

Sinister Things

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Vhallaan: The Early Years

Introduction

I had avoided creating a full creation myth and back story for my fantasy campaign setting because I do not trust myself to not reveal the secrets to the players. I talk too much. But I was struck one day by a notion and it snowballed into a full explanation of the world. Many of the basic concepts were ones I already had but had not placed into a coherent chronology (and still avoid all references to actual dates). But now I have put it all together into something that seems to make some small amount of sense. I have also added some elements that have been integrated into the campaign or from player input.

In the Beginning

In the darkness of time, long before the first cities were built or the first seeds were sown, man lived in a demon-haunted world. The fabric of the cosmos was still new and the barrier between our world and those beyond was imperfect. Powerful, alien creatures would come to the world in search of their favorite prey—man. Armed with only simple weapons of stone with no iron or bronze to protect them, our ancient ancestors were vulnerable and weak compared from those who came through. Countless generations lived and died in a ceaseless struggle to survive against these dark forces.

The Others

It is known that the smallest of the demons were not so powerful that a single skilled man could not kill or even capture them. Finding such beasts in isolation was difficult and wrought with peril, but a few succeeded. Training or domesticating them was impossible; these were not wolves, but beings beyond human comprehension. And so to harness the power of these demons, men began to bind the demons, fusing their otherworldly energies into their own spirits. Most who tried died. But those who survived the insanity and torment of these rituals, succeeded in transforming themselves to something beyond human—not Mortal, not Demon, but Other.

More successful than man to combat the demons, the numbers of the Others slowly grew. While the experiments and binding continued, the Others also interbreed with humans, beasts, and demons, alike, evolving into a chaotic, motley race. Not all remained faithful to their original purpose—to protect mankind against the forces beyond. Instead, these half-breed monsters, a race of horrific beauty and passionate cruelty, driven by mortal vices and demonic appetites, turned against their human heritage. To this day, the Others remain a force that is both respected and feared, revered and hunted.

The Rise of the Priest-Kings

Axes and spears were all but useless against the demonic invaders, and so man reached out to the greater cosmos for assistance. Shamans screamed prayers, performed rituals, and made sacrifices to the gods—any gods—who might help them. And their prayers were answered.

The barrier, though weak, did protect man from the worst of those from beyond. The holes that allowed some of their breed to pass into our world were too small to permit the largest and most powerful. But under the direct conditions, with the right rituals, a Greater One could still not pass through the barrier, but it could reach through.

With these terrible, desperate magics, the shaman learned how to call forth a fraction of the elder Gods' power and direct it against the demons. Though such power came with a heavy price, it was one that too many were willing to pay. Untold lives were sacrificed to the Elder Gods. Undoubtedly, more lives were given to these greater powers than would have been lost to the demons, but the culling of both man and demon created a stability that had never before been seen in the world. And the men who made it possible, at least those not consumed by the awful powers they invoked, became very powerful indeed.

And so the priest-kings of lore rose to prominence. Fueled by the powers granted them by their dark lords, they built temples and monuments. The first cities were born and agriculture began to house and feed the masses who would in turn feed the appetites of Great Ones. The Others resisted the power of the priest-kings but were rebuffed and driven to the shadows along with the lesser demons who had eluded attention.

Over the centuries, a state of balance was achieved. Humanity huddled in their city-states, toiled in their fields, and prospered, leaving the wilderness to Others and lesser demons who remained. Without the demons constantly fighting their way inside, the barrier began to heal. Soon, the only true gateways to the beyond existed deep within the temples of the priest-kings where the gods reached through. In the wilderness, there were places of weakness, places where those from beyond could not pass, but places where the barrier stretched to form a place that was neither the world nor the beyond. And it is in these places, far from the temples of their enemies, the Others and lesser demons hid and bided their time.

The Fall of the Priest-Kings

As the holes in the barrier continued to close and the power of the gods slowed to a trickle. And yet, the priest-kings continued the sacrifices for their own power and greed. Rather than feed their gods, they took the power into themselves until they themselves were like unto the gods. And this proved to be their downfall.

Consumed by their desires and drunk with eldritch power, the priest-kings became decadent and paranoid. Ever lustful of more power, the priest-kings began to expand their empires and confront each other. Heedless of the costs, city-states warred against one other and a terrible toll was wrought upon the land and its peoples.

Eventually, the people began to fight back. Despite their power, the priest-kings were still men and vulnerable to a blade, an arrow, or their own vices. At first one city-state fell and then another until the supernatural power of the priest-kings was erased from the world of men.

But magic did not completely disappear from the land. The Others and the spirits remained. And there were still those, lesser priests who escaped from the temples before their destruction, who knew the art of sorcery, but not its deepest secrets. These priests secretly passed on their knowledge and their ancient heritage still lives in the sorcerers of today.

Now, no one knows of the priest-kings or the source of their power. Temples were ruined, records destroyed, and lore purposely forgotten. However, the clues exist, waiting to be discovered by someone with the ambition, knowledge, and will to rediscover the secrets and the dark power of the priest-kings.

Our God is Dead...

The Indok, peoples who live to the north of Vhallan, have a legend that their god died. "Our god is dead" is their reaction to most things religious. What is not widely known, even among the Indok is how their credo ends: "... we killed him."

This legend dates back to when they overthrew the temple and the priest-king who ruled there. The site is now a volcano known as The Godsforge. This act shaped the cornerstone of their harsh culture and remains a point of contention between the Indok and the followers of the Lords of Light. Though not atheists in the literal sense of the term, they nevertheless maintain that gods have no true power, which can only be wielded by man's own hand (preferably wielding an axe).

[The original idea for the Indok having a dead god originally came from one of my players, Gil, who is responsible so far for the most written background material. He took on the task of making the map, and being a graduate student in History, developed far more than I would have expected. But this concept of a dead god fit in really well with the elder gods concept I had developed. Even though Gil decided to back away from that idea, I made him keep it (though he has yet to know why).]

The Tomb of Ur-Meshil-Anna

The last great battle in the land that would come to be called Vhallan took place against the priest-king Ur-Meshil-Anna. Mortally wounded, his minions were able to steal away his body before its destruction and they entombed him so that he may one day rise again. And so he did.

His tomb was discovered independently by our heroes and the villainous Earl Highmore of the Bronze-wood in Burhov.¹ Determined to unlock its secrets, the Earl, a very accomplished and corrupt politician and

sorcerer, send a small group to unearth the tomb. But our heroes intervened and explored the tomb on their own, where they were able to hold off a weakened Ur-Meshil-Anna, who had been drawing energy from the very land itself, but could not prevent his escape.

It should be noted that they were not responsible for awakening this evil, but merely unable to contain it. Had the Earl's men been able to penetrate the tomb, they would have fared worse. Currently, Ur-Meshil-Anna is in hiding and building his strength to regain the temple and throne that had been stolen from him over ten thousand years ago.

The Fall of Irongate

In the Mountains of Ruin, at the northern edge of the Ironwood and south of The Fens, there exists an ancient fortress, Irongate, built upon the ancient and forgotten remains of a temple. Deep within the broken and labyrinthine catacombs of that horrid place, an elder one lies in fitful slumber. During the last Salandran war, besieged and starving, the sorcerers of Vhallan attempted to draw upon far greater than themselves, unaware of the true magnitude of evil and corruption that lay dormant far below them. And so they cast their mighty spell and brought doom down upon them all. The god stirred and the power so unleashed wiped out the entire Salandran army and consumed all those within the fortress. The true nature of this Pyrrhic victory has never been discovered, but the fortress has been considered a place of doom and portent ever since.

[I plan to end the campaign in Irongate with the PCs battling against this ancient evil and the men (Marquis Highmore² and possibly Ur-Meshil-Anna, if the PCs have not dispatched him by then) who would use its power. I am guessing the Marquis and a small force of men will occupy Irongate and the PCs will have to infiltrate the fallen fortress and stop Highmore from awakening the great old one that sleep there.]

Odds & Ends

The Others, of course, are what are now called the fey. And while I elude to a split between seelie and unseelie fay, there is no formal court structure within the fragmented and hidden faerie communities. What are called "nature spirits" are really lesser demons who have survived on this side of the barrier all these millennia.

Faith in the Lords of Light, was brought to Vhallan by the Hran invaders, but there is no divine power behind the faith. Rather, the Lords were heroes of legend, dating back to the fall of the priest-kings, who have evolved into gods over time. In fact, the three gods today: Aurora, Sophia, and Merik (and their Not-to-be-Named counterparts) are an amalgam of many heroes and legends. They only things the faith truly offers are a moral code and a communal bond.

¹ He has a half-dozen sorcerers in his employ dedicated to discovering and harnessing sources of supernatural power. The PCs have now twice encountered and thwarted his men.

² He was recently elevated from an Earl through marriage. His sudden rise to power has alarmed a few of the nobles and knights more loyal to the Duke than the Marquis, who represent potential allies for the PCs.

Multiple

I concede that humans may still be evolving. What I should have said is that our tool making has far out-paced evolution and any progression of humans as a species will not be due to evolutionary forces.

Myles Corcoran

Savage Worlds and Fudge have distinct similarities; the former could be thought of a focused version of the latter, which tends to overwhelm people with its forced customization. Though you can use Fudge to emulate either SW or OTE, SW and OTE are very dissimilar. SW is “hard coded” as most rpgs are in a way that OTE simply is not, but it comes at the cost of a number of fiddly, crunchy rules that some people simply do not want to deal with. Though SW is not nearly as fiddly or crunchy as GURPS or d20, for example.

Whether or not zombies maintain flexibility in a vacuum depends completely on the magic used to create them. Or GM fiat. Same thing.

For copyright duration, I would like to see a simple rule of “50 years since the original date of creation.” I might allow that to be expanded to the lifetime of the creator, but when dealing with copyrights owned by corporations rather than people, “lifetime” is too messy.

Robert A. Dushay, Ph.D.

If it were me, I would tie Napoleon's revolution closely to (weird) science and technology rather than psionics. You can still have Lightning Cannon and the creations of Dr. Frankenstein, but they are products of (weird) science, not psychics.

Lee Gold

Windshields and car grills hit bugs at 35 to 85 mph, which is not the same as a bug flying into a windmill.

Spike Y Jones

My company has occasionally lost sales because though we had a lower quoted price, the quote from the competitor had a higher discount from list price and thus it appeared as if the customer was getting a better deal from the other guys. If doctors lowered their rates by 50%, insurance companies would try to negotiate them down 50% from the new lower starting point!

Even if your theory about pigs is correct, how does that apply to shellfish, horses, rats, frogs, etc.?

When someone on a web forum asks if a customized character sheet is printed in the book, the appropriate response is “no, but here's the link.”

Louis La Mancusa

Are diet soft drinks acceptable? Sure, they are not as good as, say, water, but they do not have any calories. In fact, except in cases of a specific disorder such as diabetes, I find the emphasis on any one culprit (carbs, colas, whatever) to be besides the primary

point: balancing caloric intake (from a balanced diet) with exercise.

According to my wife, who sells Allstate, home owner's insurance covers so-called “acts of God,” but that flood and earthquake damage is not covered unless purchased separately.

Brian Christopher Misiaszek

Once your *Flatlanders* understand higher dimensions to the point of building Dyson spheres and starships, interacting with “Thickies” should not be an issue.

Lisa Padol

The impression I got from Amber was that it depends on which versions of the elder Amberites the GM chose. It was all a matter of points to determine if a younger can beat an elder, except that specific icons should always have the most points in their specialty.

Your description of Scott's portrayal of Groo definitely sounded as if he deserved the recognition. To pat myself on the back, Matt Helms says Todd told him I was “the best Angelus he's ever had” when I played it back on Memorial Day.

Brian Rogers

Can mechanics really help others create wonder? What about imagination?

I would like to present all of the classic superpowers, giving examples and options. But I doubt I have the energy to do finish it, not with *Truth & Justice* out.

Myles Corcoran

Allow me to get on my minimalist, method roleplayer soapbox for a moment. If you know the genre, know the characters, and are in sync with the other players, then what does a system do for you? The system is simply a tool for making decisions, but if you are capable of making good decisions (about your character, about the story, or whatever) on your own, it is unnecessary. Game systems are like guard rails; they matter so long as you need them. Once you have reached that point where they are no longer needed, they actually get in the way when you want to widen your path. I have experienced more cases with the system intruding upon the goals of the game than helping them. But see, my goals are roleplaying and character immersion—activities that are external expressions of internal decisions unrelated to the game mechanics. But, as I step off my soapbox, I understand that others have different goals and want a system to help them get there.

My comments about wonderment were spoken from that same soapbox, where I narrowly define roleplaying as playing a character. This then leads to the statement that roleplaying is at odds with a game where my role is to sit passively and try to feel wonder at someone else's description of something. So it is not

so much one-true-wayism, but snarky semantics and poor assumptions on my part at play.

Also be aware that what I say may not match what I actually do. As a player, I want a minimalist system. I really resent it when the game designer is telling me how to play or what to do with my character. But as a GM, I specifically choose those systems (such as Savage Worlds in my current campaign) that do what I want them to do. As a GM, I want those tools and guard rails in place. I am willing to collaborate with the game designer to run the campaign.

When my DC Heroes game is postponed due to scheduling problems, the GM has run Castle Falkenstein in its place. The characters were designed using the point-based system from *Comme Il Faut*. One of the players took 12(!) Poor abilities. This is so egregiously against the spirit of the game that I was dumbfounded when I found out. But the GM had allowed it because these were recurring "one shot" characters and not an actual campaign. So ya, system matters, but not when players are so willing to stomp all over it.

On a lighter note, in *Order of the Stick*, the characters were created with the the original D&D 3rd edition rules. In fact, the very first strip describes their conversion to the 3.5 rules. Besides, Belkar explains "It's a common practice among my people. Halflings of my village carry lead sheets to prove our manhood." So stop oppressing his culture. See strip #202. :)

Peter Hildreth

Savage World does facilitate heroic deeds, but it can also be extraordinary cruel. However, I have twice been amazed when a very good roll from a PC swoops in to save the day when all else looks lost.

Spike Y Jones

I had had my Honda Civic for nearly 13 years before I was car #3 in a 4-car pileup. It was totaled by our insurance company, but we bought it back as a salvage and Linda fixed it up and now it is her car, which she needs now that she is out of the Army (a medical discharge due to injuries sustained in Basic Training). Had it not been for the accident, I probably would still be driving Wondercar, which I had always planned on keeping for at least 10 years.

Smell could also be a major factor in allowing dogs to distinguish objects of similar color.

It is perfectly normal to ask a company to compare two games. You could ask Looney Labs to compare *Chrononauts* and *Fluxx* or their multiple incarnations of *Fluxx*, for example.

Joshua Kronengold

Asking "What's at stake?" is a perfectly valid, insightful question. Answering the question should be left to others who will all have their own opinion (and I gave several examples). Otherwise, you are preaching your way. Lisa's description make it seem like the question was asked and answered.

Lisa Padol

My comments on sense of wonder assumed semantics not agreed upon. Your examples of wonder were now what I would call wonder. I would call them drama and good roleplaying. But I can see where one can get a sense a wonder from those moments.

I agree with you on "what's at stake." The question is a great tool, but not when shackled with a fixed answer which is what I thought you had described. Affixing an answer is like having a wrench that only works on one sized nut—it is a tool, but it s very limiting and only works "one way".

Brian Rogers

I too like the pseudo-fictional approach to cities. Another trick, utilized famously by *The Simpsons*, is to never tie the city to a specific geographic location. Saying "Gulf Coast" or "Midwest" is fine, but avoid naming a real-word state or landmark unless it is a place that is far away.

Your approach to genre-appropriate actions is exactly how I think it should be done. There need not be any hard-coded mechanics for genre emulation if the GM and players are on the same page. Heavy-handed genre mechanics can make the roleplaying experience more like "playing a game" than "playing a character."

Marco Subias

Growing up, I knew teachers who had to work over their "3 month vacations" just to pay mortgages, so the benefit of getting summers off did not really exist. My impression of the California state school system is filtered mostly through my father, an educator in the San Jose Unified School District of nearly 40 years. I dismay at the shameful manner in which districts are administered and the criminal evaporation of state education funds. I strongly disagree that privatization (in its many guises) is the solution.

Public education, like public health care, should be focused not on profits, but results. Private firms in either sector are designed to maximize profit, which is often best achieved through minimal results. Sometimes this involves not only reducing bureaucracy, but also by reducing customer service. Even non-profits are not immune to this effect. We need a system (and people running the system) that enables the best education and patient care possible; unfortunately, I do not see this happening under either a free market or state-sponsored system.

I like the way that *Savage Worlds* handles injuries. If you suffer a severe injury (two or more wounds from a single blow), and fail a Vigor roll, your injuries are permanent regardless of healing. This can result in reduced stats, disabled limbs, and other hindrances. There are no permanent mental defects except in the fear mechanics, which can easily be tied into the combat rules. For example, you might require Guts checks (the skill used to resist fear effects) under certain combat conditions (as I did when a PC was surrounded by giant rats).