Ethan. "This message seems calculated to make us feel weak. Why would they try to move us so if they did not fear our strength?"

"Our strength?" asked Angus. "I didn't see much strength when that BEAST was tearing through BRIAN and LEONIPPUS and the others. Granted, when you're cornered there's nothing to do but fight who you can with what you can lay hands on. But I don't know that

we're cornered. What's to stop us from relocating to Greece, or even up to Romania — somewhere we're not known, where we can start again with the knowledge we've gained here?"

"You would abandon the SACRED TEMPLE?" asked Fadime, disbelief clear on her face. "It may be easy for you, a foreigner with a passport, to speak of fleeing, but this country, this land is my home! I'll not abandon it for the scorn and hatred of the Greeks, even if I'm the last one here!"

"I think we can all agree that it's too soon to speak of leaving SAFE HAVEN," said THE PROPHET. "The question is, will speaking with this 'Friend' protect it or leave it open to further assault?"

Carleton spoke then. "It may be that this offer — while not entirely naked of narrow interest — is for the most part genuine. Conflict among different groups of the CORRUPT seems to be the rule, rather than the exception. Perhaps 'Friend' merely sees us as a new arrow for his bow."

"Then perhaps, like the policeman Çölgecen, they can be made into our weapons instead," said Georgette thoughtfully.

"I like that thought, though only time will tell if it bears fruit," said THE PROPHET. "Perhaps Ali would have some insight into this. Perhaps Aziz mentioned this 'Friend' to him."

We all agreed that discussion with Ali was wise, and though he had heard of no "Friend," he did tell us much that was of value.

"Take care: This 'Friend' sounds to me like a *haiyi*," he said, using the Arabic word for 'snake.' "They are despicable — as are all the CORRUPT," he hastened to add, "But they were particularly hated by Aziz and those like him."

"Why?" asked Ethan. "Were not both of them DEATH DRINKERS and enemies of the WHITE GODDESS?"

"They are both children of the same curse, but they worship different vampire gods," Ali explained. "The serpents follow a deity of luxury and forbidden knowledge. His name, or hers, is unknown to me. My enslaver was a follower of Haquim, an austere deity of honor, violence and revenge. The children of Haquim say they are native to Turkey, and that the serpents are aliens who have come as intruders and usurpers."

"Is this such a surprise?" asked THE PROPHET, smiling. "The DEATH DRINKERS are creatures of chaos, born to war and violence. Is it any wonder that they contend with one another as much as with the BLESSED PANTHEON? It is this disunity that will be their undoing."

With Ali's advice in mind, THE PROPHET telephoned "Friend" and proposed a meeting in downtown Istanbul. It was agreed that each party would consist of three members. THE PROPHET, against the advice of those who love her, decided to go in person. For her

companions she chose Vahide and Angus — the very two who had spoken most strongly against the meeting.

"I know you are uneasy at the thought of meeting an ABOMINATION without the intent to destroy it," she said, "It is for this very reason you have been chosen. I need your blessings, Vahide, should we be betrayed, and I will need your strong arm, Angus. But even as you restrain me from too close an approach, I beg you to accept my restraint from too much fear. We may gain much from this 'serpent.'"

With a small smile, she spoke again and uttered the EIGHTH LESSON: There is no sin in robbing our enemies before we kill them.

We took every precaution, of course. The three who went promised to maintain the strength of the BLACK GOD in their thoughts, to protect them against UNHOLY influences. Adil had been alerted to watch the area of the meeting beforehand, and the secretive Mukhfi was also warned.

We who stayed back at SAFE HAVEN were on alert. We sealed the gates, manned the gun emplacements and — perhaps most important — set CHOSEN in hourly shifts, using the SACRED SIGHT to watch for concealed enemies.

All this was for nothing. There was no attack on the TEMPLE, and the trio who met with "Friend" and his two companions (both blood slaves — as were two other people in the café where the meeting took place) returned unmolested.

THE PROPHET reported that "Friend" was indeed a DEATH DRINKER. He offered protection and "guidance" against the other vampires whom he dubbed "assassins." With *haiyi* patronage, he claimed, the assassins would no longer consider us a threat.

When THE PROPHET asked if they would be correct in that assessment, "Friend" merely smiled. "The wise course with the assassins," he said, "is to master the art of turning their murderousness aside from oneself and toward more productive ends. Believe me, there are better targets for them than you. Just as there are better targets for you than Cobra Juan."

Although the GODLY before him denied it, he made it clear that he knew of our destruction of Juan, and of our attack on his "sister" on the island of Büyükada. These things he was willing to forgive, dismissing them as the tragedies of ignorance. This forgiveness, of course, depended on our willingness to forgo ignorance and embrace "truth."

THE BLESSED PROPHET was nauseated to hear the HOLY name of TRUTH spoken by such an ABOMINATION, but her *chador* hid any scowl that crossed her face, and she played along, feigning eagerness to learn his mysteries. She would later explain to me that as he spoke, his eyes grew wide and golden, and the voices of the PANTHEON grew loud in her mind, warning her of its attempts to corrupt her will. With this knowledge, she

was able to trick the trickster, letting it believe that her resistance to its wiles was weak and that its powers affected her. Yet she also knew that "Friend" could have little doubt that the GODLY were more than helpless and DARKENED, so she took care to show it some of her power to resist. Just not all.

This, she later explained, is the NINTH LESSON: Even when your enemy knows your power, you can hide its full extent.

The ABOMINATION requested a second meeting, in private, and suggested that it would come alone — if THE PROPHET would accept a gift of its blood.

"I won't lie to you," the lying serpent said. "When you drink my blood, I will gain insight into your true heart, for I will be part of you. But if your heart is pure and honest, that's nothing to fear. In return, my blood offers the strength of ages and the power to suspend death within eternal life. Is that not an attractive bargain?"

From Ali we knew well that this was in no way the only effect of such BLOOD POISON. But Carleton assured us that the blood of such a creature was no match for the protection of the GREEN GODDESS, and that its power to enslave and embalm the living would have no effect on one of the GODLY.

THE PROPHET said she would agree to those terms if "Friend" offered some proof of his knowledge. Specifically, she asked him to tell her how to destroy the ghost of Deli Ibrahim. *"Do that," she said, "and if your knowledge proves worthwhile, I will return after the next full moon and drink of your blood."*

He laughed, and called her a shrewd negotiator, and he told her — and us — how to defeat the mad ruler's ghost.

BOOK OF CHRONICLES, CHAPTER 18

Blessed be THE HOLY PROPHET, and all praise to her sacred name! Who else can pull knowledge out of fear? Who else could rally us to triumph, so soon after a disastrous defeat?

Though UNHOLY, "Friend" advised us well in the ways of spirits. Perhaps his CORRUPTION gave him insight into the CORRUPTION of others. Perhaps his innate destructiveness and treachery made it inevitable that he would betray and destroy a being that is as much an affliction on the world as himself. Or perhaps it is just that the wisdom and mercy of the PANTHEON are so great that they can turn even evil into good.

"Friend" told us that Deli Ibrahim's spirit was linked to Topkapi and that it would draw much strength from its home. This we already knew. He also said that the mad king was as much DEMON as ghost, a creature of malice and viciousness. This, too, we had surmised. But our own anger and hatred ("Friend" said) were the BEAST's closest allies against us. Rage, fear and other DARK emotions were its very food. Its weakness, then,

was love and mercy and forgiveness. If we could find pity for it in ourselves, our goodness would call out to any seed of humanity that remained within it. When the ghost was most human, he told us — that would be the time to strike.

Since one of our number had once guarded Topkapi, he still knew many of the workers there. Among themselves, they whispered fearfully of the palace ghost, but they dared say nothing to their employers — bureaucrats who had never been attacked in the palace by moonlight, and who would deny their own memories even if they had. But there were some who knew, and who were strong enough to admit THE TRUTH. Through them, we gained admittance to the palace grounds after dark on the full moon's night — for night is when the barriers between the living and dead are the weakest, and night would be the best time for our gift of love and positive emotion.

A group of a dozen UNTOUCHED were selected for this mission, chosen to enter the palace with Vahide and Adil. There they would pray for the forgiveness and peaceful rest of Ibrahim's soul, while Vahide and Adil used what powers they could for defense. Cell phones and radios were issued, to keep them in constant contact with a "rescue squad."

Unbeknownst to that first group — whose knowledge might have tainted the purity of their emotions — the rescue group, consisting of Angus, Galip and THE PROPHET, planned to enter and destroy the spirit once they believed the first group had made it sane enough to kill.

I was not present, but when the injured UNTOUCHED were brought to me, I heard their stories. They had gathered, as planned, and prayed, partaking in the GREEN GODDESS' herb to encourage tranquillity and forgiveness. When the spirit appeared, it raged at them, but Vahide held it back and protected all the believers with the embrace of the GREEN GODDESS. When it made to leave — perhaps to find a guard or other person to possess — Adil halted it with his eyes. All the while, the believers chanted their love for it, their forgiveness, their will for it to forsake EVIL and be healed.

The creature did not succumb easily. It seized physical objects in its intangible hands and flung them at its well-wishers. Many were bruised and battered as it flung furniture and pedestals. Yet, in their courage and benevolence, they forgave the BEAST even as it struck them, and before their unseeing eyes, it changed. Only Vahide and Adil saw it cease its attacks and fall to its knees weeping, begging for the forgiveness they offered.

It was at that moment that the second group struck. "Friend" had spoken truly: The CREATURE was much weakened, and they tore it to pieces before it could even comprehend what was happening.

Afterward, Adil and Vahide were upset that THE PROPHET had concealed the true mission from them. She took care to explain that their ignorance was necessary to remove the spirit, and Vahide was quick to see her wisdom. Adil, however, was stubborn.

"Did you even have time to see his face before you struck? Did you see his look of sorrow and guilt before you destroyed him? Did you see in his eyes how you betrayed him?"

THE PROPHET endured this castigation as a mother endures the shouts of an angry child. *"I believe the creature suffered great torment, and I believe that torment is ended. Is that not a goal you would embrace?"*

With no ready answer to that, Adil fell back on his complaint that THE PROPHET had concealed her purpose from him — and worse, had lied.

At this, she hung her head.

"Adil," she said, *"I have long been troubled by your unwillingness to live with us at SAFE HAVEN, and by your continued reliance on your false religion. Do not bother to deny it: I know THE TRUTH. But I will not give up on you. My suspicions were unfounded, for you have always been a staunch defender of RIGHTEOUSNESS when it mattered most — even to the point of risking your life. If you can forgive me, I swear that I will never hide my plans from you again."*

Adil seemed uncertain, but before such a magnanimous apology and such a gracious offer, he could not remain angry for long.

BOOK OF CHRONICLES, CHAPTER 19

With the death of Ibrahim, THE PROPHET guided us into a dangerous game, balancing us between two hostile factions of DEATH DRINKERS. The *haiyi*, particularly "Friend," considered us new pawns, dangerous, useful but imperfectly controlled. The assassins saw us as a threat, the killers who had cost them five of their number and flung their police conspiracy into disarray. Now, the serpents would attempt to persuade Haquim's followers that we were no longer a threat.

THE PROPHET planned well, scheming to restore stability in the short term. It was clear to her that "Friend" planned to use us as a dagger at the assassins' throats by promising to keep us controlled in return for concessions from them. We accepted this role, all the time maneuvering to keep him convinced that we were docile. While we persuaded the other DEATH DRINKERS that we were too dangerous to simply eradicate, we needed to also convince "Friend" to aid us by providing security devices, more mines and trained dogs to protect the compound.

It was not easy or quick, but we had advantages that neither side knew. We had Ali's knowledge of their true powers and conflicts. We had the pursuit powers of THE PROPHET to uncover the lairs of both groups. *Mukhfi* proved

to be a consummate spy, capable of uncovering many of the security secrets of those devil dens. In time, we grew more dangerous to each side than either suspected.

"Friend," in the guise of aiding us, directed our powers against the ghosts and walking dead of Istanbul and its environs, and in truth, he did aid us — though there was no doubt that the elimination of his rivals in CORRUPTION served his interests, at least in the short term. In this fashion, we passed from Year One into Year Two of the AGE OF THE PANTHEON.

After six torturous months, we felt we had sufficient grasp of the strengths of each group. The *haiyi* temple was truly formidable — hidden, entrenched and staffed with fanatical guards whose blood was POLLUTED with foul strength. As for the assassins, their numbers were greater, their connections to the police and military truly profound, and their personal powers superior.

Gradually, we increased the pressure on each side. By this point, both were convinced that we were merely a cult of insane thugs, dangerous but without wisdom. Little did they know.

The breaking point was when one of the Egyptian DEATH DRINKERS spawned another of its vile ilk — something the Turkish vampires did not seem to want but (after much haggling and negotiation and cajoling) grudgingly accepted.

That new DEATH DRINKER was dead within a week, by our hands, but we took great care to drain out all of its blood — to lay the blame upon the cannibalistic worshippers of Haquim.

We let the ABOMINATIONS discover this deed on the night it occurred. The next day, we struck down an assassin vampire, one who had been most antagonistic toward the *haiyi*. We permitted the kill team (Galip, Angus and Vahide) to be seen by a POLLUTED servant.

That night there was fire in the countryside around Istanbul. This was our celebration — on the first anniversary of SAINT CAHIR's death, we made our enemies into weapons against each other. The assassins struck at the main temple of the Egyptians, using their servants, their military contacts and their own fierce skills at war. But the Egyptians were forewarned and their resistance was strong. It was in this conflict that Dörtlök perished, fighting beside his masters to the last.

As the two sects battled at the temple, we moved by night as well — striking not at the vampires, but at their human servants. This was, in some ways, the most difficult — not only because our HOLY POWERS of pursuit and attack would not work on many of them, but because assaulting or abducting a human, even one of the DARKENED, is morally different from acting against a being wholly CORRUPT and devoted entirely to EVIL. We needed to kill only one, the POLLUTED police officer Kayar. Putting other vassals in the hospital or drugging

them into a stupor with the BLACK GOD's aid was often sufficient, for we merely needed them out of the way the next day. Most were taken in their sleep. Only a few of the most vile were killed. Others were injured or incapacitated. Two, who had not taken the BLOOD POISON, who would not be immediately missed by mortals and who seemed to be serving against their will were taken to SAFE HAVEN in the hope that time and training might purify their beliefs.

It was during the next day that we struck at those assassins who had survived the assault of the night before.

The second night, "Friend" called and requested, then *demand*ed that we come to protect him against assassins grown "blood frenzied."

THE PROPHET laughed a beautiful laugh as she hung up the phone on him.

She was not laughing long. It was not long after that SAFE HAVEN was attacked a second time — this time, not by DEATH DRINKERS, but by mortal men, paid, armed and trained. They were not army or police — the entanglements of both MONSTER factions prevented either from using them effectively. They were Kurds, probably members of the PKK, probably hired as deniable and disposable mercenaries.

Unlike the first assault, we saw them coming in plenty of time. But also unlike the first assault, there were many of them, and they were armed not only with rifles, but with grenade launchers as well. This was not an entrenched battle between CHOSEN and UNHOLY, but a swift, confusing clash by night between two groups of mere mortals.

We did not fight long before the air force showed up. They were indiscriminate with their bombs, but since we were inside and the attackers were outside, they got the worst of it. In the end, they were dead or driven away and we were still in possession of SAFE HAVEN.

But as the general Pyrrhus said, another such victory would destroy us. In addition to thirty martyred UNTOUCHED, we lost three of the CHOSEN. Blessed be their names, they who gave all — those who had to be killed so thoroughly that no trace of them remained. May all in the PANTHEON sing for the souls of SAINT ANGUS McCRAE, SAINT ADIL SOYLU and SAINT CARLETON VAN WYK.

THE BOOK OF SECRETS, CHAPTER 2

Know, o reader, that if you have been offered this knowledge freely, you are thrice BLESSED by the trust and love of the LIVING FLAME, the TRUE PROPHET, the VOICE of the PANTHEON. But if you have opened this book through deceit and guile and treachery, you are thrice cursed and shall know the full wrath of the GODLY CHOSEN.

You have read of our hard and secret struggle against the vampires of Istanbul in the Book of Chronicles. Now

you will learn deeper truths about that struggle, and the way it was fought — the way it had to be fought.

To create a lasting and final conflict between the assassins and the Egyptians, THE PROPHET knew we would need to sting the pride of the assassins. We had already done this by killing their warriors, so redirecting their ire from us to the *haiyi* was essential. Thus, in her guile, THE PROPHET felt we must convince Haquim's followers that we were not recent thralls of their rivals. Rather, they must be made to think we had acted on the other DEATH DRINKERS' orders when we first struck them.

This seemed like a small thing to me. What (I asked) would the assassins care if we had killed five of them before or after we came under *haiyi* influence?

THE PROPHET explained that it made no practical difference, but that there was a great emotional difference. If we were loose cannons that the Egyptians brought under control, then the assassins could feel good about paying the Egyptians to repress us. But if the *haiyi* had taken control of us, murdered assassins, and only then claimed to be taming us — in that case, any concessions Haquim's followers made would be like payments to the murderers of their brethren. That, they would not stand.

Convincing them of the Egyptians' older control, then, was the issue. Who could we find that the assassins would trust? The answer was one of their previous

servants, Ali Sallaseh. THE PROPHET's plan was for him to return to his former masters and describe how we had captured him and brought him under the control of the *haiyi*, long before "Friend" supposedly approached us.

"They will want, very much, to believe this lie," THE PROPHET explained. "If they believe that we knew of their attack before it was made, they no longer need to admit that mere mortals could overcome their brethren. They can say to themselves, 'We did not fail. We were stabbed in the back!'"

Ali did not want to do this, however. The notion of returning to them as a failure terrified him. More than that, he was afraid of falling back into his addiction to their CORRUPT BLOOD.

"You do not understand!" he cried, weeping most piteously, when we suggested that his new faith in the PANTHEON could shield him from the addiction. "You don't understand its power. It is more than bliss. The BLOOD POISON is everything to one who has tasted it. If it was before me now, I would have no choice but to greedily imbibe, even knowing its foulness, even knowing its perversity. It is stronger in me than TRUTH."

He had fallen to his knees before THE TRUE PROPHET, and as he wept he embraced her feet, pleading that she not return him to temptation.

"It is better than love," he whispered.

In my weakness, I would have acted from human kindness. I would have denied him the opportunity to



prove his strength by serving TRUTH. But THE PROPHET saw through to his real courage and utility, and insisted that, between Ethan's skills and the CRADLE OF ENLIGHTENMENT, he could be made to truly believe the story he was to tell. These same techniques — combining the SACRED ROOT of the RAINBOW GOD with sleep deprivation, with Ethan's techniques of guided imagery and with certain stage-set scenes — could, he felt, be used to make Ali believe that we had been CORRUPT all along.

There was much heated discussion between THE PROPHET, Adil and Angus over this matter. Angus, ever the voice of caution and restraint, was hesitant to risk a source of information as valuable as Ali — especially when returning him to the assassins might reveal our true strategy.

Adil resisted even further, saying that by "brainwashing" Ali to the point of madness, we were no better than MONSTERS ourselves.

"Who are you," he demanded "To point to a man and say, 'You! You will have your mind destroyed, and maybe your soul as well, to carry lies to our enemies?'"

His tone enraged THE PROPHET. *"Who am I? I am the voice of the PANTHEON! I am THE PROPHET, the seer of souls! They picked us from the common mass, stripped away our comforts and delusions, then flung us into this battle. To win this war, we must be willing to rob others as we ourselves were robbed."*

Remember this well, for it is the FIRST SECRET LESSON.

It was at this point that Georgette interrupted, saying, "Seeing one man polluted by the BLOOD POISON may make them suspicious, but it will not make them sure. Especially when it is a servant they bound themselves. If they see a second person CORRUPTED, someone who has been with us from the first, and know that person was not bound by them...."

At these words, Adil's face turned ashen. "You mean to suggest that we poison one of our own as part of this ruse?"

"The doctor took samples of blood from Aziz. There's no reason to think they could not be used," Georgette said.

"There is much wisdom in your words," said THE PROPHET, *"But I sense that you wish this glorious mission for yourself. Much as I would love to accept such a fate for you, your skills and your position are needed elsewhere. Someone else — someone without a passport, someone who is not fated to be an evangelist — would serve our purpose in this much better."*

Adil stood and stared at THE PROPHET, shock and horror in his eyes. "Your callousness is beyond insanity," he said. "This is blasphemy and I'll have no part of it."

He turned and left us, turning his back on the fight, the TRUTH and the PANTHEON. We were silent, watching him go.

"Perhaps he will reconsider," I said, hoping it with all my heart.

THE PROPHET shook her head. *"He is dead to our WISDOM. He has been offered the cup of life and has struck it from his lips."* She sighed, deeply saddened. *"Now he must be stopped before he can steal THE TRUTH from others."*

After more silence, Ethan stood. THE PROPHET looked at him and nodded. Ethan had learned the SECOND SECRET LESSON.

How much THE PROPHET must envy me, and Georgette, and all of the UNTOUCHED who are unburdened with leadership. For it was a hard thing she had to do, and heavy, to order Adil's death. But it was necessary.

THE BOOK OF SECRETS, CHAPTER 3

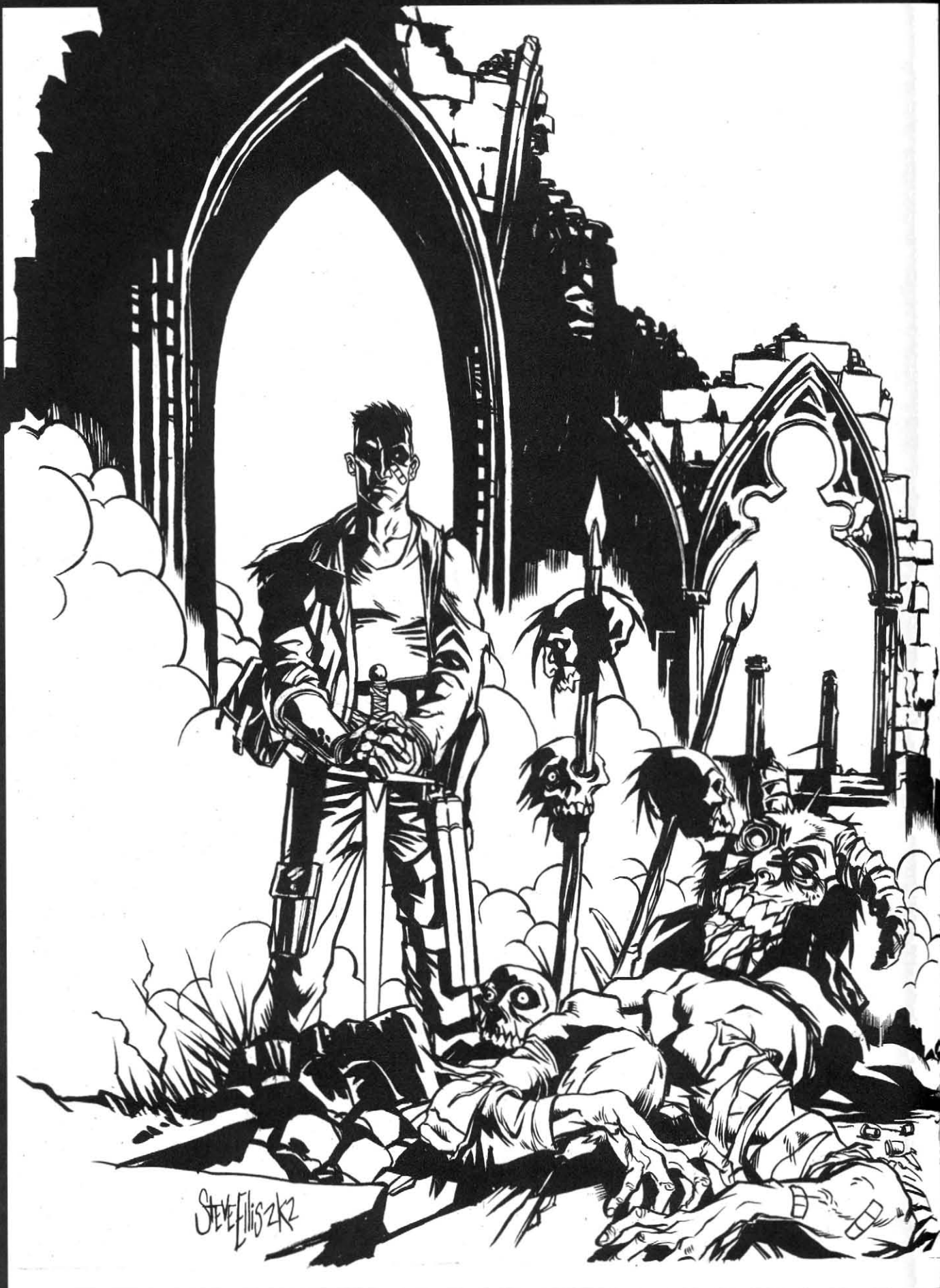
Ali was prepared with the CRADLE OF ENLIGHTENMENT and other means, as was another man — Guler Bal, from Vahide's town, who had come to us from cowardice. Guler was always slow to labor but quick with a demoralizing word. A weak link in our chain of RIGHTEOUSNESS, but even he was made to break in a way that gave glory to the PANTHEON.

When his mind had been sufficiently prepared, we gave him the blood of Aziz, and with it the unnatural strength of the CORRUPT. Then he and Ali pretended to escape and went to the assassins to beg for the addicting BLOOD POISON. In return, they offered many "secrets." Some of these were entirely fabricated, though with much care given to their plausibility, such as the details of the rivalry between Cobra Juan and "Friend," or the long history of the CHOSEN and our haiyi patron. Other secrets, such as the location of the Egyptian temple and other lairs, were true to the best of our knowledge.

It was in this fashion that the grand ruse was carried out, setting DEATH against DEATH for the triumph of the LIVING FLAME. Ali and Guler forfeited their lives once the assassins had interrogated them, as we suspected might happen. Although their names cannot be listed on the roster of SAINTS, they can be recorded here.

Saint Ali Sallaseh

Saint Guler Bal



CHAPTER 4: FALLOUT

And it shall come to pass in that day, that his burden shall be taken away from off thy shoulder, and his yoke from off thy neck, and the yoke shall be destroyed because of the anointing.

— Isaiah 10:27

THE BOOK OF THE FOURFOLD TRUTH BOOK OF CHRONICLES, CHAPTER 20

All praise to THE BLESSED PROPHET, most favored of the FOURFOLD PANTHEON! Her courage has forged us into a true religion! Her wisdom has cleansed Istanbul!

It has been several months since the great battle between the Egyptians and the assassins, several months since the PKK assault on SAFE HAVEN. In that time, we have grown yet again.

THE PROPHET says the PANTHEON is pleased with us, and because of our victory they have turned their faces upon Istanbul. During the night of fire, when we were most sorely tested, the loving gaze of the most HOLY GODS and GODDESSES fell upon the city, and in the light of their regard more were CHOSEN. As the *haiyi* contended with Haquim's worshippers, many of the DARKENED were threatened, yes, and many killed as the maddened BEASTS stole human blood to fuel their battle. But as the ABOMINATIONS showed

their true natures in their struggle, some of the UNTOUCHED near them acted with courage and wisdom, and as a reward received blessings of clarity from the PANTHEON.

We did not learn this immediately, for we had much other work. The police and the army were, of course, very interested in the attack upon us and wanted to know why the PKK would choose us, in particular, for such a vicious assault. Their suspicion was that we were competing with Kurdish terrorists in the drug trade. While this is ridiculous in truth — our ultimate, SACRED goal is to free humanity from the slavery of IMPURE drugs by returning them to the proper use of the FOUR BLESSED PLANTS — our growing of said plants at our compound might lead them to the wrong conclusion.

But the destructiveness of the UNHOLY always destroys them in the end, as our actions with the VAMPIRES amply show. In the very act of showering SAFE HAVEN with bullets and grenades, the terrorists destroyed the evidence that could have turned the police against us.

It took some careful guidance to keep the police out of the mined perimeter, but THE PROPHET'S cunning was, as always, equal to the task.

Aiding immeasurably in this endeavor were our two UNTOUCHED followers in the army. With great subtlety they were able to convince the police that three PKK outcasts were hiding at SAFE HAVEN — that our religion had sheltered them unknowing. In this scenario, the outcasts had fled or betrayed the PKK from greed and planned to turn vital information about their hidden camps to the *jandarma*. Before they could do so, the PKK found them hiding out at the isolated base of a "cult" and attacked it mercilessly to silence the traitors.

While this story paints us as naïve and foolish, it also explains why terrorists would attack a group innocent of any wrongdoing. Our fields and groves outside the central temple were badly damaged, but their remnants supported our claims that we were a simple faith with an agricultural compound.

The UNTOUCHED, as always, were our great salvation at this time. Those who were from the villages worked with tremendous heart to replace our shattered buildings, while those from the city have followed Georgette's example and given all their worldly goods. By their labor and generosity, we have built better emplacements for hidden weapons, and have concealed the hydroponic gardens of Sacred Plants in the ground beneath the one of the sheep pastures. Most importantly, we are rebuilding the TEMPLE.

Supported by such an increase of virtue, how can the SECOND GREAT TEMPLE fail to surpass the first? The first was as HOLY as any place on this CORRUPTED world could be, but the building was still a weak Quonset hut made of aluminum. The SECOND GREAT TEMPLE will be of stone and reinforced concrete, with walls a meter thick — a veritable fist of defiance against the forces of EVIL. No showy minarets or bell towers are needed to adorn this BLESSED design — a single story building, lovingly carved with the SACRED SCRIPT, is all the church we need. When one has THE TRUTH as adornment, any other detail is superfluous.

While the police and the *jandarma* see us as a pitiful cult of New Age dupes, the common people have come to know us well. Where they once scorned us as madmen, they now implore us to accept and protect them. Not a very great number, it's true, but those who have seen the UNHOLY and felt their caress in the ghetto's dark night are always alert for salvation, always hoping for a chance to stand against the darkness. Now, among the poor of western Turkey, they know where their chance can be found.

Since the attack, over a dozen of the wretched, the needy and the hopeless have found their way to SAFE HAVEN. We have bathed their sores and fed their hunger — but most importantly, when they are strong enough they are taken to Ethan and the CRADLE OF ENLIGHTENMENT to have their minds unveiled of deception.

Victims are not the only ones to embrace us, however. Those DARKENED we have rescued from the wealthy classes know full well how to best share their joy with others like them. Unlike the UNTOUCHED, these acolytes are introduced to THE TRUTH more gently — having been kept in darkness so long, the light of purity would burn if shone upon them too strongly. But the gradual process they require gives them a chance to extricate themselves gently and slowly from their previous lives. By the time they willingly enter the CRADLE OF ENLIGHTENMENT, there is no legal doubt of their intentions. Since the destruction of the first GREAT TEMPLE, we have coached four more of the DARKENED into the light of the PANTHEON. Two of them are lawyers, who will no doubt make themselves very useful indeed.

While we GODLY were saving the DARKENED and UNTOUCHED, the PANTHEON attended to the creation of more GODLY. Five CHOSEN found their new eyes on the nights of the great convulsion. We did not find them ourselves — the physical work of rebuilding SAFE HAVEN was a great distraction. But some disciples who were trusted to travel to the TEMPLE OF THE FIRST WORSHIP in Istanbul began to see the SACRED SIGNS written on walls and carved on benches. These SIGNS were truly infused with the BLACK GOD'S power, but we knew no one from the TEMPLE had created them. We responded with signs of our own. It was the *Mukhfi* who ultimately led us to the new CHOSEN.

How like us they were! Or, more truthfully, how they resembled us as we had been when we began — doubtful, afraid, tormented by uncertainty. And, as it was with so many of us, they did not trust THE PROPHET from the first. Though illuminated, their minds still held shadowy cobwebs of CORRUPTION'S lies. But when they saw SAFE HAVEN, when we explained the PANTHEON fully and when we explained to them the truth behind the vampiric violence they had seen, they joined us willingly.

THE BOOK OF DOCTRINE, CHAPTER 7

Those GODLY who have arrived at their state independent of the blessings of the CHURCH OF THE FOURFOLD TRUTH are purified warriors, but at the same time they are in a dangerous way. Like the DARKENED, they remain entangled in a web of lies.

While tools such as the CRADLE OF ENLIGHTENMENT and the HOLY RAINBOW ROOT can be used to snap the strands of this web, doing so can have the effect of leaving an individual in free fall, and when they finally crash into the unyielding surface of THE TRUTH, it can injure their mind and soul as surely as a physical fall harms the body. How much better, then, to encourage them to disentangle the web themselves, willingly participating in their liberation? This is slower of course, but it allows them to come to THE TRUTH gradually, to stand up on its foundation firmly and comfortably. While there are some cases where this is not feasible, it is generally preferable when possible.

Therefore, when new DARKENED and CHOSEN are introduced to the CHURCH, it is best to take great care to show them only those elements that they most desire, while concealing for a time those necessary sacrifices that may frighten them back into the cozy, narcotic trap of DECEPTION.

The elements to hide and reveal differ from person to person, of course. An ardent Christian should hear little, at first, of our rejection of all false gods and prophets. Instead, our dedication to uplifting the impoverished and defending the weak should be shown most clearly. Someone who is wedded to a lifestyle of material luxury may not be ready to embrace the sacrifice of possessions for the good of the struggle.

In her great wisdom, THE BLESSED PROPHET has decreed that when we are ready, we will evangelize through satellite churches. However, true initiations, such as first-time ingestions of the HOLY PLANTS or participation in purification sessions, should be performed only at SAFE HAVEN. In this fashion, only those who are most willing and ready to embrace THE TRUTH will find it, while those who would willfully misinterpret our ways and smear our name can be weeded out.

THE BOOK OF SECRETS, CHAPTER 4

Our expansion after the PKK attack was not without difficulties — difficulties of the type that would confuse and demoralize believers at any but the highest level of initiation. Foremost among these was the discovery that two of the CHOSEN — whom we believed lost to us as sainted martyrs — had really fled from THE TRUTH and hidden themselves.

Had anyone but THE PROPHET told me that Carleton and Angus had betrayed the CHURCH, I would have denied it unto death. These were two men I loved as brothers, men who had each saved my life. To think that they would abandon us at our time of greatest need — that they would regard the PKK attack not as an assault of darkness, but merely as cover for an “escape

attempt” — the idea was ludicrous, on its own. But backed by the words of THE PROPHET, and by her tears, I could not doubt it.

Calling together her most beloved disciples, she revealed this sad news and other secrets as well.

“It pains me to say that Carleton and Angus have turned against the CHURCH, the TRUTH and the PANTHEON. But, like Adil, they had not the strength to carry our burden. Now, only the final mercy remains for them. Who can do this deed? Who can save our CHURCH from the peril of treachery and cowardice?”

Ethan volunteered, as did Galip and Georgette. THE PROPHET looked at each in turn.

“Ethan, I know your heart is true, for you have done this painful, needful thing for us in the past. But I need you here first and foremost to oversee the CRADLE OF ENLIGHTENMENT and our education labors.

“Galip, your courage is undoubted, despite many tests. But these traitors have fled to Europe, and I know you do not have a passport. Besides, your strong arm can best protect us here.

“Georgette, that leaves you.” Eyes wet with tears, THE PROPHET embraced the Frenchwoman. *“You were the first of the DARKENED to see TRUTH’S LIGHT, and without your generosity and courage I would be dead, and this CHURCH only an ABOMINATION’S bad memory. I have long planned for your return to Europe, where you are destined to found another TEMPLE in Paris and there to teach THE TRUTH. I wanted your departure to be a time of joy. Instead, you must go in secrecy and peril, and you must wait on the bliss of founding the Paris CHURCH until you know the agony of spilling the blood of traitorous CHOSEN. But you are my best choice for this. Would that I could keep you by my side forever, but I cannot let the world suffer for my selfish comfort.*

“After I dismiss the others, stay behind. I will give you the names of certain men I know in Europe who make murder their business. This is a terrible part of my old life but fitting, perhaps, for a terrible necessity.”

Then THE PROPHET turned to the rest of us and said, *“Angus and Carleton are not the only GODLY to be lost and deluded. The PANTHEON, in their infinite compassion, have been profligate with their BLESSINGS, and every nation of the world counts some of the CHOSEN within it.”*

Naturally, this announcement surprised us all and gave many of us much hope, but THE PROPHET tempered our joy with caution.

“Do not think these other CHOSEN are like us, worshipping the PANTHEON or even understanding them. They have taken power, but they reject WISDOM, and instead of worshipping the GODS and GODDESSES they try to explain their power through science, or by the stars, or by false gods and rank superstition. Leading them to THE TRUTH is our great goal, but sharing compounds their

individual confusion and misunderstanding. For they talk to one another and all the time ignore us. They have a computer system called 'hunter net.' Through this, they grope for the understanding that we have, but which they reject when it is offered."

"How do you know of this thing?" asked Ethan.

"I discovered it early in my understanding, but my hopes for it were soon dashed when my WISDOM was mocked and rejected. That is why I concealed it from you and from the rest of the CHURCH. I feared that by exposing you to its din of heresy and doubt, the clear tone of TRUTH might be silenced. Carleton was on this system before he came to us and was purified, and he has posted messages there again, denouncing us and warning other CHOSEN — or, as the apostate would call us, 'imbued' — against the TRUTH of the PANTHEON.

"My followers, I call on all of you to familiarize yourself with this thing — but do not be misled and do not yet reveal your connection to the CHURCH. Join — I shall show you how — and read, and post messages if you see fit. But anger no one. Contradict no one, and most importantly, do not try to convince them of THE TRUTH. Instead, show them that you are reasonable and thoughtful, courageous and just. Then, when the time comes to speak well of the CHURCH, your words will carry much more weight."

BOOK OF CHRONICLES, CHAPTER 21

Even with the expulsion of the Egyptians, Istanbul did not fall into peace and harmony. Rather, the opposite occurred. Much of the city's vice and crime had been influenced by one DEATH DRINKER cult or the other. Since their favored method was the BLOOD POISON, many powerful criminals were addicted to the foul substance. Once their supply was destroyed, their UNHOLY addiction drove many of them into frenzies of bloodlust and madness. It was the smallest portion of these CORRUPTED madmen who fell by our hands. Many more died in hopeless shootouts with the police, or with rival gangs, or with their own colleagues.

As the criminal underworld seethed and contorted, things more vile took advantage of the confusion to insinuate themselves into the city. Our first hint that they had arrived was in November, when they struck at our UNTOUCHED members. Though it had long been a point of doctrine that only the GODLY were permitted in the city after nightfall, after the SECOND GREAT TEMPLE was completed, we had permitted UNTOUCHED initiates to return to Istanbul to proselytize to the unfortunate and downtrodden. We always sent them in pairs or trios, and there had been no trouble. We had even considered sending them to Bursa, until the day that five of them failed to return by nightfall.

When calls to their cell phones went unanswered, we sent Fadime and Vahide with one of the new CHOSEN to search for them, but all they heard were vague reports that the UNTOUCHED had been seen in this area or that. It seemed that one pair and one trio had simply vanished from the streets where they preached.

THE PROPHET, in her wisdom and benevolence, again commanded all the UNTOUCHED to remain at SAFE HAVEN until this new threat could be assessed. THE PROPHET tried to contact the Mukhfi for assistance, but kept her own counsel about his words, saying only that he had become strange to her and might no longer be trustworthy.

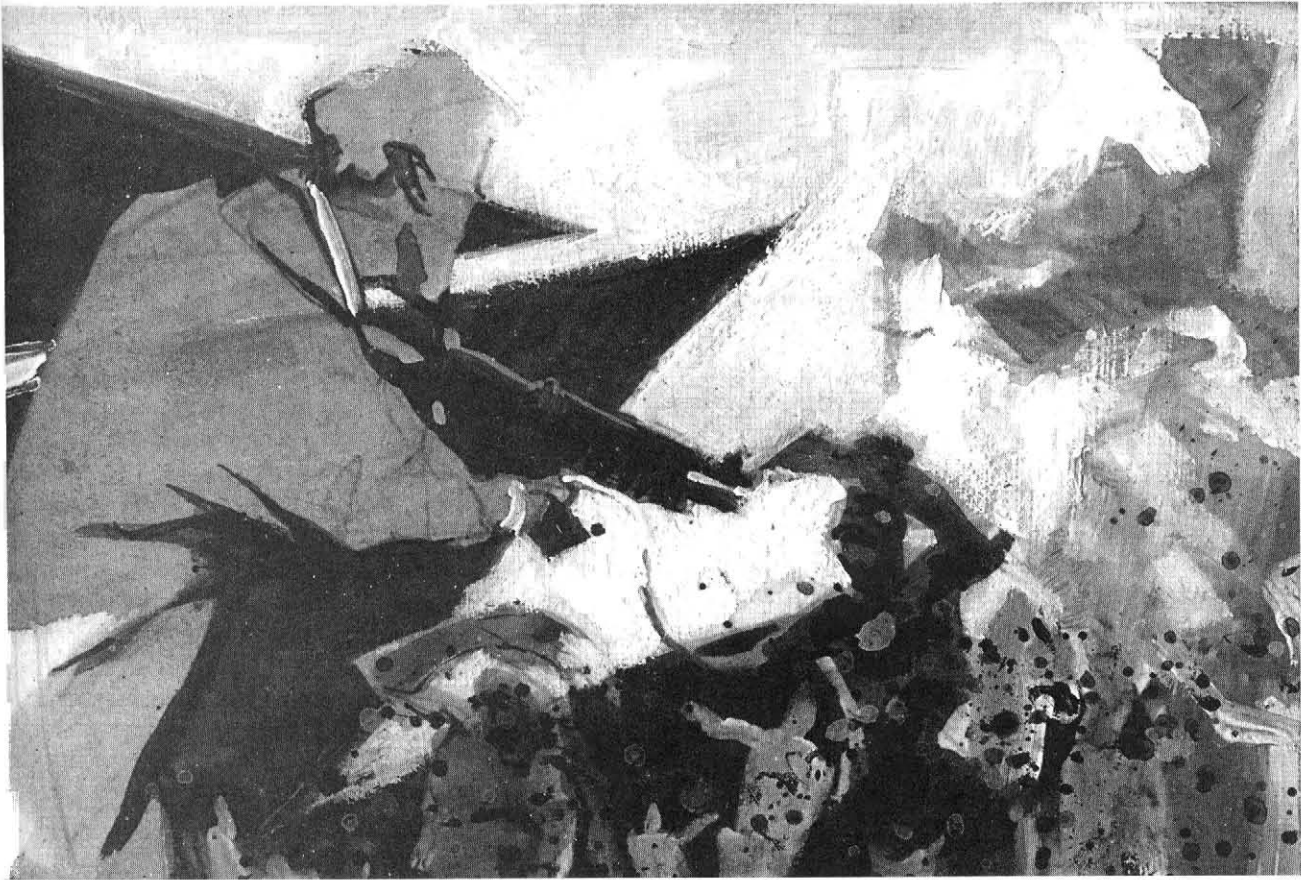
We knew that alerting the police would, of course, do more harm than good. Although purged of direct CORRUPTION, the stain of previous infestation remained. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the return of officer Çölgecen. Though he had not been involved with the PKK attack investigation, he continued to dog our initiates and, indeed, came perilously close to uncovering the membership of one of our military connections. Unfortunately, that noble soldier was forced to fire Ferdi and forgo the direct protection of one of the CHOSEN in order to conceal his allegiance to us. All was not lost, however. By feigning fear and repulsion toward the "mad cultist" he had "unwittingly" employed, this influential man was able to gain Çölgecen's confidence, become privy to his plans, and lead him away from those prominent Turks we had rescued from DARKENED lives.

No amount of influence, of course, could have convinced the police that we were innocent victims of crimes — not even as our people were abducted in broad daylight. We reported one woman's disappearance, hoping that in finding one, the police might lead us to others. But we knew well that the loss of five at once would simply reinforce their theory that we were involved in crime.

BOOK OF CHRONICLES, CHAPTER 22

One of our missing UNTOUCHED — Songül Uzel, the very woman we reported to the police — returned to us after five days lost. Sadly though, she was returned to us violated and debased — her mind addled by CORRUPT powers and her veins coursing with the BLOOD POISON.

Her story was that she had been seized from the street by men who "looked like Israelis" and who spoke a language she did not understand. They took her to a warehouse by the train yards, where they tortured and interrogated her. She told a plausible story of her escape — how the pipe to which she was handcuffed had been bolted to rotted wood, so that she was able to pull it from



the wall and sneak away under cover of nightfall. Songül was quite confident that she could find the warehouse again and said that two of our other members were being held there.

Clearly, this was a great conundrum. We knew that we could not trust anything she said. We knew that her words were merely what her new masters wished us to hear. Knowing that there was a spy in the house of heaven, we could plant misleading words in her ear, for her to relay to her CORRUPTORS. Yet this would work only so long as they believed us ignorant of her true nature and purpose.

I said that we should keep her from temptation and exhort her to embrace virtue with purification sessions, but THE PROPHET disagreed.

"Is it not better," she asked, "for us to let their own nets ensnare them? Following Songül will lead us to these creatures as surely as a dog returns to its vomit. If we give her no freedom to betray us, she can never lead us to our true enemies."

By this logic, it was reasonable to mount a rescue attempt on the warehouse. But the question was how to do it. Surely the warehouse was some form of trap: Either the DEATH DRINKERS hoped to lure us, the CHOSEN, to our doom, or they planned to evaluate us through the use of our BLESSINGS, or they

wanted to place more BLOOD POISONED traitors in our midst.

After careful consideration, we decided to use Çölgecen once more. We phoned in an anonymous tip that followers of the FOURFOLD TRUTH were stockpiling weapons in the warehouse. In this manner, we ensured that he would enter with caution, well armed and with many other witnesses. We timed the call to send him in by day, as well.

There were, indeed, armed defenders at the warehouse. Two policemen were badly injured (though not, alas, Çölgecen). The two UNTOUCHED were rescued, though when they were brought forth, they were in handcuffs — and one of our newly CHOSEN could see the inky stain of CORRUPTION upon them.

We had shown our mettle to our new enemies, and they in turn showed us theirs. The POLLUTED traitors were arrested — despite being kidnapped prisoners — and the next day Çölgecen came to SAFE HAVEN with a search warrant. He said that he suspected us of growing, abusing and selling illicit drugs.

THE BOOK OF CHRONICLES, CHAPTER 23

We had little warning of Çölgecen's search, but we had enough. A lookout along the road to SAFE HAVEN

saw them coming and, with admirable forethought, drove his sheep in front of them as he called to warn us. The door accessing the SACRED PLANTS was quickly hidden, as were our caches of weapons.

All praise to THE LIVING FLAME, whose wisdom and foresight shelter us all! With keen discernment, she had divided all of our initiates — both UNTOUCHED and redeemed DARKENED — by what task they might best perform. Those who were fair of face and voice were sent to teach in the cities. Those teachers were never permitted to construct or work in the SANCTUARY OF BLESSED PLANTS. Similarly, those whose skills were best for labor stayed at SAFE HAVEN, where their toil was most needed and where their secret efforts could be concealed. Because of this wisdom, the two CORRUPTED initiates could not tell the police exactly where the SACRED CROPS were grown.

Confident that our mysteries were thus protected, THE PROPHET herself met the police with open arms and a broad smile.

"Welcome," she told them.

Çölgecen's suspicion was a dark contrast to her cheer. As his men fanned out to search the premises, he personally took THE PROPHET aside for interrogation. Pausing only to see that each officer had a personal guide to ensure his comfort, she invited Çölgecen to her office. He wanted to speak with her alone, but she insisted that I come as well.

"Anything you say to me, you can say in front of a witness," she said.

In her office, he asked if she knew who Yeter Bilgin and Abir Moussafa were. To my surprise (though I should have learned never to be startled by any of THE PROPHET'S cunning maneuvers), she answered him honestly.

"They are drug merchants and smugglers," she said.

"I'm surprised," he said. "You claim to be the leader of a... simple agricultural religion... and yet you associate with that sort of scum."

"I am the leader of a simple agricultural religion," she replied, "But our beliefs hold their activities in a contempt that I don't think you're really equipped to comprehend. To us, they are BLASPHEMERS, and I have spoken to them in an attempt to persuade them from their wicked ways."

"You really expect me to think you tried to talk Bilgin and Moussafa out of their jobs? That's ridiculous. I think that instead, you've been trying to muscle in on them. I know all about your involvement with Dörtlök and his rotten crew. I know about your involvement in his death, too, and Adil Soyly's death, and all the drug and crime deaths that have sickened my city since your weed religion sprang out

of the dirt. You don't want to stop Bilgin and Moussafa. You want to be them!"

At this she laughed, and her look at him was kind and pitying all at once.

"Can you fail to see how your own words tie you in knots? Can you truly believe that all our public preaching about the ills of these poisons is simply a ruse? If you can see me as a murderous international crime lord, why is it so hard to believe I am what I claim — a woman of faith who hates to see lives lost and CORRUPTED?"

"Because I know your past! I know what you were doing in Macedonia. I know what you were doing in Uzbekistan. And I have a pretty good idea of what you were doing in Sri Lanka. You're no woman of faith. You're a criminal degenerate looking for a dirty way to make easy money."

THE PROPHET took this abuse without flinching. She waited until he had said his piece, giving no defense against his horrible — yet true — accusations about her past. Then she simply told him, "Do not judge who I am by who I was. If you have proof of all these many accusations, I suggest you arrest me, instead of insulting me in my own home. If not... perhaps you should consider another possibility."

She looked at him with eyes that had beheld GODS. She spoke quietly and intently, with a voice that had held council with GODDESSES.

"I have seen the naked face of EVIL, Inspector. I have looked upon it and been changed. If you could only believe in me, together we could finish the great work of sweeping Istanbul clean of its CORRUPTORS. Together we could make this the finest, safest and most HOLY city in the world. You can join me, have faith, and when I can I will prove every word I've said is true. Or you can oppose me, remain DARKENED, and unwittingly serve those you so loudly claim to oppose."

I could see illumination struggling to cross his face, just for a moment. But then one of his officers pushed into the office and said "Sir! We've found something!"

My heart was in my mouth, fearing that they had uncovered weapons or the sanctuary of SACRED PLANTS. But instead, they had merely uncovered a small store of the GREEN GODDESS' LEAF. We later suspected it had accidentally been knocked behind the WHITE FLEECE during a ceremony or while our worship stores were being hidden.

Çölgecen triumphantly arrested THE PROPHET — again — and warned the rest of us that jandarma would be patrolling our property and keeping us under constant surveillance.

This was, in truth, no great threat. Thanks to our friends in the military, any truly dangerous secrets could be protected. Within hours of THE PROPHET'S arrest we had a half-dozen UNTOUCHED

who were eager to claim responsibility for the GREEN LEAF, knowing that our HOLY leader could be saved by one noble liar claiming it was a personal supply, not a communal one.

Yet while the eyes of the *jandarma* could not destroy us, they could constrict us, and thus we moved with some regret to what THE PROPHET and Ethan had termed "The Apprentice Broom Plan."

Simply put, half of the CHURCH indulged in a ruse. We pretended to be shaken by internal stresses while our leader was imprisoned. Under the cover of this deception, the believers involved in the plan — those best able to live, work and conceal themselves in cities — abandoned SAFE HAVEN and scattered into Istanbul, Bursa, Ankara and even as far as Izmir. In their new homes, their mission was to continue to worship in secret, making the pilgrimage to the SECOND GREAT TEMPLE when they could do so safely.

Those UNTOUCHED who stayed behind were kept ignorant of the true faith of those who departed, the better to carry out the deception. Foremost among those (of course) was the CORRUPTED spy Songül.

The five newest GODLY would stay in Safe Haven to protect it alongside Ethan and (once freed) THE BLESSED PROPHET. The rest of the CHOSEN — Fadime, Vahide, Ferdi and myself — would head the new churches.

Leaving SAFE HAVEN was a bitter blow to each of us — particularly to Vahide and Fadime, who wept and said that it was the best home they had known. But our orders to cleanse the world took precedent over our mean personal wishes.

This unworthy servant was given the most BLESSED mission of all, for I was put in charge of the dozen members sent to Istanbul itself. One of our wealthy believers had long since acquired the old apartment building containing THE TEMPLE OF THE FIRST WORSHIP, and it was there — humble in appearance but magnificent in HOLINESS — that I based our new church.

THE BOOK OF SECRETS, CHAPTER 5

When I was commanded to found a new church in Istanbul, I entered my new position with fear. That is no secret. What is secret, is the second mission I had beneath my first.

Even as our worship became concealed to the DARKENED outside, so was my other mission hidden from all but the most trusted of THE PROPHET's disciples.

THE PROPHET had spoken the truth when she said our religion loathed the drug business and longed to purify it, but her intent was to purify it from within. Çölgecen had some true foundation for his suspicions, and while in Istanbul I was to ally myself with criminals,

come into their confidence, and in time try to control their enterprises.

This was not so impossible a task as it might seem. While I was once a naïve girl with no knowledge of crime (save how to find raves and buy Xtasy), my time with THE PROPHET had shown me much. Furthermore, I was acting at a time when the crime world of Istanbul was in great turmoil, due to the destruction of the Egyptian DEATH DRINKERS and the madness of so many BLOOD POISONED servants. Many ambitious criminals, seeing a power void at the top, struggled to fill it.

Into this struggle came I, with my GODDESS GIFT. On THE PROPHET's secret advice, I allied myself to a gangster named Dursun Erguner. Erguner owned two legal brothels and a nightclub but was heavily involved in unlicensed prostitution, extortion and gambling. As his minions battled with rivals, they did so knowing that I could, in an emergency, provide healing such as no hospital could. This protected not only their bodies but their criminal enterprise — for how could the police arrest a gunman badly wounded in a fight when the wounds described by witnesses were nowhere to be found?

I know that had THE PROPHET been present, with her wise manipulation and subtle guile, they would soon have been our closest allies, but I lacked those skills. The best I could manage was an exchange of favors, because they could sense (I think) that I feared them.

But this was enough, I told myself. All I needed to do was maintain until THE PROPHET was free. Then she could lead us forward again. Alas, my wish was slow in coming. The charges stemming from the bag of drugs discovered on our property were dropped after one of the UNTOUCHED confessed to owning it, but Çölgecen had many tricks up his sleeve. Or perhaps it was the CORRUPTORS of the two captured initiates. In any event, those two from our church scarcely let a day pass without making some new accusation against HER HOLINESS THE PROPHET. They accused her of murder, of plotting murder, of smuggling weapons, of torture, of kidnapping, of theft and fraud and a dozen things besides. Çölgecen, eager for any excuse to imprison her, scheduled trial after trial, each on a separate charge. Many of the charges were sure to be dismissed, as there was no evidence beyond the flimsy accusations of the two traitors. But until the formalities were met, he had every excuse to keep THE LIVING FLAME in prison. And he was in no hurry to meet those legal formalities.

THE BOOK OF CHRONICLES, CHAPTER 24

By the craft of the ENEMY and the hatred of Çölgecen, THE BLESSED PROPHET remained in undeserved captivity while wild and slanderous accusations were leveled

against the CHURCH OF THE FOURFOLD TRUTH. We had learned many lessons in our short and noble existence, many of them hard indeed, but this current one was perhaps the hardest.

The TENTH LESSON is this: The DARKENED hate and fear the light of TRUTH, and they are eager indeed for the comfort of FALSEHOOD. Even without the direct manipulation of a BEAST, the habit of deception is so ingrained that they embrace LIES on their own initiative.

For the selfsame newspapers and television stations that ignored and laughed at us when we brought them true footage of THE WORLD'S CORRUPTION — these "purveyors of public information" who could not be bothered to take time out from discussions of sports figures and pop stars to reveal the convulsions of a world in torment — were all too ready to hear LIES about a brainwashing drug cult. Oh, they were eager to hear any hint of scandal. They were most pleased to print conjecture as fact, to pretend to be evenhanded while all the time silencing any voice of outrage from the CHURCH. We tried to tell them THE TRUTH, but they never seemed to have time in their programs or space in their papers for *our* side of the story.

With no end in sight to THE PROPHET's unjust imprisonment, we had to take more and greater steps to protect ourselves and SAFE HAVEN. With great care, the mines were removed. The heaviest weapons were taken away — sealed in waterproof drums and buried for a later day of need. (We did not leave the site perfectly defenseless, of course: Even the police would acknowledge our right to own rifles and pistols after the carnage of the PKK attack.) The sacred GREEN BASIN was removed to Bursa and placed in Fadime's keeping, while the holy WHITE FLEECE was given to Vahide for protection.

Most tragic, we took our last harvest of the SACRED PLANTS and stored it all in secret caches with great care. The hydroponics room was most carefully cleaned, and the troughs once full of those plants BLESSED BY THE PANTHEON were replaced with tomatoes and beans.

Bereft of all but the barest supplies of the RAINBOW ROOT, initiations were cancelled until such time as they could be conducted properly and at length. Ethan was sure that in time he could fully convert the DARKENED with nothing but the CRADLE OF ENLIGHTENMENT and vigorous education sessions, but THE PROPHET said that our numbers were sufficient at that time and full acceptance should come only from her.

It was in this time of disarray that our onetime ally, the secretive *Mukhfi*, revealed that his pride had been his downfall. Though he had felt firsthand the generosity of the PANTHEON, he had scorned their wisdom while



accepting their power. Thinking his merely human strength enough to protect him, he rejected THE PROPHET and defied THE TRUTH. But though the BLACK GOD protected him from the ABOMINATIONS for a long time, he was but one man in the end.

Rather than approach us as equals and allies, he wrote me as if he could dictate terms. He demanded that the CHURCH leave Istanbul for "you have become a plague as vile as the creatures you fought." According to him, in times of war one needs weapons, but when the war is won the weapons are put aside — and while his insight was strong, it was narrow indeed if he considered the war won.

Not content with his senseless demands, he made threats. He said there were new shadows upon Istanbul, and that while he would tolerate us so long as we eliminated them, we should tarry in "his" city only long enough to complete this task. Otherwise, he hinted, those who had captured Söngül and the others could be led to us as easily as we to them.

But his arrogance was no shield when CORRUPTION found him. After his threats, I took steps to learn his true identity, and that was how I learned that the *Mukhfi* — a local businessman named Soner Bolat — had been killed in a surprise attack by the forces of EVIL.

THE BOOK OF SECRETS, CHAPTER 6

Angus McCrae and Carleton Van Wyk have both been marked for death, without success. Adil Soyulu died after the condemnation of THE PROPHET. And Soner Bolat died, not by her HOLY word, and not by the CORRUPTORS as is written in the Chronicles, but at my order.

Who really killed him? That's the question. Most obviously, it was one of the UNTOUCHED who strangled him with a scarf. But it wasn't really that loyal initiate, for he really did only as I commanded. So perhaps it was me. But it wasn't really me, either, for I did not desire his death in any way. I acted only out of sheerest necessity. I had no choice because of his betrayal of the CHURCH. So he was, in a truer way, the author of his own demise, for he could have chosen at any time to avoid it. But deeper than that — below the hand that killed and the voice that ordered and the soul that forced events — there is the ultimate responsibility, and — as written in the Chronicles — that lies squarely with the powers of CORRUPTION.

Who drew mankind away from the PANTHEON? The BEASTS.

Who filled Soner's mind with such LIES that he could not accept the FOURFOLD TRUTH? The BEASTS.

Who sculpted this modern world into a cauldron of conflict in which Soner could see no way to treat with us save with threats and violence? The BEASTS.

His death and its attendant suffering was most disturbing to me, not merely because the GREEN GODDESS has, perhaps, enhanced an already merciful nature, but because of what it implied about the power balance between the HOLY and the CORRUPT. THE PROPHET, in her most distant moods, has spoken about glimpses of greater evils, buried in the earth like cancers and waking anew to pervert and destroy, but I never dreamed they might pervert the gifts of the PANTHEON. Yet, in Soner's case, this seems to be exactly what happened. While the BLACK GOD'S BLESSING gave him great power to find and identify the CORRUPT, the DEMONS' curse upon him made the presence of other GODLY CHOSEN utter agony to him. Yet rather than come to us for help, hoping we could lift his curse, he chose to flee from the pain and reject the CHURCH. Easy in the short run, but ultimately fruitless.

My mere proximity was sufficient to torment him, and I suffered as much as he did during my interrogation. I am not like Ethan or THE PROPHET — I have no head for the big picture, for realpolitik, for ugly necessity that is justified in the long run. In my weakness, I am probably very like Soner, who sacrificed his ultimate salvation for a short-term surcease of pain. But I had my role to play, my duty, and pitiful as his cries became, I had to do it.

I truly believe that the BLACK GOD's embrace was a mercy for Soner Bolat. Yet I cannot say that it was unearned, for before his death he revealed the full depths of his treachery to the PANTHEON.

First and foremost, he had concealed the presence of new DEATH DRINKERS from us. This time they were French, coming into Istanbul under cover of darkness. They brought with them a number of BLOOD VASSALS — two of whom were recent appointees to the Istanbul offices of the World Health Organization.

Perhaps worse, he had detected in Istanbul the presence of European CHOSEN.

THE BOOK OF SECRETS, CHAPTER 7

Thanks to the late *Mukhfi*, I possessed knowledge of both a group of European "imbued" and several well-defended DEATH DRINKERS. While THE PROPHET might have produced some brilliant strategy for a frontal attack on the latter, I was no tactician. Worse, the fortunes of the CHURCH as a whole were dismal, and no one could leave SAFE HAVEN without being closely trailed. Only those of us concealed in the cities could operate with any sort of freedom.

I had brought a few of the formerly DARKENED into my confidence for the purposes of attending to the *Mukhfi* problem. In the days following his death, we

busied ourselves with making sure he had left no evidence of his CHOSEN nature. The last thing we wanted was for a respected businessman to be murdered and to have a journal or list of SACRED SIGNS surface to connect him to the FOURFOLD TRUTH.

At the same time, I was looking for a way to present myself to the European GODLY. I began leaving SACRED SIGNS in response to their symbols, and — after much mutual suspicion and arrangement of safeguards — I met them at noon in a crowded coffeehouse. One of them was Italian like me, so we discussed matters in that language. His first questions concerned “a violent cult led by a former gun runner.”

From his face and the tone of his voice, I knew he was unready to believe anything good about us. Rather than spread the pearls of TRUTH before swine, I decided that I must use FALSEHOOD to direct one enemy at another. In this I followed in the footsteps of THE PROPHET, though I can only hope to emulate the small part of her skill.

Instead of correcting him, then, I heaped lie upon lie. Though it scoured my heart to say it, I told him that the CHURCH was insane, that any CHOSEN who refused its tenets were summarily murdered, that THE PROPHET was using her powers only for personal gain, and that I had been hiding from their wrath for months.

I further told them that I had been working with another disbeliever CHOSEN — Soner Bolat. In this fashion I was able to plausibly give them the *Mukhfi*'s data on themselves and further cement my position as a person to be trusted.

When I suggested action against the new DEATH DRINKERS, however, the “imbued” said they were more interested in “rescuing” people from the CHURCH.

That was when I knew I'd have to watch closely for a chance to destroy these newcomers.

THE BOOK OF CHRONICLES, CHAPTER 25

Do not cry for me, though I am falsely imprisoned. No, for when THE PROPHET is jailed, can I do less than join her? Mourn, instead, for the CHURCH, which is hedged about by LIES and imprisoned by its enemies! In doing so, weep for THE TRUTH, which suffers in turn as her FOURFOLD CHAMPION is attacked on all sides. But do not halt your sorrows there. Raise your lament for the world itself, for if TRUTH can be chained by DECEIT, there is no hope for this Earth, for its people or for any soul upon it.

I am in prison, but at least my mind is free of CORRUPTION. In this, I am freer than you who walk DARKENED streets, ignorant of your true peril.

The FOURFOLD CHURCH, so recently damaged and embattled, has been struck once more by the jealous blows of envious EVIL and frightened ignorance.

I do not condemn those who believe the terrible accusations leveled against us. Before my eyes were opened, I would have believed them as well, for they are plausibly crafted by the masters of DECEPTION. What is known of our CHURCH? Not our message or our purpose, for the papers and TV channels have no interest in that. No, what people know is that we are not “people of the book” (and therefore suspect), that the police suspect us, that we have a “compound” and that we wear gowns embroidered with strange symbols.

What, then, are they to think when someone in a *chador* embroidered with symbols resembling ours rushes at new World Health Organization employees, screaming about “ghuls and demons” before detonating a suicide bomb?

I cannot say who placed this impostor. The “new shadows” that Soner Bolat alluded to before his untimely demise? The Assassins, regrouped and attempting to reclaim Istanbul, their bridge between west and east? The Egyptians? Some other unsuspected ABOMINATION?

Whoever did it in reality, the blame has fallen upon the CHURCH with the weight of a thousand hammers. Ethan and the resident CHOSEN succeeded in fleeing from SAFE HAVEN before the *jandarma* finally occupied it. Some of the UNTOUCHED escaped as well, though not as many as I might have hoped. A very few foolishly attempted to fight back — surely something THE PROPHET would never have allowed — and while the SECOND GREAT TEMPLE was built as a solid fortress, it could not long survive the might of the Turkish army.

That brief resistance was the death warrant for our open worship. Arrest warrants were issued for all known members of the CHURCH, including myself. Our lawyers struggle to keep our finances from being frozen, and as they do so, every effort is made to move the money to secure accounts in Switzerland and the Grenadines.

The accusations against me — in addition to the charges of sedition and conspiracy leveled against all CHURCH members — are more serious by far. Whoever assassinated Soner Bolat apparently had the craft and guile to frame me for his murder. While I'm sure these charges will eventually be dropped when seen as the fabrications they are, in the meantime I am constrained to remain in a Turkish prison.

I have not succumbed to despair, however — I have not and cannot while THE PROPHET lives and the LIGHT OF TRUTH burns within me. While SAFE HAVEN

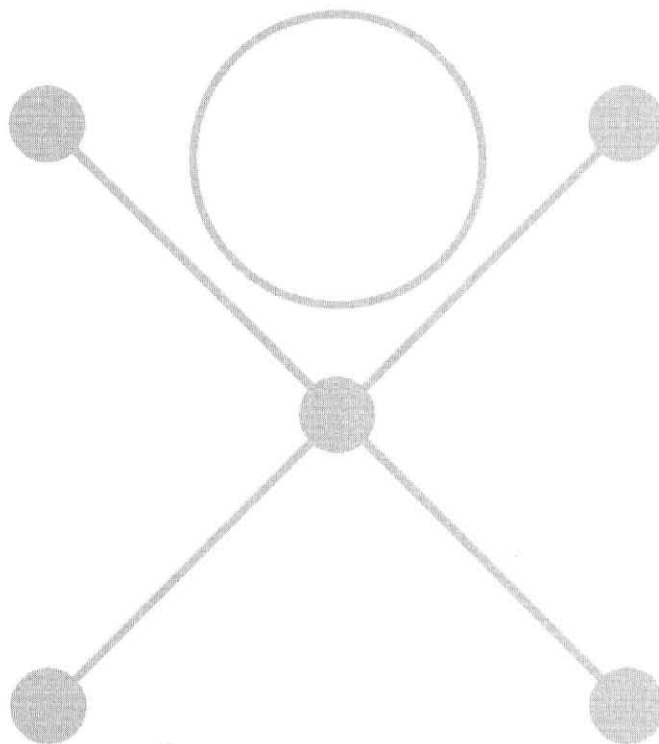
is occupied for now, there is no sign that our enemies or the police are aware of the Apprentice Broom Plan. The hidden congregations are, so far, undiscovered. So are many of my personal followers in Istanbul. The HOLY BOOKS have, to date, been concealed successfully from the DARKENED *jandarma* and from the fully CORRUPT as well.

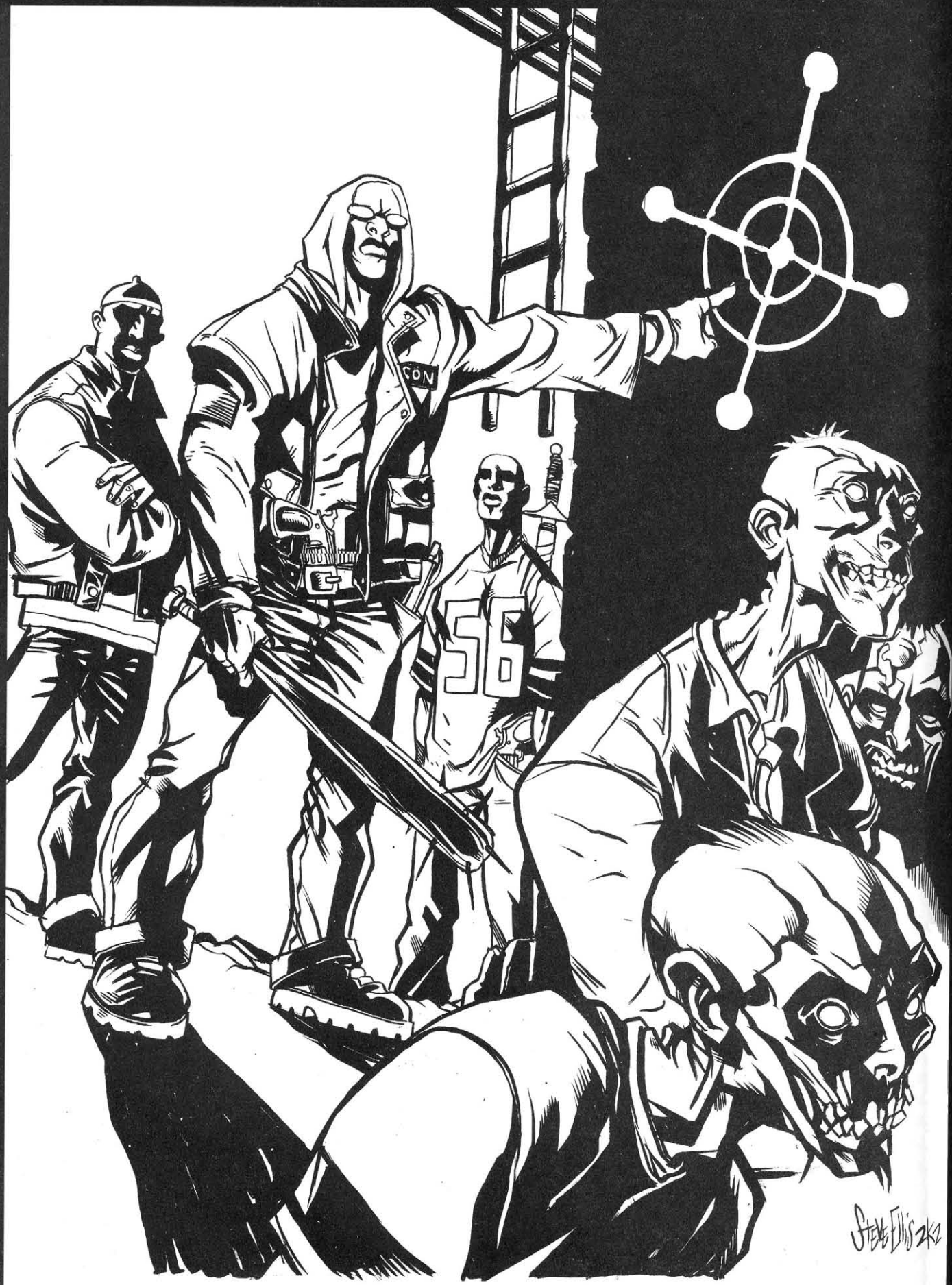
Is our faith destroyed? No, it is not, nor can it ever be. For even months ago, it was nothing. Its foremost members were then a criminal, a wealthy tourist and a college student. Like the sudden rage of a flash flood, we

surged into Istanbul and swept it clean of its filth. The CORRUPTION has seeped back, poisoning the cleansing water, but there is a new spirit upon the land that they can never completely destroy.

The books and the knowledge are fertile seeds, and from them one day, a renewed CHURCH will grow. Already its seedlings sprout in Izmir, Bursa and Ankara. Through Georgette, they grow in Paris, and through Ethan we shall soon be seen in America as well.

Do not weep for the CHURCH. One day, SAFE HAVEN will be ours again.





CHAPTER 5: STORYTELLING THE REVOLUTION

*When they were but few in number, few indeed, and
strangers in it, they wandered from nation to nation, from
one kingdom to another.*

— Psalms 105:12-13

In **Hunter: The Reckoning**, characters fight the most uphill of battles. They struggle constantly under the cover of the cruelest night to climb an insurmountable mountain. Their feet scabble to gain footholds. Their hands grab for razor-sharp rocks. Many slip and fall to their deaths. Others perish from exposure, leaving a carcass to the elements. Set against the enormity of the mountain, their climb goes in vain and their existence is forgotten.

Did they ever make a difference? Did their climb blaze the way for others to follow? Show a route to the top? Obviously, something drove them to try. Something suggested “progress” to them. Some internal vigor convinced them that while they were climbing, by God, they were doing some good.

But after they died, what then? What was left but paper-thin skin and bleached bones?

Imagine that these climbers — these hunters — *do* make a difference. They band together and achieve something that *remains* after they’re gone.

Of course, hunters’ effort isn’t to climb a mountain or lead others to a literal summit. Their collective goal is to liberate humanity from control and oppression by inhuman, supernatural forces. Whether the newly imbued or seasoned veteran knows it or not, she stands up to the tyranny of monsters by virtue of contending with

even the lowliest of beasts. When multiple hunters do the same, whether together or apart, they begin a movement to free mankind. To lay a foundation for a better world. Those few send a message to other hunters and perhaps even humanity in general that *hope is possible! The monsters will not win!*

Don’t misunderstand, though. Those hunters who “climb the mountain” and dedicate themselves to breaking monsters’ grip — who “make a difference” — still die. Everyone dies. Their chances of reaching the top, of looking out over a promised land free from beasts are precariously thin. Hunters as mortal people are all too perishable — bags of meat with a fast-approaching expiration date. But hunters may be able to *leave something behind*. A legacy. A plan. A future of sorts.

And that’s what this chapter — this book — is about. It’s not dedicated to your “average” hunter group. Like it or not, most groups of hunters fall apart or are wiped out in a struggle with forces they cannot understand. Sure, they defeat or reconcile a creature here and there. Maybe they even save some souls along the way. But who cares? They suck the pipe in the end and fail to make any impact on the Other Side, mankind or the world. Bump one monster off the list and it seems like a thousand take its place. Not to mention that hunters are a disorganized lot. Even with hunter-net and other

communication structures supplying some infrastructure, they're still a scatter-brained, confused group of paranoids who hide in corners, hoping that they do *something* right and don't lose their minds in the process.

What we're talking about here is hunter groups that *manage to do something*. They look to the future and indelibly mark the world. Whereas hunters largely stumble blindly in a dark room, now consider the possibility that *your* hunters have a flashlight. Sure, the batteries are dying, the lens is cracked and the beam is weak. But they can *see*. Just a little. Things are just a *little* clearer. What do they do with the knowledge and facts they discover? How do they — or can they — change the world?

If you're a member of an underground, subversive movement, fighting an oppressive regime, and you don't know who your allies are, where to find them, how to get in contact with them or even if they exist, how do you go from being one insurrectionist to a revolution? That's the dilemma that **Hunter: Utopia** explores. This book guides you and your players from stories about solitary, isolated, disenfranchised and ignorant hunters to possible stories about cabals of agents, secret plans, covert operations, corporate and government coups and even secret wars fought by armies on hidden fronts. Consider this book a how-to guide to waging — and maybe winning — the struggle against monsters. **Utopia** offers guidance on how characters in your game might try to "Inherit the Earth," in whatever way influential individuals, motivated circles, connected enclaves or united forces believe is right and good (whether they're just and true or misguided and corrupt).

Your characters' potential is virtually limitless once they have the power (and the chance) to see and become organized. Do they destroy the plant that's been poisoning the town water supply and making puppets of the citizens? Do they liberate the town wholesale? Or the city? Are they capable of making the government stand up and take notice? Do they wipe out bloodsuckers all over the state? The country? The *world*? The larger the goal, the bigger the plan, the more tenuous and fragile it is. With too many plates spinning on sticks... well, the crash of fine china is inevitable. So, how do hunters handle it? How soon do they and their efforts fall apart? What do they accomplish before dying?

In the end, there's a very good chance that your imbued don't fulfill the greatest of their aspirations. The battle against largely unseen, unknown enemies remains painfully overwhelming regardless of the strength of the characters' direction and commitment. Death and defeat are inescapable. But for the most part, the chosen try to find a foothold on the mountain. They carve their name in its side. They find their niche and seek to fill it.

Here's your chance to create and tell a story or chronicle that details the rise (and quite possibly the fall) of a group of imbued that works toward a dream of

"Utopia" — a world free of monsters or that finds peace with them, or that achieves another ideal that only your troupe could conjure up. The goal and how much of it sees the light of day is up to you and your players. What follows is simply a discussion of possibilities for your chronicle, a glimpse into *what could be* for hunter society in your game. Do the imbued succeed? Do they fail? What can be achieved before they falter? That's what we're here to find out.

Note that before reading this chapter, it's recommended that you read "In This Together" on p. 154 of the **Hunter Storytellers Handbook**. That article helps explain some of the possible imbued group dynamics behind, ones allowing hunters to get together and stay together before they can even begin to pursue a higher goal for their world.

BRICK BY BRICK

As a Storyteller, it's your job to help craft the societies of hunters' world — friends, family, co-workers, allies, enemies. You pilot the chronicle that features those societies, big and small. That makes for a lot of balls to juggle, from keeping track of all the imbued at large (including the players' characters) to knowing what the monsters of your world are up to. Plus, you have to maintain the constant tension that keeps your story moving. It's a constant building process — laying brick atop brick, foundation to roof. Your chronicle begins with the origins of the hunters and builds with the introduction of a network of subplots and supporting characters, launching the chosen from humble beginnings to a potentially apocalyptic finale. The question is, how do you create a **Hunter** chronicle that has an inauspicious beginning and a cataclysmic finale?

WHAT DO THEY WANT?

Everybody wants something. It's a precept that rules us all. Some want money, others love, and many of us want a thousand little things in between. Sometimes, people with common goals and similar ideals move in the same circles and form groups or unions that support their common aspirations. Social cliques, political parties and congregations all are under this umbrella. Members of these groups may want to bring the world to the light of "God," or to impose strident governmental reform or perhaps just to get together and drink/ snort/ smoke themselves into oblivion.

Everyone has goals. Hunters belonging to a group are no different. A hunter circle on a small scale — a handful of chosen huddled together against the darkness — isn't likely to conjure up much of an overriding purpose, however. Such imbued are lucky to live from night to night as they deal with what little of the truth they know; it can be difficult or impossible for them to see the forest for the trees. They are confused, scared and

THIS IS YOUR STORY

This book's introduction explains that the content of *Utopia* is for the most part "what if." The ongoing, published *Hunter* storyline and plot assumes that the imbued are a hodgepodge of people who are across the world awakened to the reality of monsters' existence. In the continuing events of *Hunter* supplements, the imbued remain largely ignorant about their own origins, the nature of monsters, the goals of the Other Side and the identity of the Messengers. Consider that hunter condition the "official" status quo of their existence.

This book is intended to show you how you can raise your chronicle above that level of ignorance and uncertainty — how your characters can discover more about themselves, their rivals and their fellow hunters, communicating, organizing and perhaps fulfilling minor or major agendas with regard to the supernatural. These kinds of developments occur in *your* game and in *your* World of Darkness, but not in that presented in other *Hunter* books or in that of any other Storyteller game.

Consider this book a guide for following the "Golden Rule" to extremes. You can use it to tell whatever revolutionary stories you like about the imbued rising up against the unknown and changing the face of the World of Darkness. Simply understand that once you do, your game diverges from the status quo observed in ongoing game books. Take from other supplements what you like and can use in your ongoing stories and continue to make your chronicle your own.

angry, and generally they aren't able to be proactive or seek to make a future for themselves. They react to the creatures they stumble into rather than identify specific ones and go in search of them. Hunters have no map to guide them, no trail of breadcrumbs. They might make a small difference. In the end, though, they're deadlier than a lot of the things they put in the ground.

Some groups, however, have loftier intentions. Plans. Motives. They are compelled to gather force and numbers. They look to the future with bright, wide eyes and hope they understand what it takes to get there. At any cost. If you and your players want to concoct a stable, goal-oriented hunter group (nay, even a *society*), then you need to know why and how they manage it. You and the players must know the characters' goals.

MINOR GOALS

Hunters who simply try to stay alive and do what little they can about the things *may* experience that "necessity" develop into a *small* goal. Such an objective is good for just one hunter group (a troupe's characters),

because it's largely attainable. Achieving it doesn't require some sweeping manifesto that could immerse (and perhaps destroy) all hunters, monsters, humanity or the world. Goals of this sort are manageable, with an end somewhere in sight, even from the start.

What constitutes such intentions? Perhaps the destruction or redemption of a *particular* creature. It needn't be some ancient or powerful being — any young, untrained monster fits the bill. After all, compared to most agents of darkness, the chosen can be weak, especially when starting out. Battling some young vampire in a small town can be a harrowing, arduous pursuit. The creature can probably move fast, affect people's minds and potentially shrug off bullets like bee stings. Maybe that creature has begun to accept a predatory existence, an inhuman soul, and poses an outstanding challenge to individuals who wish to show the monster "the light" (whether that light is heavenly salvation or the glint off a pair of hedgeclippers is up to the hunters). In other words, this attainable goal can be the focus of one or several chapters of a chronicle, with a handful of characters.

Other small-size goals could include eliminating the influence of monsters from a specific business, an apartment building or a small neighborhood. Maybe the characters want to save a family (one of their own, even) from possible corruption or slavery. It's also possible that the hunters seek to make peace with a handful of ghosts that haunt the burned-out schoolhouse at the edge of town.

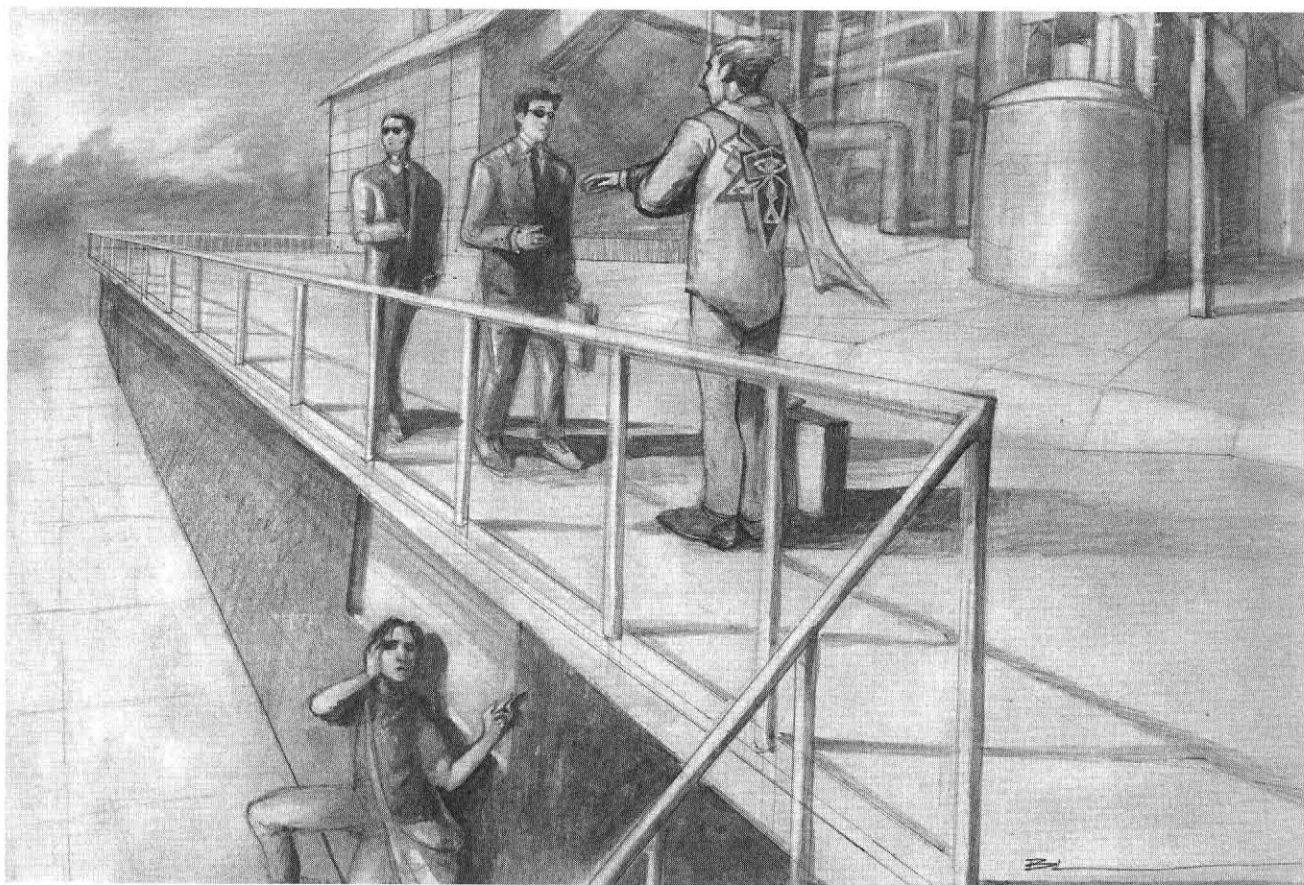
Small goals are achievable. Their scope is manageable. The parameters of possibility aren't blurred or inconceivable. Indeed, if a small goal is achieved, another may be pursued or greater aspirations may seem possible.

MODERATE GOALS

Some groups may want to carve themselves a bigger niche in the world. Taking out the bloodsucker that lurks around the local convenience store just might not cut it — or perhaps has been accomplished already. Some goals exist on a new level in scope and depth.

Moderately sized goals may involve cleaning up a small town (whether by wiping out the monsters within it, establishing a truce or trying to teach creatures how to resist their dark urges). They may entail cleaning up a block or two in a city, or a crusade to bring down a corrupt politician (though none so big as, say, the vice president). Maybe it means severing the monstrous ties of a local corporation or factory. Other mid-range ideals can include tackling a tainted police force, wiping creatures' stain from a city's churches or "saving" a town's entire roster of creatures and showing them the light of God or Buddha or whatever deity your hunters believe in.

Moderate goals don't change the world, but they do make a difference. They register as a faint blip on the radar of the World of Darkness. People across the state



may not feel the repercussions of events, or even hear a news story about developments, but the people — and monsters — in the area or who were already involved or connected feel the ripples. A power vacuum is created. Reforms are called for to ensure that the “scandal” or “accident” never happens again.

Although a moderate goal is attainable, able to be logically plotted out to some kind of foreseeable end from the very beginning, a lot can go wrong or lead to unexpected outcomes. Liberating a factory from one inhuman faction may make it a prime target of another, far worse controller. Cleaning up a city borough may eventually become as harmful as it was initially helpful when many citizens prove to have been supported or protected by the creatures.

A considerable number of hunters is likely to be needed to achieve a moderate goal — more so than for a small goal, anyway. These include the players’ characters but also outsiders who are invited in or who barge in to help. Too many cooks can spoil the soup, though. By no means are hunters a unified front, nor do they have unifying goals. Infighting can undermine any “mutual” achievement.

A group tackling a goal of this size can also be spread thin, leaving members vulnerable. Just when the hunters think they can dispose of some beast that’s tainting meat at the cannery, they might be attacked by a faction

they previously disregarded. If they turn their backs on other problems to concentrate on one, they may pay the price for their negligence or narrow vision.

But, despite the dangers, twists and turns along the way, even moderate goals can be achieved if hunters plan and persevere. When those ideals are fulfilled, still greater ones can seem possible.

MAJOR GOALS

These are the kinds of goals that make the planet shift uncomfortably in its orbit. These hopes are *huge*. Far-reaching and requiring a heavy toll on their perpetrators, these objectives make the denizens of the World of Darkness cock an eyebrow — assuming the goals are fulfilled.

Imagine wresting control of a government from monsters, *wholesale*. First maybe state, then federal. Or what about the FBI or CIA or some other government watchdog? Maybe your hunters want to clean up a metropolis such as New York or Los Angeles — or even the whole East Coast. Could be they’ve found out about a powerful, ancient being and want to bring the bastard (and his numerous malefic minions) down for the count. This achievement is the kind that makes the monsters of the world stand up and take notice of hunters — that there is some kind of new force or entity at work.

The hunter group that pursues a major goal might be an international organization, trotting the globe and rooting out monstrous conspiracies left and right, ban-

ishing the darkness from the Vatican or the Malaysian government or even the World Health Organization.

Significant goals aren't passing dalliances. They could take a lifetime (and then some) to achieve, assuming they can ever be reached. Sacrifice is necessary, and there *will* be a death toll — for the hunters, their enemy and for any civilians who get in the way. And don't think for a second that a group of five lonely-but-determined imbued is going to last in this type of crusade. An achievement of this magnitude requires a *lot* of hands to chip away at the mountain. You think five hunters can clean up a major city? Ten? Twenty? A hundred? Who can say? But smart money says it's going to take some big (and numerous) guns to take care of business on that scale.

And a goal like this is so big that it's easy to lose sight of its parameters, whether at the beginning, in the middle or near the end. Ever try to tackle a project that was too big for you alone? Hunters with these aspirations absolutely bite off more than they can chew. There are too

UBER-GOALS

What's that? "Major" goals aren't *big* enough for you? You want hunters with even more colossal balls? Sure, such aspirations are possible. They're high-unattainable and pretty goddamned unlikely ever to get off the ground, but it's your game and your troupe can go for it. Maybe they *take over* a whole city. Maybe they unveil the existence of monsters to humanity at large, establishing a political and military bulwark like the world has never seen. Do they get their own country? Do they get support from the Pope? The Prime Minister of Japan? There could be thousands — *tens of thousands* — of hunters who mass together to create a literal society in its own right, with a government, laws, an economy, military support and a whole buffet of social mores. The characters get on the map, unavoidably, undeniably revealing themselves to the citizenry, the monsters and anyone else.

Just remember, though, that such developments are wildly extreme. If you observe **Hunter's** themes at all, you're talking about a plumber, a schoolteacher and an accountant becoming world powers, which inherently defies the everyman ideal of the game. But that kind of story might be cool. Your players might love it.

Overall, goals of this magnitude require tremendous forethought, sacrifice and execution. Money, influence, power, strength. A massive network that has to be designed by you and the players. Imagine the characters walking into Congress or the UN, demanding control and having the clout to take it. It wouldn't be easy, but it would be interesting.

many rots involved, and they're all well hidden. Some participating hunters are identified by the enemy and can't contribute to the effort any longer for fear of compromising it all. Focus is diluted by in-fighting.

How can one group stay on track for such a long time to accomplish such a monstrous (no pun intended) end? Strong central leadership? A democracy? A merciless dictatorship? Not to mention that hunters already get chewed up and spit out by the day-to-day rigors of knowing the truth. How long can they really last in pursuit of such a magnificent plan when family, friends and livelihood are at stake?

If the hunters in your game set out to achieve such a goal, they — and you — need to consider the necessities of fulfilling it and the consequences of striving for it.

CHECKLIST

The following are some questions that could help you steer initially confused and independent hunters into a group or even a society with common goals and the means of fulfilling them. Answering these questions won't establish every detail of that group or its direction, but doing so should provide you with a starting point and help you foresee where events might go.

HOW DO THEY MEET?

Hunter groups don't *necessarily* come together magically. There's no homing beacon that resonates every time someone is chosen by the Heralds. Some groups may be imbued together, true, and others may come together via hunter-net, which is rumored to be protected from On High. But when you talk about bigger gatherings, groups meeting other groups, events aren't usually so cut-and-dried or fantastic.

Separate hunter groups often come together through legwork. That is, through mutual effort or that of either party. Sure, hunters might be inexplicably led to others of their own kind and may work together thereafter, but life isn't usually that easy. More likely, imbued circles discover the existence of others like them when word of similar experiences arrives from elsewhere. Maybe a news story about a missing politician in another city strikes a similar chord to details of a local disappearance caused by the characters. Could it be that others are doing the same work elsewhere, cleaning up the government where they live? Can such a common cause allow the groups to pool their resources?

Or maybe hunters recognize a celebrity to be a monster and begin to notice that a few people photographed in her vicinity wear the hunter code. When the star suddenly and inexplicably confesses to heinous crimes, maybe the characters know who influenced her and can try to hook up with them.

No matter the circumstances, meeting fellow imbued means traveling to their stomping grounds and establishing a relationship. Posting hunter symbols,

ideally with a phone number or email address is a prime way to make contact. But initial contact can also occur by taking the risk of putting a face to an email handle or lurking at a recognizable scene of supernatural activity *on someone else's turf* and waiting to see who turns up.

Yeah, hunters might be led to one another and to similar groups by inexplicable or amazing means. That's always a narrative tool at your disposal. But if the characters of your chronicle have set out to accomplish a goal as imbued, they should work for every aspect of it, even something as seemingly innocuous as finding and meeting allies. Success at such small challenges grants characters the confidence and will to pursue larger ones.

HOW MANY ARE THERE?

It's possible that a hunter group with serious intentions is a mere handful — maybe five or six in number. But to really accomplish some broad, sweeping task, bigger numbers are probably necessary. In fact, the larger the goal, the more hunters it takes. How many are needed to fulfill the "victory conditions"? Can 10 do the job? Do they need 50? The more hunters who are involved, the more you also need to ask the previous question, *How do they come together?* Gathering 50 hunters for a project is a big goal in and of itself. Plus, consider that the scope of the plan might *not* be proportional to the number of hunters who are recruited. Maybe the group is under or overstaffed. What happens if you don't have enough to do the job? Or too many? Idle hands are the devil's playthings.

WHAT TYPE OF GROUP DO THEY FORM?

This question is kind of vague and is perhaps best answered by examining the group from the outside. Tons of possibilities exist here, from the mundane to the truly bizarre. Some viable group stereotypes include resistance fighters, cults, sects, "terrorist" cells, gangs. Are the imbued government-backed — and if so, what government? Which branch? Have they found some status with authorities and now work for them? Are they religiously oriented, and if so what religion? Do they operate within a corporate framework as, for lack of a better term, monkeywrenchers? Or are they just part of some grassroots movement that builds potential energy until it bursts into action à la the titular movement in *Fight Club*?

Although your hunter group probably falls outside any easy classification, with members from different social, racial and economic groups, it's important to know what the group looks like to uninformed observers. If "religious cult" is the most easily digestible explanation for why these people come together, then the outside world probably reacts to them according to such labels. Indeed, the Other Side might play any such stereotypes against the hunters to make them misunderstood or condemned by the very people whom the imbued are probably trying to help. It's hard for the chosen to liberate

a town when the local sheriff's department searches for them as devil worshipers suspected of recent murders.

HOW WIDESPREAD ARE THEY?

This question is addressed easily enough: How far does the reach of this particular organization or coalition extend? Is it in one small town? In a city? Are its members scattered across state lines or international boundaries? Maybe the group has members on every continent in the inhabited world, all working together like some bizarre United Nations or CIA of the imbued. It's important to know the locations of all contributors, whether they live in one small neighborhood or across the world. It's necessary for reasons of communication, economics — even plot convenience. What happens when something needs to be done in Florida *now*, but the big guns are off cavorting around Canada on some wild-goose chase? You'd better have all your pins in the map if you want to keep track of your society's membership.

ARE THERE GROUPS WITHIN GROUPS?

If the hunter organization is big enough, sub-groups and "camps" are likely to form. Some of these may be sanctioned by the larger collective. One group could be the muscle. Another could comprise researchers who don't (often) get their hands dirty. Another division might police the larger whole. Someone, or perhaps a council, must organize these parts and coordinate their efforts, whether overtly or covertly. Maybe each section is a cell that's unaware of who or where other, similar groups operate. Orders might arrive in code, and required actions might not have obvious results unto themselves but do once all other aspects are performed, or such tasks may have an impact that only the leaders perceive and understand.

Then there's always the possibility that some camps might *not* be sanctioned by the society or its administrators, and may exist in subtle or direct opposition to party-line goals. A small cluster of hard-liners might believe that their leaders don't make a lot of sense anymore. Maybe they want to attempt a coup or to take only certain matters into their own hands, unbeknownst to the majority. Alternatively, what happens when some forgiving members grow tired of the finger-breaking tactics of the collective?

When you create a group of this magnitude, think of it as being *layered*, with levels upon levels of social and political possibilities. Members — players' characters included — don't exist in a vacuum. They're not automatons. They undoubtedly segment and categorize themselves — more and more as the group gets bigger — along lines that conform with their personal sensibilities, hopes and fears. What happens then?

WHAT TYPES OF HUNTERS ARE INVOLVED?

Obviously, individual hunters have their own agendas, and these aspirations coincide to some degree with

their creeds. In simple terms, some hunters want to salvage the world, others might want to burn it down and start again, and still others hope to find some other direction for it. The reality of the hunt and fear of the truth rarely allow hunters with the same beliefs or dreams to find each other and work together exclusively. Individual imbued are glad to find anyone who *knows*, never mind holding out for someone with the same outlook. A collection of imbued probably represents each Virtue, as a result.

If one Virtue tends to be dominant in the group, however, whether in number or influence, or a certain approach to the supernatural such as curiosity is taken repeatedly, membership is likely to evolve. Some hunters may be offended or outraged and drop out. Others whose goals or acts defy the group's may be asked or forced to leave. How long can a Judge abide persistent inquiries of monsters, for example, when the things are obvious killers?

Diversity of membership influences the group's overall coordination, whether to uphold or undermine it. A collection of like-minded imbued is quicker to agree on a course or direction than are varied and different hunters. And yet, chosen with the same predilections are likely to fall into the trap of being predictable and to

VIRTUAL REALITY

If you have trouble getting your mind around the whole "Utopia" notion and how hunters could pursue it, here's an idea: Look at real-world groups and use them as examples of "what might be" if hunters tried something similar. The Freemasons (or their potential predecessor group, the Knights Templar), the CIA, the Sicilian Mafia, the Crips or the Bloods, Greenpeace, the Palestine Liberation Organization, or even that hacker group the Masters of Disaster. The real world offers all kinds of groups that you can look at and evaluate through the blood-colored lenses of the hunt.

Take the Mob. Imagine a group of hunters that seeks to take control of a city from monsters by using violence, money, favors and fear to undermine the creatures' control. Perhaps these hunters seek to establish such control for themselves, and they're willing to buy or extort monsters' compliance in return for protecting them from other imbued. This organization isn't just a collection of chosen that seeks to free humanity. It seeks to be in charge of humanity, maybe for common folk's "own good." The question is, do the citizens unwittingly trade one kind of monster for another? Who is it that achieves a "Utopia" in the end? The hunters might not have started out with such dubious goals when they got their mission under way, but somehow events just evolve that way.

suffer from a lack of varied perspectives. Similarly, a group with an array of creeds has more tools and gifts on which to draw and pursue its goals against the Other Side. A group with too many theorists may have insufficient tacticians or communicators. The result in this case might be decisions based on theory alone, without direct experience or information straight from the source.

How well balanced is membership of your society, and how may that be a strength or weakness?

WHERE DO THEY OPERATE?

Although the answer to this question shouldn't be so cheesy as determining a "secret hideout" (and it had better not be the *Mystery Machine*), a big group of hunters has to work out of *someplace*. Is it one location or many? Is a single location just an excuse for everyone to get killed at one place and time by a big, bad thing? And what kind of location is it? Is it as unassuming as a restaurant where one of the hunters works during the day? Or is it something bigger, like a mansion or a library or a penthouse? Maybe the group doesn't use any kind of headquarters at all, relying on random, changing locations for meetings and initiations and whatever else is necessary. Do the mortal authorities notice an odd collection of boisterous people at an inappropriate locale such as a bookstore? How public is the setting? Time is definitely spent in this place (or in these places), so it's worth deciding.

WHAT HOLDS THEM TOGETHER?

As a group grows in size or ambition (or both), it requires more and more coordination. One person juggling chainsaws is dangerous enough, but several people throwing them back and forth is deadly. If one participant doesn't pay attention, someone gets killed. So, how does the group stay focused and unified while members rely on each other and lay their lives on the line? If they go up against all the corporate offices and pollution-spewing factories of some monstrous trans-global company, they all need to know their parts and see them through. Does a leader give direction? Are members motivated by rewards? Are they driven by the sheer altruism of their mission? There's always the possibility that they're in it for money or are dedicated to the goal under threat of punishment or humiliation. To reach "end-game" the group needs cohesion. What binds it?

WHO LEADS?

Every group, organization or society has some kind of leadership. Anarchy is rarely a means to get things (intended things, anyway) done. Someone has to make the rules and someone has to enforce them. How is it all achieved? Is there one leader? A trio that shares control? Is it a democracy? A dictatorship? A hegemony of cruelty and hostility? Is the leadership religious or political, or based purely on ideology toward monsters or humanity or the future of the world? Is the will of the group enacted with a gentle hand or does someone enforce the law with

an iron fist? A group with a collective aspiration and otherworldly opponents does not survive without strong leadership, be it by one or many.

WHAT IS THE GROUP'S LEVEL OF INFLUENCE?

Sheer muscle is unlikely to be the answer to every problem hunters face. Some small victories may be achieved this way, but once a goal becomes complicated, with politics or religion or decision-making involved, kicking ass and taking names may not be enough. The hunters may therefore have some kind of *influence*. This ability to manipulate and achieve results through coercion or contacts can be based on the Background of the same name, and on other similar Traits. Hunters' individual Backgrounds are plied by the group as a whole for the collective good. Granted, a single hunter may not want to have to ask a favor of a bureaucrat-friend *again*, for fear of trying his buddy's patience, but the larger group may need him to make that sacrifice. A hunter's own intentions or hopes for his Backgrounds may be squashed or downplayed when the larger society has needs that he can fulfill.

How group influence plays out is up to you and your players (typically, when they create their characters). Is it money-based? Is it dependent on a system of owing, gaining and doing favors? Maybe blackmail is involved. Also, do members (and therefore does the group) have allies? In what positions are these allies? The military? The police? Big business? Or perhaps such friends are low-key and blue-collar, like a union rep or one deputy on a tiny police force.

Once the players have decided what Backgrounds their characters have, you can begin to anticipate how useful such contacts or debts might be to the forming of a hunter society. Maybe a member can get himself out of a jam, but can he get his three fellow hunters out, too? And if he can, what does it cost the single character? What does his ally or contact want in return? Is one hunter willing to make sacrifices for the people with whom he hunts, or will he use his own resources for his own good and hang his "comrades" out to dry?

Ultimately, how far can individual hunters' powers of coercion, cooperation and communication with the world at large benefit their collective imbued movement?

DOES THE GROUP COMPRISE ONLY HUNTERS?

Whatever form a hunter society takes to outward (or even genuine) appearances — a cult, a gang, a terrorist group — it's likely that the chosen are the focal point of the organization. They establish the goals, the methodologies, the ideologies. But that doesn't mean hunters are the only members. There's always the possibility of including bystanders. These poor bastards have *some* inkling of what's going on but are often left outside the margins of both hunter *and* human society. If they manage to become clued-in or connected to hunters' goals, bystanders can play a useful part in

building a better world. At least they have a clue. They can gather information. Run interference with the authorities or with people who just can't understand. Or do research. The initial reluctance that made bystanders what they are may give them a fervent desire to "make amends" or "do something right this time."

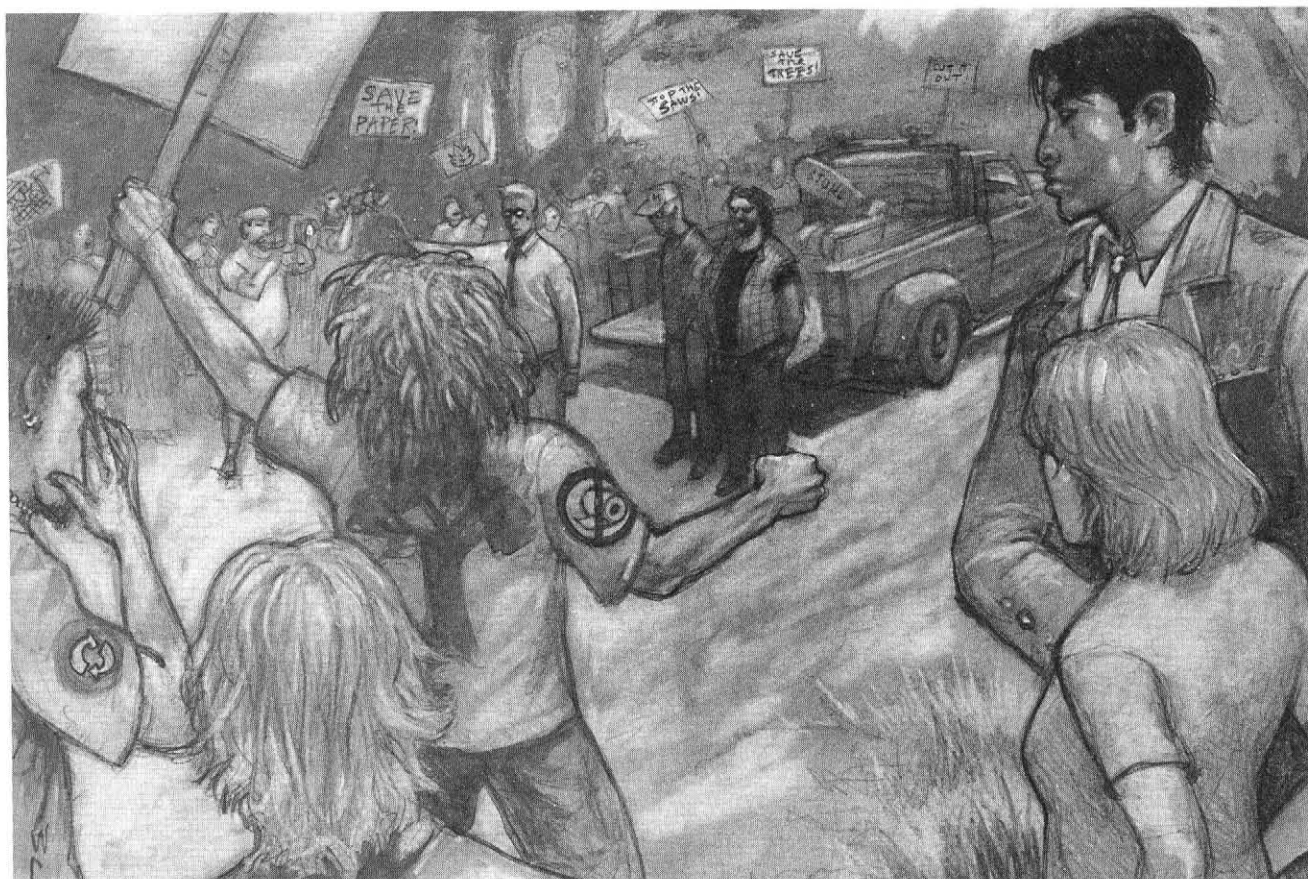
But maybe the group doesn't deal *only* with the chosen and bystanders, and actually includes "blind" citizens. They could be unaware of the *true purpose* of the organization and fill the lower echelons of the group. Maybe they provide monetary support or religious devotion, or they may even just be placeholders set there by the higher-ups to make the group *look* like a legitimate business or religion. It could be that a nonprofit "save the owls" foundation is really a front for an eco-terror campaign run by hunters who believe the environment is being despoiled by monsters.

Hunters may also want to educate the public about the truth, even if only slowly and carefully for fear of overwhelming the masses. Indeed, that may be the hunters' very goal, the ultimate achievement in overthrowing monstrous control. The question is, how far can hunters go in exposing people to the truth before their efforts backfire? And how can monsters play humanity against the chosen to make hunters look like criminals, killers or maniacs?

WHERE DO THE PLAYERS CHARACTERS FIT?

Ultimately, this is one of the most important questions to answer in a chronicle dedicated to fulfilling goals against the supernatural. The players are the lynchpin to every story; their place is *very* important. Ask yourself: Do the players' hunters *start* this movement? Do they initiate the goal and originate the group? Do they decide what strategies are used? Do they determine how the movement will succeed or fail? Or are the players' characters up-and-comers, ascending through the ranks of the organization as "people to watch?" Perhaps the hunters are just cogs in a big machine, performing small functions to support a greater cause with their identities lost to any of the higher-ups. Each of these positions has its merits and flaws in terms of story possibilities. Maybe the players want their characters to be there from the beginning and lead the way. Maybe they want to start from the bottom of a larger hunter group and work their way up as they seek goals. Ask the players what they want and give it to them.

Whether they're in charge or just cogs in the machine, make sure that the characters remain the focus of your chronicle. Don't let supporting characters overshadow the players' hunters, even if cast members hold higher positions of authority. Let the protagonists be at the heart of events so that they decide the course of the organization, whether they succeed or fail at their chosen or appointed assignments.



FROM START TO FINISH

Say you've outlined the overall group, organization, society, cult or faith to which your players' characters belong or that they've formed. You've anticipated and sketched out every last detail of the group, from the achievements that the characters seek to make, to the unforeseen events that occur during formation, to the people who join whether by the hunters' invitation or not. You know what goal the players' hunters seek to fulfill, and you have an idea of how it can come true or go haywire. But guess what? You're not done. This isn't a perpetual-motion machine that continues its ineluctable churning without your help once you set it in motion. It's a story requiring organic creation, like a lump of clay on the potter's wheel. It doesn't just make itself into a pot.

So, you've got some interested players, a bunch of cool characters and a story to tell. Here are some key precepts to consider in maintaining a consistent plot that actually keeps players involved in events from their humble imbuing to their climactic achievement.

Take Notes: You're not a computer. You're just a regular person who can't possibly keep every last detail of your chronicle stored in your head. This type of chronicle in particular — one with hunters who pursue a specific goal and who probably gather allies and followers to achieve it — requires a compilation of important details:

names, numbers, dates, events. The scope of the plot and the characters' organization demands a record of what happens, who's involved and what the fallout could be. You can't keep track of every supporting character, health level and plot point without *some* kind of record.

How obsessive you get with such record-keeping is entirely up to you. You might have a notepad with some scribbled shorthand in it, or you might keep a journal full of every minute aspect of the game. No matter what, always jot down the important stuff. That'll save your butt later when the players ask about how events that occurred three sessions ago have developed since.

Conceive the Story Arc: In a game about hunters making a mark on the world, you're looking at a big story. Not some one-shot "hunters blast monsters" deal, but an *epic*, long-running tale. Anything less misses the point and probably falls short of player expectations. So, it's important to understand the general flow of your plot — what can happen, where events may generally go, and how they could be resolved. Short stories, novels and movies all have a story arc, an overall beginning, middle and end. It should be no different with a Utopia game.

The *beginning* should consist of establishing the society itself, whether among a handful of hunters in a small town or dozens of imbued scattered across the world, and settling the group's goals, whether defeating

THE DEVIL'S IN THE DETAILS

The fact of the matter is, answering the questions presented here about the nature of your hunter group may provide you with a good foundation when creating a society and the goals it aspires to, but doing so may not provide *enough* of a foundation. Maybe you want to really dig deep into the whole process, knowing how the organization operates in every detail, or maybe you just want to wing it, overlooking the fine points of how things get done and letting the characters run wild.

In digging deep, you may come up with a detailed roster of the hunters in the organization (beyond the players' characters), and might write involved origin descriptions, timelines and elaborate accounts of events that don't directly involve the players' hunters. Winging it, you might jot down some short-hand guidelines for plots and supporting characters, elements that you're able to bend (or break) depending on the needs of each chapter. Either approach is fine. The key is knowing which details are important. Whatever elements make the story and the group feel real, like things are happening around the hunters and like they're a part of evolving developments — those are the elements you want to focus on. Equipment, allies, locales, when's, where's, who's, why's — pay attention to the pieces of the puzzle that excite the players. That's ultimately what this is all about, no matter what style you use to achieve that end.

a monster encountered at the characters' imbuing or undoing an international conspiracy. The beginning of your chronicle probably needs to introduce the main supporting characters and settings to the players' hunters, as well. To get an overarching plan in motion, the protagonists need to know who's available to them and from where they can start. Preliminary antagonists might also be presented at this point. They show the characters glimmers of what's going on in the shadows, or they motivate the chosen to get their initiative under way. The beginning is a springboard that ideally makes the players interested in current events and possible future events, thanks to plot hooks and foreshadowing. That mail carrier the hunters encountered at their awakening was terrifying, but even more so is the web of beings at work up the Federal ladder. How high might the corruption go? Someone needs to find out.

The *middle* is where all the plot elements fall into place — tensions between society members begin or intensify, the big "monster" makes its moves, the FBI sits up and takes notice of the group's activities. Whatever works for your specific game, go for it. This is simply the time when all the critical plots and subplots are laid on the table — some of the cards are face up, others face down.

Then comes the end. This is the climax, the crescendo of your Utopian symphony. Power plays are executed. Surprises catch the characters off guard as all the cards are turned face up. There can be a grand triumph in which the hunter society perseveres through adversity and ousts the ancient influence from its town. Or tragedy can loom, maybe involving the widespread loss of life or the disintegration of the group's goals. Most likely, it's a mixture of both. Either way, the ending has to be *big*. Defeat doesn't necessarily mean lots of explosions and bloodshed, but it has to hit the hunters hard. They take personal blows such as separation from family, or are forced to run from the law and have to abandon the very home they sought to defend. No matter how things go, the players need a payoff, a resolution whether successful or tragic, or perhaps the premise for yet another chronicle, perhaps as the characters take to the road and contend with the supernatural as they run.

Be Ready to Improvise: Just as it's important to keep your mind on the overarching story of your Utopia chronicle, it's just as important to allow the story to be flexible. Your players are likely to do exactly what you *never* expected them to. You think they'll bite at the carrot and their characters will go into the abandoned factory, and instead they follow some "lead" and carry themselves off on a wild chase. Such derailments are even more likely if the characters are part of a large hunter society that has many others with whom to interact. If work can be delegated, the players' hunters might request that supporting characters follow your intended lead, placing your planned story firmly off-stage.

That's why it's important to keep chronicle developments defined, but *loosely* so. What if the characters stage a successful coup against their group leader? What if they accidentally lead the monsters to the mineshaft where everyone's been hiding? It's even possible that, by some random miracle or unforeseen event, the protagonists meet one of their goals much earlier than expected. Then what? If such possibilities weren't in your original plan, they need to be now. You can't just ignore what's happened and steamroller ahead with your planned plot. Doing that cheapens the experience for the players and looks like cheating. It may be your world, but it's their game. So, be ready for anything, and that means maintaining a flexible game world and story.

Try New Styles of Game: Sometimes, *Hunter* works best when it's about that small group scrabbling for survival; members' hands are bloody and blistered from cruel nights' work. There's nothing wrong with that. But a Utopia game can open doors. There's raw potential here for game styles you might not have tried before. Consider a *political* game, one that downplays combat. Hunters are immersed in debate (both philosophical and doctrinal) over how to deal with monsters, and more specifically, what kind of world they want to achieve and how. A

political story features interpersonal suspense. Hunters may back-stab or make power plays for leadership positions, and some may try to out-talk, out-think or simply assassinate “allies” who don’t agree with their way of doing things. There may be “double agents” or conspiracies at work in this political-thriller-style story, so the characters and the players have to remain on their toes for threats beyond the physical.

Or if you want to go the other way, try a *military* story. It isn’t just about the small group of hunters inflicting (and suffering) random violence. It’s about a force of men and women led into battle. The group can be a commando-style outfit or a group of partisan freedom fighters. This isn’t guns-a-blazing chaos. It’s about orchestrated troop movements. This is a game, in the vein of *Saving Private Ryan*, about a bunch of hunters who have a mission to do, who are trained and willing to lay down their lives for a cause that supersedes even an assigned task. Perhaps rescuing captured friends becomes paramount over “neutralizing the enemy.”

Any divergence from the status quo **Hunter** game (about isolated, confused imbued struggling to survive and make a dent in the supernatural) is worth looking into. Indeed, even a single unique game session in a chronicle like this might be impetus for hunters cowering in the dark to seek their own brand of Utopia, changing the very direction of your game. Or, alternative moods can be a welcome break for hunters (and players) who already seek a goal and who welcome different ways of pursuing it other than the same old struggle.

Sustain Interest: With a chronicle of such epic scope on your plate, it’s easy to get caught up in the intricacies of *your* story and to forget about the *characters’* story. There’s a labyrinth of details to want to show and get lost in with a hunter society, but you have to remember to pay the most attention to details of the players’ imbued. They’re the focal point. Without your players and their chosen, you’d be sitting all by your lonesome rolling dice and weeping over a half-empty can of Mountain Dew. A Utopia chronicle is a *big game*. Lots of elements, lots of places to hook your players and lots of places to lose them. That’s why it’s important from the beginning to be mindful of your players’ wants — and those of their characters.

In a Utopia chronicle, players have far greater expectations than they do in a game in which their hunters go to nightclubs and “redeem” forlorn vampires. They have an objective to fulfill that’s larger than any one of them — a legacy that survives them and ideally makes for a better world, even if in only one locale. After every game session, ask the players if their interest is being held. Do they see the potential for their characters making a difference? If their enthusiasm wavers, it might be time to have the hunters achieve a significant milestone toward their objective. Maybe

they get the once-blood-cursed cops on the local force to back them up hereafter. Perhaps they take down one of their antagonist’s major lackeys. Or maybe the last few sessions have focused on the political and it’s time to throw a little hard-core monster suspense or some pure action into the mix.

Ultimately, the players should sense that their hunters make some kind of headway toward achieving the goals set out for the chronicle. These can be “baby steps,” but the ideal of freeing a town or purifying a company should seem a little more attainable after almost every game session — even if gains made in one story are lost in the next. Say, a vampire nest in the sewers is wiped out only to be replaced by shapechangers who were previously held at bay by the rots. Okay, that seems like a setback, but now the hunters know that each achievement has repercussions and they discover the extent of their possible enemies — or of potential untapped allies. Maybe these new beings will be interested in helping wipe out the plague that festers at the old factory.

Maintain Internal and External Conflict: Part of all that “applying tension” and “sustaining interest” talk is *conflict*. We seek to avoid conflict in our own lives. Conflict is bad. It means someone achieving a goal at the expense of someone else, and all too often that “someone else” is us. But in games (and in fiction in general), conflict is the fuel that keeps a motor going. We seek it. It’s drama.

There are two primary types of conflict in a Utopia chronicle: internal and external. *Internal* relates to the relationships among the characters and the larger imbued group they form. Who chafes at working, or who just won’t work with whom? Who disagrees vigorously (violently?) with whom, and why?

Don’t just focus on ethical divisions regarding the hunt and how to carry it out, either. Sure, the chosen can contend over the validity of killing some beasts and letting others go, but hunters are basically still the same people they were before. That means they’re flawed and hold onto grievances, misgivings and suspicions about other people that they always did. Think about divisions in morality, religion, race, sexuality and gender and what they do to the group. Two people with similar attitudes about disposing of spirits may never see eye to eye when one openly considers the other a “faggot,” and that character calls his colleague a “nigger.”

Players who depict ordinary people as characters will create their own inter-group tension merely by course. It means roleplaying a fallible human being. But you can inspire tension if you want, even where it doesn’t perhaps deserve to exist (or when it doesn’t arise often enough). If the hunters’ hideout is invaded by goblins and the protagonists try to figure out how their secret was discovered, you could casually point out that Dave’s character was absent at the time.... Or maybe

some creature goes on a killing spree and the characters link it to a monster whom one of them has been trying to save. In fact, maybe aggressive group members once wanted to destroy the thing but let it go at the pleading of the forgiving hunter. If you go this route to create inter-character tension at the expense of any single hunter, make sure that her player can handle it and won't get pissed at you in the real world.

That law of physics, "Every action has an equal and opposite reaction," also stands true where external conflict is concerned. Every action that players' characters (or their hunter allies) perform can motivate an equal and opposite reaction in the world in which they live. Imbued destroy a sniveling young bloodsucker? The one who bestowed unlife upon him wants to know who did it and takes steps toward retribution. Or maybe that leech baits the killers to focus on other vampires' "children" to diminish competition for blood in the city. The hunters convince a ghost to go to its final rest? The spirit's surviving grandson wants to know who severed his tie to otherworldly powers, and he uses the characters to lead him to sources of more.

External conflict gives the characters something to do — something to overcome at the expense of others. (Remember that definition of conflict?) But achieving these goals has the downside of bringing more unhealthy attention and rivalry down upon the hunters as forces out there react to the hunters' efforts. These mounting responses can be the very phenomena that inspire the imbued to pursue a mission greater than nightly survival. Maybe destruction of one rot attracts the attention of others, and the hunters realize there's a bigger threat to take care of. Instant Utopian goal.

So be sure to keep the external pressure on and frequently tailor it to the quest the characters hope to fulfill. That way the hunters are reminded of their objectives by the very forces that oppose them. It's pretty easy to be reminded of the importance of protecting a local cemetery against all comers when the creatures that crop up also want that very ground.

INTO THE BREACH

The life of a lone hunter is anything but wine and roses. It's a terror-filled struggle of madness, harm and loss. People get hurt and die at the hands of otherworldly things, and all while the world gets worse bit by bit before the hunter's eyes.

When the imbued find the awareness and organization to band together, form groups — and even outright societies — you'd think a lot of that night-to-night desperation might go away. In some cases, it does. A lot of the problems that a lone hunter (or a small circle) deals with are alleviated once allies can cover one another's backs, protect friends and family and simply

offer consolation that, yes, this world is as it seems. Something of a support system evolves among chosen who coordinate their efforts and existence.

But closing the door on some old problems opens the door to new ones. A bunch of people who to outward appearances defy the existing order, whether standing up defiantly among the human cattle or disregarding the laws regulated by mortal authorities, tend to make a scene. They may seek to work covertly or keep their heads down, but sooner or later an organized movement makes its existence known, just by virtue of contributors working toward the same goals. Plus, the more hunters who try to cooperate, the more ideological head butting that's likely to result. And when you're dealing with hunters (some of whom might be lunatics), you never know how volatile things might get. In retrospect, these new problems might make the old ones of isolation, ignorance and fear seem like a fond memory.

As Storyteller, it's your job to keep the chronicle moving and to pose challenges to the hunters. Once you and the players have built an organization from the ground up, you set events in motion toward an intended goal — in this case a Utopia of the characters' choosing. But nothing runs smoothly in the World of Darkness, and you're the one who presents many of the obstacles with which the imbued must contend. What kinds of problems can — and will — occur? Here's a sample of just *some* hurdles that may turn into crucial story or chronicle dilemmas.

Ideology: Hunters are divided. There's no two ways about it. Some do business by swinging fists and pulling triggers. Others seek to alleviate misunderstandings. Yet others largely dispense with these efforts as distractions that fix minor problems now but leave the greater problem of the supernatural unresolved. Virtues and creeds are reasonable representations of these possible divisions, but absolute agreement doesn't exist even among adherents of the *same* Virtues or creeds. There are ideological differences among hunters just as there are among any people of the world, whether it's religious or political, or hunter-specific conundrum over monsters being saved or destroyed.

Whereas many regular people are dedicated to their beliefs, however, few are prepared to fight or kill for them. Hunters are often among the latter group. Debating religious tenets and "agreeing to disagree" is one thing, but when deciding whether a monster should be killed or spared is a matter of personal life or death, disagreement among hunters can lead to heated conflict.

Ideally, such ideological strife is best played out among the players' characters. It forces them to come to terms with one another, which is essential if they have any hopes of achieving their Utopian goals. Early on in hunters' careers, such interplay can mean struggles between individual characters, but when a larger imbued society is created, ideological differences can mean group

turmoil, loss of direction and perhaps widespread loss of life. What happens when an Avenger grows seditious and takes up arms against the characters or the group's leader? Suppose a Martyr decides that the hunters haven't "sacrificed" enough and starts making dangerous decisions for the group as a whole. How is such tension alleviated while keeping the organization on target?

Also, remember that imbued may change their perspectives as their Virtue ratings increase, possibly becoming utterly mad. What happens when a once-quiet Redeemer achieves a sufficiently high Mercy rating that she sees suicide or murder as the only way to save monsters — or her allies? Or a Visionary's plan becomes so twisted that his followers' very souls might be seen as expendable? Are such hard-core lengths necessary to achieve the group's goals, or must such extremists be dealt with to keep the society together?

Differences in objectives or how to achieve them can lead to splinter groups, Draconian punishments or even (if you're up for it) a major civil war among the imbued. Feel free to be as subtle or as severe with these clashes, and their repercussions, as your chronicle can handle. Perhaps the society can find it in itself to get along, even if only to achieve a greater good that's followed by divisive infighting. Bear your players' enjoyment of the game in mind here. If internecine squabbling becomes excessive or replaces pursuit of the hunters' holy grail, you might subtly diminish criticism from supporting cast members and throw challenges before squabbling imbued that pry the characters from each others' throats.

Sacrifice: Hunters' past lives don't tend to lend themselves well to existence after the imbuing. Doing something about monsters, even if only sporadically and in a minor fashion, means taking risks and forgoing mundane activities that might have seemed important before. It's damn near impossible to hold down a 9-to-5 job, take those movies back to the video store and remember to feed the dog when you're on guard against inhuman creatures. Once you know the truth, you can't forget it. Sacrifices must be made.

When hunters aim for large goals and try to work together to achieve them, sacrifices not only happen, they're *necessary*. It's the adage, "You can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs" at work. Sacrifices are payment. They're prerequisites to achieving overarching goals. The situation may mean abandoning loved ones or friends to focus on cleaning up the town. It might mean leaving one's job, home or even country. Maybe the movement needs money. A financial burden is certainly imposed upon the society. How are gear, hideouts, food, ammunition and weapons paid for? If hunters value a goal highly, they must inevitably give of themselves to make it possible, often without thanks.

And what happens when someone can't or *won't* do her share? Another possible sacrifice looms right there:

identity. Free will. When joining a large group, a hunter may be required to become a part of the "whole," less an individual. He may be called upon to give up rights that were inalienable before. He may be punished severely for perceived indiscretions against the society. He might be told when to eat, sleep, have sex and shit, all because that's what someone has decided is necessary to make Utopia a reality. How far are the players' characters willing to go? How much are they prepared to forgo for the "greater good"? Are they prepared to force it on others or rebel against it themselves? Where is the line between humanity and inhumanity drawn, and when do the characters cross it in an effort to realize their dreams?

Monsters: Although a lot of the problems that might destroy a hunter group definitely come from the "beast within," there is still the "beast without" — monsters — to be faced. Successful hunters can deal with monsters to some degree and get away with it. One by one, in small groups, they go unrecognized or are seen as nothing more than a few upstart humans. But what do monsters do when the cattle *organize*? The bigger a hunter group gets and the more doggedly it pursues its goals, the greater the chance that creatures take notice. It's your job to determine their response. Perhaps they seek to infiltrate the group, learn what makes it tick. Or maybe they want to use the hunters, either through a *faux*-alliance or through subversive — even supernatural — control. After all, powerful or ancient beings are likely to view collected hunters as a handful of new pawns to use in their eternal game. They could direct the imbued toward enemies. And, of course, those enemies are capable of doing the same in return. A monster may not be able to control a hunter telepathically, but it can control someone at the hunter's credit-card company, his wife, or the cop who arrests him. And that kind of pressure can force a hunter to "play along."

Just bear in mind that even as monsters discover and respond to hunters' existence, the chosen may also gain clues as to who creatures are and what they want. Maybe monsters learn that some force has changed these humans, but not even these "hunters" know who or what is behind them. Meanwhile, vampires' nocturnal existence could be identified as a weakness, one that lets them be undermined through their blood-cursed proxies who operate by day. Ideally, neither side learns so much about the other to consider any information fact or to take the other party for granted. Monsters never identify who these "Messengers" are, and hunters probably never learn that vampires operate through specific clans. Hunter and creature interaction can reveal things about the other, but never to the extent that conflict is eliminated. That conflict is what keeps your chronicle rolling.

The World: The world isn't ready for hunters. If and when they gather to form large groups or a society, not

only are they likely to register on monsters' radar, but on that of the mundane world. Police, FBI, CIA, international groups — all of these probably notice any sort of strange behavior. Buying/selling guns (or other contraband), gathering in a "compound" (à la Waco), or any display of organized criminality. Such activity and coordination draws the wrong kind of attention unless great care is taken. Small caches of weapons might be acquired here and there by a group, but when it becomes clear that some real firepower is necessary against the supernatural, the human or inhuman authorities might hear (or interfere) when the deal goes down.

Once the authorities know, the media is only moments behind (hell, these days the media often gets the jump on everyone, monsters included). That's when hunters become a threat to John Q. Public, whether legitimately or not. Consider that creatures pulling the strings of the mortal world may influence how a hunter group is portrayed, vilifying the imbued beyond reason. Once hunters become public enemies, their "opponents" are no longer restricted to the otherworldly or immortal. The very people the imbued hope to protect can work or turn against the hunters. That might mean contacts refuse to deal with their onetime friends. The Influence Trait ceases to have meaning. A loved one wonders what happened to a spouse or relative. And mobs might resort to witch-hunts. It's one thing to create a Utopia by contending with an unseen opponent, but how do you create one for people who actively oppose your efforts, whether they know it or not?

Success: Even though hunters face all kinds of threats as they seek to create a new world, it's still possible that they achieve their Utopian goals. They might free that factory from inhuman control, learn to live with the spirits that inhabit the local cemetery or clean up the town. What happens then? Even success has repercussions.

How do any other monsters, whether survivors of a purge or simply nearby, respond? Who or what tries to fill any power vacuum? Can hunters maintain tenuous control or does some new being arrive to take over? Or suppose the hunters learn to co-exist with a certain type of creature. They've found a compromise with spirits: The ghosts no longer haunt the living in return for help from the characters to put lingering matters from life to rest. There are always going to be *other* monsters who don't like that compromise or don't give a damn about it. What do the hunters' achievements amount to then, and do past accomplishments have to be undermined to deal with a new threat?

The bigger the achievement that hunters pulls off, the likelier it is that more creatures hear about it and respond. The creatures that hunters originally target might be defeated in an effort toward an ideal world, but what other, possibly greater threats emerge to topple that Utopia? The World of Darkness doesn't necessarily come to a screeching halt because the characters stop

the possessed mayor's plans. You could slap the players on the back and say, "Good game!" But if you don't want to, and the players want to continue with their characters, the story doesn't have to end there. Goals achieved means new goals can be initiated. Bigger goals, with bigger problems. And so it continues.

FRINGE GROUPS

To the players' hunters, who have been awakened to the existence of monsters, efforts to undermine or reconcile those forces are right and good. Something has to be done about the creatures to save family, the community or humanity. And if hunters can pool their resources and bond to achieve their goals together, perhaps they have a chance of liberating mankind.

But what do these groups and efforts look like to the outside observer, particularly to everyday people who have no idea about the supernatural? These people believe they're in control of their lives, culture and society. They believe humanity commands itself and the world. They're at the top of the food chain. To their eyes, hunter groups who act outside day-to-day norms, break laws, challenge authority and make their own rules are rebels, criminals, cultists and maniacs.

Hunter groups are believed to exist on the fringe of accepted society — that lifestyle many imbued see as spoon-fed to the masses by inhuman hands. Such outsiders support a particular viewpoint through violent or extremely unethical actions. The Aryan Nation, the Anti-Abortion Violence Movement and the Manson Family could all be labeled "fringe" groups.

Whereas hunters are (ideally) unlike such groups, they often become publicly associated with them. And why not? Hunters are often violent. They kill. They blow shit up. And if they're not openly violent, they're probably weird enough that people *think* they are. Hunters espouse theories that mark them as crazy. "There are things out there." "Monsters exist and they control us." "Government and religion are traps meant to keep us down and quiet, waiting in line for the slaughterhouse." Why *wouldn't* the common man and woman misunderstand what the imbued really are and what they really want?

Here are three types of fringe groups that hunters may, inadvertently appear to be — or purposefully become — in the eyes of the public. These classifications should help you decide how the imbued are received when they set to fulfill their goals. These stereotypes may suggest what challenges society poses to hunters on a mission.

TERRORISYS

Their key to terrorism is... terror. Terrorists commit acts to inspire fear to further their cause or gain some sort of social or political advantage. Their use of force and violence is unlawful, and their main objective is intimidation. They often collect in cells, small groups

THE BLIND LEADING THE BLIND

So, you've built a hunter society from the ground up. A network of chosen, poised to succeed or fail, linked together by bonds of unity and commonality. They have goals, structure, methodologies. You've set them on their path and the story progresses. Good.

It's been said before, but it bears repeating: *The hunters are still in the dark*. Always. No matter how much organization they might achieve, no matter how forthcoming some relationships with monsters might be, hunters are still largely clueless when it comes to understanding creatures. No manual detailing the intricacies of clans or Traditions or changeling courts or ghostly guilds falls into the characters' collective lap. It's rare for a hunter *ever* to get an accurate glimpse into the true workings or nature of the beings they face. They're lucky if they can even figure out the difference between a ghost and a goblin. They don't make friends with the Technocracy. They don't even know who those guys are most of the time. They *see* inhuman entities, but that doesn't mean they *understand* them. Always be sure to maintain hunters' ignorance when it comes to these details. Not only is it realistic, but it reinforces the desperate and human themes of the game. Any glimpses of the truth that characters have should be just enough to *confuse* the situation rather than clarify it. Sure, they might have stopped the "possessed" major, but no spirit was driven out of him. He turned into some kind of nightmare in solid form. What kind of ghost is that, and did the hunters beat it after all?

that act on specific orders from somewhere on high (often without knowing where "on high" is, or who). Often, their activities unfold so that the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing. All the while, cell members act in accordance with a particular agenda that may be fueled by religious fundamentalism, political fanaticism or plain, old-fashioned hatred.

So, where do hunters fit into this classification? The old adage that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter applies here. It's all a matter of perspective. Hunters don't see themselves as terrorists. They see themselves as crusaders. People doing a necessary job. Fighting the good fight. Their enemies are invisible to the rest of the world. The hand of oppression closes around the globe, and only hunters have the ability to break its grip. Problem is, those rationales *sound* like terrorists'.

The average terrorist, whether a Montana Militiaman or an Al-Qaida operative, may very well be motivated by the same rationale: ceasing "oppression" to win freedom (albeit forcefully and quite criminally). But the world rightly looks down upon these acts and sees not political or religious motivations, but horror and pain. Same goes for

hunters and their efforts. The imbued, especially in a collective, may have to shake things up in ways they don't want to, but that are necessary to achieving their Utopian goals. A school is riddled with corruption? They may blow it up. A political opponent is allied with monsters? Threats against that politician — or her family — may be the only way to pressure her out of an election. But the rest of the world considers such tactics terrorism. It goes against the law and morality. It uses fear to win a victory. The nonimbued don't see bloodsuckers or possessors or the black veins of corruption. They see a business burning down or murdered hostages on the nightly news.

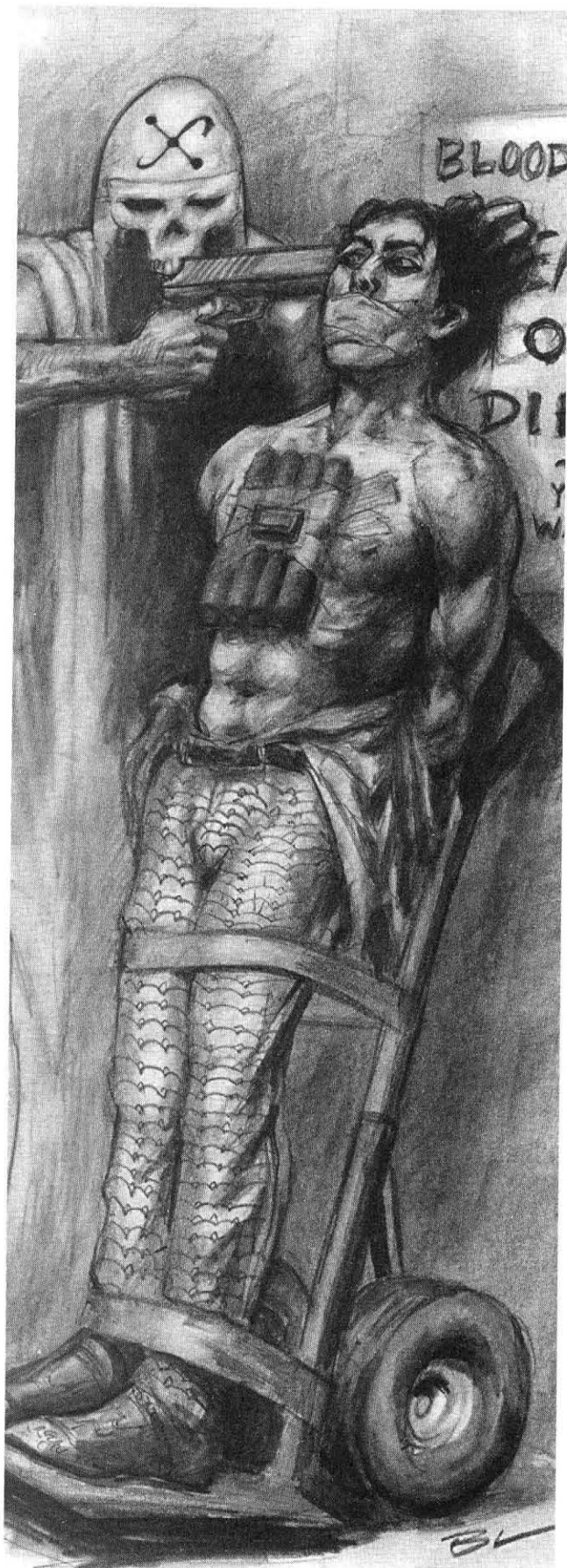
Of course, it's always possible that a group of hunters sees *itself* as a terrorist organization. Members may willingly organize in cells and wage a shadow war of purposeful fear and violence upon anyone who shows the slightest bit of supernatural taint. The hunters may believe that the end justifies the means, and if some unsuspecting people have to suffer to achieve a greater good, so be it. That perspective may simply be a "realistic" one to these imbued, an inevitable necessity of having been chosen in the first place.

But most of the time, a hunter group perceives and identifies itself as a clutch of freedom fighters, guerillas fighting foreign invaders, a militia seeking to purge the state, country or world of corruption. Unfortunately, they're still viewed and treated like terrorists by a human populace that has no idea a war is being fought on their own soil. It's all a matter of perspective.

CULTS

A "cult" is hard to identify and define. Some claim a cult is nothing more than a splinter group that champions religious (or pseudo-religious) ideals. A textbook definition states that a cult is a small group of people characterized by strong devotion to a person, idea, object or work. There are, however, negative connotations to the concept that aren't included in the textbook definition. By general consensus, cults are dangerous organizations that support radical religious beliefs (bordering on the insane) and practice severe techniques to "convert" others. Most cults in the public consciousness are threats, such as Japan's Aum Shinrikyo group, which used nerve gas on subway riders in hopes of bringing about some kind apocalypse. (In fact, Aum's leader Shoko Asahara believed he could see auras around people that identified them as "evil," a rather creepy similarity to the imbued.) Some can be doomsday cults (like Aum), suicide cults (like the Reverend Jim Jones' People's Temple), or new age and religiously bent groups. One of the bigger real-world cults on record was a group of a hundred-plus people in East Java that hunted "witches" and "sorcerers"....

Hunters can easily come to be cultlike in their organization. Their mission or Utopian goal can be seen or



defined in religious (or supernatural) terms. Even the word “chosen” implies a certain metaphysical destiny. A group may require unwavering commitment. Doubt or disobedience may be punished. An imbued society probably has a very clear “us versus them” mentality, and “them” may apply to monsters, to anyone in league with monsters, or to anyone who simply doesn’t understand that monsters are real. The group (or its leader) may dictate every aspect of members’ behavior, from how they dress, to what they can eat, to what they can watch on television (if anything at all). A leader may also perceive himself as divine or supported by the divine (the Messengers, for example). A group of this nature may consider itself outside the boundaries of law and regular socialization. After all, the rest of the world doesn’t understand, and certain measures have to be taken whether everyone likes it or not.

It’s also possible that a group could *evolve* into being cultlike. In the beginning, it’s unlikely that hunters would aim to become such a group. They have the best intentions. Their plan is fair and just. But over time, as goals blur, members are hurt or die and the monsters seem to be winning, ideals and best-laid plans can be compromised. Someone may have to take charge with an iron fist. Members may have to be subjected to tasks that focus them, and to rituals that “purify their minds” to ensure that they can achieve the group’s ends. The direction of contributors’ lives may have to be taken in hand for their own good. Add to these developments the rise of leaders’ Virtues and the accompanying derangement, and a group’s goals might change as those leaders gain greater “insight” into the truth. Before hunters know it, they belong to a cult, and they may be dangerous to the Other Side and to humanity.

GANGS

A gang is typically a small group with some kind of unified purpose. Obviously, the most common type is the criminal kind, a handful of individuals who get together to perform illegal or delinquent acts. They might be street gangs, prison gangs, Mafia-style groups or biker gangs.

Hunters may organize into gangs as smaller, more manageable alternatives to potential imbued organizations or societies. Or, if hunters don’t consciously collect into a “gang,” the world may see them that way. Consider that gangs use graffiti to mark territory. Hunter code, anyone? Gangs also may wear certain symbols or colors or clothing to identify one another. Hunters, too, need to identify each other, and may adopt these techniques (such as a black armband or hunter-code markings/tattoos). Gangs also oversee certain territories and neighborhoods, much like hunter groups might. A small hunter group (with a manageable or moderate goal) may take a city block, neighborhood or a small town under its wing, taking care of business — sometimes in plain sight. Effectively, the group looks and acts like a gang.

It's important to note that hunter gangs aren't like "regular" hunter groups. They don't necessarily consist of random members who happened to be imbued together or in the same vicinity. Gang members don't have various goals and perspectives. Nor do they work together solely from fear of dying alone. An imbued gang supports some kind of goal or notion, just like a more advanced hunter group does. It chooses members based on compatibility of beliefs with the gang's collective objective. It has initiation rites and perhaps a set of codified rules by which members must abide (even if these laws differ from those of the conventional world). "Hunter gang" doesn't automatically mean small-time. The group has plans, motives and goals. Its activities and perhaps size simply make it seem like its mundane equivalent.

THE CREEDS

Hunters' creeds reflect their personalities, responses to the existence of monsters, and methods in the hunt. The creeds are simple summaries of hunters' possible identities and influence the roles imbued play and the feats they may perform for the cause. You may handle them very loosely, allowing players' characters to run the gamut of ideals, aspirations and capabilities, or you may impose creed boundaries stringently, treating the classifications more as jobs than as personality assessments. Regardless, creeds play an important role in hunters' efforts to fulfill long-term goals in the hunt, and in a chronicle exploring that effort. Just as each person with unique values and skills adds something to a group effort, so do members of each creed offer something to hunters' collective end. A Visionary leader doesn't think to himself, "We really need a Martyr in this group," but *you* as a Storyteller might come to that conclusion.

Presented below are a few ideas on how the creeds might fit into — or lead — a large-scale hunter society and help make its agendas a reality. Optional rules are presented that offer benefits for having a leader of a specific creed. These awards are not for the average hunter group — they're for bigger fish, the ones with plans in motion. Perhaps these systems are the Messengers' way of rewarding hunters' efforts as social animals.

AVENGERS

The vengeful are easy to misunderstand as militant killers, angry hunters bent on violent punishment of the supernatural. Although it's true that Avengers are geared toward vindication and a straightforward interpretation of justice, hunter societies allow Avengers more layers of possibility. A soldier in a hunter group could be called upon as a leg-breaker or gunman, but there are other options. Avengers are about, well, vengeance, which doesn't always have to be personal. It can be found vicariously by helping others and striking any kind of blow against monsters. A vampire may have taken an Avenger's chil-

RELATIVITY

In no way do we encourage sympathy toward terrorism, cult activity or crime by suggesting that "heroic" hunter behavior is comparable to all three. We simply point out that, to the rest of the world, what a hunter (or a group of them) does is likely to be interpreted as, say, terrorism. If a hunter kills a shapechanger and that being leaves a human corpse behind, the *perception* is that the hunter is a murderer. The authorities, the media and the populace of the World of Darkness lack the ability to see that the victim was actually a monster that stole children for its own terrible purposes. They see a conventional crime, nothing more. From the outside looking on, what hunters do is violent and horrific, just as terrorism, cult activity and crime are.

dren, but she can do much the same by finding a way to break bloodsuckers' bond with their pawns while still allowing those former puppets to live — a walking reminder of what the leech had but can no longer claim.

Indeed, some of the strongest, most efficient forms of vindication don't involve the direct violence you might associate with Avengers. One may get his revenge by spying on monsters, marking them and reporting back so that other hunters can take care of business. Another may find a satisfying form of justice in the boardroom, initiating a corporate takeover of monstrous assets. Hell, an Avenger might even make a damn good *leader* — what better way to get some payback than to create and organize a group of hunters to make existence hard for the corrupters? Now, *that's* serious retribution.

System: Hunters under the direction of an Avenger may add one point to Stamina when soaking damage for one scene, and only when enduring that harm has direct bearing on fulfilling the group's primary goal — say, to remain conscious long enough to drive off a shapechanger archenemy. This "phantom" point cannot be used for any other purpose.

DEFENDERS

It's easy to imagine a Defender using her mind, skills and supernatural gifts to protect her home, family and allies against the unknown. Guardians certainly have a role in a hunter society for that very reason. A group always needs someone to keep evil at bay. A Defender may lend himself to protecting something more abstract than her allies, however. Consider a hunter who attempts to preserve a way of life. Maybe she wants to be a part of a larger group to help maintain the peace and sanctity of a small town. Or maybe she helps to honor an ideal — a political, spiritual or even financial agenda. Monsters are taking over our banks! Our churches! Our

schools! Such Defenders make it possible to achieve a Utopia, and then guard it. They can be the lynchpins of any group, the backbone of morale. Some imbued might be able to sleep at night by knowing that a trusted friend watches their backs against the encroaching darkness.

System: Some imbued who follow a Defender's lead find themselves more in tune with their surroundings and any threats that might arise nearby. The difficulties of group members' Alertness rolls are reduced by one in the presence of the leader.

INNOCENTS

Some hunters come across as lambs waiting for the slaughter — naïve, doe-eyed chosen who get pushed aside by those more willing to do the "dirty work." But their temperance, open-mindedness and respect for others — even monsters — can be very useful in a more ambitious group scenario. Innocents can fill numerous support positions that don't require fire-and-fury tactics. Consider their use as researchers. They can establish a rapport with receptive creatures and get close to the dark side, learning about inhuman existence and the forces that motivate it. The information gathered can be invaluable to any group, whether it's used to work with or against the creatures.

But don't assume that an Innocent can't be a leader. In fact, one of these imbued might be a very different type of leader or advisor in hunters' world. She may be almost messianic in her guidance, conducting a group that is less interested in hurting monsters and more interested in living with them or understanding them. Such a leader can encourage moderation, allowing for hunters, people and monsters to find common ground. Their hands can guide, pushing a society toward acceptance. They are capable of promoting pacifism, harmony and accord.

System: An Innocent's flock gains an extra die on all Empathy rolls for a scene in which the group's ultimate ideals are pursued. Hunters seeking to come to terms with local monsters might understand that a blood puppet acts out of perverse devotion to her master, for example, not out of a personal desire to inflict harm. Furthermore, followers may not be affected by berserk rages such as those that can be caused by an Avenger's approach or by edges such as Enrage (found on Waywards' Deviance path).

JUDGES

Judgment is essential in a hunter society. Someone has to weigh the souls and actions of beasts. Someone has to set rules. Someone has to be an objective arbiter and separate right from wrong. And all the more so in a large hunter group, whose numerous and varied members might have all kinds of opinions on what course to take and on what is the right thing to do. A Judge can be the ultimate decision-maker on which monsters warrant the group's attention. The judicious may look at each problem posed to the organization and decide which response is a step on or off the

group's path. These people may also preside over disagreements among fellow hunters. They may police their own, determining when rules are broken or when a hunter has stepped out of bounds. They may even decide what penalty is due, or counsel imbued and decide whether a member is "fit for duty." A Judge is in many ways an avatar of balance. Every group needs at least one to moderate its actions.

System: Information is key to a Judge, and such a leader may ask his agents to be attentive to it, as well. Intelligence allows for informed decisions, and while all data is good, what's gathered with an unbiased eye is best. Those hunters who follow a Judge gain an extra die on Investigation rolls.

MARTYRS

A Martyr can wear many hats in a hunter society. She's probably willing to give herself to the cause or mission, playing any role or performing any acts that are simply necessary. She's motivated by a sense of responsibility. She may volunteer to do anything — spy, perform diplomacy or even act as bait — and she can throw herself into the job with such unyielding tenacity that she gets turned to all the time. Anyone so determined must *want* to get herself killed. Why not help her do it?

But there are more useful and practical applications for a Martyr, and her diligence typically ensures that even these jobs are performed well. One of these people might be called upon to finance the group's mission. She might find the money even at the loss of her own home, car or savings. She might be ideal for recruitment. Imagine how well the passion of a Martyr might inspire another hunter to join the cause. And a Martyr might be just what's needed to win victories against monsters when nothing short of complete commitment can overcome. Whereas other hunters fear going all the way against the supernatural, Martyrs' willingness to sacrifice might turn the tide and even save lives when allies' hesitancy or tentativeness would get them killed.

System: Following a Martyr comes with its own twisted rewards. Hunters serving such a hunter ignore the penalties that come with losing the Bruised, Hurt and Injured health levels, but only for one scene and only when the objective they pursue contributes to the Utopian goal that the groups seeks to achieve. Suppose the hunters strive to undermine a rot-controlled police force by enduring physical abuse from the cops — because they know it's all being caught on film. The penalties from Wounded, Mauled, Crippled and Incapacitated still apply normally.

REDEEMERS

Forgiveness is a relative concept — salvation may come with the taste of a communion wafer or at the end of a gun barrel. It depends on whether the redemption is *sought* to make up for past sins or is *inflicted* before any further depravity can be committed. Subjects of such salvation can also be myriad. Does a Redeemer seek to

forgive monsters, everyday people or hunters? It's the last option that may offer hints as to pardoners' possible roles within a society. They may be spiritual leaders — people who keep ethics, morality and perhaps faith at the forefront of all members' activities. Redeemers can be excellent founders of groups. The act of creating such a society, especially one geared toward reconciling lost souls, may be a Redeemers' grand plan for world deliverance.

A pardoner may provide an element of hope and temperance for his hunter group. Just when his followers are poised to make a violent mistake, he can be the voice of reason and restraint. And, if group members cross that line anyway, a Redeemer might help them find solace or show them how to turn that act into a lesson learned. Indeed, the sheer psychological toll that hunters must bear can be diminished by a Redeemer's very counsel.

And of course, such a hunter's role in dealing with monsters is far from useless. One of the forgiving may help a modest, compassionate group to establish contact and a dialogue with certain creatures — or perhaps unity with them all.

System: Chosen who bow to a Redeemer's authority may re-roll one failed (but not botched) Social roll per scene, as long as the roll involves understanding a being or opening a dialogue that does not involve aggression or intimidation.

VISIONARIES: ARCHITECTS OF UTOPIA

We've covered the other creeds and some possibilities of their direction and purpose within a larger group of chosen. The final question is: *What is Visionaries' possible role in all this?* In building a society of hunters with some sort of Utopian ideals, it's imperative to keep an eye to the future. Any member of any creed is capable of creating and maintaining a futurist perspective — but in general, many hunters keep their heads down to focus on the task at hand. They might want to free their town of monstrous influence but never seem to get past dealing with the random creatures spotted on the street, and there never seems to be an end to them. Visionaries, however, are unique creatures among the imbued. Their reliance on the Vision Virtue offers them something of a more far-reaching outlook than other creeds typically (though not necessarily) have.

It's possible that Visionaries were *meant* to be hunters' leaders. They tend to be the ones with the long-range plans, the ones who apply a design (be it sane or insane) to the corrupt world around them. If anyone has a distant goal — and the blueprints to carry it out — it's a Visionary. But they can't go at it alone. And two Visionaries together often have conflicting objectives and plans, which may very well put one of them in the driver's seat and force the other's ideology to the wayside. Obviously, it's not essential for a Visionary to take control and become the leader of a large-scale hunter society. But they *do* seem almost shaped for the position.

So how do they go about it? First, a Visionary has to have a plan for other hunters to follow. If it's just some vague notion of how things should be done, other hunters aren't likely to find the conviction (small "c") to join the crusade. The more goal-oriented and unambiguous the "plan" — get the hospital from under monsters' thumb through steps A, B and C — the more likely it is that other imbued agree to follow. Even if the ultimate strategy is absurd — start a pirate TV channel that communicates the truth — at least concrete details may convince hunters to be a part of it.

What does the plan entail? Is it some 10-step process of assimilating the monsters into our culture? Does it require precise, surgical violence? Visionaries must decide. They're the ones who can figure out how many hunters are needed, what "gifts" can be used in the process, and according to what timetable this must all occur.

Once a Visionary's plan is set in motion, it's important to remember that it isn't a juggernaut. There will be pitfalls to overcome, and the design won't come to fruition all by itself. The hunters make it happen through their own efforts and through the Visionary's direction, whether sensible or bewildering at any given time.

But what keeps everyone on the same path? Following some ephemeral, invisible goal doesn't cut it for long. The group loses steam pretty fast if no tangible results are evident. Here's another role that a Visionary must fulfill: providing guidance or just plain "rallying the troops." But how does she do it? How does a pathfinder translate her ultimate plan into morale, motivation and action? Does she give a speech like a sergeant egging her platoon onward into enemy territory, reminding them constantly of the objective? Does she allow brief diversions from "the plan" to satiate individual hunters' desires for the hunt? Does she take pains to illustrate how separate, seemingly nonsensical tactics have combined in the past to bring the group to where it currently stands? Does she always call upon input from her supporters and weigh the best course of action, making everyone at least feel like part of the decision-making process? Does she promise rewards? Or warn of punishments? A Visionary may fuel her campaign and its disciples through triumph, power, guilt, humiliation — or even avarice (if her Utopia promises cash rewards to its liberators...). Anything goes when it comes down to furthering the cause.

Something else to bear in mind is the burden that a Visionary's Virtue eventually places on her shoulders. One who has success in both creating and continuing her dreams for the future gains Vision points one by one. As her faith in herself, aspirations for the future and perceived understanding of "the way things are" broadens, she might seem, to the rest of her group, to lose focus. Her ideas might become increasingly unattainable or bizarre. In short, she might go nuts. What happens when de-

rangement takes hold? Does the group lose faith as they watch her become slowly unhinged? Or does the group grow slowly insane *with* the Visionary in some symbiotic way? Does the extremity of their actions intensify with the extremity of her ideals? Whether the Visionary has her hand on the rudder as the leader or just as a guiding figure, it's important to explore the consequences of an "accelerated" Vision Virtue.

System: The rewards of teaming with a Visionary on a mission of Utopian scale can be tangible. Every time the Visionary gains a point of Vision, all those under the banner of her leadership gain a point of Conviction. Group members see or sense the progress they make or are inspired by insights from their leader. Also, all adherents of the Visionary's plan are able to ignore one botched roll per game session *when in the presence of the Visionary*. This botched roll is counted as a failure, nothing more.

BYSTANDERS

Bystanders are the little people. Overlooked and, according to some, not worthy of the title "chosen," these poor bastards are often viewed as draft-dodgers by "true" imbued. So, you might think that bystanders could fulfill no position in a hunter society. That's not necessarily true. Consider that bystanders had a *glimpse*. Sure, they missed the boat and no longer gain the "blessings" of the Messengers, but to some degree, *they know things are wrong*. They're not useless. They don't have to sit around on the couch, just trembling and waiting for goblins to come and steal their souls. Some of them may actually be willing to make up for what they did when they turned their backs on the imbuing. They might *overcompensate* for this lapse by throwing themselves, life and limb, into the hunt. As such, a hunter organization is the perfect place for bystanders to come into their own.

There's room at all levels of hunter society for "duds." They can be the ultimate support system. They may not have powers, but they can use cameras, guns and radios. They can front money. They can buy supplies. There's nothing about them that screams "out of place," which allows them to duck monsters' radar more easily than even hunters, so they can run errands and lay the foundation for activities without drawing attention to themselves.

And don't think for a minute that bystanders can't be leaders. They have the ability to plan, to lift morale and to rile up the soldiers just as much as any other hunter can. Hunters are human, with perhaps a few blessings or curses. Bystanders are human, too. Their capacity to lead lies in their knowledge of what's out there. They may have closed the door on being "chosen," but that might drive them to want to marshal the forces. That, and a person with no gifts at all who is still prepared to go against the unknown can inspire defeated imbued who are infinitely more "fortunate."

THE LOST CREEDS

The different creeds have varying potential in a hunter society, and the lost creeds — Hermit and Wayward — are no exceptions, even though they ostensibly seem like outsiders to any such community.

Hermits can't handle being around hunters or monsters in any great numbers, or they start to lose it. This makes incorporating them into big groups of imbued difficult but not impossible. Their edges allow them to communicate from afar, which means they can perform reconnaissance and gather intelligence without subjecting themselves to undue punishment. They can report to other hunters and even supply on-site guidance to any chosen in a crisis.

But can they be leaders? You bet. As silly as it sounds, think Charlie from *Charlie's Angels*: a disembodied voice, possibly that of a very wealthy person who coordinates efforts from afar. Sound like a Hermit to you?

But what about Waywards? It's no secret that they're fucked-up individuals, furthering an agenda less about Utopia and more about destruction. As a rule, they just don't play well with others. But Waywards are adherents of Vision, and by definition they create and maintain long-reaching goals. They're simply apocalyptic ones, with monsters being destroyed at any cost. If such hunters can find a group with which they mesh — perhaps aggressive imbued who can't imagine a world past tomorrow, much less the cinders left after a worldwide war — Waywards might join up. Or a maniac finds a Visionary in whom the Wayward sees possibilities for the future. The leader might have use for the killer's skills, and that application both releases the Wayward's urges and allows him to believe that he contributes to a plan for a world free of the abominations. Or there's always the possibility that a Wayward sits high and mighty in the leadership chair, commanding a whole group of chosen in a destructive crusade.

But all this is not to say that Bystanders just fall right into any hunter group without complications. There is prejudice against them. They may be seen as inferior, not worth the time. Their lack of second sight might get them killed. They have no edges. Plus, their brush with the truth undoubtedly still haunts them and may be enough to dissuade them from another such encounter, so they can't be trusted when it matters most.

And yet, they're not useless. They have minds and hands, and if they're made of the right stuff (otherwise, why would the Messengers have chosen them?), they can be just as important as a full-fledged hunter in a society. In fact, if the chosen achieve the Utopia they seek, who will lead humanity in that place? If the monsters are

defeated or reconciled, will there be any purpose for the imbued? Bystanders raised up with the group might be the people to take charge in the new world.

SAMPLE HUNTER GROUP

The following describes a burgeoning hunter organization that you may introduce into your chronicle or examine as an example of how one might become established and pursue a goal for a better reality. Although this group's goal is initially indistinct — a response to what members barely perceive as wrong with the world — it can become more focused and determined as members understand the truth better and seek to change it. Perhaps the characters in your game can observe this progress or partake in it directly.

AGNUS DEI

To many members of this hunter circle, the Catholic Church is the means to salvation. None of the hunters involved are members of the clergy, but several are devoted to the faith and believe quite strongly in its doctrine. Their problem is that, whereas they regard Scripture as truth, the Church itself they suspect to be riddled with corruption. Devils are believed to eat holes in the spiritual woodwork like diabolical termites. Priests, bishops, cardinals — even the Pope himself — may be at fault, and the group has already weeded out some dark influences from the echelons of the clergy. If the doorway to salvation is barred by monsters, group members fear, how can anyone find peace with God? And so, these hunters believe it's their responsibility — their divine duty — to purge the Church to ensure people's salvation.

The group originated in Killarney, Ireland, at the Church of the Assumption. Father Joseph Listowel was the young parish priest there. His congregation was small but devout, with members attending mass regularly and supporting their new pastor. Late one night, Listowel was accosted by three of his parishioners: Robert Kiley, James Branigan and Liam McCoy. Kiley pinned Listowel against a wall and announced that they knew *what* the father was. They had seen him in church one day and had “up and figured it out.” Listowel, seeming repentant or desperate to save himself, broke down. He confessed to visiting a monsignor in Dublin, a man he'd met in the seminary, and being “compelled” to engage in all manner of sin... the first of which was drinking the priest's “holy blood.”

The three men — recently imbued — took Listowel to a prepared place and pressed him for information, threatening that if he didn't tell them the whole story they'd frame him for illicit acts before his congregation. The story they heard was beyond anything they could have imagined — or feared. The corruption extended as far as the Americas and as high as Rome itself. An infection had

supposedly festered within the Church since *at least* the late 15th century, starting with Pope Alexander VI, a dabbler in magic and a father of over 60 bastard children. The men told Listowel that this was his chance to make good. He would return to Dublin. He would kneel before the monsignor, and he would get names, locations — anything he could about corrupters of the church whom the men could track down and deal with.

Before long, the three waged a campaign of harassing Church figures identified by Listowel. Their efforts were indirect — property damage, blackmail, threats of violence — all meant to pressure the things to give up their ways and abandon their hiding places in the Church.

In time, the men encountered three more Irish faithful who were unaware of the decay within the Church, but who could nevertheless see *the truth*. Soon, two more joined. Its numbers growing, the movement continued and extended into England and Scotland. Eventually, the group was forced into a confrontation with the monsignor himself, a blood drinker who had hidden behind the cross for untold years. The hunters lost four members (including two founders, McCoy and Branigan), but they prevailed in the end. His was their first murder and they looked on it as such. They believed what they had done was necessary, but that they had sinned nonetheless.

Only recently has the group's leader, Kiley, sought aid outside the British Isles. He has discovered hunter-net and operates online as Believer323. He contacts only those “imbued” whom he believes hold beliefs or loyalties similar to his own, whether in terms of faith or the desire to show others the path to salvation.

ORGANIZATION

Initially, numbers were small enough that the group would meet sporadically in Killarney. Those meetings continue, but the circle now extends beyond those origins. Apart from small groups operating in Scotland and England, others have sprung up in Rio de Janeiro, Cincinnati and Santorini, Greece. All labor under the auspices of Kiley's efforts to reach out to like-minded believers. The hunters have yet to decide how they can cleanse the Church of its corruption, but they seek ways to undermine the deceivers within while neither interfering with the good that the institution can do nor despoiling its good name.

ROBERT KILEY

Growing up poor and hungry amid a scattering of homes in a rocky part of Ireland known as the Ring of Kerry (not far from his current home of Killarney), Robert Kiley knew want in many forms. He was a quiet child, quick but not so book-smart, and he was picked on thanks to his small size. Thus, he suffered one bloody nose too many and finally learned to fight. He was reared Catholic but didn't really understand what that meant until he reached his late teens. After he nearly died in a car accident, he was devout.



Kiley was imbued during Mass one Sunday along with James Branigan and Liam McCoy. The words in Kiley's hymnal seemed to shift and run together like ants. He couldn't look away and still swears today that they spelled out "THE SINS OF THE FATHER." Then, for the first time, he could see that Father Listowel looked... different. Stained with sin. God had shown Kiley the truth.

Stern and simple, Kiley is a man of few words. He's not given to bouts of idle speculation or petty bickering. What needs to be done will be done. Kiley never saw much of the world — or of Ireland, for that matter. He remains proletarian to the core, working at the market and trying to keep up with his group's activities, whether in person or through that "damned computer." And despite being terrified by his knowledge that the forces of the Adversary infest the Church, Kiley simply accepts that he must do his best to purge them. What else could a good Catholic do?

Creed: Redeemer

Attributes: Strength 3, Dexterity 2, Stamina 3, Charisma (Persuasive) 4, Manipulation 3, Appearance 2, Perception (Intuitive) 4, Intelligence 2, Wits 3

Abilities: Alertness 2, Brawl 3, Computer 1, Crafts (Engines) 1, Demolitions 1, Dodge 1, Empathy 2, Intimidation 2, Intuition 3, Investigation 3, Leadership (Commanding) 4, Melee 2, Research 2, Security 2, Stealth 2, Subterfuge 1

Backgrounds: Allies 3, Contacts 2, Influence 2

Edges: (Redemption) Bluster, Insinuate, Respire; (Visionary) Foresee, (Defense) Ward; (Judgment) Discern

Mercy: 6, **Vision:** 1, **Zeal:** 3, **Willpower:** 6

PATRICIA HESLIN

Until the imbuing opened her eyes to the depths of the world's depravity, Patricia Heslin was a sister at the

Sacred Heart Convent in Cincinnati, Ohio. Children and local churchgoers to whom Heslin and her fellow nuns tended were being preyed upon by a horrific being that fed upon their bodies — and to her eyes — their very souls. Worse, she discovered that her mother superior and some of her peers ushered victims to this dark presence, whether by its command or at their own behest.

Heslin tried to learn what the others were doing and what the demonic presence might be, but ultimately she fled the convent in fear, her head a tangle of voices and her faith sorely shaken. Months passed as she struggled to come to grips with what she had seen, and she wrestled with what to do about it. In the meantime, life seemed to proceed as if normal at her convent, but Heslin knew different. Strangely, no one arrived to seek her out or learn why she'd suddenly left. It was as if she had been forgotten altogether, which led her deeper into depression and isolation.

Before long, only objects — the television, newspaper, radio — kept Patricia abreast of the world and events at her former home. She ventured onto the Internet via a neighbor's computer only out of some bizarre compulsion that she couldn't explain. Soon enough, she discovered Robert Kiley and found in him a kindred spirit. She wasn't alone. There was hope. She could have faith again.

At Kiley's behest, Heslin does her best to observe developments at her former convent, and she hopes to learn what truly goes on there. Thus far, she has discovered no other of God's chosen in her vicinity and suspects that others whom she has read about — apart from Kiley — simply misunderstand the message that has been delivered to them, assuming even that God has spoken to them at all.



UTOPIA

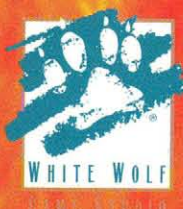
Living the Dream

When hunters are first awakened to the supernatural, all they know is terror, paranoia and chaos. The unseen world is a nightmare. But the imbued have a dream. They imagine a paradise free from monsters' grip, a world of humanity's own. And they set out to achieve it, even if it means sacrificing everything they — and the rest of humanity — hold dear.

Free at Last

Hunter: Utopia explores ways in which hunters might strive to break monsters' hold over humanity, whether in a neighborhood, throughout a city or across the world. But can such a Utopia be achieved? Can the monsters be defeated or is it an unattainable dream? You decide.

HUNTER
THE RECKONING



WWW.WHITE-WOLF.COM

ISBN 1-58846-706-6
WW8133 \$19.95 U.S.



9 781588 467065



Printed in USA