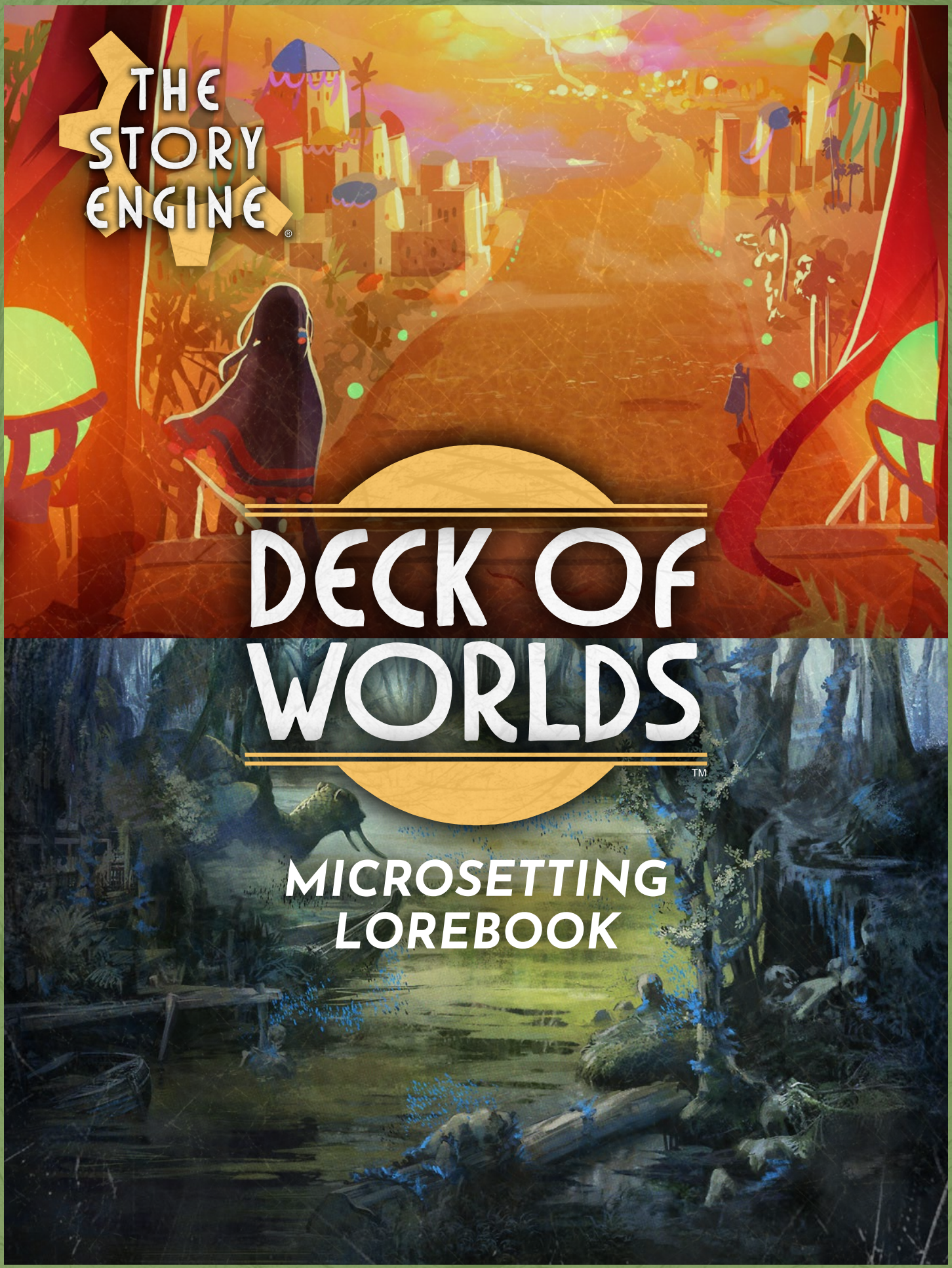

THE STORY ENGINE®
DECK OF WORLDS™
MICROSETTING LOREBOOK

Introduction

"You are lucky to be one of those people who wishes to build sand castles with words, who is willing to create a place where your imagination can wander."

—Anne Lamott, Bird by Bird

This lorebook contains 13 microsettings created by a team of writers and artists using *The Story Engine®: Deck of Worlds™* during the alpha testing period. The goal was to see what kinds of locations these creatives could dream up using the deck as a starting point. The results were jaw-droppingly creative, varied, beautiful, harrowing, and inspiring.

Some microsettings were created by fiction writers who were collaborated with artists to bring the microsetting to life. Others were created entirely by artists, who also provided notes on the lore of their locations. The results are intended to be portable "postcard" microsettings that can be explored on their own or dropped into your own campaign world for a tabletop roleplaying game.

Some of the cues and cards have changed since the alpha deck, so the updated prompts shown in this document may be slightly different from the original wording and configuration that the collaborators used.

We encourage you to dive into the lore, take inspiration from how various creative thinkers have used the *Deck of Worlds* to build engaging settings and stories rich in fantasy and lore.

Contents

The Basin That Weeps	3
The God-Touched Road	7
The Prophecy Coast	11
Azugon's Haven	13
The Prisma Isle	17
The Hiphathenaeum	19
The Bog That Laughs	23
The Forest That Remembers	25
The River That Walks	30
The Monument of Refugee's Glacier	34
The Laughing Cliffs	36
The Marsh of Feathers	40
The Museum of Rare Insects	43

**Note that the settings and illustrations are the intellectual property of the writers and artists that created them. If you would like to create and publish work set in these settings outside the bounds of personal use, please contact the creator to inquire about rights.*



THE BASIN THAT WEEPS

Written by Alina Pete and illustrated by Tiago Sousa

The Basin That Weeps



Created by Alina Pete

"They say that the snails tell only of Deepest Truth, but beware those who will read the portents for you, for they can lie..."

The pilgrimage to the Basin That Weeps (also known as the Basin of Tears) gives those seeking answers a lot of time to meditate on their Question.

The Climb

The first part of the journey takes place under the shadows of petrified trees. These shattered pillars line the pathway up the mountainside to the caldera where the Basin is located, and are all that remains of the forest that used to surround the mountain. A pilgrim's reflection in the obsidian pathway is their only companion on the journey to the mountaintop. That, and the ghosts...

Strange lights can be seen dancing above the Basin at night, blue-green against the flickering orange of the caldera. It is said that these lights are the cursed spirits of the inhabitants of the area, whose fearful misdeeds brought calamity upon them in ancient times. Other, more scientifically-minded observers maintain that the lights are simply the result of gases given off by the volcanic vents, but no one can quite ignore the fear that grips their hearts when the lights are at their brightest.

The Summit

The sight that greets those pilgrims who make it to the summit is said to be worth the climb. Down in the caldera, surrounded by violently bubbling volcanic pools, stands the Basin That Weeps. Despite the heat, the Basin's turquoise waters are always near freezing, and clouds of cold mist boil off into the air.

Fifty feet high, The Basin That Weeps is so named due to the condensation that streams down it like tears. Droplets form near the rim and trickle down the sides until they reach the pool encircling the Basin. Here, pilgrims are

"... forgiveness is not the goal... only awareness of one's faults."

instructed to wash their hands in the painfully cold water, and to sit in contemplation of their own misdeeds while the mist rains down on them. It is not a comfortable experience, and forgiveness is not the goal... only awareness of one's faults.

The Snails

What draws pilgrims to such an inhospitable place? Though the Basin is impressive and mysterious, most pilgrims journey here to see the dance of the Prophetic Snails.

These iron-shelled creatures are found everywhere in the caldera, and are equally comfortable lounging in the volcanic pools or crawling through the freezing water. No one is quite sure what they eat, but they are the only food source for the hermits who live in the caldera, and are said to taste like "brimstone and regrets."

At unpredictable intervals, the Prophetic Snails will form into herds of up to 10,000 individuals and spill across the caldera in a great "dance." The patterns they create during these dances are said to spell out prophecies that are always true. It is unfortunate that to interpret these patterns, one must rely on a hermit.

The Hermits

Shrines dot the caldera, and are said to have been constructed by the ancients to keep the cursed spirits from wandering. In modern times, most of these shrines serve as homes for the hermits. Drawn from many lands, the hermits all claim to be able to decipher the patterns of the snail's dance.

Travelers are cautioned to be wary of handing over their gold right away, however, for it is rumored that only those with the right spark of madness can truly find meaning in the patterns made by the dancing snails.

Where the Mist Eats the Land

"Friend", said a voice from the shadows.

I frowned. No one in this gods-forsaken pit was anyone I'd trust, and the smell coming from the shrine-turned-hovel made me disinclined to stop and chat. But... I needed information.

The pause was all the invitation the hermit needed. They scrabbled out of their den and stood unsteadily before me, wrapped head to toe in rags and wearing an improbably bright cape that used to be a prayer flag. It was impossible to tell what gender or even species this person was.

"Friend. For a drink of spirits, I will read the snails for you."

I nearly left in disgust. The hermits who interpreted dance of the Prophetic Snails were supposed to be holy, god-touched clerics. This person would make the filthiest beggar in my village look sensible!

It was the eyes, I suppose, that convinced me. One of the only things visible through their wrappings, the hermit's eyes burned with a frightening intensity. They were mad, to be sure, but there was something powerful lurking under the waters of that madness like the drake-sturgeon of my home waters. And like those sacred fish, this thing offered me my desires, if I was worthy... or a curse if I was not.

I handed over the last of my whiskey and regretted it instantly as the aged and finely oaked liquor was guzzled down like dockside gut-rot.

"Awful!" The hermit said, turning on their heel and staggering away.

I was too incensed to move for a time, and the hermit was nearly over the next ridge when they turned back and looked my way. Once again, I felt the weight of their eyes like a blow.

"Well. Come on, come on." They said. "The dance has already begun. Do you want me to read for you or not?"

I scrabbled after them, almost stepping on one of the razor-sharp snails in my haste to catch up. Before, it had been difficult to catch a glimpse of the famed creatures; their shells were the same color as the stone, and the few I'd seen had been hidden in the waters near the Basin.

Now, they were everywhere.

The light from the pools glinted off their shells, making a field of oligochaete stars against the caldera's blackness. Like the stars, they seemed uncountable.

"Ask your Question!" The hermit's voice startled me from my reverie.

I hesitated.

"Ask!" They shouted.

"I... where can I find a cure for my beloved's illness?"

"Hah!" The hermit said. "Surprisingly practical. Usually it's all lost heirs and failing empires. Right. Let's see what they have to say. I'll warn you! They may not answer your question, now or ever."

"I ask for nothing more than a chance."

They threw back their head in a cackle. "Those that ask for more are truly mad!"

Behind this ragged figure, the snails went through the slow, stately motions of the dance, forming spirals and whorls that encompassed the landscape. The wonder of the intricate patterns was enough to rouse even my skeptical heart, but I despaired of them making sense to any mortal.

I had to trust the hermit...

They stretched their arms to embrace the sky, and a surprisingly light melodic voice, completely unlike that I'd heard before, left their throat.

Two, and two, and two again
The bird and the serpent will rise
Find the place where the mist eats the land
At the third hour, under the blood moon
Find the flowing stair, or hope's demise



Fig. 1: Artist's field sketch



THE GOD-TOUCHED ROAD

Written by C.L. Clark and illustrated by Frances P

The God-Touched Road



Created by C.L. Clark

"The God-Touched Road" is a long road that stretches from the holy city of Delshos in the south, resting place of the Divinity, to the holy city of the north, Tykono, where the Divinity was born. Among the devout, it is known simply as *the* Road, as it was a gift from the Divinity to their devout, and it is said to lead unerringly to one's destiny.

Hraika

Though the God-Touched Road most importantly stretches between the two holiest cities, it is also well known for a stop along the way: the town of Hraika, where pilgrims may stop, rest their legs, restore themselves with a warm meal, and perform their devotions. Hraika is known for its strict adherence to holy ritual and the etiquette befitting the devotees to the Divinity, including their precise gestures of greeting and the cuts of their clothing.

If one times one's travel well, one may even attend the Divinity's holy Festival of Transformation, where the devoted celebrate the Divinity's changing physical nature with costumes and paints.

The First Road

It is suspected that fervent dedication to this holy etiquette comes from its proximity to the First Road, which was the Divinity's first gift to their devout, and the Glorious Wasteland, which was the Divinity's first warning. The First Road now leads to nowhere discernible, and those who follow that path into the foggy unknown of the Glorious Wasteland are never seen again, unless they return deranged with an incomprehensible madness.

The Glorious Wasteland was once a town not unlike Hraika, but it is said that their devotion to the Divinity's rites and holy etiquette were not as complete, nor done with true devotion in their hearts, and so the Divinity smote the town and cursed the First Road. The Glorious Wasteland is now uninhabitable by humankind, and yet it is a sight to behold from a distance—impenetrable shimmering, multi-hued fog that stretches to the sky, traces of scorch marks upon the ground, and an eerie, muffled silence.

It is against Hraika's holy etiquette to speak of the First Road and the failure of humanity that is the Glorious Wasteland. Strangers who

do are ejected from the town immediately and provided no succor, which could be fatal on the long road between the holiest of cities. Hraikans who break the holy etiquette are lashed for the first offense, and exiled for more.

The Blessing of Transformation

Among the other alleged properties of the God-Touched Road, most interesting is that travelers attest that those who wish it, and who are devoted to the Divinity and have walked the full length of the road, can request a blessing of transformation from the Divinity themself. People have used this to explain a preternatural intelligence with which certain birds watch them, or the startling resemblance of a prowling prairie cat to a loved one who has gone missing. More typically, however, devoted pilgrims return with changed human traits, including permanently painted skin, different sexual characteristics, or facial features they find more appealing.

"...the First Road, which was the Divinity's first gift to their devout, and the Glorious Wasteland, which was the Divinity's first warning."

In the Gutter of Divinity

I enter Hraika at sunset. The wind at my back urges me forward, pressing my purpose. Everything is as I remember before the pilgrims' town cast me into exile, daring me to make a life in the Glorious Wasteland if I refused to be bound by the Divinity's laws.

Even now, I stand out: I do not wear the correct garments, I do not greet others the way piety demands. They called me a heretic, but I am full of sudden longing. It is time for the Divinity's holy days, and the town is festooned for the occasion in green and gold and purple and pink, colors of transformation, of the sky at dawn and dusk. I close my eyes so I do not weep. I dress in colors of the road, the hazy brown of the foggy wasteland itself.

"Yokri."

My name from beloved lips with familiar scorn. Tonnu straddles the thoroughfare, arms crossed. The woman who was my wife. Once, I would not have struggled to place the emotion tightening the corners of her eyes.

"You've changed," she says finally.

"By the grace of the Divinity." I place my hand against the now-flat plane of my chest. It is almost, but not quite, the gesture I should have given. "So have you." Swirls of permanent ink map her hands, her bare arms.

She glowers.

"A storm is coming," I say. "I've seen it from my camp. Postpone the celebrations and—please, let my people shelter, too."

"You're not welcome here."

"Hraika's leaders may think otherwise. Let me—"

"I am Hraika's leader. Go."

I straighten stiff as my walking stick at the cold iron in her. I step closer, speak softer. "You've been on the pilgrimage." I reach out as if to brush her ink and she flinches away. The loneliness of that sojourn stretches within me.

"You've been gone a long time." Tonnu avoids my eyes. She shivers, reaches for absent sleeves in the brisk wind.

Behind her, protectors bristle with steel.

I swallow around the lump in my throat and journey back down the hill.

I return at sunrise, stomping down the boulevard to the Hall without paying my respects to a single one of the statues

carved in the Divinity's myriad image.

"Tonnu!" I call. "Tonnu!"

Tonnu comes out raging but it is nothing compared to the ceiling of dark clouds encroaching on the peach-purple of dawn's light.

"Hraika will become another Wasteland." I speak loudly so that all may hear.

Tonnu matches my volume: "You come into the way station of pilgrims and threaten our holy days? You, who were exiled as a blasphemer and a heretic?"

"I am no heretic," I growl.

"If we abandon the Divinity's rituals, then we'll end up like your Glorious Wasteland." She gestures widely, encompassing the town, its pilgrims and its people, its decorations and its shrines. "Enough," the woman who was my wife barks. "This time, do not return. Forget us."

A droplet of water falls to her cheek and at first, I think she's crying—and then, on my own cheek.

Tonnu wipes her face and her expression hardens. "A storm. It will pass."

I pull her close, my lips against the curl of her ear as the spring rain pelts us.

"You've received a boon from the Divinity. You know the truth of their nature. Change. Do not stagnate now and risk everything."

She wrests herself away. This time I track her gaze from the smear of ink along her arm to the stain on my wet hands.

"A heretic and a liar," I whisper. Awed. Amused. Accusatory.

"Leave."

My people and I dig ourselves into ditches on either side of the God-Touched Road. At sunset, I look again toward Hraika, toward her, but there has been no word, no conciliatory messenger, no succor.

I am asleep when the storm hits. Lightning sears my eyelids. Thunder stutters my heart. I wake as my tent rips free, leaving me bruised by pellets of ice like road gravel. We scramble. We are out of time.

Someone grabs my hand and presses their mouth against my ears. All I hear is Hraika, Hraika, Hraika. They point and, in the darkness, a lone figure lists in the wind like a cart with a broken wheel.

I race to Tonnu. She steadies against my chest, staring up. From the yellow-gray of the sky, the clouds reach down, swirling into narrow, shrieking fingers. My people crouch transfixed in their ditches as they spin nearer.

"If that isn't the Divinity's hand, I don't know what is," my wife whispers. Somehow, I hear her.

In the darkness, our slick hands find each other one last time.

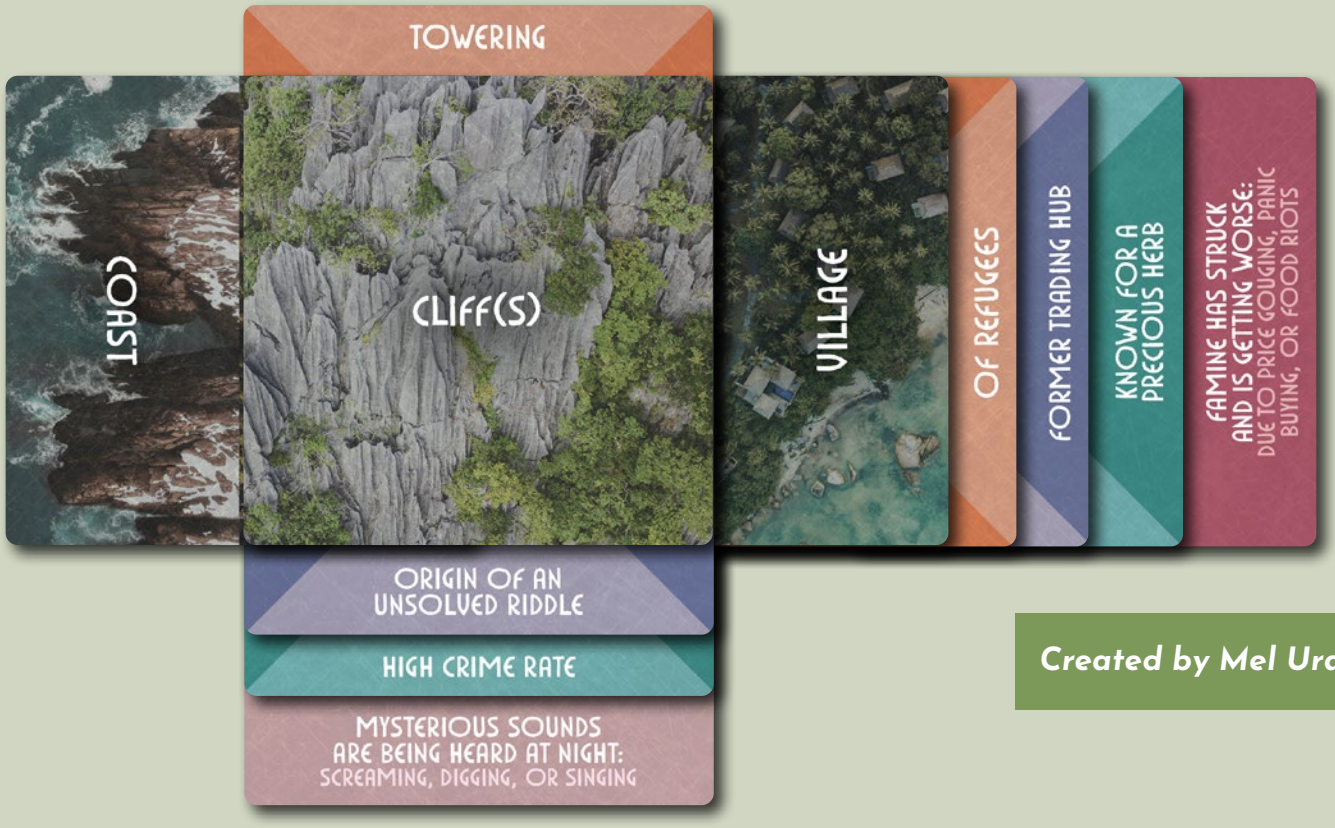


THE PROPHECY COAST

Written and illustrated by Mel Uran



The Prophecy Coast



Created by Mel Uran

Hidden the cliffs of the Prophecy Coast are the remains of the last oracle and an abandoned font said to contain a riddle that has never been solved. Any who make the trip can find the font and pursue the riddle. It is different for each seeker. It comes at a cost, for the cavern's passages lead one to madness if ill-prepared.

Solitary seekers who fail to find the font often fling themselves into the ocean. The coastline below is littered with the dead and their belongings. Parties will turn on each other and the survivors often flee to the nearby village and may continue their rampage.

Inhabitants of the village hear mysterious screams at night—and not always from the seekers. The local legends say it's the screams of frustrated rage from the last oracle, murdered within the caverns centuries ago.

The village was founded as a trading hub, but changing fortunes reduced it to a refugees village, taking in the outcast or roving people between destinations. The only crop that thrives on the harsh coastal climate is an herb known for medical and hallucinogenic properties. It is enough to keep the village alive in the midst of a famine. Only someone truly foolish would brave the cliffs for an answer to their predicament.

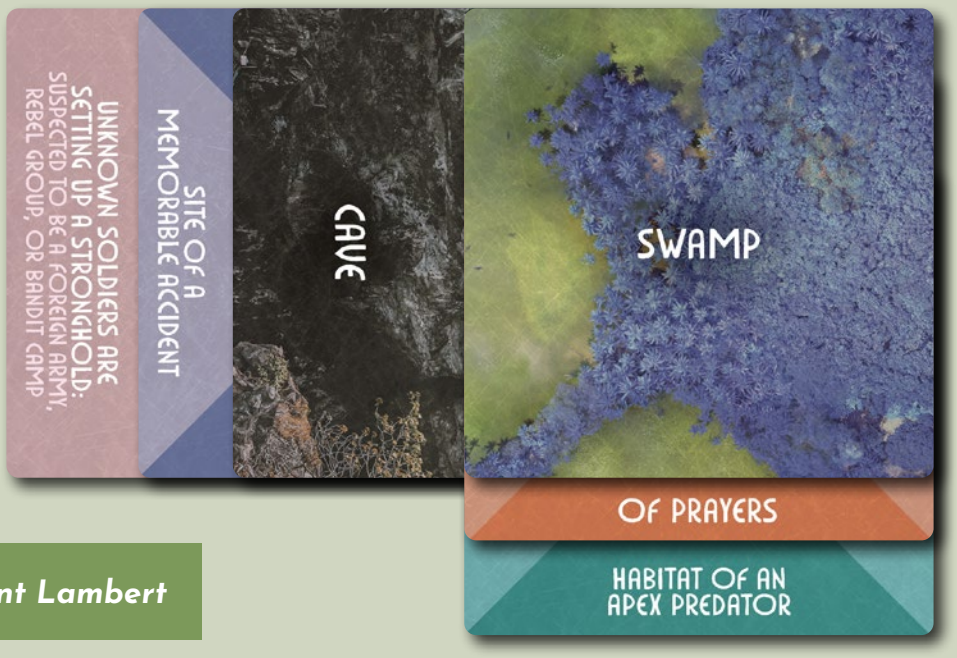
"The coastline below is littered with the dead and their belongings."



AZUGON'S HAVEN

Written by Brent Lambert and illustrated by Beth Sparks

Azugon's Haven



Created by Brent Lambert

"When the Divine Beasts were finally allowed to rest, they viciously carved out their havens amongst us lesser beings."

—Dr. Karijo Elysee, Head of Divine Biology at Siego-Dan University

The so-called "Swamp of Prayers" lies in the southern reaches of the Malissta Imperium and has mostly been left abandoned since the arrival of Azugon. Its name was one based in a fortuitous economy and nothing deity-related—until the Divine Beast found the massive insect-farming communities that resided in the swamp to be a nuisance. In a matter of days, Azugon completely destroyed a large portion of Malissta's economy, and any survivors were left to describe feebly the might of a godly weapon.

The Divine Beast

Azugon is best described as, without hyperbole, a holy apex predator. The scion of a battle goddess, it killed thousands in higher dimensional combat before finally being unleashed in our lesser realm. Scientists believe it found its way to the Malissta swamp because of its physical composition. Like all Divine Beasts, Azugon is a composite construct. With the head of a leopard, tusks of an elephant, a black mamba's scales and a raptor's body, it is nothing beautiful to behold. And those predatory attributes have been enhanced to levels no mortal weapon could stand up against.

The Swamp

It is hypothesized that the swamp's oppressive humidity attracted Azugon the most. Assuming the scales mean it is cold-blooded, the Swamp of Prayers would have been a siren's welcome. The air is oppressively thick and leaves one with the constant feeling of being coated in ooze. The swamp's well-known blue vine species emit an odor best described as corpse-like and the

"Malissta stands on the edge of collapse now, with such a large portion of its economy held hostage by the Divine Beast."

swarms of various insects that feed on it are not pleasant either. It's safe to assume that Azugon is not a predator that operates through olfactory means...

The Insects

The Swamp of Prayers earned its name because of the immense wealth it brought to The Malissta Imperium. The aforementioned insects were discovered to possess several interesting biological properties based on their blue vine diet. Many, when crushed to a fine powder, provide nearly miraculous healing properties. Infections that would have once meant assured death heal overnight. Others, when ingested whole, create euphoric hallucinations known to break years of melancholy in patients. Needless to say, these discoveries gave The Malissta Imperium vast economic power.

Azugon's arrival changed all of that. Malissta stands on the edge of collapse now, with such a large portion of its economy held hostage by the Divine Beast.

The Cave

Expeditions have been made to monitor Azugon in the hopes of ascertaining behavioral patterns and how to possibly kill it. The few expeditions that manage to return in one piece have all agreed on one fact; Azugon has made its home in a massive cave near the center of the swamp. Attempts to breach the cave have been unsuccessful primarily because of the hostile ecosystem.

The water inside the cave is uniquely acidic compared to the rest of the Swamp of Prayers. No one knows why but Azugon can endure it. The cave's air contains isolated spores which when breathed in induce horrible plant-like growths within the lungs. Azugon seems unaffected by those as well.

The Cull

Removing the Divine Beast truly seems to be a task for the ages and the Malissta Imperium is growing impatient. Greed and the loss of political power are making them uniquely desperate. Most other nations afflicted by the arrival of these holy monsters have found a way to accept their plight and move on, but none have been as deeply impacted as Malissta.

The Five Queens of Malissta are said to have now commissioned a dozen disparate mercenary companies into one fighting force to finally remove Azugon from its haven in The Swamp of Prayers. Estimates place the endeavor at least twenty-eight million listorums, an exorbitant price that the government hopes will be easily recovered once insect farming is restored. An unsuccessful hunt could mean a financial crisis for not just Malissta, but all the various nations that depend on its economic status.

It must be said that killing Azugon may induce a different sort of calamity. For no one knows if the gods watch their pets with adoration, nor what offense they might take if one of them is slain...

"For no one knows if the gods watch their pets with adoration, nor what offense they might take if one of them is slain..."

The Hunt

Colonel Artero ran fast, the Divine Beast's roar close enough to rattle the swamp vines around him. Coming here had been a mistake. His entire force had been slaughtered. The treacherous Swamp of Prayers killed as many as Azugon, the Divine Beast, had. The Colonel refused to be next. He had to live to tell the Five Queens to give this hunt up. The Swamp of Prayers belonged to Azugon now. The sooner his country accepted that, the better.

"Shit and piss! Fucking shit!" Artero yelled as he hauled ass through the thick, sludge-like yellow water. He'd thrown off most of his armor a mile back. It was already slow going and Azugon would be on him soon. Fighting the Divine Beast head-on wasn't an option. He needed to be smart, even if every instinct demanded panic.

Looking behind him was a sure way to kill any chance of calm. Azugon's monstrous form devoured courage. Its tusks dripped with the blood of his soldiers. Panic had set in the instant his troops saw the beast and Azugon tore them apart for their hesitation, ignoring the fallen as it went. Some things a commander shouldn't witness.

The Divine Beast roared behind him again and Artero nearly fell to his knees. Fear and a dogged need to make sure his soldiers' deaths weren't pointless kept him going.

"Shit!" This time it was said in hope and not fear. A cave had opened up not far from him. Some plant species in the swamp disguised cave openings at random and then slinked their foliage back. Biologists back home couldn't figure out why.

Colonel Artero didn't give a damn about the answer. He ran straight into the dark cave and prayed Azugon didn't use smell to track its prey. The biologists were so sure, but how the fuck did you test that theory on a monster that dropped down from heaven? He kept running until his legs buckled and he was forced to take great gasps of air.

It was then the cave's smell hit him. Sweet rot. The air was stale too. "Weird."

That was when the first bite came. A sudden stab on his hand. Then another on his leg. One on his cheek. Each bite became successively more painful. Artero couldn't hold back the scream anymore. He ran to get out the cave, even knowing it would take him back to Azugon. The pain was too great.

The bites just kept coming. He was in agony and crawling by the time daylight hit him again. Finally, he could see his attackers: small red bugs with too many legs. They hissed when the light touched them. As they fell off the Colonel, they left behind weeping wounds. He would have winced, but a sweeping numbness fell across his body. The bugs had reduced him to crawling through the murky swamp, water nearly at his chin.

He crawled to a tight bundle of vines and rested his head against them. As soon as he heard the roar again, he knew the bugs had killed him. They had reduced him to paralyzed prey. A place he thought would be refuge only delivered him death.

Out the corner of his eye, Artero saw the slow approach of Azugon. The Divine Beast's black scales glistened and its tusks indeed dripped blood. The Colonel closed his eyes and waited for death to come.

...it never came.

The Colonel woke up much later that night with feeling beginning to return to his body and his clothing completely saturated with dirty swamp water. But he was alive. He would have laughed, but his tongue felt too heavy. Maybe the bugs saved him after all. Azugon had ignored the dead earlier. The bugs' paralytics made him look the part.

The cave had been salvation after all.



THE PRISMA ISLE

Written and illustrated by Megan McCurdy

The Prisma Isle



Created by Megan McCurdy

"The city itself can only be reached by airship, making it inaccessible to anyone without adequate transportation and piloting expertise."

Prisma Isle was founded by a religious order to worship an apex predator of the floating island: a massive tropical dragon.

The city itself can only be reached by airship, making it inaccessible to anyone without adequate transportation and piloting expertise.

Lately, a new invasive species of dragon has been throwing off the balance of the island's ecosystem. The species seems to have been brought in by—or perhaps even created by—a faction within the city trying to diminish the power of the dragon worshipers. By threatening the dragon's position as both apex predator and religious icon, they seek to break the temple's centuries-old grasp on power and perhaps even drive the ancient creature to extinction.

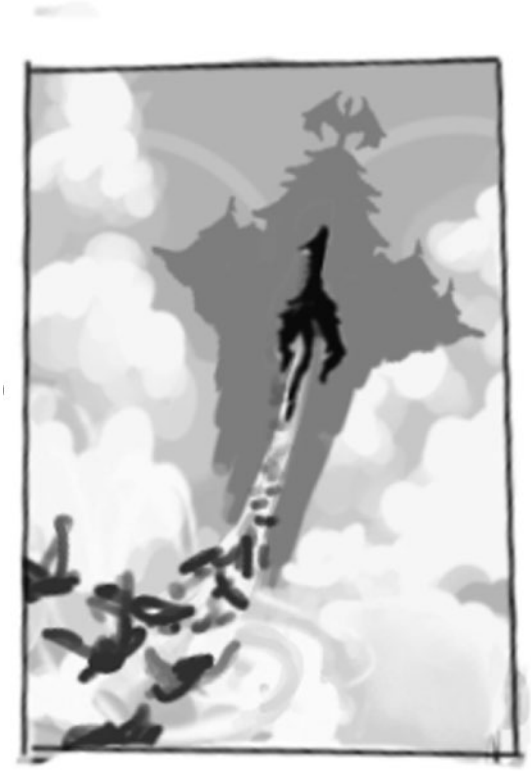
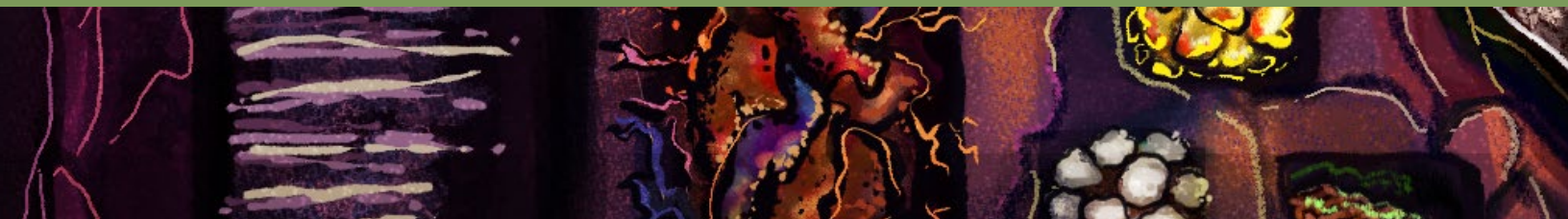


Fig. 1: Artist's field sketch



THE HIPHATHENAEUM

Written by Jordan Shiveley and illustrated by Kuutti Terävä



The Hiphathenaeum



Created by Jordan Shiveley

"At the outskirts of the Seventh Desert Ward there is a canyon that escapes up from the earth and then plunges back down into it..."

From the Travelogues of Janus Bardum, first published as "A Complete Recounting of the Nine Desert Wards," later reprinted in anin. 45L as "The Caravaneer's Almanac"

At the outskirts of the Seventh Desert Ward there is a canyon that escapes up from the earth and then plunges back down into it, first a lone jutting tooth of worn rock and scrub brush, and then a deep abscess where the air cools considerably from the scorching heat above.

As a traveler descends the gradual slope of the canyon floor and the walls rise up around them, multicolored striations worn by the passage of time and long-gone waters. One might be forgiven if they thought they were arriving at the site of an underground oasis. After all, the temperature in the canyon does drop far more precipitously than one would expect and the passageway steadily widens into a small, mostly covered valley. The pedantic in a traveling group would probably agree that it is in fact a cavern with a large gaping stone mouth in its roof, but the insightful would notice the lack of rock formations that should be present in such a location. Instead, it looks as if the earth was torn in two here in some past forgotten incident and then the rocks and earth wearily settled back into place to nurse their wounds and become the reluctant guardians of whatever it was that had passed through on its way deeper into the earth.

And for the geologically minded, this is enough of a reason to take the trek out over the sands to see this formation. However, the

"... whomever first started this library—and it is a topic much discussed but never decided for certain—made it from fungal spores."

rocks and sand are not what most people come here for. They come to see the Hiphathenaeum. All around the edges of the bowl-like canyon there are niches carved into the walls. Many of these lead into tunnels that honeycomb the surrounding rock. The walls and ceilings of these are covered with a grid of deep square indentations that have in turn been filled with compacted earth and seeded with the Library.

The Hiphathenaeum, you see, is not a depository of knowledge made of paper and leather, book boards and binding cloth. You will find no scrolls or folios holding the illustrations of past artists, or card catalogues for you to hunt down a specific volume. Instead whomever first started this library—and it is a topic much discussed but never decided for certain—made it from fungal spores.

This highly unconventional means of knowledge storage and dissemination has proven to be a puzzle for those who would study it, and also for anyone simply traveling by. The unwary who do not choose to protect themselves have been known to accidentally ingest spores that float in the still air between the canyon walls and find themselves in possession of snippets of knowledge they have no idea how they have come upon. Many scientific expeditions have visited the site, but besides learning the basic facts of its existence and that it is not a naturally occurring phenomenon, they have gotten no further than the pilgrims who seek the site out as evidence of some hallowed mystery.

This writer would caution the casual traveler or the more business-minded of those seeking to cross the Desert Wards to steer clear of the place altogether.

A Tendril of Crimson

The desert sand crunched beneath the feet of the Thing that slouched down from the crest of a sand dune. The night air would have been considered bracing, possibly edging into bone-achingly-cold territory, but it felt nothing but the thrumming in its head. A steady beating drone that grew stronger as it neared its destination. Up ahead it could see a smear of light against the fractured veil covering its many eyes and felt the vibrations of several voices reach the soles of its segmented feet.

A group of pilgrims were gathered at the mouth of the opening to the valley of the Hiphathenaeum and they had begun to set up prayer candles and hang long trailing prayer cards that rustled against the rock walls they had been spiked into. The Cantors among them had begun their languorous hymns that were supposed to open a channel of communication with the fungal repositories. Whether they actually did was unknown to those not of the pilgrims creed. Each group of pilgrims claimed only their tonal prayers were the correct type to access the fungal hive mind, so the matter was far from an accepted truth.

The other pilgrims turned from their preparations as the sounds of loose sliding shale and the shuffling of something large coming down the canyon trail alerted them to the Thing's presence.

The smell of the wet meat ahead drew the Thing towards the pilgrims' presence. A tendril of crimson need that slithered

into its nostril cavities and wrapped itself around one of its many brainstems. The Thing did not see the shape of the meat yet. It had only just awoken after all, and had not yet had time to reclaim all the senses that had been stripped from it during its long imprisonment. But the smell of soft, defenseless meat, that was a memory that no amount of being sealed in a dark stone box and forgotten beneath layers of wards and hexagrammic bindings could drive from it. Inside the creature, sinewy muscles began to ripple and pulse as they drew its creaking bones tighter together. The sound of them cracking and reforming must have been horrifying to anyone else close enough to witness them but the creature didn't even notice.

It knew two things only for certain.

One: that beyond this pulsing grouping of meat and tender bones was whatever had awoken them. Or at least the smell of what had bound it to begin with. It was confusing to parse with a skull that was still regrowing many of the organs it normally housed.

And two: it would need to go through the meat that was beginning to edge closer to it, the sounds of their weak squeaks and yawps just now beginning to pierce the Thing's senses.

As it unhinged its great hunting jaws in preparation for this, the creature realized belatedly that it also knew a third thing: it was going to enjoy going through them… immensely…



THE BOG THAT LAUGHS

Written and illustrated by Angel Muro

The Bog That Laughs



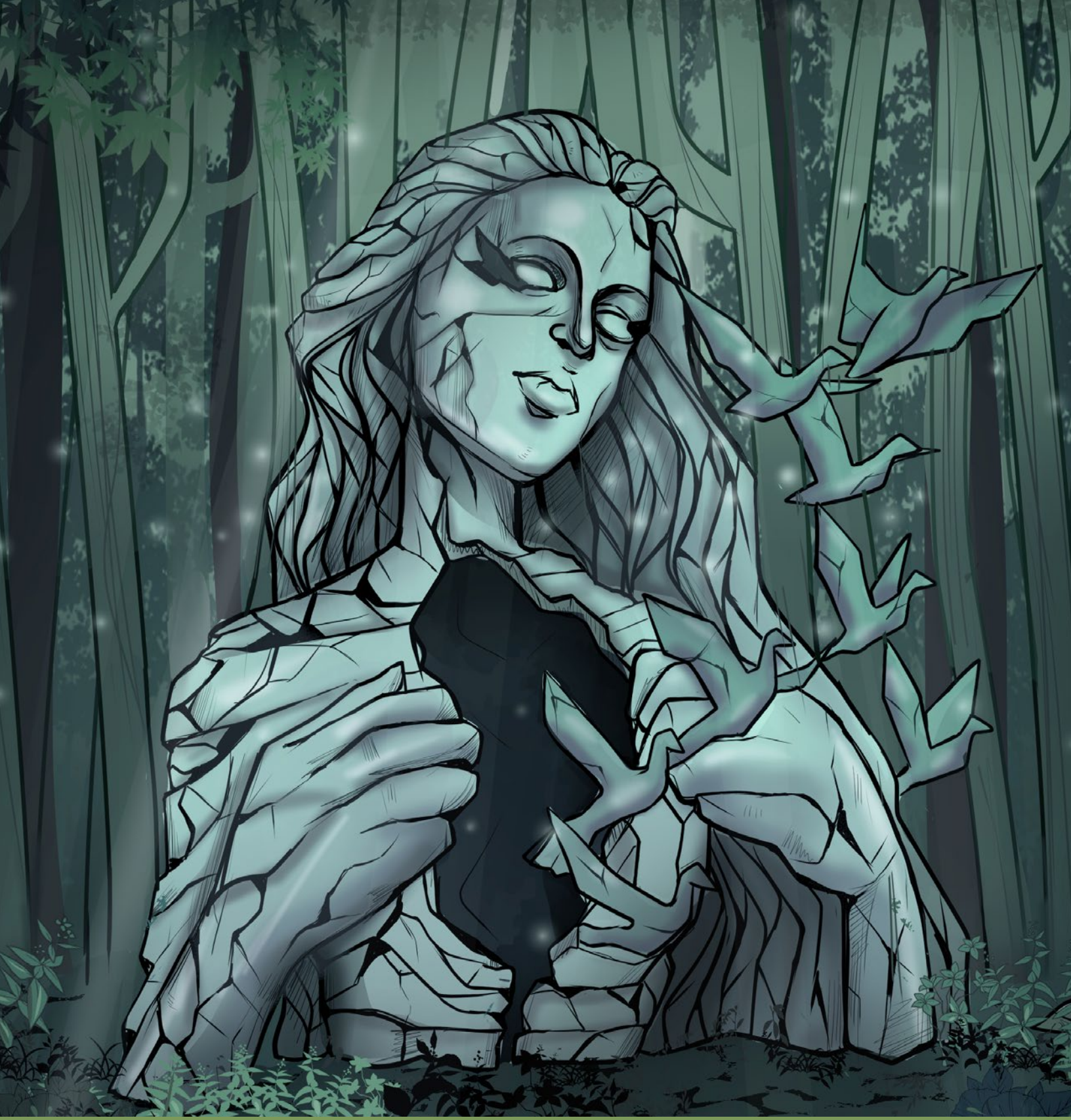
Created by Angel Muro

The Bog That Laughs was the site of an ancient burial ground and every few years, tremors signal the awakening of the cursed spirits of an ancient people. People who venture too close to the bog during this time reportedly hear what sounds like laughter.

The cathedral was built near the outside edge of the bog by early religious pioneers completely unaware of the of the spirits that roam the area. One year, after a service, the congregants were found mutilated amongst the pews of the cathedral. The massacre is a mystery that has never been fully explained.

After those tragic events, the cathedral and surrounding area have been abandoned, only to be used as a campsite and trail marker by adventures brave enough to spend the night.

"... every few years, tremors signal the awakening of the cursed spirits of an ancient people."



THE FOREST THAT REMEMBERS

Written by Elizabeth Aoki and illustrated by Aysha

The Forest That Remembers



Created by Betsy Aoki

There are some forests in Arabis Tawon where the trees themselves are predators that can move, stalk, and murder travelers with their hollow maws. And woodland growths where brush and branch grow so thick, explorers have turned back, skin scraped raw by an impenetrable wall of parasitic thorns and brambles. Roots so hard they break bones if fallen upon.

But these are all physical dangers, local to other forests, too. The greatest danger the Forest that Remembers presents to travelers is a subtle and steady degradation of the mind. For as the traveler forgets, the Forest does not.

The Forest That Remembers cups the soil like a basket within its vast underground networks of roots. Its "memory trees" smell of eucalyptus and cinnamon bark one moment, teak oil and pine resin the next. These trees, stationed as they are above the shivering, whispering root system, have no need to move to prey upon travelers—all news of creature movements naturally flows to them. It is quite easy to pass by a memory tree without experiencing a splinter or piercing, or even noticing it. Memory trees aren't interested in a traveler's blood, bones or skin. Their varicolored leaves instead hover over the heads of travelers, absorbing, rustling, thieving.

Local History

Hunters and woodcutters noticed the trees' effects about 150 years ago, after the Karatakian army first attempted to push past the Forest into greater Arabis Tawon.

After a few days' travel inside the Forest, locals—even those whose families lived by the forest for generations—would become disoriented, not remembering where they laid their traps, or which paths they normally took to find the best timber. They would cut marks on the trees as they went, and yet would find themselves striding elsewhere, hours later, having cut no marks nearby and not remembering much of what had happened to them. They would only find their way back to their campsites by seeing the rise of evening fires, or through hearing the hunting whistles of their fellows.

Worst were those in larger groups insistent

"For as the traveler forgets, the Forest does not."

on longer and deeper forays, who forgot entirely the faces of their companions and their purpose for traveling. Logging parties would come across the body of a friend shot with their own arrows—arrows they could not remember ever bringing to bowstring. Foragers would die suddenly and violently, stabbed in ambush by comrades who no longer recognized them as one of their own but took them for poachers, bandits, or Karatakian scouts. Devout pilgrims in search of enlightenment might even flee from their holy guides, or worse, choke them with their own prayer necklaces.

Needless to say, even to this day, Karatakian military forces have never managed to penetrate the Forest That Remembers from the north by the wooded lake. Far better to start from the Road, from the politically neutral Shrine of the Execution where provisions can be had and guides obtained.

The Shrine of the Execution

As a neutral, even favored religion to the Karatakian invaders, the Shrine's religious order presides as best it can over the buffer zone of several hundred square miles surrounding the forest.

Shrine disciples—themselves of all genders, shapes and races—have but one unifying feature: eidetic memory, or sometimes even hyperthymesia. These acolytes have made the most reliable maps of the Forest to date, and are the ones who set the animal traps, logging flags, and marked bee hives that keep the order in trade goods and winter food supplies.

In some ways, it can be a curse to remember every little detail in one's life, but these earnest acolytes' work in supporting travelers and the small community around the Shrine have made the malaise the Forest inflicts on everyone else easier to bear. Even the Karatakian spies have to admit that if one seeks anything inside the Forest, it is best to have a guide from the Shrine.

The Ruins and the Lady of the Shattered Heart

It was the Order of the Executed that unearthed the first treasures in the sunken Ruins, riches that allow the Shrine to support itself. And from its acolytes came the first tales of the odd magical areas within the Ruins:

- A gazebo where you encounter memories of your birth family and are able to talk to them whether they are living or not.
- A tunnel system of barrows and libraries and collections, where scholars often come to examine books, bones, gems, cups and coffins.
- The Lady of the Shattered Heart: the statue of giant torso and head of a woman carved from gray-green stone. Buried to the waist, her statue emerges from the earth pulling the broken halves of her ribcage out, creating a passage that only the very brave, foolish, or pious would enter.

The Lady's passage leads the seeker to the heart of the memory trees' root system, where memory is the most malleable. What the memory trees steal, the Lady gives back. Shrine disciples descend to receive memories from other people's lives. From the future, from the past—it isn't clear how the gift is chosen, but if the acolyte doesn't go catatonic, they stagger back to the Shrine with new skills or new history or new prophecies for the Shrine's archives. Some even say those memories are whole enough to contain voices, personality, guidance.

Acolytes that receive the Lady's gifts without losing their minds are rare and tend to rise through the ranks of Shrine leadership. Who better to determine whether an excursion to the Forest's heart should be permitted at all?

But the world around the Forest and Shrine is growing more desperate. Karatak has been sending disguised soldiers to the Shrine, hoping some of their own will pass the initiate trials and

make it to the Lady. Wars always require more for the treasury, new weapon designs and a skilled leadership.

After all, Hervatis the Executioner—herself the original founder of the Shrine of the Execution—had been once been a Karatakian commander who disappeared somewhere in the Forest. If a soldier could become imprinted with her memories, well... perhaps the Karatakians could finally win, and Arabis Tawon exist as a rebel state no longer.

"Karatak has been sending disguised soldiers to the Shrine, hoping some of their own will pass the initiate trials and make it to the Lady."

Forest of Memory

They were almost at the four-day point when Kira found the leather-bound scraps. Skinny Scribe, her client, hurried over as soon as he realized she was holding something to read.

"Is it a sign from the Lady?" he asked. She really should bother to use his name in her mind—Agavi, like she could ever forget—but clients blurred together in their greed.

If it weren't for the rare inks and papers he brought her sisters at the Shrine, she would have arranged for an animal or something else to kill him by now. But this one was an important patron who had to live, and the Abbess had asked Kira specifically to handle him.

Kira patiently held up the scraps—anything she did with Agavi required patience—and Agavi snatched them faster than he'd ever rushed to the bushes to pee or even fled that one fire wolf she'd had to drive off.

Like the rest of his bookish tribe, the scribe wanted to believe Hervatis, the great Karatakian General, had become the Executioner. That she was the founder of the Shrine of the Execution. That she still lived somehow inside the Lady of the Shattered Heart's abode deep in the Forest, where you could ask a gift of memory. Where you could perhaps ask for the memories of Hervatis herself.

Blah blah blah.

Agavi didn't understand much about the Forest but he at least could read the Karatakian dialect the journal was in. Kira could not.

"Mid-century Karatakian, military officer's notes," he said, frowning.

Mercifully, the memory trees were bored with stealing languages and those were generally the last thing they ate from your brain.

"They kept running into deserters claiming to be of their brigade."

"Probably were," Kira said agreeably, still herding him in the direction of the midpoint camp.

Karatakians deserted by the thousands when they realized they couldn't win the war, never mind losing their minds in the trees for months. And the scribe—whatever he said he was—was probably Karatakian military. They really had to be at the midpoint campsite by nightfall. The memory trees respected only certain boundaries.

Agavi stopped suddenly. "They ran into a fire wolf den, the one you and I ran into two days ago. And survived it."

"So that's good, they made it all the way out here after that," Kira said. She peered at the sky. "If they made it to the midpoint camp, maybe we will find the rest of the journal on the way there."

Suddenly Agavi dropped the journal and pulled the pack off his shoulders with a thump. Kira backed off, as this was generally how the memory sickness started. Confused belligerence. Shedding clothing like it was taboo. Blank stares as though she wasn't there.

But this wasn't memory sickness.

"They were heading back to the Shrine," Agavi said angrily. "They had already seen the Lady and her tunnels. They claim to have Hervatis's glove."

Uh-oh.

Kira had shifted her own pack's weight but not taken it off to reach her weapons; everything she needed to survive the woods was in that pack and she trained in fighting with it on. Her left hand was on her throwing darts; the other held her knife.

Agavi had his own knife out, now willing to show he'd had some military training.

"How much have you and your order lied to me, Sister," he spat out.

Kira tried to put the calmness of the Abbess in her tone. "If anyone had successfully returned back from the forest with Hervatis' artifacts, don't you think you would have heard of it by now? The Shrine sits on the Road. Every tavern along the Road would be buzzing."

"Why didn't you tell me of this prior… historic expedition?"

"We told you most travelers fail. Rumors of successful military expeditions are just that. Rumors."

Agavi stood there, measuring his breaths just as Kira was.

"Each person's path walked through the Forest That Remembers is distinct," Kira said. "I didn't lead that party; I can't tell you what they did or did not do to survive. They may have lost their minds and circled back towards the Lady and died in her arms. The forest hides a lot."

Kira chanced a look away from him, at the darkening sky.

"I will say that I will turn us back if we are at a week and aren't close enough to the Lady's abode, because otherwise you will lose your mind before we return. We need to get moving to the midpoint campsite, now."

"So, am I still going to be the first scholar to return with relics?" The scribe's hand was still clenched around his knife.

"Yes," Kira said. "But you won't be anything at all if we don't reach midpoint. There are worse things than fire wolves in this forest."

It seemed forever that they held each other's gaze forever, as Kira waited as potential for violence flared and flickered out.

Agavi tossed the handful of journal at her. It hit her shoulder and fell next to her right foot. She kept her eyes up until he put his knife back in its sheath, and stooped to put his pack back on.

She picked up the scraps of journal warily and kept her knife hand steady until Agavi turned his back and moved forward in the direction she indicated.

The memory trees hated human litter. So did the Executioner.



THE RIVER THAT WALKS

Written and illustrated by Grace P. Fong

The River That Walks



Created by Grace P. Fong

The River had another name once, but the wetland people insist it must now be referred to as the "River That Walks" or its respective translation in each foreign language. Locals believe that transliteration obfuscates, even dishonors, the meaning of their home's name.

Geography and Geology

The River That Walks is too small and sparsely populated to merit being drawn on most maps. All its tributaries are confined to a single mountain range roughly 20 miles east of the delta itself. While the peaks are generally too warm to accumulate snow, the mountains still trap summer rains. The runoff results in annual autumn floods in the wetlands below.

The flood cycle has created many alluvial placers along the river. Prospectors who have panned them have uncovered abnormally large amounts of gold. However, despite the region's obvious value, no mining company has successfully established a long-term operation. Local myth attributes this to divine protection.

Climate and Ecology

The River has biodiversity comparable to similar subtropical ecosystems. The warm, wet, climate supports a wide variety of ferns and several species of flood-tolerant trees. Study of these trees' aerial roots provides valuable insight into historical water patterns. Interestingly, tree-ring dating shows few old-growth specimens in the region. Almost all plants are younger than one hundred years old, potentially implying a die-off event in recent history.

Migrating water birds often rest here on their passage, but pelicans and fish owls can be seen all year round. However, the delta has one species that cannot be found anywhere else in the world: the giant goldspot salamander.

Lifestyle

Like the ecosystem, the native peoples' lives also revolve around the River's cyclical flooding. In spring, they divide the riverside into paddies by making mud retaining walls. The fields are then planted with rice and catfish. The resulting symbiotic relationship raises the crop yield of both.

"However, the delta has one species that cannot be found anywhere else in the world: the giant goldspot salamander."

Goats are kept for dairy, and oxen for farm work. The goats' distinct horns and markings clearly show they descend from wild species in the mountains upriver. However, the oxen do not possess a single genetic relative within the region. Their closest kin seems to be a small, hardy breed that inhabits a grassy plain a full thousand miles to the River's north.

The people also construct islands and pathways to build homes upon. Rocks are laid to form a foundation, and the gaps are filled with mud mortar. The main structure is then made from wood with more daub where additional resistance is needed. Then the roofs are thatched with water reeds. Although not expressly forbidden, use of metal is frowned upon, whether it is large pieces for construction or small everyday items like cooking utensils. This disdain goes to an extreme taboo for any form of gold. Any gold items, even nuggets that naturally occur in the River, are moved and buried outside of city limits. As a result, the economic system depends on barter, backed by a secondary system of knotted reeds that function as symbolic banknotes. Note, their units for currency are very similar to their units for water.

Daily life centers around the lowland village, but the population ventures into the mountains on foot for important life events. Trekking alone into the mountains is a mandatory rite of passage for youths transitioning to adulthood. The traditional funeral dictates the deceased's immediate family make a procession and bury the body in the mountainside, making sure the final resting place lies above the water table.

Although the valley inhabitants have individual perspectives on the world, they tend to communally acknowledge the same origin myth. The church that developed around it is likely inspired by the regenerative abilities of the native salamander.

The Great Salamander

Millennia ago, a divine salamander was conceived in the heart of the mountains. She slept in gestation until she was awoken by the summer rain. She drank the rain, and it made her grow. She grew and grew until she was so large, the mountains could no longer contain her. So she carved her way through the earth to find open water. The trail she left behind became the River.

But the trip was long, and the earth was hard. As she thrust through the mountain pass, drops of the rain she had drank fell from her skin and made the earth fertile. Her tail broke, and its blood became the first grains of rice; its flesh, the first fish.

Many seasons later, the salamander returned to lay her eggs where she was born. She saw the life she had created in her wake and the life she carried inside her, and asked herself, who would steward this new land? The effort of the return had exhausted her. She did not have strength to watch over her children. So, as she laid her eggs on the river bottom, she formed its mud into the first humans, who would care for the land until she woke.

Satisfied, she settled into the soft silt in which she was born, waiting for the next rain to wake her again.

"Millennia ago, a divine salamander was conceived in the heart of the mountains."

The Catastrophe

Scientific analysis suggests a catastrophic event occurred in the region roughly one hundred years ago. The inhabitants have tried to reverse the damage by replanting and re-irrigating, but an account is still preserved in their oral history.

No one can say whether this tale is wholly true, but an alarming number of human bones have been excavated on the route that leads out of the river valley.

"... an alarming number of human bones have been excavated on the route that leads out of the river valley."

The River That Walks

The story of the River's name recounts the arrival of a pale stranger who rode atop an ox. He came from a land far to the north in search of gold. The wetland people thought it strange he wanted such soft, sparse metal for his tools, but they let him stay. He gave the people whatever he found that was not gold and taught them how to forge it. For a time, all were content.

But more pale men came, and so did more desire. They brought iron beasts that drank water from the River and spat it in torrents at the mountains. The rock broke, revealing even more gold. The gold whispered to the wetland people: gold is immortal. Why do you pray to a creature that dies?

At the sight of the bounty, their greed grew unstoppable. In their folly, they built a dam and caged the River. The enraged River thrashed against its bonds and flooded the land. Camps, houses, and lives were swallowed by water. Disease and famine grew rampant. With mines now occupying the mountainside, the people could not take the dead up for proper rest, so they buried the lost in the soft earth of the valley.

Only one priestess had not lost faith. She threw herself into the River, and her final scream held so much anguish, it woke the great salamander who slept under the water. The salamander broke the dam with a swing of her mighty tail, and the River began to flow again. As the water rose, so did the dead. Chased by hundreds of walking corpses, the pale strangers left the land for good, and the people of the River never looked toward false gods or gold again.



THE MONUMENT OF REFUGEE'S GLACIER

Written and illustrated by Lauren Ring

The Monument of Refugee's Glacier



Created by Lauren Ring

"The Monument of Refugee's Glacier was carved by climate refugees from the sunken southern reaches as a symbol of their joy upon reaching unmelted ice for the first time."

The Monument of Refugee's Glacier was carved by climate refugees from the sunken southern reaches as a symbol of their joy upon reaching unmelted ice for the first time.

The local northerners turned the monument into a tourist attraction with a festival and open-air market, drawing visitors from across the continent and inspiring the works of artists, architects, and luminaries.

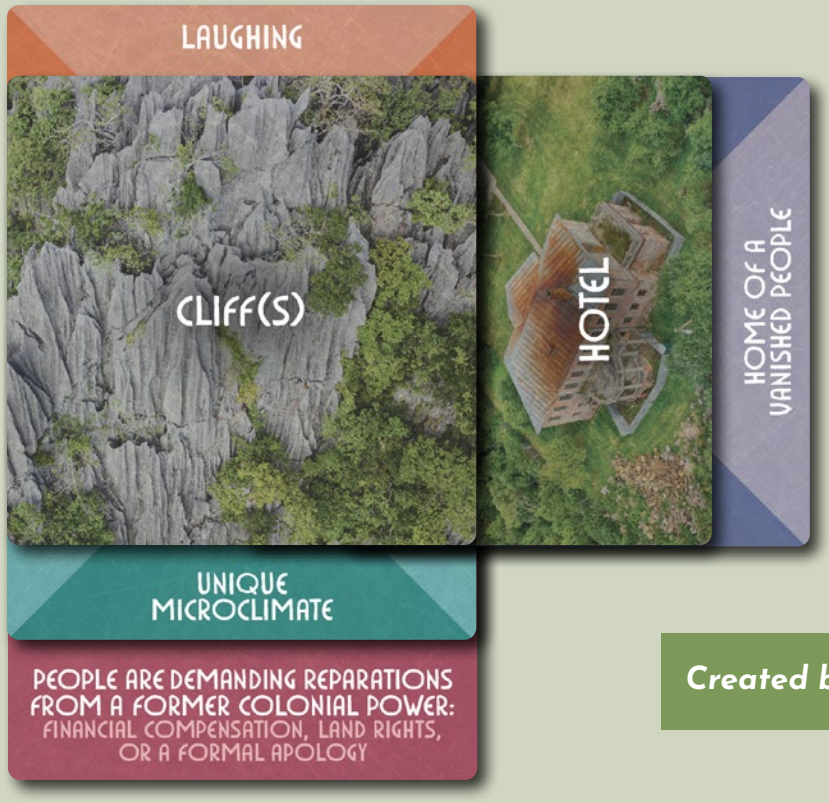
Descendants of the original climate refugees are calling for the blocking off and protection of the monument, because they do not want to see it eroded away like their former home. They worry people see it as only an aesthetic piece and are forgetting its meaning.



THE LAUGHING CLIFFS

Written by Victor Manibo and illustrated by Sabaa Bismil

The Laughing Cliffs



Created by Victor Manibo

The Laughing Cliffs are a long escarpment on the Red Ridge, massive mountains originally thought to be a single range. For ages, a wide gorge that separated what in fact was two ranges lay unfound, because of its narrow and forbidding passage. The Laughing Cliffs overlooks this gorge, and stands at an elevation with a 1500-foot drop. Further up from the cliffs is the highest peak in the Ridge, Spearpoint.

Because the Laughing Cliffs are situated far below the mountain peaks, the air and soil temperatures are not frigid, and because it is nestled between two ridges, the length of the escarpment is almost always in indirect sun. Despite the lack of rainfall, the moisture and temperature conditions can support a temperate forest along the mountains on the level of the cliffs. The air temperature and humidity in the gorge below, as well as the winds that blow through it, cause the formation of fog on the cliffs, in addition to the clouds form above it, near the mountaintops.

Given the climate, the soil on the Laughing Cliffs and its surrounds is moister and more fertile than higher up the mountains or lower down on the gorge.

History

The face of the cliffs is made of coarse granite. Its first settlers discovered deposits of a special type of luminescent iron in its highest peaks.

"Solitary mountaineers and wayward travelers describe the sound less as howling and more as thunderous laughter, as though giants lived in the mountaintops."

"The metal glowed a pale shade of white like the moon, which led its discoverers to believe that the metal was imbued by magic..."

The metal glowed a pale shade of white like the moon, which led its discoverers to believe that the metal was imbued by magic that made the metal stronger.

The area's earliest known inhabitants were the Salta tribe, arriving about four centuries ago. Composed of nomadic shepherds, the Salta first settled in the gorge before discovering the more fertile cliffs. The Salta thrived and prospered in the cliffs, growing to a small village of about 1,000 people at its height. They discovered the deposits of moon-touched iron on the Red Ridge peaks, and in time they developed skills to mine the precious metals, which they used decoratively and for trade with outsiders.

The moon-touched iron attracted the attention of the Dromue, a warrior tribe known for their ruthless expansionism. They brought the full force of their army to bear on the Salta to take control of the precious metal trade. A proud and resilient people, the Salta fought valiantly yet fell to the Dromue, leading to their total slaughter.

Little is known of why the Dromue left the settlement not long after their conquest. Some claim that they had simply depleted the iron deposits and moved on to conquer other lands. Some claim that the Cliffs' unusual climate had deleterious effects on the Dromue's health, who were used to more arid lands and lower elevations. Some claim more supernatural causes, though these have not been confirmed.

Folklore

It is widely accepted that The Laughing Cliffs got their name from the sound the wind makes as it blows through the empty mining caves dotting the Red Ridge. Solitary mountaineers and wayward travelers describe the sound less as howling and more as thunderous laughter, as though giants live in the mountaintops. Some say that the name comes from the high-pitched whistling of the reeds as gentle breezes flow through the forests near the cliffs. Yet others claim to hear laughter from ghosts or malevolent fairies. These fearsome stories left the cliffs unoccupied for a long time, until they was rediscovered by lowlanders.

The Hotel

The Laughing Cliffs Hotel is situated on the farthest and highest point on the cliff, on an outcropping overlooking the gorge. The hotel complex was built from the foundations of a compound of stately manors that once housed the Salta tribe's royal class. The compound lay in abandoned ruin for ages, until a lowlander cooperative refurbished it into the now luxurious hotel, which serves wealthy travelers who seek to experience the cliffs' isolation and unique climate, and adventurers seeking to summit Spearpoint. The occasional traveler comes to the Hotel to unearth the secrets of the laughter in the cliffs.

"We Are Not Gone"

By the time Ludo found a gap in his schedule, the young woman had been waiting at the bar for three hours. He had hoped she would have already left in resignation, but, greeted with her wide smile, Ludo sighed knowing his plan had failed. At least the hotel's tavern had emptied. Ludo wouldn't want any of his guests overhearing.

"As I've said before, Miss..."

"Magali. Just Magali." Her eyes narrowed, and Ludo saw that the woman—garbed in the crimson robes of the ancient Salta tribe, with the ceremonial chokers and

bangles made from luminescent iron—was not as young as he first assumed.

"There are proper avenues for your 'claim.' The Ancestral Domain Decree requires an official finding by the ducal council. I may own The Grand Hotel, but it's out of my hands." Ludo said, feigning contrition.

The woman gazed out the expansive windows that opened onto the fog-laden escarpment. The moon shone onto the mist, turning the view into a pale, milky sea. The snowy peaks of the Red Ridge mountains loomed like sentinels in the distance. The wind began to howl.

"What stories do your employees tell when visitors ask why this place is called the Laughing Cliffs?" Magali asked, undoing the pin that secured her hair into a bun.

"Our esteemed guests don't care about that," Ludo smirked. "They're here to luxuriate in the views; otherwise, they're busy making their way up the summits."

"Do you know?"

The question was a challenge. He didn't know, not with certainty. Yet Ludo knew where this was going, how she'd press him to establish his right over this land. He countered with a challenge of his own.

"Tell me again how you're one of the Salta. They've been gone for centuries."

"We are not gone, just… scattered to the wind."

Ludo felt himself grow wearier. The woman was only the latest of itinerant pretenders trying to assert a native claim on the abandoned land. He rose to leave.

"I would rather not go through the council," Magali rushed to add. "Bureaucracy slows the process." She then reached into the folds of her robes and withdrew an ornate box of carved wood. She slid it toward Ludo, then opened it.

The tavern sparkled in the light of countless diamonds.

"What is it you believe I can do for you?" Ludo managed to reply, transfixed by the gems. "Everything goes through the council, and frankly, I'm concerned with your desire to circumvent the process."

"When your people have been deprived of their home, you will understand the desire for swiftness. But as it is, you've no ties to this land. Like the tourists that pass through here, you are an interloper."

Ludo slammed the jewel box shut. "I've heard enough. If you truly are one of the Salta, then you'd have no trouble proving it to the duke."

Magali took the box and rose from her seat, her face impassive. She paced backward, though not as a retreat. Her stoicism incensed Ludo more. He clutched the back of his seat as though bracing for a fight.

"That laughter they speak of in legends," the woman said coolly, "it's not the wind as it passes through the giants' caves, nor is it the howling of jackals in heat."

Magali raised an upturned palm. The zephyr blew in from the windows, rattling the shutters and straining their hinges. Chairs toppled, glasses clinked and fell from the tables. The drapery flew, rent from their fixtures.

"Nor is there truth to that puerile drinking shanty. The cliffs aren't named after the hollers of the Dromue as they slaughtered my people and took over our palaces—the same ones you've perverted into this… hotel."

Magali's feet left the ground. Her windswept hair formed around her head a halo of black.

The ground shook, as though the cliff face itself was cracking beneath them. Ludo cowered to the floor, as he did during earthquakes. Yet this was not that, and he'd lived here long enough to know what an avalanche feels like. No, this was something else.

"Now do you know?"

Instantly he heard it. The pealing laughter of a thousand Salta souls.



THE MARSH OF FEATHERS

Written and illustrated by Thaleia Demeter

The Marsh of Feathers



Created by Thaleia Demeter

"In a time long past, the marsh was the site of legendary festivals, where the Ancients gathered their poets and artists, and their gods gave out blessings."

The Marsh of Feathers, named for its lush meadows of feathery grasses, sits in a valley far from any large cities or towns. It's of little interest to passers-by, other than occasional artists come to paint the shifting seasonal hues of the plant life, or scholars come to poke around the overgrown and crumbling ruins.

In a time long past, the marsh was the site of legendary festivals, where the Ancients gathered their poets and artists, and their gods gave out blessings. Songs were written there that are still sung today, and names that are now just ink on weathered pages, back then belonged to living creatures who drank and sang and lay amongst the whispering grasses to watch the stars spiral overhead.

The Marsh of Feathers was also to be the site of the Ancient's last great festivity. Amidst the revelry, an ill-timed song and an angered god (or a grieving one—the legends vary) led to a great rift amongst the Ancients, and their eventual decline. The truth of that festival, and the years that followed, are lost to history.

Not much remains of the Ancients, now. A fragment of poetry, here. A half-remembered story, there. And in the marsh, amongst the threads of a living, whispering carpet of grasses, their ruins still stand, half-sunk into water for most of the winter months.

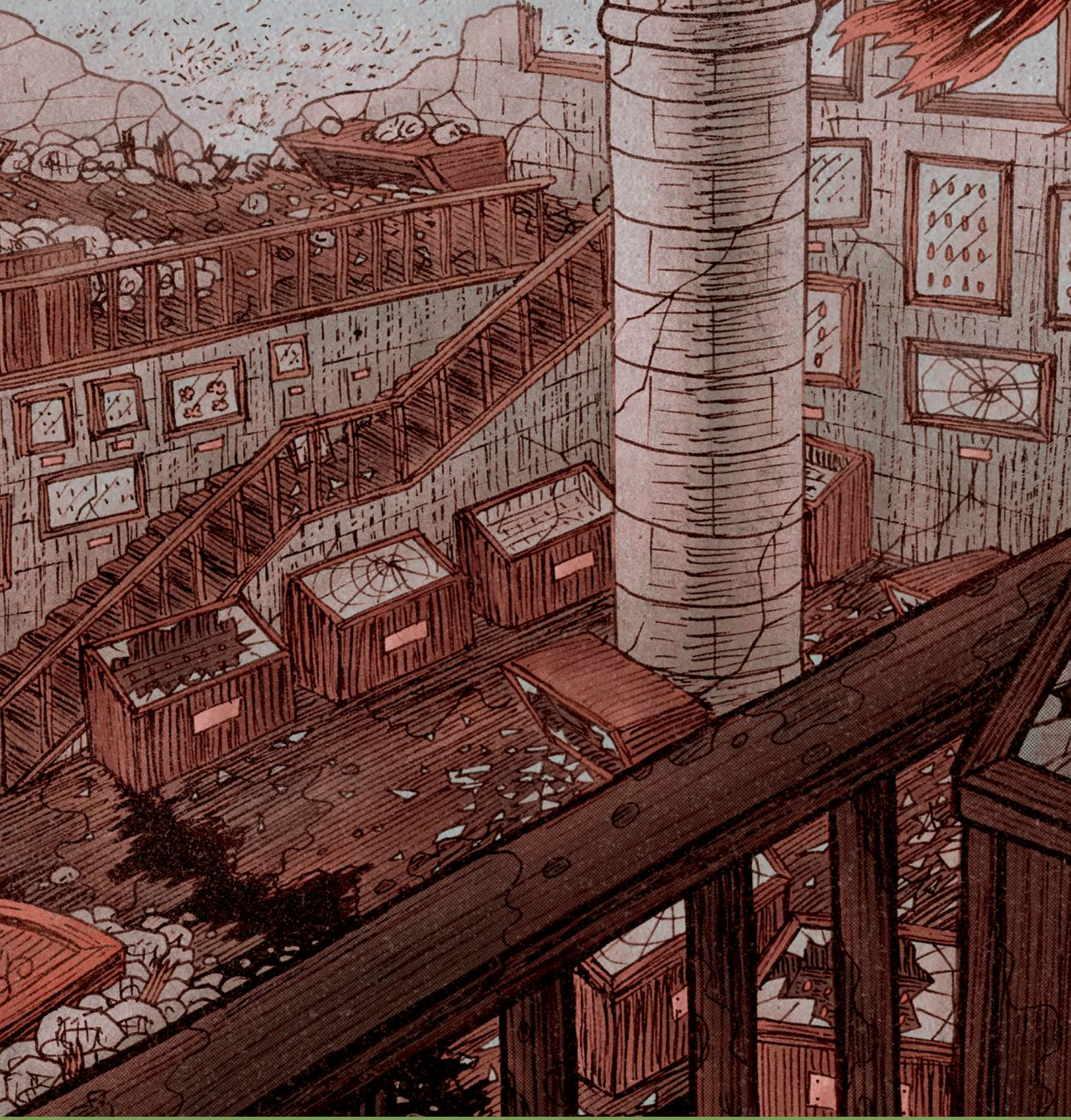
Memory clings strong in the Marsh of Feathers, or so the locals have always said. Sometimes, when the wind rattles the grasses, the whispers almost sound like words. And, on a clear night, when the last of the light clings translucent to the edges of the mountains, they say there is an echo of those long-ago festivities.

Despite their warnings, the listeners still come to gather the marsh's ancient secrets. And what they have learned, they share with no one.

The words of forgotten poets and the voices of long-dead gods, summoned by the timeless wind and the endless grass.

Lately people have been gathering in the depths of the marsh meadows. They travel from far afield, and string out like garlands amongst the grasses, from one ruin to the next. They wait to catch the whispers, and they piece the fragments back together with painstaking notes and recollection. And slowly, old traditions are resurfacing. Lanterns light the twilight fields, and floral offerings cover the ruins. Recently, locals have heard songs sung from the marsh meadows, songs they've never heard before.

The songs are stirring fears amongst those who live alongside the marsh. If a song doomed the Ancients, then what misfortune is being courted, to sing these songs again? Some locals have taken to guarding the marsh against visitors, but the Marsh of Feathers is large, and beyond their keeping. Despite their warnings, the listeners still come to gather the marsh's ancient secrets. And what they have learned, they share with no one.



THE MUSEUM OF RARE INSECTS

Written by Carrie Cuinn and illustrated by Zach Schuster



The Museum of Rare Insects



Created by Carrie Cuinn

From the Handbook of Lost Places, Vol. 4, available only by special request and explicit approval by Council for Cultural Heritage

The most famous museum in history is arguably the so-called Museum of Rare Insects located in the abandoned port city now referred to as "The Lost City".[1] This insectarium gained notoriety during the nation's last civil war, when its ownership became a hotly contested political issue. Because the building itself was unscathed by the fighting that was reported to have destroyed the surrounding area, it became a symbol of both survival and resistance, outweighing its value as a storehouse of unique entomological specimens. As a condition of the ultimate ceasefire, both sides agreed to seal the museum and obfuscate its location, leaving it as an untouchable monument to peace.

Due to this arrangement, this Museum of Rare Insects is no longer open to the public.

History

The Museum of Rare Insects was founded perhaps 30 years before the outbreak of the war, most likely by a wealthy patron who wished to promote the study of "insectology," as it was referred to then. Patron-founded educational and academic institutions were common at the time, and it is likely that the original name for the museum reflected this patronage.[2] It is thought to have been a large building of local white stone, without adornment, in order to better reflect the natural beauty of its specimens. The museum reportedly had two stories of exhibit halls above ground, with the upper level made accessible by either ramps or lifts as well as the usual stairs, though the specifics are not currently known. It also may have contained

"Seeking out the museum, or entering the exclusion zone for any other reason, is a crime punishable by imprisonment or death."

at least three levels below ground, similarly accessible, with offices, research laboratories, specimen storage, and brood rooms.[3]

After the war, the newly-established Council for Cultural Heritage ordered most information about the museum kept from the public out of a desire to protect our people from further harm.[4]

Location

Maps of the region no longer show the location of the museum or the surrounding city, and older maps have either been lost to time or purposely removed from public circulation. It is generally thought to be located on the eastern seaboard, toward the northern edge of the country, about a week's travel (on foot) outside the current Capital City, though there are conflicting reports on this measurement. Official reports indicate that the museum and the surrounding area have by now crumbled into the sea, lost forever, though we cannot know for certain, since travel to the area for geological surveys or any other purpose is strictly forbidden.[5] Seeking out the museum, or entering the exclusion zone for any other reason, is a crime punishable by imprisonment or death.[6]

Rumors

Any information about the insectarium not disseminated through official channels is generally regarded as useless gossip. There is no proof to the theory that certain priceless insect specimens remain intact in the museum, though many would-be adventurers have lost their lives in search of these treasures.[7] Recent reports of a new illness among those who live in the area have not been confirmed.[8]

The Museum in Popular Culture

The city itself is often depicted in stories, plays, and artwork (though the latter are often drawn from works which are themselves copies of older images, and over the years their accuracy has been diluted due to political pressure or changes in artistic styles). The most famous painting currently on display at the Center for Culture and Beauty is a known forgery, though beautifully rendered, because the orcarneleen paint that would have been used for the color orange while the Museum of Rare Insects was still in operation has been lost to artists for at least a century.[9]

See also: history of artist materials, insect-based paints, orcarneleen.

References

1. The museum's true name could be easily translated from the original but this information has been redacted by the Council for Cultural Heritage, Order 548.
2. The Library of Education in the old city of Dulsad was previously known as the Lord Arturus Dulsad Children's Library before being renamed by the Council for Cultural Heritage, Order 8332. (The city itself was renamed by the Council for Cultural Heritage in the same order.)
3. The insectarium of Sonolac was reportedly been built on a similar floor plan, and while that museum was destroyed along with the rest of city of Sonolac, information about their museum is available by request through the *Archive of Lost Places*.
4. According the latest edition of the *Handbook for Discussing the Council and Its Actions To*

"Official reports indicate that the museum and the surrounding area have by now crumbled into the sea, lost forever."

Ensure Public Safety and Community Standards, Council for Cultural Heritage, Order 493.
5. *Creation of and Parameters for the [REDACTED] Exclusion Zone*, Council for Cultural Heritage, Order 008.
6. Exact statistics on the number of people imprisoned or executed for these crimes cannot be determined because the Council reports that no one has ever tried to enter the Museum or the surrounding area. *10-Year Statistics on Crime and Punishment, 19th Edition*, published by order of the Council for Cultural Heritage.
7. Per popular ballads "The Song of Dead Arthur," "Why Did You Leave Me, Kyle of Danforth?" and "Lost Forever, Sir Templeton, Lost Forever".
8. Marked for deletion per Council for Cultural Heritage, Order 14642.
9. Not to be confused with the sap of the so-called "mimic orcarnelia," a carnivorous plant from the southern swamp region, which disguises itself as a hive of bright orange insects in order to attract prey. While a similar color, the sap is corrosive and cannot be used as an archival-quality pigment.

"There is no proof to the theory that certain priceless insect specimens remain intact in the museum, though many would-be adventurers have lost their lives in search of these treasures."

A Strange New Disease

The dour face of Lord Paresalma's personal assistant didn't change as he stopped in front of an ornately-carved wood door, and motioned for the young doctor to go in without him. The doctor hesitated, so the assistant—an older man dressed in elegant linen robes—knocked instead. A moment later, the door swung open on well-oiled hinges, silently revealing a long hallway. Paresalma's assistant pointed toward it.

"Right, well, thank you," the doctor mumbled, the sound of their voice muffled by the heavy leather mask they wore. They stepped forward, cautiously moving into the corridor. The door shut on its own, and the doctor gasped out loud to find themself in sudden blackness.

The sound of a match, a candle flicker"the doctor walked toward these until the light grew large enough to mark the edges of a circular room. There were paintings of various sizes hanging on the wall, spaced an arm's length or so apart. A tall, thin, man stood very close to the painting nearest the room's entrance. He didn't seem to notice the doctor, but he spoke without turning around.

"Have you visited the National Gallery this year?" Lord Paresalma asked.

"Um, no," the doctor replied. "Rising year of medical school"they keep us busy."

Paresalma looked then, and for a second, he almost smiled. "You wore the mask," he said. It wasn't a question.

"You, I mean, your message"it said I should bring it." The doctor fidgeted with a button on their vest.

"I meant I wanted to see it. Out of curiosity." Paresalma paused, then added, "You can take it off."

"Oh, yes, thank you." The doctor pulled the mask up and off, revealing short black curls and a round, youthful face. "It was a bit warm in there."

"May I?" Paresalma asked. The doctor nodded quickly, handing over the mask. It was heavy, hand-crafted from oiled leather. It was similar to the old-fashioned leather masks worn by doctors when they went into crowded buildings to investigate a reports of disease, but not quite the same. This one had the traditional long nose but it was rounded, like an insect's proboscis. It had the same glass lenses covering the eye holes, but these were oval instead of the usual circles. On the top, two tiny spiral

horns jutted straight up, and a pair of feathery antenna sprouted to the sides. "I understand that these days it's common for young doctors to make their own masks," Paresalma said, still turning the mask around in his hands. "You personalize it toward your specialty, yes?"

"That's right. Mine is insect-born diseases. So it's—"

"A moth, yes, I see that," Paresalma finished the sentence. "Which is why you're here, of course. Not moths specifically, but I believe, an insect-borne disease."

"Something unidentified? I hadn't heard," the doctor said. They touched the buttons on their vest again.

"We aren't announcing anything until we know more." Paresalma set the mask on a nearby chair, neatly upholstered in tufted gray velvet. He turned back to the painting, waving his hand to invite the doctor closer. "The National Gallery has been exhibiting art and artifacts from the Lost City since winter. Mostly copies of course, but these are originals."

"They're very nice, my lord."

Paresalma just stared while the doctor took a deep breath.

"I mean, aren't they?"

"They are very nice indeed," he replied eventually. "This one is painted from a copy of a copy, the artist taking great liberties with the design of the buildings, and of course the fashions are wildly out of date, but it's pretty to look at. That one," he said as he moved to his left until he stood in front of a different painting, "is earlier. See how the buildings are done in softer colors, and they catch the sun from a better angle?"

"I'm not really familiar with… fine art," the doctor mumbled. "What were you saying about a new disease?"

"I promise, this is relevant," the Lord said, but he sighed a little. "I understand you're due to graduate soon," he said instead. "The Council has decided to lend you to me for an investigation. Probably nothing, but it needs looking into. Once you've solved the problem, your degree will be conferred."

"And if I don't? Solve it, I mean." The doctor was beginning to sweat.

"Finally, an astute observation," Paresalma said with delight. "I was beginning to wonder if you had those. Yes, obviously, if you cannot track down the source of this new illness, there's no reason for you to return to medicine."

The young doctor looked around for a place to sit but there was only one chair in the room. "Could I perhaps get a cup of water?" they asked quietly.

"No," Paresalma said. "Back to the art. This is my favorite." He moved to the middle of the wall, where a curtain of red fabric spilled down the wall. The Lord took hold of a braided rope on one side and gently pulled the fabric back, revealing a small painted image not much bigger than a dinner plate. "It's sensitive to light, which is why we have only the one candle. But look!"

It was a perfect miniature cityscape. The main building appeared to be a simple cube, plain white, with no decoration save the bright orange doors at the center of the first floor. It was surrounded by taller buildings of various heights, painted in a mix of iridescent pastels. The sky above it all was a comforting shade of summer blue.

"It's beautiful," the doctor said, and meant it.

Now Paresalma smiled. "This exquisite piece is the star of my collection. It depicts the fabled Lost City as it was, created by an artist who lived there and saw these wonders for herself. Few are ever allowed to see the City as it once was. You should feel humbled in its presence."

"I do, I truly do," the doctor managed to get out. "Why am I in its presence, though?"

Paresalma seemed lost for a moment, gazing at the little painting. Finally he remembered himself and said (quite matter-of-factly), "Because you're going there."

The doctor stepped back so fast they nearly stumbled. "No, no thank you, I should

go now."

"Don't be ridiculous. Ansoor!"

The Lord's assistant entered the room, carrying another of the gray velvet chairs. He set it down next to the doctor. Paresalma motioned for the doctor to sit.

"I am not political, not really. I have no interest in breaking the law, so please, I should go," the doctor said instead.

"Don't be silly. The Council has granted you special permission to investigate an outbreak of a strange new disease, which just happens to be infecting a small village not far from what remains of the Lost City."

"What does remain of it?" the doctor asked. "I am not great with history but I thought it was razed as part of the, you know, the... what do you call it, agreement to end the war?"

"It was," Paresalma said, "except for this building here." He pointed at the white square in the center of the little painting. "That is the Museum of Rare Insects, and if I am right about the cause of this disease, your studies make you the right person for the job."

"I don't want the job, though," the young doctor said, whining slightly.

"It's this or you don't graduate," Paresalma reminded them.

"That's a terrible choice," the doctor muttered. They sat down in the empty chair, though.

"Luckily, it's not your choice to make," Lord Paresalma said, his smile widening. "Now that it's settled, let me tell you only exactly what you need to know..."

Writers



Alina Pete (they/them) is a Cree artist and writer from Little Pine First Nation in western Saskatchewan. They are best known for their Aurora award-winning comic, *Weregeek* (weregeek.com), but they also write short stories, poems and RPG supplements, and their work has been featured in several comic anthologies.



Brent Lambert (he/him) is a Black, queer man who heavily believes in the transformative power of speculative fiction. He resides in San Diego but spent a lot of time moving around as a military brat. He manages the social media for *FIYAH Literary Magazine* and just had an anthology produced with Tor.com titled *Breathe FIYAH*. He can be found on Twitter @brentclambert.



Carrie Cuinn (she/her) is a deaf + queer writer, artist, local historian, and gamer. She has written for *Wasteland 3*, *Kaleidotrope*, *Apex Magazine*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Chaosium*, and more. If time weren't a construct, she'd stuff it full of books, console/PC and tabletop games, and sleep. Find her on Twitter @CarrieCuinn or online at carriecuinn.com.



C.L. Clark (they/she) is a BFA, Ignyte, and Locus award winning editor and the author of the Nebula finalist *The Unbroken*, the first of the *Magic of the Lost* trilogy. When she's not imagining the fall of empires, she's trying not to throw her kettlebells through the walls.



Elizabeth (Betsy) Aoki (she/her) is a poet, short story writer and game producer. She has received fellowships and residencies from the City of Seattle, Artist Trust Foundation, Hedgebrook, and Clarion West Writers Workshop.



Jordan Shiveley (he/they) is the author of the Dread Singles (@hottestsingles) Twitter. Their work is in *Unfettered Hexes* from Neon Hemlock and tabletop RPGs (*Spire*, *EMBERWIND*). They cohost and write for the *Caring Into the Void* podcast. Their first full-length narrative work (*Hot Singles in Your Area*) will be apparating from Unbound Books. They live and work in Minneapolis, Minnesota with their cat and partner.



Victor Manibo (he/him) is a Filipino speculative fiction writer living in New York. As a queer immigrant and a person of color, he writes about people who live these identities and how they navigate imaginary worlds. His debut science fiction noir novel, *THE SLEEPLESS*, is out now from Erewhon Books.

Artists



Angel Muro (he/him) is a freelance illustrator/concept artist working out of Southern California, and is an alumni of ArtCenter College of Design. Angel derives his passion for illustration from his love of nature and music.



Aysha (she/her) is a digital illustrator, graphic designer, fine art student, and pluviophile. Find her on Instagram at @k.ayshaart.



Beth Sparks (they/them)is a concept artist and illustrator from the Chicago area currently working in the immersive multimedia industry in Montreal. When not making art, they like reading, playing games poorly, and making friends with all the neighborhood dogs.



Frances P. ("JellyfshFortuna") (she/her) is an Ontario based illustrator. The love she has for vivid works and imaginative palettes is reflected in her work. She wants to create images that burst with color and creativity!



Grace P. Fong ("Fictograph") (she/her) is a Hugo-nominated and Ignyte-winning illustrator and narrative designer. She makes covers for speculative fiction publications and promotional material for authors. Recent magazine clients include *Glitter+Ashes*, *Silk and Steel*, and *Strange Horizons*. You can view more of her work at artstation.com/fictograph.



Kuutti Terävä (they/them) is a nonbinary artist from Finland. They enjoy drawing creatures of imaginary nature and landscapes with nice colors. They are over the moon to get to work on this project!



Lauren Ring (she/her, aka Finchie of @rosefinchie) is a lesbian artist and merchandise designer who has created dozens of enamel pins, including three successfully funded Kickstarter sets. She has recently designed merchandise for Neon Hemlock Press, Aiden Thomas's merch shop Graveyard Goods, and Light Grey Art Lab's exhibition The Tomb. As a digital painter, she has also worked with *Metaphorosis Magazine* and the *Classics But Make It Gay* artbook.

Artists *(continued)*



Mel Uran (she/her/they) has worked in the RPG and comics industries with companies such as White Wolf Game Studio, Onyx Path Publishing, Upper Deck, Perna Studios, Exhibit A Press, and others.



Megan McCurdy (she/her) is the lead artist on Multiverse, the art director on *Eyes Unclouded*, and a resident witch who loves sparkles, hedgehogs, overalls, oat milk and *D&D*.



Sabaa Bismil (she/her) is a freelance illustrator. She enjoys dramatic lighting, iced tea, and petting any dogs within range.



Thaleia Demeter (she/her) is an illustrator living in Tasmania, Australia. She creates cosy worlds and romantic, tea-steeped fantasy.



Tiago Souza (he/him) is a Brazilian concept artist based in São Paulo. He started his career as an illustrator in 2013 and now he's focused on environment concept art and visual development for games.



Zach Schuster (he/him) is an illustrator from Calgary, Alberta. He graduated from the Alberta College of Art + Design in 2018 with a Bachelor of Design. His first comic, *THRUD* was successfully Kickstarted in 2020 and was recently reprinted by Mythos & Ink. For more of Zach's work, visit zmschuster.com!