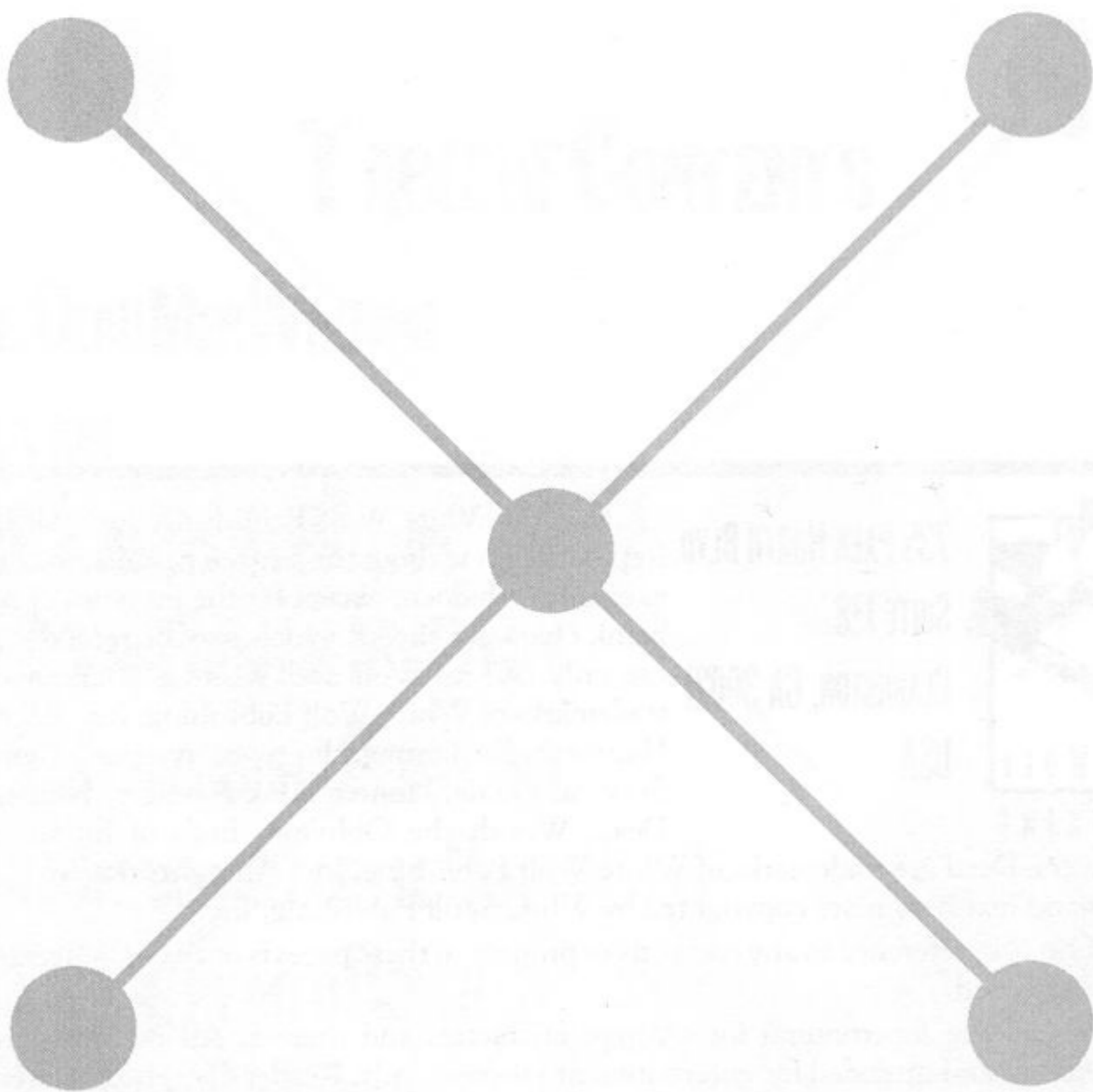


The Walking Dead™



An Enemy Book for Hunter: The Reckoning

The Walking Dead



By RICHARD E. DANKY, ED HALL, MICHAEL LEE AND ADAM TIMWORTH

CREDITS

Authors: Richard E. Dansky, Ed Hall, Michael Lee and Adam Tinworth

Foreign Language Translations: Kristine Bravo

Developer: Ken Cliffe

Editor: Ed Hall

Art Director: Richard Thomas

Layout and Typesetting: Pauline Benney

Interior Art: Mitch Byrd, Kyle Hotz, Jeff Rebner, Brad Rigley

Front Cover Art: Tommy Lee Edwards & Melissa Edwards

Front & Back Cover Design: Pauline Benney

Playtesters: Thérèse Gaughan, Matt Honeyball, Martyn Meeks and John Shockley



735 PARK NORTH BLVD.
SUITE 128
CLARKSTON, GA 30021
USA

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PRINTED IN THE USA.

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PROLOGUE

DEAD MEN WALKING

When the man climbed from the cab just a few minutes past six, John O'Malley knew things weren't going to go the way he hoped.

It had been snowing since early afternoon, and a sky the color of ashes squeezed the glow of the streetlights into fuzzy haloes and blurred the outlines of Chicago's skyscrapers. Men and women in overcoats and business suits hurried along the sidewalk in front of the Merchandise Mart. They hunched against the icy wind, eager to be home and out of the cold. The man from the cab was short and heavysset, and he carried an orange and blue shopping bag by which O'Malley was to recognize him. His thinning gray hair whipped into tangled wisps as he headed for the entrance to the mart. He wore an expensive wool overcoat, leather gloves and wingtip shoes. He might have resembled a typical executive except for the bleak expression on his face and the way he clutched at something small in his coat pocket.

The man expected to meet O'Malley in the mall, which was why the hunter waited outside, smoking a cigarette and sizing him up. He took no notice of O'Malley, or anyone else for that matter, his eyes downcast in what looked like dull grief. O'Malley shook

his head. Instinct told him this was all a mistake. The hell of it was, he didn't have much of a choice.

He took a long last drag on the cigarette and flicked it into the snow. As the man passed, O'Malley reached out and grabbed his arm. "Harry Winston?"

Winston jumped, startled from his pain. His eyes were bright with anger and fear. He half-turned, the bulge in his coat pocket straining against the fabric. His eyes widened as O'Malley's hand tightened on his arm. The hunter leaned in close until they were nearly nose to nose.

"Don't say a word, Harry," O'Malley hissed. "And let go of that gun before you hurt somebody."

Winston pulled his hand out of his pocket. O'Malley was average height, only about an inch taller than Winston, but he was broad-shouldered and strong, and he carried an air of casual authority that his faded jeans and worn leather jacket could not conceal. He might have been handsome once, but his blue eyes were now lifeless and cold.

The smaller man blinked nervously. "Are... are you Cop90?"

"My name's *John*. Let's just leave it at that," the hunter warned. "You told me you were bringing the laptop, Harry. Where is it?"

Winston took a deep breath and looked O'Malley in the eye. "It's somewhere safe. As soon as we've killed that... thing, you can have it."

For just a second, O'Malley wasn't sure what to do. Part of him wanted to laugh. Part of him wanted to drag the little idiot out of sight and start breaking fingers until he found out where the computer was. He glanced up at the sky, shaking his head in disbelief. "For Christ's sake, Harry! This isn't a fucking *movie*." The mart's automatic doors opened and a group of teenage girls hurried past. O'Malley lowered his voice to a whisper. "Your wife was hunting... someone and it got her killed. That's all we know. Did it ever occur to you that she might have left some notes about this on her laptop? Something that might just save our asses?"

"Of course it occurred to me," Winston said hollowly. The despair returned to his face, like blood welling up from a deep wound. "I looked through everything. There were just the files she copied from that email group, and a list of contact information. Nothing about the... *monster*." Winston pulled his arm free of O'Malley's grip. "The fact is, I don't think you'd be here if it wasn't for the laptop. You don't give a damn about my wife. You just don't want her files to wind up in the wrong hands!"

"That's not true," O'Malley said. It was, at least in part. O'Malley knew what it was like to lose loved ones, especially to the other side, but Winston's phone call early the previous morning had scared the shit out of him. He didn't have a clue as to how Winston's wife had gotten his phone number, or how long she'd had it. But with a phone number, it was very easy to get an address. There were things out there in the darkness that would be *very* interested to know where "Cop90" slept.

"All right, Harry. I won't lie to you. Your wife never should have made that list. It puts a lot of people's lives at risk. Her death *matters*, though. She was one of us. I'm going to find the thing that killed her, and it's going to pay. That's a promise."

Winston looked him in the eye. "It matters that much to you, even though you never knew her?"

"Absolutely," O'Malley replied.

"Well, John, she was my wife for fifteen years. I loved her more than life itself. Imagine how much it matters to *me*."

O'Malley gritted his teeth. Winston wasn't one of the chosen. He didn't have the fire inside. If anything, he'd be a liability if faced with one of the beasts. But O'Malley was again reminded what it was like to lose someone to *them*.

"Okay, Harry. You win." The hunter checked his watch. "It's six-twelve. Let's go have a look at the scene."

"Scene?" Winston asked.

"The scene of the murder, Harry. The place where your wife died."

* * *

The Loop was in the heart of downtown, several blocks walk from the Merchant Mart. O'Malley tried not to worry about the laptop and to focus on what he knew about the killing. There wasn't much.

"Harry, the police report said your wife died of a heart attack. What kind of physical shape was she in?"

Winston shrugged. "Debbie? She was pretty active. Walked in the mornings and evenings. Watched her weight. She started taking karate after... you know, the change."

"The change," O'Malley echoed. "How much did she tell you?"

"She told me a lot of things I didn't believe." A gust of wind came howling down the street and lashed them with icy needles of sleet. Winston didn't seem to notice. "I think she tried to keep it from me as long as she could, but then the nightmares started. Debbie would wake up screaming and then couldn't sleep the rest of the night. Some times I'd get home from work early and she'd be gone — shopping or drinking coffee with a friend, she'd say, but she always was a lousy liar. Then one morning she asked me for a divorce. I asked her if she was seeing someone else and she went into hysterics. That's when it all came out."

"You said you didn't believe the things she said. Why start now?"

Winston didn't answer at first, staring out into the snow. Finally, he sighed and said, "I'd rather believe a monster ruined my life than think it was some random act of nature. The monster, at least, I can try to hurt back."

O'Malley couldn't argue with that.

They reached the Loop as snow began to fall heavily. The hunter felt his pulse quicken. He started to take more notice of his surroundings, to look at everything and everyone with that intensity he'd developed. He turned to Winston as they hurried across the street and headed for the stairs leading to the train platform. "Listen. Odds are we won't find anything up here, but stick close to me, just in case. If something happens, you'll never see it coming. Just follow my lead — and keep your hand out of your pocket. Don't touch that gun unless I tell you to, understand?"

Winston nodded. They fell into step with a line of commuters and climbed the salt-scattered stairs.

The wind was worse up top. The platform was fairly crowded, and O'Malley wondered if the trains were

running on time in this weather. As the hunter moved among the commuters toward the back of the platform, he matched up what he'd read in the report with what he saw before him.

Winston walked beside him, studying the platform sadly. "Do we know where she died?"

The hunter nodded. "A little further ahead." They walked three-quarters of the platform's length and stopped near one of its thick metal supports. "Right here," O'Malley said. "A couple of the commuters saw her slumped against the pillar." He looked left and right along the platform, imagining the scene. She died in plain sight. No outcry. No struggle. No one noticed a thing. "One of the guys in the crowd started giving her CPR, and someone with a cell phone called the cops. The paramedics arrived about five minutes later but couldn't revive her."

Winston reached out and laid a hand on the support. "What a place to die," he said softly.

O'Malley shook his head. "There's no such thing as a good place to die, Harry." The hunter wasn't going to feel sorry for this man. He'd asked for this. "She died right around six-forty-five, seven o'clock — right about now. Look around. Look at all the people. Nobody could have killed her without *someone* noticing."

"Could she have been... I don't know, scared to death?" Winston asked.

"If you saw something so terrifying it gave you a heart attack, wouldn't you yell or make some noise?"

The smaller man folded his arms. "Then what kind of thing could just cause her heart to stop?"

O'Malley shook his head. "I don't know. I don't have any idea. That's what worries me."

He stepped away from the support, toward the back of the platform again, and scanned the area *carefully*. He tried to think of it like any other crime scene. There was always *something* the crooks left behind, some shred of evidence missed in the heat of the moment. But if it was there, O'Malley couldn't see it.

The paramedics hadn't reported any bruises on the victim, which ruled out a physical struggle. There were no signs of blood loss, which argued against a blood-sucker or a flicker, most likely, but what about a ghost? O'Malley looked closely at the crowd of commuters.

That's when he saw it.

Midway along the platform, it was just a pale shape amid a sea of red-cheeked faces and steamy breath. O'Malley started to move, paralleling the back of the platform and peering through gaps in the crowd. He caught the glimmer of a bleached face beneath a black felt hat. Moving a little closer, he could make out the

collar and shoulders of a dark wool overcoat. The hunter stepped past a couple of businessmen distracted with cell phones and saw the monster entire, standing like any other commuter waiting for the train. But there was no breath to mist the air around its face, and it held itself with an eerie, absolute stillness. Gray hair, almost white, was neatly trimmed at the nape of its neck, and the coat hung from its bony shoulders as if on a scarecrow.

O'Malley squinted, focusing. Even more details leaped out at him. There was bluish-black shade to its pale skin, and its hair was lank and dull. A rash of tiny white maggots' eggs clustered just inside its left ear.

A hand touched O'Malley's arm. He jumped and Winston recoiled in response. "Do you see something?" the smaller man asked.

The hunter threw him a hard look, but nodded. "It's a rot. Right there in front of us."

Winston peered into the crowd, a puzzled frown creasing his forehead. "A what? Where?"

"The man in the dark hat and coat. Pale skin, looks to be in his late forties to early fifties."

"Are you sure? He looks like my father." Winston turned uncertainly to the hunter.

"For Christ's sake, Harry, he's a fucking *zombie*! This is how they move among people — they can hide their real selves." O'Malley's mind raced. Zombies weren't smart. They weren't subtle. They couldn't just stop a person's heart. At least, not as far as he knew. "Shit," he cursed softly. "This thing may be our killer — or it may not be at all."

"How do we find out?"

"We take it somewhere, cut off its legs and torture it until it talks."

Winston's face turned ashen. He looked nervously at the monster. "You're not serious."

"Welcome to my world, Harry," O'Malley said darkly. "Just follow my lead and don't say anything."

O'Malley took a deep breath and tried to get it together. He did a quick check of his holster to make sure the pistol was ready to draw, then pulled out his badge and walked up to the monster before he lost his nerve.

"Excuse me, sir?"

The monster turned and looked at him. Its cheeks were sunken, skin stretched across knobby cheekbones, and its thin-lipped mouth was drawn into a perpetual disapproving frown. The creature had a salt-and-pepper mustache and a patrician nose, which gave it the air of a disapproving academic. Bits of dirt and dust rested in the wrinkles around its eyes and mouth. There was a strange, damp sheen to its face.

O'Malley flashed his badge. "I'm Detective Smith of the Homicide Division. We're taking statements from commuters regarding a death that occurred here last week. Could you come with us and answer a few questions? It shouldn't take too much of your time."

The zombie's dead eyes seemed to be staring right through him. O'Malley felt goosebumps race down his arms. Suddenly, the thin lips parted and it spoke in a hoarse rasping whisper, "*I just want to be left alone.*"

"Well, sir, I can, uh, certainly understand that. But this will just take a few minutes. It's a matter of *police business*—"

The zombie took a step forward and its blue-tinged lips pulled back in a snarl. "*Why can't you leave an old man in peace?*"

O'Malley's hand drifted back to his pistol just as the train arrived and the commuters surged forward. The monster turned away, moving with the crowd. O'Malley reached out and grabbed the zombie's wrist. Its skin was cold and clammy and shifted unnaturally under his grip. "Sir," he said, thinking quickly, "I can arrest you if I have to."

"*Let go of me!*" the creature rasped, trying to pull away. The zombie was strong, O'Malley realized quickly, but not nearly as strong as he had feared. He reached back with his left hand and was fumbling for the cuffs on his belt when Winston rushed forward and grabbed the zombie's other arm.

"Stop struggling and come along quietly," Winston yelled. "We know what you are!"

The zombie growled like a wounded beast. Instead of pulling away, it pushed and sent Winston stumbling into O'Malley. They went down in a tangle of limbs. The monster disappeared into the crowd aboard the train.

"*Shit!*" O'Malley exclaimed. He pushed Winston aside and struggled to his feet. "What the *fuck* did I tell you to do?"

Winston snatched his glasses off the platform and put them back on his face. "What was I supposed to do?"

"Just get on the train!" The hunter leaped for the doors as the last of the commuters squeezed inside. The two barely made it, earning angry stares from jostled passengers.

The doors hissed shut and the train started to move. The zombie was nowhere to be seen.

* * *

They had about five minutes until the next stop, O'Malley figured. They stood at the rear of the car. Winston pulled out a handkerchief and rubbed his hands. "What was on that thing's skin?" he asked quietly, smelling his fingers and grimacing. "Smells like paint thinner."

"Some kind of rancid cologne," O'Malley said absently, wiping his own hand on one pants leg. "They wear perfume sometimes to cover their smell."

"Why didn't he stop our hearts like he did Debbie's? We almost had him."

"Because he didn't know we were on to him until you opened your fucking mouth!" the hunter snapped. "Now you've tipped him off. From here on out, it's all or nothing. If he slips off the train we might never catch him."

"He seemed so normal," Winston said, staring at his hand. "But his skin... like a rotten fish.... Dear God, what's going on?"

"If you ever find the answer, be sure and tell me," the hunter said bitterly. "Come on. We've got to find him."

They weaved through the crowd, glancing at faces and searching for a glimpse of pallid flesh. At the end of the cabin, they peered carefully through the window of the connecting door, then crossed into the next car and continued the search.

The zombie was in the third car. Halfway to its connecting door, O'Malley could feel the pounding bass of someone's CD player ahead. The thudding rap had driven most commuters out of the car beyond, but the zombie sat, rubbing its hands and face with a handkerchief, directly across from the gangbangers who'd taken over the car. The monster stared at them with undisguised anger. The kids were too busy trying to talk over their own music to notice.

O'Malley took in the scene from his side of the door and paused, his hand on the handle. Winston stepped up beside him. "What's going on?"

"Bunch of punks looking to rob somebody," O'Malley replied. "That's why they've got the music so loud. Drives away witnesses and drowns out any shouts for help. There's our *friend*, sitting there, asking for trouble."

Just then, one of the kids met the monster's stare. He stood up and put his attitude on, throwing back his shoulders and stalking toward the pale figure. The gangbanger sneered while his boys egged him on. The kid pulled up his shirt to reveal the pistol stuck in his waistband. The monster simply stared up at him.

Winston glanced at the hunter. "Aren't we going to do something?"

"Yeah, we're going to watch and see what it does to these animals — and take notes. If they mess with him, they deserve what they get."

The kid was standing over the monster at this point and grabbed a handful of the zombie's lapel. It looked back coolly, unfazed. O'Malley could see the mix of uncertainty and bravado on the punk's face.

Just then, the train pulled into Roosevelt Station. The connecting door at the other end of the car opened and in stepped a tall, muscular transit cop, who fixed the gang members with a forbidding glare. The kid let go of

the zombie's coat and stared a challenge as the cop stepped up, but the officer grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and all but threw him out of the car. The rest followed suit. The cop stood in the doorway and watched the kids on the platform, while the zombie stared hotly at the man's back. The monster rose slowly and made its way forward toward the next car.

O'Malley shook his head. "Who says cops aren't around when you need one? Dammit! We could have learned something."

"You were going to let that creature kill those kids, weren't you?"

"Damn right," O'Malley replied. "Better them than me. Those little angels were street trash. Killers."

"And what the hell does that make you?" the widower said coldly.

"I'm a *hunter*, Harry," O'Malley growled. "I get to see the shit these fuckers hide from people like you. I get to see them do whatever they damn well please to innocent people simply because they *can*. I don't know why I got picked to live this goddamn nightmare. I don't know nearly enough about the bad guys to keep myself from getting fucked up. And I don't have anybody to call at the crack of dawn to come bail my ass out of trouble. The only thing I *do* know for sure is that every hunter I've ever met is either dead or insane. Sooner or later, my luck's going to run out, too. So fuck you, Harry. I'm not your knight in shining armor. I'm living on borrowed time. If I can't save everybody, I can at least *avenge* some of them. Like your wife."

Winston looked away. He leaned wearily against the side of the car. "Why do they come back?"

"I don't know," the hunter replied. "Unfinished business, I guess. I've heard lots of stories, lots of theories. Some people talk about Biblical shit, end of days and all that. I don't know anything about it. A lot of the zombies I've run across are just looking for the people who wronged them when they were alive."

"Are there a lot of them out there?"

"More than you care to know, Harry. Let's just take care of this one. Then you can go back to whatever life you've got left."

"Okay," Winston said, nodding to himself. He sighed wearily. "John?"

"Yeah?"

"You don't have to worry about the laptop. Debbie wasn't a fool. She left specific instructions about her computer... and what was on it. After I set up the meeting with you, I took it out back, poured gas on it and watched it burn."

The hunter leaned his head against the car door and managed a tired laugh. "You're a manipulative son of a bitch, Harry, but I could get to like you. It's a pity you aren't one of us."

Winston straightened. "Who says I'm not? I'm here, aren't I? Let's get this thing over with. Then maybe I'll help you go looking for another one."

* * *

The train rolled on as the pair watched the creature from the door of the adjoining car. They stopped at station after station. The crowd thinned, but the zombie remained, sitting statue-like, its hands in its lap. Until it moved on or the crowd dried up completely, there was little they could do.

"We're almost to Cottage Grove," O'Malley said, breaking their silence. "End of the line. It'll either get off here or ride back downtown. Depends on whether it's waiting for someone specific or just trolling for victims."

"And if it gets off the train?" Winston asked.

"We follow it. The first chance we get, we take it out."

"How—"

That was when the door opened and the zombie stepped purposefully between them.

"*Shit!*" O'Malley cursed as he stumbled backward. Winston fell and hit the edge of a seat as his right hand groped for his coat pocket. He wrestled his pistol out and one of the commuters screamed.

The zombie turned on the widower. O'Malley cursed again. The monster had forced their hand by waiting for a moment when they let down their guard. Now it was using the crowd against them. The hunter pulled his own pistol and yelled, "Freeze!"

Winston saw its expression change from anger to veiled surprise as it found itself rooted to the spot where it stood.

The other passengers stampeded for the far end of the car and fought to slip through the connecting door. Winston crawled clear of the monster, his expression almost as bewildered as the zombie's.

O'Malley didn't need to see the zombie's face to know what it was going through. "Surprise, asshole," he said. "I've got some tricks of my own."

However, behind his wolfish grin, the hunter's mind raced, guessing at the minutes left until the train reached Cottage Grove. They would have to kill it and jump the train immediately before anyone arrived to investigate.

"*I told you to leave me alone!*" the zombie said, its face twisting with rage. "*Why can't you hooligans give me any peace? If I were still a strong man, I'd give you the beating of your life! What kind of a world is this where an old man can't ride the train without being harassed?*"

"Shut up, you freak!" O'Malley shouted. "We're not the ones murdering people. Did it make you feel like a tough guy, killing that woman last week?" He stole a glance out the window. They were almost at 53rd Street.

"The little tramp got what she deserved!" the creature snarled. "Hounding me. Watching me! The bitch grabbed me by the neck and stuck a knife in my back! But I didn't kill her. She killed herself."

"You fuckers sure are fond of cryptic bullshit," the hunter said. Outside, he could see the train enter the station. "I know you can give people heart attacks. But I'm betting you have to touch them to do it or you'd have dropped that punk in his tracks from across the car. I'm not giving you the chance."

The zombie looked at them and laughed, a cruel, rasping sound. "You're already dead men. You died back at the Loop." It smiled. "When I was young, I killed vermin like you with a stick. Now that I'm older, I prefer to use poison." He pulled his handkerchief from a pocket and rubbed his face and hands with it, leaving a damp sheen.

Winston gave a shriek of pure terror. Just then, the connecting door opened and the transit cop rushed in, pistol drawn. The zombie reached out and pulled the emergency stop, just within its arm's reach.

The brakes screamed and everyone pitched forward. O'Malley's face hit a metal post, and he felt his nose crack. There was no pain, only an overwhelming wave of panic. His stare had been broken!

The zombie scrambled for the opening doors. Winston screamed again and fired, the gunshots deafening in the enclosed space. The hunter saw bullets punch cleanly through the monster's chest and leg to bury themselves deep in the wall of the car. The zombie disappeared across the platform. Winston staggered to his feet, firing after it. One shot, two, three — then the widower's body shook as the transit cop fired from the floor and blew eight ragged holes in his leg, chest and head. The cop's gun jammed as Winston's lifeless body collapsed.

O'Malley raced from the car, his eyes searching the terrified crowd. He caught a glimpse of a dark felt hat disappearing down the platform stairs, and he ran after it, his gun ready.

What the zombie lacked in strength, it made up for in speed. It was nearly at the bottom of the stairs by the time he'd reached the landing. He fired a shot at the figure and saw it stagger, but it ran on, unchecked.



He raced down the icy stairs. The November wind clawed at him, but he didn't feel its touch. His skin felt hot and his breath came in short ragged gasps. O'Malley kept running. There was nothing else he could do.

People's faces flashed by. He only dimly heard their screams. Ahead, the zombie crashed into a man and a woman, sending them sprawling. He took a shot at it that sparked off a light pole. Someone crashed into him — a man, shouting, scrambling for the pistol. He smashed the man in the teeth with the gun butt, broke free and charged on.

He felt the first stab of pain in his heart. He felt as if he couldn't get enough air. The zombie had nearly reached the corner. No one was in the way.

O'Malley stopped and took a two-handed grip on the gun. There was a roaring in his ears. He held his breath and squeezed off a shot. The monster lurched to one side and clutched at its shattered knee.

It wasn't enough. The pain was like a hot spike, jabbing into O'Malley's chest. "Not yet," the hunter gasped. "Please...." He tried to run but felt as if a hand

of fire clenched around his lungs. Ahead, the monster lurched into an alley, out of the line of fire.

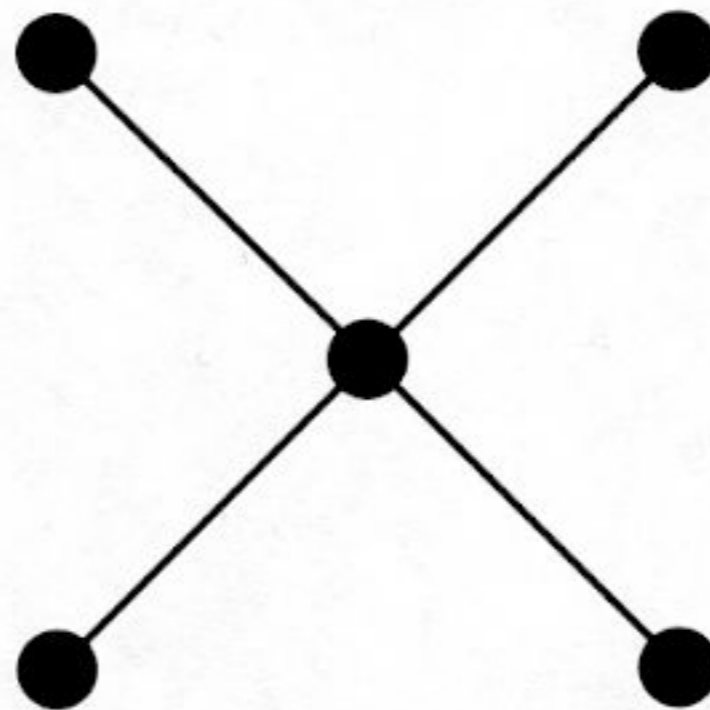
Each step was an act of will. O'Malley was nearly deaf from the sound in his own head, and his lungs never seemed to fill no matter how hard he breathed. Darkness gathered at the corners of his vision. He focused on the alley mouth and forced his legs to work. He reached the alley with the last of his strength. There was no pain anymore. No sound. The light was fading. At the end of the tunnel, he saw a pale face wreathed in shadow. The pistol was more than he could lift. He fired and the thing jerked, but its eyes never left his.

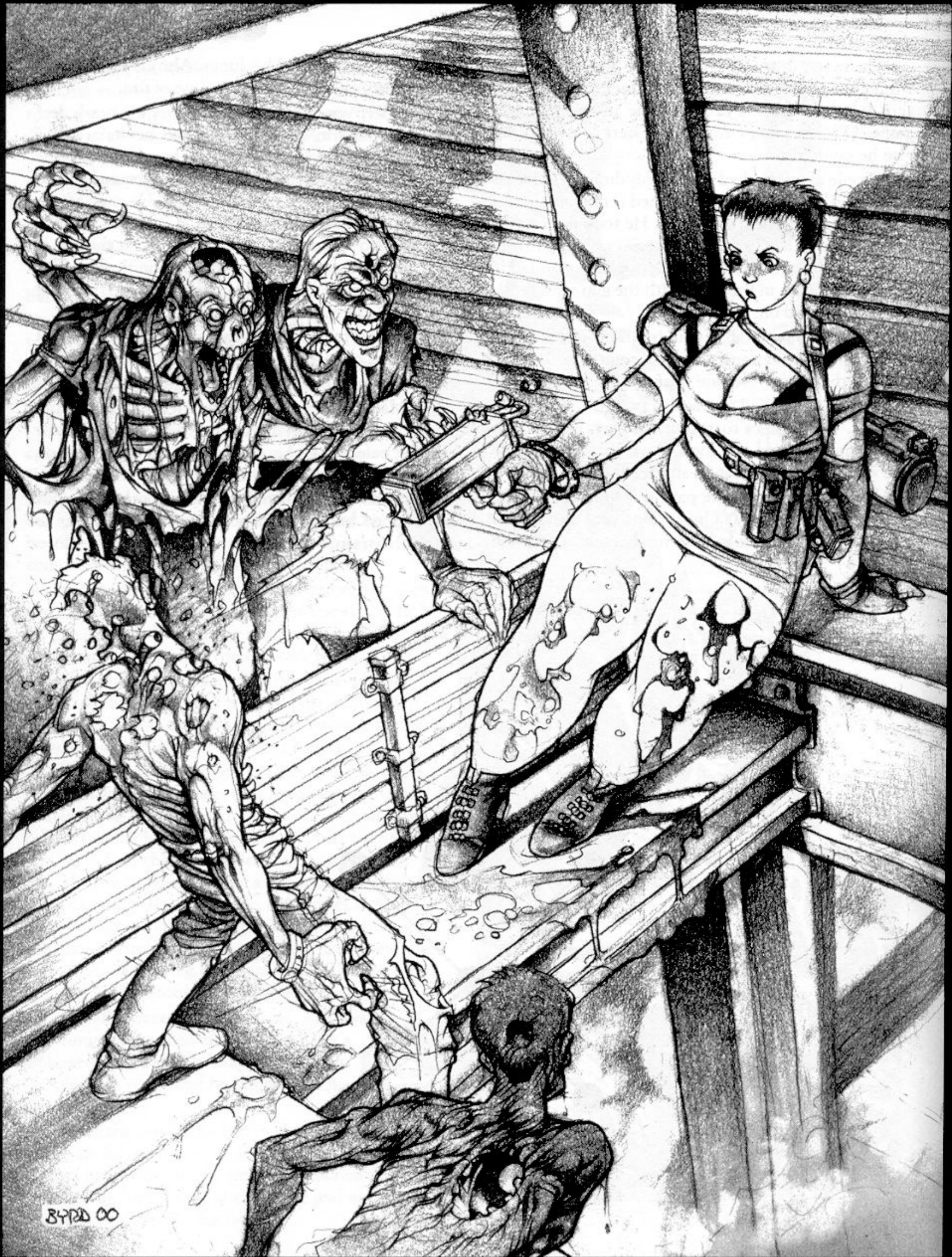
O'Malley took another step. Fired wildly. The dead eyes looked on, waiting, patiently waiting.

The hunter fired again as his legs gave way.

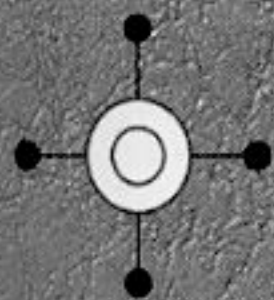
O'Malley lay in the muck and felt his heart seize. The darkness rolled in like a tide. The last thing he saw was that pale face looking down into his, its expression cold and uncaring.

The monster adjusted its hat, smoothed its coat and limped back onto the streets of the living to catch the train.

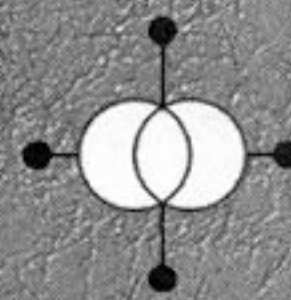




BYRD 00



Welcome to Hunter-Net



Here we are again. And God bless we're still here.

Recent terrifying, amazing and baffling developments on the hunter list compel me to attach another archive site to the main one, much as I did at <http://www.hunter-net.org/huntersurvivalguide/> after hunter-net came back online. The survival guide went up as instruction and advice from our own to our own about our condition worldwide. This page goes up for similar yet very drastically different reasons.

Hunter.list was recently compromised *again* by the very things we contend with. Despite all my efforts and the "advice" I seem to receive in shoring up defenses here, some of them got through. Specifically, two entities found their way to (or more appropriately were "introduced to") the list. If you were online during their presence, you know what I'm talking about. If you weren't, this page is for you above all others.

You might think that such a security breach is the ultimate sign that we cannot perform our duties or carry out our mission online. That we're just too vulnerable here, and staying online will cost us all in the end. I don't think that's the case. I mentioned receiving "advice" on maintaining hunter-net. I think it comes from our mutual *friends*. For me, it's inexplicable and sometimes incomprehensible visions or daydreams about how to make this site impregnable to our counterparts. Sometimes I don't even understand what I'm doing myself. I just try it and it seems to work — or it did till recently.

The reason I believe this site and its related ones are still secure derives from the way in which our intruders seemed to emerge. I won't give you any preconceived notions. You can make your own call after reading their text. But I believe the "hackers" were actually *ushered* here and were *allowed* in. I don't want to be my usual metaphysical self, because that would just create confusion. However, consider that this site might still be solid and our informants were brought here to teach us something. After that, they were closed out again.

Like I said, this page has been created for all who weren't online when the dialogue with our intruders occurred. I have edited together all related posts as best I could, to encapsulate everything that was exchanged and revealed, and to share what other list members appear to have done in response to our "informants'" unsolicited contributions.

The bottom line is, we may now have much greater insight into what seem to be our chief opponents — the walking dead. Even more importantly, we might have more insight than ever before into *ourselves* — who we are, what we've become and why we were made this way. Of course, everything the intruders posted must be taken with extreme caution. If they truly were what they claimed, we have no more reason to trust them than we would any menacing creature in a dark alley or damp cellar. And yet, we have so little to go on toward understanding the beings we face and comprehending ourselves that we're desperate for information, even such as this. We're like starving soldiers offered food by our enemy. Though we know it might be poison, we can't resist the urge to eat.

INTRODUCTION

They gather themselves together against the soul of the righteous, and condemn the innocent blood.

— Psalms 94:21

Hunter: The Walking Dead serves three purposes for **Hunter: The Reckoning**. First, it's meant as an in-character resource for players and characters to witness the online imbued experience. The communication and conflict that occur among hunters online is revealed, helping you depict the same interaction in your games, with the same sharing of helpful insight or the same distracting, counterproductive flame wars. The Internet can be hunters' greatest tool when used properly to relay accurate information, or their greatest weakness when abused for conducting character assassinations and spreading misinformation. All of these things occur here.

The threat of monster intrusion made manifest is also depicted, helping players understand how the enemy might play its hand online, rather than just lurking and picking out the weak members of the herd.

Second, **Walking Dead** answers many of the questions that plague players and the imbued, both about hunters' primary opponents and about hunters themselves. Possible truths of ghost and zombie origins and the purpose of the imbued are revealed. Yet, the fact that these "disclosures" are made by the very things hunters fight makes them extremely dubious — as are 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.

Of course, Storytellers can also find all kinds of story ideas throughout the email exchanges. Tips offered by the Other Side might indeed lead to weak or raging enemies that need to be dealt with, or to self-discovery. Or, supernatural informants might lead the imbued into traps as the intruders further their own agendas at the expense of the chosen. You decide.

Third, this book devotes an entire chapter to the **Hunter** Storyteller. Players should not read this section at all, unless you just *have* to know things that your characters can't, and you want to shatter the ignorance that makes

your hunter fun to play. Storytellers, suffice to say that this chapter offers everything you need to understand how the walking dead exist and function, and how the imbued truly interrelate with them. You even get a few more tricks to throw at players who've sneaked peaks at the other chapters or books that they shouldn't have read.

The best part is, players familiar with **Wraith: The Oblivion** and the conditions of the Underworld established in that game are in for some surprises. Things are not as they were, and you as Storyteller get to reveal the truth of the World of Darkness and **Hunter** in general at your own pace. Characters can be gradually exposed to the reality of things through puzzling glimmers, or they can be exposed fully and forced to contend with it all, assuming they remain sane.

All in all, this book is *the* source on ghosts, spirits and zombies in **Hunter: The Reckoning**.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Hunter: The Walking Dead is divided into seven chapters. All but the last are for everyone's eyes, and they help make the Internet real as a tool of the hunt.

Chapter 1: The Enemy Within introduces the self-dubbed creature Ichmail and begins his dialogue with the online hunter community, with details on something called the "Orphic Circle."

Chapter 2: The Enemy of my Enemy details the emergence of "Carpenter169" on the list and indicates how monsters might hide in plain sight on the faceless Internet.

Chapter 3: Stranger in a Dead Land compiles the field reports of Shaka74 as he investigates Haiti's restless-dead menace.

Chapter 4: Speaking Ill of the Dead illustrates just how much the imbued have to learn about the walking dead, even when intelligence comes from the enemy itself.

Chapter 5: Descent into Death presents Oracle171's messages describing her unearthly exploration of Ichmail's Orphic Circle. What do her discoveries mean for the imbued as a whole?

Chapter 6: Ties to the Dead speculates on the bond that connects hunters, the dead and all of the living.

Chapter 7: Rules & Storytelling is full of mechanics and background information on the restless dead, their strengths, limitations, motives and fears.

SOURCE MATERIALS

There's a lot of stuff available about heroic people who deal with the unquiet dead (usually in a manner that proves fatal to some or all participants). We've tried to avoid silly or over-the-top sources in compiling this list. **Hunter** is about regular folks faced with monsters. They're scared, yet they do something anyway. We've tried to pick out movies and books that emphasize that very real resolve and bravery — **Hunter's** theme.

MOVIES

Everyone knows George Romero's seminal zombie flicks and their bastard children, *Return of the Living Dead* and the *Evil Dead* series. There's more to hunting the walking dead than splattering zombies, however.

- *Cemetery Man* — A hysterical and sometimes touching Italian import about a naïf who takes a job at a cemetery where the dead refuse to stay in their graves. He makes hacking zombies to bits all in a night's work. But when his girlfriend joins the re-animated parade, things get interesting. It's a perfect display of the ability of everyday people to persevere in the face of the supernatural.

- *Dead Alive* — Another film wherein the walking (or more accurately, shambling) dead intrude on the living. *Dead Alive* is a bit of a gore-fest and wears its low-budget credentials on its sleeve, but it is shockingly effective at points. It's directed by Peter Jackson, who also did...

- *The Frighteners* — ... which is well worth seeing for its portrait of a man who can see the supernatural all around him. Critics didn't quite know what to make of the blend of humor and horror, but it's a good reference for this game.

- *The Serpent and the Rainbow* — A real rarity, a film inspired by a work of non-fiction. The book is an excellent resource on voodoo, while the movie hosts some truly disturbing images. If you can, find the superb soundtrack by Brad Fiedel — it's extremely scarce, but also one of the spookiest film soundtracks ever recorded.

- *The Sixth Sense* — Although the protagonist is not necessarily a hunter per se, he certainly has the sense of the unreal invading the real that's so important. The scene in the school, in front of the stairwell, is particularly potent.

- *Fallen* — Excellent and overlooked. Watch as the supernatural enemy slowly turns everything and everyone against the man hunting it.

Also worthwhile are: *The Believers*, *Predator 2* (for that feeling of fighting a monster that can make itself invisible and soak up as many bullets as you can fire at it), *Fright Night*, *Demon Knight*, *Split Second*, any of the *Mr. Vampire* films and *The Hidden*.

TELEVISION

Believe it or not, there were monster-hunters on TV long before Mulder and Scully. Old shows such as *Kolchak*,

The Night Stalker and *Shadow Chasers* can be difficult to obtain. But thanks to cable and home video, recent series can usually be accessed easily. Some of the best include:

- *Poltergeist: The Legacy* — The show has absolutely nothing to do with the original movie, instead concerning itself with monster-hunting and long intricate plotlines. While some stories are clichéd, others are genuinely disturbing, and the hunters are far from invincible.

- *Friday the 13th: The Series* — Again, nothing to do with the films. Instead, a band of low-grade hunters seeks out cursed items and deals with the havoc they wreak.

- *Millennium* — Yes, it's depressing, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. *Millennium* focuses on Frank Black, a former FBI agent who can sometimes see what murder victims — or their killers — saw. Frank works with a mysterious organization called The Millennium Group, which contacts him mostly by email. He hunts down human monsters when he isn't being dragged into something deeper. Frank is an excellent example of the lone hunter who keeps his real agenda secret from the people around him.

- *Brimstone* — The protagonist may have been dead, but this short-lived drama was all about hunting monsters. In this case, the targets were damned souls escaped from Hell, which is as close to walking dead as one is likely to get.

LITERATURE

At the turn of the 19th century, the hunter figure — in the form of the so-called "psychic detective" — was a popular character. In more recent times, hunters have become grittier and less genteel, but they still have a literary heritage that goes back a long way.

- *The Complete John Silence Stories*, by Algernon Blackwood — Silence was one of the first occult detectives, and one of the best. Also check out the Dr. Hesselius stories by J. S. Le Fanu, which are in a similar vein.

- *Carrion Comfort* and *Children of the Night*, by Dan Simmons — A pair of chilling novels about ordinary people on the trail of — and on the run from — vampires of various sorts. Both books balance scientific skepticism with the need to get the monsters. *Summer of Night*, which features children as protagonists, is also worth a look, though the enemies are less identifiably walking dead.

- *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, by H. P. Lovecraft — A lone researcher, whom everyone thinks is mad, going against a cleverly disguised power from beyond the grave? Perfect! (It was also made into a fairly good film called *The Resurrected*.)

- *Mindhunter*, by John Douglas and Mark Olshaker — The book is nonfiction, and readers can take or leave Douglas' stance on rehabilitation and punishment, but the material is riveting. Douglas helped build the FBI's forensic psychology unit from the ground up, and the book is a true-life story of a man going after (human) monsters.

- "The Last Illusion," by Clive Barker — While the film adaptation, *Lord of Illusions* (especially the director's cut), has its moments, the story is infinitely better and much more chilling. Harry D'Amour is very much a hunter figure. It's just that, in this case, the things he's hunting don't necessarily have names.



CHAPTER I:

THE ENEMY WITHIN

When the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord shall lift up a standard against him.

— Isaiah 59:19

“THE MESSAGE BEGINS”

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: sender unidentified

Subject: URGENT

IF YOU WERE IN FACE-TO-FACE CONTACT DURING THE LAST 5 WEEKS WITH LIST USER ALLEYMAN222, WALK AWAY FROM ANY STATIONARY COMPUTER NOW! AND KEEP MOVING! YOU ARE IN DANGER OF CAPTURE BY AGENTS OF THE US GOVT! NO BULLSHIT, LEAVE NOW!

Subject: security breach

From: witness1

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

As usual, I'm making every effort to reduce intrusions onto the list to zero. As usual, that's an ideal. Regardless, an anonymous message like that one suggests a roll call is in order, so sound off at your earliest opportunity.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: sender unidentified

Subject: my warning

Yesterday I sent the message subject-lined “URGENT.” I realize no one here has any reason to trust me, but the fact is that I have only the welfare of the imbued at heart. I work for a division of the government that knows about some of the creatures the imbued combat and is trying to fight in its own way.

But I also know these people have no idea what they're up against.

On the plus side, and to my surprise, my part of the bureaucracy seems to be unaware of this list. I conceal my identity as much to protect it and all of you as to protect myself. On the minus side, imbued activity concerns these people and is misunderstood by them. What little they know makes them lump all of you together with the enemy.

Again, I realize how suspicious this post must look. Rest assured, I'm in this right alongside you in the fight

for freedom. I do what I can to keep the two groups apart, but there are limits. The best I can offer is what you ought to know already: Fight the good fight and keep your heads down. The Feds are watching.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: mojo20

Subject: good to know i'm not alone

I work for the intelignents establishmnt too! Maybe now some of you will nbeleve me about the cia expirimints on college student. They put stuff in lsd way back in the 60s and some of those kids they died and now theyre coming back as zombies! aNd the ones that lived those were our parents. Now the truth can finall be revealed!

THE PRODIGAL RETURNS

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: sender unidentified

Subject: Greetings

Call me Ichmail.

Having thrilled to all your many exploits for as long as prudence allows, I feel that now is a good time to introduce myself. Of course, the name is not my given one, but because no one else here shares that information, I shall do as the Romans do.

While I was alive, I was a monster. No word better describes me in the warmth of my youth. I spent my formative years in the company of monsters and came to be celebrated by them. And by that time, I had already suffered torments sufficient to destroy in me anything resembling compassion or mercy. It's no wonder that I matured doing the awful things I did. All of which I tell you not to engage your pity or to seek your forgiveness, for those things don't interest me (well, maybe just a little), but merely to establish my credentials. And to lend you some perspective on me. After all, now that I'm dead, I'm a much better person.

Advice is cheap. Advice is words, nothing more, and people (yes, I consider myself a person, albeit a dietetically challenged one) deploy words to get what they want. One of our other Mysterious Lurkers tells you to "fight the good fight" alongside the federal government, but not to be surprised if the thanks you receive is a bullet in the brain. I do not know how much of what he says may be true. Regardless, be certain that whatever advice he offers and whatever truths he unveils come attached to some agenda. Be wary of advice.

All of which is a preamble to my own offerings and unveilings. The short explanation of my agenda is self-preservation. Mysterious Federal Lurker (MFL, which might also stand for Mother-Fucking Liar) understates the case: It is not abstract freedom, The American Way

of Life, or anything else so picayune that is threatened now. What teeters on the brink is the world as we know it, something many of you here already understand. I know better than most, including all of you, I daresay.

After I died, I went to Hell. Or perhaps, hell. Or maybe just a hell. Whichever was the case, it was even more unpleasant than I had imagined it might be — and when it came to torture, pain and similar sorts of unpleasantry, I assure you that I had *quite* an imagination. Let me put things in perspective for you. Many who post to this list casually use the term "demon" to label the creatures that you combat. I assure you, *none of you has ever seen a true demon*. Such creatures do not walk the Earth. I do not believe the Earth could withstand their touch. How my own soul survived even mere proximity to such creatures remains a mystery to me. Yet I endured being among them for what felt like eternities. *Eternities*. I escaped their clutches, their obscene torments, cruel beyond any reckoning, and found that I had shared their company for *mere weeks!*

The monsters, human and otherwise, whose company I kept in my living days, seek the merger of the living world and the underworld. They mean literally to bring Hell to Earth, and they delude themselves into thinking that demons will allow them some power in the smoldering ruin that would result. As if demons might be capable of gratitude or mutuality!

Sitting in the clean and well-lit cybercafe where I compose to you this *billet-doux* and admire the delicious-looking creatures who wander in and out, I know with a certainty I cannot communicate that I am now as close to Hell as I ever wish to be again. It may be that I am immortal and the prospect of confronting Hell's true denizens again, even for a second, fills me with dread. The notion that I might have no means of escape from them for all eternity, were they to join us in this world, is nearly unthinkable.

So let me take you by the collective hand and guide you all to an understanding of the menace that is the Orphic Circle.

Right after a snack.

THE BETRAYAL

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: sender unidentified

Subject: The enemies of rational beings everywhere

Ichmail here. My change of scenery after mealtime should, I hope, inspire me to brevity... but don't count on it.

In brief, the Orphic Circle is a cabal of mystics, both living and dead (and somewhere in between, like me), who devote themselves to worldly power and, ideally, immortality through worship of the underworld's darkest forces. Depending on whose history of the Circle you choose to

believe, it was founded by a v_mp_r_ (God45 may be eccentric, but he's correct in his insight that some words should *never* be used casually). Or by some jaded Greeks who'd drunk all the wine in the world and decided that personal advancement through human sacrifice should be the next big thing. Or by some emissary from the Other Side in the service of the dark forces I already mentioned.

I don't know what the truth is because I wasn't around. I exited the mortal stage less than half a decade ago. Recent events lead me toward Door Number Three, however, as there can be no question that during my years in the Circle there was an abundance of inexplicable meddling by creatures' whose abilities reached beyond anything I have encountered elsewhere. Reading over what I've just written, though, it occurs to me that choices one through three could all be true simultaneously.

By the way, you won't find a history of the Orphic Circle at your neighborhood lending library. The Circle has existed as long as it has (more than a thousand years) because of its *near* obsession with secrecy. For example, during my tenure, I served on the cabal's membership council. We vetoed most candidates and extended offers to persons we hoped might join. We also killed anyone who declined membership. Once a person joined, the Orphic priests (and priestesses, best not to short-shrift the priestesses) worked a ritual binding on the new member that compelled the individual to report any betrayal of the Circle to the Ebon Bench, the ruling body. Said traitor was then turned over to my indelicate care for interrogation. In the two such instances that transpired while I was the Orphic Inquisitor, I was always *most* persuasive.

Of course, you're wondering how it is that I'm able to relate all this information to you now. Again, I don't know for sure, but I suspect it has to do with my untimely demise. I survived dying, obviously, but it seems the binding did not. You might wonder, too, as I did, why other non-living entities in the Circle did not commit this sort of backstabbery sooner. My conclusion is that such creatures were already in their postmortem state when they were bound.

Alas, feeding time beckons again, which means that it's time for a drink. More after this break.

DEAF EARS

Subject: Get to the point

From: doctor119

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Or better yet, Ichmail, tell us where you are so we can get the point to you. I'm sure you catch my meaning, just as I catch yours in these casual references to dining. It's clear to me that you're wandering away from your keyboard to do what your kind does: drink blood, like the parasite you are. And you smirk at us before and after. Don't believe that you can go unpunished for your

crimes. You admit to torture and murder without any hesitancy. You admit to being an escapee of some netherworld. And you hint at treating human beings as fodder! If what you've written here is true, sending you back where you belong would be our obligation.

Witness, how much more of this unconscionable trespassing must we endure?

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: cabbie22

Subject: Re: Get to the point

Why are you getting worked up by this asshole? If you're right, whoever he is, he'll either go away eventually or one of us will send him away permanently. Meanwhile, *monsters are killing people in our own neighborhoods*. That's where each of us needs to fight this war, and that's where we'll win it.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: potter116

Subject: Re: Get to the point

I don't know about the rest of you, but it's not often that I encounter misguided who talk freely about themselves or their kind. If Ichmail is on the level, we need to hear him out. That's the only way to tell whether he's blowing smoke or not.

Ichmail, if you're really what you claim to be, tell us something useful. *Immediately* useful.

THE SORROWS OF HELL

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: sender unidentified

Subject: Re: Get to the point

Ichmail here.

Doctor119 is correct, as are Potter and Cabbie. I consume human blood for sustenance. When I am done sharing information with you, I shall go away to consume more. Unless you read what I write, you cannot know how much credence to give my messages. No doubt, some of you are disturbed to receive notes on the enemy *from* the enemy. Too bad. Take my gifts and do with them as you will.

If it makes you feel better, be aware that I do not strip my victims of life. To do so is wasteful and impractical, and the consequences can be grave. I never take more than what one of you might donate to save the life of another. I have seen v_mp_r_s do otherwise, both while I was potentially part of the menu and since I changed nutritional requirements. I have discouraged such behavior in my fellows, primarily for reasons of, yes, self-preservation. Lately, not only do the living avenge the dead, the dead do a good job of it themselves.

If you require something practical to help secure my credentials, know this: Pounding a stake into the heart



of a v_mp_r_ doesn't kill it, but does paralyze it. Field-test this information as you please.

Before I return to the topic of greatest importance to the future (and making sure it becomes the present), I must also observe that I have never seen one v_mp_r_ change a living person into another v_mp_r_. The belief in this transformation's possibility lingers, even among the unliving of my acquaintance. I have not seen this act performed, although I have seen it tried. It may be that all v_mp_r_s are, as I am, the lucky damned who escaped the most excruciating bondage, only to discover a different sort of damnation among the living: *The fruit of the earth and the flesh of beasts offer me no nourishment now.* Just as stones are not edible by any of you. Yet, unlike the carnivores among you, I need not kill the creatures that sustain me. And I do not.

Now we can proceed with what you should all know about the Orphic Circle.

Secrecy, as I stated already, is more valued by the sect than gold. Thus, few mortal members understand that some of their fellow Orphics are... different. I came to that realization only gradually myself. The ones who appeared between sundown and dawn. The ones who never appeared at all, whose presence was signified by an empty chair. The ones who spoke through various "representatives" when they had something to say. It all came together for me at last. In those days, I was as most of you are now: certain of little, but suspicious of everything. I had advantages you lack, though. At my disposal was one of the world's great occult libraries, and I found myself in regular proximity to creatures I'd read about or seen some allusion to in this or that text.

All of which, I'm sure, holds limited interest for most of you, so let me serve up — with a cautionary note — what the more eager among you want: Here you'll find a map showing the location of the Orphic headquarters in Thessaly and a rough floor plan of the mansion. I do not know whether you'll find anyone on the premises, but I suspect a visit might prove worthwhile even so. In case anyone is there, *I recommend that you take time to read what I write here before you stop by. If you hope to come back alive, that is.*

Three hundred beings make up the Orphic Circle. Your much-discussed "sight" will no doubt be helpful in separating mortal members from those who are v_mp_r_s or other aftermaths of life. Be assured, though, that every member is potentially deadly. Never turn your back on any of them, and be especially wary of the following:

Caspar Bratovitch — In the years I knew him, he changed extraordinarily little in appearance. He did change, however, and he went about freely in daylight, so he is no v_mp_r_. Whatever he is (which certainly is not the pre-adolescent bumpkin he seems), Caspar is

incredibly intelligent, strong and fast. Barehanded, he can pluck out your still-beating heart, and then he's likely to take his time sucking the marrow from your bones. I am not being metaphorical. He is security chief for the Circle. He keeps an apartment along the main corridor, just past the mansion's entrance.

Antonio _____? — Definitely a *v_mp_r_* and something stranger besides. Old Antonio's tenure predated mine, which is one reason I never knew his last name. He also had what seemed to be two of his kinsmen as his sometime-allies in the Circle (all manner of political skulduggery goes on within the cabal; having partisans of one's own is essential). I never knew their names at all, but the resemblance among them was striking. Once, while exploring the mansion's secret passageways, I was able to eavesdrop on this trio as they argued among themselves in hushed Italian. If I understood them correctly (my strengths are in written Italian and Latin, but not the spoken form of either), their "family's goals" and those of the Circle "coincided." Nevertheless, Antonio's hope was that "we" could "bring down the curtain ourselves" in order to get "first choice of souls." Whether by "we" he meant "*la famiglia*" — that is, members of their extended clan not present for the chat — or only the three who *were* present, or the Circle itself, I could not determine. The tension between them seemed to be about whom exactly they were betraying. I wish I could share their family name with you, but I never knew Antonio by any other appellation.

Ada Pavon — Far deadlier than the males, this Caribbean woman may be Public Enemy Number 1. She is what devotees of *voudon* call a "horse," and the being that rides her may be one of the true demons I mentioned earlier. Whatever her dark companion is, it possesses terrifying abilities of transformation. If it is a demon, it has no semblance of morality whatsoever.

Jane Profitt — (a.k.a. Susan Sarvarian, a.k.a. Suzy Billions) Mortal, as far as I know, and rich beyond my knowing. Little Suzy made her money alongside (also beneath and atop, no doubt) an arms dealer, now deceased, named Alfredo Carcassione. She is Pavon's closest ally.

The aforementioned may be problems — or not. You may discover they've all been replaced by new members in the Circle — or not. It may be that the Circle is extinct as an entity, but I cannot be sure. You possess the abilities, the numbers and the geographical breadth to resolve at least some of these uncertainties.

Here is what I know for sure.

Late last summer, sometime after my return to the mortal plain, I made my way to Thessaly. My intention was to thwart the Circle's goals in any way I was able. As

I said, the unification of the living and dead worlds do not coincide with my — or your — continued health.

Knowing what I did about security measures at the estate, I observed the place under cover of darkness for several nights. I had settled upon a way to enter when explosions wracked the west wing. They began to spread and grew ever more frequent. Hopelessness swept over me as I became immediately convinced that I had waited too long. I felt a wave of... chill, for want of a better term, strike me. Then, things began to rise into view above the mansion. First came two helicopters, both of which raced away, one east, one west. Next came what I thought were bats spiraling into the night — not an unreasonable conclusion, since the mansion stands above an extensive cave system.

But reason, I quickly realized, had no place there that night.

What erupted from the Orphics' hideaway and filled the sky above it *were the dead*. Evil spirits. What Caspar Bratovitch used to call "malcontents." Beings whose sole existence is dedicated to misery, pain and the end of all living creatures. Because the mansion had always been magically protected from incursions by such entities, I knew something dire had occurred within. I also knew I had to flee, as some of those spirits might have known (or even been made by) me in my previous existence. Even then, I knew that spirits' memories are nothing if not long.

Obviously, I escaped that night. But something has been different ever since, and avoiding the ultimate effects of that (apparently global) alteration may be impossible. Later that very week I began to encounter the crumbling revenants you discuss here regularly, creatures that were unknown to me prior to that terrifying event at Taenarus. The dead walking the earth *en masse* strikes me as a sign that the worlds of the living and the unliving have indeed been brought closer together. Understand, though, that battling the results of the merger is superficial treatment for the underlying illness.

Because the Orphics aren't done.

Yes, what happened to their home base suggests that they were hoist on their own petard. But there remains the nagging detail of those two helicopters. Any survivors of Taenarus' destruction are sure to continue in the Orphic tradition. Of course, those vehicles might have held outsiders responsible for the destruction that I saw.

But if not...

All of you, of course, are going to do as you will. Just bear in mind that, as bad as things are now, ignoring my warning could let them become a thousand times worse.

Good hunting.

RIPPLES

Subject: roll call redux

From: witness1

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

In the weeks since the last roll call was announced, I've heard from all active members except the following:

God45

Pilot56

Shaka74

Oracle171

Alleyman222

Any information concerning these individuals, good or bad, would be appreciated.

Subject: traitor56

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: alleyman222

traitor56, better known to most of you as pilot, is alive and well. but not for long.

peleus

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: pilot56

Subject: the truth

I sent the anonymous warning to hunters who'd been in contact with Alleyman222. I am one of the imbued. I *do* work for part of the government that monitors electronic transmissions of all kinds. If you know what that means, you understand why I don't want to post its "call letters" here. Doing so might raise a red flag in their data sieves. Somehow, as I said before, the government, or the part I work for anyway, seems to be unaware of this domain. And that's how I hope to keep it. Whatever you think of me now—and Alleyman, at least, clearly appears to think the worst—I have always been dedicated to our fight. Before I find myself silenced, possibly by one of my own brothers-at-arms, there are truths I have to share.

I could sling mud the way "Ichmail" has, but it serves no good. Instead, I'll just point out that the device the Feds use to detect what we call rots and so on started out as a probe to view "another dimension." A few months ago, we stopped being able to see that... place, I guess. It disappeared almost overnight in a haze of static. About the same time, the probe, in its capacity as a detector of the other dimension's *denizens* (which I believe are the things some of us call "the disembodied" or wisps; rots or fangs when they have physical forms) in *this* world went nuts.

The brass convinced itself that an invasion was underway, a real body-snatcher scenario where formless

aliens were coming here and possessing all sorts of people. But because the folks who had this detecting technology were in Washington, they mostly worried about people in Washington being possessed. Typical.

Me, I was a desk jockey who used to be a pilot. I had all the right security clearances, so I wound up in the thick of monitoring a war by surveillance. Watching more people get caught up in this web, watching the names and the dates stack up as we connected the dots between these creatures and their pawns. Or puppets. Whatever.

Then one day I heard The Voice. My life changed. I began to live in fear. Fear of discovery by my bosses, fear of falling into the hands of the enemy and revealing just how much the Feds *really* knew. After a while, though, I stopped being afraid of what I was doing. I was more scared of what the government *wasn't* doing. But even then, I didn't agitate. I thought hunters could win this war on their own. That's when New Dijon happened and the shit hit the fan.

You all remember the little town in Canada that isn't, right? Graves popping open, the disembodied swirling through the air like ashes on the wind, soldiers cordoning off the whole show? Well, in the "official" version, none of that happened. How could it? The U.S., specifically my little part of it, stepped in to help its Canadian buddies sweep New Dijon under the rug. Today, the whole town and a good chunk of land around it is a fenced-off "hot zone"—some crap about a rodent-borne hantavirus that causes violent hysteria. If only that were the lone consequence of the whole episode. But no, New Dijon scared the shit out of the brass. They took it as a frontal assault from "the dimension next door" and decided to strike back at the "occupying force." They finally did it this week.

And this week, a lot of good men died. A heavily armed assault team with flame throwers and a lot more went after what looked to be the highest "alien" on the totem pole. They did their duty. We, once again, sat back and watched from a distance. We watched while our own men turned on each other. Some kind of mind control was the general consensus. I had no comment on that front, as you can probably guess

The people I work for are terrified by the idea that what they're trying to fight might be *exactly* what it seems. I want to scream at them: If it looks like a vampire and acts like a vampire and drinks blood like a vampire, does it matter whether it's an alien that *thinks* it's a vampire? But I can't do that. I can't tell them the truth. Or what I understand to be the truth, which is constantly shifting, most recently thanks to Ichmail's



revelations. But I can tell all of *you* what I know, and the truth is that the Feds think some factional war is going on among “alien invaders.” Yes, these guys watch too much TV. Our problem is that they believe *we* are one of the factions.

I’ll do what I can to keep the imbued out of the government’s sights as long as I’m able.

Meanwhile, here’s hoping I’m not in *your* crosshairs.

Subject: I KNEW IT!

From: soldier91

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Pilot, you’re a lifesaver! I’ve been saying all along that the Messengers are aliens, but no one on these lists even wants to consider it. The Feds believe we’re part of a planetary struggle because *we are*. Their belief in extraterrestrial activity on our world *is correct*. The only part they have wrong is that the aliens aren’t the bad guys, they’re *helping* us! They gave us the powers we have so we can pull mankind out of the hole it’s dug for itself with all these pollutants and all the negative psychic energy that’s a byproduct of developed civilizations. The enemy is very terrestrial because *we* created

them. They come from within us. As soon as we prove that we can wisely use the powers we’ve been given to make the Earth right — the way the Messengers used those same powers to pull themselves up by their bootstraps and take to the stars — our benefactors will reveal themselves.

That’s when the new golden age will begin.

Pilot, I’ve got your back. Anybody who *thinks* about harming Pilot56 will answer to me.

Subject: Re: I KNEW IT!

From: memphis68

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again. Soldier, turn off the goddamn television. I don’t know who’s sadder, you or Pilot. This raft of bullshit he’s trying to float about the “dimension next door” is too lame for words. What worries me is how much truth he’s telling about Uncle Sam. The FBI tried to destroy the civil rights movement from inside with plants and blackmail and worse for years. Pilot, if you mean what you say, you better *do* what you say or we’ll all pay the price.

Soldier, go read some history books.



BYRD 00

CHAPTER 2:

THE ENEMY OF MY ENEMY

When I heard, my belly trembled; my lips quivered at the voice: rottenness entered into my bones, and I trembled in myself, that I might rest in the day of trouble: when he cometh up unto the people, he will invade them with his troops.

— Habakkuk 3:16

HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
From: carpenter169
Subject: Test

This is a test. Please do not respond.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
From: cabbie22
Subject: Re: Test

Not another hacker? What the hell is going on here? First this Ichmail and now — who? Or are we talking “what” again? Hey buddy, want to share how you found this list? This site is going to be a CNN hot pick before you know it, I swear.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
From: carpenter169
Subject: Re: Test

Nice to see how you respond to a polite request or simple instructions. I’ll tell you what: Next post, I’ll type in “Please don’t jump off the Brooklyn Bridge” and we’ll see how much list traffic diminishes. Deal?

Incidentally, what’s with the format on the avatar handles? It makes us sound like a bunch of late-era AOL subscribers. I’m expecting one of you to tell me about how I can make millions online or see nubile young teenagers in XXX poses.

OTOH, it’s nice to see some of you have pulses, if not spellcheckers. I think you’ll be very interested in a few of the things I’ve discovered over the last couple of

decades, and now I’m in a position to share that knowledge. I can’t do much with it myself, or by myself, but now that I’ve found you people I think you’ll be in a position to do some real good with what I can share.

That is, if you’re willing to listen.

I’ll be off the list for a couple of days to let you decide if you want to hear me. Watch for me in the obituaries in the meanwhile.

PS. And before the frenzy of speculation starts, no, I’m nothing like Ichmail. I’m not a vampire, though I’ve met several. I’m still around. They’re not. Think about it.

From: gardener67
To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
Subject: We’re all very impressed

OK Carpenter, the braggadocio is old already. We’ve seen it before. In fact, everyone here has seen something out of the ordinary and lived long enough to at least spread the word afterward. So stop showing off and don’t even think about trying to impress us. If you’ve got a story to tell, tell it. Mysterious references to all of the bad things you’ve endured are nice, but that and a buck-and-a-half will get you a tall cup of coffee these days.

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

I still want to know how you found your way here Carpenter. This place caters to a pretty exclusive clien-

tele, and it's not the sort you can just stumble across. Also, we've been experiencing some... technical weirdness of late. With that in mind, I'm curious about who you are, what your story is and what the hell you're actually doing here. Feel free to satisfy my curiosity at any time.

Subject: Re: Route

From: doctor119

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

What Cabbie is trying to avoid saying is that we've had one intruder who by all rights should not be here — well, here of late — and people are understandably a bit nervous. You've presented yourself in a rather confrontational manner and this isn't the best of times for that sort of thing. So why don't we start again. Introduce yourself. Say how you found this place and why you're here. Add whatever else you feel like adding. That may get things back on the right foot.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: carpenter169

Subject: Picky, picky

Cripes, I thought this was a place where people who hunted monsters exchanged information, not a sewing circle or a quilting bee. I'm sorry if people were offended by the splash I made, but, hey, wake up! We're hunting monsters! Let's not beat around the bush. If you can't deal with a mean net post, what are you going to do when some bloodsucking freak comes howling out of the rafters at you? Ask him to scream on key?

But I can play nice. You want to know how I found this place? I'll tell you how.

It was, of all things, something I can only describe as an "intervention" on Alta Vista. I'm not joking. I couldn't make this up if I were trying.

I'd just come back from a very long trip and had gotten home for the first time in what felt like ages. The place was a shambles, of course, just the way I'd left it. Fortunately, I'd done some shopping on my way back and picked up a laptop and everything else I needed to get up to speed on the modern age. The clerk was surpassingly helpful, all things considered. I didn't even need to shout much.

Anyway, I got home, blew the dust off everything (it felt like it had been years, really) and started to play with my new toy. I was pretty quick to get everything up and running, so I settled in for an evening of bouncing around online, looking for naked pictures. After all, I seemed to remember the "net" being good for that sort of thing.

That's when things started to get screwy. I opened up a web browser, got set to look for something suitably naughty and found that my web search for the terms, well, we won't go into what those terms were but assume they weren't anything to do with this place. Anyway, my search gave me one hit. Here. Then it went blank, flashed a half-dozen colors and just gave me 72-point Courier letters that said, "THIS IS THE WAY."

So I cursed and rebooted. That looked like some kind of virus and I really didn't want my brand-new computer to be screwed already. Starting back up took forever, so I tried a bunch of different searches with different terms. Three guesses where I wound up every time? So I loaded up some different software, thinking it was my browser. No dice. I even went out, got that godawful fishwrap they call the Sun-Times and actually typed in some of the URLs listed in the technical advice column. Every time I wound up here.

Needless to say, this isn't where I wanted to go, but even someone as slow as I am (and I'm certainly not quick, at least not these days) can figure out when he's being hit over the head. Besides, that damn "THIS IS THE WAY" message kept flashing. Eventually all you can do is humor that sort of thing.

So I clicked and the strangest thing happened. I'm still not quite sure how to describe it. It was like someone turned on every light in the entire house. Everything got brighter, but not in a garish way. It was just warm, with a weird a sense of a presence. It was even sort of peaceful, which is precisely the sort of thing I despise.

Oh, and there were these voices repeating the message, but I'm not going to bore anyone with my account of that.

I'm still convinced the whole thing was just some sort of massive cover to draw your attention away from the fact that this site takes forever to load. It's remarkable, really, for something that doesn't have a lot of pretty pictures on it. But that's the story of how I got here. I lurked for a while before opening my yap, in part to figure out what the rest of you were all about, and in part because I wanted to see what you know.

To tell the truth, guys, it ain't much. But since people want me to refrain from showing off, I'll keep my trap shut.

Unless Ichmail comes back.

Subject: A discrepancy noted

From: doctor119

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Your account is interesting, Carpenter, but it raises a few questions. It certainly sounds like you've been contacted by the same entities the rest of us have. I think of them as constructs or perhaps even nonhuman intelligences, but to spare the sensibilities of the others here I won't advocate my viewpoint now. But your encounter differs significantly from mine, and from every other one I've heard recounted. I'm puzzled by the discrepancy, and I'm curious as to any possible account you can make for it.

In short, it seems that each time one of us has been contacted or triggered or activated or whatever you wish to call it, it has been in direct response to the immediate presence of one or more supernatural entities. Of those incidents, 64% involved rots, 21% other varieties of walking dead including shamblers, possessors and the like, 9% involving animalistic entities, and the rest a variety in-

cluding “wizards,” goblins and, in at least one case, a “detached head flying around under its own power.” (I haven’t delivered my report on that last incident yet because I’m still gathering details. The imbued involved does not wish to join this community for fear for his/her life, and passed the story on with the greatest reluctance.)

Admittedly, I don’t have an exhaustive list of every imbued’s moment of clarity (to borrow a phrase), but I have sufficient data to at least form a hypothesis — that proximity of some form of creature is essential, possibly even the trigger mechanism, for the transformation or activation we undergo.

And yet, your account lacks this crucial detail. Why is that? Admittedly, all of the other details seem compatible: altered perception, mysterious text communication of some sort, even the voices (which have been heard in a majority, albeit not a totality of changes). But the absence of that one crucial connection makes me curious.

So can you explain this anomaly? This is not an accusation, merely a request for information. Your account alters a great deal of my thinking about what makes us what we could be.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: hunter9

Subject: Re: A discrepancy noted

The other possibility, of course, is that he could be lying.

Subject: Re: A discrepancy noted

From: bookworm55

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

I’d say it’s more likely that he may be telling a partial truth, rather than flat-out lying. After all, he’s here, and that means he’s got something from the Messengers. You just don’t make your way here without that, do you?

And Carpenter, you shouldn’t have mentioned your newspaper. There are only so many rags in this country with that name. You just made it a lot easier to find you, and if unfriendly beings are listening, you may have endangered yourself.

Subject: Re: A discrepancy noted

From: doctor119

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Yet another possibility is that Carpenter experienced a different sort of contact from our mysterious patrons than did the rest of us. We shall see what this ultimately means.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: carpenter169

Subject: Recollections

You know, I honestly don’t know why I keep on trying. Every time I try to pass along some useful information, I have my honesty questioned. It’s enough to make a man think that he’s not trusted. If it were up to me, I’d abandon the lot of you

to your fate. Unfortunately, I find myself compelled to keep coming back here and subjecting myself to more abuse.

And if you don’t find that interesting in and of itself, Doctor, I’ve lost all hope for you.

From: gardener67

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Promises

We keep on hearing all about these super secrets on ghost-busting you’ve supposedly got, Carpenter, but you haven’t shared word one. I think you’re just a blowhard. I’ll continue to think that until such time as you prove otherwise.

In the meantime, I’ve got a lead on a haunting. There’s some serious poltergeist activity at a house in northeast Philadelphia that I’m going to have a look at. I’ll report back with what I find. Hopefully, I won’t report on what found me.

THE DEAD PRESIDE OVER THE LIVING

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: freezer182

Subject: Walker one, hunter zero

God damn, walkers are tough! I don’t know why I’m still alive to write this, but I figure I’d better get it down before that thing comes looking for me again.

I don’t think I can survive a second go with it.

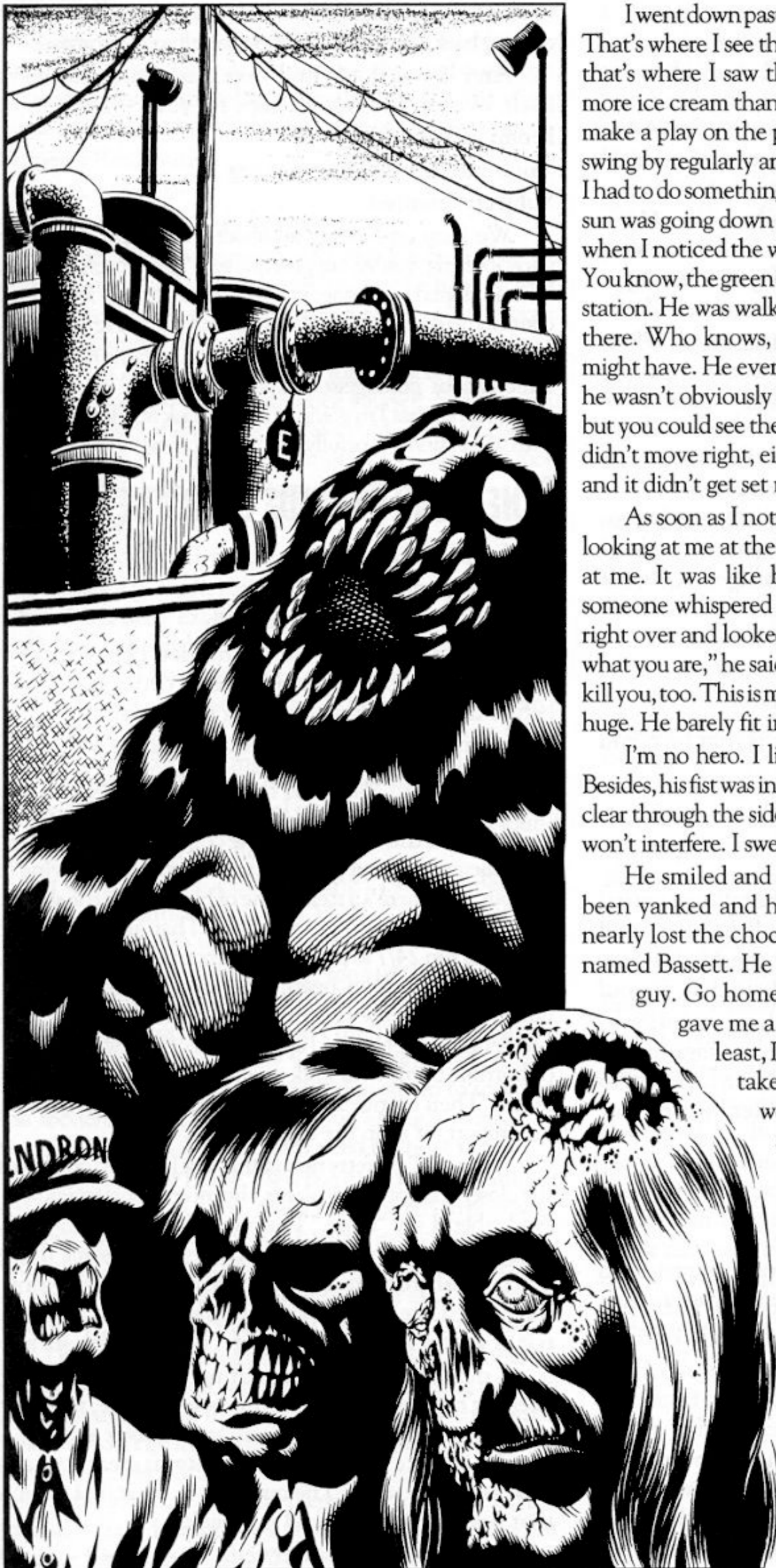
Right. Slow down. Start at the beginning.

The city I live in has a lot of oil refineries. Oil is what used to make this city go, and the corpse is still twitching. That means there’s a constant stream of trucks moving in and out, and there’s a steady line of blue fire on the skyline from the plants burning off waste. That also means the refineries run 24/7 as plant managers try to convince their bosses to keep them open. The refineries aren’t maintained as well as they ought be, as a result. There’s a lot of accidents that get hushed up, and a lot of men with one arm or horrible burns who walk around town on the company nickel. Their silence has been bought. Workers’ lives are less important than the bottom line.

Anyway, I’m pretty new at this, but I noticed quick that the closer you got to the plants, the more monsters you saw. And when I say “more,” I mean *more*. Rots. Giant hairy things. Ghosts. The occasional hidden. And some things that no one here has mentioned or described. There was one that looked like a combination of a human and a massive pile of worms. I ran when I saw it. I hope it didn’t see me.

I did a little work watching the creatures and keeping my head down. Fortunately, no one, not even a monster, looks at an ice cream truck driver and says “I wonder if he’s a monster hunter?” It was great cover, at least as far as it went. The question is, what do I do now that a walker has wrecked my truck?

I’m getting ahead of myself.



I went down past the Endron plant on my route last Friday. That's where I see the highest concentration of things — and that's where I saw that worm-monster. But the workers buy more ice cream than anyone else. Go figure. I wasn't about to make a play on the place, but I did think it was important to swing by regularly and at least track what was in there in case I had to do something. Anyway, I was doing one last pass as the sun was going down — and I was pretty much out of stock — when I noticed the walker. He was dressed in a plant uniform. You know, the green and yellow you see at every Endron service station. He was walking straight for the gate like he belonged there. Who knows, considering what else I'd seen there, he might have. He even looked pretty good for a walker. I mean, he wasn't obviously rotting or anything, and he didn't smell, but you could see the blotches and the off color of his skin. He didn't move right, either. He walked like he had a hip broken and it didn't get set right or something.

As soon as I noticed him, he noticed me. He wasn't even looking at me at the time, but turned around and stared right at me. It was like he'd been tipped off or something, like someone whispered in his ear. I couldn't move. He stomped right over and looked me up and down. "I don't know who or what you are," he said, "but don't think about interfering or I'll kill you, too. This is my business." His fist was huge. The guy was huge. He barely fit into his uniform.

I'm no hero. I like to make violence the last thing I try. Besides, his fist was in my face and he looked like he could punch clear through the side of my truck. So I just nodded and said, "I won't interfere. I swear. Just tell me what's going on."

He smiled and it looked horrible. All of his teeth had been yanked and his gums were leaking blood and pus. I nearly lost the choco-taco I had for dinner. "There's a boss named Bassett. He has an overdue bill. I'm the collection guy. Go home if you know what's good for you." He gave me a friendly slap on the side of the head. At least, I assume it was friendly because he didn't take my head off. Then he just turned and went in. It was strange. No one at the security post tried to stop him. They didn't even seem to notice him.

I'm sure some of you think I'm a coward for not doing anything to stop this... guy, thing, whatever. Maybe you're right. Maybe I should have. But he was right in my face and could have splattered my brains, and at that point he didn't seem like he was going to do me any harm. I debated trying to warn Bassett, but how exactly do you call up a total stranger and say, "Your life is in danger from a monster"? That sort of call doesn't get past the secretary, if it isn't transferred over to security.

So I dithered and while I did all hell broke loose. I heard gunshots and a couple of explosions. Part of me wanted to follow the walker's instructions and get out of there, but the rest of me was frozen. I had to see what was going on. I got out of the truck and edged up close to the gates. In hindsight, that was a really bad idea.

After a few minutes, I saw the walker. It wasn't walking any more. It was *running* for the gate. There were security guards after it, and some of them were shooting. I saw the thing take what looked like a dozen bullets before it finally went down, maybe twenty feet from the entrance.

"Oh well," I thought. "That finishes it. I should go." I turned to start the truck and that's when it happened. The walker got back up — and it looked real mad.

Maybe I'm making excuses here, but when that thing came and talked to me, it was sort of human in a way. It wasn't what I'd call pleasant, but it didn't seem to leak evil. When it got back up, whatever humanity that was left was gone. It was pure hate on two legs. It turned around and went after the security guards who were still shooting at it. It seemed to get stronger with every step.

They didn't stand a chance. It was over in seconds, except for the moans. Even where I stood I could hear their bones crack. Then the thing turned around and came out. "He told you to leave," it said. "Good thing you didn't listen."

I tried to get away but I was too slow. It picked me up by the collar and said, "Give me the keys or I'll snap your neck like a wishbone." I'm not stupid. I gave him the keys. He smiled and tossed me like I was a rag doll (and believe me, you don't drive an ice cream truck for ten years and stay skinny.) I bounced off the fence and hit the pavement. The last thing I saw was the walker driving off in my truck at full speed with the music on. Then I blacked out.

I woke up in the hospital, surrounded by cops and a couple of nervous Endron lawyers. They told me they were taking care of my hospital bills since I'd been injured on their property. The way they kept looking at the cops told me they knew what really happened and were there to keep me from spilling the beans. I'm smart enough to take a hint. I told the cops I got in a fight with a guy trying to steal my truck. He won. The cops nodded and said stuff about angel dust and let me get on with recovering. The Endron guys thanked me, repeated that they'd cover all my bills and left me with a fruit basket. Everything in it sucked.

They told me my truck was found wrapped around a telephone pole a day later. There was no sign of the thief and there were no prints except mine and stuff that was the right size to belong to kids leaning on the counter. I went out to look at it later at the wrecker's, and didn't find much else. There was dust on the seat, which was odd, but that was about it.

So that was my run-in with a walker. I hope this helps other people who meet them. I'm lucky to be alive. Next time I see one I'm going to try to take it out before it sees me... or I'm going to run like hell.

From: howitzer114

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Walkers

Freezer, your experience sounds like a pretty typical walker encounter. There have been other reports of the sort of dual personality you describe. Me, I think they're just putting on a pretty face until the chips are down, then they show their true colors. But I don't think I've never met one like that so I could just be guessing.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: carpenter169

Subject: Re: Walkers

Freezer, did you notice if the walker was carrying anything? Did it have a weapon or anything else in its hands? Was it carrying anything unusual?

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: freezer182

Subject: Re: Walkers

It didn't have anything in its hands. I know, I saw it up close and personal. Its fists were right in my face. It just had on an Endron uniform, a beat-up Drillers hat and work boots. But you wouldn't expect even a walker to go around barefoot in these parts.

From: howitzer114

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: (no subject)

Would that be the Tulsa, Oklahoma Drillers on the hat? Freezer, check your local paper. There's an obituary listing for a Murray Bassett, long-time Endron executive. There's even a picture of him. He looks like a sanctimonious corporate bastard, but then again they all do. He's fat and satisfied and now he's dead.

The report reads he died of injuries suffered from a fall last Friday night. They don't mention the distance he fell, or whether it was an accident. I am inclined to believe he did indeed die from a fall — the walker probably pitched him out a window. There's an extended tribute to the deceased's remarkable qualities as a human being, most of which means nothing, and little more on the incident. There's nothing on the security guards or any related story about the stolen truck. I'm very interested in seeing how this turns out.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: freezer182

Subject: Addendum

I caught the story about Bassett, and yes, I am in Tulsa. At least, I am at the moment. I'm getting out of town as soon as all of the checks from Endron clear. It's dirty money, but I'll take it and start over. If I cash the checks here they can't track me. Besides, everything I had was tied up in that truck. In the next few days I'll be putting everything I know about this town

in a file and uploading it. The rest of you can take on whatever you feel like, or avoid the area as you want. I'm leaving.

However, there's one other thing I need to add to wrap up this whole thing.

I was out walking in Chandler Park this morning. That's near the refineries, but not too close, It's about the only place I want to remember around here. Anyway, I was in the park early. There weren't even any joggers, which tells you how early it was. That's how I like it.

So I'm walking and I notice a figure on one of the benches. I didn't pay any mind until I got close and saw that he didn't move. I thought maybe he was a vagrant fallen asleep. I walked over to slip him a buck — there's always someone worse off than you are.

When I got close I got the second-biggest shock of my life. You can probably guess what the first one was, and maybe you can figure out this one. He looked like he'd been dead for years now, not days. There wasn't anything menacing about him any more. He looked peaceful, even with his cheeks sunken in and his skin peeling back. That stupid Drillers hat was still on his head.

Maybe I did the wrong thing, but I dragged the body down to the river and tossed it in. It sank. I'm not sure why I did that, especially considering the state I'm in, but it seemed like the right thing to do. Somehow I knew those Endron guys would want to get their hands on him, and they just gave me the willies.

I kept the hat, though. That seemed right, too.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
 From: carpenter 169
 Subject: The hat

If it feels right, by all means hang onto the hat. Keep it safe. I don't recommend wearing it, and you might want to wash it. I suspect he was buried wearing it.

I don't expect the body will ever surface, though that depends on the chemical composition of the river. You're covered on that end, at least from the police. Endron's a different matter, I suspect. They've probably got a few cops on their payroll. Leaving town is a good idea.

Just remember to take the hat with you.

A STRANGER IN OUR MIDST

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
 From: cabbie22
 Subject: That reminds me

I should have mentioned this earlier. I saw in one of the early posts that our new authority mentioned rots by the common term for them. Carpenter, if you're reading this, you should know better than to ever, ever call those things by their proper name. The last thing we need is them finding us because you got lazy with your typing.

Witness, can we have an update on security? Please?

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
 From: carpenter169
 Subject: Okay, I Lied. I'm Back.

Geez, people, what's wrong with you? So I typed the word \$#@\$. (Hah! Thought I was going to type — oh wait, don't want to set you off again.) What, you think they're demons out of fairy tales, that saying their names summons them? Get a grip, Cabbie. It doesn't work that way. And if they're smart enough to sweep net traffic for the actual word, don't you think they're smart enough to check for permutations like "v_mp_r_" or "v_mpyr" or "bl_ds_ck_ngfr_k"? (Yes, I've been lurking long enough to watch *that* little exchange. When do I get my secret decoder ring?)

You know, for people who're convinced that your enemy is omnipotent and omniscient, you seem to think they're pretty damn stupid. You're not going to fool them with grade-school tricks and code names. You have to give them credit for being smart and fast and powerful. On the other hand, they're not everywhere. They don't know everything. My continued existence proves that. I can tell you a lot about them — and about your friend Ichmail.

Now, you've got two choices. You can rant and rave about how I don't play by your rules. Well, guess what? I don't. That's why I'm still here. More to the point, that's why I'll still be here in five years and most of you will be dead.

Or if you're smart you can listen to me. You can take what I give you and run with it. You'll last a lot longer and do more good.

It's up to you. Me, I'm going to the game. Got myself good seats for the first time in what seems like... a lifetime.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
 From: cabbie22

Subject: Arrogant son of a bitch

I don't have to take this. I won't take this. Witness, can't we get this jackass out of here?

Subject: Rots
 From: soldier91

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

We're aware of basic security measures, flag words and some of the limitations of our opposition, Carpenter. You might get more respect if you were polite.

Subject: Another anomaly
 From: witness1

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

This is odd. I've been doing trace routes on Carpenter's posts. I'm always curious when someone comes on and makes such a splash in such a short period. Usually if they've got that much to say, it's a good idea to check up on them and see what their story might be. It also lets me scan news reports in their area for evidence of rots on the move. After all, the noisy among us unfortunately tend to be silenced.

Carpenter, for what it might be worth, is posting messages from multiple accounts that are primarily from

local providers in the midwestern United States. While he certainly could be logging on remotely to all of these accounts, he could also be posting from separate locations each time and racking up a heck of a lot of frequent-flier miles. Or there could be something very odd going on.

All of that could be significant, or it could mean nothing, particularly when we combine it with the anomaly that the good Doctor noted. What I think it should mean, however, is that it may well be very important to listen to what Carpenter says, and to double-check every word of it.

Keep your eyes open, people.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: carpenter169

Subject: Poor Wandering One

Interesting that you took the time to track me down, Witness. I commend your thoroughness. Then again, I have to wonder how many other people you've checked up on in this fashion. Good to know that someone's keeping tabs on us. Incidentally, Witness, that's a nice protection you have up against forging headers. No, I didn't try it but I did examine it, and you're good. Have a little faith in the man, people. He's talented.

As for why I'm posting from so many different accounts, it's simple: I move around a lot. I have a lot of enemies. If I give them a pattern, they find me. I seem to attract them somehow. I always have, even before this whole imbuing or whatever the hell you call it. In my own way, I've been fighting spirits for a lifetime. It's almost as if they get into my head and home in on it. So I stay light on my feet and don't have a lot of belongings. Coming in through multiple accounts is just one way of protecting myself.

But something brought me here, and I'm willing to share what I know *for now*. Sooner or later, though, I'm going to get fed up with this shtick, and no matter how many times my screen flashes "THIS IS THE PLACE," I'm going to ignore it. Or kick it in.

Can we get back to cases, please?

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: cabbie22

Subject: I smell bullshit

There have been a lot of people claiming to deal with ghosts for a long time, Carpenter. None of their stories ever amounted to squat. Even with what I know now, I don't buy it. We've only had this "blessing" for a little while. None of us ever saw anything at all out of the ordinary before. Now you come along and say you've been fighting monsters for years. I don't know what your game is, but it stinks.

Subject: Do we have a choice

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: god45

I'll listen, Carpenter. Heaven help you, though, if this turns out to be bullshit. You see, if you're not on the

up and up, it doesn't matter. Get me killed. I'll come back. I learn from my mistakes. I'll find you and deal with you.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: carpenter169

Subject: Enough

Does everyone new here get the rubber hose like this? Let me put this in simple terms. I. Want. To. Help. Someone or something brought me here with the obvious intention of having me tell you what I know, so shut up already and let me say it.

Otherwise, whoever or whatever brought me here is going to get mad. Do we really want that?

FULL DISCLOSURE

From: howitzer114

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Material

If you're that gung-ho to tell us what you know, Carpenter, then why don't you just dump it into a data file and upload it, so we can look at it without having to put up with your crap? Look at it another way. You keep on saying that we've only ourselves to blame if we don't follow the instructions you give us. Well, give us all of the instructions in a lump so we can start following and hopefully save lives.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: carpenter169

Subject: My encyclopedia of all knowledge

It's an interesting notion, but there are a couple of problems with it. One is that if I wrote down everything I know on the topic, it would be years before I got it up in usable form. I'm not sure I have that much time, and I certainly don't have that much patience. The second factor is that I want to make sure I share what's most pertinent to the rest of the imbued. We're all going to feel like shmucks if I give you a million words on exorcisms that have worked for me when what you really need is what sort of slime to expect the next time you see a certain spook. So, in the interests of all concerned (and so I can avoid giving myself carpal tunnel syndrome), I'm just going to respond to what's going on and try to offer advice that's useful.

That reminds me that I should sit down and work something up on walkers, like the one Freezer ran into. You'll be seeing that shortly.

From: gardener67

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: No luck

Sorry, folks. That place I told you I was going to? The haunted house up in the northeast? False alarm. Went there, combed the place from top to bottom and couldn't find a damn thing. There were a few suspicious footprints in the dust in the attic, but that was about it. The place looked to be a real bitch, too. I mean, if you were going down the

checklist of haunted house stories, this one would ring every bell. Supposedly this place has had bleeding walls, vermin infestations, mysterious noises, poltergeist activity, cold spots and weird lights. Too bad I didn't see any of it. There wasn't even a kid in a sheet trying to scare me.

From: carpenter169
To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
Subject: Habeas Corpus?

So let me get this straight. You went into this house once, didn't find anything, so you decided it was empty? Okay. Let me throw an idea at you: I walk into your house while you're at work, assuming you actually hold down a job and don't spend your days wanking around here. I walk in the front door and I don't see you. I walk up and down the stairs and don't see you. I even poke around in your basement and your attic for a bit, but not for too long because it's dusty and I have allergies, and I don't see you. So I come to the conclusion that you don't exist, go home and tell everyone that [insert name] is a myth. Oh sure, there were some bills and dirty socks and suchlike scattered about, but no real proof. Do you follow my logic here?

From: gardener67
To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
Subject: Doubtful

I swept the place top to bottom, hard. Maybe you could drop the superior attitude and give me a little credit?

From: carpenter169
To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
Subject: Ghosts

Doubtful, though I think perhaps I chose a bad example. Let me put it this way: You don't like the IRS, right? Nobody likes the IRS. They could give the bl__ds_ck_ng fr__ks tips on how to, well, suck blood like freaks. Even if you've got absolutely nothing to hide, and I'm sure you don't have any skeletons in your closet, Gardener, you still don't want to talk to these guys *just in case*, right?

So you're going to do your damndest not to be home when your friendly IRS agent, or the guy with the subpoena from the mother of your illegitimate child, or the little man from the draft board knocks on your door. You're going to hide, duck out the back or tuck yourself into a cedar chest to make sure the guy thinks you're not there.

It's perfectly sensible. It's the sensible thing to do. (And I don't want to hear it from any of you that you'd stick it out and take your medicine. Maybe some of you would, but I'm betting the vast majority would cut and run or cover your asses.)

So you walked in the door, Gardener, blundered around like a cop with his first search warrant in hand, and the ghosts amscrayed out the back.

Do you blame them? More importantly, do you understand why there wasn't anything there for you to find? They saw you coming and they ran.

From: gardener67
To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
Subject: (no subject)

What do you mean they saw me coming? Every ghost I've dealt with has been stupid, as in "stood there and let me whack it" stupid. Some of them were mean and stupid, but they were just... there. They recognized me as a threat, but that was all. They certainly weren't intelligent enough to get out of the way. I think we're getting a snow job here.

From: potter116
To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
Subject: Intelligent ghosts

No, Carpenter may be right on this one. I've seen spirits that certainly acted intelligent, even though they didn't respond to any attempts at communication.

From: healer115
To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
Subject: Re: Intelligent ghosts

Maybe they saw you were trying to destroy them and didn't think they had a lot to say.

From: doctor119
To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
Subject: Re: Intelligent ghosts

Perhaps. It's more likely that they don't communicate in any way we understand. Perhaps they are other entities whose manifestation corresponds (and has corresponded historically) to the way in which we have viewed ghosts throughout the centuries.

From: rigger111
To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
Subject: Dumb ghosts

Blow it out your ear. A spook is a spook is a spook. They're mad, bad and crazy. Of course they didn't talk to you, man. What are they going to say? "Hey, gonna fuck you up now, and thanks for talkin"? I don't think so.

Subject: I disagree
From: healer115
To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

I refuse to believe that any intelligent life form can be automatically and irrevocably hostile. It simply makes no sense.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
From: shogun213
Subject: pure evil

Going back to Carpenter's example of the IRS agent, I'd say you're wrong.

Subject: Intelligence
From: bookworm55
To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

I can unequivocally add my experience to Carpenter's assessment. I've come in contact with a few

ghosts and poltergeists in my time, and most of them have demonstrated the following:

- Response to outside stimuli
- Evidence of learning behaviors
- Clear proof of memory and recognition
- Efforts to communicate, though I can't vouch for the quality of it in most instances
- Demonstrations of fear
- In many cases, fairly incontrovertible proof of malice, which sad to say is a hallmark of intelligence

Add all these factors up and one comes to the inescapable conclusion that many ghosts, poltergeists and possessors are, for lack of a better term, possessed of some form of intelligence. What they chose to do with that intelligence is the question.

From: gardener67

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: (no subject)

Fuck around if you want, Shogun. You've obviously never faced one of these things. Otherwise you wouldn't joke.

And as for you, Carpenter, if you know so much about the way these things think, why don't you spill it? Or are you just enjoying sitting back wherever you are and tossing off your snide bullshit? Let's have some proof that you know what you're talking about or I'm throwing you in my /gag list.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: carpenter169

Subject: The truth

I've been meaning to come forward, but I'll admit that it is fun to watch you dance around the truth. For what it's worth, yes I do like sitting back and making snide comments. It's the only pleasure I derive from this angst-ridden existence, and the rest of my life is just torment unless I'm sniping at you. No, really.

In all seriousness, I know a little bit about what I'm talking about. I've seen spirits. I've met spirits. I've even put a few spirits down. There are ways to do it, if you're smart and fast and careful and you respect them. But if you go stomping around like you're killing ants, the ghosts will fade into the woodwork or will make you pay. Why? Because ghosts are as smart and fast and mean as you are, and they have an advantage over you. They're dead. You're not. You're still afraid of dying. That gives them the edge.



From: gardener67
To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
Subject: Dying

I'm not afraid of dying as long as it's for the right reason. Can you say the same, Carpenter?

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
From: carpenter169
Subject: Being Dead

Nice show of bravado, but wait until the moment you actually see the gun barrel pointed at you like a big black "O." Then tell me you're ready. It's easy to talk about, but a hard, hard thing to face.

Subject: Re: Dying
From: soldier91

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

You're either ready or you're not. I saw guys in the service, big tough guys, real bruisers, who took a bullet to the gut and cried like babies. On the other hand, there were these little tiny wiry guys, ones you'd expect to fold up like napkins, and they didn't make a peep, didn't want to give the rest of the platoon away. Some guys can face death, some can't. It's that simple.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
From: potter116
Subject: Off topic

What we're debating here is whether spirits are actually the representations of people who've died, and how we might approach and maybe even understand them.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
From: carpenter169
Subject: Being Dead

Being dead does give ghosts an advantage. Trust me. While there might be worse stuff on the other side waiting for them, they've already been through anything worse than you ever have. They're not afraid of it. What's the worst thing you're going to do? Kill them again? Who knows, maybe being a spirit sucks and they'll be happy to be destroyed once and for all. But they know that you're afraid of death, because deep down every living thing is (or was). You can't help it. So in that split second when you force yourself to do something your DNA and subconscious resist, a ghost is already acting. That's its edge.

Subject: Re: Being Dead
From: bookworm55
To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

You sound remarkably well informed on this, Carpenter. Dare I ask how?

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
From: carpenter169
Subject: How Do I Know?

I died and there was this long tunnel with a bright light at the end of it, and then Della Reese was waiting for me.

What do you think? Maybe I just do my research, Bookworm. Have you ever considered that? Maybe I know what I'm talking about because I do my homework? I'll tell you what: You keep mouthing off instead of listening to useful information, punk, and you'll end up dead sooner rather than later. Then you can come back and tell us how wrong I was.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
From: potter116
Subject: Courtesy

There's no need for that sort of thing, Carpenter. If I didn't know better, your post could be interpreted as a threat. We've got too many problems out there to be at each other's throats in here.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
From: azrael256
Subject: Bookworm

Even if something horrible were to happen to Bookworm, God forbid, there's no way he could come back and tell the list what it was like. It's not like ghosts can type.

UNDER SIEGE

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
From: carpenter169
Subject: Ichmail

Fascinating. So does anyone know if there's any way that the enemy can find this place? One vampire with a browser could learn an awful lot. And that still leaves open the question of Ichmail. Let me guess: He's not supposed to be on here, is he?

Subject: Re: Ichmail
From: witness1
To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Ichmail presents an... interesting situation. He's hacking the system, and doing so with a lot of sophistication. I think I see how he got in and am impressed. It's almost as if I left the hole open all the time. That's not to say I can't shut it whenever I want, now that I know where it is. (Yes, Ichmail, that's intended for you to read. You're here on my sufferance). But he seems to be behaving himself and proving somewhat useful to the community. I know of at least one earnest response to his information thus far. With that in mind, I'm not going to take punitive action — yet.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
From: carpenter169
Subject: Re: Ichmail

You're dodging the question, Witness. He's not supposed to be here, is he?

Subject: Re: Ichmail
From: witness1
To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

No, he's not.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
 From: cabbie22
 Subject: Re: Ichmail

If he can get in, can other monsters get in as well? We all understand that there's a threat of intrusion, but doesn't this new list have better safety measures than the previous one? I mean, isn't that why this one was started?

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
 From: mojo20
 Subject: security

were comprmised we abandon the site and stat over agin like bfer

Subject: Re: security
 From: witness1

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

I think everyone's being a bit premature here. Yes, we had a security hole. It's plugged. Ichmail's not an issue.

As for the larger one, let's put it this way: We have a few lists out there now. If the rots were paranoid enough to find this place or other sites through sweeps or keyword tracing or anything else, they would have done it by now. It would have taken a week at most, possibly a few hours.

But apart from Ichmail, they don't *seem* to be here. Is this conclusive proof of our safety? No. But my gut tells me it's all that I need. That's the same feeling I've had ever since I was *contacted*. I've learned since this all started that my gut is the only thing that I can trust.

That's where we stand. If it's not good enough for folks, I'm sorry.

Subject: Re: security
 From: soldier91

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

I'll trust your gut, too, for now.

DEALINGS WITH THE DEAD

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
 From: bocal77
 Subject: ghosts

We should not be fighting against ourselves. That does the work of our enemies for us. I must ask has anyone fought a spirit? What is it like? I want to be prepared.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
 From: carpenter169
 Subject: Ghostbusting

Right. This is where I jump back in and tell you about a few of the things I've actually seen firsthand, up close and personal. Read closely, because mishaps will get you killed.

For those of you who want to know my credentials for all this, they're simple: I've been a ghost magnet for years, even before I could really see the damn things. I've been possessed twice. I kicked one of them out and made him tell me

everything he knew. I've studied haunted houses, manifestations and spirits. I've had ghosts talk to me at all hours since the Roosevelt administration. And I've listened when they've told me stuff. Especially that bastard I've still got in a bottle.

So, let's talk about spirits—from what I've seen here, also known as ghosts, specters, haunts, poltergeists, possessors and all sorts of other good ways of saying “people who should be quiet because they're dead, but aren't.”

That's the key to the whole thing right there, incidentally. They're people who should be dead. People. They're ordinary folks just like you or me who happen to be dead. They want things, don't want other things, like some things and don't like others, and, well you get the idea. So don't go thinking they're stupid, mindless, alien or anything else. They're people who just happen to have a unique experience under their collective belt.

On the other hand, don't assume a spirit will act exactly like Aunt Martha did when she was alive, because it won't. Death changes you. It flenses out a lot of the extraneous bullshit. Ghosts tend to focus on what's important to them. They're not distracted by the random day-to-day things that still catch our eye. If you buy into my theory on what these things are, it only makes sense. If they're ghosts, they're ghosts for a reason. They're not hanging around trying to get a better job, a nicer apartment or laid. They're not attracted to a nice set of legs across the street or a shiny dime on the sidewalk. That stuff doesn't matter to them anymore. They're dead! All the old urges and all the little things that used to fill up the long moments between events aren't there any more. A ghost who's decided to kill you is going to give everything he's got. If you're less than equally focused in return, you're going to die.

But that's a digression. Let's get back to the main point: spirits as (dead) people. The fact that they're people means they think. Maybe the way they think is a little skewed. I don't know exactly how, to be honest, but they're intelligent all the same. That means that when our buddy storms through the front door, they run out the back. If they figure out you're dangerous, they treat you the way *you'd* treat a monster. Either they avoid you or they try to get rid of you as fast as possible.

Oh, sure, there are stupid or mindless ones. Then again, there are stupid or mindless people. The morons who stick knives in toasters or who smoke at the gas pump make just as stupid ghosts. Those are the kinds that many of you have probably encountered—some guy who was dumber than a bag of doorknobs in the real world, and who hasn't improved since. But most spirits have at least two thoughts to rub together, and they act like it. If you go in expecting a ghost to be dumber than you are, you're begging for trouble on both knees.

And that, near as I can tell, takes us right back to where we started, with Gardener telling us about the haunted house that wasn't. I'll lay money that I can go in there and find you some ghosts, and damn smart ones at that.

From: descent88

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: ghosts

I don't know. What you say sounds reasonable, but doesn't fit all the facts as we know them. Most of the things I've faced just kept coming and coming, no matter what. If they were thinking, I couldn't tell.

Subject: repetitious ghosts

From: bookworm55

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

I've seen things like that, too; ghosts who just keep on doing the same thing over and over again. They can't be thinking or they'd just go mad. One theory I heard about these is that they're echoes of events, doomed to be replayed over and over again for eternity. While they don't seem to harm anyone directly, I was told that such manifestations can be responsible for, or at least connected to, higher-than-usual rates of accidents and premature deaths.

From: howitzer114

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Back to work

Fascinating, but a bit off topic. So far we've got one massive warning about the way spirits really think, one bit of evidence refuting it and one digression into the Ten Plagues.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: shogun213

Subject: Re: Back to work

This is all bullshit. I don't care about all this theory. I want to know where it is, what it can do to me and how I can kill it. Ghosts aren't the problem, v_mp_r_s are.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: carpenter169

Subject: Proof

If you don't think spirits are a problem, you're living a bigger lie now than you did *before*. Possessions are up 57% over the last six months. Fastest growing supernatural incident in the world, even more than cattle mutilations. The East Coast Intelligencer says Vatican exorcism teams can't keep up with the demand in Europe, let alone calls for help from New York, Boston and Montreal. Poltergeist incidents in houses are up 32% according to the stats on Vatcher's scale, and there have been over a dozen fatal incidents in the last four months alone. Yes, we need to pay attention to ghosts.

Then again, I could just be making all of this up.



Kyl 2000
VEKH

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
 From: cabbie22
 Subject: Re: Proof

Something about all this still smells fishy. Carpenter, your story doesn't ring true. I don't know why and I don't know how, but I think it's damn odd that you're the only one I've seen here claim to have supernatural experiences before the imbuing. I'll be watching you.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
 From: carpenter169
 Subject: Re: Proof

It's because I'm special. Now can I have a pony ride?

From: gardener67
 To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
 Subject: Re: Proof

God, you're an asshole.

I can give you an address on that house, Carpenter, if you think you can do better. Maybe someone else should go in with you to see about the efficiency of your methods. That way, if you're on to something, we can all pick up the technique and we'll have a reliable witness to attest to its usefulness.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
 From: mojo20
 Subject: (no subject)

Im not going anywhere with him the only carpenter I trust has been dead for two thousand years and I dont think this is him.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
 From: carpenter169
 Subject: Various

Why don't we stick to one thing at a time here, people? Last things first. No, I'm not Jesus Christ, I never claimed to be Jesus Christ. I've been accused of delusions of grandeur before, but even I know my limits.

Next: I don't need to prove to anyone that I know what I'm talking about. I do know and it's that simple. If you doubt me, that's your problem. I'm not going to endanger myself at a publicly announced location just so you can decide, gosh-darn, I really am a swell guy who just happens to know a thing or two about hunting ghosts. If you want me to check out that house, post the address, but I'll do it in my own time and my own way, without witnesses. I can promise you this, however: The stories that got you into that place are going to continue and probably get worse now that you've been there. If I go, that stuff is going to stop. Keep an eye open. Look for the switch to flip. You'll see what I'm talking about.

Third: Possessions are a whole other kettle of fish. I'll get to them by and by, but trying to explain what I know about that without finishing up what I've started here puts the cart before the horse.

[Digression: I know that not all of you buy into what I'm saying here. Two or three of you no doubt cling fast to your belief that alien probbers are responsible for this whole crisis. No matter how much proof I offer, that isn't going to change. The rest of you, however, the ones who aren't locked into your own little worlds, have a choice. Frankly, I know this sounds a bit odd, but you have to believe that I know what I'm talking about and that I've got the best of reasons for sharing. It's very simple: I want these bastards dead and gone. I hate them with a passion the likes of which you can't imagine, and if I can give you people the knowledge and tools to get rid of them, then I'm happy. Believe it or not.]

Finally, we come to the big bugaboo that everyone seems to be worried about, the one thing that people say disrupts my "theory." The answer is simple. Remember that little event that makes ghosts into what they are? It's called "dying," and just like everything else in life everyone handles it a different way. Some folks come through it just fine. Some are screwed up by it. And some go catatonic.

You can't say you haven't seen that sort of thing before. I'm sure you've all known someone who retreated from reality at the slightest setback. What you're seeing, kids, is what happens to these people after they die. If they can't handle life, they sure can't handle the important stuff like death. But who knows? Give them enough time and maybe some of them will actually get their act together and turn into full-fledged spirits. I'd rather not give them that chance, if it's all the same to you.

So that answers that. Any questions?

From: gardener67
 To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
 Subject: Bullshit

You talk a good game, Carpenter, but I'm not buying it. This is my fifth haunt site and I know what I'm doing. I'm sure I can kick the butt of anything that jumps out at me. Just you wait and see. I'll come back with ghost pelts on my belt.

I'm going back into that house and sniff it out top to bottom. If there's a spook in there, I'm going to find it. And I'm going to deal with it. You know what'll happen then? I'll find you and I'll shove its spook ass through your mail slot just to prove you wrong.

I'll even make you a deal. If you're right and whatever is in that house gets me, I'll come back as a ghost and kiss your butt.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
 From: carpenter169
 Subject: Nice Knowing You

They probably won't kill you, but you're going to feel damn stupid before all this is over.

Probably.

DEEDS LEFT UNDONE

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: shogun213

Subject: Back to the point

Before we got so rudely interrupted, Carpenter was going to tell us more about how ghosts behave and the like. I want to hear the rest of it.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: carpenter169

Subject: Continued

Right. Where was I? That's right. I was talking about ghostly motivations.

Let's start with the basics. When I mean "ghostly," I mean ghosts. No rots, no walking dead, just ghosts. As far as I can tell, the imbued have broken ghosts down into categories: ghosts, poltergeists and possessors.

Forget all that. That's like saying there are three types of people: plumbers, accountants and ditch diggers. All of that crap isn't what they are, it's what they do. You can get metaphysical and say that a man's work shapes what he becomes, but the short version is that all the different types of ghosts come to work with the same sets of motivations.

That may sound simple. It is. Don't misread and assume they all work on some sort of master plan. They don't. After all, I just got through saying that they're people. That's not to say they don't have some sort of master plan, though. They might. But what I'm talking about is the fact that they want us. They want all of us and what we have to offer them.

By that I don't mean they're after our precious bodies. What would they do with them, anyway? Ghosts are after something a lot more insidious. Think about it for a second. They're hanging around this existence where they can't touch anything, can't smell anything and can't even taste anything. What can they do? They can feel. That's all they do — they feel. I mean, sure, they can touch one another, but that's not going to be the most rewarding experience in the world.

Instead, all they do is feel. That's what keeps them going. That's why they need us. Why? Because human beings, real live honest to God human beings, feel much more strongly than they do. And that's what powers ghosts. When you feel something, they feed off it. But it's still not even that simple. Most of them have something specific they feed off, like love or hate or fear. Sure, some can handle a smorgasbord, but most of them are on fairly strict diets.

And that, in a nutshell, is the explanation for poltergeists. What do they like to feed on? Fear, mostly. The more afraid anyone around them is, the stronger they get. So they pull out all the stops to make whoever's there afraid. The more afraid the poor slob is, the stronger a poltergeist gets and the more tricks it can pull. It's a positive feedback loop. And there are always idiots willing to move into haunted houses, either

because they don't believe or because they want to see the big bad ghosts for themselves. That's called "fresh meat."

Possessors tend to want other things besides just fear. After all, fear is easy. They're after more subtle stuff; things they can make the bodies they steal feel. That includes the naughty stuff like lust, which is something they have a hard time getting their hands on otherwise. Apart from bad slasher flicks, most people don't like bumping uglies in haunted houses. So they climb inside people's skins to either get them to feel all sorts of itchy things or to inspire others to feel them. Either way, the possessor feeds.

Normal ghosts aren't so lucky. They can't touch the living world and make people see things or provoke reactions. So they're reduced to hanging around and hoping for opportunities to feed. That's why they hang around places guaranteed to inspire emotions. It's like a soup kitchen for the dead. But by and large, they're left to pick at the table scraps while the poltergeists and possessors get to chow down on whatever they want. That's one of the reasons the imbued make ghosts so happy. We can see them. That means we can react to them.

Doctor, you once discussed encountering some ghosts who taunted you, mocked you and generally pissed you off. Think about that incident in light of what I just said. *They wanted you to get mad.* It wasn't because they figured that would make you easier to beat, or it would get you in trouble (well, maybe a little bit of that). Mainly it was because if you got mad, they could feed on it. You got angry and they ate it up, then went off to do whatever the hell else they really wanted to do.

How does that make you feel? Me, I'd be even more pissed off. But that's exactly what they want. Instead, you need to be as cold as you can. If you charge into a fight with a ghost of any sort, leaking anger out your pores, he's going to feed on it. That's going to make him stronger and tougher to beat. If he gets tougher, you're going to get more frustrated. Do you see where this is going? So you need to be utterly cool when you're up against ghosts. Otherwise, you're betraying yourself and giving the bad guys help.

Subject: Sensible

From: doctor119

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Seen in that light, the incident I described does make more sense. Not only would I be serving the entities' ends by losing control and possibly putting myself in a position to be incarcerated, but I would have been replenishing their energy, which no doubt had been diminished by efforts to frame my erstwhile partner. One can only wonder at the sheer amount of energy it must have taken to manufacture the evidence.

I'm certainly not ready to take Carpenter's theory as established fact, but it does fit the specifics of my case remarkably well. Does anyone else have any information, anecdotal or otherwise, that can further illuminate this situation?

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
 From: shepherd274
 Subject: Re: Sensible

I may have something that sheds additional light on the subject. For the past several weeks, I've been followed intermittently by a ghost. The spirit doesn't seem to have made any threatening gestures or hostile inclinations. It's just followed me everywhere I go. No efforts to communicate with it have been successful, though it occasionally smiles at some of my efforts. Occasionally it leaves me alone — like when I go to the bathroom — but it always returns.

At first I found its presence alarming, then nerve-racking, but now it's almost routine. I was worried that perhaps it was providing information on my whereabouts to other ghosts, but nothing's happened.

I've encountered roughly the same number of entities after acquiring my tail as before. Several seem to have dealt with my spectator instead of me, and I believe her presence has even averted several potential confrontations. I don't understand her reasons for following me, but she seems harmless.

Now, if she's getting emotional energy from me, I don't know what it is. I pride myself on being level-headed.

Subject: Re: Sensible
 From: doctor119
 To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Perhaps it — or "she," as you insist on calling it — is not feeding from you. Perhaps instead it is feeding from the emotions you inspire in others, making you a sort of stalking horse for whatever sustenance it requires.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
 From: shepherd274
 Subject: Re: Sensible

That's possible. I work with troubled kids, and they can be pretty excitable. I seem to be able to calm them down some. Maybe my ghost draws off their emotional energies. Maybe she's the one calming them down. I don't know if that's good or bad.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
 From: mojo20
 Subject: bad idea

i think its very strang that youve gone from it 2 she all of a sudden its like youre thinking of the ghost like its a reel person instead of what it is witch is a ghost

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
 From: shepherd274
 Subject: Re: bad idea

At this point, I'll give her the benefit of the doubt. She certainly appears female. In fact, she'd be really good looking — if she were still alive. But she hasn't done any harm. Why should I be angry?

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
 From: shogun213
 Subject: Duh

Umm, BECAUSE SHE'S A FUCKING GHOST?! Because she's a monster? Because she's the thing we exist to destroy? Is that plain enough for you?

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
 From: potter116
 Subject: Jumping to conclusions

Look, I hate to be the one to say this again, but isn't it time to re-assess that sort of position? Yes, some of the things we seen earn the name "monster." Each of us has faced one or more of these things. We've even lost friends or loved ones to them.

On the other hand, we've had friendly and helpful encounters. Doctor, you say that not all of your subjects have been malicious. Bookworm, how much time did you spend with your mysterious "Purple," and how much information did he give you? When we dismiss these creatures as hostile, we cut off a potentially useful or helpful source of information. Perhaps we even risk losing allies.

I'd say follow your gut instinct when it comes to your ghost. If it says to trust her, do it.

From: howitzer114
 To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
 Subject: It's your funeral

Go ahead. Trust a spirit. Just wait. They can, after all. They can afford to be patient. You'll get comfortable with it. You'll trust it. You'll ignore its presence eventually because, well, it's always been there and it hasn't done you any harm. That's when it's going to strike. That's when it's going to hit you. You'll never see it coming.

Subject: He's got a point
 From: soldier91

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Ghosts can turn on you. They can do it in the blink of an eye. Think about what nearly happened to Freezer, the poor bastard. Even the ones that seem nice can snap in an instant. You can't turn your back on them, ever. Not till we clean this place up.

FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
 From: carpenter169
 Subject: While we're on the topic...

...there's one other thing that I didn't get a chance to mention.

Yes, they feed on emotions from everyday folks like you and me. (Well, leaving that definition of "everyday folks" loose.) But there's another way they can feed.

Ghosts don't become ghosts for no reason. They've usually got some kind of purpose that drives them after death. There's something that keeps them going. If there weren't, they'd just be plain ordinary dead folks who don't make a ruckus. They have motivations. Needs, for lack of a better term.

Think about what that entails. First of all, a ghost who's doing what keeps him going will be stronger than a ghost who's just dicking around. He's tied into his purpose and that makes him tough. He feeds on himself.

Great, you say. He's doing what he's got to do and getting down with his bad self. Fantastic. What does that have to do with me? Plenty. It doesn't much matter if a ghost just hangs around, watching over his stamp collection to keep it safe for all eternity. But how about a ghost who was a real son of a bitch in life? Think about the guy whose purpose is to hurt people. He's going to find a way to cut people, and he's going to enjoy it. Plus, it's going to make him stronger, so the next time it's easier and he feeds more.

Let's take it a step further. You want to talk about walking dead? I'll give you one for free here — most of your walking dead are ghosts in human bodies. They're possessors who've taken up permanent residence. That means they feed the same way that normal ghosts do, but with a bonus. If you think it's hard to keep yourself going after you die, you haven't seen anything yet. Think about how pissed off you have to be to climb back into a body permanently. Think about how single-minded that son of a bitch is that he can kick open his own coffin or take over someone else's body. Better yet, think about what it takes to get him that focused. This guy is out for blood. He's out for vengeance. He's got a serious hair up his ass, and he's going to wipe out anything that gets between him and it.

Even better, since he's on the way to do whatever it is he's supposed to do, anything he does along the way counts as part of the process. If you get in his way and he tears your head off, he's doing his job and he gets off on it. *The very act of resistance makes him stronger.*

Do you see where this is going?

Take Freezer's encounter. I'll bet that if you go back through the Tulsa papers, you'll find an account of a man who worked at that Endron plant, probably a big Drillers fan, who died in a tragic work accident. I'll bet fire was involved. I'll also bet that if you look harder, you'll find that the man ultimately responsible for the accident was a guy named Bassett. Maybe he didn't buy good parts or maybe he didn't do safety inspections. It doesn't matter. The dead guy held Bassett responsible.

So they bury the dead guy. Time passes. He sticks around as a ghost with an eye for getting revenge on the son of a bitch who got him killed. But nothing happens. Maybe Bassett's good, maybe he's lucky or maybe he's got friends that protect him from spooks. It doesn't matter.

Bassett is doing fine and our ghost is getting madder and madder. Eventually he gets mad enough to crawl back into his body and sit up. He's got one thing on his mind. He heads off to the plant to find Bassett. Freezer isn't a direct threat, so the walker doesn't waste energy to deal with him. Instead, he gives a warning and heads in.

The guards, who are probably just doing their jobs, get in the way. He deals with the guards. He finds Bassett, whose protections don't seem to be so effective against brute force. Bassett gets chucked out a window. Unfortunately, Bassett doesn't croak immediately, and more guards show up, probably more than the walker thinks it can handle. It decides to cut out. The guards follow, shooting. It snaps, and since it's still technically doing its thing, it gets the extra juice you'd expect. The guards die. The truck is there and it's a convenient escape. Freezer gets his ass handed to him. Eventually, Bassett dies, the walker's job is done and that's that. Final score? One dead Bassett, one dead truck, lots of dead rentacops and Freezer in the hospital. That's not even counting all of the incidental damage to Tulsa that we don't know about. If Freezer tried to fight back, he'd be dead, too.

That's it in a nutshell. Just another ghost taking care of business, right? Think long and hard about whether you want to get in the way of that. That's why you want to hit ghosts, walkers and everything else hard when they're not looking, because if they're doing what they feel they have to do, you're in for the fight of your life.

Subject: News

From: witness1

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

I got this off philadelphia.com this morning. While I can't be certain (Gardener logged in through an anonymous account), the details seem to jibe.

PHILADELPHIA — The body of a 32-year-old Rockledge man was found today in a vacant house on the 3200 block of Alburger Avenue. The man, identified by police as Aidan Loviglio, a teacher at Jenkintown High School, was discovered by a neighbor who heard "banging noises" inside the house. Loviglio's body was face down on the second floor at the head of the stairs.

Police described the crime scene as "grisly" and "horrific." Traces of blood could be found on the walls of several rooms on the second floor, though there were no signs of a struggle and no murder weapon was found. "We are going to investigate this situation to the best of our abilities," said police spokeswoman Marjorie Campion, "and the Philadelphia police department will spare no effort to uncover the killer." Police also noted that there were signs of forced entry to the home. Whether Loviglio or his assailant was responsible has not yet been determined.

In Jenkintown, students, teachers and parents organized a candlelight vigil to honor Loviglio's memory. The popular teacher taught 10th-grade history and was assistant coach of the girl's field hockey team. "We'll miss him terribly," said

senior forward Monica Hirsch. "He was a great coach and a great teacher. It's just horrible that something like this happened to him. All we can do is go out and play like he wanted us to. Hopefully we can make him proud."

The house at 3204 Alburger has long been the subject of ghost stories, though there is no record of violence of any sort ever occurring there until now. Police speculate that Loviglio, who had written several magazine articles about local legends and ghost stories, may have entered the house to research another article. The house is currently unoccupied.

There's an obituary as well, but I don't think I need to post that. Take a moment of silence, people.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: coach41

Subject: Following the Story

I've been keeping up with local accounts of Gardener's death. Apparently the cause was heart failure. There wasn't a scratch on him. He was 32, in good shape and came from a family with no known history of cardiovascular illness.

It looks to me like the spooks did get him. Is anyone up for a road trip to Philadelphia to get the monsters that did this?

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: carpenter169

Subject: Timing

Not a chance. The media is going to be all over this one for a while. Mysterious death, ghost stories, the works. Camera crews from local news stations probably won't hang around past the end of the week, but then the fun starts. You get your documentary film student types who want to record the historic site, guys from cable channels running "Unexplained Murders Month," tourists, self-proclaimed psychics—all sorts of human crud. They'll be there for weeks until there's another murder by a monster somewhere else that doesn't get covered up. Then they'll all flock to Duluth or wherever and leave the place open. I expect the property owner will board the house up and sit tight for a while. It's pretty much unsellable until the media circus dies down.

All this means it's impossible to get in there quietly or without being watched or arrested for trespassing. If the cops feel really nasty, they'll book you for interfering with a crime scene and obstruction of justice, which can add up to a lot of time.

So the best thing to do is to wait, study and remember.



Subject: Any chance this is premature?

From: healer115

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Do we really know it was Gardener? Could we be wrong? I mean, I don't want to wish anyone *else* dead, but are we so certain it's one of us?

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: carpenter169

Subject: Sorry

Gardener mailed me the address privately before he went off and got himself killed. Apparently he was serious about wanting me to double-check his work. On the other hand, no ghosts have shown up on my doorstep claiming to be Gardener, so it's entirely possible that Loviglio was just a possession victim and Gardener is actually the killer.

It's unlikely, of course, but it's the only other possibility I can think of.

From: descent88

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: You Knew?

You knew where he was going ahead of time? You were the only one who knew? It could have been you who did it to cover up the fact that he was right and you were wrong!

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: carpenter169

Subject: Elementary

Ah, brilliant deduction. To win an argument with a bunch of people I've never met, I drop everything from my incredibly busy schedule, hop a flight to Philadelphia, ambush Gardener (who from the newspaper pictures looks like he could have been a football player), splash blood all over the place and scare him to death. Then I fly home and chat with the rest of you like nothing's happened.

Wait, here's a better idea: I just dialed up some of my ghostly friends and told them when and where Gardener was going to be. Then the ghosts took care of everything for me and I stayed home with a perfect alibi. It's ingenious, don't you think, to use things that aren't really there to murder someone? I mean, there's no way, no way at all that stands up in court.

Grow up and grab a clue with both hands. I hate to speak ill of the dead, but he was asking for it. Do a little scrollbar. Read his posts. He charged in there with his fly unzipped and his hands in the air, and he ran into a buzz saw. The spooks probably checked him out the first time he called and were ready for his second trip. I tried telling him, but he was all set to be the lone hero and it got him killed.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: shogun213

Subject: Whose side are you on?

I don't know quite how to put this, but Carpenter, you sound like you're rooting for the other side.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: carpenter169

Subject: Re: Whose side are you on?

I really don't believe this. Hello! I'm not rooting for the ghosts here. I'm pointing out that Gardener was stupid. His death could have been prevented with a little thinking and planning. But that wasn't his style. In this sort of business, going off half-cocked makes you fully fucked.

Stop trying to bust my chops. I'm pragmatic. Gardener is dead. I'll even go so far as to predict that anyone who uses him as a role model will wind up the same way. If that's your thing, go for it. It'll clear up bandwidth. On the other hand, my offer to share what I know still stands.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: shogun213

Subject: Oh please enlighten us

Share your wisdom with us, oh great and wise one. You can even call me "Grasshopper" while you're at it.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: carpenter169

Subject: Heh

You sound like you're a prime candidate to pick up where Gardener left off.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: potter116

Subject: Enough

Let's stop the bickering. Carpenter, if you have something to say, say it. Everyone else, stop baiting him at least long enough to see what we've got here.

DEAD MEN TELL TALES

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: carpenter169

Subject: Everything you know...

...about haunted houses and haunting sites is wrong.

First of all, stop thinking like a living person about them.

I know everything you know about haunted houses. They're big, they're lonely, they generally sit way outside of town, and in 1884 old Major Rosencrantz went nuts and bludgeoned his daughter-in-law to death in the drawing room. Does that sound familiar? Of course it does, but that's the cliché. In monster movies, clichés always hold true.

We're not in a monster movie.

If you were a ghost doomed to spend eternity wandering one particular place (and we'll get to that assumption one of these days), what would you look for in a home? Would you want lots of space? How about minimal pedestrian traffic? I mean, think about it — even the most notorious ghosts are damned shy about showing up, especially when there are cameras around. Even the nasty ones don't seem to want to be on-stage all the time.

So far, we're two for two on criteria, right? Those haunted mansions out in the country offer everything a ghost could want. There's no regular company and plenty of room to move around. Of course, you do get the occasional looter or kids looking for a place to do it, but let's face it: They're fun to fuck with. If I'm a ghost and some horny punk comes along, I'm going to enjoy making him pee his pants.

Now think about the other big ingredient in a "standard" haunting site: a murder or some such. Why would a ghost hang around where he got murdered? Because he has a particular fondness for the place where he bled to death in agony? I don't think so. No, he's there because it means something to him. It's important. If dying wasn't the most important thing he did in his life, it was in the top two. The fact that the place is important to him and has a strong emotional attachment means that it's a powerful place for him. He's tied to it.

Now, does that mean that the only haunted murder sites are secluded? Of course not. They're all over cities. Open your eyes and look and you'll see them. Besides, a hell of a lot more people get capped in Cabrini Green than in Pennsylvania Amish country. Naturally, there should be more ghosts in cities, particularly in parts of cities with high murder rates. But we don't see them, do we? You know why? Because those ghosts aren't there. They have to hide themselves better in the city. Out in the country there's nothing to do but wait for the latest intruder, so those ghosts get cocky, bored and noisy. They show off. City ghosts don't have that luxury. They keep a low profile. That's why you don't hear as much about hauntings in town.

"But wait," I hear you say. "Carpenter, I've heard stories about haunted houses where no one was murdered, but someone died of a lingering illness. And then there are all those stories about ghosts haunting graveyards. No one ever gets murdered in a graveyard." To which I say, "Ah, you're paying attention."

Remember why I said ghosts hang around where they were murdered? Because those places *matter* to the ghosts. They matter a lot. If you hacked your lungs out in an attic bed over three painful years, you'd have a strong emotional tie to that attic. If you were buried in a plot that your family came to visit every week for ten years, that place would matter to you. I'd suspect it even happens with good feelings, too — houses where people lived happily for forty years — but I'm generally a negative person, so I wouldn't know about that sort of thing.

What does matter, and what I do know about, is that the basic premise holds. A ghost is almost certain to haunt a place that had some heavy-duty significance to him in life or in death, though probably in life. Mind you, he may not even have a choice in the matter. If the connection's that strong, he keeps on coming back to the haunted spot because he can't help himself. There's no other place that feels as good or as powerful to him.

If he's smart, he doesn't fight it. If he's lucky, he's got a couple of haunts. But not all spooks are smart or lucky.

So let's sum up. A haunt is a place that meant a lot to a ghost, and now he's pinned to it somehow. If it was a place where a lot of people kicked off or felt strongly, like an old hospital, then you get a lot of spooks tied to the place.

Of course, the flip side of all this is that if a ghost feels that strongly about a place, he resents intrusions — a lot. If he can't do anything about an intruder, he's going to duck and cover. If he *can* do something about it, watch out. That's where you get your classic hauntings, manifestations and the like. They're all malicious attempts to get us out of what is now the property of the dead. I can't say I blame them. Do you want strangers stomping on the furniture in your bedroom? The dead don't, either. So that, combined with the need to feed, is where it all comes from.

It's not just places, though. It can be people or things, too. Anything that you can imagine that means a lot to someone can continue to mean a lot after he kicks off. A wedding band? Sure, especially if the ghost cheated on his wife and felt guilty about it for thirty years. A stuffed animal? If the ghost kept it with her long enough, though not many kids seem to make it as ghosts very long. Really, it can be anything at all — or anyone. If a guy loved a girl all his life and never worked up the balls to tell her so, she may be what keeps his sorry ass around.

Then again, if a woman betrayed you and you died hating her, well, that may be enough to keep you around, too. It's variable. In the end, it all comes down to depth and strength of feeling. If someone dies with a really strong feeling, a hate with a capital H or a love with a capital L, he's got the makings of a ghost. The feeling can be attached to anyone or anything, but it needs an attachment, at least at first. Once the ghost is strong enough to detach from the stuff that originally held him, all bets are off.

All this means ghosts have a weakness. If a ghost hangs around because he loves or hates or misses his teddy bear, what do you think will get rid of him? Set the goddamned bear on fire! When it's gone, the ghost is gone, too. If a spirit is tied to more than one thing, you get to go on a scavenger hunt. The ghost himself may lead you to them. Whack one and he retreats to the next to protect it. Destroy that and it's lather, rinse and repeat until he's gone. The best thing about this is that you generally don't have to go up against the ghost himself, just the things that matter to him. All of you who want to tangle with poltergeists can line up on the left. I'd rather find his old fountain pen and toss it in an incinerator.

You can also take it to the next step. A ghost who isn't tied into a rock or a tree or a picture or whatever is probably tied to a house. Houses burn. If someone had taken a match to Gardener's house years ago, he'd be alive today. Yeah, it's arson, but then again, how many people here are already on the run from cops? What's a little kerosene on the front stoop between friends? You can call the fire department to keep the blaze from spreading, if you're that concerned.

Even better, it hurts the bastards to watch a place burn. They know they're losing their ties to this world and they can't do a damned thing about it. A rain of frogs doesn't put out a blazing frame house.

So here's your chance for a little payback as well as a good deed. Balance one lousy stinking house that probably hasn't been lived in for years against the community benefit of getting rid of the damn things. It doesn't hurt that it's fun, too.

That leads us to the ultimate question: What to do if one of these things latches onto a person. That's tough, there's only one answer in the end.

I won't spell it out for you. Just consider numbers.

Something to bear in mind is that this sort of thing isn't unique to invisible ghosts. Walkers and hidden have the same weaknesses, though in different forms. Walkers tend to carry whatever's most important to them around with them. It's never bigger than a breadbox, and sometimes it's alive. (An easy way to check is to look to see if there's a crazy animal around. No sane dog is going to stay within a city block of a walker, but a crazy one might actually be its ticket to ride.) If you can spot that, it's your lucky day, because it's a hell of a lot easier to take that item or schnauzer or whatever out than it is to take care of a walker.

I have no doubts that the one Freezer met could have tipped over his truck if it really wanted to, and I'm just as sure that if he'd set fire to its hat, it would have fallen over. (The hat's still worth hanging onto, though. There's power in it now.)

If you deal with a walker's focus, for lack of a better word, it's history. It goes back to the other side and the body collapses, which means you get to explain to police why you're standing over a three-month-dead body and holding the remains of a pocketwatch. On the other hand, it's better than the cops standing over what's left of *your* corpse once the walker's through with you.

(Walkers are some of the scariest things on the planet. They're stronger than people. They're faster than people. They're tougher than people. Knock them down and they get back up. Shoot them and they keep coming. They can do anything a poltergeist can do, and they're mean about it. Their only saving grace is that sometimes they hate rots more than they hate people, and then it's a pleasure watching them tear into the bad guys.)

Hidden are a little trickier. They don't necessarily carry around their hearts on their sleeves, though a lot of them can simply be thought of as better-preserved walkers. Sometimes with them you have to go hunting to find out what to whack. That can be hard, because the spirit that's in a hidden may not be the one that goes with the body. Walkers seem to go back to their own dead bodies, but hidden get stuck with the luck of the draw.

God must have a sense of humor, because normally the match is at least vaguely appropriate, but every so often you get the spirit of some biker stuck in the body of

a little girl. The power flows into the hidden regardless of the shape it's got, which means the little girl fights like, well, an undead Hell's Angel who's too pissed off to stay dead. It's sobering and it's scary. No matter how hard you try, you're still going to see a little girl, even when the monster inside tries to splatter your brains.

On the other hand, what we call shamblers aren't even worth the effort. Most of them are those dumb ghosts we talked about before. They don't comprehend enough to know they're tied to stuff, and it's not really worth the effort. What's dangerous about these guys is that they can soak up and dish out a lot of hurting, and they don't ever stop. They're too dumb to know they're hurt. Plus, they move in packs, which means the time you take to deal with one lets the four others get you. Deal with these guys from a distance if you can. The other danger with shamblers is that every so often, they're created by other types of monsters to do their dirty work. Rots in particular love making shamblers. So if you feel lucky, follow a pack of these things. They might lead you to someone more... interesting.

To wrap everything up in a neat little package: ghosts, walkers and hidden are all vulnerable. There are things and places that can be used to hurt them without ever risking direct confrontation. I suggest you use them.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: potter116

Subject: Drastic measures

I can't agree with what you say, Carpenter. There have to be less *permanent* ways of evicting an unwanted resident. After all, you said you were possessed, and yet here you are. For my own part, I've been able to use several different methods to force a possessing spirit to leave, either by suggestion or forcibly when absolutely necessary. You can draw the ghost out, coerce him or just yank him by the scruff of the neck in extreme cases.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: carpenter169

Subject: Re: Drastic measures

Yeah, yeah. Don't throw my own words back at me, dammit.

Subject: The hat

From: healer115

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

So that hat Freezer took could have some sort of supernatural influence still on it? Has anyone heard from Freezer in the past few days? Carpenter, what if he puts it on? What would it do to him?

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: carpenter169

Subject: Re: The hat

I'm not sure. It might act as a magnet for ghosts or it might get him possessed by the one that used to own it.

Hey, I warned him. Don't blame me.

REVELATION

Subject: Carpenter

From: witness1

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Ladies and gentlemen, we have a problem and it's logging on to the list on a regular basis.

You may not believe this, but I've got a little story to tell about Carpenter, and it comes from an excellent source.

The other night, I was going out for groceries when I got that hairs-on-the-back-of-the-neck sensation that says, "You're being followed." By now, all of us know not to disregard that feeling, but to pay it careful heed. I kept walking and *saw* something very disturbing.

There was a ghost walking very deliberately behind me. It was a little boy. He was a horrific figure, eyes bulging in fear, mouth locked in a scream, hands covered in blood up to the wrist. I turned, ready to deal with it, when I realized that I'd seen him before.

The figure was a boy I'd known as a child. I hadn't known him well. No one in our class did. He was quiet and small, didn't do particularly well, and he often had bruises or black eyes. In those days, however, you didn't comment on that sort of thing. One day, he just stopped coming to class. No one really wondered what happened to him. I guess I'd just learned, because here he was, waving frantically to me.

I tried to remember his name and raised my hands to show that I meant no harm. To my surprise, it tried to speak! No words were audible, and it vanished in frustration.

I went straight home and looked up what I could. His name turned out to be Samuel Fox. As I had guessed, he'd been murdered and his father vanished. It barely made the newspapers back in the day. The father was never found and the police wrote it off. Apparently Samuel hadn't written it off, or so it seemed.

Samuel's image appeared to me several times over the next week-and-a-half. Each time he seemed to be trying to say something, but he lacked the strength to get out more than a syllable or two. Finally, I got a great idea. I motioned for the ghost to follow me, walked into a local Internet cafe (I certainly wasn't going to bring him into my house), and sat down at a computer. "You show me which key to hit and I'll hit it," I said to the empty air. The clerk looked at me with derision, but I didn't care. The ghost nodded excitedly.

Half an hour later, this is what we had:

carpenterisoneofthedeaddheisknownherefearedhereheisevil!!!

Or, in other words, "Carpenter is one of the dead. He is known here, feared here. He is evil!!!"

With that, Samuel got a terrified look on his face and vanished. I have no idea what happened to him. That left me with a frightening dilemma.

On one hand, I've been left with the feeling that this site is supposed to be safe. We're supposed to be free of the

ravages of our enemies here. On the other, Ichmail disproves that rather handily. On one hand, Carpenter could be giving us very useful information. On the other, we have the word of a ghost that he's not what he seems. Then again, it could be that the information Carpenter gives us is so damning that the other side needs to discredit him and sends the spirits of children to do it. It's an intriguing puzzle, once you get past the fear that it inspires.

My gut tells me something, though. All those little inconsistencies in Carpenter's story add up to trouble. It tells me we've been had.

Carpenter, what do you have to say for yourself?

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: cabbie22

Subject: More Information

Witness, I think you're right. I think this son of a bitch has been playing us for suckers.

I was doing research at the public library and stumbled across something. If you look hard enough in old Chicago newspapers, you find stories about a small-time legbreaker and bagman named Dennis "The Carpenter" Maxwell. He was famous for nailing people's hands to tables to get them to talk. That's what got him his name. If you dig a little further you find more stories about him in books on the Chicago mob. They say he got sold out by his girlfriend, the daughter of the capo he was working for, and that he was gunned down right in front of her. Mind you, Maxwell wasn't important enough to make the front page. He got two columns on page three, and an obituary. The papers were full of that sort of thing in 1934.

There's other stuff in those old files, too, like Maxwell's testimony in a few assault cases. It's funny, Carpenter. Those transcripts read like what you've been typing here.

I think you're a dead man. I think they put a bullet in your chest 50 years ago and you've been hanging around ever since to make a fool of us.

You've been dropping clues all along. You've been dropping clues because you thought you were so smart, and now I've got you. I'm going to find you and I'm going to take you down. Laugh while you can. Laugh over getting Gardener killed. You're not going to be laughing long.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: carpenter169

Subject: Unmasked

I'm impressed, both of you. You got me. Witness, I'm surprised your little friend was actually able to communicate, though I'm gratified that I still have a reputation over there. I wouldn't worry too much about him. He's made some very powerful enemies. They're angry with him and they're going to come for him. Say your goodbyes now, because he's not going to last.

But we're not here to talk about one more pathetic little ghost who's made his own bed. We're talking about something much more interesting: me.



Am I dead, Cabbie? Yes. Did that cold-hearted bitch get me killed in 1934? Yes. Have I been lying to you all along? Yes and no. If I'd come on here and told you that I was a ghost, and not a particularly well-liked one, would you have listened to me? Of course not. You would have tripped over yourselves lining up to try to nail me. I don't think you'd do very well, but I know you'd try. I'm very impressed by all of the miracles you've been granted, but none of you has proved you can soak up a slug the way I can, and I was a very good shot even before I died.

I'll tell you what the deal is, though. I have something you want. You have something I want. We can work together. Who's willing to make a deal with the devil? I can show you every weakness the restless dead have. I can tell you every trick they know and every trap they fall into. I can tell you how to destroy them, once and for all.

You want that, don't you? Cabbie, you'd be much happier not to look in your back seat and see that old man with the worms in his eyes, wouldn't you? Doctor, they got your partner killed. They're a blight on the face of the world and they shouldn't be allowed to go on any longer. That's why I was brought here. I'm here to show you how to wipe them out.

Why? It's simple. It has to do with that murderous witch who got me killed. Her family's got connections. They've got connections to people who know people

who know bloodsuckers. Those bastards know ghosts and make zombies. And I want to hurt them, and hurt them bad. You want to know what I've been feeding on for over 50 years? Hate, pure and simple hate. You try that for fire in your belly. I promise you'll feel the burn.

The rest of you, I couldn't care less about. I'm not here to break your glasses or put spiders in your beds. I'm a professional. I'm here to do a job. You can help me get what I want and you can benefit from it. You can ply the lessons I'm willing to teach long after I'm gone.

Or not.

Think about it. The offer's only open until she dies. After that, you're no good to me.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: cabbie22

Subject: You son of a bitch

Carpenter, so help me God, you're dead. I will find you and put you down like a dog. Count the hours, you bastard, because that's all you've got left.

Subject: Enough

From: witness1

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

The next person, no matter who they might be, who utters a threat here is gone. Banished. Exiled. I don't

care who you are or how justified you think you are. I will not stand for that sort of thing. Period.

Carpenter, you've lied to us. You've misrepresented yourself and, for all that I know, presented information that has the potential to get people killed. By all rights, I should do exactly what half the people here want to do. But that's not me. At least, not yet.

I'm giving you one chance and one chance only. If you screw it up, not only are you gone, but you're going to jump to the head of the list of every person here. Sooner or later, one of us *will* get you.

Start talking. Lay out the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God. Or God will be the only one who can help you.

Do we have an understanding?

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: carpenter169

Subject: Bravado

Okay, let's make a deal.

First of all, understand that I am not afraid of you, Witness. No one on this glorified debate club scares me, though a few of you make me laugh. So don't get the idea that I'm knuckling under or giving in. If you came after me, I'd kill more of you than you have numbers to assign. What I do, I do for my own purposes. You know what some of them are. Some of you know more than that by now (and I'll let the rest of you ponder what the hell *that* means).

I will level with you, though. Why? Because I want to and because I think it will get me what I want. Less competition, for one thing.

So here it is, the straight scoop, the news flash all you cut-rate snoops have been waiting for. Read it and weep.

In the beginning, there were the lands of the living and the lands of the dead, and never the twain did meet. Well, at least not very often. Ghosts lived in the underworld and occasionally messed with you breathing types. The very rare idiot wandered into the lands of the dead and occasionally got back out, but that was it.

In the lands of the dead you had, big surprise, dead people. Ghosts. Some of them were nice, some of them weren't. Some of them tried to hang on to what they knew, and some tried to tear it all down. Some built cities and pretended they were still alive. Some even managed to climb back into their bodies for a little while and became what you call walkers. They've been doing that for thousands of years, though. Check your legends. You'll find them.

(I could tell you more, but you wouldn't believe me. Your minds aren't built for it.)

So that was the status quo for a very, very long time. The living didn't bother the dead too much, except when you tore down old buildings or threw out trash that just happened to be a ghost's lifeline to reality. And

the living didn't mind the dead except when walls bled and spiders came out of Grandma's mouth.

Unfortunately, nothing good — or even mediocre — lasts forever. Something happened. Something bad. What exactly that bad thing was, I'm not sure. I've talked to a handful of sources and they tell me different things. Some say it was a war among the dead involving weapons that simply shouldn't have existed. Some say rots caused it by trying to feed on victims a second time and walking into the lands of the dead. Some say it was a living scientist who tried something he shouldn't have. And some say that one of the "walkers" — the story I heard was that it was the very first, still seeking her true love after four thousand years — managed to cross between worlds at exactly the wrong time and tore the whole damned thing wide open.

That's when everything went, quite literally, to hell. A storm blew up strong enough to topple everything. It tore through the place and ripped ghosts to nothingness in seconds. Worst of all: The wall between the living and dead fell.

Like I said, I don't know why it happened. It doesn't matter. The damage had been done and the world would never be the same again. With the winds of that storm behind them, hundreds, thousands, God knows how many ghosts were blown into this world. Suddenly the dead are back! How's it going?

So, that's where your infestation of the walking dead comes from. That's what's behind all of this. The dead have come back to pay the living a visit, and maybe take care of some unfinished business. Eruptions like that little shindig in Canada are just ripple effects from the initial disaster. But in the meantime, you have a metric fuckload of ghosts in houses, bodies, cars, pictures, dogs and cats — and they're waiting for you.

That's right. They're waiting for you.

Check the date, kids. Your change was recent, wasn't it? For all of you? Maybe I don't know exactly what happened, but five will get you ten it was on or right after the very day that the lands of the dead went to hell.

Think about that! You're the fucking janitor — or more appropriately his mop, bucket and broom! Your lives are forfeit to clean up the goddam mess!

So why am I telling you this? I want to make the fight a little more even. Why? Because I hate you all, but I hate that Sforza bitch more, and this amuses me while I wait to lay my hands on her. So go ahead, destroy yourselves for my amusement.

In the meantime, I leave you to your own devices to think it all over. Witness, at this point I don't think you could keep me off here if you tried. I have business to transact. But I'll do you the courtesy of stepping away for a while, just to give you breathing room.

Of course, I can't make any of you believe all this. Shit, maybe I made it up just to get my way....



CHAPTER 3: STRANGER IN A DEAD LAND

Wisdom is before him that hath understanding; but the eyes of a fool are in the ends of the earth.

— Proverbs 17:24

FOOL'S ERRAND

Subject: Hell on Earth

From: shaka74

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

I made a mistake in coming here. I knew it as soon as I stepped off the plane and saw a herd of goats grazing outside the airfield. Haiti has lots of goats. Unfortunately, goats are just about all this place has in abundance. Goats and misery.

Recent events in and around my own base of operations, plus centuries of tradition, pointed here as a possible ground zero for the plague of "walkers" we face. Given the attitudes some of you hold, it made sense to me that someone sympathetic to the plight of black people should come here to investigate. Suddenly, though, I find myself in a place that demands more sympathy than I believe I possess. Maybe more than is humanly possible.

Once I decided to make the trip, I learned what I could about the place and got a French-English dictionary. I knew that Haiti is the western hemisphere's poorest nation, but the gap between having that fact in

your head and having the reality all around you is huge. Blacks in the U.S. used to talk about economic oppression forcing them to behave "like crabs in a barrel": everyone clawing at everyone else to get to the top. In Haiti, everyone's struggling to get to the top of a dung heap. The children here all look like they've missed some meals, and the adults look ready to do anything to feed their kids.

The lucky people here have something to sell. In Port-au-Prince, if that something is a vehicle, they offer "taxi" rides from the airport into town. People were nearly fighting for my business. To draw as little attention as possible, I rode in the back of ramshackle truck with nearly a dozen other folks and their luggage. I let them drive me past my hotel, got out at the next one and trudged back with my duffel bag. As soon as I got off the truck, people were trying to sell me stuff. Cloth. Unidentifiable vegetables. Goat meat. Time *alone*. I kept walking.

I had intentionally chosen a dump to stay in, mostly to maintain a low profile and avoid other Americans. I chose too well. This place is borderline-uninhabitable, but it does have second-story access through my window to other buildings, in case I need to leave by some

route other than the “lobby.” Another thing that worked better than expected was arriving close to nightfall. Night here is damn dark. Most of the streetlights don’t work even when there is electricity, which goes out several times a night. I thought the power was back on when flickering lights from outside woke me. It was actually flames from the heaps of trash that line the streets. I wonder whether they caught fire spontaneously or somebody lit them.

I lay on my camping cot and watched patterns of orange shift against the grimy ceiling tiles. The last thing that went through my mind before I fell asleep was, *if it’s true that monsters subsist on human misery, this place must be their paradise.*

ODD MAN OUT

Subject: By the way, I’m alive

From: shaka74

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

I just saw the follow-up roll call message and me listed as MIA. Sorry to worry anybody. I was traveling a lot before I got to Haiti. Let me tell you, it’s not like what I expected here, but I’m not sure it’s what I feared in my last message. To be honest, I’m still not sure *what’s* going on.

All of you have played “Find the Critter,” right? Activated your sight in the middle of a crowd and scanned people on the street for signs of anything... unusual? Well, I did it today in the middle of a market. I had trouble finding anyone *normal*.

Okay, maybe that’s an exaggeration, but I just froze as the foot traffic moved around me. It seemed as if every other person was surrounded by a purple or lavender glow, and that the ones who weren’t had spirit passengers. The primary exceptions were the non-natives: A couple of uniformed U.N. monitors, some tourists, and that was about it. When somebody bumped into me, my heart skipped a beat. I left there fast, but things were no different outside the market. I started to calm down when none of the people I stared at responded to my attention. But I knew I needed to go somewhere to think. I wound up in the cafe at the Holiday Inn. My hand was trembling even before I picked up my espresso.

I’d used the sight on my waiter, on the hotel clerks and on the bellhop as I came in, all of which left me feeling cross-eyed on top of having the shakes. They all looked normal and it made me wonder why. They all seemed native and sounded native, though I guess they could all be from elsewhere in the Caribbean. What was the deal here? What was the connection — or the lack of one? Why were the streets full of folks touched by the invisible? And people indoors free of such influence? Would I be safe from possession inside but not on the street? Could it be that simple? I learned it

wasn’t soon enough, when I saw a white man enter the hotel and a spirit exit him immediately. The man stood there for a second, looked around, then asked a bellhop what hotel this was.

I decided to go on the offensive, threw down too much money and stood up to follow the thing, which looked like it might once have been a young Haitian woman. It — or she — disappeared through a wall, so I went searching for a door that might get me where she’d gone. The only candidate was one that led to the hotel offices, and they appeared to be occupied. I hung around the hallway until an employee asked if I was lost. In bad French, I asked where the men’s room was and the guy led me back to the cafe.

Once I got back, I realized how wrung-out I felt. I had steeled myself against possession as I set off after the ghost-woman and kept up my resolve while I waited for her to show again. At that point, though, I don’t think I could’ve fought off a kitten. At least the waiter was glad to see me again, so I settled down for food and another coffee. This time, I sat with a slightly better view of the lobby. Several hours, too many espressos and one garden salad later, the dead woman reappeared. She waited in the lobby, the way somebody might wait for a cab, until she climbed aboard a hotel employee who was leaving work. The woman’s uniform made her easy to follow outside, which was a good thing: I didn’t feel ready to muster up the sight.

I took the chance that the dead woman would stick with the live one until they got wherever they were going. Of course, the bigger chance I was taking was picking up a passenger of my own and never knowing it. I clenched my teeth and tried to look like a bad ride. Maybe I was right and the dead only “changed partners” indoors.

The woman’s first destination turned out to be a crowded street corner, which I realized soon enough was a bus stop. I was relieved to be able to observe her at rest. After waiting there for a while, I tried the sight and once again found myself in a sea of black people, a few with purple auras and many more with see-through black people riding them. This time, I watched calmly while we waited. It was still unnerving to be surrounded this way, but the dead weren’t *doing* anything. I figured I wouldn’t either, for the time being. Plus, they had that whole outnumbering thing going.

About the time the bus (I use the term generously) showed up, I had begun to pick out some patterns. Many of the living people who got on had riders of their own. Unlike the hotel worker, most folks were dressed in old-looking, heavily worn clothes. To the extent I could tell, *all* of the spirits were attired that way, too. Some of the dead even

wore what looked like sack cloth, the kind of stuff slaves might have worn.

The hotel worker took a seat just behind the driver. I could see her from my standing position in the middle of the bus, which was full. I wanted to be closer to her without being *too* close. As people got off, I inched my way forward. The route took us through some incredibly congested areas (a lot of the cars on Port-au-Prince streets look abandoned). Things cleared up as our surroundings became more rural.

We stopped for a man who ran waving to catch up, out in the middle of nowhere. By then I was nearly opposite the woman. This is what I saw: She was seated face forward — it was a very old bus, not like American ones where the front seats face each other across the aisle. The dead woman was leaning forward, almost detached from the hotel worker, and was touching the driver on one shoulder. I probably should have been alarmed, but I wasn't. I just felt really sad, and I'm still not sure why. I concentrated and I had this flash of the woman, not dead but alive, and the driver I think, not as a man but as a child. She made the same gesture toward him as he got on a different bus, in an earlier time.

That's when the driver slammed on the brakes. The mass of people on board surged forward, but none of us fell. I thought the dead woman might be to blame for stopping us till I saw the truck blocking the road ahead. A pissed-off looking white soldier armed with a rifle got out of it, stormed over to the bus and banged on the door.

Everybody on board — even the ghosts — watched him step in. I was afraid, not *of* this guy but *for* him. He had blood on his face and neck. Not his, I think, because it was splattered. It didn't flow the way a head wound would. He said, "There's a sniper on this bus. Everybody off, now! Line up outside! Let's go, let's go, *now!*"

As passengers — who didn't need English to understand the angry man's gestures — left the bus, another soldier separated the men from the women. Inside the army truck (which had a bullet hole in its windshield), a third soldier attended to what looked like a wounded man. The one with the rifle walked in front of the men and stared at each, then turned and came back. That put him near the door of the bus and the driver, who was still in his seat. He pointed his rifle at the driver and yelled, "Who—," but he didn't finish.

The soldier threw down his gun and started screaming. He fell to the ground and slapped at himself like he was covered with bugs or something. Just as the thought occurred to me, all of the soldiers *were* being swarmed by *scorpions!* I used the sight and saw the dead woman and another ghost — one that had been riding a passenger

— gesturing at the men. All the soldiers were writhing on the ground and screaming bloody murder. I knew that's just what this would turn into if I didn't do something fast, so I ran to the driver, shook him and yelled, "Make them stop." The driver looked genuinely frightened, just as I hoped he would in order to make the dead woman turn her powers on me instead. She did, sort of. The driver appeared to be crawling with snakes that he was oblivious to. I think they were meant to frighten me, but I knew they weren't real.

None of that helped the soldiers, though, who still had dozens of *real* scorpions stinging them. I noticed that a lot of passengers (ones with and without ghosts) had run away. The one whose rider was my bet for scorpion wrangler just stood there, smiling.

I concentrated and just *knew* in my gut that the scorpion wrangler wouldn't hurt me because I wasn't white. I grabbed a rifle and fired into the ground at the his feet. That got the attention of the man *and* his ghostly companion. I pointed the rifle and said, "Go! *Allez! allez!*" He didn't hesitate, he just ran. The scorpions were gone from the soldiers, but all three were swelling terribly. I ran to the truck and grabbed the radio. A frantic voice said, "Delta Bravo, do you copy?"

"Your men are out here on—" I yelled at the bus driver, who looked petrified, and asked the name of the road. "—on the Laurendine Highway. They need medical attention right now." Naturally, the operator wanted to play twenty questions. I just ignored her and used a bandanna to wipe my prints off the radio, the rifle and the door handle. I wasn't surprised to find the cloth stained with blood when I was done. The soldier in the truck appeared to have been shot, and he was way beyond medical attention.

What I really wanted to do then was take the driver and the hotel worker someplace and ask some questions of my own. I was afraid to be anywhere near the bus, though, in case the army guys got there soon. So I started walking back to town and hoped it wasn't more than a few miles. I figured I'd track down the mystery couple later.

By the time I got back to my hotel room, I'd thought a lot about the day's events. Getting this much down will have to be enough though, despite all the questions I have. It's time to sleep.

REFLECTION

Subject: Many theories, few facts

From: shaka74

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

I've thought more about everything I discussed in my last message. I have some ideas but that's all they are. I'll throw out a few to see if anything sticks. Your comments are invited.

1. The dead and the folks with the auras that Bookworm says bring strange luck seem to be much more common here than stateside. The widespreadness (is that a word? you know what I mean) of both types took me by surprise, but it shouldn't have, really. Many, many sources describe Haiti's population as 90% Catholic, 100% voodoo. What I knew about the history of voodoo in general and zombies in particular got me thinking that the current state of the world could have had its start here. Maybe there was some supernatural accident in Haiti. Or maybe someone here purposely cursed the rest of the world. After seeing the living conditions of most Haitians, I'm not sure I'd blame them for doing it. Or maybe Papa Legba and the rest of the loas (the spirits that voodoo devotees worship) are just restless.

2. How aware are the people here of ghostly presence(s)? A lot of voodoo is ancestor worship and inviting spirits to ride the living, but I thought that last part happened only during special ceremonies. Maybe all the folks I saw had participated in such ceremonies recently, but there's a whole lot of riding going on. Plus, the dead woman from the hotel was inside a white tourist *before* she climbed into the hotel worker. Considering that I've been inside a limited number of

buildings here (most of them hotels), I can't say for certain, but there seem to be more spirits riding people outdoors than indoors. What's that all about?

Is it possible that some of the powers associated with voodoo (a politically incorrect term here, BTW) have really been ghosts using the very powers we've encountered? Which brings me back to my earlier question: To what extent do people here understand what's inside them? Scorpion man didn't seem at all surprised or upset by what his "passenger" did to the soldiers. But did he know who was doing it? Like I said, he seemed to be into watching the soldiers suffer. What if the "voodoo doll" is nothing but ghost magic practiced by a dead person through the guise of a living person?

On the other hand, the hotel worker seemed much more... I don't know, out of it. She barely responded to what happened. All her responses seemed to be governed by the dead woman, whose only concern appeared to be the well-being of the bus driver. Was she his mother? His grandmother? Or did I glimpse an encounter between two people who are *both* long-dead, but the child's soul had been reincarnated? Maybe I *should* have made the two of them come with me and questioned them. At least I know where to find them.



3. Why do I think all this is important? Maybe the dead are eventually going to be as common everywhere as they are here. Maybe the sort of religion practiced here might pacify some of the angrier souls we encounter. I'm not suggesting that vodou should become a world religion by any means, but surely it's occurred to some of you that by dying to protect the living from the dead, we — hunters — may join the opposition. No, I haven't met the ghost of a hunter yet — at least, I'm pretty sure I haven't — but that doesn't mean I never will. I don't know if the idea frightens any of you, but it scares the shit out of me.

DRAWING CONNECTIONS

Subject: More questions

From: shaka74

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

I went out two days ago in hopes of finding a vodou ritual under way. No luck so far. What I did find just adds more confusion to the mix.

All my research into larger vodou ceremonies characterized them as rural phenomena. Okay, I figured, let's make another visit to the countryside.

After another long wait, I caught the bus at the same stop in hopes of encountering the same driver. There was a much younger man driving this time. Maybe the other guy's shift was over or it was his day off. When we got to the place where the army truck blocked the road, I tried to ask the driver how much farther to the end of the line, but I don't think he understood me. Anyway, the end of the line turned out to be literally that, where the road had collapsed for some reason. There was a turnaround worn in the grass alongside the road. A few people were waiting, and that's where I got off. There was a foot path worn into the hillside, so I followed it. It got wilder and steeper with every step. I passed a few shacks that seemed abandoned (though it's hard to tell here). None of them looked especially promising. Not that I was sure what I was looking for, anyway.

Of course, when I did find what I was looking for, I didn't even know what it was — or how I recognized it.

I had noticed elaborate symbols painted on the exteriors of many houses: a heart-shaped grid pierced with a sword, totem-type figures somewhere between a stick man and a railroad-crossing sign, intersecting zigzags, and others I can't even describe. Then, as twilight approached, I saw one that took my breath away. Painted in white on a bright blue house was something I immediately took to be a symbol for "death" — what I now know to be *our* symbol. Then I saw the crude face, done in red, inside the circle. It was basically

a skull-and-crossbones. Strange, I thought, how I'd never made that association before. Even stranger was when I later realized I knew the simple version (without a face) to be our sign for death. Though I had seen others, that particular symbol was one I had never used or even seen used!

I decided to hang around just out of sight to see who might come or go. It was just after nightfall when the door opened and a tall Haitian man exited. I used the sight on him and saw that he was a blood-pawn, some night creature's helping hand. He looked around and then set off downhill. I waited ten minutes or so to see if he might return, then I left my hiding place and walked right up to the front door. Just before I reached it, I concentrated for a glimpse of myself inside the place. What I got was a mostly empty room, so I kept going.

There was no latch, so I pushed the door open and walked in. To call the contents sparse would be an understatement. There was a folded cot, a broom and a coat rack. Atop the coat rack was a black top hat. The "closet" was the wall to the right of the door. Several items of clothing hung there on pegs, including a jacket with tails that was protected by a cellophane bag.

I didn't linger. After all, where there's a puppet, there might be a bloodsucker, right? If I had to deal with one of them, I wanted to be prepared. Also, I wanted to research the symbol outside the house. So I went back to town, thinking about more efficient means of transportation the whole way.

Back in my room, I realized that I should have looked at a few more books and a few less websites. Even the Holiday Inn's tourist books offered more information. The skull-and-crossbones turned out to be a *vévé*, a symbol used in vodou to open the way into this world for spirits. In fact, I'm embarrassed to admit that nearly all the emblems I described before turn out to be sacred markings of one sort or another, so nearly every building I saw in the countryside was probably some kind of temple. None of my online sources had shown *vévés*, even though several mentioned them. A few other *vévés* are similar enough to imbued sign language to make me wonder all the more about the exact nature of the Heralds — and us.

Maybe I was hasty in saying vodou shouldn't be a world religion. Maybe the Heralds *want* things everywhere to be more like they are in Haiti — spirit and material worlds "closer together," more reconciled. Could it be the Heralds *are* loas? I mean, didn't Traveler quote Oracle once as saying something like "the angel is inside me"? What if our sign language works the way *vévés* do, or are supposed to, and creates bridges or doorways for the Heralds? And if that's true, is it

necessarily a good thing? I'm having trouble seeing what benefit vodou has brought Haiti on a temporal level — but that's seldom a fair measure of any religion. Overall, there seems to be relative peace between the living and the dead here, despite all the ghosts riding around inside of people. Then again, I bet those soldiers wouldn't think things are too peaceful between the living and the dead. That is, if you could get those guys to believe the truth of what happened to them.

Thinking about those soldiers and the scorpions and all reminds me of something I saw in the newspaper. Sometime last year, didn't Congress get its way and force a total withdrawal of U.S. troops from Haiti? Does anybody recall for sure? If that's the case, what's the military still doing here? Besides stirring up trouble with the locals, that is? I wonder if there's a racial component to antagonizing the ghosts here. Could it be that some of these ghosts died in one of the earlier U.S. invasions (look 'em up for yourself) and are just delivering some payback? Or that they were slaves of the French? Things sure were calmer on that bus before the soldiers showed up.

FUMBLING FOR ANSWERS

Subject: scared

From: shaka74

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

On my way back to the shack in the hills, I had three turns of luck. The good one was bumping into a Haitian who was selling a few things I could use. I probably shouldn't have attracted attention to myself by overpaying the guy, but he looked like he needed the money. Anyway, I got a rusty-but-working bike, a rusty-but-working can of spray-lubricant (I tested it on the bicycle's chain, which needed it), and a ball peen hammer with a big chip out of its handle. The spray can and hammer went into my pack, and I rode the bike back out to the country.

The bad turn of luck, or so it seemed at first, was that the bike's chain only lasted halfway up the first real hill before snapping. I was pissed at first. Then I realized I had a bike chain to use as a weapon in case I needed one. I wheeled the bike off the road and was stashing it in some bushes — waste not, want not — when I realized I wasn't alone.

I activated the sight as I looked up. Standing there was the soldier who'd boarded the bus. He was a mess. Oozing wounds covered his bare torso, arms and face. Dried blood coated his hands past the wrists. Worst of all, though, was what hid inside him: a spirit that only bordered on human. Hell, maybe it never was. Who knows? I waited for him to make a move, to see whether the soldier was in charge or not.

The sound he made as he rushed wasn't English and didn't seem all that human, really, so I was thinking "puppet show." I flipped the bike toward him and he tripped over it. Even as he tried to get himself clear, he was groping after me and snapping his teeth. I focused a little guesswork on him and saw myself throttling him to death with the bike chain. Needless to say, I was horrified, and my immediate impulse was to run to avoid having to kill the guy. I was also thinking, *maybe he's incoherent with pain and the spirit isn't guiding him at all right now.* Either way, I knew he was still a fucking menace.

As he launched himself again, I swung the chain low to snag his legs. He hit the ground hard, face first. When he came right back up, I was pretty sure the guy wasn't in control.

That was when the real bad luck hit: He got hold of my leg and bit me. His teeth went right through my jeans! Hurt like hell, and he wouldn't let go. I just started swinging the chain at him. When that didn't stop him, I knew it was him or me. I pivoted on the ball of my foot, forced my knee behind his head and pushed his face to the ground. When he tried to come up, I looped the chain over his head and pulled it as hard as I could. I channeled everything into holding him there until I saw the invading spirit exit his body.

I wanted to check his pulse, but if you've ever done that thing where you put your all into some effort, you know what you're like immediately after. Which is to say, I collapsed on top of the guy. By the time I could roll over and check him out, his eyes were bulging and glassy.

Suddenly, I didn't feel like tracking down fangs or their flunkies. I'd never felt as disgusted with myself as I did at that moment. I wished I'd never come to this hellhole.

I thought I might bury the guy (not that I had the strength to manage it). But the last thing I needed was to be caught in the middle of doing *that*. I didn't think the spray can was volatile enough to help torch the corpse. So I left him in the bushes. I just picked up the bike, wheeled it onto the road and left him there. I climbed onto it and coasted downhill as far as I could. Once the road leveled out, I just pushed the bike into a ditch, tossed the bloody chain into a stagnant pond and kept walking.

After a while, the bite started to throb. By the time I got to my hotel, swelling had set in. I'd been able to find peroxide at the Holiday Inn's gift shop, but I didn't even ask about doctors or hospitals. Haiti is not a place where sensible people request medical services. I tended to my wound in my room.

As much as I'm trying to stay calm as I write, the bite has me worried. The soldier's teeth didn't penetrate far,

but they did break the skin. Mostly, the calf looks badly bruised. Not too surprising, considering he managed to bite through *denim*. When I left him, his mouth was open and his teeth looked normal. Not like fangs, I mean. But aren't fangs — bloodsuckers, I mean — able to hide their teeth? Could I have been wrong about what the soldier was? Has anyone out there come across a bloodsucker that looked like it had some basically inhuman spirit hiding inside? I'm probably worrying about nothing, but... what if?

Of course, there's also the possibility of simple infection, human mouths being the cesspools they are. Anybody know the early signs of gangrene?

I don't want to die in this place. I don't want to be a ghost here, or a vampire, or any other kind of spirit-infested leftover. Then again, if killing innocent people is the only way to "save the world," I'm not so sure I can go on living.

INTERVIEW

Subject: The visitor

From: shaka74

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

This is very important! Please read!

I just survived an extraordinary conversation with an unexpected visitor, and I'm trying to get it all down while I can. What's amazing me is how clearly I can recall everything.

SPEAKING WITH THE DEAD

The first thing I noticed was his smell, like the sweet-rotten smell of those rawhide chew toys they sell at pet shops. Except deader than that. Not as bad as most rots, but my visitor definitely smelled dead. This will sound weird, but I was glad it was him and not me; my first thought upon waking to this stench was *is that my leg?*

Then I realized I had company. I'd been asleep on my cot (the bed was still too scary). He sat in the room's only chair, not far from my feet. His legs were crossed very casually, as if I had invited him in. Which I had not. It was dark — just moonlight from the window — so it was hard to tell anything else about him, at first anyway.

"Awake at last," he said. His English was nearly perfect, almost too perfect. There was a hint of an accent that I couldn't place, other than thinking it *wasn't* particularly Caribbean.

I leaped out of bed to the far wall. It took me a moment to become oriented and control my fear. That's when I realized how much my leg hurt just to stand. I'm lucky he wasn't aggressive from the outset. I wouldn't have gotten far or lasted long.

"Who are you?" I demanded.

Instead of answering, he responded with a question. He did that a lot. "Why have you come to Haiti, and how long have you been able to see the dead?"

Now his speech seemed less perfect than it seemed *willed*, as if my visitor was struggling with some impediment. He had trouble with b's, v's and m's, it seemed.

Once I had the presence to actually *look* at him, I saw... nothing. To the sight, the guy wasn't there. I shut it off and he reappeared as a dark shape of a man. "No need to be shy," he said. "We're all friends here, for now."

The way he gestured made it seem there were others in the room, but the sight revealed no one else. Or maybe I was being paranoid. Of course, I had damn good reason.

"American, yes? A runaway soldier?"

"I'm an American," I said, "but not a soldier. Not anymore. Me and the army didn't see eye to eye. They said I thought too much." And now maybe I *spoke* to much, yet conversing with this intruder seemed natural somehow.

"So you abandoned your duties?"

"No. That was a while ago."

"Then what is it you're running from?" By this time, my eyes had adapted to the darkness. Outside, there was a puff of noise and an orange flash. The new trash fire gave me just enough light to see the wreckage of my visitor's face, or what remained of it: grayish leathery skin, receded eyes, no nose, sunken cheeks, and — the reason for his odd speech, I realized — no lips. But a frightening set of dangerous-looking teeth. I'd almost say he was *all teeth*.

"What are you?" I asked.

"Exactly what I appear to be. You, though... you claim you are no soldier and yet you aid them."

I knew he meant the soldiers by the road. "They needed help."

"'Help' is an interesting term for garroting, don't you think?"

I didn't reply to that. Despite my efforts, I'd apparently been watched since I arrived.

"Now I understand! You're one of those *other* Americans here, like the fellow I... interviewed, the NAS man."

"The what?"

"The marksman who shot my servant. Well, you likely considered him a spy. Ugly word, 'spy,' for an ugly undertaking."

He sat waiting for me to reply. I said nothing. Finally, he continued, "No, I'm wrong. You're much more forthcoming than he was."

"You're talking about the sniper, aren't you? Are you saying an American did that?"

"Do you believe a Haitian did it?"



"It's never been my nature to accept the 'official' word."

"Wise of you. The marksman had captured the frightened man who flagged down your bus. He released the poor fellow after shooting my servant in the army vehicle. He threatened to shoot the Haitian, too, if he didn't run toward your bus, as if the marksman intended to throw the soldiers' suspicion on every black man aboard it — to instigate a mass confrontation."

I wondered what race this creature had been *before*... whatever the hell had happened to him. His understanding of racial chemistry and its volatile mixtures made me think he had an insider's view — that, or he'd observed this place for a *long* time. Either way, his current appearance made any conclusive determination impossible.

"And you said the sniper worked for... the 'NAS'?" I asked.

"How much do you understand about vodou?"

"Enough to be dangerous to myself. I know less than I believed I did." I suddenly had strange thought, *is this how it happened for that Bookworm guy?* Then I remembered that he lost his legs....

"I am more interested in what you *know* that you believe. Do you *believe* in vodou?"

"I believe in lots of things these days. Should I have faith in vodou?" I felt a pang of worry about our symbols and the images I'd seen painted on the shacks.

"Have you ever had faith in anything?"

"Never for long. I think a lot. Maybe too much. Faith doesn't usually hold up for me."

"For mortals, faith often comes with time and the acknowledgement of mortality. Nevertheless, it's not beyond those who have already died. Centuries offer many chances for reflection, after all."

"How old are you, exactly?"

"You never told me how long you've been able to see the dead."

"I can't—"

"You're an untalented liar. Since childhood? Did your dead great-grandmother come sing slave lullabies at your bedside?"

"It's... a new skill. I'm still getting adjusted to it." Did Bookworm feel the same temptation to tell all, just to have answers for once?

"And how many others like you does the United States employ?"

"I told you—"

"Just checking. Why is your government engineering clashes between its own military and Haitian civilians?"

"I have no idea."

"I believe the United States knows of the unbidden. And fears them. As it should."

"Do you mean all the ghosts?"

"As long as mortals have dwelled on this island, so have ghosts. Some of the African ghosts were so devastated after losing their descendants to slavery that they *walked* across the Atlantic to join their kin. Most rode here in the living bodies of their loved ones. And they do so even today.... No, the unbidden are the ones even the most powerful oungans fear, the departed ones who have returned even though no vodou priest ever called them back. They are the dead who leave footprints."

I took a chance and said, "I thought I was talking with one of those."

"Touché. No, no one made the unbidden. They appear simply to have *occurred*. Like the rain," he said, gesturing upward.

"So, someone... made you this way? Are you some kind of mummy?"

I'm not going to try to describe his laugh. It was one of the most disturbing things I've ever heard. I'm getting the creeps all over again as I recall it. When he stopped, he said, "Ah, you Americans."

"I'll take that as a 'no.' Suppose you're right and the U.S. does know about the unbeckoned or whatever you call them. Why should a nation with nuclear weapons fear them?" [This is incredible! At the time, I was talking to him I couldn't remember the exact word he'd used for these creatures. Since I started typing, it's as if I'm hearing a recording of the conversation inside my head — every pause and missed p!]

"The unbidden are an army that can conscript new foot soldiers by doing what any army does as a matter of course: killing its enemies."

I digested that silently for a moment.

"Will the United States use nuclear weapons on its own soil? Against its own citizens?" he asked.

"I don't think things in the States are as they are here. I've seen a lot of ghosts there, but not near as many as here. The living still outnumber the dead over there. And the zombies I've seen don't seem organized like an army, either. They're more like a mob."

"I trust the history of France is still taught in your country?"

"That mob had intelligent leaders...."

"Intelligent and wicked. Surely something can exist even if it is beyond your experience? Need I remind you that you are talking with a corpse?"

"Are you saying that someone is guiding these things? Who? One of the local *voodoo* masters?" I wanted to see if he'd flinch at the term, but he didn't.

"Nothing so commonplace."

"Are you going to tell me or do I have to guess?"

"You assume that I have the answer. I can only tell you with certainty what we are *not* talking about. It is no mere manbo or oungan."

"So how do I find out?"

"One of our mutual acquaintances might help you." He pointed behind me. I turned slowly, wondering for the briefest moment if it might be a trick. The only "mutual acquaintance" I could think of was the soldier I'd killed. That's when I saw a terracotta jar in the corner of the room. I got a sick feeling as I imagined parts of the soldier — maybe his head, given the size of the container — inside.

"Do you want me to open that?" I asked.

He remained silent. I didn't want to know what was in the jar, but I *had* to know what the hell was going on. Finally, I limped over to the container. It was a maybe two feet tall, with a lid. I lifted the lid. It was still pretty dark in the room, but the urn *seemed* empty.

In obvious confusion, I turned to my "guest."

"She's with you now. Be patient."

"Fuck!" I activated the sight and two things happened: My dead friend vanished and the ghost-woman from the bus appeared *out of me*, as if she was being forced from my body.

"What are you doing?" I yelled, ready to fight whatever I had to.

"You're the most *squeamish* medium I've ever encountered," the rot said. "Celia intends you no harm, and she could not inflict it without my permission. She says you 'evicted' her. How did you do that? I fear you may have hurt her feelings...."

"Yeah, well, I fear *losing* mine! I've seen what ghosts can make people do!" I was angry now.

"Then we find ourselves at an impasse. Celia has information to share, but she requires an instrument in order to be heard."

"You heard her just now! Why can't she use *you* as her 'instrument'?"

"Throttling the soldier wasn't the first time you succumbed to a... regrettable impulse, was it? How does the question go? When *did* you stop beating your wife? After she was dead? Is *that* when you started seeing ghosts?"

"I'm getting tired of this. *Nobody* gets inside me."

"Sounds to me like a masculinity issue. If you wish to hear what Celia has to say, she must ride you. Unless

you prefer that she impart her information to you through dreams....”

His casual tone belied a threat. Either let her in while I was awake and maybe alert, or she'd sneak in while I was asleep.

“I asked why *you* can't be the one! You two seem to be friends.”

“The prevailing weather in the deadlands makes it tiring and difficult to pick out her words. Poor Celia has to shout with all her strength just to be heard above the din, and I have to strain to hear her. Of course, she *could* speak through my mouth, but unless you have a thorough grasp of Creole, which differs enough from French that—”

“I get the picture. Why not just say you want to see what I can do and I have no choice about it?” His attempts to put me through my paces were getting more and more obvious.

“One always has choices. It is not my desire to coerce you. What is your decision?”

What I said was, “Let's get it over with.” What I was thinking was, *how would Dr. Phibes here like a blowtorch to the face?*

“You may wish to sit down. Some people experience dizziness or disorientation when a riding spirit speaks.”

That was fine by me. The knapsack that held my tools — and the spray can — was near my cot. I'd have grabbed for it when I first awoke, but I wasn't exactly rational at the time. I sat and looked at the patterns of orange dancing on the far wall.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Ready,” I lied. I still had the sight activated, which meant I'd been hearing him but not seeing him for the last few minutes — very bizarre — and seeing her but not hearing her as she appeared to speak in his direction. My timing had to be perfect.

She came closer, looming above me — then stopped. It was as if she had hit some invisible barrier surrounding me. She turned to face the chair, and that's when I made my move. I let go of the sight, dove off the pallet, tore open the knapsack and found... nothing. It was empty. I looked up at him, still seated unperturbed in the chair.

“I moved your toys elsewhere before I woke you. Shall we continue?”

COMMUNION OF SOULS

I didn't say anything as I repositioned myself on the cot. I still wasn't saying anything when a string of patois came streaming out of my mouth.

“Celia says you have much better teeth than the average Haitian.”

I tried to reply, but her words came out instead.

“She asks if you know why they are keeping her son.”

Again, I tried to speak. I took myself by the throat and shook my head at him. He said something in French — or Creole, I guess — and her words stopped as mine began: “—fucking word in edgewise!”

“Parity is what you two must achieve for this to work. What of her son?”

“Is he the bus driver?” Phibes nodded solemnly. “I don't know. I've been trying to find him myself.”

He spoke, she spoke, he translated: “The soldiers who arrived after you left the scene at the bus took everyone they found to an American compound in the hinterlands. Celia did not remain in her horse because she feared the ghost-eaters there. The ones at the gates that keep spirits away. Do you know what she's talking about?”

“No.”

“She didn't want to abandon her son, but she had the chance to change mounts outside the compound, so she did.”

“So the woman from the Holiday Inn... Celia's horse?” He nodded. “Has Celia seen her since all this happened?”

He said, approximately, “*Et ton cheval?*”

He listened, said something else that I couldn't follow, then said, “There has been no sign of her, either.”

“Ask her how the soldier I... the soldier I strangled got that thing inside him.”

He talked longer than he had since we'd started this seance, or whatever it was, then she replied for a long time, too.

“She doesn't know.”

I suspected I'd gotten the edited version that time for sure, but all I could do was concentrate more on their words and hope to pick something meaningful out of the flow.

“Wait. Don't you have other ‘servants’ among the Americans? Like the guy who got shot?”

“Not anymore. Shortly after entering my... employ, each has been reassigned outside Haiti. Except one.”

“And?”

“She's dead.”

I wish I'd used the sight on the dead soldier in the truck. All this might have made more sense sooner. Or not, since it still wasn't entirely clear what was going on now. “How'd she die?”

“Immaterial,” he said.

“I can't help you if you won't let me.”

“Let's move on,” he said, sounding irritated for the first time.

“They've found a way to detect your spies, haven't they? And you were hoping I could tell you what it is. Well, here's a tip: It ain't me.”

"Our time together is finished. Celia!" A string of rapid-fire Creole followed. I followed none of it.

An equally incomprehensible response began streaming from my lips. Suddenly, he leaned toward me and placed a hand on my leg, the bitten one. I panicked and activated the sight. He vanished — though I could still feel the faint pressure of his hand on my leg. Meanwhile, *she* appeared, forced out of me once again. Then, as quickly as she was there, hovering in the air before me, she was sucked into the terracotta jar like water going down a drain.

He spoke again, still invisible but close enough for me to get a real whiff. I was almost ready to puke as he said, "Had I not been your guest tonight, you might have earned a visit from Gédé, instead. He may call on you yet, and he has neither my curiosity nor my appreciation for humanity's finer aspects." His grip tightened. "Remain in Haiti and it will be the death of you."

And then he was gone. So was the jar. Only his stench remained.

It was about the time his smell faded that I realized his parting words might have referred to my leg.

ANSWERS!

Subject: The morning after

From: shaka74

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

I checked out of my hotel last night. In the middle of the night, actually. I spent some time in the lobby of the Holiday Inn and finally reserved a room, but didn't even put my stuff in it. I've been at Port-au-Prince's only internet cafe since it opened. I've been thinking. I've been trying *not* to think about my leg.

1. I'm willing to bet my 40 acres and a mule that Phibes is a bloodsucker. For some reason, though, I felt sure that saying the v-word in front of him would mean a trip to the boneyard. I'm not sure why. Maybe it was the way he seemed to avoid it. Anyway, so much for the myth about them having to be invited in.

2. Could it be that there are hierarchies among the dead? And the undead? I got the distinct impression that Phibes' relation to Celia was master to slave, owner to property. Do the ones with bodies lord it over the ones without? It can't be that simple. What about shamblers? They must be pretty low on the totem.

3. What's the NAS? Could he have meant NASA? Maybe Soldier91 was right all along and the truth really is *out there*. But the idea of NASA assassins sniping at GI Joe seems ridiculous.

Almost.

4. I've seen other references on hunter-net to ghosts and storms, which is what Phibes implied was going on

wherever Celia was. Does anyone have more intelligence on this? What's the connection?

5. As a matter of course, I now activate the sight before I compose email to the list. You never know what's looking over your shoulder. Then again, the failure of the sight on Phibes was *scary*. It was as if he could be seen and heard only to the extent that he wanted to be, like he was more than a match for it. I hope that's not common.

6. I wonder how long Phibes has been watching me. Then again, maybe he had other "servants" watching me all along.

7. The most disturbing thing we discussed was walkers massing into an army. Or being massed. Downright apocalyptic. Maybe he was wrong.

8. The other disturbing thing was the U.S. army detaining Haitian nationals. Isn't that a violation of international law? Of course, it's also a little troubling to think that the government knows about the things we fight but doesn't let on. Not that it would be any great revelation to learn the feds have lied to us — again.

I find myself with more questions than answers, as usual. This is as good a time as any to get the hell out of town. I'll be out of touch for a while. I want to see if I can find this base Celia talked about.

MY REASONS

Subject: Where I'm headed

From: shaka74

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

I never told any of you exactly why I came to Haiti. It's time I did, since I might not get another chance.

Maybe you remember me saying that I came here to watch out for the interests of black people in our war. I didn't say then that the reason I feel it's necessary is the insane racism embraced by some of you. Not all of you, some of you. But believe me, that qualifier doesn't make me feel any better.

The rabid bigotry of imbued like Jager, Apartheid's poster boy, has been back-and-forth enough that just his name sums up what's ugly and wrong about the imbued. But his disappearance from hunter-net didn't mean that his attitudes went with him.

When I read in the Times-Pic that a 9th Ward housing unit had burned to the ground, I didn't think much about it. When arson was raised as a possibility, I still sort of ignored the story. When two more got torched the next week and cops were quoted about "gang symbols," along with a story from an eyewitness who claimed people were shot as they tried to exit one

of the burning buildings (autopsies were still pending then), I took notice.

Damn if I didn't find a "protected" sign spray-painted onto a wall bordering the 9th Ward.

Some of you probably remember me making an open call for a bullseye in New Orleans. I was trying to lure this killer into the open. Didn't work, though.

What I did get was contact with some out-of-towners who were trailing a firebug/sniper named Peleus, a nasty piece of work who, according to them, was supposed to be dead. Some backtracking on their part had revealed him to be one more in a series of "corpse thefts" reported lately in their home base. The morgue had tried to cover up these disappearances because they "reflected poorly" on the medical examiner's office. Right. Whereas a botched cover-up was sure to win public confidence. Anyway, I was thinking *great, not just a rogue, but a dead rogue. One who knows our sign system, no less!*

The four of us, me and the three out-of-towners, set traps for Peleus. To cut to the heart of it, he kept sidestepping us — the man is wily, I'll give him that — until I finally had him in my sights, literally. He was busy with targets of his own, *civilian* targets, so I had no

qualms about shooting him. I said, "I've got him" into my headset mic to alert the others — but I hesitated. I had to know. I used the sight — and saw that he looked normal. Alive. *Not like a rot.* Through the headset, I heard one of the others say, "Shoot, dammit! What are you waiting for?" As the implications hit me, I pulled back just for a second. When I looked again, Peleus was gone.

My partners were so pissed that they abandoned me to chase Peleus on their own again. I wasn't happy with me, either. I had the chance to save innocent lives from a maniac who seems to believe it's okay to burn whole apartment buildings if any of the dark-skinned people inside are monsters. Or working for monsters, I guess. He shoots anybody who tries to escape the fire — probably just to be on the safe side. I blew my chance, people died and Peleus is still out there somewhere, sizing up his next target.

But it's more than that. I've never been sure of a whole lot in life, except how fluid everything is. What's true today may be wrong tomorrow. I remember reading not too long ago that the gravitational constant had been proven to fluctuate. A long time ago, I accepted the comforting childhood platitude, *there's no such thing*



as monsters. I didn't have to become imbued to learn how big a lie *that* was. All I had to do was be black in the United States — but it's not just about race, either. Live in the world and you can't help but see how inhuman people can be to one another. Seeing all these *things* that we do, it's possible to forget that people don't need any help at being monstrous themselves. At being evil. Like Peleus.

I *wanted* him to be a rot! I wanted an easy explanation for human evil. I didn't want to pull the trigger on one of our own, on a real live person. But when I failed to do what I needed to do, I couldn't forgive myself. I left the army pretty much for the same reason. Once the time came when I could choose to be a soldier or not, I chose not to be.

Then, some damn space alien or avenging angel or aspect of God — pick one, there are plenty of possibilities to go around — drafted me into this militia of ours. So it looked like I'd be a soldier whether I liked it or not.

Except I resisted it. I tried to use my brain, to figure out the enemy, to study the opposition. Whenever possible, I tried to subdue, not kill, to separate and keep the peace. That's what a policeman does. Ideally, anyway. But soon enough, that approach made me a spectator. An observer. A private eye trailing after zombies and spooks.

This war can't be won by watching. I see that now.

My time for watching is past. One of our enemies is implacable and uncaring. This particular foe dwells — I don't know if *lives* is the right word because I haven't seen it, just its servants — in the Artibonite

Valley, almost due north of Port-au-Prince. It's on a plantation with corral after corral of the walking dead. Thousands of them. Someone rich and powerful has gathered them and made the place look like a marijuana farm. If the Corpse was telling the truth about the "NAS," our culprit could be the U.S. government, but I don't think so. It could be some vodou priest or priestess, but that doesn't fit, either. Huge limousines come and go between the plantation and the president's mansion in town.

Whoever or whatever the lord or lady of the house is, he/ she/ it is holding U.S. army personnel captive in beggar's cages suspended above the corrals. There are catwalks above the pens, too, and dark-suited white men who go from pen to pen to jab spears and heated pipes into the caged soldiers. I don't pretend to know what the goal is. I just know somebody has to stop it.

Inaction is another enemy of ours, but I can put a face on this one: mine. No more. I'm getting those soldiers out if I have to torch every motherfucker on that plantation. And I think I've found a way to do it.

In case I don't come back, let me belabor the obvious one last time. Our worst enemy is our own capacity for evil. Some people who call themselves hunters are just as inhuman as anything they hunt. Don't be like them. Don't be Peleus. But don't be what I was, either.

Keep the peace when you can. We have to win this war the right way for the right reasons. But let's win this war.

Inherit the Earth.



CHAPTER 4:

SPEAKING ILL OF THE DEAD

These are not the words of him that hath a devil. Can a devil open the eyes of the blind?

— John 10:21

SHADES OF TRUTH

Subject: Long silence

From: witness1

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Okay, it's been a week. There's been nothing public from Carpenter since that last post. Has anyone gotten any private communication from him? Cabbie, you had a line on his old stomping grounds. Has he been seen there?

On a related note, has anyone heard from Ichmail lately? Oracle claims his information on Thessaly was dead on, but we haven't heard boo from him since you went. Did something happen to him? Does anyone have any information?

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: shogun213

Subject: Ichmail

More likely someone here happened to him. *Laugh.* It's not like if someone was about to stake him, he could shout out "Wait! I'm Ichmail!" He probably didn't even know who got him.

From: howitzer 114

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Too bad

He seemed to have a serious case of that sort of self-loathing that rots appear to get. I think that if you're lucky, you can work that to your advantage. Some bloodsucker who's feeling crappy about himself might mope around and

get sloppy, and then you can follow him right back to a bunch of his buddies. If I'm reading this possibility right, you might even be able to play it so that you take out the guy's friends without ever letting him see you. He gets convinced he's a curse or bad luck or something and wanders off to the next batch. It's like deep-sea fishing with low-test line. You play him out as bait and gently reel the big ones in.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: azrael256

Subject: Depressed Rot

I find it hard to believe that there are depressed monsters out there who could be that dumb. If I'm an immortal monster with superpowers, I'm gonna live it up. What the hell do they have to be depressed over?

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: shogun213

Subject: Don't Ask Me

I don't know what drives them, man. I'm just glad that they make stupid mistakes and do stupid shit. If they were smart all the time, we'd be fucked. Maybe deep down they know what monsters they are and whatever is left of them that's still human is looking for a way out. I don't know. Anyone got a better explanation?

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: mojo20

Subject: X-plain

i think the depressed ones are the failed experiments the washout from the govts secret labs that get turned loose on



the public so the scientists can watch them&observer&see what they do when theyre out on their on so the scientists can make the next model better. Theyre not actually depreed theyre on behavir modication drugs so that theyll act this way. it may be a plt to draw us into the open now that I think bout it bcause we cant resist folowing them and putting rot like that out of its misry but really that just is a loor and they can absorb the losses to gt us.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: shepherd274

Subject: Point of Order

So let me get this straight: Vampires aren't the walking dead? I mean, they're dead and they walk. What differentiates them?

Subject: Re: Point of Order

From: bookworm55

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Let me see if I can break this down for you. "Walking dead" is pretty much the classification for certain types of entities walking around that don't necessarily correspond to the traditional notion of the vampire legend (though some tend to). According to Carpenter, their presence in our world is due to some sort of catastrophe or accident in theirs. They can be summed up as lost souls in human bodies (I've heard stories about possessed animals, but I'll treat them as hearsay until I see proof). Dead but still walking around.

Vampires, on the other hand, are walking dead but not *the* walking dead, if you take my meaning. Yes, they might be dead, or so it seems. Yes, they walk as well as talk, dance, fight and whatever else you please. However, they seem to follow the established monstrous archetype — that is, they seem to be recognizable creatures out of myth — that it simply makes sense to treat them as their own particular type of being. It makes identifying what you encounter easier. If I say "vampire" everyone here knows what I mean, while if I say "walking dead" and that term includes vampires, there's going to be some confusion.

On the other hand, vampires do (as I said) walk around, and they sure seem dead, so they might at least belong on the periphery of this discussion.

Hopefully, this all makes sense.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: shepherd274

Subject: Re: Point of Order

I think I follow, as much as I'd rather not. I just wish the explanation could be more optimistic.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: rigger111

Subject: Art Imitates Undeath

Too bad that the movies aren't like real life. It would be great if a v_mp_r_ would feel compelled to

spill his guts to some journalist and tell the guy everything we'd need to know to hunt their sorry asses.

Subject: So Sorry

From: memphis68

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Your humor is misplaced, Rigger. We can't rely on the enemy doing anything that will just hand their heads to us on a plate. We've been chosen for a reason, and that reason isn't to sit back and watch them beat themselves. I sure as hell haven't seen any of these suckers moping down the street, and I don't count on seeing any like that anytime soon. More like the ones you saw were being used as lures, like Mojo said, but by rots that wanted to get rid of other rots. It's the oldest trick in the book. You set your enemies on one another and let them tear each other up. Then when they're done, you step in and pick up the pieces. It's perfect. So watch your backs if you ever do see some lame-ass monster lollygagging around. There's probably someone watching you watch him.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: shogun213

Subject: Experience on the matter

Just because you're a monster doesn't mean you're bright. I've dealt with rots that act like this, and when I say "dealt with" I mean "dealt with."

I'm not the sort of person who likes being around other people. This is as close to any of you as I want to get. I'm much more comfortable working solo, without worrying about anyone screwing up while he's supposed to be watching my back.

I've killed a bunch of rots and I've seen a lot more. They're dumb, at least the ones you see are. They're dumb because they're lazy. They think they're the only ones who know they're there, that no one else but other rots can see them. After all, it's just poor dumb people out there, right? They can't see rots. So they get lazy and walk around without bothering to look out for anything but their own kind. That means we're off their radar. Once you spot one, you can follow it forever because it doesn't bother to look for you. The really young ones do sometimes, because they still think getting cussed out by a priest is enough to make them melt. Most of them just don't look, though. They know they're boss, so they don't bother checking to see if anyone's moving in on them.

Those are just the street rots, though. They're like gangbangers, only they drink blood. Think of it like a cartel or mob. You're gonna see the low level guys, the legbreakers and the runners and shit out on the street corners. Deep down they know they're low grade, so they flaunt their act. They show off what badasses they are because they know they're nothing compared to the bosses. Out on the street, they're tough. When they get called in to talk to Don Vampire, they're jack-shit.

All that gives you two edges. One is that they're all puffed up and cocky, so they fight stupid. They're showy and they make wise-ass comments when they should be

biting your head off. They wind up or do kung fu shit that's totally unnecessary. The time they take to do that and pose for the ladies is the time you take to kill them.

The second edge is that they're small time and they know they're small time. If they weren't, they wouldn't be out on the streets or in the clubs looking for a meal. They'd be having USDA prime honeys brought to them. They know they don't rate, and that means you can scare them. If you can call up holy fire or something showy like that, they're gonna piss their pants because they're not sure they can handle it. They're used to pushing around weak defenseless 7-11 clerks and drunk secretaries. The second you show them something real, they panic cause they aren't expecting it and they haven't got a way of handling it. And since these punks are just punks, they're gonna need everything they've got to hold you off. If they panic, they're not fighting with everything they've got, and you can nail them.

Got myself a few that way.

LAYERS WITHIN LAYERS

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: carpenter169

Subject: Sometimes yes, sometimes no

You're half-right, Shogun. "Baby" rots—ones who don't have a lot of power yet—are pretty easy to eliminate. They can't pull many tricks. Odds are most of the people reading this can do more, though vampires generally have the knack of being able to use their tricks again and again until they run out of blood. They're not that tough, *comparatively speaking*. They can't take too much punishment and they tend to break easy. A lot of them have put too much stock in their status as vampires and don't know how to react when they don't control the situation. Shogun's right about that. That's when, if you're fast and lucky and good, you can get in a shot.

That's "a shot," as in singular. One. You don't get a second punch with vampires. If you don't kill them when you get that initial opening, you're in trouble.

Why? Let me tell you something people: You call yourself "hunters?" You're fooling yourself. You're not hunters. You're sheep with shotguns. Don't create airs for yourself. Vampires, they're hunters. They're the only thing that feeds on the top of the food chain. They're built from the ground up to hunt invisibly, to kill quickly and to vanish without a trace. They're predators, people, designed by God or the Devil to kill human beings.

And last time I checked, fancy lightshow or no fancy lightshow, you're all still human beings.

But enough about you. (It's always about you, isn't it?) Now it's time to think about them. Has anyone here ever scared a predator? First they jump back, *then they freak out*. It's bad enough when your house cat goes nuts, right? It's all teeth and claws. If you're lucky, it doesn't draw too much blood. Now pump up the scale to a vampire. Bloodsuckers have teeth and claws. They can go batshit,

too. The difference between your cat going psycho on you and a rot doing it is that you're likely to survive the former.

It's simple. If you push a vampire too far, he panics. If he panics, his instincts kick in. His instincts are those of a hunting animal — the kind that hunts people. If he gives in to them, you have a ravaging beast that can move fast, shrug off bullets, vanish and otherwise tear your head off faster than you can blink. Remember, too, that while he's in panic mode, he's using everything he's got in his arsenal, all at once. That's a lot of shit, even for a vampire fresh out of the coffin.

What's the moral of this story? If they see you coming and have time to prepare, you're in trouble. If you let them freak out, you're in trouble. The only window of opportunity you've got is to hit them in the seconds between when they figure out you're there and when they go berserk.

Good luck.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: cabbie22

Subject: No Welcome Back

Oh happy day. The prodigal son is back. And here I was hoping you'd had a fatal accident.

From: howitzer114

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Re: No Welcome Back

More like the prodigal scum. Welcome back, Carpenter. What happened to your little plan? Was the old lady too tough for you again?

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: carpenter169

Subject: Why Do I Bother?

Why, hello Howitzer, nice to hear from you again, too. Me? I'm fine, thank you for asking. Oh, it was no bother providing all that information for you on the walking dead, no trouble at all. I was glad I could be of assistance. Really, your gratitude is very touching. No, no, your thanks are all the reward I need.

Oh wait, I'm sorry, that's what I was going to say. My apologies for the confusion.

Now let's get one thing straight before we go any further: My business is my business. You can like it or lump it, but it's not *your* business. Do I make myself clear? When I achieve my ends, you'll know. Read the papers and you'll see proof.

Now, as Howitzer and Cabbie so brilliantly note, I'm back. I'm back for reasons of my own that you probably won't understand, so I'm not going to bother listing them. All you need to know is that I've got more news that you can use, and I'm willing to share it out of the goodness of my heart. Let me know when you're ready to listen.

Subject: Mediation

From: doctor119

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

I think the problem many of us have right now, Carpenter, is that you have been revealed unapologetically to be something

that, at the risk of being melodramatic, Should Not Be. You are our enemy, that which we seem to have been chosen by unknown agents to oppose. You have deliberately misled us and shown no shame for your deception, and you have intimidated that you have had close contact with the forces of darkness. Finally, you have admitted to wanting to use us to further ends that, if your prior life is any indication, are nefarious in nature.

Given all of these things, is it any wonder that we harbor suspicions about you, your true motivations and your offers? Of course, if you can provide some surety of what you say....

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: freezer182

Subject: Hate to interrupt

Just wanted to let people know that I'm alive and well in a new location. Don't expect me to drop any clues about it. And yes, I still have the hat. It's a good fit.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: azrael256

Subject: Huh?

I've got a better question. Carpenter's a... what? A hidden? A spirit? A spook? How the hell does he know anything about rots?

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: hunter9

Subject: A bigger worry

We could be overlooking a potential catastrophe in the making here. Carpenter's knowledge of vampires could be evidence of an active cooperation between multiple breeds of supernatural monsters. If they're pooling information and tactics, then we're in deep trouble. The combination of tricks and tactics that could be brought to bear on any one of us is terrifying.

A SECRET WAR

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: carpenter169

Subject: Hah

You're about as likely to see a bunch of different monsters teaming up as you are to see the Duesenberg make a comeback. In other words, don't worry your pointy little head about it, Hunter. It's not going to happen. You lot are more likely to form yourself into a cohesive group than they are, and I don't think anyone here would argue with me about how likely that is. Let me share a little secret with you: Monsters don't necessarily like each other. As a matter of fact, a lot of them hate one another. They're always screwing with each other's plans. The rots spend more time tearing each other apart than they do taking care of clowns with home-made stakes and holy water. You just don't

see it because they do it behind closed doors or under cover of something big.

Now what the hell does this have to do with anything, right? It has everything to do with things, not to mention what you're trying to do, why I'm here and why I know as much as I do about vampires.

Bear with me. This takes some setup, and I know a few of you have short attention spans.

First of all, you want to know what I am? I'm a dead man. I've been a dead man for over a half a century, and I'm very happy being dead. I took that big trip back to this side recently, at the same time so many other ghosts did, and I've been walking around in a borrowed body ever since. I like this one. It's in good shape and has a steady hand. I'd rather have my own back, but seeing how it's rotted away, that's not an option. I dug it up and checked. It's a pretty sad sight.

Enough about me, though. Let's talk about how I know so much about vampires. It's pretty straightforward when you think about it. I'm dead, right? And what do vampires do that gets you so fired up to exterminate them? Why, yes — *they kill people!*

Now where do you think all of those people go when vampires kill them? Do you think they go through a tunnel to a bright shining light? Get reincarnated as a turtle or a catfish? No, they go straight to the lands of the dead — if they're lucky. The really fortunate ones hang around a long time and can tell some amazing stories. Most of them have these big hang-ups about how they died, and they like to talk about it. They tell you where they died, when they died, how they died — and who killed them. Some of them do all sorts of research into their murderers and then share what they know.

Now how many people do you think your average vampire kills? How many of them become ghosts? How many of those are willing to talk? The answer to all those questions is "enough for me to have a damn good idea of what's going on."

If there's anyone here who's got a better source for info on rots than six decades' worth of talking with their victims, you're welcome to chime in. Otherwise, don't challenge me.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: hunter9

Subject: Conditional interest

For the sake of argument, I'm willing to listen for now. Any advantage we can get is good.

Carpenter, what can you tell us about rots that we don't already know? We know that the old stories are bullshit, that garlic and crosses and running water might not slow them down. Tell us what will work.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: carpenter169

Subject: Re: Conditional interest

What works? Easy. Fire. Douse them in gasoline, strike a match and you get roasted vampire. Even the really old ones can't resist an inferno for long. Sunlight still works really well, too, though it's hard to put a piece of Mr. Sun in your back pocket and save it for later.

But that's stupid stuff. Everyone knows it. What you're really asking me is, "How do I get in position to use something that works?" You want to know more than what will kill them. You want to know how to get into position to make the kill. That's a bit tougher.

I can tell you, but I want something in exchange. I think you've got a good idea of what it is. We'll get to that later.

There are a couple of ways to get near a vampire. Spot one. Follow it. See how it hunts. Then pretend to be its food. Of course, that's a risky thing to do, because there's no guarantee that you'll get your shot in before you become lunch. Besides, word of that sort of personal approach gets around, and one of these nights there'll be an ambush waiting. Do you seriously think you're the only ones who share information?

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: shogun213

Subject: Wait a minute

You just said that there's no chance of monsters working together, and now you're saying they share information? What are you trying to pull here, Carpenter?

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: carpenter169

Subject: How Dense Are You?

Stop being so literal. What I said is that there's no horde of monsters lining up like cartoon supervillains, marching in lockstep toward your front door. That doesn't mean that one rot doesn't talk to another or that there aren't small organizations or groups. Come to think of which, you've given me a pretty good place to start on something.

You know a little bit about me and what I used to do. I was with a part of a group that was attached to a group that was connected to a group that, for lack of a better term, we'll call *Unione Siciliano*. That's not its real name, of course, but it'll do for now. The Union and its partners were a funny bunch. They were murderers. They were thugs. They were thieves and extortionists and legbreakers. But they played by their own rules and they were organized.

That was the key to the whole thing: organization. Everyone knew what everyone else was good at, and

they stayed out of each other's way. They didn't step on each other's turf. Even better, when a guy needed something done that was someone else's area of expertise, he could call the other guy and get the job done. Extortion? You talked to the boys in Detroit. The garment industry? That was Luciano's thing. You wanted someone dead? You called the boys from Brooklyn and people got dead.

What's all this have to do with the dead? That's how the rots operate, more or less. They have different mobs or families or whatever you want to call them, and these things specialize. You step on someone else's specialty and they rub you out for interfering. They can work together. They can share info and mutual respect, even while they're wishing the rest of their kind would suddenly drop dead. They may not *like* the other families, but they understand them and know where to draw the line in messing with them. And they know that in a pinch, when it comes to fighting something else, they can insist that the others help.

What does this mean for you? Trouble. It means that if you whack some dumbass flashing his fangs on a street corner, someone from one of the other vampire families is going to see it or hear about it, no matter what. (How, you ask? There are scads of ways. Some of them can talk to pigeons' for Christ's sake. Have you ever been outdoors and not seen a pigeon?) They'll hang onto that information and maybe trade it for something else useful, but sooner or later word will get around, especially if you make a nuisance of yourself. Be warned. It will happen.

Mind you, not every vampire is part of this cartel. Some are lone wolves. Others are small-time solo operators. Those you can pretty much pick off without any repercussions. But way too many rots work with friends and family, and they'll pay a pretty penny for your head on a stick if you dispose of Cousin Vlad.

The bright side to all of this is that the bloodsuckers aren't half as cohesive as my old bosses were. The city dons have to deal with underbosses because most of the time you have multiple families in the same city. That means you get tension. Where you get tension between vampires, you get opportunities. If you have two families of rots going at it, you can pick off a few from either side during the chaos and no one will be the wiser.

But we've got what looks like a contradiction in terms. On one hand, you have this big syndicate of rots. On the other, I'm telling you they're always fighting. Am I talking out my ass? Not at all. The vampires close ranks to protect the overall operation. That means killing anyone and doing anything to prevent people from finding out about them. That means making sure that they don't break the big rules of their little club.

That means standing shoulder to shoulder as long as there's a threat to the whole business.

But night to night, when it looks like things are going well in general, the cracks show. Don't forget that these guys live forever. Some of them have been vampires hundreds of years or longer. It's entirely possible that some of them have been pissed at others for the whole damn time. So if they can whack one another without getting caught or without putting the operation as a whole at risk, they do it. Hell, they'll do it in a heartbeat if they think they can get away with it. Again, this is good for you to a certain extent. It means bloodsuckers' defenses are chipped away constantly. It also means they're expecting trouble from their own kind, not from you.

All this has a few repercussions. Shogun was right. The vampires you see in the clubs or the hoods or wherever are generally bagmen at best. They're errand runners and cheap punks there to patrol territory and make sure everyone knows who the neighborhood really belongs to. The vampires with real power are all in the ritzy part of town, hidden. Some of them even pretend to be alive, if you can believe that. The sheer gall of them....

Anyway, it's not that the ones in power are afraid of the punks. But they know that if they keep a public presence the punks will keep on trying to whack them, and that some dumbass vampire will get lucky sooner or later. Of course, the punks they're afraid of are 300 years old and answer to names like "Corneleus" and "Lucien," as opposed to "Pittsburgh Phil" and "Fats Twist," but the principle is the same. So forget the upper guys, at least for now. You'll never get to them. Not with your current approach.

Even if you can't get them, though, it's worth knowing what they really are. Are they a government conspiracy? No. Most of them are older than the government. And if you can't wrap your head around that, you're dead meat. Remember, they're vampires. They are for all intents and purposes, immortal. They've lived a very long time and they plan in the very long term. Unless you've got discipline, you'll get sloppy after a week or a month or a year of hunting. A year is nothing to them. They'll wait as long as they have to because you'll make a slip before they do. That also means that if you're too much of a pain in the ass, they can beat you by outliving you — or by dumping your grandson's corpse on your doorstep in forty years. If you're not willing to face up to that kind of fight, get out now, because that's how the old ones play it.

Mostly, though, the old ones hide and hide deep. They've got layers upon layers of protection, spun so thick that you'll suffocate in it. An old vampire has dozens if not more people between you and him at all times. Some defenses are subtle — they have people in

newspapers who plant articles painting you as a crazy, or they have fingers in the electric company so your juice gets shut off just in time for you to get a "visit." Some defenses are less subtle — a lot of them have cops in their pockets who come by, hassle you, throw you in the joint or take you for a ride. And some defenses aren't subtle at all — they have young vampires who want to curry favor with the boss, or things that are mostly human but not quite any more, and all of them can kick your ass.

All of these guys are dedicated, powerful and ready to do whatever's necessary to make their bosses happy. Half the time you can't see them until it's too late. Think about it: guys working for vampires who have some of the same powers that vampires do, but who can walk around in daylight and function like any other Joe. I think they're called puppets on this list, which is actually pretty astute. However, I suspect that a lot of the chest-thumping you guys are doing about killing vampires is misplaced. Five bucks says you've been wasting puppets instead.

Puppets are easy for bloodsuckers to make — pretty much anyone can become one with the proper encouragement, or so I'm told — and vampires like using them as errand boys. Need an enemy beaten up during the day? Send a bunch of puppets. Need someone trustworthy in city government? Get a puppet who's loyal to you elected. Need to deal with that pesky asshole who goes around swinging a hockey stick? Make a bunch of bruisers into puppets and send them off to deal with him. Is this starting to sink in?

No vampire worth his salt ever shows himself if he can send someone else to do his dirty work. You'll run into ten times as many puppets as you will rots, guaranteed. Puppets are cheap and easy and above all expendable. My guess is that most of them think they're in line for the big fang promotion, which is why they put up with all the crap the vampires make them deal with.

Here's an easy way to tell if you've killed a vampire or a puppet: If it bleeds in time with a heartbeat, it's a puppet. If the blood just leaks out, it's a vampire. If it's around during daytime, it's probably a pawn. If its breath steams in winter, it's probably a puppet. (I haven't seen too many vampires get wise to that. You'd think they'd learn by now.) If it looks at a pretty girl or a good looking guy involuntarily, it's probably alive enough to be a puppet. Pawns show up a lot better through night vision goggles and other stuff that depends on IR, because they're at normal human body temperature and rots are at room temperature. Most importantly, though, puppets have normal human reactions to surprises and emotions. You can shake them. You can make them cry, and they won't cry tears of blood. Short of taking the guy's pulse, the best way to

tell if someone is a rot or a puppet is to try to get that sort of reaction out of him. It's a dead giveaway. (That being said, vampires generally look pale at the best of times, washed out at the worst. Puppets just look like people who haven't been getting enough sleep.)

Incidentally, there's one other problem to fighting the goons that a vampire sends after you. They're still alive, which means that if you kill them, you're on the hook for murder. Don't think that bloodsuckers don't know this. If you turn into a big enough pain, they'll gladly sacrifice a puppet or two to get you. After all, pawns are only human and thus replaceable.

Scared yet? You should be. It gets worse.

They've spent years hiding their money behind dummy corporations and holding firms. They've got thousands in favors accumulated with city politicians who don't want to know who's funding the campaign. And the best part is, half the people who work for them don't even know it. They're just doing their jobs and incidentally carry out the agenda of the local blood-sucking fossil. If you take the direct approach of going after an old vampire, you'll get tangled in the web its woven. So much for the old ones.

Their underlings can be touched. Why? Because all the underlings want to be the next big boss, and that means they take chances. They want the really big dons to notice them, so they have to make names for themselves. That means they expose themselves, either trying to build up their own organizations or bucking for promotions in the ones that already exist. (There's no retirement plan for vampires, so you can guess what competition is like up the ladder.) If you're lucky, you can find one of these young bucks making a play and latch onto him. Sooner or later, he'll lead you to the people who give him orders, and that gets you past all of the bullshit.

One thing I do recommend is never ever make a deal with one of these things. Why? Vampires are incapable of doing anything altruistic. Sure, they'll offer to set up one of their kind because "he's such a menace" or whatever. But that's all crap. He's feeding one of his enemies to you to get rid of the guy. If it fails, you're dead and he's clear. If it succeeds, you've taken care of his business. Before long, he'll have another name for you, and another. You'll go along, merrily cleaning up his messes until the night he decides he's done with you. At that point, he'll feed you a lead that sends you right into a meat grinder.

If you're approached by a vampire for that sort of thing, and you're stupid enough to take him up on it, be ready to turn on him. He may offer you the moon. He may talk about how his conscience torments him and he wants to help you root out the real monsters. None of that matters. Sooner or later, self-interest is

going to force him to turn on you. What do you think happens to a vampire whose buddies catch him hanging out with the likes of you? If he's lucky, they just kill him. If not, they use the fact that he consorts with the enemy to lean on him, and he can only take so much of that. He'll either sic you on the people leaning on him, or he'll take you out to remove their leverage. Either way, you're the one left holding the bag. So be prepared to turn on your "ally" at a moment's notice. Watch for the signs. Do his tips get more frequent? Do the rots you go after get tougher and tougher? Does your contact look harried or does he run late for meetings? Odds are he's got a nightcrawling monkey on his back.

Christ, my fingers hurt. I'm going to take a break. Consider your questions carefully. I'll answer them in a day or two. In the meantime, I've got an old flame I want to visit. I'll bet she hasn't changed a bit.

FALLOUT

From: howitzer114
To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
Subject: Well don't that beat all?

So now he's telling us that vampires work like the mob! Do they all have names like "Vinny 'the Blood-sucker' Torricelli?" Is that the deal? Are we going to start finding little piles of ashes in Hefty bags in people's trunks?

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
From: hunter9
Subject: Enough

I wish you wouldn't go out of your way to piss him off, Howitzer. I actually found that interesting. I've sort of suspected something similar for a while, namely that there is some sort of consortium or hierarchy of vampires where I operate. I've noticed that certain rots stick to certain areas and avoid others. A guy I'll call "Bruno" almost never leaves the meat-packing district, while another called "Clarice" spends all her time over at State. There are only a few districts, mostly shopping or entertainment, where I ever see more than one at a time. If vampires do have some sort of system of "territories" and "responsibilities," it goes a long way toward explaining what I've seen.

However, now that I think about it, that all might be extraordinarily bad. If vampires are that organized, they can bring that organization to bear on a perceived threat. We look to be the best candidate, near as I can tell, though I honestly have no idea what else might be out there.

If that's the case, we might want to consider more active cooperation here, simply to prepare for the inevitable response.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
From: mojo20
Subject: the connection

I am telling you they are a brnch of the govt that has known about them for years monitering comunicatins FBI does dirty work covering up disappearances in cities 100000 people go mising each yeer why do we not hear about it??? Becase the govt is feeding them to its vampire friends&someday soon they come fer US!!!

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
From: shogun213
Subject: Your brain's short a connection

Christ, Mojo, couldn't they make you the next one to disappear? Take your MKULTRA paranoid bullshit fantasies and learn to spell for God's sake. If there is any connection between the US Government, which I freely admit has its own brand of bloodsucking monster, and the asshole I capped the other night who had a bone through his nose, seven earrings and this fucked-up Celtic bullshit tattoo on his face, then I'll call you "sir." Most of these punks are just that, punks. They're not jackbooted ATF thugs knockin' on your door. and they aren't Men in Black coming to take you away for knowing too much. They're punks who do punk things, and who deserve to die for it.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
From: cabbie22
Subject: I don't like the sound of that

Carpenter, this is an open warning. I know where you are and who you're going to see. I'm not going to let you lay a finger on her. I can find her and I'll be waiting there for you if I need to be.

Do we have an understanding?
To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
From: carpenter169
Subject: "Voice Recognition Software" is nice

My oh my, I can feel the love. Let's tackle old business before we get onto new.

1. I never said they were mobsters, though I've actually seen a few old business associates who've crossed over to the other side. Abe Reles is still kicking around, and that should be enough to scare the crap out of anyone with a sense of history. No, I just said they were organized a lot like the old syndicate was/is, with the same strengths and weaknesses. It's an operation model you can use in planning. Nothing more. Hell, I didn't even say they were all tied into one big operation. Near as I can tell, there are at least two duking it out for control right now, with a few on the side. (More on one of those in a bit, when I tell you how my visit went. Cabbie, I can tell you're breathless with anticipation.)

2. They are not the government. They're more dangerous than the government because they're actually good at getting stuff done. I'm sure the US Government is behind some of those disappearances, and covers up some of the rest. But here's a notion for you: Most of it is just people doing rotten things. Creatures like me don't come out of nowhere. We come from all the mean and hateful and vicious people out there. You don't need us as an excuse to murder or rape or torture. You do it happily without anyone's say so. Sure, monsters make it worse or more extreme, but people like me are really just extreme versions of people like you. Without all the sheer crap in the human soul, we wouldn't exist. We wouldn't need to.

Consider that before you mouth off about "monsters."

3. Yes, they're organized and they react to organized threats well. That's a good call, Hunter. It's nice to see someone on the stick. But don't go buying canned food and ammunition for the anti-vampire bunker just yet. You're not a big threat to them. How many of you are there? A couple hundred here, half of whom are dead? Maybe a few thousand more who haven't found this place because they don't have Internet access up in the mountains of Peru? Yeah, you've got something big on your side, but don't forget what you're up against. The other side was there when Rome fell. They were there watching Columbus head west, and George Washington paddle to Jersey. They're old and they think in big terms. You're going to have to do a lot more than whack streetcorner Johnnies to make them think you're a threat.

Hell, those who've discovered you probably think you're *useful*. You're weeding out the stupid ones and making a smarter breed of monster. Besides, they've got bigger fish to fry than you. As I said, it looks like there are two operations duking it out, and it's getting ugly. Fortunately, my concerns are mainly with one of the smaller families.

(Have I mentioned how much I love this "voice recognition software" thing that a "friend" got for me? Just my luck to steal a body with two lousy wrists from typing.)

But let's get back down to brass tacks. Howitzer, stop your bitching about what I'm giving you. What do you want? Names, addresses and phone numbers? Screw you. Do your own legwork. Back in the day, I was lucky to get the target's house pointed out to me, and maybe a crash car to run interference.

Speaking of that, let's get back to specifics and the vampire families. In my day, a "family" was just a name, a way to get you thinking about the organization so that you felt like you were part of it. Sure, you had a few sons and cousins and whatnot of the boss sprinkled around, but it was a business and the "family" was a polite fiction.

It isn't like that with bloodsuckers. It is a family with them, more or less. That's not to say you've got the

Momma vampire and the Poppa vampire and little baby vampires, or even that you can do a flow chart of "Who Bit Whom." No, they're all similar in the ways you see members of the same family being similar. Mannerisms, philosophy, stunts they can pull — all similar. Just knowing that should give you an edge. See if you can spot patterns and then extrapolate. The really ugly vampires are a great place to start, because you can always pick them out of a crowd. Most of the ones I've seen can talk to rats and disappear. Most of them like to live in sewers. Most of the ones I've seen hate beautiful people. With the other families, it's more subtle, but it's there. Are these absolutes? God, no. But there are trends that tell you which way the frog is going to hop. And if you can get a sense of what's coming, you can anticipate and hit back.

THE PRICE

Now let's take a minute and focus on what I want. My beef is with a branch off one of the independent families, which is a good thing, relatively speaking. One of these things is scary. A cartel of a half-dozen or so is terrifying. The ones I want make a great case study for what I've taught you. They're here in Chicago and they operate like a family. Hell, from what I can see the few of them here even look related.

Watch them long enough and you see that they've got certain other things in common, too. They're all cautious as hell. They all surround themselves with a ton of bodyguards. They're very, very careful about making sure there are layers of protection between them and the public. And they all like screwing around in morgues or otherwise messing with ghosts, in addition to their "legitimate" business interests.

From that, you should be able to put together plans of action, and decide what you might be up against. They could have spirits at their disposal, or thugs or cops who can be iced. And they have assets that can be attacked to draw them out.

That's my challenge to you all: I've given you something to start with. Let's see what you do with it.

Oh, and Cabbie? I spent the day at Wrigley. I've missed the old girl something terrible. I'm not about to lay a single one of my fingers on the lovely Ms. Sforza. Don't try to anticipate me. You won't.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: cabbie22

Subject: Fuck you

You know, Carpenter, I'm really starting to hate you.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: carpenter169

Subject: Re: Fuck you

Good.



CHAPTER 5: DESCENT INTO DEATH

Hell and destruction are never full; so the eyes of man are never satisfied.

— Proverbs 27:20

THE INFERNO

Subject: Bad things in Thessaly

From: oracle171

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Whatever other crimes Ichmail may be guilty of, he didn't lie when he told us terrible events had taken place in Greece. As soon as I finished reading his messages and printing out his maps, I booked a flight to Athens and reserved a rental car. I waited until I arrived before buying camping gear, flashlights and lots of batteries. As you all know, there is no darkness to withstand the light.

The drive from the coast is pleasant enough, but as the mountains towered around the road, I began to feel like I was traveling to the oldest place on Earth, almost like I was moving back in time, even though that ability is not yet available to me.

After resting overnight in Kalambaka, I drove again until I ran out of road, and then set out on foot. It was as if that part of the world had been forgotten by God, and its meager population only reinforced the feeling. Even before I left the mountain road behind, I passed no more cars than I could count on one hand.

Early on, I came across a sign of worse things ahead. Maybe three hours walk into the forest, I found an abandoned campsite. It had a dry-rotted tent and some shredded sleeping bags stained with blood. Otherwise, there was no sign of life nearby. I poked around one of the sleeping bags and found the first joint of a fingerbone caught in the stuffing. If people had been inside the sleeping bags, they must have died suddenly, so why just the one bone? Could animals have carried off the rest? That didn't strike me as likely. I felt the sensation I've come to know as the Angel within folding its wings. I knew I was right without having the whole story.

Another hour ahead, the path just stopped. I began using my hatchet on the fir trees to mark my trail. Some time after that, I was surprised to notice that I might be traveling in a circle. I certainly was seeing my own mark, since I was carving our symbol for danger, and the mark I saw was freshly made. I wondered if it could have been made by a "future" me who *could* slip outside time, but that seemed less likely. When I came upon the mark a third time, I was sure that I was retracing my steps, so I thought that the woods might be tainted somehow. I had been using the

sight since finding the campground, but whatever sent me astray seemed to defy even that. "Show me the way," I whispered. The sunlight hitting the floor of the forest changed and my path was made clear.

It was nearly dark when I saw the first of them. It walked alone. Its clothes were so tattered that it was hard to tell whether it had been male or female in life, and what remained of its body didn't help. However, its withered hands made me think of one explanation for the fingerbone in the sleeping bag. I made myself unseeable and pressed ahead. I wasn't sure whether my shining path would last past nightfall.

Soon enough, I saw that the path would not last. Worse, by night the forest was full of the lost. Like the first one I'd seen, they moved slowly. Hidden as I was, I avoided them easily. I settled next to a boulder and watched and listened while they moved about in the dark. At one point, two of the dead things came to blows. Eventually they tore each other limb from limb. Under my breath, I thanked the Angel within for its guidance and prayed for it to deliver me safely to my journey's end.

The lost there did not act not like others I have seen. These were many in number, but each one walked by itself. It was hard to tell just how many stalked the woods, but it got so bad that I could always see or hear

at least one moving about, and whenever they came together, they fought terribly.

I thought for a long time about whether to stay near the boulder or to turn on a flashlight and try to move forward again. I'm not ashamed to admit that I was afraid of attracting the dead things' attention. I knew the divine light would protect me, but I was sure it would also call the lost to me like moths to flame, with similar consequences. I wasn't ready to go that far, even though the creatures in the forest seemed violent beyond reason. What I *truly* feared was fully unleashing the Angel within.

Hours passed as I watched the lost stagger about. At first my fears of what they might do to me, and of what I might have to do to them, kept me wide awake. Eventually, though, the day's hike compounded with squatting still and quiet for so long dragged me toward sleep. The worst moment came when I saw bloody hands coming at me from the darkness. I screamed and woke, and was relieved to realize I'd been dreaming. That didn't diminish my danger, though, as I realized I could have been killed in my sleep or my cry might have betrayed my presence. Fortunately the woods were less active than they had been. Dawn approached and even the half-light seemed to discourage the dead from showing themselves.



When light pierced to the forest floor again, I knew it was time to move. I asked the Angel within to light my way once more. I considered marking more trees to be sure I wouldn't wander the forest indefinitely, but knew all I needed to do was trust in the Guardian. Thinking of trees, though, I remembered another dream I'd had in the night, something involving a different tree, one much larger than the evergreens I had been using my hatchet on. And a snake, there was a snake in the tree I dreamed about. I couldn't recall any more details than those at first.

I was still trying to salvage details of the dream when I suddenly found myself at what had to be my destination. The woods ended abruptly, maybe fifty yards short of an ornate iron fence. Beyond the fence were the remains of a good-sized mansion in the Greek white-masonry-and-slate style. What dominated the ruins of the house — and what held my attention — was a familiar massive oak. It appeared to have grown somewhere inside the building until it had smashed down walls and poked out windows. The tree had taken over so thoroughly that, from some angles, it was difficult to tell that there ever was a house.

I kept to the trees while I searched for an entrance. Eventually, I found a large, closed gate. The gate was locked. Its metalwork depicted human figures and seemed to tell a story involving a man, a woman and a snake. At one point, the snake was shown biting the woman on the foot, so I didn't think it was about Eden. The man followed the woman's... soul? ghost? to a cave made of other souls or spirits. I was admiring the beauty of the work when I realized the "cave" hid a door-sized gate within the larger one. I pushed at it and it opened. I stepped through and headed toward the main entrance of the building — or at least what was left of it. There was more ironwork here, but it was smashed as if something large and powerful had left the house in a hurry.

Inside, it looked as if fire, rather than the tree, had damaged the house. I had to step over burned and collapsed timbers and scorched bits of roof. Instead of a ceiling or a roof overhead, there was a canopy of oak limbs that let in little of the gray morning light. Glass and cinders crunched underfoot. Concerned that I was announcing myself to anyone or anything that might be there, I made myself unseeable again. And just in time. As I asked the Angel within to cloak me in its light, one of the lost stepped into my path and just stood, as if waiting.

It was hard to look at, even compared to the other dead things I'd come across. Its jaw had been torn away. There was a ragged crater where its eyes should have been, as if the person's brain had exploded. It still

had ears, though, grotesquely prominent ones, and its top row of teeth. I remained as still as it did for a moment. Could it hear me, find me by any noise I made, despite my being hidden? For what seemed a long time, nothing breathed in the room. I was about to reach into my pack for a flashlight when the dead thing turned and left the corridor the same way it had come. I stayed frozen in place. Finally, I took a long breath and a slow step forward. Even the least sound seemed like a shout to me then, as tiny bits of stuff turned to powder under my foot.

Another step and another long pause later, and knew I couldn't do it this way. I felt like I was betraying the Angel, the Mission and myself as I abandoned patience, unzipped my knapsack, pulled out a large flashlight and began to run.

At the end of the hallway was a pile of rubble, which I began clawing my way up. Thinking I'd feel cold hands at my throat any minute, I was up it and tumbling down the other side quicker than I expected. I took out a second flashlight, turned it on and listened for sounds of pursuit. Once my heart slowed, I turned my attention on the space around me. I could pick out the remains of a stairway and, in spots, patches of earth, some covered with toadstools. I thought the area must have been a huge open courtyard at one time, but the branches overhead made it gloomy enough to be a basement, in spite of the daylight. On the far side of the courtyard, the structure appeared to have collapsed completely and left a black chasm that my flashlights couldn't pierce.

With something close to shock, I realized the dark gap I was facing wasn't open space. It was the trunk of the oak tree.

My heart raced again. Out in the forest, it had dawned on me how fearsome a power lay in the Angel's light unleashed, a pure, unrelenting force to wash away even the greatest evil. Yet I resisted setting that power free on the violent dead in the woods because there seemed to be something of us in their struggles. Why did they fight each other? Did they understand why themselves? What if only one of them killed the campers in the woods, and the others wanted to stop him from killing again? What if I was wrong and none of them were responsible for the violence that had occurred?

Out in the forest, all these doubts, all these questions made me restrain the Angel within. Here, in the presence of this tree, I felt no such doubts, no such qualms. In my bones, I felt I was in the presence of evil itself. Here, I knew, was where the Angel's glory was meant to shine most brightly.

I raised my flashlights and began to walk toward the tree. I had covered maybe half the space when I

heard sounds all around me. I turned and saw them, dozens of the lost, a ring of them closing in on me. This time, I didn't hesitate, I just said, "See the light." I spun in place and watched dead flesh burn away from bone, and bone burn to ash. More of the dead replaced the fallen, and I burned them, too. All I could think was, *If I die here, who will reveal the truth of this place?*

It seemed that I had destroyed more of the lost than I'd seen since being chosen, but they were still coming. I had to retreat toward the tree, where I had intended to go from the beginning. The last thing I remember of the house is backing away from a skeletal hand as an advancing dead thing tried to shield itself from the Angel's glory.

And then I was running through a cave of some kind. Ahead of me, more dead things — disembodied ones now, all of them twisted beyond belief — fled before me and vanished into the walls or down side passageways. I felt fear greater than anything I'd ever known, so it took a moment for me to question where I was and how I had gotten there. My body ached and I was so thirsty that it hurt to breathe, but more than anything I wanted to see daylight again. In the dark ahead of me was a patch of brightness and I prayed for it to be a way out.

When I was close enough to the opening to see clouds in the sky, I realized I was being followed. I turned and saw the dead thing with the exploded head. I screamed and raised both flashlights at it. Where the light touched it, the thing's exterior blackened instantly. Smoldering, it fell backward. I turned again and ran for daylight.

I stepped out of the cave and found myself on a hillside atop a jumble of rocks. I moved a few hundred feet away from the cave's mouth before I began to fumble for my canteen. As I drank, I tried to recall how I had wound up underground and what had happened inside the house. I also wondered where on earth I was — and when. Had I finally learned to walk outside time the way the Angel does, but been unable to perceive the experience? If so, had I stepped back to the time before I reached the house? If I walked into the surrounding forest, would I see myself on my way in?

While I pondered these questions, I also felt a pang of regret: I had attacked the (mostly) headless thing without hesitation, though it gave no sign that it might attack me. It disturbed me that I had set loose the Angel out of fear and horror, more than for any good reason. It hadn't even raised a hand at me.



All these thoughts and doubts were pushed aside when I heard what sounded like a large truck not far away. I ran toward what I hoped might be a road. I was relieved to know I hadn't somehow stumbled into some remote past, but was a little disappointed at my progress along the Angel's path, too.

I found the road easily enough. A road sign indicated the kilometers to Kalambaka. I didn't really notice. I felt confused by all that had happened. I was frustrated that the true path continued to elude me. Why wasn't it as plain to me as the road? Was I a poor vessel for the Angel's glory? Did some imperfection in me diffuse its light? Had I failed some crucial test at the mouth of the cave?

The first vehicle to come along was a car containing a couple and their teenage son. They were headed from Kalambaka into the mountains, so I rode with them to my rental car. When they told me they intended to camp out there that weekend, I had to lie and say there was a bear loose in the woods. They looked at me strangely and asked if I was sure, said that they had never heard of bears in the Pindus region. I said that it had escaped from a zoo transport and that I was helping to track it and that they should spend a nice weekend at home. They seemed to accept that. I hate lies. As useful as they can be to protect people, lies still poison the world and change the way people see it.

After they turned around and left, I drove back to Kalambaka. I type this message the morning after. And while I've been composing it, I've made my decision: Whatever evil is under way at the site of the Orphic headquarters must be stopped, but I don't think I can do it alone. Obviously, the Angel is displeased with me for my slow progress. Perhaps it knows I can't succeed alone and it wants me to join forces with other chosen. Even writing those words makes me feel better. So that must be the way.

Here is what I propose: I will stay in Kalambaka to await anyone who cares to join me. I'll put messages in the Angel's language on the town kiosk so you can find me. I will also post a call on our internet help wanted list. I can stay here only as long as my money (ample) and my tourist visa (good for most of the next three months) holds out. Contact me as soon as possible. Then we can go to the heart of darkness together and let our light shine forth in holy triumph.

Subject: Re: Bad things in Thessaly

From: memphis68

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Is it just me or does anybody else get a bad feeling from this message? And I don't mean about this whacked-out enchanted forest full of rots, but about Oracle herself and her story? What's this slipping in and out of time business? And the gap in her story?

Lady, it sounds to me like you need to get help.



CHAPTER 6: TIES TO THE DEAD

And death shall be chosen rather than life by all the residue of them that remain of this evil family....

—Jeremiah 8:3

A WORLD OF HORRORS

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: azrael256

Subject: Stay out of Chinatown

Consider this an open warning to everyone. Y'all want to stay away from Chinatown if there's one in your city. I don't know if the hell that's breaking loose here is breaking loose everywhere, but I'm damn lucky to have gotten out with my skin. Take it from me, you're not ready to go in there if you're planning on walking out under your own power.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: shogun213

Subject: Details would be appreciated

Okay, so there's bad craziness going on in Chinatown where you live. What exactly makes you think it's anything more than a local problem? Spill the beans.

Subject: Scary Monsters

From: memphis68

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Why Chinatown in particular? This smells like some sort of "Yellow Peril" baiting bullshit.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: azrael256

Subject: Fuck the Bok Choy

You don't give a guy an inch, do you? Let me tell you the whole story and you can decide if I've got any ulterior motives.

There's an Asian market that I go to on the edge of Chinatown. My reasons are innocent enough, though they have nothing to do with our purpose. It's a real hole in the wall kind of place from the outside, but once you get inside it's great.

I've been going there for years and I went again recently.

I walked in and stepped on something that crunched. I looked down and saw this little green statue — well, its body and head. I bent down to pick them up and apologize to Liu, the woman who owns the place, I think. But she wasn't at her regular place behind the counter. Instead, there was a guy I'd never seen before. He had a sharp suit on, all black — not the usual counter help. He looked daggers at me for breaking the figure, raised his arms and shouted something in Chinese. I have no idea what he said, but the idea was clear enough: Get the hell out.

Idiot that I am, I wanted to apologize to someone for breaking the statue, and maybe to pay for it. I also wanted to know what happened to Liu. It just didn't smell right. So I took a look at this guy, I mean I *really* looked at him, and he had this real faint haze. It's not like he was a monster, but like he was tied to one somehow. I guess something like you describe puppets having. His color was weird, too. The harder I looked, the more it changed. There was yellow and red and a few colors I'm not sure of.

The guy couldn't know what I was looking at, but I'm sure I looked suspicious at that point. Maybe he was hiding something. I don't know. What I do know is that he came around the counter, straight at me, like he was going to throw me out.

I backed toward the door with my hands out the whole way, trying to calm him down. That's when I heard *the voice*. It came from the back storeroom, past the swinging plastic door that I'd never seen anyone pass through. It was the most terrifying thing I'd ever heard. Not "evil" or twisted or painful. It was this high-pitched woman's voice, like nails on a chalkboard. It seemed to have the same effect on this guy: He stopped in his tracks.

I don't know what she said. It couldn't have been more than two sentences. But when she finished, the guy turns back to me and says *in English* that he's sorry for the inconvenience, the store is closed and that he forgot to post the sign. There was no charge for the statue, that it was his fault for not picking it up. However, the owners would appreciate if I left it behind.

Through all this, I just knew that whatever was in the backroom was watching. If I did the wrong thing, I'd get a look at it, and I didn't want to see what could have made that sound.

I went to hand back the figurine and got a good look at it. It had that same sort of weird tinge to it that the guy had. I was shocked. I'd never found the sight to work on objects before. I dropped it in surprise. The guy cursed something while I ran out. I could hear things breaking behind me, like the guy was having a fit. Maybe that little statue was more important than I thought.

My car was parked down the block, and I ran like hell. That's when I heard the jingle of the door, and the guy in the suit was after me. Somehow, I knew if he caught me, I'd be dragged back into the store to meet that *thing*. Maybe she — it — had figured out I was one of us. Maybe it was just hungry. I've faced some monsters before and come out okay, but that thing scared the shit out of me.

I knew pretty quick that I wasn't going to make it. He was coming up *fast*, so I stopped short, ready to fight. He was reaching into his coat for a gun. Better that than seeing that woman, I figured. I didn't have to deal with either, though — and this is when the shit really hit the fan, if you can believe that. A car tore around the corner, with two guys with guys leaning out the windows. One of them yelled something and the Chinese guy turned from me. I dove for cover.

All the windows around me were shot to shit. There were bullets and glass everywhere. The guy in the suit spun around bleeding. The buildings lining the street seemed to spring to life as shots were fired from windows and maybe rooftops, riddling the car. The drive-by guys fired back randomly.

Despite all the chaos, my sight was still on and I saw the guys in the car. The ones shooting seemed to be things. The driver looked normal. But who cares? Why were they gunning down people in the middle of Chinatown? Why were all kinds of shooters just waiting for an attack? All I can guess is that the monsters in the car were trying to send a message to that thing in the storeroom, but it delivered a message of its own: "War!"

My car was just outside the war zone. When things slowed down, I scrambled across the sidewalk and pulled open the passenger door. There were a few bullet holes and broken glass, but I just wanted out of there. I started the engine with my head down all the while, till I glanced in the rearview mirror.

I knew instantly that I was looking at the creature that had been in the storeroom. I guess it had come out to inspect the damage. I wanted to floor it, but couldn't. I was stuck to the spot. All I could do was watch.

I mean, it didn't look like a monster. It was this tiny little Chinese woman, with a wasp waist and a bob haircut, in traditional clothing, I guess. She looked left and right, and then looked right at me and nodded.

It was electric. There was something there, something I never would have expected. For a second, it almost felt like kinship. Then the badness flooded in and the feeling was gone. She smiled and opened her mouth, and a swarm of locusts or flies or bees or some shit came out! The cloud circled around her once then shot right at me. That's when I finally hit the gas.

Needless to say, I'm not going back to that market again. I don't know what that woman was. I don't know how she did that thing with the bugs. I don't want to know. I mean, you'd think anything a rot hates has to be someone you'd want to talk to. No way. That woman scared the crap out of me and I never want to see her again. If there's a war between monsters brewing on the streets of Chinatown, the best thing any of us can do is stay out of the way and let them beat the shit out of each other.

Sorry I don't have more details, but I'm lucky I got out alive.

From: howitzer114

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Rocket (Launcher) Science

Sounds to me like you got caught in a turf war between two kinds of critters. You did the smart thing by getting out of there.

I suggest you proceed with the following:

1. Give that area a wide berth for several months.
2. Relocate if you can. You were there when someone went down. Someone had to see you. If they saw you, they'll come looking for you.
3. Reconsider the whole scene: Did you get away or did they let you go?

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: cabbie22

Subject: Connection

There's something that troubles me in all of this. Azrael, you said you felt some sort of "connection" with the monster who came out of the store. I've been doing this for a while. I've seen a lot of things. I've never felt anything like

that. Are you sure it wasn't using some sort of trick on you to make you feel that way? Maybe so you wouldn't run?

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
From: azrael256
Subject: Quite Certain

Let me see if I can say this right. I haven't faced any monsters on their own turf, but the moment that thing and I locked eyes didn't feel like anything planned. I got this very weird feeling that she was as surprised as I was. There was a moment when she was, I don't know, I guess "unguarded" is the best term for it. That's the best way to describe what I felt, at least. Then the walls went back up and I got out of there.

I don't think creatures like that enjoy unguarded moments. I didn't.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
From: (sender unidentified)
Subject: Beware

Ichmail here.

Such creatures do not, in fact, take kindly to unguarded moments, Azrael. Their existence is defined by rigid self-control. Any moment when that iron discipline slips, even for the barest sliver of a second, is a moment when they can be overwhelmed by madness or terror. Anyone who can induce a moment of that sort is therefore incredibly dangerous to such beings. If you have done so once, the one you saw will fear that you can do it again. She most certainly cannot allow that possibility, for she has many enemies, as you have learned. Therefore, you are a threat who must be eliminated. Their reach is long and their cunning is great.

I fear for your life, Azrael.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
From: azrael256
Subject: Overreaction?

I realize that it's better to be safe than sorry, but I think people (and Ichmail) are overreacting. Look, whatever I saw has its hands full. If there's that much going on in her turf, I don't think she's going to worry about me.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
From: rigger111
Subject: Wishful Thinking

Keep telling yourself that and you'll be able to sleep nights. Well, the next few nights until whatever that was comes for you.

TURF WARS

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
From: carpenter169
Subject: Enlightenment

I think I'd take Ichmail's warning on this one, Azrael. A little bird tells me he's got very very good information on this sort of thing.

So how about it, "Ichmail"? Are you going to confess your sins? Or do I have reveal you for a heretic?

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
From: (sender unidentified)
Subject: Re: Enlightenment

You must have been here earlier, Carpenter, when I shared the details of my new existence and confessed my unhappy state. I'm sure we even found ourselves here by similar means. I fail to see what more needs to be said.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org
From: carpenter169
Subject: The Devil Is in the Details

I was really hoping it wouldn't have to come to this.

Allow me to propose a hypothesis: Based on evidence from sources who need not be named (the fewer people who know about them, the safer they are), I say that Ichmail knows exactly what Azrael ran into in Chinatown. He knows what she can do, where she came from and what she wants. He even knows, or has a good idea, of how to stop her — but he's not sharing.

How does he know? Simple. He knows what she wants for the best of reasons — they're the same kind.

In other words, everyone here's been had by Ichmail. He's not a rot, not in the fashion you know them, anyway. He's something other and more or less different. He may drink blood, but then again, so does a mosquito and that doesn't make it a vampire.

But before I say more, I need to ask a question of you all. Bear with me, because it takes a little setup. Ichmail comes on here and throws himself on the mercy of the court. He confesses his sins, says he's been a bad little monster and wants to make amends. He then proceeds to rat out, err, give us all of the information we need to find the so-called Orphic Circle, which turns out has already been smashed, so none of the really important details of his story can be corroborated. We do, however, have everything we need to know to hunt down and kill monsters like this Ada Pavon or that half-dead little beast Bratovich. We have everything we need to get rid of Ichmail's enemies.

Let's say someone out there finds and wipes out everyone in the Orphic Circle. (In fact, Oracle already seems to be on it.) I'll tell you what happens: Ichmail gets a clear field. Everyone who knew him is eliminated. Suddenly he can maneuver and nobody knows who or what he is. He drops off this list — or maybe lurks to keep an eye on what we're doing — and carves out his own monster turf. He comes to confessional, reveals his sins and has you all do his penance. After that, he strolls into a heaven he created for himself.

How can I say such terrible things about Ichmail, you ask. I'm a suspicious bastard, not to mention a determined enemy of the human race. It's why I'm still in one piece. I'm suspicious of the fact that Ichmail has told everything about everything, but nothing about himself or his kind. I'm

doubly suspicious, because he doesn't offer any suggestions on how to take down his own kind. He might be covering his own ass, but I look at it as holding out. He wants us to deal with his problems — but not be able to deal with him.

That worries me. It should worry you, too.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: shogun213

Subject: What Do You Mean We?

Carpenter, we've already conclusively established that there is no "we" here, as far as you're concerned.

You're a monster. You are not one of us. The powers that be may have seen fit to allow you to find us, but that doesn't mean I have to like it and that doesn't mean I have to put up with your bullshit for one second longer than is absolutely necessary. If you have something useful to say, say it. If not, shut up. I don't like Ichmail, but I like him a whole lot more than I like you. At least he didn't bullshit us about being human. Now you, you've given us a snow job since minute one, and I've had it. You're against Ichmail? That puts me in his corner.

And now that I think of it, why are you so fired up to pit us against him? What are you hiding this time? So help me God, you better come clean on this or I'll do everything I can to find your dead ass and put you in the ground.

From: howitzer114

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Subject: Re: What Do You Mean We?

I may be reading too much into this, but I can only think of one reason for Carpenter's outburst. He's afraid.

FIRST BLOOD

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: carpenter169

Subject: Semantics

Let's say for the sake of argument that you're right. Let's say I'm afraid (though I prefer to use the term "concerned"). Explain to me why exactly you're so happy about that.

After all, I'm a monster, right? I'm the thing that makes you wake up screaming. I'm the thing that's going to kill you if you ever turn your back or give me a chance. You should be afraid of me, and if you aren't, you're a bigger fool than Gardener ever was.

Now you've stumbled onto something that "scares" the monster. Let me explain something to you. This isn't a case of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." These things are no friends of yours, mine or anyone else's. They're alien. They've gone somewhere that even I have trouble imagining and they've come back, and that changes you even more than dying does.

Look at it this way: One of the points I kept on trying to hammer home to you was that ghosts and the walking dead are still human in some way. They're dead human,

but they're human. You can understand what they're after because they've still got some of the same hopes, fears or whatever that you do. Even rots are what's left of a person's soul when everything good about it corrodes. You can understand them. You can get a handle on what they want because it's something that you might want. Someone's bound to get pissed off at me for saying this, but on one level you're close to them. You can imagine yourself in their shoes, and that lets you anticipate what they might do. It lets you understand them.

These things, the sorts of things that Ichmail is, aren't like that. Mind you, Ichmail was a monster before he was dead. I've met some of his victims on the other side. They had stories to tell that would cost a living man sleep. Most of those souls were so scarred they just went looking straight for the Void, and I was happy to send them there. But that was before he died. Now, he's something else.

The sort of monster that Ichmail is, you see, isn't just a rot or anything so simple. It's a force. It crawls out of the grave with the stench of Hell on its breath and a love for murder, and then it gets worse. They're not interested in human things anymore. Whatever's done to them in Hell or whatever they sell out to down there gives them an agenda, and that agenda becomes absolutely everything to them. Plus, there's an incentive to it. The further these things get along that agenda, the more powerful they get and the more tricks they have up their sleeve. Moving like the wind? Seen it. Turning into a monster? Seen it. Drinking down souls? Seen it. Sacrificing human beings to control a demon? I've seen that, too.

They're everything that every other monster can do rolled up into one nasty package, and unless you've been where they have, you don't have the foggiest goddamned clue what they're up to. They'll be polite and friendly and cheerful one minute, and they'll rip your arm off the next. If you're not in their way they ignore you. If you catch their fancy, they don't stop until you're theirs. And if you cross them, they'll chase you to the grave and beyond.

So maybe I am afraid. Or maybe I'm just smart. You make the call, Shogun.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: (sender unidentified)

Subject: Corrections

Your breadth of knowledge impresses me, Carpenter. I am forced to wonder, however, how much of it is hard-earned and how much is postulated? Hypothesized? Imagined? If you have met any souls who knew me in my previous incarnation, you have done them a great service by sending them on to the next destination in their journey, though I find myself questioning your motives for doing so.

Indeed, I sadly find myself forced to question your motives in general. I would remind others that there are two monsters here. I am here in an earnest attempt to



make expiation for evils that I have been party to, and to prevent greater evils from being inflicted on the world before their time. You have confessed to a personal agenda. Your words are tainted.

Much of what you say is true, though twisted. You do not understand what I have experienced, or what others like me have, and yet you insist on judging us. I tell you this, Carpenter. I have learned little of my new self and role, but I assure you, I know in the way that every child knows he must draw breath that I do have a place in Creation and a task to fulfill. So, too, do all of my kind. I could give you a name for what we are but it would mean nothing to you. Our role is something of which we are painfully aware. You do not share that awareness, and so you stumble on blindly. Perhaps in doing so, you play the part ordained for you, but by filling the minds of those here with half-truths, you do them grave disservice. They should fear what you say more than silence, and if they are wise they will give places where others of my kind dwell a wide berth. Their quarrel is not with my kind, nor does my kind take issue with the "imbued."

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: shogun213

Subject: ???

I don't believe it. First we have one monster telling us who to go out and kill, and now we've got another one

telling us who we shouldn't. What the hell is going on here? I'm telling you, I'm this close to giving up on this and going my own way again.

"THE MESSAGE ENDS"

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: carpenter169

Subject:

Very nice, Ichmail. Play the martyr, the poor tortured soul who's just doing what he has to do. You may be able to pull it off for a while, but you don't fool me. I *know*, you see. I *know*. Every soul that's ever been lost to the Void screams inside my head, and I know. I've heard the whispers about what's coming next and your part in it, how you'll set the fires to burn the world away and wear coats made of human skin. I know where the thousand embers are dispersed, and the name of the path that you walk. I even know your name, Hideo Masaka, and your mother's ghost tells me what you did to her. I'll take your secrets and shout them to the winds, and if that's not enough, I'll write them on the sleeping minds of children. I'll DAMN DAMN DAMN THE BITCH IS DEAD THE BITCH IS DEAD IT'S PULLING ME BACK TO THE OTHER SIDE NO NO NO I WILL NOT GO EGO NON IBO HORA IGNIS VENIET ET IMPERATOR REGIONES

INFERNI IPSUM OSTENDET. AS CRIANÇAS GÊMEAS-SOULEDDOJADELEVANTARAM-SEDE SUAS SEPULTURAS E ESPERAM A HORA QUE VARRERÁ AFASTADO AQUELAS CUJAS AS ALMAS NÃO SÃO DIVIDIDAS. A TEMPESTADE HERALDS A HORA DA DESTRUICÃO, E SEUS VENTOS VENTILARÃO AS FLAMAS SEMPRE MAIS ALTAMENTE. O HEAVEN STEPCHILDREN VAGUEIA, CEGA, NO REINO DA MORTE MAS SUA VISTA É AFIADA. CARNEMARCIA ECOWER MARCIO DI ANIME SOTTO I CORNI DI ANIMA. FEUER REINIGT UNS NICHT, UND UNSERE KNOCHENSIND ALSSAND. QUI EST? QUI NOMEN MEUM INVOCAT? QUI (Connection Reset By Host)

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: azrael256

Subject: What the hell?

Does anyone know what the hell just happened? Can someone please tell me?

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: bookworm55

Subject: Translation

I thought people might appreciate a rough translation of what was said there. Roughly, it means this:

"I shall not go! The hour of flame comes and the emperor of Hell manifests himself. The twin-souled children of jade have risen from their graves and await the hour that will sweep away those whose souls are not divided. The storm heralds the hour of destruction, and its winds shall fan the flames ever higher. Heaven's stepchildren wander, blind, into the kingdom of death but their sight is keen. Rotten blood and rotten souls gather under the horns of blood. Fire shall not cleanse us, and our bones will be as sand. Who is there? Who calls my name? Who"

I took a couple of liberties here, primarily with the tone, but that's the gist of it. I'm also assuming the last bit was a complete word, "qui," as opposed to a prefix, but the rest seems pretty straightforward — if you're a polyglot. The Latin's a bit shoddy, but the rest is Portuguese, German, Italian.... It's a linguistic bouillabaisse, to be honest.

Cabbie, did your research reveal evidence that Carpenter spoke a half-dozen languages fluently? I suspect that he couldn't. What we're left with, then, is something akin to speaking in tongues (or typing in it, though he did say he had voice-recognition software), albeit without the standard glossolalia.

What does it mean? It beats me, but it certainly seems ominous.

Subject: I'm stumped

From: witness1

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Some of you may find this interesting.

Carpenter's accounts no longer exist.

There is no record of any of Carpenter's accounts ever having existed.

None of the ISPs Carpenter went through has any record of any dealings with him — ever. Attempts to register accounts in the names he used cause catastrophic errors.

There is no record of any of the accounts Carpenter would have used to pay for any of his connections, either.

There is no record that Carpenter ever connected here in the log, except for his posts themselves.

Likewise, there is no record of Ichmail. There is no record he ever logged in here, except for his posts.

It seems our ghosts have turned into ghosts in a fashion that I would have thought impossible. As I said, I'm stumped, but the ramifications worry me intensely. Someone — or some *thing* — has gone to a great deal of trouble to conceal the fact that those two ever existed. The question is, who and why? I have to guess that it's the same forces that let them — and possibly other supernatural entities — find this site. Honestly, though, I really don't have the slightest clue as to what just happened. All that I do know is that we had at least two monsters on here being relatively civil, and now we have almost no proof that they even existed.

What we do have, it seems, are their posts, which, all thoughts on Carpenter's personality aside, would appear to be useful. Take from them what you can and put it to good use. For my part, I'm putting up more security.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: mojo20

Subject: I know who

this is the sort of cover-up the govermet specializes in i wuld regard all information received as supect and posibly government planted to lur us into the open we act on it we will be idetifid and liquidated

Subject: Re: I know who

From: doctor119

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

I am afraid I must disagree. Let's look at the facts we have here. Carpenter and Ichmail came on the list at the same time. For better or worse, they seemed to complement each other. They vanish at the same time. Both give us a fair bit of information about their own kind, but disappear when they tangle with each other. Carpenter describes an experience similar to the ones we've all had — similar, but significantly different. Ichmail just describes his rebirth, which is symbolically the same thing. And now this.

My guess, putting it all together, is that it was our mysterious patrons who led Carpenter and Ichmail here. I further hypothesize that they were led here for a particular reason, which is to say to illuminate us as to their various fields of expertise. Once they had finished that and descended into name-calling, they had outlived their

usefulness and were disposed of. I will not venture to guess whether or not they were disposed of permanently, but at the very least I do not think they will ever trouble us again.

I welcome any and all alternative ideas.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: shogun213

Subject: Re: I know who

So you're saying that they were brought in to tell us how to kill them? That sounds good to me. Let's get to it.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: potter116

Subject: Re: I know who

I'm not so sure that's where we should be going with this, Shogun. What was the big point Carpenter kept trying to make when he told us how to deal with his kind? He hammered home that they think like people and act like people because they were — or are — people.

I think that's the key. I think that's the reason we got these visitors. Yes, what Ichmail told us about his former associates is disturbing, and useful. Oracle has demonstrated that very well. But I'm more interested in Ichmail's confession and his explanation of why he was here. You can even look to Carpenter's eventual admission. They revealed themselves as *people*. Yes, they're monstrous, and they're not quite human any more. Yet at their core, they're still like us in some fashion or another.

That goes for everyone like them, too. No, I'm not saying that all of the rots just need a hug and some understanding. Some of them are monsters, pure and simple. But there's a spark of something down in there, a spark that can be fanned into a flame or at least mourned when it's gone.

As for the ghosts and walking dead, I read what Carpenter said and find myself wondering. Ghosts and their near kin are tied to things, he said. They're tied to people and places and things that were important to them in life, and they've got things to do with them still.

Carpenter wanted us to destroy those things. He wanted us to wipe out those people and places and tear the ghosts out of this world, to send them wherever they might go when they can't be here any more. In some cases, that might not be a bad thing. We've all met walkers or hidden who have done horrible, horrible things. They certainly merited destruction. I've put a few out of their misery myself. But some of them have just been lost or alone or afraid. What does destroying them prove? What does it accomplish? It can't be a greater good.

Perhaps there's a different path to take here. If these lost souls are still tied to things here, perhaps we can loosen the knot gently. We can set them free, not send them flying out of control. I'm not sure how we can do it, but I have a few ideas.

We have to listen. If the walking dead want to speak to us, we have to hear what they say. Perhaps they can tell

us why they're here. If they trust us with their reasons for returning, maybe they can trust us to help. If they don't want to speak, perhaps we can convince them to.

Carpenter spoke of driving desires that brought the dead back and sustained them. Can we help satisfy those needs and allow those souls to rest? We can't help a walker kill his murderer, but we can at least bring the murderer to justice. If a ghost is doomed to protect his loved ones, can't we assume that responsibility and let him rest in peace? If there are places or things that anchor ghosts to life, maybe we can reunite them and allow the ghosts to say goodbye. I can't believe we're here just to kill. Perhaps this, too, is part of our burden.

Like I said, I'm not sure how to go about all this. I'm afraid to try. There are real monsters out there, not just suffering people in their shapes. Show mercy to the wrong spirit and you pay with your life. But I can't believe that every ghost and every thing wants nothing more than blood, or that whatever powers granted us these gifts insists that we use them to destroy.

They are lost souls, people. What more needs be said?

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: cabbie22

Subject: RIP?

I hear what you say, Potter. It's interesting. My gut tells me no, but I'll need to think about it.

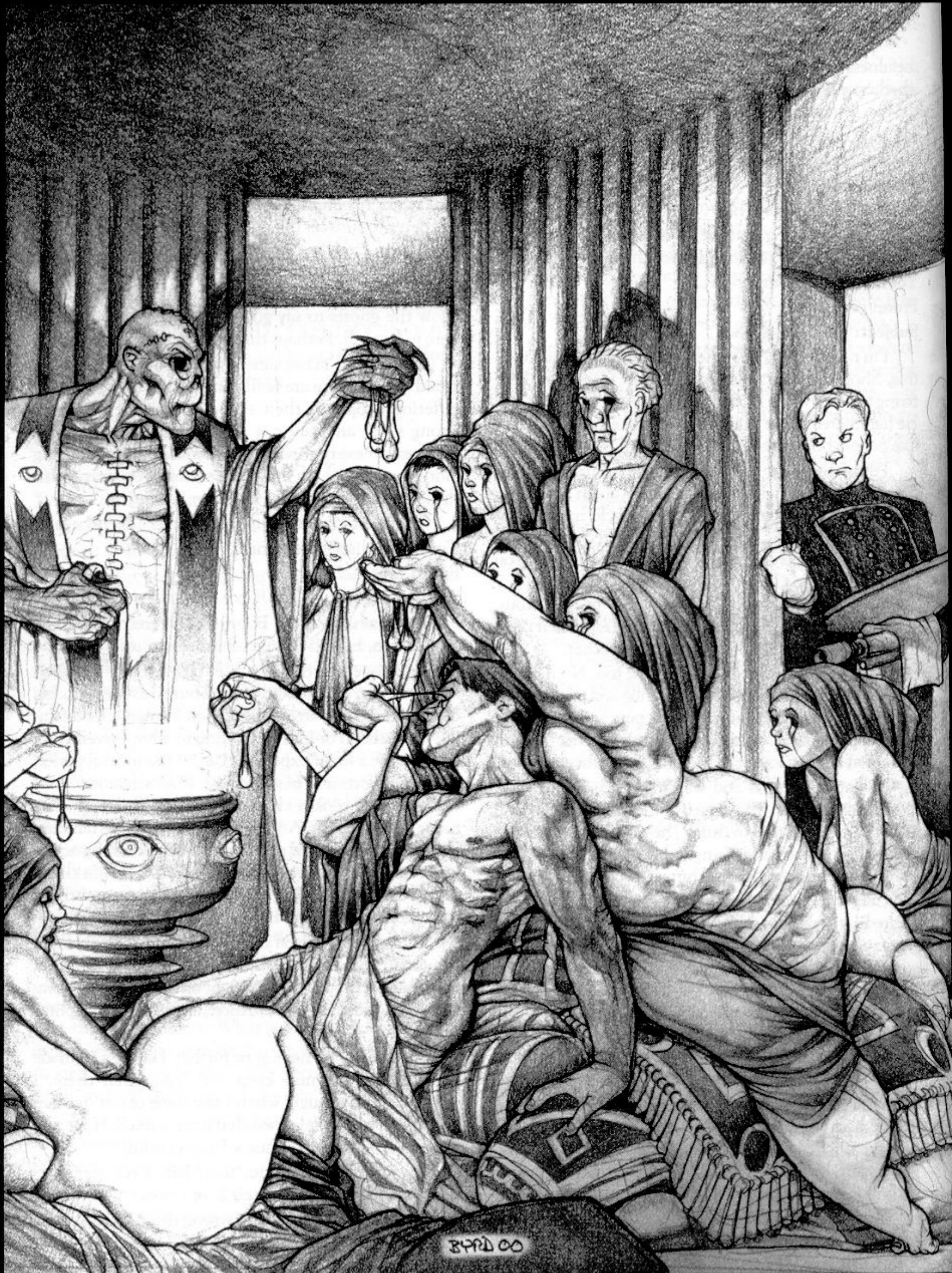
I do have one thing to add to this topic, and then maybe we can lay it to rest. I took a fare to a funeral today. The deceased was an elderly Italian woman. Good family, no husband or kids, according to what I overheard. There were a lot of expensive cars at the funeral parlor, a lot of imports and black sedans. It all screamed "connected." So I took a chance and asked the deceased's name. The one I got, Annabelle Sforza, sounded familiar. That was the name of the woman I kept running across in my research on Carpenter, the one who got him killed. Going back and reading over Carpenter's posts, I think she was what kept him here. And now she's gone.

I dropped the fare off and drove around to the back on a hunch. The back door of the place was wide open. Someone had ripped the lock right off the door. There was a stench like an open grave in there, and bloody fingerprints on the wall.

I guess I should have gone further. I know who made those prints. He may even still have been there. I stopped short, though, when I saw some of our signs on the wall. It was simple, two characters mixed: Hope and Corruption. I think he knew I was coming.

I waited for a minute, then left. Even monsters deserve a moment with their loved ones.

God help me if I did the wrong thing. Somehow, I don't think I did.



CHAPTER 7: RULES & STORYTELLING

O that thou wouldst hide me in the grave, that thou wouldst keep me secret, until thy wrath be past, that thou wouldst appoint me a set time, and remember me!

— Job 14:13

Passionate, driven and relentless, ghosts and the walking dead are by far the most common enemy that hunters face in their struggle against the supernatural.

Sometimes, a battle-weary hunter wonders if every building hides a few ghosts, every company has a rot or two worming its way up the corporate ladder, and every family is haunted by a poltergeist.

The apparent profusion of spirits means that the small community of hunters worldwide has probably dealt with more possessors, zombies, shamblers and ghosts than all the other types of monsters combined. The reason hunters are still far from complacent about dealing with the dead is simple: the sheer variety of powers these monsters display. Although the chosen have faced spirits over and over, the true nature of these beings still eludes them.

This chapter, combined with information in the *Hunter* rulebook and the *Hunter Storytellers Companion* (HSC), gives you the Storyteller all the rules, guidance and tricks you need to make the most of the walking dead in your chronicles, whether they're uneasy allies, suspicious entities or out-and-out abominations.

If you're a player, thanks for picking up this book, but please stop reading now. The information that follows will only spoil your fun. You've been warned.

WHAT'S GOING ON?

Everyone dies sooner or later. It's the one thing we can all count on. We live our lives. We die. After that, who knows?

The restless dead know, at least to a degree. Some people fail to pass on to whatever reward awaits when they die. These souls are trapped in a land of the dead,

instead. The ghosts in this bleak, decay-tainted realm can see the living world but struggle to contact it in any way. Trapped with the spirits of those who have died before, these ghosts linger in the next world, feuding amongst themselves, seeking salvation or simply trying to escape oblivion and despair.

Souls might not go on to their final reward — be it Heaven, reincarnation or whatever suited a person's beliefs in life — for various reasons. Some have ties to their old lives that are too strong to allow them to move on. Others believe they must complete tasks before they can consider the tales of their lives told.

At least, that's how things were until a few months ago. Now, things are worse than ever in the lands of the dead. A storm sweeps the underworld, tearing ghosts apart and reducing them to nothingness. The storm was triggered by a huge explosion that rocked the very foundations of the dead lands. The explosion had another cataclysmic effect, too: Hordes of ghosts all over the world were thrust violently back into the lands of the living.

These ghosts found themselves bound to the objects — corpses, buildings, objects, people — with which they collided upon re-entering our reality. Spirits trapped in corpses quickly learned to animate the bodies and became the majority of the walking dead that hunters face. Other ghosts found themselves consigned to haunt the objects, places or people to whom they were suddenly bound. Some spirits even learned to possess the living people or animals with whom they were linked.

Disturbingly, the explosion seems to have done even greater damage: It has weakened the barrier that

separates the living from the dead. Events like the dramatic ones in New Dijon (p. 22, and the **Hunters Survival Guide**, p. 100) suggest that ghosts may continue to re-enter the world in inestimable numbers.

Even more alarming, this sudden influx of the dead seems to coincide closely with the imbuing of the first hunters. More and more of the chosen come to believe that there is a connection between themselves and their most common adversaries. Of the few imbued who have made overtures to ghosts, some have learned that “life” for the dead hasn’t always been this way. Apparently, God, nature or some other power from beyond once drew a hard line between the living and dead. That line has now been broken, or at least bent, and the spirits of the dead return. Such terrible events began only months ago as measured in the living world. Startlingly, this is about the same time that many imbued recognize their awakening. Certainly, no credible hunter has claimed an earlier pedigree and proved his assertion. There also seems to be no end to the people who have been imbued since, much as the ongoing escape of the dead into the living world might continue.

So if there is a connection between walking dead and hunters, what is it, the imbued ask? Perhaps hunters are chosen to put the dead back where they belong. Maybe Hell is full and hunters are the embodiment of demons sent to recover lost spirits. Perhaps the chosen are a karmic counterbalance to the profusion of souls in the material world. Then again, the relationship between hunter and spirit could be incomprehensibly complex.

Whatever the answer, confronting the reality of life after death comforts precious few imbued. Yet, what choice do they have when loved ones are endangered every day and every night? The one respite or even hope that hunters may find is learning to understand the restless dead. If there really is a tie between the two, the chosen might better understand themselves by understanding their “enemy.” Is it possible that lingering spirits might not even be the enemy at all?

DEALING WITH THE DEAD

The first time a hunter — from wide-eyed Innocent to cynical Avenger — truly sees one of the walking dead, he typically reacts with horror. It’s a moving corpse, something that should be rotting in the ground, not walking, talking or worse.

It takes a lot for the newly imbued to see beyond the decay, the “wrongness” and the obsession of the dead to find the personality, the once-living person within. Not all ghosts are hostile things or predatory monsters to be eliminated, however. This chapter explores alternative ways for you to use the walking and restless dead in your chronicle, beyond the role of “monsters to be destroyed.” Entire stories can be based on the concept of *helping* ghosts — or at least trying to comprehend them.

This chapter also offers insights into the unique aspects of ghostly existence and how they impact on

SIGNAL TO NOISE

The preceding chapters of this book present a lot of information about spirits and zombies in the world, as related by various narrators. Some of these folks are hunters who do their best to ferret out the truth. Others are monsters themselves that reveal ghosts’ strengths and weaknesses to further their own ends. Understand that there’s no hard truth in either case. The ratio of information to misinformation in those chapters is dangerously even, if not actually weighted against the imbued. Since the other chapters are for players to read and characters to digest, the real truth is saved for this one, for you.

Narrators such as Shaka, Oracle, Ichmail and Carpenter sometimes get it wrong, aren’t fully up to date on recent events of the underworld (and the ramifications of those changes) or intentionally mislead the chosen. Thus, as Storyteller, take everything printed previously with a grain of salt. The real truth is detailed in this chapter. This section provides the rules for how things such as spirits’ anchors actually work. Sure, players may get mad when Carpenter’s advice for dealing with ghosts gets characters hurt. That’s what they get for believing a monster, particularly a malicious one. Thanks to this chapter, only you know how spirits and zombies really work. Keep it to yourself and have fun.

hunters’ relationships with the dead. Greater understanding of what motivates these beings makes them much more compelling as adversaries or allies. It also defines who hunters are by comparison and contrast.

SPLIT PERSONALITIES

Talbot eyed the rot warily, the broken stool still smoldering in the hunter’s hands. The wrecked theater bar was deserted save for the two of them.

“Are we clear, then? You leave Shona alone and I don’t take your head off. Deal?”

The rot seemed almost weary. It slumped onto one of the few whole bar stools left. “You don’t understand, do you? I didn’t want to hurt her. I just want to talk to her.”

It sighed heavily and rather melodramatically for a creature that didn’t need to breathe, and toyed with an empty pint glass. “I loved her, you know. I still do.”

Talbot listened incredulously as the creature started making noises that sounded suspiciously like crying. He put down the stool and started forward. “Look, I didn’t mean...”

Then he heard the beer glass shatter. The rot swung at him, holding a jagged shard in its hand. “Fuck you, fuck love and fuck that cheap bitch!” the zombie roared. “I’ll show you what suffering really is!”

One of the most puzzling and threatening aspects of ghosts and the walking dead is their tendency to undergo significant personality shifts without apparent reason. These changes are rarely for the better. One moment, a ghost talks reasonably to hunters, the next it's a raging mass of homicidal impulses and self-destructive influences.

The moment of death seems to change a person's identity in subtle ways. The dark, self-loathing part gains a life of its own. Some of the perceptive among the imbued notice that ghosts and walking dead occasionally seem to pause, as if undergoing a transition, as if listening to a voice no one else can hear, after which behavior changes completely and the dark side takes over. Some imbued also worry about the parallels suggested to hunters' own "voices," the Heralds.

The dark part of a spirit's personality overwhelms the ghost, compelling it to acts of destruction, whether against the living, the dead or even itself. An enemy that changes its objectives, personality and methods without warning is a dangerous one, because it doesn't behave in a predictable manner. A trap that depends on a zombie's evident affection for an ex-lover can be doomed to failure when the corpse suddenly decides she wants to kill him, not protect him.

WHY IT HAPPENS

When and where should you have the dark side of a ghost's personality come to the fore?

The key factor is exposure to negative emotions. Ghosts subsist on the emotional energy of the living, as detailed in the rulebook and HSC. Feeding on positive emotions makes them more likely to behave in rational, constructive ways—or to at least work toward achieving their goals, even if they're ones hunters wouldn't consider benevolent. The more a ghost is exposed to negative emotions such as hate, anger and fear, the more likely it is to turn maniacal in an instant. It becomes a creature of pure malice set on destruction, sometimes its own, as if self-abuse fulfills an agenda of the dark side's own.

The greater and more prolonged a ghost's exposure to negative emotions, from the hostility of a group of gang members defending their turf to repeated attacks from an Avenger or Defender with an attitude, the greater the chance of a personality shift.

Extensive use of tricks and subsequent exhaustion also makes ghosts vulnerable to base impulses. More than one hunter group has successfully fended off attack after attack from a ghost, only to have it turn *really* nasty just as it seemed to be weakening.

Use of common tricks more than four times in a scene, or use of uncommon ones more than a couple of times, makes a switch likely.

WHEN TO DO IT

A ghost or zombie's personality changes should be driven by the needs of your story. While random switches

can add to the confusion and ignorance that largely define a hunter's existence, too many can irritate players. Antagonists with no apparent motivation or explanation for their actions don't make very interesting opponents.

Remember that ghosts feed on emotional energy. If one hasn't been exposed to the sort of emotions that might make it switch, it probably doesn't do so. A helpful ghost that has dealt with nothing but inquisitive Innocents and thoughtful Visionaries is unlikely to freak out. The same ghost subjected to the passions of an Avenger seeking its destruction or to the fear of terrified humans is more likely to be subsumed by its dark side.

Try to delay any personality switch until a point in the story where it makes events more interesting for players (which usually means making life even more challenging for the characters). Generally, this crucial moment will be when story lines or confrontations come to a head.

Don't do it too often, though. A ghost's personality switch should be a defining moment in any hunter's relationship with the being, whether it be hostile or friendly.

SOME EXAMPLES

- The hunters are in the process of springing another trap on a walker that has thus far been the quiet calculating type. Their last attempt to destroy the creature through a direct assault failed because it anticipated the ambush. The hate that several of the group felt during the abortive strike was enough to trigger a personality shift. As a new plan swings into action, the characters suddenly face a vicious, homicidal monster, which leads to a prolonged fight that attracts police attention.

- Mercy-based hunters try to negotiate with a rot or find a nonviolent solution to a haunting. One of the characters gives in to her frustration briefly and yells at the others, triggering a personality shift in the ghost. Just as it appears that they've dealt with the problem, the ghost changes its mind and launches an attack on some hapless people nearby.

- Zeal-based hunters might struggle to take down a crazed poltergeist, only to have it turn round and offer the key to its own defeat after a Judge asks it questions and expresses sympathy for its motives. Can the group's Avenger bring herself to trust the entity?

HOW TO DO IT

Avoid making spirit antagonists into Jekyll-and-Hyde cases. An entirely new personality doesn't take charge of a ghost. Its malicious, self-destructive aspects simply come to the fore.

An altered ghost almost always works against its previous goals. Some do so obviously, taking actions that make their change of intent plain: attacking allies or friends, trying to destroy things protected before or intentionally revealing plans to hunters. The dark sides of other spirits bide their time, pretending nothing is amiss until they can do themselves or those around them—whether other ghosts, hunters or normal people—the most harm.

Serena glanced at the rot that was leading her. She decided to follow it against her better judgment, unable to resist the opportunity to understand it better after its initial polite overtures. It stopped suddenly. Maybe incapacitating those two security guards took more out of it than she realized.

"Are you all right?" she whispered.

"Fine," the rot replied after a moment. "Never better. C'mon, this way."

They took the elevator to the twelfth floor. Cautiously, the rot led Serena through a warren of corridors and finally stopped in front of an office.

"Is this the one he's in?" she asked.

The rot nodded. Serena pulled out her stolen pistol and steeled herself to burst through the door.

"Hey, Jimmy-boy, you've got a guest," the rot yelled suddenly and laughed.

Serena cursed and dove to the floor as the door burst outward.

Keep identity changes brief. They should last no more than a scene, sometimes not even that. As soon as the episode is over, the ghost returns to its old self, often with little or no memory of what it has just done.

Some spirits deny everything, claiming that hunters must be mistaken. Others try to rationalize their actions in human terms: "I got angry and did something stupid" is a common excuse. A few even admit that they have problems with self-control or their "dark side." The final option is a last resort, as most walking dead are astute enough to realize that such admissions only damage relationships with sympathetic (or suspicious) people.

USING TRICKS

A spirit's personality shift tends to empower the entity. Many display previously unseen tricks and seem able to draw on new reserves of energy.

For the duration of the scene in which a personality switch occurs, the ghost returns to its normal starting Pathos and may use these points freely to power tricks or restore health levels as normal. At the end of the scene, the creature's Pathos level returns to whatever it was before the identity change occurred.

Spirits under the control of their dark sides generally manifest tricks that are directly harmful to the living, such as Physiology Flux or Afflict (from the HSC). Favorite powers inflict pain and distress for extended periods of time. These emotions feed the ghost's dark side (see the HSC, p. 12) and can prolong the spirit's "episode" by as long as you like. "Compromised" spirits also tend to use tricks that do psychological damage, such as Dark Visions or Nightmare. However, such influence sometimes works in hunters' favor. The ghosts' efforts are wasted if intended victims have Conviction active or a hunter responds in time to remain in control (a reactive-Conviction roll succeeds).

SELF-INFLICTED WOUNDS

Rather than bring about a complete and obvious personality switch, a walker's "other half" can also act on its counterpart "from the shadows," using its powers covertly to



throw obstacles in its foremost identity's way. Sometimes, such self-destruction manifests as an uncontrolled and self-defeating use of a trick — not even the presiding identity of the spirit seems able to control the effect. Or a ghost might display abilities that seem to have no purpose other than to create problems for itself. Meanwhile, the being's dark side laughs at its counterpart's follies.

Posters to hunter-net and other lists have clogged the bandwidth trying to explain or rationalize spirits' strange behavior, to little or no effect. Most are happy to take ghost's unpredictability and apparent self-loathing as proof of their nature as monsters and leave it at that, ignoring the fact that living people can display the same behavior.

Acts of self-sabotage should occur rarely, but slightly more often than do *complete* personality switches. Certainly, a hidden's dark side shouldn't inflict harm upon its presiding identity more than every couple of scenes or so. Ideally, it should happen just often enough for characters to realize that they deal with something that isn't entirely under its own control.

Some of the most common covert "self-inflicted wounds" include:

- A walking corpse suddenly becomes extremely and obviously dead in appearance. The stench of the charnel house follows it everywhere, its skin looks more rotten than it actually is, and clouds of flies buzz around it.

Normal people (and hunters *without* active Conviction) who are exposed to the rot tend to lose control, running for their lives, collapsing into a fetal ball or jabbering to themselves, or they ignore the whole scene as if nothing were wrong. The fact that an animate corpse is in the vicinity is painfully obvious even to hunters without active second sight, and players of these unprotected imbued should be allowed a reaction roll (Perception + primary Virtue roll, difficulty 6) to spend a point of Conviction, anticipate danger and avoid losing control. Hunters with Conviction already active are immune to the worst effects of the appearance change but still find the corpse nauseating.

The spirit's truly monstrous appearance generally persists for one scene.

- The sabotage of a ghost's own plans isn't always apparent. Sometimes, it consists of nothing more than altering a phrase so that the meaning is utterly different from what the ghost intended to say. Think of the difference that replacing the word "help" with "hurt" has in the following sentence: "I'm here to help you." It would provoke an entirely different response in the hunters.

- A ghost's "dark side" is quite happy to torture its host by sending pain wracking through its form. Dice pools are reduced by one to three for the turn, at the Storyteller's discretion.

- A ghost or rot reacts as if it sees something different from what is actually before it. For example, instead of reacting aggressively to the three armed hunters advanc-

ing on it, the walker announces that it's flattered but a little confused as to why they're giving it flowers.

- Rots and ghosts occasionally go deaf or mute for no apparent reason. This fact may not be immediately apparent to hunters. If they're engaged in a discussion or negotiation with a spirit and it suddenly ignores them, they may jump to the wrong conclusion.

ANCHORS TO THE LIVING WORLD

Jason approached the ghosts, shouting at the top of his lungs. "Hurt kids, would you, you sick fucks? It's about time someone showed you what happens to your kind."

The ghosts jeered and mocked him. A couple of them moved forward.

Jason began reciting the Sermon on the Mount under his breath and felt the power rise within him. The two ghosts stopped abruptly in front of him, shocked expressions on their faces. He hadn't run away!

"Not so cocky now, are you?" Jason snarled, lashing out with his club at a mirror, shattering it with a spray of glass.

One of the ghosts screamed and doubled over, obviously wracked by pain. Then the ground seemed to open beneath it

HEY, ISN'T THAT...?

Storytellers familiar with *Wraith: The Oblivion* will spot a few familiar concepts in this chapter: Spectres, Thorns, Fronds, Dark Arcanoi and the like.

So why aren't we using those terms? Simple. Those things don't and probably won't ever matter to hunters. The complex metaphysics of the underworld, with its concepts of Oblivion and Angst, are far beyond the sphere of interest of even the most inspired Visionary.

Delving too deeply into the world of the restless and walking dead means distracting attention away from the focus of the chronicle: hunters and their struggle to deal with the new lives forced upon them.

Besides, the last thing you need is a whole swath of new statistics and systems to keep track of, distracting you from telling an involved and vivid story. So, keep the mechanics simple and the issues raised complex.

If any smart alec player complains that your ghosts don't act the way she expects wraiths to, you can always point out that since the events of *Ends of Empire* unleashed the Sixth Great Maelstrom on the underworld, all bets are off.

If you really want to get into the ins and outs of wraith and Spectre existence, you're free to do so, but in many ways what you'll play won't be *Hunter*.

and vomit an eerie purple light into the room. The ghost tumbled through the hole, leaving only the lingering echo of a scream.

Jason stood stunned for a moment. Then a slow smile crept across his face. "Who else wants some?" he asked ominously, as he decided which piece of furniture to break next.

THE TIES THAT BIND

PRIMARY ANCHORS

More than pure passion keeps the dead so close to the living world. All ghosts at work in this realm are bound to some item or object. These things, people or places are known as anchors and are crucial to ghosts' existence.

The explosion that threw the lands of the dead into utter turmoil had two specific effects: It triggered a vast storm that lashes the underworld even now. And it literally hurled innumerable spirits from beyond back into the living world. The vast majority of these "evicted" ghosts were caught by surprise and were completely unprepared for what happened to them. They found themselves bound to the first things they came in contact with back on this side, be it a place or object. It soon became apparent that these anchors, as such items are known, allowed spirits to stay in the living world, but restricted their ability to move more than a short distance away.

The exceptions to this phenomenon were ghosts who found themselves bound to people, living creatures or corpses. Using tricks they already knew or learned quickly, these spirits were able not only to loiter around their anchors, but even to take control of or animate the bodies. Ghosts that occupied or controlled a living creature resulted in possessing spirits, whereas ones that animated corpses became the walking dead.

Spirits have a complicated relationship with their anchors. For game purposes, anchors gained upon initial impact with the material world are called *primary* anchors. These things root spirits in the material world so they can stay here. They also prevent many ghosts from traveling around with the freedom they had in life or in the underworld, however, causing many spirits to resent their anchors. Ghosts attached to objects, people or places they find aesthetically displeasing or repulsive have a particularly rough time of it.

So why don't some spirits just abandon their primary anchors? Because these things are all that keep ghosts from being sucked back into the storm-torn lands of the dead. Most ghosts fight with desperate ferocity to avoid *that* fate. Few ghosts are willing to brave the fury of the storm that awaits on the other side. Others want to cling to life or the living for its own sake, no matter how distasteful the circumstances.

Every single ghost and walking dead that hunters encounter has a primary anchor. In the case of ghosts, it's an object, location or person from which they never travel more than 100 yards or so. As long as a ghost

exceeds that range, the anchor is "lost" (see below), and the spirit is wracked by the dead lands' storm winds.

The only exception to this travel limitation applies when spirits use tricks like Benign Occupation, Claim, Death on Holiday or Direct Connection (all in the HSC) to insinuate themselves into a person, body, object or computer system. While the ghost "rides" the item in question, the spirit can move or be moved away from its anchor. However, should a riding ghost exceed 100 yards from its primary anchor when it vacates its "host," the rules for loss of that anchor come into play as normal.

So, for ghosts anchors serve as both a link to the living world and as shelter from the ongoing destruction in the underworld. In general, primary anchors can be anything and everything, from a desk to a car to a house to a tree. The only real restriction is size: The object needs to be at least the size of a small table or large painting. Otherwise, a ghost wouldn't have bonded with it as the spirit crashed back into the living world. Blundering or unconcerned hunters may never notice that a spirit remains in the proximity of a certain object. Astute hunters may catch on right away. You decide how subtle or overt clues are to ghosts' travel limits. (Detecting Anchors on p. 94 details how hunters might recognize such items.)

The anchors of possessing spirits and zombies are more obvious: They're the bodies they linger around or inhabit. In the case of an anchor that's a living person or animal, the 100-yard rule applies as it does with objects. Some spirits simply stay close to a living anchor. Others that know the right tricks can enter the body and ride in it without influencing its behavior. Or they can suppress the body's true identity and take over. The HSC covers rules for both possession scenarios.

A spirit that collided with a corpse upon being deposited back into the living world probably animates that body and is essentially a part of it. The spirit can't usually linger outside the form. When the body is destroyed, the spirit's anchor is destroyed.

SECONDARY ANCHORS

Some ghosts and zombies have a *secondary* anchor, which is an object, person or place that was important to a soul in its breathing days — a spouse, a child, a home, a favorite toy, a desk at work or a photograph of a lost love. There's no restriction on the size of a secondary anchor. It can be as small as a pen or as large as a major office block. The only requirement is that it be something or someone that was important to a spirit in life.

Only powerful ghosts and walking dead have secondary anchors. Few of the beings deposited back in the living world are passionate enough to maintain such lasting attachments to former lives. There's no hard-and-fast rule about who can have a secondary anchor, though. If you've designed a spirit or walker to be a recurring villain or ally, give the being a secondary anchor.

Most restless dead have only their primary anchors to protect them from the ravages of the next world. Only the most exceptional spirits have more than one secondary anchor. Few hunters encounter ghosts as powerful as the latter in their careers. Spirits with *multiple* secondary anchors are too wily, prepared or incomprehensible to track down or meet face to face.

Although secondary anchors appear to have no immediate use to the dead, spirits protect these items as if their very unives depend on them — which they do.

LOSING AN ANCHOR

The separation from, destruction or loss of a ghost's primary anchor triggers a ghost's end in this world. Suddenly exposed to the destructive forces howling through the dead lands, the spirit is literally torn apart.

The effect applies just as much to a zombie as it does to a ghost. The zombie's body is a primary anchor for a riding spirit. When the body is destroyed, the spirit is exposed to the storm.

A ghost without a primary anchor is doomed. Only spirits lucky enough to have secondary anchors might

stave off destruction, if they can get to their secondary anchors in time. Those that do still must go through a period of adjustment to their new "homes" and become inactive for weeks or months.

Should a spirit have no secondary anchor or fail to reach another anchor in time, a veritable crack in reality appears below the ghost. The spirit plummets in, screaming. For all intents and purposes, it is destroyed. Witnessing such destruction is horrifying for hunters. It's a haunting glimpse into another reality; revelation enough to suggest that *something* awaits beyond, but no evidence of what it really is. Imbued who dedicate themselves to destroying ghosts and shamblers, and who see victims sucked down to "Hell" repeatedly might even develop derangements at your discretion.

In truth, spirits separated from their anchors are pulled back into the underworld. Though they're likely to meet oblivion there, they don't have to. A potent or resourceful spirit might have what it takes to climb back to the living world and haunt hunters again. The process takes months if not years, and no more than one spirit should ever accomplish it in a single chronicle. Make sure the spirit character is worth it as hunter ally or enemy.

THE UNDERWORLD

The ghosts that hunters encounter are almost entirely those thrown into the living world by the explosion that occurred *beyond*. Almost as if by the Messengers' decree, the imbued are incapable of seeing past the physical world, not even with second sight or edges that offer enhanced perception. Hunters therefore cannot see into the underworld or see any spirits that might linger there. *Hunters' vision and sensitivity to the supernatural is limited to the material world alone* (a very important limitation on hunter capabilities, raised in the rulebook under "Perception," on p. 132).

Storytellers familiar with **Wraith: The Oblivion** know that ghosts in the underworld aren't bound by such limitations, however. Those beings are quite capable of seeing the living world and affecting it with powers and tricks.

If you wish to introduce these "otherworldly" ghosts to your **Hunter** chronicle, remember that the imbued cannot see into the underworld through use of second sight or edges — ever. The only exception to this rule is the very moment when a ghost *in the underworld* uses a trick to affect the living world. A hunter with active second sight could glimpse the ghost briefly in that moment. As soon as the spirit stops using the trick, it disappears. So far, only use of the Redemption edge Suspend prevents this "extra-dimensional" intervention. (When that edge is active, ghosts in another realm are barred from affecting the living world in the hunter's presence.)

Spirits in the underworld don't suffer the same restrictions on travel that their counterparts in the living world do, either. **Wraith's** ghosts are able to travel and operate outside the material realm as they please, beyond any proximity to their own kinds of anchors. (Otherworldly spirits' liberties are certainly curtailed by the storm that rages across the lands of the dead, however. For reference, their safety and comfort there is comparable to ours in a *devastating* hurricane.)

If you know **Wraith** and you want to incorporate some of its spirits into your **Hunter** game, feel free. Simply understand that most spirits encountered by the imbued are now full-time denizens of the living world. Hunters who do witness spirits that appear for a moment, cause something to happen in the real world and then disappear again may speculate that yet another kind of ghost exists and generally eludes their perceptions. In a sense, they're right, and it might take cooperation with "traditional" **Hunter** ghosts or walking dead for the group to uncover the truth about the next world's mysterious inhabitants.

Bear in mind that introducing another "breed" of ghosts sets characters an extremely difficult challenge. The imbued can see and affect such a ghost only at the moment when it touches the living world to use a trick. The characters stand virtually no chance of dealing with such an elusive entity. If characters want to set a trap for it, they most likely have to forge an alliance with *this world's* spirits.

For further details on the current state of the underworld and its beings, see **Wraith: The Oblivion** and its **Ends of Empire** supplement.

System: For each turn that a ghost is separated from its primary anchor, roll eight dice of damage if it is outside, six dice if it is indoors (the difficulty is 6 in both cases). Treat damage as “lethal,” so it cannot be soaked. As long as a ghost remains outdoors, all of its actions are at +2 difficulty, as well.

You can measure the duration of this collapse by scene rather than by turn if you want a particularly compelling spirit to get to a secondary anchor and return in future stories (and it’s likely to return *angry*). Such a being probably flees the characters immediately in search of shelter; it doesn’t hang around to threaten or menace while its very existence is at stake. Meanwhile, have “run of the mill” spirits and shamblers collapse in turns for more satisfying hunter victories.

A spirit cannot use Pathos to heal any damage suffered while it lacks an anchor.

Should a ghost reach a secondary anchor before it’s destroyed, three Pathos must be spent to bind itself to the other anchor. If your antagonist doesn’t have those points, he might not have the will to survive, after all (then again, you might just *allow* him to do it for your chronicle’s sake).

When one of the walking dead loses its primary anchor — its current body is destroyed — the spirit within is probably destroyed, too. If the animating spirit is one of the rare few that has a secondary anchor, however, it may resort to that shelter thereafter, just as any ghost would. For simplicity, consider the outcast spirit to have full health levels in incorporeal form (although it may have suffered damaged from edges such as Cleave that affect corporeal and incorporeal beings). That “vitality” doesn’t mean the spirit is ready to keep on fighting, though. It’s just lost its “home” and needs another — fast — to resist the storm winds or it really will be destroyed forever.

A spirit isn’t limited to “walking” to its secondary anchor. Remember that spirits with access to certain tricks can take shelter in people and objects to travel beyond 100 yards of their anchors (p. 92). That same technique can be temporary recourse for a spirit that’s lost its primary anchor and that seeks a secondary one. Benign Occupation or Full Possession might be used to hitch a ride in a passing human, delaying the damage inflicted by the dead world’s storm. Indeed, some spirits hop from body to body to travel to secondary anchors. Should there be a handy corpse around, a being could use Death on Holiday to seek refuge and become mobile again. Alternatively, a spirit could apply Claim to take control of a car or motorcycle to get to a secondary anchor. (Pathos cannot be used to recover lost health levels even while temporarily possessing an object or person. Another anchor must be reached before health levels can be restored.)

None of these tactics is a solution, though. The spirit must “possess” whatever being or thing it rides until the host is in proximity to the spirit’s secondary anchor. If the spirit does leave its temporary host for any

reason (except to move to another temporary host), it is subject to destruction again.

If a spirit has access to the trick Fast Forward, it’s virtually home free, traveling directly from its current location to its secondary anchor.

Once a spirit binds with its secondary anchor, it is trapped there while it recuperates. It regains one health level per day until fully healed. Thereafter, it regains one Pathos per day until it reaches its starting level. (Replace Pathos with Willpower if using the rulebook’s guidelines on spirits.) Then it’s free to act as it wishes once more.

Note that if a spirit exceeds the 100-yard radius of its primary or secondary anchor, but then returns to that area, damage from the storm ceases. Pathos cannot be spent to recover health levels while the spirit exceeds its range. Pathos can be spent to heal upon returning to the anchor’s proximity, however. In this case, the anchor isn’t really lost, just strayed from.

If a secondary anchor is also destroyed, it’s game over for a spirit unless the being is so potent that it has yet more anchors. When all secondary anchors are lost or are too distant to access, a spirit is usually wind-swept and dragged from this reality.

Then again, a truly desperate spirit may seek to take refuge in any item or body that’s available even after all anchors are lost. The spirit must possess a trick such as Claim, Death on Holiday, Benign Occupation or Full Possession to do so. Such efforts are ultimately futile, though. Those powers have limited duration, after which the spirit is expelled again. In such circumstances, its return to the underworld is inevitable.

DETECTING ANCHORS

Ghosts’ and walkers’ reliance on anchors for existence in the living world makes anchors powerful tools for hunters to use against spirits.

Once a group of hunters becomes aware of the idea of anchors, it changes their relationship with “the enemy” forever. Whereas the walking dead are a physical problem that the imbued can deal with by physical means, spirits are intangible. They make edges or negotiation the only weapons in hunters’ arsenal. Awareness of a ghost’s anchor gives hunters a physical means of harming the spirit *and* an irresistible negotiating tool.

For hunters to make use of anchors, they have to discover the concept and then be able to track down the objects or people in question — no mean feat. There are numerous ways that hunters can learn about spirits and anchors.

OBSERVATION

The simplest yet most challenging way to suggest that ghosts are bound to objects is to make aspects of ghostly existence plain. The first and most obvious method is to show characters what happens when an anchor is de-

stroyed. Most confrontations between hunters and spirits take place in the vicinity of anchors. Perhaps a spirit is connected to a chair, which a hunter breaks to create a weapon for use with Cleave. Many confrontations between hunters and monsters result in collateral damage and a ghost's anchor could be part of it. Or the destruction of a shambler opens the veritable mouth of Hell. A spirit is pulled from the body and dragged down, wailing. When the chasm slams shut again, an inert body is left behind.

Under certain circumstances, players could roll for characters to recognize ghostly behavior. A Perception + Alertness roll, difficulty 7, might reveal that a particular person is present every time a ghost manifests. A Wits + Alertness roll, difficulty 8, might reveal that a ghost seems reluctant to leave the vicinity of a particular item or seems to shelter it from harm. Resort to such rolls only when players are absolutely stumped by a ghost's tendencies or *modus operandi*. Die rolls are always a desperate substitute for storytelling and roleplaying.

All of these are reasonably straightforward ways of saying to characters: "Hey, these spirits have something to do with those objects." They're challenging to implement because you don't want to lead players by the nose, or make them feel that you're doing all the detective work for them. Perhaps the clearest way to draw the connection between ghosts and anchors is to demonstrate the cause and effect between the two and let players come to their own conclusions. For example, a ghost could arrange to have her anchor — say, a vase or painting — delivered to a hunter as the first step in a campaign of terror against him. Can the hunter recognize the connection between the "gift" and his haunting?

TALKING

It's possible — though unlikely — that hunters following a Mercy-based creed might talk a ghost into revealing the concept of anchors. The spirit is likely to share such sensitive information only when its anchor is in imminent danger. Perhaps the hunter can help preserve the spirit's object, at least for the short term. Maybe the ghost can blackmail the character, so revealing the truths of the other side isn't such a concern. And even if a spirit does tell a hunter about its anchor, it doesn't offer any more details than it needs to. ("That book helps keep me near my loved ones," as opposed to "That book keeps me from being sucked down into the void.")

Here are some examples of situations that might compel a ghost to disclose the truth of its anchor.

- A ghost is bound to a table in an old house. The current residents are moving and the spirit wants to remain behind. Can it persuade the hunters to stop the people from taking their furniture?

- A ghost is bound to a building that's scheduled for demolition to make way for a shopping mall. Can the ghost convince the hunters to prevent the destruction?

- A ghost is bound to, but doesn't possess, a person who has attracted the attention of a bloodsucker or other monster. Can the ghost persuade the characters that the *other* creature is more of a threat to the hapless person?

Other sources of information on ghosts' anchors, though untrustworthy ones, are other monsters. Vampires, warlocks and perhaps even ghosts' own dark sides might have some information that could help characters. The services that another monster demands might be more than hunters are willing to pay, however. Are they really willing to part with their own blood, their own secrets or their own loved ones to better relate to ghosts? Warlocks are an elusive breed and can often be difficult to comprehend. Will hunters even be able to understand what such a being tells them? And bloodsuckers are absolutely untrustworthy. Can hunters put credence in what nightcrawlers tell them? Allying with the enemy, even for information, can therefore be a risky venture.

Communication with other imbued in an area, should there be any, might help characters understand the role of anchors. Other hunters' encounters with the dead may fill in the characters' blanks. Alternatively, other hunters' experiences or interpretations may be completely erroneous or misleading, sending the characters down the wrong path altogether. Such are the dangers of hunters' collective ignorance and taking information on faith.

There's also hunter-net and any other widespread means of hunter communication. While the imbued online community has yet to catch on to the concept of anchors, many individuals worldwide glimpse the truth. If you use regular posts as part of your game, feed hints about anchors to characters through hunter emails (or from any monsters online). An African hunter might have a vital piece of information that completes the characters' understanding. The Internet is an ideal way to share such information. The question of its validity arises again, though, as it does in all imbued communication about the enemy.

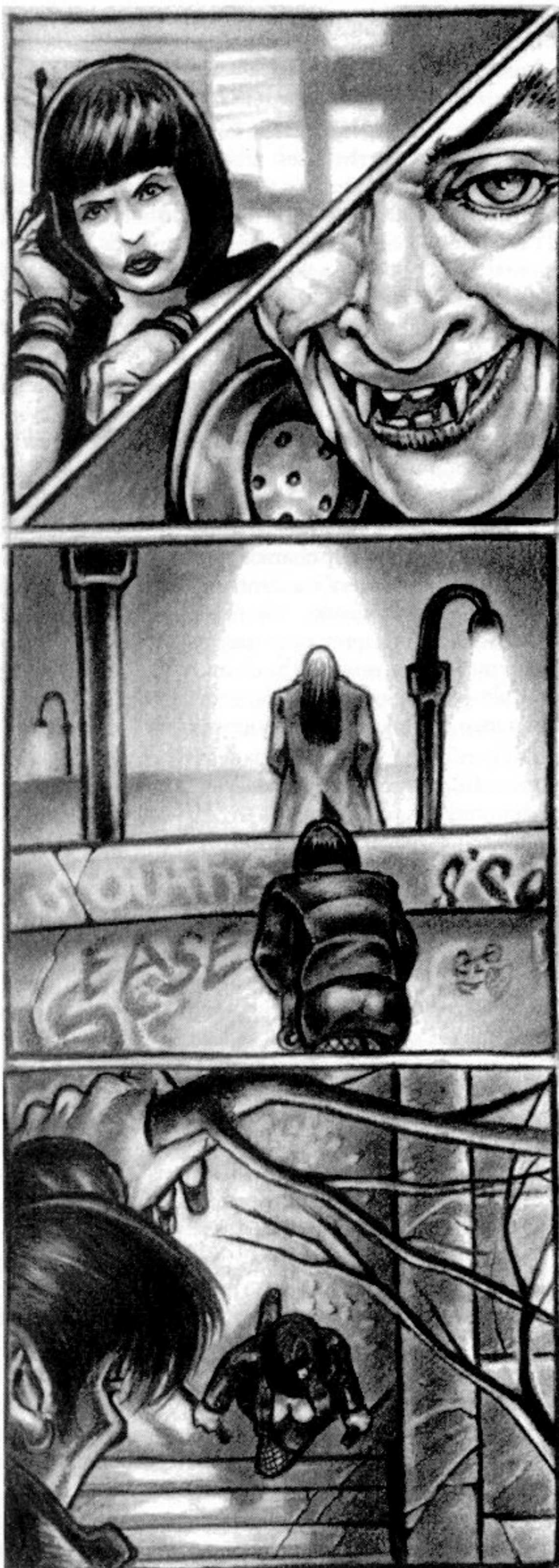
EDGES

Hunters could also use their powers to recognize an anchor as something more than what it seems. Second sight alone probably offers no direct clue to an object's status as an anchor. It might seem abnormal or strange, but that's all. Some edges offer more insight.

Delve: (Hunter, p. 156) If this edge is used in the vicinity of an anchor while the hunter has second sight active, the power might reveal the ghost's repeated presence in the vicinity. This clue is not a clear indication of an anchor's nature, but is a guide nonetheless.

Discern: (p. 160) This edge might indicate that a ghost never travels very far from a particular object or location, an insight from which the character may be able to deduce an anchor's significance.

Illuminate: (p. 148) Use of this edge while looking at an anchor allows a hunter to perceive a clue to the subject's



importance. It may have a faint nimbus around it that's similar in color to ones seen around ghosts or the walking dead, only pale or translucent. The item may appear covered in cobwebs, decayed or it may emanate a thin trail that links it to a ghost if the creature is in the vicinity.

Pinpoint: (p. 155) This edge is very effective at identifying an anchor. Not only does it reveal an object as a ghost's weakness, but multiple successes offer clues to its location.

Witness: (p. 150) Use of this edge near a ghost could confront the user with images of a particular location, person or object on unpredictable occasions. These visions stand out from the typical results of this edge because there's no indication of the ghost's monstrous nature, just a glimpse of the anchor itself. Visions of an anchor appear only if the player scores three or more successes on the edge roll.

There are also a few Abilities that could help hunters sense the significance of spirits' anchors. Awareness might indicate that something is strange or amiss about an object; it gives a character that "tingly feeling." Intuition might be all that's required to grab an improvised weapon, which just happens to be a rot's secondary anchor. So why does the creature suddenly shy away when the hunter shakes the item menacingly?

You could even integrate a sense for anchors into a character's Destiny or Exposure Background. An epic fate as a hunter might involve being a lodestone for all things dead. Thus, objects bound to the dead seem *different* to the character. Contact with ghosts back during normal life might have revealed their activities around certain items or people. That information makes sense only now, and the hunter can use it against ghosts. A character with the Patron Background might also receive a message about the significance of an anchor. A booming "THE DEAD CLING TO THEIR PAST" is a pretty heavy hint that objects and things still mean something to spirits.

ANCHORS AS MOTIVATIONS

"This is ridiculous," Jason muttered as he pried open the window.

"Really?" Talbot said, lugging the portrait toward the house. "We seem to spend our lives fighting inhuman monsters. It makes an interesting change of pace to deal with a human one."

Jason grunted noncommittally as he pulled himself through the window. He switched on the flashlight and looked around the room. Cheap furniture, a handful of weighty science books on the bookcase, and a poster of an expensive car were revealed by the beam. "This doesn't look like the home of a murderer."

Talbot sighed and lifted the portrait into the house. "Just help me get our friend here in place. We'll know if we're doing the right thing soon enough."

Beyond being a means of staying near the living, secondary anchors have emotional importance to ghosts and rots. Objects or people, beyond those primary ones that a spirit seems stuck to, bear sentimental value. As

ANCHORS AND EDGES

Two edges can have profound effects on the relationship between a ghost and its anchor.

Burden: (p. 161) A ghost fixed in place by use of this edge is susceptible to exceeding the range of anchor if that item is moved away from it. Such events can impose the rules for loss of an anchor immediately. Such damage stops as soon as the ghost is back within 100 yards of its anchor, however.

Ward: (p. 157) Hunters using this edge can actually push ghosts beyond an anchor's protective radius. Once the ghost is pushed more than 100 yards from its anchor, it starts to be flensed as if by raging storm winds. Once the ghost is back within the perimeter, the damage stops.

explained earlier, secondary anchors are things that retain meaning from a spirit's life. Sure, ghosts can take refuge in these items, but that's just the beginning of their significance. Attachment to the trappings of life suggests that a ghost or poltergeist has memories, thoughts, feelings or motivations. An entity might be reasoned with, spoken to, negotiated with and above all understood, not just destroyed out of hand. Maybe these human qualities can be invoked to help a spirit make peace with the world.

Wrathful or destructive hunters aren't usually concerned about a ghost's feelings or motivations. "Destroy them and move on. There are a lot more spooks to deal with," these imbued rationalize. Compassionate hunters know better. They recognize that spectral passions can be alleviated so that the restless dead feel no more need to torment the living, even if they still linger in this reality.

After recognizing the importance of anchors, the next step in dealing nonviolently with ghosts is understanding their psychology: Helping ghosts to resolve lingering business or to let go of past lives. Insightful imbued — often Visionaries, Redeemers, Innocents, Martyrs and sometimes Judges — try to look beyond the bleeding walls, rotting corpses, possessed machinery and weird personality shifts to find the once-living people beyond.

If a hunter can persuade the dead that it's not their place to interfere with the living any longer, the chosen fulfills a vision of the hunt as surely as if she'd cleaved a zombie to pieces. This process is perhaps one of the most rewarding ways for the Merciful to actually cooperate with monsters in a way that both satisfies the creature and protects the world from the supernatural.

Of course, the danger of trying to help spirits is that many without secondary anchors tend to not remember or have ties to former lives (they have only primary anchors). They know only their current existence as tormented, lingering, hungry spirits — and behave accordingly. Even the adamantly Merciful must acknowledge that no hu-

manity remains in some monsters, and that they have to be put down for the good of the living.

PLAYING A PART

Hunters can reconcile and negotiate with zombies and specters in many ways, all to cease spirits' torment of the living. They can help a ghost gain access to the people, places or things that it seeks to contact. Most ghosts have trouble communicating with the living world. Their mobility is also limited by their primary anchors. They need people who can contact both the ghosts themselves and the living who need to be reached, and they need assistants who can move about freely. Hunters fit the bill on all counts.

The requests a ghost makes to fulfill its needs can be innocuous: taking a final message to a loved one, making sure a precious item is placed out of harm's way, or getting a final piece of research published. Or requests can be morally dubious or dangerous: taking revenge on a murderer, stealing a precious object so that the ghost can stay near it, or solving a mystery around a ghost's death.

The more demanding the request, the more of a dilemma hunters face. Essentially, the characters make themselves a ghost's proxies in the living world. How far are they willing to go in pursuit of a creature's aims? What they do may well be a step on the road to removing a parasite on humanity's emotions, but is the personal cost to hunters worth it, especially when their charity case is subject to unpredictable personality swings? Indeed, how far are characters prepared to harm the living world to help *one* of the dead?

A story about interaction with ghosts should never have a clear-cut, morally correct path. Choosing to aid a ghost should be as complicated as choosing to hunt and destroy it. The difference is, helping a spirit heals a wound instead of creating another one.

TAKING THE INITIATIVE

Once hunters are aware that they can prevent attacks on the living by aiding ghosts and rots, they might take this approach to all dealings with spirits. It's a commendable effort from the perspective of Mercy- and Vision-driven hunters, and it certainly adds a new roleplaying dimension to the game. Even Defenders might help if compassion means saving someone or something from being haunted.

Few hidden or ghosts just accept help from these odd or seemingly deranged people who can see them and who aren't afraid of them, however. Put yourself in the monster's shoes. You're confronted by a group with inexplicable powers, obvious drives and the capacity to see you for what you are. What reason do you have to trust them? They're living. You're dead. How can they understand? If anything, they're a potential threat.

Persuading a ghost to accept help should be an extended roleplaying challenge. Trust doesn't come quickly or easily under the best of circumstances. Maybe characters

have an opportunity to destroy a ghost's anchor, but don't. Perhaps chosen do an unexpected favor for a ghost and ask nothing in return. Or imbued go out of their way to actually preserve a zombie's secondary anchor from destruction.

Even if hunters do gain a spirit's tentative trust, not every ghost or zombie believes that making peace with the trappings of its past is a good thing. In fact, most of them struggle to cling to the things that were precious to them before, to continue doggedly pursuing their former goals. Hunters trying to persuade a ghost that he would be better off leaving his children to the care of their mother and stepfather might find themselves perceived as part of the problem, not the solution.

Rots are perhaps the most difficult to coax into relinquishing their past lives. Not only do they have the same trust issues as ghosts do, but they don't need help nearly as badly. After all, they're back in a body, "living" once more. Why the hell should they stop meddling in their former lives? A hunter who can answer that question convincingly might be a candidate for a significant Conviction bonus.

So helping ghosts reconcile their old obsessions helps ease relations between this world and the next. By negotiating with ghosts, however, all hunters really do is persuade the beings to co-exist peacefully with reality, not necessarily depart from it. Perhaps a ghost is convinced to be content in a former lover's presence, or to watch over a prized book collection, rather than to torment anyone who comes near. For most rots and ghosts, such compromise is the only alternative to a final battle with imbued.

Yet, a few spirits seek more than just "hovering around but not dabbling in their old lives." Perhaps that existence would simply be too painful, a mockery of what they once were. Beings capable of such sentiment may aspire to leave life *and* afterlife behind altogether, moving on to whatever final reward awaits.

FINAL REWARD

The three hunters regarded the ghost before them. He just didn't look dangerous: a skinny guy in his early 20s, dressed in slightly fire-damaged clothes that were maybe five years out of fashion. A faintly manic grin played across his face.

"I don't believe it," Serena snapped, shifting her arm uncomfortably in its sling. "It's a monster, just like the rest of them. Don't listen to it. Just kill it and let's go home."

Talbot thought for a moment, then said, "I understand why you don't trust ghosts, Serena, but what if it's right? If we can help it move on, doesn't that give some meaning to these new lives of ours?"

Jason looked at the pair in obvious frustration. "Look, there's not much call for all this deep thought where I'm from," he said. "All I know is that if there's a way to get these things away from people without beating the hell out of them, I'm willing to try it."

One of the most powerful possibilities offered to Storytellers by the walking dead is the chance to move **Hunter** beyond a seek-and-destroy mission. While understanding anchors opens new avenues of negotiation with the dead, the boundaries can be pushed further.

Virtually every religion offers some form of reward after death: Heaven, reincarnation, spiritual oneness. If you can accept the concept of ghosts as dead people trapped by their attachment to the living world, it's not too big a leap to accept that if they let go of that attachment they might achieve their final reward. Hunters are (relatively) normal people, too, and they can come to the same conclusions.

Yet, just as we don't know what lies on the other side, nor do the imbued — even though, when they put spirits down, they sometimes get glimpses of what's unseen. Characters therefore shouldn't be completely in the know about how to help spirits reconcile their past and move on to a better place. Indeed, a hunter who perceives all ghosts as dead people who need help puts her life in the hands of the first malicious, manipulative, calculating spirit that comes along (not to say that teaching such a harsh lesson shouldn't be a part of your game...).

Players and characters knowing too much about ghosts and how to help them can also take the thrill out of your game. It's very difficult to conjure up horror or mystery if characters are so chummy with the dead that all aspects of postmortem existence, even the promised land, are revealed to them.

Still, allowing characters to learn that these "monsters" may have complex personal motivations is not a bad thing. An Avenger confronted with a revelation that the "demon" she's intent on destroying was once a good father, respected member of the church and frequent charity donor — and that he *wants* to go to Heaven — probably questions the moral high ground on which she stands.

In many ways, ghosts can seem closer to hunters than other monsters. Just like the imbued, they were once normal people whose existence was turned upside-down by something they couldn't control. For hunters, it was the Heralds' intervention in their lives. For ghosts, it was the simple arrival of death.

Also, like hunters, ghosts are motivated creatures and many are as confused about their state as most imbued are. So maybe it's hunters' duty to help such kindred spirits find some resting place.

Of course, cynical hunters are quick to point out that these arguments for aiding ghosts ignore fundamental points: Ghosts are parasites that survive off human emotions. They also can undergo dangerous personality shifts, during which they can do tremendous harm.

Still, some hunters — particularly Visionaries, Innocents, Redeemers, Martyrs and the occasional Judge — believe the similarities between spirit and hunter are sufficient common grounds for helping a ghost find any true afterlife.

MOVING ON

Abandoning this reality to attain a final reward involves letting go of all ties to a previous life, and thus a ghost's sense of identity as she understands it. There are as many ways of helping a spirit meet this challenge as there are restless dead. All approaches fall into one of two categories, however. The being must either let go of the needs and wants that persist from before or seek to complete tasks left unfulfilled in life.

WEIGHING ANCHORS

A ghost's persistent obsessions are typically other people or possessions, and these items are often a spirit's secondary anchors. Ghosts must let go of emotional attachments to anchors in order to move on. This isn't simply a matter of abandoning items. The ghost has to realize that while an anchor was once important, things have changed and it must allow life to continue without its otherworldly influence.

Some Ideas:

- A ghost is obsessed with its workplace, especially the desk at which it wasted so much of its life. A Merciful hunter might learn something of the spirit's past and try to persuade fellow imbued that the ghost is not to blame for anger at the employers who mistreated it. The hunters can simply destroy the desk and dispose of the spirit without putting it to rest, or they can convince the ghost to stop haunting co-workers and accept that its job is in the past and was never that important, anyway.

- A person died in a car accident, plunging off a bridge into a river. A present intended for a boyfriend was in the vehicle. The accident victim, now a walker, is unable to rest until the gift is delivered — and no one will stand in her way, not even the guy's new girlfriend. Can the characters track down the present (see the rules for detecting anchors, p. 94), which may now be in the hands of the police or someone who found it on the river bank — or might still be underwater? And can they convince the intended recipient that it is a gift from his long-dead love? After all, wouldn't it be better for the poor guy if someone other than the zombie delivered the gift to him?

- A knife used to end someone's life (and to condemn him to existence as a rot) rests in a police evidence locker. The zombie never saw it — he was stabbed from behind. He wants one look at the weapon that killed him so he can confirm the identity of his murderer. Can the hunters help him get to the weapon?

CASTING OFF

Another means to moving on is letting go of life's driving ambitions and emotions. This transition is more profound than letting go of anchors. The imbued must convince the "monster" to literally change its frame of mind. Agreeing not to interfere while remaining in the presence of something or someone that inspires an emotion isn't enough. The spirit must actually choose to abandon its former goals and passions — the meaning of its life — forever.

These feats can be accomplished in two ways. The simpler one is to achieve an ambition or fulfill a passion with hunters' assistance. Such tasks can be relatively basic: The hunters might help a ghost reach a former lover three states away, to whom the ghost wishes to say a final farewell (whether benevolent or malevolent). Or fulfilling an ambition can be demanding: A ghost wants his daughter to take up the guitar again, believing she has thrown away a promising career. How on Earth can the hunters persuade her to resume her art?

The complex and challenging way to reconcile a ghost's emotions involves showing the spirit that its feelings are no longer relevant. This means roleplaying — intensely. In the examples above, characters might have to demonstrate to the ghost that her ex-lover is now happy with someone else and that delving into the past would only cause harm. The dead father might need to be persuaded that his daughter has her own life and ambitions, and that his intentions would only interfere. Obviously, there can be no rules for changing a spirit's mind. The characters simply have to be compelling, convincing the entity that its time is past.

Other ideas for reconciling ambitions and emotional ties:

- A business rival drove a woman's company into bankruptcy and provoked to the owner to commit suicide. Do the hunters help her ghost take revenge or do they persuade it that any such quest is futile? Maybe the rival's own business is now in trouble. Maybe the hunters convince the ghost to *help* the rival avoid the spirit's own fate.

- A young girl lost her life while protesting the development of a natural area. Do the hunters help undermine the construction? Do they convince her that her death was an unavoidable accident and she should forget the whole thing? Or do they get her to use her supernatural abilities to help her fellow protestors one last time?

- A ghost's doctoral thesis sits nearly finished in her laptop. Can the hunters help her gain access to the computer and have it submitted posthumously? Or do they make her realize that academic qualifications aren't important anymore? This story can involve dealing with unfulfilled desires (getting the doctorate) and letting go of an anchor (the laptop).

THE REWARD

Deciding when a ghost or zombie attains the required perspective to move on lies entirely with the Storyteller. A spirit's realization shouldn't come easily. Both hunters and their ghostly counterparts should go through some profound changes in the course of the story.

Before a ghost transcends, you should be satisfied that the characters have been sufficiently persuasive and helpful, and that it's plausible for the spirit to know that her time with the living is done. The hunters' involvement is crucial. They, not any ghosts, are the stars of the show. If they haven't done enough, a ghost doesn't find its final reward any time soon.

It's quite likely that hunters disagree on the best way to aid a spirit. If these discussions become heated, the negative emotions generated could trigger a personality shift in the ghost, as described on p. 104. That makes the hunters' lives a lot more difficult, especially if the ghost's dark side feeds them misleading information.

Helping a ghost find its reward can change hunters in that they have a resounding new understanding of the restless dead. It's one thing to try to help a ghost exist peaceably with the world, but another entirely to see it put to rest once and for all. A hunter who accomplishes this goal is probably loath to do a spirit or zombie harm again, unless the being is clearly uncompromising and dangerous.

Of course, making other imbued recognize the good of aiding spirits can be nigh impossible, especially with those as determined to destroy as are their worst undead counterparts. The compulsion to aid rather than harm "the enemy" can even create a permanent rift between the chosen, if not make them outright opponents.

HELPING HUNTERS SEE THE LIGHT

There are several ways in which the imbued can be drawn into a spirit's quest to find its final resting place.

AVENGERS

This creed is perhaps the most difficult to work into a final-reward story. There are ways of doing it, though.

If a ghost or an Avenger's fellow hunters can convince her that the only way to get rid of the spirit for good is to help it achieve a transcendent state, perhaps she can be persuaded to help.

Maybe an Avenger feels sympathy for a ghost who seeks revenge against his murderer as a means to fulfill his concerns from life. An Avenger might also identify with and respect the ghost of a soldier or cop killed in the line of duty. Perhaps that spirit tries to finish some task that an untimely death left undone.

DEFENDERS

A Defender could perceive one of the restless dead hovering near a woman, but also see that the ghost doesn't actually pose a direct threat. The hunter might find a way to ensure the safety of the woman without attacking the spirit. When the entity suggests putting it to rest, perhaps by getting a message to its loved one by mundane means rather than by its often terrifying tricks, how can the protector refuse?

INNOCENTS

"Wide-eyes" inherent tendency to learn about creatures make theirs one of the most likely creeds to discover the possibility of ghosts' final reward. Some spirits with unfinished business are so pathetically happy to be recognized and talked to by the living that they willingly reveal the circumstances of their death and perhaps even some truths about their unearthly condition.

Innocents champion their creed when they discover and help a "monster" who wants to do one final

good turn before passing on. A young ghost that seeks to relieve its mother's grief is an excellent example.

JUDGES

Followers of the path of Judgment are faced with a dilemma when they learn that spirits can seek transcendence. Judges are typically burdened with the responsibility of choosing which ghosts are worth aiding and which must be put down. This is never a simple matter. Just because a ghost seeks relief doesn't mean the methods it uses meet a Judge's strict standards of right and wrong. Can a Judge tolerate violence against a living person? How about theft? Is it acceptable to allow (or even help) a ghost kill its own murderer? Such are the moral decisions that define the Judgment creed.

A would-be helpful Judge might even negotiate terms of assistance that are acceptable for the character. Perhaps the Judge won't countenance physical revenge against a killer, but will help expose him to police.

Even if hunters decide to aid a spirit, Judges constantly question their course to assure that the deceased is what she claims. Indeed, Judges are unlikely to ever trust a spirit fully, and instead always measure its actions and words for signs of betrayal (signs that the twisted side of a ghost's personality can be all too willing to display).

Only through its upright actions, keeping its word and avoiding doing harm to others can a ghost win the grudging trust of this suspicious creed.

MARTYRS

For Martyrs, helping a spirit move on to paradise is just another way that they give of themselves to cleanse the world. These hunters are prepared to donate their time and passion to help a ghost find a way out of purgatory.

"Masochists" are the hunters most likely to act as a ghost's "hands" in the mortal world, to complete a task that a ghost cannot. Perhaps the spirit seeks someone to look after her orphaned daughter, and a Martyr takes it upon herself to adopt the child. Such sacrifices can have far-reaching implications in your chronicle. Another burden is the last thing most hunters need. Yet, sacrifice is just what these imbued are about.

At the other extreme, a Martyr might help a violent or abusive ghost to prevent colleagues from being harmed by it in combat. Better that the character risk herself than others should. Perhaps the Martyr even helps the ghost do something morally reprehensible, at the expense of the hunter's own peace of mind, to ensure that other people go unharmed and the spirit passes.

REDEEMERS

Members of this creed are ideally suited to a final rest story. The themes of moving on — wrongs to be righted and self-acceptance to be achieved — lie at the heart of forgiveness and reconciliation.

A Redeemer who doesn't jump at the chance to help a ghost lay its past to rest is a poor example of his

creed. Spirits that appeal to a healer's sensibilities often seek to atone for the mistakes of their lives. A ghost who pilfered from his company's pension funds might seek a Redeemer's aid to lead investigators to his foreign bank accounts so the money can be repaid.

A Redeemer is unlikely to help a ghost who seeks vengeance, however, which would only perpetuate the spiral of violence that can encompass the restless dead.

VISIONARIES

A prophet is naturally attracted to the idea of helping a spirit find its final reward. Doing so is a revolutionary way of dealing with the supernatural crisis. Helping also bolsters a Visionary's purpose on the mission: She witnesses or is made aware of greater truths in the universe, that there is more to reality than its physical aspect. That understanding might be used to cure the world's ills.

A Visionary could also change a ghost's mind about the best way to proceed in coming to terms with its existence. A rot dead-set on killing his wife because she was unfaithful while he lived might be shown that leaving her alive is greater punishment — if she's now alone and destitute, for example. Although the alternative to death is not overly charitable, it is an alternative to the destructive option the spirit pursued.

EVERYTHING CHANGES

A successful story about helping a ghost achieve its final reward should change several things in your chronicle. The revelation that there truly is some form of paradise — beyond a lingering, miserable existence in this world — probably has a profound impact on the way hunters understand life, death and their calling. If there is some higher purpose and a better place for souls to go, can characters justify destroying zombies and ghosts — even violent ones — ever again? Phantoms may suddenly change from being perceived as menaces to unfortunate beings barred from their intended destination. Does talking, not fighting, become hunters' new first reaction? If it does, how long is it before hunters learn that ghosts and zombies come in all shades of good and evil?

Turn these revelations, issues and dilemmas on players by allowing *all* creatures the same benefit of the doubt. If characters question the imperative to destroy rots, shouldn't bloodsuckers and shapechangers be given the same consideration? Perhaps they, too, can be put at ease, ending the cycle that creates more monsters (then again, a nightcrawler on a killing spree — who turns out to have been a serial killer in life — can demonstrate that evil is a force that transcends morals and even the line between life and death).

Religious hunters confronted with proof of an after-life may find vindication for everything that they've ever believed in. Suddenly, their hunt assumes all the more meaning — they're doing the right thing after all, and the Messengers have helped them achieve such good. Then again, a religious person's passion for the hunt may die

when exposure to a genuine otherworld or paradise refutes or contradicts what she's always believed. "How can I keep doing this when all my reasons are wrong?" The hunt might never be the same again, or the character might find new motivation for carrying on.

Visionary characters can be deeply affected by confirmation of a final reward. They receive an answer to one of life's most haunting and fundamental questions. How does this knowledge alter or shape their long-term understanding of the mission? Where should it be taken? How far can a message of the hunt's "true" purpose be spread? Can others be convinced of a true "Heaven," or do they dismiss a Visionary as a crackpot? For some imbued, destruction is easier to embrace than paradise.

The further a seer goes in pursuit of Vision (the higher her Virtue rating), the more likely she might be to bargain with spirits to learn even greater truths. A glimpse of Heaven may quicken her desire to learn more about the hidden universe. Suddenly, making deals with the dead for information may be acceptable at almost any price — possibly ones that other imbued cannot tolerate. For these Visionaries, if the ultimate end of the hunt is fulfilled, what does the short-term suffering or even the lives of some people mean in the here and now?

Visionary extremists, informed of paradise's existence, could also turn their thirst for further knowledge against spirits. No living people need be hurt if a seer can appropriate a ghost's anchors and demand information in exchange for their safekeeping. The quest for understanding reaches new heights, but at the expense of spirits that might crave paradise for themselves. Hunters sympathetic to ghosts' condition might rail against the blackmail or torture of spirits, leading to conflict with Visionaries who are "supposed to give the hunt direction for all."

There's an even steeper downside to perceiving the ultimate reward, and it applies to all hunters: So characters make tremendous efforts to help one spirit achieve salvation. What good are their efforts when ghosts and zombies seem to linger and stagger *everywhere*? Perhaps after relieving one ghost, the characters go for a celebratory drink at a bar only to discover a half-dozen ghosts anchored to the pub. The entities may not be disruptive or harmful, but they're there, and the hunters' work is clearly cut out for them.

How much effort will it take to help *all* spirits? Is it worth it? Is the mission ultimately futile, and the revelation of a final reward just a Sisyphean torment? Comprehending Heaven's existence but suffering immense trials to help only a handful of spirits find it can drive some imbued to abandon the mission altogether. Relieving a ghost of this world can give characters hope that there is more to their calling than they once thought, but it can also be a cruel blow that emphasizes the futility of their efforts. Characters therefore never lose sight of the horror they're up against.



STORYTELLING RECONCILIATION

There's a process to designing stories about spirits deserving sympathy and assistance, rather than abuse. Always remember that this is a **Hunter** game and that the imbued are the protagonists. The characters should be instrumental, not peripheral, to helping ghosts achieve their objectives. Indeed, a ghost might not even recognize an opportunity to put its past life aside and move on. The characters might have to illustrate or confront the being with the possibility.

No matter how it happens, helping a ghost achieve its final reward should never be an easy solution. It should be a struggle that could take several game sessions to resolve.

The direction of the story is probably influenced by the characters' creeds. Merciful are willing to help because doing so corresponds with their identities. Visionaries might offer assistance as an exploration of ghostly existence and what it means for the living. The Zealous might help rather than harm ghosts if harm proves futile or the being is a kindred spirit, another soul that appreciates taking a stand and fighting for what's right (to its mind, anyway).

The simplest approach to helping a ghost make peace with the living is to encourage characters to help it fulfill its lingering tasks. These can range from ensuring the safety of a place, object or person to bringing murderer of the deceased to justice. The spirit still lingers, but it feels no compulsion to do further harm or torment.

More challenging but much more fulfilling is inspiring characters to persuade a ghost to relinquish its life and afterlife. This approach involves characters feeling sympathy for the spirit and winning its trust — or it winning theirs. Then the hunters have to learn what keeps the ghost here: the passions that drive it and the anchors that weigh it. Characters must realize that the ghost has to change its outlook on life. Characters can perceive this necessity by witnessing the futility of a ghost's existence. Maybe it hovers around a loved one but really can't affect the changes it desires. Making a ghost recognize the need for reconciliation is accomplished through extensive roleplaying. The result just might be one fewer spirit haunting the living world.

Stories about coming to terms with ghosts are best suited to a mature troupe, one that's prepared to plunge into the psychology of desire and regret. Players who experience and are inspired by the basics of understanding ghosts — the discovery of anchors and the recognition of ghosts' motivations — are the most likely to be interested in telling a story of ghostly redemption.

THE RESULT

Serena fidgeted nervously. "How much longer are we going to wait? The police will be here any minute."

"Shhh," Talbot responded. "Just watch."

The two spirits starting moving tentatively to the '50s music blaring from the stereo system. By Talbot's reckoning,

it was over 30 years since the abandoned dance hall had resounded with anything like it.

As the beat picked up, the ghosts danced with greater and greater enthusiasm, spinning, twirling and jumping without disturbing a single cobweb or the dust that lay thick on the floor. Serena found her foot tapping to the music, despite herself. Dammit, she was enjoying this. And so, it appeared, were the deaders.

After the music reached its climax, it faded slowly. The ghosts began to fade bit by bit, in time with the final notes. Their beaming faces were visible till the last, however.

"Told you," Talbot gloated.

Okay, so hunters can help spirits find their final salvation. That's fine in theory, but how do you actually portray it in a game? There are numerous ways you can depict a spirit's ascension, and without necessarily resorting to ridiculous melodrama. Indeed, the simplest way to express a ghosts' final departure is most in keeping with **Hunter's** minimalist, low-key, even mundane mood: The ghost simply fades away.

If your players prefer a touch more drama, there's always the archetypal tunnel of light, as seen in films such as *Ghost* and *The Frighteners* (the latter of which could be about a dedicated Martyr going to any lengths to deal with a homicidal ghost). Other ghosts or even "angelic" beings could appear to take the now-peaceful soul to its final rest. Or the penitent spirit could transform into a beam of light that pierces the clouds and lights up the landscape for one moment of painful beauty. Ultimately, the portrayal you choose should suit the theme and mood of your story or chronicle.

A scene about a spirit finding paradise might be heart-warming, but don't forget the complications. If a transcended being occupied a corpse, the characters have a rotting body on their hands. If you're generous, you could have it crumble away or disintegrate as part of the whole process. The problems of dealing with a lingering corpse are very much in keeping with **Hunter**, though: ordinary people in anything but ordinary circumstances. After the lofty success of a final-reward story, the gruesomeness of dealing with a nauseating body brings characters back to reality, especially because they have to dispose of the corpse without the authorities' intervention.

Whatever finale you choose for a spirit's passing, make sure players gain some sense of achievement from it, even if the feeling is fleeting. Helping rather than harming a spirit allows characters a rare sense of doing the right thing—a brief flash of hope in the grim life that hunters endure.

The key is to grant players a feeling of success and a clear message that there is something more to characters' existence than simply stalking and destroying. Any character who contributes to this conclusion by upholding (or re-evaluating) the values of her creed should probably receive bonus Conviction points. Even simple participants in the event, whether willing or not, should gain at least one point.

THE DANGERS

Although hunters understanding spirits leads to all-new possibilities for your chronicle, don't let your game devolve into "ghost friends" or the "Scooby gang" telling helpful stories. The setting is still the World of Darkness, and few mobile corpses play nice.

If the hunters become too complacent about the walking dead — "They can all be helped" — throw a couple of angry ghosts at them (see below). Perhaps a spirit tries to convince characters that she seeks resolution but actually uses them to do her dirty work. She might claim that the anchor of a rival ghost is hers, and that "destroying it is the only way I'll come to terms with my life."

Better yet, introduce a ghost who thinks his way to the next world is through the death or defilement of a living person. How do the hunters react to this request? Does the ghost trick them into helping? And how does the ghost react if the characters refuse to help or if they turn on it after its misleading them?

The motivation of every rot and ghost is different. Precious few have outlooks that coincide with hunters' and make meaningful dialogue easy. Maybe a ghost's expectations of a final meeting with an enemy are completely different from the sentimental parting that hunters anticipate.

Remember that ghosts' personalities are turbulent. Their dark sides can take over without warning and cause them to turn on hunter "allies" the way a rabid dog attacks its master. Aiding a ghost can be a dangerous and unpredictable task, and hard-won trust can be destroyed in a moment.

Indeed, unless players are willing to burn their precious Conviction like it's going out of style, characters make only occasional contact with a sympathetic ghostly associate. What's it really up to when they can't see it? And if the ghost needs to make contact, it probably has to use tricks to do so. That means it expends Pathos, which can exhaust the spirit and open the door for its dark side to come through. Furthermore, how easy is it to trust words that appear spontaneously on a computer monitor or that are written in insects on a wall? Sometimes, ghosts' means of communication are only reminders of their supernatural existence (not to mention that bizarre contact from a ghost, such as letters in blood, could really manifest from any spirit, and one might set another up for a fall at characters' hands).

Finally, other hunters might not tolerate characters' sympathy for the enemy. Trying to help a ghost can turn into a desperate race to save it before other imbued destroy it. Diametrically opposed outlooks on spirits can also result in direct conflict between hunters. Would determined Avengers really condone another hunter's assistance of a ghost? Maybe the "betrayer" is considered part of the problem, not the solution.

ANGRY GHOSTS

A drop of blood fell on the middle of the blueprint, obscuring the area Serena examined. She sighed and smeared it somewhat with a tissue. Glancing up, she discovered a string of obscenities written in gore on the ceiling.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," she called in a sing-song voice. She'd seen too many of these petty displays to be bothered much, especially when she used the sight she'd been given.

The ghost that emerged through the wall and walked toward her wasn't what she expected. Its body was scorched and twisted, with whole chunks missing. Its eyes were pure black and set into a skull that looked as if it had spent time under the tender care of a hammer. Its mouth was set into a snarl.

"What do you want?" Serena asked. "I'm willing to listen."

The ghost said nothing but continued to stalk forward.

"I can help you," she announced almost as a warning, feeling nervous now. How come this worked for Talbot but not her?

With a roar of pure anger, the ghost leaped at her, and the pain began.

The most experienced hunters, as far as that descriptor applies, have begun to notice variations in ghostly nature. In particular, at least one type seems to consciously resist or dismiss the helpful overtures of even persistent hunters. These ghosts appear to be consumed by their own fury and determined to vent it on the living.

MONSTERS AMONG MONSTERS

The *Walking Dead* offers many ways for hunters to interact with the dead beyond tracking and undoing them. "Angry ghosts" are the flip side. They are destruction personified, the demonic aspect of ghosts made manifest. Should a hunter ever downplay ghosts' threat or become complacent in dealings with them, angry spirits teach a valuable lesson — assuming the hunter survives to learn it.

Angry ghosts are the result of a normal ghost's dark side taking control once and for all. Too much exposure to negative emotions twists a ghost's perspective, and it becomes obsessed with spreading misery, pain and fear.

While angry ghosts differ only slightly from "standard" spirits and zombies in system terms, their behavior is quite different. Traditional ghosts and zombies have as many motivations as there are spirits. Angry ghosts and their walking dead equivalents have but one: destruction. They have no qualms about who or what they hurt in their pursuit. In fact, hurting more and more people is their pursuit. They take genuine pleasure in inflicting suffering on those who oppose them — or who just happen to be within reach.

Any hunter, regardless of creed, is eventually compelled to destroy these brutes. There is no redemption for such corrupt spirits. They are monsters, pure and simple. Unfortunately, some would-be helpful imbued have to learn that the hard way.

Warning of angry-ghost presence offered by the Heralds — if any occurs at all — is often unequivocal: "DESTRUCTION WALKS AMONG YOU," "HATRED BEARS FORM" or "DEATH DESCENDS." Let players decide how their characters react from there.

THE NATURE OF THE BEAST

Some minor system differences exist between angry ghosts and their "normal" counterparts.

- Angry ghosts feed exclusively on dark emotions — hate, anger, jealousy, despair and terror — as opposed to any others, as detailed in the HSC, p. 11.

- Angry ghosts all have primary anchors by virtue of being blasted into the living world, along with other ghosts. The same rules for primary anchors apply to them. When angry ghosts range too far from primary anchors, however, or those items are destroyed, these spirits simply seem to fade from the living world rather than be torn apart. The health levels that angry ghosts lose to "damage" suffered from the storm are actually a measurement of the rate at which they fade, not an indicator of how storm-thrashed they are. It's as if the ghosts are drawn or summoned back to the underworld rather than pulled down or ripped to pieces.

Angry ghosts can also have secondary anchors and can resort to them when primary ones are lost. These spirits are certainly more powerful and fierce than their "lesser" counterparts, as if their loathing and hatred is too powerful for even forces of the dead world to rein in. Angry ghosts' secondary anchors tend to be the things and people they *really* hated in life.

- Exposure to positive emotions or repeated use of tricks causes personality shifts in angry ghosts. These are the exact opposite of normal ghosts' changes. Instead of becoming more destructive and vicious, they become congenial, almost as if they have a "light side" struggling to emerge, just as conventional spirits have a dark side. During a shift, an angry ghost becomes more rational and works to protect others from its own excesses. It may also warn people, help others who seek to stop its abuses, and try and undo damage already done. Otherwise, shifts work exactly as they do for "normal" spirits.

- Angry ghosts possess an uncanny ability to communicate with other angry ghosts and can call on two to three others of their kind on short notice. They may even contact and influence regular ghosts whose dark sides are currently active (see *Distant Whispers*, p. 115, and *Summon Angry Ghosts*, p. 116).

STORYTELLING ANGRY GHOSTS

Most ghosts are little different from motivated humans in their attitudes. Angry ghosts have largely abandoned the trappings of human desires or feelings. Most are howling brutes, existing only for the destruction of others and themselves.

There are a few, however, that are cunning and wily. Their interaction with the living world is calculated. They play their hand only when it accomplishes something toward a long-term goal — usually destruction on a sweeping level — and can be quite intelligent. Some even approach hunters in a friendly manner and seek to convince them of their ghostly good intentions before duping the imbued into actions that they might just live long enough to regret.

These strategic angry ghosts or zombies are quite capable of acting like any other ghost if it suits them. Hunters are hard-pressed to ever tell them apart from other types of walking dead. Use of an edge such as Witness might offer some clue that what hunters face is more vicious than it appears, however. Flashes or insights might depict the rot clearly enjoying torturing or debasing people, or committing repeated acts of cold-blooded murder.

The final aim of both manipulative and just-plain-vicious angry ghosts is the same: destruction of others and then of themselves. They seek to spread pain and misery with an almost evangelical joy and go laughing to their own end if it serves their cause.

ANGRY GHOST PROFILE

The profiles of angry ghosts are broadly the same as those of other ghosts. There are a few differences, however. Perception and Stamina are usually two points lower than average, whereas Intelligence and Manipulation are a point or two higher.

The following represents an average angry ghost.

Attributes: Strength 4, Dexterity 4, Stamina 2, Charisma 3, Manipulation 5, Appearance 1, Perception 2, Intelligence 5, Wits 4

Abilities: (choose from) Academics 3, Alertness 4, Athletics 3, Brawl 5, Computer 2, Crafts 2, Dodge 5, Drive 2, Etiquette 4, Expression 4, Intimidation 5, Investigation 3, Leadership 3, Linguistics 2, Medicine 4, Occult 4, Politics 4, Science 3, Security 4, Streetwise 4, Subterfuge 5, Survival 5, Technology 1

Willpower: 6

Pathos: 8

Tricks: This book details new tricks available to “normal” and angry ghosts (see p. 114). Otherwise, all tricks and powers listed in the HSC and rulebook are available to angry ghosts.

THESSALY RULES

Storytellers who wish to integrate a visit to Chapter 5’s Taenarus, the onetime headquarters of the Orphic Circle, into their chronicle may find the following information useful. The place is just crawling with angry ghosts, so this information is best suited here.

This remote region of Thessaly is “consecrated” ground for evil spirits. Their control is contested by other spirits that wish to contain the influence of the evil ones,

however. The result is a place of exceeding danger for the imbued, who are well-advised to steer clear — if they think that’s a luxury they (and the world) can afford.

THE ENCHANTED FOREST

Intrepid hunters who elect to go “into the woods” find getting to Taenarus *at least* half the problem. The walking dead who stalk the forest are locked into a war of would-be attrition. The opposing sides use physical force to destroy any foe they encounter, which includes living intruders. Hunters have no easy way to distinguish between the two sides, not that it really matters.

Worse than the threat to life and limb that awaits anyone who ventures into the local forest is the barrier that separates Taenarus from the outside world. To keep interlopers away from the sinkhole of maleficence that the mansion has become, creatures in the woods have pooled their powers to warp time and space so that people traveling on foot become lost forever. Compasses and global-positioning equipment fail here. To find a path *through* (or even back out of) the warped area requires an appropriate level-five edge — that is, one possessed by a Storyteller character.

Despite any emails she might exchange with other imbued, or any plans she might agree to with same, Oracle herself never meets with any characters traveling to Thessaly. The only signs anyone is able to find of her ever having been in Greece are trees marked “danger” and a cave mouth that has the imbued symbol for “haunted” etched into its stone.

You may introduce another such powerful — and incomprehensible — imbued to lead a party through the traps of the enchanted forest. Even so, the most vigorous hikers find penetrating the trackless, dense (almost supernaturally so) woods sufficiently arduous that only characters who possess 4 Stamina *and* 3 Survival can make the trip afoot in the hours between dawn and twilight. And at twilight, the dead things begin to walk the woods....

Characters who try to use all-terrain vehicles in the region find them actively dangerous: In the warped zone, throttles work in reverse of their design, causing drivers to race forward when they wish to slow down. Brakes snag at inconvenient times or fail altogether. Batteries catch fire or explode, and so on.

Really clever characters who think to fly in via helicopter or other vertical-take-off-and-landing vehicle learn the hard way that the “irreality bubble” surrounds Taenarus spherically, not in a mere ring at ground level. A pilot with at least 3 Dexterity might crash-land in the forest in such a way that any characters aboard who succeed on a Dexterity + Athletics roll, difficulty 9, *might* be able to crawl away from the wreckage... and into the Forest of No Return. At that point, the hunters’ putative campaign becomes a dire quest for survival. A pilot of lesser Dexterity suffers a crash that’s fatal to all aboard; kind-hearted Storytellers may wish to give members of an

aerially inclined group dreams or visions of riding on a firebird and being consumed in the flames.

Of course, an alternative exists for folks who reject the idea of orienteering their way through a place where compasses tell lies and the walking dead await....

THE ORPHIC CAVERNS

In Chapter 5, Oracle exits a cave system at an opening not far off a road between Kalambaka and the mountains. *Extremely* clever characters might think, based on the way the extremist walks freely into daylight, that this route must lead back to the mansion itself and allow adventurous spelunking types to reach Taenarus easily, without having to rub shoulders with the walking dead. They're only half-right.

The Orphic caves run extensively beneath the Pindus Mountains (and theoretically give access to Taenarus). A caver with 4 Survival and 3 Stamina could penetrate the underground system just far enough to encounter the irreality bubble — if the *thousands* of evil spirits who infest the caves don't overwhelm him first. Even before the time/space warp is encountered, the caves themselves prove to be downright *labyrinthine* to anyone without prior caving experience, never mind the disembodied horrors that lurk there. A bunch of Cleave-wielding Avenger wackos *might* be able to fight their way to the irreality perimeter (where, without a Storyteller character to guide them, they'd become hopelessly lost), but chances are they would exhaust their Conviction and fall prey to the vicious apparitions haunting the subterranean abattoir. The one advantage of imbued who have the good sense to turn tail and run (before they reach the warp zone, that is) is that the evil spirits haunting the tunnels cannot venture outside.

TAENARUS

The reward for any hunter lucky (foolhardy) enough to actually reach the remnants of the Orphic headquarters is... certain death. Or at best the chance to become a shell for one of the evil spirits who guard the oak tree. The tree itself withstands any attempt to affect it, by the way. Sorry. The imbued are simply not up to the task. Anyone who gets far enough to try dies heroically, end of story.

Again, kind-hearted Storytellers may want to give repeated and dire portents of doom to anyone who insists on venturing someplace even angels *should* fear to tread.

SPEAKERS WITH THE DEAD

Talbot and Jason covered the ground from the hospital to the parking lot in silence. Jason unlocked the doors and slipped into the driver's seat. Talbot entered on the passenger side.

Jason was the first to speak. "She'd better be all right," he said. "If she isn't, I'll wreck every bloody spook in town!"

Talbot sighed. "Jason, I'm as upset about Serena as you are, but I thought we'd learned more than that by now."

Jason glared at him. "Listen you arrogant bastard, you can go and—"

He was interrupted by a knock at Talbot's window. An earnest young woman with long auburn hair and a curiously childish nose gestured at them to wind down the window. Talbot glanced at Jason, who nodded.

Talbot held the button until the window was half down. "Can I help you?"

She flashed him a slightly worrying smile. "I've got a message for you."

"From who?" Talbot asked.

"Not so much who as where," she replied, giggling slightly. "It's from, well, the other side. You know — the spirit world."

"From a ghost?"

"Yeah. He says the tense guy there is next."

Legends tell of others in the world, outside the imbued, who can see and deal with ghosts. They're called mediums, seers or fortunetellers. The stories about them might even be true. Should you choose to introduce "normal" people with the ability to talk to the dead in your game, they should be so rare that the players' characters are probably the first of the imbued to ever encounter them (Shaka's inconclusive experiences with the concept of mediums in Chapter 3 strike at only a few truths about these mysterious people). Mediums' scarcity reaffirms the fact that hunters only barely realize the depth of monster infiltration in the world. There are always new dangers to face, some of which must be met without guidance from other imbued — a harsh lesson for hunters who rely on the Internet for information about the enemy.

Despite mediums' normal-seeming countenance, there is clearly something "off" or "wrong" about them. Second sight reveals them to be abnormal, not completely mundane, touched somehow by the supernatural. Edges such as Illuminate, Witness and Discern reveal them to have subtle auras, traces of death about them or signs of past contact with spirits — whatever is appropriate to the power used. Mediums can vary wildly from fairground fortunetellers to members of militant ghost-hunting organizations. Some might be intent on aiding the dead, others on opposing them. In other words, mediums can be just about any people you want them to be — whoever will surprise or shake up the characters and players.

Hunters who encounter mediums probably share their experiences on hunter chat lists or by word of mouth. Many posters or confidants respond with speculation that mediums are a form of warlock that specializes in dealings with the dead. Others might advise characters to look for the same luck-changing capabilities associated with witches. Still others refute these connections because there just haven't been enough encounters between warlocks and hunters to draw such conclusions.

A few hunters online even propose that mediums are allied to nightstalkers who seem to have a knack for controlling the dead. These suggestions are almost universally shouted down as ridiculous, but may be no less valid than other assumptions.

If you want a full treatment of mediums, read the Wraith book *Mediums: Speakers with the Dead*. You don't need to for *Hunter* purposes, though.

USING MEDIUMS

Those rare individuals born with the ability to communicate with the dead can perform several roles in a *Hunter* chronicle.

THE GOOD

Mediums can communicate with ghosts with far more facility than hunters can. If the characters can strike up some sort of rapport with a medium, they might be able to glean some useful information about the next world's denizens. Mediums might also initiate a meaningful dialogue between the dead and the imbued, which can lead to final-reward style stories. A ghost might know what needs to be done for it to find peace, having witnessed what hunters are capable of, and a medium is a useful means to make contact with the characters. Or a medium could be familiar with a dangerous spirit and approach the characters for help; perhaps she has caught wind of rumors among the dead about these strange "aware" people.

ATTITUDES TOWARD MEDIUMS

Avengers — "Traitors, the lot of 'em. Use 'em to find out where the rots are hiding, then deal with the whole damn shooting match at once — corpses, diviners and whatever else."

Defenders — "The ones that prey on the gullible, with their seances and messages from dead relatives? They're probably just fakes. The ones that can really lead us to poltergeists? We need to *talk* to them."

Innocents — "We can speak with the dead. So can they. Does that make them evil? Does it make us evil?"

Judges — "I'll go by what they do, not by what they *can* do."

Martyrs — "Maybe we can learn from these people. They give up so much, and so many people question their sanity, just because they try to help the living and dead keep talking."

Redeemers — "A tool in our mission. Every spirit they help us understand and aid is a point in their favor. However, some of these miserable souls, constantly subjected to the demands of the dead, might require our aid as much as the walking dead do."

Visionaries — "Their insights into the next world should be considered, if not always believed. Use their knowledge but weigh their motivations. Who knows what regular contact with the dead does to a person? There could be a message about our own future hidden in their behavior."

A lone medium working the carnival circuit would be a useful, if unreliable, ally. Her regular contact with the dead might provide leads and clues for the characters to pursue. They can never predict when she might be in town, however... or when she might take them for a ride.

Of course, if otherworldly beings ever discover that a medium feeds information to hunters, she might need the characters' protection — and fast.

A less flamboyant medium, perhaps a middle-aged man who dabbles in the occult and who has awakened a latent power, could emerge as a source of mysterious warnings for characters. He, too, has learned something of the imbued through conversations with ghosts. But chances are that he is unwilling to reveal himself directly for fear of endangering himself and his family.

How does the group react to someone who registers as *unnatural* but who has a direct line to the world of the dead? Do they treat a medium's warnings as help, misleading information or something else entirely?

THE BAD

It's easy for mediums to be resistant to hunters, if not actively opposed to the imbued. After all, the many responses of hunters to what they perceive to be wrong is "kill it," and that knee-jerk instinct could be applied to mediums, too. Since mediums don't have a particularly binding lease on life, that approach makes hunters — all of them — a danger. Furthermore, mediums' contact with the dead can mean they're attached to the deceased — emotionally and perhaps physically, acting as willing hosts for spirits to travel the living world. Hunters who harm ghosts thus harm mediums' friends, allies or even soulmates.

"Bad" mediums are therefore not so much "evil" as they are opposed to many hunters' actions or motivations. Such people might work from the shadows to gather information about the imbued and blackmail or threaten them in hopes of ending characters' killing sprees. Perhaps a fortuneteller is prepared to frame the characters for murder and reveal them to the authorities (which wouldn't require much evidence given that hunters leave dead things all over the place). She withholds the evidence only as long as the characters leave her spirit allies alone.

Ultimately, the relationship between "bad" mediums and hunters is tentative. It usually leads to one of "good" or "ugly," depending on how interaction between the two groups proceeds. If the sides make overtures to communicate with, understand or even help each other, the first step is taken toward an ongoing productive association — "We won't kill you if you don't bring the hosts of Hell down on us."

If the parties make no efforts to come to terms (or at least tolerate each other), mutual suspicion and mistrust eventually turn ugly. Hunters and mediums probably fight, manipulate and rally allies against each other. The result is probably one group left standing, perhaps barely so.

THE UGLY

A medium can be immediately perceived by hunters as a traitor working with the dead against the living, which doesn't necessarily mean he is out to do harm. Some hunters construe him to be simply by association, nevertheless. There are many reasons why mediums might want to contact ghosts. The spirits they ally with could be deceased family members or friends whom they trust, for example.

Jane Chalmers lost her husband two years ago. A year ago, she started getting an odd chill in her house. Three months ago, she saw her husband again, and now she can talk to him whenever she likes. He isn't quite as she remembers — he can be volatile, aggressive sometimes — but she has her James back, so she won't complain. She'll also do anything to keep him here and happy for the last few years of her life.

The almost-ordinary nature of mediums can make them dangerous to hunters for many reasons. Most mediums live in open society, with friends, family and business colleagues. That means they and their spirit-friends have access to normal folk — even hunters' friends and families — and can get away with almost anything. So, when even genuinely unassuming mediums happen into violent confrontations with hunters, they often have little choice but to turn ugly.

Jane found James' old hunting shotgun and kept it nice and clean, just as he asked. So she was ready when James and a couple of his late friends came into the house at a run. She merely pointed the gun at his pursuers and explained that the police would be far more inclined to believe an 82-year-old woman protecting her house than a group of young men and women babbling about ghosts.

If hunters do believe mediums to be as much the enemy as the actual dead, the question arises of how to deal with them. Mediums are real people with real lives. They don't leave months-old corpses, burn up in the sun or fade away. Killing a medium is murder in society's eyes, if not in the eyes of many other imbued. If aggressive imbued really want to call down the wrath of God on diviners, the hunters need to be prepared for the ramifications. And some fallout may even be felt in the spirit world....

NEVER THE T'WAIN

In the event that some hunters and mediums are able to find common ground in any capacity, they're still unlikely to become close allies or fast friends. Other hunters attack mediums outright, so that makes all speakers-with-the-dead wary. Many hunters are also ruthless to mediums' ghostly friends or compatriots. Persecuted ghosts might decry all hunters as maniacs or destroyers, turning any potential medium associates into enemies. Indeed, the dead have watched over the living for centuries, maybe even ages. "So who the hell are these crazed people displaying frightening capabilities?" they ask. If it ever comes down to picking sides, would mediums really choose the imbued over their eternal associates?

From the hunter standpoint, mediums register as *wrong* to second sight and display powers that humans, in the name of all things right and proper, should not have. Granted, hunters have powers, too, but as some rationalize, the imbued still appear normal to the sight. Others believe themselves chosen by God, and that's all they need to know. Still other hunters look at their edges and question their humanity, but not for long. Too much self-examination can be destructive under the already oppressive weight of the *truth*. Assuming mediums to simply be "them" is far easier than wondering the same about "us."

The upshot is that hunters and mediums view each other warily at best.

STORY IDEAS

THE ROT'S REVENGE

The characters are approached by a medium who has been harassed by a group of ghosts. According to him, the spirits were all trapped in the same house until its owner died in an accident. One of the group was able to take the corpse for its own and is now one of the walking dead.

The spirits' existence in the building was never very cordial; they fought with each other constantly. Now the rot takes its revenge on the remaining ghosts by attacking their living families and loved ones. The trapped spirits have turned to the medium for help and won't leave him alone until he concedes.

Will the characters help?

THE HUNTERS HUNTED

While the characters help a ghost find its final reward, they themselves are subjected to attack by some other group. Are they other imbued furious at the characters' act of charity? Second sight says "no"; these attackers are tied to the dead — yet they seem alive and determined enough. The only way to find out the truth is to capture one of these people. She has no idea what the Messengers are, but she sure seems capable of dealing with the dead and doing some weird things of her own.

THE ENEMY WITHIN

The characters seem to be under attack, but by mundane means. Their phone lines are cut, their cars are sabotaged and their friends are threatened. Judicious use of second sight reveals that they are being followed by ghosts, but who is the spirits' living contact staging all the assaults? And when the culprit is found, can the hunters convince him to stop?

MEDIUMS' ABILITIES

All the tricks available to mediums have a common purpose: to allow them to see or interact with the dead. Various types of mediums use different methods to activate their particular tricks. Some use a traditional crystal ball. Others use seances or even meditation. All of the following tricks apply only to ghosts trapped in the living world, not to those in any underworld.

Ordinary people are terrified by contact with or witnessing any sign of spirits or the walking dead. They routinely flee the scene, become catatonic or carry on their business while subconsciously refusing to acknowledge what they've perceived around them. Hunters without active Conviction are also subject to such fear. Mediums, with their otherworldly magnetism or sensitivity, are exempt from this effect. They can look upon materialized spirits, hear disembodied moans, stare into rotting faces and see blood drip from walls without losing control. Granted, a Willpower roll might be called for to tolerate particularly disturbing scenes, but mediums can bear the restless dead for the most part (if hunters could only recognize this strength they could make allies of mediums and call upon them in times of need).

BEHOLD THE DEAD

With intense concentration, a medium can clearly see, hear and contact all the ghosts in his vicinity.

System: Spend two Willpower and roll Perception + Awareness, difficulty 7. The number of successes achieved is the number of minutes for which the medium can see and talk to all spirits and walking dead in his proximity. Ghosts do not need their own tricks to talk to the medium while this power is active.

REVEAL TORMENTORS

When a medium is the target of ghostly powers, she can call upon this trick to reveal her tormentor.

System: Spend one Willpower and roll Perception + Awareness, difficulty 6. Each success reveals one ghost in the medium's presence who performs or considers performing hostile actions against the medium. Helpful or benevolent spirits are not revealed by this effect. The spirit remains visible to the medium for the duration of the scene or until it leaves her presence. Such spirits are not made visible to anyone else unless the person possesses his own capability to see ghosts.

THE LOOMING PRESENCE

This trick allows a medium to sense an incorporeal ghost's nearness. It also inspires an uncomfortable feeling in the presence of the walking dead. The medium doesn't know the specific location, identity or intent of the spirit, nor does she know which "person" in a crowd might be a life-like zombie. She knows only that one is nearby.

System: Spend one Willpower and roll Perception + Awareness, difficulty 6. Success tells the medium whether ghosts or zombies are in the room where the ability is activated or within 10 yards of the user if outdoors. Multiple successes indicate the number present. The sensation is instantaneous, a snapshot of the area.

WILLING HOST

The medium can open himself to control by possessors.

System: Spend two Willpower and roll Charisma + Empathy, difficulty 7. Each success lowers the difficulty of a ghost's effort to use possession tricks (such as Benign



Occupation, Idle Hands or Full Possession from the HSC) on the medium by one.

JUST SO WE'RE CLEAR

Mediums' abilities are not available to hunter characters. Sorry, but if a character shows even a trace of medium capability, the Heralds don't chose her for the imbuing. Mediums cannot be imbued. The end.

GHOST CULTS

Jason and Serena raced along the street. The hidden they chased was only yards in front of them. It pushed a man in a suit out of its way and entered an alley. The hunters rounded the corner at breakneck speed — and came to a crashing halt.

Standing before them were a half-dozen people, all glaring and holding makeshift weapons — baseball bats, boards, pipes. The rot sheltered behind them with a smug look.

One of the group, a short woman in her mid-30s, stepped forward and said, "I think you might want to reconsider."

"In fact," a man barely out of his teens continued, "you might want to consider your whole attitude toward our master."

That's when the group moved forward, weapons raised. Suddenly, Talbot skidded around the corner. He gasped and gawked at the mob. "They're human, aren't they?"

Serena scowled at him. "Full marks, Sherlock. Any bright ideas before they kick our asses?"

They're something more than human. They have supernatural powers. Human nature being what it is, somebody's going to worship them. Some ghosts and rots have no compunction about taking advantage of the human predilection for seeking answers to life's mysteries. These manipulative dead can establish themselves as objects of worship for fanatical mortal cults, through which the spirits act in the living world.

Indeed, by organizing or adopting a cult of mortals, the dead gain both a small force of living to carry out their ambitions and a ready supply of humans in which to inspire the emotions on which they feed.

In return, most cultists gain the direction their former lives lacked (or so they believe). A blessed (or cursed) few gain powers, granted to them by their restless mentors. Sometimes, the price of power isn't worth the reward, though.

HOW A CULT WORKS

They gather in dark halls, dilapidated homes and abandoned warehouses. Ordinary people by day, they don arcane robes of office, daub their faces with paint and gather in secret on holy nights, full moons and other allegedly significant times. Animals are sacrificed. Ancient incantations are read. Holy symbols defiled. At the climax of a rite, the practitioners attempt to summon their dark master.

Sometimes, just sometimes, these rituals work, but not for the reasons cultists believe. Dramatic outpour-

ings of emotion at such elaborate rituals can lure ghosts and rots to a cult. When the restless dead discover such a banquet of emotional energy, few can pass it up.

In fact, some ghosts set out to establish symbiotic relationships between themselves and potential followers. Manifestation of even basic tricks can be enough to convince cultists that they have contacted the being they seek. Blood dripping from the walls is dead easy to pull off (no pun intended), and swarms of insects hardly tire a ghost at all. They know how to play to their public.

Rots and ghosts are happy to use their tricks to fulfill worshipers' desires. With judicious use of the right powers, cultists' rivals can be silenced, enemies killed in untraceable ways, lovers punished or won, and power can be gained. In return, cultists are more than happy to do their deity favors, most of which generate the emotions ghosts crave.

Soon, cultists are easy pickings. Whereas a ghost or rot once promised power, it now demands service in suitably outrageous fashion: "The great Mal'toth demands your obedience."

Cult activity tends to grab hunters' attention. The imbued may run into cultists while on the trail of a monster, or when searching for a friend kidnapped as a sacrifice in an upcoming ritual. Sometimes, the Heralds even step in. Perhaps as a character reads a newspaper report about a kidnapping, the words "THE DEAD LEAD THE LIVING" appear inexplicably in the story.

Many of the tools that characters are accustomed to using on the hunt are useless against cultists, however. Servants who haven't been granted powers by their ghostly patrons are "normal" people, so they don't register to second sight or perception edges. Suddenly, even seasoned monster hunters are like regular people again — in terrible danger from the supernatural but unable to see or identify its source. Ironically, practitioners' humanity is what endangers the imbued most. Cultists can therefore be antagonists who remind hunters that they're still human, as well.

USING CULTISTS

Pitting characters against a ghost's fanatical worshipers can add a new dimension to your game. After all, these are no more than normal people deceived by monsters — the very folk whom most hunters claim to protect.

Characters can't afford to simply lash out at cultists. Religious freedom is widespread throughout the world. The authorities don't set a hunter free after he kills religious practitioners, even if their rituals are truly outrageous. And then there's an extensive investigation and undoubtedly a trial. Cultists are therefore very much like mediums as hunter enemies go — people with the weight of human society behind them. Take out a worshiper and all that weight comes crashing down.

The concept of attacking cultists might also be anathema to many hunters. Defenders, Judges, Innocents, Martyrs, Redeemers and Visionaries could all recognize

the need to find the monstrous entity behind a cult, rather than to slaughter its members. But to do so they have to weather the slings and arrows of the fanatics. How long can even sympathetic hunters endure such abuse before they lash out at the very people they try to help? Or maybe sympathetic hunters seek to go undercover in a cult to get to its leader. How far are they willing to go in the role to meet the “master”? Sacrifice a person? Subject themselves to abuse? Betray allies? The desire to help “poor deluded people” can be suddenly strained when playing along compromises a hunter’s beliefs or values.

STORYTELLING A FANATIC

Cultists aren’t completely defined by their beliefs. They’re ordinary people with lives, lovers, family and friends. By day, they’re photographers, training consultants, brokers, teachers, office managers, real-estate agents, journalists and line editors. They’re not so far from hunters themselves.

Yet, something drives worshipers to dress up in robes, make sacrifices to an unfathomable deity and surrender their free will. The reason is different for each of them. For some it’s as prosaic as a lust for power. Other motivations include revenge, a need for answers to life’s mysteries, a genuine interest in the occult, or a need to protect family or friends from a perceived threat.

Justin Suza was a quiet, introverted man. He did systems support for the local government, a job that satisfied what little ambition he had to begin with. Apart from a brief experiment with his own gender at university, Justin’s sex life was nonexistent. His social life revolved around his sister and her friends.

That all changed six months ago when he met Sarah. He fell for her — hard. After they’d been together for four months, her husband reappeared on the scene, and she felt obliged to give it another go for the sake of their kids. That night, Justin got more drunk than he’d ever been in his life, and he poured out all his troubles to a stranger in the bar.

The stranger made him an offer: Join a group of people who could solve his problems, and never look back. Justin was drunk and desperate enough to agree. His first meeting confirmed that he’d found a way to win Sarah back.

Remember that cultists are people. You should define them as such when telling a story about them. They shouldn’t be reduced to cannon fodder for hunters to wade through. They should be a clear reminder of the purpose of the hunt: victims subjected to monstrous abuse.

Indeed, perceptive hunters might draw parallels between fanatics and themselves. Both groups see and hear signs. Both groups are exposed to the supernatural. Both groups receive powers or insight. And both groups have a sense of righteousness in what they do. Can the imbued really turn on people who are mere shades away from themselves?

Also bear in mind that, like hunters, cultists have no direct means of escaping the law. Crimes committed

in the name of their patrons must be discreet if the cabal is to continue. Thus, cultists’ deeds are subtle, perhaps even more so than those of some monsters hiding in the shadows. Characters need hard evidence to bring the law down upon worshipers; they can’t simply be exposed as monstrous and that’s the end of it. Cultists can therefore play an unseen chess match with hunters as both seek to fulfill their agendas without attracting the attention of the populace or authorities.

The cult leader asked Justin to act against a hunter who was causing trouble for the group. The next evening, Justin stayed late at work to access the county files. Happy to serve in anticipation of winning back his love, Justin passed the hunter’s address on to the leader.

Coincidentally, Justin’s sister dated a local cop. Jason decided to explain how his friends had been harassed of late. . . .

It’s imperative to remember that neither second sight nor detection edges reveal fanatics as anything other than normal and human. (At least, that’s true for ones who aren’t endowed with supernatural tricks.) They may be misguided, evil, vicious or cruel, but these are all human ills, not ones unique to a supernatural condition.

CULTISTS AND SPIRIT HYSTERIA

If cultists are normal people, how can they follow a ghost or zombie without being subjected to hysteria, fear, fits or obliviousness — the stuff that spirits tend to cause? Fanatics are regular people, *physically*, but their outlooks aren’t what you’d call mundane. These are people desperately in search of something in life, be it meaning, love, direction, purpose, fulfillment — anything that seems to be a void in their lives. Would-be cultists are so obsessed with filling this void that any solution is appealing to them. Joining a cult probably isn’t their first choice or attempt. They’ve probably suffered at the hands of manipulators and con artists in the past who’ve profited from their weakness. Still, these people press on.

Absolutely obsessed to find the meaning and purpose they seek, cultists are somewhat inured to the fear and mania that ghosts and zombies usually instill. If the restless dead presents itself in a manner that seems rewarding, informative or compelling, such as scrawling out answers in blood to a person’s yearning questions, the potential fanatic gets past the normal fear.

This doesn’t mean cultists are immune to the horror of *all* supernatural displays. A shapechanger’s inhuman transformation still sends them into fits. Likewise, a truly horrifying act demanded by a cult leader could overwhelm and terrify a follower, if not make her come to her senses. If approached in terms of their deranged needs and wants, however, worshipers can deal with the emanations of the unnatural.

THE BLESSED AND THE CURSED

Not all cultists remain human. Some are lifted beyond the human norm. Certain ghosts and walkers have the ability to invest their capabilities into their followers and grant them limited supernatural strength. Cult organizers, favored servants and promising agents are typically imparted supernatural gifts.

The immediate danger of empowered cultists to hunters is obvious: The person is another supernatural entity. Yet, endowed followers pose a much more insidious threat if hunters are insightful enough to consider it. Gifted fanatics can be killed, sure, but the fact that they're tainted means the supernatural can potentially turn any person into one of *them*. The infection might even run deeper than it seems. Perhaps unwitting victims could bear the marks of the otherworld and not know it, but draw hunters' attention all the same. Maybe people with supernatural influence can even do good, but still appear as *wrong* to the imbued. Where is the line drawn? Murderous hunters might not care. Considerate or compassionate imbued might be stymied by the prospect. And once again, there's that lingering question of just how different gifted followers are from the chosen. Is an empowering spirit really so different from the Messengers?

"Blessed" cultists are detectable with second sight. Hunters perceive a definite *wrongness* about them. Edges such as Illuminate, Witness or Discern are required to understand that this taint stems from ghostly interference. The gifted might appear skeletal, touched by decay, have a faint aura of a spirit, or smell slightly of the grave.

POWERS OF THE BLESSED

Like ghosts and zombies, the blessed use Pathos to fuel their tricks. Generally, such cultists have very low levels of it: no more than five points at the most. They cannot replenish Pathos by feeding on the emotions of others, as ghosts do. Pathos can only be restored to them by restless patrons. Assign the blessed whatever powers you like from the list below. (For an explanation of Pathos, see the HSC, p. 11. Willpower easily substitutes for Pathos if you use the creature guidelines in the rulebook's Chapter 9.)

AURA OF DEATH

The blessed cultist is able to make herself appear like a zombie for a brief time. The flesh seems to fall from her bones and she reeks of decay. The spectacle is enough to drive most people to abject terror.

System: Spend one Pathos to activate this trick. Any normal people or hunters without active Conviction who see the blessed flee in terror. Other cultists might not be affected by the sight unless it's truly horrific. The effect lasts for one scene. Hunters with active Conviction are immune to this trick; they see the cultist's undead appearance but are not unduly frightened by it.

HELL'S FIRE

A rare blessing, Hell's Fire allows a cultist to conjure up otherworldly flames with which to smite unbelievers.

System: Spend three Pathos and roll Willpower, difficulty 8. Each success creates one cubic foot of fire, which inflicts two levels of lethal damage per turn upon anyone caught in it. The cultist can direct fire at a target with a successful Perception + Alertness roll, difficulty 6. Flames can be targeted at areas within 20 yards of the cultist.

Each time the cultist uses this power, make another Willpower roll, difficulty 8. If it fails, the fanatic loses a point of permanent Willpower. A cultist could become irrevocably insane after repeated uses of this trick. If permanent Willpower is reduced to zero by this means, the blessed is consumed by her own flames.

POWERS FROM BEYOND

Some cultists, deeply corrupted by their interaction with ghosts, learn to use some of spirits' own tricks. Powers manifested must be possessed by a cultist's patron.

System: The cultist may use any "common" trick listed that does not involve possessing people or objects. The Pathos cost is twice that demanded of a ghost or zombie.

PROPHET'S CHARM

Blessed with ghostly powers can have a profound effect on those to whom they preach. This trick makes a speaker's face seem extremely intense and his voice take on a deep, commanding timbre. Each word hangs heavy with portent. The weak-willed are swayed easily by such a speaker.

System: Spend one Pathos. Add three dice to any Leadership roll for the remainder of the scene, unless the target is a hunter with active Conviction.

VISIONS OF DEATH

A cultist can project visions of what seems to be Hell into the minds of others. While the sights verge on the incomprehensible, they show souls in torment and a terrible storm raging. These visions can disorient people and are often enough to convert nonbelievers, who become desperate to escape such a fate.

System: Spend one Pathos and roll Manipulation + Intimidation, difficulty of the target's Willpower or the highest Willpower in a group. If the roll succeeds, the victim is at +2 difficulty to all die rolls for the remainder of the scene. Hunters with active Conviction are immune to the effects of this trick and do not see the visions. A hunter without active Conviction is subject to the power, but becomes immune to difficulty penalties if Conviction is activated later in the scene (the vision is dismissed as an illusion thereafter).

THE PRICE OF BELIEF

Extended exposure to the presence of a ghost can have detrimental side effects on a flock. Although cultists' expectations of meeting the supernatural seem to buffer them against the usual temporary insanity, the simple fact of cultists' associations slowly erodes their minds and bodies.

The following effects are cumulative with time and exposure to ghosts. Giving yourself to monsters is never good for your health.

MENTAL EFFECTS

Each time a ghost participates in a cult's rituals, roll its Pathos, difficulty 8. The number of successes achieved is the number of cultists afflicted by a temporary derangement for one week. Repeated appearances don't impose cumulative derangements on the same people. They might, however, keep the same derangements or gain new ones week after week if contact with the spirit is frequent.

PHYSICAL EFFECTS

For every two weeks that a spirit has direct contact with a cult, roll its Pathos, difficulty 8. The number of successes rolled reflects the seriousness of an illness imposed on one or more cultists. One success inflicts exhaustion or regular nose bleeds. Three cause a disfiguring illness such as scoliosis or leprosy. Five impose a permanent disability. Six or more successes result in a slow, painful death.

Of all cult side effects, this one is most likely to attract hunters' attention. Something is clearly amiss

OPTIONAL RULE: RESISTING THE HORROR

The appearance or manifestation of gifted powers has the same impact on most people as do ghosts' powers. Seeing a person spit fire is scary, perhaps as much as a ghost or zombie that does the same. Normal folks therefore flee or go catatonic in the presence of a blessed's powers, just as they do in the presence of ghosts'.

You may feel that it isn't quite appropriate for hunters to flee a worshiper as quickly as the majority of humanity does, however, even if hunters don't have Conviction active. After all, gifted fanatics aren't *that* far from human, and hunters can face far worse creatures. A reactive Conviction roll (see **Hunter**, p. 133) can safeguard a hunter against fleeing a blessed's mystical performance. But if the roll fails, a hunter might still have a chance to resist such "lesser" sights if he has the will.

If a player fails a reactive Conviction roll, he could spend a Willpower point to keep his character from fleeing in terror. The imbued's experience with varied monsters steels him a little against the lower level tricks wielded by cultists. Spending a Willpower point allows the player another chance to make a reactive Conviction roll (probably Wits + primary Virtue, difficulty 6). If that one fails, the character turns tail.

This rule is an optional one and might be invoked to preserve characters from fleeing every monstrous pawn—including a gifted cultist and medium—who flashes a glimmer of power. It should not be applied when characters are exposed to full-blooded monsters. A werewolf's kin or ghost's agent might still be human enough to contend with. An actual werewolf or zombie isn't.

when several members of a community fall ill with unexpected and inexplicable ailments.

SOCIAL EFFECTS

The presence of a ghost, the actions that a cultist is required to perform, and the increasing fear and misery many feel all compound to ruin whatever social life a follower has left. Followers grow increasingly paranoid, reclusive and short-tempered.

For each month that a fanatic participates in a cult, roll Willpower, difficulty 8. A failure imposes a -1 penalty to all Social dice pools associated with friendly interaction. This effect is permanent.

EFFECTS ON HUNTERS

Should a hunter attempt to infiltrate a cult, she is subject to the same long-term effects of membership as followers are. If she has Conviction active during all rituals and meetings, however, none of the above effects manifest. If Conviction is used on only some occasions, the hunter is as vulnerable to mental, physical and social side effects as any fanatic.

Although second sight doesn't reveal the side effects of cult membership as anything *wrong* in a cultist or posing hunter, Discern or another edge may reveal a person's social withdrawal, nagging illness or mental ailments. The character using the edge can extrapolate from there. If hunters know a person well, special powers aren't necessary to recognize that something is wrong with him or her. Strange behavior, chronic weakness and alienation all make sense when a hunter investigates a friend or loved one's mysterious activities.

STORY IDEAS

THE PRICE OF POWER

A bystander associated with the hunters, frustrated with her lack of ability to deal with the monsters that she knows to exist, quits their company and disappears. She reappears months later, mysteriously granted powers and followers, and with an agenda that opposes the hunters' own. How do they deal with their former ally-turned-opponent? And can they track down the rot that is the true source of the bystander's newfound abilities?

FOES UNSEEN

The hunters are stalking a rot that's been spotted in the neighborhood over the past few months. Yet, their efforts are blocked at every turn. People are resistant to questioning (even on unrelated matters), the police are threatening, store owners refuse characters' business, and the hunters' children seem to be in constant trouble at school. The local police chief, several teachers and one or two shop owners fall ill over the course of a month. Can the hunters recognize the link?

RACE AGAINST TIME

A series of kidnappings throughout the city makes everyone nervous. The police seem half-hearted in their efforts to stop it. One of the hunters receives a

vague message: "THE RITE BEGINS." Can the characters learn what's really going on and stop it?

THE ARSENAL OF THE DEAD

The shop window shattered as Jason flew through it and crashed into the toy display beyond.

He groaned as he rose, bleeding heavily from several deep cuts and wondering why does this guy need a cult again?

The rot stood before the window, trying to laugh through what remained of its mouth. "You shouldn't have come alone," he gurgled. "You should have waited for your friends."

Hoping for a little breathing space, Jason started muttering the Sermon on the Mount. To his satisfaction, he saw the rot pushed back a little.

"Oh, that trick won't stop me, my friend," the rot announced. "I'll find a way to play with you still."

Jason heard something clatter at his feet. He glanced down. A group of dolls was standing, staring up at him. "You're kidding, right?"

"You seem the type who still plays with dolls."

Jason screamed when the first of the toys drove its hand into one of his wounds.

To the intense frustration of information compilers on hunter-net such as Bookworm55, the more often hunters encounter the deceased, the more often they're faced with new ghostly abilities.

HUNTERS AND CULTISTS

People who bear supernatural gifts from spirits can never be imbued. Neither can hunters ever receive or be imparted the gifts of ghosts. Ghostly capabilities and the imbuing are anathema to one another — as a rule. It might be possible for a cultist who never received any powers or gifts to be imbued, perhaps even at a coven meeting. That person must be at a crossroads in her life, though — becoming aware that the group, its leader and its motives are wrong. Maybe she's simply lacked the strength to leave or do anything about it — until now. In fact, a cultist's former associations could be accounted for with a rating in the Exposure Background.

Here's a wide selection of new tricks for use against characters to keep players on their toes.

A WORLD OF GHOSTS

Some hunters begin to suspect that certain tricks are region-specific. The ghosts of Asia, Africa and the Caribbean seem to have access to tricks of their own, for example, as globe-trotting imbued learn at personal cost. The following tricks are commonly witnessed in the regions listed. They are almost never encountered elsewhere.



AFRICA: DEATH OF INNOCENCE

This horrifying trick allows a ghost to kill a newborn member of its living family, draw the soul from the infant and destroy the spirit. This trick is used to punish families that do not show their dead relatives due reverence.

System: Spend four Pathos and roll Strength +3, difficulty 8. If the roll succeeds, the child dies and its soul is lost. This trick can be used only on a ghost's infant blood-relatives. Use of Witness near the perpetrating spirit or the child's corpse reveals the involvement of a ghost or a rot.

AFRICA: FORM OF THE BEAST

Certain African ghosts can take the form of predatory animals such as leopards. While the "animal" is wrong to hunters with active second sight, and obviously not an animal to perception edges, normal humans are fooled into thinking it is a real member of the animal kingdom and therefore don't flee in terror as they normally would from spirits. Combined with a trick like Materialize (HSC, p. 26), this power can be deadly.

System: Spend two Pathos and roll Manipulation +3, difficulty 7. The number of successes achieved is the number of turns the ghost can maintain this form. Physical Traits are raised by two to a maximum of 5, and the ghost gains an additional health level, all for the duration of the effect.

ASIA: ANCESTOR'S BLESSING

Asian ghosts seem to spend even more time haunting their families than do their Western counterparts. Some even choose to bless their relatives with gifts by use of this trick.

System: Spend one to three Pathos and roll Charisma + Empathy, difficulty 7. The number of successes achieved is the number of scenes in which the subject can activate its blessings. Gifts expire as soon as they're used, regardless of how much time remains in which the effect could be applied. The nature of a blessing depends on the amount of Pathos invested.

One point: The subject can reduce the difficulty of a single roll by one.

Two points: The subject can re-roll a failed roll.

Three points: The subject gains a point of Willpower.

No more than three Pathos can be spent for the deceased to bestow a gift, so more than one gift may be granted to one person, as long as combined Pathos costs don't exceed three. A ghost or zombie must be within five yards of the person it wishes to bless.

Hunters can never receive a blessing, not even when Conviction is inactive.

THE CARIBBEAN: THE GIFT OF SECRETS

The dead of the Caribbean islands appear to be able to tap into a wealth of cultural knowledge and lore to increase their Traits briefly.

System: Spend two Pathos and roll Intelligence + Occult, difficulty 8. The successes gained are added to any Talents, Skills or Knowledges that the deceased

already possesses, on a one-for-one basis, for the duration of the scene. No modified Ability can be raised above 5. This trick can be used only once per scene.

COMMON TRICKS

These tricks are encountered everywhere. Even the weakest spirits and zombies are able to use them.

DISTANT WHISPERS

Some ghosts and rots can communicate with each other over vast distances, as long as they're already acquainted. This trick allows them to hold a telepathic conversation regardless of the distance between them, a capacity that many use to coordinate hauntings in different locales.

System: Spend one Pathos and roll Perception + Empathy, difficulty 8. One sentence may be communicated per success. For each success after the first, another participant can also be brought into the loop, assuming any other spirits need to be involved.

FOOLED YOU

This petty little trick allows a ghost or zombie to distort an observer's perception of an object's location by two yards in any direction. The object must be about the size of a video cassette or smaller. The real location of the object must be visible to both the living observer and the dead. The object cannot be "moved" beyond the observer's line of sight. Any attempt to grab the object disrupts the illusion, revealing its true location.

System: Spend one Pathos and roll Manipulation + Crafts, difficulty 6. The illusion lasts until dispelled by someone trying to grab the object or until the observer or the user moves out of line of sight of the object. Hunters with active second sight see the object where it really is.

GRAVE GARDENER

Some ghosts of a horticultural bent can cause twisted flowers and grass to grow upon any surface. This impromptu garden blooms into a twisted parody of nature, with eyeballs for flowers and leaves with razor-sharp edges.

GHOSTLY SPEED

Some ghosts appear to be able gain a sudden burst of speed, moving like a blur and performing multiple actions almost at once.

System: Very few ghosts have more than a single dot in Ghostly Speed, and none have more than five. For each point in this capability, a disembodied spirit can perform one extra action per turn. This extra action must be dedicated to one activity only, such as attacking an opponent. It cannot be dedicated to multiple activities, such as driving and firing a gun simultaneously. Gaining extra actions costs a total of one Pathos per turn. Using this trick guarantees a personality switch, bringing the ghost's opposing dark or light side to the fore within a few scenes or perhaps even right away.

System: Spend one Pathos and roll Intelligence + Crafts, difficulty 6. Each success creates one square foot of twisted plant life. The total number of successes rolled indicates the number of hours the garden lasts before it wilts away without a trace. Any attempt to touch the plants inflicts one level of lethal damage. The plants are obviously unnatural to any onlookers.

INSPIRED DREAMS

For reasons known only to themselves, some rots and ghosts choose to inspire the living to feats of great artistic achievement. This trick stimulates the imaginations of sleeping artists and causes them to create works truly worthy of the label "art." Such creations lean toward the dark and horrific, often motivating critics to sing the praises of the creator's insight into mortality or the futility of life. Occasionally, a benign spirit inspires the creation of a less morbid work.

System: Spend one Pathos and roll Perception + Expression, difficulty 7. The more successes achieved, the greater the finished piece of work. Five or more successes result in a work that could be recognized internationally. Ghosts can harvest Pathos or Willpower from a subject's creative vigor or depression (HSC, p. 12; Hunter, p. 273). Should a ghost attempt to inspire a hunter, you may allow the player a reaction roll to let his character wake up and resist with Conviction. Should the ghost succeed, any future use of Conviction ruins the effect and cripples any further work on the piece.

MARK OF CORRUPTION

This trick makes a ghost look even more repulsive and corrupt than it usually might, at least to anyone who can see it. The power has a similar effect on a walking corpse.

System: Spend one Pathos. The difficulties of the user's Social rolls increase by two for the duration of the scene, barring those that involve scaring or intimidating, for which difficulties *decrease* by two. Hunters with active second sight are immune to this effect. They see through the being's illusory appearance and are not frightened. "Reactive" rolls could be made for hunters without active Conviction. All senses may be affected by this trick, and a hunter might smell the creature well before he sees it.

REINFORCE

This trick allows a ghost to strengthen the integrity of an object no larger than a chair or desk. Attempts to damage the item become significantly more challenging.

System: Spend one Pathos and roll Dexterity + Crafts, difficulty 7. Each success adds a "health level" to an object, up to the limit of the ghost's Stamina in extra levels. If health levels have no real application, increase the Strength required to break the item by one for each success rolled (see Hunter, p. 183). Once again, the bonus is limited to the ghost's Stamina. The effect reinforces an object for one scene.

An affected item might seem "wrong" to hunters with second sight, whereas imbued with edges such as Discern, Witness or Illuminate could detect ghostly influence over the item or a bizarre intensity to its components.

SCRIPTURE

This trick allows a spirit or zombie to communicate with the living by creating written messages on any surface. The script is always written in some unusual and horrifying way, be it blood on a wall, electricity burning words onto a table or a stream of insects spelling out words on a floor.

System: Spend one Pathos and roll Intelligence + Expression, difficulty 6. The ghost may continue writing until it is finished or interrupted. A new roll must be made to start again if a distraction occurs. Each sentence vanishes shortly after it is completed.

Hunters with active Conviction who witness the display are not *unduly* frightened by it. A Conviction reaction roll might be appropriate for imbued with no active defenses.

SHADOW SENSES

This trick allows the restless dead to manipulate light, sound, smell and touch. Common visual effects include blotting out all light within a room, moving luminous figures and creating human shadows that have no apparent source. Typical smells generated include rotting meat, grave mold and smoke from a dying fire. Typical sounds are rattling chains, low moans and the infamous "things that go bump in the night." Tactile manipulation can create an icy chill or the pressure of fingers on a body.

System: Spend two Pathos and roll Dexterity + Performance, difficulty 6. The effect lasts for as many turns as successes scored. Only one sense can be affected per use. The area of effect is typically the room occupied by the spirit or the immediate vicinity if outdoors.

Second sight doesn't counter any sights, sounds, smells or feelings. However, active Conviction allows the imbued to resist abject terror.

SUMMON ANGRY GHOSTS

This trick allows the most twisted, vicious part of a ghost or rot to call out to the most dangerous spirits around and summon them to its aid.

System: Spend one Pathos and roll Charisma + Leadership, difficulty 7. The number of successes determines the number of angry ghosts that arrive. Their strength and the time they take to arrive are at your discretion. This trick can be used only once per scene.

TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED

Some spirits and walking dead appear to be able to peer into the minds of other creatures and call up specific memories. A memory is invoked by asking a specific question such as, "Where were you at closing time last night?" or "When did you last see Lorna?" Whether the subject can actually hear the spirit speak doesn't seem to matter, but the spirit must be in the

subject's presence. To the victim's perception, a memory springs to mind seemingly of its own volition.

System: Spend one Pathos and roll Perception + Empathy, difficulty of the target's Willpower. The more successes scored, the more vivid the recollection. Memories older than a year cannot be invoked. Memories cannot be plundered from hunters with active Conviction. This trick cannot be used more than once per person per scene.

TEMPTATION'S WHISPER

This trick allows a ghost or zombie to make its own dark desires seem like good ideas to the living. Victims of this trick often find delight in causing pain, betraying people or just being damn rude, seemingly without provocation. The suggestion is acted upon or resisted immediately.

System: Spend one Pathos and roll Manipulation + Intimidation, difficulty of the target's Willpower. One success encourages the subject to act upon a notion if he's already inclined to do so, such as making an angry person throw a punch. Three or more successes are required to make a person act against her nature. Truly harmful or self-destructive acts can require five or more successes. A Willpower point can also be spent for the subject to resist a compelling temptation. Resistance of each subsequent use of the trick requires another Willpower point, however. Hunters with active Conviction are immune to this power.

UNCOMMON TRICKS

These powers are encountered only occasionally and are usually wielded by potent rots and ghosts.

ARMED AND DANGEROUS

This trick allows a ghost or zombie to produce a *solid* melee weapon from nowhere. The weapon is just as capable of inflicting wounds as any mundane weapon.

System: Spend two Pathos and roll Strength +3, difficulty 6. The number of successes achieved is the number of turns that the weapon persists and may be used to attack. It functions just as an ordinary melee weapon of the appropriate type, with attack and damage rolls based on the wielder's Traits. The weapon fades when the trick's duration expires, but any damage inflicted remains.

Normal humans and hunters without active Conviction who see a weapon materialize, apparently from thin air, flee in terror.

DARK PET

This trick allows a spirit or walker to summon a ghostly animal to be its eyes and ears in a locale while the summoner is elsewhere. The spirit pet is typically a small animal, one with an eerie reputation such as a raven, rat or owl.

System: Spend two Pathos and roll Manipulation + Leadership, difficulty 6. The number of successes achieved indicates the number of scenes that the spirit has access to a ghost-pet. During that time, the summoner can see and hear through the pet as well as

through its own senses, observing what occurs in two separate locales. A summoner can have only one dark pet at a time. He cannot use this trick again for one week after the destruction of his last pet.

Second sight and perception edges such as Discern, Witness and Illuminate reveal a pet as a translucent animal to hunters. Any single successful attack that affects incorporeal beings destroys it. Active Conviction protects a hunter from responding to the creature with fear.

DEAD MEN TELL TALES

One of ghosts' and rots' subtle but disturbing capacities is knowing information they shouldn't. This trick allows a creature to access a corpse's memory from life. This power lets spirits pose as the people formerly within adopted bodies. It also allows ghosts to gain the goods on others, perhaps identifying a person's murderer.

System: Spend two Pathos and roll Wits + Intuition, difficulty 8 (9 if the corpse is more than six months old). Corpses more than a year old can't be read. The number of successes achieved is the number of scenes for which the ghost recalls a subject's life, at least as the subject remembered things at the moment of death. That is, the spirit doesn't gain a photographic memory of everything that happened in a subject's life. He receives the subject's own vivid, blurry or disjointed memories of the past.

KILLER TOYS

Some poltergeists delight in terrifying the living, especially children. This trick allows a ghost or walker to animate several small objects, typically of a similar nature, at the same time. Examples are a toy collection, a jar of pencils or a screwdriver set. Inventive spirits use this trick to switch off all the lights in a house simultaneously or to slam all doors at the same time.

System: Spend two Pathos and roll Wits +3, difficulty 4 + 1 for each object the ghost attempts to control above its Wits rating. Difficulty can never be higher than 9.

The collection of objects has the same Physical Attributes as the ghost for performing attacks and doing damage, but each individual object has only a fraction of that total (destroying one item at a time slowly reduces the collection's overall Trait ratings). The objects stay true to their nature. Soft toys could walk and grapple, while pencils could stab (or write and erase if the rot is creative). Decide whether lethal or bashing damage is inflicted, based on the type of attack.

The effect lasts as long as the ghost concentrates on controlling the items and does nothing else. If the ghost is attacked it relinquishes control. The area of effect is roughly the size of a house; objects manipulated must be within those confines.

LOOK AT ME

Humanity has a psychological defense against ghosts and many other monsters, forcing the mind to shut down or refuse to acknowledge an otherworldly pres-

ence. This trick allows the restless dead to override that mechanism for a short period of time.

System: Spend three Pathos and roll Manipulation + Intimidation, difficulty equal to the subject's Willpower (or the highest Willpower in a group). The number of success achieved equals the number of turns that the target reacts as if he has second sight.

Understand, however, that this power does not confer Conviction's fortitude to witness the dead. Whereas a hunter with active Conviction is not unduly terrified by what he sees, a normal human is *but simply does not run or collapse*. After the trick expires, the subject is afflicted with a derangement of your choosing. The ailment may be temporary or permanent, depending on what happens while the person can see the dead.

Hunters with active Conviction are immune to this power; their second sight and Conviction defenses are already active. Allow hunters without active Conviction a reaction roll to protect their minds when their second sight suddenly "comes on." If the reaction roll fails, a hunter is treated like a normal person; he may gain a derangement after witnessing the ghostly display.

MIRROR MONSTER

This trick allows a ghost or rot to turn a mirror into a psychological weapon. When a victim looks into the mirror, she doesn't see her own reflection, but her

greatest fear given form. The vision reaches out of the glass for a fleeting moment, traumatizing the victim.

System: Spend three Pathos and roll Perception + Performance, difficulty 7. The more successes scored, the more frightening the vision is. The victim gains a derangement, which persists until the end of the story or may be permanent. Only the subject sees the vision. Hunters with active Conviction still see a vision meant for them, but aren't terrified by it. If a hunter subjected to this trick activates Conviction later, any derangement gained may terminate permanently or simply fade for that scene and resume afterward.

ONCE MORE, WITH FEELING

Sometimes, spirits and rots force their victims to relive certain moments of their lives, often ones that are also important to those spirits. The victim feels as if she has been transported back to that moment and acts accordingly.

System: Spend two Pathos and roll Charisma + Empathy, difficulty of the target's Willpower. The number of successes determines the duration of the flashback (one minute per success). The ghost or rot must be able to "touch" the victim to use this trick. The subject could simply go catatonic while he relives the past, or he could seem to mime other events. Hunters with active Conviction are immune to this trick. If a hunter is subjected to this power and had activated Conviction in his re-



enacted past, he does so again now and is immune to this trick thereafter.

PACK ATTACK

Animal possessors and animal zombies are able to call upon other animals of the species they possess. The level of control is minimal, but it can be enough to set a pack of angry dogs on a group of hunters.

System: Spend three Pathos and roll Manipulation + Animal Ken, difficulty 7. The number of successes achieved equals the number of animals that comes under the user's sway. The Storyteller has leeway to adjust this based on the size of the animal. Three successes could call three dogs, six domestic cats or 30 rats. You must judge if there are enough of the particular type of animal in the vicinity (perhaps within a mile radius or so).

The effect lasts as long as the ghost concentrates on controlling the pack. The spirit can do nothing but concentrate during that time. Should its focus be broken, say by a direct attack, it loses control and the animals run away. Repeated use of this trick in the same scene does not win control of the same animals after they have been manipulated once. Controlled animals show no special signs to second sight or perception edges such as Discern, Illuminate or Witness.

RARE AND DEADLY TRICKS

These powers are witnessed or experienced by hunters very rarely, and just as well because many of them are lethal. Only the most powerful ghost or zombie can use tricks of this magnitude.

CHANGE OF HEART

This insidious trick allows a zombie or ghost to subtly alter a victim's mind by implanting a new desire or excising an old one. The subject must be "touched." Desire for a lover can be squashed or twisted to hate. Interest in a subject can be replaced with utter boredom. Someone who once agreed with a plan can be made to pick holes in it. The subject is unaware that she has been tampered with, simply believing that she's changed her mind or been inspired by a new idea. Indeed, others may suspect no wrongdoing as the subject seems reconciled with the new concept.

System: Spend four Pathos and roll Manipulation + Empathy, difficulty equal to the target's Willpower. Most mind alterations accomplished with this power are imperceptible, although you may allow a player a Perception + Empathy or Science roll, difficulty 9, for an onlooker to detect a change in another person.

Hunters with active Conviction are immune to this trick. Storytellers may allow players a reaction roll to resist if characters don't have Conviction active at the time. Perhaps hunters sense outside intrusion on their minds or recognize an idea change but don't know where it comes from.

Normally, this effect is permanent. Hunters who are subjected to it and for whom Conviction is activated

later, however, may remember former thoughts thereafter, or may do so for the scene and forget again at its end, possibly prompting them to keep spending Conviction to maintain their normal identity until they can get help.

CLOAK OF DREAMS

Ghosts who use this trick can weave themselves a death shroud as if from thin air.

System: Spend three Pathos and roll Charisma + Expression, difficulty 6. Successes scored are considered extra health levels that are lost before any normal ones are. Any kind of damage suffered — bashing or lethal — eliminates one of the cloak's levels. The cloak evaporates when all extra levels are lost. Pathos cannot be spent to increase or restore the lost levels that a cloak confers. This trick may be used once per scene.

DARK TWIN

This trick allows a *disembodied* ghost to manifest a twin of itself in all respects identical to the original except usually more malicious in intent. The two are able to move, act and use tricks independently of each other. Angry ghosts do not usually possess this power.

System: Spend four Pathos and roll Manipulation +3, difficulty 7. The number of successes achieved is the number of turns the twin is active. It has exactly the same statistics as the creator at the moment of duplication, but can use only the creator's common tricks. A dark twin has its own agenda and sometimes works against its originator. Second sight reveals the duplicate as slightly malformed compared to the original. An edge such as Discern, Witness or Illuminate might suggest that the twin is an aspect of another — if both are present (the twin might display all the negative features of its creator, for example).

This trick can be used only once per scene. The twin is unable to create duplicates of itself.

DETECTIVE'S DEMOUEMENT

Exceptionally old and willful ghosts and rots can take memories from one person's mind and show them to others. Sometimes they use this power to expose murderers and other miscreants. Other times, they use it to destroy people who have dark secrets. Who can fathom the motivations of those dead so long?

System: Spend three Pathos and roll Manipulation + Empathy, difficulty of the target's Willpower. If the roll succeeds, every person, living or otherwise, in a 10-yard radius sees the selected scene played in her head. The number of successes indicates the number of minutes of history that are revealed. The vision is "viewed" instantaneously; subjects don't gawk for minutes or leave their bodies vulnerable.

Hunters with active Conviction are immune to this effect as both victims and recipients, even if they *wish* to receive images.

DEATH STORM

This thankfully rare trick allows a rot or spirit to bring a small portion of the storm that rages in the

underworld into the living world. The real world grows dark, black lightning crackles overhead, blood rains from the sky and gale-force winds carry jagged fragments of bone that can shear flesh. Most people react in absolute terror and may be hurt seriously.

System: Spend six Pathos and roll Strength + Occult, difficulty 9. All characters within 10 yards of the summoning ghost or rot (and including that creature) suffer one health level of lethal damage per turn, automatically. The storm lasts for a number of turns equal to the number of successes rolled, and centers on the creator. The summoner cannot move and could well be destroyed by his own handiwork.

Normal people and hunters without Conviction active when exposed to the storm may acquire derangements that persist until the end of the story. Obviously, these people are terrified by what they witness. Hunters with active Conviction are certainly frightened by the spectacle, but can still control their actions. Imbued who witness this power attribute all kinds of origins to the storm — “Hell on Earth” and “a reflection of the undead psyche” are common. No one knows what it is for sure, though.

EMOTIONAL OVERLOAD

Powerful old ghosts and rots can flood their victims with pure emotions so strong that victims are unable to move, think or act. In some cases, the feelings are so intense that subjects' minds are shattered by the sheer depth of the experience.

System: Spend four Pathos and roll Strength + Empathy, difficulty equal to the target's Willpower. Each success paralyzes the target for one turn. She is so swept up in the emotional tide that she cannot move, act, speak or even defend herself. If five or more successes are scored when a negative emotion is evoked, the victim may lose a point of a Mental Attribute or gain a derangement. If five or more successes are achieved with a positive emotion, the victim becomes addicted to the sensation and gains a derangement. Emotions imposed can be used to feed the offending ghost or others on the scene, as long as the feelings provoked are ones “nourishing” to any of those spirits.

Hunters with active Conviction are immune to this trick. The Storyteller should almost certainly allow a

player to make a reaction roll to spend Conviction if this trick is used on an otherwise unsuspecting character. If a reaction roll fails, Conviction cannot be spent on a hunter while he's overwhelmed. Mental ailments that result can be permanent.

IMPOSTOR

This trick is similar to Materialize (see the HSC, p. 26), but it allows the ghost to appear as *someone else*.

System: Spend five Pathos and roll Dexterity + Crafts, difficulty 6 if imitating someone familiar (8 if imitating someone unfamiliar). Each success determines how good the facsimile is. One means the disguise fails under any scrutiny, whereas five result in a perfect copy.

Each success also allows a ghost to retain mortal form for the time it takes to draw one breath. If the ghost manifests before people who knew it in life or with whom it has spent a great deal of time, the ghost can maintain its “living” form for one hour per success.

Hunters' second sight reveals that the individual is somehow *wrong*. Discern, Illuminate or Witness are required to recognize that the individual is a *physical* ghost, and multiple successes with these edges may be required to recognize the spirit for its *real* self.

SLEEPWALK

This dangerous trick allows a ghost to take possession of a sleeping body or one that is in a coma or trance. As long as the ghost doesn't force the body to take any sudden actions and no loud distractions occur, it has complete control. The spirit can use the body to make a short speech, move things around or to even put a pistol to its own head and pull the trigger.

System: Spend three Pathos and roll Manipulation + Empathy, difficulty equal to the subject's Willpower. The number of successes achieved is the number of turns the ghost retains control. Note that the body's reactions are sluggish compared to normal — it's asleep (or comatose), after all. Reduce the subject's Dexterity by two, to a minimum of 1.

Sleeping hunters don't normally have Conviction active. You should almost certainly allow a player to make a reaction roll to activate Conviction if this trick is used on his sleeping character. Once a hunter is possessed, no Conviction can be spent to restore self-control.

The Walking Dead™

Behold a Pale Horse. . .

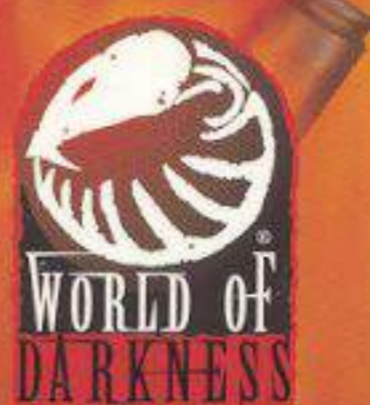
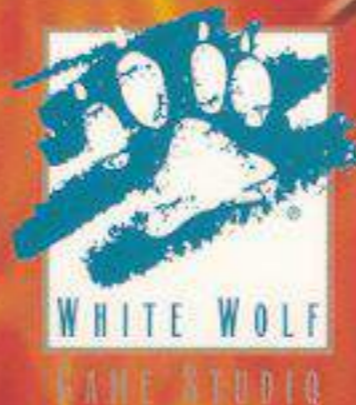
Graves yawn wide. Spirits haunt the living. Corpses pursue perverse agendas from beyond the grave. The gates to the next world swing wide. Is it the end of the world? Not if hunters can help it. Theirs is the power to put the dead to rest — once and for all.

. . .and His Name That Sat on Him was Death

Hunter: The Walking Dead explores and explains the proliferation of ghosts and zombies in the lands of the living. These monsters are hunters' greatest enemies — they're everywhere and are clearly abominations against everything right and natural. And yet, why do hunters' emergence and the rise of spirits seem to coincide? What is the hidden connection between the imbued and restless dead?



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