

Horror vs. Adventure

by Daniel M. Brakhage

“The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.”

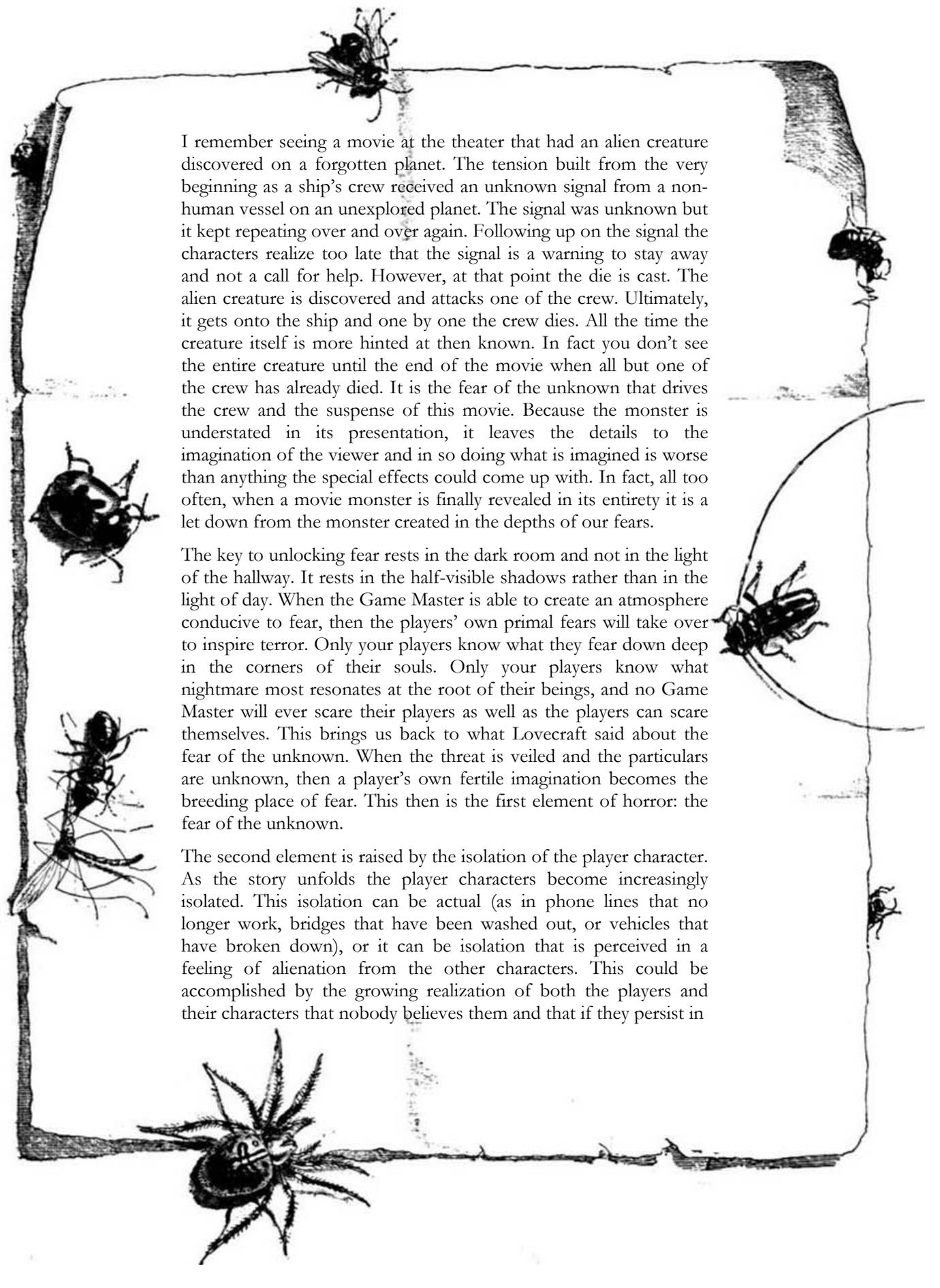
– H.P. Lovecraft

Most of us are familiar with fast-paced action adventures such as fill so many of our movie screens, books, and games. Game Mastering such action-packed adventures has been covered by many persons in many different places and ways, so I will not presume to cover it again here. Rather, I want to talk about horror.

Horror has some different elements than a standard adventure. Here I would like to talk about three of them: 1) Fear of the Unknown; 2) Isolation; and 3) the Revelation of Dark Contrasts. While adventure is a matter of fast-paced action and heroics, horror invokes the elements from which our nightmares are made, and is a matter of suspense and unseen threat, alienation from that which could help us and ultimately coming face to face with our fear. In a typical horror story the characters would love to be able to fight something. Unfortunately, the threat is all too elusive and sometimes even the desire to initiate action is the wrong choice and simply breaks up the group. True horror is often forgotten today in favor of cheap thrills in a hack-and-slash encounter that presents blood and gore instead of invoking horror.

Unfortunately for all involved, when you are presenting blood and gore instead of invoking the deeper emotions of our nightmares, you have a numbing factor. By that I mean that you must constantly go for more blood and more gore to get the same effect you had last time. This is an escalation as futile as any other escalation for eventually you reach the breaking point. In movies, books, and gaming the breaking point of gore comes when you get a reaction of “Oh, *that* again?”

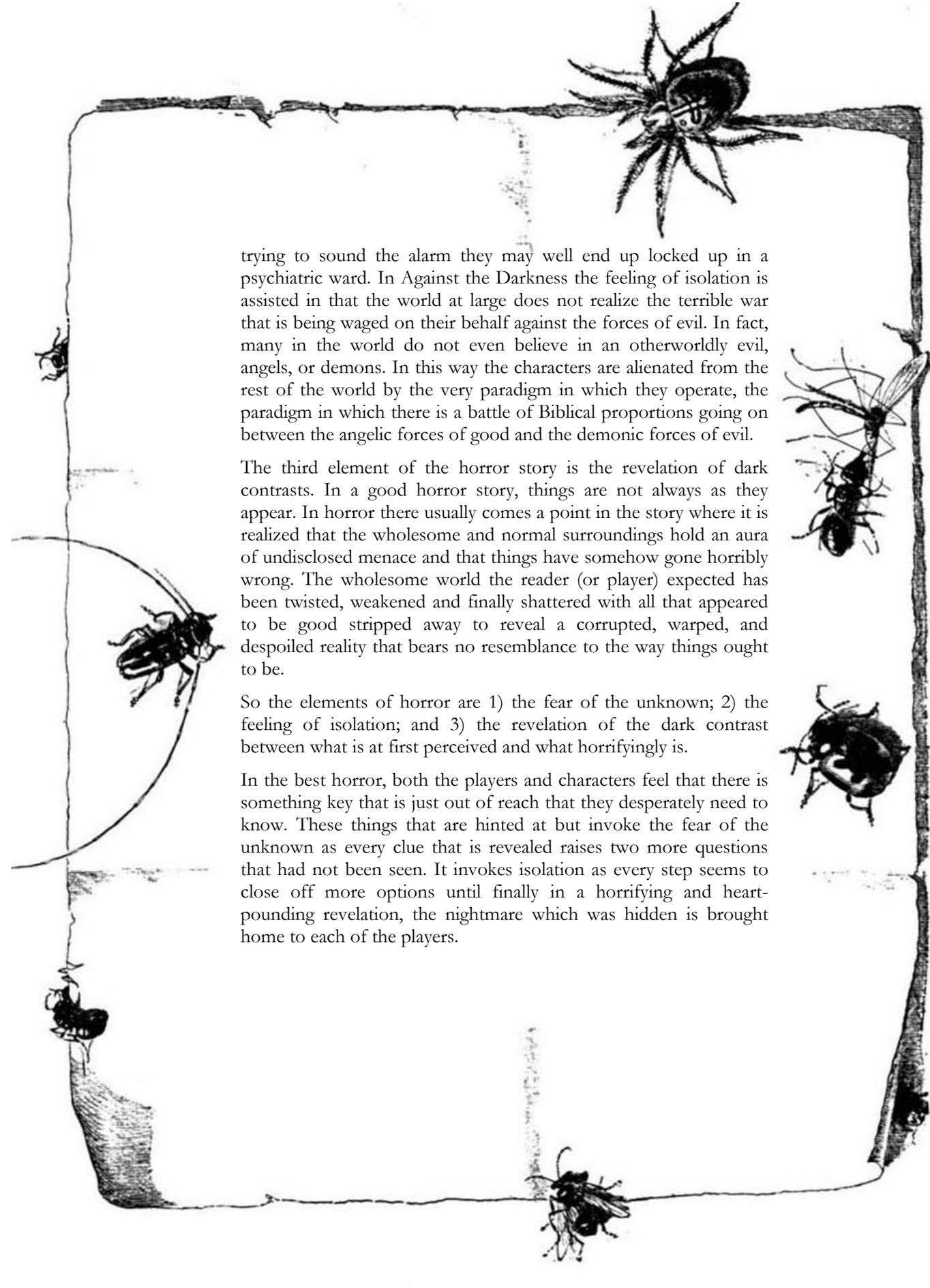
Horror is a subtler flavor than hack and slash and as such it is more difficult. Where hack and slash barrages the senses with what eventually is an underwhelming field of gore horror is the light tap of detail that strikes a primal and terrifying chord within the depths of our soul.



I remember seeing a movie at the theater that had an alien creature discovered on a forgotten planet. The tension built from the very beginning as a ship's crew received an unknown signal from a non-human vessel on an unexplored planet. The signal was unknown but it kept repeating over and over again. Following up on the signal the characters realize too late that the signal is a warning to stay away and not a call for help. However, at that point the die is cast. The alien creature is discovered and attacks one of the crew. Ultimately, it gets onto the ship and one by one the crew dies. All the time the creature itself is more hinted at than known. In fact you don't see the entire creature until the end of the movie when all but one of the crew has already died. It is the fear of the unknown that drives the crew and the suspense of this movie. Because the monster is understated in its presentation, it leaves the details to the imagination of the viewer and in so doing what is imagined is worse than anything the special effects could come up with. In fact, all too often, when a movie monster is finally revealed in its entirety it is a let down from the monster created in the depths of our fears.

The key to unlocking fear rests in the dark room and not in the light of the hallway. It rests in the half-visible shadows rather than in the light of day. When the Game Master is able to create an atmosphere conducive to fear, then the players' own primal fears will take over to inspire terror. Only your players know what they fear down deep in the corners of their souls. Only your players know what nightmare most resonates at the root of their beings, and no Game Master will ever scare their players as well as the players can scare themselves. This brings us back to what Lovecraft said about the fear of the unknown. When the threat is veiled and the particulars are unknown, then a player's own fertile imagination becomes the breeding place of fear. This then is the first element of horror: the fear of the unknown.

The second element is raised by the isolation of the player character. As the story unfolds the player characters become increasingly isolated. This isolation can be actual (as in phone lines that no longer work, bridges that have been washed out, or vehicles that have broken down), or it can be isolation that is perceived in a feeling of alienation from the other characters. This could be accomplished by the growing realization of both the players and their characters that nobody believes them and that if they persist in



trying to sound the alarm they may well end up locked up in a psychiatric ward. In *Against the Darkness* the feeling of isolation is assisted in that the world at large does not realize the terrible war that is being waged on their behalf against the forces of evil. In fact, many in the world do not even believe in an otherworldly evil, angels, or demons. In this way the characters are alienated from the rest of the world by the very paradigm in which they operate, the paradigm in which there is a battle of Biblical proportions going on between the angelic forces of good and the demonic forces of evil.

The third element of the horror story is the revelation of dark contrasts. In a good horror story, things are not always as they appear. In horror there usually comes a point in the story where it is realized that the wholesome and normal surroundings hold an aura of undisclosed menace and that things have somehow gone horribly wrong. The wholesome world the reader (or player) expected has been twisted, weakened and finally shattered with all that appeared to be good stripped away to reveal a corrupted, warped, and despoiled reality that bears no resemblance to the way things ought to be.

So the elements of horror are 1) the fear of the unknown; 2) the feeling of isolation; and 3) the revelation of the dark contrast between what is at first perceived and what horrifyingly is.

In the best horror, both the players and characters feel that there is something key that is just out of reach that they desperately need to know. These things that are hinted at but invoke the fear of the unknown as every clue that is revealed raises two more questions that had not been seen. It invokes isolation as every step seems to close off more options until finally in a horrifying and heart-pounding revelation, the nightmare which was hidden is brought home to each of the players.