



GANGREL

SAVAGE AND MACABRE

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AD's Apology

My sincerest apology to Mr. John Van Fleet for accidentally omitting him from the credits in the Ventrue and Daeva clan books.

Special Thanks

I'd like to thank my wife, Michelle, for putting up with my crazy ass when I spend too much time writing about vampires and vampire hunters and ghost-owls and cults and other awful nasty bits. Her patience will earn her sainthood by the end of her life (or the end of mine, even if she murders me in my sleep.

-Chuck



erty of
Alice

I tracked her, as you asked. Her trail hasn't been hard to follow: the carnage she's left behind wasn't concealed, given that her spree is far from graceful. I still haven't found her, not exactly. But somewhere along the way she finally relinquished her grip on what you've been looking for: the journal.

It was laying on the chest of a dead man in an alleyway. The dead man is, or was, Phoenix Malone, one of the thugs working for that so-called Worm Lord, Rufus Septimus. Yes, he's the one who gives me all those problems.

Regardless. I don't know what this man did to deserve having his chest torn open, but it was. I assume she did it, though admittedly I didn't see the murder.

Atop the journal was a Polaroid picture of the corpse. Next to him, the camera itself. I've included both. The camera's probably useless to you, but for the sake of completeness it's in a separate baggy.

If you need more information from her, I will continue my pursuit of the girl. Otherwise, at present, she's causing just enough upheaval and killing the right "wrong" men that I'm inclined to let her continue with this bit of merry-making.

The journal fairly straightforward, though. I don't think my interpretations will add anything special, but I thought I might give you an idea of what to expect.

The first part — the part where I like to think of Alice as "The Girl" — has some interesting reading. It starts with *The Hand on My Neck* (p. 3), where she finds the inspiration to undertake this little project, let's say, and moves right into the first part of *Midnight Roads* (p. 4), her running commentary on life on the road. It gets interesting from there, with *A Spot of History* (p. 4), and her first interview with one of her clan: a historian, as it turns out. She also includes *The Truth* (p. 9), which was apparently nailed to the door of her motel room.

More of her *Midnight Roads* (p. 11) follow, and then *The Ancient and the Monstrous* (p. 12), her interview (and I use that term very, very loosely) with a particularly whorish Savage by the name of "Glinda." Then, we have *The PSA* (p. 20), if you will, an interview with a cackling, jostling brood of neonates, which provides an interesting counterpoint to *Oral Tradition* (p. 23), her interview with Konstantin Korab.

The next section — sort of an interlude — is a piece I picked up from another Sheriff on the other side of the country. It's basically an interview called *Witches, Kisses and Bombs* (p. 27).

The next section of Alice's journals — the sections where I think of her as "The Vampire" — get a little more jumbled. Take her first part of *To the Gingerbread House: Dreams of Cake and Blood* (p. 32), for instance. There's something sloshing around under her psyche. It isn't all introspection here, however; she looks at *Mythic Propoganda* (p. 33), a bit on that damned *Domestication of Enkidu* flyer that's cropped up here and there.

This journal continues her *Midnight Roads* (p. 35) entries before going back to her *To the Gingerbread House: The Ratweasel's Tour* (p. 35) ramblings, this one inspired by a bit of sightseeing in the Old World. The next section — which she calls *A Tribe of Savages* (p. 37). Have you heard of *Jonah Highsteeple's* manifesto? She includes it here, along with the response she gained by sending it to the *Gangrel Seneschal Santana*.

This next section has a whole slew of interviews. More *Midnight Roads* (p. 40) here, this time an encounter with a fucking *Oberlock* run wild. Almost to highlight just how degenerate and wild that feral little runaway was, she then includes *Dogs Loose in the Halls of Power* (p. 45), her interview with *Seneschal Santana*. She also interviews *Mother Janice* (p. 48), a *Sanctum Gangrel* and den-mother of their flea-bitten ilk, and then follows that up with an interview with *The Hierophant, Cerynitis the Hind* (p. 50), a *Savage* that is both *Prince* of his domain and a *Crone-worshipper*.

Then, more of the *To the Gingerbread House: Wolves in the Chapter House* (p. 54), followed by *A Dream: The Chase* (p. 57). From there, she writes more about her *Midnight Roads* (p. 57), this time just a little piece of paper she found. You'll note, by this point, that our little Alice seems to stumble on any number of...interesting things.

She follows this with *The Lord and the Lion* (p. 58), a letter she received that quite unnerved her, it seems. The sixth *Midnight Roads* (p. 60) comes after the letter, and then she has *A Dream: The Conversation* (p. 62) which is perhaps the oddest interview in the journal. Afterwards, more of *To the Gingerbread: Lovely, Dark and Deep* (p. 63). Another *Midnight Roads* (p. 66) rounds out this section, including some interesting photos from a subway.

The strangeness begins to truly grow and blossom here, as she receives *The Phone Call* (p. 66) from none other than the *Hind* she interviewed earlier, and then she goes into her next *To the Gingerbread House: Suffer Not a Witch* (p. 67). She looks also at some interesting individuals of her *Blood in Glimpses from the Blind* (p. 68). The narrative grows stranger with another *To the Gingerbread House: Wakey, Wakey, Blood and Bakey* (p. 70).

Another interlude separates the latter two portions of the journal. This is a transcript with someone who calls himself *Dracula* (p. 71). For what it's worth.

The third chunk of the journal I can only call "The Beast." I trust its contents will make it clear why that is. It starts with *A Dream: The Change* (p. 86), and moves right into a bit of narrative from someone in the wake of *Katrina* (p. 87). Then, another of the *Midnight Roads* (p. 90), which runs on until we go *North of London: The Lambton Worm* (p. 93), where she interviews... Something. It claims to have once been one of us — or perhaps, one of them, one of the *Savages*, but I don't know that you can call it that any more.

We then find the overwrought *The Soul is a Dark Pit* (p. 97). Don't mistake this section for some sort of whinging, though — at this point, there is something going on behind the mask of little Alice's face, inspired by the strange fragment she found here. Shortly thereafter, she met someone who told her an interesting tale of *Draugr?* (p. 99). The journal ends, then, with the ninth and final *Midnight Roads* (p. 102) and then *A Dream: The Conversion* (p. 102), making it very, very clear what has happened to her — a risk that all *Gangrel*, in every *Domain* and *Covenant*, present. As appropriate, the final entries are marked *The End* (p. 103).

- C. Hardaiken

THE HAND ON MY NECK

They have Sarah and Little Jack.

Jesus, I don't even know who *They* are. Maybe it's a Him. Or a Her. Shit, I just don't know! I tried to leave them out of it, tried to make the break. I moved halfway across the country (the "night country," one of us said, and I promise that you haven't seen this place until you've been here only at night, long stretches of empty, hungry night) to get away from them so I didn't expose them to any of this. It wasn't my choice to be what I am, but now I have to live with it —

Live with it. I can't even stop talking like that. Like I'm still alive. Shit!

Okay, Alice. Calm down. You know how they talk about being "hot-blooded," like when you're angry? It's literal for me, now. Wasn't before. Before it was just a... a thing, a descriptive thing, a poetic thing. But the blood inside, it's normally cold, slow, like molasses or corn syrup. Then I get scared. Or angry. And it gets warm. Hot. Not just temperature hot, but the way putting a chili on the tongue burns the skin hot. I wish I could sweat.

All right. Let's go over the thing. Let's take this one step at a time.

Someone took my sister Sarah and her son, Little Jack. They have pictures of them. Bound to chairs in... it's dark in the shots, but I think it's some kind of ballroom.

The letter says they're safe. For now. I tore most of it apart, but... I still have a piece of it. Here!

Expect you perform the tasks. I have put forth in this letter, and your sister and nephew shall remain alive and unharmed. You have one full year, compiler, to comply with my wishes. In that time, if you finish the tasks, I will send you an invitation to come claim

The "tasks." My god, I don't know what He/She/They expect of me. This list of names. I've not heard of most of them. And the ones I have? They don't talk to me. They won't talk to me, and I can't imagine talking to them. I wouldn't make it through the night. I'm supposed to find things out? Certain things? Specific things?

The "List of the Savage and Macabre," the letter calls it.

I'm not going to make it. One of them will destroy me. They'll eat me or tear me apart or rape my corpse or... I don't know what. But I've heard the stories. I'm young. I'm too young. They won't suffer my stupid questions. They won't suffer me taking notes or plunking down a tape recorder.

Shut up, Alice! You have to do this. *Have to.* Sarah. Little Jack. If you don't finish this, who knows what will happen to them? Who knows what He'll do to them?

Yeah, He. Him. I've decided it's a man. It must be. Only a man could be so cruel.

I guess it's time to go to work. The clock is ticking.

HE THAT IS TAUGHT
ONLY BY HIMSELF HAS
A FOOL FOR A MASTER.
—HUNTER S. THOMPSON

MIDNIGHT ROADS

I set out two nights ago. Hitching, mostly, but some of the way I'm walking. The moon's just a curl of silver mercury in the sky. The stars are limitless out here. For the first time in a while, I feel pretty good. Maybe it's true. Maybe we Savages are really meant to be nomads, because damn if I don't feel like a compass pointing True North.

Have a few things with me: my backpack, a canteen of water to wet the whistle, a second canteen of blood to do more than that, a flashlight, a lockback knife, a .38 Smith and Wesson snub-nose with the serial numbers filed off (not my idea, that's just how I bought it) and my Polaroid camera. Oh, doh, and this journal. The one I'm going to write and then give to you, my child gone from my hands and into yours. I'll photocopy it first. I want my own reminder of this trip, if I make it through with my mind and body intact.

Here's the real corker, though:

I've already seen my first ghost.

It jarred me. I know they're real. I've known since I was a kid, really: lived in an old farmhouse where something liked to play with the electronics. VCRs would turn on, rewind, eject videos in the middle of the night - just a nest of vomited brown tape. The stereo would kick up at 4 in the morning, blaring the hiss of white noise. Once in a while you'd see it, a faint brightness in the dark room, not even that,

really just a muted glow like someone had worn the darkness away a bit with a smudged thumb. And it would move over the bed and be gone. Then the phone would ring once and stop.

But I didn't expect to see something like this. Like her.

She was standing on the side of the road. In a sundress I'd think should be yellow but here was colorless, the hue of icy breath. Her pale face was tortured. Frozen in a terrible scream. Weeping. Like she'd just lost

a baby or a boyfriend or her whole damn family in a fire.

What was creepy was how quiet it was. There, her mouth wide open, her eyes squeezed shut, and all that's coming out is the sound of crickets, or a distant engine.

You know what, though? I'll tell you what's really bugging me out.

How human she looked.

That emotion? It was real, boy. I haven't seen that look on the faces of our kind, not really. Mostly it's all cold looks and cool glances. But this woman, so dead she isn't even there, isn't even able to tether herself to a

body, is probably more human

than we are in this mockery of life.

It's like when you die, you only get one of two choices. You get the body, or you get the emotions. You can't have both.

That's some sobering shit.

Won't let it sober me for long, though. The road feels good. The crunch of gravel under my boots is making me feel loose, free, perfectly careless in the best way possible.



A SPOT OF HISTORY

My first meeting. This guy's a historian. Or so I'm told. He's not one of us, which I'm sure is a mistake, but it seems like he's got the clue and I want to know what he knows, or at least what he thinks he knows. I'm assured he has little reason to mess with me. Let's hope that's true and that he doesn't smell the weakness on me like a bad perfume. Because these guys, when they smell weakness, they smell blood. And when they smell blood, they move in for the kill - but not before tossing you around like a cat with a mouse.

[R.K. Transcript]

Alice Sewell: Thanks. For agreeing to meet me, I mean.

R— K—: Oh, don't mention it. You're young.

AS: Pushing 30. Not that young.

RK: I mean in the notes and chords of the Requiem. I'm nearly 40 years dead, that doesn't account for the almost 40 I spent alive.

AS: Oh. Yes. I... I died last year. Well. Almost two years, now.

RK: You don't seem particularly savage. A bit earthy, perhaps. Certainly a wild mote in the dark of your eye, like a firefly flitting against the bottom of a glass jar but otherwise... hardly anything exceptional about you.

AS: I'm nobody special.

RK: Then we're in agreement.

AS: My notes say you're a historian. A notable one, at that.

RK: It's true. Among the Dragons I'm called *martor ocular*, the "eyewitness." Strictly speaking, I haven't witnessed much with my own eyes, given the breadth and depth of our aggregate history. But I study it in such a way that I might as well be the primary source.

AS: Good. Then I don't suppose you mind me asking —

RK: It does you little good to be afraid.

AS: What?

RK: I see it upon you. I learned how to read people from a friend of mine in the covenant. A man named Yellowtail, who is so much a Shadow that he himself has no shadow, though some say he's haunted by himself, a ghost that looks just like him. Perhaps *that* is his shadow. I'm not very good at it, not compared to him, but I see the wisps of fear around you. A bit like frightened fog, mist that parts and flees when you reach toward it.

AS: I don't know what you're talking about.

RK: Play ignorant all you'd like, Alice. Just be thankful that I'm of a more reserved sort than others who you'll encounter. For some, fear is a powerful aphrodisiac. For others, it's a drop of blood in a bay thick with hungry sharks. Those who might slake lust or thirst upon you, well... I couldn't bear to think of such a thing happening to you. I'd practice tamping down that fright, were I you. Like bees and dogs, we can all smell it.

AS: Super. Thanks for the advice.

RK: A touch of sarcasm in there! Good. Wit and anger help fight fear. Now. Let's get back to the point at hand, I know your people favor a certain *directness*. History. What is it you wish to know?

AS: Where we came from. The... us, our clan, the Gangrel.

RK: This could take some time.

AS: As it turns out, I've got that very thing.

RK: Lovely. As all the books say, let's begin at the beginning. From Beasts We Come

RK: Let me first make you understand that I'm not commenting on the present when I say the things I'm about to. I mention this just in case I've underestimated your wild side and that those fireflies behind your eyes emerge with a vicious sting. What I say comes as a comment on history, nothing more, nothing less. Agreed?

AS: Fair enough.

RK: The arc of the Savage origin is curious, for it is at least in part utterly *backward*. They begin as men, become beasts, become monsters, then become slaves.

AS: That doesn't seem to make sense.

RK: Doesn't it? In the earliest days of the Roman Empire, Rome was a great torch shining in the darkness, a light representing indomitable truths and seemingly limitless power. But stray too far from the light and one enters the darkness anew. In the shadowed forests outside the Empire, men dwelled who were... socially and otherwise less evolved than those of Rome, and certainly less so than the proud fiends of the imperial Camarilla.

AS: You're speaking of barbarians.

RK: Yes. More or less. Modern scholarship seems to want to ascribe some kind of civilization to the barbarians, but that's foolish. These were blood-soaked berserkers. Social mores were so thin they were practically non-existent. They weren't Neanderthals, not precisely, but certainly the reptilian brain had a greater stake in the actions of this uncivil lot. And part of the directive of the reptilian brain is sex. For pleasure. For coupling. Following?

AS: Not really. They had sex?

RK: Yes, but not solely with one another. They coupled with beasts, you see. Wolves from the woods, lowly hounds, proud stags. Boars and bears, for all I know.

AS: You're talking bestiality? Are you serious? They fucked animals. They fucked *animals*?

RK: Drop your jaw all you'd like, but as I noted, social norms are a construct of true civilization, Alice. These so-called "men" formed niche tribes, mad moon-howlers out in the deepest, darkest forests. Why, it is believed that humanity contracted syphilis from the hunter cults in northern Europe that routinely ritually mated with does in order to increase their power over the herds, in the long-ago past. They elevated mundane animals to the role of gods. They sought to breed with these gods — or at least, their servants — and in doing so created a kind of unholy, unnatural union. The things that were born were monstrous things — not animal, but certainly not men.)

AS: This... fornication actually resulted in children?

RK: Mad things. Gibbering. Soulless. Venom in the teeth like that of a snake. Eyes that could only perceive in black and white. Ears that tilted and twitched at every tiny sound. Now, what happens next is a bit controversial. I've some loyalty to the Lords, of course, but more loyalty to the truth. *Some* say that these bestial madmen hungered for the blood of men and bit them, much as we do to humans now. And, much as we can do, the bite resulted in a kind of Embrace: vampires of a sort were made. That it was some kind of infection, I guess you could say. Ah, but the logic here doesn't hold. Let's be clear, you and I are not of the same breeding, but we are of the same... species? If that's the word you choose? On the surface, you are me and I am you. Deeper, yes, you find deviance. But it doesn't stand to follow that somehow, the vampires of each family came about from wholly unique means, does it? It'd be like suggesting that some men evolved from apes, others from dolphins. Where does one draw the line?

AS: Okay. So what's *your* theory?

RK: It's hardly a theory and might as well be relegated to fact, or at least a *neighbor* to fact. I as a matter of point have bits of a journal from a Roman *equite* known as Gnaeus, a name whose origin cannot be precisely discerned. As it turns out, Gnaeus was more than just *equite*, he was one of the Roman Damned, a horseman of the Legion of the Dead. It was *he* who suffered the bite from the vicious thing in the woods. It was *he* whose own Blood-capital-B mixed with the blood-smaller-b of the bestial berserker.

AS: So he's the origin point. He's the, I dunno, your outbreak monkey.

RK: If you care to put it so crassly, then yes, Alice, that's it.

AS: And what clan did he belong to?

RK: Why, the Lords, of course. The Savages are a weakened strain of Ventrue blood.

AS: ...

RK: No disrespect, of course.

AS: ...Sure.

- Slaves and Soldiers -

AS: So when you're talking about the arc, you say they're men who become beasts who become monsters who become slaves. It's that last part I'm not clear on. Monsters, okay, they... copulated with animals and became something altogether worse than animals, and somehow that spread to this undead Roman soldier, whatever his name was.

RK: Gnaeus. And he was a horseman.

AS: Yeah. Yes. Him. So how do they — *we* — become slaves?

RK: At first, Gnaeus and his new childer hunted at the margins. Legions on patrol, Roman soldiers drift-



*Little Red Riding Hood
Cherry popped on the forest floor
By the Big Bad Wolf
My what big claws you have*

ing through the trees away from camp — maybe for a piss, maybe for a turn with a barbarian girl — and Gnaeus moves in to feed. And as the nights and years go on, he moves closer and closer to that great shining torch, Rome itself, glory of the seven hills. I have to imagine — and his journals no longer serve to illuminate history here for he stopped writing them — or at least that's what I believe and this is all therefore pure speculation on my part, that Rome looked something like a big buffet for old Gnaeus's childer. Why wouldn't it? Fat with food, it was. Herds of human livestock crammed into darkened streets. It seemed a glorious thing. Gnaeus himself was surely aware of this delight, but even he may have been glad again to see the streets run thick with sweet blood. It's possible that he'd never even seen the inside of the shining city, of course; every soldier might've been a child of the Empire, but not necessarily of the city itself.

AS: So, okay, he and his band of... Savages sees the limitless potential for food and moves in to eat. Which surely made someone less than happy. Princes now don't like it when someone new comes in to start chowing down, right?

RK: Exactly that. This was not a free meal. The servants of Senex would not abide poachers.

AS: The Senex?

RK: The Old Man, the keeper of the Blood of Rome. The Camarilla embodied.

AS: I'll trust you on that.

RK: Good. So, Gnaeus and his men had a choice: to suffer the sword of the Senex and turn to ash by mandate of the Legio Mortuum, or throw on the yoke of civility and become something better than his breeding dictated. His gang of louts and beasts chose wisely, and were given the lowliest, most venal and vile jobs of the Legion of the Dead. Soldiers and slaves, you see. Mercenaries and monsters with mandates. Leashed. Tamed.

AS: I don't think our kind would like –

RK: Yes, yes, you're right. But I can only be held to the standard of truth, not to the service of politeness. Now, let's speak for a moment about a deviation from this story – another *controversial* point.

AS: I can't wait. Let me guess, we were also child molesters?

RK: Be serious. No. Nothing that horrid.

While the barbarian men were coupling with the beasts of the ground – wolves, dogs, black cats, what-have-you – some of the barbarian women mated with their own creatures, but these from the sky. These women were said to have fornicated with ravens, crows and owls in particular. What struggled free from their ragged wombs were again soulless things, but things of a far crueler intelligence than what came from the couplings of the barbarian men. An infernal intelligence, even. These were the Strix, you see? In Slavic tongue, the *strega*. Lilitu, owl-women, soul-eaters and body-thieves. A plague on Rome, they were. Ousted, thankfully, by the Legio Mortuum just before the Empire found its own grandiose weight crashing down upon itself.

AS: And these... owl demons, they're not around anymore?

RK: Correct. Blessedly so.

AS: But they're us. Or some cousin of us.

RK: Not "us." You.

AS: The Gangrel.

RK: Precisely.

AS: So this is the part where the men have become beasts and the beasts have become monsters. Where do we become slaves?

RK: First, you seem young. Perhaps naïve. Are you college-educated?

AS: ... yeah.

RK: Truly?

AS: I didn't graduate. Flunked out, actually. Got involved with the wrong guy and then the drugs, and, Jesus, I just couldn't keep it together. My friend said –

RK: I'm not your biographer.

AS: Sorry.

RK: You'd be smart to keep things like that close to the vest. Others could use it to manipulate you. Each piece of information is a puppet string, one that anybody can grab hold of to make you dance. More advice? I'd learn to lie.

AS: Fair enough. Thanks.

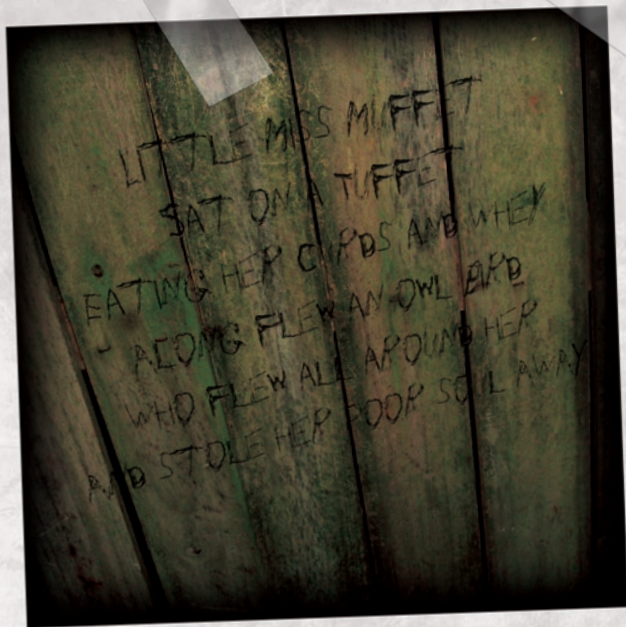
RK: Don't mention it. As in, truly, don't ever mention it to anybody that I was helpful to one of you. Now. Slaves. You have to understand something about Rome. Slaves weren't like the slaves you might think. They weren't generally abused. They sometimes lived nice lives, actually. A wise master was a good master. And the Senex was a good master.

AS: The Old Man. He enslaved us?

RK: Slaves in Rome were often conquered peoples. Sometimes barbarians. Over time, the Savages grew tired of their way: the untamed loping down empty streets, hunting madly for blood, and often getting speared or beheaded for the effort. Some were tossed into the blackest tunnels of the underground Necropolis, left to wander the wastes. But many knew the score. They saw their future, and it was short.

AS: So they... assimilated.

RK: To a point. Much as a dog can be domesticated, so were the Savages. Also like a dog, your people were quite loyal. Trained to attack, to maim, to kill. Hunting down betrayers in Necropolis – sometimes their own. Some of these Savages were Sibyls and prophets, but that frightened most of the Camarilla Damned, and why wouldn't it? It was a great shame to give into those feral visions, and so they were often targets by the more military-minded of your own. Loyal dogs hunting mad dogs. The mad dogs were killed, and the loyal dogs survived. But therein lies an important note.



Little Miss Muffet Sat on a Tuffet
Eating her Cords and Whey Along flew an owl bird
Who flew all around her And stole her poor soul AWAY

AS: Which is?

RK: Even the most loyal hound can turn on its master. The dog is an animal. The dog will never be a man. While men are devious and cruel and callous, the dog is of two minds: the loyal mind and the rabid mind. He isn't devious. He doesn't sneak about and pilfer chickens like a fox or thief coins like a jackdaw. No. He is loyal until he is not, then he is angry. And he bites.

AS: So we're just common dogs.

RK: Not individually. But as a clan? Yes.

AS: Great. So what happened to us?

RK: You did as dogs do when they are let off the leash. Rome crumbled, and the dead hand of the Senex relaxed his grip on your collars. And, smelling freedom, the dogs went wild and ran off into the night. Rejoining with the darkness. Rejoining with the barbarians. And to a degree, that's where you've been since.

AS: Wild. Rampant. Rabid.

RK: Absolutely. Look around. Too few of you have really made much of yourselves. If I could offer advice to you, it'd be to hold onto your humanity. Not in a cloying, tepid, sentimental way, but in the way that the human model is what keeps us sane, what keeps us from our worst instincts. We are murderers, many on purpose, many on accident, but we can still hold onto our civility, our history, our *laws*. Your kind is too swift to discard those things, seeing them as nothing more than the trappings of an uncomfortable skin.

AS: Maybe they just want to be free. Maybe the skin *is* uncomfortable and like a bird or a lizard or... even a spider they have to molt.

RK: Do you believe that?

AS: I... really don't know.

RK: Well. Take time to think about it. Really truly think about it. Were I you, I'd reject those of your ilk who give in so plainly to the animal inside. Lest you be a dirty-cheeked monster, some gross thing sleeping in the ground and supping on rats and children.

AS: A child molester. I knew we'd get there somehow.

RK: You said it, not I. Anyhow. I've somewhere to be. A meeting of the minds, so to speak.

AS: Some roundtable of Dragon academics?

RK: No. A primogen meeting. I was being sarcastic. They want some historical presentation on the Damned of this and nearby cities, so I bow and smile and do as they bid. We're all slaves, dear. To someone outside or to ourselves. No shame in it.

AS: If you say so. Thanks.

RK: Goodnight.

Shit. I found this...
manifesto nailed to
my door!

THE TRUTH

But she bore another unmanageable monster like nothing human nor like the immortal gods either, in a hollow cave. This was the divine and haughty Ekhidna, and half of her is a Nympe with a fair face and eyes glancing, but the other half is a monstrous serpent (ophis), terrible, enormous and squirming and voracious, there in earth's secret places. For there she has her cave on the underside of a hollow rock, far from the immortal gods, and far from all mortals. There the gods ordained her a fabulous home to live in which she keeps underground among the Arimoi, grisly Ekhidna, a Nympe who never dies, and all her days she is ageless. -Hesiod, Theogeny

That's the truth, you stupid bitch. Don't think we haven't been watching. Don't think we're blind to who you been talking to. You think some scum Lord pukefuck is going to give you the truth? And that it won't be discolored and mutated by all his fucking cocky spoor and gas-bloat pride? You want answers like these, you go to your own. You want to talk about Beasts, you come to the Beasts. We are you and you are us, and don't you ever gods damn forget that.

You want the story? You got the story in front of you.

TRICKLE DOWN BLOODONOMICS

When the Earth was unformed, man walked upon it but was by no means the master of his domain. Nature was a mean cunt, winds whipping and rocks biting. And when man died, he did so alone and brutally, and his blood touched the ground and ran downwards in trickles and trails, pouring through crevices and puckered pores into the caverns below the surface.

And that's where our Mother waited. And that's where she fed. The blood drizzled into her open mouth. Bits of skin and bone tumbled down the tumbledown roads and into her lair. She feasted. She grew.

ORIGIN STORY

You want to know where she came from? Fuck you — that's where she came from. Where does the sun come from? Doesn't matter, what matters is only that it burns us to ash. Where does the moon come from? Doesn't matter, only that it gives us comfort in the cradle of the nighttime sky. Whether you call her Ekhidna or the Crone or the Mother of Monsters or Bloody Bitch Nancy or Rawhead Ramona she's the same thing, she's our Mama, she's our legacy. Half-serpent, half-woman, and the creator of our nice little family. You ask that question too loud, little princess, and she'll come sneaking up out of the dark like she does sometimes, and she'll pull your tongue out of your precious head. Maybe she'll replace it with a tongue of her own. A tongue that knows not to ask too many stupid questions and is wise enough not to seek counsel from our little brothers, the Ventrue.

LITTLE BRO

Yeah, that's what I said.

The Lords ain't so Lordly. Let me tell you a story, and this is no tall tale. I knew this Ventrue Prince, a Prince who'd rather remain nameless but he was a treacherous ape so let's go ahead and just call him what he is, Prince Agnon of the Pine Barrens. And this Prince was the king shit, and by that I mean he was the king of shit. All the dumb Damned of that domain weren't much more than a hardscrabble bunch of dipshits and common dogs with about as much poise and grace as a headless rooster. Not to mention the draugr problem we had — the old Prince, funny enough. But Agnon, he thinks himself the cream of the cream, but really he's just the prettiest turd that floats to the top of the bowl, buoyed by its own sense of self-satisfaction. He wore the nicest suits. Had a man to polish his shoes, buff his nails, pick flakes of dried blood from between his teeth.

But I caught him one day sitting in a shaft of moonlight in the middle of a clearing, the trees all around him. There he sat, weeping tears of blood and jabbering, all around him an orbit of dead animals. I hid behind a thicket of thorns and I watched as for hours the shit king called animals to him from the darkness of the woods, and he would talk to them for a while, just babbling away in some kind of crazy beast tongue. And then he'd torture them — little squirrel legs snapping between insistent fingers or bird wings twisted off the body like a crab claw — before drinking. Wasn't gaining anything from the drink, I imagine, but there he was, doing it anyway.

MOTHER OF MONSTERS

That's the irony of the Lords. Same way you look at some people and they protest about drink or drugs or sex, and what do they do in the quiet hours before dawn? Drink the meanest vodka, inject poison into their veins, and stick their dicks in rat traps. It's repression. In the Lords' case, repression of the truth, hiding from a reality they all secretly know (because the Beast, it tells them, whispering to them through the Blood) but won't or maybe can't admit.

The truth is that the Lords are just Savages. An off-shoot. A weak offshoot, at that.

I heard one of my brothers say that they stole the so-called "Lordly Tongue" from us. That like Prometheus stealing fire, when they broke away from the Mother's blood they took that like thieves in the night. I shattered his kneecap to remind him not to speak such treachery. They have the command of men because they need it. We don't. We aren't men any longer. We're something else. We're the next fucking step. They still want to play in the kiddie pool with that shit, fine, let them. The rest of us are going for the big leagues. While they're off convincing club rats to dance a certain way or to say something nice, we're in the street. Claws out. Eyes bright. Hunting, like we should be. Like the Mother of Monsters wants.

SIREN'S SONG

See, Ekhidna, she's not all monster. She's part people. Got the mind of a girl, and a girl gets lonely (and I know that you get lonely, hell, you haven't found yourself a proper pack, yet, have you? Get one, bitch, or one will get you). And that's where we come in, you see? And as the chaos leaves the world and the earth starts to form like we know it now, she's tired of being alone in the deep and the dark and so she figures it's high time to do something about that.

She can't go to the surface, of course, so she does the only thing she can do: she sings a song, a deep subterranean lullaby that drifts up out of the same puckered pores and cubbyholes that helped carry the blood down into her belly. And the song catches the ears of many men, and most know that it's not a sane song, and no matter how pretty it was they knew not to go poking around in the dark places. But then you got those others, different humans with a love of the darkness. Those with a wild heart find everything they need in that song, it calls to the boar and wolf and owl inside them. And together a small tribe went into the shadows and deep below the crust and they found her, waiting. She made them into us. She gave them some of her own wildness to complement their own. Some of her black blood jacked into their veins, and that black blood is still floating around in us, today.

BELLY OF THE BEAST

She's still out there, too. Stories say she lives in the dark places underground. Collapsed buildings. Old mining tunnels. In bomb bunkers and volcanic passages and in the boiling vents vomiting gas and magma at the bottom of the ocean. Sometimes you hear of one of our own sensing her siren song and going out to find her. They don't ever come back, but maybe some day they will and they'll be different than us, and they'll be better than us in the way that we are better than people. We're the next step right now, but who knows who's beyond us?

Sometimes, too, they say she'll come up to teach you a lesson. Maybe she'll appear in your dreams. Maybe she'll appear by your bed or stone slab or gods damn coffin. Her beautiful porcelain face. Her indelicate fangs dripping bile and venom. Scaled flesh. Chest of quivering teats, each oozing lacrima.

But even if she doesn't come up on you that way, she's in all of us. The Beast has many faces, and one of them is hers. The old face. The original face.

Mother Ekhidna. She never dies. Her nights are ageless.

We are her children.

And we love our Mama.

You ought to love her, too.

You want, you come find me. Leave a note or a spray tag on the concrete underpass just beneath I-95. We'll find you.

-KOLT-





BULLSEYE

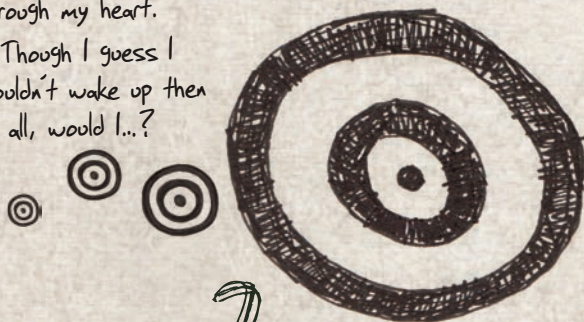
Sun's coming up soon and here I am worried that others know where I sleep. Awesome. He knows where I am. Which means he can't be the only one. I mean, god, I admit that I've probably been telegraphing my every move to whoever's watching me, I guess... I guess I just figured that nobody would be bothering to watch. I don't know who has me on the leash. I don't really know who's following me. But I'm obviously in far deeper waters than I had expected.

I've a big bullseye carved into my chest. No, not literally. But might as well be.

I don't have time to go anywhere else tonight. I should ditch this burned out motor lodge, but not yet, I guess.

Here's hoping I don't wake up with a chair leg punched through my heart.

Though I guess I wouldn't wake up then at all, would I...?



MIDNIGHT ROADS

Town called Jane Doe, do you believe it? I've seen some great town names (Bat Cave, Intercourse, Bird-In-Hand), but Jane Doe?

I came in on the bus, dropped me off at the corner about 2 in the morning. No bars were open. Christmas lights blinked in the general store window, and it's July. In the distance I hear someone pedaling a bike, playing cards *thwip-ing* in the spokes... but I haven't seen this person on a bike yet, I only hear them.

Everything's clean. Not a smudge of dirt on the curb, not a hunk of gum on the road.

The storefronts are impeccable. The houses, too! each one a box inside a box, a beige or pink or ochre home inside white picket fence or post-and-rail. Lawn so well manicured you'd think they hired little squirrels to clip it with tiny scissors.

This place, though, is like a beautiful set of pedicure nails with one ragged hangnail.

The graffiti.

Here's some pics I snapped!



Jack and Jill went up the hill
To meet the folk of Jane Doe
Jack knelt down and took off his crown
And Jill bowed down soon after

Connie Loves Mitch Because We Must

Bliss escape bullets save us so we may be free

HIS NAME IS DRIAX HE COMES
FROM THE STARS

cold hands round my throat i cant breath [sic]

itsatrapitsatrapitsatrap

I couldn't find a good place to hole up, right? All these little towns across America, I've had no problems finding some burned out building or gutted storefront. Hell, back in... I think it was Quakertown, I slept in a half-collapsed wig shop. Plenty safe from the sun and from troublesome kids. Times are hard, and that's good for me, I guess. Good for all of us. (What does that say of our kind that we benefit from misery? Nothing good.)

Here, though? Nothing. Two in the morning - well, three, by then, and not a damn safe place to stay. Every door, locked. Every building, clean and together. So while I'm out sniffing around, you know what I see?

A big fat housewife in her pink robe and a mossy mud mask shaking a can of spray paint and writing a message on the back wall of the elementary school. The Polaroid above with the "Driax" name mentioned? That was hers. I got close, figured I could maybe see what the hell was going on (and I admit it, get a little taste, too), and she heard me coming. Woman turned, smiled this pained smile, and I saw she'd been crying: eyes puffy, rimmed with red, a line of snot coming out the one side of her nose.

Then she gave me this weird friendly wave and the can thunked to the ground, slipping from her hand.

She took off running: bolted like a deer. Fast, too. Way faster than I'd have thought possible.

I figured she had the right idea. It was already past three and I still didn't have anywhere to hole up. Bus wasn't coming back until 7 the following night to take me in a different direction from the one that dropped me here. So I booked it. Put feet to street and ran until the lights of the town were faded and gone and it was just me and the stars once more.

I crashed in the horse stall of an abandoned stable miles outside of town. Just as the sun was rising. Cutting it close, Alice, cutting it close.



Who killed Cock Robin? I, said the Beastie,
with my teeth and claws, I killed Cock Robin.

THE ANCIENT AND THE MONSTROUS

I'm just a toy for these monsters. This information is meaningless. We all know it. Whoever you are, you just want me to do this because I'm guessing you have something personal against me and you're loving the fact you can watch me struggle. You just want me to be abused, to be goddamn debased for your amusement? But yeah, okay, whatever, I'll play your game, dickhead. I'll even transcribe this tape for you, like you want. But I'll be crying the whole time, and if my bloody fucking tears mess up your precious transcript, and you can't read some words through the streaks of red, just remember that it's your fault, not mine.

This is a transcript with the vampire Gilda. Gilda dosed me. Gave me a cup of blood, and I figured, hey, holy shit, nobody's been nice or civilized enough so far to give me a drink, and I thought, she's a girl looks a bit like me, I'm a girl looks a bit like her, everybody's happy. But the stuff was laced with... some kind of paralytic, or that date-rape drug or something. So I just laid there, could barely move, my wet lips hardly able to make anything above a squeak. She undressed me as she talked. She didn't do anything else to me, just traced a hard nail along my skin or occasionally picked at parts of me almost like some kind of... of scientist. Fuck. Then at the end she stuffed the ticket in my mouth.

I came undone and found my head again not far from sun up. Even still, I had a hard time moving. My muscles felt like they were on fire. The veins and arteries inside felt... brittle, arthritic, I don't know.

I'm just a toy. This is all just some sick game. Don't worry, I'm still playing. And I aim to win.

[Gilda Transcript]

You've come to the right girl, Alex.

Sorry, Alice? Alice. I'll admit, I'm a little stung: you tell me you're compiling all this groovy information, and that someone's got you on a leash and tugging you to do it. Why they didn't come to me, whoever they are... that's a shame. Because I know a lot. I'm not the meanest, maddest, oldest, baddest Savage on the block, but I've been around it a few times, and I've met some of the truly sublime within our number, and I've seen and heard some stories that could coagulate the blood in your body. Like the gelatin that collects atop a dish of gravy in the fridge. See? I'm not that old. I still remember gravy. So relax a bit, will you?

You're looking for some history. Some '*notable personas*', as your letter dictates? (Oh, I'm sorry, did you ask me not to take a look at the letter? I asked earlier and you said no, but now it's just sitting in your hand so maybe you don't mind if I take it? Thanks so much, cutie. Sad little twat.)

I'll answer your questions, because I'm the giving sort.

THE UNHOLY

Seems the best place to start is the living — or ahh, "unliving," if you accept the term — urban myth of our family and tribe, the Unholy.

Now, before you balk and roll your eyes, I'm going to add that I've seen her with my own two, you understand? I've not talked to her, no. But I've seen her. I'm sorry, are you comfortable in that jacket? It's a nice jacket. They call that a "barn jacket," don't they? Let's just remove it — no protestations, please. Are you warm? It is a warm night, even in November. That shirt looks as if it's trapped you.

The Unholy, this is what she does. And nobody really knows why. She comes out of her nomadic... I don't know, *pilgrimage* once in a blue moon, and she goes to a city. Just walks right in, long jacket or robe covering up her deformities, a cowboy hat slung low to hide her beaded black eyes, and she goes right to the Prince or the Lictor or the Caliph or whatever the ruler-in-charge calls himself, and she pretends to be someone she's not. Usually some few-years-dead nobody, a confused waif or dumb puppet. She plays ignorant. She lets the Prince or Primogen or Sheriff have some fun at her expense. And then they let her go. Because she's nobody. It's like... opening the doors to your well-protected fortification and just letting the enemy inside to do as she wishes.

And she soon does as she wishes.

It's always something different. Rarely the same blasphemy twice, at least not in a row. Maybe she poaches from the Prince's own



esteemed herd. Maybe she Embraces wantonly — not just *larvae*, mind you, but full childer; though how she manages that without turning into a real moonbat isn't really known (though I'll get to some theories in just a minute). Sometimes she kills. Sometimes she leaves chaos — a nighttime sky thick with crows and vultures and other carrion birds descended one time on Detroit, and they blotted out the moon and the stars and they battered bloody against car windshields, rocketing down on the highway, and the accidents and pile-ups and deaths... oh, the shriek of metal and the blood on the highway, all the bits of glass, all the parts of people. I saw the aftermath, because that's where I was at the time, verifying that one of our kind lives in a nearby lake (not true, at least, what's there isn't one of *us* as far as I can tell). And that's where I eventually saw *her*.

See, at some point they take her. Maybe the local Dragons consult some magic hoodoo behind closed doors and they get a read off some dead raven, or could be that a Cronie in the pocket of the Prince paints a blood-clot crescent on the floor and as it dries it seizes up and spells out an address. I don't know how they did it in the Motor City, I only know that they found out where she was hiding (one of the old auto factories, in one of the big busted-out body shops) and they went in and took her. She went politely, so the stories say. She always goes with a gentle head-nod and she even lets them draw ropes or cuffs around her bird arms.

Did I see your eye twitch? That's what I said, "bird arms." The stage was dark when the Prince brought her before us, the gathered throngs, but light came in through the window and we could all see well enough. And to me, it looked like from the elbows forward her skin became cracked and wrinkled, like the flesh of a chicken's foot. And the hands were only part human, and part... crow claw. Talons tipping craggy gray fingers. A thumb, mostly human, but still topped with a claw.

So she comes in and the Prince — a dumb, cocky dreamer, a succubus named Dagobert — thinks he's going to do what nobody else has done before, because he doesn't have his ear to the street, he won't listen to the pulse, won't accept that some people have stories that maybe he should hear. He thinks he's going to embarrass her and abuse her in front of all of us, and we'll all gape and gasp at his authority over the legendary Unholy. It's funny, you could tell those of us who really knew and believed the stories, because as everyone else was inching forward, we were taking good steps backward. Wise that we did.

Dagobert brings up one of his advisors, some hack fuck stage magician (who looks the part, really, black velvet jacket and waxed Vandyke goatee) and thinks to turn the Unholy into some kind of puppet, some *act of entertainment*. And she's good. Because she's playing the part of fear, making it look real official.

I'm sorry — you still look warm. Let's get those boots off. Socks, too. You have lovely toes, so rare that you see pretty toes. You should paint them. Red, like your teeth after having supped from that cup I gave you.

So, the Unholy is whimpering and weeping and the magician (I forget his name, honestly, but it started with a 'J' if your keeper needs to know that) stares deep into those black doll eyes and he tries to get a hold of something, some fraying thread he can use to pull the whole sweater apart.

But that's obviously not what he finds.

Maybe he finds a flock of crows in there. Or an empty hole. Or a black volcanic dagger that sticks right into his brain and heart. Whatever he finds, his head snaps back (we could hear the spine *pop*) and blood arcs out of his nose (could hear that, too) and he topples, contorted, fetal, keening.

Then the windows break. And the crows come in, a Biblical flood of oily black wings and pick-ax beaks.

I couldn't see what was happening, not really. You can't see through birds, at least, I can't. I do know that the birds did a number on those who had inched closer. And they didn't bother the handful of us in the back at all (in a way, I wonder if that was a little nod from the monster on stage, a tip of the cowboy hat to tell us that she respected our respect of her... if you can call it respect). Didn't seem prudent to waste that good favor, so we hoofed it out of there, leaving behind screams of Kindred and the shrieks of birds.

The next night, I didn't have to press my ear too far to the ground to get the details. The hypnotist stage magician asshole? Wiped his brain clean. Tabula rasa, poof. I hear that for a while someone brought him blood, spooned it lovingly into his outstretched mouth as his empty eyes stared around the room. But then I hear other things. You'd think they might just let him languish, or let our kind have at him. Nah. His boys took him. His ghouls. They have him somewhere, and they feed him blood and pump him up and then drink from him in return. He's just a battery giving them juice, it seems.

Dagobert the Prince lost his hand. *Lost it*, lost it. As in, it ain't coming back. Crows picked the meat from the bones and then dismantled the bones and that was that, just blood and black feathers and no hand at all.

Others suffered — missing eyes, cheek flesh, fingernails — but nothing permanent. Not like Dagobert's grabber.

And what happened to Miss Unholy? Poof gone, she hit the bricks (or the skies, if the rumors are true that she can grow fucking *wings*) and that was that. For now.

So just what is she? I'll tell you the theories if you'll take off those jeans. I must say, those are some real cowboy jeans. Wrangler? Those're men's jeans, honey. They don't compliment your shape, which isn't quite so tomboyish as I'd thought.

Ah. Yeah. There we go. You're lucky, honey. You died with a bit of a tan. Which means every evening you *wake up* with a bit of a tan. Me? I'm pale as it gets, "butt-white" so the description goes (though I prefer "milky alabaster" for its poetic lilt).

Okay, now that you've got your getaway sticks free and clear from those repressive jeans... the theories. Some say she's just a particularly old Savage, old and strange and from another time. Maybe she came from those who copulated with beasts. Maybe she's one of those who lets the owls inside them, those demon birds (if you've not heard of them, then maybe you ought to ask around because it'll scare the skin off your bones), and maybe those demon birds live inside her always.

Oh, but here's my favorite theory. She's not just one of us, she *is* us. She's what made us all. What spawned our blood in the darkest nights so long ago. The Mother Savage, the Mommy Monster, whatever it is you want to call her. And sometimes she wakes up or gets her gumption up, and she goes into a city and she checks on us and brings a little chaos to bear, and then... gone again, gone again. If that's true, and trust me, there's plenty of our kind out there who are coming around to that idea more and more, that means those she Embraced are maybe closer to our origins than we'd think. Find one of them and you might have yourself a real interesting story.

Her Little Cult

She's got people, the Unholy. People who worship her. Curiously, they *don't* hold to the theory that she's our progenitor; but they do believe her some kind of primal force, some elemental spirit who has taken the flesh of a Savage and elevated her above. This cult, see, they accept that most of our kind are just... carrion-feeders, just selfish little demons who play pretend and fiddle around with politics when all we really want is just the next sip of blood. But this cult thinks that some of our kind can become something bigger, something more primal. (Mind you, they believe this is only true of the Savages, which is a darling bit of solipsism from a cult of Damned who are themselves Savages, don't you think?)

They think the Unholy is just that, a vampire who has ascended to a mightier state, something some call Golconda, something others call the Surrender. They're like a pack of Deadheads, and by

that I mean those who follow the band — they travel from city-to-city, trailing supposed sightings the way one might track sightings of Bigfoot or a UFO. I don't know that any of them have even seen her. A few, I hear, are Savages who have peripherally experienced her presence (been in a city where she came through, like a storm of wings and talons), but most seem to be just zealous Gangrel who want to believe that they can become something bigger and better than what they already are. The Unholy to them is a role model. Tell them otherwise and they'll rip you to ribbons.

CHERUFE

Still wearing a bra? Silly girl, Alice. You don't need a bra any longer, and I'll tell you why. For one thing, it's too human. Humans are concerned about lift and separate. I can tell



you're one of those who still thinks herself human, yeah? Still have a family somewhere you think about? Still remember your first pet's name when you were a wee tot, some hamster named Mister Tickle or some mutt named Lucky? I remember when I remembered, if that makes sense. But I've learned to forget about all that. We're something different, you and I. We're Savages, doll. The name is apt. We're bound to the wild, to the chaos in nature. Humans are order. They're clean plates and alphabetized DVD racks. We're all blood and twisty vines and molting feathers.

Second reason, and this is the real reason: the blood inside makes a bra redundant. You want fuller tits? Think real hard. Concentrate. Grit your teeth and *push* the blood into them. It doesn't last, but you can do it as often as you need – got some trucker who'll come behind the diner with you if you flash those beautiful babies, if you give him a glimpse of that cavernous cleavage? Do it up. Get him back there. Then drink him till he's weak and trembling on the asphalt, a big bad puppet with his strings cut, clippity-fucking-clip.

What I'm trying to say is, this is a too-human crutch, this bra. Let's get rid of it.

Lovely, Alice, lovely.

You heard of Cherufe? Blink once if you have, twice if you haven't. That was three times, Alice, that doesn't help me. I'll just assume you're in the dark, here.

Let me put it this way: you look like a tough girl. You know how some of us, maybe you, can shrug off bullets, take a brass knuckle punch to the jaw and smile with all your teeth intact? I've seen some whose flesh'll break a knife. Well, Cherufe is *way* beyond that.

Chile has a lot of volcanoes, and Cherufe supposedly lives in one of them. Literally *within* it, within pools of magma and surrounded by blistering hot rock. He's one who apparently let his humanity go a long time before, because stories of Cherufe have been around for centuries, and the Mapuche natives down there worship him like a god. And perhaps he is, and maybe there's that theme again – that our kind, if we work real hard, can surpass our condition and become something bigger and better. Something a little bit like a god, I suppose.

Anyway, Cherufe, he lives down in the volcano, and he's bound to this place like nobody's business. He's hungry, so he demands sacrifices. The Savage beast has honed his hungers, though, to a very sweet and precise point: he can sustain himself on four women a year (virgins, the story goes, so maybe something about the pure and innocent blood can sustain him?). But he's too monstrous to come and get those women himself: if he feeds on his own, he can't control himself, right? He'll emerge and take out whole villages, because his guts run deep. Alternately, if the natives were able to *hand-deliver* four virgins a year, once per season, well... Cherufe

doesn't have to leave his volcanic womb, does he? So they do. Year after year, a couple families down there – ghoulish families, whole bloodlines of Mapuche dedicated to our people – gather up the virgins and send them into the slumbering dark of the volcano. Here's the kicker: the next night, those Mapuche come back to the rim and they find the girl's head there. Just the head, frozen in horror, as if spit back out. Grisly stuff.

And what happens if Cherufe doesn't get his fix? The legend is that he's so tied to the land, so bound up with the rock and the magma that he can stir it to action, that his own dissatisfaction and hunger reverberates. Earthquakes? Volcanic ash? All have been blamed on Cherufe's unfulfilled hungers.

Is it true? It might not be. Might be bullshit, or maybe it was true once but not any longer. I didn't see him, I just met with the families who consider themselves the caretakers of this grim duty. I watched as they took the 13-year-old girl to the dark pit. They painted her with messages for their god. And then they upended her into the dark. Her screams hung in the air for a long time, let me tell you.

And the next night, I went with them to collect the head. It was upside-down, laying on a flat bubble of black rock. Mouth open. Tongue frozen. Eyes turned to ash.

I'll never forget that.

YARA-MA-YHA-HU

Two monsters, I've met. Face-to-face. I've encountered the little man known as Yara-ma-yha-hu, and I've met the ancient Greta.

You know, I'm sorry, I have to stop here for a min-



ute. I just have to compliment you on your taste in underwear. I'd figured you for the type who'd wear Granny Panties, big white pantaloons that you could use as an emergency parachute or supply tarp or something. But these little white things? A little lace around the edge? That's nice to see. So many of our tribe, they just stop caring about personal hygiene, you know? And we can get pretty disgusting. Drinking blood'll make your mouth stink like road-kill if you don't brush up, and over time, a lot of us just stop brushing. But you? Your hair smells of, what's that, jasmine? Your skin smells of soap, normal soap, plain white soap-scented soap. And those delicate, elegant cheek-hugger panties.

Very cute. I admire you.

But they have to go, darling. We've made it this far. I'll just discard these or — no, wait, I think I'll keep them. A souvenir. A reminder of our time together. Welcome to my parlor, said the spider to the fly, and then the spider took the fly's panties for her collection. That's the story I heard.

I had to travel to Australia to meet Yara-ma-yha-hu, who I'll just call "Yara," if that's okay by you? Good. Traveling is a giant bite in the ass, especially traveling halfway across the world. Nearly impossible to do in the normal fashion, really, because inevitably the sun is going to shine in through the plane's windows. And it's not like I'm wealthy enough to have a jet. Sure, I am paid fairly nicely to acquire the stories I do, I have my own benefactors just as you have yours. But I don't get that kind of cash. Which means traveling is dangerous. If I had a pulse, even the thought of such a long journey to and from the Land Down Under would make it race at a swift skip. But I managed, because I planned. For a year. I got everything in place, every hand who would touch the body bag in which I waited, dark, impermeable, perfect. I played the role of corpse, and the right hands put me on the right planes. And even then it didn't go perfectly, I had to teach a couple a dire lesson... but that's really getting away from the point.

The outback is endless. At night, it's endlessly *dark*. Nighttime there is as beautiful as you'll see it. The vast expanse of stars? Dizzying. Blood, though, is thin, so if you ever go out there, bring a supply with you, whether on legs or in bags.

Yara is one of us who has... adapted to unlife out in the middle of nowhere. He's a small man, an Aborigine with a broad smiling face, a big bald head, a beard so out-of-control you'd think it was reaching for you with an aim to strangle your throat. And his eyes, without pupils, just bright white like the stars above. But of most interest are his hands and feet.

On each palm and on the bottoms of each foot? A mouth. A human mouth, with lips and hooked teeth.

He didn't always have those, he told me. He *developed* them. He willed his body to make them, and it did.

The way he tells it, he can get more blood from a victim that way — with his normal mouth and his four *other...* orifices, he can grab hold of a meal the way an octopus might. Each mouth sucks blood and, according to him, other fluids — bile, saliva, marrow, seminal juices, anything they can "milk" from the body.

Like Cherufe, Yara can last a lot longer on this than you'd think — weeks on end, apparently. When the time came for more, he hunted the vast stretches of nowhere, honing in on sources of blood the way a mosquito might. A little man, dark as the sky above, no taller than the height of my elbow hanging loose at my side, you'd maybe not think him so potent, so monstrous. Oh, but he is.

Yara sometimes likes to play with his food. He attacks. He drinks. Drinks just enough to make the victim woozy, confused, but still able to walk and talk and stumble about. And he lets his prey do just that for the rest of the night — they amble beneath the moonlight, weeping, crying aloud for some kind of solace, and just before sun-up, Yara attacks again. Why? Why do this? Because he's cruel. Because he *enjoys* being cruel. He'll tell you as much. It's what he told me. He was surprisingly genial, and was careful to remind me that our own kind should not be our enemy. Seems a naïve perspective coming from a dwarfish monster living by himself in the Outback, but then again, he's been around a lot longer than you or I.

Am I imagining things, or did you just push a little blood into your nipples? Pert things. Each like the end of a child's thumb, red as if hammer-struck. Those drugs really worked, didn't they? I won't lie, I don't know what they even are. But I have a friend on the streets, works the clubs, and sold me a heroic dose of whatever it is that's getting the kids date-raped these days.

You barely react when I twist that nipple. Hard enough to rip it off, and yet your eyes only squint, your jaw tightens... and that's it.

I have to assume you're enjoying yourself. I know I am.

GRETA

Greta, Greta, Greta. You know, she looks a bit like you? If you vacuumed out the fat, tightened the form, and drew the skin so taut that it held fast to the bones and tendons and muscles. But her hair, her eyes, even the faint twist at the corner of the lips... you could pass for a daughter or a sister. If you could get that close to let somebody compare.

I like the bit of fat on you. Baby fat. Boyish. These hips, these thighs — no, I know, girls don't like it when you call them fat, and I don't mean to imply you're some grotesque thing, some flesh-fed Macellarius,



but... what's the word? Zoftig? You've got some zoftig parts. I think it's nice. Especially right here – Funny, I'm not ticklish anymore, either. Death seems to have removed that from me. Such an odd thing to think about, but there you go.

Greta owns a part of Philadelphia. Just *owns* it as her own. She's marked out a huge Domain in the north, around where Temple sits. Bad area. High murder rate. She's a pale white lady in a predominantly black neighborhood. And they know about her and they talk about her in whispers, the way you might have spoken of the Man with the Hook Hand or Bloody Mary. Because they know if they call her, she might come. And if she comes, she'll come hungry and she'll only help you if you help her first. The smart ones know that it's unwise to make a deal with the devil. The dumb ones stand on the rooftop and whisper her name – that's all it takes, the barest whisper – and she comes calling, hungry, always hungry.

She doesn't speak English. She seems to *understand* it, mind, but she doesn't speak it. French, German, Spanish, Latin... but never English. She's not from this country. She seems to despise it. But you can't get her talking about it too in depth, because she starts to get agitated. I've no proof, thankfully, but I imagine getting her agitated is a bad idea.

This is what's interesting about Greta. The rest of the Philly vampires leave her to do her thing. They let her have her territory. They let her hunt wantonly, because she stays in her place. Doesn't matter that she's a known diablerist. Doesn't matter that she interacts with the mortal herd in such a way to telegraph her true nature, which does little good for that delicately-held Masquerade. Oh, sure, every once in a while someone gets up a good head of boiling blood and decides it's important to hunt her down and exile (or destroy) her; and sometimes the ballsy motherfucker goes in alone; sometimes he brings a small army with him.

And one or all of them always end up as a pile of dust and a smear of blood.

That is her hunting ground. And she marks it, too. For those who care to open their senses to it, they can smell the old blood that rings the stop-light post or they can see the faint cursive claw marks etched in the sidewalk or curb.

So: how did I survive my encounter?

First, I'm one of her. So are you. We're Savages. She likes us. Claims we're all kin, and not like the Lords are kin. No, she says we're all one big family – a "tribe," you'll sometimes hear me say, well, I got that from her.

Second, I brought her a gift. Nothing big, just some newbie dipshit neonate, the childe of a haughty Lord up Allentown way. She enjoyed eating him. I watched. It was hard to watch, but I sat there and rooted my feet to the ground as she drew him deep into her, a beautiful and powerful spider. Plucking the wings from the fly. When she was done, he turned to curling ribbons of smoking skin in her hands, and the rest was just bone dust that blew away in a wind that seemed to rise up out of nowhere. As if she summoned it by the satisfaction of her hungers.

Third, I didn't come to hurt her. Or to even try, since so far no evidence exists that you even *can* hurt her (some within the city think her the ghost of a Savage, though she was quite real and corporeal when I got near to her).

Greta's cagey. We conversed in my gutter French, and when that failed us, we mixed it up with my gutter German. She doesn't like to be pinned down, doesn't like to give too much. She doesn't actually know who she is, not really. She knows that she's old. She knows that the blood inside her is black and moves like cooling pitch. She knows Greta is her real name, but that's the only part of the name she can recall.

And in discussing this, it's the only time I saw anything remotely human inside her. All other times, we were speaking in human languages and affecting the mannerisms of human conversation, but her eyes were fixed on me like a wolf's, and her muscles were pulled taut as if she could tear me asunder with nothing more than the decision to do so. Ah, but when we got on the subject of who she was and how her identity was largely lost to her... for just a second, a hair's breadth of a half-a-second, her eyes softened, her firm-line mouth curled downward for that moment. She *tried to draw a breath*. That's something only you young ones do anymore, still relying on that old muscle memory of sighs and breathy moans and sucking intakes of breath.

So even the monsters, they sometimes have a bit of humanity in them. A tiny spark, no more than a firefly held in a slowly-crushing grip, but it's there if you know how to find it and draw it out. It can't last, I imagine. I know my own connection to the human herd has waned — which is largely my choice, as I've noted. And it should be your choice, too. Sweet, sweet Alice. Of the soft thighs. The smallish ears. The nose faintly upturned, the toes curled slightly inward, the natural breasts small but more than a mouthful.

I can see it in your eyes. You want to know about the Baba Yaga.

THE BABA YAGA

Ah, the wild old witch, the *strega nona*, the forest spirit, the *Ježibaba*. Like the Unholy, she has many stories to tell. She's been around for a very, very long time — longer than some will say we can survive, and she's done it without taking one single slumber in all that time over all those many centuries.

How does she do it?

This is the thing, sweet Alice. You know how the Unholy has her little cult? Her sycophants, her adherents, her zealots?

The old witch has hers, too.

I'm one of them. I don't wear it on my sleeve, of course. The local Spear-carriers wouldn't let me near their flock if they knew. I don't go practicing the *strega's* blood magic out in the middle of the street.

I... I don't know if I'll go. I don't know that I can trust Gilda. Obviously I can't! What she did to me? The way she... played with me like that? Don't get me wrong, don't get excited, I've had worse done to me. But she did it to prove her command over me. So why should I trust her?

But I know if I don't get you what you want...

Fuck you.

The ticket is for one month from now.

Fuck you!

No, we have our spaces beneath the city and above it where it's safe. Away from prying eyes.

So, I won't tell you anything further about the old woman. But I see her name's on your list and in the letter, so you're...

required to go after her for whatever reason. (I'd love to know why. I know this letter has pages missing. What is it that's held above your head, what dangling sword threatens to fall, hmm?)

What I will do is this:

I will take this fingernail here, this pinky nail that's been sharpened again and again, night after night, to keep it honed. I'll put my fingers in your mouth — so dry, the mouths of the Damned, that's another thing I have a hard time accepting, the lack of *saliva*, ugh — and... do you like that? Did I hear a faint moan? Perhaps I did.

But this isn't for pleasure, dear, at least not yours.

With my pinky nail, I'll draw a faint slit in your tongue. And I'll milk — let's see, yes, just like this, I'll milk three drops of your blood into my palm and then from my palm onto this white cloth.

Then I pluck one, two and — stubborn, aren't they? — hairs from your head.

They go onto the cloth, stuck to the blood.

I roll that up and save it for later.

Final step? Here.

This is an airline ticket and a list of names. The ticket'll get you to Warsaw. The names are of some... handlers. They'll get you there safely.

I'll leave the ticket in your mouth. Stuck there not by saliva, but by blood.

Take it or leave it.

But if you want the Baba Yaga story...

Enjoy the trip. I know I did. I'll see you later, Alice. It's been a pleasure. For both of us.



BABA YAGA — Ivan Bilibin

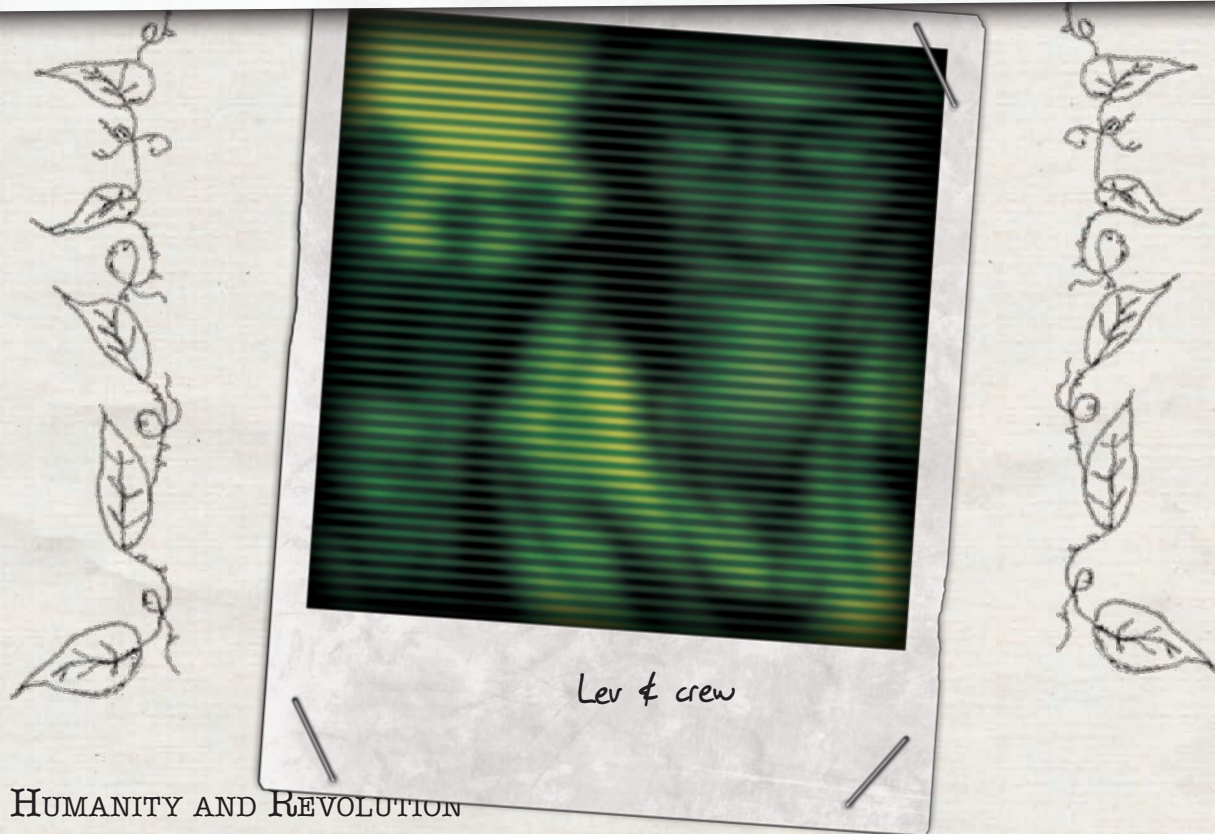
THE PSA

This is a new one. I solicited the words of Leviticus ("Lev," apparently) Ulster, and I got back a videotape. I broke into an elementary school and used their media room and I watched that tape. I was expecting something awful, you know? A snuff film, maybe. Fuck and kill, trapped on VHS.

Thankfully, that wasn't what it was. No, Lev taped himself, along with some of his "crew." And, of course, it came out blurry: you can kind of make out his face if you squint and cock your head.

The damn thing views like a Public Service Announcement, I swear. But you know what? I like it. It makes me feel good. Like I can hold my head a bit higher than I did two nights ago after Gilda.. did what she did.

So, here goes. The transcript. I even typed this one so you don't have to read my abysmal handwriting. Thank Christ for late night copy stores.



HUMANITY AND REVOLUTION

LEV

Is this thing on? My name's Leviticus Ulster. My parents were dicks. They named me this. I got my ass kicked. End of that story. I was Embraced by another dick, a Savage named Yorick. I wasn't one of the lucky ones where my sire skips town. No, Yorick hung around. Liked to torment me. So I had to stick a chair leg in his chest and sink him in Lake Superior. Shit happens. Point is, call me "Lev." Hey, Bettina, get into frame -

BETTINA

(on camera)

Yo.

LEV

This is Bettina. Betty. Bo-Betty. Banana, fana...fuck it. Betty's not a Savage, she's a mean-green bull-dyke Daeva with pouty lips and a pair of thighs like tree trunks. She's also my best friend in the world, and yeah, our kind can have friends. She helped me hold Yorick down so I could hammer that chair leg home - took me about six shots, pretty nasty business, has to be a better way.

BETTINA

That bitch went for a swim.

LEV

No kidding. You've maybe heard of us? They call us the Wrecking Crew. We didn't come up with the name, but unlike Leviticus, it's one I'm happy with. You might know the story - city run into the ground by a Shadow Tyrant, and a bunch of us young'uns took the city back. Remember that dictators are only as good as the assholes who prop them up, so we took out his support legs one by one. Believe it or not, we used the Internet. Found some guys on YouTube who had this nerdy "network" of supernatural exposures. They did awesome work. We were able to expose all kinds of stuff and get it out there, get the cops involved, rip the façade off some politician slaves, show all the players - particularly the human ones, because they're the vulnerabilities. We couldn't have taken on the Tyrant by ourselves, it was all about guerilla media warfare and it did the trick. Had the help of - hold on, you, yeah, you, come into the magic camera eye -

KIPPER

(on camera)

All right -ow! Scooch over. Fuck. C'mon.

LEV

Relax, Kip. This is Kip. Kip's a Lord. Yes, we Lords and we Savages can get along. Are you sensing a message, here?

KIPPER

It's like the United Colors of Benetton or something.

LEV

Go away, Kip.

KIPPER

Fuck you.

LEV

Fuck you, too. Where was I? Right. We did that thing with the Tyrant. We're young enough to know how the tools of modernity can stop ancient influence in its tracks. Yorick Embraced me when Nirvana first hit MTV with *Smells Like Teen Spirit*, so while I'm no baby-beast, I'm damn sure not some Ancient High Muckity-Muck from the back alleys of Mesopotamia. But that's not what I want to talk about. That's just the intro.

BETTINA

(off-camera)

Ow! Shit. Kip just bit me.

LEV

Amazing we can accomplish anything, given that we're basically Big Dead Children.

KIP

Take it, twat! Ow! Jesus, I was just kidding.

LEV

Shut up already!

Though even that has its point and its place. First point? We're humans. I don't care what anybody tells you. You want to think yourself some undead monster, go for it. We drink blood but we don't kill people. Yes, I've gone too far. Yes, I've hurt people. That was accidental. I don't blame myself. I'm okay with it. I cope. I'm still human. People look at me, and they see my eyes, and they smell my breath and they think, "Shit, that's a Savage right there. A real Animal Man. Big Bad Wolf." No, that's not how it is. Yeah, that's how it *feels* sometimes, but I do what I have to do to keep sane. To keep *normal*. I watch TV. I grow a garden, and even though I don't eat the crap I grow, I give it to the homeless.

KIP

(back on camera)

He's a real philanderer, this guy.

LEV

Philanthropist, shitwit. And no, I'm not. Hey, it's selfish. My charity is bullshit. I do it because it makes me feel normal, but that's important - *feeling normal*. You've got to find your center. The hunger sometimes gets at you. I used to do heroin. Not a lot. But I did it. And it's the same but different. It's this deep thing way down inside you and it itches and twitches and tightens like a fist. It's like, you'd *kill a mother-*

fucker for a sandwich or a needle or a nip of the bottle or a nip of blood. Addiction's addiction, but it can be managed. You can focus. Our fourth buddy, Eyre, told me that.

BETTINA

(back on camera)

Eyre's our Nossie buddy. He smells like gravemold. You don't know what gravemold smells like? Come smell our Nossie buddy, Eyre, and then you'll know.

LEV

Eyre's out right now interfacing with his "people." Haunts talk to Haunts around here and most places, for good or ill. He's talking to somebody called - what was it?

KIP

(off-camera, laughing)

The Shrinking Violet!

LEV

What he said. See, Eyre's part of the gang. The crew. We're not just separate parts, we're one thing. And that's my other message to you. Lots of Savages think their only friends are other Savages. Not true. And when it is true, it's only true because they make it that way. Thinking that way is the same thing as racism, classism, sexism -

KIP

(off-camera)

Zoomorphisms!

LEV

(ignores him)

- and acting that way hurts you as much as it does anybody else. I've known Savages who were solid, salt-of-the-earth types. I've also known Savages who would eat your head like a praying mantis if given half-the-chance. My crew? We are what we are and we accomplished what we accomplished because we bring different strengths to the table.

BETTINA

(back on camera)

I can lift a car.

LEV

That's a lie. But Eyre can. He's tiny, but he can throw me across the room, seriously. Point is, you've gotta keep your options open. Hold onto your humanity. Find friends. Don't give into all that *boys' club* bullshit.

(peers into camera, gets close)

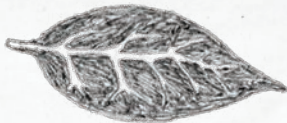
Tamp that Beast down, you hear? Put your foot on its neck. Be human. Be normal.

MAYBE SO

Maybe he's got a point. But maybe he's a bit hypocrite, too.

I like what he has to say, but it has a certain, *This Is Your Brain On Drugs* mentality, and those commercials were garbage.

Still. Humanness. Good. I'll hold onto it. Thanks, Lev, wherever you are.



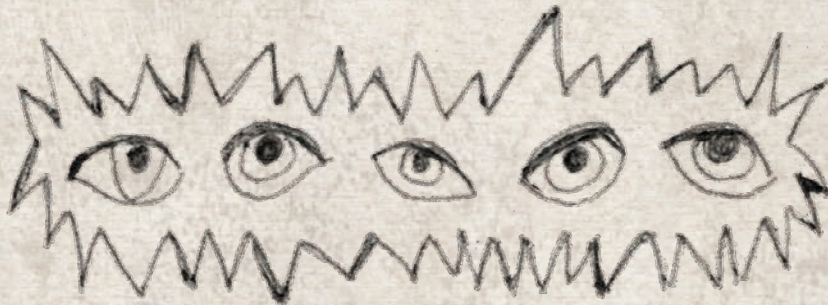
ORAL TRADITION

I sat with Konstantin Korab yesterday: a Kosovar Albanian who's been living in this country for the last 50 years. You see this guy, and you don't know what to make of him: he's not fat, but jowly. Wears a deep purple tracksuit with gold stripes up the side. Big gold-rimmed eyeglasses - actually, everything's gold. Two gold watches. Three gold chains. Bleach-white sneakers with gold Nike swoosh and laces. One molar capped in what might not be gold but is instead a brass shell casing like that from a .45 or such pressed down into the gum so it's level with the other teeth. I didn't want to take him seriously: his broad grin and open arms seemed fake or crazy or dangerous.

But then he started to speak.



Something about his words. I don't think it's anything supernatural: I've heard those who tinge their words with the lore of the Blood, but this wasn't that. Part of it is the accent, I admit! to me, it's that nebulous half-Russian half-European crispness, and the lift of words that up-tick and down-swing in ways that you don't normally hear in this country. Part of it is something really immeasurable, like he's infusing his words with such enthusiasm that it drips from them like red honey. He wanted to talk to me about history, so I turned on the tape and... well, happily let him talk. Jesus, I'm just glad he's not another Gilda. We're not all monsters, see? Some of us are still people. Kind of.



THIS IS NO EPIC POETRY

Some of us think the stories really aren't important. I've heard them. They say that history isn't what matters: it's the present that counts, that razor's edge moment between *then* and *what happens next*, upon which every cursed thing hinges. Do you take this woman's blood? Do you slit her throat? Do you give her your blood in return? What word do you say to the Prince who hates you, the childe who is made to adore you, the hound that's stayed loyal to you even through your death and resurrection? Which fork of the road do you take? Yes or no? North or South? Mercy or malice?

A single decision in the span of a moment is the present, and that's what so many of us – oh my, *too* many of us – think is most important. These are the sorts who say that the past is nothing but regret, and the future is nothing but fear.

You watch those who say that. Keep a close eye on them, a wary stare. Because anybody who doesn't know his history and how things have come and gone and may come again just isn't somebody you can trust. They've got no perspective. It's just pure self-interest, an eye turned only to oneself. You start thinking only about the present and you start giving into every urge because the past and future don't mean a thimble full of rat feces. Those Savages give in to the worst whims, become blood-mad id-monsters with broken claws and raging hard-ons.

You have got to pay attention to history.

Ah, of course, we don't have history like others have history, that's part of what you need to understand and you need to put in your little book. So many of the others, they take the pen and they furiously scribble! They write all their precious history in their precious books with precious swirls of calligraphy, and it becomes all so damned *indelible*.

Not so with us. We speak our history. You break the mold by writing this all down, but most of us? We share stories. We tell the history to one another and it changes. History has many faces and tongues, as many as there are those to speak it.

Oh, but it's all good that history dips and swerves and shifts, you see? Truth is not immutable. The annals and accounts are not absolute! Much as we refuse to be caged, so too does our history refuse such easy captivity!

THE WINE-DARK SEA

Some say we were born of the sea and made to serve the sea, that the Blood and Beast inside us is brine and sea salt and biting barracuda's teeth. We were pirates, once, and will be pirates again. As the Sea People, we raided ships drifting down the Nile, we reached up and dragged them down

and drank the wine and blood kept in ceramic jars and vases made of bone. We decided that we could use the ships ourselves and soon we were stealing them instead of sinking them. Barges of blood! Triremes of teeth and tissue and terrible need. Who was it that held Julius Caesar captive in the inlet of Pharmakonisi in the Twelve Islands, demanding the sweet divine blood of emperors as paid repast for returning their blessed one? Who was it that kidnapped the Saint known as Patrick off the coast of the Dingle Peninsula and made him sup the venom of snakes to give him visions of our past and future? Who was it, I ask you, that stole the sun in the name of Maui and forced the little island people to teach us how to make the fast-moving canoes that let us sweep through the sea-side villages with the speed of the gods?

It was us! Pirates, all of us: coral and deck wood in our hearts, our minds a cloud-trapped crow's nest! Pirates, still, are we. I know some myself. They carry assault rifles, not swords and axes. Their boats have powerful motors churning the sea into bloody broth, not rudders and sails. That is how history matters. It is with us always. It seems past, but really it becomes the present and future.

AS YOU SAY, TOM-AY-TOE, TOM-AH-TOE

The Dark Ages, a bad time for all, yes? No. Civilization fell? Shadows bled across the forests? Barbarians howled in the night? Oh, bad for the weepy mumbly whelps of the other clans, perhaps. No precious bathhouses! No beautiful Necropolis carved out of the bowels of a broken city! No tower libraries with pretty books, no biting tongues of debate, no order, no light, only chaos and dark! "Boo hoo! So sad for their loss!"

But it is in chaos and dark where we thrive, we Savages. Eh? You feel it. When the pomp and circumstance is stripped away the animal is left as the remains of man, and we are that animal. In the Dark Ages, we triumphed. We became the kings. Long stretches of wilderness did not worry us. Barbarians? We *came from* barbarians! We rose from the desert and jungle like djinn, we swept over the snow and forest like Valkyries! Tyranny had been kicked out on its draconic ass and we were once more the lords of the wastes, the kings of darkness, the champions of the wild!

I will tell you of a man: Sigmund is a boy. He is a dumb boy, his face marked with pocks from a pox, his hair so gold it might as well be made of light. He does not seem a strong boy, but the *vikti* wizards and seers tell him that he is destined for greatness even though his father and the other men shove him and beat him and work him hard to try to hone the boy to some kind of strength. But then he is taken by a night creature who is a slave to the Roman fiends, which makes Sigmund

a slave now, too. And he stays in Rome for many years, watching the Empire grow thicker and heavier like mud or dung on a shoe and soon he knows the shoe will drop, but it takes longer than anybody thinks. And he works as what they call a "rat catcher" for the Legion of the Dead in the deep mazes of the underworld, finding those lunatic Kindred who have become lost in the labyrinth, and when he finds them, he destroys them. Oh, but the Augurs and Oracles tell him: *you will be powerful one day*, the same words spoken to him by the *vikti* of his village.

And Rome falls. It is not an overnight thing, you know, it is the way that a cliff face erodes over time into the ocean, but to our kind? We are patient. We can watch it happen. And Sigmund watches and when he has his chance he flees into the night as the Camarilla chokes and burns.

Where does Sigmund go? He goes back North. To his village. The *vikti* praise his return. His family is dead, of course. His brothers and their children are all dead. Even their children's children are all gone. But Sigmund remembers how they hurt him and he remembers the wizards' words. And he becomes king of this village, and soon not just that place but all the villages around: he creates his own children to serve him and they do, because we are not so duplicitous to one another as are those of other clans. Oh, we bite and we tear at each other. We nip at each other's heels. But we are the same.

The Dark Ages were so good to us. We ruled vast stretches as wild kings. We did not fear the torch-light of men because it had been snuffed out. Yes, yes, God and Christ and the sword of their righteousness. But it rarely fell on us because we stalked the dark paths, while they chose to remain on those well-lit. And when they did come to us we made them serve the Beast Princes, not the Son of God.

Oh, and what happened to Sigmund?

I'll tell you.

He remains the Prince of Berlin.

I swear it to be true! Ah, he calls himself Sigiswald, of course, Hand of the Invictus, but it is Sigmund. See it in his pocked cheeks and his swipe of sun-blond hair.

What did I tell you? The past is the future.

ENLIGHTENED MONKEYS ARE MONKEYS STILL

It's true. The Age of Enlightenment thought once more to bring civility to self-important men. Time to shoo away all the superstition and brutality and fear that gave our kind the crown and scepter, yes? A torch held aloft for men stirred them to meaningless heights, it seems to me. Some humans emerged as the hunters of our kind, too,

a disgusting change. And once more like rats and pigeons the Kindred of those other clans worked their way into the civilization, becoming occult philosophers and the advisors to kings and the keepers of strange scientists while we were once more pushed to the margins.

Oh ho ho, but some of us found reason. We found truth in the writings of freedom and liberty, knowing that we are the ones who have long been held inequal and who deserve a grab at the brass ring! The clans once more thought to leash us, but we used their so-called *enlightenment* and *reason* to bite the hand that reached to cuff us. Fools, the lot of them!

TOTAL WAR

What else? Do you want to hear the tales of war? We are creatures of war, we Savages. Killers and barbarians and berserkers, all. Do you want to hear the tale of Vasily Kobre, the Savage who escaped a Thule-obsessed party of Nazi vampire hunters by hiding in a mass grave of dead Jews, Gypsies and Poles long after they plowed it under? Do you wish to know of the *yurei*, those Japanese Gangrel who wandered the two cities after they were bombed, wide-eyed and mind-blasted and scraped to the rawest nerve (not to mention the black tumors that hung from their necks and still do today because, despite what the Ventrue of Hiroshima will tell you, they have not all been killed, no, no)?

What of the packs of Gangrel who followed the Mongol hordes, feasting on the banquets of severed limbs and still-dying left in the villages crushed by Temujin and his warlords?

Do I speak of the Trench Rats, those Savages who stormed across the No Man's Land of the battlefield in the Franco-Prussian War, their bodies torn to ribbons by the French 75 repeating cannons, but still trudging forth despite the almost total eradication of the flesh? Feasting hungrily on those who manned those awful machine guns?

Or how about the wretched swamp Savages in the bogs of New Jersey who grew disgusted at the interruption of their fetid kingdoms by your American War of Independence, thus deciding to take and make Embraced prisoners of those soldiers from both sides who dared wander too close to their territories?

What of those patriots who could not abide the Nazi menace and were hired by your government to fight the Germans as undead super-soldiers? A lie? Perhaps.

Even now it continues. Some of us still hear stories of the Savages made dead in Vietnam by a plague of *draugr*, an army of the feral doomed stalking the jungles and rivers, some of them piloting old gutted PT boats fitted with bones and

skin and rough netting. In what was once a fertile crescent (and what some say forms the backbone of the bloody crescent called upon by those who pander to the Crone), men still fight and die over in Iraq, and surely we are there, feeding on the dead, feeling the joyous pain of bullets punching through dead meat, stirring chaos so that we may find food. The stories have not yet trickled out of there but they will one day, and I will be but one of the voices to speak them.

A BIOGRAPHY WRITTEN IN LIES

You want to know my story?

I come from the University of Priština, and I was an actor and dancer and speaker. I was Roman Catholic. I loathed the Muslims but was turned by one of them into what I am now. I am young enough, only twenty-five years dead.

Or perhaps I am a thousand years old. I was an Illyrian seeking refuge in the highlands on the

run from brutal Slavs who thought to trap me and kill me for my meager treasures. I went to sleep in a small cave and was troubled by a golden ring sitting on a rock, and when I reached for it a wet hand shot forth from the darkness and pulled me into a wading pool with blind fish and flesh-stripped human bones, and the hag who lurked beneath those waters saw in my eyes something she recognized, and she made me like her, and in my veins curdles her bad blood still.

Could be that I was the child of a Sultan, an adulterer of an Italian Fascist beauty queen, a soldier in the Balkan Wars, a Thracian seer, a gifted liar.

History has many shapes and colors, and not just the broad sweeping history like a grand tablecloth, but my history, my small napkin folded into gentle corners. It is not one thing, and I am not one thing. Just as you are not one thing, my dear, none of us are.



When a pretty girl like her asks an ugly mug like me to kill someone, you figure it's a setup. That maybe she's trying to convince me to do her dirty work. But I've just been watching her bleed the doll for fifteen minutes straight, with what you might call unnecessary roughness. I haven't had a drop all night, so this isn't a setup. It's proper consideration.

Which isn't to say we don't have other reasons for murder. Neither of us has domain, because there hasn't been a Prince worth the title for twenty years. I've been renting from a redneck called Gravel, down in what passes for Necropolis 'round here, but I'm ready to move out, to get my own ground. You hold ground by strength. Before that, though, you have to make a claim. Murder's the easiest way.

Got this from another Sheriff I met a while back. We're in the same Covenant, and when he heard I was looking into some of the Savages and their doings, he thought this was important — he seems to think that the worst part about Gangrel isn't that they're fucking barbarians. He seems to think that the worst part is the way they bring that out in others they meet. He sent me this photocopy of the Haunt's words.

—Hardaiken



But before she offers me the kill, there isn't a "we." Just both happened to be scouting the same neighborhoods, and both zeroed in on the same cow. Nobody's seen Old Man Troughton in a while, and his dolls have been getting lonely. Probably some are worth keeping around, but this one's good to make a mess of: young, white, teaches fourth grade. That's a front-page stake right there. Splatter that, word'll get around you got balls.

She doesn't have balls. The camo pants would be tight enough to tell, even without the way she's squatting. You can really appreciate the thunder she must have put into those thighs when she was breathing. By the time she hears my shoulder crack, I've already palmed the switch and I'm ready to give her a fight for the doll. That's when she asks.

"You wanna do the honors? Or you just gonna Haunt?"

I knew there was somebody else scouting this neighborhood. She must've, too, but picking the same night? That's magic. Which is why I take her at her word, crawl over to the cow and start sucking at the nasty gash she left where the bitch's throat used to be. There's still a heartbeat going there, just faintly. That's magic, too. Which is why I take a chance.

"Share?" I ask, and she buries her face in the meat next to mine. And then there's a "we."

We share more than dinner. She and I map out a dozen of Troughton's blocks, from the Tombs up to Seventh Street. We leave Sixth as neutral territory. Our kill makes the cover of the *Post* and the *Times*, and we stay away while the cops and the packs come poking around. When the heat's gone down and our Kindred have figured they're not gonna sniff us out, we get to tagging.

She hasn't been dead more than twelve years, and I'm less than twenty. Her pack's not going to back her this far west if the shit hits, so we invent a war. We design a couple new tags and do a bunch more kills. It's her idea, but we take turns picking the hits. Tag by tag and kill by kill, we build a fiction. Two tough guys at war.

She laughs at that, picking skin out of her teeth.

"Guys, huh?"

"I was talking generically."

"We could be girls. I'm a girl."

"I've noticed." I've been noticing all night. And we've had a lot of nights together, lately. She doesn't seem to mind the way my bones creep and twist.

"So we could be two girls nobody wants to get between." She teases, too.

"Everybody wants to get between two girls." I pick up the spray-can.

"That what you want?" She starts with hers again, too. Whichever tough guy hates Sicilians is marking out this block. We'll give it to the dude who hates Chinamen next week.

"I was talking generically."

"Uh-huh. Gimme a boost?" I hoist her onto my shoulders so she can finish the piece. I pretend it's no big deal, that she isn't grinding against me, that she's not breaking my neck from exactly the wrong side. "Move in a little bit?" I step closer to the wall, and I nearly fall over when she jumps off my shoulders. I lose my paint around the same time she drops hers. I'm saved from the fall by her twisting forward, bracing against the wall and throwing her legs around my neck. She ends up facing me from exactly the right side.

She gives me a look, the same one she gave me when she offered the doll. I rip her jeans down to my chin.

"You're gonna pay for those, yeah?" she asks through a wide grin.

"Yeah," I say.

The rest I'll maybe tell you when you're older.

I wake up like a heart attack. The pain is clear and blinding, and I clutch the sheet. My heart's doing jumping jacks, and sense or no, I feel sure I'm going to throw up. I drag myself to the toilet, which has long since crusted over with age and shit, and I brace against it until the palpitations stop, until my body's reconciled being alive and dead again. The shower doesn't have a curtain, but any water that goes flying will help the general state of the place anyway. The water's heated, at least, and it burns off my waking-sweat and soothes away my phantom pulse. I splash through the liquefied muck on the bathroom floor and dry myself off with the bedsheet. I hang it up; six hours should be enough.

Waking isn't always this bad, but it has been lately. Has been since her.

I run into Gravel in the hallway. He's wheeling along a mop and bucket. I have to wonder what it is he's going to clean.

"Sleep well, man?" he asks, ignoring my question.

"Yeah," I lie, because I don't feel like getting into it, don't feel like explaining that my body's been remembering shit lately. For all I know, he'd decide I'm carrying, turn me out. Gravel runs the hotel, and he's pretty easy-going, but I hear tell he's not the owner and I don't want any shit coming down on me. I got places to be, anyway.

"Need anything for your room?" I shake my head as I brush past him and hit the elevator button. He looks at me through his cracked sunglasses, then turns around and wheels down the hallway again. "Just trying to help, man."

Getting out and to the surface is a little complicated. Even though I'm already six stories down, I have to go two stories further to the lobby, through the Crack Deco furnishings and to the back door behind the check-in desk. Then climb the fire-escape up to the third-story-cum-basement of the building next door, slide the fake brick-over away from the window and

slide in. Up another story-and-a-half to the kitchen of the restaurant that's there now, then out *that* back door. Finally, I'm out in the "courtyard" behind the three adjoining buildings, back with the dumpsters and the employee parking... and her.

She's already waiting. She gives the impression it's been a while, but it's just an impression, like her cigarette or like me breathing in the stink of the trash.

"You waste a lot of moonlight," she teases.

"Makes for a safe crash," I shoot back. "Sleep easier knowing there's no way the sun can get down there."

She flashes her face-splitting, heart-melting grin and takes off across the courtyard. Do I need to say I follow? She leads me down an alley, and then another, and jumps into the side of a squat building, hard, then takes a flip up and starts climbing windows by the boards on them. I ape her, even when she finally lets go of the cigarette and burning embers pass a hair from my face. I'm no more than a few feet behind her the entire scramble up, if you stretch "a few." I chase her across the rooftop, make the flying leap to the next folded fire escape. The gap between us widens and closes over the next several blocks. We go higher and higher, until we're dizzyingly far somewhere above uptown and I'm close enough to grab her shoulder and throw her down on the tar-papered roof. The wind whips us as I crush her mouth with mine, and if she notices my jaw cracking and sliding and putting itself back together, she doesn't say anything except "mmm." You can kiss crazy-long when you don't have to come up for air, and if I didn't get much chance before her, well, I learn fast.

"Lemme show you something you won't see in Necropolis," she says, and one-hand-on-my-chest pushes me up. My hopes that it's some new kink are dashed when her other arm points east. I look... right into the damn east wind and the ashes it's carrying. I blink them away and look out across the broken-bottle skyline. I stiffen and roll off her, ready to run, because there's an orange rim behind the buildings. She's behind me, though, quick as a cat, her hands massaging my shoulders as much as she's holding me in place. Her bob cut brushes my ear as she whispers "breathe." I do, and my supernaturally paranoid senses tell me the fire's far away. My collarbone twists and fractures and knits again under her fingers.

"I thought you might like to see the sunrise," she says, and I realize what I'm looking at. The sky's lit up, yeah, lit up by a blaze from the direction of the stockyards. The whole horizon is on fire or reflecting it, the jagged silhouettes of skyscrapers scattering the sounds of sirens. Instinct tells me to be afraid of the fire, to go to ground and find a tomb, but the fingers on my back tell me to stay still and my bloody eyes can't look away.

"You did that for me?" I ask.

"Sorta," she says, "I did that for us." Satisfied that I'm not going to panic, she sits down behind me, wrapping her legs around my stomach. "I felt like watching a sunrise, too." She laughs, and then I laugh, and we don't stop giggling until a couple of my ribs crack.

"Seriously," I ask, "how big a fire is that?"

"Only a couple of blocks..." I swear I can hear her biting her lip. "...to start," and we're cracking up again. "They don't call me a witch for nothin'."

"You're going to seriously piss off the Abattoir." I can never help being the wet blanket. "Real witches, and your clan besides, right?"

"Maybe most of them are Gangrel, but they ain't Bruja," she says. "Ain't my pack, ain't my problem. But I signed it, anyway." She slides her hand up my shirt, then scratches a few lines into my skin. Easy to read, even by touch.

VII.

"The Abattoir'll be all over themselves blaming the Spear. They might come right out and call 'crusade.'"

New rounds of laughter, then quiet while we watch her sunrise grow. Eventually her beret lands in my lap, then her t-shirt.

"D minus three hours," she says. "You wanna go back to my place?"

Girl's burning down the town for me, and she's topless. You think I say no?

Her pad's a world from mine. I wrap myself in buried buildings and dirty sheets. She takes over a high-rise condo and just bolts over the windows with plywood and leather. A few of her pack's cows are lounging in the front room watching a porno. I guess we must have rubbed a few nerves, having dinner and then getting right into it. We get an update on her blaze from the news. Apparently, it's spread into the canneries and the ghetto.

She rolls off my chest. I can see the flowering bruises, where her marble skin hit my ever-breaking bones. Her blush hasn't faded yet. I like to think it's 'cause I'm that good. I stretch the arm that's not under her; bend it a way it's not supposed to go.

"You sure this doesn't bother you?" I watch the shards swim under my skin, looking for new ways to hook up and twist my bones.

She gives me an irritated sigh and a nip on the forearm.

"Course not. It's just shit with your Blood. And I'll bet it means we can squeeze you in all sorts of interesting places..."

The nip turns into a bite, and we're busy until my pager goes off. She gets it, lifting my pants along with it.

"Alarm," she says. "D minus thirty minutes." Her eyes do the asking.

I look at her, look at the covered windows, look back. I belong below ground, not above, in the city of the dust more than the city of the damned. But she doesn't mind my twisted bones, and she's offering to let me stay the day. The punks in the living room are probably good for a few more pints, assuming they're still around by nightfall. You think I say no?

A dozen bottles hit the homeless guy before the boys realize he's first, already dead and second, not the walking kind. She and the boys are playing bean-the-bum, and four of us are thirteen up. I think it's a little crass to play with the food when you ain't gonna eat it, but I don't say anything.

I don't really like her pack, but they've taken to me. Yeah, they crack jokes about my hunch, but they don't blame me for Blood, especially not Blood that makes 'em feel like they've got one up on me. And they crack on each other worse, anyway. They all figure themselves for alpha, all except her. She and I aren't living off the group's BS rep as machos. We aren't sucking off the Spear's dole and faking allegiance in their war with the Abattoir. We got our own havens, and our own hunting grounds. I make sure we always meet her pack here, though, so they don't know 'em all. They're a greedy bunch of sumpitches, and lazy to the last man. I put up with them, but I don't share more than I have to. You might say they're my in-laws.

One of the yahoos is making a big deal about visiting "his girl" tonight, and I get the sick feeling he's not just gonna drink from the cow. Most of them are too close to the food for my taste, pun intended. They fuck the meat; it's what happens when you get a bunch of Savage boys all worked up and none of them can pull a decent dead chick. Not that I should be talking, generically speaking. I thank Dracula every night that I got it so good. I watch her twirling the empty bottle between two fingers, the green glass reflecting in her eyes, and I watch her let the bottle drop.

Shatters dead-center against the bum's forehead. Sure, not a moving target, but just for a second, while I watch her clapping for herself and getting envying looks from the boys, I can see the fun. That's what she does, for me. She puts the fun into the night.

The game's over, at that point, and we just bullshit around for a while. The boys decide to meet the rest of the pack, to go hit the clubs. It's the Sabbath, so the Rack's a no-fire zone. I'm hungry, too. She asks if I want to come with them. I think about it, even as my knee curls in on itself. Yeah, I'd get through the door.

"No, honey," I tell her. "I'll be fine." I check my watch. "See you D minus one?"

"D minus two." She kisses me, then wanders off to the edge of the rooftop. The boys have already jumped. She turns, and her eyes come back to me. We both just felt something shift.

It's the first time I've told her no.

Seemed easy, at first, but my arms are hurting by D minus four, two floors from the uptown balcony we're meeting on. I spider it, one arm and two legs, the other arm keeping the pram in balance. I'm only hearing the occasional squeal from inside. For a guy with breaky bones, I'm doing damn good. And it takes devotion. Maybe she'll notice.

She smiles when she sees me, that years-familiar grin a little sad this time. I set the pram down and we hug. I open my eyes when I hear thunder, but the sky's still dry. I can see all the way to the horizon, lights and traffic and the cathedral spire raising a fist to heaven. She feels me twitch, though, and pulls back. The pram shakes a bit.

"You know a baby won't keep me," she jokes. It isn't funny, even followed with her laughter.

"It's a present," I tell her, "look inside."

She leans over, pulls the blanket off the squirming mass, and she laughs again. I've been getting ready for that laugh all week. The rats, free of the blankets, start to squeal and climb out. She whispers them quiet.

"Oag gift?" she asks. I shake my head.

"Just wrapping," I say. "Look underneath." She pulls out the phone and starts to shake her head, then sees the second one and looks confused.

"I'm hitting the road," she repeats, as if I could possibly have forgotten. "I can't..." Her pack already went. She's meeting them at Bullrush, and from there? She won't tell me. She probably hasn't decided.

"The blue one's for what you can't do. The red one," I smirk.

"It's a last date present." Her eyebrow quirks.

I put my arms around her, move to stand behind. She's stiff for a moment, and then she relaxes.

"I'll miss you," she whispers.

"I'll miss you, too." I put my hand around hers, raise the red phone. I turn us towards the cathedral, and I hit Send. She tries to turn back towards me, but I nudge her away with my chin.

"Just watch."

Takes a moment. I'm afraid it won't work. But somewhere out there, the third phone gets the text.

VIII.

There's a sound of bells as the first bomb goes off, rocking the spire. Just as the echoes are starting to fade, the incendiaries trigger, coiled up and down the towers and buttresses.

I listen to her laughter again, for the last time. She leans back into me, and I can feel it.

"Are you going to kiss me?" she asks.

You think I say no?



At this point, it starts to fall out of precise order. More pages have been torn out and rearranged. I can't imagine there's any message in there: just the fury of chaos, of a mind devolved from human to beast.

Still. She's telling a story. She's collected the information. Met with a wider range of her low brood than I'd have expected. Certainly no Ventrue agent of such untested age could manage such a thing. That, I suppose, is a testament to the commonness of their kind.

- C. Hardaiken

TO THE GINGERBREAD HOUSE - DREAMS OF CAKE AND BLOOD

Well, at least I'm not in a body bag.

This room, though, smells of fear. I'm crowded in the dark with the dogs and the cats and, if I hear it right, some kind of pissed-off parrot. It's not speaking words, but the bird is over there in the darkness making these.. angry warbles, like a madman in the shadows. And there's a poodle, one of the big ones not the tiny teacup ones, and he just barks and barks and freaking barks.. ugh. Plus, the plane's been hitting so much turbulence that you'd think we were on the ground instead of the air, bouncing down a broken road. Hit a new bump, and the cats and dogs wail in concert. Perhaps the only time they get along, these moments of potential doom.

To sum up? Traveling sucks. It's bad enough just getting through airport traffic and taking off your shoes to make sure you don't have some kind of "hiking boot nuke" tucked away in there. (Though I suppose I should be thankful that those machines don't check your heart-rate, huh?) I'm sure if I were a... "better" vampire, I could do something about all this. Just snap my fingers and bypass the security or turn into a bat and fly to Poland my own damn self (can we really turn into bats? Or is that just some fairy tale folklore garbage? I mean, you read vampire stories you also find vampires who are pumpkins or some nonsense, so at this point I don't know what to believe other than I personally cannot become a bat or a pumpkin).

But all that's just an inconvenience. Something watches over the airport. I could see it, I swear I could. Just a pair of eyes, red like a plane's wing lights, reflected back from the wet tarmac, the windows, the chrome ringed a trash can, everywhere. I swear it's true, but... not like I have proof. You'd think it had to be just as it seems, reflections of lights and nothing more. Damn it, though, if they didn't look like eyes.

Whatever it was, it didn't seem to care that I was passing through its domain. It let me go. Maybe it wanted me to go. Who knows? I met with Gilda's "people," and they said nothing to me at all. They grabbed the ticket out of my hand, and then tore it (as if they were official ticket takers and not some jerkoffs in black coats and blacker eyes), and next thing I know they were shoving me into the plane with the help of some runway workers, pushing me up into the room where they keep the pet carriers.

I don't even know why I'm doing this. Oh, wait, I know why - because you need me to, because you've got a knife to my throat and you'll hurt the people I love, even though I'm told that our kind does not

CIVILIZATION ENDS AT THE
WATERLINE. BEYOND THAT,
WE ALL ENTER THE FOOD
CHAIN, AND NOT ALWAYS
RIGHT AT THE TOP.

-HUNTER S. THOMPSON

or cannot love, that it's just some hollow mockery, some false face we wear to convince ourselves that maybe, just maybe we're still human.

You want to know something? I had a dream yesterday as I slept. I don't dream. I never dream. Since dying, I can't recall one day dream, because during the day it's like I'm really truly dead. I lay down at night's end and I feel the wildness in me start to recede like a tide and before I know it, it feels like I'm slipping into cold water.

But yesterday, a dream.

I dreamt that I was Gretel without Hansel, that I had come upon the witch's house and it was made of cake and candy. From behind a window made of rock candy I could see the face of the witch, blurred by fat crystals of sugar, but even still I could make out those yellow eyes and stringy hair. And my hunger overwhelmed me then, a great clutching pain in my gut that traveled up my throat and to my mouth and my jaw started working, as if chewing. It was a fire inside me, burning and tearing me up, but fuck it if it wasn't cold too, like an injection of saline straight into the veins.

And I started eating the house.

Each candy I broke into blood. Every hunk of cake or gingerbread I pulled from the wall bled. Red blood. Glutinous. Like

syrup. And I ate the food in great heaving handfuls, and my mouth was smeared with sticky red, and the blood was sweet. Like honey. Not like blood really is... not that I don't like the taste of blood, but it's heady, with a tang like licking an iron sword, with a strange aroma that fills the mouth and dizzies the mind. But in the dream it was nothing like this! it was like flowers and sugar and tree sap and it was delicious.

Fuck. Fuck! Now I'm thirsty.

And all I've got to eat are somebody's pets. ... Shit.

I hope nobody's going to miss that poodle. I sure won't.

Is this what my life, or lack of it, has become? Hiding in the dark on a plane to Poland? Thinking about having eaten a poodle?

Anybody tells you that vampires are sexy is full of crap.

MYTHIC PROPAGANDA

This has been popping up. It's a flyer, and it doesn't break the Masquerade... not strictly speaking, at least, but I'm sure the Powers That Be aren't thrilled with it. Thing is, it's not just here in this city that these posters are showing up. And from what I'm told, the other ones are obviously cobbled together by different hands even though the text is the same, so it's not just one of us doing it. Actually, I don't technically know that vampires are responsible at all. But it has the earmarks, right?

The Domestication of Enkidu!

He will embrace her and the wilderness will reject him.

We are not your common dog!

Aruru created us to be a man of the wild, pinched from clay and given the mind of the beast. Enkidu was unwashed, wore many skins, and walked among the animals as one of their own. His freedom was his own!

But Shamhat the Succubus was sent by the Lords to neuter Enkidu! She went and spread her legs and showed him what lie between, and her perfumes drifted off her skin with a mesmeric odor, an odor not of musk or of beast but of lies!

With every thrust of her traitorous hips, she took something from the free man! When she had finished with him he took off his skins, oiled his body, and wore the clothes of man. He was made clean. He was allowed to enter into their homes behind them. He ate their food and drank their drink.

The animals would no longer speak with him.

He could no longer command wolves or lions.

He now protected not the animals, but the shepherds and hunters.

The Succubus and the Lords.

We will not be domesticated!

We are not your common dog!

We will be free once more!

It's weird. Propaganda born not of recent events or even ancient history, but from out of myth and legend. I guess with our "group," this kind of shit has wings.

Weird Carthian Savage propaganda? Just Carthian? Just Savage? Neither? Enkidu was, what, he was the wild man created to be Gilgamesh's friend? I remember that much from college. I don't recall the succubus part, but I was also stoned half the time in class (when I went to class at all). I do remember that they went to fight the Humbaba together, and didn't Enkidu feel a pang of guilt or remorse? That he had to fight his own, because Humbaba was a wild man or a creature of the forest or something? I might just be making that up.

But Humbaba must figure into the equation somehow. Because wherever these posters spring up, so does this bit of graffiti:



Humbaba's mouth is fire, his roar is the floodwater, his breath is death!

What's particularly bizarre is that this flyer apparently is getting picked up and maybe even circulated by normal people. Non-dead people. College students assuming a radical "go green" philosophy, to anarchists who think that the common man has been shackled by oppressive government. And maybe that's the target. But Succubus? Lord? I don't think so. But I do wonder how humans picking up the philosophy and running with it helps or hurts the "cause."

Whatever the "cause" even is.

Again, the library is your friend. When Enkidu was destroyed - he was punished for defying the will of the gods and helping Gilgamesh destroy the Bull of Heaven - he cursed the courtesan, Shamhat, for domesticating him.

MIDNIGHT ROADS 3

Jesus Christ, that was terrifying.

There's a long stretch of rough asphalt that cuts through the forest - the road's called Grief Road. And down the middle of this road you start seeing signs for an old Army base, Fort Royale. But you can tell the base isn't in operation anymore: the sign looks like something out of the 1950s, and kudzu's grown up over most of it (and when you pull the ivy back, the sign's pocked up with bullet holes, and lots of 'em).

So I kept walking. I was enjoying the forest at night. No cars. No people.

Came the time that I found the base: like the sign, the forest had reclaimed it, a mighty triumph for old Mother Nature, I guess. The trees stooped over the place, branches like hands trying to pin the place to the ground. The darkness seemed darker. I saw the shadows of towers, the silhouettes of wire fence, the black slabs of blocky buildings. I thought to get close. Mistake, major mistake.

Pulling away some of the kudzu (that stuff's diligent, like it's got a mind of its own), I curled my fingers around the wire fence and peered deep into the "front yard" of the compound..

And alarms went off.

Klaxons, screaming. From each tower, a red spotlight.

Then I felt it: a tightening of the throat, the scratching at my spine. Vampires. Not just one. But many. I saw shapes emerging from the base. Pouring out of it. Red eyes. Then yellow-eyed dogs, or wolves. I heard the flutter of wings above my head.

One of the red spotlights found me.

And I don't believe this still, but it felt like it was sucking something out of me. Like it was pinning me down, the way the trees had pinned this old forgotten base down to the ground, holding me still for examination. A butterfly on a nail.

Whatever it is that lurks inside us wasn't happy, though: like a cat with its tail in a mouse trap, my own inner Beast went fucking loony. Gave me just enough *cumh* to uproot my feet and run. I heard bodies hit the fence. I heard dogs wailing.

The red lights faded and soon disappeared.

The voices and alarms and dog howls all stopped. At the same time.

But I didn't stop running.

TO THE GINGERBREAD HOUSE - THE RATWEASEL'S TOUR

I guess there are rules, and then there are rules.

I had always thought, you go to a city, you go before the Prince or his people and you say, "Hey, I'm in your city. I am not a foreign invader. I'm no poacher, no plague, please accept my humble blah-blah-blah and by the way I think it'd be great if you didn't destroy me."

Ludo, though, told me different.

Who's Ludo? Another one of Gilda's people, it seems. Ludo looks like a rat and a weasel rolled up in a mostly-human package. His teeth are long and sharp, almost as if he filed them that way. He licks those teeth a lot, which makes it seem like he's going to eat me. But then he tells these jokes, these off-color jokes about Americans and how dumb we are, which seems ironic, but I'm a fan of irony so I laugh. And it feels nice to laugh.

But Ludo says no, "our kind" doesn't need to present ourselves because we're "different." Off the books, off the record, and too many not much better than a "dog pretending to be a wolf" or a "wolf pretending to be a politician." (His words, not mine.) We don't present ourselves, and the reasons are twofold: one, we're better than that, above and beyond that petty world. And two, some Princes would either banish or destroy us on sight or, at the least, keep a needlessly close eye on us.

The Prince here is someone called Mayor Sokrates. A Carthian by the sound of him, though Ludo doesn't call him that (he refers to the Mayor's group as the "Plantation Committee," whatever that actually is). He's a progressive who even supports a weird underground version of some kind of Kindred Newspaper. Odd, that: you enter a city like this with all its Old World European charm shellacked with a kind of... gray World War II veneer (I'm sure the people who live here don't see it that way, but I "calls them as I sees them," as my Pops used to say), and you don't expect it to be lorded over by someone theoretically more progressive than what you find in American cities. I half-expected some Vlad Dracul Lord, all shadows and castles and heads on spears.

As time goes on, I learn that my expectations about things turn up wrong more than they do right. Oh well.

While we walked, Ludo told me a lot about Warsaw. Not normal, tourist shit, but the weird stuff. The stories you wouldn't believe, but they'd scare you anyway. It's double worse for me, because... Jesus, I know only a little of what's out there, and it includes the walking dead who drink blood to survive, so how hard is it to believe in ghosts and demons? If Ludo told me that Warsaw was under the control of a parliament of werewolves, I'd nod and maybe laugh at the silliness of it but I'd not be able to shake the chill because, why not?

First off, Ludo said the place has demons. Actual demons. Demons who claim to have broken free from Hell, the Hell not a Hell, and will do damn near anything to remain here. Ludo is "friendly" with one of these so-called demons, a figure who lurks down in the Old Town barbican and sells strange plants and animals (according to Ludo: blood-drinking roses, ravens that speak, dry powdered vines that grant visions when mixed with blood and consumed). I asked what the "demon" looked like.

"Like you or me," Ludo said. "But his hands are cold, cold as the grave. Flames flicker when he passes near."

Which sounds to me like air currents, and the hands are probably just clammy, but if Ludo wants to think him a demon, I guess I won't stand in his way.

Also in Old Town, he showed me the mermaid statue in the market square, and claimed - get this - that mermaids are real, that they live in the rivers, and that if you sprinkle three drops of blood on a picture of a dead loved one and drop it into the waters of the Vistula, a mermaid will come to you and claim you. Which means, apparently, dragging you down into the depths. I've no idea how anybody's ever verified that story; you'd think they'd be too busy drowning or getting it on with a mermaid bride to come up and confirm the reports, but again, vampires are real. I'm unliving proof. So, mermaids? Fuck it. I'm a believer.

He told me about the Piarist ghosts of *alibor*, the werewolves of *Ogród Saski* park who are said to worship some moon-faced Greek goddess (Artemis would be my guess, but I don't have any Robert Graves or Joseph Campbell handy, plus, I flunked out of college), and the hellfire club members who make trouble for the local Damned because they like to burn vampire blood in braziers and get high off the smoke and fumes (Ludo said that contrary to what most believe, out of all the things that "creep and crawl" in this world, humans scare him the most).

The really scary stuff, though, is happening around some of the city's Jewish sites (which are culturally too few and far between, if you ask me). First, the graffiti. Found on graves and trees at the Hebrew cemetery on Okopowa Street, and on the few remaining walls that used to be the ghetto: Miła Street, the old Umschlagplatz (the dock where they used to load the trains on the way to Treblinka), the pale brick of Żłota 62. Painted in red:

GUR QLOHHXVZ UNIR RFPNCRQ TRUVAABZ.
GUR BJYF SYL SERR.
GUR FPNYRF JVYY QNYNAPR NTNVA.

I don't know what it is. Ludo showed the writing to me as we walked, so I copied it down. I figured... Christ, I know this is ignorant, but I figured it was Polish or Hebrew or something. Truvaabz? Sure, sounds European. Nearby on some of the old stones is written *To był mur getta*, which I guess is Polish for "This was the ghetto wall" or something, so what the hell do I know? Stupid American, I get it, but it sounds... Slavic or something. Am I nuts? Ludo thinks so.

He laughed at me. Clapped me on the back with one of his greasy hands and then told some crass joke about Russians that I really didn't understand.

So. Whatever it is, wherever the graffiti ends up, the local Damned have seen things. Owls with human faces, mostly, but ghosts, too - pale things, skinny, with mouths too large for their heads. Silent. I guess some of the local vamps are curious, too curious for their own good, and they tried to talk to the ghosts or capture one of those owls. You know the end to this story, so say it with me! And They Were Never Seen Again.

But you know who were seen again? A group of Israeli students visited the old extermination camp at Majdanek, right? They went missing that day but were found the next morning, draped over the fences marking the borders of the prisoner fields. Each had no marks on them indicating how they were killed except that their mouths were pulled open so wide that the jaws broke and the cheeks around the lips split.

Not far from their bodies? The graffiti.

Story's not done yet! the bodies went to the morgue, but that night disappeared.

And they've been seen. Up. Walking around. Hissing. Laughing. Mumbling in... well, Ludo says maybe Latin? You might see one off in the distance, painting or etching that weird graffiti on the wall. You can't get close, though, Ludo says. Get near and they run. Or just disappear. Maybe you hear the flapping of wings. Or the squeak of rats, he says, offering his own vermin's teeth in a cruel smile.

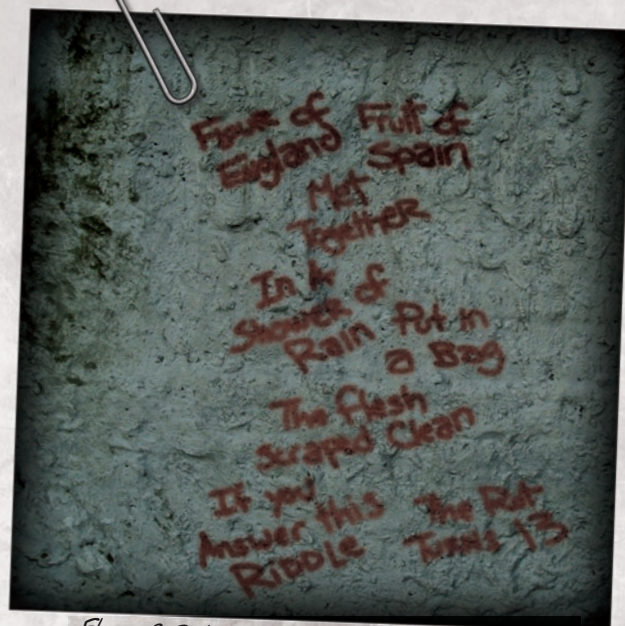
I asked Ludo his theory. Everybody's got a theory, after all.

He says we're cursed. Our animal side isn't kept inside us anymore. It's out there. Like a ghost, like a totem, free from its fleshly moorings and wandering loose.

Once, he said, we were born from fornicating with beasts, and we broke the natural laws. This gross flaunting of what is right and proper... well, he said it's coming back to haunt us. Maybe to eat us, or maybe just to breed as we once did to those lesser than us.

Great. I'm glad that "The Gangrel Are All Animal Fuckers" theory has followed me here. Do we really hate ourselves that much that we believe this tripe?

So, that concludes our walking tour of Warsaw. I'm at the Chapter House now. Yes, apparently we have Chapter Houses. Yeah, that shocks the shit out of me. Morning's coming, soon, so I'll tell you about it before we get on the road tomorrow night.



Flour of England, Fruit of Spain
Met together In a shower of rain
Put in a bag The flesh scraped clean
If you answer this riddle The rot turns thirteen.

A TRIBE OF SAVAGES?

This... manifesto has been going around. In your letter, you asked - or is it best to say demanded? - that I give to you anything that seems pertinent to our clan, even if it wasn't on "the list." So, here's this.

I don't know much about the one who wrote it. Few do, apparently. They know his name! Jonah Highsteeple. They know that he was once a doctor or scientist. A professor, too. Discredited because, if you believe the rumors, the rape of a student. Was his Embrace some kind of repercussion? The revenge of one beyond the grave protecting a beloved servant or family member? Jesus, I don't know, but that's rough stuff no matter how you look at it.

He stays hidden, this guy. He remains off the radar, but seems keen to put his manifesto in the hands of prominent Savages, those who - with his "coaching" - end up in positions of power. He seems to think that we should be something more than the nomads and wolf-men and park rangers (or, bestial fornicators) some think us and that we should... I don't know. Take charge. Look at nature and become kings in the mode of a T-Rex or something. It sounds nice when I write it, but when he tells it it's cold and weird and unsettling. If Highsteeple really believes this stuff, he truly has pushed his "humanness" away.

Dominance Hierarchy: A Biological Manifesto

We are no longer men. We are something more, and strictly speaking, something less. Don't be fooled by that, though. "Something less." The negative connotation lives in that word, *less*. Perhaps it's the wrong word. Perhaps it's not a "lesser" element, but a "simpler" element. That's what it is. We are something altogether simpler.

We are animal.

One could argue that man is always animal and just fools himself into thinking he is better, when it could be that he's only more complex. I might agree with that sentiment. Man is hunger. Man is safety. Man is thirst and violence and instinct. But he hides it behind a veneer of civility, morality and forward-thinking.

The Embrace strips most of that away. At least, it has for me and my brothers and sisters. Some within the Kindred still cling to the old ways of human-doing. They still pretend at having manners and they still play at their precious salons. They give into the idea that supremacy is something human, the divine right of kings or power conferred by votes from the masses. The Lords love this. They see it as holy. As an imperative.

Ah, but. Supremacy, authority, kingship. These are not men's concepts. They are animal ideas. A canid proves his status at the head of the pack with vicious fangs. A chimpanzee thwarts other males, demonstrates his potency, controls the women with a forceful grip. (And when the chimp and his tribe find those of another tribe, they destroy the males, sometimes eating them. The babies, they dash against trees and rocks. The females, they claim. And so the dominance there moves from the single chimp to the single tribe.) Even the lowliest insect gives into the hierarchy: ants and bees serve a queen, and those that do not belong in a species-specific hierarchy are still given over to the hierarchy of nature. A moth is a treat for a bird. Grubs plucked from trees by native hands are grilled on skewers.

We are animal. More than this, though, we are apex predator.

Illustration of Principle

Like the gorilla or chimpanzee, we must first establish the order of dominance within our own group, within the clan. It's not about breeding rights, exactly, though it can be. The Prince chooses who may draw others into this world with the Embrace; there, the pecking order is plainly stated, and so we must either strive to become the Prince or become powerful enough so that the Prince does as we deem desirable and/or prudent. It's ultimately about the Blood. The dominant Blood perseveres, pervades, grows populous. The strongest in the tribe is the one who has the greatest choice of childer. The strongest can choose who will serve his Blood, be they mortal or Kindred thrall. The strongest is afforded the largest territory.

Then, as a family, as a tribe, we must exert our supremacy. Like the triumphant chimps, we can choose who belongs and who does not. We can destroy or humiliate those weaker than us, removing them from the equation through final death or social obviation. As the group with the power, we establish the rules (rules that favor us, naturally). We carve out the largest territory, keeping only those of our kind who serve the proper way. Dominance is a self-strengthening effect. You become the authority and make the rules, rules that ensure continued ascendancy.

Illustrations of Possibility

Games of domination take many faces. All approaches are valid if the end result is the same.

Dominance can come simply, through brute strength of body, mind or social command. The predatory shark is a thug. It must swim forward or die. It does little more than eat. But it is the king of its food chain, because that is what it's good at doing, that is how it's *built*. Swift swimmer. Powerful jaws. Massive bulk. The approach offers little cunning, but it does not need to. The authority of this animal is plain. If this is what we can be, this is what we will be. Physical potency, the ability to suffer damage that others of our kind cannot, can demonstrate our worth, our royalty.

Ants support a queen without fail. Unlike humans, the ant colony is not defined by its weakest link; it is as good as its strongest. All ants learn from the best examples within the colony: those who are successful create success in others through principles of learning and the exuding of pheromones. The Blood calls to Blood. If the tribe is strong, we are strong. And the Savages are always strong.

Another approach in the insect world is a kind of initial parasitism. We are not parasites, but we can begin our ascendancy *with* a parasitic approach provided the end goal remains dominance. Consider the braconid wasp. It lands on the caterpillar of a hornworm moth. It deposits eggs beneath the skin of the worm. The eggs hatch, and the larvae chew free of the worm's flesh, strengthening themselves on the meat of their host. Once free of the skin the larvae pupate. The pupae hatch, and wasps crawl free.

Note here that the life cycle only contains parasitic elements in the first part. Creatures who remain parasitic throughout their lifespan (tapeworms, remora fish, bacteria) are not to be admired or embodied. They are not kings. They are subjects, lowly and small, feeding on the very bottom. The braconid wasp is only parasitic in its initial phases until it can emerge, well-fed and ready to fly. If we must play weak or operate hidden until the time comes to reveal ourselves, then that is what we must do. One must be careful not to believe in the ruse, however; it becomes too easy to accept a lowly position, whereas the Blood and Beast demand better.

Wolves are social animals. Alpha wolves demonstrate their natural authority through success in hunting, through winning games of dominance and submission. They demonstrate controlled aggression. They display motivation. They are the most social, illustrating how connected they are to the rest of the pack. This is the most desirable approach amongst our families: complex proof of our natural home at the hierarchy's pinnacle.

Connotation vs. Denotation: Feral

I have heard some refer to me and my people as feral. I am inclined to agree, but not in the way that they mean.

The connotation of feral is, as an emblem, the hissing cat, the bucking horse, the dog with the bared teeth and frothing rabidity. It evokes a maddened creature, driven by unnatural lusts and hungers. This tag might apply to some of our kind, but it does not apply to me, and does not apply to those who follow my teachings.

The denotation of feral, that is, the strictest definition, is of a creature who has shunned its domesticity and gone back to a wild, natural state. This is a reasonable definition, and applies to what we are and what we do. We were once human. Mankind, tamed. Domestic. Complex. Given over to false social order. We have broken that chain and have gone back to the wild. As the Savage Damned, we can strip away all of that domesticity in favor of a purer, more natural state. We can become true kings, not the kings of men. Not the kings the Lords hope to be, but the kings the Savages were *meant* to be.

If that is feral, then I am feral.

Become the Witness

I urge you: witness the truth of my words in action in nature. Speak to the beasts; their purity will teach you. Listen to how a hound demands obeisance from other hounds, how he asserts himself over the lesser whelps, the neighborhood cats, even his owner if the owner is weak. Put your ear to the hornworm caterpillar and listen to the worms chewing and pulping its innards. Learn the strength of the raptor hawk or the way an owl commands the rest of his parliament.

You may one day seek to learn the tongue of thralls, but first I urge you to master the command of beasts. It is a natural step in the evolution, an authentic and absolute expression of your power. The tongue of birds and the words of wolves. Learn them first.

Conclusion

It is easy to give into one's covenant. One's overarching social group seems a ripe place to make a stand for ascendancy. It is not. Covenants represent a false face, a human face. Wolves do not segregate themselves: a wolf leads his pack, his pack dominates other wolves, and wolves consume those beneath them. The strata are clear. A chimpanzee doesn't create a sub-tribe broken out by belief: chimps who accept a mighty chimp god, chimps who think all monkeys should be allowed a voice, chimps who offer prayer to shadows. Yes, the chimps may break out by job, but that is a function of the tribe, not a function of faith.

Clan is pure. Clan is family. Clan represents your tribe within the species. Like the wolf, we lead our coteries, our coteries lead our Clan, our Clan should lead the other Kindred. And Kindred are the kings of the food chain, and we are at the top of the Kindred.

We do not have the role we were meant to have, not yet. We have been convinced of our bestial nature. We have been convinced that we are dogs, not wolves.

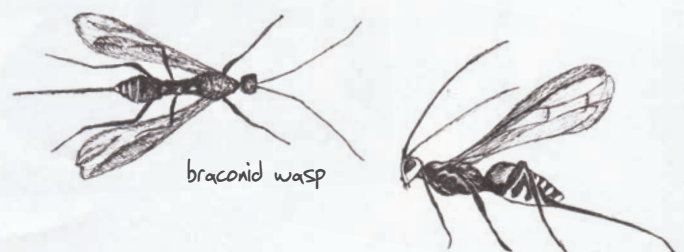
Time to cease belief in this persistent lie.

Serve Clan, not covenant.

Rid yourself of your humanness.

Learn the ways of beasts.

Learn the ways of true Princes.



REACTION?

So there's a Savage from a city up north - a Seneschal, if you believe it. I figured I'd send a copy of the manifesto along, passing it through what few channels I have access to, see if I could get a reaction. A statement, a response, something.

I got a response, all right. And not what I'd expected. Apparently, the Seneschal has a seneschal. A human, a ghoul who acts as his "voice." I didn't know we could get so uppity. You learn something new every night.

This is what I got:

=FROM THE DESK OF SENESCHAL SANTANA=

Alice:

The Seneschal does not appreciate being sent things like this. This so-called "manifesto" has been going the rounds for a couple years now and it has its zealots, more than I'd like, but then again we've got UFO cults and Scientology and Supermodels, so the world's full of things that are popular without sense, that are accepted without thought. This does damage to us; the Seneschal has worked very hard to surpass certain stereotypes and expectations to get to where he's at, and material like this only serves as some atavistic throwback to the way we have been perceived in the past (or, alternately, it approaches a whole new crazy, neither of which we desire).

I appreciate you sending this along - the Seneschal does like to keep in contact with others of the Blood.

But if you ever send anything else like this again, the Seneschal will hunt you down personally and stuff those pages down your dead and dusty throat.

He likes to handle most matters - except letter writing - himself.

Yours,

Rosalita Guaro, Assistant to the Seneschal

This is the kind of thing that's going to get me dead, or at least deader. Jesus. I thought I was acting all... reporter-like, trying to get a comment, and instead I have my existence threatened. And you have to figure she means it. Every night with this list is like dancing on a minefield; one bad pirouette, one clumsy plié, and boom. So, thanks for that, whoever you are, wherever you are. Hope you're enjoying yourself.

Though, I'm not going to lie.

Now I really want a face-to-face with Santana. Curiosity really did kill the cat.

4 MIDNIGHT ROADS,

Tonight, I found a vampire more ignorant and confused than I am. A tough feat! More important, I think he's one of us.

I was following a rough-hewn deer trail: all bramble and whip branches, but I wanted to get off the road for a while. Figured out here maybe I wouldn't get caught in evil red spotlights or have to sneak by some sobbing spirit.

I heard the sound before I saw him: a quick flick of the flashlight, and there he was. Stooped down over a deer carcass, sucking at the thing like a baby at a breast. He didn't hear me coming, but the light certainly didn't hide my presence.

He bolted.

I mean that, like a wild mustang. Kid - and I say kid because he looked like he was fresh out of high school - went sprinting off with these long, gangly noodle-legs. And me, dumb-ass that I am, went

after him. What the hell is wrong with me? Writing this dumb book for you has tweaked the volume on my curiosity to 11, then broke the knob off. I can't stop being curious. So I ran, calling after him.

The kid handily outpaced me, and soon was out of sight, but I could still hear those footsteps cracking and breaking ground ahead. I kicked it up a notch. Felt slow blood grow hot. Felt it reach out to my muscles. Suddenly, I felt stronger, faster, more graceful. And lucky for me, I guess, the dumb kid was too spooked to notice the fallen sapling: caught his ankle, went toppling down into a ravine.

Took me a while to calm him down and get his story. It didn't take me long, however, to realize that the poor kid didn't have a tongue. I mean, he did! but not much of one. Just a stumpy root of muscle, like a turkey neck in his mouth.

When finally we did calm each other down, we went back to the deer where he'd been feeding and where he'd left some of his stuff. He had an old Coleman lantern, so we hung that in a tree and from there, wrote a conversation to one another. Here's his story:

So what's your name?

Riley

Got a last name?

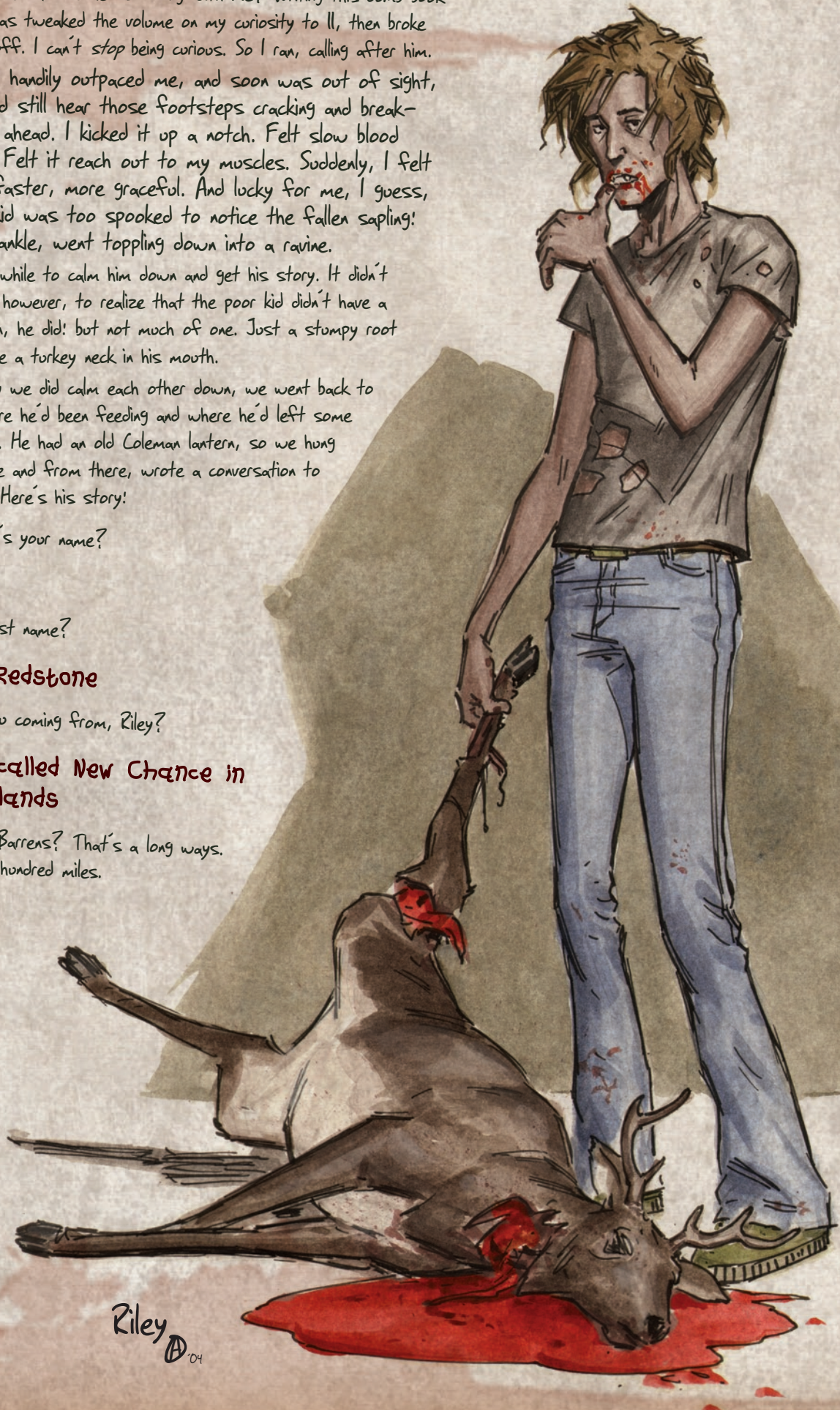
~~Oben~~ Redstone

Where you coming from, Riley?

Town called New Chance in
NJ Pinelands

The Pine Barrens? That's a long ways.
Two, three hundred miles.

I ran



Riley
© 04

No kidding. So why'd you run from me?

I thought you were family

Family?

You're a vampire like me so I thought you were a sister or cousin come to claim me

I guess in a way I am. We're both Savages. Both from clan Gangrel.

I don't know what that means

Well I don't know what you're talking about either. Tell me the story. Write all you want, I'll wait. It's a nice night.

I was out on vacation with my real family the human one. I'd done well in basketball that year and made varsity and so dad said we could go to the shore. BUT he got lost and didn't like asking directions or have a GPS. Night fell and we were way out in the pineys and we finally stopped to ask directions at a gas station and general store and a kid on the front porch with a face smeared with what I thought was strawberry juice or jelly said to go inside but inside everybody was dead

So we run back to the car where mom was waiting but they already have her out of the car a whole gang of them and they're all biting into her and she's screaming and dad goes at one with nothing but his fists but they're just monsters and they drag him into it too. The kid behind me with the red face is maybe a few years younger than me and he says to them that I look strong and fast and that maybe the family needs some new blood since someone named Daniel died a few months back

Something hits me in the back of the head and I wake up beaten and my tongue cut out and a pack of dirty men in old clothing tell me that when I was knocked out I babbled and cried out and they couldn't have that and besides they need someone who can work not someone who can talk

And one of them steps forward and he's got a big round face and an almost friendly smile but a mouth full of mean teeth some of them sharp. He's the one who made me like this made me a vampire. He packed me into one of the army of RVs and had me drink from some woman they'd been keeping chained up in the little camper shower

His name was Georgie. Said he was now my New Daddy and that I had a new family that we were all the Oberlock family now but this was no family not really

Wasn't long before we attacked the town of New New Chance and I mean that - attacked. Was a rainy night and they just stormed in and took captives when they could and killed everybody else



Was a big house not quite a mansion on the hill overlookin the little town and most of the family set up shop there and Grandfather took the topmost room in the attic with the tower like in some castle and because I was just a stripling they put me down in the basement locked away in a musty old room with rats that first bit me but later I bit them

Holy shit. You're telling me a whole pack of Gangrel just took an entire town? Openly?

yes

They never said anything about a Masquerade?

Like a party? No

What did they do with all the captives?

Put them back in the town and made them work - most of them could still do what they were doing like running the one gas station or keeping up the corner store and the ones who resisted were kept for a week or two and fed the blood of the mothers and fathers (but never Grandfather) and then they were like slaves I guess

Made thralls, yes. Tell me about Grandfather.

I was made to just call him Grandfather but I heard others use a more formal title like Grandfather Graham Oberlock and they sometimes added Child of Old Alice

My name's Alice, you know.

I know and that scares me a little

Well, I'm not old, in fact I'm young and dumb like you.

Ok

I guess I'm confused. How did they get away with it? Didn't... the world at large catch a whiff of the awfulness that was happening in New Chance?

Out in the pineys everything's pretty isolated plus the people who worked outside of town were the ones who drank the blood and were told not to say anything and so they didn't say anything

Basically, your so-called "family" took over the town and set up its own blood supply, that what I'm to understand? Basically like a herd, a big herd of human livestock?

You could say that yes. Theyd have lists scrawled on the walls or written in blood on old newspaper that said who was allowed to drink from who and how often

It's almost... admirable if it weren't so disgusting.

They hurt people if they acted out of line and sometimes even if they didn't. They hurt us too and made us work real hard and perform TESTS to make sure we were still worthy of the family tree - one night Mother Melissa decided to make one of the townsfolk (this guy

named Bucky) into her child and so she made him like us and she was all sweetness and smiles but she worked him like a dog - one time she made him carry so many rocks that he could barely walk and he misstepped and his ankle snapped. The bone came out and everything gross. So comes the night when he sneaks out of his locked room and doesn't escape or anything but just goes to the top of the roof near morning and waits till the sun comes up and one of the towns people said it was like snow the way his body disintegrated and caught in the wind

So how did you escape?

Bucky left behind some lockpicks he made out of some of the barbed wire they kept in bails down in the basement with us but after that they searched us a lot and so I pushed it up under my skin and hid them there - it hurt but as long as I didn't heal it stayed under the skin

And you just ran off?

Yes but not before killing Father Georgie

How'd you kill him?

They had a room of all the weapons or weaponlike things they took from the town in this one room of the house near the kitchen so I took a shovel whose handle had been sharpened like a spear. I found Georgie out at the Rothdeckers house where he went some nights because he liked messing with their teen daughter and he gets really into it so into it that he doesn't pay attention and I ran him through with that spear

And then what?

He just froze up and seemed to die I helped the girl out from under him and we got away together but I told her that we couldn't be friends because I was all messed up and was thirsty in a way she wouldn't like but I told her she needed to call the police and get them to investigate that town and that house

Did they?

I don't know I haven't stopped running

We parted ways shortly thereafter. I ran into a couple of other vampires the next town over - they had a mean, rangy look to them and they steered clear of me. Thank God. Here's hoping that poor kid got away, but from the looks of the kenneled dogs in the back of their pick-up, I've got my doubts.

DOGS LOOSE IN THE HALLS OF POWER

I couldn't find anybody to handle this for me. I wish I could have. Going out and speaking to those of us Savages who have managed to worm our way into power somehow... (Jesus, would you listen to me? How prejudicial is that toward my own clan? "Worm" our way? Maybe we deserve the power we take.)... what I was trying to say, before I put my foot in my mouth or whatever the equivalent is with the written word (pen through hand?), is that it's scary. These are vampires who have been on this earth dead longer than I have been alive. They have temporal and supernatural power that goes well beyond what I imagine, much less what I know. Talking to one of them is like standing against a crushing tide and praying that it doesn't come down and sweep you away, never to be seen again. Anyway. I've compiled my talks with these Savages here. Hope this satiates your curiosity. It had better.

[SANTANA TRANSCRIPT]

AS: You're a hard man to meet.

SS: As well I should be.

AS: Why is that?

SS: I have friends and I have enemies, and both are dangerous to me and what I'm doing here.

AS: How so? How are friends as dangerous as enemies? And who are they?

SS: My enemies are easy to identify. I am Gangrel, but I am no Savage. A wolf perhaps, if you care for that sobriquet. But Savage — such an ugly term. Racist, too. The Native Americans, the Incans and Mayans, they are all thought of as Savages, too. It's a name pushed upon a lesser people by those in power. We are the lesser people. So we earn the unpleasant name. How is it that we get to be Savages, but others get to be Lords?

AS: You still didn't explain —

SS: Who my enemies are, yes. You'd be wise to let me speak my turn before interrupting. Your youth is in your tongue.

AS: I'm —

SS: No apologies. Apologies are for the weak.

AS: ...

SS: Good. My enemies are those who think I am somehow betraying them by elevating myself to the halls of power. My enemies are those who believe I have gone against my Blood, who think I'm a lapdog to the

SENESCHAL SANTANA

Took me a while, but I got it. Took me two favors, too — the worst kind of favors, the kind "to be named later." I know his name's not on your list, but my instinct tells me you'll want this. Or at least appreciate it.

Let me first give you a little perspective on the man: he's cut like a butcher's block — square head, square jaw, square chest, he's all blocks and hard corners. When he talks, he doesn't move. No gesticulations, here. A lot of people, they shift and squirm: eyebrows up, hands like butterflies or birds, tongue licking lips in a moment of thought. Not him. It's all business. Icy. Still. An unblinking stare that looks right in your eyes and never looks away. It's hypnotizing. And it's scary.

(And fuck me if he doesn't look a teensy-bit like Saddam Hussein. No lame beret, but the same mustache, the same punching bag nose. He's not Arabic, obviously: the smoky accent and the name tell me he's Hispanic, but I'm sure if he were to go to the airport, they'd do more than check his shoes.)



hedonist who runs this city. They see a collar around my neck, a tag of ownership punched through my ear. It's a common concern among repressed peoples. A black man leaves his neighborhood and goes to college or becomes chief of police, and suddenly his people think him trying to be white, when really he's just trying to become smarter, stronger, more powerful. I knew a man who worked his way from Mexico into this country — legally, all legally — and he ended up the mayor of a prominent West Coast city. Do you think his people supported him? Hardly. Most thought he had sold them out. They saw his nice suit, his gold watch, his smiling face on the television, and they saw a *traitor*. I see you waiting. You may speak.

AS: So, your enemies are Gangrel. The ones who'd rather you be out, running around the woods or something?

SS: While it's not as simple as that, yes. They think me tamed, when I am quite the opposite.

AS: Who are your friends, then, and why are they dangerous?

SS: My friends are also those within the clan. They see one of their own carried to near the top of the pyramid and they want to be with him, want to *join* him. They think me their ally by dint of our Blood, but it could be no further from the truth. I am no ally, not by something so flimsy as blood relations. Do I have sympathy for our kind? Yes. And I lead by example. Do I make the city a better place for the downtrodden, we Gangrel and the strange Nosferatu, as well? I do. I am a hand on the Prince's elbow, a loud whisper in his ear. He knows that I will keep everything safe, but that requires him to play things my way sometimes. But I am a man of all Kindred. I am not a man of the so-named Savages.

AS: I still don't understand. They support you, so they're dangerous?

SS: Some are zealous. They support me whether I want it or not. They will do so with tooth and claw and wild howls, when that is not what I want. I want civility. I want honor in war. I am no glutton. I do not feast wantonly. I don't tear my prey asunder. I may think like a wolf, yes: when I have adversaries, I stalk them, I track them, I pick at their weak spots. But I don't piss and shit and howl, I don't sleep in the mud with my belly to the dirt. Restraint is everything. These Savages want me to support them without reservation, and they do so to me in return. And that's not good for me. Any chaos they cause in my name is done *in my name*. It's my fault, in the eyes of our Kindred. My cross to bear. Everyone sees it that way. The madmen who dare to carry me on their shoulders only serve to harm my cause. The others who hurt me are the leeches.

AS: Leeches. That's kind of a derogatory term for our kind.

SS: It is. You'll have those who see me riding to power and think that they can come with me, that they have a free ride to the top, as well. Like the — ah, what was it? The remora fish on the shark, or the tapeworm in the belly.

AS: You *did* read Highsteeple's manifesto.

SS: I did. Mostly, it disgusted me. But I cannot lie; he had some truth in there.

AS: What kind of truth?

SS: He approaches some of this in a cold and calculating way, which is key. Emotion figures into it not at all. Many Savages — and Succubi, too — are creatures of wild emotion, vacillating between *this* passion and *that* fury. Highsteeple? He is distant from his subject matter. That is a good way to approach it. He unfortunately comes to the wrong conclusions, though. We are not animals, despite what lives inside our hearts. We are men. Dead men. Hollow men. But men just the same.

AS: Some might say that men are just animals, though.

SS: Some are fools who seek excuses to act like monsters. Man is a higher creature, given dominance over this world by God, and we as dead men are given dominance over man, a charge given also by God.

AS: I didn't know you were Sanctified.

SS: I am Sanctified in that I have been baptized. I go to Midnight Mass. I am friends with Bishop Tuto, the Shadow. But my heart belongs to the First Estate.

AS: And you find that the Invictus treats you well.

SS: You only get out of it what you put in. I don't know that you'd do well in the organization.

AS: Why is that?

SS: You're soft. Confused. But the Requiem changes some. Maybe you'll change. Most don't, though. Death seems a stagnant state for all too many. Like still water; they only grow more fetid.

AS: Have you found this particularly among our... tribe?

SS: We are no tribe: tribe implies shared customs and culture. We have none. We share nothing. What we claim to share is empty. Let me tell you a story, a story of the remora, of a group of *tapeworms*. When I was appointed Seneschal by a vote — a vote that was hard-won, I'll add — I settled into a new haven, something with greater luxury, greater comfort. Comfort I was owed. A trio of Savages somehow learned where I'd settled down and, two weeks into my service came to pay me a visit. They thought to join me in my haven for a time, to share in my comforts. I told them to go to hell. "But we're Blood!" they cried. "What's mine is yours and what's yours is mine." Feh.

AS: What happened to them?

SS: I made them honor their statement. I took what few possessions they had. They brought a girl with them, a dirty, bruised thing on a lead of nylon rope.

I took her as my own, too. You've spoken with her Rosalita.

AS: Jesus.

SS: Then, since we were such good friends, I thought I'd take them to the roof of the building in which I lived, because it had such a beautiful view. The sunrise, so I'm told, is exquisite from up there. I shared that with them; if we are such close family, then I can only deliver unto them the best I have to offer the uttermost beauty.

AS: So they're gone.

SS: Ash on the wind.

AS: Did you feel any remorse over this?

SS: Why should I? Do you cry a little and say a prayer any time you find a tick on your body, drunk on the blood inside? Do you lament and pull at your hair when you press a smoldering match-tip to its bloated body?

AS: Our kind then, we're just ticks.

SS: You're not listening. Shall I dig the skin out of your ears to open them wider? Only those of us who'd dare to take what's not owed are ticks. Worms, mosquitoes, viruses. I am not them, and so they should not assume that I will feel any loyalty to their kind.

AS: Am... I just a tick, then?

SS: I do not speak to ticks.

AS: So what makes me different?

SS: Initially, I thought nothing. You kept asking Rosalita for a meeting, as if I owed you that indulgence. I thought, perhaps it would be good to end your impudence. So I had you watched.

AS: What?

SS: Yes. A vigilant watch, kept over you for several weeks. And I saw what you did to procure good favor with Rosalita, and with myself. I know that you owe Black Jack, the Haunt, and I know that you owe one of the servants of the Old Bat. Neither are favors you will be able to repay lightly. But you made a deal. You have debts to pay. You are willing to work, see? To sacrifice to get what you want. That speaks well of you. Maybe you're young and dumb but you haven't gone wild. Not yet. Time may change that, but for now...

AS: I feel sick sometimes, you know. Like there's just this... pissed-off dog inside of me and he's scratching to be let out. And sometimes he's not a dog at all, but a demon, some diabolical thing who thinks he can get out of the box I've locked him in.

SS: It will be a struggle. I keep my demons in. I have many locks, and I have melted all the keys. But that is a topic for a different time. This conversation is over. I grow bored and I have things to do.

Of course, what did I find out later? Someone left me this picture:



Is it true, that Santana did this? Is it true, that he sometimes... "decompresses" by just flipping shit? That he does gorge and claw and go wild, even if only for one night a year, as the note on the back of the photo suggests?

Maybe he doesn't have his demons as captive as he'd like. Maybe he doesn't even know that they get out sometimes.

What the hell are we?

MOTHER JANICE

Janice is a... priest, not priestess, she made sure to correct me on that point. For the Sanctum. She acts as an advisor, both spiritual and practical, only to her city's substantial population of Gangrel vampires. I couldn't meet with her, given the lack of proximity (we're essentially on opposite coasts), but she did take a phone call from me. I don't really have a good picture of what she looks like! I've heard tell she's eerily thin, almost anorexic, with wide wild eyes and a mouth that neither frowns nor smiles. Maybe one day I'll meet her. Maybe I can get some spiritual advisory of my own.

[MOTHER JANICE TRANSCRIPT]

AS: I hear they call you "Mother-May-I?"

MJ: They do. Those of our clan, at least.

AS: Why?

MJ: Because they look for permission. To be who they are.

AS: And do you grant it?

MJ: It's not mine to grant. But I tell them what is permissible in God's eyes. And what plainly is not.

AS: So what is permissible?

MJ: God has given us a predatory dominion. So we may be that... predatory. Our clan has a way of being predatory that perhaps differs from what you find in others. We hunt more efficiently. We forge packs. We share the food. Well, most do, at least in my city.

AS: What isn't allowed?

MJ: Being animals. God gave man dominion over the earth and its creatures, and God gave the Sanctified dominion over man. By proxy, we are at the pinnacle of physical beings, the inheritors of the corporeal world. By lording over men, we also then lord over the earth and its creatures. Thus we cannot be those lowly creatures that we rule, can we? Else we open ourselves to being enslaved or controlled. We are higher thinking beings. Of course we possess certain mammalian instincts, heightened at the moment of death and made our own. That does not mean we are to act like animals.

AS: Do you have a... a church?

MJ: That's not how it works. The Priests of the Sanctum do not strictly have churches; some are allowed to minister at the church, but most of us at least out here do not literally shepherd the herd from a given pulpit. Mine is the church of the wilderness. We leave the city. We commune with the night. We speak to the trees and the animals and learn how we can best serve them as masters, as is God's plan. We sometimes even commune with the men who have become wolves. We offer them gifts and they do us, in return.

AS: I didn't think the wilderness was that safe for our kind. Most of us stick to the cities. Even a lot of our clan, yeah?

MJ: The wilderness is safe for us because we are its masters. The Bible is not without mention of the wilderness. In Hebrew it's *midbar*, a deserted place thought

to be "beyond." Beyond all things: the borders, the settlements, the light, the life. We, as Damned, are most clearly beyond all things, and so we are most clearly *midbar*. The wilderness is a place of sacred renewal. It is where we escape the shackles of the material world and commune with a place more purely as God created it. Don't mistake me: it's a place of testing, true. Hunger and thirst cannot be easily slaked in the wilderness. The woods are often haunted by wayward ghosts and vengeful spirits. It's not safe in that way, no, but we are the masters of it and so we make it ours.

AS: I hear you're a bit of a -

MJ: I should add something. The wilderness hearkens back to the nomadic traditions of the Jews and early Christians. We are the equivalent to that within our society. Nomads wander to find the hidden truths that God has scattered around the world. And the wilderness is home to many of these secrets, and it is we who must find them. In this way, the Gangrel are the holiest of God's beautiful Damned. We are also the ones who will find evil in the wilderness and will best it in God's good name.

AS: We smite the evil-doers?

MJ: "And he carried me away into the wilderness, and there I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast which was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and bedecked with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication; and on her forehead was written a name of mystery: 'Babylon the great, mother of harlots and of earth's abominations.' And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus." That's from Revelations, you see?

AS: The scarlet woman sounds an awful lot like one of us. Uh. A vampire "us," not necessarily a Gangrel "us."

MJ: Yes, because evil is easily born within the dead. Our humanity has been lessened by the loss of life. That's what makes our struggle so pure.

AS: But we aren't evil because we hunt men and drink their blood?

MJ: No. We do not kill men, and if we do it's because God has demanded it. God and his angels are also

killers, but they do so with righteousness. If we feed our thirst with righteousness, then we've done no wrong. If we hunt out of greed and gluttony, then we have done evil. We are not cruel or evil because we drink the blood of men. Men eat the meat of cattle, does that make them evil? God has drawn the celestial ladder quite clearly. It is not evil to make proper use of those beneath you.

AS: So what I was going to ask before is, I hear you're a bit of a firebrand?

MJ: Some have said as such. I don't think my pursuit of goodness for my people makes me some kind of anarchist.

AS: Why do they call you that?

MJ: The Catholic and Christian traditions are rife with those who would protest injustice. I carry that torch in honor of those who came before me. Whenever our clan is mistreated, I step in and speak. If one will not hear my words, I commit to action. I drop the torch and start the fire. I swing a sword like Christ on his white steed. I become God's Hand of Mercy and Wrath.

AS: Jesus. Uh. Ahh. Sorry, I didn't mean to take the Lord's name in, you know, vain.

MJ: Mmm.

AS: I just mean that, haven't they tried to stifle you, yet? It seems to me that – and trust me, I'm young, dumb, totally untested over here – that it's unwise to rock the boat in our strange little society. They seem to clamp down hard on dissent.

MJ: I am protected by God and the Church. I fear no repercussions.

AS: Can you give me an example of your... actions in service to the clan?

MJ: I will give you a recent one. Just last year the Primogen – who have the power in this city, they call themselves the 'Ministry', a cruel name because not a one of them are Sanctified ministers – gathered to urge the Prince to push our people to the margins. They felt we had become too strong, too populous. They wanted our territories taken away or at the least, halved. They wanted our resources weakened. They wanted us back to the wilderness (which, were that to happen, we would only gain strength there and not be besieged by weakness).

AS: How did you respond?

MJ: A simple thing, really. They gathered in an office building one night. All their cars and all their people waiting in the uppermost level of the garage, just outside the boardroom where they met. We pulled the fire alarms. As I said, it's so simple: our kind fears fire. We did not use actual fire, but only the threat of it. They poured out of there like so many rats. When they got to the parking garage we cut the power. We had already destroyed their tires. They could not

escape. Our people – the Anointed Savages – emerged from the shadows, eyes red and claws out. We did no harm. We smiled our pearly whites. We said nothing. Oh, they pointed their weapons and made their boasts and threats. But the message was clear.

AS: What message was that?

MJ: We're not afraid. And we've nothing to lose. It works on the same principle as how a single American soldier in World War II was able to hold an entire Nazi platoon captive with a single pistol. They had no weapons. He had one. They could've swarmed him. Could've taken it. But individually, none of them was willing to die. And at least one of them would have. Each German thought to himself, "I don't want that to be me," and so collectively none stepped forward. Because they were selfish creatures. This Ministry comprises only selfish creatures. We are selfless. We are together, whereas they are just a group of individuals. They knew that one of them might find his eternal Requiem cut woefully short. They all know that now, and should they forget we will remind them.

AS: And they didn't move against the clan, then?

MJ: They did not. They... politely retracted. God's will be done.

AS: That's a pretty cool story.

MJ: So let me ask you a question.

AS: Um. Okay.

MJ: Are you saved?

AS: Saved?

MJ: By God. Have you chosen to take hold of your Sanctified path?

AS: Not... strictly speaking, no. I mean, I kind of believed in God when I was alive. Agnostic or something. But, being dead but still walking... that tells me there's more to Heaven and Earth, Horatio, you know?

MJ: Consider it. God does not favor the fence-sitters. You will choose your side before this is all done.

AS: Before what is all done?

MJ: This journey of yours. This quest for information.

AS: How did you know about that?

MJ: I know a lot of things. God whispers in my ear.

AS: Do you know something specific? Can you help me?

MJ: When you're ready to carry the cross, come back to me. Then maybe we'll talk.

AS: But – wait! What's going to happen? Are you telling me you have some gift of, of prophecy, or do you actually know what's going to –

MJ: Fare thee well, Alice.

AS: No, wait!

AS: Hello?

AS: Mother Janice?

The pulpit had been replaced by a broad stone altar ringed with bird skulls and a garland of evergreen. The Hierophant puffed out his chest, then extended his left hand - its fingers were tipped with yellow claws.

He dug into the skin and meat of his chest.

Then he leaned over the altar. Blood oozed down through the hair and over the skin, finally spattering to the altar top.

With palms flat, he smeared it around the stone surface the way a child might smear fingerpaint on a linoleum floor.

Then, one by one, he pointed at those in the pews - who numbered 23 - and they approached. They all spilled blood on that altar. One tilted back the mask and ripped off his ear. Another reached beneath the mask and... I don't know, but I think he did something to his tongue. All spilled blood from different places: the meat of the forearm, three claw marks down the throat (leaving "vents" that looked almost like gills, so perfect were those incisions), a sharp branch stabbed into the palm. And then at the end, they sat down, with wreaths of... I think it was laurel on their heads.

Except...

He pointed at me.

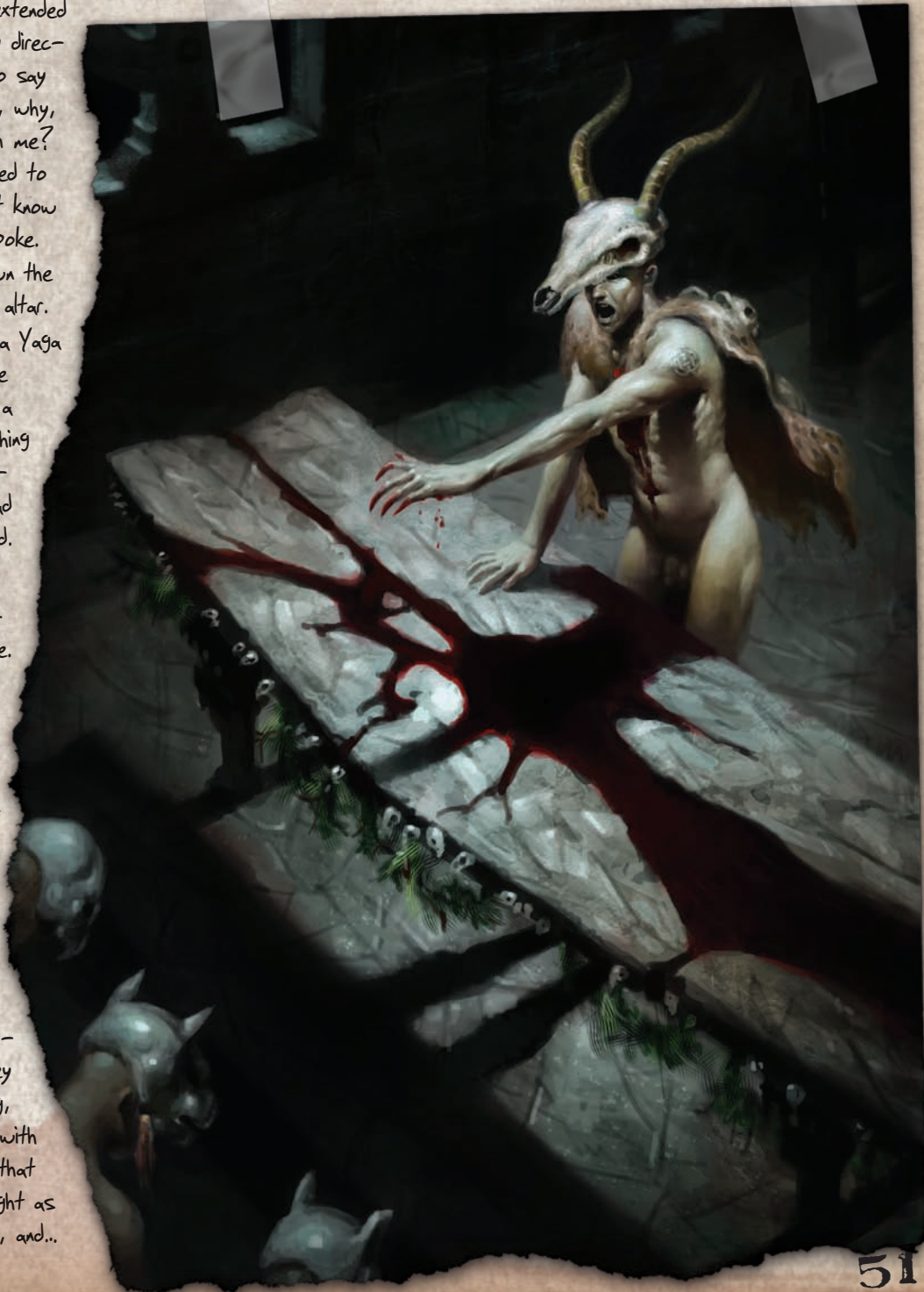
When they all were done, he extended one of those yellow claws in my direction and said nothing. I wanted to say something, I wanted to ask who, why, what the fuck do you want with me? I'm just an... an observer, I wanted to say, but I didn't. Because I didn't know what would happen to me if I spoke.

So I stood. And I walked down the aisle. And I stood there at the altar.

And I remembered where the Baba Yaga had touched me, and I took a knife that sat next to the altar - just a small knife, like a paring knife, nothing fancy, nothing ceremonial about it - and I cut a small incision in my head and I hung my face over that blood.

The blood had pooled atop the stone, and was still wet and reflected the moon and stars above. And I smelled it, it reached up into my nostrils with that aroma and made me dizzy and sick and wonderful, and then I saw something as my own blood went drip, drip, drip, meeting with the rest of the red.

I saw myself. Or something like myself. Reflected in the surface, all scarlet and crimson, and I was standing upon two rooftops, a body beneath me in an alley or an open room, and I was leering, gleeful, my arms and mouth dark with blood, darker than even the blood that pooled on the altar, so dark it might as well have been oil or liquid shadow, and...



Then it was gone. I had healed the cut in my head without meaning to, and I felt the Hierophant's eyes staring at me from behind that animal mask of his, and I felt like that scared howling rabbit depicted on someone else's face. I scurried to the back of the church or temple or whatever it was, and I hid my face in the pew and tried not to weep.

Then the Hierophant spoke, finally:

He said, "The Winnowing is complete. You have all seen your shame, you have all seen your glory, for they are one and the same."

Then he explained what would come next: the city had poachers, he explained. A cabal of Damned who picked at the food supply but, even worse, had been reaching out to the locals to try to "pick away at their faith." He spoke of them as "God monsters" and the "Fornicators of the Spear." Sanctified? He spoke of them as well-armed, as if trying to convert those of the City of Hounds was a military operation above all else.

And then he said, "May the sacred hunt convene. Bring me their faces."

All the cultists stood simultaneously. I don't know how to describe it, but it made a noise, this accumulated swooshing of robes and the stomping of feet.

From under their robes they pulled knives. These were ceremonial, not just.. kitchen knives. I could see the gilded handles. The curvy blades.

They walked out in a determined line, bodies leaning forward, knives out.

I felt a chill. I felt bad for those who had come here to convert. But maybe this is what they wanted. Maybe faith really was a battle. Shit, the Middle East has always been a battleground of belief. It's what some seem to relish: the chance to perish in the name of their adoration of some higher (or lower) power.

I didn't know: should I go with them? Should I hunt with them? It was an absurd thought; I don't belong to these people. I'm no mask-wearing weirdo. But I spilled my blood, didn't I? I locked eyes with the Prince Hierophant. Was I one of them now? Again, absurd, right? Aren't I in control of myself? I didn't feel like I was. Not entirely.

But before I could decide, he pointed at me again.

"Come with me," he said. "You want to talk, let's talk."

CONVERSATIONS WITH THE HIGH PRIEST

He took me to his chamber. It.. had a smell. This'll sound dumb, but it had dueling aromas: life and death. Death: rot, filth, old blood. Life: fresh blood, sex, flowers, musk. The room was lit with red lighting - red lace cast over lamp shades, by the look of it.

The way he moved, the way he laid down on the floor surrounded by red and black pillows.. I don't know. He's like a cat. A big cat, a panther or tiger: powerful but lazy, predatory but narcissistic. Then when he leaned back and eased his mask off, I could see the paleness of his body and he made me think of a whole different animal: a serpent or dragon, pale and languid, every muscle relaxed until it needed to be taut.

He bade me to sit near him on the floor, but I didn't. I couldn't. Oh, I wanted to - but a smart part of my brain kicked and screamed: would it be such a good idea to go kicking my shoes off next to a tiger or serpent? So I just orbited him in a half-circle. Always keeping to his front because any time I threatened to move behind him, he tensed up: the tiger ready to pounce.

I didn't have to ask my first question before he was answering it, as if he skimmed the surface of my mind - "This is how we rule, us Savages," he said. "We create a kingdom primal and majestic, and we lord over it. We act as alpha. Or, when the need be, shepherd to the weak and wandering herd."

He told me that ours is a clan of many princes and rulers, though that has been "suppressed" by those who would prefer that we remain as wild men and loner shamans. We aren't meant to be loners, he said: "We're meant to be leaders, chieftains, generals." He claimed there's been a major misinformation campaign - Like a virus, it spreads almost all on its own, a cruel and improper meme - through our Damned society that we've never been a clan of Princes.

But he told me about many of us: Chieftain Jarl of the Faroe Islands, said to be betrayed by his seneschal (the Lord

Sýsla) and thrown off the cliffs into the turbid ocean below (and never seen again); or the many "empresses" of the secret Toltec empire, a line of blood queens who shadowed the mortal world with the politics of the underworld and were Savages each and every one; or the Chief of the Burial, Nolo Kiva, a wandering king of the burial chambers and tunnels of the Mimbres culture (which according to the Hierophant had ties to the lost Anasazi in the American Southwest). He said the "rotten spear" no longer tells stories of Saint Gibuld, the Savage King who was said to command the word of God and with it order legions of snakes or burn armies of the enemy to cinders. He said the Invictus refuses to speak of the Savages who fought to save Rome in the old Camarilla: the one-eyed augur (the Venus Genetrix), the theurgist apostate (Timorius), the soldier-prince from the North (Martyn). He went on to curse the Invictus, said they've "glommed onto the godhead Sanctified" and now work hand-in-hand with some mythical Dark Father... when in truth the First Estate was born out of the old pagan magic and theurgy of Rome.

I asked him about his ties to the crescent, to the old ways of blood magic and to the Circle that teaches it.

"Blood magic is ours. We didn't create it; you can't create magic. The only thing you can do is grab it, which is no easy task because it's slippery and slick, like a stuck pig. This magic of blood and fluid and bone lives in the dark places, the distant places. And we're the only ones who can go to those places and return, you see? Packs of us went into the true wilderness epochs ago, and we returned from the primal chaos and lightless shades having grabbed that magic by its greasy throat."

"Seven of our people. The Iminbi. They were the ones who returned with the magic of the crescent, with the blood of the moon painted in an arc across the top of the altar. They created a place, the Temple of the Divine Heptad, where they refined the magics and protected themselves from the demons that would try again and again to reclaim the secrets from the hands of these unclean Savages."

I asked him what happened to them, this Divine Heptad.

And he smiled. Not in a good way. His teeth were stained pink in his pale face, bits of red and black stuck between them. The contrast unsettled me.

"We don't really know," he explained. "Some say each of them Embraced seven, and those childer each embraced seven, and it's what formed the basis of our clan today, and that each of us could and should fulfill our destiny by - over time, of course - Embracing seven of our own and teaching them the ways of the blood rites. But I've heard other stories, stranger stories."

Such as?

"That they were able to become one. That they bit and clawed at each other upon the broad flat altar in their temple and they fucked and mixed blood, their hands pushing up into each other beneath the ribs and into their mouths, and that they did this ceaselessly to pool their power. To protect themselves from the demons and angry gods. And that in doing so, over time it wasn't just their blood that mingled, but their flesh, too. I've even heard stories that they're still out there, somewhere, writhing in the hidden temple. Finding it would be a great horror and a great boon. If only I had the courage."

How does he know all this? I asked him - if this stuff is truly so old, probably even antediluvian, how can he know it? Isn't it lost? Isn't it little more than myth?

He bristled at this, and I suddenly got scared. What if the snake grew tired of my questions and coiled around me? His words are certainly calming, soothing, kind of soporific in their coldness. Before I know it, he might be upon me, his arms around me, crushing the blood out of my bones...

But then he calmed, and leaned back.

"We have our ways of looking back. Some writings exist. Writings that detail even earlier works, which detail truly primeval tales. But..."

What, I asked? What?

"We have other ways, too. I don't know that you're ready. You're young. Untested. I can see that you're special, though. Different. I wonder, could you handle it?"

I begged him to tell me. I pleaded with him. I felt strange, begging like that. I'm not a beggar. And abstractly? I don't give a shit how he knows all this stuff or whether he just makes it up in his head and tells it like it's truth etched in bone. But yet... I hung on his words like a child, I wanted to hear the secret.



I needed to
hear the secret.

And he wouldn't tell me.

"Not now," he said with a smile. "But someday soon."

I won't ask him again. I got out of there. I could feel the effect of his voice on me, a lulling pull, a weird electric draw. No. Not again. I lasted long enough in the chamber of the monster, and I don't care to know more. That should be enough for you, shouldn't it? Does that satisfy you?

TO THE GINGERBREAD HOUSE - WOLVES IN THE CHAPTER HOUSE

I said it before, I'll say it again: we have Chapter Houses.

Not many of them. Not more than a dozen, though Ludo admits his "numbers" might be old. And trust me, "Chapter House" sounds a lot more extravagant than it really is. This is no cathedral room, no abbey, no study of mahogany tables and cherry pipe-smoke and endless shelves of books.

This one is a bombed-out building on the edges of the Praga neighborhood, which looks like a rough-and-tumble blue-collar immigrant area, maybe something out of Chicago. It's not far from a bar called *W/ Oparach Absurdy*, or the "Fumes of Absurdity." The derelict building itself isn't really the Chapter House proper - little safety and solidarity (*solidarnosc*, Ludo tells me to write it) out in the open. No, the gathering space is below that, in a series of broken walls and tunnels running beneath this and the surrounding buildings.

It's funny. Even down here in the bowels of this building I can smell the smells from above: grease on a grill, meat cooking somewhere, the whiff of incense or a spilled compote. The ears aren't lonely, either: somewhere above, a punk band and a jazz band compete for dominance of the ears of those out in the night.

Seven Savages make their home in the Warsaw Chapter House this night. Five are itinerant, which is truly the point of the Chapter Houses: we Savages are known to wander, and the "tribe" (as the bitch Gilda calls it) seems to want to protect its own from the outside and give them places of respite when they travel, when

they hunt, when they walk their wild pilgrimages. The two Gangrel who aren't nomads operate this place, as much as one can "operate" a crumbling building and a series of tunnels. They're like black-eyed, fang-mouthed hostel owners: they'll tell you where it's safe to hunt, where it's most certainly not, and where you can go to fulfill any number of kicks and tricks. Broda and Zuzanna are the proprietors here, married for over fifty years (and they're only thirty years dead). He with his big beard and mountain of fat and muscle, she with her straw-like hair pulled tight behind her head (so taut, actually, I think she's unable to blink).

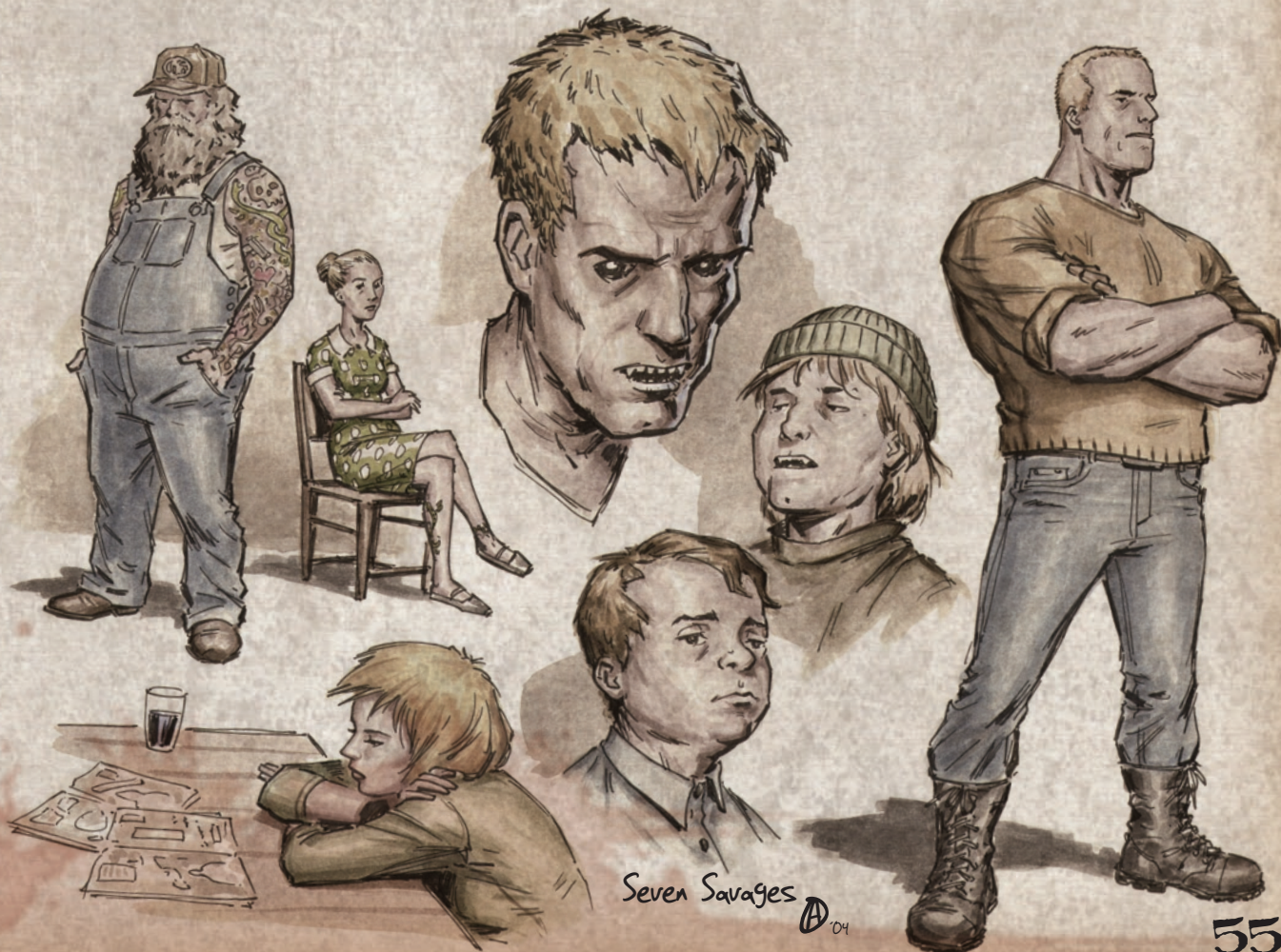
I asked them if they love one another. Broda said yes, Zuzanna said no. Broda clarified: "We love each other in the truth of love," which might as well have been said in Polish because I didn't know what the hell he meant. He must've seen my eyes searching because he clarified further: "Love is nothing more than need given a fancy name. I need Zuzanna. So. I love Zuzanna."

She didn't buy it and shoved him out of the way, spitting as she walked off. But I heard her laughing around the corner. She loves him, in that she needs him. I wonder if they've shared blood. I wonder if that's what it takes to stay together in the long nights.

That's depressing. Switching gears.

The other five are: Mouse, who looks more like an elephant - which I guess is the irony of the name; Karl, a falcon-nosed Teutonic dude who says nothing to anybody but himself, and often in mumbled German; then there's Fisk, Kitty and Pauper Tom, a pack of Savages from Maine who are here on their own pilgrimage of sorts, a search for the bones of some ancient Gangrel Prince known as Zolwierz. I ask what they want with those bones, and they tell me they're not the ones who want ... it's someone who's paying them a nice price. I ask them why, and they won't really say. Something about the blessings of God on a pagan warrior-king. Something about a conversion. I guess that they're Sanctified, and they confirm this for me, even though they don't look the part. Pauper Tom has the faint air of a priest about him, not in dress but in humble gaze. The other two might as well be homeless by the look of them. I think Kitty still has dried blood on her chin from who knows when.

I asked Ludo: is it really safe? Why is this place allowed to exist if the "Mayor" of Warsaw doesn't favor the Gangrel? Are we as safe from one another as we are from those outside?



Ludo didn't skip a beat. This is obviously something he's answered before:

(Paraphrased): "Tradition cannot fall by the wayside even as progress marches forward, and Sokrates recognizes this very much. And, would you want to kick over a wasp nest? Let us bees alone, I say. Fuck the warszawka, the little pigs with their little privilege."

I asked him again: are we safe here?

From the Damned of the city, he said yes.

From one another, he said, "of course not."

Then he laughed, which terrified me.

In the first few hours of tonight, I've seen:

Mouse throw Karl through a half-collapsed sewer tunnel wall.

Karl bash Mouse's head in with a hunk of mortar.

Fisk and Kitty give "communion" to a hollow-cheeked Ethiopian prostitute.

Pauper Tom steal money from Ludo, as Ludo fucked with the broken jukebox in the corner.

Zuzanna playing with spiders, whispering to them like they were her children.

Of course, then Karl and Mouse went out hunting together. Pauper Tom and Ludo argued over who was better, Elvis or the Beatles. Fisk and Kitty "shared" their kill with the rest of the Chapter House (I denied; even in death, still sometimes a germaphobe). And Zuzanna and Broda arm-wrestled, drunk on booze-soaked blood.

All before midnight.

At that point, Ludo told me it was time to go. The car was here, he said. Not much of a car, it turns out: an old Russian jeep whose hood glowed as if there was a small fire underneath, which gave me pause (and now I can't get the nightmare image out of my head of the vehicle exploding and me on fire crawling toward the river but never making it, and it replays over and over again and... Jesus it's awful).

Before we left, Fisk was changing his ratty shirt because... well, I guess it had too much blood on it. He slipped a black t-shirt over his bony frame, and written on it in white letters (in English, thank God), was:

Call the Bear 'Uncle' 'till you're safe across the bridge.

I asked him what it meant, and he just shrugged.

I bid him and the others goodnight.

Pauper Tom said, "God bless."

I said, "Let's hope not."



And then I left the Warsaw Chapter House and its wolves behind.

A DREAM! THE CHASE

I've been having dreams.

I already mentioned that, I think, earlier? I've never dreamed before when I slept during the day, but now I'm dreaming. Not every day. Not even every week.

But often enough to scare me.

The latest one was after I met with the Prince, the Hierophant. Two nights after staring into the red-slick altar and seeing someone who looked just like me straddling rooftops, her arms covered in blood up to the elbows, I had another dream of her.

I was chasing her through a forest. Fog clung to the ground. It was like, I don't know, snakes encircling each trunk, ribbons of mist. She darted from tree to tree. Ducked behind this one. Put her back to that one, spun around it and would be gone again.

I'd stumble through the fog, blind and mute, and I'd feel rough bark beneath my hands (and I swear I could hear or feel a heart beating). Then I'd come upon her again, finally, and she'd be ten feet away carving something into a tree with a little knife, but those ten feet would feel suddenly like ten miles. I'd run to her but couldn't run. Would feel like there was heavy mud stuck to my boots.

Then she'd laugh and hiss and disappear back into the fog. I'd try to read what she etched into the tree, but fog would fail to part when I got close. It'd drift up, like a curtain of gray cloth, and I couldn't push the fabric out of the way.

This would keep happening.

Over and over again.

No morning, no sunrise. Just endless hours of this chase, this hunt.

I only woke when I saw him. The Hierophant. Standing at the edge of the forest, his dark eyes staring past that stag mask, and he was beckoning me into a tree trunk like that which belonged to the witch Baba Yaga.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw it!

A single word carved into the tree.

It said, all lower-case: *surrender*.

Then, sunset. Evening. I awoke.

Hungry.

MIDNIGHT ROADS, 5

Funny. Not ha-ha funny, but irony-weird-fucked-up funny.

I crashed during the day in this old gas station way out here in the desert. When night came I poked around, found some money, a pair of fuzzy dice that smelled like roadkill (I'm keeping them and will wash these pink badboys when I find a midnight Laundromat), and...

Someone's journal. Or diary, whatever.

It's mostly boring, and I maybe feel bad about saying that because I don't think this woman met a real... fortunate end. At least, her husband sure didn't. The diary's all about her husband's new job and how much she loves the guy even though he sounds like a prick, but then you get this entry. I'm pinning it here with a couple rusty paperclips I found!

I hope somebody finds this. It hurts so much to write - I just hope it's not for nothing.

Jack tried to get a signal out here in this God-forgotten desert because he needed to call his agent to let him know the car had overheated and luckily, by the saints, we'd found a gas station and garage out here in what seems the exact epicenter of nowhere. The sun had gone down, but the road was still hot, and he walked ten feet up the blistering macadam, then ten feet back. Still no signal.

The cornpone cracker lackwit who was working on our car - missing two front teeth like maybe the old fool left them in a tough radish somewhere - peeked out from under the hood as Jack approached.

"Found the problem," he said with a grin and a wink. He wiped his greasy hands not on his shirt, but on his face, leaving an oily stripe down each cheek. Nasty.

"Tell me it's an easy fix," Jack said.

"Yup. It's easy like Sunday morning." I had a hard time believing this guy knew a Lionel Ritchie tune (or hell, was it when Ritchie was with the Commodores?), but at that point I figured there were stranger things in the world so I didn't hold onto the thought for long. Maybe I should've. Maybe if I had of, things would be different. The mechanic just smiled: "C'mere, I'll show you how we fix it."

I didn't want to get too close to this guy since he stunk like a road-smashed armadillo, and I could see Jack was hesitant, too. But if it got the car back on the road, so be it. Jack ducked under the hood.

Cooger - that was his name, evidenced by his overalls and the name on the still-buzzing neon sign posted out on the side of the highway - tapped the radiator hose with a ballpoint pen. The hose twitched. Jack heard something.

Then Cooger reached over, unscrewed the hose clamps and popped the hose. He tilted it toward his hand.

And a bunch of bugs spilled out into his dirty palm.

I gagged. Jack staggered back, trying to get away from them. I heard their little legs scratching against one another. The caged light that hung from the underside of the hood showed me something I didn't want to see: some of the bugs were spiders, black and shiny with red hourglasses on their fat little bodies. Black widows. I tried to pull Jack away but they bit him before I could.

"Bad case of road bugs," Cooger said, then pitched the ones still squirming on his hand into his mouth. He chewed, and yellow fluid dribbled out the corners of his mouth.

I screamed. Jack tried to speak, tried to say something, but I could see his tongue was already swelling up in his mouth, purple and thick.

"You took a wrong turn, kids," Cooger said with a mean gleam. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Showed us a horrible pair of fangs. "You left the world of the living about—oh, fifty miles back. I don't suspect you'll be making the return trip."

Cooger laughed, and I saw how the mechanic's hands weren't hands anymore but hissing spiders, and his eyes were not two but eight.

I— I don't remember what happened after that. I know I woke up here in this place. And it was deserted, like nobody had ever been here in the first place.

Jack is dead. Laying across from me.

He has no blood in him. Dry as the desert around us.

My legs are lined with little bites. They itch and burn. My heart is beating a mile a minute. I don't think I'm going to make it. If anybody finds this, send my love to our kids.

So. This Cooger. One of us? Or something weirder, something worse?

THE LORD AND THE LION

I... got this letter.

How do people know what I'm doing? Or where I'm at? Is it you? Are you still fucking with me? I get my letter and they get theirs? You tell them where I'm staying, where I'm sleeping? Are you fucking watching me as I travel the country — shit, the whole world — doing your ugly Masquerade-breaking business? I'm going to lose my head one night. And you won't get your precious book, here, will you?

I found this letter taped to the underside of the gutted bus that I had been sleeping underneath. I awoke from the dirt, looked up, and there it was. Duct taped to, I don't know, the muffler or some other bulbous part of the undercarriage.

I didn't know whether to cheer or wince when I read it.



To You Poor Soul Whoever You Are:

I know you're out there. Compiling this for someone. Probably the same someone. So I thought I'd give you an update if that same someone gives a rat's tail.

I had a chat with a Ventrue Lord. Effete prick. Haughty and happy to twist the knife, that type. I thought I was doing someone a favor. I thought I was paying a debt to a friend by doing this (a friend who disappeared after I took this "assignment," by the way). But I lost a finger. And I gained a new debt. A debt to this prick.

That's not something you want, a hand on your leash. Especially not a Ventrue hand. A Succubus asks you to do something, well, at least it might be fun. A Worm, one of the freaky Nosferatu, if they ask you for a favor, you at least know it's going to be weird. A Shadow, well, I've never been in debt to a Shadow, and the way they look at me I might not ever want to be. But when a Ventrue tells you what's up, you get worried. Because they want to humiliate you. The chattering imp inside them is thrilled any-time they get to debase you and kick you even lower than your station. I could only imagine what this guy was gonna have me do, you know? In the span of a single night, I figured I'd go get his dry cleaning, I'd lick his boots clean of dog shit, I'd have to kill some innocent orphans, I'd have to remove some rectal obstruction from some white tiger he secretly probably owns, I'd have to groom him or please him in some fucked-up don't-ever-tell-my-pack way.

Yeah, but here's the secret.

You ever owe something to a Ventrue, here's what you do:

Before that fucker comes calling, you destroy that fucker.

You ask around and you put claw to throat until someone says,

"Oh, this is the address of his mini-mansion."

And then you get your buddies together not long before sunrise and you bar the doors and windows except for a few, and you burn that place down. And you don't want fire because "fire bad," but you're a Savage, god damn you, so grit your teeth and knuckle down and don't freak out. And as the fire burns you wince and close your eyes and bar the other doors and windows you left open long enough to get the fire up in there.

And then, just as the sun's about to come up - got to time it right so they don't have time to turn to snakes or get to the helicopter on the roof or whatever escape method they've got going - you just take a few steps away and sink into the sweet earth.

And the sun comes up.

And they can't escape.

And the fire eats them up, yum.

That's how you deal with favors. Especially when you owe one to a Lord.

Get rid of the Lord, get rid of the favor.

This is friendly advice from me to you. You're on somebody's leash, so just make sure it's not a Lord. If it is, feel around in the darkness and follow that leash back to the hand that holds it, and bite it off.

Good luck.

Yours,

-The Lion

MIDNIGHT ROADS, 6

Every night, a new and horrible revelation. It's great being a vampire. Sarcasm, I hope, duly noted.

I met a pack of Savages outside Grand Junction, Colorado. They were all right. Morbid sense of humor. A sense of that "oral tradition" I've been told about. The alpha of the pack, Mordecai, told me a story. A story about a lone woman, some vampires, and some werewolves. Werewolves, I asked? You gotta be shitting me. He said it's true. He's seen them. Mean hunters. "Brutal fuckers," one of the other Savages, Yolanda, said. Some of them are worse than others, she claimed. Mostly, they stick to their territories. They won't bother you if you don't bother them. Chills me, though.

Anyway, this is the story Mordecai told. I got it on tape, and I'm transcribing it here!

Crash!

Jessie blinked. Brushed bits of glass out of her hair. Wondered what that noise was, then realized she was leaning forward on the horn. She pulled away like she'd just touched a hot stove with her elbows.

The car hissed. The engine made a *tink-tink-tink* sound. A cold winter's wind blew in through the hole in the windshield, coming in hard over the object that had broken the glass in the first place. She could see what it was now: a rusty paint can hanging from a chain. She peered up through the open windshield and, in the moonlight, saw the chain go all the way up until it wrapped around a tree branch above the road.

The paint can's lid was pried up just enough. She moved it so the moonlight illuminated what was inside. Rocks. A can full of rocks. Hung from a chain. And dropped down onto her car as she drove.

Someone did this to me.

The thought struck her like a fist.

She felt a line of crusted blood across her forehead and staggered out of the car, stepping onto the winding mountain switchback. Wind howled up around her. Jessie dragged her jacket out of the backseat, slipped it on. The thought came again:

Someone did this to me.

Taking this road was a mistake. She thought it would be faster. Hot damn, the whole *trip* was a mistake. What did she think was going to happen? That she'd get to the college, find Christopher, and they'd kiss and make up? That all the problems complicit with a long-distance relationship would be wiped clean by this impromptu visit in the middle of a dead and dry winter? Would his indiscretions with another woman simply fade away, replaced by a warm forgiveness? Hell, why was *she* the one making the effort, driving up in the frozen mountains? He was the cheat!

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

And now here she was. Took a "shortcut" to make sure she got to the college before midnight, before Christopher went to bed.

Someone did this to me.

Jessie fumbled for her cell phone in her purse, her hands already seizing up from the cold. One bar's worth of signal. Fine. It'd be enough. Biting her lip, she called Christopher (*What a mistake*, she already chided herself).

Voice mail.

And then the signal went from one bar to none. (I suggest replacing the repetition with "none")

"Shit!" she called out. Tried hoisting the phone up in the air, waving it around, seeing if somehow she could 'catch' the signal the way you might snatch a butterfly mid-flight, but it was futile. Jessie repressed the urge to pitch the phone off the side of the road and into the forest of dark needled pines that went down the mountain's slope.

Then she heard it.

The *snap* of a twig.

Whoever did this would be out there. That made sense, didn't it? They stopped her, pitching a paint can full of rocks against the car so she'd have to stop... and then what? What did they want from her?

Shivering, heart pounding, she ducked back into the car. *Please work*. Jessie flipped on the headlights, tried to start the car.

The engine just turned over and over. *Vroom, vroom*, nothing. A damning give-and-take of a mechanical whine, and despair set in.

Shadows emerged from the side of the road, stepping into the headlights.

Three shadows, to be precise. One man holding what looked to be a fire ax. Beside him on each side was a large dog, like a Siberian Husky or a German Shepherd, but larger, more bristly. The dogs led the way, quiet step by quiet step, while the man stayed back and surveyed the scene.

Images in Jessie's head flashed: *Her, chained to a table, the dogs sitting and watching while the man cut into her. Maybe now and again he'd throw a hunk of Jessie meat to one of the animals, who would catch it with a clap of his hungry maw.*

One of the dogs stepped up onto the hood of the car, and it rocked with the weight of the beast. She could see green eyes gleaming. Her muscles tightened. She wanted to cry out, but couldn't muster a sound, couldn't even manage to blink back the tears that were forming at the corners of her eyes.

The beast stuck its head through the broken windshield, sniffing at the paint can while staring holes through her with those eyes. It exhaled a cloud of icy breath, and Jessie caught the stink of gamy meat in her nose.

It's not a dog. It's a wolf.

Someone did this to me.

Bang!

A distant report of thunder across the mountain road, and in a flash the animal was knocked off the hood of the car as if struck with a hammer. It skidded to the ground and disappeared off the edge of the road, crashing down through the spruce trees with a wounded cry.

Bang!

Another cascading rumble of thunder, and the man and the other animal took off in a swift run, disappearing into the darkness from whence they came. It was then that Jessie realized: it wasn't thunder at all.

Gunshots.

Jessie folded in on herself even more, sinking down into the seat and closing her eyes, as if in doing so she could make the whole situation go away.

It didn't.

But, for a time, it got better. Like it always does before it gets worse.

A man came down from the other side of the road, a long rifle slung over his back, the barrel still oozing smoke. He jogged over to the car, offered her a hand and told her that the "man and his dogs" had gone away.

He introduced himself as Victor, which was true. It had been his name for a long time, many decades, now. He consoled her, held her close and told her that everything was going to be okay, now, it was all going to be fine. She didn't notice how

cold his skin was: how could she? Winter stole that chance from her with its frost-nipped air. So old Victor walked her up a mountain path to his pickup truck, and said that they'd head to a nearby diner. While she ate, he'd call the police.

Both true.

Of course, some things went unsaid. She assumed the man and his two dogs were the danger, and that was an assumption Victor let the girl have. He jostled a pocketful of silver-tipped 7mm rounds while he listened to her story. It would do her – or him – little good to learn that Victor was the one who had set the road trap, dropping the can of stones down onto her car. It also wouldn't do anybody any good for her to learn that the people at the diner – oh, and the police, too – weren't really *people*, not in the strictest sense of the term. They were folk, I guess. But like you or me, they were dead folk.

Jessie sat there, eating from the big spread of food put out in front of her. Waffles. Eggs. Fresh strawberries. Strong diner coffee.

"Fattening the lamb," Victor whispered to Ramon, the line cook. Behind them, Selma, a waitress, licked her bruise-dark lips.

What nobody there knew was that the wolves were not done hunting, not that night. Even the wounded one would persevere. The dark man from before would himself become a wolf, and together they would descend upon that diner. They would destroy this nest of monsters that had been fattening lost lambs for years.

And they'd save Jessie, too.

But not before Victor and his Savage buddies had already drank her mostly dry. She'd come back from it, with the magic of the wolves, but not easily. She'd always be burdened with a bit of brain damage, coupled with the nightmares of that night. It was unfortunate, but the wolves knew that in a way it would make her stronger. Sometimes, the road demands sacrifices, and sometimes those sacrifices are made in buckets of blood. It's just the way of things.

The guy's a great storyteller, I'll say that. He'd keep his voice low when the tension would rise, then he'd clap his hands or say a word real loud and we'd all startle. Even his pack, who'd heard the tale before. Is the story true? I don't know. But they all agree: they've seen the Lupines. They've spoken with them. The wolf-men match our savagery pound for bloody pound. Moral of the story, I guess, is stick with your territory. That's why being a wandering nomad is a bad bit of voodoo: you go tra-la-la traipsing into some mean wolf-dude's territory, and they're going to find your ashes scattered over a half-acre.

A DREAM! THE CONVERSATION

She spoke to me yesterday. As I lay in the dirt, dead, merged as one with the soil that grew warm beneath the sun, she came to me in the dream and she spoke to me.

We stood on a plateau. The world lay dead all around us, but here we were in a field of wildflowers. Crows complained overhead. The sun was up and we stood beneath it. Some kind of... bastion of purity in a ruined world. She felt the flowers with blood-crosted hands. She took a breath. I tried, and remembered that I couldn't.

She was marked with tattoos. Dues I do not possess. Crawling up her thigh and beneath her shorts, a mad dragon. Blue like blood before it hits the air. This is the conversation as I remember it.

Me: Who are you?

Her: Who do you think I am?

Me: I think you're me.

Her: No.

Me: But you look like me.

You... almost sound like me.

Her: Therein lies the trick!
Almost, almost, always almost.

Me: You're
almost me.

Her: Yessss.

Me: Are you a demon? A ghost?

Her: A bit of both.

Me: Why are you so angry?

Her: I'm not angry.
I'm hungry.
I'm thirsty.

Me: So am I. Why am I suddenly so hungry?

Her: Because of me.

Me: You're me. You have to be me.
You're my ego or my id or whatever
the term is. You're my other side,
my dark side.

Her: No. But so close.

Me: You're me!

Her: I'm within you.

Me: Stop lying to me!

Her: I'll stop lying
when you surrender.

Me: What? What did you say?

Her: Surrender.

Me: No! I won't surrender.
I don't even know what that means.

Her: Surrender.

She was in front of me, right in front of me - I don't know how she got there that fast, but it was some kind of... nightmare movement, some swiftness held only in dreams (though I know some of us do move with preternatural swiftness, this was something else). She had a handful of bloody flowers and she shoved them into my mouth, and her fingers tasted of bitter ashes.

What the fuck is happening to me? Why am I dreaming? Who is this woman that is not me, but is almost me? I have to find out. What lunatic journey have you set me upon? On what path have you forced me to walk?

You motherfucker.

TO THE GINGERBREAD HOUSE - LOVELY, DARK AND DEEP

The moon was gone, and the forest was as bleak and black as the night.

I hopped down out of the jeep, and Ludo tossed me my bag.

I told him, I said, "I thought you were coming with me?"

That laugh, again. A rat's chittering joy.

"Fuck no!" he said, "I stay out of the woman's forest."

I was floored.

"But what do I do?"

"You go in. You go deep. You find the true Jagietto Dak - the true one, now, like we talked about - and leave a gift there for her."

"How far in?" I asked.

He shrugged. He laughed. "Three days, four at most!"

I started to stammer. I didn't have food. Where was I supposed to sleep?

He mimed holding his breath like a swimmer going underwater. "You sleep in the ground! Like all of us do sometimes."

I didn't know how to do that. And I told him as much.

Another shrug, another laugh.

Then he snapped his fingers, and the jeep bounced off the grass and onto the little road that brought us here. I called after him, even ran, but... the one unbroken tail-light weaved and bounced, a red dot in the dark, until it was gone. Leaving me alone. Gift? What gift? How many god-damn nights? I thought Ludo was my friend, but there again, I'm stung. A human idea, friendship. You either need each other, or you don't. I needed him, but he doesn't need me, and so here I am. Alone in the dark. Trying to figure out my next move.

Fuck. Into the breach, I guess.

And no more friends allowed. If I'm going to do this, I have to toughen the fuck up.

The forest is Białowieża Forest - a massive stretch of primeval woodland covering both the east side of Poland and the West side of... I guess it's Belarus? It's tourist friendly... in parts. Not the parts I'm in. We came in the back. No paved paths, no parking lots. Just deer trails. And thickets. And thorns. And tall trees that block out the moon, not that it matters because there's no moon anyhow.

The thing about this area, according to Ludo, is that it's been a hunting reserve for much of its history. It passed into and out of the hands of the tsars again and again. Goring wanted to mark this place as the world's biggest hunting preserve, a site where the fat, fed Nazis could come to hunt bison and elk and probably humans for all I know.

Ludo also told me this is a mystical place, a pagan place. "Thin" in spots, with the worlds bleeding together. And she, Baba Yaga, is what helps keep it that way.

I'm going to find her or perish trying. Don't think I won't do my job. Sarah and Little Jack better be safe when I get there. I've no idea who you are, but you don't really have any idea who I am, either.

If I could've peed my pants I would've. Jesus! The fog is thick here - fat ribbons of it, wrapped around everything like some bloated white snake. All I've got is this flashlight so I don't keep it on (I have a few spare batteries but I can't carry much), so I was wandering, lights off, and suddenly this shape rises up in front of me, this lumbering thing with a terrible maw and a terrible claw and...

Goddamn logging operation. Defunct. Gone. Don't know where the loggers are, but this equipment's been abandoned for who knows how long. The forest has come to reclaim the machines, vines winding up around and over, pulling it all back. Something in there that speaks to me, something primal. I don't know what. I feel sick. Excited.

Morning will be coming soon.

I don't know what I'm going to do. Bury myself? Hide in a tree stump and hope for the best? Pray that maybe God or the Devil will give me shelter from the sun?

Evening, journal. Evening, Alice.

I'm not crispy.

I found shelter, of a sort. Some old hunting cabin, half-collapsed and crushed beneath a fallen tree. Actually, all the trees in this spot are fallen; some are even twisted, corkscrewed to splinters. Like a bad storm came through. Lightning. Wind.

But it's quiet now.

I'll add: eerily freaking quiet.

No bugs. No birds. No wind.

Just darkness and stillness.

Keep moving, Alice.

Morning is coming again soon. I am fucked. I don't belong here. What was I thinking? I grew up in the suburbs. I was Embraced in the city. We had one tree in my backyard, one. Now I'm lost. In Europe. In a primeval pagan forest looking for some ancient vampire hag witch bitch and fuck fuck fuck! I don't want to die out here. Or whatever it is you call it when we "expire." I don't want to extra-double-die out here. Shit!

I did it! Ha ha ha, I did it.

I don't know how I did it, but I did it.

I knew I felt a connection with this place. Not a sane connection. Not... happy. But, ancient. Empowering. Scary. In the best and worst way. And I knew the sun was coming up and I was beginning to freak out so I started to dig and dig and dig with my hands and it pulled some of the skin away from my knuckles and palms and before I knew it my hands had become dirt and my arms too and suddenly, I was shed of my backpack and my clothes and I could smell the thick pungent aroma of fresh earth in my nose and then I realized I didn't even have a nose anymore holy shit, I did it. I became one with the ground. The trees here are pines, thin and tall, and it feels like for a moment they're watching over me, not because I'm a good person or a weak person but because I have demanded that they do so. By my blood in the ground, I now own this spot.

Jesus, that sounds weird. I don't even know what that means. But I feel it.

I feel it deep in my dead heart. What I don't feel deep in my dead heart is blood. I'm growing... hungry.

The night's almost at an end and I still haven't found food. I heard something. I did. I tilted my ears and I heard something rustling around, snorting even. A pig? I guess it's a boar out here, not a pig, but is that really what I want to eat? Better than nothing.

But I hunted and searched and no pig. Boar. Whatever.

And now I have to dig a spot beneath the fallen twigs and forest stones and sink deep into the soil once more, and I still haven't had a thing to eat.

I'm getting worried.

Losing my mind, I think.

I saw a ghost, I'm pretty sure. The ghost of an... elk, or stag, or maybe they're the same thing. It wasn't real. I could see through it. Like it had skin of fog, bones of water. It bounded away, disturbing nothing as it passed.

I'm lost.

And now I'm seeing ghost deer.

What did I think would happen if I wandered out in the middle of the woods? For nights on end? Did I think I would just hone in on the tree I was looking for? One tree out of millions? Did I think the witch would just come and present herself? She would offer me a kindly hand and a cup of tea and we'd traipse about, tra-la-lar-ing together?

And now, now I'm seeing ghost deer.

I did it!

I caught a deer.

A real one. Not a... ghost. But I think the ghost lead me to the real one. I don't know how I did it. I was following glimpses of the ghost, and suddenly it was standing there — the real one, that is. Drinking out of a puddle. And stupid me I stepped up on a log to get a better look and I snapped a twig and the thing ran, it ran like lightning had fired up under its tail but I ran, too. The deer tried to go right, found the thicket too high, then went the other way, but I was there.

Something was driving me. I didn't command myself to leap, I didn't think about it before I did it, I just gave in and let something take over and before I knew what was happening I had tackled the damn thing around the neck. I caught a hoof to the back of the head (and it ripped my ear partly off, which normally would disgust me but right now there's no pain, only gain) as the thing kicked and bucked, but I just grabbed its head and twisted. And then it lay still.

What the hell is happening to me? I've always been kind of a tomboy, but it's not like I was an animal killer or torturer. Like any young girl I had drawings of unicorns and Bambi on my notebooks, so why don't I feel any remorse? Why do I feel so good?

I guess I should stop asking questions.

But I won't.

And I should probably eat.

I have another idea, instead.

I found it. After all this time, I found it. The tree. The Oak of Władysław II Jagiełło. Some king, some Lithuanian or Polish King who slept here during... I don't know, some battle. The tree was said to have fallen, taken down by a lightning strike or wind or something, but Ludo said that wasn't the real tree. That one is for the tourists. For the humans. But this one is hers. This one is the witch's tree.

And I found it.

And I don't know how I found it.

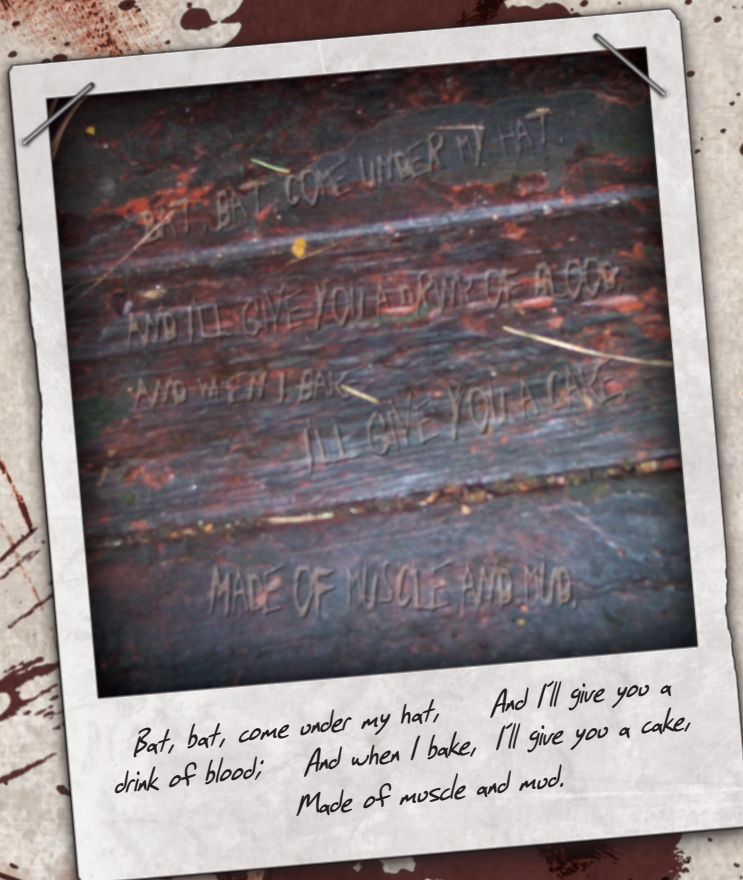
I'm carrying this damn deer around on my shoulders, and I can barely manage it, and I have to sleep so I sleep in the ground and then I get back up in the evening and I keep pushing forward, and now, what do I see? This tree, tall and thick and with a dark hollow in its trunk like a wailing mouth, and I just know. I know that this is the tree and that I've been led here. By what or who, I have no idea even though I have my suspicions.

And then I take the deer - my gift, I hadn't forgotten, Ludo said I had to bring a gift - and I lay it at the mouth of the tree and..

Now what?

It's been an hour. Maybe more.

I opened the deer's throat just minutes ago (sorry, journal, for the bloody fingerprints, maybe later I'll lick the pages - a real flavor saver, trust me, I'm hungry and it's hard not to tear these pages out and stuff them down my throat), and I let the blood pour out over the ground and the tree and

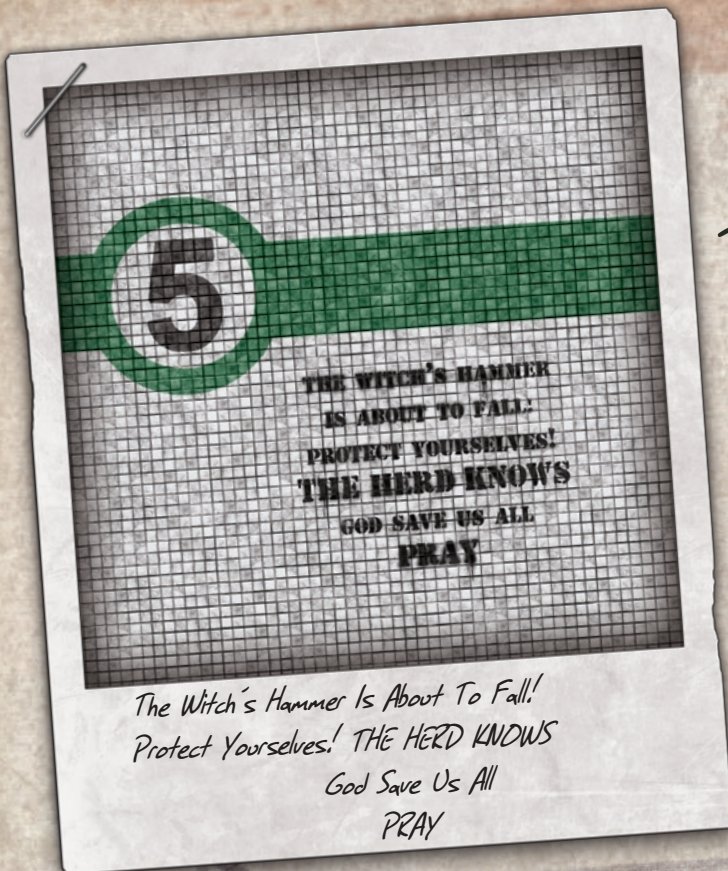


Bat, bat, come under my hat, And I'll give you a
drink of blood; And when I bake, I'll give you a cake,
Made of muscle and mud.

MIDNIGHT ROADS, 7

Took this on the subway:

Lovely. Thanks, Crazy
Guy Who Writes
On Subways.



THE PHONE CALL

The Hierophant, the Hind, called me.

And this will mess with my head forever.

I was at a diner. A greasy spoon off the highway. Lots of truckers. No vampires. I was just there to wash up, because I was filthy with road dirt.

I was going into the bathroom, and the payphone near me rings.

I ignore it.

I come back out of the bathroom, toweling off my face, and the phone rings again.

What compelled me to pick it up?

I'll never know, but I did.

And it was him. The Hind.

He told me he'd had dreams of me. Of what I could "become." He said the winds were changing and it was time he contacted me. He knew about my dreams. He knew what I'd seen in the blood on that altar, though I have no idea how. He said that if I really wanted to commune with the ancient and the beastly and get to the heart of the tribe, I'd either need to look deep inward at "The Woman" (his words, spoken with such importance I can't help but capitalize them) or find one of the "true elders."

And then he gave me a line on one of these true elders, since I told him I wasn't ready to commune with the creature inside of me.

The information is going to take me to London.

I guess I'd better start arranging for a flight. Somehow.

TO THE GINGERBREAD HOUSE - SUFFER NOT A WITCH

Jezipaba, Jezipaba, I am Jezipaba.

The first of us was Jaqwig, the Mother of Battle

The second of us was Misha Koz, the Horned One.

The third of us was Vasilissa, the Beautiful.

The fourth of us Shall Not Be Named.

The fifth of us is me, Agrafena Tretjakov.

Jezipaba, Jezipaba, we are Jezipaba.

Your back to the forest, your face to me. This is my home, this old dying tree.

You come seeking my story so I write it here.

This forest has always had a Jezipaba, do you see?

This forest is ancient, connected with all ancient places, and so we are a keeper of all the world's distant forests.

The forest is within us as much as we are in the forest.

The land is us, we are the land.

You are only the soil, only the soil for a blink in the eye of time.

But we are the soil, all the soil, ancient and eternal.

Just as dirt and mud cannot die, we cannot die.

There is always a Jezipaba.

The forest is our protectorate and our hunting ground. We guard the old gateways of thorn and bone. We watch the trees to ensure they still stand. We feed on what walks upon our skin but does not respect us.

In every dark forest, a tree stands where Jezipaba can be summoned.

You did not need to come this way, but you did.

You are the new dead. You are still pure of heart.

The Jezipaba likes a pure heart.

My cat, Afonaz, thinks you pretty.

My dog, Grisha, thinks you loyal.

My tree, Boleslav, thinks your roots are strong.

My door, Sergej, thinks your heart is open.

My servants will bless you as they once blessed me. And I shall confirm this blessing by a mark on your head, a star drawn in dirt and dust and blood, all crushed by this mortar and pestle. This mark still waits upon my brow, too, invisible, wiped clean, but not truly. It is always there, even though you cannot see it.

Those with the Eye can though.

Rest now, rest. You sit in a chair made from the body of the king who once slept beneath this oak before a terrible battle, and when he slept the Jezipaba who was once Vasilissa went to him and whispered into his dreams and made him her own. He enjoys our blood but he is weak and feeble and can be little more than the chair on which you sit.

He gasps and gapes over your shoulder.

The king thinks you pretty, as Afonaz does.

Morning comes. We all must sleep.

Sleep, Alice, sleep.

I have your tongue's blood. I have your hair. I've had them for a while, now.

Maybe one day you will be Jezipaba, too.

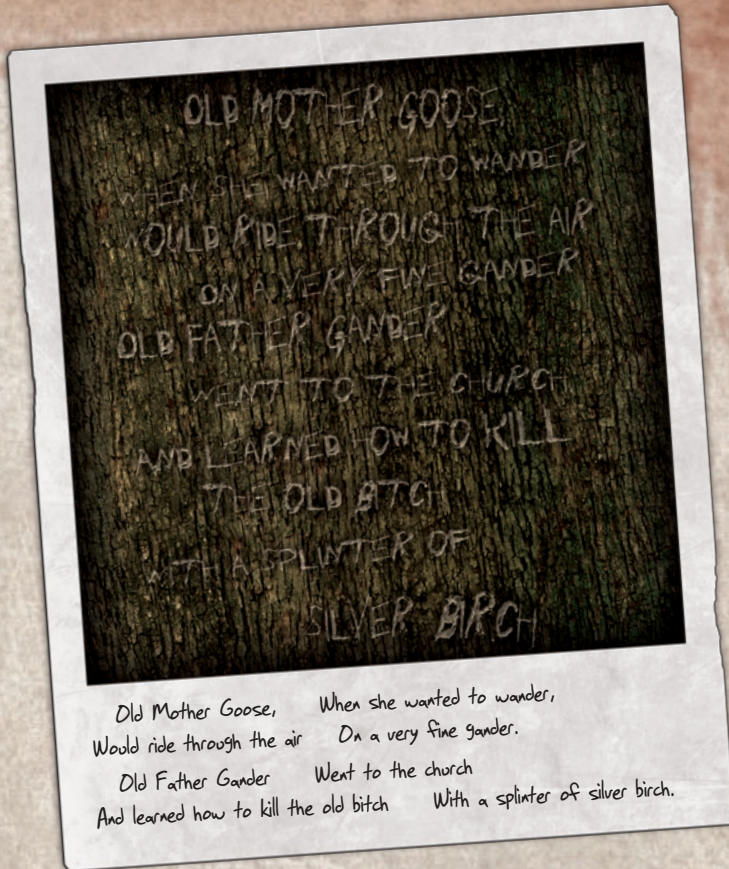
Jezipaba, Jezipaba, you may be Jezipaba.



GLIMPSES FROM THE BLIND

As it turns out? We don't do history very well. The Hierophant had his own brand of Savage history, obviously, pulled from... well, from who knows where since he wouldn't tell me, and that's damn near as "official" as it gets. It shouldn't surprise me. A lot of Gangrel are nomads. History matters little to a lot of us; what's important is the present or recent past, or at best distant myth and folklore. But to find out what the hell we were doing as a clan 100, 200, 1000 years ago... it's a joke. Don't get me wrong, in a way I'm just happy to assume that we were doing as we do now: wandering, hunting, feeding. But I recognize that such assumptions are dangerous. Certainly I've reported on hints that we have been (and can be) so much more than we are, but how can I know for certain?

Well, what's below is what I've found. So far, at least. It's disreputable information, all of it. As good as fiction, really.



THE AUGUR OF THE BLACKMOOR BROWNSTONE

Might as well open big, right? So here's the story: I guess maybe ten years back, there was this Savage who called himself Frankie the Fork. Reputed mobster from the 1950s, head like a jar of pennies, nose broken in so many places it might as well have been a sweet potato duct-taped beneath his eyes. Or, his lack of eyes. Story goes that he was a killer, not just a leg-breaker, but a bad-boy brutal thug killer for the local Cosa Nostra, and he sometimes liked to stab his victims in the eyes with a fork and, well, eat those eyes like they were pitted olives. So, before his Embrace, his sire did the same to him as payback: stab, stab, eyes gone.

I guess being made both blind and dead at the same time didn't sit well with Frankie the Fork's mind. He was never a dumb thug, but he wasn't known to be precisely introspective, either. That changed when his sight and life were taken from him.

He started talking to animals. Birds in particular. He'd go to the roof night after night and would summon birds to him, and he'd talk to them. Soon he started keeping birds in one of those makeshift pigeon houses. He had pigeons, obviously. Crows, too. Sparrows. Reportedly, he even had a peregrine falcon up in that box with a child's leather glove as its hood. These mad flocks were his only friends. Some whispers say he fed them really well: human food, and his blood, to boot. Other stories say he starved them but kept the birds caged anyway until they died; then he'd just summon more freaking birds.

Well, apparently he believed that these birds had some kind of... ancestral hive-mind. That what these birds remembered was equivalent to what all birds have experienced in the past, and that includes those who have cavorted with our Savage classmates from bygone centuries. Sound ludicrous? Deal with it. This is what I could find. All of it comes from notebook pages and scribbles written in the margins of Chinese food menus and whatever, all of it pinned or taped to his wall. A local Chinatown Hapnt named Romy Chu came into possession of all the lunatic scrawlings. He let me photocopy some of the more... interesting ones. I've stapled them in here so you can see.

I get it, this is basically garbage. It's so insane it's like painting with a shotgun. But it is what it is. If you wanted better, you should've found someone who experienced this crap first-hand. Enjoy the bird's eye view.

MORTENSEN BANDED THE FALCON its
how we talked how we kept our
savage kingdoms together during
the dark times HE WAS THE FIRST and
we learned from his ways

THE BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT HERON
remembers how it was when we
emerged from the fog it is a sacred
bird the first bird the bird who is
keeping our soul like a friend holds your
keys WHEN THE TIME COMES we will once
more take our souls and be complete

THE CROWS AND
OWLS fear the
crows and owls
that are not the
crows and owls at

THEY LEARNED IT FROM US these
TINY FINCHES of the islands of
the pacific these itty bitty
black birds with their itty bitty
sharp beaks they stab the
seabirds and sip their blood
THESE VAMPIRE FINCHES FROM
GALAPAGOS

SHE WAS THE FIRST the one called Mary the Gull she
wanted to feel alive but she was dead so she opened
her chest and made a cage within her ribs and in
that cage she put A LITTLE GRAY MOCKINGBIRD and
left it in there and sometimes opened the cage and
fed it food and blood and treats and snacks and
SHE COULD BECOME A BIRD NOT LONG after



our SHIPS NEEDED THE
GULLS you see we had
spoken to the gulls and
made a pact with the
birds and we could only
SAIL AT NIGHT and the
gulls were our eyes

THE CIA USED PIGEONS TO TAKE
PHOTOS so we have learned
to do the same you think we
know our territories so well
its because we FLY HIGH with
the EYE in the SKY

THE BIRDS REMEMBER DISEASE they
know it has come from us and we
must mend our fence with the
winged because in our bodies
bacteria twists and shifts and
shits its pants and becomes
TERRIBLE PLAGUE A NEW FLU IS
COMING we must stop it or our
food supply will fail

THE FALCON MEN LIVE in the
towers and high places where
we are forbidden to go

COMMAND THE FLOCK and
you have food forever
they bring blood in
beaks like water in cups
and they each open and
pour it into your mouth
like the FISHING CORMO-
RANTS DIP and dive and
stab and SUCK

OH CUCKOO shall I call thee BIRD
or but a WANDERING VOICE

TO THE GINGERBREAD HOUSE - WAKEY, WAKEY, BLOOD AND BAKEY

I'm not ready for any of this. I'm freaking out.

I'm about to have a breakdown, a convulsion, a full-scale nuclear meltdown.
I awoke this evening in the motor lodge. Under a burned husk of table, under the same burned husk of table where I made my bed... up until I decided to go looking for fucking Baba Yaga.

I am not in Poland. Or Belarus or Russia or on any other continent but this one.

The plane ticket to Warsaw? Sitting next to me. Untorn. Untouched. As if I never went there in the first place. As if I never got on a plane with yapping dogs and yowling cats, as if I never met Ludo and went to the Warsaw Chapter House and saw Broda and Zuzanna making out and biting each other's tongues till they were bloody. As if I never wandered the dark forest.

And yet I did.

The plane tickets? They were resting in a mortar and pestle.

My head, I can feel where she touched me. I can feel the star, almost like a scar that isn't physically there but is there never the less. Less like a raised bump on the flesh and more like a faint indentation in my skull. Drawn there. By her hand. And then my journal... Christ, she wrote in my journal. I watched her do it. With the tip of her finger, no pen, no blood, just the whorls and scritch-scratches of her bent and yellow nail.

I don't know what's real. This is what I remember!

She came upon me, the dead deer laying there at the mouth of the oak. She came up behind me and... I don't know what she did, but there was a flash of a gray cloak, the smell of moth-eaten fabric paired with the odor of earth, fresh earth.

And I was somewhere else, suddenly, sitting on a chair made from a man - some old king, if I'm to believe what she wrote. Around me, the earthen walls had crude shelves, and on each shelf was a line of little clay idols. They looked a little like her: fat hips, long hair, hands like spiders perched at the ends of brittle wrists.

A gray cat - a Russian blue - sat to my right, watching me with green eyes.

A black dog - no idea what kind, I guess a Labrador - stood to my left, watching me with his yellow eyes, his wolf's eyes.

Tree branches sometimes touched my hair.

Somewhere, I heard a gate swinging in a wind I couldn't feel, its old hinges squeaking.

Buried in the ground, like cobblestones, were the tops of skulls.

Small skulls. Like those that would belong to children.

Jesus.

What did she mean? That I could be one of them?

I have to get my head clear. I have to find another place to sleep, since I already ditched this one months ago. Part of me wants to contact Gilda, to ask her just what the hell is going on, but I know she's with her. She's the one who kicked me down the rabbit's hole in the first place. I can't go to her. She'll just fuck with me some more anyhow.

This is all going to be fine.

Repeat after me.

This is all going to be fine.

This is all going to be fine.

This is all going to be fine.

I'm just going to pretend that none of this ever happened.

These two bastards came rip-roaring through my turf a year or so ago. The Big Man wanted to know who the fuck they were, where they were going, and why they had half the bikers in the state ready to rip everything in their path apart looking for them. They were both only too happy to talk. Unfortunately, as I delivered this transcript, they escaped. Killed two of my best Hounds, too, and took off with that big crate as well. This? This is pure Savage, right here.

- C. Hardiken

Dracula

The kid's being a bitch, so I tell him I'm Count Dracula.

"You can't be fucking Dracula," he says, even though I'm big enough he should know better.

"I didn't say I'm fucking Dracula, I said I'm Count fucking Dracula." His look is still blank, if finally scared. He's backing up against the cigarette racks. "It's a motherfucking hereditary title. I'm the oldest male grandchild of Dracula, so I'm Count. So you're going to fucking help me out here." People just don't get the simple goddamn truth.

"I'm sure the Order... would..." he stammers. He has obviously not encountered this particular situation before.

"There's no Order in this town." He slacks his damned jaw again. "If there were Order in this town, I would know. Ask me how I'd know."

"How... how would you know?" It's beginning to sink in for him. That he's trying to bullshit with a seven-foot-seven bodybuilder and piercing enthusiast who is crazy enough to corner the Sheriff in an Exxon convenience store and claim to be Count Dracula.

"Because I'm Count Dracula. If my crazy fucking cult were around, don't you think I'd have found them?"

"They got a lab down south, in Bull-"

"Shit, boy, if you think I ain't been through there already, you must think I'm pretty dumb." His lip

twitches. He can't help it. He wants to laugh. So I punch him in the stomach. "You know how else I know there ain't no Order around here? Because a dipshit like you is the motherfucking Sheriff."

"Now, look" I soften my tone, because the Count understands subtlety. "I realize it ain't your fucking fault that you're one of the three kindred in this whole damn town. But when you are presented with a damn challenge to your authority, you don't dick around. You either put up, which clearly you can't, or you put out, which in this case is as easy as answering my goddamn question."

"W-wha..." He looks like a deer staring at an oncoming subway train.

"Spit it out, boy."

"What's your... goddamn question? Sir."

Fuckin' A, the Count is always forgetting that shit.

Sheriff no-balls points me in the direction I need to go, which is as simple as east on the goddamn interstate. East, he tells me, that's where they took my friend. Contrary to what you might expect, the Count has friends. The Count even has bitches. Lots of them, when I can find the time to stop and turn a few proper ladies. Worst thing is a bitch with no breeding. The Count does not put up with that shit.



DIARY ENTRY: Felix

I'm tied up in the trunk again. It's actually not that bad, the trunk, except that it stinks, because my hands are in here with me, rotting. I keep trying to roll over onto them, like they'll reattach or something. I've reattached one hand before. That's why I don't know if I can grow them back. I certainly can't if my captors keep starving me. I really hope I can, because I can probably charm the ladies with my hands tied behind my back and cut off... but I wouldn't be able to shake hands properly, much less feel up warm, bloody tits.

My name's Felix. It's not true what they say about me and your sister, don't worry. My kind can't do that. Now, what they say about me and my sister... well, actually, that depends on which version you heard...

...the version I'm hearing is that my "father" sent her to "rescue" me. I'd stashed myself away in a nice little box, because I'd been doing not-Daddy a very big favor. I recovered a priceless treasure for him, fought off all comers (and there were a lot of comers) in the process, and settled down for the sleep of ages until the heat cooled down. I'd arranged for this idiot called Mole (even the servants are making up their names these days, it's disgraceful) to forward me and my box along to the right people. And then I was going to start a new life in the country (or at least another country) and everything was going to be lovely.

Except that Daddy didn't give me enough credit. He sent my sort-of-sister to save me. Her strategy was to murder my only allies and leave me stranded on the road. Well, with her car, but it wasn't hers anyway. I got less than fifty miles before a nice policeman stopped me for driving a stolen vehicle. And then it turned out we had some things in common, feasting on the blood of the living kinds of things, and I had to run. The running didn't go too well for me, though. He sold me to these ogres for... well, I don't really know for what.

I've done the only thing that makes sense. I've called the maddest, baddest and most dangerous vampire in Christendom to help me. Blood magic, a little charm he taught me. Unfortunately, Hood (one of the ogres) caught me doing it. He took the most expedient solution to keep me from writing with a pricked finger, which would be the aforementioned amputations.

I'd like to meet his mother. I'm sure she's very proud.

Dracula

The Count is not a violent man. You have to understand that about me. I happen to have a few of my grandsire's memories about war, and I can safely say that what I do to people only occasionally qualifies as violence. Folks say I act like a thug. They don't realize that's a compliment. The Thuggee were a sect of Kali-worshipping assassins and brigands, who camouflaged themselves within the dominant Islam-centered society of India for centuries. If they were Kindred, you might say they were masters of the Masquerade. Except you wouldn't say anything about them at all, because you wouldn't know shit about your neighbors, much less some Kindred in India. Whatever folk say, the Count is educated. And the Count is also a master of the Masquerade.

Consider: even reading this, you do not believe I exist. You think I'm bullshitting you. Go ahead. Keep thinking that. I'll be getting on with rescuing Felix.

Ah, Felix. Now, that little guy's trouble. Always has been. He's a cuckoo's egg, you know? See, I'm

more educated than you. Again. Felix comes on like this prissy little Suck, tells you he's fifty or sixty or so. He's not, though, he just trampled the shit out of his "sire's" memory. This fella was some kind of historian, right? And he finds Felix all torpid and helpless-looking. The Blood in that shit's gotta be thin as all hell, right? Right. So our historian figures he'll wake him up, pump him for information about the dark ages and faerie princesses or whatever. Only it turns out Felix remembered one thing: how to crush memories. So as soon as he's up and about, he breaks the guy who woke him. Makes him think he's a newborn childe and shit. Cuckoo's egg, see?

Something like that, anyway. Felix wouldn't tell the whole truth even if it worked for him. He's done a lotta good for me over the years, though, so I taught him how to call. How to make the serpent in the Count's belly coil, let me know my buddy's in danger. Plus, his fake-sister? She was one hot-ass chick. Liked the bitches sometimes, but hot as fuck anyway. Felix might have her number, so the Count is thinking.

DIARY ENTRY: Felix

I don't believe that Count Dracula is who he says he is. He's probably only told me as much of his past as I've told him mine. But he's a bit of a wonder in his own way, and I really have to admire the guy. Me, I'm no good once they've shrugged off the insight and the charm and the outright headbreaking.

I'll tell you something about the Count. He only feeds when he kills. Which, along with his somewhat unorthodox appearance... well, it should make him a bit conspicuous, shouldn't it? Somebody you'd have heard of, if not somebody your Prince left out for the sun? Well, that's what you'd think. But he has... good manners, I suppose you'd say. He cleans up after himself with the best of us. And he can pass among the herd, too. You only have to give him a moment, and he'll loosen his belt, hunch over, and then the shadows... oh, he's marvelous with those. The shadows will creep up and iron every quirk out of his features.

Here I am telling you about Count Dracula. Forgive me, but at this point the only other thing I could be relating is my skull fracturing every time this idiot hits a bump in the road. By this time I've nearly convinced myself that I can't have been sold as food. I was worrying about that, you know. You see it discussed a lot in the Cacophony... Kindred slavery rings or diablerie cults. And who would run them? Well, the ogres of course, the Gangrel. The only vampires who get around. Besides my sister, obviously.

Dracula

Slam a guy's head in a car door hard enough, and it's as good as chopping it off. You need a good solid door though - on an old 79 Buick, for example. When you've worked his hands and arms in the door till the bones are paste under the bruised-black skin, and he's told you everything he could possibly tell you about anything you care to ask, then it pays to be merciful and put him down. Never let it be said that the Count doesn't learn from his mistakes. Work the face last. Once you're done listening to it flap and spill noise, then you can turn hell loose on it.

I'm getting closer, anyhow. The dirty secret of my blood kin is this - the wandering rogue-wolf lifestyle requires an awful lot of planning and logistics to maintain for long. Some do it friendly-like, stopping over with their mates to weather the storm or sleep out a day when they're caught without their caravans, or they don't know yet how to let the dirty mother embrace them. Friends are good, but some go in for slaves and thralls, left behind waiting their masters to return like Irish tinkers on the circuit, round and round again a few times a year to take their tithe in blood, and leave their blessing in vitae, granting their ghouls a few more months of ageless stasis.

Those at-home thralls pine and sweat, obsess and get strange. Distance doesn't lessen the bond, but it sure as shit doesn't make the heart grow fonder. The Count don't let anybody near his prick that in her heart-of-hearts hates him - and these lonely, waiting ghouls get a mighty powerful hate for their wandering masters. That doesn't mean they don't want them and lust after them and ache to be under their heels, because they do - that's the blood working in them. It's just that given the chance to betray their masters, they'll do it when somebody applies just the right leverage with just the right finesse; say, the leverage needed to slam the door of a 79 Buick onto an already broken hand and the finesse so it smashes the finger bones, but doesn't sever the fingers themselves.

When the ghoul's conversation turns into nothing but sobs, I figure he's spent. Rattling out his master like that had to be worse than the things I did to his arms. Or not - I did some pretty bad things to his arms. But he kept talking right up to the end. I feel I'm growing as a person, getting a better handle on asking questions like this. Added bonus: slamming the door over and over on his head leaves me cool as a well-fed crocodile for hours after.

DIARY ENTRY: Felix

I'm trying to keep track of how many nights I've been in here, but I lose count after three. It could be five. It could be eleven. I've got no point of reference other than my hunger, and past a certain point, that's just making things harder to judge. When I start to hallucinate, I give up trying. If they don't start feeding me, I'm going to slide into slumberland, and then wake up somebody's lunch.

It's my not-sister in the trunk with me, and she's playing her bass guitar (even though there's no room in here for it or for her - no surprise, she's always been that rude). Except instead of the thrum thrum of the bass, the strings emit a tone, like a struck bell, but continuous while she touches them. It reminds me of a keyboard guitar thing, like they had in the 80's new-wave. A keytar? A guitboard?

"You trying out for Duran Duran? Didn't think that was your scene."

"How dense are you? Hello! Clue! Listen."

"You're not making any sense."

"What do you expect, I'm your hallucination."

"So quit trying to summon the mother-ship. I don't think we're anywhere near Devil's Tower."

"You're hopeless, you know that?"

"Why don't you shut up, and show me your tits?"

"And predictably disgusting."

"Since you're my hallucination, does this mean I think I'm disgusting? In my subconscious?"

"Not just in your subconscious, either."

"Ah shut the fuck up, and take off your shirt. I need to see something to distract me."

See how far gone I am? I said the last before I realized the trunk was open, and I was looking up into the face of a woman so skinny her cheekbones looked like knife-cuts under her huge anime eyes. I try to say, "Oh, not you honey." But she'd already punched me in the mouth.

Dracula

Most of the Big Book's bullshit, you know. It's the Sunday School version of my grandsire's whole damn Requiem. I should know; my sire made me spend years poring over it, finding the little niggling inconsistencies. She made me translate it a bunch, too. And then she made me translate my translations, just so I could see how shit it got with only one imagination.

I think about her a lot, especially when I'm cruising down the road, on the lookout for prey... or, like tonight, sniffing for an old friend I gotta save from some prey. Know what my reward was, for doing my studies right? I'd get to suckle from one of the monks. Half-damned, ghouls, fed on Vitae with the memories of Dracula and some other great teachers. You drink that down, it's like remembering an old lover from a passing scent. It's all poetic like that, but it hurts a lot more. At least for me. So, basically, the reward for studying was I'd get to study more, except with this, like, existential heartbreak. You ever start to wonder why a guy might give up the quest to transform himself, well, that's why. I figured I'd already got cut one break, by being allowed to change once, by being allowed to be kindred. So I cut that old bitch loose and I decided to go carve out a piece of the world in my own name. And I happen to have the baddest name there could be, you know?

Seriously have to wonder what Felix did to piss these guys off. I've been hounding them a week in nights now, and I've beaten out vaguely who they

are. Buncha kin of mine, if you believe it. Not Dracula, obviously, but Gangrel. And that's what my honored grandfucker was, you know. Gangrel. He built himself up and shit, but we tore all that down in class. Disassembled it, put it back together. You got a fine specimen like me, and some of my less fortunate broodmates... well, you can study the Blood down to the fucking marrow. And we're Gangrel. Just better Gangrel, Savages way closer to the root of our savagery than any other group. Now, the Damnation of Dracula? I got fuck-all idea how that happened, but he got a bigger dose of the curse than anybody else. That's why he was so keen on fixing it.

So, these crap-ass Gangrel... well, they ain't so crap-ass. Turns out they do a lot in the corpse trade. Digging up recently torpid elders for other bastards to eat. They're supposedly real honest, too, not taking the best for themselves or nothing. That's why I can't figure what they want with Felix... he's old, yeah, but he ain't what I'd call a meal. And trust me, I got a pretty good sense what's kindred and what's kibble.

If the stupid little fucker were a real Suck, I wouldn't have this problem. He'd be able to use his personal magnetism or whatever to summon me to wherever they got him. Instead, I've had to look for leads on freaks. Watch the birds of ill omen, talk to the yokels whose domains they hauled him through.

DIARY ENTRY: Felix

Do they think they're keeping me alive? Every night now, just after wakey-wake, they pull out my gag and make me drink pig's blood. I'm happy to let the ogres underestimate me for now, but they're extraordinarily stupid if they think that does anything besides wet my whistle. Tastes foul, too. I think they've been using preservatives of some kind. That speaks well for their wealth, if not their hospitality.

I've identified most of them, I think. The big one in the Punisher t-shirt, he's called Hood. Appearances can be deceiving, but in his case I don't believe that they are. He does all the heavy lifting. The one I always see with the maps or the GPS, she's Twig. Named for her rather lacking figure, I imagine. Butch... doesn't really live up to his name, honestly, but I think he's in charge. There are a few hangers on, and kine who travel with them. I get the impression they press gang their ghouls. That's the only explanation I can give for the ragtag and recalcitrant band that follows us in a soccer-mom van. They're junkies, but not happy junkies. Not at all. I do wonder what they'd do if I gave them another way to get their fix...

...a thought for another time. We're parked at an abandoned campground, and the ghouls have their own bonfire. My captors keep away, but that keeps them closer to me. I wonder if the ghouls know the fire repulses their owners. Mmm, there's that delicious thought again. If only one would come close enough. I'm sure my eyes are as deep and dark as ever. I know my urges are...

Dear old Dad's box still seems to be traveling as part of the caravan. Do they have any idea about its worth? I'm starting to wonder if I do. I had assumed it was another one of his precious historical knick-knacks, valuable only because it was held by one of the most brutal Kindred police states in the South. Dad called New Orleans a "cultural bastion"... I call it good riddance. Sanctified aren't meant to be Catholics, nor the other way around; they acquire the most tedious elements of both, and they take them to heart. But that box and the instrument it contains have caused me nothing but trouble since the start of this whole affair. I wonder if that's just my lot in life.

And I can't help but notice the curious immunity of my captors to my charms. You'd think at least one of the vicious little bastards would like the way I wink or the way I squirm. It's a proven fact everyone else does. But these... no. I have to wonder if they've got some kind of blood tricks of their own. They look at each other curiously... perverts if ever I've seen them. Perhaps their shared blood has them so madly obsessed with each other that my gifts pale in comparison.

The Count and I used to talk problems like that over late at night, over a hot woman. I do hope he gets here soon. And disembowels these fucks.

Dracula
The Count never realized that he hated yokels so much. Usually, I only have to "enjoy" the company of my Kindred when I want something from them. These nights, I need something, and I think they know that. They know that the Count is worried about losing the scent. And even as they cower and they quiver, they know they have something I need. A few of the motherfuckers even try to charge me for it. Well, the Count does not take that bullshit, and the Count has been hungry anyway. Like a town called Bat Cave even needed vampires.

I forgot to ask my question again. It gets hard to focus on conversation, sometimes, when you're trying to take the other party apart without damaging their ability to talk. Motherfuckers always get to sobbing, too. No sense of dignity. Paranoid, too. Everybody is, since the storm. All these stupid little domains whose biggest fear was that man would discover fire, and then they find out that God sent water. At least I've maintained my antediluvian cool, you know? Would suck if the spawn of Dracula hid in a damn hole the rest of his life.

Fortunately, I got a couple lifetimes of experience tracking assholes down. My broodmates from the Order. Those Crone fuckers I hung out with afterwards and then hung from the trees. So it's not so hard for me to figure out what this caravan club is up to. They're gonna have mortals to do shit for them, but that's also gonna be their supply train between towns. They'll need to replenish ghouls and dolls as fast as they break 'em, and that means they'll be preying on human travelers.

This is why the Count notices the flier. This, and the wicked skull logo.

DIARY ENTRY: Felix

They haven't opened the trunk up for the night, yet. They did give me some human blood last night, though, and I'm starting to grow some stubby little hands back. The night's loud. There's a herd out there, several herds if my ears don't deceive me. The humans are gathering for some kind of party. I'm sure it's not a scene that I usually work. How could it be, out in the middle of nowhere? Still, if I could slip these surly bonds I'm sure I could find some human fodder to help me out.

I hear a band somewhere out in the night. Far enough away that I'm hearing them secondhand through speakers. I'll never understand the mortal tolerance for shitty amplification. A few decades with an audiophile sister and I can't even enjoy the radio for its novelty. I'll kill her for that, someday, and for a hundred other things.

Dracula

The Count admits he's a snob for good ink. For one of us to go under the needle and have it stick, we really have to want it, and that makes this taint's tattoos even worse, because he decided after getting them done that he really liked that ink and wanted to keep it, even though they obviously came right out of the book. The Count's ink is all original. The Count is educated, see? Classically. You got to know which end of the brush the paint goes on, and so the Count's tattoos are his own.

This guy, I decided I didn't even want to ask him any questions because any mother-fucker with a bleeding heart on his chest stuck with a dagger isn't going to know shit. I just punch him in the throat so he can't scream and twist his head around and around until the vertebrae grind together and his neck looks like chewed toffee. He was riding heard over a bunch of meat-sacks. They're a pretty worn out crew. Street kids mostly, like you get manhandling out-of-tune guitars all over Portland. The Count does not carry spare change, and does not like being asked for it. There's not much left of these kids after the drugs and rough living. They are just nature's way of keeping blood warm, but somebody will be coming, looking for a bite when the music starts whipping the Beast a bit, and then...

"Hey kids, is this were I'm supposed to leave the meth?"

Their heads crank around farther than their dear-departed tattooed minder's. One of them gets a hungry look - a parody of caggy.

"Yeah, that's right. We're supposed to hold it."

DIARY ENTRY: Felix

When an amorous couple starts to vigorously rut against the car, I try to imagine what they look like based on their gasps and grunts, and choices in fuck-talk. I get the impression that the male actor in the farce wants the female actor to "take it" and further, to "take it all". She - apparently named 'Bitch' - limits herself to a series of barking cries of "yes" and one angry admonishment to the effect of "You'd better not cum yet, asshole!" Bitch and Asshole may be a couple of naughty scamps, but thus far, they are the only human contact I've had in more than a bit.

They must be mortal. Even an ogre would have a better patois when it comes to the hoary old tradition of furtive sex against automobiles.

I kick against the trunk door, and yell (in my special voice) "Hey, let me out of here! The fuckers tossed me in here with all the fucking coke! I'm getting the shit all over me!"

Bless them, Bitch and Asshole aren't the sharpest knives, but they do cut pretty quickly to the fundamentals of my exclamation. Cocaine. In the trunk of a car isolated enough so a few minutes of rough copulation wouldn't be noticed and interrupted. How good was my judge of human nature?

"Did you say coke?" Bitch asks.

"Yeah! There's hardly any room in here. A joke's a joke, but this is fucked up. Pop the trunk!"

She consults with Asshole for a moment, and I catch "fuck" and "dickless shit" and "if you won't" and "fine, Bitch" and then, the deep thunk of the latch unlatching, and through the crack streams glorious moonlight and more over-amped derivative rockabilly noise. Then, through the wider crack streams Our Hero, the Fiasty Felix Fleeing for Freedom, or possibly, a Fight.

Dracula

The Count does not do drugs. It isn't anything mystical or some fuckall religious thing, but drugs are pretty weak when compared to the good red stuff. Still though, drugs are cash waiting to happen. Pick up a kilo of meth from a hillbilly trailer park lab and haul it a hundred miles down the road, it's worth a few grand. It isn't like being caught with drugs is going to make it any worse for the damned, so might as well cash in.

The Count plays it smart, and farms meth labs here and there, seeding the money to get things going, and then picking up product when passing close by. Running prescription pills is another good one, because they're small, but a steady supply isn't as easy to establish as meth. Right then though, I had half a K of unstepped crank and a plastic bag full of pills from a cancer vic's hospice room. The same redneck I got the crank from had the pills too, and I took them because what the fuck, right? The Count trusts his intuition.

What the kids started smoking and snorting wasn't what they thought it was. The amphetamine would keep them awake while the psychotropic and antidepressants and thorazine I'd spiked the meth with worked its alchemy on their brains, and when their owners came for some party food, they'd get a dose of it too. Honor isn't about fighting the way somebody else tells you that you have to fight - it's taking a fight seriously enough to do it fucking right.

The first one to come to the kids is a skinny female, like a bunch of sticks crammed into a dirty

Credence Clearwater shirt. Looking at her, she is clearly wearing it without irony. She drags off one of the space-brained kids, and finishes him off rough and ugly in the shadows. She hardly bothers to drag him out of earshot either, but the others are beyond caring - their nerves are bubbling, but their brains have boiled dry. I give her a few minutes to enjoy the rush, and then for the micky to hit, and then I stand up and take her when she stumbles back towards the kids... mouthing words like a guttering candle, never quite taking light.

"Guh... whut... tha... fuck?"

The Count doesn't believe in hitting women. He doesn't believe in chairs either. He just knows about both of them. They're both facts. She is tougher than she looks. At least the Blood runs that true in her, and so finally I can unload everything I've been saving up since Felix wormed his way back into my life. There's something so satisfying about being able to deliver a proper beat-down. When she quits squirming, I take off her head with my bowie knife, and I have to lean my weight on the wide blade to force it down through her neck - even though it is so skinny I could wrap my hand all the way around it. Her head comes off with a crunch of cartilage, and starts to corrupt and rot almost immediately. I hate getting splashed with juice from a rotter. It stains leather, and the smell... you have to burn your clothes, and the Count takes pride in his appearance. I step back until she's done bubbling and bursting, and poke around in her soggy clothes, and then spot her mobile phone where it has fallen.

DIARY ENTRY: Felix

The Felix is a man who usually likes to take his time. (Did I get the tone right?)

[Fuck you, Felix.]

But unfortunately, there just wasn't much time available for the taking. I come out of the trunk, unfolding, da-dink-da-dink-da-dink-dink-dink-da-dink-da-dink-da-dink-dink. Pop goes the weasel. I punch Bitch first, as hard as I can, squeezing the last trickle of strength from the Blood, and under my lumpy pink baby-fist, I feel her nose crunch, and she goes down sobbing. I catch Asshole coming around the car, and tackle him gracelessly - and smash his face three times with my forehead until I can hardly see him for the starbursts and creeping black, and then...

There's something to bottom feeding. When I occasionally hunted with long-dead Mirabel, she'd pick some bum or junkie and we'd share him, and the sick stinking wrongness of it made it right. I'd touch her, and feel my skin crawl being close to her. She disgusted me, and somehow, that made it better. I learned to grin at haunt-fucker too.

Devouring Asshole is like that. He reeks of sickness and the metabolic breakdown products of drugs and drink. His blood is foul with it, and I think I would have vomited it back up if I weren't gorging as much as I could, washing bad blood down with worse. But tainted as it was, there was strength in it, and my impressive collection of wounds closes, my little slug fingers swell like a clown's long balloons. When Asshole is crapped out, I stalk down Bitch to where she'd crawled into the trees. Her, I take a little extra time with. I wouldn't kick a pretty boy out of bed, but at heart I'm a lady's man, and a lady's man simply must know how to treat a lady. Women have an intuition about these things, and can pick up immediately when you're not wholly in the moment with them, and for the lovely Bitch, I'm really there for her. When we part, I'm flush and rosy-cheeked, heart beating to life in my chest. At least I can meet the Count standing up and smiling.



Dracula

The Count is not naturally patient, but when he has to be, he can sit and watch and wait, to-night though, especially after the skinny kill, it is almost impossible to just wait by the poisoned well for another primitive to come and sip. My knuckles itch. I want to be off the leash, but that's not the way of my line. If you go into battle, you do it riding the beast, not the other way around. But fuck this waiting.

I stand up.

From the treed dark between the drugged out circle of kids and the stage with the rough amps, somebody says, "Who the fuck are you?"

And so I let him see me.

He flinches back so hard, he careens off a tree and goes down, scrambling backwards. That's what happens when it's the beast on your back and not the other way around. When it sees a bigger monster, it crawls and flees, and drags you along with it. Three long lopes, and I'm standing over him, and I stamp my foot down on his chest and tell him, "Stay!"

He's got a pair, because he comes up with a blade and tries to stab the Count in the calf, but only manages to gouge a nineteen-hundred dollar custom made boot. When you're built like the Count, good boots don't come cheap. I catch his wrist, and twist till his bones break. He isn't as dedicated a student as his twiggy sister. He

tries to scream around my other hand, but just ends up spraying my fist with a mist of blood from his nose, hemorrhaging a little in his panic. I don't let go of his broken wrist. When you're holding onto a man's broken wrist, then you run the show.

"Do you see the metal in my ears? In my lip? How about the bar at the bridge of my nose? You know who gets to pierce the Count's skin? Hint - It's not you."

I punch him in the throat so he can't scream, and unload.

DIARY ENTRY: Felix

Between Bitch and Asshole, I dress myself to suit the crowd. I fret about how dirty I am, but when I start mingling with the masses in the floodlights, and start moving along with them to the ugly noise coming off the flat-bed trailer serving as an impromptu stage, I know if anything my ride in the trunk with my own rotting hands and then Felix's follow-up feeding frenzy left me, if anything, too clean to blend easily. Bikers, hitchhikers, street kids. The motorcycles say "Rally," but there are too many who'd never stay astride a hog mingling in the crowd.

I know I'm walking enemy ground here - this meeting has to mean more than one pack coming together, their cattle and thralls mingling and exchanging rumor and gossip and body fluids. My erstwhile captors are bound to be lurking about, waiting for whoever would pay them for my lovely corpse so I might be some wealthy neonate's diablerie cherry-pop, or a jaded elder's big gulp. I once saw one of the Blutmaschinen overlooked in Russia's rapine revenge in Berlin. The design was so beautiful, so German. Within it, locked into immobility by shining stainless steel, limbs severed, mouth wedged open with a steel feeding tube, arteries tapped for easy bleeding, one of us could be held indefinitely in a state of utter claustrophobic horror. Force-fed the blood of beasts or men (not all that Jewish and Gypsy blood was wantonly spilled down sluices and drains), and sealed behind a featureless steel door so like an industrial refrigerator save for the spouts along the front. Again, so German - they resembled nothing so much as beer taps. But I don't imagine the buyer lined up for me would have such a sophisticated and antiseptic barbarity. It would be collars and cages under the bench in some slack-jawed savage trucker's big-rig, and I'd have to listen to Waylon Jennings for endless miles and miles between brutal feedings until I'd even deign to pray to the spear-chucker for the sweet, sweet embrace of German steel.

No, I think, that won't do at all.

I'm flush with power now, humming with it. I've killed two already, and gorged up good. I have the speed in my limbs now, if I want it, but if I just light out and run, they'll be following me with their hounds and herd, their slaves. No running just yet, I think - now, amongst this crowd of humans and hormones, this is my territory. Here, I'm the apex predator.

Out amongst the humans, I spy with my little eye, something beginning with "H".

Dracula

The Count does not go in for this twangy country rock. The Count prefers heavy and industrial sounds with names ending in "core". Music for stomping ass to. The band is not making the Count feel at all forgiving. In fact, after the glow of freshly done murder fades, I feel like glowering at this whole fucking mess. The Rally is loud and out-of-control. The sort of thing the locals won't like. Cops. Highway Patrol. My respect for the crew who took Felix declines with every power-chord and every whiff of ganja smoke. Worse, finding where Felix is locked down will be hard in this mess.

That's when the Count smells blood and violence - the smell of voided bowels and adrenaline-laced sweat evaporating. Grand-sire's battlefield memories play out for me in a strobe of sense-images. On TV, they never show you how messy a real killing is. Sometimes, I think it'd be better if I only kill people who're just coming out of the toilet at the time.

I find the car, and read the signs - two dead, stuffed in the trunk, dead and dry.

There's a gas can sitting out by it, and I get the impression it's a reminder like a string tied around a finger. "Don't forget to torch this car, and burn these bodies." A quick sniff in the trunk tells me what I'd been hoping to find out - my man Felix had slipped his own bonds, and was at liberty, flush with red, and if I know the little motherfucker, dealing out some payback with that half-smile he reserves for people he's about to kill. It's like he's saying, "Well, how weird is this? You... me... this scalpel...whatever shall we do to pass the time?"

The Count remembers why he likes Felix. Felix makes the Count smile.

DIARY ENTRY: Felix

The crowd isn't all food or slaves. When I start mingling, it all makes sense. Recruitment drive. Free show. Drugs. Beer. The fliers make it seem like the place to be if you were horny and hurting and looking to score some junk and get your junk sucked. I shake my head. The romance of the wandering beast, eh? They make out like they are free, but look at this - scamming bikers and run-aways into hopping into the chuck-wagon. I always imagined them besieging lonely farmhouses or picking up hitchhikers. If they were going to these lengths, why not just settle down? Live in a city with some nightlife and a big park for when the call of the wild got too strong. I was disappointed. Running with the Count clearly raised my expectations for his cousins.

Gift, horse, mouth. I observe and judge, watched where Hood's eyes wander, and pick out one little pixie of a girl, tiny and new to this whole scene. Just his type. She is so responsive when I start playing with her, I almost abandoned my plan and take her somewhere secluded, but shake off the urges and nod to the big clenched fist of a man.

"Seriously, he's shy, but my mate over there is over the moon for you."

I don't know why, but I slip into my Colin Ferrell impersonation, and Irish it up. Funny thing about the Irish accent - Americans never expect people with a funny curvy brogue to do something horrible and cruel to them.

"Really? Like, he's... wow. And he's shy? That's so cute."

Cute? I'll admit, seduction-by-proxy is a little tricky, but I think I was pushing harder than just "Cute" for Hood.

"Oh, gorgeous girl, you've no idea how cute he can be. You go over and say hello, why don't you?"

And she does. I wind her up as tight as she'll go, and even the road-weary lads catch the vibe coming off her as she goes past. I hear "bitch in heat" float in her wake by some clever boy destined never to find a sober girl willing to fuck him. I watch, feigning sips at the plastic cup of piss-warm domestic beer I'd been handed. The big guy is an open book. Surprise, lust, hunger... my little pixie doesn't notice that last one, or confuses it with the middle one. When she gestures back my way, mouthing "Your Friend," I'm already gone into the crowd, hiding like a tiger inside an animated conversation held by a circle of guys loudly arguing over who would win in a fight - Chuck Norris or Jack Bower.

The pixie leads Hood almost passively away from the light, her little hand in his big one. I abandon my conversational concealment with, "Norris is a real guy and he'd kill Bower because Bower never stops to take a piss. Chuck would kick him, and burst his distended bladder. I'm out."

Out into the trees, away from the light and noise, she led the big man, with me creep-creeping along behind.

Dracula

The Count wishes he'd had a little more patience, and gotten names and descriptions for the whole pack from the last guy. It would save the Count all this wandering around and letting his beast sniff the air. When it senses another kindred spirit, its hackles go up and, so there I go looking. The Count's beast is well-trained though, and they don't get a whiff of anything unless the Count wills it.

The next one is giving seven kinds of shit to a group of ghouls around a big pickup with a camper cover on the back. The thing is stuffed with crap, and the guy is threatening to gouge

out the thralls' eyes if they take them off the truck for a minute. He's right on the edge of losing it, and ripping into the slaves, and they know it. They won't meet his eyes, and they're hunched back against the truck.

The Count recognizes that sometimes, brutality is the best policy, but he's sophisticated enough to know it isn't always the best policy. Too many gutter-Gangrel never get that, and take things to the beast and let it run the show too soon. And seriously, it's hard to blame them because letting the beast loose feels fucking incredible. With humans, you can bet a fucking dollar that if something gets their dicks hard, they're going to keep doing it. With us, it's pretty much the same way without the involuntary erection - and for those with the savage blood, running mad is like getting full-body wood, and then ejaculating violence. Memories and images of ancient times - in them I see men charging, naked but for the blue woad smeared all over their bodies. In their eyes... pure perfect ferocity and commitment - the death of consciousness. Yes, the Count knows all about wanting to surrender will and thought.

I wait until the very angry man leaves, and so do the ghouls. I wait a little longer. So do they. Then they start breathing again. The moment comes, like I know it has to, and they exchange looks, smile a little, roll their eyes. Without actually speaking the words, they're saying "What

an asshole." One lights a cigarette, the Count drives his face against the side of the truck, and mule-kicks the guy next to him, leaving the print of a nineteen-hundred dollar (and now scratched) boot in his chest. The others gape, and then start yelling and trying to draw.

The Count is already moving again.

I leave my big knife in the closest guy's chest. No art of fancy moves - just a hard, fast, downward stab like an old Italian murder stroke. The next one gets his pistol out, but forgets to rack the slide, and he's clicking on an empty chamber while the Count grabs him by the face and uses the back of his head to smash the ugly mug of the guy behind him.

The thing about keeping dangerous animals is this - when they act as they've been trained, it's important to reward them with a special treat,

My Beast needed a proper release. At least three of them weren't dead or dying, just very badly hurt.

When I'm done with them, even dental records won't work because all their teeth and jawbones were mixed up together or missing. When the murder is done, there is this weird sound, like a struck crystal bell from the back of the truck, but muffled, and it just keeps going and going instead of fading.

DIARY ENTRY: Felix

Hood is remarkably restrained for an ogre, even when the pixie turns loose all the sexual energy I'd built up in her, but of course he succumbs eventually. Who among us wouldn't? The way she tilts her head, her panting breath? I wait till he's lost it, and has lifted her, crushing the girl to his chest and biting down.

That's when I reach him at a full-run and hit him in the back of the head with the tire-iron I'd brought from the trunk. It has to be the worst bite-us interruptus the big idiot has ever experienced. I'm stronger and faster - with the blood in me running true, I know I have that edge even if he were twice my size. Gangrel are tough, and I am thorough. I force the mingling vitae of Bitch and Asshole to move my limbs with unnatural speed and force, and land two more blows to his head with the steel rod before he topples forward on top of Pixie, whose screams are muffled by his bulk. Presented with this opportunity, I decide to make the most of it, and so keep pounding on his skull until I've pulped it quite nicely, and covered myself in spray.

I pause, to consider my work. Not quite dead. I roll him off of the girl, and check her as well. Also, not quite dead. What to do, what to do?

I rifle his pockets, coming up with a big snub-nosed revolver (silver bullets for the werewolves lurking between cities? Alas no, just hollow-points), a phone, and a roll of cash made of mostly hundreds. I'm clearly in the wrong business. There isn't much of Bitch and Asshole left in me, so for expediency's sake, I finish what Hood has begun, whispering to her before the light goes out of her eyes completely, "You done this lad some good, you did."

Then refreshed, I beat Hood's skull some more until I've so wrecked it that his corpse releases its spirit like a deep rumbling fart, and he starts to come apart.

Dracula

The Count wears a lot of leather because shiny leather on a very big man makes a certain statement, and that statement is "I will fucking kill you if you look at me funny". The Count finds getting people to acknowledge this truth early on prevents annoyances later. The other advantage to leather is that it doesn't show blood and it wipes clean. Before mingling with the rest of the crowd, I figure it might be a good idea to take advantage of this last fact.

I pop the camper top and drop the tailgate, and rummage around a little in the truck. It's clearly their baggage car, packed with junk. A couple of guitars. Some boxes. Books. Underwear. I crack a suitcase full of band tee-shirts, and use handfuls of them to wipe down the duds. They're bands nobody ever heard of. Likely a couple of them joined the crew's little caravan and ended up feeding the corpse with blood rather than the soul with music. Now, nobody will ever hear of them. Dead they may be, but their shirts do the trick. A huge man in leather stands out. A huge man in leather covered in blood stands out too much.

I consider torching the truck, just to get them running this way, but the weird sound changes with this thought, getting lower - almost menacing, like a cat's low growl before the hissing and clawing start.

Then, the Count hears the shooting. (I'd suggest deleting this "start")

DIARY ENTRY: Felix

I do not like being shot. Especially when I'm not expecting it. Being shot robs you of dignity. Noise, a feeling like being punched or hit with a hammer, then the pain. Inevitably, you spasm and thrash, jerking this way and that looking for the shooter. At least he isn't difficult to spot, running towards me and screaming like that. Butch looks positively miffed.

The gun is falling from his hand, as his fingers twist and warp, becoming unsuited for sophisticated tool use. So like a savage: to trade the evolutionary advantage of the opposable thumb and the whole world of tools for two fistfuls of hooked claws so clumsy you couldn't twist a doorknob without fumbling. But he is beyond thinking about this exchange - he is furious, beyond control. Seething. He comes at me in a low loping run, showing me his teeth and reaching. Run? Fight? I don't relish those claws opening me up. A wolf kills clean, but a feral dog doesn't have the instincts for a wolf's efficiency, and there was more of the dog than the wolf about this one. If I ran, he'd be behind me, and could I be sure I was faster than he was?

I raise Hood's big pistol to fire, and then...

Something plows into Butch, something black, something huge. I see a flash, and Butch goes up, a spur of blooded steel showing beside his spine, and there is the Count lifting him by the big knife he'd plunged through Butch's body. Somehow, I'd forgotten just how big Count Dracula is.

I take it in, count at least five new piercings while he grabs Butch by the throat, and then works the knife back and forth in his belly until his guts fall out in black ropy coils. Butch tries to claw at the Count, but ends up four fingers short, as he meets the Count's knife instead of his flesh. He tries the other hand, and Dracula just impales it on the blade, piercing between the bones in his palm, and then he twists the blade, cracking a three-inch wide gap in the middle of Butch's hand.

I'm not ashamed to admit, I wince a little in sympathy. Mostly though, I smile wider and wider when Butch starts to scream like an animal. Me, I like the people I kill to know what's coming. Killing a frenzied foe isn't Felix's way, rather fine Felix finds fun in focused victims who know just how bad it's getting. The Count, oh what a thing he is to see in action! Not like these guttersnipe jackals. He sits astride his beast, guiding its savagery. He isn't a slave to it, no not at all. It's his animal, his monster. With a brutal upward thrust, he drives eleven inches of steel through Butch's scrotum into his abdomen, twists it a few times, and then withdraws, dropping the neutered man to the ground where he falls atop his intestines, and curls around his wounds and mews. The Count turns to me, and says...

Dracula

I snatch up my blade from one of the corpses, and I'm running, the Beast running before me like a hunting hound, clearing the way. People are jumping aside without ever having looked at me - they just know to get the fuck out of the way, NOW! and so they get. The crowd parts, and there is Felix.

He looks shorter than I remember, but he has that smile. He is covered in a mist of blood, pinking his skin, with droplets running down his cheeks, and in his hand a bloody tire-iron, and in his chest, two bullet wounds.

The guy who shot him is dropping the pistol and... uh oh. He favors a different art of the blood than his stick-bug cohort - his hands flutter, folded, are the shape of fox claws, of bat claws, eagle's talons, cat claws, rat claws, and finally some hybrid of them all - curled and cruel. Felix's smile wavers a tick, and then I hit his shooter running full-out and stab him through with the bowie knife, and then lift him so he can't get any leverage off the ground (and to make it hurt like fuck, of course). The little shit tries to claw me, so I whip out the blade, cut off four of his fingers, and then impale his other hand and split it open with a twist. Then to give him something to think about, I cut his belly open, and shake him till his guts fall out in a black rotting mess. I drop him onto his innards, and while he tries to paw them back into his ruptured belly, turn to yell at Felix...



DIARY ENTRY: Felix

"You grinning short-ass tomcat motherfucker!"

The gunfire is causing some activity, in the same way kicking a big anthill causes activity. Most people are running like hell away from us, but a few are running towards us. The music abruptly cuts out - I can see the band legging it off the stage. Somebody is screaming and sobbing - Butch, I realize.

"You want to quit coming on to me, and do something about that noisy meat?"

He shows me those teeth of his - he's gotten some more of them filed to points! The man is a purloined letter, isn't he? Taller than a house, leather-clad, pierced, tattooed and now with permanent filed fangs like a Malay cannibal, but looking at him nobody would ever think he actually was a vampire, would they? They'd say, "Who's the freak who looks like a vampire?" Finding out he was the real McCoy would almost be a letdown, like realizing the magic trick was real magic, and there was nothing to figure out. The rabbit was really gone. The Count lived in a weird cave of human incredulity.

The Count kicks Butch in the face so hard, his neck brakes. He is still mewling, but much quieter now.

Dracula glances back the way he'd come, and says "These fuckers have friends, and they're on their way. My bike's back this way - we'll get the fuck out of here."

"I'm not riding on the back of your bike like a bitch!"

"Well, what the hell are you going to do then? I've been wading through other people's teeth looking for you, and it's getting ankle deep."

"I ride off into the night on the back of Count Dracula's fucking bike, and people will say we're married."

"Then find some transport quick, and meet me over by your old ride."

"Do me a favor. These dicks took what I was carrying. Something for my fake-father. A box about yay-big, and delicate. I think they had it in a truck."

He doesn't answer. He just gives me that jagged smile again.

Dracula

Like playing one of those games, where you roll the dice and have to go back one square, I head to the truck where I'd smeared those ghouls, and rummaging around in the back I find the box Felix asked after. Kind of bulky - a wooden shipping crate about the size of a dresser. Easy enough for the Count to heft, but there's that sound again: the bell tone going on and on. Coming from the box.

I don't think Felix understands the mystical shit. That little charm I taught him, it pleased him far too much for somebody with any esoteric mojo. Whatever this thing was, it was hot and cold, a sound I heard with my teeth, the smell of shaking, the chatter of fingerbones made a long low tone - it was madness, but there was something else in that tone that reminded me of the demon-monks and their libraries of blood, memory distilled into substance. Memory as a sound? A tone? Your ears drink it in, and you relive the encoded thoughts and dreams and experiences?

Whatever it was, it was certainly hot - anything that sets the Count's teeth on edge like this is bad enough news that everyone wants to hear it.

DIARY ENTRY: Felix

In the panicking crowd, dodging the heavies with ugly looks and uglier guns is simple. Moving with crowds is what we do best, and I let it carry me a bit as I search for escape. I need something I can haul the magic daddy-box on, but the thought of a car makes me queasy. A motorcycle? Or... I move closer to a line of bikes, and yeah - there!

Sunset yellow, buttery - I thought it was a Vespa at first, but saw the Chetak emblem on the front, and on the back a big luggage rack with tie-downs hanging from it. I think of the Count's huge custom cycle, all matte stainless steel and pipes that were louder than hell, or whisper quiet based on how he gave it throttle. I think of the expression on his face, and that sells it.

I wait a few minutes, and a guy comes out of the crowd, pulling at his keys, and when he sees me oogling his scooter, he starts to say something, so I just hit him with my charm and then in the gut with my foot, and take the keys. The little Indian bike starts up, chortling softly, and I have to fight down the flashbacks - how long has it been since I've ridden one of these things? I goose the throttle, and twist into first, hopping off the center-stand and away, and the years mean nothing - the night is the same night, and the wind is the same wind. For some reason though, I can't remember why I got rid of my old scooter.

Dracula

The Count is rarely speechless.

"Felix, what the fuck are you riding?"

He grins at me - he even has fucking goggles on under his shell helmet.

"I haven't ridden one of these in decades!"

"If it were anybody but you. I'd be kicking their ass right now on general principle. How the hell are you going to carry the magic box on that thing?"

He hops off the ridiculous machine, and comes over, "Help me get the lid off this box."

With my knife between the wooden lid and the box, prying it free is short work. Inside, wads of paper around a quilt-wrapped... something.

Felix carefully pulls the package out - it is only a quarter or less the size of the box. When he pulls it, the sound gets louder, but he doesn't seem to notice anything.

"I'm going to strap the fucking thing to the back of my scooter, and fuck anybody who says different. This thing has gotten me nothing but shit, so to hell with it if it gets broken."

I'm startled - that's about the most I've heard Felix swear in one sentence in the whole time I've known him. He's usually more creative.

I shrug. "How fast will that thing go?"

He thinks about it. "With the extra weight, it'll top at sixty."

Alright, not so bad.

"That's if I have the wind behind me. Fifty at least. Forty-five, minimum."

The Count is not pleased.

"Come on, I can get eighty miles to the gallon. If you won't think of the planet, somebody has to. Plus, check us out - two bad-ass dudes astride their iron horses, tearing up the American heartland. On the next excit-

ing episode of... Felix and The Count..."

"Fine, little man, but we got to jet. Hell's breaking loose, and the law is on the way." I show him the police band scanner I keep on my bike. "I know a place close to here. Family owes me. We can stash your magic box there for awhile. I've extended them my protection as Count Dracula, so nobody fucks with them without fucking with me. It'll be safe while we figure out what we're doing next."

DIARY ENTRY: Felix

I can't even begin to remember how we ended up at the old Victorian. The Count never stayed more than a mile on one stretch of road, and I know we double-backed and covered the same ground more than once. There was nobody behind us, so I don't know what he was doing, but a couple of hours before dawn, we pull up in front of this old house that looks like it's falling to shit. Needs paint. He tells me to wait, and carries the package up to the entrance. The door opens, he sets my box down inside, the door closes and he walks back to his bike.

We crank up, and pull out, turning...

Dracula

Felix is running his mouth now the way he does when he's surprised to be alive, but all I can hear is that damned ringing tone, fading fading, we turn back onto the road, and...



A DREAM! THE CHANGE

If I could throw up, I would. I'm thinking about trying. About sticking a finger or a spoon or my whole goddamn fist down my throat and just belching up any blood that's been soaking into my body over the last couple nights. I feel ill. In so many ways.

All because of this dream! This stupid dream.

Listen, I don't know who you are, I don't know when you're going to read this if ever, but I'll ask you to look back to a time when you were human. You ever have one of those dreams that was wrong on some level but you enjoyed it anyway?

Maybe you had a girlfriend or a wife, and in a dream you were kissing somebody else, and you knew that it was wrong but it thrilled you anyway? Or maybe you were going crazy fucking some repulsive bitch or some forbidden woman (yeah, I know, I'm still assuming you're a guy, though after all I've seen I might as well believe you a woman since we can be just as cruel but in a whole different flavor), and you knew it was awful and inappropriate but that just made it all the hotter?

This dream was like that. I was her.

I could feel the dragon and snake tats squirming around my thighs.

I walked through a... I dunno, a hotel lobby. Everyone was dead. I had killed them.

I licked blood from my fingers.

A dead man in a nice suit lay splayed across a black leather chair, his briefcase open in his lap. I tossed the briefcase aside. I lifted his head to make him look at me (which made a sound, a squish, because his throat had been torn open and here I was shoving the dead wet flesh back together), then I opened his fly and I pulled it out and I fucked the unmerciful shit out of him. And somewhere I heard animals. Birds cawing. Coyotes howling. Flies buzzing.

Then, movement. Someone, one of us, behind me.

He had a fire ax. And a serpent's tongue, flicking.

I didn't even dismount. I just reached back. I felt claws sink into skin. The ax spun over my shoulder and rattled against the marble floor somewhere. I tore out a heart. I ate it. And I kept fucking the dead man.

And the dragon or snake on my thigh tightened to the point I thought my kneecap was going to come off.

I felt myself hiding inside this... woman, shrinking, recoiling, crying.

But I also felt powerful, wild, perfect.

Did I mention I want to throw up? I want to throw up. I'm going to go throw up.

Here, she seems to gain some focus.

Certainly ironic. That she would find a level of clarity as she so plainly falls apart. I can't say I understand what's happening to her. We've all felt the madness within tugging at us, but here it seems a truly dynamic thing, a thing within her more alive than any of us.

Like a fire, it threatens to consume her. And as we've seen, it does just that, in the end.

It burns fast with her, too. Another odd irony. She's so young. Rarely have I seen a neonate go wild like this.

So it goes.

- C. Hardaiken

HE WHO MAKES A BEAST OF
HIMSELF GETS RID OF THE
PAIN OF BEING A MAN.
-HUNTER S. THOMPSON

KATRINA

Maybe you know about Internet memes. Maybe you don't. But the idea is, some things kind of float around the Net, right? Chain letters. Urban legends. Scams, charity, funny pictures, awful video clips. It's a virus of information.

This is part of that virus, and it relates to what you're looking for, I guess.

It's a photocopy of what is apparently a genuine letter or part of someone's diary. Didn't come on the Net, of course, but it's something that seems to end up circulating into the hands of vampires. Hopefully it hasn't gotten into the hands of humans, but then again, what do they know if it does? Just some dumb piece of fiction, they'd assume. That's arguably what's useful to our kind, I think, about the memes that go around - we've seen so many of them that we're used to distrusting information, we admit that it "could be" real with a wink and a nod and an elbow nudge, but in reality people are skeptical, cynical assholes.

Anyway. I've heard two names associated with this bit, but like with memes on the Net this could be total bullshit fabrication! Riker Klipsch and Horton Waldrop. Do either of these Gangrel even exist? I've found no evidence that says they do. Then again, whoever this guy is, it seems clear that he existed alone in his own little world, so... maybe it doesn't even matter. Maybe "truth" is something altogether different than fact and that the honesty of his sentiment is what's important, not the veracity of this information.

SAPPING THE SAVAGE GARDEN

My mouth still tastes of lake water.

The lovers broke. The water came in. The rain.

The monster Katrina took everything from me. (

And now what am I? Now I'm like you. Now I

OLD DESIRE IN CIVILIZATION CITY

The Desire Projects in the Ninth Ward were dozens, near to a hundred buildings of humans clawing for a spot at the bottom of the barrel. A nest of rats. A puddle of larvae squirming. It disgusted me the way they lived. And some of the Damned of the city used that. A cabal of Daevas greased their throats and fattened their guts on the blood of those who lived in the Desire Projects. They controlled it. They controlled the crime. The maffiance. They put guns in hands. They put drugs in baby's mouths. They laughed and spit, disease on their lips. Carrier feeders, those demons. Maggots chewing on a low belly.

I was no such thing. I watched this at a distance, curious and repulsed. I am a creature of finer things. Just because I am a Savage does not mean I fail to enjoy the smell of cherry smoke or the feel of a nice suit cut to fit. I was not dragged into my Requiem in this city, but I have come to it and I love it. Its elegant squalor speaks to me. The decadence is beautiful, the way rust is beautiful, the way a spider with long legs gripping a captive fly is beautiful. But not all of the city is - was - like that. Too much of it had lost its elegance and taken only the squalor. Too many bottom-feeders, both human and inhuman. Too many mouths willing to taste dirt in their blood, too many greedy hands satisfied with gripping a greasy penny or sucking the juice from a lake rat.

When the time came that they tore down the Desire Projects, I was delighted. Tear it free, I thought. Let the entropy be beautiful.

Quick Note -

As much as I'd like to include the original, this crap is unreadable. I went ahead and transcribed it for you on the following pages.

You can thank me later.

- C. Hardaiken

Salting the Savage Garden

My mouth still tastes of lake water.

The levees broke. The water came in. The rain poured down. The floodwaters rose and swallowed it all.

The monster Katrina took everything from me. Everything I've worked so hard to build.

And now what am I? Now I'm like you. Now I'm nothing.

Old Desire in Cut Throat City

The Desire Projects in the Ninth Ward were deplorable. Housing projects, been here since the late 1940s, near to a hundred buildings of humans clawing for a spot at the bottom of the barrel. A nest of rats. A puddle of larvae squirming. It disgusted me the way they lived. And some of the Damned of the city used that. A cabal of Daeva greased their throats and fattened their guts on the blood of those who lived in the Desire Projects. They controlled it. They controlled the crime. The malfeasance. They put guns in hands. They put drugs in baby's mouths. They laughed and spit, disease on their lips.

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When the time came that they tore down the Desire Projects, I was delighted. Tear it free, I thought. Let the entropy be beautiful.

They kept some of the buildings as "historical."

I liked that.

So I took the top floor of one of these disused buildings and I made it my chamber.

A bed with fine silks.

A gilded bird cage for whatever bird I chose to call and keep. (awkward)

A jukebox (1951 Seeburg with teardrop speakers at the base) with the music I like.

And my garden.

Foxglove whose pink petals were shot through with veins of red.

Roses of pale yellow and black-red, with thorns as fat as the thumb and sharp as tacks.

Bruise bugleweed that shudders when you mist it with blood! A weeping maple whose drooping branches call to mind the hair of a drowned girl, and whose leaves are tipped with a faint white milk that dizzies the mind and almost stirs the heart to beat! Creeping vines, that grow with a faint tightening sound if you listen deeply and dearly at midnight, who sprout strange flowers with twisting stamen and dusted white pollen.

My sweet garden.

Then she came.

The hurricane. Hungry Katrina.

She took who I was and made me who I am.

Swept Away

My city, my beautiful city, drowned.

Oh, it could still be beautiful. In some ways it is. But what happened to the people and to the Damned is not something we can soon recover from. Civility and society were torn away. It reduced us to our barest elements and what we found there was stinking rot. What we found when we kicked over the log was awfulness.

The rains came. The suffering began. Death struck, and bodies bloated. We grew hungry and desperate. We were forced from our havens into the night and the rains. We walked upright beneath rising floods, the polluted water from the lake stinging the eyes, some of us still thinking about that human urge to cough, to choke, to vomit.

The things I saw.

age garden, Johnny Ray, Bobby Blue Bland, Big Momma Thornton, Frankie Laine's "Rose, Rose, I Love You" 9th

The once mighty reduced to thieving, pilfering. They did not seduce. They stole. They did not use charms; they used clubs to bludgeon.

Tearing into the neck of a lost rescue worker.

Shattering the kneecap of a looter bringing rotting food to his family.

Pretending to be the drowned dead and lying in wait like a crocodile. Floating.

This is not what we are. We are not common predators. We shan't be carrion birds.

But that's what we were reduced to.

That's what we became.

The Bloom Is Off the Vine

My garden drowned. The rains came in and the wind blasted the windows and it killed everything I had striven to grow over the last many years. I had fed it with my own blood. Pruned and twisted vines with my own fingers. I sang to the savage garden, Johnny Ray, Bobby Blue Bland, Big Momma Thornton, Frankie Laine's "Rose, Rose, I Love You." Then I had to leave to find food and when I came back – weeks later, weeks that felt like years in the way I saw things change – it was all dead. My bed was a sodden mess. A beam from the roof had fallen on the jukebox. The carcass of a cockatiel lay its moldy skull against the inside of the gilded cage, its black tongue like a dead worm.

And I could not stir my garden to life.

I tried planting anew.

Nothing would take. I gave it all the blood I could manage; I killed many men, forcing their lives through the crucible of my body, that I might feed my garden once more.

But the ground lay fallow.

More weeks went by and I finally left my haven behind. Desire, gone.

Sucking Maw

The hurricane was not an eye as you might think but instead, a mouth. A terrible hungry mouth, a vacuuming vortex. Spiritual and terrible, it came down and it fed from us the way we feed on the world. It drew up out of our kind all graciousness and sophistication and left only monsters behind. Gulping filthy rainwater and blood. Lurking in the shadows, hiding and hissing like feral cats or mongrel curs. Clothes in tatters. Shoes off our feet, the soles stuck with jagged stones and bits of glass and we don't even notice.

I cannot grow my garden because I can no longer grow.

I have been reduced.

Perhaps I should be thankful. Perhaps what I was or what I tried to be was an illusion. A Noble Savage, indeed. Mostly alone but happy in my trappings. Now I am part of the society, the lowest common denominator.

This is what I think happened.

Most of our kind say that the arrival of the hurricane was not our doing. It was, in fact, the doing of man: something about pollution and oil consumption and angering the ocean, stirring her to act. Could be that this is true.

But perhaps it was our sin.

Floods come as a cruel baptism. God sends the Deluge to wash away the iniquity.

This was possibly our baptism, our Deluge. Enough of us monsters gather and we change things. With our rot. With our beautiful entropy. And humans change, too. They become like us. They become monsters, diseased with inelegance.

Like an infection.

Like mold.

Like a corroded beam or a rotting support.

Soon everything we are is eaten away. Worn down. The foundation disintegrates. The bones and muscles putrefy. The center cannot hold. The widening gyre is the whorl of the hurricane, and all that stands is lost and gone and we are nothing, nothing, nothing but the monsters that we did not want to be.

I am now truly Savage.

MIDNIGHT ROADS, 8

Awesome, just super-fantastic-fucking awesome. Like I'm not feeling crazy enough? Like this journey hasn't put its boot through my brain already? I thought I'd maybe get some time alone. I'm out here for the last month or so walking the old roads of Route 66, you know, broken busted American Road, decommissioned some 20 years back to make way for the Mega-Highways. Some bits of the old Mother Road have been forgotten with other parts subsumed and eaten by other roads, like Christians converting old pagan temples. It's been cool. I like all that retro shit: Cadillacs and Soda Jerks and Shattered Asphalt. It's helped me find my center again. And I haven't seen one weird thing in the last month, at least nothing that isn't human (I did see an old burned-up five-and-dime and in the window was about a hundred cracked porcelain dolls staring out of the glassless window, but that wasn't weird-weird, just normal everyday weird). And you know what? It's helped. It's really helped. The dreams have all but stopped. I don't hear voices. The Blood has.. cooled a bit. I've fed. I've walked. I've enjoyed the warm road from a hot day cooling beneath my feet as night marches forward.

Then? Then I find the Hair of the Dog Roadhouse.

It's out there, middle of nowhere. Road all busted up, though you can still drive on it. If you cock your ear just right, you can hear the highway, but the town around it is dead, gutted, a hollow carcass picked by birds.

But this bar, *BAM*, lit up like a neon Christmas tree. Blinking lights. A dozen defunct beer signs buzzing in the night. Some shit-kicker rockabilly mumbling from inside.

I head toward the place. I think maybe I'll chat up some drunk asshole, and he'll think he'll get his Wranglers down and his snake charmed, when really I'm just going to have a sip and leave him under a tree somewhere. It'll be great, I decide.



Fuck that. You know what this place is? A giant bug zapper. Or one of those carnivorous plants, you know, the pitcher plants? Looks like a drink pitcher, and I guess it's all sweet smelling and colorful and suddenly an ant comes dancing along the edge and topples into the nectar pit, which is basically just the plant's digestive system. Slurp. Gone. Food.

I go through the door and it's like a rope tightening around my neck. I feel it. And so do the dozen or so vampires hanging around. I'm like a dog entering another dog's house! it's all hackles raised and an unspoken hungry tension that you can't see but you can damn well feel.

A guy who looks like a mountain topped by a tiny cue-ball head gives me a mean look and runs a surprisingly small hand over his scalp, which is tattooed in a tangle of senseless blue ink.

Some cowgirl at the bar leans back and files a nail, a serpent's tongue flicking over one exposed fang. She winks. It isn't friendly.

Two motherfuckers playing pool each have more metal than face, it's all lugnuts and screws and the one doesn't even have a nose, just a rusted metal plate bolted to his face (he's a Haint, he's gotta be a Haint because even then he was flipping me out).

The rockabilly banged out of some old cobwebby jukebox.

No drinks on tables. No food. Just empty bottles behind the bar.

Cockroaches on the floor, brave and unconcerned.

The tap behind the bar, broken and hanging limp.

A rose. A sham. Like a fake backlot for movie filming.

It's a single moment where I know I'm dead where I stand. Double-dead. Extra-dead. I know they're going to rush me because I see it in their bodies! tendons in the neck pulled tight, a hand curling so hard around a pool cue you can hear the wood cracking, and the cockroaches start to scatter, finally afraid.

Then, pop.

It's like someone cut through the bullshit with a box cutter.

The tension was gone as if it had never existed.

The dudes go back to their pool game. The cowgirl takes her eyes away from me and keeps filing her nails to dagger points. The bald mountain pinhead waves me over.

"Jeremiah invite you?" he asks, kicking out a chair from underneath his table.

I lie. Tell him yeah, yeah, Jeremiah. I sit.

"This is how it goes," he said, his small mouth forming a puckered almost childish smile. "It's a waiting game, but ain't it all? Jeremiah's out there now with his boys, herding folks if he can."

Herding, I ask?

He nods. "Yup-yup. They don't know they're herded, but they're herded. Works different depending on where he is. Maybe he sees headlights coming? So he and the boys pull a chain and out of the weeds rises this new street sign. Tells the folks! Highway, This Way or Gas Station, Over There or whatever. Official signs, though, look real. Either that, or they might close off a main road real quick just for one car; forces 'em to divert down a different road, a road that leads them right here."

Oh.

"Yup. This is the only place alive for miles, so they'll come in. Maybe they want a beer. Maybe they want directions or a phone book or to pick up some trim. Maybe if we're lucky it's a pair of douchebags or maybe even a whole family lost on their vacation to fuckin' Wallyworld or some shit."

A trap. A combination buffet table and trap.

He likes that. He snorts when he laughs. "Buffet table, that's a good one. I'll tell Jeremiah that, he'll like that shit. Yeah. We all get a taste, and then we ditch the bodies in the lime pit out back. This your first time, so you gotta buy in."

Buy in?

"Yeah, do some shit for us. You know. Your part of the work so you get your part of the taste. You probably gotta take the bodies out to the pit, that's what I had to do the first night. Other times maybe you need to pay the power bill or go out with Jeremiah to do the herding. Always somethin' to be done."

I start to like Pinhead, even though I'm kind of sickened by what they do. I feed. But to kill? And not just to kill out of hunger but to run people into your trap like some kind of cattle chute in a slaughterhouse..

But we're laughing, so you forget about these things. Pinhead's telling me about some of the things he's seen. I tell him about some of the things that I've seen.

And then Jeremiah comes through the door.

I know he's one of us instantly! it isn't just the long, greasy black hair, it isn't just the way he carries himself like some Native American wolf spirit. The guy's got an underbite and a nest of fangs almost like tusks are curled up over his top lip.

Pinhead, of course, sells me out.

"Hey, Jer. Alice here found the place all right."

I'm hoping Jerry's cool. I'm hoping he's happy to have met another Savage Sister, but I know I'm just another mouth to feed, and a lying mouth at that.

The way he carried himself, I figured Jeremiah was smooth, smart, measured somehow. Not true. He's a brute, a dumb brute. He snarled, grabbed a bottle off a nearby empty table and busted it up. He lunges at me. I see he's got more licks behind him: his gang, his boys, and I know I can't go out that way.

I don't know how to kick anybody's ass but I took self-defense, and I know how not to get stabbed, grabbed or shot. I bat the bottle out of his hand. It breaks. I'm under the table and he's flipping it over.

Pinhead's too slow to know what's going on, so at one point he mistakenly helps me get up on another table, and Jerry doesn't like that. He backhands the teeth out of Pinhead's pinhead.

The two dudes at the back are coming at me and I dance away from them. The cowgirl doesn't give a rat's ass. She just smiles as Jerry's bolting for me, a half-circle of his boys hemming me in. You know what the bitch says to me?

"Tell his fist that Mustang Sally says hello, sug."

Sug?

I catch a fist to the back of the head but I'm recovering quick, and I roll over the bar as someone's knee slams into it (right where I had been laying a moment before).

And then I start pitching bottles. The whole back wall is empty bottles, part of the fake bar veneer, and I whirl those motherfuckers like Chinese stars. They start breaking on heads. It's not enough to stop these guys permanently, but it's at least like a hose spray in the face! just the right thing to keep them from coming at me.

When I have my chance, I take it!

I go up over the bar and bolt for the door, because now all the assholes are in there with me and not outside.

In the lot, two black Caddies, headlights painted black, windows painted black, hubcaps painted black. Matte. It's how they herd, I think, but I hear footsteps pounding on the gravel.

I start to run.

Then I see the headlights.

Time to do a good duty, I think. Because the headlights that are coming up were herded here.

And I see it! it's a man and a woman, a young couple in a Volkswagen Jetta, and I see their faces frozen as I hurtle toward them, the bar just vomiting a stream of assholes coming after me.

The poor driver doesn't know what hit him! I throw open his door, and I don't pull him out (that'd be cruel and not at all a good deed for the day, er, the night), I just slide in on his lap. The wife or girlfriend or Preppie hooker protests, but she doesn't for long because she sees the tide of bikers and deviants about to slam into the hood of their car.

I elbow the driver in the face to keep him quiet.

Then I grab the wheel.

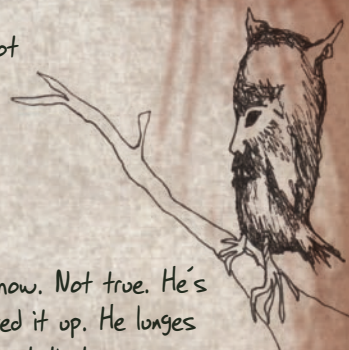
Shift. Clutch. Tires spin.

And we're out of there.

I tell the dumb couple that I followed all the signs like they did and ended up in a bar full of murderers. I don't say shit about vampires, I just crawl in the backseat and eventually let the Yuppie idiot drive, and when he gets out to use a phone booth not far from the highway I sneak a taste from the girl. She loves it, and when I'm done I ask her to tell her boyfriend that "Mustang Sally says hello, sug."

Then I bolt into the night because morning isn't far behind.

..



See, here's the thing. I loved every minute of that. It was awful. My immortality was in mortal peril. And it felt great. It felt almost, almost like I was alive. I'm no thrill-seeker, no risk-taker. Never was. I was more content to do nothing. I was always a slug in school, happy to take the easy road, whatever the easy road was. But I don't know that I'm like that anymore. I've heard stories that say our kind doesn't change, that as vampires we're basically just dead, staid, frozen in our ways. I don't know that it's exactly true.

I think we can change. I just think we can only change for the worst.

Because I don't like feeling this way. I hate that I enjoyed it. I want to go back to getting high before Political Science or making out with whatever frat-boy asshole wandered near the couch I was on. I hate that I'm having the dreams again after a month away from them.

I hate that I'm starting to like the dreams.

I hate her voice in my head.

I hate that I don't hate myself.

NORTH OF LONDON: THE LAMBTON WORM

"I will tell you my story for a taste of your blood."

Once I heard that, I knew I had gone to the point of no return. Jesus. I should've known that this was a mistake. The Hierophant told me to commune with an elder, and he knew of one that would perhaps listen to one from its "brood," which I meant to understand as meaning clan.

But this blows everything else out of the water.

I thought elders... a few hundred years. Maybe a bit older. Anything beyond that, and I was led to believe that their minds go frail, that they forget who they are, that their power shifts and diminishes as the brain falters and blood thins. But maybe it doesn't work like that. Maybe things work differently than even the smartest of us knows.

The witch in the woods, I know that she was no elder, but the continuation of a cursed legacy. (But even still, shouldn't I have learned my lesson, there? I went overseas and met with the monster and lost a bit of myself in the process and now I've gone and done it again.) Shit! I feel like I'm circling the drain, you know that? This whole process has laid me bare, it's left me questioning everything. And the dreams come with greater frequency now, and whenever I'm in the presence of something like this, I feel my blood start to sing, and it's not a sweet song or a soft song but a goddamn fucking cacophony of locusts and violins and wind in the trees and pulsing drombeats. Fuck! Fuck



All right. Okay. Focus, Alice, calm down. Just tell the story. Get past it, and shut it out.

I went to London. Another long flight. This time with the luggage, not the pets. Had to arrange my own way, and that almost got me burnt up, but that's a story for another time. I made it. And I went north to some place called Penshaw Hill in Durham. On this hill... it's like a Greek Temple, really, like some place the gods would dwell and debate the fortunes and curses of man or something. I'm supposed to go there at midnight, and I hear a voice whispering from the darkness, and it says just what I wrote above: *I will tell you my story for a taste of your blood.*

And I can't see anybody or anything, but a hooked knife spins across the stone floor and stops at my feet.

The whispered voice again: *story for blood.*

So I cut myself.

I wait for someone to come sop at my wrist gash, and I close my eyes and expect to feel cold lips on my wound, a tongue wriggling into the parted skin, but nothing happens.

Then I hear it: a lapping sound, like a thirsty dog at his dish. Then I smell it: a reptilian musk, and that's the only way I can describe it, like the stench at the zoo's reptile house or at a pet store, a pissy odor, a curdling odor.

I open my eyes. Then I see it.

It's human shaped, but certainly not human. Pale white, like a lawn grub, no wrinkles, no lines, just smooth frictionless flesh. The limbs are eerily lissome, so long and lean and tipped with fingers and toes a good six or seven inches in length. The thing has crawled to my feet and where the blood has fallen, it slurps at the floor and licks the wet stone.

"More," he hisses. "This is too small a taste."

I nearly turned and ran.

No, I thought, *stay*. I stayed, and I kept milking my arm for its blood.

It kept pouring, spattering, and he or it kept sucking it off the stone.

I started to feel the edge sharpen inside me. I could picture my blood-soaked "other half" inside me rattling the doors of her cage. I was spilling too much. I was getting hungry. *She was getting hungry. Shit!*

Then, he stood. It was not a comfortable transition, from crawling around on his belly to standing on those thin, frail legs. He did not wipe his mouth, which I could see had row after row of teeth - like a lamprey or shark. His long fingers fluttered over his round, almost pregnant belly.

He told me his story.

He did not speak it aloud.

He spoke it right into my head.

It felt like a terrible invasion: a gross violation of the one thing I thought was still sacred, my own mind. But it took him no effort to throw open the doors of my goddamn perception, and the story he told is not something I can forget. I don't mean that in a half-ass, metaphorical way. I mean I can still call upon his exact phrasing, his inflections, I can play it back in my head like some awful recording - all whispers and hisses and a wet sound in the hollows of his throat even though he did not say it aloud.

I'll transcribe it here.

Worm

I am the Worm.

I am the Worm.

I am the

What the fuck? When I try to... write this down, I feel my hand grow soft, limp, and... *that* writing comes out of me.

This world is way more fucked than I could have ever imagined.

Here goes.

I am the W

I am the Worm.

I was once a man.

*My Mother left the darkness and found me tending our village fire.
She was a black shadow, a smear of stars, a doorway into a heart of thorns.
She made me like her.*

And then she left me to my own hungers.
I stalked the desert, a pale djinn.
I walked the mountains, a black ogre.
I crawled along the ocean floor, a sucking serpent.
I roosted in tall trees, a starving harpy.
But I was still just a man.
I fought armies with knives, I killed maidens with but a glance,
I spilled blood with my poems, I drank blood with my eyes and my hands.
But I was still just a man.
My heart grew fat on the blood of my childer.
My childer were many, one hundred pulled to darkness, ninety-nine drawn to my teeth and tongue.
I was their monster father.
But I was still just a man.
Temples grew that praised me. Altars built to feed me.
Ships wrought to carry my words and body to far corners. I was angel, I was god, I was all.
Beginning and End.
But I was still just a man.
The owls and witches thought to possess me. Devils thought to tempt me.
My brothers and sisters thought to destroy me. I turned them all away.
But I was still just a man.
Then came the dreams. Then came the promises.
I was still just a man but it came time that I could change, I could transform. It was time to Become.
Fates collided. Destiny laid its road bare.
The skein of thread tied me to fortune and doom, both one and the same. My fortune is others' doom.
My doom could be another's fortune.
I would no longer be just a man.
I came to find the man called John Lameton, a sinner at the river who would not go to church.
A boy at the time. I let him find me in the river beneath a rock,
for I want to stare in his eyes and see if my fate shines in the dark of his pupil — and it does.
As designed, he lets me go and flees.
He forgets this encounter. For he is but a man.
He fights in the Crusades, having learned to love God.
And one day he returns to his home to find that I have made my home there, too.
I cannot survive on the blood of livestock but I kill them anyway.
I take children into the river and I drown them and drink them. I am but a man,
but the stories say I am something greater than what they see:
the men deceive one another, and they say I am larger than I am, that I have eaten more than I have,
that I am far more monstrous than I truly appear. I can wrap myself around the hill ten times, they say.

I have a lizard's head. A dragon's tail. I live in the well.

I live in the river. I live in the hill.

I do not live at all.

John Lambton seeks help to vanquish me, to do what others have failed to do.

He finds a local witch and he beseeches her aid. She provides it without cost.

She tells him what he must do: this is no man, she says, this is a monster. A lie.

She says he must wear armor that is covered in the heads of spears once carried by dead men. A lie.

She says he must chop me into three pieces in the River Wear,
for there I am slumbering and there I cannot heal.

A lie.

She gives him an axe smeared in his own blood. She helps him make the armor of spears.

She leads him to the river where I wait.

I was still but a man when he came for me.

He expected to see a great beast, a terrible thing.

I was monstrous, but no monster.

He wrestled me to the water, cutting me with the dead men's spearheads.

He brought his own blood-soaked axe upon me, chopping me thrice.

The water carried my parts away.

I heard his horn sound.

I heard a hound barking.

And it was done.

The ritual complete.

I became the Worm.

The witch was mine. One of my loyal, one of my faithful.

She had been for nearly four hundred years by that point, kept alive and enthralled by my salted blood.

She knew the threads of fate.

She knew what blood magic would keep me from slumbering, from falling into the rest of ancients.

She knew what would turn me from Man to Worm.

I cursed Lambton for nine generations.

More men came to worship me.

This time, it was deserved.

I had them build my temple like my favorite edifice, the Thersicon,
once built in service to me but later taken when I had fled. Taken and given to the God of the Smiths:

then, he deserved the worship, not I. But times had changed.

I was the God, and I deserved a true adytum.

They built it, and you now stand in it.

I am no man.

I am Worm.

BECOMING

When... "he" was done speaking, he pulled away. Standing not far from us were two more, just like him. I mean, exactly. They each whispered and murmured to one another. He threw up blood - my blood - on the stone and they each supped. When Lambton split him in three parts, it only made him stronger. It made... Jesus, it made three of him.

I didn't see the witch. I don't know if she still exists or if their need of her was done.

What I do know is that the Lambton Worm was ancient way back then, and he's only older and stranger now. This is no doubt! we have something inside of us that is nothing like human. It's something truly diabolical, something utterly wayward. If we can become that, if I can bide my time and become some wretched folkloric monstrosity out of the worst possible stories..

Why don't I just kill myself now?

Why don't I just march outside and wait for morning and let the sun char me and turn me to a carbonized mannequin that flakes apart in the first rough wind?

What do I have to look forward to?

This?

Becoming a true monster? Not just a monster of heart and mind but of perverted flesh and soul?

Fuck that.

I won't go dancing off this immortal coil just yet. But if I catch a sign of becoming like this, I will. I promise.

THE SOUL IS A DARK PIT

This... this is the worst yet.

I know we're monsters. I get that. I know that what we do is not natural. I recognize that drinking blood and being burned by the rays of the sun is indicative of the unholy. I get that we're basically blood-guzzling addicts stalking the night.

Some of us, though, we maybe get comfortable with that but go no further. I've seen some Savages who take this to an almost primal level. They become a part of the food chain the way a hawk or a shark or a spider would. Some of that is in this book already. I don't know that I agree that we should be common beasts, but as common or even uncommon beasts I can find something admirable, something simple, something pure.

This, though, is not pure.

It's gone beyond or below the beastly.

Whoever sent this to me can go to hell. Fuck them. This is disgusting. Who did this? Who would... take off a human face, and dry it and tan it like it was going to be a leather jacket or deerskin blanket or something? Worse, who would write on it, stamping this weird missive into the dried skin like you might imprint a key fob with your goddamned initials?

This..

This goes beyond all that I've seen so far.

In context and context, and especially in the delivery of the message.

This is truly fucking savage.



EVERYTHING HAS ITS TIME.
COMETS CRASH, THE SEAS OVERTAKE AND ERODE,
MAGGOTS STEAL FLESH FROM A CORPSE,
WINTER COMES, SO DOES FIRE, SO DOES FLOOD,
ALL IS CLEANSED. IT IS NOT THE END OF THE WORLD
BUT THE END OF A TIME, NOT ALL TIME, JUST THIS TIME.
I HAVE BEEN BITTEN AND I HAVE SEEN OUR FUTURE,
WE ARE LIKE A FAT TICK ON THE HEAD OF A PIN,
TEETERING, TOTTERING, ALMOST READY TO FALL AND POP.

THE ANGELS WHISPER

IN MY EAR,

WE HAVE

BECOME

TOO MUCH,

A CANCER

THAT NEEDS CUTTING OUT. MANKIND IS ON ITS
CUSB AND WE ARE ON OURS.

WE MUST RELISH

THIS TIME,

IN THE FESTERING

BITE, I HEAR MY

SALVATION, SPOKEN

IN THE WET SQUIRM

OF WORMS OR

THE HISSING

RELEASE OF

BLACK BUBBLING BLOOD.

I GIVE MYSELF

TO THIS.

I LET IT TAKE ME

FOR NIGHTS.

I BECOME WOLF

AND FOG, I BECOME

GNASHING TEETH

AND RENDING CLAW.

I LAY IN THE SPILLED

VISCERA, THE BOWELS AS

PILLOWS, THE BONES AS

HEADRESTS, THE TEETH AS DICE.

IT IS THE ONLY WAY I CAN BE FREE. WE CAN TRANSCEND.

THEY HAVE TOLD ME THIS.

LIKE CICADAS EMERGING FROM

THE GROUND AFTER DECADES.

LIKE THE REAPPEARANCE OF

A COMET IN THE SKY.

LIKE ANOTHER TURN OF THE WHEEL.

THEY HAVE RETURNED AND I HAVE

GIVEN MY FAITH

TO THEM.

DRAUGR?

I'll admit, I don't know shit about shit. But I'm learning that the world is home to lots of bad things, bad things I don't want to know about but I'm probably going to find out about. I don't know how this guy found me. He's not on my list, but somehow, I'm on his. He sent me this little microtape, and on the label was written one word:

DRAUGR.

I listened and transcribed it to the best of my abilities, below.

THE SUPPRESSION OF INFORMATION MUST BE STOPPED

"Listen to me. It wasn't supposed to go down like this. You understand? I thought I could game the system, you know? I figured, why be an itty-bitty barracuda in a big pond full of bad-ass sharks? Why not branch out? I can eat animals. I can sleep in the dirt. So I left the bright lights, big city. I figured I'd find some small (but not too small) town on the edge of nowhere and, man, just live like a little king. Grow fat off the land. They'd never know I was there. Three, four thousand people? Couple bars? A handful of dark alleys? A place with a good side of the tracks and a bad side of the tracks? How could I go wrong?

So I found the place. Little town called Bellwether. Mostly white but with burgeoning racial tensions from immigrants – which can only help me, right, because undocumented workers aren't going to go banging on the police station door saying they got bit up by the chupacabra, right? The whole place has that kind of New England feel, even though it's out here in the Midwest, and that suits me just fine. Reminds me of home in a way.

I spend some nights there. Two weeks, maybe three. I stay low. I don't go poking my nose around, I don't go flashing my face or my ten-years-expired driver's license. I feed from the one homeless guy who lives at the burned-out train station. I feed from some teen girl doing grave rubbings at midnight. It covers me. Keeps my belly warm. And for a time I feel like I've done it! You know? All the other vampire assholes can glut together in the city, biting and scratching each other, wondering just how that knife got between the shoulder blades or this stupid stake got punched through the breastplate. While they're killing each other, I'll be alone. Happy and alone. It's like, empowering. I feel like I've learned a major secret. A secret that any Savage would kill for. I fancy myself a lone lion, right? Stalking the veldt. Proud and eternal. Awesome. Sublime. Yeah.

But, bad news. I'm not alone.

I find the first body up on a hill overlooking the town, one of those teenager make-out points that's now more a "teenagers fuck each other" point or a "this is where molesters bring the little kids" spot. It's a dead kid, a teen boy, young-looking, got a boyish face like me (if I even remember my face right, when was the last time I saw what I looked like?). Chubby hamster cheeks.

And his throat's torn open. I mean, really ripped wide. Barely a drop of blood in this kid, too. He's hanging from the trees and I smell him from a mile away and the smell of rot is in my nose and fuck me if it doesn't make me hungry, which disgusts me.

At this point, though, I don't think too much of it. Okay, maybe I have a competitor out here, maybe. I can handle that. I'm tough. Boyish face, maybe, but I got fists

like bricks and claws like razors. If something is staying out here, thinking it's the king, well, this bitch has got another thing coming.

I... Jesus, I had no idea.

HUNGRY EATING NOISES

Another few weeks go by, and I don't see any sign of anything. I got rid of the kid's body so the locals don't start lighting torches and picking up pitchforks, because, shit, we're in a small town in middle America. Maybe God really does whisper in their ears from the rows of corn. I don't want them pointing that holiness toward me, so away the body went. Cement blocks, buncha rope, a blanket, gone. Just bubbles. Sorry, kid.

Then one night, I'm hanging around back of this one bar, close to 4 A.M., because I've been watching this kid, this Mexican kid. He must wash dishes or something. Got a lean hound-dog face, sweet-looking, innocent. I'm not going to hurt him. He'll like it. I figure I'll just move in, see if I can't get close and take a taste.

Behind the bar, behind the parking lot, is a field of wheat. It's pretty damn quiet. They've turned the jukebox off inside. No voices. Just the whisper of wheat and the occasional *click* of the traffic light out front. Going from green to yellow to red, to green again.

Then I hear it. You ever hear a big dog eat? A Rottweiler or a bloodhound, maybe. Something with jowls. It snorts as it eats. You hear it 'cause it's sloppy. Bite, bite, wet cheeks slapping on wet food, chew, chew. Gulp. Swallow.

That's what I hear.

It's coming from somewhere in the field.

Mexican dishwasher kid has yet to show his face.

The smell of blood hits me. The stink of voided bowels, too. Not much wind, but what's there carries it right to me.

I feel fangs. I feel claws. My own, sliding out, ready. Got an itch at the back of my neck. This is my kingdom, I think. Whoever's out there, you're fuckin' mincemeat, pal.

I wade into the grass, feeling it brush against my palms and my nails.

It isn't long before I find it. And it's worse than I could've imagined.

It's like God or the Devil wants me to see how awful it can be to be us, because a single shaft of moonlight is shining down from the clouds and highlighting it, like a big spotlight from Heaven. God laughing up there. *Look at this. Look at how fucked up my creation can be.*

It's human, but it's not human enough. It's a woman, too, but not woman enough either. Stringy dirt hair hanging down. Skin all muddy, grass stuck to her elbows, bristly hair sticking up from the arms. Clothes are ruined, they just hang off of her like ragged shreds of cloth sacks

or something. And when she looks at me, she's got a mouth full of crooked sharp teeth and a pair of eyes that are mostly white but for the pinprick black dot in the center of each. Thing is, I know she's Savage like me. I don't know how I know that. As my hackles raise and that itch at the back of my neck starts to burn like someone's got a cigarette pressed there, I just *know*. This one's kin. Distant, long lost, but kin just the same. She sits hunched over a body, unrecognizable. Got blood wetting her chin.

She says something to me right then, and it's the only human thing that'll come out of her mouth.

She says all sad-like, "It's all red, all I see is red."

Man, that chilled me to the god-fucking marrow.

Then she leaps for me.

Shit was she fast! Her claws, they weren't like mine. Mine are like human fingernails but long, sharp, mean. Hers were like something off a wild cat, or maybe worse: longer, leaner, curved on the end like fishhooks. I grab her shoulders and twist her over my head so she can't get my throat, but now I'm off-balance and going down. And she's digging into me like a dog looking for a bone, her claws kicking up the skin and meat of my stomach like so much dirt. And it isn't long before her fingers find my guts and they're starting to come out in her hands and, suddenly *I'm* seeing red.

I don't remember it, not well. I just know I got a thumb claw in her one eye and another around her tongue. The eye popped. The tongue left her head and landed somewhere in the whispering wheat.

Then I had a fist full of throat and I pulled it, tearing it out like she had torn out that poor kid's throat weeks before.

I remember the taste of her blood in my mouth. Bitter, hot. Like the blackest coffee.

Then she was gone. Running away on all fours, loping. I laid there in that shaft of moonlight. Next to the body. I rolled over. Had a taste. Had more.

Felt better.

Laughed.

King of Nowhere, I thought. Prince of Bellwether.

Then somewhere, I heard a scream.

OVER THE EDGE

We all got a line. It's inside us. For some it's probably closer to the surface than we know, for others it's far off. You can barely see it. Once you cross it, though, that's it. The line's gone. The way back is shut.

I don't know who this monster is or was, but I think she crossed the line that night. Maybe she'd crossed it long before, I don't know. But when she spoke to me, I heard something in there that was human. Just a squeak, a peep, but it was there.

But then I went and fucked her up, and I think that did it.

I put my guts back inside of me and healed what I could heal and went to see. I listened to that screaming and it suddenly cut short, but it wasn't long after that I heard another shriek. A man's yell. Scared. And in pain.

I stumbled into the street beneath the piss-yellow lights.

On the corner, a woman who might've been a prostitute. It was a cool night for summer, and the way she was dressed... you know how they look. Fishnets. Something

that's more of a nightie than a shirt. She lay face down in a puddle of blood.

A half-a-block up, a man. Some shitkicker in cowboy boots and a cowboy hat, like anybody really needs to dress like that anymore? I guess the crazy Savage didn't like his outfit much either, because soon as I stepped on the scene she ripped out his throat with her teeth and spun him like a top.

But here's where it happened. Here's where it all went fucking nuts.

The guy hits the ground. Boom. Back of his head cracks against the curb.

And she's on him, drinking noisily. I step over the prostitute's dead body and inside I'm just railing. I'm mad because I think, *she's ruined it*. I had a good thing going and she's ending it before I even start. I can't come back from this. I can't make nice-nice with a town that's seen a buncha bodies ripped apart on the corner of State and Main.

Everything seems in slow motion. I watch as the monster chick *vomits blood* back into the now-dead guy's mouth. I can't imagine what the hell's going on, but I do hear something behind me. I don't think anything about it, though, because I can't look away as the man's dead mouth starts to work. Like a baby at a nipple. Drinking that puke blood.

And I step forward and I'm ready to break into a run but a hand catches my ankle and I go down hard.

I look behind me and there's the prostitute. With a mouth of teeth just like the crazy Savage bitch, grinding them needle fangs like a meth tweaker.

She bites into my Achilles tendon and it burns. She hisses. I kick her in the face and get my foot back.

I scramble to my feet and I see the cowboy's already getting up. Fang mouth snapping at the air.

People are running out of the one bar down the street and a carload of Mexicans is coming up, bass banging in some kind of mariachi rap.

The Savage bitch is on the car. She's kicking in the windshield. They're screaming.

The cowboy's barreling forward; he's lurching at some couple in their mid-20s, good kids, clean kids, and they're screaming but not screaming for long.

And the prostitute's up on her shaky legs and she's running for me.

Blood sprays on the passenger side of the low-rider.

The couple is down underneath the biting, clawing cowboy. He's puking blood on 'em. Into their mouths.

And I snap a fist into the prostitute's nose, driving it up into her brain but she doesn't care and she just tries to bite my hand.

I throw her into a parking meter. I hear her back break.

The couple is up. They're with the cowboy. Looking around, hungry heads pivoting.

The car door flies open. A fucking *pack* of those Mexicans clamber out like dogs or spiders or goddamn *dog-spiders*, and the Savage is behind them. They're sniffing the air, bloody faces leering and rent throats drooling red.

The prostitute is crawling toward me, her body making these herky-jerky motions because the back is busted and I have no idea if she knows how to heal.

They've crossed that line, I think. The whole world has crossed a line.

I do the only thing I can do, and that's run.

GUN STORE APOCALYPSE

I busted into a gun store. Just kicked the window in and climbed through it. Dumb shit didn't have his weapons locked away in a gun-safe, so I just grabbed a handful of long arms off the wall and pistols out of the cracked case and swept an armload of ammo boxes down onto my head and lap.

The prostitute came in just in time; I'd finished loading up a Ruger Redhawk .357. She took some shots to the chest. She didn't care. A fifth shot hit her arm and blew it off at the elbow, and she still didn't care. She was up over the broken pistol case, the glass biting into her knees, and there were those teeth, gnashing up over my head, chomp chomp chomp, and I did all I could to put that gun barrel in between those biting teeth.

They broke and split around the barrel.

I pulled the trigger. Ventilated the back of her skull.

I kicked her over the side and waited.

Night turned into day and I slept behind the counter.

Night came again and with it, howls and moans and strings of sentences using words that weren't words, mostly just inhuman gargles. Peeking up over that glass case, I saw them outside. Stumbling the streets. Salivating blood. Sniffing the air.

Dozens of them.

Are they vampires? Not like I know 'em to be. Maybe strictly speaking. Seems like they're born of some kind of Embrace. But it doesn't leave them like it left you or me. Embraced by beasts, made into beasts. That wildness you see in a Savage's eye, it's in these creatures full-bore. Not a lick of mercy in there. Just hunger.

Looking out over the case, I nudged one finger. And it pushed a piece of glass that pushed another piece of glass which then fell onto the floor. A small, tiny tinkling break.

And all the monsters outside turned and looked at me.

Suddenly they were moving in my direction. They could fucking run, too.

I started shooting.

A fat fuck got hold of my arm and twisted, damn near broke it. The shotgun up under his chin dissuaded him a

little – and I wasn't messing around this time, just going right for the head.

A housewife went for my neck. I broke hers first.

I shot my way out of there. Cordite and glass and wood splinters and blood.

Then I saw them.

HUNTERS

Black-clad soldiers in gas mask rebreathers. Fucking real-life swords strapped to their backs. Shotguns and sub-machine guns. The nape of my neck tightened. Vampires? These were vampires? On their chests, a sign like the horoscope Sagittarius, the horse-man with the bow and arrows. Some militant wing of the Invictus? Second Estate Inquisitors?

They were... eradicating everything. Bang, bang, bang. The screaming fiends hurtled toward them and were cut down.

One of them pointed at me. I heard his command. One asked: "Is he *draugr*?"

The response? "No. But destroy him anyway."

A bullet clipped my neck and it stung. I turned and found the Mexican kid, the dishwasher, hurtling toward me with clawed hands outstretched, and this wasn't the kid I'd seen nights before. I would've been too slow but a bullet from the soldiers punched through his face and erased his features. He went down, a dead fish flopping to the dock.

I ducked behind an alleyway.

And I ran, and ran, and fuckin' ran.

THE TRUTH IS IN US

That's my story. You're going to get it out there. Because they're coming for me. I've seen the black helicopters, silently stalking the skies above. I've seen the soldiers in the distance, treading the same ground that I myself have walked through the fields of wheat and corn. They don't want the truth exposed, see? I've seen how the world ends. It's us. We destroy ourselves, don't you get it? We lose our minds. We go deep. The beast wins. And when the beast is free, he just wants more of himself. And he can make it, puking blood into the mouths of ravaged corpses. The beast army.

Tell somebody. Tell everybody. We are our own doom, or will be if we're not careful.



Hunters?

THE LIBRARY IS STILL YOUR FRIEND

I did a little research at the library. Draugar (there's an 'a' in there, poor anonymous guy) were... Viking ghosts? Ghosts who possess the dead, making them another kind of undead? They were said to be "death black" or "dead pale," and some were draugar of land, others draugar of the sea. They had immunity to normal weapons, which seems true according to the tape, so they instead had to be fought hand-to-hand, which... can't be true, I guess, since here it seems a bullet to the head (and nowhere else) does the trick. Interesting, to prevent the making of a draugar, some would sew the corpse's feet together with thread or rope so if it did arise, it could not walk. Doesn't seem like a practical option, though, does it?

I don't know what to think. Is this real? Or the ravings of some paranoid headcase who went mad not long after he wandered into the wilderness? You'd think if it was real, they'd somehow have swamped us by now! as he says, a beast army.

Maybe I should be thankful we have anonymous protectors in gas masks.

But I think I should be terrified. Hell, that's all I feel anymore. Raw terror at what's going on around me and inside me. Monsters, monsters, everywhere.

MDNIGHT ROADS,

9

On the way, now. I stole a car. I mean, fuck it. I want to see my sister and nephew and I've got a bit of a drive to get back to the city I call home. To get there, shove this book in your hand and finally see my family.

An hour ago, I passed a minivan on the side of the road.

I slowed as I passed.

Inside, I saw a woman driver, her face frozen in what was plainly a rictus of pleasure and fear. I know that look. I've caused that look.

Didn't surprise me, then, to see someone on top of her, pushing her head back, nestling at her neck like a lover but really just a monster, a feeder.

I saw the bike - a chopper, mean and all chromed up - hiding in the weeds about a hundred yards down.

I thought, maybe I'll stop.

Maybe I'll save her.

Maybe I'll eat her.

Maybe I'll interview the guy, he's probably one of us.

Then I thought: nah.

I'm coming home. Nothing can stop me now.

A DREAM: THE CONVERSION

I had a dream yesterday. I don't know that it was a bad one, really. Not like the others. But something about it worries me more than them. Because I know who she is, now. I know that I'm communing with the demon inside me, the beast who lives in the labyrinth of my heart.

In the dream, all was still and dark.

I was her again. Laying in a meadow. The moon above. A warm wind sweeping over naked skin.

The wind carried the smell of death and it comforted me.

The woods lay not far away, the meadow ringed by dark trees.

And I heard them calling me.

Somewhere, a child's voice. Little Jack. My nephew. Laughing, light and easy, the sound of a chiming bell. He begged for me to come join him and I knew that I would because I felt so good, so right.

So peaceful.

Shit.

I'm coming to you tomorrow. I'm bringing you this journal and I'm going to get my sister and her son back. I'm coming for Sarah and Little Jack and they'd better not be harmed. I want to believe that I had such a nice dream because I know that things are okay now, that I did the job you wanted me to do. I felt peace because peace was on its way. A bit of foretelling. Maybe a taste of prophecy, like what Mother Janice might have.



So why does it feel so wrong?

I have a feeling in my gut. It feels like a fist of clot-
ted blood. Like a miscarriage
tumbling around inside.

If anything goes wrong...

No. I won't think that way.
I won't let the beast inside
me get the best of me. Not
that way. Not now. I need
to be clear.

I'm coming, Sarah. I'm
coming, Little Jack.

THE END

It happens tomorrow night.

I can barely focus long enough to put pen to paper.

I'm done with this stupid book.

I'm done with this fucking clan.

I'm done with you.

I'm going to be better. And you know what? I'm going
to be more human. As close as I can get, even if I can
never be that. I can try, can't I? All the things that I've
seen, all the monsters within me and outside of me...

I have a family. I've kept them out of it but
you dragged them into it and now I've got to be
there for them. For as long as I can, which, as it
turns out, might be something close to forever.

Tomorrow night, I see them.

Sarah and Little Jack. My beautiful sister and my darling nephew. I haven't seen
them in a couple years, you know that? I can't wait. It's going to be glorious.



EVERYTHING HAS CHANGED

The woods are pretty right now. Almost silent but for the buzzing of bugs, the occasional call of an owl to another owl.

I don't know if this book will ever end up in your hands. I don't know where you are. So I'm writing this for me. I'm writing this to document what happened, because I know that one day I may not have the presence of mind to know, or more importantly, to care.

Little boy's blood tastes different. Did you know that? You probably did. You probably set up this entire ruse just to get me to find that out, to test me and push me away from what I want to be. Human. Congratulations. But maybe I'm getting ahead of myself.

I went to the address you sent me.

The old Victorian, outside of town. Black shutters. Peeling ochre paint. Windows like eyes, door like a mouth. You know the one.

It had been ransacked. By you or someone else. Everything was smashed. Claw marks down the wall. Blood, too. Boards peeled up, nail-heads popping. Every light fixture, smashed. Every mirror, smashed.

I called out. No response.

I checked the downstairs: in the kitchen, I found two men with suits and earpieces, their throats open in a second grin, their bodies mostly bloodless. They had been propped up at the table, with teacups of their own blood sitting nice and neatly before them. Your men? Or those who had come to harm you?

In the library, another man. Made to kneel before a suit of armor, his mouth shaped in an 'o' and pressed against the tarnished codpiece of the armor. This one's feet were gone. Nowhere to be found, those feet, though I'll admit to not looking very hard.

I started upstairs.

Found another one with his head shoved through the railing. Fireplace poker jammed up through the mouth and the back of his head.

In the bathroom, a bloody tub filled with body parts and suit scraps. No discernable face or limbs, just skin, bone, and coagulating blood.

This whole time, I salivated. Dily blood wetting my mouth, getting me hungry for more of the same. And I hate you for that. I hate that my need to see my family was pushed down beneath my urge to lick the blood from that tub like a common mutt.

In the master bedroom, I found my family.

Sarah had been propped up on a padded stool, her dead face leaning against her dead hand, her dead eyes staring into the mirror of a gilded vanity, a pink pillbox hat askew on her head. Her eyes had been pried open with wooden splinters. Her one hand was nailed to the dressing table, the other hand was nailed to her face.

Little Jack was laying on the bed, arms crossed over his chest, eyes closed, his face and hands bruised and bloody.

I felt something within kick up inside of me. Tempest in a teacup, isn't that the phrase? Within my ribcage was a raging conflagration, a tornado of locusts, a burning forest, a cackling flock of flesh-picking crows.

EMPTY

HOW?

HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?
IT'S ALL GONE WRONG.

DID YOU DO THIS?

ARE YOU DOING THIS TO TORTURE ME?
AM I DOING THIS TO TORTURE MYSELF?

I would've torn that place from its foundations.

Except.

Except for one bubble of blood.

It ballooned from Little Jack's nose. Then, delicately, it popped.

I wish what stopped my fury was the realization that he was still alive. I wish that to the cordled marrow of my bones, but what stopped me was hunger. All that blood around me and that one gurgle of blood from a boy's nostril was the straw that broke the beast's back.

And I fed.

No blood had been taken from him. It was all mine. A treat left behind by you or whoever did this.

I sipped every last drop from my nephew, his lips working silently, his eyes rotating in his head. And then he was dead. Until I gave him my own blood in return.

LISTENING TO: RED SURRENDER

I was instantly appalled at myself, you see. I pulled away, the blood still dripping from the gash I made in my neck where I had cradled him and forced his small mouth to sup. What had I done? I had made him a monster, like me. A stunted fiend, a demon in a boy's body, an animal in a child's funerary suit.

I was ready to do something awful. I'd said it before: if I saw myself becoming this, becoming something worse than what I was, a thing that is only part human if any part at all, I would end it. I would march headlong into the eye of the sun or set myself ablaze or fall on a sharpened plow blade and remove my head from my neck.

But then I heard the music. If you could even call it that. Ever take a finger and run it around the rim of a glass? Circle, circle, circle, and the sound begins: a warbling whine, a lit of otherworldly sound made by the simple motions of a fingertip circumnavigating a glass brim. And I closed my eyes and in the dark I felt a kind of electric stillness. An eager need. In my mind's eye I saw a tall shadow with long arms playing a device that doesn't even seem like a real thing: a long glass tube held in a mahogany case, the glass ribbed and tapered, and from his fingers dancing on the glass, this noise, this almost-music, this alien hum.

And then:

A soft voice spoke up.

Not the voice of the man, somewhere, playing a glass instrument that does not exist. Not the voice of my dead sister or my nephew who was now sitting up in the bed, the Hunger just about to grip him hard and twist him up. But something in my ear.

It was her voice.

No.

It was my voice. The voice of me from my dreams.

"Surrender," it said at first.

And I shook my head no. The music continued: trill, shrill, the music of a worm burrowing through my eardrum. Haunting.

"You've done such a good thing," it said. "You saved his life. Now you can be with family forever, can't you?" And slowly, I shook my head yes.

The boy, still hungry, tried to bite me again, and I pushed him away. He scuttled off to his mother, and he bit into the meat of her ankle to finish taking whatever was left inside her body.

The tones of glass music faded and I slipped away. Oh, not physically. No, I still sat there on the bed, but some part of me just... drifted off. I gave it to her. To it. To the music and to the voice. And I felt a shadow pass over me, like a bird or plane flying overhead during the day (a shadow from the sun) and the edges of my vision softened and turned red like a piece of paper stained with ink or blood.

She told me something, then, but it was not her telling me, but just my own voice repeated back. She told me that Little Jack was family, and that I could raise him as my own. And I told myself no. I'll tell myself that it was a willful defiance of her, that I cannot be responsible for him and that I'm no good. Though I wonder: was it just selfishness? This was freedom, newly found. Why pick up more baggage when I'd just put so much down?

I walked out of the room and out of the house, his hungry feeding sounds fading. Beyond the house was a forest, and I heard voices floating to me from within.

I looked back at the house, and I saw him: Little Jack in the bedroom window, finally having composed himself, the moonlight illuminating that dark smear across his mouth.

Then I saw a shape behind him. A shadow, tall and thin.

It put a hand on his shoulder and pulled him away. The curtains closed.

And me? I walked into the forest, where I am now.

THE WHISPERING WOOD

This is where I belong. The forest is telling me that in her voice, not the voice of my Beast or who I have become, but the voice of the old witch. Baba Yaga. Nona Strega. The Jezibaba. She is inviting me into her wood, dark and deep, and I accept that invitation.

I've seen glimpses of what I may become in my dreams.
And I can feel a dragon tattoo squirming its way up my inner thigh. I looked.
It's not there yet. But it will be. I'll put ink to skin and will it to stay.

My world is red.
The forest is dark.
And I feel happy again.

Maybe one night I'll push it all away and I'll choose to feel the sorrow and the guilt and the low wretchedness, but not now. Now, I need to feel good, so I will feel good.

I hear a little song in my head, a funny little rhyme.

And with my new claws - they just
pushed themselves free from the
fingertips, you see, sharp and
painful at first but so
empowering - I carve the little
song into the tree behind me.
I've taken a picture of it.
Want to see?



*Alice had a little lamb Its fleece was bloody red
And everywhere young Alice went
She left a trail of dead*

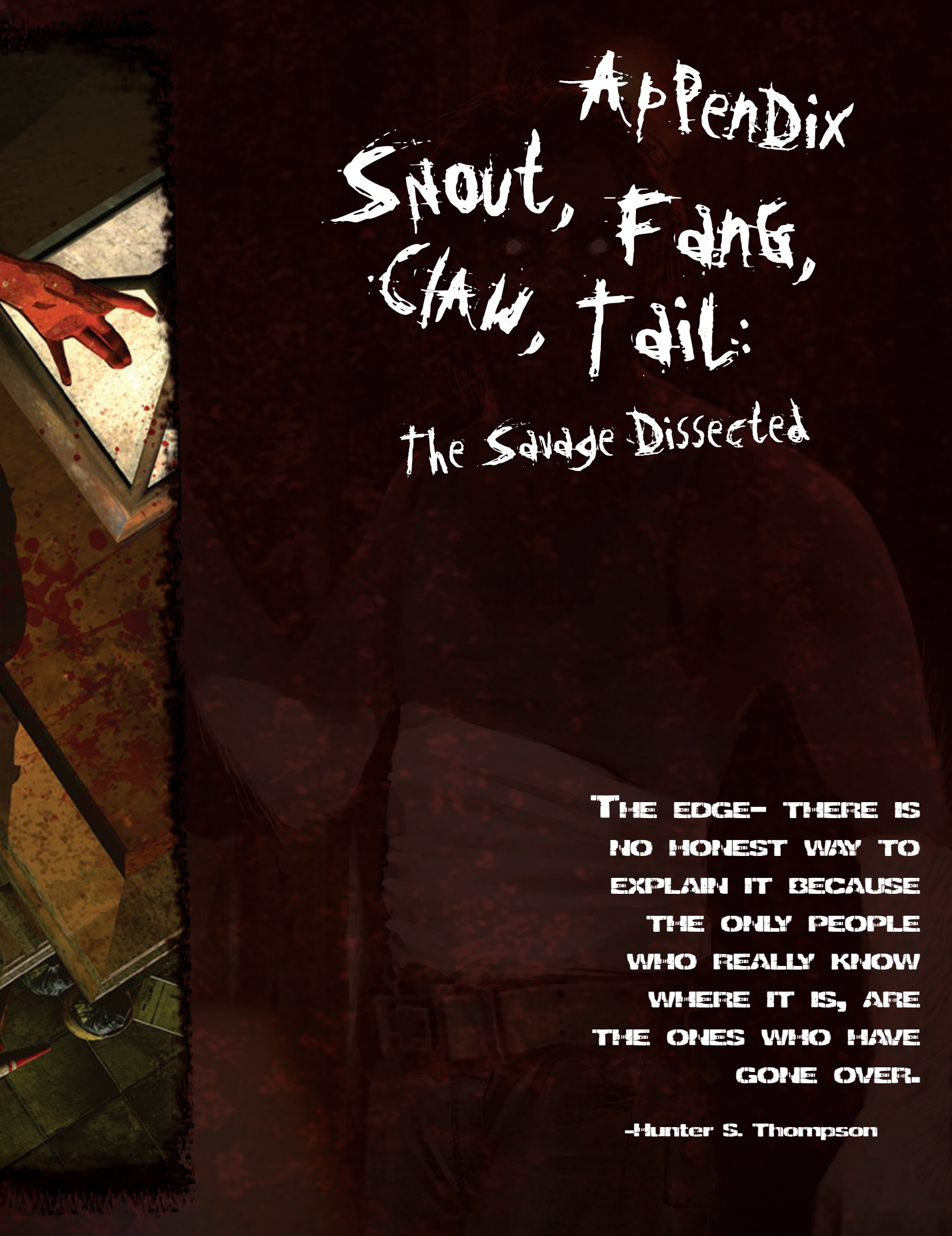
I've done some looking around. I asked, since I knew you were curious. Alice is still out there. She shows up on the radar now and again, like so many of the Savage criminals do. Her rhyme there at the end suggests some truth: she does leave a trail of the dead, brutal bodies torn asunder, fed from till their skin puckers. So far, she's been picking off the lowlifes: criminals, dealers, rapists, so forth. That will change if the patterns are any indication. Right now she clearly is able to justify her murderous intent by killing those she deems deserve it. That way lies darkness, as we all know. Before too long she'll be able to justify tearing someone to ribbons simply because they gave her a curious look.

I can't promise this book is in the right order, but I've done my best to reorder it. At some point it's clear to me she tore this journal asunder and left the pages in disarray, though part of it suggests she had some lunatic ordering in mind, but I couldn't decipher it. So it is what it is.

Hope it's what you're looking for. If I find anything else, I'll be sure to send it. In the meantime, I have some more of your compilers and authors to check in on, to make sure everything is on the up and up.

- C. Hardaiken





Appendix Snout, Fang, Claw, Tail: The Savage Dissected

**THE EDGE— THERE IS
NO HONEST WAY TO
EXPLAIN IT BECAUSE
THE ONLY PEOPLE
WHO REALLY KNOW
WHERE IT IS, ARE
THE ONES WHO HAVE
GONE OVER.**

—Hunter S. Thompson

Mabry (Bloodline)



"We switched the signs. Got the music going. Neon's bright. Soon, the blood will fill our cups."

You're lost. At midnight, the roads all seem to tangle. The street signs are hard to read —did that one have mud on it? Doesn't it contradict the other one you saw, about five miles back? No gas stations out this way that aren't closed up husks, just silhouettes against the dark night. But then you see it: a roadhouse, just down the way. All lit up like a beer-advertising Christmas tree. You think that, well, maybe it's time to ask directions. Maybe grab a road beer, too; the wife won't mind, she's asleep next to you. You go in. But you won't come out. Your wife, maybe she'll live. Maybe they'll let her live. Then again... maybe not.

See, some Gangrel don't like to go out and hunt. Why should they, when they can make the prey come to them? The world is home to countless pockets of isolation: lost highways, ghost towns, depressed economies. Places where people go astray, usually on accident, sometimes on purpose. Those of the Mabry blood, well, they just set up shop and wait for the blood to start trickling in.

Bloodline Disciplines: Animalism, Protean, Resilience, Vigor

Nickname: Trapdoor Spiders, Rock Snakes

Weakness: Those of the Mabry blood often feel alone in this world; the isolation gets to them, and others of the bloodline are the only common company they keep. As such, being apart is hampering: when one Mabry is away from his brothers and sisters, at least by a mile, he suffers a -1 to all rolls, and -2 to all Discipline-related rolls.

History and Culture: It started in the late 1800s way up in Alaska and the Yukon. A Savage by the name of Carlton Clyde Mabry lived out in the whipping snow and howling winds with his "boys," the childer he'd chosen from the leagues of mushers and miners. Mabry started to get a bit greedy, though: the blood they were able to get most nights was wan, thin, rare. He wanted more. Liked the hot feeling throughout his body. So they set up a roadhouse along the Klondike Highway, set back just a ways from the snowed-over road that so often saw dog- and horse-sleds traverse its length. They let the torches flicker in the cold night, those fires doing all the advertising for them. Travelers would have a chance to disembark from the trail. They'd think they were getting a bowl of porridge and maybe some hot cider, but what they really got was a face full of teeth as Mabry and his boys fed. When the time'd come, they'd tear down that roadhouse and set up another one further up or down the trail or on another road altogether.

The tradition has since continued. Mabry's boys (which now include quite a few girls, because damn if that doesn't bring in the marks) now set up shop all over the place. Bars, strip clubs, mountain diners... one coterie was even said to have set up a whole *carnival* to draw in the wayward masses.

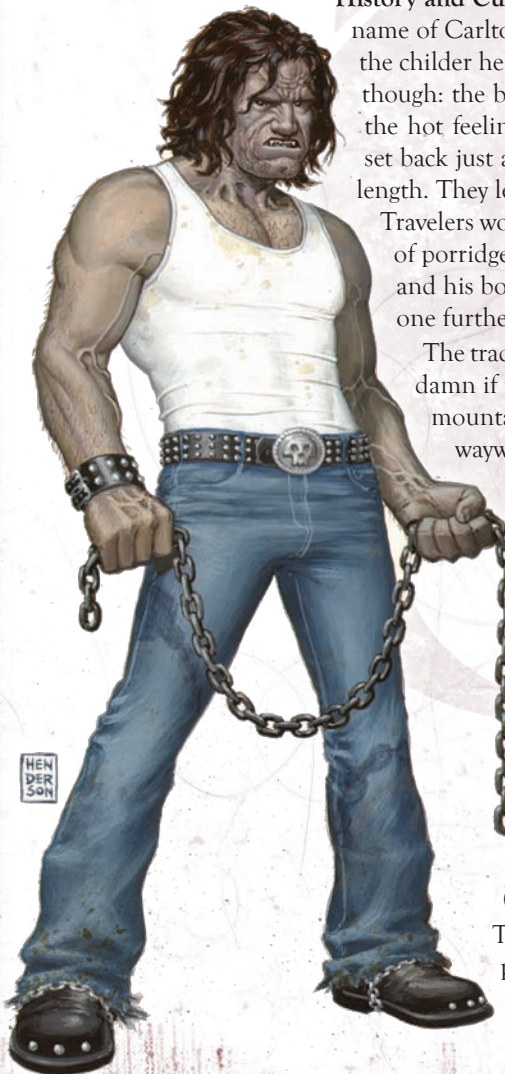
Some coterie are more brutal than others, needing to hide bodies more often than not. Others are unusually humane: bring in a lost family or a vanload of college students, get them drunk or otherwise fucked up, take enough blood to leave them passed out on the floor, then drive them far enough out of the way so they'll never find their way back. (That there is a "win-win situation").

Reputation: Amongst other Gangrel, those of the Mabry blood are lazy, like rock snakes hiding in the dark waiting for food to pass on by. Amongst the Damned in general, well, most don't know shit about the Mabry, and even when they do they don't figure them for a bloodline (which is, of course, a relatively new one compared to more ancient lineages).

Blood From the Boards

(Protean •••, Resilience ••)

The world is full of blood. Literally. A lot of it is old. Broken down into its constituent parts. Still, though, it's there. Animals die. Wars and murders leave men with their lifeblood soaked into the soil. Some Mabry have figured out how to get a little bit of that blood, a little taste while sleeping.



See, the Mabry like to use Haven of Soil to sleep in or around where they keep the roadhouse (or whatever the location is). One sinks into the gravel lot behind the joint. Another actually learns to sink through the floorboards into the building's crumbling foundation.

And there's blood to be had for those who care to have it. With this Devotion, the Gangrel can reclaim some Vitae simply by slumbering in the earth using Haven of Soil.

Cost: 1 Willpower (spent when activating Haven of Soil)

Dice Pool: No roll necessary

Action: Reflexive

While the Mabry sleeps, she needn't spend a Vitae to awaken: The blood that exists is enough to reconstitute itself within the Gangrel. She can only do this once in a given 100 yard by 100 yard area, however, unless fresh blood has been spilled at that spot within the last week. If that's true, she can actually do this three times in the same spot before having to move on.

This Devotion costs 15 experience points to learn.

The Hounds of Actaeon (Bloodline)



"He's bleedin' out, somewhere. You'd be amazed at how far they can run even after they been shot in the side."

For many Damned, the hunt is a simple thing, a thing of whim, subsistence without a plan. A vampire enters the night, finds a target and then he feeds. Lather, rinse, repeat. The Gangrel tend to do things a bit differently: One pack of hungry Savages might harry prey into a pit trap and then slowly descend upon their captive meal, while another lone Gangrel might instead let his hunger get the best of him to the point where he's little more than a rampaging thing of pure craving, a thing that hunts without grace.

The Hounds of Actaeon — or, simply, the Hunters — have their own way of putting blood in their bellies. They hunt like humans hunt animals: with rifle or spear, with arrow or 12 gauge. It isn't for sport, not for most of the Hunters. No, this is about feeding. About performing a sacred duty that goes back a long ways, indeed.

Bloodline Disciplines: Animalism, Obfuscate, Protean, Resilience

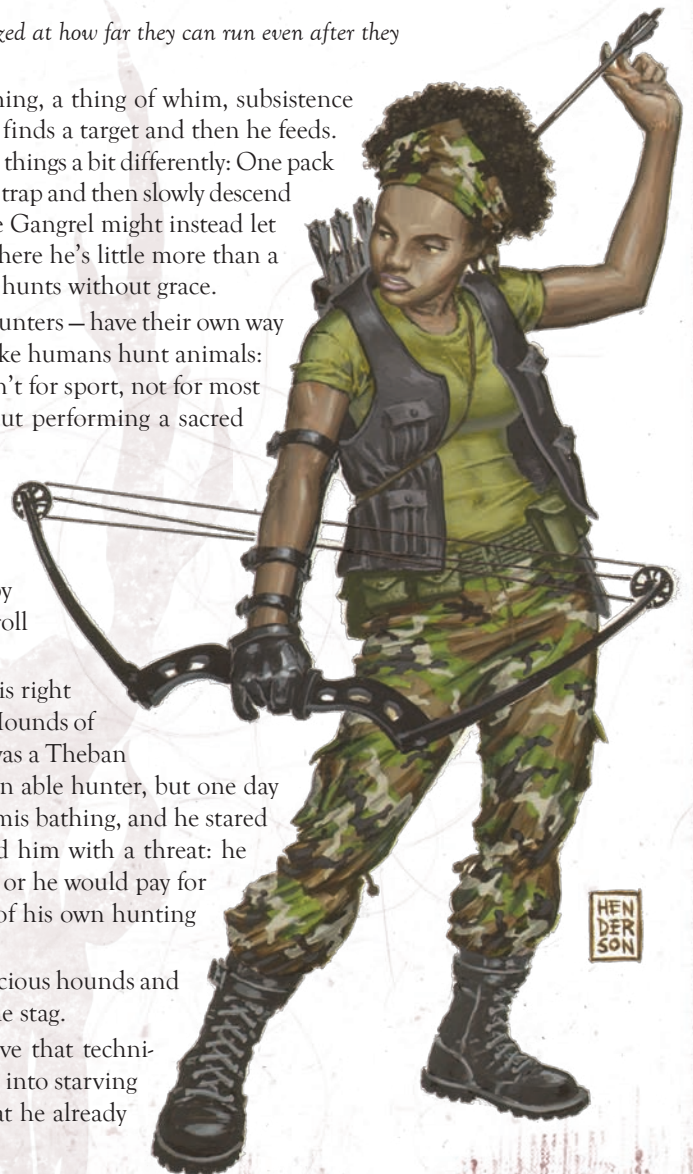
Nicknames: Hounds, Hunters, Poachers

Weakness: The curse of the frenzy supposedly incurred by Artemis (see below) still haunts the Hounds of Actaeon: any roll to resist a hunger frenzy is penalized by -3 dice.

History and Culture: The story of this bloodline's nativity is right there in the name: They are, they believe, descended from the Hounds of Actaeon. In case you don't know the story, it's this: Actaeon was a Theban hero and friend to the centaur called Cheiron. He was also an able hunter, but one day he made a grave error. The hero came upon the goddess Artemis bathing, and he stared in awe at her nakedness. She saw him ogling her and cursed him with a threat: he shall never speak again (so as not to tell anyone what he saw), or he would pay for that transgression. Of course, when Actaeon heard the calls of his own hunting party, he cried out.

Oops. That's when Artemis turned his hunting party into vicious hounds and turned Actaeon himself into a stag. The hounds tore apart the stag.

Whether true or not, the Hunters of this bloodline believe that technically, the hunting party wasn't turned into actual hounds, but into starving Kindred, and Actaeon was not turned into anything but what he already was: a human being filled with precious blood.



The “tearing him apart” portion of the story is the Hounds’ greatest shame, though. One of the bloodline’s chief conceits is to recognize that the attack on Actaeon was a graceless, frenzied attack. An indiscretion in which the purity of the hunt is lost.

And so, they attempt to recapture that purity through regular hunting parties where the prey is, nearly always, human, the “Most Dangerous Game.” They hunt the way the Native Americans might have, or how more thoughtful human hunters might now: with spear, arrow, rifle or shotgun. They track prey. They aim to kill, not to wound. They pray over the body whether still alive or dead. And, most importantly, they endeavor to use all parts of the “animal.” Blood is food. Fat goes to soap. Skin makes a kind of leather that can be used as clothing or cording (tendons, too, make for good cord, cord that can go toward holding a blood skein at one’s side or can help string up dead prey to let it “bleed out”). Bone makes for simple weapons or armor (though is most commonly used for decoration, given that Hunters generally dress like woodsmen or sportsmen). While heads make fine trophies, rarely do the Hunters keep trophies unless the prey was of some note.

Reputation: Those who know of the Hounds grant them a reputation of mercilessness, of vicious blood hunts and callousness. Yes, that’s true for some, especially those who let their Beasts get the better of them, but that’s not the standard. The Hunters aren’t particularly human, and they have Humanity scores to match their actions. But they aren’t cruel. They don’t torture. This isn’t a personal thing. It’s about food. It’s about use. About a sacred tradition and honoring their predatory graces. Sometimes, they come across as downright icy about it, having written off any moral compunctions that might come with the act of hunting human beings. Still, though, the reputation is as wild hunters out of control, mad packs of brutal thugs stalking and torturing prey.

Camouflage

(Protean ••, Obfuscate ••)

By concentrating for a single turn, the Hound’s flesh assumes the shapes and colorations of his surroundings. This is not a perfect camouflage: his flesh does not bear out the precise details of what lays near him. But at a distance and in the dark, it’s a surprisingly effective way to remain hidden and pursue the hunt for humans.

Cost: 1 Vitae

Dice Pool: Stamina + Stealth + Protean

Action: Instant

Every success on the roll incurs a -2 penalty to any Perception rolls (Wits + Composure or Wits + Investigation) made to spot the Gangrel. If it’s particularly dark or in wild territory, the Devotion roll might gain +1 to +3 depending on the severity of the shadows and the wilderness. The opposite holds true, as well: a -1 to -3 penalty might apply depending on the intensity of ambient light or the closeness of urban living (people, vehicles, noise, motion).

This Devotion costs 12 experience points to learn.

THE HUNT HAS MANY FACES

Baiting: The Hunters bait the prey and wait in hiding. The bait must take the form of what the target wants, hence it’s important to know the target quite well. Will the prey go for a bag of money? A passed-out sorority girl? A loved one bound to a tree?

Camouflage: Evolution favors those who can blend with the background, as it makes them better hunters or safer prey. Here, the Hounds of Actaeon favor camouflage for the former, but it’s important to note that camouflage is only truly successful when the Hunter isn’t moving. Humans sense shapes and subjects by movement, and the more still or slower a Hunter is, the more likely he is to fool the prey.

Deerstand: Okay, so they don’t hunt deer, but some Hunters will track prey from an elevated position. In rural areas, they might wait while concealed in trees or lurk on rocky overhangs. In urban areas, cities have no lack of “high spaces” — awnings, ledges, fire escapes and so forth.

Driving: Also called “harrying prey.” Involves one or two vampires frightening or spooking prey into an area where the rest of the Hunters wait.

Persistence Hunting: Some Hounds do not hunt with rifle, shotgun or bow. They simply pursue a victim until the victim can no longer run. This ancient Paleolithic practice is easy for the vampires, as they do not grow fatigued, and a human can only run so far for so long. Eventually, the human drops. Eventually, the Hunters feed.

Shining: Also called “blinding.” The goal is to blind a target — not difficult for the Hunters, given most hunting parties occur at night away from lights, so it’s easy to disturb a target’s visual sense and stun them with a sharp flash of light. Many use bright spotlights of high candlepower.

Terrible Thoughts, Savage Systems

In this section, you'll find new systems for your Gangrel character as well as some examinations of what it means to be among the Savages. How does it feel to have an undead heart that still beats with the beast's pulse? What does the Blood do to the Savage mind? How does a Gangrel find control?

Gangrel Merits

What follows are a series of Merits found primarily among members of Clan Gangrel, though unless otherwise indicated, they are not limited to the Savages.

Inhuman Resistance (•••)

Effect: Your character's Beast is willful, unknowable, certainly inhuman. Certain mind-control powers have a hard time reconciling this, for they are ostensibly for use on a human mind. But the Beast will not be shackled so easily.

In game terms, this means that your character has a canny resistance to the powers of Dominate and Majesty, gaining +2 on resistance rolls made to thwart their effects. In many Gangrel possessing this Merit, this is less of a conscious thing, and more something that the Beast stirs to work against. (In this way, some posit the Beast as kind of a parasite in and of itself: it works on the behalf of the host to keep itself safe.)

Drawback: Unfortunately, the Beast being what it is, the Gangrel suffers -2 to any rolls made to resist the effects of Animalism powers (Leashing the Beast in particular) or other powers that specifically interact with the Beast.

Of Rose and Thorn (••••)

Prerequisite: Blood Potency ••, Animalism ••

Effect: Some Gangrel maintain "Savage Gardens," ill-manicured plots of land (whether in the city or far from its lights) where blood-red roses grow with biting thorns, where love-lies-bleeding hangs from a rotten crosshatch of wood, where sallow trees produce sick fruit and climbing vines conspire to blot out the light from the moon and stars. Some such Damned cultivate gardens much like any mortal: while a vampire's touch is chill and unnatural, it does not blacken roots or wilt flowers (usually). Some, though, aim to take a more personal touch with their projects. They grow so bound to such cultivations that they begin to feel a connection with the garden, with the very soil around it.

This opens up Animalism to the Gangrel, allowing her to use the Discipline on plants as well as animals. Of course, this is not a perfect one-to-one ratio: the powers work a bit differently on foliage and flowers than they do wolf and hawk. Furthermore, the Gangrel must possess Animalism at a rating of one more dot than the power she wishes to use with plants; thus, to use Obedience, a Gangrel must possess Animalism •••.



The first four dots of Animalism work accordingly when used on plants:

Feral Whispers (•): The Savage is able to speak to a plant. This is no easy conversation. Plants "think" in alien, inscrutable ways – sometimes simple, other times woefully complex. A Savage might be able to learn who was in her garden or what the plant hungers for, but will have no luck discerning elements of time from flora. Eye contact is obviously not required for this ability to take effect.

Obedience (••): The Savage can command a plant to grow in a certain way, and somewhat quickly. He can demand that it bloom. He can force it to produce nectar. He can stir a vine to climb a wall, slippery moss to spread across a stone path, or the branches of a tree to grow together so that visibility is limited to nearly nothing. Given the commands thusly, foliage does grow at thrice its normal "growth rate" until its task is complete. Note that a plant cannot do things that are outside its purview; that is the nature of the next level of this power.

Call of the Wild (•••): With this, the Gangrel can demand that a plant grow elements outside of its own nature: a blood-red maple tree may bloom roses, the grass beneath one's feet may manifest thorns, a thick hanging vine may be infused with medicinal or hallucinogenic properties to humans (or to Damned who drink the blood of those humans). Once again, growing such elements occurs at a growth rate of thrice its expected speed.

Subsume the Lesser Spirit (••••): The vampire may psychically enter a single plant's "body" and possess it. The other rules of this power as per with animals apply. The Gangrel cannot move faster than the plant normally does (which may be not at all or at such a glacial rate that it's not worth considering). Sunlight does not harm the vampire while in this state (though it can harm his empty body), and he does *not* need to attempt to remain awake at this time. To exit this state, the vampire must expend a point of Willpower or be otherwise trapped. He can use Animalism while within the plant, but no other Disciplines.

Note that this Merit only applies to the first four levels of Animalism: Leashing the Beast (•••••) has no plant-specific effects.

Drawback: Possessing this Merit makes it harder for the Savage to use Animalism as it was naturally (or perhaps unnaturally) intended. All Animalism rolls suffer -1 dice when used on actual animals, due to the perversion of the Discipline.

Pack Blooded (••)

Prerequisite: Must belong to a coterie where other members of the coterie (some, if not all) possess this Merit.

Effect: For most Damned, being a part of a coterie is without true bond. The vampires within a given coterie might work against each other as much as they work *for* one another. A handshake and a kind word in the front, a sharpened stake and a whispered insult from the back. Moreover, at least when compared against the entire backdrop of a vampire's eternal Requiem, coterie form and fade all the time. They are ultimately fleeting.

Not so with some Gangrel coterie, known as "packs." A pack formed between Gangrel is something that goes beyond a social relationship. It gets in the Blood. This doesn't mean they share Vitae, swapping the red stuff in some sort of circular Vinculum. No, it's as if the Blood within one Savage shifts subtly to be like the Blood of another in his pack. Silly as it seems, it's how mortal females living together for long periods of time often develop the same menstrual periods: the Blood is given over to a certain animal rhythm for those who care to give into it. Some Gangrel certainly do.

Only those who possess this Merit within a given coterie gain the benefits, and these benefits only *apply* to those who possess the dots of this Merit in that coterie. (In other words, if a pack has four Savages and only two of them possess the Pack Blooded Merit, only those two gain the benefits for one another. The others are outside the harmony of this feral resonance.) To reiterate, this only works with vampires in the same coterie or "pack." How a pack is formed is different from place to place. Some Gangrel institute elaborate rituals of scarification or ceremonial hunts to "bond" the Damned together. Others need no such ritualized behavior, recognizing other kin and giving into the unspoken bonds immediately.

Those with this Merit gain +1 Initiative, +1 Defense and +1 Speed when working together in combat (they must be within 50 yards of one another).

Outside combat, those with the Pack Blooded Merit gain +3 to all Empathy rolls made on one another.

Drawback: Being Pack Blooded is a disavowal – whether conscious or not – of one's own human compass. Degenera-

tion rolls made whilst in the company of other Pack Blooded members of the coterie are made at -1 dice.

Savage Kenning (•••)

Prerequisites: Animalism • or Animal Ken •, must be of Clan Gangrel.

Effect: Something in one species of animal resonates with the Gangrel: that wild spark in a hound's eye, the mad curiosity in a cat's swishing tail, the alien distance of a fat and hungry fly. The Savage gains +2 to all Animal Ken or Animalism rolls involving animals of that species. The character cannot possess several versions of this Merit applying to different species. It can only be purchased once and cannot change: whatever it is that forms the link between animal and Savage is something that is deep and primal, a connection based off the Savage's innate nature. The Damned are simply not dynamic enough of creatures to dig that deep and change something so utterly fundamental.

Available at character creation only.

Swarm Mind (••)

Prerequisites: Protean ••••

Effect: By purchasing this Merit, the Savage using Shape of the Beast (Protean ••••) can become a swarm of small animals instead of a single larger creature. The purchase of this Merit allows for only one *type* of animal: rat, raven, horsefly, or some other creature of Size 2 or smaller. This Merit must be repurchased for each different type of animal.

The Protean swarm form exists in a radius or yards equal to the Gangrel's own Size (usually Size 5). A swarm can generally inflict one die of bashing damage to anyone within its radius per turn. A swarm can inflict even more damage by condensing. Every time the swarm condenses to cover one yard less of its full area, it inflicts one additional die of damage per turn (representing a larger concentration of rats biting, bees stinging, and so forth). Condensing is also representative of a visual horror: rats piling into a teetering tower of yellow teeth and tails flickering, or a column of spiders toppling toward a victim. A vampire can choose to drink blood in this form, thus doing lethal damage, but can only drink a single point per two turns – many mouths make quick work, yes, but they can only take blood in nips and licks.

Armor is effective against a swarm only if it covers one's full body, but even then it provides only half its rating. In addition, targets are distracted by the swarm, suffering -2 dice on rolls involving perception or requiring concentration while they are within the radius, even if they're not specifically attacked.

The swarm cannot be attacked with fists, clubs, swords or guns. Only area-affect attacks such as a torch affect it. Each point of aggravated damage inflicted by a flame or other applicable attack halves the swarm's Size. Once the swarm is reduced to a two-yard radius, the vampire has no choice but to return to his original form (at which point he must check for a fear frenzy, **Vampire: The Requiem**, pp. 179-180).

Drawback: Fragmenting the body is not a sane action. For eight hours after changing to a swarm form, the Gangrel suffers from the Irrationality derangement and must make Resolve +

Composure checks accordingly to resist giving into that lunacy. If the character already suffers from the mild version, he suffers the severe malady (Multiple Personality) instead. These derangements are found in the **World of Darkness Rulebook**, pp. 99-100.

Undead Menses (•••)

Effect: A woman's menstruation has in some primal societies or traditions been tied to the lunar cycles, to the tides, to magic as a sacrifice of blood. It represents a woman at the height of her power: she is fertile and capable of the creation of life, symbolized by the seemingly supernatural ability to bleed without being weakened or dying. It's also a grave taboo in many cultures, particularly those that are male-dominated. The blood is seen as threatening. It is indicated as shameful, arguably because men seek to repress (or simply not admit to) a woman's power. It is blood that an infant does not feed upon; it is blood that leaves the body and does not create life. For some, that is frightening.

Some Savages still bleed like this regardless of (or more appropriately, *in spite of*) their unliving state. The blood that flows is black, thick, a musky elixir. It does not come once a month as it does with humans, but instead flows whenever the vampire wills it: by expending a point of Vitae, she may expunge this undead menses from her body.

The blood expelled in such a way has a few different functions: if used in the blood magic of Crûac, it grants the Savage a +1 bonus to the roll to empower the ritual. If fed to a mortal being, it acts as a mild hallucinogen (-1 to all relevant dice pools) in addition to providing the other effects intrinsic to Vitae. Finally, the blood itself acts as a potent marker for other Savages or those with Auspex. Marking an area with the blood gives off a heady aroma long after the blood dries or is washed away (for a number of weeks equal to the marking vampire's Resolve score). If a Gangrel vampire or a vampire possessing any dots in Auspex comes across that mark during this time, the vampire's player may roll Wits + Survival to sense the mark and its nature. Some Gangrel use their undead menses to write messages in this way (symbols or short words) to their brethren.

Drawback: The vampire can only access this undead menses once per day for "free." Gaining the blood (i.e. more than a single point of Vitae expelled) more than once per day is possible, but the vampire feels her insides twist up and cinch, as if something has been damaged. And it has; she takes one point of aggravated damage per point of Vitae menses expelled beyond the first.

Devotions

What follows are devotions available to Gangrel characters. Others outside the clan can learn these devotions, but must spend more experience points to do so (four times the total number of Discipline dots necessary as opposed to three times the amount).

Undying Familiar

(Animalism ••••, Protean ••)

Animals do not weather the Embrace. Sometimes, the spark simply fails to take: the vampire wastes his precious Vitae by

pouring it down the throat of a dead beast. Other times, the animal's body seems to reject it: as the potent blood stirs the creature to a second life, the body contorts, bones snap, and the skin tightens to the point that it ruptures. Any semblance of false life is temporary and gone in moments.

But with this Devotion, some Savages have learned to *mimic* the vampiric condition in animals. The Gangrel kills the creature and drains its blood (though he needn't swallow said blood if his body cannot absorb such base material). Then, as the animal's life goes winking out, the Gangrel feeds it his own Vitae and performs the roll below. The creature gives into a reasonable facsimile of life; this is no Requiem, not really, but for all appearances it's easy to assume that somehow the beast was given the Embrace and dragged into immortality.

Cost: 1 Vitae per the animal's Size

Dice Pool: Resolve + Animal Ken + Animalism

Action: Instant

Whatever creature is granted counterfeit life awakens, but not hungry like those humans who receive the Embrace. The beast awakens mostly dead of any personality it had before (this is less concerning with a creature such as a falcon, but perhaps more disturbing when performed upon a once-loyal and favored hound), and even its appearance seems to be muted and dulled: the sheen goes off the coat, any colors in the feathers seem gray or worn, its eyes fail to twinkle with that spark of life. The animal isn't a mindless automaton, not exactly. But it changes. It *lessens*, somehow. Almost as if hollow of mind and soul.

The creature retains the normal set of stats attributed to it (some animal stats can be found on pp. 202-203, **World of Darkness Rulebook**), with one exception: successes gained on the roll to enliven the dead beast can be added to its Attributes at a rate of one for one. If the Gangrel's player achieves four successes, he can add four new dots to the creature's Attributes (though Attributes cannot be taken above 5 normally). Other traits may change as a result: Defense, Speed, Health, Initiative, Willpower, and so forth.

The Savage is tied to this creature in ways he may not expect, hence why the devotion often refers to the beast as a "familiar." The Savage has an easier time when using any of the effects of Animalism upon the creature, gaining a +2 bonus to any such roll. During the day while slumbering, the Savage also automatically rides along in the beast's senses with no roll necessary, as if having performed Subsume the Lesser Spirit. (The creature is not subject to harm by the sun, so it may wander in the daytime – though it may prefer instead to sleep next to its master, as well. The vampire, however, does not need to check Humanity to "stay awake" during daylight as opposed to the systems present in Subsume the Lesser Spirit.)

The animal may ignore bashing damage. Lethal and aggravated, however, cannot be healed. The beast cannot be destroyed via lethal damage, but its body can be made such that the wound penalties (up to -3) carry through as it accumulates aggravated damage: it drags a broken limb, its head hangs low with the skin stripped off, or its ribs show through tattered fur or feathers. Once the beast has suffered all accumulated aggravated damage, it finally perishes, turning to a pile of leathery skin and bone dust.

The familiar needn't feed on blood like a vampire, but the Savage creator must nourish the animal with a point of his own Vitae once per night. Failure to do so causes the creature to start to decay, suffering one point of lethal damage per night that passes without consuming its master's precious fluids.

This power costs 18 experience points to learn for all Savages except those with Status in the Circle of the Crone. In the Circle, Savages find this devotion to be more common, and thus the cost is reduced to 15 experience points.

Unnatural Contortion

(Protean ••••, Resilience •)

By concentrating for one turn, the Gangrel can literally bend and manipulate his body in unwholesome ways: legs over shoulders, joints going the wrong way, back of head touching the spine, and so forth. Some Savages use this to freak out the kine. Others use it to escape bonds or wriggle into spaces normally too small for them – an air duct, beneath a low-hanging bed, through a cellar window.

Cost: 1 Vitae

Dice Pool: Dexterity + Athletics + Protean

Action: Instant

Every success on the roll can apply toward the reduction of the Gangrel's Size score (to a minimum of Size 2, about the approximate Size of a 4-year-old human child) or can instead go toward any rolls made to escape bonds.

Note that Size reduction is artificial, not the literal shrinking of the body. Bones may pop out of shape and allow the Gangrel to scrunch up or rearrange his "natural" form, but he doesn't actually lose mass. In this way, the Gangrel does not change any stats based on the Size score, such as Health.

This power costs 15 experience points to learn.

Crúde

What follows are blood magic rituals available only to those who belong to the Circle of the Crone. Does this speak perhaps to the Gangrel's early ties to the magic of the bloody crescent? Is it possible that they, as some have suggested, helped to bring this magic to the world – maybe even carrying it at the behest of some monstrous mother? Or, is it just that their intimacy with the Beast and Blood gives them some small advantage with these unique rituals?

Prey's Blood

(Level Two Crúac Ritual)

With this ritual, a Savage cultist can become a preternaturally gifted tracker. The ritual helps "mark" a target, be it living or vampire, supernaturally infecting their blood with some element that the Gangrel can feel at the back of his mind: a faint tickle, the sound of wind whipping, the feel of a tongue on brain tissue. The elemental feeling increases when in proximity to the marked target. This means that the Gangrel gains substantial bonuses when attempting to track this marked individual. Survival rolls made to track the target gain a +4 bonus. This lasts for a number of nights equal to the Savage's own Resolve score.

If the Savage attempts to track a vampire, however, the roll to mark the blood of the Damned is penalized by that vampire's Blood Potency score *unless* the target Damned is aware of the ritual attempt and approves its use (meaning, the character could mark the blood of a pack or cult mate as long as they know and agree, and the penalty would therefore not apply).

Tickblood

(Level Three Crúac Ritual)

The vampire curses the flesh of a mortal with this ritual. That person's body now holds more blood than it once did, up to twice the normal amount (which is equivalent to twice that human's Health score in points of Vitae). Provided that the mortal target doesn't lose blood during this time in a substantial way, he actually bloats and gains one point of fresh blood regenerated per day (upon awakening in the morning). As this happens, the skin stretches, the belly and fat bloat, the body shifts and distends like a tick filling up on dog's blood. This "livestock" process does not increase the person's Health per blood point gained, but he *does* gain +1 Health by the end of the process because of all the swelling and distension. She stops gaining the "one point per day" whenever blood is drawn from her in large quantities (at least a point taken). Some call this "lancing the boil."

Whereas drawing blood from humans invokes one lethal point of damage per point of Vitae taken, this is now changed to one point of lethal damage per *two* points of Vitae taken from the body. In this way, some Savage cultists create whole farms of humans who bloat unnaturally with twice the blood a normal human body can hold.

The Red Surrender

The Beast is active. The Blood is alive.

The Savages know this in a way that the Damned of other clans do not. Something in their black blood binds them to the Beast in just such a way that is, for many, too close for comfort. Some, though, *do* find comfort in this proximity to the mad

creature clawing at the inside of one's dead heart. They find the lure of the Beast like a warm, sucking tide: a blissful undertow threatening to sweep one into the deep dark of mother ocean. Is it really so bad? To be lost in just such a way? Even if only giving into it for a short time?

They have many names for it, almost as many names as there exist packs of Gangrel. One might think of it as “unleashing” the Beast or “opening the cage door.” Another might paint it negatively: “submission” or “surrender.” The common name is the Red Surrender, if only because of the faint blood-colored hue that stains the periphery of one’s vision when given over to the Beast’s toying grip.

To enter the Red Surrender, a Savage merely need to relinquish his grip on humanity for a time and let the Beast have a larger role in the character’s mind and soul (or what passes for one, anyway). The Beast isn’t a sentient thing, though some *do* put a face or a voice (or even a name) to the Beasts lingering in their thoughts and day-bound dreams. Most admit (or *hope*) that this is just a reflection of the Gangrel’s own repressed wishes and mad desires. (See below, “Draugr,” for more reflections on the Beast.)

To be clear, giving into the Red Surrender is *always* the Gangrel’s choice – though many falsely believe it is outside their choosing. In much the same way that heroin addiction or a propensity to overeat is ostensibly a choice made by an individual (though perhaps unconsciously), so too is “opening the cage door” and letting the Beast out to play.

Unleashed, Untamed

It happens immediately. It’s almost as if the Savage relaxes a too-tight muscle or lets go of a single inch of whatever rope holds her dangling over the abyss, and... the Beast surges forth, coming nearer to the surface.

It feels strange. *Freeing*. That red hue playing at the edges of one’s vision, the sudden feel of moral buoyancy, the lack of troubling human thoughts (always so petty and plainly trivial, those thoughts).

The Beast isn’t in control. Not exactly. But what was once a shadow beneath the surface of the dark waters now has shape, a face, a voice.

The Savage isn’t an animal, either. She doesn’t revert to some growling, snarling state. She doesn’t drop to all fours and lope forth like a common dog. But her sensibilities grow more feline. Some manifest this in an icy, predatory way, others in a hot-blooded, claws-out hunger for passion.

One Savage might simply have little interest in conversation, and would rather stalk prey or communicate through body language. Another might indulge himself, glutting on blood or sex. A third leaps from rooftop to rooftop, exulting in the cold air rushing past beneath the fingernail sliver of the moon above.

Plainly stated, it feels *good*. And given how rarely the Damned feel good (outside the Kiss, which almost painfully seems more pleasant for the human vessel than for the consuming Kindred), it’s something a vampire doesn’t really want to leave, does it?

Note that giving in requires nothing from the vampire other than the choice to do so. It happens in the span of a single turn; and within, one can almost hear the faint echoing *click* of the key turning in a very bad lock.

POSSESSION IS NINE TENTHS OF THE LAW

Isn’t this a surefire way for entities to possess the Gangrel? In particular, the spirits of the Strix, who are said to be returning?

You bet it is.

Gifts from the Beast

The Beast is not without benefit. Outside the warmth of the Blood inside the body and a kind of *satisfied* feeling, the vampire gains the following benefits on the first night having given into the Red Surrender:

- The vampire gains +1 to dice pools based on the following Skills: Athletics, Intimidation, Stealth and Survival.
- The vampire gains +1 to Initiative.
- The vampire gains +1 to any Wits + Composure rolls made to detect an ambush or some other surprise event or attack.
- If the vampire spends Willpower on dice pools involving Animal Ken, she gains four additional dice instead of the normal three.

The Beast Taketh Away

It becomes harder to access human levels of emotion, intelligence, and interest. As such, a Savage who has given herself over to the Beast in the Red Surrender suffers the following effects:

- The vampire suffers a -1 penalty to dice pools based on the following Skills: Academics, Computer, Medicine, Science, Empathy, Socialize.
- The vampire suffers a -1 penalty to any non-Discipline dice rolls involving Intelligence.
- The unskilled penalty for Mental rolls goes up to -4 dice from -3.
- The vampire may not regain full Willpower by fulfilling her Virtue. Instead, the vampire gains only a single point of Willpower, as though indulging in a Vice.

The Catch, Cruel and Callous

The Gangrel may choose to remain in this state beyond that first night. Doing so comes part and parcel with reward and consequence.

Anything that gained a +1 bonus gains another cumulative bonus per night remaining in that state of Red Surrender. Two nights equates to a +2 bonus, three nights garners a +3 bonus, and so forth until a maximum of +5 dice after five nights.

Of course, penalties are similarly cumulative. Anything that suffered a -1 penalty grows in penalty by one die per night, to a maximum of -5 dice.

Each night, the Beast swims closer and closer to the surface. By the fifth night, its face is clear, its voice is crystal.

Moral Compass Endlessly Spinning

Degeneration becomes all too easy during this time because the Beast has little interest in human need or the morality of mortals. While lost in the throes of the Red Surrender, any actions necessitating a degeneration roll seem distant to the character, almost outside her scope of interest. It's not impossible to gain perspective on it in a human way, but it's harder to find compassion and focus on it.

As a result, degeneration rolls made during the first four nights of operating within the grip of the Red Surrender suffer a -1 penalty. Upon the fifth night and after, if the character remains in the state of surrender, that penalty doubles to a -2 (though the character's player can always have one die minimum to roll when resisting degeneration).

Obviously, this is a slippery slope. The Red Surrender feels good. While under its spell, it's easier to make choices a human would not make but a vampiric predator most certainly would. Once those choices are made, it's hard to view them in a human light, which may lead to degeneration, which only puts the character farther from her once-extant morals. That slope is slippery, all right. Slick with sweet, greasy blood.

But Wait, There's More

The Red Surrender feels good. The Beast ensures that. It works to stir bestial pleasure. It only wants to *help*.

Which means the Red Surrender becomes a state that is not always easy to leave. On the first night, negating it necessitates success on a Resolve + Composure roll. Success means that the Beast sinks back down into the tenebrous depths, a comfort for some, a sadness for others.

Each night beyond the first, though, invokes a -1 penalty to that Resolve + Composure roll. Meaning it becomes harder and harder to leave the state of the Red Surrender. And only one roll may be made on behalf of the character per night. Willpower may not be spent on this roll; whether the Beast blocks it as an active repudiation or whether it's the character's own subconscious mind working against her (and some say that's all the Beast really is, anyhow, just the character's own base and vile subconscious) remains unknown.

Some Savages enter the Red Surrender and remain in its grip for weeks, months, even years. Few manage to remain in

it for much longer than that, finding themselves tumbling into a heartless and truly bestial state – the kind of existence that gets a team of hunters (mortal or vampire) to put the Savage down like a dog with distemper. Other Gangrel flirt with the Beast, giving in a taste at a time, an hour here, an hour there. But flirting with the devil is never safe: soon that hour will come that the Savage cannot stir the will necessary to deny the state, and the red at the edges of her vision creeps ever closer, discoloring all that she sees in a warm veneer of blood.



A RUMOR OF DEFIANCE

It's said that a Savage can not only rebuke the Red Surrender but can deny it in such a way that she truly helps to quash the Beast within, forcing it so deep that it becomes only the faintest shadow.

Doing so necessitates the expenditure of a *dot* of Willpower, spent in such a way that it forges a leash or pair of manacles for the Beast.

The vampire may never again touch the Red Surrender, but once per week she can access a single night of effects opposite to what the Red Surrender provides. All the -1 penalties become +1 bonuses (for example, she gains +1 to Intelligence rolls) and all the +1 bonuses become penalties (she suffers a -1 to Survival rolls). No other mechanical effects besides these are felt, but one other ironic twist is present:

It feels *awful*. Humanity is no pleasant thing. Denying the Beast feels sick, wrong, tainted. The vampire concentrates overmuch on all the wrong things she's done and recognizes herself for the monster that she is. During this one night, she experiences a curious effect on her Humanity: degeneration rolls gain +1 dice, but if she fails a degeneration roll the roll made to determine whether or not she suffers a derangement is made at a -1 penalty.

Of course, this might just be a rumor. The Beast surely cannot be denied in such a way...



The Draugr: Humanity Lost

The Damned are not human, but they hold onto the human parts of themselves. Sometimes they cling to the good parts of being human: the compassion, the love, the ecstasies, the triumphs. Maybe they ring hollow but lying to oneself is easy, and moreover, the Kindred are good at deception both of themselves and of others. For many, it's easy to convince themselves that these elements of humanity are real for them, a truly

genuine expression, and thus simple for some to cling to these facets the way a man in the ocean clings to a floating board. Others hold onto the *bad* parts of being human: the anger, the jealousy, the petty needs and wants, the hatefulness and the injustice. It's easy to grab hold of these elements because they are so prevalent, and so indicative of the Damned experience that stripping away the good things and focusing strictly on the

awful ones seems easiest. But that path is a slippery slope, slick with mud and blood: committing acts in service to these darker elements can push one farther away from the moral center, from what it means to be human. As darkness drapes over the soul, the vampire moves away from the lights of village and city and into the shadows of the forest – into a wilderness of the mind if not the true badlands.

The loss of Humanity is a strange thing: each dot lost represents a *comfort* with having let go of that rung of the moral ladder. It's not troubling to lose a dot of Humanity, really... it's almost freeing. A derangement born as a result certainly represents trouble and difficulty – the dissonant disconnect with trying to be human and failing – but once that dot of Humanity is lost it's often difficult for a vampire to see the connection between the madness and the degradation of one's "humanness." He likely doesn't even recognize the presence of the derangement in the first place: crazy people, after all, so rarely see themselves as crazy. A lunacy becomes a crutch, an excuse, perhaps even a point of pride.

So that loss of Humanity doesn't really *bother* the vampire, because if it did, if he truly recognized his distance from the moral, mortal center, he'd be all the likelier to feel guilt. Recognizing the threat of loss is what allows a character to keep the dot. Failing to recognize it – and thus failing to see the danger or the impediment to relinquishing one's humanness – is what the loss of Humanity truly represents.

That's how Humanity loss is a slippery slope: lose a dot, and find comfort in sin. Shedding oneself of mortal trappings is almost like lightening a load: a great moral burden turns to ash and blows away on the wind, leaving one feeling perhaps more pure, more connected to himself, but what he's really more attuned to is his Beast.

Is it true that the Gangrel have an easier time degenerating? That they are genuinely closer to the feline monster within than the Damned of other clans? Technically, no. A Savage does not possess a preternatural proximity to her Beast. She is not inclined by dint of the Blood to give into the Beast's needs. It's all too easy to assume that because the Gangrel are bestial that the Beast is mammalian, some expression of a reptilian mind. But that is not precisely true, is it?

The Nature of the Beast

A Gangrel's Beast is the same as any other at the core: it is a monstrous exultation of all the sin and hunger and madness of being a vampire. It's not natural. It's not a wolf living in the heart, because a wolf is a creature of nature. Maybe it's a wolf with distemper, a wolf with a bloody muzzle and mad eyes and black tumors hanging from his neck. But it's just as likely a shadow grinning in the reflection of a knife or a howling keening wind that strips flesh from bone in the Savage's daytime dreams. The Beast is not an expression of the primal side of nature. It's far worse than that.

That said, the Gangrel sometimes *choose* to be connected to their Beast for precisely the wrong reason. The Savages can convince themselves, or one another, that the Beast is a natural

expression, that the howls within or the wolf's eyes peering out from the chambers of a dead heart is a "pure" thing, the Savage's soul at its barest and most elegant state. Many Gangrel share the idea with one another that tearing away one's humanity in great strips of meat and muscle and skin is a way to get closer to this untarnished existence, to release the Beast from his cage of bone (and for some, this can be a genuinely Manichaean struggle wherein the flesh – and thus, the human body – is believed to be a manifestation of corporeal corruption and evil and thus must be damaged to find a state of righteousness with one's inner monster, many calling this state "Golconda"). Ah, and once convinced of this, loss of Humanity is simple, as noted: lose a dot, feel comfortable with its loss, and continue down the path. It's made all the easier by those who gleefully sprint toward this state under the mistaken assumption that they are ridding themselves of fetters in order to become one with nature, one with the animal within. If only it were true. If only the Beast were truly that, a beast. If only it weren't a hurricane, a madman, a spray of blood on the wall or a swarm of biting flies with human faces.

The Beast is not natural, but that's the mistake that allows the Savages to get closer to the Beast than the Damned of other clans: within the clan is a viral idea that has convinced them otherwise.

Communion with the Monster

A Savage standing over his first kill closes his eyes for just a moment, and sees something in the dark of the mind, a shade standing in the faint light that penetrates the eyelid.

A Gangrel who bloodlets himself and prays as an adherent to the Mother Crone feels his Humanity twist up, tortuous, within him – and with that loss he feels a face behind his own, sneering and laughing.

The Savage who has become a lurking manifestation of the id cackles as he violates each and every corpse in the high school gymnasium – all of them dead by his claws, of course – and as he does so, he sees another version of himself just outside of his periphery, urging him on, his own blood-soaked spectral cheerleader.

Some Gangrel have a Beast that over time gains a face, even a personality. It's not real, not truly a different thing from the character – no, surely it's just the vampire's own dark side given imaginary flesh and form. (Then again... one must wonder if the Beast is a real thing, a thing that can be made tangible, a demon lurking in the clothes of the skin.) At any point in which the Savage's Humanity is threatened, it's possible that the Beast may linger longer, revealing an eye or a twisted mouth or nothing more than an applauding shadow.

With the Storyteller's help, a player can actually conceive of her Savage character's Beast – it isn't a concrete definition, and certainly the appearance and actions of the Beast can change. But by conceptualizing what the Beast may look like, and how it might "act" as a phantom that only the character can see or hear... it helps give definition to what the character's slide down the gore-slick slope of Humanity might look like. Is the Beast tied in some way to the character's Vice? (A bloated worm's

neck and fat mouth for Gluttony, a Priapic Big Bad Wolf for Lust?) Could the Beast be something from the character's mortal life, such as an abusive father dragging his whipping belt or the character's once-best friend (now dead by the Savage's own hand)? The Beast within might just be an embodiment of the character at her worst: bloody, brutal, wide-eyed, savage in the deepest meaning of the word.

How does the Beast appear? In the periphery, perhaps. In the character's mind's eye or whispering in his ear also works. The Beast might appear in dreams experienced during the dead slumber of day.

Nobody can see or sense the Beast beyond the character, but it serves as an interesting phantom presence when appropriate; during times of moral decay, the appearance of the Beast works to serve as either a warning to the character... or an affirmation of her actions, depending on how she views visits from the tempting monster.

Humanity Zero

With the exception of the Ventrue, the Gangrel are perhaps the likeliest to fall to the lower tiers of Humanity, having given themselves over to ideas that celebrate the Beast within or a feral way of existing. They keen in the forest. They hunt in packs, brutalizing all who fall before them. They cast social mores and human norms to the wind. And Humanity dwindles.

So, what happens when a Savage drops to zero Humanity? As described on p. 186 of *Vampire: The Requiem*, the Reptilian brain takes over: the vampire wants very few things, and all of those involve fucking, killing or sleeping. The character's mind is likely lost to this tidal pull of *need* and *want*, and only rarely can a vampire be brought back from this brink.

Most exist this way, doing nothing beyond hunting, gorging, slumbering.

But some – and nobody knows what triggers this, what separates one debased monster from the next – add another item to the menu:

Breeding.

These are the Draugr: mindless undead whose primary goal is to Embrace wantonly.

The Draugr's Embrace...

... is no Embrace at all, really. The Embrace performed by a vampire can be an elegant thing: a swipe of claw across a wrist, a razor cut down the center of one's tongue-meat, press the skin to the slips or give the dying one a kiss and a mouth of Vitae, and the chords of the Requiem cue up and the Blood ignites within as an animating force.

This is not how the Draugr make more of their own.

They do not need a corpse drained of blood, as the Damned do. And the Embrace is rarely so elegant: the Draugr somehow forces a gory pint of its own thick blood into the mouth and belly of the body (perhaps by biting its own tongue or vomiting the blood into the open mouth), stirring it to some rough semblance of life.

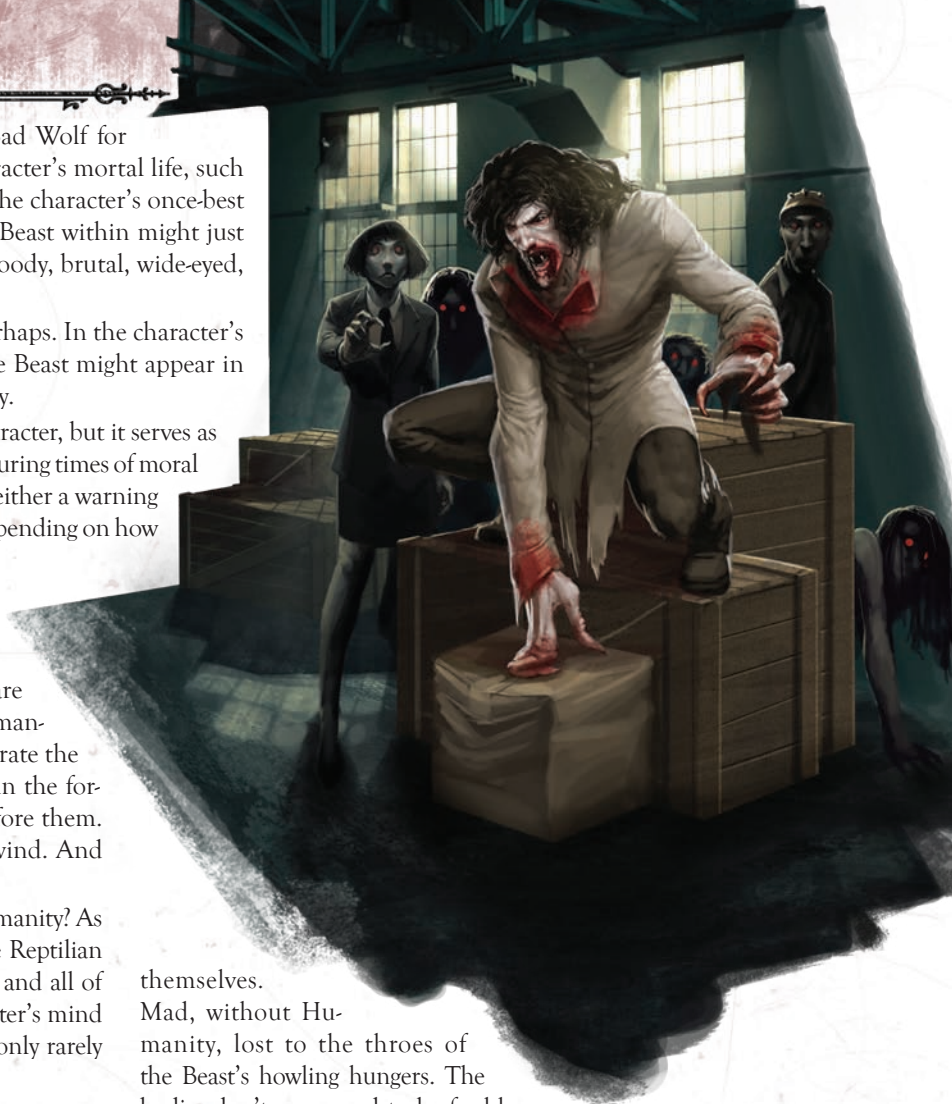
And "semblance of life" is key, here. Most of the so-called "childer" of Draugr are just like their sires, and awaken as Draugr

themselves.

Mad, without Humanity, lost to the throes of the Beast's howling hungers. The bodies don't even need to be freshly dead —, corpses deceased within a few days and mostly "together" (though such corpses, the Ordo Dracul maintains, must have been touched by the vampiric Curse in some fashion – ghouls and the victims of Kindred feedings are very susceptible, as are those who died while under the psychic

THE BEAST OF OTHER DAMNED

Personifying one's Beast within isn't necessarily only a Gangrel trait, and can apply to other vampires. The reason it's mentioned here, along with the Savages, is exactly as mentioned earlier: the Gangrel tend to believe themselves closer to the Beast, and many think this a good thing, a way to become or remain "untamed." The Beast is personified in their minds (for some, it becomes a god or a genuinely external presence like the Crone or a demon) and so it's all the easier for the spiraling mind to envision such a thing as lurking at the margins. It's for this reason you can assume that in most ways, a Gangrel's Beast always has some level of bestial magnetism, just as the character likely does, albeit in a lesser manner.



influence of vampiric Disciplines). The Draugr force blood into the corpse, and another Draugr is dragged into inhumanity. They form packs. They hunt together and make more of their own. They blow their Willpower (for the Embrace still works mechanically similar) on body after body, and when one is spent, another can create. It's a gross infection, an outbreak scenario that the Damned fear. The Invictus have special teams to "take down" such monstrous horrors, while the Ordo Dracul has its own cabals whose only goal is to capture the Draugr and study them (for clearly they represent the opposite of what the Dragons hope to achieve, and are certainly worth examining...). Mortal hunters, too, are quick to rise to the occasion when a tide of undead fiends threatens to overwhelm a town or a city block.

Blessedly, every instance of the rising Draugr has been put down. So far.

The Rare Few

Ah, but not every "childe" of the Draugr *becomes* a Draugr. Some stir to unlife as any vampire would upon the moment of his Embrace: certainly hungry, probably confused and mad-dened, but with Humanity intact. Where is the line? What unforeseen element draws the distinction between slaving beast and unfortunate Savage? Nobody knows. Some suspect the nature of death or the proximity to the *time* of death matter: if the body is freshly dead and has lost enough of its blood, perhaps the Embrace can be more "natural" (if such a distinction is even reasonable to make, which many Kindred think that it is). Perhaps it has something to with the Draugr sire? If some tiny semblance of humanity remains, is it possible that his childer will possess the spark necessary to not devolve immediately into a raging monster?

However it happens, sometimes a Draugr will sweep through an area and instead of spreading the plague that is his mindless hunger, he will leave behind a confused and starving brood of Gangrel – they are wayward and hopefully find one another, for all they have to go on is the memory of the gibbering thing that gave them this curse. More than one such brood has banded together to first and foremost hunt down their collective sire.

The Draugr's Strengths

A true Savage Draugr remains a vampire and, for the most part, still is subject to the same advantages and drawbacks of all the Damned. However, Draugr also have the following preternatural benefits:

- The creature can only be killed by either an accumulation of aggravated damage or by at least five points of lethal damage done to the head (necessitating a targeted shot, -2 dice). A stake through the heart will still paralyze a Draugr, however.
- Draugr seem to gain a level of swiftness unrelated to any dots possessed in Celerity. All Draugr gain +3 to their Speed score.

- A bite from a Draugr does not heal easily: damage done from a bite is aggravated, given that the wound puckers and necrotizes, and may result in a septic infection. Whether this infection is literal and born of bacteria or is some kind of "spiritual" sickness remains a question that none have successfully answered.

The Draugr's Weaknesses

Though the Draugr obviously have some strengths above and beyond what the average Damned get, they are also subject to some unique weaknesses:

- Each Draugr lurches to a rough semblance of living death with some kind of folkloric taboo in place: holy water may burn it, the ringing of church bells may disturb it, a line of salt across the ground may unsettle it. Any time the Draugr confronts its taboo (meaning the taboo is within proximity to the creature – it can see, feel, taste or hear it), the Draugr suffers a -3 to all rolls for the remainder of the scene (or longer if exposure is prolonged). While exposed, the Draugr likely keens, howls, dances about, clutches its head or performs some other deranged animal act.
- A Draugr's use of Disciplines becomes incredibly savage and primal. While it is still perfectly capable of using Disciplines such as Auspex, Dominate and similar phenomena, it wields them solely to sate its urges, and make its hunt easier. The Draugr possessed of Majesty is a terrible and horrifying figure, a veritable blood-soaked messiah whose unholy allure brings its prey to their violent ends. Draugr cannot, however, utilize Covenant-based powers: the effects of the Ordo Dracul's Coils fade from the Draugr, and they are incapable of using Theban Sorcery, Cruac or other effects.

SAVAGERY WITHIN?

So, only debased Humanity Zero Gangrel can become Draugr? Not explicitly, no. In theory, any vampire who drops to that point can become Draugr. So why is this listed in a book only about Savages?

Because ultimately, Savages are in closer connection with the Beast. The Draugr is a rabid embodiment of the Beast, and so it's perhaps likelier that the Gangrel become such a monster at this stage of lost Humanity. Moreover, because the Savages are often nomadic and wander from town to town or city to city, they are also more likely to be exposed to Draugr hunting the highways and byways; it is a plague that threatens the Damned, and the Savages are unwittingly the first on the line against this monstrous incursion. Finally, the Draugr represent a dire warning to Gangrel who think that one's humanness is a weakness.

Mad, Rabid, Untamed, Wild

What does it feel like to be Savage? When you as a player step into the role of a Gangrel, what does your character feel night-to-night? How best can you express this in-game? Below, we help illuminate some elements of playing a Gangrel that may come to the front as the story continues or, at the least, may be something that you keep in the back of your mind to help you guide your Savage through the wild growth and brutal tangle of his Requiem.

A Low, Throaty Growl

It may be the tiny impulsions that give your character some context in the night-to-night. Little things that allow you to conjure character traits, tics, habits.

Bestial Blood

The Blood. It is not a sentient thing, not a thing that has its own will. And yet it is wholly unique to every vampire, for within the decanter of undead flesh mundane blood is transubstantiated into the mystic and mythic Vitae of vampires. In less lofty terms, it's like drugs or alcohol: they affect different people in different ways, and so too does the blood. In many ways, it's like a momentary injection of the divine or the infernal: once again, every recipient of such an infusion handles it in her own way.

The Blood is alive. A vampire always can *feel* it in her bones, whether it sluggishly collects in a soggy morass deep in the dead gut or whether it clings to the bones and burns like napalm. So how is it that a Gangrel feels the Blood within?

That's up to you, of course, but remember that for the Savage, the Blood is itself wild and untamed. Yes, the Gangrel can control it, but certainly it sometimes feels like she cannot: it squirms like a worm or a snake out of her invisible grip, or like a snarling wolf or patiently-waiting spider it lurks... giving off the feeling of being too perilous to touch. Pick at least one adjective to describe the Blood within. Searing? Rabid? Pulsing? Frenetic? Hungry? Defining that descriptive word actually helps you pinpoint an element of your character because whether she wants it or not, the Blood is within her when she feeds. She may resist embodying the traits of her Blood, but those traits still demand embodiment. It's likely that in her worst of times (when she is hungry or when her Willpower has been expended to nothing) she gives into this most basic trait; if the Blood within feels like a bonfire charring the bones, then her personality will certainly become that level of fire and bombast. If the Vitae inside is given to rabidity, then that is how she devolves in her weakest hours, becoming like a cur with distemper, easy to rile and woefully unpredictable. Does the Blood have its own bestial noise? The snake's hiss as it burns through rotten veins? A chorus of mad crickets as it fills the canals of the Savage's ear? A warbling and discordant howl as her tongue wets itself with fresh *claret* in the eager anticipation for more of the same?

The Bloody Beast

Earlier in this section we elucidate some ways that the Beast Within may be a unique experience for Gangrel, and it's worth referencing again for the sake of development. Does the Beast have a leering face in the dark hollow of the Savage soul? Does the Beast have a voice, wicked in its mammalian seduction or crass in its berserk invective? Thinking about the face and voice and shape of the Beast helps you think about the nature of your character. If the Beast is truly the barest bones of your character, her deepest Vices exemplified, then it's worth shaping this invisible side of the Savage – it is, in a crude way, her other half, a twin who only manifests during times of frenzy and need.

Blood Like Slow Sap

It's a question worth asking: what happens to a vampire when the Blood grows more potent (mechanically raising her Blood Potency rating)? The system is the same regardless of clan, but how it *feels* and *manifests* can be different for those Damned of various lineages. Does the Gangrel with more potent Vitae act out more with her Disciplines, using them to embody more bestial traits? Or does the blood flow so slowly inside of her that it really is like sap and she becomes like a tree – or, a more apt comparison, a carnivorous plant, waiting in her lair or hunting place for prey to amble by, and when it does, she uses every advantage afforded to her by the puissant Vitae to trap and drain the target. Some of the Savage elders cease to be feral legends feared by humans, instead becoming the stalking bogeymen of other vampires: red eyes in the dark, the sound of claws clicking on marble floors, the mumbling susurrations of a body dragged through the dark. (Strange as this sounds, some Savage elders are therefore able to return to some degree of Humanity because at high levels of Blood Potency they no longer need to – or, no longer *can* – hunt humans as food. This is rare, of course; most elders are truly alien, as distant from the ways of mortal thinking as gods or worms, but some manage to strike a balance and reclaim some of what they've lost.)

Humanity to Bestiality

The loss of Humanity to any vampire is striking, and it has already been covered to some degree above. But it's still worth considering: when your Savage salves his moral grief with some manner of comfort or justification, how does this change him? Is his reasoning, like it is for many Gangrel, one tied (perhaps mistakenly) to a mode of evolution or a “survival of the fittest” notion? That it was *kill or be killed* and that he did what he needed to do to survive? (It works: the more a Savage relies on cold biology or evolutionary ideas to make sense of his actions, the less human he becomes.)

And how does the loss of Humanity manifest? For some, obviously, it's in the element of the beast, the animal, the

creature. A Gangrel might start evoking a new animalistic trait any time she loses a dot of Humanity – this trait isn't a physical characteristic but a behavioral one: she paces like a patient lion, she's more prone to baring her teeth when displeased, she grows uncomfortable with bright lights, she

ceases to live indoors and instead moves to the outside. Others may give themselves over falsely to odd tics or taboos: the sound of cars honking feels like glass breaking in her ear, or he must return to his forested lair twice a night or begin to feel cagey and trapped.

Sample Characters

What follows are two sample Gangrel characters (both fully-statted as potential combatants). Both are neonates, meant to serve as examples for players and Storytellers, though they can also be used as characters by either.

The first is actually the narrator of the book, Alice Sewell. These stats roughly apply to her throughout the text (though by the end, one can argue she's quite different and might

necessitate more extreme stats). She might make an interesting Storyteller character or player character who is acting as a compiler for a mysterious patron, putting herself in harm's way to get what she needs for the "book."

The second is a less urban and urbane Gangrel, one who falls more in line with the stereotype of the clan: wild, unkempt, a survivor at heart.

Alice Sewell



Quotes: "I... need your help with something. I know, *quid pro quo*. But can I ask you a few questions?"

"I've been having dreams, lately. I see me, you know? But it's not me. It's me, but bloody, wild, murderous. Do you dream?"

"I can't do this anymore. It's killing me. It's driving me fucking nuts. I just want this to end, I want to know that my family is safe..."

Embrace: Just under two years ago

Apparent Age: 25

Background: Alice never really made much of herself. Born of baby boomers, she found that her parents were too self-indulgent and narcissistic to actually care about her; she was more a point of pride by dint of her presence than by her actual actions or disposition. They were proud of *having a child*, but they were not proud of the actual child. They disapproved of her "dreamer" sensibilities: she often stared out the window at the trappings of suburbia... and focused past all that. Watching birds at the feeder. Clouds drift across the sky. Two white cabbage moths whirling in some mad aeronautic dance. They punished her for this. It only encouraged the behavior.

And it translated over to school. In high school and college, Alice went to class stoned or bombed, because it was easier to disconnect, then. Far simpler to unhook oneself from all the bullshit and just float free, right?

One night, she left a frat party, "celebrating" the letter she received that her financial aid was going down the toilet because of her persistently abysmal grades. She stumbled out in a haze and took a walk. It was her last walk as a living being.

She doesn't know her sire. Whoever it was, he was a hulking brute in rags and one arm curled into a lame hook. He beat her, he drained her, and he made her into what she is.

Up until recently, she's lurked at the margins of the Damned. She has a few contacts among the lower caste of neonates, but no real friends or allies. She hasn't bothered anybody and they haven't bothered her. Then she got the letter. With the pictures of Sarah and Little Jack, and the command to begin compiling.

Description: A bit of a tomboy, Alice has a short mane of red hair she usually keeps pulled back. She's pale with a few tattoos

here and there. She's got curves, but keeps most of them hidden beneath boyish clothes: an army jacket, a pair of baggy pants, a clompy pair of hiking boots.

Storytelling Hints: Alice hides her fear beneath a smartass veneer. In truth, she dwells in constant trepidation of the world around her and, worse, the world within her. She knows what she is, and she knows what she has to do. But that doesn't make it any less frightening, at least not yet. The dreams she has frighten her. The Savages she encounters frighten her not just for what they can and might do to her, but more specifically because she worries *that's* what she may one day become. She still feels human, and still expresses things in a human way. This is what she fears losing the most. That touch of humanity, that connection with mortal society. She feels it slipping...

Playing Alice: Alice is still getting used to this whole thing. She's developed her survival abilities to a sharp point and tends to avoid violence when she can — she's going to get out alive, come hell or high water. Thus, she has a sharp Wits rating, and plenty of Empathy to figure out what people's intentions around her are. She's developed the second dot of Resilience, though that supernatural power has come as a result of seeing and doing some very hard things; this character's Humanity is reduced by one dot, and the resultant five experience points used to purchase a second dot of Resilience.

ALICE THE COMPILER

As compiler, Alice is a dynamic figure who travels the country and the world compiling bits for the mysterious patron who demands the completion of these books. Characters may interact with her in the midst of this book, perhaps even helping her to compile it. Alternately, they may work to oppose her, or may even see her slow crawl toward the Beast and may try to forestall this gross downturn.

Burn Barrel Matty



Quotes: "Yeah, yeah, I get it. You think I'm funny. You like to laugh at me. That's cool, that's cool. You won't think I'm funny one day, though."

"Is that a threat? Fuck yes it's a threat! Step off, suit. I'll tear you some new holes, boy."

"Whoa, whoa, man, I'm just kiddin' around, man. Don't sweat it. Yeah, no, I know who you are, it's all good, it's all on the up and up. I was just, y'know, joking."

Embrace: Just under three years ago

Apparent Age: 31

Background: Matthias Tyrell Johnson trained for war with the United States Army. And he went to Afghanistan to fight, to use his training to promote democracy and kill the evildoers and protect America. He was good with his rifle. He was good with his hands. He had keen eyes like a hawk. Matthias didn't make any bones about it — he knew how he was going to die. He'd lose a limb in a grenade attack. Maybe an RPG would come busting through a car window and blow him to burned bits. Might just be a bullet. Some Taliban motherfucker would kick down the door and spray the room with wild fire, and Matthias would take a couple past the jacket and would fire back before all went dark. Matthias expected to go out as a soldier. Blaze of glory and all that. How wrong he was.

It was two weeks after he got to Afghanistan that they were on the road to Kabul, and the Jeep hit a hidden crater and did a rough bounce. Matthias fell off the vehicle. He wasn't wearing his helmet because he'd been scratching his head — the same head that cracked against a rock and messed up his brain.

Cut to the States: Matthias got some medical attention, but not enough of it. The Veteran's Administration wasn't really up to the task of all the soldiers coming home with missing limbs or head trauma. They did what they could with him. But the VA only handled so much of it; the bills mounted. Matty wasn't non-functional, but his brain had been damaged. He could remember things pretty well but it felt like he wasn't the same guy anymore. It was harder to think. Everything sat behind a kind of cloud. Working jobs was tough, and the work he could manage didn't pay for the mounting debt.

Matthias ended up on the street. "Matty," the other bums called him. At first he hated them: disgusting creatures, never done nothing to help themselves or their country. But over time he saw how he and they were alike: rejects of society, some of them had put in time or tried to make the effort but were punished instead of rewarded for it. Over the course of a few years, Matty started working real hard at his friendships with the other bums, keeping one another safe, a small army of street people. One would go missing and they'd find out what happened to him. And if they needed to break some legs, they'd break some damn legs.

Well, something had been preying on his brothers and sisters of the street, so he and a few others went after the crazy sonofabitch: some killer or lunatic, probably. Always seemed that they practiced on the homeless and itinerant, so Matty and the others tracked the killer down to a chop shop that had burned down the year before that and remained a charred shell. And there she was, a mindless thing with a mouth full of awful teeth, and cold dead eyes. She gibbered and howled, and then attacked.

Matty remembers dying. He remembers her biting open her own bottom lip and bleeding into his mouth. And he remembers the fire inside of him, an acid burn that tore everything up. He saw her doing the same to his boys, too: but they didn't get up like he did. They didn't stand straight and they damn sure didn't have clear eyes. They were gutted of their souls, it seemed, and Matty still had his mind about him. They attacked him. His muscle memory from his days as a soldier suited him well. He broke their necks. Kicked their kneecaps so hard the legs bent the wrong way. Beat their heads to an unrecognizable pulp with a board with a nail through it. His "sire," too, if such a name even applies, lay smashed up in front of him: and as the morning sun threatened to rise outside, the bodies before him belched gas and blood and turned to ash.

These days, Matty exists as a joke among the local Damned. They think him stupid, when really he's smart but just slow getting to those smarts. They think he's some kind of freak the way he stands kind of hunched, and maybe he is. They think he's a crazy fool the way he tempts himself by standing closer and closer to the old bum burn barrels, the Beast within him like a spider on fire trying to put itself out. But he gets closer night after night. It's his test. It's his testament.

Description: He was once lean and rosy, but now? Matty's a hunched-over cretin, a face barely visible from beneath the frayed green hoodie, his body concealed by layer after layer of rags and jackets. His head, if one gets close enough to see it bare, is bald and marked with a puffy, jagged scar: where the skull met the rock on the road to Kabul. He moves like a loping animal, long strides, a strange mammalian rhythm to his gait. You'd almost think him gorilla-like, the way his arms dangle at his sides, the busted-up knuckles damn near dragging. Like a gorilla, it's easy to sense the power coiled up inside of him; he may seem slow, he might even appear gentle, but in the deep of his eyes it's easy to see that he could maybe tear your arm out of its socket.

Storytelling Hints: Matty's all right. Treat him nice and he'll treat you the same. Problem is, few of the Damned really treat him right, do they? They abuse him. Throw things at him. Parade him around Elysium: even the Nosferatu freaks have a good time hiding behind his humiliation. Those who don't treat him well earn a special angry place in the dusty red chambers of Matty's heart. It's hard to keep that place a secret: all too often, he babbles out some threat or insult to someone far beyond his station, but he's smart enough to retract it in time. For now. But that angry place is getting filled up awfully quick. He needs friends, allies to help either calm him down or to give him extra hands when the time comes to tear the city down around its ears.

Playing Matty: Matty gets around, and he's fairly good at getting his way — his Manipulation + Intimidation means that he scares folks fairly easily, and can usually depend on getting what he wants that way. He's got the Resilience in case things go bad with that route, and an ace in the hole in the form of a big, mean ghoul'd pit bull that he can communicate with.





GANGREL



SAVAGE AND MACABRE

Name: Alice Sewell

Player:

Chronicle:

Concept: Masquerade Consultant Clan: Gangrel

Virtue: Hope

Covenant: N/A

Vice: Sloth

Coterie:

Attributes

power

intelligence

●●○○○

strength

●●○○○

presence

●●○○○

finesse

wits

●●●○○

dexterity

●●●○○

manipulation

●●●○○

resistance

resolve

●●●○○

stamina

●●○○○

composure

●●●○○

Skills

mental

(-3 unskilled)

Academics ●●○○○

Computer ○○○○○

Crafts ●○○○○

Investigation Intuition ●●●○○

Medicine ○○○○○

Occult ●○○○○

Politics ○○○○○

Science ○○○○○

physical

(-1 unskilled)

Athletics ●●○○○

Brawl Self-Defense ●●○○○

Drive ○○○○○

Firearms ○○○○○

Larceny ○○○○○

Stealth ○○○○○

Survival ●○○○○

Weaponry ○○○○○

social

(-1 unskilled)

Animal Ken ○○○○○

Empathy ●●●○○

Expression ●●○○○

Intimidation ●○○○○

Persuasion ●○○○○

Socialize Tense Situations ●●●○○

Streetwise ○○○○○

Subterfuge ●○○○○

Other Traits

merits

Contacts (Clan Gangrel)

●○○○○○

Danger Sense

○○○○○

Fleet of Foot

●●●○○

Resources

●○○○○○

○○○○○

○○○○○

○○○○○

○○○○○

flaws

disciplines

Protean

●●○○○○

Resilience

●○○○○○

○○○○○

○○○○○

○○○○○

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○○○○○

○○○○○

○○○○○

○○○○○

Size 5 [5 for adult human-sized kindred]

Defense 3 [lowest of dexterity or wits]

Initiative Mod 6 [dexterity+composure]

Speed 13 [strength+dexterity+5]

Experience

Armor

health

●●●●●●●●○○○○○

□□□□□□□□□□□

willpower

●●●●●○○○○○

□□□□□□□□□

vitae

□□□□□□□□□

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

Vitae/per turn 10/1

blood potency

●○○○○○○○○○○○

humanity

10 ○

9 ○

8 ○

7 ○

6 ●

5 ●

4 ●

3 ●

2 ●

1 ●

equipment

Attributes 5/4/3 • Skills 11/7/4 (+3 Specialties) • Clan (+1 bonus Attribute; see p. 92) • Covenant • Blood Potency 1 (May be increased with Merit points) • Disciplines 3 (Two dots must be in-clan) • Merits 7 • (Buying the fifth dot in Attributes, Skills or Merits costs two points) • Health = Stamina + Size • Willpower = Resolve + Composure • Size = 5 for adult human-sized Kindred • Defense = Lowest of Dexterity or Wits • Initiative Mod = Dexterity + Composure • Speed = Strength + Dexterity + 5 • Starting Humanity = 7 • Vitae = d10 roll

GANGREL

SAVAGE AND MACABRE

Name: Burn Barrel Matty

Player:

Chronicle:

Concept: Dracula's Legbreaker

Virtue: Charity

Vice: Envy

Clan: Gangrel

Covenant: N/A

Coterie:

Attributes

power

intelligence

●●●●●

strength

●●●●●

presence

●●●●●

finesse

wits

●●●●●

dexterity

●●●●●

manipulation

●●●●●

resistance

resolve

●●●●●

stamina

●●●●●

composure

●●●●●

Skills

mental

(-3 unskilled)

Academics ●●●●●

Computer ●●●●●

Crafts ●●●●●

Investigation ●●●●●

Medicine ●●●●●

Occult ●●●●●

Politics ●●●●●

Science ●●●●●

physical

(-1 unskilled)

Athletics ●●●●●

Brawl ●●●●●

Drive ●●●●●

Firearms Military ●●●●●

Larceny ●●●●●

Stealth ●●●●●

Survival ●●●●●

Weaponry ●●●●●

social

(-1 unskilled)

Animal Ken Strays ●●●●●

Empathy ●●●●●

Expression ●●●●●

Intimidation ●●●●●

Persuasion ●●●●●

Socialize ●●●●●

Streetwise Homeless Population ●●●●●

Subterfuge ●●●●●

Other Traits

merits

Allies (Shelter)

●●●●●

Fast Reflexes

●●●●●

Herd

●●●●●

Retainer (Stray Pit Bull)

●●●●●

Strong Back

●●●●●

flaws

disciplines

Animalism

●●●●●

Resilience

●●●●●

●●●●●

●●●●●

●●●●●

●●●●●

●●●●●

●●●●●

●●●●●

●●●●●

Size 5 [5 for adult human-sized kindred]

Defense 2 [lowest of dexterity or wits]

Initiative Mod 7 [dexterity+composure]

Speed 9 [strength+dexterity+5]

Experience

Armor

Attributes 5/4/3 • Skills 11/7/4 (+3 Specialties) • Clan (+1 bonus Attribute; see p. 92) • Covenant • Blood Potency 1 (May be increased with Merit points) • Disciplines 3 (Two dots must be in-clan) • Merits 7 • (Buying the fifth dot in Attributes, Skills or Merits costs two points) • Health = Stamina + Size • Willpower = Resolve + Composure • Size = 5 for adult human-sized Kindred • Defense = Lowest of Dexterity or Wits • Initiative Mod = Dexterity + Composure • Speed = Strength + Dexterity + 5 • Starting Humanity = 7 • Vitae = d10 roll

health

●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●

□□□□□□□□□□□□

willpower

●●●●●●●●●●●●●●

□□□□□□□□□□□□

vitae

□□□□□□□□□□□□

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

Vitae/per turn 10/1

blood potency

●●●●●●●●●●●●●●

humanity

10 ○

9 ○

8 ○

7 ○

6 ●

5 ●

4 ●

3 ●

2 ●

1 ●

equipment





GANGREL



SAVAGE AND MACABRE

Name:

Player:

Chronicle:

Concept:

Virtue:

Vice:

Clan:

Covenant:

Coterie:

Attributes

power

intelligence

●○○○○

strength

●○○○○

presence

●○○○○

finesse

wits

●○○○○

dexterity

●○○○○

manipulation

●○○○○

resistance

resolve

●○○○○

stamina

●○○○○

composure

●○○○○

Skills

mental

(-3 unskilled)

Academics _____ ○○○○○

Computer _____ ○○○○○

Crafts _____ ○○○○○

Investigation _____ ○○○○○

Medicine _____ ○○○○○

Occult _____ ○○○○○

Politics _____ ○○○○○

Science _____ ○○○○○

physical

(-1 unskilled)

Athletics _____ ○○○○○

Brawl _____ ○○○○○

Drive _____ ○○○○○

Firearms _____ ○○○○○

Larceny _____ ○○○○○

Stealth _____ ○○○○○

Survival _____ ○○○○○

Weaponry _____ ○○○○○

social

(-1 unskilled)

Animal Ken _____ ○○○○○

Empathy _____ ○○○○○

Expression _____ ○○○○○

Intimidation _____ ○○○○○

Persuasion _____ ○○○○○

Socialize _____ ○○○○○

Streetwise _____ ○○○○○

Subterfuge _____ ○○○○○

Other Traits

merits

_____ ○○○○○

_____ ○○○○○

_____ ○○○○○

_____ ○○○○○

_____ ○○○○○

_____ ○○○○○

_____ ○○○○○

_____ ○○○○○

flaws

disciplines

_____ ○○○○○

_____ ○○○○○

_____ ○○○○○

_____ ○○○○○

_____ ○○○○○

_____ ○○○○○

_____ ○○○○○

_____ ○○○○○

_____ ○○○○○

_____ ○○○○○

Size _____ [5 for adult human-sized kindred]

Defense _____ [lowest of dexterity or wits]

Initiative Mod _____ [dexterity+composure]

Speed _____ [strength+dexterity+5]

Experience _____

Armor _____

health

○○○○○○○○○○○○○○

□□□□□□□□□□□□

willpower

○○○○○○○○○○○○

□□□□□□□□□□

vitae

□□□□□□□□□□

□□□□□□□□□□

Vitae/per turn _____

blood potency

○○○○○○○○○○○○

humanity

10 _____ ○

9 _____ ○

8 _____ ○

7 _____ ○

6 _____ ○

5 _____ ○

4 _____ ○

3 _____ ○

2 _____ ○

1 _____ ○

equipment

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— Cerynitis the Hind

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