

SHADOWPACT: BACKGROUND

The True and Secret History

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PURPOSE

The purpose of this document is to provide the narrative background for Shadowpact by setting the stage for events that have occurred prior to the start of the game while evoking the overall atmosphere of the game itself. It is by no means a definitive guide to the Shadowpact universe, but should serve to establish some basic concepts that are explored more fully in other documents. Note that much of the information contained in this document will not initially be known by the player, but must be discovered during the game.

BACKGROUND

The sound of his cough was broken and wet. No matter how quick I was, I could never quite suppress the first image that sprang to mind when I heard that sound: a piece of cloth, slowly being ripped in two. It was a sound that I had grown increasingly familiar with over the past few months as a bitter winter gave way to a grudging spring, and while I couldn't shove away the unpleasant images that it provoked, I had been far more successful in rationalizing away what it implied.

"I'm dying," he said.

He sat down heavily in the overstuffed chair across from me, shifting the bulk of his frame until he had found his customary position. He reached inside his tweed jacket and removed a well-oiled and utilitarian pistol from its holster, setting it aside on the table next to him. But still within easy reach.

"Don't be ridiculous," I said.

"Don't be insulting," he replied.

We had arrived at the office only after a long, sleepless night, one that had found us still alive as the first birds began to chirp in the formless gray dawn. Our mood had turned somber, though, as we said goodbye to each of our companions in turn – the ones who had traveled with us through the darkest of passages time and again – until finally it was only the two of us walking in silence through the empty streets of the still sleeping city. Both our footsteps and our thoughts seemed muffled by the morning mist, but I'd found myself wondering about that last cryptic comment Talullah had made before she kissed me lightly and ran off into the haze. I couldn't tell you what his thoughts might have been

as he'd walked along side me, though I can now guess he was considering the very things that he was about to tell me, and which I can now tell you.

"I have lived far too long, done and seen far too many things, to not know when I'm about to look upon the last and the greatest of the many mysteries that have confronted us."

He seemed to consider something for a second, and then lifted himself from the chair in an effort that appeared equal parts mental as well as physical. He walked over to the small silver serving cart that we kept nearby and began to pour himself a finger of brandy.

"You're not going to die," I said.

"Do be quiet!" For the first time he showed a flash of emotion, a quick dart of anger that shot through the air between us. I sat in stunned silence, watching as the outline of his shoulders finally slumped beneath a weight I hadn't realized he was carrying until that moment. Not the knowledge of his own mortality; we all have that. But something else entirely.

He returned to his seat. "We've known each other for years and have become, I like to think, friends." He sipped from his brandy. "Not in the casual way that the term is so often used now days, but in a more fundamental way. We have endured and survived, together, events that probably would have annihilated us individually. It's not an exaggeration to say that you and I – and the rest, certainly – have all stood fast at the threshold of darkness. Just this evening, in fact."

I was about to say something, but he gave me a look which silenced whatever trivial observation I was about to make.

"But you...you never asked to be involved. And when you were involved – either by accident or fate, to which I am willing to admit a small debt – you didn't turn away. You saw the fight for what it was and became a soldier, not a bystander, and in doing so you became my friend.

"So now I am going to tell you why. Why we struggle, what lies behind it all, behind even the darkness and the light. The Great Secret. The Grand Plan. I'll warn you now, you may not consider this confidence, however deserved, to be desirable. If not, you can leave now and we will have many more nights to reminisce before my time is finished. It is not all that close, not just yet."

He paused, staring at me with his watery gray eyes. I gave only the briefest consideration to refusing. My nightmares were full of those things created by science and magic and hidden from the sane world of mothers and children and husbands. To know the reason for it, no matter how awful it was...what was one more worrisome thought in the night?

I nodded, and he gave a wan smile. "As I expected. But I thought I'd at least give you the opportunity." He took a deep breath.

"We live in great and important times, but some things never change because people do not change. For example, have you ever stopped to consider Sanctuary?"

I indicated that I hadn't.

"A technological marvel, a fully realized virtual reality cheap enough to insure its installation in every corner of the world, and advanced enough to make instantaneous face to face communication an accepted part of modern life almost overnight. But where did it come from?"

"Vreetech," I said. "The Vreetech Consortium." I gathered that this was the answer I was expected to give, and that I was being led somewhere...but since I didn't know where the destination might be, I decided to let him guide me there in his own fashion. "They run the whole thing under license from the worldwide governments. We all know they have ties to the Societies – I mean, Vreetech knows everything that happens in Sanctuary, and by extension, almost every action the Societies take. But they could never do anything with the information for fear of uniting the Societies against them."

"And where was the Institute in all this?" he asked. I shivered a bit at the mention of the Occam Institute. There had been a time when my body had played host to a liquid thing, one not entirely of our time and place, and the Institute had been the only ones with the tools to remove it from me. "Remove" is a polite word; they preferred "extract," when what it really felt like was my soul being stretched on a rack. They had observed this with the same impassiveness that they observed everything.

"The Institute is at the forefront of science and technology," he continued, "and yet they were completely surprised by Vreetech's achievements. It wasn't just that they weren't first, but that they hadn't even known about it. They – of all people – were taken by surprise."

"Vreetech must have worked on it in secret."

"There are secrets, and there are secrets." He swirled his brandy around in the glass and stared outside the window as cars began to drive by on the street below. "The Institute still doesn't know how Sanctuary works. Neither do any of the other Six. And no one else bothers to ask."

"Does it matter?"

"It could very well be the most important question we have ever faced." A tiny smile curled the corner of his mouth. "Magic is made of two components: faith and information. There is precious little difference between faith in fiber optics and in silver cords...and Sanctuary is nothing but information. We assume that if we can explain something then it must be science, and we never stop to consider that it might just as well still be magic.

"And that's what I mean," he continued, leaning forward. "We make the same mistakes again and again, thousands of years of history and yet we learn very little. Pain infests the world, noble men struggle with their own shadows, injustice beats a heavy drum beat – and yet, fine things still glimmer in all that mud. But nothing changes. We fight, and we fight, and for what?"

"You're asking me a lot of questions," I said with what I hoped was a tone of friendly mocking, "to which you are the only one who appears to have the answers. It doesn't seem entirely fair."

He stopped, and barked a short laugh. “No. No, it isn’t. Sometimes I act embarrassingly like the old man I am, trying to instruct you like a child instead of just telling you the truth like a man.” He settled back in his chair and collected himself for a moment.

“First, you should know that there is a God. Perhaps not the Christian God, or the Buddhist one, or even the Pagan conception, but there was one who created this universe and all that is in it. I can’t tell you if they are a vengeful or a kind God, but I do know that they aren’t perfect because the universe they created isn’t perfect.

“This universe of ours...it is only one of many. The Kabbalists were right about that, and a lot of other things. Creating a universe – how can we even imagine the process? It is truly a Godlike thing, and the miracle of our birth is only the faintest echo of that original act. But myself, I’ve always fancied that it’s rather like blowing a globe of the finest, thinnest glass.” He said this last with almost a lilt in his voice.

“How do you know this?” I asked. “Are you being literal? You’re talking about...about God.”

“I am being quite literal. The problem with secrets, I think I’ve remarked before, is that people are generally only willing to believe the ones that they already suspect are true. Sometimes the real secrets are quite plain, just too large for people to accept. And as for who told me...that is something you will have to wait a bit for, but trust me, some day you will meet him.”

I let this last pass as he went on. “Much like blowing glass, though, creating a universe is a delicate process, one that requires skill that can only be learned through repetition. God or not, they botched the process. Whoever said that we live in the best of all possible universes was obviously suffering from wishful thinking because nothing could be further from the truth. Our universe is fundamentally flawed in its construction, and everything that derives from it is similarly flawed. We can never free ourselves from evil, never attain perfection, because at its heart the universe itself is not perfect.”

“You can’t be...I mean...” I struggled to maintain my objectivity, but there was a small chorus of voices in the back of my head singing *lost, lost, lost*, that everything we had stood for, fought for, sacrificed for, was ultimately doomed to failure if this was true. After all we had been through together, it never occurred to me for a moment that he was being anything less than honest. But maybe he was mistaken...

“Oh, I know very well what you’re thinking. It’s nothing I haven’t thought myself a thousand times over. If it’s a consolation, you should know that if we and people like us didn’t struggle against it then that same flaw would overwhelm everything. We build levees to turn back the tide, but there is no way we can drink the ocean. In that sense, at least, we do live in the best of all possible universes, because the alternatives are far worse.”

“How many –” My throat had gone dry. I walked over to the cart and poured myself a glass of water from a cut crystal decanter there. For just a second, my attention was caught up by the idea of the water trapped in its pretty glass prison. I swept the thought away. “How many are there, do you know?”

"Universes? Uncountable. Even the one that told me didn't know. I sometimes think of them all hanging in the void, like Christmas ornaments, some of them broken and shattered, others whole and imperfect. You know as do I that there are entities in that void that have grown jealous peering through the glass of our universe at the warm life within, however flawed it may be, and would love nothing more than to find some way to cross over to the inside. That is what we stopped from happening this evening."

"Good God," I said, not even comprehending the irony. "And is there one...a perfect universe, I mean?"

"Who knows?" He shrugged. "It may not exist. All these universes, ours and the rest, are discards. Ignored and unwanted. We are alone, at least as long as we live."

"And then what happens?" I asked, turning to face him. "When we die?"

He was quiet, and I thought that maybe he had chosen to ignore the question, but still I stood frozen in place unable to take my eyes off of him.

"A hand cannot pass through a glass window," he said at last, "but a ray of light can. We have souls, and maybe they can eventually pass through the glass walls of our universe and rejoin that from which they were created. I don't know. That is my own belief." He looked at me pointedly. "You will have to determine what you believe for yourself."

I sat down again.

"All of that is, I'm afraid, just the stage for the drama that is the true and secret history of the human race. This universe was created from part of God's own essence, an act of separation in which we were given both life and soul. But the creation was, as I said, imperfect, and there were other...things that were trapped in the universe with us. The Kabbalists call them *klippoth*, husks – you might call them fallen angels, or demons. In the Biblical apocrypha they're referred to as the nephilim. They are life without soul. While not precisely evil, they exist in an exquisite state of agony given both their awareness of their own nature and their inability to do anything about it: they are trapped in an imperfect universe from which they can never escape to rejoin the light of God because they lack the very soul which might make that possible. They've been imprisoned here since the beginning."

"Why here? The universe is a big place."

"No doubt. And who knows how many of them are still out there? But freed of the constraints of a soul they were once far more powerful than you or I. They could walk the universe in the blink of an eye. And they are still immortal, though not invulnerable. This makes them more devious and cunning than you can possibly imagine. When I die, maybe I'm reborn, or maybe I become one with God again. There is a certain reassurance to either of those thoughts. But one of them? They're snuffed out like a candle. There is nothing for them but oblivion. They hate us because no matter how powerful they are, we have what they don't. So instead they plot and scheme, and for whatever reasons, they gathered from throughout the universe to plot and scheme here. They wear a human skin but there is nothing remotely human about them.

"But I'm getting somewhat ahead of myself. In the beginning, there was the Garden. That was all their idea, by the way. Part of a plan that they orchestrated to rejoin God."

"I thought you said –"

"What I said was exactly correct. Without a soul, they cannot pass through the walls of our universe, and so long as that's true they remain trapped here. But if the walls were shattered, broken from the inside, then there wouldn't be a problem, now would there?"

Outside a car horn beeped, and a sliver of sunlight cut through the mist to shine through the window and illuminate the opposite wall. Down below people walked and thought their own thoughts, never realizing what things were being said just above their heads.

"You're talking about the destruction of the universe."

"Oh, yes. Armageddon. Ragnarok. Götterdämmerung. Ever wonder where those ideas come from? Race memory, aftershocks still ringing in the collective unconsciousness."

"But what happened?"

"They all gathered at a place, a city in the ocean. It has had different names throughout history as well. The Garden. Atlantis. They poured their essence into a great work, their own act of godly creation – a thing called Leviathan – and in doing so diminished themselves. 'But what of it?' they thought in their arrogance, for Leviathan would do what they couldn't and shatter the walls of the prison that entrapped them. No sacrifice was too small, for once they succeeded it wouldn't matter anymore – nothing would matter. They needed something else, though; their essence was only life, and if that was all that they could contribute to the creation of Leviathan then it would have been no more powerful than they were. They needed something else. What they needed was us, our souls.

"And so they brought us to the Garden and kept us ignorant. They fed off our souls – they couldn't take them for their own, but they could steal them and bind them to Leviathan. My God, the sheer scale of it is inconceivable to us...its pointless to speculate how many human souls were lost to that thing. What I do know is that they very nearly succeeded in doing what they set out to do."

"It's obvious they didn't, otherwise we wouldn't be having this conversation."

"That's not entirely true. To say that they didn't succeed is not the same thing as saying that they failed."

"I don't follow. Was Leviathan completed or wasn't it?"

"To be honest, I'm not entirely sure," he mused. "It is one of the points on which my...my source was vague. I've attempted to find out exactly what went wrong for a long time, but it's clear something did. Maybe they underestimated how powerful the thing that they'd created was and it escaped their control. I've also heard whispers that within their ranks were divisions and sects fighting for some kind of supremacy, and it could be that escalated to the point of open conflict. I even spent three years in India once tracking down a prophet, supposedly a great man – a madman if you ask me – who said that God had not abandoned this place, and it was his hand that moved on the water and buried the city in the waves before their work was completed."

“The city sank?”

“Not just the city. Whatever happened triggered a worldwide cataclysm. A flood – The Flood. Our surviving ancestors were scattered, and so were the klippoth. Diminished though they were, they weren't destroyed. No...and neither was Leviathan. It was merely broken into pieces. But the odd thing is – Leviathan is unlike anything we've seen, or can possibly understand. The nearest approximation we might have today would be the most sublimely elaborate computer program ever written, a thing of pure information and pure faith. Magic. And when it was broken apart those small bits of life and stolen soul from which it was constructed returned to us, just as I believe my own soul will someday fly to God.

“But those fragments of Leviathan were not entirely ours anymore, but something else instead, and so they jumped from human soul to human soul down through the ages. While not sentient, they nonetheless had a kind of...of programming to fulfill, if you will, and they drove those individuals most sympathetic to their influence to recreate the information that they embodied in some of the greatest works of art the human race has ever crafted. Divinely inspired, you might say. Odd to think that the klippoth were inadvertently responsible for so many things of beauty, and to think that those same beautiful things might still conceal the seeds of our destruction.”

“I'm...not sure I understand. Wouldn't we recognize a part of Leviathan if we saw it, if it really is that powerful?”

“Oh, it's that powerful. And I'm sure you've already recognized it, because Leviathan is part of you – it's part of all of us. Like calls to like in sympathetic resonance. Leviathan is pure information and it can take almost any form: the geometry of the Holy Grail; Mozart's Requiem; the text of a lost Shakespearean play. Anything.”

“What happens if the pieces are assembled?”

“Then Leviathan awakes, and our universe, no matter how imperfect, is destroyed.”

“Destroy the pieces then.”

“Destroy one piece, it is simply reborn as an idea in the mind of another human being. I'm telling you, our souls were used to construct this thing. We can't disentangle ourselves from it. They know that. Maybe they hadn't planned it that way, but they are certainly going to take advantage of it.”

“‘They’? They're still around?”

“Yes.” He smiled ruefully. “Yes, I'm afraid they are. They never went away, nor have they lost sight of their original plan. They're far less powerful than they once were – they remain trapped here on this planet, and the creation of another entity like Leviathan is completely out of the question. But if they can find all the pieces of Leviathan, then they can reassemble it and finish what they started. They need us, though; without souls, they can't recognize the fragments of Leviathan for what they are. At first they worked singly, or with small groups of us...but over the centuries they built organizations, operating in secret and manipulating the whole pageant of human history from behind the scenes towards their own ends.

“You see, the Six – they think that they’re the secret masters of the world, but the joke is that they themselves are being manipulated. Oh, not all the Societies are under the control of the kliploth. Some of the kliploth wandered away, dissipated and senile after their own fashion, leaving the organizations that they created running on their own blind inertia. Other groups were formed by humans who actually discovered their plans and decided to oppose the kliploth – or to just take advantage of the chaos for more selfish ends. But over the years the Six and all the other Societies like them have forgotten the reasons for their existence, no matter which side they might have been on at one time. They fight over bits and pieces of arcana like they were toys in a sandbox, but that doesn’t make them any less dangerous. Make no mistake – there is a war being fought in the shadows and we are all soldiers, whether we know it or not.”

He was seized by a coughing fit and doubled over in his chair. I made as if to rise and help but he waved me off before I’d even gotten out of my seat. He stayed that way for a moment, finally removing a white cotton handkerchief from the breast pocket of his jacket and dabbing at his lips before sitting upright again. As he stuffed the handkerchief back into his pocket (with a slight flourish that was something of a trademark), I noticed tiny flecks of blood on the material. Bright and scarlet.

“Things have continued in much this same vein for the last several millennia,” he said after composing himself. “But at some point – and I’m not exactly sure when, more than a decade, less than a century ago – the situation reached the point of stalemate. Or maybe a Mexican stand-off would be the more accurate description. No one Society could move without exposing itself to all the others, and most of them had grown so tired and lethargic, so encrusted with history and tradition that they could scarcely stir beneath their own weight anyway. Like mad kings they still grasped for power, but no longer had the will to attain it or the reason to remember why they’d wanted it in the first place. Even the kliploth seemed to grow weary of the games.

“But Vreetech and Sanctuary changed all that. Sanctuary is not just another way to portray the physical world, but a way to portray that world in relation to the sea of information that has become its lifeblood.”

“Instant communication. Instant information,” I said half to myself, slowly beginning to understand how things had come to be the way they were. “After centuries of meaningless ritual and ignorance. Sanctuary must have been the undiscovered country, an entirely new field of battle.”

“Oh, people like you and me still do the dirty work, that will never change. But it has given the Societies perspective, something which they have been sorely lacking for quite a long time, and if the wrong side uses that to their advantage then we will all pay the price.”

“That’s not all,” I said. A statement. Thinking back to what he had said about magic, faith and information – and the Institute.

“No, that’s not.” He sighed again, this time heavily. “But I don’t know what it is. I really have grown old, and to be damned honest, tired, and I don’t have all the answers. I doubt I’ll have that chance. Maybe you will. This conversation we are having right now, it is a very old one that has been going on for a long, long time, and I suspect for better or for worse you may be one of the last who needs to hear it. Something is coming, all the signs point to it. The calendars have been signifying it for ages. Very soon now someone

will take the Crown of the World and they may usher us into a new age of peace or destroy everything. In either case, I won't be around to see it."

He smiled at me, the way my father had smiled at me once. "But I know whatever happens, whichever way it goes, you will have done your best."

We sat in silence for a long time. I lost myself between the loud *tik-toks* of the grandfather clock wedged into one corner of the room. That clock had saved my life, once upon a time, but now it simply seemed a dull wooden metronome to the senseless circles in which my thoughts now ran.

"We have to tell them," I said at last. "They have a right to know."

He laughed at that, not cruelly but not entirely with amusement either.

"Tell them what? That God has abandoned them? That they live in a world that will never be free of pain and suffering? That every moment of every day they live in peril of their lives and their souls? You would do that to them?" He pointed to the world outside the office window. "You would really take that sunny world away and put what in its place?"

I had no answer for that. He was, of course, right. But it still seemed unfair that they should be forced to play in a game and not be made aware of its stakes.

"I will tell you one last thing," he said, "and then I think the time for telling secrets will be over. At least until I have had a very large breakfast and gotten a good twelve hours of sleep.

"All of this was told to me not to cement a bond of friendship, as it has been between the two of us; it was told as a punch-line to a joke, a mean one intended to make us – all of us – feel small and worthless. You and I have struggled to prove them wrong, to be large and make our time here felt. To have stood and counted for something. To have made a difference. That is the only thing that matters in whatever happens next."

"And what does happen next?" I asked.

"What happens next...what happens next is that you have quite a lot of thinking to do. You've just been told the secrets of the universe, after all, and this only after saving the city from one of the more unspeakable evils that wanders in the void. I would think that what happens next is that you should take a deep breath of spring morning air, find someone you care about, and then hold them as close as you can. And then...and then we will talk some more, for there are other things I should tell you, and other plans that you need to know."

With that he lifted himself from his chair and showed me to the door. We embraced there, all the terror that I had felt during the evening and the joy at seeing the morning draining out of me as if he was some lightning rod. He turned before I could say anything, and then I was on the street in front of the office. The sun shined down lightly, and all around me people rushed in the crisp morning air.

I found Talullah at her house. She was awake and waiting for me. She said she'd known I would come, but she didn't know how. I lay in bed next to her, my ear to her chest so that I could listen to her heart beat, and I asked what she'd meant by that oddly cryptic

phrase she had whispered in my ear before racing off into the mist. She told me it was a secret.