

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- C. Hardaiken

THE HAND ON MY NECK

They have Sarah and Little Jack.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sample file

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

MIDNIGHT ROADS

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

Have a few things with me: my backpack, a canteen of water to wet the whistle,

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

Here's the real corker, though:

I've already seen my first ghost.

It jarred me. I know they're real. I've known since I was a kid, really: lived in an old farmhouse where something liked to play with the electronics. VCRs would turn on, rewind, eject videos in the middle of the night - just a nest of vomited brown tape. The stereo would kick up at 4 in the morning, blaring the hiss of white noise. Once in a while you'd see it, a

faint brightness in the dark room, not even that, really just a muted glow like someone had worn the darkness away a bit with a smudged thumb. And it would move over the bed and be gone. Then the phone would ring once and stop.

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

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

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

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

How human she looked.

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

tether herself to a body, is probably more human than we are in this mockery of life.

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

That's some sobering shit.

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



A SPOT OF HISTORY

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

[R.K. Transcript]

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

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

AS: Pushing 30. Not that young.

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

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

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

AS: I'm nobody special.

RK: Then we're in agreement.

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

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

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

RK: It does you little good to be afraid.

AS: What?

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

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

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

AS: Super. Thanks for the advice.

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

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

RK: This could take some time.

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

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

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

AS: Fair enough.

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

AS: That doesn't seem to make sense.

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

AS: You're speaking of barbarians.

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

AS: Not really. They had sex?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

AS: And what clan did he belong to?

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

AS: ...

RK: No disrespect, of course.

AS: ...Sure.

- Slaves and Soldiers -

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

RK: Gnaeus. And he was a horseman.

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

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



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

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

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

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

AS: The Senex?

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

AS: I'll trust you on that.

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

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

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

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

RK: Be serious. No. Nothing that horrid.

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

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

RK: Correct. Blessedly so.

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

RK: Not "us." You.

AS: The Gangrel.

RK: Precisely.

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

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

AS: ... yeah.

RK: Truly?

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

RK: I'm not your biographer.

AS: Sorry.

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

AS: Fair enough. Thanks.

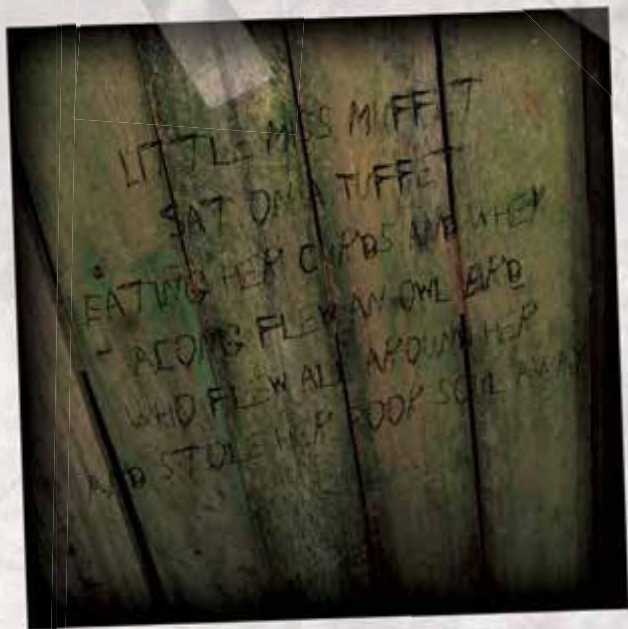
RK: Don't mention it. As in, truly, don't ever mention it to anybody that I was helpful to one of you. Now. Slaves. You have to understand something about Rome. Slaves weren't like the slaves you might think. They weren't generally abused. They sometimes lived nice lives, actually. A wise master was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

AS: The Old Man. He enslaved us?

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

AS: So they... assimilated.

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



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

AS: Which is?

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

AS: So we're just common dogs.

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

AS: Great. So what happened to us?

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

AS: Wild. Rampant. Rabid.

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

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

RK: Do you believe that?

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

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

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

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

AS: Some roundtable of Dragon academics?

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

AS: If you say so. Thanks.

RK: Goodnight.

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

THE TRUTH



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

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

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

TRICKLE DOWN BLOODONOMICS

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

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

ORIGIN STORY

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

LITTLE BRO

Yeah, that's what I said.

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

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

MOTHER OF MONSTERS

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

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

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

SIREN'S SONG

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

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

BELLY OF THE BEAST

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

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

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

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

We are her children.

And we love our Mama.

You ought to love her, too.

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

-KOLT-





BULLSEYE

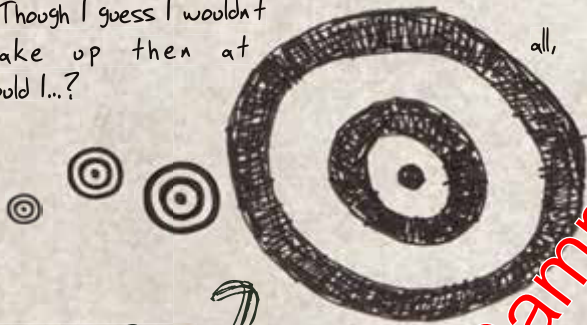
Sun's coming up soon and here I am worried that others know where I sleep. Awesome. He knows where I am. Which means he can't be the only one. I mean, god, I admit that I've probably been telegraphing my every move to whoever's watching me, I guess... I guess I just figured that nobody would be bothering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

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

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

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

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



MIDNIGHT ROADS

2

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

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

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

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

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

The graffiti.

Here's some pics I snapped!

I couldn't find a good place to hole up, right? All these



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

Connie Loves Mitch Because We Must

Bliss escape bullets save us so we may be free

HIS NAME IS DRIAX HE COMES
FROM THE STARS

cold hands round my throat i cant breath [sic]

itsatrapitsatrapitsatrap

little towns across America, I've had no problems finding some burned out building or gutted storefront. Hell, back in... I think it was Quakertown, I slept in a half-collapsed wig shop. Plenty safe from the sun and from troublesome kids. Times are hard, and that's good for me, I guess. Good for all of us. (What does that say of our kind that we benefit from misery? Nothing good.)

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

THE ANCIENT AND THE MONSTROUS

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

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

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

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

[Gilda Transcript]

You've come to the right girl, Alex. Sorry, Alice?

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

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

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

THE UNHOLY

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

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

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

And she soon does as she wishes.

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But that's obviously not what he finds.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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