

Dr. The
Whispering
Vault

MASTERING
THE VAULT

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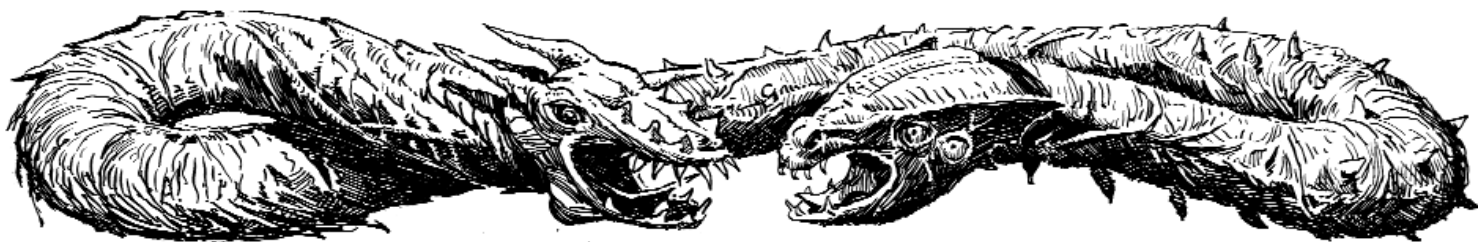
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WELCOME

After years of waiting patiently, the material in this book is finally ready for your next game of *The Whispering Vault*. Inside these pages are:

- GM advice by Nigel Findley.
- A timeline by Chad Brinkley.
- A hunt by Nigel Findley.
- Unbidden as Player Character rules.
- A few adventure hooks.



GAMEMASTERING THE WHISPERING VAULT

by Nigel Findley

*Gamemastering **The Whispering Vault** involves some very specific challenges, not necessarily found in other games. The game brings with it some characteristic pitfalls into which GMs – new and experienced – find it all too easy to fall. On the other side of the coin, these same challenges bring with them some significant rewards that might not be found in other games. This section discusses some of these pitfalls and ways to get around them, and provides some specific techniques gamemasters of **The Whispering Vault** can use to get the most out of their games.*

MOOD

More so than many games, *The Whispering Vault* is a game of mood. A game of *Vault* lives or dies by how well the gamemaster – and, secondarily, the players – build and maintain the mood.

If you look at *The Whispering Vault* superficially, there's not that much unique about it. "Let's see," you might say, "take elements of horror and fantasy – with maybe some superhero gaming tossed in for good measure – add some extra-dimensional bounty-hunters, and you've got it." Looked at that way . . . what's so special about *The Whispering Vault* anyway? Sounds pretty boring, all in all . . .

But *The Whispering Vault* isn't boring – or, at least, it shouldn't be. It can be – and *should* be – compelling, evocative, dark (but notably distinct from the many other "dark" games on the market), even disturbing . . . and, in a sense, *magical*. What is it that sets *The Whispering Vault* apart from a game of "whacked-out bounty hunters on steroids"? *Mood*, pure and simple.

GENRE

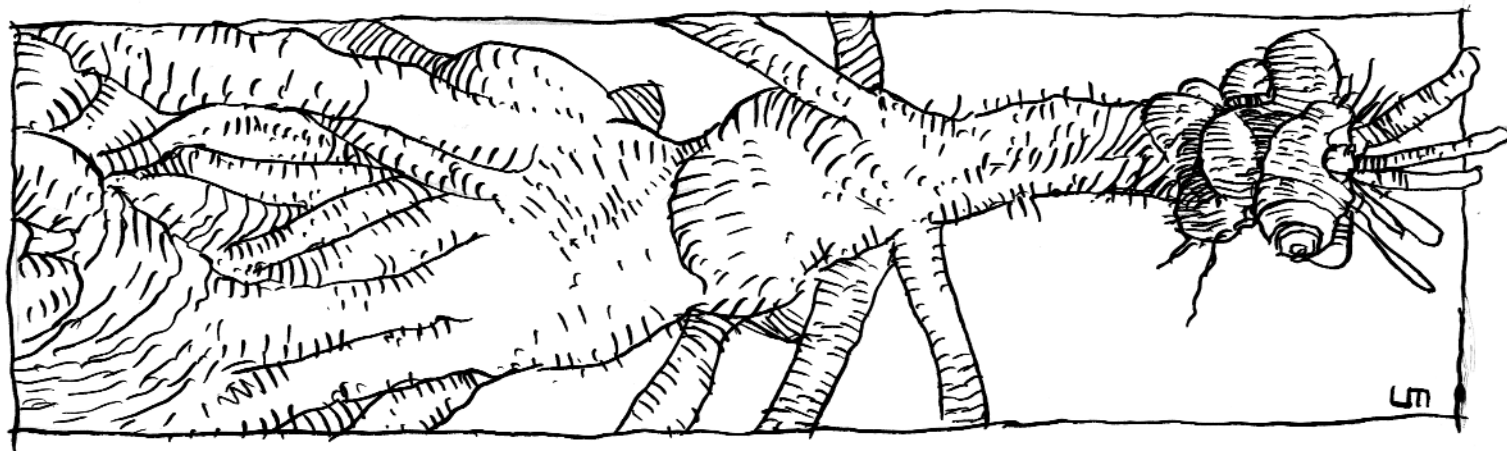
But *what* mood? It's time to take a look at that. What makes up the characteristic mood of *The Whispering Vault*?

IS *THE WHISPERING VAULT* A "HORROR" GAME?

Strictly speaking, I'd argue "no." (Caveat: This and other opinions expressed in this article are *mine*. Not necessarily those of the publisher, and not necessarily yours – you gamemasters and players of the game. Personally, I think it's important to remember that. Your game of *The Whispering Vault* is *yours*, after all – not mine, not anyone else's. As long as you're having fun doing what you're doing . . . well, keep on doing it. What I'm providing you here are guidelines you can try to *increase* the pleasure you get from your gaming sessions, not hard-and-fast rules, graven inn stone, specifying precisely how the game is to be played *right*. End of sermon.)

Certainly, there are horrific elements in *The Whispering Vault*. Many conventions used in the game are similar – though generally not identical – to con-





ventions used in horror fiction, cinema and gaming. There's the mysterious, often inscrutable foe, defended by guardians that are often monstrous. There are enigmatic, arcane forces at work – often, forces that the player characters understand only inadequately. There are elements out of nightmare – familiar faces concealing hideous intent; transformation and transmogrification, until it's impossible to be sure that anything is what it seems. There are flashes of brutal violence, inhuman destructiveness, pain, loss, death. There are innocents drawn into things beyond their imagining; and those who consider themselves predators, suddenly realizing that they've become prey. And, throughout, there's the mass of “innocent” humanity, blissfully unaware of the primal forces struggling and striving around them, threatening to shatter their comfortable worlds and lives forever. All of these are mainstays of the horror genre, and key parts of *The Whispering Vault*.

But then there are two central conventions of horror that are directly contradictory to the mood of *The Whispering Vault*. In the familiar horror story (or game), the protagonists – the player characters – are almost always totally outmatched by the antagonists, by the opposition. Most horror “heroes”

are everyday types – not heroes (or, at least, not people who'd ever *consider* themselves to be heroes). They're drawn into a mystery, usually against their will, and then almost immediately put in danger for their lives. The archetypal horror plot-line is one where the protagonists have no choice but to pit themselves against overwhelming odds – a coven of vampires, a shopping-mall full of zombies, or Great Cthulhu himself – because the alternative is simply unacceptable. Death (or worse) for themselves, death of innocents the protagonists care about, often the destruction of the human race, the entire universe, or even the multiverse.

Horror heroes generally *know* they're outmatched, too, and that knowledge affects every aspect of their behavior. They know that the only way they can survive to “win” the conflict – whatever it is – is to keep a low profile, to keep their location and actions, even their very existence, a secret from the antagonists. That's one of the central challenges of the horror genre: finding the weakness in the antagonist that allows the heroes to survive.

Even seemingly “powerful” horror heroes are actually weaklings when compared to their foes. The only way the heroes can survive and triumph is through stealth, cunning, a healthy

measure of luck, and a knowledge of how to exploit the foe's weaknesses. (Case in point: Van Helsing meets Dracula at midnight . . . and has carelessly left his crucifix at home. Would *you* bet on the “powerful” vampire hunter to survive until dawn . . . ?)

Powerful Protagonists

And that's a major way in which *The Whispering Vault* diverges from the archetypal horror story or game. Whatever else they happen to be, the protagonists, the heroes – the Stalkers – are *not* helpless innocents. They're about as far as it's possible to get from “normal people drawn into something too big for them.” The Stalkers *are* heroes – or maybe “champions” is the better word.

How does this fact affect a *Vault* story? Stalkers are going to be driving the plot to a much greater extent than the “heroes” in a horror story/game. The Stalkers are – or *should* be – *agents*: people who *act*, rather than people who are acted *upon*. Once the Stalkers are involved – once they've answered the Call – they drive the events of the story. They should be *acting*, making things happen, rather than standing back and waiting for something else to happen *to* them, or around them. (This is as important a point from a character point of view as it is from a story standpoint.





Stalkers are the servitors of the Primal Powers, the guardians of the Dream . . . and, by all they once held holy, they *know* it. Stalkers are the ultimate agents, and agents must *act*. For a well-played Stalker, hanging back and waiting for events to develop should be totally inconceivable – as inconceivable as for a hunting tiger to wait for prey to walk directly into its jaws.)

Fear, Terror and Horror

Although most people use them interchangeably, these three words have very distinct meanings. Fear is a reaction to a direct threat. It's the natural reaction to danger, the energizing response that drives the "fight or flight" response. Although there are irrational fears (phobias, for example), fear can be a rational response to circumstances. Just as a character in a horror story feels fear, so to might a Stalker (so I'd argue, at least). The *nature* of the fear would be very different, of course. A dedicated Stalker might have no personal fear of nonexistence. Yet still, the Stalker might still fear the consequences – to the Dream and the Dreaming – if he were to fall in the battle against the Unbidden. Also, a Stalker and a normal human would probably *respond* quite differently to fear. A well-played Stalker wouldn't let her fear control her, wouldn't let it turn her aside from right action, and *certainly* wouldn't be paralyzed by panic. But fear is, and should be, a part of a Stalker's existence.

Terror is defined as overwhelming or overmastering fear – an uncontrollable emotion that's a mainstay of horror fiction and gaming. Characters flee in terror, or are so overwhelmed with terror that they collapse in a gibbering heap. Would a Stalker ever feel terror? I'd say, "categorically *not*." The experience of terror – of being "undone" and overmastered by fear – is a weakness of the flesh, one that Stalkers have long since left behind them.

And horror? Well, horror is defined as a sensation of abhorrence or repugnance. Usually, this abhorrence is coupled with fear, but not necessarily. At its core, horror is the sense that *something is terribly wrong*, that the world is out of joint, that the natural order of things has somehow become perverted. For mortals, this realization is more than enough to cause fear; that's why horror and fear are identified with one another in common parlance. For Stalkers, however?

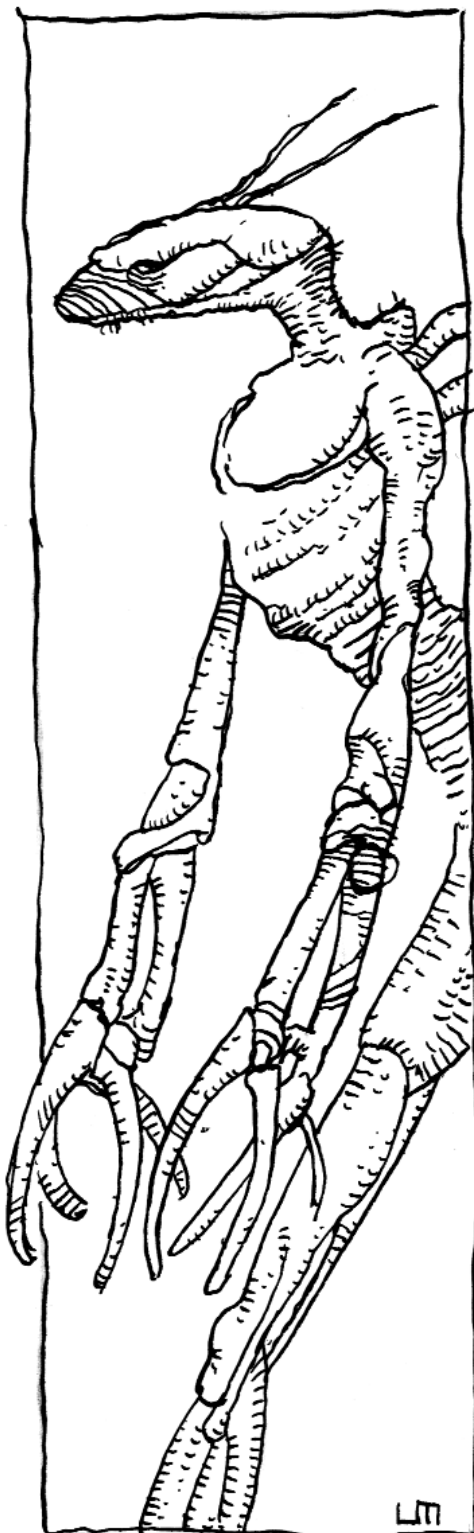
Stalkers *do* feel horror – the (possibly self-righteous) realization that the Unbidden has deserted its duties to interact with the Realm of Flesh, to pervert the entire Dreaming with its unbridled passions and hunger. They feel the abhorrence and repugnance that lie at the core of horror . . . but they don't feel the accompanying fear. In a sense, it's horror – this sense of inexorable *wrongness* – that motivates a Stalker's actions. (Looked at this way, perhaps *The Whispering Vault* is more a game of true horror than those more commonly bearing that label . . .)

THE "FOUR-COLOR TRAP"

Gamemasters and players might also "skew" *The Whispering Vault* closer to the genre of the superhero, the genre of the four-color comic. After all, there are crossovers between these two genres as well, just as there are between *Vault* and horror fiction. What's to distinguish between the Stalkers and a band of super-powered heroes from the comics? After all, aren't many of a Stalker's powers similar to those a self-respecting four-color hero might enjoy?

The Sense of Wonder

The difference between the genres is, to me, one of the most vital elements in *The Whispering Vault*: the sense of wonder. Comic-book characters might be able to change their form (Morph), control the minds of mundanes (Dominate), extrude





claws and tear an opponent (Savage), and even heal wounds they've suffered (Weave). But in the four-color universe, these abilities are accepted, if not as mundane then certainly as the character's "due," in some sense – taken for granted.

Not so in *The Whispering Vault* – in my view, at least. *Nothing* in *Vault* should ever be taken for granted. Stalkers should never become blasé about their abilities, should never accept them as "just one of those things." Every time a Stalker uses a Discipline, the event should be attended with a sense of wonder. Every ability of a Stalker is *special* – an alteration in the fabric of the Dream. How could this *not* be important?

This sense of wonder is innate to the entire *Whispering Vault* paradigm, or world-view. Think about the process of passing from the Realm of Essence to the Realm of Flesh. Crossing the Rift in response to the Call is basically just preamble: a preface to the "real" events of the game. In another genre, another game, the passage across the Rift could be instantaneous, automatic: something

that happens "off-stage." In *The Whispering Vault*? The Circle must summon the Navigator, pass along the Winding Path, dispel the Guardian who tends the Barrier . . . and only *then* can the Stalkers actually enter the Realm of Flesh. In all but the most unusual of cases, there won't be any complications. The Circle will reach the Realm of Flesh without difficulty.

Why, then? Why bother with the entire rigmarole of being consumed by an infinitely-long worm? The answer given in the rulebook is "to get the players into the proper mindset to play Stalkers." I'd take it further: I'd say, "To establish the sense of wonder – the sense of shadowy, infinite forces – that should infuse the entire game session."

One way of maintaining that sense of wonder is to visualize and describe *exactly* what happens when a Stalker uses a Discipline, evokes a Servitor or whatever. (I'll have more to say about visualization and description in a later section.) Let's take the latter example as a case in point. Exactly what happens

when a Stalker summons an Essence Hound?

In game terms, the answer's simple: the Stalker's player makes an Evocation Challenge and loses a point of Vitality. The Essence Hounds respond – assuming the player made the necessary dice roll – and go about their business. But how does that manifest itself in the game world?

My suggestion is that the player summoning the Servitors explain exactly how her character is going about the process and precisely how the Servitors respond.

Consider the following example:

"From the folds of my robe, I extract a tiny flute, carefully carved from the bone of an animal long extinct from the world. I raise it to my lips and blow, feeling the piercing note shiver through every fiber of my Vessel. I step aside as the first of the hounds emerges into the Realm of Flesh, seeming to materialize from the floor and walls that surround me. Red-rimmed eyes look at me expectantly."

Even this kind of detail can become formulaic – and hence boring – after awhile. Consider asking your players to ring interesting changes on the details each time they use a particularly power (or at least every few times).

Make sure to keep the sense of wonder alive – for your players *and* for yourself (believe me, your players will sense immediately if you're not fully engaged). Staying true to this major element of the genre stops the game from sliding into the "four-color trap," and from drifting into the related problem of "just another fantasy game."





DEUS EX MACHINA

A common trap in gamemastering – and in writing fiction, for that matter – is the “*deus ex machina*,” the “god from the machine.” The term itself comes from ancient drama; what it means is a convenient occurrence that concludes the plot – usually saving the protagonists and defeating the antagonist – totally unconnected with the protagonists’ actions. Examples of *deus ex machina* in gaming and fiction are legion: the hyper-powerful non-player character who shows up from nowhere just in time to save the day; the meteor or earthquake or whatever that frees the player characters from the villain’s death-trap; the “coincidental” fact that the runaway train ran out of fuel; or, the archetypal example, the phrase “and then the little boy woke up.” Normally, *deus ex machina* is the sign of bad plotting, both in fiction and game design, and thus something to be avoided.

The interesting twist is that, in *The Whispering Vault*, the Stalkers *are* the *deus ex machina*. They *are* the “hyper-powerful characters” who show up to pull the Supplicant’s fat out of the fire. The Stalkers are the mechanism used by the Primal Powers to “make everything right again,” to counteract the perversions caused by the Unbidden. The Stalkers know what their position in the cosmic scheme is; they *know* they’re the *deus ex machina*, and this knowledge should affect just about every aspect of their world-view. This is an important facet of the mood of *The Whispering Vault*.

Perhaps even more important, however, is the reaction of mortals who come to understand even an inkling of what the Stalkers are and what they represent. In many cases, only the Supplicant herself will sense that the Stalkers are *something special*. But her response to them – awe, amazement, fear, denial, or whatever else is appropriate – is also vital to the game’s mood. The Stalkers *are* something special.

Even when their true nature is masked, they stand out from the crowd. They know they’re different from the run-of-the-mill, and everything that occurs around them – the reaction of every mortal they encounter – should reinforce that knowledge.



“THE COSMIC MACHINE”

Though the Stalkers are of a different order of existence from the mortals that surround them in the Realm of Flesh, they’re still only small cogs in a much bigger structure: the “Cosmic Machine.” If we use the human body as an analogy for the entire Dreaming, then the Stalkers are leukocytes – white blood cells – sent forth into the bloodstream to combat “perversions” in the cosmic order. (Following this analogy, the Unbidden can be thought of as cancerous cells . . .) Though unarguably important, the Stalkers/leukocytes are still but a tiny part of the Cosmic Machine.

Is it reasonable for leukocytes in the bloodstream to expect to understand everything about the body in which they’re functioning? Of course not. Similarly, I’d argue, Stalkers can’t expect to understand everything about the Dreaming, about the Realms of Flesh and Essence, about the Rift. They know their own place in the grand structure; they know their purpose; and they understand the constraints put upon their actions (the Forbiddance). Beyond that, though? The world of *The*

Whispering Vault is full of unknowns and imponderables . . . and that’s just the way it should be.

Why, for example, can the Stalkers cross the Rift only in response to a Call? Why are the Stalkers categorically forbidden to harm the Supplicant? To players, these constraints often seem arbitrary. (To Stalkers too, perhaps . . .) Within the logic of *The Whispering Vault*, however, they’re *not* arbitrary. They make perfect sense; they’re natural outgrowths, necessary consequences, of the way the Dreaming works. Of course, understanding *why* they’re necessary required a comprehension of the entire Dreaming – something that’s beyond the capabilities of everything but the Primal Powers themselves. The Stalkers can only accept these things as “givens,” as the axioms of their existence . . . and hold to the certitude that everything proceeds as the Primal Powers wish.

It’s up to you, as gamemaster, to convey this gestalt – this overall world-view – to your players. The symbolic, ritualistic aspects of the Hunt’s beginning – the Call, the summoning of the Navigator, the banishing of the Guardian, etc. – are great ways of reminding the players of their characters’ place in the grand scheme. Throughout the Hunt, take any opportunities that arise to bring this point home. When the Stalkers use Disciplines or summon Servitors, feel free to describe the sensations the characters feel (above and beyond the descriptions the players themselves give). Disciplines let the Stalkers alter the fabric of the Dreaming – on a minuscule level, of course – and they should *feel* this. They should feel the enormity of the structure around them – the structure that is the whole of existence – and sense the workings of the other parts of the Cosmic Machine. (It’s important to use this sense of enormity, of *immanence*, judiciously; otherwise, it’ll become formulaic and meaningless through repetitions.)





MORALITY – “AN INVENTION OF THE FLESH”

Stalkers are – or, at least, *should be* – amoral individuals. Not *immoral* – *amoral*: totally beyond the scope of morality as humans understand it. Morality, after all – the distinction between good and evil – is a mortal concept, an “invention of the flesh.” In the Realm of Essence, the terms “good” and “evil” are totally meaningless.

Certainly, Stalkers may occasionally lapse into seeing things in terms of conventional morality. They were once mortals, after all, and the good/evil dichotomy is drilled into mortals from the day of their birth to the moment of their death. The Aesthetics, the Unbidden, and the Primal Powers *don’t* view things in terms of morality, however . . . and that means *you*, as gamemaster, can’t either.

It’s an easy trap to fall into; it’s convenient to class the Unbidden as “evil” and the Stalkers as forces for “good.” But that’s simply not true to the mood of *The Whispering Vault*. The Stalkers pursue the Unbidden, mend the Enigma, not because the rogue Aesthetic is evil . . . but because what it does is *wrong*: counter to the cosmic order. It’s a subtle difference, but a vitally important one.

Conceivably, the Unbidden could create an Enigma that mortals would consider “good.” Perhaps the Enigma is that everyone is kindly toward his neighbors; that people forgive, rather than holding grudges; that cruelty and violence are unheard of; that sickness, and death, are eliminated. Would the Stalkers be justified in turning a blind eye to this kind of Enigma, in calling off the Hunt because the Unbidden’s actions obviously aren’t “evil”? Of course not. What matters is that the natural order has been altered by the very presence of the rogue Aesthetic. The Enigma is a rent in the fabric of What

Should Be, a perversion of the Dreaming. And so the Stalkers would hunt the Unbidden with the same fervor as if the Enigma caused innocent children to spontaneously combust.

To help get this idea across, you as gamemaster have to be careful in the words you choose to describe the Unbidden and the Enigma. When a Stalker uses Sensitivity, tell the player her character senses “wrongness,” not “evil.” Instead of words like “wickedness,” “badness,” “vileness,” etc., use terms like “transformation,” “mutation” and “perversion of the natural order.” Again, this is a subtle distinction, and sometimes a difficult one to communicate. But when you *do* get it across to your players, you’ll find it’s certainly worth the effort.

TECHNIQUES

Here are some techniques and tools you can use to build the mood and maintain the atmosphere so necessary for *The Whispering Vault*. (I won’t bother with obvious tricks and trappings; you already know you can play by candlelight, and put eerie music on the stereo . . .)

SYMBOLISM

A good game of *The Whispering Vault* should have many similarities with a nightmare. The familiar appears in transformed, often monstrous, guise. The monstrous is revealed to be benign, if not outright helpful and beneficial. The world of *The Whispering Vault* is our world, viewed through a dark and distorting mirror. How, as a gamemaster, do you get that nightmarish feel? One way is through the use of symbolism.

In this context, a “symbol” is something that is representative, not objective. It denotes, or depicts, something beyond its physical existence. It carries extra meaning – meaning that can bring enlightenment to a Stalker able to decipher its significance.





THEME AND “THROUGH-LINE”

Before you start tossing symbols into your game, take some time to think about the theme, the story “through-line,” that you’ll be dealing with in your adventure. The Hunt you’re about to play is a story. What’s that story *about*? If you had to describe to a friend the key “feel” of the story in one word, what would that word be?

If you’re having trouble figuring out the theme of your story, take a look at the motivation or goals you’ve assigned to the Unbidden, at the nature of the Enigma. In abstract terms, what *is* the Enigma? What’s at the heart of it? Is it associated with any emotions?

For example, a Hunt that revolves around an orphanage or children’s hospital where the Unbidden is performing twisted experiments on innocent children, might have a theme of betrayal, or of corruption of innocence (or of both, depending on how your story’s put together). A Hunt for an Unbidden holing up in a movie studio might revolve around reality and fantasy, and the difficulty of telling them apart.

Other common themes are loss (of a loved one, or of innocence); betrayal; sacrifice; truth and lie, and how one can sometimes become the other; transcendence; flight or escape; and many others.

Once you have your theme – once you know what your story’s about – take a moment and list images associated with that theme. What words and images come to mind for you? Those words and images will become the symbols you weave through your story.

As an example, let’s say the theme of your story is abandonment and betrayal. As your Stalkers seek the Unbidden and try to mend the Enigma, they observe or overhear seemingly-unrelated events that actually reinforce the theme and atmosphere of the Hunt. A bedraggled kitten, mewling desperately at the closed door

of a recently-vacated house. A child wandering lost through the noonday crowds on a city sidewalk. An obviously-prized doll dumped unceremoniously in a garbage can. Although these symbolic scenes don’t necessarily have to have *anything* whatsoever to do with the plot of the Hunt, they are – or *can* be – emotionally evocative, underlining the central theme on which you’ve decided.

Archetypes

Situations, events and objects can be symbols. So can people. “Archetypes” (in this context, at least) are individuals who represent an entire category or “class” of people. Familiar archetypes from movies and fiction are “Everyman,” the Madonna, the Fallen Hero, and the Doubt-Wracked Priest. Like other symbols, archetypes can evoke strong emotion that supports the theme of the story.

There’s a particular risk associated with using archetypes. If used improperly, archetypes can easily slip into stereotype, or – worse – caricature. The value of archetypes doesn’t justify the conven-

ience (and the cop-out) of two-dimensional characterization. Even archetypes – or maybe “*especially* archetypes” – need distinct, differentiated personalities. Your players have no doubt encountered a Fallen Hero before; that doesn’t mean that they should ever have met *this* Fallen Hero. “Archetype” doesn’t mean familiar, or mundane.

If you do decide to use an archetype in your adventure, it’s important to make sure that he or she is closely connected to the theme of the plot.

Recurring Symbols

Be careful of recurring symbols – particularly *between* Hunts. Recurring symbols within a particular adventure can greatly enhance the emotional effect of that story’s theme. But be aware if you’re falling into a rut of using the same symbols – or even the same *class* of symbols – in different adventures. The first time your players say something like, “Oh, an abandoned animal. Guess this is another betrayal story,” you’ve lost the mood.





SUBTLETY

It's easy to take symbolism too far – so far that your players will look for symbols in everything, assume every item you mention is symbolic of something else. On some Hunts, maybe this is the case. In the majority of cases, though, use symbolism sparingly – as a way of refining, of bringing into sharper focus, what you consider to be the key concepts of the Hunt. As soon as your players start expecting symbols to be everywhere, you've lost that tool. Remember, even Sigmund Freud – one of the “fathers” of the symbolic language – admitted, “Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.”

VISUALIZATION

One of the central aspects of role-playing is that all the action takes place in the players' (and gamemaster's) minds. Everything is visualized.

Visualization is even more important in *The Whispering Vault* – partially, but not only, because the rule mechanics are so brief and abstract. To go back to an earlier example, just because evoking a Servitor requires just a single dice roll doesn't mean it should be a simple, run-of-the-mill event in the game world. Think about it. What is the Stalker doing? He's calling across the Rift, sending forth his will to attract the attention of a distinct, semi-sentient creature with its own needs and wants. He's subtly – or not so subtly – altering the fabric of reality, affecting the warp and the weft of the Dreaming. This isn't superficial stuff!

Any time a Stalker uses a Discipline or similar “supernormal” ability, encourage the Stalker's player to *visualize* exactly what's happening – what his character sees and hears and does, and (most importantly) what his character *feels*. Does the Stalker sense the vastness

of the Neitherspace from which he's calling the Servitor? Does he hear his voice echo off into infinity, beyond the physical bounds of his actual location? If the action is strenuous, costing him a point of Vitality, does he feel the expenditure of energy? Does he feel lassitude after? Exhaustion? Physical or mental pain?

And, once the player has visualized what's happening, encourage her to *describe* it to you and to the other players. Most gamers being at least somewhat competitive, your players will probably feel the urge to outdo their companions when it comes their turn to take some supernormal action, to stretch their descriptive abilities to the utmost. Not only can this be very enjoyable, in and of itself, but it also can dramatically heighten the high-dramatic mood of *The Whispering Vault*. Depending on your players, some of the finest, most evocative visualization can come before the Hunt even begins, when your friends describe their Stalkers sojourning in their Domains, awaiting the Call . . .

VISUALIZATION/DESCRIPTION IN COMBAT

Traditionally in role-playing games, where visualization and description tends to break down is in combat. As soon as the dice start to roll, and the fists and bullets start to fly, the most evocative description degrades to, “I swing at him,” and, “This round I'll use Rend.”

Don't let your players off the hook just because they're fighting for their lives. This is the time when the drama should be at its height – not the tension that comes from wondering how the dice are going to fall, but the true *drama* that arises from identifying with your character, putting yourself in her position, and experiencing the world through her senses. As with so many other facets of the game, the descrip-

tions of combat abilities in the rulebook are purposefully vague. Whenever a Stalker uses some combat Discipline – Frenzy, Rend or Savage – *make sure* the Stalker's player describes exactly what's happening. What kind of weapon does the Stalker manifest with the Savage Discipline? What does it look like, sound like – what does it *feel* like for the Stalker to suddenly create a weapon out of its Vessel?

What form does the ranged attack of Rend take? Do spiked chains shoot out of the Stalker's eyes? Does her hair turn to razorwire and lash out? Again, what does it look like, sound like, *feel* like . . . ?

It's so much easier to fall back on the tried and true than to come up with something new and exciting all the time. Thus, even the most creative players will probably fall into familiar “licks” or “chops” when it comes to combat. Rend will *always* manifest as chains from the eyes. Savage will *always* involve fingernails turning into scalpels. Consider giving your players some very real benefits for trying something new. After the first attack in any given combat, maybe you could enforce a +1 or even +2 penalty to any attack where the player's description of his Stalker's action is “boring” (as judged by the gamemaster, or perhaps by the other players). If a certain player always defaults to Rend-via-optical-chains, you might slap a +1 penalty on each subsequent Rend attack where he doesn't come up with something innovative. (There's even a logical rationale for this kind of penalty. Once an opponent has seen – or experienced – a chain-from-the-eyes attack, he'll certainly put at least *some* effort into figuring out some way to counter or dodge that kind of attack. Only by constantly trying something unexpected can a Stalker keep her combat effectiveness at a maximum.)





GAMEMASTER DESCRIPTION

While your players can and should be responsible for a lot of the visualization and description in the game, you as gamemaster must bear the brunt of it. If it's easy for a player to get lulled into the familiar routine of "I swing and miss," during combat, it's even simpler for the gamemaster. Keeping it novel and interesting can be difficult, but again it's well worth the effort. A Minion attacks a Stalker. Fine. *How* does it attack? Cautiously, probing for a seam in the Stalker's defense without committing itself prematurely? Or in all-out attack, closing the distance between them in a rush, to tear and bite? Both attacks are the same from a rules-mechanics point of view, but the difference descriptions like this make to the overall experience is obvious.

Evocative, moody description is particularly important when a Minion is wounded and the Husk tears away to reveal the creature within, or when the Unbidden itself drops the Veil. These events are often high points in the game – the kind of scene that would be included in the cinematic "trailer" that advertises a new horror movie. You should take care in describing the horrific manifestation of the Minion or the Unbidden – as much care as, if not more than, the players themselves take describing the event when their Stalkers drop the Veil.

"THE ALIEN"

The Whispering Vault should be a game of the strange, of the weird – the alien. The Stalkers themselves, and the procedures they have to follow during a Hunt, are outré enough. (In other games, player characters rarely travel via the gastrointestinal tract of colossal pandimensional worms, after all . . .) The seemingly-arbitrary restrictions on the Stalkers' actions – no crossing the Rift without the Call, hands off the

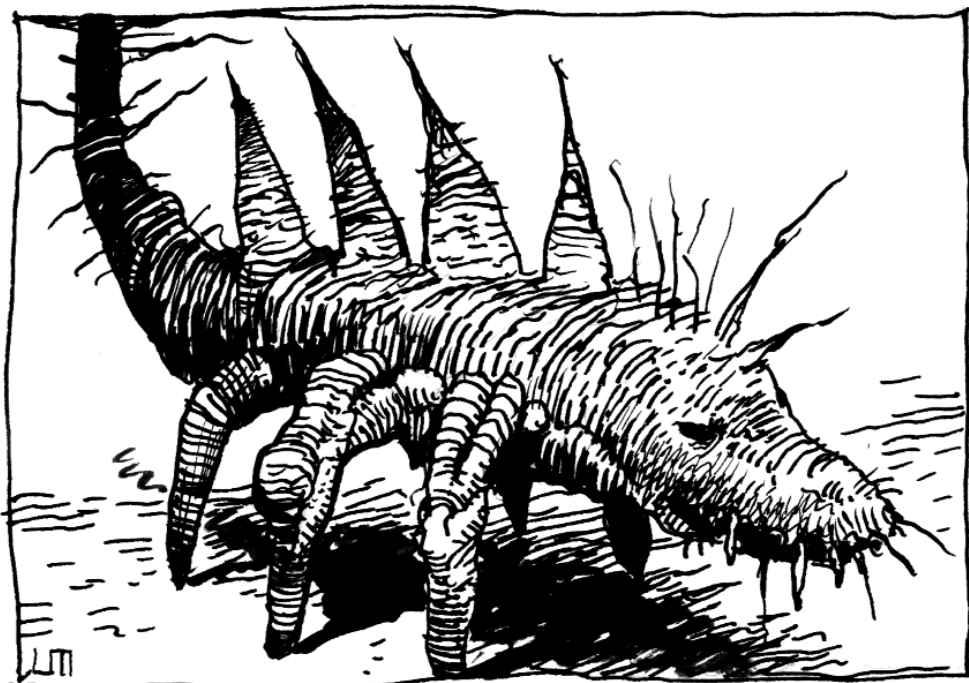
Supplicant, etc. – are enigmatic in and of themselves. The Stalkers themselves should have a decidedly distinct view of reality and their own place in it. Viewed from the standpoint of a normal mortal, that point of view is definitely alien.

But where the exotic, the truly alien, comes into play is in the world-view, motivation and actions of the Unbidden. Remember, the Unbidden is *the Other*, in every sense of the word. It was never a mortal human, as the Stalkers were. The Unbidden was an Aesthetic: a creation of the Primal Powers, the outgrowth of those Powers' hunger for the wonders of the previous Cycle of existence. In turn, the Realm of Flesh – the world we call "real" – is a creation of the Aesthetics, the outgrowth of their Dreaming and imagination. Forsaking its place among the host of the Aesthetics, the Unbidden has crossed the Rift to interact directly with the world that it participated in creating. The Unbidden's conception of reality, its view of its own place in the Dreaming, will be totally incomprehensible from the once-mortal standpoint of the Stalkers.

Remember, the Unbidden has abandoned its place in the cosmic scheme to satisfy its own hungers and desires. Basically, some aspect or aspects of the Realm of Flesh are so enticing, so engrossing, that it's perverted the entire structure of reality to satisfy its wants. In essence, then, the Unbidden is virtually a deity that has set aside its own godhood, and put itself into direct conflict with the Grand Scheme.

Why? Obviously for reasons that seem good and sufficient to the Unbidden. To anyone else, though – specifically, to anyone who still carries the limitations (the "taint," almost) of the mortal condition (in other words, the Stalkers)? These reasons will and *should* be totally incomprehensible.





This is another distinction between the genre of *The Whispering Vault* and more typical horror or fantasy stories. As with all “good” – that is, well-realized and well-plotted – antagonists, the Unbidden has strong motivations. It’s doing what it does for reasons that make perfect sense to it, not “just because.” Unlike other genres, however, in *The Whispering Vault* those strong and “logical” motivations should be completely obscure and arcane to the Stalkers (and to the players). The Unbidden doesn’t come to the Realm of Flesh to amass wealth or power, to become famous or feared, to wreak vengeance or settle old scores – familiar human motives. Instead, the Unbidden might strive to alter the thought-processes of certain children – seeming to drive them “insane,” while actually skewing their perceptions of self and of reality. It might toy with the distinction between fiction and reality. It might remove or alter the national inhibitions of mortals – including those that protect from self-

destruction – just to observe the results. In other words, the Unbidden should have an agenda . . . but an overwhelmingly *alien* one.

As a guideline, then, if you find that the Unbidden in a plotline you’re considering is acting from familiar, easily-understandable motives . . . *seriously* consider changing things around. The actions and motivations of the Unbidden should be outré, disturbing, *eerie*. You’re doing a good job if your players think they can *almost* sense the logic behind your Unbidden’s actions – *almost* but not quite. If they have the niggling, disturbing feeling that they *almost* understand, then you’re definitely on the right track. (If, in addition, you can intimate that finally *coming* to understand would be dangerous in some sense – that if the Stalkers ever fully understand the Unbidden’s motivations, then they’re in danger of following the rogue Aesthetic into apostasy – then you’ve encapsulated perfectly the atmosphere of *The Whispering Vault* in your game.)

THINGS TO WATCH

Here are some areas of concern to which you might want to pay special attention – typical pitfalls into which I’ve seen *Vault* gamemasters fall (or into which I’ve fallen myself . . .)

HUMOR

This is a touchy subject in a lot of games. I’d argue, though, that it’s even more of a delicate issue in *The Whispering Vault*.

Humor is valuable. As playwrights, novelists, and good gamemasters know, an ebb and flow of tension throughout a play, story or game session is vital. If everything’s always happening at an emotional fever pitch – if the tension’s cranked up tight and never released – then readers or players “overload.” Their emotional “circuit breakers” trip, and they withdraw from what’s going on.

If you plot the level of tension in any good work of fiction – and I definitely include a good game session in the category of “fiction” – you’ll see something that looks like a roller-coaster. Not a steady, unrelieved ascent to a climax. Not a plateau, where the tension is maximal from start to finish. Instead, you’ll find an ebb and flow of tension – peaks and valleys. Certainly, the average level of tension increases from the start to the climax, but there are plenty of respites – moments where the players (and you, the gamemaster) can catch their collective breaths.

Humor can be useful to momentarily decrease the tension, setting your players up for another, higher, peak of stress. If you use it judiciously, humor doesn’t have to break the mood. Even in *Macbeth*, one of the bleakest tragedies in Western drama, Shakespeare tosses in a scene of comic relief. Rather than “spoiling the mood,” instead it “softens the audience up,” preparing them to react with renewed sensitivity to what follows.





Conversely, nothing can wreck the carefully-established mood of a *Vault* game than *inappropriate* humor. “Boffo” comedy – the kind of over-the-top situation-based humor you’ll find in most TV sit-coms – generally isn’t appropriate for this kind of game. More ironic humor – based on an understanding and appreciation of contradictions in a situation, or arising from character rather than event – is much more in keeping. Speaking personally, I find that the best form of humor is that where the *players* recognize the humor in a situation but the Stalkers they’re role-playing *don’t*. This kind of dry, “multi-level” comedy, most often based on misconception and “conceptual mismatch” can lighten the mood without betraying the genre.

Here’s an example of what I think is appropriate humor (with a follow-up “twist”) from a recent game I played. The player characters are approached by a slightly-scattered little old lady, who’s concerned that her husband’s gone missing. She takes cookies to her husband every afternoon, she explains, but today her husband just wasn’t there. She’s worried, and wants some help in finding out what’s happened. The player characters ask around, and quickly learn that the woman’s husband died seven years before. Quietly amused, the players send their characters forth to break the news to the obviously-senile old woman that her husband’s well beyond enjoying her cookies any more. It’s only when they’ve stumbled through a careful, oh-so-tactful explanation, that they discover that yes, the woman knows her husband’s dead. Every day since his funeral, she’s been delivering a plate of his favorite cookies to his gravesite . . . and today, she found that his body had been exhumed. A touch of humor, combined with a way of revealing a major plot-point – the stolen body – in a surprising, and hence more effective, way.

Be particularly careful with the Unbidden and the Enigma. Weird and alien

is appropriate; “goofy” isn’t. It’s a fine line to walk, sometimes, but you’ll soon find the balance that works for you and your players.

Of course, as with everything else, it’s entirely up to you and your players how you use humor in your games. If everyone’s laughing themselves hoarse throughout your game of *Vault*, then they’re obviously enjoying themselves. And enjoyment is the main purpose of gaming anyway.

INNOCENT BLOOD

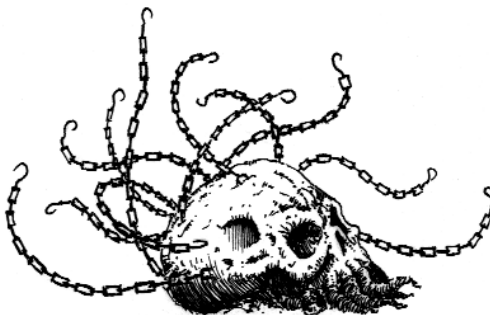
One of the unwritten axioms of a Stalker’s existence is “tread softly.” The Circle’s task is to correct a disturbance, a perversion, in the fabric of the Dreaming. In effect, banishing the Unbidden (or destroying it) is secondary to the major task, healing the Enigma. Following this logic, then, it makes sense that the Stalkers should go to great lengths to minimize their impact on the Dreaming themselves. They aren’t, strictly speaking, part of the fabric. Their very presence causes slight aberrations in the pattern around them. Generally, the Living Dream is fluid and adaptable enough to reconcile minor changes, to re-weave itself so that the pattern isn’t substantively harmed by the Circle’s actions. It’s obvious, though, that the Stalkers should keep their impact to a bare minimum. That’s the importance of the Forbiddance – a reminder to overeager Stalkers that they’re contemplating an act that could endanger the Dream.

Usually, the Forbiddance comes into play when the Stalkers use obviously-

supernatural abilities outside the Temporal Isolation, or when they drop the Veil. The Forbiddance is also important, however, when the Stalkers are considering taking innocent blood, or manipulating the minds, actions or lives of mortals unrelated to the Unbidden or Enigma.

Stalkers are so much more competent at most things than the mortals that surround them on a Hunt. Even without using Savage or Frenzy, a competent Stalker can slaughter a bodyguard, a hostile street-gang, or an inquisitive policeman before the mortal opponent even knows what’s happening. For many players, this ability seems to be a strong temptation. I believe it’s a temptation that should be held in check. Despite its horror aspects, and its flashes of brutal violence, *The Whispering Vault* is at heart a game of problem-solving. A lot of the challenge, the flavor and the interest is lost if the Stalkers can solve any problem that arises by tearing off a few heads. The Forbiddance can – and perhaps *should* – come down hard on anyone who kills, or otherwise interferes with, innocent mortals.

Think of it from the logic of the Dreaming. The Dream is a fabric; each mortal is a thread within that fabric. Stalkers have no way of recognizing which threads are important to the pattern, and which are irrelevant. They should recognize their ignorance, and this understanding should make them circumspect. After all, it’s easy to imagine how a Stalker’s ill-considered action can be as damaging to the Dream as the presence of the Unbidden. Thirty years in the future, a major, world-changing development will be made by a scientist or artist (remember, there’s no past or future as the Primal Powers perceive the dream) . . . except that an overeager Stalker has just cut down the cop who was to be that innovator’s father. That ill-considered action has torn a great rent in the fabric of the Dream.





This kind of hypothetical situation is central to *The Whispering Vault*. You and your players need to keep it in mind throughout the game. Feel free to use the Forbiddance as a not-so-subtle reminder that the Stalkers should “tread softly” on the Dreaming while they’re in the Realm of the Flesh.

THE CHRONOSPHERE

The Whispering Vault isn’t a time-travel game. The “grandfather paradox” and other twists and turns of temporal logic are beyond the scope of the game. Nevertheless, some players’ first response to a *Vault* scenario set in a historical time-frame is, “What if we kill Hitler when he’s a child?,” or “What if we prevent Lincoln’s assassination?”

In short, the answer should be – within the logic of the game – that this kind of thing is categorically impossible. The Chronosphere is a fabric, a pattern, which the Primal Powers view in its entirety. The concept of “time” is a simplification, a convenient fiction embraced by those who can’t comprehend the Chronosphere as it truly is – i.e., mortals, and Stalkers. Hitler is part of that grand pattern, as is Lincoln . . . as, to some degree, is every mortal who ever lived (or will live). Tearing Hitler from that pattern, or reweaving the fabric so Lincoln’s thread doesn’t end in 1865, is as much a perversion of the Dreaming as anything the Unbidden might do. Therefore, the Forbiddance should come into play – immediately and categorically – to forestall anything the Stalkers might consider along these lines. (This is another one of those seemingly-arbitrary aspects about *The Whispering Vault*, which is actually a logical necessity arising from the underlying paradigm.)

This inviolability of the Chronosphere can be a major restriction on the actions of the Stalkers – particu-

larly if you define matters strictly (as I described in the previous section). If can also provide major clues to the Stalkers as to where the Unbidden is hiding, and the nature of the Enigma. If circumstances seem to be leading toward an event or development that isn’t “appropriate” within the pattern of the Chronosphere, it’s a sure bet that the Unbidden is involved. (For example, if it looks as though World War II is going to break out four years “early,” that gives the Stalkers at least some idea of the Unbidden’s activities.) Of course, this makes the History skill incredibly valuable for Stalkers . . .

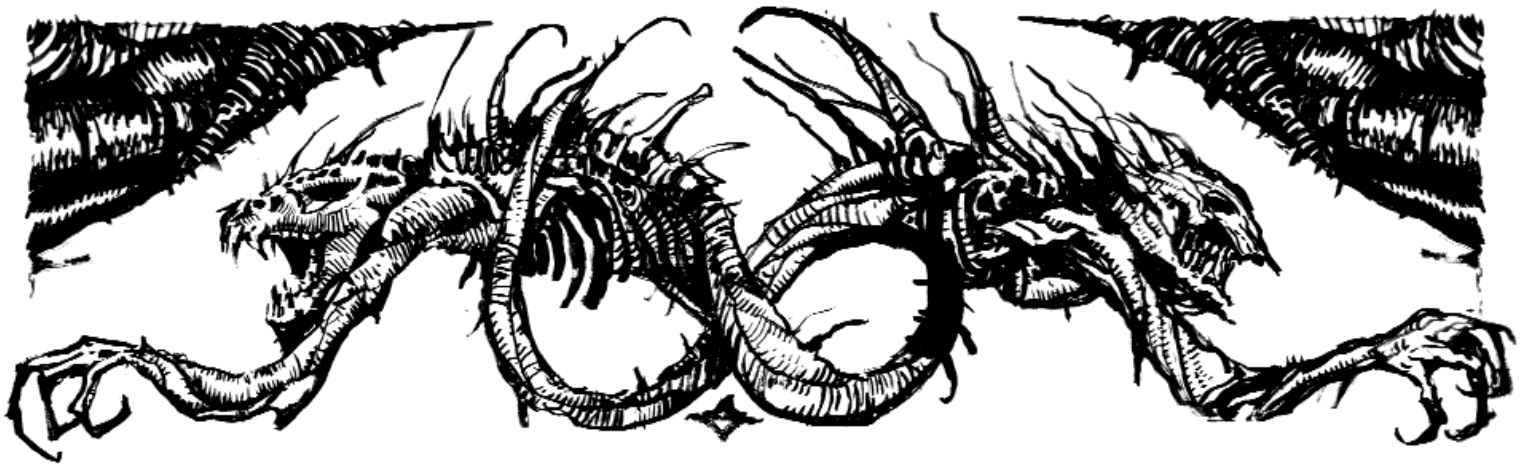
Once the Stalkers have found the Corrupted area around the Unbidden, and entered the Temporal Isolation, then all bets are off. Anything that happens within the Temporal Isolation isn’t “real” as far as the Dreaming is concerned, and there’s no concern about triggering the Forbiddance.

CONCLUSION

In essence, then, there are four basic “rules” for gamemastering *The Whispering Vault*:

1. Keep it strange. *Vault* is a game of the Other, of the Alien.
2. Keep it internally consistent. The Stalkers are part of a cosmic machine that operates by its own laws – admittedly arcane, but nonetheless unbreakable.
3. Keep it “focused.” The sole purpose for a Stalker’s existence is to mend rents in the fabric of the Dreaming. To *cause* rents – even small ones – should be totally anathema for a Stalker. Use the Forbiddance to keep the Stalkers on track.
4. Keep it fun. That’s what it’s all about, after all . . .





INVISIBLE HISTORY

by Chad Brinkley

The events described in this timeline are certainly not an exhaustive record of the activities of Unseen creatures in the Realm of the Flesh. They are, however, some of the more significant events – some because they took place over several years or decades and others because they had lasting effects. None, of course, changed the course of world history: History is determined by the Aesthetics, and its key events and characters are protected by the Forbiddance.

6538 B.C.: An Enlightened sage sees written in the stars an ancient codex describing the true nature of the universe and the dreams of the Aesthetics which create it. Her cave-drawings symbolically record her insights, though few mortals subsequently understand her pictorial scrawls.

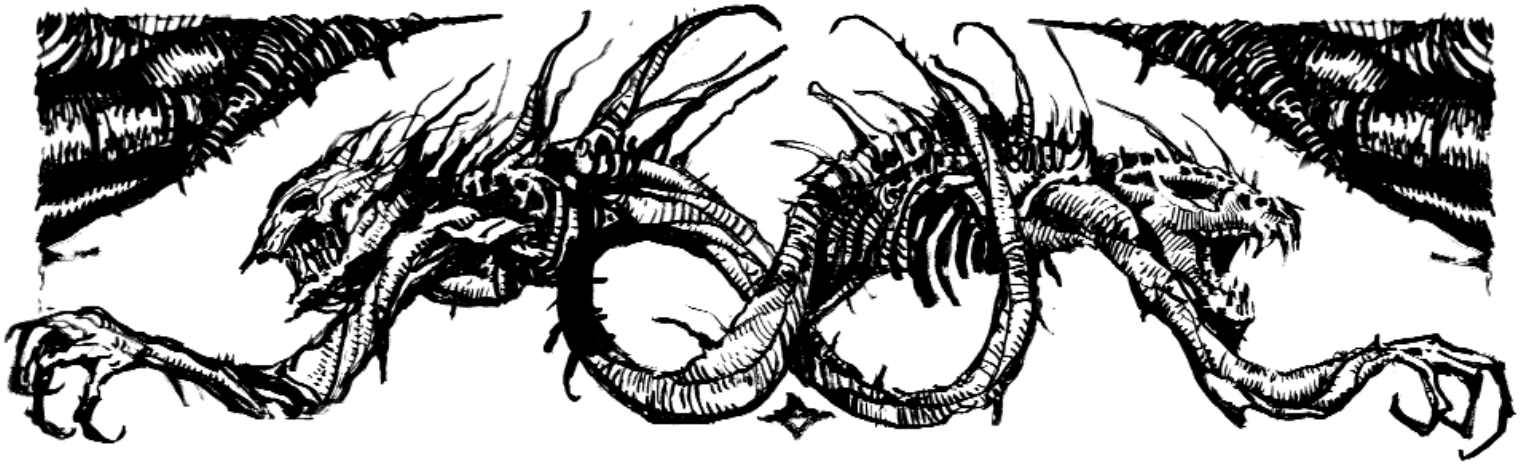
3228 B.C.: A “prophet” (Stranger) appears in the Mesopotamian city of Ashur, promising to lead the people to “the home of the gods beyond the stars.” Its demented plan - to somehow free the Essence of its followers and then to lead them into the realm of Essence to wage war on the Powers - is foiled by a Circle of Stalkers. But the Essence-remnants of many of its followers endure in the Rift.

2742 B.C.: The Aesthetic formerly known as Kho-Phe-Thak (He Who Waits Beyond) absconds and settles as an Unbidden amongst the emerging cities of the Indus Valley. Fearing that her presence will attract a Circle of Stalkers, she instructs a group of mortal magicians to create and enchant a broad marble bowl, five feet in diameter and carved with vines, animals

and similar symbols of life - all, of course, unpleasantly warped. A small measure of the Unbidden’s Essence is concentrated into the Great Bowl, and whenever it is subsequently filled with blood she may manifest her entire Avatar at the bowl’s location. This even allows her to return from the Vault - as she often does over the next 5,000 years. She can influence the bowl’s mortal owners, encouraging them to recall her from the Vault. After a dozen manifestations, each time being Bound and returned to the Vault, a Circle of Stalkers finally deduce the bowl’s significance and destroy it.

2310 B.C.: Shriekblack and Guzz make their earliest appearance on Earth, in China. (They had actually begun their careers later in history, and travelled back to this point.) They offer the Chinese Emperor the secrets of magic in return for an ancient stone tablet found buried underneath the palace. The Emperor refuses, believing the tablet to be some powerful artifact. Shriekblack and Guzz offer their magic to a small group of Enlightened mortals if they will agree to steal the tablet. The mortals agree, take the





tablet and trade it for Shriekblack's knowledge of sorcery. This small group will later become the basis for the Secret Masters.

1904 B.C.: An Architect called Rhifor'ydg becomes vizier (lieutenant) to the Kings of Egypt. Unable to defeat it, an Enlightened magician named Abanar imprisons it within its own Vessel and slays the body. With the Unbidden still within, the corpse is buried in one of the greatest tombs of Beni Hassan, where the nobles of the period were often interred.

1260 B.C.: Lorbzor, a shadow, is accidentally awaked when Etqhuczi, a South American king, wishes in a moment of despair that he were never born. The mortal king vanishes and is replaced by Loboroz, who creates a kingdom which comes to be known as "The Land Where Wishes Come Real." The area is soon rejected by the Dream.

813 B.C.: Immigrants in Ireland, led by a Sensitive war-leader and her magicians, clash with several small groups of Ogys, who manage to cooperate to present a united front against the mortals. The tales of the conflict form the basis of much Irish folklore and later influence folk and faerie beliefs.

771 B.C.: A small group of Shadows, fearful of the knowledge gathered by the Secret Masters, manifests and joins a band of barbarians in sacking the Chinese capital, guiding the mortals to attack the Masters and their library. (Shriekblack and Guzz are rumoured to

be amongst the Shadows.) The Masters' leaders are slain and their books are destroyed or carried off by the barbarians. The remaining members, with what treasures they can carry, scatter throughout the east.

c.700-c.100 B.C.: A recurrent and apparently natural Enigma, based around an isolated river valley near the Black Sea, renders the surrounding mortals virtually unable to die. The people, gripped by extreme age, injury or disease, are not overjoyed, but the Enigma's effects lead to legends of a "spring of youth." The Enigma is continually Mended and reMended by various Stalkers, often opposed by mortal sorcerers and others who wish to exploit or alter the valley's "enchanted" waters or its Enigma.

212 B.C.: The ruins of the former library of the Secret Masters is discovered in China, and the remaining texts begin to circulate. Emperor Shihuang, afraid of these new ideas, orders all scholarly materials which are not of immediate use to be burned. During the destruction of the texts the infamous Shriekblack and Guzz are Awakened. Shriekblack later explains that it was in "breathing the fumes of so many burning books" that he gained his wisdoms.

17 A.D.: An Architect constructs a lush paradise in the deserts of Arabia, luring human colonists to its green and pleasant land only to destroy them so that their Essence maintains its creation. A Circle of Stalkers Bind the Architect and the paradise slips off into a Temporal Isolation, unconnected to the Flesh,

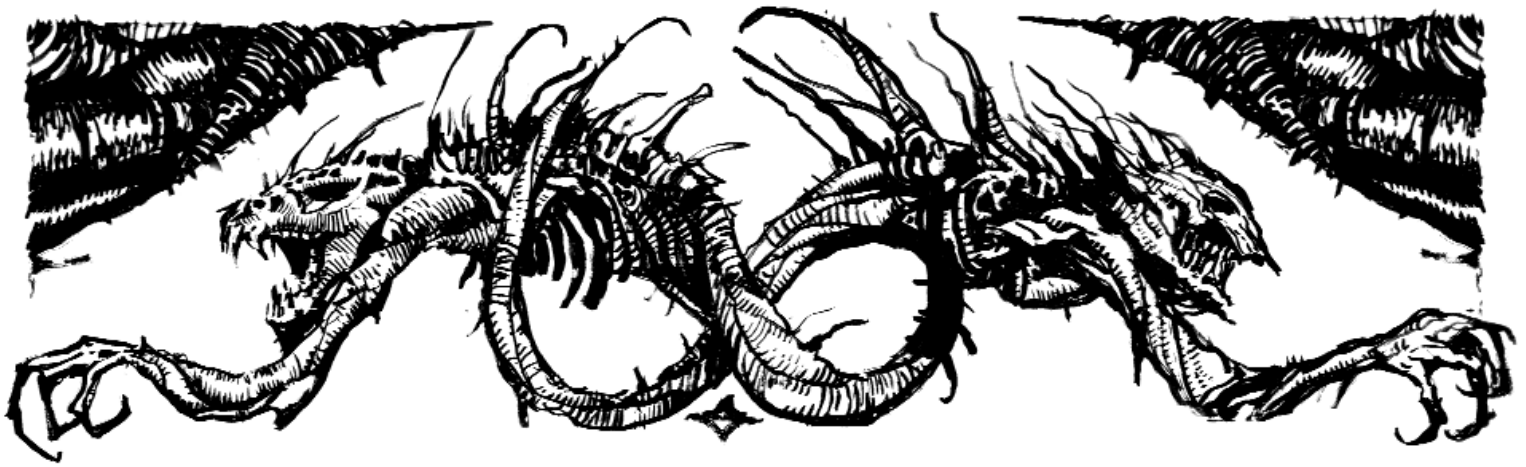
floating in the Rift. It subsequently becomes the lair of a renegade Circle of Stalkers, and eventually disintegrates.

179 A.D.: The screams and shouts of an unwanted newborn child left by its parents to die on a hillside allows Abballor the Butcher to manifest for the first time. The ritualistic murders draw the attention of the Enlightened mortal hunter Tiberious Furianus. Tiberious tracks Abballor using his hedge magics, and manages to destroy the Butcher's shell. Tiberious dedicates the rest of his life to accumulating knowledge about the evil spirits he believes lurk within his world, and founds a lineage of mortal hunters which will span nearly 20 generations.

237-351 A.D.: China's Yellow River often beats with the sound of a heart (audible only to Sensitive characters), probably as the result of a mortal sorcerer's experimentation.

443 A.D.: The Aesthetic known as Khalibrymboro (The Dust of The Foundation Stone) abandons its post. He desires to indulge himself by reversing the order of things such that the foundations are freed. He creates an upside down fortress of snow, fog and water hanging on the underside of a rock slab suspended in the sky above Australia. Rejected from the Dream, the castle shifts into a state of Temporal Isolation. A Circle of Stalkers Bind the Unbidden and cut the Shadowland off from the Flesh. The castle continues to exist in its own Realm, however, and several of the creature's human proteges - demented Aboriginal Shamen - still have enchant-





ed stones which allow them to pass into the realm.

511, 521, 531 . . . 571 A.D.: On one night every ten years a crystal horse appears in the forests of Bavaria. Wherever it passes the mortals experience prophetic dreams, but plagues and blights spread in its wake.

641 A.D.: The Shadow known as The Librarian first appears, salvaging books during the Arab sacking of the Library of Alexandria.

644 A.D.: A Navigator is glimpsed through the Veil in Japan, leading to its worship as a worm-deity by the desperate peasantry.

692 A.D.: The death of Lin So, China's greatest sorcerer, aged 149. He leaves behind him dozens of enchanted artefacts.

779 A.D.: A "dying" Navigator causes havoc by sucking whole areas of land and numerous mortals from the Realm of Flesh as it connects randomly with various points in the Dream. Several Circles of Stalkers are busied recovering lost mortals from the Navigator's body and Mending the resulting Enigmas, until the creature finally connects with an area of high population and is destroyed by the Forbiddance.

880 A.D.: A Unbidden manifests in the bustling city of Baghdad, taking as its Vessel a swarm of rats, living only to feed and to reproduce. Successive Circles of Stalkers are summoned to deal

with the creature, and although they easily defeat individual insects they cannot destroy all of the thousands amongst which the creature's Essence is spread. Eventually one Circle tricks the Unbidden into concentrating itself into a human host and Binds it.

971-2 A.D.: The Unbidden calling itself Muse appears in the South Pacific. As an Aesthetic it created the impossible dreams and fantasies of mortals, and it uses its store of dreams of a lost continent to forge a kingdom in the South. The "continent" that it tries to raise is rejected by the Dream, and the Unbidden and his subjects vanish into the Shadowland. Praying to their "gods," neighbouring islanders alert a Circle of Stalkers. But the Unbidden assails the Stalkers with their own lost dreams and hopes, and deludes them into serving him. Several other Circles are then dispatched before he is finally Bound. Most of the Stalkers who succumbed to his temptations are punished by being returned to the Dream in human form.

1016-1377 A.D.: In 1016 an Architect evades a Circle of Stalkers, vanishing in the area of Salt Lake (in what would later become Utah). It managed this by dissipating its Essence through the Lake, from where it continued to exert an influence over nearby mortals and Shadows until another Circle realised that it was within the lake and Bound it. However, a trace of its Essence (and power) remained for several centuries.

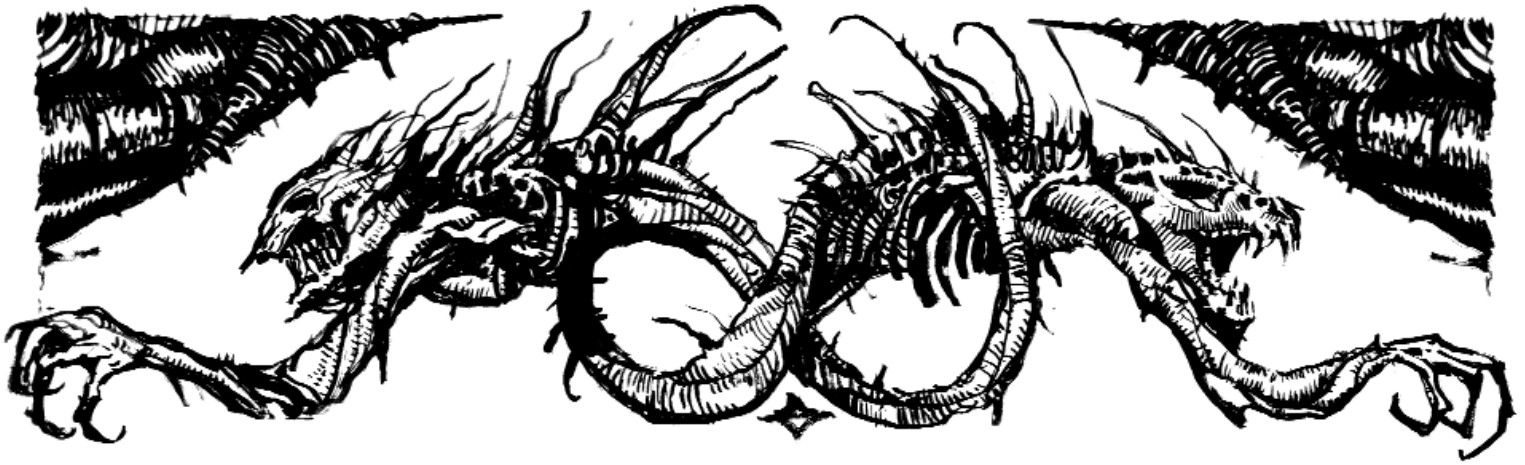
1028 A.D.: First contact between The Order and Stalkers.

1099-1291 A.D.: The barbarities of the Crusades Awaken and attract scores of Shadows. The creatures' leaders begin to squabble over the latent power of the shrines and cities of the area - and particularly Jerusalem, the spiritual centre for three major religions: through their faith, the Essence of millions of worshippers and martyrs is channelled into the city and surrounding shrines and waits to be tapped. The Shadows' squabbles soon break into wars which reflect (and, some Enlightened folk speculate, may have been influenced by) the mortal wars in the area. The leaders, controlling vast stores of Essence, have considerable power, and in their squabbles the factions' misuse of the Essence creates several Enigmas which require the interventions of Stalkers.

1212 A.D.: After abolishing a number of restrictions on membership, the Order opens a school for the study of magic in Athens. Their hopes are to gain enough initiates so that they can enter directly into combat with the Unbidden. Unfortunately, the Order's teachers lose control of the forces they are attempting to harness and a powerful ritual invokes the forbiddance. The school and everyone it is destroyed utterly.

1293-1326 A.D.: In the West African Kingdom of Benin, the harvests of Kola nuts (usually used as mild stimulants) are found to provoke hallucinations. Any mortal eating the nuts gains "insights" and "messages from the Ancestors" - believed by the Enlightened to be messages sent from a nearby Unbidden, whose destruction ends the effect.





1305 A.D.: Creation of the first Aegean Codex.

1364 A.D.: Burako the Faceless, an Aesthetic concerned with maintaining the apparent continuity of time, abandons its post. It appears in the city of Mankeweni, in East Africa, as an Unbidden. Its defection creates numerous minor Enigmas across the Dream, in many times and places, and it proves extremely difficult to Hunt down: once its Vessel is stripped away, Burako exists only in the gap between the past and the present, and so it escapes Binding several times, until at last a Circle of Stalkers realise that they must Bind it exactly as its Vessel is destroyed.

1376-1408 A.D.: The rules of Edgar Murell and "Sharp Beth" over the European Secret Masters.

1436- A.D.: An Arabic merchant ship, blown off course by storms off Sumatra, drifts into an area of becalmed sea, in which hundreds of funeral barges are slowly rotting. The area, swarming with morbid Shadows, is subsequently encountered by further traders and explorers over the next two centuries.

1527-8 A.D.: The coasts of Korea and Japan are terrorized by a living ship, built of bone, captained by an Unbidden and crewed by Shadows. The "pirates" are finally destroyed by a Circle of Stalkers, but the bone wreckage of the ship is salvaged by mortal magicians eager to contact the imprisoned Unbidden or the Shadow crew.

1616 A.D.: The prayers of a starving Puritan Colony in North America are answered by a confused Circle of Stalkers. Before the circle can realize that there is no rend in the Dream, the colony's leader - Jonathon Van Horn - manages to steal a key from each Stalker. He binds them into his service and forces them to help build his colony. Unfortunately, the power of the stolen keys corrupts Van Horn and he forces the Stalkers to slay all of the colonists whom he feels are plotting against him. Realizing that they are almost out of time, the captured Stalkers use the little energy they have left to summon a new Circle which manages to defeat Van Horn.

1619 A.D.: A Portuguese vessel vanishes at sea in the East Indies. The few survivors speak of a giant squid with hundreds of tentacles. The creature - a Lurker once attached to the Bone Ship destroyed a century before - continues to prey on shipping until the 20th century, when it is destroyed by the Forbiddance. Rumours of sea monsters multiply after every attack.

1620 A.D.: A group of self-proclaimed "Pilgrim Bastards" arrive in North Africa, intent upon establishing a community to worship certain "gods" - apparently Unbidden imprisoned in the Vault. Their magics and rituals establish several unstable Enigmas. It is later believed that their leader, an Awakened Pain Mother, established the colony just for the pleasure of watching a group of Stalkers eradicate it. Fragments of their writings survive, and later inspire numer-

ous misguided magicians, occultists and religious cults across Europe, colonised North America and the Middle East.

1655 A.D.: Inspired by the Parliament of Cromwell's England, the numerous shadows residing about the London area decide to form their own "Shadow Parliament," which long after tries to regulate the activities of Shadows across the surrounding lands.

1756-1783 A.D.: The French sorcerer Jean de Bois-Couteau indiscriminately hunts creatures of Essence across France and northern Europe. He defeats numerous Shadows, two Stalkers and an Unbidden.

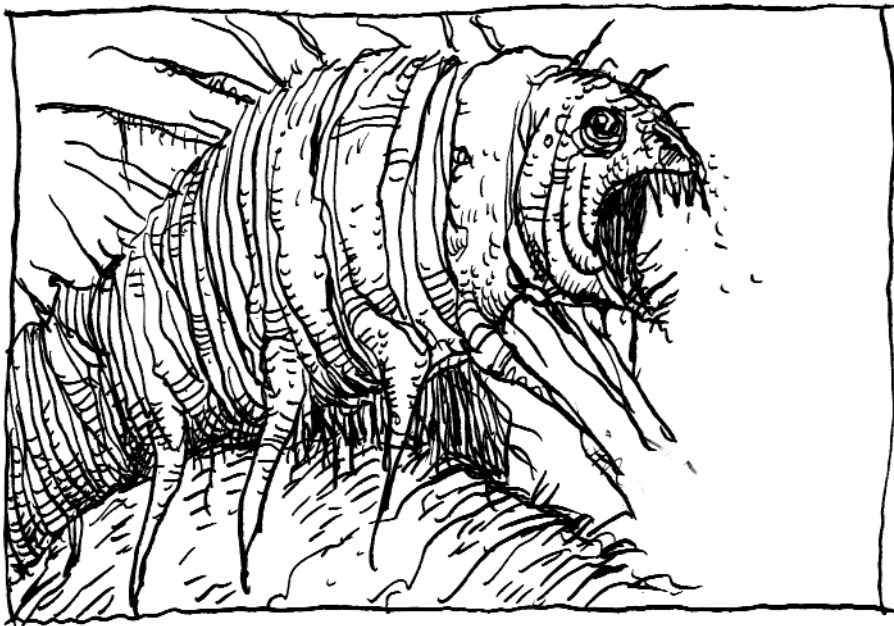
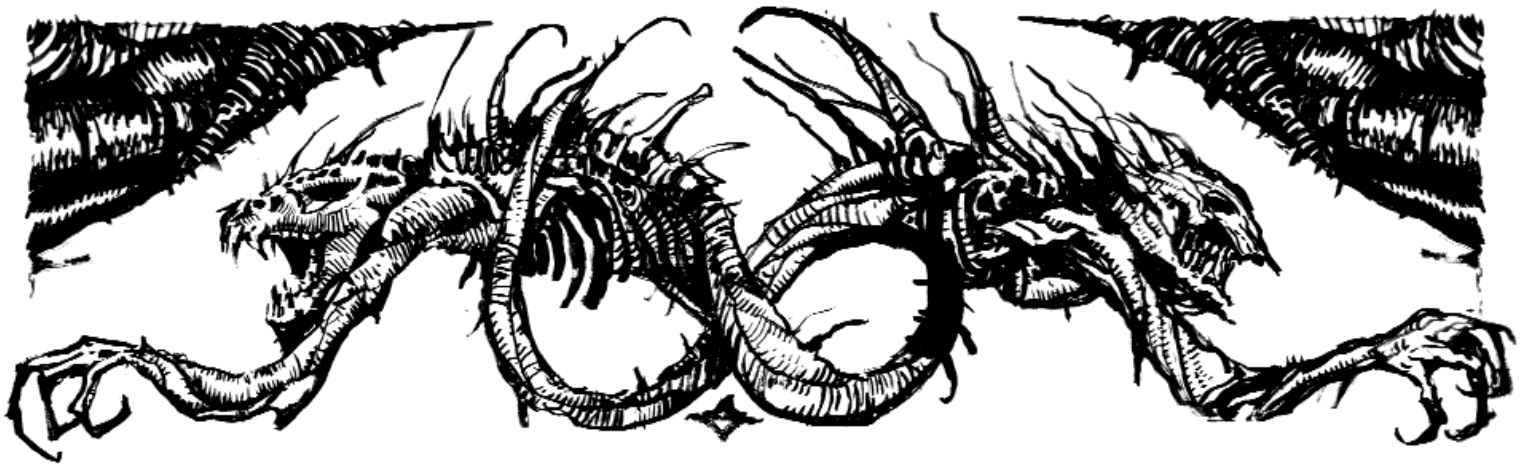
1797 A.D.: The wooded hills of western France are ravaged by supernatural "wolves," believed by the Enlightened to be Shadows Awakened by the bloodshed of the French Revolution, or the remnants of Jean de Bois-Couteau's enchanted hunting-pack.

1822 A.D.: The first instance of an Unbidden taking up residence within a mechanical "Vessel." Weaving machinery in Lancashire, England, becomes host to a Stranger and begins to produce lengths of clammy cloth with unusual powers.

1849 A.D.: A group of Secret Masters attempt to create a powerful enchantment called the Black Cage, near Boston, Mass. The Masters performing the ceremony vanish, along with their enchanted Cage.

1863 A.D.: Establishment of the first Black Harvest under Ethan Price.





1867-1900 A.D.: America's Secret Masters are led by the notorious Honorable Delany, responsible - amongst other things - for the Inspired Feast of 1887.

1893 A.D.: A Stranger takes up residence in the British Library, London, and begins to "modify" many of the books stored there, gradually rewriting the Library's entire stock. Its activities are discovered by The Secret Masters, who manage to steal several of the more interestingly warped texts before a Circle of Stalkers Bind the Stranger and restore the Library's remaining texts.

1894-1953 A.D.: A manipulative magician calling himself Ebenezer Wonder tours North America with a travelling circus in which he works as a puppeteer. He is slain by his own malign

puppet theatre, which outlives him by nearly a century.

1920-46 A.D.: An Awakened Pain Mother calling herself Magda Klein holds court in Berlin, Germany, posing as a minor mortal artist. Her stranger artistic creations, never revealed to the mortal world, initially gain her an unparalleled reputation amongst the city's Shadows. She has numerous followers, both Shadows and decadent Sensitive artists, and rules over the city as their effective leader. From the mid 1930s her works become increasingly horrific.

1931 A.D.: An archaeological expedition opens a large tomb at Beni Hassan, Egypt. Within is the Architect, Rhifor'ydg, who has by now escaped his Vessel. Taking one of the archaeologists

as its new Vessel it makes its way to the Sudan, where it tries to establish a kingdom along the lines of Ancient Egypt's. Several Occultists and mortal magicians travel to the kingdom, where the Unbidden teaches them secrets forgotten for thousands of years: in return for its greatest secrets, the creature demands the heart of Abanar, the magician who imprisoned him so many years before. Intuitively, Rhikor'ytg knows that the Heart is still whole.

1932-1936 A.D.: Revival of the Black Harvest under Clarence Beddows and, subsequently, Simon Clarke.

1968 A.D.: Internal conflict leaves several Secret Masters dead. The struggle seems centred around three factions within the Masters, each apparently "led" by one of the warped books stolen from the British Library in 1893.

1993-2007 A.D.: Proving that knowledge is power, and it's who you know not what you know that matters, Tzusiki Ikiro becomes preeminent amongst North America's sorcerers. If he can't handle a situation personally, then he can find a magician who can . . . at a price.

1996 A.D.: The first time that an Unbidden takes a computer as its Vessel. The creature occupies the mainframe of a data processing firm in Denver, Colorado, manipulating other computers by modem rather than being restricted to a fleshly body.

2004 A.D.: The disappearance of the Order.





AND A CHILD SHALL LEAD THEM . . .

by Nigel Findley

Setting: A small English town, c.1965 (Amersmede, Buckinghamshire)

In the 1990s, stories – largely apocryphal – abound concerning ritual abuse and Satanism at child-care centers. In 1965 England, these stories are far in the future. The core event – around which many of these “urban myths” might have accreted – actually takes place in this era, however.

The Windmill is a “nursery school” (day-care center) well-known in the county of Buckinghamshire, some 28 miles outside London. It was run for more than twenty years by a married couple, Rebecca and Graham Burhouse. In 1963, Rebecca Burhouse died, and for the last two years her husband Graham has been continuing the Windmill’s operations as a kind of living legacy for his wife.

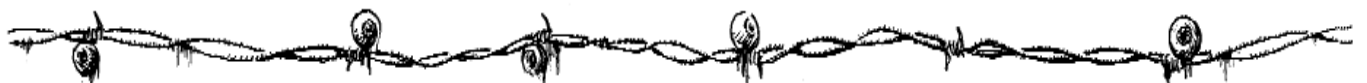
Things have changed at the Windmill. In years gone by, the facility rang with the innocent laughter of children. Now it’s a quiet, almost somber place. There are still children present; families still send their children there, based on the nursery school’s reputation. For the children who attend, however, it’s no longer a bright and joyous place. A pall of depression – perhaps fear – hangs over the nursery school. When children return home at the end of the day, they no longer speak of the happy hours they’ve spent at the Windmill. They never talk about what they’ve done during the day, and any direct questions about how they’ve spent their time are met with uncomfortable silence.

Over the last several months, ten of the children who attend the Windmill have started exhibiting strange behavior. Three have sunk into an almost-cataplectic state; two have started showing the symptoms of what will later be labeled “autism”; four have exhibited “fugues,” alternating with fits of almost homicidal rage; and one has killed himself, by flinging himself onto the tracks of the commuter train that connects Amersmede to London.

The police have begun investigating, but they haven’t found anything to explain the behavior changes. Graham Burhouse claims he has no explanation for the strange events, and visitors to the

Windmill have found nothing that might have caused the spreading insanity among the children. (In a later era, suspicion would have fallen immediately on Burhouse; here and now, however, the tendency is to automatically believe the statements of trusted care-givers.)

Help arrived from an unexpected source. Since before the turn of the century, an insane asylum, the Blackthorn Institution, has stood on the slope of the hill that leads down from Amersmede to the older village of Old Amersmede. For almost a century, Blackthorn had been home to various dangerous “patients” beyond the ability of contemporary psychiatry and medicine to cure. A year or two ago, a new individual – one Dr. Jonas





Stead – took over Blackthorn, and changed its mode of operation. The dangerous “inmates” were moved to other institutions, and Blackthorn became a research establishment, purportedly dedicated to pushing the frontiers of psychiatry. Dr. Stead, it turned out, claimed to have experience as a child psychiatrist, and suggested that he might be able to help the children of the Windmill. Under his direction, the nine survivors of the first “epidemic” – and several more children who have since shown similar symptoms – have been committed to Blackthorn for observation and treatment. Over the last six weeks, two of these young patients have been discharged, apparently “cured.”

There’s some debate over whether these cures are complete, however. The children no longer show the disruptive and self-destructive tendencies they initially exhibited, but their personalities have definitely changed. They are quiet and reserved, and seem incapable of smiling, laughing and playing as they once did. To some observers, they seem as though the distinctive features of their personalities have somehow been stripped away. Dr. Stead, however, claims that the damage has been corrected, and that – with time – they will return to normal.

Few children now attend the Windmill. Although there’s no open talk about the topic, some people believe that Graham Burhouse is somehow responsible for the children’s afflictions. Others point out that the spreading “taint” is no longer limited to children who ever attended the Windmill, however. At the present time, some twenty Amersmede children have shown similar symptoms, and most of them have been given into the care of Dr. Jonas Stead. It is in the midst of this strange situation that the members of the Circle find themselves.

THE SUPPLICANT

The Suppliant is a child by the name of Jeanie Hawkshaw, five years old and a one-time student of the Windmill. She has summoned the Circle . . . using ritual magic! When the Stalkers are summoned, they know that they’re answering the call of magic, and will no doubt expect to face a skilled sorcerer capable of reaching between the worlds. To their surprise, they’ll find themselves facing a five-year-old child who’s absolutely shocked to find that the words and rituals she repeated have actually worked!

Jeanie Hawkshaw – who has latent eidetic memory – has seen someone working some form of summoning magic. Although she didn’t really understand everything that was going on, she inferred that this person was calling for help from some source. Now she believes she needs help herself, and has duplicated the process she witnessed.

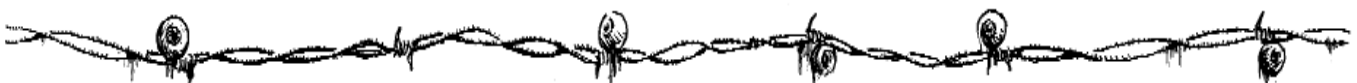
Jeanie can’t tell the Circle where she saw this magic; a binding spell prevents her. If the Stalkers remove or somehow circumvent this spell – or perhaps learn what they need to know through investigation – they’ll discover that she saw Graham Burhouse performing ritual magic at the Windmill.

THE TOOL

The Stalkers will probably conclude that Burhouse is the Unbidden they must confront and control, and the madness spreading among the children the focus of the Enigma they must mend. They’re wrong on both counts. Burhouse – whose own sanity is seriously in question – is just the tool of the Unbidden.

Rebecca’s death hit Graham hard, and unhinged his already doubtful sanity. He’d always dabbled in the occult, and now decided that he’d use what he’d learned –

all too little, in reality – to try to bring his beloved wife back from the grave. The Unbidden, who was nearby and had its own plans, sensed the working of minor and undirected magic, and decided to use Burhouse in its own hidden agenda.





Pretending to be a shade of Rebecca Burhouse, the Unbidden co-opted Graham, teaching him some new spells that would – supposedly – truly and completely return his wife to life. Of course, there would be some cost . . . but Graham didn't really care. So far, Graham has been unable to bring his "wife" back to life, although he keeps trying, believing that he's well advanced

with the long process that will do this. The spreading madness among his charges at the Windmill is the result of his workings.

THE UNBIDDEN

And who is the Unbidden? Dr. Jonas Stead, of course.

"Stead" has a grand goal in mind: basically, the "re-engineering" of human society. He knows he must start small, and has decided to begin with the children of Amersmede ("And a little child shall lead them" . . .). The magical workings of his

tool, Graham Burhouse, have driven some children mad, and their parents have willingly given them into the hands of "Dr. Stead" for "treatment." (The Unbidden appreciates the irony: his subjects' parents are giving their children to him of their own volition . . .) The children who have been discharged from Blackthorn have had their personalities "re-engineered" along the lines the Unbidden desires. Unbeknownst to their parents, they too are practicing sanity-blasting magics, spreading the "contagion" throughout the county faster than Burhouse could on his own.

Blackthorn Institution is the center of the Enigma. The actual Focus is a dark and echoing tiled hallway in the basement of the old stone building – a hallway that extends many times further than the foundations of the building should allow, and that opens onto different nightmarish locales depending on who traverses it and when. The "practical nurses" and the other employees at Blackthorn are the Unbidden's Minions, cloaked in Husks of

flesh. The Temporal Isolation is currently limited to Blackthorn Institution, but it may well spread.

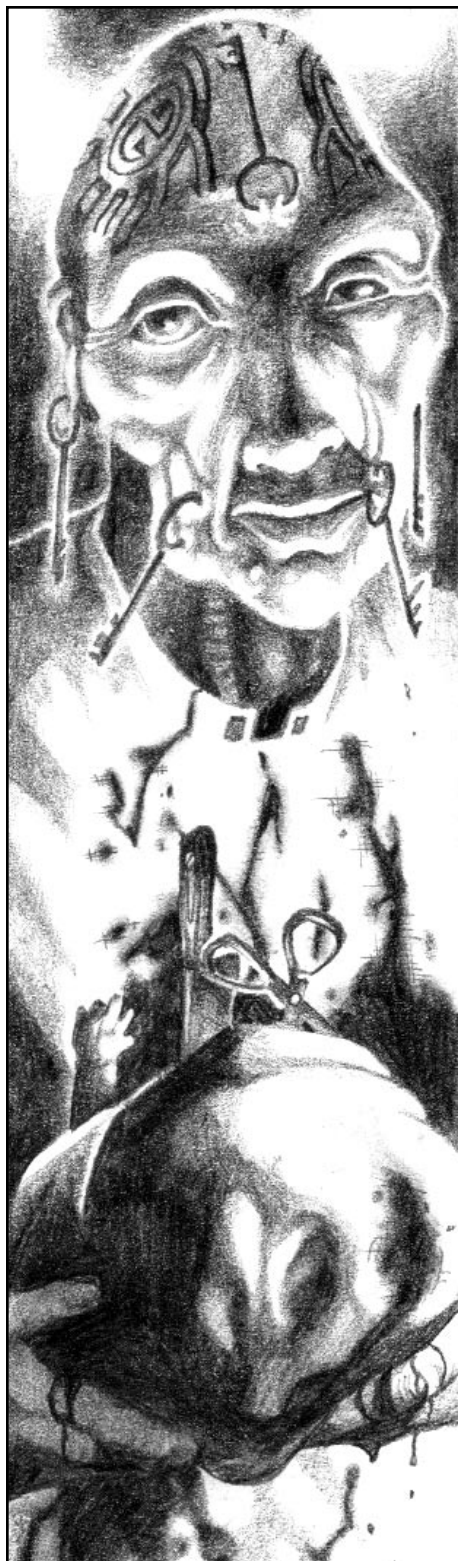
THE INVESTIGATION

The Stalkers may well seize on Graham Burhouse as the perpetrator of the Enigma, and bind or destroy him without looking any further. If so, then the Unbidden is safe, since the Circle can't come after it again if once they've failed (I think that's the case . . .). Even if the Stalkers do extend their investigation, Burhouse will still serve as an excellent "red herring," giving the Unbidden warning that the Circle is on its way, and time to prepare its defenses. (This is why the Unbidden decided to use Burhouse in the first place.)

The Stalkers may learn that there's something strange about "Stead" by talking to one of the doctors who used to work at Blackthorn – who was "squeezed out" when the new owner arrived. This doctor – William Blackthorn, a distant descendent of the person who founded the asylum – has tried to investigate Stead's background . . . and has been unable to find anything at all about him. Apparently, Stead had no recorded existence before he appeared to take over the asylum.

The Unbidden has been present for almost two years, and it's been using this time wisely, suborning or recruiting many of the Unawakened Shadows in the area. These "recruited" Shadows will not fight the Circle directly, but they'll certainly do what they can to mislead the Stalkers. One of the few Unawakened Shadows not under the sway of the Unbidden can be found in the graveyard of an old church, St. Martin of the Fields, in Old Amersmede.





THE UNBIDDEN AS PLAYER CHARACTERS

by Mike Nystul

Eventually the Circle will encounter an Aesthetic whose perspectives challenge their ethos and test their dedication to the Dream. Most Stalkers know full well that this time will come and steel themselves against temptation but the Unbidden can be compelling. Many Circles have turned from their duty, led astray by a charismatic renegade who promises them a better world and freedom from the Forbiddance? This Aesthetic can be a useful non-player character but the gamemaster may choose to allow one of the

Regardless of what stage it has reached, the first step in creating an Unbidden is determining its motivations. Every Unbidden is an Aesthetic who has, for some reason, cast aside its former self.

The Unbidden admire the Stalkers because they have both freedom and power- a rare combination.

Why give up vast power and immortality for the tenuous vulnerability of the Flesh?

Sadly, the simplest and most common answer is "lust."

Some Aesthetics become obsessed with some favorite aspect of their creation and long to sample some of its delights for themselves. Like a painter who refuses to sell his greatest canvas or a computer programmer who obsessively plays the games that he writes, they want to revel in their creation.

THROUGH ALIEN EYES

No matter how much an Unbidden player character learns about the Realm of Flesh and the people in it they will never truly understand it. Like it or not the Unbidden are perpetual outsiders.

ALEX WANTED TO BE A REAL BOY – JUST LIKE PINNOCHIO

I don't really know what he means but I like how it sounds. He is a good friend. I want to be like him one day. The puppet did it but he had that strange little cricket to help him. Talon tells me I don't need a cricket but he may be telling a variant truth (he doesn't seem to like me very much). I remember being hungry and a lot of blood. Maybe that is why they look at me funny sometimes. I hope they can forgive me. I don't want to go back.

So much to see. So much to do. The Shining Ones were good to me but they kept me locked up tight to watch after the falling leaves for them. The Grey Man says I have the right to dream my own dreams.





“I WAS CREATED - NOT BORN”

One experience all mortals and Stalkers share is birth. The Unbidden were created out of whole cloth by the Primal Powers so they were never young. This gives them a very different perspective on things. They are often intolerant of the young and the immature because they have no empathy for what it is like to be

“MY KIND ARE ETERNAL”

A defining aspect of the human experience is the knowledge that we are all going to die. We begin running from the reaper the moment we first feel his breath on our neck and don't stop until he catches us and we are layed low. Six feet under and no more tomorrows.

How different it must be for the Unbidden who have no fear of death until they learn it from the Stalkers or from the mortals they encounter.

“YOUR WORLD WAS MY DREAM”

The Unbidden were once Aesthetics. Now, consider that the renegade could potentially cross over anywhere and anywhen. Where would it most easily pursue its passion or conceal its activities? An Aesthetic with a penchant for decadent art might choose 1920s Berlin or 1940s New York, for example, but an Aesthetic fascinated by the “science” of destruction might manifest in a modern war zone.

“YOU ARE AS DERANGED AS I”

Lastly, think about what the Unbidden wants to do; what its plans and goals might be. What Special Powers, Minions, and Mortal allies does it need to serve it? How do its plots affect the local mortals? How do its activities lead to the Stalkers being Called? How do the prey's schemes provide clues which Stalkers can use to

track it down; these schemes should also help to determine the Unbidden's local power and reputation (if any). A creature with aims and goals, allies and enemies, is far more interesting than one which merely sits waiting for the Stalkers to stumble upon it.

SYMBOLS AND METAPHORS

The Unbidden must be epic villains who provide the reason and climax for the Hunt. They should also be more than that. Each embodies an extreme craving considered perverse by most mortal societies. In a sense, they embody natural desires gone out of control and out of proportion.

Think about what the prey embodies, and then select incidental characters (mortals and Shadows), settings and plots which contrast with or mirror these issues.

For example, if the prey is a Beast, then it is a being who destroys in order to live. To reflect this, you could set the Hunt in a famine-plagued valley where bandit gangs scavenge for food, and every meal a mortal eats is stolen from another. Have the Calling occur in a missionary Church, where the faithful willingly starve themselves to give food to the priests.

Compare and contrast; try not to preach. (Your players aren't likely to appreciate it.) Have fun playing with ideas and images and exploring issues that interest you.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

Here's a few more adventure hooks gamemasters should feel free to expand into hunts.

COLONISTS OF THE NEW WORLD

Entire native village populations are destroyed as the European settlers begin their expansion on the North American continent. The natives blame the settlers at first, until one of the natives escapes a destroyed village with a tale of a great animal spirit which attacked his village out of a mist. The Unbidden has taken the form of a grizzly bear and the Enigma is focused on the tribal totem located at the first destroyed and abandoned village.

GANGLAND SLAYINGS

Both the federal government and the leaders of Chicago's organized crime syndicates are worried. There appears to be something supernatural which is killing members of both sides in a most gruesome fashion. The bodies of the dead are found filled with sawdust, and all money and contraband missing.

The Unbidden is masquerading as a local cop on the take, and the Enigma is lost. The Unbidden cannot yet feel it, but searches for it. The Enigma is focused on a diamond which has been stolen. The renegade Aesthetic is killing in an effort to find the diamond. The corruption enhances feelings of aggression, which is unfortunate, because the stolen diamond has been stashed in a zoo.

