

NOSFERATU

THE BEAST THAT HAUNTS THE BLOOD™



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Special Thanks

We just want to thank all the fans that made these books possible. Your continued support is what gave us the ability to go through with this great experiment and it has been exciting to see each one of these books incite discussion and debate. We're glad they struck a chord.

-The Vampire Team



Master West,

I am afraid this letter will be my last. This bundle is the finale of my research, at once a history and a pathology of our shared blood.

Your funding has been generous, and your name has opened many doors. Perhaps in another age, it would have bought me a measure of protection, as well. But war has come and gone, here, and the hunt has begun for the scholars.

When you commissioned this great work, I hoped it would be only the prelude to a greater history. The Nosferatu have always been more tightly connected to each other than other clans. We lair together, we work together. On occasion, we trust. Why, I thought, with one of our own made ruler, shouldn't we join not just as kindred or allies but as partners? I hoped to write that history.

Why, indeed. Because our appearance and manners reflect our natures. We are creatures of fear. We cling together because we fear the world, and we can rule only so long as the others fear us. We were not meant for victory, as the Lords, nor for adoration, as the Succubi. We can only haunt the halls of power, not take up residence there.

Whether we rule by fear or are driven by it, we have a fatal weakness. Hope. We reach for more than our due. Our subjects learn courage, and banish us to the shadows.

The city is burning. The Black Prince has fled her throne. The Pig's soldiers glut themselves in their victory, but do not see the barbarians slipping through the gates. There will be a new Prince, and there will be purges. I trade my scholar's pen for a monk's cassock, and pray for mercy.

As long as there is hope in the world, there is no hope for us.

- Nicodemus

DEAR DIARY

The diary, found in England in the late 1970s or early 1980s, has no dates indicating year attached to it. The quality of the paper and ink crisp, unfaded and certain other anomalies lead me to wonder if this is, if not a hoax, much more recent than it initially appears to be. Strange.

29th April.

Dear Diary,

I had the most terrible shock today. I told Mama this morning that I had spent last night feeling rather ill, and she told me that I was lazy and sinful and that I had no right to vex her so. And I know I am lazy and sinful, but I do try so very hard to be good, and even so, my stomach cramped so terribly last night.

I was performing my private ablutions this morning, and I know I must never look at myself, but I felt something strange on my fingers, so I looked and I found spots of blood on the flannel. I screamed for Mama, and when I had covered myself, I let her into the bathroom and showed her, and she told me that I wasn't ill at all. It was my fault, she said. I had brought on the Curse.

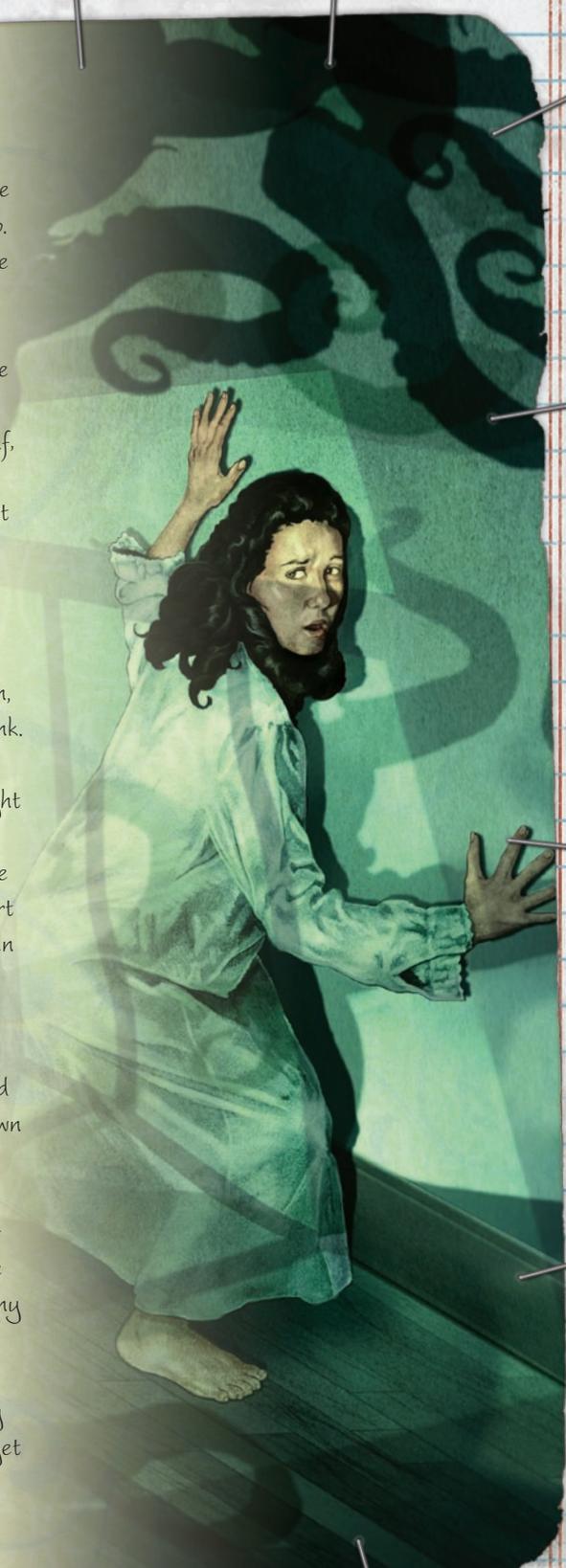
I was crying so hard, I didn't understand what she was saying, so she sat me on the privy and told me that the Curse is a mark of our sin, and that bad sinful girls who think bad, sinful thoughts start to suffer from the bleeding once a month, because God is punishing them for the terrible things they think. And I tried to say to Mama, I never thought such things, but she shouted at me and told me that evidently I had too thought such things, because here is proof that God had given me the Curse, and I cried and said, no, Mama! I'm really sick! And she told me that I was a foolish girl, because the sickness was part of the Curse, and I could never make it go away, because when God judges, He does not change His course.

I felt sick and afraid, and I said, I'm scared, Mama, and I wanted Mama to take me in her arms and tell me that she forgave me, but she stood there and folded her arms and said that I must be locked away and must do my lessons on my own until the Curse goes away, and that this must happen every time that the Curse comes back.

I made Mama most terribly cross, for I could not stop crying, and her words became harder and harder. In the end, she slapped me across the face and dragged me by my hair to my room, and locked me in.

I cried and cried to be let out, and I quite skinned my fists against the door, but she did not come back, and I could only use handkerchiefs to mop up the blood as best I could, and get dressed, and begin my lessons, on my own.

I must be such a terrible trial to Mama.



1st May, small hours.

Dear Diary,

So Mama came in this morning to bring me my breakfast, but would not permit me to eat it, despite my pleas, when she had seen how I had spoiled my handkerchiefs. She was kind enough to bring me some paper towels later, after she had inspected me and found that the Curse had not stopped. And so, I spent a second day alone in here.

I did not mean to think sinful thoughts. But I cannot stop my dreams.

I thought perhaps it would stop if I was good and dutiful, and so I dressed myself and sat and did my lessons, and a little needlework. But I had stayed up so late last night writing and thinking about what I had brought upon myself, that I began to doze. I tried so hard to remain awake, pinching myself and periodically standing and stretching, but the lazy beams of sunlight that filtered through Mama's yellow lace curtains shed so much warmth upon me, and I thought it would do no harm for me to put Matthew Henry's commentary aside, and fold my arms on the table and lay my head upon them.

When I woke, it was dark. I rose and felt my way through the room, and tripped, and gave out a little scream, because I had stubbed my toe on the bedstead. I quieted myself quickly. I didn't want to bring Mama upstairs. I listened for her coming, but she did not come. Perhaps Mama and Papa had gone out for the evening. Or perhaps it was very late indeed, and they had gone to bed.

I fumbled through the room for a second or two, and presently I located the light switch, but as I raised my hand to press it, I suddenly developed the strangest feeling, that I was not alone in the room. That I was being watched. And that if I would only turn on the light, they would be free to leap upon me and do terrible things.

I held my breath and listened for any noise at all, but I could hear nothing beyond a strange whooshing and rushing that I realized was the sound of my own heart. Still, the feeling persisted, and I thought that I might say something, only I didn't, because it would have been silly to do so, and because I couldn't think of anything to say.

But the whoosh, whoosh, whoosh of my heart kept going, and even though I knew that there wasn't anyone in my room, I still stood there, silently, taking the shallowest breaths I could, my finger resting on the light-switch, ready to flick it down. I wondered if I would have the courage to ever turn on the light.

I don't know how long I stood there like that. It felt like forever, but then, these things often do.

Presently, I said out loud to myself, "Why should I be frightened of the dark?"

And a voice — a boy's voice, as clear as a bell — said, "Bravo! Why not indeed?"

I jumped, and pressed the switch before I even knew what I was doing.

In the yellow light, my room was empty. The window was closed and the door, just as I had expected, was still locked.

I did not dream that voice. I did not. I am sure of it. I was wide awake, and on my feet, and heard it in the dark quite as clear as... day.

I shall sleep with the light on tonight, and I shall not tell any of this to Mama.

Evening.

I have spent another day in my room. Today, Mama allowed me to eat breakfast, and even saw fit to bring me a small luncheon and a light tea. I thanked her sincerely for her care and love for me, and did not ask when I would be let out of the room, which satisfied her somewhat.

But secretly, I was thinking things of which Mama would never approve. Who was the boy who spoke to me, I wondered? Where had he gone?

I wondered if our house had a ghost, or if my guardian angel had decided to make himself known to me. At times throughout the day I whispered out loud, saying that my name was Joan, and that I would like very much to meet the person who had spoken to me before I repaired to bed last night. I left my window wide open and occasionally looked out of it hoping to see if anyone would come to the window and look up at me. But I heard nothing except the wind swishing in the trees outside.

I feel sometimes as if I am the only person in the whole world.

3rd May, Morning.

Dear Diary,

This is quite the queerest and strangest and most excitingest thing that has ever happened to me. I have to describe it one thing at a time, because it feels like it would otherwise all burst out in one big jumbled mass, and then what sense will you make of it?

I slept through the night, after I last wrote, like I was dead, and I was woken up by Mama roughly shaking me, and hissing in my ear that I am a lazy girl and a sinful girl and how I deserved the Curse. I said I was sorry, but it was too late, and so Mama had to go and get the Stick (I did not weep, or shudder. I stood up straight and put out my knuckles and let her strike me, and I thanked her, and she nodded). Mama expressed disgust at the paper towels in the bin, and made me carry the bin downstairs.

And yet, I looked at the bin, and the bloodied towels were... the bin was not full, I mean. Most of the towels had gone.

I thought she was going to make me take them to Papa, but she gripped my wrist hard and steered me past Papa's study, and escorted me to the bathroom, and made me flush them down the privy, one by one, saying a short prayer for forgiveness each time. Then she inspected me, and satisfied that I was still suffering, she took me back to my room. Later she brought me some more paper towels, but she did not bring me breakfast.

I am sorry to say that I hated her a little then. I know that she suffers terribly with me, and that I am a dreadful trial for her, and that she has given up everything to teach me at home, away from the sinful, corrupt state schools. She deserves better than me. I know.

But I was so hungry today. I had had three meals the day before, yes, but they were such small meals, and for two days before I had been given nothing, and yesterday hadn't been enough for me to be fill up.

I was so hungry, I could not tell if the ache in my stomach was from my hunger or the pains from the Curse. They mixed together. One became the other, and then changed back again.

But Mama did bring me a small luncheon, some bread and cheese and a piece of ham, and I felt quite sorry for feeling the way that I had in the morning. Although I asked, she would not let me leave my room, because, she said, I was still filthy.

I asked for a book to read. Mama told me that my Bible and my needlework were sufficient, and left, locking the door behind her. She doesn't know about you. I worked into the night. At suppertime, Mama brought me some more bread and cheese, and would not speak to me. I do not know why.

I suppose that I should have gone to bed shortly after that, but I stayed awake with my needlepoint.

When it got dark, I turned the light on. And at about eleven o'clock, the handle of the door turned, and the lock went click. I wondered why Mama was coming in to see me, and I asked her, I said, "Mama?" But the person who came in was not Mama.

It was a boy, of about my age, with messy fair hair and a dirty old-fashioned sort of shirt on him. He had a harelip, and his eyes looked in slightly different directions, so I could not be sure whether he was looking at me or not.

He started when he came in, and said, "Oh! I had not expected to see you awake!" As if coming into a young woman's room unannounced was a normal thing for him.

I shrank back from the boy, and I told him that I would scream for Mama if he did not leave.

He said, "I am sorry. I did not mean to frighten you."

I realized then that his was the voice that had spoken to me on that previous night.

"Why are you here? And why do you have the key to my room?" I asked. He smiled, which was a strange, grim sight with his disfigured upper lip.

"I came for your treasures," said the boy. "I came for your life."

I shrieked, and jumped to my feet. "You want to kill me?" I said.

"No," he replied, disdainfully, as if I had said something silly or ridiculous.

He walked over to the bin, where I had put the paper towels. And to my horror, he reached in, and took one of them out with his bare hand.

"You mustn't!" I said with horror. "They are filthy!"

He shook his head. "No," he said. "They are beautiful. They are life."

He flattened out the paper towel as best he could, and leaned forward his neck and sniffed the blood that soaked it, which was only beginning to turn brown at the edges.

"You have been told that you are under a curse, have you not?" he asked.

"I am under a curse. I am a bad girl, and I have to get sick and bleed from... places. Because of things I did." I bowed my head.

"Oh, no, Joanie. No," he said, and he took a step towards me, still cradling the soiled paper towel in both hands.

Suddenly, another voice began to speak, a woman's voice. I turned and saw a lady, about the age of Mama, only wearing a long dress like a smock, printed with faded flowers. She had terribly pale skin and wild fair hair, with worms and snails visibly crawling through. I realized with an odd sort of chill that she had come in with the other, only I hadn't seen her. "This is a sign that you are an adult," she said, "and that you have life in you. And the potential for life. You are growing into a woman, and you must be proud of this life within you. Life that you spread around. You seed the Earth, my child."

The harelippped boy gave his towel to the woman, and took another from the bin. And then, both of them knelt in front of me, and began to sup on the blood in the towels, licking it and sucking it into their mouths like a kitten licks at his paws. The two strange figures, whom I found myself thinking of as mother and son, looked up at me, and the boy thanked me for the gift of life. And they told me that they loved me.

I shuddered and was revolted, a little. And yet, if these two were strange to look at, why should that repel me? As Mama keeps saying, I am not a thing of beauty. And no one had spoken to me in quite so kindly a fashion as this boy and his mother for so very long a time. I know that Mama loves me, but she does not tell me so. These people talked to me with mildness and respect.

And so I simply asked them their names, as they clearly knew mine, and they looked up and told me that their names were Charlotte and Henry. They lived upstairs, they said, in the attic. And that as residents of our home, they were holders of skeleton keys.

"Why has Mama not told me before that you live in our house?" I said, astonished.

"Your Mama," explained Charlotte, "does not know that we live here. And yet we have been in this place for far longer than your Mama."

"And Papa?" I asked.

Charlotte and Henry exchanged a look which contained much in the way of meaning and weight, which I noted, even though it would have been impolite to ask why.

"Our Henry is quite taken with you," Charlotte said. Henry looked away. "And I only thought it right that since he allowed himself to be caught out in his admiration of you, I should introduce us." She held out a beautiful, languid hand, clean and smooth and long-fingered, that I might shake it. I took the hand, which was cold like the stones that make up our house, and cupped it in my own.

"I am pleased to meet you," I said. "But surely I must tell Mama and Papa that we have guests in our house."

"No, no," said Charlotte. "Please, do not. We showed ourselves to you because we trust you and love you. But your Mama does not understand. She cannot understand. We are here to guard you and love you."

It is so good to have friends.

They took me outside of the house. I was afraid to leave at first, if only because I didn't want to go against Mama's wishes, but Henry and Charlotte were so very persuasive.

We crept through our darkened hall, past Mama's room, past Papa's room, to the end of the house where the attic ladder stood extended, waiting for us. Except it was very strange, because it was as if I couldn't see the ladder, until Charlotte showed it to me. And then they took me upstairs, and there I saw such things!

I have never been in our attic. It is huge, like a palace lined with soft black glistening timber and jeweled cobwebs, full of boxes and yellow plants that poke from joints in the wood, and mushrooms and fungus growing from the angled ceiling. I saw a number of old chests, some very big indeed, and I wondered what beautiful ancient things might be inside them. There were four very old chairs painted with gold and covered in dust and webs, and a table set with a glass chess-set, where some of the pieces were made of red glass and some of the pieces were made of black glass, and the pawns looked like wizened little men with big noses and cruel eyes and sharp teeth, and the

knights snarled, and the castles twisted and turned and had odd little watchtowers and strangely-shaped windows. Lace hung everywhere, and it was as if the cobwebs, which glistened in the bright moonlight shining through a leaded roof window, had grown from the lace like frost grows on a windowpane.

It was so beautiful, like a fairy grotto.

Charlotte was a painter — she painted such places! Vast underground caverns, lit by odd artificial light, with red fountains and temples and fungus that glowed. Everything in her pictures was rotten and covered with mold and mushrooms, and I know that Mama would be appalled and would call it filthy and vile and sinful, and maybe there was a little part of me inside that thought that, too, but somehow it all seemed beautiful to me. Because it was a world that I had never seen, a new, exciting world. I asked her to tell me about her paintings, and she said that she and Henry had traveled in times past, and that it was a kingdom ruled by people like her and Henry, who lived in the dark and made people scared of them, and who liked to eat life.

And then she said, "Are you scared of me?"

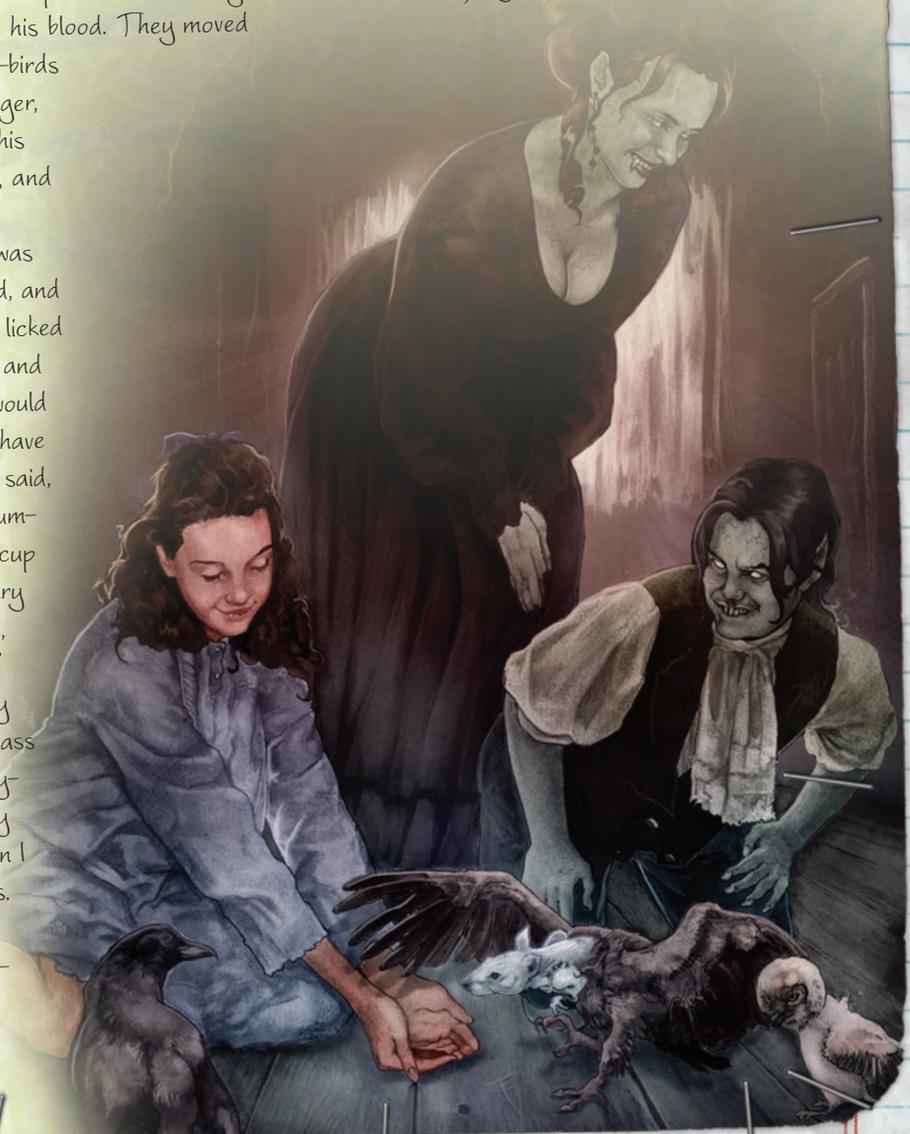
And I told her, no, I wasn't, because she was my friend. And she nodded and smiled, and said that was good, and her teeth were very long and thin and sharp like the bone pins that Mama keeps in an enamel box.

After a time, Henry said that he wanted to show me his treasures. He had a collection of mice and rats and birds and other creatures that he had cut apart and sewn together in such wonderfully creative ways, special toys that he fed with his blood. They moved around and nuzzled against him, his rat-birds and owl-mice and his precious crow-badger, and he said, "Don't be scared," and cut his finger and dripped a little into my hand, and let me feed them.

And then when they were done, there was still a little smear of his blood in my hand, and I wondered what it would taste like, and I licked it, and oh, it was so sweet, and I said so, and Henry hugged me and told me that we would be the best of friends, and that I should have more if I wanted, whenever I asked, and I said, I should like that very much. Charlotte rummaged in a chest and found a little old cup made of gold with gems in its sides. Henry bit his finger hard, and blood flowed out, and I asked, "Doesn't that hurt, Henry?" and he said, yes, a little, but not for very long, and he poured his blood into the glass and I drank, and I have never tasted anything so sweet. I drank it all, and ran my finger around the inside of the cup when I was done and licked up the sticky dregs.

And we laughed and talked, and promised that we would be friends forever and ever.

But it had to end. Charlotte looked up at an old, old clock that was so



I wonder what sort of bloodline has a power like that?

covered with dust you could barely see the hands and said, "Oh, my darling, it is time for you to return to your room now, for the sun must rise soon, and we must sleep, and your Mama does not know you have left. But you must come to visit us again!" And she reached into her bodice and pulled out her skeleton key and gave it to me.

I took it gratefully, feeling terribly wicked, and quickly I returned to my room and did not fall asleep, for the taste of Henry's blood was still warm in my mouth and it made me dizzy and wide awake, all at once.

I must make a string for my precious key, so that I can hang it around my neck.

Evening

Once again, Mama has given me no food, but I do not feel hungry anymore. She has taken my needlepoint away. I had embroidered a picture of one of Henry's pets — I had meant to give it to him — and I didn't hide it quickly enough when Mama came into the room. She saw me trying to put it away, and demanded that I show it to her, and when she saw it, she screamed in horror and tried to tear it up in front of me, but couldn't because the cloth was too tough. But she screwed it up in her hands and made me give her all my needlepoint, all my silks and needles and pins and muslins, and told me that I deserved the Curse. And even though all the paper towels were gone from the bin, she told me that I was lying and that the Curse was still in me, and that I had thrown them from the window.

She left me with nothing but my Bible and you, my little book, all day. I was sad that I could not make Henry his gift, but I felt an odd, light sort of happiness, because Mama did not know what I had, and who I had met.

Secrets are so terribly exciting.

When I was sure that Mama was downstairs, I let myself out of my room and crept down the hall. There was the ceiling with the hatch for the attic, which I had never noticed before the night before. It had no handle. I was feeling perverse and adventurous, and I poked my head into Mama's room, hoping that I might find a book or some silks and muslins and needles. In the bottom of the wardrobe, I found Mama's embroidery box, and took away a few things, so I might keep myself occupied.

I am so bad! I must surely be going to Hell.

And then, on the way back to my bedroom, I passed Papa's room, and I thought, surely Papa must have books, for he loves to spend time in his study.

The door to Papa's room was locked, so I turned the skeleton key and cringed as the door creaked, and looked inside. What a surprising thing! The room was quite empty! The space was clean and bright, but the mattress on the bed had no bedding, and the wardrobe — when I opened it — was empty.

Where, I wonder, does Papa sleep?

4th May

After I was sure that Mama had gone to sleep, I opened my door and crept ever-so-quietly to the end of the hall, and there was the ladder to the attic, waiting for me. Up I went, and I spent a wonderful time with Henry and Charlotte. Both of them gave me their sweet, rich blood to drink, and I came back to my room slightly giddy and joyful, and I slept until dawn, and was awake and ready for my toilet when Mama came to fetch me. She told me that I would be confined for one more day, if I was good, and I said, "Thank you, Mama," and smiled and did not meet her eyes, so that she might think I was being good.

I longed to ask her where Papa was, but I couldn't, because she would know that I had been out of my room.

She brought me lunch today, but I gave the bread to birds that came to my windowsill, and hid the cheese.

She went away again, and I waited, and then, so slowly, so carefully, I unlocked my door, and peeped around it, and, satisfied she was gone, I went downstairs, one step at a time.

The house was quiet. The sun shone so brightly through the windows at the end of the hall. I did not like it. It hurt my eyes terribly. But Mama was not anywhere to be seen. I thought she must have stepped outside.

I came to the library, and picked up a copy of *The Railway Children*, which as you know, I love, and then I passed Papa's study. I wondered if he was in there.

Gently, I tried the handle of the door. It was locked. I considered that I might take the skeleton key and open the door, but then I thought, what if he was in there?

And then Mama clamped her hand on my shoulder, and said in her hardest voice, "What is the meaning of this?"

She slapped me, hard in the face. I hated her a little, then.

I said, "You didn't lock the door, and I came down to tell you!" And although she didn't believe me, and found her stick and hit me on my chest and hands and thighs over and over again, she could not explain how I had left the room, and did not find the skeleton key that still hung around my neck.

But she dragged me upstairs with one hand twisting my arm behind my back, and her other grasping my hair, and she flung me into my room. She said that she would let me out when I had learned to be good.

I think that I shall never be good.

5th May

I am so excited! I am in love!

Last night, Henry came to me, alone, and begged that he might court me. He was so shy, with his harelip and his strange eyes, and he scuffed his feet on the floor. I teased him a little. I said that he was very silly. And then I said that I would be honored to step out with him.

And he embraced me, and he kissed me, in his way, and he nibbled at my lip with his little needle-sharp teeth. And then he bit down hard and made blood well up in my mouth, and I was scared and it hurt a little, and I nearly choked, but then the most beautiful thing happened. The blood turned to moonlight and Henry's teeth were like stars in my mouth, and my whole body shivered and went tense and soft, all at the same time, and he was standing before me and he had taken off his shirt, and I could see patches of pink scales and mold on his body, and I loved them all, and I unbuttoned my dress and let him bite me again, here and there, and let him drink the last of the Curse, which was no Curse at all, and when he had done kissing me and biting me, he bit hard into his finger and let me drink from it, and I was suddenly thirsty, and I drank from him.

His blood was so much sweeter than before, and something in me changed. I love him! I will do anything for him! He is in my thoughts now. He is all my thought. I love him. Henry — that name excites me, makes my insides twitter and flutter, even when I write it, Henry Henry Henry oh Henry — loves me, and I love Henry. He could command me to give him anything or do anything, and I will do it for him.

I am in love!

6th May

I remember how you kiss

I want you to drink my blood

Holding you is bliss

You are my angel, my

— what then? "Good"? "God"? Something else? I don't know. I want to write this for dear Henry — he can read whatever he wants of this, if he asks — but the words aren't coming. Everything is confusion.

I went out tonight. Henry told me to leave the house for a time and take a walk. He said that Mama would not know, that she was asleep. It has been so long since I went out, but Henry said he would be beside me, and although he would be invisible, he would hold my hand. And with my dear Henry beside me, how could I fear anything?

Everything in the world outside looks wrong. The cars are the wrong shape — they are different in the books, and the girls who walked at night wore things that I never dreamed existed — some even wore trousers, like men! After a time, my Henry asked me if I wished to go back inside, and I said yes, and we went in, and I looked around my old house, and thought that it looked so old and strange. I wished that I had gone to a state school.

"Why are things like this?" I asked dear Henry.

"They have always been like this," Henry said. "Your world is the false one. Your mother knows this, and she hates the world outside, and she wants to keep it from you, and you from it."

"Do you hate the world outside?" I said.

"No," answered Henry, "but I like my world more. I would travel to the caverns and temples with you, Joanie." He said my name and I sighed. And we walked home, arm in arm.

But I felt dreadfully wicked, and I said to my love Henry, "Shall we see what is in Papa's study?" And he replied that yes, perhaps it was time, and although I didn't understand what he meant, I felt a little thrill when he agreed with me.

So we crept up to the door of Papa's study and I took out the key and opened it, and the door creaked dreadfully. The room was emptier than Papa's room had been. It was wholly bare — bare walls, bare floorboards, and nothing at all upon them. Papa had gone.

"I did not wish to tell you," said Henry, "but your father is gone. He left a long time ago. Your Mama has been lying to you about this as well."

I nodded, feeling more numb than anything. How could I have felt sad? Henry was beside me.

He took me back to my room and kissed me again, and left, allowing me to write before I go to bed, which I shall do now.

I do not know the date.

Mama woke me up violently, shaking me hard, holding me tight. The sunlight hurt my eyes, and the sight of Mama's furious face filled me with a strange kind of anger myself.

She threw me down, and held up in my face my skeleton key, which she must have seen lying on my chest as I slept.

She screamed and screamed at me, calling me a devil and a sinner and demanding to know from where I had stolen it. She said that she knew I had been in Papa's study, and I told her that I knew Papa had gone away, and she went pale and her face twisted into something quite monstrous. I wriggled away and tried to run out the open door of my room, but she grabbed my hair. I fell backwards. I remember a crack...

Everything was so very, very cold and still. I heard my mother screaming, and then there was nothing.

And then everything was dark and I was lying in the attic under the lace-and-cobweb draperies, staring into the eyes of my Henry. I lifted my head, and my neck went click, and try as I might, I could not make my head stay straight. It lolled and moved on my neck. But my teeth were sharp and I was so hungry. I needed more blood, and I asked Henry for it, and he said that I had broken my neck on my bedstead and died, and that Mama had chosen to leave me dead where I was but that he loved me and gave me precious blood and brought me back.

Charlotte, whom I realized was near, said that I should find my Mama. And so I climbed downstairs on legs that felt as if they were the legs of a bird and I walked as bold as anything into Mama's room, where she stood in front of a mirror, brushing her hair.

"Mama," I said, "Oh, Mama. I am so hungry, and so lonely, Mama. Papa has gone away, and only I am here with you."

She looked so very cross and frightened. She opened her mouth, and she could only say "But. But." I showed her my new teeth and made my face all hard and frightening, and she shrank and cried for me to stop like I had when she had beaten me. And I grasped her throat with my fingers, which were gnarled now, like steel twigs, and pulled her close to me, and then I craned my head forward so my neck clicked and juddered, and bit hard into her flesh with my new needle-teeth, rolling little gobbets of meat around on my long, thin tongue as I chewed and savaged her, slobbering with glee as I gnawed through an artery and the hot sweet blood gushed into my mouth. Mama stopped struggling and shivered like I had when Dear Henry Henry Henry first kissed me...

RUFUS SEPTIMUS, THE WORM LORD

Rufus Septimus is the self-proclaimed Emperor of the Avernus Necropolis, a tortuous nest of train tunnels and tombs. Each knotted catacomb features countless pits and dead ends. If the stories are true, there's even an albino tiger gone blind from its many years hunting in the dark channels. Emperor, however, is not the title Septimus prefers: the Worm Lord, that's what he asks to be called. From what I've seen, those who serve him gladly do so.

The Worm Lord is one thing to the world of humans, another to the society of the Damned. He rarely mixes the two "pleasures." To the mortals, he is no vampire but still very much a monster. Tyrant of the city's criminal underworld, the Worm Lord has fingers in many foul pies. He moves great heaps of "product," usually heroin, through the Necropolis, cutting it with all manner of strange chemicals and reagents before sending it back up to the world above for a tidy profit. His ledgers list several chop-shops scattered across town, all of them catering to and encouraging the theft of automobiles and, when necessary, the execution of the drivers. He filters money to various street gangs and criminal coteries. He "shepherds" (his word) a major prostitution ring that sells bodies of all shapes, sizes, ages and genders. Those beauties he deems too fair to walk the streets serve either as executive "escorts" or come down to the Necropolis to serve Septimus directly.

To the Damned, the Worm Lord is a source of exclusive information a pretty phrase for blackmail. His spies are many, and he barterers one fact for another. Surprisingly, his network reaches beyond the city limits, as Septimus eagerly connects with Kindred from foreign domains. As he is fond of saying, "No secret is safe."

I told him nothing of this project, but he is already aware of other agents like myself. He would not speak their names, for I have no information to give him in trade. You should know, however, that he hopes to make you an offer for all the material that you are collecting.

Things I know about the Worm Lord:

- Septimus has a lover. She is a Succubus called Penny Reflex, said to once have been consort to the Prince herself (and so it is suggested that this is why our good Prince has such an active dislike for the Worm Lord) and who may be related in some way to the Old Bat. Septimus and Penny have been "together" for the better part of a decade, now. They are openly affectionate, if that is the term. This "affection" often spills out into the tunnels. She scratches at him. He bites at her. Neither is a child, but they share the blood-bond common among younger Kindred, with all the lovey-dovey perversity that implies. Also of note: he's a masochist. Sexually. Penny regaled me with a tale of a recent session, where she scraped the flesh clean from each knot of his spine with her teeth while he lay bound and bent over a roll-top desk. She then licked the exposed vertebrae, which she said gave him a potent dose of pleasure and pain. Septimus was present during the conversation, and did not seem embarrassed by her words. No. In fact, he seemed proud.
- He keeps no covenant, fearing that allegiance to any would limit his customers. He admits, however, that despite "limitless sins," he does believe in the Lord of the Sanctified and sometimes takes communion from a local priest. This contact is one of us, the Reverend Sedge. Septimus will not attend a Midnight Mass, however.

IN THE BEGINNING THERE WAS FEVER. THERE WAS BLOODY URINE. THERE WERE LONG QUIVERING STRINGS OF FLESH THAT SPOOLED OUT OF THE SKIN. THERE WAS SLEEPY DEATH IN THE WAKE OF BITING FLIES.
- CARL ZIMMER, PARASITE REX



- Plainly stated, Rufus Septimus enjoys disgusting others. His seemingly sunburned skin peels constantly. He strips it off in gauzy swatches and flicks wadded up bits of decaying membrane at those near him. He gladly regurgitates blood, wasting it for the look of shock on the faces of others. He even admits to particularly striving to disgust those of his own clan; it is something of a challenge, clearly, to make a Nosferatu blanch and shudder. This, he claims, sometimes requires a subtler hand, for overt displays of grotesquerie often sail over our heads. I'll admit that he does a thing with his eye — pressing his twisted pinky finger into the depths of his pupil as if the eye doesn't matter at all — that unsettles me mightily.
- The Worm Lord is somewhat obsessed with prophecy and those who speak it. This interest is not just for those who'd prophesy information about him in specific (though he'll pay generously for such information), but includes anyone who can provide Septimus with paranormal predictions about anything at all.

Rumors that I have heard about the Worm Lord:

- While he does not belong to any one covenant, stories suggest that he filters money to and from the First Estate. Despite the upper echelon's public dismissal of the Worm Lord and their abject disapproval of his ways, whispers in the dark claim that they are actually quite chummy. Some say that the Worm Lord pays those worthies to be allowed to operate in the city. Other, quieter voices have said that they pay him for that privilege.
- We know that our kind is rife with strange breeds: thousands of bloodlines representing tiny deviations from the norm. I have been told that Rufus Septimus is the progenitor of one such bloodline, one that has lived so long beneath the surface that light destroys the senses utterly, at least for a time. Even if Septimus is not of such a familial line, some of us in his employ most certainly appear to be. An even stranger anecdote purports that this bloodline is somehow bound up with the Mekhet; did they engineer such a family line? Or was a Shadow cannibalized, somehow resulting in this bloodline... that may or may not exist?
- Despite his faith in and fear of a Christian God, Septimus allegedly prays to a pagan goddess, Laume, the weaver of fate. A witch of my acquaintance claims that Laume was once triple-aspected, but that "something" happened to her other two aspects that left her alone. (Is fate then woven out of control? Does no one spin the thread and cut it? What does that say about the destinies of all of us — that we are existing in circles and whorls, that despite our individual faces many of us are one?)

CONVERSATIONS WITH THE CAECILIAN

His library is an abandoned train station.

Entering from the sewers to a lower platform, I ascend into the cyclopean hall. The great windows are blacked out, the interior is filled with shelves, cabinets, refrigerators and, of course, books.

Piles upon dusty piles. He appears normal, but for his limbs. His nose is a bit of an eagle's beak, true. His eyes, though, are clear and blue. His mouth, his lips, both sane, albeit bent into a permanent frown. He seems human. For the most part.

The limbs, though, are shriveled. Have you seen twists of dried meat?

Like ribbons of pale leather without padding, his arms and legs

are without muscle and bone. "Not long after the Embrace," the Caecilian said, "the bones and tendons slid free from the skin. It was the way a body might reject a stubborn splinter." These limbs, dried and desiccated, dangle at his side. They do not even twitch. The Caecilian is torso and head, nothing more.

How does he feed? His librarians bring him his meals. For he is the Archivist, and his herd is the passel of thralls who serve him in these long galleries of books and tape machines and old televisions and amphora filled with crumbling scrolls. Each thrall is addicted to his blood in a way that I've never before witnessed; the Caecilian allows them to draw his blood with syringes, and they empty the crimson vials upon old, yellowed paper. If you listen hard enough, you can hear the blood crackling as it soaks into the fibers, filling the spaces between cellulose cells. Then you hear them suckling on the paper, for that's what they do; they press it into their mouths, over



and under the tongue, sucking on the soggy mass for the rest of the night. A slow release of bliss as they bring the Caecilian more books, more tapes, more whispers.

Some say these thralls are a repository for information. Have you heard of ghouls whose blood functions as a storehouse of knowledge? Used as couriers? As an ancient delivery system, messages coded in the dead blood within living vessels? I wonder if the blood of these librarians functions as an epistle relaying the Caecilian's memories perhaps back to himself should he feed upon them?

The librarians are how he reads, as well, and how he gets around. They carry him to his chosen book. One holds it open for hours, when necessary. 'Til the hands tremble and turn blue with the loss of blood.

As Archivist of Avernus, the Caecilian knows a great deal about our clan. I asked him why he would care to research and record such a subject, since he works for a criminal with more love for gossip than wisdom and who honors prophecy more than history. The Caecilian responded with, "The Worm Lord recognizes that knowledge is power. Ignorance may be bliss, but power is never pleasant. Rufus Septimus seeks power, not pleasure. Leave pleasure to the prostitutes and princes."

I've attached several of the ruminations given to me by the Caecilian. I occupied his time for nights on end; this is only a meager sampling of his limitless wisdom.

On Our Grotesque Nativity

You may believe the ancient propaganda. That in some fashion we are less than the others. Some old lies say we come not from the clean and freshly deceased but were instead made from the deadest of the dead: feculent flesh, muddy eyes, rotten teeth, bowels bursting with a maggot parade. As if we were cursed to rise from the graves, all sallow skin and charnel smell. Go on. Continue believing it. That's your cross to bear.

Oh, we were cursed. *Yes*. But not in the way those old lies claim. They are told to diminish us. To demean our spirit and to remove us from our distant glory and chthonic nobility. Have you heard of the Hidden Ones? Folklore gives them many names, all of them false: *huldrefolk*, *coblynau*, the *asura*, the *akvan*. Were they just miners? Tricksters? Ghuls? Monsters of the deep, the dark, the endless? They were all of these, but that only skims the surface of the waters filling this bottomless pit.

The Hidden Ones were a race not of men but of *gods*, the gods of the Underworld, of the Many Hells and profound kingdoms. They lurked in the hollow earth, ruling the world below as the gods of the land and sky ruled the world above. And just as those gods had their children, the Hidden Ones had theirs. They bred with chosen mortals, you see? On nights when the moon had gone dark and the stars were lost behind a curtain of clouds, the Hid-

den Ones would emerge. They would find the humans sleeping in their camps and villages and cities, and they would choose the ones who most deserved to come with them. Those chosen were different already, understand? Outcasts. Pariahs. Freaks. Strange in the world above, but glorious in the world below.

They would drag the men and women deep, and they would let the men couple with their females, filling goddess-wombs with their potent spawn. The children of these couplings were both human and god. Blind. Some with many limbs, others with none. Every vibration, every whisper and breath and wind, all felt on the skin, the flesh as eardrum, covered in endless *cilia*. But these were not vampires, no, no. These were living, breathing creatures. The kings and queens of the Underworld. The princes and ladies of the Beneath.

Then, *they* came, in search of the divine blood. A hunting party of five — a coterie we only now know as the Brothers Worm. They were dead men, yes, but men just the same; five brothers playing the same Requiem, hungry for blood, hungry for power. You know the legends — they were true then as they are now. Drink the blood of an ancient creature and you may know secret power. Drizzle the blood of a lycanthrope on a sponge of milk cake and consume it, or offer a debt to a dragon for a taste

of what oozes through its veins. It may bring madness, but with that madness comes a flourish of promise, a grand revelation of pain.

So they came, seeking the creatures that lived beneath the earth. The blood of the gods or the half-gods; it didn't matter which. Laughing, they dug. Boasting, they chipped away at rocks with pick axes. Weeping and screaming they were pulled into the darkness.

I cannot say what it was that found them — one of the Hidden Ones, or one of the half-breeds that wrenched its way from a human womb? The letters are not clear on this. What found them, though, was certainly one of the below dwellers: black eyes, its body long like a snake, its mouth full of flat razor teeth meant for scraping skin from muscle and muscle from bone. It thought to triumph over them, but the poor creature believed it was dealing with a band of human brothers, not undead kinsmen. It attacked. But they were able to beat it in the head with their clubs. They staked it to the ground. They held down its stretched out neck and cruelly choked it. And while it screamed and wept and gibbered, they sank their greedy glutton teeth into its belly and drank its blood.

The fools.

It changed them, obviously. Madness? Just as they had wished. Power? Yes, this was power, but not in the way they expected. What happened to them next isn't entirely clear; we know they disappeared into the depths for a time. A pilgrimage of sorts. A communal with the Hidden Ones, what you might think of as a *discovery* of what they were becoming.

You want to hear something? I'll read you a short passage from The Good Message of Brother Worm, a kind of apocryphal underworld gospel that was knocking about in the 9th century or so. Is it true? Is anything true? The passage is this:

"My soul is changed and it has changed the flesh to match it. In the dark our wet flesh slides together, slick as it goes one way, rough and sharp as it rubs the other. In the shadows there are only tongues and fingers and tiny hairs; my body can taste the rock walls, can hear the churning of the earth's organs beneath me, can see through the darkness with a clarity far greater than what the distant sun could have ever granted me. I am in love with the darkness. I love my new sisters and my old brothers. We are all worms, forever intertwined together."

The next time we see the Brothers Worm, they are in Rome, working to serve the Camarilla. Slaves? I don't think so. I believe they had a plan.

On The Name, Nosferatu

Where does this come from... this *Nosferatu*? It enters the public consciousness with Stoker's novel, then later with Murnau's masterpiece — and it is a masterpiece for the truth it speaks, for the presentation of a *cauchemar* Worm lost in the throes of his own kind of love, lost so deeply that he forgets of the coming sunrise.

Plainly, though, the name was accurate to us long before Stoker got a hold of it, yes? So, then, what is its origin? Has it been with us since the very beginning? No, no. Once, we were simply Worms. Worms of the Earth. Worms of the Underworld. Brother Worm, Sister Worm. Dismissive, but true to our nature in some fashion — always digging, always with our hands in the pliable earth. More on that in a moment.

I've heard tell that we picked up the moniker of Nosferatu in Romania, where many of us had caves and caverns and ramshackle shelters. It is true, that a great number of us in the years since the Empire's decline settled in those dark places. In the wintry ridges of the Dragon Window. Slumbering in the glacial lakes. Waiting in tunnels bored deep into the Fagaras Mountains. It is also true that they have a word there, *nesuferitul*, translated roughly as 'the insufferable one.' It is not true, however, that our name comes from this; rather, I like to believe it's the other way around. That mundane term instead comes from those who have known us, who were unable to suffer our onslaught. Our *disease*. Ah, and therein lies the truth — the truth of disease, whispered to us by the gods above.

The word, then, is *nosophoros*, from the Greeks. 'Disease-bearing,' that's what it means. Today, that association is a foul one. Unclean and vile. We think of disease and see

it paired with rats and waste and rotten blood, with shit in gutters and snot coughed into open mouths. In Ancient Greece, though? Disease was the provenance of the gods. The gods gave disease, and they cured disease. Only they. No other had that power or luxury. So, to have a disease may have meant being cursed by the gods or it may have indicated being *touched* by the gods. Even a curse of divine origin was in its own mad way a blessing.

How is it, then, that we fit into this? The gods were fond of intermediaries, creatures and demi-divinities that sat on the cosmic hierarchy above men but below them. So. The Brothers Worm of Rome each had five children of their own, and one of those children came to Athens. He was nameless — or, like the others, he was simply Brother Worm — but that would change when reaching the Greek city-state. Without the support of his siblings, this Worm could not feed himself well. He did not know the city. He was young and untested, almost a neonate in modern terms. He would've starved. Some legends suggest he *did* starve, falling into a torpid slumber, his guts gone dry and shriveling like a moldy peach.

Oh, but here we come to the gods' desire for intermediaries, of which I spoke. This Brother Worm found himself visited by the twins, Artemis and Apollo, she with bow, he with lyre, and they asked Brother Worm to be their go-between, to bring disease when they so required it, a way to humble man and force him to entreat the gods for a cure. And Brother Worm agreed, and they told him he must take a new name. He chose the name Aristaichos, a designation indicating something like, *the ultimate shame* (or what may later be thought of as *the insufferable one*,

yes?). But truly, he was called Nosophoros, the Disease-Bearer. He was the first of us to have a name and a title. Given by the gods, see?

But as they say, here's the rub. A twist in the tale that twists twice. At first, Nosophoros and his childer spread disease when the gods demanded it. Each of his childer had a mouth tainted with one disease only: rotten teeth and tongue a breeding ground for the plague, for leprosy, for typhus. When the gods pointed their fingers, Nosophoros and his Worms went and bit and gave their vile corruptions.

Nosophoros, though, began having dreams. Dreams of the Hidden Ones, the Gods Below. They were furious that he had given himself to the whims of the Gods Above, yes? Disgusting! A gross treachery! And they beseeched him to prove his loyalty to them, to defy the orders of the twins Artemis and Apollo.

With his own mouth tasting of plague, Nosophoros began to feed indiscriminately — biting this one, biting that one, his pale belly bloating with blood retained. And the plague spread swiftly, like a brushfire out of control. Black tumors and pus boils. Rib-cracking coughing fits. Miscarriages carried out of the womb on a rush of poison blood (which his childer surely supped). Doctors who attempted to help were themselves bitten, themselves

dragged into the plague and made dead. And all of this during the second year of the Peloponnesian War, when Athens needed her strength.

With Sparta attacking so fiercely on land, much of the city retreated behind the walls of Athens, which of course was becoming a veritable breeding ground of awfulness. The disease easily took one-third of the city's populace right then and there. Nosophoros thought he had truly hamstrung the city-state, snubbing his noseless face at the Gods Above... but therein lies the next twist.

The Athenians had to burn their dead in great pyres. Monstrous crematory towers, bodies toppling, all aflame. The Spartan army saw these fires, and the story goes that they saw wretched faces wreathed in the smoke; and they withdrew. In addition, the plague somehow spread out of the walls of Athens and into the Spartan army.

Nosophoros thought to spite the gods, but he instead helped those gods achieve their goals. A lesson waits there, for those who think to spite those of the world above. If our kind gets too cocky and thinks we're doing some grand disservice to the Lords and Ladies above, then it's just as likely that we've gone and hurt ourselves, too.

Here. Take this. Put this in your book. This is just a copy of a copy. It's an Orphic Hymn to Nosophoros."

To Nosophoros, Curse of Artemis, Hand of Apollo.

T Nosophoros, hear my pleas, for I hope that you will not come visit my household, for you are the divine carrier, the keeper of disease upon dead lips, a pestilent hunger. Dread eater; glorious worm; scavenger of bone and blood; pale thing that is both ghost and flesh; divine hand so cruelly chosen. Hear me, Nosophoros, Aristachos, Brother Worm. Save my household from your tainted touch. Save my family from your ruined mouth. Turn away. Turn away.

On Our Memory of the Underworld

Our clan-mates are always digging, aren't they? Moving grave dirt aside with spidery fingers or chipping away at tomb or tunnel walls with axes, shovels and oh, even blasting it with *dynamite*. Why do we do this? What is it with our fascination to go deeper, to hide from the light and fade from this world?

The easy answer, which isn't the true answer, is *never* the true answer, is that we're freaks. We belong in the dark. We seek comfort away from judging eyes. Interesting. And false. Few of us are ashamed of what we are, have you noticed that? Some are humble, yes, yes, but guilty and shameful? Over what? Over one eye, larger than the other? Or eyes gone shriveled? Limbs turned to little more than beef jerky? It's not like it makes us weaker, does it? We've all seen the Nosferatu who can tear a man's head off his neck like it was a ratty teddy bear and not a living, breathing human being. We know those who can cock an eye at a person and reduce them to weeping on the ground, blubbing, tearing clumps of hair out by the trembling fistful. We're *weak*? More propaganda. Spoken so proudly despite the irrefutable evidence to the contrary.

So, then. The answer that *is* true is that we are creatures who come not only from under the ground but from the actual Underworld. We have the blood of the Hidden Ones within us, the blood of the Gods Below. We dig, we go deep, because unconsciously that is who we are. We strive to earn their honor again. To find them anew. Our sprawling warrens and vast subterranean kingdoms are all built in deference to the Hidden Ones. Perhaps we shall impress them. Maybe we'll earn their honor and they'll come back out of the tunnels and shadows, smooth flesh sliding against rough rock, eyes glowing pink in the blackness of the forever night, and they will bless us with a kiss and more of their blood. Or maybe we secretly hope that when they emerge we can destroy them, taking *all* their glorious blood into our gulping mouths.

For most, as I've said, this is unconscious. But some know it. Some sense it. They grasp that we are trying to mimic Hell, Hades, Dis, Niflheim, what-have-you. We all hope to be the Devil, the Dragon Kur, the Queen Ereshkigal, the judge Anubis. This place, why do you think we call it Avernus? The entrance to the Underworld. Not an accidental name, I assure you."



On the Gods Below

Do they still exist, the Hidden Ones? Those who know of them say no, that they've gone so deep that they left this world. Others say they're still there, scuttling about in the caverns between strata, waiting for something to happen. Some say they haunt the nightmares our mesmerism evokes, that wherever we bring fear, the hidden gods are quick to follow.

I say they're still out there. I've photocopied a journal page for you that might indicate such a thing. A group of humans went deep, see? Excavating. Thought they'd found ruins from some proto-civilization, these archaeologists and anthropologists. Called themselves the Shield and Spear, hoping to find powerful artifacts from epochs long past. They found something alright. Before one of them died, he wrote this page:"

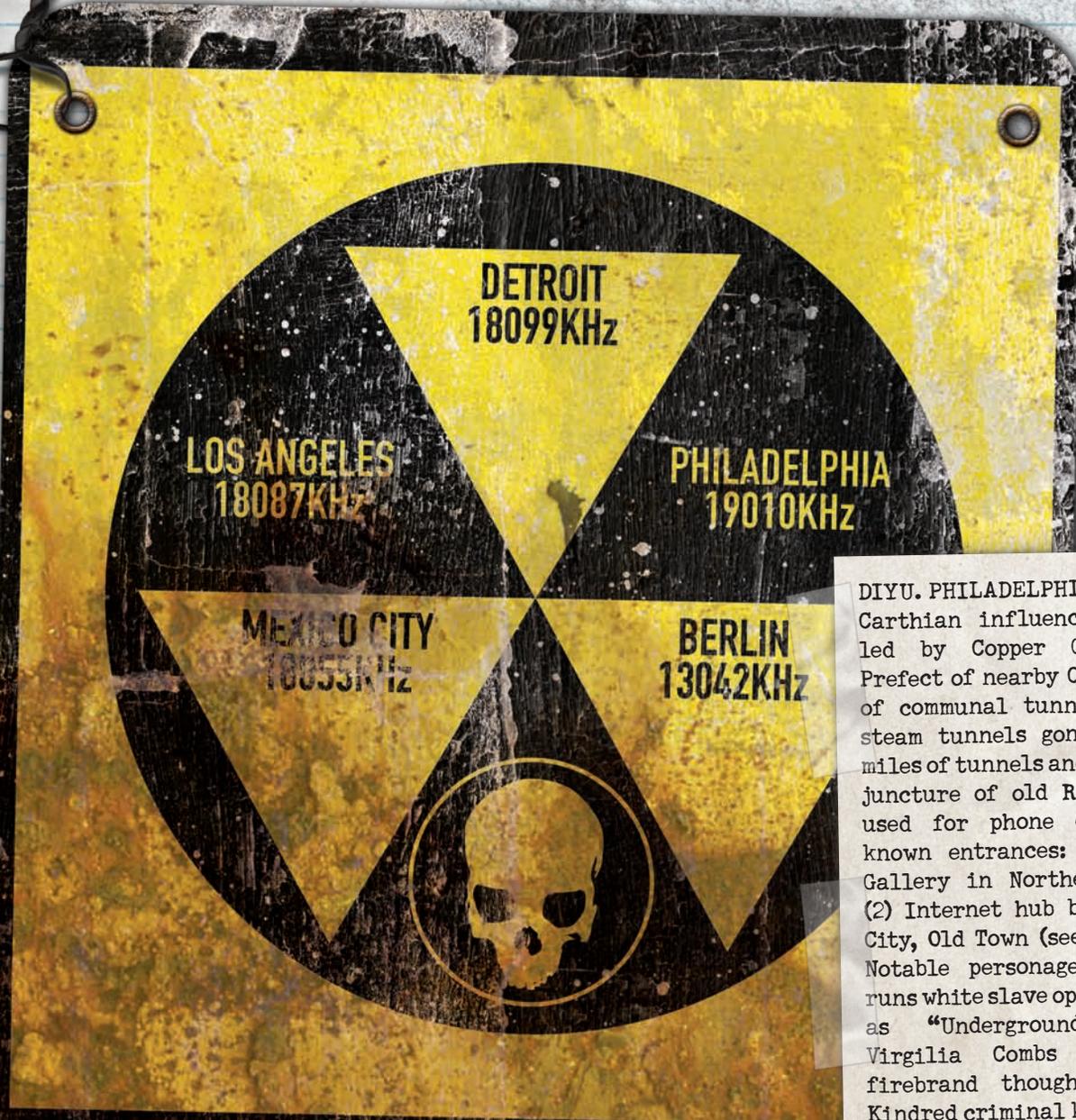
came down out of the lava tubes and I didn't see but the two things grabbed Jacobs and he was gone like that, shit, just gone. Beters and Starcourt went after him a day later, they were going crazy, I said to stay, just stay, we still have food and water and the Aegis Kai will send help, they'll find us! But they went away, and they never came back. And I was out of food and almost out of water and I kept seeing things out of the corner of my eye, little pale salamanders with eyes sewn shut skittering about, so I went after them. I crawled up the one tube and it was like climbing coral the way it cut me. Soon I heard them, then I saw them: two pale things, all limbs and mouths, tongues and fleshy protrusions —

They were... coupling with Beters and Starcourt... but this wasn't rape. The two of them seemed to be... I can't believe this, they seemed to be enjoying it. Beters whispered to me to join them. Starcourt just laughed. I didn't see Jacobs. I screamed. I tried to crawl back down the lava tube but fell. I'm cut. It's gone to scab but my leg's broken, too. And the salamanders are on me, now. Little tongues tasting the blood. I hope help comes soon.

OF WARRENS AND NECROPOLI

One of the librarian ghouls a servitor of the Caecilian directed me to this at the Archivist's behest. I thought not to take it, believing it secret information. In the end, though, I decided the risk to be worth it. The Caecilian swears that it is false. I doubt him. Based on the many whispers that drift up from the darkness, I suspect this is an offensive by the Worm Lord.

First, let me identify the below sign, and second, I will define how and why this might be such an attack by Septimus.



THE HOLLOW EARTH IS REAL
WE ARE ITS CHILDREN

FIELDS OF AARU. DETROIT. 18099KHz.

Invictus underground. Led by Pradeep Tresh, said to serve as a secret Seneschal to the Prince (as opposed to "true" Seneschal). Necropolis unusual in that it stretches over city, connects with easily 20+ "subterranean" human locations, most off-map (Red Oak Casino, The Weather Club, Gracie's, Fist Ring by the River). Unusual in that Necropolis is clean, well-lit, close to the surface. Notable personage(s): Tré Thompson, fight coordinator, runs the underground fights at Fist Ring; Sally Motor, runs the illegal street races (note that this is how the Nosferatu operate with the Invictus, by supplying a stream of illicit cash injections).

MUSPELHEIM. BERLIN. 13042KHz. Sanctified-leaning, but not declared so. Monitored by Sister Abendroth. Only one entrance: Ochre yellow door in subway station Gesundbrunnen, leads to tangle of disused civilian war shelters, bunker complex, ventilation shafts, brewery cellars, pneumatic postal system, and hundreds of miles of drainage. Sometimes called The Cathedral, this Necropolis serves as a kind of monastery for those seeking rumination, but has competition: a second Necropolis is said to exist in the same area, a violent "art liberation" underground shepherded by Karl Republik.

SHEOL. LOS ANGELES. 18087KHz. No affiliation. Steam tunnels and unused maintenance tunnels form several strata beneath UCLA. "Urban spelunkers" help form basis of herd and thralls; campus whispers about "secret tunnels," students come exploring, stumble upon Nosferatu Necropolis, are bled for food or made to serve. Heavily trapped (puddles of water electrified to give shock, stun targets). Overarching mood is penance, repentance. Nosferatu claim not to "kill." They are being "punished" and are said to watch the tunnels for "intrusions from worlds other than this." Notable location(s): Toilet Bowl Graveyard, cavern of unused and forgotten toilets, said to be a place where the "intrusions" most commonly occur (presaged by shaking and clinking of porcelain against porcelain). Notable personage(s): Professor Murieta, is head of "Sheol council," the decision-making body of this small largely academic Necropolis.

The document is a list of Nosferatu warrens, or "Necropoli." All are subterranean. Of these five Necropoli, three are in the United States, and two are abroad. They are each apparently quite large.

Why might this be information contributing to an offensive maneuver?

The Worm Lord has cut himself off from these warrens. He no longer wishes to be part of the larger community. He is a selfish entity a judgment that I expect even he will agree with - and while once he supported the solidarity of Haunts the world around, this no longer appears to be true. The whispers intimate that he in fact now views other clutches and clusters of Worms as nothing more than competition. Why go to him and pay his (what some say to be exorbitant) prices when it might be riskier, but substantially cheaper, to send an emissary to a distant warren where one might possess similar or even better information?

Hence, an offensive maneuver. The discovery of these warrens and the somewhat exhaustive information surrounding them could be used against the Nosferatu of these kingdoms. I will still share it, of course, comfortable in my lack of concern for the others. Some think us a tribe, but I've no great love or hate for those of my particular breed and brood. So. Do with this as you will. You might see it only as an artifact lending greater depth to your understanding of our kind. Or you may see it as a plan of attack, a cold order of operations. I am fine either way not that I'd dare tell you otherwise.

You'll note that each Necropolis comes complete with a shortwave radio frequency. That is or was, anyhow how some of these warrens communicated with one another.

MICTLAN. MEXICO CITY. 18055KHz. Pagan, Crone. Views itself as the "underworld," literally. Served by "king and queen," who believe selves to be divine: King Mictlantecuhtli, Queen Mictecacihuatl. Kingdom mirrors the Mexico City Metro lines; one of most heavily used metro lines in world, many riders "go missing" year to year, pulled into the dark and "sacrificed" to King, Queen, and the "gods" of Mictlan. Rumors that this opens into "Hollow Earth" at its nadir. All entrances bound to Mexico City Rail stations and tunnels. Notable personage(s): Garcia Garcia, "psychopomp" figure who serves as diplomat between the world above and Mictlan; Carlos Mecatli, said to have various cults of personality across city due to engaging personality, cults all human, a small army ready to serve.

THE EXPERIMENT

And so it is in my tour of Avernus that I am ushered into a long room that calls to mind a city morgue brightly-lit unlike the rest of the Necropolis, many metal tables, drawers of various implements (some common, some most certainly not), a bin for linens (mostly clean, some spattered red, black, yellow). Perhaps it is a morgue; I've been shuttled through so many doors and up and down so many staircases and ladders that I have no idea whether I'm above the ground, in a shallow basement, or deep in the bowels of the earth.

Only one of the tables features a patient; this one is alive, however, not a corpse at all. A reedy boy I say boy, but he might very well be in his early 20s, is strapped face up to the table. The straps are leather, and bind beneath the table holding him fast. In decidedly non-medical fashion, a dock is held in his mouth by a crooked 'x' of electrical tape. His left arm the sleeve of the white t-shirt pulled all the way up over the bicep looks to offer the flesh of an addict, numerous needle tracks and even a few sores walking up the skin. He is aware of me as I look down over him. He has

enough room to turn his head toward me, eyes wide (held open with what I can surmise is actually some kind of epoxy binding lid to skin). Those eyes are pleading. I would dearly love to help him, but I have to whisper in his ear that this is purely an informational visit. Journalism, I call it, and I like the ring of that.

One must be impartial, after all.

At the end of the room stands a well-paid servant of the Worm Lord, a Haunt with many names. Some call him the Nematode, or as a shortened nickname, simply "Nemo." Others call



him the Butcher, the Hematologist (leading to a rather roll-off-the-tongue name of Nemotode the Hematologist), or even "Sawbones." He asks me to use the nickname, and so I shall.

Nero bears few of the obvious strains of deformity that others of our line possess. He's thin but for the pot belly that suggests pregnancy. He's bald, but his head is marked only with liver spots and not with blisters or bone protrusions. His nose is piggish, but present. His eyes they bulge. Too much. The flesh around the orbs is puckered and tight. But the truly unsettling display is when he opens his mouth and reveals his tongue; it's covered in fleshy threads, as if each taste bud stood up a quarter-inch to see what might be going on in the back of the throat. Like moles or tags of skin. It modifies his speech, but not by much; it is not an impediment so much as a persistent shushing hiss in his words.

I will let him tell you what he does for the Worm Lord, and what he is specifically doing here today with his patient. My trusty recorder captured it all.

Nemo's Words

I was a Dragon, you know. Yes. Still would be, but for the Worm Lord. He has some grave issue with them. Not sure what that would be, and I don't care to ask. I could speculate. Is it that the surpassing or examination of our condition by another group gives him less power? Is it that the Order so closely holds its knowledge that they are competitors? But no, I won't speculate. The opportunities presented here are too fascinating to resist. Plus, I am Nosferatu. To know that a whole warren lurked under my feet for nearly ten years and I didn't know it... well. It's time to be a part of something that is wholly my own, I guess.

What do I do here? I was a doctor in my human years. A practitioner of surgery in Philadelphia roundabout the start of the 18th century — 1709 or thereabouts, the details escape me.

-Untrue, as I'm told. I suspect that Nemo is actually William Sterner, a male nurse from the 1950s. Not a doctor at all. And certainly not as old as he purports. He is not without power, but examining him has not revealed the black threads or vile stains of having consumed the heart's blood of another. He must have come to power another way. The Ordo Draconum, perhaps.

I'm no healer, not anymore. I mightn't have been a healer even then, really. My job was mostly cutting things off. Limb gone infected with streaks of red? Saw it off. Finger broken so the bone is peeking out? The finger would go to the dogs.

The Worm Lord has certain needs. Not personally, I don't mean to gossip about any kind of peccadilloes (even if he'd like me to, and charge you for the privilege), I only mean that his operations here in Avernus necessitate a deft hand with a scalpel, with surgical tubing, with bone saws and stitchery. I'm the best. So here I am.

How does this apply to his operations? He's the carriage stop for a small portion of the drugs that come into the city. I say a small portion because what he hopes to do — and so far, has accomplished nicely, if you ask me — is create high demand for limited supply. He doesn't glut the market with his product, because his product is *special*. And that's where I come in. At least, in part.

He's got a chemist, works a few rooms over (if you press an ear to the wall as I assume you might need to, you can hear the bubbling of beakers, the venting of steam, the scritch-and-scratch of children's hands working to measure and bag the drugs), name of Silas. Silas won't talk to you, I promise that. "Too busy," she'll say, and yes, I said *she* will say. Looks like a boy because she dresses that way, cuts her hair that way, and the lack of lips and all those craterous pores don't help matters anyway. She even artificially deepens her voice *like this, rumble, rumble, I'm a man, not a girl.*

Point is, the chemist sometimes has special needs. At times Silas handles these things herself — drain cleaner or black mold or asbestos cut into the heroin or sent boiling into some glass cauldron of meth or whatever it is she's cooking up over there. Other times, she comes to me for special ingredients. And I have the ingredients.

-Here, Nemo pulls me away from the boy's struggling, fearful body and shows me his metal cabinets and drawers of what he calls, well -

These are my many *delights*. Some used. Some not yet used. These jars — blood, you can see, they're all filled with blood — form the backbone of my collection, though perhaps they're not all that interesting to look at, even in these harsh lights. In the back here, these are jars filled with the blood of various *therianthropes* — shapechangers, you know, lupines and their infernal ilk. I've got the blood of a few witches, one a swamp *bokor*, one jar from an old farmer way north of here who used old magic (not too far off from what you'll find the Cronies practicing, believe it or not) to bless his crop yield, and this jar is from some lackwit who thought he could animate the dead and actually control them (he couldn't, and his "patient" tore both his legs off).

It's not the blood that gets me excited, though — never thought one of us would say *that*, did you? Here, look, look at this. What is it? It's a gall bladder, and these rough bits which you can see behind the glass are polyps. Not exciting yet, I know. Let me rotate the glass here, and then you'll see — ah, *there*. See that? The bile duct? It's a wedding ring. Diamond and everything. Princess-cut, I think they say. Can't you see it? It's... grown right into the organ. Almost like it *is* part of the bile duct, somehow. Where did this come from? We... caught something. Down here in the tunnels when we were blasting our way into the unfinished pipeline that runs underneath the city center. It looked to be mostly man-shaped. But it had staples all up its skin, as if they were holding it together. And the thing kept belching up bubbles of mud and sewage. Its blood was worthless. But this organ? A *gem*. You take it out with a pair of big forceps, you give it a squeeze, and the bile that comes out of there... potent, real potent. Mix it with your own blood, give it to someone? The Vinculum, formed in a *single step*. Let's see the Dragons replicate *that*.

This bag here, these are... well, they're owl feathers. I'd rather not talk about those. Here, gaze upon this, instead. Pair of eyes, right? Just floating around in brine? Human. Blue. Nothing special. First, get close. Can you see that? Maybe you can't. That there is the optic nerve floating behind like a, like a tail or something. See that connected at the end? Look where I'm pointing my tweezers. That's a *microchip*. One on the other eye, too. Now, watch this. It's a simple thing, but —

See that? The change? So fast. They look normal until

Nemo taps the glass with the dull end of a metal scalpel. It jars the ears, the way the echo is down here.

you disturb them, then they turn into... well, *insect eyes* come to mind, wouldn't you say? Hundreds of little eyes, and if you do that enough, they turn and look at you before fading back to human. The Archivist says they must be demon eyes according to the books, but I do not believe in demons, not in the strictest sense. Though one might suggest we are all demons.

He tries unsuccessfully to show me more — he tells me that he has at least seven more drawers of note, but I quietly prod him to demonstrate why he has this poor young gentleman strapped to a morgue table. He gets quiet. Then he opens another drawer. He shakes a new glass jar at me, this one filled with brittle dry thorns — each over an inch long — that tinkle and whisper against the glass.

Nemo goes over to the table. He taps one thorn into an open palm and pinches its tip betwixt thumb and forefinger. He holds it above the boy's brow, and when he draws it across the skin the way you might drag a piece of chalk across a chalkboard's bleak expanse — I can hear the skin split and the boy's jaw clenching so hard that his teeth almost break against one another. Then comes the potent smell of ozone, like the air before a lightning strike, and I can taste fire and sulfur and what might only be described as brimstone.

Drops your jaw, doesn't it? Demon, I know, that's your first thought, too, especially after those eyes I just showed you. He looks normal again, too, just like the eyes — you scratch him with that thorn and white light comes crackling out of his mouth and his eyes turn to liquid fire and his skin starts to smolder the way a hot coal might before it glows orange, but then he's back, he's human, nothing strange.

Nemo tells me that the captive experiment is something from a fairy tale. That he is not human at all but a fey thing left in the cradle by a thieving creature from some other place. Now grown, this thing the monsters left behind is a gross simulacrum of humanity, but certainly inhuman.

It's true. The thing lies, though. If you give him half-a-chance, he'll try to convince you that *he's* the human, that *he's* been captured before by someone just like me, and he keeps calling me his "second keeper." Obviously, fey minds don't hold up to the rigors of this world.

Point is, his blood isn't much when consumed directly. But Silas thinks she can make a potent hallucinogen out of it — perhaps something a bit more novel, a fake tattoo

rubbed on the flesh or the back of a cartoon stamp to lick. Who can say?

Nemo wishes to continue regaling me with tales of his medical prowess, but I must interrupt and explain to him that I simply do not have the time. I feel that if given enough rope, he would hang me and himself in some elaborate cat's cradle of lies and stories. I urge him to finally answer the question that truly motivates this interview.

Why do I follow the Worm Lord? I don't like him. Not personally. I find him... a study of extremes. Like a piece of excrement pressed with elegant gold leaf. Oh, don't worry, he's heard that comparison from me and he seems to take a certain thrill from it, so I expect he considers it true. I mean to say that he's incredibly articulate and his plans so sophisticated, that it's like he's thinking three chess matches down the line. But he's grotesque. He thrives on his awfulness. He often claims to be the embodiment of everyone's worst dreams, and in many ways, that's too true. Though one could claim that this makes him all the more compelling a leader, does it not?

FROM LIBRARIAN OLIVIERI: THE FIFTH WORM

A runner found me in the catacombs, springing upon me out of the dark, though my ears did not fail me and I heard him coming nearly fifteen minutes before he happened upon me examining the graffiti upon the walls. One of The Caecilian's librarian thralls wished for me to have this information:

You know what happened to one of the children of the Brothers Worm, as he went to become the first of the named, Nosophoros. It can be assumed that the large bulk of the Brothers Worm remained in Rome, even as it fell, even long after it fell, picking at the bones of the Empire like birds pulling strings of meat from a well-preserved carcass. They became named, of course - our own Necropolis King takes his name from a Worm of the time, Rufus Septimus. It is of course hard to tell what happened to each of the Brothers Worm, given their affinity for that single name, but as they gain names they write missives, some on walls, some on papyrus. And here is a curious thing: did you know that sounds may be trapped in ceramic as the clay is spun upon a wheel? As a reed or blade of grass forms texture upon the clay, it is like the groove in a record, it may record sounds; and a similar reed driven through the clay groove may play back sound in much the same way as a needle upon the vinyl.

A message trapped in the clay of an urn found locked in a chest in a Necropolis around Uganda's Lake Victoria gives an interesting story of one of the children of that first generation of Worms:

"I am the king of the hidden cities. I am the keeper of Tim Buk Tu. I am the serpent beneath Axum, its obelisks my bones. I am the trackless veldt, I am the secret army of worms. My children are Tsetse, Anophales and Locust. I am the monster of Bornu, the disease of the Kush. Your palm fronds and goat skins cannot stop me. I am Sakpata."

It is possible, then, that one of our earliest believed himself to be a god of disease and insanity, a plague upon Africa. The stories that come out of that continent tell us that Sakpata - or someone calling himself such, a child perhaps - is still the plague, his flesh erupting with consumptive insects, his mouth a breather of disease, his fingers rubbing together making a sound that stirs the mind to break.

Humans are always seen conjuring charms and talismans to thwart our feeding. Few, if any, do anything at all. Here, the Librarian references the palm fronds and goatskin? Both (in Africa, of course) are supposed to protect one against disease and the diseased (palm fronds hung in doorways, goatskin kept on one's person, often as a pouch or satchel). It is no surprise that the emblems of thwarting disease are at times also used as charms to thwart the Nosferatu, for in many places, we are disease.

This is who we should be, still. The guardians of magic in the mundane life. Givers of fortune, keepers of disease.

true that the African gods controlled the vagaries of nature, but mundane life was watched over by ancestor spirits. Ancestors were powerful forces in one's life, offering security and prosperity to those who honored them, disease to those who did not. In some communities, a villager was appointed as a go-between for the village and its ancestors. Other lore, however, suggests that some villages report actual physical manifestations of those ancestors, pale and strange in death. The relationship between the living world and the dead is complicated, one bound by bargains and negotiations. Those still living owed the ancestors, and in some cases paid in very literal blood. But the ancestors owed a duty to the living, as well; they watched over the villages, and elaborate ceremonies ensured the renewal of these contracts between life and death. At puberty, a child who

CONVERSATIONS WITH THE WORM LORD

(NOTE: This conversation is not recorded, for the Worm Lord would not have it. My memory, however, is near flawless. What I've transcribed below is most certainly what transpired, give or take a word. Fear not inaccuracy; my mind is sharply hewn.)

When my trip through the bowels of Avernus was complete, I was ushered into a broad, subterranean bathhouse copper tubs lowered into the crumbling floor and set there with fresh cement, the air turbid with steam, rats squeaking somewhere in the distance. The Worm Lord was not present, not yet, but three of his thralls prostitutes whose faces had been cut, scarred, almost tribally with sharp lines puncturing puffy whorls of raised skin undressed me and I felt their warm hands at my elbows. They ushered me into a tub. A part of me wondered: is here where I meet my end? Have I learned too much? Has this been an elaborate ruse all along?

In the water, a dead rat bobbed at the level of my sallow chest. The prostitutes oiled my scalp with... olive oil, so the smell suggested, and then left the room.

It seemed interminable before the Worm Lord finally made his entrance, long bedraggled coat sweeping the floor behind him; he mumbled to himself, chuckling, as if going over a ledger of notes in his head.

When he finally stood before me, I could see that he was a small man, as small as myself, with a head in part like a ruined and moldering pumpkin, pale as a blind worm.



He eased himself into the waters, and splashed the rat out of the tub.

The tub was large, easily of the size to accommodate four or five of us, but for as small of frame as both of us were, I felt one of his long nails - roughhewn and jagged, like an owl's talon snapped in half - drag for but a moment across the bare whisper of skin that hangs at my ankle.

S (Septimus): Welcome to the Avernus baths, Nicodemus. Warm enough for you?

INT: Yes. Most certainly. I am surprised to see these tubs filled with water, not with blood.

S: Tubs full of blood tend to set our teeth on edge. Some can handle it. Some can't. Feels like bugs - happy bugs, their little legs dancing and itching - on your skin. Expensive, too. Once in a blue moon we host a gaggle of Pretties down here with their dick-whacked priests. They like the blood baths. Something about a bull. Something about a goddess.

INT: Cybele. Yes. Of course.

S: Right, right. So. Here we sit, ready to slice and dice the Masquerade up into practically-unusable bits.

INT: I'm sorry?

S: This book. This compilation. It doesn't do any favors to our secrecy, does it? A book detailing the secrets of not just occulted vampires but the most secretest hush-hush on-the-QT vampires of the playground.

INT: Are you going to -

It was at this point that remember the toenail? Gliding along my thin skin? It tore through. Like a hook it pierced the wan flesh and grabbed a hold. A small spiral of black blood drifted up to the surface of the water.

The Worm Lord dipped his finger in it, swirled it around, and smelled it with what remained of his nose. He flicked it away, worthless.

INT: — destroy me?

S: Could be, rabbit, could be. You've been wandering around in the dark collecting secrets and thinking you'll just be allowed to put them in your little scrapbooking effort? Then again, maybe I want my secrets out there. Maybe I want them all to know what Avernus is, what we do, how we are the secret economy that runs this city.

INT: Of course. If there's anything I can do...

S: There is, Nicodemus, there is. See, you're not the only one making these magical memory books. I know at least of two others, each for their respective families, and so I can then assume that if there's three, there's five. Maybe more. Maybe the First Estaters get their own bullshit diary, who knows?

INT: Other books. Oh.

S: "Oh" is fucking right. So. I could slit you from toes to tits right now, empty you into the tub for easy cleanup, or I can solicit a promise from you.

INT: A promise. Yes... of course, Worm Lord.

S: Get me one of the other books. Just one. I'll tell you the easiest way, you can think on it, think if this suits you. One of the books, and God only knows how or why, is in the hands of a neonate, a Savage. Alice, I think her name is. She was here in the city but now she's gone nomad on us. But she'll be back, of this I have... confidence. And I want you there when she does. I want you there, and I want that book. I'll give you something that might help... soothe the savage beast. Something that comes to us from the Big Easy before Mother Nature took a shit on it. Deal?

INT: ... Certainly.

We shook on it. He is small, but his grip was strong. I felt my knuckles grind together, ready to shatter even though our hands were exactly the same size. Then he took a blood bag out from beneath him, something he had brought into the tub but I hadn't noticed, and he starting sucking from it like a human infant at its bottle. The blood was congealed within, and it seemed that he was having some difficulty.

S: Gah, it's clotted. I thought the steam might loosen it up a bit. I'm like a kid with a milkshake over here. Whatever. Now that we've gotten past formalities, let's talk turkey. What do you want from me, Tommy?

INT: Tell me about Penny Reflex.

S: Not much to tell. We got similar needs. Damn sure got similar wants. Or is your question, how does a mutant like me get a beauty like her? It's easy. Even dead, women aren't as much about the looks as us men are. They look deeper. They see the man beneath. Of course, I'm shallower than a puddle of spit and semen, but I guess she sees something there. Plus, she used to be an amputee fetishist. You know, guys missing legs and chicks in car wrecks whose arms popped off at the elbow. Finding me is just a natural step down. They say love can't thrive amongst the undead. Depends on how you define love. It isn't like from when I was alive. It's somehow better, somehow worse. My heart doesn't hurt, and I don't get those moths in my belly. But the Blood? It sings, brother.

INT: Are you Invictus?

S: Next question.

INT: It's only that I've heard —

S: Next question, or I drape your guts like a mink stole across my shoulders.

INT: What do you think of your clanmates? Of the Nosferatu?

S: I don't think much about us. Them. Whatever. We are what we are. Some'll make a big deal out of it, like you can only be a set of things when you're in this fucked-up family of ours. We're all freaks and weirdos, fine. We can't be members of high society? We can't be businessmen? We're all bat-faced molesters and sleep-eaters who are all woe is me, boo-hoo I'm a monster? Bull. Shit. We can be whatever we want to be. Too few of us get that. Too many hide in the shadows, flinching any time a suit walks by. Too many become fragile little snowflakes or go the other way and become rampaging brute thug assholes (like that War Pig, once on the leash of the First Estate, now he's a mad dog with a frothing muzzle with his chain trailing him). Garbage, all of it.

INT: But you thrive on being a monster.

S: No, I thrive on the reaction. Some are disgusting because they're simply disgusting. I'm disgusting because I love how it knocks others off their axis. They think that my freakishness is in my flesh, in me giggling or eating flies or urging my dry and dusty body to evacuate my bowels one last time on the dinner table. Whatever gets them to cringe, and recoil and worry about being somehow contaminated by my presence, is what suits my plans. Because these are not the things they should be worrying about."

INT: And why should they worry?

S: Because while they've been paying attention to how grotesque I am, while they've been consistently underestimating me, I've gone ahead and conquered this city. Or close enough.

INT: How is that?

S: The "real" economy is jumpy, like a rat hit in the ass with a BB from an air rifle. Oil prices up, the world trembles. Some disaster, oh no, a terrorist attack, ah, the whole thing wobbles, like it's balanced on a see-saw. But not my economy. Mine is bound to mortal forces, but more specifically to the forces of sin and vice and desire. Everybody wants. And they want all the time. Gas prices skyrocket and people still want their drugs, their whores, their knockoff handbags — even more than before. Our esteemed society of the Damned ties itself loosely to some criminal aspects — dirty real estate deals, maybe, or bank scandals — but they can still get fucked. Not me. I get paid. And you think it's not all about money for us, even though we're dead, then you can go back to thinking the world is flat and Superman will save the day.

INT: And of course, you sell information.

S: I call it selling "knowledge." Sounds official. Sound fucking edifying. But yeah. Knowledge is power, and power is money.

INT: It's truly all about money for you.

S: It's all about money for all of us. Money and blood. Look at it this way, my-new-friend-Nicodemus. Money is about the fundamentals, the physical world, the mundane of the mundane. It's the blood of the world. He who has it grows fat with power. He who finds its flow stanching withers like a grape on a broken vine. Blood is about the... I hesitate to call it the spiritual side, but it's damn sure mystical. It's magic, the blood. It's not just red. In our dead arteries flow secrets, gifts, memories, the blessings and curses of outside forces, the dreams and fears of inside forces. Our own damnable minds. Money is the world's blood. Blood is... well, blood is blood. It's personal.

INT: You speak of the mystical. Is that why you are so attracted to prophecy?

S: Who told you that?

INT: "In our dead arteries flow secrets."

S: Fine, don't say. Yes. I have a predilection toward prophecy. Those who prophesy — eh, listen. You take a look, right? Look through history. Our history. Cycles, repeated. Patterns, over and over again. Maybe it's the blood. An endless stirring of the same events. Our kind hits certain peaks and valleys. Sometimes we're high on the hog, cackling and feeding and boom, we hit a saturation point. And then, just as quick, it all goes to Hell. A new curse sweeps down on us. Whispers and owls and demons come to cut us out of the tapestry — a scalpel cutting cancer free from the body. I like prophecy because it tells us what might be coming down the pike.

INT: And you think we're hitting another... "saturation point?"

S: Could be, rabbit. Could fucking be. That's why I want those other files or books or whatever they are. Truth waits within. Get them for me. That's all I have to say.

And then he stood, discarding his plasma bag, and kicked the rat out of his way. He winked at me, and pointed at his open eye, but I'll never understand why.

Then he was gone, leaving me with my mission.

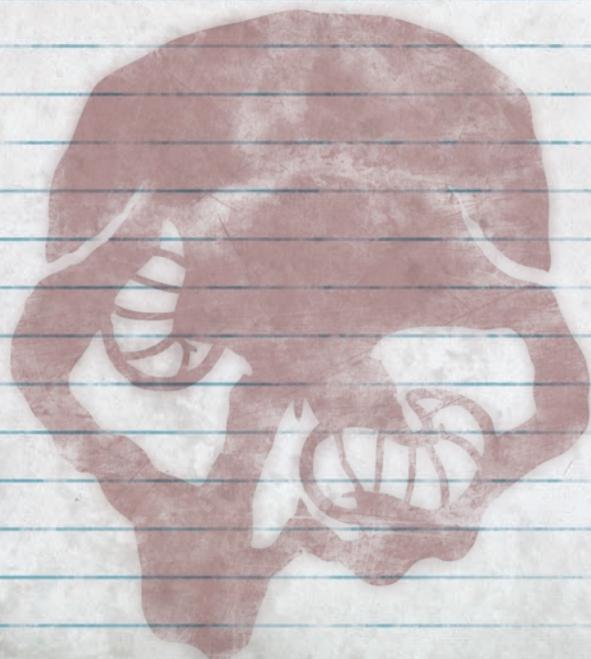
FINAL NOTE

I do not wish to defy you, of course. But the urge to find these other compilations is like an itch in the center of my back — difficult to scratch, yet scratch it, I must.

Don't worry. I will not hand them over to the Worm Lord. I will deliver them to you when I am done with them, if I end up with anything meaningful.

But my curiosity is insatiable.

Besides, perhaps it shall tell me: am I doing this right, at all? Is this even what you seek, these files, these interviews and transcripts?



THE DEAD LIEUTENANT

Midnight in the Police Parking Lot, twenty yards underground and wreathed in concrete. I make myself visible at the agreed spot, in front of O'Neill, a fat, sweaty young man in shirtsleeves and shoulder holster, who leans against a pillar. He has that look in his eyes, that half-crazed, dulled look; it tells me he's strung out on the Blood. He isn't surprised, though, which suggests to me that his master has been a naughty boy.

O'Neill leads me across several bays of cop cars and wagons. Many of the cars have dents and scratches. The fluorescent tubes that still work flicker incessantly, creating, now and then, that effect that I saw on a movie once, where all the movements we make seem to be a series of still images.

O'Neill takes me to what looks like a maintenance door, and then into a stairwell. It smells like a stairwell in a tenement. Like piss and decay. You'd have thought the cops would have had higher standards. We go down the steps, to my surprise, and come out one floor from the very bottom through a door whose blue paint is more flaked off than not. We walk through a gray-white corridor, lit by those same intermittent fluorescent tubes. The walls give signs of once having had posters on them. The doorway at the end of the corridor is impassable, blocked by a metal-and-chipboard police desk standing on one of its ends and jammed into the doorway at an improbable angle. O'Neill, unfazed, leads me through a vented metal service door and into a narrow corridor lined with shelves, each filled with old bottles of toilet bleach and floor cleaner, dust-covered faded packets of paper hand-towels. At the end of this corridor we come out into a communal bathroom; on the other side of which is the door that connects to the shadowed office of the Dead Lieutenant.

It's strangely reminiscent of one of those old noir films, where the Private Dick sits in a dark smoky office, bands of light coming through cheap venetian blinds. The Dead Lieutenant is not smoking though. He sits, silently, completely still, and he makes no move whatsoever until I am within ten feet of his desk.

It's hard to look at him. I mean, not because I can't bring myself to do it or shit like that, but because you can't look directly at him; it's as if your eyes slide off the man and you're instead focusing on the wall behind him or on the table, or on the stains on his tie. I think he might look like a middle-aged cop stereotype, all heavy-set and jowly and with the thinning gray-black hair and the lined forehead. It's the picture I get in my head when I think about him. But I know that at the same time, he has some characteristic that I cannot pin down, something that makes him uniquely wrong. Something I cannot remember, even though it lurks in my head.

We experience the usual brief pause, as we come to grips with the presence of the Blood, and both having conquered it, we greet each other. I remind him why I am here. He nods, says, take a seat. He motions to O'Neill with a wave, and gets up and shakes my hand as if nothing is wrong.

O'Neill rummages in a rust-ridden filing cabinet before coming back with a heap of files that he dumps unceremoniously on the desk between us. He stands at the Dead Lieutenant's side for a moment, expecting something. The Dead Lieutenant says, *Haven't you got po-lice work to be doing, son?* O'Neill, relieved, waddles off, presumably to do whatever it is police de-
tectives do in this city.

So it's me and the Dead Lieutenant. He sits behind the name of Lt. McNulty, but that isn't the name he uses, and it's not the name he had when he was a detective.

Sorry. When he was a *living* detective. The police still have him on their payroll. They have no record that he ever died. He just works nights now.

Things I Know About the Dead Lieutenant:

- In narcotics, the Dead Lieutenant is Lt. Wilde. In the Organized Crime Unit, he is Lt. Yeats. The Dead Lieutenant's usual names, when working homicide, include O'Brien, Joyce, Heaney, and Behan. Given the number of homicide cases with those names attached to them, you'd think he's harder-working than anyone else.
- But a disproportionately small number of homicide cases, investigated by one of those names, are ever actually solved. And this is of course deliberate. He explains to me that as a contractor to the Prince (he refers to Our August Leader as a "client," nothing more) he often gets hired to clean up messes. And what better way to clean up a mess done by one of us than to take over the homicide investigation, send it down the wrong track, and either frame someone or, easier, get it so hopelessly compromised that it goes cold? Through this, he makes himself an essential part of Kindred society, even though by his own admission he has very little to do with that society. Elders have accidents too, and a great deal of embarrassment can be averted with a simple cover-up. On the other hand, while a neonate might not be able to afford the Dead Lieutenant's prices, his sire or some higher up cog in the machinery of social undeath certainly can. So the mentor buys the Dead Lieutenant's obfuscatory services, and the careless neonate is in hock for a very long time. If the Dead Lieutenant didn't exist, the hierarchy would have had to invent him.
- He is very busy. Not that he really cares much about the status quo beyond its ability to provide him with money and favors. This is speculation, but it seems to me that he still genuinely loves police work. Whether upholding the law or subverting the law, the Dead Lieutenant dedicates most of his time to being involved with the every-night mechanics of the law.
- He is, however, still a dead Lieutenant, and dead lieutenants still have to hide the fact that they're dead. He cemented his power base early on, like a virus, binding or scaring high-ups into submission without ever compromising himself. Or so the story goes. Suffice to say, no one in the City Police Department becomes Lieutenant, Major, Captain or Commissioner without him knowing about it and directly or indirectly approving of it. He has more ghouls and slaves in the department than most of the city's Ventrue elders have across the whole domain. It all comes back to him.

Rumors I Have Heard About the Dead Lieutenant:

- On the other hand, a fair number of the Kindred who know about him and use his services reckon that no one vampire could be that busy. He does seem to have the knack of being in about six places at once. An elder calls him about an unfortunate corpse on the other side of the city, and the Dead Lieutenant's there in ten minutes. Either he can teleport, or those six names belong to six different vampires, albeit vampires with similar enough heritage to be indistinguishable from each other, thanks to the odd sensation the viewer has of being unable to look straight at him. Or them.

- A corollary to this is that it's just too convenient for the Dead Lieutenant to have all this power and all these connections, and yet for him to be entirely not bothered with the mechanics of Kindred power. He's a vampire, for Christ's sake. Vampires want to take over. They want control. They don't sit in their own little kingdoms waiting to be told what to do. And elders don't let vampires like him just exist without taking precautions. Someone has the upper hand in this relationship. It's nowhere near as amicable as people seem to think it is.
- The flipside viewpoint comes from those who reckon it's all bullshit, and that notwithstanding his much-vaunted powers of obfuscation, the Dead Lieutenant doesn't actually have any clout at all. He doesn't do much of anything for his money. He just sits there and lets his police colleagues (who are really just his herd) do all the work, and he knows they're never going to solve the "murders" he's supposedly covering up. They're a police department! Competence is not generally a police characteristic.
- But yet another theory has it that he's neither an all-powerful keeper of the spider-web nor is he just a schmuck; he's just a clever, lucky vampire who knows when something needs fixing and when something doesn't.



GETTING TO THE BOTTOM

LT: I was always a cop. Good police, as they say. Married to the job. Kicked the bottle, worked 18-hour days. Managed to get a high rate of cases closed without making too many enemies high up. You know how hard that is?

INT: No.

LT: Pretty fucking hard, I can tell you.

(pause)

LT: Still, someone up top didn't like me much. So I ended up in the middle of this drug case. Big case. One of those cases where you have to do surveillance for months and then you only get a couple of fucking arrests to show for it, right up until the end, where you finally make the big score and get the fuckers, as long as you don't give it all away and let 'em change their whole style. Pretty shitty detail.

INT: Can't imagine.

LT: No. You can't. So one day, we're about four months into the case and this ends up on my desk one morning when I walk in. No idea who put it there. Asked the whole team. None of them had seen it. Here. Take a look.



TWILIGHT
Eyes Only
FAO: Officer in Charge
RE: Arnheim Case
Pages: 1 of 1

CLASSIFIED

1. Close observation of lieutenant in charge of the Arnheim case recommended;
2. Evidence of PS/ENE involvement in blood test results of suspects Masterson and Little.
3. Central locus deemed warehouse on corner of Maple and 12th.
Send ARU.

INT: OK. So what's TWILIGHT?

LT: Fucked if I know.

INT: OK.

LT: But the Arnheim case, yeah?

INT: It seems obvious now.

LT: That was the case I was working on. And I was the Lieutenant in charge. They were saying, "watch this guy."

INT: And "PS/ENE"?

LT: Well, I have a pretty good idea that's some sort of a code for "vampire." 'Course I didn't know that straight away.

(pause)

LT: Asked a few discreet questions. Nothing. So I looked at it up and down and finally came to the conclusion that the corner of Maple and 12th was going to be my next port of call.

INT: With an ARU?

LT: No fucking way. Didn't have that kind of clout. Pulled in some favors, checked out a shotgun and headed down to scope the place out.

(pause)

LT: Spent most of the afternoon there. Waited long after it got dark. Think it was about two, three in the morning and I was just about ready to go home. Car pulls up. Guy in it? Sean Arnheim.

INT: I mean, I know who he is, but to you he was... top dog of the gang, right?

LT: Yeah. Big man. Owned a strip club, half-dozen laundromats, used auto lot, licensed casino. Didn't have his name on any of them. The laundromats weren't the only thing doing laundry, you know what I'm saying?

INT: Smart guy.

LT: Hard man to touch. So here he is going into the back door of this boarded-up warehouse at 3am? 'Course I'm going to check it out.

(pause)

LT: Little bit more watching, and I figure out they have a guard on the door. Decided that the best thing to do was to come back in the morning and plant some mikes.

INT: OK. So the Department backed you up?

LT: No. First problem was, I took some pictures, right? They didn't come out. I mean, they came out, but Arnheim didn't show up in them.

INT: Of course.

LT: Couldn't convince anyone who mattered that I'd seen the fucker. Boys in the squad agreed, but the DA? Guy who had to sign the authorization? Put yourself in my shoes. What you going to do about that?

INT: You faked the papers and went and did it yourself.

LT: I did indeed. It was illegal. But I just wanted the investigation over and done with. The wires were illegal. Couldn't use them in court. But shit like that can be fixed. And if this blew up in my face, I'd be double fucked and no mistake. Couldn't get any of the boys involved in it with good conscience. So it was just me.

(pause)

LT: Biggest fucking mistake I ever made.

INT: So what happened?

LT: About ten in the morning, went inside. Picked the padlock on the door, waltzed right in, waved around a flashlight, smelled something really weird. Followed my nose, and walked right into Sean Arnheim. Standing there in the dark, waiting for me. With about three or four of his homeboys. Motherfucker saw me the night before. Knew I was coming back. Had the time to wait.

INT: And this was when he... turned you?

LT: In a manner of speaking. Kept me tied up for about three days. Just giving me drinks of blood mixed with coke. Made me dependent on him. So suddenly I'm working really hard on the investigation again. Except I'm not. I'm planting evidence. And moving it and destroying it.

(pause)

LT: Thought I was going completely crazy.

INT: How long —

LT: About three months. Never got caught. But the blood fucked with my head, you know? Like I wanted to do whatever Arnheim said. Even when it was tearing down everything that ever mattered to me and shitting on the pieces. I hated that fucker. But I couldn't do anything about it. He had me. And the more I did for him, the more I didn't care, and the more the motherfucker had on me.

(pause)

LT: After a while, he decided I wasn't useful as his bitch anymore. He called me out to this dump for a meeting. Pointed a .45 at me. Shot me in the head. Left me there.

Must have been a few hours later, after Arnheim's gone, some vile smelling cocksucker with one eye comes out from under the junk and decides he's going to bring me back. Fucker had a grudge against Arnheim, see. Thought I'd help him out. Gave me some rats to drink from, explained what his plan was in some sort of sorry way.

(pause)

LT: Fucking loser. Didn't have a hope. Came up with the plot on the spur of the moment. Was about ten minutes before he found out his little plan wasn't going to work. Never even learned his name. Motherfucker turned his back on me and I took his head clean off with a piece of scrap metal.

(pause)

LT: Bad enough being Arnheim's bitch. Sure as hell wasn't going to be one for some bum.

INT: So the Vinculum —

LT: I don't rightly know. Don't think it was gone then. But I didn't feel the same way about the motherfucker as I did when I was alive.

INT: This was ten years ago. When Arnheim had his —

LT: Accident. Except it wasn't.

INT: Did you... ?

LT: No. He still had me fucked. I couldn't help it. Turned up at his door like a fucking puppy, and he thought it was fucking hilarious. And I did what I was told. Only at night.

INT: So how did he... ?

LT: Not sure. But I think that whoever it was gave me that piece of paper that got me fucked in the first place didn't go away. They were watching me. And when they'd seen enough, they stepped in, three motherfuckers with riot gear and fucking enormous rifles and took him out.

(pause)

LT: I saw it.

INT: You were there?

LT: Yeah. They came out of nowhere. White unmarked van. Three fuckers in riot masks. One, two, three, flamethrowers, Arnheim's ash. Took about as long as it took me to tell you. And two of them are scraping up the ashes and the third motherfucker is looking right at me.

INT: But you got away.

LT: No. Fucker raises his gun, pulls the trigger. Next thing I know, I'm in the basement of the police department working a night shift. Three nights later.

INT: So what happened?

LT: I reckon the fuckers tagged me.

INT: What?

LT: It was like about two nights later. And I was getting on with police work. Scratched my neck. Like I used to when I was alive. Still had the habits back then. But suddenly, back of my neck feels wrong. Like there's something hard just under the skin. I can move it with my fingernail.

(pause)

LT: Went and got a knife, dug the fucker out. Little black box with a microchip in it.

INT: What did you do?

LT: Took it to the precinct kitchen. Put it in the microwave. Thirty seconds on full. That was that.

(pause)

LT: Still. I figure they know where I am.

(pause)

LT: They're waiting for me to start screwing around with the police work more than I do.

(pause) Clean Streets

LT: Last time a dealer turned up on my turf, I went and found the fucker and told him where to go.

(pause)

LT: And of course the little cocksucker is all, "You can't do shit," so I did the voice.

INT: Aagh! Shit! Shit!

(pause)

INT: Sorry.

LT: Hah. Pussy. But the little fucker shit himself too and went back to his boss, and the boss didn't believe a word of it. Inevitably.

INT: So he sent in the big boys?

LT: Bigger boys. Three boys. Didn't even have to talk to them. Gave them the voice, too. Scared them half to death.

(pause)

LT: So they send new boys to hang out outside my apartment. They don't know I'm in the basement. Tore all but one of them to pieces. Took six bullets. Sent their faces back to their boss in an evidence baggie, carried by the one I let walk away.

INT: That can't have scared them off.

LT: No. But it did send a message.

(pause)

LT: Dealer or gangster boy comes on my turf, me or one of mine'll fuck them so hard, they'll never walk again. If they're lucky.

We keep these streets clean for decent folk.

(pause)

LT: Because decent folks make the best meals.



INTERLUDE I: THE GLASS ARMONIUM

This house smells of pig fat, pig blood. The family who dwells here is thankfully too frightened—like little mice, or roaches that flee from the light—to come for my blood, even though that’s what they are. Addicts to what lurks within us. It has paralyzed them. Their clothing doesn’t match this era; the smell of mothballs and mold is pervasive, clinging to the house and mixing with the odor of the rendering plant down the road. I constantly hear the squeal of hogs, some at the moment of being butchered, their cries cut short.

Grigor Swancott lies in a clawfoot tub in the basement of this old house, his body curled up like a dead insect in the porcelain. The tub itself is etched with lines of coal, various *veves* and *mandalas* and strange homespun *hexes*. Beeswax candles, mercifully unlit, surround the tub, as do garlands of dead grave flowers. Those smells contribute, too—an underlying sweetness that is sickening.

The Worm Lord did not tell me that Swancott would be torpid.

This family, the Gravenors, they must feed from him. Drifting my hand across his desiccated skin, I feel the chew holes, where their teeth have bitten and ripped to suck his juices into their eager mouths.

And he is supposed to aid me?

I set the instrument down by the tub. This is the Glass Armonium, and the Worm Lord is responsible for its delivery into my hands. I let my hands drift over the glass curves and ridges. Nothing happens. I press my fingertips to it; is this how one plays an Armonium? Still nothing happens.

I hear shuffling upstairs. Feet sliding along carpets. Boards squeaking.

An idea strikes me: I take my fingertips and I drag a tooth along each, opening it the way a scalpel might lance a boil. I urge the Blood to the digits, so it wets the tips.

Then I try.

I run the moistened fingers along the glass.
I do not hear the music, but I can feel it.
It reverberates within me. A melody dreadful to my ears, beautiful to my bones. It hits notes that bore into my marrow.
And then everything changes.
The walls of the cellar shudder and then fall away, as if pulled by ropes into darkness. I see eyes, pink and red, gleaming at me from the shadows. White forms squirm and shuffle beyond the veil, writhing closer, shouldering for prominence.
Swancott is moving.
Maggots. An army of them within his body. They flee his skin like rats bailing from a sinking ship. But they do not leave his flesh. No; I hear them, biting into his skin.
And they enliven him, for but a moment.
I dare not stop playing; I spit more blood into the glass to keep the song sickly sweet.
Swancott jerks up out of the tub like a puppet. He tilts his head to leer at me, at the Armonium. His eyes crunch and flake when he blinks.
“You’ve learned how to play the awful thing,” he whispers, an unsteady hiss.
“What is it?” I ask him.
“It is the heart of one of the Strangers. The Lurkers, the Watchers Beyond the Door.”
“The Hidden Ones,” I venture.
His skin ruptures and suppurates as he nods.
The shapes, pale and serpentine, writhe in the shadows.
“It stirs things it should not within the flesh of others,” Swancott says. “I fear it. Its song is so beautiful, I cannot stop listening to it, but I must. *I must.*”
I know then what could happen, should the music continue. The creatures would come closer. They would take us away with them. To do what, I do not know. Breed with us, eat us, make us their kings, make us their slaves. Perhaps if I was allowed to keep playing I could bust down the doors between worlds forever and permanently, and these awful leeches, these beautiful serpents, these long-forgotten gods would take residence in our world. I think to stop. I think, *relax your fingers, stop playing.* But I cannot.
Swancott mouths, “No,” over and over again.
The shapes swell into the room. Like tumors bulging in slow motion, a cancer growing.
I do not want this, and yet I do.
Blessedly, I have no choice in the matter.
Suddenly I am wrenched from the instrument. Forced from it by a swarm of Gravenors, biting and kicking at me; they believe I have threatened their torpid master—who now slumps back into the tub, slumbering once more, the maggots retreating back into the many bite holes in his flesh. They think to bleed me, to feed me to their supine patron, but I merely need to turn to them and show my true face, the face of horror with eyes of blackblood and redtongue and worldend and they gasp and cover their faces in horror; some flee, some drop and weep.
I gather the Armonium to my chest, and I leave. This is what will help me procure the other texts? It all seems needless. And yet, overkill can be so sweet.

VIKTOR TREPAN, THE WAR PIG

I stand in a hallway full of weapons. A fire ax leans against a nearby doorframe. Laying against an old iron radiator are at least a dozen guns, all longarms, their barrels resting casually in the radiator grooves. An old wooden crate sits on a chair whose seat has been long broken, and inside this crate wait grenades, and upon its side is written something in Chinese or, perhaps, Vietnamese.

A pair of ghouls passes me. Each mumbles to the other as they pass. They see some similarity in me, perhaps. One nods with his head, the other with the shotgun held in his tense grip.

I cannot say where this hallway is, for some information must not be shared. But some will be shared, and shared at the behest of the target I come to see today: Viktor Trepan, War Pig of the Nosferatu.

Trepan, I'm told, is happy to have his story told "happy" being a relative term, one supposes, given that no story of him ever describes the man emitting anything close to mirth or contentedness. He has always been a brute, a thug, a berserker hurricane whose flesh is a force of broken nature that once was directed only by the hands of the elite. Where the vampire aristocrats pointed, Trepan went, his bare hands ready to make bonemeal from whoever stood in his way. Things changed, though. Something earned the ire of those aristocrats, or perhaps it was simply the way their loyalties shift like a wind coming off an uncertain sea. They turned on him. They sought to have him destroyed. They did not know what they were dealing with, it seems.

And now, in the span of a year a short time for us, as short to some as a minute or five is to most mortal creatures he has amassed a small army with a massive cache of weapons. More importantly, it's not just about the army, it's about the verve with which they follow the self-proclaimed "War Pig." They have grown weary with what seems an eternal discontent; the system has them mired, the blood has grown thick and flows all-too-slowly (when it flows at all), and they see Trepan as an instrument of change.

If he is successful, he will be that instrument. But not a precise instrument. Trepan is no scalpel. He's not even the brash swinging of a sledgehammer or the wide blast pattern of a shotgun. No. Trepan is as precise as an earthquake; he has as fine a point and edge as one building crashing into another. His assault will be as clumsy as a bus crash or the collapse of an overpass, but clumsy does not equate with ineffective. If successful, he will be quite effective. The change he seeks will come, because all that will be left is ashes and rubble. He and his disenfranchised sycophants the ones who do not perish in the assault will be left standing amid the bones and fog.

I do not yet know if they will let me speak with the War Pig. They seek to protect him, of course. It all makes this information-finding mission a bit troublesome; while they are free with information, much of it seems propaganda. Still, I hope to sit with him. His world is not the insular world of the Worm Lord; this is not the subterranean kingdom in which our kind is kind. No. The War Pig lurks upon the surface world, an insurrection forming in our midst. Speaking to him is dangerous, this I know. I am ready.

Things I Know About the War Pig:

- As one of the Prince's bounty hunters, the War Pig's own blood hunts have gained some notoriety. He has personally corralled a number of "high-profile" criminals against the Traditions: the Draug Lord Djokovic, the Blood Cult of Saint Chrysos, and the Subway Killer (Phoenicia Coy).
- The War Pig is utterly blind. His eyes are little more than dry stones in the sockets. Some have speculated that they are dry stones, plucked from a riverbed, bound in leather, and shoved into the cavernous sockets that sit in his mauled face.
- The War Pig has funding from another notorious warlord, one whom Trepan may idolize or even model himself after given enough time: a Colonel Gabriel DiTillo. It is said that the weapons that wait before me here come in part from DiTillo, who is also funneling money and other resources to this ragtag army of insurrectionists.

Rumors I Have Heard About the War Pig:

- Speculation runs rampant that he belongs to a distant bloodline renowned for its blindness: the Baddacelli. They are also, however, well-known for their mimetic skills, which casts some doubt upon the theory in my eyes. As noted, Trepan is not precisely savvy or clever; he is a blunt force instrument. He compensates for blindness with other preternaturally sharp senses. His sense of smell, for instance, is almost legendary. But none of the stories speak of him being able to change his voice or shift his appearance or anything of that sort. I am therefore almost wholly assured that he could not belong to that lineage. Furthermore, I've never even met one of that blood, so they may not even truly exist at all.
- The stories of Trepan's identity before his Embrace run the gamut. One version claims he's truly ancient, a relic from nights past who has lost most of what he was to the thieving mists of torpid memory. Others say he's curiously young (which then ascribes him a certain dynamism, for only the young are surely capable of swift change and momentous rebellion, or so that theory goes). One story stands out in its repetition among his "soldiers." They claim Trepan returned from serving as a human soldier in World War II, perhaps American, perhaps Polish or Russian or even Greek. But something happened that ruined his face, disfiguring him mightily. Shrapnel, perhaps, from a grenade or a burst canister. Thus was he made hideous before his transformation into one of the Haunted.
- An apocryphal story, one that can find no confirmation beyond the telling, but one that theoretically answers what it was that turned high society against him, is as follows: Trepan discovered that the Prince was himself serving a far older creature, possibly the Prince's own sire (thought to be long-gone, turned to dust centuries before). It is said that some true monsters among us have found a way to go on existing without giving into the inevitable drag of one's Blood towards rest, and in staying awake and alert beyond any slumber find powers undreamt of by the ordinary Damned. Trepan, according to nameless whispers, witnessed the Prince sucking at one of his sire's diabolical teats (his or her chest lined with many nipples, most of them given to the Devil himself, or, so those whispers assert). Trepan, dutiful, did not blanch and promised the Prince that this information would not escape his lips. After all, he was blind and "saw" nothing. The Prince agreed, but paranoia is a constant plague on our dead minds. He decided that Trepan could not be trusted with such a grave secret. He concocted some story — and manufactured evidence, most surely — and presented it to the Primogen. Convinced that Trepan was a danger, they opted to have him destroyed. In doing so, they may have signed their own final death warrants...

War is wholly unlike diplomacy or politics because it must be fought by men whose values and skills are not those of politicians or diplomats. They are those of a world apart, a very ancient world, which exists in parallel with the everyday world but does not belong to it. — John Keegan, "A History of Warfare"

WHY HE IS WHAT HE IS

Trepan has a biographer. Strange, given the reclusiveness not only of our species in general but our clan in particular. That said, Trepan is now breaking all the rules. His threat to the establishment is well-documented. He is not being quiet, or rather, his army doesn't keep quiet.

Still, no telling if they'll let me get past them to sit with him.

For now, his so-called "biographer" will have to do. Meet Artemis Tremayne. Nosferatu without gender. Adherent to the Magna Mater. Rabid what is the word? Fashionista. Yes. I met Tremayne briefly a week prior. Tall, bald. So thin that the skin is little more than wax paper vacu-sealed to the skeleton. Long fur coat like armor, and nothing else worn. I asked the creature about its frightening thinness, and Artemis's response was simply, "Anorexia is hot right now."

This is a piece from the purported biography. I hesitate to judge, as it seems my role to be impartial, but I do not think Tremayne a particularly gifted writer. It reads more as propaganda than anything approaching able journalism. It is telling, though. Some details about Trepan arise that I did not know before. And, if this article proves anything, it's that he is amassing not just an army, but a cult of personality. He is their savior, a monstrous redeemer.



THE ARTICLE

The truth is a lie. Happiness in slavery is a myth, *kittens*, and the War Pig proves it!

Who is the War Pig? Rumors abound! Was he truly once a slave, dragged here and made to dance for the white man? Or is it *true* that he worked the Chicago Stockyards as a pork packer, disassembling hogs on the line (hanging, killing, scalding, scraping, spraying, gutting, larding, beheading, bisecting!)? Some say he wasn't born, he was *made*; cobbled together with gallons of blood and piles of mud, baby, given the divine fire and forced to life (or a reasonable facsimile thereof)!

We know he worked for Prince and Primogen, diamond-studded collar around his pretty pig's neck, a gun at his side and an axe in hand, hunting the worst offenders to our Society's stability. But then they went and fucked him! And now, the Pig is on a *rampage*!

Who he *was* doesn't matter, it's who he is that we came

here to discuss. See, you can't keep a whole underclass oppressed. No, sir! The more you push them down, the more they start to pop up when you least expect it. It's like a pressure-cooker. Release that steam or the thing will blow! We are your homeless (ew!). We are your poor! We are your downtrodden, your abused, your ever-neglected. That means we're your ghost, we're your disease (like herpes, *you can't get rid of us*), we're an anchor around your neck and a colostomy bag at your hip. The more you ignore us, the more you find us there. The more you hate us, the more you're ashamed of us. And the more shame we take, the hungrier we get for the establishment's blood!

The War Pig's army is marching dozens strong, now. Those weary of the fat bats above our head and the fat cats at our feet, they're here with us, now. Tired of tithing upward to the *beau monde*, the blooderati,

the *upper-crusted*. Ready to fight. Ready to remake this *black bloodocracy* in our own image!

William, once-kneebreaker for Primogen Kozlov, said it right when he had *this* to say:

"I'm tired of saying 'yes, sir' and 'no, sir' to someone whose head I could crush like a rotten pumpkin," William was quoted as saying. "They have the power for no other reason than we let 'em keep it, you know? Fuck that noise. Let's tear high society down."

Amen, William! Let's bring *low gauche society* up in its place! The War Pig believes that a new

A quick note: a copy of this "article" in its "zine" form was found rolled up in the back pocket of a gangbanger down in Fishtown. This means, a) it's possible the War Pig now has a mortal contingent and b) the Masquerade fractures. This will soon come to a head.

THE TRUTH ABOUT WAR PIGS

War elephants, used most famously by Hannibal of Carthage, saw their earliest use in India as charging trampling, massive juggernauts of leather and muscle that could break the enemy ranks or crush an advancing militia. Crude. But effective.

Use of the war elephant continued on into the 15th century. While it was gunpowder that finally brought the usefulness of such beasts to an end (a well-placed cannon shot made quite the mess of such a creature; one can only imagine the monster's guts rushing from a rough hole in its gristly belly), many tried different tactics through the ages to stop the trampling march of the elephants.

And so you find the march of the pigs, instead. Incendiary pigs, or "war pigs," actually. The enemy, be they those of Megara or those of Rome, would take the pigs and cover them in pitch, tar, or olive oil. They might tie sharp weapons to the swine: broken spears, chipped knives or short swords, or perhaps just a mish-mash of wooden splinters. Then they would light the animals on fire.

The flaming pigs would be shepherded toward the enemy in particular, the approaching army of elephants. Elephants, you see, are as loathe of pigs as they are of mice. It's the squeal, I

imagine. The shriek of a terrified pig excuse me, a terrified pig on fire must be a frightening thing for the ears to take in. The pigs would barrel toward the elephants. The war elephants would buck and lose their riders, then often turn back to the militiamen behind them and crush the soldiers beneath their panicked stampede. It seems too simple a strategy because plainly, it is.

The pigs would often return to the army from whence they came, you see. A burning hog cannot be commanded; it thinks only of the fire that seems to endlessly pursue it as its hide sizzles. And so they'd barrel back toward their own ranks. Pitch would wipe off on the armor of the Roman or Megaran soldiers, and with the pitch came swiftly the flame, cooking them in their suits. Any sharp implements bound to the swine were often at just the right level to slash the legs, hobbling the victims.

War pigs were only so useful, then. Herein lies a message, though, doesn't it? Viktor Trepan is our own war pig, the equivalent of a rampaging swine set aflame by a callous army of the Damned who thinks itself so clever. And now the hog all tusks and knives and rippling fire has returned to its keepers, cutting through the ranks. Burning. Slashing. Squealing.

Our kind by which I mean all Kindred, not merely the Haunts so often creates our own enemies, our own monsters. Viktor is one such creation. I almost feel bad for him.

WHY THEY FOLLOW HIM



This man, Hussein, is not one of us. But he does belong to the War Pig. A man like Hussein is not the type I would expect to follow the War Pig, but therein lays Trepan's obvious abilities; much of his army comprises such disparate personas. They follow him blindly ironic, given that he himself is blind and they cling to him with almost religious devotion. He has not enslaved them with his blood. He's enslaved them with his ideas. His indignation, you see, is potent. His anger is palpable. Our blood is cold most of the time but it can be stirred to great heat, like water left long on a boil, or a cyst on the skin left to swell and split and pop. When the War Pig finally goes on the war path, he will have an army whose most elemental weapon is the righteous fury it carries.

Here, I ask Emil Hussein why he follows the War Pig. Emil's not hard to read. He's expressive, animated, his long limbs and grinning mouth do little to conceal his emotions. I cannot detail those here, though, so his words must do justice.

The Confession of Emil Hussein

What I'm gonna tell you ain't no fuckin' secret. That's why I'm telling it to you. We're broadcastin' our, ahh, telegraphing our... intentions? Yeah. That's it. *Intentions*. I'm here to let the world know. If they don't already, which I figure they do.

You look at me, you smell me, you know I ain't no Freakshow. I'm a fuckin' African, baby, an asp up out of Egypt, a deeper shade of Shadow. Do I look pale to you? No. So why do I follow the War Pig? Why am I ready to tear shit up, bring the whole motherfucking world down around my ears? Let me tell you a story, so listen close.

I was never into political shit. Prince was so high up, I never saw him, couldn't give a fuck. His people, same way. All up in the storm clouds, just flashes of lightning and rumbles of thunder. It affected me the same way a heavy storm might; sometimes I get wet, sometimes the wind tumbles me around a little, then the shit passes. Maybe it blows an enemy into my way and I have to take care of him. Maybe it throws me into an enemy's lap and I got to find a way to get the hell out of Dodge. Shit happens. Shit tumbles downhill. But otherwise? Who gives a fuck? Prince is the prince is the prince, doesn't matter his name or face. At least, it didn't.

One night, I'm in the backroom of this chicken and waffles joint down on South Street, yeah? I do a lot of my deals there. What people want to know, I sit there and I give it to them after they put the money in my hand or the whisper in my ear. I'm havin' a good time, laughing, telling jokes and whatever, but midnight comes around and the door opens and here comes the War Pig. You seen the War Pig? Motherless fuck he's ugly. Some of those Freakshows, they a little freaky, but this guy is the bee's knees of ugly motherfuckers. Head like a block of cement wrapped in, I dunno, pig fat or something.

Mouth like a leech, like, a real leech. Eyes puckered shut, but sometimes they open and you see these dried up shfveiled peach pit fuckin' eyes. Plus, I know who he is, what he does... or at least, what he *did*. He work for the Prince. He break necks for the bosses. He disappear dudes for all the suits.

So he jacks me up against the wall with these hands like frozen turkeys and I can *feel* the power in those hands, and he wants to know where someone named Felix is, and I don't know nobody named Felix, so I'm about to tell him to *step off*— and trust me, telling a mean dog like Trepan to get up out of your grill is like punching a shark in the mouth, a bad idea but I figure, yo, I'm a bad guy, too dumb to know better.

Then, bang! Door kicks down. Buncha punks come in. Two of 'em got shotguns and two of 'em have fucking *fire axes*. Dudes with the shotties are surgical, too. My guys, boom, boom, black blood on the wall and on the bare bulb over head. I take a blast to the knee. War Pig, an axe comes down on his collarbone and I hear it snap like a stick underfoot, but that don't matter to him.

He doesn't move fast, in fact seems like he moves slow, y'know? But it's like it don't matter because his hands are grabbing this fuck here and this fuck there, and he just *twists* like the way you might try to tear the green shit off the top of a carrot. Bones break in his grip, man. Twist. Rip. Snap.

I am in fuckin' *awe* of this guy, right? I can't close my jaw. I'm catching flies. My eyes are drying out the way they can't blink and shit. He's done with the attackers and then he picks me up and shakes me like a baby and then he does the most effed up thing, he goddamn *smells* me. Like a, a, a bear smellin' his kill or whatever. Those fleshy puckers like gill-slits, the fringe skin sucking in when he sniffs me.

Then he asks me the question.

He says, "These men intruded upon your sanctum."

That's not the question, though, but I said, yeah, yeah they did, and I'm about ready to evacuate my bowels, make a bloody mess in my fuckin' jockeys.

He says, "They don't care about you."

And I believe him, right? I always knew they didn't care about me, but I didn't *care* that they didn't care. And suddenly I did. His voice, man, it just cut into me.

Then he asks, and this is the question, "Will you join me in making them pay?"

And there I am, nodding like an idiot, like a thirsty man begging for a thimble of water. He sold me right then and there because even in those dead butthole eyes I thought to myself, I see the truth, man. This dude's ready to fuck some shit up. He's pissed off, and it's contagious like a raw rash.

I still feel it up inside me.

I want to tear this place apart.

That's why I follow the Trepan, man. Because I can't do any different. I don't see any other way but to tear the world apart and kick over this house of fuckin' cards, yo.

WHO ARE WE?



I found Zelda Finch on the fire escape whetting a slaughterhouse knife hooked, the blade made for drawing across the throat of a beast while standing behind it on a slab of stone. Unlike Hussein, Finch is one of us, pale and as small and avian as her name suggests.

She didn't have much to say, but she still was clear on why she stands behind Trepan.

The Confession of Zelda Finch

The truth of it is, I don't really like who we are as a clan. We're weak. Subordinate. And I felt that way for many years, trust me. I went to Midnight Mass. I said my prayers. Nodded and smiled when Father Wright told me how wrong I was, how the Lord had punished me for some unknown transgression and my flesh bore the weight of the sins and that's why my bones are hollow and prone to snap. I'm strange because God hates me. What a charming message! Thanks, Father.

'Course, I knock the goodly Father Wright, but it's *our* fault. We buy it, don't we? It's like, we feel lesser, we know we're ugly and weird, so we act the part. So many of us like to hide, we shrink into the corners and draw a hood of shadows over our heads, like a kid in class who hunkers low so the teacher won't call on him.

Trepan isn't like that. He's a brute, I get that. Nothing polite or delicate about him. You know what, though? That's appealing to me. We don't have to cower. Why feel like we're somehow inferior? He shows just how superior we can be. With those hands, he can crush a barrel or shatter a guy's skull just by clapping those palms together, slap. I used to think that it was all about the subtle approach, the quiet way, the "sneak in through the backdoor."

I don't feel that anymore. I've been dragged over the coals and abused too long. I've suffered the slings and arrows of dismissive glances and ill-whispered invectives.

He wants to punch things, make them break?

So be it. I'll back him up. The time for subtlety is done, stick a fork in it.

THE SECRET ADMIRER

WHERE DO ALL THESE
WHISPERS COME FROM?

While it's painfully clear that the War Pig is without nuance, some of his army reputedly picks up the slack where his own cunningness fails to manifest. Case in point, a pretty named Jack Nasty, Succubus extraordinaire. Jack Nasty is an Invictus harpy, the owner of the Jer-june Gallery down on Galloway. Everything about him suggests that he is a dyed-in-the-wool devotee of the First Estate, a capitalist sycophant with a love of money and status and an even greater appreciation of the power those two things bring when working in tandem.

But so often with our kind, the truth is buried not in one grave, but several. It was whispered to me that I should find a way to communicate with Jack, and so I did that very thing. As it turns out, this Invictus proselyte is no such thing. He has been denied access to anything above his station time after time, and he feels that because of his sexual leanings he continues to bang his head on some manner of "glass ceiling."

As a result, he feeds intelligence to the army of the War Pig. Intelligence that hasn't yet been acted upon, but is reportedly being kept close, stored away until it can all be used in one fell swoop. The "tearing down of the world" that we hear so much about.

I did not have much time with Jack, and his words are even more brief than what we heard from Zelda Finch. But here they are, nevertheless.

The Confession of Jack Nasty

You heard? You'd best not tell. I'm a ruiner, don't you know? I'd hate to have to ruin you. That's okay. I can see it in your eyes. I can smell him on you, just as surely as he can smell me when you finally meet him.

I'll make this quick: I'm tired of the stagnation. My hands are bound to this rung of the ladder, and while I'm normally a fan of bondage — *yum* — I find that the view is growing tiresome. So I play quisling.

I don't like the War Pig, don't get that idea. I think he's a monstrosity. He's the worst of your kind, a gross mutant, a freak off his leash. And he knows how I feel. You want to know why I follow him? I'll tell you.

It's because he's going to *win*. And I'm no loser. Now, shoo. Flee. Piss off. I've got a meeting with Delacroix here in 10 minutes to talk about a fabled Matisse.

WHY HE'LL WIN

The letter below was sent to me, anonymously. I have it on good authority that this is authentic, and that it comes from a respected but not loftily elevated member of the local Invictus contingent. This person is not necessarily in league with the Prince. He or she is, in fact, not well-regarded by the Prince, if the stories hold true. Still. Take it with a grain of salt, yes?

ANONYMOUS LETTER

Nic:

An associate of mine told me you're taking a good long look at the War Pig situation. I'm surprised you know about it, but maybe I shouldn't be. We thought we were keeping this shit under wraps. I guess things have a way of bubbling back up. Sometimes we're so out of touch with anything outside of us (read: "beneath us") that we're dancing away and congratulating one another while the Red Death rages on outside. Tell me you've read Poe? Of course you've read Poe, what am I thinking?

So. I'm worried. I'm super-crazy-fucking-worried. Why? You're like Frankenstein, you people. The monster, not the doctor. A whole army of nasty hiding in the dark. And Trepan? He's the King Frankenfuck, a murderous brute thug. Here's where the metaphor or the simile or whatever starts to gain ground - we made Trepan what he is. Oh, yeah. It's like that shit with the terrorists, how they know the things that they know because the United States Government showed them - well, we created anthrax, we gave the terrorists the bomb, we gave the monkey the handgun, we gave Trepan all he needs to tear us into bloody ribbons.

Why did we do that? Because we constantly underestimate you people. That's your strength. We dismiss you. We assume that you're weak freaks or dumb bullies. And so when we think we can civilize one of you, we do. Oh, how we congratulated ourselves with Trepan. Holy shit! What a monster! What an egregious, hideous weapon of war! Golf-claps all around. He's ours. He's on our clock, our leash! Our brilliance is without end. It has an end though. It has a terrible end, with the War Pig's snagged fangs at our throats.

Trepan knows everything. You think he hasn't been to some of our havens, taking instruction? He knows where we meet. Where we feed. He doesn't know this because he's smart - though that he may be - he knows it all because we put it in his hands. Surely, by civilizing him, he'd thank us, kiss our perfectly-sculpted toenails, compliment us on how our shit don't stink?

We. Are. Fucking. Dead. Double-dead. Double-dog-headless-dead.

Two things, then. First, how'd this happen? I do not know. I know that the Prince betrayed him somehow, for some reason. Trepan maybe saw something he wasn't supposed to ("saw" being a relative term, I guess, given those shriveled fig eyes), or maybe one of the Prince's gaggle of cackling bitches made fun of Trepan one too many times and the Prince decided he wasn't going to lose favor by daring to keep such an ogre on his payroll. Whatever did it, done it. Princey tried to have Trepan whacked, two, maybe three times. That ended poorly.

And now we've all got to make peace with... well, nobody, because we'll never make peace.

Please, please, please, this is the second thing: save me. Save my dumb, ignorant ass. You're investigating Trepan? You get a sit down with him, you tell him, we're not all against him. He makes a move, we'll... well, we can't help him. If it shakes out the wrong way, that'll be worse for us than anything. But there's a good handful of us who are more than willing to stand out of the way, maybe go into hiding for a couple weeks. Let me know when it's about to hit. You can trust me. We'll be ghosts. Poof. Gone. Please.

I fucking beg you.

-anon

WHY THIS IS NOT WITHOUT PRECEDENT

I do recognize that this file is about Viktor Trepan, and I assure you, it still is. Here, however, we take a moment to meet with one of the librarian thralls of The Caecilian, the Worm Lord's esteemed Archivist. They have a depth of information that may help us with context, and in our seemingly endless Requiem, context is everything. Without context, one is just a monster from night to night. With context, our monstrousness loses human shape.

From Librarian Vignoles

INT: You have something for me?

Librarian Vignoles (LV): Yes, the Archivist directed this information be sent to you when he heard of your most recent profiling effort. The War Pig seems unique, and of course, in a modern context, he is. Mm, but this element of our clan rising up and taking control is not without precedent. Consider first the tale of Zosimos, one of our kind who, according to our archives, helped inspire the Ionian Revolt against the Persians.

INT: Ionian Revolt?

LV: The Persian Empire's control of Greece in Asia Minor and Cyprus was alarmingly complete. Persia was a dominating power with the crushing threat of a heavy stone, the suffocating potency of a swift flood. The islands of the Aegean Sea revolted against their Persian masters, and this insurrection began upon the island of Naxos, home to Zosimos, purported to either be a child or grandchild to one of the earliest Brothers Worm. He was not a creature of disease, as some of us were, but a creature of the tunnels, of the copper mines and doubly ancient catacombs.

INT: Why would he stir the humans to rebel? That seems strange.

LV: It is, but you must realize that those of our kind back then did little to hold onto their humanity. They were considered above humans as divine or below them as beasts and demons. The Persians held their Damned as divine, and the humans were allowed a measure of interaction with these purported divinities. The Damned of the Persians were known as Satraps — not human governors, as the title suggests, but the guardians of territories, the so-called "territories of blood." For each human satrap there waited one that was not human. The Damned Satrap of Naxos is thought to have been a hedonist, known as the Satrap Caspar (to what lineage he belonged remains something of a



mystery; while some agree that he was a seducer, at least one source actually indicates that he was of our own brood, an element that the Archivist believes must be propaganda from centuries past). Caspar was not kind to the Ionian Damned; he visited upon them what were called the Limitless Torments, which truly only came thrice a night, but that was three times too many.

INT: And Zosimos rebelled against this, I take it. I also assume it did not go so well?

LV: It went quite well. At first. Here. This is a page from a tragedy written by the poet Pamphilos, friend of Phrynichus (the former may have been one of us, may have been a thrall, or may have simply been a casual observer to the occurrences upon Naxos and Miletus as they happened). The play is sometimes known as "The Unbound Worm." This piece here takes place just after Zosimos has ended Caspar's Requiem by beheading him.

Enter from the right ARISTAGORAS, The Tyrant, with Armed Attendants.

ZOSIMOS.

Thou foul tyrant, neck choking in Caspar's rope
Time to meet the fate of your keeper
The burden of your present treachery
Vexes me and so you shall meet the charred corpse of
Caspar
That waits beneath my eager feet
I bring bright empyrean to this tenebrous night
I shall see you tormented by the gods, the gods!

ARISTAGORAS.

My griefs, my griefs! The race of gods do know
My hands in Caspar's was only for the love of man
My people, strong and safe I kept them
But Caspar is now gone and the shackles broken
The invasion felled and the beast pushed back
We have time to breathe if thou will not take my head
As trophy for your conquest
Histiaeus my uncle and father shall come to reclaim
This that has been lost, his heel falling hard
Upon us if we do not make a plan
And this plan is yours to design and mine to aid
Grave ghost, Zosimos, I plead for you to allow my
hands in yours

ZOSIMOS.

Think not to fill my ear with lies from your tongue
As shade of death and certain grave ghost
My vengeance will not be kind should you choose
To pierce my heart and sink me in the endless deep
With your help if help it shall be we will rise up
And tear the terrible pillars from beneath the Persians
And all the Satraps and all their Limitless Torments
Shall quake when they see our armies both living and
dead

Storming their shores, crying havoc, crying chaos!

Our Masks: Comedy and Tragedy
As you may know, our kind is quite
steeped in the theatrical traditions. I
know of at least three troupes of no-
madic Worms who put on theater for the
Princes and Primogen. They produce tales
from the myths of the Damned, generally
tragic with all the haunts wearing masks
made of gold, bone, wood or skin. Also used
are the black boots, the *kothornai*, dedicat-
ing us as the figures meant to translate such
tragedy to the masses.

But do not think us without our com-
edies, too remember, the Damned are a
cruel sort and are glad to laugh at the
misfortune of others. The wise among us
know not to pick scabs and play com-
edies that would dare to mock those
spectators in attendance, and instead
make humiliation of those the audience
counts as adversaries. It is too easy,
though, to remain unaware of buried
loyalties or secret alliances. One troupe,
the Thorn and Briar Players, did not
know that the comedy they had written
mocking a certain embarrassment to

the Lords, an elder and long-gone fool by the name of Roderick the Devil (this epithet being
ironic and a mockery in itself) would touch on such a nerve. See, the Prince counted among
his lineage not Roderick, but Roderick's lover, a one Miss Borsika Brosca. Embarrassment
ensued. As did the removal of the hands of the comedy's writer the stumps charred so that
they would not so swiftly be remade by the living Blood.

INT: You said this is a tragedy. So this did not end well.

LV: No, and such is the theme of many such Nosferatu uprisings. In this instance, Zosimos pairs with the tyrant Aristagoras, the latter of whom betrays his Persian masters and gets the citizens to support him — Zosimos simultaneously mounts the downtrodden Damned to his cause. All spurred on by Zosimos's destruction of Caspar, of course. Inevitably, the Ionian Revolt fails. Contrary to the history penned by mortals, Aristagoras did not die in Thrace upon the shores of the Strymon River, but instead he is Embraced — by one of Caspar's childer, Dastan. It is Aristagoras, then, who destroys and consumes the heart's blood of Zosimos.

LV: Mm. Also worth mentioning, the Dog Men of the Chichimec, a centuries-long pairing of both Haunts and Savages (and some say rather unusual bloodlines resulted from this long mingling) that had established something of a symbiosis with the Chichimec.

INT: The Chichimec?

LV: Contemporaries of the Aztecs. The symbiosis was a result of a sharing of blood and of food; the humans willingly sacrificed their blood (and sometimes, their women) to the Dog Men. The Dog Men in return did the bulk of the hunting; they were able to bring down game with alarming skill given the preternatural abilities of our kind. The Dog Men and the Chichimec were the ones to mount resistance against the Spaniards in the 16th Century — of course, eventually Cortes won. And he enslaved the Chichimec and their Dog Men in the mines. Our own portion of the Dog Men disappeared, said to be "called into the deep" of the mines by voices whispering to them.

INT: The Hidden Ones?

LV: If they exist, then maybe.

INT: But the Savages of the Dog Men, they did not disappear?

LV: No. Their bloodlines still dwell in Mexico, admittedly in lesser numbers.

INT: Certainly there must be good news? Some possibility for success? Our kind cannot be ineluctably doomed to a bitter and brutal end when the time comes for us to stand up to oppressors. Or does fate truly have its hands around our throats?

LV: In the Second World War, there was an uprising stirred by a Nosferatu named Sobieslawa, known to many as the Mother of Ghosts. Warsaw was chaos, a place of much awfulness, and in the Ghetto doubly so. The Mother of Ghosts was able to make some difference in that wretched place, but even there waits a lesson in tragedy; it is said she made a deal with something, perhaps human dead, perhaps something far worse and far older, something that is capable of thieving bodies and wearing corpses like costumes. It is said that with her summoning such a thing, she loosed it upon this world and was not able to bottle it back up. Who knows? She's gone, like so many of us. Gone into the deep, one might think. Mmm. The only truly positive tale of a Nosferatu insurrection is, honestly, fairly recent — the story of the Fish Friar and Prince Overholt.

INT: Ah! Yes. I know this one. Damn my mind for not conjuring it before. Both the Friar and the Prince were Nosferatu...

LV: You do have some knowledge then. At least that much.

INT: The Fish Friar was something of a... court jester for the Prince. A seemingly shallow-empty-headed lunatic — gibberish poetry, repulsive theatrics, he'd paint his face in blood and gambol about or perform puppet shows with skeletons, corpses, carcasses.

LV: Mm. And Overholt had a potent public face, but behind the scenes —

INT: He was a monster. And the Fish Friar was detailing all of it. He documented every transgression, every violated Tradition, every contravention of the local laws and the Masquerade. He even recorded Overholt's insults of the local powers, did he not?

LV: He did. And those recordings — some of them, at least — lurk in our Bleak Annals. The Caecilian, in his glory and wisdom, was able to procure them at quite a price.

INT: So there's hope, one could suggest. Hope for Trepan and his efforts.

LV: If history is a guide, hope exists, though in a slim margin. Mm, but the Fish Friar did become Prince. He exposed Overholt and in a violent — but mercifully swift — coup, all of Overholt's lieutenants were made forever scarce. Overholt was torn limb from limb, and the powers-that-be installed the Friar as Prince.

INT: One wonders then, is he just a dupe? A willing puppet like his own marionettes of tendon and bone?

LV: One wonders.

INT: Trepan will be no puppet. Not anymore, I imagine.

LV: Time will tell.

WHY ALL BETS ARE OFF

Here, that mortal contingent I was speaking of. Or, more appropriately, a new element of that contingent. This is not a gangbanger, nor is it someone who has connections to such a gang.

Meet Walter Danville. Self-proclaimed "hunter" of "things" like myself and the War Pig. He is a haunted man, evidenced by the shuddering breaths or his nervous tics (listening to his fingernails pick at other fingernails or the sound of his teeth biting and pulling chapped skin from his lips was quite distracting). He knows of us. He knows of what our kind is capable. And still, he counts himself among the War Pig's allies. Well. I'll let him tell that tale.

Danville's Words

I hate you fucking things. I hate that you're not *natural*. I hate that you... so blatantly exist, dead and still among us, feasting on our blood like parasites. But it's not the blood thing that gets me. That squicks me, sure. But you have to eat like we have to eat. You can't control that. I accept that we all have needs, but with your kind, it's the *wants* I worry about.

You want to humiliate us. You want to debase us, to hurt us, to not just take our blood for food but to take our blood for some kind of god-awful pleasure. It's like, when you died, the important parts — the moral centers, the positive emotions, the love and hope and the, the... *all that shit* — stayed dead, but the rest of you kept on going. And now you're just hollow. Hollow like a porcelain doll, except maybe still filled up with all that badness that we humans try to mitigate. All the sin and desire and selfishness and self-importance, it's still in you. Maybe that's your own parasite. You prey on us because it preys on you. I don't know.

So. I know. I'm telling you this and maybe it's getting you mad, maybe that placid face in the shadows there is twisting up in rage and next thing I know you're going to tear my arm off and beat me to death with it. Nah. You won't. Because I got free passage in this neighborhood. I have Viktor Trepan's seal of approval stamped across my head, like a brand on a bull's haunches.

How'd I get to this point? On Trepan's side? I'll spare you all the long and gory details, but I'll just say that you and yours hurt me and mine. I had a family. I don't anymore. Your kind dangled all kinds of pretty shiny things in front of them. Made them want you. All that money and passion and... and the blood. Now they're



gone. Your kind took them, so I've been out there making your kind pay.

But it's been little shit, you know? Piddly nobodies — sunfish instead of bass, minnows instead of sharks. I behead some fresh-from-the-grave asshole, and all he does is bring coffee to the guy who brings coffee to the monster that really matters. Or blood. You don't drink coffee, do you? See? Inhuman.

About a year ago, though, I saw my shot. I'd been following this banker, right? One of yours. Round fuck with a cow-slick haircut, big grin and little squinty butthole eyes: Edgar Winters. You cocked your head when I said that. You know him, I guess. You know what he's into, then. You know who he hurts with his money and how he hurts them. Anyway, I follow him. I watch him. I get some boys together, and we all keep an eye on him from every angle. And he meets with someone you can't forget, because he's hideous, just a ruined head on hunched shoulders — he looks a lot like you. Whatever it is what screws your type up, makes you different from the rest, well, it got him hard. He hit every branch of the Fucking Nasty Tree on the way down.

We think, fine, we'll use this brute. We'll watch him — because we're patient, not dumb — and we'll sandbag him at some point. Take him down, and maybe get him to squeal on Winters. This troll doesn't go around with bodyguards, not like that big fish Winters. I think, we can take him. We find out who he is (the minnows squeal when you bring a hissing torch near their eyeballs, I have to tell you)... Viktor Trepan. We think he's a middle fish. A tuna who can take us to the swordfish.

Of course, that's not true, is it? About a year later, we have it all planned out. Tactical strike on this thug. The boys will hold him down. I'll bash his face in, ruin that nest of fangs he calls a mouth. It'll be quick. We'll smash his hands, feet if we have to. And keep doing it so he can't just... fix himself.

We're ready to make the move, and what happens? He's attacked. Dragged into an alley and jumped by a bunch of mob-goon-lookin' jerkoffs. And I know some of those goons. They're with *Winters*. Some of the crew who follows him around like remora fish, feeding off whatever the shark leaves behind floating in the stirred-up waters.

Yeah. Dilemma. What to do, what to do?

Here we got this guy, the obvious monster. The face that only a mother could smother in a plastic bag. Then we have

the suits clubbing him, jumping on him, and they're with Winters. Winters with the child slavery ring. Winters with the bank schemes, draining family coffers. Winters with the big smile because he's so proud of what he's doing.

Dilemma solved. I tell the boys what to do. And we jump into the fight and hit Winters' hoods hard. It's tough, because this isn't how we planned it, right? Everything has to do with a plan. When the plan falls apart... Haneke didn't make it. I mean, shit, he's still alive, but he's only still with us by the grace of some godless machine in the hospital that beeps and hisses and keeps his lungs and heart going. But that was the only casualty that day aside from a few busted ribs, a concussion, and too much blood.

So, next thing we know, a cold wind sweeps through the alley and we're face-to-face with the monster himself. And we got Haneke bleeding out. Do we hit him, too? They're all monsters. They're all bad eggs.

And this beast sniffs the air, and he says, "Nice work. I'll be in touch." And on his breath I smell, fuck, I don't know, but my kid had a hamster die in our walls and whenever the heat would kick on, this *dead rodent* odor would exhale through the vents, and that was close to the same smell. And I know, I know you don't breathe... but when you talk I guess those dead lungs have to expel something. When you asked me to talk, I could smell a bit of that same dead hamster smell on *your* "breath," too. Guess you guys are on the same diet.

Trepan came and found me, like he said. And I was ready, just in case, a can of hairspray and a lighter in my lap. Quick fix to keep you blood junkies at bay.

And then Trepan made me an offer. He *knew* all about me. Maybe that's what he had been doing after the knock-down drag-out in the alley. Checking up on me. He knew about my wife. About how she got addicted, and then how she got made into one of you dead things. He knew I had stored up a belly full of fire, and he told me how he could help me... unleash it. On "our" enemies. So. Fuck it. I'm on board.

What do I do for Trepan? Not much, yet. But that time will come. The monsters have to sleep. And when they drift off into naptime, I'm just getting up and having breakfast, and I'm sharpening my knives and reloading the 12 gauge shells in between bites.

Listen, I know the score. I know Trepan's a monster. And he knows what I do. He's made it clear, and I haven't disagreed... when this is done, all bets are off.

WHY THEY HATE US

I received this recording. I have packaged it with all the rest and typed a transcript. You can follow the transcript when listening to the audio; it will help decipher the man's cries and assist you in penetrating the odd white noise. I suspect he must have recorded this near running water beside a sewer run-off, perhaps, or near to some hissing pipes.

Begin Recording.

Only screams at first: cries of unliving agony. The screams are sometimes gurgled, intimating that there must be blood welling up in the throat. In the background is that constant susurration. Likely pipes or machinery of some ilk. Potentially the whispers of Trepan's soldiers. Perhaps, perhaps.

The subject as I understand is one Charles Hardaiken, Sheriff of the First Estate. He is one of the Uppities, a Lord of the Law. Trepan clearly considers the Sheriff a part of some plot against him.

The screams die down at 4 hours, 32 minutes. At 5 hours, 56 minutes, the conversation begins.

VT: Tell me of your Prince's betrayal. Tell me or I'll cut off your other hand. Tell me or I'll stick this arrow shaft in and out of your exposed heart again and again and again. Tell me. Tell me or I'll bring hell to your flesh over and over and over.

CH: I'll confirm... no such thing.

VT: Tell me how your Prince turned on us. Tell me how he came to cut the throats of we, his loyal servants!

CH: If you say it's true, then it must be true, but I know... nothing.

VT: Bite your double-speaking tongue! We were his hunters. We were his soldiers. We stayed to the shadows and fought those he needed to be destroyed. We cleaned up his many messes. Then he turned on us. Then he sent his other dogs after us. We were betrayed, Sheriff. Unlawfully. Do you not care for law?

CH: I am the law, monster. You are not. You are a crass contravention. Nothing more.

VT: A crass contravention? Clever words, law-breaker. Fuck your law. How can you be so dismissive of our kind?

CH: You want to know? Do you want to know why we loathe you so?

VT: Careful with that mouth, or I'll rip the jaw from your head.

CH: You're a disease, Trepan. A mutant, a freak show. Look at you. Eyes shriveled in the sockets, looking more like dried figs than pupils, corneas, irises. Skin sallow and gray like the grave. Nose little more than a fleshy gash in that worm's face. Of course, not all of you look as bad as you do. But you all have something. Some mark, some curse, some exuded element of wrongness about you — the smell of the slaughterhouse about your mouth and armpits, some off angle with the bones and joints, or even teeth too-small or skin chafed as if by eczema.

VT: You don't look so good yourself, Sheriff. Of course I had to do this to you myself, but each hand with three fingers? All your teeth banged out of your head to make you look like a baby or an old man? That one eye of yours, swollen shut beneath a landslide of broken bone and sloughing skin? You're the freak, now.

CH: Yes, but I have a pedigree. You were not created like the rest of us. Your line's unholy, profane nativity is less than that of even the mad-eyed Savages. You're a so-called soldier. A student of war, you claim. You know the first instances of biological warfare? Plague corpses catapulted over the walls of the enemy's fortifications. Bodies ripe with contagion, flung into the foe's midst. Clumsy, but it did the trick. That's you, Trepan. You're the plague carcass, the blighted corpses we throw at our enemies. We hurl you far away from us so that your disease can take root elsewhere, among the throngs of our adversaries. You're a Bubonic flea. You're a flu rat, a tumor-addled dog. Plainly spoken? We hate you because you disgust us.

VT: You missed something, Sheriff.

CH: Do tell.

VT: Those bodies hurled over the walls? You can contain the bodies but not the plague. The plague spread within the enemy fortifications but would not be held by walls. The disease left. The epidemic spread.

CH: So?

VT: That's us, fucker. We're the plague you can't contain. You thought to control us? The Prince thought to discard us like so many bloated bodies? You can't get rid of us. We're like cancer. The Spanish flu, buried and waiting. We return. We return to destroy.

CH: Go to Hell, Haunt.

VT: Already there, Sheriff.

CH: Your voice — it sounds different —

At this point, the sounds that emerge give the impression that Charles Hardaiken is no more. The noise that hits the ear is of meat tearing, almost like the ripping of wet fabric. But if the stories are true, the stories that whisper up from the underground and drift down from the world above, then Hardaiken is not destroyed at all. No, Trepan is keeping him, the voices say. Walled away, a stake in his chest, the good Sheriff's abode becoming a Cask of Amontillado. Perhaps to be punished. Perhaps to be used later. Who can say?

THE WORDS OF THE WAR PIG

I will not be afforded the chance to sit before the War Pig and ask questions. I will not even be allowed the opportunity to write my questions down and get them to him. He believes it is too dangerous. His representatives say we are "too much alike" and that he fears a kind of blood sympathy between us, though why I cannot say it could be that he is becoming as paranoid as the Prince who condemned him to this course.

We are graced, however, with the presence of this microtape, which I've bagged up and am sending along, but have also listened to and transcribed, below. This is the voice of Viktor Trepan, the War Pig. These are his words.

Nicodemus.

I'm glad to help you with this little... project. You should consider yourself, lucky, though. Were I in a different situation, I might not find this prying into my affairs so entertaining. Were I still in the Prince's stable, I'm most certain he wouldn't find it amusing, and the last thing you'd want is to have me coming for you.

I want to be clear about some things. About my intent. I regret this. I loathe this course of action. This wasn't my choice. Certainly not my doing. Me and my men, we were loyal to the order of this city. I despise chaos. The Prince sat at his boardroom table so many years ago and on a night just like this one — bright, full moon with a warm wind through the canyons of the city — he promised that together we could bring order to this ugly society. "The ship," he said, "has sprung a leak. I want you to fix that leak."

So I did so. I was the fucking glue that held it all together, if you ask me.

Why it was that he turned on me, I cannot and I will not say, because there I'll still be true to my word. Why would I value such a thing, as my word? I cannot answer



that question either. Perhaps out of some warped sense of honor. Or maybe just as an ironic twist to this whole damn affair.

It has become clear to me that sickness is rampant. So often, our kind is associated with disease; we hideous, mutant corpses must be the bearers of sickness upon our pursed and rotting lips, right? But the disease, it's not us. It's them. Those above us. They're a layer of sewage, fermenting, breaking down into its constituent bits. Most things would try to rise above the sewage, but the strata of shit is so heavy, it takes a lot of effort to push through it, to climb up through the sickness and see the stars. Well, me, I'm that effort, I'm the one who's going to push the shit aside, who will bury the disease and rise above it all. I'm sick of cleaning up the messes and trying to put all the snakes back in the bag. I'm tired of being told what to do by the incestuous and insane.

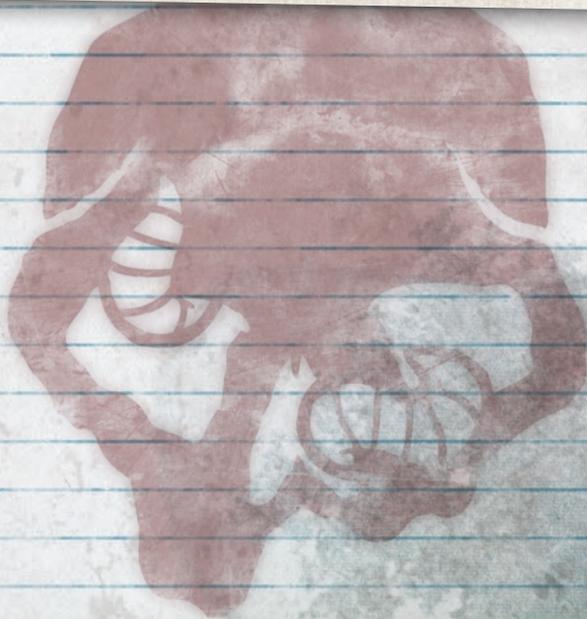
I am done with it all. And now those monstrous elitist fucks will pay for turning me aside. It's about revenge at its base level, but if my revenge becomes something greater, then so be it. I'm clear about that with those who follow me. I don't tell them that this is about any greater good. Hold no illusions, I say, about me doing this out of some sense of justice or right versus wrong. I'm doing this because you spurned me, and now I'll fucking end you. It just so happens that it's the right thing to do. It's a pleasant coincidence. They don't buy it. They think I'm some kind of savior, some hand of change. Fine. Let them think that.

I'm also clear about this: I don't know what will happen afterwards. I'm the guy who tears down the rotting lumber, but I'm not the one who builds the new house in its place. I don't know what will rise up after the Prince, after me, after it's all said and done and the last fires have gone out. Truthfully? I don't much care. Because who knows if I'll even make it through? I may not. As long as some worse shit doesn't take the place, my ashes can rest peacefully wherever they may lay. And if something the same or worse does pick up the crown and sits down on that boardroom throne, well, I hope someone like me comes along and smells the way the wind is blowing and decides that enough is enough, it's time to tear it all down again until one of us fucking monsters can get it right.

So. That's that. It begins tomorrow night. The siege. It'll be quiet at first. Maybe quiet the whole time if we do it right, but I figure it'll get louder before it gets done.

Nicodemus, I'm also sending a copy of this tape to the Prince. Just so he knows what's coming.

Prince, good night, good luck. Once, it was good working for you. Those nights are long gone, and now I'm going to have your heart for a midnight snack, you godless betraying fuck. Tell the Primogen to suck a stake and die. I'm coming for them, too.



This was not how it should have gone. Forces are working that I do not understand. I thought to meet this girl, this Alice, a young Savage who has been compiling her own book for—you? For some other? A competing volume or just another chapter for your library, my dear employer?

I thought, this is where she will deliver it. I will play the Armonium for her, and while she is staggered by the shapes from beyond the veil, I will gently take the book from her and go. A delicate effort. So simple.

It did not turn out how I envisioned.

Someone has already been here. A killer. A tormentor. Dead thralls downstairs. A dead boy and—his mother?—upstairs. Who did this? The Masquer, I wonder? That dread killer or someone worse? Some different fiend?

Alice shows. This is not what she expected, either. The horror radiates off her in waves. She weeps tears of blood, I can... taste them by their smell, I can hear them fall and strike the floorboards of this old tilted house.

I follow her in shadow as she kneels before the bed where the boy's corpse waits, but then—I hear the bubble of blood pop from the tiniest breath from his nose and I know that he's not dead, no, not at all, and she does not intend for him to die. She intends to give him the second life, to fill his ears with the chords and strains of the Requiem. A cruel gift for a boy, an abuse I cannot abide. In the shadows, in my pocket of darkness, I slide behind where the Armonium is placed and I wet my fingers and I play its song.

The strangest thing happens.

I see the shapes. The Hidden Ones. The walls are gone. The darkness is absolute.

But Alice—if this is even that girl—does not see them. Her head doesn't turn in horror at the pale thing that twists in its tortuous coils next to her.

She only whispers a word, spoken not to the child or to myself, but I can hear it:

"Surrender."

She seems ready to follow her own command. But it's too late. The boy is lurching up, feeding from her wrist; she pulls it away and... numb, simply leaves. The boy cries out. It's enough to jostle me, to force me to stop playing. The song ends. The walls have returned and the shapes behind them are gone.

I pull the boy to me, and I let him taste a bit.

He is not mine, of course; I did not make him.

Shall I take him as a childe? A surrogate of sorts? He can be my eyes.

We go to the window and watch his new mother shuffle into the forest. There comes a moment when she turns and looks up at us, and the boy waves.

I pull him away, and wonder what to do next. I have no books. But I still have the Armonium and its otherworldly harmony. And now I have a friend.

His name, he tells me, is Little Jack.



INTERLUDE II: ALICE AND THE BOY

VIOLET WALDROP, SHRINKING VIOLET

Violet Waldrop is just an infant, really, only a few years dead.

Photos of her then do not compare to her visage, now. Once, she was the daughter of a prominent land baron (some might say "slumlord," but one transcends such a title when one's bank account reveals an endless cascade of zeroes), the toast of the social town, the pride of the gossip pages. No national celebrity, but all within the city knew the name Violet Waldrop. Her many men. Her many women. Dalliances and drugs and big tips on tremendous cocktail bills. Charity, too, scads of it, every day a new article about her donations, vomited forth in some perhaps honorable need to make up for her apparent shallowness.

Let us hope she remains charitable, now.

You see, Waldrop is enormously gifted. Yes, she is young. Untested and naive. But her powers of remaining hidden are, to my knowledge, unparalleled amidst at least our local population. It is not hard to see from whence this comes; her Embrace was not an easy one. Not that any are easy, but hers was particularly cruel.

Who the sire was, nobody but Violet knows. But she confessed to the awful process when she was found. Waldrop, the prominent daughter, went missing. Kidnapped, the story went, though never did any ransom notes come in, as everyone had expected they would. Her father loved her endlessly, perhaps the only thing he did love.

For a year, her keeper kept her alive.



AGAIN EYES! ALWAYS EYES! THE TRUTH IS IN THE EYES!

Whittling her down mentally, emotionally, physically. Her captivity was a horror house: eat dog food, dear Violet, oh did I mention it's truly the ground meat of your actual dog? Here, dear Violet, drink this tea I made for you, ahh, yes, that taste you wonder at is my blood, your blood, mingled together. Here is your little toe, pressed into your palm, a silver chain run through the callused skin so that you may wear it forever around your neck a souvenir of our time!

And so on, and so forth.

One year later, her keeper finally ended her suffering, but then began it anew with the Embrace.

Of course, as it is with our species, high society here is far different than the society with which Waldrop was familiar. Hers was a tank of piranha. This is a mad river of many sharks. They laughed at her, happy to toy with the Great Socialite Diva Princess, Violet Waldrop. It only forced the girl to retreat all the more quickly from the world, pulling back into the shadows, deeper, deeper until she was as matte black as the darkest night.

When she does reveal herself, it is with an awful visage: her face stretched in a permanent scream (more than a little like Munch's painting, if I recall it correctly in my mind's eye), her eyes unblinking, her face bone white but for the gray stretch marks. She could be pretty if only her face would return, would relax, would lose its bleak striations.

I hope she will help me.

She can hide. She can hear things in the darkness, getting close to that which none of us can. So inconspicuous.

Things I Know About Violet Waldrop:

- Here's how inconspicuous she truly can be: the society of the Damned has already forgotten her, because they believe she has met her final death somewhere, somehow, or that she has fled the city never to return. They believe they ran her out on a rail. They are, of course, wrong. All they did was force her deeper into the darkness.
- Waldrop has no haven: she lurks in the world above us, truly above us. I don't mean that metaphorically in reference to our predilection to be subterranean — no, quite literally Waldrop frequents water towers, rooftops, fire escapes, and the like. Better for her to hear what goes on beneath her? Perhaps. But maybe she just knows that few are likely to look up, reducing the chances of her being found in the first place.
- Would you believe that her father knows what she is? It explains a lot about him, if you are aware of the arc of Norman Waldrop. Around the same time that Violet emerged into our world, confirming her Embrace, Norman sold off all his assets and became, of all things, a preacher; he has devoted himself to something he calls the "Long Night," and claims that we have entered the period of Tribulation as promised by the Bible (though truly promised by no Bible I have ever read). He preaches that it is time to rehabilitate the "monsters" that "prey on society" (this is his logline quite often, quoted in too many articles to count). Most believe this has to do with the disappearance of Violet. Instead, it has to do with her reappearance in his life. I have personally seen her leaving his bedroom window, her cheeks wet with red, Bible in hand.

Rumors I've Heard About Violet Waldrop:

- While this is largely unconfirmed — and no surprise — it's something that cannot be easily and objectively defined, and thus I leave it in the "rumors" column... Waldrop is clinically quite mad! Even before the Embrace it had been suggested that she elicited intense manic depression (charity perhaps being her mania), and some say that she struggled with suicidal thoughts, though never acted upon. Others have claimed that she manifests obsessive-compulsive tendencies: they claim to have heard her counting her steps as if cataloguing the number for some purpose that lurks only in her own mind. And what else lurks in that mind? Multiple personalities, perhaps? I do not myself believe this one, and have seen no evidence of such a thing. A mistake. Or a lie.
- The matter of her sire is some question, obviously. One rumor has Rufus Septimus, the Worm Lord, as her sire, but again, that must be a mistake or a lie. The Worm Lord simply does not have that cruelty within him; he is capable of harsh and decisive action, but nothing about him strikes me as possessing the sickness necessary to engage in such tortures with a human. He is grotesque, yes, but not a bottom-feeding fiend.
- How did she learn to hide so effectively? Some simply grow into the ability, often as a self-defense mechanism, and that could be the case with her. But I believe she was taught, and taught intensely. It is not impossible that her own sire dedicated some time to this issue, but I do not think him so kind or prudent. No. She must have had another mentor, someone with equally capable skills. This someone might still exist out there in the night, even more hidden than his protégé. Find him — or her — and one might learn a great deal about the things of which our kind is truly capable.

OVERHEARD: TAG IT

two lost haunts
out-of-towners
heard out back
of begley's moon
tavern 5th walnut

Voice1: Body's cold. No blood. So what?

Voice2: So what? You brought the paint?

Voice1: Yep. Two cans.

Voice2: Above the body, paint this.

(sound of paper rustling)

Voice1: Fuck is it? A... mountain and two trees? Two pillars? What?

Voice2: Turn it over, you fuckin' idiot.

Voice1: Wait. Oh. Oh! Shit. That's hot.

Voice2: No kidding it's hot, I know it's hot, because I fuckin' thought of it. The city's going to go to shit here soon. Trepan's boys against the Prince and his Invictus cronies. We stick this on the wall above the body? Boom. Instant panic, just add hot pink spraypaint.

Voice1: Would these guys use hot pink spraypaint?

Voice2: Who cares, retard? Just fucking paint it already! We want to rob these assholes blind, well, we have to make sure everybody's got their hands full. And that means Hardaiken.

Voice1: I haven't seen Hardaiken in a few weeks.

Voice2: Oh, what, he checks in with you? A three-year-dead dummy with a face like curdled pus? Shut up and paint.

Voice1: I'm painting, I'm painting...

ABUSE BEGETS ABUSE BEGETS ABUSE

Once more, she has perhaps gleaned insight into our condition. I give you this: the first letter, an original copy, as written by the Masquer, the serial killer who plagued this city a dozen or so years ago. It came with this postcard, from Violet:

he will kill again soon
sleeping, now
but not forever

PLACE
STAMP
HERE

I AM WRETCHED. I TAKE THEIR EYES SO THAT THEY MAY NOT SEE.
I DO NOT TASTE THEIR BLOOD
BECAUSE THAT IS A GIFT. NO PLEASURE, ONLY TORMENT, NO KISS ONLY
KILL. ROGER BOUND MOMMY TO THE RADIATOR AND MADE HER CRY
WITH HIS BELT. ROGER MADE ME MAKE HER CRY TOO. THEY HELD
ME IN THE DIRT BECAUSE I COULDN'T CATCH THE BALL. BROTHER ROBIN
MADE ME HURT MADE ME UGLY MADE ME BAD AND SO I KILL AND
SO I TAKE THE EYES HE WOULD NOT LET ME TAKE MY OWN ROBIN
SEWED MY ARMS TOGETHER AND PUT MAGGOTS IN MY MARROW AND
MADE ME SLEEP IN A TANK OF SEWAGE AND NOBODY KNEWED ME BE-
CAUSE HE KEPT ME SECRET SHH HUSH-HUSH WE ARE ALL THE SECRETS
THAT YOU KEEP THAT YOU BLOODY LORDS AND LADIES KEEP
I HAVE TWENTY EYES NOW
AND I SHALL TAKE TWENTY MORE

Those who follow the Masquer have long assumed him to have been human, though Violet and my own theories indicate otherwise. The mortal authorities believe that the suspect is Harold Grier Carson, a recluse living in the bluffs who has been arrested a few times for, as the reports suggest, "severe animal abuse." Elements of this didn't hold water, however: not only was the single fingerprint found on the scene most certainly not Carson's, but the eyes always appeared to be removed with bare hands, no small feat for a man of Carson's size 300 lbs,

but only 5'8" with what one might describe as fat little doll hands. He could not have removed those eyes himself.

One suspects, then, that one of the Damned is responsible. Some chords of that letter strike a certain tone: drinking blood, maggots in the marrow, and the references to ugliness and wretchedness certainly call to mind elements of a Haunted existence.

The name "Brother Robin" is not known to us, but among the Sanctified in years past there had been a "Brother Thrush," and of course the American Robin as a bird belongs to the thrush family (and is known for eating a diet of worms). Thrush was a Nosferatu. He was also burned on a cross atop the roof of the old bank building by his Sanctified brethren because he not only violated several precepts and the Traditions, but was also renowned for his cruelty toward his "flock" of ghouls, congregants and childer. One childer, a broken thing known only as Jessamyn, claimed and here it is, the signal flare that he would force her to sleep underground in a septic tank covered with a concrete slab.

Violet may be indicating that she has found the Masquer, whose identity is unknown but who seems a likely childer of Thrush before he was burned.

He may be slumbering, as well. But Violet's translations of reality and information into communication is at times, imperfect. The poor girl is damaged, much like our friend, the Masquer. It explains a great deal about our kind, of course. We are so often abused. Abused to the point of becoming the monsters so many assume us to already be.

OVERHEARD: THE PIG AND THE WORM

Pig: It has been a while, Septimus.

Worm: We've met before? You sure about that?

Pig: Oh, we've met. You think hard enough, you'll realize that.

Worm: If you say so, you freaky old bastard, you. Let's get down to the meat of the matter. You've already begun your little crusade. The Prince's retinue, piled in a heap of the closed-down Mirador Hotel — did you know that's what the Mongols used to do? They'd sweep through a town, kill who needed killing, then pile 'em up in the town center. Sometimes whole bodies, sometimes quivering heaps of cooling limbs.

Pig: Thanks for the history.

Worm: Yeah, no problem. We were there, of course. Descending upon the ruined villages like the flocks of crows and buzzards that fall upon a road-dead deer. Anyway. So you killed the Prince's retinue —

Pig: And his new Hound. Brunvand.

Worm: Right, right. The story I hear is that they found his oily ash starting in the middle of the floor, running to the wall, up the wall, and then onto the ceiling. That must've been you personally. Am I right?

Pig: ...

*Piggy and wormy
meeting of the minds
at the drain embankment
off of the slurry run*

Worm: I'll take your silence as a big fat yes. And Hardaiken? He's still missing.

Pig: True.

Worm: So it has begun, is the point I'm making. Nasty business, this stuff. And I don't want any part of it. I have... people. People on that side of the fence. I'd like them kept safe. Or safer, at least. No permanent marks.

Pig: Are you asking me for a favor?

Worm: Maybe. Or we could turn this into a business transaction and get to the cost analysis right here, right now. Tell me what you want.

Pig: Free passage.

Worm: I don't know, Avernus is —

Pig: Broad and deep. Your warren has a hundred boltholes and trapdoors. It would be of great service to me to have access.

Worm: And of great vulnerability to me. Puts all my glorious kingdom in big ugly danger. Can't have that, Trepan. Your army's loyal to you now, but one day, they won't be. I can't have them keeping a map of my lands in their heads.

Pig: Then passage for just me and a handful of others. I'll select three. Haunts only.

Worm: Better. Still...

Pig: Think of it as me taking out the trash. The Prince and his court stands in your way. Always have, always will. It is a wall. I plan on crushing that wall beneath my boots. Let me in.

Worm: A man like me enjoys his opposition. Being opposed by the Prince, that rotten apple fuck, makes me look like a gentleman by comparison.

Pig: Okay. I'll put it to you another way. Give me access. In return, I'll spare your men. And, also in return, I'll spare you. Now. Tonight.

Worm: You truly are blind. That would be suicide.

Pig: You're blind, too, then, "Worm Lord." I'll sacrifice a great deal to get what I want. I'll sacrifice everything. Will you?

Worm: ... no. You're the brash brute here. I'm the self-indulgent side of this coin.

Pig: So you are. Do we have a deal?

Worm: We do.

Pig: Good. It bears mentioning that we're being watched, right now.

Worm: We are?

Pig: Not to worry. She's one of us. Isn't that right, Violet?

WORMTONGUE

Violet would like to share a secret, a secret so obvious to me that I would have forgotten to include it. So much of our nightly existence seems blatant to me, but it might not to you, whoever you are. Here, Violet shows you what some simply call "The Code," what others refer to as "Wormtongue." It is a way that we communicate with one another see, regardless of allegiances, we are all Nosferatu. We all share some understanding of what it means to be what we are. We all know the pain. The judgment. The mad and uncontrollable joys of discovering a comfort level with the horror. Anyway, below are some examples. Violet was kind enough to "decode" where appropriate.

LIVE MUSIC IN GODSHAW PARK SAT!!!

NIGHT
WITH

THE FUCK YOU RARHORES

BOOBOO VOODOO

AND PUSSNATCH

COMING DOWN TO RODDY McGEE'S

TOD

pentagon- "five corners" one intersection in city with five streets coming into it, known as "five corners" / two down arrows, down two "levels" beneath the city / go down manhole, no icon for that but we all know pussnatch is



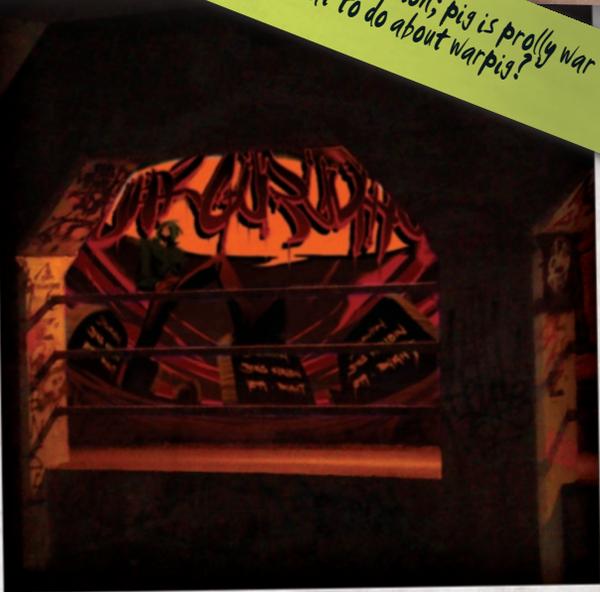
drummer of booboovoodoo is nossie ghoul named kitty

pussnatch- not a band; local haunt, the one announcing a meeting / on hunt for local snitch who ratted his sins to sanctum priest



roddy mcgees is "worm elysium" safe only for our kind from our kind; excludes everybuddy else

tod: topic of discussion; pig is prolly war pig as in what to do about warpig?



graffiti done by juice, juice is one of us; he's a real artist a true gift, a rare creator among the dead hands uhar sur unhas; nothing to do with hags, but caesar cipher in the key of n



translation: "Hunt the Haunt"
target: boris "yellowfin" karabin
the hunt is still on
but this tag is old: by two years or more

Yes. Boris Karabin. Traded in relics. Old pieces relevant to our clan. Betrayed us by stealing from us and selling to the open market. The Hunt Hunt is our own blood hunt; we take care of our own business when appropriate. The targets simply disappear. Boris, as I'm to understand, remains at large.

THE ADDICT

Here, Violet has procured a rather curious suicide note. I'll let her give the salient details.

Dear Marissa:

I've swallowed a fistful of pills. I don't know what they are. You can look by the nightstand; the bottles will still be there, unless the police have taken them by now.

I know things have been different for us over the last year. I've become distant. Hard to reach. Sometimes I get mean, but I never hit you, you know I never hit you. My words though... I know they stung, and I'm so, so sorry.

It's because of somebody else.

Her name is Martina. I met her at the Laundromat one night. I was drunk, as usual. Trying to wash the puke out of my shirt and the wine stain out of yours from when you threw that wine in my face but most of it ended up on you instead of on me.

Martina isn't human, Marissa. She'd kill me for telling you that.

I thought her an old woman at first... the type all hunched over, their back almost at a ninety degree angle. She was pushing a small cart filled with clothes: filthy rags, covered in mud or shit, maybe blood, but I didn't really know that, then. Martina just sidled up next to me and started loading a washer, and she took her babushka or whatever it's called off and...

...she wasn't old at all. She was young, with a beautiful face and clear blue eyes and a fantastic pair of tits, but they hung straight down because of that awful bend in her back. Once she slipped the shawl off her shoulders you could see her spine through her boy beater, bumpy and rigid almost like the fins of some prehistoric fish.

Martina... she did things to me. I couldn't move when she looked in my eyes. I felt horrified, frightened, but fixed to the spot. She touched me, bit me, let my blood run playfully down her perfect chin the way a child might squirt a bit of juice from his mouth. Then she pushed her own wrist in my mouth and jerked it across my teeth and it cut into her, and her blood rushed across my tongue...

poor sad ghoully
loved the blood hated the blood
all he had to do was stop but he couldn't
so I cradled his cold stiff head
for many nights reading this letter
over and over again
marissa whoever she is never came
poor poor ghoully



And that was the end of it. That was when it began and when my life ended. Because of that blood. It tasted like heaven even as it filled my nose with the coppery smell of long-gone garbage. It poured down my throat in an oil slick, sweet and pungent and peppery and I can't get it out of my head. She wrapped around me the way a spider encumbers a fly, and she laughed as I drank.

It's the worst drug ever. One hit and you're hooked.

I was hooked, Marissa, hooked real bad. I don't know what it is. . . I don't even know what 'she' is, but I can tell you her heart never struck a beat in that chest of hers.

The things I'd do for that blood. . . god, I can't even think of it. I'd humiliate myself. I'd wear women's clothing. She'd have me start fights with people on the street. I'd piss myself, I'd eat till I was sick, I'd sell myself on the street for. . .

Jesus. All for the blood, Marissa. God, so perfect, so hideous. I felt like I was addicted to disease, like I loved the way the sickness felt in my mouth and my guts. Warm down my throat, warmer than any shot of good scotch I've had. Forget Glenlivet or Glenfiddich, this was Glenmartina, Glenblood, comforting and numbing.

But Martina's been gone for a week or so, now. Something happened in the city and she said she had "things" to attend to, but that I'd be a good little boy and wait for Mommy to come back, to wait for "Mommys milk" as she has come to call it recently.

The time away, though, it's given me pause.

My head's cleared just a bit. I still want that blood, I do. I hunger to be wrong. It feels so beautiful to be humiliated. But my head's clear enough now to see how fucked up that is. And I don't want to pull you into it. I don't want to say horrible things to you anymore. And I damn sure don't want to lead Martina to your doorstep.

So I've taken these pills.

And it feels so good. Martina always told me, she said that even in death I'd not be able to escape her. That she'd track down my ghost and sheec

Curious. I know Martina. Not personally, but I've met her. Never met this thrall, but here's the curious part. Martina has herself a new thrall. A fresh-faced girl named, yes, you guessed it, Marissa. Marissa is always seen carrying around a jar. An urn, really. This man's ashes? I do not know, but it seems reasonable to suspect.

OVERHEARD: THE TWO LIBRARIANS

worm lord librarians
ceacele — I can't spell it
— the archivist librarian
ghouls
sharing... memories in blood
these two shared a glass of
cognac in subbasement
of tenement brownstone
648 elm
one of the avernus boltholes
in the heater blower

Librarian Marnatti: Hello, Ambrose.

Librarian Ambrose: Salutations, Marnatti.

Marnatti: I quite like the fresh air.

Ambrose: Fresh air? Do you think? Smells like dirty laundry and fuel oil down here. I find it quarrelsome to the nose.

Marnatti: I suppose. Living underground is no olfactory circus. More like a septic tank. Staid air. Must. Dust. Stagnant water. Sewage run-off.

Ambrose: Always so dramatic, you. There's no sewage down there. The Worm Lord has ensured that we have minimal crossover with the septic lines. Besides, plumbing pipes simply end up at the treatment plant. That would be an easy way back to the Necropolis.

Marnatti: You're quite right, as always. So. Did he feed you today?

Ambrose: He did. It was glorious. The Mahabharata, Stri-parva, the Book of Women.

Marnatti: Oh! Is that where they murder the sleeping army?

Ambrose: No, no, this is the lamentations of the dead by the women. "He who had checked all the desirous Pandavas, after causing the slaughter of a vast force, at last himself succumbed to death. Alas, those wives of his, with faces as beautiful as the moon, are crying, sitting around that irresistible hero who resembled an angry elephant!"

Marnatti: That's fascinating.

Ambrose: It still vexes me — in the best way, of course. How does he do it? How does his blood, when soaked to the pages, somehow convey the words to my mind? Forever embellished upon my thoughts?

Marnatti: Not just that. It's him. In the blood. His lessons.

Ambrose: His secrets. Did you know that the Archivist once spent time in a secret basement of the Biblioteca Ambrosia in Milan? That he met with a woman there who claimed to be human but eternal, living and not dead like we, and that she was the daughter of the Devil himself?

Marnatti: Ahhh, yes, yes! That was where he consumed three pages of the Codex Diabolos and where he first learned of the Book of Eschaton, is it not?

Ambrose: That may be, that may be. See? This is why I love these meetings, Marnatti. For we may gather and speak of our feedings, of the potent codes carried in the blood. The things you learn from the tasting are not the things I learn from the tasting. It is brilliant how he does it.

Marnatti: Let us toast to our keeper.

Ambrose: To the Archivist.

Marnatti: To the glorious and historied Archivist!

I truly must assume this to be a trick the Archivist learned from one of the Shadows. I grow more convinced of this as time goes on. Their cults are many, and their secrets doubly numbered.

WYCOMBE'S GRANDBOY

A letter included from Violet. I'm honestly not sure what it is or even where this belongs; it seems to speak to some allegiance between this Nosferatu of the Cockscomb Society and some as-yet-unnamed human society?

Dearest Mister Witherspoon:

I quite surely don't know of what you speak. Yes, you seem to be familiar with my "grandfather," Potter Wycombe, but I can only assure you that this does nothing to connect us. My group, the Cockscomb, is perfectly content being who we are... citizens of our society, sir, upstanding and moral. Your own group is not without rumors preceding it, and I assure you that if ever our two societies were linked that connection has long died on the vine.

The "visions" you sought to mention in your many letters do not strike any chord. You have seen pillars of fire, some which seem to consume your casino, some which seem to make the grounds of the casino "safe" for our kind? Is that how I am to read your words?

I honestly don't know whether your letter contains threat or promise, boon or bane, but truly, sir, we have nothing to discuss. Any history between our groups is vapor and fog; the Abbey and our Society do not share similar goals. Yours is crass hedonism. Ours is a nobler endeavor: to embody our humanness in all forms.

I urge you, sir, not to contact me again.

Sincerely,

Tyball Wyatt of the Cockscomb Gents and Gals

lies lies silly lies - humanness is a lie - they deny what they are to be more "human" - but this is what i saw:
wyatt gorging himself again and again until he threw up the blood - because his dead veins could hold no more
it did not burst just from his mouth - but from his eyes and nose too - though not his ears
no idea who the abbey is tho

OVERHEARD: ONE-SIDED HARDAIKEN

Hardaiken: ... fine, fine, I'm fine. Yes. Of course. Of course there's an edge in my voice. I just freed myself from the War Pig's torture suite. Shouldn't I be a bit frazzled? My cool demeanor, as you put it, can be shaken when my fingers, toes, tongue and nose all grow back millimeter by bloody millimeter. Yes, it's painful. But we are survivors, that's how we manage. Yes. Yes. The city's gone to shit. No, the humans haven't been spooked by it; to them, it just looks like a surge in crime. But they'll catch wind of it eventually. Even those who won't admit it will soon know that monsters walk among them. We can only hope it's over soon enough. What's that? Yes. It's him. Trepan. I'll tell you, that's the irony of the whole affair — his kind are supposed to be the fiends in the darkness, the hush-hush secret keepers. They're all basically serial killers, you ask me, they kill in strange ways, ritual ways... but they keep it quiet. Trepan isn't doing that. He's making it loud. Brash. He's angry and it's coming off of him in great gawping waves. No, no. No, I haven't checked in with the Prince, I called you first. I don't suspect I will contact her, not yet, not unless you need me to. Mm. Yes. You have a lead on Alice? I'll do what I can, but I'd like a night to heal up. Jordan's my childe, yes... but don't let her know. What of the Armonium? I do hope you appreciate the work that I'm — wait. Something just moved. I swear I just heard something. I'm going to go. I'll contact you later.

the sheriff of nottingham
charlie hardaiken is not demised
i crouched atop a gazebo roof as
he waited beneath
battered and bloody
speaking on his cell phone

AUTOMATIC WRITING

Ah, of course. One thing I neglected to mention: Violet Waldrop sees ghosts. Or at least, purports to; it's not something that can be proven, at least not something that's yet been confirmed.

It's not unusual among our kind, though I don't truly know why. One could posit that it's because of our charnel connections, our ties to the grave, but those ties are ultimately hollow and driven somewhat by propaganda: *oh, the Haunts are cursed, they're suicides gone wrong or bodies that were buried improperly.* Our skin marks us as dead not because we are dead, in which case all of the Damned would seem as corpse-like as we, all pallid and rotting and smelling of grave mold. No, we are this way because at least, if you believe the histories put forth by the Caecilian we have ties to ancient beasts or gods that lurked beneath the ground, and we were later blessed with a certain propinquity to disease.

Then again, it's just a theory. Maybe it's a wrong one. Maybe we look this way and are this way because of some connection to the grave. Or maybe, maybe, it's because graves are traditionally carved out of the earth, cut square into the ground and made subterranean. And we, as subterranean creatures (at least, in our earliest Requiems), we therefore seem bound to the plots of earth in which men are buried? Who can say?

What I do know is that the spectral dead seem to find us somehow intriguing or mollifying or something. Some come to us. Sometimes, we can go to them. I don't know what it is that allows some of us to see the spirit world like that. I certainly can't. Violet can't, either, actually, but she can hear the spirit world; she's blind to them, but her ears are quite open. Why is this? Is it

because she has been so abused that it has damaged her own soul and spirit? Giving the spectral dead some connection with her?

Whatever the case, Violet sometimes engages in the practice known as automatic writing, in which she lets her hand act as the ghost's hand. She writes, then they write through her. Question, response. Again and again.

This is one such session, written on the back of

a placemat from a local diner. I do not know that you'll find it particularly illuminating. Perhaps it's a lie. But even that is telling, is it not? That we are so damaged we essentially have imaginary friends who we claim belong to the leagues of the dead?

tell me who you are. I M THE MURDERD
do you have name? TALISA THE MURDERD
who murdered you? ONE OF YOUR MNSTERS OKOMFO BONE BAD KRONA
what is an okomfo? is that a name? TRIPPED US SUPPOSTD TO BE SACRED
PRIEST SHRINE GOD OBJECTS
i do not understand. KEEPS OUR BONES AS SACRED ANY HE DRINKS KILLS
one of us has enslaved you? RINGS HIS BELL TRAPPS IN BAD MAGIC
MANY SOULS AR HIS
how many souls? SEVEN SOULS ARE HISS
what does he do with you? FORCS US TO ACT DO HS BIDDING WE KILL FOR
HM WHISPR IN EAR EARN HM NEW VIC TIMMS
he has magic? BAD MAGIC NOT GOOD MAGIC HE LETSSS SPIRITS NTR HIS
BODY THEY USE HM
he lets other ghosts into his body? NOSPIRITSNOT SPECT R S ANFUL
THINGS LIKE SHADO SVI
where is he now? COLLECTING MORE OF US
is there anything else you'd like to tell me? I SEE MANY HE HAS GIFT OF KOM
WHICH WE HAVE ALL FALL APART
what falls apart? YOU HAVE DEAD YCES MANY FACES BLIND BLIND BLIND
BLIND BLIND
blind what? spirit? talisa?

OVERHEARD: THE SOLDIER AND THE SANCTIFIED

Tilda: It's all shaking out, Father. The lines are drawn. Already the territories are putting up their walls. The siege is starting.

Mac: As it is with us, it always gets worse before it gets better.

Tilda: You could've ended that statement with "it always gets worse."

Mac: Perhaps.

Tilda: And they can't believe it. An army led by one of us, you know? It doesn't add up for them, but it would if they were in our skin. You kick a dog enough times, eventually he's going to bite. It still bugs me, though.

Mac: What does, Tilda?

Tilda: The... allegiances. Where's the solidarity? Trepan's got a bulk of support, but in the grand scheme, it's a small army, not a large one. We should have at least all of our own clan on our side, but we don't. How? How do they not get it? The Worm Lord and his filth? That Invictus prick who only cares about his own corner of the city?

Mac: I'll tell you a story. I'm not from here, of course. I'm from the other coast. There, those of our ilk were truly bound to one another. Truly. Consider: we had our own city within the city, a shared domain not beneath the ground as some would have it but at street-level, amidst the crowds and cars and strip malls. We took it — not with violence, but with the threat of violence, with a

surge like rising flood waters. The other Kindred recognized that we could overwhelm them if they did not accede to us what we demanded. What we asked for was a broad territory — a good third of the city, really, not a bad effort for the “weird” ones — and there we held sway.

Tilda: And the outsiders never tried to damage the dream?

Mac: Well, of course they did, but we were one, understand? We acted — at least to those outsiders — like a single immovable force, because once we settled on a pattern of action (we voted with that black pebble, white pebble means of determining anonymous outcome), it was settled. We brooked no defiance. And we rarely had to address any. Because it was us versus them every time, even when it really wasn't, and it helped us stay a cohesive tribe.

Tilda: How long did this utopia survive? Not long in the big picture, I bet.

Mac: In the big picture its time hasn't yet equaled a glacial epoch, no, but it's still surviving. Worth a looky-loo if you can manage the trip. We really set our own rules. Grand decisions were done by voting or, if voting could not contribute to a goal, a council of three would help to set up a plan or determine an outcome. We had our own areas of Elysium, but they only applied to us and those we labeled as our “guests” in the domain. Those of the “other city” would sometimes cross and that would be fine, we'd cross to them, too, but we brooked no poaching, and we kept a far better eye on them than they did on us. Thanks to the wonders of closed circuit cameras.

Tilda: So it was all happy smiles and mutant sing-a-longs of Kum Ba Yah?

Mac: Hardly. We had our dissenters. Those who couldn't work with the group were free to go to the other city and dwell with the bulk of the Damned. That was fine provided they didn't cause us any trouble or give away our secrets, and most of those secrets were either truly secret or weren't set in stone. Truly, most who went over to that side came back eventually anyway, realizing that they were either not just low man on the totem pole but were somehow crushed beneath the damn pole, or that they were treated more like a pet and a novelty instead of a participating member of the society. As it always happens, especially with our kind and their intense ennui, novelty wears off. So, they either held their tongue and ate spoonfuls of... well, bullshit, to stay in that other city, or they came back to us. And we welcomed them. Arms open.

Tilda: Couldn't happen here. Too many strong personas. Or personalities, whatever. They all want different things. Meanwhile, the Prince wants what the Prince wants — absolute unmerciful control. So, she wins for knowing just what she wants and taking it. We lose because we can't get our shit together. I hope that Trepan changes that. I wish you'd come onto our side, Father.

Mac: I would, Tilda, I would, but I am a man of the cloth, now. Confessor not just to our kind but to all of God's special children, his hunters and predators. I must offer myself to all. Those who commune with God and work as intermediaries should not — note that I didn't say “do not” — take sides in this battle.

Tilda: But I bet you did in your magical monstrous utopia.

Mac: Well. I wasn't a Confessor then, but we did have our own “branch” of the Sanctum, yes. It's different, though. There, our kind could not get the spiritual advisement necessary when walking among the other Damned. We had to have our own church, had to have our own messengers carrying God's commands to our ears and our prayers to God's. Here, I strive to allow all to grant me their confessions.

Tilda: All right, all right.

Mac: That's a nice rifle, by the way. Bit of a classic, is it not?

Tilda: Mmm, yup. Winchester lever-action, extra lightweight. Good caliber, though, .45-70, some old Wild West shit right here. Will punch a hole through undead flesh, do a little more than sting if I carve out the lead into hollow points.

Mac: Hopefully it won't see much use. Is it time for confession?

Tilda: You know what? I think I'm going to hold off on that right now, Father. I feel pretty good about what we're doing, you telling me all those good stories and stuff. I feel hopeful. And angry. And my trigger finger's now a little bit itchy. But shame, I don't want to feel shame tonight. Maybe later.

Mac: We have an eternity.

Tilda: Here's hoping.

tilda is one of the war pig's soldiers with baseball bat slung across back and an old rifle hanging at her side she confesses to Father MacInerney, father mac, also a haunt like she

A bit of research required here. I asked Librarian Olivieri, and received an interesting answer: "The *okomfo* in Africa Ghana in particular is a keeper of the shrine, a priest who protects the shrines and churches against evil. There, evil most often manifests as witchcraft, something the people live in constant fear of. The *okomfo* are said to be able to 'see the unperceived' which could be construed to mean ghosts or other non-corporeal entities. He communicates with gods and evil spirits around the base of the shrine, staggering about, trying to steal glimpses of the entity with a small handheld mirror. The *okomfo* cannot look at the being directly, for if he does, the creature will cast his eyes into blindness and this invites evil inside. I am forced to wonder if the reference to blindness is somehow key to this."

Does this mean we have a *Nosferatu okomfo* running around, enslaving ghosts? It is not the first I've heard of one of us maintaining what you might call a "stable" of specters. The hint to blindness is a concerning one. We are all blind, in a way. Viktor Trepan is quite literally blind, but he does not seem the mystical witch doctor type, does he?

THE WORM PIPE

email i intercepted i intercept so many
wireless thievery
like electronic magpie
take take mine mine

From: anon52@networkzero.org

To: archivist@avernus.net

Subject: Blackfoot Artifact

The AKD has procured the artifact you seek.

Believe it or not, we discovered it on a dig in a pumpkin field; we meant to be unearthing corpses, and we were, but below that waited a stratum of secondary bodies — Blackfoot Indians. On one of them, hanging at his side by a deergut cord and wrapped in deer leather, was the Worm Pipe. The cord and leather held up beautifully; I might suggest "supernaturally," given that the corpses hadn't been mummified and thus were quite decayed. The leather and cord was not.

We understand that you're not willing to give up the Armonium, and we of course suspect that it's not even in your possession. As such, we are willing to make a trade for another artifact. It has come to our attention that one of your kind — perhaps an ally, perhaps not — holds one of the fabled Minturn Mirrors. Should you decide that you seek to have the Worm Pipe in your possession, then I'd politely suggest you find a way to get a hold of that Mirror. It seems an equitable trade.

If you decide you wish to pursue this barter, you may email me here or contact me at the Pope Gallery, number's in the phone book. When the secretary answers, simply repeat the phrase "Shield and Spear" and she will transfer you to my line.

Hope to do business with you.

Sebastian Radcliffe

The Armonium? Disturbing.

I know the legend from which the Worm Pipe originates, but instead of replicating the story from memory, it seems best just to request a copy from the Archivist's own records; It's salient to us given the context. Copy follows.

A man who was a hunter had a beautiful wife and a beautiful boy. But the birth was not kind to the woman and it left her sick, unable to get well. Her body would not improve with any doctoring, and one night she died.

For a year the man wept, his child on his back, lamenting to the nighttime sky about the loss of his wife. Finally, he told the boy, "Your grandmother will take care of you for now, as I must go to find your mother and bring her back."

He journeyed for many days and many nights until he found a dark shadow across the land; within the shadow, the trees were blighted and the animals limped about with flesh ragged from disease. Straddling this shadow line sat a house, and in that house was an old woman who told the hunter he was about to set forth into the country of the Worms. She said that the Worms were ghosts who had inhabited the flesh of the dead, even if they did not belong to them. They had powerful magic driven by the blood within their unliving bodies.

The old woman told him where to go in the land of the Worms, but cautioned him that they would try to frighten him, for they were living nightmares. They would hiss at him from the darkness, and whisper in his ears his worst fears and secrets.

Still, the hunter persisted and went forth into the dark land. True to the woman's word, the shades sought to drive him back, spitting and snapping their teeth at him. When they realized their threats would not work, they offered him new wives: women whose bodies were beautiful but whose faces were bent and twisted like warped wood.

Finally, he reached the village of the Worms and started a fire in the middle of the town to warm his cold hands, for this country seemed to have no sunlight and thus, no warmth. The fire kept the shades at bay and they asked him what he wanted. He told them he mourned the loss of his wife and his child was now alone because of it. He asked if they had the power to return the dead to life, and they answered that they did.

In the fire, a long piece of wood burned bright orange, embers swirling above it. Along the glowing wood crawled a black worm with milky eyes, and as it crawled, it shaped the wood into a pipe. The shades told the man to take the pipe from the fire. Once he returned to his village, he could take the Worm-Pipe and burn within its bowl a cup of his own blood, and upon doing so he could breath the red smoke into his dead wife's mouth and she would return to his world, alive forever - but also not alive. She would always have the blood of the Worms within her, and while her heart would beat some part of her would always stay dead. The hunter agreed, and reached in and took the Worm Pipe. It did not burn his hands. He went home to restore his wife to the world.



THE CAUCHEMAR'S DIARY

Diary: stole this from the demon's desk - poor soul - doesn't know how to eat properly

Jesus. I hate that term. "Diary." I should've gone with "Journal," but I bought this book and it actually says "Diary" right there on the front. Dairy. Diary. Dairy-rhea.

So, as it turns out, I'm having trouble adjusting to this life, or non-life, or Requiem as I've heard it called though I can't imagine why (is a Requiem like a eulogy or something, except put to music?). I could call it My So Called Unlife.

There I go again, trying to be funny. Funny to who? (Sorry, to whom?) Not like I'm letting anyone read this. I'm certainly not going to let Bernard read this. What a freak that guy is. I hear that others like me have sires who... well, abuse them, really, but in the way that an abusive father might. Bernard's not like that. He's like, lonely. He wants to be my friend. And he's the last man on earth who I want to be friends with.

And yet, I can't help feel like I'm slipping into his shoes, the way a son becomes the father even though he doesn't want to be. I don't look as strange as he does, but I... hear my voice, and how it croaks, and I can smell the smell coming off of me, and it's like fertilizer or heady overturned dirt or something. Weird, but sometimes it calls to mind mushrooms? Fecund, I think that's the word.

See, Bernard calls himself a cauchemar, or other times, an incubus. He only feeds from sleeping people. And let's see here, what do I do? Oh, yeah, I feed from sleeping people. I can't seem to do otherwise. Approaching someone who's awake? Chills my blood, turns my guts to ice water. I freak out. My palms sweat little beads of pink blood, and then I back away, no, I run away. Part of me thinks, oh, I bite them when they're asleep, and who knows the difference? They wake up a little dizzy, confused, maybe flu-like, and meanwhile I have a bit of warmth in my veins. Good times. Except.

Except Bernard tells me just last week, oh, we get in their dreams. The bite, it feels good, even when it comes from a freak like him (or me), and the "Kiss" invades their dreams. Sometimes, he said, they open their eyes and look around, but they can't move (and not just because he's sitting on their chest like he sometimes does, either), can't even twitch a goddamn pinky finger. That sounded familiar, so I looked it up. Yup. Hypnagogic hallucinations. Or, night terrors, or, sleep paralysis. Had a girlfriend who used to have them; she used to feel the pressure on her chest, she couldn't move, sometimes she heard a sound in her ears like blood rushing, and always, always there was The Presence. A shadow shaped like a man, standing in the doorway or a hag hiding in the closet and watching her. Great. Awesome. Am I to believe Bernard was maybe sneaking into our bedroom at night and feeding from my girlfriend like she was sleeping beauty? Don't get me wrong, she was a treat anyway, but still. Fuckin' Bernard.

Bernard's really goddamn weird, too. Like, really. Get this: he jacks dudes off while they're sleeping. Seriously. Captures what he calls their "seed" and then "gives it to" women he feeds from. Has a whole fridge of the stuff. It's a mini-fridge, granted, but man, it just curdles the brain thinking about it. Twisted freak. He says it's almost like he's the one getting them pregnant (not that he has proof any of them ever got knocked up from this grisly procedure, him wiping jizz into their panties, but it's molestation plain and simple. Though, then again, I'm not sure just what you'd call biting their necks and drinking their blood).

I hate this. I hate him. I don't want to hurt people. I don't know that he wants to hurt people either, but he's gotten so he really likes this, almost like he gets off on it. I don't ever want to be that. But there's a tiny voice inside of me that tells me it's happening already. I want to be normal. Just a normal guy. I don't want to live underground and go blind like a cave cricket and be some hissing, spitting freak in a top hat. I just want to live my life (unlive my unlife?) and tamp down all these weird feelings like they don't exist at all. Can't I be normal? Please, dear diary, please? I don't want to be anybody's nightmare.

I have to wonder how many of us are cauchemar, the sleep-feeders? I suspect many. Damaged and confused, we hide and think to sink our fangs into those who rest unawares. I would've gone this route myself if not for a sire who forced me to do otherwise.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE: THE REST OF THE CLAN

Is it better to out-monster
the monster, or to be quietly
devoured?

- Friedrich Nietzsche

The earth is full of worms. My research over the years has brought me into contact with dozens of Nosferatu, either directly or by written or oral accounts. Princes and Prisci, to be sure, but more often those that others did not notice (or pretended not to). Whether intentionally remaining below others' radar or simply shunned because their looks, attitude or aura made others uncomfortable, the Nosferatu clan is an iceberg, with only a fraction visible to outsiders.

Some were proud of their clan, even perversely so. Others bore undeath as an eternity of shame. Some clung to their identity as a member of the clan (or to their particular family line within it) like a lifeline. Others shunned the company of other Haunts, seeing themselves as different from or better than their Nosferatu brethren, or even eked out hermetic existences away from contact with any kindred at all.

The following are some of the small sub-files I collected during my interviews. Many are anecdotal, written down after brief interactions with the individuals in question when I did not have the opportunity to record their words more formally. Some are mere snippets, or notes, but who knows what information might be gleaned from them at a future date. Some of these may warrant further investigation in the future. I've grouped them, for the sake of later reference into some general categories that I feel are pertinent, and may make later profiles easier.

IN THE BEGINNING

New Nosferatu are made every day, pulled from the mire that is humanity into a potentially eternal unlife of nightmares. Some are chosen carefully, painstakingly picked for particular qualities after being studied for weeks, months, even years. A collector of antiquities might take a historian or archivist into the fold, to supplement her own specialties. I've heard reports of Haunts who hand-groomed their childer throughout their human lives, or chose offspring from the ranks of their ghoul servitors.

Likewise, a Haunt who has dedicated his unlife to serving as an undying boogiemane haunting the streets of a city (whether for noble purposes or his own personal sadistic delight) might choose a childer to carry on his work. Perhaps a sneak thief, back-alley mugger or peeping tom. On the other hand, the prospective offspring might be taken from among the ranks of those the Nosferatu delights in terrorizing, as the vampire gives one of his former victims the chance to become a predator himself.

Asp

I hear occasional stories about a Nosferatu using the name "Asp." They all mention different locations, and each version differs slightly either in modus operandi or victims chosen. I doubt that there's a single Asp. Previous experience suggests an original with copycats, a family line, or, of course, a fiction. See attached documentation for reports of Asp-related deaths and survivors' stories from Seattle, Phoenix, Austin, Hartford, Tulsa, Raleigh, Bombay, Seoul, London and Tianjin. Each of these cities has produced a minimum of four survivor or confirmed-death reports. Additional cases of fewer than four reported incidents exist for 48 other cities throughout the world.

Modus Operandi

Certain aspects of Asp's methodology remain constant wherever stories of his sadism are told. His victims are always subdued in some manner; sometimes drugged, sometimes knocked unconscious, but none are awake for the actual Embrace. Each wakes sometime at or shortly before dawn, in a location which is (or will soon be) exposed to the sunlight. Every victim reports some sort of depiction of a snake or serpent in the vicinity – one might be on a rooftop near a spray-painted graffiti tag of a king cobra, while another wakes beneath a road sign warning "Danger – Rattlesnake Area" and a third near a billboard for a sports car with a snake-logo. And finally, in each case, Asp himself is nowhere to be found, although some survivors claim they were watched as they scramble to come to terms with their new existence in time to prevent the rising sun from destroying them.

Victims

Often, Asp victims (both those who do, not survive and those who do) in a particular city have something consistently in common, although the "something" varies from location to location. In one town, each of the victims might have been involved in the sex trade. In another, they might all drive massive SUVs. One city might experience a

rash of disappearances, all who turn out to have been corrupt police officers, while another spree of Asp embrace/murders years later in a town nearby all target religious figures. In other areas, the similarities are physical – hair color, body build, a penchant for body modification or a particular ethnic background.

The Meaning Behind It

Most versions claim that Asp's targets are chosen specifically as punishment. Those who claim to have been embraced by him often say that those he chooses were among the lowest of the low, the reprehensible or irredeemable dregs of human society. Those who manage to survive Asp's embrace with no resources or education often claim that they have been changed by the experience, and that the ordeal has led them to be more humane as a vampire than they ever were in their living existence.

Robin Sims

The following is transcribed text from an interview with one of the survivors of what I now believe to be an Asp embrace. Sims currently makes her home in Springfield, which is where the embrace took place. The interview is one I received second-hand, and was apparently originally conducted as part of an investigation by the Executive of Springfield in regards to a rash of unauthorized embraces. My colleague in the area noted a similarity between certain aspects of Sims' narrative and others I had discussed with him in the past and obtained a copy of the transcript for my archives. I'm including only the pertinent pieces, with enough surrounding material to provide context, and added notes as to why I believe Storm is an Asp survivor.

After reviewing this information, I sent documentation about other Asp-embrace situations to my contact in Springfield, but have not yet heard back whether this has aided the Executive's investigation.

Transcription Notes: Interview with Robin Sims – Page 3

Interviewer (INT): And that's where you woke up?

Robin Sims (RS): Yes. I didn't have any idea where I was. Hell, I didn't have any idea who I was. But the sun was starting to come up, and I knew I had to find a place to hide.

INT: You knew? How did you know?

RS: I could just feel it. It was like being underwater and knowing you had to find the surface to get air. I wasn't thinking logically at that point, just instinct, I guess.

INT: Instinct. I see. And so this instinct told you to break into Quist's haven?

RS: NO! No, I didn't know it was Quist's haven. I didn't know who Quist was, or what a haven was or anything like that. I just knew I had to get off that rooftop and into someplace dark.

(NOTE: No fewer than five members of the Executive had their havens breached in this manner. In two other cases, the victim was unable to find safety before being destroyed by the sun, leaving nothing more than a pile of ash and fragments of clothing.)

INT: And it was just pure coincidence that you were on that particular roof top.

RS: Like I said, I don't know how I got there. Last thing I remember, I was talking with my some guy in a bar. We were getting ready to leave, and the next thing I know, I'm waking up on a rooftop. The guy's nowhere to be found and I'm terrified and scrambling to hide from the sun.

INT: And what were you speaking about?

RS: Small talk. Nothing special.

INT: Is it your habit to leave bars with individuals you do not know?

RS: I... How exactly is that your business? I don't have to...

(SOUND OF SLAP AGAINST FLESH)

INT: Shut up and answer the question. You're in no position to make demands here.

(SOUND OF STIFLED SOBS)

INT: I asked if it was your habit to leave bars with individuals you did not know by name.

RS: ...yes... sometimes...

INT: For what purpose?

RS: (mumbled reply)

INT: Speak up!

RS: For sex, okay? Sometimes I meet up with people, they need company, I can show them a good time.

INT: So, you're a prostitute.

RS: No! No, it's not like that.

INT: You meet strangers, and have sex with them for money.

RS: No. Just... We just would party. I just like to have a good time.

INT: And so they never gave you money for your... encounters.

RS: Sometimes, if I needed some cash for rent, someone would loan me some. But just a loan. I will pay them back, when I'm doing better.

INT: I... see. So, you met this individual, this man, at the bar that evening. Describe him.

RS: I don't really remember. He had dark hair, I think. Short hair. He was tall. Average build. Wearing business clothes. A suit, in a dark color.

INT: That is sufficient. We will send in someone later who can help you... remember.

(NOTE: According to my contact's information, the Executive had already apprehended and interviewed this subject. Interrogation revealed no memory of having met Sims or even been at the location in question. Whether he was used as a pawn and then mesmerized, or whether his face had been appropriated by some witchcraft is uncertain.)

INT: Continue. You left the hotel bar with him, and went upstairs. Did you use the elevator?

RS: I didn't say it was the hotel bar.

INT: You didn't have to. We have done our own research since you were apprehended.

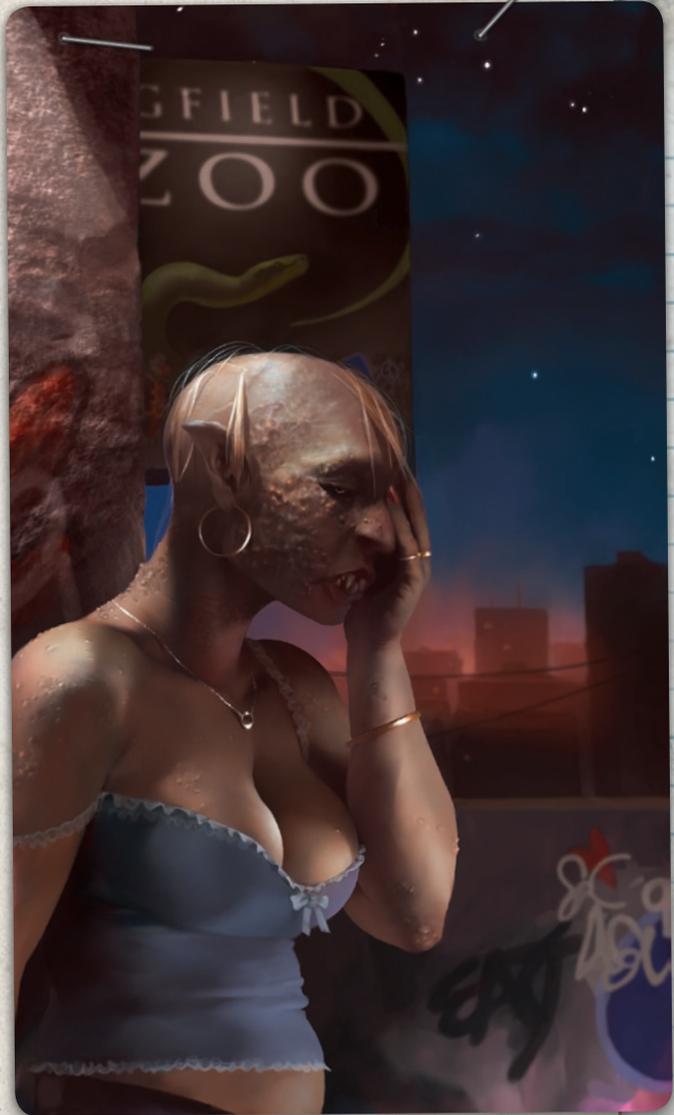
RS: Listen, I don't know who you think you are...

INT: I am the person in charge of determining whether your invasion of Quist's home was a willful act of sabotage, an attack by some unknown enemy, or merely a whim of fate. I will personally decide whether you continue to exist or are staked out to meet the dawn. I recommend you cooperate with me to your fullest ability. Do I make myself clear?

RS: Yes.

INT: Then, if we may continue. Did you use the elevator?

RS: I... I think so.. Yes... Yes, I remember the interior was mirrored. And I remember thinking that... I remember wondering if they could use one-way mirrors in elevators, because I just had this... weird feeling that someone was watching me.



(NOTE: Each of the individuals in Springfield who are suspected of being victims of Asp went missing from a building with an elevator. All of the survivors report having actually been in an elevator as their last cognizant pre-embrace memory.)

INT: And was anyone else in the elevator when you got on?

RS: No... No, just he and I.

INT: And what floor did you go to?

RS: I... I don't remember. I know he pushed the buttons, while I was looking at the mirror, but I don't remember which one.

INT: I see. And so you rode the elevator to some unknown floor and departed from it?

RS: I... I suppose we must have. But... I don't remember getting off.

INT: Excuse me?

RS: The elevator. I don't remember getting off the elevator. I was there, and then... Then it was almost dawn and I could feel it get lighter... and it burned...

INT: Go on.

RS: I remember the smell of the asphalt under me... The sound of traffic. And even though it was still dark, I could feel the light on my skin. It was warm at first, and then hot, and then it just burned, like bleach or battery acid. I knew I had to get away from it.

INT: And that was when you broke into the Quist's home?

RS: I didn't break... well, I didn't mean to, anyway... I just needed to get out of the sun. There was a door, and I ran. I pulled, but it was locked. But it was getting lighter and it hurt so bad. I yanked hard, and the door bent and came loose. I ran down the stairs and yanked another door open, trying to get as far from the light as I could. I didn't mean to, it just... It hurt.

(NOTE: Photographs taken at the scene of Storm's embrace revealed a large billboard affixed to the rooftop. The advertisement at the time of her attack was for the Springfield Zoo's upcoming reptile fair.)

INT: And that's where they found you?

RS: Yeah. I... I must have fallen asleep. It was dawn, and I just couldn't help it, even though I was terrified.

INT: I see. And you claim that, when they found you there, you had no idea what had happened to you? No memory of the Embrace, no knowledge of who or what you are?

RS: No... I knew I was hungry. But they woke me up and eventually some of them told me what had happened. I didn't believe it at first. Sometimes I still don't. But everything else they've told me seems to be true. I can't hold down real food. I fall asleep every morning. And... well, God knows something happened to me. I mean, my hair... my skin... If I ever catch whoever did this to me...

(NOTE: RS exhibits extensive epidermal deterioration. Her hair, reportedly once blonde, is no longer present anywhere on her body.)

The Sheik

The Sheik has apparently embraced more than 20 women over the course of the last 70 years. He preyed upon aspiring starlets, always blonde, always buxom. His obsession was to attempt to preserve the beauties he "fell in love with" for all time, by giving them with eternal life. His naivete is as comic as it has been disastrous. With each new Embrace he hoped that his "lover's" beauty would not curdle, enabling him to create a bride worthy of his attentions for an eternity.

Unfortunately, for both the targets of his attention and the Sheik himself, his Embrace has proved brutally

disfiguring. For nearly a decade during the middle of the 20th century, the prince of Hollywood was a grotesque Nosferatu who called herself "Siren." Her first act as regent was to order the murder of her sire, offering a substantial bounty to anyone who could bring her proof of the Sheik's demise.

The Siren's obsession allegedly led her to abdicate the throne when the Sheik was rumored to have resurfaced in Mexico. With the benefit of distance, I suspect she was disposed of by one of her broodmates. After all, the Sheik left no shortage of progeny in Hollywood...

THE MANY FACES OF HORROR

There is no more a typical Nosferatu than there is a typical scent or color. Of the twenty-three Haunts I spoke to directly or had second hand information about who appear to be presently making their home in this city, fifteen showed tangible physical anomalies or disfigurements that appeared to tie directly to their embrace or unlife. Some were overt, whereas others were far subtler. These latter were perhaps within the realm of human anomaly.

Even seemingly overt physical flaws cannot automatically be attributable to a Nosferatu's clan. The lines between physical anomaly and epically poor hygiene or physical self-abuse, for example, can be blurry indeed. The miasma of one Hunt's grave-stench might be purely of supernatural manifestation, regardless of how pristine she maintains her person, whereas another's might be environmental, a product of her spending her daytime sleeping hours amidst charnel or effluvia. One Nosferatu's unhealed wounds and festering sores might be a vampiric legacy of his embrace during a plague, while another might worry at his own skin constantly, digging new wounds open each nightfall out of guilt or anxiety. Without being able to interview each individual in-depth, there is a great deal of ambiguity possible and many potential explanations beyond "The Curse" as a cause for even in the most seemingly obvious manifestations of Nosferatu's physical disfigurements.

Unfortunately, at least for the purposes of research and categorization, while there is at least some strong likelihood that one can accurately chalk the War Pig's hideous visage or the Worm Lord's withered limbs up as aspects of their Nosferatu nature, more subtle physical disfigurements or mental and social blights are even less easily categorized.

Ja's mental quirk might well be attributed to her Embrace, as might Violet Waldrop's eccentric and retiring nature. One is challenged to draw the line between vampiric extremes and the legendary horror that separates the Nosferatu from the rest of Kindred society. We have all met beings (vampiric or not) whose bearing was so offensive, so predatory, so odious or downright creepy as to make social interaction with them almost impossible. The line between a blood curse and the extremes of social dysfunction can be blurry indeed.

ONE BIG FAMILY

Whether it is because their disfigurements (physical or otherwise) offend others' sensibilities or, Nosferatu often congregate with their clansmates more than other vampires. In some cities, this consists of entire underground "domains," such as the one the Marquis described, although of course not every city has the equivalent thereof. As well, the Haunted often form coterie from their own clansmates, and family lines (when not tainted by resentment for being "cursed" to such an unlife) can remain strong for centuries.

Rzezniks East and West

The Rzeznik trace their origins back to the Dark Ages of eastern Europe. According to the family's oral history, the brood was almost eradicated during the late 1800s. In 1886, a single chosen member, protected by the family's most loyal ghouls, was sent away from their homeland and off to America to pave the way for the rest of the line to follow. Other than those in torpor, unfortunately, the rest of the European Rzezniks were destroyed before such groundwork could be laid. The immigrant Rzeznik, however, flourished and set about recreating as much of her family structure as possible, with herself as the matriarch. By the early 1900s members of the Rzeznik "clan"

could be found in most eastern American cities, as well as several prominent domains in Canada and Mexico. Each city branch of the family is headed by a patriarch or matriarch, who often claims the title "Grandpere" or "Grandmere." Each family keeps in patchy communication with members in other cities, fairly remarkable among our kind.

Allegedly, the European Rzezniks have no love for their Colonial cousins. The local branch go on at length about the vengeful elder who lives across the sea. It's unlikely, however, that they have any *real* flow of news from Europe.

Ask Violet about her lineage. Ditto with Septimus. How many of the city's Haunts share a common progenitor, and how far back do those connections trace? Is there any lineage loyalty present, or do the existing family lines splinter and war amongst themselves?

All for One?

The proclivity of Nosferatu to flock together within a city, however, doesn't mean they actually get along. A sire may incur the undying wrath of her child simply for Embracing him, or a struggle between two or more individuals (as appears to be happening between the War Pig and Black Prince) may force the rest of the clan to choose sides... or at least walk very carefully in the resulting war zone. This also sometimes takes the form of fierce and bloody battles or decades-long cold wars between broodmates or former allies.

I questioned Black Molly about intra-clan tension, but my timing in doing so was, perhaps, unfortunate. For a split-second, she frowned, before taking on a non-committal expression. "I'm not really sure what you are

referring to, Nicodemus. There's nothing like that happening here."

"I wasn't saying there was, just aski..."

"There's not. And it might be best if you didn't ask that question too loudly, at least not where others can hear it."

"I..." I stuttered, uncertain of what to say in response.

"I'm just saying this for your own good, Nicodemus. There's a time and a place for everything, and this is neither."

Later, however, when I approached her in a more private setting, the Priscus refused to even acknowledge the topic, looking upwards as if seeking out an unseen eavesdropper in our conversation. I left the meeting even more confused than I'd started it.

There's something going on beyond the rebellion that Trepan's plotting. Molly may know. Does Violet? Reread her notes. There may be something there.

VAIN GLORIOUS MONSTERS

Some revel in their deformities and the reactions they cause in others, using them to their best advantage. Victor Trepan is a prime example of this. Even if he were a Shadow, he'd probably be a blustering bully, but he takes full advantage of the fear and repulsion his Haunt nature allows him to trigger in others. Those who feel as Trepan does may go out of their way not only to flaunt their ugliness, deformities or frightening nature, but may actually take steps to accentuate it. Among young or progressively minded Nosferatu, extreme body modifications might include grotesque tattoos, brands or piercings and augmentations. I saw a Haunt once who had sewn his own mouth back into a snarling grimace. The combination of permanently exposed fangs and sloppy black stitches binding lips to his cheeks and chin

was enough to intimidate (or repulse) even the most stoic viewer. Another had carved alcoves into her own flesh which she used as erstwhile pockets, storing valuables, weapons or worse within these gory chambers. One evening she needed to know what was happening in another location, and as I watched, she let out a sharp whistle. What had previously appeared to be merely an unhealed sore on her collar bone began to bulge and squirm, and then a wriggling ball of matted fur as big as my fist burst forth from it. The rat-ghoul looked up at his regnant for a moment, and then scuttled off on his business, while I was near-incapacitated with nausea.

After seeing my reaction, the Nosferatu went out of her way to find excuse to summon forth a veritable army of ghouled rats, insects, bats and snakes from these self-inflicted wounds at every opportunity, apparently reveling in my revulsion.

Nor are those with physical deformities the only ones to take pleasure in the "gift" their clan bestows upon them. Many Nosferatu become masters at utilizing their particular manifestation of their line's eerie, horrifying or just disturbing aura to intimidate, frighten or manipulate those they interact with.

Sister Nicolette

One of the most unusual curses I have heard of belonged to a Haunt known only by the formal title of Sister Nicolette. Neither fair nor disturbing in visage, her clan's manifestation caused a disturbing arousal in those around her. If, for example, someone she spoke with was a homophobe, Nicolette's aura would manifest in a slightly lower voice, perhaps the false perception of an Adam's apple or simply a masculine "vibe". As if this was not disturbing enough, it simultaneously evoked a strong sexual response to these stimuli which would normally be abhorrent to the individual she was interacting with. The combination of the two left those who interacted with her feeling disturbed both with her (for manifesting traits

they found unsettling) and with themselves (for a wholly unacceptable aroused reaction to the offensive stimuli). For someone who has been a vampire for long enough to believe themselves above sexual reactions at all, the flicker of sexual interest itself may be enough to trigger the repulsion/attraction/shame combination.

When I interviewed Knight, she admitted that she used her "blessing" to find out the fears and weaknesses of those she interacted with. Occasionally, however, she met someone who, rather than being repulsed by her, seemed obsessed or intrigued. Those, according to Knight, were individuals who reveled in their own perversion and degradation and needed to be treated with utmost caution.



SHAMEFUL COUNTENANCE

Not every Nosferatu revels in their monstrous nature, of course, or even accepts the company of her fellows. Some are filled with self-loathing and hatred for the creatures that dragged them into a horrific eternal existence.

Tara Two-Face

According to the Marquis, one of the most successful raids that Prince Gustavson made on the early Undertown was aided by a newly embraced Haunt who hoped to escape her fate and be accepted in Gustavson's court by turning traitor to her new clan. When her knowledge of Undertown's fortifications proved unequal to the task and the above-ground forces were pushed back, her duplicity was punished by exile from Undertown. Gustavson, having lost a favored child in the raid, also exiled the treacherous Nosferatu, and rumors suggest she maintains a hermetic and miserable existence on the outskirts of both the town and Kindred society to this day.

No one that I met, including the Marquis, claimed to have actually ever met Tara Two-Face. The Priscus claims not to have heard of her. Among several others

I interviewed, however, the rumors of her existence still persist.

The story of Tara Two-Face has made its way from vampiric society into the scary stories and urban legends of the town's human population. According to tales whispered late at night or used to warn against duplicity, any one who betrays a promise (or in some versions of the story, tells falsehoods) may be visited on the night of the full moon by Tara Two-Face, a horrific monster who is capable of literally scaring her victims to death.

Most versions of the story claim that Tara (as her name suggests) has two faces. One is beautiful and beguiling, and she uses her good looks to lure her victims into the shadows where she reveals the second face, a terrifying visage with glowing red eyes and teeth like daggers.

THOSE WHO PERSEVERE

Other Haunts simply accept their fate stoically as the burden they bear for some imagined sin, crime or moral deficiency, real or imaginary. This outlook is especially common, of course, in those whose life before the Embrace was exceptionally malevolent, especially if their sire approached their early vampiric training with a hellfire and brimstone attitude. Some Haunts, however, seem capable of manifesting this guilty attitude about their own nature without any particular teaching from others, instead conjuring forth a shroud of guilt from deep within their own bruised psyche.

Jae

Jae says she was Embraced as a morality lesson. By her own account, she was a shallow and prideful girl before being chosen by her sire. She frequently enjoyed tormenting those she saw as less than herself: less fortunate, less popular, less attractive. Jae used her intelligence, charm and not a little bit of money to take the best of everything for herself.

Even for the fortunate, however, luck eventually runs out. One evening as she cut through a dark neighborhood street on her way home from some social event, a gang of young men caught up with her. They stripped her first of her purse, then her coat and were quickly working through her clothing when he they were interrupted.

At first, she thought they were squabbling amongst themselves, vying for the chance to be the first to rape her. But when one by one the gang members' bodies hit the sidewalk, it quickly became apparent that something else was at work. The last of her attackers had pinned her against a wall, his leering face inches from hers. Then suddenly, he was gone, and she could feel a warm mist falling against her face where his foul breath had been. His body still pressed hard against her for a moment, and then it too fell away, landing sprawled at her feet like the deer she'd once seen her father hit with his car.

In shock, she wiped her face with the back of her hand, surprised at the blood spray she found there. She tried to scream, but before she could exhale, something hard and

cold covered her mouth, and a voice whispered hoarsely for her to keep silent.

The thing looking back at her was dead. Had to be dead. Nothing could have looked like that and still lived. Its face was gouged with cuts, dozens of them. None of the wounds, however, wept so much as a drop of fresh blood. One of the cuts slashed through the thing's right eye, leaving the eyelid a tattered veil. The thing smiled at her, its torn lips peeling back from impossibly white teeth in a macabre grin, and then everything went black.

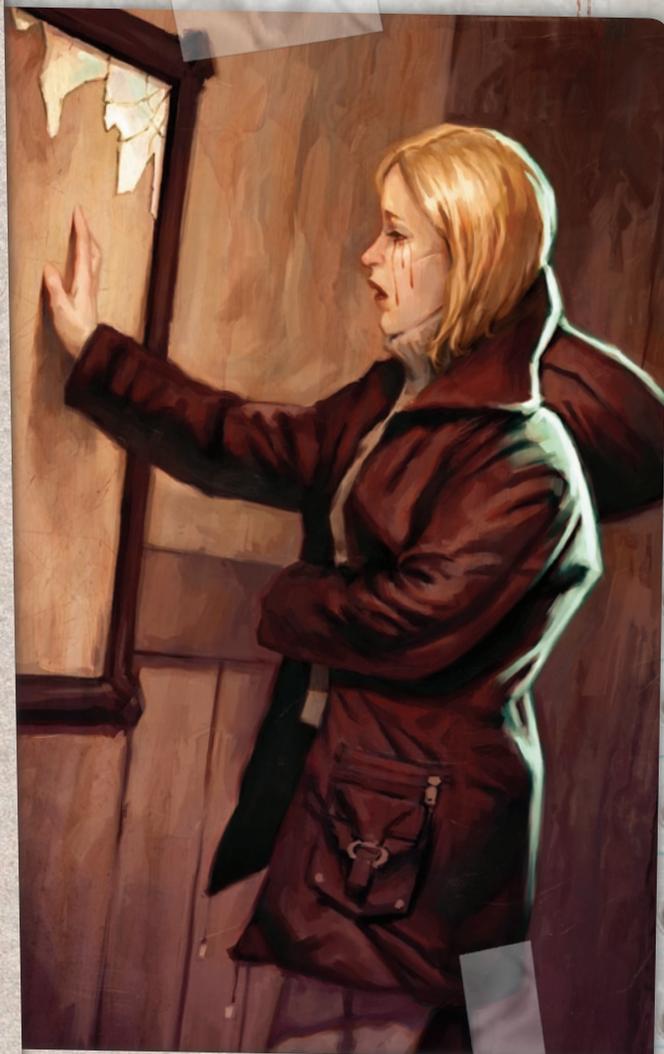
Jae woke, covered in debris and filth, locked the boarded-up basement of an abandoned house. A strikingly handsome young man knelt over her in the murky darkness, cautioning her to be quiet, or "it" would come back. Quickly and quietly, the two young people planned their escape. The stranger claimed to have been prisoner there for several days before "it" had brought her in. He said he wanted nothing more than to escape, and he needed her help. Time passed in their shadowy prison, marked only by when the two slept, as they could not see the outside world enough to tell night from day. And, as they waited for their opportunity to escape, the two became very close. Finally, a noise from outside their barred door seemed to warn of their captor's arrival. When her lover prepared to fight the monster on the other side of the door to save her, Jae broke down in tears, begging him not to allow

himself to come to harm. And then the door opened and Jae rushed towards it. But instead of her captor, she found herself face to face with a full length mirror.

The creature she saw looking back at her was hideous. Her once-perfect skin was marred by a thousand disjointed seams, her face was slashed in hundreds of places, some razor-thin and shallow, some deep and gaping. It was like looking at a reflection of herself in a shattered mirror. She screamed, backing away from the image, and found herself in the arms of her protector. As she looked up at him, however, his own visage blurred, and she found herself in the arms not of a handsome young man, but the horrific creature that had killed her attackers.

In Jae's own words, she "completely lost it." Even now, decades later, her hands shook as she lifted the veil she wears in public to allow me a glimpse at the visage beneath. A nearly perfect beauty of perhaps 18 years of age looked back at me. Her visage was marred only by a tiny white line, no wider than a single hair, which lay across one cheekbone. I tried to protest, but she shook her head as she lowered her veil once more. "Don't say it. They all say it's not so bad, that it's hardly noticeable. But I know. I can see the wounds. I can feel the gaping slashes here and here and here..." She pointed, beneath the veil, to her chin, her forehead, her cheek. There was no damage to her skin any of the places where she touched.

I left her then, silent and alone in the corner of the room where she'd been when Black Molly first sent me to speak with her. What the Priscus had said was true. Somehow, Jae's sire had inflicted a worse revenge upon the woman than any physical injury he could have caused her. He infected her mind as much as her blood, painting forever an image of horrific destruction in her own mind's eye. No matter how many individuals told her otherwise, how many portraits were painted of her, she would never see or feel anything other than horror in her own visage for the rest of her unlife.



Radar

Seen only slightly more often than his namesake, the vampire who calls himself Radar is a useful tool for any who can gain his loyalty. This trust, however, is not given lightly, and it was only through bartering favors with Black Molly that I was able to gain even the briefest of interviews with him.

According to her, Radar's senses post-embrace became so preternaturally sharp that he had to hide himself away from contact with human and vampiric society in order to

maintain even a tenuous grip on his own sanity. She equated his perceptions to those natural among the Mekhet.

I spoke with Radar for only a few moments, but it was obvious that even that short time had him desperate to flee my presence (and that of the Kindred around us). Due to his sensitivity, the entirety of our conversation was conducted barely above a whisper. Because of this, I had a difficult time transcribing the interview and have had to reconstruct some portions of the discussion from memory.

INT: Thank you for...

Radar (R): (whispered) shhhh. Not so loud.

INT: Sorry... Black Molly said (you rarely come to gatherings.)

R: No reason to. Loud, nasty things. (Full of/Full up) Loud nasty things. What do you need?

INT: I wanted to speak with you about your embrace. Molly said that you had (served the clan) before your embrace?

R: Served the shadows. Serve the shadows. Still serve the shadows.

This conversation was conducted at a barely audible whisper. I have pieced it together as best as possible. Areas where the tape was simply too quiet to be certain of its content, I have put my best interpretation (from transcription and memory) in brackets. Alternate possibilities are separated with slash marks. This information should be held as potentially incorrect.



INT: But you are Nosferatu, are you not? (Not Mekhet?)

R: The shadows not the shadows.

INT: Were you a ghoul before you were embraced?

R: I was a watcher. I watched. I saw things.

INT: How did you end up being Embraced?

R: There are things no one should see. I saw them. I knew.

INT: So, you saw things the Nosferatu were keeping secret?

R: I still do.

INT: And they chose to Embrace you rather than just kill you?

R: I'd seen too much. I know. Too much. I was already one of them.

INT: You were one of who?

R: The clan. I'd started to change. I could hear things. See things.

INT: So, you started manifesting...

R: You're blind.

INT: ...no...

R: You're blind. You really don't see it, do you? (She/He) has done it. (You're in a bind?/You're really blind?)

INT: I'm not sure what you mean?

R: Never mind.

INT: Are you okay?

R: No. (She/He) knows.

INT: Knows? Who knows what?

R: Who knows what, indeed. I have to go. (Scent of much./I've said too much.) Listen to the whispers.

With that, Radar literally disappeared, leaving me sitting alone when the Black Prince walked by and fixed me with an intent gaze. She looked at the empty chair beside me, nodded once, and walked away.

As I watched, the shadows around Radar seemed to thicken, making him harder to perceive.

At this point in the conversation, Radar became visibly irritated, fidgeting and glancing around the room in a state of what I interpreted to be paranoia.

ARCHEOLOGY

HERITAGE GROUPS CONTEST VALLEY DEVELOPMENT

A new commercial development in Van Nuys, CA could meet with delays after a Native American group has contested its progress in the State Court. Citing the apparent discovery of a pre-Columbian burial site under the local of the former Van Nuys Flyaway station, the group is attempting to halt all future building. Rafael Soares, a representative of the Chumash Heritage Association, says that "this is an important discovery. Why were these remains not found by the builders of the bus station?"

The now-defunct bus depot on Woodley Avenue was purchased by a retail consortium late last year for redevelopment as a mall.

The oldest of these documents is about two years old. The file belonged to Nicolas Hernandez, a member of the clan who served the First Estate in Los Angeles before falling off the map back in January. A Kindred going through his goods sent these to me.

NATIVE AMERICAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGNER, FAMILY FOUND DEAD

Chumash activist Rafael Soares was found dead along with his wife and 16-year-old son in their house in Encino yesterday. Police are not treating the deaths as suspicious

A genuine loose end. Could have been anything.

Julio said there was something up on my turf. I said, my turf's pretty big, and Julio said, yeah, he knew that, but something was up, and I said, could he be more specific, and Julio said, down by the schoolyard.

So me and Julio went down by the schoolyard, and Julio showed me this bum who was really badly messed up. I said, you took me down here to look at a dead bum? And Julio said, no, look, and I looked, and he had blood on him, but it was mostly on his clothes, and so I got down on my hands and knees and sniffed, and he smelt of booze and tobacco and growing old, but mostly he smelled like he didn't have no blood in him.

And there's the thing - great big gashes in the neck and thighs, hardly any blood.

So I said to Julio, OK, I'll grant you, this needs looking at. Got any leads? I said. And Julio, he said, yeah, he had some leads, and so I said, OK, what are the leads you've got? And he takes me to see Rosie down in Van Nuys. So we're in Rosie's place, with all the old stuff, and Rosie, she shows me what she found half a mile from that mall they're building. It's a tomahawk. Like in the old cowboy and Indian movies. Piece of wood, piece of rock. Leather string. Big deal.

And Rosie says, no, it's really old. She was into digging up old stuff when she was alive, and me and Julio, we're like, what use is that? But every so often she comes up with something. And she says, it's really old. Like, really, really old. She pulls out a book and says, no one's made one of these like this for a really long time. And I say, nah, it's a prop from some movie up in Hollywood that someone walked off with, and she says, no, I mean a really long time as in thousands of years. So I say, so maybe it's a caveman movie. And Julio pipes up and says, do you know any cowboy movies or caveman movies being made right now? And I say, no I don't. Maybe it's an old prop.

Well, Julio and Rosie got this crazy theory that some of the digging boys opened up a grave and disturbed a bunch of vampires in a coma, and I say, don't be stupid, there weren't no Kindred in California before the Spanish got here.

I know my history, see. Spent a lot of time being all Sanctified before I decided that politics was better than religion.

Rosie and Julio shrug and say, maybe you're right, but there's still a vampire on your turf who shouldn't be there. Which I admit is something of a fair point, and something we gotta deal with because it'll make me look bad if we don't, and then where am I? Any bastard could step in and take over. So we leave Rosie with her rocks and shit and go find Bruja Leon, who's your best help in times like this. He ain't so hot on the politics and the etiquette and shit, but he knows how to rip heads off of people.

We hop in the car and head down to Leon's place and there he is with a cute little chica on his knee, shooting at birds outside his trailer. Oh, she's a sweet one, and she's all smiles and waves when Leon introduces us. We all go inside Leon's trailer and he fixes the chica some eggs. He asks us, like you have to when there's breathing chicas around and we say no, we're good, like you have to.

After a couple of minutes Leon tells the chica to go home, and she's all pouty and shit, and we're all pouty and shit because she was making us hungry, but Leon tells us that he's keeping her for a rainy night. And besides, if we've got someone with the fangs to hunt, we'll have the good stuff real soon. All good points, so we're good. Leon gets on his hog and we're in the car back to Van Nuys on the hunt. We're about five blocks from the building site when we have to stop, cause there's a body lying bang in the middle of the road. Which is careless, so we get out and move him, young black guy in sweats, and he's really light, like he's paper, except he isn't, he's flesh, but he's been torn to pieces and drunk dry. Shit, that's two, I'm thinking, and Leon realizes that we've stopped and comes back looking for us. He says, hey, let's find a place to park, cause we're hunting, and Julio and me look at each other and shrug. OK, we say.

So Leon pulls out this crowbar seen the crowbar before. Leon took a Kindred's head off with it once, in the one swipe, splat. Saw it myself. Brutal.

Se we're all fangs bared and bravado, and we're shitting ourselves, or would be if we could actually, you know, shit.

TRIBE OF 2000-YEAR-OLD INDIANS TERRORIZES VALLEY!

MALL DEVELOPMENT AWAKENS ANCIENT CANNIBAL CULT

CALIFORNIA — Building of a new Encino mall may be delayed by attacks from Indians, after digging machinery disturbed an ancient Indian burial ground, awakening a tribe of pre-Columbian cannibals.

Six workers and three members of the general public have been attacked by the Indians since demolition of the Van Nuys Flyaway bus terminal reached its culmination a month ago. Encino resident George Flocker witnessed an attack first-hand. "It was definitely Indians," he says. "There were five or six of them, and they just climbed out of a manhole and started whal-

ing on this poor bum with stone tomahawks. Next thing I saw, they were all biting into him, until the blood was everywhere." Mr. Flocker didn't stay to find out what happened next. "I ran like hell," he admits. "I didn't look back, and I locked the door when I got home. I even loaded up my trusty .44." When asked why he didn't call the LAPD, Mr. Flocker replied, "Those bozos probably work for the LAPD."

Other witnesses tell similar stories. A construction worker who does not wish to be named told the WEEKLY WORLD ENQUIRER that it was the construction program's fault.

"We'd had protests from native rights groups," he says, "and we were getting behind schedule. So the foreman tells us, let's start anyway. First thing we hit with the earth mover was this mound full of bones, and we had to stop. I think we went to work for about two minutes." Concerns that the digger had hit valuable archaeological remains were soon replaced by the fear that the workers had awakened something or someone, as vicious attacks began on those unlucky enough to get in the way of ancient stone-age warriors who appeared to kill and eat their human prey.

So we park the auto and the hog and walk away from them, all slow and careful. And then, pow, there's a crash, and Leon's hog's on its side and skidding across the road towards us. Me and Leon, we got out of the way, but Julio, he can't, and snaps his ankles against it. Goes down like a sack of potatoes, doesn't get up for a while. Just lies there sobbing and whining.

Just as he's managing to heal his legs, this figure leaps out of nowhere. Out of the shadows. I can do that, I say. I do that a lot.

But it ain't nothing I ever seen before. It's like an Indian, but it ain't really an Indian. He's really old, and he's buck-naked and he's all painted black and red, all over. Holding a tomahawk like the one Rosie showed us. And he sorta hisses at Leon. You can feel the taint in the air, the way we all shrink back from each other. Julio is still there trying to pull his legs together and he's kneeling now saying oh shit oh shit oh shit and he's getting there when he looks up and the painted butt-naked Indian standing next to him just shifts his arm, whack, and puts the stone ax head right through Julio's forehead, and Julio kneels there for a second before he falls backwards and starts to rot, like you snapped your fingers.

Leon takes ten steps forward and hefts the crowbar like he's going to swing it in the head-removing way. And poof, four more of them are here, all exactly the same, and one's standing right next to Leon, and catches Leon's wrist in his hand. He thrusts the tomahawk into Leon's stomach and then batters him in the face with the flat of it, before taking a long graceful swing and driving the ax's head up and under Leon's chin. And another one of them buries his ax in the top of Leon's skull, and it makes a noise like you'd hear if you trod on an egg. And that's it for Leon.

And then there's these three, four, five old butt-naked Indians and they're all really old, really wrinkled and leathery, and the second one who popped out of nowhere does the Face. The scary face that makes people run away. He does the Face.

And I do it right back at him.

He's not expecting it, either, and he steps back and looks at one of his wrinkly-ass buddies, and I take-off running for the car. I'm fumbling with my key and running and then the fob's in my hand and I'm pushing the unlock button, and the car finally goes wheet and I get in and try to start up. And just as I'm going to turn the ignition, the passenger door flies off the car. Just torn right off.

But I turn the ignition and hammer the gas anyway, and I'm off, except there's a buck naked geezer attached to my car. And the steering goes crazy, because the guy is reaching in and clawing at my face. I start to spin out of control, and then I can hear a thud, thud and the bumpiness of the car wheels driving over a body. The hand scrabbles in my face again, so I start to chew at it, gnawing at the bones, tasting the blood that laces the fresh meat. So I'm chewing and chewing, and the car's all skidding around corners and through red lights, and some idiot mortal out at three in the morning is going to end up wrapped around a fire hydrant. And I've got the hand half off,

Fact: Hernandez's opponents exhibited abilities almost identical to those of Hernandez and his clan. One tossed a motorcycle. Another tore a car door from its hinges with ease. They vanished from plain sight. And they could distort their faces and incite fear and horror in their potential victims.

Fact: The newcomers uniformly excited disgust in mortals by their mere presence. The fact that each had a deformity of some kind only reinforces the effect.

The most obvious conclusion: they're Nosferatu.

Except —

Fact: The strangers came from a hole in the ground that had been filled since before the arrival of Europeans.

Fact: The Nosferatu of California are not indigenous. The first Nosferatu we know about arrived with the Europeans.

Except —

These are, if not indigenous members of Clan Nosferatu, certainly partakers in the same Blood.

What does this mean?

It may indicate that Clan Nosferatu is more ancient than we can know, and that members of the clan split off and migrated north and east during the original migrations that populated continental North America.

It may, however, mean something more fundamental. I have a page or two from a Latin book by Piso Minor, which describes the Worms of the Earth — he means the Nosferatu — as rising up spontaneously "when certain signs come to pass: a cock lays an egg, a snake coils around a gravestone, three owls alight on a dead man's house, a child is born at the moment of a nearby death." We consider it these days a myth. But what if it was at some point true? What if sometime in the past — if not even now — certain circumstances could produce from the dead a spontaneous Nosferatu?

The Mekhet include some who believe that they are a different species from the other Kindred. What if this was true of the Nosferatu? What if the Worms of the Earth really do, at times, arise spontaneously from the corpses of the dead? People assume that the clans are really bloodlines which consolidated and became potent, and that each has a patient zero of sorts, a single originator. But what if the Clan Nosferatu really is in fact a more diffuse thing, with no single originator?



right through the tendons, sweet, old blood all over my face, not half as strong as I thought it'd be, and the old guy lets go and loses his grip on the side of the auto and he's gone, and now I'm at Rosie's place and I'm hammering on the door, screaming, Rosie, let me in. Rosie comes to the door and she's got blood all over her mouth and down her front, and she says, I'm busy, but I bust right in and ignore the dead guy on the floor messing up the carpet and I tell her what I saw and she says, better tell the Prince, and I say, what good's the Prince of Encino going to do? He'll only make me look stupid for letting a pack of crazy butt-ugly naked old men take over my turf.

She says, whatever, dabbing at her mouth like she's got a bit of sauce on it, and I say, Rosie, you've got to help me, and she says, tough luck, Nicky, I did you all the favors I'm going to do you this evening, and I see the tomahawk, and I say, give me the ax.

And she says, what? And I say, give me the ax. I need the ax. I don't know why I say that to her. It just seems like the thing to do, you know, face off the bad guys by taking them on at their own game.

And she says, you're crazy. You've never used one of those things. And I say, yeah, I know. But I saw something. They're going to find me. Do you mind if I hide out here, I say, and she says, yeah I do mind, and then she says I don't want you trashing my house, and she kicks me out, but she lets me have the ax, because I think she's scared about them wanting it back.

So I decide that I'm going to go to my place. And I take off my shirt and sit on the side of the mattress in the dark room holding the ax. And when dawn comes and I have to sleep, they don't come. And they don't come the following night. On a third night, then they come.

It's pretty much sudden. One minute, I'm sitting waiting, and the next minute, the front door and a big chunk of the doorpost is ripped away. I'm ready, I say, as three old men with muscles like cords and faces like distorted landscapes glower at me.

They come in. I just wait for them. And then they all do the Face at me, twisting into monsters, just for a second. And then I brandish the ax and do it back at them. And I take a step forward and shout out, my house, my house. This is my house and my turf, you fuckers. And I do the Face right back at them, giving it everything I have. And I think it works, and they're going to back off... but no, they're not.

I turn and run again, and set up in the bathroom, and that's fine, because it's a defensible position. My crib gets trashed, but never mind, cause it's getting on to dawn, and they're gone.

But they're going to come for me. I just know it. Unless I come for them. Rosie's going to come too, like it or not. She can read thoughts. I need that. We're going to find them and we're going to figure out what they need, and then we're going to kill them forever, ancient Indians or no.

From this arises the question whether it is better to be loved rather than feared, or feared rather than loved. It might perhaps be answered that we should wish to be both; but since love and fear can hardly exist together, if we must choose between them, it is far safer to be feared than loved.

- Niccol Machiavelli

MARI BRENDAN, THE BLACK PRINCE

Despite the disturbing curse that all Haunts labor under, not all are content to spend their unlives hidden in the sewers or tucked among the rooftops of the city. Some will not be content to view the world from any seat not elevated head and shoulders above the rest. Whether as Hierophant, Architect, Archbishop, Alder, Priscus, Primogen, Prefect or Prince, there are leaders among the Nosferatu, individuals who refuse to allow their clan's flaws and weaknesses to prevent them from attaining their goals.

Mari Brendan, the Black Prince, is one of these.

Not satisfied simply to lead her clan, shortly after arriving in the city Brendan set her sights on the throne. She achieved her goal almost a decade ago, and has ruled with an iron fist ever since. Under her rule, the city's structure has become highly codified, with those who support her reign in places of almost unassailable power carefully balanced with sufficient checks and balances to ensure that without her constant attention the entire city would surely topple into chaos.

Mari Brendan has no illusions about the state of her city, or its member's opinion of her. She knows that few of her subjects love the Black Prince, and that many hate her. More important, however, is that all but a very few fear her. That, she claims, is the mark of success.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

My first encounter face to face with the Black Prince was during one of her official courts. Heralded by an angelic blonde androgyne, with a voice that echoed off of the Elysium walls, Brendan swept into the room flanked by four individuals in domino masks, all of a similar height and body shape to the Prince. Clothed alike in black, featureless suits, the Prince's entourage followed three steps behind her with military precision. Each wore gloves, and a cowl-type hood that covered the head entirely. The subtle lighting gleaming from the stark porcelain masks provided the only relief in their otherwise colorless visages. These, then, were the Masques I'd heard of. They were every bit as disconcerting as I'd been lead to believe.

Brendan entered what had been a crowded gathering, and those assembled parted to make way for her like the Red Sea before Moses. A path, more than wide enough for five men to walk abreast, extended from the doorway to the dais at the far end of the great hall. The Prince squandered down the center of it, slim and tall, and her presence commanded every eye in the room.

What first struck me about Mari Brendan, especially after doing so much research into the Haunts, was how normal she appeared to be at first glance. Her skin was clear and very pale, even for one of our Kindred. She moved gracefully, and her body appeared fit and well formed. There were, at least, no apparent extra limbs, tentacles, club feet, or shoulder

humps. Her hair was straight, falling to her waist in a waterfall of shadow that seemed to absorb, rather than reflect, the light that fell upon it. Some whisper that this is the origin of her title as the Black Prince. Obviously, they have never met her in person.

As she passed, the crowd around her seemed to hold its breath. Some bowed, either grand sweeping gestures or small nods of respect. No one spoke, not so much as a whisper. Such is the power of a prince who rules by fear.

At the far end of the Elysium hall, a spotlight turned on, illuminating a raised dais upon which stood a single seat. The throne (for there could be no other label for it) appeared to be carved of a single piece of alabaster: solid, cold, and unbreakable, much like Brendan herself.

The Black Prince ascended the dais, and settled herself on the throne. Two of her Masques arranged themselves, one at each shoulder. The other two stood beside their twins for a split second, and then disappeared from sight, leaving me (and probably the rest of the room) wondering for the entirety of the evening if they were lurking unseen behind me at every moment.

Once the Prince was seated, she paused, looking out over those gathered. There was a feeling that every person in the room was holding his or her breath no mean feat among the undead. Then she nodded, almost imperceptibly, and the gathering relaxed and returned to their previous discussions.

I watched as the Black Prince's herald became the nucleus of an orbiting circle of Kindred. Many wanted the Prince's ear that evening, some more desperately than others. The herald kept notes in a small leather book, approached by subject after subject until, almost an hour later, the throng dwindled and then ended entirely. For all this time, as her herald made appointments, Brendan sat on that throne, watching out over the crowd without appearing to focus on any one aspect of it. I observed, thinking myself unseen, secure in my anonymity.

Secure, that was, until the herald approached Brendan and, without a word being spoken, the gaze of the Black Prince turned and fell upon me like a lead weight. I found myself frozen in place, gaze locked with her obsidian eyes. For what felt like hours, she held me there, separated by a full room of others, but feeling as if I knelt directly at her feet.

And then she smiled and looked away.

I am not ashamed to say I turned and practically ran from the room. I had no choice. I had seen things in her eyes horrible things that my own mind will not allow me to remember. I only know that they were there, dwelling within her, and that the cruelest thing she could ever do to me would be to look at me thusly again.

It was difficult to continue my research after that. Nothing, not the War Pig's brutality or the Worm Lord's depravity, came close to that which I saw in the depths of her eyes. But, at length, bolstered by rereading my notes and seeing the other horrors I had encountered and continued on in spite of, I made the choice to return to my work. It was the hardest decision I have ever made.

Things I know about the Black Prince:

- Brendan is not the first Nosferatu prince of this city. She took the throne from a relatively short-lived Ventrue monarch who made the mistake of focusing on usurpation rather than the long-term viability of holding control of the city. The Ventrue was prince for less than four years from the time he publicly destroyed the former ruler, who was a Haunt of the First Estate.
- The Black Prince does not appear to manifest a physical curse in the way that many of her family does. Nor does she carry a repugnant or off-putting aura, although she is able to exude it when she desires. Because of this, others often do not immediately recognize that Mari Brendan is Nosferatu.
- The Black Prince consults regularly with an ancient Gangrel hag, named Himinglava. She calls this Acolyte seer her "Norn" and seeks her advice before each court and council meeting. When an outspoken Succubus called Himinglava a "foul witch" in Brendan's presence, the Nosferatu ripped the offensive vampire's head off with her bare hands as a lesson to others.

Rumors that I have heard about the Black Prince:

- Mari Brendan is actually not female, but is instead an alias for the same male Nosferatu Invictus who ruled the city before the Ventrue usurper "killed" him. While he had originally stepped aside, agreeing to be "destroyed" so that his covenant-mate could take the throne, he could not stand the inept job the younger vampire did and thus reclaimed rulership with a new identity in an attempt to put the domain back on the straight and narrow.
- Brendan is not a Haunt at all. She is actually a member of an obscure left-handed bloodline that has managed to divest itself of their clan curse by consuming the souls of ancient aristocratic vampires. She has enough blackmail material on the city's Nosferatu, however, that no one dares argue if she claims to be one of them.
- The hag who Brendan relies so heavily upon is actually her sire (making Brendan Gangrel, rather than Nosferatu), to whom she is wholly bloodbound. She has no choice but to consult with the witch, and abide by her demands. While I do not know the nature of their relationship, I have stared into Mari Brendan's eyes. I can say for certain: the Black Prince is one of us.

ONE OF US. ALWAYS ONE OF US.

FROM ON HIGH

A wise prince leaves nothing to chance. Brendan is no fool, and has stacked the deck in her city, carefully lacing the power structure of her domain with members of her covenant, those who are bound to her will through the Vinculum, and, of course, other members of the Nosferatu clan. Especially among the Haunts, whose bonds as a clan arguably run deeper than with any other, there are obvious advantages to dwelling within a domain where a member of your clan is the ultimate authority. Even those Haunts who do not hold any particular position of power still are afforded some small measure of "trickle-down" respect, so long as they are not overtly in the Prince's ill graces.

I spoke with several Nosferatu within Brendan's domain (including the Nosferatu Priscus) who had nothing but glowing things to say of the Black Prince. Considering Brendan's reputation as a merciless monarch, perhaps it is not particularly surprising that the public responses I encountered were almost unanimously positive, but the interviews are included here.

Black Molly, Nosferatu Priscus

Many outsiders see Nosferatu as horrific, misshapen creatures that shroud themselves away from the rest of Kindred society in a cloak woven of darkness, fear and nightmares. Black Molly exemplifies that stereotype. I hadn't realized she was standing next to me until I asked the herald for an introduction to the Nosferatu Priscus, and *she* stepped out of a shadow less than a foot from my right shoulder.

I have seen pictures of plague victims, where the pustules and buboes had covered the corpse's skin, leaving no square inch of unmalignant flesh. Thus it is with Black Molly. From the crown of her bald head to her bare feet, there is no part of her skin that is not swollen with fever blisters, oozing with open wounds or wrinkled with gangrene. It is this last, I believe, that earned her moniker; just as the same rot lent the Black Plague its solemn name. Each of her fingers and toes is blackened and curled with pestilence, and her eyes are so rheumy and jaundiced that the "whites" appear like raw egg yolks shot through with blood-filled veins. In a bizarre juxtaposition, this necrotic figure was draped in an elegant cocktail gown, the black-satin, spaghetti straps and glittering rhinestones only serving to throw the hideousness of her visage into more striking contrast.

For all that I have steeled myself against the physical horrors possessed by some of the Haunts I encounter during my interviews, I could not keep myself from gasping when I first looked at her. Fortunately for me, this was apparently exactly the response that Molly sought in making such an entrance. She grinned, revealing a gaping maw half filled with brown stumps, and I realized that her deplorable physical form was only half of the horror that was Black Molly.

Imagine soured milk, rotting meat and feces, all set in the noonday sun to ferment. Now, imagine that scent, but as an aura, rather than a smell. Even if you're not bothering to breathe, it invades your nostrils. There is no relief from it, not even for a second. It is not so much a smell as a feeling, an assault against all of your nerves at once. That was what it was like to stand next to Black Molly. It was all I could do to keep from running, hoping that the foul stench had not infected my pores and tainted me forever. I felt my muscles tensing against my will, battling for dominance.

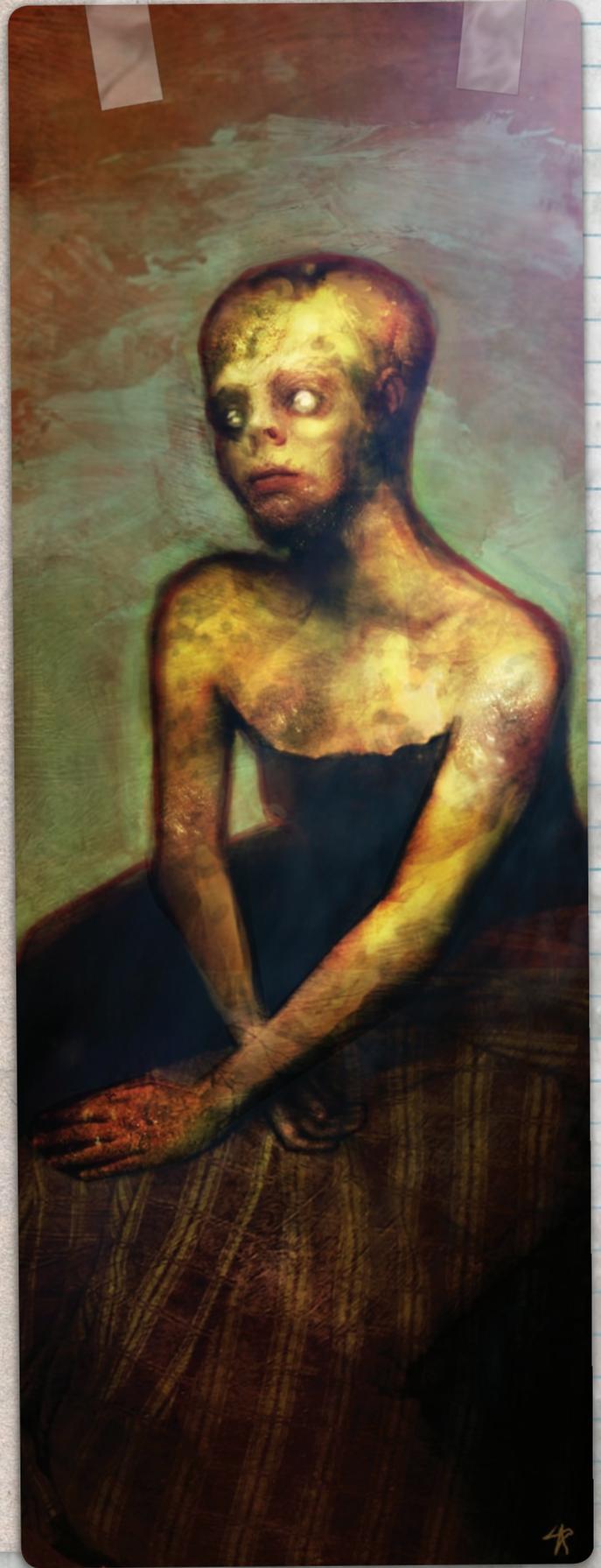
Then she introduced herself.

And it was like an angel had called my name.

I have, to this day, never heard a voice more melodic, its timber more perfect or intonation sweeter. It was in such stark contrast to her physical form and malicious aura that I was entirely taken aback. My confusion must have been clear on my face, which seemed to please her even more. While I was still too stunned to move, she slipped one hand into the bend of my elbow and, with supreme grace, escorted me to a private corner of the gathering.

I am ashamed to admit that I did not have the composure to either record our conversation or to remember it word for word. Rather than try to replicate what was

said, I have summed up what I could recollect of our conversation into a narrative, which I hope will do justice to the kind and thoughtful individual I found to be lurking behind Black Molly's rather disturbing exterior.



Prince and Priscus

In our city, the Priscus of the Nosferatu is a role with a great deal of responsibility, both to the clan and to the domain itself. I served the former Priscus, Alyksandir Von Khreb, for many years, keeping track of whatever information he considered too mundane to require his particular attention. As time passed, more and more of the clan's business in the city fell under that heading, as the nights weighed heavier and heavier upon his shoulders. Then, three years ago, Alyksandir simply stopped responding to phone calls. At first we didn't think much of it, the rest of the clan and I. He was a crotchety old codger and disliked technology anyway, and we just assumed that he'd finally refused to use it any more. We inquired after his health in manners we knew he preferred - by mail left in a hollow of concrete near his haven, Wyrmtongue graffiti posted where he liked to feed, and finally a formal missive sent by one of my ghouls who had visited one of his publicly known meeting rooms beneath the city. There was no response, and the ghoul did not return. After a few more nights, it became clear that something was not right, and as his aide, I took it upon myself to travel directly to his haven, which few others knew the exact location of, and investigate for myself.

The entrance to his haven was deep under the city, past the public meeting place that I had sent my ghoul to. I proceeded cautiously, not knowing what to expect. Even when responding to a direct invitation, entering an elder's home territory is dangerous. Walking in, uninvited and unexpected as I was, was foolhardy. Yet I felt I had no real choice. I owed it to my fellows to find out what was keeping their spokesman and leader from their presence.

In the meeting chamber, I discovered my ghoul's fate. He had apparently triggered one of the many traps that Alyksandir had set to deter unwanted visitors. While the falling stones might have only broken a Kindred's bones and left him immobile, until Alyksandir could come to feed the unfortunate and set him free, my pet was only human and had permanently broken beneath the heavy pile of rocks. Undaunted, I continued, avoiding what traps I could, and managing to remain relatively unharmed by those I did trigger. My years of learning at Alyksandir's knee had taught me more than my mentor had intended, and I was at least marginally aware of the types of traps he favored and the locations that he was likely to set them in.

I found him in his outer sanctum, slumped over his favorite writing desk with a pen still clutched in his still fingers. It was, in some ways, a blessing that he'd fallen there, and not in his inner chambers - I doubt even I could have penetrated the innermost of his sanctuaries and lived. At first I suspected foul play, but there were no signs of a struggle and I knew Alyksandir to be far, far older than other vampires who I had seen turn to ash upon their demise. I left him there, disturbing him no more than was required to remove the letter he had been penning when torpor struck him, and went to consult with the Prince as to how to proceed.

Having one's prince be a member of one's clan is both an opportunity and a challenge. Any ally in a position of power can be an asset. However, calling a leader clanmate can put one under uncomfortable scrutiny. Rather than simply deciding amongst the more powerful, eldest and most politically adept individuals who should next represent our clan, I felt it necessary to inform my sovereign of Alyksandir's fate, and to wait for her wishes on the matter. I was surprised when she insisted that I take the role for myself, and doubly so when the rest of the clan's elders backed her decision. But, although I am younger than many of my family in the city, I had served the longest at Alyksandir's side, and was the most prepared to continue coordinating our clan's public efforts with the rest of the local Kindred.

I am not the leader of our clan, any more than Alyksandir was before me. As long as the Prince is on the throne (and I do not anticipate her leaving it willingly), she will insist on being the ultimate authority in her domain, and while she may hand over nominal responsibility for attending to mundane matters, we are all aware exactly how limited our rights and freedoms are. Or rather, our privileges and leeways are broad, so long as they are in keeping with the Prince's desires.

What does that mean to me, as a powerless Priscus? Very little has changed since my service to Alyksandir. Now, I report directly to the Prince. I serve the clan, even if I do not lead it, and that is satisfying enough.

Alyksandir was Priscus before the Black Prince took over the domain, and thus served other princes before her. While he never spoke so much as a word of disloyalty to me, I cannot help but think that perhaps her rule is why he withdrew. Especially considering the contents of the letter I found him writing when he fell to torpor.

You were correct. She's mad, or if not mad, then so far gone into her own obsessions as to see nothing else. I have heard rumors, whispers yet, but I am following them, that she has begun to make enemies here even among the clan, eyes and ears who formerly were one with her and now have turned away. If we can find those rebels, perhaps we can aid them and thus bring about the necessary change without putting the "official" contingency of the clan under direct risk should the rebellion prove unworthy of their task.

I do not know whether it is related to her decline, but Swancott has been

While the memories of my conversation with her are somewhat shaky, I am fairly certain that the gist of Black Molly's statements about how Prisci are chosen are fairly city-centric. Other cities I have researched have a more totalitarian and separatist modality, with the Priscus serving, essentially, as the prince of the undercity (with or without the prince proper's blessing.) In others, especially remote or under-developed regions, the choosing of a new Priscus can be a brutal matter of physical combat, with the victor remaining the clan's representative until deposed. The most

fascinating rumors I discovered, however, were those of a German city where each member of the clan took a portion of the responsibility for serving as the clan's representative. In order to avoid those outside of the clan from knowing the true nature of the family's hierarchy (and thus effectively thwarting attempts to assassinate, investigate or bribe influential members), all Nosferatu in the city took turns using the same illusionary visage and identity to serve a term as the representative for their family. This public identity has, according to some stories, served as the Priscus of the city for several hundred years continuously, seeing the clan through generation after generation of changing princes.

Draken Malier, Haunt Archivist

Among those I had the dubious pleasure of interviewing was one Draken Malier, a gnarled caricature of a man, who has apparently dedicated a large portion of his unlife to researching Nosferatu princes. It was not surprising, then, to find he had recently made his home in the Black Prince's domain, or that his opinions about the roles of Nosferatu princes in Kindred society ran strong and deep. What was, however, surprising, was that he professed to not possess any biographical information about the Prince beyond what was held to be common knowledge.

It is possible that the archivist simply was not at liberty to divulge the information he possessed about Brendan. Given the Prince's iron grip, that seems likely. It is also

possible that the Black Prince has truly thwarted even this dedicated and experienced researcher, and has managed to keep her background thoroughly hidden from his eyes. However, I think that there were some subtle hints within his statements about Haunt rulers in general, which align sufficiently with some of the less spurious rumors circulating about Brendan, to make me suspicious that the archivist was (consciously or inadvertently) sharing information he had gleaned about the Prince herself.

He allowed me to tape his dissertation, which has been archived for in-depth analysis. I have excerpted a portion of it for inclusion in this file, including one of the areas that I felt particularly interesting. I have also included details that I believe may refer directly to Mari Brendan.

Transcribed from Audio Tape Series L7, Number 3 of 14

BEGIN TRANSCRIPTION "...common misconception. While my studies are, of course, anecdotal, I would estimate that as many as one in ten cities throughout the world is currently ruled by a Nosferatu. There have been, of course, periods when the clan, as a whole, held far more reign. While the information comes from secondary sources, sufficient evidence suggests that during the 1st century, a virtual Nosferatu dynasty rose up in what is now Libya and western Egypt, with one extended family holding reign over every city in the region for a period of almost a century. A similar region of Nosferatu influence is rumored to have sprung up in the latter part of the 13th century, although this time the area was the Iberian Peninsula, in what modernly makes

up far southeastern France and eastern Spain. This period of control was shorter, perhaps no more than 3 decades, but during that time there are no reports to indicate that a single non-Nosferatu held leadership of a city in the area for more than a few weeks before being evicted from the throne, most often lethally.

More recently, during the early years of the 20th century, the entirety of Alaska and portions of northwestern Canada were held by a consortium of Nosferatu rulers. While the Haunt rule of Nome is near legendary, stretching until fairly recent years, during the heyday of the Nosferatu range, there was no Kindred city in that region that was not ruled by one of the clan. Their control stretched all the way across the Bering Strait, and into northeastern Russia, as well.

Strangely, while researching these dynasties, I came across what I thought, at first, was an interesting coincidence. In every one of the areas that would qualify as a Nosferatu imperium (that being three or more cities in a geographic area being held by Nosferatu, with no non-Nosferatu held cities within the same region) the advent of Nosferatu ascension was either directly preceded by or coincided with an outbreak of some virulent disease on an epidemic level. In most cases, the plague was prevalent - bubonic, viral hemorrhagic, septicemic. Some reports are clear enough that we can link the symptoms with high probability to a known plague variant; in other cases, especially in early history such as the northern African imperium at the turn of the last millennium, sources are more difficult to obtain and we can only make suppositions as to the nature of the disease. Whether this is a matter of coincidence, physical cause-and-effect, or something more... mysterious... is uncertain at this point. There are those, especially among the more self-loathing of my clan who I have shown this evidence to, who believe that this is a clear omen - a sign of the... how did she put it?... the "wrongness" of our kind, I believe were her words. However, my intuition is that, in time, a simple explanation will be uncovered, and that it is unlikely to be as enigmatic or esoteric as reality passing judgment upon the appropriateness of Nosferatu rule.

Most Nosferatu princes, of course, are not part of some region-spanning collection of clan-kin, any more than their subjects are. Most reign alone, master or mistress over their own painstakingly carved out domain, holding territory against the encroachment of a nigh-constant stream of potential usurpers and would-be inheritors. Which, of course, has often lead to border disputes or political feuds. When coupled with the Nosferatu's often poor social standing among the others of Kindred society, it is not surprising then that others often seek to actively thwart a Nosferatu from rising to the throne, or to quickly depose one who has attained it. What is, perhaps, more surprising is that, even with these reactions, Nosferatu not only frequently do become princes, but also that, when they do, they often remain regnant over a city for as long or longer than is average for a Kindred to reign.

I have several theories about this phenomenon... END TRANSCRIPTION

Marquis D'aumont

I spoke with the Marquis at Black Molly's recommendation. Although she warned me about his eccentricity, she praised his knowledge of local history. To the best of her knowledge (and if his stories are to be believed), D'aumont is the senior-most member of the city's Nosferatu population, having moved here more than 200 years ago.

Meeting with the Marquis was a unique experience. From across the room, he appeared to be the epitome of a Napoleonic-era French nobleman, from his white powdered wig to the huge buckles on his high-heeled shoes. As I crossed the room, however, it became clear that he was, indeed, of the Nosferatu clan. His facial skin, powdered and painted in an opulent fashion, was peeling off in layers that no amount of cosmetics could cover, and as he elegantly extended one silk-glove-

covered hand to me in greeting, I could see that the affliction affected his arms as well. In places, the sinewy ropes of musculature could be seen beneath the flaking layers, a situation which I tried hard to ignore during our conversation. Luckily, D'aumont's stories were interesting enough that distraction was not too difficult. Molly had warned me of his age, and that his memories were often unclear, and I tried to keep this in mind as we spoke. It was difficult, however, for he seemed clear of thought and agile of speech. If it were not for some facts I later checked, which suggested that at least a portion of his tales were untrue (annotated below), I would have thought the Priscus mistaken. Other than the annotations, I am including the Marquis' stories as he dictated them.

(Note: According to the Ventrue Priscus, there is no record of Abel Gustavson in city records. He believes the city's Kindred population started with a coterie of Gangrel, who claimed the fledgling settlement's citizens during a building boom. As well, while America's first sewer system was in place by the late 1600s, it seems unlikely that a city so much younger and smaller could have implemented one by the time period Daumont describes.)

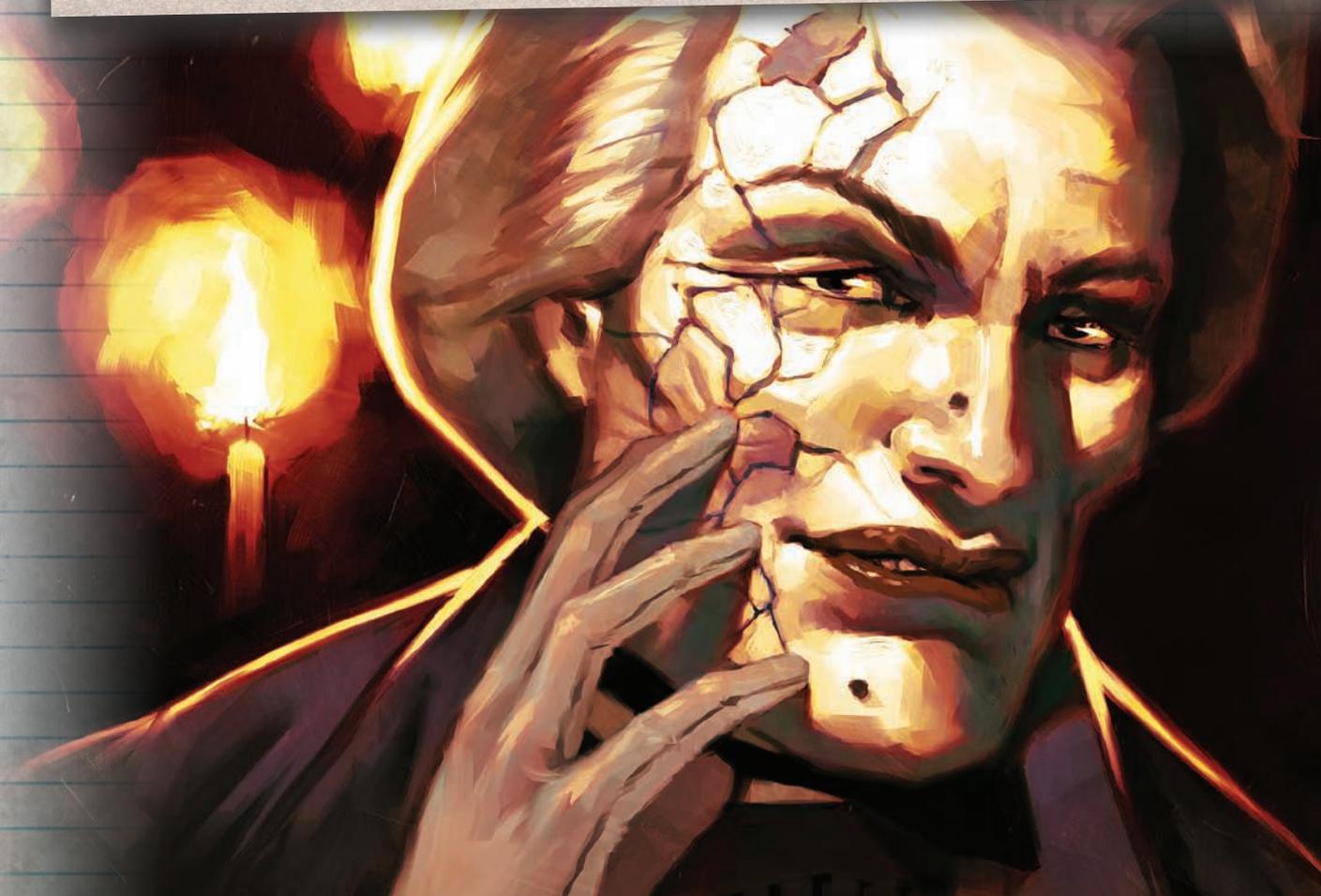
As Above, So Below

Long ago when this city was first being built, with wooden sidewalks and wells for water, we had no real place of our own. As we trickled into the newly born city, we made our havens wherever we might — a cavern at the outskirts of town, an abandoned dugout cabin build and left by earlier settlers — one of us even used to sleep in a deep hollow under one of the biggest rocks out at the rapids of the river. There wasn't much in the way of clan politics at that point, no real need for a leader. There was a Ventrue in charge back then, Abel Gustavson, who'd come out from Germany in the early 1700s to try to make a name and a domain for himself. He made sure that those who havened in the area kept to the Traditions, but beyond that, there wasn't a great deal of hierarchy to the town's sparse Kindred population.

Fast forward a few decades. The city was growing by leaps and bounds, not just the kine but we of the night as well. While the Succubi and Shadows and Lords were

content with their boarded and curtained windows and the Savages with the earth, we were finding it harder and harder to find safe havens. Rumors were running rampant about "something" haunting the town. Something ugly... Something brutal... Something terrifying. That something was us. Our numbers were such that something had to be done, and the Kindred leadership took action.

The before-mentioned Abel Gustavson somehow convinced the people of the town to install a new-fangled sewer system, and, rather than dig into the bedrock below, they built a second layer of city over the first, bright shiny buildings that eclipsed (literally and figuratively) the humble ones from the town's advent. They laid the first sewers there, rivers of effluvia that ran right down through what had once been the main street of town, and as soon as they'd boarded and filled and covered the last of the original settlement, we moved in and were grateful to dwell there among the stench and decay.



The Prince and Undertown

It wasn't until we moved into Undertown that the Nosferatu of the city really began behaving like a clan. Prior to that, we didn't even have a Priscus. We were the castoffs and bastards of the Kindred community.

Then, we were shuttled down into Undertown, and all that changed. Haunts who hadn't spoken to each other in decades of living in the same town suddenly found themselves as neighbors. We began forming coteries, coordinating our hunting to avoid over-harvesting the same areas. What started as communication for survival quickly evolved into a resource network that spanned the town and beyond, as Nosferatu gathered and shared what we heard not only in the city but from our former contacts in other areas as well. Eventually, we found those contacts were valuable to those above as well.

Having a commodity to barter with was new to many of the younger Nosferatu. Those of us who were older and cannier appointed a representative, since Gustavson was still in power up above. We stormed the Prince's court and demanded our own seat on his Prisci council.

To our surprise, Gustavson relented without an argument, and offered one of our eldest a position as an advisor, our first Primogen. He was trying to get a headlock on something he saw less as a clan than as a political movement. By putting pressure on both the Priscus and Primogen, the Prince hoped to control the rest of us, without losing access to the information we were trading. He partially succeeded. However, the burdens he put upon us and the tactics he used began to chafe. Eventually, tired of being used and abused, we revolted.

We withdrew from the world above. At first in jest, we formed our own political structure below the city over our heads, with factions and ranks that were parodied on those we'd learned at court. Rumor Mongers kept our status and traditions, where those above used a Harpy. We had a Keeper of the Pits instead of a Chatelaine. A Shadow Keeper rather than Sheriff. Whisper Tender rather than Herald. And, of course, the Prince of Undertown, who wore a crown like that of Gustavson's, made of rat bones and coal rather than ivory and jet.

In time, however, those above sought us out. They needed us for information, for communication, for our stealth and our ability to use our strength and mastery of fear in their defense against humanity. They needed us more than we needed them. I'm not sure which group was more surprised to discover that fact. But, by the time those above realized that we were not merely retreating to lick our wounds, we'd already organized ourselves into a social and political network that didn't change for more than a century.

As the mortal government would do several decades later, the Prince's forces attempted to prevent our secession from his "union". We had the advantages of both terrain and resources. They came for us, thinking to teach us a lesson, and instead found their numbers whittled down by the traps we'd laid in the access ways to Undertown. We'd watched well during our time among their ranks, and had learned their weaknesses. And we used every ounce of our strength, every bit of cunning, every trick of mind and stealth, to thwart their advance. Just before dawn, they withdrew, those who were not ash upon the floor.

Nightly at first, and then with less frequency, the Prince threw his city's resources after us, but we had dug deep, expanding the city below his feet in ways he no longer knew or understood. Then one night, he sent a representative bearing a white flag, asking to parlay with our leaders. His offer was simple — access to the city's above-ground resources and a modicum of respect we'd previously been denied, in exchange for our return to our former roles within the domain. We agreed, but on one condition. The underworld would be ours, for the rest of time, and business below would be ours and ours alone to maintain.

Again to our surprise, he agreed, and we returned to the work we'd previously done to serve the domain. But never again would we be without representation above ground. And never again would those above us have access to, or knowledge of, the world we'd built for ourselves below.

NOTE FROM -W-

A most curious thing happened when I was arranging my notes after leaving the Black Prince's Court. I found, tucked between the pages of research I'd compiled, a note that I had never seen before. I asked Black Molly whether she could identify either the handwriting or the signature, which resembled a child's scrawled W, but she was either unwilling or unable to do so. I'm still uncertain exactly how the author was able to secret the paper in with my notes without my notice,

DER MI+D MIC, I HERD
U TOK TO JAK BOT
THA PRIN+Z. HE WUZ
RONG NOT ALL OV
UZ LIK HER BUT WE
CANT ZAY IT. U ZHUD
TOK TO REN AND
HOORAN. THE NO
WAT I MEEN .W.

but as it seems quite appropriate to the topic I am including it herein. The spelling and grammatical errors are original to the missive, and in some places the handwriting was so bad that I am only guessing at the words intended. If it is sincere, it provides a contrasting view to those publicly professed by the city's Haunts, and leaves the question of whether the rebellious force amassed by the Warpig is in the minority, or is in fact an unspoken majority.

DIPLOMATIC TOOLS

Despite the rumors of her ferocity, the Black Prince is not incapable of adroit diplomacy far from it. I have personally witnessed Brendan using everything from subtle half-promises to sly backhanded threats (along with more overt violence and intimidation) among her domain members, as well as utilizing her almost innumerable minions, servants and pawns as an extension of her will to carry out her bidding throughout the domain.

Many of the Prince's pawns seem firmly aware that they are doing her work, willingly or unwillingly trading a modicum of their own self-direction either for benefits that serving their regent can provide, or out of fear for what would happen should they choose to disobey.

FEAR AND FACADES

The unknown is always more frightening than the known. The Nosferatu, masters of fear and illusion, know this lesson better than most. One of the tools used by Mari Brendan, to ensure that her domain never ceases to be properly held in the grips of fear, are a troupe of personal guardians/spies/assassins known only as The Masques.

Except for the Black Prince, no one in the domain is certain exactly who (or what) the Masques are. No more than four are ever seen in the same place at the same time, and it is common for four to arrive in escort to the Prince, and then for half of their number to disappear in a very public manner, the remaining two serving as a visible reminder of their vanished brethren. The Masques all appear identical: tall, slim, androgynous but undeniably fit bodies, all identifying features hidden beneath black clothing and white domino masks. None wear weapons openly, although more than once a vanished Masque has reappeared behind their intended victim wielding a knife or razor-sharp garrote. In these cases, the assassin-Masque strikes almost impossibly fast, and disappears just as quickly, leaving nothing behind but a falling body or swirling cloud of ash where their former victim had stood.

As is likely the Prince's goal, the things that are not known about the Masques are an even greater source of fear and rumor among the domain than their obviously lethal efficiency. Even during my relatively short visit to the Prince's gathering, I was able to discern a multitude of suppositions about the Masques. Some seem more blatantly unlikely than others, but all were spoken with (to the best of my ability to discern) utter belief in their veracity.

Rumors about the Masques

- The Black Prince is actually just the pawn of a powerful coterie of ancient vampires who appear as the Masques to keep tabs on her and protect their puppet-prince. By looking like Brendan's servants, they keep any potential enemy's sights on the Prince, allowing them to slip in and out of the domain's public and private functions without being challenged or targeted.
- Mari Brendan has somehow learned to split herself across multiple bodies; each of the Masques is a shadow of the Prince herself.
- Brendan is really just a neonate who made deals with demons. The Masques are another "favor" she bargained with the devil for, an army to help her keep her throne.
- A Nosferatu proverb states "There is no truth, save for what is believed." Both in the Kindred world and the world of mortals, lives have been ended, kingdoms toppled and wars won all for the sake of appearances. The Haunts know this, and we often turn it to our advantage. Some, like the Black Prince, use this ability to build an atmosphere of constant threat, paranoia and fear. The Masques, whose anonymity ensures that everyone in the domain is likely to suspect every other member of being one of their number, is only one way Brendan manipulates her image.
- Contradictory rumors cloud Brendan's background. This stands in clear contrast to the last two rulers, who were Invictus and thus well-pedigreed. In the gaps between the few known facts about Mari Brendan, her subjects fill in dozens of possibilities, most sinister. They scare themselves into submission. Brendan herself may be the source of many of the most terrifying rumors.

PAWNS

The following is excerpted from the notebook I had earlier observed the Black Prince's Herald taking notes in. As I was awaiting audience with the Prince, the Herald left the book on the side table beside me while escorting another individual into Brendan's presence. I was able to sneak a look into the book during the Herald's absence, and used my camera phone to snap a quick picture of the most recent page. Upon reflection, I am not at all certain that the Herald did not intend for me to read what was written there. Still, I will include it with this report, for the sake of completeness. I believe that "G" may stand for "ghoul", while the Herald seems to have also assigned some sort of priority ranking (perhaps to facilitate organizing the Prince's limited court time) at the end of each individual notation. I'm uncertain whether to be insulted or relieved that my own request for audience was not high on the Herald's importance scale. The "Singh" noted is, more than likely, Vladimir Singh, the current Priscus for the city's Gangrel, while "4Whores" is probably Malice Four Horses, an outspoken Crone. I was unable to decipher several of the entries' identities, and it's possible that the herald was referring to obscure situations to indicate those who he wished to protect, while leaving others' identities unobstructed.

SINGH - SEEKS AUDIENCE - TERRITORY VIOLATED (AGAIN) - 5
• GUNDOG - CARTHLY WHINER - SEEKS AUDIENCE (AGAIN) - 1
• HARDAIKEN - SUMMONED - HAS REPORT - 5
• JESTERS - NEW COTERIE SEEKS OK TO FEED DOWNTOWN - 3
• FUENTES - TOADY FOR OPHICLIUS - TREATY - 4
• PRIMOGEN COUNCIL - MEETING AT MIDNIGHT - 5
• BASTLING (G - HAVERCOURT) - INFO ON EXPLOSION BAKER STREET BRIDGE - 4
• 4WHORES - NEW WITCH INTRO (HELLMOUNT) - 4
• NICODEMUS - AUDIENCE - POSSIBLE INTERVIEW? - 2
• F. HUSSEIN (WD ALLY?) - AUDIENCE - 0
• SISTER SPARROW - REPORT ON WOLVES NORTH - 4
• J. NASTY - SUMMONED - 5
• HYACINTH DE LA CRUZ - DIVA (?) NEW. SEEKS RECOGNITION - 3
• BARCUM (G - MEISTRO FEZINI) - GIFT FOR PRINCE - 2
• KUIZZ - SUMMONED - POSSIBLE TRIAL? - 5

The Haunt's Herald

The Harpy's Call - Despite our conversation in regards to the War Pig (or perhaps because of it), when I came face to face with Jack Nasty, chief among the city's harpies, he was as cordial and saccharine as he'd been blunt and insulting before.

(INT): Excuse me, Jack, I...

Jack Nasty (JN): Oh, hello! I'm sorry, I don't think I've had the pleasure.

(INT): I... um... Nic... I'm Nicodemus. We...

(JN): No, don't apologize for having not met me before. It's a big domain and I am sure you're terribly busy. I know I am... So, Mr. Nicodemus, what can I do for you?

(INT): I was wondering if I could ask you your personal opinion on...

(JN): Candid?! I don't have a personal opinion on anything, Mr. Nicodemus. My opinions are loud, proud and shouted to the crowd!

(Note: At this point, several onlookers made crude comments about Nasty's opinions, and it was clear that JN was reveling in his public persona.)

(INT): A public opinion, then. What do you think of the Prince?

(JN): Mari Brendan is the most efficient and steadfast ruler I've ever met, not to mention the finest. She's universally respected by her subjects, and rules with a firm but fair hand.

(Note: JN's tone at this point was rote. There was no doubt in my mind, and from the looks he got, in the minds of many of those around him, that this speech had been written long ago and rehearsed, and that Nasty had merely been waiting for the right moment to trot it out.)

(INT): So there's no dissent here...

(JN): None at all.

(INT): Really?

(JN): Occasionally some young upstart will get a little ballsy and think that Prince Brendan's generosity means she's weak. Last time, it took them weeks to get the blood stains out of the curtains, and the offending splatter's coterie is still paying penance a year later for his presumption. Rebellion just doesn't happen under a strong ruler.

Outsiders - While observing Prince Brendan's court, I had the good fortune to make the acquaintance of one Antonio Fuentes, a foreign diplomat who suggested he might have come from as far away as the coast. I spoke with him about his views of the local ruling structure, as well as the views of those he came here to represent. While I cannot be certain he was being entirely candid with me, our conversation (recorded clandestinely) was enlightening.

TAPE 18G — approximate time 11:30pm — Saturday, December 11th

(sound of walking — unidentifiable individuals murmuring in the background)

NIC (INT): May I join you?

ANTONIO FUENTES (AF): (heavily accented Spanish) Of course. Please do.

(INT): I'm Nicodemus. I'm new to the domain... Are you a local?

(AF): No... No, I am a visitor...

(INT): Ah! Well, we out-of-towners should stick together then!

(AF): (chuckles) Perhaps... perhaps...

(INT): So, what brings you here?

(AF): I am an emissary, here on behalf of Prince Ophicius.

(INT): Oh?

(AF): (nods) Official business. Very important.

(NOTE: At this point, our conversation was joined by Jack Nasty.)

Jack Nasty (JN): Nicodemus! Tony! How goes? Are you enjoying our little soiree?

(AF): ...

(INT): Jack. Nice to see you again.

(JN): Well, of course it is. Tony? Are you not talking to me now?

(AF): (sullen) Good evening, Jack.

(JN): Well, that's better. Wouldn't want the Prince to think you were being rude to her domain members, now, would you?

(INT): We were just talking about Mr. Fuentes' business here in the city.

(JN): Oh? Were you now? And what business would that be?

(AF): I am not at liberty to say. It is official business from Prince Ophicius.

(JN): Ooooh. O-fficial business... From Prince Ophie, eh? Well, surely you wouldn't want to tell it to the likes of me... I mean, I certainly am not privy to things like the treaty Ophie's trying to strike up with Herself... They don't talk to me about that sort of stuff.

(AF): (Muttering... swearing in Spanish?)

(JN): (voice lowered) I certainly don't know anything about your Prince's feelings in the matter, Tony-boy... or about the fact that your 'diplomatic mission' was a punishment for speaking out against Ophie's latest "toy" last Fall. I mean... I wouldn't know anything about that sort of thing...

(AF): Enough!

(JN): (aside to me) Oh, dear. I think I got Mr. Fuentes all riled up. I'm so sorry to disturb your conversation, Nicodemus.

(INT): I... no... no, it's okay.

(JN): (turning away) Carly! Vladimir! So good to see you! It's been ages!

(INT): (quietly) Hey... listen, I don't know what's going on, but I've heard enough to realize you don't want to be causing a scene around here.

(AF): A scene? I can assure you, sir, that I will not cause a scene. Unlike some, I have respect for tradition, for the correct way of doing things.

(INT): I'm sorry. I don't understand.

(AF): (glancing up towards the currently empty throne) Her. He was right. This duty is not an honor. It is a disgrace. A punishment from one disgusting, corrupt ruler to serve as a liaison to another. There is no honor in treating with monsters.

(INT): Well, technically, we're all...

(AF): NO! (quieter) No. No, sir. We are not all anything. There are those of us who are more than we were when we lived. Who strive to keep civility and tradition in this world of night that we walk, and who succeed not only in becoming greater, but in inspiring greatness in others. And then there are those who use this gift we are given as an excuse.

(INT): An excuse?



ANTONIO FUENTES

(AF): Yes... to be tyrannical, abusive, monstrous. That sort should never be allowed to rule.

(INT): The Prince?

(AF): All of her kind. (Fuentes nods towards a cowed figure across the room, and then in the direction of a vinyl-clad figure who stood nearly 7 feet tall and whose paper-thin skin seemed spray painted on beneath the fur-lined jacket and fedora he wore.) Nothing but monsters, the worst of the worst. Prince Ophicius is little better, to seek treaty with one of them. To force me here, begging and scraping to one of their kind who fancies herself nobility.

(INT): But from what I understand...

(AF): You understand nothing. She is a monster. No rank can change that. Nothing, save the final death, can cleanse her kind from the face of this earth. (Pause) Now. If you will excuse me, I must prepare myself for the most humiliating act of my existence. Good evening, sir.

(NOTE: With that, Fuentes rose to his feet and smoothed non-existent wrinkles from his suit before crossing the room to seek audience with the Black Prince herself.

The following was a treatise made public to all members of Brendan's domain upon her ascension to the throne of the city. Newcomers are required to read it and verbally acknowledge its validity before being recognized as a part of the Black Prince's domain. Those who I asked about it were varied in their opinions. Some expressed respect and admiration for the "truths" expressed in the treatise. Others seemed to have forgotten its contents, or looked at it as just another hoop to jump through in order to achieve acknowledgement within the eccentric Prince's city.

I obtained a copy of my own, and am including it in this file, along with the Sable Law, a proclamation made by the Black Prince and read before each of her formal appearances.

THE NATURE OF LEADERSHIP

In any domain wherein diverse and individual beings dwell, there must be leadership, else there will be chaos. In disorder there is waste, and within waste there is the loss of potential. Thus, effective leadership begets order and provides a people with the greatest opportunity to reach their fullest possibilities.

Effective leadership, however, is a rarity. To lead, one must forgo all other priorities, dedicating one's self to one's domain to the exclusion of all other objectives. Any conflict of interest provides a situation wherein the strength and health of the domain may suffer for the sake of accomplishing some other goal. And the opportunities for conflict are abundant.

Article One - A Leader May Not Be One of the Flock

It is the nature of all beings to seek the approval and acceptance of their peers. Any deviation too far from the norm within a pack or flock will undoubtedly earn the aberrant ostracism, if not outright destruction by her own kind. Thus, bending to the common will becomes a matter of survival whenever an individual is part of a group.

There is only one situation wherein being significantly different from the mean of a group is an advantage, and that is this: if and when these differences are sufficient to allow the rogue to exceed the capacity of the group and thus prove herself worthy to lead those same individuals who in other circumstances would have torn her apart.

Article Two - The Leader Must Only Lead

It is not enough that a leader be strong enough to take control of a domain. Effective leadership is a continual effort, a constant dedication to a singular goal — to promote and protect the health of the domain as a whole. Distraction from this priority can only breed disaster for the leader, and thus for those she governs. Other interests mean that eventually conflicts will come into play, and with conflict comes the potential that leadership will not prevail as the divided leader's top priority.

Article Three — The Leader Must Stand Alone

There can be no kinship between a leader and those she leads, even if they come from common roots. To do so is to invite chaos, as the crowd no longer has clear distinction between themselves and the one who leads them. They cannot think of their leader as one of their own, subject to the same rules that bind those who are ruled. The lawmaker must be seen, at all times, as beyond the laws, else how can she create them?

Article Four — The Leader Must Be Strong

For a leader to be effective, she cannot bow to the whim of her people, either wholly or to any given sector. That is not to say that she does not have the best interests of all those she governs in mind, but how that interest is protected and promoted is solely the purview of the leader.

A wise leader seeks the counsel of those around her, but is not dominated by it. In the end, all responsibility falls on the shoulders of she who leads, and thus all choices which lead to that weight must be hers and hers alone.

THE SABLE LAW

Let it be known throughout the lands of this Our city, that certain truths shall be defended at all costs. Those who would enter herein are thusly warned of these, and given fair notice that, on these matters, no dispute will be brooked.

First and foremost, is that We hold this domain by right of strength and right of blood. By strength and blood We took it from those who could not hold it, and by strength and blood We shall hold it in the future. Within these lands, and all spaces within, Our word and will are the law.

Secondly, Those who dwell herein do so at Our forbearance. All, save those who have been accused of crimes against Us, have permission to seek recognition within these, Our lands. This permission, however, is at Our whim. It is neither earned nor purchased, and can be revoked for any individual, regardless of rank or station, at any point. The lives of those who would trespass into Our lands without Our permission are null and void and may be confiscated by Our true subjects at Our command.

And finally, there is nothing which happens in Our lands which may be hidden from us, nor which we do not have the right of. Commerce transacted from within Our lands is subject to tax or confiscation at Our will. Harm done to members under Our protection is as if done to Us and We do and will claim blood-dues therefore. Violations of Our commands or desires or the Traditions of Our kind are punishable by whatever means We deem suitable, up to and including final death - a right which We reserve for Ourselves and those We do appoint thereto.

THE HORSE'S MOUTH

Shortly after my interview with Jack Nasty and Mr. Fuentes, I asked for and was granted private audience with the Black Prince, Mari Brendan herself. We spoke in her council chambers, a cavernous room filled floor to ceiling with bookshelves. I have no doubt that our conversation was monitored, but as to whether that affected the Prince's responses to my questions, I cannot begin to guess. To say the audience was brief would be an understatement. However, I could not in good conscience omit it from my records.

Nicodemus (INT): Your Highness, thank you for agreeing to meet with me.

Mari Brendan (MB): Certainly, Mr. Nicodemus. What can I do for you this evening? You have five minutes.

(INT): I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit about your leadership of the domain. I'm studying t...

(MB): I don't particularly care what you're studying. The domain is mine; my word is law.

(T): Yes, of course. I was just curious about your views on the role of your clan within this domain. For example, you are Nosferatu...

(MB): (pause) That is what they tell me.

(T): And does that affect your leadership style, do you think?

(MB): Mr. Nicodemus, allow me to be blunt. My leadership style is simple. This is my domain. You're welcome here as long as you don't fuck up. You break my rules, you die. You get in my way, you die. You ask too many questions... are you seeing a trend here? It doesn't matter if you're Nosferatu or Nostradamus. Period. We're done here. Good evening, Mr. Nicodemus.

(Note: At this point the Prince turned to look at me and, as I had been earlier in the evening, I was filled with terror. It was like peering into the pits of the abyss, and I could not hold my ground. As I left, my tape recorder caught this final exchange. I did not hear it myself, but upon reviewing the tape I discovered it and transcribed it as best I could. I attempted to place the voice of the woman speaking to the Prince, but could not be certain of its identity due to environmental interference caused by my hasty exit. It could be that of Violet Waldrop.)

Unidentified Female Voice (UFV): He knows.

(MB): No, he doesn't. Shut up.

(UFV): He's going to tell...

THE BANDAGED MAN

- 3 November 1993

I found an infant in a dumpster tonight.

I don't know what made me take him home.

Perhaps it's the desire for companionship, which seems to have cycled back again in full-force. I thought I'd rid myself of that for good. I've been free of it for ten years this time.

Perhaps it's simply that someone threw him away. He's someone's trash: human refuse.

REF-fuse; RE-fuze

I live in a dump, in the wasted space that's been left me by the modern world; he was left in a garbage bin - that's how you get things out of your space and into mine.

no ID means you're not real

I've gotten him a wheeled bassinet from the junkyard. It's missing a wheel, but I'm not sure what it needed them for anyway. It was a bit of a trick getting it back home in one piece, but a pile of old coats hardly seemed an appropriate bed for a babe.

I suppose he'll need a name, too.

More to do before sun-up. How does one feed a human child these days anyway, with no mother in sight?

- 4 November 1993

I found books last night, and the sheer number of things necessary for an infant has proven to be quite astonishing. It was fortunate that breaking into the lending library wasn't much of a challenge. I almost didn't have enough time to hunt down everything I needed. I barely got the babe fed and swaddled before sunrise; I laid him to bed just before I collapsed.

But he was crying when I woke up this evening. Why?

I fed him again upon waking - a strange substitute they give for mothers' milk, these days - and changed his "disposable" diapering cloth for a new one. isn't everything?

I am holding him as I write this. His smell is interesting, and I find his heartbeat oddly soothing. I shall hold him as I read through my books, in search of an answer.

(Later)

It seems infants do not sleep long at a stretch - certainly not solidly through the day-lit hours. I feel I should have remembered such a thing.

I've no idea how much he cries in the day, when I am dead.

I don't know what I can do about it. Surely he is better off with me than in a dumpster?

I must do more research.

- 5 November 1993

I have always believed that one can never have too much information, but I must admit that this area confounds me with its assumptions of prior knowledge. What experience could I possibly have, who never dealt with a babe in my adult life?

Not one of these scholars is in concordance with another on all points. How am I to determine the superior method without corroboration?

I find my long-repressed fastidious tendencies are resurfacing. This, at least, is largely agreed-upon as the correct approach, and I cannot give credence to those who claim children require dirt. I have discarded those books completely.

To prevent contamination of the infant, I have begun wrapping my face and hands in clean bandages upon rising each night. I cover the bandages on my hands with surgical gloves when I change him.

It is as much as I can do here, and it is not enough.

A child needs a home.

- 13 November 1993

I have spent the past sennight working to procure a home for the child.

It seems like it should have been more difficult.

The first night I watched a whole block for its comings and goings, and only one house was still. A light in one window, flickering with the pictures on the television, outlining a single pale figure in brief washes of color. He fell asleep in that chair, and he hadn't moved when I had to leave at dawn.

I placed a leaf on his doorstep before I fled the daylight, and when I returned at sundown, it hadn't moved.

As the nights went by, I learned that he had his groceries delivered, and a boy came to cut his grass once a month. He received his post through a slot in the door, and his primary outgoing communication was via envelopes of money left in that same slot.

Seven nights in, when I had narrowed my focus almost to the exclusion of all the other houses, I had a stroke of luck. From my observation point on the rooftop of the house across the street, I heard the telephone ring inside my fellow's dwelling. I made my way down and across the street with due haste, arriving under his windowsill just a moment after he'd answered; I was settling into the shadows there as a woman's voice came through the line - "Hello, Dad," she said, and even I could hear the strain.

She wants to know why he never calls her. Is he getting out? No, the light hurts his eyes. Dad, please - No, this is what he wants. He's old and tired and wants to be left alone. They fight, a strange fight; fine, she says, voice so tense it breaks. Fine! If you won't let me help you, you can just stay there and die alone, you miserable old man!

It's perfect. Alone in the shadows, I exult.

The old man weeps on the other side of the wall, but that's all right. His sadness won't last much longer.

It was only later that it occurred to me - I should have found someone I could keep alive to assist me with my boy during daylight. Well, I've learned the lesson for next time.

- 18 December 1995

Our first home lasted only two months - when a neighbor complained about all the crying, it became necessary for us to move. This time, at least, I knew enough to take a thrall's home.

Unfortunately, the privacy there was also lacking - it has been astonishingly difficult to find acceptable long-term accommodations. We have had to move - oh, easily a half-dozen times over the last two years. I believe we were in one home nearly five months though.

All in all, perhaps the sewer would have been steadier.

But no, the climate was unhealthy for an infant. I do believe I made the right choice.

And now I have a much harder choice before me.

The boy is at least two years of age now, and quite precocious. He is a talkative child, and I have done my best to teach him all that I can. But my books tell me that this is not enough.

He must socialize, they tell me, with other children his own age; he must learn to interact among them.

If I do not wish him to share my loneliness, I must give him up.

But who can I trust with my precious boy, my only son? Who will value him as I have?

This is so fucking stupid.

I don't know why I'm even writing this. No one's gonna read it, so what's the point?

The shrink says it'll help to get it all down on paper, and she was all "I promise not to read it" and "this is just for you." Whatever. I wouldn't be doing this "just for me."

I wouldn't do it at all if she was gonna read it, though. They'd never believe I'm not crazy.

When I was little, my parents thought I was just talking about my imaginary friend, right? Kids do that - I never did, but whatever. I didn't need to; I have the Bandaged Man.

I think it was when I turned six that they started harping on the imaginary thing. "That's not for big kids," stuff like that.

But I was just six. I didn't know I should just shut up about it. I knew the Bandaged Man was real; he'd been at my window every damn night as long as I could remember. I was six; the truth was what was true.

I kept on talking about him, even though I figured out that other kids didn't have their own. The friends their parents said were imaginary, really were. But I knew mine wasn't, and the more everybody told me he was, the more stubborn I got about it.

You would too, if everybody kept telling you something that was so not true it was just stupid, right? Like you can see the sky is blue, so why's everyone keep telling you it's red all the time? It's dumb, and you're right. Why do you have to be the one who shuts up all the time? How does that make sense? WHY CAN'T THEY SEE IT?

She said it was okay to write big, or swear, or whatever. I was just supposed to write whatever I thought about without thinking about it - it sounds really dumb, doesn't it? I'm not supposed to erase anything, just keep writing. I really think this is stupid. I'm gonna delete it as soon as I print it out.

So, I was kinda a weird kid. But that was normal, right, cause I'm adopted. My parents got me when I was two years old - probably two, that's what the doctor said, but they don't know what my real birthday is cause someone actually left me on their freaking doorstep. Who the fuck does that?

Somebody leaves me on their doorstep with a note, right, to take care of me. And their real kid had just died, so they decide they should. She was the same age as me, so they're all caught up with how right it seems that they should raise me and pretend that they're not still grieving for their real perfect precious baby girl who died, so she's perfect forever. They like to pretend that there's a higher power or some shit at work there, who gave them another baby in their sadness.

And I mean, don't get me wrong, they're good parents, I guess. Which is fucked up too, right? I'm fifteen, I'm supposed to hate them.

But I know better than that. I've known better than that since I was seven.

That's when I started to notice that people I hated out loud... just went away.

I've known that words can kill since I was ten.

That's when other people started noticing too, how people around me kept going away. That's when they put me with a real shrink, instead of just the regular make-your-kid-a-better-kid-stuff. I'd been with those types for ages, cause I was adopted and they didn't want to fuck me up any more than I was.

And I had a tutor, too, cause they thought I was a child prodigy since I could talk already when they got me. Like, really talk, not like a baby. My dad said I was better spoken than most of his college students. I didn't talk right away, cause they didn't know I could. They said I was totally silent, didn't ask for anything or cry or shit. They said one of their first real shocks was when I went and used the toilet, all without a word.

I think they baby-talked to me at first, so that I didn't really know what to do. Plus, I'd never seen them before. I didn't say anything till they were asking the doctor how old I was. Then

I told them - My father believes that I am two years old, though he is not certain precisely how old I was when he first found me. I was just answering their question.

They got all excited, asking me who I was, who my father was, where was I from?

I was just me. Sometimes I was the child or the boy. My father was Father. I was from my house.

I could only answer with what I knew.

So, anyway, when I was ten they took me to a real shrink, right? I think I said that already. It was cause I'd gotten in a fight at school. This stupid kid Paul was making fun of me cause he'd heard about the Bandaged Man, and he came up behind me and put his arm around my neck, so I bit him.

He was on my neck! I was just a kid, I didn't really know about back kicks and shit, I just reacted. He threatened me, so I bit him. And then I got in trouble for it! Stupid Paul had teeth marks in his arm, so I was the bad guy. They made me talk to the principal and I had to apologize and I was so mad cause no one understood how Paul started it and it was not ALL my fault.

So I told the Bandaged Man about it that night when he came by. And he told me how he understood. He said it was a natural response. He said that we only have three choices when we panic. He said if my enemy made it so I could not flee, then of course I had to fight. He said he'd have been worried if I froze instead. That makes you prey.

He was still there when I fell asleep.

But Paul wasn't at school the next day.

When the shrink asked me about Paul, I said I hated him cause he was a stupid jerk and he attacked me. Then she told me that Paul was dead. I didn't know, and I was tired, and I should have known better than to say it out loud.

"Oh - I shouldn't have told the Bandaged Man!"

That's what screwed me over, that's why I remember it. That's what made them think I was crazy, and hell, I was only ten. I held out some, but eventually I fell for the act and told them how I should have known not to tell the Bandaged Man because he'd make Paul go away, like Sally and Miss Jennifer and Robbie and Helen and Johnny and David and Brent and everybody else.

I didn't say it all at once. It took a long time for Dr. Mary to get me to tell her all their names.

She asked me how the Bandaged Man found me at the institute. How did he know where I was?

He just did. He always knew. When I asked him, he told me he kept an ear to the ground, to make sure I was safe. That's what he always did, except for that time we went to Disney World and I couldn't sleep cause I waited and he didn't come. Then I was bratty during the day and my parents got mad at me. He said when I got back that he couldn't make it all the way down there during the night. He was really upset. Next time I should tell him ahead of time so that he could make arrangements to be certain of my safety.

He always talks funny like that, like I did when I was really little.

I had a talk with him after they told me about Paul. I tried to explain about what Dr. Mary was telling me, about not hurting people. I told him not to hurt Dr. Mary, either, even though she tricked me and stuff. I had to tell him that it would be bad for me if he hurt her. If someone new came in I wouldn't know what they wanted right away. It took me long enough to figure out Dr. Mary, even with his help.

He didn't know they thought it was ME doing it. But you're only a child! How on earth could you have gotten into someone's room in the middle of the night? I don't know what they think. They just noticed, finally, how people keep going away around me, and so they think I must have something to do with it.

And I do, really, I guess. But I don't mean to! You know, sometimes when you're mad, stuff just slips out. And the Bandaged Man just wants me to be happy and safe. He was just trying to help, all those times. I mean, it's hard not to talk about things when you're angry. I tried not to have tantrums, but sometimes... sometimes I told him too much. Or I told him a name by accident. And then something bad happened.

Sometimes you wanna hurt someone, you know? Just for a little while, right, and not for real? Well, what if you had somebody who could hurt them for you, and he'd just do it to take care of you if you said anything about someone you might want to hurt a little. But he did it too much, and too hard, and all the time, for little stuff. Stuff you didn't really even mean.

When I got mad at him once and told him he shouldn't kill people for me anymore, he didn't come back the next night.

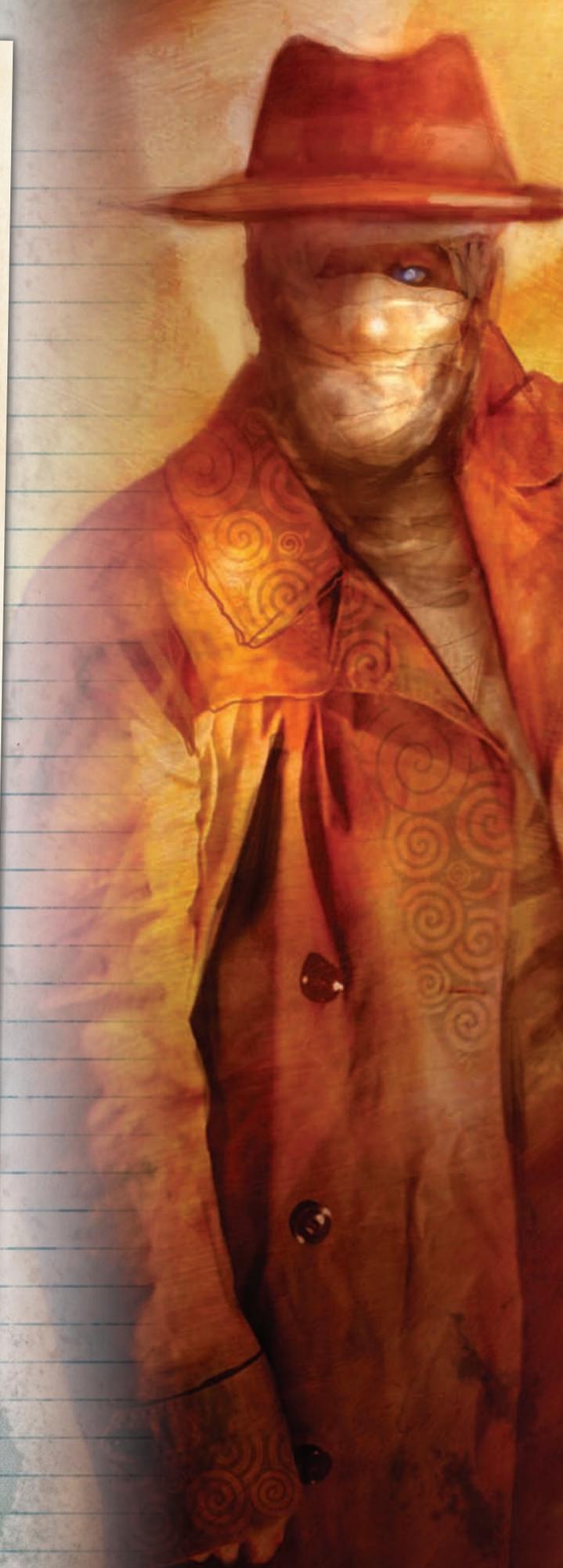
I heard on the news that three people were murdered that night. Nobody said anything about them to me cause they didn't have anything to do with me, but I knew it was my fault.

When he came back I told him I was sorry. I knew he only wanted to help me and keep me safe, but we needed to be more careful. I asked if he could maybe only hurt people when I said to, and try to not kill anybody. He answered that he only wants the best for me, and he agreed that it would be terrible if they locked me up over such stupidity.

Sometimes it worries me a little, that I understand him better than other people - he just makes more sense to me. But he's always talked to me like a person, even when everybody else forgot and spoke to me like I was just a kid. I know he taught me more than school did, when I was little.

I know he killed my sister to make a home for me.

I know what he does is wrong, but I understand why he does it.







GRIEVOUS AND GROTESQUE MASKS: THE NOSFERATU

EVENTUALLY THE PARASITE
BECAME A STANDARD CHARACTER...
WITH HIS OWN MASK.

-CARL ZIMMER, PARASITE REX

THE COCKSCOMB SOCIETY (BLOODLINE)



“They say that life is nasty, brutish and short. Good thing we’re not alive, then, eh?”

The Nosferatu of the Cockscomb Society do not wallow in their pitiful visages or grotesque leanings, nor do they celebrate them. They think of these things as a bit of a handicap, perhaps, but not insurmountable. It’s a curse. Why welcome it?

They endeavor then to reject the trappings of Nosferatu tribalism: they don’t live underground, don’t reveling in being reviled, and most certainly do not accept a low rung on society’s ladder simply by dint of unfortunate breeding. Part of this involves keeping connected with the human world—they may have monstrous blood and a hissing Beast, but they were once mortals, by god. They have a human side that shan’t be repressed.

Some might say, though, that they get it wrong. They equate “humanity” not with a spiritual quality but instead associate with human society: the acquisition of assets (money, property, items of status), the attendance of mortal events (dinners, dances, parties, balls), the mimicry of all things human (emotion, relationships, manners, body language, slang). That’s not to say they don’t connect with the culture of the Damned—in fact, they strive for power in that way, as well, accepting that such a goal is still human even if it’s performed amidst unliving fiends.

Bloodline Disciplines: Majesty, Nightmare, Obfuscate, Vigor

Nickname: Gents, Gals (as in, “Ah, you’re a Cockscomb Gent! I see the black rooster on your lapel.”)

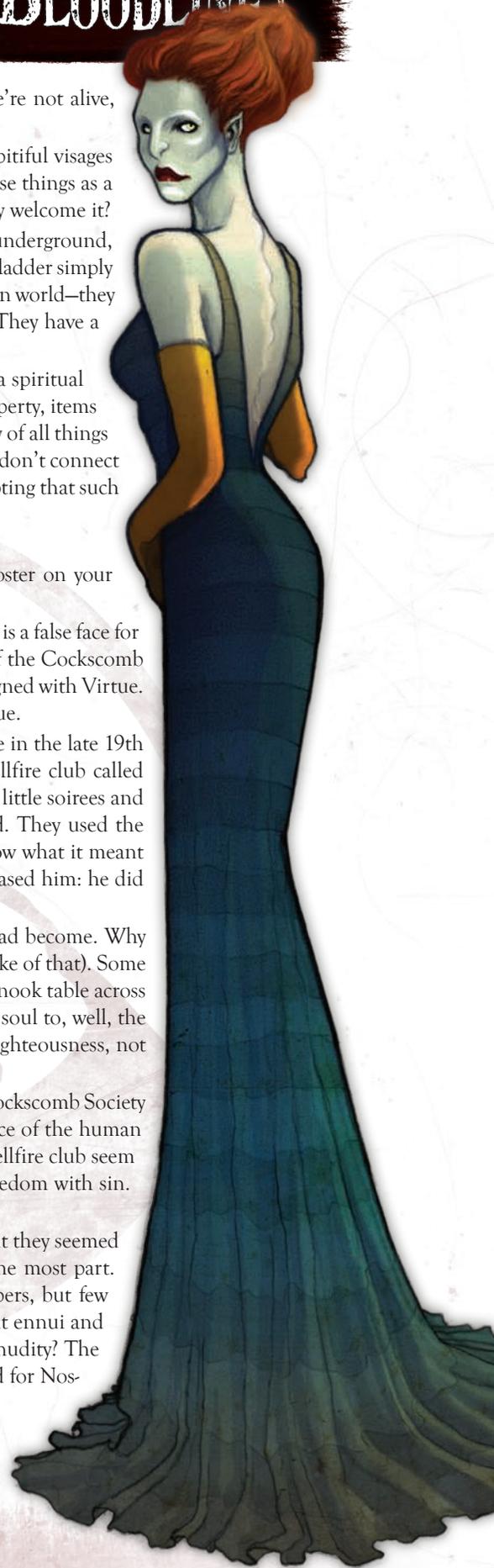
Weakness: They try to be human. They really do. Problem is, clinging to human ways is a false face for many, and worse, it gets just a tiny bit dull. Ennui is a grave issue for the Nosferatu of the Cockscomb Society, and actions in line with a character’s Vice are far likelier to thrill than those aligned with Virtue. As such, Haunts of this bloodline cannot gain Willpower back by fulfilling their Virtue.

History and Culture: This “Society” got its start with Potter Woolsthorpe Wycombe in the late 19th century. Wycombe, a Nosferatu, was one of the few vampiric members of a local hellfire club called “the Abbey.” He helped supply these taboo-smashing humans secure “assets” for their little soirees and “erotic gardens.” He brought them other vampires. The humans feasted and fucked. They used the captive Damned as toys and toilet paper, teaching the monsters that they did not know what it meant to be a monster. Wycombe did not involve himself in such activity except when it pleased him: he did it for money, and to destroy his enemies, not for any perverse thrill.

Then came the night that Wycombe came to realize what he had done, what he had become. Why the revelation, few know. He won’t say (and Wycombe is still out there, make no mistake of that). Some whisper he saw an angel. Other stranger stories tell of a night where Wycombe sat at a nook table across from his Beast. They sipped cups of blood. And the Beast tried to get him to sell his soul to, well, the Devil. Wycombe apparently refused and resolved to put himself on a path to... not righteousness, not really, but a path to humanity.

It didn’t work as perfectly as he had planned, though he and most members of the Cockscomb Society seem oblivious to that fact. First, their mimicry of humanity is not actually an embrace of the human experience, it’s a hollow quest to appear human. Second, Wycombe’s origins in the hellfire club seem to haunt his brood: as noted, they cannot help but give in to languor, answering boredom with sin. Secret sin, of course: they do not publicize their deviations. That could ruin them.

Reputation: Honestly, they have a pretty good reputation. Yes, they’re Nosferatu, but they seemed so well-mannered, so clean, so articulate. They aren’t brutes and oddities, not for the most part. Nicely tamed, they talk the talk, walk the walk. That doesn’t stop the sinister whispers, but few believe them. Stories of the Cockscomb Gents and Gals out there given over to potent ennui and thus giving in to great debauchery... well, it can’t be true, can it? All that blood and nudity? The gorging and regurgitating? The gross usury and rampant avarice? They seem so refined for Nosferatu. It’s probably just rumor.



PLAYING THE PART

(Majesty •, Nightmare ••, Obfuscate ••)

The recipe works a little something like this: Nightmare is the Nosferatu, the awful side, the wretched shadow. Obfuscate helps to hide that side, to conceal it beneath a veneer of false humanness. Add in a dash of Majesty for a little social voodoo, and voila: the Gents and Gals who know this Devotion can suppress their awfulness for a time and actually gain a bit of Social leg-up, to boot.

Cost: 1 Vitae

Dice Pool: Presence + Socialize + Obfuscate

Action: Instant

For the remainder of the scene, the Nosferatu gains a number of Social dice equal to successes gained on the roll. In addition, even one success allows the Nosferatu to avoid registering to the Predator's Taint of other Damned. The physical response to this is that in many ways the Nosferatu appears more human: a flush of pink to bone-white cheeks, eye color returning, a suppression of that slaughterhouse smell.

That said, despite their hopes, this does not do anything to suppress the Nosferatu's actual weakness. The Haunt still suffers from that no matter what he does to cover it up. The Nosferatu still betrays his identity in some way, shape or form: a freakish titter, an oddly lissome movement, an inability to blink.

This Devotion costs 15 experience points to learn.

LYGOS (BLOODLINE)



“Being afraid of the dark isn't about being afraid of the absence of light. It's about being afraid of the things that hide in the dark. Like me.”

Light is noise. Darkness is the absence of that noise.

At least, that's how the Nosferatu of the Lygos lineage see it. To them, the darkness is pure. It envelops them. For lack of a better term, it embraces them. They are the pillbugs and maggots underneath a darkened log. They are ribbons of shadow deeper than the shades of night itself. Light is garish. It does not reveal: it only confuses. When light shines upon a vampire of the Lygos, he hisses and spits and retreats from the luminous intrusion.

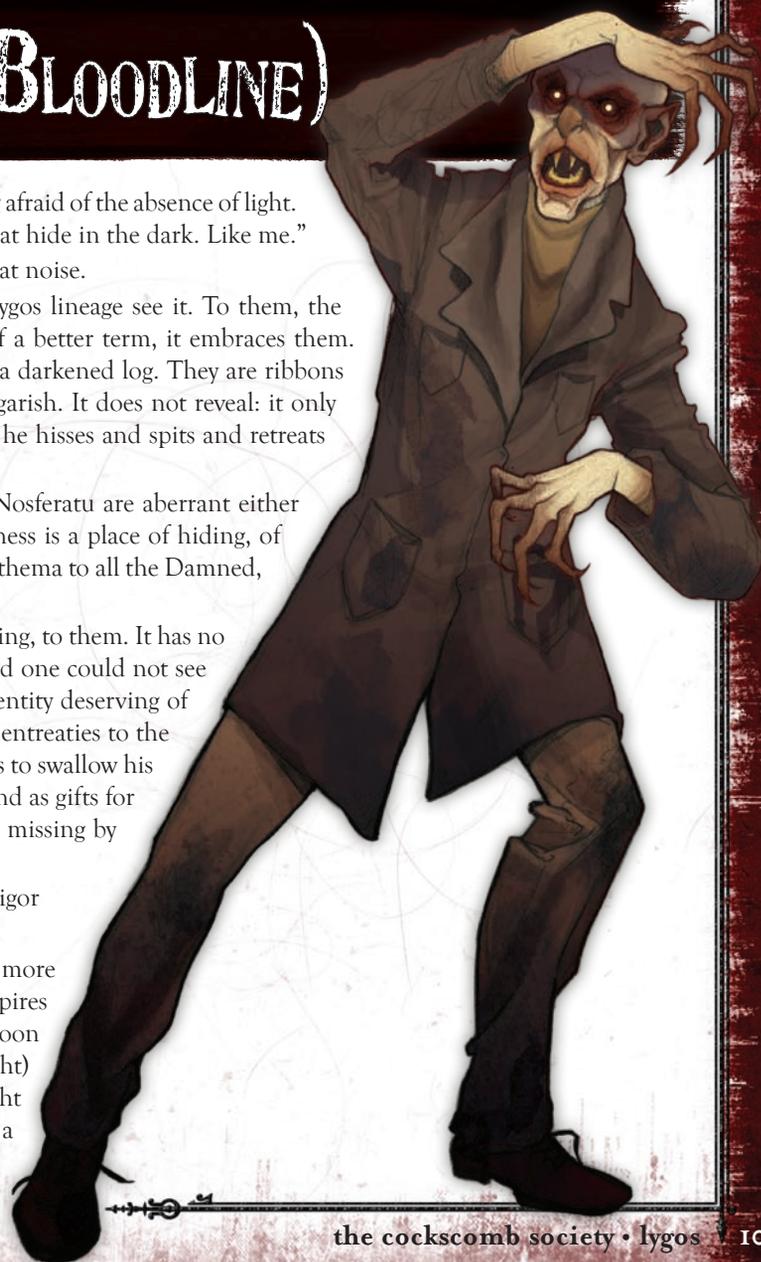
That part isn't all that hard to understand, really. The Nosferatu are aberrant either physically or spiritually (for some, it's both), and the darkness is a place of hiding, of safety, and of advantage. Plus, they're vampires. Light is anathema to all the Damned, at least to a degree.

But the Lygos? They worship the darkness. It is a living thing, to them. It has no name, and it has no face (for darkness is all-consuming, and one could not see its face regardless), but it is a real thing, an encompassing entity deserving of veneration. A Nosferatu of the Lygos whispers prayers and entreaties to the darkness to keep them safe if not sane. He begs the darkness to swallow his enemies. He might even leave little treats and baubles behind as gifts for the shadows, and none are surprised when those trifles go missing by moonrise the next night.

Bloodline Disciplines: Auspex, Nightmare, Obfuscate, Vigor

Nickname: Creeps, Shades

Weakness: The light really fucks with a Lygos' senses. The more intense the light, the greater the penalty one of these vampires suffers on Perception rolls. A flickering candle or a bright moon might incur a -1 penalty, moderate light (a bright flashlight) would force a -2 penalty, normal everyday houselights might incur a -3 penalty, floodlights or potent fluorescence causes a



CRONIES?

It might seem natural for these Nosferatu to belong to the Circle of the Crone, and this is true for some. But to most, the darkness is well-beyond the bloody fundamentals espoused by the cults of the Crone. Darkness predates *everything*. Before the world was drawn up out of beautiful chaos, there lingered only impenetrable darkness—the Crone might be a granddaughter of that darkness, but that doesn't automatically make her the deified matron of the Lygos.

-4 penalty, and the light of the sun itself stirs a -5 penalty. Curiously, this penalty applies to all Perception rolls, even those that don't involve sight. Light literally causes a kind of dissonance to the Lygos—for some, this manifests as a high piercing noise, for others an intense crawling of the skin (as if covered in biting ants).

History and Culture: The Lygos won't admit to this story, not ever. And it might not even be true (even though they fear that it is): once in the lands of Egypt there lurked a powerful Mekhet known as Nebt-Het Asenath. Asenath was said to be a childe of Longinus, the Dark Father, and was rebelling against him and hoping to stir awake old gods who might come to spite her sire. And so she walked to Ethiopia where there waited an old church buried beneath the ground, covered up because it had been made home to fallen gods, the Lord's touch erased from the stone. In uncovering the church she discovered a nest of torpid vampires: wretched, pale Nosferatu who had dwelled too long in the dark. They awoke when she troubled their grave, and they swarmed her. It is said that it wasn't one who performed the diablerie, but all of them together in grim simultaneity. In consuming the Vitae and soul of this potent Shadow, this clutch of Worms suffered what some say was a terrible corruption and what others (those of the bloodline) claim to have been a powerful revelation. They became the Lygos, servants of the darkness, adherents of shadow.

For the most part, the Lygos in modern nights stay far the hell away from the tempests and incests of the Damned, preferring instead to remain in the darkest places the city presents, a hissing nest of monsters. They usually do "elect" a representative, though, a bridge between the world of the rest of the Damned and the darkness of the Lygos. This go-between communes with both sides, and ushers favors and requests where appropriate.

I SEE YOU

(Auspex •, Obfuscate •)

In the darkness, the Lygos is king. He strikes swift and true. A broken bottle cuts across a victim's ribs as he staggers about. A hard shove from behind comes from nowhere and pushes his face into the hard wall of the drain embankment. A hand coils around his throat. And it's over.

Cost: 1 Vitae

Dice Pool: Wits + Stealth + Auspex

Auspex's Heightened Senses allows the vampire to see in the dark, obviating the need to flail about and hope to hit a subject (see "Fighting Blind," pp.166-167, *World of Darkness Rulebook*). Here, with this Devotion, though, she can split successes gained between Defense, Initiative and Speed for the remainder of the scene provided she continues to fight in utter darkness. Obfuscate's function goes toward concealing small movements and weapons, which goes toward making her more effective. Auspex tweaks her carnal and violent perceptions.

This Devotion costs 1 experience point to learn.

NOSFERATU MERITS

HAUNTED CHANNEL (• TO •••••)

Effect: When a ghost endeavors to communicate with the Nosferatu or manifest near the character, the ghost gains a number of dice equal to the dots purchased in this Merit. The Nosferatu gains no control over the ghost, but the ghost finds it has a much easier time communicating with the Nosferatu than with others, whether manifesting or communicating without Numina, or attempting to use Numina such as Clairvoyance, Ghost Sign or Ghost Speech. The ghost gains nothing to rolls made in attempt to harm the Nosferatu (though insulting or threatening communications still gain the bonus).

HAUNTED HAND (• TO •••••)

Effect: Whenever the Nosferatu makes a roll against a ghost (be it a roll to communicate with it, abjure it, exorcise it, or use a blessed item against it), the Nosferatu gains a number of dice equal to the dots purchased in this Merit. This bonus doesn't apply when attempting to affect a ghost's anchor.

TRUE WORM (•••)

Effect: Certainly not every Nosferatu lurks and lingers beneath the ground, and even those that do rarely make it a permanent home. They still have apartments, or live in gutted water-towers or in some teetering Victorian at the edge of the city.

However, some *do* live and lurk in the subterranean darkness for weeks on end, and over time they become accustomed to this place of forever night, an underground strata where sunlight never comes.

Those so accustomed needn't actually slumber when the sun rises. The Nosferatu can still feel when the sun rises, however: his muscles tighten, his skin grows a bit waxy, a bit tough.

This *only* applies when the Nosferatu is at least 30 feet below the surface of the world above and runs no chance of seeing the sun. Sewer tunnels that open up to the street still could have faint shafts of sunlight poking through: but the tunnels beneath the tunnels likely have never seen that kind of light. If the character is in an area where the sun touches or has touched even in a tiny way, the pull is too deep, and he must find a place to slumber or go deeper to remain conscious.

At sunrise, the Nosferatu still expends a single Vitae as if waking for the first time that night: his muscles unclench, his skin eases.

Drawback: While active during the day, the Nosferatu is at half his normal Speed (round up). In addition, a Haunt character possessing this Merit is especially harmed by sunlight. The Nosferatu suffers +1 Health point per turn when exposed to any of the sun's rays (see "Sunlight," pp. 170-171, **Vampire: The Requiem**).

UNLIVING ANCHOR (• TO •••••)

Effect: The Nosferatu is ghost-touched, literally acting as a specter's anchor in this world. Why is this? It's most likely because the ghost is tied somehow to the Nosferatu. If the Nosferatu claimed the person as a victim accidentally, that person may continue in this world, fettered to the Haunt. The ghost may have once been a member of the Nosferatu's own family, perhaps even a wife or a child that "lives on" as a specter, bound to the immortal vampire. It is possible, though, that the ghost has no actual connection to the character. Perhaps the character somehow convinces the ghost that he is someone other than he truly is, or perhaps the specter is grief-struck and lonely and gloms onto the Haunt because it senses a kind of "kinship in death."

This Merit works similarly to the Retainer Merit (p. 116, **World of Darkness Rulebook**). Each acquisition of this Merit grants the character one spectral follower that claims him as an anchor. Dots spent in the trait indicate the strength and ability of the ghost at hand. One or two dots suggests something akin to the power level of an apparition. Three dots are likely equivalent to the dice pools (though not necessarily the demeanor) of a poltergeist. Four dots suggests something on par with a deceiver, while five dots is closer to the level of a skinrider. (All such spectral types can be found on pp. 214-216, **World of Darkness Rulebook**.) The ghost, however, has a number of Numina equal to the dots purchased in this Merit: no more, no less, regardless of the suggested trait levels.

For the most part, the ghosts do as the Nosferatu bids, though certainly they cannot affect the world as a human retainer would. In addition, the Nosferatu gains no bonuses to communicate with the spirit, and may have to work to get his messages or commands heard (or felt).

Drawback: Ghosts are persistent and somewhat invasive. The ghost will perform tasks as the Nosferatu bids, but keep in mind this is a two-way street. From time to time, the ghost will demand that the Nosferatu do *its* bidding. It may have an ancient enemy it seeks to dispatch or may want something far simpler, like to have the character visit its grave and put a certain type of flower upon it. A good rough guideline for Storytellers is that for every three commands the Nosferatu gives the ghost, the ghost will give one in return. If the Nosferatu fails to perform such a task, assume that the Merit loses a dot. This loss of a dot might represent the ghost literally losing power, or it might instead indicate that the ghost is unwilling to devote the breadth of its abilities for the Nosferatu's needs. Dots can be regained through story and the appropriate experience points. If all the dots disappear, assume that the ghost is either gone forever, or is now hostile toward the character.

UNYIELDING MASK (••• OR ••••)

Effect: Many Nosferatu wear masks—literally. Porcelain masks. Plague masks. Gas masks. One Haunt might wear a sacred animal mask (bearing the vicious countenance of a bat or enraged dog), while another might wear something that evokes eerie beauty (perhaps feminine beauty, even on the face of a male Nosferatu). Leather bondage mask? Sure. A plaster death mask of an American president? Could be. A Mexican *luchadore* mask topped with a knot of real hair, stolen from some victim somewhere? Absolutely.

Why would they wear such masks? Different reasons for different Damned. The Haunts recognize that they're... bizarre if not necessarily in appearance then in the vampire's aura, and a mask may help to conceal more overt deformities (though it can also *heighten* the sense of strangeness, which is fine for many Nosferatu). Others use masks to frighten enemies, given that a freakish ceramic countenance can do a lot to accentuate the terror such a creature causes. Some are shrinking violets and try to hide from the world behind masks. Some... well, they just like the anonymity. A mask allows the Haunt to be someone different. Something *new*. Perhaps even inhuman.

A normal mask worn by a Nosferatu might offer a minor (+1) equipment bonus: the frozen screeching rictus of a monkey mask might offer +1 to Intimidation, for instance, while a beautiful and delicate dramaturgical mask might grant a +1 to Expression in the right circumstances. That's all well and good. But it doesn't require Merit dots.

What *does* require the purchase of a Merit is what's called an "Unyielding Mask." In this case, it's a mask that's literally affixed to the face. For the most part, permanently. Perhaps it's bolted to the face. Or the skin has been peeled back and stitched or stapled to the fabric. Or the Nosferatu used his own Vitae as a coagulant glue, bonding it to his pallid flesh.

It's important to note that the mask gains its power not simply from being a frightening or beautiful mask, but because it literally bonds with the Nosferatu's eerie aura and his disturbed flesh.

At three dots, Unyielding Mask protects against any Discipline that attempts to mentally or socially coerce the Nosferatu (Dominate, Majesty, Nightmare), earning the Nosferatu a +2 to the rolls to resist *or* a -2 to the foe if no such resistance roll is expected. At four dots, the Unyielding Mask allows the Nosferatu to gain a persistent +1 to a Social Skill of the player's choice. As above, Intimidation and Expression are viable, but so is any Skill. Subterfuge might gain a bonus from a snake-like mask (serpent's tongue and all that), while Animal Ken might gain its bonus from being soothing or frightening in some primal, wild way.

Drawback: The Unyielding Mask can be targeted and destroyed. Assume that any mask has a Durability of 3 and has a number of Health equal to the Nosferatu's own, halved (round down). Bashing damage does not affect the Unyielding Mask, but lethal and aggravated do. The Nosferatu cannot heal the mask directly, but the mask does heal one point of damage when the Haunt awakens for the first time in the evening (and expends the single Vitae to do so). If the Mask is destroyed, it confers a single aggravated level of damage to the Nosferatu.



NOSFERATU DEVOTIONS

WICKED GRASP

(Nightmare ••, Vigor •)

The Nosferatu becomes like a twisting python. Arms slide about his victim's neck and chest at impossible angles, legs seem to coil like constricting worms, even the vampire's *chin* seems to press into the target's flesh to keep him pinned.

Cost: 1 Vitae

Dice Pool: Strength + Athletics + Nightmare

Action: Reflexive

The Nosferatu may attempt to use this Devotion when grappling. If both the grapple and the Devotion roll are successful, Serpent's Grip has two effects. First, the victim goes to the end of the Initiative order. Second, when attempting to break the Haunt's hold, the victim not only subtracts the Nosferatu's Strength, but also his dots in Nightmare, as well.

This Devotion costs nine experience points to learn.

THE LOATHSOME FOE

(Nightmare ••••, Obfuscate •••••)

Much like The Familiar Stranger (Obfuscate •••••), this Devotion allows the Nosferatu to appear to a victim as someone other than himself. Here, though, instead of appearing to be whoever the victim expects to see most, the Haunt appears to be whoever the victim *fears* the most, no matter how unlikely that person's appearance may be. A man might see a mugger who put him in the hospital six months back, or he might see the bully who humiliated him daily back in elementary school.

Cost: 1 Vitae

Dice Pool: Presence + Subterfuge + Obfuscate versus Composure + Blood Potency

Action: Contested; resistance is reflexive

If the Nosferatu wins the contested roll, he may appear to one target as whom that target fears the most. Though the Nosferatu doesn't necessarily know the nature of her mistaken appearance, she will easily see on the face of the target the abject fear. Any rolls the target makes against the Nosferatu are halved (round

down). In addition, a number of the target's traits are halved, as well: Defense, Initiative, and Speed. The target literally feels trapped in a nightmare—running slow as if the ground is mud or a tangle of vines, being unable to work against an adversary, feeling overwhelming fear. Note that the suggested modifiers for The Familiar Stranger (p. 138, **Vampire: The Requiem**) can apply here, as well.

The Nosferatu's appearance remains altered for the rest of the scene. The Nosferatu's form reflects the fears of a single victim, and only that character is penalized. However, all characters in the scene are affected by the illusion, and see the vampire as person feared by the victim.

This Devotion costs 21 experience points to learn.

THIS AWFUL GRIP

(Nightmare •, Vigor •••)

The Nosferatu's gripping hand becomes something out of a dream: fierce, unyielding, able to crush a doorknob or snap a knife's blade in half.

Cost: 1 Vitae

Dice Pool: Presence + Brawl + Vigor

Action: Reflexive

During an attack on an object, the Nosferatu may now ignore as much of the item's Durability as equals the character's Blood Potency score. If the character's Blood Potency is 1 and she's trying to punch down a steel door whose Durability is 3, the item's Durability is now 2, instead. If her Blood Potency is 3 and she's trying to bend an aluminum bat whose Durability is 2, she can ignore all that item's Durability and do damage directly to its Structure.

Because this works on *objects*, the Devotion can be made to work against a victim's armor, as well. Her Blood Potency then equals how many points of armor her attack can ignore instead of Durability.

This Devotion only works on attacks made using the Nosferatu's bare hands. It doesn't affect grappling rolls.

This Devotion costs nine experience points to learn.

NOSFERATU NECROPOLI

Press your ear to the ground. Hold it tight. What might you hear? At first, nothing but the sound of distant traffic, the faint susurrations of water trickling or gas hissing. But were you to continue, were you to hold your ear so tight to the asphalt that the lobes scratched and bled, you might hear something more.

Could be that you'd hear the sound of pick-axes working against the old brick of forgotten tunnels. Could be you hear a chorus of voices chanting to some ancient God thought (and hoped) long-forgotten. Maybe the grumble of a tomb door sliding open. Perhaps the slow shudder of a generator roaring to life, and with it, soon the sound of power drills and whirring saw blades.

Something lives—er, *so to speak*—down there beneath the city. Something has made its home down there, a kingdom in the collapsed Metro tunnels and sealed-off sewage rooms. It dwells. It breeds. It feeds.

It's the Nosferatu, haunting the subterranean strata.

CITY BENEATH THE CITY

They call it the "Necropolis," taken from old Rome. Just as the humans had the city of Rome as their shining gem in the crown of the Empire, the Damned had their own tarnished pearl tucked in the silt and filth, the underground city of the Necropolis. The unliving city sprawled much of the length of Rome itself, carved out by Kindred hands and tools over centuries. Once, it was a point of pride for all the Damned, but as the centuries passed and social norms changed, the vampires soon came to feel that living cloistered in supposedly grand subterranean cities was simply not befitting such powerful creatures. No, they sought instead to live among the humans—or some, *above* them, in shining penthouses or offices of glass and metal.

But the Nosferatu stayed down there in the dark. And they picked up the shovels and worked their hands to the rough bone. They kept building.

The Haunts don't have a Necropolis in every city, and even when they do it's rarely very large. For some, it's just a few rooms off old train tunnels or beneath that half-collapsed parking garage. For others, it's a labyrinth of chambers twisted and tangled, a nest of temples and garbage pits and tombs, a catacomb of blood cellars and gaols and claustrophobic theaters.

How do other Kindred view the realm beneath their feet? Many don't even know that such a thing exists. Sure, they hear stories. But finding the way to a Nosferatu Necropolis is no easy task. The paths aren't lit, they aren't marked, and they're often lined with traps for the unwary. Is it really wise to wander into waters where piranha wait, or into a cave where hungry dogs lie in wait? If the city's vampires know of such a horrid place at all, why not let the Haunts have their little cubby-holes, hip-deep in human waste? It's easy for other Kindred to assume that such a complex is harmless, that it's best to let the freaks have their closets and cellars. But what happens when the Necropolis is home to a fomenting rebellion? Or the center of stirring blood sorceries that only the Nosferatu know? What happens when one night the Prince's favored Seneschal is taken swiftly and silently, dragged into the deep dark of the Necropolis? Will any brave the depths? Or is it like a penny tossed into a seemingly bottomless well, not worth the effort and danger to rescue it?

MAPS OF THE SECRET CITIES

The world beneath our cities is truly labyrinthine. It isn't just bedrock and walls of brick and asphalt down there. Most cities have some subterranean strata, be they sewer channels, subway tunnels, or even earlier streets and buildings. There's a giant bomb shelter beneath Beijing, easily covering 40 square miles of subterranean city and fortified against attack. A secret Chinatown rests beneath Oklahoma City, built by poorly-paid Chinese laborers in the 1800s to escape racism.

HAUNTS OF THE HOLLOW EARTH

In a way, the stories are true: a race of creatures *does* live beneath the Earth's crust. Some think of them as the *nagas*, grotesque serpent men. Others think of them as "deep dwellers" or "old ones," a strange fallen civilization of aliens or proto-humans who were cast into the darkness of the Hollow Earth. They say this realm has openings in certain parts of the natural world: Kentucky's Mammoth Cave, California's Mount Shasta, and Tibet's Himalayan Mountains. Some cities are supposedly home to such entrances, too: Rama, India; Manaus, Brazil; Cairo, Egypt.

Are these Nosferatu and their Necropoli? Very likely. It's possible that, especially upon the fall of Rome, many Nosferatu remained deep beneath the earth. Perhaps they carved tunnels over the centuries criss-crossing the continents... or perhaps they simply found tunnels that had been bored by something *else*, something long gone... or perhaps rediscovered and worthy of worship?

Paris is home to famous catacombs and ossuaries. London has its Camden catacombs, complete with an underground pool once meant for canal boats. The Nosferatu may make use of any of these—even if not directly, surely these underground areas have clandestine doorways or concealed tunnels that help lead to the Haunts' Necropoli.

Some cities, including Atlanta, Montreal, Chicago, and even Walt Disney World are home to developed underground areas containing hotels, train stations, malls and offices. Who'd expect that a Nosferatu might slip into the last stall of the Marriot bathroom at midnight, only to disappear? Would anyone think to look for a removable drain or a movable stall wall concealing the constricting access "hole" that the Nosferatu wriggled through?

Necropoli aren't restricted to cities, either. Like any other Kindred, Nosferatu prefer to gather where the food is freshest, but the suburbs and rural areas are also home to subterranean regions. These include abandoned silver mines, tunnels meant for transporting Army vehicles without civilians finding out, or hidden caverns. A Necropolis can be any of these places. Truthfully, a Necropolis doesn't even need to be below ground—the only necessary element is that it remain hidden, somehow. A series of skybridges, water towers and desolate rooftops? Fine. A line of bombed-out buildings (like those destroyed in the last World War) or derelict factories (like those you might find in Detroit)? Done. The Nosferatu gather where they can, or more appropriately, where they *must*. Where the Haunts haunt, Necropoli grow like moss, fungi, disease.

The following system allows both player characters and Storyteller characters can contribute to a city's Necropolis. This system is optional: a Storyteller may simply rule that the Necropolis exists without the expenditure of Merit points on behalf of any character, and that a Nosferatu character can make use of the Necropolis by dint of clan membership.

MERIT: NECROPOLIS

(• TO •••••; SPECIAL)

Effect: Buying points in the Necropolis Merit allows a Nosferatu character to contribute to the communal catacomb "kingdom" of the local Haunts. While it's possible that only one Nosferatu in the city contributes these points, the Merit is meant to be shared by some or all of the city's Haunts. One Nosferatu may possess the points which contributes toward the Necropolis' many chambers and sites, but in all likelihood these are still open to those allowed entrance.

Every point purchased in this communal Merit go toward the procurement of the various chambers and sites as listed below.

Necropolis dots can be lost. Nosferatu characters may betray the nest. They may fall out of favor. They may end the relationship held with their other subterranean dwellers, preferring instead to eschew the freakshow and try to carve out a niche amongst the "upper crust" of Damned society. Alternately, one of the Haunts may meet Final Death or be forced into exile by an angry Prince.

In any such instance where Necropolis dots are lost, the Storyteller and players should work together to decide what that means for the communal Necropolis. In some cases, it

might be easy: if one of the chambers is of variable dots (• to •••••), it's easy enough to lower a three-dot chamber to a two-dot chamber and accept the resultant vulnerability. Alternately, it may be reasonable to restrict access to one of the rooms until the lost point or points can be bought back (thus, reclaimed) by another Nosferatu character. For example, if a powerful Nosferatu Bishop lost his head, the Dark Temple in which he held Midnight Mass might fall into disrepair. Until the Bishop's dots in the Necropolis Merit can be bought back, assume the Dark Temple's benefits cannot be accessed by any of the nest-member Haunts.

If all the dots in the Necropolis are purchased by a single Nosferatu, assume that only that character grants or restricts access to the Necropolis. This Merit can apply to any Kindred, but it's very rare that the local Haunts are willing to share the glories and shadows of their Necropoli with any outside their clan.

BLEAK ANNALS (• TO •••••)

The Bleak Annals are a library... of sorts. Oh, never a *normal* library, no. Maybe it's too-tall walls whose thousand niches are filled with clay pots and in these clay pots lurk curls of papyrus. Sure, it could be books, but if they are, don't count on them being arranged by alphabet or by the Dewey Decimal System—instead, they're probably piled into teetering stacks or are scattered not in one room but throughout the breadth and depth of the entire damn Necropolis. Worse, the Annals might be something totally bizarre: walls made of shrunken heads that speak secrets if offered prayer, or a breeding room of rats whose squeaks and chitters could be translated into knowledge and wisdom for those who care to take the task.

Story Use: Some Annals detail only the exploits of their clan keepers. Others offer a ragtag collection of whatever strange information its Nosferatu "archivists" could scribble down on Post-It notes, in the margins of newspaper clippings, or on take-out menus. The Annals always have one Nosferatu who serves as a master archivist, the Damned who knows how to translate the strange system and find the information necessary. This is an ideal role for a player's character.

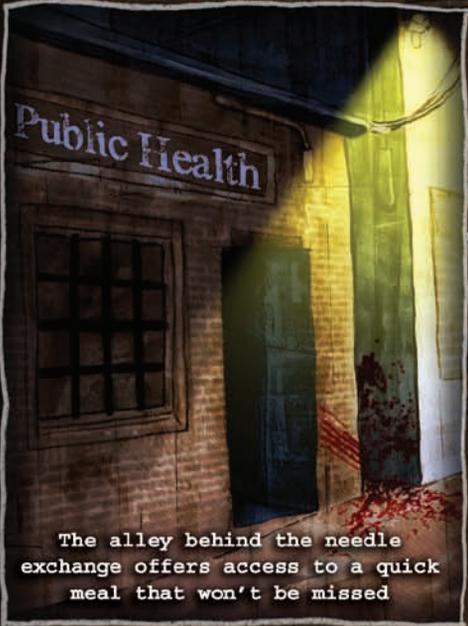
System: For each dot in the Annals, choose one Mental Skill Specialty. At any time, any Nosferatu with dots contributing toward the Necropolis can use the Bleak Annals and make a Research roll (pp. 55-56, **World of Darkness Rulebook**). Success on this roll allows the character to utilize the bonus from the Skill Specialty as if it were his own for the rest of the night. Note that, when purchasing dots in the Annals, the same Skill Specialty can be purchased up to three times.

For example, the Annals might be particularly focused on demonology, and if this Occult Skill Specialty applies three times, it grants a +3 bonus to all appropriate Occult rolls.

The Storyteller may allow non-Mental Skill Specialties to apply when appropriate, but these may only be purchased once. Those who do not contribute dots toward the Necropolis can still use the Annals, but have to pierce the veil of confusion when trying to decipher the system of organization. They must



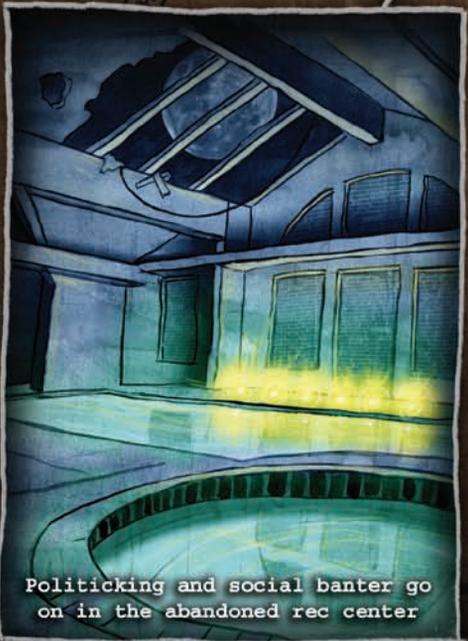
The potter's field specters impart forgotten knowledge to the custodian of the black annals



The alley behind the needle exchange offers access to a quick meal that won't be missed



Ashes of the dead leave thier blessing on the Dark Temple located below the city crematorium



Politicking and social banter go on in the abandoned rec center



A murder of white crows protect the labyrinth beneath the city

still succeed on the extended Research roll, but suffer a -3 to the roll and must gain 10 total successes.

CALDARIUM (•••• OR ••••••)

For some, the Nosferatu bath house is a truly glorious affair: tarnished brass tubs sunken into stone floors, the tubs and water made hot by a floor heated through with steam or stoked with smoldering coals. For others... well, in one Necropolis the bathhouse is a grimy series of pits filled with rancid blood whose skin (like that which forms on old tomato soup) is pierced by the vigilant stirring of blind ghoulish sycophants.

Story Use: The Caldaria are the social centers of the Necropolis: even those who choose not to partake in the baths still come to feel the warmth and peer through the gauzy steam, brokering the deals of the Damned that the vampires of the world above don't know one whit about. Here, one Haunt sells his herd to another. Or a coterie comes to beseech the aid of a fat-bellied Nosferatu smuggler. Or the whole of the Necropolis gathers just to shoot the shit. The Caldaria are the one location in the Necropolis that strangers *may* be allowed to visit. If the Haunts allow such a thing, then the Caldarium often lurks at the fringes of the Necropolis, a distance away from anything the residents consider important. The Caldaria is, in a way, a Nosferatu Elysium: one shall not bring violence here, or the Haunts will fill the baths with that one's boiling blood and bubbling juices.

System: At one dot, the Caldarium provides a place of social power for the Nosferatu: all Haunts within the Caldarium gain +1 to rolls involving Expression, Persuasion, Socialize or Subterfuge. At three dots, this bonus increases to +2, and in addition all present gain the Meditative Mind Merit. At five dots, the bonus increases to +3, and a dark serenity stays with the Haunt even after he leaves the bathhouse. For the rest of the night, he gains a +2 bonus against any kind of frenzy.

CATACOMBS (• TO ••••••)

Some Necropoli are little more than a series of connected rooms: a rotting set of pocket doors opens to reveal the library, a rusted porthole leads to the temple, and so forth. Others, though, have a great deal of space between the rooms, and in some, this space is a precarious tangle, a true labyrinth. These are the Catacombs.

In one Necropolis, the Catacombs are a series of long-forgotten and ill-conceived sewer tunnels, never-mapped and choked with the foul miasma of trapped methane. In another, they are a tortuous knot of abandoned mine tunnels or even an endless series of gutted bomb shelters whose matte gray appearances are damnably similar that over time it becomes impossible to orient oneself in the never-ending sameness. Some Nosferatu carve out their own Catacombs, blasting or hacking away at the rock to forge twisting burrows and narrow bolt-holes. Some even decorate their catacombs with a funhouse flare, with strobe lights, rooms of warped mirrors, floors that move, or concealed speakers that emit unnerving cacophonous notes.

Story Use: The Nosferatu use the Catacombs for protection. Those who seek to traverse the grim underground and

find the Necropolis have a great deal of trouble navigating the labyrinthine structure, thus providing a potent buffer against the Haunts' secrets. Those who dare to find the Necropolis often end up wandering the dark tunnels and twisting chambers, hungry, thirsty, blind, mad. They wail as they feel along the walls, driven to fits of hysteria.

System: Navigating the tunnels necessitates an extended Wits + Investigation roll, with ten successes required. Each roll is equivalent to one hour's worth of wandering. Those who do not have dots in the Necropolis Merit suffer a penalty to this roll equal to the owners' total dots in Catacombs. Those who *do* possess any dots in the Merit, however, may still have to succeed on the roll. Even the Haunts may find themselves periodically lost in the dark and distorted heart of their own Necropolis.

The Catacombs are almost unremittingly dark. Standard Perception rolls are hampered by a standard -3 penalty, and the "Fighting Blind" rules (p. 166, *World of Darkness Rulebook*) may apply at Storyteller discretion.

DARK TEMPLE (••)

Perhaps it's a small altar ringed with rat skulls, or a golden urn in which the ashes of an ancient Haunt linger. Or perhaps it's a bloody pulpit surrounded by rock walls made white with chalk crosses. Somehow, this room has become consecrated—*why* or *when* such a consecration happened is hard to say. The local Haunts may or may not remember. Maybe the Dark Temple lies beneath an open sewer grate that opens up in what they call "Murder Alley," and over time all that bad blood dripping down left an indelible stain (both physical and spiritual) on the room. Could be that some decrepit Nosferatu Saint (Saint Cheslin of the Boneyard, Splinter of the Monastery of Yellow-jackets) makes this room his sarcophagus. Or, perhaps it's just that this is where the Nosferatu choose to worship, and their grim energy has pooled here like so much sewage.

Story Use: If a Necropolis has a Dark Temple, it is the spiritual center of the city of Haunts. Here they gather to perform rituals in service to some old, mad god or goddess, be it the many monstrous faces of the wretched Crone or the one shining face of the cruel Lord of the Lancea Sanctum. The presence of the Dark Temple is also an indicator of the presence of one or several Nosferatu "holy men," whether a synod of withered Bishops or a Cybele cult leader who consecrated the temple by castrating himself on the altar, then burning the wound forever shut with the hissing flame of an oil-soaked torch.

System: The Dark Temple can only be consecrated for the Lancea Sanctum or the Circle of the Crone; to whom it provides its benefits must be decided at the time of the points purchased. The Storyteller may allow characters to actively attempt to "re-consecrate" the Dark Temple to their own faith.

The consecration provides two benefits: usage of either Theban Sorcery or Cruac in this Dark Temple gain +1 to those rituals, depending on whether the temple is sacred to the Crone or the Dark Father. Also, those with Status in the appropriate covenant gain +2 Social dice when speaking to those *without* such Status while in the Dark Temple.

GARBAGE PIT (••)

Trash has to go somewhere. Welcome to the Garbage Pit (which like many of the chambers listed here may have its own name in the Necropolis: *The Shit Pit*, perhaps, or simply, *The Ditch*). In some cases, it's the trash from the world above. Garbage seems to ceaselessly wind its way downward, as if seeking interment and decay. Other trash comes from the Nosferatu themselves: old blood-stained clothing, broken masks, pilfered goods from victims, and so forth.

Garbage Pits come in many shapes: a big broad room that stinks of motor oil, curry, mold; a pile of metal parts strewn across several chambers, the floor practically lined with raw tetanus; or a collection of bins which gives the appearance of some kind of organization and neatness but is truly just a bunch of bins filled with refuse and debris.

Story Use: The Garbage Pit finds many uses among the Necropolis Haunts. Looking for a present for your true love (a ghoul chained to a pipe on the other side of the underground kingdom)? Dig around, see what you can find. Need to hide a couple of corpses? The Garbage Pit is glad to swallow them up. Is the Necropolis compromised with enemies traversing and stalking the halls? Lead them to an ambush in the Garbage Pit, where the freaks lie in wait...

System: The Garbage Pit provides a handful of unconnected benefits. The first is that when aiming to use Crafts to jury-rig a device, a Nosferatu's player can make an extended Wits + Investigation roll to look for a "missing part." Five successes are necessary, and each roll is an hour of digging deep into the debris and waste. Second, any Nosferatu with points invested in the Necropolis gains a +2 to Stealth rolls performed within the Garbage Pit (imagine as him dancing across a floating pig carcass, deftly leaping to an oil drum and ducking behind an old Vaudeville sign—all in perfect silence). Third, the Nosferatu are home amongst the trash, and gain +1 Initiative here.

LABYRINTH GUARDIANS (•••)

Perhaps the vaulted arch ceiling is darkened not just by shadows, but by a carpet of shuddering bats. Maybe a pack of mangy hounds stalking the endless Catacombs, ribs showing through leprous flesh, eyes flashing in the pitch black. That skittering sound might be a flood of rats, the sound of a hundred spiders weaving a thousand silken strands, or a ravenous, shit-eating horde of cockroaches stampeding through unused pipes and conduits.

The Necropolis is home to bestial, avian or insect guardians: these beasts are lost, hungry, wayward, having gone more than a little mad in the tenebrous chambers.

Story Use: These animal guardians of the labyrinth aren't pets, not exactly. The Nosferatu don't control them, but the two have a kind of symbiotic relationship. All have become part of the shadow ecology, and so they accept each other. In many ways, the beastly guardians reflect the Nosferatu contingent in some way: should the preponderance of Haunts in the Necropolis be like the Galloi bloodline (thin, coy, beautiful in a sickly way), then the guardians might manifest as a colony of feral cats (perhaps even patchy Egyptian Blues or some other rare breed). If the Haunts are gutter-fed mongrels, then the guardians are mongrels, too—

dogs, vicious and starving. It can get as bizarre as the Nosferatu themselves: one Necropolis is said to be home to a mad, blind stallion called "Blackjack." The stallion gallops about, bony and sick, biting and kicking, whinnying and snorting like some diabolical nightmare. Some even say that ol' Blackjack has eyes of fire, he does. Few believe it, but few dare find out.

System: Purchasing Labyrinth Guardians buys the Necropolis a number of creatures that total up to 12 points of Size (which could be six cats, six ravens, three dogs, a variable-Size swarm, or some strange combination). All do lethal damage when attacking, and attack, they will. Those who possess dots in the Necropolis Merit get a bit of a break. The beastly guardians recognize their own by sight, scent, or something altogether more subtle and preternatural. However, if the character encounters the Labyrinth Guardians, she must give to them a point of Vitae, which they will sup upon and perhaps even share.

When the creatures encounter an enemy (be it a human sewer worker, a vampire intruder, or even just another animal) that doesn't belong (i.e. doesn't have points in the Necropolis Merit), they'll attack with all their grotesque fury. Should the Guardians be killed, they will be replaced by some other manner of creature that will crawl into the shadows, but not until the next story begins. For swarm information, see below sidebar.

LABYRINTH GUARDIANS: THE SWARM

The swarm exists as a Size 6 "creature," which is also the radius in yards the swarm takes up. For purposes of the above Merit, the swarm can generally inflict one point of bashing damage to anyone within its radius per turn. A swarm can inflict more damage by condensing. Every time the swarm condenses to cover one yard less of its full area, it inflicts two additional dice of damage per turn (representing a larger concentration of rats biting, bees stinging, and so forth), and the damage becomes lethal. Condensing is also representative of a visual horror: a leathery column of bat wings whirling about, or a squirming parade of biting centipedes overtaking itself as it tumbles toward a victim.

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 Perception and concentration rolls 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-effect attacks such as a torch or an appropriate poison 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 swarm is likely to disperse or flee.

NECROPOLIS SPECTER (• TO •••••)

Somewhere in the heart of the Necropolis is something that a ghost considers very important: a Polaroid of loved ones thrown decades before, the still-bloody claw hammer that ended the ghost's mortal life, or even a set of blueprints outlining the architectural design of the original Necropolis tunnels (blueprints designed once designed by the ghost himself). This something serves as an anchor for the ghost, and so the ghost lurks within the Necropolis.

Much like with the aforementioned Labyrinth Guardians, the Necropolis Specter is something of a key fixture in the subterranean chambers or caverns. The ghost is as much a part of the Necropolis as the Haunts who built or claimed it. The specter is in the walls. The whisper of water running down the wall contains his whispers, too. The foul wind that sometimes kicks up might carry breath of the wraith.

Story Use: This specter isn't entirely mindless. He's a character unto himself, and while he may perhaps become trapped in many mad reiterations of a single action (crying for a drowned child, writing a diary entry and then smoking a cigarette, or running from some unseen presence), he can be pulled from those chained actions and may at times actually communicate in some fashion with the Necropolis Haunts. This ghost may know secrets about the Necropolis, or may even know tales of decadence, perversity or horror that would thrill even the most cynical Nosferatu. Not every Necropolis Specter needs to be a vocal character—one could just as easily be a furious poltergeist rattling rusted grates and venting searing pipe steam in the faces of unwitting intruders.

System: Assume that the Necropolis Specter has stats roughly equivalent to the "Deceiver" ghost found on p. 216 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook**. The Storyteller, however, chooses an appropriate Virtue and Vice for the ghost, and should come up with a story to explain the ghost's presence and determine the ghost's anchor. Each point purchased in this Merit earns the ghost one Numen from the list found on pp. 210-212 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook**.

SEPULCHERS (• TO •••••)

The bigger the commune of Nosferatu gathering in the Necropolis, the bigger the need for Sepulchers. The Sepulchers are the havens of the Haunts who call the Necropolis home. Not every Haunt needs to slumber in these places, but many do.

The Sepulchers are generally gathered together in a cluster in one part of the Necropolis. Perhaps a half-collapsed mine tunnel, rock walls riddled with boltholes, leads to the sleeping chambers. Perhaps a busted-up bomb shelter's many Spartan rooms have been claimed by the many Haunts. Some, though, aren't clustered together at all, and are scattered throughout the whole of the Necropolis. Consider the general layout of the Necropolis and determine where the Sepulchers could fit.

Individually, the Sepulchers are of roughly equivalent Size, usually big enough to sleep in and to have a few personal things, perhaps even one or two pieces of furniture (an old rickety set of drawer in which one keeps her many porcelain dolls, or a burnished mirror whose glass has been replaced with a crazed painting of the character). In some cases a Necropolis may have

an "emperor" or "Senex" of sorts, and he won't sleep in the havens represented by the Sepulchers, instead keeping some grand chamber of horror and divinity away from the chattel. In most cases, though, the Necropoli are truly communal, with the space offered by the Sepulchers divided equally among the Haunts.

Story Use: A Nosferatu's Sepulcher is his haven: or at least *one* haven. While not huge, it does give the Haunt a chance to customize his space a bit: does he sleep on the bare floor, surrounded by tapestries stolen from a wicked sire? Does he sleep on a cot, beneath which waits a suitcase full of guns and knives? Has he managed to bore a hole all the way down from the above world and secure a shitty modem connection for his crusty old laptop? The Sepulcher might be religious, with the Nosferatu using it to offer worship to some old god or accept worship as if he himself is of twisted divinity. The Sepulcher might be where he keeps his Resources, recognizing that banks are too public for a guy who smells of the slaughterhouse: his money, therefore, waits in a rusted gun-safe.

System: The Sepulchers are purchased a bit differently from other elements of the Necropolis. In this case, a character must purchase his own Sepulcher, and the dots that go toward it are his and his alone to access, representing his own "private" space within the community. It's a bit like Haven, but here Size doesn't matter (assume all Sepulchers are about the size of small apartments, one to two rooms). Location doesn't figure in, either, because they're all a part of the Necropolis. And Security isn't something the character really controls: Security is largely communal, so assume that for every five Sepulchers in the Necropolis, intruders suffer a -1 penalty to discover and intrude upon the tombs (to a maximum of -5). So what do dots in Sepulcher go toward? Pick a Skill upon the purchase of a Sepulcher. This Skill gains a bonus equal to dots purchased when the character is present in the haven itself. The Storyteller must approve the Skill chosen, but nearly any choice can work with a proper explanation. Perhaps the Nosferatu gains Empathy dice because he has set up the room to scrutinize those who gain entry (the way a shaft of light is angled to illumine a face, or the way the walls echo every peep, squeak, moan). Maybe the Nosferatu gains dice toward Science because his Sepulcher is more a lab than bedroom: beakers and burners, specimens bound to a workbench with medical tubing, a periodic table written in blood on the wall. Could a Nosferatu gain Brawl dice? Sure. Maybe he knows every crooked floorboard, every cubbyhole of loose mortar (dust that can be thrown into an adversary's face), each iron pipe hanging low in the darkness... all of which allows him to move with an unerring grace while within the confines of his tomb.

TRAPDOOR (• TO •••)

The trapdoor spider constructs a burrow, then tops it with a spongy mix of soil, vegetation, and web. When prey walks over this "trapdoor," dinner is served.

The Trapdoor in the Necropolis works similarly for the Nosferatu. One way or another, a clandestine "trapdoor" opens up somewhere that is heavily populated or trafficked, though also somewhere that the trap is easily concealed: the dark corner

of a nightclub, a vent in the back of a busy dock warehouse, a sidewalk grate down a dark but oft-traveled alleyway. Or, it might be somewhere not commonly traveled, but somewhere that the Nosferatu can sometimes lead prey: think of a Nosferatu who answers a classified ad and asks the person to show up and bring the merchandise to a spot just in front of a hidden trapdoor.

Of course, not every Trapdoor is literally a trapdoor: some even drop down from ceilings.

Story Use: The trapdoor works for those Nosferatu who want food: wriggle your way down the tunnel and wait for passersby full of sweet blood. But it can work also for Nosferatu thieves (dart out, grab a purse, disappear once more into the darkness). Worse, though, it can also work for those who wish to gain entrance to the Necropolis: any who discover the way in might be able to muscle aside the hidden door and enter the dark

tangle of the Nosferatu kingdom. Of course, doing so presents its own dangers for the intruder...

System: Using the Trapdoor for feeding purposes necessitates that the character succeed on a Grapple roll, and this roll gains a bonus equivalent to the dots purchased in Trapdoor. The target gets a chance to detect surprise, but suffers -3 dice to the Wits + Composure roll. Successes gained on the Grapple roll can translate directly into points of Vitae gained, with the Kiss sealing the deal and the mortal going slack as the Haunt hungrily feeds in the dark of the tunnel. A Trapdoor can be found only by those looking for it: it necessitates a Wits + Investigation roll, and this roll is penalized by a number of dice equal to the dots purchased in Trapdoor. A Necropolis can be home to several Trapdoors, meaning this Merit can be purchased several times. A Haunt may even have her own Trapdoor that other Nosferatu don't know about.

OTHER CHAMBERS

Feel free to come up with other chambers within the Necropolis. A Jail between • and ••••• might indicate the Durability of the rusted iron bars or junk-welded doors that keep captives imprisoned. A Theater from • to ••••• might increase rolls to serve Expression or Nightmare by a number of dice equal to dots purchased. Hell, more technology-minded Nosferatu might have a Hub or a Hotspot (•) that allows them to connect to the 'Net and maybe earn them a +1 to Computer rolls.

All that said, feel free to describe chambers too that have no mechanical bonus. A chamber where beasts are kept or a parlor where Haunts hold cackling wakes for dead victims may offer no notable bonus and thus necessitate no Merit dots to purchase.

DEVIATIONS OF FLESH AND FEEL

Some think of the Nosferatu as... well, *freaks*. Deformed, twisted, with ghastly countenances and tortuous limbs. In some cases, this is true. The Embrace is not kind to any Haunt, and some end up genuinely malformed as a result, looking more like days-dead corpses and radiation-warped mutants than anything alive and human. The reality, however, is that most Nosferatu aren't that freakish. And even those that are, well, that's not really the problem, is it?

What's most concerning about the Haunts and Worms is the *atmosphere* that their presence permits. Think of a room whose angles are just slightly wrong, whose pictures hang gently askew, whose wallpaper is an unsettling shade of ochre or dirty cream. Think to the runt of a litter, a twilight sky and full moon whose color is a few shades off normal, or a simple drink of water whose passing leaves an unidentifiable aftertaste. None

of these things are freakish, exactly. If they were so bizarre and freakish they'd be easy to dismiss, almost comfortable in their extremes. But what's most unsettling about the Nosferatu is the sense of being just *off-kilter*, askew, awry. Whether it's in one's alien grace or another's charnel-house odor, Nosferatu are truly frightening not for the obvious deformities but for the ones that are subtle and speak to the unconscious mind's need for order and sanity. Yes, a pale grub of a vampire with rings of corpse-fat around his neck and fangs that are more tusk than teeth is off-putting; but what's truly disconcerting is the slightly strange color of his eyes (a muddy-yellow that occurs in no human) or the way his fingernails are perfectly groomed (and tapered to gentle jugular-puncturing points). It's the little things that get to you, like a chigger burrowing under the skin.

STRANGE WEAKNESS, WEAKNESS OF STRANGERS

The Nosferatu weakness as it stands is a purely Social one: the aura of strangeness that clings to them like a bad smell or a veneer of mold affects their dealings with others, as expected. Few feel comfortable around the Haunts—even others within the clan. The social drawback manifests as an inability to reroll 10s on Social rolls, and in addition, any 1s rolled subtract from total successes. This mechanic enforces not their inability to be Social creatures, but their inability to be *perfect* Social creatures. For every crisp rebuttal of an argument, for every lyrical canticle sung to the Prince, for every fusillade of blasted gossip, there lingers an imperfection. An uncertainty. A flaw in fine glass, a fly struggling in a teaspoon of honey.

DRAW BACK THE CURTAIN

It behooves you, when creating or playing your Nosferatu character, to recognize exactly *how* the above weakness manifests. It doesn't manifest anonymously and without effect. Even if the effect is otherwise subtle, you as player should know how to describe it. An eerie tremor in the character's voice? Fingers and toes too long for their respective limbs? Is she without hair? Without fingernails? Have half her teeth rotted out of her head while the other half has grown longer by a half-inch or so, turning from faint yellow to an almost perfect white? An odd pattern of moles and skin tags? Are her movements accompanied by the whiff of rotting flowers, or is each movement punctuated with a wet popping of bone?

She may otherwise look normal but for that one flaw. Alternately, if you want to go whole hog and describe a portrait of a true freak, a beast who is genuinely monstrous in flesh, go for it. But you should still endeavor to discern what *small* flaws and imperfections most disturb others. Obvious freakishness is easy to get past once the short, sharp shock have fled. As noted, it's the little imperfections that continue to unsettle: like when someone offers to shake your hand, and as you reach to grip theirs, you notice the pinky finger is a crooked, shriveled stub.

It may not be kind to be disturbed by such a thing, but human reactions are rarely kind.

FLAWS BLOOMING LIKE GRAVE BLOSSOMS

What follows is an *optional* system that requires no Merit dots or experience points. It only necessitates the approval of the Storyteller and your desire as a player to advance your Nosferatu's unnerving aura—both the good and the bad.

Below you'll find a number of manifestations of the Nosferatu weakness. They do not replace the weakness, but go toward describing just how the weakness manifests in your Haunt character. You can begin to refine the weakness and utilize this below system at Blood Potency 2, and the flaw continues to deepen as your character increases her Blood Potency. Each manifestation comes with either two Attributes or two Skills. One Attribute or Skill receives a bonus, the other Attribute or Skill suffers a penalty.

At Blood Potency 2, the bonus is +1 and the penalty is -1, but as your character increases her Blood Potency, both the bonus and penalty increase.

At Blood Potency 4, it grows to +2/-2.

At Blood Potency 6, it becomes +3/-3.

At Blood Potency 8, it swells to +4/-4.

Finally, at Blood Potency 10? It's now +5/-5.

For example, see Alien Grace, below. Alien Grace gains a bonus to Dexterity, but suffers a penalty to Strength. If a Nosferatu with the Alien Grace flaw has her Blood Potency increase to 4, all Dexterity rolls now gain a +2 bonus, while Strength rolls suffer a -2 penalty.

If the Nosferatu reduces his Blood Potency to a lower level, both the bonus and penalty drop accordingly. So, if the above character with Alien Grace drops from Blood Potency 4 to 3, both the Dexterity bonus and the Strength bonus shrink by one.

Certainly you can "take" such flaws while ignoring both the bonus and penalty, as the flaws may still go a long ways toward

CHOOSE YOUR OWN AWFULNESS!

Want to create your own blossoming Nosferatu flaw? Go for it. It's easy. Describe the flaw in all its unnerving glory—and show, don't tell. Don't just say to the other players, "Mister Nickel has beady eyes that freak you out," *describe* it in an evocative manner such as, "His eyes sit nested in the hollows of his head like black buttons worn on a doll's face, and wherever you go, these dark pits seem to follow your every move." The first is boring, the second is creepy. Always go with the creepy.

In addition, all you have to do is think about which Attribute or Skill gets the bonus, and which gets the penalty. This, of course, should be appropriate to the flaw: the button-eyes as noted above wouldn't enhance or penalize Strength, but may very well toy with Presence or even Investigation (modifying Perception, effectively).

Also worth mentioning: the below flaws may suit you in description, but perhaps you feel that the disfigurement or frailty manifests differently in regards to bonus and penalty. With Disquieting Tongue, you may instead choose to reverse them, allowing a bonus to Subterfuge but a penalty to Expression rolls. If the logic holds and the Storyteller agrees, go for it.



describing how you hope your Haunt character will unsettle others. Also, if a Storyteller allows, a Nosferatu character may suffer from more than one such flaw. However, in doing so, it's encouraged first that you only choose *two* such flaws, and in addition you choose one flaw that helps/hampers an Attribute and one that helps/hampers a Skill.

Note that while Attributes may seem to change, it's only a bonus or penalty to the dice, not an actual increase or decrease in dots. Related traits (Defense, Health, Speed, etc.) do not change accordingly.

ALIEN GRACE

Bonus: Dexterity

Penalty: Strength

Description: Maybe it comes from the way your character moves: with eerie, sweeping grace or perhaps with egregious movements (a neck that turns too far, joints that bend both ways, limbs that grow and stretch too long). As the Nosferatu's blood grows more potent, this delicateness and poise becomes more pronounced. But so too does the character find her strength sapped and fading. Could be that her bones grow hollow, or her limbs extend too long for the dead tendons and muscles to properly use them for strength. Yes, she may be able to dance about on the top of a towering gravestone, but to pick up a rock and bludgeon her enemies strains the limbs and forces tears of blood from her wincing eyes.

DISQUIETING TONGUE

Bonus: Expression

Penalty: Subterfuge

Description: It's... something about the Nosferatu's voice. It's got power contained within. Some might say magic. Perhaps the character's voice is an eerily lilting brogue, even if she was raised in Kansas. The voice might be shrill, deep, warbling, or just a susurrant like hissing steam. It's captivating, in its way, hence the Expression bonus. But when the character chooses to lie, the voice shudders and shifts, it squeaks or scrapes. (Note that this can just as easily be switched: a serpentine tongue may make lies sound like so much sweet honey while poetry sounds garbled and like she's gargling broken glass.)

HUNGRY EYES

Bonus: Investigation

Penalty: Socialize

Description: Those eyes aren't right. Maybe they're without pupils. Or the color in the irises are something you can't find in a fake contact (unless you work for a movie studio). Are the whites so bloodshot that the red overtakes the rest? Are the eye-balls too big for the lids to sufficiently close upon them? These mad eyes serve a great function to the Nosferatu, because it allows her to *see*. Like with an eagle, details are keenly manifest. But who likes talking to someone like that? Who likes trying to have a conversation with someone whose eyes twitch or whose pupils can't seem to stop staring at one's jugular?

POTENT PERFUME

Bonus: Presence

Penalty: Composure

Description: The smell might be pleasant, too pleasant: pungent honey, dizzying flowers, the sickly sweet smell of a room full of candy. Maybe it's not that pleasant at all: a miasma of death, a chemical brine, the whiff of burning plastic. The character's own charisma is in a way heightened: for some it's subtle and alluring, for others it's crass and hits a target in the face like a brick. But the potent affects the Nosferatu, too: that smell, always there, always in her nose. It's dizzying. And it can affect her Perceptions, too (hence the Composure penalty).

RUINED MOUTH

Bonus: Intimidation

Penalty: Persuasion

Description: Nest of teeth? Maybe. Cleft palate with tongue whose taste buds look more like a cheese grater? Okay. Lips twisted and ashen? Fine. Here, the character's mouth is a mess,

obvious to all who gaze upon her. When she speaks, you can hear the ruined maw in action, and she can't be too convincing with such a messed-up orifice... unless of course she's threatening you with an axe, or worse, a bite from those tusked teeth. Then she's suddenly all-too-effective.

SWOLLEN SKULL

Bonus: Intelligence

Penalty: Stamina

Description: Macrocephaly. The head is too large for the body. The skull is swollen or distended. Perhaps it is smooth and round and the flesh recedes from the bare bone. Perhaps it's lumpy, offering a disturbing topography of phrenology gone mad. The Nosferatu knows it to be a blessing, in a way: whether or not one's intelligence is truly locked away in the brain, it seems to pay to have a bigger one, because she can *think* all the more clearly, even sometimes through the fog cast upon her in torpor. But her body pays the price, almost as if it has devoted too much of its energy toward this gift (*the Blood giveth, the Blood taketh away*). Her body is frail, or small. Maybe it looks strong, but is truly weak. The head tilts and wobbles. The body suffers.

ALIENS AMONG THE DEAD

Eyes follow you, warily. Oh, sure, they laugh at your jokes. Somebody's empty-eyed thrall hurries up to refill your glass. They gather 'round, hoping to hear what delicious rumors have flitting like moths to land upon your finger. But they don't get too close, do they? Those laughs are more nervous than they are genuine. When you tilt your head back into a mad guffaw, some of them flinch—noticeably. And when you escape from the crowd for a moment, hoping to check on your own childe who's surely lost somewhere in the darkness, you can't help but hear a few of the whispers that pass in your wake. You can't help hear the names they call you.

This is the truth about the Nosferatu: they are aliens among their own kind. Let that sink in for a moment. Among vampires, among *actual monsters*, the Haunts are the freaks, the pariahs, the ever-present strangers. This doesn't relegate them to the gutter, of course: yes, some take all the withering glares and bitter whispers as an excuse to enter the darkness and stay there away from their so-called "peers," but it isn't an absolute barrier to entering the society of the dead. That's not to say it's easy, though. Dancing the dance with the other Damned, a Haunt comes to realize that he may very well be the novelty at the affair, the freak in an ill-fitting tux, the strangest example of "show-and-tell" that any of the assembled throng have ever seen. Or, the Nosferatu recognizes that they give him what seems to be respect only out of fear and loathing, not out of any genuine place—and yes, while it's still respect, it comes at that cost.

For much of the Damned, the Haunts are the elephant in the room, a cruelly vigilant reminder that vampires are *dead*, not alive. The way the Haunts wear the lifeless veneer (pale

skin, strange smell or dead eyes) is a persistent symbol of the unnatural nature of all the Damned, even those that look pretty or slide comfortably into sharp-angled suits.

The Haunts, plainly stated, are different. At first (and always for some), the difference is largely external: the flesh changes or the atmosphere around the character manifests in a discomfiting way. Over time, though, one's interior life—his thought processes, his desires, his fears—come to a certain strangeness, a strangeness that matches what lurks on the outside. The flesh is twisted and so the soul, or what passes for one, twists as well.

The question is then, what does it feel like to be a Nosferatu? What is it to be haunted by one's own eerie semblance, to be cursed as a lifeless oddity?

THE CURSE

Most call it just that, "the Curse." Others think of it as the Deformity, the Defect, the Distortion. It is, of course, when a Haunt's weakness takes hold after the Embrace. When the alien nature settles in like a hungry consumptive disease.

When does it happen? The Curse is not beholden to any timetable. One Nosferatu suffers the Embrace and upon waking, feels how his flesh has gone cold and rubbery, smells how his pores exude an aroma of decay and fish-guts. Another might find that it happens over the course of a week: every evening he wakes and finds some new *tweak* to his visage, like a person who discovers a breakout of hives or a new mole on her cheek. One evening

he finds that a single ear (but not the other) has shriveled like a dying flower. The next evening he startled awake to find several of his “old” teeth lying bloody on his chest (and he cannot help but lick them clean in a quick rush of hunger, an action that surely disgusts and disappoints him later). A third Haunt may see the Curse settle in day by day over the span of an entire year. The changes are subtle to him: slowly his skin changes hue, his pupils fade to white, his hair falls out in small patches every day. Though, to others, the Curse has already begun (meaning mechanically, for all Nosferatu, the weakness of their kind is in play from the moment they are dragged into the Requiem).

Is there pain? For some, yes. Never debilitating; it incurs no dice penalties. The pain isn’t even physical, though it may feel that way. It’s spiritual, if such a thing can be said of a dead tribe. The pain is deep, deeper than the marrow. And it’s worse for those who were pretty or overtly normal before the Embrace.

Is there pleasure? Can be, yes. Some revel in the change. The Curse sets upon them and it’s awful, but self-haters or those who are already freaks of a sort might relish this grotesquerie. Think of those who accept body-consuming tattoos or indelicate and strange piercings—they gain pleasure from the modification of the body in some cases. Some so-called “cutters,” those who slice their flesh for attention or to express their inner torment might actually feel a sense of relief when the knife parts the skin. So too with the Curse. For some Haunts, the Curse is a rush of relief, the feel that one is becoming what one has been all along. (And beyond that, for some pain is simply pleasure. The release of undead endorphins—really, just the stimulating of live blood in dead veins—can be quite pleasurable, indeed.)

TRANSUBSTANTIATION

Human blood enters the cauldron of the Nosferatu body and it changes. It’s alive, still, but not like it is for other Kindred. For the Gangrel, the blood runs hot, channeling the growls of the Beast. For the Daeva, it channels the salacious whispers of the vampire’s worst demons, an oily unguent that speaks of *want* and *need* more than anything else. The Blood of the Nosferatu is a whole other monster.

Some Haunts claim it feels like worms crawling around in the body, or termites gently chewing through wood—a tickling mass, a crawling chaos, a paroxysm within. This sensation only deepens as the Nosferatu’s black blood grows more potent. As she ages and feels the Blood thicken, the tiny worms become a rush of moths, the crawling chaos becomes a symphony of noise and motion that only the Haunt can sense.

Think on it. Try to understand what the Blood feels like within your Haunt character. The Blood is a destabilizing element, the thing that forces the character to be apart from all other characters. How does it manifest to your Nosferatu? Is it a symphony of discord playing in her bones? A carpet of roaches living beneath the skin that is felt but never seen? The Gangrel’s Blood seems to run hot, so it may be that your character’s Vitae manifests as an icy sensation like an injection of hoary saline or the persistent internal feel of a warm hand touching a wind-chilled gravestone.

Does stirring the blood to one’s dead limbs (either to strengthen them or perhaps for Discipline use) feel like herding ants?

When healing a wound, does ushering the blood to the ragged edges feel like spiders knitting flesh to flesh?

Giving or receiving the Vinculum might feel like consuming a cup of disease. Blood Sympathy might feel like recognizing a brother or sister in sickness. Those who feel the Predator’s Taint of the Nosferatu do not sense a wild beast or a social predator, but they instead might feel an overwhelming sense of unfamiliarity, as if perhaps being watched by a distant god or instead feeling a moment of cognitive dissonance as if one is no longer sane or connected to a sane universe.

The Blood of the Nosferatu is what makes them alien. You decide precisely how.

HUMANITY TO INCONGRUITY

The Nosferatu loses Humanity like any other vampire, by committing sins that distance him from human norms and mores. But yet again the question is, how does this *feel*? For the Gangrel, the loss of Humanity is something that pushes the vampire closer to her Beast—and while this could be said of all vampires, for the Savage it represents a slide toward wildness, toward an untamed brutality. For the Daeva it offers a seduction to sin and perversion: her Beast manifests as the inescapable allure of one’s Vice.

A Haunt, however, finds that his Humanity fades with a whole different feel. Yes, it still represents a closing proximity to one’s Beast, but what does that mean? One Nosferatu describes it in terms of being drawn into a spider’s embrace, a thickening cocoon of silk binding the flesh and mind. See, losing Humanity is literally that for the Nosferatu. One’s humanness fades, replaced by the alien strangeness exhibited by all of their kind. With each degeneration, you as player are encouraged to come up with a new way in which your character separates from the human herd. Some new foible? Or some lost habit?

Perhaps your Haunt, upon losing a dot of Humanity, now fails to include any kind of human politeness in his speech: gone is any semblance of *please* or *thank you* or any human vocal cues at all. It’s all cold language, direct and affronting. Alternately, perhaps it goes the other way. Now your character is *all* politeness, manners performed at a truly uncomfortable level—even as she’s slowly draining some club kid of his blood she’s all *Please may I drink you dry?* and *Thank you for this bountiful offering*.

These don’t need to be mechanical in nature and don’t necessarily need to reflect a gained derangement. It’s simply some strange new manifestation of her strangeness. Maybe now she smiles *all the time*. Perhaps she destroys her body in unnerving little ways: biting off fingernails, pulling flesh from her dry lips, scratching at her scalp until a faint trickle of muddy blood drizzles down the bridge of her nose. It could even be that her posture is now perfect (stock straight all the time) or ruined (bent at a cock-eyed angle even when running).

Loss of Humanity is literally a widening gulf between the Nosferatu character and her once-humanness. How it manifests is in your hands.

SAMPLE CHARACTERS

MARY CONTRARY

Quotes: “Yeah! Fuck you. Fuck your pretty face. Fuck your shiny car. Fuck your tit job, your cell phone, your Labradoodle ghoul. Bitch cock shitfucker!”

*“*belches up a bubble of blood*”*

“I see you lookin’ at me. You don’t know whether you want to fight me or fuck me. I got a body like an angel and a face like a bat. When you figure out what you want, you come tap me on the shoulder, yeah?”

Background: The other schoolkids beat her up as a child. Said she was U G L Y ugly. Her parents—affluent, upper middle class, alarmingly normal—didn’t like the undue attention she drew to herself. They said she invited it, even though she really just tried to get through her day. By junior high, they were sending her abroad to various schools, pushing her to get a “diverse” education at the hands of several private institutions. Truth is, they just didn’t want to deal with her. They had no other kids and found her a burden: more a devil than an angel, even though she was well-behaved.

Cut to last year, when Mary got drunk on the night of her college graduation in the city, drunk because her parents didn’t show up, because she didn’t have any friends, because she felt as low as a worm ground into the cracks of a cement sidewalk. A few of her classmates—boys, damn near as drunk as she was—thought to have a bit of fun with her. They thought to use her, abuse her. Get her naked. Laugh a bit. If she got lippy, give her a swift punch to the gut.

They only got so far. As Mary wailed, her naked back pressed against the fire escape, something swept down. Throats opened. Blood poured out upon her. She was saved, or so she thought: then the thing came for her, too. Teeth deep. Blood gone. Then, blood right back in, a foul effluence drizzled upon her tongue that suddenly tasted sweet, too sweet.

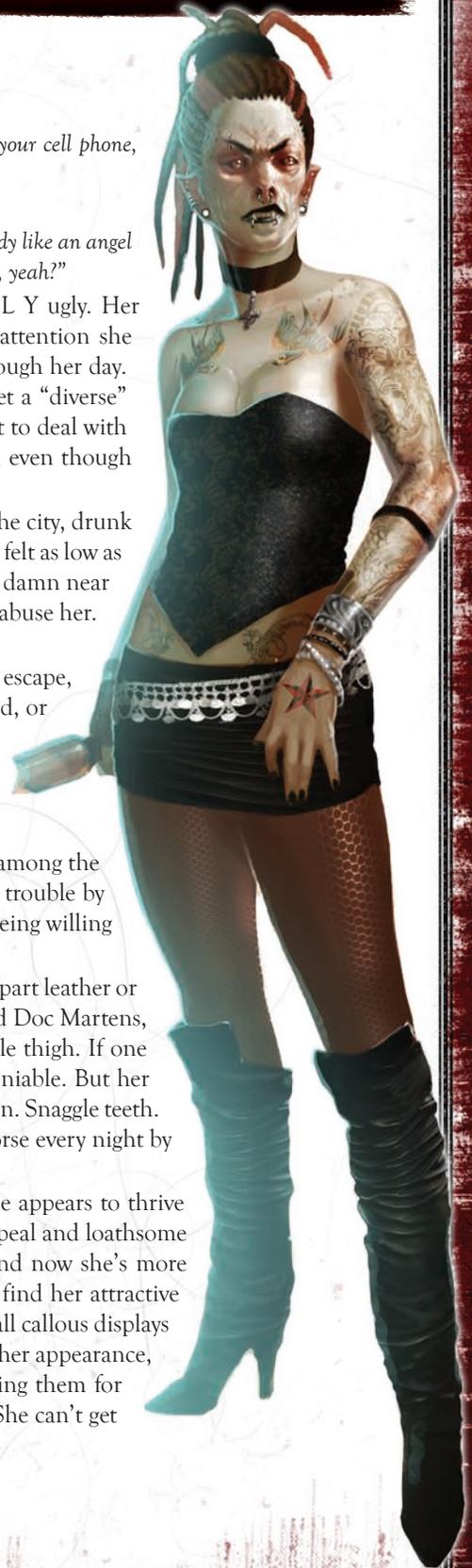
The Requiem has been... kinder to her than to some. Certainly she feels more empowered, now. She’s chosen no covenant but has a number of friends and allies among the Carthians and will likely end up there in the next year or three. She gets herself in trouble by saying the wrong thing to the wrong people, but it’s also earned her some cred for being willing to rant and rave in the face of authority.

Description: Every night, Mary wriggles into some skimpy tight get-up, something part leather or half lingerie. She slides on high, spike-heeled boots, or maybe a pair of blood-stained Doc Martens, or maybe she just goes barefoot. Her cleavage is good to go. She always shows a little thigh. If one were to just gaze upon her body, well, the attraction would be imminent and undeniable. But her face? Oh, poor Mary’s face. It looks like it’s been hit with a shovel. Over and over again. Snaggle teeth. Cleft lip. Eyes too big for her head. Nose crushed against her skull. She makes it worse every night by sticking new piercings and ink on her face flesh, too.

Storytelling Hints: Mary seems to relish in the shock her appearance causes; she appears to thrive on their reaction, and she eggs it on, loving the crass dichotomy between her sex appeal and loathsome visage. Truth is, though? It’s something of a front. Mary’s never been attractive and now she’s more hideous than ever before. Those who find her disgusting hurt her, and those who find her attractive revolt her. She hides these feelings, of course; with her, it’s all bluster and boldness, all callous displays and cackling laughter. When Mary find someone who seems generally unaffected by her appearance, that person becomes something of a challenge. She ends up loving them or loathing them for their blasé disinterest. A good example? One of her local crew, Burn Barrel Matty. She can’t get a read off this lunatic, and that’s why she loves him, and that’s why she hates him.

Clan: Nosferatu

Covenant: None (Carthans, soon)



Embrace: Last year

Apparent Age: 21

Mental Attributes: Intelligence 2, Wits 3, Resolve 2

Physical Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 2

Social Attributes: Presence 3, Manipulation 3, Composure 2

Mental Skills: Academics (Useless Information) 3, Computer 1, Investigation 1, Occult 1, Politics 1

Physical Skills: Athletics 1, Brawl 1, Larceny 2, Stealth 1

Social Skills: Empathy (Pain) 3, Expression 1, Intimidation (In Your Face) 3, Socialize 2, Subterfuge 1, Streetwise 1

Merits: Allies (Carthian Movement) 2, Fast Reflexes 1, Language (French) 2, Striking Looks 2

Willpower: 4

Humanity: 7

Virtue: Fortitude. For better or worse, she's a survivor. Other girls might've slit their wrists or swallowed a mug full of Vicodin years ago.

Vice: Envy. Oh, she'll never admit it. But she envies so deeply, she's jealous of something about everyone.

Health: 7

Initiative: 6

Defense: 3

Speed: 10

Blood Potency: 1

Disciplines: Nightmare 2, Vigor 1

Vitae/per Turn: 10/1

MARY CONTRARY IN THIS BOOK

Mary Contrary might belong within the ranks of either the Worm Lord or the War Pig. It's likelier that she'd join the ranks of the Worm Lord given her apparent outward selfishness, but the War Pig's army offers her the chance to express her anger and frustration more overtly.

WELDON FONTAINE

Quotes: "No, you've nothing to worry from me. I don't associate much with that crowd. They stick to their roach motels and rat traps. I have a lovely townhouse."

"I have a nose for money, truly."

"What will it take to convince you of my loyalty? Say the word, and I shall do it."

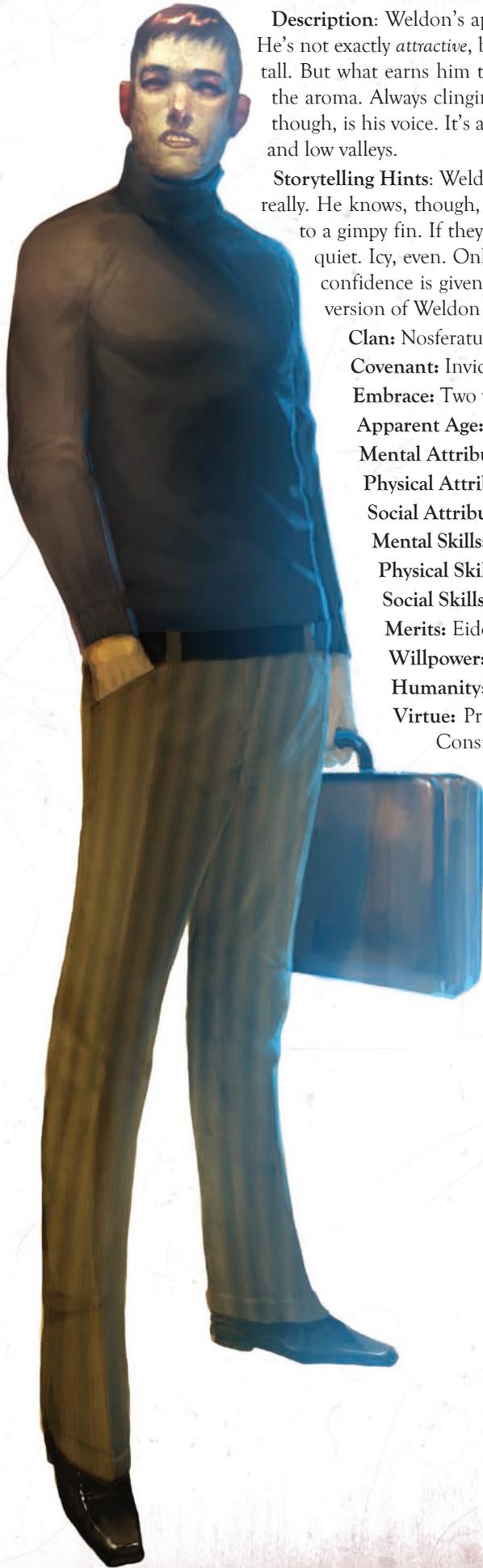
Background: Weldon Fontaine comes from old money. Banker money. Why was it that his sire, Blackjack Carver, targeted him for the Embrace? Carver's never really been clear about that. Something about Carver's own human family, and something about how the Fontaine Bank did something to them with money and foreclosure and... well, who knows? Weldon certainly doesn't. All he knows is that one night on his way home from the movies with his fiancée, Carver attacked. Broke the soon-to-be-wife's neck. Dragged Weldon kicking and screaming into the Embrace.

For the first year of his Requiem, Weldon found himself abused at the hands of his sire. Physically, mentally, emotionally. And it's not like Weldon's a tough old soul: he crumpled like a paper cup with the first kick. But Carver was relentless, a true monster.

The Invictus saved Weldon Fontaine, and to them he owes their life. While Carver was out hunting, they sent a small party to "collect" Fontaine. Certainly it had to do with their own interests: Weldon had access to money, lines of credit, investments, all manner of resources. Things that the local First Estaters wanted. And hey, they rescued him. He was glad to provide.

He's *still* glad to provide. They've found him a valuable ally, because not only does he have the connections, he is also gifted in the financial and political spheres. Weldon's capable of smart moves and good advice, even as a neonate. In fact, him *being* a neonate gives him a proximity to the mortal world that other more "aged" vampires cannot manage.

So, for now, they protect him from Carver. And make no mistake: Carver wants his childe back. His abuse and anger have not yet seen a satisfying conclusion.



Description: Weldon's appearance doesn't have the freakishness some expect from the Nosferatu. He's not exactly *attractive*, but for the most part he looks human. Perhaps a bit gangly. Certainly too-tall. But what earns him the strange looks and shivers are two things, both intangible. The first is the aroma. Always clinging to his suits and skin is the unmistakable smell of sour milk. Stranger, though, is his voice. It's a tremulous thing, wavering and unstable, vacillating between high pitches and low valleys.

Storytelling Hints: Weldon's nervous, but he tries dearly not to show it. He's pretty good about it, really. He knows, though, that he's swimming with sharks—and his clan association is tantamount to a gimpy fin. If they smell his weakness, they'll bite him in half. So for the most part he stays quiet. Icy, even. Only rarely does he speak out or seem to get excited: any moment where his confidence is given the room to surge is sure to show a different, madder, more "keyed up" version of Weldon Fontaine...

Clan: Nosferatu

Covenant: Invictus

Embrace: Two years hence

Apparent Age: 32

Mental Attributes: Intelligence 4, Wits 2, Resolve 3

Physical Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 1

Social Attributes: Presence 2, Manipulation 3, Composure 3

Mental Skills: Academics (Economy) 2, Computer 1, Investigation (Financial) 4, Politics 4

Physical Skills: Drive 1, Firearms (Derringer) 1, Stealth 2

Social Skills: Persuasion 3, Socialize 2, Subterfuge 2

Merits: Eidetic Memory, Resources 3, Status (Invictus) 1

Willpower: 6

Humanity: 7

Virtue: Prudence. Weldon plays his cards close. He values restraint above all else. Consider this quote from *Glengarry Glen Ross*: "Don't open your mouth until you know what the shot is."

Vice: Greed. Plainly stated, it's an inherited trait. Weldon loves to possess.

Health: 6

Initiative: 6

Defense: 2

Speed: 9

Blood Potency: 2

Disciplines: Obfuscate 3

Vitae/per Turn: 11/1

WELDON IN THIS BOOK

Could Weldon be a money-man for the Worm Lord? Sure, but not likely. He's not really that comfortable with other Nosferatu. More likely, his need for security would lead him to clandestinely throw in with the War Pig. Still, he's no soldier, and not even much of a killer. When the city's burning and his back's against the wall, whose side will he choose?



NOSFERATU

THE BEAST THAT HAUNTS THE BLOOD



NAME: *Mary Contrary*

PLAYER:

CHRONICLE:

CONCEPT: *The Ugly One*

VIRTUE: *Fortitude*

VICE: *Envy*

CLAN: *Nosferatu*

COVENANT: *(Carthians, soon)*

COTERIE:

ATTRIBUTES

POWER

INTELLIGENCE ●●○○○

STRENGTH ●●○○○

PRESENCE ●●●○○

FINESSE

WITS ●●●○○

DEXTERITY ●●●○○

MANIPULATION ●●●○○

RESISTANCE

RESOLVE ●●○○○

STAMINA ●●○○○

COMPOSURE ●●○○○

SKILLS

MENTAL

(-3 unskilled)

ACADEMICS *Useless Information* ●●●○○

COMPUTER ●○○○○

CRAFTS ○○○○○

INVESTIGATION ●○○○○

MEDICINE ○○○○○

OCCULT ●○○○○

POLITICS ●○○○○

SCIENCE ○○○○○

PHYSICAL

(-1 unskilled)

ATHLETICS ●○○○○

BRAWL ●○○○○

DRIVE ○○○○○

FIREARMS ○○○○○

LARCENY ●●○○○

STEALTH ●○○○○

SURVIVAL ○○○○○

WEAPONRY ○○○○○

SOCIAL

(-1 unskilled)

ANIMAL KEN ○○○○○

EMPATHY *Pain* ●●●○○

EXPRESSION ●○○○○

INTIMIDATION *In Your Face* ●●●○○

PERSUASION ○○○○○

SOCIALIZE ●●○○○

STREETWISE ●○○○○

SUBTERFUGE ●○○○○

OTHER TRAITS

MERITS

Allies (Carthian Movement) ●●○○○

Fast Reflexes ●○○○○

Language (French) ●●○○○

Striking Looks ●●○○○

○○○○○

○○○○○

○○○○○

○○○○○

FLAWS

DISCIPLINES

Nightmare ●●○○○

Vigor ●○○○○

○○○○○

○○○○○

○○○○○

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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 10 [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





NOSFERATU



THE BEAST THAT HAUNTS THE BLOOD

NAME: *Weldon Fontaine*

PLAYER:

CHRONICLE:

CONCEPT: *Old Money*

VIRTUE: *Prudence*

VICE: *Greed*

CLAN: *Nosferatu*

COVENANT: *Invictus*

COTERIE:

ATTRIBUTES

POWER

INTELLIGENCE ●●●●○

STRENGTH ●●○○○

PRESENCE ●●○○○

FINESSE

WITS ●●○○○

DEXTERITY ●●○○○

MANIPULATION ●●○○○

RESISTANCE

RESOLVE ●●●○○

STAMINA ●○○○○

COMPOSURE ●●○○○

SKILLS

MENTAL

(-3 unskilled)

ACADEMICS *Economics* ●●○○○

COMPUTER ●○○○○

CRAFTS ○○○○○

INVESTIGATION *Financial* ●●●●○

MEDICINE ○○○○○

OCCULT ○○○○○

POLITICS ●●●●○

SCIENCE ○○○○○

PHYSICAL

(-1 unskilled)

ATHLETICS ○○○○○

BRAWL ○○○○○

DRIVE ●○○○○

FIREARMS *Derringer* ●○○○○

LARCENY ○○○○○

STEALTH ●●○○○

SURVIVAL ○○○○○

WEAPONRY ○○○○○

SOCIAL

(-1 unskilled)

ANIMAL KEN ○○○○○

EMPATHY ○○○○○

EXPRESSION ○○○○○

INTIMIDATION ○○○○○

PERSUASION ●●●○○

SOCIALIZE ●●○○○

STREETWISE ○○○○○

SUBTERFUGE ●●○○○

OTHER TRAITS

MERITS

Eidetic Memory ○○○○○

Resources ●●●○○

Status (Invictus) ●○○○○

○○○○○

○○○○○

○○○○○

○○○○○

○○○○○

FLAWS

DISCIPLINES

Obfuscate ●●●○○

○○○○○

○○○○○

○○○○○

○○○○○

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○○○○○

SIZE 5 [5 for adult human-sized kindred]

DEFENSE 2 [lowest of dexterity or wits]

INITIATIVE MOD 6 [dexterity+composure]

SPEED 9 [strength+dexterity+5]

EXPERIENCE _____

ARMOR _____

HEALTH

●●●●●○○○○○
□□□□□□□□□□

WILLPOWER

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VITAE

□□□□□□□□□□
□■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

VITAE/PER TURN 11/1

BLOOD POTENCY

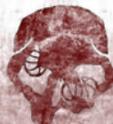
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HUMANITY

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





NOSFERATU



THE BEAST THAT HAUNTS THE BLOOD

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

_____ ○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○
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FLAWS

DISCIPLINES

_____ ○○○○○
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_____ ○○○○○

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

○○○○○○○○○○○○

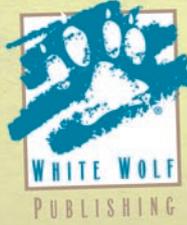
HUMANITY

10 _____ ○
9 _____ ○
8 _____ ○
7 _____ ○
6 _____ ○
5 _____ ○
4 _____ ○
3 _____ ○
2 _____ ○
1 _____ ○

EQUIPMENT

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PRINTED IN CHINA.

“Watch your step.
It’s a long way down.

No, don’t worry, there aren’t any rats.
Just you and me.

You, and me, and everything you’re afraid of.
Welcome to your new home.”

— Fabian, Inquisitor to the
Archbishop of St. Paul

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