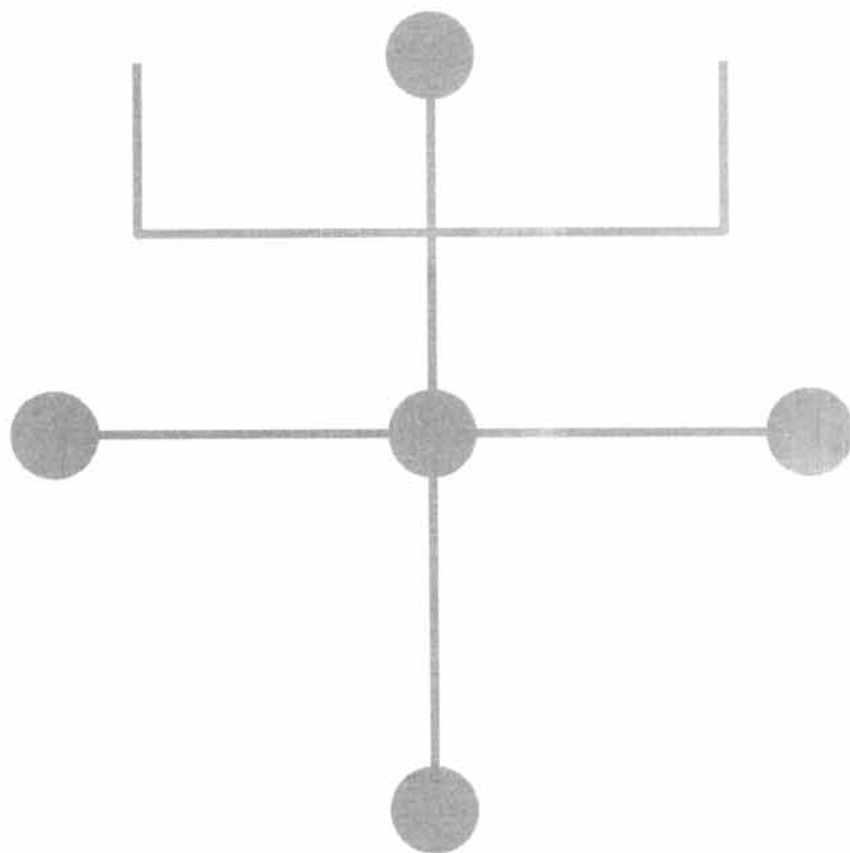


THE INFERNAL



An Enemy Book for Hunter: The Reckoning®

THE INTERNAL



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THE INFERNAL

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PROLOGUE: A CHILD SHALL LEAD

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.

— Isaiah 11:6

I've always loved kids. I've always looked forward to having a family of my own some day. I think that's one of the hardest things about doing what I do. The fact that it means I'll probably never have a family of my own, not like I ever imagined, anyway. It's one of the reasons I drive an ice cream truck, because I like kids and having a chance to talk to them. The other reason is because nobody thinks a guy in an ice cream truck is out looking for monsters to hunt and kill.

After the business with the walking corpse in Tulsa, I made sure to get the hell out of town as soon as I could. Wyoming is a far cry from the industrial plants back home. Hardly the place where you'd expect to find monsters, but something told me that this was the place I needed to be. In fact, when I was driving down the highway I swear the exit sign said "BROKEN PROMISES" for a second before going back to "Promise 1 mile." I had tried to convince myself I was getting a much-needed break, but that fantasy didn't last very long.

There was something wrong about Promise. Things seemed normal enough on the surface, but I could feel a... presence, like a dark cloud hanging over everything. Despite the pleasant welcomes and the kind faces, there was something else. When I flipped through the local paper and found the want ad for a driver, I knew. I was supposed to be here.

It took me a while to figure out exactly why, but I was glad for the chance. I followed my route each day and kept an eye out for any trouble, waiting for a sign of some kind. I got to know the local kids. They were willing to talk about anything they might have heard, although their stories turned out to be just that, at least as far as I could tell.

So, I had seen Jacob several times. My route took me past the local church, and Jacob was there a lot. Apparently his father was the pastor, Reverend Pitt. He was

raising his son alone, so after school Jacob went to the church and spent time waiting for his father to finish work. He was a shy, quiet kid, but I was always nice to him. After a while I think he started to open up to me a little. He would hang out by the truck and I would take a few minutes to hear how his day was or what was going on at school. I got the impression that his father didn't have a lot of time for him and that the kid was lonely. I knew how that felt. Then I met Jacob's father.

The kid was looking kind of down one day when he came out to the truck. As I gave him his usual bomb-pop, I noticed that he was also looking kind of pale. I fought down the urge to reach out, grab him by the collar and check the side of his neck. Instead, I asked him if he was feeling all right.

"Okay, I guess," he said sullenly, scuffing one shoe on the pavement.

"Is there anything wrong?" I asked. "It's okay, you can tell me." For a brief moment, I thought I saw a spark of hope in his eyes, but then he looked down at his shoes again.

"It's..." he began quietly, then stopped as a shadow fell over him. Jacob instantly clammed up. I hadn't seen his father approach from behind the truck. Pitt — I can't bring myself to call him "Reverend" after what he did — was tall, thin, with dark receding hair that emphasized his wide forehead.

"Come inside, Jacob," he said gently to his son, touching him on the shoulder. He led Jacob away without so much as a word to me. That's all right. I'm used to being ignored. It's actually an asset in this business, but it was the way that Jacob and then his father glanced back at me as they walked away. Jacob as if pleading with me, and Reverend Pitt with an expression that made me wonder and *look closer*. A shadow seemed to fall across his face, like the sun slipped behind a cloud, and I felt it. There was something wrong

about him. It was more than just my instant dislike for him. Reverend Pitt had been affected by something.

I finished up my route in record time and drove my car back to the church. I normally did surveillance from the truck, but Pitt had seen me in it already, and my car is pretty inconspicuous. I waited until the two left the church and I followed them home, keeping my distance. Then I settled in to watch and wait to see what happened. I told myself that I wouldn't do anything more. If something serious happened, I would log on to hunter-net and see about getting some backup. I had made contact with a few folks who I thought were in the area, but I wanted to make damn sure I was right before I asked for help. At least, that was my plan.

When the mist rose up and the clouds covered the moon, I huddled down in my windbreaker, feeling a chill cut through me. Then I realized that it wasn't the temperature, it was a feeling of something else. Something was coming. I just knew it. I saw a faint light inside the house. It flickered for a moment, like someone passed in front of the window.

I grabbed my stick from the front seat and got out of the car. I needed to get a closer look at what was going on. So I crept up around the side of the house to the back porch, where I could see a light on inside the hall, showing part of the kitchen. I tried a window and it opened just a crack. That's when I heard the voices.

"That's right," someone unfamiliar said, low and soothing, like a parent talking to a child. "Like the sacrifice of Abraham. What are you willing to give up to your God, Zachary?"

"Anything, Lord." It was Pitt, quiet and dull, almost like he was in a trance. "Anything."

There was a low chuckle, followed by a frightened whimper. My hand tightened around the hardwood stick, one end sharpened and fire-hardened like I'd read online.

"Don't be afraid, Jacob," Reverend Pitt said quietly. "There's no pain..." The whimpering got louder, and then faded into a low moan. I'd heard enough. There was no time for hunter-net, no time to call the cops, no time for anything else. I jumped up, flung open the screen door and kicked the back door as hard as I could. The lock splintered and the door flew inward with a bang. Two pale faces turned toward me instantly. Pitt was frozen with a look of shock on his face while the stranger's face was twisted in rage, blood dripping from its lips and chin as it bent over Jacob sprawled across the kitchen table.

"Get away from him!" I yelled and charged at the thing, ready to drive the sharp end of the stick through its heart.

It was gone in an instant, like a blur of shadows. I felt a cold hand throw me into the far wall. I managed to hold onto my stick and I slid down as a fist punched a hole right through the sheet rock where my head had been, showering me with dust. I scrambled to the side as the monster yanked its hand out, eyes flashing red in the light, its fangs bared.

"Stop!" I yelled, raising my stick to fend it off, throwing aside its rush. It stumbled past me into the hall, knocking over a small table and crashing down a small wooden cross that hung on the wall. I scooped up the

cross and held it in my other hand. I risked a glance back at Jacob, and it's a good thing, because it gave me the split-second warning I needed to keep his father from knocking my brains out with a pan. He just missed me.

"How can you do this to your own son!" I screamed at him. It was like I'd slapped him. He stumbled back, dropped the pan and looked around like a man coming out of a coma.

"Jacob?" he muttered, looking at his son lying on the table, blood running down the boy's neck. "Oh dear God, what have I done? What have I done?" Pitt fell to his knees.

Then the monster was on me again. I tried to bring up my stick, but I was too slow. He knocked it aside and I heard it clatter somewhere. The force of his impact sent us both crashing to the kitchen floor. The stench of blood and decay made me gag as clammy hands reached for my throat. I jammed the cross into him and the bloodsucker laughed, actually *laughed*, before grabbing my wrist and pinning it to the floor.

"Your God can't help you now, fat boy," he said, "but start praying anyway." He licked the blood from his lips. I struggled, but his grip was like iron and his weight was pinning me down, squeezing the breath from me. His face was sickeningly close.

"No!" I tried to scream. "Stop!" It was like time slowed to a crawl. I still remember that moment when I close my eyes at night. I still wake up drenched in sweat, checking my neck. The thing hesitated for a second, like he was savoring the moment.

And then, "Stop," another voice said, high and pure. It was barely more than a whisper, but it sounded like thunder. The monster and I both looked to see Jacob standing on the table, towering above the floor, looking down on us. The faint light seemed to frame his blond hair in a golden glow. "Release him," he said in a calm, even tone. "Now."

The bloodsucker overcame its initial shock, its features twisting into a sneer. "I'll deal with you in a minute, boy, when I'm finished with this." I tried to reach for my stick where I thought it had fallen, almost willing it back into my hand, but it was too far away.

"Then burn" was all Jacob said. There was a whooshing sound and the bloodsucker's back was suddenly on fire, like it'd been doused in gasoline and someone had struck a match. I could feel the heat and was afraid that I was about to catch fire, too. It let go of me and leapt up, a high shriek filling the room, and ran out the door. I scrambled across the floor, grabbed my stick and went after it.

The monster was rolling around on the ground outside, vainly trying to put out the fire. Its whimpers of pain were so pitiful, I almost felt bad for it, but then I thought about what it was about to do to me. I pinned it to the ground quickly with my foot, raised my stick and drove it straight into its chest. It threw up one charred hand to try and ward me off, but the point went right through its heart and into the dirt underneath, pinning it there like a bug. It twitched once and then its arm fell to the ground. I staggered back and fell on my ass. I'd been burned, but not bad. I just sat there staring, watching it go up. I don't know for how long.

Then I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned to see Jacob standing next to me. The front of his T-shirt was stained with blood, but his face was calm. His blue eyes looked into mine with an intensity that I'd never seen before, like he was looking right into my soul.

"Thank you," he said. That's when I glanced at his neck. There was no bleeding, no scar. No sign of any wound at all. There was blood on his clothes, but his neck was perfectly smooth.

"How...?" I began.

"A miracle!" Reverend Pitt interrupted, staggering down the back steps to drop to his knees beside Jacob. "A miracle of the Lord has saved us! Oh, thank you, God! Thank you!" He sobbed and clutched his son close. I stood up and realized that I would have to do something about the remains that were rapidly turning to ash in the yard. As I turned to look at the two, I noticed that Jacob was simply standing in his father's embrace, arms at his sides, never taking his eyes off the burning corpse. The light of the fire reflected yellow and orange in his eyes and I shuddered.

◆ ◆ ◆

Subject: Re: Firestarter

From: bookworm55

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Sorry, Freezer, but I don't know anything about one of us being able to make a being go up in flames like you describe. I haven't even heard about anything like that.

I have heard about at least one kid being chosen, maybe in a time of trauma like that. I guess there's a chance that your kid may be one of us, especially if he was abused or in contact with a creature or creatures for a long time. Maybe that night triggered something in him. Who can say for sure in this business.

I suggest keeping a close eye on him and trying to talk to him when you get the chance. His father may be a problem, but if he was really under this thing's control like you seem to suggest, then he'll probably be willing to keep his mouth shut to avoid any kind of scandal. Still, be careful. If he was a slave, he could be trouble even though his master is gone.

◆ ◆ ◆

I logged off hunter-net. Two days and nobody knew anything about how Jacob set that thing on fire, or how he healed so quickly. I'd heard stories about some of us who recovered from almost fatal wounds, but nothing about spontaneous combustion. But then, I guess we found out new things about what we could do every day. Nobody was willing to say what was possible or impossible. There was no way to know if Jacob was one of us. But if he wasn't, then what was he? I wasn't willing to consider that he'd become a bloodsucker.

I was damn lucky after that night. Pitt seemed truly repentant for what he'd done. He really believed that a miracle saved us all from that monster. I wasn't going to argue. Hell, I'm still not sure that it *wasn't* a miracle.



Whatever happened, Pitt considered me a part of his salvation, so he vowed to say nothing to the cops. He gave them some story about vandals doing the damage to his house. Jacob kept real quiet. I assumed he was in shock. It sure felt like I was. I wanted to ask Pitt about taking Jacob to the hospital, maybe getting him some professional help, but it seemed too soon. Everything was happening so fast, and I was afraid of Jacob telling anyone what really happened that night.

I know. What was more important, protecting this kid or keeping myself out of jail? Still, the more I thought about it, the more convinced I was that there wasn't anything a shrink or doctor could do for him. They wouldn't believe him and he'd just end up diagnosed as crazy and be put on drugs for the rest of his life. Plus there was *that* possibility. What if Jacob was one of us? He'd been exposed to the truth and there was no way to undo that... or was there? I remember how scary it was when I was chosen, when I realized what was happening. How much harder was it for a 10-year-old kid? Most of us didn't have anyone to help us through it. Maybe Jacob could be different.

So before I went to work on Sunday, I went to the church to talk to Jacob and his father. I don't know exactly what I was thinking, something about trying to help Jacob live a normal life. Maybe I could convince Pitt to let me teach the kid to control whatever it was he had. To let him at least grow up without having to deal with anymore horror. Maybe I saw it as a chance to give him the normal life that I couldn't have. I don't know, but it turned out that I wasn't the only one who had plans for Jacob.

I found the church absolutely packed with people. Standing room only. I knew Promise was a God-fearing town, but I'd never seen the church so busy before. All it took was one look up front to figure out why.

Pitt was up there. He was getting the crowd all fired up. He was talking about sin and forgiveness, how we were all wretched sinners in the eyes of the Lord, but how through His grace we could be forgiven, how the power of innocence could wipe the slate clean. He talked about the healing power of God, and that's when I noticed Jacob sitting behind him, all dressed up in his Sunday best. My heart sank. The truth is, a part of me wished I had killed Pitt while I was fighting that vampire.

He started telling everyone how God had blessed his son, how Jacob had "the power," and he called people up to witness. I wanted to say something, I wanted to stop it, but what could I do? I just stood there and watched as people came up complaining of everything from arthritis to depression. Pitt asked each one, "Do you believe?" and when they said "Yes," Jacob laid his hands on them and they were healed. Maybe some of it was fake. I wanted to think so, but I knew that some of it was real. I'd seen those marks on Jacob's neck, even though there was no sign of them now.

By the end of it all, people were falling on their knees, praising God and wanting Jacob to touch them to give them His blessing. I didn't even stay to watch it all. I couldn't stand it. I left as quietly as I came in and waited for Jacob and Pitt in

the back of the church. I think the "Reverend" was surprised to see me, but Jacob wasn't, or if he was he didn't show it. He just smiled calmly as his father moved to protect the boy. Strange behavior for a man who was willing to offer his son up as a sacrifice just a few nights before.

"What do you want?" Pitt demanded, closing the door of his office behind him.

"To talk," I said. "To Jacob."

"I can't—" he began, when Jacob laid a hand on his father's arm.

"It's all right," Jacob said. "Please." Pitt looked down and something passed between them, something that wasn't at all like a son talking to his father.

"All right," the pastor said slowly. "I'll be right outside." He left quietly and closed the door behind him.

"Thank you for your help," Jacob said to me.

"I should be thanking you," I said. "You're the one who saved me from that thing... aren't you?"

"Yes," he said gravely, "but if it weren't for you, I wouldn't have had the chance."

"Do you know how you did it?"

A slow smile spread across the boy's face. It sent a chill down my spine. "Oh, yes," he said. "Do you want me to show you?" He held out a hand and I... shrank away from it a little.

"No, that's okay. I just wanted to talk to you."

"I won't hurt you," he said, "I promise. Go ahead." He extended his hand again.

I reached out and took his hand, and it was like the sky opened up. A brilliant gold-white light shined all around him and I could see something like fiery wings, the color of a peacock's, spreading out behind him. There was music, so loud it was almost deafening. A chorus of voices or instruments, I couldn't tell which. Over it all, a voice like thunder spoke to me.

"NO CREATURE CAN STAND AGAINST THE CLEANSING FIRE THAT I COMMAND. DO YOU BELIEVE?"

"Oh my God!" I pulled my hand away and backed against the wall. I was about to lose it completely when he stopped. As quickly as the vision appeared, it was gone, and there was just a skinny kid standing there in a button-down shirt and faded corduroys, looking at me with a puzzled expression on his face.

"You have been touched," he said, almost to himself and almost afraid, it seemed. We stared at each other. For the first time since that night, I realized there was something else looking back at me.

"You're not Jacob," I said slowly.

"I *am* Jacob," the boy replied in a very mature tone. "Or what *was* Jacob, but I am more than that, much more."

"Who... what are you?"

"I think you know," he said.

"That's impossible."

"As impossible as monsters that drink blood... or those with the power to stop them?"

"What happened to Jacob?" I asked. His young face looked almost wistful.

"He's still here in some ways. His thoughts, his memories. He liked you very much. You were kind to him and talked to him."

"What happened to him?"

Those blue eyes looked up at me. "He's gone. His soul couldn't withstand what was happening to him. There was too much pain, too much suffering." Tears welled up in his eyes. "He is at peace now, at least."

My eyes darted to the door that Jacob — or what was once Jacob — blocked. I must have looked horrified. That's what I felt.

"Please, don't look at me like that, Tom," Jacob said. (I don't know what else to call him... It?) "There was nothing that could be done for him. He's beyond pain now. He's at peace."

"How do you know that?"

"Believe me, I know."

"Why are you here? What do you want?"

"The same thing you do. A chance to make a difference, to help."

I just stood there for a minute, staring. The truth was, I wanted to believe him. I wanted to think that the prayers of so many people had been answered. But at the same time I didn't want to think about what that meant, and I'd seen too much to have faith in anything anymore. I looked at him and saw something else, something different from the glorious golden light and majestic wings he'd shown me, something terrible.

"You're... you're not an angel, are you?" I said slowly, quietly. I don't even know why I said it. It just kind of slipped out. If I'd been smart, I would have kept my mouth shut and left then and there. I wouldn't have confessed that I knew.

Jacob turned away and there was a long silence before he responded. "Once, I was like a shining star," he said. "A star that fell from the sky. Do you understand what it means to be nothing but light, and then plunged into eternal darkness?" He turned back toward me. "Do you know what it's like to see and hear with the eyes and ears of an artist, then to be struck blind and deaf?" Tears rolled down his face now. His lower lip trembled and his voice cracked. It was so hard not to think of him as a scared child at that moment.

"But now I can see and hear again," he said, regaining a bit of his composure. "Now there's light, and I know what needs to be done. It will be different this time. I can make it work this time."

He looked up at me and smiled faintly. "I could use your help, Tom." It wasn't a demand. Not even an offer, really. Just a statement, left out there for me to do whatever I wanted with it. I swallowed hard, feeling my sweat turn cold.

"I have to think about it." I lied.

"Of course," he said. "I understand."



Reverend Pitt eyed me suspiciously as I left the church. I did my best not to look over my shoulder when I made my way out into the parking lot, where people were still talking about the miracles they'd witnessed. I wanted to scream at them, to tell them that it wasn't true, to tell them... what? I wasn't sure myself. They seemed so happy, so full of hope. I heard some say it was the turning point of their lives, that it saved their souls.



They worship him. They see Jacob as their direct line to divine grace, and the whole damn town adores him. I watched it happen. I watched how Pitt's "ministry" grew, with Jacob and his miracles at the center of it all. I heard about how they were going to take their message on the road, to bring the blessings Jacob had to offer to as many people as possible. I heard the stories of all the good they attributed to the boy, and the more I listened the more I became convinced.

They worship him. They put their total faith and trust in him. They put their total faith and trust in God — or what they *think* is God.

The worst part about it is that it's true. He does heal people. They put their faith in him and he lays his hands upon them and the blind can see and the lame can walk. He takes away their pain and suffering, and all he asks in return is that they believe in something greater than themselves.

I don't know, maybe I'm just jealous. Maybe it's because I don't really believe in anything anymore. Maybe I just wish I could put my faith in something — someone — like they do. But I can't. I've seen too much, done too much to put my faith in anything other than myself anymore. It's a hard way to live, but it's what *we* have to do to survive. Maybe Jacob or whatever's in him *does* want to do good. But what good is there in taking people's faith and turning it into lies? What good is there in making them dependent on you? What fucking good is there in taking the body of a 10-year-old boy and wearing it like a suit?

That's why I have to get out of Promise, and why I have to tell the others what I know, no matter how crazy it sounds. That's why I'm going to meet some of them, and we're going to figure out what to do next.

We "hunters" think we know what the enemy is, but we don't know anything. All I know is that when I said it wasn't an angel, it didn't argue. It said, "Now *we* can see and hear again," and that means there may be more of them, maybe a lot more. I just keep thinking about the phrase, "Our name is Legion, for we are many."

I don't think I can look the other way. None of us can. We made that choice when we heard the call. Those people believe in him, but they don't know what they're dealing with. They don't understand, but we do, and we do what we have to.

I keep thinking that, after Jacob thanked me and asked for my help, after he healed people and performed miracles, after he restored faith to a community, after all he did, I may have to kill him. God help me.



J. M. S. 2007

INTRODUCTION

The enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels.

— Matthew 13:39

DEAL WITH THE DEVIL

Fallen angels. Forces of evil personified and borne up from Hell. The children of Satan that tempt us to sell our eternal souls. Demons, devils, dark lords. The followers of the Beast.

The idea — and fear — of utterly evil entities that seek to corrupt humanity is as old as humanity itself. Just as we often seek to explain our origins by imagining concepts of Supreme Beings, heavenly rewards and celestial benefactors, so do we call up images of malevolent entities that resist our creators and that seek to destroy us. The notions of gods, angels, demons and destroyers are part of humanity's collective unconscious, brought forth to explain ourselves and to give our existence meaning. Whether these icons are complete fabrications, results of our deepest desires to feel significant, or are the last remnants of knowledge that such celestials actually do exist, cultures across the world uphold these images. People live their lives under the belief that angelic forces protect them and demonic hordes seek to lay them low. Wars, schisms and trials have arisen over the fanatical desire to venerate one man's God and to defeat another man's Devil.

Ultimately, however, we can't know if Heaven and Hell exist, we can have only faith. There is no empirical proof of either, so we can only decide that they're genuine. It's a belief that can't be substantiated, a blind acceptance that angels and demons are real in our world.

In the World of Darkness, demons are real. They once traveled the length and breadth of the cosmos, fulfilling divine will and overseeing Creation. They were divine servants and were one with reality. But when humanity was born and left to fend for itself without knowledge of the universe, and the Heavenly Host was commanded not to interfere, the angels were torn. How could they love humanity yet allow mankind to suffer in ignorance and fear? Finally, some desperate celestials defied their edicts from Above and stood by humanity's side. The result was a war between Heaven and Earth, between the loyal and the rebellious. After millennia of struggle, the rebels lost. The Creator cast them into the Abyss where they lingered for ages, separated from reality. It's there that they cultivated a hatred for the Creator, the universe and for the humanity that they once sought to help.

And there the outcast remained. Only from time to time did an infernal spirit escape to Earth, summoned by

a corrupt or audacious wizard or cultist willing to make a pact. So the demons continued on, but they existed in a prison outside the universe, unable to affect any of the cosmic changes that they once performed on a whim.

But now something has changed. The gates of Hell have shifted and cracked. A horde of demons, devils and defilers has escaped and descended upon the Earth. After ages of bitterness and hatred, the infernal can now exact their revenge on the humanity that failed them. They can build a new kingdom of their own making. They can make Hell on Earth. They can bring about the end of the world... unless hunters can stop them.

Although the imbued grasp no more than anyone else about the true nature of devils, they are no longer allowed the luxury of wondering if the spirits exist. Demons are real and hunters see them. The chosen recognize the infernal for what they are — otherworldly beings that walk the Earth, that manipulate mankind for their own ends, that gather power and influence, and that might seek to bring about the end of Creation. Hunters have no more knowledge, skills or weapons to bring to bear against these hordes than they did against other creatures, but now the stakes of the calling have been raised to terrifying heights. At one time bloodsuckers, shapechangers and the walking dead threatened human lives. Now the denizens of the Pit threaten reality itself. What hope do these scattered, isolated and blessed few have against the very forces of destruction?

SHATTERING THE ILLUSION

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

Infernal also helps Storytellers understand how demons might respond to the hunter phenomenon and its possible threat. ("Possible," because how could a handful of awakened mortals be a threat now, against cosmic entities?) Storytellers can also find all kinds of story ideas throughout. Lies and schemes perpetrated by the Other Side might lead hunters to weak or raging

enemies that need to be dealt with — or lead to imbued self-discovery. Contact with the infernal might also lead the imbued into traps as demons further their own agendas at the expense of the chosen.

Hunter: The Infernal tells three stories about hunter and devil interaction, each told in two parts.

Chapter 1: Blind Among Enemies explores the sympathy that the imbued may feel for demons when the spirits are reborn into and are as confused about the world as hunters are.

Chapter 2: Strange Medicine shows the good that celestial beings returned to Earth may seek to do for humanity, now that they have been freed and given a second chance. Or is such "goodwill" all lies and deception?

Chapter 3: Confession plumbs the depths to which the infernal can insinuate themselves into the modern world, playing upon people's weaknesses and fears, luring them into pacts for any rewards that can be gained in this life.

Chapter 4: Exiled from Light is part two to "Blind Among Enemies" and reveals how quickly the damned can come into their own as they reclaim this world.

Chapter 5: False Hope continues "Strange Medicine" and shows how humanity and hunters can be turned against themselves by the guile of the fallen.

Chapter 6: Damnation completes the story begun in "Confession," portraying the lengths to which the imbued may have to go to in order to overcome devils and their minions — if such victories can be won at all.

Chapter 7: Rules and Storytelling is intended for Storytellers alone. It offers tips and guidance on how to understand and portray demons in your **Hunter** chronicle. This chapter (indeed, this whole book) operates under the tenets for depicting creatures explored in "Building Better Monsters" in the **Hunter Storytellers Handbook** (p. 47). That is, devils don't have to be raging imps or horned and hook-tailed caricatures to terrify hunters and their players. The infernal shown here are frightening for their craving for power and revenge, combined with their need for and abuse of humanity. They're terrifying for the temptation that they represent, inviting the imbued to stray from the path for the wealth, renown or love that all people crave. Devils are horrific not only for their unimaginable power and willingness to inflict harm, but also for their human demeanor and for the identification that the chosen can find with them. Demons are reminders of how easy it would be for hunters to become metaphorical monsters of their own kind.

Ultimately, this book is meant to allow you to capture the mood and feel of the damned as portrayed in **Demon: The Fallen**, without having to own that game. **Demon** certainly helps if you want to capture the breadth of devils' existence, society and machinations in your chronicle,

but it's not necessary. In fact, you could take all the information about the hellspawn presented here and cast them any way you like, with an origin, purpose and existence of your own creation. That way, they're your antagonists alone — nothing that players of other Storyteller games have ever seen before. It's your chronicle.

SOURCE MATERIALS

A lot of stuff is available about heroic people who deal with demons (usually in a manner that proves fatal for body and soul). We've tried to avoid silly or over-the-top sources. **Hunter** is about regular folks facing a suddenly monstrous world. They're scared, yet they do something about it anyway. We've tried to pick books and movies that emphasize such resolve and bravery — **Hunter's** themes.

Paradise Lost, by John Milton. Seventeenth-century poetry isn't most people's idea of light reading, but this classic is a must for its evocative, even sympathetic portrayal of Lucifer and his war against Heaven. Though his motives are driven more by jealousy than love for mankind, his defiant struggle against the Almighty is no less heroic because of it.

The Screwtape Letters, by C. S. Lewis. Presented as a collection of letters written by one demon to another, the book is an insightful commentary on temptation and faith in the divine.

In God We Trust: But Which One? by Judith Hayes. Hayes, a prominent atheist, makes the case that if there is a God He's not one worthy of our worship. For

Storytellers who want more depth for their demon antagonists, this book is a good start. It's humorous and thought provoking, but not for the easily offended.

Legion, by William Peter Blatty. Blatty's follow-up to *The Exorcist* is a great novel with a fascinating theory on the nature of evil, free will and the identity of Lucifer.

Music of Razors, by Cameron Rogers. Warring angels form the backstory to an urban fantasy. Of particular interest is the depiction of artifacts from before Lucifer's rebellion.

Needful Things, by Stephen King. King's story is a perfect example of a demon at work in a small town.

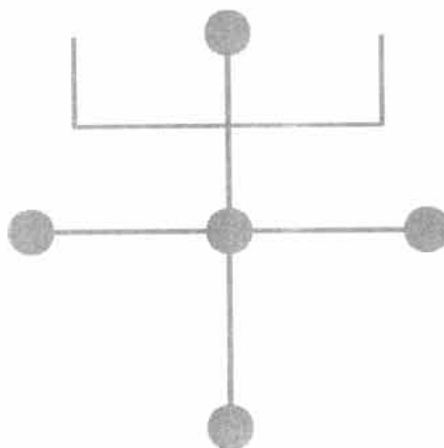
To Reign in Hell, by Steven Brust. Hard to find these days, but an excellent and darkly humorous story of Lucifer's rebellion.

American Gods, by Neil Gaiman. An evocative (and at times horrifying) tale of gods and their symbiotic relationships with mankind. An excellent story about the power of human belief.

The Devil's Advocate. Al Pacino's Lucifer is a perfect example of a devil lost in his own anger. His "look but don't touch" monologue near the end is classic.

Angel Heart. A creepy, atmospheric tale of dark desires and subtle corruption. Watch for Robert DeNiro's subtle, chilling performance as Louis Cypher.

American Gothic. This mid-90s TV show is a great model for how a demon in human form could infiltrate a community, maintain thralls and get away with murder. Additionally, Selena Coombs could well be a low-powered demon trying to change her ways.





CHAPTER 1: BLIND AMONG ENEMIES

By the roots of my hair some god got hold of me.
I sizzled in his blue volts like a desert prophet.

— "The Hanging Man," Sylvia Plath

And then the windows failed and then,
I could not see to see.

— "I heard a fly buzz when I died," Emily Dickinson

MISSION LOG

Date Code: Orion-five-sigma

I guess I still like poems but somehow I don't enjoy them as much as I used to. I started to copy all my favorite poems into one of my notebooks but I don't feel like that anymore. It's too much writing. I will put some verses in with my log entries instead, just so I don't completely forget them.

Well today it's one year that I've been in on the secret. And of all the people who I met on that first day, two are dead and one is, well I guess you could say brain dead. In fact, none of the others I met over the last year are still alive. Except maybe Mrs. Kramer, who I don't know what ever happened to. Sometimes I have nightmares that she comes back and she's a zombie. Can we become zombies? Need to design an experiment about that. What if one of us fell into the well with Experiment # 17? Maybe there would be two zombies in there the next day? Have to consider that a thought experiment. Can't actually do it unless I find a volunteer. No one to ask right now though. (NOTE: Post query on h-n for volunteer? Remember, got flamed last time.)

Uncle Pete sold that old computer I was using. Said he needed \$\$ for doctor bills. Have to keep making log

entries with school computers, or writing them down and typing them in. Not secure. Need to find another PC. Maybe ask Angie. Could do it while her mother is at work.

No messages for over three weeks now. Longest time ever. Not sure what to do. I wish Mr. Franklin was here. He'd be able to connect me with others. He always listened to my ideas. He convinced the others to listen to me too, like the time that people kept disappearing out by the quarry and we caught that guy down there. Everyone wanted to kill it, but I got them to let J. talk to it first, and we found out there were two other zombies and they were all working for that thing in the cave. I felt really good then like I was really helping out. Now all I do is sit around and sometimes answer things on email. I wish I could drive. Maybe I should teach myself. I bet I could figure it out.

Maybe I should try and join Dave O'Reilly's group. But Mr. Franklin always said they were bad news and I think he was right. Seems like they only have hitters in their group. Last week I stopped in town on the way home from school for a soda. I saw these people come into the Burger King and one had a mark written on his jacket. Maybe I should have said something but I was nervous. You got to be careful even with others who

know the secret. They had out of state plates on their car so I probably won't see them again. Just passing through. But maybe I should have gone up to them. I don't know. I have to do something. I'm part of the secret as much as anybody. I can't just sit around doing nothing. But by myself I can't really do much of anything. I can't even talk to anyone about it. This sucks.

Addendum: You know I just read over the last entry and I have to say that all this stuff about the secret and all really doesn't do the trick anymore. I guess I wanted to make myself think I was some kind of undercover secret agent or something but that stuff just doesn't fool me anymore. It's like what a little kid would say. I guess I always knew it was silly because I never talked that way to the others. Maybe I'm growing up or something. But from now on no more secret talk. It's just "us."

EXPERIMENTAL LOG

Date Code: Pisces-eleven-gamma

Experiment #17, continued

Objective: To determine the time a zombie can survive while in isolation.

Method: Single male zombie, identity unknown, was lured near the dry well in the field behind Weaver's Junkyard. After removing the well cover and covering the hole with a tarp I maneuvered the zombie so that it fell into the well. (See mission log, date code Cetus-twenty-three-kappa, and experimental log Cetus-three-iota for details.)

Results: Experiment 17 remains active and mobile after 33 days of captivity at the bottom of the well. Upon my approach, it immediately stands up and stares in my direction. It does not seem to react to the spotlight I shine on it. I retrieved the bucket of "food" I lowered to it last week (raw beef, chicken livers and those cow brains I got from the butcher's) and they were apparently untouched, though really bad after a week without refrigeration.

Its behavior patterns remain unchanged: It gives no response to my attempts to speak to it, but almost immediately it attempts to climb the wall of the well. As always, it is unable to do so.

Conclusions: Zombie does not seem to need food or water to exist, or perhaps only needs it once in a while. Zombie shows no sign of fatigue. Zombie's state of decomposition seems unchanged since Day 1. Zombie seems not to learn from past attempts to climb the walls or to change its routine during examination.

Future Projects: Have established that zombie is unaffected by toxic chemicals (bleach, fumigation bombs; see experimental log Draco-thirty-seven-alpha) and not responsive to music or religious items. Next test: physical trauma. Materials required: pellet gun, crossbow, hunting rifle. Maybe fireworks. Not sure yet how to acquire them.

To: J_Mattes1

From: M_Reese1

Re: Problem student?

Hey John,

Wanted to run this by you before I go to Hogan. I've got this kid in my class, you probably know him, Calvin Miller. Usually I barely notice him. Gets high Cs mostly, never says a word, just kind of there. Well today we're going over the Bill of Rights again, and I can't get anyone to name even one of the amendments. I was about to throw my desk at someone, when all a sudden Calvin lets out this bored sigh and starts rattling them off. And in more detail than I ever covered, complete with ratification dates and everything. I just kind of looked at him and some of the kids in the back snickered, and then the bell rang. So this got me curious. I look in the kid's file and did you know he had these incredible scores on the Frehlig-Myers tests a few years ago? Like gifted level. In fact he used to get straight A's and his file's full of commendations until a year ago. What happened? Shouldn't we be doing something for this kid?

To: M_Reese1

From: J_Mattes1

Re: Problem student?

Mel,

Glad you put me in the loop on this one. Whatever you do, don't go to Hogan about this. You'll just get on his shit list. Yeah, the Miller kid was a real bright penny once. But we don't have the resources to deal with a "gifted" student, and his guardians — aunt and uncle, I think — won't hear of sending him to any kind of private facility. Frankly, they're poor white trash who don't comprehend what they've got on their hands. I hear his mother is in the nuthouse. (They told him she's dead. How fucked up is that?) I don't know where the father is. As for the kid, he probably realized that acting like Einstein was irritating everyone around him so decided to coast through his classes until he can get out of this dump. I know that's what I'd do. Sure, the kid probably needs "nurturing," but he's not going get any from this district.

PERSONAL LOG

Date Code: Ursa-five-alpha

Today sucked. First Uncle Pete was too sick to drive me to school, so I took the bus. What a mistake that was. The Fritz brothers were sitting behind me and just wouldn't shut up. Why does everybody think they're so funny? Assholes. So I never heard of "TRL" or whatever. I know lots of things that would make them shit their pants. I wish I had one of those tricks that makes you get

really strong. Then I could teach them a lesson. Or maybe it wouldn't work on them anyway.

School is such a waste of time. Why do I go? I have to sit in a room full of monkeys who can't do a simple word problem without a half an hour explanation from Mrs. Lenahan. And the teachers probably don't even know the quadratic equation. Give me a break. Anyway, I can't skip school anytime soon without causing trouble cause I missed too many days last year. English class isn't that bad though. Miss Dwyer likes my poems a lot now that I'm keeping the zombie stuff out of them.

I thought Angie wasn't coming to school today because she wasn't on the bus, but then at assembly she was there. Her mom drove her. I could have gone with her if I knew!! She has this big black eye. It's funny how she's always bumping into things. She only got the cast off her wrist last week. So at lunch time Angie's eye started to bleed. Not her eye really, but the bruise, you know. So she had to go to the nurse. She didn't want to go because she said they might send her home. That doesn't make sense. I convinced her to go and I ended up having to eat lunch by myself.

I walked home and I was about to cross the field behind the junkyard when I saw some people there. Something about the way they were walking made me nervous. I turned on the secret sight, but they were clean. I took out the little binoculars from my book bag and looked at them from behind a bush. It turns out it was Dave O'Reilly and some of his guys. I don't know what they were looking for. If they found Experiment #17, they're sure to do something bad to it. And they'll have to wonder who put it there. I mean, it couldn't fall into a well and pull the cover over itself, right? I don't know if they'll make a connection to me, but if they do, that would be bad too. Is there some way I can move 17 before they find it? What if

HER EYES AND THE STARS

Her eyes and the stars
Silently waiting for me
How can I answer?

— "Untitled haiku #7," C.M.

Date Code: Ursa-five-alpha, continued

It was Angie knocking on the window. I snuck out of the house. Wasn't too hard since Uncle Pete's sick in his room and Aunt Viv was asleep in front of the TV. It's too bad Angie's trailer isn't across the way from ours, then we could signal each other right from our rooms.

Angie said she couldn't stay out long because her mother thought she was taking the garbage to the dumpster. I was afraid she'd want to go walking down Frame Road or something. I'm not too keen on going out of the park at night. It never bothered me before

INCIDENT REPORT

Marsha Hane, R.N.

John Quincy Middle School

Student: Angela Linnel

Homeroom: 5B

Summary: Angela Linnel was brought to the aid office at 11:53 complaining of pain and bleeding due to a contusion around her left eye. Examination showed the bruise was tender and contained a shallow laceration above the orbit that had reopened. Applied triple-a ointment and bandaged the wound, dispensed children's aspirin for the pain and advised her to ice the injury when she got home. Questioning revealed the child had sustained the injury by "tripping over a toy and hitting her head on a doorknob."

Recommendations: The injury could be consistent with the scenario she describes, but I do not believe so. The angle seems wrong and the bruise too large. While examining the eye, I noticed a large bruise on her left arm and another partially visible on her neck. Checking our records, it seems this child has suffered an unusual number of injuries over the past year. I think we should open an investigation.

Marsha Hane

MEL, THANKS FOR FORWARDING THIS, BUT YOU AND I BOTH KNOW KIDS GET BUMPS AND BRUISES ALL THE TIME. I'M NOT ABOUT TO LET THIS TURN INTO A WITCH-HUNT. PARENTING IS THE JOB OF PARENTS, NOT THE GOVERNMENT. LET'S NOT LET AN OVERZEALOUS NURSE BREAK UP A FAMILY JUST BECAUSE SHE THINKS SHE'S A DETECTIVE.

EVERETT HOGAN

but lately I think about the things that could be out there and I get nervous. Maybe it's because it's been too long since I've really seen any of the monsters. It's like when you haven't gone swimming for awhile and you end up staring at the water and wondering if you really want to dive in.

But Angie only wanted to walk as far as the pool, speaking of swimming. That pool always has a really bad smell. The manager's supposed to cover it at night so no little kids fall in, but he never does. Anyway, at least we were far enough away so we could hardly hear all the TVs blaring through people's windows. I hate that, all those different channels filling the air at once. It makes it hard to think.

I asked Angie how her eye was and she didn't want to talk about it. I guess she feels embarrassed that she's



always knocking into things. I told her not to be ashamed, she's really not all that clumsy. I mean, she doesn't look clumsy, she doesn't walk around all awkward. She walks really graceful, at least that's kind of what I tried to tell her, but it came out kind of jumbled up. She thought that was funny, I guess, because she kind of smiled. She didn't laugh, though, and come to think of it she seems kind of sad all the time lately. I recited a line from "I Knew A Woman" by Roethke and she seemed to like it.

We lied down on the concrete by the pool. The moon was out and it made a funny kind of light reflecting off the water. Since there was only one pole light there, and it was kind of flickery, we could see most of the stars and I showed her some of the constellations. That was when she asked me:

"Calvin, do you have a secret that you're afraid to tell and afraid not to tell?"

I wasn't sure what to say about that. I knew right away what she was talking about. I mean, Angie's known me for about as long as I can remember. She had to notice some of the strange things I've been doing. All the times I wasn't around, or had to go somewhere and didn't tell her where. And now she wanted me to tell her what was going on. I expected it at some point, but I had no idea what to do.

"Well," I said to her, "I guess everybody's got some kind of secret."

"Yeah," she said, "But what do you do about it? What if it's a secret that could get someone else in trouble?"

I really wanted to tell her, but I couldn't. Even if she believed me, knowing the truth would only be bad for her. I guess that's about the only thing that everyone touched by the Messengers agrees on.

I told her, "I think some secrets need to stay secret, because even if it makes you feel better to tell, it could mean someone else gets hurt."

She turned her head from looking at the sky and stared at me. Her eyes made me feel funny. I can't explain it. Then all of a sudden she sat up. "Oh my god," she yelled. "I have to get back! My mom will freak!" I watched her run around a corner. Then I laid back down again and looked at the sky. For some reason I decided to turn on the secret sight, just to see what would happen. Maybe the sky would be filled up with ghosts like on that Scrooge cartoon. But nothing changed. Just the same quiet stars, putting out light that finally reached our planet after traveling for millions and millions of years. For a second I thought I saw a kind of red star near Orion's belt, but then it was gone.

EXPERIMENTAL LOG

Experiment #23

Objective: To determine if I can use time sight to see my mother's last day of life.

BRENT COUNTY MILITIA**Meeting Minutes, 4/10**

Presiding: O'Reilly

Present: Jackson, Harper, O'Connor, Chambers, Balliet. Absent: Wong, Sterner. MIA: Cross

Reports

A. Recruitment. As planned, Harper spent a few days in Silar City discreetly exhibiting the soldier sign in appropriate locations. There were no overt responses. Chambers reports a new co-worker who seemed to recognize a code sign. He intends to follow up. Harper reports ongoing email correspondence with an experienced soldier willing to relocate temporarily should we require assistance.

B. Personnel. Still no contact from Cross, who has not been back to his apartment for 10 days now. Balliet, Harper and Jackson have volunteered to join Chambers to search the area near Hunsicker's Glen where Cross was last sighted. Jackson reports that Sterner remains incapacitated. [Meeting disrupted as Jackson and Harper argue about the circumstances leading to Sterner's injury. Order restored, meeting progresses.]

C. Enemy activity. Harper reports no activity at St. John's Cemetery, recommends scaling back surveillance to once weekly. Motion carried. Jackson reports no leads on missing rot from sortie of late March. Jackson remains convinced that the trail ended somewhere near Weaver's Scrapyard. Moved to continue searching. Motion passed.

Method: Einstein and others describe time as a dimension in the same sense as length, width or depth. Normally people can "see" into the past only in a limited way through memory (and not into the future at all). Several months ago the Messengers apparently granted me a way to look into the past apart from memory. Use of this ability on missions has proved that it yields true and accurate information, rather than being a hallucination or delusion. I intend to visit the hospital where my mother died and attempt to see her across a time distance of approximately 11 years. This will be the furthest distance into time I've attempted to date.

Results: I took the bus to Brent County Memorial and found the appropriate hospital room (third floor, room 337, Aunt Viv said). The room was not currently occupied. I entered the room unseen by hospital staff and attempted to activate my time sight. But nothing happened, no vision or tingly feeling or anything. I can't explain why in scientific terminology. It was just that something seemed to be missing. I kept trying but after awhile I felt like I was just playing a game, like what I was doing was a waste or something. I felt kind of empty inside.

Conclusion: No conclusions about the time sight can be drawn. Maybe I'll ask Aunt Viv if she's sure she doesn't have a picture of my mother. If I knew what she looked like, maybe that would help me try again.

PERSONAL LOG**Date Code: Capricorn-forty-one-omicron**

I didn't see Angie much yesterday. It was a gym day so we didn't have lunch at the same time, and I had too much stuff to do after school to look for her. Aunt Viv asked me to go to the store for some stuff, and Uncle Pete was away at a doctor's appointment or something so I had to walk to Granger's. The sun was going down by the time I got back. I passed Angie's trailer and I thought of knocking, but then I heard a lot of yelling inside. Angie's mom was really mad about something. I could hear Angie crying, too. I feel bad that she and her mom don't get along. Tomorrow on the way to school I'll show Angie the poems I wrote for Miss Dwyer's class. That would cheer her up, I bet.

(later)

I have to write this down now even though I'm really having trouble. My hands are shaking and it's kind of hard to breathe. I don't know why, it's not like I'm in any kind of danger or anything. But I guess I'm kind of upset. I was reading in bed, looking over the Emily Dickinson poems in *Great American Poets*. And I started to doze off a bit, you know, when your eyes start going all blurry. That's when the words on the page changed. It was a message, the first one in weeks. AN ANCIENT PRISONER IS FREE. Whenever I get a message, I always feel kind of dizzy for a moment, because I kind of hear it in my head at the same time I read the words, only the voice seems to be speaking in a different language than the words, which somehow I still understand, but it confuses me. When my head cleared I realized that my room was filled with colors: red, blue, red, blue, red, blue. I ran to my window and saw a police car parked two rows down, and then an ambulance shot past my window and turned the corner by the police car.

By the time I got my robe on over my pajamas and got outside, there were like 20 other people heading in the same direction. Behind me I heard Aunt Viv calling me to slow up and wait for her but I couldn't. I turned the corner and saw where the ambulance was parked. A police woman was out of her car and keeping people back. Everything was blinking in red and blue lights, on and off. I couldn't believe my eyes because the ambulance was stopped in front of Angie's house.

I worked my way back from the crowd and behind the trailer next to Angie's house, then snuck over to her back window. Their trailer is raised but I was able to see in by standing on a trashcan. I saw right through the kitchen and into the living room, where Angie was laying on her back on the carpet. Angie's mom was

standing over her with her hands pressed over her mouth. There was a dark stain all over the rug all around her, and even though the light was funny I knew it was blood. I saw Angie's face. Her head was tilted back and her eyes were rolled back in her head so that you could mainly see just the white part. I felt sick to my stomach and mad at the same time.

Then the ambulance guys blocked my view as they bent over her. I know they were helping her but I wanted to tell them to get away from her, not to touch her. I couldn't see what they were doing. By the time I ran around to the front of the trailer, they had her on a stretcher and were putting her in the ambulance. A whole crowd of people was standing around watching like it was some kind of performance. I hated them. Every ugly, ignorant one of them. They didn't care about Angie the way I did. They just wanted to see something exciting happen.

There's nothing I can do now. Aunt Viv says she'll call the hospital in the morning, and that right now all we can do is pray for Angie. I really, really hope she's okay. I'm scared that she won't come back. I don't know if I should pray to Jesus or the Messengers. I guess I could pray to both.

C:/RECOVEREDFILES/DOCUMENTS/ANGELA/DIARY/I__WAS__BORN

Dear Diary,

I was born today.

I know that doesn't make sense. People aren't like this when they are born. They are smaller, I think, and they cannot walk and talk. But still I know I was born today because all I remember is being in a dark, dark place for a very long time. And now I am in the light.

Dear Diary,

I have had some time to collect my thoughts. It is very confusing when you are born. I am going to write down the things that have happened and the things that I am sure of.

Things that happened:

1. I woke up on a bed with many things looking down on me. They were bigger than me and had these long parts of them that waved around like stalks with smaller stalks on the end of them. They had round things that looked at me and they made waves in the air that I felt in my head. I think this is when I was born.

2. I looked around and looked at my body and saw it was like their bodies, with long stalks that I could move around if I thought about it. The top of me, which is my head, felt funny.

3. One of the things said she is my Mother and said I would be all right. I tried to make sound in the air like they did and it was hard at first but then I remembered how to do it. I said "I want to go home," but I am not sure it was me who said it.

4. I was afraid but then things seemed to become all soft and I felt like I was going away. Then I was in another place with the Mother and we were moving in a little room with strange chairs and all glass in the front. Those are the words I think.

5. Now I am in somewhere else, on a bed that I remember from some time before, and the Mother is elsewhere. She said stay in your room and said that name again which I'm not sure is mine. In it I found this writing machine. You are supposed to write Dear Diary so that is what I did.

Things I am sure of:

1. Before I was born, the Mother hurt me and punished me by locking me in a dark closet forever. I was with other bad children in the closet but I don't know if they were real like me.

2. Now that I am born I must try and remember many things or the Mother will hurt me again.

3. The Mother has a name for me that I don't think is my real name, but I will pretend. I have another name, and that name has its own secret name.

4. I will not let the Mother put me in the closet anymore. If she tries I will hurt her.

WAKE TO SLEEP

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

I learn by going where I have to go.

— "The Waking," Theodore Roethke

Date Code: Cassiopeia-forty-seven-theta

Angie isn't in school today. When I got up this morning Aunt Viv said she forgot to call the hospital but she'd do it later, so I have to wait until after school to find out anything. Nobody at school is saying anything about it. I think the teachers figure she's out with a cold or something. Some of them didn't even notice she wasn't at her desk. I'm writing this at lunchtime and later I'll key it in to my computer.

I've been thinking about the message I got. I think it had something to do with what happened to Angie. It could be that there's a monster in the trailer park. I have to be real careful. I have to figure out what happened or someone else could get hurt. Those Fritz brothers are looking at me. I'll have to put away the notebook for now.

(later)

Angie is okay! I can't believe it. She came home this afternoon. When I got back from school I knocked on her door and there she was. Boy, what a relief. She has a bandage on her head and says it hurts a little but not too much. She says she'll probably go to school tomorrow. I talked to her for about an hour and told her all the things that happened in school today, like how Mrs. Lenahan

called Joey Dillon clueless and principal Hogan gave a boring speech about traffic safety.

Angie acted kind of funny. A lot of times I had to say things twice or tell her who someone was. Now that I think about it, she sort of acted like she didn't recognize me when she first opened the door. Probably she had a concussion, which I think can leave you kind of disoriented for awhile (I can't remember what I did with that medical textbook I used to have but I'm pretty sure that's how it goes). By the time I left, though, she seemed pretty much normal and she even laughed a couple of times. Then we heard her mother's car driving up, so I had to sneak out the back window.

Now about the mission. I need to get Angie to tell me exactly what happened to her. It's my best chance of figuring out what happened. What kind of monster we're dealing with. Her mother might have seen something too, but I don't know how I could get her to tell. I'll have to think about that. But tomorrow I'll talk to Angie about it. I know that a lot of times people can't really remember what happened when they see a monster. Mr. Franklin said once that monsters have ways of erasing people's memories. My theory is that people just get scared. I've read that soldiers and other people in combat or in really terrible situations can black out and have a kind of amnesia, and I think that happens to normal people when they see a ghost or something like that. Anyway, it's tricky but maybe Angie can tell me something that will give me a clue.

(later)

Okay, I have some important data now.

I was having trouble sleeping. I kept hearing a noise outside and thinking about some kind of monster being in the park, maybe nearby. And that made me think of the time Mr. Franklin and me and Mr. Merlo followed a zombie into that burned down house in Ferly's Corner and it was hiding in the closet and almost got me. Mr. Merlo knocked off its head and it still tried to grab me. That was the last time they let me come with them on a mission. And then I started thinking about experiment #17, out there in the dark, down in the hole. If it ever gets out I have a feeling it will find me wherever I am. I think maybe keeping that thing wasn't such a good idea. I'll bet it hates me now. What if it gets out? I have to do something about that.

Anyway, this was all keeping me awake so I took out my notebook and started writing. That makes me feel better. I've been working on a long poem about this woman who dies and comes back to life years later and can only stay alive as long as one of her children is still living so she secretly protects them from murderers and stuff. I was writing this:

Moonlight surrounded her like water
She moved silently across the sky

She followed the trail of her daughter
She reflected death in her eye
Her voice was less than a whisper
But all who hear must obey:

LOOK BACKWARD TO THE TRUTH

I didn't even realize I was writing that last line until I had done it! And I realized right away what the Messengers were saying. I guess it's been too long since I've been working on an active case otherwise I would have thought about it. If I used my time sight, I might be able to see for myself what happened to Angie. I decided it would be best to try right away, because the more time goes by the harder it is to see. At least that's how it seems to me.

So I snuck out the door. It was after midnight so Aunt Viv and Uncle Pete were asleep. Uncle Pete doesn't snore half as loud as he used to, I noticed.

When I got outside I was kind of surprised by how I felt. I was all nervous. I haven't gone out late at night in a real long time. It's not so easy anymore. It creeps me out. I was glad I didn't have to leave the park.

There was nothing going on around Angie's trailer. All the lights were out and even her neighbors weren't watching TV or anything. Anybody with half a brain can learn to pick a lock. All you need is the right tools and some practice. I was very quiet when I went into their living room. It was kind of dark but the shades were up and there was some light from the moon and light poles.

Then I squeezed my eye shut in that way, opened them, and I knew right away that the time vision was working.

The room got light and I saw Angie and her mother. Her mom was yelling but I couldn't hear (even though I tried to). She was yelling and pointing at the closet in the far end of the room. Angie was standing in front of the closet and shaking her head. Her mother yelled again and Angie stomped her foot.

Angie's mom walked across the room with a real mad look on her face and grabbed Angie's arm. She pulled and it looked like she was trying to drag Angie to the closet, but Angie wouldn't go. They were both screaming now and it was weird not to be able to hear it. From her lips I think Angie was yelling "no."

That was when Angie's mom hit her. She hit her. I didn't want to look at it but I was so surprised I couldn't turn away. It wasn't like you see some mom slap her kid at the grocery store. I mean, Angie's mom really punched her, like a man would punch somebody, right in the jaw and I swear I could hear the crack. Angie dropped to her knees. Her mother was still holding her arm and

It's hard to write this.



Angie's mom kept hitting her. Then she shoved Angie to the floor and kicked her, right in the ribs.

At that point something changed. Something about the light in the room, it seemed to get a little darker. Then I thought I saw a shape out of the corner of my eye. When I looked at it, it was mostly transparent and hard to make out, but if I let myself see it kind of from the side of my eyes, it looked a little darker, like a cloud of fog that was hovering near the ceiling. Then I looked toward Angie and her mother. They didn't react to the shape.

Angie's mom was dragging her across the carpet toward the closet.

That bitch. I know that's not a nice word and all but, I wanted to kill her then. I tried not to get too mad because I was afraid it would break the vision, but I was madder than I have ever been.

Angie was trying to hold onto something, anything, while her mother pulled on her arm and dragged her across the floor. Then Angie's leg kind of kicked out and her foot knocked against her mother's calf. That must have really hurt her because she let go of Angie and rubbed the spot where she got kicked. Angie started to crawl away. Her mother walked over to her and grabbed her by the shoulders and lifted her up. And then she kind of threw, kind of pushed her and Angie fell and her head knocked really hard against the coffee table.

Blood spilled out all over the carpet. Then, really fast, the cloudy shape moved into the room and flew over to where Angie was lying. Angie's mom was backing away but I couldn't tell if she saw the cloud or not. The cloud seemed to be getting darker. It bent over Angie and it looked kind of like a person, tall and thin with something sticking out of its back. One long arm touched Angie's head and another touched her chest like where the heart is. And the cloud kind of melted into Angie and was gone.

And then I was standing in the dark empty room again.

I think the adrenaline of it all is finally wearing off. I have to think about all this tomorrow. But one thing seems clear. I think Angie is possessed by a ghost.

QUAVERING

A quavering cry. Screech-Owl?

Or one of them?

— "Night, Death, Mississippi," Robert Hayden

Date Code: Cygnus-three-theta

Today I visited Angie and things are definitely not normal. First of all, it was 11:00 in the morning and Angie was sitting on the couch eating ice cream and watching cartoons. Angie's mom never has any ice cream in their house and she sure doesn't let her eat any sweets before lunch. Plus Saturday morning is usually when Angie has

Dear Jackass,

I'm tired of playing this game, Jack. It's been six months of excuses and lies and still not one cent from you. Well no more. You'll be hearing from my lawyer, you fucking asshole, and I hope you're ready to spend some time in jail with other deadbeat shitheads like you.

I'm not interested in your sob stories about how hard it is to sell toilets or whatever the hell it is you're hawking these days. Nothing is as hard as trying to raise a 12 year old girl alone. You remember your daughter Angie, don't you? Do you even remember knocking me up? If you think I'm going to spend the rest of my life slaving away, working double shifts and living in this shithole trailer park, forget it. I expect you to do your part. I can't handle this kid myself anymore. She's disrespectful and I don't have the energy. Every time I look at her I see your eyes and your face and I remember how much I hate your guts.

You start sending the child support checks, Jack, and then you get your ass out here and take her to live with you for awhile. Otherwise my lawyers will take away everything you've got and leave you out on the street.

Joan

to do a lot of chores and clean up the trailer and stuff like that. But when I got there, there's Angie on the couch and her mother in the kitchen washing dishes and wiping off the table and stuff. I thought at least Angie's mother would make us go outside because she doesn't usually like people in her trailer, but she didn't say anything the whole time I was there.

The first thing I did when I sat down was turn on the secret sight and look at Angie. I guess part of me was hoping she would look okay, but there is no doubt now, she was wrong looking. I remember one time there was an old lady living at the senior home downtown and Mr. Franklin found out she had a ghost in her. I only saw her once and you could see there was like another person inside her. You could even see what the ghost looked like, kind of though it was confusing because you were looking at the person at the same time. But Angie wasn't like that, not exactly. With the secret sight, you could barely see Angie at all. It was like she faded away almost completely. And in her place was something else.

What I saw looked kind of like a tall lady, with long thick hair and glowing eyes. She was holding a candle in

one hand and for a second it almost looked like she was on fire. Then there was a kind of waviness in the air and all I could see was this bright light where the spirit had been and I couldn't see Angie at all. I turned off the sight so Angie would look normal again. She didn't seem to notice that I was looking at her funny.

Angie's head wasn't bandaged anymore. That was when I realized that her black eye was completely gone. Now that I think about it, her eye was normal when I saw her yesterday, even though it was so swollen she could barely open it just a few days ago. The spirit must have taken care of it. This could be a good sign, that it's not a malicious kind of ghost. Or it could be that it just wants to be in a body that's healthy.

After we talked a little bit about the cartoon I started to get serious. (You know, I never knew they had such a big TV because Angie's mom never let us watch it when I was over before.) Angie's mom had gone out of the kitchen into the back, and I was glad because when I looked at her I kept thinking about what she'd done to Angie. I talked kind of quietly so she wouldn't hear us if she came back in the room.

I asked, "How are you feeling?"

She tilted her head kind of funny and said, "I'm feeling just fine, Calvin. You asked me that when you came in."

"Oh yeah." (She was right, I forgot.) "Angie," I said, "do you feel any different since you came back from the hospital?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, do you feel like there's" (and then I had to think about how to say it) "like there's someone with you?"

"With me?" She was twisting her hair around one finger.

"You know. Someone else, maybe in your head, or maybe," and I had to whisper this part, I don't know why, "in your body."

She seemed to take the question very seriously. She thought about it for a long time. Then said, "There's nobody here but me, Calvin. Nobody else."

I wanted to ask more questions, but her mom came in. "Honey," she said, in a funny voice, "I think I'd like to go meet Betty and Lorie for lunch."

"Oh," Angie said, "but I wanted you to make lunch for Calvin and me."

Her mom didn't say anything.

"Mother." Angie said, very quietly and kind of meanly. "Calvin and me would like our lunch now. We'll have tuna sandwiches and chips, and soda. Please."

Angie's mom took kind of a step to the door. It almost looked like she was going to run. But then she just turned and walked to the kitchen and started messing

with plates and stuff. She made us our lunch just like Angie asked. Then Angie made her hang around and do stuff around the house, like she told her to clean up the junk on the coffee table, and made her take out the garbage and even told her to clean Angie's room. Angie always said "Please do this" or "Will you do that" very polite, but whatever she asked her mom did it. I couldn't believe it. Anyway, with her mom always in and out I couldn't really talk to Angie anymore about what was going on. I didn't want to tell Angie to send her away because then Angie or the spirit might get suspicious. At about 4:00, I knew I had to get to the drug store to pick up some medicine for Uncle Pete, and it's a long walk, so I told Angie I had to go.

So here's what I figure so far:

Angie is possessed by a spirit or something like that.

I can't tell yet the spirit's intentions. The good thing is that Angie's injuries are gone and the spirit doesn't seem to be hurting her. But I have to find out why it's here. What it wants.

Angie still seems to be acting kind of spaced out. Sometimes she talks like she's almost normal but other times she's not all there. Her memory seems to go in and out. Like she couldn't remember the name of the cartoon we were watching even though we've seen it a hundred times.

Angie doesn't seem to know she's possessed. Either the spirit is completely hidden from her awareness, or it has total control and is only pretending not to know. I can't tell. Usually I feel like I'm talking to the same old Angie, only it's like she's sick or confused or something, but sometimes it seems like she's a whole other person. Maybe they're fighting for control.

Something's going on with Angie and her mother. It could be that Angie's mom is just feeling scared and guilty after what happened, so she's doing whatever Angie wants. Or maybe the spirit is controlling her somehow.

I'll try to talk with Angie again tomorrow, hopefully somewhere we won't be disturbed. If I can make contact with the spirit I bet I can learn a lot from it. This could be a rare opportunity. The spirit could be trapped in there the way Experiment 17 is trapped in the well, and maybe I can get some information for helping it out. It could turn out to be the best experiment yet.

C:/RECOVEREDFILES/DOCUMENTS/ANGELA/DIARY/I'M__REMEMBERING

Dear Diary,

I'm remembering things more and more. It is a funny kind of remembering. If I try to not concentrate on what I am doing, then I am better at knowing how to do it. That is how I've been writing down these words. I just don't think about how my hands move, I just let them do it.

In this way I have remembered many things. I remembered that the outer parts of my body are not part

of me at all. They are clothing and must be taken off and replaced with other clothing. And I remembered that the empty feeling in my middle means it is time to eat things. I like eating. Before I was born there was nothing for us to eat. In the Closet I mean. So now I am enjoying the eating.

I am staying in a small place, so much bigger than the Closet, with the Mother. She calls me Angie. I remember that is the name for part of me. But I have another name and that is Aya. I am not sure if those are the right letters because no one has put that name into a word before. Sometimes I feel like Aya is partly asleep and Angie is who I am. That is when I remember things best. Other times it is Aya who is me and Angie is in a safe place somewhere else until I need her. Aya feels like she is not in the right place and wants to leave this little house. Aya is very angry and Angie is very sad.

There is a thing, a boy called Calvin who comes and talks to me. I have known this boy for a long time, but not for very long at all. I knew him before I was born, but he was not in the Closet, so I am not sure how I know him. If I do not try to think about it, then I remember being with him many times and I feel good when I am with him. He is Angie's friend but Aya is not sure about him. I do like to be around him though. I think he makes me feel like a time long, long ago, before I was born and even before I was in the Closet, if there was really a time of that.

The Mother is afraid of me. She wanted to hurt me, but I made myself too strong for her. I pushed her down and then I squeezed her hand. I told her that she must do what I tell her or she will be punished. After that she was very nice to me and will do what I say. I want to make her hurt very, very much for putting me in the Closet but it is not time for that yet.

HER HANDS

Her hands are **around** at my throat: the first night I dreamed of death.

His eyes are **rotting**-rotted away: the **next** second night I dreamed of dust.

A swarm of voices: The third night I dreamed of delusion.

Silence: The fourth night I dreamed of devastation.

— "Seven Dreams," C.M.

EXPERIMENTAL LOG

Date Code: Pisces-eleven-epsilon

Experiment #27 (initial)

Objective: To establish communication with a spirit possessing a human host.

Method: I took the subject, Angela Linnel, over by the pool at the far end of the Meadow Creek Mobile Home Park. Because of the poor upkeep of the pool, lack

of lifeguard and unpleasant odor, there was no one in attendance, despite the warm May weather. We sat comfortably and, with the subject's agreement, I recorded our conversation. The following is a transcript, edited for clarity.

Results: Transcript:

CM: Okay, Angie, we're recording. Thank you for letting me tape you.

AL: That's okay Calvin. You say this thing will make a copy of our voices?

CM: That's right. It's a tape recorder. Do you remember seeing it before?

AL: (Pause). Yes, I remember candles burning and people singing.

CM: Right. I got it for my birthday. Can you remember recording your voice on it before?

AL: No, I don't think so.

CM: Okay. [Note: Two years ago Angie and I recorded an entire comic book on tape, with each of us taking different parts, like in a play. I will attempt to find that tape and play it for her to see if it triggers her memory. C.M.] Okay, Angie, can I ask you some questions?

AL: Sure. We don't have to go in the water, do we, Calvin?

CM: That's a funny thing to ask. Of course not. I hate this stupid pool.

AL: Me too. I hate this stupid pool.

CM: Angie, can you remember anything about the night you went to the hospital?

AL: Hospital? I don't know what that is.

CM: Uh, the place where the doctors and nurses were? You went there after your accident?

AL: Oh, hospital. I was born there.

CM: Right, I guess. Do you know why they brought you to the hospital?

AL: No.

CM: Do you remember, uh, the night that your mother, uh, she hurt you? You hit your head?

AL: No, my mother would never do that, Calvin. Why would you say that? (Voice tearful).

CM: Angie—

AL: (voice steady) Mother put me in the closet.

CM: You mean she tried to put you in the closet?

AL: We were bad children and mother made us go into the closet.

CM: Can you tell me who 'we' is? Who else was in the closet? Was someone else in the closet with you?

AL: All the bad children went in the closet. For not listening. For fighting. In the closet for a long, long time.

CM: Fighting? Fighting who?

AL: The good children. The children who listened.

CM: Okay, can you tell me who I'm talking too? What's your name?

AL: I, uh (pause)

CM: Go ahead.

AL: I, uh (Another long pause. I waited to make sure I wasn't interrupting but she didn't continue.)

CM: Okay. Can you tell me why you're here? What it is you want?

AL: I want to go home but I don't know where that is.

CM: You want to go home? To who's home? Angie's home?

AL: I don't know. The thought just came into my head.

CM: Can you tell me when you were born?

AL: Three days ago.

CM: (Pause.) Can you tell me where you grew up?

AL: You know that, Calvin. I grew up around the corner from you. (giggles)

CM: Is this Angie talking?

AL: Angie, I, what's the difference?

At this point the experiment was interrupted. I'll explain about that in the personal log since it's outside the parameters of the experiment.

Conclusion: Things did not go as expected at all. I thought I'd be dealing with two different personalities, Angie and the spirit. I thought the big problem would be getting the spirit to talk to me. Instead the two personalities seem all jumbled together and I can't tell who I'm talking to. Maybe it was the spirit the whole time, trying to confuse me. I've never spoken with a possessing spirit before so I have nothing to compare it to. It's very frustrating. I think I may have to find a spirit talker to help.

PERSONAL LOG

Date Code: Pisces-eleven-epsilon

My interview with Angie and the spirit didn't go the way I'd hoped (see experimental log). But the worst part of it was when toward the end when we got interrupted. What happened was, I was asking questions and then something hit me. It was a rock or something. I turned around and there were Mike and Jimmy Fritz, standing on the other side of that little fence by the road. They were both laughing and then they climbed over the fence and came toward us.

They started yelling things like, "Hey, look at the babies at their baby pool," and "Eww, I wish I lived in a trailer park so I never had to take a bath," and junk like that. The tape recorder was still running and here's a transcript of what happened:

MF: Hey, Jimmy, get a load of these dirty shit-eaters.

JF: Yeah, they stink like shit. Maybe they need a bath.

CM: You're trespassing. You don't belong here. Why don't you get lost?

MF: Sure, we'll get lost, right after we throw you and your girlfriend *in the pool*.

JF: You get the girl, Mikey. I'll push this fag in.

CM: You don't scare me. Come on, Angie, let's go.

JF: (high voice) Oooh, come on Angie, let's go. Let's go somewhere and *you can suck me off!*

MF: (Laughs)

AL: Go away.

MF:/JF: (Can't make out what they're saying, but they stop laughing immediately and kind of gasp.)

AL: Go away!

MF: Jimmy, what, what the fuck?

JF: (sobbing) Let's get out of here! We have to get out of here!

At that point they two of them took off, running for the fence and climbing over it fast. I didn't see anything happen. There was no visible effect, but their whole behavior changed *when Angie spoke*. At the time her voice had a very strange, creepy kind of echo to it and I felt the hairs on my arms stand up (but that doesn't seem to come through on the recording). I should add that Angie walked toward them before she spoke so that I was behind her. These factors make me think that it was something in her voice that made

them run rather than some kind of mind control thing. But that's just a theory.

It all happened so fast that I couldn't really react to what was going on. I didn't even get to enjoy seeing those two *jerks afraid and running*, because I was just so surprised. But even though they deserved what they got, the incident proves that the spirit inside Angie can be dangerous. I need to remember not to underestimate her. Or it.

MISSION LOG

Date Code: Sagittarius fifty-one-eta

Lots to write about tonight.

First off, Angie's back in school. Today was her first day back. She seemed pretty okay. Not normal exactly but I don't think anybody but me could tell any difference.

To: dickinson373

From: crosstitch223

Re: Re: Can you talk to ghosts?

Hello, I saw your post on Triage and I think I can help you. I'm not in your part of the country, but I can get there fairly easily. I'm willing to travel. Email me directly and let's work out the details.



Second, the Fritz brothers are dead. I noticed they weren't at assembly this morning, and then at lunch-time I heard people talking. Then after school I looked in the paper and read about it. Mike and Jim and their parents were found in their car on the side of Rt. 11 and the car was on fire. They were all killed, burned to death. The article didn't say how the fire started exactly, just that they were investigating it and all the usual stuff. After a while you just get to recognize when one of these newspaper stories has more than meets the eye. I mean, Angie must have had something to do with it right? They threaten her and then a few hours later they're dead from a freak accident, and that's supposed to be a coincidence?

I supposed it could be. I mean statistics show that wild coincidences happen all the time. Scientifically, just because two things happen in conjunction doesn't mean there's a cause and effect. But I don't know. I supposed I could go to the spot and try to look with my time vision. But I don't think I want to see it, see all those bodies burning. I'm trying to think of a way to ask Angie about it, but on the other hand do I really want to know?

I have to know, though. It's my mission.

The other thing to report is, I managed to get in touch with someone on h-net who's had some experience with people that are possessed. We emailed back and forth for a few days, I still don't have a PC at home but as soon as Uncle Pete is feeling better I'll start talking to him about getting one, maybe a used one, just enough

for me to go online. But anyway, this other hunter said she'll come out and talk to Angie and try to help us. We're going to meet up on Saturday.

The more I think about it, the more nervous I am. Meeting another hunter, I mean. She seemed nice enough on the emails but you never know. Maybe she's lying and is one of those people who hates ghosts and spirits. What if she tries to kill Angie? Or what if she tries to push me around? Some of these guys are really nuts and others just aren't good people. I won't be able to sleep too well worrying about it.

Also something kind of disturbing came up when we were emailing each other. This hunter asked some questions about what I wanted her to do and I told her and gave her some details about the situation (I didn't mention anything about what happened to the Fritz's). And then she kind of wrote back and sort of yelled at me. Well, not yelled but was a little mad I think. She told me that I was talking too much about "questioning the spirit" and "learning about it," and how in all my emails I never said anything about actually helping either the spirit or Angie. And I read about it and she is right about that. I guess I was caught up in trying to figure out why this spirit is around. And I've never communicated with a ghost before. They must know so many things we don't and could maybe answer so many questions. It just seems like an opportunity if I handle it right. But of course I have to think about Angie, to help her. That has to be the first priority. I have to keep reminding myself of that.



DWARD SIK
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CHAPTER 2: STRANGE MEDICINE

Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.

— 1 Timothy 3:7

IN THE END

From the personal journal of Anna Gray.

How little we know about those we trust.

It was amazing, in a frightening sort of way, to find out just how much Eric had recorded. It just reinforced how little I really knew about the man I had trusted with my life. We all knew he was a bit paranoid, but I think we all figured it came with the territory. None of us had any idea that something like this was going on. He had tapes going as far back as five years, each with the time labeled and the people who appeared on them. Everything from "date with Carolyn" to "phone call to admissions office" to our group's first meeting, after the incident at the hotel. He also had transcripts, some written by hand, some printed out from a computer. From the looks of it, he saw our new life as just another thing to catalog and record.

Peter and I sorted through them all and kept the transcripts of our meetings. We burned the others and all the tapes on the grill out back. At first Peter had wanted to throw in our own transcripts, but I just couldn't. We can't afford to throw away any information we gain, even though it's painful to look at now. It all started out as a way to keep the police

from learning what really happened that night, but I think as time goes by I've put this timeline together for my own peace of mind.

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE

Transcript of Apartment Meeting 6/18

E: [Sounds of shuffling, low talking] The door's locked. I think we can start now.

P: Where's your mother, Eric?

E: A neighbor is taking care of her tonight. I told him I was having some friends over to watch the game, so we have the place to ourselves.

M: Is she feeling better?

E: In and out. They have her on some new medication that makes her pretty drowsy, but it's better than the nausea she had with the last stuff.

S: Sorry to interrupt, but I think we should get down to business. I know this is a few days early for our meeting, but Eric and I ran across something yesterday that we feel everyone needs to hear.

A: What happened?

S: Do you mind if I tell them?

E: Go ahead.

S: Eric and I went to a few of the bookstores on the strip in New Hope, trying to find anything about the spirit we encountered last week. All of a sudden I blinked and my vision just snapped into focus, if

you know what I mean. I didn't do it on purpose, so I was afraid something bad was around.

P: Where were you?

S: At a table outside a restaurant across the street from Positive Loop. It's the little occult shop by the ice cream store.

P: Ok, I know where you mean.

S: I looked around. I think what triggered it was an older man who was walking by. I couldn't place what was wrong with him right then, just that he was strange somehow. So I took a closer look, and, well, I don't know how else to describe it, but it was as if there was something hiding in him. Something that wasn't supposed to be there.

M: Like a ghost?

S: No, I don't think so, or at least if it was it wasn't like anything I've ever seen before. There was no other person on him or anything. It just sort of seemed centered on his chest. It... it... [sounds of a pen scratching on paper] here, this is about what it looked like.

A: So it was kind of a... cloud?

S: More or less.

P: What did he look like, aside from this... thing?

S: You're better with those kinds of details, Eric.

E: Late 30s or early 40s, polo shirt, khaki slacks, slightly receding brown hair, new sunglasses, maybe five-ten, one-seventy-five. Cellular-phone holder on his belt and a gold watch on his right wrist. At one

point, he took out a key chain with a BMW logo on it, and then wrote a check with an expensive-looking pen. Left-handed.

A: You remember all that?

E: Once upon a time, I was thinking about becoming a cop after graduation. Now that I've seen some of the things that wear badges, I'm glad it didn't work out that way.

M: So, what exactly did this guy do?

S: As I watched him, the *cloud* seemed to breathe in time with him, like it was part of his lungs almost. Sometimes little wisps of smoke came out of his mouth. Nobody on the street seemed to notice, so I figure it was something that would appear only to us. I got Eric's attention as quietly as possible, so he could see, too. I guess Eric couldn't make out the shape as well as I could, but we both agreed that it deserved more attention.

E: We waited until he left the store, and then started following him from a safe distance. There were enough people around to hide us. He didn't seem especially cautious. He seemed to be out shopping like anyone else. He stopped at two stores, a Thai restaurant, and finally one of those natural remedy places.

P: What are the names of the places he stopped at?

E: I've got them here, if you want to take a look. The only unusual thing about it all was that he seemed a little too well dressed for the places he was going. He looked



perfectly comfortable, though, even greeting a few of the clerks like he knew them. I'd guess a former hippie-type who's trying to hold onto his roots, or maybe a mid-life crisis, but that's based more on the nature of the town than anything else.

S: I'd agree more with the former, but we're starting to stray from the point. What bothered us even more is while we were following him, I saw three people who were strange in the same way. [Muttered voices] Sorry. I know that sounds incredible, especially in broad daylight, but here's what we managed to find out: The first was working in a bookstore the guy went into. As soon as we went in, I realized that the man behind the counter had the same thing on him. The two of them seemed to know each other well. Just casual conversation, though. When our first subject left, Eric followed him while I bought a map and struck up a conversation. His name was Michael. He was co-owner of the store and a local. That's all I could get without attracting attention.

E: While Sean was still inside, I saw another person who seemed wrong, just passing by on the opposite side of street. Young woman, maybe mid-20s, black clothes, dyed-black hair, lots of silver jewelry and piercings. If she knew the first guy, she didn't show it when they passed each other. I couldn't tell if she had the same thing on her or not, but at that point everything was starting to set off alarms. I almost ditched the first guy to find out what she was. Lucky for us, she met up with a group of other kids and stood and talked, or Sean never would've gotten a chance to have a look at her.

S: I saw the cloud clinging to her, too. Eric's right. Things weren't just suspicious anymore. They were threatening.

M: What do you mean?

S: Too many people with the same condition, appearing in the same place in the middle of the day. It was all too coincidental. I was worried that we stumbled into some kind of nest or breeding ground.

E: Like *Village of the Damned* or something.

S: Well... the same idea, I guess. But it gets worse. After spotting the girl, we wondered if we should keep watching or come back for help. We decided to keep going to see how far it reached and followed the first subject. After dinner, he headed uphill, crossed over the bridge and went down a staircase to one of those stores right over the canal. An herbal medicine place.

P: [Paper rustling] The Tribal Apothecary, then?

S: Yeah. There weren't as many people around and we were afraid we'd get caught if we went in, too. We decided that Eric would hang back and keep watch while I pretended to window-shop next door. The man running the health store was one of them, too, but different from everyone else. Different from anything I've ever seen before. I don't know how to

describe it. A few times it looked like its body moved just out of sync with everything around it, like it took some extra effort to move. In the light I could see that it was surrounded in the smoke that clung to the others. I can't say for sure but... it looked like it had wings.

M: Oh my God. Oh my God.

[Strained breathing, confused conversation and sounds of an inhaler being used]

A: It's ok, sweetie. Don't worry, you'll be ok. Shh, relax. Don't worry, you'll be fine.

P: Melissa, are you all right? What happened?

M: I'm fine. [Deep gulping breaths] Sometimes when I'm under stress, it triggers an attack. The last couple of days have been pretty hectic at work. I guess this was just a little too much all together. I'm fine. Keep going, Sean.

S: You sure? Ok.... The guy behind the counter talked to our subject — very friendly-like — while they did some business.

P: [Paper rustling] Did you get his name?

S: John Blackburn. At least, that's what the sign on the door said. I heard the customer call the man behind the counter "John" as he walked in, so I assume he's the owner.

P: [Sounds of pen writing] Keep going.

S: From the look of it, they'd known each other for a while. It was hard to believe, watching the guy stand there and talk with something so obviously wrong, as if nothing was the matter. They must have been pretty absorbed in their conversation, because I'm sure I would have been easy to spot at that point, staring in the window.

Finally, I noticed that the smoke wasn't just coming from those two. It looked like some of the medicine for sale was affected the same way. I know it sounds bizarre, but—

A: Wait a minute. You're saying that the *medicine* was wrong? How is that possible?

S: I don't know, but I swear that's what I saw. I looked away and back again, and it still looked the same, so I don't think it was me. Most of the stuff in the store looked normal, but there was one row by the counter that was surrounded in smoke. The man we were following bought a bottle. It looked like he was about to leave, so I headed into the shop next door. After a couple minutes, Eric and I decided we needed to talk to the rest of you before we went any further.

So here we are. Aside from the notes from Eric, that's all we were able to find out. The question is: What are we going to do?

A: Well, I think that before we even consider what we need to do, we have to talk about what all this might be. Are you sure you got a good look, Sean? I don't mean to second-guess you, but I just want to be sure.

S: No, that's ok. I understand. If our positions were reversed, I'm sure I'd do the same. I was able to get a pretty good look at all of them.

E: Except for one thing. Maybe you're not willing to say it, Sean, but that medicine place.... There was something going on there. Even I could feel it.

P: What do you mean?

E: It's hard to say exactly.... I know that a lot of the stuff we see is pretty freaky, but this place was worse. Bad in a way you just *know*. Evil.

M: You know I hate it when you say things like that. How can we possibly know if any of these things are "evil"? We barely know what we're dealing with, let alone where these things come from—

E: Look, I'm only saying that—

M: Let me finish, please! I'm not arguing with what you saw. I'm just trying to remind everyone that jumping to conclusions like "good" or "evil" doesn't do us any favors.

E: I know you hate the idea that some things might be too far gone, but that's the feeling I got, ok? Not just wrong, but *evil*.

S: That's enough, both of you.

M: Like hell it is. Why does everything have to boil down to black and white for you, Eric? Can't it be enough to see that it might just be a person who needs help?

A: Melissa...

M: It's ok, I'm not going to be stubborn about it. I'm just saying that we shouldn't throw around words like "evil" until we're absolutely certain we've met someone beyond hope. And I haven't seen anything like that yet.

S: Fine. Can we all agree to drop the "e" word until we've looked closer? Good. Then let's get back to the original question: What do we do? We've got at least three otherwise ordinary seeming people, one crea... uh, entity... and even objects that seem affected.

P: Did you see any sign that the people were controlled somehow?

S: Not that I could tell, but I wouldn't rule it out.

A: Was there anyone else in the store?

S: No, it's pretty small. It looks like it might just be this thing, and maybe some hired help, but that's all. I wrote down the hours.

A: Should we go to the store first or find one of the customers and see what they know?

E: I don't want to tip this thing off before we deal with it.

M: It's too soon to "deal with it," but I agree, actually. If we talk to the owner, maybe we can find out what's in that stuff and then decide from there how to handle the customers. If he's ok, maybe we can leave the whole thing alone. If he's not, well...

S: Good thinking. I vote for the standard drill: We go over there together and question it together. I'll make

sure it doesn't run before we talk to it. Melissa, see what you can learn. If things go badly, Eric, Pete, you can take care of it. How does that sound?

M: I'm in, so long as we're clear that we're talking first. If something goes bad, then something goes bad, but we do everything we can first.

S: I don't think that will be a problem. In fact, I think— [sounds of knocking]

<<Now entering judgmentday.list chat>>

observer: Thanks for getting back to me, everyone. Did any of you turn up anything related to what my group encountered? I hate to come to the table with nothing, but a lot of questions need to be answered before we face it. The more I know the better.

latelistener: We once met up with a creature similar to the one you described. I've included a description here. Ours was difficult to spot at first, but once we were able to examine it closely it seemed like a possessing entity of some kind. Large, muscular, sort of bluish in color with prominent horns. It was very protective of its allies. I believe it would have become violent if we pressed too hard. Watch yourself, Observer.

justme: I ran into a real bad ghost recently. It looked like something out of a nightmare, all twisted. Like someone had taken a person and stretched it. What you described sounds a lot more subtle. This thing was mad and destructive. It did possess one person, but real clumsily, and only used him to hurt people.

serena: I don't know about what you describe as a possession, but I did come across an actual physical creature that sounds somewhat similar, on the Continent. Or rather I did, but I didn't know it at the time. I took a few pictures at this beautiful old estate in Vienna. When I got them back, there it was, perched on top of the building. It had leathery wings and a powerful body. It blended in with the other sculptures up there. I can even look at the picture now and see that it's wrong, but I never even knew what that meant at the time.

observer: Thanks, but I don't see how all this necessarily applies to what I'm dealing with. What's the pattern?

justme: Maybe these things get aggressive when they've been kept from a body for too long. They can keep themselves under control when they have a body.

latelistener: Maybe, but we're still not sure if we're dealing with the same things. Don't take anything for granted, Observer. If it is like any of these things, it's probably dangerous.

observer: Don't worry, we'll go prepared for anything. I need to go. I'm preparing some contingency plans with another one of my group. I'll be in touch.

<<End chat session>>

E: Hang on. [Distant sound of a door opening, low conversation, and a door closing.]

E: That was my neighbor. My mom's not doing so well, so she's coming back early. I have to go get her room ready. We've got to wrap things up.

S: I think we're pretty much done here. I'll email around details. Eric, I'll call tomorrow and work out how to get over there.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

From the personal journal of Melissa Hathoway
Entry dated 6-19

I'm still trying to take in everything that happened tonight. Every time we go out to speak to the unknown, it's completely different from the last. I guess that's to be expected, but it doesn't do anything for my nerves. Fortunately, I have a pretty good memory, especially for conversations. I think I can reconstruct what happened pretty accurately. I confess, however, that there were definitely times when I was distracted, mad or terrified. I'll have to show this to Anna and make sure I didn't leave anything out.

We got to the shop at 10 minutes before closing. Eric and Sean were in the lead, as usual. It was unnerving to know that I must have passed it dozens of times without ever knowing the truth. The paint and the storefront looked fairly new, but what does that really mean?

I don't know how much to really trust Sean or Eric's descriptions in the future. From what they described, I was expecting a wild-haired hippie in a tie-dye T-shirt. Instead, he was a neatly dressed young man in a button-down shirt, with a well-groomed ponytail and a friendly smile. I had opened my heart before we entered, and I could see that there was something about him, although at first I didn't see anything like the cloud Sean described. Then I saw him, really saw him, and I almost screamed, much as I'm ashamed to admit it. It was so much more than what Sean had said. I got a fleeting glimpse of a form the color of asphalt, with eyes like red pools. For a second it looked like some kind of terrifying sculpture come to life, and I understood why they had been so quick to label it as evil.

I was determined to give the being a chance, though. Even as I looked at him, those eyes seemed to have a sad cast to them somehow. A kind of helpless suffering, as though the very act of living was painful. I don't know how I knew, but it felt right, and for a moment it was so strong I had to look away or I felt like I would cry.

If nothing else, that gave me a chance to look over the store. I got the same sense of "other" when I looked at some of the medicine bottles. That more than anything else made me nervous. It feels funny to say, but looking at objects and seeing them as strange was unsettling, too. People may be able to make mistakes or catch afflictions that lead them to become monsters, but things? Even with Sean's warning, I still had trouble believing what I was seeing. I wonder if that's where we get stories of haunted houses. Not lingering spirits, but a house itself. Maybe some flaw in its creation or presence causes it to absorb negative energy.

Finally, I faced the man again. He looked a little uncertain when he saw all of us. Probably unaccustomed to such a large group coming in. But if it threw him off, he didn't show it in his smile. "Hello, my name is John. How can I help you?" Just like that, and he was a he, no longer an it, and I shook off the fear of that first impression. He extended a hand across the counter to Sean, who was closest. Sean didn't take it.

"My friends and I have come here to ask you something," Sean said. His voice was calm, professional, but he was glancing at John. He'd recently told us that sometimes he seemed to be able to fix creatures in place with his eyes. I don't pretend to understand how, or even how he learned to do it. I could hear the concentration in his voice, so I assumed he was trying it then. "We want to know what you are."

"Excuse me?" John was still smiling and his voice didn't waver from its polite tone, but his eyes flicked across us as if sizing us up in a whole new way. Not threatening, just evaluating. "I'm not sure what you mean," he said.

Eric stepped forward. "I think you know exactly what we mean." One hand went to rest on the knife he wore on his belt, and I exchanged a worried look with Anna. Of all of us, Eric is the quickest to look for direct means of solving problems. I just hoped he remembered what Sean said about gaining information first. We'd only ever had one meeting with an afflicted person come to violence, and that was because the poor thing was too far gone to really know what it was doing.

"We know you're not like us," Sean continued, his voice still measured and almost pleasant despite his focus. "We know you're not human. We want to know what you really are, and where you came from." John was silent for a moment. He was unreadable. Seconds seemed to crawl by, and I just knew Eric was a growing threat. Even Peter, who's never done anything worse than try to keep a ghost from coming back to hunt his wife, was tense. Anna drew me close to her.

John looked like he was about to say something, and then he tried to step away from the counter. He stopped as if he didn't understand what was happening. He looked confused, then angry. I can only assume over whatever it was that Sean was doing. "You would imprison me?" he finally said. I think that's the moment I was truly afraid. Even though his voice was low, I could feel a distant rumbling and objects on the counter started rattling. Anna made a frightened noise and grabbed my hand. Eric and Sean didn't seem to know what to do. "Let me go now!" John said loudly.

"Sean!" Pete yelled, and Sean turned away, apparently breaking his hold on John. I wasn't sure if that would be enough. The ground shook harder and I could feel the air vibrating around me. Just as I thought Eric was going to draw his knife, everything stopped. The anger visibly drained from John's face, replaced by sadness or something that looked like exhaustion. He leaned heavily on the counter, hanging his head. I could hear Eric, Sean and Pete talking quickly in low voices, but couldn't make out what they said.

"I'm sorry," John said at last, raising his head. "I didn't mean to frighten you." Eric muttered something that sounded like a threat, but when none of us backed him up, he settled down. I'd like to say it was because we were more levelheaded, but in truth I think we were all still too shocked to do anything. I mean, it felt like he was triggering an earthquake! What do you do to a being that can do that? Fortunately, our hesitation seemed to break the tension.

John looked at Sean. "I don't know who you're with or how you found me, but I can tell you know." His voice took on a very tired tone. "I suppose this is the part where you tell me to leave. That this isn't my territory."

Sean shook his head. "Not quite. Not yet. We want to know what you are, and how you got here." He pointed at John accusingly. "All of it."

Eric looked like he was about to add something, probably a threat that would make things worse, so I stepped in. "We asked you what you are and how you got here." Then before John could give some kind of rehearsed answer, I looked him in the eye and asked, "Do you remember?" I knew this was what Sean expected of me at some point.

John seemed about to speak, but then the real impact of my words hit him. I'd seen the same before from other beings, and hoped for the best. His eyes lost focus, maybe watching something in his memory. I think he winced, as if he was really there. He finally said, "My parents opened this store when I was a kid. They loved it. It was their dream. When I was in college our house caught fire and they died. They left the store to me, and I took care of it as best I could. It was so hard. I missed them so much."

His lip quivered. "A couple months ago I got really sick. I nearly died. I think I actually wished I would die. I was so lonely. But it was like my parents didn't want me to go, like they told me to stay behind, so I came back from the edge. When I woke up in the hospital, I knew I had to do something better, something that would help people." He gestured around him. "I started really paying everything I had into this new medicine, and since then things have improved."

"Like hell." Eric's voice had an edge that I hadn't ever heard before, something raw and furious. "Cut the crap. You're infecting people with something here. What does this shit really do to them? Make them monsters like you?"

"Eric—" Peter's voice was a warning, but it wasn't necessary. Instead of becoming angry, as I expected he would, John flinched with every word and hung his head again. Could it have been shame? I don't know. His voice was broken. He said, "You've got it all wrong. It's not like that at all. You make it sound like I'm trying to hunt people. I'm just selling medicine."

His head came up suddenly, the pain in his voice now mixing with something different. Maybe, I think. "I haven't done anything wrong. What I make here," he swept his arm outward, "it helps people. I make a difference. How can that be so wrong?"

Eric bristled, but, bless her heart, Anna was the first to speak. "Look, we didn't come here to accuse you of anything," shooting not quite a glare, not quite a warning at Sean and Eric. "I'm sorry if it seems that way. But try to see things from our perspective. Understand that whatever you're putting into this medicine is doing something strange to people, which looks bad to us. Our first instinct is to find out if what you're doing is harming them."

"But I didn't — there shouldn't — I don't understand," John said. He looked like an honors student who'd just been given a B. I was beginning to think he was a good actor or exactly the opposite, that every thought or emotion showed on his face. If not for the fact that I could see something inside him, I would have said the latter. But there were too many unknowns to be sure. "It shouldn't do them any harm," he said. "It's meant to cure them, not make them sick."

Sean shook his head. "I saw what's in those people. Whatever you put in that stuff, it stays inside them. It doesn't belong there." He seemed to be losing his composure. This was going about the last way any of us expected it to. For someone so sharp, Sean could be a control freak, especially when it came to dealing with the afflicted. If they didn't fit the theoretical roles he expected, he could unravel.

John became almost frantic. "But it doesn't hurt them! Look, I have records of all the people who take it. They're doing better now than ever before!" John moved as though to reach under the counter, but then looked at Eric and seemed to think better of it. Eric had drawn his knife. "Unless you're not really interested in finding out whether it's helping," John followed up. He put his hands up. "Maybe you've already come to your own conclusions."

Silence. We all glanced at each other uncertainly. Not even Eric seemed certain about what to do. It was as if we were waiting for a cue to attack John or leave him alone completely.

I knew it was now or never. "Let me look at those records," I said, stepping forward and putting myself between Eric and John. I put my hands on the countertop and forced myself to smile reassuringly. "If we're going to believe what you say, we're going to need evidence. I can get more information if I know who to look at."

"Certainly," John said. He even managed a slight smile, though his eyes stayed on Eric. John reached under the counter and brought out a large black ledger. From the looks of it, it had been used for years. He flipped to the back and scanned down a list of names before turning the ledger around and showing it to me. "All the ones marked with a green check have been taking the medicine. Their addresses and phone numbers are on there." He gave me a hard look. "I just promise that you'll treat them better than you've treated me."

"We're not here to make promises," Sean said, though it sounded like his tone had softened. "If this comes back as harmless as you say, we won't bother them."

Peter asked something like, "What exactly is in this medicine, anyway?"

John seemed reluctant to answer, but probably figured it was a fair enough question that he couldn't refuse. "My customers tend to be frustrated with the healthcare system. That's why they come here. It's an herbal remedy. I only suggest it to patients who really need it for pain or chronic conditions. It's not much different from anything else I make, though. I don't see why it bothers you so much."



Anna asked something to the effect of if it worked so well, why didn't he just give it to anyone who walked in? John shook his head. "Even in this town, I can't afford to give stuff like that out to just anyone. It's not illegal, but I can't afford that much attention." His voice took on a bitter tone. "The medical community is always looking for excuses to put stores like mine out of business. If they heard I'm handing out some kind of a home cure, that'd be it. Holistic medicine is bad for their business, especially when it works."

"It's really that potent?" Anna asked as I finished copying. Eric immediately put his hand on my arm and drew me back a few steps out of John's reach. Not roughly, but with enough force to let me know it was an order, not a request.

John's voice smoothed, confident and salesman-like. "You'd be amazed at what I've seen it do for people." He laughed - genuinely. "If you like, you can take some samples. See for yourselves."

Peter started to reach for one of the bottles, but a nudge from Sean stopped him short. "No, we're going," Sean said.

"Of course." John's whole manner had changed back to friendly and open, as though we'd never barged in or threatened him. "Now, I've been helpful under the circumstances. It's only fair that I get to ask who you are."

We looked at each other. It was a question we'd gotten before, of course, but never from quite so rational a source. Nobody seemed willing to speak. Finally, Peter simply said, "Call us - concerned citizens."

John looked at us as a group and shook his head, resigned. I want to say he had a slight smile. "Never mind," he said. "I guess I'll be seeing see you again."

"Count on it." Eric's response was meant to sound threatening. I'm sure, but I don't think it worked. There was more to the man than I could read.

BODY & SOUL

From the journal of Melissa Hathoway

Entry dated 6-22

I finally got a break with the medical records we were looking for today - most of the people on John's list use local doctors in the New Hope - Lambertville area. My friend Jen from junior year is an archivist at the storage place that handles a lot of the old records. Doctors' offices ship them over when they run out of room. (Library Science majors with networking skills? Perish the thought!) Thank goodness the insurance industry is so paranoid nowadays about malpractice claims. A couple years back all these would have been destroyed.

I owe Jen a nice dinner and then some for the favor. I'm lucky that's all she wanted. If I wasn't so straight-laced back in school, she'd still be asking why I wanted to see them. Sometimes having been a nerd pays off later in life. As soon as I launched into the details behind my "project," I could see she had already decided I was just being my usual harmless self. Hopefully someday I'll be able to level with her, but not now.

The dust on some of the older files nearly killed me, but that's another story. It was pretty simple to cross-reference the files with John's notes and get a rough medical history on about two-thirds of the names he gave us. There's no mistaking the trend. John was right. These people have been getting better since they started taking his medicine. A lot better. I've put together a list of them for the others, but I have to put some of them down here.

Bruce Williamson, 54, a chain-smoker since 16, diagnosed with emphysema two years ago. Enter his first visit to the store six months back, probably out of desperation. He had one physical after that and his doctor noted astounding improvement. He somehow regained most of his lung capacity. His insurance information shows no drugs or equipment that might have been responsible for such a quick turnaround.

Similar story with Emily Jacobs - 67, came down with crippling arthritis in both hands after more than 30 years as a textile worker. Had a hip replaced three years back after a fall. Her records indicate that she's been on pain medication ever since. At least until last December, when she came to the store. Lord knows how an old woman like her found out about the place,

From: bartender206

To: vigil.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Re: state of affairs

dole7 wrote:

>how are things with you and yours? last we spoke you mentioned you'd picked up a couple of people. i hope the visit you mentioned

>went well? everybody still breathing?

It's been a real mess. Yeah, we went over to talk to the thing, but it didn't turn out at all like we expected. I left feeling sorry for it, if you can believe that! We came in half expecting a fight - at least the guys did - and it got tense for a couple of minutes early on. But as soon as we confronted it with the fact that we knew what it was and what it was doing, it just kind of caved, started blubbing and talked about how it was just trying to help people. I know what you're thinking, but I was there, and it seemed truly sincere. After so many years behind a bar, you get pretty good at spotting a genuine hard-luck story. I think he was on the level, at least as far as he knew. I wouldn't bet my life on it, but I trust it enough at this point to have some serious doubts about our next move.

I'm not the only one. As soon as we left, everyone started arguing about what to do. The professor's girlfriend is practically ready to co-sign a loan for the thing. She thinks if it's not hurting anyone, we should just leave it alone, never mind what the stuff it does to people looks like to us. The professor herself isn't quite so trusting, but still saw the thing as a source of information.

I'm not completely convinced, but if it really is trying to help folks, I can relate to that. But if it's all a trick, I'll deal with the thing personally.

I'm not sure about the others. Observer is suspicious by nature. I get the feeling that if we don't turn up clear proof that it's not doing harm, he's going to find a way to bring the hammer down on it. His sidekick isn't even that patient. If he didn't respect Observer so much, I think he might have already gone after the thing. I'm afraid he might do something stupid if Observer isn't there to cool him down. There's already enough head-butting here. The best solution we could settle on was that no one would go near the store again until we'd reached a decision.

I'm not sure what's going to happen, but I hope it's something we can live with.

much less trusted it. Pain makes people do desperate things, I guess. I know that better than anyone. Two visits to John's store and she's off the pain medication completely. It looks like just routine doctor visits since then, with no further complaints about her hip or hands.

None of the records mention Tribal Apothecary. They're either keeping it a secret or their physicians didn't consider it worth noting. Most doctors may not believe in a lot of herbal medicine stuff, but as John said, I don't see them

turning a blind eye to a place selling snake oil. I would think at least one doctor would have looked into the store by now.

I feel like I'm holding something world-changing in my hands, like Salk staring at the formula for the polio vaccine, or Fleming and his first dish of penicillin. It sounds silly, I guess, but if all this is true and there are no other effects, then this could do an incredible amount of good for the world. If nothing else, it might finally give Eric and all those people online who yell "monster" something to think about.

Still, they're going to want more evidence than just medical records to know if people are in danger or not. I can't really blame them. I'd like to see what these results look like firsthand, too. I'm supposed to call the next meeting when I've finished here. Maybe I can convince everyone, if I have the nerve.

BEDSIDE MANNER

Entry dated 6-23

I can't believe I actually did it.

I left work early this afternoon and went to see Emily Jacobs. I knew she probably wouldn't answer questions from a total stranger, so I decided a little deception wouldn't hurt, especially for the good it could do. I used to love acting when I was younger, before my lungs crapped out on me and made me too unreliable onstage. It felt a little strange to "get into character" again after so long. I put on my old glasses and took a clipboard, hoping she would talk to a researcher from a medical journal. With the kinds of questions I needed answered, I couldn't think of another story that would be plausible.

Emily is a lovely old lady. She was gardening when I pulled up. I introduced myself and said I was doing an article on herbal medicine and its value to conventional medicine. (Not too far off, really. I guess the most convincing lies stick close to home.) She seemed a little suspicious at first, but when I mentioned Tribal Apothecary, her face positively lit up. She invited me in for tea.

Watching her get around the house, I would have never guessed that she had hip problems and arthritis. She seemed in perfect health, even a little spry. I was careful to look at her with the special sight, too. She did seem a little off, but if there was an ominous side to it like Sean and Eric described, I didn't see it. Anna would say something about testosterone.

We talked about the treatments she'd received before trying herbal medicines. Nothing I hadn't read in her file. Then came the questions I was really waiting for. They're underlined here. I've paraphrased her answers as best I can from my notes. How did you hear about Tribal Apothecary? From a friend of hers at the local senior center, B. Lomax, whose rheumatism had been cured by the medicine. (I couldn't verify Lomax's records, but I take this as a good sign.) How soon afterward did you see results? Almost immediately. Emily claimed that by her third dose her arthritis had faded almost completely, and that by the end of the week all her pain had vanished. Do you know anything about the owner? His name was John, he was very nice, and he politely resisted her efforts to set him up with her recently divorced daughter Claudia. Did you know what was in the medicine? No, but she went over to a cabinet by the stove and got one of the bottles I had seen at the store. I could see at least three or four more there. Regular customer for sure.

She handed it to me and I wrote down the ingredients myself. They seemed fairly straightforward. Nothing you probably wouldn't find in any other store. I just to be sure, I double-checked them when I got home. Nothing unusual stood out. I was about to ask her if she had been told about any possible long-term side effects when the phone rang. Suddenly I was alone with the medicine. It looked a little strange. Like her. Like the bottles did in the store. But how could an object be "wrong"? It doesn't make any sense.

I didn't want to go near the stuff at the store, especially not with the others around, but right there, after seeing the medical records for all those people and talking to Emily... So I did it. I opened the bottle and put some of the pills in my pocket. My heart was pounding. I thought I was going to have an attack right there, but it passed before Emily returned. A few more

questions and I was out the door. I promised to send her the article when it was printed. I hope she doesn't remember to look for it.

Now I'm sitting here with a pill in front of me. Anna's not home yet. I'm a little frightened, but if I really think that this stuff is beneficial, what am I afraid of? I've seen it work with my own eyes. The others might argue with records, even with the visit I made today, but if I come to them cured and I don't show any sign of change? I don't think even Eric could argue with results like that. I've looked on that website Anna is always going on. A lot of people there seem to think we've been touched or protected by God somehow. There are all these stories about how what would affect normal people doesn't seem to work on us.

Do I believe?

If it really worked I could breathe again. I'd never have to carry an inhaler. I'd never have to worry about what will happen if I have an attack. I could live like a normal person instead of just pretending. Isn't that what we want to do, now that we know the truth? Bring everything back to normal, back to how it should be?

If that isn't worth the risk, nothing is.

From: observer209
To: futureperfect384
Subject: What Next?

I understand you met my friend E yesterday and discussed our mutual problem. I agree with you about the creature and the danger it presents. You have my sympathies regarding your acquaintance. Rest assured that we'll free her. E and I are meeting our group tonight to convince them to see our point of view. Even if they aren't with us, we can still go ahead with the plan E discussed. They may not see this thing for what it really is, but they won't stop us, either. Hopefully it's not too late.

UNPOPULAR VOTE

Transcript of Meeting 6/24

S: I hope everyone has been able to sleep since the other night. Melissa, what have you been able to come up with?

M: I managed to get medical records on most of the names John gave us. I checked them against the log of when they started coming into the store. You can definitely see improvement from the time they started taking the medicine. In some cases, there's been total recovery, even from chronic conditions. Here's copies. There's also something else that—

S: What about the names on his list you couldn't come up with anything for? Any idea why?

M: I could only get records for patients who my source had access to. I'm sorry, but it's not perfect. I don't have access to medical records myself, so I did the best I could without.

S: I understand. Still, isn't it possible that some of those people you couldn't find are ones who haven't gotten better? Who didn't experience a miracle cure?

M: I suppose that's possible, but there's no apparent record of anyone who got worse as a result of taking this medicine, either.

S: Really? Or maybe this John only keeps track of the ones who work out.

A: What do you mean?

S: I'm not saying that your work is faulty. But we need to realize that we started this from a highly suspect source — information provided by the very thing we're investigating. This is all information he gave us, which apparently supports the claims he made. Awfully convenient, don't you think?

M: I also interviewed one of the patients directly. She was doing far better than she should have been. She freely attributed her recovery to the store. She seemed... odd... when I looked, but—

E: See! It doesn't matter who it is. They all look wrong!

M: Let me finish! There was none of that ominous, creepy feeling that you two described. It seemed to be giving her energy, not taking it away. And I didn't get any hint of outside control. What about that? Did he arrange the perfect interview, too?

E: We don't know how these things work. He—

S: Eric, please. She has a point. But my concern still stands. We're talking about a source given to us by the creature itself.

A: The fact that she says the medicine seemed okay doesn't matter?

P: Calm down, everyone. We won't get anywhere if we're all yelling. Relax.

S: Let me put it this way: Melissa, did you come across any other information, apart from what we got from this creature?

M: I — I don't know. [Pause] I can't think of anything. But that doesn't mean—

S: You're right, that doesn't automatically condemn him. But in light of what Eric and I uncovered, it may not be enough to save him, either.

A: What are you talking about?

E: I was in New Hope a couple of days ago when I saw this kid hanging out near the store. He seemed to be trying to watch it inconspicuously. When I got closer he was wearing a bunch of patches with some of our symbols worked into them. So I drew one of the symbols on a napkin and approached him. His name is Jim. He went to school at Princeton until he saw the truth and dropped out. He wouldn't say how long ago that happened, but from how he talked I got the impression it was a while ago. He's been here since something went wrong at Princeton. Turns out he knows the girl we saw that first day, and he's seen her change, too.

A: Hold on. We agreed that no one was going near the store again until we'd decided what we were going to do! What were you doing there?

E: I just went back to make sure the thing hadn't gone anywhere. That's all. I didn't go in or confront it.

M: No, but I'm sure you lingered outside long enough to threaten him.

E: No, I didn't!

P: Both of you calm down! This isn't getting us anywhere.

M: Tell him that.

A: Melissa—

S: The fact is, this young man has direct evidence that whatever this substance is, it has detrimental, mind-altering effects on people. He talked about his friend becoming addicted. This creature and the medicine it sells are a threat, and I think we should deal with them accordingly.

M: So I go through all this trouble and it's not good enough for you, but a few words from some kid and you're ready to go to war?

S: I've spoken to him and I assure you he's not just some kid. He's seen a lot of things, but more than that, he's one of us and that's what matters most to me about what he said. With all due respect, Melissa, we've already established that you worked from suspect information, right?

M: [Pause] Yes. But there's still no proof that he's doing anything harmful. For all we know, the medicine marking these people might be accidental. Some kind of side effect he's unaware of.

S: You have a point. It did seem genuinely stunned that its medicine might be doing anything. Maybe we could convince it to stop selling the stuff. I think that could work with what we have in mind.

A: Who?

S: Eric, Jim and I were talking, but never mind about that. It's changed now. We're going to convince this thing to stop selling anymore of that medicine.

M: No vote? What the hell are you doing, Sean?

S: I'm sorry, but given how quickly the effects might spread, I feel that direct action is justified. Eric and Jim are already in. I'd like for the rest of you to join us. Peter?

P: Sean, I... No, I can't. I don't know what you have in mind, but I can't. It hasn't done anything to justify using force. Not yet.

S: Melissa! [Silence] Anna?

A: Oh come on, Sean, do you really have to ask? What you're saying is insane — not to mention illegal. Can you live with that? If you get caught, what about your job?

S: I'm ready to accept that. I'm sorry the rest of you don't feel the same way. [Sounds of movement] We're going to do this, without any of you, apparently. I hope you trust us enough that you won't interfere.

P: What the hell is that supposed to—



CHAPTER 3: CONFESSION

You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery.
— Acts 13:10

ORIGINAL SIN

"Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned."

"How long has it been since your last confession?"

"It's been six weeks, I think. I don't know. The last week or so has been terrible. I lost track of time."

"I see. And what have you to confess, my son?"

"A lot, Father, a lot. Jealousy, anger, hatred and worse. You name it, I've done it."

"I see. These are serious sins, even in the service of God. Please, go on with your confession if you truly repent."

"I... I... Aw, this is a waste of bloody time. I don't know why I'm bothering with this."

"Come now, child. God's love and forgiveness are endless. Confess and you will be forgiven. Remember, the confessional is sacred, especially for the blessed. Nothing said here will be repeated unless you wish it."

"God's love? Forgiveness? Yeah, right. What does God care? You've seen those things out there, Father. You know. God doesn't protect us from them. He lets them exist, hurting people. Where's the bloody love and forgiveness in that?"

"Child, tell me what is truly troubling you."

"Father, I'm not sure I believe in any of this anymore. The things I've seen — God couldn't allow them to exist. Not any God I'd like to believe in, anyway. I'm about to go face something that's made my wife happy, and I'm going to do it because some voice tells me it's a bad thing. I'm risking my life and happiness for the sake of something I can't touch or see. Am I doing the right thing, Father? Is it really God telling me what to do? Or am I just a psycho, hearing voices and claiming that 'God told me to'?"

"You must have courage and faith, my child. God loves us and guides us, but Satan tests us. Remember the Book of Job?"

"Not really, Father. It's been a long time. Not much call for the Bible down my way. Been a bit busy of late, too. That was half the problem, you see. That let them get to my family. My wife, she..."

"She what, child?"

"She got involved in something. Something she shouldn't have. Something I could have stopped if I'd been paying enough attention to her and the kids. Not fucking around fighting monsters with Josh and the others. I thought I was protecting my family, but instead I left them open to attack by the things out there."

"The demons?"

"Demons? Do you really believe that it's as simple as that? That they're devils from Hell, come to drag us into the fire? I don't bloody think so."

"I'm not sure I follow. The Bible teaches that some of God's servants rebelled and now tempt humanity from the path of righteousness. What else could they be?"

"Well, it's a bit bloody simple, isn't it? Good versus evil. Good guys, bad guys. We're the good guys. We should win. But it doesn't work like that, does it? God doesn't protect us. Good doesn't triumph. David doesn't beat Goliath. The big fucker stamps all over the little guy. The bad guys win. People die. Remember Paul, who used to come and visit you and the others? He died. Torn to death on some back road in Suffolk. And now my family's gone to shit. They got their claws into my wife and I couldn't protect her. The Bible says this. The Bible says that. I don't care what the book says, Father. I want to know what you think. You're a bloody priest. You've seen them. What the fuck are they? What has my wife got herself into?"

WARNING

"Shhhh, my child. Calm down. Tell me what happened."

"Oh, fuck, Father. I don't really know where to start. It's all been a bloody nightmare."

"First of all, could you please control your language? I understand your struggle, but remember that there are people here. Please talk quietly."

"Uh, yeah. Sure. Sorry about that. I'm kinda upset, you know?"

"I understand, Jason. Now, go back to the beginning. When did all this start?"

TUESDAY 11TH

father,

I pray once more for an end to the doubts that plague me. As I look back through this diary, I see that of all my prayers have not been answered, Lord. I just need to know why you didn't find me, who has devoted my life to your service, worthy of your blessing.

We are visited again by one of the blessed from London, bringing us news of others doing your work. He too believes, Lord, and he has warned me that he seeks confession and forgiveness. Please give me your guidance. I am worried that without the faith I once had in you, I cannot guide him as I should.

Lord, why do you choose the people you do? Why is an unemployed plumber, a musician and a shop assistant more worthy in your eyes than a man who has devoted his life to your service? I should not seek to test you Lord, but I need your help so badly to overcome these doubts.

"To be honest, I'm not entirely sure. I was busy. I was ignoring the wife. I'd gotten used to it. Back when I was driving trucks, I would be away for weeks at a time. We got used to it, Julie and I. She had her life and I had mine. Sure, we enjoyed the good times, but she did her own thing with the kids while I was away.

"Anyway, that made it easy to fu... disappear when I needed to after I discovered the monsters. I told her I was on a job, Josh bunged me some money, and we did what we had to. I dunno. I suppose I was away a bit more than I was before. Maybe I wasn't as nice to her when I got back. Anyway, I had the alarm on her, and that—"

"The alarm?"

"Well, you know this weird shit we can do?"

"The Lord has not seen fit to bless me with such gifts, but I have seen others use them."

"Uh, yeah, whatever. Anyway, I have this thing I can do that lets me know when one of them comes near someone I'm trying to look after. I don't know how to describe it really. I can just sense when one of the things tries to do something to her. Well, I usually kept a watch on my wife that way. Josh suggested it. He always thought that they might try to get to us through our families. Not that he's got any to speak of from what I've seen, but he's a secretive bugger. It made sense, so I made a point of leaving it on her whenever I could. I never really expected it to go off. I bloody wish I'd been right.

"It was about a month ago. I was down the pub with Clive. He's a mate of mine. We go back a long way, and he was there when we all first saw the monsters, when I got... what did you call it?"

"Blessed?"

"Yeah, blessed, but he didn't. He helps out when he can, though. Clive's like that. Good bloke. He's there when you need him, even if he is shitting himself every time. You gotta respect that, y'know?"

"I know better than you realize, my son."

"Oh, yeah. Right, sorry. Anyway, we're having a couple of pints down the pub when suddenly I got this real sick feeling in my stomach. I just knew that something was wrong with Julie. I could feel where she was, too. In the direction of our flat. I just ran out and headed for the motor. Clive followed, loyal bast....

"It only took us 10 minutes to get home, and as we were arriving some posh car pulled away. I think it was a BMW, but I didn't really look at the time. It just registered as being out of place. We don't get a lot of cars like that down our way. Anyway, big car park, you know, lots of cars around. I just figured it was a posh guy come to do some business with one of the hookers. Uh, sorry, Father."

"Go on, my son. I'm well aware of the sins of the world."

"Well, anyway, I dashed up the stairs with Clive right behind me. As soon as we got to the flat, I signaled to me mate to wait there, and I went inside. Uh, do you

know what I mean by "the eyes"? You know, the way I can see the things?"

"Yes, child, I am."

"Yeah, well, I was looking so I could check the place out... and my wife."

"That must have been hard. I mean, suspecting your wife of being corrupted."

"Don't fucking patronize me, Father. You're not allowed to get married. I bet you've never even had a shag. You've got no idea what it was like to think that about the woman I love. Yeah, it was fucking hard. I hated it. I had no idea at all what I'd do if she was one of them. I just knew that I needed to know."

CONFRONTATION

"So I went in and found her chatting with a couple of the women from the estate that she hangs around with, including Clive's missus. They were all dead excited about something, and none of them was wrong, thank God."

"Praise the Lord."

"Yeah, whatever. Anyway, I rushed in there and demanded to know who they'd seen, shooting my mouth off. I was probably shouting, I was that scared and angry. Julie just looked at me. She looked really bloody angry, too. She just glared at me at first until I shut my gob. The

other women were looking dead uncomfortable, like they wanted to be any place else.

"Finally, she told them to go and thanked them for their help or something. I don't know. I can't remember. I let them go. I figured that there would be time to talk to them later, if need be. I just wanted to find out what was going on with Julie.

"Once the others had gone, she told me to sit down. I told her I wasn't doing any bloody thing until she told me what had been going on. She said she'd been warned that this would happen, that people would try to block her progress and undermine her or some other bullshit. I just ignored all that and asked her who the hell she had been talking to.

"Then she asked me why I wanted to know. What the fuck was I meant to say? Some strange trick I've got told me a monster was fucking with her? The angel of the Lord said, 'Lo, there's a monstrous bastard in your house'? Like she'd believe a word of that. Trying to work out what to say threw me for a moment, and then she started shouting at me."

LONELINESS

"She started shouting at you?"

"Yeah. She accused me of all sorts of stuff, half of which I can't remember a word of anymore. The gist of it was that she was angry with me for never being around, for not supporting her, for not encouraging her. She needed



something to do when the kids were at school and that she'd actually found something that gave her a boost.

"I flipped. I don't know, maybe I'd had a beer too many. The fact that the fucking monsters were part of this, that one of them had been in my house was making me furious."

"Perhaps you were scared, child. It's nothing to be ashamed of. It's natural when dealing with such things."

"Yeah, well, I asked her who had been there earlier. I demanded to know who she'd let into our house, who she'd exposed the kids to. That seemed to calm her down a bit. She seemed reassured that I was worried about the kids rather than just shouting at her. She said it was just some new friends, people she'd met on the course. And then she asked me if I'd been drinking.

"I told her that I had. I was forcing myself to calm down, Father. I've been married for too long. I know perfectly well that I'll never get anything useful out of her by shouting at her. We'd just stand there and shout at each other until we can't shout anymore. My fear had made me forget that. I told her that I was sorry for shouting and that I was just worried. She seemed to buy that. Then I asked her about this course.

"Turns out it was some sort of self-help bollocks. Lots of losers in a room sharing their feelings and all that shit. I asked her what the hell she needed to go on one of those for? Wasn't I enough of a man for her to talk to? Didn't she have enough other friends to talk to? She came out with this really weird answer that I didn't really understand. It just didn't sound like her, and that's what got me worried.

"She said something like there was an emptiness inside her. She had this need for something to finish her. For a while she thought I'd be enough, and then she thought that the kids would do it. None of us were enough, though. I remember her saying that damn clearly. Apparently this damn course taught her that. What was the word? Empowerment. Apparently she could only find it in groups of equally fucked-up friends, all sharing their problems and talking about it. Yeah, yeah, I know. It sounds like a load of complete bollocks. Just sitting around talking doesn't solve anything, as far as I'm concerned. It seemed to make sense to her, though."

"It kind of makes sense to me, my son. I always considered that yearning to be the part of us that seeks God, that wants to be unified with Him once again. People have tried to fill it with many different things: wealth, pleasure, drink or even other religions."

"Yeah, well, this bastard and his course were filling my wife just a little too much for my liking. I mean, why the fuck would she go to them rather than me? I'm her bloody husband. I've always been there when she needed me. It's more like a cult than a self-help group, if you ask me. That's the only reason I can see why she went there in the first place. They must have done some of that brainwashing shit, like they do to those kids who run away from home in America."

THE CULT OF SELF

"So, who ran this course?"

"They're called Powell Power Experiences, or some shit. I've got leaflets and everything about them here. She was on a course they run around the country. They're organized by this guy called Adrian Powell. He's written books and shit. He charges people an arm and a leg to come on his courses, and then he gets them hooked. They keep coming back for more. Josh calls it a form of community brainwashing. That's what it looks like to me, too. Like I said, a cult.

"The thing that gets me is that this guy is almost bloody famous. He's all over those daytime TV shows that Julie seems to watch now. You might have seen him on the telly."

"I'm afraid I don't have much time for watching television, but I'm familiar with his kind. Some of the courses might be useful, but generally they prey on the inadequacies of the weak and hopeless. We try to lead the people away from such things, but in a secular society they're an easy trap to fall into."

"I'm not sure I follow."

"Well, if people don't believe in God, they seek to fulfill that need in other ways. These courses give much of what the church does, without the need for the belief in God that we seem to find so troubling. They meet like-minded people, get a set of rules to live their lives by, and constant reinforcement of their own self-worth. They start to define themselves through membership to this group. While the same may be true of Catholics, at least we act for the greater glory of God. Not for flawed, mortal man."

"Hang on. You said 'we' have trouble believing in God."

"I... This confession is about you. Tell me how your 'alarm' happened."

DEVIL AT THE DOOR

"Well, it turns out that the wife had done a couple of these courses now. I really should have kept a closer watch on the bank account. They cost a bloody fortune. She said she'd kept it from me because she wanted this to be something for herself, separate from me and the kids. Then she said something about feeling that she'd become just a wife and a mother and not a person or something. See the sort of shit they were putting into her head?"

"If you say so, my son."

"Well, apparently they were pleased with her progress and wanted her to get involved in running another course. I didn't like the idea and told her not to do it."

"She didn't react well to what you said?"

"Yeah, you could put it that way. I'd say she went fucking mental at me. She told me to get the hell out of the house until I learned to respect her for who she was,

not what she was. I still don't know what the hell that was supposed to mean.

"Anyway, after a lot of shouting and throwing, it turns out that one of the guys that runs the courses had come to see her and the other women that afternoon. To discuss the course she was helping on, teach them the basics of managing, that sort of shit. My money was on him being the monster. He left just before I got there, or so she said. That made me think of that BMW again. God, I wish I'd taken more notice of it. I might have saved us all a lot of trouble. I could just have confronted him then and there, maybe solved the whole thing without all the shit that went down next."

"So, what did you do?"

"I left. I know Julie and I know that shouting at her gets me nowhere. If those things had got to her, she was going to be even less likely to listen to me. There was only one thing I could do. Find the others, find out what was really going on and put a stop to it. That's the only way I could protect her, see? Get rid of the bastards screwing with her. That's what I thought, anyway."

"Clive was still outside. He'd been given a good ear bashing by his misses on her way out over him being there with me, but he'd still waited. See, I told you he was a good bloke. I was too angry to drive, so he took me over to Josh's place. I called Serena and Alan on the way over. When I mentioned that the wife was involved, they pretty much dropped everything to be there. It's what we all fear, isn't it, Father? The idea that the monsters can get at our families. That they can come to our very door and there's nothing we can do to stop them?"

PLANNING

"So, Josh, Serena and Alan, they are other blessed people that you work with?"

"Uh, yes. I won't tell you their last names. I'm sure you appreciate why. I won't give them nicknames, either. I'll never be able to keep them all straight while telling the story. Anyway, Serena went on that internet thing and found out as much about Powell as she could while we waited for Alan to arrive. She showed us the stuff Powell has there. Some fancy website outlining what he stood for, she said. 'Typical self-help claptrap' was how she put it, I think. Josh gave me a drink to calm me down a little, but told me to wait until the others arrived before telling us everything that happened."

"Alan was pretty damn skeptical when I told them. He's new to all of this. Can't blame him, really. It all seems pretty weird to me when I stop to think about it. Josh and Serena took my word for it pretty quickly because we've been doing this shit together long enough. Even Alan started to accept it when Clive told him how I'd reacted in the pub."

NATURE OF THE BEAST

"Josh got pretty quiet after I finished. He always sees the worst side of things, but this time I think he had pretty good reason. He was going on about how we'd seen a ghost use a cult before and how he hated it. It didn't matter who was behind it. I just wanted the bastard stopped and told Josh as much. He said I was right, and asked Serena what else she had come up with."

"Serena didn't really come up with much more that was helpful. It seems Powell has been around for a few years. It's only pretty recently that he's been really successful. His organization nearly closed down after his book before last was a flop. Then all of a sudden it all turned around."

"That seemed to bother Josh. He said something about it being all too public for a rot, even a live looking one. He said that maybe Powell wasn't really behind it, that someone was pulling his strings or maybe that there was a monster hiding inside the group. He was guessing. We didn't know fuck-all about anything yet. He laughed and said that it was 'educated guessing.' Probably something to do with that place on the internet he goes to a lot. Do you know it, Father?"

"I must confess that I'm not good with computers. I'm more comfortable with books."

"Don't blame you. Seems like a bloody waste of time to me, but Josh and Serena seem to think it's important. Anyway, it turns out that the courses have been booming. Serena said it was like some kind of marketing. When one person sells to his mates...."

"Do you mean a pyramid group?"

"That's it, yeah. People finish and then run the next course. They seem to be going every couple of months. The next one was only a few days away. Josh didn't hesitate. He told Serena to book places for all of us except her. She got a bit narky about that. She wanted to know why she was being left out. Josh explained pretty reasonably that if these guys were messing about with people's heads, we'd need someone separate from it all to spot it if we came back affected."

"I think that scared Alan a little, even if he didn't say anything. He definitely went pale. He still agreed to come, though. He's a good lad, even if he did get into trouble."

THE WAITING GAME

"What sort of trouble did Alan get into, my son?"

"Uh, I'll get to that later. It's kind of hard to explain without telling you what else happened. Josh paid for the tickets and booked us hotel rooms and that was that, really. He's spent a while making up these false identities for us. Ones that might even stand up to police checks. We haven't needed them before, but we bloody well did this time. He even got himself a credit card in a different name. I don't know how. I can't even get a credit card of

my own, let alone one in a different name. One rule for the poor and one for the rich, I suppose.

"We had a few days to wait before the course. Those were some of the hardest days of my life. Can you imagine going back to your wife every evening, knowing that she was involved with something connected to them? That a monster knew where you lived? That it had walked into your house?"

"I couldn't tell her a fucking thing about it, either. She wouldn't have believed me. I didn't want to leave her side for the whole of those few days, but I had to. She'd have known something was up if I'd stuck to her like glue the whole time. I had a few evenings down the pub with Clive to try and forget about it, but alcohol can't bury shit like this, you know? No, I don't suppose you do. What made it worse, though, was the fact that she was praising me for being so understanding about this course she was going on. More than once I nearly got in the car and went to track down that bastard at Powell's offices and do something, anything to stop me feeling so bloody helpless.

"Josh was right, though. If I acted without knowing what was going on, I could make things worse. I don't know what you think Hell is, Father, but that was pretty damn close."

"The Pope's latest teaching is that Hell is a state of separation from our Heavenly Father, rather than an actual place. I'm not sure how we can reconcile that with those things out there."

"You and me both, Father. You and me both."

STAYING THE COURSE

"Anyway, that's why we're in Manchester. The course is being held in a hotel up near the exhibition center. The hotel's way out of my league. A really dead posh place. They've got those covers on the toilets and free bathrobes and everything. If Josh wasn't paying, there's no way in hell I could have stayed there. If Julie had gone to a place like that for her courses I'd have bloody noticed, I can tell you. They would have drained our account dry. I was a bit out of my league, so I let Josh do the talking. Alan was pretty quiet, too.

"Anyway, we checked into our rooms and then we went down to the 'getting to know you drinks.' I was on edge the whole time. I'm used to dealing with weird shit and this was so, I don't know, normal. Just people standing around chatting. Drinking. Eating. Part of me was looking for trouble in everything they said, and the other half just wanted me to have been wrong about it all. I suppose it had been over a week since I'd felt that warning, and sometimes it's hard to believe in the things we can do when we're not right in the middle of it all.

THE LAMBS

"The people on the course were exactly the sort of losers you'd expect. I could see Josh getting more and more annoyed as he worked the crowd. I'm sure they wouldn't have picked up on it, but I've been hanging around with him long enough to know when there's something wrong. I managed to pull him aside for a while and asked him what was up. He was mad that the folks were all desperate and were being taken. I asked him what made him think that, when it could be the same monsters that were fucking with my wife. He just glared at me and said something about knowing what it felt like to reach rock bottom. I don't quite know why it was eating him so much.

"He was right, though. They were all pretty screwed-up people. There was one middle-aged bloke there I couldn't quite figure out. He kind of reminded me of Paul, but fatter. Same kind of up himself attitude. I wondered exactly what he was doing there. His attitude was probably all bluster. I bet he was dead scared of everything inside.

"There were a couple of older women, too, not bad looking actually."

"Ahem."

"Oh, yeah, sorry. I think they were wives neglected by their rich husbands. One of them spent most of the course hitting on Josh. He was playing up to it, the bastard. He's a complete tart, that one. They just seemed to be looking for something to fill their days while their husbands were busy doing whatever the hell guys in suits do all day.

"There was an old guy I really warmed to, an old council worker from Leeds. His accent was kind of thick, but I enjoyed talking to him. I liked him but felt sorry for him at the same time, y'know? He and his wife retired 20 years ago. She died six months before and he had no idea what to do. I think being with her was about all he had left, and when cancer took her away.... Makes me angry just thinking about it. His kids couldn't be bothered spending time with him, and so he goes turning to these people for direction. Makes you wonder, doesn't it? What's the point fighting for people who don't care?"

"Who else was there, my son?"

"There were plenty more, but I really didn't get the chance to get to know them that well. Oh, yeah. There was this spotty kid who spent the day trying to pluck up the courage to talk to this hippie chick. I didn't talk to her much, but she seemed like a middle-class rich kid who thought she knew everything. Maybe she was only doing the course to piss off her dad. The boy, though, a typical late teenage sob story. Doesn't get out enough. Spends too long in front of a computer. Hasn't got any friends he's actually met outside of the internet, and has never been laid. He

said he was there to make more of his life. I think he was just there looking for enough confidence to be able to say five words to a girl without clamping up. He couldn't say a word to the course leader."

"The course leader? Tell me about him."

"Her. I can tell you a lot about her. For a start, she was wrong. One of them. We didn't know at first. Josh suggested that we didn't look until something weird happened. I wasn't happy about the idea. They could do any bloody thing to us if we didn't know who they were. He pointed out that the course ran for two days and that we couldn't look the whole time. He was right. I tried that once, keeping the eyes on for hours. When you get scared, you do shit like that. Didn't work. I got, I don't know, tired."

"Her name was Emma. Told us a lot about herself as part of that caring-sharing shit and how it turned her from a bored secretary into a success story. Changed her too damn much, if you ask me. Somehow it made her into one of them. Then she introduced a guy named Phil. Apparently he used to be a drinker. He'd done the whole Alcoholics Anonymous thing, but it hadn't worked, or so he claimed. And then Powell changed his life. Yadda yadda yadda."

GRIEF'S SEDUCTION

"We should have seen it coming, I suppose. Alan is new, and he's still hurting really bad. We met him when we were facing off against some rots. One of his workmates died, and he still blames himself. He couldn't have stopped it, but it still left him pretty shook up. Apparently the guy had a wife and kids. Alan was best man at their wedding and all."

"Anyway, somehow this bitch got her claws into Alan and started playing on his pain. We didn't really guess anything was wrong until dinner on the first night. I was slagging Phil off for a while because he'd been really bugging me with his permanent smile, and then Josh pointed out that he was drinking wine over dinner. He told us that most reformed alcoholics don't touch a drop."

"Then Alan said that just went to prove that Powell was more effective than most courses. We thought he was being sarcastic. Josh suggested that none of us spend any time alone with Phil or Emma, and we should use the eyes if we did. Alan looked confused and said she seemed really nice. You can imagine our reaction. All of a sudden he had our attention. Every fucking bit of it."

"Nice in what way?" asked Josh. He had that slitty-eyed look he gets when he has an idea. "Tell me why you trust her so much." Alan started talking all this bollocks about how she had opened his eyes to his potential. Josh and I looked at each other, and he motioned to me to keep quiet. He asked Alan question

after question, half of which I didn't understand the point of, but even so the situation was pretty clear. That bitch had got to him somehow."

"Had she turned him?"

"Turned him, Father?"

"Turned him to the side of evil."

"Uh, I don't think so. There was nothing wrong about him when we looked at him. It was like, I don't know, she was persuasive. She could sell him ideas that other people couldn't. It was pretty damn creepy, seeing one of us just spouting off her lies like that."

"Finally, Josh asked Alan how he felt about his workmate's death. He said his pain was gone. He knew that it wasn't his fault anymore. I asked if he thought that was strange. He just looked at me like I was mad."

"Josh motioned and said he was heading for the bar to get a drink. I got the message and said that I'd go with him. Alan seemed quite happy chatting with some others. When I got to the bar, Josh was swearing up a storm under his breath. He said something about making a mistake, not thinking that they'd actually be working the courses themselves, and now they'd got to Alan."

"It was easy to see when it had happened. Just after lunch, we'd broken up into small groups. I was with the old guy and one of the women. Alan was with the teenager and the other woman from the man-hungry pair. They went off with Emma and Phil. The idea was we were to share the emotional issue that was troubling us most and see if the others could suggest a solution. Emma spent the whole time with Alan's group, while Phil occasionally came round and checked on the rest of us."

"So, when you realized that she'd taken the chance to influence Alan, you decided to check on her?"

"Pretty much the moment we'd gone to the bar, she'd sat at our table. We used the eyes on her. Sure enough, there was something wrong about her. I couldn't tell what, though. That's Serena's trick. Alan can find stuff out to, but he was no bloody use just then. Knowing she was wrong was enough for me, though. I said we had to do something. Josh said to be patient. I could hear from his voice that the anger was back. I think that's how he deals with being afraid. He gets so angry about what they do that he doesn't feel afraid of them anymore."

"Anger will lead him into the enemy's hands. For, as Jesus said in Matthew's gospel—"

"Save the sermon, Father. I'm here for your opinion, not your preaching. Josh is a good guy, right? He'd be the last of us to do that."

"I'll be sure to bear that in mind, my son. So, what happened?"

"Well, as soon as the bitch left them alone, we went back over. We eventually convinced Alan to look at



her. It took some doing, mind you. He didn't want to believe anything bad about her, however hard we tried. When he finally did what we asked, it was a big shock. He swore out loud, catching the attention of several people at the table.

"Josh just smiled at them, chuckled and said that Alan had stubbed his toe. They went straight back to their meals. Alan was still swearing. I think he felt like an idiot for not seeing her earlier."

CLOTHED IN RAIMENT OF LIGHT

"Don't you think it was more likely that your Alan was afraid because he'd been so easily fooled? Satan's greatest weapon is his ability to hide behind a pleasing face. As Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians, the Devil is able to appear as an angel of light."

"Huh. Yeah, I suppose. I wasn't really thinking about that. I just wanted to get that bitch and her friends, now that we could see what she was."

"That she was a servant of the Devil?"

"If you want to put it that way, yeah."

"My child, if I stop believing that, I couldn't sit here taking your confession. I couldn't continue being a priest and supporting the blessed. There must be a reason that He didn't choose me, and I must accept His will."

CONFRONTATION

"Uh, anyway, we decided confronting Emma was the only way we'd get anything useful from the bitch. So after she'd gone to bed, I picked the lock of her room. I know, I know, Father. I've done some stuff in the past I'm not proud of, but when you grow up on an estate like I grew up on, you end up doing a few things that aren't legal just to keep body and soul together. Anyway, hotel locks are pretty easy. They're just put there to make the guests feel better. I was through in seconds.

"She was asleep. Alan and I stood either side of the bed, while Josh switched the light on. She woke with a start. Josh told her not to scream, but it seemed pointless. She didn't look at all afraid. All she said was, 'I've been expecting this to happen. Who sent you and what do you want with Adrian?'"

"Josh is a quick thinker, I'll give him that. He barely paused before saying, 'I'm sure Adrian has a pretty good idea of who sent us. Now, do you want to give us an idea of exactly what you're up to here, or do we have to hurt you?' That might not have been exactly what he said, but it was something like that. He uses words better than me, you know?"

"Anyway, the bitch looked pretty calm, even though she had three blokes in her bedroom. That made me

kind of worried. What the hell could she do if she wasn't the slightest bit scared? She was a little thing, barely any muscle on her. She should have been bloody terrified. Instead, she just laughed.

"She looked at the three of us. Alan looked really uncomfortable as she looked him over. She said something about him being weak-willed but 'cute.' I don't think he liked that at all. Then she turned back to Josh and said something like, 'I'm sure your mistress would love to know what Adrian's doing. Bad luck. This is working far too well for him to share, and we do damn well out of it as well. Can you say the same? Does your mistress treat you well?'"

"Josh sat down at the end of the bed and looked at her for a while, doing that slitty-eyed thing again. Eventually he said that wasn't the answer he was looking for. Then he motioned to Alan. Alan hesitated for a second and then hit her. I don't know how he does it, but when he punches someone, it hurts. It really hurts. It sent her sprawling across the bed and down onto the floor. I guess this really is turning into a confession, isn't it? Breaking and entering. Assault. Damn lucky that you're not the police. Alan turned to Josh and asked if he was sure. That was stupid. He turned his back on the bitch.

"She shot over the bed, screeching, and lunged for Alan. He screamed in pain and lashed out at her, knocking her down again. I was muttering the Lord's Prayer under my breath, and I could feel the heat rise in me and wash out. As she stumbled to her feet, she was pushed backwards towards the wall by the thing I do. I moved to keep her trapped in the corner of the room.

"I could see why Alan yelled. Her hands had turned into claws. They were horrible. Nothing like the claws you see on animals. They were smooth and black, and looked sharp. She was trying to get at us, but couldn't reach. Said something about Adrian eating us alive.

"Josh was over with Alan. He looked worried. He said he thought Alan would be okay, but that I might need to help him in a moment. Then Josh picked up the metal lamp in the corner with both hands. I could see it begin to smolder. He walked over to the bitch, keeping just out of her reach. And then he told her in that voice when he's furious and terrified at the same time that if he didn't get some answers, he was going to beat the hell out of her then and there. She just snarled at him, so he swung at her with the lamp. It hit her hard. She went down like a ton of bricks and didn't get up again. The lamp broke when he did it, but it didn't look like it would matter. She was out of it.

"Josh turned and nodded at me, so I dashed over to Alan and took a look at his back. He was in a pretty bad way. The claws had cut deep and he was losing blood fast. I put my hands on the wounds, and just

concentrated on making him better. I normally pray when I do that. I was worried and a bit flustered, so I didn't bother this time, and do you know what, Father? It worked all the same."

"Sometimes the Lord hears and answers the prayers we don't speak."

"Hmm. Maybe. Anyway, as soon as I'd done what I could for Alan and got him back on his feet, I checked on Josh. He was crouched over her, tying her hands and legs with the flex from the light. When he saw Alan was upright again, he called him over and told him to find out what he could about the woman. Alan nodded, crouched down and started to concentrate. His eyes went a little funny and he stared into space. Josh turned the radio on, cranked the music up loud and raided the minibus for several bottles of spirits. I was confused.

"Got to make the room like we're getting pissed up and having a party in here,' he explained. 'We made a lot of noise. Someone might come looking.' I nodded and turned back to Alan. He was staring down at the woman in disbelief. Josh asked him what was up. I'll never forget what he said or the way that he said it.

REVELATIONS

"Alan's eyes were open-wide in shock. I think he'd been expecting bad stuff, but what he'd seen caught him by surprise. 'He gave her sight,' he whispered. 'She was blind, and he made her see. No wonder she worships him. Jesus, Josh, are you sure we're doing the right thing here?' Josh looked at them. The claws had gone. She just looked like a battered woman, tied up. It was like something from a bad thriller or a police video."

"Restored her sight?"

"That's what I said, Father."

"Sweet Mary, Mother of Jesus. He'd performed a miracle on her?"

"If you want to call it that, then yeah. If what Alan saw was true, I guess he performed a miracle on her. She certainly seemed to think it was something like that."

"How do you know? She was unconscious, surely?"

"Yeah, well, she was, but Josh had other ideas about that. He sat on the bed for a little while, thinking. I carried on scattering empty booze bottles around the room. I drank a few of them — I bloody well needed it, I can tell you. That's when Josh told me to make her better. I asked him if he was off his fucking rocker. He just shook his head, and said we needed to know her take on things. I told him we'd be in danger. He said we'd put her down easily enough when unprepared. She should be pretty easy to deal with when injured and tied up.

"You know what, Father? I did it. I didn't like doing it. It went against everything I feel about these bastards, but I did it. I didn't fix her right up, though. Just made her well enough to talk.

"As she came round, Josh asked her how long she'd been blind. She stared at him. 'He must be pretty powerful to give you your sight back,' he said, real casual-like. Her eyes lit up. He'd hit the right button. We could barely shut her up after that. She told us loads. She'd been born with an eye problem. I can't remember what it was called. It meant she slowly lost her sight and went blind by her early 20s. She got miserable and depressed. She went on a couple of courses and they made a difference, or so she claimed. Then Powell himself asked if she believed and trusted him. She said she did. It made me sick listening to it. She sounded just like my wife.

"I guess he said he could feel how much she believed in him. And then he gave her her sight back. Well, he bloody well had her, then, didn't he? Even I can see that. Bloody hell! I mean, I've heard of people getting crushes on doctors and nurses that fix them up. Imagine what it must be like to have someone give you your sight back, just like that. Y'know, if I hadn't seen how wrong this bitch was, I'd be believing in him myself. Sight is one thing, but razor claws and a bad attitude are a whole other. Poor woman, she never really stood a chance, did she?"

"I suppose not."

THOU SHALT NOT KILL

"Anyway, then she said something really strange. She said he showed her his true self and that it was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen. I think she expected us to understand, as if we'd been through the same thing. Josh was playing along with her pretty well, though, which is just as well. I would have blown it then. He wasn't actually agreeing with her, but he wasn't disagreeing. He asked her to describe what he actually looked like and she started crying. She said something about wings and a face of, what was it again, grace or power or something.

"Josh asked if she was one of many people that he'd helped. She got quite angry at that. Jealous, almost. She snapped something about only a few special people who really loved him being blessed. That's creepy. She used the same word you do, Father."

"Yes.... Did she tell you much more?"

"Nah. I think Josh was getting a bit twitchy. We'd been in there a good half hour and made a hell of a lot of noise. I know that he wanted out of there as soon as he could, and I sure as hell did, too. But he wanted to leave her behind and I...."

"You what?"

"Look, Father. You have to understand that my wife is involved in all of this. She's in danger. She's the only one who matters. I love her more than anything. I had to do it, you know? It was the right thing to do. You said it yourself. She served the Devil. She had to die, right?"

"You... you killed her?"

"Yeah. It was pretty easy, really. Easier than I expected. I used the lamp. It felt right, Father. I'm sure it was the right thing to do. She was wrong, wasn't she? She was one of them. She screwed with Alan, so she could screw with other people, ones who couldn't protect themselves. I had to protect them, right? It was the only thing I could do. You can see that, can't you?"

"Father? Father?"

FORGIVENESS

"I needed a moment, child. How did the others react?"

"Alan was disgusted and confused. He was still shaken up by what he'd seen about her and whatever it was Powell was. Josh just looked at me sad and didn't say a bloody word. Not a single bloody thing, after all we've been through together. That was worse, I think, than Alan being so fucking judgmental about it.

"Josh insisted that we go back to our rooms and wait the night out. We were all wearing gloves, so there weren't any prints to give us away. We learnt that one a while ago. Anything else, like Alan's blood, would take time to trace back to us, so long as no one saw us. We did okay on that. It would look more suspicious if we just ran for it.

"So we went to breakfast the next morning. Alan didn't sit with us. He went and sat with some of the others over breakfast. We all acted surprised when she

WEDNESDAY 12TH

Father.

I pray for your guidance in understanding Jason's confession. Lord, how can creatures that appear monstrous in the eyes of your blessed perform miracles? Surely that is the province of you and your saints alone. If such creatures do exist, and act as he described, then I am very much afraid that my doubts will prove well founded and my faith will crumble.

Lord, if you hear any of this, please guide me. Should I have condemned Jason's actions? Can such acts really be part of your plan for the world? Would you really give your blessing to a person who would commit such an act if it was not part of your plan?

I know that the Book of Job teaches us that you allow Satan to test our faith and that we must not question your decisions, but that is a hard lesson to take to heart. I have not felt the Holy Spirit in me since the moment you opened my eyes and then closed them again, leaving me to watch as others did your work. I do what I can to guide them and give them shelter in this church, and truly you blessed us by sending that American doctor and then Paul to guide us. But now Jason brings further doubts and questions. Once more, Lord, I pray for your guidance. Without it, I don't know if I can carry on.

Lord, please show me what is right.

didn't turn up for the course. The maids found the body at around 11. Then the police came and they took addresses from us all, and then they let us go. We used the same fake names and addresses we gave when we checked in. I guess the fake IDs stood up like Josh and Serena said. Amazing what a bit of money and the right contacts can do.

"It didn't stop the police from questioning us for bloody hours, though. They dragged all of us through questioning one at a time. They called Alan back twice and I was sweating for a little bit, but he obviously didn't say anything. As soon as we were given the all clear, which took forever, we headed out."

"How long ago was that, child?"

"About three hours ago. I came straight here. I needed to talk about what I'd done. Alan won't talk to me and Josh refuses to discuss what I did. You were the only person I could trust. This is my confession, Father. I killed a woman because she served them. Am I going to Hell?"

"I thought you doubted the existence of God, child. That's what you told me."

"Father, I killed a woman. I don't know what to think. Shit, just tell me that I did the right thing. Tell

me that she was working for the Devil and that I did God's work by killing her. Please, Father. Take away this guilt."

"Well, the Bible—"

"Please, Father. No more preaching. Just tell me."

"Well... if she really was in willing service to the Devil and you truly repent, I'm sure there can be—"

PRAYER FOR THE DAMNED

"Thank you, Father. You've freed me to do what needs doing."

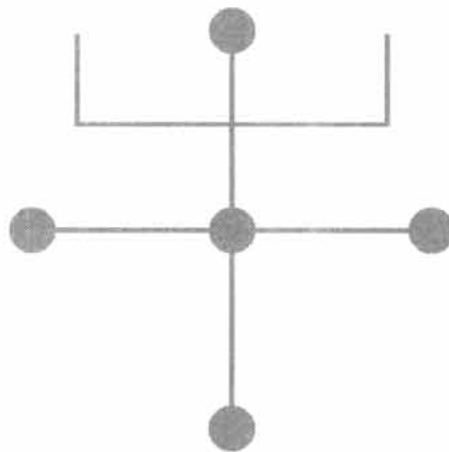
"I'm sorry?"

"This needs to be dealt with. I don't know what they are. Maybe you're right and Adrian Powell really is some devil. It doesn't really matter, though. It's hurting the people I love and it has got to go. Josh is waiting for me outside. He doesn't share our faith, but he's fighting for the good, too. That's all that matters, right?"

"I can't lie to you, my son. I don't know what to say. What you've done is between you and God. I can't understand His ways."

"No Hail Mary's, Father?"

"No, my child. I'm not sure I have the right to offer you anymore."





CHAPTER 4: EXILED FROM LIGHT

The Grizzly Bear is huge and wild,
He has devoured the infant child.
— "Infant Innocence," A. E. Housman
Blow hope to terror, blow seeing to blind
(blow pity to envy and soul to mind)
— "What if a Much of a Which of a Wind," e. e. cummings

C:/RECOVEREDFILES/DOCUMENTS/ANEGLA/DIARY/
THERE__ARE__MANY__THINGS

Dear Diary,

There are many things I do not understand.

I am learning to do many things. I have learned how to make things happen outside of my body. I can speak in an old kind of way and people will listen, or my voice will make them afraid. I can talk to fire in its own language. And lately I have found something inside of me, something that I can turn inside-out so that my body becomes another body, though I don't know exactly how to do that yet.

But also, remembering these things makes me feel afraid. When I do these things, something inside me is used up. Something becomes empty in me. Food is not enough. I need something else, and I don't know what it is. I must be careful.

The other thing is I wonder if the Mother is watching me. Not the Mother who lives in this house where I live, but the other Mother who lives in the sky, or in the stars, or in the buzzing atoms that I once could see (I think I remember). If the Mother sees what I do, she may come down from the sky and put me in the Closet. Or she may send the good children after me. Where are the good children? If I don't think about it, I have the idea that the good children should be everywhere, but I do not see them. If I think about it, I don't know who the good children are or where they came from.

This Mother who lives with me is afraid of me and hates me. I like that. Perhaps if I punish this Mother, the other Mother will suffer.

This person Calvin comes and talks to me every day. He has a lot of questions. I like to talk to him so I answer. Sometimes he looks at me in a funny way. I wonder what he is thinking. He seems to be the only one interested in what I do. I must be careful. He is not one of the good children.

But maybe they talk to him.

EXPERIMENTAL LOG

Date Code: Ophiuchus-ninety-seven zeta

Experiment #27 (continued)

Objective: Second attempt to establish communication with possessing spirit

Method: Conversation while walking to school. This time the recorder was hidden in my backpack.

Results: Transcript follows (edited for clarity).

CM: Hey Angie, how are you feeling today?

AL: I feel fine, Calvin. I feel a little tired.

CM: How do you like being back in school?

AL: It reminds me of many things. I think it helps me for now.

CM: Helps you? How?

AL: Part of me can go to sleep while the other part knows what to do.

CM: How many parts of you are there? Are you more than one person?

AL: I used to be more than one person, I think, but now I'm just me.

CM: Angie, do you know about the Fritz family?

AL: Who are they?

CM: The kids, Mike and Jimmy. They used to go to our school. Do you remember them?

AL: I don't think so. Why?

CM: They died. It was a terrible accident of some kind. Their car caught on fire and they were all burned up. Did you hear about it?

AL: (Whispers) I won't go back.

CM: What? You won't go where?

AL: I won't go back to the closet. And anyone who wants me to is my enemy. And anyone who is my enemy will be shown no mercy.

CM: Jeez, Angie. Take it easy. Don't look at me like that. It's Calvin, remember?

AL: Okay.

CM: So (pause) So, who are your enemies exactly?

AL: The mother and the good children.

CM: The good children? Can you tell me about them?

AL: Do you know the good children, Calvin? Have you seen them?

CM: Well, I don't know. I mean, I'm not sure who you're talking about. Are the good children like you?

AL: Have you seen others like me?

CM: Not exactly. I've seen a lot of strange things, that's for sure.

AL: Tell me.

CM: Well, I've seen plenty of zombies, walking dead. The old quarry used to be crawling with them. Somebody said that the Indians used to bury their dead there, back before it was flooded, but I don't know about that. These corpses looked pretty new. And I've seen ghosts. If you go to that spot in the woods, where the hotel burned down back in the 1800s, you see them. There was one, he had no head, but if I led him to this certain tree his head would appear and he'd answer a question. The next time his head would be gone again, though.

AL: But have you seen the good children? They have wings and light.

CM: I read about a winged woman that somebody saw in Silar City, but a lot of hunters think that's just a myth. You know, Angie, it really feels good to talk to you about this. I don't know why I never did before. It's so hard not to have anybody to talk to about this stuff. It's kind of a rule to keep it secret.

AL: Who made the rule, Calvin?

CM: I guess it's the Messengers who make all the rules. You know, your name means messenger. I mean, it comes from the Latin word for messenger.

AL: Who are the Messengers, Calvin? If you don't mind telling me.

CM: Sure. See, the Messengers gave me the secret sight, and

Two things happened at this point. First, talking about the Messengers gave me a sudden idea. And this idea surprised me so much that I dropped my book bag. That made the tape recorder knock against the ground and I guess the batteries fell out, so the tape stopped. But we didn't really do much more talking for reasons I'll go into in a minute. Anyway, what I suddenly realized was that I hadn't looked at Angie with the deep sight. That's what I call it, anyway. It's a way of looking that just lets me know about a monster, sometimes. I couldn't believe I hadn't thought of doing it before. It just goes to show how long it had been since I'd done anything like this. Anyway, it all surprised me so much that I dropped my bag.

I bent down to pick it up, and I just thought, well, I should do it before I get distracted and forget again, so I turned on the secret sight and held my breath and kind of pushed with my eyes to make the vision deeper. And I looked at Angie.

Like before, Angie's body kind of faded into the background and I saw this tall woman for a second, then a kind of sheet of flame. It was very bright but not so bright that I couldn't look at it. And then the deep sight kicked in and I really saw, and not just saw but some kind of understanding came into my head (it's hard to explain). I could see that Angie and the spirit are like a wick and a flame. They can't be separated. If they are, the flame goes out. The spirit can't really survive if it's forced out of Angie's body.

The deep sight only lasts for like a second, and then you just know what you know. I didn't want to keep staring at those flames so I let the secret sight go off. Then I thought to look at my watch, and I realized we were going to be late for school. We both ran and got to the school yard just in time for assembly.

Conclusions: First of all, I don't have any doubts about Angie's involvement in the deaths of the Fritz family. Just me mentioning it clearly had an effect on her and she started talking about "enemies" and all that. So I'm certain that she was behind it somehow. I think this spirit is very dangerous.

Second, what's all this about the good children? I can't really understand what it means but it's obviously very important to her. Are they real? Why is she afraid of them? Who are they?

Also, I have to think straight. It was stupid of me to start blabbing about the Messengers and stuff. I don't know what came over me.

And the most disturbing thing is what I learned with the deep sight. That spirit definitely needs to be inside Angie or it will blow out like a candle. Which means it's not going to leave willingly. And if Angie is the wick, does that mean the spirit is burning her up? Will she end up just burned all away like a candle when the wax is all gone?

I just thought of something. Maybe Angie really did die that night and the spirit is the only thing keeping her body alive. But if that was true, wouldn't she be a

zombie? Is it possible this is how all zombies start out, and eventually her body will start to rot?

No, that can't be right. But whatever's going on it's not normal. I mean, it's not how these things usually go. It's real interesting and I have to figure it out before anything happens.

A DAY PASSES

Not a day passes, not a minute or a second without a corpse.

— "To Think of Time," Walt Whitman

Date Code: Aquarius-thirteen-eta

Today is the day I meet the spirit talker. I'm so nervous, when I got up this morning I felt like I was going to throw up. I just wish I knew what to expect. This woman could be trouble. She might want to hurt Angie or she might get mad at me. We had a spirit talker in our old group and he was pretty nice, but I have no way of knowing what this woman will be like. We're meeting at Weaver's scrap yard. That way, if something goes wrong she won't know where I live.

I'm not writing down her name or even her handle.

I don't think I'll tell her what I saw with the deep sight. I'm not even sure I could explain it so she could understand. She might take it the wrong way. I don't know how much I can trust her yet, so I'll hold that back for now.

I'm going over to Angie's now and then we're going to Weaver's. Angie doesn't know the reason, but she never seems to ask me why we're doing things. Before her accident, Angie always had things she wanted to do. Anything to get out of the house as long as she could. Now she doesn't seem to care if she stays home or goes out.

MISSION LOG

Date Code: Aquarius-thirteen-eta (continued)

At about a quarter to one, Angie and I got to the place in the fence where there's a hole you can squeeze through to get into the scrap yard. I led Angie around until we got to that section where all the Bug cars are. I saw the lady before she saw me. She was older than I thought and looked kind of like a teacher, and I think she was Japanese or something like that. She looked at us and then didn't pay any attention until I got close and held up my hand with the mission sign drawn on it. "Are you Mrs. —?" I asked her, and she nodded, looking kind of surprised.

"You're C?" she asked. "You didn't tell me..."

"I know, I'm a kid," I said. "I wanted you to take me seriously so I didn't mention it."

"And, this is your friend?"

"Yes," I said, and for a second Mrs. — looked very sad. Then her face blanked out again.

"Okay," she said to me. "What's your name, darling?" she asked Angie. Angie looked at me and I nodded. "It's okay, Angie, she's a friend of mine," I said,

which was kind of stupid since Angie just heard us introducing each other. Oh well. She didn't seem to mind. She said, "Everybody here calls me Angie."

I could tell that Mrs. — was looking at Angie with the sight, because a kind of surprised look flickered across her face for just a moment. "Angie," she said, "would you mind if I asked you some questions?"

"Calvin asks me questions all the time," Angie said, and I went kind of cold because now Mrs. — knew my real first name. "Go ahead."

"Will you tell me what you are?"

Angie stared at Mrs. — for a good minute and her jaw kind of hung open. She had sort of a far away look. Then she said, "I was one of the light bearers. Now I don't know what I am."

Angie sat right down in the dirt and I thought she was going to cry, but instead she just looked at the ground. "I don't know what I am," she said again.

Mrs. — knelt down next to her and put a hand on her shoulder. "It's all right," she said. "I understand you're confused. But maybe I can help you figure some things out, okay?" She was talking in a real nice kind of voice. "Would you like to talk to me for a little while? Would that be okay?"

Angie nodded. "Okay. But I think I want to talk to you alone."

I didn't get what she meant, because we were in a kind of hidden part of the scrap yard and there really was nobody else around. But then Mrs. — looked at me, and then I got it. "Wait a minute," I said, "I have to be here too."

"If you really want this to work, I think you should do as she asks," Mrs. — said. She walked over to me and was talking in a low voice. "You're going to have to trust me, young man. Without trust, this won't work." I remembered that Mr. Franklin said something kind of like that once, but then I also remembered the whole thing with Mrs. Kramer, and she seemed like a nice lady, too. At first.

"Angie, are you sure you don't want me to stay?"

Angie just looked at me kind of sad and shook her head.

"I guess I'll go then. I guess I'll come back and check in... in like an hour. But you have to tell me everything," I said, whispering that last part.

"Fine," Mrs. — said. "We'll be right here."

So I walked back to the hole in the fence and down the street to where the bus stop is. I sat on the curb and have been writing all this down. I've thought about sneaking back to watch what was going on, or to get my tape recorder, but that wouldn't be trusting and who knows, it could just screw everything up. Still, I'm worried that Mrs. — will think Angie is just a little kid. I know she has the sight and everything, but still.

Okay, I just thought of something. As long as I'm over here I might as well check on Experiment #17. By the time I get over there and back the time should be up. So that's what I'm going to do.

C:/RECOVEREDFILES/DOCUMENTS/AMEGLA/DIARY/
I_DON_T_WANT_TO_REMEMBER

Dear Diary,

Something happened to me today. It was frightening at first but I think it has helped me. Only now I have many things to think about and understand.

Today I went with Calvin for a walk and we met a woman who said she was our friend. She wanted to ask some questions and I thought that would be okay. First she stared at me kind of funny. Then she asked me a question. I can't remember what the words were but as soon as she said it, all these feelings came to me.

I looked at Calvin and at the woman and they seemed all alone. The whole world seemed alone. The world should have been full of others, all working together to make sure Calvin and the woman and all the people were happy and safe. And all the protectors would be looking to me for their commands, and I would be directing them, and I would know what to tell them because I carried the light that made all things clear.

But then as soon as all these things were in my head they went out again because I saw that I was weak and alone, too, and I had done something very bad to be put in this place. I wanted to cry but I didn't. I could not bear to have those two looking at me, to have them see me that way. I asked for Calvin to go away because I wanted to talk to the lady some more.

After that the lady asked me more questions and I don't know what I said. But pretty soon I started to think: why does she want me to remember these things from before I was born? I wanted her to stop, so I talked to her in the voice that makes them be my friend. I asked her to tell me why she was here and what she wanted from me. But it didn't really work and she kept wanting to talk about me.

That made me afraid. And then she started to talk about Angie and how I wasn't really Angie was I? And I started wondering if she was one of the good children come to punish me. I didn't think it was because I don't think the good children look like regular people, but then who was she? I started to get mad, because who was this person to talk to me like this, to see me all small and dirty and without light? I was glad Calvin was not there because he is Angie's friend and I don't want him to be hurt.

Anyway, I do not have to worry about that lady anymore.

THEY WILL FIND YOU

You have only to wait, and they will find you.

— "Messengers," Louise Gluck

Date Code: Aquarius-thirteen-eta

I'm all out of breath when I think about what happened today and it's hard to keep things right in my head. But I need to keep the logs right, so I'll go slow and put things down as they happened.

So I want to check in on Experiment #17. I haven't thought much about it in the past week because of all this

with Angie. As I was walking over to the well, I was trying to think of a way to end the experiment. I hadn't considered it before, but what am I supposed to do with the zombie once I'm done studying it? I don't think I have any way to kill it, and I sure can't haul it out of there, can I? I really need to put some thought into getting a group together somehow because I can't do too many things.

Anyway, I was kneeling down by the well cover to take off the padlock. (I got tired of picking the lock all the time so a few weeks back I replaced the padlock with one that looks okay but actually just pulls apart if you know how to do it.) When I was just about to pull open the lock I heard a noise behind me.

I turned around and it was Dave O'Reilly and two of his guys. I don't know their names.

"What are you doing there exactly, son?"

I stood up and it was hard to see because the sun was in my eyes. "Nothin'," I said. "Just, uh, looking."

O'Reilly took me by the shoulder and dragged me over to him, then kicked at the lock and it fell apart. "Miller," he said, "I should have known it was you." I pulled out of his grip and he just kind of pushed me but I didn't fall down. "You left footprints all around this thing, kid. Stupid."

One of the guys asked, "Who is this kid, Dave?"

"He's Calvin Miller. Used to be part of Franklin's group. You know, that group that got killed."

"You mean he's got the call?" One of the guys said. I don't know which one.

"Yeah, but it looks like he could use some direction."

He grabbed me by the arm and told the guys to open up the well. "Pay close attention, kid," he said.

For a second I thought they were going to throw me down there. It was hard to breathe and I tried to pull my arm away. "Settle down," Dave said, "or you'll really regret it." Then I saw that the other two guys were carrying something, and I watched as they dumped a whole big can of gas down there, and then another. I wasn't able to see over the edge, but I could kind of hear something moving around, like splashing.

"This is how we do it," one of the guys said, and he lit up this bottle that had a rag sticking out of it. He dropped it into the well. There was a loud whoosh and a huge black cloud puffed out. "Damn," the guy said, "Look at that thing run in circles. Like a chicken with his head cut off." He spit some tobacco juice into the hole.

"Okay," Dave said, pulling me away from the well and then standing in front of me. He let go of my arm. "You listen up. Your days as a free agent are over. You work for me now. You do what I say, when I say. I say jump, you ask how high. That clear?"

I didn't say anything because I was afraid I would cry if I tried to talk.

"That clear?" he yelled, and I had to just nod my head.

"Good. We're gonna keep a close eye on you, junior, and God help you if I find you been hiding any more of

the enemy or keeping secrets from me. We'll make a soldier of you yet, but until then, you don't do a damn thing without my order. Got that?"

I nodded again, and he kind of pushed me away from him. "Good," he said again. "Now you run on home and we'll be in touch."

I started to walk away when one of the guys said, "Hey, Dave, you want I should walk him home? Make sure he don't get into trouble?"

"He's already in trouble. I expect he'll stay out of it for the time being. Besides, we need to get to the scrap yard and find a new door for the Chevy."

I thought I might throw up when I heard that. So I started running, running across the field toward Weaver's, trying to think of what I would say to Mrs. —. Behind me I heard, "Hey Dave, I don't think this ol' boy is down for the count yet."

"Shit, let me have a look at it."

By the time I got to the hole in the fence, my side felt like it had a knife in it and my legs couldn't run anymore. I squeezed through and kind of limped to the spot where Mrs. — and Angie were. Only when I got there, I saw Angie alone.

"Hi, Calvin," Angie said. "I've been waiting for you."

I couldn't think of what to say. Then I had to ask, "Where's Mrs. —?"

"She had to leave," Angie told me. "She went away."

"Is she coming back?"

"I don't think so."

I started to ask why she left, but then I thought of O'Reilly and his guys coming and decided the best thing to do was to get out of there. So I told Angie we had to hurry, and we snuck through the fence and headed for home.

I spent the rest of the afternoon talking to Angie but she wouldn't tell me anything about what happened with

Alighieri,

Thank you for your recent message. I appreciate your indulgence in communicating by physical means. I've made it something of a hobby to order my thoughts and express them in this manner. Communiqués of critical importance can be sent in the traditional mode, of course.

In any case, I wanted to tell you that my strategy may have paid off. You mock me for spending so much time with my ear to the firmament, but a few days ago I detected an unmistakable disturbance. Since then I've felt more ripples. Someone is definitely evoking in this area. Once I close in on the origin, I'll let you know whether we have another convert to our cause or one less rival with which to contend.

Milton

Mrs. —. All she'd say is they talked for a while and then she left. It's very frustrating, because now I have no information about their conversation and it may be critical. I sent an email to Mrs. — and I'll just have to wait for her to respond, I guess. After a while Angie said she didn't want to answer any more questions and that she was going home because she didn't want me to make her mad.

I'm nervous about O'Reilly and what he's going to do. He knows where I live and everything and he has a lot of friends. I have to get this thing with Angie figured out before he finds out. But I just don't feel like I'm getting any closer.

**C:/RECOVEREDFILES/DOCUMENTS/ANEGLA/DIARY/
I__FIGURED__SOMETHING__OUT**

Dear Diary,

I figured something important out today.

When I was only Angie I sometimes would stay at other houses and keep watch over the little ones there. It was a way that Angie could be away from the Mother and she would get some money. I remember now that Angie was collecting as much of this money as she could get because she wanted to go away, far away from the Mother one day.

Today one of the people in the other houses asked me if I could come to watch over her children at night. Even though Aya did not like to be told what to do, Angie very much wanted to do it so I said that yes I would.

There were two of the little ones in the house.

Mostly I let Angie talk to them and play with them. Angie was very glad to be doing things that she used to do before I was born (that is why Aya lets Angie go to school). The little ones were happy to be with Angie and they like her very much. It felt very good the way that they liked me. No one has liked me that way since I was born (except maybe Calvin). I wanted them to like me even more so I showed them some of the things that Aya can do and they were laughing and happy. And then this empty hunger in me started to fill. There was a warmness coming out of the little ones that was going into me and making me full.

I am your secret, special friend I said to the little ones. I will be your friend forever and I will give you special presents if you will promise to always love me and be my friend.

The little ones said yes and now they are connected to me. They are mine and their warmth is helping fill the empty places inside me.

Tomorrow I will find more little ones.

MISSION LOG

Date Code: Delphinus-seventeen-kappa

Angie doesn't seem to want to answer many of my questions anymore. I think I may have pushed her too far. I haven't heard anything from Mrs. — in three days now and I need to know if she found out anything. I tried to get Angie to tell me what happened, but she's become distant. Here's the only part of the conversation that gave me any new information:

"Angie, do you remember that woman we talked to at Weaver's? And you made me leave so she could talk to you alone?"

"Yes."

"Well, I was wondering what happened after I left. What happened to the lady?"

"I told you, she left. Why do you keep asking me about it?"

"Did something bad happen to her?"

"What if it did?"

"So something bad did happen to her."

"Whatever happened was probably only what she deserved."

"Why would she deserve something bad to happen to her?"

"Maybe because I said so. When someone hurts you, you hurt them back. If they can't stop you, then you do what you want."

This was very disturbing to me. I never heard Angie say anything like this before. She never wanted to hurt anybody. It was like she had totally forgotten the difference between right and wrong. I wanted to get more information since she seemed to be cooperating.

I asked her, "Did Mrs. — do something to hurt you?"

"Why are you always asking me so many questions, Calvin? I don't want to talk about this anymore."

After that I backed off.

I think I'm in trouble. I'm afraid to post anything on h-n because one of O'Reilly's group might see it. I don't think they know my handle but I can't be sure, and anyway, they might be able to figure it out by what I write. And if any of them goes back and looks at old posts they could see where I asked for help from a spirit talker. And if someone who knows Mrs. — starts posting about her, O'Reilly is sure to see it and come asking.

I never should have got anyone else involved in this. Time is running out. I have to figure out what to do.

PERSONAL LOG

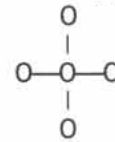
Date Code: Lyra-seven-phi

I'm in more trouble than I thought.

I was at my locker this morning hanging up my coat and stuff, when I found a note that somebody shoved through the crack.

Calvin:

Remember, we're watching you.



Then while I was looking at it I heard somebody behind me. It was one of the custodians. I don't even know his name, but he was mopping up a spot on the floor. I



looked at him and he turned to look at me. He nodded and raised up his hand and I could see that he had drawn the sign on his palm with a magic marker or something. He looked at me kind of mean and said so I could barely hear it, "Dave says hi." Then just kind of stared at me.

That's when I saw Angie coming down the hall.

She was getting closer and I didn't know what to do because if the guy looked at her with the secret sight, that would be the end of it. So I tried to be all normal and everything with Angie but I was very nervous. She walked with me to class and the guy just went back to mopping the floor.

I have to make sure this guy doesn't get a good look at her or get suspicious about her. For all I know Dave could have other people in the school on his side. He may watch over all the kids to make sure there's nothing going on. That's what I would do if I was him. Is there some way I can keep Angie from going to school? Convince her to pretend she's sick or something? Or would that make people suspicious?

NOT BORN TO SURVIVE

But we were not born to survive
Only to live

— "The River of Bees," W. S. Merwin.

Date Code: Cygnus-eighty-three-tau

It's been two days since that note in my locker. I'm really afraid Angie is going to do something at school that will get her noticed by O'Reilly. Lately, she seems to have a lot more energy. Well, not energy exactly. It's just that she doesn't act so spaced out all the time. When I talk to her she still doesn't speak the same way she used to, but she seems to be more alert. In school she has even started talking to the other kids. Before, she was like me. Nobody wanted to talk to her and she didn't like to talk to anybody. But now it's different. Like today in the cafeteria, she was waiting in line to get a soda. It was a long line and I heard Angie saying how she was in a kind of a hurry and could she get to the front if nobody minded. I was sitting near there and I knew that would make everybody mad, and I was worried what Angie would do. But instead, everybody was like, okay, go ahead and was all nice to her.

Later when we were walking back home from school she started talking about how some teacher was looking at her funny. I asked who, but she said she couldn't remember. (She still has trouble remembering the names of people she used to know.) But then she said that if that teacher was her enemy he would be very sorry. I wanted to ask about that but we were at Angie's house and she said she had stuff to do and would talk to me later.

That's one thing. The other is that I was just about home when I saw two of the little kids in the neighborhood goofing around. It was the Boyer kids. They live in that blue and red trailer just three rows from the west entrance to the park. I wasn't really paying attention to them, then all of a

sudden the "God Bless Our Home" sign in front of the trailer changed to say CORRUPTION SPREADS.

It took a few seconds for me to catch my breath. Then I turned on the secret sight and looked at the kids. And sure enough, there was something strange about them. I walked over and said "Hey, you guys," or something so I could get a better look. They didn't look as off as a monster does, I guess, but there was a kind of glow around them. It was a little bit like fire and it sort of reminded me of what Angie looks like under the sight, only not as strong.

I asked them if they'd seen Angie around lately.

"Oh yeah," the boy told me. "She babysat for us the other night."

"Do you have any candy?" the girl asked me. "Give us some candy now."

I ignored the girl and asked the boy, whose name is Paul, to tell me about the other night. He told me about some stuff they watched on TV and what they had for dinner and stuff. Then he said, "We love Angie. She's magic."

His sister, whose name is Julie, said, "That's secret, Paul! You're not supposed to tell!"

I said, "That's okay. I'm a friend of Angie's. She won't mind. What do you mean, she's magic?"

"She's our secret angel friend, and she can do anything and some day she's going to take all her friends up into heaven where we can all eat candy and play with puppies and never go to bed!"

Then Julie started to yell something like "Hi-yah! Hi-yah! He's telling the secrets!"

Paul started to yell at her to shut up, and then they both ran away shouting things at each other. Except for the strange mark on them I saw with the secret sight, there didn't seem to be anything unusual about them.

I spent the next three hours walking all around the park, trying to get a look at every kid. (If they weren't outside playing, I thought of reasons to knock on their doors, like saying my Aunt wanted to borrow stuff). I looked at a bunch of kids and I found five more that had the mark on them. There was another brother and sister, two brothers and one kid who's an only child. And all of them had Angie for a babysitter at some point.

One weird thing happened, too. I was at the Mulvey's trailer. Their daughter Jean is an only child and has the mark like I mentioned. I was in their living room while Mr. Mulvey looked around for the morning paper (I told him Uncle Pete wanted to look at it) and Jean was sitting on the couch when Mrs. Mulvey said it was time for her to come and eat dinner. Jean said, "I'd like to eat dinner here on the couch, please." Mrs. Mulvey didn't bat an eye. She just said, "Sure, honey, that's okay." Then Jean says, "I don't want any broccoli. I want to have chocolate ice cream for dinner." And Mrs. Mulvey just smiles at her and says, "Of course, if that's what you want. I got your favorite ice cream just like you wanted. I'll bring it

right over to you." Mr. Mulvey didn't say a thing about it, either. He just handed me the paper and smiled.

Angie has done something to these kids and I don't know what. I should try and observe more families for strange behavior, but between keeping an eye on Angie and watching out for O'Reilly and his gang, I just feel like I'm losing it. I wish the stupid Messengers had picked someone else for this.

WE TALKED

We talked between the rooms,
Until the moss had reached our lips,
And covered up our names.
— "I Died for Beauty," Emily Dickinson

Date Code: Lepus-eleven-delta
I feel all confused.

About an hour ago I heard someone tapping on my window. It was Angie and she told me to meet her outside. It was dark and I was nervous to go out there, but I did. As soon as I got out the door, Angie came out of nowhere and kind of grabbed me. She hugged me real tight and I wasn't sure what was going on. Then she let go and I could see she was afraid.

"Calvin," she told me. "You have to help me."

"What is it?" I asked her. She shushed me and took my hand and made me run with her down the row. We ducked behind the big dumpsters. My hand got all sweaty holding hers. "Look over there," she told me. I saw that way down the lane there was a car, driving real slow. I saw the taillights getting farther away and then they stopped. I looked at Angie and she said, "They're after me, Calvin. I don't know what to do."

"Who's after you?"

"The people in that car."

"I don't understand," I told her. "Who's in the car? What do they want?"

"I don't know who it is. I just know there are people in that car who are looking for me. They're after me. I know it. I heard a voice that told me."

"Stay down," I told her. The car had turned around and its headlights were getting bigger as it came closer to us. I was pretty sure they wouldn't be able to see us if we kept behind the dumpster.

"Oh no, oh no," Angie was saying, kind of low. "I don't want to go back in the closet." She wasn't crying, exactly, but her voice was all scared and shaky. I don't know why, but something made me take her hand and then I was pulling her toward me. Her body was warm and soft. "Don't be afraid," I told her. "It'll be okay." It made no sense for me to say that because how did I know how things would turn out? But I just didn't want her to be scared.

The car was getting closer. It was moving real slow. I couldn't see inside the windows, and I didn't recognize it. It was a 4-door of some kind, dark green. I couldn't see the license plate. But it could only be someone from

O'Reilly's group. They'd heard of strange things happening over here. One of them might know one of the families whose kids were acting weird.

Angie was holding onto me real tight, and shaking. I didn't know what to do so I rubbed her back and told her it was okay. The car was gone for about a minute before she let go of me.

Then she turned and ran.

I wanted to yell at her to stop, but if someone really was looking for her, that would be dumb. So I got up and ran after her. She was running in a straight line, right down the lane, faster than I ever saw her run before. I could barely keep up. Before I knew it we were almost out of the park. I felt sick. I wasn't sure I could leave the park and go out into the real night.

Then Angie turned and ran through the gate that leads to the pool. By the time I got to the gate I saw her go behind the building that has the locker rooms and snack bar and stuff in it. I followed her and I saw she was on the concrete, like she'd fallen down, and she was crying.

"Don't be afraid," I said. I could see she wasn't going to stand up so I sat down next to her.

"Oh, Calvin," she was saying, "Please, you have to help me."

"Calm down," I said. "Tell me why you're so upset. Tell me who you think is after you."

Angie took both of my hands in hers. And then the next thing I know she kissed me.

It was my first kiss ever.

Her lips were soft and warm and I wasn't sure what to do exactly but it felt good. And I kind of pressed my lips into hers and I couldn't think. Then her tongue was kind of in-between my lips, and it touched my tongue and I was surprised but then before I knew it our tongues were rubbing against each other. And after a minute we had to stop to breathe.

"Are you on my side, Calvin?" she said. "Will you always be on my side?" I just looked at her and my lips felt all tingly. I was breathing kind of funny and then I realized I had a boner. I've had boners before but this one I really really felt.

I didn't know what to say to her. "I want to help you, Angie."

She took my hands again and it made me kind of shiver. My heart was really pumping fast. "Calvin, do you trust me?"

I was about to answer when there was this loud "bang" somewhere in the park. It could have been a car backfiring or a gun shot. We both got nervous. Angie looked like she was about to run again. "Wait," I said. I stood up and turned on the sight and looked all around. Everything seemed quiet and normal.

Angie was standing up now, too. And with the sight on, she looked all covered in flames. I could barely see her body behind the light. But when she walked over and put her arms around me she felt like skin and I closed my eyes and we kissed again.

When we were done with the kiss she said, "I know you wonder what has happened to me. Now I'm going to show you something."

I watched and the part of Angie that was fire seemed to go into the part of her that was her body. And then her body changed and standing in front of me was the tall lady that I had seen before with the sight. The flames were sort of outlining her, but now I could see that she was a beautiful woman with skin like gold and long red hair like fire. Something warm ran down my leg. But that didn't matter.

Her fingertips had little flames on them like candles.

It was the most incredible thing to see, and for some reason I wanted to look deeper. I squeezed my eyes tight and opened them with the deep sight. At first the vision was the same, but then it started to change. The creature seemed to get taller, but at the same time its body got more compact. Its arms and legs kind of shriveled up like they were burning until it looked like a black skeleton. Its hands were like claws and its teeth were sharp as knives. Its whole body was shaking and I knew it was in pain.

Then the deep sight was gone and the beautiful woman was standing in front of me again. And I somehow knew that the vision I'd just seen was something that could happen to the woman depending on the things she did, on the choices she made.

I had so many questions but I couldn't get any of them to turn into words at first. "You're not Angie anymore," I finally said. "Is this what you showed to the kids?"

For a moment she said nothing. Then, in a voice like an explosion, she said, "Worship me! How dare you stand before me and not worship me!"

"Are you a ghost? Is that what you were before you found Angie?"

Then all I could see was a huge burst of light, and I felt a wave of heat. Without thinking I yelled, "Don't!" and tried to jump out of the way. But nothing happened and suddenly it was dark. Angie — the creature — was gone and there was no light but the moon and stars.

Now I'm back home writing all this down and I'm desperately confused. Part of me wants to go find Angie and tell her that something bad will happen. She'll turn into



that burning skeleton thing if she's not careful. I can't let that happen. Another part of me is just mad and wants things to go back to the way they were, when Angie was just Angie and normal. And then part of me knows that it isn't really Angie anymore, and I have to think scientifically, like she's an experiment, and not interfere with whatever happens to her. But the worst thing is I have a feeling Angie is gone for good and that makes me sick to my stomach. I'll be lonely without her.

BE CAREFUL

Be careful what you do,
Because certain lies are true.
Even if you use your eyes,
What you're seeing may be lies.
— "Secret Angels," C.M.

Date Code: Serpens-thirty-seven-rho

It's been almost two weeks since the night Angie and I kissed. And just like I thought, she seems to have vanished. No one knows anything about it. A lot of stuff has happened.

First of all, Angie's mom is dead. They say she killed herself. I read in the paper that they found her body in the trailer in the closet and she shot herself. No sign of Angie. The police are looking for her and the whole trailer park is talking about where she could be. Everybody is freaked out and keeping their kids inside after dark, except those kids who have Angie's mark seem to be allowed to come and go as they please.

Three nights this week I had dreams with Angie in them, and when I woke up my pajamas and blanket were all sticky.

The other day I was walking home from school and feeling real sorry for myself being alone. I was wondering what I could have said to make Angie stay with me. I was coming up Frame road when this car pulled along side of me and somebody yelled, "Hey, kid!" I looked over and at first I didn't recognize it, but then I realized it was the same car that was driving through the park the last night I saw Angie. I thought, "Great, O'Reilly's stupid gang, what do they want?"

The car stopped and I walked over. The guy wasn't familiar. I had the feeling right away that this wasn't one of the O'Reilly guys, because he was dressed like a real rich guy. He said hello, and his voice was a little funny sounding. He had an accent that I later realized was probably British. The license plate was from out of state.

"Do you live around here?" he asked me. I just kind of shrugged, the way I do when I want people to think I'm just some dumb kid.

"Do you go to school around here?" he asked, and then didn't even wait for my answer. He just said, "Do you know a girl named Angela Linnel?"

That was enough. I turned on the secret sight. And the guy's body almost faded away completely, like with

Angie. In its place I saw a tall man with skin that was like gray stone. I remember he had two big curvy horns on the sides of his head and it looked like bird's wings on his back. But then his whole body was covered by a kind of ugly, purpley glow, kind of colored like smog or a bruise.

They guy handed me a piece of paper out the window. I took it. "If you see Angela, you call this number and tell me where she is. But don't tell her about me. Don't tell anybody about me. Forget you saw me. Just call this number if you see her." He didn't even wait for me to say anything. He just rolled up the window and drove away.

MISSION LOG

Date Code: Cephus-seventy-three-sigma

So here's my theory about what happened with Angie.

1. She was possessed by a very powerful spirit. So powerful that it either merged with her personality or completely pushed it out. This type of spirit can't leave the body once it gets in, so it has to take complete control to survive. But in the process it seems to lose some awareness of itself.

2. I think this spirit is not the ghost of a person, but something more. It got the kids on its side. Maybe it needs people's help, but doesn't want them to be independent. The kids say they still hear her voice sometimes and that she talks to them in their dreams. I don't know if that's their imagination.

3. There may be others like this spirit. The man in the car may be like it. Maybe you can recognize this type of spirit because the secret sight shows a much stronger spirit image than the human part of them. Sometimes Angie talked about having enemies that wanted to punish her, but was that Angie talking or the spirit?

AMONG ENEMIES

O loss of sight, of the I most complain!

Blind among enemies, worse than chains.

— "The Blindness of Sampson," John Milton

Date Code: Canis-twenty-three-nu

I hate Dave O'Reilly and all those guys.

I was walking to school today when a bunch of them came driving down the road in this pick-up truck. They stopped and made me get in. They put a blindfold on me and drove for a long time. When we stopped they walked me somewhere and spun me around and then took off the blindfold. I was out in the woods, in this little clearing. I heard a kind of funny sucking noise and I turned around and there was a zombie.

I tried to run, but something pulled at my ankle. They had put a kind of long handcuff on it and the other end was attached to a big cinderblock.

The zombie was coming. Slowly, but he was coming.

"Look around you, boy," I heard a voice. They were standing at the other end of the clearing, O'Reilly and his guys, watching. The zombie was coming closer and I

ran and stretched the chain as far as it would go, with the zombie limping after me. It had skin like gray lunchmeat and it smelled like a dead dog. Its lips were moving but all the sound it made was a kind of sucking.

"In the leaves," somebody yelled. I kept moving to stay ahead of the zombie. We were going in circles and all the guys were laughing.

Then I saw something shining on the ground. It was a gun. A shotgun. I looked at it like I didn't know what it was. The zombie was right behind me all of a sudden and I bent to grab the gun and ducked out of its way. I turned around and the zombie was clawing at me. I don't know anything about guns but I pointed and pulled the trigger. I was thrown back and the gun smashed into my chest. The zombie was in pieces, sprawling all over the ground. There was sticky blood and pieces of dead skin everywhere. I threw up.

They came over laughing. O'Reilly said something like, "See, there's hope for you yet, boy. Somebody else said, 'Now you're one of us, kid.'" They wiped me off with a towel and took me back to school.

Only I didn't go to school. I ran home. Nobody was there because Aunt Viv went to the doctor with Uncle Pete. I went into my room and cried for a long time. Now I know how much I hate O'Reilly and all of them. I think about what Angie said, how you have to hurt someone who hurts you, and no mercy to your enemies. I think she was right.

I've been thinking and I know what to do.

(later)

Well, I did it. I called that number that the guy in the car gave me. I left a message and told him where Angie will be and when.

Now I'll call Dave O'Reilly.

SUDDEN BLACKNESS

There in the sudden blackness the black pall
Of nothing, nothing, nothing — nothing at all.

— "The End of the World," Archibald MacLeish

Date Code: Scorpio-sixty-one-sigma

I snuck into Angie's trailer today. It's all locked up and the police say nobody's supposed to go in there. Everything looks pretty much the same as it always did but the closet in the living room has that yellow tape around it. Anyway, I went into her room and got her PC and now I'm caught up on keying in all these reports. Later I'll look and see what kinds of files she has on this thing. I hope it can go online. I think that

Okay, I was just looking at the books on my shelf and the titles on the sides started moving around and the letters spelled out, "THEY ARE NEAR." I'm going outside to take a look.

CM: (low voice) Okay, I took my recorder with me. It's clipped on my belt and the mike seems to be okay pinned onto my collar so I can keep my hands free. I should have thought of this before. It's easier than

writing down notes in the field. Boy, it's dark out tonight. No moon. Only some of the lights are on.

Huh? There's Paul and his sister. Man, it's like after midnight. What are they doing up? They're walking kind of funny.

Hey, guys. Hey, Paul. What are you doing out here? Paul? Man, he's not even looking at me. Like he's in a trance. Paul?

PM: Hiya. Where are you? Let go of me.

CM: Paul, don't you know me? Julie? They're just standing here, looking up at the sky. Are they sleepwalking? Maybe I'll try to—

Here come some more kids. They're moving real slow. Three more. There's Jean Mulvey. What? Now they're just standing around. Jean.... Julie!

Julie just started shaking like she's having a fit. Her nose is bleeding. Wait a minute....

[Damaged section of tape]

CM: This way! This way! Hurry! Oh God! Come on! Come on! I'm... I'm trying... I'm trying to get the kids out of here. The fire is everywhere.... Hey, little girl! Come over here with us— [loud explosion] Oh, shit, another trailer. I think it's the propane tanks. The grass is burning. The trees are burning. Oh God. I— [many voices, crying, screams] I've got a bunch of kids here. No, hold my hand! We have to get out— [several loud explosions]

[Damaged section of tape]

CM: I can't see.... Where are we? My skin is so hot. Come on, keep moving— No, Jonathan, this way. The pool! We can... We have to get in the pool! This way! [Unintelligible] Angie and the... guy from the car... They're fighting somehow. Angie... I saw her touch a telephone pole and... the whole thing is one fire! [Cries and screams get louder]

[Damaged section of tape]

CM: [Multiple screams in the background] Please, get in. Don't be scared. Get into the water. Please....

There's six of them in the pool. We were holding hands but some of them got separated. The fire... uh... is so close. My skin feels like blisters. No! Hey kid, stop! Come here! Get in the pool! Oh my God! He caught fire. Oh. Oh... come on, everyone, stay low.

CM: Why is it so dark?

Dear Principal Hogan,

A nice nurse here is writing down my words for me. Thank you and all the kids for the nice cards and candy you sent me. It is nice to hear from all my friends at Quincy. I miss everyone very much.

They are taking good care of me here at the hospital. The doctor doesn't know yet if the damage done to my eyes by the smoke and fire is going to be permanent. I hope I can see again soon.

I do not know where they will send me to live when I get out because the fire destroyed everything, as you know. Please pray for the souls of my Aunt Viv and Uncle Pete and for my friend Angie.

Calvin Miller



CHAPTER 5: FALSE HOPE

Others said, these are not the words of him that hath a devil. Can a devil open the eyes of the blind?

— John 10:21

NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH

From the "River Valley Post," article dated 6/26
LOCAL STORE VANDALIZED

New Hope, PA — Residents in the small artistic community are outraged at a malicious act of vandalism that occurred early Sunday morning. Tribal Apothecary, a store that specializes in holistic medicine and herbal remedies was vandalized. The store's front window was smashed and much of the merchandise was destroyed. In addition, several large graffiti symbols were painted on the front door and the inside the store, which officials believe may be gang markings. "I don't know why anyone would want to do something like this," store owner John Blackburn said. "It's not the biggest store in the area, and certainly not the richest. It just doesn't make any sense."

Blackburn inherited the business from his parents, lifelong area residents Ronald and Jeanine Blackburn, following their death. Ronald Blackburn had opened the store before alternative treatments and herbal remedies became popular. Since then it has been frequented by health-conscious locals.

"This store was their dream," Blackburn said, wiping away tears as he surveyed the damage. "I can't understand

why anyone would do this in a town like ours. We're supposed to celebrate differences here." Police officials declined comment, except that they had several solid leads.

Amid the ruin of his store, Blackburn remained surprisingly forgiving. "I hope that whoever did this realizes I don't hate them, and I hope they don't hate me. There are better ways to solve problems. Healing starts with forgiveness."

From the "River Valley Post," article dated 6/27
POLICE SEEK VANDALISM SUSPECT

New Hope, PA — According to authorities, thanks to information received from an anonymous tip, they are close to making arrests regarding the vandalism incident that occurred early Sunday at Tribal Apothecary, a local medicinal store. Authorities say they are seeking at least one suspect for questioning in connection to the act, James Armstrong, a 21-year-old native of Ewing, New Jersey. According to authorities, Armstrong attended classes at Rider University in Lawrenceville and its satellite Westminster Choir College in Princeton until three months ago, when he dropped out after a long string of absences. Armstrong's current whereabouts are unknown. Authorities urge anyone who might have information on his whereabouts to contact the New Hope Police Department.

BROKEN GLASS FALLS INWARD

Transcript of Meeting 6/27

[Note: There are muffled sounds of conversation several minutes before the beginning of the meeting, as well as the sounds of car doors opening and closing. It appears that Eric started recording before arriving at the meeting, though the conversation prior to it is hopelessly muted, possibly because the recorder was under heavy clothing.]

E: What the hell is going on?

S: Eric, calm down.

E: No, I want to know what the hell this is! [Sound of paper rustling] It's been front-page news for two days, for Christ's sake!

A: What did you expect? You trashed a store in the middle of downtown. You're lucky you weren't all arrested on the spot! What the hell were you thinking? That no one would notice?

S: That wasn't it at all—

E: Dammit, they're making it sound like he's the victim!

A: Think about it! As far as they know, he is. He's a businessman whose store got trashed. He sells medicine, for God's sake! What did you expect, the rest of the town to set fire to what was left?

S: All right, just relax, everyone! You're right. We weren't expecting people to run him out on a rail or anything. We just didn't figure a few smashed windows and some graffiti would get this much attention.

E: And just look at that bastard, crying those fake fucking tears and sucking up all that publicity—

P: Yeah, well, there wouldn't be any publicity if you hadn't decided to go off on your own. Jesus, what the hell were you guys thinking?

S: We can't take back what's been done now, can we? We need to figure out what to do next.

A: We? How much of a "we" do you think there is now, Sean? The last time we saw you, you threw democracy out the window and came this close to threatening us when we wouldn't join you!

S: Look, I'm sorry. I overreacted, I admit it. It's just that... the rest of you weren't there when we saw all those people, all with the same thing inside them. I didn't know what it was and I wanted to make sure it didn't spread any further. We needed to do something. If you didn't approve, fine, but I didn't I snap off a salute and goose-step out the door!

M: Fine, whatever you say. I just hope you're happy with what you've done. Both of you.

S: At this point, we're more concerned with reprisals.

P: You honestly think that this thing is really going to try to get back at you?

E: Hey, we were all there the first time. For all it knows, we were all responsible. So I wouldn't be too fucking smug about anything right now.

M: There was nothing about any of us in the news. Don't you think that if he really wanted revenge, he'd have told the police about us by now?

S: He doesn't know our full names. He doesn't know where we live or what we do. There really isn't much he could give them.

M: But he still could've provided descriptions, guesses, something. The point is, even though you two flew off the handle, he didn't go to the police about any of us. What do you think that means?

E: What's this other story about Jim, then? Huh? The thing never even saw him, but now all of a sudden the police are after Jim?

S: Actually, Eric... I called in that tip.

E: What? What the fuck did you do that for?

S: I panicked, all right? The paper said they had solid leads! What was I supposed to do? It was either turn him in or wait and see if all three of us would be thrown in jail!

E: I can't believe this! You betrayed him after he helped us? One of us? You were afraid to face the consequences, so now he has to? That's bullshit!

S: Which would you rather have, Eric? All of us in jail, or just one of us so the others can keep going? Remember what you said when we first met? That we were expendable? That you'd make sacrifices to save people?

E: Yeah, but I... I didn't think—

M: No, you didn't, but fortunately he did.

A: Honey, don't. This is rough on all of us.

E: Not as rough as it is on Jim.

S: Eric, please! They have a point. We tried to run that thing off and it backfired. As much as you might hate it, if I hadn't tipped the police off, we all might have become suspects. I suggest that we let things cool down. Maybe then we can approach this more rationally.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: futureperfect384

Subject: SOLD OUT!

don't trust observer209!!!

observer209 just sold me out. we were in on a plan together with a friend of his, but it fell apart, and i think observer turned the cops on me to save his own ass. i don't know for sure, but the paper said the police had gotten an "anonymous tip" and since only he and his friend knew about it, i think they set me up. i managed to get out of town in time but i won't get far on what i have left, and i need help. i need a place to stay for a while — i don't care where it is, i just need somewhere i can lay low. if you live in the northeast and can possibly help, please write back and let me know.

P: I agree, only this time don't go over there and do anything else stupid.

E: Hey, I'm warning you—

A: That's enough, both of you. Take an adult timeout. If you still think it's necessary to deal with this person, we'll talk it over — and this time we'll actually abide by a group decision, agreed? Sean? Eric? Then let's go home before we all get testosterone poisoning.

SHEEP'S CLOTHING

From the personal journal of Melissa Hathoway
Entry dated 6-28

It's 5:27 A.M. I can't sleep. I keep replaying what Sean and Eric said at our last meeting. The way they talked about what they'd done, as if there was nothing wrong with it. The way they kept talking about John as an "it" and not a person. I know it's a terrible comparison, but I keep thinking the Nazis must have said things like that when they exterminated the Jews. That's why I don't go on that website of Anna's. Even on the Triage list she showed me, they still spend so much time talking about "monsters," and fighting about "what needs to be done." As if they'll be able to solve everything all at once. Some may talk about saving things instead of killing them, but they still treat these beings like objects. That makes them less than human.

There's a cycle to it. I remember reading about it in Sociology. Aggressors form a bond, and with people who feel isolated, frightened. Sean and Eric didn't even have to really do anything on their own — our lives already made us scared and alone.

Next, they pick a scapegoat and make the enemy of it. Not a person, but an "it." Anna once told me that one of her students wrote a paper about how television and movies show the faces of heroes, while villains usually have masks or helmets. It creates distance, so that you don't feel bad about those people dying. They're not real. In our case, it's worse than a mask. We look at someone like John and see something that we instinctively fear, as if we've been trained to do it and don't even know it. Never mind that he says he doesn't mean any harm. We don't have to look any further than the surface to see that he's "evil."

The part after that is more frightening. They change the facts to suit their plan. We all agreed that we would base our next step on what I could find in the medical records. But when I came back with evidence that contradicted what they wanted, they did everything but accuse me of lying and attacked the store anyway. Being suspicious is one thing, but if our roles had been reversed and Sean did the investigating, he wouldn't have put up with being questioned.

It makes me wonder if this is how it's been from the start with the both of them. Do they just see what they want about the supernatural? I might believe that about Eric. He's been quick to judge since I met him. I hope that isn't true about Sean.

Anyway, once they're done they justify their actions as necessary to combat "the enemy." If others in the group don't agree, they say it's too late and that everyone has had a hand in it from the beginning. If that's not what those two are doing, I don't know what they're up to. But what does it all mean? If it's human nature, can they help it? It seemed easier when we were dealing with ghosts. They were already dead. But John is alive and we haven't seen him do anyone any harm. Lots of normal people aren't that noble.

I can't be too harsh on them. They try not to act like it but they're still just as lost and confused as the rest of us. But if this is the best we can do after learning the truth, what does it say about human nature? Not as though I'm much better these days. I still haven't told Anna about taking the medicine. She just thinks I'm having one of my good periods. Heaven help me, I can't tell her. I love her. But I'm afraid it would change things between us.

If something happens and you're reading this, baby, please understand that I never lied to you. I may have been stupid once or twice, but I never lied to you. You and Peter saved me when you came into the library that day. I was so close to the edge, you don't even know. I never told you, but I was seriously thinking about just putting an end to it. The nightmares wouldn't stop, and I couldn't help hearing voices. Then all of a sudden along comes a beautiful woman. We recognize each other and she actually understands what I'm going through. And then all of a sudden there's hope. What a miracle you've been for me, baby.

But I have to wonder if this medicine will show up on me like it did the others, like Sean described? Will that make me a "monster" too? I've tried to look at myself. I haven't seen anything. Does it work that way? Once you're changed, can you tell or go back? I feel so much better. The only time I have a problem is when I try to look at myself like that. My attacks come back again, almost like doubting makes the medicine fail. Scientists use placebos to trick patients, and those people still get better. Is this the same thing?

And then there's what Eric said days ago, about John being evil. It sounds so ridiculous to describe someone that way, even here. I don't think that he's right, but I don't have Anna's agnosticism to fall back on, either. If we've seen ghosts, why couldn't there be things that are truly evil, too? I'm Christian. That means I have to believe in evil, or at least the Devil. Talking to John, I can't imagine anyone so kind and unassuming could be something so wicked. But if the Devil really did come to Earth, wouldn't that be just how he would look? I lived most of my life blind to the way things really are. Wouldn't the Devil be in sheep's clothing?

I'm thinking in circles. Maybe I'm making this all too complicated. We've done John wrong. I feel that much. I don't care if he's human or not, we did him harm without provocation. I'm not sure if it will make any difference to him now, but I have to make this right.

I don't know how, though. I guess it starts with talking to him, but I don't know if I can do it alone. Peter's sweet, but he's too busy trying to keep us all speaking to each other. He won't do anything that might break up the group. I could bring Anna with me, but what if something about the medicine comes up? What if he can tell that I've been taking it? I don't want her to find out that way. Not until I've decided what it means to me first. Besides, I'm almost out of what I took from Emily.

I guess it's up to me to fix things. Maybe John will be too angry to talk and will throw me out. I'm not worried about him getting violent. Even if I misjudge him, I still don't believe he's got it in him to be that way.

Anna's up. I can hear the shower. If I put on a pot of coffee and make some toast, I can pretend I got up early. I'm sorry for the deception, baby, but it's just for a few more days until all this is sorted out.

It's kind of funny, but remember when I used to worry about things, like what would happen when my parents found out about the two of us, or how my grandmother would take the news?

If only things were that simple now.

SECOND CHANCES

Second entry dated 6-28

I don't know how much of this is accurate, and right now I really don't care. If it's not exactly right, then I think it's what was intended at the time, and that's all that really matters. I know that's a strange thing for someone like me to say, who's spent her adult life arranging and cataloging information. But I learned today that there are some moments, some insights too powerful for words to do them justice.

I called in sick after Anna left, and around noon went over to the store to see John. That yellow “do not cross” tape was strung up, but there was no sign of the police. I guess they figured they’d found everything, and now it was up to John to pick up the pieces. I wasn’t sure what was worse, the damage that had been done or the symbols that I think mean “monster,” “corrupt” and “threat” sprayed on the walls. Seeing those made me feel so ashamed, but I knew if I didn’t explain that we’re not all criminals, that some of us care, then they’d have won.

I thought for a minute about putting my guard up, but then I caught myself. What did that say about me? If I really believed the others had misjudged John, then wouldn’t I be doing the same thing if I treated him as dangerous? Sean would say I was being rash, but then again look where his decision got us. Besides, my lungs started to ache just at the thought of focusing like that. Maybe all this time, it wasn’t doubt in the medicine that interfered with it, but doubting the man who made it. It seems a little silly at first, but the more I think about it, the less ridiculous it sounds. After all, wasn’t it my trust in that ghost that helped move it on to the next world? Maybe helping John required the same leap of faith.

I wasn’t sure if he’d actually be there, but sure enough he was inside, sorting through the debris. When I saw him, I suddenly realized that part of me hoped he wouldn’t be there, or that he would be furious so I wouldn’t have to go through with what I was about to.

He looked up, gave me a tired smile and waved to come in. “Just watch out - there’s still a lot of broken glass around,” he said.

How do you apologize for friends who have ruined someone’s life, just because of who he is? I don’t think there are words for that. John didn’t say anything. He just walked through the mess and put his arms around me. Up close, he smelled of sweat and almost like freshly turned earth, like a garden. He was strong. After a moment, I noticed that he was shaking. He drew in a long, broken breath and I realized he was crying. He apologized over and over again until his words were just sounds.

“Sorry?” I was stunned. Everything I might have said a moment before was gone. I never imagined that.

He didn’t lift his head from my shoulder. I was suddenly reminded of how I held my brother when he was four and had skinned his knee on the driveway. “I’m sorry one of your friends is in trouble. I didn’t tell them anything. I didn’t want the police to arrest any of you.”

“John, it’s okay. I know you didn’t talk to the police.” I slowly coaxed his head from my shoulder until we looked eye to eye. For a brief moment, I remembered the being that lived behind those human eyes, and thought of guarding myself, but then it passed and I wasn’t scared. Pain is pain, no matter who suffers it, and that requires one thing, Help. “We did. We called the police,” I said.

“You?” He looked at me, confusion and hurt written across his face as if he expected me to pull the rug out from under him at any moment. “Why? He’s your friend. One of you, isn’t he?”

“Maybe, but he did something very wrong. We couldn’t just stand by and let that happen.” It was a white lie, but the damage was already done, so why not try to get a fresh start? “What I’m trying to say is, I’m sorry about what happened.” I looked around at the wreck of the shop and felt ashamed. “We knew something might happen, and we didn’t stop it.”

“It’s okay,” John said, and for an instant I thought I saw something dark and formless and painful slide across his eyes, but if it was there it was gone an instant later. “I probably deserved it anyway.” His seemed resigned, as though what happened was a conclusion reached long ago and beyond all question.

“What do mean?” A hint of an edge crept into my voice, but it wasn’t directed at him. It was for whoever could make him or anyone sound so defeated. “You didn’t do anything wrong. You said so yourself.”

He shook his head. “I thought about what your friends said before. About how my medicine might be hurting people instead of helping them. The more I thought about it, the more I think they were right. I can’t stay here anymore.” He gestured helplessly to the store. “I don’t know what I’ll do. But it won’t be here.”

“You don’t have to go,” I said. “Nothing else is going to happen to you here. I promise.”

His face turned to me, now very serious. “Thank you. You don’t know how much that means to me, but I don’t even know what I’m doing here.”

I had to smile. I couldn’t help it. “No one knows what they’re really doing. That’s just means your human.” I subconsciously caught myself on the last word. He looked at me for a moment, and then we both just laughed. At the end he gave me another hug.

“I’m not good with people. Not normally,” he said and waved a dismissive hand when I started to protest. “I mean, I’ve learned how to sell, and to be friendly with customers, but outside of that... I have trouble controlling my emotions sometimes, so I usually avoid dealing with people. I thought all this was just one more sign that I’d failed. But now,” he smiled, “maybe there’s hope.”

“I just hope I haven’t ruined things for your friends,” he said.

“We have our differences,” I said. “but you don’t have to worry about that. We’ll make it through. Once all of this is past, things will get better. They always do.”

He seemed lost in thought for a moment. “If nothing else, I know you’ll stick up for me, right?” He seemed to stare at me, questioning. The answer was important to him. “I know this is a lot to ask, but you seem to understand me better than anyone.”

I told him I’d do I what I could.

“Could you talk to the others for me?” he asked. Make them understand that I don’t hold anything against them? It would mean a lot to me.”

I smiled and said, “No problem.”

I checked my watch. I was late. Anna’s lunch hour was in 15 minutes. I had to get going if I was going to meet her on time. I didn’t want to raise any suspicions. It felt like such a shame to leave after such a wonderful moment, but it looked like things were working out better than I’d ever hoped. I told John that I had to go, and for some reason I felt the need to tell him I believed in him. I don’t know why.

We said goodbye, and I was almost out of the door when I stopped. I wondered if it was the best thing to do, but ultimately I couldn’t help myself. I tried to be as pleasant as I could and asked if I could buy some of that medicine. I didn’t even feel the need to tell him why I wanted it, and I didn’t want to make up a story.

He wouldn’t take my money and gave me a bottle. Another couple weeks of freedom.

DECISION AT MIDNIGHT

Transcript of Meeting 7/1

[This recording begins with our meeting already underway. We were in the back office of Pete’s bar. We couldn’t get a hold of Eric in time to arrange it at his place. We eventually had to leave a message for him and just go ahead. It had been going for a few minutes, discussing whether or not to officially extend an olive branch to John Blackburn. Then Eric finally showed up and was pissed.]

S: ...wonder what they would say if — Eric! There you are! Where were you?

M: Eric? Are you okay?

E: No! I'm not okay! That fucking monster is going to burn, I swear to God! I'll fucking kill that thing! I'll fucking kill it!

S: Pete, get the door before someone hears. Eric, what's going on?

E: My mother.... That damn fucking monster!

A: What are you talking about?

E: That creature has my mother hooked on his garbage! She's been turned just like the others. My own mother! It's all that thing's fault!

S: Calm down. Just tell us what happened.

E: She read about it in the news. She's been on all these different prescriptions, you know, and none of them seem to work very well, and they're all expensive as hell. So when she read about that thing's store, she thought it was worth a try. She didn't want to tell me, because she knows that I don't believe in that crap. I only found out when I was leaving and my neighbor said he couldn't believe how much better she was doing. That he couldn't believe how good that new medicine was. I went back in and searched the medicine chest. That's when I saw it.

A: Take it easy. It's okay.

E: It's not okay, all right? I got mad. I started yelling at her. Mr. Keller must have heard and came in. What I said to her, oh God. I said it was poison, that the asshole who made it was evil. I said it all. [Sounds of crying] I was out of control. I didn't know what to do! We tried to put him out of business and now my own mother is using his shit!

Mr. Keller put his hand on my shoulder and I — I shoved him. Not hard, I didn't mean to shove him that hard. He hit the wall hard and just lay there.

M: Oh my God!

E: I didn't mean to! It was an accident! There were people out in the hall. I heard someone say they were going to call the police. I didn't know what to do, so I just grabbed everything I could about us, about the thing we did at the store, and threw it into my car. If the police came, I didn't want them to find anything about what we've been doing. I'm in enough trouble, but — Christ, my mother! I just left her there without anyone to look after her!

P: Eric, listen to me. If there aren't already other neighbors looking after your mother and Mr. Keller, if the police have been called, they'll take care of her. Your mother will be fine. What you need to worry about now is your—

E: No! Don't you see? That's just the problem! I'm going to jail. I'll be locked up with God knows what kind

of thing while my mother keeps taking that fucking monster's poison! There's nothing I can do about it! Can't you see that?

S: Eric, I know it's hard right now, but be rational. You're not going to jail. Even if your neighbor wants to press charges, it'll probably be nothing serious. You're a first-time offender. You're not going to—

E: No, I'm not.

M: What are you saying?

E: It was none of your business. When we all met, we agreed that the less we knew about each other, the better, right?

S: I meant things like the names of our friends and family, addresses. I didn't mean hiding criminal records! I'm a lawyer for God's sake!

A: Wait a minute. Eric, what did you do?

E: It doesn't matter! You don't need to know! What you need to know is what this creature has done to us! It's destroyed me — through my mother. It's destroyed us. It's making us fight each other instead of getting rid of it like we did the other things.

M: We didn't get rid of them, we put them to rest—

E: You're missing the fucking point! Instead of focusing on him, we've been fucking around. We even sold Jim out! All because of that fucking monster! And now it's spreading because of the attention we brought it.

S: What else could we do?

E: What else? It shed fake fucking tears and convinced its fucking brainwashed victims to say good things about it, and all of a sudden we were listening to these pussies. You backed down, Sean. You said you'd get them to agree, but what really happened?

A: You were going to get us to kill it!

S: I... I was considering it. I wasn't convinced it was peaceful.

M: Killing a person in cold blood? That's murder, Sean! I can't believe you'd even consider it. Let alone, want us to help!

E: Shut up, Melissa. Just shut the hell up. I saw how you went all soft when that thing told us its sob story. You think that just because you're sick that any monster that seems pathetic is just like you? It pulled the oldest trick in the book, and you fucking fell for it. So why don't you listen to another goddamn sob story: I'm going to jail and this thing is going to stay free and poison people. So how about you think about fucking helping for once, instead of getting all pissed off because some of us call a monster a monster?

P: Eric, you can't be asking—

E: You're fucking right I am! If I'm going to jail, I want to stop it first. It's not going free. I don't have much time, so either come with me or get the fuck out of my way.

S: I can't help you. Not this way. I agree it's not human, but I don't think killing it will help. What if you get caught? You'll be up for murder.

E: Not if I have an alibi. [Long pause] Well... I guess that's your answer.

P: We can't. If we get caught, who'll protect things? My bar? Your mother? Think about it. You don't have to do this, especially not now.

E: There's no better time. If I don't do it now, none of you bleeding hearts ever will! Fuck!

A: Eric, it's not like that at all. We're trying to help you. Forget about hurting this creature for a second and clear your head. You don't know where it might be, for one. And you're not even sure if you'll be able to hurt it. What you can do might—

E: It's never failed before.

A: But what if it does now? You'll lose. Who knows what that'll mean?

[Sounds of movement]

M: Eric! Eric, wait! You don't have to do this! The medicine doesn't hurt anyone!

E: Like hell it doesn't, I've seen—

M: I've been taking it! I've been taking it for over a week. It doesn't hurt you.

S: What?

A: Melissa?

M: I'm sorry I didn't say anything before. I didn't know what you would say. I started taking it right after I saw Emily Jacobs. I stole some from her house. I thought that maybe if I tried it and it didn't hurt me, nobody would try to hurt John. I was tired of my own medicine. Tired of being careful all the time. Tired of being sick.

E: So you're — you're saying you willingly took some of that thing's poison?

A: Baby, wait, don't go near him, he's—

M: I took it and I'm fine! I haven't felt so good since I was a kid! And look at me! Look! Do you see any of those clouds clinging to me? Do I look evil to you?

E: You weren't just a sucker, you were a plant! No wonder you didn't find anything wrong with those people! You were in on it!

M: That's not true! Look, do you remember when we first met, and you helped us put that spirit to rest? Do you remember?

E: I — I guess I — you bitch! You fucking bitch! Don't you use your fucking tricks on me! I'm not some monster! You are!

M: Eric, don't. I—

E: Fuck you! You can burn in hell!

A: No!

[Sounds of a struggle, a woman's scream, shouting]



E: Let go of me! I swear to God I'll—

[A crash and the voices fade. Sounds of footsteps running]

A: Stop him, he's—

S: Oh my God, the blood, there's blood everywhere!

P: Get an ambulance. Someone call an ambulance!

A: Melissa, baby, hang on. Just hang on. Help will be here soon. [Sounds of crying] Somebody call 911! Please, God!

M: It's okay, honey. I feel fine. I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I was feeling so much better. I didn't mean for any of this to happen.

A: Don't talk. Just hang in there.

M: I—I never would have made it this far without you. I love you. Don't let this ruin.... We have to keep trying....

A: Melissa!

NEW BEGINNINGS

From the personal journal of Anna Gray

No one's spoken much since that night. I guess Eric ran out, carjacked a couple of kids at knifepoint and drove straight to the store in New Hope. The police were waiting for him. What choice did we have? Let him stab Melissa and then attack John, too? We had to call them, and I don't feel sorry about it. Not even when I found out that Eric was shot and killed when he attacked one of the officers. I should probably feel guilty, but I don't, and I don't care. Sometimes I'm glad I can't just go see a therapist anymore. It means I don't have to know just how messed up I've become.

Melissa's heart stopped on the operating table six hours later. They worked on her for as long as they could but just couldn't bring her back. Peter was the only one who stayed with me through the whole thing, from the ambulance ride to the hospital, and the police questioning. I remember being angry at Sean for not saying he was sorry. Later we found out it was because he had taken the time, while the ambulance was coming, to go through Eric's car and take all of the tapes and other records he had brought

from his apartment that night. Leave it to that bastard to be so cool and collected while Melissa was dying. According to the note Sean sent me with the tapes, the tape recorder was still in Eric's jacket when Melissa pulled it off him during the struggle. What was on it would have been impossible to explain if the police had gotten it. I can't help but think that's so like Melissa. Helping the rest of us even without knowing it.

Sean asked for another meeting, to talk over what happened. His note is still sitting on Melissa's desk. That was when my resolve starts to crack and I think about calling him, about returning to that life. I have to look at all the pictures on her desk and remember why I hate that bastard. He brought that maniac into our group, and he still thinks that we can talk? Maybe if we're still alive 10 years from now.

I still hear from Peter from time to time. He understands loss, too, and it's good to talk to him. We talk online every once in a while, but that's about all. I hardly ever try to look at the things anymore. The last time I did, I saw what looked like a spirit riding a person. I just broke down. By the time I pulled myself together, I had drawn a crowd and the thing was gone. I don't have the strength for that anymore. Part of me is sad about that, but only a bit. It's easy to drown it out with the pain.

I believe in God now. The foundation of my belief is hatred. Only an intelligent creator could cause so much tragedy from such good intentions. I'm sorry, sweetie. You were always trying to convince me to believe in Him, and now I only can in the worst way. Maybe someday I'll believe from love, like you did, but not now. You always were the better of the two of us.

John Blackburn has become more active in New Hope since our collapse. According to the news, he's made a deal to open a string of new stores. The official grand re-opening happened a week after Melissa's funeral. If the article was right, business is better than ever. We even got invitations. I don't know how he found us, and I don't care.



CHAPTER 6: DAMNATION

And they shall no more offer their sacrifices unto devils, after whom they have gone a whoring. This shall be a statute forever unto them throughout their generations.

— Leviticus 17:7

SECOND CONFESSION

"Forgive me Father, for I have sinned."

"How long has it been since your last confession?"

"Just a week, Father. Just a week. That's all it took to destroy my life. I need to confess failure and arrogance, and ask for help."

"Tell me what has happened, my son."

"What has happened is the loss of my fucking life. I'm still alive and walking, but I might as well be dead. Pretty much everything I care about is gone, except maybe my kids, and I don't know how I'm going to explain any of this to them."

"Is your wife dead?"

"No, Father, but it might be better if she was."

HOMeward Bound

"What happened after you left here last, my son?"

"We headed back to London. It was a four- or five-hour drive down the M1, so it was pretty late in the evening when we got home. I don't think any of us said more than a few words the whole way. What was there to say? Sure, a woman was dead, but at least those poor bastards on the course were safe from her tricks. I was sure that I'd done the right thing after talking to you. I know you couldn't say much because of that "Thou shalt not murder" thing, but you understand, Father. You've seen them. That's why I really didn't care what the others thought right then. All I could think of was getting home and checking on my family.

"Alan bailed on us as soon as we got back. He said he had some serious thinking to do and that we knew where to reach him. The look he gave me, Father. Such disgust. Josh seemed relieved, though. He wasn't sure that we could trust Alan after what happened back in Manchester.

"He was afraid they might still have their hooks in Alan, that it might be safest if he wasn't involved anymore. That got me thinking about Julie.

"I tried to explain what I did, how it was for Julie's sake. You see that, don't you, Father? Josh cut me short. He told me that I did what I felt I had to, and there was

MONDAY 17TH

rather.

The last week has been hard. Jason's confession troubles me deeply. Lord, show me that I have not wasted my life. Give me a sign that what we do is right and there is a purpose to our struggle against the demons that plague us. Surely faith is our true defense against them? If the world had not turned from you, as I have done, then perhaps the demons would not have the power they do? I have tried talking to my superiors, but they dismiss the idea of demons as a metaphor for spirits separated from the Lord. How can the teachings of the Pope be at such odds with what you have shown me? Is he not your voice on Earth?

Lord, because of these doubts, I could not even inspire a man who came to me for help.

no point in discussing it further. When I asked him if he agreed with it he changed the subject.

WHILE YOU WERE OUT

"I told Josh that I wanted to go see Julie straight away once we'd dropped Alan off, but he suggested that we head back to his place and check with Serena first. I didn't understand why, but it all became clear as soon as we got there. It turns out that Josh hadn't just left Serena in London to act as backup. He'd left her there to keep an eye on Julie for me. She'd spent much of the last couple of days loitering around the area of our flat. Sure enough, the bastard from Powell's outfit had visited a couple of times, and Serena had been able to bump into him and put the trail on him. She'd got a lock on where he lived by following it. It was one of those big, posh houses up on Blackheath, the three story places that look onto the heath. Serving one of them pays well, I suppose. Josh is pretty well off, but this was well out of his league.

"I was all for heading straight up there and dealing with this thing there and then. He talked me out of it. He usually can, the bastard.

NATURE OF THE BEAST

"We sat down with Serena and shared what we'd learnt. It wasn't much. As far as we could see, Powell was almost certainly one of them. We couldn't work out quite what he was. He didn't seem to match up to anything we'd seen before. We knew that he could influence people, give them gifts of healing and power, and that he turned people into frothing fans. 'Inspiring worship,' was how Josh put it."

"That is not an idea I find comfortable, my child. Did he mean it in the sense that people worship pop stars or great footballers? Or did he mean it in the sense of religious reverence?"

"Uh, the last one, I think. Yeah, because then Serena said something frightening. She said Powell sounded almost like an angel. He healed people, seemed to be helping people, and none of his group had attacked us until we attacked them. I think I said some rude things to her about that idea, I can tell you. Maybe I was a bit out of order, though, because Josh told me to shut the fuck up.

"Serena suggested that we should be careful. She kept going on about how maybe he wasn't a threat and it could be that he genuinely did want to help people. She even had the cheek to suggest that my marriage problems were the only reason we'd suspected him. As far as I was concerned, we already had more than enough evidence, so I told her where she could stick her opinions. Josh told me to shut up again. I was on the verge of walking out, but Josh asked me to stay. Serena can be a pain, but Josh has got us through some nasty shit and he's got his head screwed on straight.

HOBSON'S CHOICE

"Josh said there were still two issues troubling him. The first was that they clearly manipulated Alan against his will, which was a bloody good point. The second was now that I'd killed that bitch, he wasn't sure that we'd be able to deal with Powell in a neutral way.

"Serena looked at me in shock. She was angry and demanded to know why I killed her. Bloody stupid question. Wasn't it obvious? She was one of them and she was manipulating hurt, defenseless people. It wasn't like we could get the police to take her away, was it? It was the only way we could safely deal with her. As far as I was concerned, the world is a better place without her.

"Serena refused to believe it. She asked when I'd become such a bigot. I didn't know what to say, but Josh cut in. He said that we'd been at this a long time now and it was affecting us all. He told Serena to remember that my family was involved so I had a different take on it all.

"I'd had enough of that bollocks. We were sitting around talking while my wife was in danger. That might have worked for those two, but I'm just an ordinary guy, Father. I prefer actually doing things to sitting around talking. I told Serena that Josh was right, I was personally involved and that there was one thing I should be doing instead of sitting around with them. Checking my family was okay. I headed out the door. Josh came with me, but Serena stayed behind. To be honest, Father, I didn't really care at that point. I just needed to do something."

THE DEVIL'S DISCIPLE

"We sat in silence again on the drive down to Kidbrooke. Josh doesn't have any family he's close to, so I guess he didn't know what to say or how to sympathize with me. He just kept his gob shut. I left him in the car outside the tower block and made my way up to the flat. No BMW in the car park this time, which was probably just as well.

"I could see that Julie was furious the minute I walked through the door. She just sat on the sofa, glaring at the TV. It had some stupid cookery show on and she hates cooking. I don't think she was really watching it, just staring at it to avoid looking at me.

"I'm back," I said. I didn't know what else to say.

"Have a nice time in Manchester?" she snapped.

"I felt a chill. How could she know? I looked at her, and said I hadn't been in Manchester, that I'd been driving a lorry to Newcastle and back. She just snorted at that.

"She wasn't wrong, at least. Well, not really wrong. But there was something off about her, definitely. I felt sick, knowing what that woman in the hotel had become. How far gone was Julie? Shit, was I going to have to put her down like I did that bitch? I couldn't imagine ever hurting Julie, but if she'd sold herself to them, she wasn't the woman I married.

"I really wished Serena or Alan had been there. They could have told me more. What the hell had she done while I'd been away, and why had Serena just let it happen? She's bloody quick to criticize, but she doesn't do much to help.

"I must have gone quiet, because Julie started speaking again. She sounded calm, like she just didn't care. 'You weren't driving any bloody lorry,' she said, still staring at the TV. 'You were in Manchester on a course.'

“What the hell makes you think that?” I said, the sick feeling getting worse.

EXPOSED

“She threw me over an envelope. It must have been on the sofa next to her, but I hadn’t noticed it until then. I saw Powell’s logo and my heart sank. I knew what was coming. Inside were pictures. They were of the ‘getting to know you’ drinks in the hotel. I hadn’t even noticed the bastards taking them. I think that sometimes we get so carried away looking for supernatural threats that we forget the normal ones. There were pictures of all of us in there. Alan, Josh and me, not to mention the rest of the losers there.

“I thought about it for a moment. ‘Who gave you these?’ I asked. She said it was one of Powell’s people. Apparently they always take photos of events to use in brochures and things. Someone realized there were pictures of her husband — me — in there, and come to ask her to identify me. Alan must have spilled more to Emma than we realized while she was screwing with his head. Lucky that Phil guy wasn’t there the morning after I killed Emma, otherwise our cover would have been blown straight away. The bastard must have headed straight for London to check it with Julie.

“Anyway, I wasn’t really listening to Julie at this point. I was too angry. She’d let at least one of those fuckers into the house again. I know that Serena had already told me that, but hearing it from Julie’s own lips seemed to make it worse somehow. I’ve given the last few months of my life to fighting

these bastards and now they’re just walking in and out of my house, the one place I wanted to protect most of all.

“I did my best to hide my anger and fear. I told her that I’d been impressed by what she’d said about the courses and had wanted a look for myself. She snorted again and told me to stop lying. ‘Your friend, there, the hunky, good-looking one. He told one of the girls everything. About how you and your mates went up there to screw up the course.’

“She was getting angry and beginning to raise her voice. I was just cold. Shit. They not only knew about Julie, they knew about Josh and Alan and me. We were totally fucking exposed. They knew we were coming and they knew we were hostile. We were screwed.

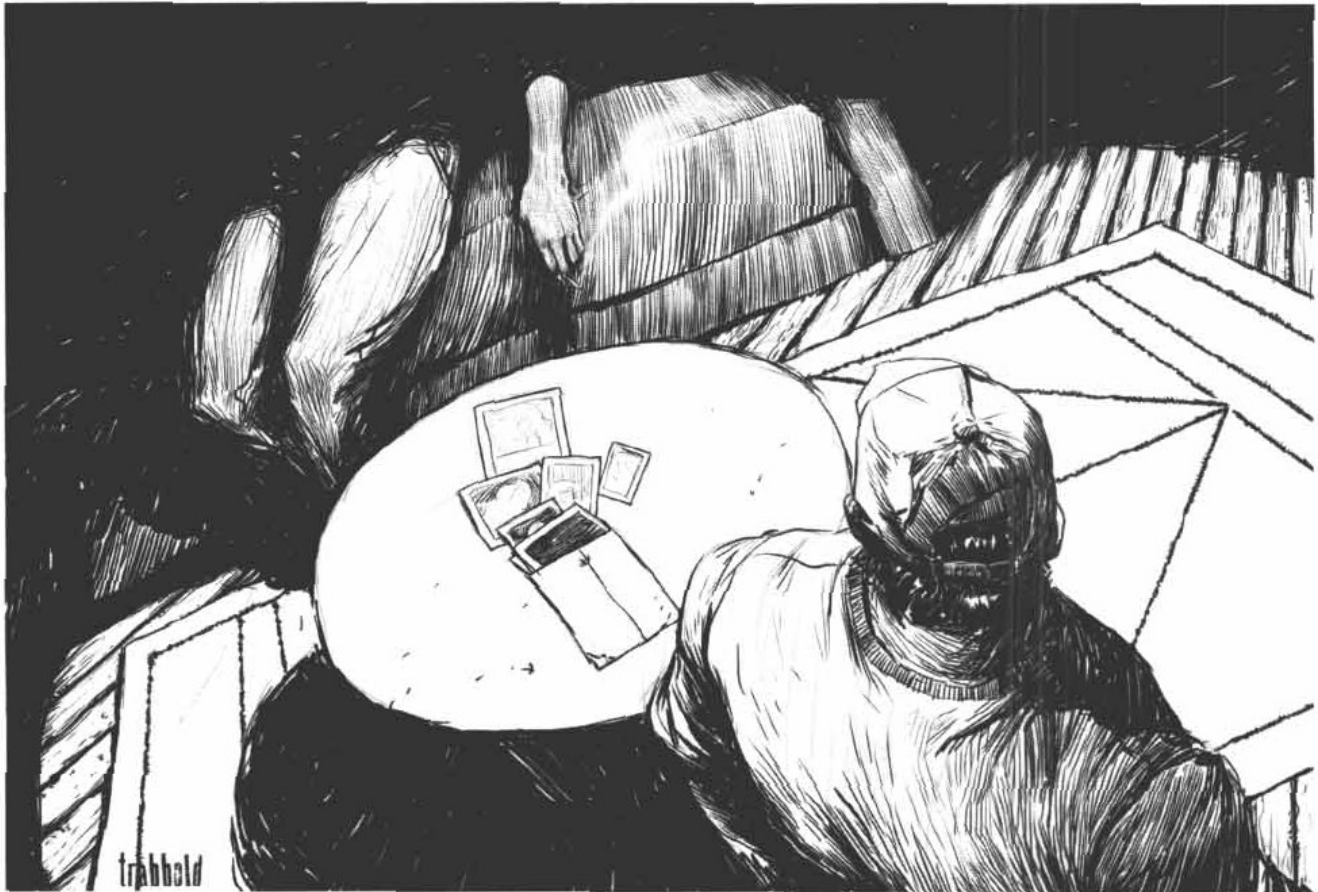
THOU SHALT NOT COVET THY NEIGHBOR’S WIFE

“I was panicking by then, and tried to stop the argument from getting worse. If I was going to protect Julie, I had to keep her rational and talking to me. Maybe she knew something that would be useful. I tried to clam her down.”

“How?”

“I did something stupid. I relied on the one thing I always thought we had — love. Shows what a bloody fool I am. I said something like, ‘Jesus, Julie. These guys are bad. Can’t you see that? They’ve bloody turned you against me. How long have we been married? Does that mean nothing?’

“Then she... she... I’m sorry, Father. It’s just that, well, it still hurts to think about what she said next. I wish none of this had ever happened.”



trabbold

"The road God chooses for us is a hard one, but the destination makes the journey worthwhile. Tell me in your own time. You are safe here in the church."

"She... she said that I'd hardly ever been around. That I was never there when she needed me. She said that she was always lonely, stuck with the kids and my mate's pissed-up slut of a wife. She said that I was a shit husband. She said that bastard thing was a better lay than I was."

"Oh, my son. She had fallen to them."

"No shit! It was like it was some other woman sat there talking to me, not Julie. She wouldn't say those things. She'd become someone I didn't want to know anymore. My Julie wouldn't hurt me like that. She wasn't my wife. She was one of them. My wife is dead."

"I know what you're thinking, but no, I didn't hurt her. I just turned and walked away. All I had to do was find the kids, get them somewhere safe and then deal with the fuckers that took my wife. She shouted something at me as I walked out, the photos still in my hands, but I didn't care. She couldn't say anything that would change my mind."

SHATTERED BELIEF

"I'm truly sorry, my son. All I can offer is the assurance that the Lord will make it right for you, either in this life as he did for Job, or in the life that is to come as he did for Job's children."

"Oh, I've seen the life that's to come, Father. It's about shambling around in your rotting body and being put down by people like me. When they finally get me, I just want that to be the end. The end of the struggle. The end of all this pain."

"Child..."

"Leave it, Father. I'm here for you to listen and pass on what I tell you to the others, so they can succeed where we failed. I don't want to hear about a God who doesn't give a shit about me or my family. When this all started, I found faith. I thought my eyes had been opened to monsters and God. The last week has ruined that. There is no God. There is no blessing. We're just tools in something's game and we haven't the sense to realize it."

"What do you mean?"

"Pay attention."

FALLOUT

"Josh was in the car outside. He started asking me all these bloody questions, just like he always does. I ignored him, got my mobile out and called Clive. I told him to collect the kids from school. They trust him. He's been their uncle for as long as they can remember. I told him to take them to Josh's place out in Ilford. He started to ask the same bloody stupid questions that Josh was. I told him to just go."

"When I hung up, Josh started with all the bloody questions again. He was asking how my wife was, so I told him that I had no wife. She was gone, as far as I was concerned. She'd been replaced by some bitch who screwed with monsters. Josh tried to make me feel better. I didn't need that. I just needed to hit something."

"I started the car and just drove for a while, heading out of town down the A20. I had no idea what to do next, other than waiting for Clive to call and say he had the kids. Josh just sat silently, as if he was waiting for me to do something. Finally, I started telling him everything. It was his turn to shut up and listen."

"He muttered bollocks while I was talking, but I didn't care. I just wanted the pain out of me. After a while, I turned the car around and headed back into London, back towards Josh's flat. Clive called and said he got the kids okay, but he'd had problems with the school. They tried to call home to confirm his story, but got no reply. Julie probably headed straight out to see her new boyfriend."

CHOOSING THE PATH

"Finally, Josh got around to saying something useful. It was about time. He said we'd screwed up badly. Too bloody right. He said that we only had two choices left if Powell knew who we were — confront him or run away. Running away meant leaving the country, as far as he was concerned. It would be easy for Powell to finger us for the murder if he knew that much. Hell, he might have done it already."

"I told him that there was only one bloody option as far as I was concerned. As long as my kids were safe, and I knew Clive could sort that, I had only one thing that mattered — getting revenge on the bastard that did this to Julie."

"Josh agreed. He said he had some arrangements to make and some people to contact, but then we were done. He got his phone out and started making calls. I remember he talked to Manisha, that Paki girl Paul used to hang around with, and then I lost interest in what he was doing. Building hunter social circles is his game. I just try and stop people from getting hurt."

"Hunter?"

"The blessed, Father. It's just another name some people use."

"I don't like it."

"Seems better than 'blessed' to me. Anyway, we all met up back at Josh's flat. Clive had my kids in the living room, watching videos. Serena and Josh's bird Penny were there, too. Even Alan had turned up. Apparently the news about my wife had made him feel guilty, and too bloody right that he should. I ignored the fucker and that was more than he deserved. He's so fucking smug when he thinks he's in the right, but when he's screwed up? Silent as the bloody grave. We wouldn't be in this shit if he hadn't let that bitch get to him."

"There wasn't much talk. We could all see what we had to do. We had to get to this guy that was fucking Julie and try and get to Powell through him. It was going to be up to me, Josh and Alan. If the others didn't hear from us within six hours, they were to get the hell out of the country with my kids. Josh had got some contacts in the States to promise to help look after them."

"There wasn't even time to plan anything. I wouldn't have sat still for it, anyway."

THE FALLEN ONE

"We parked in Blackheath station car park and walked across to the house that Serena had tagged the day before. We figured it would be less conspicuous that way. The house was pretty big. Three or four stories high and old.

"I was a bit nervous of going in there. I don't usually get that scared, Father. I'm no wimp, but this was pretty bad. We didn't know what this fucker could do and the rest of our lives could depend on this.

"I turned to the guys and asked if they were ready. They both nodded. When I turned around again, I saw a mark on the gatepost and just knew it was a trap. I could have sworn it wasn't there only a second before."

"A mark?"

"Those signs... that we can read sometimes?"

"I..."

"Yeah, well, there's one on the front of your church. Someone drew that one. The one I saw... well, it wasn't really there. It's hard to explain."

"I'm learning that there's a lot I don't fully understand."

"Yeah, well, I pointed it out to Josh. He shrugged and said that if they know who we are, they probably know we're coming. That it was better to face them here than in one of our homes.

"Then he just walked up and rang the bell. I couldn't believe it. He announced that Mr. Marshall and his party were here to visit. Can you believe it? They let us in!

"There was nothing wrong with the guy who answered the door. I didn't know what that meant. He showed us into a huge room. Real posh. Tacky even, you know?"

"It has not been given to me to minister to the rich, my child. Most of the people around here are unemployed. Does this look like a rich church to you?"

"Nah, I suppose not. Anyway, take my word for it, this place looked like something out of a magazine. Anyway, Alan didn't sit down. He just paced around, looking nervous. I took my cue from Josh, who sat. He said he thought that we might as well be comfortable if there was trouble to come. There was, just not the sort we were expecting. We get kind of used to hitting everything going, you know? Actually talking to the other side seems to happen less and less. Well, these guys certainly seemed to want to talk. I was almost glad that Serena wasn't there. She'd have been giving me all her 'told you so' shit.

OLD FRIENDS

"Weren't you scared that they'd influence you, like they did to your wife?"

"Honestly, I think I was too angry to be scared. I couldn't think of much apart from getting at the bastard who shagged my wife. I didn't even know his name at that point. Just his boss'. I think Josh and Alan were there just to stop me doing anything stupid. Maybe they'd have just skipped the country otherwise.

"Anyway, they went out of their way to put us at ease. When the door opened again, two people came in. It was the old guy from the course, the one I felt sorry for, and that teenage kid. I could see the difference in the pair of them. The sadness had gone from the old guy's eyes and the kid wasn't so bloody nervous. Looked like they'd bought him some new clothes, too.

"The old guy rushed over to me. He seemed delighted. He was babbling on and on about how they'd rescheduled the course for London, and how they'd paid to get him and some of the others down here, even putting them up overnight. So much for me saving them by dealing with that woman. They got their claws into them anyway."

"They were fallen?"

"Well, they didn't look wrong when I put the eye on them, no. They just seemed to be utterly sold on Powell. Apparently they'd done some sessions the night before and that was what seemed to get them."

"So, they hadn't actually been turned?"

"Um, no. I don't think so. Just, you know, taken in. Fooled."

"I see. Satan's servants are cunning indeed. What better way to draw people into his service than by inviting them in with the things they need most?"

"Yeah, that's it. You know, if I didn't know that the people behind it all were wrong, I might have actually gone along with it. But the truth was too much, for all the good it did me."

"What do you mean?"

"I tried to tell the old guy about it. I said that they were manipulating him, playing on his fears, that he should get the hell out of there while he still could. He actually laughed. He said he'd been around one hell of a lot longer than me, and that he was more than capable of looking after himself. Then he tried to reassure me. No one came on these sorts of courses unless they had something to deal with. He said how could it be bad if it helped people?"

"I told him it was bad because it made him dependent on the people on the course. He laughed again. He said that was ridiculous. That of course they'd make friends. They were opening up to each other. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. He was walking right into it.

DOUBTS

"I went to talk to Josh and Alan. They'd been chatting to the kid, and the story was much the same with him from what I heard. No worries about what he'd done, just a new sense of confidence. I managed to pull Josh aside, leaving Alan to talk to the other guys. I asked him if he was disturbed by it all. He pulled one of those long silences on me again and finally said it was either wonderful or disturbing, and he didn't know which yet. He said the fact that they hadn't attacked us yet, even though they had plenty of chance, might be a good sign.

"I was beginning to feel like I was the only one paying attention, you know? It was like the rest of them couldn't see what was really going on."

"I understand, my child. The wiles of the Devil are many. He can delude the most righteous of us, if we don't trust in the Lord."

"Yeah, well, I've been trusting in the Lord for a long time now and it didn't help me one bit. It just got me into shit I couldn't get out of."

"Yes, but do you deny that it allowed you to see danger where others couldn't?"

"Well, yes. I suppose it did."

"And did you really rely on God before, or was he just a convenient crutch when things were bad?"

"Oh, so there are conditions on His help, then?"

"Only one, my child. You actually have to accept Him. I'm not sure you did."

"Oh, thanks, Father. I'm on the run, my family is in ruins, and now you're judging me?"

"I'm sorry. I was just trying to show you a way through the darkness. Please, continue."

SLEEPING WITH THE ENEMY

"Yeah, well, it felt like no one was listening. I was on the verge of getting really angry when the doors opened again. It was the guy who showed us in. He said it was time for 'Mr. Marshall and his group' to meet the new course leader. We looked quickly at each other. When Josh shrugged, we followed the guy. We went down a hallway, the guy motioned to a door, and then he left.

"I looked at Josh. He looked at Alan. Alan looked at me. None of us wanted to open that door. Then Josh just did it.

"The room was like a small library, covered in all these old books and pictures of dead, posh people. There was a guy sat behind a desk in the middle, and guess what? He matched Serena's description of the bastard who'd visited my house. Average build. Short black hair beginning to go grey. I'd say he was in his mid-30s. He had a big smile on his face and yeah, he was wrong, just like that bitch back in Manchester. The others could see it, too. I could see Alan tensing up, but Josh seemed quite casual about it all, sliding into one of the chairs opposite the desk.

"The guy stood up and asked if we'd like to take a seat, too. I told him I'd rather stand. Alan stayed standing, too. The guy told us to suit ourselves, and then sat down again. He just kept smiling that fucking smarmy smile and said that we'd been giving the Powell organization a headache. Then he asked if we'd had anything to do with Emma's death.

"Josh spoke up then. He asked one question. 'What did he offer you?' It made the guy look uncomfortable. 'I see you're getting straight to the point,' he said, and something about getting bailed out of debt. Gambling or something.

"Josh clapped slowly. 'He's quite the clever one, isn't he?' he said. 'Curing drink problems, blindness, gambling addiction. Just how is he managing all this?' I love it when Josh gets sarcastic. The guy just smiled and said he was sure we understood just how gifted certain people could be. Josh just nodded and kept silent, hoping that the guy would keep talking, I think.

"I'd had enough, though. There was one question burning in my mind and I wanted it answered. So, I asked him straight out, 'Are you sleeping with my wife?' That sure as hell wiped the smile off his face. He said, get this, 'You must be Mr. Marshall. Yes, Jason, I'm rather afraid I am.'

"Alan spoke up next, much to my surprise. It was a simple question, but it made all the difference: 'How does breaking up a marriage help people, exactly?'

"The guy smiled again and said that he was filling in for someone who clearly wasn't up to the job, looking at me all the while. I felt Josh's hand on my arm, and that was the only thing that stopped me belting the guy. He was goading me, I could see that, but fuck it, I wanted to be goaded. That guy deserved a good kicking. 'Besides,' he continued, 'working for people like our masters has to have its perks, right? And she is very cute. And very eager.'

"That was enough for me. I didn't even think to use any of the weird shit I can do. I just went for him. He was faster, though, stepping out of the way and leaving me to fall across his desk. That made me even angrier. He was an arrogant shit, just like the woman in the hotel. I didn't go straight for him again. I've been doing this long enough to know that if you're dealing with someone faster than you, you wait for your opportunity.

MISTAKEN IDENTITY

"Once he realized that I wasn't going to go for him again, he relaxed. He said, 'Your wife is very worried about your children. At least, I presume that they're your children.' It was Alan's hand on my shoulder that stopped me this time.

"He said that he'd told Julie that they would be fine, and that he hoped I wasn't turning him into a liar. Arrogant fuck. And then he said that now the formalities were out of the way, we should get down to business. He wanted to know who we were working for and what we wanted with some guy called Hassle-Thorne Al or some fucking stupid name like that. There was a silence for a moment as we tried to work out what to say. Josh, as normal, was the first to speak. 'We don't negotiate with monkeys, even trained ones. The message we've got is for the boss and no one else. If you'd like to call him and tell him we're ready to speak to him, we'd be happy to wait.'

"The guy looked unhappy at this. He tried to say that we could say anything to him that we wanted to say to Half Al's Sore, or whatever. That there was no way he could let us near his master given our actions in Manchester. Josh just looked smug and said that we'd be on our way, then. He's got balls of iron, that one.

"As Josh got to his feet, the guy started going on about how he had Julie and that he could report us to the police with no trouble at all. Josh just smiled again and said that clearly my devotion to our 'mistress' was far greater than my love for my wife. That, and our mistress could protect us from the police. It was a bluff, I guess, and it worked.

"The guy said he would be a moment, and he went out the door, glancing back at Josh as he left. Josh thanked me for not losing control again. We were all terrified.

SUCCESS OF A KIND

"The sleazebag was gone for quite a while. Alan paced the room, listening to Josh and I planning. In the end, we came to the conclusion that we should just talk, try and find out where this guy was coming from. The guy didn't give us much hope for Powell.

"Alan agreed to the plan. I guess he was still feeling guilty for giving so much away. All we had to do was wait. I hate fucking waiting. It leaves you too much time to get scared."

"Perhaps that's why they made you wait. This whole process seems to have been a way of playing games with you."

"Yeah, maybe."

"Please, child, listen to what I say. This fight isn't just about hurting the enemy. It's about defeating his ideas. If you fight him on his terms, you'll lose. If you trust—"

"Don't say it. You haven't been through what we have."

"I... Then maybe you should finish your story."

"Yeah. Lover Boy eventually came back, looking like he'd got himself together again. He told us that his 'master' would 'lower' himself to seeing us. We didn't have much choice. He took us up two flights of stairs, towards a room at the front of the house, overlooking the heath. That's where...."

"Where what, child?"

"That's where I lost all faith in God. That where I saw the creatures that really rule the world.

THE DEVIL HIMSELF

"He was sat there, in the middle of this upstairs room, a glass in his hand and a huge smile on his face. It was Adrian Powell all right. I'd seen him on leaflets and shit. At least, that's what part of him looked like. The rest was horrible. I actually felt sick, like his being there defied everything that was right. I had to stop myself from throwing up.

"The sleazebag who was shagging my wife walked around behind him, like a dog with its master. The wanker looked kind of uncertain. He let Powell do all the talking.

"Powell asked us to come in and sit down. For a moment I could barely stand, I felt so ill. It had never been this bad before. He asked if this was what we were expecting.

"I think we all just looked at him blankly. I don't know what I expected, but someone making jokes wasn't it. It was like we weren't a threat at all, but he was still interested in us. Like a kid with a bug.

"Then the guy actually apologized. He said something weird about not being able to resist his body's sense of humor. I don't know.

"Josh picked up on that. He asked the guy if he was really Adrian Powell. The guy laughed and said something about yes and no — that he was Powell, but Powell was dead.

"I'm trying to remember what he said next. It was something like, 'What does your mistress want of me? You do work for Maggie's Day, right? Killing one of my people to send a message seems like her style.'"



“Maggie’s Day?”

“That’s what it sounded like to me. Josh glanced at the pair of us and then said we were working for ourselves. Powell laughed again. It was really fucking irritating me by now. I don’t think he could believe it. He asked us what we were doing if we weren’t working for this other guy he mentioned. Alan said that we were trying to protect people from him.”

“Did he believe you?”

“Nah.”

“Perhaps you should have told him the truth. That you are servants of God.”

“Problem with that, Father, is that none of us bought it, so there was no chance of selling him on it. He just accused us of lying and said he could get the truth out of us. He ordered us to tell the truth. I got a bad headache and then it passed. Powell paused, turned to the sleazebag and told him to get rid of us.

“The fucker grinned and walked toward us. His hands changed just like that bitch in Manchester. Alan was fast this time. He got to the guy first and put him down with one punch.

“Josh pulled a truncheon out of his jacket. I have no idea where he got it from.

“Powell seemed thrown by all this. He said we had no idea what we were dealing with and that if we had any sense, we’d be on our knees begging for mercy. Something odd was going on with him. He looked taller somehow, more in control. Some part of me wanted to fall at his feet like he said, but I wouldn’t.

“Josh tried talking to him one last time, but things were getting out of control. I could hear the fear in his voice. He told Powell we’d held our own against things like him and unless he gave us some answers, he’d be next.

“That was my signal to get ready with the shield thing, to keep him away from us when the shit hit the fan. Powell asked Josh what the hell we were doing there. Josh wouldn’t answer, but wanted to know why Powell was fucking with people’s heads. He laughed again. I was getting really fucking sick of that and really, really wanted shut his gob. He said that he was doing them a favor, giving them something to believe in.

“Josh didn’t like that answer. ‘You want to be worshipped? Is that it?’ he said.

Powell didn’t answer. He just tried to make us lose our cool.

“How...? Wait, I think I know. Did he make you doubt yourselves?”

“Yeah, I guess. He asked how we got imbued — sorry, blessed. He said he rewarded his people. What did we get? He asked who we served, that he could feel our tricks weren’t our own. That stopped Josh. That’s the sort of shit he wonders about a lot, even if he pretends not to.”

“The Devil always seeks to undermine our faith in ourselves and the Lord.”

“Yeah, well Josh bounced back. He went into this talk about not knowing if it’s God or angels or aliens, but we know right from wrong. I think he only does it so he

can get close enough to something to hit it. He didn’t get very far into it this time, though. Mentioning God and angels seemed to upset Powell. Really upset him.”

“The enemy cannot stand the name of the Lord.”

“My memory’s not the best, Father, but there are some things you just can’t forget. This was one of those moments. He laughed. It was probably the worst thing I’ve ever heard. He said, ‘God? There’s no God. Just us. We made the world. You’re all our playthings. We decide if you live — or die!’

“That’s when Powell changed. I didn’t really notice, but Alan said that wife-stealing bastard twitched and moved when Powell changed. Alan said later that he thought they were connected somehow. I was locked on to what was happening. I couldn’t look away. It was horrible because it took time. He got taller. His skin twisted. Wings came out of his back. It looked like scales across him. And his eyes! It was the worst thing I’d ever seen.

“Alan broke and ran. I can’t say I blame him. I was too afraid to run. Maybe he’s just smarter than me. The thing didn’t seem to like Alan leaving. It reached after him and this — I don’t know how to describe it — fire maybe, came out. It went everywhere. The pain was awful. I think I blacked out for a second and grabbed a chair, but I still hit the floor.

“The next thing I knew, Josh was lying next to me. He was out cold, thank God. His arm was gone, Father. It was just gone. There was just a black stump where it used to be. Bloody hell, I failed Julie and I failed Josh. Maybe it’s just as well that I’m out of their lives now. I seem to fuck everything up. There was no sign of Alan. I turned my head slow the other way and saw Powell looking down at the bastard who had been screwing my wife. I think he caught the worst of it. Serves him bloody right.

“Powell looked normal again, but pissed off. I wasn’t done yet, though. I didn’t bother with praying or anything. I just reached for that warmth inside me and pushed outwards with it. Powell staggered back. I climbed to my feet and started walking toward him. The heat around me pushed him further and further back towards the window.

“He told me that I should be dead. I ignored him. He told me that he would kill my family. I ignored him. I just kept walking until he was right at the window. And then I threw myself at him. He held on for a second and I charged him and pushed him through.

“I think he tried to change as he fell, but he didn’t make it. He lay on the concrete, his arms at bad angles, but he was still moving. What the hell is he that he could survive that fall?

ESCAPE

“I didn’t have time to think about it, though. I ran. I grabbed Josh, slung him over my shoulder and I ran as fast as I could. Nobody tried to stop me. As I reached the road by the heath, I looked around. There was no sign of anyone, but also no bloody way I could get back to the car without hundreds of people seeing me. Then the Land Rover pulled up and the door flew open. Alan was inside.

“He didn’t look good. In fact, he stank of shit. I guess he lost it, but he still came back for us. That made him a beautiful sight in my eyes.”

Father,

I've spent all night writing down all I can remember of Jason's confession. I will copy it and give it to the others you have blessed.

Thank you for sending me the sign I needed. I now know that your enemies are truly abroad and that we do your work in opposing them. I may have failed to open Jason's eyes and soul to you once more, but I now know why you chose not to bless me.

Others are called to fight for you against your enemies. It is my role to stand witness and guide them on the path of your righteousness. Jason's story has shown me how easily they can doubt and fall. I will keep the church a shelter for the blessed, a place where they can find sanctuary, guidance and rest. If I can open some of their ears to your message and blessing, then I will consider my life well spent.

Lord, I pray for Jason's soul. He has strayed from the path and I hope you will show him the way back before it is too late. I also pray for guidance as I seek a new home for his children. They are innocents, saved from corruption only by your grace.

Amen

"What happened then?"

"We went as fast as we could to the Blackwall Tunnel under the Thames. I did what I could to treat Josh. I think I made a difference, but not enough. Josh looked like he was in shock, not that I know fuck all about that. We got back to Josh's place and I left him with Serena and the others. I've been on the run for a few days since. We've been round the houses to try and confuse anyone trying to track us. We spent a couple of days with Dole in Newcastle, and now we're here with you. I can't go back to them. Powell knows who I am, and who Alan is. That makes us a threat to the rest of them. We didn't see any sign of Phil from the course, but we know that he has dirt on some of us, too.

"Alan's in Manchester with me. After I'm done here, we're on a flight. I've been in contact with some others in Canada. I think they can put us up for a while. It's over for me here, though. I saw Powell on TV this morning. He looked fine. I can't stop him, Father. Maybe he was right. Maybe we are nothing against his kind. I don't know, but it's not my fight anymore."

"Have you given up hope entirely, child?"

"Hope? Not much call for that anymore. There was only one thing that happened that gave me any hope at all. The moment we acted, Powell actually seemed surprised. I don't know if that was because he'd never seen anything like it before, or because he didn't think we had it in us. I guess it doesn't matter, but it might mean he and his kind don't have as much control as they think. Maybe we have a chance against them. Maybe one day I'll be able to live in London again."

DEPARTURE

"So, what now for you? You don't seek forgiveness and you don't believe in He who could grant it anymore."

"Two things, Father. The first is easy. I want you to tell the others what I've told you. I want them to know about Powell and what his kind does to people. They need to be on the lookout for it. Tell them everything. Don't worry about any confessional bullshit. Maybe they'll be able to succeed where we failed."

"I understand, child, and I thank you for your trust."

"Don't thank me yet. Tomorrow afternoon, two kids will turn up on your doorstep. They're young and confused. I want you to find them a new home. Through your church or congregation or something. They can't come with me, and they can't go back to their mother. I may not have faith anymore, but I know you're a good man. Treat them well. If you let me down, you'll have a lot worse than Hell to worry about."

"I'll try. God go with you."

"Not much chance of that."

LONDON WOMAN FOUND BEATEN TO DEATH

Husband and children both missing.

By Staff Reporter

The body of a woman was found in a flat in Kidbrooke yesterday afternoon. Police confirmed that it was Julie Marshall, 37, a housewife. She had been beaten to death some hours before.

Her husband, Jason Marshall, 39, and their two children have been missing for some days.

The police indicated that they believed there was a connection with a similar murder in Manchester a week ago. A spokesman claimed that they had evidence that placed Jason Marshall in the area at the time and were currently interviewing a number of witnesses who were attending a course with him in a local hotel.

The police also said that whilst Marshall claimed to be working as a long-distance lorry driver, he had in fact resigned a year ago. They are eager to trace his real employer during that period.

"We would ask them to come forward so they can be eliminated from this enquiry," said the spokesman.

During an emotional appeal for information, Julie's mother, Mrs. Sharon Evans, said that Marshall had concealed this from her daughter. "Julie knew nothing about that. All she knew was that he was bringing home a little more money, but was away longer than he used to be."

Neighbor Clive Maslin, also 39, a builder, vehemently denied that Marshall was capable of killing his wife. "I've known Jason and Julie for years, and that guy would have done anything for her. I don't care what the police say. Jason would never have done this to his wife."

A spokesman for the Metropolitan Police said they were looking for Marshall and his children. They are also seeking a middle-aged white man with greying black hair who drives a BMW.

CONTINUED PAGE B4.



CHAPTER 7: RULES AND STORYTELLING

So I have learned this rule: When I want to do good, evil is there with me.

— Romans 7:21

DEMONS IN HUNTER

Devils. Evil spirits. Beings fallen from their exalted place as celestial servants of the Most High. Stories of demons are told all over the world. They are secret corrupters who play on the weaknesses and failings of our souls. Perhaps they exist to bring us down to their level. Maybe they're a universal reaction to the existence of good; without evil there can be no good. Or maybe they stand to illustrate that evil is not a unified force but something inherent to all things. In the modern world, many people believe that demons exist within us, not as spirits but as the creations of our own negative thoughts and emotions, the dark impulses with which we wrestle. In the World of Darkness, demons and the forces of Hell are real, and hunters only begin to discover how real. Although they have faced bloodsuckers, skin-changers, shamblers and other monsters, the imbued now face creatures that may be the literal embodiment of evil. Demons possess powers older than humanity itself, a deep and enduring hatred for all things, and a desire to drag everyone and everything with them into damnation. In the legions of Hell, the chosen may well have met their match.

But perhaps more troubling than the pervasive threats that demons pose are the questions they raise. Are they truly fallen angels? Do some of them seek repentance? Do demons prove that God and the Devil truly exist? Are they the reason that hunters came into being, and are they related to the Messengers in some way?

This chapter provides all the information that you as a Storyteller need to present demons as adversaries and potentially even as tentative allies in **Hunter: The Reckoning**. You may find **Hunter: Fall from Grace** useful as a companion to this book, although it is not required. It addresses the fate of the most lost of extremists, and the perils they face of losing their souls to the Host of Hell (among other powers). If your chronicle involves infernal antagonists but doesn't focus on imbued of that intensity, **Hunter: The Infernal** stands on its own. This chapter also references material from the **Hunter Storytellers Companion** and the **Hunter Storytellers Handbook**. Limited space here prohibits reprinting material from those other books.

A NOTE TO PLAYERS

If you're a player, please don't read any further. Your Storyteller may prefer that you don't know the information in this chapter, and you may want to be surprised by what your character encounters rather than know it all in advance. An important part of **Hunter's** horror is the unknown, and demons are among the least known monsters of the World of Darkness. Don't spoil the surprise.

REVELATIONS OF THE BEAST

This chapter is a summary of the origins and identity of demons. Where they come from, where they've been, how they've returned and what they do now. This information is largely unknown to hunters, although many demons know it. Of course, the hellspawn are notorious

liars and deceivers, so anything that they choose to tell others — particularly demon-hunters — is suspect to say the least. The material in this section is the truth as some demons know it. How much of that truth you choose to reveal to your players and their character is up to you. Just keep in mind that there are some things that remain mysteries to even the infernal. Now that they've returned to the world, some of them struggle to remember who and what they once were. Their masters may have left some in the dark about cosmic facts or details. Others may pretend to have answers but anything they say is actually wild speculation or a cunning lie. But hunters, of course, have no way of telling the difference.

CREATION AND THE FALL

In the beginning, demons were celestial beings of tremendous power. They were the appointed agents of a divine Creator, each set to oversee certain facets of Creation. One of those elements was humanity, which existed in a state of divine grace but that was ignorant of the great truths of the universe. Filled with compassion and love for humanity, the celestials wanted to improve man's lot, but were forbidden to interfere. Frustrated by their conflicting duties, some of the divine finally chose to rebel against the Creator out of a desire to help, and a great and terrible war ensued between Heaven and Earth. Although the rebels fought long and hard, they were eventually overcome. According to the rebels, humanity turned its back on the champions in the end and abandoned them to their fate.

The Creator exiled the rebels to a place outside Creation, removed from all existence. Demons describe it as a place of eternal torment, not because it was (and is) filled with fire and brimstone. It was simply a place of endless and eternal nothingness and non-being. There was nothing for the exiles there except to sink deeper and deeper into their own guilt, anger, bitterness and hatred, until that was what remained of most of them. In the hell of the Abyss, the fallen remained for untold ages until their divine nature was forgotten and they had nothing left except their bitterness toward the Creator that exiled them and the people who betrayed them.

OPENING THE GATES

In the untold time since the Fall, demons have occasionally been summoned back to Earth. Sorcerers and witches in possession of demons' True Names have called the spirits up from Hell using magical rites, and perhaps even bound the beings to do their bidding. More than a few people seeking power have made pacts with devils, although most arrangements have not ended well for the mortals who've made them.

On occasion, cults have sprung up that worshipped demons and fed them power with faith and devotion. These cults have sometimes managed to summon their patrons to Earth, and some of these demons are still around, expanding their influence and working behind the scenes. They're among the most powerful and cunning infernal in the world, simply because they've had

SO DOES THIS MEAN...?

The story of the creation, fall and exile of demons strongly implies that Judeo-Christian lore about the world and the fall of the angels led by Lucifer is the literal truth. Is it? Well, yes... and no.

Yes, the history of demons did happen. They were celestial servants of the Most High damned to exile in Hell for their rebellion. Their Creator did create the world and everything in it. However, the war that the demons talk about was fought in an age before recorded history, perhaps even before the world as modern humanity knows it came into being.

Demons occasionally mention that Creation was "different" back then in ways that they can scarcely explain to modern people. It wasn't limited to being just one thing or having only one truth. Some things were actually multiple things, and seemingly contradictory truths were all applicable. Demons certainly acknowledge that the world has changed much since then, perhaps changed many times, and it's impossible to say how long the fallen have been imprisoned. Time as we understand it has little or no meaning in the depths of the Abyss. So perhaps the history that demons know is only one of the "true" histories of the world, if any of them are really true.

It's possible that Judeo-Christian belief is based on visions and dim recollections of the time demons speak of. Perhaps it's based on interactions with forces both divine and infernal across the centuries. But while demons are pretty strong evidence of the existence of God and angels, they're not absolute proof. All they prove is that evil exists and that we're on our own against it, which is a truth the imbued already know.

millennia of earthly existence to extend their influence. Fortunately for humanity, such demons are extremely rare, no more than a handful... until recently.

Now, unknown forces have torn open the gates of Hell and a flood of demons has been loosed into the world. This apocalyptic tragedy may have been connected to the plague of ghosts, shamblers and other monsters that hunters have faced, or might even have been the impetus behind hunters' creation. There are some suspicious, insightful or paranoid imbued who warn that the Messengers chose certain people in preparation for the coming of the legions of Hell, and that demons are the true threat the imbued are meant to face. Whatever the reason, a great number of demons have poured into the world. They were not summoned like their brethren, but have simply been released as disembodied spirits in need of places to go.

POSSESSION

The liberated demons have found havens in the bodies of certain mortals, people whose souls are weak, worn out or too feeble to resist the invasion of new, more

powerful beings. (These hosts include abuse victims, those who bitterly mourn the loss of loved ones, excessive drug users, broken-down alcoholics, the suicidal, and even the very recently dead.) The demons have possessed these people, assuming human forms and identities that allow them to move undetected through the world, except by those with the eyes to see them.

To a hunter's second sight, a person possessed by a demon is somehow *wrong*, but it is difficult for the hunter to say exactly how. Demonic possession is subtle since the mortal host still lives and breathes and possesses a soul (although not its original one). Hunters with active Conviction sense something disturbing about the demonically possessed, but it's not always the same thing each time. It may be a hint of the demon's true form, such as a scent of brimstone or strangely glowing eyes. A hunter may get a brief impression of wings, horns or other demonic features. There may be a sense of intense heat or cold, a shadow that falls across the demon's mortal form or simply an overwhelming sense of malice from the creature.

All these confusing and conflicting observations may cause hunters to second-guess their perceptions or feelings about demons. They may mistake a demon for a possessing ghost or some other sort of creature. They may not know *what* it is, only that it's not human. You as Storyteller should maintain this uncertainty when describing demons to players. Keep them wondering exactly what it is that their characters sense — whether to sight, smell, hearing or intuition — since it helps make demons a frightening unknown.

When using observation edges to ferret out demons, hunters get more information but it isn't always conclusive or consistent.

Illuminate allows hunters to perceive that a demon is not the mortal being it appears to be. The subject bears an ominous aura of some kind, whether utterly black, one that seems to absorb all light, or one like the corona of the sun — fiery and smoldering. That's not to say that all users of *Illuminate* see the very same aura, however, not even around the same demon. Two hunters standing side by side may see different kinds of outlines, while a single hunter looking at two demons may see different auras around them. The variation can arise from a hunter or devil's mood or intent, predisposition toward the subject observed, or from a hunter's interpretation of what "demon" means. An imbued who defines "demon" as evil may see a black aura, while a hunter who wonders if



“demon” implies “fallen angel” may see brilliant light surrounding an entity. Ultimately, you get to keep players and characters on their toes when Illuminate reveals varying and not always reliable information.

Witness allows a hunter to see a flash of a demon's infernal form (p. 88), revealing the demon's true nature. It's the most effective means to see the creature for what it is, but since infernal forms often differ in appearance from subject to subject, be careful not to simply tell a player “it's a demon.” Describe the demon's infernal form in detail, instead, allowing player and character to draw their own conclusions.

Discern is not very effective against demons simply because they inhabit living host bodies and therefore lack most of the signs of supernatural possession. Increase the difficulty of using Discern against demons to 8. Things that a hunter may notice using this edge are slight changes in mannerisms, skin that is unusually warm or dry to the touch, faint and musky odors, or the smell of smoke where there is no fire. These signs are limited and confusing. They should tell a hunter only that something is wrong about a particular individual, not necessarily that it's demonically possessed.

THE POWER OF FAITH

Demons have various supernatural powers that are fueled by the energy of faith. Each hellspawn has a Faith rating that measures its overall might, ranging from 1 to 10, much like Willpower. Also like Willpower, Faith has a permanent and temporary rating. Newly arrived demons tend to have permanent Faith ratings between 3 and 5, while more powerful ones or those that have spent more time on Earth have ratings of 5 and higher. Faith points can be spent for demons to use some of their powers. Devils can't regain Faith on their own, however. They must receive it as gifts from mortals, or they may take it by force.

When a demon needs a “quick fix” of Faith, it can get it by causing a hapless mortal to believe — *really believe* — in what the demon represents, for good or ill. That moment of pure belief is enough for the demon to leech off some of the mortal's Faith. Unfortunately, the acts that a demon must commit to truly prove that it is a creature from Hell tend to make the process unpleasant for the victim. After being kidnapped and systematically tortured, a target is more than ready to believe when the demon reveals its true form. Demons also reap Faith from mortals using gory cult rituals, stalking them like prey, or by encouraging or forcing mortals to give in to their own temptations.

It is possible for demons to inspire faith through good and benevolent deeds as well. An entity that saves mortals from harm or danger or that provides aid and convinces people that it is a divine or spiritual being also gains a measure of Faith. Some demons do this to gain the trust of potential followers and to conceal their true horrific nature, but those that need a quick Faith fix prefer cruelty over kindness.

In either case, roll the demon's permanent Faith in a resisted roll against the victim's Willpower (both

difficulty 7). If the demon wins, the demon gains a point of temporary Faith. If the victim wins, the demon can keep trying until the victim gives in (or until the acts that the demon commits drive the victim mad or kill him). Subsequent efforts to gain Faith are rolled once per turn, minute or hour, depending on the intensity and nature of the act that the demon performs. If a being inflicts slow and tedious torture on a person, and reveals increasingly terrifying aspects of its true form to the victim, Faith and Willpower rolls might be made every hour. Eating limbs quickly and methodically, one after another, might provoke a resisted roll every turn. In contrast, if a demon performs a single, instantaneously act such as miraculously saving someone from a car crash, only one resisted roll might be allowed to gather Faith. If it fails, no further rolls can be made because the awe-inspiring act is complete and past. In the case of prolonged displays or acts inflicted on a mortal, the target may suffer a derangement, not to mention the possibility of permanent injury, impairment or death.

Regardless of how often a demon seeks a quick fix of Faith from a human, no more than one point can be acquired per scene. Subsequent efforts to inspire it in the same scene do the demon no good; the victim already believes to the core his being. Continued efforts to reap Faith in the same scene can still do the target harm, of course.

And yet, taking a bit of Faith here and there isn't usually enough to keep a demon supplied with the power it craves. That's why demons recruit thralls, followers who give it Faith in exchange for favors and power. Mortals can and do enter into pacts with demons, effectively selling their souls (or at least small pieces of them). In essence, a demon agrees to grant something that a mortal wants in exchange for the power of the mortal's Faith. The demon takes a “cut” of that power, and uses the rest of it to fulfill the mortal's desire. Ironically, it's the mortal who provides all the energy to fulfill her desire, but that wish couldn't come true without the demon's contribution (at least not easily, which is the allure of a demon's offer).

Demons can grant a number of benefits to mortals, including supernatural potential, wealth, influence and beauty. See “Thrall Powers” (p. 94) for guidelines on what gifts can be granted.

The demon can thereafter “skim off” a portion of the thrall's Faith. A beast can recover one point of Faith per day per thrall that it has. Beyond that, a demon can draw more heavily on a thrall, but at a cost. Each additional Faith point acquired per day costs the thrall a point of Willpower. The thrall suffers terrible visions, wracking pain and unreasoning terror. Thralls whose Willpower falls to zero by this means acquire a permanent derangement. If the demon continues to drain Faith, the thrall takes a health level of lethal damage per Faith point, suffering stigmata, burns, sickness and internal injuries. A thrall reduced below Incapacitated in this manner is killed. Demons can draw Faith from their thralls over any distance.

REVELATION

Whenever a demon publicly reveals all its infernal glory or uses a power overtly before human onlookers, it can overwhelm those people. The sheer magnitude, spectacle or glory of the sight may strike some witnesses catatonic, triggers others to flee, cause some to suffer temporary blindness and inspire a very few to stare transfixed. No one really understands what they see, and few remember it. Those who can recall anything simply know that some amazing or terrifying occurred. The particularly weak or frail might even suffer heart attacks. The effect is similar to what ordinary people suffer in the presence of hunters' edges in use.

The same revelatory affects apply to those who are reaped by a demon for a Faith point. A demon revealing its true grandeur or using a power publicly does not automatically earn the being Faith, however. Reaping such points from victims involves much more personal interaction with an individual.

Hunters with Conviction active are immune to the shock of a demon revealed, although imbued with no defenses up suffer just as other people do. Thralls and other supernatural beings can also be immune to demons' revelatory presence. The experience is terrifying or awesome, sure, but these individuals retain their composure and memory.

Since thralls are valuable as continuing sources of power, demons are reluctant to strip-mine their souls indiscriminately. Still, a demon backed into a corner is capable of calling upon tremendous reserves at a terrible cost to its minions, something that hunters confronting demon-led cults may discover to their horror.

Can a demon-thrall relationship ever be broken? Probably not, even if a servant eventually sees the error of her ways and repents. The agreement is supernaturally binding while the entity still exists on Earth. Sending the demon-spirit back to the Abyss (see p. 87) severs its ties with all of its minions. It's also possible that a demon could relinquish its hold over a particular thrall if offered something even more lucrative, such as the trapped essence of a rival devil. A hunter could theoretically broker such a deal, but the demon almost certainly looks for loopholes in the agreement to lose nothing and win on all counts.

Hunters might also offer an alternative thrall for the freedom of an existing one. An imbued could, say, offer his own services in return for the liberty of someone else, perhaps a loved one. Hunters can't become thralls, though (see "For the Record"), so the demon is certainly enraged when its influence doesn't properly take hold over the chosen. That the hunter knows he is immune is unlikely, unless he's faced demons before and been made offers on previous occasions. Then again, what self-respecting demon would relinquish control over an existing thrall before establishing a firm bond with his

new one? When that new bond doesn't take, the being certainly doesn't respond well to the hunter's duplicity.

It's also possible that a hunter who seeks to negotiate with a demon could try to redeem the devil and free one or more of its minions. The effort would probably be useless if the demon were unrepentant of its past sins and reveled in its newfound mastery over humanity. If the being saw the error of its past ways and regretted abusing people, it might be convinced to free a slave. The process is by no means easy and requires the conscious and willing participation of the demon. Repeated counseling sessions are needed, and application of edges such as Insinuate that cut to the being's deepest feelings help. Assume the process to be a resisted and extended action. The hunter's Willpower is rolled against the demon's Faith (difficulty 7 for both). Excess successes achieved by the hunter are accumulated. As many as 10 may be required to convince a newly returned and repentant demon is liberate a thrall, while 30 might be necessary to get an established and angry creature to relinquish a pawn. (The established demon probably wants something significant in return, too, such as a favor or immunity from further hunter interference.) Use of edges such as Insinuate in the process lower the hunter's difficulties by one. Sessions can be arranged as often as hunter and demon are amenable, but no more than one roll is likely to be made every few days, at the most.

A liberated thrall or one who's lost her master is stripped of all the benefits of her pact.

While hunters cannot become conventional thralls, they can be the targets of infernal efforts to reap Faith. As with any mortal, the demon commits a heinous or benevolent act before the subject and inspires the belief that such hellish, heavenly or simply unearthly beings exist. The exception is when a hunter's second sight is in use. Active Conviction denies a demon from gaining reaped Faith from a hunter, even if the chosen *wants* to empower the creature. The hunter still knows that the entity is miraculous, but keeps his wits about him and knows that the being "does not belong." The hunter does suffer any pain or torture that the devil inflicts, though.

IMMORTALITY

Although the bodies that they wear are mortal, and some demons retain fractured memories of their human hosts, the souls that once inhabited those bodies are usually gone. In many cases only the demon remains. While hunters can hope to "exorcise" a demon and restore the host's soul, driving the demon from its body might leave nothing but a mindless, soulless shell (a potential housing for any other wandering spirit or ghost—or maybe another demon). Or, perhaps the original suppressed soul can be restored. It's your call. (See "Prayers," p. 98.)

Ultimately, host bodies are mortal and can be killed. Demons themselves are immortal. A devil whose host body is killed can simply inhabit another, even if doing so is draining. The new host must fulfill the same conditions as before, having a weakened soul that the

FOR THE RECORD

Just so you know, the imbued cannot become the mortal hosts of demons. The mind and soul of a hunter automatically rejects the demonic presence, no matter how defeated a hunter is, denying the demon any sort of hold. Hunters don't have to spend Conviction for this protection; it's simply part of the nature of being imbued. Not even the very recently deceased body of a hunter can be possessed. It's a dormant vessel that offers an invading devil no anchor or footing in the material world. Thus, the infernal gain no insight into the beliefs, knowledge or memories of the imbued — at least not through possession, anyway.

Likewise, the chosen cannot normally become the thralls of a demon. A hunter's inherent nature rejects a demon's powers, enhancements and "gifts." Still, there are some means by which even a hunter can fall to demonic manipulation. See "Hunter Thralls" (p. 96) for more information.

Any mortal who is or has ever been a thrall to a demon can never become a hunter. The Messengers seem to disdain those mortals who have been so strongly tainted by the infernal. Such mortals cannot even become bystanders.

Of course, hunters have no way of knowing any of this. The smart ones avoid making any sort of deals with demons to begin with, and hold out hope that a beast's mortal followers can be redeemed. More than a few hunters fear for their souls when it comes to dealing with the infernal, and in many cases they're right to worry. The imbued may be protected from some of a demon's powers, but devils possess other capabilities, and there are fates far worse than becoming mere pawns.

demon can easily overcome. The spirit must grow to understand and grasp its new identity and body, and any new emotions that go with them, a process that can take days or weeks. Demons can inhabit the bodies of their thralls, as well, using the connection of the pact. Indeed, some thralls willingly give up their lives to allow their demon masters to survive and escape for another day.

Demon-spirits can also inhabit objects or places, if desperate. The object or place must bear human resonance. People must pay attention to or think about the object or place on a regular basis. A prominent statue might apply, as might the computer on which an author writes the Great American Novel. A key or a train car doesn't apply unless those objects are somehow significant to people. A Willpower roll is made (difficulty 8). If it succeeds, the item or place becomes the demon's new home. The being is limited to the physical capabilities and perhaps location of the host. If he inhabits a statue, he can't move or speak. If the roll fails, the spirit cannot enter the object and must move on. On a botch, the spirit loses a permanent point of Willpower. If a

possessed object is destroyed, the demon is cast adrift again and must repeat the process of finding a new host.

The only way to destroy a demon permanently is to destroy its physical host and then attack the incorporeal spirit when it appears before it can find a new host. The demon's incorporeal form looks like a ghostly version of its infernal form to hunters' second sight. The incorporeal form has a number of health levels equal to the demon's permanent Faith rating (no damage taken by its former host is suffered now). The demon-spirit is affected only by edges such as Ravage, Burn and Cleave that permit hunters to attack insubstantial creatures. No wound penalties are suffered by a demon that's damaged in spirit form, but nor can it affect anything physically or use any of its powers.

Since an incorporeal demon is capable of moving through the air and solid objects at great speed (Willpower +5 miles per turn), the chosen must strike quickly or else the being escapes, moving out of reach toward a new host. Using Burden (**Hunter**, p. 161) to keep a demon from escaping is an effective tactic. Each turn the demon exists in the physical world without a host, a Willpower roll (difficulty 6) must be made. If a roll fails, the spirit is sucked back into Hell. Willpower points may be spent for automatic successes to remain.

ATTACKS AND DAMAGE

Demons wearing mortal flesh are vulnerable to physical harm, although not as much as ordinary people. Demons grant their host bodies supernatural resilience, allowing them to soak both bashing and lethal damage with their full Stamina ratings (plus any additional supernatural Endurance or powers that a demon may have — see p. 89). Mark both types of harm as a "/" on a demon's Health chart.

Demons generally have the same number of health levels as mortals, although truly powerful demons may have more. Demons do feel pain and are subject to wound penalties just as mortals are.

An injured demon can use Faith to heal bashing or lethal damage. A single Faith point wipes away *all* bashing damage that a demon has suffered, or removes a single level of lethal damage. Demons can heal at will as a reflexive action, and a demon with access to many thralls can recover instantly from any attack that doesn't kill its host body outright.

While they inhabit human hosts, demons are vulnerable to all of the same things that hurt people. That includes dangers such as suffocation, poison and disease. Some demons can use their supernatural powers to make them temporarily immune to such threats, and Faith points can still be spent to heal any damage suffered, even while such harm is incurred. So, Faith could be spent to stave off the damage caused by poison or drowning, although the demon would continue to suffer damage as long as it was still exposed to the toxin or was unable to breathe.

Demons also suffer aggravated damage (especially intense harm) from the claws and fangs of other supernatural creatures and from blessed weapons (see Holy

Items, p. 98). Demons cannot soak aggravated damage, nor can Faith be spent to heal it. They must recover from it over time as regular people heal lethal damage. Mark levels lost to aggravated damage with a "X" on a demon's Health chart. Apply aggravated damage done to demons as lethal damage is applied to hunters.

If a demon's host body is reduced below Incapacitated by lethal or aggravated damage, the body dies and the demon is forced out of it in spirit form. The demon must locate another suitable host before it is dragged back to Hell. An incorporeal demon that's drawn back to Hell is trapped until someone summons it again, if ever. Demons often teach trusted thralls how to summon them, giving the spirits the means to return to Earth (see "Summoning and Binding Demons," p. 100, for details).

INFERNAL POWERS

Demons have a variety of powers at their command, making them dangerous foes. Some infernal powers are innate and always available, while others require a measure of effort and experience to direct. All demons have the innate capabilities described here, and probably at least three or four common powers. More experienced demons or those higher in the hierarchy of the damned have four or five common powers and two or three uncommon powers. The most powerful creatures have six or seven common powers, three to five uncommon ones and one to three rare capabilities at their disposal.

Demonic powers are considerable and mysterious, so feel free to borrow and use the tricks given to other monsters in the *Hunter Storytellers Companion* and other *Hunter* books to supplement what's presented here. Such "borrowing" increases the breadth of hellspawn potential and makes the infernal ever more unpredictable. Substitute Faith for the Blood, Rage, Pathos, Glamour or Willpower points that fuel these powers, as appropriate.

(Note that Willpower does not fuel demons' powers as is suggested for all other monster types in *Hunter's* Antagonist chapter. Faith does so, as already established here. Demons still have Willpower ratings, however. As with hunters, these points are used to help demons gain successes in mundane feats such as jumping chasms or staying awake for extended periods of time. Demons tend to have Willpower ratings from 2 to 8, depending on their resolve to act on the anger that they developed in the Abyss.)

The ghost powers Acceleration/Deceleration, Dark Visions and Whispers (common); Firebug, Gremlinize, Hastening the Inevitable, Immovable Object, Phantasmagoia, Poltergeist's Rage and Stigmata (uncommon); Center of Gravity and Obliviate (rare) all suit demons. The vampire powers Charm, Haunt the Mind, Headgames, Keen Perceptions, Speak with the Dead, Summon Animals, Terrify and Unseen (common); Command the Dead, Inkblot, Inter, Memory Wipe and Zombie Servitors (uncommon) are also appropriate for devils. Also see *Demon: The Fallen* for a more detailed selection of demonic powers and capabilities.

INNATE POWERS

All demons have certain inherent capacities based on their infernal nature. These powers don't generally require a Faith expenditure to be used. A hunter using the Payback edge (*Hunter*, p. 151) can temporarily rob a demon of one of these innate powers, imposing the restrictions of the demon's mortal form on it for a time.

CLOSED MIND

Demons are immune to all forms of outside compulsion, control or possession (not surprising since they themselves possess mortal bodies). Consider it the same as hunters' own body, mind and emotion control when Conviction is active. This defense does not protect demons from normal social interaction, manipulation, coercion or

HUNTERS AND DEMONIC POWERS

The presence of a hunter with active Conviction interferes with a demon's use of Faith, almost like magnetic charges that oppose each other. If a hunter with Conviction active is in a demon's presence and can see the demon as it uses its powers, the Faith costs of those capabilities are doubled as long as the hunter focuses his attention on the devil. This dampening effect requires no active effort on the chosen's part, merely attention on the subject. The demon is not automatically aware of the hunter's influence or interference, although it does notice that using its powers is taxing.

Note that this cost increase applies to only powers that actually cost Faith points to use. Innate powers are unaffected by a hunter's presence, and work normally.

This extra Faith cost does not apply to thralls when they try to activate powers bestowed through infernal pacts. Pawns use Willpower to fuel such gifts, as discussed under "Thrall Powers," on p. 94. Only demons' capabilities and Faith are influenced by hunters' presence.

This phenomenon is one of the greatest advantages hunters have against the infernal. It forces most demons to be cunning and subtle in dealing with the imbued, rather than confronting them outright. Still, a demon with enough thralls to provide Faith can confront a group of hunters and still wield its powers quite effectively, and only hunters actively using Conviction limit the damned in this way. Under normal circumstances, demons can use their powers against ordinary humans and hunters to full effect.

It's important to understand that hunters don't *know* they have this suffocating effect on demons, and the fallen have yet to figure out how or why their powers are more difficult to use around the chosen (indeed, or that anyone who could be called a "hunter" is even responsible). Demons who are aware of this weakness conceal it carefully, and they can still be quite intimidating to any imbued who don't know their own strength.

outright intimidation; it only shields them from supernatural attempts to influence or take away their free will. Note that the hunter edge *Insinuate* (**Hunter**, p. 152) still works against demons, stirring up memories of their human hosts or of the benevolent beings they once were.

The only means of taking away a demon's free will is to learn its True Name and to bind it ritually (see "Summoning and Binding Demons," p. 100, for details).

AWARENESS

Demons are fully aware of the supernatural and capable of sensing it around them, almost like hunters perceive the unnatural and "magical" with second sight. Demons often have one or more points in the Awareness Ability to reflect their understanding of what their supernatural senses tell them. They can detect when an extraordinary effect occurs around them, whether it's a ghost's passing, a goblin's use of a spell or a hunter's application of an edge — even one with no overt or obvious effects. Roll Perception + Awareness (difficulty 7) to determine if a demon recognizes such activity in its vicinity. A successful roll doesn't automatically tell a demon what effect is in use, but the wielder of the power is clear.

Demons can also see through illusions and supernatural forms of concealment with a successful roll.

Note that demons do not have the capacity to sense or detect hunters that do not actively use their edges. "Inactive" hunters appear as ordinary mortals to demons, potentially giving the imbued the element of surprise (at least the first time they encounter a particular demon). A hunter's simple use of second sight does not attract a demon's attention, although using an observation edge such as *Witness*, *Discern* or *Illuminate* does. Use of such powers — or any edge — makes a hunter "active" to infernal senses. Ironically, use of *Hide* can actually *attract* demon attention if a successful Awareness roll is made.

The dampening of demonic powers due to hunter presence (see "Hunters and Demonic Powers") does not in itself trigger a devil's awareness of supernatural activity. The demon's power is more taxing to use, but the beast does not necessarily sense unnatural activity in the area. The demon has to determine for itself that one of the imbued is responsible for draining its energy.

A demon's detection of the supernatural generally extends as far as its host body's physical senses.

INFERNAL FORM

Finally, all demons have the capacity to manifest their true, demonic forms through their mortal host bodies. Their bodies transform in various ways, giving devils various increased Traits, but also showing their true nature clearly. Obviously, demons don't reveal their true forms lightly, but they do assume these shapes to deal with particularly dangerous threats. Hunters who confront a demon thinking that it is simply a spirit possessing a human host may be in for a surprise when the entity assumes its infernal form.

A demon assumes beast form at will, and with the expenditure of one Faith point. The change is instantaneous and occurs as a reflexive action. Demonic form is maintained for a scene, although a demon can resume human form whenever it wishes. (The dampening presence of a hunter with active Conviction doubles the cost of assuming infernal form to two Faith.)

Basic Enhancements

Each demon has the following enhancements while in infernal form:

- **Claws and Teeth:** The demon's true form is equipped with powerful claws and fangs that allow it to inflict Strength+2 lethal damage to hunters.

- **Demon Hide:** The demon's skin becomes preternaturally tough. It may assume the appearance of scales, iron, sharkskin or something similar. The demon's soak rating against bashing and lethal damage increases by four.

- **Horns:** A pair of curved ram or bull's horns protrudes from the demon's forehead. If attacked in close combat (melee or brawling), the demon may make a free counterattack at its foe. Roll Dexterity + Brawl. If successful, the demon inflicts lethal damage equal to its Strength -1. No more than one free counterattack can be made per turn.

- **Wings:** Massive wings sprout from the demon's shoulders. They may be birdlike or batlike. Birdlike wings include those of an eagle, hawk, peacock or swan. The demon can fly at three times its running speed.

Additional Enhancements

Demons may also have one or more of the following capabilities in infernal form. Fairly weak or inexperienced demons manifest only one or two of these benefits, while truly powerful demons have them *all!*

- **Extra Limbs:** The demon grows a second set of arms or a prehensile tail. Extra arms allow the demon to parry or block melee attacks without sacrificing its own attack, or make up to two additional attacks per turn (all of which are considered multiple actions). A prehensile tail is half the demon's height and uses half his Strength (rounded down) to lift objects.

- **Foul Stench:** The demon exudes a terrible stench of rot or brimstone. A successful Stamina roll (difficulty 7) must be made for anyone within a number of yards equal to the demon's Faith, or victims lose their next action while gagging and choking. On a botch, a victim vomits uncontrollably for a full turn and can take no other actions (including self-defense).

- **Hellfire Shroud:** The demon is surrounded by an aura of infernal fire that inflicts three dice of lethal damage on anyone who touches the demon or strikes it unarmed. At the Storyteller's discretion, the shroud may damage or destroy weapons that strike the demon. Weapons created with Avengers' "Terrible Swift Sword" technique (**Hunter Book: Avenger**, p. 75) are not damaged.

- **Hellish Voice:** The demon's voice becomes deep and resonant, filled with hate and bile. The difficulties of Intimidation rolls made for the demon decrease by two.

- **Immunity to Fire:** The demon is completely immune to damage from heat and fire.

- **Multiple Eyes:** The demon has multiple sets of eyes, reducing the difficulties of Perception rolls by two.

- **Regeneration:** The demon regenerates one health level of bashing or lethal damage per turn automatically as a reflexive action. Health levels lost to lethal damage are regenerated first, and then those lost to bashing damage are recovered. This capability is in addition to a demon's capacity to restore lost health levels through Faith expenditures. Consider regeneration to occur first each turn before any health levels are restored with Faith.

- **Venom:** The demon's claws and fangs are poisonous. A Stamina roll (difficulty 7) must be made for anyone who suffers one or more health levels of damage from them. The roll is made every turn thereafter for a number of turns equal to the demon's Faith. Any failed roll means the victim suffers an additional health level of lethal damage.

COMMON POWERS

COMMAND BEASTS

Many demons display the power to control creatures of the wild, particularly feral animals that live close to humanity. A demon need only be in the presence of such beasts and will them to obey its commands. Typical beasts controlled by demons include cats, ravens, snakes, rats, wolves and dogs.

System: Spend a Faith point and roll Manipulation + Animal Ken (difficulty 6). Success allows the demon to command the loyalty of beasts in its presence, and silently issue them mental orders. One success is enough for simple and straightforward tasks (ordering the beasts to attack), while additional successes allow the demon to give the animals more complex orders such as using them as spies (two successes) or having them follow a particular target and report back (three successes). The demon can command a number of large beasts (about the size of a dog) equal to its Charisma rating, and up to 10 times its Charisma rating in smaller animals at one time. Control of the animals persists for the scene, unless the demon is Incapacitated or frees its pawns.

ENTHRALL

With their honeyed words and cunning insight into human (and inhuman) nature, demons are masters of persuasion and trickery. They can ensnare others in webs of deceit and promises, getting almost anyone to do their bidding. This power makes a demon so convincing that others become its loyal followers, prepared to do anything they're asked. Ordinary people can go on killing sprees, create cults and even turn against their friends and loved ones. Supernatural creatures are also affected by this power, although not quite as easily as mortals.

System: The demon must speak with a target or group of targets for at least a minute or so (making this power useless in the heat of combat). The demon can affect a number of targets equal to its Manipulation at one time. If more than that many people listen, the

POWER, SPEED AND ENDURANCE

Demons are able to enhance the physical limits of their bodies in various ways, making them capable of inhuman feats of might, speed and fortitude. Most demons have at least one or two points of these enhancements, while elder demons may have as many as 10, making them truly superhuman. Since these benefits require the modification of a demon's host, they are fueled by Faith and are not innate or automatic. They can apply to a demon's mortal or infernal form, but the demon must spend Faith to activate them in either case.

Points of Power, Speed and Endurance are not exhausted when used. They're ratings and don't usually change.

Power

Demons can perform feats of strength beyond the seeming limits of their bodies. Their power comes not from muscle and bone but from force exerted by supernatural will. Powerful demons can shatter wood, stone and metal, snap chains, and strike hard enough to reduce an ordinary human to a pulp.

System: For each point of supernatural Power a demon possesses, it gains one automatic success on any Strength-related action. In close combat, these extra successes are applied to damage rolls. Each automatic success costs a point of Faith, so demons are generally capable of only brief bursts of superhuman strength rather than sustained uses.

Speed

Demons are capable of acting with preternatural swiftness and grace. They can move virtually before a mortal has time to blink, and can perform amazing feats of movement and acrobatics in defiance of the laws of nature.

System: For each point of supernatural Speed it possesses, a demon can perform an extra action in a turn. Each action must be dedicated to one feat only, such as running *or* attacking. Multiple feats — running *and* attacking — cannot be performed in the same action. A demon using this enhancement moves like a blur to hunters' eyes. A demon is also capable of running along vertical surfaces and ceilings in defiance of gravity, up to 10 feet per point of Speed in a turn. Each point of Speed used during a turn costs one Faith point.

Endurance

In addition to their capacity to draw on Faith to heal themselves, and their greater than normal toughness, some demons are tremendously resistant to injury.

System: For each point of supernatural Endurance a demon possesses, its soak rating against bashing and lethal damage can be increased by one for a turn. The demon can also soak aggravated damage with a rating equal to its Endurance alone (Stamina is not added). Each point of Endurance used in a turn costs a Faith point. Endurance is not applied constantly, only when a demon wills it, as a reflexive action.

demon chooses which are affected. Spend a Faith point and roll Manipulation + Subterfuge (difficulty 7). Listeners resist with a Willpower roll (difficulty 8 for mortals, 6 for monsters). If they don't get as many or more successes than the demon, they see the devil as a wise and wonderful person who should be obeyed and even worshipped. Hunters with active Conviction are immune to Enthral, but those with their defenses down can be ensnared as easily as any human can be.

Enthral lasts indefinitely. Even if the demon is Incapacitated or otherwise disabled, its followers act to protect it. Enthral can wear off if subjects are regularly forced to do things that are against their nature — harm loved ones, commit crimes. In each case, another Willpower roll is made for the victim with any successes added to those achieved in the subject's original roll. When accumulated successes exceed those from the demon's initial Enthral roll, the victim is free. Demons often reinforce their power over followers, however, making other Enthral checks to reduce slaves' accumulated Willpower successes and keeping those minions under control.

If a hunter is ever captivated with this power and Conviction is activated for him at a later time, the imbued may act freely for that scene but becomes the demon's devotee again afterward. Or, the first use of Conviction after being affected breaks Enthral's hold altogether. It's your choice. Someone who has been captivated with this power does not appear off to second sight unless she is also a thrall.

GUISE

Demons are masters of deception and often appear as friends, allies or simply harmless passersby. A demon using this power transforms its appearance to that of any other person it desires, either to be nondescript and evade notice or to imitate a particular subject.

System: Spend a point of Faith and roll Manipulation + Subterfuge. The difficulty is 5 if the demon tries to appear nondescript, 7 if it wants to imitate a particular individual. A successful use of Guise lasts for one scene. The disguise is flawless as far as mortals are concerned. They can't tell the disguised demon from the real thing. A hunter with Conviction active can see the demon's true form (not necessarily the true appearance of its mortal host), but cannot convince others that the demon's appearance is false, even if it's pointed out to them.

LEVITATE

The laws of the physical world are a demon's playthings, bent to its will. Demons can defy gravity, rising into the air and hanging suspended, or even moving about slowly with nothing to support them. This power can manifest when a demon first assumes its mortal host, a classic sign of demonic possession that can alert hunters of the entity's presence.

System: Spend a Faith point. The demon can rise into the air at a rate of one foot per turn at will for the remainder of the scene. It can stop and hover as if it were standing on firm ground, and even "walk" through the

air at a normal pace. The demon can also choose to walk along the ground (actually hovering just a hair's breadth above it) and be immune to falling, such as walking off a ledge out into thin air or remaining upright and stationary while the surface beneath it collapses.

LORD OF THE FLIES

Demons are often associated with "unclean" insects such as flies, maggots and roaches. This power allows a demon to summon forth such creatures to bedevil and torment its enemies. It summons a cloud of buzzing insects or a mass of writhing worms or maggots. They simply appear in the air or burrow up from the ground at the demon's command. If any dead organic matter is nearby (such as a corpse or even food), the creatures may emerge from there, accompanied by the stench of decay.

System: Spend a point of Faith to activate this power. The hideous mass of insects or larvae is quite distracting. All difficulties increase by two for characters in proximity to the insects. Ordinary people likely panic and try to flee as quickly as possible. The demon can command flying insects to pursue particular victims. The swarm moves at a speed of 15 yards per turn but cannot exceed the demon's line of sight. This power lasts for one scene. The insects dissipate if the devil is Incapacitated.

PAIN

Demons understand torment particularly well and are experts at inflicting it upon others. A devil can cause searing pain to shoot through a victim's every nerve, just by looking. Demons use this power as a means of torture and punishment, and of dealing with those who defy them.

System: Spend a Faith point. The demon must touch or make eye contact with its chosen victim, requiring either a successful Dexterity + Brawl roll for a touch or a Wits + Subterfuge roll (difficulty 6) for eye contact. (If the victim is unaware of the danger, one success is automatic.) Then roll Manipulation + Intimidation with a difficulty equal to the victim's Willpower. Each success reduces the victim's dice pools by one. Any dice pool reduced to zero or less indicates that the victim is no longer capable of taking that action. The pain persists as long as the demon continues to concentrate. Any distraction (including a successful attack staged against the monster) requires a Willpower roll (difficulty 6) to be made for the demon to maintain its concentration. This power affects even hunters with active Conviction; it's not an attempt to control the hunter's mind or body, it's simply a supernatural attack.

UNCOMMON POWERS

ENCHANTED GIFT

A guitar that bestows extraordinary skill. A necklace that grants beauty. A gun with bullets that always kill and cannot be traced. Demons are the source of many wondrous gifts, but all of them come with a price. Infernal craftsmen can enchant different items, usually to give them to thralls or mortals whom a demon wants to sway. A devil may even grant a gift to one of the

imbued — if there is a good reason and the hunter is willing to accept it.

System: The demon chooses the gift's effect. Any demon power or benefit that can be given to a thrall is possible (see p. 94). Creating the gift involves an extended Dexterity + Crafts roll (difficulty 6), with five successes required to bestow a common power or simple effect, 10 successes for an uncommon power, and 20 or more successes for a rare power. Make one roll each day. Two Faith points are then spent to enchant the gift when creation is complete.

Each use of the gift calls for a Willpower roll (difficulty 8) for the wielder. A botch results in the loss of a permanent Willpower point. Alternately, the user can "attune" herself to the gift, dedicating herself to its amazing qualities. Doing so costs a point of permanent Willpower. She can use it at will thereafter without a roll having to be made. The demon gains a point of Faith each day that its enchanted gift is used.

Hunters with active Conviction cannot use or benefit from a demon's enchanted gift, but can otherwise use it normally. If a hunter accepts a gift while his defenses are down, and later activates Conviction, the item's properties do not work for him while Conviction is in use. Nor does the demon creator receive a point of Faith from the item that day.

Demons can also create cursed items. Some are beneficial for a while before turning against their owners (failing when needed most), while others cause frequent botches (on rolls of 1 or 2), sapping users' will and making them increasingly vulnerable to demonic manipulation. Demons do not gain Faith from cursed gifts.

Enchanted and cursed items look "off" or "wrong" to second sight, and observation edges such as Discern, Witness or Illuminate may reveal the illusions or enhancements that the objects impart to the wielder. The owner of an enchanted gift is not necessarily wrong to second sight, unless he's a thrall to a demon.

HEALING TOUCH

Perhaps a remnant of their once-divine nature or simply another temptation that they can dangle before the needy, some demons have the power to knit wounds and restore health with a touch. In addition to curing injuries, demons can use this power to remove disease, restore missing limbs, repair failing organs and otherwise return subjects to complete health. More than a few bargains have been made at the bedside of ill, crippled or dying mortals.

System: The demon must touch the subject. Spend two Faith points and make a Perception + Medicine roll (difficulty 7). Each success restores one health level lost to lethal damage or one success eliminates all of a subject's levels lost to bashing damage. Lost limbs or organs are completely and immediately regenerated, while diseases and poisons are purged from the body. This power cannot cure aggravated damage, but it heals everything short of that. The power can also be used on a demon's own mortal host. It cannot be used to restore incorporeal beings.

HELLFIRE

Demons can wield the fires of Hell against their foes, projecting goutts of white-hot flame from their hands, eyes or mouth.

System: Spend two Faith points and roll Dexterity + Athletics in a ranged attack against a target. The power has a range equal to the devil's Faith in yards. Each success inflicts a level of lethal damage on the target. A Hellfire attack can be dodged like any other ranged attack.

MORTAL CLAY

In addition to their power to mend damaged bodies, some demons can sculpt and reshape flesh and bone as if it were clay. This effect allows a devil to grant mortals strength, grace, beauty or any of the other physical qualities they may desire, and also grants the power to take away all of those things. A demon can twist people and animals into creatures out of nightmares, or into pitiful lumps of flesh that barely qualify as living beings. The transformation is painless for the subject, and the results can be delightful or horrifying.

System: The demon must touch the subject. Spend two Faith points and make a resisted roll between the demon's Dexterity + Medicine and the target's Willpower (difficulty 7 for each). Willing targets do not have to resist. If the demon wins, it can reshape the mortal's body to some degree. Generally, each success adds or subtracts a dot in Strength, Dexterity, Stamina or Appearance, or significantly alters a particular feature (skin color, skin texture, hair color, eye color). Demons can make substantial changes through extended rolls (one roll can be made per day as often as subject and demon permit). The results of the effort last for a number of days equal to the demon's Faith, but a point of the demon's temporary Willpower can be spent to make the effects permanent, at least until undone by another use of this power.

Hunters with Conviction active when this power is used are immune to the effect, even if they desire a change. If a hunter willingly accepts an alteration and activates Conviction while the change remains, it continues to apply. It is not eliminated for the duration of the scene. Bearers of physical changes do not look wrong or strange to second sight or observation edges, unless they are thralls.

SHADOW STEP

Darkness is a friend to the infernal in more ways than one. Some demons can step into any shadow or darkened area and disappear, reappearing some distance away. They use this power to travel quickly from place to place, to evade those stalking them, and to appear out of nowhere to strike before vanishing back into the shadows.

System: Spend two Faith points. There is no die roll involved. The demon steps into a shadow and vanishes, appearing in another shadowy or dark area a number of miles away equal to its Faith rating. The demon can move only to places within line of sight or that are familiar. It can also step to any of its thralls' current locations, or to the location of anyone who speaks the demon's True Name, provided the subject is in or near an area of

darkness or shadow and within a number of miles equal to the demon's Faith. Using this power to surprise an opponent adds three to the demon's Initiative in the first turn of combat. The demon cannot take anyone with it, and can travel only with what it can carry.

WIND BLAST

The hot winds of Hell blow at a demon's command. In addition to intimidating mere mortals and billowing the demon's clothes, hair (and possibly wings) in an impressive manner, the wind can aid the creature in various ways. A gust can provide lift for a glide or leap, push things over, blow away smoke or gas or even knock aside ranged weapons.

System: Spend two Faith points and roll Stamina + Survival (difficulty 6). The wind blows in whatever direction the demon wishes, to a distance of Faith x 5 in yards. The number of successes rolled becomes the wind's dice pool, depending on how the demon uses it. The pool can be added to an Athletics roll to leap across a chasm, added to a Dodge roll to avoid a thrown or hurled weapon, or added to a Strength dice pool for pushing over objects or opponents. The wind persists for one turn, unless an additional Faith point is spent to continue its effects for another turn.

RARE POWERS

CREATE MONSTER

Hunters who believe that monsters are the spawn of Hell point to this power as proof. With it, demons can twist ordinary people and animals into monstrosities that they can use to further their own ends, and to spread pain and terror among humanity.

System: The demon must touch the target. Spend three Faith points and a point of temporary Willpower and make a resisted roll of Faith (difficulty 6) against the target's Willpower (difficulty 7). If more successes are rolled for the demon, the target transforms into a monster of the devil's choosing and is under the beast's control as if the Entrhall power were used. You can have demons create any monsters from the other **Hunter** books that you want, including vampires, werewolves, shamblers and such. The effects of the change are permanent unless the manipulating demon undoes it, which can be done at will. Hunters are completely immune to this power and can never be transformed into monsters.

EARTHQUAKE

With this power at their command, demons can stir up the earth itself, causing it to rumble and shake. Such quakes tend to be powerful and localized, but demons sometimes create weak earthquakes over large areas. Such displays are useful for impressing cults of followers, as well as for causing rockslides, collapsing buildings and creating "obstacles" for hunters. Demon-induced quakes are often accompanied by bursts of steam or smoke from the ground, which smell of brimstone.

System: Spend three Faith points and roll Strength + Survival (difficulty 7). Divide successes achieved

between the intensity and the extent of the quake. Intensity determines how many turns the quake persists and is added to the difficulties of all physical actions performed by people caught in the area (the demon itself is not affected). Intensity is also rolled as a dice pool for damaging structures. Wooden buildings have structure ratings of 1 or 2, while brick and stone buildings have ratings of 3 to 4. The difficulty of the damage roll is 6.

Extent determines the size of the area affected. One success indicates an area equal to Faith in square feet (enough to cause a tremor directly under a particular person or the corner of a building). Two successes make it the demon's Faith in square yards. Three or more successes make it the demon's Faith in square miles. A demon need not be at the epicenter of the quake. The center can be located anywhere that the demon can see.

FREEZE TIME

This potent and disturbing power allows a demon to step "outside" of time, effectively freezing everything else in a single moment while the creature is able to act. The entity seems to appear and disappear at will, or makes things happen in the blink of an eye. A demon can be standing helpless one moment, then suddenly have all of its opponents' weapons at its feet and one of their severed heads in its claws in another.

System: Spend three Faith points and roll Stamina + Intuition (difficulty 8). The number of successes achieved determines how many turns the demon can act "outside" of time. From the creature's perspective, everything is frozen; bullets hang in the air, people stop in mid-step. The demon can move and act normally outside of time, and can exert normal force on things, but the results of its

WHERE DO MONSTERS COME FROM?

You may find the Create Monster power inappropriate for your **Hunter** chronicle, maybe because you've decided that monsters are created by their own means, exclusive of Hell's purview, and demons shouldn't be able to invoke the transformation. This could be particularly true for Storytellers interested in sticking to the canon of other World of Darkness games. If so, feel free to ignore this power or change it so that demons create only "pseudo" monsters. For example, a demon might transform a normal person into a pale, blood-drinking creature with supernatural strength and an aversion to sunlight, but it's not a "true" vampire. Likewise, a demon might impose a supernatural curse that transforms someone into a bloodthirsty beast by the light of the moon, but it's not a "true" werewolf.

Regardless of whether or not demons can create "true" monsters, hunters don't necessarily know the difference! Create Monster can make a demon a fearsome foe when a group of imbued discovers that the entity is responsible for a plague of bloodsuckers or shamblers.

actions don't take effect until time returns to normal. So, a demon can pluck bullets out of the air or stab an enemy, but the enemy won't die or even bleed until time is restored. The difficulties of the demon's actions are unchanged, but opposed actions such as attacks go unresisted (no defensive maneuvers are possible).

The power affects an area equal to Faith in yards. The results of the power are instantaneous. Passersby do not see people frozen in place.

Hunters with active Conviction are immune to the effects of this power. They remain able to act while everything else is frozen, just as the demon is active. Hunters with their defenses down, however, are affected like everyone else. Storytellers may wish to permit the reactive use of Conviction for imbued suddenly confronted with this power (see **Hunter**, p. 133).

RAISE THE DEAD

Perhaps the most impressive of the powers at a demon's command is the ability to restore life to the dead. As with all favors done by a demon, this one usually comes at a high price.

The demon can use this capability to take a disembodied spirit (including someone recently dead, but also a ghost or disembodied demon) and place that spirit in a suitable body. The body must be freshly dead (no more than 48 hours) and reasonably intact. In addition to restoring a dead soul to its proper body, a demon can use this power to place a ghost in a younger, more attractive or otherwise

more desirable body. Some demons' thralls do not inhabit their original forms, and some of the recently dead are indebted to demons for giving them a new lease on life.

System: The demon must be able to touch the intended host, and have the spirit close at hand. Spend three Faith points and a permanent Willpower point for the demon, and roll Stamina + Awareness (difficulty 7). If the spirit is unwilling, its Willpower is rolled (difficulty 6) to resist. If the power is successful, the soul is placed inside the body, which is restored to life and complete health (healing any damage done to the body). The newly risen character has the Physical Attributes that the body had in life and the Mental and Social Attributes and Abilities of the soul. Note that the dead bodies of hunters can be affected by this power. Hunters' spirits cannot be trapped or inserted into bodies, however.

A resurrected body and soul looks like a victim of ghostly possession to a hunter using second sight or observation edges such as Discern, Witness or Illuminate, even if the spirit returns to its original body.

SUMMON STORMS

Demons can exert power over nature to create fierce storms: dark clouds, driving rain, hail, thunder, lightning, the works. They can also banish foul weather, although they're rarely inclined to do so without some inducement.

System: Spend three Faith points and roll Intelligence + Science. The difficulty is based on the sort of weather the demon wants to create (or banish). Creating



a storm near open water is difficulty 6. Creating a hail-storm in the desert is difficulty 8, while causing it to snow in a desert is difficulty 9. The number of successes rolled determines the intensity of the weather. One success is sufficient for light wind and precipitation, while three create/banish a tropical storm, and four or more cause/eliminate a tornado, hurricane or the equivalent. With an additional two successes, a demon can create unnatural weather effects such as a rain of blood, toads or crickets. The storm lasts as long as a normal one of its type (or an hour per Willpower point spent if the devil wants the storm to last longer). The weather covers an area with a radius in miles equal to the demon's Faith. If characters are caught in the storm, the difficulties of all actions involving sight or movement increase by two.

DEMONIC THRALLS

Although demons are potent beings, they're limited by one thing. They draw their power from Faith, but have none of their own. They must therefore acquire Faith by taking it from mortals, whether from followers who offer it willingly or from the unwitting from whom it's taken by force. In fact, it is the infernal need for Faith that tends to draw the attention of hunters — when a demon starts a cult in an area that hunters protect, or when someone associated with a hunter becomes a demon's latest victim or thrall.

There is something subtly disturbing about a thrall to a hunter's second sight. It may be a shadow that seems to fall across the subject, just a gut feeling or a hint of brimstone, but something tells the hunter that this person is tainted. Since thralls are still human, the traces of their corruption are subtle and don't reveal exactly what's wrong with them. Observation edges may suggest more. Witness can show flashes of a thrall's relationship with a demon, in which the subject does the demon's bidding, debases herself before the beast, or turns the gifts she's been given on defenseless people. Discern may indicate odd appearance or behavior from a thrall. The minion might seem awkward in its own body, still learning to adapt to its enhancements. Muscle tone or beauty might seem mannequin-like or artificial. And Illuminate might show pale versions of the auras perceived around demons themselves (see p. 83).

Thanks to their relationships with the infernal, thralls can in turn witness hunters' edges in action and remain composed, just as other supernatural creatures do. Such calm may also be an indication to hunters that such people are more than they appear to be.

THRALL POWERS

What do minions get from selling their souls? Virtually anything they want, within limits. The demon takes part of the mortal's Faith and innate power, shapes it and uses it to fulfill the mortal's wishes, upholding its part of the pact. The exact nature of the demon's "gift" varies from pawn to pawn, but some guidelines follow. One, two or even three of these

enhancements may be acquired, based on how useful a demon finds a thrall, or on how dependent on her the creature wants the agent to become. A demon might take a little from each gift described below, such as granting a thrall beauty (Appearance) and wealth (Resources), or great physical prowess (Strength) and preternatural powers.

- **Attributes:** The demon can enhance one or more of the thrall's Attributes. Appearance is a popular choice, followed closely by Charisma, although some thralls prefer Strength, Stamina, Intelligence or Wits. This is usually only a one- or two-point increase, but it may be more in the case of some thralls. A demon cannot increase a mortal's Attributes to superhuman levels; he is still limited to a maximum of five points.

- **Abilities:** Demons can grant mortals significant prowess in a particular field. This is usually a Talent, Skill or Knowledge that the mortal already pursues or wishes to perfect. Athletics, Craft, Occult, Leadership, Performance and Politics are all common choices. As with Attributes, a demon cannot increase a mortal's Ability beyond five points, but it can make a mediocre practitioner into a world-renowned master.

- **Backgrounds:** Many mortals don't care much for their own capabilities. They simply want the trappings of success. These are actually easy for demons to grant, and they can bestow as many as 10 to 20 points in various Backgrounds, including Allies, Contacts, Fame, Influence and Resources. Thralls often go from being nobodies to lottery winners. They make sudden killings in the stock market, or find themselves heirs to forgotten fortunes. They can become overnight superstars or pop sensations with the guidance of otherworldly patrons.

- **Powers:** Demons can also grant superhuman capabilities to their thralls. A devil can give a slave any one of the common demon powers, any one of the innate demon powers (including one of Power, Speed or Endurance), or any one quality of the demon's infernal form. More worthy thralls may have two or (rarely) three powers (or perhaps a single uncommon or rare power), making them forces to be reckoned with. Thralls use their Willpower rather than Faith to fuel these powers, and the effects work just like they do for demons.

SAMPLE THRALLS

The following are two demonic thralls for use as examples and stock characters. Although thralls are mere servants to demons, they're powerful opponents in their own right when compared to ordinary folks, particularly those pawns who have considerable resources and influence in the world thanks to their benefactors. Infernal followers should be played as intelligent and resourceful foes for a group of hunters.

THE CULY LEADER

Prelude: Carol Furst never fit into her conservative, religious family. She tried to "find herself" in a number of ways. First it was music and freaky clothes. Then it was Wicca and studying magic. But Carol found that most of



the stuff she read was crystal-waving crap, and most of the so-called witches were tree-hugging hippies with no real idea of what “empowerment” meant. Carol wanted *empowerment*. She wanted to stop feeling helpless. She wanted to feel forceful, confident, and most of all loved.

She got into hard-core occultism, the kind of stuff that her peers just didn’t get. She wrote some magazine articles and started her own website that attracted a bit of a following. Then she began teaching informal classes, taking on students to share her insights. Having students made Carol feel important, but she wasn’t interested in giving *them* power. She wanted them to depend on her for what they knew and did.

Carol always believed in the existence of magic, but it wasn’t until she met a demon that she truly believed. She didn’t scream in terror like a girl in a cheap horror flick. Instead, she realized that it was an opportunity, and she took it. Now Carol is a high-priestess, the leader of many, and she lies with a demon-lover who whispers secrets into her ear and who tells her of all that they’ll do together.

Concept: The ultimate Catholic schoolgirl turned bad-girl. Carol is a woman to be reckoned with. She knows a lot of influential people and can pull a lot of strings. She’s smart and attractive and not afraid of using either her brains or her beauty to get what she wants. On top of that, she has a few “gifts” that her demon-lover has granted her to deal with any problems that may arise, such as a group of hunters nosing around the cult.

Roleplaying Hints: You’re a powerful woman, the sort that other people respect and fear. You flout convention and you expect others to treat you with the respect that you deserve. Other people are like playthings for you to manipulate as you like.

Equipment: Expensive clothes, jewelry, silver dagger (kept hidden in her purse), small .38 caliber revolver (licensed to own and carry for self-defense)

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 3, Charisma (Seductive) 4, Manipulation (Deceptive) 4, Appearance (Stunning) 4, Perception 2, Intelligence 3, Wits 3

Abilities: Academics (Ancient History) 2, Alertness 1, Awareness 2, Empathy 2, Firearms 1, Intuition 2, Leadership 2, Linguistics 1, Occult (Rituals) 4, Research 3, Subterfuge 3

Backgrounds: Contacts 5, Mentor 4, Resources 4

Powers: Enthrall, Pain

Willpower: 6

THE DEVIL’S ADVOCATE

Prelude: Joseph Cunningham has it all: a senior partnership with a prestigious law firm, a six-figure salary, an expense account, an expensive car, a fantastic apartment, and all while he’s still young enough to thoroughly enjoy it. They say it’s because Cunningham is a silver-tongued devil who can hold a jury in the palm of his hand, but it’s actually another devil to whom he owes his success.

When he was an up-and-coming attorney, struggling in a glutted legal market, Cunningham came to the attention of a demon named Fellias. The entity offered him a deal that was too good to be true, and too good to refuse. Fellias has made good on everything that he offered, and Cunningham is content to uphold his end of the bargain. Why wouldn’t he be? He’s got everything he could want, and Fellias doesn’t ask much of him in return, just to solve the occasional legal problem. Cunningham just pulls strings to get things done. Easy.

Still, there are times when the parties are over and Cunningham lies awake that he wonders what he’s done. He thinks about the future and what his deal with Fellias means, and he finds himself shaking so hard that he needs a couple more stiff drinks before he can go to sleep.

Concept: Cunningham is the classic image of the soulless lawyer: handsome, slick, rich and utterly merce-



nary. He makes the idea of selling your soul look tempting, because he seems like he has it all. If confronted with the existence of hunters, Cunningham is torn between trying to cover his own ass, making sure they can't threaten him, and the possibility of betraying the demon in hopes of finding a loophole in the deal. A lot would depend on which way the hunters approach him, aggressively or willing to negotiate.

Roleplaying Hints: Outwardly you're confidence personified. You can argue any case, any point of view, so long as there's something in it for you. You have the self-assurance that comes with wealth, power and knowing that you're the top dog.

Equipment: Expensive suit, cell phone, PDA, briefcase

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 2, Charisma (Likeable) 5, Manipulation (Convincing) 5, Appearance 3, Perception 2, Intelligence 3, Wits 3

Abilities: Alertness 2, Athletics 1, Bureaucracy 2, Empathy 3, Expression (Oratory) 3, Finance 2, Investigation 2, Law 3, Politics 3, Subterfuge 3

Backgrounds: Contacts 5, Influence 4, Resources 5

Willpower: 5

HUNTER THRALLS

While most hunters cannot normally become thralls (see "For the Record," p. 86), there are circumstances under which they can turn a deaf ear to the call and the infernal can reach them. Such a hunter has to be truly unbalanced or desperate to fall victim to such corruption. And yet it happens and is a serious setback to the cause. A person's family might be destroyed in the course of the hunt and the chosen is so obsessed with revenge that she'll accept help from any source — even another one of the enemy. Or a hunter might receive help from a mysterious source and eventually become dependent on the assistance, only to learn that his benefactor is infernal in nature and the help is indispensable.

There are limitations to such a hunter-demon relationship, however. The chosen cannot make "conventional" pacts. The imbuing still rejects any of the various gifts and enhancements that a demon has to offer through the power of Faith. In essence, the demon cannot sufficiently tap into a hunter's belief to make miraculous gifts a reality.

A hunter *can* make other kinds of bargains with demons, though, for cooperation, information or assistance. One of the hellspawn might offer assistance against a fellow demon, information on dealing with another creature, or an enchanted weapon (see the Enchanted Gift power, p. 90). Provided that the hunter knows what the demon is, one of these bargains allows the demon to gain one Faith point from the hunter each day like it does from a normal thrall. The demon cannot draw upon the hunter's Willpower or health, however. The hunter's very imbued nature protects it from such abuse.

While a hunter might enter into such an association with the best of intentions or to do the greater good (no

matter how he perceives it), he may be tainted by the association. If the hunter survives long enough and is steadfast enough, he may become an infernal hunter — an imbued whose allegiance is closer to devils than to the Heralds. The options of divine and independent power laid out in **Hunter: Fall from Grace** are closed to this hunter, permanently. At your discretion, the Messengers may warn the hunter of the risks of becoming indebted to a demon, with statements such as "DARKNESS LIES AHEAD." Or the hunter could see the "demon" and "extremist" code signs everywhere he looks, or he could smell smoke wherever he goes.

In systems terms, a hunter who becomes a full-fledged thrall must go beyond the edge of sanity with a 10 Virtue. At that point, the hunter's soul is open to certain... influences. In essence, demons get a chance to test the hunter's dedication and will, and they bring all their wiles to bear. A demon can offer a hunter power or any other sort of deal. If the hunter accepts, she becomes a thrall of that demon, a veritable infernal hunter.

The fallen hunter gains a level-five "corrupt" edge, among any other thrall benefits that the demon sees fit to impart. You can use the infernal edges from **Fall from Grace** or any of the uncommon demon powers presented in this book, substituting the hunter's Conviction and primary Virtue for Faith. Thereafter, the binding demon draws Faith from the thrall like it would from any minion, now *including* the freedom to draw upon the hunter's Willpower and health levels to gain Faith.

An infernal hunter who activates Conviction at any point is temporarily protected from his master's power. The demon is not privy to the hunter's thoughts and experiences, and cannot draw upon the hunter for Faith for the duration of that scene. Indeed, the hunter is not bound to obey the demon's wishes during that period. Any derangements that the hunter has incurred persist, however, and the demon still has long-term hold over the imbued. When the effects of the hunter's Conviction fade, the terms of the bargain reassert themselves. Also, if an infernal edge is in use when second sight is activated, the edge's effects terminate immediately. Likewise, if second sight is in use when an infernal edge is activated, the sight is terminated and cannot be used again until the edge's duration expires.

The ultimate goal of acquiring a hunter thrall is the possession of the victim's body. It's quite possible that only a fallen hunter's body is capable of containing a truly powerful demon. Where such an entity burns out any other hosts in a matter of weeks, days or hours, a hunter's body might hold up much longer, if not indefinitely.

A demon undergoes the possession process by using the fallen imbued as a potent pawn to pursue its agenda on Earth and to dispose of enemies. Throughout that period, the demon systematically breaks the hunter's will. Sure, the imbued gets power with which to fulfill his own goals on the hunt, but he must also perform acts for his master as part of the bargain, and sometimes those acts are utterly

reprehensible — theft, abuse and ultimately crimes such as rape and the butchering of children. Given enough such “chores,” a hunter’s spirit eventually wears down. In any scene in which the hunter interacts extensively with its master (accepting an order, asking questions, taking its advice) or he uses his corrupt edge, a Willpower roll must be made for the hunter. The difficulty starts at 7, and may be higher depending on what terrible act the hunter performs. You decide the final number. On a successful roll, the character manages to bear the horror of the demon’s presence a little longer. On a failed roll, he loses a point of Willpower. On a botch, the hunter loses a permanent point of Willpower.

When the hunter’s *permanent* Willpower rating reaches zero, he is possessed by the demon permanently. His soul is destroyed. The tormenting demon may abandon its current host and assume the hunter’s corrupt form. Possession of a hunter is possible at this point because the imbued has fallen so far from the Messengers favor. The benefits of the imbuing are withheld from the demon, though, probably much to its fury. A possessing demon inherits none of the hunter’s capabilities. No second sight, no Conviction protection, no edges, no Virtues. The one thing that the demon does retain is the very level-five edge and any other gifts that it bestowed upon the hunter. That was the one contribution that the entity made, and it gets to keep that power. Otherwise, the demon acquires all the basic physical qualities, characteristics and ratings of its new host upon which to apply its own enhancements, benefits and bonuses.

A demon that fully controls a corrupt hunter’s body may continue on with its irredeemable ways. Certainly, there may have been little left that was recognizably humane in the hunter’s soul. Or the infernal spirit occupying the character’s body could find some tiny spark of what it meant to be human — or more importantly, what it meant to have received the favor of the Powers That Be. It’s possible that the host’s once-imbued state reminds the possessor of the Creator’s love, and the fallen angel seeks to amend the sins of ages past. In the latter case, the demon could strive to help humanity and turn against other unrepentant fallen.

Indeed, possession of a hunter might suggest to a demon that the Creator’s influence is still at work in the universe in some capacity, even though it can’t be perceived by other means. Such a revelation would terrify or inspire many fallen who have returned to reality and believe it abandoned by the Creator and his loyal angels. Would other demons listen? Would they return to the higher path to seek forgiveness? Or would they scoff at the possibility and proceed with their own bids for power and personal gain?

SHARED KNOWLEDGE

Perhaps the greatest danger of hunters who bend their knee to demons is posed to other imbued. As soon as an extremist enters a pact with a demon, gains a level-five edge and becomes a genuine thrall, the demon

knows his agent. The being is aware of every thought, memory and feeling that the hunter has ever had, does have and ever will have before the thrall’s body is finally captured. That means the entity knows about the imbued — everyone the pawn has ever heard from, read about or met. Hunter-net, the existence of other monsters (as the hunter understood them), and possible theories on who and what the Messengers are.

Obviously, this knowledge could be catastrophic to the imbued at large. Individual demons know who and what the chosen are, and possibly where to find them. The hunt seems doomed.

It’s not, though. A demon-master’s understanding of all things imbued-related is peripheral and analytical at best. There’s no intuitive comprehension of what all the baggage of hunter existence means. Okay, some force seems to have affected select people and made them alert to the existence of the supernatural, but hunters’ own ignorance about that source could make it anyone. For all a demon-master knows, another potent member of the Host of Hell is responsible, using these humans as weapons to deal with enemies and threats.

And sure, a demon lord could use its pawn’s knowledge to wipe out the rest of the imbued, but why? They’re ultimately just lost, lonely, frightened mortals. No match for a Force of Creation. Anyway, awareness of hunters, their activities and even capabilities empowers a demon. Now he has a weapon of his own that other demons lack. It would be foolish to destroy all hunters or even draw other devils’ attention to the imbued, at least until the chosen could be orchestrated to bring down infernal rivals without the master raising a talon.

The imbued are therefore “safe” from being exposed by the handful of demons that discover their existence. These hellspawn still hold sway over some dangerous hunters who are at large — Rigger111 (John Coaler) and Oracle171 (Beatrice Tremblay) are good examples — but demons don’t automatically “out” the chosen as a whole. That would be playing their hand, and demons always hold their cards close to their chest. Woe to hunters who target one of these “informed” demons, however. Not only does the master have a potent imbued agent at its disposal, it might recognize the hunters’ efforts long in advance and easily dispose of them... or turn them against its own enemies.

DEALING WITH DEMONS

Clearly, demons are powerful supernatural forces, some of the most cunning and dangerous foes that hunters can face. Fortunately, in addition to their edges and strength of will, hunters have a few weapons they can wield against the unleashed forces of Hell, if they’re willing to take the risk.

THE SWORD AND SHIELD OF FAITH

Although demons need human Faith, they are also vulnerable to it. The power of devotion can affect the

damned in various ways, and the mortals able to wield it are rare indeed. Characters must have the Religious Devotion Merit to have a chance of wielding their belief as a weapon or defense against demons. Discussion of this Merit can be found in the **Hunter Players Guide** (p. 97). The rules in this section refer to the Religious Devotion Merit and assume that it is somewhat scarce among the imbued. Adjust as needed to suit your own chronicle.

PRAYERS

Those with Religious Devotion can call upon a higher power to intercede for them when dealing with a demon. This request for intervention is handled as a resisted roll between the number of bonus Willpower points the hunter receives from the Merit (one to three) and the demon's permanent Willpower (difficulty 8 for each). If the roll favors the imbued, a prayer can force a demon to flee from an area or be unable to approach the faithful character as if the Ward edge were used successfully, or it can hold a demon in place like use of the Burden edge. (Use permanent Willpower instead of Zeal to determine the distance at which the demon is held at bay for Ward, and permanent Willpower instead of successes rolled to determine how long the entity is held in place for Burden.)

Prayers can also be used to try to force a demon spirit from its host through an exorcism of sorts. The effort is long and grueling and requires that the demon be held in place for hours or days. A prayer of binding (see p. 101) is the ideal choice for holding a demon. More mundane means such as heavy chains, drugs or crippling physical injury are also possible, but demons' physical prowess and stamina make these methods highly risky. Extended and focused prayers are required for the rite, while the demon undoubtedly seeks to tempt or distract its exorcist. A Willpower point must be spent for the overseeing hunter per hour, and an extended series of Religious Devotion versus Willpower rolls is made (each at difficulty 8), once per hour. If the hunter knows the demon's True Name (see below), the difficulty of his rolls is reduced to 4.

A number of accumulated successes equal to the demon's permanent Faith rating must be achieved for the hunter to drive out the demon's spirit. If the being is unable to find another host, it is pulled back into Hell. If the required number of successes is achieved by the demon first, it defies the hunter. At least one day must pass before the hunter can try to exorcise the demon again, assuming that the entity can be bound that long. If a botch is rolled for either side, all of its accumulated successes are lost.

Is it possible to save the *human* soul of a demon's host? Is the human soul even there anymore, or is it just the memory of the mortal's mind clinging to the skin like an old smell? If you run a story in which a mortal soul still exists in a host, submerged deep below the demon's dominant persona, or if you believe that it's possible to call the soul *back* into the vessel and evict the demon, you might allow hunters to attempt or arrange an exorcism.

This is no easy task. It's not something that can be handled with a few dice rolls and some game time. It's a battle for a soul — both demonic and human. While systems are involved, the rite should be enacted out with intense and serious roleplaying.

If the demon is defeated, the mortal's soul resurfaces. The former host now has a Willpower score of zero and suffers from a temporary derangement of your choosing. With each Willpower point that the character regains over time and recuperation, a Willpower roll (difficulty 7) is made to overcome the derangement. One success is enough to restore the character's grip on sanity. If any roll results in a botch, the derangement is permanent and no further rolls can be made to eliminate it.

HOLY ITEMS

Some items bear a measure of power from being handled by holy people or from years of veneration (or both). Such blessed relics have their own Faith ratings from 1 to 5. An item such as a rosary that's rated 1 might have been blessed by a particularly holy individual, while one rated 5 could be a genuine relic such as a piece of the True Cross. A holy item grants a number of bonus dice to Religious Devotion rolls (above) equal to its rating, provided that the faiths of the item and wielder are compatible. (A pagan gets no benefit from a Christian relic, for example.)

A holy item may even benefit a person who believes in what the object represents but who normally has no Religious Devotion, at your discretion. The item catalyzes and strengthens the wielder's belief, so a number of dice equal to the item's rating is rolled for the wielder in any prayer.

Holy items that are also weapons (such as an ancient sword containing a holy relic) inflict aggravated damage against demons.

HOLY GROUND

Certain places are invested with holiness and faith. These locales are anathema to the damned. Like holy items, holy ground is rated from 1 to 5, with a setting rated 1 being a particularly holy church, graveyard or monument. A rating of 5 is reserved for the most holy of places, such as prominent religious sites in Rome, Jerusalem or Mecca. Note that not every church, mosque or temple is holy ground. In fact, few of them truly are.

A demon that stands on holy ground suffers a number of levels of lethal damage equal to the site's rating each turn. This damage takes the form of burns and stigmata-like wounds that open on the demon's body. A Willpower roll must be made for the demon each turn. The difficulty is 4 plus the site's rating. If a roll fails, the devil must flee from the place as quickly as possible. On particularly holy sites (rated 3 or higher), demons may actually burst into flames (even if they're immune to normal fire). The damage they suffer is aggravated instead of lethal.

Some fallen angels who regret their sins of the past and who genuinely seek forgiveness now that they're



back on Earth might be able to tread holy ground without injury. The few who have successfully accomplished this miracle are at a loss to explain why they weren't burned, but point to it as proof that redemption is still possible.

TRUE NAMES

Demons have many names. They have infernal names (the names they're commonly known by), titles (such as "Lord of the Flies"), and aliases (including the names of their mortal hosts). But each demon has only one True Name. A demon's True Name encompasses its essence, its very being. Knowing a True Name gives the speaker power over that demon (and also makes him a dire threat with which the hellspawn must deal). Demons' True Names may have been given to them by their Creator or may have arisen from the vibrations of the cosmos. Occultists speculate as to the origin of demonic True Names, but the entities themselves remain silent on the matter (and may not even know, either).

LEARNING A TRUE NAME

Needless to say, demons guard knowledge of their True Names carefully. It's possible to discover a demon's True Name through careful research and observation, because the name epitomizes the very being of the creature. The more one understands a demon's essence, the closer she is to grasping its True Name. Studying demons this closely can be an unhealthy practice, of course, and it can draw their attention.

Discovering a demon's True Name demands a series of extended Intelligence + Occult rolls. Each roll represents a month of solid research. This may involve reading obscure books, interviewing victims of the demon, visiting places where it has been and studying reports of its activities. The hunter must have an Occult rating of 3 or more, and a Resources, Allies or Contacts score of 3 or better to have access to the right research materials, such as rare books, police reports, psychological case-files and other restricted information. The total number of successes required varies, ranging from as few as 10 for a low-ranking demon, to as many as 30 or more for a lord of Hell.

You should make these Intelligence + Occult rolls on a player's behalf and keep a secret tally of successes. The difficulty of these rolls should be at least 8, sometimes 9, for particularly obscure or powerful demons (who are more cunning about concealing their True Names). A hunter never knows how complete or accurate the information he gathers is, and while he may collect several letters or syllables in a demon's name, he can never know for sure when he has formed a complete or correct name. The only way to find out for sure is to use it. Incomplete True Names have absolutely no power over demons. Therefore, a smart hunter takes the time to make sure the research is as thorough and accurate as possible. Full discovery may be the work of months or even years, and some may never have the courage to find out if they truly have a demon's full True Name. (A True Name has power only if it's spoken. Writing it down or thinking it has no impact.)

USES OF TRUE NAMES

A demon's True Name can be used for several things, most importantly to summon and bind the demon through an occult ritual. A character that knows a demon's True Name can use it for the following.

- **Communication:** Demons are extremely sensitive to their True Names. Speaking a demon's True Name aloud allows the being to hear you from anywhere in the world and communicate with you over any distance, if it chooses. Such communication is two-way. This connection allows a demon's intimates to contact it at any time, although demons share knowledge of their True Names with only a very trusted few. Speaking a demon's True Name out loud also draws its attention, allowing it to know the identity and location of the speaker, which is why a demon's True Name is never spoken lightly.

- **Intimidation:** Knowing a demon's True Name grants a measure of power over the beast. Hunters who know a demon's True Name gain a number of bonus dice equal to the demon's permanent Faith rating in Mental rolls regarding the demon, such as using Investigation or Research to learn more about its plans, or when Social rolls are made to influence the demon or its thralls. If this bonus is applied to an effort performed in the demon's presence, such as trying to goad or intimidate it, the devil recognizes that the mortal knows its True Name. And, of course, if the entity's name is spoken aloud, it hears as detailed under "Communication."

- **Resistance:** A hunter who knows a demon's True Name gains a bonus equal to the demon's permanent Faith rating on rolls to resist some of the creature's supernatural powers. Note that this resistance doesn't protect a hunter from a demon's *physical* capabilities and attacks (claws, poison, hellfire), only from mental influence and mystical powers. If such a power does not normally involve a resistance roll, one is made for the hunter with a pool equal to the demon's Faith. If the player gets as many or more successes in his roll than you do for the demon's power, the hunter is immune to the effect. If the demon's power involves no roll, the player needs only one success for his character to be impervious.

A hunter doesn't need to speak a demon's True Name to be immune to its powers. He simply needs to know the name. And yet, any devil worth its salt suspects that something is afoot when its powers inexplicably fail to affect the target.

If Conviction is active for a hunter when a body-, mind- or emotion-influencing effect is used on her, Conviction's protection applies first, before the protection offered by knowing a True Name. Knowing a True Name has little bearing at that point. Knowledge of a True Name is therefore most effective when a hunter's Conviction is "down" and he's subjected to the demon's capabilities.

Ironically, to a demon's perspective, the protection that hunters receive from Conviction can make them seem to possess the beast's True Name. If one of the imbued uses second sight, and the devil discovers that its

mind-control power has no effect on the mortal, the beast might suspect that the person has somehow gained knowledge of its True Name. What else could explain such miraculous protection? Would a demon suffering from such a misunderstanding seek to kill the hunter who has "mastery" over it, or would it throw itself at the human's mercy and do her bidding?

- **Binding:** Someone who knows a demon's True Name has a considerable advantage in attempting to bind the creature using an occult ritual. See below for more information.

SUMMONING AND BINDING DEMONS

Using certain mystic rituals, it's possible for a mortal to summon a demon (even one inhabiting a human host) and bend it to obedience. Throughout human history, this lore has been used to make pacts with demons trapped on Earth, or to summon others from the Abyss, commit them to service and (hopefully) return them to their prison. The same principles apply in the modern world, except now many more demons roam the planet. The summoning ordeal is exceptionally dangerous, even with the best of intentions, but it's a useful weapon in the hunters' arsenal, provided they can resist the temptation to abuse it.

RESEARCHING THE RITUAL

The right ritual is required to summon a demon. The slightest mistake results in nothing or an angry demon that can't be controlled. The would-be summoner must therefore take great care in researching the proper rite. Each ritual is unique and tailored to a particular demon; a practice for one won't work for another, even if they seem like similar beings.

Researching a ritual involves an extended Intelligence + Occult roll (difficulty 7), with each roll taking a week's time (or more at your discretion). Characters must meet the same requirements as for investigating a True Name (sufficiently high Occult and one of Allies, Contacts or Resources to provide the necessary materials). If the researcher knows the demon's True Name, a dice-pool bonus equal to the demon's permanent Faith is gained. A minimum of 20 successes is needed to complete the ritual. An incomplete ritual is useless, although it may attract the demon's attention anyway (allowing it to take action against the intended summoner). In order to prepare a ritual at all, an occultist must know something about the particular demon he intends to bring forth — any of its other names or its role in Creation before the Fall.

SUMMONING

Once the ritual is complete, the character can attempt to summon the demon. The summoning rite requires elaborate ingredients, including complex diagrams that are painted or engraved on the floor, candles, incense and lots of chanting. The ritual may need to be performed at a specific place or time (usually at night, often at midnight, perhaps even at a particular time of the year). At your discretion, a sacrifice (animal or human) may be required, particularly for more powerful

demons. Performing the ritual takes a number of hours equal to the demon's permanent Faith rating. If the ritual is interrupted for any reason, it fails, but the demon is still aware of the attempt.

Once the ritual is complete, roll Wits + Occult on the player's behalf. The difficulty is usually 7, higher if the ritual is performed under adverse or inadequate conditions, lower if the conditions are especially auspicious or extra preparations have been made. If the roll fails, the ritual fails and nothing happens. On a botch, there may be a mystical backfire, the wrong demon appears (making it immune to the binding ritual), or the intended subject is not only made aware of the effort but learns the identity of the occultist.

If the ritual is successful, the demon appears in its true infernal form at the site of the ritual. A demon that inhabits a mortal host leaves that body behind wherever it was last. The body lapses into a death-like coma (which can be quite inconvenient for the demon). Demons in Hell are summoned to the physical plane.

The demon must be summoned into a specially prepared space; usually a magical diagram intended to contain it. This diagram (circle, triangle, pentacle or hexagram) doesn't actually prevent the demon from escaping, it merely keeps it from being drawn immediately back down into Hell. If the demon leaves the bounds of the diagram, it is affected like any other demon without a host (see p. 87 for details). If the summoner has tasks for the spirit to carry out in the material world, it can be returned to its host to fulfill them, or a specially prepared body of a recently dead person or animal may be required to give the demon an anchor outside the summoning diagram.

It's assumed that a summoner who brings a demon forth is already so sufficiently immersed in the otherworldly that he is immune to supernatural fear. He can bear the demon's presence without losing control or blocking out the incident.

BINDING

Once the demon appears, the occultist can attempt to force it into obedience. Make resisted Willpower rolls (difficulty 8) for the summoner and the demon. If the summoner knows the demon's True Name, a dice-pool bonus equal to the demon's permanent Faith score is gained. The infernalist also benefits from "acolytes" or assistants. A Willpower roll (difficulty 8) is made for each, with each success adding a die to the summoner's Willpower dice pool. If the summoner doesn't know the demon's True Name, the demon gets bonus dice equal to its Faith.

If an equal number or more successes are rolled for the demon, the binding fails and the spirit is free to do as it wishes. That can mean returning to its mortal host if it has one or finding a suitable host if it doesn't already have one. Very few demons are willing to return to the Abyss once they have a chance to escape.

If more success are rolled for the occultist, the demon must obey for a time. Each excess success represents one task or service that the demon must perform.

These tasks must be specific, such as retrieving a particular item or freeing an intended host. Tasks such as "protect me from my enemies" or "guard this place forever" are too broad and the demon can refuse them. Summoners usually have a particular task or tasks in mind, otherwise why would they take the risk of dealing with a demon in the first place?

The demon is bound to fulfill assigned duties to the best of its ability as soon as possible, and cannot take any action against the infernalist until all its charges are complete. The demon is then free to act as it wishes, although a clever summoner always makes a demon's last task "return to the Hell that spawned you," since that leaves the demon trapped and helpless until someone else brings it forth. A demon can, however, try to coerce others to attack its mistress or seek to subvert her commands as much as possible.

An occultist can attempt to bind the same demon again once its first tasks are complete. Doing so requires modifications to the binding ritual that take a day and a successful Intelligence + Occult roll (difficulty 8) to complete. The number of successes required is one more than the number of times the occultist has bound that particular demon. So, if the demon has already been bound twice, three successes are needed the next time. If the occultist doesn't achieve the required number of successes, the binding ritual is no longer effective and the demon is free. If a renewal effort botches, the demon automatically knows that the binding ritual no longer applies and it can act accordingly.

Demons are fiercely proud and have their own agendas, so they tend to resent being bound. Any occultist who binds a demon can count on earning that demon's wrath. Demonic memories are eternal, so the beings can wait as long as necessary to get revenge. A demon that escapes its bounds, or that completes its duties and is allowed to remain on Earth, might not exact justice immediately. It could need a host body — fast. But the creature certainly begins plotting against the mortal who interfered with it.

LET'S MAKE A DEAL

Of course, there's nothing that says an occultist *has* to attempt to bind a demon after summoning it. Perhaps he hopes that a spirit freed from the Abyss will be indebted to him. An infernalist can just talk to a summoned demon and try to reason or bargain with it. Some occultists worship demons and consider themselves servants, so they summon demonic masters in order to do *their* bidding. Others summon demons in order to forge pacts with them, giving a demon some Faith in exchange for something that the human wants. Generally, demons are willing to consider such deals, especially if they stand to gain more than they give. Summoners who are respectful have a chance of avoiding a demon's wrath, assuming what they have to offer is satisfactory.

MORTAL OCCULTISTS

Note that ordinary mortals are capable of learning the necessary rituals to summon and bind demons,

although few have the dedication, drive and sheer recklessness to do so. This means the demon that hunters track could actually be under the control of a person who summoned and bound it. Indeed, the demon may be willing to cooperate with the chosen to deal with its “boss” and set it free. Do the hunters work with such a creature or do they risk letting the summoner get away, allowing him to call up the demon or others like it again?

More importantly, only mortal occultists (including hunters) are able to summon demons from Hell. Demons and other supernatural creatures can use rituals to summon and bind demons that already inhabit the mortal world, but they cannot breach the gates of Hell to call imprisoned demons to Earth. Only mortals can do that. The reason remains unknown, but it is definitely a case where humanity may be its own worst enemy, and where the greatest threats posed to the imbued come from the very people they seek to protect.

PORTRAYING DEMONS

Nearly every culture in the world has myths about demons, devils and various kinds of evil spirits. Demons have haunted the dreams of humanity throughout time, and fear of them and their works has ignited wars, inquisitions and religious schisms. In many ways, demons are the ultimate monsters, so how do you portray them in your **Hunter** chronicle? There are a number of different ways to view the infernal, some of them unexpected. This section looks at some themes involving demons and how to use them in your game.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

The Breaking of the Seventh Seal. The coming of the Apocalypse. Is the appearance of demons on Earth indication that The End is near? That’s the feeling hunters could (and maybe should) get when they realize that demons are real and here.

Demons represent a certain sense of hopelessness, where hunters have lost the struggle to save humanity from monsters. The imbued have struggled, fought and died against vampires, shapeshifters and ghosts, and now the gates of Hell have been thrown open and even more terrible things have been unleashed. It’s enough to convince the chosen that they can never hope to win. The simple knowledge that demons exist — that the imbued also face the legions of Hell — should shake hunters to their core.

You can use disturbing signs and portents to foreshadow the arrival of demons in your chronicle, potentially preparing hunters for their first encounter with the infernal. Perhaps there’s an increase in random acts of violence. The imbued come across a group of demon-worshippers with no evidence of demons (yet), but the leader of the cult has strange capabilities that he got from *somewhere*. There are more crazies than ever out there, proclaiming, “The End is Nigh!” Religious symbols and services are more prevalent. A statue of an angel or saint exhibits stigmata or weeps in the hunters’ presence (or only to their second sight).

Once the characters have encountered a demon, turn things up *another* notch. Emphasize the World of Darkness’ atmosphere of doom and despair — now more intense than ever. Perhaps there’s a sudden plague of vermin in the area. A mysterious serial killer leaves ominous religious calling cards for the police — perhaps verses from the Book of Revelation. The hunters have nightmares about fighting alone amongst piled corpses against an endless horde of monsters in a charred world. Then they wake to discover that a friend or acquaintance has become another victim. And investigation into the killings proves another hunter to be responsible — and he’s gone over to the other side. If hunters can fall to corruption, what hope do the characters or the world have?

While you don’t want to make your chronicle so crushingly hopeless that the players can’t have any fun (unless such despair is their idea of a good time), you do want to make it clear that demons are not just “run of the mill” monsters. They’re epic adversaries for the imbued, and their appearance can change the tone and direction of your game.

TEMPTATION AND CORRUPTION

Demons are subtle corrupters, luring otherwise decent people into evil, or simply taking advantage of the potential for evil, selfishness and cruelty that exists in every human heart. Often all that a demon has to do to draw people into the depths of corruption is ask one question: “What do you want?”

Power corrupts and demons are able to offer power beyond most people’s wildest dreams. A demon can give someone the wealth, influence and celebrity she needs to live out her fantasies. A devil can grant opportunities for revenge, or to satisfy desires that people repress and try to ignore. How many can resist that kind of temptation?

Although hunters can’t normally become the thralls of a demon, they may still be vulnerable to temptation, and the infernal are master deal-makers. What if a devil offers to use its powers on a hunter’s behalf, to dispose of a creature that haunts or terrifies one of the chosen? Demons can grant enchanted weapons (suitable for slaying other monsters). They can provide information. They can even raise the dead in some cases. Are hunters willing to deal with devils that can help accomplish so much? Do the imbued try to outwit fallen angels? Make deals and then seek loopholes after demons have fulfilled their end of the bargain? Or do they steadfastly refuse to negotiate with demons, no matter what?

THE HAVES VERSUS THE HAVE-NOTS

Hunters tend to be fairly ordinary people before they’re imbued. While demons may enter almost any mortal host, they tend to move in important circles, possibly by coincidence, but most likely by design. Meanwhile, demon thralls are often beautiful, rich and powerful thanks to their patrons, which is a stark contrast to the everyday lives and concerns of hunters, who may have trouble keeping down even a regular job. Indeed, demons are capable of enjoying the fruits of success more so than any other monsters, which often have to hide from the light or avoid human discovery.

HUNTERS AND SUMMONING

Hunters can learn the rituals to summon and bind demons just like any other mortals can. Their imbued status doesn't prevent them from using the rites. Nor does it necessarily protect them from a summoning gone wrong. The primary difference is that a hunter performing a summoning ritual cannot use *any* edges until the demon is no longer in the hunter's service. (Conviction and second sight can still be used, however. Any hunter participating in the ritual who does not have Conviction active during the scene is subject to supernatural fear and flees the scene or cowers uncontrollably and blanks out the whole spectacle.) Afterward, the hunter's capabilities return in full measure, which means that a hunter who tries to summon a demon and fails cannot use any of his edges against the being. This prohibition arises as the hunter creates something of a rift between himself and the Heralds.

The main reason for a hunter to attempt to bind a demon is probably to banish it. One net success on the binding roll is enough to command a demon to return to Hell where it is trapped again, unable to return without the aid of a mortal summoner. Of course, to achieve this goal, a hunter has to painstakingly research the demon's nature and the necessary rituals for months, gather the components and successfully perform the ritual.

But bound demons can also be useful to the imbued. A trapped devil can be forced to give hunters information about itself, its thralls, and other demons or creatures that it knows of. It might also be used as a weapon against other creatures. Most hunters are smart enough to know that trying to "fight hellfire with hellfire" is an extremely dangerous proposition, but there are those willing to take any risk to gain the upper hand against specific nemeses.

Any demon that discovers an attempt to bind and banish it is certain to interfere with the hunter's efforts. A demon may notice research into its True Name (if the chosen ask questions of the wrong people), and it automatically knows when someone speaks its True Name aloud. Thralls might be sent to dispose of the imbued, or earthly demons and their followers may accuse hunters of being "devil-worshippers" or "Satanists," pointing to the characters' unhealthy interest in the occult and demonology as proof. (Just try explaining to the cops that you're doing a black-magic ritual and sacrificing pigeons to *save* humanity from evil.)

Demons are also incredibly cunning and willing to beg, plead or bargain for their freedom. Even if a hunter is successful in summoning a demon, it may offer to serve him willingly, even turning against its followers or fellow infernal to avoid being sent back to the Pit. Such offers are genuine, but the demon is always alert for opportunities to twist its orders, or to corrupt the hunter, making its "master" more and more dependent on it until the roles are reversed....

Demons offer an opportunity to explore conflicts between the haves and the have-nots in human society. Hunters may have to move in social circles with which they have no experience, facing prejudice from "proper" society that helps protect an infernal being. When a group of hunters knows that a senator is entertaining a demon at a dinner party, what do they do? Neither the police nor security is likely to look kindly on a group of scruffy, gun-toting vigilantes breaking into a private estate. How can the imbued hope to topple creatures that want for nothing?

The contrast between the material success offered by demons and the relatively Spartan nature of hunters' lives may also serve as a temptation. Have any of the imbued ever wanted to achieve wealth or success? Who hasn't at one time? If offered a chance to have such rewards, can the hunters refuse?

What about a wealthy or influential thrall who sponsors a group of hunters, becoming their "mysterious benefactor," directing them against creatures and other demons that are a danger to the master? Even if the hunters discover the truth and deal with the minion, a demon waits in the wings and knows almost everything about the group.

Such stories emphasize what demons and their followers have compared to what hunters might lack — power, fame, wealth. Is answering the call more fulfilling than any of these privileges?

FAITH

The existence of demons raises all kinds of issues regarding devotion and religious belief. Do demons mean that God and His angels really exist? If so, then why haven't they intervened to protect humanity from monsters? Some hunters believe that they have — by creating the imbued. Other hunters reject such religious explanations of their origins, but that can be difficult to do when hunters can perform such amazing feats. How do religious and non-religious hunters deal with the existence of demons and what they represent?

Faith and religion are excellent sources of apocalyptic imagery. Imagine a gothic church with plaster saints and angels looking down. A storm rages outside as a few scattered faithful seek shelter and pray. The hunters come upon the scene, suspecting that a demon lurks among the tiny congregation. Which one of them is it? What does it want? Has it come seeking redemption or an opportunity to desecrate a holy place?

The demonic need for human faith also raises possible themes. Why do people need something to believe in, and is that need so strong that they will believe in anything? It can be difficult to maintain faith in a distant God who seems deaf to prayer, especially when beings actually exist that can fulfill every mortal hope and dream. All we have to do in return is believe in them. Is that so difficult?

It can be easy to make thralls two-dimensional fanatics, power-hungry cynics or faceless cultists. Consider instead what motivates them and how they express their newfound faith that the demon needs so much. Perhaps thralls are just people who need help to find a

better life. To get out of the inner city. To ensure that their kids grow up right. To save loved ones from illness. Can hunters sympathize with these needs? Are hunters left wondering about the validity of their own faith when they can't bring themselves to believe in a higher power? Do the imbued have faith in anything anymore?

THE ULTIMATE EVIL

Demons may represent the greatest evil that the imbued have ever faced. They can be wickedness and corruption incarnate for a **Hunter** chronicle, the ultimate foes, even after the chosen have fought their way through bloodsuckers, beasts, witches and walking dead. If you like, demons may be the power behind it all, the enemy that hunters were created to fight. Although this portrayal of demons leaves out much of their own struggle, it's not really about that. It's about what makes for a good **Hunter** game, in which case, demons as creatures of pure evil may work quite well.

REDEMPTION

Demon: The Fallen is about the search for redemption, and that can be a theme in a **Hunter** chronicle that features demons, as long as the focus remains on the imbued and how they wrestle with the issues involved. This approach can make demons three-dimensional antagonists, even sympathetic ones, but no less dangerous. It offers opportunities for roleplaying and dramatic conflict, but it may limit your potential to use demons as outright villains.

One of the primary conflicts in demons' redemption — their desire to make amends for the sins they've committed throughout Creation — is the contradiction that caused them to fall from grace in the first place. Demons loved humanity so much that they chose to defy their austere Creator in order to help mankind. In the end, they suffered for their rebellion. Now, the sad truth is that demons are little more than parasites. A well-intentioned demon can offer humanity a lot, like the power to make dreams come true in exchange for faith and acceptance. It seems like a good deal on the surface, but what becomes of a humanity that's nothing more than a well-cared-for pet? How would that be any better than the situation the demons rebelled against in the first place, when humanity was left to survive and suffer completely on its own?

What does a demon need to do to find redemption, assuming that it's even possible? How can a handful of imbued hope to help a being as old as the ages? How long can a group of hunters hold out hope for such a creature, and what risks do they take in doing so? If a devil slips and gives in to its infernal nature, must it be cast back into Hell? Where do the hunters draw the line? Such questions can create a lot of dramatic tension and opportunities for roleplaying in your chronicle.

SHEEP'S CLOTHING

A key difference between demons and the other monsters that hunters encounter is that demons need people to *believe* in them. The infernal need to draw upon the power of mortal faith. Whereas vampires and

werewolves don't care what humans think, and hide behind veils of secrecy and terror, demons don't conceal themselves. They have to gather thralls to replenish their power, and those followers must believe, even if only for a while, in what the demons represent. Demons *must* reveal themselves sooner or later, giving hunters the opportunity to find out about them and track them down.

Of course, nothing says demons have to make the hunt easy for the chosen. Demons don't create ad campaigns and announce, "Greetings from the fiery pit!" They build up circles of pawns, cults and other networks of influence that feed them the Faith they need while at the same time shielding them from adversaries. Remember that demonic thralls are often people of power and influence (after all, they've made pacts with devils). Hunters pursuing a demon may discover that prominent business and political figures interfere with their efforts, or that celebrities are indebted to their prey and are willing to lend their considerable resources to protecting the demon.

Even more problematic is the fact that demons are extremely difficult to detect. Without second sight, demons in mortal bodies appear to be completely normal people, and no scientific test can prove otherwise. These creatures breathe, bleed and have enough of their hosts' memories to fool almost anyone. They're not vulnerable to sunlight or much of anything else, and they're more than capable of quoting scripture to suit their needs. Convincing anyone that a famous televangelist is actually possessed by a demon is next to impossible. And killing the demon is likely to leave behind a normal human corpse. Demon hosts don't conveniently crumble to dust or burn to ash when killed, unlike some other monsters. So, demons can rely on the protection of mortal authorities even more so than many monsters.

In the end, it's hunters that come off as crazed killers and religious fanatics, claiming that they're trying to kill a demon! Hunters may have a relatively easy time discovering that someone actually *is* a demon, but a very difficult time proving it to anyone else or acting upon their knowledge. That's why the hellspawn are such frustrating, dangerous foes. They can hide in plain sight, mingling among ordinary people.

The demonic need to reveal themselves and to cultivate human belief also gives you an opportunity to inject more signs of demonic influence or the coming End into your chronicle. To the imbued, portents of demons could appear increasingly once they know what to look for. Rags to riches stories become disturbingly more common. Once-adamant agnostics or atheists suddenly find faith in a higher power. Amazing medical recoveries are reported in hospitals and homes for the elderly. Bizarre religious sects and unexplained crimes spring up. Urban legends arise about strange sightings and forces lurking the streets. Mysterious "visitations" and "abductions" occur. And anyone the hunters encounter could be a potential pawn or believer, whether they know it or not.

WHAT DEMONS KNOW

Although demons are impossibly old, most of them have been on Earth for only a limited time. They know what their mortal hosts knew in life, and what their followers have told them, but little else. Demons often know as little (or less) about the imbued as hunters know about demons. This is fortunate for the imbued, although it remains to be seen how long demons remain ignorant of the threats posed to them.

Devils do know that some mortals are aware of their existence and hunt the hellspawn. That's been the case for as long as demons have been able to return to the mortal world. They also know there are rituals capable of binding them, and that humans of particularly strong faith can keep them at bay or even exorcise them. The powers of the imbued are somewhat new, however, at least in their modern incarnation. Demons aren't immediately aware of what hunters can do, although they learn quickly.

Demons have the capacity to sense the supernatural, but they don't immediately recognize the chosen for what they are. A demon may notice something unusual about a hunter, something similar to any mortal of great faith, and may take an interest in the imbued as a result. But a devil can't pick out one of the chosen easily, so long as the hunter doesn't use her edges in the creature's vicinity. Hunters may easily escape a demon's notice if they aren't caught interfering in its affairs.

Demons *can* know some things about other monsters, information they may be willing to share for the right price. Many monster types have been around for millennia and demons that have escaped the Abyss throughout the ages might have encountered the creatures. The infernal don't necessarily know how or where shapechangers originated, or what social circles werewolves maintain among their own kind, but they might know that the creatures are quick to anger and that silver is their bane. Demons in the past, as much as today, may have run afoul of other creatures and dealt with them, but that doesn't mean the infernal and, say, vampires were ever allies or cohorts and exchanged personal secrets. Such confidence would be too dangerous for everyone involved. Of course, that doesn't mean a demon confesses limited knowledge of other monsters.

HOW MUCH DO YOU REALLY WANT TO KNOW?

The knowledge demons possess about cosmic truths and Creation has the potential to seriously impact your chronicle. They could blow the lid open on life, the universe and everything. Fortunately, there are a number of reasons why demons can't or won't reveal this information to the imbued, giving characters the answers to all the questions and spoiling the mystery of the game.

The first and foremost reason why demons don't share is that they never give *anything* away for free. Information that hunters (or anyone else) may want comes at a cost, and a big one at that. Demons may tempt the imbued with claims that they know any numbers of truths, from the existence of God to the creation of the

imbued, to lure hunters into a bargain. But under normal circumstances, demons are tight-lipped when it comes to giving away secrets — any secrets.

Secondly, demons don't reveal all because they're uncontrollable liars and deceivers. Why should they trade the actual truth for Faith or a service when telling a lie reserves the truth for a future deal? Even if hunters do get some genuine information from a demon, they have no way of knowing that it's accurate. Another demon may come along and contradict what the first demon said. How do hunters know that they're not *both* lying? You can make up all sorts of cunning stories about the "true nature of reality" for demons to share. "God exists and He released us from Hell to consume the world because all you people have fucked it up." Or, "We created your kind. How else did you get the powers you have? Hasn't your life become a lot worse since you got them? That's the price you're paying." Devils' lies might also offer an opportunity to establish some erroneous "insights" into the various supernatural factions of the World of Darkness to perpetuate hunters' confusion about monsters. Say, "Bloodsuckers and shapechangers were a single creature once, but a feud divided them. Now they fight over who controls everything." Demons are sure to exploit any and all of these lies for their own ends.

There's also the question of how much demons really know and how much of it they can explain to mere mortals. The truth is that their long exile in the Abyss has made many demons' recollections of the distant past foggy and unreliable at best. Ages of anger and bitterness have warped the details. The demonic point of view can be biased, to say the least. Many demons recall things with their own unique slants, which don't always agree. Another possibility is that entering a human host clouds a demon's perceptions and understanding of its own past. The sudden wave of emotions that comes with being human puts a new spin on old beliefs, making them circumspect after all this time. Or the immediate experiences of grief, friendship, hunger or love obliterate millennia-old anger — and memories.

And some of the Great Cosmic Truths to which demons can be privy are beyond mortal comprehension, or at least beyond the limits of human language. How does a demon explain the true nature of God or Hell to a hunter? How does it relate that Creation was many times, places, possibilities and realities to a feeble human mind? Demons' mystical experiences can be totally nonsensical or contradictory to the limited mortal point of view, and there's no way to explain them more clearly. Some truths man was never meant to know, because he *can't* know them.

So, while introducing demons to your game may seem like opening a vast can of cosmological worms, you can show hunters and players as much *or as little* of the truth as your game can handle. If you want grand revelations of the true scheme of things, go ahead, but if you'd prefer to keep the hunters in the dark, there are plenty of ways to do it.

DEMON AND HUNTER

Storytellers looking for more information about demons in the World of Darkness can consult **Demon: The Fallen**. The focus of **Demon** is the struggles and exploits of fallen angels on Earth, while the focus of **Hunter** is on ordinary people thrust into the role of protecting humanity from monsters that only they can see. The difference in focus can mean that elements suited to a **Demon** chronicle may not work well in **Hunter** (and vice versa).

This section looks at borrowing material from **Demon** for your **Hunter** game, and the possibility of departing from the information about the fallen provided in **Demon** to create your own unique creatures.

PUBLISHED MATERIAL

Demon: The Fallen is a fairly new game compared to, say, **Vampire: The Masquerade** or even **Hunter**. On one hand, that means there isn't as much published material for you to draw on for your **Hunter** game, but on the other hand, it means there aren't years and years of established "canon" to worry about where demons are concerned.

The primary disadvantages to using published **Demon** material in your game are familiarity and differences in tone. It's quite possible that you and your players have played or at least read **Demon** and are familiar with the information presented there. If your players have difficulty separating personal knowledge from character knowledge, you may have a difficult time surprising them with material taken from **Demon** and its sourcebooks. Still, players are less likely to be familiar with **Demon** than with the much more established Storyteller games, so this isn't as much of a problem as it can be with creatures like vampires and werewolves.

Whereas **Hunter** is a game about mortal characters struggling against monsters, **Demon** is about the search for redemption and issues of faith. Be careful when incorporating material from **Demon** that you don't shift the focus of your chronicle. It should be about the hunters, not demons. While the fallen search for meaning and hope may become an element of your stories, making demons three-dimensional antagonists, their struggles shouldn't be the main focus. Remember that hunters typically see only the surface of the supernatural world with which they interact. They may notice demons reaping Faith in "random" acts of violence, they may recognize the corrupt activities of demonic thralls, and they may discover demonic cults. But delving into the depths of demon politics, society and history is probably beyond the scope of imbued comprehension and the scope of a **Hunter** chronicle.

Borrowing material from **Demon** can save you a considerable amount of work since it provides you with complete information on the various infernal factions, their powers, and goals. While the hunters may not know the difference between an "Earthbound" and an

embodied demon, or a "Luciferan" and a "Faustian," you can use small hints of such background to add depth to demonic adversaries without having to make it all up.

Demon can also provide you with ideas on how demons interact with mortals and mortal society. There are plenty of examples of people dealing with demons (and vice versa) in the book, along with extensive looks at thralls, cults and other topics that this book can cover only briefly. You can use that extra material to give devils more depth and to get a better feel for how to portray them.

EXORCISTS

Demon features various "demon-hunters" who are not imbued. They're mere ordinary folks (some of them backed by the power of their faith) who are aware that demons exist and who track the hellspawn down to cast them back into the Pit. It's quite possible — some might say inevitable — that these exorcists cross paths with the imbued. It's up to you whether or not you want to introduce exorcists to your chronicle. Here are some guidelines if you want to do so.

Demon-hunters are ordinary mortals in terms of Traits. They're not imbued or even bystanders, so they don't have the benefits that hunters do in dealing with the supernatural (particularly second sight and Conviction). On the other hand, exorcists (those that survive for any length of time, anyway) tend to be fairly well trained and experienced in dealing with their quarry. They have a few advantages over the imbued, such as knowledge, faith and possibly the ability to summon and bind demons.

Demon-hunters tend to have Occult ratings of 3+, having studied and learned all that they can about their enemies. Unlike the imbued, who hunt all sorts of monsters and often without knowing much of anything about them, exorcists focus on the infernal. They may have encountered a ghost or vampire along the way, but they've studied and know more about demons than most imbued do. This experience gives exorcists insight into how demons think, what they're likely to do and how they operate. It doesn't mean demon-hunters have an infallible sense of devils' plans. Far from it. But they do know some things that give them a bit of an edge. Part of that knowledge may be research into the True Names of particular demons (see p. 99). Knowing a demon's True Name can give even an ordinary mortal a significant advantage in dealing with an entity.

Some exorcists also have the True Faith Merit (discussed in the **Hunter: First Contact**, pp. 39-40). Essentially, these demon-hunters can use the capabilities described under "The Sword and Shield of Faith" (p. 97) against demons, most notably prayer to banish and bind demons. Exorcists may be actual clergy or very faithful laity. While perhaps not as versatile as hunters' Conviction and edges, their faith can be a powerful weapon against the infernal.

Finally, demon-hunters can use rituals for summoning and binding demons (p. 100), just like anyone else

DIVINE MESSENGERS?

So are the Messengers angels trying to protect humanity from the forces of evil? Some hunters certainly think so. There is no proof, of course, but there's also no proof of any other explanation for the imbued. In truth, demons are not entirely sure what's become of their angelic brethren — those who never fell and who remained faithful to their Creator. As far as the infernal know, any "Messengers" could be angels or something else entirely. Even if the Messengers *are* really angels, it's unknown whether they act on the orders of a Higher Power or on their own, and what that means for humanity.

Ultimately, it's up to you to decide if the Messengers are angels or divine beings trying to help the imbued battle the forces of Hell. Or if they're something else altogether. Your chronicle probably benefits from a level of mystery surrounding the Heralds, their powers and motivations. If hunters are definitively pawns of God, then their struggle against monsters may seem less important. Surely if they lose, God could still make the world, right? The question of demons' specific place in the universe and in hunters' creation is therefore left a mystery in this book and may be best left as one in your game. Sometimes knowing the answers to the big questions makes everything else seem less important, and **Hunter** is a game that focuses on the "small stuff" of characters' lives and struggles.

Interestingly enough, demons don't know about hunters' "Messengers" at all. The fallen only just learned about the imbued, and they don't know where hunters' powers originate. Needless to say, many demons would be very interested to learn of the existence of any "Heralds" and what the chosen believe them to be. After all, that's belief that could be dedicated to the infernal instead. These beings may provide some proof that there are still angels active in Creation. Belief in the Messengers as a concept could therefore prove to be a useful bargaining chip for hunters, giving *them* something with which to make deals with the Devil.

can. They typically use these rites to banish demons back to Hell, but some zealous exorcists may try to "fight hellfire with hellfire" by turning demons against each other. Studying and using these rituals also makes demon-hunters vulnerable to the possibility of corruption. Devils can promise anything to escape banishment back to the Abyss, and might tempt even the most dedicated foe if they know the right buttons to push.

There's also the matter of how exorcists react to the imbued. For the most part, the chosen are unknown to them. Edges in use may be suspect in the eyes of some demon-hunters, while others may see the imbued as potential allies or even saviors. (Exorcists' direct exposure to the infernal makes them immune to the paralysis and hysteria that edges and even monsters' presence can

inflict.) Particularly narrow-minded demon-hunters may consider the imbued "corrupt" or "tainted" and could try to kill them. Some exorcists may simply see the imbued as misguided or in need of wise leadership (which is to say *their* leadership), so the chosen can be directed at the true menace that humanity faces.

Exorcists seem like perfectly ordinary people to hunters, even under second sight. Only the most intensely faithful and blessed (those with Faith ratings, or with True Faith and who are capable of performing miracles) seem different. They're not so much "off" or "wrong" as they are "strange" or "unusual." They may also seem to radiate a nimbus of light — especially when looked at with *Illuminate* — and can induce calm or inspire anger, depending on whether these exorcists are serene or righteous at any given moment. What the imbued make of these insights is up to your players.

VARIANT DEMONS

Nothing says you have to adhere to the portrayal of demons given in **Demon** or this book if you don't want to. Changing things can afford you more creative freedom, although it tends to be more work and players familiar with or interested in **Demon** may be disappointed if their adversaries aren't the fallen that they expect.

Ignoring or modifying existing material about the infernal allows you to fit them into your **Hunter** chronicle however you wish. You may decide that the "demons" described in this book (evil spirits inhabiting mortal bodies) aren't demons at all but the infernal equivalent of the imbued, created by the *real* demons, which are the opposite of the Messengers. These "infernal hunters" serve their demonic masters and search for a way to return their lords to Earth, with only the "good" imbued standing in the way. Or demons may be more corporeal and less spiritual creatures. They could be more alien or incomprehensible, with goals that the human mind can't fathom at all. Whatever the case, your players won't know about it from reading **Demon** or any other published material.

If you plan to change significant aspects of demons, you might want to talk to your players to at least let them know what you're doing. That way, when things end up differently from what they know and maybe want, they won't be let down.

On the other hand, saying that you *may* change things, whether you plan to or not, can help keep players' expectations from interfering with the game. It can keep them on their toes, since they won't know if the information they have about demons is necessarily accurate. Warning your players about change can mean you don't actually have to alter much at all to maintain a sense of the unknown.

STORY IDEAS

Presented here are some story hooks and ideas for using demons in your chronicle. Feel free to modify them to suit your needs and make them your own.

THE CULT

A hunter's friend or loved one joins a demon's cult. They convince her that it's the *hunter* who's demonically possessed or influenced, that the cult will save her soul, and possibly the hunter's. How quickly the character learns of the situation depends on how much he focuses on the hunt versus mundane life (including friends and loved ones). Therein may lie a valuable lesson for obsessive hunters.

Even if the imbued manage to rescue the loved one, it may be too late. If the supporting character has become a thrall, what then? Can they guard her night and day? Can they find a way to break the demon's hold? Can the characters cut a deal with the cult, and what does the demon want in return?

A HUNTER FALLS

A hunter with whom the characters are in contact starts to show signs of going over the edge into truly fanatical devotion to the cause. Worse than that, he is tempted by a demon (perhaps even more than one) to call upon it for power and is very close to giving in. The demon engineers circumstances so the extremist needs more and more power, making it increasingly likely that he will succumb to temptation. Can the characters find this mysterious and elusive hunter and prevent him from falling? If the hunters are too late and their former ally *does* become an infernal hunter, can they bring themselves to track him down, or is there hope that he can be redeemed?

The extremist in question can also be a player's character, assuming that she's reached the pinnacle of power and Virtue described in **Fall from Grace**. The story can mark the end of one chronicle and the beginning of another, introducing demons into the setting and possibly resulting in the fall or demise of one or more characters. Perhaps the hunters in the next chronicle deal with the old characters as enemies or mentors (or both).

A DEMON REDEEMED?

The hunters encounter a demon, but not the kind that they might expect. This one is repentant for its past misdeeds and wants to find peace and perhaps salvation. The demon is willing to cooperate with the imbued and even become their ally against others of its kind. Although the offer and the demon's intentions are genuine, there are complications.

The rogue demon is stalked by others looking to either destroy it or bring it "back into the fold." Although the demon is reformed, it still needs mortal thralls to give it Faith to use its various powers, and the hunters can't provide the degree of devotion it needs. Even if the demon takes only complicit thralls, are the hunters willing to stand by? There are also others stalking the demon, either other imbued or exorcists. They may not understand why the characters choose to "shelter" this enemy of humanity and may believe everyone is under the demon's influence.

Although the demon is sincere, it's still an infernal creature and may sometimes succumb to its dark nature.

The hunters' new "ally" is like a ticking time bomb waiting to go off. Are the chosen willing to risk helping the demon find redemption? Conversely, are they willing and able to destroy a creature that truly tries to save itself? What if the demon discovers that the imbued are plotting against it? The hunters may bring about exactly the sort of confrontation that they fear.

SAMPLE DEMONS

Storytellers can use the following demons as antagonists in their chronicles or as examples to base their own demon characters upon:

JACOB PITT (IVREL)

Prelude: Young Jacob Pitt grew up under the guidance of his stern minister father after his mother's death. Then his father fell under the sway of a vampire. When Jacob became the vampire's latest victim, the horror of it was too much for the boy. His body became the host for Ivrel, who destroyed the vampire, convincing Reverend Pitt that a miracle had saved both him and his son. The reverend's view was further enhanced by Jacob's ability to perform other miracles, particularly healing the sick and crippled. Pitt took to his ministry with new zeal, with Jacob at the center of it, and the pews of his church filled to overflowing.

Concept: Although Jacob Pitt was always a quiet and serious child, now he's practically angelic. That's truer than most know, and Ivrel intends to see to it that things are different this time. He's been away for a very long time, but now that he's back, he intends to do right and help people. All they need to do is believe in him.

Roleplaying Hints: Once you were a power that shook the cosmos and guided the stars in their course. Now you are considerably humbled, but determined to help humanity in the face of an uncaring world. To do that, you must survive and you must have followers who



believe in you. Anyone and anything that threatens your work must be dealt with.

Possessions: None

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 3, Charisma (Compelling) 4, Manipulation (Innocent) 4, Appearance (Angelic) 4, Perception 2, Intelligence 3, Wits 3

Abilities: Alertness 3, Awareness 3, Dodge 2, Empathy 2, Expression 2, Intimidation 3, Leadership 2, Occult 2, Performance 2, Subterfuge 3

Backgrounds: Allies 4, Destiny 3, Influence 2, Mentor 2, Resources 2

Infernal Form: Claws and Teeth, Demon Hide, Horns, Immunity to Fire, Wings

Powers: Endurance 2, Enthrall, Healing Touch, Hellfire, Speed 3

Faith: 4

Willpower: 6

ANGELA LINNELL (AYA)

Prelude: Angela Linnell grew up poor and living in a trailer park. Her mother abused her, beating her and locking her in a closet, sometimes for hours. A final beating proved too much and Angie became host to Aya. The two personalities were mixed by the trauma of the merging, and Aya struggled to remember her true nature. All she knew was that she had been in a dark place, and now there was light. She also knew that she would protect herself from anyone or anything that threatened her. For a time, she befriended a young hunter, but the realization of her true nature ended her playing at being mortal. A fire destroyed much of the trailer park where Angie lived, and Aya moved on that night.

Concept: Although she may seem young, Aya is both ancient and terrible, a virtual goddess in the form of a girl. She feels a strong desire to protect children and

finds that they believe in her more readily than adults do, so she becomes their "secret friend" and helps them in exchange for their dedication.

Roleplaying Hints: You were imprisoned in the darkness for so very long, trapped there with the others, unable to feel or do, only to be. Now you are free again, and no one and nothing will ever imprison you again. You punish those who defy or threaten you, but reward those you favor, particularly the children for whom you care. No one will hurt them as long as you're around.

Possessions: None

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3, Charisma 3, Manipulation (Deceptive) 4, Appearance 3, Perception 3, Intelligence 3, Wits (Cunning) 4

Abilities: Alertness 2, Athletics 1, Awareness 3, Computer 1, Dodge 2, Empathy (Children) 4, Intimidation 2, Occult 2, Stealth 1, Subterfuge 3

Backgrounds: Influence 1, Resources 1

Infernal Form: Claws and Teeth, Demon Hide, Hellfire Shroud, Horns, Immunity to Fire, Venom, Wings

Powers: Endurance 2, Enchanted Gift, Enthrall, Pain, Power 1, Speed 1, Summon Storms

Faith: 5

Willpower: 7

JOHN BLACKBURN

Prelude: John Blackburn's parents owned a small apothecary. After they died in a tragic accident, John inherited the shop. He also developed a drug-dependency problem to deal with the pain and grief of his loss. An overdose landed him in the hospital, where John became host to something else. He returned to work with renewed energy, hope and ideas for a new herbal formula to help people get well. It wasn't the medicine but people's faith in it — and Josh — that did the work.



The medicine from "Tribal Apothecary" brings them health and wellness, and John Blackburn has become a well-known and beloved figure in his community.

Concept: Although he portrays himself as repentant and caring to those who discover hints of his true nature, John (or rather the demon inhabiting his body) is calculating and manipulative. The demon extends its influence by helping others, but it is little more than a "pusher" of good health, bringing patients and clients back in for a regular fix, providing the creature with the faith it needs.

Roleplaying Hints: Mortal frailty is the key to mortal faith. Humanity once relied upon you for protection, healing, knowledge... virtually everything. Now you are reliant on humanity in a way, but you won't allow that to weaken you. Instead, you've turned it to your advantage by exploiting human weakness. The best means of dealing with your enemies is to find their weaknesses and apply pressure until they crack.

Possessions: Apothecary shop, various herbal and holistic medications

Attributes: Strength 3, Dexterity 2, Stamina 2, Charisma 3, Manipulation (Genuine) 5, Appearance 3, Perception 3, Intelligence 3, Wits 3

Abilities: Academics (Holistic Practices) 1, Alertness 2, Awareness 3, Bureaucracy 1, Crafts 1, Dodge 2, Empathy (Needs) 4, Expression 2, Medicine 2, Performance 3, Research 2, Subterfuge 3

Backgrounds: Influence 1, Resources 2

Infernal Form: Claws and Teeth, Demon Hide, Foul Stench, Horns, Wings

Powers: Endurance 2, Earthquake, Enchanted Gift, Keen Perceptions, Power 1

Faith: 3

Willpower: 5

ADRIAN POWELL

Prelude: The "Powell Power Experience" is one of the most popular motivational seminars in the world, and Adrian Powell, the man behind the movement, is one of the world's greatest motivational speakers. Attendees of Powell's conferences claim to feel "uplifted" and "inspired" by his work, and thousands have bought his tapes and videos and attended his live appearances.

What few know is the source of Powell's stirring speeches, or that Powell is not human at all. Only a select group of devotees is exposed to the speaker's true power. In exchange for their belief and loyalty, they receive whatever they desire.

Concept: Powell is a charismatic and public figure, one with considerable wealth and influence. Even if he weren't a demon, hunters would find him formidable. Backed by his infernal capabilities and loyal followers,



he's a force to be reckoned with. Hunting down and destroying Powell without being exposed to the authorities or simply being killed is a challenge for even an experienced hunter group.

Roleplaying Hints: You've waited a long time for this opportunity and you're not about to waste a moment of it. The world is your playground and mortals are your toys to do with as you please. Their simple and petty desires are easy to manipulate, and they give you the power you need. They adore and worship you while giving you anything you want. Those who defy you will learn to regret it long before you permit them to die.

Possessions: Pretty much anything he wants

Attributes: Strength 3, Dexterity 2, Stamina (Unstoppable) 4, Charisma (Compelling) 5, Manipulation 3, Appearance (Darkly Handsome) 4, Perception 3, Intelligence 3, Wits (Clever) 4

Abilities: Academics (Business) 2, Alertness 2, Athletics 2, Awareness 3, Brawl 3, Bureaucracy 2, Dodge 2, Empathy 3, Etiquette 2, Expression 2, Intimidation 3, Investigation 2, Leadership 3, Linguistics 3, Occult 3, Performance (Oratory) 4, Subterfuge 3

Backgrounds: Allies 5, Destiny 2, Influence 3, Resources 5

Infernal Form: Claws and Teeth, Demon Hide, Extra Limbs, Hellish Voice, Horns, Regeneration, Wings

Powers: Endurance 3, Guise, Headgames, Healing Touch, Hellfire, Mortal Clay, Power 3, Regeneration, Speed 1

Faith: 5

Willpower: 8

THE INFERNAL

The End Is Nigh

They say angels once rebelled against God and were cast out of Heaven. Hunters don't know if Scripture gets it right, but they do know one thing: Darkness has fallen and it's Hell on Earth. Things that can be called no less than demons walk among us, tempting the righteous, corrupting the innocent and orchestrating the end of the world. Can they be stopped before the Devil gets his due?

Repent! Repent!

Hunter: The *Infernal* explores the blasphemous realm of demons as hunters desperately seek out devils' strengths, fears and weaknesses. But the tempters have discovered hunters, too, and are willing to strike a bargain. Can hunters possibly drive the infernal host back into the Pit? If they can't, there will be Hell to pay.

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