

Terra Vista: The Vance Disappearance

A Modern Cosmic Horror TTRPG Scenario

This guide outlines the core narrative and key encounters for a one-shot or introductory campaign in the Terra Vista setting, focusing on psychological dread, investigation, and the personal cost of confronting the incomprehensible.

The Premise

Elias Vance, a quiet but respected curator at the local historical society, has vanished about a week ago. He was known for his meticulous work and an obsessive fascination with the city's "forgotten histories"—local legends, urban myths, and architectural oddities. Elias believed there was a hidden narrative beneath the city's surface. He was the lead curator for an exclusive private viewing of a newly discovered collection of artifacts, housed in a forgotten sub-basement of a historical library. The viewing is still scheduled for later this week, despite his disappearance.

The Playable Characters

The story features six playable characters, each with a unique connection to Elias Vance and two crucial NPCs.

The Paranormal Debunker

An online content creator and talk show host who built a following debunking local myths and supposed supernatural phenomena. They wrote a scathing article or created a viral video dismissing Elias's work as the ramblings of a crackpot historian.

The Journalist

A cynical freelance journalist writing a human-interest piece on Elias's passion project. They received the invitation to the private viewing from Elias and have been digging into Elias's digital footprint, finding cryptic, unposted social media drafts.

The Artist

A struggling artist commissioned to create a mural for the new exhibit. They noticed Elias's obsession with the impossible geometry and patterns of the artifacts, even trying to get the artist to incorporate strange shapes into the mural.

The Private Investigator

A retired police officer and a close friend of Elias, now hired by the museum to investigate his disappearance quietly. They were invited to the viewing as a friend and for security purposes.

The Coffee Shop Owner

A person who runs a local coffee shop that Elias frequented. He often spoke in vague, philosophical terms about the city's "hidden life." The coffee shop owner found a small, unusual trinket left behind by Elias, something that looks like an old, impossibly shaped coin.

The Subway Conductor

An employee on the city's subway system who is also a hobbyist urban explorer. They often met with Elias at the coffee shop to share stories and theories about the city's hidden places, abandoned stations, and forgotten tunnels. This character has intimate knowledge of the train system. Elias recently shared with them a set of coordinates for a place he called "The Hum."

Key NPCs

The Archivist (Elias's Protégé)

A young, eager archivist who worked closely with Elias. They were the one who discovered Elias's strange map, which he had left taped to their monitor. They admired Elias as a mentor but also noticed his increasingly erratic behavior. The Archivist will become the primary antagonist in Act III.

The Woman on the Train

A mysterious woman in her mid-50s, carrying a briefcase, who gets on the train at a crucial moment. She will suffer a critical stability failure, revealing a strange artifact and hinting at a larger conspiracy.

Act I: The Unsettling Commute

Scene: Train A, 8:03 AM

The story opens on a seemingly ordinary weekday morning. It's 8:03 a.m., and the players find themselves on Train A, the city's main commuter line. Each player is seated in the first car, at the front, just as an anonymous, cryptic message—an encrypted email or a typewritten letter—instructed them. The message simply listed the coordinates: "Train A, 8:15, first car, front seats."

As they glance at each other, there's a shared look of confusion and unease. There's a subtle, unnatural silence around their seating cluster, a pocket of quiet in the otherwise loud train. The digital clock on the subway car ticks down from 8:03, creating a palpable sense of tension. They have exactly 12 minutes until the specified time.

Encourage players to describe their characters' initial reactions to the strange situation and their fellow, unknown passengers.

Prompt initial awkward interactions. "Does anyone else feel like they're in a bad spy movie?" or "Did you all get a weird message too?"

Event: 8:12 AM - The Woman Arrives

At 8:12 a.m., the train pulls into a station. A woman in her mid-50s, wearing a simple, well-worn jacket and carrying a briefcase, gets on. She looks exhausted but determined. She doesn't sit with the players. She stands near the doors, anxiously glancing at her watch, seemingly oblivious to the players' strange gathering.

Allow players to make observations to notice the woman's anxious demeanor or any unusual details about her.

Event: 8:15 AM - The Stability Test

As the clock ticks to 8:15 a.m., a subtle, unseen force washes over the first car.

Call for a Stability Check from each player. This is a crucial moment for establishing the core mechanic of the game.

Results of the Stability Check:

Passing the Check: For this player, nothing happens. The train continues its normal course. The lights flicker, but stay on, and other passengers continue their commutes, seemingly unaffected.

Failing the Check: For this player, time warps and becomes a blur. They lose track of what's happening. For a terrifying, disorienting moment, they believe the train has stopped. Everyone else in the train car—passengers, the conductor—freezes in place, a collection of human statues. They can move, but the world around them is a still, silent photograph.

The NPC's Critical Failure: The woman in the briefcase suffers a critical failure on her stability check. The dissociation is too much for her mind to handle. She drops her briefcase, her eyes roll back in her head, and she collapses into a catatonic state. She isn't dead, but she's completely unresponsive.

Emphasize the sensory details for players who fail the check: the silence, the stillness, the uncanny feeling of being the only one moving in a frozen world.

For players who passed, describe the sudden collapse of the woman and the immediate need for action.

Regardless of individual results, the woman's collapse forces the group to interact and react.

Event: The Shifting Message

Following the jarring events on the train, the chaos begins to subside. The woman is on the floor, her briefcase spilled open. The mundane commuter train has become a crime scene, a medical emergency, and a gateway to the unknown all at once.

As the players begin to process what happened, they realize something else has changed. The card or email that brought them to the train—the one with the instructions “Train A, 8:15, first car, front seats”—has shifted. The directions have been rewritten.

Call for a second Stability Check from each player to see how they perceive this change.

Results of the Second Stability Check:

Passing the Check: The player notices the card has subtly but distinctly changed. The text is different, the ink has a new hue, or the digital message on their phone has been altered. The old instructions are gone, replaced with new ones. They see the change clearly and understand that this is the next step in the mystery. They are grounded enough to accept that reality is warping around them.

Failing the Check: For this player, the card never changed. The original message is still there. When they look at the card, it still says “Train A, 8:15, first car, front seats.” The horror for them is not in seeing a change, but in the growing sense of paranoia and doubt. As their fellow players talk about a new location, they begin to question everything they are seeing and hearing. The rift in their perception grows wider. Are their companions lying? Are they hallucinating?

The new directions will point to the Archivist’s personal studio/workspace.

This is the moment the players must decide to trust each other and pursue the mystery.

Act II: The Archivist's Sanctum

Having followed the new, unsettling directions, the players are led to a seemingly ordinary apartment building—the Archivist's personal studio and workspace. This is the first tangible link they've found to Elias's disappearance since their fragmented journeys began.

Scene: The Locked Door

The players will find the apartment door locked. The scent of decay and something metallic hangs in the air, a preview of the horror inside.

Players will need to decide how to gain entry.

Skill Check: Allow for Lockpicking (if a character has the skill) or a Strength check to break down the door. Failure might attract unwanted attention or make noise.

Scene: A Nightmare of Art and Madness

When they enter, they are confronted with a scene of utter psychological breakdown and cosmic dread. The Archivist's workspace is a complete wreck. Books are torn apart, papers are strewn everywhere, and strange, impossible-looking artifacts are scattered among the debris.

The most terrifying sight is on the walls. In a horrifying display of madness, the Archivist has used blood and feces to create intricate, unhinged carvings and drawings. These aren't random scribbles; they are meticulous, deliberate depictions of a demonic, tentacled creature. The carvings show the creature in various stages of a ritual, its tentacles reaching out from a central, impossible point.

The walls are also covered in intricate ritualistic symbology—a chaotic mess of impossible geometry and glyphs that pulsate with a dark, unnatural energy.

Describe the scene with vivid, unsettling detail. Emphasize the smell, the visceral nature of the "art," and the unsettling patterns.

Stability Check: Players should make a Stability Check upon entering the room, or after spending a few minutes absorbing the horror. The sheer depravity and madness of the scene will take a toll.

Clues in the Chaos

Amidst the chaos, the players can find crucial clues that advance the story and give them insight into the Archivist's fractured mind and Elias's fate.

The Ritual Board: A corkboard covered in photos and string hangs on one wall. It's an obsessive, paranoid mess of connections. The board links the museum's new artifacts to specific dates, times, and locations around the city—the very locations Elias Vance had marked on his map. Scrawled across the top of the board, in a large, unhinged hand, is the name "Yth-Sarkh", the elder god the Archivist is trying to contact. The board is a roadmap to the ritual, which they believed would bring Elias back.

Skill Check: Investigation checks can help players decipher the board's connections and understand the ritual's purpose.

The Missing Artifacts: The players can deduce from the board and the scattered mess that several key artifacts from the museum's collection are missing. These are the very artifacts needed to complete the ritual.

Skill Check: identify empty display cases or notes indicating missing items.

The Journal: A hidden, leather-bound journal can be found. It is filled with Elias's final, frantic entries. His handwriting grows more spastic and unhinged with each page. He talks about "the voice" in the artifacts and how it's showing him the "true shape" of the city. He mentions a "gate" at the museum's sub-basement and warns that the Archivist has become "a new host for the old ones."

Skill Check: Investigation or Deduction to find the hidden journal. Read Language/Decipher if the writing becomes too chaotic.

This scene confirms that the Archivist is not merely missing but has fallen prey to the same cosmic influence that took Elias. The clues point directly to the museum's sub-basement as the next, and likely final, destination.

Act III: The Museum Confrontation

The final act brings the players to the historical museum, the very place Elias Vance was preparing for his private viewing. The museum, once a symbol of history and civic pride, has now become a vessel for something ancient and alien. The players, having followed the new directions from their altered messages and the clues from the Archivist's sanctum, will find themselves drawn to the museum's sub-basement, the location of the special exhibit.

Scene: The Sub-Basement Gateway

The sub-basement of the museum is a site of pure cosmic horror. The impossible geometry Elias was obsessed with is now a tangible reality. The walls pulse with a sickly, organic light, the air smells of dust, ozone, and something indescribably alien. The strange, alien artifacts from the new collection are arranged in a grotesque circle, glowing with an unnatural, pulsating light.

At the center of it all is the Archivist, no longer human, but a writhing mass of impossible biology and tentacles. Their form is a grotesque parody of the human shape, constantly shifting, with eyes that seem to see into other dimensions. They are a fusion of human ambition and an incomprehensible power, desperately trying to complete the ritual. Their voice, when they speak, is a distorted chorus of Elias's pleas and the guttural whispers of Yth-Sarkh.

Describe the scene with as much sensory detail as possible to maximize dread. The sounds, smells, and impossible visuals should overwhelm the players.

Stability Check: Players should make a Stability Check upon witnessing the Archivist's transformation.

The Confrontation

The confrontation isn't a simple "kill the monster" scenario. The Archivist is not just a tentacle monstrosity; they are a tragic figure, a victim of the same cosmic horror that claimed Elias. The goal is to stop the ritual and seal the gateway before the Archivist's transformation is complete and the ancient power of Yth-Sarkh is fully unleashed on the world.

The players must use the clues they've gathered throughout the story—from Elias's map, the strange coin, the Archivist's journal, and the ritual board—to figure out how to disrupt the ritual. This might involve:

- Destroying or realigning the artifacts: Each artifact might have a specific weakness or a correct alignment needed to sever the Archivist's connection to Yth-Sarkh.
- Completing a counter-ritual: Perhaps Elias left behind a way to undo the process, requiring a specific sequence of actions or knowledge.
- Reaching the Archivist's mind: A desperate attempt to appeal to the last vestiges of their humanity, perhaps by using a personal connection or a shared memory.

This is a multi-stage encounter. It should combine elements of combat, puzzle-solving, and roleplaying.

Skill Checks:

- **Combat:** For direct engagement with the Archivist's monstrous form.
- **Investigation/Research:** To interpret the ritual and find its weakness.
- **Dexterity/Agility:** To navigate the shifting, impossible environment.
- **Stability Checks:** Ongoing checks as the horror intensifies and the Archivist's pleas or the entity's whispers assail their minds.

The Archivist's pleas, their warped human voice crying for help, yelling at them telling them they will suffer, inhuman screams should be a constant, haunting presence throughout the confrontation.

Emphasize the personal stakes: the players are fighting someone they knew, a friend or colleague who made a desperate, tragic mistake.

The Stakes

If the players fail, the city will be consumed, not by fire or flood, but by a reality-altering force that will rewrite existence itself under the influence of Yth-Sarkh. But the personal horror lies in the fact that they are not fighting a faceless monster, but a person they knew, a friend or a colleague who made a desperate, tragic mistake. The outcome will forever alter their perception of reality.

Aftermath: The Price of Knowledge

Assuming the players succeed in stopping the ritual and sealing the gateway to Yth-Sarkh, they emerge from the sub-basement, bruised, battered, and forever changed.

Scene: The Destroyed Basement and the Arrival of Authority

The sub-basement is a ruin. The impossible geometry has receded, but the walls are scorched, the air is thick with dust and the lingering scent of ozone, and the artifacts are either shattered or inert. The Archivist's monstrous form has collapsed into a grotesque, inert mass—no longer a threat, but undeniably no longer human.

As the players stumble out, they hear the blare of sirens. The police, alerted by the commotion (perhaps a panicked museum staff member, or a security alarm triggered by the ritual's energy), are swarming the museum. They find the players covered in dust, possibly blood, and standing amidst an inexplicable scene of destruction.

Storyteller Notes:

This is a moment for roleplaying the immediate aftermath. How do the players explain what happened? Do they try to cover it up, or do they tell a version of the truth?

Skill Checks:

- To convince authorities of a plausible (or implausible) story.
- To treat their own wounds.

The authorities will be baffled. They'll likely attribute the damage to a gas leak, structural collapse, or an elaborate act of vandalism, unwilling or unable to comprehend the true nature of the events. The players might be questioned extensively, but ultimately, there's no logical explanation for what occurred.

Scene: The Funeral

Days or weeks later, a small, somber funeral is held for Elias Vance. The official cause of death will be vague or listed as "missing, presumed deceased." The museum will issue a statement about a "tragic incident" and close the exhibit indefinitely. The players, having shared this incomprehensible experience, will likely be the only ones who truly understand the gravity of Elias's disappearance and the Archivist's fate.

Storyteller Notes:

This scene offers a moment for reflection and emotional processing for the players.

Allow players to roleplay their characters' reactions to the funeral and the public's ignorance of the truth.

The NPC woman from the train, if she survived and recovered, might make an appearance, perhaps exchanging a knowing glance with the players, hinting at a shared, unspoken burden.

The Future: Life, Unraveling

The players have survived, but they haven't escaped. Their encounter with Yth-Sarkh and the unraveling of reality has left an indelible mark. They are no longer just ordinary people. They've glimpsed the true weirdness beneath the veneer of modern life, and that knowledge is a heavy burden.

What do they do now?

The Burden of Knowledge:

They now see the subtle anomalies everywhere: a flickering streetlamp that seems to pulse with an unnatural rhythm, a distorted reflection in a shop window, a momentary glitch in their smart devices that echoes the train incident. The world feels wrong.

A New Purpose

Do they try to forget, to return to their normal lives, knowing what they know? Or do they embrace this new, terrifying awareness? Do they seek out other anomalies, try to understand more, or perhaps even try to protect others from the creeping cosmic horror?

The Whispers of Yth-Sarkh

Even though the gateway was closed, the elder god's influence might linger. Players who failed stability checks throughout the adventure might experience recurring nightmares, strange compulsions, or even brief, terrifying visions of impossible realities. The skeptic might find their worldview shattered, leading them down a new, darker path of inquiry.

Forming a Group

The shared trauma and knowledge have forged an unbreakable, if unsettling, bond between the players. They are the only ones who truly understand what happened. Do they formalize their group, becoming reluctant investigators of the weird, or do they simply remain a support network for each other in a world that feels increasingly alien?

Storyteller Notes:

This section sets the stage for future Terra Vista adventures, allowing you to continue their story as they navigate a world that is "almost perfect," but increasingly sinister.

End the session by asking each player what their character does next, and how this experience has changed them.

Terra Vista: Character Backstories

These notes provide a foundation for each playable character's connection to Elias Vance and their entry into the strange events of *The Vance Disappearance*.

The Paranormal Debunker

Name: (Player's Choice)

Profession: Online Content Creator / "Reality Consultant"

Life, Personality, and Hobbies: You spend your days poring over grainy footage, analyzing dubious audio recordings, and cross-referencing witness accounts, all from the comfort of your home office. You're sharp, cynical, and driven by a need to expose what you see as mass delusion. Your online persona is witty and sarcastic, but in real life, you're a bit of a loner, preferring the company of your meticulously organized files to unpredictable people. Your hobby *is* your profession: finding the logical, mundane explanation for every bump in the night. You thrive on disproving the supernatural, often feeling a smug satisfaction when you unravel a hoax.

News of Elias Vance: You first heard about **Elias Vance** when his "forgotten histories" started getting local media attention. You immediately saw him as another charlatan peddling fantasies. You wrote a scathing article and produced a viral video, dissecting his theories about hidden city narratives and strange artifacts, publicly challenging him to provide proof.

When the news broke about a museum curator going missing, your first thought was, "Oh, *that* guy." You received the anonymous message about the train, assuming it was a desperate prank from a rival debunker or perhaps even a setup by one of Elias's more fervent followers.

Your curiosity, and the lure of new content, led you there, ready to expose another fraud.

The Journalist

Name: (Player's Choice)

Profession: Freelance Journalist

Life, Personality, and Hobbies: Your life is a constant scramble for the next big story, chasing leads, conducting interviews, and battling deadlines from your cramped apartment. You're ambitious, resourceful, and possess a healthy dose of skepticism, honed by years of sifting through half-truths and PR spin. While your work can be all-consuming, you find solace in long walks through the city's older neighborhoods, always with your camera ready, looking for the untold stories hidden in plain sight. You enjoy true crime podcasts and old noir films, appreciating a good mystery.

News of Elias Vance: You were initially assigned a routine human-interest piece on the historical society's new exhibit and **Elias Vance's** curatorial work. During your interviews, you found Elias to be eccentric but genuinely dedicated. You sensed there was a deeper, untold story beneath his academic facade, a hint of something truly unusual.

He even sent you a personal invitation to the private viewing, hinting at "something truly extraordinary" he wanted to show you. When you heard about his disappearance, it immediately clicked: "That's the curator, Elias Vance!"

You came to the train hoping to find a lead for your story, now a missing person's case that feels increasingly bizarre and personal.

The Artist

Name: (Player's Choice)

Profession: Struggling Artist / Muralist

Life, Personality, and Hobbies: Your days are a mix of odd jobs to pay the rent and long, passionate hours in your studio, covered in paint and lost in your creative process. You're sensitive, observant, and possess a unique way of seeing the world, often finding beauty and strangeness in the mundane. Your hobbies include urban sketching, visiting obscure art galleries, and collecting discarded objects that inspire you. You're drawn to the abstract and the unconventional, always pushing the boundaries of perception in your art.

News of Elias Vance: You were commissioned by the historical society to paint a large mural for the new exhibit, depicting scenes from the city's early history.

Elias Vance was your primary contact. He became increasingly insistent on specific, almost impossible geometric patterns and visual distortions in the mural, claiming they were "authentic historical details" from the artifacts. You found his requests strange and challenging, but his passion was infectious, and you subtly incorporated some of these unsettling shapes. When news of a museum curator going missing broke, you instantly recognized the name. "Elias? No way."

You received the anonymous train message, assuming it was a networking opportunity or a bizarre art installation.

The Private Investigator

Name: (Player's Choice)

Profession: Retired Police Officer / Private Investigator

Life, Personality, and Hobbies: Your retirement from the force didn't stick, and now you run a small, discreet private investigation firm out of a cluttered office. You're world-weary, pragmatic, and possess a keen eye for detail, honed by decades of police work. You prefer facts and evidence to speculation, but you also trust your gut. Your hobbies include fishing, tinkering with old radios, and quietly observing people. You're a loyal friend, and that loyalty often leads you into trouble.

News of Elias Vance: You didn't know Elias Vance personally. You first learned of his disappearance when the museum quietly hired you to look into it, hoping to avoid public scandal. They wanted a discreet, off-the-books investigation, given the odd circumstances and the upcoming exhibit.

You've already done some initial digging, finding no logical explanation for his vanishing act. You received the anonymous train message and, despite your professional skepticism, felt a gut instinct that it was connected to Elias's case.

You're here because you were hired to find him, and this bizarre message is the only lead you have.

The Coffee Shop Owner

Name: (Player's Choice)

Profession: Coffee Shop Owner :

Life, Personality, and Hobbies: Your days revolve around the comforting rhythm of brewing coffee, greeting regulars, and managing the controlled chaos of a bustling café. You're warm, observant, and a natural listener, the kind of person people confide in. Your hobbies include baking, gardening (especially herbs), and people-watching. You find a quiet satisfaction in providing a welcoming space for your community.

News of Elias Vance: **Elias Vance** was a regular at your coffee shop, almost a fixture. He'd often sit for hours, nursing a single cup, sometimes sketching in a small notebook, sometimes engaging in philosophical discussions about the city's "hidden life" or the strange coincidences he observed.

You had a friendly, casual relationship, sharing stories and observations. About a week ago, a day or two after Elias was last seen, you realized he hadn't been in.

When you heard about the missing curator, you immediately thought, "Oh, that's Elias!"

You received the anonymous train message and decided to go on a whim.

The Subway Conductor

Name: (Player's Choice)

Profession: Subway Train Conductor

Life, Personality, and Hobbies: Your day job gives you an intimate knowledge of the city's underground, its rhythms, and its hidden spaces. You spend hours navigating the dark tunnels, listening to the hum of the tracks, and observing the endless stream of faces. You're methodical, reliable, and a bit of a quiet observer. Your passion, however, is urban exploration—delving into abandoned tunnels, forgotten service routes, and derelict buildings. You find a thrill in uncovering the city's hidden past.

News of Elias Vance: You met **Elias Vance** at the Coffee Shop Owner's place and quickly bonded over your shared fascination with the city's unseen layers. You two would often swap theories about urban legends and unexplored nooks.

When you heard about the missing curator, you recognized the name and felt a chill. "That's the guy from the coffee shop," you thought, a knot forming in your stomach. You received the anonymous train message and, recognizing the train and time as part of your route, felt a chilling sense of foreboding.

You're now on this train, not as a conductor, but as a passenger drawn into a mystery.