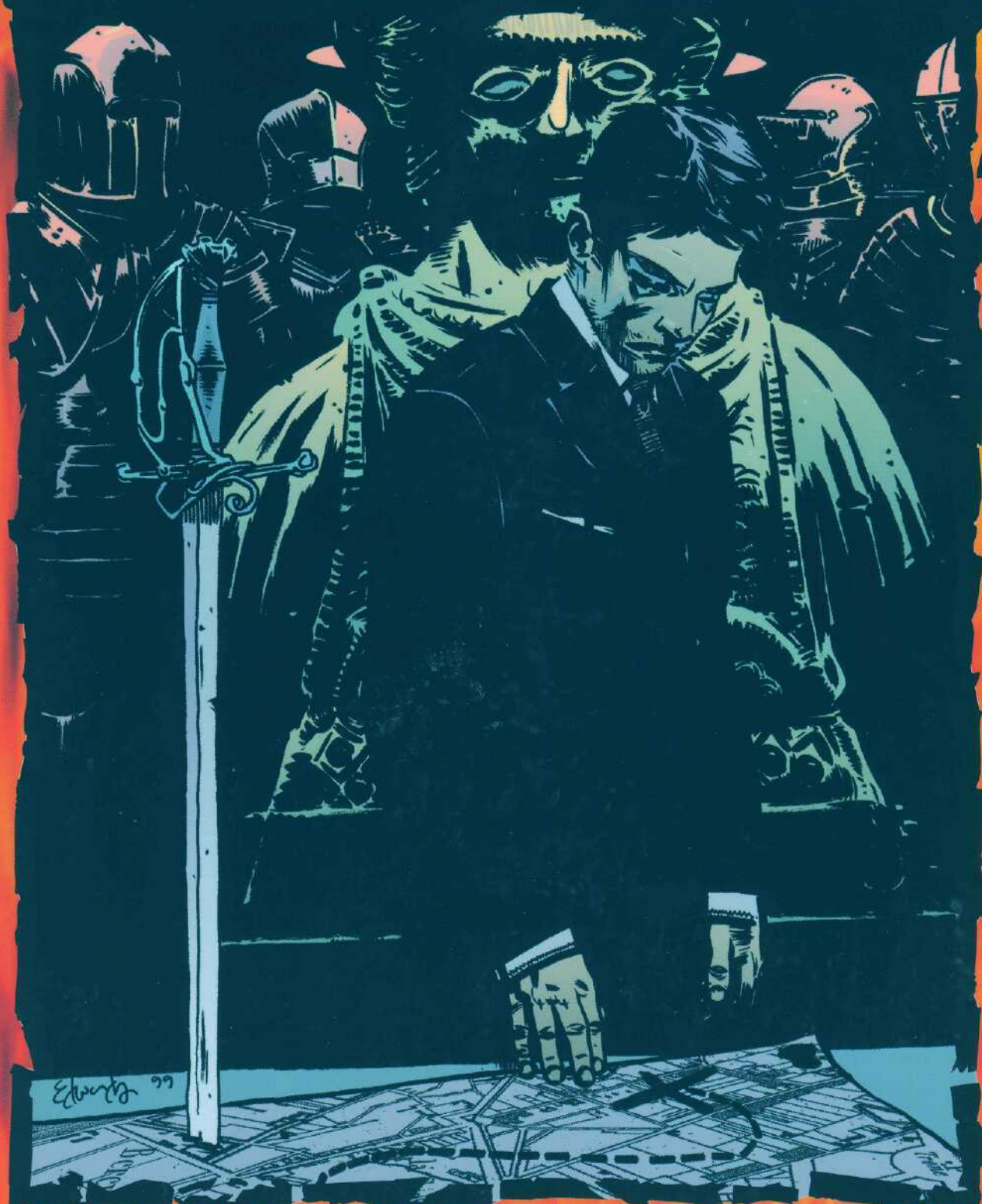


HUNTER-BOOK™

Hermit



A Character Book for Hunter: The Reckoning™

Email Program

Subject: Further information

To: witness1

From: violin99

Copied To:



Send Message



Get Messages

Witness, you should know that you are a blind, petty fool. It depresses me unutterably to see that even the generally respected among the chosen are still ludicrous idiots with no more vision than the average street thug. I was astonished and incensed to find that you had judged Fyodor a madman and placed him on your "Danger List" for no other reason than you disagree with some of his actions. His methods may be uncompromising, but he is as sane as I. We are caught up in a war, not a tea party. He assures me that the chosen girl in Pittsburgh was already corrupt, overwhelmed with bloodlust, and that she needed to be put down. He also confirmed the evil of the vampire and his puppet, which should hardly need saying, let alone external verification.

The squeamishness you exhibit is nothing short of pathetic — much like your entire disastrous journey to the East Coast, which you so shamelessly play up. I personally believe you should retract your slanderous accusations about the sage, but I have no doubt that you are too bigoted and stupid to consider for a moment that you might have been wrong. Fortunately, I am certain that your ludicrous verdict will have no impact on Fyodor's safety or movements. I will have no pity for any misguided cretin who tries to act out your impotent fantasies of attacking him.

In the future, stay on the West Coast, cosseted in with your flashing lights and bleeping boxes. Keep your mouth shut about your betters, try not to get any other friends killed, and you'll do us all a favor. If, by some unfortunate coincidence, someone does indeed manage to murder Fyodor or make him disappear, please believe me when I say that you will not live long enough to realize the disaster you have caused. That is not a threat — I am not in the habit of killing fools just for their stupidity — but rather a fair warning of simple facts that I have no influence over. Let us just say that his brother is a cruel, petty, vengeful man.

But enough of that. I didn't email you to exchange pleasantries.

Here is information that I understand you will be able to distribute. These are pages of Fyodor's notes that I received — due to a postal error — after "Apocrypha" had been printed. I am attaching them as scanned images. They need to be seen by as many as possible, and I will not allow my loathing of you to blind me to the greater good of the worthy few. I only hope you retain sufficient wit to see that they do indeed need to be shared with the chosen at large.

Do not bother to reply to this message. I have added you to my emailer's killfile. You make me want to vomit.

— Violin99

Knowledge screams for escape from its boxes, but it often needs help from the rest of us in order to spread amongst its followers. In the months that have passed, much has happened. Most of it is unclear in import, but that is the way these matters progress.

I have come to suspect the existence of a mystic law or force that prevents the clear transmission of information from the high powers down to the Earth. Perhaps if the forces of light were to give us unequivocal, open instructions, a subtle balance would be tipped, allowing the darkness the same benefits with regards to its own minions. The restriction could be more fundamental than that; perhaps a genuine proscription of some sort. It would be interesting to conduct experiments upon one of the Shining Ones, seeing if it could be forced into passing back plain information it had just been given, or if the returning material still came through clouded. Protracted study might even yield some keys to deciphering the style of the obfuscation that settles on their communications. Sadly, however, I suspect that it would prove nearly impossible to obtain specimens. Thus, I am forced to make do with clouds and shards.

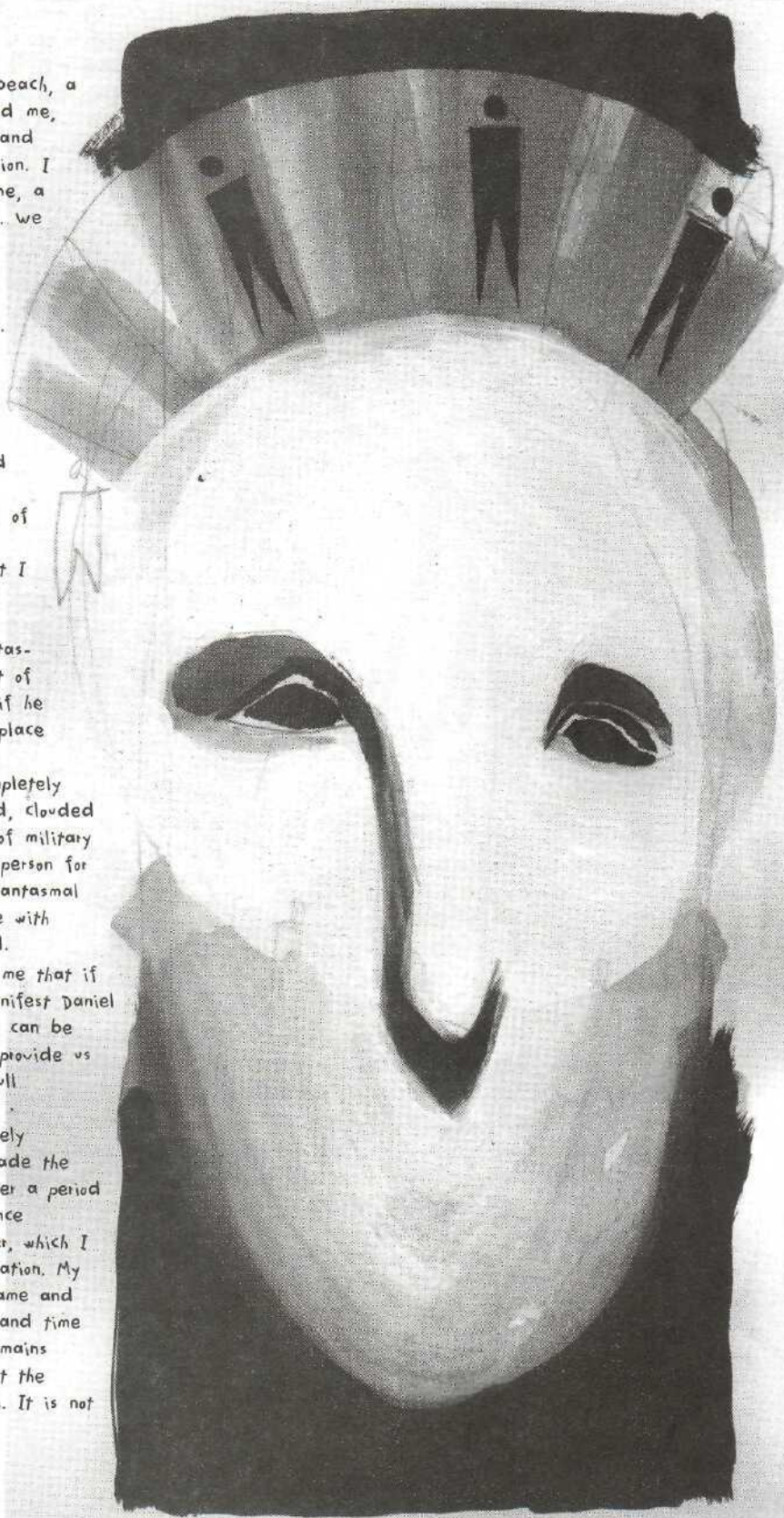
Some six months ago now, I was walking along a crowded beach. As it happens, I got a number of strange looks from the naked and near-naked youths of both sexes — it seems that not baring your chest on a beach nowadays is some sort of taboo, which is interesting. I found little evidence of interference, at least compared to what you would find on any city street. I would guess that the Darkness dislikes idleness, and keeps its minions too busy to permit them to spend their days bathing in the sun. Power ever did come with a price. The Dark Ones made up for their lapse at night, though, preying on the drunken, the drugged and the lust-poisoned. It was a fascinating demonstration of applied morality as a core survival skill — if you are a bad girl, the monsters really will eat you.

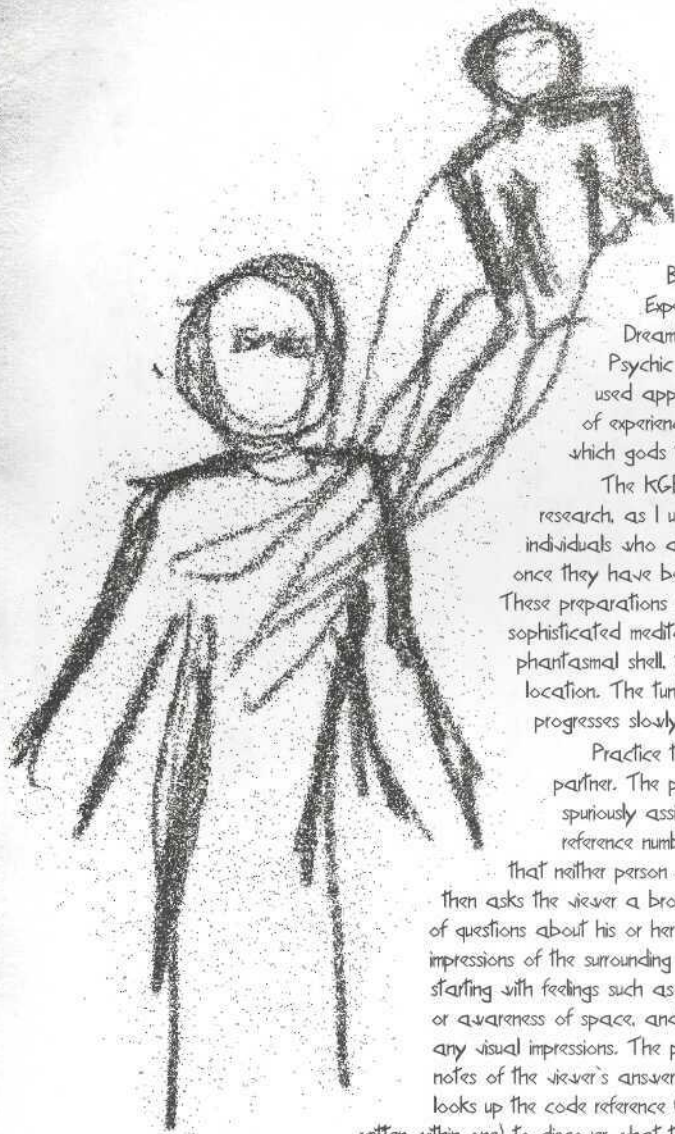


As I was leaving the beach, a phantasmal hunter approached me, clearly visible to my sight and bearing our sign for discussion. I am not sure how he found me, a fact which concerns me still. We communicated silently, messages passing from his mind to mine like balls of crystal dropping into a bowl. His name was Daniel.

Daniel advised me of a certain ancient manuscript that his archaeological expedition had recently uncovered in North Africa. It was from the time of the fall of Sumer, and he thought — correctly — that I would be interested in it. I asked him about navigation within the world in his phantasmal shell. He said that most of the time it was exactly as if he had been physically in the place his spirit stood, though some locations were forbidden completely and others were mythologized, clouded or dreamlike. I have heard of military installations that will kill a person for merely approaching in the phantasmal shell, which seemed to agree with what Daniel had experienced.

The thought occurred to me that if I attempted to physically manifest Daniel in the same way that a wisp can be forced to manifest, it might provide us with a useful tool — both full bilocation and instantaneous teleportation would be extremely valuable for the calling. I made the attempt, but to no avail. After a period of some discomfort, his presence coalesced as a silvery powder, which I still have for further investigation. My inquiries — based on his name and general area, and the date and time — suggest that his body remains alive but mindless, hinting at the dangers of this sort of travel. It is not for the casual tourist.





My brother confirms that although he has not been involved personally in the research, the KGB has devoted substantial resources to the investigation of moving sensory input without physical motion. I believe the practice is known variously across the world at different times and places as Bilocation, Astral Projection, Out of Body Experiencing, Body of Light Journeyming, Dreamtime, Vision Questing, Medicine Trance, Psychic Spying and Lucid Dreaming. The term used appears to depend upon exactly what sort of experience the person has while phantasmal and which gods they worship.



The KGB has had a great deal of success in its research, as I understand. It has discovered a number of individuals who are able to enter the phantasmal shell once they have been through certain preparatory routines. These preparations commonly involve calming the mind using sophisticated meditation, focusing the awareness within the phantasmal shell, then tuning the senses to the target location. The tuning process begins with touch and progresses slowly to hearing and finally sight.

Practice traditionally involves a training partner. The partner provides a spurious assigned coded reference number to the viewer

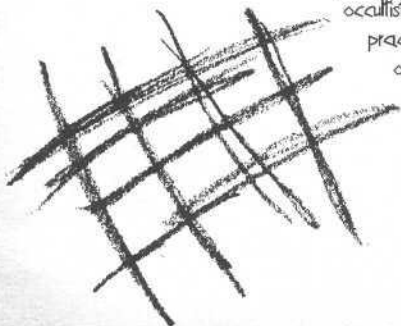
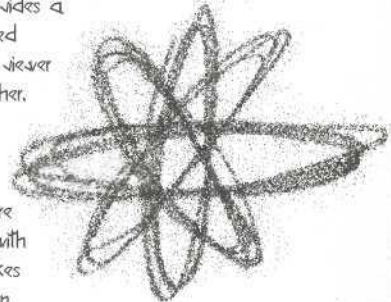
that neither person can decipher.

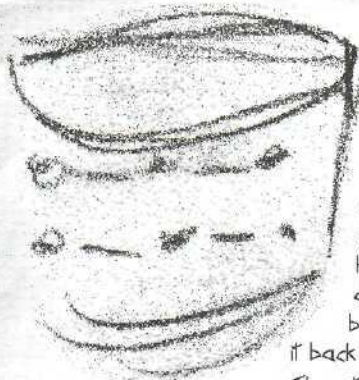
Then asks the viewer a broad range of questions about his or her impressions of the surrounding area, starting with feelings such as temperature or awareness of space, and finishing with any visual impressions. The partner takes notes of the viewer's answers, and then

looks up the code reference (or opens the envelope, if the reference is written within one) to discover what the objective site actually is.

While my brother claims astounding success, the trick he describes seems greatly inferior to the skills of certain among our number, who can clearly see into other places. Indeed, Daniel's spirit truly was at that beach.

The more effective form of this power as known to hunters is no newer than the rest of our abilities, though. Five hundred years ago, certain notable Elizabethan magi recorded legends of earlier people travelling freely in time and space inside an Astral Body. The clergy also agrees with the occultists, for once. Many saints, both modern and classical, are known to have practiced Bilocation, the divinely granted ability to seem to be in two places at once. These include, for example, St. Alphonsus, St. Padre Pio, St. Leo the Great, St. Maria Faustina Kowalska and St. Francis of Assisi.





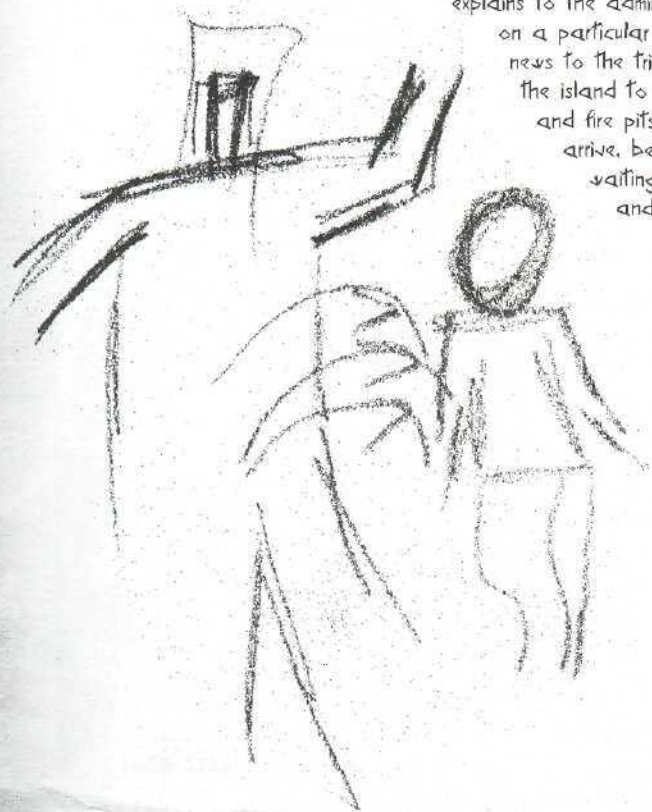
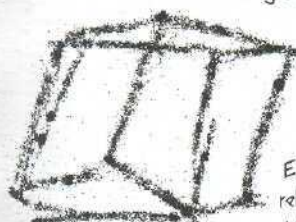
Animist peoples across the globe once talked of shamans entering trance states, in which they journeyed across the face of the earth, locating food for a village or healing the sick. At least, they did until we shackled them with alcoholism, drugs and pornography, seized their land, and turned them into farm laborers and house builders. There are entire cycles of legend and mythology dedicated to the exploits of cunning shamans and the ways they won, bought, claimed or stole power and medicine from the gods and brought it back to mankind.

These tales span the globe and are remarkably similar. You find the same themes and achievements no matter where you look, whether you examine Icelandic sagas, Aztec carvings, Graeco-Roman books and frescoes, African fireside stories,

Native American legends, original Russian fairy tales, anthropological recordings of Pacific Island beliefs, Tibetan teachings or Native Australian songs. Even the Chinese, so proud for so long of their empire based on rational Confucianism and Taoism, retain the same themes within their folk stories.

Some of these constructions are extremely advanced. In the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, an administrator of the former colonial government recounts some relevant anecdotes in his memoirs. In one, a local holy man — who listens to spirits on the wind and lives apart from the rest of the tribe — steps out of his body and ventures into the sea. While in the water phantasmally, he locates a school of large fish and talks to them. He explains that his people are hungry and asks some of the fish to join the islanders at a feast, at which they will be both guests of honor and the main course. The fish graciously consent to send some of their number. The holy man then exits his trance and

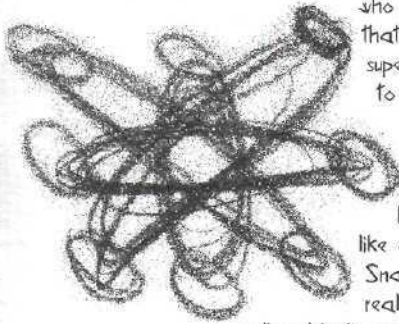
explains to the administrator that the fish will arrive shortly on a particular beach. The administrator carries this news to the tribe, which journeys several miles across the island to the specified beach and sets up tables and fire pits. When all is ready, several huge fish arrive, beaching themselves on the sand and waiting quietly to be ceremonially honored and slain.



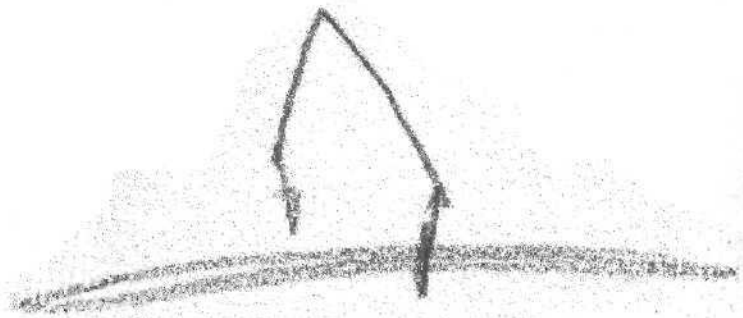
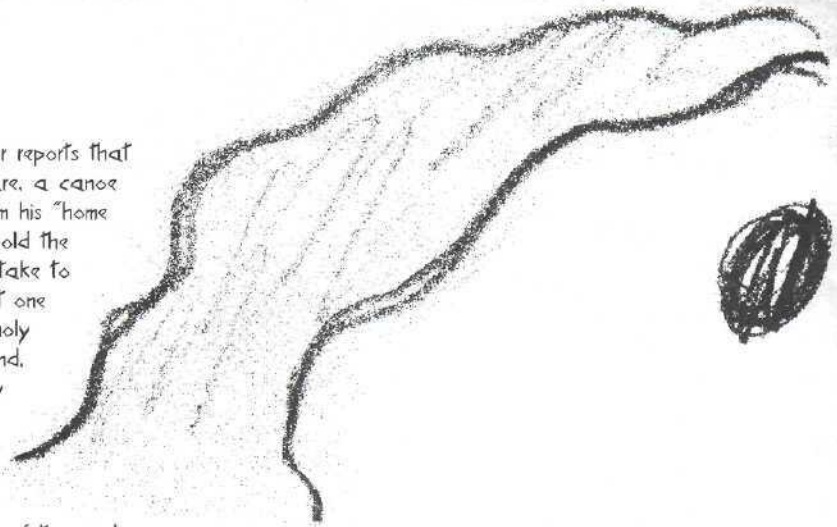
The same administrator reports that one of the islands in his care, a canoe journey of several days from his "home base" island, is known to hold the path that the local dead take to the afterlife. He recalls that one day he was talking to a holy man who lived on that island, when the holy man suddenly cocked his head, listened, then announced that a prominent person on the administrator's base island had just died. Spirits of the wind had passed the information on. When the administrator returned home, he discovered that the holy man had been right.

Further down in the Pacific, there are interesting tales of a now-dead tribe that had a communal sleeping life as rich and interactive as its waking one. When they went to bed, they phantasmally stepped out of their bodies and continued with their social activities around the village all night - learning, singing, dancing, telling tales and making love until it was time to get up again at dawn.

Sometimes the village was visited at night by similarly phantasmal teachers, who held sessions and imparted great wisdom. There are even some hints that the village in which they spent their night-time excursions was somehow superior to their physical village, but there is little in the way of detail as to how the villages were different.



Not all tales of phantasmal life are as innocent and peaceable. Many of the South American peoples believe that certain shamans have a second phantasmal body known as a Nagual. This Nagual may look like a man, but it may also look like any one of a range of different totemic animals, such as Bear, Snake or Eagle. Naguals are often considerably larger than their real-world analogues, and particularly powerful shamans are supposedly able to make their Nagual become fully physical. These solid Naguals fight in combat when the village needs to be defended, and are held to be mighty and dangerous warriors, well beyond the prowess of any one person to defeat. If the Nagual is somehow slain, the shaman, still back in his hut, dies as well.





There are other dangers. The KGB, so my brother claims, have a special sort of machine that generates a phantasmal shield. He says the Americans have similar machines. When activated, they fill a spherical area around themselves with vibrations that are inimical to the phantasmal body. These vibrations have no effect on the real world and are completely undetectable even to an experienced phantasmal traveler, but to cross the barrier and enter into the sphere of influence while phantasmal is to be killed outright. The phantasmal body — presumably along with the immortal soul — is ripped to shreds. The KGB uses these devices to protect its leading politicians, secret storerooms and sensitive military, research and espionage facilities. I would strongly encourage any phantasmal traveler, no matter how curious, to stay well away from official government buildings and test zones, particularly ones known to be sensitive.

The other place to absolutely avoid is Antarctica. Recent satellite overviews revealed a strange heat vent in the mountains that melts the ice around it. Physical survey discovered a clearly artificial shaft, lined with smoothly cut stone blocks so ancient that they defied analysis. A team of British SAS killers was sent into the shaft, and later found scattered around the entrance, unconscious. They remembered nothing. They were later taken back to Britain by the American Navy — normally a three-week journey that turned into fourteen months in isolation for the SAS. My brother says that the KGB sent a team of phantasmal scribes from Azerbaijan to investigate, but they lost their minds before they were able to make any report at all. The scribes will spend the rest of their lives in small cells in St. Petersburg, screaming at the walls.

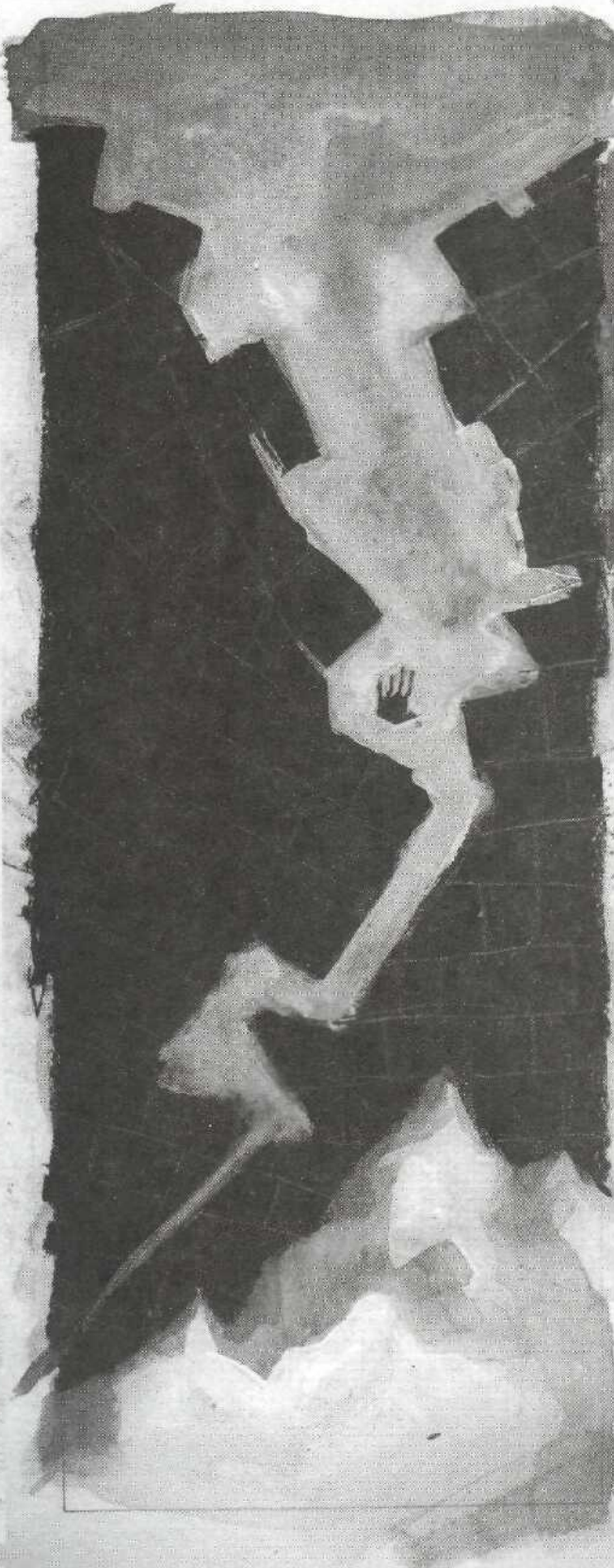
Yesterday, I had a vivid dream that woke me from my sleep, always a sure sign that the Shining Ones are present. I was flying through the air when I came across two mighty pyramids balanced precariously, one on top of the other, point touching point. The lower, pointing up, was made of mud. The higher, pointing down, of delicate pink flowers. The pyramids were vast, and filled the sky in which they floated. As I drew closer, I realized that they were not actually touching each other — one was suspended above the other, with the points perfectly aligned, just separate from one another.

Suddenly, the top pyramid flashed. Light poured down its sides and collected at its point. When all the light had gathered at the tip, which was immensely bright, it discharged like lightning into the lower pyramid's tip. The light then proceeded to distribute itself as a small glow across the whole of the bottom pyramid. The scene flickered and swam but did not change, and then the light discharge happened again.

This time the bottom pyramid could not withstand the power. It shattered, crumbling into a rough sphere of rubble floating in the air. Bolts of lightning continued to arc from the top pyramid more and more quickly into the rubble, striking individual chunks and lumps, and illuminating them briefly.

I looked closely at a piece of rubble, and saw that it was in fact made from a small group of people pressed together at strange angles. A bolt of lightning struck into the group, hitting a single individual at its midst — you, friend William. You were suffused with light and pain in equal quantities, and started to babble. As your words came out, so too did the light, and for a short while all the group glowed with light, and then the light was exhausted, and all was as it had been.





I suddenly realized that you had originally been at the very apex of the lower pyramid, several dozen copies of yourself standing upright but squeezed together into the shape of the pyramid, your very skulls stretched up and twisted together to terminate in a sharp point. You and your twins formed a cap on the rest of the structure, acting as an interface to the top pyramid. The first bolt of light had been passed down properly throughout the entire pyramid, but that had been some time before, perhaps even a great deal of time before. When the bottom pyramid shattered, I could sense frustration and disappointment throbbing over the scene, as if God Himself howled His lament. Still, the underlying sense of purpose did not waver, and the upper pyramid continued to discharge energy into the cloud of rubble, illuminating as much as it could. It was clear, however, that the process was so inefficient that almost all of the rubble would remain unenlightened almost all of the time. The scene faded to darkness and the dream ended.

It was only upon awaking that I realized you and your other selves had not been the only constituents in the cap on the pyramid. Mixed in with your copies were a few copies of a man who looked like Josef Stalin, the great butcher who slaughtered so many of my people.

I remain uncertain about that image, but I do know that you and others like you were to be the information conduit between the Shining Ones and the hunters. A war is won or lost on the strength of tactical knowledge and advance intelligence, as much as by force of arms. If there is to be any hope, we will need to regain the strength of purpose that we would have had if the pyramid of hunters had remained whole. Perhaps there is some way that a harbinger like yourself may be corrected. I shall have to do some research into the matter.



PROLOGUE: CHAINED

Being manacled to a stove gives one time to think.

Once he'd settled down, William thought about how foolish he'd been to chain himself up without putting a chair within reach. He could sit on the toilet, but only barely. The bathroom shared a wall with the kitchen, and if he stretched the chain out to its full length, he could have a bowel movement. But only if he kept his left leg stretched out, pulled by the chain out the bathroom door, around the corner and to the oven.

He could sit on the bathroom sink, but it was cold and uncomfortable, and if he relaxed too much his back would slide back and be poked by the faucet. The kitchen counters were a little better, but not much; he could only perch on the edge because of the overhanging cabinets.

He eventually settled for sitting in the hall next to the pantry. The only sound was the grandfather clock ticking in the foyer. He wondered if someone would come for him before it wound down. Someone or *something*.

He picked at the manacle around his ankle, wiggled his toes and cursed himself for putting it on so tight. But at the same time he felt an ember of pride that he'd done it *right* — hadn't compromised, hadn't taken the easy way out. He still had *that* much strength.

If he stretched he could look in his home office and see the computer. It was out of reach. He looked at the damage in the kitchen wall where he'd ripped out the phone. It was distasteful — an ugly hole in an otherwise careful decorating

scheme. William spent a lot of time in his kitchen. He was an excellent cook, even when cooking only a single serving.

He walked over to the counter and slowly wiped off the plaster dust, thinking about Fyodor... about Constance.

* * *

He'd been warned about Constance, but not in any specific or even useful way. He'd been working in his office, refuting shoddy scholarship about Georgian sympathizers in Revolutionary America, when it hit him. First the sickening plunging feeling, like he'd fallen face-first off a cliff. The plummet went on and on. The crawling started next. Everywhere he looked, images writhed. The wood grain on his desk, the pattern in the wallpaper. As his eyes touched them they transformed into diagrams, maps of unguessable realities. Any letters he happened to spy crawled over one another like frotteurs at an orgy, coupling into cryptic warnings. He squeezed his eyes shut and rubbed his fingers into them until tears came, but even the red and purple sparks formed coded missives.

Finally came the voices, the roaring, conflicting, unintelligible voices: his angry father, his disappointed mother, his weeping ex-wife, his first girlfriend, his college professors, his editors, the psychologist he stopped seeing after three sessions back in 1987. The voices of everyone he'd ever respected or feared or wanted badly to be like, be with or simply be. The voices were the worst — because he knew, somehow *knew* that if he was just a little

bit smarter, a little bit stronger, a little more *worthy* it would all make sense....

"Shut up," he whispered. "Shut up shut up *shut up!*"

He opened his eyes, wiped the tears away and looked out the window. He couldn't see anything, but he could feel it coming, feel it battering the doors of his mind as it got closer.

He turned to the curio cabinet by his desk and squinted at an item that sat front and center. It was a geode — a bubble of gray rock, cracked in half to reveal a lining of bright crystal. In 1830, an Appalachian widow named Maude Murdoch used it to predict the Bad Axe Massacre on the banks of the Mississippi. Maude (or sometimes "Maid") Murdoch became a central figure in area folklore. William had been lucky to get her scrying stone. While it had never shown him the future — of the "chosen" he knew, only Fyodor was trusted with that power — he could use it to see the area around him. He looked into its depths and then saw the view from the roof of his house.

This particular stretch of Connecticut was a few miles from the highway. There were a few family farms still stubbornly tilling, but the houses had mostly been refitted, either as summer homes for the wealthy from Boston, Washington or New York, or as homes for the more modest local elite — business owners, moneyed lawyers and well-off academics like himself.

The only thing he saw moving was a car coming up the back road toward his home. A flick of his mind and his senses projected within it, as if he was sitting invisibly next to the driver. She looked like she was in her mid-forties, roughly his own age. She seemed fit and well maintained (also like himself), and was driving a Lexus. He wondered if she was "chosen" too, or if she was simply some aberration of the world, part of the grand plague that he was theoretically supposed to combat.

He didn't bother to find out. She was not Fyodor or Fyodor's little protégé, so he would not be home for her. As she drove up the back way, he opened his garage, got into his BMW and prepared to depart out the front.

The car failed to start. He grimaced but didn't bother with a second try. He just closed the garage door instead. As he got out, he picked up an axe — not that he expected it to do much good.

He heard a knock at the back door as he went into the basement. "Mr. Hannon," a woman's voice called. "Mr. Hannon? Are you home?"

He locked the door and hid under the skeletal wooden stairs to the basement. If she tried to come down, he supposed he could stick the axe between the slats and knock her down.

"Mr. Hannon?" He saw her ankles through a dim window. She was wearing Reebok cross-trainers. Suddenly, as if she felt his gaze, she knelt down by the window.

William knew he'd pay for it, but he squinted and tried to *really* see her. The voices and sensations intensified immediately.

The world shattered before his eyes. People grew around the splinters, stealing the power of the world maker to battle one another, to fill the world with horrors or rob it of its splendor, to build cages for others and for themselves.

A sick violet miasma surged and swirled around the woman and William's mind shrieked with warnings of hidden power as she smiled at him encouragingly. A copy of Fyodor's book was in her hand.

"*There* you are. I was hoping we could discuss this book...?"

"Go away," he croaked. He could barely hear himself speak over the shouting in his head

She faltered. "I... I know you didn't put your name on it, but I asked around and—"

"Get off my property."

"If this isn't a good time—"

"I'm calling the police," he said as he turned toward the stairs, half expecting the phone lines to be out or for her to simply kill him with some incomprehensible display of power. When he reached the top of the stairs, though, she was driving away. It wasn't until the next day that he found her card tucked in his mailbox. It read "Constance Nash, Antiquities" and had the requisite email, fax and phone numbers. He pulled it out with a stick and burned it.

* * *

An hour after chaining himself to the stove, William got a little hungry. He opened the refrigerator and ate a plum. It was good and juicy. He washed his hands in the sink and sighed. He was getting very bored. He wondered what would have happened if he'd tried to kill Constance that first day. Then he chided himself for the kind of weak, pointless dithering that he so despised in others. He had made his choices. He had good reasons. Now he would deal with consequences, not idle speculation.

Suddenly, without warning, he found himself yanking the chain, pulling at it as hard as he could. His heart hammered with fear as he tried to master his body but was simply unable. He wrapped the chain around his hands and strained at it with all his might. "Stop it," he grunted to himself, but his body ignored him. He turned around so the chain dug into his shoulder, braced a leg against the front of the oven and pulled, pulled, pulled.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the fit ended. He slumped to the floor, puffing, exhausted. Initially, William thought of simply looping the chain through the stove door handle. He had decided instead to prop up the stovetop and pass the chain through the actual steel frame. Now, standing gingerly and getting ice for his raw hands, he was glad for it.

He realized idly that he probably could have stymied the spell if he'd used the power he felt dormant within him. On consideration, however, he was glad he hadn't done that. He could not use the power of the Shining Ones without drawing their attention, and the stress of their overwhelming regard was worse than sore hands. If he found himself trying to saw his ankle off with a bread knife, he'd call. For now, he was secure.

* * *

Fyodor had given William the shackles months earlier — before Constance even visited his house the first time.

William hadn't been at his best at that time. He couldn't be. His options were to endure the mental static of the Shining Ones or sedate his ability to perceive them (and everything else) with codeine. Given the option, he chose the drug.

Fyodor was in one of his moods at the time. William tried to engage him with questions about the intersections of their research, but Fyodor clucked his tongue impatiently and demanded more food. The Russian was ravenous, William remembered distinctly. Fyodor ate an entire roast chicken.

William blamed himself for Fyodor's impatience. Himself and the sedative. It made everything seem to be happening a second too slow, and then the world would jerk forward to catch up with lost time. Time was meant to flow, not drip like a leaky faucet.

It didn't help that Fyodor's accent — not to mention his esoteric pursuits — made him difficult to follow at the best of times. To a man on a stumbling dose of painkillers, it was all close to gibberish.

Fyodor suddenly grabbed William by the arm. "Here," he said. "I've something to show you. Come with me." William's balance was so skewed that he fell to one knee as he was half-dragged to Fyodor's car.

The Russian had arrived in a nondescript Taurus. When he opened the trunk, flies buzzed out and William was assaulted by a scent like a hot iron pan.

"Is that blood?"

Fyodor waved his hands impatiently. "Pay attention, William. This is important. Choose."

Inside the trunk was a pistol and a length of chain.

The chain had manacles and serious padlocks. It wasn't the sort of thing you got at the local hardware store. It was the kind of thing that made prisoners in Africa and South America cover their eyes and retreat behind mental walls.

The pistol was a revolver with a long cylinder and a slim barrel lengthened by a silencer.

"Choose what?"

"Pick your tool, William. You will need one or the other eventually."

"I... I don't..."

"Which way will you have it?"

"Is this some kind of metaphor?"

"No, you goddamn fool!" Fyodor barked in Russian, his voice echoing through the hills. "Pick one!"

William had unaccountably felt like weeping as he picked up the length of chain. He'd never fired a gun in his life.

"Ah," Fyodor replied in a calm English tone. "The hard way."

* * *

That distant night still puzzled William, but as he rubbed his sore ankle with his sore fingers, he found his mind going back to it again and again. It gave him hope, somehow. Perhaps Fyodor had known. Perhaps Fyodor had foreseen the whole thing. Maybe if William had chosen the gun, Constance would be dead now. Or — more likely — perhaps he would have shot himself.

William didn't own a gun and had no plans to buy one. It would be too tempting. During one of the first visits from the Shining Ones — the time Fyodor found him — he had tried to kill himself, slicing at his wrists with a kitchen knife. But as the pain from his forearms grew, the babbling of his tormentors subsided, blotted out by the primal sensation of agony. William had always considered his mind superior, but this time instinct



overruled intellect, forcing him to drop the knife and weep. Fyodor bandaged him, told him to focus, encouraged him not to fight the Shining Ones but let their fury pass through him, like light through a pane of glass. It didn't work perfectly, but it helped.

In time, William found other ways to deal with the onslaught of the Shining Ones. He contacted Fyodor via email or they spoke on the phone. Their discussions seemed clear, but that damnable hunter-net — somehow its very messages stirred up echoes in his head. He had his codeine. He learned to stay away from people.

Fyodor saved him once. Would he do it again? Would he do it now?

* * *

William ignored the first phone call from Constance. She tried to reach him at home, apologized on his answering machine, and asked if she could make an appointment to speak with him.

The second time, she called his office at the museum and left another message, talking about how very intrigued and interested she was in his book. She implied that she could reward him handsomely if he introduced her to its author.

She was persistent for over a month, but William was just as stubborn. She followed him — he could feel the ebb and flow of her proximity through the babble in his head. Whenever it started, he looked into the glint of his watch face or the shine of an antique bottle, stepped outside his body and found her. Then he avoided her. At his home that first time, he was trapped, but he knew the museum and its environs intimately. He was always able to get away quite easily from there.

Then one day the babble began as he approached work. With an irritated grunt, he pulled over, looked into his rearview mirror and did a quick rundown of the neighborhood. He didn't find Constance. What he found was a painted symbol on an empty shop front — a sigil he somehow knew meant "danger," even though he had never seen it before. Inside the shop, his wandering gaze found three dead men, yet they still walked. They were discussing what they would do when night fell. Their plans were not pleasant — killing and "feeding."

William's fear for the things' intended victims was so slight, it barely registered. What was important was that the killers' presence limited his options. He could try to work through the nausea and agony of the Shining Ones' abuse, he could go to work drugged, or he could try to get rid of them somehow.

Then he had an idea that he thought was very clever. He drove to an area where he could think clearly, and he called Constance.

"Mr. Hannon? What a delightful surprise! I was worried that—"

"Ms. Nash, I'll get to the point. You're a witch."

"I'm... I beg your pardon?"

"Don't play games with me, or I will hang up and never call back. You have questions. I have answers. I will answer what questions I choose, in the fashion of my choosing, but only after you've done something for me."

She was quiet for a while. "Yes?" she finally said. "Not that I'm agreeing, mind you. I just want to know what you want."

"There's an abandoned store at 1416 Campden Avenue. Inside are three angry and dangerous creatures. Get rid of them and I will speak with you one time, for half an hour over the telephone."

After he hung up, he frowned. It was likely that he'd still have one problem or the other after it was over, but one was better than two.

* * *

While locked to the stove, William wondered if Constance managed to exert some kind of control over him from that first phone call. Perhaps his assumption that a phone would insulate him was naïve. But his only other options were drugs or a barrage from the Shining Ones. He preferred self-reliance.

Perhaps, he mused, if Constance hadn't been so clearly intelligent, so obviously cultured and well educated... but there was no profit in those thoughts. She was intelligent. She *did* understand what he said on the phone. And without the tiresome repetition that had so eroded his patience with college students.

As her half-hour interview approached its end, she asked him to meet her face to face. He refused. She asked why and he refused to say. She asked if they could have another discussion, and he refused that as well... but he hesitated. He noticed his own hesitation, and he was sure she did as well.

After he hung up, he was surprised to realize that he *wanted* to talk to her again. He wanted someone accessible (which Fyodor so often was not) with whom to discuss his questions and findings.

As he so often did, William dismissed his feelings. But a month later, when invisible spirits occupied a warehouse and made William's life hell once again, he called Constance and proposed the same sort of arrangement.

"No," she replied.

"Ah," William said calmly. "Well, if you've found someone else who can satisfy your curiosity...."

"I haven't," she said, "But you're being unreasonable. Ghosts are dangerous, and I'll need to call in some favors to settle them. I want more than a phone call. I want to look you in the face when we speak so that I'll know you're not lying, so I can be sure you won't just hang up on me."

"I assure you, you'll get a clearer answer if we speak over the phone."

"The clearest answers are rarely true. As a historian, I'm surprised you don't know that."

He smiled. He didn't think about the smile, it just happened. He agreed to the meeting.

* * *

William took a taxi to the restaurant. He knew the codeine would leave him in no shape to drive. When the cab pulled up in front of the meeting place, he gritted his teeth and called on the Shining Ones, asking for the sight that was destroying his mind.

He could barely figure out the tip for the cab driver.

Constance had her hair up, but William couldn't even see her dress through the purple effluvium that enshroud her body. Indigo light seemed to flash from her eyes as the voices screamed, "HER MIND SEARCHES YOU."

"My God, William, are you all right?"

He could vaguely perceive her worried expression.

"Let's sit, shall we?" he muttered. She took his arm and gently steered him to a booth in the back. As they walked, he saw other patrons looking up, eyebrows raised. Her aura flickered again and their brows cleared, their eyes slid off him and they returned to their placid feeding.

"SHE VIOLATES THEIR WILL," the Shining Ones bellowed.

"Thanks," William muttered.

"It's nothing," she said, clearly thinking he meant to thank her for her steadying hand. But really he was thanking her for turning their eyes away, for sparing him the dull gaze of the herd, for keeping them from repulsing him with their thick, vapid, wrongfully superior stares.

"What's happening to you?" she asked.

"They're talking to me," he replied.

"Who?"

He shrugged.

"Do you know what they're doing to you?"

"They want me to stop things. Things like you, and the ghosts and all the others..." A thousand foreign names flitted across his mind, but he couldn't grasp them any more than he could stop them.

"Why? What have they got against me?"

Another shrug.

"Are all the... You call them 'imbued' in your book.... Are they all burdened the way you are?"

"No. The others... the soldiers and foot servants and medics... they are shown only what they can handle."

"Were you supposed to handle what you receive?"

"I suppose so."

She was quiet for a moment. William looked at his menu but couldn't read it. The words rearranged themselves into warnings.

"William... I think I can help you."

"You'll excuse me if I'm disinclined to accept." Glaring at her was the first moment he'd felt vaguely like himself since he entered.

"Honestly, the human mind is... well, it's sort of my specialty. There's a great deal of interference, but I can see how badly fragmented your mind is by the stresses upon it. With time and effort, I believe... I think I could help you sort through all the input. I could help you correlate it into something useful."

"Why should I trust you with something so precious as my mind?"

"William, I know what it's like to suddenly be... assaulted by perceptions of a larger world. It happened to me. It happens to all of us. What you're feeling is the pressure of something called an 'avatar' trying to be born into your soul. The birth pains can be agonizing, but with a midwife it's a lot easier."

"I'm not what you are."

Now it was her turn to shrug. "How can you be so sure? I've awakened avatars before, William, and you look like a classic case. I can tame it if you let me."

William shook his head. Her misplaced confidence depressed and exhausted him. Then he gritted his teeth and showed her what she looked like to the Shining Ones.

She screamed and ran. He passed out.

* * *

Thinking back, William wondered if *that* was when she got him. When he was unconscious, unprotected. Maybe. He guessed it didn't matter.

The sun was down, the kitchen light was on and he was cooking up a big pot of *tom khai gai* — Thai chicken and coconut-milk soup. It was a favorite of his, but he didn't make it often because it took so much time.

He frowned as he sliced ginger and garlic. He had to make do with powdered galangal, as he was out of fresh; he replaced the lemongrass with lemon juice and he had no lime leaves, but he hoped it would still be palatable. Making it passed the time.

Perhaps she tinkered with his mind when he was unconscious in the restaurant. Perhaps she placed a suggestion that he feel sorry for her and agree to another meeting. Or perhaps he had just been weak, had enjoyed pitying her because it fed an illusion of not being pitiful *himself*.

It was inconsequential *when* it happened. At some point, she got her foot in the door.

Initially, he was suspicious, but she worn him down, promised to ease his suffering — and she *did*. She told him that *Tanacetum parthenium* would probably work just as well as codeine on his unique condition, with fewer side effects, and she was right.

She spent months on him. Money, too. She arranged a grant for him to work on a folklore classification project from home, so he wouldn't need to be distracted with a commute. He didn't trust her. But he trusted himself to be smarter than her.

Jingling his chain idly, he knew that was his ultimate mistake.

* * *

William spoke to Constance less than two hours before he chained himself up.

"So the knowledge of these symbols is simply imprinted on your mind?"

"Exactly. The epistemology of it is frighteningly pure."

"And you're certain that these symbols aren't based on some suppressed or previously perceived medium?"

"For the last time, this is *not* my subconscious trying to contact me, it is *not* an 'avatar.' Hundreds of other people have had this same experience."

"Well, it might *seem* that way to you... but there's been an awful lot of weird stuff going on lately. No one's entirely sure...."

He was walking her back to her car from a late supper when he spotted a freshly painted symbol on an alley wall. It was the one for "warlock."

"Look," he said, pointing.

That was when the hunters struck.

There were only two of them. If he'd been alone, he would have felt them coming, but Constance's presence masked them.

They were young, just kids really, one swinging a chain and hollering and the other following with a knife. Constance was quicker than both of them. She got on the other side of a parked car and had a gun out before the first reached her. Her aim was true. The second tried to run, but her second bullet dropped him.

She stood for a moment, perhaps shocked by her own actions. Lights flicking on in the surrounding windows and she realized the police would soon be there. Her heart began to race. Then she made herself calm.

"William? Are you...?" Her voice trailed off as she saw him running away up the empty street.

* * *

That was when he knew. Two idiotic children attacked them and before William even thought about it, he called the Shining Ones to see if these things were bloodsuckers or skinshifters or something else.

The Shining Ones showed that they weren't tainted, but the calling had shown him much more than that. With the Shining Ones in his mind, there was no place for the reshaping that Constance had done — so subtly, so carefully, so painlessly, so unlike the crude power of his patrons — over the course of months. The obedience. The comfort. The relaxation. She'd given him everything with her that he didn't have with them. Like a dog, he'd rolled over to expose his belly. He'd answered every question. He'd let down his guard and made it so easy for her to put suggestions in the little nooks and crannies of his mind, things he'd never notice until the time was right... suggestions that would bring him back to her, helpless as ever.

"Stay with me," he muttered aloud, begging the Shining Ones as he got to his car. Eyes wide with fright, he pulled onto the highway, hoping he'd lost her, instinctively heading home.

"Stay with me."

What they brought wasn't clear-headedness, far from it, but at least with them he was himself — confused and in pain, but his own man, not an amiable lapdog to a witch. He dialed

as he drove. He knew he wasn't supposed to call Fyodor's brother on a cell phone or from his home, but there wasn't time, not even for a pay phone. It could be traced to him, a call to a killer, but it didn't matter. He needed Fyodor. Only Fyodor could save him.

He got an answering machine. Too rattled to think in Russian, he left a message in English.

"This is William Hannon. Tell Fyodor I need him *now*. Tell him to come with every ally he can find, this is... it's very bad. Tell him I'll be at my house. Tell him it's urgent!"

At home, he turned on his computer. When he logged onto hunter-net, the pain was a *relief*.

He knew where to find the killers. He'd posted an urgent message on "firelight," telling them where he'd seen Constance last. He told them what she could do, what she'd done to him. He told them her name, her phone number and her address — the ones that she had given him, anyway. Then he begged them to contact Fyodor or Bookworm if they could, to tell them to rescue him.

Finally, he told them he didn't dare get online again until he knew Constance was dead. He didn't *think* he'd told her about hunter-net. He didn't remember telling her, and she probably hadn't thought to ask. But he couldn't be sure. He couldn't trust his memories, or lack of them.

He ripped the phone out of the wall in the kitchen, chained himself to the stove and threw the key down the hall, far beyond his reach.

* * *

The grandfather clock stopped chiming after four in the morning, but William slept right through it. His ankle was beginning to scab. He fell asleep hoping that Constance's subtle command to free himself and come to her had been thwarted.

What woke him was vertigo — a terrible feeling like falling face-first off a cliff. As he opened his eyes and winced, the texture of the linoleum seemed to show him terrible things. The voices came, clamoring, untamed by any drug.

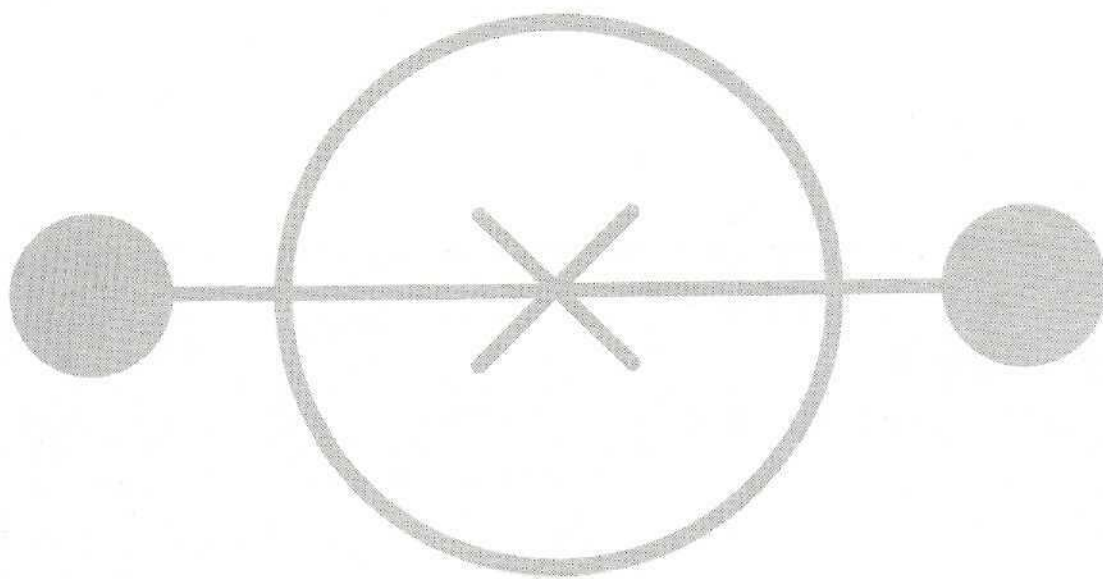
Someone was coming. He could feel it. Someone was getting closer.

He got the biggest knife out of the drawer. He didn't expect it to do much good.

He asked the Shining Ones to make him see, and then waited. He could hear someone walking up to his front door.

HUNTER-BOOK™

Hermit



BY TIM DEDOPULOS AND GREG STOLZE, WITH PHILIPPE BOULLE

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HUNTER-BOOK™

Hermit

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROLOGUE: CHAINED	10
INTRODUCTION	20
CHAPTER 1: ALONE IN THE CROWD	24
CHAPTER 2: KEEPING YOUR DISTANCE	36
CHAPTER 3: BRIDGING THE GAP	52
CHAPTER 4: DESTINY LOST	64
CHAPTER 5: EDICT'S FROM ABOVE	74
CHAPTER 6: ANCHORITES	94



INTRODUCTION

Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them: and I will make of thee a great nation.

— Exodus 32:10

STANDING ALONE

Hunter Book: Hermit is a sourcebook to help you develop a better understanding of the Hermit creed and its emerging role in the world of **Hunter: The Reckoning**. Hermit is one of the two “lost” creeds, one of the mentalities and philosophies on the hunt that only now begins to emerge among the chosen. In truth, these outsiders and outcasts have been around since the first hunters were imbued — and perhaps even before. They have simply been taken for intense, obsessive or reactionary hunters of various perspectives, and given little more credence than that. Little did anyone know that these loners are actually of a like kind. Their bizarre behavior was imprinted upon them equally as much as it was determined by who they were before the Heralds touched them.

As a Hermit, you are a tortured, beleaguered person; a rarity even among the scarce imbued. Your imbuing is essentially similar to that of other hunters in that you are confronted by the existence of monsters and are made to see the truth of the world. You might even be awoken alongside other people who also respond to the spectacle before them. Whether you know it or not, your change is fundamentally different from those of other hunters, though. Whereas they see visions, hear disembodied voices or suffer other hallucinations thanks to the Messenger intervention, they are largely left to their own devices afterward. You are not allowed that “freedom.” Rather, it seems the Heralds

awaken you and then never leave you completely, assaulting your mind with sights, images, odors, decrees, warnings and alerts for the remainder of your days.

In most cases those days are short, because the onslaught of information is too much for a person to bear. Your brethren kill themselves or go completely mad. As it is, even those who can bear the noise lose something of their sanity. The pressure from above proves most intense in the presence of monsters and of other hunters, as if the Heralds seek to communicate most with you when you're in proximity to the beings that you're intended to work with or against. It's as if you're meant to be a medium for information from above to your peers on Earth or a conduit of lore about the world's monsters, but you don't possess the fortitude, will or insight to hear or decipher the word of the gods correctly.

This intense focus from the heavens makes social interaction anywhere from challenging to agonizing for you. Whereas it seems that simple proximity to people causes you pain, it eventually proves that the monsters and other imbued *who hide within the human herd are the source for your suffering*. Your most likely source of peace is therefore to escape the masses, to flee the others who incite the word from above. You seek isolation, distance and solitude, because then the voices diminish and your mind is your own. Yet, the voices and signs never cease completely, and you can't ignore the booming imperatives to do something about the creatures and corruption to which you're exposed. You must conduct the

hunt by some means. You must make some difference in the world. But action often means painful confrontation, while inaction means torturous otherworldly decrees. You're damned if you do and you're damned if you don't.

Is it any wonder that you're a broken hunter? An imbued who senses an essential role to play as a facilitator or communicator, but who is inherently disabled whenever he tries? Is it any wonder that other hunters consider you insane, schizo or a freak? Is it any wonder that other imbued would choose not to recognize you, not to work with you, until times are desperate? If only you didn't come up with divinely inspired insights, extraordinary revelations about monsters, the imbued or the Heralds, you could be left alone to your suffering. But once in a while, you're possessed by an all-encompassing truth of the hunters' agenda, and you have no choice but to share it and make yourself invaluable to the imbued at large. Perhaps you were supposed to perform that role from the beginning and have simply failed from the change itself. It doesn't really matter. Your significance to the creators makes you an invaluable participant on the hunt, whether you want to be or not.

Hunter Book: Hermit book helps you understand your creed and your character. It helps you determine who your Hermit is, before and after the imbuing. The creed's unique powers and rules don't hurt either. (For Hermits' official creed definition and explanation, see p. 16 of the *Hunter Players Guide*.)

Just as you need to understand your own Hermit, however, you must also understand hunter society as it emerges; the two are inextricably intertwined, even though your character is an outcast. As the other newly imbued struggle to understand their new world, origins and purpose, they inevitably compare experiences, philosophies and fears to those of others on the streets or on the Internet. At first, the recently awakened latch onto anyone who understands them; this new world is just too terrifying to contend with alone. In time, though, as more and more imbued dare meet and make overtures to find each other, individuals with similar attitudes and theories are attracted to one another and develop like-minded circles. These nascent social groups are the bases for what ultimately become the hunter creeds.

During the hunters' emergence, many varied imbued can seem to have common goals. As the chosen make contact, they try to understand their mutual condition and work together. They quickly discover, however, that *similar* goals and *comparable* experiences can hide fundamentally different philosophies, whether about hunter purpose, the nature of the Messengers or the necessary fate of monsters. Mutual experiences and mutual values turn out to be two very different things. Hunters can therefore be taken by surprise when a fellow "Innocent" really proves to be a fanatic Avenger or a philosophical Visionary. Sometimes, the chosen aren't even sure of their *own* ideals until they immerse themselves completely in the hunt.

It's only after the imbued become fully devoted to, or even obsessed with, the hunt that their approaches to it become purposeful and refined. Some become determined to save monsters' souls. Others want to see such creatures

utterly destroyed. When this distillation is complete, the creeds as social classifications will finally arise. Judge will recognize Judge and Redeemer will recognize Redeemer, all through the creeds' codified values, intentions and goals on the mission.

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

The Hermits' fractured existence as hunters keeps them outside the evolution of hunter contact and creed recognition. The pain they suffer in hunter and monster presence begins from their very imbuing and never fades completely. Suffering and anguish during social contact makes interaction, coordination and mutual understanding difficult. Indeed, the Hermits' desire to avoid both their peers and monsters is what makes them the least understood of hunters. Still, Hermits experience many of the same fears and transitions that other imbued do as they try to come to grips with what's happened to them and what the world is really like. Hermits often go it alone out of necessity, but they're still terrified by what they see and know. They need validation that they aren't mad, and lack of that confirmation alone pushes many outcasts over the edge.

Even when distant and isolated, however, Hermits are afflicted with decrees from the Heralds, telling them of beasts and atrocities that must be addressed. Remaining silent would actually allow the monstrous and horrific to come to pass, which is perhaps even more intolerable than the clamor they suffer around monsters and hunters. So Hermits come out of their shells and down from their mounts to share the word of the gods — or whatever creates the imbued. They force themselves to play a part in the hunters' crusade despite the pain. Although they're often misunderstood, the veracity and enormity of the information they share makes them impossible to ignore, even by the most close-minded. Hermits therefore become a part of the hunter fold and perhaps even emerge as a collection of imbued unto themselves.

Ultimately, the course of your chronicle and your Storyteller's vision decides when all creeds become publicly recognized in your game. In the meantime, your Hermit's fully developed identity helps define his own kind and the society of all imbued.

PERSPECTIVES

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

general. Each, like all Hermits, has his own concept of the way the world should be once the imbued have broken monsters' stranglehold on humanity.

The creed and its members' views evolve constantly as Hermits try to define themselves and their aspirations for the future in a world they no longer understand. With no other frame of reference, the chosen often resort to the ideas, values and philosophies they possessed before their transformation, ensuring that each Hermit's explanation of the hunt is as unique as the individual who gives it. Thus, it is the *questions* the imbued ask of themselves and their world — not any specific *belief system* — that best illustrate their individual and collective identity. After reading this book, you should have a sense of the frustrations and impulses that inspire and motivate various outcasts. You should sense why these people seek solitude, yet can't resist the command to be active and interactive members of the hunter order. We also hope that you're inspired to fully develop your character's identity and values, to make his reaction to monsters and the hunt just as compelling.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Hunter Book: Hermit broadens the World of Darkness as creed members perceive it and offers insights into the imbued psyche. It also offers new rules and powers for use by the outsiders among hunters, and possibly by other creed members. This book can therefore help you better understand your character and elaborate upon her.

Chapter 1: Alone in the Crowd explores the nature of monsters, the Messengers and hunters from the Hermit perspective, and seeks to explain why they're cursed above all other imbued.

Chapter 2: Keeping Your Distance covers outcasts' approach to their calling and how they turn their torment into revelation for the imbued.

Chapter 3: Bridging the Gap describes Hermits' relations with other hunters and how to make any kind of interaction possible.

Chapter 4: Destiny Lost presents loners' resignation for their role, and anticipation of their own fate and that of the world, as snatched from the clamor from the Powers That Be.

Chapter 5: Edicts from Above offers rules and edges that are special to Hermits and might even be available to other hunters.

Chapter 6: Anchorites details newly imbued outsiders who are ready for play. This chapter also profiles creed members who have acquired somewhat infamous reputations.

LEXICON

Largely existing in a vacuum and seeking to understand his existence utterly alone, each Hermit tends to develop very personal terms for monsters, other hunters and the mission. He grasps for words that can define what has happened to him and what he has become. The following are formative terms used to label other people, ideas and experiences gathered from Messenger and occasional contact with other hunters.

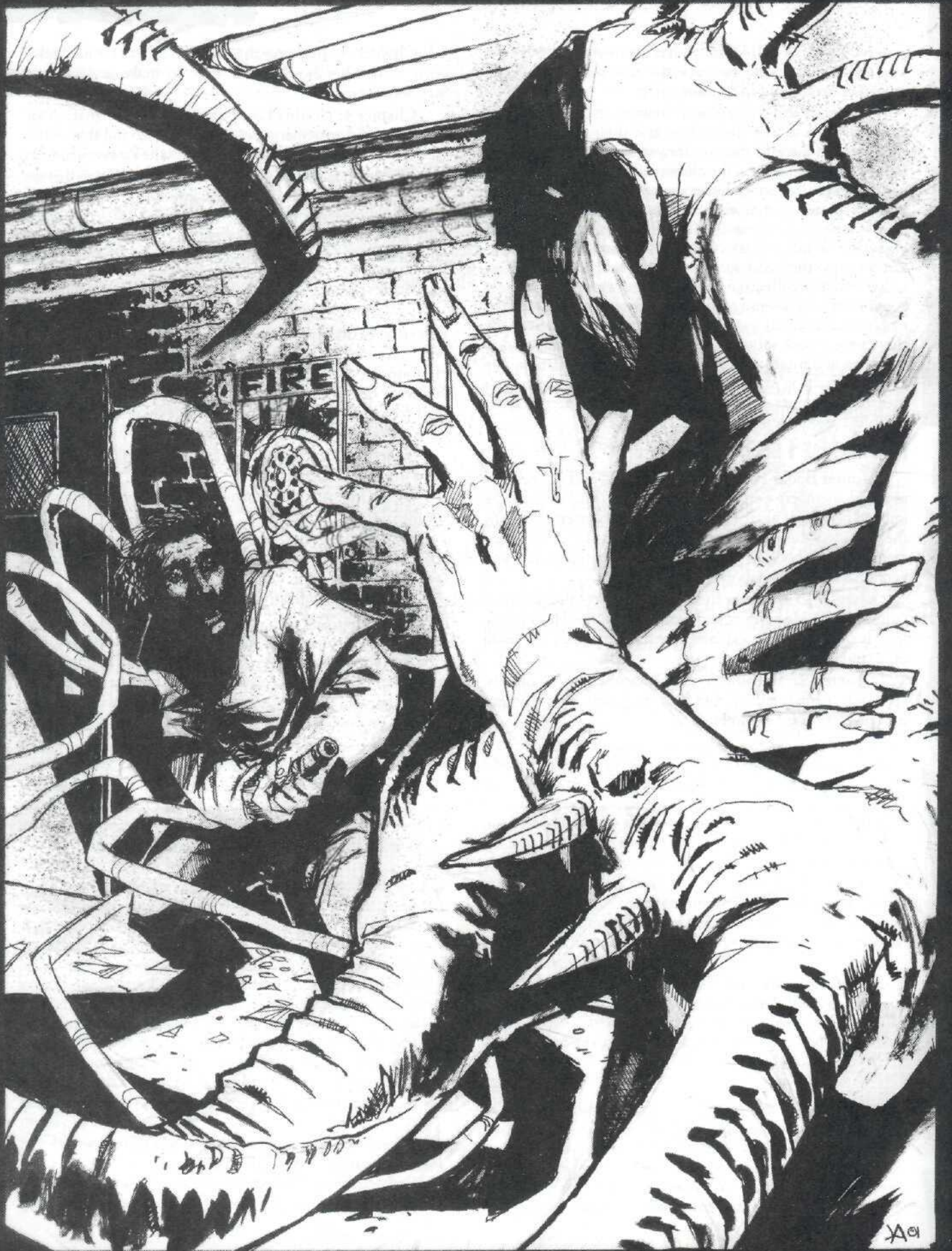
balancer: Another hunter; an interpretation of the imbued in general as "balancers."

Dark One: A monster or a supernatural being better not specified. Also "tumor."

outcast: One of the imbued who's tormented by Herald contact. Also known as "loner," "outsider" or "schizo." A member of the Hermit creed.

Shining One: Herald, Messenger

static, the: The pain, nausea, headaches and noise that Hermits suffer constantly, but particularly in the presence of monsters and other hunters. The static is actually a product of subconscious efforts to keep the Herald's barrage of messages out and to maintain some semblance of sanity. Also "babble," "clamor" or "noise."



CHAPTER 1: ALONE IN THE CROWD

All the days wherein the plague shall be in him he shall be defiled; he is unclean: he shall dwell alone; without the camp shall his habitation be.

— Leviticus 13:46

Dr. Arthur Wu
Rivendell Psychiatric Hospital
Sydney, Australia 2138

Dr. Bertram Leo
St. Louis Psychiatric Rehabilitation Center
St. Louis, Missouri, 63116, USA

Dear Doctor Leo,

I was surprised to learn that the circumstances of the "Jones Murders" had spread to the United States. It's been in the news here "Down Under" since the initial incident, but I didn't know that American papers had picked up the story.

I must confess to some doubt about your theories of a widespread "paranormal paranoid complex." I diagnosed Pamela Drummond as a paranoid schizophrenic and I stand by that diagnosis, as I believe her file bears out. However, if the similarities between her and your patient Yolanda Cardaras are sufficient, I could be induced to change my mind.

I feel reluctantly compelled to advise extreme discretion with these files. I'm sure a man in your position handles this sort of personal material all the time and I have no doubt that your professional standards are beyond reproach. Due to the media circus surrounding the Jones case in Australia, however, my department has been subjected to extremely invasive attention from several tabloid reporters. I would not put it past them to steal this information.

In any event, good luck with your research.

Best Wishes,
Dr. Arthur Wu

THE RIFT

Name, Pamela Drummond
Attending Physician, Dr. Arthur Wu
Date of Admission, July 14

Reason for Admission. Subject was present during a domestic disturbance at 1499 Clarke Court. When police arrived she was hysterical, incoherent and bloodied. An ambulance took her and one other individual from the scene to Westmead hospital. As a consequence of persistent hysteria, she was sedated and restrained.

Initial Assessment. Dr. Morgan was on call when Pamela Drummond was brought in. According to Dr. Morgan, Drummond was spattered with blood both front and back, and her arms were coated up to the elbows. Apparently very little of the blood was her own. Her injuries were limited to circular burns on her forearms and on her left shoulder blade.

JULY 15

As per my instructions, Nurse Naramore released Ms. Drummond from her restraints before the patient regained consciousness. It was a risk, but only a small one. Ms. Drummond is a petite woman, there were few breakables in her room and I stationed a nurse outside with orders to page me when Ms. Drummond awoke. She came to at about 10:00 this morning. I arranged our initial interview immediately, and arranged for proper documentation. Upon beginning the interview, I introduced myself and asked her if she minded me recording our interview.

AW. Please state clearly that I have your full permission to record this interview and future interviews.

PD. Uh... sure, I guess. Your computer can record this?

AW. Yes, I have voice-recognition software. Can you state your name, please?

PD. Pamela Drummond. How does it tell between words that sound the same but mean different?

AW. I have to go in and clean up the text files manually sometimes. Do you know where you are?

PD. I'm in a hospital. (Here she looked at the restraints.) Is this the psych ward? Am I crazy?

AW. "Crazy" is a word so misused as to be meaningless. You were brought here last night, and yes, this is a psychiatric facility.

PD. Thank God!

AW. I beg your pardon?

PD. Well, if I'm crazy, that means what I saw was just a hallucination, right?

AW. I'm sure I have no idea. Why don't you tell me what you saw?

PD. I don't think I can describe them. Not in a way that will really make sense. They were just... just awful. Like black jelly fish with tentacles — huge. But that doesn't really tell you how wrong they were. (As she spoke, she broke eye contact and became increasingly agitated.) It wasn't just the sight of them, or the smell, but it was just their presence. They didn't belong.

AW. I'm not sure I...

PD. There was something just wrong! They shouldn't have been allowed to... to be real! It was like in a nightmare where you see something normal, but it scares you for no reason? Like that, only a hundred, a million times worse, seeing their real shape... like holes, or tumors, only it was the *world* they were making sick!

AW. Ms. Drummond, please calm down. Whatever you think you saw, it's not here now. Please relax.

PD. I'm sorry, I think... maybe I'm crazy.

AW. Why don't you tell me, in your own words, what happened last night.

PD. Well, I don't remember all that much, really. It started with a party at my boss' house. David Lavelle. He's from France, so he celebrates Bastille Day every year.

AW. What do you do for a living?

PD. I work at Lavelle audio. We sell stereo equipment.

AW. So, you were at a party at your boss' home?

PD. At first everything seemed normal. There were a lot of people... David owns several businesses, and he'd invited his neighbors, too. And then I heard this voice.

AW. Who was it?

PD. I don't know. No one was talking, not to me, anyway. It was like it was all around me. Like... like I was hearing it with my whole body. It said, "The world sickens."

AW. Had you ever heard this voice before? Or other disembodied voices?

PD. I don't think so. But that wasn't all. I saw them.

AW. Was this the, uh... the tentacle beings?

PD. Not at first. At first I saw two figures. One was made of light, or maybe fire. Kind of like the heat rising off a highway? The other looked like it was made of shadows. They were moving through the party, touching people. Not everyone, just some of them. But the people they touched started looking around, and then they started doing things — screaming or running away or grabbing people. I turned to see what they were looking at, and that's when I saw the... the other things. (Discussing these visions made the patient visibly upset, but she was still under control.)

AW. What did you do?

PD. I don't remember exactly. There were people screaming and running and fighting. I remember yelling things. They seemed to make sense at the time, but I don't know what I said now. I think I was pulling someone, and then one of the creatures came at me and was trying to take her from me. It touched me and it burned. I let go and ran.

Notes. Ms. Drummond is clearly an intelligent woman, but she appears to have had — or have currently — severe hallucinations. While this has the marks of a psychochemical imbalance, I suspect there may be some psychological elements. The fantastic figures she describes clearly fulfill some symbolic function if they stir her emotions so powerfully. But what do these phantoms represent?

When the police report describes what happened, I'm sure I'll know more.

HONORING A REQUEST

"How does one write a letter with no recipient? Think on that puzzle, William. I shared my thoughts and researches with you for your 'Apocrypha.' If you would like to return the compliment, write a letter to no one for me, one that will never be sent, only received."

A cryptic request, but Fyodor would not ask without some reason. It's harder than might be expected — with no clear image of a reader, expressing content is challenging. And yet, it fills idle moments. So, if I am to write a letter to no one, I think I should start at the beginning and tell it like it is.

Some of us are marked for greatness from the moment we are born. We stand out from the crowd, clearly superior to those less fortunate. It's tragic that in the modern world, with its teeming democratic masses, even the faintest hint of quality is enough to make you a target for the scorn and aggression of the fools around you. Democracy itself is surely the greatest, saddest lie of all. By promising a slice of power to everyone, it ensures that only the most numerous can flourish. Regrettably, we are not empowered and ennobled into one self-enlightened unity as politicians promise. Quite the opposite. We are locked into a vicious prison created by the coarsest common instincts and desires of the lizard brain within us — spite, greed, faithlessness and treachery.

Men and women of true vision are hidden from view within this poisonous fog of deluded primitivism, swamped under the tide of mankind's earliest programming. But it's even worse than just sheer dilution by volume of the superior into the inferior. Being a person of quality opens you up to the jealous rages of fools — talking monkeys —

who see only that they are lesser than you. Rather than attempt to benefit from the many and great things that you have to offer, they seek to strike out, to reduce the "threat" that they perceive from more advanced life forms than they. If they would only consider cooperating, accepting that you have strengths that can support their weaknesses, then all would benefit. Instead, they lash out with mockery, scorn and stones, driving you away and laughing like hyenas at the pain that they have caused. The benefits that all could have enjoyed are lost, thrown away in favor of a selfish scuffle for the crumbs that remain. The glory that could be enjoyed by all is destroyed because the stupid and the oafish are too self-obsessed to see that humanity is a many-tiered thing, not a pool of bland equality.

This is the great tragedy of the modern world, and it makes me weep to consider it.

I count myself particularly unfortunate, for my superiority has always been plain for the masses to perceive, in my vocabulary, intelligence, accent and mannerisms. At school, I swiftly learned not to waste my time trying to interact with most of the children around me, and sought social acceptance in more intellectual strata, becoming a passable musician. Unlike most of the little idiots, I spent my time actually trying to learn, and the education I obtained served to further set me apart from them. I allowed them to ostracize me — even enjoyed not having to interact with them — and channeled my interests into saner times long past, when people knew their role.

In due course, I became a skilled historian and folklorist, supporting myself financially through paid research and shrewd dealings in antiquities and items of historical significance. I have had my work published in a number of journals. Were I more inclined to put up with blithering idiots, I could have easily obtained a research seat at one of the local colleges where my work is known — Harvard, perhaps — but I chose not to. The thought of having to stare at sullen theaters full of resentful youths is utterly abhorrent. I would rather spend time with my books and my artifacts. They, at least, provide good company.

I have said that some are marked for greatness. My elevation to the ranks of the chosen came when I was returning from a trip to a fellow dealer, one who advertises his services more widely than I. He is based in Hartford, a town with some architectural charm. I had decided to pay a visit to a historical house I had noticed on a previous trip. It was late in the day, and out of season, so I felt relatively safe in expecting a degree of privacy. As I was about to enter the drawing room, a mighty wind sprang up and a tremendous voice boomed out, "THE PAST HUNGERS." I felt a sharp discomfort — an utterly loathsome feeling of plummeting off the edge of the world into a vast abyss, mixed with a crawling sensation as if my skin were trying to escape. I became aware of a howling roar of voices shouting at me, too tangled to distinguish more than an occasional syllable. At the same time, I realized that I could see a horrific being seemingly comprised of teeth and claws bounding around the room insanely, like a madman trying to break out of a padded cell.

The assault on my expectations was stunning, and I stood, dazed, on the threshold of the room for some moments, trying to gather my thoughts and resist the agony. Some stupid little woman with a litter of children tried to push past me and into the room. Despite my dislike, I found that I could not quite bring myself to leave her to such a horrific thing. I extended my arms to block the doorway, turning my back on Hell itself, and made it clear to her that she couldn't pass. I believe I recall telling her that I was an administrator at the house, and that the room was currently unsafe. Somewhat aggravated, she moved on. I would have waited longer, I think, but after a few more moments the mad thing departed in frustration, simply disappearing.

The pressure in my head and chest slowly subsided to a dull throb, and when I had gathered my thoughts enough to function, I fled to my car. I spent some hours trying to put the worst of my shock behind me. Finally, once I felt relatively certain that the thing was not following me, I began the journey home. The drive seemed like an eternity.

JOURNAL, DAY 1

When Bev and I were seeing a marriage counselor, he said we should keep journals of our thoughts about our lives and stuff to put things straight in our heads. I thought it was kind of gay, and it probably still is. It didn't help then, probably won't now, but I can't think of anything else to do. I could drink, I suppose, but it's awful early in the day.

At first I thought I was crazy, but the marks on my truck didn't get there by themselves. So what I saw was real, I guess. Though I'm not sure what I saw.

I got a call real late from Ben Kirby. Said his jeep had just up and quit on him way out on Rural Route 9. He asked could I come and give him a jump? So I went out and I found his car. It looked like it had just flamed out on the highway. He hadn't crashed. It'd been running fine. I tried to turn it over and it started right up. So he started swearing up and down and apologized for looking like a jackass. Said he'd pay for my time and gas, and I said he was right about that. We turned around and started going back. About ten miles back toward town, there was one of those big-ass Ford Excursions pulled over on the shoulder. It'd passed us while we were checking out Kirby's jeep. In front of it was the Sheriff's Blazer with the lights on. So I pull over, figuring maybe someone else broke down. Kirby stopped, too. He's a busybody like that. But there wasn't anyone in either car.

Then there was a bright light way off in the distance, and about a second later this really loud noise. But at the same time I heard the noise, I could hear a voice. I heard it perfect. It said something rises or something. I looked at Kirby and asked what he said. He had this weird look on his face, but said he didn't say nothing. Then I got this real bad headache and I swear I could hear someone talking off in the distance.

My tow truck wasn't built for off roading, so we got in Ben's jeep and headed where we saw the light. There was a fire, a big one. There was someone running around it. Then we heard gunshots. I got Ben's shotgun off the rack and started loading it, though all he had was birdshot. We drove up just in time to see



Deputy Miller on the ground with this huge thing on top of him. Looked like a big dog or maybe a wolf.

There were other wolves around, and some things that looked like people, but just weren't. I don't know how to describe them. It was like they were all fighting, and right in the middle of it all is Miller, some out-of-towners, and Ben and me. I guess the folks were from the Explorer. They were all huddled together, crying, but no one was paying any attention to them.

Ben pulled up and I started shooting out the window, but I think all I did was make the things, whatever they were, mad. I had a bad feeling that things weren't gonna go well for us when the things stopped fighting each other. That's when my

head really started hurting, like I was kicked by a mule. I told Ben to just get us the hell out of there, but he wouldn't go. He yelled for those people to get into the jeep. I was cussing at him. There was three people running to us, but only a black girl made it. The others got dragged down along the way, like the things couldn't see them till then. The girl started screaming and wanted to go back for her friends. Ben yelled at me to take the wheel and went out and got her and pulled her kicking and screaming inside. I stretched my leg across from the passenger seat and hit the gas while they were barely in the back, and got us out of there. We

were all yelling when we came up to the road. Kirby was saying he'd saved the girl's life, she's yelling that she'd abandoned her friend, and me just saying shut up!

When they did, we could hear howls and getting closer. The girl ran to the Ford. Kirby got back in the driver's seat, and the two of them were gone in opposite directions before I even got the tow truck out of second. I was the only thing on the highway when three wolves hit the road going fast, and I've got claw marks clean through the wheel well and in the bumper to show for it.

THE STATIC

(Later)

I had lunch and looked over what I wrote. I sound like a fucking headcase. But the marks are there. I'm almost tempted to leave them there so I'll know for sure, but they'll rust out after the first wash. I took some pictures instead and started getting ready to hammer out the worst of it. I might need some Bondo. Or replace the whole panel.

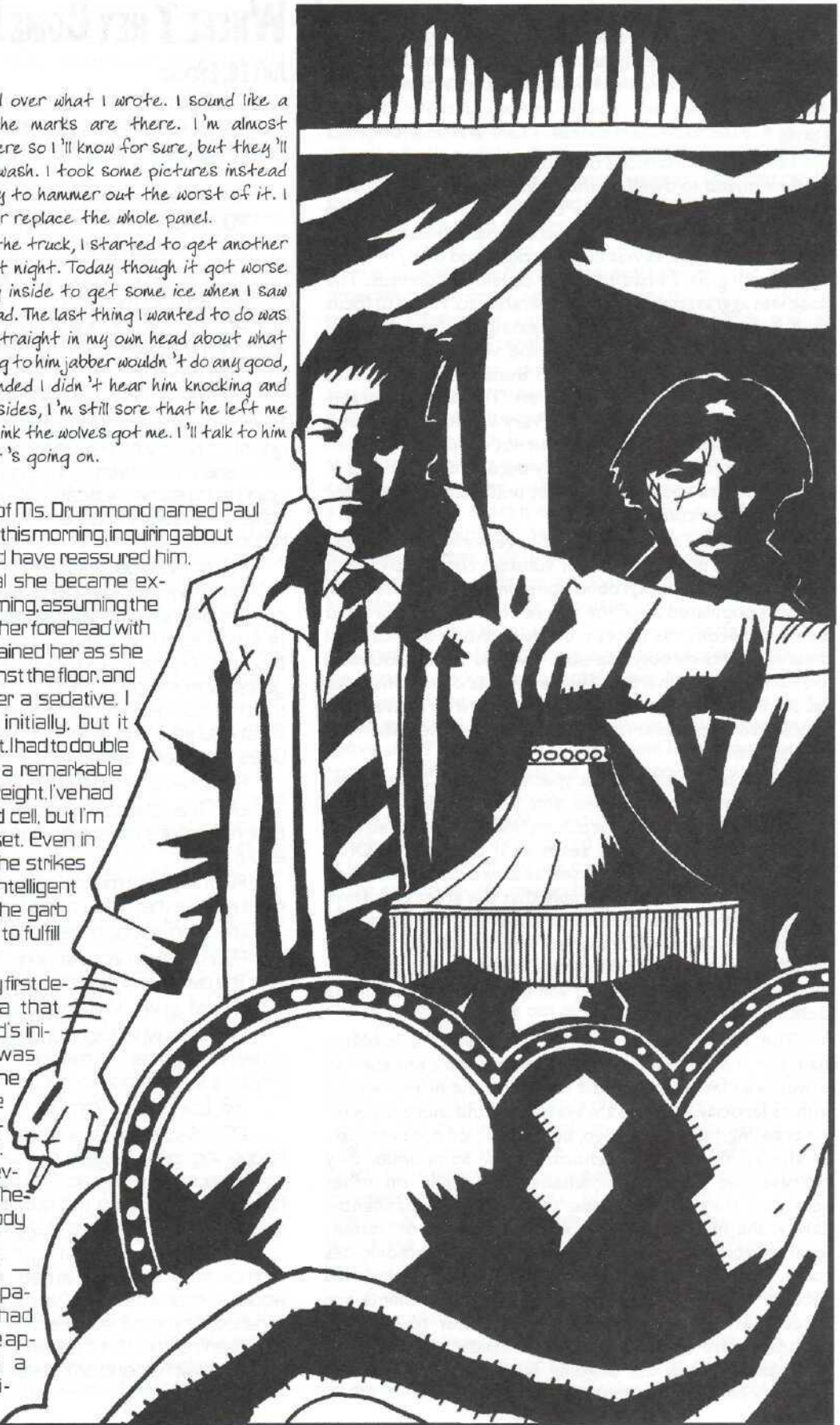
While I was working on the truck, I started to get another real killer headache, like last night. Today though it got worse and worse. I was just going inside to get some ice when I saw Ben's jeep rolling up the road. The last thing I wanted to do was talk to him. I still wasn't straight in my own head about what happened, and I knew listening to him jabber wouldn't do any good, so I went inside and pretended I didn't hear him knocking and yelling for me. Jackass. Besides, I'm still sore that he left me there last night. Let him think the wolves got me. I'll talk to him tomorrow, when I know what's going on.

July 16

Notes. An associate of Ms. Drummond named Paul Ferrie came to the hospital this morning, inquiring about her condition. I wish I could have reassured him, but just before his arrival she became extremely agitated — screaming, assuming the fetal position and beating her forehead with her fists. Nurse Swit restrained her as she began to hit her head against the floor, and I was forced to administer a sedative. I gave her a small dose initially, but it seemed to have little effect. I had to double it before she relaxed — a remarkable dose, given her low body weight. I've had her removed to a padded cell, but I'm holding off on a straitjacket. Even in our brief acquaintance, she strikes me as a sensitive and intelligent woman. Dressing her in the garb of a lunatic might lead her to fulfill the expectation.

Mr. Ferrie gave me my first description of the trauma that provoked Ms. Drummond's initial breakdown. He was apparently present at the party, and it was far more than the "domestic disturbance" of which I was told. Three people died and several more were injured. The police have a man in custody named Evan Jones.

Mr. Ferrie's story — later confirmed by the papers — was that Jones had been hired as a waiter. He apparently experienced a sudden psychotic episode, took a knife and



fatally assaulted one of the guests, a woman named Katrina Richards. In his frenzy, he also started a fire that injured several people [perhaps that's the source of Mrs. Drummond's burns?] and killed two more before he was apprehended.

TUNING

I set off from Hartford on autopilot, absolutely refusing to allow myself to dwell on the events in the house. Once I was on the freeway and able to drive without having to concentrate on the other idiots on the road, I became aware that a babble of voices was in the background of my mind — a faint hissing, as if I had suddenly developed tinnitus. The noise was aggravating, but not desperately so. I tried to focus upon it, but had little luck in increasing my perception of what was being said. Perhaps, if the voices were not all pitched in the same register, with the same timbre... but there is no point indulging in regrets. The pain had largely subsided too, which was a relief. Every so often, both noise and pain increased momentarily, but not enough to threaten my safety on the road. This mostly occurred while I was in sight of small towns, but it was not until some weeks later that I made the connection.

It seems as if the presence of large numbers of people aggravates the problem. It never subsides completely, but it can fade into the background sometimes. The closer one gets to a populated area, the worse both the pressure and the noise become, as if steam builds up inside the head and chest and vents through the ears. It would seem reasonable to assume that the morass of humanity is as objectionable to the Shining Ones as it is to me, which is why I have been selected to help preserve the few deserving ones when the last days come.

The problem takes on a special urgency in the presence of most other chosen and Dark Ones. It is my understanding that very few other chosen are afflicted with the problem, so it would seem as if the Shining Ones themselves perceive the chosen as a two-tier solution to the world's ills. This would imply that the great bulk form an expendable strike force, as objectionable as the masses and the Dark Ones, while the few who are afflicted or who do not aggravate the problem — such as the sage, Fyodor — are the intended elite, and will form the nucleus of the Golden Time to come.

The subtle variations in the way that the problem manifests would be quite fascinating, if it were not such an unwelcome intrusion and did not strike me nearly witless with its ferocity. There is always babble, and there is always the crawling, lurching vertigo, but the two do not necessarily always manifest at identical levels. Sometimes they increase and decrease simultaneously, while on other occasions they seem to operate almost independently. Rarely, the muttering of the voices clears — or, rather, separate voices with different qualities and mnemonic ties come into close alignment — allowing for words to become intelligible, although their pronouncements are obscure at best. The Shining Ones seem to have an oracular sense of obfuscation, and hardly ever deign to speak plainly. Still, the ongoing quest to decipher their pronouncements is an extremely exciting one.

WHERE THEY COME FROM

JULY 16, EVENING

Mrs. Drummond asked for me when she awoke, and I decided to interrupt my dinner to see her. She seemed to have recovered from the morning's episode, so we had another interview.

AW: Are you feeling better, Pamela?

PD: They were here, Doctor.

AW: Who was here?

PD: The shadow man and the fire woman.

AW: Are they here now?

PD: Not really. Not fully. There's... there's part of them in me. I don't know what they did but they put something in me. I'm crazy, aren't I?

AW: Pamela, you remember what I said about the word "crazy"? Listen to me. You're hallucinating. That's serious. But you still have the facilities to recognize your hallucinations as such, and that is a very good sign, a very promising sign. I'm going to try some medication that I think will reduce or eliminate the hallucinations. But Pamela? I think these hallucinations are happening for a reason.

PD: What do you mean?

AW: Consider someone with a weak heart. He's in greater danger of a heart attack after running up a flight of stairs, right? Similarly, chemical imbalances are often triggered by trauma. In your case, the trauma was what you saw at the party. We can use medicine to cope with the chemical aspect, but until you understand and accept what you saw and what happened, you won't be cured. Does that make sense?

PD: I guess....

AW: This "shadow woman" and "flame man," then — their recurrence means something. What can you tell me about them?

PD: They want me to do something. I'm not sure exactly what it is, but they have plans for me. For all of us.

AW: Who do you mean when you say "us"?

PD: For people. For the world. They're picking people... to help. The people they touched at the party, they were chosen.

AW: What would they have you do?

PD: That's what I don't understand. I can't... I can't follow! It's like they scream at me and I can't understand what they want. It's too fast and too loud.

AW: Calm down, Pamela.

PD: I tried to get back from the fight and see what was happening, to save Stacy, so they chose me. Paul was chosen because he was mad. That black man got in the way and he was chosen. Stacy, too, but I don't know why — because she was bright? We were all shown what was there.

Notes: Very interesting that the shadow is now a woman and the flame is a man. I'll have to question Pamela about her parents when I've established a stronger transference. There's clearly some kind of emotional bond between her and Paul as well — on his part, because he came to visit her, and on hers since he figures prominently in her delusion.

A police detective wanted to interview Pamela today, but I had to turn him down. Pamela is in no condition to talk to the police at this stage, and an official inquiry could impede her recovery significantly.

JOURNAL, DAY 2

Hammered the dents out of the bumper and patched the back panel. It should do until I can find another panel somewhere.

Didn't sleep well last night. I keep thinking of all kinds of stupid shit. Like when you're a kid and you lie in bed thinking about dying or time and how big it is. About how space just goes on and on and on until you scare yourself or get all weird.

I don't understand it. I should be thinking about wolves and shit, but instead I'm thinking about what makes the world work.

I remember Bev's fucked up sister trying to explain that black and white thing she had on her necklace. The bang or something. Back then I pretty much tuned her out, but last night that thing, like a b9. I kept thinking about that. Like how totally different things come together to make something, that push and pull each other at the same time, so they never come together but never get away either.

Why the fuck am I bothering with this crap? What's next, I start writing poems? But I can't get it out of my head.

That symbol looks so simple, but it gets real complex when you think about it. It's like fixing a car. Okay, a car is broke. That's easy. But to fix it I have to understand the problem. Does it turn over or not? It's got to be one way or the other. Suppose it turns over but won't start. Okay. Now I know it's not an electrical problem. I've split the problem between what it is and what it isn't. I keep dividing until I find the bad part. Then I divide that part out, so things are pushing away from each other.

But then I put a new part in. I attach it and connect it. Even though there are a bunch of different pieces, they're all part of the car. And the car is part of a bigger thing, like traffic. Traffic is part of... I don't know, business or something. But everything is itself and part of something else all at the same time.

That's the world right there. Politics? We divide into parties that come together to vote. Sex? We're divided into two sexes but we can screw. (If we're goddamn lucky.)

I don't know where the hell I'm going with this. But everything is caught between separating - tearing down and simplifying and understanding - and coming together.

I don't know how I know this or how I figured it out. This isn't like me. But I just know this has something to do with what I saw the other night. The weird looking things were supposed to be divided, but they weren't. They were there or alive when they shouldn't be. And the wolves were supposed to be unified, supposed to be bringing everything together, but they were falling apart and destroying. It's all out of whack.

If I can see that things are broke, maybe I'm supposed to fix them.

THE SHINING ONES

Perhaps the most positive aspect of being chosen is the sense that the mysteries of the cosmos are suddenly within reach. I have always been interested in unraveling hidden truths, and history used to be an extremely fertile ground for

such pursuits. Trying to solve an enigma is much like I imagine hunting prey through a jungle to be. The difference is that rather than stomping around a dark, mosquito-infested plague hole in the middle of nowhere, one conducts the hunt in the pages of books and journals. Facts, like beasts, leave tracks and spoor, hints of their presence in a time or place. A chance mention here, a vague allusion there, a reference to a work long lost but cited in other primary sources. The hunt can be long and intense as one closes in on the quarry, running the enigma to ground and finally pinning it out in the light of truth to watch it yield to hard facts. One may journey through all manner of places, perform close-quarters searches through time rather than space, set mental snares for clues, and follow trails of information or deduction to the bitter end, all without leaving the comfortable isolation of a library.

I believe being chosen has opened up entire new territories, nearly untouched, in which to hunt knowledge. Within those territories, the things that matter most — the truths on which the world itself is built — are known to make their lairs and have their ranges. What scholar could possibly resist such a challenge? Even if the world is a black, maggot-ridden corpse in reality, and the relative brightness of our society is the illusion — as I am coming to believe — then that is still valuable to know. Information is its own end. It is never possible to have too much knowledge, only to have too little.

The Shining Ones have seen fit to vouchsafe me a lot of disparate pieces of information in the course of their thundering intrusions. I have committed every fragment of which I have been aware to the care of my excellent memory, where I use it to slowly build a map of the new vistas that have opened before me. There is much to digest, and large quantities of it remain disjunct, unexplained or contradictory, but I am confident that in time a broad picture will come together. I am a dedicated expert in these matters, and I have no doubt that I will be able to fit the shards and scraps back together to yield at least an outline of the key messages that they bear for us. In the meantime, my researches across mythic and historic plains have helped suggest certain answers or have opened new avenues of research.

I am interested in determining how the Shining Ones get their information. The level of detail in some of the messages I have managed to pick out of the babble is quite extraordinary. It could be that the Shining Ones are able to mingle invisibly and imperceptibly with the world, and spend much of their time observing everything that goes on. Then, provided that they are able to intercommunicate freely and instantaneously to transfer information among themselves, they might be able to synthesize the requisite understanding in order to produce the knowledge that they demonstrate. However, the sheer volume of data that they all have to continually originate, transmit, receive, process and analyze would call for a mental structure entirely different from anything known on earth.

A more workable option would be if the Shining Ones share a collective sentience, as bees and termites are rumored to. If they possess a group pool of intelligence, then each separate entity might be no more than the equivalent of an eye or a mouth or a hand, reaching into the world like the

heads of a gigantic hydra. It might make even more sense if individual Shining Ones are actually conduits, channeling information up to yet higher powers, who are then able to perceive raw information, analyze it and transmit deduction and information back down the line, so to speak. There are certain hints within the sound I hear of a higher authority, such as a nobility, a controller or complementary elemental forces. This might provide some support for the idea of the Shining Ones as agents for more remote beings, perhaps because the greater forces are too vast or overwhelming for the human mind to endure their contact.

However high the "chain of command" rises among the Shining Ones, it doesn't change the fact that somewhere, the forces that have selected us have access to all the information buried within the world and its history, and not just the parts that humanity itself knows. Some of the statements I understand clearly regard the darkness and are drawn from it. One such message I perceived recently was, "THE DIRECTOR REACHES OUT TO BEND THE WORLD," which suggests to me that one way or another, the Shining Ones have direct access to information about the Dark Ones, as well as about everything else. If that information could be passed on clearly, we would be in a much stronger position to gain control of the world. The gap between human and Shining One must be so vast as to make clear dissemination of knowledge impossible, so that our patrons are reduced to veiled hints and tangential fragments. Perhaps it is their frustration at our inability to withstand their communication that is behind the pain and the seeming babble.

HISTORY

JOURNAL, DAY 3

Drove into El Paso today to get groceries and started to get a goddamn headache when I was a few blocks away from the supermarket. I thought about swinging by Eats to get a beer, but I saw Ben's jeep there. Just the thought of seeing him made my head hurt twice as bad. By the time I got to the store I felt like I was dying, but I still managed to get some stuff. When I was getting set to pay, things got really nuts.

First some idiot dressed up like Big Chief Wampum with a black ponytail and Indian necklace shoves in front of me in line and gives me the hairy eyeball when I complain. If I'd felt better I might have asked him to step outside, but I already felt like I'd gotten my head stomped, so I just let it go. Then I see one of the papers has this headline "WOLVES BLITZKRIEG SOUTHWEST" and the picture on the cover is the same dickhead right in front of me. Then when I look again it's something about Wolf Blitzer from the news. But I take another look at Chief Big Dick and all of a sudden I can see there's something wrong about him. Like he's out of balance, like everything I saw a few nights ago.

So now I'm home and trying to figure it out. At least my head feels better.

If that guy from the store is connected to something that can claw through a tow truck, what am I supposed to do about it? These things have been around forever, I think I'm sure of it. There's legends of wolves going back for all time. But you never hear about people suddenly getting sent to get them under control. I suppose people who got picked to balance

things out might keep a low profile, so the wolves wouldn't know who to look for, but if it's just at random, what's the chance of doing anything?

I've got a feeling these kind of balancers are something new. Maybe the world just wasn't screwed up enough to need us before this. From what I see, it sure is now.

Jesus, this is just like last night, with all that crazy joining and dividing crap. How is all this shit getting into my head?

BALANCE DECAYS THE GUARDIANS OF EARTH ARE LOST TO RAGE THE SCOURGE OF THE BLOOD IS PERVERTED AND MASTERS INSTEAD OF SERVING THEY WAR AND HUMANITY IS TRAMPLED UNDERFOOT THEY MUST BE REGULATED THE NEXT AGE WILL SWEEP AWAY THE WRECKAGE AND THE SEED WILL SPROUT ANEW ONLY IF THE BALANCE IS PRESERVED IF THE CYCLE CONTINUES TO BE CORRUPTED ALL WILL CEASE ENTROPY STILLNESS ANNIHILATION UNIVERSAL SAMENESS UNIVERSAL ISOLATION UNIVERSAL DEATH

JULY 17

Today was my first formal session with Pamela, and I'm guardedly optimistic.

AW: Good morning, Pamela. Did you sleep well?

PD: Okay, I guess. I didn't see them again, if that's what you mean.

AW: I'm going to put you on Haldol. I think it has an excellent chance of reducing the frequency and intensity of your hallucinations. I want to stress, however, that this is not a "miracle cure." It's not a quick fix. You will not be free of these delusions until you understand what's really causing them. This will be work. Do you understand?

PD: I understand. Believe me, Doctor, I want to go back to how I was. More than you can imagine.

AW: Good, very good. Is there any history of schizophrenia in your family?

PD: Not that I'm aware of.

AW: All right... let's begin. Tell me about yourself.

PD: Um... I don't suppose there's much to tell. I had a good childhood. My parents are pretty well off. I mean, they fought some when I was young and they divorced when I was eighteen — I kind of think they held it together for me and my sister. Ellie is a year younger than me. She works in New Zealand for a shipping company. My father's a banker. Mum works in real estate. I went to New South Wales Conservatorium for a music degree. I graduated about three years ago. I play in a small ensemble on weekends, the Mishkin Quartet.

AW: What do you play?

PD: Clarinet. We're a jazz band. I tried to get David to hire us for his party, actually.

AW: Are you seeing anyone?

PD: Not right now. I was living with a fellow named Patrick for a while but it just kind of fell apart. Nothing really dramatic.

No shouting or throwing things. I'm really a pretty normal person. Not the type to start seeing things.

AW: You'd never had any sort of... odd spells before Mr. Lavelle's party?

PD: You mean any hallucinations?

AW: Yes.

PD: No. Never.

AW: I see. Now... the flame and shadow people and the tumors you talked about... do they remind you of anything? "The selection"? "The sickness"?

PD: Not really... I mean, I remember some stories from when I was growing up, but nothing like this.

AW: What stories?

PD: Just, you know, vague stuff. Aborigine stories from primary school. That there is a second sort of dream world outside this one. Just as real, but invisible. Or stuff about shamans who stand between this world and the spirit world, I guess. With spirit animals or guides or something. I guess that does sound kind of like what I described, doesn't it? Spirits that no one else can see, choosing people to contact between their world and ours.

Maybe it's been going on forever.

AW: Maybe what has?

PD: Sorry?

AW: What, exactly, has been going on forever?

PD: Uh... well, I suppose that all those old shamans could have been hallucinating. They were always starving themselves and, I don't know, doing drugs, right? How common is it to imagine that higher powers are talking to you?

AW: As delusions go, quite common.

PD: So maybe all through history, people have thought they were getting a message from the other side. What if they were really just getting messages from inside?

THEM

JOURNAL, DAY 4

I got wolves on the brain. It's like I can't read on the shitter without seeing an article on them, or turn on the TV without one of those nature shows about them. My head's feeling a lot better, but I keep feeling like there's something I ought to be doing. I keep thinking about that asshole in the store.

(Later)

I went into town looking for the Indian wolf-guy from the grocery store. As soon as I got into town my head started hurting again, though not so bad this time. I was really looking, but I didn't find him right away. Instead, I spotted another unbalanced guy, wandering around the same neighborhood. He was sitting on a bench in front of a little store church. It was like the letters on one of the signs jiggled around to say BLOOD HE SERVES instead of His Blood Saves. It was right by Dan's Diner, so I got in a booth and pretended like I was doing the crossword. I was wishing there was some way I could get closer to him, when all of a sudden I was there on the bench next to him! Only not really there. I could kind of feel the bench, but not like I was touching it. More like I was imagining what it would feel like. Same with what I was seeing. I could see him really

clear, up close, but it was like he couldn't see me. Also, I couldn't see myself. Like I was a ghost. I mean, I got right in his face, I could hear him breathing, but he had no idea I was there. I even touched him. Only not really. I could feel without feeling, like when I touched the bench. I could feel that he had a gun on under his jean jacket, but the cloth didn't move when I touched it. I was there, but I wasn't.

I was shitting myself.

Then he looked up real sudden and he was looking across the street at Chief Dickhead. I could see myself through the window of the diner, too, which was fucking weird. When the wolf guy turned the corner, the wrong guy got up and followed him. I stayed with him. Wrong guy followed wolf guy three blocks to the Aztec Motel and went in after him. I tried to go with, but suddenly I was back at Dan's.

What was really weird was when I looked down and saw that I'd been writing on the newspaper the whole time. Or at least, there was writing on the newspaper in my handwriting and I was holding the pen. But I sure don't remember writing all this crap.

July 17

AW: If you're correct, that your visions of these flame and shadow people are meant to represent some inner voice, what are they trying to tell you?

PD: I got the sense that... I don't know... that they want me to understand something. To look behind the obvious, the false stuff, and get at some hidden truth.

AW: What hidden truth?

PD: That everything we look at is a lie. We're supposed to be doing more than we are, but we've gotten wrapped up by... by something. I'm not sure what it is. I once heard someone say, "Fire and water make good servants but bad masters." I don't know where that's from. I heard it quoted on some American sitcom. But I think that's what the shadow man was trying to show me. That we'd been fooled or misled somehow.

AW: Misled from what?

PD: I don't know! What we're really supposed to be doing? The lives we lead... you know, with our nice cars and clothes and stereo equipment? I feel like it's a lie.

AW: Do you feel like you don't deserve your affluence?

PD: It's not about deserving. It's more like we're fiddling while Rome burns. And the fire wants us to ignore it.

AW: Does this tie into the fiery person?

PD: No, she's... she's the one trying to wake us up. Though she wasn't so involved with me... She wants to start a new... a new... I don't know. Dammit! It's like trying to remember something from when you're a kid, something important but distant. I can feel the memory, but I can't remember!

AW: What about this shadow person? What's his function?

PD: To correct and understand. To separate right from wrong.

AW: And the tumors? What are they?

PD: They're... wrong. The world is sick and they thrive on it. They're like... like... I can feel the answer, but I don't know how to put it! They're like bugs in a garden? They're supposed to be there, to eat weak plants and get rid of rot. But

something's gone wrong and they're out of control. Killing everything. If they aren't stopped, they'll eat it all.

THE DARK ONES

We have been chosen to help fight the darkness — our perceptions, gifted to us by the Shining Ones, make that perfectly clear beyond any doubt. But in all candor, I wonder if humanity at large isn't itself completely responsible for everything that it gets. It's not as if people need the encouragement of supernatural forces to indulge themselves in spectacular evils. Dealers give lethally addictive drugs to foolish children to get them hooked, so that they can be dragged into a life of desperate prostitution. Scientists and doctors with vested interests deliberately hide beneficial advances and falsify evidence to please their company paymasters. Greedy corporate shareholders drive profits ever higher, ignoring quality and safety. Smug politicians mouth platitudes while leaving the poor to die on street corners. And the rest of the world turns a blind eye to it all, too selfish to risk the potential inconvenience of getting involved. Everywhere you look, thugs and petty criminals steal from each other and everyone else. It's impossible to know who is the most guilty, who is the most deserving of punishment. Only the very few are worth saving.

There's so much wrong with the world that the only answer now is to let the selfish, corrupt masses be swept away by a tide of monstrous predators — except that even they don't seem in any hurry to get the job done. Instead, the monsters revel in the decay of the world, taking positions of power and influence, feeding off the hopeless and the homeless, enjoying the freedom of a lax system to commit horrendous physical and mental abuses. It's their idea of paradise, a lovely little holiday resort for the monster-about-hell. Somewhere for the devils and demons to get away from the stress and strain of inflicting infernal torture. "Come to Earth! Get a hotdog! Sink a few souls into despair! Come on in. The water's fine." When they do arrive, they find the locals waiting with open arms — and open souls — to be as accommodating as possible. Why would they want to do anything to threaten the way things are running?

Perhaps they, the darkness, are our designated purifiers, a change from Noah's flood. I can't believe that the powers of light view modern humanity any more favorably than Jehovah saw the corrupt of Sodom and Gomorrah. The forces of heaven have demonstrated a perfectly cheerful willingness to condemn the world's sinners as irredeemable. In terms of Christian theology, the compact between God and man as mediated by the rainbow and later by Christ could quite reasonably be assumed to have been revoked in the face of extreme and grotesque provocation. It would be a beautiful irony if our purpose as chosen were not to act as saviors of the stinking masses, but as a spur to goad the Dark Ones into action — an escalation of hostilities, to tip the balance of the celestial battle into another of its periodic all-out wars.

I, for one, would take greater comfort in the calling if I felt that its final aim was to cleanse the world. It would also go some way to explaining why so many of the chosen are such idiots, interested only in leaping into any situation, regardless

of advance intelligence, reconnaissance, consequences or even the possible chance of survival. A terrorist cause — provoking war is *always* a terrorist act — requires plenty of fanatics with no brains or sense of proportion. One could almost feel sorry for the darkness, if it wasn't so totally loathsome and abhorrent.

Sadly, I fear that most chosen are an inevitable consequence of humanity's poverty of spirit, rather than a master plan on the part of the Shining Ones. There are so many utter fools in the world, and so few people of true thought and self-awareness that our benefactors simply do not have the requisite scope of choice to ensure that all — or even many — of us are up to par. It is a pathetic level for a species to sink to, when it cannot even muster up a small group of superior representatives. It would be comforting to believe that we were the proactive agents of reform, but we might simply be the reactive antibodies of a diseased system. At least I can draw strength from the knowledge revealed by Fyodor that the world is set for change, whether we like it or not. Still, humanity, festering in its stinking rags, really does deserve a fairly high proportion of the indignities that it has to face.

FIRE, AIR AND LIGHT

Notes. It's premature to make any judgments, but I'm tempted to view the man and woman as mother and father surrogates. If this turns out to be a fruitful line of thought, I'd be very interested to know why the mother — usually a comforting figure — is, if I understand correctly, wreathed in flames and blessing this Paul "because he was mad." The shadow man seems to be a contradiction as well. The figure is dark, but he chooses Stacy "because she was bright." Does that mean intelligent, energetic? Or did the patient have a hallucination of light?

Light typically stands for understanding, illumination or holiness. Was her father a religious man, or particularly intellectual? Flames can also be holy, but they have more primitive connotations. They warm but also consume. If the flame woman is a mother figure, this could be one source of conflict. If Pamela has repressed anger against her mother or this mother figure, seeing Katrina Richards murdered could have resonated with her own repressed rage.

It's too soon to tell, I suppose. I must guard against making up my mind and leading the patient down the most convenient line of theory.

SIGNS OF THE CHOSEN

When I was first awakened into my destined role as chosen, I became aware of a sudden wind that sprang up and whipped around me, both physically and mentally. The physical presence swiftly subsided, but the mental one has endured the many months that have passed since. That same wind still blows through the corners of my mind, and it carries a thousand voices. It hasn't let up since the moment it first started. It has howled constantly — and often painfully — without pause. Although it might seem a distracting thing to the unenlightened, the truth is exactly the opposite. There is a quality to the wind that encourages reflection and consideration. The half-heard whispers in the back of one's

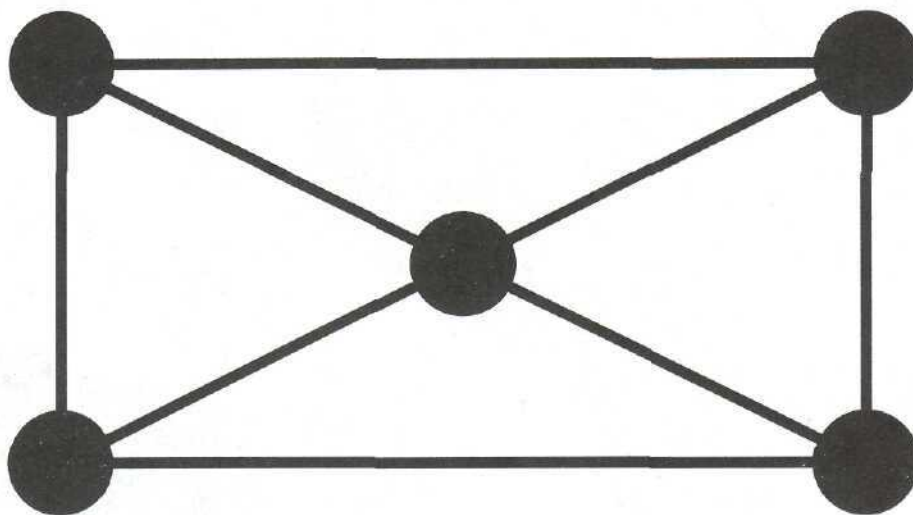
mind spur thought and analysis, and can lead one down new and unexpected paths of inquiry. When the Shining Ones speak clearly — or at least as clearly as they ever do — and the words reverberate through my entire body, it is the wind that bears their messages.

Furthermore, the wind serves as the vessel by which I can gain access to the capabilities granted me by the Shining Ones. When I project my sight through my stone, the wind carries my senses away from my body and into the larger world. On the one occasion that I felt the need to reach out to the mind of another chosen, it was the wind that carried my words to him. It appears as if it is part of the dance of life, a breath of soul that whistles through all of nature, modulated and mediated by the beings that it passes through, but always reshaped by the guiding intelligences above. It is a manifestation of the will of the Shining Ones, the medium by which their intelligence is mediated here on Earth.

I am aware that some have reported a similar perception of the winds, and that there are those amongst the wider strata of the chosen who, at the point of imbuing, perceived themselves as being bathed in light or engulfed in flames. It would make sense to suppose that the Shining Ones deliver subtly different messages in the three different manifestations, tailoring the scope of the change to the

limitations of the newly chosen. For the coarsest and most bestial, the Shining Ones reach out with fire, fanning the flames of anger or passion or pain because there is nothing else in the person to work with than a sullen sense of resentment, disenfranchisement or rage. Next come those with too much discernment to focus purely on anger. Instead, they are imbued with gentler reflexes, but because they still lack the true ability to intellectualize and plan, they are prone to excessive sympathy for our foes. Finally, the keenest minds are fully opened, given the tools with which to analyze and strategize. These are the few that are meant to stand above the rest.

Being aware of these manifestations of fire, light or air is partly a function of having sufficient strength and enlightenment to perceive the moment of one's imbuing, and partly a function of strong animal instincts for the hidden. In some chosen it is strictly one or the other, and in some it is a mixture. It is unfortunate that some fools possess the inherited senses to perceive the nimbus, because it muddies the waters. Were it otherwise, it would be a fine way of picking out the best from the different strata of chosen. As it is, however, it is impossible to tell whether awareness of the elements is a sign that a person is superior, or merely an indication of ancestral cunning of the type that can be found in any common mongrel.





CHAPTER 2:

KEEPING YOUR DISTANCE

Thou wilt surely wear away, both thou, and this people that is with thee: for this thing is too heavy for thee; thou art not able to perform it thyself alone.

— Exodus 18:18

IMMEDIATE PRIORITIES

JOURNAL, DAY FIVE

Ben stopped by my house again. Jesus, I could do a job on that jeep of his. The idle on it is so screwy it gives me shooting pains in my spine just hearing it come down the road. I went into the cellar, but this time he went around the whole damn house, hollering for me, asking if I'm all right. For a second I thought he was going to pry open a screen and look inside, but he eventually took the hint.

He left me a check in my mail slot, what he owed me for coming out to jump his car. Or what he thought he owed me. It was about five dollars shy, but screw it, it's worth five bucks to be rid of him.

He put a little symbol down in the corner, on the comments line. It kind of made me feel weird looking at it. What's really weird is that I know what it means, without knowing how I know. It means something like "justice" or "revenge."

(Later)

So I couldn't stop thinking about that damn check and finally decided to go to town and cash it, and that's when the shit hit the fan. I got a headache again. Looking at the check, it seemed like "Allied Bank of El Paso" turned into "ALLY PASSES." I don't know what that was supposed to mean. Somehow in there I took a wrong turn and wound up in front of the Aztec Motel. I knew without even looking that Ben was in there with the wolf guy. I just knew because my head hurt so bad. I parked in the lot and there was Ben's jeep with the shotgun missing from the rack.

I had no idea what to do. I looked around and saw a newspaper box on the corner and remembered what happened at the diner. I took a paper, ran back into the truck and stared at the paper hard. Suddenly I was outside again. My body was still in the truck, but I was there in front of the hotel. It was fucked up. I'm amazed I hadn't pissed myself by the time I got back. I didn't know what to do, so I just went inside. I don't remember going through doors or anything, but then I went behind the counter, where the signature book was open. My eyes seemed almost drawn right to "Jonathan Samoset," whoever that was. He was on the second floor.

Then I was just up the stairs. Like that. That's where I heard the gunshot. I didn't run - I mean, I don't think I did - but I went down the hall fast and into a room, and there was Ben with Samoset - or something. It was the Indian guy from the store, but as I got there it was like he exploded, turning huge and hairy. His head scraped the ceiling and he was hunched over. This mountain of fur and muscle. He jerked the shotgun out of Ben's hand and slapped him clean across the room.

Ben didn't go down, not then. He yanked out a hunting knife just as the thing jumped over the bed and landed on him. Ben put the knife clean through the thing, and I could smell burned hair. The thing howled so hard all the windows and mirrors cracked. After that, it just killed Ben. There's no other way to say it.

It was quiet for a second, until doors started slamming up and down the hall. I guess Ben had kicked the door to this room in. I was suddenly scared someone might come in and get torn to pieces too.

Then the thing did something I can't even try to explain. It grabbed a suitcase, looked in the mirror and... it was like it got sucked in and vanished. Gone. Just like that.

The room was a mess. There was blood all over the place, smoke from the gun and blood from Ben. Poor bastard. He hit it with both barrels. I didn't mention that. He shot it and it still stood up and killed him.

I was back in the truck. I don't know why I noticed all of a sudden, but my headache was gone.

(Later)

I just read over what I wrote and there's definitely something very weird with the headaches. I never got headaches before, not day after day anyhow. Maybe during the divorce, but a couple aspirin and some scotch took care of them. Not these.

Growing up I had these allergies that would stuff up my nose in the spring and I'd get sinus headaches. But these aren't sinus headaches. Ben made my head hurt. Samoset made my head hurt. That guy on the bench by the church made my head hurt.

I'm starting to wonder just how goddamn smart these balancers are. I'm supposed to take care of a problem and every time I get near it, my head busts open? That's fucked up.

Maybe they're trying to force me into it? No, that doesn't make any sense. If that was the plan, they'd hurt me when I'm not doing it instead of when I am.

Poor Ben. I can't believe how pissed off I was at him. Is that part of it too? It's clear that I'm going to need some help if I want to get rid of Samoset. Anything that can take two barrels to the chest, get stabbed and still come back for more isn't anything I want to square off against.

July 19

Notes. Our discussion of Pamela's family was illuminating, though I have not yet uncovered the root cause of her symptoms. She seems to be responding well to the Haldol, though that's possibly premature. Her mother encouraged her musically, that's clear. Despite her insistence that this encouragement was positive, I wonder if perhaps her mother didn't push her rather hard. Feelings of letting down one's mother are very difficult to deal with, as we all know.

She has asked to be allowed out of her room, and I have acquiesced on the condition that she be accompanied by a nurse at all times. Talking with her, seeing her so eminently reasonable, it's hard to remember she's the same woman I saw beating herself violently.

As I was leaving the room, she asked if Paul Femie had come back. I said he had not, and she said she "wasn't ready" to see him. When I asked what that meant, she said she was afraid he'd remind her of the party and she wasn't ready to face that yet. I nodded and said I understood.

But do I? He's her co-worker. She said he's a friend, though she stressed there was "nothing more." She said it without prompting. Could it mean something? He's also a survivor of the same ordeal. Why would she want to isolate herself from someone who had the same experience, someone who might justify her behavior? Is it because she suspects he might condemn her, instead?

FIRST STEPS

My first concern, when I had recovered from my first weeks of reactions to my change with the help of the sage, was to attempt to verify some of the conclusions I had reached based on my experiences and upon the hints that Fyodor had shared with me. It took a period of some weeks to hit upon

appropriate mental bulwarks and physical remedies to cope with the vertigo and the other cues from the Shining Ones, but I did manage it. I didn't necessarily notice anything at the time, but I had arrived at many of my conclusions as a direct result of information that my subconscious mind had filtered from the visual cascades and the roaring babble. That gave me a significant head start on the bulk of the chosen, who seem to lack the requisite powers of perception to hear the Shining Ones at all.

My advantage allowed me to deduce a number of tests by which I could verify certain presumptions I had about the political structure of the world. I obtained a high-power pair of binoculars, stationed myself in the middle of a local park in the afternoon when it was fairly quiet, braced myself for the onslaught and called to the Shining Ones. Once my perceptions were cleared, I made myself observe some of the large companies and civic offices around the edge of the park. It took a degree of willpower to force myself to stay there, despite the extreme discomfort of the vertigo and the howling voices. Over the course of a few days' efforts, I was able to observe several people who clearly stood out as wrong, "Renfields," as Fyodor would call them.

Once I was certain that the darkness did indeed form a fully integrated part of modern life, my second concern was to ensure my personal safety. I had no idea whether I was as clearly identifiable to these new threats as they were to me, so I wanted to be as sure as I could that my personal situation was as safe as possible. Obvious mundane protections were the easiest to organize. I obtained and fitted car security alarms, grilles for all the windows of my home (which often doubles as my office), dead-bolts and hinge locks for my front and rear doors and sensor-activated security lights on all approaches to my property. I also upgraded my home alarm system by several steps. It cost me a lot of money but delighted the security firms in the area that I spread the work across. It also greatly reduced my insurance premiums, the first truly positive effect to come out of the whole situation.

Slightly less obviously, I also altered my answering machine message to give no personal information, purchased a telephone voice modulator, installed full 24-hour audiovisual CCTV surveillance both inside and outside my home (including a second, passcoded observer suite in the garage, so that I could observe the house from outside it) and arranged a new mailbox in a slightly more distant post office, to which I had my old box redirected. Between them, this second round of measures absorbed most of the remains of my savings. However, their collective necessity should be obvious to all but the most foolhardy.

Once I was satisfied that my personal privacy could be reasonably guaranteed from casual invasion, it seemed only prudent to acquaint myself of any Dark Ones operating in my immediate area — from a suitable distance, of course. I knew that a concerted operation of scrying the local region — I have a stone that permits such things — would be immensely uncomfortable, and would leave me almost unable to think coherently. However, if an action is important enough that it has to be done, then it has to be done, and there is nothing more to say. I spent several hours over the course of three days and nights examining the region, but my home is not part

of any actual village or town. At the end of the period, I felt as comfortable as possible that I was free of local infestations.

My last task was to prepare myself for having to vacate my premises in a hurry. I do not own a firearm — they are vile tools that the stupid and cowardly use to take control of the superior, and they should be outlawed. I also have no skill in combat, so standing to fight would be stupid pride. I prepared two identical packs, each containing \$500 in cash, a quantity of dried food and some water, medicines, a compact one-person tent, thermal clothing, a stout knife and a flashlight. I placed one of the packs by the kitchen door, and the other in the trunk of my BMW, so that whether I had to flee on foot or by car into the woods, I would at least have some resources to aid in my survival. The packs only contain modest food and water for one or two days, but I cannot carry more than that and still move faster than a slow trot. I may stash larger quantities of food and water in a suitable place a day's brisk walk from here, as an emergency reserve.

JOURNAL, DAY SIX

The newspapers are going crazy. When Deputy Miller disappeared there was a front page notice. It was about what you'd expect, an alert about a cop going missing on duty. The next day they went out with dogs, but I'm guessing they didn't need them if anyone had the brains to look for vultures. So they found him, the other guy who was there (I guess his name was Tony Burns. It sounds like he was some hitch hiking bum) and Janice Preastor. The headline was huge: Police Find 3 Bodies in Desert.

I went to the coffee place across the street from the sheriff's office (some fancy-ass place that doesn't know how to make "a cup of coffee," but can give you a lattay or a cappochino or any other fairy thing). I bought a paper and "took a nap." Over at the station there was another guy out of whack, which I suspected because of my headache. It's like I'm allergic to these things.

This one's a cop. His name's Dean McNitt, and I'm pretty sure I'd be in deep shit if I'd been watching him in the flesh, instead of with my newspaper. One of them hiding in the cops has to be smart, I think.

The cops sitting around were all talking about what might have happened. The last thing the deputy called in, he was pulling over to see why the Ford was stopped. He called in the license plate, so they're looking for Flora Mak—something—I'm guessing that's the black girl me and Ben saved. Wish there was some way to warn her. Too bad for her she took off so fast.

The fake cop was pushing the idea that Samoset was involved somehow. His theory is that Samoset and Burns were serial killers who were going to do the two girls out in the desert when Miller stumbled on them. They'd just killed the white girl, Miller killed Burns, Samoset killed Miller and ran for it. They've got no tie in for Ben yet — maybe a witness, maybe wrong place at the wrong time. Seems to me that it wouldn't take much to match up the tires of Ben's jeep to the tracks we left in the desert that night. The fake cop, McNitt, is pushing the killer theory pretty hard. Maybe that's got the others thrown off all the evidence.

So the question is, what do I do about all this? They have no idea I was out there, and I don't think there's any evidence that I was. I sure wouldn't mind having the cops after Samoset, and get him out of my hair. Would McNitt know more about how to kill that thing, or would he be more trouble than good?

What was Ben's connection to Samoset? Why was he up in that thing's room with a goddamn shotgun — and still couldn't kill the guy?

Maybe I should give in to the headaches and see who or what is stomping around El Paso.

Maybe I need some silver bullets or something.

PSYCHOLOGICAL COPING

July 20

Notes. Another hysterical fit today. This time the patient tried to smash out her window. It came at a particularly inconvenient time, as well [if that doesn't sound too callous]. I was speaking about Ms. Drummond with a Mrs. Eleanor Hughes — another survivor/witness of the party episode.

Mrs. Hughes seemed extremely pleasant and helpful, and I'm apparently not the only one taken by her charm. Initially I was rather surprised that George at the front desk let her back to see me, knowing how busy I am, but once I spoke with her it was easy to imagine her persuading him.

She had just begun offering to assist in any way she could when Nurse Swit entered my office and told me that Ms. Drummond needed my help.

When I entered her room, Ms. Drummond was attempting to get through the window and was screaming. When I entered, she turned, her eyes wide and she retreated into a corner, curling into the fetal position. She also soiled herself.

I then realized that Mrs. Hughes was right behind me and I sternly ordered her to leave. Nurse Swit seemed to be in a daze until I told her — rather sharply — to escort Mrs. Hughes away. She went, still protesting that she could help Ms. Drummond.

I went to sedate Ms. Drummond, but she had already passed out. When Nurse Swit returned, we cleaned her up and put her to bed. This time we put the restraints on.

ADDENDUM

After she awoke, I had an interview with Ms. Drummond. She seemed disoriented and strangely passive.

AW: Pamela, are you feeling better?

PD: One of them was here, Doctor. One of the tumors.

AW: What do you mean?

PD: I felt it coming. Like there was a bug trapped in my head. The closer it got, the louder the buzzing got. It was standing right behind you. Couldn't you see it?

AW: I didn't see anything, Pamela.

PD: You did. You saw it but you didn't know what you were seeing. You sent it away, but it'll be back. If it knows I can see it, it'll come back for me. We took them by surprise the first time, but now they know.

AW: Who knows? The tumors? Or did you see the shadow man again, or the fiery woman?

PD: The shadow is inside me. He's with me but not with me — here, but distant. When they come close, he gets louder and louder, but I can't follow it. I can't tell what he's trying to tell me!

AW: Do you know Eleanor Hughes?

PD: No.

AW: She was standing behind me in the doorway. Is she one of the tumors?



PD. Yes. So you did see it?

AW. I saw an ordinary woman who was concerned about you.

PD. You didn't see it. I thought it was going to get me. You saved my life. It would have killed me.

AW. I don't believe so.

PD. Maybe I could have escaped. At the end there, I managed to get out. I went out the window and was down there by the shore. That was better.

AW. What do you mean, you "got out"?

PD. I went outside, onto the grounds. I went by a fountain. Then I remember being back here, with you standing over me. It was like my soul ran and hid. I don't think it was the right thing to do, but the noise was so bad.

AW. I agree that it's often better to confront and understand one's problems than to run from them, but I'm not sure I know what you mean by "noise."

PD. The noise inside. They cause it.

AW. They? The tumors?

PD. No, the tumors... they just turn up the volume. Them and the other cursed ones like me.

AW. You feel that you're cursed?

PD. I have to be. I can see the tumors and you can't. It's making me insane. Wouldn't you call that a curse?

AW. I think you've had the bad luck to see and experience some traumatic things, but I don't think you're cursed. A curse comes as a punishment, doesn't it? Do you think you've done something that deserves punishment?

PD. I tried to make a difference. That's why I'm cursed. The Bible says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are you when they spit on you for me, blessed are those who sorrow." Being blessed and being cursed may just be the same thing. Maybe all the noise in my head is a blessing that just feels like a curse. Maybe it's my reward for trying to do the right thing.

AW. So where did this noise come from? The shadow or flame person?

PD. Yes! You mean you understand? What do you see? I keep seeing a web. They've trapped me between all the other blessed and cursed people. There are things caught on the web, too. They're not people at all — tumors. When any of the others move, the strands tug at me. They pull and shake me. The closer they get, the more I can feel it. It's like every strand is hung with bells, and the slightest touch, the slightest breeze, makes them ring, and it keeps getting louder.

But maybe if I can get a feel for how the strands move, how the bells ring, ... Have you ever been in a concert hall?

AW. Yes, I've been to a number of concerts.

PD. There are dead spots in badly designed theatres. Places where the sound doesn't reach. Where the sound waves clash and cancel. That's what I need to find. I need to find the dead places where the webs don't shake and the sounds won't deafen me. I know they're there, if I can just find them. I know it. I can feel it.

Notes. Mrs. Hughes, a lovely and concerned woman, is perceived as a monstrous "tumor." Her mere presence activates a "web," entangling Mrs. Drummond in its strands. She's searching for a "quiet place" within the web by altering the rela-

tionships between the people who are like her [the "blessed/cursed"] and the people who are not [the tumors]. The web was established by a "shadow man" and "flame woman."

She's constructed quite a complicated mythology.

If the shadow man is her father and the flame woman is her mother, what does it mean that he is with her but far away? This seems like a fairly common longing for a distant but benevolent patriarch. The "tumor" was the wife of an upper-class businessman — like Mrs. Richards, whose murder prompted the patient's breakdown?

Perhaps the web stands for a social construct — a network of obligations and social mores that she feels confine her. She seeks a silent place — somewhere without her music? Without the music her mother pushed her to study? Somewhere she can be free of the expectations of the "tumors"?

PERSPECTIVE

While I will readily admit that I find the Dark Ones loathsome beyond the unpleasantness of humanity at large, I cannot say that I am particularly shocked by their existence. Frankly, it rather makes sense. We know the world is sick, peopled with vacuous idiots, greed-blinded fools, murderous thugs and shallow poseurs. Why on Earth should we suppose for a second that it is not also populated with monsters that stalk the night? The fact that the most cancerous evils are spread throughout government, law enforcement, religious orders, finance and the media — an obvious deduction, verified by Fyodor — should shock no one. We all accept that these institutions are rife with corruption, organized crime, immorality, perversion, alcoholism and all the other dregs of our psyche. Why should it seem odd that they are also shot through with genuine evil? Frankly, it would be shocking if they were *not*.

However, I would not want any reader, even a theoretically nonexistent one, to think for a moment that I countenance the presence of the darkness within our institutions. Normal people are stupid and corrupt, yes, but it is a matter of scale and perspective. The Dark Ones are considerably more abhorrent than even the most brutish idiot, even when their intentions are the same. There can be no doubt about the way the Shining Ones feel about them, nor about their instructions to us regarding them. I picture it as a scale, with the superior few at one end and the darkest evils at the other. The bulk of humanity occupies the middle ground, and the bulk of the Dark Ones occupy the bottom end. I dare say that there might be Dark Ones who rank more highly than some humans, maybe even a very few who rank more highly than most humans, but in the great majority of comparisons, this is not the case. I particularly resent the influence that the darkness has in our institutions, for the government affects me directly, but then I also resent the influence that the all-too-human idiots have as well.

It is important to try to find a way to focus on higher things. While the world still turns, daily life will continue to roll on in its usual, unstoppable, implacable fashion. There is little that can be done to change that, whether the senate runs for the benefit of vampires or of Mafia dons. I have always made a habit of trying to look beyond the daily world to find perspective and meaning, and history has been a fertile ground for that. The great advantage of working in the past rather than in the present is that the people one encounters are all restfully dead, their deeds and thoughts transmitted solely through words and

objects, and therefore unable to cause much aggravation. It is far easier to live with a fool who is long-since dust than with a fool who is hammering on your front door.

In practical terms, this means that although I now find it painful and mind numbing to be near large numbers of people, and excruciating to be near Dark Ones, I have never really had any interest in mingling with the masses, anyway. I do not find myself socially or psychologically hampered by the problem. I have never had time for the fools that surround me, and that has not changed. Although the pain and confusion attendant upon the problem causes me some debility when it is aggravated, it is relatively controllable most of the time. It has always been necessary to stand back and away from the world at large to be able to perceive it and study it effectively. You cannot really look at something properly from the inside. While I dare say some chosen would rather not see the whole truth, I have found that it merely reinforces my natural inclinations to step away from the world in order to gain better understanding.

As for the final destiny of humanity, I remain a sanguine observer. The world is very deeply flawed, and the people within it are, for the most part, not salvageable. Perhaps they were not always so — perhaps — but the cruel tides running within society ensure that any remaining shards of latent decency are swiftly removed. If the only way to improve matters is for the powers that be to indulge in another cleansing operation and consign the masses to oblivion, so be it. Who am I to disagree with the mandates of heaven?

JOURNAL, DAY SIX, PAGE 2

Went down to Eats tonight for a beer. I didn't really feel like it, but I got to keep my face out there so people come to me when their cars break down. Word of mouth and an ad in the phone book is about all I can afford, plus a bottle of Jack to the State Troopers to call me for accidents every now and then. Besides, I don't want to make people suspicious.

Of course, all everyone is talking about is Ben. What they've heard is that some Indian guy killed him in a hotel room and left town. No one was saying anything, but the one Indian guy in the bar was getting more than one look. Poor guy. To help him out, I said how I'd heard that the guy from the hotel wasn't a real Indian at all, just some fake wannabe with a ponytail and a black hat.

The question I was asking — like everyone — was what Ben was doing there. I didn't know *how* he wound up there, but I knew *what* he was doing there, and I sure as hell couldn't tell no one. It was weird. I *wanted* to tell them. It was almost like I could feel the pressure behind my mouth, like when you're a kid and you hold your breath until your cheeks puff out. I was worried that I'd open my mouth and the whole stupid thing would come right out. What good would that do? I'd get locked up. Or they'd believe me and when Samoset showed up they'd all get murdered trying to kill him with their good silverware. Nah, I'd get sent to the nuthatch.

So every time I felt like opening my mouth, I stuck a beer in it. Now, I did ask Helen if she thought maybe this Samoset guy had something to do with Ben stepping out on his wife. (Everyone suspected, since Ben's wife was always calling Eats when he wasn't there.) She thought that was bullshit, but now the idea's out there and if I'm lucky no one will remember it was me who asked.

Coming to town, I could feel the headache, feel it getting stronger. It was real strong by the bus station, but I couldn't bring myself to go there. What could I do? If it's more balancers,

what good am I going to be to them? If it 's the wrong ones, what can I do to them?

The important thing is to keep in the daily grind. Everything 's gone crazy or it always was crazy, but that don 't mean I have to go crazy with it. I got along fine for twenty years fixing cars when there were critters and other weird shit out there, and I expect I can keep doing it. Telling someone would sure feel good for now, but so does banging a hooker and look what that gets you - VD and a trip to the county lockup. Telling a friend would just get me a bad reputation and a trip to the bughouse.

So instead, I pulled off by that Stop ' n ' Go on the other side of Eats. There 's a phone in the back that Ben always used to call his girlfriend. No one can see it from the road or the store. I called that fake cop McNitt and asked if he had some silver bullets for Samoset. He asked who I was and I asked what he was. He said we should meet and I said no way in hell. Then I hung up.

For some reason, I felt a lot better.

PRACTICAL COPING

July 21

AW: Good morning, Pamela. How are you today?

PD: Horrible. What happened last night?

AW: What do you mean, what happened?

PD: I remember... bits and pieces. I think I had another hallucination, didn't I?

AW: You don't recall?

PD: Please, don't play games with me! What I remember doesn't make sense. I remember seeing one of those things, and then I had an... I guess you'd call it a hallucination. I imagined I was outside in the courtyard, down by the shore.

AW: Have you ever had that feeling before? The sensation that you've left your body and are watching it as an observer?

PD: Uh, no.

AW: I assure you, I'm not "playing games." It's a somewhat common reaction to extreme trauma. Many incest survivors report that sort of detachment.

PD: I was never... nothing like that ever happened to me.

AW: Okay.

PD: Really! My father would never do anything like that. No one in my family would.

AW: I believe you.

PD: The closest thing to... that... happened when I was a girl. I mean, nothing really happened. My friend and I were taking a bike ride along one of the trails in Roseville. That's where we lived at the time. We stopped where the trail crossed a little stream, by this little bridge. We were sitting and talking — being little girls — when suddenly we smelled something awful. We looked up, and there was this man there, this smelly old tramp. He muttered something at us — I don't know what it was. And then he took his trousers down. He wasn't very far away — maybe four or five feet. I screamed and grabbed my friend and pulled her away as he started coming toward us. I think he was drunk. The first time I got sick from drinking at college, that was what it smelled like. He grabbed my shoulder and I knocked his hand off as hard as I could. We ran up from the stream, got on our bikes and went back to my house as fast as we could.

That was all of it.

AW: How did your parents react?

PD: I... uh, well, I didn't tell them.

AW: Really?

PD: I was awfully young. I didn't understand what happened, or what had almost happened. I thought maybe it was our fault. I guess I didn't want them to worry. Maybe I thought that talking about it would make it... I don't know, more real somehow.

AW: Did your parents discipline you often?

PD: What do you mean?

AW: You said you thought they might think it was your fault. Were your parents strict?

PD: I guess so. They didn't put up with much silliness. But I really just wanted to make it not have happened, if that makes sense. I wanted it to stop being real. I guess if I pretended it didn't happen... well, no, I didn't really pretend. If I didn't let myself think about it, like it never happened, then maybe everything would go back to normal.

AW: Did that work?

PD: Guess not. If I'm still talking about it years later, in an asylum.

AW: Do you think what happened to you there had some connection to what happened to you at the party?

PD: You're the bloody expert, why don't you tell me?

AW: No one's as much of an expert on Pamela Drummond as you are.

[Silence]

PD: All right. I was stupid. Is that what you want to hear? I was a stupid, foolish girl who nearly got raped by a tramp, and then denied it like an ostrich with her head in the sand. I probably put it all down in my subconscious where it could fester, and when I threw up in college I had a hysterical fit that scared my roommate so much she moved out. And then something else happened to me at this party, something I can't remember and this thing has been growing in my brain for years and now it's completely mad! Is that it? Is that what's happening?

AW: Do you think that's what's happening?

PD: God! I don't know. The party... it was different somehow. And I didn't get raped by that tramp. I got away, I mean, I was really pretty smart and resourceful, for a little girl.

AW: You were very brave.

PD: I was brave at the party, too. I tried to save Stacy. I just didn't.

[Silence]

PD: I was dumb to try to deny what I saw. I was dumb to hide from the truth and think I could undo it. I'm doing the same thing now, aren't I?

JOURNAL, DAY SEVEN

Today was almost normal. It's been a week since the highway, though sometimes it feels like it just happened. No headaches all day, just the normal stuff — people bringing in thrown belts and light bodywork. A day like any other day. Two weeks ago I wouldn't have thought anything about it, but today it felt good.

So, feeling good like that, I decided to use it. I went into town and followed the headache to an apartment building by the river. I got a newspaper and had a seat on a bench. I had time to see the sports

section headline, something about the Stars winning 3-2, and it twisted to something about 23C, and then I was out of me.

I looked like a dead man. I could see me breathing, but not like in a mirror. Now I know what I look like asleep. It's not pretty.

I had an idea where I was supposed to go. In room 23C I saw Samoset sitting at a kitchen table cleaning his nails with a gigantic knife while some slick type guy with wireless glasses and a ponytail talked at him about "consolidating their gains." The two of them had words while I was looking through the rest of the apartment. Samoset wanted to go on some sort of rampage. The other guy wanted to take things slow. About what, I don't know.

I was looking for mail. Looks like the apartment is rented to someone named Quinn Weathers. Probably the glasses guy. Someone was taking a shower, so I went and looked. Don't know her name, but I haven't seen anything that nice since my last trip to the titty bar. It was weird. Her not knowing I was watching. Then it got scary, cause she suddenly got tense, spun around, not looking at me, but sniffing the air almost. She jumped out of the shower, still wet, butt-ass naked and ran out to the others saying "We're being watched!"

That was enough for me. I was back on the bench and on my way to the truck pronto.

Three wolves chased me that night a week ago. Three of them. Doesn't take a genius to do the math.

Quinn Weathers

1420 Sarasota Avenue, Apartment 23C

555-7802

POSITION

As I intimated earlier, scholarly work is an inherently solitary practice. There is no room in the serious researcher's

life for cramped, sweaty offices filled with chattering morons, ever-ringing telephones or long, tedious lunches with self-important windbags. There are no endless committees or status meetings. All one really needs is a first-class library of reference material, passes to certain academic libraries and museums and, nowadays, a connection to the Internet. On the occasions that I trade in valuable rarities and curios, it is normally through the classified columns of certain specialist publications. All things taken as equal, being chosen has had little affect on the way that I conduct business. After all, I am well used — and well suited — to keeping my own company.

When I am engaged in primary research — to uncover information to put into articles for journals or magazines, for example — I tend to cocoon myself cheerfully into my home. My books and other reference materials are old friends, trustworthy and reliable in a way that no person has ever been. They are also excellent company, full of fascinating information and amusing discourse, which again no person can match. I have no need to mingle with people I despise, pretending to have things in common with them simply to obtain some sort of feebly conceived psychological gratification. On those few occasions when I need to meet with a colleague, contact or dealer, I have always forced myself to tolerate their presence politely as a necessary step toward obtaining the required information or resources. Although such interludes can be interesting at times, I have hardly considered them a pleasure at any point.

I find it far easier to work when I know that I am not going to be disturbed. Proper research and evaluation requires a degree of immersion and concentration that is impossible to obtain if one is on edge, forever waiting on the next interrup-



tion. It is vitally important to be able to sink into a topic in the secure knowledge that no one will get in the way of what you are trying to do, or will stick their nose in during the middle of a problem. That way, the entire mind can be focused on the important business of keeping track without having to make contingencies for a disturbance.

That means I have had little problem reconciling my elevation to chosen with my ongoing business interests. I am aware that many of the imbued run around like headless chickens at all hours of the day and night, trying to fight this creature or convert that, and let their personal situations slide merrily to hell. It isn't until they find themselves out on the street with no resources, no roof and no food that they understand exactly how stupid they've been. My calling draws me to retreat from the world in preparation for the final elevation, which is undoubtedly why I was selected for this role. To sacrifice the things that enable me to continue my research would be the greatest folly of all.

If you neglect your financial situation, you cut your own throat. It is regrettable, but money is the lifeblood of the world. I doubt that it will ever again lose that status, short of the end. It is a critical resource, and without it one is unable to hold body and soul together. If one fails to keep oneself as an effective actor in the world, everything else starts to weaken. It is no good declaring boldly that one is a "Warrior of God" or whatever, if one is unable to purchase shoes to walk in. A little forethought should make it perfectly plain that the world is going to keep playing by its own rules no matter how virtuous one feels — but then again, a little forethought is exactly what the great majority of chosen lack.

Similarly, it would be impossibly foolish of me to neglect my own sanity. My seeming proximity to the Shining Ones assaults my mind and senses. It would be merely denial to say otherwise. If I were to court it recklessly by mingling with foolish chosen or by stalking Dark Ones, I would squander my resources as unforgivably as the barefoot warrior. The only option open to me is to withdraw as much as possible. I have important duties to perform, information to pass on to the deserving few, and if I am to do that, I must keep myself as hale and hearty as possible.

Anchorite Press has taken a surprising amount of time and personal inconvenience to establish. Working on Fyodor's manuscripts and notes is always a pleasure — his revelations are as evocative as they are astounding — but making them available to the superior few who need to hear his words is a very stern duty. It far outweighs the sort of fooling around with local predators that the disposable bulk of the chosen are prone to do. My calling is to be the distributive source of the most critical information that the imbued will ever know, and that is a great privilege. Next to that, everything else pales.

July 22

Notes. There was some unpleasantness today, and I hope very much that it will not set Pamela's therapy back. She had been resting in the lounge, watching television when she calmly summoned Nurse Naramore and said she thought someone was lurking around the grounds. Naramore was initially inclined to dismiss it as an irrational fantasy, but to humor the patient she sent George out to look around. Imagine our surprise when someone bolted from the bushes! George chased after whomever it was, but it was fruitless.

Today's issue of the Explorer had the headline "Jones Witness Driven Mad by Butchery." It had Pamela's college yearbook photo, stock pictures of our building and a grainy photo of someone standing by a window. I called detective Glencoe and told him that if he wants Pamela to be stable enough to give meaningful testimony, it would behoove the police to keep the muckrakers from frightening her.

I'm pleased with how Pamela handled it, but I worry that being genuinely spied upon might not play into her delusions of being watched by unseen beings.

JOURNAL, DAY EIGHT

McNitt called me today. Said he 's doing a routine interview of Ben 's buddies, and when would be a good time for me to give a statement. I hemmed and hawed and probably sounded like an idiot. Jesus. Does he know I called him? He can 't. If he knew, he 'd do something. Maybe he only suspects. Or maybe he 's telling the truth. But if I see him, I know that brainkill feeling will start and I don 't feel too good about talking to him anyhow. What the hell am I supposed to do?

(Later)

Work was light and I took another headache cruise. I stayed away from the apartments by the river. This time I found a bunch of wrongers at the bus station. Perfect place to fall asleep with a paper and get a closer look. There were a couple, and the headline Mystery Deaths changed into DEAD MYSTERIES while I was looking at them. I stepped out to spy on the wrongers. This time I did it from my truck. If they can pick up on me watching them like that naked chick did, I want to be able to beat it fast.

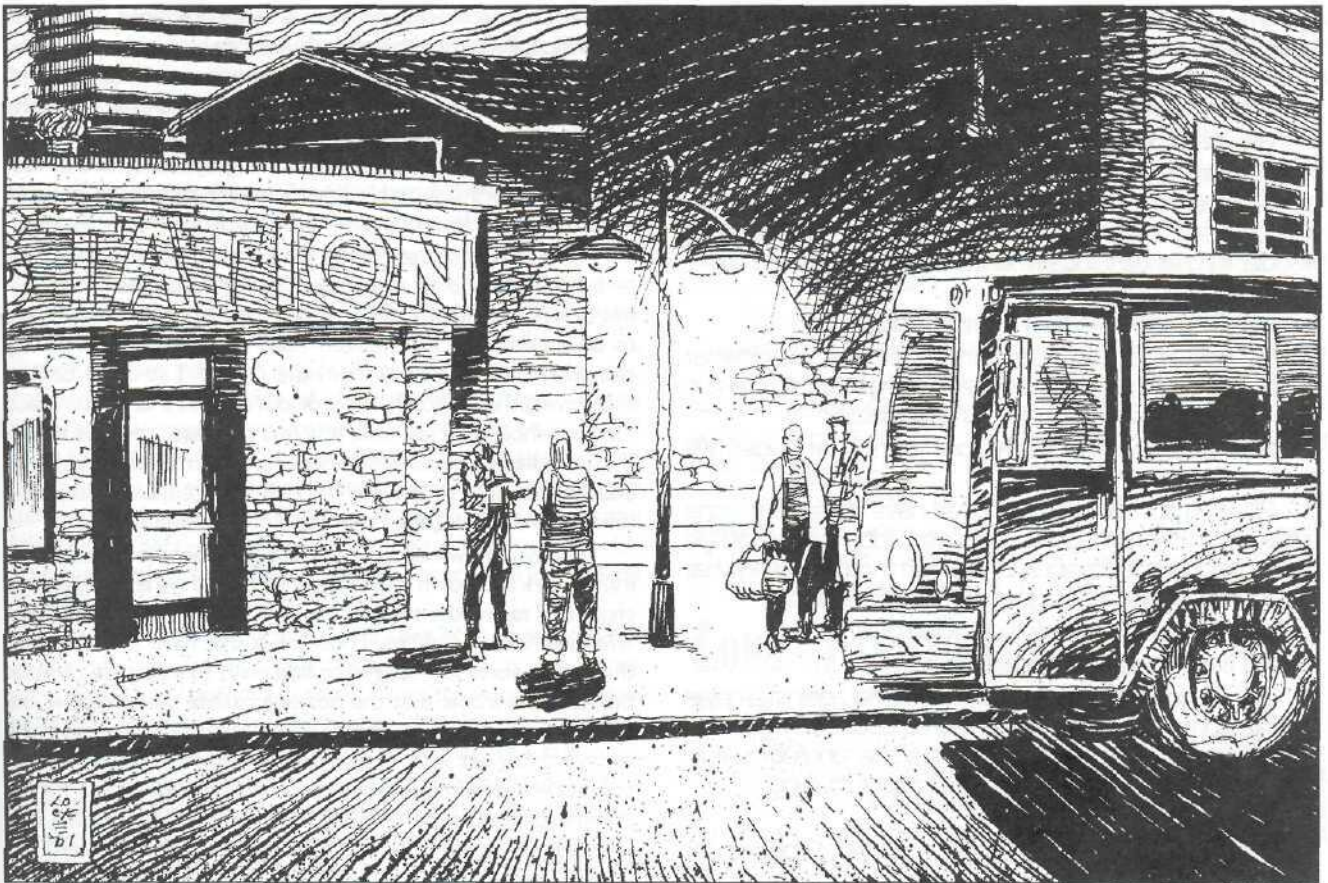
One guy was real slick in his leather pants, keeping an eye out for anyone getting off a bus who looked lost or young or poor. I saw him work his moves a couple times — acting like a pimp, telling these dumb young cunts that he knew this "real cool party" where they could hang out later that night. One didn 't fall for it, but the other one looked kind of convinced.

The other was a woman, some fat old Mexican bitch looking for other Mexicans, rattling at them in Spanish about a mile a minute. All I could catch was something about papers. She probably had three on the hook. The folks who talked to her looked like they were expecting her. Oh, and she had two guns, one in her purse and one in an ankle holster. The pimp had something in his pocket, maybe a switchblade. I wasn 't going to feel any closer to find out.

The whole thing had a sick, wrong feeling to it. Then the poster behind Leatherpants changed from advertising a "Denver Getaway" to DEATH ESCAPES. Yeah, I get it, but what am I supposed to do? Go up against a knife and two guns with magical headache powers?

So what I did was hop on the freeway, go down a couple exits and find a pay phone at a McDonald 's. The first call was to McNitt, telling him Samoset was going to be at the bus station in an hour, and that he 'd better be ready. He asked who I was again. I told him a friend of Tony Burns.

Then I got back in the truck, drove around some more for maybe forty minutes and called Quinn Weathers. He was just as suspicious as McNitt when I told him that there was some shit at the bus station that would interest him. He told me I had the wrong number and was acting ignorant until I said it was a "hairy" problem. He asked who I was, too. I said my daughter had been hauled off from the bus station and never heard from again. Then I hung up, came home and started drinking.



ORDINARY PEOPLE

JOURNAL, DAY NINE

Samoset 's dead, McNitt 's dead and a real cop is in the hospital. The story is that the cops caught Samoset trying to get on a bus, he resisted arrest and was gunned down outside the bus station.

Good. That fell out pretty much the way I was hoping. Pity about that other cop, but if he only knew. Or maybe he did know, in which case, not so much of a pity. Maybe. I don 't have to worry about McNitt anymore. But there 's still the pimp and the Mexican bitch and Quinn Weathers and that babe from the shower.

Maybe more important, there 's still that dumb teenager and those three wetbacks. I got no idea what happened to them, no idea where they were taken or what was done to them. Maybe Quinn and his girlfriend are on it, but I probably can 't rely on that. I mean, for all I know the wolves want to eat them too.

Still, the basic plan - "let 's you and him fight" - worked just right. Could it work on a bigger scale? Lead both sides into some kind of trap? Neither one seems to know I 'm working both sides against the other. On the other hand, why fix something that isn 't broke? I mean, I suppose I could have set the bus station on fire with them all inside - them and a couple dozen other bus drivers and passengers and other folks. But that seems like a high price to pay for a couple things. Doesn 't seem balanced.

But where does that kind of math stop? Sure, killing a dozen folks would be wrong. But what if it was just one? Like that injured cop. If he 's not a wronger, well, he came out okay. Being a cop is a risky job. Even if he 'd been killed getting rid of two wrongers. That would be sad, sure, but two for one? There 's got to be a lot more ordinary folks than

monsters. An army that does two casualties for one is probably going to win. If the numbers are anywhere near close, anyhow. I don 't know.

What if it hadn 't been a cop? What if it had been a little kid, and he got killed? Would it still be worth it to get rid of McNitt and Samoset? But how many people have the two of them killed or hurt? Probably a lot. The pimp and the Mexican woman made four people disappear in one night. That 's more than just one injured cop. That 's got to count for something.

Fuck it.

JULY 23

PD. Hello, Doctor. Can you tell me something? Did that man from the newspapers print anything about me?

AW. I'm sorry?

PD. The man I saw in the bushes. He was from the newspapers, wasn't he? What did he say?

AW. You really shouldn't concern yourself with the tripe that passes for journalism these days.

PD. If you don't tell me what it said, I'll probably just imagine something worse.

AW. Very well. I'm afraid it's rather bad. I'll get you a copy, if you want. It's in my files in the next room. [Here we paused while I got her the clipping. She remained very composed while reading it.]

PD. This isn't very flattering, is it?

AW. Nor is it accurate. I strongly encourage you to give this meaningless blather no more attention than it deserves.

PD. What's inaccurate about it? I'm mad, aren't I? Isn't this a madhouse?

AW: You don't sound insane to me. You sound very reasonable. You're certainly handling this well.

PD: I'm a bit surprised about that, too. Maybe it hasn't sunk in. Maybe I'm still in denial. Wouldn't that be in character?

AW: What do you think is going to happen?

PD: Well, for a start, all my friends and colleagues will probably see this at the market. Some will believe it, some won't, or say they don't, or think they don't but secretly wonder. It'll change things when I'm out of here. They'll never see me the same way again.

AW: Do you think they'll mistreat you?

PD: Not... mistreat. But mistrust, perhaps. Watch what they say around me, because they'll worry that I can't take it. Would you tell your secrets to a crazy person?

AW: Do you really think your friends' attitudes will change that much?

PD: Why not? Before this, I could have gotten out, gone quietly back to work maybe, could have... I don't know, not said anything about it, been vague. Or told them in my own way what happened. Not like this. Maybe I should sue the paper.

AW: Do you really think that would help?

PD: It might make me feel better.

AW: Do you think it would? A lengthy trial against a news organization with deep pockets and unscrupulous lawyers? As your doctor, I advise you against such a strenuous lawsuit, at least at this time. I think it might interrupt your therapy.

PD: Really?

AW: We've established, I think, a tendency toward denial. Wouldn't a big legal crusade provide a huge distraction from your real work — the work of getting well?

PD: But what they did was wrong. They should have to pay for it.

AW: I don't argue that, but the price of pursuing justice might be too high for you right now. Don't let them interfere with your progress. They're not worth your attention right now. You need to concentrate on yourself before you accomplish anything else.

PD: Maybe you're right. But still...

AW: Yes?

PD: I don't know. I just... I feel weak. Maybe they're right about me. That I crumpled because I'm selfish and weak and I can't do anything for anyone else because I can't even help myself.

AW: What do you think you should be doing?

PD: I'm not sure. But I have this nagging feeling that something terrible is coming, and I'm supposed to do something about it. Stop it, or at least slow it down. I'm supposed to be helping others. I'm not supposed to be wrapped up in myself. But maybe I just say that because I want others to help me. Because I want them to ignore the newspaper and say, "Pam's still our friend and we should feel sorry for her." Because I want them to think I'm noble and strong and generous, instead of weak and crazy.

LIMITATIONS

CONTRIBUTION FROM AFAR

Fondly as I anticipate the new world to come, it is important to bear in mind at all times that it is not a foregone conclusion. We have to put our faith in the Shining Ones and fulfil their wishes

for us in order to have a chance of proving victorious. Those few of us who fulfill unique and critical functions have to be protected as much as possible, as any vital resource does. For the rest, sometimes it will be necessary to put health and even life on the line — a key sacrifice of the few to give the many a chance. People who have not been selected by the Shining Ones are, for the most part, even more disposable than front-line chosen. In times of war, distasteful decisions have to be made from time to time.

One of the hardest things for me to come to terms with — both in the world at large and in regard to the chosen — has been the difficulty of knowing where superior people are to be found. One instinctively feels that a person of quality should shine out clearly from the crowd. I strongly believe that if we did shine forth, the world would be a far better place for the whole species. Still, it is not the case, and this means that one has to make allowances for the masses in order to ensure that duty to the worthy is discharged, and acceptable losses have to be kept to an absolute minimum.

As chosen, we all have our assigned positions within the framework laid down by the Shining Ones. If we are to have any chance of saving the seed of the new world, we all have to do what we're supposed to. Those of us that have the wit to see the larger world are obliged to find ways to pass that information on. It is ironic that the howling babble that gives me the hints and fragments to find enlightenment (and the sickening vertigo that goes with it) also makes it so hard to be in direct contact with the imbued. However, the risks of not sharing the material passed to me — by both the Shining Ones and the sage — are so great that the problem must be circumvented.

Anchorite Press has been a critical solution to the problem. The printing and distribution of "Apocrypha" is a vital step toward helping the Shining Ones fulfil their mission, and it makes a lot of information available to the people who need it. Publishing a book is an excellent way of disseminating material at a distance. It does not aggravate *the problem* in the same way as that damnable hunter-net. There are irritations associated with small-scale publishing, and to any who might think it a profitable venture, I should point out that it is an excellent way to lose money, but passing information on has to take precedent over all other concerns.

Publishing works for the chosen is not the only way to share information. If it were, I would no doubt be a complete pauper. The hunter Internet list is very difficult for me to use, but it would be possible, no doubt, to recruit an assistant — what I've seen called a "lurker" or "bystander" I think — who could post missives to the list on my behalf. Others may find the list less personally distasteful. Another available option, and the one I make most use of is to encode information into other works. My professional medium of communication is the written article, and it's always possible to encode warnings and other vital material into an article through the use of allusion and diagrams featuring our signs. People who communicate in other media could slip similar patterns into their work, I'm sure.

A smaller-scale option would be to monitor the local area with the tools at our disposal, keeping track of the chosen and Dark Ones, and leaving notes, clues or signs to provide guidance to other imbued. This sort of work would most likely involve all sorts of skulking around the neighborhood at peculiar times to get messages to the correct places, while minimizing the pain caused by proximity. If the Shining

Ones see fit to pass on information that is relevant to the immediate vicinity and the chosen acting within it, it would be unforgivable not to make every effort to relay that material. Even clearly idiots may have a useful role to play in saving a valuable person — which holds as true for the masses as it does for the chosen. Distasteful as it may be, when sides have to be selected, it's our duty to side with the humans, not the inhumans.

There is never any need to ally with evil. With careful manipulation, the forces of darkness can perhaps be used against each other, coaxed into conflict that benefits humanity. That should not become an excuse for collaboration, though. When you find yourself in a position where you compromise the security of the imbued at large, or you unnecessarily sacrifice members of the public, you should back away from the situation. Aside from weakening the cause of the Shining Ones, it exposes you to unnecessary danger. Any instance in which you allow yourself to become known to others — even to other chosen, in fact — you risk your personal security, and you take a chance that you will be embroiled in another's wild scheme.

It is extremely important to stay out of the way as much as possible. The intelligence-gathering function is one of the most vital in any conflict. No chosen with the wits and abilities to obtain accurate information should ever be considered disposable, or used as a front-line operative. The facility to gather knowledge is always more useful than just another warm body on the line of fire. The outside perspective allows greater breadth of vision, greater security and therefore greater utility.

If at all possible, keep out of sight altogether. Act from the shadows. It is the best possible way to operate, and entails the least danger and exposure.

JOURNAL, DAY TEN

Things have been quiet. Quinn Weathers is a lawyer, it turns out, and he's raised some hue and cry about Samoset's death and says the cops shot first because Samoset was an Indian or a Native American or whatever. Nothing weird going on other than that — not until today.

I've been busy, got a lot of work all of a sudden. Still went to town, but no headaches, no big ones. I looked around for the pimp and the Mexican bitch, but no show. Guess they decided El Paso was too hot for them.

Anyhow, today the headache machine started up again, this time out by a highway hotel. I looked hard and didn't see any unbalanced things running around. Then this guy — normal guy, short hair, not wrong at all — comes out and the headache gets worse. So I figure that's my guy. So I follow him, like I'm in a goddamn movie, and the headache gets worse when he pulls up at this little shit-hole Mexican dive. So I drive past and park down the block with my newspaper.

Inside the bar, he's meeting this skinny little black woman. They look at one another kind of suspicious. She's got this napkin with a little symbol drawn on it — not what Ben put on his check, but similar somehow. I get that this one means "sacrifice" or something like that.

So her name's some long foreign thing like Madaharry and his is Steve. They aren't talking long before I find out they're balancers, like Ben must have been. Or like me, I guess.

The woman says there's something out in Cuidad Suarez that's a no shit vampire. Says that human beings drink blood from

it to get freaky strong, and then bring people for it to drink from so it can survive. Sounds pretty crazy to me, but then she pulls out these pictures she took, and there's the pimp guy from the bus station. She says he's one of them, one of the "blood slaves."

Steve gets real excited and says that if they're out in the desert, cut off, they might be able to do some kind of raid. A real Desert Storm kind of thing, it sounded like to me. The woman wasn't too convinced, said they should get more information. Steve agreed. I kept waiting for one of them to give a phone number, but they didn't.

I thought about going to talk to them, but the headache was so bad I couldn't really think straight. Besides, I don't know if they've seen things in action like I have. Real vampires? Hell, why not? Samoset was more like an animal than a person. And out in the desert that night, the wolves were fighting something that could go toe to toe with them.

I could tell these two what I know, but without a phone number I'm not sure how. I'm not sure what I should do. I guess I'll do what Steve and the woman are doing. I'll watch and make up my mind when I've got more to go on.

LONG-TERM GOALS

JULY 24

Notes. Pamela asked for a stamp today. She's written a letter to Paul Ferrie — her co-worker who was at the party, and the person who came to visit her. I consider this a positive sign. I asked her to let me see the letter and she acquiesced. It was coherent and positive, though a few doodles on the page seemed to indicate distraction or nervousness to me. She said that she was feeling much better, much more balanced and in control. She asked after several of their co-workers and asked him to write back soon.

I am somewhat curious about her choice of medium. She has full outgoing phone privileges, and could easily have telephoned him. I suspect she fears a direct, unconsidered exchange — fears what Paul may say to her. So she writes a letter to create a layer of remove.

Interestingly, she has freely telephoned her father and mother, as well as members of her jazz quartet. Perhaps I'm mistaken about the "shadow man and flame woman" being paternal sublimations. If Paul Ferrie — who was present at the incident — is the "shadow man," then who is the fire woman?

JULY 25

2W. How are you feeling today, Pamela?

PD. All right, I guess. A little anxious.

2W. Why anxious?

PD. Oh, no reason in particular. Nothing important.

2W. This wouldn't have anything to do with your letter to Paul Ferrie. Would it?

PD. Ummm... I don't know. Maybe.

2W. I'm curious why you wrote him instead of calling.

PD. I guess I felt I'd have a better chance to say everything I wanted to say in a letter. You know, without interruptions.

2W. You think Paul is likely to interrupt you?

PD. Probably.

AW. He was at the party, right?

PD. Uh... yes, I believe he was.

AW. You believe?

PD. I told you before, I don't remember that night very clearly. All I remember are the hallucinations, which are impossible, right?

AW. Why are you asking me?

PD. I'm trying to get some... some independent confirmation, if that makes sense. I can't trust myself, so I have to trust you. Or someone else who knows what's really going on.

AW. Is it hard for you to give that trust?

PD. What do you think? Do you think it's easy to be told that what you saw with your own eyes is false? That I should trust a man I haven't known two weeks to help me tell which perceptions are real and which are made up? It's particularly hard when you can't answer anything! You never tell me anything. You just ask more questions!

AW. I can't tell you how to be yourself. I'm not a figure like your shadow man or fire woman....

PD. They weren't trying to tell me how to be myself. They were trying to tell me what I have to do.

AW. What do you have to do?

PD. If I listen to you, I have to hide out here and get well. If I listen to them, I... I'm like Noah, building an ark while the rest of the world ignores the danger. Only it won't be water this time, but fire and chaos. Both insist they're right, but only one can be. So prove your point, Doc. Prove to me that the world is sane, that my madness isn't just seeing the truth of the world.

AW. I can only assure you that reality is real, that the world exists in a steady state — and that you yourself accepted that stability until you were confronted with an experience that you're still unwilling to remember.

PD. Unwilling? I'm plenty willing to remember. I just can't! I want to get out of here. I want to... to...

[Here she began to cry.]

PD. I'm not even sure what I want to do. Part of me wants to go back to everything being the way it was, but I can feel this sickness underneath. Like going back to work and selling speakers would be the real denial. But the other part of me, the part that feels that, doesn't have any idea what to do about it!

AW. So your first priority is to determine what's real. Do you think the Haldol has been helping?

PD. I guess....

AW. Until you've made up your mind about what the true state of reality is, any action is inadvisable — be it to leave your old life or return to it. Neither is a solution until you're personally satisfied that you've made the right choice between reality and delusion. That's something only you can do.

PD. I know, I know. I want to find out which is real. You've told me what I saw wasn't there, and my brain accepts that. But I want it to feel false. And right now it feels very real.

AW. When you remember what really happened, I'm confident that your hallucinations will end.

PD. Doctor?

AW. Yes, Pamela?

PD. Can you explain the burns on my back and arm?

JOURNAL, DAY ELEVEN

Slow business today. Maybe because I've been tied up so much with all this fucked up bullshit. I just had a widow who wanted her spark plugs gapped, and some teenager who finally saved enough money to get a fender replaced. But maybe it's just slow because it's slow. If I didn't get those headaches whenever someone was around, I'd set myself up as their mechanic. I'm sure I'd get plenty of work then, if my truck was any sign.

Anyhow, after I finished that stuff I started melting down some silverware from an antique store and molding it into deer slugs. I've got about a dozen. Maybe shot would be better, but molding silver ball bearings would be a royal pain. Besides, it's a soft metal. I dumfounded them. That should do.

A SACRED DUTY

When the immediate crises posed up by the imbuings and the truth of the world are past — as much as they can be — it is time to take stock of the situation that one finds oneself in and make plans for the longer term. This is common sense, and if you're too stupid to realize the importance of strategy, you fully deserve your early death. There are a number of things that one can do to balance the larger task of gathering information with the everyday needs of continued survival. Fortunately, the need to observe and collate while staying out of sight is one that has arisen many times over the course of history, and the role that past solutions have created continues to be viable today. I am talking, of course, of spying.

It is traditional that spies remain anonymous not only to their targets, but also to the great majority of friendly forces. If no one knows who you are or where you operate from, no one can give away your identity, wittingly or otherwise. That should be obvious. You may have a contact with the power and vision to make use of your information, as I do, in which case it would be appropriate for that person to be able to contact you, but that sort of situation should be the exception, not the rule.

The first line of approach, unsurprisingly, is to not give your name, location, address or other identifier to anyone who knows you to be chosen. Hunter-net, odious as it is, provides for a high level of anonymity, and that is a gift that should be extended to the rest of your life. Keeping others at an arm's length is something that comes naturally to us, anyway. Where possible, you should do what you can to completely avoid any direct contact with other chosen. The babble is an excellent reminder and warning of that fact. Let it guide you from others, keep yourself away and never make phone calls from your own telephone. There are plenty of ways to pass information to someone without ever having to meet them or be anywhere near them.

The fastest way of getting information to a person without actually coming into contact is to use a proxy, someone who will make contact for you. Rather than calling your recipient, or handing him a note at a bar, you can get a third party to do it. The weakness, of course, is that a regularly used proxy becomes someone who knows you and establishes a link to you. There are courier services in almost all towns, and you can even make use of flower deliveries to include a message with almost no chance of backtracking.

Misdirection is another effective strategy. If you need to slip documents to your target, find a way to get them to investigate something harmless on the other side of town, then put the documents under their hotel door while they're

out. That sort of double blind helps you stay out of sight and protects your anonymity. If it's possible to set up one part of the misdirection with the aid of a proxy, so much the better.

If you have a working relationship with one particular person or group to which you want to remain anonymous, try arranging a dead-letter drop. This is a site where both parties know messages for the other can be left securely. It is usually a public place where any passerby might have a justifiable reason for loitering. The actual drop-spot itself obviously has to be hidden, so that members of the public do not come across your messages. A hollowed-out cavity behind a loose brick in the wall of a public lavatory is a good example. That way, when you have information, it can be left at your discretion for your recipients to pick up when possible. When you visit the drop, a simple disguise helps protect you from observers — even just tying your hair back and wearing a radically different style of clothes can do the trick.

Most importantly, though, you need to remember that it is vital to maintain your own security. It's not always possible to act on every piece of information that you receive. One of the oldest ways of flushing out an information gatherer is to pass a critical fact on to the suspected spy and wait for hostile forces to act upon it. There may come a time when you are set up in this way. If you have any reason to suspect, even briefly, that a piece of information may lead to a trap, suppress it. Historical precedent is absolutely clear — sometimes sacrifices of defenseless people are necessary. The Allies would never have won the Second World War if the British Prime Minister had not sacrificed an entire city, Coventry, in order to hide his ability to decode German messages. I would advise treating second-hand information, such as that passed on by Moderator87's rather unpredictable group, with extreme caution. Over-valuing third-party intelligence may well cost you your life.

At the same time that you keep yourself hidden, you also need to be able to gather information. Fortunately, those of us who are afflicted by the babble often have certain advantages in this. To start with, there are the voices themselves. Although they are overwhelmingly unpleasant and often very difficult to differentiate, sometimes the information they pass on is clear enough to use. For example, a creature that I was observing through my stone prompted the warning "IT PROFITS FROM SOULS." The next morning, I recalled seeing a particularly high number of Renfields going in and out of a financial institution the week before. I did some research and discovered that the creature I had been watching was a director at the institution concerned. I was able to assemble enough evidence to make a convincing dossier to pass on to a team of foot soldiers better equipped than I to deal with the creature.

The rest of the time, the bits and pieces that can be picked up may yield interesting speculation, provide tantalizing hints, or even come together over time as a genuine revelation. More usefully, however, those of us who can cast our senses beyond our immediate location have a power that any spy in history would have given his right arm for — the ability to watch and listen without being present, often without even being detected. Although apparently some creatures are able to perceive us, being noticed at a distance is considerably better than being noticed in the same room.

Cross-reference is also a vital tool to piecing together information. Although some historical, mythological and anthro-

pological texts can be thought-provoking, communicating with others who gather information is the best way of assembling new pieces of the puzzle, which is partly what "Apocrypha" is for. We all have a duty—a sacred charge—to record as much fragmentary information as we can, whether it is pronouncements from the Shining Ones, bits of sentences from the babble, prophetic dreams or personal insights. You can never tell whether a seemingly meaningless hint will eventually prove useful to someone else. Stay hidden, gather information, pass instructions and day-to-day intelligence to the troops, and cross-reference the things you learn with the rest of us. That way, we'll have our best chance of winning this war. That is the only long-term plan worth discussing.

JOURNAL, DAY TWELVE

Things have sped up. Not at work.

Steve and whatsername are qing-ho, I'll say that for them. They went down to Ciudad Suarez and I followed them. Wasn't much fun, I didn't have time to pack. They didn't spot me, since the headache told me they were around, even if they got out of sight.

They're planning a mission out to the vampire's hiding place, or whatever. Apparently it's a big-ass ranch out in the middle of nowhere.

Listening to these two is really something. Both of them want to save the world, kick off the critters and start again clean. Steve thinks ET is going to come down and tuck us into bed after we get the monsters out of the closet. Holy shit. I mean, I believe in some freaky shit now, but I think this guy sounds crazy.

It makes me wonder how much they've really seen, and what they really know about the things. Neither one of them talked about any coming doomsday, but I can't get away from the idea. They think we're going to change the world. I think the world's going to change us. They think the "Messengers" (that's what they call the things waking people up) are really on the ball. I don't see it. I think they're doing the best they can with what they've got. Seriously, even hearing them talk about how widespread it is, how there are balancers everywhere... it sounds like a last minute fix, not like an overhaul.

I still haven't talked to them. Still in too much pain. It's easier to watch them through the newspaper.

Anyhow, they went out to look at the ranch by day and I followed them enough to get a sense of where it is. I went in, that way. Nearly came back out of my mind.

It's scary as all fuck in there. It's like a compound. I saw maybe twenty people. The real stuff in the house is in the basement, I think. I went in there, but couldn't see a damn thing. I wound up feeling my way, going through doors, I guess, touching my way around. It was fucked up. Even though I couldn't bust my shins or anything, couldn't feel pain, I was still the most scared I've ever been.

The first room was some kind of cell—bars instead of a door, real thick chains on the wall, and a dead body hanging there. I nearly lost my shit when I felt that, all cold and clammy and still. But it wasn't the worst.

Next was a bedroom. I felt the bed, soft covers. The bedposts were all carved. And then I could feel someone under the covers, cold as ice, not breathing. I felt all along the thing and it was dead. I thought it was another body. But when I put my hand over its heart it shifted, tried to sit up. If I'd had a mouth I would have screamed. I mean, I wasn't there and it still felt me!

I was out of there after that. No way was I sticking around after the alarm went up. No way in hell.

JOURNAL, DAY THIRTEEN

Things are moving way too fast. Steve and the woman are bringing people into El Paso to cross the border by night and nuke the ranch. They think this is a movie.

Three more balancers have joined them. They're all staying in the same lousy flop house. I've checked in too. The headache is constant. Whenever I see one of them, the pain gets bad enough to make me puke or cry. Even seeing the little symbols they put up for one another is bad. Gin helps, but not much. The only thing that really helps is getting away from them, but when I run away I feel like a pussy, like I need to go back and help them. I'm stuck.

What's worse, they're being watched. I don't know how I know, but I know. They're being spied on. Everywhere I look, jumbled letters tell me. A matchbook. Billboards. The cover of the fucking Bible!

Finally, I couldn't take it. I put a note under the woman's door warning them, and then left.

JOURNAL, DAY FOURTEEN

Getting out of the hotel was definitely very smart. I feel a lot better, though I still can't handle getting within a block of them. More are showing up. I newspapered in and they're still planning to do it tonight. No one even mentioned my warning. Maybe whatsername never got it. I called the hotel, asked for Steve, but they said no one with that name was staying there.

I wrote out another warning and went over to put it on one of their trucks. I thought about going in to talk to them, but the pain was too much even halfway across the street. I wouldn't be able to make sense around six of them. It'd be like trying to

explain something with your head on fire. Hell, I almost got hit crossing the street. I stuck the message under a windshield wiper and then stumbled away.

I was almost crawling when I looked up and saw this woman, gray hair, green eyes, nothing special. But I heard the roar in my ears and it was like God's voice saying THE SERVANT RULES THE MASTER. I knew she had something to do with the things, and she looked wrong, but she was out in broad daylight. I just stared at her, stupid. I think I tried to say something. She gave me a dollar and told me to sober up.

I was pretty much helpless until the balancers set out at nightfall. The woman - queen of the boogymen or whatever - left before they did. I knew their plan. Maybe they could still pull it off, I thought. Maybe I could help them.

I got in my truck, crossed the border, parked at a gas station and started walking toward the ranch. It was a long goddamn way, and I got there just as some faggot looking thing was interrogating Steve. Most of them were there, chained up. I guess it had taken the dead looking things some time to get them under control, because it was almost sunrise when I started shooting through the windows. I think I got lucky and hit someone with the first shot.

Then house blew up. Fuck if I know how. But I have a feeling that's only a band aid, not the cure. I took a look inside and some of the basement rooms were secure. I didn't see the gray haired woman either. I watched one guy get out - black guy. I cut him off a ways away. Said his name was Travis. He looked shook, and with the headache I could barely put one foot in front of the other. It sounds like Matawahoever ignored my warning. Travis hadn't even heard of it.



JOURNAL, DAY FIFTEEN

I was so happy today just to wake up without pain. That's my goal. Not to save the world or kill all the critters. Just days without pain.

There are clearly some big, big problems making connections between me and the other balancers, but I have to face it. If I'd been able to warn them, those gung-ho fucks might have come back alive. Shit. But what more could I do?

Next time I'll get phone numbers. Next time I'll make sure they listen to me, not some gun nut who believes in UFOs. Next time I'll do it right.

THE SIGNS

SIGNAL TO NOISE

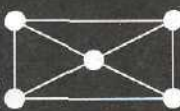
As a backup for intelligence efforts, our symbols are among the most useful tools that we have. A good code has been a staple necessity of covert work since such efforts first began. To my knowledge, ours appears to remain pure — unbroken. That's very important. It means we can leave messages in public that the opposition is hardly aware of and does not understand. They're also versatile enough to convey even fairly complex messages, which is important.

It's interesting that the code is not fixed. We know the meaning of signs that we see, but may not have known how to craft a sign before seeing it. Similarly, new shapes can occasionally be revealed. Perhaps there are certain shapes that are pleasing to the Shining Ones or that somehow embody particular concepts that become necessary. Whatever the

One of us selected to gather and pass on information from afar. An imbued who hears the babble.



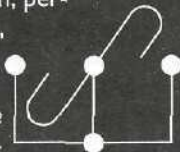
This denotes that a place or person is being watched or monitored in some way — it can be a warning that a chosen is in danger or that someone is keeping a friendly eye open.



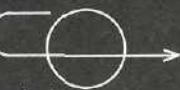
This is always a warning, used to inform a chosen that they have dangerously underestimated a situation or opponent. It makes an excellent cautionary message.



Something that has been foreseen, perhaps a message from the Shining Ones, or a glimpse of the future. It usually makes sense only in conjunction with other signs, to show future trouble spots or other warnings — "Prophesied Infestation," for example, or "Prophesied Danger."



A "closed for business — back soon" sign for use when your awareness is not in the same location as your body. It can be handy to help ensure that you are not thought to be dead. Not everyone has the wit to understand it fully, though. I have heard that some idiots think it means "faking death." Still, that's good enough.



reasons, new signs do come to light. I know, because I feel that I have been selected by the Shining Ones to reveal some.

JULY 26

Notes. Paul Femie called Pamela today. He asked for her through the receptionist. I approved and Pamela actually agreed to answer. Their conversation was brief, but afterward she seemed moody and withdrawn. I asked her if something was troubling her and she said no. She had a notebook and was writing or sketching in it intently. I asked her if I could see it. She looked at me curiously and allowed it. It was filled with a number of small, cryptic figures, similar to those in her letter to Femie. They were made of dots and circles and lines, and looked a bit like constellations or wiring diagrams. I asked her what they were and she said they were just doodles. Her facial expression and body language belied her casual tone, but I didn't push.

JOURNAL, DAY SIXTEEN

I think I've got it. I woke up with my head full of these weird little symbols, like the one Ben put on his check and the one that woman put on the napkin. I have a plan.

One of the symbols means "meeting." I'm putting it on a piece of paper along with the name of a crappy little bar called O'Hearn's up the road. I'm also putting the time 7:00 PM on it. Then I'm making up a bunch of symbols that don't mean shit. I'm putting them on the sheet along with times and locations all along Interstate 10. Then I'm going to xerox them and drive around posting them up and down the highway, wherever I get the ache. I can't be in the bar, but there's a restaurant right next to it and I can wait there for the headaches to start. When I see someone go into the bar, I'll put an envelope on their car with instructions on where to leave me contact information.

Let's hope this works.

JULY 27

Notes. I'm not sure exactly how to say this. Pamela is gone. It is unclear whether she escaped or was abducted.

This morning she asked me to call Eleanor Hughes and ask if she still wanted to visit. We discussed why she wanted to talk to Mrs. Hughes, and she seemed eager to confront her neuroses head-on. I agreed, with the caveat that I be present. Pamela seemed fine with that.

Nurse Swit said Pamela was on the phone for some time after that, talking in a low voice. When she asked who Pamela was talking to, she said it was her sister.

When Eleanor Hughes arrived, she was assaulted in our parking lot. Detective Blencoe says it's very unlikely it was an accident — a hit and run.

There was, of course, a great deal of disorder here immediately after the accident, but as I was leaving my office, I heard a strange sound from Pamela's room.

She was huddled in a corner, staring at her window. The grate around it had been wrenched off — the police said a pneumatic drill was used — and a man was standing on a ladder at the window, yelling for her to come with him. I shouted at him to stop but she stood and went to him. She said something about how this proved that it was all true. I was going to go after her, but the man in the window threatened me with a knife. With tears in her eyes, Pamela said it was for the best.

Taped to her window, on notebook paper, was one of her symbols, written largely.



CHAPTER 3: BRIDGING THE GAP

Behold, the hour cometh, yea, is now come, that ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave me alone: and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me.

— John 16:32

GUIDING THE OTHERS

JOURNAL, DAY SEVENTEEN

Got my first response from my symbol posters on April Fools. Real funny. It was two guys in a beat up old truck, a skinny blond guy and this big black guy. They went into the bar and I checked them over. They were clean, but the headache was pretty fierce. I thought about papering in to see what they were talking about, but decided to just give them the information and split. As it turned out, it wasn't even that easy. I watched them through the window until the blond guy went to the bathroom. Then I got in my car and drove over by the truck. I'd gotten out and was putting the envelope under the wiper when the black guy came out and started yelling. Good thing I left the engine running, but I'm worried he saw my license plate before I drove away. Next time I'll disconnect the lights around it, which I should've done anyway.

JOURNAL, DAY EIGHTEEN

I followed the headache around El Paso looking for more balancers, but since they don't show up as weird to look at, it's not as easy to find them as it is the wrongers. Found two of those, but not the pimp, Gray Hair or the Mexican woman.

JOURNAL, DAY NINETEEN

Like I asked in the envelope, the blond guy went to the gas station in Las Cruces and stood by the phone at 9. When I called him from Ben's pay phone, he answered right away.

He says I can call him Curt. Wants to know why I won't meet him face to face. I told him it was for the safety of both of us, that if one of us got caught or something, he wouldn't know who to betray. He asked if I was on something called "hunter net" and I said I'd never heard of it. I thought about lying, but what the hell.

Apparently there's some kind of computer hookup with all these other* imbred.* Curt says that's what the balancers call one another on this net thing. From the sounds of it, I don't want to be a part of it. I asked him if anyone knew what was really going on. I probably sounded pretty eager. It seemed like he was afraid of disappointing me. I shouldn't be surprised. No one knows any more than I do.

But - no surprise - everybody in this net thinks they're right and everyone else is wrong. No one agrees. He says some of them think some monsters are okay and others think they've all got to get sent back to hell. He wanted to know what I thought. So I said all the ones I'd seen were pretty goddamn nasty, but I didn't see any reason there might not be ones who were okay. He said that was pretty much his idea too.

He wanted to know what "gifts" I had. I asked what he meant. He said he was real good at spotting* them* and could sometimes freeze them in place just by staring at them. I said I could see things at a distance, but I wasn't sure if that's what he meant. He said he'd never heard of anyone being able to do that.

He wanted my phone number, but I wouldn't give it, so he wouldn't give me his. I told him that if he wanted to get in touch

with me, he should put up a poster at the Eagle Supermarket in El Paso - the one on Alamo Road. I said I'd leave posters up for him at the same place. He also said we should both leave fake posters with fake symbols every once in a while, in case we're being watched. I didn't like the sound of that, that he might be followed, but I agreed.

JOURNAL, DAY TWENTY

Three more came to O'Hearn's, a guy, a woman and a teenage girl. They drove up in a late model Saab and looked kind of out of place. I had it a lot better planned this time. I'd gone there that morning and taped an envelope underneath the pay phone. When they got there, I checked them out with the newspaper trick. Then I just had to wait until one of them went to the bathroom (which was right by the phone) and call from the restaurant. When the woman answered (her and the girl went to the car together, like they always do), I told her to get the envelope. When they saw my marks on it, they were willing to read it. In it, I gave them another phone number to call in one hour. That was the phone number for a gas station a couple miles away. I told them they could call from anywhere, so they'd know they weren't being set up. They seemed to think I was the paranoid one. But they called back.

The three of them were more trusting than Curt, by quite a bit. Their names are Ramona, Anthony, and the girl is Gina. Ramona gave me her last name, Searles, and her phone number 555-6307.

So now I have five balancers I can contact, if I count Curt's friend. That's not too bad. I've been keeping an eye on Quinn

Weathers, who doesn't seem to have done anything too crazy or bad. Nothing that got in the papers, anyhow.

JULY 28

Notes. Eleanor Hughes is dead. She died of injuries sustained in the accident, or her murder. I suppose I should say. The papers didn't offer details until today. Detective Glencoe came to talk to me about Pamela. What he had to say was quite distressing.

He believes the attacks on Eleanor Hughes and Katrina Richards were connected. He says that Mrs. Richards' death may not have been the act of a single madman (Evan Jones) but rather the work of some kind of organization or even cult. He believes Pamela is a member of this group and is a danger to herself and others unless apprehended.

Detective Glencoe then asked me for help capturing Pamela. I told him I would have to think it over and he seemed puzzled and angry. I explained doctor/patient privilege, which he seemed to understand, but felt that under the circumstances it was better for Pamela if I shared what I knew.

He left after I promised him an answer early tomorrow.

My first instinct is to refuse. Perhaps this is unfair, but all along I've had the feeling that Glencoe sees Pamela as a means to an end. His pressure to interview her when she was just admitted, and now his eagerness to read Pamela's file, both cause me some irritation. But I must remember that time is of the essence in police work. To him, I'm sure psychotherapy work looks glacially slow.



I suppose the core of the matter is this. Is Pamela Drummond a threat to herself and others?

I would like to think the answer is no. Through all my conversations with her, my impression remains that of a sensitive, bright young woman who has been pushed past her tolerances. But I must remember that she has attempted to injure herself and that she seemed to willingly go with the intruder at her window.

Is it possible that Pamela has multiple personalities? I've always been dubious about claims of MPD, particularly from those who assert that it stems from ritual abuse during childhood. But I know very persuasive experts who do believe in it.

Could it be that the fire woman and shadow man are not her parents, but her other selves? That the personality I know is one of several — the most reasonable one, the one she showed at work and at school — and that she hides the self-destructive side I only glimpsed?

If I accept that, is it such a jump to see her as a member of a cult?

July 29

Notes. I called Detective Glencoe directly after church this morning and told him I would help recapture Pamela — but only on the condition that he would do everything in his power to support my request to have her returned to my care. He agreed, though I'm unsure how much he will or can do. Still, I think it's better for Pamela to be in custody than at large.

JOURNAL, DAY TWENTY ONE

Found the pimp. Or, Curt found him. He left me a message at the grocery store with some kind of symbol that just seemed to suit the pimp. He left a bunch of phone numbers too. All the numbers had little symbols over them, and all the symbols were bullshit except one. It means decision maker or something like that. So I called that one and some guy answered in Mexican. I said I wanted Curt and he said I could leave a message. I gave him another phone booth number — shit, it's gotten so I don't drive by a pay phone without jotting down the number down and where it is. I said I'd be there at 5:00 that night. Curt called and described the pimp, said he'd spotted him at the train station. Asked if I wanted his address and I said hell, yes.

As soon as I was off the phone I went to the pimp's place. — a little old ranch house on this dusty road in the middle of nowhere. I parked in front of his nearest neighbor about a mile away and read the newspaper. I need to get a new one. The pimp wasn't there, but there was one big freaking dog and a keypad next to the door. Inside the house was a cabinet with a bunch of guns and some kind of crossbow or something. According to the labels on his magazines, his name is José Rios.

I got an okay look-through when I heard the pimp coming back. I got out in time to see how he disarmed the alarm — 7734.

I called Curt's Mexican friend back and this time he told me call back in fifteen minutes and I'll have a phone number. This phone tag crap is a pain in the ass, but I'll take it over the headaches. Once I finally got Curt I asked him who was answering the phone. He said it was a friend of his with a broken back who did some kind of wholesale work from his

house — was always by the phone. Curt told this guy I was a collection agent hassling him, but that he wanted to contact me at his convenience to get things worked out. Good cover. Anyhow, I told him about the dog, the guns and — most important — the passcode. He said if this was straight he'd give me his pager number and we'd cut out all this intermediary stuff. He also said that if the code was good, no one would ever find the pimp.

AVENGERS

July 30

Notes. I filled Detective Glencoe in on the hallucinations Pamela described. He was particularly interested in the concept that Pamela was the "center of the web."

He immediately asked about Paul Ferrie. It seems he has quit his job and moved, leaving no forwarding address. Even his own family seems to have no idea where he is or why he left.

In the spirit of an open exchange, I asked why he believed there was a cult behind the murder and Pamela's disappearance. Glencoe told me that Ferrie and several others from Mr. Lavelle's party had begun behaving very oddly. A woman named Marguerite Zimmerman had been seen "snooping around" the homes of Mrs. Hughes and two other women in their neighborhood. When questioned, she seemed evasive, though (as a resident of the area) she was not charged. But the night Ferrie disappeared, Zimmerman abandoned her husband as well — after liquidating their bank account.

As for Ferrie, Glencoe believes he was the "hitter" in the Hughes murder. The vehicle used was a heavy pickup truck, stolen hours earlier from the airport's long-term lot. Witnesses — including our receptionist — said that the driver aimed directly at Mrs. Hughes, then got out of the truck and battered at her with a pipe or tire-iron as she tried to crawl away. As he did so, a second car pulled up and he got in.

Detective Glencoe admitted that this is not the first such cult he's heard of operating in Australia. Several police departments theorize that they organize, or perhaps ritualize, their roles in crimes. Thus, if Ferrie is a "hitter" he probably had a hand in Katrina Richards' death, as well.

This is very disturbing, given Pamela's assertion that Paul was chosen for his anger.

JOURNAL, DAY TWENTY TWO

Well, I guess Curt and his buddy killed the pimp yesterday. I went by the store and there was that triangle thing that means "slave" — though I couldn't tell you how I know it means that — with a big X over it. I called Curt's pal, played "collection agent" and left a message.

Then I saw in the paper that a guy had been murdered. There wasn't a picture — didn't even make the front page — but the address was right and the name was José Rios. Said someone had apparently robbed the place.

Curt called back and told me the scoop. Apparently he and his buddy Lanny had some unexpected problems. They took care of the dog okay, but José had company when he

came home - a teenaged boy, looked like a runaway. Curt said they scared the kid away and that he didn't see their faces, but that if the cops talk to him he'll be able to say that Jose got beat down by a big black guy and his little friend. I asked why they didn't wait until the kid was out of the way. He said Lanny wasn't real patient when it came to "the under dead."

Shit. If I'd been there or been around, I could have warned those two fuckheads beforehand that José had company. But that would have put me in the headache zone, and I don't know how much good I would have done them. Plus, I'd be connected to them if they got caught - which they probably will be if Lanny is as stupid as he sounds.

Curt did give me his pager number, though.

DEFENDERS

JOURNAL, DAY TWENTY THREE

Got a message from Curt today. He met another guy through that net thing and wanted me to check him out. The guy is named Franklin Reeve and he lives in a trailer park off of I-10. I told him sure.

So I went and I looked and this Reeve guy seems like kind of a freak. There's these dumb magazines all over the place - "Soldier of Fortune," stuff about UFOs, something called "Fortune Times." There were pamphlets too - something about "them" controlling the government, stuff from the "Order of the Rose" and the "Blood cult Network." Also some kind of German-looking stuff right next to this black power crap. Everything but a rifle and a map of local water towers. He was sacked out when I came in - big guy, kind of fat, no sign of a wife or kids or a girlfriend anywhere. He's maybe thirty, I guess.

He had four big dogs, too, big ugly pitbulls on short chains in the backyard. They started barking when I was sneaking in. Scared the crap out of me. But I suppose if that naked chick in Quinn Weathers' apartment knew I was there (if I really was "there"), it makes sense that an animal might too. Can't say it did him a lot of good. He just kind of rolled over and grumbled, then yelled at them to shut up.

So next thing that happens is this little kid runs up and starts pounding on the door, yelling for him. Reeve sits bolt upright and reaches under his pillow, then relaxes. The kid's saying something about how there's this suspicious guy nearby. Reeve pulls this huge gun out from under his pillow and puts it in the back of his pants. He yells at the kid to wait and pulls on a shirt. Then he goes out with the kid, puts a leash on the biggest dog, and they start going up the road. Next thing I know, the kid's pointing at my truck!

I snapped right to and cranked the engine - good thing I fixed that starter back in February! I could see Reeve. He let the dog off the leash. It was just like day one, only this time the dog didn't catch my bumper. I heard him yelling at the kid as I drove away, asking why he didn't get my license.

(Later)

Well, I just re-read what I wrote, now that I've calmed down a little and sorted things out. Looking back, it's actually kind of funny, I guess. And this guy Reeve seems pretty on the ball.

I mean, the last person who twigged to getting locked at was one of the monsters. Maybe I'm just jealous cause he seems like he's doing a good job staying safe, like I want to.

I paged Curt and told him Reeve seems okay.

REDEEMERS

AUGUST 5

Notes. Detective Glencoe called me today after arresting a woman named Dana Falk. Apparently Ms. Falk left her home in Canberra not long after Ferrie and Zimmerman. She was picked up in Newcastle. Glencoe couldn't fill me in on the full details of the case - or didn't want to - but he thought Pamela had been with Ms. Falk at one time and hoped that I might be able to get some kind of clue.

It was very odd. Before I went in, Detective Glencoe and I talked about the difference between a police interrogation and a therapy session. I told him I wasn't about to "trick" or put any kind of unhealthy pressure on the woman, police custody or no. But as it happened, I didn't need to try to deceive her. She jumped to her own conclusions - helped. I don't doubt, by some legal but sufficiently horrible forms of psychological coercion by the police. She looked exhausted. I'm sure they'd been "grilling" her for hours.

I introduced myself and showed her the symbol that Pamela had posted on her window the night of her abduction. Before I even had a chance to speak, her face lit up with hope and eagerness. She blurted out something about me coming to release her.

I'm not sure, now, why I did what I did, but I put my finger to my lips for her to be quiet. She sat back, with a glance at the one-way mirror behind me. I knew Detective Glencoe was behind it, and Ms. Falk must have suspected.

I asked if she knew Pamela Drummond. She was evasive before admitting she might know her "from the newspapers." I told Ms. Falk she hadn't been charged with a crime yet and might not be if she cooperated. I don't remember my exact phrasing, but I suspect that it was an unintended double entendre. From my possession of the symbol, she incorrectly deduced that I was a member of her religion who had come to release her. When I spoke of cooperation, I meant that she should cooperate with the police, but she may have presumed that I meant that by cooperating with me - her fellow group member - she might gain freedom without being charged.

What commenced was a strange dialogue of implication. She wanted to answer my questions, but she didn't trust Glencoe and wanted to conceal her meaning from the police.

When I asked about the burning woman, she said she'd heard of her, but had never seen her, or the shadow man. She used that phrase voluntarily, not after hearing me use it. I asked what they wanted, and she said no one seemed to know. She said many thought they were on a mission of vengeance and destruction, but that she

thought they were sent for healing and reconciliation — that violence wasn't necessary, that all their goals could be accomplished peacefully. She also said that "a mutual acquaintance" seemed to have the best understanding, but that this acquaintance — I'm sure she was referring to Pamela — was unhappy with the dissent among the "chosen" and seemed unwilling to "pick a side." She came right out and asked whose side I was on. I said "Pamela's."

She shook her head and said she wasn't sure what side that was.

MARTYRS

AUGUST 8

Notes. It seems that I have become an expert on this supposed cult against my will. Detective Glencoe called yesterday, asking if I would be willing to speak to Evan Jones — the man in custody for killing Katrina Richards. Initially I demurred, citing my poor training with criminal insanity, but he encouraged me by saying how useful I'd been with Dana Falk. Glencoe was now quite confident that the symbol Pamela placed in her window meant "escape." He also said that without me, he wouldn't have the valuable knowledge that there's a schism in the cult between violent and peaceful factions. But the persuasive argument was, of course, an appeal to Pamela's safety.

Evan Jones was nothing like what I expected. He has been formally charged with the murder and refuses to deny or confirm his participation in it — refuses to discuss the matter at all. The police have been reticent about the details (in order to keep the jury pool pure in this widely publicised case), but Glencoe confided that they had more than enough to convict. He felt Jones was just stalling, trying to draw out the legal process as long as he could. I'm not even sure why he agreed to talk to me. He didn't act like a condemned man. He was strangely serene.

I showed him Pamela's notebook of symbols and he asked (politely) who had drawn them. He didn't recognize her name when I answered, and he said he had no idea where she was. He denied knowing her. When I asked how long he'd been chosen, he just smiled and said I didn't know what I was talking about.

Nothing about his behavior added up, so I decided to try a little detective-style subterfuge. Though I'd normally be loath to do so, I suspect that being lied to by a psychiatrist was the least of Jones' worries right now.

I lied by implication. I said that when he was released, he might come to me for treatment if he changed his mind. He just laughed, said no jury was going to let a poor black waiter walk away when he was charged with cutting up a beautiful white woman. I shook my head.

I said something like, "Evan, we know you were chosen to be the sacrifice. You may think it's noble to take the fall for the real killer, but let me assure you, we will find Paul Femie."

It was the only time I saw him look frightened.

INNOCENT'S

JOURNAL, DAY TWENTY FOUR

This morning, every time I looked at my remote control or my phone or anything with numbers on it, they seemed to turn themselves into Ramona Searles' phone number. I may not be the brightest bulb in the lamp, but I can take a hint, so I called her. She was really glad to hear from me, and I felt kind of bad that I hadn't called her more often or given her some other way to get in touch with me. But she's way up in New Mexico, so I can't just send her to the supermarket bulletin board without revealing what city I'm in.

She said she just got a cell phone, so she gave me the number for that too.

Anyhow, she and Anthony found something nasty in Carlsbad. Not Carlsbad Caverns, the actual city of Carlsbad. They're not sure how bad though. Ramona was looking around and she spotted this invisible spirit floating around. Shit, it was weird hearing her talk about that stuff on the phone. I mean, it's weird to write it here and to see it too, but even on the phone Curt kind of talks around it. Not her though.

Anyhow, it seemed to be focused on some house out on the west side of town, so she and Anthony kept watch on it. Said they saw people going in and out, mainly at night. Monday they saw people painting a sign — "The Church of the Second Life." The people going in and out looked normal — they weren't dead or weird, like the pimp I guess. So she said they had Gina go up and talk to them. That was when I shook my head and asked what she was talking about. I thought Gina was maybe thirteen. Ramona said she's actually sixteen, just small for her age, but I still didn't understand what was going on.

Ramona said Gina has special protection, and besides, people underestimate her when they think she's a kid. I guess these Second Life people were real eager to talk to her. Ramona said they sounded kind of nutty, talking about all this 'contact with a higher world' stuff. They wanted Gina to come to a service on Friday night, but Ramona and Anthony weren't sure they should let her go.

I said that instead of sending Gina they should let me check it out. Ramona said that was a good idea, but maybe we should meet face to face first. I nixed that, just asked her to stay by the phone.

After the talk I drove all the way up to Carlsbad and checked into a motel, then went out to the church she described. I didn't get any static driving out to the place, and I was thinking it might be a wild goose chase. There was no telephone anywhere nearby. I looked around anyhow and that's when stuff got weird. I was in (or, at least, "looking at") this big open hall, like it used to be a dining room, when this woman walks in, puts her hands on this big book case at the front of the room and says "Ethan? You there?" And suddenly it's headache city, the voices going on about how she's being ridden or some shit, and I can see this kind of transparent man sort of overlapping her.

That's when I snapped back to myself. I didn't mean to, but the headache was bad. I'm for sure going to check this stuff out tomorrow night. I'm also going to call Curt and get him up here.

JOURNAL, DAY TWENTY FIVE

Jesus, what a pain in the ass Curt is. He wanted to know where the church was so he, Lanny and Reeve could burn it down before the service. I thought that was a stupid idea and he got pissed.

I talked to Ramona again and she said she 'd give me her cell phone to use if I 'd meet her face to face. I said no but told her she could drop it off behind a strip mall near my motel. I said I 'd leave a symbol where she should put it. She finally agreed. So when I felt her getting close I checked her out through the paper. She hid, too, the bitch. Waited to see if I 'd come and get it. I called the cell phone from a phone booth instead and told her to get away. She was pretty surprised.

So now I know where Curt and his guys are staying, and I can call Ramona at home. I 'm still scared as hell to go out there by myself. If dogs can sense me when I 'm searching, can ghosts too?

(Later)

Jesus. That Gina girl is either the dumbest or bravest kid alive.

The "service" at the church was pretty weird. The woman I 'd seen before stood up at the front and just flat out said that her grandfather had returned with wisdom from beyond the grave, and that people who wanted it could have it. Then she grabbed the bookcase and got all weird. People started yelling out all these questions and she was answering them in this old man 's voice.

And then in comes Gina.

At first no one noticed her. My first thought was that I had to call in the cavalry, but if I did that, I 'd have to stop watching to dial the phone. So I stayed, and pretty soon Gina stood up and asked the ghost "What about you? What do you want?"

So everyone was looking at her all of a sudden and I had to break off to call Ramona. She said Gina had disappeared and Anthony was looking for her. I told her to leave him a message and get to the church pronto.

When I was off the phone I got on the paper and looked again, and it looked like there was an argument going on between Gina and the woman with the ghost. And then this banner behind her that said THE SECRETS ARE REVEALED changed into SHE REVELS IN SPIRIT. I swear that 's what it said. It was hard to keep track of who was saying what - the old man ghost and the woman were kind of talking with the same voice - but it seemed like the woman was pissed and wasn 't letting the old man talk. And the crowd was getting antsy. Gina was accusing the woman of not letting the ghost speak, which was true, I think. The woman was denying it and the old man ghost got pissed. Then he steps out of her, grabs the banner and yanks it off the wall. He starts whipping it around over the crowd. That was it, people started screaming and going nuts.

I cut off and started up the truck. I also called Curt, which wasn 't easy while driving. I was kind of disoriented from all the switching too. Anyhow, I finally told him where the church was and to hurry.

I drove right through the fence and up to the house. I wasn 't sure where Gina was. I just hoped she wasn 't getting trampled. People were running all over the place, crawling out the windows even. I looked in just in time to see Gina struggling with

the woman. The window was wide open so I grabbed a tire iron and climbed in, yelling at them to knock it off.

I guess a skinny teenager is one thing, but a man with a chunk of steel is another. The woman let go of the girl and started hollering. I grabbed Gina and pulled her toward the door. By this point the place was nearly empty. Gina wanted to know who I was and how I knew her name, but the headache was like fire and I wasn 't in the mood.

When I got outside I saw why my head was so sore. Ramona had showed up. I threw Gina at her, got in my truck and took off with the two of them yelling behind me.

Jesus. What a dumb little bitch. She 's lucky I was there to pull her fat out of the fire. Though I suppose I have to give her credit for making things happen. I never could have done that. As soon as the old ghost showed up, I 'd have been too wrecked to think straight.

JUDGES

JOURNAL, DAY TWENTY SIX

Woke up in my hotel room, disoriented and with a headache. Looked around through the newspaper and saw Curt sitting on the front bumper of my pickup truck. Thought about running, but couldn 't really see any good it would do. At least he 'd come alone.

So I went out and said hello. He asked me if I was Mr. Payphone and I said I supposed so. He said he met Ramona and Gina. They described me and my truck and he went looking for me. He asked my name. I said I wouldn 't make it easy on him - that both of us were scared for our safety and had good reason. He nodded, but he didn 't seem convinced, so I told him about the headaches and everything. That he seemed to understand, and he promised he wouldn 't let the others know he found me.

He filled me in on what happened at the church. Him and his group showed up just as I was leaving, I guess. Anthony got there too - Ramona had left him a message. And like I said, Lanny and Reeve had wanted to burn the house down, but Gina and Ramona talked them out of it. There was some big deal about the ghost and the woman. It sounds like she was the ghost 's granddaughter and was kind of using the old guy - Curt figured she liked being a big shot, liked having all the answers and the attention. They communicated with the dead guy somehow. All he wanted to do was watch over his grandkids and protect the family land. Lanny still wanted to whack him, but I guess Curt talked him out of it. Says Anthony, Ramona and Gina are going to check up on the ghost, see if they can maybe get him settled so he rests in peace. Sounds like a tall order. He 's got two other grand kids and they all hate each other.

Anyhow, Curt wanted to thank me. Said that if it wasn 't for me and Ramona, him and Lanny probably would have done something stupid at the church. Might have gotten hurt or hurt some people. I told him I didn 't do much.

All the people there last night - Curt and his crew and Ramona 's group - they all exchanged names and phone numbers. Curt thinks they can get a lot more done if they work together. I said I wouldn 't want to deal with a group that had both Gina and Lanny in it. Curt just laughed. He thinks he can handle them. We 'll see.

I told him I'd be in touch, and he said the same. I gave him Ramona's phone. Asked him to return it - maybe that he found my room but I was gone. He said he was sorry we couldn't work closer together.

I'm not sure I feel that way or not.

VISIONARIES

August 23

Notes. Pamela telephoned me today at the office. I consider this a very positive sign. A transcript follows.

AW. I'm taping this. You must know that. I'm taping this and I'm giving the tape to the police.

PD. Do what you have to, Doctor.

AW. I must strongly encourage you to turn yourself in. You don't need to be afraid, Pamela. I'm with you. I'll stay with you. I won't abandon you.

PD. Doctor, that's very sweet, but...

AW. You're clearly not responsible for your actions.

PD. Yes I am. And I'm not crazy, no matter what you think.

AW. You left your Haldol behind when you left. Have you been hallucinating again?

PD. I've seen things, but I haven't been hallucinating.

AW. Pamela, listen. If you've lost the ability to discern between hallucination and reality, you're in great danger and you endanger everyone around you. Please come back!

PD. Has anyone from the Lavalles' neighborhood come to visit you?

AW. Pamela, I—

PD. Tell me! It's important!

AW. No, nobody.

PD. Good. If someone does, particularly a beautiful woman, don't talk to her.

AW. I can't promise that.

PD. Then I can't guarantee your safety.

AW. I'm not the one in danger.

PD. Yes you are, Doctor. I've met someone who sees very clearly. Not as often as I do, but more clearly. She's a genuine prophet. She said we're not done.

AW. Who is this woman, this prophet?

PD. You know I can't tell you that.

AW. Is she the "high priestess"? Is she the flame woman?

PD. You haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about. She's a woman like me, one who's had her eyes opened... but she's better off. It's not so overwhelming for her. She can handle it. She can accept what she's shown, whereas I get hurt. I have to hide my head in the sand. But we're working around that....

AW. What do you mean, hide your head? What is it you're seeing, Pamela? More violence? More murders? The police haven't leaked any information about the cult to the papers, but it's only because they don't want a panic. What else have these people done?

PD. You're looking at this all wrong, though I don't suppose I blame you.

AW. What are you doing now, Pamela?

PD. I'm protecting you. Protecting all of you the best way I can. Maybe if I was stronger I could do more, but I'm learning to live with it. One or two now, it's not so bad. I can stand one or two. I can find the quiet places. But I still can't be around too many. But I can find....

AW. Find what?

PD. Find the chosen who've been lost. Find the lost and the dangerous.

AW. Are you saying you're a recruiter? Pamela, please, talk to me!

PD. No one recruits. You're either chosen or you aren't.

AW. Which group are you with now? The peaceful branch or the violent one?

PD. There aren't branches like that. There are different functions, and our leader can choose which function is needed.

AW. And you do anything this leader says?

PD. No, of course not. We're all still free, still people. But if you'd seen what we have, you'd be willing to make some concessions. Look, I'm sorry if I've hurt or frightened you, but you have to understand. What you think are hallucinations are real and are more dangerous than you can imagine. Because of your connection to me, they may come for you. You have to avoid them if you can. If you can't, play dumb. If that doesn't work... well, forgive me.

AW. Pamela?

PD. I have to go.

WAYWARDS

August 27

Notes. Pamela has been recaptured by the police along with three other members of the so-called "Cult of the Chosen." While this is good news in broad terms, I'm shocked and appalled at the circumstances.

She and six other members, whose names I have not been given, attacked a business retreat near Perth — all the way across the continent.

The details are hazy, but from what I gather on the news they attacked at dawn, murdering two vacationing executives outright and taking a dozen more hostage. They released five of the hostages at noon, but as the freed prisoners were running away, one of the cultists opened fire on them from behind, killing two more. This outburst was followed by sounds of disagreement and struggle from within the complex. The police attacked after nightfall and all but four of the "chosen" were killed. Only two of the remaining hostages survived, and both of them were badly injured.

August 28

Notes. I still haven't spoken with Pamela. There is some question about whether the authorities in Western Australia will let her be moved back here. I did, however, talk to Detective Glencoe.

I must say, this was the first time I've seen him look shaken. He clearly has not been sleeping well. When I commented on it, he said he's been working late trying to track the cult. He says the more they find, the bigger the whole thing gets. He says he's traced equipment and money back to Japan, Saudi Arabia and even Mexico City.

The other shock was the violence involved. Apparently one of the dead cultists — a woman named Candice Mao — was torturing the captives before her fellow cultists killed her. She was the one who fired on the retreating hostages. She was a schoolteacher from Carleton.

Like me, Glencoe is eager to get Pamela back, but for very different reasons. I want to get her back into treatment. Glencoe wants to pick her brains for information on her group. He says it all depends on whether Pamela took an active part in the violence. If she was just part of the conspiracy, they might let her return. If she pulled a trigger, she'll probably stay there to stand trial.

SEPTEMBER 2

Notes. Pamela is coming back. The police are satisfied that she did not take part in the slaughter. I still don't know, however, if I'll be allowed to continue treating her.

Pamela, the flame woman, Candice Mao... this sect seems to have a number of prominent women members and female imagery. Is Mao the leader Pamela described on August 23? Is the cult dominated by its priestesses?

If it is, can Pamela be the one to stop any more violence?

SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

Relying on other people is risky at the best of times. No matter how well you know someone and how much you rely on them, something that is important to you is, by definition, less important to other people. If it needs to be done right, you need to do it yourself if at all possible. When you consider the critical importance of personal safety in the face of the immense danger of the hunt, it should be obvious that you are the only person you can rely on.

That would be true even in a world where everyone was intelligent, dedicated and worthwhile. As it is, the great bulk of your potential allies are imbeciles. Most of the blinkered idiots are so hung up on either leaping into the fray or giving some slavering beast a heart-warming hug that it's almost impossible to talk to them at the best of times. Who would want to be burdened with such a suicidal pack of idiot children in a lethally dangerous situation? The moronic majority of the chosen can do an excellent job of wiping each other out, and they'll take you with them if you give them a chance.

Even if you have enough control over a group of allies to suppress their tendencies to deal with problems in their own personal ways — whether that's beating it to a bloody pulp, asking about its mother or building a fort to keep it out — you have to remember that your fellows may be too stupid to react effectively when you need them to. When the pressure is on, they'll revert to type. If they are as cretinous as most, they'll screw up in so many ways that they'll be a liability to you. Add to that the horrendous headaches that being

anywhere near any of them will give you, and it becomes obvious that it's really not worth the risk.

At the same time, however, you can't afford to go alone against the Dark Ones. That's even more suicidal than hanging about with a pack of chosen. Those of us who are dedicated to the big picture are not suited to front-line combat. We're strategists, not troops. If I were to stroll up to some blood-sucker and try to stab it with a wooden stake, I have no doubt that I'd end up smeared across the walls. I wouldn't even want to try attacking something relatively slow, like one of those shambler things. I am a historian, folklorist and researcher, not a combatant.

When something dangerous needs to be dealt with directly, the only answer is to leave that task to the relatively expendable people on the front lines. The soldier types are quick to get up close and personal with just about any nasty thing there is to be dealt with. Whether they want to slaughter it or save it, they're the ones who've been taken on to alleviate the problem. We all have our jobs, and theirs is to go up against the Dark Ones. Ours is to gather and pass on information, and that does not fit us well to getting involved in fights. When all is said and done, we betray the trust of the Shining Ones if we expose ourselves to needless and pointless risk.

Occasionally, however, you're going to find that you're caught up in a local situation that needs resolution. It might be that something impinges on your security or safety, for example. You may discover a creature whose activities are so repugnant, far reaching or otherwise revolting that you need to deal with it as swiftly as possible. What is considered regrettably tolerable and what is considered utterly unacceptable is always a personal decision, but chances are that sooner or later, you will find yourself faced with a problem. The solution depends on your available resources, but should not include personal involvement. History is crammed full of stories of people who used clever leverage to achieve what their personal muscle or influence could not. We can learn a lot from the ways that various relatively weak but well-informed ancestors achieved great deeds.

If you have some time to work with and you are in an area where you know other chosen are active, one of the best strategies is to fall back on our code. A well-placed sign outside a haunt or lair describing the creature's general type, to indicate that the creature is viciously evil, will draw attention from one of the boy-scout chosen in the area. You don't necessarily have to rely on a sign outside a Dark One's home, either. Adding one of the "this way" directional signs from Witness I's Unity site can point out the right direction. If your target lairs somewhere which is difficult to find, you might want to use an entire trail of directional signs from a spot where you know local chosen spend time.

If you've taken the time and effort to search your local area fully — and I would strongly advise it — then you should know the mailing addresses of one or more local chosen. An alternative to convoluted sign trails is to post details of a creature to other imbued in the area. Give as much information as you can about it, so as to make it a more attractive target. Remember to include at

least some of the code on your letter, so that your recipient knows you're relatively trustworthy. The 'demonic' sign is a good way of stating the urgency of the situation. Most front-line chosen are far too dumb to resist such a challenge.

You might also want to forward details of a Dark One to hunter-net. A wide and frightening variety of extremists and maniacs subscribe to that forum. Try to suggest that you're not local to the problem, and that you are too unsuited to confrontation to take direct action, so that calls for you to be part of the operation are minimized. The 'firelight' list is particularly ideal for this sort of call, as it seems to be where the most militant chosen spend their time. Remember to give as much information as you can, so as to be as helpful as possible to anyone who responds to your problem.

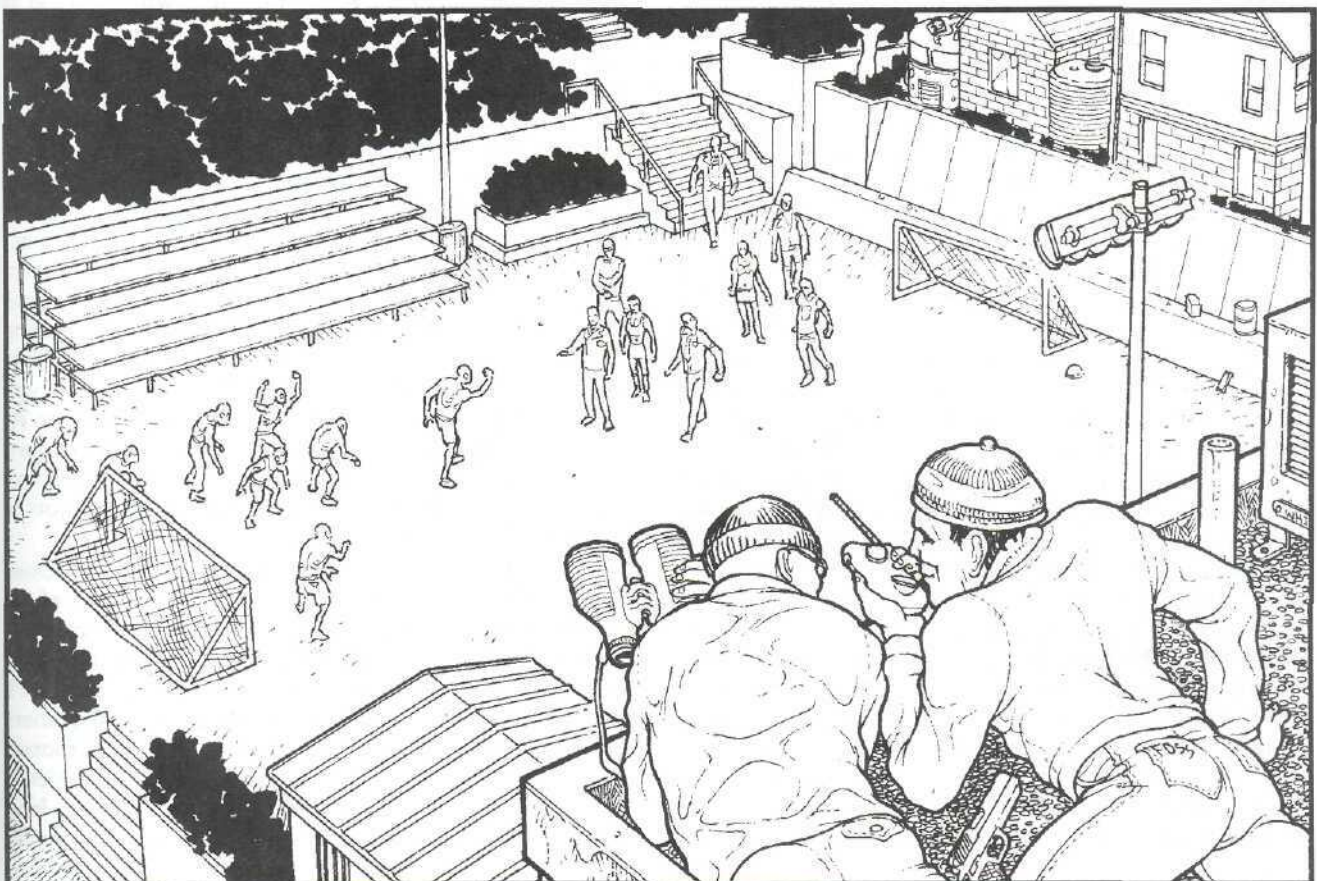
If you'd rather not use the Internet and don't know where to find any local chosen, place a small ad in the local paper. A couple of column inches won't cost much more than \$50 and you can include symbols to indicate the type of Dark One, and an address where it can be found. Most of the imbued are too wary to go charging into a situation on the say-so of a small ad, but they might scout out the situation, and having observed the creature in action, try to resolve the problem for you. If you do place an ad, remember to have someone else drop off the copy at the newspaper office.

If there are no chosen in your local area, or for whatever reason you are reluctant to involve any that are there, then there are still a number of perfectly service-

able options open to you. You just need to use a little imagination and think laterally. Ask yourself how you would deal with the situation if you were not one of the imbued. Plenty of people all across the world manage to get all sorts of legally dubious things done without any recourse to Herald-granted abilities, and there's no reason why you can't do the same. Knowledge is power and information is knowledge.

The most effective way to deal with a situation is to use non-imbued contacts that are accustomed to dealing with unusual problems. Fyodor, for example, has emergency access through family connections to a pool of operatives that he can draw on worldwide to provide quite extreme levels of aggression. They can also provide a wide range of equipment and assorted substances of greater or lesser legality. If you have some way of drawing upon a go-between or group of highly trained professionals, that is the swiftest way to neutralize most Dark Ones.

However, you don't necessarily have to restrict yourself to having agents at your beck and call. If the creature in question is tough but not particularly sophisticated in its apparent abilities, simple weight of numbers should be enough to deal with it. In that instance, it should be possible to obtain the services of a number of violent young men for a fairly small amount of money. If you know your way around the criminal subculture (which I do not), then you probably know which bars to go to and which people to pay in order to get some thugs to take care of your target. Remember to be careful though, as those are dangerous waters. A cheaper and slightly safer option —



which has worked for me — is to go into a trucker's bar late at night and claim that you need help getting back at a crack addict who raped your daughter. You might be surprised at the ease with which a vigilante mob can be assembled, with some judicious acting.

If you need more extensive help, you might be able to perform certain services for an unpleasant organization in return for its aid. The ability to see at a distance is very valuable to the world of organized crime. While career criminals are repugnant and offensive on all levels, it may be that they are very much the lesser of two evils if you need help destroying a monster that does something more despicable, such as killing children. Obtaining the access codes for a safe can serve as payment for assistance in wiping out a serious threat. Reports suggest, however, that once you're involved with such elements it may be very difficult to liberate yourself, and there must be all sorts of problems and dangers that I have no idea about. So use the criminal world only if you feel you have the expertise required to handle it.

It is typically safer to work within the law. We are all bound by the laws of the countries in which we live. We are required to work for and within the system. So it seems only fair to turn the tables once in a while and make the system work for you. The danger of going to the authorities is that they might be under the control of dark forces, so you're wise to observe the authorities before you turn to them, to check for signs of taint, or for links back to the very creature that you oppose.

You can minimize your exposure by keeping yourself one step removed from the actual process of investigation. The police and the other investigative bodies are used to working from anonymous tip-offs. One of the simplest options is to spend some time studying the activities of a creature — cautiously, because it may be able to perceive you — and making extensive notes on its activities. Every time it commits a serious crime, jot down as much information as you can, such as exact location, exact time and what it did to clean up afterward. Compile a dossier on its actions, include, if possible, an address where it can be found, and post the information to a seemingly clean detective at the local station. Modern forensics is incredible. Even old, cleaned crime-scenes can yield enough evidence to warrant an arrest. The creature might pose a danger to officers, but the police, like militant imbued, choose to be in the front lines.

If a Dark One is actively engaged in the criminal underworld, you might be able to lure it into a sting operation. Setting up a significant drug purchase and informing the police once you've done so (again, anonymously) should be an effective way of making the local area too dangerous for a creature, hopefully terminally so. The same sort of thing can be attempted with stolen goods, prostitution rings, protection rackets and illegal labor scams. Again, I offer up the same sort of disclaimers as earlier — there must be all sorts of codes, procedures and other inner workings of criminal society that I know nothing about, so I advise staying away from that side of things unless you know your way around.

A middle ground, perhaps, lies in setting up some sort of frame-up of a Dark One. I understand that there are plenty of places both on and off the net where one can order all sorts of items from foreign or off-shore companies, many of which are illegal here in the US, perhaps even grossly so. You might be able to supply such items yourself or have contacts that can do so. Failing that, it should be possible to arrange to have such items delivered to your prey, or to break into its lair (personally or by proxy) and deposit them there. One excellent option is to legally purchase a dangerous firearm, then send it to or plant it on a target and report the individual as having stolen it. You can project your senses, check on the item's location, make detailed notes and then inform any group, organization or individual who you think might respond.

You can get far greater respect and assistance from the police if you risk taking the step of becoming known to them as an informant. Every cop on the street knows the value of having a good source of inside information, and none of them would dream of asking a snitch to testify or offer proof. A certain amount of time spent surveying common criminals at work and making notes will give you a detective's ear. Modern fiction suggests that the best way to become known is to pass information about a crime that the police already investigate, but the public knows nothing of it. Then follow up with information the police do not have but that they can verify relatively easily — a place soon to be burgled or the location of a stash or a body. Claiming that you have a loose-lipped relative or lover peripherally involved in the underworld should at least give you an excuse to have such information. It seems plausible enough to me, anyway. They probably won't believe your alibi, but if you're accurate, they won't care. Whatever you do, don't claim to be psychic. Remember that Shoemaker idiot.

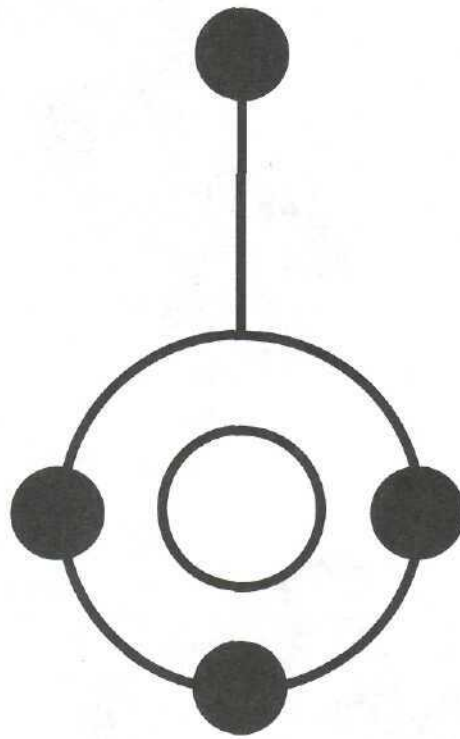
Once you've convinced the police that you're in the know but not involved (relaying information on two or three obviously unrelated crimes), they'll be quick to act on other tips you give them. You'll have to become known to at least one cop to achieve this, and you'll need some good, glib answers of some sort about why you're helping and how you know. Remember to base them on your core excuse for having information. With time and effort you can build a working relationship with the local precinct. At that stage, information about your troublesome creature is more likely to be acted upon. Just be very sure you don't expose yourself to Renfields, possessed officers or other servants of darkness.

If all else fails, you might play two groups of Dark Ones against each other. The hunter-net list seems to be of the opinion that the darkness is consumed by internal rivalry and feuding. That can be used, perhaps. If your problem creature could reasonably impinge on the interests of other Dark Ones in the area, send a dossier of its activities to the others rather than to the police, criminal elements or local chosen. Typed transcripts are always an excellent form of evidence that you don't need to be on site to obtain — they look convincing, they sound convincing, and if a few details

happen to be inaccurate or downright deceitful, who's going to prove you wrong?

You can even return the compliment and inform the Dark One you're trying to get rid of that others are planning to get rid of it. That should add fuel to the fire. In desperation, you could even commit certain inflammatory acts yourself, and then inform both sides that the other side did it. If you can locate a Dark One that seems more or less reasonable, or that's prepared to deal with you for

some reason, you can try an open and honest dialog. That is perhaps the quickest way to resolve the situation, but you have to keep your wits and your defenses up at all times so you are not compromised or otherwise influenced. Dark ones can make very useful allies if you can find common ground to deal with them. The sage himself has foreseen it happening, so do not discount the option out of hand. So long as you are strong-willed and clever, everything should be fine.





CHAPTER 4: DESTINY LOST

*I loathe it; I would not live always; let me alone; for my days
are vanity.*
— Job 7:16

THE FUNCTION OF THE CHOSEN

JOURNAL, DAY TWENTY SEVEN

Been a while since I wrote in here. Nothing much has been going on. I've been doing a lot of work, trying to get my finances in shape after taking off after all that weird stuff. Quinn Weathers isn't doing shit, and that woman who was with him seems to have left. The Mexican woman shows up now and again, but I haven't been able to follow her good enough to really figure out what she's doing. No sign of the gray haired woman. I know she's important though. I can just feel it.

Christ, * I can just feel it. * Sounds like I'm falling in love, like some whiny teenager.

I took a drive out by Ciudad Juarez and looked over the wreckage of the old ranch. Some grim-looking Mexicans are rebuilding it.

I don't know. I thought about telling Curt and Ramona and them about the ranch. But what if it's really finished for good? I didn't go in and check it out again. Shit, I know it's not finished. Not with Gray Hair still around. But, Steve, he went in there with guns and bombs and all kinds of crap, and that was pretty much a wash. I mean, a half-dozen people with guns and bombs go in there and one guy gets out? And if I hadn't been there to bail him out, that guy wouldn't have gotten far, not in the desert in daylight.

Maybe I'm not being fair. They did kill at least three things. At least. And there's no way of knowing how many of the gofers they got. But it wasn't enough. So what's Curt's gang gonna do? Send in Reeve's dogs?

Shit. There's not anything we can do, not realistically, not while they're all holed up out there in the middle of the desert. But I feel like I've got to do something.

JOURNAL, DAY TWENTY EIGHT

Curt left me a message at the grocery store - one of the signs that means a chance or something like that. Just that, and the words * call me. * Well, why not? I know who sent it, I guess. No one else is going to know what it means. So I paged him, gave him a phone booth number. I'm * Mr. Payphone * still.

What he told me just about knocked me on my ass. He's been busy, but not hunting critters. He took a page from me and had everyone in his crew - and Ramona's bunch too - hang signs all over the place. They've picked up four more like us all along the border and in Texas and New Mexico. Not just that, he's got a project - a town called Brinsburg.

One of the new recruits is from Brinsburg and she says the place is just thick with dead things. When Curt went in to look around, he found out she wasn't kidding. In just an afternoon of driving around, he spotted three, and Brinsburg isn't big.

So he asked if I wanted in on it, if I wanted to help. And really, I don't, but I guess I'm supposed to. So I told him I'd go out tomorrow. Hell, maybe the things will be less active on a Sunday.

SEPTEMBER 4

AW. Hello. Pamela. How are you doing?

PD. That's a stupid question.

AW. I'll be more specific then. Has the Haldol helped?

PD. Helped what?

AW, Have you had any hallucinations since... well, any this month?

PD, No.

AW, Good. Do you—

PD, I haven't had any hallucinations this month, any more than I was hallucinating before.

AW, Pamela, we're not going to make any progress if you refuse to acknowledge what we did before. I know you're confused. I know other people put a lot of pressure on you—

PD, I don't think this is going to do any good. I don't even know why I'm talking to you.

AW, Maybe because you secretly suspect I'm right?

PD, I wish you were right, but I know you're not. You're living a lie. As much as I want to, I can't. Not ever.

AW, Because you've had your eyes opened? Because you're one of the chosen?

PD, Your saying the words, but you have no idea what they mean.

AW, Why don't you explain it to me?

PD, I can't explain! I can't tell a deaf man what music sounds like, can I? It's just the same with you! You'll never understand — or at least pray that you never do! You should never have to do what I do!

AW, What do you have to do, Pamela?

PD, Inherit the Earth.

AW, Inherit the Earth? Inherit it from whom?

PD, From them! From horrible things you can't imagine. From every kind of horrible nightmare, only real. They're real and they've been here for ages and they know all about people. They've been molding us for centuries. We're their sheep, and you, you and that detective are their sheepdogs. When a lamb strays from the flock, the two of you ride it back into line with the others. You don't understand what's really going on any more than a dog understands shearing or knows where lamb chops come from.

AW, Nightmare things like Katrina Richards? Like the guests at that party?

PD, You can't understand....

AW, Pamela, I know you can be honest with me. It's hard, but I know you're brave enough to do it! You did it before and you can again. You trusted me before and you were getting better. You can do that again. You can trust me!

PD, Oh, I trust you. I know you would never hurt me. But you can't help me, because you'd have to be crazy to believe me.

AW, Try me.

PD, There's no point....

AW, So you're giving up before you even begin? You're a smart woman. You believe these things. If you can't persuade me, shouldn't you at least consider the possibility that you're mistaken? I promise you, if you make your case reasonably, I'll consider the possibility that I'm wrong.

PD, You'll never believe me!

AW, If that's your excuse for not telling me, then I can't help you.

PD, Fine. You want to know? You really want to know? Okay, here it is. God didn't make the universe. He jobbed it out so He wouldn't get His hands dirty. The workmen cut some corners, so instead of a perfect world we get one that's constantly falling apart.

When God saw what a bungle the world was, He turned up His nose and went away. He left rules to keep the world in balance, but at least one of them was ignored or just stopped working, so now everything is ruined. Things were supposed to repeat, like the seasons. But because the world is broken, it's more like a downward spiral.

It's like God's left the phone off the hook. Even the things that are supposed to be keeping the world on track are in the dark. But the powers that ruin and destroy — the ones who were intended to just keep everything else from growing unchecked — are breaking loose all over the place. The universe is destroying more than it's creating.

That's where the chosen come in. We're supposed to get one more cycle out of the universe. Everything we know — civilization, history, maybe all life — will be destroyed. The question is, will the world have enough momentum to survive or will it all just stop?

AW, If these beings are so powerful, why don't they simply set things right themselves?

PD, I don't know.

HEARING THE MESSAGE

Quantity, unfortunately, will usually beat quality. The most notable exception is probably in cooking. It doesn't matter how much red wine you have available, if you're stuck with an inferior Beaujolais Nouveau, your Coq au Vin will taste worse than if you use a decent Merlot, and you only want a glass or two of it in your sauce either way. That, however, is by the by — for most situations, volume will outweigh other considerations. There is more profit to be made in selling large quantities of goods at low margin, for example, which is why malls and supermarkets flourish. Ten slow laborers building a house will beat a fast one. By the same token, twenty of us looking at the same problem will come up with more solutions than one brilliant one. It only works if everyone has exactly the same information, though, if everyone is dealing with the same issues. If not, it's twenty people considering twenty different problems. The way to the future is for all of us to be looking at the same problem.

That means we all need to have the same information. It is not until we start sharing our knowledge, visions, dreams and hints from the Shining Ones as fully as possible that we're going to be able to start working together rather than at cross-purposes. Information is almost alive. It grows stronger and more vital as it gets more concentrated. Bring enough random bits of material together and suddenly connections start leaping from one to another, like synapses in the brain. At a certain critical point, called the Gestalt, what was a soup of fragments flashes into full realization as a body of facts, an item in its own right. In that moment, you gain a field of knowledge that can be worked, interrogated, trained and grown, to give you the resources you need. That is the principle upon which all scientific thought is based — that any fragment might prove a vital key at some place and time, so all knowledge is desirable and worth pursuing. It is scientific thought that has taken us from mewling savages cowering in firelit caves to the point where we are powerful and knowledgeable enough to track, confront and on occasion beat the darkness.

We, the special chosen, are all repositories of fragmentary knowledge. The Shining Ones feed us hints and whispers, dreams and shadows, momentary visions and temporary

grails. Occasionally, a clear word or phrase wells up from the howling maelstrom of the babble. The fragments that we possess need to be brought together so that we each have a chance of building toward the Gestalt. When we can bring enough bits and pieces together in our collective minds, we will be able to obtain the answers, instructions and strategic directions that the chosen so desperately need.

I have said before that it is vitally important to record every fragment of information that comes your way from the Shining Ones. As in the scientific method, you have to assume that no snippet is too small, meaningless, local or obscure to be worthless. As important, however, is making sure that your records and notes are circulated to others in the same situation. The information has to flow between those of us who are burdened with the babble, and it has to flow as freely as possible. By passing material and examining it, we make sure that we all work on the same problems, and the chance of finding an answer to any specific question becomes significantly greater. It is the only clear way to move forward with any chance of hope.

There is one important factor that I believe will play a significant role in the times to come. I have started to see signs that the babble may be growing clearer as my understanding of the Shining Ones deepens. Certainly, some of their pronouncements seem to hold clearer hints and suggestions than they used to — as if the babble itself is just on the verge of becoming comprehensible. Recently, I have perceived a few more comments and fragments from within the howl than I would normally expect to, and at times I have felt as if the babble itself might at any moment become clear, allowing me to make sense of the individual voices within it. I believe that when the time comes for the true fight, when the darkness makes itself known and the mask is ripped from the eyes of humanity, as the sage has foreseen, the static and confusion that stops us from hearing the Shining Ones will also be removed.

What we chosen currently do is prepare for the real battle that's to come. We are honing our skills and strategies, learning about our enemies and their weaknesses, pruning the dead wood from within our ranks and whittling their numbers down a bit. It should be obvious to all concerned that there is no way we could ever win this struggle as things stand. There just aren't enough of us to deal with all of them. The true battle will start once the Lords of the Dark awaken, and the truth of our world is revealed to all, not just the chosen. Then our role will change, and we will be the backbone of mankind's armies in the last fight. The Earth we are about to inherit will be a war-torn place of desperate struggle, not a new utopia.

That's when the babble will prove truly invaluable. At the moment, we receive pain most of the time, but it's like a radio — even if you are tuned to the correct wavelength, you only get static unless a station is broadcasting. The Shining Ones will provide us with direction and strategic guidance when we need it most, when we are faced with the oldest, most dangerous forces of darkness and their armies. We need to assemble as much knowledge as possible from the background information that they pass to us now, because there may not be time for detailed briefings once the war begins.

That's why it's so important that we pool our information now, before things become critical. There is much information we will need that is being passed to us, but for various reasons already discussed, we lose much of it in the babble. There may

be no time for the Shining Ones to re-transmit that information, and if we cannot piece the core of it back together now, we may find that we lack vital knowledge in how to combat our enemy. By working together now, before the world changes, we have a chance of being as prepared as we can be. That is so absolutely fundamental that even pointing it out seems redundant, but I know how dim some people can be.

When the static that prevents us from hearing and understanding the Shining Ones fades, the babble will no longer be a painful howl. It will become a towering whirlwind of knowledge that sweeps us up from our petty everyday concerns. It will blow right through us, whipping around us with its glory, transforming everything that we know and are — a pillar of wisdom, carrying the knowledge and wisdom of the Shining Ones to us on the radiant winds. There's nothing that we have to do to bring this about; nothing, in fact, that we could possibly do to stop it, even if we wanted to. The future is coming, and all we have to do is stay alive.

JOURNAL, DAY TWENTY NINE

Brinsburg is fucked. It's one of those little flea 's-ass towns that grows up around a gas station on the highway and eventually gets a factory. Only in this case the factory was sloppy and spilled mercury into the groundwater. Bunch of people got sick, died, moved away. Only the dumb ones stayed, I guess. That's before it got haunted.

I got a headache the minute I crossed the city limits. Just driving around, it felt like someone was beating my head like a drum. I started looking hard — not with the newspaper, but just really paying attention to see what I could see — because half the people in town looked dead already, and they weren't the wrongers. They were just skinny, sick looking normal folks. The real dead fit right in.

I'm getting to be a fucking pro at reading my headaches. It took me right to the old, closed-down factory. I half expected it when I remembered where I'd heard "Brinsburg" before. The rest of them are probably too young to remember, except maybe for Reeve or Anthony.

That's where the wrongers were. I looked in with a paper and counted five of them before one looked up and I got spooked. I think I saw enough anyhow. They were cleaning off the machinery and messing around with the fuse boxes.

Are they trying to revive a dead factory? It doesn't make much sense to me, but I've been living a nut 's life since day one.

I couldn't stay near the factory too long — not with that many wrongers around. I looked around some more and found a couple more — some near city hall, some in the graveyard. At this rate Brinsburg is going to have more dead folks in it than living.

I paged Curt when I got home, and he was pretty damn spooked about the factory. He thanked me and wanted to know if the "Messengers" said anything. I told him they hadn't, I guess.

I asked what he was going to do. He was going to talk to the others and see what they thought. I asked if he was going to put up something in the grocery store, or if I should page him or what. He said I should page him tomorrow at six. That way he'd know it was me and he could fill me in.

JOURNAL, DAY THIRTY

I got to hand it to Curt, it sounds like he's doing a bang up job. He said he sent in Ramona, Anthony, Gina and Reeve, along with some new guy from Mexico called Javier — "soft touches," he calls them, except for Reeve, who went along in case things



went south. They managed to spot a lone thing at City Hall and talked to him without him going nuts. I don't know how they did it, but I guess Ramona and this davier guy were able to make him break down and cry. Then he started talking crazy. Now, I only got a third hand version of what this thing said, but one part's loud and clear: The deaders in the factory want to poison everyone in town, just the way they got poisoned. It's set for the 13th, so Curt's crew has three days to take care of this thing.

I wish I could help them more, but with ten balancers and a ton of wrongers around I probably wouldn't be able to spell my own name. Jesus. If it falls apart, how am I even going to know who survived?

JOURNAL, DAY THIRTY ONE

Curt has been working that computer thing and he's got two more coming in tomorrow. Meantime, the hard core - Lanny, Reeve, Curt and these two women I never met - are going to go see if they can pick off some of the things in the factory. Curt was talking about burning it down, said that might be their link with the past that was keeping them stuck. I told him good luck - it's all metal and glass.

JOURNAL, DAY THIRTY TWO

They took down three - two "dumb ones" and one "boss one," whatever the hell that means. I didn't know critters had ranks, but apparently some are worse than others. One of the women sounds like she went seriously nuts. But Curt said the "boss" was the thing that killed her daughter. So this woman got her revenge but broke an arm doing it.

JOURNAL, DAY THIRTY THREE

No word from Curt. I paged him a bunch of times, but nothing. Same with Ramona's cell. Fuck. I should have gone.

No, that's bullshit. If I'd gone I wouldn't have been able to do a damn thing. I'd just have died too. But Christ, why do people keep trying this Hollywood shit? You just can't win.

JOURNAL, DAY THIRTY FOUR

Jesus. None of them died. Not a single one. Curt was unconscious when I was paging him, and Ramona's cell phone got busted. That's all. They're all alive. They're hurt, but they're alive. And the critters are stopped.

Curt wasn't real clear on the details, but he said they found out the truck the things were going to hijack, got the driver there late, and redirected another truck there. The things wound up trying to poison the town with thousands of gallons of milk. The critters went apeshit and started tearing each other apart.

When I hung up, I suddenly had this image in my head. I think it means working together or teamwork or some grade-school shit like that.

But this is what we're supposed to be doing, I think. Curt and Ramona, Reeve and Gina... they did it just right. Maybe me too.

Damn. When I called him, I could hear people laughing in the background. I wish I could have made it to the party.

THE FUTURE

SEPTEMBER 7

PD. Welcome back, Doctor.

AW. Thank you. How are you feeling?

PD. My arms and shoulders hurt from when the nurses grab me to hold me down. My mouth is sore from when they forced it open. And my throat feels kind of scratchy from when they shove the pill down. Thanks for asking.

AW: Would you prefer it if they drugged your food?

PD: I'd stop eating. At least, I think I would.

AW: What good would that do?

PD: I don't know. But I can't take lithium.

AW: It seems to work better for you than Haldol. You've had fewer episodes since you went on it, right?

PD: That's ridiculous! When I'm on that crap, I can barely see or feel or think. If you just killed me I'd never have an episode again. Wouldn't that be the perfect cure?

AW: Pamela, I'd love to regulate your medication to a level you're more comfortable with, but until you stop fighting the therapy, I can't do that in good conscience.

PD: Ah. Now I get it. "Admit that you lied to me and I'll stop poisoning you."

AW: I'm glad to hear you express some honest emotion, even if it is misdirected anger at me. If you could direct that same passion at getting better, we could make real progress—the kind we made back in July. Not too long ago you were willing to work hard on getting a good hold on reality again. What happened?

PD: I saw the truth. Remember the web I told you about? About the points on it where things are still? Well, I spent the last month in and out of those points. Sometimes it's very still and clear and I can almost understand everything. Other times, it's very, very noisy. I finally know what the noise is. It's the sound of the world falling apart.

The world is like a car heading for ice. If we'd turned or hit the brakes sooner, maybe we could have avoided it, but now it's too late. Our only hope is to cane the bags out of it and hope to get through to the other side. If we delay now, we'll just end up stuck forever.

AW: This "ice" metaphor. That's the same thing as the annihilation and stasis embodied in Mrs. Richards and the others?

PD: I guess so.

AW: You sounded awfully sure of yourself a few moments ago.

PD: In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.

AW: I liked it better when we first met. You'd talk straight to me. Now you just throw out convoluted metaphors and tired aphorisms.

PD: You won't have to put up with it much longer.

AW: Oh?

PD: Like I told you before, it's all coming to an end.

AW: You mean this... this grand finale, possibly the end of all humanity?

PD: Yes.

AW: If that's so, why don't you take your medicine? If everything is hopeless anyway, why not give in? Do you think you can escape again?

PD: I guess not.

AW: Are you going to continue to fight the nurses?

PD: I don't know. Maybe you're right. Maybe there's not much point to it.

Notes. An exhausting session today. Just going to see her in that jail is depressing enough, but I feel like the spark of intelligence and potential I saw in her just two months ago is dimming before my eyes. Today she agreed to stop resisting her medication. Maybe it's positive. Maybe it indicates a desire to heal, at some level. But it feels more like pure despair to me.

SIGN OF THINGS TO COME

The time that is to come will be extremely frightening for everyone. No one truly likes violent and unpredictable change at the best of times, particularly not when it is obvious that life, future and sanity are all under immediate threat of obliteration. I would imagine that even the Dark Ones are, for the most part, going to be scared and confused. For the majority of the population, safe and complacent in their self-absorbed worlds, it's going to be the most horrendous and terrifying nightmare they will have ever had. One way or another, it will kill most of them. Those religious fanatics who wander the streets preaching about Judgment Day are in for a rather rude awakening when they discover that the Horsemen of the Apocalypse have fangs and run the local police force.

The most immediate effect is naturally going to be the dissolution of society's power structures. No one is going to work when the world is about to end. All of the old regimes and patterns of life that we're so used to are going to be swept away. Mass transportation will fail as power and gas companies stop supplying. The inner cities are going to erupt in a blaze of anarchy as people riot for food, but government will have collapsed, and there will be no one to stop the violence—except for hunger and thirst, that is. We have concentrated most of our population in cities, relying on transportation of food from rural areas. People in cities will turn to cannibal first, and then most will starve. Rural communities should survive, until heavily armed marauders come to take over or until the darkness swallows the country.

We, the chosen, will finally be liberated from the oppression of the masses, but it will hardly be a glorious freedom. It's going to be a period of horror and nightmare, and even we will look back upon our lives now as a golden age, despite the terror of being chosen. My hope and belief is that once the masses can perceive the darkness, we will be able to present our credentials to the remains of the military machine in a way they can understand qualifies us to lead the fight against the monsters. Armed might is the greatest bargaining chip during anarchy, and we will need to stay alive, to have food and shelter, if we are to go about our business.

We must harden our hearts against the plight of the majority of mankind. There is nothing that we can do to save them. It's too late. If they had been more worthy they would have been chosen as we have. They have not, and we cannot afford to give them priority over us. They are not equipped to fight for the world. Many of them will die in terror and agony, and that is sad, but it's also the way it has to be. All that could be done has been. If, as a species, we had been less bullying, less greedy, less insensitive, less hostile, then maybe... but we were not. Mankind has called judgment down upon its own head.

There is a lot that our species has to atone for. We have pillaged the Earth. Advanced societies have raped those weaker, smaller or more naïve than our own, leaving them in poverty, all in the name of greed. We have polluted the air, land and sea and driven countless species to extinction without a moment's thought. We have driven our own weather system beyond possible repair. We have strip-mined, slash-burned and over-farmed everything we could, always assuming that someone else would clean up our mess later. We have allowed commercial interests to destroy our morals and our ethics to the point that vandalism and robbery

is not only common, but acceptable as “teenage high spirits.” Humanity has been so grossly complacent about what has happened around it that we haven’t even stopped to look.

Our species has committed every sin that there is to be committed, smiling cheerfully all along. Now it has to pay the price. Don’t tell me you feel sorry for them or feel they deserve to be spared.

SEPTEMBER 9

AW. Pamela? How are you today?

PD. Hello.

AW. Are you feeling better?

PD. Better? I guess so.

AW. Have you seen anything? I mean, anything unusual?

PD. No. Except when I’m asleep. I guess. I’m not sure. Just dreams. I think.

AW. What do you mean, you think they’re just dreams? I’m a little confused.

PD. I’m a little confused, too. Everyone acts like there’s asleep and awake and they’re two different things. But sometimes you’re half asleep. Like watching TV. You’re not really thinking, you’re not awake, but you’re not really sleeping, either. Or when you sleep, but you dream you’re lying awake in bed. How do you know you’re not really lying awake in bed? Until you wake up.

AW. What sorts of dreams have you been having?

PD. It’s hard to remember. I think maybe I was dreaming about the tumors. One of them grabbed me. That’s where I got that round burn, from where it grabbed me with one of its... what do you call, like a leg on an octopus? I used to know.

AW. What happened in your dream?

PD. I dreamed about them nursing their children. Sleeping with their husbands.

AW. Really? What do you think that means?

PD. It was horrible. I don’t want to think about it.

AW. Did it surprise you to see these supposedly evil beings acting in a maternal fashion?

PD. You don’t understand. It was the children they were after all the time.

AW. I don’t understand.

PD. They couldn’t come through before because there was a wall, but it’s gone now. And they still couldn’t come through until someone gave them a body, and no one wanted to give up their body for a tumor. But there was a loophole. Because the Bible says that a husband and wife will be “flesh of one flesh.” So the husbands could offer their wives’ bodies to the tumors.

AW. Why would they do such a thing?

PD. The tumors made promises. Said they’d be better. The men couldn’t see the tumors for what they were. They thought they were just demons, that they were just selling their souls, just bargaining their wives away for money or power or sex. Succubi. Those are the sex demons. That’s what they thought they were getting.

AW. Do you really think men would do such a horrible thing?

PD. Men discard their older wives for young ones all the time. This is just the next step. The tumors wanted to come in and they offered to be perfect wives, beautiful, just for a chance to exist. But the men were fooled. What the tumors really wanted



was children. Because children always want to please their monsters. I mean, their mothers. They'll do what they're told, as long as the tumors are in the wives, they have to be what the men see them as. They have to live out their succubus lies. But when the children give in to them, they'll be completely free.

Notes. Perhaps one reason I've been so involved in Pamela's case is the way it speaks to my own parental issues. Her image of cosmic tumors stifling their children and stealing their existence is frighteningly close to my own resentment toward my mother for her rejection of my lifestyle choices.

The more Pamela descends into her madness and accepts it, the more horrified, hopeless and nihilistic she seems to become. In all her talk of her "purpose" and "mission," she regards herself as a minor tool in the hands of uncaring, superior powers. I am more sure than ever that those forces are her parents, trying to fit her into some undesired conformist role — just as her "succubus tumors" (who are upper-middle-class women like her own mother) seek to steal the identities of their children.

I'll have to share this insight with Detective Glencoe, if only to learn how common this attitude is among the other chosen they've apprehended. How much of this parental rejection is indoctrination by the cult, and how much comes from her own experience?

HOW TO GET T'HERE

JOURNAL, DAY THIRTY FIVE

It's been another long time since I wrote in here. I haven't been doing much. Watching for Quinn and the Mexican woman, but nothing much going on with either one. I've been thinking about tipping Curt and his "Texas Ten" about Quinn, but I'm not sure it'd be a good idea. Quinn doesn't seem to be hurting anything right now. I think the ten of them could take him down, but is it worth it if he kills a couple of them in the process? There seem to be more monsters all the time. Balancers are a limited resource.

Talked to Ramona. She still wants my phone number. I'm still saying no way. But it sounds like she's making some slow progress with that old guy and his fucked up family. And the whole crew is working Brinsburg. The spooks there haven't got leadership anymore, but there's still weirdness going on. Sometimes they need the soft touch, sometimes they have to send in Lanny. But it's under control, knock on wood.

JOURNAL, DAY THIRTY SIX

Tried to page Curt, but he didn't call back. Called Ramona and she's going crazy. Curt has just up and vanished. No one knows where he went or what he's doing, but they've been looking all over for him.

I got some phone numbers from her and talked to Reeve and Lanny. They said the last time they talked to him, he was planning to take a look at Cuidad Suarez.

Shit. I should have warned him. But if I had, he probably would have gone in a lot sooner. Hell, maybe before Brinsburg, and now the whole town would be dead. Or maybe he would have gone in with his eyes open and some friends and they would have finished what Steve and his knucklehead buddies started. Shit. No way of knowing.

What ever happened to the harmony I was writing about just a couple pages back? Everyone was working together. Everything was going great. Now the leader just up and disappears and I'm

the only one who knows where — me, the worthless one who can't do anything about it without getting blinded by pain.

Well, I can look around at least. I owe him that much. Maybe I should call the rest of them and fess up to what I know.

HUMAN OR SUPERHUMAN

JOURNAL, DAY THIRTY SEVEN

I met Gray Hair at last.

I'd gone out to the ranch during the middle of the day, just to look around. Figured I'd be safe enough. Nope. Don't know how they spotted me. Doesn't matter. They sent normal folks out to take me down — a man and a woman, looked like brother and sister. They had rifles and dogs. They took me inside.

Curt's alive, but just barely. They've been torturing him by day and letting the boss things have their way with him by night. I almost got the same treatment — one of the things, who I've never seen before, pointed me out to Gray Hair and said I was the guy from the phone booth, no doubt about it.

So they tied me up in a chair. Gray Hair wanted to know if we were human or not. I told her I guessed we were. She wanted to know how we could do what we do. I said I didn't know.

Then one of the critters started talking all kinds of crazy shit — the kind of crap Steve was into, about UFOs and the government. Just stupid shit, but I guess that's what Curt was telling them. Tough bastard, I've got to give it to him. They weren't sure if they should believe it, but they were certain that Curt believed it. Guess they'd never seen their torture fail on anyone before.

I told them that if they let me take Curt and go, I'd keep the others away from them. They just laughed. Said that if they let us go, we'd just lead the others back to them for another attack. What could I say to that? Gray Hair was right.

That was when everything went crazy.

I hadn't been at my best already, with the headache. So I guess that's why I didn't feel the others approaching. It worked out pretty good, I guess. I mean, Gray Hair's folks were distracted interrogating me when Ramona and Lanny and the rest of them charged across the desert. Nothing subtle, just nine pissed off people in jeeps and trucks, firing flares and shotguns. The fucking cavalry.

The critters ran. They tried to take me and Curt with them, but Curt did something that pushed them back somehow. Some trick he'd learned from one of the others, I guess. He couldn't have kept them back forever, and he couldn't do anything to the pure humans, but it gave us a breather. When the explosion went off, they started to panic. Bad memories from last time I guess.

Turns out the big bang was their own damn landmine. It killed Anthony, Gina and Ramona. I spent a good fifteen minutes trying to get out of my chair. I could hear more gunfire and some yelling. When the dust cleared it turned out that no one had gotten hit on either side.

We burned down the ranch — again — and went home. I think Reeve put the bodies in the fire.

WORTHY AND UNWORTHY

All philosophical and ethical considerations aside, the most important factor in weighing the relative importance of the chosen with the rest of humanity is our relative worth in the fight. It's a matter of resource allocation, nothing more,

nothing less. The chosen are the most vital resource in the war against the darkness, the ones who have the defenses to resist the mind-altering powers of the Dark Ones, the ones who have the wisdom and understanding to work against them, the ones who have the power and strength to hunt the Dark Ones down like the beasts they are. We have to take priority. Our abilities and talents make us the most vital resource there is, and that means that we have to place the highest possible importance upon our own survival.

We cannot afford to get sentimental about the masses. Most of them are worthless even at the best of times — skilled perhaps in weaseling out of commitments and contracts, or in providing indifferent service with a mocking sneer — but dead weight in the struggle against the Dark Ones. We have to accept that they are going to die in the billions, and there is nothing that we can — or indeed should — to stop it. People with knowledge, combat training, medical experience or craft or engineering skills are going to be extremely important in the war. Middle managers, lawyers, corporate apologists, paper pushers, receptionists and burger-flippers are going to be almost no use at all.

There are going to be a lot of civilian casualties. Anarchy, starvation and the darkness will all take huge tolls on the population. In fact, there are going to be a lot of civilian casualties lying in heaps in the streets. That is not something we can afford ourselves the luxury of really acknowledging. It will drive you mad if you let yourself think about it too much. The chosen are more important. We are stronger, better suited to win the war, better suited to trying to rebuild things afterward. Without us, everyone on the planet will die. With us, some might be saved. Don't think about the dead. Think about the living.

Within the ranks of the chosen, those of us who hear the babble — and those, like the sage, who have the clarity of mind to synthesize the information that we receive — are more important than the front-line chosen. It is our collective wisdom and leadership that is going to have a chance of snatching victory from the darkness, and the overall war is far more important than any individual. We have to make ourselves take priority. We owe it to the world to do so. If we do any less, we put everything else in danger. It's not our place to go against the dictates of the Shining Ones. We have been selected to hear their words above all others, and we must therefore ensure our own safety, even if it means closeting ourselves away from the rest of the world.

EXTREMITY

SEPTEMBER 13

PD. Is Paul dead?

AW. I'm sorry?

PD. Paul Ferrie. Is he dead?

AW. Where did you hear that?

PD. I saw it in a newspaper, that he was killed in a shootout with police while trying to rob a bank.

AW. I'm surprised they let you see that.

PD. They didn't exactly let me. They didn't know I was looking. He's dead, though, and you didn't give me a straight answer when I asked if he was.

AW. I'm sorry if you feel—

PD. Never mind. I'm just glad you got them to cut back on the lithium. It would have killed me.

AW. I'm not your enemy, Pamela.

PD. I know that. You just don't understand.

AW. I want to.

PD. I think you believe that, too. But if you understood, you'd wish you could stick your head back in the sand.

AW. I'm sure we all believe some lies if they make us feel more comfortable. Don't you think?

PD. You used to be much less transparent.

AW. Perhaps it's your perceptions that have changed. Perhaps you used to trust me enough that you didn't see deviousness in every question.

PD. Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps. I'm never getting out of here, am I?

AW. I think we'd make more progress if we—

PD. I can't expect straight answers from you anymore, can I?

AW. Pamela, you are implicated in a string of brutal murders.

PD. So that's "no"? I'm not getting out of here?

AW. Well... let's say it's not likely in the foreseeable future. But your stay here can be much more comfortable if you cooperate.

PD. Doctor...

AW. It's not like you've got much else here to occupy your formidable mind.

PD. My mind can escape this prison in ways you can't possibly imagine.

AW. How? By recourse to fantasies about a fiery woman who justifies all the hatred you've sublimated toward your parents and other authority figures? By having visions of a destiny that confirms your desire to be special and sedates your fears that you're silly, untalented or insignificant?

PD. I don't know what you're talking about!

AW. Pamela, you've accused me of mendacity, so I'll put my cards on the table. If I don't show concrete progress with you, you'll be reassigned to one of the staff psychiatrists here, and I daresay he won't be as tenacious or sympathetic. I've tried to be patient. I've tried to build up your confidence in me, but I no longer have the time. If I'm going to continue to be your doctor, you need to help me. I need you to wake up and take responsibility for your actions.

PD. I take full responsibility for everything I've done!

AW. Really? Despite the orders from these phantom beings? Despite your mandate from heaven to commit these crimes?

PD. Do you think I want to live like this? To go from fear to violence and back all the time?

AW. Is that any worse than the mundane life you fear? Being stifled by the tumors — by women who try to mold their children and steal their identities? Were you molded like that, Pamela? Do you feel you disappointed your parents?

PD. My parents? I... sure they're disappointed now, but that has nothing to do with it.

AW. Was it a relief? To finally sink as low as you could?

PD. No!

AW. Was it worth it to spite them that much? Was it worth it to escape the lie they made you live?

PD. You want to know what living a lie is like?

[Pause.]

AW. I... I have to go now.

Notes. There can now be no doubt in my mind that I have compromised my professional integrity by identifying too

closely with Ms. Drummond. Not to mention compromising her recovery, which is complicated enough as it is. I can offer no excuse for abandoning her mid-session, as I did. I do not understand it, myself.

All I can say is that I lost control of my emotions. As she spoke to me and looked me in the eye, I suddenly felt the most crushing sense of insignificance imaginable. Perhaps all her talk of cosmic intelligence had sunk in on some subconscious level. For a moment, it was as if I was regarding myself — with all my pride and secret shames, all my small accomplishments and petty vanities — from an incalculable distance. Seeing myself in proportion to the rest of the world and realizing that I meant very little. It was an experience of nihilistic despair that was almost palpable.

It's clear to me that I must never treat or see this patient again.

JOURNAL, DAY THIRTY EIGHT

There 's a lot to put down here. I 'm just not sure how to do it. I 'm really confused.

I guess I 'll start with the headache. I was working on Lynn Huth 's Dodge when I felt it. First time I 've felt it at home since before Ben died. I started to get scared when I saw a car coming down the highway. Then something made me look at Lynn 's license plate. Instead of Deuce2 it said 2 TRUCE.

I got a paper and looked. Gray Hair was driving the car. She was alone and didn 't look good. I had plenty of time to get a shotgun from the house, but when she pulled up she started waving an honest-to-God white flag.

"You win," she said. "I surrender."

Maybe I should have blown her away. I think Lanny would have. But I didn 't. She was unarmed. We talked.

Her name 's Maria. She 's either fucking crazy or really goddamn smart. Or both.

She told me a bunch of stuff about vampires. They drink people 's blood to stay alive. But if people drink their blood, the people don 't get any older. That 's what she does - drinks vampire blood to stay alive. She says she 's done it for a long time.

She got kind of creepy when she was talking about that - sort of like she was tuning out. Said that when something gives you life like that, you can 't help but love it. Like a mother, she said. Even kids with bad moms, kids who get beat up or whatever - they may hate their moms, but they love them too. And she said a mother who really loves her child will do anything for it, even things the kid might not like. Said a child might not know what 's good for it.

Then she came back to earth. She said some of her vampires wanted revenge. Said she was sure Curt wanted revenge on them too. She didn 't see any good way for it to end, so she left.

I asked her how many we 'd killed. She asked me the same question back. Neither one of us wanted to answer. Maybe I was afraid she 'd decide she was winning. Probably she was afraid I 'd do the same.

She 'd found me. I 'm not really surprised. They looked in my wallet first thing when they caught me. I kind of hoped they 'd run off for good, because I just can 't afford to leave home - not after the way my business has been going downhill. But I guess I 'm not the only one who 's been losing money hand over fist.

Maria asked me if I wanted any more of my people to die, and I said I didn 't. She said the same - said she couldn 't stand to lose another one. I swear to God her eyes were tearing up when she said that.

Out of nowhere, she promised that her vampires would be good. Said they wouldn 't kill anyone, wouldn 't kidnap anybody permanently. She said that with fewer vampires in her gang, they can feed a lot more quiet. Said they have to - they 're afraid of us finding them again.

I said I wasn 't sure, and I think she could tell I wasn 't jerking her off. I mean, with the headache, I wasn 't in any shape to wheel and deal. So she said she 'd sweeten the offer. Said she had lots experience with all this shit. She 'd tip me off. Warn me. Said that when other vampires pass through, she 'd give me word. She doesn 't want any competition from critters outside her "family."

So we made a deal. She keeps me up on where her people are, and I do the same. Nothing too specific, nothing that could get someone in trouble. Just warnings. Just enough that they don 't run across each other too often. Just enough to keep both sides unhurt.

I even gave her my phone number.

BLESSED ONES

The Shining Ones do not have human minds. Their intelligence is a finer thing, more refined than ours. It operates on levels that we cannot even dream of, seeing things that we never will. We are so far beneath them that we're ants scuttling around at their feet. How can we hope to comprehend the way they think? We cannot. It is not for us to judge them, nor for us to comment on their actions — they operate according to a plan that we cannot visualize.

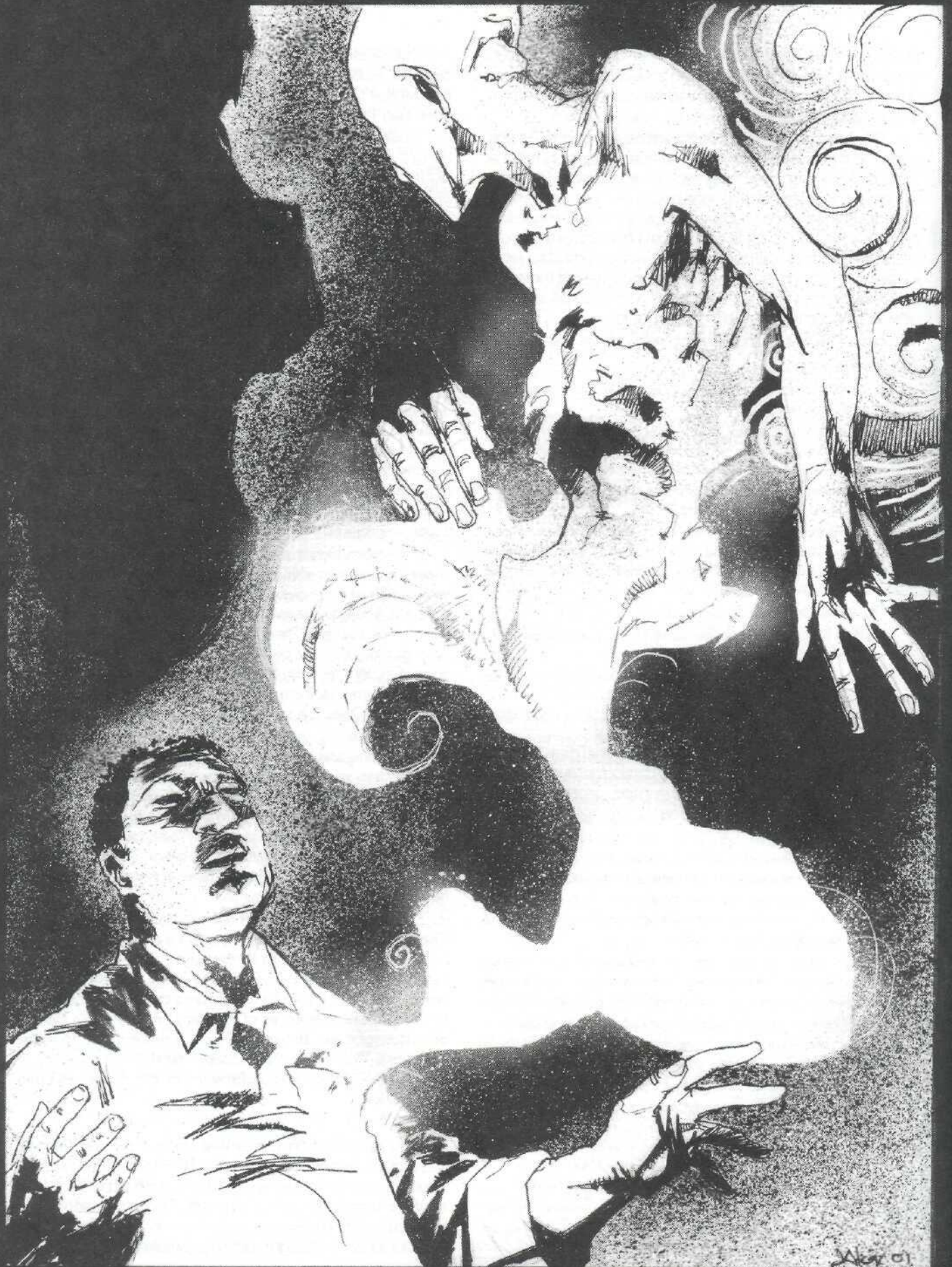
However, as our understanding of what it means to be chosen grows, knowledge, experience and continued contact with the Shining Ones expands our mind and brings us closer to them. We gain deeper power as chosen, become more advanced in thought. That refinement elevates our consciousness out of the fully pedestrian channels that it had been rooted in. We, in turn, become less comprehensible to the people around us. Each step we take toward understanding the Shining Ones is a step away from the unenlightened.

Those among us who, like the sage, have gained great understanding and enlightenment may from time to time take actions that seem peculiar — callous, incomprehensible, pointless or even insane. To presume to make that judgment is the ultimate in arrogance. They comprehend things that we cannot hope to. They have the vision to stand fully in the light of the Shining Ones and share in their plans. The fact that they cannot always explain or justify their actions simply proves how advanced their thinking is.

I defy anyone to condemn these holy men and women. They have risen further than we, gained greater understanding, and act in response to threats and problems that we will never even be aware of. For us to judge their actions, we would need to be able to understand their motives, and to see the full consequences of the things they do. We cannot do either of these things, and we are not entitled to make comment. We must simply accept that they are superior in every way. I, for one, look forward to the day when I join their ranks.

OCTOBER 4

Notes: I heard from Doctor Wallace today. He said Pamela has stopped responding verbally to treatment. At times she appears catatonic. He wanted to know if I could think of anything to try before resorting to electroconvulsive therapy. I asked him to try taking her off all her meds for a month. He was dubious. He thought that might make her dangerous.



W. K. 01

CHAPTER 5: EDICTS FROM ABOVE

*And, behold, there came a great wind from the wilderness,
and smote the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young
men, and they are dead; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee.*

— Job 1:19

OUT OF ISOLATION

One of the greatest problems facing the imbued is their lack of clear information, whether about their origins, the nature of monsters or about the true extent of the world's corruption. In particular, the imbued lack information or direction about their overall goals and aims — why they were changed and what they're supposed to do. There are as many different ideas about who or what the Heralds are — and what they want the chosen to achieve — as there are imbued. This makes it very difficult for hunters to pull together in small groups or across the world as some visionaries aspire, and as it seems the imbued were meant to do to some of these people. Local or personal concerns tend to take priority over greater goals among the chosen. And that's perfectly fair; it's very difficult to focus on a danger in another city when the devil is at your door.

It's possible that the chosen were meant to operate with direction. The Messengers may have always intended to pass information down, about everything from their own origins and the future of the world, to specific dangerous targets and how they could be dealt with. Adherents of the Vision Virtue, in particular, can sometimes sense that there is more to the mission than the imbued have been shown. The fact that these people strive to perceive cohesion to the imbuing, monsters and the world, and yet are hamstrung by a distinct lack of guidance from any creators, suggests that something in

hunter creation is flawed or incomplete. Otherwise, why would the Heralds bother awakening anyone to the truth?

Some prophetic imbued suspect that the Messengers intended their creations to receive a steady flow of information, whether to everyone or to individuals who would then pass word on. The imbued would then have been a mighty force directed by the heavens, a divine hammer to crush the monstrous. If this theory is correct, things didn't work out as hoped or planned.

Hunters seem to be as divergent in nature and motive as the very people who are chosen. Every hunter who meets a peer soon learns that other imbued have their own personalities, agendas and plans, often a product of who they were and what they believed in before being awoken. That melting pot makes for a divergent, eclectic collection of people. And yet, as more hunters meet and seek to understand each other, some emerge who are unique from the apparent majority of imbued. Some of these are obsessive and extreme hunters who have taken their mission so far that they're no longer comprehensible or even down to Earth. And yet, their roots can still be found among other hunters'.

There are still others — a very rare few — who don't seem to be their former selves, now only made aware of the truth. Rather, these people seem possessed and tormented by the hunt, often confronted with inexplicable visions and a deafening, sourceless clamor that marks them apart from other imbued. These individuals appear to remain in almost constant contact

with the Heralds, as they continue to suffer the sights and experiences that most hunters endure at their imbuing and only occasionally thereafter. In fact, to those who have met them, these haunted hunters seem driven to distraction or madness by whoever or whatever refuses to leave them alone. These hunters can be left mentally, emotionally and especially socially dysfunctional as a result — when they showed little or no such difficulties before being contacted.

But, despite the fits and rages these people suffer, the constant pulling of their strings seems to make them privy to information that no other hunters are known to have. These tormented imbued can spout out words or describe scenes vital to understanding monsters, imbued existence or the nature of the Messengers.

To many hunters who refuse to tolerate these “conduits” outbursts and inexplicable manner, the “schizos” are a waste of time. They’re obviously insane and of no use to dedicated hunters. To those patient, considerate or contemplative imbued, the torments, revelations and insights of these go-betweens mark them as special among the imbued. Perhaps they’re people marked for an important role that didn’t or couldn’t come to pass. Maybe they’re even hunters intended to act as preachers among the imbued, relaying the word of some god down to His people so that they can do His work. Whatever that word is, it largely seems lost in the signal-to-noise ratio that these “chosen among the chosen” endure. But from time to time something is made clear and a secret, lost truth or blatant purpose is revealed.

A very few enlightened hunters have even appointed themselves the task of understanding the isolationist prophets. Among these researchers is the enigmatic Fyodor. Through word of mouth and cryptic announcement, these researchers share their theories and findings about the outcasts with the few imbued who are willing to listen.

The so-called ostriches, loners or outsiders are thought to be the key to hunter existence, the vital channel of communication between heaven and earth — the intended radio-men and -women of the imbued. They are believed to have been meant for constant contact with the Messengers, receiving, recording and passing on information that the rest of the chosen needed to answer the call. The Messengers had overestimated humanity, however. The pressure of being in constant contact with higher forces proved utterly overwhelming to the human psyche. In every instance where an intended conduit has survived the imbuing, the mind reels to prevent itself being swept away by the sheer power of the Heralds’ communication, slamming barriers in place that keep the barrage at bay.

The strength of the signal from heaven is such, however, that even with all of a personality’s defenses at work, some of it still bleeds through into the imbued’s consciousness. This defense and overflow is called “static” — a deafening howl of incoherent phantasmal voices, gut-wrenchingly sickening vertigo with nausea and agonizing headaches.

It’s theorized that the original plan was for receivers to get information about nearby monsters and fellow imbued, and messages to pass on to other hunters. This design would have allowed the Messengers greater information flow when the recipient was near beings of interest. As things seem to have turned out — as is so common with a flawed humanity — the barrage of information

only serves to tip the balance in the conduit’s mind from being able to ignore the static to being overwhelmed by it and unable to function properly, driving the would-be dispatcher away from rather than toward monsters and other hunters. (Although some of the outsiders seem to have greater tolerance for the proximity of monsters and hunters than others.)

Even though conduits don’t seem capable of properly performing their theorized role, and are tormented by their place in the grand scheme of things, they still emerge among the newly imbued. Their *known* numbers are extremely few, even for the chosen, but some are still encountered at imbuing from time to time, as if the Messengers can’t stop the creation process they have begun. The dysfunctional outsiders still play *some* role in the hunt, which is better than none; or else these unfortunate chosen have more important roles than even prophetic hunters can perceive, thus they are still created, despite the anguish that the role imposes.

Truly blessed (or cursed) thinkers wonder why leaders, pathfinders and shepherds among hunters weren’t the ones to suffer constant and oppressive contact from the Heralds. Wouldn’t it make sense for such leaders to receive commands directly from above and then make them a reality? One proposed answer is that supposed hunters of vision and direction were a reaction to the creation of the receivers — not an original part of any cosmic plan. Perhaps intended leaders, too, would have received the word of the gods, but when the conduits proved too weak to bear the burden, leaders and other hunters had to be created by other means, lesser means, indirect means. “Evidence” of such a possibility is said to exist in the limited and confusing contact most hunters have with the Messengers at the imbuing and sometimes afterward. That’s all people can endure and still perform some aspect of their original function, whereas the conduits are contacted frequently and left virtually disabled.

And yet, it might be possible that would-be leaders among the imbued can still listen and turn to outsiders for wisdom, insight, direction and purpose from the Heralds. These suffering hunters can act as assistants, aides or spies. That way, hunters’ leaders might still get some direction from above and the imbued as a whole might function more cohesively and see their mission through, even if at the expense of an unfortunate few.

The question remains, though, if any other roles were intended for the imbued but also failed to be realized by a weak, impure humanity. What other suffering and broken — and potentially dangerous — hunters lurk in the world?

HERMIT'S IN PLAY

This chapter makes it possible to play Hermits, members of one of the “lost” creeds. It offers enough information about the creed’s origins to give you a basis on which to create a genuine person, tormented yet invigorated by the hunt like no other hunter can imagine. The characters you read about in the preceding chapters are just such regular folks subjected to a horrific imperative. This chapter explains Hermits’ challenges, capabilities and powers so that you can make these people come to life in your *Hunter* game.

Hermits are adherents of Vision. Like Visionaries, that is their primary Virtue. They have their own edges and creed path to

follow. These creed members are also among the rarest of all hunters. No one knows how many hunters exist in the world, and absolutely no one knows how many Hermits there are (most imbued don't even realize that these people exist), but the outsiders are dangerously few. There should never be more than one Hermit character in your entire chronicle, and no more than one or two Hermits should ever appear as Storyteller-controlled imbued.

Although these creed members are obviously broken, it seems the Messengers believe that even a poor information channel is better than none. Otherwise, why continue to create them? Unfortunately, there appears to be no way to turn off the information flow that causes the static — only ways to diminish it. The results are socially evasive hunters, who are constantly confronted with the truth and seeking escape from their torment, but who still suffer with a veritable divine command to share or do something about what they see, hear and learn. It's a miserable existence, and one some Hermits can't bear. Yet, the fate of the world may rest on whether they are able to find the strength to transcend their limitations and flaws, somehow functioning as a shadow of what they might have been.

THE LONER'S PLIGHT

As a consequence of their condition, Hermits are subject to some special character-creation and Trait rules. These qualities help define who and what they've become and must be incorporated into your character.

PATRON

All Hermits are in constant contact with the Heralds on some level, even subconsciously. They are therefore far more likely than most imbued to receive some sort of message or contact from the creators. While Hermits can't understand most information that causes the static, they are still able to perceive the same sorts of messages that are passed directly to the chosen during the imbuing and in subsequent contact. If a newspaper headline alters from "NEW STORE OPENS" to "IT STALKS OPENLY," a Hermit is as aware of the message that's intended for him as is any Avenger, Innocent or Visionary. Hermits receive the Herald declarations meant for them alone, just as other hunters do.

On occasion, however, an unspecified or "ambient" warning or proclamation — one not necessarily meant for the Hermit — is so powerful that it cuts through the static and actually makes it into the Hermit's awareness, just like a directed message would. This increased contact stems from the fact that a Hermit is so receptive to the Messengers. Whereas other hunters might resist hearing such an "ambient" declaration, a Hermit offers less resistance and the message gets through the poor person's subconscious defenses. His is essentially the path of least resistance for the edict, and he has no choice but to hear it.

The content of "passive" messages can seem as vague or incomprehensible as any sent to a Hermit directly, or such messages can be sudden, undeniable truths — undirected screams that still deafen despite an unspecified recipient.

Regardless of the nature of any given Messenger contact, the effect is often the same: nausea, disorientation, headaches. Other hunters can suffer the same when subjected to direct Herald attention, but the problem is chronic for Hermits who seem to be constantly subject to the Heralds' whim.

To reflect Hermits' high level of contact with the Messengers, all Hermits start play with a rating of 3 in the Patron Background for free. Ranks 4 and 5 of the Trait can be acquired normally during character creation or play as if they were ranks 1 and 2, respectively. Backgrounds typically increase or decrease during play due to story and character development — they aren't usually gained with experience points. See the article on altering Backgrounds during play in the *Hunter Players Guide* if you want Patron ratings to change after character creation.

DERANGEMENT

A "less beneficial" consequence of heavenly contact is the strain imposed on the Hermit mind. Most of your character's mental resources are channeled into blocking the Heralds out — a murmur instead of a scream. As if that weren't enough, he suffers an association between crippling discomfort and the presence of monsters and other hunters. Mere proximity to other imbued or monsters raises the volume of Messenger contact, potentially overwhelming your Hermit. (Perhaps *even worse* for a recently imbued outcast, it's difficult to distinguish monsters and other hunters from the human masses, so it seems that the presence of people alone threatens to drive the Hermit mad.)

All these factors ensure that no Hermit is able to escape with his sanity entirely intact; they are all withdrawn and prone to isolating themselves. Some come to resent people intensely because of the pain they suffer. Others feel they are somehow guilty of a crime and their discomfort is punishment for some sin. Most Hermits are extremely reluctant to associate with other imbued, and a few do everything they can to run away from society altogether.

Every Hermit starts play with a mandatory derangement, courtesy of their heavenly "aversion therapy" treatment. Any ailment that makes social contact challenging is suitable. The most appropriate tend to be Paranoia, Megalomania, Manic-Depression, Compulsive-Aggressive Disorder, Dissociation, Agoraphobia, Addiction or Demophobia. (See later in this Chapter for definitions of some of these conditions; others may be found in the *Hunter* rulebook or in the "Hunter Book" series.)

Some Hermits are able to cope with the presence of a limited number of hunters or monsters for short periods of time (see the Tolerance Talent, below), but even they are still aware of the discomfort of proximity — they just don't let it affect their capabilities.

Thankfully, the constant assault of Messenger interference does provide Hermits one benefit. They possess some immunity to the effects of high Virtue ratings. Their experience with the barrage means they find it a bit easier to adjust to the shifts in perception and awareness that come with increasing ties to the Messengers. Essentially, their worldview is already skewed before any of their Virtues rise to 7 or more. Hermits do not gain a derangement for high Virtue until any score reaches 9 (although they still become vessels of the Messengers and potentially property of the Storyteller at 10 Virtue). This is, however, small consolation for such a beleaguered and abused handful of people.

THE STATIC

Static is fundamental to a Hermit's experience with the hunt. It's a constant background murmur in an outcast's mind, a persistent whispering or droning that is not usually



intelligible — the product of ceaseless noise from the Messengers that doesn't make it through to the Hermit's conscious mind. The sound is agonizing, disorienting, confusing, terrifying and very frustrating — and that's at its best.

Whenever your Hermit nears other imbued or monsters, torrents of half-formed encouragement, visions, warnings, odors, impulses and other advice are added to the usual barrage and the static flares up to full strength. It becomes physically and mentally, not to mention socially, debilitating. It's enough to impact a Hermit's ability to hunt and can drive her mad.

If an outcast can endure it, frequent exposure to other imbued and monsters can sometimes encourage a resistance to the static (see *Tolerance*, p. 83). For some Hermits, such resistance allows them to function almost normally (and strangely enough, the presence of a Visionary seem to make resistance easier), but the static itself never stops or becomes less painful.

All Hermits have theories about the nature of the static. Some blame themselves for their own suffering — if they were stronger they'd be worthy vessels for the Messengers' wisdom. Others think the static is a punishment from the Heralds, and they spend a great deal of time trying to figure out how they've earned the punishment. More cynical hunters think the static is just evidence that the Messengers are as fucked up and incompetent as everything and everybody else in the world.

The intense sensation of psychic invasion occurs regardless of whether a Hermit is close to designated prey or close to a fellow hunter. Bystanders — who seem to appear the same as normal humans to the Messengers — do not usually trigger the static.

System: Whenever in the presence of one or more stimuli — be they imbued or supernatural creatures — every single task

your Hermit performs is at +1 difficulty. For Hermits with high Patron ratings (4+), this penalty may rise to +2 if there are a large number of creatures and/or imbued present, at the Storyteller's discretion.

Of course, horrendous discomfort is a hard sign to ignore; the static has a silver lining of warning your character of imbued or monster presence. The static is triggered at about 30 yards for a character with 3 Patron, and doubles with each additional point of Patron (60 yards at 4, and 120 yards at 5). No roll is made for this detection. When the static activates, it intrudes upon all other thought. There's no doubt what it is — even though there's no way of telling whether a fellow hunter or a monster is near until the subject is visible — and her exact nature may not be immediately apparent even then.

Most Hermits can't tell a difference between the static of one presence and the static of a multitude. Players of characters who are particularly attuned (4+ Patron) can make a Patron roll, difficulty 6, to get a vague sense of whether the static is caused by a single being, by a few beings or by a large group.

THE IMBUING

Most Hermits find the static makes life so uncomfortable that they end up avoiding everyone, not just fellow hunters. In crowded towns or cities, there is usually something within range to set the static off, whether it's identifiable or not. Even quiet urban areas are frequently uncomfortable, as another hunter, creature or bruise might pass through the Hermit's awareness, triggering a sudden attack. As a consequence, Hermits withdraw from any concentration of people, never

THE STATIC IN PLAY

The great curse of all Hermits, the static switches on at the moment of imbuing and stays on for the rest of your hunter's life. As such, it's important that players of Hermit characters — and the Storyteller — fully understand how it manifests.

The static is created by the human mind as a release valve for the pressure generated by communication with the Messengers. When no other imbued or monsters are within range, the Messengers are *relatively quiet* and the static is not too uncomfortable. The static itself does not convey any information. It is not the actual communication from the Messengers — that is blocked off before the conscious mind becomes aware of it. Rather, the static is the mental stress caused by keeping the power of the Messengers from destroying your character's mind.

The static can take many forms. At its most bearable, it's a whining in the ear, nagging aches and pains, background muttering or a pervasive crawling, itching sensation in the skin across the Hermit's body. It's possible to ignore when your hunter is distracted by something that requires no concentration — watching television, for example — but it can be extremely irritating or distressing if your character tries to concentrate or relax.

At its worst, the static can be a deafening howl of incoherent phantom voices, churning sickness, crippling headaches, pain throughout the body, shocking visual disorientation, dizziness or vertigo. In combination with this overwhelming discomfort is a terrifying sense of the mind being attacked or breached and the feeling that your Hermit might become possessed or witless at any moment. A Hermit might suffer different symptoms at different times, but different symptoms are not usually indicative of a trend among nearby monster or hunters, or of a particular message from the Heralds.

As soon as a hunter or monster comes into range, the static rises to full intensity, shocking and distressing your character and hampering his actions. The static is identical whether triggered by a monster or a fellow hunter. Even the most "social" hermits (those with the Tolerance Trait and the will to test it) seem distracted, pained or stressed in the presence of others.

Hunters who receive information in a bout of static do not actually filter it out or the roar, although most believe they do. Rather, such warnings are heard because the Messengers have taken the time to transmit a declaration specifically down the channels opened by your Hermit's Patron rating, or the message has been blurted loudly enough by the Heralds in their own dialogue or to another hunter that your Hermit hears it. At its clearest, information from the static may manifest as dreams or vague compulsions. Typically, coherent contact is like that had at the imbuing — only more frequent. These communications are *most* frequent during intense bouts of static, when hunters and monsters are nearby, because that's when the Messengers are most aware of your Hermit.

knowing when company might turn into agony. After the imbuing, they quickly come to resent humankind in general for the pain they suffer. It may take some time for them to truly understand that individuals trigger the full static, not the crowd itself. It may take even longer to understand that the

discomfort has nothing to do with other people, or to forgive people in general for not being afflicted as the Hermit is.

The irony is that Hermits are usually chosen because of their ability to communicate. People associated with creative, teaching and inspirational fields are selected by the Heralds to pass on their messages. These people can be socially active, gregarious or skilled at conveying information in writing, art or music. Even those who don't enjoy the company of others at least know how to pander to an audience or convey feelings and knowledge. Their new existence as loners and outcasts frequently requires an extremely painful adjustment in the way these skilled communicators and people-persons think and live.

During the imbuing, new Hermits typically avoid taking much direct action against the monsters that are suddenly revealed. Their edges lie in working from afar and passing on intelligence, and their behavior during the crisis usually reflects this tendency. They do take an active stand, however. *If they didn't, they'd become bystanders. The imbuing is painful for Hermits, and the bewildering agony of the static makes any monster, even a nominally sympathetic one, a figure of terror or hatred.*

Hermits do not have a gentle awakening. After they have been imbued, the static inevitably forces them to get as far away from the scene as possible, as quickly as they can, fleeing even other hunters as a source of pain.

IDENTIFYING A HERMIT

The path of the Hermit is particularly hard, even compared to those of other imbued. It also places strains on your troupe's organization — and on you as a player — that should be considered carefully. You and your Storyteller should have an idea of what sort of people are imbued as Hermits — the static kicks in during the imbuing, after all, so your character's actions leading up to that moment are critical to defining her creed.

No two Hermits are quite the same, but they usually share a rare combination of emotional and psychological factors that make them suitable for being the "intelligence officers" of the imbued. Consider the following outlooks and behaviors when deciding if it's appropriate or if you want to play a Hermit in your game.

- **Taking a Step Back:** In order to be effective at passing on information, a Hermit has to be able to divorce himself from the consequences of his work to a certain extent. If he gets involved personally in every fact and warning, he'll go mad with the horror of it. Hermits are almost always a little emotionally isolated or very mildly sociopathic. If they were completely committed to other people, they'd never be able to stand the work of their creed.

At the imbuing, that means a Hermit might offer suggestions or advice to some participants and not others, based on whose actions he believes are prudent. Additionally, he might offer advice contrary to a participant's goals — such as pointing out where a potential weapon is to an Innocent — and later blame that person's loss or suffering on him or her for not taking informed advice.

- **A Need to Communicate:** The Hermit creed is dedicated to communication. The people selected are all competent at one or more forms of performance or conveying thoughts. This can range from an artistic talent such as poetry, painting or music to practical skills such as motivational speaking,

technical authoring or website design. Any would-be Hermit needs some practice at putting her ideas across to other people.

At the imbuing, such a potential Hermit might share information with other hunters or monsters in an effort to make contact. She might not have an agenda, such as making a monster change its ways, but she may instead confront participants with the facts of their actions to make them consider what they do and if that's the best course. ("Why are you all fighting? How do you think you can fix this mess that way?")

- **Turning the Other Cheek:** People who become Hermits are not, for the most part, brave or altruistic. Hermits typically hang back yet manage to find a way to deal with a situation without getting in too much personal danger. They may have a strong desire to help (or at least have a great dislike of the current state of the world), but lacked the personal courage to do anything about it before and wrestle with doing anything now. To their frustration, they still feel compelled to act despite their misgivings, being unable to deny the horrors of what they see and hear through the static.

At the imbuing, this potential Hermit might walk away altogether, but ultimately returns to the scene to make some, possibly minor, contribution despite his better judgment.

- **History of Denial, Isolation or Lack of Confidence:** People who become Hermits tend to have complicated personalities. On one hand, they are withdrawn from society, used to shying away from confrontation. On the other hand, they have a talent and need for communicating, and a longing to do more

than they do. This may have caused them mild social problems in the past, leaving them frustrated, shy, isolated or the kind of person who tries to socialize too hard and winds up being awkward or discomforting as a result.

At the imbuing, such a potential Hermit might seem to do nothing when in fact her mind does the acting for her. She manifests the Reach edge (see p. 87) to take in the scene, gain insight to what's going on and react based on that experience. Any actions that result are probably not contentious, but useful to resolving the episode or saving a life.

PRELUDE EVENTS

Although the imbuing varies wildly, certain types of experience are relatively common across the Hermit creed. You can recognize events and particular actions that might lead your character to becoming a Hermit, or the Storyteller might arrange events to allow for such a transition. Either way, prelude events and reactions to them should be in keeping with the outcast frame of mind.

- **On the Edge of Chaos:** Your character finds herself caught up in a shocking and terrifying confusion of events that she doesn't understand. Other hunters may be imbued at the same time, and some sort of battle with monsters probably erupts. Your character stays on the edge of the fight, trying to drag out the wounded, taking opportunistic potshots or shouting out information or warnings, either from her perspective or that handed down by the Messengers. Everything is a blur due to static overload. As soon as things seem satisfactory (or hopeless) for the "good guys," your character probably flees the scene and her new peers.

- **Imbued from Afar:** The main events of the imbuing take place some distance from your character. Other imbued are at the center of things, but physical obstacles such as subway tracks between two platforms make it difficult or impossible for your character to get there. She may find a way to bridge the gap and provide some sort of support, but might also find herself snap into the middle of the action with Reach. Having had a look at things, she passes critical information to the other hunters, either by shouting or with Send (p. 88) if it is available.

- **Between a Rock and a Hard Place:** When the Messengers show the real world to your character, she finds herself confronted with something large, terrifying and hostile. Lacking the will or the weapons to take the fight to it, but refusing to run, she focuses on diverting the creature away from defenseless people, or keeping them away from the area. She refuses to abandon the site until things seem fairly safe, but at the same time does not want to address the monster or the other newly imbued.

- **Running Backup:** Your character is in a situation where she can make a useful and meaningful contribution to the other new hunters (or to normal people), based on what she knows or has at her disposal without taking an active hand in the scene. She might know how to escape from an ambush or building. She might have a car that others can pile into. She might be able to bring a subway train to an emergency stop so that the larger imbuing may proceed unabated. Or she may know how to activate a sprinkler system or trigger an alarm. The key here is that your character participates by maintaining her distance, which is what she values most.

CHOOSING THE CREED

Ideally, you should request to play a Hermit or the Storyteller should consult you about playing one before the prelude gets underway. Mature, thoughtful players make the best Hermits. The creed members are broken, challenging to play realistically and can be frustrating hunters given their limitations. Forcing a Hermit on an unsuspecting player just because a character behaves appropriately at the imbuing isn't always justified. The Storyteller should make sure that's who you want to be before the decision is made, perhaps taking you aside during the prelude to get your input before the static kicks in and makes it official. Although the **Hunter** rulebook invites creed changes in the early stages of a chronicle, it's hard to write your character's crushing headache and "monster sense" out of that first game after it has figured so prominently.

If and when you and the Storyteller agree that your character is a Hermit, the static should kick in during the prelude. The effect probably applies when your character manifests a Hermit edge or it's decided conclusively that he belongs to the creed. The static applies to both witnessing a monster and seeing other people perform amazing feats—all of whom seem daunting and painful to your character. Perhaps the one thing that distinguishes between the unbearable parties is that a monster often looks inhumane, whereas other hunters at least seem human. But, of course, a "monster" can seem like nothing of the sort. Meanwhile, insane people can perform impossible feats and perhaps inflict terrible harm. Now which side is the horrific one? Your Hermit's dilemma begins.



PLAYING A HERMIT'

After the imbuing, a Hermit has to cope not only with the reality of monsters in the world, but also with the sudden and overwhelming sense of mental invasion and the disorientation and pain that comes with it. Your character also has to learn to accept the fact that this feeling of invasion and pain is perpetual — it's never going to go away, even for a moment. Most hunters can at least seek solace in the kinship that they have with regular folks and each other, and in the knowledge that they work to save a world of which they are part. Hermits don't have these comforts, as the static cuts them off from urban areas and, for the most part, from their social structures. No Hermit ever looks back on her imbuing — or any other hunters who were imbued at the same time — with much fondness.

Playing a Hermit involves several unique challenges for which you have to find solutions. Most Hermits are very wary of getting personally involved with other imbued in any capacity, but a character who insists on remaining apart is extremely difficult to play for any length of time. Split troupes are very difficult for even the best Storyteller to manage. If your character stays away from the others all the time, you'll have nothing to do for most of the game session — or chronicle.

So, as a Hermit player, you have to make certain allowances in order to get the most out of your character and game. You might decide to find a way to keep your Hermit with the rest of the troupe as much as possible. The Tolerance Talent is vital — if you don't invest in it, all your die rolls will be at a significant penalty in the presence of other hunters. Toler-

ance, however, does not change your character's *perception of or reaction to* being around other imbued — the experience is still discomforting and unnerving. It just allows her to act with negligible penalties. She is still distracted, maybe even perpetually confused, frustrated or just strange.

These facts mean you need to come up with a compelling reason why your character is prepared to put up with the torture of the static in order to be around the other hunters. Talk to your troupe and see if any good justifications arise. Perhaps your Hermit is another character's protective older sister or close friend. Maybe the Messengers have clearly shown her that she will be killed by a monster unless she stays with her own kind. Alternatively, one of the other characters might threaten, bribe, blackmail, pay or otherwise force or persuade your character to work closely with a group. Whatever the reason, your Hermit might still resent the fact that her colleagues do not seem to realize how much pain and disorientation she suffers just for being near them. Can't they see her sacrifice?

If you prefer to keep your character somewhat separate from the rest of the group, bear in mind that the Storyteller has to give all players equal attention. If the rest of the characters are together when your Hermit is away, you'll get only a portion of the action. As long as you're okay with that, there are a number of ways your character can arrange to interact with the rest of the group without actually having to come face to face.

One of the most dynamic ways is to set up a system of radio contact. All hunters in the troupe wear group-band, encrypted radio headsets. (Prepare to use up some Resources setting the system up.) The radios allow characters to remain in constant contact, even if your character is remote and can't get involved

in the action directly. If she stays by an Internet-connected computer or a small private library — or both — at the same time, she may relay information or coordinate efforts.

Other approaches include phoning group members regularly to share information and discuss plans. Your character could also pass documents and other material around by snailmail, dead-letter drop, courier or online chat list. At the same time, your character could help in different ways, such as performing dedicated research, scouting areas to get information on monsters — particularly with the Reach edge — or stirring up trouble by manipulating other monster forces or mundane institutions (the police, newspapers, criminal organizations) to work against targets.

Above all, remember that your Hermit has a unique and rather awkward position in any troupe and **Hunter** game. He can remain true to his identity and compulsions and work “outside the box.” You just have to make an effort to ensure that the game proceeds smoothly, your Hermit doesn’t demand all the limelight (or fade from it altogether) and that everyone is able to remain in character and have fun.

CHARACTER CREATION AND DEVELOPMENT

As members of a “lost” and “broken” creed, Hermits require some alternative thought on your part, especially during character creation. You basically design a person who was communicative and expressive or perhaps introverted but artistic before the change, and who now seeks to avoid hunters, monsters and even the world whenever possible. Your character therefore has a distinctly different identity from an Avenger, Redeemer or Visionary who seeks out monsters, other hunters and regular people, and *wants* to work with them. The following are some new Traits that can help you capture the personality and uniqueness of your outcast.

NEW ARCHETYPES

These Traits can be added to your game as Natures and Demeanors.

ECCESTRIC

Eccentrics are greatly misunderstood. Other people look at an Eccentric’s melodramatic behavior, his unusual interests or habits, his flamboyant outfits and his unpredictable manner and assume the man is a bit mad or a little soft in the head. Nothing could be further from the truth. In a mixed-up, topsyturvy world, the Eccentric knows that being too predictable is dangerous, and that sometimes the only way to react to strange events is to be a bit strange yourself. He keeps other people — and himself — on their toes in order to make sure no one is caught flat-footed when the going gets weird.

— Regain Willpower whenever an eccentricity of yours accidentally provides critical information, an early warning, an escape route or otherwise saves the day.

ARTIST

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. It can be a hard truth to accept, but the Artist quickly learns that something that gives her pleasure doesn’t always please others. But true art is not about pleasing others — it’s about challenging them, eliciting a response, making others think about something bigger than themselves. Her goal is to make people react to her

work, one way or another. If a piece inspires someone, that’s all that matters. The actual emotion inspired is utterly irrelevant.

— Regain Willpower whenever a person gains something useful — knowledge, a warning, resolve — from a piece of your work.

CAMPS

Hunter’s creeds are a convenient way of describing and summarizing a set of preferences and attitudes. They allow you to get a firm grasp on your character quickly. Within the game world itself, creeds are nothing more than trends, common beliefs and associations that different imbued feel they have more or less in common. Hunters themselves do not have much awareness of creeds, although their understanding of like-minds grows.

Even within a creed, hunters can have different values, beliefs and aspirations. No two Defenders or Innocents think exactly alike. Loose trends in inter-creed philosophy are called camps. The different camps that Hermits fall into are even less defined than the creed itself. They represent certain spectrums of attitude and stereotype that can help you get deeper into character. Camps are not strict factions within a creed. Individual Hermits might fall into one camp or another, but they might just as easily straddle any lines, blurring contrasts on various issues. In fact, most Hermits grow and change as they endure their calling and can move from one camp to another in the process.

CONSERVATIVE

Conservative Hermits — those who take the hardest line with unnatural beings — are usually people who believed they had a very firm idea of what reality was and how it worked before the imbuing. The revelations of the Messengers jar them out of this staid rut, and they don’t like it. Rather than resist the Messengers, however, conservatives take out their confusion and anger on the monsters they’re shown. (If the first creatures perceived are particularly violent or disgusting, a Hermit is probably likely to become conservative.)

This same resistance to change (though futile at some level) gives conservative Hermits some appreciation of other people. Regular folks may be stupid or scary, but at least they’re familiar — normal folks are likely to be the one thing their old understanding shares with their new one.

Blaming monsters for the destruction of their cherished illusions of normalcy, conservative Hermits feel a strong need to take decisive action against “them.” This often leads conservatives to associate with other imbued. Conservatives are the most social Hermits — not by choice, but by necessity.

Favored Attributes: In addition to the Perception needed to see the bastards coming, conservatives tend to value Intelligence (to out-think and entrap monsters) and Wits (to react if their traps don’t work).

Favored Abilities: Firearms and Demolitions are both popular among conservatives, because they offset creatures’ innate capabilities. Investigation and Stealth are both useful for finding the weak links in a target’s armor.

Favored Backgrounds: Tolerance (see page 83) is critical for working with other imbued. Allies and Animal Companions (see page 84) can also be very important, because their aid does not invoke the Messengers’ mental dissonance.

Other Favored Paths: Conservative Hermits often acquire Judgment edges in order to round out their self-appointed roles of supporting other hunters.

MODERATE

Moderate Hermits are the most likely to measure both the imbued and the unnatural by the same standard. Their view tends to be jaundiced by the intense suffering both provoke, but the same behaviors are tolerated (sparing enemies, behaving with nobility, being open to communication) and condemned (inflicting unnecessary harm, provoking confrontations, ignoring the input of others) in both groups. Playing both sides of the fence forces moderates to walk a fine line. Like everyone who takes the middle ground, moderate Hermits risk getting it from both sides. Giving up blind faith in one side or another might come at a high price, but moderates are willing to pay it for a clear point of view.

Unlike conservatives, moderates don't recognize a distinct demarcation between "good people" and "bad monsters." This may be because moderates were often more open-minded (or just less decisive) before, because their first encounters were not so terrifying or violent, or simply because moderates started out with a more cynical view of mankind.

Favored Attributes: Perception is the key to separating the good creatures from the bad — and the same goes for other imbued. Manipulation and Charisma are often necessary for dealing with both as well.

Favored Abilities: Subterfuge is essential — not only for playing both sides, but for calling bullshit when trickery is plied by others. Awareness and Intuition are both useful for grasping at the truths the Heralds offer. Dodge is also useful — just because.

Favored Backgrounds: Bystanders can provide backup and perspective that does not come with noise from the Messengers. Resources are useful because they are flexible and moderates prize flexibility a great deal. Influence is often useful for persuading both "critters" and other imbued to bring the level of conflict down a notch.

Other Favored Paths: Moderates often walk the Innocence and Defense paths, because they provide potent protection. Martyrdom edges can also be tempting: When you're all alone and can't trust anyone, it can feel like you don't have much to lose.

LIBERAL

Hermits who don't trust the Messengers and their agenda are usually the most liberal. This unwillingness to follow can arise from several circumstances: witnessing bad behavior on the part of other imbued, general distrust of authority, suspicion about the painful methods the Messengers use to "bless" their chosen. Some liberals even cling to a deep-seated sense of atheism, resenting and mistrusting the possible divinity of the Messengers.

Liberal Hermits, then, often isolate themselves most from the community of hunters — but not from the hunt itself. Their isolation often gives them insight into the loneliness and exile experienced by "monsters" in a human world. Beyond Innocents and Redeemers, liberal Hermits can be the most sympathetic to unnatural creatures. This doesn't mean they want to get close, but communication by phone, over the Internet, or by good old-fashioned message drops can create a "breathing space" that allows the human and the other to set aside their differences for a time.

Of course, at other times that disconnect from the immediate reality of a rotting corpse or slaving beast can lead to bad judgment on liberals' part — and to the hunters' downfall.

Favored Attributes: Liberals always prize Perception. Operating alone, they often need an advantage when it comes to evaluating a situation. Liberals often need Manipulation as well, the better to judge if a creature is genuinely innocuous or it's faking. Dexterity is also quite useful — for running away when things go sour.

Favored Abilities: Empathy is important for understanding the problems of creatures outside the natural order. Security, Stealth and Computer can be very useful for creating, getting to and communicating from a secure haven.

Favored Backgrounds: Arsenal is a good choice — not for the guns so much as for the defensive technologies. Exposure can be useful (and can sometimes make the others more tolerable to be around than the imbued). Resources also make a big difference when it comes to operating in isolation.

Other Favored Paths: Defense edges are favored by the more retiring liberals, while Redemption and Innocence paths provide tools for safely meeting and communicating with those who can possibly be saved.

TALENTS**TOLERANCE**

Earl stared at the woman, trying to burn every line of her face into his memory. So this was "Mr. X," the mysterious guide whose hints and clues had saved their lives? She had gray hair dyed black, baggy wrinkles, and clothes from Target. Just some middle-aged black woman he wouldn't look at twice. Yet she'd saved them, guided them, still always hidden from them.

"What's your name?" he finally asked.

She shook her head.

"C'mon," Earl said. "You still don't trust us?"

"It's not a matter of... trust," the woman said uncomfortably. "Look, I'm... I'm meeting you halfway here. I came in person. So you can see I'm not one of... of them."

He nodded. "When do you want to meet the others?"

"No!" she said, a look of horror on her face. "I can't. Not more than one at a time. More than that and I can't... can't keep myself together."

The closer a Hermit gets to other imbued or monsters, the stronger the clamor or static or noise in her head becomes. Overpowering signals from the Messengers crowd in, threatening to fragment your character's consciousness and even sanity with their urgency. More imbued or monsters, and a correspondingly closer connection to the Messengers, exacerbates the problem. People can get used to just about anything, though.

Hermits who have learned (or been blessed with) Tolerance can concentrate hard enough on their surroundings to focus on what they're doing and thus function normally, despite the static. They can operate among other hunters — or even monsters — as long as there aren't too many and it's not for too long. It's no more pleasant than if they didn't have the Talent, and your character doesn't perceive any difference in the static, but this Ability allows him to avoid the dice penalty normally associated with the noise (see p. 77).

Visionaries have a curious effect on the static, somehow making it more bearable. The presence of one or more Visionaries within three yards of your Hermit increases his effective Tolerance by one point (the maximum is still 5), even giving a completely intolerant Hermit the temporary benefit of 1 Tolerance (your

character doesn't need to possess this Trait to get this bonus in the presence of a Visionary). A Hermit with 3 Tolerance who is temporarily boosted to 4 by the proximity of a Visionary is considered (in the absence of any other Trait specialty) to specialize in Visionaries for that time. Any existing Tolerance specialty (for having an independent rating of 4 or 5) takes precedent.

Hermits have many different theories about why they feel this affinity for the leaders, shepherds and prophets among the imbued, ranging from finding their wisdom and understanding calming, to drawing moral support from them, to the idea that Visionaries distract the Messengers from nearby Hermits.

This Talent is available to only those who suffer from the static — that is, Hermits. Individual hunters and monsters each count as one being for the purposes of determining how many a Hermit can endure, total. If more than the indicated hunters or monsters are close by or remain near your character too long, the full effects of the static kick in and all of his actions suffer a difficulty penalty.

- You can endure the presence of two hunters and/or monsters for an hour without penalty.
- You can be around up to three hunters and/or monsters for two hours without penalty.
- You can stand four hunters and/or monsters for three hours.
- You can put up with five hunters and/or monsters for as many as four hours.
- You keep it together for five hours in the vicinity of as many as six hunters and/or monsters.

Possessed by: Hermits alone

Specialties: Any single creed. Individual members of that creed count as only "half" a person for determining the number of hunters or monsters who can be dealt with through Tolerance.

BACKGROUNDS

ANIMAL COMPANIONS

Lucius smirked while he watched Carter writhe. He didn't even needed to hit the old bastard. Just showing up was enough to make him collapse in agony. Perhaps he was having a fear-induced coronary. Lucius couldn't resist rubbing it in.

"Serves you right, you washed-up old piece of crap. You shouldn't have been poking your nose in other people's business. You have no idea who I am. Now your snooping is going to get you killed."

Clutching at his head, Carter screamed, "Millie."

"Going senile already?" Lucius asked. "Your wife died years ago. I checked."

A floorboard creaked and Lucius glanced over his shoulder to see a huge mastiff, teeth bared, leap at him. His shoulder erupted in agony as the dog's jaws locked. Lucius collapsed under the dog's weight as a second dog went for his throat. He barely had time to register the irony of having his throat ripped out before everything went black.

Carter petted his dogs while he sat next to the bloodsucker's remains. "My wife was a holy terror, boy. Why do you think I trained the girls to attack at the sound of her name?"

People are (by and large) devious, sneaky, self-interested and altogether too clever to be good. Animals are different. They're simple. Whether your dog fetches a stick or soils the rug, you know where you stand with it.



The kind of person who hates other people (or simply finds them distasteful) often takes a pet (or pets) in order to have some kind of emotional outlet. That's no big deal: Your character can take as many useless turtles and guinea pigs as he wants without paying any points for them.

What this Background does is provide really *useful* pets (or, if your character is in a more rural or undeveloped area, work animals). Your character wants that fanatically loyal pit bull whose jaws can crush soup bones? That's not a pet. That's an Animal Companion.

Just as hunters are regular people, Animal Companions are normal animals; they aren't super-intelligent, can't communicate beyond barks, whines or roars, and can't perform feats that are beyond their physical limits. However, possession of this Background implies a significant bond between your character and the creatures in question — he is undoubtedly the alpha male. Your character and his pets may have been together for years and he's taught them several tricks, or another party has trained the animals to respond to your character.

Each animal can be taught one significant trick for each point of Animal Ken that the trainer possesses. Such tricks include "attack," "retrieve" and "run," as opposed to "roll over" or "shake." Encouraging a companion to perform an established trick takes one action and requires a successful Manipulation + Animal Ken roll, difficulty 4. Trying to get an animal to perform a new or particularly complex trick calls for a higher difficulty, as decided by the Storyteller.

- You have a housecat with a really loud voice. As in legend, the cat is sensitive to unnatural presences. (Consider it to have an eight-die Awareness pool.)
- Your big mean dog keeps those bratty kids off your lawn (see sidebar).
- You own a horse, raised from a colt (see sidebar).
- You either have a horse *and* a big dog, several dogs or the equivalent.
- You own a stable, or you train attack or seeing-eye dogs professionally.

MAN'S BEST FRIEND

The following are some statistics you can use for Animal Companions.

Big, Mean Dog

Attributes: Strength 4, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3, Perception 4
Abilities: Alertness 3, Athletics 2, Brawl 3, Dodge 3, Empathy 2, Intimidation 3, Stealth 2
Health Levels: OK, -1, -1, -2, -2, -5, Dead
Attack: Bite for five dice, claw for four
Willpower: 5

Well-Trained Horse

Attributes: Strength 5, Dexterity 2, Stamina 4
Abilities: Alertness 3, Athletics 2, Brawl 3, Empathy 2, Intimidation 2
Health Levels: OK, OK, -1, -1, -2, -2, -5, Incapacitated
Attack: Trample or kick for six dice; bite for three
Willpower: 3

THE HIGH COST OF COMMITMENT

Hermits are in a peculiar position. Their nature is to stay back and observe, to try to stay sane and capable — but ultimately, to act. However, due to some apparent flaw, error or oversight in their creation, it's challenging for them to communicate what they have learned or coordinate their actions with other hunters. Their distance from other imbued makes it hard to maintain the will to hunt, but at the same time their proximity to the Heralds makes it imperative to do so. The result is often mental and social instability from the very moment of the imbuing. Whereas all hunters are mortified and terrified by the reality of the world and the falsehood of their lives, Hermits suffer worst of all, because their very identities can be forcibly changed by the awakening. How a Hermit copes with the changes in his world and his very self, in hopes of maintaining some semblance of composure and order, can determine his enthusiasm for and success in the hunt.

SPENDING CONVICTION

Walking the line between community and isolation, action and inaction, sanity and insanity isn't easy. When a Hermit absolutely must succeed at this balancing act — often to save a life or achieve a success that's crucial to his goals — he puts everything he has into the feat to guarantee results. For outcasts and the bizarre capabilities they've been granted, that effort usually means risking or spending Conviction points. The personal vigor for the mission that results also means an even closer bond to the very Messengers who torment Hermits — a bestowal of energy from them, simultaneous with the static that they always inflict. So answering the call is, for many isolationists, often a double-edge sword.

Some Hermits spend Conviction as fast as they get it. These conduits tend to have the most trouble dealing with their imbued existence, wrestling with the many issues and hardships that the Heralds inflict. They therefore seek Herald guidance through second sight and their edges in hopes of revelation. Either that, or their suffering is so extreme that they hold their lives forfeit, already anticipating an end to the world and seeing no need to save their strength or hold anything in reserve. If these people succeed and survive, gaining Conviction points in bursts, they cash them in for Virtue points as soon as possible. Virtues can rise quickly and mean more comprehension of the Messengers.

Others hoard Conviction. As recluses, they have little opportunity to spend it. They believe themselves secure from monstrous intervention, and so feel no need to active second sight frequently. They abstain from using their edges because they believe themselves protected by distance and mundane means. But when they *do* need to act, to seek the Heralds' vitality, they spend a lot of Conviction on second sight and edges because there's no one to back them up. And if they gain extensive points, the points are used to increase Virtues, rather than being spent on further contention with monsters and hunters. For these isolationists, increasing Virtues is often rationalized in terms of reaching out to the Heralds and making their message clear, in hopes that *this* time the Hermit can figure things out, that *this* time she'll get some answers.

The Virtues raised by a Hermit depend of her frame of mind and situation. All recluses can appreciate the benefits of increased Vision — the creed's primary Virtue. More Vision

leads to more capabilities in the Solitude path. Solitude powers make the hunter do some frightening and amazing things, but also help her accomplish more from a distance and with less threat of monster or hunter contact or harm. Vision also grants access to Visionary capabilities as well, which allow Hermits a broader range of information-gathering capabilities. If a recluse can continue to work from afar, without face-to-face contact with others, this trend is very rewarding — as far as can be said for the hunt. (Also, see the Message in a Bottle technique, p. 91, which activates when Vision is increased.)

Hermits who are forced to, or who force themselves to, interact with creatures and other hunters may need the benefits of Zeal and/or Mercy to accomplish their goals. Zeal offers the potential of self-defense, but also the benefits of a strong offense. Meanwhile, Mercy edges make sympathy for monsters, hunters and people possible, allowing information to be spread amicably, and problems to be solved peaceably. The route a Hermit takes depends on how antithetical she finds monsters to be, and whether other imbued are any more deserving or completely dispensable.

REGAINING CONVICTION

Conviction is normally gained through risking points on successful edge rolls. The Storyteller can award points for actions appropriate to your character's creed, though. As a general rule, Hermits gain Conviction when they either act effectively from a distance or when their distant aid allows other imbued to complete a task. A Hermit who kicks in a door alongside an Avenger and helps beat a zombie into paste probably doesn't gain Conviction. The one who stalks the zombie beforehand, however, and tells the Avenger to attack when it's already injured probably would.

Here are some guidelines to awarding (or removing) Conviction points based on a Hermit's actions. No more than one point should be granted per game session for such actions, even if more than one is performed. The constant onslaught of the static is usually sufficient to remind Hermits that individual successes don't absolve the hunter of the life he now leads.

- Gain a point of Conviction when your character successfully interprets a message from the Heralds that directly saves a life — whether his own or another's.
- Gain a point of Conviction when your character successfully escapes or avoids a creature's concerted effort to attack him.
- Gain a point of Conviction when your character provides useful information to other imbued that achieves a goal, whether significant to him or in regard to monsters.
- Gain a point of Conviction when your character learns a critically important fact about a creature or group of creatures that could undo them, save them or put them to rest.
- (Optional) Lose a point of Conviction when your character gains information that could save a life or do immense good, but he fails to communicate it effectively.
- (Optional) Lose a point of Conviction when your character trusts someone implicitly and his trust is abused.
- (Optional) Lose a point of Conviction when your character's guidance directly causes someone to be injured or killed.

DERANGEMENT'S

Every Hermit has to find a personal way to come to terms with the feelings of isolation that the calling imposes. Forced exile always manifests in a derangement of one sort or another,

and it can never be overcome. The onus on the Hermit is to learn to cope with the fact of her derangement, rather than to try to find ways to cure it. Any character who did miraculously find a way to cure her creed derangement would have to learn how to completely shut out the static. Such a Hermit would be so divorced from the hunt that she would lose all access to her edges and Patron Background — assuming any of this is even possible and that the Heralds would ever let one of their own go.

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, all Hermits start play with one derangement, automatically. However, the punishment they endure attunes them somewhat to the whims of the Heralds. They suffer less mental anguish later in their existence, when Virtue scores become high and hunters of other creeds would normally lose touch with reality.

The hunt is still traumatic for Hermits. Contact with the Messengers does not anesthetize them to terror, personal loss or tragedy. Through the course of play, a Hermit may acquire new mental problems, particularly if she is exposed to grotesque scenes; if her failures lead directly to death and destruction, such as idly passing on critically flawed information; or if she negligently forgets to convey vital facts or intelligence. The Storyteller decides when such ailments are appropriate to your Hermit's experiences. These experiences may be unique from her starting condition, based more on the circumstances that trigger the new problem, or may elaborate on her starting deficiency, compounding that derangement.

Overcoming mental ailments acquired on the hunt typically involves your Hermit finding a way to fully understand and chronicle the events that triggered the condition. She may need a long period of seclusion and peace to go back over events and discover not only what went wrong, but why the various participants — herself included — acted as they did, what could have been changed, and what information could have prevented the disaster. She may not need to withdraw completely from contact during the recovery process, but she certainly has to spend many hours each week alone, preparing detailed accounts of the event to force herself to face up to her memories (not to mention that you might have to spend several Willpower points). If your character needs professional assistance, she may have to obtain it from expensive and time-consuming research with psychological books rather than finding a doctor to confide in. After all, how could any therapist understand your character's dilemma?

After sufficient time and effort, your Hermit may be able to lay a mental problem to rest — at the Storyteller's discretion. Part of her treatment might involve a detailed document of the events and symptoms of the problem, and notes on how to ensure similar events do not happen again, which she could be driven to disseminate using the Message in a Bottle technique described later in this chapter. Note that, like a Hermit's starting derangement, it is hardly ever possible to eliminate the conditions imposed by a 9 or 10 Virtue rating.

HYPochondria

People are dirty, filthy, disgusting bags of flesh, riddled with every germ, virus and parasite you can imagine. Those who routinely hang around with dead bodies are a million times worse.

Every person you meet is a vector — a possible avenue of infection. Constant vigilance is needed to stay healthy. Soap and water! Air purifiers! Boiled and filtered water! Those are good starts, but to remain healthy, it's really better to isolate yourself as much as possible from all the vectors.

Of course, germs are everywhere, so it's impossible to remain healthy all the time. In fact, no one is ever "perfectly healthy." We're born sick and get sicker until we die... but the germs aren't getting you without a fight! Antioxidants! Vitamin E! Sunscreen and insect repellent!

The hypochondriac constantly believes himself sick and in danger of getting sicker. A mild form of this neurosis is characterized by persistent research into dangerous or exotic diseases, along with attempts to avoid these diseases or treating oneself for them. In game terms, any time someone mentions illness to your mildly hypochondriac character, you must make a successful Willpower roll, difficulty 6, to resist babbling neurotically about his latest set of symptoms. (This sort of verbal discharge can cause trouble with Social rolls.)

When a hypochondriac enters a "hot zone" — somewhere with unsanitary conditions such as a city dump or the home of an invalid — he flees immediately unless you spend a Willpower point. Even then, all die pools are reduced by one while your character is "exposed."

A more severe form of hypochondria is psychosomatic illness. A person with this condition so thoroughly believes in his infirmity that his body conforms to the belief. An example of this is someone who has convinced himself that he has emphysema; he coughs constantly and is unable to catch his breath. This forced coughing can eventually damage lungs that were previously healthy. Similarly, someone with a psychosomatic bout of influenza may throw up even though no physical illness causes the symptom. Extreme cases may result in blindness or deafness.

A psychosomatic illness typically imposes a permanent level of bashing damage. That level disappears if your character can be treated for his derangement.

DEMOPHOBIA

Look at them. The individual human is beautiful — or at least comprehensible. You can deal with a person, one on one. But put them into a mass and you get a faceless, impersonal jelly, crammed together on a city street, dead-eyed, uncaring. Just a press of flesh and impatience.

Crowds. Crowds are vile. You can't have mass hysteria without the mass. People are at their most dangerous when they're packed in a herd. They get stupid, hypnotized. They give in to group-think and the mob mentality. Watch "Triumph of the Will." Just watch it. All those glazed German eyes, shining lustfully up at Hitler, begging. "Enslave me. Please. Tell me what to do. Tell me who to murder. It'll be glorious."

That's just human beings. Add some monsters to the mix and it gets so nightmarish it's almost a joke. A crowd of people is a sea of anonymity, ready to turn into a tidal wave if conditions are right, ready to smash and riot because a collective is blameless, no face to identify, no ass to kick and no soul to damn. What sharks swim in that sea? What creatures are at home in the seething madness, breathing in the crowd's sickness for sustenance? What beasts pull the strings, light the fuses and trigger the stampede?

A demophobe is afraid of crowds. It's like a specialized form of claustrophobia, only instead of being enclosed by walls or buildings, the demophobe fears being surrounded by human beings. This sort of feeling can stem from several plausible hunter traumas. Someone caught in a riot could easily become nervous around masses of people. A hunter who was injured by normal people stampeding away from an exposed monster might develop a fear of the human herd. On

the other hand, someone who tangled with a monster capable of disguising itself as human could fear crowds simply because they provide perfect cover for such beings.

Demophobes suffer a one- to three-dice-pool penalty to most actions when in a crowd. The exact penalty is left to the Storyteller's discretion, based on the size of the crowd and its emotional intensity — relaxed versus riotous. As a rule of thumb, five or more people within a two-yard radius of the demophobe is considered "crowding." Of course, this is situational. If your character is alone on a balcony overlooking Bourbon Street during Mardi Gras, he's still going to suffer. Spending a Willpower point negates all penalties for a single scene.

EDGES

For most hunters, the powers they manifest during and after the imbuing are terrifying, bizarre phenomena that, if considered too long, might make a person question her own sanity and even humanity. After all, normal people can't stop beings in their tracks with a single word, or hide in plain sight at will. Those capabilities seem to exceed what it means to be human, and could make an imbued wonder how different she really is from the creatures with which she contends.

Hermits are no different. They're ordinary people granted anything but ordinary powers. And yet, their situations, and therefore their edges, are considerably different from any that *other hunters manifest*. Perhaps *Hermits' seeming proximity* to the Messengers makes them privy to special capabilities. Maybe their inherent madness broadens their minds sufficiently to inherit and master powers beyond even the imbued norm. Or Hermits could just be cursed with capabilities that they're not meant to comprehend or even deal with — they're just meant to use them to get a job done.

Specifically, most hunters are restricted in their powers. Those of other creeds are tied to or bound by the material world. Almost all hunters' edges impact on the physical reality that the imbued live in, understand, can see and can touch. Some edges might affect ghosts that haunt the physical world, but those powers still have foundation in that world. Other dimensions, spirit realms and layers of reality available to some monsters — and perhaps to the Messengers themselves — are denied to hunters' capabilities and perception, almost as a rule.

Hermits' edges allow them to perceive and touch realms beyond the physical plane. They can project their senses across distances, communicate with other minds without speaking, and travel as spirits without form — things that no other hunters can do or comprehend (and perhaps neither can Hermits). Ask an outcast how he knows what he knows or has seen what he's seen and he won't be able to explain it rationally. He just knows and sees, and is undoubtedly afraid of what he can do. After all, other hunters are frightening for both the amazing things they can do and the pain they inflict in a Hermit's mind. But what does that say about an outsider who can do so much more? Is his humanity even a possibility anymore?

• REACH

Reach is the power to send one's senses elsewhere. Just as some Visionaries can see and hear events that occurred at a location at a different time, Hermits can perceive events that occur nearby at the *same* time, as if they extend their mind's eye beyond themselves.

OTHER EDGES

Hermits are transformed by their imbuing, often more so than any other creed members. Their edges are tied closely to their intended mission, whatever that might actually be, and require intense contact with the Messengers. As such, Hermit edges put tremendous strain on the minds of the few other hunters who acquire them. Followers of other creeds cannot gain Hermit edges until their Vision rating reaches at least 4. Furthermore, for each Hermit edge that adherents of the Mercy and Zeal creeds gain, they automatically develop one derangement from the following list: Paranoia, Megalomania, Manic-Depression, Compulsive-Aggressive Disorder, Dissociation, Agoraphobia, Addiction or Demophobia. (These ailments are detailed in the *Hunter* rulebook and in the various creed sourcebooks.) These derangements cannot be removed, just as with high-Virtue disorders. Visionaries and Waywards, being fellow followers of Vision and more attuned to Hermits, do not suffer these derangements but must still have 4 Vision before Hermit edges can be acquired.

The edges of other creeds are not similarly restricted for Hermits, perhaps due to the outcasts' connection to the Heralds. If a Hermit pulls even a fragment of meaning out of the static when he encounters another hunter, he might easily manifest and understand an Innocence or Defense edge. In some cases, Hermits demonstrate edges from other creeds even if they haven't seen them in use or heard about them. After all, they're tuned into the Heralds at all times; the Heralds empower Hermits in any enigmatic way the entities like. Hermits naturally tend toward Mercy-based more than Zeal-based edges, however. They typically hang back, observe and learn rather than leap into the fray. If Zeal-oriented powers are developed, they usually assist in a Hermit's information-gathering goals and should be rationalized as such.

Reach applies to all five senses — touch, taste, sight, scent and hearing. However, just because a Hermit can feel what an opponent has in his pocket doesn't mean he can affect that object. The power offers clairsentience, not telekinesis.

This edge is not without its dangers. While a Hermit's senses are elsewhere, he cannot hear or feel what happens to his physical body. To an outsider, it looks like the Hermit is simply asleep — but attempts to waken him don't work until his sentience returns.

Furthermore, particularly perceptive people (or beings) may sense that they are being watched by a reaching Hermit. The outcast has no "ghostly" form of any kind while projecting, but can suggest a "presence" to the receptive.

System: Roll Perception + Vision, difficulty 6, and spend one action to activate the edge. For each success, your character can go "out of body" for a maximum of approximately 10 minutes, and you can make standard Perception rolls from a perspective other than your character's physical location. He can return to his body instantly, at will. He returns forcibly if his body is ever rendered Incapacitated while his senses are elsewhere, at which point he is unconscious thereafter in body and mind. If his body is killed while reaching, his senses die, too.

Your Hermit can attempt to activate second sight (and its associated protection) through Reach, but doing so is not automatic. In addition to the usual Conviction cost, you must make a successful Perception + Awareness roll, difficulty 6. Second sight is active for the remainder of the scene and protects both his sentience and body from supernatural tampering. If the roll fails, a Conviction point is still lost and neither part receives special awareness or protection; your reaching character sees and detects only what he can with his regular, human senses. Second sight may be activated *before* reaching, but the Perception + Awareness roll is still required to maintain it while out of body. Repeated attempts to activate second sight are allowed.

Reach has a range of about 30 yards per point of Vision that your character has. Your Hermit can move his senses around at a "fast sprint" anywhere within that range, and is not impeded by physical barriers. He can pass through walls, suffers no harm when "hit" by a car and can pass through people. (All these incorporeal capabilities assume your character can grasp their possibility, though. It's human instinct to try to use a door before walking through one, and it may take some time for your character to realize that he can move through solid items. Likewise, he probably avoids traffic until he's had considerable experience reaching and masters his fear of being "run over.")

The static still applies to your character when he reaches. Creatures or hunters within range of the approximate location of your character's senses, *not his body*, invoke the noise. All static rules apply normally thereafter (difficulty modifiers may even interfere with attempting to activate second sight while reaching).

If your Hermit's body is within a yard or so of a Visionary, the range he can reach is doubled. Outcasts who have discovered this benefit suspect some kind of intended teamwork for the hunters involved, but can't explain it specifically. The proximity of some other imbued simply helps with reaching, which contradicts Hermits' normal relations with other hunters.

A subject of Reach may get an uneasy feeling of being watched. Roll Perception + Awareness, difficulty 9, for normal people (including other imbued). The difficulty drops to 8 for animals and supernatural creatures. It's 7 for creatures with supernatural senses or anyone with the Awareness Ability.

•• SEND

With this capability, a Hermit can transmit words and images directly into the mind of a fellow imbued. In theory, this tool is invaluable: The Hermit and fellow hunters can communicate silently and clearly without fear of being overheard. But of course, *in theory* Hermits weren't supposed to be socially challenged recluses.

In practice, such communication tends to be similar to messages received from the Heralds — garbled, cryptic, distracting and unpleasant. Recipients can be frightened, startled, disoriented or dimly aware of an idea forming in their head without apparent source. Message recipients who have the Patron Background, however, are unlikely to mistake a sending for a genuine contact with the Heralds. Herald messages are painful and confusing because they're pure intent transmitted into an impure human medium. Hermit sendings are painful and confusing because they come from a *different* impure human. Also, some sendings communicate more than a Hermit intends.

An outcast can only send to someone he can see or hear directly with his naked eyes or ears. Sending should not be confused with telepathy or mind reading: Only messages projected deliberately can be sent to or received by a target. This edge can't be used to eavesdrop on others' thoughts.

System: Roll Intelligence + Vision and spend one action to activate this edge. The difficulty is based on your character's target: 7 for another hunter with second sight active; 8 for an imbued with the sight inactive; 9 for a bystander. If your roll is successful, your character can communicate a simple message — typically a sketchy mental picture or something he could say in five words or less. The more successes gained the clearer the communication.

Successes **Clarity**

- 1 A murky feeling that could be ignored easily.
- 2 A fairly simple sense of what your character means.
- 3 Good communication. Your character gets some sense of the recipient's reaction.
- 4+ Instant rapport! Your character can mentally "talk" to that person for 30 seconds as if they were on a telephone.

A botch means that instead of making a "conscious to conscious" connection, your Hermit makes an "unconscious to unconscious" one. Instead of what your Hermit wants to show, the receiver gets a taste of his deepest fears, hopes and desires — but only in *her* unconscious mind. She may dream your character's dreams or recognize his hopes when she sees him next. In any event, her next Social rolls in regard to your character are at -1 difficulty due to her uncanny understanding of him. (If she's not your Hermit's ally, she may get a feeling of his identity, if he seeks to keep it secret.)

This power can be used successfully on a single subject no more than once per scene.

Your character cannot send a message while also using the level-one Reach power. Messages can be sent only when your character's senses are still in his own body.

Send cannot be used to deliver messages to normal people or monsters.

● ● ● **EDICT**

A Hermit locks eyes with a target and — for a split second — that person or thing sees itself as the Messengers see him. It's not verbal or visual communication. It's a sudden visceral perception of the vastness of the universe and the insignificance or undesirability of the subject in that milieu. The Hermit virtually becomes a transmitter for the Heralds' judgment, burdening a target with the static.

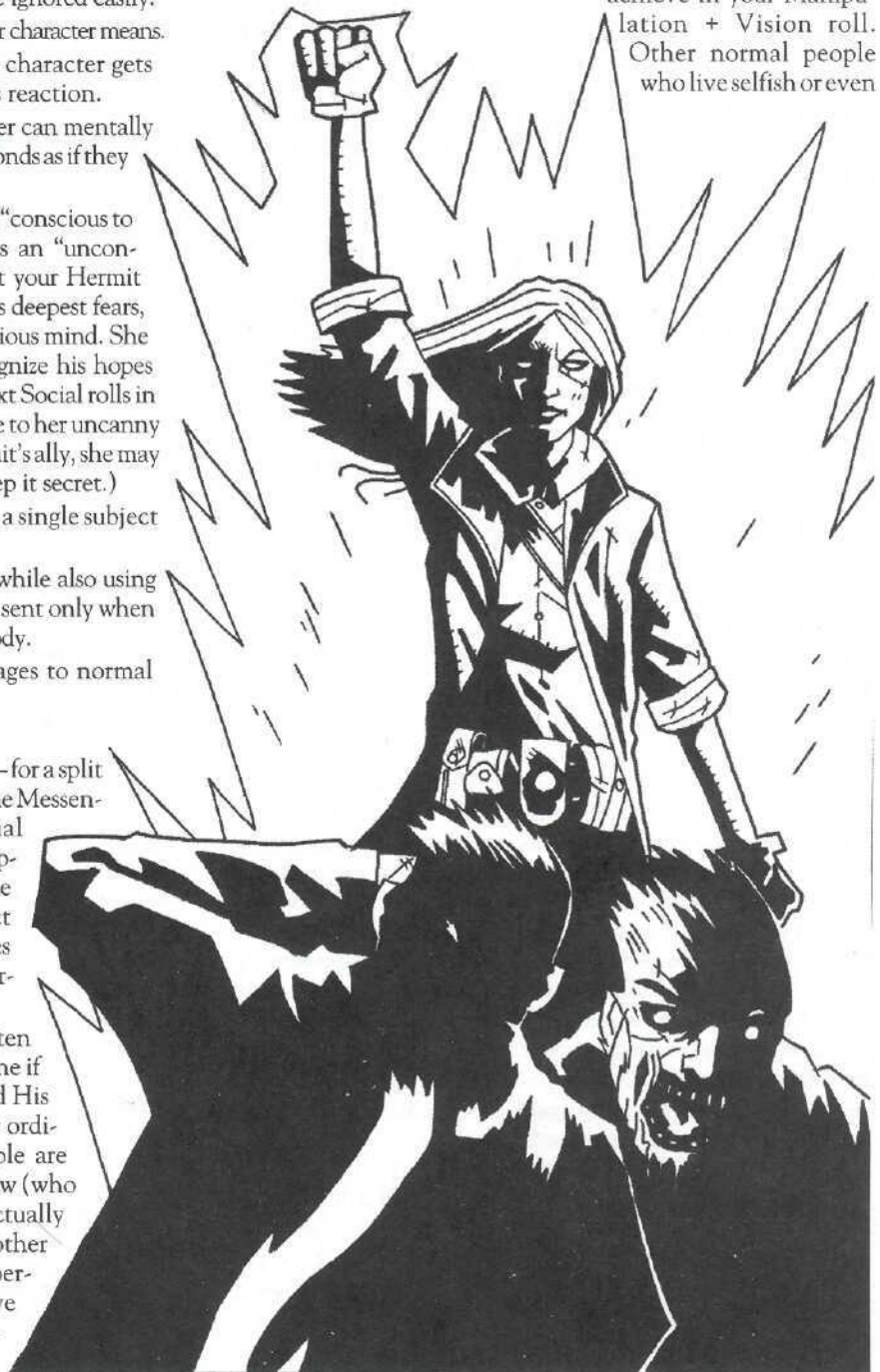
For supernatural creatures, Edict often inflicts excruciating rage or despair. (Imagine if God spoke to you from a pillar of flame and His first words were, "You are worthless.") For ordinary humans, it's less painful. Some people are unaffected, some are depressed and a very few (who are particularly humble or selfless) are actually buoyed by their own sense of worth. For other imbued, Edict can be a curse (when they perceive the extremely long hard road they have ahead) or a blessing (when they get confirmation that they're on the right path).

System: Roll Manipulation + Vision, difficulty 6, and spend one action as your character and the subject's eyes meet.

If the target is a supernatural creature, it automatically loses a point of Willpower for every success you achieve, to a minimum rating of zero. Ancient or powerful creatures are as likely to be affected as young ones, the former glimpsing the abominations they have become and the suffering they have caused, the latter sensing the misdirection their lives have taken and the humanity they have lost.

If the target is a regular person (or bystander) who serves the forces of the supernatural, whether wittingly or not (such as being a human pawn or agent of monsters), he or she loses one point of Willpower, no matter how many successes you

achieve in your Manipulation + Vision roll. Other normal people who live selfish or even



abusive lives, but who do not directly serve monsters in any way, suffer no effect. Meanwhile, those rare people who seek to live some kind of deserving or rewarding life can gain a sense of encouragement or worth in the encounter with your character. They gain a point of Willpower.

If the subject is a hunter, the Storyteller decrees whether that person has been true to her personal beliefs and values in the hunt (i.e., her creed) or has denied or abandoned her ethics of late. The former gains a point of Conviction and the latter loses a point. Those who behave neutrally — staying on and straying from their respective paths in equal measure — get a sense of being analyzed, but are not judged.

No hunter can gain or lose more than one Conviction point per chapter from use of this edge. Hermits and Waywards, being in close contact with the Messengers at all times, are completely unaffected by this edge. High-virtue Hunters are similarly more challenging to affect — the difficulty of your roll equals the extremist's highest Virtue rating, which should be 7 or more. No monster or person can be affected by this power more than once per game session.

Whether a target is a monster, hunter or a regular person, being evaluated by a Hermit's piercing gaze is unnerving. Being found wanting is horrible; the creature feels insignificant, irrelevant and sinful, and inexplicably understands that its goals are in direct contradiction to the natural order. This is extremely upsetting and depressing and might even prove frightening, driving a creature off. On very rare occasions, this judgment may be accompanied by actual physical pain. By contrast, hunters who fulfill their roles are heartened and encouraged, gaining new levels of self-belief and personal worth.

Edict has no effect on animals or creatures with subhuman intelligence. One needs a certain level of intellect to suffer an existential crisis.

This edge cannot be used in conjunction with Reach, since your Hermit does not use his physical eyes when seeing remotely.

••••• TRANSCEND

With this edge, a Hermit can step out of his body as a spirit, not just with his senses as he can with Reach. He can move instantaneously to any point on Earth that he has previously visited physically or astrally, or from which his body holds an object. He can travel to these places at speeds of up to 1,000 miles per hour (250 miles per 15 minutes). In addition, some other edges can be used by the disembodied spirit. Physical edges such as Cleave don't work, but non-physical ones like Send, Burden and Discern do. Your character can also make *very small* changes in the physical world — not enough to do damage or even turn on a light switch, but maybe enough to knock a piece of paper to the floor or to write a message in the condensation on a window.

Astral existence is not safe. A Hermit feels solid to other spirit entities (most notably ghosts) and they feel solid to him. This means hand-to-hand fights can occur between otherwise immaterial beings. A Hermit is also visible to hunters with active second sight or perception-based edges such as Discern, Witness or Illuminate. Hunters perceiving the "spirit Hermit" are likely to think him a ghost, unless he takes the time — perhaps using Send — to try to inform them otherwise.

System: Spend a point of Conviction and roll Stamina + Vision, difficulty 8. Your character must also spend an action to activate this power. If successful, your character leaves his body and enters a different realm, one that surrounds the material world but doesn't affect it directly. For each success rolled, your Hermit can remain "astral" for 15 minutes. At the end of that time, he returns to his body instantaneously and cannot leave it again for at least 24 hours. He may also return prematurely at will.

In astral form, Wits is used instead of Dexterity, Intelligence instead of Stamina, and Manipulation instead of Strength. This change applies for all interactions between astral bodies, but *not* for the use of edges.

Astral forms can fight. The Hermit's astral body has the same health levels as his physical body at the moment he projects. If he's killed while astral, the character dies and his body becomes an empty shell in a coma — easy prey for any possessing spirit. All "astral damage" is healed when your Hermit returns to his physical form. It is absolutely impossible for any Hermit to enter any vessel other than his own physical body — he cannot possess any creature or object, even another Hermit who is in a "projecting coma."

Your character can activate second sight and its protection while projecting, but it affects his astral self only, not his dormant body. The static also applies to your character when he projects. Creatures or hunters within range of the approximate location of your character's spirit, *not his body*, invoke the noise. All static rules apply normally thereafter.

As with Reach, a Hermit using Transcend cannot sense what happens to his physical body. He returns forcibly if his body is ever rendered Incapacitated while his spirit is elsewhere, and he is unconscious thereafter in body and soul. If his body is killed while transcending, his spirit dies, too.

It costs one Willpower point to affect the material world in a meager way when projecting, as described above. Your character's spirit can also pass through material objects as discussed under Reach. It's impossible to speak to physical beings while projecting, although the Send edge can be used to communicate.

Anyone in your projecting character's vicinity may sense his presence. Roll Perception + Awareness, difficulty 9, for normal people (including other imbued). The difficulty drops to 8 for animals and supernatural creatures. It's 7 for creatures with supernatural senses or anyone with the Awareness Ability. "Spectral displays" performed by your character, such as writing in the condensation on a mirror, are blatant evidence of some kind of presence. Ordinary people and hunters without active second sight who successfully sense or perceive evidence of such otherworldly existence lose control of themselves as if they had seen a ghost (*Hunter Storytellers Companion*, p. 13). Other hunters might have a chance to activate second sight reactively (*Hunter*, p. 133) and can then see your character as an incorporeal being — although not necessarily "wrong" as a genuine ghost might look.

The level-five Redemption power Suspend can trap a Hermit's transcending spirit in the Redeemer's presence. Other hunter edges that affect spirits can affect a projecting Hermit if they are used on him.

●●●●● PROCLAIM

With Edict, a Hermit can show a creature its insignificance or blasphemy in the world. With Proclaim, she can actually bring that being to the Heralds' attention.

This is not an imbuing, but it sure brings back memories to those who are already imbued. The effect conjures the same overwhelming sense of need and duty backed by otherworldly power and intelligence — the same pain and revelation.

As for its effects on the unnatural, it seems to be maddeningly agonizing — literally. They generally go into hysterics and don't seem to be the same afterward.

Proclaiming to a creature is not necessarily easy or safe. The Hermit becomes a conduit through which the power of the Messengers flows, and their view of How It Is goes head to head against the will and worldview of the monster. If the Hermit was a perfect medium for the Messengers' will, it would be no contest. But, as we know, Hermits are far from perfect. If a monster's will to resist is greater than the Hermit's desire to proclaim, the Hermit may suffer from grievous psychic trauma.

Most amazing of all, proclaiming to an existing bystander gives her a second chance, bringing her back to the Messengers' attention as a potential new recruit. Unless the bystander deliberately shies away a second time, she can join the imbued as a genuine hunter. Proclaim has no effect on humans who have not already been exposed to the imbuing — it cannot be used to spontaneously imbue people.

This edge is triggered by speaking in tongues. Some theorize that the words spoken are a heretofore unknown spoken equivalent of hunter code.

System: Spend two points of Conviction and roll Vision. If proclaiming to hunters or bystanders, the difficulty is 6. If proclaiming to creatures, the difficulty is the highest current Willpower in the group, maximum 10. Potential targets must be within your character's sight. Your character spends one full turn blathering at the targets to activate the power.

For each success rolled while addressing imbued, one of them enters close contact with the Messengers as if she possesses the Patron Background, assuming she doesn't already, and it is active for the rest of the scene. The Storyteller may take this opportunity to confront each and all recipients with hallucinations, dreams, spoken messages — like those of any imbuing — to communicate information directly to the chosen. These signs and symbols can be as disorienting and nonsensical as ever, but they should allude to something important to hunter origins or purpose, or to dangers or important events yet to come in the chronicle. It's a great chance to give characters prophetic roles in the game, all thanks to the channeling Hermit. The Storyteller decides if hunter subjects of Proclaim suffer difficulties to actions attempted while confronted with messages from above.

If your character allocates at least two successes to a bystander when proclaiming, and in the presence of at least one monster, that bystander has a chance to be imbued again. The bystander's reaction determines creed as it would at any imbuing. If he fails to respond again, he remains a bystander forever thereafter. (No further uses of Proclaim grant another opportunity.)

The effect of proclaiming to supernatural creatures depends on the number of successes achieved. Successes are allocated to or among monsters as you choose.

Successes	Result
Botch	Your Hermit gains a derangement or loses a point of Intelligence, permanently.
1 Allocated	The creature gains a derangement that lasts for the rest of the scene.
2 Allocated	The creature gains a derangement that lasts for 24 hours.
3+ Allocated	The creature gains a permanent derangement or loses a point of either Willpower or Intelligence, permanently.

Derangements inflicted on creatures by Proclaim are typically phobias, fugues or paranoia. The Storyteller decides exactly which derangement affects each creature, and how the creature reacts to the sudden onslaught of mental torment. (For a quick and dirty system, assume the creature loses a die from every pool for the duration.)

If fewer successes are rolled than hunters and/or monsters are present, you have to choose which ones are the recipients of these effects, and how many successes apply to each target in the case of bystanders and monsters.

A Hermit can use this power only once per day. It has no effect on other Hermits or Waywards; they're already close to the Messengers and subject to intense contact. The Storyteller has the option of making truly ancient or powerful monsters immune to Proclaim, or they might be subject to it only if enough successes are applied to them.

MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE

Although they apparently made a fundamental error with Hermits, or else modern humanity simply couldn't cope with contact with the heavens, the Messengers sought to make the creed as effective as possible. Presumably, Hermits were originally intended to communicate with one another regularly and pass knowledge on to other chosen who needed it. To assist this, the Messengers decided to help in this process by taking documents and other sources of knowledge created by Hermits and distributing them, using coincidence and apparent random error to make sure the items fell into the hands of the appropriate imbued. That way, chosen who did not know a Hermit would still be able to receive the information they needed, and traveling Hermits would get the material that they were supposed to. At least, that's how some outcasts try to explain themselves, and hunter-researchers such as Fyodor have begun to accept and promote these claims.

Although their creed is flawed, Hermits still seem capable of relaying what they experience and learn on the hunt to some degree. When one prepares information in the proper way and leaves its dispersal to suitably random forces, the Messengers might take over and ensure that the people who need it get it. Although no Hermit is fully conscious of this process, all are able to do it and repeatedly find themselves driven to reach out. Alone on their cramped islands of isolation, Hermits are occasionally compelled to create "messages in a bottle" of one form or another, and throw them out into the world.

The recipients of these messages are usually Visionaries or fellow Hermits. Of all creeds, they have sufficient familiarity with the Messengers and their teachings to potentially see any of the truth contained within a message. Other creeds can and do receive communications, and may be able to understand any direct warnings or strategic information therein, but material applying to the big picture of the hunt usually makes sense to only Visionaries and other outcasts.

Anchorite Press' "Apocrypha" is the most widely distributed message-in-a-bottle document yet produced. As the first Hermit to try proper publication as a means for this technique, Violin has produced a large supply of material for distribution. Copies of the book turn up through underground sources, through word of mouth and in odd bookshops around the world for hunters of all creeds to "stumble upon." Even so, other Hermits and Visionaries are the ones most likely to be able to distinguish fact from fancy within.

THE CREATIVE URGE

Hermits are repeatedly driven to produce message-in-a-bottle documents during the course of their existence. Each time a Hermit is about to acquire another Vision point, she feels a powerful need to record or express her insights and experiences that have led up to that acquisition. This force builds within her each time her Conviction increases until, when 10 Conviction are cashed in for a Vision point, she is compelled to create a message. (Conviction exchanged for another kind of Virtue does not demand creation of a message. Nor are messages created for the first Vision points a Hermit acquires at character creation.)

The technique for creating a "message in a bottle" is subconsciously known to all Hermits, and is quite simple. Any medium of storing and transmitting information can be used, from writing or drawing on paper through recording audio or video cassettes, all the way to composing an email or, like Violin, publishing a book. Your Hermit draws upon the signs and hints passed on to her by the Heralds, along with fragments from the static, things she has seen with Reach, material from hunters or from other sources, and her own insights and deductions, and pours the collected rantings out onto the paper, keyboard or whatever. Your character always has justification for her actions — keeping a daily diary, making a record of interesting happenings, describing events to a friend or relative, or even performing a psychological exercise. Violin's letter of previous chapters, written without a specific recipient and apparently at the behest of Fyodor, is a good example of a rationale for a message in a bottle in the making.

Once the document is finished (that is, once the Hermit has said everything she has to say — a process that demands about two days' work and the investment of a Willpower point), she must cast the message out for the Heralds to deliver. For a piece of paper, that can be as simple as balling it up and throwing it out. Larger items can be "accidentally" dumped in the trash, left in a café, put in an envelope or mail sack with no delivery or return address, or sent to a small-press magazine for publication. Faxes can be sent to "wrong" numbers, and emails might be sent prematurely, even with blank recipient windows. A physical book like "Apocrypha" can be put in general circulation, even if it's overlooked by almost everyone except the imbued. The need to dispose of, relinquish or fire off the

document can be rationalized by the Hermit in terms of dispensing with a foolish waste of paper, as careless treatment of the material or even as something "funny" to do.

Only some Hermits genuinely know that they compose documents for distribution by the Powers That Be. Yet, if any one fails to relinquish hers immediately, a nagging sense of dissatisfaction with the document builds day by day until she is finally so fed up with the item that she discards the message in exactly the sort of random way that allows it to be passed on to an appropriate recipient. Indeed, until the message is dispatched, the Hermit is unable to gain a Vision point.

As soon as an item is released, your Hermit is granted a modicum of relief from the static, almost as a reward for performing her duties. The Heralds' attention is temporarily focused on getting the message in a bottle to the right recipient and away from your character. For a week after sending a message, the effective range for triggering the static is reduced to one-half of your character's usual level, making life somewhat more bearable for her.

By the time your Hermit attains 3 Vision, 1 Mercy and 1 Zeal, she has been through the process enough times to suspect that the Messengers guide her hand, that the effort makes her feel positive for a while, and reduces aggravation caused by the static. She may also start to receive enough messages herself — see below — that she begins to sense the unique communal pain shared by all outsiders.

MAKING IT REAL

If you or the Storyteller decide that your character is about to gain Vision from a Conviction exchange, based on story events or personal development, you can prepare for the creation of a message. Your character may be inspired and drop out of the hunt for days to capture the thoughts and realizations she's had. Such dedication might even be at the detriment of other imbued who need your character's help or contribution. It all depends on how badly your character feels the need for greater insight and understanding (how much you need that next Virtue point). Acquisition of it might mean the development of a new Vision-based edge that makes a considerable improvement in your Hermit's efforts on the hunt. That difference might outweigh the immediate needs of fellow hunters.

You're encouraged to actually design the document that your character creates, making a real-world version of her expressions. The Storyteller should offer you some cryptic insights into coming events in the chronicle — a warning of a monster looming, a threat of a character trailing from the cause, a caution of the dangers of obsession for the hunt — and allow you to interpret them into your work. He can then incorporate your creation as an actual prop in your game, which other players might receive. Imagine the Storyteller throwing a balled-up piece of paper at a player mid-game, seemingly without provocation, as his character walks down a street. Who knows where such real-world items can lead your game?

INCOMING MESSAGES

The flip-side of creating a message in a bottle is that every so often, your character is the recipient of one of them. Even members of others creeds occasionally receive these cryptic communications, which might be theoretical discussions, diary entries, rants, third-party case notes or just about any-

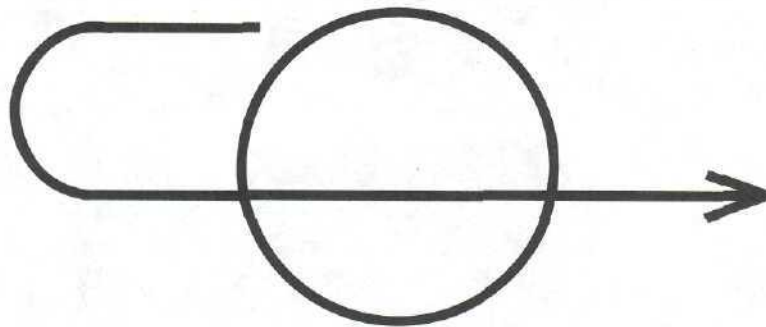
thing else. They may seem bland and irrelevant, or as cryptic as one of the Heralds' own communications, but the messages always contain material that the recipient finds useful — once it has been deciphered.

For the Merciful and Zealous, messages tend to be timely warnings, information about objects, creatures or locations that the recipient is involved with or that pose a threat, or accounts of events that clearly highlight dangerous flaws in a plan or that foreshadow events to come. The journals of the imprisoned Tyrone Bellamy (**Hunter Book: Martyr**), faxed around the imbued community by Hermit Celia Goldman and the Muslim Federation, are an excellent example of imbued of various creeds receiving messages.

Hermits and Visionaries tend to receive messages that are more abstract — rantings and wild theories that other hunters would discount as sheer lunacy. However, careful study generally brings the recipient to greater understanding or acceptance of an issue that she was uncertain of, or a message may offer tools for the hunt, such as new code signs

or hints on how to learn an edge from a different creed. Some messages received by Hermits or Visionaries might be no more useful than the daily newspaper. Still others may invigorate your character in the hunt and its purpose, offering Conviction or Willpower points. In the last case, your hunter is reassured that she is on the right track, that her assumptions, priorities or ways of dealing with the world are correct, or even that actions she has taken or information she has passed has helped save lives.

The content and frequency of messages that a character receives are always at the Storyteller's discretion. He alone may specify the benefits or knowledge, if any, that can be gained by studying a particular message in a bottle. Those created by Hermits of increasingly higher Vision rating are particularly Byzantine, confusing and elaborate — but might also contain the most revelatory truths. When such documents are introduced spontaneously into your game, the Storyteller should design them as props just as you can for your own character's creations.





CHAPTER 6: ANCHORITES

*They wandered in the wilderness in a solitary way; they
found no city to dwell in.*
— Psalms 107:4

Receiving the word of the heavens puts a traumatic strain on Hermits — more than their mere mortal bodies and minds can withstand. The result is often people driven into isolation, afraid of human contact, wary of any who approach and frustrated that they are constantly confronted with monstrous visions — visions that must be responded to *somehow*. Outcasts deal with all these pressures in various ways, almost always as a product of who they were before the imbuing and who they have become since — as beleaguered human beings. This chapter profiles some of these people for you to use as characters or to introduce into your chronicle. Elaborate on them as you like and make them your own.

REDNECK

Crapola.

Prelude: You've heard all the names: Hayseed. Yokel. Hick. All from people who'd starve dead in a week if the supermarket and the Starbucks closed down.

Who needs 'em? You don't. You got the same farm your great-grandpa farmed. You got woods full of deer and squirrels. You got streams full of fish. Those city folks need *you*, which is probably why they turn up their noses. They need to eat and you've got food. What do they have that you need? Investment tips? Faster Internet access? Imported gizmos from wherever?

Crapola.

The only thing they have that you need is money. Because truth to tell, that's something of a sore spot. Used to be, a man could farm and fish and live all right selling his surplus. Now those factory farms, they've bought the best land. They're getting all the deals from the fertilizer companies, all the deals from the seed companies, because when you buy insecticide for a million acres, no one needs to bother selling to the little guy.

So instead of peddling everything you grow at the lousy co-op, you've found this place in the city where people pay crazy prices for a squash that was grown without chemicals. (Or at least you say it was grown without chemi-

cals.) "Organic produce," they call it. Sure. Whatever. Just don't forget to sign the checks.

So, one day you're in the city dropping off some pumpkins and right there, right in the middle of the strip mall, the ground cracks open and dead folks come out. You'd heard crazy Ned go on and on about the angry dead taking revenge when their graves were violated. You figured it was bullshit. Maybe now you owe him an apology.

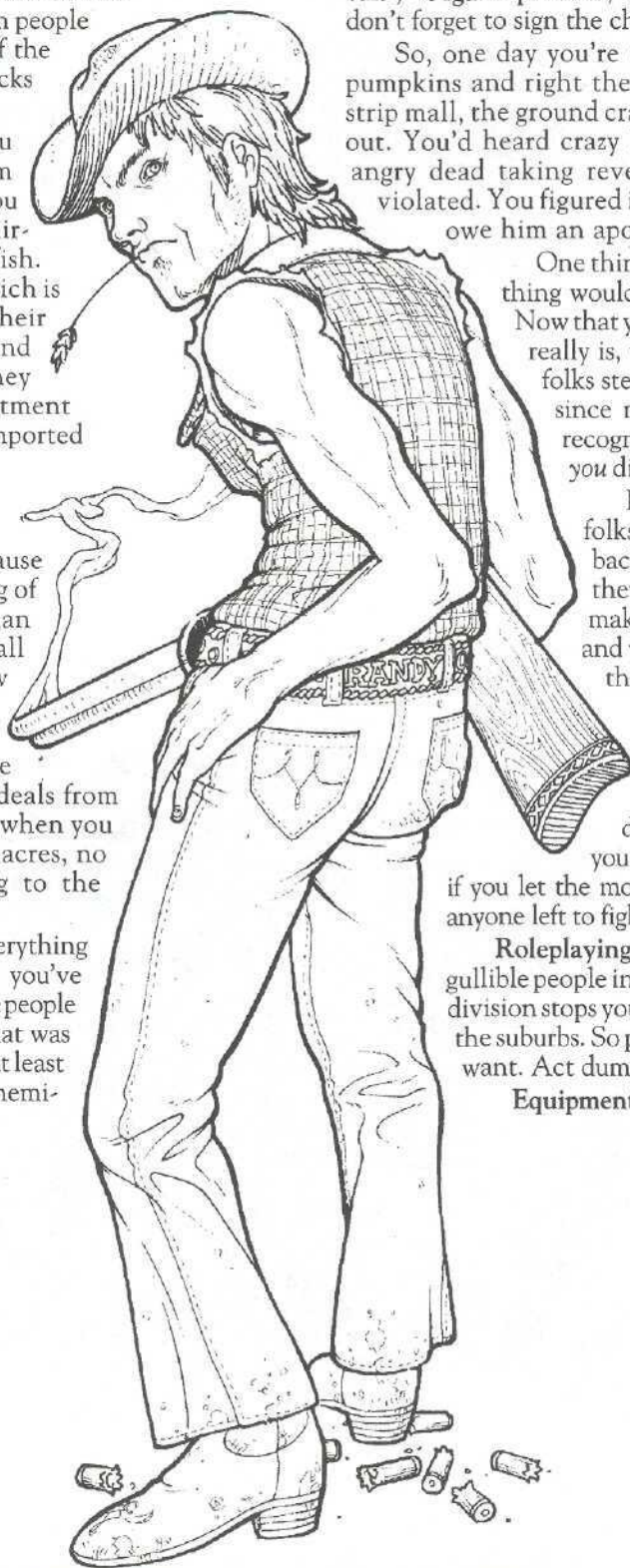
One thing's for sure, though, that kind of thing wouldn't happen out in the country. Now that you know how dangerous the city really is, you're tempted to let those city folks stew in their own juice. Especially since most of them are too dumb to recognize what's happening. But then, you didn't know that long ago, either.

Besides, if you can't get the city folks to fight the things in their own backyard, there's no friggin' way they'll bail you out if the things make it out to the country. It's war, and you'd rather fight it on their turf than yours.

Concept: You're fiercely independent and have a chip on your shoulder. At the same time, you know you're *not* as independent as you pretend. Even while you can't stand people, you know that if you let the monsters kill them, there won't be anyone left to fight when they come for you.

Roleplaying Hints: City folk are the most gullible people in the world. They think that long division stops you cold if you're from further than the suburbs. So play on that. Give 'em what they want. Act dumb — until it's time to be smart.

Equipment: Pick-up truck, shotgun, tractor



HUNTER-BOOK Hermit

NAME:

NATURE: traditionalist

PRIMARY VIRTUE:

PLAYER:

DEMEANOR: curmudgeon

CREED:

CHRONICLE:

CONCEPT

STARTING CONVICTION:

ATTRIBUTES

PHYSICAL

Strength
 Dexterity
 Stamina (Long Hours)

SOCIAL

Charisma
 Manipulation
 Appearance

MENTAL

Perception
 Intelligence
 Wits

ABILITIES

TALENTS

Alertness
 Athletics
 Awareness
 Brawl
 Dodge
 Empathy
 Expression
 Intimidation
 Intuition
 Leadership
 Subterfuge
 Tolerance

SKILLS

Animal Ken
 Crafts (Engines)
 Demolitions
 Drive
 Etiquette
 Firearms
 Melee
 Performance
 Security
 Stealth
 Survival
 Technology

KNOWLEDGES

Academics (Agriculture)
 Bureaucracy
 Computer
 Finance
 Investigation
 Law
 Linguistics
 Medicine
 Occult
 Politics
 Research
 Science

ADVANTAGES

BACKGROUNDS

Animal Companions
 Resources
 Patron

EDGES

NAME	CREED	LEVEL	TRIGGER
Reach	Solitude	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Cleave	Vengeance	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	_____
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VIRTUES

MERCY	VISION	ZEAL
SCORE SPENT	SCORE SPENT	SCORE SPENT
1 <input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> X _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____
2 <input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____
3 <input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____
4 <input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____
5 <input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____
6 <input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____
7 <input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____
8 <input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____
9 <input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____
10 <input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____

DERANGEMENTS

Paranoia

CONVICTION

WILLPOWER

EXPERIENCE

HEALTH

Bruised
 Hurt -1
 Injured -1
 Wounded -2
 Mauled -2
 Crippled -5
 Incapacitated

URBAN STYLITE

God, I hate people.

Prelude: The stylites were early Christian zealots who went out in the desert and sat on tall columns of stone, seeking enlightenment. Lucky bastards. They never had to deal with a landlord who thinks that just because he can't change the rent on an apartment, he doesn't have to change the light bulbs, either. The stylites didn't have to deal with that fat cow in 4A asking them to watch her cats while she goes on vacation. "The vet charges so much to board them and there's only three and you seem like such a nice young girl." They didn't have to deal with getting asked out by "Rodney-c-c-call-me-R-r-raw" from 7D, whose tongue stud and leather jacket haven't changed his stutter or his boondocks accent. They don't have to deal with Stefani on the other side of your bedroom wall having loud, Cosmo-girl multiple orgasms every Friday night after the '70s retro clubs shut down.

You wish you were deaf. You wish you had atrocious body odor. You wish you had leprosy or that you were a huge one-eyed man with scars and a chainsaw. Anything to get all those puling, stupid, drippy nosed people to stay away.

You'd leave the city, except that you never have and figure that people in the rest of the world are just as stupid, if not stupider. (Hell, when "R-r-raw" moved here from Idaho or Ohio or wherever, he probably lowered the average IQ in both places.) At least in the city you've got universities, museums, and a few people educated enough to be tolerable.

You spend your days in libraries, where the quiet is mercifully enforced. Your name is known to a small but sufficient circle as an excellent researcher

and fact checker. Those are the good times. Most of the time you have to make ends meet by editing execrable manuscripts, doing translation scut-work and digging up details for authors too lazy and inept to do their own damn research.

Until one night one of the researchers from the inner circle — a particularly brilliant scholar of the Renaissance — asked to meet you late. You agreed, hoping to pick up some more lucrative work.

What he offered was not work. He offered you the chance to live forever. Before you even had a chance to grasp the question, he was attacked by a gang of punks. You didn't want to get involved, but you had to. He killed two of them, but as he was going after the third... maybe if she hadn't been so young you would have let the chips fall wherever, but... You joined in. You stopped him.

Now, more than ever, you envy the hermits on their pillars, splendidly aloof and delightfully alone.

Concept: You're much more comfortable with what people produce — words, ideas, languages and philosophies — than you are with people. You prefer to deal with them at a distance — correspondence, email or by phone. Now you're faced with a situation that seems to demand face-to-face interaction, and you don't like it.

Roleplaying Hints: You're a sullen loner and everyone you meet is an irritating doofus until they prove themselves otherwise. The only thing that really brings you out of your shell is a chance to show off your smarts.

Equipment: Stun gun, pepper spray, frumpy clothes, bulky Pentium III computer, endless notepads and countless books



HUNTER-BOOK Hermit

NAME:

NATURE: *pedagogue*

PRIMARY VIRTUE:

PLAYER:

DEMEANOR: *curmudgeon*

CREED:

CHRONICLE:

CONCEPT

STARTING CONVICTION:

ATTRIBUTES

PHYSICAL		SOCIAL		MENTAL	
Strength	● ● ○ ○ ○	Charisma	● ○ ○ ○ ○	Perception <small>(Inconsistencies)</small>	● ● ● ● ○
Dexterity	● ● ○ ○ ○	Manipulation	● ● ● ○ ○	Intelligence <small>(Research)</small>	● ● ● ● ○
Stamina	● ● ● ○ ○	Appearance	● ● ○ ○ ○	Wits	● ● ○ ○ ○

ABILITIES

TALENTS		SKILLS		KNOWLEDGES	
Alertness	● ● ○ ○ ○	Animal Ken	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Academics <small>(European History)</small>	● ● ● ● ○
Athletics	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Crafts	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Bureaucracy	● ○ ○ ○ ○
Awareness	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Demolitions	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Computer	● ● ○ ○ ○
Brawl	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Drive	● ○ ○ ○ ○	Finance	○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Dodge	● ○ ○ ○ ○	Etiquette	● ○ ○ ○ ○	Investigation	● ● ○ ○ ○
Empathy	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Firearms	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Law	○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Expression	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Melee	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Linguistics	● ● ● ● ○
Intimidation	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Performance	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Medicine	○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Intuition	● ○ ○ ○ ○	Security	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Occult	● ○ ○ ○ ○
Leadership	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Stealth	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Politics	○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Streetwise	● ○ ○ ○ ○	Survival	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Research <small>(Rare Books)</small>	● ● ● ● ●
Subterfuge	● ● ○ ○ ○	Technology	● ● ○ ○ ○	Science	○ ○ ○ ○ ○

ADVANTAGES

BACKGROUNDS		EDGES		VIRTUES				
		NAME	CREED	LEVEL	TRIGGER	MERCY <small>SCORE SPENT</small>	VISION <small>SCORE SPENT</small>	ZEAL <small>SCORE SPENT</small>
<u>Contacts</u>	● ● ● ○ ○	<u>Reach</u>	<u>Solitude</u>	● ○ ○ ○ ○		1 ○	● X	○
<u>Resources</u>	● ● ○ ○ ○	<u>Send</u>	<u>Solitude</u>	● ● ○ ○ ○		2 ○	● X	○
<u>Patron</u>	● ● ● ○ ○			○ ○ ○ ○ ○		3 ○	● X	○
	○ ○ ○ ○ ○			○ ○ ○ ○ ○		4 ○	○	○
	○ ○ ○ ○ ○			○ ○ ○ ○ ○		5 ○	○	○
	○ ○ ○ ○ ○			○ ○ ○ ○ ○		6 ○	○	○
	○ ○ ○ ○ ○			○ ○ ○ ○ ○		7 ○	○	○
	○ ○ ○ ○ ○			○ ○ ○ ○ ○		8 ○	○	○
	○ ○ ○ ○ ○			○ ○ ○ ○ ○		9 ○	○	○
	○ ○ ○ ○ ○			○ ○ ○ ○ ○		10 ○	○	○

DERANGEMENTS

Demophobia ● ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

_____ ● ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

_____ ● ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

_____ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □

CONVICTION

● ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

WILLPOWER

● ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

EXPERIENCE

HEALTH

Bruised		□
Hurt	-1	□
Injured	-1	□
Wounded	-2	□
Mauled	-2	□
Crippled	-5	□
Incapacitated		□

VOYEUR

I like to watch.

Prelude: You have a love/hate relationship with people. People are fascinating, from the proper perspective and in the proper doses. People are beautiful, when you look at them right and can take it in at a leisurely pace. But they can also be nasty, cruel and capricious. You like people, you want people to like you, but you don't understand them and don't know when they're going to *turn* on you. You can be talking to someone, chatting away, getting enthusiastic and suddenly she turns to you and says, "You're starting to creep me out." Just like that. Bang. And suddenly all the smart you thought you were turns into dumb, and all the fun turns into hot humiliation.

You've tried to understand people, but nothing you've heard through your shotgun microphone or seen through your night-vision binoculars has made human interaction any clearer. It was exciting, though — until you got arrested. When you paid your fine and accepted the restraining order, you decided to move to a new town and start over. For a while, it was a real relief to not know anyone.

After a few scary and unpleasant encounters with people you misread, you've found a way around it. You've found a way to keep people at a distance, where you can contact them without all that weird nonverbal face/ posture/ eye-contact garbage getting in the way. The Internet is your salvation. There, people are just words. All words. The best part. And the images of women there are malleable, controllable — not volatile, unpredictable or puzzling. Get into trouble and you can just shut down. That's better. Maybe there's something wrong with you, but you're more comfortable with your net-friends than you've ever been with anyone you've met face to face. Some folks say people on the net lie — showing false pictures, pretending to be who they aren't. What does it matter? If the illusion is more fun than "reality," then what claim does reality have to be superior?

And everything was going fine until one of your next-door neighbors came back from the dead. You knew her because she was pretty and you liked to watch her working in her garden. She died in a car crash — you read about it in the paper. Her husband was going to sell the house when she came back.

You knew you could get in big trouble for watching people, but a walking corpse! Well, that was something you just *had* to figure out.

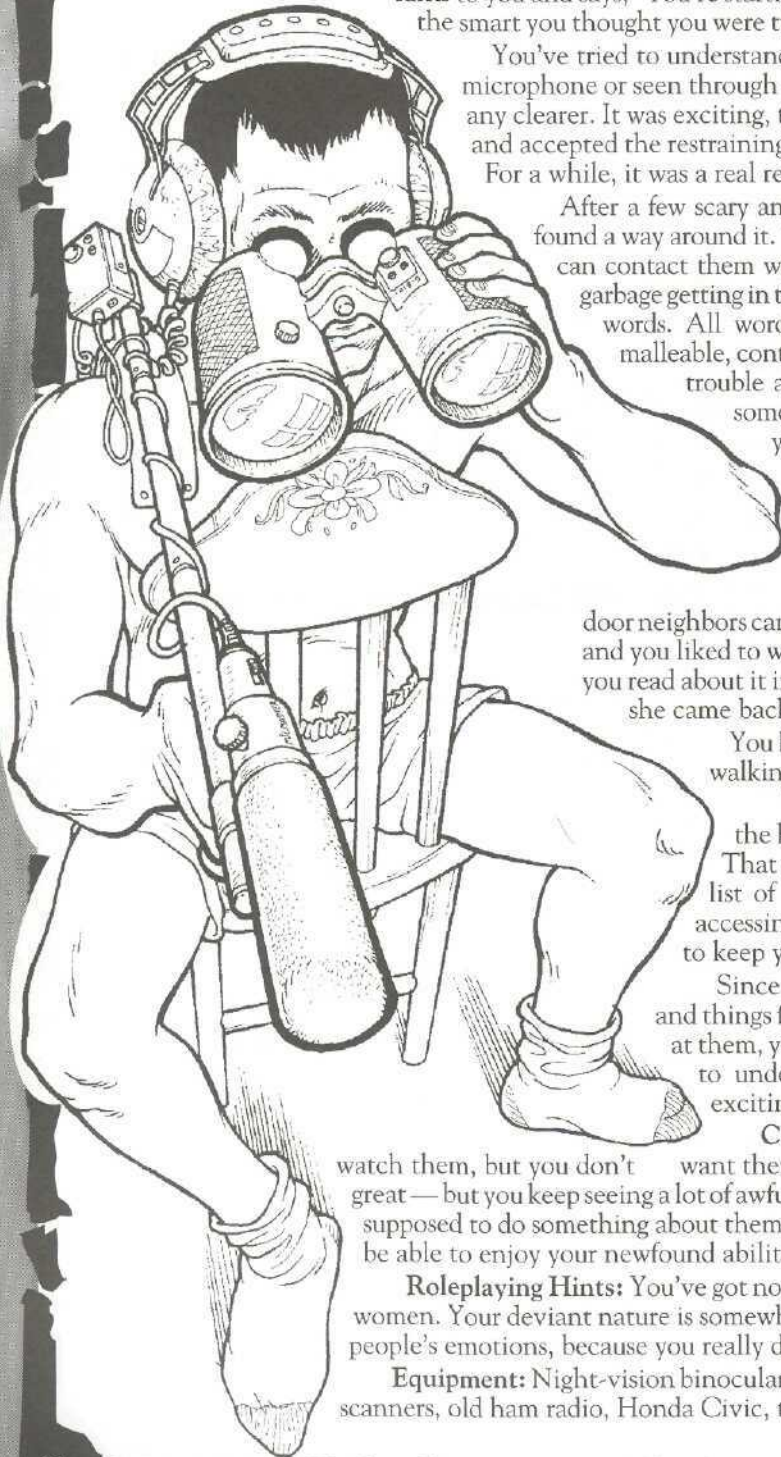
They argued, he ran away, and you convinced him to sell the house to someone who wanted to tear it down and rebuild. That seemed like a good idea. You've also found a web page and list of people who seem to have had similar experiences, but accessing the list makes your eyes blur and your ears ring, so you try to keep your time there to a minimum.

Since that time, you've discovered that you can look at people and things from far away, which is great. No one knows you're looking at them, you can't be convicted, and you think you're finally starting to understand what people are really like. It's scary, but it's exciting, too.

Concept: You prefer people at arm's reach. You'd like to watch them, but you don't want them to be able to watch or affect you. Your new abilities are great — but you keep seeing a lot of awfully nasty things, and you get this terrible feeling that you're supposed to do something about them. Maybe if you get rid of the things that trouble you, you'll be able to enjoy your newfound abilities in peace.

Roleplaying Hints: You've got no social skills and you like to watch people, especially pretty women. Your deviant nature is somewhat under control, but you're still callous and careless with people's emotions, because you really don't have any empathy.

Equipment: Night-vision binoculars, illegal shotgun microphone, cell phone and police-band scanners, old ham radio, Honda Civic, top-of-the-line computer with a really big monitor



HUNTER-BOOK Hermit

NAME:

NATURE: Addict

PRIMARY VIRTUE:

PLAYER:

DEMEANOR: Addict

CREED:

CHRONICLE:

CONCEPT

STARTING CONVICTION:

ATTRIBUTES

PHYSICAL	SOCIAL	MENTAL
Strength _____ ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○	Charisma _____ ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○	Perception (Spying) ● ● ● ● ● ●
Dexterity (Sprinting) ● ● ● ● ○ ○	Manipulation _____ ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○	Intelligence _____ ● ● ● ○ ○ ○
Stamina _____ ● ● ● ○ ○ ○	Appearance _____ ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○	Wits _____ ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○

ABILITIES

TALENTS	SKILLS	KNOWLEDGES
Alertness _____ ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○	Animal Ken _____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Academics (Math) ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○
Athletics _____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Crafts _____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Bureaucracy _____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Awareness _____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Demolitions _____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Computer (Cyber-stalking) ● ● ● ● ○ ○
Brawl _____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Drive _____ ● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Finance _____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Dodge _____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Etiquette _____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Investigation _____ ● ● ● ○ ○ ○
Empathy _____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Firearms _____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Law _____ ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○
Expression _____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Melee _____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Linguistics _____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Intimidation _____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Performance _____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Medicine _____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Intuition _____ ● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Security _____ ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○	Occult _____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Leadership _____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Stealth _____ ● ● ● ○ ○ ○	Politics _____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Streetwise _____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Survival _____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Research _____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Subterfuge _____ ● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	Technology _____ ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○	Science (Applied Electronics) ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○

ADVANTAGES

BACKGROUNDS	EDGES	VIRTUES
	NAME CREED LEVEL TRIGGER	
Resources _____ ● ● ● ○ ○ ○	Reach Solitude ● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	MERCY SCORE SPENT
Contacts _____ ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○	Hide Innocence ● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	1 ● X
Patron _____ ● ● ● ○ ○ ○	_____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	2 ○ _____
_____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	_____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	3 ○ _____
_____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	_____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	4 ○ _____
_____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	_____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	5 ○ _____
_____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	_____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	6 ○ _____
_____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	_____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	7 ○ _____
_____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	_____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	8 ○ _____
_____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	_____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	9 ○ _____
_____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	_____ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	10 ○ _____
		VISION SCORE SPENT
		● X
		○ _____
		○ _____
		○ _____
		○ _____
		○ _____
		○ _____
		○ _____
		○ _____
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		○ _____
		○ _____

DERANGEMENTS

Agoraphobia _____

CONVICTION

● ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

WILLPOWER

● ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □

EXPERIENCE

HEALTH

Bruised

Hurt -1

Injured -1

Wounded -2

Mauled -2

Crippled -5

Incapacitated

PROMINENT HERMIT'S

The following people are among the most noteworthy, or simply well-known of Hermits, if such recognition can be attributed to people who aspire to remain remote and anonymous. The inescapable need to respond to the Heralds' messages is evidenced in these Hermits. Without such demands from above, these imbued would surely turn their backs on the world completely. To the "public" eye of fellow hunters, these people are schizos and fuck-ups — hunters too warped to identify with. Little do other imbued realize that these few represent the best of a very rare and unique hunter mindset.



WAYNE BERG

Wayne is a down-to-earth, grumpy type with little time or energy for the broader philosophical questions of the world. He's got his head down and is trying to get by without screwing up or looking like a clown.

Wayne grew up in Montana. His dad took off when he was 10, and his mom struggled pretty hard after that. Wayne spent a couple of good summers with his loner uncle, hunting and fishing along the Canadian border, but when he was old enough to get a job he started helping support the family. He did okay in high school, and when his mom died and his little sisters moved away, he went to trade school and learned to repair cars. Eventually, he moved to Denver to be near his sisters and there met Beverly Modine. They got married and moved to Beverly's hometown of El Paso, where Wayne opened a garage. Things were okay for a couple years, until Beverly left him and moved back to Denver. By that time, Wayne was settled.

Wayne is pretty skeptical about everything, but where your standard urban-hipster-cynic thinks he's smarter than everyone else, Wayne is just as skeptical and resigned about his own intelligence. He believes he'll never figure anything out, and letting himself think he has is just pure dumb.

Wayne figures that most people are, by and large, worth about the same (not much). He'd like to make things fair and safe

and generally peaceful because, hey, what else is there? To achieve his utilitarian goals, he'll do whatever he deems prudent. He doesn't have big plans. He wants to make things perceptibly better in the short term, and to do that he's just as willing to align himself with the "forces of darkness" as with the imbued.

See, Wayne's hookup with the Messengers has shown him some pretty nasty, big-time badness, and he's got the feeling it's all coming down soon. If he's right about the hard rain that's about to fall, all the plans of critters and things are going to add up to shit. Maybe making things good now is the last chance anyone will have for a long time. If he's wrong, well, that's nothing new.

Currently, that means riding shotgun over a group of yahoos in Texas. Together, they're pretty efficient. He's been careful to insulate himself, but the "Texas Ten" — whose real number is always changing — have a fair amount of confidence in their "mysterious benefactor." They might be less sanguine if they knew he was partnering with a parasite's parasite — a bruise named Maria who's hundreds of years old. She takes full advantage of the Ten's activities to capture and "protect" vampires so that she can continue to exist.

Wayne has no illusions about Maria, but she's useful. He's sure she has no illusions about him, but finds him useful, too. He figures he'll string her along as long as he can, then have his buddies whack her. If she gets jumpy and does him first, well, shit happens.

PAMELA DRUMMOND

Pamela is a nice young lady who's been flung headfirst into several things that nice young ladies shouldn't have to cope with. The first was an encounter with monstrous beings, disguised as beautiful women at a party. The second is the mental-health industry.

The well-meaning but utterly naïve Dr. Wu convinced her to doubt the reality of what she had seen and experienced, but at the same time the Messengers were insistent that they were real.

Pamela finally decided to test her private hypothesis by sending a letter to Paul Ferrie — a co-worker imbued at the same time — containing a message in hunter code. She



showed the letter to Wu, and he couldn't understand the important part, but Paul understood completely and called her to reassure her that what she had seen was very, very real.

Pamela still wasn't sure that the madness was in the world and not her own mind. She had to find out, so she contacted Ferrie again in the same fashion and arranged her own escape.

Unfortunately for Pamela, being around Ferrie and his fellow hunters proved intolerable to her, but they refused to take her problems with "noise" seriously. Pursued by "tumors" while being held close by her own partners, Pamela was perhaps lucky that the police caught her first.

She is no longer held at the institution where Wu still works. She is incarcerated at a secure facility for the criminally insane. They keep her on tranquilizers and anti-psychotics 24 hours a day.

Wu stopped visiting her after she confronted him with what the voices thought of him. He rationalized the experience as "losing his objectivity" in the case. It's possible that he even consciously believes that — or tries to convince himself as much. But on some fundamental level, Wu has seen the truth and has been changed.

Alone in her cell, Pamela finds some peace from the Messengers but only torment in her inability to get out and change a world that needs her desperately. Only one thing keeps her from utter despair. One of her guards came by a week ago with a small symbol written on a matchbook. As he walked toward her cell he was accompanied by a growing swell of voices speaking of him, around him, about him. She breathed on her window and drew a symbol. He nodded as he went by.

CELIA GOLDMAN

Celia Goldman, a court stenographer, heard the voices a few weeks after beginning a new job in Atlanta, Georgia. Working in criminal court, she'd long before developed the detachment necessary to record the most gruesome of details passively. But the details of one case wouldn't be silent on her stenography machine. The police woman's testimony of watching her partner retch blood until he died, of the upscale condo development with desiccated bodies hidden behind the walls, of the 12-year-old



child supposedly responsible — it all made her blood run cold. But she never stopped typing and recording. In fact, her typing grew frantic and the words stopped making sense. Instead of the details of cross-examination, she bashed out "EVIL WITHIN" "MADNESS AWAITS THE" "THE JACKALS" and countless other sentence fragments. No one noticed until she collapsed, her fingers still typing madly at a keyboard that was no longer there. Somewhere in the haze of that breakdown, Celia caught a glimpse of a rotting corpse in judges' robes calling for order.

Celia spent over a year in and out of psychiatric hospitals on a variety of drugs, trying to shake the schizophrenia that manifested whenever she was in a crowd. On the advice of her doctors, she moved to a small town and avoided crowds. It helped, but not that much. Rushes of voices and visions of things still haunted her. It only started to make sense when she met Ibrahim Nasir.

A local black Muslim organizer, Nasir hardly seemed like an ideal confidant to white, middle-class, Jewish Celia, but that's how things turned out. Nasir showed up on her doorstep and told her he had seen the things, too; that he had actually been in the courtroom when she was "revealed," but that he was still "blind" at the time. When he finally awoke to the truth, he remembered her and tracked her down. The judge, he said, was a beast who needed to be stopped. She recognized the truth in his words despite — or perhaps because of — the voices screaming in her head and the cramps in her hands. After Nasir left, Celia wrote for 24 hours straight, venting the voices onto every scrap of paper she could find.

Celia and Nasir have corresponded by email and other remote means ever since. Nasir calls himself an organizer and has gathered a few other chosen in the Atlanta area. Most are African-American, and Nasir uses the Muslim Federation as a cover for many of their activities. Celia exists on the periphery of this group, acting as an occasional advisor and aid. She spends much of her time scanning the news looking for evidence of monstrous activity. She takes meticulous notes and then faxes them to Nasir. She used connections at court to find out details of the judge-monster's life; Nasir used her information to destroy the creature in a back alley in College Park. Celia's voices fell silent for a full week after that.

Last year, Nasir sent Celia a series of hand-written journal entries from a prisoner on trial for murder. The journal revealed that the prisoner — who never identified himself — was chosen and fighting hidden monsters. Celia read the first journal over a dozen times before realizing she had to share it with everyone in the group. At 3 AM, she faxed it to numbers that she misdialled in her exhaustion, and it went through. She sent out the other journal entries she had received as well, and each number tone that sounded was different than what she had entered. Nor could her machine seem to store the numbers that were actually dialed. But with each page, the voices diminished a little and Celia thought her life might return to normal.

The voices came back, however, and they warn of darker things still to come.

WILLIAM HANNON, AKA VIOLIN99

As the only child of an ambitious Bostonian banker and his timid wife, William was expected to follow his father into the financial world. He was raised as a young gentleman — tutored to be like his father, hiding behind a thin veneer of polite civility.

To the old man's fury, William was not interested. Despite plenty of arrogance, he had no inclination for com-



merce, no natural sense of financial ambition and little viciousness. He was far more at home with scholarly pursuits, avidly seeking knowledge of the past as a means to escape the present and the future. Hannon Sr. took his anger out on his wife and child in equal measure, but succeeded only in driving his son deeper into books.

William's parents inspired him more to guilt and loathing than love — his father for being a tyrannical bully, his mother for being weak enough to accept the abuse without fighting back on his behalf. The boy withdrew from them completely, never even realizing how much of a failure he felt. He was sent away to weather his puberty and teenage years in impersonal boarding schools and given to ever-changing domestic staff when home for the holidays.

Eventually, the withdrawn child grew into a well educated but emotionally stunted young man, hiding his sense of inadequacy behind intellectual snobbery, even from himself. The death of his father and his mother's subsequent decline barely pierced his self-absorption. He performed well at college, earning a solid post-graduate degree in his preferred major, History. The politics and brown-nosing required for life in academia eluded him, though. To the irritation of his professors, he abandoned college. He didn't much care what they thought, anyway.

William's credentials got him regular work writing articles for magazines and journals, doing research and checking historical facts for journal papers and documentaries. History and folklore remained his first loves and only true passions. His work also paid well, and over time he started to dabble in the acquisition and sale of antiquities, which proved profitable. A number of half-hearted relationships eventually gave way to a listless marriage, but William never really connected with his wife, or with the girlfriends who had come before her. In the end, his wife filed for divorce and marched out tearfully, leaving him wondering what all the fuss was about.

As the years passed, William failed to gain any real empathy for people. Always judgmental, he considered most of the population his intellectual inferior, and — at

best — a necessary evil. Those he saw as equals could at least expect some degree of respect, but rarely genuine fondness. William channeled his emotional needs into studying and writing, letting his social life atrophy into exclusively work-related contacts.

His imbuing, when it came, seemed to be a validation of his notions of superiority. As the static — “babble,” as William calls it — continued to overwhelm his mind, however, he was forced to accept that it would be with him to a greater or lesser extent for the foreseeable future. With all of his ego drives channeled into his mental abilities, the confusion and distraction of the static left him devastated and extremely depressed.

William was brought back from the brink by a Russian colleague, a fellow historian and antiquarian named Fyodor with whom he had corresponded on a number of issues. The Russian turned up unannounced about a week after William's imbuing and shocked him with all sorts of information about what was happening. In a moment of panic, William went into the kitchen and tried to kill himself, but couldn't even succeed at that. Fyodor bandaged him up and helped him come to terms somewhat with his new life.

William has worked closely with Fyodor ever since, disseminating his colleague's writings and helping with his research. William is one of only two people in the United States to have a contact number for Fyodor. William regards Fyodor as a mentor, patron and friend, perhaps the only one he has. The Russian, in return, has an undeniable interest in the Hermit and seems fond of him, although Fyodor's enigmatic manner makes it difficult to tell.

Recently, after a long absence, William posted a detailed and shocking plea for help to hunter-net, begging assistance from any and all volunteers in eradicating a witch who had brainwashed him into sharing secrets about the imbued. The various hunters who responded all insist that they found his house unlocked and unoccupied. Two groups claim — separately — to have found and killed the witch in question. William has not come forward to announce his escape. If he is alive and free, he's in hiding. It may be that he has been persuaded to join Fyodor on his travels for a time. If so, William could turn up safe and well in any part of the world.

PROFILE

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 3, Charisma 2, Manipulation 2, Appearance (Distinguished) 4, Perception 3, Intelligence (Incisive) 5, Wits 2

Abilities: Academics (History) 5, Alertness 2, Bureaucracy 2, Computer 2, Crafts (Cooking) 3, Drive 2, Etiquette 3, Expression (Writing) 4, Finance 1, Intimidation (Superior) 4, Linguistics (French, Spanish, Latin, Ancient Greek, Russian, Mandarin, Hebrew, Potomac) 4, Melee 1, Occult 2, Performance (Violin) 4, Research (Reference Libraries) 5, Science (Demographics) 2, Security 2, Tolerance (Visionaries) 4

Backgrounds: Contacts 2, Destiny 1, Mentor (Fyodor) 5, Patron 5, Resources 3

Edges: (Hermit) Reach, Send, Edict; (Judgment) Discern, Burden; (Redemption) Bluster, Insinuate

Mercy: 4, **Vision:** 7, **Zeal:** 3, **Conviction:** 8, **Willpower:** 6

Derangements: Megalomania

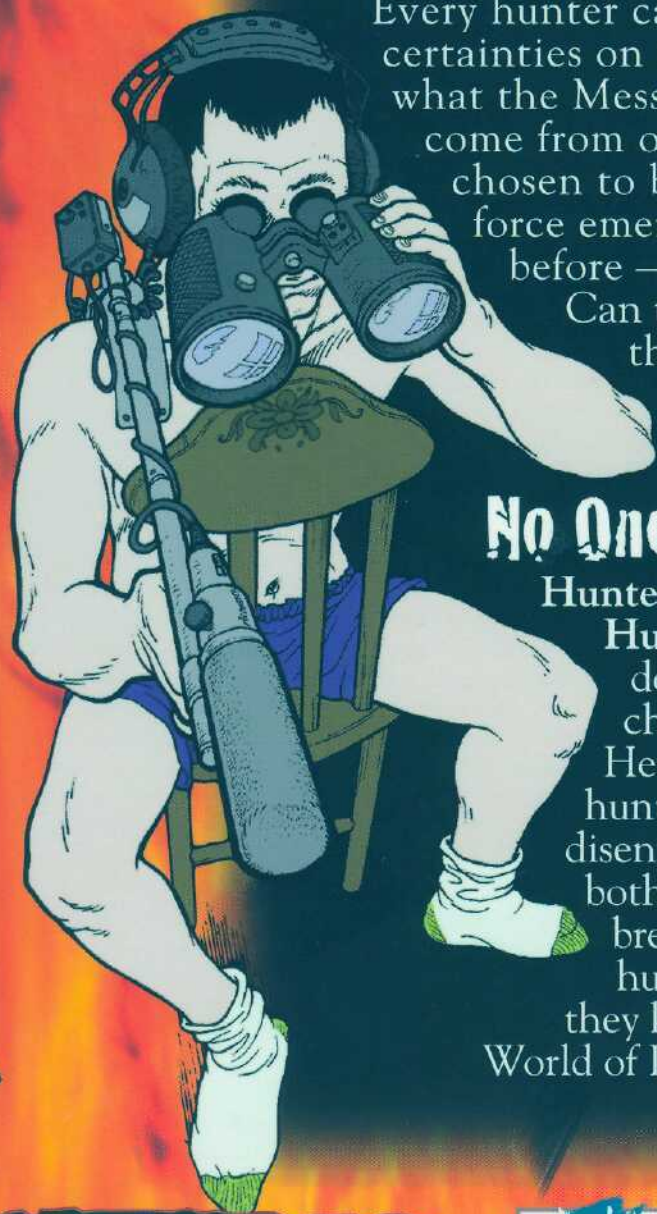
HUNTER-BOOK™ Hermit

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