

# *The Town Drunk*

*Presents*

## **Hell's Bells**

*Chuck Wendig*

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Coyote walked into the waiting room and surveyed the damage. Sam, the Cheated-on-His-Wife-but-Gives-to-Charity guy, sat trembling beneath a tented magazine. The Godecki sisters (died together in a tragic cable car mishap) huddled together in a corner, mewling and plugging their ears with ripped-out carpet fibers. Franklin, Mr. Coronary Embolism—with his heart of gold and his selfish brain—pressed his face against the room's pale Fleur-de-Lis wallpaper. Over and over again, he muttered his now-daily mantra: "Shut-up-shut-up-shut-up-shut-up." Drool crept down from where his chin met the wall.

Others were in similar positions. Some hid their heads under chairs. Others hid their heads under those who were hiding under chairs. Lamps lay broken. Even Coyote himself had spilled coffee on his chest fur. He sniffed it with his lean muzzle, licked it. It still tasted fine, but had lost something in the spilling.

"Please do something," Sam pleaded from beneath his magazine-hat.

"That would mean going next door," Coyote said. "Traveling between worlds is not all it's cracked up to be."

"Please," Sam said.

"It's just—"

"The sound—the *sound*."

Coyote sighed. His ears twitched. Traveling next door wouldn't be fun. Sure, this was his job now. But he didn't ask for the job. And these people, he didn't owe them squat, bupkus, zippity-nada. Of course, they weren't his only charges: no, this room was only one of thousands, each reverberating with that awful tintinnabulation that rang twice daily. Countless rooms, locked in a senseless cosmic cube.

Limbo. The celestial waiting room. The precise epicenter of exactly nowhere.

The last time he went hopping between worlds, it didn't end well. He had convinced the rest of the Animal Council that traveling to the Upper World Land in the sky was the thing to do—because, hey, that place was stocked with fat berries and the finest ladies, or so the legends said. They worked long and hard to get up there, but of course the Angry Cloud People already *had* all the fat berries and fine ladies, and it just—

It just didn't end well.

Then there was the thing with Bat. His once-handsome friend—jeez, probably his *only* friend. Things were said. Feelings, hurt. A friendship kicked square in the snacks.

Poor Bat. Poor, ugly Bat.

Coyote didn't want to think about that now. What was done was done. Everybody thought he was an asshole. He *was* an asshole. And now these people in Limbo knew he was an asshole, too. Unless—

He sighed.

“Crap,” Coyote said. “All right. I'll go.”

Sam gave a small cheer and went back to hiding beneath the magazine.

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The first thing Coyote thought was, *Hey, nice monocle*. Lucifer pressed the single lens against his dark eye and scoured forms with an intense, single-eyed gaze.

Coyote sniffed the air. The Devil smelled of cologne. Heady. Rich. Like leather and chocolate, like heavy books and heavier ideas.

After a few moments of tongue-clucking and loud breathing, Lucifer finally looked up.

“And you are?” the Devil asked.

Coyote cleared his throat. “Mr. Satan, sir—”

“No,” said the Devil, rolling a knot in his long, oily beard betwixt thumb and forefinger.

“‘Satan’ is a title. Like King, Duke, or Archduke. It means ‘adversary.’ My name is Lucifer. I am the most-highest, and I deserve more respect than what you've already given me. I don't know who you are, and I don't know how you got in here, but I suggest that you immediately start using my proper title. You may call me Morningstar. Or Lightbringer.”

“Okie-doke. Mr. Morningstar, then—”

“*No*. No ‘Mister’ this or ‘Mister’ that.” Coyote watched as the Devil tugged impatiently on his

beard, scowling as he did so. “*Morningstar* or *Lightbringer*. Quickly, now. Snap-snap.”

“Morningbring—er, Lightmorn—ehh,” Coyote stammered. “Never mind, let’s just go with *sir*. Sir, I’m Coyote, and I live next door.”

“Hell has no next door.”

“It’s Limbo. We’re quiet neighbors.”

“Coyote, Coyote,” Lucifer said, repeating the word a half-dozen more times as if he were rolling around something bitter on his tongue. “You’re from that heathen pantheon, right? Skirt-wearers? Corn maidens?”

“That’s one way to put it.”

“Fine. How’d you end up in Limbo?”

“I’m not so much *in* Limbo as I *run* Limbo.”

“You run Limbo.” The Devil blinked, obviously incredulous. “You’re a dog.”

This guy wasn’t too bright, Coyote thought. “No. Coyote.”

“I grow tired of this.” Lucifer continued poring over the reams of paper bureaucracy stacked beneath his bearded chin. “However you got in, find your way out.”

But Coyote chose to remain—what choice did he have?—and instead cleared his throat once more. Maybe small talk would lube up the conversation. “Yikes, that’s a big stack of forms you got there. Lots of paperwork, huh?”

“It is Hell, after all,” Lucifer muttered.

“I didn’t know you fallen angels had to do paperwork.”

“We did not *fall*,” Lucifer said through clenched teeth. “We were *pushed*. End of story. Now get out.”

“It’s about the bells,” Coyote blurted.

“The bells?”

“The bells. Outside. The ones at the very top of your palace?”

“Pandaemonium.’ Give the palace its proper due.”

“Yes, well, the Bells of... Pandaemonium, they’re really loud.”

“Loud?”

“They didn’t used to be so loud.”

“We raised the volume. I couldn’t hear them so well anymore. Even now, I’m considering raising them again. I barely notice them, and they’re very pretty-sounding.”

“To you, maybe. But it’s kind of... unsettling the folks in Limbo.” Which was an understatement on par with saying the ocean was damp.

The Morningstar barely stifled a chortle. “Of course. Watch me be concerned about a bunch of half-wits who couldn’t decide whether to be good or evil.”

“They’re just confused, man. We’re all a little confused.”

Lucifer paused, then narrowed his eyes. “I’m curious. How did you end up running Limbo, exactly? You’re not an angel.”

“Limbo’s angel got a book deal, leaving the position vacant. When Big Bad Jehovah cleaned house and sent all the excess gods and goddesses to the Elysian Fields for a permanent vacation, so to speak, and he stood there on that big platform made of pure light and golden eggs or whatever, I kind of, you know...” Coyote looked at the floor, embarrassed. “I pantsed Him.”

“Pantsed.”

“As in, *removed the pants of.*”

“Yahweh doesn’t wear pants.”

“Yeah, I found that out the hard way. It’s all flowy robes and nothing underneath.” As an aside, Coyote leaned forward and added: “And let me tell you, He doesn’t like people touching His holy no-no’s.”

“Leave.”

“No, no, wait!” Coyote said, holding up his paws. “C’mon, chief, do me a solid! These people are in Limbo so they don’t have to deal with Hell, at least not yet. But the bells, they bring Hell to us, and that’s not right. Now my people are getting crazy, and they’re tearing up the magazines, and one guy peed in the rubber tree planter, and—”

“You talk, and it’s like diarrhea in my milk.” Lucifer set the pen on the desk, tidied up the Babel tower of forms, and stood. He came around the side of the desk, his beard trailing behind him like a hairy snake. “Your needs, your problems, they’re nothing to me. The desires of a potato bug have greater importance. The people in Limbo don’t like Hell’s bells? *Boo-hoo.* You’re stuck in an awkward position, punished for your canine impudence? Pardon me while I mop my weeping eyes. Another tear-stained pillow night, to be sure.”

Coyote's heart raced. The Morningstar stood over him, a sentinel of shadow, a paragon of malevolence. The Devil's left eye sat magnified behind the monocle, so it looked like a giant squid peering through a submarine porthole.

Then, a glimmer of delight crossed the Devil's face (a fact which worried Coyote immensely) as he glanced at a gilded pocketwatch fetched from the nest of his beard. He grinned, a sharp-angled mouth full of angel-white teeth. "Wait for it."

"Wait for what?" Coyote asked. But he didn't have to wait long.

The bells began their cacophony. The black, ichor-smeared bells of Pandaemonium clanged together, resounding with the noise of children screaming, of a million gulls dying in a sea-tossed squall, of modern pop music and all its infernal accoutrements.

Coyote howled, flattening his ears and pressing them down with his paws. Lucifer, on the other hand, closed his eyes and basked in the dissonance, his head swaying gently back and forth.

Minutes later, the bells ceased their diabolical disharmony. It was the worst thing Coyote had ever heard. He lay on the ground, curled in a ball, his muzzle slick with tears and snot.

"Little poochy," Lucifer said, "I suggest you leave this very moment, or I will leash you with my beard and make you lick clean those quite-*literally*-Godforsaken bells twice a day, every day, for thrice the time it takes for eternity to expire. Are we clear?"

"Crystal," Coyote gurgled, not even sure what the heck the Devil was talking about. But it sure sounded bad.

"*Au revoir*," Lucifer said. Coyote slinked away.

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He felt pissed and half-sick, which meant it was time for a sandwich.

Hell, quite curiously, was renowned for its cafeterias—unlike Heaven, where victuals were often described as bland, flat, and cardboardy. Holy food was far less scrumptious than the cuisine of sin. Unleavened, salt-free bread didn't make anybody want to do anything bad, except maybe sit in silence and weep softly. But a big bowl of peppery gumbo, or maybe a seven-layer sundae with enough sugar to give diabetes to a baleen whale... well, that made you want to go out, dance on tables, drink like a pirate, make bets with a hooker, and all sorts of other bad news. Coyote had heard tell that Hell's chefs made a fine, *fine* Monte Cristo sandwich. His tongue moistened at the thought.

He wanted that sandwich.

But at the cafeteria, he was stopped at the door.

A big, fat, naked demon sat on a stool that disappeared into the folds of his gray hind-flesh. A pair of tiny, leather-vein wings twitched and jerked from the beast's soft rolls of back-fat. A little nametag, pinned clean through the fiend's flesh, read: *Belphegor*.

"Can't come in," the demon mumbled through a mouth full of blunt tusks.

"But I'm hungry," Coyote said. "I've come a long way."

"Can't come in," the demon reiterated.

"But I'm a sinner. I like sin. I want to eat."

"Not for sinners. Employees only. Sinners have to eat in their own respective Hells. Meals of bat guano, urine-basted cricket paste, their own feet, that sort of thing."

Inside, over the demon's shoulder, Coyote could see a multi-armed imp in a porkpie hat playing some rag-time piano. Demons dining at long tables raised frosty mugs of beer and sang along with great merriment.

"It looks like fun in there," Coyote said.

"It is."

"I hear Hell's food is really nummy."

"It is."

"But I can't come in."

"You can't."

"But if I work here, I can."

Belphegor of the greasy jowls nodded.

"Time to get some temp work." The people of Limbo could wait—it's what they were there to do, after all.

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The trickster got gussied up.

He found a pool of cooling tar by a gaggle of screaming telemarketers having their intestines removed by surly ferrets. Handfuls of the black goo painted across Coyote's fur gave him a cruel, demonic cast.

Not too far from there were caves where a bunch of fiendish sprites collected the aforementioned guano from the aforementioned bats. He clambered up the cave walls, nabbed a bat, and stuck it on his back, smack dab in the still-moist tar. The bat's little wings, now Coyote's own, fluttered in the ammonia-choked air. Briefly he thought back to his old friend, Bat...

"No," Coyote said. "Don't go there. Don't worry about that. What's done is done."

Outside the cave, Coyote found little stalactites (or were they stalagmites? He decided he didn't really give a damn) forming on the dusty dry floor. Snapping two off, he stuck them in his lower jaw so they jutted up and out over his snout. Two tusks, made to order.

Finally, he found some muscle-head *dyubbuks* standing above an in-ground pool filled with lukewarm cat vomit. In the pool floated a bunch of paunchy, balding men in swimmy trunks and arm floaties. The *dyubbuks*, chuckling, were stabbing downward with their signature pitchforks. Coyote approached.

"Fellas," he said.

"Go from here," one of the *dyubbuks* said through a needle-toothed underbite. "You are not *dyubbuk*. You do not belong here punishing these cheating husbands."

"No," Coyote said, "but I am from the home office."

"You say home office?" The *dyubbuk* frowned.

"You got it, chief." Coyote raised a tar-caked eyebrow. "I'm from the Pitchfork Inspection Division, the PID."

"You say PID?"

"Need to see that pitchfork, son."

Reluctantly, and with more than a little confusion, the demon handed over his pitchfork.

Coyote eyed the length of the tool, tested the tines and points with the pads of his paws. Then he flipped it around clumsily, and the torture device went spinning off, clattering to the heat-cracked ground.

"Whoa, whoa, *whoa!*" Coyote exclaimed, shaking his head. "That's a Code Six-Sixty-Six violation, buddy."

"What? What is violation? What you say?"

Coyote snatched the pitchfork off the ground with mock frustration. "This pitchfork is wildly imbalanced. When was the last time you oiled the fork?"

“Oiled? No oil pitchfork—”

“I can tell. And when you did you last check it for nicks, cuts, scratches, dings, or scars?”

“Uh, no check—”

“Uh-huh. And what about termite infestation? Carpenter bees? Wayward cherubs?”

“What? What you mean?”

“I thought so.” Coyote *tsked*. “I’m going to have to take this with me.”

“But that my fork!”

“Not anymore, hoss. You’ll have to put in a requisition with the PID to get this back. What’s your name again?”

“Called Adramalech.”

“Well, Adramablahblah, this trident’s coming with me. Thanks for your time; sorry it had to turn out this way.”

Then Coyote fled on all fours, pitchfork clutched between diligent (and hungry) jaws, laughing maniacally.

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At the door to the cafeteria, Belphegor blinked and looked over the disguised trickster.

“I don’t know you,” Belphegor said. “You say you work here?”

“I’m new,” Coyote mumbled around his impromptu tusks. “I’m the Eighth Deadly Sin.”

“There are only seven.”

“Check the website. There’s eight now.”

“Which one is number eight?”

“Slow Driving.”

“Oh,” Belphegor said, seeming appeased. “What’s your name again?”

Coyote gestured to the piece of slate stuck in the tar on his chest. Scrawled in chalky bone dust was a bunch of letters.

“Your name is *Xzybrgh*?” Belphegor said.

“Nice,” Coyote said, giving a thumbs-up. “You know you’re the first guy to pronounce that correctly all day?”

“Really?”

“Heckadang yes. Even the Big Boss, the Morning-Guy, he couldn’t get it right. He was all, ‘Hello, *Xzygrab*,’ or ‘What’s up, *Zyxbrag*.’ You’re a good man, Belphegor.”

“Thank you.”

“Can I eat?”

“Go on in.”

“Nice,” Coyote-as-*Xzybrgh* said, grinning. He hurried inside.

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The songs were jaunty. The place smelled good. Infernal camaraderie filled the air with an electric buzz, and Coyote enjoyed all of it. Limbo wasn’t this hopping. Limbo was about as much fun as eating paste or cleaning grout. The most excitement they had in Limbo was when Metatron the Angel brought in the new magazines—but this? The beer, the food, the rag-time piano? Wonderful stuff.

He was just about to bite into a Monte Cristo sandwich, dripping with maple syrup and powdered sugar, the succulent ham, turkey, and Swiss pressed between two slices of toasted wheat bread, his salivary glands working overtime and—

—and then a hand took the sandwich away.

Coyote looked up.

Lucifer stood there, holding the sandwich.

“Monte Cristo,” the Morningstar said. “Good choice.”

“I’m something of a connoisseur,” Coyote said, disguising his voice and trying to make it gravelly and diabolical. “I love me a good sandwich.”

“I hear you’re our new Deadly Sin—the eighth, yes?”

Sheepishly, Coyote nodded.

“And you also double as an agent for the Pitchfork Inspection Department?”

“Division, actually,” Coyote corrected.

“So you’re good at inspecting, Mister... ah—what’s your name?”

The trickster gestured to his nametag.

“Mister Zyzgrble?”

“I told him you couldn’t pronounce it,” Coyote snickered under his breath.

“I’m sorry, what was that?”

“Nothing, just talking to my... inner evil.”

“Of course. So, you say you’re good at inspecting?”

“The most bestest ever.”

“Good,” Lucifer said, taking a seat across from the trickster. The Lightbringer draped his beard over steepled fingers. “You see, we need someone to inspect our *bells*. Seems they’re not *loud enough*. They’re about to go off in about a half-hour. I figured I’d come and see you, since you’re such a *fine* inspector.”

“Well, I don’t really know much about bells—”

“That’s not what I hear. You’re being modest.”

The bat on Coyote’s back twitched, as if sensing the trouble in which Coyote had found himself.

“Well, maybe tomorrow, right now I gotta eat this sandwich and get home to the wife—”

“Already called her. She’s aware you’ll be a bit late.”

Coyote swallowed. “Oh. That’s... nice of you.”

“I’m a nice man.”

“I noticed.”

“Shall we, then? I can take you to the bells directly.”

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The bells stank. It was a combination of that smell your hands get after handling a bunch of old pennies mixed with the odor of sour milk. And maybe the piquant aroma of asparagus pee.

Even the bat seemed irked by the malodorous air—and the bat was used to smelling its own acrid

droppings.

Coyote leaned the pitchfork against the wall and looked out the bell-tower window. Down below, he saw the little speck that was Lucifer at the very bottom, by the front gates of the Palace of Pandaemonium. A crowd was starting to collect. The trickster worried at his lower lip and tasted tar. He spit it out.

Leaning over the tower ledge, he cupped his paws around his muzzle and snout.

“Looks okay,” he hollered. “These bells are great. Can I come down, now?”

“No!” Lucifer shouted back.

“Please?”

“Wait till they ring!” Lucifer yelled. “Then you can come down.”

“Ah! But I forgot my... Bell Calibration Kit! It's in the car.”

“We'll have it brought up to you. Stay where you are.”

Coyote backed away from the ledge and toward the bell. He pinched his nose shut.

“Godsdamnit,” he muttered, not even knowing who he was talking to. He decided to address the flapping bat. “I'm Coyote. I'm a bad-ass. I saved the world from the Elk Monster. I discovered corn. I invented *rap music*.” That last part was a lie, but what did the bat know? “Once upon a time, I was cool as ice. I make a few bad choices, *boom*, I lose my friends, I get stuck babysitting Limbo, and now I'm here in Hell, hungry for a sandwich, about to be killed by a pair of stinking, angry bells. Oh, how far we titans fall. God's a jerk. So's the Devil.”

He went back to the ledge.

“How long do I have?” he yelled down.

He could barely make out Lucifer glancing at his beard-tangled pocketwatch.

“Wait for it,” the Devil shouted.

Once again, he didn't have to wait long. The bells began their ear-shattering, bowel-loosening music.

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Coyote was an asshole. Everybody thought so.

The bells had a way of making people feel really bad. Not just physically bad, like they'd eaten

some old ham and dirty shoelaces or whatever, but *spiritually* bad. It conjured up all manner of bad memories, and Coyote was yet again reminded of how much of an asshole he was.

Whenever he was late to a meeting of the Animal Council, they reminded him. He'd come in, an hour or three late, breath smelling of peace pipe, lipstick staining the fur of his haunches.

Eagle would look at him and say:

“You're an asshole.”

The rest of the animals would nod in agreement. Even Grizzly Bear—who was a pretty nice guy, despite the blood-caked claws and teeth—agreed.

Then came the day that Coyote thought he could win them all back. “Sure,” he told them, “the Upper World Land is going to rock. Berries. Ladies. Good times.”

His buddy Bat assured him later, “This is going to work. They won't think you're such an asshole anymore.”

“Right,” Coyote said. “I'm totally not an asshole. They're going to love me. Thanks, Bat.”

And so, they went to make their way to the Upper World Land in the sky. Of course, nobody could figure out how to get up there. Even the fliers of the group, Eagle among them, couldn't manage to soar high enough. But Coyote had an idea—one sure to convince them that he wasn't such a jerk. He used a bow to fire hundreds of arrows into one another so they could make a ladder to climb to the Upper World Land. It was awesome. It worked. They climbed up, and what happened? The Angry Cloud People kicked their asses. Royally, up and down, left and right. Beaver, that wuss, tried to make peace. Grizzly Bear roared and put up a good fight. But it didn't matter.

The Angry Cloud People tossed them all out. They burned the arrow ladder, too, so the falling Animal Council had nothing to grab on the way down. They plummeted.

Coyote tried to catch a ride with Eagle, but Eagle said, “No way, asshole.”

And then, Bat, his buddy, came along.

Bat, that handsome fellow. That good friend.

Bat grabbed hold of Coyote, but Coyote, always a big eater, was too heavy.

The little wings struggled to keep them aloft.

The wings couldn't do it. Coyote and Bat, together, hurtled downward. The two of them smacked hard into the ground. Bat hit face first, breaking Coyote's fall.

Bat looked up, his face all mashed and fugly, and Coyote couldn't help but laugh.

"Oh, man, you're really ugly!"

Bat made his face even uglier by scowling.

"You're an asshole," he said.

And that was the end of their friendship.

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Coyote thought about this as the bells clanged on, the dark music intoning secondary visions of car accidents, angry crows, chattering imps, wailing sirens, and so-called "music television." He was sure he felt blood bubbling up and trickling out of his ears. He clamped his teeth and tried to keep his head from exploding all over the place.

And then, for just a moment, Coyote opened his eyes, and he looked up. What he saw amazed him.

The bat had gotten free from the tar and was orbiting the grotesque black bells in that herky-jerky flying motion that bats are so good at. It clamped the pitchfork in its little bat teeth. Coyote thought this a bit curious, but even more curious was when the bat began whanging the end of the trident against the bells themselves, only increasing the hideous, horrendous din. Coyote tried to stand, tried to stop the bat from creating *further* clamor and commotion, but it was no use. The sound crippled him. He could only kneel, his ears twitching with epileptic spasms.

"Stop," Coyote whimpered, his voice lost in the bell-banging ruckus.

And then, quite suddenly, it *did* stop.

The bells snapped free of their wrought-iron casings. The leviathan instruments jerked once and toppled free, smashing through the floor of the tower. Coyote dashed to the edge, making it in time to see the bells go crashing through floor after floor of Lucifer's palace, the cacophony replaced by the shrieking of demons falling beneath the crushing weight.

Coyote laughed, and wept with joy.

The little bat—after setting down the pitchfork—alighted upon his shoulder.

"Good move, little bat," Coyote yelled over the ringing in his own ears.

"You're an asshole," the bat said.

"What?" Coyote said.

“You’re an asshole!” the bat said, louder this time.

It was then that Coyote realized that he wasn’t just a little bat, but Bat himself!

“Old buddy!” Coyote cried out. “I really *am* an asshole. But you sure can fly! Look at you go!”

“Yeah, but I’m still ugly,” Bat replied sadly.

“You’re ugly, and I’m an asshole. We make a good pair, you and I.”

Bat’s angry face softened. “Maybe.”

“Hey, how’d you get here in Hell?”

“I got a job. They needed guano.”

“Cool,” Coyote said. “Keep up the good work.”

Bat turned to fly away, but Coyote stopped him.

“Hey, wait. Little man, you maybe wanna hang out sometime? Limbo—that’s where I work—it’s not that exciting, but, you know, there are magazines.”

“I like magazines,” Bat said, a little skeptically.

“Think about it.”

“I will.”

“Goodbye, Bat.”

“Later, asshole.”

And then Bat took off, fetched the pitchfork, and flew out the open window. Coyote watched him go, then looked down at Lucifer, who was sitting on a cluster of lava tubes muttering to himself.

Coyote felt good. Like he’d done something right. The people in Limbo would be happy. Bat didn’t totally hate him anymore. He had brought Hell to its knees.

“I should get out of here,” he said to himself.

His stomach growled. His mouth dampened.

“But first, a sandwich.”

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**Chuck Wendig** has contributed to over forty books for White Wolf Game Studios. His short fiction has infiltrated *Whispers From the Shattered Forum*, *Not One of Us*, and an upcoming Carnifex Press anthology. He mentored with screenwriter Stephen Susco, and he is currently trying to force Hollywood to pay him money to write movies. He lives in the wilds of Pennsylvucky with two dogs and a recently captured wife. He is drunk and untrustworthy. You can find his crazed ramblings carved out in 1's and 0's at [www.terribleminds.com](http://www.terribleminds.com).