

THE CREATORS GUIDE TO:

EPIC LOCATIONS

• NATURE •



TILL LAMMER & GUY SCLANDERS





THE CREATOR'S GUIDE TO EPIC LOCATIONS

NATURE





DEDICATED TO

My beloved daughter, Isabelle Lammer, so she can use it
to create her own amazing worlds.

My sister, Holly Sclanders,
who loved exploring and being out in nature.

Developed and written by: Till Lammer and Guy Sclanders

Editor: Lou Fryer

Graphic Designer: Martin Hughes

Artwork: Guy Sclanders

Additional Artwork: Victor Yah

Map Artwork: Till Lammer

For Geekstable: Derrick Greyvensteyn

Additional Resources: You can find additional resources to supplement this book
on our website www.greatgamemaster.com and www.dungeonfog.com

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*Note: Throughout the book we use the terms Heroes, Characters, Audience and Viewers.
These can be interchanged with PCs, NPCs, and Players if you are running a TTRPG
and using this book.*

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- WHAT KIND OF LOCATIONS DO WE NEED, HOW CAN WE USE THEM AND HOW DO WE TRANSFORM THEM INTO POWERFUL TOOLS FOR STORYTELLING, PACING AND TENSION? WHAT IS THE 'ART' OF LESS IS MORE? WHEN SHOULD YOU MAKE A MAP AND WHEN SHOULD YOU NOT? -



CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

What makes a great location? What makes an epic location? Must every location be epic? How can you hope to design them all before you begin? Your worldspace - the place where your stories are going to take place - is vast and varied, and contains hundreds of different locations. How do you know which ones need to be epic locations and which ones do not? There are so many possible questions to ask and so many ways to resolve them.

Contained herein are 16 locations that frequently occur in nature, ranging from the mundane like plains to the exotic, like volcanoes. Each is then presented as it exists in our own 'real' world, and also as it might exist in various fantasy settings. This book is meant to be a resource for you to dive into in moments of need, to plunder like a good

spelunker before returning to your own creative process. It is designed for you to wander through the pages like a seasoned explorer, learning neat information and tricks about locations you may never have thought about. Finally, no book of this nature is complete without giving you some tools to make your maps even more beautiful, colorful and useful to you.

The pressure to produce maps for every contingency is also very real (though not necessary), and to overproduce maps with more detail than is needed can lead to mapper's fatigue. Understanding then, how many maps are needed, and how much detail each requires, is a fundamental component of mapmaking that is not spoken about very often.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A LOCATION, A SCENE, AND A MAP?

Simply put, a location is a region of our world; it could be vast, covering thousands of miles of territory, or small, only a few hundred feet in size. What makes a location a location is that everything within its boundaries share common properties. If the location is a volcano, the slopes of the volcano, the caldera, and possibly the low hills around it are considered 'the location'.

A location is a specific area that contains an idea or objective for the heroes. A swamp might be hundreds of miles long, may contain patches of forest, some low hills, and two rivers. Whilst those are distinct environments, it is counted as one location for the purposes of this book, as the heroes' journey to find a specific piece of information or complete a certain objective likely takes place across the entire locality. Many locations come with implied tones and themes, as well as distinct obstacles, which help shape the story.

Scenes, on the other hand, are moments within a space. They help to visualize where the characters are. Not every location demands a scene, but every scene demands a location to be set in. They represent

a limited area with associated geographical information, as well as events that take place therein. Scenes can be described, utilizing multi-sensory narration of the events taking place, as the characters enter. To determine relational values in a scene, you might choose to use a map: the entrance to the forest is here, the river is two miles from there due east, and so on. A map is not always necessary to describe a scene, however, so it is important to learn when to use them properly. Maps in the context of this book are generally less than a square mile and form small, localized places within a location.

A location can therefore be thought of as a series of scenes that - when combined - share a common purpose or thought, and maps - when used correctly - add an additional layer of information to those scenes. However, there is often so much more to a scene or a location than just this basic explanation. To prevent being overwhelmed, you need to arm yourself with tools. The more tools you have in your toolbox, the more capable you will be of designing a location from scratch and enhancing it beyond just the mundane.



- IT IS ALWAYS EASIER TO DO SOMETHING ONCE YOU HAVE PRACTICED THE PROCESS A THOUSAND TIMES. TO REMEMBER THE PROCESS, BREAK IT DOWN INTO BITE-SIZE STEPS. LEARN THE STEPS, REPEAT THE PROCESS, AND SUDDENLY IT IS AS INTUITIVE AS BREATHING. -

CHAPTER 2:

THE GAME MASTER'S TOOLKIT

When it comes to any creative endeavor where only imagination is the limit, it becomes virtually impossible to decide which of these limitless options is the best option. If you create limits – call them ‘constraints’ – then you can narrow your choices and make your process simpler. If those constraints are useful, logical, and support the creative process, then all the better; as you merely need to select the most interesting option available to us.

Each of the seven tools presented below is a constraint you can apply to your process. Use

whichever tool or tools give you the most inspiration at any point in the process, in whatever order, to help you improve your location and help it to enhance your story.

A story can be told without a map,
but a map without a story is just artwork.

Whatever is created, everything must always support the narrative, and not take away from it.

TOOL 1: PURPOSE AND PREP

You may desire or plan to create every location in your worldspace in immense detail, but the cognitive overload and immense effort that would take would likely result in burnout, at best, or a watering down of your story, at worst. There are simply too many. Understanding which locations need your

creative attention and time, and which locations can be kept to a few concept notes or phrases, will help you avoid becoming overwhelmed.

There are three categories of creative need when it comes to locations - **unplanned**, **planned**, and **transitional**.

UNPLANNED LOCATIONS

Unplanned locations are those that the character’s choices take them to that have not been prepared in advance. Often, an adventuring party decides to change course mid-adventure, and heads in a different direction. Locations they stumble into need to be considered in terms of pacing and resource drain. Pacing is discussed in much greater detail in **Tool 3** but, if players find themselves in an unplanned location, you must initially make a simple decision: will their journey be quick, relatively without comment and, perhaps, merely narrated? Or will their presence prompt an entire mini side adventure that may or may not link back to the main narrative?

If the party decides to go and look in a swamp for a clue, for example, and you have not designed the swamp location, you could describe their entrance into the swamp (using some phrases from **Location 14: Swamps**, perhaps), let them find the clue they are looking for, and then get them out. If you want to create more challenge and drain some of your character’s resources, you might add in a

combat encounter, like a swamp monster, reducing their hit points and making them think more carefully before making their next plan, perhaps.

If you want their decision to lead to more interesting and complex results, and turn into a mini side adventure of its own accord, your location will, of course, need to be considered more carefully. Narrative progress of locations is explained in **Chapter 4: Designing Your Own Epic Locations**, but understand that this option requires the characters to learn about the location, to explore it, and to delve deeper into it. Multiple encounters (both social and combat) are likely to play out, and days or weeks may pass, whilst the characters are in this location, which is likely to alter the pacing of your game and/or story. If you understand this ahead of time, you can account for it, plan for it, and use it to your advantage, rather than allow your narrative to meander. It is sometimes a lot of fun to find yourself creating an unplanned location as you go; the GM can end up being as surprised by the situations as the characters are!

PLANNED LOCATIONS

Planned locations are those prepared in advance, knowing that the characters are heading there. You will have had a chance to think carefully about these locations, to flesh out interesting scenes, and to design and create any maps required. You will also have been able to anticipate a narrative journey. The majority of this book focuses on supporting

you through this as, in an ideal scenario, your characters will spend the most time in locations that you have worked long and hard creating a variety of interesting and unique encounters, interactions, and geography for. Very rarely, however, do adventuring parties stick exactly to a script or keep entirely on tracks laid out for them!

TRANSITIONAL LOCATIONS

Transitional locations are places that are required to exist because of the laws of your world; a river must have a source, a mountain must have a summit, for example. Transitional locations do not need to be designed in advance - you just need to know that they exist. If characters head into a mundane location - say, a forest - that is merely a transitory passage to another area of the world, that location does not necessarily need to be planned for. You know that nothing is going to happen in that space of consequence prompted by you; perhaps the characters may elect to camp for the night and swap personal stories and get to know one another, but the location itself is not going to contribute to the narrative.

The focus, when creating these locations, is simply filling them with things that usually belong

there (perhaps a few that normally do not, to add non-narrative interest), such as wildlife, plantlife, humanoid activity, or structures. The burden to create scenes in the location is removed - there does not need to be any additional information.

Unplanned, planned, and transitional locations vastly differ in terms of input and workload required to put into them. Knowing which is which means that you can understand in advance where your creative efforts should be taxed and where they can relax.

You will end up creating all three of these location types as you tell your story, so accept that this is the case and learn to lean into it.

TOOL 2: STRUCTURE

To create a living, breathing location, while keeping the narrative flow while your player characters are exploring the space, it is important to understand the basic principles of narrative structure and how

they can be applied to your location. Knowing which area of the location is best suited for which part of the story is one of the most powerful tools in your toolbox.

THREE ACT STRUCTURE

The three act structure is a narrative model that divides a story into three parts - a beginning, a middle, and an end - or introduction, adversity, and conclusion. In Act 1, the audience is introduced to the situation, the characters involved, and the principal goal or aim that is to be achieved. Act 2 sees the heroes struggling to overcome a problem or challenge, usually put in front of them by an antagonist of some sort, all in an attempt to achieve the goal. Finally, in Act 3, the characters claim their prize or reward after defeating the final obstacle to achieving their goal.

Applying narrative structure to a location can lead to some very interesting constraints. In Act 1, the characters must arrive in the location, and be introduced to it. They must get a glimpse of the danger/trouble/adversity that they might face (difficult terrain, dense undergrowth, lava flows and so on), and see or understand what the goal might be (cross the location, simply survive it, obtain something hidden within, for example).

In Act 2, the location needs to provide adversity to the characters. As they cross the location, or journey deeper into it, they encounter more and more problems and challenges. Act 2, generally speaking,

contains the bulk of the scenes set in the location. The heroes should struggle within it, but this does not always mean they are fighting for their lives. There could be the lure of peace, calm, comfort, and warmth, that the characters must fight against, instead of succumbing to the location.

Finally, in Act 3, the heroes must face the climax of the location - the greatest challenge - and, once they overcome it, they celebrate their triumph before continuing on. By following this approach, the location practically creates itself. Applying a narrative structure to your location design can be an incredibly useful tool, and the entire approach can be finessed further as you continue to add more tools to your toolkit.

In **Chapter 4**, you can find a much more thorough and complete breakdown of what is being explained briefly here, as well as more detail about how to apply the principles.

Applying a three act structure to your location helps to ensure your characters do not get lost, and reduces the chance that they will not know where to go or what to do.

TOOL 3: PACING

Understanding how to pace a story and build tension is important, and probably the most difficult tool in the toolkit to master. Controlling the pacing does not always come naturally, and it relies on many different components that creators need to be aware of. The purpose and structure of your locations might mean it is traversed quickly or slowly, and both affect pacing.

Encounters, scenes, and maps are great tools to build tension and create excitement within your location. They offer opportunities for exploration and exposition, and give your players agency to interact with the location. The more scenes you plan to include in your location, however, the slower the characters are likely to progress through the location, as players might choose to play out each and every scene. If you add maps to these scenes, the pacing slows down yet further.

The game master is ultimately responsible for striking the correct balance as the story progresses.

Some decisions might be simple, based upon how much time has already been spent in the location; if the characters have already spent a long time there and are only halfway through, dropping planned scenes, maps, encounters, and planned experiences from their journey will allow them to reach the conclusion of the location faster.

If the heroes are disinterested in the location, or are not finding it engaging or challenging, the best option is usually to speed up their travel through it. Sometimes, the destination is far more important than the journey. If the characters are meeting new and interesting creatures and situations, however, and if they are engaged, and finding the encounters appropriately (but not punishingly) challenging, it is more than ok to keep in, or even add to, what you have planned.

If a location, scene or map slows things down without increasing fun: cut it, drop it, remove it.

TOOL 4: APPLICABILITY

Creating awesome locations and the right scenes and maps for them might seem like an unnecessary time sink when it comes to utilizing your preparation time but, rest assured, it is not. Tool 3 instructs you to cut out locations, maps or scenes if they are slowing things down, but this does not mean throwing any of your hard work away.

There are always times when you create a location, as well as its affiliated scenes and maps, with the intention of using it in a story, but you do not end up using it. Perhaps the characters get side-tracked and forget all about heading there, or travel in a different direction and circumvent it altogether. This may feel like you have wasted your time and effort, but this is not the case. Store all your unused locations away and use them for your next adventure, or the next, or one you get

around to writing in six months' time for another party of heroes. The most wonderful attribute of maps and locations is that they never expire. Humans in the real world still use thousands-of-years-old maps, and visit millions-of-years-old locations. Once made, your locations and maps are resources and treasures for you to use, reuse, and revisit, always.

Keep your maps and locations somewhere safe. There are many online tools that allow you to do this, and of course printing your map, or drawing it, before storing it in a safe and memorable place is just as valid a solution in an increasingly digital world. Put as much effort into cataloging and keeping your locations safe as you do into drawing them. You won't regret it.

TOOL 5: NAMING

Naming your locations, and the specific areas within them, is a critical step. Some creators use a name as a jumping off point before they start to design. This is often the case if a character asks a question about an unplanned location; the GM might think of a name for it on the fly, or read it off their broader world or region map, and then properly build it out before their next game session. Alternatively, a good name might simply be inspiration enough for

some spontaneous creativity. Other creators design locations first, before naming them based upon the ideas they have come up with. Both approaches are equally valid, and both are fluid and organic, with both name and design likely changing over time. The best method is the one that works for each individual creator. The importance of a location's name cannot be overstated, however; names provide a wealth of opportunities.

NAMES SET EXPECTATIONS

Imagine, if you will, 'the swamp to the south of the village of Higgins'. Compare your mental picture to that of, 'Lost Brides Swamp, to the south of the village of Higgins'. With the addition of the name 'Lost Brides Swamp', we begin to develop some preconceived notions and expectations before we even arrive. Will we find the ghost of a lost bride? Are there more than one? Is this location a nexus for all brides jilted at the altar?

Expectations help you in the development of your locations as well. What do you expect from a swamp called 'Lost Brides Swamp'? Maybe your thoughts go to the foliage: white, wispy mosses that drift in the wind? Maybe you imagine albino fish, with fins reminiscent of the delicate, beautiful ruffles of a wedding gown, swimming in the waters? Let your name inform and help your decision-making.

NAMES INSPIRE THE STORYTELLER AND CHARACTERS

Even if a name does not instantly give clues about the nature of a location, it can still inspire. 'The Great Ghazdak Mountain Range' does not provide much in the way of expectations, other than they are great, perhaps very large. The word 'Ghazdak' means nothing to the majority of those that see or hear the word, so perhaps it might make them wonder where it comes from. Is it

Dwarvish? Orcish? An ancient, forgotten tongue? Instead of guiding your design like an expectation can, a name can inspire the flavor of a location. You might decide that Ghazdak means 'jagged' in Dwarvish. From this, you might add some clues to that origin into the location. Perhaps there is an old, dwarven statue at the peak of the central mountain, half broken and long forgotten.

NAMES PROVIDE CHARACTER BUY-IN

Sometimes, when characters in a roleplaying game stumble across a location that they are unfamiliar with, such as 'The Plains of Tal Shadan', its name might give away no further information than the type of location: in this case, plains. The nature of roleplaying games, which usually utilize skills or some other gamified means of characters gaining knowledge that their players do not have, means that game masters can have players roll (or use whatever random number generator their system uses) to recall information (a history or lore check, perhaps) or to determine if they know or recognize the language or even the origin of a location name. This has the benefit of involving a player in the location in a more significant way. If they succeed on their skill check, they are provided with more information. Perhaps 'Tal Shadan' means 'the forsaken' in ancient Elvish for example, which they remember hearing in a childhood story, or from an old textbook that was required reading for their wizardry course at an elven academy of magic. Perhaps it was on The Plains of Tal Shadan that, 1000 years ago, the emperor executed 343 elves for daring to believe in a different god.

The player is unlikely to forget information that has been linked to their character and backstory; they have 'bought in', because now the link is personal and meaningful. 'The Plains of Tal Shadan' have obtained a whole set of expectations and are

starting to inspire storyteller and players alike because of the additional healthy dose of player investment. The player 'discovered' the information themselves, so is much more likely to be inclined to linger in an attempt to learn more.

As well as the benefits of setting expectations, and providing inspiration and character buy-in, names can also:

- Reveal information
- Build the worldspace by expanding it
- Entrench locations in the minds of players and readers
- Help visitors to identify with locals and their mindset, especially if they are the ones that came up with the name in the first place.

Use a location's name to inspire you to add more detail, and then physically represent it in the location itself. This also helps to add authenticity to your location, and make it seem more real.

Names are far too powerful a tool for you not to have handy - sometimes you will get no warning before needing to provide a name. Consider having a ready-made list of inspirational and evocative names for various locations on standby, in case you find yourself in need of one. You may end up using more of them than you think.

TOOL 6: GEOGRAPHY

Although the stories and games being created are set in a fantastical world, a basic grounding in the physical laws of nature and geography is useful to know when thinking about locations. These simple statements may seem blatantly obvious, but establishing and entrenching these rules in your world gives the world believability, and makes it all the more amazing and wondrous when you subvert or alter one or more to create amazing epic locations.

- Water flows downhill from its source.
- Liquids follow the path of least resistance.
- Ice forms when it is cold.
- Rock can melt, or be worn down by water or wind.
- Mountains form by various means, but all erode over time into hills.

- If there is lots of liquid water, there is probably lots of vegetation.
- If there is no liquid water, there is little to no vegetation.
- One type of location does not terminate before another starts; there are always gradual, transitional areas of change from one location to another.

In the locations detailed in **Chapter 3** of this book, we explore the geographic fundamentals of each.

You do not need to be an expert geographer to create fantastical locations, but you should at least understand the basics.

TOOL 7: MAPS

Utilizing maps as part of the location can be a powerful tool. But as it is with all tools, it is important to know which works best in what situ-

ation. Before going further into the details of map making in chapter , below are broad definitions of different map types and their purposes.

WORLD AND/OR REGION MAPS

World and region maps provide a visual representation of the world. These can help game masters, readers, and players, achieve a better understanding of the geography and locations in which the story unfolds. These maps do not necessarily have to be

complete (or even correct!), given the scale that they represent and, in the setting of your story, many details can be overlooked or simply inaccurately recorded. This also allows you the capacity to add in locations and areas you may need later.

BATTLEMAPS

As the name implies, these maps are mainly used to visualize combat in a confined area and provide clarity in a fight situation. By placing tokens or minis, all combatants are represented, helping everyone involved to follow the combat as it progresses. A battlemap, as opposed to a region map, focuses on a very confined and specific area, and does not accommodate exploration on a bigger scale. There are two main types of battlemaps in terms of their design:

RANDOM ENCOUNTER MAPS

These maps represent forests, high roads, mountain sides, or caves that can be brought out at little notice for random encounters, overland travel or unexpected locations that heroes visit.

The design for this kind of map is informed by the region the story is currently set in; game masters often do not know for sure what exactly is going to happen in a location, since the combat or other event might be defined by a random roll on an encounter-generating table. When preparing these maps, it is more important to have a good knowledge of the location and region, so they can be designed to be as multi-functional as possible.

LAIR MAPS

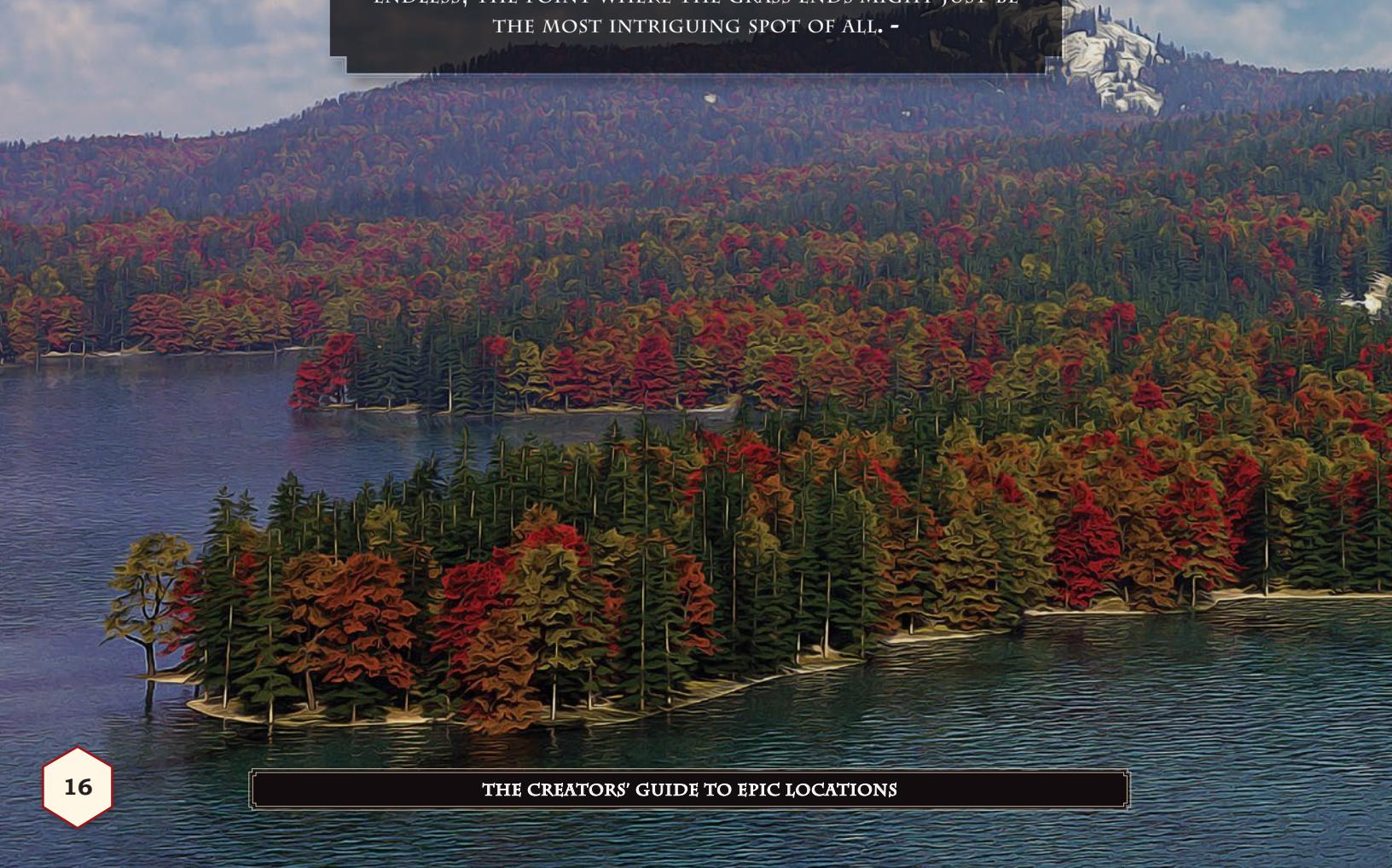
While a good random encounter map is easily re-usable time after time, there are situations where it might be more prudent to design a battlemap specifically tailored to an encounter (like a monster's lair, or an area in which to accommodate a unique situation or plot point). These maps are designed to specifically use the surrounding terrain for a mechanical effect, as well as geographic information. This could take the form of something like a waterfall map, where certain areas flood periodically, forcing the characters to adapt their planned route on a moment-by-moment basis, and taken advantage of by a deadly, aquatic monster. Perhaps the trapped ledges of a mountain cliffside collapse to bar the progress of intruders to a hidden treasure by reducing the available space and forcing repositioning.

More information about how different map types can influence your story pacing, can be found in **Chapter 4**.

A map, once created, is never a wasted effort. Even if the story veers off in an entirely unexpected direction, a map can always be used later.



- NO LOCATION IS EVER BORING OR REPETITIVE IF A LITTLE THOUGHT IS APPLIED TO MAKE IT SPECIAL. THOUGH A SWAMP IS DEFINED BY ITS WETNESS, NOT EVERY INCH NEEDS TO BE WET, AND THOUGH MOST PLAINS ARE GRASSY AND ENDLESS, THE POINT WHERE THE GRASS ENDS MIGHT JUST BE THE MOST INTRIGUING SPOT OF ALL. -



CHAPTER 3: THE LOCATIONS

This chapter contains 16 location types, broken down into various sections. The initial **Inspiration** section is a series of words, phrases, and adventure ideas collated in tables for you to choose from or select randomly by rolling dice. These can be used on the fly as you narrate descriptions, or as a means of inspiring your creativity during the design process, and are immediately followed by a brief **Introduction** to the location in broad terms.

The largest, most central portion of each sub-chapter breaks down the location into three parts: Fundamentals, Functions, and Finesse. **Fundamentals** are the basic building blocks that categorize each location, as well as the key information you might need to present in most standard iterations. **Functions** explores what might happen within the location, including why settlements might form there. Finally, **Finesse** details how to make a location unique, and helps to create unexpected elements that really set it apart from others.

The Point of No Return is a guide on what to do, and how to show, when the heroes have gone so far into a location that they cannot go back to the beginning or easily retreat, when they are so deep in that it is easier to press forward. This might be obvious or more subtle.

The final part of each location details five fantasy-setting variants to draw inspiration from. They are **High Fantasy**, the **Underfell** (deep underground locations), the **Fey Domain** (a mystical space associated with fairies, pixies, elves, and enchanting spaces), **The Hells** (based on the classical representation of an infernal landscape of torment), and finally the **Shadow Realm** (a dark and twisted mirror space to reality).

WARNING: The Hells entries are, at times, graphic in nature and contain descriptions that may frighten or upset sensitive readers. Read these entries at your own risk if gore, suffering, or ‘hellish’ torture are triggering for you, or skip if you prefer.

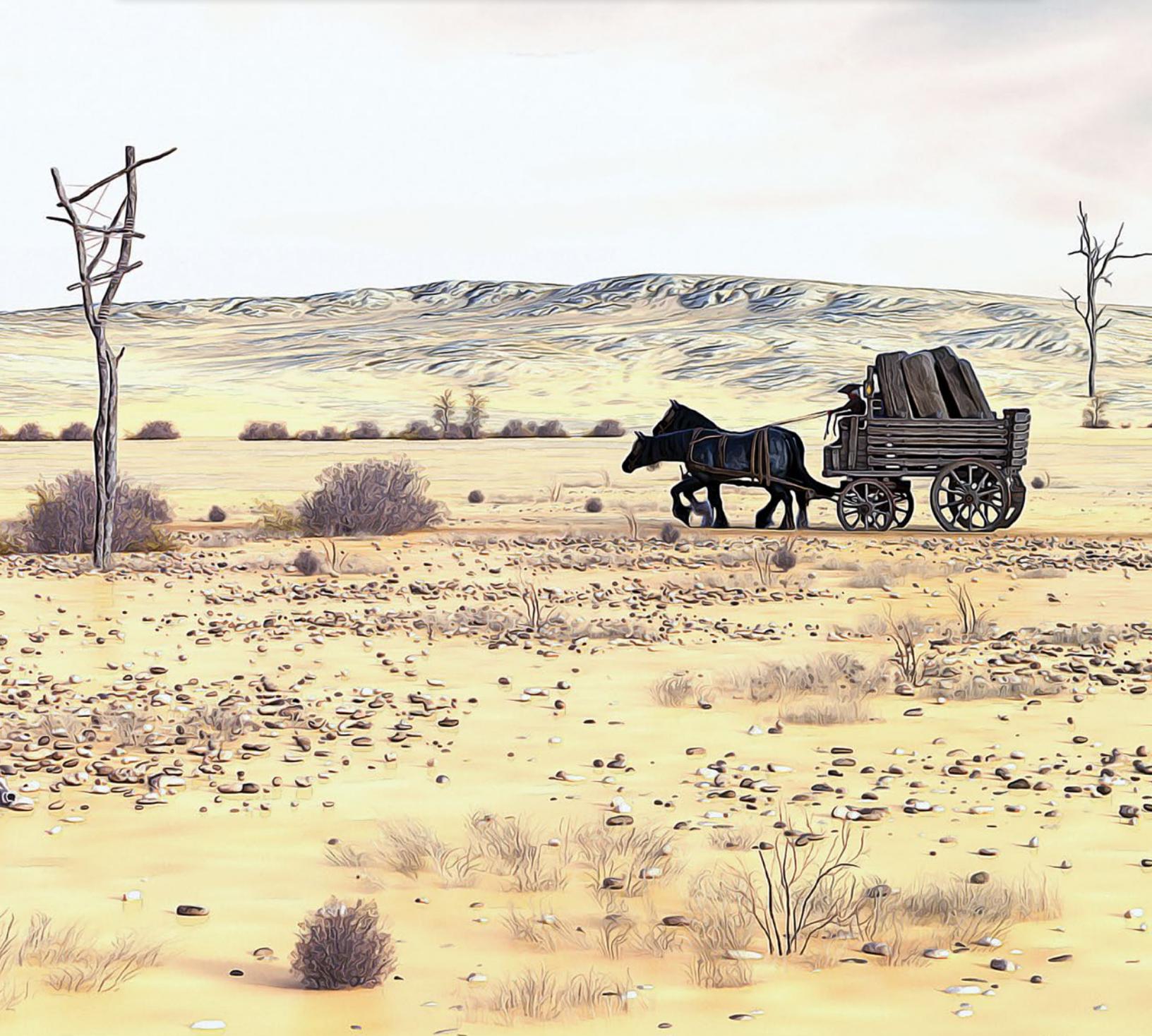
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BARREN WASTES

ADJECTIVES

Blasted	Desolate	Lifeless	Bleak	Arid	Sandy	Hot	Dusty	Dry
Shallow	Sparse	Infertile	Forsaken	Scorched	Windswept	Blighted	Withered	Sunbaked
	Vast	Bone-dry	Parched	Drab	Endless	Hopeless	Relentless	



INSPIRATION

SENSES

SIGHT	All you see is a desolate, endless stretch of sand and rock.	Charred trees and shrubs struggle to survive.	Eroded rock formations adopt curious shapes.	The sight of the sun setting on a seemingly endless horizon is breathtaking.
SMELL	The air is devoid of smell, just thick with nothingness.	A potpourri of dried brush, wild flowers, and dust hangs in the air.	There is a faint stench of a decaying cadaver drifting on the wind.	A faint hint of sulfur and brine burns across your nose.
SOUND	A stillness dampens all sound, leaving nothing but your own thoughts for company.	A whispering sigh of dust blows forlornly past.	The eerie wailing of the wind never ceases.	The horrible screeching of scavenging birds breaks the silence.
TOUCH	The searing heat of the sun scorches your face, neck, and ears.	A blackthorn scratches your hand, leaving a hot, red mark.	Even the ground seems harder here than anywhere else, unforgiving and lifeless.	The harsh wind whips against your skin.
TASTE	The dry and sandy air leaves a gritty taste in your mouth.	An ancient heat, baked over centuries, makes it difficult to swallow.	A sudden sweetness fills your mouth; fresh water must be hiding nearby.	The metallic taste of the air hints at distant storms.

QUICK ENCOUNTERS

D12	ENCOUNTER	D12	ENCOUNTER
1	A giant rock worm guards a half-buried temple.	7	An undead warlord leads his horde of skeletons through the wastes; he periodically stops to ask for directions.
2	Alone on a slight rise in the ground, an old ruin sits, containing nothing but dust.	8	Out of nowhere, a magical oasis suddenly appears. It lasts for exactly 24 hours before fading away.
3	Fifteen nomads struggle to survive in the harsh landscape, but are willing to share a hallucinogen with the party.	9	Running frantically, a small humanoid stops the party to ask which way is south, before running in the opposite direction.
4	The sound of a million hooves suddenly crashes across the land as a migrating herd of wild, magical beasts appears out of nowhere and begins its long journey.	10	Circling high above, a dozen vultures seem interested to see what happens next to the figures below them.
5	A powerful dust storm blows around the party, yet leaves them untouched. A voice in the sky says, "Not you.".	11	A ghost caravan, searching for its way home, offers shelter to the party for a night in return for stories from the living world.
6	An abandoned frontier fort houses nothing but desiccated corpses. There is no sign of who, or what, killed them.	12	What, at first, appears to be a hill suddenly shifts, stretches, and then goes back to sleep.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

D10	ADVENTURE
1	A powerful wizard has been abducting travelers crossing the wastes to live in a seemingly utopian oasis at its heart. The party must investigate what the wizard's true intentions are.
2	A ruinous tower has appeared out of nowhere, and dust-colored ravens carry messages to outlying bandit lords demanding their attendance. An injured raven crash-lands in the party's camp, still clutching a rolled-up parchment.
3	A giant sandstorm has trapped the party in the wastes. With no way out right now, they must find shelter before they succumb to the elements.
4	A caravan has vanished on a scouting mission to establish a new trading route across a barren waste, sorely needed by the towns on its fringe, so the party have been hired to investigate what happened to it.
5	A large and terrifying undead creature has been spotted gathering a great force made up of those that succumbed to the wastes. If the party can lay it to rest, it is likely that the other souls would also return to their slumber.
6	The party is hired by a mysterious benefactor to find an ancient artifact hidden deep within the barren wasteland. The mysterious 'Ms. X' finds a way to leave them a hand-written note each morning, the latest of which contains a 10 gold downpayment.
7	Strange and powerful creatures are emerging from the depths of the barren wasteland, some of which have not been seen for centuries, and the party must find out why they have reawoken.
8	A cult is attempting to open a portal to a dark plane of existence in the barren wasteland. The wide open space allows them to gather in great numbers, and the lack of surrounding cover makes it difficult to sneak up on them to thwart their ritual.
9	A mass breakout has taken place in a nearby prison camp, including some of its most infamous and diabolical inmates. The party has been hired to capture and deliver the escaped convicts.
10	The winds have uncovered the ruins of an old necropolis, and an expedition is about to set out. The scholars are ill-equipped to traverse the wastes, and hire the party as both guides and protection.

BARREN WASTES

INTRODUCTION

Barren wastes are a result of limited to no water, and limited to no soil fertility; they are desolate places of extremes. Because of this, very little grows, and the scrub that does find a way provides very little nourishment for anything else. There is little drama here - just unending nothing. Barren lands often form between two different existing climates or locations, and so function as transitional spaces in longer journeys.

FUNDAMENTALS

Whenever a region is covered in infertile soil, and offers little to no cover due to a drastic absence of vegetation, it can be defined as a barren waste. There are several different factors that can lead to a region being barren. In marine and estuarine environments, barrens are created because tides or fast-flowing rivers remove fertile soil and leave behind just rocky outcroppings in intertidal and subtidal zones, and open sandy beaches and mudflats near riverbeds. Along rivers, barren zones can include vertical banks and canyon walls that are washed clean of enough fertile ground to make the growth of diverse plant life impossible.

While most deserts are considered gigantic sandboxes, the geologically defined desert itself is often surrounded by a much wider area of barrens where vegetation is sparse, but present. On mountains where glaciers are withdrawing, barrens form and expose parent rock, glacial moraines, and talus slopes. A prominent example of wide barren zones are areas of tundra, where permafrost keeps the temperature of the ground constantly below freezing and marks a transition point, generally between boreal forest zones and arctic ice.

WIND

One reason why barren areas form is because of strong, but erratic, winds. These blow away

nutrients, leaving a thin layer of fertile soil that only allows small, hardy plants like shrubs, herbs, grasses, mosses, and lichens to grow. These winds may not last long but are frequent and powerful enough to move great amounts of loose soil.

DEHYDRATION

In areas where rain is sporadic, and subterranean water is out of reach for most plants, barrens form due to a lack of hydration. In some cases, like pine barrens, only a specific type of plant (in this case, pine trees) can grow. As there is not enough water or nutrients to sustain other plant life, this results in monotonous landscapes that look like the result of a copy and paste job. Limited water contributes to the desolation and isolation of the space.

TOXIC SOIL

Either through constant inundation of saltwater, like in coastal areas, volcanic activity that causes poisonous water to seep into the ground, or acidic rainfall, barrens form when only a minority of plants can adapt and grow in the given toxic environment. Travel through areas of toxic soil might also present other environmental hazards, such as poisonous fumes, acid rain, and great craters.

FUNCTIONS

Most barren zones on Earth are so desolate and unforgiving that humans do not settle in, or even near them. Hunting too is sparse in such locations, and might only be possible at specific times of the year, when changes to rainfall or temperature offer new feeding grounds to migratory wildlife.

Since barren zones often mark a transition between two biomes, they can be used as a tool to underline a narrative transition, or introduce a change. This can add contrast to a story, and make the extremes of one environmental seem even more so in comparison to another.

USING BARRENS

As when characters pursue a goal in any hazardous environment, barren wastes can represent the desolation and despair that is often felt when leaving the safety of more civilized, friendly lands.

A prominent theme for the edge of a barren location is of a 'last outpost': a location marking the end of civilization, the final frontier before the desolation of the wastes. Beyond is an unforgiving, dry land, settlers living on the brink of starvation and collapse, and even a thriving society of outlaws and

shady folk that want to be as far away as possible from the long arm of justice. Communities such as these often form their own laws and traditions that might seem strange to travelers. There is a reason why most post-apocalyptic settings are set in barren zones; the dread of starvation and exhaustion is omnipresent in such environments.

When using a barren zone as part of a story, consider the constant fight between the people trying to wring out any kind of existence, and the land they are trying to wring it from. 'Enough to stay - too little to thrive' is an appropriate epithet for most barren locations.

A LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

When a group of heroes' arrive from a place of struggle, even a barren waste can conjure the opposite of desolation and despair. If leaving a desert, suddenly even a small shrub is a beacon of hope. The emotional updrift is a useful tool in controlling the psychological responses of characters - the end is nigh, and at the end is a bathtub full of hot water, a cold drink, and a hearty meal.

FINESSE

The most important aspect of a barren location is a seemingly unreachable goal. Whether characters are traveling into a barren wilderness, or are returning through it, their object of desire should be in the far distance, close enough to seem realistically reachable, but far enough away to present an obvious challenge. Two good examples where this technique is utilized in fiction are the Dark Tower in Steven King's series of the same name, and the Eye of Sauron in 'The Lord of the Rings'. Both are described as looming in the distance, always visible, but seemingly never closer, regardless of the protagonists' pushing forward. The dark silhouette of a mountain range, the mirage of a city on the horizon, or the distant smoke plumes of a volcano are perfect options for a point of reference – and a focus of dreadful despair.

While this book often espouses the advantages of using maps, barrens are a good example of locations where a regional map, showing the exact location of the characters, is usually a poor choice. Emotional distress can only be created if heroes do not know for sure how much distance they have traveled, and have left to cover. The only point of reference is their unique landmark in the distance during the day, and the stars at night - if they can be seen. While battlemaps can still be used for intimate, interesting encounters, larger scale mapping with exact markings is not recommended.

ENDLESS FEATURES

Most barrens, especially those created by constant winds, are flat. Cracked, dry soil is only broken by sparse shrubs and patches of grass. Where elevation exists, hills are wide, and crossing one usually only reveals the next one behind it. Where hard rock structures exist, they are likely to be heavily eroded and weathered, creating unusual sculptures. Crevasses, ditches, and canyons may hint at water once being present, long ago, and offer some form of refuge from the unending expanse, though also present their own challenges to traverse.

In single vegetation environments, the underbrush is usually very sparse. Here, the risk is not the extreme flatness and monotony of the expanse, but the limited vision and the lack of unique features; everything looks the same. With precious little surface soil, tracking too is nearly impossible.

THE UNEXPECTED

At the midway point in a journey in a location of this type, the mundane, repetitive nature of the wastes should be clear to all. Future sections of travel should therefore contain new levels of harshness, desolation, and isolation. If more of the same is presented, the effect is simply a slowdown of narrative pace, and boredom. Adapt, subvert, or entrench the wastes as a location. There are many occasions when this can be very useful.

Initially, make the monotonous normal. This can be achieved mainly in montages - the endless trail, the walking, the thirst, the threat, etc. Adapt the wastes and add in unique features, like unusual stone formations that provide a temporary oasis, or a cave with water or protection from the blasting winds, to give heroes a chance to remember what normal felt like.

Subverting the expected tropes of the barrens is when it becomes interesting. A settlement, thriving and full, is suddenly discovered. Water is drawn from deep below the ground, and some natural or artificial resource is located here, and here only. Las Vegas is a prime example of a city that should not exist in its location. The only resource available is gambling, and it secures enough income to pay the additional costs of transporting in everything else required to run a city in the middle of nowhere.

The discovery of naturally occurring oases, thermal pools, or unusual geological formations completely subvert the ideas of the wastes too, as little slices of paradise in a hellscape. At the same time, some unexpected locations - particularly those that are inhabited - may be stretched to their limit, and the arrival of additional mouths to feed and water may not be welcomed. These places may also simply be overtly hostile towards newcomers, or may see strangers as just another source of protein.

Getting so close to escaping the wastes but then encountering another roadblock is heartbreaking. The classic moment from 'The Lord of the Rings', when Sam and Frodo look down upon the masses of enemies between them and Mount Doom and almost give up, is a prime example.

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

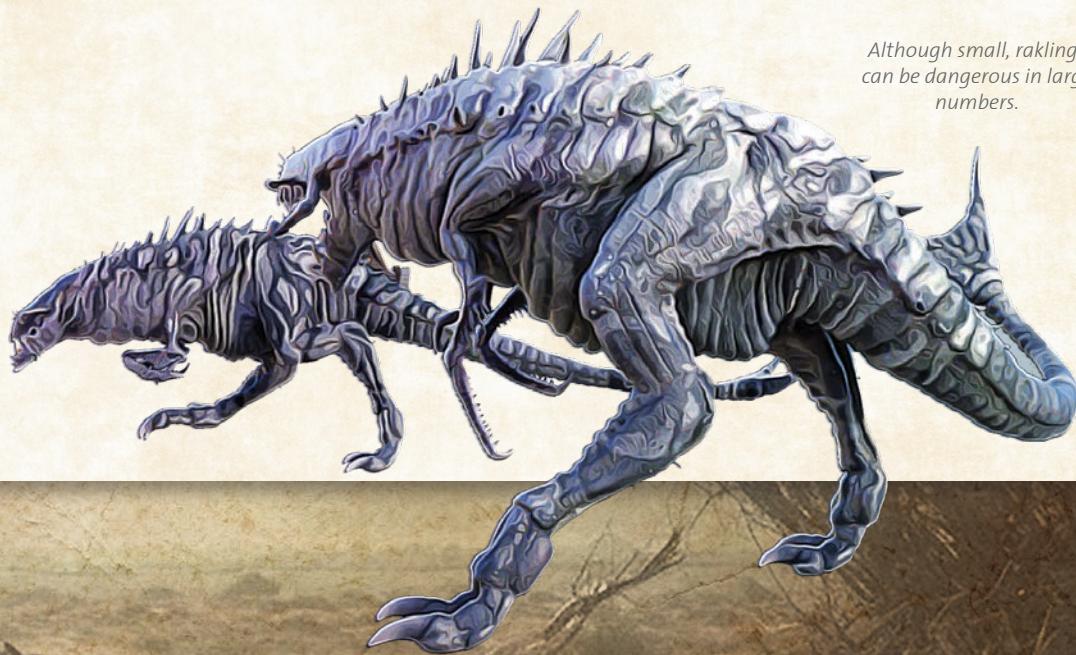
The point of no return is a very powerful stage in every story, and the remains of previous expeditions can mark that point in a story. There is almost always someone else in history that has tried to do what the characters are now attempting. Some of them will have failed, perhaps at the point that characters now find themselves at. Usually, this marks the end of the first half of their journey through the barren waste. Trinkets, notes, or diaries make excellent reading material: a catalog of failure and despair. Beyond this point, the hardships only get worse.

Barren wastes, like many other hostile environments, have limited food, water, and shelter. All

three are critical to survival. Unlike other location types, however, the wastes are not prone to sudden geological activity. The point of no return is therefore different; it is likely to be supply-related. To this end, the wastes must be completely barren for at least the first half of overland travel. Too many animals or water sources renders the point of no return useless.

Thus, the point of no return is when the characters are down to less than 50% of their supplies. After that moment, it must be clear that they do not have enough to survive the whole return trip to where they started. They must press forward to restock.

Although small, raklings can be dangerous in large numbers.



DESIGNING EPIC BARREN WASTES IN FANTASY SETTINGS

Add any of the following features, or use them for inspiration, to create a barren waste that is clearly not of our world.

HIGH FANTASY

Magically barren locations are interesting, because they are likely to either be void of magic, or have 'bad' magic with unwanted effects that make it dangerous for casters. This could be because of geological exceptions, that cause the inherent magic of the world to be drained or twisted, or because of some terrible incident long ago that affected the arcana of the land.

I AM BECOME DEATH

A magical incident of a large enough scale to create a barren waste is likely to be widely documented and known about. In your world, it might have been part of a major event in history, like a great war, or the spell-equivalent of a nuclear meltdown that caused widespread destruction of the land. Whatever the cause – perhaps even history has forgotten the true cause of the incident, or accounts are widely biased – the cataclysm might have rid the land of its natural magic, or dramatically altered it in some way.

DUSTER COAT

The barrens are a vast space, and magic scourges are not uncommon. These dust-devils sweep across the

hot, open land and absorb all magic in their immediate area. The dust itself is dangerous as it can become embedded in unprotected skin, and continues to sap magic from those impaled. Because it is dust, a mage sometimes does not realize what is happening for weeks, until they have a good long bath.

ON THE UP AND UP

Gravity is erratic or corrupted in many barren places, causing rocks and small plateaus to float in the air. The warped forces of this miraculous landscape are enough to suspend the stones as well as the weight of passengers, allowing some rocks to be used as make-shift sleds, however the effect is transitory and unpredictable, and can switch or stop at any time.

EFFECTS MAY VARY

The casting of magic in this particular waste has unusual side-effects: it is amplified in places and damped in others. This affects not only spells, but also magic items, potions and scrolls, making them all dangerously unpredictable. Surging magical storms drop multicolored lightning bolts of pure magic, with each color producing a different effect.

UNDERFELL

Barren wastes in the Underfell can be found where the circumstances prevent soil from taking hold. This happens in both locations where the rock is extremely dense and smooth, and where external factors, like cave winds, flooding, or glacial movement carry away all remaining soil periodically. Think big when creating an epic barren waste in the Underfell; the vastness of the location, and the despair while traversing it, work best when characters are given the opportunity to take in what they are about to face.

BEYOND WONDER DOME

The enormity of a particular domed cave is almost impossible to comprehend. Those that enter from an elevated position see that the ceiling and walls reach far beyond their visual capabilities. Below lies a flat, barren plane, with nothing but the occasional rock or pile of gravel covering the ground. The wind pulls on clothes as if the whole dome is sucking everything to its center.

STUNGLIGHT

Some places in the Underfell are devoid of much scenery but harbor amazing creatures. Islands of light appear at random and, from a distance, look like large clouds of glowing energy. The closer

one gets, the more apparent it becomes that the light is made up of thousands upon thousands of cave wasps - they move so quickly that the air is heated sufficiently to glow. Anyone disturbing this hot congregation learns very quickly that cave wasps have no sense of humor, and can see in total darkness.

BLACK VELVET

Although scholars have long debated about the benefits (or otherwise) of staring into the abyss, these wastes in the Underfell are so massive and so dark that staring into them is like staring into a velvet curtain. The space feels like it is a few feet across, and yet at the same time feels like dozens of miles. Those who venture into these barrens seldom make it out the other side with their sanity intact.

GATHERS NO MOSS

A particular curiosity of the Underfell are the walking stones. Sometimes the size of a coin, sometimes the size of a house, they move slowly across the wastes, all heading in the same direction, and yet do not seem to have a destination or, if they do, none has yet reached it. Following the stones is a trap; they usually avoid water, colonies, and - some believe - simply go in circles.

Floating
Terraces

Water and
Sand falls
over the
Terrace

Large
Canyons

Faeries
^^

F Fey Domain

A barren waste in the Fey Domain might seem constrictive at first, but it is contradiction that creates a truly epic location. Like all Fey places, everything is exaggerated and has a strange beauty.

A WASTE OF GOOD PIGMENT

The Grand Canyon is vibrantly colored, and looks different depending on the position of the sun. Fey Domain barrens exist in a full spectrum of rainbow hues, ranging from yellow sandstone to bright ochre plains, to rocks striped with layers of crimson red sediment. As the sun wanders over the sky, or when a thunderstorm rages, these colors might even change dramatically, lending each a unique palette.

Hoodoo? You Do

Where usually winds shape sandstone, in this barren waste the rock formations are primarily sculpted by magic, and take on far stranger, and much more deliberate-looking, shapes. Huge formations cluster together on one bit of dusty ground, abstractly shaped like a troupe of dancing faeries. Monuments of stone in other patches resemble creatures and buildings, and many of the rocks (or 'hoodoos') are whittled into impossibly tall and narrow spires.

THEY WILL FOLLOW

Some Fey barrens are separated into floating terrasses, each holding a massive canyon in its center, with water flowing down onto platforms below or simply out onto the barrens. Sometimes, whole villages live on these. Where the water comes from, no one knows, and what keeps the terrasses aloft is an equal mystery. What is known is that other, nomadic tribes follow along on the ground, benefiting from the perpetual water supply and making use of the cast-offs of the 'high folk'.

FEARFUL SYMMETRY

A strange symmetry is inherent to this barren place; shrubs and trees grow in specific patterns, and floating terrasses and rock formations align to complete a bigger picture. This odd organization is not immediately obvious when traveling amongst it at ground level but, when viewed from higher elevation, the whole vista unfolds and is revealed, demonstrating the peculiar neatness, but overarching beauty, of the whole location.

T The Hells

The land in hellish barrens is riddled with pools of acidic water, the ground is crusted with sulfur and salt, and constant heat cracks the dry ground.

SEEING RED

Red dust emanates from the ground in hellish barrens like a thick, acrid vapor, filling the air with a suffocating intensity. Its smell is overwhelming; it can be felt in the throat and lungs and leaves a distinct taste of ash in the mouth. Wandering through any barren waste is exhausting enough, but red dust makes things infinitely worse by limiting sight and making breathing difficult.

BOLT FROM THE BLACK

Crimson lightning constantly arches over the dark sky of the barrens like jagged knives, but no thunder or rain ever follows. Each flash bathes the area in a dim, turbid-red light, offering the briefest glimpse of what is ahead. Where the lightning strikes, rock spires shatter, tumble down, and crack the ground, burning strange obsidian-like formations into the landscape. Wind whips around in violent gusts, and the atmosphere is filled with an ominous dread. The chaos of the storm is a constant reminder of the fury of the Hells.

THE DAMNED CANYONS

All infernal barrens are penetrated with cracks, chasms, crevasses, and canyons, as if giant fists have shattered the ground. Some chasms are bridged with strange, metallic ramps; others cannot be crossed, as fumes of acidic gas and heat constantly shoot up from their bottomless depths, along with a never-ending chorus of screams from tortured souls. The air near the cracks is thick with sulfur and ash, and the ground shifts underfoot as the molten core of the Hells churns and boils.

A BAD TRIP

Where the land is not split by massive cracks and canyons, the flat ground of most barrens is covered with pools of acidic liquid. These pools can have the strangest hues, ranging from dark-purple to vibrant turquoise and yellow. Some boil, others are crusted over with the dry residue of dust, sulfur and brimstone, still more burn with high levels of corrosive and extremely caustic sulfuric, hydrochloric, and other strong acids. The pools are found in some of the deepest parts of the Hells, and can dissolve almost anything that touches them. They are surrounded by a thick, yellowish fog with a pungent and sickening odor.

SHADOW REALM

It often feels, to those that venture into the Shadow Realm, like a vast expanse of nothing with constant ash-fall. A dark vapor emanates endlessly from the ground, creating a ghostly, black updrift, while the air flickers and twirls and obscures all sight.

A LITTLE SILHOUETTO

Even with nothing nearby to cast them, the shadows of gigantic, nightmarish structures, monuments, and creatures appear on the ground everywhere. The source is unknown and mysterious, originating from nowhere and everywhere. The shadows are in constant motion with no visible propulsion, creating eerie and unsettling displays of shifting and morphing shapes. Whether a trick of the mind or a deliberate intimidation technique, the silhouettes seem to be of living, breathing entities with a will of their own.

DEPTHES OF DESPAIR

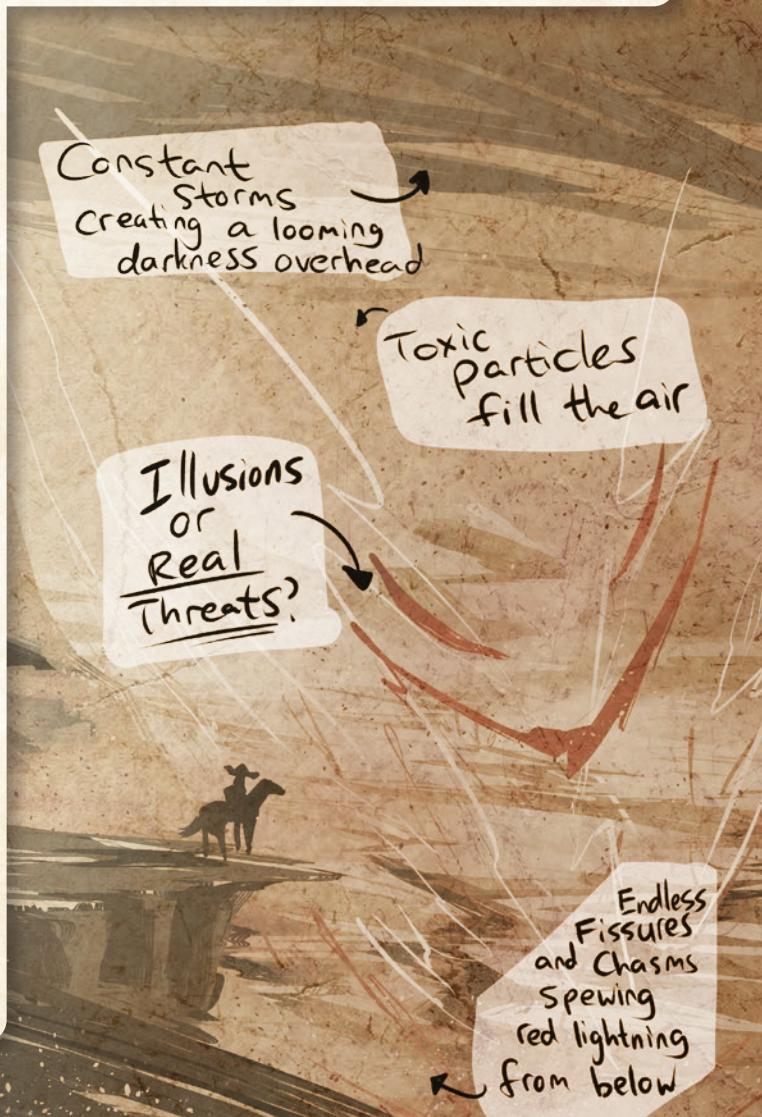
Cutting through the land, like geometrical edges to the plains, are seemingly endless chasms filled with nothing but empty void. Those that get too close to the chasms might believe they are falling into an abyss of darkness and hopelessness, and become filled with a deep and overwhelming sadness that feels impossible to overcome. Thoughts of throwing oneself into the depths become almost irresistible; escaping the pain of the present seems more appealing than that of facing the future. Only here and there can bridges of solid obsidian be found, though most are narrow and only allow passage one after the other.

THEY MOSTLY COME AT NIGHT

Heroes that plan to traverse the barrens of the Shadows had best carefully consider how they will take rest, as most that do are plagued with horrific and disturbingly vivid nightmares. It takes enormous mental strength to resist them, and waking can be incredibly difficult; those that manage are left exhausted and drenched in cold sweat. Even if successful in waking, most feel more tired and drained than before they laid down their head.

WE'RE ALL MAD HERE

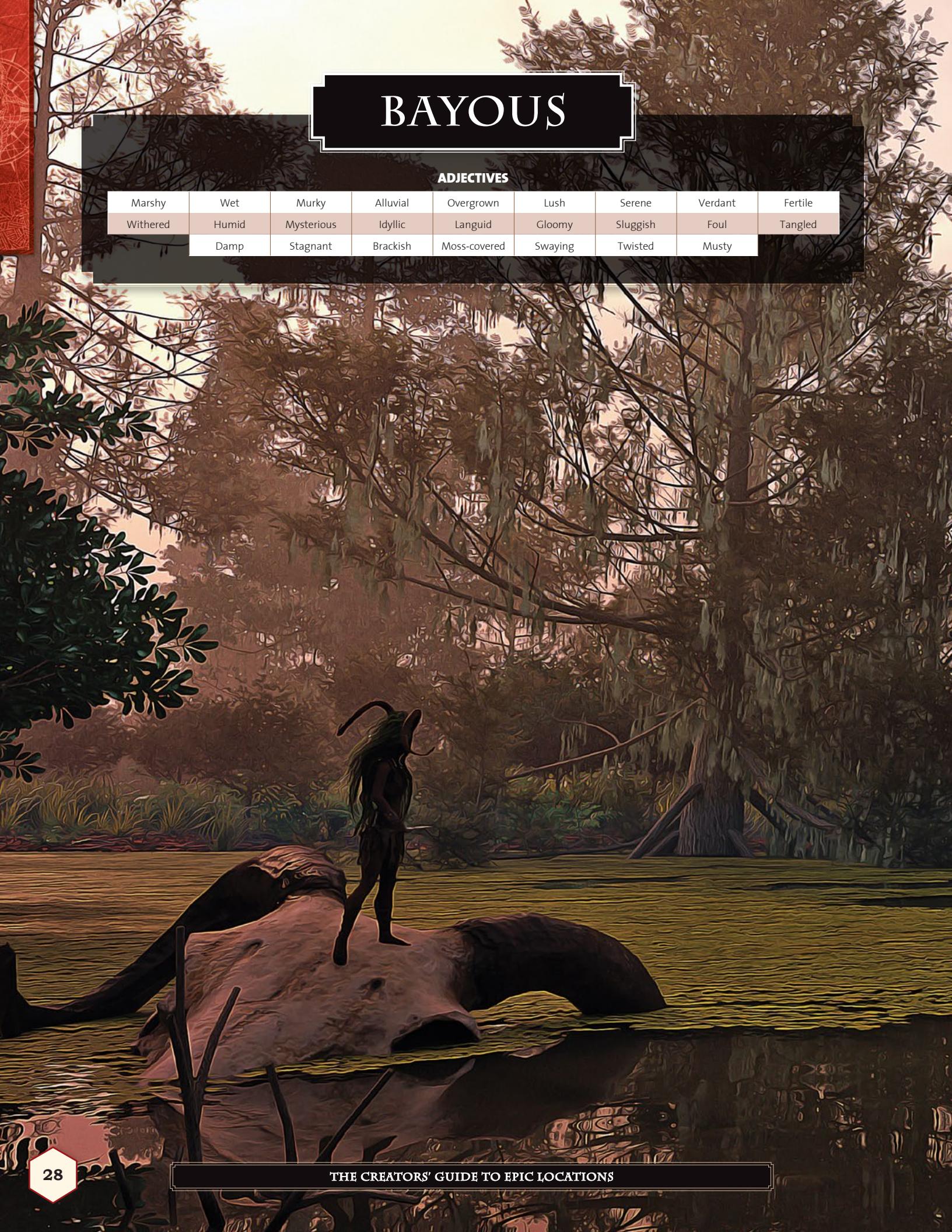
Traversing the barren wastes of the Shadows is a heavy burden on the mental stability of every traveler. Ghostly whispers from the black, glass floor, eerie sounds from monoliths and chasms, the never-ending darkness that permeates, and the ever-changing landscape are disorienting, enough to eventually drive anyone that stays too long in this unforgiving place mad.



BAYOUS

ADJECTIVES

Marshy	Wet	Murky	Alluvial	Overgrown	Lush	Serene	Verdant	Fertile
Withered	Humid	Mysterious	Idyllic	Languid	Gloomy	Sluggish	Foul	Tangled
	Damp	Stagnant	Brackish	Moss-covered	Swaying	Twisted	Musty	



INSPIRATION

SENSES

SIGHT	Moss-covered willows loom in the distance.	Still, murky water reflects the trees and sky above.	Cattails and sedges sway in the humid air.	The twisted roots of giant cypress trees poke out of the water.
SMELL	A rank stench of rotting mud fills the hot air.	The sickly-sweet scent of a local flower permeates everything.	Your own sweat reeks, thick and heavy, in this hot environment.	The smell of damp earth and stagnant water fills the area.
SOUND	The sounds of chirping insects and croaking bullfrogs echo across the water.	Water laps gently against the roots of trees that stab into the river.	There is no sound, save for your own footfalls, as you cross yet another stream.	The hush of the river is only disturbed by the occasional splash of a fish.
TOUCH	The thick, humid air hangs heavy.	The rough, scaly bark of ancient boughs feels like sandpaper against the skin.	Gnarled roots are rough to the touch.	The warmth of the sun contrasts with the coolness of the water.
TASTE	Everything tastes of mud.	The water tastes warm and brackish with a slight hint of rotten vegetation and fish.	As you breathe in, you taste decay and death rotting the air.	You swallow yet another mosquito, and taste fresh blood.

QUICK ENCOUNTERS

D12	ENCOUNTER	D12	ENCOUNTER
1	Growing large, a haunted cypress tree emerges from the bayou; a ghostly figure can be seen hovering in its branches.	7	A giant constrictor snake is blocking the river's path, causing it to overflow and burst its banks.
2	A village of frogfolk is welcoming to anyone that is not wearing iron.	8	An ancient temple to a forgotten god, deep in the heart of the bayou, slowly rots, forgotten.
3	A druid that lives in a floating hut and guards the sacred creatures of the swamp warns the party of an approaching flood.	9	An eerie mist appears, bringing with it strange creatures that emerge and dance with one another, but say nothing to outsiders.
4	Five pirates, searching for lost treasure in the murky waters, are willing to swap map information.	10	A sunken temple, hidden beneath the surface of the water, suddenly pulses with light and then goes dark.
5	Three hags, performing dark rituals in the fog-filled night, suddenly pause. They have misplaced the eye of a toad, and ask if the party has a spare.	11	A houseboat is slowly sinking into a muddy pool. It has been entirely ransacked except for a single black box, abandoned out on deck.
6	A small island, inhabited by a tribe of talking monkeys, begins to rise out of the water. It floats in the air before sailing up into the sky.	12	Two vengeful spirits, who have been cursed to wander the bayou for eternity, are arguing over a lost item of power.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

D10	ADVENTURE
1	A party member has been cursed and is gradually turning into a frog. The party must journey to the bayou to find the curse's origin, and its cure, before it is too late.
2	A notorious band of river pirates are causing havoc along the bayou, and the gang is getting ever closer to the hometown of one of the party's allies or family members. They must be stopped.
3	An old priestess of the river has requested the party retrieve her lost magic staff from the depths of the bayou. An extremely strong force, like a giant magnet, dragged it out of her hand and into the dark water, to gods-know-where.
4	The party must rescue a group of prisoners who have been taken by a band of lizardfolk. The lizardfolk trail is very obvious, with trinkets dropped like breadcrumbs. Perhaps they want to be followed?
5	A mysterious fog is rolling in from the bayou, bringing with it strange, twisted creatures of the night, which are causing havoc. The party must find a way to stop it.
6	The party is hired to track down a group of poachers who have been targeting the local wildlife. A local blackmarket has had a sudden influx of exotic products; perhaps it would be a good place to start investigations.
7	An once-sunken temple has resurfaced in the heart of the swamp, and is now guarded by a powerful entity. Stories abound about the temple, what it was originally erected for, and what might be concealed within.
8	A powerful and dangerous creature from the deep bayou has been spotted near a small village, and the party must find a way to drive it away.
9	The party have been hired to track down a group of smugglers who are trying to transport a stolen magical artifact out of the bayou. The smugglers are good at covering their tracks, but the item has a very distinctive signature.
10	The party finds itself in the middle of a battle between two powerful factions in the bayou. One side seeks to protect it from outside influence, while the other wishes to exploit its resources for the good of the wider community.

INTRODUCTION

Bayous are slow-moving creeks or sluggish sections of a river system or shallow lake. They form in wide, flat regions, typically those containing lots of water, and most often in very humid conditions. Usually, flooding in the surrounding areas blurs the lines between river, mud bank, and flood plain. Unlike swamps that are mostly composed of standing water, bayous tend to have river arms and forks, where a slight stream is still present. Still pools of dark water can form as silt closes off small streams, or when rain adds more water to the system. What distinguishes a bayou from a river, or a fast-flowing swamp, is its iconic foliage: tall trees, hanging vines, and moss-covered trunks form a unique-looking landscape. Open waterways, flooded with light, and closed-in dense canopies casting shadows, all weave a mysterious pattern of magical ambience. When a bayou stretches over a wide area, the dense vegetation and the manifold river arms, pools, and dead ends can become a maze of canals that inexperienced travelers can easily get lost in.

FUNDAMENTALS

A bayou consists of a wide area, with limited elevations, covered in a maze of rivers – some deep and some shallow – flowing around sand and mud banks covered in dense foliage. Some channels of the rivers might end in small lakes, others might join and split again. Because the area is so flat, water can suddenly spill out and change the shape of the area overnight.

Bayous usually start from either a few river systems converging on a flat plain, or from a large, slow-flowing river encountering a broad open space. Due to the nature of the dense foliage, these systems are rich in nutrients which makes them full of living creatures adapted to a very wet environment (fish, reptiles, and specific mammals, and birds).

FUNCTIONS

Around the edges of a bayou, landmarks are relatively simple to spot for the purposes of navigation; firmer and drier ground offers fertile soil for different foliage, and it may be possible for structures to be present. Once inside a bayou however, the verdant tree growth of remarkably similar trees, the shifting water courses, and the maze-like nature of the space removes any sense of direction.

To create a sense of disorientation and uncertainty in a bayou location, consider compiling random environmental occurrences instead of designing a traditional map of the area. Each time characters move, the environment they encounter can be randomly determined, and if they backtrack they can discover that everything they thought they knew has also shifted and changed. As is the case with utilizing any random table, remember you can select specific outcomes if they are more narratively appropriate.

FLOOD	A distant thunderstorm is heard up ahead. A few hours later, the water in the bayou rises by 1 foot, flooding all areas of land in the vicinity for 8 hours.
MAZE	The crack of a tree falling breaks the silence, altering what was once a clear path ahead; the maze of small pathways becomes more complex.
DEEP WATER	The next body of water encountered at first appears shallow but is, in actual fact, very deep, requiring either a boat or strong swimmers to cross.
SHALLOWS OF MUD	The next body of water encountered is only an inch deep, but there is several feet of thick mud below it that sucks at anything stepping into it.
OLD GROWTH	The island ahead has old growth so densely packed as to be impenetrable. There is no way through - it is necessary to circumnavigate around.
INTERLOCKED ROOTS	Under the water, the roots are so layered that each step is a risk: either a hole to sink into, or an exposed root to trip over.
SILT BANK	A bank of mud, curiously devoid of dense vegetation, pokes out of the water. Although wet, it is a refuge for 12 hours, after which it slowly washes away.

RIVER MAZE

To give a bayou location complexity, and make exploration interesting, it should be maze-like. A few intersections and dead ends can be created and mapped out to facilitate the placing of encounters for the characters, but the majority of the maze can be largely left unmapped to create the idea of unending nature. Encounters should punctu-

ate, not detract from the journey. To emphasize hard travel through the bayou, sections should be included that cannot be crossed by boat, and instead require the characters to get out and walk. This poses an interesting problem, since they now need to find a way to either carry their boat(s) - called 'portage' - or risk abandoning them, when they might need them again later on.

SHALLOW WATER

Playing with a mix of shallow water that is only waist-high, and deeper sections where heroes need to swim, is a wonderful way to create tension. Walking through water where parts of the body are submerged plays to inherent fears of the unknown. False scares and uneasiness can be created by having roots, aquatic creatures, and submerged carcasses 'grab', 'stroke' or 'touch' the characters' submerged appendages. Then, as the water gets deeper, alligators (or other large predators) might become aware of the heroes and slowly submerge out of sight a few dozen feet away. Panic is likely to ensue - especially if the only safe land is a few hundred feet away.

CIVILIZATION

Living in a bayou is rewarding for a few reasons: plentiful wildlife for hunting, the protection of difficult and treacherous terrain keeping out anyone unfamiliar with the environment, and a uniquely challenging changing location where no two days (or walks around the block) are ever the same. If you can get a fire going, the variety of fish, reptiles, and shellfish that abound within a bayou make for excellent eating. The challenge of living in a bayou is the adaptation required to live in permanently moist conditions. Water is everywhere, and everything is waterlogged.

Villages within a bayou typically consist of stilt houses, connected via footbridges and docks. Traversal of the branching river systems is by long, shallow canoes or flat-bottomed riverboats designed to manage both deep and shallow water.

Because of the fungicidal properties of cypress trees - one of the most common and iconic found in bayous - they are especially resistant to rot. Their tall, straight trunks, with few knots, make them a reliable source of lumber and siding. Riverways make transportation of lumber easy, especially if there is a large port or city further downstream.

FINESSE

While the maze of rivers and shallow waters already set a beautiful scene, the mystique of a bayou should not go unremarked upon and overlooked. Hanging moss might be mistaken for shades hovering in the branches, or the corpses of the dead suspended for horrific crimes. Although many individual locations have significant spiritual importance to their inhabitants, bayous in themselves have a mournful, hidden spirit that is hard to ignore. Playing with the idea of a beautiful, vibrant, day-time ambiance which transforms into gloomy, creepy surroundings at night, has the potential to make heroes feel closer to the spirit realm during their journey. In some places, they might be.

BOG GAS

When vegetation and animals fall into the waters of a bayou, they sink to the riverbed where silt and mud covers them quickly. As the dead matter decomposes, it releases gas - methane and hydrogen sulfide - which is flammable, pungent, and highly toxic when inhaled. It can build up in pockets under the layers of mud and silt and, over time, can seep through the ground and trickle in small bubbles to the surface. If the stream of gas is sufficient, the water appears to boil and, if exposed to an open flame, burns with a constant blue flame that hovers a few inches above the surface. If the pressure under the mud gets too high, it can forcefully erupt, blowing up whole sections of the watercourse and releasing great volumes of deadly gas.

Bog gas presents a challenge for characters to navigate, but might also conjure frightening images in their minds, or even give the illusion of wayward spirits. Faint, blue lights, seen at a distance, could resemble restless ghosts, and would be especially common after lightning storms, which might even set the gas alight.

FACES IN THE WATER

If a storyteller wishes to subject their readers or players to more abject horrors, they might utilize a curious habit of certain predatory reptiles,

which wedge the carcasses of their kills under tree roots submerged in water, to be returned to later. Anyone walking past these slowly decomposing corpses could dislodge the body, knocking a grisly obstacle to the surface.

If the level of horror required is more subtle, the dark waters might instead play tricks with heroes' minds, and conjure faces of the dead: knotted roots and twisting shadows create interesting shapes.

RAISING THE STAKES

Bayous are home to a wide variety of predators. The larger the body of water, the bigger the beast. As characters venture deeper, the creatures likely become not only bigger, but more aggressive, entirely different, or simply more plentiful. The relatively still pools and shallows found at the fringes may house only specific types of creatures but, as the bayou gets deeper, or more isolated, more unexpected alligators may be replaced with giant leeches, sharks, or catfish of unusual size.

ROT

A constant within a bayou is rot; everything breaks down. Characters that spend too much time in wet environments will start to notice their leather garments rotting around joints and seams, and any item of clothing not treated or waterproofed becomes much heavier than when dry, adding to the fatigue of their journey.

Skin is particularly susceptible to constant exposure to damp conditions. Trench foot - a term coined during the First World War due to the experience in trenches - describes the condition of appendages left for several days in wet socks and boots without ever getting the opportunity to properly dry. The skin and surrounding tissue begins to necrotize, and often amputation is the only recourse to save the limb. Characters that cannot manage to get dry on a daily basis may begin to notice loss of sensation in their feet, then blisters, and so on until one or more of their feet is wasted.

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

Once the characters have ventured deep enough, an excellent point of no return presents itself: the ever-shifting nature of the bayou. Heavy rainfall can change the water level significantly, washing away old tracks and paths. The opposite can also be effectively utilized; perhaps a lack of rain causes wide areas to become treacherous mud-flats, and the threat of sinking sand and sinkholes makes a return journey impossible. Any maps that heroes bring with them are also subject to the moist conditions and, unless considerable effort is made to keep these dry, inks run, and paper becomes moldy and illegible.

Thus, the point of no return is when the characters' navigation, or their physical surroundings, make backtracking impossible, for one of the many previously detailed reasons. After that moment, whether by their wits or pure guesswork, soldiering on becomes the only choice.



Though normally peaceful, treefolk can sometimes turn violent.

DESIGNING EPIC BAYOUS IN FANTASY SETTINGS

Add any of the following features, or use them for inspiration, to create a bayou that is clearly not of our world.

HIGH FANTASY

Bayous are synonymous with shamanistic witch-doctors and old, magical spirits; really leaning into this angle can contribute to the creation of a living, mystical place.

CALL ME MOTHER

At the center of the most healthy bayous is a great mother tree, who extends her network of roots across the whole location. These function as a nerve system, connecting every tree and providing an overarching consciousness, with the mother tree acting as the central brain. Humanoids living in the bayou are nothing more than small parasites, sapping the other inhabitants. Though they are largely tolerated, any creature, be they local or visitor, found not showing proper respect and appreciation for the bayou might find themselves suddenly surrounded by predators, or simply covered over with thick vines or roots from nearby trees while they sleep – doomed to rot and add their nutrients to the bayou. Only those that form a connection to the mother tree can speak to her, placate her, or manipulate her.

SEN-TREE-ENT

Many bayou trees are sentient, though very selective about the non-trees they reveal this to. They feud and battle over the rivers and channels; some try to strangle their neighbors, bigger trees attempt to smother or starve smaller upstarts to death, and still others dam rivers to drown those higher up. During pollination periods, the trees enter into a frenzy, and it is best to stay clear when they do.

JUST AROUND THE RIVERBEND

Some bayou water courses are vaguely aware of what is moving through them. Though a few are kindly, most are largely ambivalent, but there are some that are particularly vindictive. These waters, along with those that fear for their lives, shift course and keep travelers stuck within the bayou. They hope that travelers will perish on their journey, and add the nutrients from their corpses to the mix.

NIGHT LIGHTS

As the sun sets, some bayous change dramatically. Water drains away into the trees, and the riverbed sprouts forth a dazzling array of bioluminescent flowers. What was once a dark, wet, and clogged landscape becomes a maze of color and light that lasts until dawn returns the dinge and dankness.

The World tree fuels the entire ecosystem through its magical roots that spreads throughout the Bayous.

Adventurers will know that they're nearing the world tree as the foliage thins. The tree occupies one of the only clearings in the Bayous.

Trees come to life and creepy critters sprawl around the thick groves that ravages the Bayous

UNDERFELL

Where an underground water source, like a well, has enough space to branch out, or a slowly draining lake has receded far enough, a bayou can form in the Underfell.

WATER SPORE

As fungi have grown along the pools and rivers of the Underfell, their mycelium network has extended enough to form a soft, spongy soil for surrounding plants to grow upon. It feels soft to walk on, as if on a bed of thick moss, and is often covered in a layer of fungi, ranging from small, colorful caps to large, fleshy ones. The air is filled with a sweet, earthy scent and flickers from the huge variety of spores.

THE SPORE YOU KNOW

Be careful of bayous that glow underground, those where spores glimmer and dance in the faint light, swirling around and creating an entrancing atmosphere that illuminates the water, and causes mesmerizing reflections on its surface. Strange

shapes and patterns can be seen as the spores drift out of the gills of the tree-sized mushrooms. This can become dangerous, as some can cause hallucinations and be toxic if inhaled over an extended period of time.

AVOID THE SLIME-LIGHT

Where standing water pools, the constant rain of spores thickens it into viscous slime. A living ecosystem in its own right, the slime supports a variety of organisms, ranging from small invertebrates to large, predatory amphibians.

I'M LICHEN IT

Thick lichen carpets habitually form on stalactites and stalagmites, covering them in plentiful colors. Where a cave ceiling is low, the lichen carpets hang like drapes and make it difficult to see what is beyond. The carpets have become home to many insects, spiders, and small vermin that use them to hunt prey near the water's surface.

FEY DOMAIN

The bayous in the Fey Domain are lush, vibrant ecosystems full of unique and diverse flora and fauna. Many have a unique, bioluminescent quality, giving the plants an ethereal and otherworldly glow at night.

SPRING TIME

In the heart of one particular Fey bayou lies the Life Fountain, a magical spring. Nymphs and sprites flutter around it, enjoying its calming presence. The Life Fountain is a magical sanctuary that brings peace and serenity to any who visit. While the waters are crystal clear and tinged with blue, they do not themselves have inherent luminescence.

THIS LITTLE LIGHT OF MINE

All life in the bayou prefers bioluminescence. Plants grow beautiful blossoms that light up on touch, moss shines in a soft afterglow where a foot has touched it, and vines hanging between the massive trees pulse in soft, iridescent lights, as if communicating. The light fades the moment the plants are picked or plucked; it belongs to the plant and no one else.

SOUL MATES

When a fey passes into the afterlife, it is believed that a part of its life force remains in the bayou and transcends into a soul cypress. The Tausi, a peacock-like humanoid species that live in Fey bayous, claim that their shamans can form a connection with each soul cypress and communicate with the souls of their ancestors. Felling one, or even harming it, is deemed a terrible sin by the Tausi.

DREAM A LITTLE DREAM

A rare type of gas can form in pockets under the layers of mud in the riverbeds of a Fey bayou. Dream gas is a slightly purple vapor that puts anyone that inhales it into a deep slumber, where they experience intensely vivid dreams. Some say the dreams are so real that injuries, and even death, sustained in them carry over to the body once the gas wears off and the victim awakes - if they awake. Over time, the gas seeps through the ground and trickles in small bubbles to the surface.

THE HELLS

With the constant flow of damned souls washing into the Hells, the soul rivers spread far and wide over the plains to form a truly horrifying bayou. During times of war and other unspeakable horrors that send great numbers of souls into the rivers, they can easily overflow and flood.

OLD DAMNED RIVER

Describing the river of the damned as a true river is a stretch, as it does not contain water, but an amalgam of tortured souls that are washed into the Hells. The river splits into thousands of channels that slow wind through the bayou of the dead. The ghostly, translucent souls that make up the river take on new forms, their defining features distorted and exaggerated, so that they resemble their original owners but with a ghoulish twist: a grotesque parody of their former self. The souls are in a perpetual state of transformation, swirling and mixing with others. Ghostly arms stretch out from the surface, trying to grasp anything that would allow them to escape their torment. A thin, silvery mist hangs over the river's surface, making it hard to make out any details.

STYX IN THE MUD

Grasping, clawing, and pulling, the souls that reach the riverbanks will try anything to escape. This makes for dangerous terrain, as the churned ground is uneven and slippery. Furthermore, hands grasp at unwary ankles and attempt to drag those attached to them into the soul-water.

Once in a while, a particularly stubborn soul manages to haul itself out. Reborn as a bodiless entity, it usually turns into a ghost, banshee, or an even-worse manifestation.

THY SOUL TO KEEP (OUT)

It is unknown how the strange warden cypress trees came into being. Some believe that the infernal plane itself brought them into existence as a reaction to the bayou forming. Their purpose however is obvious to any observer: they grow everywhere along the riverbanks. Their roots, extending into the river, form an intricate weave, and are coated in a silvery substance that repels souls that try to touch it, and is extremely slippery even for the touch of a mortal. Most unsettling about warden cypresses is the fact that, although no one has ever seen them moving, they do not remain in place. Infernal researchers have marked individual boughs and returned after a period of absence to find them in different spots.

POOLED UNFORTUNATE SOULS

Whenever an overflow of souls subsides, and the river slowly shrinks back to its bed, soul pools remain. Trapped inside these pools, souls are eventually driven mad with rage and start to coalesce into terrible abnormalities that rise up and out. Although it takes ages to form those abominations, the threat is so grave that a military order of devils has been formed to patrol the bayous and destroy the pools before a hatching can take place.



SHADOW REALM

Bayous in the Shadow Realm are a distorted travesty of their counterparts in the Material. Although river arms should support nutrition for trees and plants, all flora is lifeless and rotten. Normally lively cypresses are meager husks that stretch their thin, malformed roots greedily into the dark waters. Their branches are stunted, and the tips constantly rot and ooze a pale liquid.

TAR-NISHED

The water that runs through the river arms of Shadow bayous is like black tar. No waves or currents disturb the surface, although the surface sometimes bulges and recedes slowly, as if something big is moving beneath. Once in a while, bubbles bloat the surface and pop sluggishly, spilling a misty, gray vapor into the air. Those that walk along the riverbanks see dark tendrils growing out of the water, as if trying to grab the surrounding land. Those that enter it describe it as viscous, sticky, and unsettlingly warm to the touch. Staying in too long is deadly, as it slowly drains the body of all fluids, and leaves nothing behind but a mummified corpse.

HOLE IN ONE

Inexplicably, there are no pools of standing water to be found in Shadow Realm bayous. Wherever a river arm gets separated from the main body, all that can be found is a wet, soggy ditch of black mud, as if the water has quickly drained away, evaporated, or – even more disturbingly – wandered off to rejoin

the main river body. These mud holes stink of death and rot, although anyone that enters them finds the mud warm and somehow inviting. It promises a restful sleep... perhaps forever.

SMOKE ON THE WATER

Entire Shadow bayous are permeated with clouds of gray mist that seem to originate from the dark water. Unaffected by any breeze, the mist moves about, shifting through the vicinity as if searching for something. Where it comes in contact with plants, it accelerates rot, and flakes of dissolved plant matter twirl and mix with the mist. Although cold to the touch, sweat is instantly turned to fumes; it rises from the bodies of those who find themselves there to add to the haze, and those that stay too long see it slowly turn from white to red, as the mist starts to peel the epidermis away and begin to draw blood from the body.

THICKER THAN WATER

As the river drains nearly everything it comes in contact with, the pitiful trees are in a constant battle to survive, and must do their best to adapt to the environment; thin, spidery roots reach deep into the river mud and spread out over the surface. Blood cypresses have learned that far better nutrition can be found outside of the ungenerous waters. Their bark is covered with sharp, pointy thorns that can quickly cut deeply. Blood that drips on the ground invariably falls on the tree's root system, and is greedily absorbed.



CAMPSITES

ADJECTIVES

Picturesque	Serene	Rustic	Peaceful	Homey	Inviting	Quaint	Tranquil	Alluring
Verdant	Perilous	Unforgiving	Desolate	Wild	Unruly	Savage	Foreboding	Risky
	Menacing	Forsaken	Starlit	Gloomy	Sleepy	Eerie	Mystic	



INSPIRATION

SENSES

SIGHT	A fire crackles in a small circle of rocks, the smoke wafting up and away.	SMELL	Fireflies buzz around a lantern hanging from a tree branch.	TOUCH	Stars twinkle in the night sky, creating a glittering canopy of light.	TASTE	A cluster of tents, set up in a semi-circle, seem warm and inviting.
SMELL	There is a rich smell of burning wood and roasting meat in the air.	TOUCH	You smell damp canvas and morning dew as you awaken.	TOUCH	An earthy scent of damp soil and decomposing leaves wakes you.	TOUCH	The smoky scent of a fire pit and fresh coffee bring a smile to your face.
SOUND	The crackling of fire in a stone-lined pit mesmerizes everyone, hushing conversation for a moment.	TOUCH	With a clink of mugs, the mead is shared and laughter soon follows.	TOUCH	Pop! Plop! Bubbling stew gurgles away, nearly ready for the belly.	TOUCH	You hear the crack of branches as animals prowl around the edge of camp.
TOUCH	The hard canvas of the tent is difficult to unfold in the cold air.	TOUCH	You are warm, enveloped in your bedroll, even as the night outside grows colder.	TOUCH	Rocks, sticks, roots, everywhere you turn - your sleeping bag offers scant protection.	TOUCH	A warm zephyr crosses your face, and the threat of a thunderstorm looms in the distance.
TASTE	Smoke, no matter where you sit, gets in your eyes, your nose, and your mouth.	TOUCH	The bubbling beans, the roasting meat, the salivation - you taste it all.	TOUCH	There is a strong, grassy taste to the air.	TOUCH	After brewing all night, the coffee is ready to be chewed, not drunk.

QUICK ENCOUNTERS

D12	ENCOUNTER	D12	ENCOUNTER
1	A strange figure in tattered clothing hides in the bushes, watching the camp from a distance. They are an artist creating a painting.	7	A strange voice can be heard whispering in the wind. It beckons party members away from the camp.
2	A cougar cub wanders around the outskirts of camp, looking for discarded scraps of food.	8	A powerful storm is brewing; the party must find shelter quickly.
3	A pack of wolves can be heard howling in the distance.	9	The location the party planned to make camp in has already been claimed by a group of goblins. They are singing, off-key, by the campfire.
4	When they awake in the morning, the party finds a strange, rune-inscribed stone circle around the campfire that was not there when they bedded down.	10	A group of bandits is seen approaching the camp at speed. Strangely, they run right past, one only stopping long enough to toss a bag of gold at the party.
5	A magical fog rolls in, obscuring the camp and its surroundings.	11	Three bears scratch something onto a nearby tree. It is a crude drawing warning that a pigtailed thief is in the area.
6	Unearthly lights can be seen in the nearby woods. As far as is known, the woods are uninhabited.	12	Entrancing shapes dance in the flames of the campfire. A few of them are recognizable.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

D10	ADVENTURE
1	Within the remains of an old campsite, the party discovers a hatch in the ground. It is unlocked and, when opened, reveals a set of stairs leading down. The hatch goes back in time 10 years to just before the demise of another group of adventurers. Perhaps, were they to live, they could help the party with their current quest.
2	Wandering into the campsite, a seemingly confused woman starts referring to the party as her children. The heroes might enjoy being mothered for a while but, if they succumb to her entirely, she slowly saps their souls before moving on to the next camp site.
3	A tent peg, plunged into the ground, hits something metallic: a lock-box. On the outside is a warning: do not open. If its warnings go unheeded, the box releases a young man who begs the party to help him restore his throne. He claims to have been exiled by his conniving brother.
4	The campfire suddenly burns bright green, and an elderly woman's face appears. She warns the party that, in three days' time, they will meet an old man who will ask for help but, if they do, they will all perish. She says he must be slain; he is a vampire and, right on cue, arrives three days later, and entreats them to follow him into a crypt.
5	As the party wakes up, they discover that their camp has mysteriously moved location. They are now surrounded by desert, stretching away in all directions. A tattered scroll, pinned to one of their tents, says to head east and find Hal Janas - whoever that is.
6	Moans and groans at first seem like the arrival of the undead, but all around the camp are satyrs engaged in a bacchanalian festival, and invite the party to join them. If they accept, one of the satyrs offers them a huge reward if they can reclaim a stolen wine cup.
7	The party all share the same vivid dream where a red carpet flies high above them, covered in golden treasures. Stranger still, a similar mysterious carpet has appeared amongst their camping gear. If unrolled, it does everything it can to point them in a particular direction.
8	As a party member stirs a wonderful-smelling cookpot, it suddenly begins to boil over, and spills all over the place. It will not stop; it continues to pour scalding-hot liquid, flooding the area. A small gnome appears and offers to stop it, for a hefty price.
9	The ground under the campsite is uneven, rocky, and shudders with small quakes from time to time. Suddenly, it lifts up: it is the back of a titanic animal on its millennial migration to the middle of the ocean. How do you stop a mile-long beast that strands 500 feet at the shoulder?
10	A thunderstorm rolls in quickly, and lightning discharges all. A pixie appears and claims to be holding the storm at bay - indeed, no rain nor lightning is hitting the immediate area of the camp. The pixie demands tribute, or threatens to unleash the storm.

CAMPSPACES

INTRODUCTION

Although a campsite might sound like an unusual location to focus on, they are, in many settings, an integral space for characters during their journeys across their world. Most campsites have a few things in common, but their versatility presents a unique opportunity to make them memorable.

FUNDAMENTALS

An ideal campsite needs to be on relatively flat, dry ground. For greatest convenience, a campsite should be located near fresh water (if any is present). It is definitely a worthwhile endeavor to travel ten minutes off the beaten track to be closer to fresh water than to constantly trek back and forth over the course of a stay every time someone wants to drink, bathe, or cook.

Campsites should also have some form of protection, both from the environment (extreme sun, wind, water, or other natural phenomena), and against interlopers, be they man or beast. A hilltop usually provides an unobstructed view of the surrounding land, but it also provides a clear line of sight to the campsite. A cave or depression has the

opposite problem; it is likely to hide the camp from a casual observer but, similarly, hinders those inside from seeing anyone approaching.

The list of considerations for a campsite location increases the more complex the traveling party is. A few adventurers sleeping rough under blankets leaves little mark on the landscape and requires little space and few resources. A caravan of a dozen wagons is likely to need several hundred yards of space, particularly for the beasts of burden that pull them, which need their own protection from predators as they rest and graze. A campsite is therefore a balance between convenience and protection, between warmth and visibility.

FUNCTIONS

When designing a campsite, creating several options for the heroes to weigh up is useful. Each option presents a choice, and each has positives and negatives. This changes the mundane question of, 'Do you camp for the night?' into a more complex one: 'How do you set up your camp for the night?'.

OBSCURED

An obscured location could be between large outcroppings of rocks, or tucked away in a natural ravine or gully, and caves or rock overhangs provide some additional cover from would-be observers. Getting into these campsites is often not easy, and getting out of them can also prove problematic, especially if there is only one safe or viable entry and exit. A campfire always signposts a camp's location, however, regardless of how hidden the site itself might be.

Any vehicles need to be abandoned or parked somewhere nearby in the hope that they do not give away the campsite's location. This creates opportunities for tension; anything left outside of camp is a potential target for thieves and the like.

OPEN

Many campsites make use of open land to provide the advantage of as much easy movement as possible, to ensure nothing and noone can approach

from stealth or cover, and to allow for access to wagons or animals. With the camp so exposed, particularly to the elements, fires are often lit in dug pits to protect the embers and minimize their exposure to the wind. This does not affect smoke or provide any kind of concealment, of course.

Open sites, if large enough, allow wagons to be maneuvered into a corral – a circle. This becomes a temporary fortification of sorts, and although not nearly as robust as any constructed measures, does create an imposing barrier. They also have the advantage of occupants being able to scatter in multiple directions if attackers cannot be held at bay, making evasion and flight from the situation easier. This, of course, means that opposition too can come from any angle.

IDEAL

An ideal location is a bend in a river, restricting quiet and unimpeded access from 180 degrees around. If an area is flat and large enough to comfortably fit the characters, as well as a discreet space for any vehicles and animals, all the better, even if these are not in the immediate vicinity. A nearby elevation could be used as a look-out point for any approaching individuals, most likely coming from the more exposed side.

FINESSE

Campsites are meant to be places of refuge, a small sanctuary from the wider location in which they are set. To this end, the surrounding environment must be a major influence; a campsite in a forest is going to be vastly different to one in a desert. Both have the same fundamental requirements but are likely to have quite different resources, issues, and vibes.

When designing a campsite, take into consideration the unique factors of the surrounding location. What makes it hostile, difficult, or dangerous? How can the campsite mitigate any of this and to what degree? A campsite in a bayou might be on the trunk of a massive fallen cypress tree - a great choice in that it is likely to be relatively dry, free from leeches, and safe from the jaws of alligators, who cannot climb up it. In a jungle, a fallen tree of this nature would be a nightmare, as it would almost certainly be used as a highway by all the major predators.

Campsites are transitory by design - if they were not, they would be settlements. If a campsite is being used as a base of operations for a foray into the

surrounding location, it should survive only for as long as it is narratively useful, and not mitigate all the hazards or perils of the surrounding space. Otherwise, its formation removes any urgency from the story, and any point of no return has little meaning.

Simply having a campsite destroyed whilst the heroes are away is a very easy mechanical solution to the problem of players getting too comfortable, though they must have the chance to anticipate the destruction, or some sense that it may be impending. Thunderstorms portent a flood, a shift in the winds suggest a sandstorm, and water courses that overspill or divert may cause the erosion of a nearby cliff. If the characters can see things changing, but do nothing to stop it or resolve things, then when the camp is washed away or destroyed they understand why. It places the burden of the campsites survival on them, where it belongs.

This results in the campsite being not just a stopping point, but a pressure point. The narrative might slow down around one, but it can also accelerate it, and only for as long as you need it to.

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

Unlike all the other locations in this book, campsites are not long-term endeavors. They are locations that might exist for a night, perhaps a few, but are not the ever-lasting geological wonders detailed elsewhere. They are a point to return to, or set out from, whilst exploring the wider world.

The point of no return for a campsite then, is the point at which the heroes commit to stop for the night - and it is a commitment. Once the tents are pitched, gear is unpacked, and a fire is made, the campsite is in operation, and is unlikely to be able

to be packed up again in a great hurry unless the heroes are traveling incredibly lightly. This has very real implications; in the event of an emergency, heroes might need to decide whether it is more necessary to evacuate quickly, or with all their belongings. Probably an average party's foremost concern, however, is evidence. Campsites leave marks in the form of firepits, ash, and squashed ground. It is very difficult to leave a campsite without a trace, which leaves a nice trail for anyone - or anything - on the heroes' trail.

DESIGNING EPIC CAMPSITES IN FANTASY SETTINGS

Add any of the following features, or use them for inspiration, to create a campsite that is clearly not of our world.

HIGH FANTASY

Magical comfort has the potential to remove a lot of the tension that a campsite inherently brings to the narrative, so creating something too idealized, without chance of things going wrong, is counterproductive to storytelling. However, magical locations with their own unique challenges can be a lot of fun.

BETTER WITH AGE

Where levels of magical saturation are high, popular campsites (such as those near main roads, rivers, or rich hunting grounds) slowly, magically adapt to become a better campsite. Small commonly forgotten or much-needed items suddenly appear, and water tastes fresher and purer than elsewhere. It appears these campsites want travelers to enjoy their stay. However, transience is in their very nature and so, after a while, if they feel visitors have outstayed their welcome, the sites become hostile, forcing those camped to leave.

SPEAK FRIEND AND CAMP

The erection of this 'campsite' requires a small carving of a wooden door. The door is placed on a suitable site and a word, usually inscribed upon the door, is spoken aloud, to conjure a simple, human-sized door in its place. Through the door lies a palace, full of bedrooms, dining halls, and other places of leisure. Whoever creates the door, upon exiting it, can either collapse the space and end the

spell, or keep it going so it might be used again a second night.

JUST ADD WATER

A popular, and very practical, solution for those wishing to reduce their carry-weight is a powdered camp. The fine powder can be used to trace out the shape of a small, simple structure, such as a tent or hut. Once the shape is complete, one need only splash a small amount of water across it and, suddenly, the powder flashes bright and turns into walls, a roof and a solid floor. Relatively comfortable, and definitely warm and dry, though immovable once erected, the structure keeps its shape for up to three weeks before crumbling back into dust.

IT'S ONLY A MODEL

A small, wooden carving of a campsite, such as this, does not look like it is worth the absolutely extortionate price-tag it commands in very specialist stores, but these hold a wondrous surprise. When placed on the ground, and the words 'make camp' are spoken, these carvings transform into full campsites, with 6-8 tents (depending on the model), fire pit, cooking station, and more. Particularly deluxe models even feature tiny, intricate figures, which come to life and act as camp helpers that do laundry, cook meals, and clean up.

UNDERFELL

To create a safe camp in the Underfell, it is important to set it up in an enclosed space to provide maximum protection from the surrounding dangers.

DRAWN TO THE FLAME

Some Underfell rocks grow rapidly in the presence of heat; an open fire is usually enough to cause them to grow several feet. With careful application and control of a flame, either magical or mundane, it is possible to sculpt a safe, rock-hard, sanctuary. There is an art to creating several chambers, inter-linked with passages, and a few guides, experts in their field, pride themselves on being able to shape a 'rockoon' in less than half an hour. Their specialist services, of course, come with a premium price-tag.

PITCHED BLACK

In some of the darkest caves in the Underfell, the blackness is so complete that it has a magical quality to it. It can be touched but, like a cloud, it is seemingly made of nothing. It can, however, be squeezed together to form a cold, dark material, not unlike leather, but that stops existing when removed from the darkness and exposed to natural light. It can be draped over rocks to make a waterproof, soundproof, blackout structure, perfect for shelter or concealment, that will not even let magical light permeate.

TENT SPIKES

Hanging from many a cave ceiling are truly massive stalactites. Some of these, through erosion and time, have hollow cores, or large holes that can double up as a handy campsite. The trick, however, is getting in. Once inside, there is good protection from any other kind of incursion, and the elevation grants a good vantage point from which to look out over the larger cave system.

MAROOM WITH A VIEW

Although most fungi collapse in upon themselves when they perish, some larger species harden and, over time, their fungal structure is replaced with minerals and salts. This leaves an impression, much like a fossil, and circular tubes, or 'marooms', form. These make excellent campsites - as their walls are often four to five feet high, with great, tactile strength.



FYE DOMAIN

The best place to set up camp in the Fey Domain might not be on the ground; perhaps a treetop of one of the majestic, mystical trees that grow there would be a good choice. If such a tree cannot be found because the environment does not offer such, burrows and caves are popular options.

SLUMBER PARTY

'Slumber crown' is a particular type of tree that grows across most of the Fey Domain. Standing around sixty feet in height, its canopy is particularly dense. Leaves can each be around three or four feet in diameter and, when overlapped with others, form soft - yet stable - ground. Camping atop a slumber crown is said to be relaxing and peaceful, but it is, however, awfully exposed.



BORROW A BURROW

Many holes in the ground are the remnants of burrowing herbivores, known as aussien. Aussien are relatively harmless, but make large burrows in excess of twenty feet in diameter. Ideal for camping in, it is best to check that no one else is already camping there first, or that a very heavy-footed digger is not going to come crashing through the wall.

FLOWER BED

Some monstrously sized Fey flowers have huge petals, easily twenty-feet-long. At the center, the florret is covered in smaller flowers with a spongy texture which, when pressure is applied, make the whole flower close up, creating a large space within the petals. This space is ideal for a short-term rest spot, being sheltered and well-hidden; just do not stay too long. The squishy flowers slowly release a dissolving enzyme that burns through clothing after about ten hours.

FIELD OF DREAMS

In places, Fey grass is tall, thin, and easily braided together. Skilled campers can weave together a dome-like structure out of it that is waterproof, warm, and strong enough to keep out casual predators. The grass gives off a soft scent that many liken to the aroma of puppy breath, and causes some species to fall into a deep sleep which requires more than a good splash of water to waken from.

THE HELLS

Bitter blows the wind so, sometimes, it is best to look underground for respite. Natural crags, caves, or - better still - burrows that lead down, are the best sites for setting camp. There are simply too many predators stalking the lands to risk anywhere else.

CORPSE COVER

Anyone, or anything, hoping for a moment's reprieve in the Hells are unlikely to find it if they themselves can be found; there are simply too many predators and prying eyes for any kind of normal campsite to last. A popular, though gruesome, trick utilized by many infernal explorers is to cover any camp with corpses. This is easier to do if a hole is dug first, across which a tarpaulin is drawn, and then corpses placed over the top.

BONEYARD

Setting a perimeter of bones, sharp rocks, and other jagged objects can make a space safer. Or act as a giant lure. Predators are drawn to the fence, and will attempt to gain entry. If the actual campsite

is not within that fence, but is say, a few hundred feet away, its presence remains unnoticed.

BRANCHING OUT

Another way of getting a rest without being eaten is to use a simple, but painful, incantation, which transforms the caster into an infernal spiky tree. The process is incredibly painful, as the user's bones elongate and pierce through their flesh to form branches. Whilst in this form, the caster is just a tree, thorn-covered, immovable and, critically, inedible. When the spell ends, the wounds seal but leave swollen bumps that take days to heal.

HONEY, I SHRUNK THE PARTY

Another solution to camping in the Hells is to simply not physically camp there, or at least in the open. Casting a simple spell can shrink down all heroes but one, who can carry their tiny fellows in a small pouch or bag. If an adventuring party is smart, shifts can be taken to ensure all get their rest. If the regular-sized hero gets into a spot of hot water, however, their chance of back-up is... tiny.

SHADOW REALM

The Shadow Realm is always dark and gloomy. Making camp is therefore purely dependent on a desire to relieve some physical fatigue. Given the varying sleeping patterns of native dwellers of the Realm, it is impossible to not be the subject of something's attention at all hours.

THE BIG SMOKE

Most wood in the Shadow Realm is difficult to set on fire but, if you can, smoker wood is either best or worst, depending on your point of view. It releases vast amounts of smoke, obscuring a wide area that only a very strong wind can shift. This is a great screen from prying eyes and, if several fires are lit around a campsite, creates a rather good buffer from the outside world. On the other hand, if a smoker wood fire spreads and catches a forest alight, the area can be obscured in thick mist for months.

WEFT, WEAVE, WEB

As its name implies, 'cobweave' is a fabric with many features of a spiderweb. It does not stick to itself, but sticks to anything and everything else, though water washes it clean and ready for use again. A lean-to can be constructed out of cobweave, which can then be covered with leaves, twigs, and other debris to perfectly blend into the sur-

roundings, shielding campers from the horrors of the Shadows, albeit temporarily. In the morning, it must simply be washed clean and packed away.

THINGS ARE HEATING UP

Not actually fire, 'blackfire' looks and tastes like tar, and gives off intense heat when mixed with any water-based substance (which is why you never find it near a source). The heat lasts for several hours; the tar takes a long time to return to its resting temperature. If wetted again, it reheats. Although it casts no light, it can boil coffee, fry eggs, and bring some comforting relief to a nightmarish world.

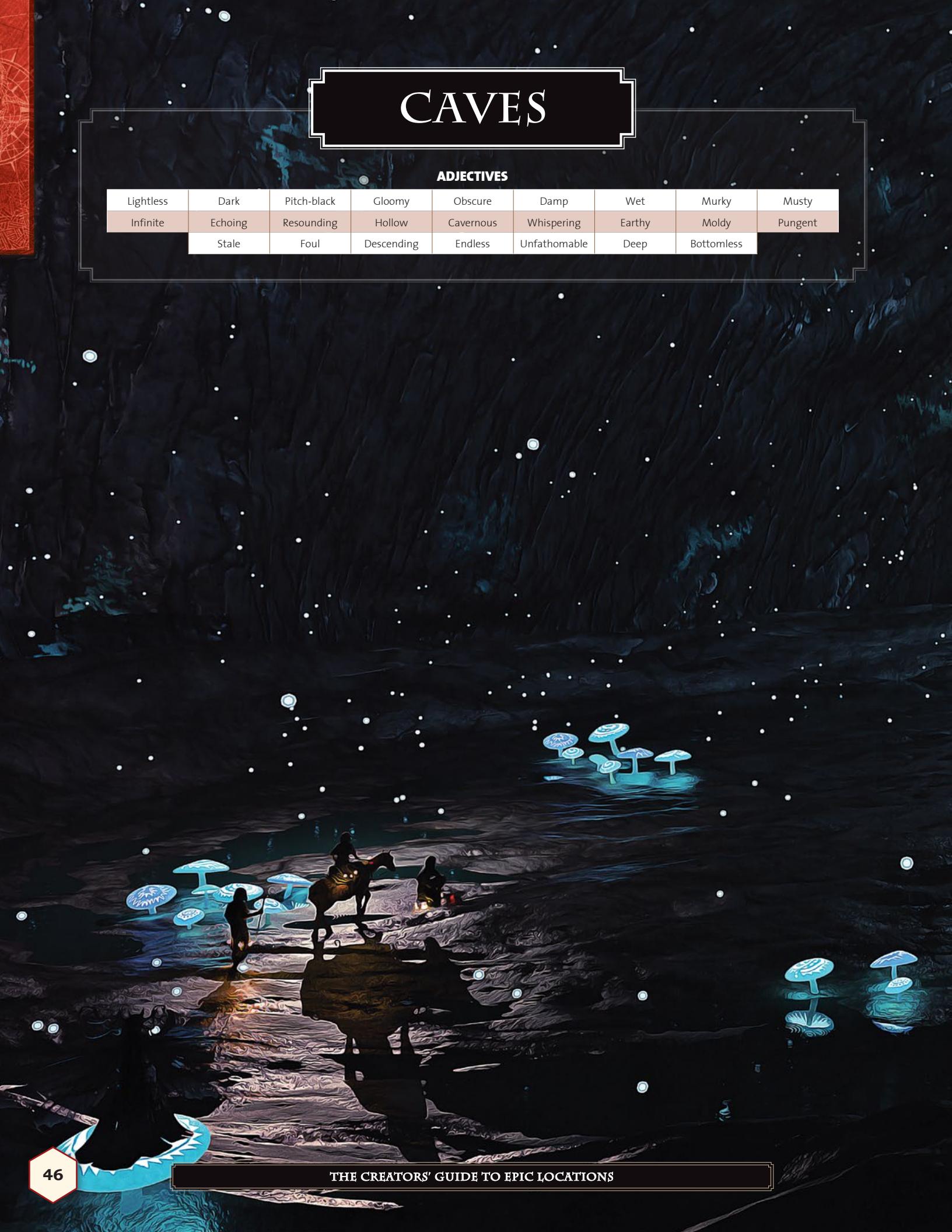
VENUS FLY NAP

Tranti pods look like venus flytraps, only much bigger. They feed on giant insects and any other organic matter that drifts into them, however they cannot digest metal, spun fabric, or oil-coated cloth. Many an adventurer has found refuge in a tranti pod, wrapping themselves tightly (or donning whole-body armor) before allowing one to snap shut around them so they can take a good long sleep, able to cut their way out, unaffected, once rested. This plan comes with great risk, though; those that leave even a pinky finger exposed will not wake up with it.

CAVES

ADJECTIVES

Lightless	Dark	Pitch-black	Gloomy	Obscure	Damp	Wet	Murky	Musty
Infinite	Echoing	Resounding	Hollow	Cavernous	Whispering	Earthy	Moldy	Pungent
	Stale	Foul	Descending	Endless	Unfathomable	Deep	Bottomless	



INSPIRATION

SENSES

SIGHT	Glistening stalactites hang from the ceiling.	The faint glow of bioluminescent fungus on the walls throws eerie shadows about the place.	Winding paths lead deeper into the darkness.	Jagged rocks jut out from the walls, teeth ready to snap and grind.
SMELL	The musty, damp smell of earth and still puddles is everywhere.	A pungent smell of fungal rot comes from deeper within the cave.	The lingering smell of burnt torches adds a smoky texture to the air.	The air is old and thick with history; breathing it makes you think of dusty rooms full of books.
SOUND	The faint sound of dripping water echoes through the chamber.	Silence is only broken by the occasional squeak of a bat or hiss of a cricket.	The echoes of your footsteps reverberate through the darkness.	Distant cracks promise hard times ahead, and thumps ominously threaten freshly sealed exits.
TOUCH	The rough, jagged texture of the rocky floor makes each step treacherous.	A cold and damp ceiling drips icy water, starting in its intensity as it hits your skin.	A faint trembling rumbles through your boots; something just moved.	Like iron, the hard rock is cold and unyielding, offering no comfort.
TASTE	Moisture in the atmosphere tastes of mushrooms and dust.	The putrid taste of old fungus spores forms a film over your tongue.	There is a saltiness to the air, sharp and acidic.	A strange taste of burnt torches and melted ore is sharp in your mouth.

QUICK ENCOUNTERS

D12	ENCOUNTER	D12	ENCOUNTER
1	With a shattering crack, a stalactite crashes to the floor. More and more start to fall with every passing second.	7	As the party walks through a cave dome, the rocks – or, what they thought were rocks – start to move and unravel...
2	A glowing mushroom dominates the center of the cave. As the party gets closer, it suddenly starts to speak.	8	As the party ventures down a tunnel, the wall behind them breaks open and a mechanical steam drill bursts through.
3	The cave is suddenly shrouded in magical darkness. No light source, either mechanical or magical, works here.	9	This tunnel is freshly dug, and the walls are smooth, coated with corrosive slime dotted with strange eggs.
4	A water incursion is beginning to fill the cave much faster than expected.	10	The party hears scratching behind a stone wall. As they stop and listen, they also pick out the faint sound of someone crying.
5	More and more webbing starts to coat the walls, and the party soon finds themselves in the middle of a spider hive.	11	A group of miners are wandering aimlessly round in circles. Any attempt to interact with them is futile; they seem to be caught in a trance.
6	A stone effigy has been neatly constructed in the center of the tunnel. It is lit by fairly new candles, and the offerings surrounding it are fresh.	12	As the party rounds the corner, they see a cave filled with a massive gold hoard. The long, deep breath of a giant creature reverberates through the chamber.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

D10	ADVENTURE
1	As the party makes camp in a cave, they are approached by a pale elf that claims to have been separated from his group. He asks the party to help him find his way home.
2	A group of kids playing at being adventurers has wandered into the caves and not returned. Their parents are at their wits end, and promise to do anything for whoever returns their children safely.
3	Over the past weeks, several strange-looking dwarfs have been found dead near the entrance of an abandoned cave. Curiously, the dwarves all wear the same red scarf, and all appear to have died from fright. Now, red scarves are turning up in the local villagers' laundry. Someone has to go into the cave and find out what is happening.
4	The emissary of a deep gnome community wants to establish a trade contract with the town nearby. The merchants seek someone to negotiate the details.
5	Strange dreams are harassing the members of a small mining company and are slowly driving them mad. They all dream of a strange pylon structure, deep beneath the earth.
6	A recent cave flooding has washed residue of a rare mineral to the surface. The party is asked to start an expedition to find the source and (hopefully) a rich deposit.
7	A massive stone gate, engraved with strange runes, has appeared on the surface of the rock that was not there before. It is slightly ajar, and the sound of birdsong can be heard coming through it. A single gold coin lies just outside the gate.
8	The earth trembles and a hole opens in the ground, revealing a massive crystal dome beneath.
9	Small tunnels have opened under the houses of a village, and food and livestock have gone missing. Now, a little girl claims that her brother was taken underground by 'the fat man'. Desperate to solve this, the villagers turn to the party for help.
10	The party is approached by a female dwarf who seeks aid. Her sister has taken an oath to defeat a powerful foe that has long-threatened their town. She fears for her sister's life as she is no warrior. Could the party provide backup?

INTRODUCTION

Caves have always held a special place in the imagination; they are seen as dangerous, exciting, mysterious spaces, promising shelter and hidden treasures, or a doorway into another realm. Caves are functional habitats, but can also have cultural or religious significance. They can shield an explorer from the wrath of the elements, or be dangerous frontiers for exploration.

What makes them so alluring? Why do we simply have to go in and have a look around? What are we hoping to find? To make characters want to explore a cave and, in many instances, to risk life and limb whilst doing so, it is imperative to make the cave offer something enticing and worthwhile: enter, and find treasure and adventure within.

Occasionally, it might also just offer, 'enter, and you won't get wet'.

FUNDAMENTALS

A cave is usually a natural tunnel, sometimes with a dead end, or with another exit somewhere else. How they are formed is remarkable, and each means of formation changes how they appear both inside and out.

KARST CAVES

Solution caves, or karst caves, are the most common and complex types of cave systems on Earth. They are formed when groundwater seeps underground via cracks, faults, joints, or other surface openings into the bedrock and gently erodes it. Over geological epochs, small cracks get washed out into large cave systems. Limestone caves are very picturesque, as they are often adorned with cave formations like stalactites and stalagmites.

GLACIER CAVES

Glacier caves are formed near the front of glaciers when their surface meltwater drains downwards through crevasses to the base. These caves usually exist in the form of long tunnels, and are usually tubular conduits with intricately sculptured walls of ice and stone, with floors made of bedrock.

SEA CAVES

Sea caves are formed by wave action along coastlines. Over thousands of years, the constant pounding of the waves erodes the bedrock of sea cliffs, some into small crevices and others into large, bowl-like chambers. Some sea caves can be accessed only by boat during low tide, while others can be accessed by foot, but cut off when the tide comes in.

LAVA CAVES

Lava caves are formed through volcanic activity. When hot liquid lava flows down the slope of a volcano, the surface cools and solidifies. Inside, hot liquid magma continues to flow creating a hard outer shell as it cools. Once the liquid magma drains out, what remains is a cave, called a lava tube. Lava mold caves, rift caves, inflationary caves, and volcanic conduits are also formed by volcanic activity. These caves are often glassy - a result of the extreme temperatures that form them.

FOLLOWING THE WATER

It should be clear by now that most caves are formed by the erosion of existing rock by some material - usually water - so a cave system functions, and is laid out, a bit like a river. When designing your own, think about the point of origin for the water, and then describe how it moved, eroding its way through the rocks downwards. Different small rivers might flow together, and create a network of tunnels. Whenever it hits a bedding plane (especially hard rock or solid surface that does not dissolve as easily as surrounding rock), it either follows the obstacle or bends around it, slowly carving bigger tunnels until it eventually breaks the surface, forming a well or river. Over time, the water might find a different exit, or may simply dry up as the environment changes. The river vanishes, leaving behind a cave. Where trace water can still seep through the ceiling, picking up calcium salts as it does so, it often drips to the ground slowly to form stalactites and stalagmites, although not always.

FUNCTIONS

Caves, as tubes made over thousands of years of patient trickling water action, offer the mystery of the unknown. Traditionally, they promise (or hint at) three things: riches, shelter, and privacy.

RICHES

Caves often reveal things that are normally inaccessible, such as a vein of ore, giant geodes full of gemstones or crystals, or unusual formations that are exclusive to the subterranean world. Whatever they are, the discovery of a nearby cave means less work to plunder these riches. Instead of mining, and having to dig an unnatural cave, a character can simply walk into one that is already there. Furthermore, one of the big difficulties in knowing where to find hidden riches is knowing where to start looking. A cave offers a glimpse into the unseen world, and offers miners a base of operations from which to start their excavations.

SHELTER

Cave entrances offer natural shelter from the weather. Adverse conditions outside seldom affect those within a cave, however the environment itself might be hazardous. Natural gasses, exposed by water erosion, may flood them. Creatures that may have found shelter in the cave previously might now find themselves trapped with the heroes, who bar their exit to freedom.

PRIVACY

A cave is a good campsite and congregating spot because it hides those within. Dark rituals, pacts, clandestine meetings, and all sorts of other secret dealings can take place within a cave that those

outside cannot see. Even campfires can benefit from having their smoke chimney out of the cave, dislocating the smoke from the source and masking the exact location of the campers.

Within caves, our own ancestors produced rock-art, images, ideas and thoughts that far outlived their creators – often by twenty to thirty thousand years or more. This was mainly because the art was hidden away and accessible to only those who knew of its existence.

In all likelihood, any cave that is fairly easy to get to, provides good shelter, is dry, and has been accessible for centuries, is likely to have at least one, if not all of these attractions listed here, and may hint at others who used it for such in the past, with abandoned campfires, shelter for animals long since dead, and possibly some rare ores. Ease of use, when combined with fresh water, make caves a highly sought-after commodity.

EXPANSION

There are hundreds of examples of how natural caves have been used and expanded upon throughout history. If water and time do almost all of the initial work, and all that needs doing is to chip out a few annoying stalactites, then adaptation is an easy choice. Entire communities might make use of naturally occurring caves, and turn them into small villages.

However, caves are full of hazards. If a cave is natural, at no point has anyone designed the structure or taken any steps to make sure it is safe and habitable. Water simply flows downhill and through the path of least resistance. Structural integrity is left for gravity to worry about.

FINESSE

Every cave should have a sense of ascending or descending terrain, depending on where the entry point is. If the cave entrance has been created due to a collapse in the higher areas of a mountain, then the general direction should point downwards. If the entrance is where water from an underground stream surfaces, then the general direction of the cave should point upwards.

COLLAPSED CEILINGS

To make a system more realistic, create narrow, half-collapsed passages and elevated terrasses to reflect the natural look of caves. The bigger a cave cavern is, the more likely the ceiling might have collapsed in parts and formed terrasses of stacked rubble, potentially foreshadowing that further ceiling collapse is possible and a very real threat, or simply providing obstacles to cross or hide behind in ambush.

WATER POCKETS

It is not uncommon to have water pockets in caves, often in combination with a partial collapse of that area. Water seeping from above loosens rock over time, making parts of the cave collapse and form a combination of narrow passages and water pools. There may also be submerged tunnels that lead into an underwater cave section as well. Partially filled caves, or those that are completely flooded, can run for miles with only small sections opening up to reveal precious air pockets.

TUNNEL NETWORKS

As heroes navigate through tunnels, it is likely that they will begin to get a feel for the dangers and opportunities that lie ahead, and start to formulate their strategy for how to proceed. Depending on what kind of mood is intended to be created, tunnel networks can evoke certain emotions. A narrow tunnel feels more claustrophobic and foreboding, while a wide one is more open and expansive. A tunnel system can also be used to introduce hazards or challenges, such as traps, puzzles, or encounters with enemies.

CAVE DOMES

Add a cave dome to a cave location to break the monotony of tunnel systems and set the stage for events that need more space to unfold. These domes can be used to create a sense of wonder and grandeur; the heroes can gaze up at the high, arched ceiling and marvel at the vast expanse of

the cave. Cave domes can be filled with ancient ruins, crystal forests, underground lakes, and settlements of cave-dwelling species. Most importantly, they serve as a great backdrop for dramatic events or encounters, such as battles with powerful enemies or the discovery of valuable treasure.

NATURAL WONDERS

To create a cave system that feels truly epic and fantastical, it is important to include natural wonders that are both visually striking and immerse the heroes in the environment. A forest of stalactites and stalagmites can help to emphasize age and timelessness, while a crystal cave that glistens like the inside of a geode can leave adventurers in awe. Pools of boiling water and geysers can add a sense of danger and excitement to exploration, as well as forecast rising temperatures as heroes delve deeper, suggesting that they are approaching an area of thermal activity or a magma chamber.

UNDERGROUND LAKES

Underground lakes are a visually impressive feature that can be included in a cave system to reveal the presence of underground rivers and streams that flow through a location; something has to be feeding it. These lakes can be filled with either water or lava, and by describing the temperature, smells, and sounds that echo through the lake dome, atmosphere can be generated. In addition to their aesthetic and narrative value, underground lakes can also be used to create gameplay challenges or puzzles. For example, heroes may need to cross the lake using some kind of boat or raft, or find a way to navigate across a lava-flooded section.

DARKNESS

An effective way to play on the claustrophobic strain of being beneath masses of rock and stone is to reduce the remaining senses that keep our characters sane. It goes without saying that caves are usually very, very dark, even more so than space; there are no stars a mile underground. If a light source that the heroes are relying on is destroyed or rendered inoperable, the cave they are exploring becomes infinite. Oftentimes, trapped gasses make the use of open flames highly dangerous, torches run out of fuel, and waterlogged tinder does not hold a flame. Even magical light relies on a caster to remain awake and alert, and the casting and maintenance of it might be all they can focus on.

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

In most cases, those that enter a cave expect to return the same way. Unless there is a known exit elsewhere (or any unknown one) a cave exploration is usually a return trip. Characters may expect to climb up or down, perhaps to boulder or dive, but know that to get out, they most likely have to go back. Does this mean that the point of no return should always be a collapse of the tunnel behind them? This is definitely the easiest method, but it is the most contrived and expected too.

For example, as characters reach the end of a tunnel, a hole opens and they see a small trickle of water that runs down the wall and splashes into a giant pool of water. Peering through the hole, they see that there is a massive cavern at their feet and, looking closely, a shimmering crystal (or other treasure) beneath the water's surface, emanating a faint glow. To get down, they need to jump or tie ropes together. If the height is sufficient, they may not have enough rope, and so they must jump or turn back. If the crystal looks unbelievably valuable, it might lure the characters into taking that one extra step and hope for the best. In the heat of the moment, a scenario such as this can be a great point of no return.

Alternatively, as characters venture deeper into the cave system, a sudden rumble and ruckus behind them draw their attention. Tracking back to investigate, they find that something, or someone, has taken up residence. It may be easier to find an alternative route out than to go back and deal with the intruder.

Given that water forms most caves, rivers are one of the major elements' mining companies tend to attempt to block or divert as quickly as possi-

ble, but their efforts might not have been 100% successful, or may be being undone. Fast flowing rivers can carry characters great distances in little time. If those rivers suddenly turn into waterfalls and drop characters into a pool, they may have no means of getting back up.

The point of no return could be any number of scenarios that forces a change of plan. After that moment, backtracking via the way the heroes came is no longer an option.

Captain Xlhope - hero, savior, and eventual dictator - was killed when a cave collapsed on him.



DESIGNING EPIC CAVES IN FANTASY SETTINGS

Add any of the following features, or use them for inspiration, to create a cave that is clearly not of our world.

HIGH FANTASY

Natural cave systems are sometimes banal holes in the side of a cliff, and sometimes surreal cathedrals of crystal locked away a million miles from sunlight. Fantastical caves can be even more interesting - literally anything is possible.

IN THE BOWELS OF THE EARTH

Gargantuan creatures exist in fantasy worlds, large enough to have whole worlds on their backs... or in their gullets. If such creatures are tricksy and hungry, those who enter into an undiscovered 'cave' may volunteer themselves as a meal. Chambers filled with pools of acid to digest anything that falls in might clue heroes in, and chambers that close behind them to seal them in a definite warning. They might find the remains of partially digested beings, with an unknown cause of death. If all these hints remain unheeded, they may find themselves walking into a large chamber where whatever organic material makes it this far is finally broken down and absorbed, and they are likely to be in trouble. Like all biological beings however, the gargantuan cave being must have some means of excreting what it has no value for - metals, for example. Perhaps a series of rivers tumble over waterfalls, filtering anything of value to be digested whilst everything else is passed along. Perhaps this could be a means of escape, though is unlikely to be a pleasant one.

SLIP IN THE BACK

Legend is replete with stories of caves that lead into the underworld. These entrances - or backdoors - are often heavily veiled in secrecy and, even if found, are often heavily protected, not only at the entrance but also throughout their passage. Some mystics and keepers of sacred lore claim

to know how to reach these caves, but warn of unknowable dangers within, typically monsters that represent things from the real-world. A twisted ferryman, multi-headed rabid dogs, canine-head judges, and incorporeal beings capable of seeing into the soul are just a few examples of things that skulk in these passages.

ONE CAVE TO TRAVEL THROUGH ALL

Rumors abound that some caves are so interconnected that it is possible to cover the entire continent without ever emerging. If these caves do indeed exist, perhaps they could be utilized to move undetected to any location of a traveler's choosing, sheltered from outside weather conditions. Secret to the wider populace, no known maps exist, any symbols or signage within are likely to be obscure, and those that frequent the passages might ensure they are dangerous to access. If any particular group has discovered them, they are likely to want the secret kept.

NULL AND VOID

Voids are not caves but are simply places where there is an absence of rock. This may seem an odd distinction, but it is a distinction nonetheless. Voids do not form stalactites or stalagmites, are perfectly smooth around the edges, and do not erode. Theories vary on what causes a void, but a sudden, perfectly smooth cave should be a warning. Voids collapse easily and temporarily shift rock out of their current dimension, into another, and might shift them back at any time, appearing and then disappearing just as quickly. Anything in a void when it collapses is either squashed flat, merged with the rock that fills it, or sent to whatever plane of existence it was formed in.

UNDERFELL

What makes a cave, in a world of caves, different? As one ventures deeper into the Underfell, the caves must change to remain interesting and engaging. Venture deep enough underground - beyond the range of what is possible on our planet - and gravity becomes malleable.

LASTING IMPRESSION

Massive creatures that roamed the world before the time of elves and dwarves (or whatever populate your world) died. Their bones were covered and turned into fossils. Those fossils in turn were eroded and left behind magical caves that echo the thunderous noises these beasts used to make. Whole chambers might be curiously rib-shaped, or skull-like forms made entirely out of crystal might loom out of the darkness and frighten the unwary spelunker.

KEEP IN THE LOOP

As caves wind their way around the core of the planet, gravity shifts this way and that, causing them to loop around one another in bizarre helixes. Over time, cave walls erode, and two separate caves sometimes join mid-spiral. This can cause caves to twist around themselves, join in the middle, and loop back upon themselves. Should

such a twisted cave system be tunneled into from the outside, a confusing, and potentially deadly, experience awaits.

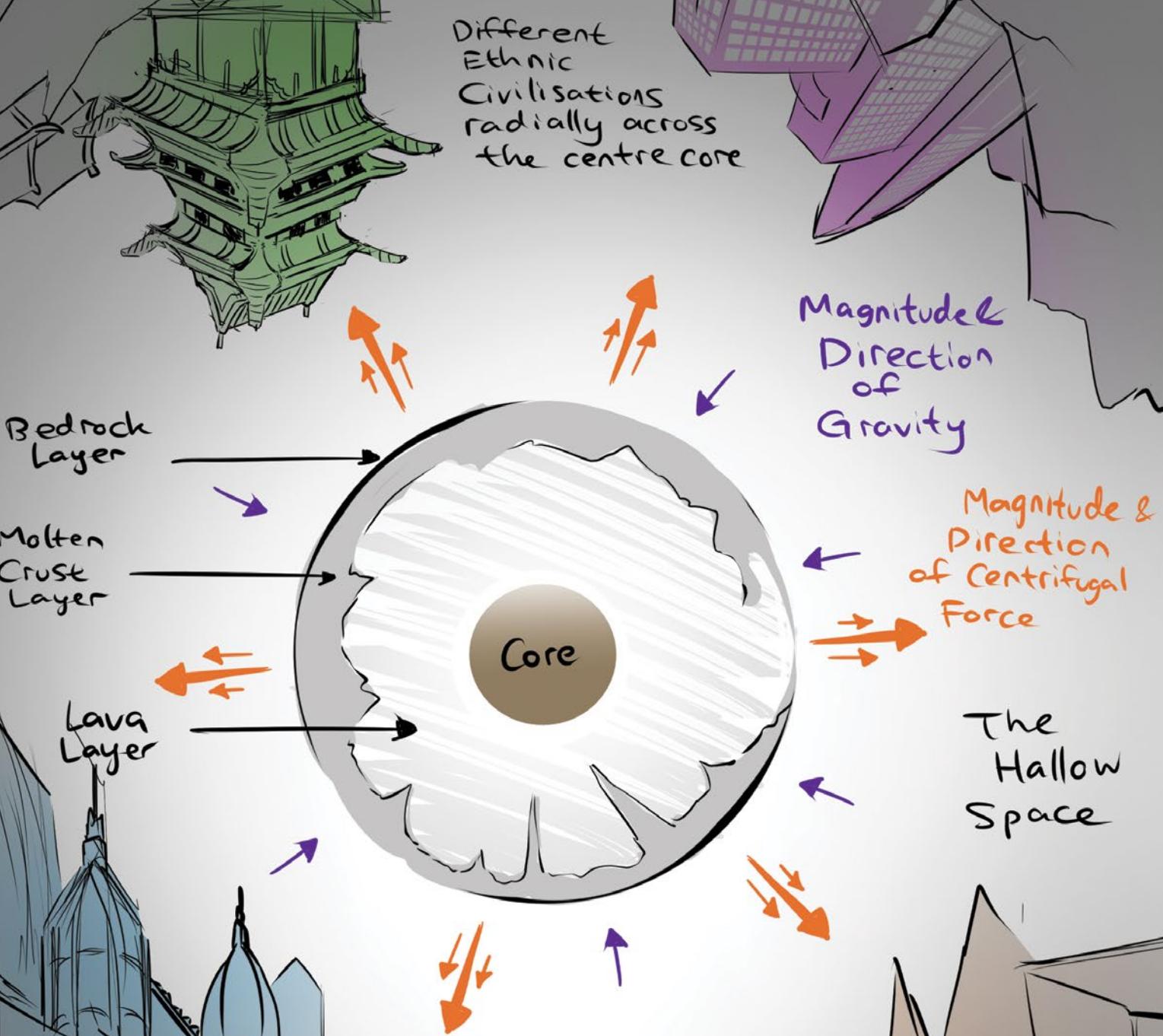
FITFUL PEAKS

The landscape in the Underfell is alien to a casual observer: an endless expanse of rock and stone, stretching out in every direction, rugged and scarred by centuries of geological activity and the constant flow of underground water. Massive rock outcroppings tower like mountains inside of caves. However, due to the reversed gravity in some places, these mountains twist and turn and form hour-glass shapes and can stretch from one side of the cavern to the other.

IF YOU CAN STOMACH IT

Underfell mushrooms feed in a unique way: they secrete digestive enzymes onto the ground around their base and then reabsorb all the resulting nutrients, like having a stomach is the outside of its body. There are many areas where great pools of this digestive enzyme amalgamate in caves, breaking down anything organic that comes into contact with them. Adventurers must be careful where they lay their bedroll.





HOLLOW EARTH IS A CONCEPT THAT STATES THAT THE CORE OF THE EARTH IS HOLLOW WITH A SINGLE SPHERE OF HIGHLY CHARGED PLASMA AT ITS VERY CENTER. THIS CREATES A TOTALLY NEW ENVIRONMENT FULL OF FLORA, FAUNA, AND NEW CIVILIZATIONS THAT LIVE IN PERPETUAL DAY AS THE PLASMA CONTINUOUSLY GIVES OFF HEAT AND LIGHT.

F Fey Domain

As the Fey Domain as a whole is an exaggerated representation of nature and its beauty, so too the cave systems mirror and subvert that of the Material. The strangeness and beauty of cave systems is only magnified here; they are truly exceptional.

IM-PRISMED

Those that are lucky enough to find it can witness a Fey cave lined with sparkling crystals of various sizes and shapes, ranging from delicate, needle-like formations to massive, glittering clusters. The colors range from bright white to deep, saturated purple and green, depending on the minerals present in the particular cluster. Deeper in, the crystals are denser and more spectacularly sized, creating a dazzling display of light and color. The cave floor is polished smooth by the centuries, and is a gleaming canvas onto which light from the entrance is scattered, prismsed into rainbows and reflected for great distances to illuminate spaces buried far from the sun.

ENOUGH TO MAKE YOU BLUSH

The 'roots' of fungi, called mycelium, spread out around them in large, shallow webs. Blushing mycelium is common in Fey cave systems, and is unusual in that it glows with an intense, blue light when compacted. When trodden on, it suddenly glows brightly. Often nicknamed 'thieves' pain', due to the propensity of Fey denizens to utilize it as a natural intruder alarm, the glow is even brighter in the darkness of a cave.

STEAMY SITUATION

In the center of every cave in a collected network lies a thermal pool, each with its own unique characteristics. Some of the pools are small and shallow, with water that is a bright, turquoise-blue. Others are deep and wide, with water that is a rich, dark-green. Much warmer than the caves they are in, dense clouds of steam rise from the pools and fill the air with a distinct, mineral-rich smell. In the most central cave, the pool has an intense glow, as if the water itself is made of light, and bathes the cave in a strange luminescence, reflected by the sparkling crystals and stalactites that hang from the ceiling.

ART IMITATES LIFE

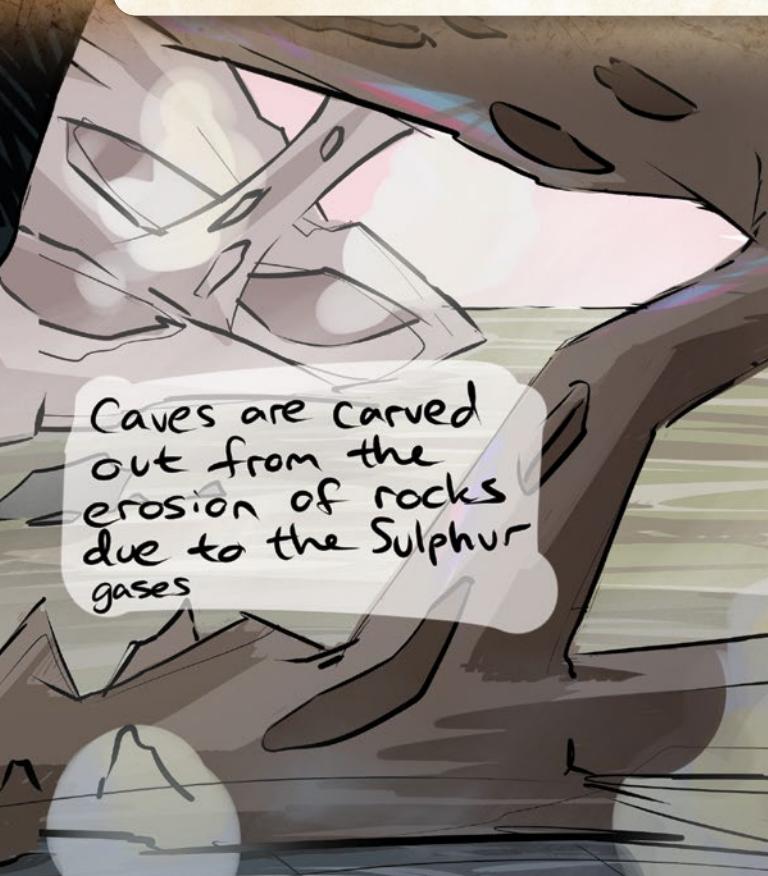
In the Fey, magic is organic, flowing through and around all things, and caves tend to channel magical currents along their length. This is how some rationalize the existence of Artu Men. Cave art, delicately drawn and innocently recording events from the past, becomes infused with these currents, allegedly, and the figures depicted become Artu Men. It is not clear if they are truly alive or merely animated drawings but, in some caves, whole tribes of men and women are witnessed hunting ancient animals across rocky plains of colored chalk and paint. Seemingly, Artu Men cannot leave the confines of their stony walls, but legends speak of extra figures being mysteriously added to existing artworks, and adventurers that do not return home.

THE HELLS

The Hells are not nice places. The caves, however, can sometimes offer a place of respite from the burning infernos and frigid cold that dominate. Sometimes.

HELL HATH SULPHUR-Y

Some hellish caves reek of rotten eggs and are coated in yellow powder which burns exposed skin like fire. Massive clouds of poison gas erupt from vents and billow out into the open; anything caught within them is instantly blinded as it burns mucus membranes. Those foolish enough to breathe it in have their lungs scorched to cinders.



MEMORY LANE

As a party of adventurers explores a cave system in the Hells, they might come across a wall of smooth, black obsidian. Wandering further into the cave, these walls screen images from a traveler's past, a slideshow of memories, but always twisting reality and highlighting hatred, loathing, repulsion, and fear. Family members are depicted as vile liars secretly harboring hate for their relatives, and caring lovers are shown as two-faced adulterers who plot their partner's downfall. No memory is safe, and the barrage of falsehoods are so realistic and relentless that it can leave wanderers wondering which memories are true, and which are but fiction.

A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

There are only a few caves in the Hells that offer any kind of relief but, of course, at a cost - this is the Hells, after all. Small domes in these caves contain, somehow, trapped fresh surface air. The domes are usually seven feet above the ground but, luckily, stalagmites often form in rings underneath them. Anyone tall enough that climbs one large enough might be able to stick their head into a pocket of fresh air and smell the sweet scent of home. Sadly, the stalagmites are razor-sharp and can cut through steel, so ascending them is a dangerous affair, and staying atop even more so, as they slowly shred the climber's skin.

TO INFINITY AND BEYOND

Some infernal caves simply have no end; they twist and turn infinitely, never changing, never yielding. Even if the hopeful turn back to try and retrace their steps, they discover that there is no exit. The caves become their whole existence, pitch black and unending. It is said that only those that truly repent their every sin and find ultimate peace can find a way out.

SHADOW REALM

Caves within the Shadow Realm seem, to all appearances, to simply be darker, deeper holes. This is partially true, but caves in the Shadows are almost never empty. What little protection caves provide from the outside is almost always exploited by the inhabitants of the Realm.

NOT MUSH-ROOM FOR MANEUVER

Accessing the Shadow Realm can prove difficult, but some caves are conduits that link the Shadow Realm to other worlds. These caves are often identified by the unusual growth of blood fungus. This red fungus glows with a faint, orange tinge, though it is usually hidden by rocks and detritus outside of the cave. The caves themselves are often rather shallow, but the back is where the magic happens. Planar doorways are covered in a black, skin-like substance with veins that pump a black, oil-like substance across its surface. Often, this membrane is warm to the touch, prompting the aforementioned fungal growth, and very tough, but it can be cut with a sharp blade made of cold steel. It is able to heal itself rapidly, so any holes close up within seconds, leaving anyone climbing through the weeping wound in a transitional space between realms.

MY GODS, IT'S FULL OF WORLDS...

A proliferation of blood fungus can also indicate another phenomenon. In some caves, the floor in parts is as smooth as glass and transparent, often covered in a thick layer of ash and dust which obscures its true nature. Due to the lensing effect of the crystal in the floor, from certain angles observers can see images of other planes. The

crystal is incredibly hard, and there are no known ways of breaking it. Many theorize that the below are tiny holes into other worlds, similar to the planar doorways of other caves, and that the crystal merely acts as a magnifying lens. If this is true, even if one could get through the crystal, the doorway would be so small as to be unusable.

OPEN WIDE

Ash dens have wide-open mouths where, over centuries, ash and other drifting material collects in deep pools across the floor. Over time, the ash compacts under the weight of that above it, turning it into a hard but brittle substance. Applying any weight shatters it: a terrible fate for any stepping onto what appears to be a solid floor, but that transforms into a giant bed of razor-sharp shards.

HEAD OUT ON THE HIGHWAY

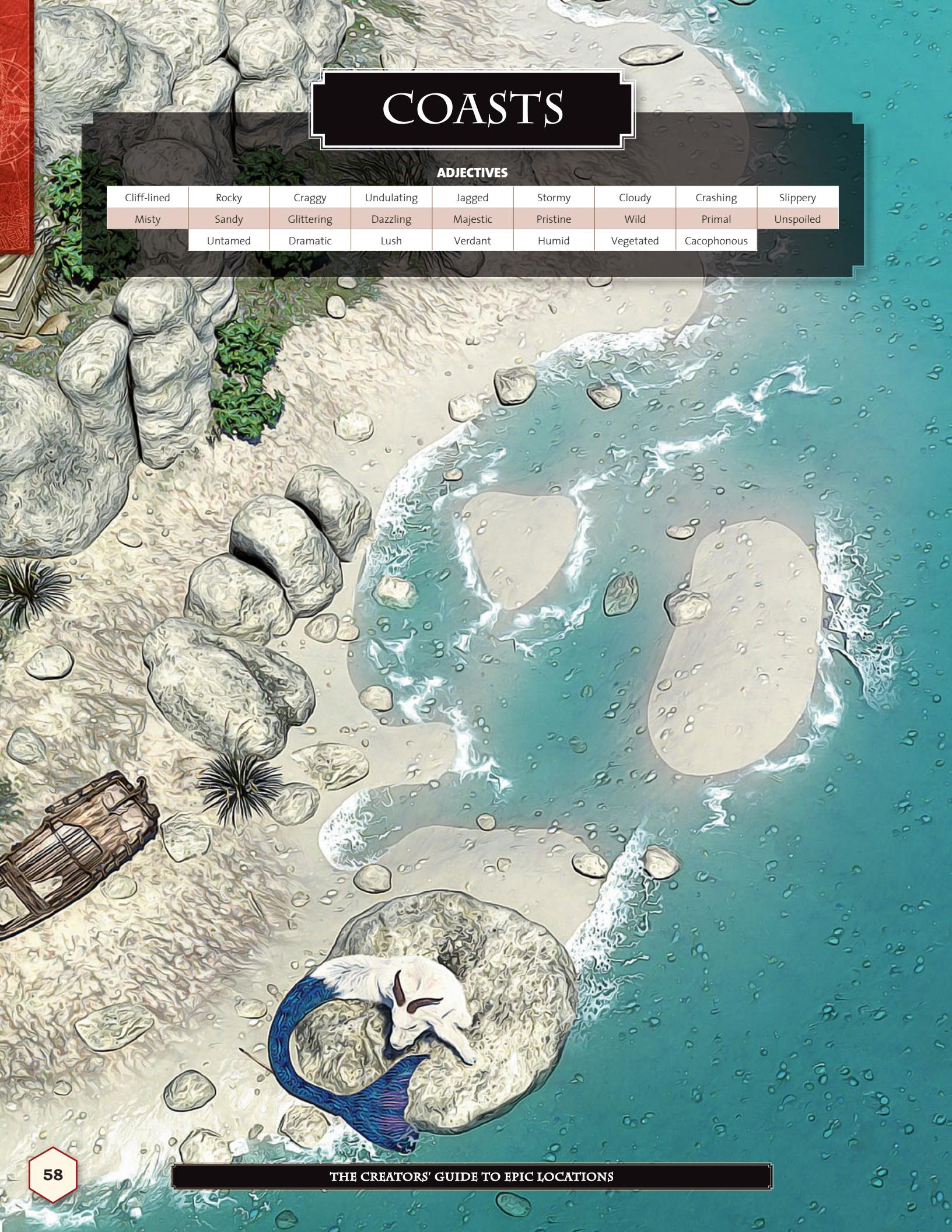
Many caves in the Shadow Realm are constructed and then abandoned. Most are originally designed as highways – a direct (or as direct as possible) point of connection to another part of the Shadows, or to another realm. Multiple caves across the landscape, in fact, connect with one another, though how one would work out where each leads is unknown. What is known is that these highways have built-in guardians. The walls appear to be covered in vines from long-forgotten plants, perhaps that grew after the abandonment; however, the vines are very intentional, and are all linked to a central nervous system with an awareness of what is happening in every tunnel its vine-like appendages extend to. What happens to that information is another mystery.

- EVERY CAVE SHOULD HAVE A SENSE OF ASCENDING OR DESCENDING TERRAIN, DEPENDING ON WHERE THE ENTRY POINT IS. -

COASTS

ADJECTIVES

Cliff-lined	Rocky	Craggy	Undulating	Jagged	Stormy	Cloudy	Crashing	Slippery
Misty	Sandy	Glittering	Dazzling	Majestic	Pristine	Wild	Primal	Unspoiled
Untamed	Dramatic	Lush	Verdant	Humid	Vegetated	Cacophonous		



INSPIRATION

SENSES

SIGHT	The monotonous rhythm of the waves rolling in is broken only by a few brave rocks.	An array of colorful sea life darts around in the clear, blue waters.	Varying in tone from light turquoise to dark blue, the water stretches out before you.	The horizon is devoid of anything but a few low-flying clouds.
SMELL	The air is filled with the salty, briny smell of the ocean.	The light, refreshing smell of cool mist washes over the shore.	Smells of salt and seaweed, eye-wateringly strong, define this stretch.	Pungent odors of various rotten fish hang in the air.
SOUND	The gentle rhythm of the surf splashing against the sand seems unending.	Stark cries from seagulls punctuate the distant rumble of the waves.	You hear the creaking of masts and the splash of oars as boats sail by.	Little waves quietly lap at the shore, and a serene calmness covers the beach.
TOUCH	Gritty sand, stuck between your toes, stabs a thousand tiny daggers with each step.	Sea spray dampens your hair and clothes.	The slippery rocks in the tide pools are as treacherous as any trap.	Slimy seaweed tickles, tugs, and clings to your ankles, as you wade through the shallows.
TASTE	Brine, somehow sweet yet overpoweringly salty, is a constant here.	Desiccating seaweed fills the air with the taste of old nori-cakes.	Somehow, this place tastes of sand: gritty, crunchy, and salty.	The dryness of the seawater when swallowed is quickly chased by the rank bile that accompanies retching.

QUICK ENCOUNTERS

D12	ENCOUNTER	D12	ENCOUNTER
1	A myriad of small, white, eyeless crabs emerge out of the water and start singing a haunting song.	7	Patches of seaweed that have been washed ashore start to move and form strange, shambling creatures that close in on the party.
2	A giant wounded sea monster is spotted off the coast.	8	As the waves splash against the rocks, water elementals start to emerge and try to dig out the sand from the tidal pools.
3	A massive fog bank rolls towards the shoreline, the silhouette of a ghost ship visible within.	9	A coven of sea hags is standing, ankle-deep, in a tidepool, performing a disturbing ritual.
4	An enormous wave crashes upon the land and, as it retracts, reveals a group of beautiful, otherworldly warriors standing on the shore.	10	A warband of merfolk asks the heroes if they have seen a giant octopus. It is wanted for treason.
5	A hunting party of turtlefolk encounters the party and lays claim to the hunting grounds of this area.	11	The water is full of sharks all slowly swimming about, for no apparent reason.
6	A sudden melody, as if sung by a soprano of incredible talent, drifts across the waves. When they break, only a seal remains on the rocks.	12	A rocky cliff, halfway submerged in the water, turns out to be a camouflaged dragon, hunting in this area.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

D10	ADVENTURE
1	The party discovers a glass bottle containing a small, wooden ship. A small gold coin is also wedged into the bottle. If the cork is removed, all characters within fifteen feet of the bottle are transported onto the ship, which is being racked in a terrible storm.
2	Four merfolk rise out of the water. They need landwalkers to settle a dispute: who is the most beguiling of their captive sirens? In reality, they are all sirens in disguise, simply luring adventurers to their deaths. If the party cannot pick up on the clues, it could spell their doom.
3	A sandcastle has emerged, fully formed, out of the beach overnight. It is garrisoned by several hundred tiny folk who declare war on any that attempt to even walk across 'their' bit of the coastline.
4	An ent, composed entirely of coral, lies dying on the sand. It was ambushed by sea elves who have a cave nearby. The ent wants revenge, and offers the location of the cave if the party agrees to teach the elves a lesson.
5	A great number of large sharks are gathering in the area. Midnight sacrifices are being made by a local mad priest, hurling victims into the sea for the sharks, and the townsfolk believe the sacrifices are necessary to protect the town. One morning, the party awakens to find one of their number missing.
6	A ship has crashed upon the beach, and every member of the crew is missing. The next day, tickets for passage aboard the ship are delivered to the party. That evening, the ship departs and, unbeknownst to those aboard, it is bound for the Hells.
7	A delegation of turtlefolk is seeking to have a section of the beach cordoned off and made off-limits. The local inhabitants do not want that to happen, and entreat the party to negotiate with them.
8	Strange lights have been sighted under the waves at night. Sea elves are planning an invasion of the land, and are signaling to one another with light-emitting eels. Their invasion hinges upon a unique once-in-a-generation tidal event. The party may be able to stop it if they appeal to the goddess of the ocean.
9	A water dragon has taken up residence in a nearby grotto. It demands tribute from all passing ships – an extortionate amount, more than most can afford. A collective of merchants is offering a bounty for the dragon's head.
10	Lobster folk are abducting local fishers, and dragging them to the depths to cook them on thermal vents on the ocean floor. Their widows, widowers, and orphans have tried to stop them, but cannot stay underwater long enough to have an impact. They offer to reward anyone that helps them with a title and a magnificent pearl.

INTRODUCTION

A coastline is the area where land meets a body of liquid. Typically, this is either a lake or sea. The coastal zone is a region where the interaction of the sea with the land affects the geology and vegetation of the area.

In many cases, these areas are in a constant state of flux, with water rising and lowering throughout the day. A section which may be exposed to air one hour is suddenly submerged the next. Furthermore, as water carries sediment to or from, these areas can change shape over time as cliffs are eroded away, beaches are expanded or plundered, and deposits built up over time.

FUNDAMENTALS

Coasts that front the open sea or ocean are referred to as pelagic coasts, whereas sheltered ones where the surrounding land masses provide some protection from the greater body of water are often referred to as bays, or natural harbors. A shore generally describes the part of the location where the water meets the land, regardless of whether it is an ocean, a sea, a lake, or a river. If the shore area is predominantly covered with sand, it is called a beach; of course, pebbles, stones, shells, volcanic rock, and all manner of other substances, and not just sand, can form a beach too.

There are many different types of coasts, more so than those detailed below, and each has a unique shape and features. All coasts, however, act as transitional zones between the land and the water.

RIA COASTS AND FJORDS

In mountainous regions that abut the sea, rivers that flow into them via valleys can flood (or be flooded) by rising sea levels. This results in a steep, cliff-edged estuary often called a ria coast. Common around glaciers, valleys cut by retreating glaciers form fjords, which are similar to ria coasts. The effect is the same – high walled estuaries, full of life.

BARRIER ISLANDS

Barrier islands consist of a low ridge of sand, usually created by waves and tidal movement, found a short distance from the coast. As more sand is stacked upon these ridges, islands start to form, and winds fortify them with dunes. Lagoons form behind these islands, a broad expanse of shallow water where tidal deposits get washed in and start to settle, forming a rich environment for fauna and flora. In places where the tides create inlets, strong currents flow back and forth throughout.

DELTA

Deposits of sand, silt, and clay are transported through streams or rivers until they meet a larger

body of water, like a lake or sea. As the current is slowed by the standing water, the deposits settle, stacking up until they create new land. Blocked by those deposits, the river is forced to divide and subdivide into more and more channels, called tributaries, forming the iconic delta shapes of such coastal zones.

VOLCANIC COASTS

Volcanic coasts arise where deposits of lava and ash flow from active volcanoes into the ocean. As the fresh deposits cool off and harden, waves erode them, creating low cliffs. Beaches and cliff shores are typically narrow, steep, and composed of fine particles of the extrusive rock, oftentimes formed of black sand and rock.

CORAL REEFS

Coral reefs are unique because the new coastland is made by living organisms. As coral and algae grow together, their secretions form deposits of carbonate minerals that make up the main structure of the reef. When an old coral colony dies, new colonies are formed on top of them. Sand slowly builds up until a new island emerges. As reefs are often close to land, these can create unusual bays and coastlines.

WAVES AND CURRENTS

The most common type of waves are on the surface, caused by winds. As the water gets pushed towards the rising land, the water builds up and forms the typical wave crests. When coastlines have longer shores, the waves have more room to disperse, often resulting in less chaotic water movement. When coasts have cliffs and/or short shore faces, there is little room for the wave to be dispersed, so the energy breaking against the cliffs is higher, causing the water to be more chaotic, with swirls and currents forming underwater.

FUNCTIONS

Coastlines that are protected from rough seas or winds, especially those that are broad or firm, make excellent places for settlements. Coastlines that are treacherous, narrow, steep, or simply exposed to the elements, are usually forlorn, abandoned places.

PORT CITIES

Consider, when creating a coastal location, that if an area would qualify for a port, a port should exist, or should be beginning to exist. Coastlines offer such an overabundance of advantages over landlocked locations that most settlement-building species congregate on a coast first before moving inland, or on a riverbank and move outwards. However, certain requirements must be met for a small fishing village to spring up, and yet more for an initial settlement to grow into a major port city.

GEOGRAPHY

If a village is located in a place that has a natural bay (a protected area), and if the water in the bay is deep enough to dock larger trading ships (typically, those in excess of 20 feet deep) it has the potential to become a port.

Further considerations include whether there is a river flowing into the bay, allowing river trade to be combined with sea trade. This only enhances the creation of a trading hub. Is there enough space on the surrounding land to allow for the expansion of the city? Large bayous or swamp locations near the bay might render it very difficult to build large structures. This is not to say these settlements cannot or will not grow; they just might not do so as fast as others.

RESOURCES

An accessible and ready supply of freshwater is arguably the most important resource settlements must account for once a suitable bay is found. A forest nearby also allows for food provisioning and building materials for an initial settlement. Areas of plains, or the foothills of mountains, can provide great grazing and arable land for farming to sustain the city, especially in times of limited trade.

COASTAL WARFARE

As Vikings showed, the capability to attack from the sea is a highly effective way to raid and plunder settlements. Where palisades and walls are easily constructed to fend off landbound raiders, protecting a settlement against seabound attacks is much harder. If enemies attack with ships, having a dedicated naval defensive force becomes a necessity.

HOSTILE COASTS

Where shallow reefs, treacherous rock formations, or sheer cliffs proliferate, a coast becomes very dangerous. Due to wave action, cliffs or banks made of soft rock (sandstone, chalk, or mud composites) can quickly be washed away or collapse, making walking on their edge singularly dangerous. Lighthouses, or some other kind of warning system, may be installed to warn ships of the deadly nature of the coast. These same warning systems, however, can be subverted and turned into traps – offering safe harbor when none exists in the hopes of dashing the ships upon the rocks and then plundering the wreckage.



FINESSE

When characters venture into a coastal area, it is important that they understand the underlying narrative that has been created for them. Depending on their geographical region, the waters might be warm and invitingly turquoise, and golden sunsets might offer zephyr-induced dreams; perhaps there is a roaring tourist trade. Coastal areas can be places of leisure, refuge, and safety, or danger and terror.

SAFETY AND PLENTY

A coastal location which is part of a bay is almost certainly going to be a site for canoes, ships, or animal visits, even once in a while, and must feature some broad stretches where ‘beaching’ (driving a boat or body up onto sand to keep it from being dragged back out to sea) can happen.

Where safe harbor is not possible, a coast might instead offer the benefit of easy fishing – small lagoons, formed by shallow reefs, trap fish and other marine life that are rich for the picking. High tide and low tide might be extreme, offering intertidal pools full of sea life easy to gather. Other resources, in the form of flotsam (material that unintentionally ends up in the sea, like wood from shipwrecks) and jetsam (items deliberately jettisoned from a ship, such as to lighten its load) might regularly wash up on the shore, and provide multiple kinds of resources and materials, though these are not predictable or consistent. Wood may be readily available for construction or as a source of fuel for fires. What other treasures might wash up?

TERROR

In hostile coastal areas, shipwrecks can form bizarre graveyards offering lost treasure but also peril. All ships are wrecked for a reason, most commonly sharp rocks, unusual tides, or false bays. False bays are sometimes temporary; sand-banks isolate the bay from the waves beyond, only to be washed away with the next tide, opening the bay up to all manner of violent weather. Alternatively, the bay might offer protection from the surrounding expanse of water, but contain something far more dangerous, such as whirlpools, unpredictable backwash, or strong currents.

RIPTIDES

Sometimes just called rips, these are unusual currents that form between waves and run perpendicular to the coast. Anyone crossing the rip is suddenly pulled out to sea, rather than pushed towards land (as is usual with wave currents). Rips transport most floating material out as far as

the waves originate, and thereafter disperse, the current eventually vanishing. They are often very powerful, and inexperienced swimmers often fail to swim against the pull.

UNDERTOW

This occurs wherever there is wave action across the planet; water pushed ashore must withdraw at some point. It does this by flowing underneath the waves, creating a counter current. The undertow is usually half as strong as the wave action, but can – in some unusual circumstances – be very strong.

SPRING AND NEAP TIDES

Depending on how many moons a world has, what kind of alignment those moons undergo, and the size of the planet, the effects of the tides may be significantly greater or lesser. On Earth, with only one moon and one fairly small sun, spring tides occur when the moon and the sun are in alignment with the planet, making high tides reach even higher, and storms larger and more powerful. On the opposite side of the planet to where a spring tide occurs is a neap tide, where there is almost no gravitational influence from the sun and moon, and water is not influenced at all. Multiple suns or moons, or those of different sizes, can have significant effects, or can cancel one another out, depending on their orbits.

The effects of vast tidal differences create broader stretches of different biomes, with more intertidal zones, wider barren beaches and foliage that is further away from the water. Where there is limited tidal variation, there are likely to be no intertidal zones, narrow beaches, and foliage that almost meets the wave line.

TAR PITS, PITCH LAKES, AND ASPHALT FIELDS

Treacherous and deadly – not exclusive to coastal regions, but most commonly found in them – tar pits, pitch lakes, and asphalt fields usually form above tectonic fault lines. These can be dangerously deep and are horrendously sticky. Some are cooler near the edges, and so can be walked upon, but towards the center the surface gets very soft until it turns into a viscous, oily liquid. As nothing can grow on the surface, there is seldom anything to grab or hold onto, and failure to get free after an exhausting struggle typically leads to suffocation, once submerged. Living creatures that perish expel most of the gasses from their corpses, causing them to sink into the oil to be preserved for thousands of years.

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

One of the most perilous events that happens, and regularly, on a coastline, is a tidal change. What is one minute a wide-open highway of beach suddenly becomes an isolated, ever-shrinking death-trap, cut off from the mainland and surrounded by powerful hidden currents ready to drag any hapless swimmer out into raging waters.

Sandbars emerge during low-tide or neap tides, and can offer security and safety. As tides last for several hours (depending on planetary size, rotational speed, distance from the sun, number of moons, and other factors), they may seem ideal campsites. As the tide changes, however, sandbars can become quickly isolated from the shore and, at high tide, be completely submerged by feet of water.

Spring tides can push water ever further inland, completely cutting off any hope of return. This is particularly dangerous when a stretch of wide beach is backed by high, unscalable cliffs. As the tide changes, the beach becomes narrow and can end up being submerged. With no place to go, heroes might suddenly find themselves washed out to sea, or simply cut off from others.

Other stretches of seemingly open or shallow water can hide dangerous mudflats. These are large bodies of super-soft mud, sometimes merely loosely packed sand suspended in water (often referred to as quicksand). Contrary to popular culture, neither quicksand nor mud can suck a buoyant object under the surface. Objects do indeed sink, but reach their natural buoyancy value and simply float - so the risk of drowning or suffocating is minimal. However, the risk of exhaustion is a very real and present threat. Due

to the difficult nature of the ground (thick mud or quicksand), creatures that struggle can easily exhaust themselves to a point where they cannot keep their heads (and, most importantly, airways) above the surface, and so sink and then drown.

Thus, the point of no return is when coastal change forces a decision that there is no coming back from. After that moment, water, currents, cliffs, or a myriad other dangers leave heroes no other choice than to stick to their current course.



Cannis, dedicated guard, never left his post during the great Crustatia War.

DESIGNING EPIC COASTS IN FANTASY SETTINGS

Add any of the following features, or use them for inspiration, to create a coast that is clearly not of our world.

HIGH FANTASY

Otherworldly looking and feeling coasts exist in our own world already; beaches that consist only of shells, white cliffs that crash down into the waves, and unusual, hexagonal stones, submerged in water, all boggle the mind. What then can make a coast yet more fantastical?

ELEVATOR PITCH

Some blowholes are huge, regular, and not as dramatic as many other blowholes that scatter the coasts of the world. These in particular are not, as is usual, induced by wave action, but rather by a curious tidal event that pushes water up from an aquifer below the surface of the world and into these channels. The water rises at a constant speed of a few feet a second. Anything in the blowhole is gently pushed upwards, to be deposited out on top. Various cultures make use of these aquatic elevators by building wooden platforms that sit perfectly within the blowhole tube, and rise perfectly up and down at convenient intervals.

REACH OUT AND TOUCH FACE

Most rock pools are only visible at low-tide, and most are harmless, but some exist on the most hazardous of coasts and, astonishingly, are the most hazardous for ships. Not water but the souls of the drowned linger in these pools and, at low tide, reach out of them, their ghostly, rotting hands clawing at anything that passes. Their goal is not to consume the living - just to touch them - for, in doing so, they can transfer their memories so they cannot be forgotten. Some coastal civili-

zations employ dedicated pool remembrancers, who attend to the pools on a weekly basis to quiet the dead and reassure them that their memory is being kept alive.

FROZEN FRACTALS ALL AROUND

Treacherous coasts have cost many a sailor their life, but this one in particular is dangerous. At night, the water solidifies into a glass-like structure. Most of the sea-life know and flee this event, migrating away from the shoreline before the sun sets. Those too slow to leave, or those that bathe after sunset, find themselves trapped within it. Half-submerged creatures must be excavated with hammer and chisel, and quickly; the glass expands over time, crushing anything within it. By morning, life and movement returns to the water, as if nothing was ever amiss.

WHAT A DRAG

Just as some of the most picturesque coasts of our world experience massive tidal changes, this fantastical coast too offers miles of beautiful beaches, baked by a warm sun. Every six hours however, the tide changes and, when high, the beautiful beaches are completely covered by twenty feet of water that stretches inland by a mile or more. These extreme tides can drag all manner of debris with them, both inland and out to sea, depending on the tide's flow. Pools of trapped tidal water are often discovered miles inland, and taken as warning to any crossing the flat, tidal plain.

UNDERFELL

Oceans certainly exist in the Underfell, and massive lakes are not uncommon. The coasts of these places are desolate and dark, and the waves that break upon the sands are cold and black.

DEFYING GRAVITY

The surface of all large bodies of water in the Underfell are turbulent, twisted into unusual shapes by the conflicting forces of gravity between the planet's core and its centrifugal forces. The waves are tall and jagged, crashing against the shore with a force that seems almost primal. If they get too high, then suddenly they are pulled across the sky to crash into the opposite land – sometimes causing flooding, sometimes landing in other bodies of water. As a result, there are no tides, but complex patterns of water movement that only the most experienced sailors know how to utilize.

THIS IS THE PITS

Tar pits are tricksy enough on the world's surface, but most in the Underfell are covered with a layer of shallow water. At first glance, a pit has the appearance of a large lake but, once the surface is broken, the thick, sucking, and viscous tar is quick to trap anything that attempts to bathe, swim, or

take a drink. As with tar pits on the surface, these too attract all kinds of scavengers, hoping that it is someone else's unlucky day.

FEEL THE SURGE

The Underfell is prone to aquifer collapse. These large, naturally occurring water cisterns in the bedrock can easily crack open and dump millions of tons of water into the caves below or around them. Even a minor earthquake can prompt the deluge; one moment a lake is calm and still, the next it has risen by sixty feet and become a new aquifer, as the older one nearby drains into it.

CREAM OF MUSHROOM SOUP

Whilst oil and tar might seem like the worst fluids imaginable to go for a swim in, nothing compares to a fungsea: a large body of rotten mushroom. Once fungal forests, something happened that caused the mushrooms to collapse and liquify. The stagnant pool left behind is riddled with mycelial roots that still secret enzymes with the purpose of trying to dissolve everything nearby. Thus, this putrid, black body of liquid reeks of rotten mushrooms and is deadlier than an acid pool.

FHEY DOMAIN

The beauty of the Fey Domain is made even more dramatic by the waves and waters found in the region. Not all the water, however beautiful it might be, is good for you, however.

BECAUSE THE SEA WEED

In certain Fey lagoons and seas, the waves that play along the shore are highly sensitive to the emotions of those in or near the water. As a result, these places are often used to determine if someone is telling the truth, truly in love, or feeling a dark emotion. The waves are often bright blue for someone who is happy, sickly green for someone who is jealous - whole tomes have been written detailing small changes of hue and what they signify. Most often, they are blush pink: the lagoons are popular with strolling lovers.

WHATEVER FLOATS YOUR FLOAT

The rocks on a certain beach in the Fey Domain have grown silicaphobic – they are repulsed by the silica usually found in beach sand. Because of this, the rocks float a few inches above the ground. They can be moved easily and, oftentimes, children stack these 'floats' on top of one another to

create floating platforms from which to leap into the water from.

PARTING THE SEA

An odd phenomenon occurs in certain Fey Domain lakes: the water is repulsed by heat. It will crash upon an empty or cold shore with abandon, but will avoid landfall if a warm body approaches. This means that an intrepid explorer can walk right across a lake; the water frantically scrambles out of the way, forming a wide, damp avenue across the bed.

SPIRALING

Waves which form during a full moon, on most bodies of water in the Fey, withdraw from the beach in tiny swirls called 'spirillia', describing intricate mandala patterns upon the sands, each said to be unique. Sprillians – trained spirilla interpreters - claim to be able to read the shapes left in the sand, understand what the water is feeling or doing, and identify when someone or something new is in the water or on the opposite shore. Rumors abound that the spirilla can be used to communicate with distant beaches.

THE HELLS

What coasts exist in the infernal places of the world? Several, each as hopeless and desolate as the next. None offer seaside views and sweeping palm vistas.

DON'T LET RIP

The blood-red waters of the Hells are never friendly, but some at the coast seem particularly mean-spirited. Rip waves appear shallow and unassuming until a victim gets too close to the water's edge. Then, the waves suddenly grow to ten feet tall and crash down with terrible force. Making matters worse is that the waves have incredible strength as they withdraw from the beach; they drag their helpless target out into deeper water where the waves swirl about them, keeping them from reaching shore until they drown from fatigue.

UNBURIED TRUTHS

Bleached white, this beach of hellish sand seems calm and inviting. When pressure is put upon it, by a creature, for example, the sand begins to reveal the darkest, most horrific, and depraved acts committed by those walking upon it - playing images across its surface and whispering words. Often disclosing the hidden truths behind the acts,

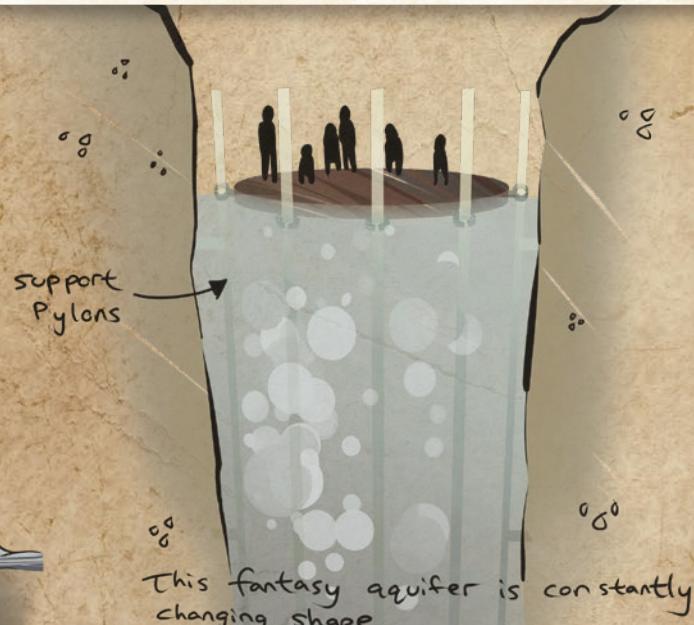
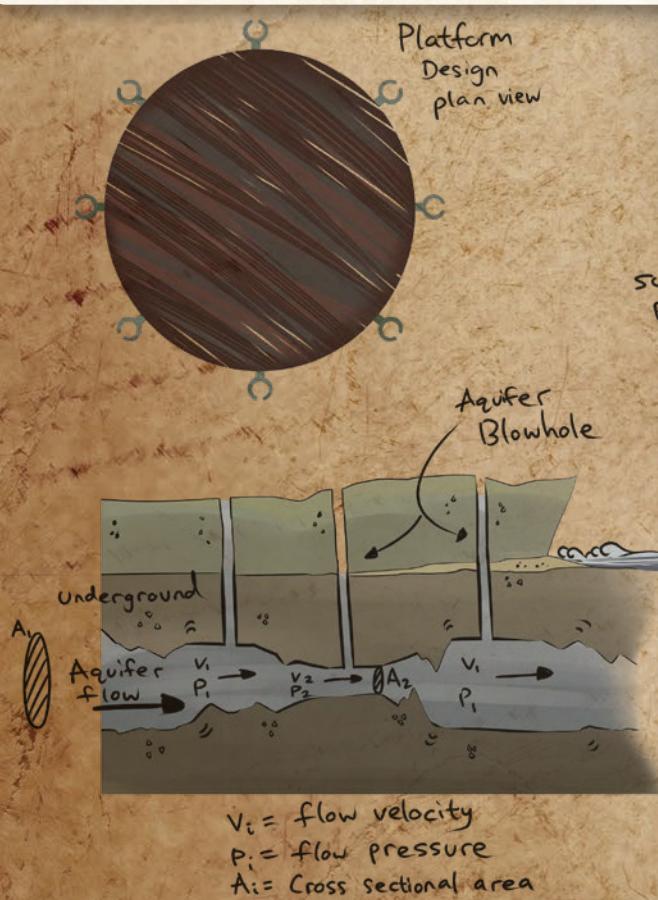
the sand has an uncanny ability to find the most abhorrent secrets of those daring to cross it.

SCRAMBLED EDGE

This particular coastal phenomena is frustration exemplified. A 'scramble' is a pitched or steep bank of sand about five feet in height. As the tide comes in, it is wise to get clear of the shoreline, so travelers need to make their way up the bank. However, as one begins to climb (or 'scramble') up the bank, it crumbles, dropping the climber down and then growing slightly taller. The more a creature tries to climb, the higher the scramble grows, all while the incoming tidal water starts to flood the area below.

IT GETS EVERYWHERE

Spinesand is so called because each particle is shaped like a spine, like those of a cactus. From a distance of a few inches, it looks like regular sand. The moment it is stepped on, however, the spines dig into and grip onto flesh, often splintering or burying themselves deep. They must be individually and painstakingly removed, else they continue to jab and stab with every movement.



Based on the 'Venturi' effect. The water height in the blowholes will rise and drop according to a change in cross-sectional area of the aquifer below.

SHADOW REALM

Choked with ash and dust, the coastlines of the Shadow Realm are grim, lonely places where only the foolish venture. Waves as thick as porridge slap languidly onto shores that reek of decay.

GOOP-OOP-A-DOOP

When the brine from the sea mixes with fresh ash fall, and then congeals into pools that are slowly thickened by evaporation, slashid is formed. This highly acidic goop burns through most known substances, except for glass, and strips flesh from bone (and bone from bone) in a matter of seconds. Often the mixture is hidden under fresh ash fall, making these little pools incredibly dangerous for any not wearing glass slippers.

ONE FALSE STEP

The shadows that play across the gray sands of the Shadow Realm hide many horrors. A false beach is one of the worst. Where sand, ash, and dust appear to form a wide beach, this mixture is a mere inch thick; underneath is a thick, soupy mixture of mud, water and ash that is several dozen feet deep. Those that fall through into the grime quickly find themselves sinking into cold darkness.

THIS SUCKS

Unlike quicksand which, as the name suggests, is quick to act, sucksand is merely a hindrance. The harder the pressure placed upon it, the more it turns into a glue-like substance that sucks and traps what encroaches on it. Though it is possible to carefully walk across sucksand, it is better to leopard-crawl across it, dispersing weight and keeping impact to a minimum; running instantly turns the surface to glue. Several predators have learned to chase prey into sucksand, wait until the chase exhausts them, and then slowly stalk over to feed.

CRISPY COATING

The spray from the waves that blows in the wind may not technically be ash, but it smells like it, and coats surfaces it comes into contact with. As it dries, it hardens into a brittle, crumbly, white substance. Although not dangerous in and of itself, the spray builds up over time, and forms thick, caking layers which can weaken the integrity of structures, and cause them to collapse.

Highest Density Material at the bottom



No creature art as this is a location guide...



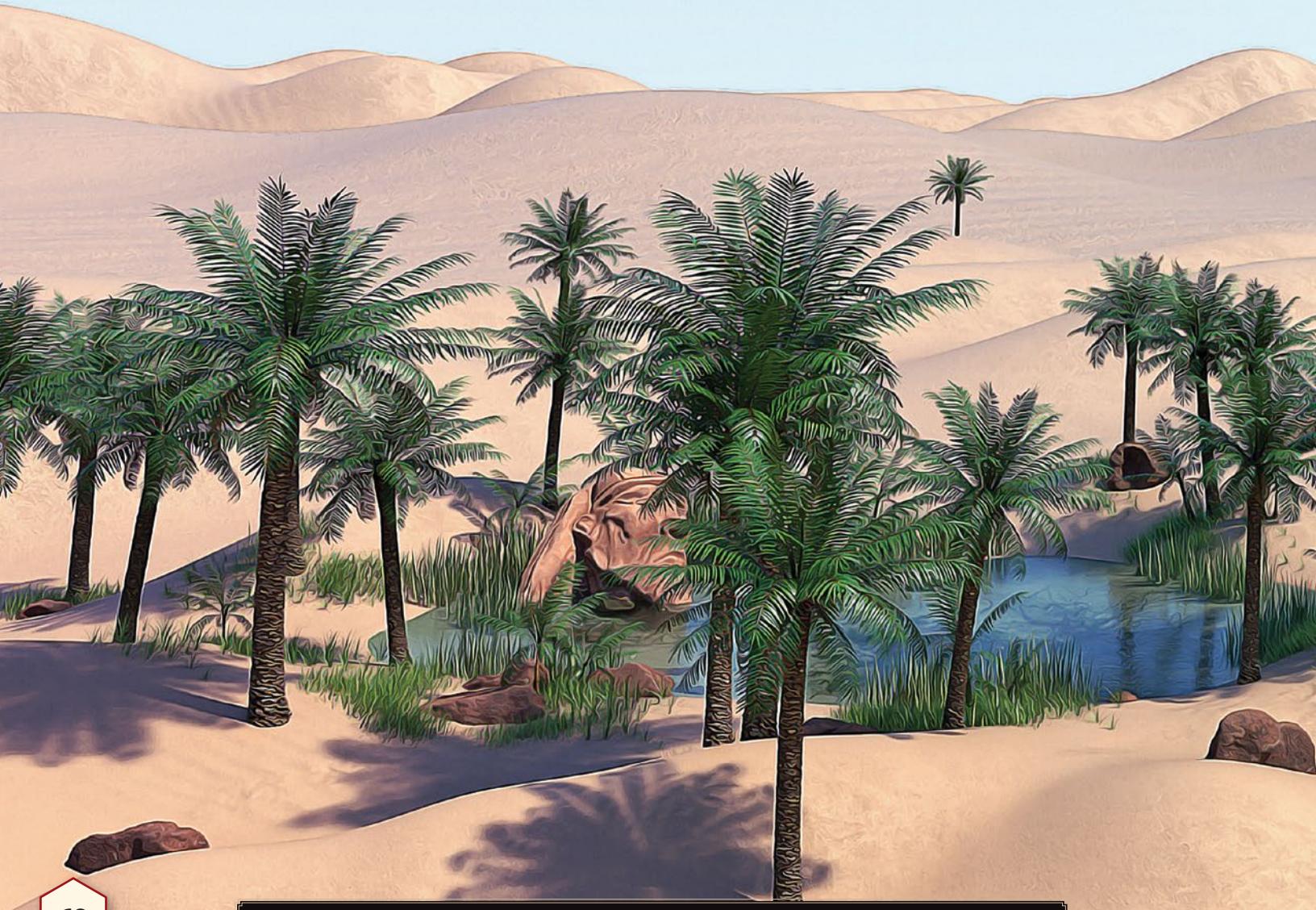
Different creatures adapt and live at different layers?



DESERTS

ADJECTIVES

Arid	Dry	Scorching	Bleak	Sunbaked	Vast	Barren	Desolate	Isolated
Unforgiving	Windy	Dusty	Rocky	Sparse	Infertile	Blistering	Rugged	Salty
	Harsh	Baked	Uninviting	Uncultivated	Uninhabited	Expansive	Empty	



INSPIRATION

SENSES

SIGHT	A distant mirage of a temple shimmers in the heat of the sun.	The bleached bones of a predator hide, half-covered by sand.	An endless expanse of slowly shifting dunes washes away to the horizon.	As the sun rises and sets, shadows of cacti grow and die across blood-red sands that blush purple.
SMELL	Dry, dusty smells of sand and heat slowly clog up your nose.	The faint hint of cactus blossom is carried by the hot wind.	The lingering stench of a rotting corpse is sharp in the still air.	The crisp, cold air at night stings as you breathe it in, and smells of long, dark nights.
SOUND	The endless hissing of sand as it shifts down the dunes suddenly stops.	In the distance, rumbling thunder growls ominously.	The lonely howl of a predator echoes in the distance.	The chirps of insects suddenly stop. A moment later, they fill the air again.
TOUCH	The blistering heat of the sun-baked sand beneath your feet burns through the soles of your shoes.	Scratching and stinging, the prickly bite of cactus spines warn you against getting too close.	The grains of sand stuck in your teeth add a new level of suffering to this infernal place.	Sun-burnt skin seems to crack in the frigid night air, only to boil again when the sun rises.
TASTE	Each bite, and each sip, is gritted with sand, crunching between your teeth and scouring your throat.	You taste copper, dust, and pain as you swallow. Dehydration is setting in.	The salty remains of sweat on your lips does nothing to help your thirst.	The water you drink has never tasted as sweet and cold as it does in the hot desert.

QUICK ENCOUNTERS

D12	ENCOUNTER	D12	ENCOUNTER
1	A passing caravan offers to trade, and warns of something dangerous on the path behind them.	7	Nomads inform the party of a nearby oasis that requires a small offering to be safely used.
2	A sandstorm is raging so fiercely it threatens to bury all caught in it alive. The party must seek shelter or, somehow, ride it out.	8	The party is approached by a camel trader, looking to sell his wares. He has some unusual and exotic items, but some may have dangerous magical properties.
3	The party comes across a sandstone ruin from a time long forgotten. The ruin marks the end of an era.	9	A hot air balloon, crewed by goblins, sails overhead, showering the party with sweetmeats and blessings in honor of some obscure, religious festival.
4	A nest of giant scorpions can be seen in a canyon. Their venom is deadly but worth a fortune.	10	The party finds a small carved gemstone. It is worth a few coins but where it comes from is unknown.
5	A bard, who has come to write about the beauty of the desert, offers to compose a poem about the party in exchange for a share of their water.	11	A lone sphinx wanders the desert, hoping to meet good conversationalists.
6	The party is approached by a genie who offers to grant them a single wish if one of the heroes swaps places with the genie..	12	The sand suddenly rearranges itself into the face of one of the party members. Nothing happens, and the wind quickly erases the portrait.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

D10	ADVENTURE
1	A powerful sandstorm has uncovered an ancient temple deep in the desert. The temple is said to contain a powerful artifact, but it is guarded by powerful traps and ancient magic.
2	An old, battle-weary dragon has taken up residence in the desert and is looking for some peace from dragon hunters. Unfortunately, the townsfolk have different plans, and have tasked the party to defeat the dragon and recover his scales.
3	A curse has recently been cast over a nearby town, causing the people to slowly turn into sand. The party has been hired to find the source of the curse, and put an end to it before it spreads.
4	A group of friendly nomads have asked the party for help in defending their oasis from a group of bandits who are trying to take it over. The nomads offer the party food and shelter in exchange for their help.
5	An archaeological expedition is excavating an old pyramid, deep in the desert. Nothing has been heard from them for the past few weeks, and the people in town fear that something bad might have happened. They were warned not to dig up what is entombed down there, but refused to listen.
6	Without warning, elementals have started to manifest all over the desert. No one knows why, but their numbers are slowly starting to become a threat to traders and their caravans. The party is tasked to find the cause and stop it.
7	Overnight, a majestic, yet somewhat intimidating, fortress has appeared, floating over the sand in the center of the desert. The villages around the desert are worried, and ask the party to approach the owner and negotiate their leaving, if necessary.
8	A magic barrier is blocking rainclouds from entering the desert. The water is urgently needed as oases and waterholes are starting to dry out. If the party cannot remove the barrier, the sand elves living in the desert are doomed to die of thirst.
9	The daughter of a local tribe leader has kidnapped the son of the village's mayor. The mayor tasks the party to return his son and promises to pay each party member their weight in gold. They learn, however, that a tragic romance is at play, and fulfilling the mayor's task will doom the future of the two lovers.
10	A genie has taken up residence in the desert and is granting wishes to those who can find and summon it. It is willing to grant the party a wish in exchange for their help in finding a rare and valuable object that has been lost in the desert for centuries. They must be careful though, as the genie is known to be mischievous.

INTRODUCTION

Although a desert is technically a variant of a barren waste, the iconic, sandy desert with its rolling dunes and its oases warranted its own entry. As with all locations, the expectations of those encountering them contribute greatly towards entrenching them as memorable. If the location is not understood, or is misrepresented, there is a risk of breaking immersion or creating a disconnect, which is something to be avoided.

FUNDAMENTALS

Sandy deserts are usually formed through a combination of dramatic temperature changes between day and night that puts strain on rocks (consequently causing them to crumble into sand), frequent winds that blow sand and form the iconic dunes (further eroding any exposed rock), and a decided lack of moisture in the air or frequent rainfall. Sometimes, deserts are formed by evaporation, where long periods of intense heat dry up a lake or river, leaving just the sand from the riverbed behind. With one or more of these climatic pre-conditions met, you get a desert. A good example is the Sahara, where the surrounding mountains are too high to allow seaward clouds to carry rain inland.

MOVING DUNES

The remarkable thing about sand dunes is that each one is entirely unremarkable; one massive sand dune looks much like the next massive sand dune. One hundred miles of flat, sandy land looks like the next hundred miles, also. But, with a dune, the whole thing moves.

Sand dunes are enormous piles that are built by the wind depositing increasing amounts of sand upon them. Dunes are differently sized and shaped, but always reflect the wind that is present, often longer on the windward side, where the sand is pushed up, and shorter on the other, leeward side, known as the 'slip face'. A common shape for sand dunes is an arrowhead, or 'barchan': a crescent-shaped dune with a tip that points toward the wind and two edges that face away, forming a curved slip face in between.

The reason dunes move is because wind picks up sand whilst it is fresh, then slowly drops it as it slows down, either because of wind action or because it becomes so full of sand particles that it loses velocity. Whenever too much sand forms at a dune's crest, or wind carries sand over the ridge, the windward side fully or partially collapses, causing an avalanche of sand that reshapes the dune.

HAMADA

A hamada is an area where almost all sand has been blown away, leaving only gravel, rock, and hard stone as a floor, making it particularly rough to walk over. Unlike ergs – the shifting, sandy desert covering – hamada are often very flat. They are usually incredibly sparse in terms of vegetation, and most wildlife avoid them. Sun exposure and near-freezing temperatures punish any who linger.

OASES

Over centuries, moving sand can cover up a river or lake, hiding the water beneath the sand. These pockets of water become, to some extent, protected from the heat of the day, and some endure as underground bodies of water. At a later date, if the wind uncovers them once again, they are revealed as small water ponds or lakes, known as oases. If plants can take seed quickly enough, an oasis can generate its own protection from being recovered in sand by the wind, and become permanent.

There are other types of oases, such as those created by underground rivers that break the surface of the desert, through pressure or climatic change. The drying remnants of a once-larger lake can also become an oasis. Many civilizations have also successfully created oases by drilling down to subterranean water buried beneath the sand and releasing it to the surface.

MIRAGES

Another iconic phenomenon of deserts are the famous mirages: shimmering images of an oasis, tricking unwary travelers into thinking that a safe haven is nearby. Mirages form through an effect where light passes through two layers of air at different temperatures. As the light passes through the layers, it bends and changes its course, causing the reflections of the blue sky on the ground where they are misinterpreted as water. Another form of mirage tricks the brain into transporting images great distances, so objects like distant

treetops appear much closer than they truly are – sometimes up to dozens of miles nearer. The ideal conditions for mirages to form are hot, still air and a sunny sky over a flat surface that can absorb the heat and cause the ground air to be hotter than the layer of air above.

SANDSTORMS

Deserts commonly have very active wind systems, and vast temperature changes between day and night: the perfect combination to form destructive sandstorms. Sand, and even small rocks, are picked up in these violent winds and transported

thousands of miles at dangerously high speeds. There are several hazards in a sandstorm. The loss of sight and hearing is nearly instant. Within a sandstorm, light is blocked. Wind-propelled sand becomes increasingly dangerous as the wind becomes stronger, and can cause damage to skin, but more dangerous are larger objects like small rocks or debris that get caught in the maelstrom. Sandstorms can last a few hours or several days, and are a magnificent – yet horrifying – spectacle, as the rolling masses of sky-high sand clouds race across the land. Subsequently, the entire geography of the area can be changed.

FUNCTIONS

Living in a desert is always difficult. However, there are many civilizations who have done so historically, and plenty that continue to do so. Even though deserts are an extreme environment in which to live, nomadic tribes have found numerous ways to not only sustain life, but to thrive. Herding livestock from one patch of fertile ground to another, they have found ways to preserve the limited, raw resources in their vicinity, and give the land time to recover. Their mobility is provided by animals like camels that have successfully adapted to living in such arid places. The Bedouin people of the Sahara, Sinai, Arabian and Syrian deserts have adapted perfectly to desert life, and have become iconic inspirations for many fantasy authors.

As trade expands across the world, new routes are often cut through deserts to reduce travel times. These caravans offer business opportunities to natives of the desert: some choose to become avid merchants, caravan leaders, guides or protectors, or of course, raiders.

CREATING TRADE ROUTES

For a desert to be considered for trade routes, there must be an inherent need to travel across it. If circumventing it is either sufficient or optimal, there would be no need for a trade route at all, and the desert would remain the sole territory of nomads living there. But, where there is trade, more often than not, there is competition. Trade companies are always looking for new, more secure, or more efficient routes. The Roman army devoted consid-

erable resources to building fortifications along known trade routes across various deserts. These functioned as trade hubs, centers for safety, and resupply nodes.

FORBIDDEN LAND

Trade routes do not necessarily have to cut straight through the middle of a desert; some might be considered forbidden or sacred land, protected by the inhabitants who see every intrusion as an act of aggression. They might form outposts at the rim of the desert to act as waystations and centers for trade, to disincentivize crossing, or perhaps as guard posts or resupply camps for patrols.

NOT ALWAYS A DESERT

Something to consider when designing a desert location is that it may not have always been a desert. Areas of land can become desert in less than a century, as a result of deforestation, overgrazing by livestock, a change in weather patterns, a nearby geological event, or a rise in temperatures. Where once a thriving civilization might have lived in opulence, surrounded by forests and rivers, now only sand and dust remain – along with curious ruins. Ancient structures might show signs of prior utilization of resources not now present in the area, such as open drainage systems for heavy rains, or tools and machinery for processing large amounts of timber. Though resources such as these no longer exist, perhaps, centuries ago, they did.

FINESSE

Ironically, one of the main features of a desert is its lack of features. There are, however, many facets to highlight that can give a unique spin to a desert location.

PAINTED DESERTS

As the sands in a desert are mainly deposited by the wind over time, a layering effect can occur where different colors of sand stack on top of one another. Alternatively, or additionally, as sand is blown clear from cliff faces, the rock underneath can become exposed. If this is a different color from the sand, it can create terraces, or stipes.

COLOR-CHANGING

Some deserts and rock formations contain high concentrations of certain minerals which reflect light differently at different times of day. As a result, a desert that appears bright pink in the morning might turn orange during the day, and then change hue once again to blood-red just before nightfall.

SINGING SCULPTURES

Rock formations that become exposed due to losing layers of sand are often slowly carved and shaped by the erosive winds that blow around and about them. These can create unusual shapes, holes, and patterns in the rock. Because the wind continues to buffet around them, some of these formations whistle and sing.

RAIN TRANSFORMS EVERYTHING

When it does rain, a transformation can take place overnight. Seeds that have been dormant for most of the year suddenly sprout, reinvigorating a sandy wasteland into a kaleidoscope of colorful flowers. These bursts of color and life usually last for a few days – long enough to release the next batch of seeds – and then wither and die as if they were never there. The rain can also create flash floods, especially in areas that are largely rocky and therefore impermeable; it is possible, though unlikely, to drown in the middle of a desert.

MUMMIFICATION

An unusual phenomenon occurs in living matter that gets buried by a lot of sand very quickly. The soft tissue dries out, instead of decomposing,

turning a body into a shriveled, but complete, husk, like jerky. The conditions in the desert are so perfect for this form of preservation that bodies can remain intact for thousands of years. Graveyards full of mummified corpses are frequently unearthed - in the past, these discoveries were so common that the bodies were ground into an aphrodisiac powder!

INVERTED LAND

At night, large bodies of still water can reflect starlight so well that it is impossible to tell which is which. This inversion of the world can be amazing if the body of water is a known entity, or confusing in the extreme if the water is revealed only at night, due to unusual weather conditions. To the observer, it seems as if the world has come to an end, and only space exists beyond.

RAISING THE STAKES

Once characters have realized that the only way to get across a desert is to continue forward, raise the stakes by adding complications that only place more strain on them. By this time, they are likely to have a definite goal, even if it is a short-term one: usually, either to get to their original target location, or to find an oasis and attempt to restock their supplies.

The biggest threat in a desert is dehydration; there simply is not a lot of freshwater present. Brackish or toxic pools of saltwater might exist in shaded areas, but large bodies of drinkable water are notably absent. Dehydration leads very quickly to hallucinations, which can make a bucket of burning sand seem like a canteen of cool water, or a precipice seem like a small step. They can turn allies into deadly enemies if the realization sets in that living creatures contain quite a bit of water (no amount of rationalizing that the liquid contained within contains a multitude of salts and sugars is likely to help).

Dehydration thickens the blood and makes it difficult to circulate, reducing the amount of oxygen that can get into the body. This makes movement difficult and exhausting. Even sleep has no effect on mitigating dehydration and, in fact, makes it worse – we still thirst when we sleep, and a lack of exertion does not save enough water to justify lingering for too long.

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

In the desert, there are many challenges facing heroes that venture too far. Sticking to existing trade routes, or following a caravan leader through well-known or trafficked areas of a location is almost always a safe bet. However, even these are subject to the wind, to shifting dunes, sandstorms, and the like. Any one of these many ever-present hazards can easily erase all traces of a landmark.

Even if characters are well prepared, and know how to manage their resources, a sandstorm is an easy option to threaten them with. After the storm has subsided, perhaps their guide is nowhere to be seen, and/or what was once a recognizable route is now just endless sand dunes reaching in all directions. Navigation using the stars becomes the only possible means of successfully traveling in the right direction with any certainty. However, if the sandstorm lasts for an extended period of time, there may not be any stars to see.

Another way of creating a point of no return is to have the party raided, stealthily if possible, with the intention of stealing as many of their resources as possible (it is, after all, the most

common reason for a raid). This might leave the party stranded, with not enough food and water to survive a return trip to where they came from.

Thus, the point of no return is when the characters run out of options, resources, or means of navigation. After that moment, pushing forward is no more of a dangerous choice than going back.

*Big desert means
big prey...*



DESIGNING EPIC DESERTS IN FANTASY SETTINGS

Add any of the following features, or use them for inspiration, to create a desert that is clearly not of our world.

HIGH FANTASY

Considering that deserts are often very isolated places, and even mundane ones are likely to seem surreal to most characters, adding some simple fantastical elements can have a big impact.

SUN, SEA, AND SCOURING

Some areas of desert have sand so fine that it acts more like water. Sand ships can sail easily, and personal catamarans are commonplace. Swimming in the sandsea is not advised, however, as the fine grains remain highly abrasive and, over time, remove skin. It is full of life too – not aquatic, but capable of drawing oxygen from the gaps within the sand. The sands are even tidal, and small, dune-like waves roll slowly across the surface.

THESE DUNES ARE FAR AWAY

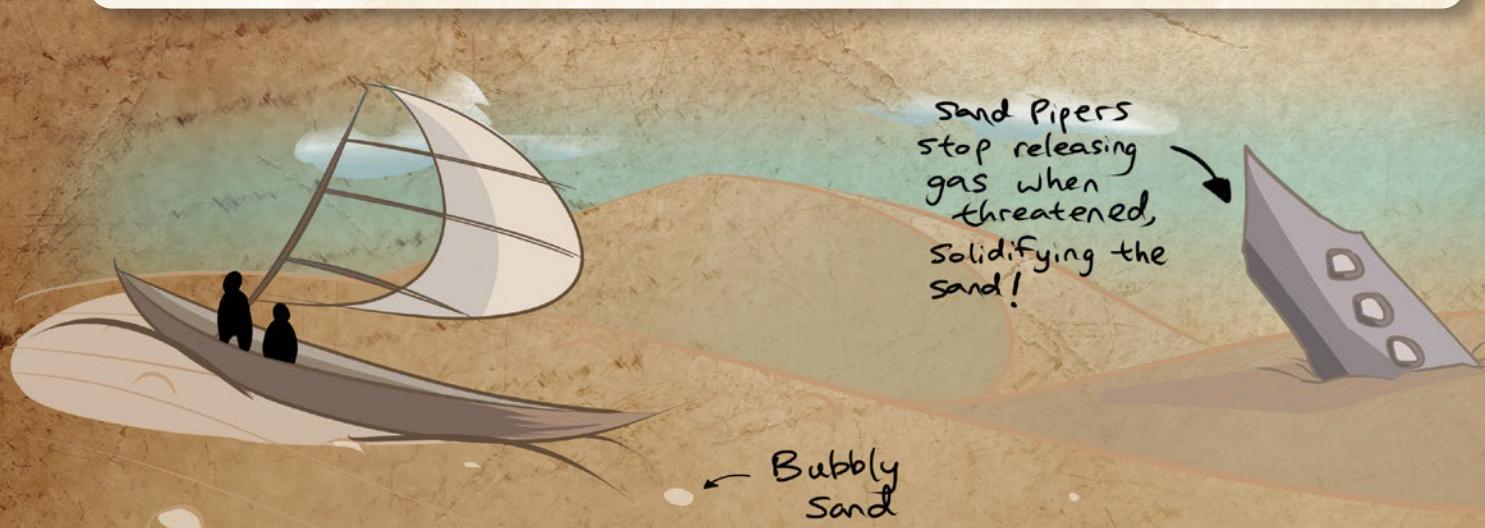
False dunes are those that appear large and solid but that, upon reaching them, are revealed to be only a few feet high. Other dunes, in contrast, appear to be nothing more than small ripples in the sand, until a creature attempts to climb it, when its true gigantism becomes apparent. Some say an ancient curse caused these dunes to appear; others say they form out of the good or bad deeds of those trying to traverse the desert.

SCHRÖDINGER'S OASIS

Often called ‘friends’ faithful folly’, some mirages of oases or rivers remain true and real for as long as someone is observing them. If a mirage is seen, one of the viewers must stop and remain behind, to continue looking at it. Their companions can travel onwards and, unlike normal mirages that vanish the closer you get to them, they discover, surprisingly, that whatever they saw in the mirage is, in fact, real. Water is there to be drunk, fruit is there to be picked, and shade from the sun is cool and refreshing. If the observer stops looking at the mirage for more than a few moments, or if the sun changes angle significantly, all aspects vanish, trapping those in the mirage until another observer comes along, allowing them to quickly escape.

MOVEABLE FEAST

Some oases do not form in a usual manner, and actually move from place to place, usually from an area near mountains towards the nearest ocean or sea, and then back again. Lasting for a few days at a time, the oasis forms, slowly dries up, and then appears a few miles distant the following day. Any foliage that has managed to take root and started to grow invariably withers and dries out. No one is quite sure why or how this phenomenon occurs, though there is much buzz about it in the research community.



UNDERFELL

Deserts are areas with very little annual rainfall and, by virtue of being underground, the Underfell has even less. Aquifers, rivers, and oceans exist however open caves where these are not present are extremely dry.

BEYOND THE SHALE

Naturally, shale flakes into long, flat rocks, with sharp edges, and these pile up in shale deserts, forming treacherous dunes. Ever precarious, wind, living things and subterranean activity scatters individual pieces that clatter to the bottom of the mound, while larger scale disturbances cause avalanches made of thousands of tiny daggers and hammers.

ALL IS DUST

Some ancient cave galleries were once exposed to the surface, or, by unusual fracturing and vaulting, have micro-fissures leading up to it. Down these narrow vents, fine dust drifts, eventually settling on cave floors and forming deep carpets. Water gets instantly absorbed by the dust, and the slightest of movements

causes it to take to the air, filling the chamber with haze and inducing coughing in unprotected lungs.

SLIPPED THROUGH THE CRACKS

Fault lines in the earth are cracks where surfaces of rock have slid past each other, and can be small fractures or gigantic rifts in the ground. Fault deserts are large, empty rifts that can run for miles. Initially devoid of anything (though usually filled with both natural and discarded detritus over a period of centuries) these barren spaces are easy to get into and very difficult to get out of.

USED TO BE BETTER, WHEN IT WAS WETTER

There once was water here, and lots of it. With the water, there was mud. Then the water left, the mud dried up, leaving behind sand that was slowly carried away, leaving behind fossilized seabeds, or in this case, fossilized sand and sand dunes. Incredibly hard, these unyielding valleys and hills are slick in places and rough and bumpy in others. Great monsters sometimes loom out of the side of a hill, or appear underfoot – frozen in time.

FEY DOMAIN

The most beautiful deserts in all the realms, Fey Domain deserts are known for their color, intensity, and unusual features.

KARMA CHAMELEON SANDS

The sands of a much-admired Fey desert come in dozens of colors – blues, greens, yellows, reds and oranges are most common. What is particularly curious is that each color tends to remain clumped with other similar shades. A streak of blue might slash through a valley of red and orange. When a slight wind disturbs the valley, the blue might suddenly spiral into the center, red blow over the hill side, and green sweep in from the south. The effect takes several hours to complete.

COMING UP ROSES

Some flowing deserts in the Domain are full of pinkish sand, but only about an inch deep. Beneath are hard, coral-like structures that grow in circular florets, like a rose. They are strong, and home to thousands of small filter feeders, and particles of nutrients that sift through the pink sand land on their broad feeding fans. Walking across the desert causes the fans to retract and

the pink sand to turn very red – the natural color of the filter-feeders' outer structures when not hidden by their feeding fans.

YOURS, IN DESOLATION

Though strange and disorienting, much is verdant in the Fey, and remarkably barren landscapes are rare. Called 'desolations' because there is nothing in them except seemingly endless tracts of hard purple rock and bitter, grape-colored sand, the only living things are those trying to get across them as quickly as possible. Due to wind displacement, fine dust hangs over the space and, at night, completely blocks out the stars, making navigation difficult.

PRISMATIC SHARDS

Made up of clear crystals, prismatic deserts change color depending on where you stand. Thousands of tiny, prism-like crystals litter the floor, as small as grains of sand, and split sunlight into glorious rainbow light. Take one step to the left and the whole desert might look to be a bright, scarlet red. Take a step to the right, perhaps, and the desert can suddenly become a deep, emerald green.

THE HELLS

If there is one place that epitomizes desolation, it is the Hells. It is hard to imagine oases in a land of fire and brimstone, however; how can there be areas that are desert-like? In truth, a true desert is fairly unusual, however that is not to say that unusual things do not manifest in the Hells.

DUST TO DUST

Skulls, bones, and other remains are ever-present in the set-dressing of the Hells. However, bone is not everlasting and, over time, crumbles into dust. In the Hells, this dust slowly aggregates in and around depressions in the landscape. Over centuries, these depressions extend outwards, catching more and more bone dust which, as it builds up, hardens into a gray substance. Nothing survives in these great barren stretches. Featureless, it is possible to get lost for a long, long time.

CRY ME A DESERT

Tears collect in hellish rivers and lakes and, often, these dry out, leaving behind vestigial anguish and sorrow and a proliferation of salt. Salt yards are some of the most depressing locations in the Hells. Walking on the white, encrusted surface, most creatures are filled with sadness and despair.

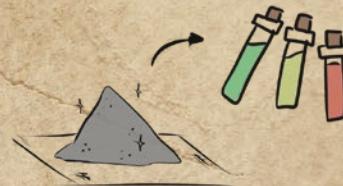
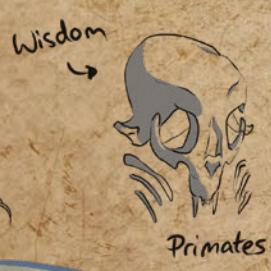
DEM BONES

In areas with strong winds, the skeletal remains that can be found across the Hells often collect together, forming bone dunes. Great piles seem to animate on their own and slowly make their way across the landscape, drawing more and more to themselves; perhaps some kind of memory or kinship draws them. Once a bone dune reaches a bone desert, they halt at the edge, slowly getting covered over in bone dust until they become one. Walking over these dunes is incredibly dangerous; the outer crust is not strong, and falling in is like being deposited into a barrel full of daggers, needles, and spears.

DEVILED EGGS

Whilst the souls of the dead are doomed to suffer in the Hells for all eternity, the bodies of devils have to come from somewhere. Soul gardens are a common entryway, though they only occur in the most arid areas of hell. Long, scraggly, black plants, with sad leaves that drag on the ground, surround a red seed pod that swells over time. When the pod is ready, it bursts open, releasing a new devil or imp, ready to take on the challenges of living in the Hells. The plants draw life from anything nearby and, as a result, soul gardens become an oasis of death amidst their own desolation.

3 Skeletal Archetypes



Collected Bone Dust
Can be crafted into
unique potions based
on bone Archetype

Method of Identification
Flame Test

Different bone Archetypes
give off different
coloured flames

The bone dunes are
blazing hot and forever burning

SHADOW REALM

Out in the Shadow Realm, the idea of a vast open space is a chilling one - nowhere to hide, nowhere to run. Deserts are likely places for the dead to flee to, for they are certainly no place for the living.

HAZY SHADE OF EXISTENTIAL DREAD

A purple haze purple and gray haze hangs over many of the deserts of the Shadow Realm. The haze obscures sight beyond a few hundred feet, but always gives the impression of a massive expanse beyond itself, hidden in the haze. The inability to navigate or see a way through is soul-crushing, lending it the common moniker, 'the sorrow haze'.

COMING LIKE A GHOST TOWN

Ruins of forgotten towns, lost to time and memory, lie buried under sand and ash in the Shadows. Old walls peek out of dunes. Some are simple structures, others more complex. Some are so well preserved that old signs, written in long-dead languages, can still be seen amongst the rubble. Most have been picked clean by centuries of scavengers.

PAINT IT BLACK

The carcasses of massive creatures sometimes dot the desert dunes of the Shadow Realm, as in the Material, or emerge from the dunes after a strong gale. Perhaps from hidden oil, or perhaps due to dying a death in the deserts of the Shadow Realm, the bones here emerge black. Bits of rotting flesh and skin still hang from the bones, even through the ravages of time.

EERIE AERIES

Curiously shaped spires of rock lance out of the sandy surface of the desert in seemingly random places in Shadow deserts. Sometimes in isolation, sometimes clustered together, these outcroppings provide good vantage points for any hoping to see above the sorrow haze.

Thunder
storms are
abundant in the
Shadow Realm

Out of world
known as
Fulgorite

Aeries Occurs
when lightning
strikes Sand

High Silica Content
in the sand cooks
instantaneously to
become a glass-lined
spire mimicing
the shape of the
bolt.

Reduced Vision/
Toxic haze
below?

FORESTS

ADJECTIVES

Lush	Verdant	Mystical	Serene	Enchanting	Tranquil	Humid	Dense	Impenetrable
Overgrown	Ancient	Ominous	Perilous	Wild	Primitive	Bewitching	Creepy	Sinister

Brooding Foreboding Mist-shrouded Shadowy Malignant Eerie Gloomy



INSPIRATION

SENSES

SIGHT	Trees, tall and gnarled, reach into the sky like ancient, resting giants.	Thick vines and undergrowth make it difficult to move.	Rays of sunlight filter through the canopy high above your head.	Mushrooms and toadstools sprout up between old, rotting trees.
SMELL	A sweet, earthy smell of freshly fallen leaves and mossy earth drifts on the breeze.	The pungent scent of decaying wood and mushrooms is everywhere.	Fragrant wildflowers and herbs flavor the air.	The smoky, woody aroma of a fire trickles across the forest.
SOUND	A choir of birds seems to be competing with a chorus of insects for dominance.	Leaves whisper between themselves as they tumble over one another in a light breeze.	With a sharp snap and crack, twigs break underfoot.	A startling rustle and thump from the undergrowth turns out to be nothing but a bird.
TOUCH	The smooth bark of the tree is scratched, and oozes sticky sap.	Soft moss on the ground adds a springiness to your step.	A sudden shock of water drops down your neck, thanks to the leaves above dropping their dew.	The coolness of the breeze brings relief to the humid forest.
TASTE	There is a sharp and pungent taste of rotting fungus, woody earth, and damp leaves.	A wisp of pine needles brings a refreshing taste to the air.	You breathe in and can taste ripe blackberries; they grow fat and juicy in the nearby thicket.	The dust of dry, fallen leaves makes swallowing arduous and your tongue thick.

QUICK ENCOUNTERS

D12	ENCOUNTER	D12	ENCOUNTER
1	The party comes across a group of druids preparing to perform a ritual to restore the forest's balance, and request help gathering the rare ingredients needed.	7	The party encounters a unicorn pacing back and forth across a clearing, muttering about enacting revenge.
2	The party encounters isolated members of a wolf pack that have been driven mad by a corrupting influence in the forest. It is making them attack each other, and their numbers are dwindling.	8	The party finds a group of giant spiders that have spun their webs across a path in the forest. They are fiercely territorial and attack anyone that comes near.
3	A group of bandits have set up camp in the forest and are preying on travelers.	9	The party comes across a group of talking animals engaged in a heated debate over a contentious issue. They are invited to weigh in on the discussion, but their opinions may have unforeseen consequences.
4	The party finds a small village that has been taken over by rapidly growing plants. No living creatures remain to explain what happened.	10	The party encounters a freestanding wooden door. To all appearances, it is just standing unsupported in the woods, but if the party opens it, something unexpected happens.
5	The party discovers a clearing where a group of friendly satyrs are throwing a raucous party, and invite the party to join in the festivities.	11	As the party passes an old, crooked tree, it suddenly addresses them and makes a very peculiar request.
6	The party stumbles upon an ancient ruin, hidden deep within the forest. The ruin is guarded by powerful magic and deadly traps.	12	In the center of a small grove, the party finds a small pond. Looking into its reflective surface, they realize that something is off, but it is too late to look away.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

D10	ADVENTURE
1	A boy from a local village has gone missing in the forest, and the party has been hired to find him. The boy's younger sister thinks he might be on a mission to retrieve an ancient artifact he learned about from the town's herbalist, and the party must navigate the forest to find clues to his whereabouts.
2	A rare plant with healing properties grows deep in the forest, and the party has been hired to retrieve it to stop a plague that is starting to spread. The plant is guarded by dangerous creatures and treacherous terrain, which the party must overcome to complete their mission.
3	A hidden grotto, containing a rare, valuable, and magically protected gem, has been discovered in the forest. The party has been hired to retrieve it, but another group is also in pursuit.
4	A band of highwaymen is robbing travelers in the forest. The party is hired by the local baron to stop them, find their camp, and retrieve his stolen valuables. When they arrive at the camp, they learn of the baron's greed and injustice, and now must pick a side.
5	For the past few weeks, the forest has grown rapidly, and is now starting to encroach on the small villages surrounding it. Something unnatural is causing the growth; the party is hired to investigate and stop it.
6	As the party travels through the forest, they are approached by a group of walking trees. They plead for help, as their forest is being chopped down by the surrounding villages for fuel. They task the party to find a solution that satisfies everyone.
7	A legendary hero is said to be buried somewhere in the forest, and the party have heard that one of the townsfolk has a map. If they can get their hands on it, they can find the tomb and retrieve a powerful artifact that is said to be buried with the hero.
8	A strange plague has befallen the nearby forest. Dark, slimy vines spread like arteries throughout, and the air has turned foul. The party is tasked to investigate the source and cure the forest, before it is too late.
9	A group of dwarves is planning an expedition into an unexplored area of the forest to search for a long-lost dwarven mine. The party has taken on a job protecting them; no one has any clue what dangers might await them.
10	A rare and dangerous creature has been sighted in the forest, and the party has been hired by a traveling circus to capture it. The creature is said to be incredibly powerful and elusive, so the party are likely to need all of their skills to track it down.

INTRODUCTION

When asked to describe what a forest is, most people would generally agree that it is an area filled with trees and underbrush. Yet, defining a forest can get quite complicated – for example, how many trees make a forest? The United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization defines a forest as, 'land spanning more than 0.5 hectares with trees higher than 5 meters [around 16.5 feet] and with a canopy cover of more than 10%, or trees able to reach these thresholds in situ'. In medieval times, forests were described as a territory of woods and pastures where the beasts of the chase were afforded safe protection.

Just to confuse matters, of course, a 'wood' is sometimes described as a grove of trees. However, technically, a forest canopy covers 60% or more of the land beneath it, whilst a wood canopy covers less than 60%. Anything less than 25% is just a slightly tree-filled field. A copse is a small grove of small trees.

Due to this total lack of clinical definition, you are more than entitled to call any area covered in trees either a forest or a wood, and any small cluster of trees a grove, thicket, copse, or just pleasantly wooded.

FUNDAMENTALS

There are three broad categories of forest: temperate, tropical, and boreal. Temperate forests are named because their temperature varies throughout the year with four distinct seasons. Precipitation is abundant, and lends to fertile soil that is able to support diverse flora like maple, oak, and birch.

Tropical forests are common to areas near the equator, where the temperature does not change drastically and the humidity is often high. Sometimes, the definition of subtropical forests is further distinguished when describing forest biomes in areas that are not quite as hot or biodiverse.

Temperatures in boreal forests are, on average, below freezing. Conifers, spruce, fir, and pine trees are the predominant needle-leaf plant species, which can also be found in the subalpine areas of mountains.

All forests are either natural or artificial; natural forests came into being and continue to exist on their own, independent of any human intervention, while artificial forests are established and managed through horticulture or forestry. Despite this distinction, and regardless of their geographical location, all three types of forests share some common characteristics.

GROWING TOWARDS THE LIGHT

All trees in forests grow upwards and outwards, trying to catch as much of the light as possible. This forces other plants that exist below the canopy line to adapt to any remaining light that permeates the dense foliage. Species that cannot adapt die out, leaving only successful ones to continue populating the forest.

EDGES

Forests have natural edges, often formed by rocky outcroppings that prevent seeds from putting down roots, or by rivers or environmentally

unfriendly conditions. Wind, water availability, and a variety of other factors all contribute significantly to keeping forests within certain invisible boundaries. This is not to say there are no trees that flourish outside of the boundaries, but they often prove to be exceptions.

THREE LAYERS

Forests have three distinct layers – understory, canopy, and emergent. The understory (sometimes referred to as the ground layer) is usually covered in smaller shrubs, bushes, or grasses in temperate and tropical forests. Boreal forests tend not to have much ground-based vegetation; fungi, algae, and lichen are more common, as they do not require as much light. Most mammals inhabit this layer.

The canopy refers to the highest branches and the lower leaves of the trees. Up here, branches, twigs, and leaves act as barriers to travel, but also help conceal those that do not wish to be seen. Birds and insects dominate this part of the forest.

The emergent layer is above the forest, where leaves are exposed to the most light. This is where all trees aim for, as the most sunlight can be gathered and there is nothing to block it. Birds and insects can be found flying here, avoiding the tangle of the canopy.

Crown shyness is a wonderfully curious event that occurs in some trees. Instead of simply spreading their branches and covering one another with leaves in an attempt to gather more light, the trees neatly stop growing towards their neighbors, leaving small channels in the canopy. This creates a brilliant pattern, beautiful when viewed from above, but the reason why this happens is still a mystery.

FUNCTIONS

Forests have always been a valuable resource for a singular reason: they provide wood for fires, for cooking, for crafting, and - most importantly - for building. Forests have the power to make or break civilizations. Oak trees were used exclusively by the British Royal Navy until the advent of metal hulls, due to their strength, and the fact that oak trees grow well in the UK. This meant that there was plenty of wood for warships, helping the British secure their position, at the time, as the most dominant naval force in the world.

In Japan, wood became such a rare commodity that the shogun and daimyos had to install strict measures to control forests; silviculture (study and planting of trees) began in earnest in the 17th century. Unlike Japan, the inhabitants of Easter Island took no such measures to protect their forests. Without trees, the islanders could not make boats for fishing. Much of the population turned to cannibalism, due to lack of other edible options, and was in a state of collapse by the time the first Europeans arrived in 1722.

INDUSTRY

Logging and hunting flourish in and around forests. Forests with large rivers flowing through them are especially useful, as the water provides a quick and easy way of transporting the produce of the forest to market, or to processing facilities.

HOME OF OUTLAWS

Dense, natural forests have historically been largely impassable and uncontrollable territories and, therefore, a-more-than-welcome retreat for those fleeing from the law. In times of war, deserters, mercenaries, and brigands often banded together to form bandit groups. Building and maintaining roads through forests was an expensive endeavor, usually financed by road taxes through the local authority. Oftentimes, only one road existed, and was only sparsely patrolled by local militia, and so these roads became chokepoints for bandit attacks, robberies, and ransoms.



Satyrs often keep warboars as mounts, pets, occasionally, bacon.

FINESSE

The most important and evocative aspect of a forest location is the untamed, chaotic freedom that all forests represent, in combination with the size difference between the giant trees and the tiny creatures walking amongst them. Due to the size of the trees, the expanse of the terrain, and their great age, it is easy to feel tiny and insignificant in comparison to a forest.

EMOTIONAL FORESTS?

Forests are often portrayed as an entity having a soul – wild and untamed, or calm and cultivated. By expanding on this concept, emotions can be applied to a forest location to give it distinct characteristics, in line with the tone and theme desired to be portrayed.

ROADS, PATHS, AND TRAILS

Whenever a forest divides the land, people have to forge a way through, eventually forming paths and, later, roads. Roads are man-made structures, wide enough to allow carts and carriages to pass. They are often paved and fastened with pressed ground, cobblestones, and other means, to prevent excessive plant growth and allow faster travel. Because construction and maintenance of roads is expensive, there has to be periodical trade or travel to justify its construction. Often, there is only one main road through a forest. Milestones are a good way to mark road segments, as these give travelers an indication of their position and allow construction workers, guards, or forest workers to find a right spot that they are required to take action in.

Paths are smaller, unpaved roads that are often used as byways for lumberjacks, hunters, and the like. They are not meant for heavy passenger

travel, and often lead to dead ends or small work campsites in a forest. As a forest becomes more cultivated, more paths are formed that start to intersect and create shortcuts for those that want to divert from the main road. Along those paths you might find stacked lumber and other resources that are byproducts of – or required for – forest operations. Forest paths are often marked with colored marks, stripes or symbols, painted on trees, to indicate what paths lead where.

Trails are the smallest type of path in a forest. Forest animals, like deer or boar, create trails as they traverse from their resting sites to their feeding grounds. Over time, vegetation gives way to their constant passing and forms small, thin walkways through the dense underbrush and grass. Since trails are naturally formed pathways, villagers might use them when traveling by foot or with small beasts of burden.

WALLOWS AND GRAZING PLACES

In temperate and tropical forests, where the forest ground is wet near a spring or clearing, animal wallows can be found. To regulate their temperature, boars and other creatures use mud pools to wallow and cool themselves. To reach cooler layers of mud, they dig and burrow, churning up the surrounding land.

Just within the tree line, or in forest clearings where trees are sparse, grazing places for herbivores are usually found. These are often kept naturally clear of dense foliage by the constant grazing, and therefore make ideal spots for campsites.

Both wallows and grazing spots make excellent hunting ambush sites. Hunters often place well-hidden traps in and around these areas.

EMOTION	FOREST CHARACTERISTIC
Adoration	This forest dedicates its life and growth to a deity. In the center of the forest, trees grow higher and higher, trying to reach for what they adore, forming a natural cathedral of foliage.
Pride	This forest is vain and proud, tries to be the most lovely and fiercely protects its own beauty. A proliferation of flowers and colorful, leafy plants grow here.
Amusement	Hiding spots and thickets abound in this forest, and roots trip whoever is passing by. Birds chitter with excitement, and animals flee playfully, only to return and then dart away again.
Anger	This forest is aggressive towards all invaders. Thorny shrubs, brambles, and blood roses grow everywhere, the trees loom and cast unnerving shadows. Branches with sharp twigs claw and grab at the unwary.
Anxiety	Thick underbrush, composed mostly of rotting foliage, makes it hard to walk in this forest. Trees, punctured with holes, stare at whoever passes by, and appear unnaturally close to each other, as if cowering together.
Apathy	Fallen branches and dense piles of leaves clutter the floor. Trees are stunted, or grow in curious shapes. Leaves fall earlier and grow later. Mushrooms and other fungi proliferate, and moss grows high on each tree trunk.
Calm	Healthy trees grow in wide spaces, providing plenty of walking room between them. Branches are held high and out of the way. The ground is covered with herbs, berries, and other thriving plants. Dappled sunlight streams down.
Craving	Roots protrude from the ground and extend far wider than they would naturally. Long, thin branches extend almost to the ground, and thickets are full of spiderwebs. The trees lean in, as if looking for something.
Horror	Twisted, malformed trees grow in unnatural, painful shapes. Somehow, it is always darker than it should be. Rotting vegetation pools, and animals hide under black, dead leaves. Trails lead in circles, and even campfires seem muted and cold.
Joy	Healthy trees, rich in fruit or blossom, stand tall, and allow lots of light to hit the ground. Animals abound, and birdsong fills the air. Great clusters of flowers grow on the forest floor, and crisp, clear brooks and streams babble between the trees.
Madness	A cacophony of noise – shrieks, barks, howls, and laughter - fills the air. Thickets grow into weird mazes, full of thorny shrubs and colorful ivy. The treetops form a dizzying pattern of light and shadow, confusing whoever walks among them.
Sadness	Trees and bushes are leafless and dry, moss and mushrooms are taking over, and resin seeps from the trunks as if the forest is crying.
Depression	The trees are entangled by infectious, black vines, and bark peels off, revealing wet and seeping phloem underneath. Shrubs and ferns are sickly white in color, and yellowish mushrooms grow everywhere. Streams are clogged with dark-brown water. Animals are scarce and may be infected.

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

Forests are fairly hospitable environments, providing food, shelter, and (usually) access to water. Many dangerous animals, such as boars and some species' of bear, can be fairly easily escaped by simply climbing up a tree. With no naturally devastating events, forests seem to offer resistance for heroes wishing to turn back. It is because of this ease of passage, however, that characters are unlikely to simply turn around and go home. There is no pressure to fall back for fresh supplies; stopping and returning would seem foolish to most.

Forests, unlike other geological formations in this book, do not dictate the shape of the land. Cliffs, ravines, rivers, and hills still form the basis of a forest, which simply grows on top. If a hard point of no

return is needed, a chasm running the length of the forest could split the heroes off from an easy retreat. To cross the chasm, fallen trees might need to be used as bridges, or old, badly maintained and constructed bridges might exist if the area is trafficked enough. Once across, these bridges could collapse. Cliffs might require a party to climb down them, or up, to continue forward.

Thus, the point of no return is when the characters encounter some sort of geological barrier that blocks their retreat, or something happens behind them that pushes them onwards, such as a forest fire, or pursuit by a predator. After that moment, their travel is likely to speed up, and the mood of the journey is likely to change dramatically.

DESIGNING EPIC FORESTS IN FANTASY SETTINGS

Add any of the following features, or use them for inspiration, to create a forest that is clearly not of our world.

HIGH FANTASY

Fantastical forests are often limited to the inhabitants of the forest rather than the forest itself. There is much to explore in this great space.

A FOREST OF A DIFFERENT COLOR

Traditional forests are full of green, leafy trees. Changing the hue of the forest only makes sense if the color shift is explained, such as by the appearance of flowers, blossoms, Autumn/Fall, for example. Making trees purple for no reason, whilst the grasses and shrubs remain green, blocks our suspension of disbelief, but in a fantasy world, new rules can apply. Perhaps the trees receive their energy from a source other than sunlight, such as arcane magic, or a celestial being?

ALT-UNIVERSE TREES

In a fantasy world, who says a forest has to be defined by trees? Perhaps forests of bamboo or sand prevail in this world or region, and forests of oak, pine, or apple are less common or non-existent. Explore large expanses of smaller things, such as a forest of fossilized trees, or mangroves of giant tulips, hundreds of feet high. Perhaps algae has adapted to grow on long stalks, or fungi has taken to the skies to create giant mushroom forests.

HERE THERE BE GIANTS

Redwood and sequoia trees have the capacity to grow immensely tall, but there is no reason why a fantasy forest might not have the scope for even larger species. If the root base and lower trunk of a tree is two or three hundred feet in diameter, and the trunk reaches up into the sky for half a mile or more, what worlds might exist at the different levels? Is the forest the height of the lowest tree? Or is that merely the underbrush of the actual forest that towers above?

THAT TREE IS UP TO SOMETHING

Unless the structure or physiology of a plant or tree is dramatically altered, even a fantastical plant is likely to have a very different kind of sentience to that of an animal. They are photosensitive, and affected by vibrations, meaning what they 'see' and what they hear or feel might be very different. But plants have another unique property: the ability to regrow. Cut a tree down and, usually, it starts to regrow. Does this mean the tree died and a new tree replaces it? Is the sentience of a tree in its roots? Plants are also immobile, in most instances – what perspective does that give them? Perhaps the only time that means anything is the change of the seasons. Do they bother keeping track of years? Do they remember in the same way we do? Does the past mean anything to a tree?

UNDERFELL

Mushroom forests, and caves full floor to ceiling with fungi... this might be what is expected from an Underfell forest, but there are far stranger canopies to walk under, deep below.

UPSIDE DOWNS

An odd variety of Underfell forest grows from the ceiling and reaches down to those on the floor, so travelers can end up walking into the highest points of the canopy! In truth, these organisms – from the fungi family – grow on the ceiling to protect their roots from predators. Their large heads hang down and secrete enzymes directly onto the floor, and minute mycelium, hidden in the cave floor, absorb the resultant soup.

THEY WOBBLE, AND THEY OFTEN FALL DOWN

There are great forests below the earth made of stone – but formed in unusual lattice shapes, allowing it to bend slightly, like rubber. Most are hollow and, if pushed too far, snap. These stalagmites are rare, and can grow to incredible heights, but beware when walking through; their great size

but relative lack of density makes them brittle, and prone to collapse or toppling when tremors strike.

CROWNING GLORY

The largest trees sink their roots deep underground, which often break into caves and form a tangle of hair-like foliage that hangs down. Some trees have learned to adapt and instead put out large, flat, leaf-shaped roots in order to catch falling minerals and water. These look very much like the crowns of trees, and so a whole forest can appear to grow down from the ceiling, rather than from the floor.

A CRYSTAL MAZE

Great numbers of large geodes are buried in the Underfell, full of crystalline structures. In places where these are particularly concentrated, whole forests of giant crystals are formed and can be wandered through. Their color and beauty is somewhat lost in the gloom of the Underfell, but their sharp edges should be avoided while their reflective surfaces are poised to gloriously refract any light brought amongst them.



F Fey Domain

Forests in the Fey Domain are as colorful as a rainbow, and as deadly as a beguiling smile. Those who wander into these great spaces sometimes never come out, their attention focused solely on the display of the trees.

WELCOME HOME

In the Fey, even the forests themselves seem to thrum with life, and each forest is aware of everything with it. Most trees can change color – leaves, bark, or both. The Scintillation happens when creatures enter the forest that are new to it, old allies, or that are known to be safe. The trees light up in unison – turquoise, blue or green. Any that stop to look at the colors find subtle shades washing over the bark and leaves in gorgeous patterns of greeting.

YOU'RE NOT WELCOME HERE, STRANGER

When a known enemy, or creatures with certain metals or other substances in their possession, enter a Fey forest, they might experience The Shunning: the opposite of The Scintillation. The trees darken and turn gray, and this color shift chases away

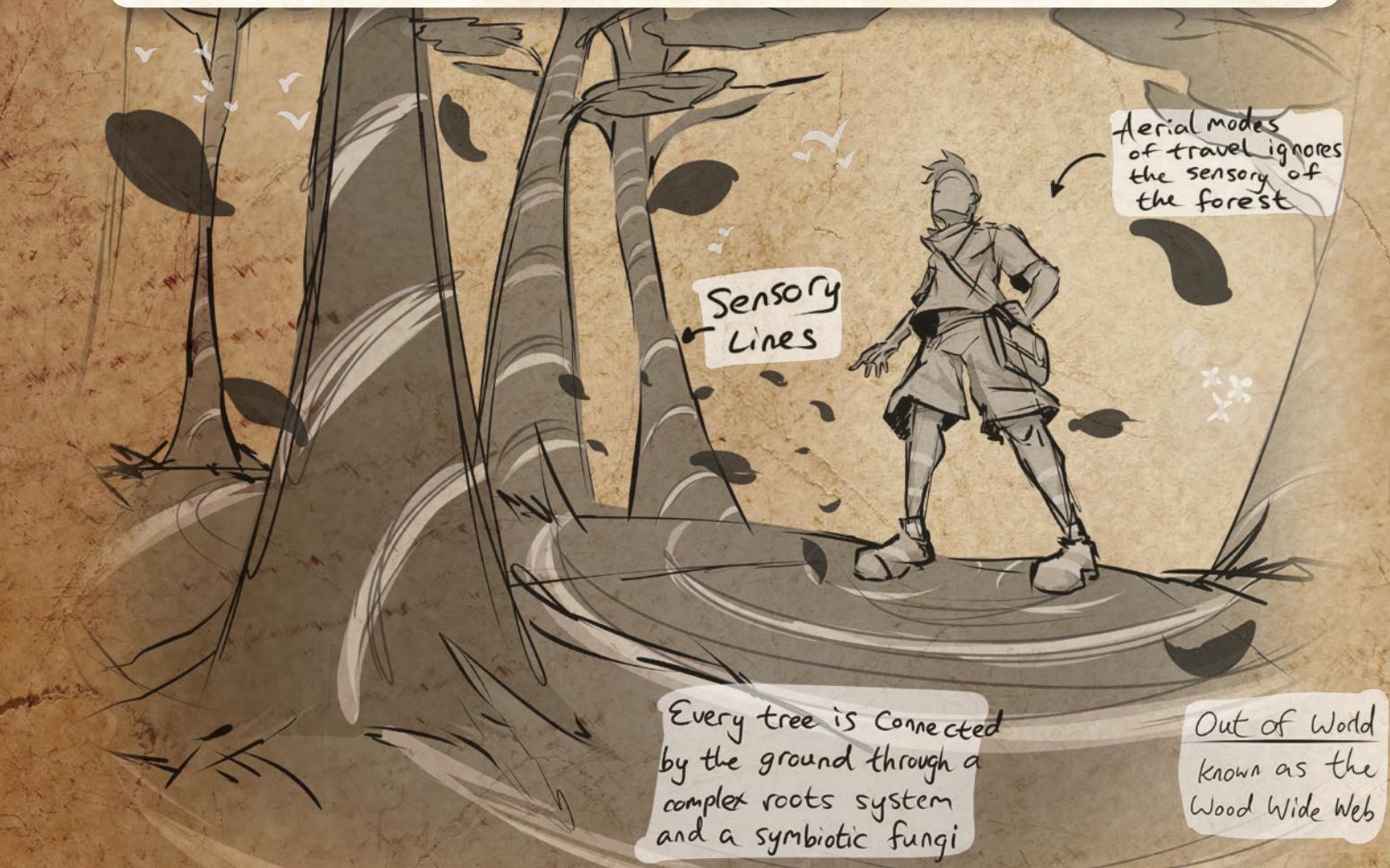
animals and birds, effectively leaving the unvetted visitors isolated and without resources.

WE'RE ALL LOOMED

Massive trees tend to cluster together in the Fey, rather than being randomly distributed across a forest. Their massive branches seem to reach out to one another and become entwined so that it is impossible to tell where one tree begins and the other stops. The reason for it is unknown. The effect is to make the trees appear to bend over, to loom. These glades with high domed branch-enclosed ceilings are spectacular places to visit.

MIRROR, MIRROR, ON THE FLOOR

It is advisable to bring plentiful water when traversing the Fey Domain, as it can be a tricksy and dangerous substance there. Still ponds are particularly so; they reflect the gentle color-changing of the trees in an entirely captivating way. Seeing one's reflection surrounded by such a beautiful kaleidoscope of colors has been known to transfix the weak-willed for days, or even until death.



THE HELLS

The forests of the Hells are truly horrific spaces. The shadows and darkness that lurk between the trunks of the ‘trees’ hide all manner of danger, and the shade thrown by the leaves is neither calming nor cooling.

CORPSE COPSE

One particular hellish forest is made of the bones of giant creatures, but completely covered over in hellichen – a tough, spiky lichen that grows on old skeletal material - resulting in structures that are vaguely tree-like. This forest cum graveyard is treacherous, as the ground is riddled with shattered bone matter, and the large bones that loom up from the ground are liable to collapse from age and decay with only the slightest touch.

CHOKER? I ‘ARDLY KNOW ‘ER!

Appearing like a dense wood, with thick, black leaves so entangled as to form a solid roof, Choker Wood seems safe, or at least sheltered and safer than the area around it. If a creature steps inside the wood, however, it quickly becomes apparent that it has grown over sulfurous vents, and that the atmosphere that the thick canopy holds within, is toxic in the extreme.

ALL THAT REMAINS

The ‘trees’ in one infernal forest are not, in fact, foliage at all, but liquified remains of the dead. Over centuries, the dead interred across the realms rot and dissolve into minerals and fluids. Often, these are dispersed back into the soil by worms, or the like. Sometimes, these are claimed by the Hells. The minerals and fluids drip down, forming a stalagmite-like structure containing the remains of several individuals, usually those of the truly evil. Full of hatred, rage, and murderous intent, these emotions seep into the atmosphere of the forest.

RIGHT-TANGLE

Few truly plant-based forests exist in the Hells, but this does not make them any safer or more pleasant. Most are full of tanglesnare, a type of tree with long, willow-like branches and fibrous roots that run across the ground. Any creature that walks near a tanglesnare finds the roots or branches grasping for it. Whole forests of individual trees work together to collectively pull bigger and bigger targets into their center, where all the trees can feed.

SHADOW REALM

Forests cover great swathes of the Shadow Realm, cloaking it in darkness even deeper than usual. The trees that grow are odd-looking and hardy.

CROWN OF THORNS

Not really true trees, but massive plants nonetheless, nettles create whole forests composed exclusively of plants of their own kind. At their base are thick, spine-covered leaves, dark-red and slightly cupped. Ash, dust, and other airborne particles fall on the leaves and provide nutrients. The stalk – also covered in spines - can grow up to several dozen feet tall and, at the very top, are the flowers. These black, red, and sometimes dark-blue structures look like a crown of spines clustered around several black seeds.

DEAD INSIDE

Some Shadow woods are but echoes of living ecosystems. When looked from certain angles, some patches seem green and alive, but it is all an illusion. These woods are cold, the trees all dead and in a state of suspended decay – rotting, but not collapsing. Most can be ripped into with bare

hands to reveal black, oily pith beneath that oozes red fluid when exposed to the air.

SCULPTURE GARDEN

Ash, dust, and whatever horrible else that blows in the wind in the Shadows often builds up in piles and mounds around small plants or rock formations; over centuries, these can grow into impressive structures. When a small field is subject to such growths, the entire place starts to become a forest of sculptures. Nothing lives in these woods, just twisted and distorted columns of hardened dust.

EAT THE HEAT

This wood appears bare and leafless. The canopy is made up of the strange, root-like branches of gaogao trees that terminate in much finer, hair-like roots that hang down, akin to a weeping willow. Underneath the broken soil, however, where roots normally lie, are the real leaves, spread out broad and thin beneath the earth. Instead of absorbing light as energy, the leaves absorb heat from underground volcanic vents.

GLACIAL MOUNTAINS

ADJECTIVES

Chilly	Bitter	Frigid	Windy	Frosty	Slippery	Precipitous	Challenging
Daunting	Treacherous	Rocky	Snowy	Rugged	Narrow	Snow-capped	Intrepid
Perilous	Daring	Unforgivable	Glorious	Exhilarating	Majestic	Awe-inspiring	Stunning



INSPIRATION

SENSES

SIGHT	Blinding sunlight is reflected into your eyes off of the crystal-white snow.	Glistening walls of solid ice glow in the sunlight, ranging in color from turquoise to deep blue.	The deep, sunken tracks of rabbits and birds trail through the snow, creating a myriad of pathways that disappear as quickly as they form.	A herd of mountain goats watches you from the steep cliff above.
SMELL	The smell of pine trees and conifers reaches you, even buried under sheets of snow.	The distinct smell of cold, crisp air almost, ironically, burns the inside of your nose.	The aroma of wet rocks and moss make the air feel damp and old.	You smell your own breath as you breathe through your scarf.
SOUND	Fresh snow crunches under your feet and reverberates through your legs.	Omnipresent and all around, the ice creaks, and the snow shifts aurally.	You hear the muffled roar of a river as it flows beneath the glacier.	In the distance, the rumble of an avalanche cascading downwards echoes.
TOUCH	Every strike of your pick reverberates the ice wall as you ascend.	Your pack drags on your back with the weight of the equipment you are carrying.	The icy chill of the glacial air stings like a thousand needles.	You feel the cold, soft ground underfoot give way as you sink with every step.
TASTE	The air is cold, crisp, and refreshing, like a freshly cut apple.	Each breath feels thin and sharp, like a blade of ice stinging into your lungs.	The salty taste of frozen sweat and snot freezes on your lips.	You relive the stale taste of your last meal as you breathe through your scarf.

QUICK ENCOUNTERS

D12	ENCOUNTER	D12	ENCOUNTER
1	The party traverses a frozen crevasse that is home to a group of ice elementals. They are restless and aggressive towards any they see as defiling their territory.	7	The party discovers a hidden valley that is home to a group of friendly frost giants. The giants offer the party food and shelter in return for a favor.
2	The party is being pursued by a pack of winter wolves. The wolves are intelligent and skilled hunters, avoiding direct confrontation and slowly waiting for the perfect moment to strike.	8	The party hears the rumble of an avalanche rolling towards them. They have only minutes to seek shelter before they are hit.
3	The party encounters a group of yetis who seem to be infected by a strange plague. They look sick and starved.	9	A powerful blizzard suddenly encompasses the party – their sight is reduced to zero and they will quickly freeze to death unless they can escape it.
4	Arriving at a vast, glacial crevasse, the party spots a single, fragile ice bridge leading across. Unfortunately, a group of ice dwarves is in the process of attaching explosives to it.	10	As the party reaches the next plateau, they see a single white tower made of ice. A camp has been erected around the tower, and is bustling with life.
5	A wide snow field is filled with, what looks to be, an army of snowmen. As the party approaches, they turn their carrot noses towards them, their coal eyes glowing like dark embers.	11	The party comes across an old basecamp. The tents are covered in snow and, looking inside, they find the preserved remains of former adventurers who died of hypothermia.
6	The party is chased by an enormous ice golem through the snowy terrain. It is incredibly powerful and reforms out of the snow every time it is defeated.	12	Walking across a frozen lake, the party sees an old white dragon trapped in the ice beneath their feet. Every step they take cracks the ice and stirs the beast.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

D10	ADVENTURE
1	At the peak of the mountain, a mysterious being called the White Oracle resides in its mountain temple. It has important answers to the party's questions, and they must withstand the trial of ascent to get to them.
2	The twin-peaked mountain and its surrounding foothills are ruled by The Court of Ice. Something has upset the Court, and they are punishing the surrounding lands with avalanches and blizzards. The party must negotiate peace and right the wrong that has been done.
3	A powerful storm is brewing in the mountains, rumored to be caused by powerful magics, though no one knows why or by whom. The party has been hired to stop it before it wreaks havoc on the nearby towns and cities.
4	A group of gnomes has set up a research facility on the top of the mountain, and their experiments are melting the glacial ice. The villagers have pleaded with them to stop, but all attempts have been answered with violence. They have tasked the party to infiltrate and destroy the facility.
5	A powerful curse is turning villagers into snowmen. Every morning, the villagers wake up to find another family standing in a frozen tableau in their yard. If the curse cannot be revoked, soon the whole village will be turned to snow, and spring is fast approaching.
6	An ancient white dragon is asleep inside the glacier. Something is tempering with its dreams, and tormenting it with endless nightmares. In unconscious desperation, the dragon is causing the glacier to expand further and further into the land.
7	A group of half-orcs recently left on an expedition to the top of the mountain where an airship of theirs that crash-landed a year ago, but they have not returned. The mayor of the local town is worried, as his daughter accompanied the expedition as a guide. He tasks the party to find out what has happened, and return everyone safely, if possible.
8	The party is hired to escort a group of mountain climbers to the summit of a dangerous peak. The climb is treacherous, and littered with the lairs of dangerous beasts. The party must utilize all their skills to help the climbers reach their goal safely.
9	A powerful artifact, said to grant immense power, has been hidden in the mountain peaks, and the party has been tasked with finding it. Many other groups also search for the artifact, so the party must outwit and defeat their rivals to claim it.
10	A powerful mantidore has taken up residence high on a nearby mountain peak, and is terrorizing the surrounding villages. The party has been hired to defeat it and restore safety to the region.

INTRODUCTION

Unlike most mountain ranges that may become snow-covered only in winter, glacial mountains are those in such frigid places of the world, and/or so at such high altitude, that they sustain glaciers at their peaks, making them permanently snow-covered year-round. These fortresses of ice are imposing structures and can occur almost anywhere, regardless of the surrounding temperatures.

FUNDAMENTALS

Glacial mountains are usually surrounded by more temperate, but vast, mountain ranges. This range might describe the general look of the landscape, but glacial mountains dominate even these giants of stone, and are a shining monument to cold. Because of their height, and the steep angle of their slopes, glacial mountains are distinguishable by their vertical cliffs, overhanging precipices and, of course, their peaks covered in eternal ice. They are formed by geological processes that push the mountain high above the cloud sphere.

NIVAL ZONE

The nival zone, found above 9000 ft., is covered in snow throughout the whole year. Glaciers form and carve mountains into the iconic, triangular shapes that are so commonly seen. Vegetation is sparse, if present at all, at such a high altitude; those that exist are highly adapted to extreme weather, cold, and exposure to unfiltered sunlight, and are often unable to survive in any kind of dense population.

GLACIERS

Glaciers form when layer upon layer of snow accumulates over the years, and temperatures are low enough to prevent melting. As the layers grow, the buried snow becomes compacted and is converted into firn (super dense snow) and then, as yet more layers pile up, finally crystallizes into glacial ice. As the glacier grows, it increases in weight and slowly expands downwards. During this process, thin layers of water can form and cause parts of the glacier to break off and cause slidings. During the summer, when the temperature rises, parts of the glacier melt, forcing the ice to retreat. As they expand and contract over centuries, moraines (ridges formed by rock deposited by the glacier's movement) are formed as ice pushes sediment in front of the glacier, whilst in other areas the movement grinds everything to dust leaving just rocky barrens.

Barrens are areas devoid of much vegetation, and are usually scarred with chasms around the edges, and super-dense, solid blocks of ice in the center. Due to the altitude, wind constantly blows across the area. It also means that, at higher altitudes, such as atop Mount Everest it never rains – it is too cold for water to remain in liquid form.

- GLACIAL MOUNTAINS ARE THOSE IN SUCH FRIGID PLACES OF THE WORLD, AND/OR AT SUCH HIGH ALTITUDE, THAT THEY SUSTAIN GLACIERS AT THEIR PEAKS, MAKING THEM PERMANENTLY SNOW-COVERED YEAR-ROUND. -

FUNCTIONS

While glaciers are surrounded by other, smaller mountains, they are the unchallenged kings of their ranges, ruling unchallenged over the land below. Crossing such a mountain is an extremely dangerous, life-threatening endeavor, as there is no easy way over. People in the surrounding lands invariably prefer to take longer routes around, and only the most pressing situations or the most valuable rewards usually force a climb. For Earth's greatest adventurers, the 'valuable reward' for climbing these mountains is simply being one of the few to get to the top. Even with modern technology and support, there is still an above 1% mortality rate for climbers of Mount Everest.

Due to the extreme conditions and their treacherous nature, crossing a glacial mountain should never be unplanned, nor should a journey over one ever be merely a transitional montage for characters. Each glacier is an epic location in its own right, without any additional material from a storyteller or game master and must be treated as such, otherwise heroes might as well have simply crossed any mountain with a light dusting of snow.

AVALANCHES

Avalanches form when too much snow accumulates, or when a trigger, such as a tremor, causes parts of the snow sheet to break off. Avalanches can be a truly terrifying phenomenon - tons of ice and snow pour down a mountain in excess of 200 miles per hour. Add into this catastrophe the roar and deafening sound that accompanies these events, and any creature unlucky enough to be in the vicinity has only moments to react before they are hit and carried away. The ice and snow do not act as a cushion, but often as a hammer - broken bones, internal damage, and concussion are common consequences of avalanches. Once one has stopped, most living things are likely buried under the snow, and this in itself is incredibly dangerous. After just fifteen minutes of being buried, the chance of survival plummets. Carbon dioxide builds up around the mouth and nose of living creatures, causing rapid asphyxiation. Furthermore, the ice is obviously freezing. Creatures trapped in the snow may be unable to move, and so quickly

lose body heat until hyperthermia eventually leads to death.

ICE FIELDS

Ice fields form when the sun melts the top layer of snow, but the wind then freezes it. These fields are especially dangerous as they are often on slopes. Having super-slick ice on a slope, especially above a dead drop, cliff, or crevasse, is always going to lead to trouble. There is another, if you will pardon the pun, 'cooler' side effect to the creation of ice fields: natural snowboards. If the surrounding temperature remains warm, but the wind-chill freezes only the top layer of snow, sheets of ice can break off under the weight, forming boards of ice. If the field has any slope, they slide downwards, carrying anything - or anyone - atop it, along. This can massively expedite downward travel to those that can control the direction and speed, and provided they can find a way to stop.

GLACIAL CREVASSES

Movement of the glacier can cause stress fractures that widen into cracks and crevasses. Snow sometimes covers their openings, and makes it hard to spot them, but the snow can freeze solid into a makeshift bridge. Walking on one of these, so-called, snow bridges always runs the risk of the snow breaking, and plunging everything atop it into the hidden crevasse below. For those not killed by the impact of their fall instantly, death might come through hypothermia, as escaping such an icy tomb can be quite difficult. Ice fields are often riddled with such crevasses, which makes any kind of rescue extremely difficult; the tilting of an ice field does not allow for easy or rapid progress, and would-be saviors can easily run out of time.

BLIZZARDS

Because of the high altitude and low pressure, weather changes quite rapidly on and around glacial mountains. A mild snowfall can quickly become a raging blizzard, robbing adventurers of sight and hearing, increasing their exposure to freezing cold, cracking ice fields, and threatening avalanches.

FINESSE

To cross a glacial mountain, most explorers have to follow a similar methodology, and take their journey stage by stage. As expanses are often featureless, short-term journey planning is often utilized, with arrival at well-known landmarks or planned overnight camps in sheltered spots the most common aims for single stints of travel. Exhaustion is a very real concern, so newcomers must be careful not to risk missing these critical opportunities to find respite from the unforgiving environment.

BASE CAMP

'Base Camp' is the colloquial term used for the location from which the first stage of the journey is departed from. It is the last full long-stay camp that is within range of a glacial mountain. These places are usually the last spot where fresh food, running water, and a warm night's rest are readily available. Some are inhabited permanently, ready to welcome and accommodate hunters or mountaineers preparing to embark upon the insane climb to the glacial peak.

STAGE BY STAGE

Each stage is usually centered around, and defined by, a small area that is deemed a (usually) safe space to camp for a night, such as a rocky ledge, shallow cave or, sometimes, just a hollow between two spurs of rock. These rest stops are often named after climbers or vistas that one can view from them.

Thalgrin's Rest	View of the World
Hot Pot Wishalot	Granny's Knot
Cave of Silence	First Thaw
Dead Man's Cliff	Sir Ginat's Horse
Kalkuri Kai	Leapers Ledge

THE SUMMIT

The tops of glacial mountains are usually quiet, alien worlds. No life permanently survives up at these extreme heights, only those trying to crawl over it. The moment that a group of characters reaches the top should be one of appreciation of the extreme trials that they have faced and survived to get there. The most difficult part, it seems, is over.

Exhaustion is the greatest enemy of climbers, and 'summit fever' is a known psychological condition in which the determination to reach the summit overrides judgment and common sense. Often, climbers push themselves too hard and end up perishing on the mountain because they simply run out of energy. This risk is tenfold for non-professionals, such as a party of adventurers, or any antagonists that might be pursuing them.

RAISING THE STAKES

Rest-stops that the characters might normally have utilized for each stage of their descent might be lost, destroyed, or covered in snow, and bridges over chasms may have collapsed in the night. A balance needs to be struck in presenting some challenges to get to the top of a glacial mountain, and then other different, more difficult challenges, to descend. The challenges, while perhaps created in the ascent, such as collapsing a bridge to stop a dangerous beast from following them across a crevasse, should not just be repeated, as this makes the entire expedition feel like an unending torment with no hope of release. By swapping out the issues for the descent, a fresh wave of terror and difficulty washes over the heroes, keeping the narrative new and exciting.

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

Ironically, the point of no return is when characters reach the summit - there is now no option but to descend. This might be on the other side of the glacial mountain, or a retrace of their steps, depending on their long-term goal. In either instance, this is the most dangerous time of their entire journey; extreme fatigue will be a major factor, as well as the potential carelessness of any character that mistakenly thinks going down is easier than going up. Down is almost always less of a challenge, but controlling a descent is not.

Chasms opening up, avalanches, and all manner of weather effects can block the characters' path, forcing them forward and keeping them from heading back. If their ascent was via the easiest path up, a game master or storyteller should present the most difficult for their descent.

Thus, the point of no return is when the characters believe that the worst of their ordeal on a glacial mountain is over, or when they realize that it

is only half done. Their supplies are likely severely depleted, and their stamina and morale low, but they do not have the option of lingering for long. After that moment, they must prepare to face the journey back down.

They're (Ice Breels) about the size of a hamster but eat as much as a mammoth.



"WE CLIMBED FOR DAYS. RESTS WERE INFREQUENT AND COLD. THERE WAS NO RESPITE FROM THE FRIGID DAMP CONDITIONS WE FOUND OURSELVES IN. BUT THE SUMMIT WAS JUST THERE, JUST WITHIN REACH..."

- MOR BOON, DWARVISH MOUNTAINEER AND EXPLORER

DESIGNING EPIC GLACIAL MOUNTAINS IN FANTASY SETTINGS

Add any of the following features, or use them for inspiration, to create a glacial mountain that is clearly not of our world.

HIGH FANTASY

Fantastical glacial mountains are the homes of ice giants, white dragons, snow elves, yetis, and all manner of other ice-loving monstrosities, according to common fantasy tropes. The tropes largely make sense – adaptation to extreme cold is rare and often bizarre, so mystical justifications are easy to reason. What can often be ignored, however, is that the landscape itself is just as great a source for fantasy stories.

WIND SECTION

The wind is exceptionally cold atop a regular glacial mountain, and extremes can be pushed even further in a high fantasy setting that is not beholden to mundane laws of physics. Perhaps, at these heights, unusual jet streams exist that bore into the ice walls and fashion, at first, depressions, and then, over time, carve out great, long tubes which eventually connect. These funnel the wind at incredible speeds and make the whole glacier moan like an old church organ.

ICE AND SNOW ON BLAST

If the aforementioned wind funnels form at particular angles and in particular directions, the pressure can build into an incredibly powerful gust as it is pumped through the carved, tubular tunnels. Occasionally, the pressure of the wind becomes so great that it bursts out the side of an ice tunnel, sending

ice and snow outwards at incredible speed, backed by a huge release of air. Inexperienced climbers exacerbate their formation by causing weak points in the tunnel walls by walking over them, or chipping into them with pitons and hooks.

HOT POCKET

Very rarely, a single ray of sunshine heats a small spot of glass-like ice. Instead of melting, the ice focuses the sun's rays and melts a small pocket underneath it. These pockets usually freeze at night but, in the morning, if the sun returns, an entire spherical chamber starts to develop beneath a layer of glass-like ice. Algae takes root, protected from the worst of the wind, and it's only a matter of time before a small oasis of slightly-above-zero conditions is formed in the middle of a glacier.

THAR SHE BLOWS

In the walls of the glacier there flows water – sometimes upward due to underground pressure, and sometimes downward thanks to gravity. When the top of the tunnel is open to the atmosphere, and the pressure from below is sufficient, upward flowing water becomes a geyser that erupts into the air and then promptly freezes and falls as snow. These rivulets are visible when they are close enough to the surface of the ice; the movement of the water can be seen sparkling and refracting.

THE 'GAM SPIRE' IS A MASSIVE GLACIAL MOUNTAIN IN GUY'S CAMPAIGN WORLD OF BRAXIA. IT CONTAINS THE LAST OF THE ICE ELVES, ENTOMBED WITHIN.

UNDERFELL

What glacial mountains exist in the Underfell? And why? The most massive of caverns host large ridges and plateaus that overlook treacherous falls into deep chasms, and yet it is common knowledge that it gets hot the deeper down you go. So, in the Underfell, how is ice preserved?

YOU'LL LET THE COLD IN

In the strange world of the Underfell, some minerals contain certain chemicals that induce an endothermic reaction. These crystals suck nearby heat in, and cool the area around them. When located inside a geode, these self-contained refrigeration units drop the temperature rapidly, and ice begins to form. If the minerals that the crystals are formed of is plentiful, great shelves of ice can appear deep underground.

COLDSINK

Bizarre rocks can be found in the Underfell that are mostly transparent or a dull-blue in color, and that have the curious property of becoming increasingly cold the more pressure is applied to them. Normally, this creates a band of cold rock that is buried beneath the surface, usually of a mountain.

However, when these layers of rock are exposed – due to an earthquake or similar geological activity – the rock releases the cold, chilling the chamber it is housing to freezing point, and spreads over surrounding slopes.

DON'T GET YOUR SKATES ON

A lahalan lake is made of liquid nitrogen in a highly stable form at sub-zero temperatures which freezes the surrounding area and forms glaciers over time. The lakes are either swallowed in their own ice, or sometimes continue to exist in a depression intombed within the glacier. Unlucky ice miners that crack into a lahalan lake are instantly frozen solid as the nitrogen turns into a freezing gas.

YOU MEET IN A CAVERN

Some caverns in the Underfell reach enormous sizes, some more than a mile long and over six hundred yards high. These gigantic structures are not common but, due to venting in their high-domes, the ground beneath can reach frozen temperatures, especially when they occur in the polar regions of a planet.

F FEY DOMAIN

Ice in the Fey Domain shines like silver, platinum, and electrum, the most beautiful in all the known realms. You can't look at it for too long, of course. Those with eyes that do so without adequate protection will almost-certainly go blind.

JUST MIST IT

Some ice atop Fey mountains appears thicker, deeper, and colder than that which surrounds it, and not as full of color as some of the other sections of the glacier. This is because the ice is an optical illusion – the 'ice' is actually a vapor so thick that it looks like a solid surface.

SHIFTY SNOW

Shifter drifts are large piles of magical snow that move like sand dunes in a desert. Rather than compacting down and forming hills and valleys, the ice is hydrophobic and each snowflake remains separate from its fellows causing the ice to act more like sand than snow. Overnight, and in strong winds, shifter drifts can move up to half a mile, changing the landscape dramatically.

RAINBOW ROAD

When Fey magic infuses water that freezes, the ice crystals become so perfectly aligned that the solid ice appears blue, red, indigo, orange, or green, and only reflect one specific spectra of light at a time. Often, these changes of color shift, depending on the angle they are observed from, meaning whole fields of ice can dramatically transition through the colors of the rainbow as they are walked over.

ICE WARM

Strangely, and amazingly, some of the ice on Fey mountain peaks actually feels warm to the touch. This is, of course, impossible; this 'ice' is actually flakes of crystal, and only occurs on high glacial mountains. The crystal flakes are brittle and cannot hold much weight, but they do, however, retain heat very well. A small patch can be super-charged by an open flame (from a torch, for example) so that it radiates a comfortable heat for hours.

THE HELLS

The expression, 'when hell freezes over' is when discussing things that are never likely to happen. Those that readily spout this phase have not witnessed the glaciers that loom over the hellscape, cold and impenetrable.

I SCREAM, YOU SCREAM, WE ALL SCREAM

The peculiar geography of the frozen sections of a particular mountain range in the Hells causes the wind that blows over it to scream as it cuts over the frigid surface. It can reach such volume as to crack ice, cause avalanches, and burst ear-drums, if it passes directly over or around a creature. When a screaming wind descends, it usually lasts for several hours, but some have been known to last for decades, though time is strange in the Hells.

COLD CUTS

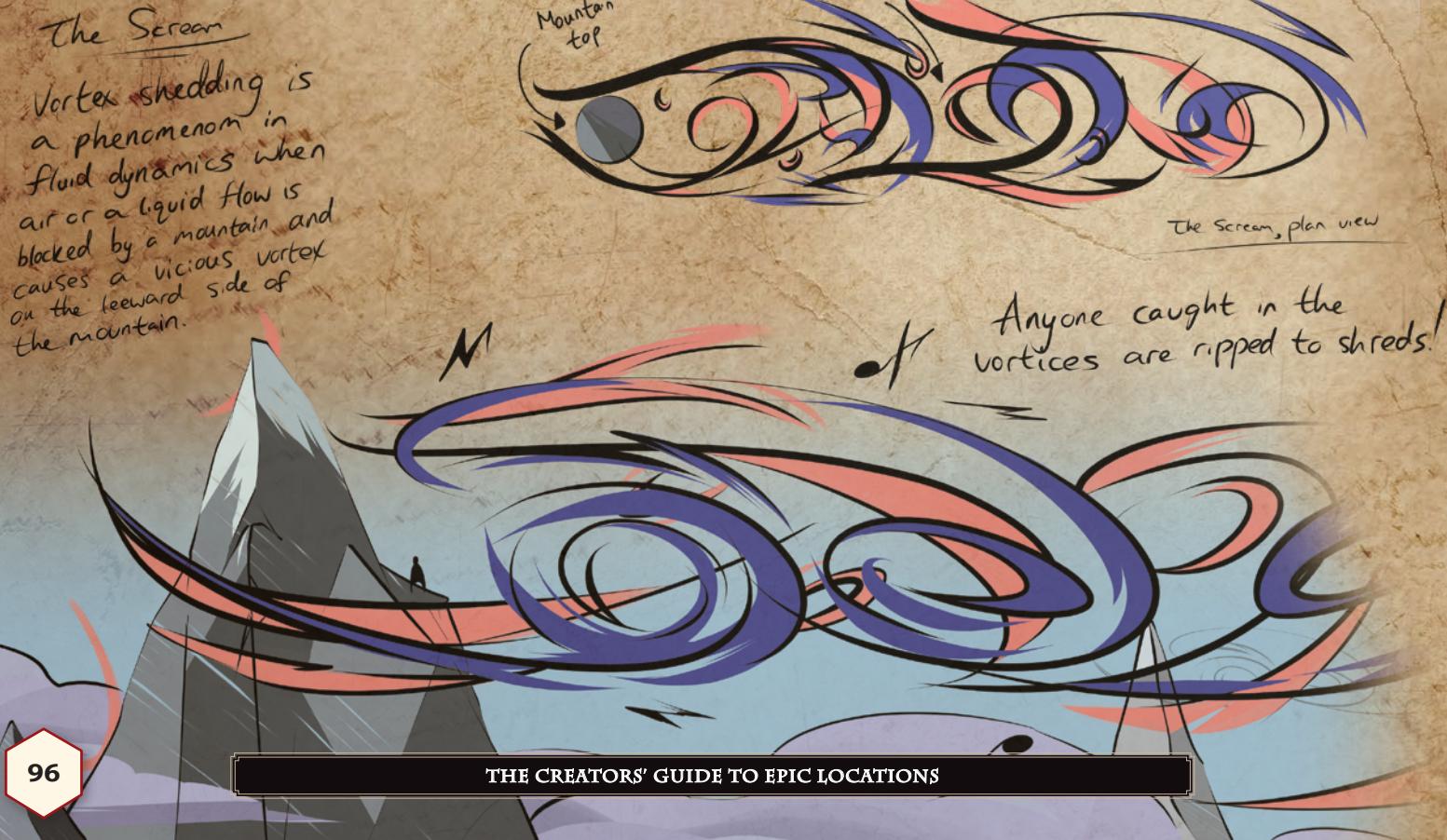
Like all ice, that in the Hells appears to be slick, smooth, and solid. Sporadically, however, and without warning, hellish ice shatters into long, razor-sharp shards, about three feet deep, and usually covering an area the size of a football pitch at a time. Anything that steps into a shattering patch or, worse, that falls in after the transformation, is usually cut to ribbons, including any armor they are wearing.

SHORT, SHARP SCALD

Beware and stay clear of slightly raised bumps in the surface of hellish ice. As thin as a sheet of paper, if these are punctured or stepped on, or if a warm body passes close enough to raise its temperature even slightly, these 'boils' burst, releasing super-hot water in a giant geyser, several dozen feet high. The water is scalding hot, but cools rapidly, falling to the ground as darts of ice that puncture through leather.

BREAK THE ICE

Blowing across the glacial ice are temperature events sometimes called 'snapsa'. These are extreme drops in temperature - as in two hundred degree drops - and are capable of instantly freezing anything caught out in the open during these sudden blasts of cold. Luckily, they are usually preceded with a loud cracking sound, giving them an element of predictability, but ice cracking is a common sound on a glacier, and even those that hear and understand the warning are not guaranteed adequate time to safely escape.



SHADOW REALM

The glacial ranges that darken the tops of the mountains of the Shadow Realm are as cold as any other. The ice however is often a dull, dirty-gray color, as it mixes with the everpresent ash that is in the air.

FREEZER BURN

Beware of pitch black ice in the Shadow Realm. It is composed of carbon dioxide and the essence of pure darkness (or so legend says) and badly burns anything that touches it. It forms in patches, usually out of the wind in areas of shadow, making it harder to spot. Ice surrounding it often melts away or forms creet (see below).

HARD AS CREET

When the ash that drifts across the realm continuously mixes with the meltwater of glacial snow and then refreezes, the two form a harder-than-concrete mix called 'creet'. It melts at a much higher temperature than ice, and so drops the temperature of the surrounding area yet further. It does not crack, but chips in small pieces, and structures made of it are super strong.

SOFT, GOOEY CENTRE

Semi-melted ice often mixes with organic matter - the carcasses of large beasts native to the region, for example. The slush, once it incorporates enough disgusting gore, oozes downhill as a tear-shaped mass roughly five to six feet wide and just as deep. Once stationary, the exposed exterior refreezes a thin layer of solid, usually dark-red ice, but it is very easy to crack, and those that do can end up neck deep in frigid slush and viscera.

A KICK IN THE GLASS

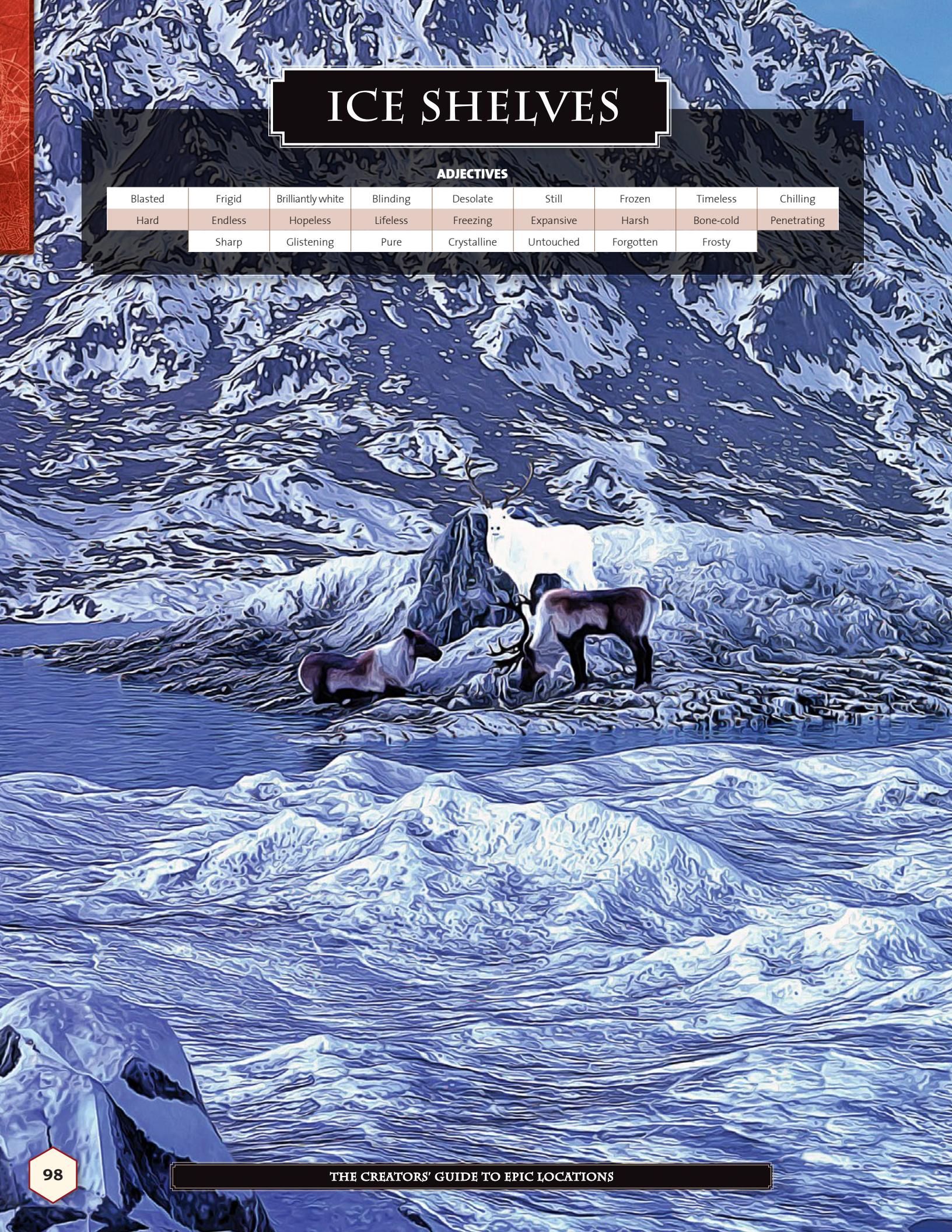
Climbing glass – as the locals call it – is impossible to climb without magical help. The ice is so smooth and so hard that only magically enchanted pitons or spikes can hope to breach it. It is highly transparent and often looks more like a cave entrance than a solid wall.



ICE SHELVES

ADJECTIVES

Blasted	Frigid	Brilliantly white	Blinding	Desolate	Still	Frozen	Timeless	Chilling
Hard	Endless	Hopeless	Lifeless	Freezing	Expansive	Harsh	Bone-cold	Penetrating
	Sharp	Glistening	Pure	Crystalline	Untouched	Forgotten	Frosty	



INSPIRATION

SENSES

SIGHT	The unending, white canvas paints a picture of frozen death.	HARD, white jagged edges pierce the timeless expanse like frozen daggers.	The blues, whites, grays ,and purples seem to mourn the memory of the sun and warmer days.	The stillness and untouched nature of the place makes it feel frozen in time.
SMELL	The air is filled with the crisp smell of freshly fallen snow.	Icy winds bite your nostrils with the sting of the bitter cold.	Aromas of mint and pine waft through the air.	Cold, wet dampness causes your nose to run and foretells an upcoming change in weather.
SOUND	Icy howls escape from hidden chasms, a chilling reminder that death is near.	Freshly fallen snow crunches under your feet as you break the surface of the new snow sheet.	A slight tinkle fills the air as the wind vibrates through snow-riden branches and hanging icicles.	The ground creaks and aches as layers of pressed snow and ice shift under your weight.
TOUCH	Your stiff fingers are numb from the cold, and sluggish when you try to move them.	As you rest near the fire, the sudden warmth makes your frozen skin tingle and itch.	A burning sensation in your toes alerts you: frostbite is setting in.	As you touch the wall you feel a sharp pain - the ice's edge has cut like a knife.
TASTE	The rigid cold bites with every breath and stings your teeth and tongue.	After hours of breathing the stale air behind your crusted, frozen scarf, you long for fresh air.	As the snow melts on your tongue, you taste sweetness and fresh earth.	The melted snow you drink has the faint taste of moldy wood.

QUICK ENCOUNTERS

D12	ENCOUNTER	D12	ENCOUNTER
1	A frozen humanoid hand protrudes from the snow.	7	A mangy fox, old and injured, watches your journey with mournful eyes.
2	A pack of hungry dire wolves rushes past, fear obvious in their eyes.	8	The wind whips up snow and, as the snowflakes dance, a face emerges that begs you to follow but vanishes quickly.
3	Three sticks, artfully arranged parallel to one another, point towards a snow-buried cave entrance.	9	Frantic banging ricochets across the ground. Under the frozen ice, a figure is frantically trying to get your attention. It needs to break out of the ice to breathe!
4	The remains of a tent that, ripped to shreds by something with enormous claws, flap sadly in the breeze.	10	A set of heavy, humanoid footprints lead on for a few dozen feet, then suddenly stop. Did the walker take to the sky? Or just suddenly vanish?
5	You hear the tinkling of chimes coming from a good distance away .	11	Four sleds, pulled by large, hairy beasts, are racing across the horizon. Two are clearly in pursuit of the others.
6	A pile of frost-stiffened animal skins rests on a small dais made of frozen snow.	12	A crude, wooden sign says: Beer. A crude arrow points to the left. In the distance, a shabby structure has a light shining in its window.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

D10	ADVENTURE
1	A she-wolf places a small, bloody glove at the feet of the party, then dashes a few feet away. If the party follows, she leads them to an abandoned ice structure, transforms into an ice demon and tries to pick each member off, one by one.
2	A glacier has appeared out of nowhere, enveloping half the kingdom overnight. Survivors can be heard under the snow, trying to find a way out. The king and his son are buried somewhere; they must be retrieved, or civil war is inevitable.
3	Six ice giants approach and place their weapons on the ground in surrender to the heroes. They need protection from 'Ikra Teemara' or, in the common tongue, 'the witch who wears white and eats people', who they say is following them.
4	A chasm has opened in the ice, revealing a magnificent city of ivory, jade, and gold. It seems abandoned, but a single door with the words, 'Open me' carved into its surface is discovered.
5	A massive chunk of the shelf has sheared off, taking half the city built upon it, with it. The rift between the shelves is less than a mile wide, but a mile and half deep. Miraculously, both of the half-cities are relatively undamaged. They have declared war on one another, and the party is caught in the middle.
6	A figure stumbles across the heroes and begs for salvation. They are running from bounty hunters who accuse them of murder, and wish to book passage on a ship to flee. The figure is a vampire - can the party trust them to do as they say? Or will escorting them to the nearest settlement put everyone in danger?
7	Seven large, boney spines suddenly burst through the ice, each nearly a mile high. Cracks around them lead down into a massive cavern, to the carcass of the megabeast out of whose back the spines protrude. A cult leader is trying to resurrect the beast to take over the world.
8	Winds are whipping up the snow into strange, sentient sculptures that are attacking nearby settlements. The winds appear to emanate from a lone glacial mountain, far to the north. The settlements have clubbed together to generate a huge reward for anyone that can help.
9	The glacier is melting, and fast. Floods, falling ice sheets, and all manner of quakes rock the shelf. Someone is purposefully taking out massive sections, using fire magic. It must be stopped before it is too late.
10	A deranged woman thrusts a map into the party's hands, before dying of exposure. It indicates a hidden cache of rare gemstones buried, not far away. When the party arrives, the same woman greets them, only much younger. The cache is at the center of a time loop focussed around the moment the woman ventured into a cave and found the cursed stones.

INTRODUCTION

Ice shelves are thick, compacted layers of ice created by centuries of snowfall and freezing conditions building up upon older layers. To maintain their structure, ice shelves need to exist in an extremely cold climate throughout the year. Temperature changes and the constant movement of the ice sheets make ice shelves dangerous and ever-changing locations. Though crystalline ice is incredibly beautiful, the constant threat of extreme cold, chasms, avalanches, and horrific weather is a combination only explored by the most daring (or foolhardy) of adventurers.

FUNDAMENTALS

Freezing cold, open stretches of featureless and mesmerizing ice, great chasms or trenches bisecting it, and irregular, unusually shaped changes in height are de rigueur for an ice shelf location.

TEMPERATURE

Ice shelves remain so because of a consistent, near freezing (or below) temperature. On Earth, this happens at the poles, where the angle of the planet's axis lessens the sun's ability to melt the ice, and at high elevation, such as the peaks of mountains.

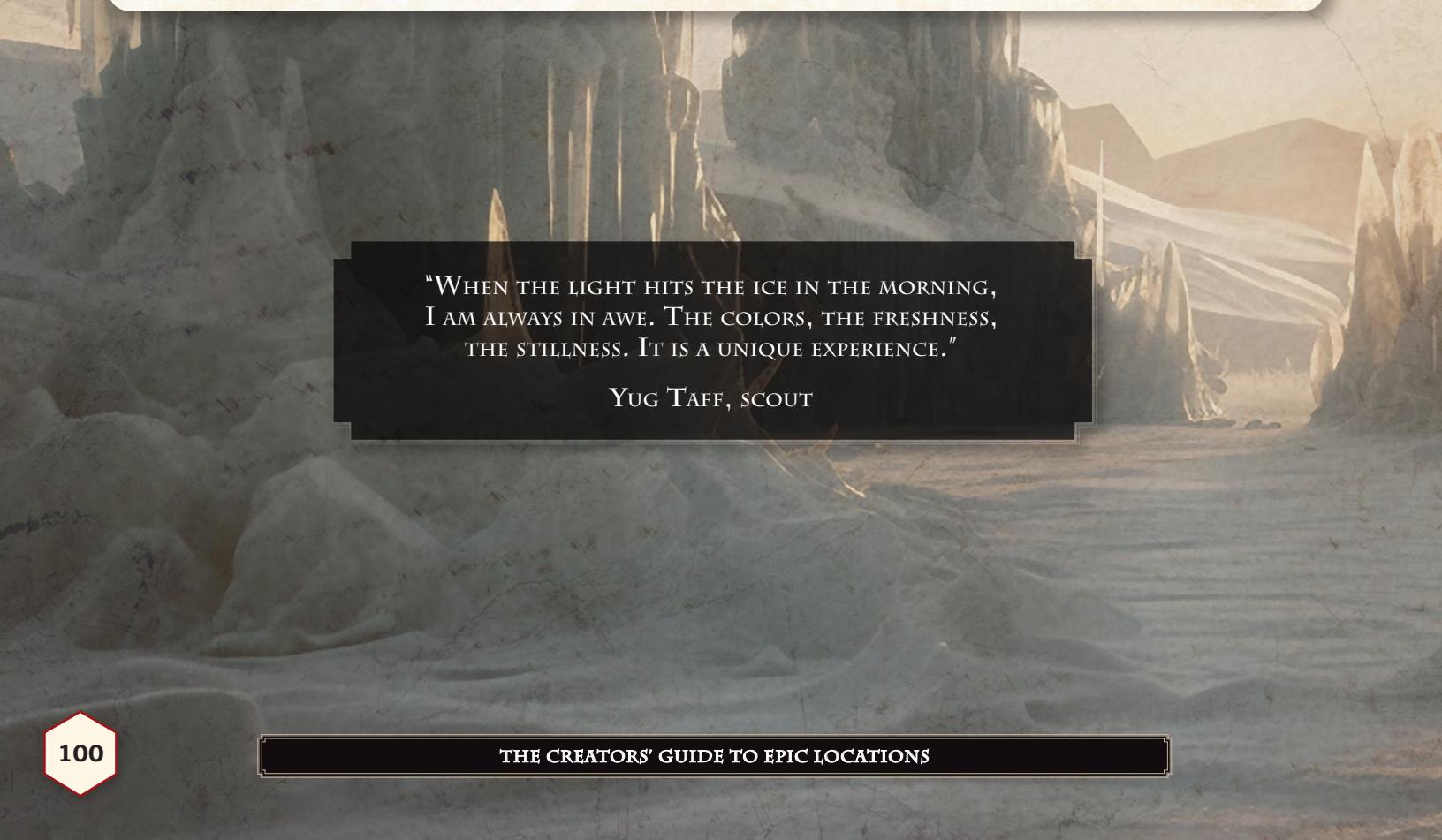
DRAMATIC MOVEMENT

Ice shelves are constantly shifting and changing environments. Ice shifts under its own weight, but it is not just gravity that affects the lay of the

land. Wind carves tunnels and hollows, meltwater erodes and undermines sheet ice, and temperature changes alter its structure and make it unstable. These changes are often spectacular and woefully erratic, forming crevasses, plateaus, and cliffs where sheets break apart, or new shapes and peaks where they are pushed together.

ERRATIC WEATHER

The near constant cold of areas where ice shelves exist ensures a constant battle in the sky between low-pressure and high-pressure systems, causing blizzards and ice storms. Intense winds hurl dagger-sharp sleet and bludgeoning gravel, all the while changing the landscape, covering tracks, and blinding those caught out in the open.



"WHEN THE LIGHT HITS THE ICE IN THE MORNING,
I AM ALWAYS IN AWE. THE COLORS, THE FRESHNESS,
THE STILLNESS. IT IS A UNIQUE EXPERIENCE."

YUG TAFF, SCOUT

FUNCTIONS

When creating region maps of ice shelves, consider the purpose of the location in your narrative. Is it a key location where characters take on multiple quests, find clues, and develop relationships, and so requires several multi-faceted areas to explore? Is it a transitory location meant to create tension and drama but on the way to somewhere more significant? Are there settlements to be explored, or is this shelf a barren, uninhabitable region that forces characters to endure and cross it without any assistance?

SETTLING AN ICE SHELF

There is almost no natural environment that humankind has not conquered. Planet Earth contains extremes of temperature, humidity, and weather, and an ice shelf certainly qualifies. What is the motivation to not only visit places with such conditions, but to settle there? Most of the time, these location types, of which ice shelves are one, offer rare and unique opportunities not found elsewhere. Perhaps this ice shelf is the sole hunting ground of a rare creature that provides valuable resources? Perhaps there are (or are suspected to be) deposits of critical resources below the ice that cannot be found elsewhere? Perhaps settlers simply want to be as far away as possible from civilization? If their motivation is strong enough, people can always find a way to sustain a livelihood in even the harshest environments.

When creating an ice shelf location, consider the 'why' before the 'how'.

REASON FOR SETTLING	BENEFIT
Hunting	Nutrient-rich animals provide unique oils, fats, skins, furs, or - in a fantasy setting - magical components.
Resources	Some resources are specific to cold regions, such as some minerals and other naturally occurring substances.
Escape	Escaping civilization, and the problems associated with it (such as crowding, disease, finance, or pollution), is just as good a reason as any to choose an ice shelf for a home.
Cultural Importance	Some cultural groups settled on the ice before anyone can remember and now, dozens of generations later, these groups are so accustomed to living on the ice, living anywhere else seems folly.

There are many people who live in Earth's icy regions that hunt whales and seals, collecting the hides and using both them and the surrounding ice to create temporary settlements. However, these are rarely permanent homes; hunters are usually on the move, following the seasons and the cycle of freezing and thawing of the ice itself. Some construct iconic igloos as shelters, because ice is such an abundant resource and easy to create building blocks from. The shape is ideal - it allows inhabitants to keep warm and sheltered inside and deflects, rather than attempting to resist, the harsh winds. Once the hunting season is over, they normally return to slightly less frigid regions, to homes often constructed on wooden stilts to keep the permafrost of the ground at bay.

FINESSE

When creating an epic location in this type of environment, consider adding interesting features and geography to form a great stage for adventure to play out on.

ETERNALLY PRESERVING ICE

The ancient ice inherent to an ice shelf location facilitates not only hazardous and exciting encounters relating to the present situation, but might also provide clues, insights, and treasures from the past. What was here a thousand years (or more!) before the heroes arrived?

Because of the preservative attributes of ice, a great way of introducing a region's lore is by having items, or even creatures, trapped in ice. There could have been a recent freeze - an expedition got caught in a blizzard just a few weeks ago, and are now preserved in the eternal ice. Equally, there could be remnants of a long-forgotten age - creatures, travelers, or items trapped eons ago, that have now resurfaced through a recent event.

This is a fantastic opportunity to break expectations. A ship or a lost adventurer, though not to be sniffed at if used in an interesting way, are rather obvious choices. To really entice players, and fill them with wonder, lock something in the ice that is completely out of place.

Unexpected things that could be trapped in ice might include:

- A small, and entirely intact, tavern
- A writing desk, filled with scrolls and parchment, standing on an intricately woven carpet
- A crashed airship ,without any sign of a crew
- Aquatic animals, caught mid-motion
- The characters themselves, but clearly older and with better-quality gear

COMPLICATIONS AND EVER-INCREASING DANGER

Unlike other locations where conditions might generally remain the same, an ice shelf ramps up the pressure on characters by prolonging their exposure to conditions that most are not accustomed to or built for. Introduce a looming blizzard that starts to build, unstable ice, melt rivers or floods, or an avalanche that forces the characters to hurry. Dropping the temperature drastically escalates fatigue and makes progress difficult. There should be a constant struggle and choice to be made between rushing towards a goal and risking the exposure of the harsh environment, or pausing the current objective so that it takes longer overall, to try and find shelter.

- THE ICE SHELF IS NOT ALL WHITE. THERE ARE SO MANY TONES OF BLUE, PURPLE, GREEN, BROWN AND EVERY MIX OF THOSE PRESENT. MAYBE NOT EVERYWHERE, BUT THEY ARE THERE. -

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

Icy conditions bring a myriad of challenges, with food, fuel, and warmth being primary. Delays in reaching resource points, or in making progress, can force an expedition to turn back, or have no choice but to move forward. Ice shelves are known to have blizzards that last for days, trapping victims in the same location and draining their supplies, whilst denying them forward progress. Cracks in the ice that turn into chasms can cost valuable time and energy to navigate around, or may be so expansive that crossing them becomes impossible.

Thus, preparation is the key means of ensuring that the point of no return is planned for, accounted for, and comes as no surprise because, on the ice shelf, it is bound to happen.



DESIGNING EPIC ICE SHELVES IN FANTASY SETTINGS

Add any of the following features, or use them for inspiration, to create an ice shelf that is clearly not of our world.

HIGH FANTASY

Magic can cause ice shelves to appear in unusual places and with strange side effects. Such places are often connected to a central source of power; finding and undoing this unnatural transformation can be a useful source for stories.

BRAINFREEZE

Due to some unusual magical interference, the ice on some shelves - despite the fact that its temperature should make it solid - is stuck in a perpetually liquid state. It is so cold that anything it touches instantly freezes. It is unclear whether the interference was intentional, but it poses real danger; the ice looks like water but should, under no circumstances, be drunk.

IT'S JUST A PHASE

Unlike regular ice, phasing ice vanishes as soon as it detects a temperature change of more than a degree or two. It transitions instantly from a solid into a gas. Any that walk on this bluish ice should be extremely careful. One moment you are trying to kindle a fire into existence on a sheet of solid ice; the next moment you are falling through a cloud of vapor into a chasm below the surface.

FREEZE!

Black ice is black, not from pollutants or colorants, but because it absorbs all light. It is so cold it instantly stops any creature within a few feet of it. They do not appear frozen - no telltale frost forms across their skin or clothing. Time simply appears to just stop functioning. Luckily, black ice is very visible, and therefore avoidable, when walking across the tundra, except for those that foolishly choose to travel at night.

ICED UP

Snow-nadoes are rare magical events that whip across icy plains with tremendous speed. In their wake, they leave behind curiously shaped structures that look like frozen towers. These tube-like formations can reach up to 100 feet in height and form natural shelters, provided that the 'nado, and the associated dangers, have passed.



UNDERFELL

Either because of proximity to polar regions of the world, magical effects, or rare climatic conditions, ice shelves form in the Underfell too. Thick ice encrusts the walls and floors of caverns, sometimes even forming subterranean networks of solid ice, riddled with caves. The dichotomy of geothermal vents meeting extreme cold can have interesting effects on the landscape.

GLASS CEILING

Where the geothermal warmth of the ground cannot reach the higher regions of a cavern, the ceiling usually retains its translucent ice. Sunlight, refracted by the ice sheets above, causes mesmerizing plays of light, which most creatures of the Underfell avoid, though snow-wisps and ice sprites are attracted to such locations. Walking through such a cavern is a most peculiar experience, as the combination of the shimmering blue light and the occasional movement of these small creatures zipping by gives the impression of walking underwater. The ice periodically shifts, interrupting any pleasant strolls of those below by dropping deadly chunks of frozen icicles.

LABYRINTHIC

Stalagmites and stalactites have transformed this part of the Underfell into a forest-like maze of frozen structures. Light is reflected a thousandfold, and the different thicknesses of the icy structures act like broken glass and mirrors, tricking the eye with false movement and reflections. Every sound is split apart, reflected, distorted, and amplified by the endless echoes of this location, making it hard to have a conversation, or hear predators approaching.

COLD OPEN

The everchanging ice, winds of different temperatures, and the shifting of ice plates, cause Underfell tunnels in the coldest places to open and seal shut without warning. Even regular travelers might find that, where an opening was before, only a solid wall of ice now exists. The erratic movement of the entrances traps some adventurers for days at a time, if there is not an alternative route to be found.

MIST ME?

With just a small amount of geothermal heat, the ice in this particular cavern vaporizes into mist. However, as it rises, it comes into contact with the frozen ceiling and, instead of condensing and falling as rain, it freezes. Anything warm passing through gets instantly coated in frozen mist, which then reverts to water, which starts to freeze, locking the unfortunate, warm object inside a thick ice shell. Eventually, everything that passes through freezes into yet another form on the cavern floor.



FYE DOMAIN

With the whole Domain known for its trickery, beauty, and marvelous natural wonders, Fey ice shelves too are staggering and disarmingly wondrous. Instead of cold and dark emphasizing the lifelessness of the land, the glistening beauty of ice and snow lures adventurers into a false sense of security as they traverse the shelf.

PRISM CHASM SCHISM

Multiple cracks and ruptures within a snowy surface can form mazes of deep chasms. The walls are solid ice and so smooth that the surface creates manifold reflections of prismatic light. Where two chasms are close to each other, the ice is sometimes thin enough in places to see distorted images of what is behind. Light, cast into such a place, is fractured a thousandfold and smooth-surfaced walls are like mirrors, so much so that some travelers blindfold themselves to pass through, to protect their eyes.

UNREAL ESTATE

The Fey Domain is inherently magical, and the land follows no laws but its own. In places where the concentration is thick, formations that vaguely resemble buildings and structures sometimes spontaneously appear, like faint afterimages of civilization have imprinted themselves onto the weave of

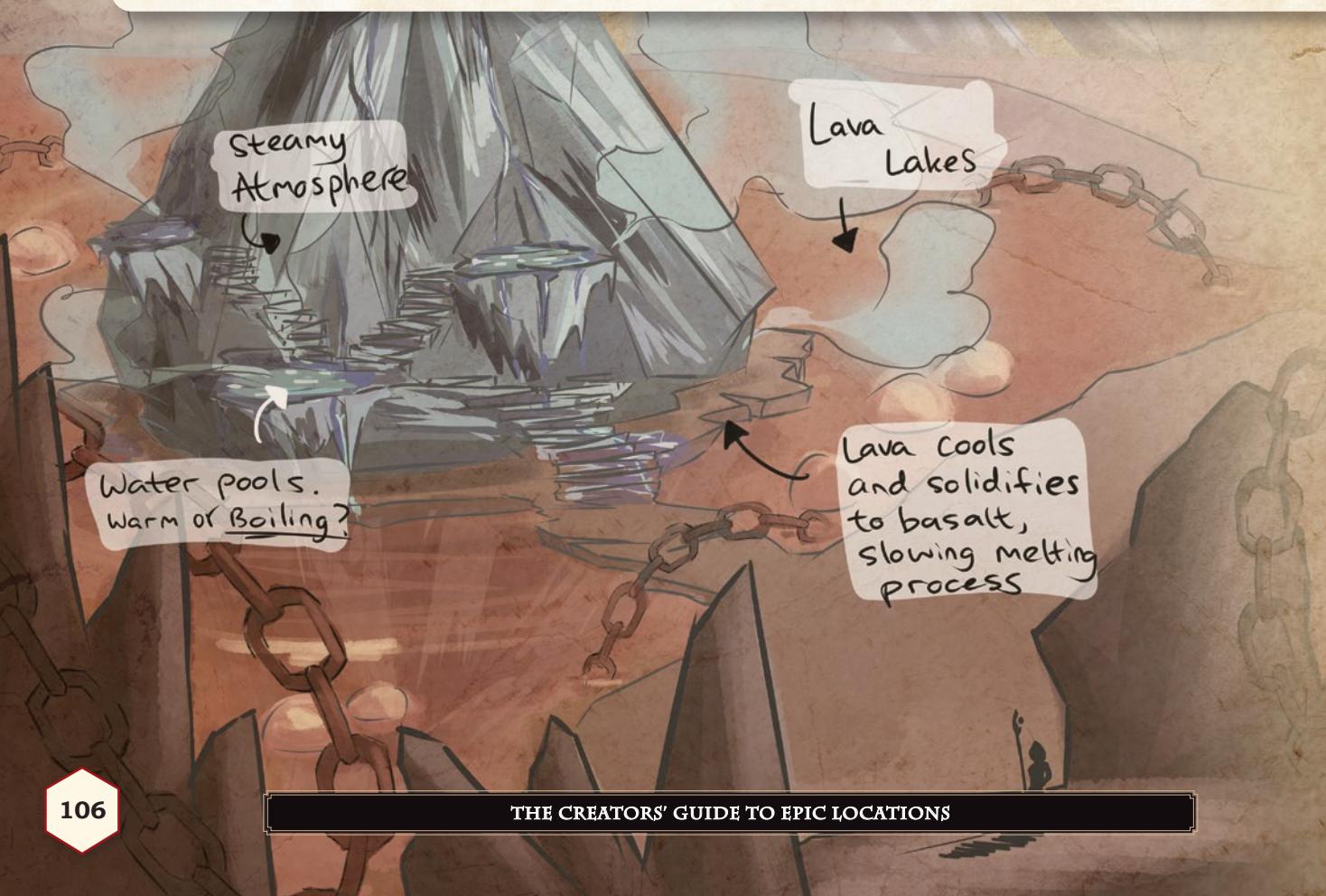
magic of the place. Archways and pylons of glistening ice reach over translucent domes, and reflective surfaces are strangely carved and decorated by the winds that howl without. While these places form without design, they are often populated – free housing is free housing.

'SNOW JOKE

Over seemingly endless plains of snow and ice, where daylight is reflected by the pristine surface of freshly fallen snow, mirages form, tricking adventurers into believing that a caravan is moving ahead, or that a town or city is within reach. These mirages are often formed directly over huge chasms, due to differences in temperature, and so have spelled the doom of many travelers.

I WANDERED LONELY AS A DUNE

As the wind pushes freshly fallen snow around, wandering dunes can form, which often reach high into the sky. This can become dangerous to travelers, as the land is constantly changing; landmarks that were visible before become suddenly buried, jeopardizing navigation. Traversing these dunes is a demanding endeavor, as the soft snow gives way easily and a wrongly placed step can cause an avalanche.



THE HELLS

An icy environment in the burning Hells can be quite tricky to explain. However, many sources present the various levels as containing all manner of environments. Ice, snow, and cold are very, very effective means of inducing suffering and torment.

HOT STEAM IN YOUR AREA

At the borders of where ice constantly forms in the sub-zero layers of the hellish landscape, surrounding heat from others melts it away. This constant cycle generates dense, superheated mists. Plumes of steam erupt occasionally when larger chunks of ice break off and evaporate, shrouding the surrounding areas in even denser mist.

CELL O' PAIN

Ice burn occurs when the water in living tissue freezes. When it freezes, the sharp ice punctures through cell membranes, exploding and instantly freezing them. The burning sensation is no less painful than from the heat of a fire.

FROSTBITE

Huge chunks of ice shelves break off at regular intervals, due to the erratic temperatures in the Hells, and slowly melt and refreeze into tooth-like icebergs. When the bergs form in close vicinity, they have the appearance of a giant, steaming maw, so travelers avoid them, but they actually

I WANT TO BREAK FREE

One layer of the Hells is so cold that the air itself is brittle. Inhaling it freezes lung tissue, and creatures that try to move though it find it melts around them and with the next step instantly freezes, encasing them in a thin sheet of ice, which shatters with the next step, but requires effort. Each step through a 'solid cold' region is a battle to keep moving, lest the freezing becomes permanent.

SHADOW REALM

Ice shelves and tundra are common in the Shadow Realm, as the absence of daylight leads to a naturally colder base temperature. Massive regions of dark ice and ash-like snow are surrounded by even larger regions of dusty barrens, and in the shadows of huge mountains, or in deep chasms where even the dim light cannot reach, the temperature can drop well below zero, allowing glaciers to form.

SUCKS TO BE YOU

Unlike the gales that sweep across glaciers normally, sucking winds constantly pull, regardless of which direction a traveler turns. This constant pull on clothes, exposed skin, and hair eventually becomes maddening, and can induce hysteria.

BLACK SL-ICE

In some icy regions of the Shadows, the snow is made of black obsidian crystals picked up from rocky beaches by the wind and dropped hundreds of miles later. They are so thin and fine that they behave like regular snow crystals, but have a sharp edge. When these fall, they slice and shred any-

thing they touch, and only the thickest and strongest armor can protect any caught out in a blizzard.

JAGGED LITTLE CHILL

Shards of ice stab out of the ground in many shadowy places in unusual circle formations. Any that wander in notice the briefest of tremors before, almost instantly, the circle snaps shut. It seems, particularly to those inside, that the ice shards are the teeth of a massive ambush predator, except this is not the case; they are merely the twisted result of Shadow geography.

CRACKED RIBS

Bent, twisted spires of black ice reach towards the ever-clouded skies of the Shadows, like the ribcage of a long-deceased god. Walking amongst them, the reflections in their dark, smooth surface are distorted and show movement where no counterpart can be detected. A constant chime fills the air, as if the spires are whispering. Constant dark smoke slowly sinks to the ground around them.

JUNGLES

ADJECTIVES

Mysterious	Treacherous	Bewildering	Sweltering	Alluring	Dense	Wild	Vibrant	Aromatic
Exotic	Overgrown	Humid	Fertile	Clammy	Noxious	Ancient	Untouched	Forbidden
Mysterious	Shadowy	Verdant	Rank	Thorny	Foreboding	Primal		



INSPIRATION

SENSES

SIGHT	Towering trees reach up to the sky, some so tall that their branches seem to touch the clouds.	Fungi dot the ground, some almost luminescent in the dim light.	Sunlight filters through the thick canopy, making its way to the forest floor.	Thick underbrush, creates a maze-like landscape that obscures the path ahead.
SMELL	The smell of damp earth and rotting vegetation mingles with the scent of exotic flowers and fruits.	The heady aroma of musky ferns and moist soil lingers in the air.	Spicy fragrances of unknown plants are tinged with the occasional whiff of a predator's musk.	Aromas of ripe fruits, hanging from the trees, drift through the jungle.
SOUND	Leaves rustle as wind blows through every gap in the dense canopy.	Monkeys holler in the distance, warning their tribe of a predator's approach.	The innumerable insects buzz so loudly around the foliage, it is as if they are inside your very skull.	The crashing rush of a waterfall is deafening, even though it cascades far in the distance.
TOUCH	The coarse bark of the trees brushes against your skin as you push through.	The slimy texture of wet vines entangle around you and cling to your body.	The dampness of the air and the intense humidity make it hard to breathe.	Sharp thorns in the underbrush scratch and pierce your skin with every step.
TASTE	Succulent papaya, sweet and juicy mango, and earthy bananas all blend together to create a delicious mix of flavors.	The air is filled with the aroma of freshly cooked plantain and yams, making your mouth water.	Served and eaten directly from the fire, nothing staves off hunger like the rich and smoky taste of spit-roasted meat.	Freshly picked herbs and spices add new depths of earthy aroma to each meal.

QUICK ENCOUNTERS

D12	ENCOUNTER	D12	ENCOUNTER
1	A troop of monkeys has started following the party. Every time they check, the troop has gotten bigger and seems to be drawing closer.	7	The path the party follows leads to a lost river arm. As they step towards the shore, they see a canoe under attack by hippos.
2	A giant gorilla suddenly charges through the underbrush. It is a silverback, and is followed by a group of female gorillas.	8	The party hears desperate shouting. Upon investigation, they find a poacher, trapped in his own barbed trap.
3	The party comes across a clearing littered with freshly cleaned bones. In the center is a peculiar-looking blossom.	9	The party comes across an ancient tree that is home to hundreds of colorful parrots. Their angry chatter is in the common tongue, and they ask the party to resolve an argument they are having.
4	As the party makes their way through the underbrush, they see a huge flock of birds taking to the air; something must have disturbed them.	10	The path ahead is filled with webbing and egg sacks. Before the party can turn around, huge spiders descend from the trees around them.
5	The party encounters a band of undead adventurers, lost forever, and cursed to perpetually wander the jungle, looking for a way out.	11	The party discovers an ancient temple ruin that is haunted by the ghosts of the priests who used to live there.
6	The party discovers a strange effigy, surrounded by a ditch filled with snakes.	12	The party spots rope ladders and hanging bridges in the canopy. There seems to be a wide array of pathways leading to places unknown.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

D10	ADVENTURE
1	An ancient map leads to a lost temple, hidden deep within the jungle. The temple is said to contain powerful magic and valuable treasure, but it is also guarded by dangerous traps and fierce guardians.
2	A terrible curse has befallen a nearby village, causing the people to slowly turn into trees. The source of the curse is said to be located deep within the nearby jungle, and the party is asked to find and put an end to it before it spreads.
3	A wealthy animal collector believes that there is a sentient ape living deep in the jungle. He is putting together several hunting parties and promises a generous reward for whoever can catch the ape alive and return with it first.
4	The local shaman of the village asks the party to apprehend some poachers who have set up camp in the jungle to hunt rare animals. He fears for the animals and speaks of 'nature's wrath' that will turn against everyone if the poachers are not stopped soon.
5	The party is hired by an explorer society to lead an expedition in search of a lost city. The city is said to have been constructed by an ancient civilization with advanced magic and technology, but went extinct thousands of years ago, due to their greed.
6	A deadly curse has befallen parts of the jungle, turning plants and trees into deadly monstrosities and driving all animals insane. The party must stop the curse before it reaches any of the villages nestled in between the trees.
7	The party is asked to investigate a strange phenomenon that is causing the jungle to grow rapidly and uncontrollably. It is almost certainly magical in nature, and is causing chaos and destruction for nearby towns and villages.
8	A young lizardfolk hunter asks the party for help. His tribe is being attacked by a pair of unnaturally large panthers, who they have nicknamed 'Shadow' and 'Darkness'. The felines return every night and take people from his village but, so far, no one has been willing to assist them.
9	Estuarine traders ask the party to help them, as a new river arm has been discovered, but all exploring parties that have set out to map it have been lost. It is believed to be a great shortcut for river trade, but needs to be secured first.
10	A group of emissaries from a lost city have appeared, claiming that their god has returned. They demand that all surrounding villages adhere to the new ruler and send tribute. The party is tasked by a collective of local leaders to investigate.

INTRODUCTION

The term ‘jungle’ describes a forest that is densely overgrown with trees and tangled vegetation, usually in a warm place with high humidity and rainfall. The ground grows thick with vines, broad leaf plants, and all manner of tangled roots, making it difficult for travelers to pass through. The name ‘jungle’, however, is a descriptive term, referring to the density of vegetation on lower layers of what is essentially either forest or rainforest, but with a lot more moisture. All jungles are forests, but not all forests are jungles.

What defines a rainforest specifically are two predominant characteristics: As the name suggests, rainforests can be found in areas with high rainfall that often last for months at a time, called ‘wet seasons’. Unlike a jungle however, rainforests have a layer of tall trees, called a canopy, that block out most of the sunlight. This canopy prevents light from reaching the ground, inhibiting the growth of plants on the forest floor.

The first Western explorers of the 19th century conflated the two terms when they published articles about the rainforest, writing of the same tangled underlayer that jungles feature. They were exploring by river, and this is indeed the case when viewed from such a vantagepoint; rivers, after all, are high-value areas for plant growth, and competition is rife. Rainforests can have underlayers of jungle, though many do not, and a rainforest can become a jungle.

JUNGLE VS. RAINFOREST: A COMPARISON

	JUNGLE	RAINFOREST
Definition	Any tropical forest with thick vegetation, forest parting, and no canopy	Forest with closed tree canopy, heavy rainfall and no wildfires
Location	Near planet's equator – typically in consistently warm zone of the planet year-round	
Climate	Tropical, high rainfall	Tropical or temperate, high rainfall, dark, humid, damp
Vegetation	Impenetrable, superdense, thick, varied undergrowth, shrubs, moss, predatory plants	Thick with the tall, large trees, sparse undergrowth competing for limited light, often surrounded by jungle
Trees	No canopy - the forest is parted, broken and open in many parts	Dense canopy - light cannot reach forest floor directly, and must filter through leaves first
Tree Height	Average of 30 feet – though some reach double that, mainly short trees choked by dense vegetation	Large and high-reaching – in excess of 120 feet, some up to 230 feet.
Typical Flora & Fauna	Vines, shrubbery, insects, reptiles, rodents,	Over half of all flora and fauna found on Earth
Largest Concentration of Animals	Forest floor	Emergent layer and canopy

“TREACHEROUS, BEWILDERING, AND SWELTERING.
THAT'S HOW I'D DESCRIBE THAT JUNGLE. I WON'T GO BACK
IN AGAIN, NOT FOR ANY REASON.”

LLIT MAL, CITY GUARD

FUNDAMENTALS

Rainforests are often surrounded by wide jungle areas and form the oldest part of the forest. The jungle areas may, in turn, be surrounded by tropical forest. Jungles and forests are rich habitats and, with some level of survival skill and a tolerance for humidity, it is possible for all species to thrive. Food is plentiful, water is either everywhere or frequently rains from the sky and, due to their geographical placement, the weather is often warm and seldom cold. To outside eyes, they appear to be a paradise.

WET AND DRY SEASONS

For many climatic regions, the yearly seasons are defined by temperature, with warm summer months and cold winter months. Nearer to the equator, where the temperature does not change drastically enough to distinguish seasons in this way, they are defined by wetter or drier weather that lasts for long periods of time. A wet season is the time of year when the majority of a region's annual precipitation occurs. On Earth, the term 'wet season' can mean different things, depending

on what part of the world you are referring to. For example, the wet season in India is controlled by the arrival of the monsoon - persistent, heavy rains which cause flooding - whereas the rainy season in Cuba is related to the occurrence of heavy evening thunderstorms, and infrequent (but intense) tropical cyclones (hurricanes). In a dry season, rain might not fall at all for several months. Rivers tend to dry up, lakes shrink considerably, and wildlife is forced to seek out fresh water wherever they can.

DIFFICULTY OF MOVEMENT

One of the biggest challenges in moving through a jungle is the density of the plant growth. In these rich environments, plants thrive. Giant palm ferns, vines of all manner, thick bushes, and predatory plants proliferate. The air is always humid and hot, so those who are not careful can suffer from heat exhaustion or dehydration. Every step is either over a root, through a clinging plant, or onto something poisonous, venomous, or sticky.

FUNCTIONS

Ironically, it is because jungles and rainforests are so abundant in food that civilizations within these areas have tended to remain hunter-gathers. But, as populations have increased, agriculture has become necessary to sustain them, and the rest of the world, and jungles are not good places to grow crops. The only way for a jungle or rainforest to yield good harvests for such crops is to cut down trees and burn whole areas to the ground to be transformed into fields.

RIVER TRADE AND TRAVEL

Rainforests are often home to wide rivers and river arms, surrounded by mangrove forests, and wetland areas, like bayous and marshes. Since traversing a jungle by foot is much more complicated than by boat, river trade and travel is common practice in those locations. Villages are often built on or near a river arm that facilitates safe fishing, easy access to other settlements, and boat trade along the river.

NATIVE HABITATS

Because dense jungles are highly impassable and uncontrollable territories, some native tribes exist that have never had contact with outside civilizations before. Where rivers allow trade, these tribes are sometimes willing to trade and

exchange with larger settlements but, as jungles and rainforests cover gigantic regions, contact is not guaranteed. Due to their isolation, little is known of these tribes, including how many there are, so we cannot know how they would react if contact was forced upon them. Not all are likely to be hostile at first sight, as many remote, native civilizations introduced to strangers in the past have been curious and forthcoming to strangers. It is to be expected, of course, as well as understandable, that there might also be more territorial tribes that do not wish to see strangers walking through their ancestral home.

KEEPERS OF THE PAST

In jungles, where weather and seasons are extreme and the humidity is high, eradicating all proof of a civilization's existence takes comparatively little time. Modern archeologists have to use high-tech aerial laser mapping techniques to penetrate the jungle and its dense floor of leaves and soil to find the remains of structures less than a thousand years old. In a twist of irony, because the jungle consumed these ancient structures, the remains are entombed under root and leaf and are thus preserved for much longer than they would, had they been simply left out in the open.

FINESSE

Jungle adventures are often stories of survival and exploration and, whilst jungles can be seen as paradises, they are also deadly to the uninitiated. As characters progress deeper into the jungle, the threat grows and changes. There is an interesting transition as the dangers shift from the ground to the treetops. While in the jungle section of a location, dangers are mainly on the ground, hidden by the dense foliage, such as reptiles, insects, and large predators. Every foot fall and every hand placement brings new risks. When the party transitions into an area of rainforest, however, the impending danger becomes death from above, as the underbrush grows lighter, and the trees start to rise high above their heads. Arboreal predators can strike without warning. Snakes, spiders, and jaguars might use the advantage of high branches and treetops to stealthily attack from above.

DISEASE AND INFECTION

Jungles are wet places, and are therefore full of parasites, bacteria, and areas that are slippery underfoot. Wounds quickly fester, leeches and ticks are incredibly common bloodsuckers, and vampire bats carry rabies which infect their victims. Water pools and slow-moving rivers are often host to worms that can cause bilharzia, a deadly disease, and bacteria, which thrives in water, can cause all manner of infections. Unless water is boiled, it poses a significant threat to anyone that drinks it.

MOSQUITO-RELATED DISEASE

Because of the high humidity of jungles and rainforests, and the number of pools of standing water, thousands of types of mosquitoes are rife, and bites are an ever-present danger. Tropical variants can transmit malaria, West Nile virus, dengue fever, and yellow fever, all of which are potentially fatal if left untreated, and most cripple their victim whilst their body fights off infection. Breeding pools that release thousands of mosquitoes at a time are a thing of terror, and should be avoided at all costs.

RIVER BLINDNESS

Another threat is carried by flies', who are host to small parasites that enter into the bloodstream of victims that are bitten. Aside from the pain of the fly bite, which is similar to a bee sting, the parasite slowly migrates to the eyes of the victim where they grow and can cause blindness. The flies breed in fast flowing river water.

HUNTED BY THE UNSEEN

A good way to add yet more danger to a jungle location is to play with the paranoia of characters. A jungle is a place of a thousand hiding spots, strange sensations, and confusing light reflections that play tricks on the mind (and eyes). The momentary flash of jaguar spots through a gap in the trees, the gleam off the scales of an anaconda lurking beneath the surface of the river, the grunt of a bush pig, or the hushed chatter of a hunting tribe - if presented mysteriously, a party of adventurers can never be sure if real threats are lurking, or if their paranoia is being fed by shadows and tricks of the light.

RAISING THE STAKES

If all the predators, diseases, and infections were not enough, there is scope for a jungle to become an even more deadly place. When your only point of reference is a palm leaf two feet from your face, or the only sky you can see is hidden by a dense canopy, keeping your bearings is incredibly difficult. Getting turned around in a jungle is really easy, therefore, for those not in possession of a working compass.

LANGUAGES UNKNOWN

As many tribes and civilizations living within the jungles may have been, until this point, completely isolated from the outside world, their languages and forms of communication may be wonderfully different. This means that miscommunication can be significant, etiquette can vary wildly, and differences in religion and culture can be dramatic. Cultures can, and do, endorse practices that many find abhorrent, such as human sacrifice or slavery. Travelers should be extremely cautious when encountering unknown peoples.

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

As characters venture deeper into the jungle, their decision to push forward must become inevitable. The transition from dense jungle to a seemingly less obtrusive rainforest area is a good way to do this as, just by changing the terrain, the way ahead seems much more traversable. Though water travel is a frequent method of navigating fairly quickly across these large domains, there may simply come a point where boats are no longer usable – perhaps the rivers thin out too much to be traversable, or there may simply not be one nearby to where they are aiming for.

As with forests, jungles and rainforests spring up, on, and amongst various other kinds of geography. Valleys, cliffs, and wide areas of flat ground are likely to be encountered, and each poses a potential reason to prevent characters from turning back. During the rainy season, rivers flood, water courses become dangerously swollen, and landmarks for navigation might become submerged. In the dry season, smaller rivers might dry up completely, introducing the challenge of finding fresh water.

Thus, the point of no return is when characters have made significant enough progress to become committed, and either something blocks or hinders their return trip, or something drives them forward from behind, deeper into the jungle. After that moment, it is likely to be a significant cost in terms of resources, and a very real danger to life, to go back the way they came.



They seem welcoming at first, but then it's just snakes and screaming and death...

- WHEN DESIGNING A JUNGLE, THINK OF A THREE-LEVEL HIGH BUILDING, WHERE THE FLOORS ARE PERMEABLE AND ANYTHING CAN MOVE FROM ONE TO THE OTHER, AND YET, EACH LEVEL HAS ITS OWN UNIQUE STRUCTURES AND INHABITANTS. -

DESIGNING EPIC JUNGLES IN FANTASY SETTINGS

Add any of the following features, or use them for inspiration, to create a jungle that is clearly not of our world.

HIGH FANTASY

As mystical and magical as most jungles might already seem, there are several elements that can be added to make them even more fantastical.

TUBULAR BOWLS

In a fantasy world, the possibilities are endless when it comes to size and scope of jungle trees. When several magnificently large and old trees grow so large that their trunks touch, the result is a large, circular tube that forms in the center. The tube fills with water, and 'tawrah bowls' come into existence. Full of rainwater, these dark water holes can reach one hundred feet deep or more, and be dozens of feet in diameter.

THE TWILIGHT ZONE

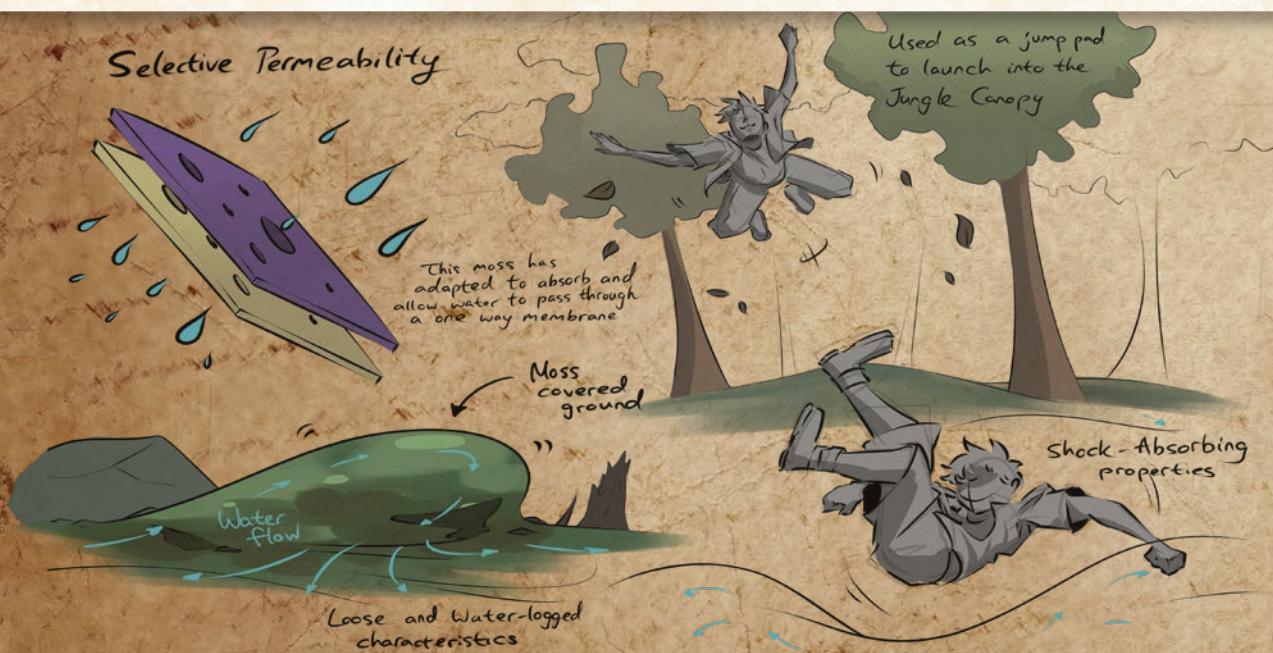
Some parts of the jungle in certain areas of the world are so overgrown and so thick that no light reaches the jungle floor at all, resulting in the entire area being locked in perpetual night. The result of this is a ground that is entirely barren; no plants can grow, yet the entire area is covered in leaf matter from the canopy above. Strange are the creatures that have evolved to live in the never-ending dark living off the rotting carpet, and stranger still are the predators that hunt them.

A CRYING SHAME

Mistaken as hills, weeping mounds come into existence gently, growing and rising up from the forest floor, usually covered in thick undergrowth. When poked or prodded, the surface feels rubbery to the touch. If pierced, the mound bleeds dark-brown water, the color of very strong tea, until its entire store is expelled, deflating gradually like a bouncy castle at the end of a birthday party. Once exhausted, however, the mounds slowly fill with water again, and build in height again over years.

SKYWAYS

When the branches of several trees run parallel with one another for decades, with higher foliage above, they start to form natural bridges that span the jungle floor, hundreds of feet above. As leaves drop, they build up on these branches and slowly, over-time, the branches become covered in dark soil too, held together by plants. The bridges are therefore well-reinforced and strong, and so become a well-trafficked highway, a wonderful alternative to the tangle of the undergrowth - for those that can get up there.



UNDERFELL

The definition of an Underfell jungle depends on your idea of what the Underfell is – a core world, or a mass of interconnected caves. Core worlds function like miniature versions of the surface with verdant green jungles, whereas interconnected caves are quite different: without natural light, only fungal jungles can exist, limiting the flora and fauna.

THE WETS

Some large Underfell caverns have massive aquifers above them. The roof of the caverns are constantly dripping water, creating perpetual rain. ‘The Wets’ are tunnels that never flood, due to good drainage, but which are constantly moist, slick, and humid. Roots that hang down form an inverted jungle, with a thick and tangled morass along the roof, and longer, sparser branches that dangle further, creating layers of vegetation, just as in the upright.

CRUMBLE IN THE JUNGLE

Floors in The Wets, being perpetually moist, can turn into a substance known as ‘crumble scum’. This is where the rock, normally porous enough for most surface water to drain away, is so eroded by the constant dripping that it cracks into dozens (or even

hundreds) of small, hexagonal columns. These look like solid floors but actually float on pools of water. Anything that steps onto one of these columns of crumble scum finds they sink easily.

WELCOME TO THE FUNGAL

As there is no sky for fungi to grow towards in the Underfell and, in many cases, fungi do not differentiate whether they grow from the ceiling or the floor, there are instances of strange mushroom ‘jungles’, with a ‘canopy’ of trunks sprouting from the ceiling, and a thick blanket of tangled mixed mycelia on the floor. This gives the sensation of walking on a bizarre, fungal mirror, and can be very disorientating.

ROCKING OUT

Not every jungle is formed of fungi. Some are made up of stone formations that look like trees. They require specific minerals to be present in the rock above the chamber but, where this is the case, the formations form a jungle as dense as any on the surface. Lichens cover every inch of every surface, granting them color and further contributing to the illusion of a jungle.

FEY DOMAIN

The jungles of the Fey are bursting with color, and are perhaps even more dangerous as a result of their disarming beauty.

YOU WOULDN'T BE-LEAF IT

A species of Fey tree, ‘leafia gigantica’, sprouts leaves so broad, so strong, and so thick, that soil, other plants, and even smaller trees, grow upon them. Though the trees are rare, even one individual is large enough to create a whole additional layer of jungle, fifty to three hundred feet above ground level. Those walking below the leaves find themselves in an inky-black world, untouched by the sun, where life cannot flourish.

TREE FALLS

An odd phenomenon sometimes occurs in immense Fey trees – those that reach nine hundred feet tall or higher. These trees draw so much water from the ground that some develop reservoirs halfway up their trunks, especially if rot or animal life has created a hollow of some kind. Occasionally, these reservoirs burst, and the stored water cascades from the tree trunk in a magnificent waterfall.

TRICKLED PINK

Many rivers flowing through dense jungles in the Fey turn a brownish-pink, or sometimes a dark-ochre-yellow, due to algae found mainly in jungle root systems. Individual organisms are not strongly bonded together, and break down in fast-flowing water, tinting the water a pinkish or yellowish color. Pink water is safe to drink, whilst yellow water addles the mind and can cause temporary amnesia. Remembering which is which is of the utmost importance.

AIN'T MIST-BEHAVIN'

Above the self-same rivers mentioned above that meander their way through Fey jungles, an early morning mist rolls in, usually bright pink or yellow in color. Millions of the microscopic algae are lifted from the river as the top layer evaporates, where they dance about until the water is totally vaporized. The effect is very pretty, and it serves a secondary function for some Fey creatures that revel until dawn; they take it as a sign that it is, finally, ready for bed.

THE HELLS

One of the few environments in the Hells where there is an abundance of water, infernal jungles are hot, humid, densely overgrown, and terrible places to spend too much time in.

HELL FOR LEATHER

The leaves of the trees in most hellish jungles are as tough as leather, and just as thick. The branches too, are stiff and difficult to move, yet supple enough to bend under a blade, but cutting them is tedious work. Travel progress is likely to be less than a mile a day, or slower for solo travelers or those with dull implements.

BILE GROUND

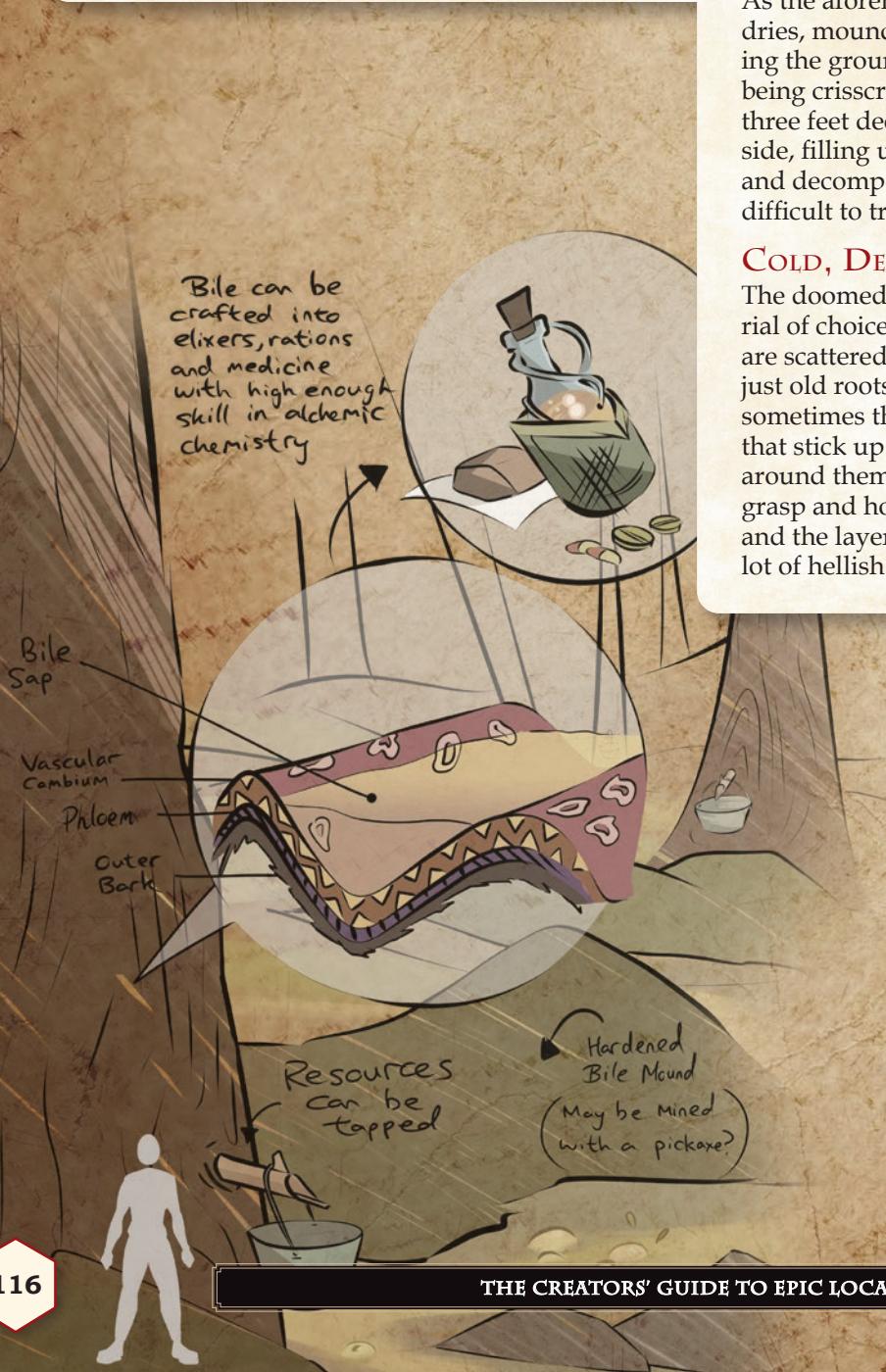
Amongst the many other horrors of jungles in the Hells, the ground around many trees is slushy and sticky. For reasons unknown, though almost certainly due to infernal magics, some trees store and excrete bile – an alkaline substance that can burn skin, and appears to have no real function in the ‘ecosystem’ other than to make things incredibly unpleasant. Accidentally stepping into a bile puddle is usually catastrophic for footwear, and worse still for the foot inside it, if not removed and expediently cleaned.

ENTRENCHED

As the aforementioned bile secreted from trees dries, mounds of it form around their bases, raising the ground level. The jungles of hell end up being crisscrossed with trenches, therefore, about three feet deep, where mounds form on either side, filling up with all manner of soggy material and decomposing leaf matter, and making it very difficult to travel and navigate.

COLD, DEAD HANDS

The doomed and damned are the building material of choice in many parts of the Hells. Bodies are scattered far and wide so, in jungles, it is not just old roots, and rocks underfoot, but bones, and sometimes the literal grasping hands of the dead that stick up from the ground. Plant life grows around them, granting them small spines that grasp and hook onto anything moving past them, and the layer of thick fungal growth that covers a lot of hellish forest floors infects wounds easily.



SHADOW REALM

The jungles of the Shadow Realm indeed offer some relief from the dark skies and falling ash that plague most of the plane, but this does not mean they should be ventured into lightly.

WHO YOU GONNA CALL?

Several thick patches of Shadow Realm jungle simply look solid but, when anyone ventures close enough, they dissolve into mist, revealing large, open glades. These phantom patches are referred to as 'ghosters', and they are the hunting ground of choice for many predators, who take advantage of prey suddenly emerging into the open, unprepared.

GROUND ZERO

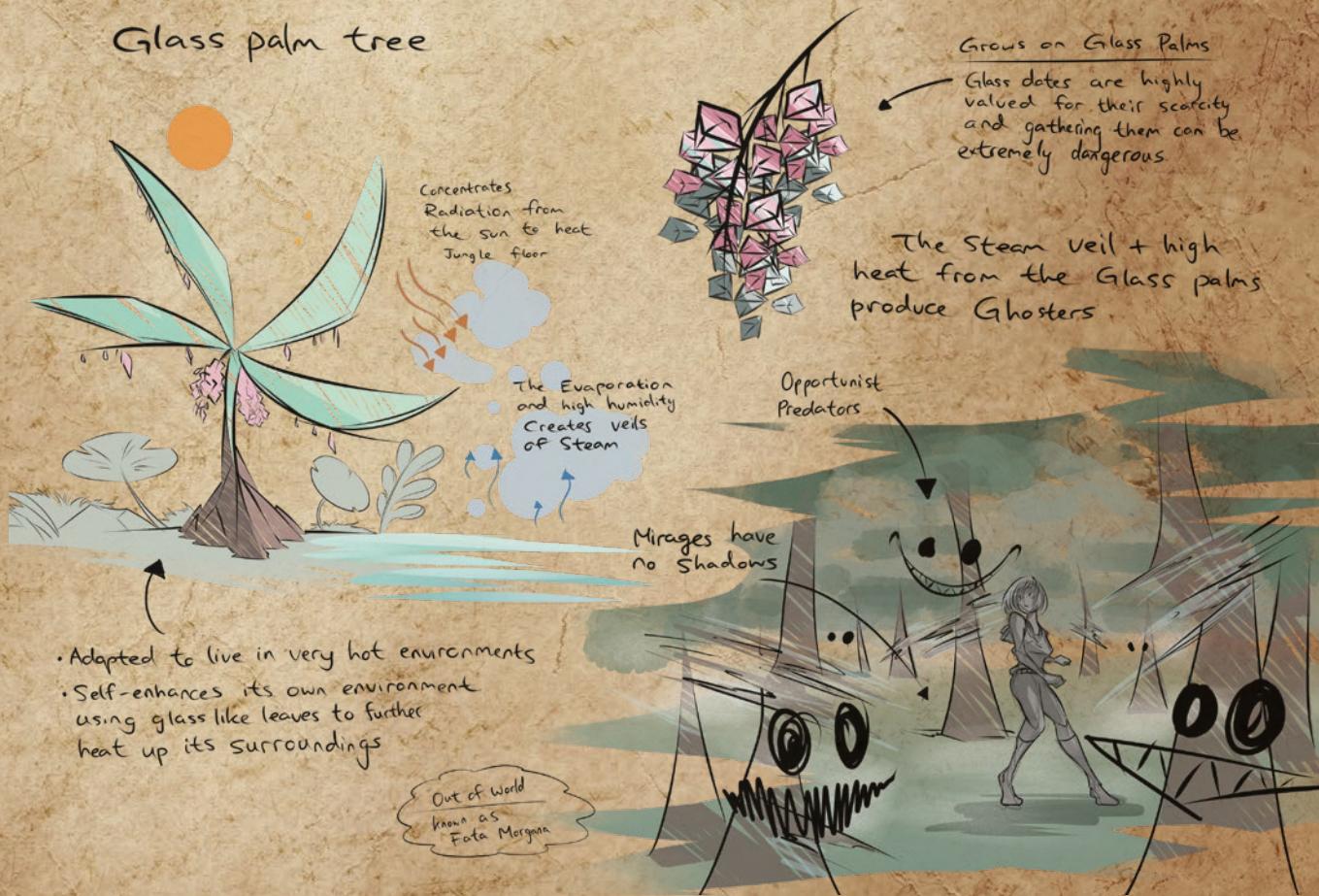
Though many aspects of the Shadow Realm are unexplained (or just, perhaps, not discussed) particularly baffling are the large areas of jungle that are simply ruined and destroyed. Though the jungle around them seems unaffected, in these places, nothing grows at all; all the trees are blasted to hell – as if a bomb was detonated. The ground is hard and cracked, all is still, and the wood that remains is brittle or turned to charcoal.

HOLD YOUR BREATH

Bladderblaits are spongy hills that gently rise up and down, as if breathing. Jungle trees grow in circles around them, forming perfect, concentric rings, though no one is sure why. Don't swing a sword when near to one; sharp objects or a sudden impact can puncture a bladderblait, releasing a great burst of putrid-smelling air. The bladderblait slowly deflates, heals the wound, and then begins filling with gas again.

ASH RIVERS

Ash dominates in the Shadows, and so does it in rivers in the jungles of the Realm. What fills them is not water, just the super-fine ash itself, filtered through the jungle canopy and in such volume that it begins to flow – like water. It follows the path of least resistance downhill, and becomes wide, meandering streams. To try to swim in one is to try to swim through sand: nearly impossible.



LAKES

ADJECTIVES

Serene	Peaceful	Glittering	Idyllic	Sublime	Gloomy	Stygian
Unfathomable	Abyssal	Perilous	Misty	Murky	Agitated	Turbulent
Hazardous	Eerie	Ghostly	Fathomless	Foreboding	Mysterious	Cavernous
	Glacial	Saline	Rocky	Moss-covered	Senses	



INSPIRATION

SENSES

SIGHT	The depths of the lake are murky, but the water is still and clear near the surface.	SMELL	The sun reflects off the lake's surface, creating a glistening light that dances on the water.	A small, wooden dock juts out from the shore, providing a perfect place for adventurers to rest and take in the scenery.	A few fish swim lazily just beneath the surface, their scales shimmering in the sunlight.
SMELL	The crisp, fresh scent of the lake water creates an invigorating aroma.	SOUND	The soft, earthy smell of the nearby trees and plants fills the air.	The faint scent of fish and other aquatic creatures mixes with the not-unpleasant smell of decomposing vegetation.	The fragrant aroma of wildflowers blankets the shore in perfume.
SOUND	The water is still and clear, and the gentle lapping of the waves against the shore can be heard from afar.	TOUCH	A fish flings itself bodily out of the water, drawing your attention as it splashes back down again.	The air is filled with the chirping and the thrumming of wingbeats, as birds hunt for insects around the lake's edge.	You hear the distant call of some waterfowl between the rustling leaves of the surrounding trees.
TOUCH	The lakewater is like a blanket of cold silk, gliding across your skin.	TASTE	The stillness of the lake is almost eerie, creating a sense of calm as you explore its depths.	You can feel the presence of the creatures around you, a constant reminder that you are not alone here.	The rising pressure of the water pushing against your body takes its toll as you realize how deep it is.
TASTE	Nothing beats the taste of freshly caught fish, grilled over a fire, when out in the wilds.		The refreshing taste of cold, clear water hits your tongue and provides instant relief.	The bitter taste of muddy water from the sandy shallows carpets the roof of your mouth with grit.	The metallic taste of blood dominates all your senses as your lungs scream for air.

QUICK ENCOUNTERS

D12	ENCOUNTER	D12	ENCOUNTER
1	A small rowboat is dancing on the water. You can see a fishing pole and a bucket of still-flapping fish, but no fisher.	7	Sitting on a small island in the center of the lake is a small child, crying and imploring the party for rescue.
2	A mixed group of nymphs are bathing and playing at the lake shore. When they see the party, they beckon them to join.	8	The center of the lake is shrouded in dense fog. As the party peers through it, they see the silhouette of a grand, beautiful castle outlined in the vapors.
3	Looking at their reflection in the water, each party member sees a drowned version of themselves holding a valuable item in their dead hands.	9	Every night, when the moonlight shines on the lake, you see the lights of a city glimmering at the bottom of the lake.
4	As the party sets foot on the shore of the lake, the water suddenly recedes, denying them its refreshment.	10	As the party crosses the lake by boat, an enormous shadow follows closely, under the water.
5	A hand reaches out of the water in the center of the lake, holding up a seemingly magic weapon.	11	Far from the shore, the party sees a person drowning. Something is pulling them under and, with each attempt to resurface, their attempts get weaker.
6	A ceremonially decorated boat floats on the water, carrying a body covered with a white sheet and a wealth of treasure.	12	As the mist over the lake reaches the shore, figures begin to emerge from the fog.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

D10	ADVENTURE
1	As the party rests on the edge of a secluded village at the lake's shore, they meet a young merchant who warns them about travelers vanishing here each night. Her husband disappeared the day before, and she fears she is next. She distrusts the villagers; she claims they act strangely and probably have something to do with it.
2	The people in town tell of a guardian creature that lives deep within the lake. Something has changed recently, and the guardian has turned against the townsfolk, attacking their boats, and pulling people below the surface.
3	Most people in town believe that the story of the castle in the mist is just a fairy tale, but an old woman claims she has actually been there. Once every full moon, she claims, the mist forms a bridge, connecting the shore with the castle so that those brave enough can approach and be rewarded within.
4	Many centuries ago, the lake was created through the construction of a dam. The village was built partially on top of the lake and the dam, and is today flourishing from fishing trade. A stranger has recently appeared and given an ultimatum to the town: abandon it and release the water, or suffer a great tragedy.
5	The nymphs living in the lake have sent a plea for help. Their underwater kingdom has been affected by a terrible curse, and they need help before they perish. They offer the party a blessing to breathe underwater and promise a valuable reward.
6	Recently, the once-drowned have started to return to the surface to hunt the living. No one knows why this is happening, but their numbers increase every night. The party is tasked to investigate the source and bring an end to it.
7	Sitting on a small island in the center of the lake is an old, abandoned wizard tower. It is said to be protected by wards and traps, and no one dares to go close. For the past few nights, light has been seen in the tower, and livestock has started to vanish. The villagers task the party to investigate.
8	Every night, a beautiful tune emanates from the bottom of the lake. Those that hear it are drawn into the water and perish. The villagers are terrified and lock themselves in their homes every night. When the party arrives, the villagers plead with them for help.
9	A gnomish corporation has constructed a factory at the shore and is polluting the water with sewage. The crabfolk living in the lake have tried to negotiate with the gnomes but have only been met with violence. They entreat the party to infiltrate and sabotage the factory.
10	Mysterious fog has started to form on the surface of the lake. The shape of a massive stronghold can be seen within and, wherever the fog reaches the shore, the ghosts of ancient warriors raid the towns and villages.

INTRODUCTION

Lakes are bodies of water encompassed on all sides by land. They can be composed either of freshwater or saltwater, and form through glacial, volcanic, or tectonic activity. While there are lakes that are formed by groundwater, rivers, and rain, these often lack the depth of the other three types and so are categorized more-easily as wetlands and mires. Ponds, on the other hand, are the small siblings of lakes, formed by the same processes as lakes, just on a much smaller scale.

A dam is an artificial lake constructed by either animals or humans. Human-built dams can be massive, but none reach the size of some of the natural great lakes. A loch, a term primarily used in Scotland, is merely another name for a lake.

CHARACTERISTICS OF LAKES VS. PONDS

	LAKE	POND
Sunlight	Does not reach the bottom	Can reach the bottom
Freezing	Does not entirely freeze to the bed in winter	Can freeze completely
Temperature	Can have different temperature zones, usually warmer layers of water on top and colder layers at the bottom	Generally the same temperature throughout
Waves	Can have waves - large surface area allows wind to build up wave energy	Usually still, except for small ripples
Climate	Large enough to affect regional climate	Affected by the regional climate

- WHAT LIVES IN THE MURK UNDER THE WATERS SURFACE?
WHAT MONSTERS DWELL THERE? LOST TREASURES PERHAPS
OR THE SWEET EMBRACE OF MUD? -

FUNDAMENTALS

Lakes form in depressions. Something must hold the water in place, be it mountains, hard rock, banks of dense mud, or simply broad, ever-rising beaches. How lakes are formed varies, and each process gives a lake a distinctive look.

CREATIONAL TYPES AND SHAPES

At the end of the last ice age, when glaciers started to retreat, they left large trenches in the ground. These trenches filled up with water from the melting ice, by opening up to a nearby sea via a canal, or simply from a shift in the water table. Initially, these might have been ponds but, over time, as more water filled the space, they developed into lakes. Fjords often form this way also, and these lakes tend to have exposed, rocky cliff sides.

When an explosion blows out the top of a volcano, a crater is formed. This can create enough of a basin to form a lake, often referred to as caldera lake. Caldera lakes can be unbelievably deep, and stretch deep into the ground, some more than 1500 feet. These lakes are usually circular, if the entire caldera is filled.

Tectonic movement and earthquakes can create fissures in the Earth's crust and reveal subterranean hollows that eventually fill up with water. These lakes can be very deep as well, and often connect to underwater cave systems and tunnels. Jagged edges, waterfalls, and uneven terrain are the give away signs of a fissure lake.

When sand starts to block rivers at the mouth, lagoons can form, sometimes called dune lakes. When this happens higher upstream, the lakes that form are often vaguely pyramidal in shape, with the apex being the river and the base being the blocked section.

Oxbow lakes are similar, and form on rivers where a sharp bend becomes isolated from the original course. This can happen if a new alternate path for the river opens up; the original bend is gradually isolated by sand until it is completely cut off. These lakes are typically U-shaped.

LAKE COLORS

Generally, clear lakes with low levels of algae and other organic material are often blue in color, lakes that have high nutrient content and algae are green, and lakes with heavily forested watersheds, wetlands, or bogs around them may appear brown, or even black, in color.

Depending on their depth, lakes can create vibrant color transitions as the water grows darker in the center of the lake. Water pollution, from set-

tlements around the lake, can also cause the color of a lake to change from blue to green, and eventually brown, resulting in the occasional, interesting location where the name of the lake no longer matches its color.

FUNCTIONS

Lakes are huge bodies of water and can be bordered by a variety of different location types, such as swamps, mountains, forests, or jungles. While you can design a lake as an epic location in its own right, it is also a useful connection point between other locations. Like all bodies of water, lakes provide a lot of benefits to those living on, or near, them.

ECONOMY

As freshwater lakes are a natural source of water and food, local economies that surround them are often highly centered around fishing and small boat shipping or ferrying. Smaller villages form along the shoreline to reap the benefit of quick access to rich fishing grounds. Sometimes, bigger cities start to form slowly, encompassing large amounts of shoreline as smaller villages merge together. Docks and stilt houses might start to be built further out from the shore for easier access to the water and can even form whole districts where canals replace streets.

PROTECTION

If there are islands, spits of land, or promontories of rock jutting out of lake's surface, towers, castles, or even small towns might utilize the natural protection of the surrounding water. Bridges are great choking points, and make it harder for invaders to attack. The flat surface of the water allows defenders to see any approaching threat ahead of time, and offers little protection or cover for attackers as they approach either over the water, or along narrow connection points from the land.

BELOW THE WATERLINE

Most lakes have an abundance of aquatic life, ranging from crustaceans and insects, to fish and large predators. Depending on how the lake was initially formed, there may be forgotten ruins or structures lurking in the dark water.

Some lakes, however, contain very little aquatic life. The water might be so salty, for example, that most lifeforms simply cannot survive there. Others may contain very low levels of nutrients, and so only support basic algae growth or small fish, frogs and the like.

FINESSE

The impression a lake presents at first sight is largely what gives it most of its flair and atmosphere. Those set in spectacular surroundings will feature a rainbow of light and reflections, grand vistas, and a sense of infinity, while those hemmed in on all sides by murky swamps might be shrouded in mist and look more like mirrors reflecting their dead, gray border than great expanses of water. A lake might appear almost black if it broods under dark and dreary pine forests, or as a clear and sparkling oasis offering a cool reprieve from the heat if it is encountered in the open plains.

FLOATING STRUCTURES

Lakes can be home to many different types of floating structure. Stilt-raised homes or villages are affixed permanently and are likely to be populated with locals of industry that rely on the lake, while houseboats and floating markets might be similarly anchored or, alternatively, journey from settlement to settlement to take advantage of where trade and traffic are good. Mats of reeds, tangled logs, and branches clumped with grasses are formed when a rapidly flowing river enters a broad, slow flowing lake, dotting the surface with natural decoration that is both a great habitat for small lake creatures and ripe for resource foraging. Various types of plant float on the surface of lakes – sometimes densely enough as to obscure the fact that there is even water underneath.

TRADITIONS

Lakes are often central to local, cultural traditions. Some are utilized as a means of disposing of the dead, others are places of purification or atonement. There are cultures that see the waters as sacred and forbidden, and others that make use of them

for entertainment and relaxation. For predatory animals, such as big cats and birds of prey, a lake is an ideal hunting ground, as prey flocks to the shore to drink. Many migratory animals use lakes as watering points along their journey, and create wide paths leading up to and around the lake.

CHANGING SEASONS

Lakes in temperate and colder climates usually change significantly throughout the seasons. A warm, welcoming lake in summer suddenly becomes a frozen playground in winter. The effect on the local population is also dramatic. Basket, fly, and net fishing from piers, row-boats and trawlers in warmer months turns into treks to drop lines through holes drilled in the frozen, winter surface. Transportation usually done by boat has to be accomplished on skis or sleds. Fresh water, while still plentiful, is more time-consuming to collect when blocks of ice have to be cut and melted, and wild inhabitants may have to similarly access water by breaking the ice with hoof or horn.

For those without the skill or inclination to adapt to a cold snap, the option is there to simply withdraw to warmer climes for the season, like the annual migration of many bird species, or to an area of greater protection and shelter, such as surrounding forests.

STORMS

Larger lakes - those with significant surface area - can suffer from terrible storms, which can create massive waves over 20 feet tall if the weather is extreme enough. For most creatures used to the calm waters of the lake, including humans, waves of this size are dangerous and highly destructive.

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

Depending on how heroes choose to traverse a lake, the point of no return will be different. They might navigate in the water itself, propelling their own physical bodies by athletic swimming, or by some sort of magic, such as transformation into an aquatic being. If they are ill-prepared, their point of no return might be when they can no longer touch the bottom, and are thus reliant on swimming or some other means of keeping above the water (on a boat, for example). Treading water is arduous, and prevents or significantly hinders most other activities (like fishing using a line, eating and drinking etc.) so water-breathing becomes more and more essential the longer that characters spend in or on a lake location.

If their destination is across the water, and not contained within it, heroes might travel over the surface in some sort of vessel. Thus, when the shore is no longer visible, the heroes reach their point of no return, principally because navigation becomes solely reliant on solar or astral navigation, as landmarks have vanished. After that moment, heroes this far into a lake must rely on their supplies lasting long enough for them to find another shore.



"This is our lake. Leave now."

- THE SHORE AROUND THE LAKE CAN BE ALMOST ANY OTHER LOCATION; A CONTRAST BETWEEN THIS AND THE LAKE ENVIRONMENT ITSELF CAN LEAD TO DRAMATIC NARRATIVE MOMENTS. -

DESIGNING EPIC LAKES IN FANTASY SETTINGS

Add any of the following features, or use them for inspiration, to create a lake that is clearly not of our world.

HIGH FANTASY

Biological and physical forces do not need to work the same in a fantasy world - laws that govern how shore, water, and the surrounding ecosystem interact and co-exist can be played with to create a uniquely epic lake.

BIG MIST-LAKE. HUGE.

A mysterious lake exists that is made entirely of mist, but a mist so dense that it can be swum or sailed across. The mist coils up around those who enter the lake, the sensation more like flying than swimming, although one does get a little damp after a while.

PERMAFROST

An everfrozen lake is a solid block of ice year-round. The lake cools the surrounding beaches for some distance but, even in the height of summer, remains frozen. Often used as a source of ice for nearby villages, some of whom create industry around it, the ice is replenished by rainfall, which pools and then freezes.

WHAT DREAMS ARE MADE OF

The water in certain, magic-infused lakes is so clear that it is possible to see all the way to the bottom and, after looking long and hard enough, there are reports of those that see their dreams unfolding just below the surface. Allegedly, the visions have no audio, and only dreams related to one's own self can be witnessed, but this does not stop dreamers roaming the world in search of such lakes. Those that find them must be wary, however - it is easy to lose yourself in dreams.

SEEING STARS

Some lakes and ponds are nearly unrecognizable as water until they are stepped in; their water is intensely reflective and is slightly denser than normal. As a perfect mirror, reflection pools are often mistaken for portals in the ground that lead to the sky or, if surrounded by dense foliage, their reflection of it renders them almost invisible. At dawn and at dusk, however, these bodies of water resemble giant patches of blazing brilliance, like a sky of false stars, as they reflect the low-angled sunlight in all directions.

- IT IS A WANDERING LAKE. IT MOVES ABOUT. SOMETIMES
IT HEADS TO THE COAST FOR SUMMER, OR THE MOUNTAIN.
NEVER SEEN A WANDERING LAKE BEFORE, AND FRANKLY,
NEVER WANNA SEE ANOTHER! -

UNDERFELL

What could be more sinister than a black pool of perfectly calm water in a dark cave a dozen miles beneath the surface of the world? The Underfell always surprises you...

BY THE LIGHT OF THE MOON

Moon Lakes are perfectly dark, the water perfectly clear. One might be a few feet deep or several hundred, and the diameter of each lake varies considerably too. Moon Lakes are connected to the night sky, and reflect it on the surface of the pool every evening, even though the lake is hundreds or thousands of feet below the surface, and the moon has no way of reaching it! Standing on the shore of a Moon lake, you can see the stars, the moon (or moons), or clouds and rain. By sunrise (above the ground), the images on the lake (below ground) fade, and the lake goes dark again.

NOT A DROP TO DRINK

An especially devious lake exists that looks like water, and feels like water, but when you swim in it, you don't get wet. If you drink it, you will quickly die of thirst. The only way to know it is not water, is to either watch someone desiccate from

drinking it (usually not Plan A), or toss a silver coin into it. The lake is composed of a clear liquid that draws water from its victims and surroundings, but it reacts with silver, turning black.

OIL BARREN

Only in the Underfell can you find a lake composed of entirely crude oil. Stagnant and cold, the oil has collected here for whatever reason for a long, long time, and the pool is now large enough to be considered a lake. Swimming across it is nearly impossible; the oil is so thick that every stroke is exhausting.

THESE POOLS ARE THE PITS

Interspersed between the great, dark lakes are shallower pools are usually only a few inches to a foot deep. Randomly scattered across their beds however, are holes - some as wide as six feet, others only a few inches - but hundreds of feet deep and deathly cold. What makes these holes, no one knows, but pitted pools, despite requiring no vessel or need to swim, are a frustration to cross because of the constant need to watch your step.



FYE DOMAIN

The lakes of the Fey Domain sparkle with color and light and are always awash with sounds of water. Truly, there are no better lakes in all the realms.

A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME

Deep in the Fey Doman is The Rose Window, a lake that spontaneously shifts color in patches of different sizes all across its surface, playing out a kaleidoscope every hour or so. As it changes, the fish that live in the lake dart from patch to patch to remain in water of the specific color that they have adapted to, causing the surface of the lake to froth and bubble. This only enhances the effect of the color shift.

IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE

Want to get to another part of the Fey quickly? Quick lakes make it happen in the blink of an eye. Whatever magic formed the lake also permeates the area around it. To cross a quick lake, simply look at a point on the other side of it, and blink - you will find yourself instantly on the other side. Be careful not to stare into the lake and blink, however, lest you find yourself suddenly walking along the bottom, a long, long way down.

CHILLIN' OUT, MAXIN', RELAXIN' ON LAXIN

The fragrances that drift across a laxin lake are disarmingly relaxing. Soft lavender and sweet jasmine seems to constantly waft off of these purple waters. The relaxation effect is so strong that only those with the stoutest of constitutions are able to continue on their journey, as most succumb and simply settle down and relax themselves to the point of death, forgetting to both eat and drink.

SWEET LIKE CANDY

Constantly bubbling with small pearls of sweet-smelling gas, a fizzling sweet lake typically has at least three colonies of humanoids dotted around it, with fierce competition raging over the best spots. The lakewater is sugary sweet and is naturally carbonated, and the colonies bottle it to sell elsewhere. The drink is extremely popular, and there are entire networks in place to manage its distribution. There is constant fighting between the lakeside colonies, who are incredibly territorial over their patch of lake and perpetually try to outdo their competition, but they also must be wary of outside interests that would love to grab a slice of their profits.

THE HELLS

The Hells have a few lakes to explore, but from a distance, and always with protective clothing. In fact, there is not much about these lakes that makes them worth the risk of even approaching them.

IN HOT WATER

No hellish landscape is complete without a fire lake. The water is not on fire; it is, in fact, not water at all, but liquid fire. Looking like the surface of the sun, these lakes are (of course) incredibly hot, with small tongues of flame breaking the surface, and are usually surrounded by a jet-black shoreline of molten lava for several hundred feet. It is possible to pour the fire water into a container, if one can be found that can withstand the solar-scale heat.

WELL OF SOULS

There are some parts of the Hells where even the dead do not loiter. Several murky-green lakes are dotted about, and have a slightly slimy look to them. No fresh souls visit these forsaken places; only the residue of forgotten souls linger. When a soul is no longer remembered, it begins to lose form until it decomposes into sludge, neither alive

nor dead, to be incorporated into the lake. These lakes are gloomy and cold, and are constantly expanding with the addition of more souls.

LAKE-ING WITH FEAR

Occasionally liquid, occasionally wet, matted hair, occasionally tentacles, occasionally entrails, occasionally snakes - Dread Lake is no true lake; it transforms and cycles through all the horrors and fears of the living, at irregular intervals. There are moments when the lake is full of unusual human fears, like mayonnaise, jelly, or cotton wool, although these are usually fleeting.

SLEEP TIGHT

One huge depression looks to be untouched by water of any kind, which is entirely true. This is a lake of pure carbon dioxide, extremely poisonous to humanoids, causing any that enter it to slowly fall asleep as their brain is starved of oxygen. The corpses should make the lakes easy to spot, but carnivorous plant abominations thrive in the lake and consume those that expire on the lake bed, while other scavengers keep the shores clear for obvious reasons.

SHADOW REALM

With no real ocean to speak of, the term 'lake' is often used to describe any 'wet' area of the Shadow Realm though, sometimes, it just describes large, gooey spaces.

NOT A REFLECTION ON YOU

The Dark Lake is the only truly water-based lake in the Shadow Realm. It is full of dark-brown water, is very deep, and very cold. The water is very still, and only very strong winds cause any sort of ripple to shuffle forlornly across the surface. With little light in the Shadow Realm, the surface looks almost matt, reflecting nothing.

JUST SPLAWE-FUL

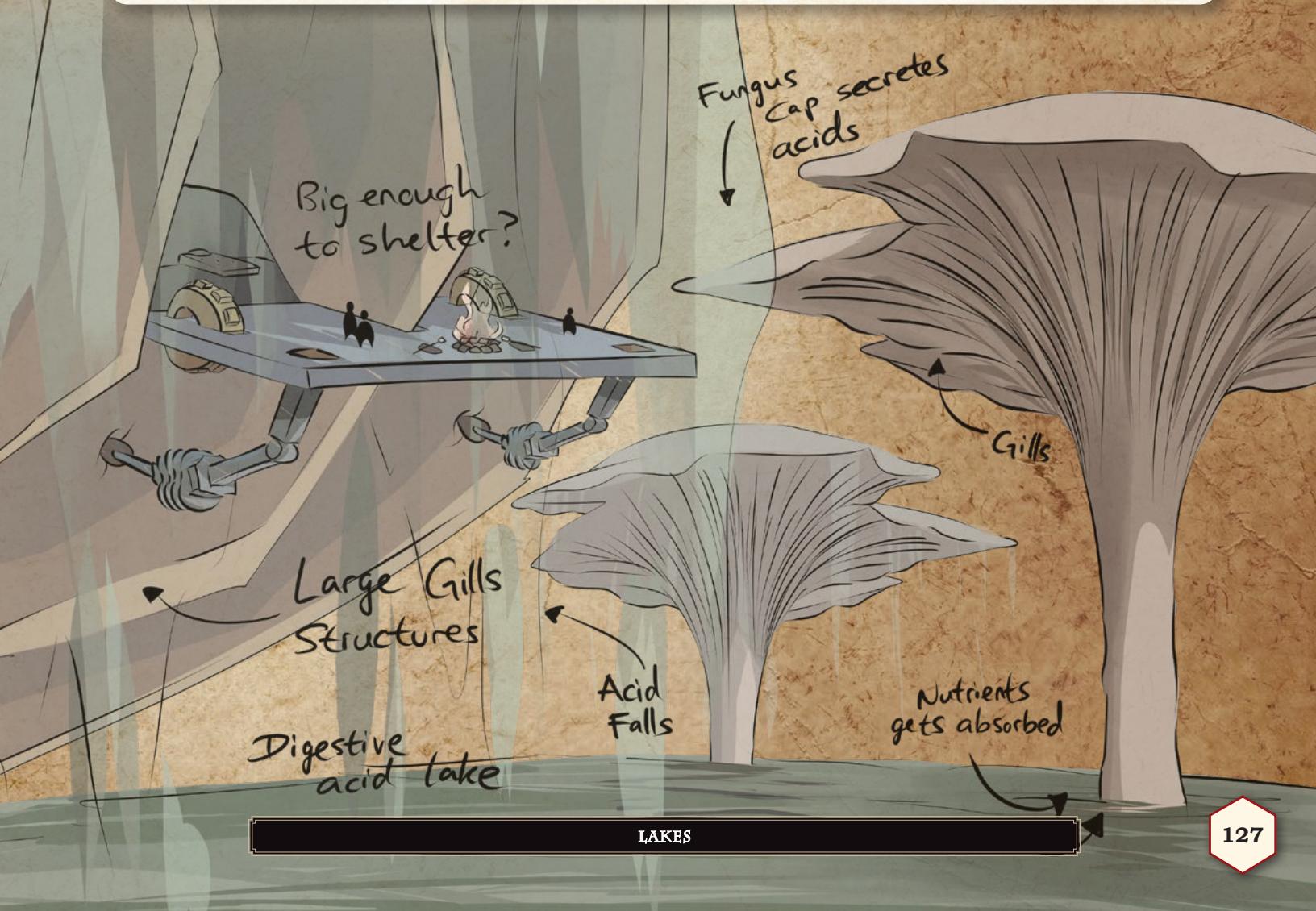
Splawe is a thick, porridge-like body of fluid, mostly made up of mud, ash, and any other debris that falls into it and slowly breaks down. Swimming through it is impossible; there are so many sharp rocks, branches, and other cutting things, and it is so thick that exhaustion would do you in if you did not bleed to death. The only way across Splawe is to go around it.

THIS LAKE IS THE 'ORST

Technically, these are fungi and not pieces of terrain – however, since each one can be over two miles in width and up to ten miles in length, orst lakes are sometimes mistaken as locations. The surface of the fungi is covered in around three feet of a water-like enzyme secreted by the fungi to dissolve organic material. Stepping into an orst lake is like stepping into a vat of acid.

SLIP-SLIDING

Scrabble cliffs form around lakes of all types in the Shadow Realm. Most look slate-based, but are coated in a very slippery fluid that seeps through the rock. Trying to climb one of these cliffs is impossible as, the more pressure applied to the rock, the faster the fluid seeps out. The lesson here is to not enter a lake in the Shadow Realm if you ever want to leave it again.



MOUNTAIN RANGES

ADJECTIVES

Towering	Impressive	Dramatic	Grandiose	Magnificent	Breathtaking	Awe-inspiring	Spectacular	Exhilarating
Scenic	Picturesque	Serene	Majestic	Idyllic	Invigorating	Secluded	Remote	Rugged
	Savage	Fissured	Demanding	Arduous	Challenging	Daunting	Grueling	



INSPIRATION

SENSES

SIGHT	A thousand crags, gullies, chasms and valleys shadow the sides of the mountain, hiding all manner of other dangers.	The pass is long and winding, losing itself in the clouded distance of the steep slope ahead.	The sides of the mountain are emblazoned with bizarre stripes of red, orange, yellow and black, as if painted by a blind man.	After days of grueling trekking, you finally reach the summit and look out over a breathtaking expanse of mountains and valleys.
SMELL	With each step, the air grows thinner, but so too does the distance between you and your goal.	The sharp, biting scent of ozone fills the air, signaling a storm brewing on the horizon.	The faint scent of wild animals reminds you that you are not alone in this rugged wilderness.	The crisp, fresh mountain air carries the sweet aroma of blooming wildflowers and pine needles.
SOUND	The sound of your footsteps echoes off the canyon wall like a steady drum beat that resonates with the very earth beneath your feet.	The wind howls through the narrow pass, carrying the sound of distant wolves and warning of the dangers that lurk in the shadows.	The rush of a mountain stream, and the crash of a nearby waterfall, fills your ears.	A distant rumble warns you of the potential for rockslides and other dangers that could threaten your ascent.
TOUCH	The cool mountain breeze brushes against your skin, a refreshing break from the heat of the valley below.	The sharp, icy air stings your face as you ascend to the higher elevations, where only the strongest survive.	The tension in your muscles is palpable as you strain to maintain your balance on the narrow trail. Every step could mean the difference between success and failure.	The numbness in your fingers and toes from the cold is a constant reminder of the harshness of the mountain environment.
TASTE	The earthy taste of fresh mountain water fills your mouth as you drink from the crystal-clear stream that flows down from the peak.	The crisp, cool air is tinged with the faint taste of snow and ice, speaking of a change of weather ahead.	The salty tang of sweat and exertion is ever-present on your tongue as you push yourself to the limit on this grueling journey.	You can taste the moistness in the air as a cloud encompasses the mountain and cloaks you in dense fog.

QUICK ENCOUNTERS

D12	ENCOUNTER	D12	ENCOUNTER
1	The party notices a small hut. They can hear rustling and movement inside the hut, and can see smoke rising from the chimney. It is unclear who, or what, might be inside.	7	Stepping into a narrow pass, a chill runs down the spine of every party member. This area of mossy stone and crippled trees is cursed ground.
2	The trail leads to a naturally formed stair, winding along a cliff's edge. The stairs emanate strange magic that seems to come from the rock itself.	8	Heavy rain suddenly starts to fall, and the light replace with: all but vanishes. The storm appeared out of nowhere.
3	An old windmill can be seen at the edge of a cliff. Its blades creak in the wind, turning slowly. Several shrubs grow around the base.	9	On the side of a cliff, the party discovers strange stone formations. They are old and eroded but seem to have once been part of a bigger structure.
4	The party approaches a deep chasm, crossed by an old, ragged looking rope bridge. They can hear a powerful stream rushing in the darkness below.	10	A group of bandits has set up camp in the ruins of a long-abandoned mountain hamlet. A plume of smoke rises from one of the ruins.
5	A rugged outcrop is home to the fresh corpse of a lynx, surrounded by a group of stunted trees. There are claw marks on the tree trunks, and the corpse is still steaming in the cold air.	11	As the party looks ahead, they see a herd of mountain goats, led by an enormous ram the size of a shire horse. The ram locks eyes with the party and they see fresh blood dripping from its muzzle.
6	The party comes across a field of high grass with patches of lavender flowers. There is a pleasant fragrance in the air. A thin, childish laughter can be heard from within.	12	A sudden fog encompasses the party as the clouds thicken around them. Silhouettes of tall creatures start to manifest and shuffle closer.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

D10	ADVENTURE
1	When the party arrives at the hamlet they have been heading for, they find out it was destroyed by a rockslide only a few days before. The survivors speak of a booming voice chanting over the crashing sound of the slide. They task the party to find whoever is responsible and bring them to justice.
2	As the party rests in a small village, they learn that local livestock is being mutilated every night. The corpses are left where they fell, almost intact, yet all are missing the same internal organ. The villagers fear what will happen when their last animal is taken.
3	The pack leader of a small werewolf tribe asks the party for help. They have tried to live peacefully in the woods, avoiding any contact with the locals and only preying on animals, yet someone has hired a group of famous hunters to kill them. They ask the party to negotiate peace, or stop the hunters.
4	The pass leading over the mountains is blocked by two hill giants that have stopped in place to have a heated argument. They have been bickering and fighting for days and no one dares cross their path. The party is tasked to resolve the issue, however they see fit.
5	A heavy storm caused a mudslide that has revealed the entrance to a richly ornamented dwarven mine nearby. Adventurous villagers have already tried to access it, but have all returned horrified. When asked, all they say is that a horrible presence haunts the place.
6	A roc has built a nest on the ridge of a nearby mountain and started to hunt in the area, snatching up livestock and even some merchants who were foolish enough to travel unaccompanied. The mayor of the village has put a bounty on the head of the roc.
7	An old military watchtower has been taken over by bandits; their numbers are growing rapidly and they are now demanding a toll from every traveler. The villagers fear that travelers will start to avoid the area, resulting in the bandits raiding the village instead. They ask the party for their help resolving the issue.
8	A famous bard, known for her ballad 'The Daughter of the Hills', has been struck mute since she performed the song in this village. The bard fears her use of artistic license in telling the classic tale has insulted a powerful entity. She offers a large reward if the party can solve the dilemma and return her voice.
9	A traveling merchant is late on his delivery. It is important for him to reach his destination on time, so is insisting on taking the much more dangerous path over the mountains, and would like to hire the party for protection.
10	Wild animals have started attacking a recently constructed dam. They have not done any major damage yet, but their attempts seem to be growing increasingly organized every day. The party needs to stop them before the dam breaks and the valley is flooded.

INTRODUCTION

Mountain ranges can be huge, covering hundreds or even thousands of miles. They can dominate vast landscapes or be relatively solitary, remnants of an ancient geological event. The type of rock that forms the basis of the mountain determines, in part, its appearance, whilst the cause of the mountain range in the first place has a decided impact on its 'look'.

FUNDAMENTALS

Mountains are formed in many ways, ranging from glacial withdrawal or expansion, to tectonic activity, volcanic activity, and even impact from meteors. Whatever the means of formation, new mountains are sharp and jagged with lots of exposed rock face, whilst old mountains are curved, rounded, and covered in soil. Of course, the term 'new' and 'old' are relative, and often refer to periods of hundreds of millions of years. Wind, rain, snow, and the contraction of heat and cold all slowly break and erode down massive peaks, humbling them into low-range hills before finally consuming them completely.

There is no longer any technical difference between a hill and a mountain, though this was not always the case. Formerly, a hill was defined as any peak that rises less than 1000 feet above its surroundings, while anything over 1000 was a mountain. Today, no scientific definition is agreed on, though hills are generally rounded and do not have the defined peaks or prominent features that mountains are widely recognized as having, and even individual countries consider hills and mountains differently.

There are several distinct zones within a mountain location.

FOOTHILLS

Foothills generally surround mountains, and include low ridges and slopes that slowly increase in elevation the closer you travel towards the mountain proper. Depending on the location and height of the mountain, and how it was formed, the foothills around it may be arid (especially if they are sheltered from rain by the shadow of the mountain

itself) or lush, if they are on the windward side of the mountain where rain falls regularly.

MONTANE FORESTS

Montane forests and ecosystems are found on the sides of mountains, and mark the transition from the slowly ascending foothills into the higher areas of the mountain. Huge rocks and debris that centuries of erosion has torn from the mountain face are found here as moss covered rocks and cliffs in these steep slopes. Because of the lower temperature, which only falls further with higher elevations, the forests are mainly coniferous, and include pines, conifers, and spruce-firs. In latitudes further from the equator, snow usually falls during winter but often melts away in spring. In those closer, coniferous forests give way to grasslands, and snow is less common.

ALPINE ZONE

The alpine zone is defined as the area between the tree zone (containing the montane forests) and the constant snowline of the mountain in temperate and tropical climates. The vegetation is characterized by an absence of trees, and varies greatly between the wet side and the dry when it comes to wind and rain shaping the face of the mountain. Small shrubs, grasses and herbs grow only where the wind leaves enough soil to take root, leaving the rest of the zone a barren conglomerate of rock and solid stone.

While mountain ranges can include nival zones as well, those are covered in **Location 9: Glacial Mountains**.

FUNCTIONS

Mountains often act as natural borders in the shaping of kingdoms. Others inhibit the growth of certain plants or prevent the migration of particular animal species. Most mountains, however, are a source of rare and precious minerals that have been pushed to the surface.

MINING

When a mountain range is formed, there are generally three different categories of rock layer. Igneous rock, formed when molten rock solidifies, often forms the basis of most mountains. Above this are layers of metamorphic rock, created through heat, pressure, and chemical processes and, finally, on top of that there are sedimentary rock layers, formed by compressing silt, sand, and dead organic matter. As the mountain range forms, these layers often break, shift, and slide, forming beautiful patterns, especially if you see a cross section, and giving each mountain different characteristics.

Simplifying the complexity of geological processes for the sake of this book, the characteristics for the resources found in each rock layer are generalized: igneous rock holds large amounts of minerals and crystals, metamorphic rock often contains metal ores, and sedimentary rock is where coal, oil and lesser minerals, such as salt, are found.

Mines usually bore into a mountain and then branch out, following whatever geological clues they can to the best source of whatever it is they are mining for. Mining operations are frequently the catalyst for the formation of small villages to house workers and their families. If these villages are near trade routes or rivers, the villages sometimes turn into towns or expand into even larger settlements.

COLOR

Due to the different types of rocks that mountains possess, and the many layers that constitute them, some are spectacularly striated, with great stripes of one color of stone sitting atop other bands of a very different hue. Other mountains show little striation or variation at all, and are a consistent color. The choice of color (or colors) of a mountain range location, as with all location types, can help enhance tone or narrative themes, and so should not be ignored or simply defaulted to gray.

TERRACING

Almost all civilizations living in mountainous terrain have developed terracing techniques. The general idea is simple: cut into the mountain to create flat areas of land that can be used for farming or living space. The typically steep slopes of foothills or montane forests might suggest humanoid habitation to be impossible but, with terraces, it becomes a lot easier. The effect turns a smooth mountain slope into a giant set of wide, shallow steps, making it appear as if the whole mountain was built, rather than formed. Terraces cut into the Andes mountains of South America 500 years ago are still in use today.

MUDSLIDES

When heavy rain saturates the soil, and the ground stability is not reinforced well enough by deep-rooting plants, mudslides can suddenly occur. They can affect large areas, and often occur on hills or mountain slopes, where gravity and elevation only exacerbate the soil rushing down in a torrent of mud, rock, and water. Since the driving force of mudslide is gravity, the steeper the incline, the faster the slide progresses, and with more momentum. If there is something to halt its progress, the mudslide can be over quickly but, given time and room to build up speed, it can progress further down the slope and pose a serious threat.

FALLING ROCK

In areas with porous rocks like sandstone, slate, or gneiss, rock falls happen more often. In severe cases, the falling rocks loosen other rocks through their momentum, causing an avalanche.

The nature of these rocks can be taken advantage of by those in the area for a variety of reasons, such as halting the progress of trespassers, trapping prey, routing an army, ambushing travelers, blocking entrances or exits, concealing an escape, or preventing any that might be following from doing so. The geography might seem like an easy to take advantage of, but the weight, trajectory, and momentum of a tumbling rock is hard to estimate, and getting the calculations wrong can have disastrous consequences.

FINESSE

Like all imposing geography, mountain ranges offer expansive and difficult terrain for heroes to have to navigate. In the past, explorers were funded by wealthy nations to literally 'go and have a look on the other side', and find passage over these massive walls.

STORY TRANSITION

Mountain ranges are often a transitional story element, a vast landscape that separates different areas of the world from one another. Crossing such a location can be a test of strength and endurance but, more often, crossing is more of a question of persistence and tenacity. Trips across a mountain range can go on for some time; some mountain crossings take days or weeks, so a mix of interesting story elements and mini adventures normally helps with pacing, with narrated travel montages intermixed with highlights of the journey.

Each of the different zones (foothills, montane etc.) should provide at least one possible noteworthy highlight. Perhaps the heroes must find fresh water and stock up on provisions in the foothills, then test their survival skills as they experience the chill of the conifer forests of the montane zone, before finally breaking free into the alpine region.

FINDING THE PASS

In mountain ranges that do not have a defined trail or pass, the heroes will need to find their own. This is often across the 'saddle' – the depression between two peaks, but getting there can be challenging. The alternative is to find lower sections where the mountains have a natural break between them. These, however, present their own challenges: they can be blocked by snowfall (or falling snow can trap those already progressing through), or might be exposed to extreme weather, such as high winds or lightning storms.

In cases where the pass is known to exist, actually finding it can be difficult and dangerous

unless someone has constructed a trail leading to it, and provided the trail has not overgrown or been eroded to an unsafe level. Trails are likely to be well-maintained in areas close to settlements, or between trail routes, but are likely to be non-existent in wilder parts of the world. To account for naturally rugged terrain, ancient bridges might span deep drops, or stairs might have been hewn out of rock to reduce the need for a sheer climb. These structures themselves, however, may have suffered damage or weathering, making them just as dangerous as if they had not been there.

FEAR THE HEIGHTS

The biggest threat in mountain ranges is always the elevation. The risk of falling, or of having something fall upon you from above is constant. Any description of a mountain that does not address this will make the place feel flat and uninspiring. Just because climbing a mountain is usually an ascent, this does not usually mean just one long climb. Ravines, sheer drops, cliffs, gullies, chasms, and false peaks all combine to force heroes to climb up, and sometimes down or across, to get to the next point from which to continue their journey.

MOUNTAINS AND MORE MOUNTAINS

Some mountain ranges, like the Rocky Mountains in the USA, are incredibly wide (in some places, over 60 miles or wider), and take days or weeks to cross, depending on the kind of vehicle utilized. In order to avoid having heroes face the same challenges again and again, consider inserting other location types along the route, such as glacial mountains, plains, forests, caves, barren wastes, or the like. Although these will be at high altitude, they will still offer a narrative differentiation and, perhaps, some interesting variation on other locations of their type, helping to prevent story fatigue.



"Have you seen any smaller folk? I seem to have lost my hobbits".

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

Descending a mountain is usually quicker and easier than ascending it, so characters need incentive or impetus to carry onwards rather than going back and trying to circumvent somehow. Collapses, avalanches, landslides, mudslides, and all manner of physical alterations to the mountain can prevent characters from turning back. They might discover that natural land bridges that are marked on their map no longer exist, forcing them upwards, or find that ledges crumble and tumble into the ravine behind them, preventing regress.

Another important element to consider is that

the other side of the mountain may be considerably different from the side they ascended. A plateau for example, would feature rolling hills or, in the case of a fold mountain range, there might be more mountains with deep valleys.

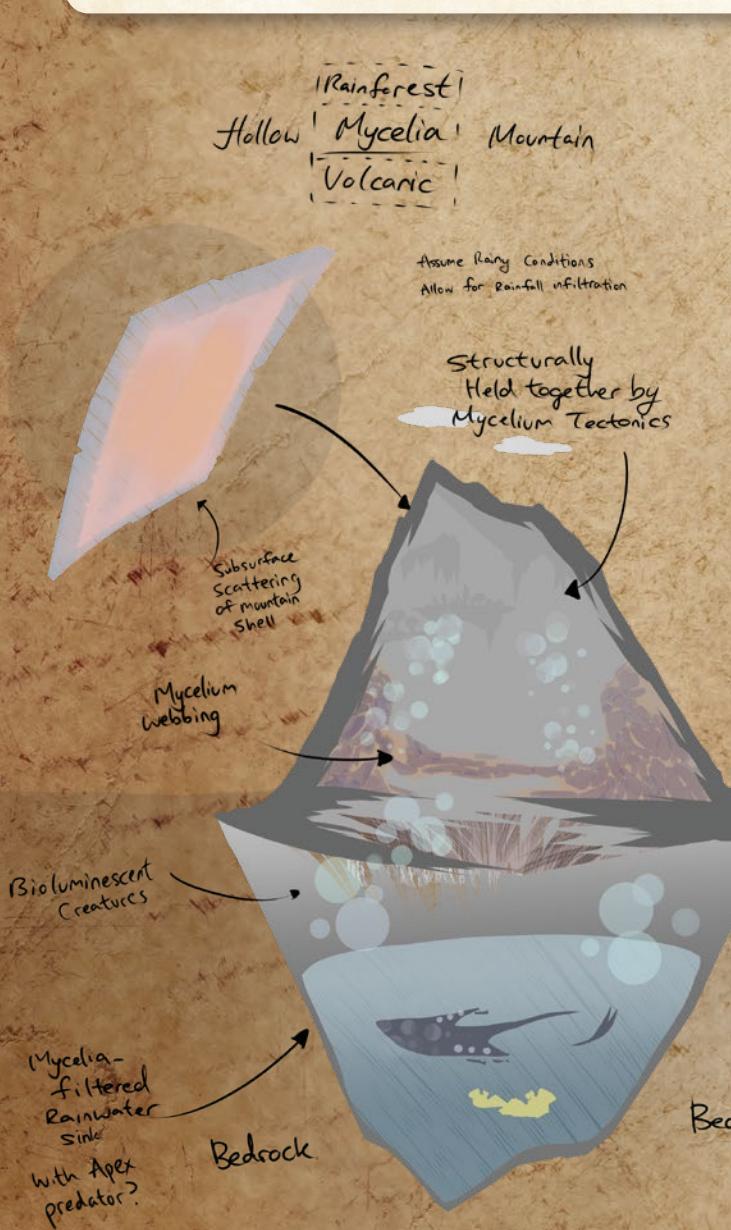
Thus, as with glacial mountains, the point of no return is when characters have ascended, and now must plan to descend again, either down the side they approached from, or via a new route on the other side. After that moment, they may think they know what they are in for, and even accounted for it, but things almost certainly will have changed.

DESIGNING EPIC MOUNTAIN RANGES IN FANTASY SETTINGS

Add any of the following features, or use them for inspiration, to create a mountain range that is clearly not of our world.

HIGH FANTASY

Mountains of fantasy often float in the air, or twist and curve into unusual, sculptural forms. Understanding how nature might take advantage of this is critical to making epic locations of this kind fantastical, yet plausible.



ISLANDS IN THE SKY

Floating in clusters of islands, titanic airborne mountains must rise for a reason. Perhaps there is something in the combination of minerals in the rock, or perhaps they are subject to magical forces. Do they somehow remain in place, or do winds push these behemoths across the landscape as surely as the wind drives the clouds?

UPWARD SPIRAL

Some rocky formations curl in on themselves, sometimes forming spirals. Do they grow each year, pushing upwards from their bases? Or is this what has been left behind after erosion, wind, and rain has taken its bite? Does foliage grow in the upward-facing curls but not on the vertical sides? Must one climb to the top or to the middle, and how?

WALKING ON A CLOUD

The mist in some mountains becomes so thick and dense, it is possible to walk upon it. The blanket of mist flattens the mountains out so that they become nothing more than wide-open plains, and fairly easy to cross. Beware, however; the mist slowly evaporates towards midday, and can suddenly lose its ability to support those walking upon it.

IT'S BIGGER ON THE INSIDE

One mountain range of note features massive, towering monstrosities, the peaks of which stretch thousands of feet into the sky, but this is not the most remarkable thing about them. A few feet - a dozen at most - beneath the surface of the mountain is a gigantic, hollow chamber. These titanic caves have their own unique, sunless ecosystems, completely out of sight from prying eyes.

UNDERFELL

As with their glacial equivalents, mountains within the Underfell are unusual. What mountains in the Underfell do have in common with their surface cousins however are precipitous drops, cliffsides and the like. Just because these often express themselves as chasms rather than sharp rises in the ground makes no difference.

OPTICAL ILLUSION

When planning an Underfell climb, either up or down, do not be fooled by the apparently easy-to-reach handholds and ledges. This trick of the eye occurs because the sheer scale of the cliff and the distortion of parallels makes the actual distance between ledges visually contract. In reality, some ledges might be fifty feet apart. Never assume the climbable is climbable.

PLAT-EAU MY GOSH

The Underfell features massive ridges with tops which are mostly flat, and so expansive that each could be considered a plain, or perhaps a barren waste. Individual ridges have a sheer drop down to more plains below, but run for hundreds of miles in all directions. These formations can make moving across the Underfell particularly difficult.

HUNGOVER

Not unique to the Underfell, but made worse by the lighting (or lack thereof), some cliff faces appear to ascend all the way to the top of the mountain, or descend all the way to the floor when, in reality, they only cover half the distance, and then curve inwards, hiding their true length. This can leave climbers suddenly needing to learn to hang from a curved ceiling, or how to fly, really quickly.

BOTTOMLESS

Chasms that crisscross the sides of Underfell mountains are truly bottomless. Plunging away into darkness, the floor is so far below that anything that falls or leaps into a chasm, is immediately picked up by the unusual wind currents, buffeted as it hurtles downwards, and then, at random, elevated upwards, or sideways, or around in circles. The currents are so changeable, and the drop so far, that eventually, and tragically, starvation or dehydration are more likely to kill a falling creature before they hit the bottom.



FEY DOMAIN

Mountains in the Fey are like mountains in any other place - big, bold, and usually brightly colored, with perfect caps of white snow that melt into turquoise rivers and paint a picture of idyllic calm... Perhaps, on reflection, mountains of the Fey are unlike most others.



PURE IMAGINATION

The Imaginari Mountains only exist if you trust and believe them to be there. If you do not believe in them with all your heart, naught but a broad, barren waste is laid out before you. It is rumored that paradise awaits those that reach the peak amongst the clouds. Reach out: those with faith will find a handhold, even as it looks they grasp at nothing. Beware, however: should a climber's belief falter, or their faith shatter once their climb has begun, it is a very long way to the ground.

KEEP OUT

There is great and powerful magic in the Fey Domain, both wondrous and terrible. None are sure what one particular mountain range is guarding, but it appears to do everything in its power to hinder or stop climbers from reaching the other side. Passes turn, bend, and lead out again the way they came in. Scalable peaks reveal only more peaks, higher and higher. Crossing the Guardian Mountains most likely would require flight and daring.

DON'T GET IT TWISTED

Some mountains in the Fey twist vertically upwards, like great corkscrews winding towards the stars. Their bases are broad and mostly flat, with excellent, nutrient-rich soil and constant rivers. The higher up the screw one travels, however, the more hostile it becomes, as snow drifts collect in depressions, and there is less and less protection from above.

OLD GIZAS

There is a Fey mountain range that looks like a collection of pyramids. Four sided, and with virtually smooth surfaces, it is as though some demented pharaoh ordered tombs built on a colossal scale. Their sides are very smooth, which can lead to their seasonal undoing, as snow slides off, collects, compacts, and slowly buries the mountains.

THE HELLS

Low mountains often form barriers between certain areas or biomes in the Hells. Less formidable than their glacial cousins, even these low ranges can conceal hidden dangers.

SNEAK PEAKS

As if one does not have enough to worry about in the Hells, many of the mountains constantly move. A climber might find themselves climbing the same mountain over and over before they realize that one they just descended has shifted to a new position in front of them. There is no known way to cross these shifting mountains, although rumors abound that walking backwards confuses them, and causes the mountains to shift around those that traverse them.

GET THE POINT

The highest peak of this cordillera is the eponymous Mount Torment, for which the whole range is named. The ground is covered in rock with razor-sharp edges; even those smashed by constantly falling boulders are resharpened overnight.

They can be crossed with the power of flight, but the journey must be done all at once as rest is impossible: any that try to make camp finds the ground underfoot a bed of daggers.

WHAT GOES UP...

The Sisyphean Range is an insidious cluster of mountains; on first inspection, they see the low foothills and assume they will be fairly easy to cross. Whenever a climber nears the summit, however, some infernal magic causes the rock to give way and slide the luckless victim all the way back to the bottom of the mountain.

TET-À-TETANUS

The prevalence of metal in many areas of the Hells is even true of the mountains, with some made out of iron: solid, rusted, and jagged. A fall can lead to a burning, infected wound, blood poisoning, and anguishing pain. The nature of the material means that sections of the mountains are so rusted, climbers risk stepping and falling through the ground and into caverns below.

SHADOW REALM

Grim and dark, these sentinels of rock loom high over the lands, blocking progress and escape. Covered in ash rather than snow, moving through them is difficult in the extreme.

FLAKIN' IT

The Banash Mountains are sometimes called 'The Flakes', and are one of the main sources of the drifting ash that seems to coat the Shadow Realm. The rock that makes up these crags is hard to the touch but dries out and flakes easily within minutes – even a light wind blows up great clouds of ash into the air.

CHIM CHIMINEY

Some unusual rock formations look like crazy, stacked chimneys. Each stack belches out black smoke that reeks of sulfur. Smokers can form almost anywhere on a mountain, making it unclear if they are a prelude to a volcanic eruption or just geothermal vents. "The smoke is probably poisonous, but no one who inhales it lives to confirm whether it's true!" is a common quip spouted to new hikers.

VARICOSE

Basack hills are usually found in very boggy, wet, or poorly drained areas, and some can be over a thousand feet high. The stone under the hills is very sandy, and they are covered by a thick, dark-pink fungal growth about an inch thick. Water and other fluids are pressed from the stone and form thick, vein-like structures under the fungal skin. Walking across the hills like walking over dozens of hosepipes, all pumping with water.

ON THE SCAPULAE OF GIANTS

Chillingly, some mountains in the Shadow Realm are made of bone and, in particular, from the carcasses of titanic beasts that once lived in the sky and deep in the oceans. Rumors abound as to why and how so many died, and where, but up to a dozen carcasses at a time somehow made their way to several areas of the Shadows, roughly in a line, and forming mountain ranges up to six hundred miles long and fifty wide. Their flesh dissolved a long time ago, and many bones have collapsed in upon themselves, causing multiple irregularities that became infested with an abundance of flora and fauna taking advantage of a free meal.

PLAINS

ADJECTIVES

Sweeping	Undulating	Rugged	Golden	Timeless	Prickly	Unending	Carpet	Broad
Rippling	Waving	Silent	Open	Unremarkable	Lonely	Flat	Vast	Lush
Windswept	Bucolic	Rocky	Salty	Lifeless	Uninhabited	Abandoned		



INSPIRATION

SENSES

SIGHT	Waves of grass undulate in the wind, rendering creatures concealed within almost invisible.	Seemingly endless land stretches off beyond the horizon, as far as your eye can see.	Windswept plains and rocky canyons are covered in patches of dried vegetation.	Dust devils chase each other across the cracked soil like children at play.
SMELL	The smell of dust, dung, and grass fills your nostrils as you walk amongst the tall grass.	The wet scent of grass, heavy with dew, is rich and comforting.	A gentle breeze ripples the endless sea of golden grass, carrying the scent of wildflowers.	Within the rocky, windless vastness of the place, the odors of your companions are brought sharply into focus; they could all do with a bath.
SOUND	The susurration of grass growing is a constant reminder of the unstoppable force of nature.	The intense stillness of the vast open space seems to grow loud, like a roaring silence.	You hear the cry of a hawk. Its sharp call a reminder of the predators that make their home in this wild land.	A distant rumble preludes a storm rolling in, carrying the promise of rain and the threat of lightning strikes in equal measure.
TOUCH	The soft, yielding grass parts easily as you brush by.	Your hand scrapes the rough bark of a gnarled, old tree that stands alone on the plain.	The neverending itching of straws and grains caught in your clothing is intensely irritating.	The heat of the sun beats down on your skin, the barren expanse around you offering no protection.
TASTE	The sweet, slightly tangy taste of fresh grass mingles with the spicy smell of wild herbs.	The dry, earthy taste of dust coats your tongue with a gritty texture.	You fill your canteen in a nearby muddy waterhole and empty the brackish water into your throat.	The salty taste of sweat on your lips reminds you of the exertion it takes to survive in this untamed land.

QUICK ENCOUNTERS

D12	ENCOUNTER	D12	ENCOUNTER
1	While traversing the waist-high sea of grass, tiny figures start to stick their heads up through the grass. The party suddenly find themselves surrounded by a band of grass nomads.	7	Walking over the seemingly endless plains, the party spots the silhouette of a three-masted ship that inexplicably is rots, stranded upon the land.
2	The grass sways and rustles around the party: they are not alone. They cannot see any creatures, just the gentle undulations created by movement just beneath the surface.	8	The earth begins to shake and rumble. It is not an earthquake, though - it is a stampede, and it is rushing towards the party.
3	From a distance, the party spots a large caravan of people moving towards them. Something in their movement is strange and, as they come close, they realize the spark of life is missing from their gray eyes.	9	Plumes of dust rise into the air and the air is filled with the thunderous sound of synchronized boots on the ground. An army is marching in their direction.
4	The party sees a large flock of vultures circling over a spot in the distance numbering far more than a single carcass could feed.	10	The party encounters a lone predatory animal. It does not attack, but seems to want them to follow it.
5	A wide circle of dying grass, dark moss, and strange vines surrounds a single stone. The air shimmers above the stone, as if a rift has been cut in midair.	11	The party comes across a small crater, caused by a high-altitude impact. As they approach, they see a naked dwarf lying in its center.
6	The party finds a cow aimlessly wandering about the plain. As they approach, the surprisingly well-spoken creature addresses them.	12	Looking to try and navigate, the only point of reference the party can spot in this endless plain is a small hill with a gnarled tree on top. Every time they look, however, the hill seems to have moved.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

D10	ADVENTURE
1	In the center of the plains, a tornado has wreaked havoc continuously as long as anyone can remember. A castle stands in the eye of the storm, but no one can approach it. A gnomish inventor believes she has finally constructed a vehicle that can withstand the storm, and is looking for adventurers who dare to take it on a test run.
2	At this time of the year, a massive herd of migrating animals usually passes through this area. The herd, however, has not arrived, and the villagers are beginning to worry. They task the party to go and investigate and, if possible, guide the herd safely to the village.
3	Tiny nomadic folk live amongst the grasses, formerly peacefully. Now, they're attacking anyone who tries to cross the plain. Some of the local villagers are demanding the elders hire mercenaries to end the problem, while others advocate for a peaceful solution.
4	Long ago, these plains were the site of a massive battlefield. Now, the countless unmarked graves beneath the grass are the only reminder of the warriors that fell in the fateful final confrontation. Something has changed recently, however, and the once-silent fallen are stirring in their graves.
5	Large termite mounds have appeared everywhere, and a group of nomads speak of an incredibly massive one, deep within the plains. A first wave of attacks on travelers have been reported, and the party is tasked to bring an end to the threat.
6	A large tribe of harpies has claimed the grassland as their new territory. They have started to build settlements within the trees that overlook the plains, and are hunting down every trespasser that dares enter their newly founded kingdom.
7	A group of traveling performers seeks assistance and a guard while they travel the plains. Their most recent play, 'The Stubborn Donkeys' angered the local rulers, and they fear repercussions for the offense that they caused.
8	A new predator to the area is hunting down livestock in their pastures. No one has seen it, but the corpses left behind speak of a terrifying beast. Last night, a band of brave locals set a trap, but there is no trace to be found of them today.
9	A band of bandits recently attacked a prison transport and freed their comrades, and now the whole lot are on the run. Local law enforcement is looking for help to capture the fugitives before they can make it out of the plains.
10	An enormous, spiraling stair has appeared in the center of the plains. It leads high up into the clouds, and travelers speak of impending giants that will descend onto the land. The party must investigate and intervene to prevent such an incursion.

INTRODUCTION

Plains might sound relatively, well, ‘plain’, but they are often quite extraordinary. For locations that are so big, open, and seemingly monotonous, there are hidden depths that go unseen until by all but the very patient (or lucky), who then get to marvel at them. Plains are large swathes of wide, open territory. Grassland plains - largely what are discussed here - are often undulating, sometimes with low hills which might give some contour to the geography. Generally, these types of plains are grass-covered oceans of green in summer, golden yellow in autumn, and dusty brown or ice-covered white in winter.

FUNDAMENTALS

There are two types of grasslands: prairies and savannas. Temperate grasslands, particularly those in Asia and Europe, are called steppes. These are usually far from the ocean, often near mountains, and are typically drier than savannas. The primary difference between a prairie and a savanna is the amount of trees present, due to climate, geographic location and seasonal cycle. Savannahs have more trees - up to 30% - whereas prairies have hardly any trees at all, less than 5%.

When creating a prairie or savanna, it is important to realize that wide open spaces provide very little cover. Riders, walkers, or anything moving in the plains can be seen from a great distance. There is also little protection from the elements. Thunderstorms of terrific power, tornadoes, and dust devils can all play havoc on those caught out in the open.

Cover, therefore, is an incredibly important and coveted resource. A gully, an eroded hillside, or a creek that flows between two low-rising hills can all be precious points, both for navigation and

for respite in the never-ending grass. In your epic location, as in real life, these should be infrequent, however, otherwise the expanse of landscape loses its scope and dramatic impact.

MIGRATING HERDS

Massive herds frequently appear in grassland plains. As they move through, they can significantly impact the region. River crossing points become heavily eroded, and trails crisscross the grass, permanently etched by four million hooves each year. Prairies and savannahs also play host to dazzling displays of wildflowers and, as seasons change, so do the flowers, creating different dazzling displays of color at varying points of the year. Water levels, too, drop around pools, ponds, and lakes. However, that impact is insignificant when compared to that posed by the creatures that follow the herds. Predators, usually the apex of the region, follow behind, looking for stragglers or young for an easy meal.

FUNCTIONS

Giant open spaces are highly attractive to agrarian cultures. Fields of cultivated plants thrive, and the work needed to be done to clear those fields is easy. These are lands that are simple to navigate (would you rather pull your wagon over a mountain or over a plain?) and which offer plenty of food.

Many communities are formed around pastoral activities, where the ground is suitable or, as in many cases, around herd rearing. Where the grasslands support millions of native wildlife, domesticated animals can also succeed. Giant ranches or cattle farms can take up large tracts of grassland, keeping the land forest free. These communities might fence off their territories, at least to contain their livestock, but boundaries may also be cryptic - say, from that rock to that river 10 miles yonder, for example. On the plains, one thing is certain, however: there is no hiding construction. Buildings of any kind can be seen from a great distance, and even more so at night if fires are lit.

Aside from sedentary settlements, the plains are often home to people that move with their herds. Their encampments are temporary or portable, and might be in place for a season but, once the great herds have moved, so does the settlement.

IT'S SO BIG

Because of the sheer scale of a region of this kind, map-making should be restricted to those parts that have any sort of interesting or unique geographical feature or structure. There is no point in drawing and printing an enormous grid map of unending grass. If a ravine cuts between two hills that are surrounded by fifty miles of open plain, the ravine is the interesting part, and is the kind of

place an encounter might occur, so might warrant a map. A small depression that masks a small campsite from general view is not worth illustrative efforts. Focusing on the unusual landmarks of a plain (though they are likely to be, and should be, infrequent) keeps them fresh and helps reinforce the idea of wide-openness.

TORNADOES

Great swirling cyclones are synonymous with rolling plains. The reason they occur more frequently in these areas is because of the very uniform, large-scale atmospheric conditions. With few geographic features to disturb weather patterns and pressures, supercells form and rising hot air suddenly hits cool, creating the perfect conditions for a tornado. They scream across the plains, most often for only several minutes before losing power and dissipating. Only very few - no more than one in a year in the stormiest spots, and much less frequently in most cases - are truly destructive tornadoes that last hours and have wind speeds of over 300 miles per hour. These colossal monsters destroy structures, wipe out herds of animals, and leave trails of debris for as far as the eye can see.

DUST-DEVILS

A subset of tornadoes, dust devils occur when the plains are very dry, and a lot of fine sand or dust is on the ground, typically in the final days of summer or autumn. These seldom have any real power, similarly last a few minutes, but contain huge amounts of dust, hence the name. They create exotic dances when several form at once and tango together down the dusty plain.

FINESSE

Although plains appear to lack any noticeable features other than being vast and open, there are options for creating dynamic locations within. Anomalies make a 'normal' plain much more interesting.

INSELBERGS/FLYGGBERGS/MANADNOCKS

All names for the same piece of geography, these are sudden, isolated, dramatic hills or mountains that stand alone in the middle of a plain, as if dropped there by the hand of the gods. No other mountains chain with them; there may be several inselbergs in an area, but they are always separated by wide areas of open, flat plains. The solitary structures afford an unrivaled view of the surroundings, as they are the tallest elements around by far. Uluru, in Australia, is one of the most famous inselbergs.

FLOOD PLAIN

Technically not always true plains, as they are sometimes a river or swamp, flood plains are an interesting element to add. Seasonally, a deluge of water causes rivers to flood their banks and, due to the surrounding area being so flat, the flood area can be huge. What is wide open countryside can, within a matter of days, become clogged with, or even submerged under, several feet of water.

Trees that are quick growing, and plants that recover quickly, proliferate in flood plains. Their appearance near a body of water is an excellent indication that something happens to dramatically change the soil and water contents of the area at points during the year, though there is no telling how often.

- PLAINS ARE NEVER JUST ONE COLOR. THEY ARE FULL OF COLORS, UNEXPECTED AND DIVERSE. PINK GRASSES BLUSH A HILL WHILST RED POPPIES SPILL A RIVER OF CRIMSON ACROSS OPEN STRETCHES. -

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

Whilst food is usually fairly easy to find, and water can be readily sourced from time to time, there is no other support for a traveler across plains. Without specialist knowledge, making a fire without wood can be problematic (dried animal dung works a treat), and settlements may be spread far apart, leaving few opportunities for topping up supplies or seeking medical assistance. This means there is only a finite number of resources that can be relied upon. Well-provisioned convoys know which vast areas contain scant resources, and take this into account. Unprepared travelers find themselves spending the majority of their time foraging for supplies, rather than moving forward.

Unlike some other areas, even despite their great scale, plains are survivable for extended periods of time. Thus, the point of no return occurs when heroes run out of time. Crossing a plain might take a few days, if provisions are plentiful and well-managed, or might take weeks if there is a need to constantly stop to hunt for food or find water. At some point, it is no longer more convenient to go back - heroes must press forward.

Fluffy!



- PLAINS IN DIFFERENT SEASONS LOOK STRIKINGLY DIFFERENT. BURNING ORANGES AND YELLOWS IN FALL, SNOW-COVERED OR BARREN IN WINTER, BRIGHT GREEN IN SPRING, AND FULL OF COLOR IN SUMMER. -

DESIGNING EPIC PLAINS IN FANTASY SETTINGS

Add any of the following features to your location, or use them for inspiration, to create plains that are clearly not of our world.

HIGH FANTASY

What makes a plain fantastical? Fantasy offers us the chance to take a grassland to the next level, perhaps by turning it into a nightmarish space, or by driving the very essence of openness to the extreme.

ROLLING PLAIN

This particular prairie appears to be like any other, except it moves or, rather, has currents like an ocean. The ground slowly moves in great swirling rivers, some forward, some back, some in circular bends – like a great grassy ocean. Heavy objects – those over a ton in weight – cause the grass to swirl around them, whilst lighter objects can simply enjoy the ride.

A TEST OF WILL

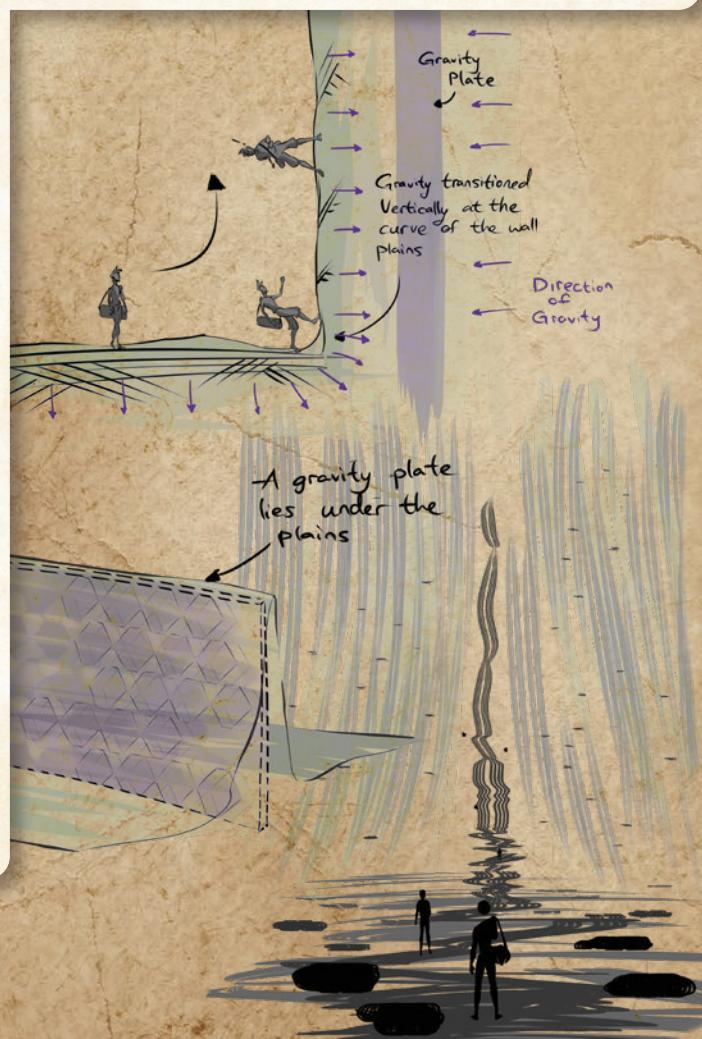
One plain, perhaps more than any other, is notorious among caravaneers and guides. Through a magical quirk, the plain continues infinitely, unless those traveling across it will it strongly enough to stop doing so. The plain must be willed into ending, and to transition into forest, barrens or whatever other biome is known to be on the other side, otherwise the grassy monotony continues on. Some civilizations, thought lost, are hypothesized to be flourishing somewhere in its infinite depths, with no will to leave.

CAN'T SEE THE FOREST FOR THE TREES

The hidden plain of Yolt is unusual; from a distance, it appears to be a lightly wooded forest. Sadly, it soon becomes apparent to those within its borders that the trees are illusionary, and have as much substance as mist. They provide no protection from the elements, and do not produce firewood. Jessamine Yolt, the explorer after whom the plain is named, led the most recent large-scale expedition to it. They never returned and there are no records of anyone going in after them.

VERTIGO

For some magical reason, this plain is perpendicular to the ground, rising straight up several thousand yards. For this reason, it is sometimes incorrectly classified and marked as a mountain on maps. Gravity shifts as it is approached, and travelers can walk on it as they are walking on flat ground. When the 'top' is reached, the 'edge' switches so that it is possible to walk down the other side.



UNDERFELL

Wide open spaces in the Underfell are uncommon but, when they do occur, they are spectacular. High cavern ceilings create an immense sense of space.

ECHO LOCATION

Most plains in the Underfell are immense and mostly flat, formed over millennia by underground rivers which have since found other channels. The walls around them are sheer and the domes of the caverns, washed and eroded as smooth as the floor below, act as an echo-enhancing chamber. A shout can be heard thirty miles away; the delay is several minutes, but the effect is a warbling space full of echoes.

NON-FRICTION

Other Underfell plains are formed by fast-flowing magma that, at one point, suddenly hit a pocket of water, instantly changing density and course, and leaving behind an absolutely smooth surface. So-called 'sheet' plains are very difficult to cross as there is little friction to help grip the ground - leather boots slip and slide in all directions - and the lack of resistance can leave travelers careening in all directions.

ABYSS-MAL

The Underfell is full of chasms and other deep rifts in the ground, even when it appears there are wide expanses of empty land. Due to changes in air temperature, these are sometimes covered - or even filled - with a low fog. In low light, the fog obscures the floor completely, and when illuminated it looks like stone, giving the illusion of a solid floor that bridges the gap between the two sides of a chasm, like it is possible to walk straight across. While some parts of the ground in these parts are wide plains indeed, most are deadly drops into the abyss.

IF YOU'RE SO INCLINED

There is plenty that makes travel under the ground difficult, some blatant and some more subtle. Many subterranean plains are at an incline or decline (depending on direction of travel) of around 3-degrees. This is usually totally unnoticeable for the first mile or so but, by the second, the constant ascension or descent becomes more and more apparent as the body has to work so much harder. The larger the plain, the deeper or higher it rises or falls, and more than a couple of miles can be crippling.



FYE DOMAIN

Wide open plains in the Fey Domain have an enchanting cycle of life, and each season brings with it a delirious proliferation of wild flowers.

SUMMER BREEZE

The plains of the Fey are thick with grasses of deep verdigris, and criss-crossing these vibrant oceans are great swathes of purple, blue, and turquoise fronds. When the wind blows from the east, a sweet scent is carried upon it. In summer, the grasses burst with pollen which is, to all but the grasses, a highly toxic poison that is blown about the whole plain. This mass-kill approach is utilized to fertilize the soil with the bodies of unfortunate wanderers.

AUTUMN-ATIC WARNING

Some call autumn in the plains of the Fey the 'season of great fire', and warn strangers not to go near. The grasses turn red, orange, and yellow, and several species flicker and wave like flames - some even burn as they become so hot. Other grasses

seem immune to the hot patches, but the fiery color palette makes it difficult to distinguish which are safe and which will scald.

EDGE OF WINTER

The grasses of the plains freeze in winter and become silver daggers, long swords of icy mithril, and bright white shields of packed snow. The fronds are not sharp enough to pierce metal, leather, or tightly woven cloth, but any that take a tumble are cut deeply and painfully all across any exposed skin.

SPRING AWAKENING

There is more color in a square foot of Fey plains than in all of those in the mortal realms combined, or so the locals say. Miniature gardens blossom and compete with one another, covering every inch in bright flowers of every imaginable color. Do not tarry too long in one spot, lest the foliage over-grow you!

THE HELLS

The plains of the Hells stretch on forever and contain nothing but torment and anguish, or so it might seem at first glance.

HARSH LIGHT

Glassica plains are easily seen from a distance, as they sparkle and glint in the infernal light. On the approach, it becomes evident it is covered in razor-sharp, rocky spines and ridges, and the grasses that grow in the cracks have sharp thorns and hooks. There is no relief from the cutting that comes from crossing a glassica plain.

THERE AND BACK AGAIN

One dastardly hellish plain of particular note seems, initially, to be only a few hundred yards across, both from the edge and when starting to cross it. However, this being the Hells, it is possible to walk for years and never reach the other side. The plain was specifically designed to torment the souls that dare to plumb the depths of the infernal realm, without paying their dues. Looking behind, the edge never seems more than a couple dozen feet behind. Turn back, though, and a return journey could take half a lifetime.

BAD HAIR DAY

Often considered the nicest type of plain in the Hells (or, perhaps more appropriately, the least horrid), trudge plains are large, densely foliated spaces. The grass reaches hip height on most humans and is reminiscent of human hair. In a similar manner, it knots and tangles, usually around any feet and legs trying to make their way through it, so each step is a struggle.

SCARY PRAIRIE

Like a multitude of other hellish locations, the plains are simply covered in rotting corpses. Digging down just reveals more, always in a state of putrefaction and decay. Puddles of goo gather in places, and the only fronds that blow in the hot wind are strands of remaining hair on the near-bare skulls. Traveling across particularly dense areas is nearly impossible, as the bodies slide over one another, thus requiring those hoping to cross to crawl on all fours to distribute their weight, which is far more than most can stomach.

SHADOW REALM

Shadow plains are dangerous spaces – offering little in the way of hiding spots or protection from any of the many surrounding horrors. They should not be crossed lightly.

A PINCH OF SALT

The ground of some Shadow plains is made up mainly of salts. What few grasses grow are usually encrusted with it, though the fact that there even are several types of grass that flourish in a place like this is almost unbelievable. Pools of highly salinated water dot the place and, when sky skies see fit to release something other than ash, even the rain is salty.

DANGER, HIGH VOLTAGE

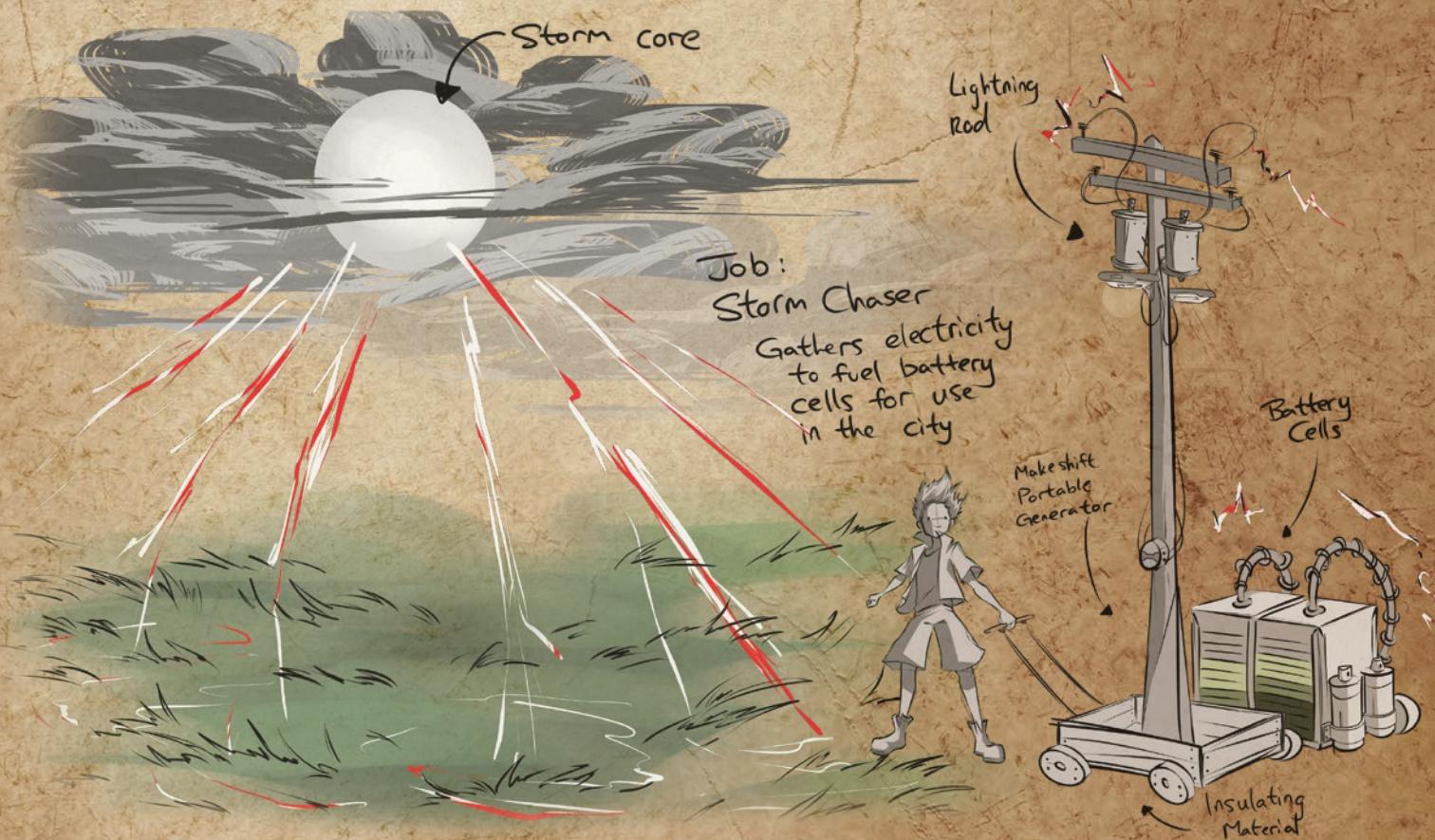
The storms that build up over the hot plains in the Shadow Realm can be so terrific, so bold, so loud, and so electrically charged that the entire area seems to dance with lightning. Huge storm cells blast over the wide-open plains, striking anything taller than the grass with deadly electricity.

DITCHED

Though all Shadow travelers would be wise not to trust what their eyes tell them, some plains of the Realm appear calm, and the gray grasses that grow there seem lush and soft. The ground, however, is anything but. Great furrows cross it, along with pits, falls, and trenches, making it very difficult to cross. Concealing these hazards is the grass that covers it all: it grows to a uniform height, regardless of its starting point, no taller or shorter than those stems around it, creating the illusion of a flat, featureless plain.

ON THE BRIGHT SIDE

Odd, and somewhat alarming after traversing the dark for so long, a scant few Shadow plains actually glow. A combination of minerals in the soil and the grasses that grow in it causes the entire plain to give off a faint, white light. Anything walking across can be seen for miles in all directions. Bright plains may seem safer than the usual gloom, as predators can be seen coming but, as with all things in the Shadow Realm, some things like to hide in plain sight.



SWAMPS

ADJECTIVES

Fetid	Itchy	Gray	Depressing	Endless	Slimy	Clammy	Still	Stagnant
Damp	Moist	Sucking	Brooding	Mirky	Treacherous	Wet	Choking	Bloated
Oily	Hidden	Humid	Strangled	Putrid	Obscuring	Rotten		



INSPIRATION

SENSES

SIGHT	Gloomy mist rises from the murky waters and conceals all detail.	Hidden horrors lurk, just out of sight, in the black waterways.	The trees are twisted and look sick, as if the environment is causing them pain.	Midges, dragonflies, and a thousand other stinging, biting, and bothering things hover in the air.
SMELL	If a place could smell slimy, this would be it.	Clammy, sodden trees reek of mushrooms and mud.	Even the water itself smells putrid, stagnant and full of gloom.	Nothing smells alive; it all seems to stink of mud.
SOUND	All is still, as if the whole swamp is holding its breath, waiting for you to die here.	A splash sounds like a thunderclap to you in this still, damp place.	Everything that creeps and crawls and bites is alerted by the sucking sound of your boots.	A long shriek of some terrible happening seems to be the song of this solitary place.
TOUCH	Everything you touch is damp, and anything you try to grip turns to mush.	A multitude of unseen mysteries in the water stroke at your feet and legs as you progress.	Each step sucks at your feet, desperate to consume your very soul.	The mud that cakes your hands is oily and makes your fingers slippery.
TASTE	Even fresh water tastes old and slightly fishy.	Mud. It all tastes of mud. And the mud tastes of old things, rotten and lost.	It seems like all the water in the world is here and yet your tongue is thick with thirst.	Bubbles of swamp gas burst on the water's surface, filling the air with the taste of rotten eggs and decay.

QUICK ENCOUNTERS

D12	ENCOUNTER	D12	ENCOUNTER
1	The party steps onto a patch of muddy moss, the plants start to emit a deafening scream. The moss wiggles underfoot, as if in pain; its screech will soon alert all nearby predators.	7	Sloshing through a waist-deep pool of mud, the heroes find themselves surrounded by bubbles. As they break the surface, they release sleeping gas.
2	The heroes enter a wide area filled with bullrushes. The moment they step in, the rushes start to come alive and attack, trying to clobber them to death.	8	A strange hut with chicken legs trudges through the mud towards the party and settles in front of them. A note, attached to its door, invites them for a safe rest, if they are willing to pay a small fee.
3	The heroes encounter a massive, intelligent tortoise named Ag ak Tortu. They almost miss the giant reptile, as his great, moss-covered shell resembles the mounds of earth around him.	9	The heroes come across a wide pool of dark, almost black water. Aimlessly drifting on the surface is a canoe filled with fresh food.
4	As the heroes traverse the swamp, they encounter a starving vampire, floating on a patch of oily, wet mud. From a distance it looks like a corpse but, as they get closer to investigate, it comes alive and does something surprising.	10	While journeying through a murky pool, the heroes witness whole sections of moss-covered ground ahead give way, creating a swirling vortex that draws water into the depths beneath.
5	In the distance, the party hears the sound of a banjo. As they get close, they see a joyful band of swamp goblins, who have set out on an adventure.	11	The heroes spot a once-towering monolith, now halfway sunken in the mud. Ancient carvings speak of a prophecy.
6	A figure, veiled in what looks like a cloak of moss, roots and vines, approaches the party. It is an eremitic swamp druid, and views them as interlopers.	12	Fog starts to rise until the heroes find themselves deprived of sight. All they can see are the silhouettes of a ghostly battalion, marching in the fog and hungry for war.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

D10	ADVENTURE
1	The heroes are approached by a prince who wants to be turned into a frog. He needs to avoid a being of great power that is hunting him, and believes that a certain flower with shape changing powers offers the solution to his problems.
2	The heroes are approached by a druid who is stuck in the form of an alligator. They need to find their home to return to their usual appearance, but have been stuck in their beastly shape for so long that they are finding it hard to resist wanting to hunt and eat the party.
3	A pixie tribe recently settled in a location that offers a special benefit to their tribe, but they were attacked and displaced by swamp ogres, who hold the area to be sacred to their god. Both sides are willing, even itching, to fight for control of the area.
4	A struggling village needs a holy stone to be delivered to a sacred site, deep within the swamp, but cannot do so without help and protection.
5	A falsely convicted person needs the characters to travel to the heart of a swamp to get the only piece of evidence that proves their innocence: a talking corpse. If they do not return in time, the prisoner will be sentenced and condemned.
6	To cross the swamp, locals rely on the services of a community-run ferry, but it has not returned as expected from its latest trip. The barge has recently been subject to constant attack, and the villagers fear it could be in trouble.
7	The swamp is spreading outwards at an unnatural speed, consuming farmland and villages. The cause of the spread seems to stem from the center of the swamp; the heroes must find out what it is and stop it, before it is too late.
8	The inhabitants of a nearby peat village speak of the tomb of an ancient paladin, hidden on an island somewhere in the swamp. It is said that, for those who approach it, the sky becomes the land and the land the sky, and that those who withstand intensive trials will be greatly rewarded.
9	The swamp is drying up, and the local communities are suffering. Someone is blocking the river feeding the area... the heroes must find out who and, most importantly, why.
10	A dragon is driving the creatures of the swamp outwards, and disrupting the natural balance. It is looking for something buried in the swamp, but what?

INTRODUCTION

There are many different types of swamp or wetland that can be included in your worldspace. What sets swamps apart from other locations is the inherent mystery and foreboding that these places exude naturally. Hidden waterways, and emerging and submerging islets keep these spaces dynamic and uncharted.

What dangers lie within these murky spaces, and what can be found at the bottom of the multitudes of pools, ponds, and streams that snake their way through?

FUNDAMENTALS

The term 'swamp' is used here to collectively include bogs, marshes, and swamps themselves. Peatlands, also known as bogs or quagmires, are characterized by peat-forming plants, and hold stagnant water constantly. Swamps and marshes, on the other hand, occasionally dry out during long, warm periods of the year. They can be found near rivers, lakes, or the ocean, leading to a huge variety of different classifications. All of them share the same general typology: the soil is saturated with water, and so forms both wide areas of mud and water pools.

A swamp is not a big lake with islands in it. It is more like a maze - interconnected areas of 'solid' ground, surrounded by flowing or stagnant water. Characters will need to navigate their way across the swamp in some way - either by forcing their way across, or hiring a guide. Swamps are also notorious for not having good roads, paths, or per-

manent landmarks. To avoid your swamp becoming a giant, wet repetition, consider what can be added to make it interesting.

Peat mining, fishing, hunting, and the richness of the feeding grounds for livestock are all elements that attract people to settle near these wet places. Since most of these tasks are viewed by many as menial jobs, villages around wetlands are usually not particularly affluent, and mostly formed of workers and their families in small communities.

The rich minerals in the soil provide great farming grounds, once the land is drained and dried. Other reasons to drain mires include getting to deeper deposits of peat, accessing trees in swamp forests, and reducing insect populations that often bring disease. To dry out a mire, draining canals and ditches are dug that allow the water to slowly seep out of the wetland.

FUNCTIONS

To make each swamp unique, it is important to look at the different types of wetlands that exist. Each is a distinct variant of the idea of a maze of waterways and patches of isolated islands.

PEAT BOG/QUAGMIRE/BOG

Peat is a brown, spongy material that is formed by the partial decomposition of organic matter in waterlogged conditions. To form peat, vegetation must fall and be buried in a relatively oxygen-poor environment so that it can be incorporated into layers of the soil without completely rotting down into nothing. After about ten years of compression and decomposition, the peat can be harvested through a peat mine.

Peat, when dried, is a great alternative to firewood, and is especially valuable in areas where trees are sparse. It is also used in distilleries to

create the unique flavor of whiskey, and can be used as a fertilizer for farming. Peat moss - a special type of peat formed when the vegetation it is mainly comprised of is moss - is also an important addition to every explorer's pack: its low weight makes it easy to bring along and, since it can catch fire quickly and easily, it is often the basic ingredient in a fire-starting kit or tinder box.

To mine for peat, trenches are dug into the mud and bricks of wet peat are cut out of the ground in cubes or 'bricks'. These are stacked onto carts and carried to drying grounds, where it is left to dry in the sun. Once dried, the peat, or turf bricks, are then transported to the nearest town and sold to distilleries, smokers, and blacksmiths.

Bogs are often covered with ericaceous shrubs and herbs, as well as any grasses that can find roots in the moss and peat that forms the patches

of ground above water. Trees are sparse and only grow where the ground is solid enough to support them. Since bogs are often found at higher elevation in the Northern Hemisphere, the wildlife is usually composed of insects like midges, mosquitoes, horseflies, frogs, toads, eels, and leeches, as well as mammals like rabbits, ducks, badgers, and beavers, and birds. At the top of the food chain are birds of prey, as well as foxes, wolves, and - occasionally - even bears.

SWAMP

Typically full of aquatic life, and rich in mineral sediments, swamps are not as forlorn and empty as they may first seem. They form in a variety of places, usually within areas that have permeable soils, a lack of good drainage, and a low water-table (the depth of water saturation within the ground; a high water-table means water is deep underground, whilst a low water table means the water is close to or on the surface, in which case a spring, pool, or something bigger forms). Tall trees can grow in vast numbers, and it is not uncommon for large predators to roam amongst the many islands of dense vegetation that form. Swamps typically feature lots of streams, rivers, and other channels of water that flow around these islands. Sometimes, they are joined by temporary mud bars, sandbars, or sedimentation that has been grown over with foliage. These crossings are fleeting, as heavy rains often reshape a swamp in moments.

If a large enough area of swamp can be properly drained and protected by walls or dikes, the ground is wonderfully rich for growing crops, and the surrounding waters are full of fish. This makes for an ideal homesteading location - if you can handle the insects that find the small, stagnant pools of water ideal breeding grounds.

The isolationist nature of swamps, along with the lack of permanent fixtures or pathways, make these places difficult to chart, and therefore ideal for any community hoping to remain hidden from view. Unless permanent landmarks exist, settlements often remain obscure, their location only vaguely known to none but those with intimate knowledge of the particular swamp.

Swamps differentiate from marshes by the existence of trees like pines, cypresses, and mangroves. Swamp forests are relatively common. Mosses, vines, and herbs, along with reeds and duckweed, grow between the trees and offer cover to mammals like beavers, badgers, and a large variety of birds. In lower temperature climate zones, reptiles are rare; whereas, in warmer regions, alligators, crocodiles, snakes, lizards and turtles, as well as

water mammals like hippos and water buffalos, are more prevalent.

MARSH

As with all wetlands, marshes are damp places, and are full of a variety of mammals that take advantage of the marshes' proliferation of grasses and lack of large predators. Dense grasses and reeds make up a marsh, creating dangerous illusions of solid ground. These quick-growing, carpet-like plants often mask deep pools of cold, black water.

Grasses make for excellent grazing, and fish also find a home in the shallows. Communities form on the edge of marshes hoping to graze livestock and take advantage of the protection they bring; one cannot march an army across a marsh.

Unlike swamps, which can change overnight, marshes generally shift little, as the waterways are constantly clogged with entangled grasses. Throughways are semi-permanent; with some care and upkeep, an actual traversable path could be made. If the need in the area is great enough, and provided that wood is plentiful, posts could potentially be placed at intervals to make travel easier.

Marshes are dominated by herbaceous, rather than woody, plant species, and you can find a huge variety of shrubs, grasses, rushes, reeds, and water plants like sea lilies and duckweed. The lack of trees is part of what differentiates a marsh from a swamp. Depending on where the marsh forms, the wildlife can differ quite drastically. In cooler climes, reptiles are rare and, given the sparse cover available, top predators are seldom bigger than wolves or foxes. Birdlife proliferates, as does the insect population. In warmer climates, water buffalos are found more often.

TRAVELING THROUGH THE MIRE

On fastened roads (those made to withstand the shifting nature of the swamp, usually out of rocks piled on top of one another and then flattened), or crossing water sections with small boats, the travel speed of a party of adventurers across a space of this nature is likely to be slow. If the party leaves any existing trails, the swamp becomes even more difficult terrain, probably halving the speed of members hoping to cross it. Mud, hidden water pools, and the typically entangled nature of the foliage makes for hard going. Every hour of travel is an exhausting mix of walking, slogging, swimming, and jumping, finding a way forward only to have to backtrack to avoid dangerous or impassable terrain.

HAZARDS OF SWAMPS

Aside from the constant threat of drowning, getting stuck in the mud, starving to death, and getting lost for all time, swamps have some wonderful, naturally occurring hazards that make for great additional challenges in an epic location.

QUAKING BOGS

A fascinating phenomena, quaking bogs can form when peat floats on the surface of the water, interlocking and forming a carpet of seemingly steady ground that is actually just a thin layer of moss and roots. Given enough time, these carpets extend until they cover up most of the bog, tricking careless travelers into believing their way ahead is solid. What seem to be harmless pools of water scattered across the grassland are actually windows to the dark, murky depths of the bog that stretches beneath unsuspecting feet. Those that plough forward and walk on this carpet feel the ground start to quake and wobble; it can easily give way if stepped on in the wrong place. The greatest danger of all is that the ground does not simply break open, but the spongy moss, peat, and roots get pushed aside and quickly close behind any that fall through, trapping them in the dark waters below. While it is easy to punch a hole in this carpet with body weight from above, there is almost no chance of mustering enough force to do the same while trapped underwater.

MUD HOLES

These deep pockets of water are surrounded by extremely wet and unstable ground and are often times submerged and not easily seen from above. Stepping on the ridge of such a hole causes the mud to slide deeper into the pocket, dragging that which disturbed it along. Every time the surrounding terrain above ground is reached for or grasped, it slips and slides back into the mudhole, making attempts to climb out of the hole futile.

MIRE FOGS

Because they are wetlands, swamps are often constantly shrouded in a light mist. In addition, any rapid temperature changes can quickly cause surface water to evaporate and form an even

denser fog. Mire fogs are known to form extremely fast, and can get so dense that it becomes impossible to see your hand in front of your face or, even worse, where your feet are stepping. In combination with the dangers of mudholes and quaking bogs, being trapped in a mire fog has been the doom of many inexperienced travelers.

RAIN

Rain is as dangerous as the tide in most swamp-lands. The water level rises quickly, and safe passages are drowned, leaving no hint of where to step next. With enough rain, streams and whirlpools can form, tugging and pulling on travelers caught in the storm.

BOG GAS

When plant matter, or dead animals, sink in a wetland and get covered by mud, the decomposition can form trapped pockets of methane and hydrogen sulfide which are, respectively, flammable and highly toxic when inhaled. Over time, the gas normally seeps through the ground and escapes to the surface as small bubbles. When it collects, however, it can explode and rip up parts of the surrounding area with it, spewing poisonous gas everywhere. If the gas constantly streams to the surface, the water looks like it is boiling. Even the smallest spark ignites it, causing a blue flame to burn inches above the water.

The corpse of any creature can become a zombie.



FINESSE

To make a swamp, bog, mire, or marsh memorable, add in additional elements that make the most of this naturally defensible, isolated, and specialist location. What kinds of creatures or groups of humanoids might benefit most from a home, hide-out, or other settlement here?

BURIAL MOUNDS

Burial mounds are a great addition to mires, as the hills they are built upon sometimes form small outcroppings of steady ground. They fit thematically into the wet, mist ridden surroundings of a mire, but are also an attractive prospect for a party of adventurers. Characters can find rare herbs and flowers, the mounds offer some protection from the wind and weather, and the steady ground invites the building of a camp for the night. Local villagers, however, dread having to spend the night on one of these cursed hills as, legends say, only sunlight keeps the restless dead entombed.

A HAUNTED PLACE

Mires have always been associated with ghost stories. The troubled souls of those that get lost and drown in the dark waters haunt these places, and there are always rumors of creatures hiding and hunting in swamps. Those that look down into the dark pools might sometimes glimpse a pale body drifting by, nev-

er certain if it is just another root, or an outstretched hand reaching out from the darkness.

COLOR

Most of the time we think of swamps as dark and grim, but they come in a multitude of colors, usually in watercolor shades of brown, green, gray, or a mixture thereof. Think about the mood you want to set for your swamp encounters. A cold and miserable marsh that is a nightmare of mud pools, quaking bogs, and mire fogs might make use of a palette of browns, tans, and other muddy colors to emphasize the dirty, mucky nature of the location. Another marsh that is more of a commercial working space, with hamlets and friendly river crossings, could be toned with light greens, yellows, and browns. This does not necessarily make it any less treacherous, and in fact can do just the opposite: it makes it more likely that a group of heroes will let their guard down.

There are times when using a very different color palette can be useful too. Shades of purple, white, and orange might feature, thanks to the sediment and minerals in the mud, and make a wetland more unique-looking. Using color in your maps and as part of your descriptions helps make your epic location feel alive and vibrant.

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

Swamps are notorious for changing. It is incredibly difficult, if not impossible in some cases, for heroes to accurately map a swamp, but this does not necessarily mean they will always be lost. Normal astral navigation techniques still work; a compass does not suddenly cease to function, so characters with a modicum of survival skill and wilderness know-how should be able to work out approximately where they are at any given moment. It is just that,

where they are, is likely to now be surrounded by wholly new swamp terrain.

Thus, the point of no return is when the characters realize that the path ahead of them and the path behind them may not be what they believed them to be before. After that moment, their return trip home is likely to be as complex, and comprised of guesswork, as their journey forward, and so they might as well proceed.

DESIGNING EPIC SWAMPS IN FANTASY SETTINGS

Add any of the following features to your location, or use them for inspiration, to create a swamp that is clearly not of our world.

HIGH FANTASY

Swamps in fantasy are traditionally dark and dank places filled with despair, death, and fog machines, but they can be so much more than that!

SWAMPS ON SWAMPS ON SWAMPS

What if your map shows that you are finally about to emerge from the swamp but, where it should end, you discover more swamp?! Repeater swamps actively convert the land around them into more swamp; they have a curious habit of disgorging great clods of peat onto dryer land, trapping moisture in the originally firm ground, which slowly becomes boggy, and eventually incorporates into the main swamp. Though this phenomenon can occur naturally, a repeater swamp might be created magically by those that want to increase their own borders, or keep out intruders.

BUT THE FOURTH ONE...

Swamps are notoriously difficult to build upon, but this one is particularly notorious. Any structure, be it stilt-hut or a giant castle, sinks into the swamp in a matter of days or weeks. The soil is so waterlogged that the ground is more akin to a lake than a patch of earth. Often, these swamps can be identified from afar by the ruins that stick out of the

surface of the water, the projects of cocksure tradespeople that thought, wrongly, that their methods would finally be the ones to make a structure stick, and make them their fortune.

FIRE AND WATER

Some swamps are just combustible; these unusual variants generate vast amounts of methane due to the biology of the foliage. Static in the air ignites these methane pockets and streams, setting whole areas of the swamp on fire. Usually there is little warning other than a gentle bubbling as the first bubbles of gas break the surface of the swamp.

A NASTY SURPRISE

It is bad enough to have to travel through a swamp you know is there, that always has been, and always will be. Native to many kinds of fantasy environments, however, surprise swamps remain small and inert for months but then, suddenly, expand in all directions for miles. They may remain this way for several years and then suddenly contract again. Sometimes called 'The Bogging', or 'The Great Wet' in places where their formation and subsequent disappearance is common, these events change kingdoms.

- THINK OF A SWAMP A GIANT NASTY PLACE FULL OF FROGS, SNAKES, AND OGRES. OCCASIONALLY A CASINO YES - BUT MOSTLY JUST FROGS AND SNAKES. -

UNDERFELL

Swamps in the Underfell usually fall into two categories - those that are a prelude to a lake, and simply horrid, soggy areas. Either way, swamps in the dark are as most: cold and very wet.

GRAY MATTER

A shale swamp can form in several ways, but usually does so around shale-heavy caverns. The shale slowly turns into gray mud and this, over time, forms gray swamps with sharp-edged stones that fill the riverbeds. Shale swamps are usually not particularly deep, but they can be very slippery and crossing them is seldom easy.

FLOATERS

Found in most Underfell swamps, float stones are porous and bob on the surface of slow-moving water. Over time, fungi, algae, and plants take root, form soil, and turn the stones into small islands that seem solid and stable but, with nothing to anchor them and very little weight, are in fact, dangerously tippable. Some Underfell cultures are known to tie several float stones together to make semi-permanent, floating islands that can disband, or reform, at a moment's notice.

IF YOU LIKE SWAMPS IN THE DARKNESS, AND GETTING CAUGHT IN THE RAIN

A type of swamp in the Underfell, known as a 'dake', gives the of being trapped in an underground rainstorm. Water constantly drips from the ceiling, saturating the ground underneath and turning it into a bog or marsh. The water is so constant that, occasionally, great clumps of muddy sediment from the ceiling break off and splash onto the ground below. These are highly unstable swamps and should be avoided.

THE BEAUTIFUL, BRINY SWAMP

The water in a 'brine' is so full of dissolved mineral salts that it is thick, like soup. Humanoids float on the surface and cannot easily submerge themselves below the water level. Quickly, anything that touches the water becomes caked in salts, and whatever islands that may be present have thick, salty crusts. Only the hardiest and most salt-adapted fungi grow in a brine.

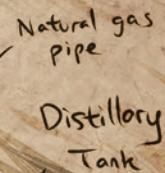
Shale can be used as a primary ingredient for brick manufacturing



Village born from Shale?



Hot Shale oil



Shale oil deposits can be refined to yield natural gas

Shale Outcrop

FYE DOMAIN

Swamps in the Fey Domain tend to be mystical places full of ancient power and forgotten dreams. Giants and mad gnomes often live in these swamps.

ONE FOR SORROW

Sorrow bogs and marshes are full of pools of black water and weak streams, choked by gray bulrushes and dark weeds. The air about these bogs is damp and miserable, and a permanent fog seems to hang in the air. The few plants that grow here are thin and strangled, and there are few creatures willing to stay in these places. A common punishment, favored by the Fey Court, is to loose prisoners into the sorrows.

THE FLOW OF TIME

Each river, each channel, and each path in Tempori Juni is dangerous. This swamp is saturated with time magic and, just like the flow of time moving inexorably forward, so the waters of this swamp carry time. Eddies, whirlpools, and cross currents, however, change its passage. As wanderers cross the swamp, they might go back in time a few minutes, a few hours, a few days or, in some cases, a few years. The older sections of Tempori

Juni can send you back in time decades, or forward in time by lifetimes.

WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS NOW IS SWAMPS, MORE SWAMPS

Some of the swamps of the Fey are incredibly old, and also entirely fabricated. Ranjin – vaguely humanoid plant-like beings (sometimes called 'The Keepers') – create and then keep these swamps alive by damming rivers, changing water courses, and growing trees or piling mud in certain places. Why they wish to make or keep these swamps alive is anyone's guess. Those that live or work in or near them can only hope their purposes are not entirely nefarious.

THE WAY IS SHUT

Select Fey swamps are referred to as 'forbidden', not because of some law or ruling, but because they choose who can enter and who can exit. Those who the swamp itself deem 'not allowed' will not find an easy entrance and, even if they do find their way, only suffer hardships within until they withdraw. Once inside, there is no guarantee of an exit: the swamp chooses who can leave, and when.





THE HELLS

Swamps in the Hells are never pleasant places, like most of the places in the infernal realms. What flows through them is less important than what lives in them.

SMELL YOU LATER

Many of the particularly putrescent swamps of the Hells are full of bloated bodies; they rot on the shores of rivers that are filled with the bodily fluids that drain from corpses. The stench is unbelievable, and no section is free from a liquifying carcass.

MAZE OF MADNESS

The black water that flows through this swamp twists the landscape, and what seems like a straight path turns and turns until the walker is heading in circles. Only when they reach a dead-end do they realize their spiral. Sadly, in almost all cases, returning leads to another spiral.

IT'S ALL COMING BACK TO ME

In the Hells, memories of life and the past can be a cruelty beyond words. Recollection swamps contain pools of still water that taste sweet, and refresh like nothing else in Hell. However, they also restore memories of pain, loss, and suffering – and make the drinker experience them all fresh, as if for the first time.

ALL-CONSUMING

Most hellish swamps are full of disease; even the mists that hang in shades of green and gray over them are riddled with sickness. On entering cut, the victim is infected with consumption. Over the next few days, a fever overtakes them, and extreme fatigue and a racking coughing full of black phlegm follows. If dehydration does not kill the sufferer, the muscle spasms do, as the victim's own body suffocates itself to death.

SHADOW REALM

The Shadow Realm is dark and dank, and could be thought of as one giant swamp, but this generalization does not take into account the unique pockets of bog, marsh, and fen that can be found there too.

YUKETY YAK: DO HOLD BACK

Yakyuk bogs are hidden under a thick layer of ash and, for the most part, are dry. However, small streams cut away to the deeper mud beneath. Any amount of heavy pressure can break through the ash and open a hole into a deep dark river below.

RUN THE DRAYCE

For the most part, a drayce fen is dry with tufts of long grass. Some areas might be a little muddy, but the area can generally pass a plain... until the flooding starts. Dark brown, near black water quickly spills into the fen and, within minutes, the whole area can be waist deep in tannin-stained,

murky water. The lack of warning means it is near impossible to get ahead of the onslaught of water.

THE OUTLOOK IS BLEAK

There are two widely accepted types of moor: dry, heather-covered hills and rolling lands, and wet, sodden bog-like areas. A bleak moor is a combination of both, except the heather is a hard, thorny bramble that cuts and claws at anything near it, and the wet, sodden bog is treacherously deep and flows rapidly beneath the surface.

A MEAR DIP IN THE HILLOCK

It looks, in this place, like hundreds of little hillocks have been herded together. In the dips between the peaks, however are muddy, wet swamps that are referred to as 'mears'. They suck and pull at those trying to cross from peak to peak, the apexes of which are hard dry land where nothing grows.

UNDERWATER

ADJECTIVES

Murky	Dim	Obscured	Hazy	Faint	Blurry	Darkened	Muddled	Opaque
Veiled	Eerie	Numbing	Lightless	Silent	Pitch-black	Glowing	Bioluminescent	Ethereal
Mesmerizing	Otherworldly	Bone-crushing	Oppressive		Weighty	Inescapable	Suffocating	

INSPIRATION

SENSES

SIGHT	Murky water stretches out before you, its inky depths concealing whatever lies beneath the surface.	The dim light of your torch is barely enough to penetrate the gloom of the underwater cavern, casting eerie shadows that dance and sway in the currents.	The water is hazy and thick, a curtain of mist and bubbles that seems to obscure your vision even further.	The water is darkened by the shadow of a massive creature lurking just beyond your vision; its presence sends shivers down your spine.
SMELL	The salty tang of seawater fills your nostrils as you take a last deep breath.	As you catch a breath in a pocket of breathable air, the tangy smell of fish and seaweed attacks your nose.	The musty smell of damp stone and earth hangs heavy as you ascend to the surface of the underwater cave.	Within the grotto, the stale scent of decaying algae and rotten fish permeates the air.
SOUND	Eerie, almost otherworldly silence encompasses you as you descend.	The distant roar of waves crashing against the shore is muted by the thickness of the water and the distance from the surface.	The faint sound of marine life, a symphony of clicks, whistles, and grunts, is almost imperceptible to the ear.	Sound carries through the water in a haunting, almost musical way, such as the creaking of old shipwrecks.
TOUCH	You feel the slight tickle of bubbles emerging from your clothing as they dance to the surface.	Your ears pop and ache as the pressure changes, making it difficult to equalize and causing a deep sense of discomfort.	As you descend, the water feels denser and heavier; it pushes down on your body and makes it more difficult to move.	The pressure builds, increasing steadily as you go deeper and deeper, a crushing weight that threatens to squeeze the air from your lungs.
TASTE	A gagging wash of salt fills your throat as you catch a mouthful of water.	A briny taste of decay and decomposition lingers in the brackish water of the grotto.	The glacial water tastes sweet and fresh and carries the chill of the low temperatures in this lake.	You can taste the metallic sting of blood as you run out of air.

QUICK ENCOUNTERS

D12	ENCOUNTER	D12	ENCOUNTER
1	The party comes across a group of merfolk who are being threatened by a school of sharks.	7	A dolphin darts towards the party, carrying a shell-covered message container. The message seems urgent!
2	Half buried in the ocean floor lies the remains of an ancient shipwreck that has become the home of a giant octopus.	8	As the party descends, they find themselves within a forest of gigantic clams. Vicious eels are darting between them, and they must find a way out.
3	A school of hostile reef sharks seems to be guarding the entrance to an underwater grotto.	9	A sudden current pulls on the party members, and they need to find a way to escape it, or be dragged down into the abyss.
4	The party discovers a hidden grotto that is home to a group of sea elves. The elves are friendly and offer the party shelter and supplies.	10	The party members suddenly find themselves trapped in a sea of jellyfish, colorful and mesmerizing, yet extremely dangerous.
5	Kraken-worshiping merfolk zealots demand the heroes recognize their tentacled deity as the one true god.	11	Impacted between a narrow trench sits the wreckage of a gnomish submarine. It looks like light is moving around inside.
6	Hidden in a shallow trench is the home of a powerful sea hag. She is unhappy with the way humans are polluting the ocean and forces the party to fight a trash golem.	12	A volcanic eruption has cut off a bay from the ocean. An insane aquatic gnome has built a bomb to destroy the lava-turned-rock wall, and open the bay. They just need someone to place the bomb and light the fuse.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

D10	ADVENTURE
1	A cult is trying to wake a goddess of fire within an underwater volcano. If they are successful, a massive tsunami will hit the land.
2	A gigantic whirlpool has formed and is threatening ship trade. The party needs to investigate the cause and stop it.
3	'Queen Sylla's Fortitude', a well-known and respected merchant ship, has sunk along with its valuable cargo. The party is tasked to retrieve as much as they can before treasure hunters make off with the lot.
4	A clan of merfolk has suddenly ended all diplomatic relations with a local town. They claim that a huge injustice has been done to them. The mayor of the town sends the party on a diplomatic mission to restore peace.
5	A gnomish submarine has run aground near an underwater trench and needs to be rescued. It can still communicate via magical means, but messages are becoming more and more erratic.
6	An intricate map of a sunken city has been discovered. The explorer's guild is putting together an expedition and has asked the party to accompany the mission.
7	As the party travels across the ocean, each member has strangely vivid dreams of a sunken temple. The dreams get more intense the closer they get to the alleged location of the temple.
8	After several days of ocean travel, the wind suddenly dies down, and you see a faint light coming from below the water. Each night, creatures emerge to drag sailors and passengers alike down to the light.
9	For a couple of days, the tides have been washing artifacts and remnants of unknown origin to the shore. It is believed they might be those of a sunken civilization, but no one can explain why they are showing up now.
10	A giant kraken has taken residence in a trade passage and is threatening the transport of goods to and from the city. The traders' guild has tasked the party to deal with the problem.

INTRODUCTION

Life under the sea is better than anything they got up there... This statement is subject to opinion, of course, but it is true at least that almost everything that occurs above the water also occurs under it. Forests, murky swamps, rivers, mountains, volcanoes, and even deserts, can be found there. Fundamentally, the aquatic world is limited to those who can breathe underwater, or that have some means of doing so. This constraint should be the first and foremost consideration when creating underwater locations.

Another aspect of significance is that, deeper down, the available light becomes limited until it is completely lost. Without some means of illumination, any map would be black and featureless and navigation impossible.

FUNDAMENTALS

Water is a remarkable substance. It allows giant kelp forests to grow to amazing heights, it breaks mountains down into grains of sand, and it is perpetually in motion. This means that locations underwater are subject to constant erosion, to constant sedimentation, and to remarkable support. Fragile fans of filter feeders can blossom and sweep the currents for microorganisms that would never be able to exist in another atmosphere.

Life underwater is subject to the same rules and requirements as life on land: life adapts to its environment and to its region. Fish that have evolved to live in total darkness in the depths of the ocean simply cannot operate at shallower depths. Sharks that develop a specialty for prowling reef zones are poor hunters in the open.

THE ZONES

Four zones are referred to when describing and differentiating depths of bodies of water – and most only occur in seas and oceans. First is the Sunlight Zone, the shallowest waters up to 600 feet below the water's surface. This zone receives light from the sun, and is where the vast majority of the fish and aquatic creatures that we are familiar with live. Below it, the Twilight Zone stretches down to around 3,000 feet. Here, there are limits to what can be seen; more unusual creatures lurk here, but even deep-divers like sperm whales seldom swim lower than this. Underneath the Twilight Zone is the Midnight Zone, down to 18,000 feet. Here there is no light, and truly alien creatures exist in the perpetual darkness. Finally, the Abyssal Zone continues down to beyond 30,000 feet – as deep down beneath the surface as modern commercial aircraft flight above.

Although this is a simplification of the various strata that make up the underwater world, it should be enough to inform the planning of your location. The deeper you go, the darker it gets, the more surreal, and the more hostile to life.

NOT JUST OCEANS

Aquifers, caves, and other underground chambers can be filled with fresh water and house unique ecosystems. Rivers, lakes, ponds, and non-organic locations also qualify for underwater locations. Consider what makes each unique and why - or how - your location was established there.

SEDIMENT

Different types of sediment change water's color significantly. Tannins, derived from organic matter like leaves, roots, and decaying plants turn water golden brown, or – if there is a lot of it – dark, almost black. Loch Ness in Scotland contains this very dark water. Many rivers turn brown because topsoil washes into the water and makes it murky and muddy, though the color of brown depends on the soil. Glacial melt water can be a brilliant turquoise-blue, unnatural in appearance. This is caused by minerals in the water – the fewer particles, the 'clearer' the water, however this means more light reaches them, and they reflect back blue. More minerals make the water appear milky, as they cast shade on one another, and only the top minerals can reflect the light. Other bodies of water appear white, due to high concentration of salt, or even pink, because of iron oxide or various species of algae. Green is common, mainly due to plant growth on rocks underwater, or fronds suspended in the waves themselves.

FUNCTIONS

On Earth, a far greater volume of organisms live under the water than above it, despite accounting for only 15% of world species, and the fact that Earth is over 70% water. The largest migrations of animals happen underwater, dwarfing those on land. Aside from hiding shipwrecks, the underwater world provides a thriving environment for those that live there permanently.

Scale – if you will pardon a fish-based pun – is everything. Though the surface area of the world's land is vast, that which is below the waves is far greater. On Earth, only 30% of the planet is above water; the rest lurks below. The largest creatures to have ever existed do so underwater.

Height is an interesting consideration when designing these locations. A mountain range is no longer an impassable barrier – just swim over it. A forest no longer blocks line of sight – swim above it. There are, however, other barriers that exist, almost unseen to the casual observer.

RIVERS UNDER THE WATER

Water in different locations, even within the same body, has specific salinities and temperatures. These form bands that crisscross one another at different levels. Each band may flow at a different speed, or a different direction.

As remarkable as it sounds, it is possible for entire lakes to form underwater. Depressions in the seafloor can fill with water with a different density to that surrounding it. As long as there is little disturbance to mix them, the two bodies remain apart and quite distinct.

Gasses work the same as they do above the water – hot air rises and cold air sinks, leading to the creation of weather and wind. Underwater, it is possible to see these phenomena side by side.

Another consideration when designing underwater locations is pressure. The deeper you go, the more pressure all creatures, plants, and objects are subject to. In most cases, the pressure will kill you if you descend too deep or rise too quickly, providing a wonderful tool for increasing tension. Generally, after 100 feet or so, divers need to perform decompression steps to prevent suffering when they return to the surface.

AIR

An obvious issue, though one which is very trope-heavy, for underwater locations is air, and the running out of it. Drowning is a base fear for many. Underwater caves frequently provide moments of relief with small air pockets. Having a means to breathe underwater, or creating areas where there

are pockets of breathable atmosphere, is the top priority for air-breathers, and a means of keeping water-breathers at bay.

HIDDEN TREASURES

The lure of untouched, sunken treasure is great, and modern-day treasure hunters use a variety of high-tech equipment to locate ships lost to the depths. Rivers too hold untold secrets; they have been plundered since time immemorial by heavy-magnet-wielding fisherfolk for this very reason.

What keeps these treasures undiscovered is usually either obscured surroundings (murky waters are treacherous), salinity, counter currents, or inaccessibility, such as great depths or difficult-to-reach caves. If these challenges are combined, the treasure is likely to remain hidden for a long time.

WATER BOTH PRESERVES AND DESTROYS

Gold is unaffected by saltwater, or any other element for that matter, given how unreactive it is as a substance. It can be covered in silt or mud, and yet still remain unspoiled. Iron, copper, and wood, however, are not as everlasting. In fact, unless they are quickly covered over by silt quickly, most will dissolve away into nothing. Silver turns black as it is corroded by salt, though it remains intact in freshwater.

If, however, an object is covered in dense silt or mud quickly, the opposite occurs: the anaerobic nature of underwater mud and silt preserves the covered object. Organic matter, over thousands of years, is replaced with minerals, and fossils are formed.

UPS AND DOWNS

Water levels tend to fluctuate as a result of various factors: orbiting celestial bodies, gravitational pull, and the speed at which the planet spins on its axis, amongst others. Areas of coastline that are underwater at a point in the day are often not a few hours' later as the tides change. Rivers can dry up, or suddenly flood. The Bay of Fundy in Canada experiences a difference of over forty feet between low and high tide. Isolated islands suddenly become promontories from the mainland. It was common in medieval Britain for castles to be built on islands that were, or still are, only accessible by land during low tide, and completely isolated (and therefore more defensible) when the tide is high.

Whilst a cave itself might not have its own tide, it can be affected if near a coastline, or flood quite suddenly if a thunderstorm deposits great amounts of rain on to mountains above. Chambers, once flooded, slowly drain as water seeps into deeper underground channels.

FINESSE

Combining the various wonderful properties of surface regions with the extremely unusual underwater conditions presented creates potentially epic environments that are surreal and mysterious, and yet familiar. Falling is no longer a threat, but being swept down into the darkness because of a plunging underwater river now very much is. Traversing a wide-open plain is less of a challenge – neither thunderstorms or tornadoes can catch you out in the open. However, predators can approach from any direction – above or below – and might be up to six times the size of their land-based counterparts. The safety of a kelp forest is relative to that of a boreal one, until storms on the water's surface transform it into a washing machine of violence, uprooting every plant and everything making its way through them.

Critically, the alien yet familiar nature of this space to surface dwellers makes it more dangerous. Adding finesse to underwater locations is also about creating a point of interest worth exploring (otherwise, why would you risk the dangers of an environment you are not built for?), the means to get there, and the obstacles to overcome. Where would it be located in terms of depth and proximity to land?

SHIPWRECKS

Shipwrecks are usually found in close proximity to the coast, where storms, dangerous cliffs, currents, or naval combat has caused enough damage to sink the ship. Treacherous regions might have caused several ships to sink under similar circumstances, rendering the underwater region a kind of naval graveyard. These resting places might contain all manner of treasures, and usually also provide shelter and housing for all manner of aquatic creatures.

SUNKEN RUINS

A rise in sea level or a geological cataclysm might have caused formerly land-bound structures to be fully, or partially, submerged underwater. These structures would most likely be located in the Sunlight Zone, and so resemble similar structures found on the surface, though it is important to consider how water might have affected their construction materials. Ruins of purpose-built aquatic structures, however, could be found anywhere, and would likely follow completely different architectural and construction principles; a watery environment would almost certainly accommodate the formation of wholly different shapes and the use of unconventional materials.

Ruins are likely to provide habitats for a host of aquatic creatures. Kelp forests might strangle long-abandoned realms, home now only to beasts, and large shells or coral reefs might equally provide shelter for more sedentary aquatic creatures.

UNDERWATER SETTLEMENTS

When land and water dwelling cultures or peoples are aware of each other, they are likely to construct settlements that largely fall into two general categories: outposts and refuges. Outposts might be constructed closer to land, allowing an exchange between terrestrial and aquatic nations, and might also serve a defensive purpose. Either type of being might construct an outpost, to keep an eye on the other, with dramatically different features to accommodate the needs of either.

Refuges, on the other hand, are intended to keep inhabitants safe from intrusion, and are more likely to be found in deeper zones, and/or further from shore. Due to the different hydrostatic weight of a structure underwater, buildings can be taller and slimmer than their land-based counterparts. For aquatic civilizations, stairs are likely to be a complete mystery, along with the need to have furniture placed on the floor. The organization and accessibility of a structure might be completely different, or even opposite – the ground floor would be the deepest, and so entry might be from the highest point or floor. Elements of function and comfort might follow different definitions; though water allows three-dimensional movement, the physiology of a species might still be affected by a natural up- or downdrift, and there would still be consideration for aspects such as security and storage. This, of course, is all under the assumption that the refuge is for an aquatic species; if a terrestrial species were to build a refuge deep below, or far out to sea, there are issues of travel to and from the surface, replenishment of air, waste management, and pressure, to deal with.

LAIRS AND HIDEOUTS

Player characters might need to track a large predator back to its lair or find the hidden hideout of a submerged pirate base. Both scenarios describe a location that serves as a retreat, and might require heroes to pick their moment and wait for an opportune time to sneak in. Underwater caves, grottos and eroded caverns in deep underwater chasms can all suffice.

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

Reaching the desired location is often rather a question of planning and preparation, than something that needs to be executed over time. Depending on the depth of the location (Sunlight, Twilight, Midnight, or Abyssal Zone) the descent to the destination might be handled, to varying extents, the same way overland travel might take place. Where travel to a location in the Sunlight Zone might be affected by the heroes' ability to overcome obstacles like air supply or spell duration, lower zones can probably only be reached when those obstacles are eradicated completely. The transition between each zone offers an opportunity to introduce PCs to random or planned encounters.

Thus, though the physical point of no return is likely to differ from zone to zone, all rely on the heroes having enough resources to proceed forward, but not enough to go back, along with appropriate incentive.

*Life under
the sea...*



ZONE	POINT OF NO RETURN TRIGGER
Sunlight Zone	Air reserves mainly determine the point of no return. For greatest effect, PCs should be teased with the sight of their goal, and an obvious opportunity to catch their breath (like an air pocket). If this opportunity is not presented in an obvious, timely, or inviting manner, there is nothing to stop them simply turning back.
Twilight & Midnight Zone	The Twilight Zone is only reachable to heroes that make use of additional tools, such as breathing equipment, spells, magic items, or underwater vehicles. Making the descent into this zone should be described by the change of light and landscape, and presented as a great achievement, so that players are less willing to turn around and abandon their plan.
Abyssal Zone	The water pressure in this zone renders it impossible to reach and survive without intensive prior preparation, and should be a mark of incredible, and much-rewarded, success. The point of no return is when characters discover that, at this depth, up or down starts to mean nothing, losing yourself is as easy as pie, and there is only forward.

DESIGNING EPIC UNDERWATER LOCATIONS IN FANTASY SETTINGS

Add any of the following features, or use them for inspiration, to create an underwater location that is clearly not of our world.

HIGH FANTASY

As mysterious as the underwater world is for most land dwellers, the world under the water in a fantasy space is brimming with even more exotic delights.

BE PRE-'PARE'D

A world of fantasy might contain a multitude of additional, magic-infused features, methods and technologies to breathe underwater. Perhaps your fantasy oceans contain pare spheres: bubbles that burst stream continuously from the seafloor that can grow in size to several feet in diameter. One of their curious properties is that they can be gripped, if you are gentle, and sucked like the opening of a balloon, to access fresh, breathable air.

UPS, DOWNS, AND SIDES

With the freedom to swim up, down, and sideways, underwater worlds have the capability to feel less restricting. Make use of the sides of cliffs and chasms as much as you do floors. Structures might be accessed from underneath, from the side, from the top, or from all directions. With gravity of a lesser concern and architecture so

changed, what need is there for a floor at all? If a structure has one, why might that be? Is it concealing something?

CURRENT EVENTS

Strong water currents, called 'movers' flow like rivers underwater. Though some currents pose danger due to their invisibility, movers are very noticeable – different types of krill, and other microorganisms, color certain streams red, pink, green, or blue. Great ribbons of color can be observed flowing in different directions, beautiful to behold, but those that swim too close can be swept along at high speed and with little effort.

THIS IS THE BADS PLACE

Bads are patches of water – usually old water that has not been mixed in with the regular currents – that have settled and turned bad. They contain very little oxygen and are slightly denser than the surrounding area. Entering a pocket of bads water feels heavy and difficult. Light is dimmer, and everything feels somehow colder.

– AS MYSTERIOUS AS THE UNDERWATER WORLD IS FOR MOST LAND DWELLERS, THE WORLD UNDER THE WATER IN A FANTASY SPACE BRIMS WITH EVEN MORE EXOTIC DELIGHTS. –

UNDERFELL

Underwater locations in the Underfell are traps for anyone foolish enough to attempt to swim in them. They are giant black spaces, largely filled with nothing.

NO AVOIDING THE VOID

When the water is so dark, and the chamber containing it is so dark, there is nothing to orient you to determine which way is up and which way is down. The pressure in an underwater chamber in the Underfell is such that even usually buoyant objects remain suspended, and do not float 'up'. Even with artificial light, it is near impossible to know what direction is what. What might heroes do to overcome this?

MOVERS AND GRATERS

Graters are formed when stalagmites and stalactites grow very close to one another and are then flooded over, halting further growth. When a strong current pulls water through these confined forests of stone, anything dragged along with it is shred-

ded against the sides of the rocky formations. How does a party of adventurers avoid a grater when everything is so dark? A cave that they believe will provide respite might turn out to be deadly.

BOIL 'EM, SCALD 'EM, SHOOT 'EM OUT A VENT

Invisible, super-hot, super-fast-moving vertical vents rip through the underwater world in the Underfell. Caused by geothermal activity, scalding-hot water shoots straight up and is vented out the top of caves.

LET'S GET THICKENING

With so little light, those that find themselves underwater in the Underfell have no ability to judge the color of water. A common phenomena, discovered by feel rather than sight, thick water is simply that which is so saturated with rock, sand, or mud particles that its consistency is more like soup. It has zero visibility, even when illuminated, and is very difficult to swim through.



FYE DOMAIN

With bioluminescent waters that flow along the coasts and in the rivers, the underwater realms of the Fey Domain are a riot of color and light.

GWOK AND GWOLL

The rocks and stones that make up a structure underwater in the Fey Domain are washed clean by currents daily. Many of these give off faint light that illuminates the water around them, and are referred to as 'gwoks'. If removed from its natural aquatic surrounds, a gwok will only glow again if it is submerged in pristine water and kept that way.

FALGAIN'S LIFE, PRESERVED

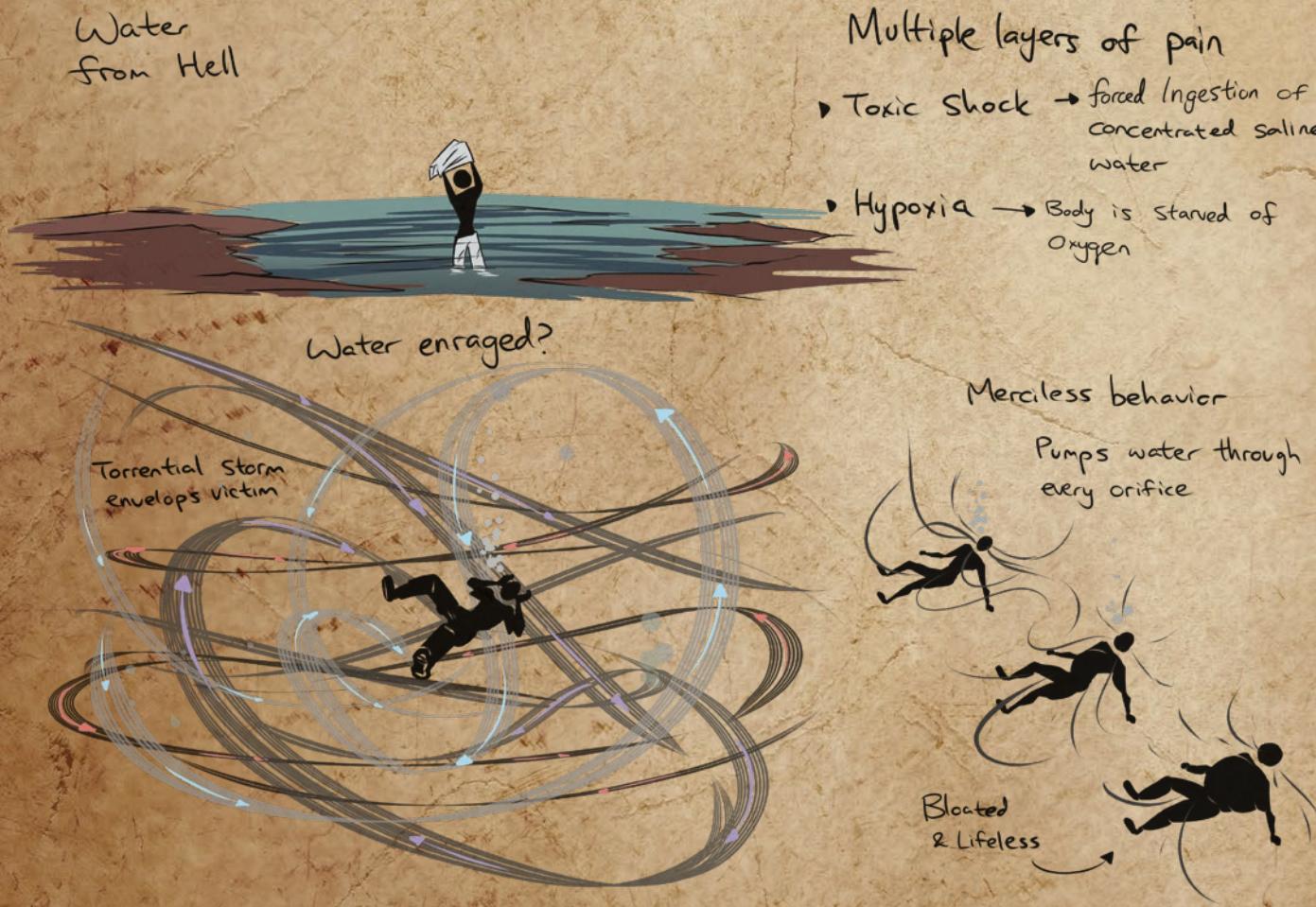
Falgain could not swim, but he found rocks that could. Or rather, he discovered that certain rocks in the Fey Domain float to varying degrees - some with just enough buoyancy to drift along the seabed, others so lacking in density that they regularly break the surface and float like islands. Falgain carved himself a hoop out of this rock, and used it to swim across an ocean.

STUCK BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD... BUBBLE

Products of oil, water, and some Fey magic, these large, iridescent bubbles of air stick to floors or walls, and have such thick outer membranes that, if enough force is applied, one can enter and have it seal behind them, rather than burst. Hard bubbles often contain enough air for a day or two, so can be useful escape pods or sanctuaries in a pinch.

WELL JELLS

Jells are pools of water with a curious, circular current that pulls swimmers back within its area of influence, giving the impression that, despite having no sentience whatsoever, it does not want them to leave. Individual pools are sometimes so robust that it takes inhuman levels of strength to emerge from them.



THE HELLS

Though the Hells are more known for fire and brimstone than lakes and seas, underwater locations can be found there. They are, predictably, exceptionally rare, but you can find them, if you search long and hard enough.

THE DARK

Found in any, but not every, pool deep enough to swim underwater, The Dark is a patch of perfect blackness with a curious twist. Swimmers are constantly aware of where the surface is, and how far away it is, but The Dark pulls them away constantly, keeping them just a few inches from breathable air.

THE WASH

Sometimes, water in the Hells suddenly becomes a murky, burnt-brown color, with swirls of ochre yellow and bursts of red. This is The Wash. Hellish rain washes over thousands of corpses, and all the body fluids of those unfortunates sometimes run together to pollute an underwater location. Typically, after

a few minutes, the water returns to its normal color and consistency. Eerily, whilst caught in The Wash, heroes can hear the screams of the dead.

THE QUICK

Even in the Hells, some water seems cool to the touch, and pleasant enough to bathe in, until they discover The Quick. When a creature is fully submerged, the water rushes around the victim, pushing in through any opening, and flooding them with water. When they are full to bursting and about to explode, the water reaches equilibrium, and a bloated corpse is all that remains.

THE LOOP

Swimming into The Loop is the epitome of frustrating. A swimmer might be progressing forwards, and then suddenly find themselves back where they started a couple of dozen, or even a couple of hundred, feet back. There is no way to swim around The Loop, and it constantly shifts so as to be as unpredictable as possible.

SHADOW REALM

Being underwater in the Shadow Realm as safe as anywhere else there - not very. Like the Underfell, the Shadow Realm is already lacking in light, which is only amplified with the addition of water.

NOT ALL THAT SHIMMERS...

To any that can create or sustain enough light to view it, this phenomena is mesmerizing. Vents of gasses on the sea floor release a stream through the water to the surface. Due to various factors, however, the streams have the appearance of shimmering light slowly rising through the water. The effect is quite hypnotic.

ASHICLE

When ash lands on salt water, it starts to sink once it has sufficient mass. As it sinks, it reacts with salt-heavy water to form a solid spike of rock-like mass nearly instantly. In the transformation, however, the ash traps a lot of oxygen, causing the formations to become buoyant and float, with the appearance of stalactites. From below, the surface of the salty water looks to be hung with thousands of daggers, all pointing their sharp points down towards the abyss.

YOU CANNOT STEM THE TIDE

One of few plants that exist in the Shadow Realm, black algae is a plague. It grows rapidly in massive colonies, billions-strong, turning the water it multiplies in into thick, black soup called a 'black tide'. The algae is toxic; it poisons water sources and burns exposed flesh. Usually, the algae grows and spreads rapidly for a few days and then dies off, leaving behind a horrific stench and contaminated water.

A FALSE HOPE

In the rare underwater places of the Shadow Realm, there are many submerged caves. A silvery sheen, seen from below, appears to be a pocket of trapped air, and is a tempting prospect. These, however, are an illusion of the dim light, and the silvery 'bubble' is nothing more than bioluminescent water lichen that grows on the cave ceiling. Many divers run out of air in mistaken pursuit of it.

VOLCANOES

ADJECTIVES

Fiery	Molten	Scorching	Smoldering	Volatile	Smoky	Ashen	Singeing	Boiling
Fuming	Seismic	Roiling	Trembling	Shaking	Rumbling	Acidic	Hostile	Lethal
	Noxious	Sulfurous	Barren	Harsh	Uninhabitable	Desolate	Unforgiving	



INSPIRATION

SENSES

SIGHT	Fiery, red lava spews from the volcano's peak and cascades down the mountainside in a river of molten heat.	Molten rock bubbles and churns beneath the surface, like a giant cauldron of liquid fire.	The black crust is permeated by glowing cracks of fresh lava.	Plumes of smoke and ash rise high into the sky from the crater, while red lightning flashes occasionally through the clouds.
SMELL	Thick in the air the smell of burning sulfur and other noxious gasses.	The hot metallic smell of ash clogs up your nose as you try to breathe in.	The acidic stench of fumes is vented into the air.	The ever-present smell of burnt wood and smoke fills the air around you.
SOUND	The rumbling of activity beneath the earth builds towards a new eruption.	Rock cracks audibly as the surface of the lava stream cools off.	The air hisses as streams of gas are vented.	Liquid lava bubbles in viscous pools.
TOUCH	The sweat trickles down your back like rivulets into the sea.	The scorching heat singes your eyebrows and hair.	The earth trembles beneath your feet as a new eruption builds up.	Every blister and singe mark on your skin painfully burns and itches.
TASTE	The taste of rotten eggs and metal lingers in the air.	The salt of sweat and exertion crusts your lips.	The mealy taste of ash fills your mouth.	Your nose is overwhelmed by the scorching sensation of inhaling hot air.

QUICK ENCOUNTERS

D12	ENCOUNTER	D12	ENCOUNTER
1	The ground splits as a giant crack opens and reveals a fresh stream of lava beneath the surface.	7	A group of molten rock elementals staggers towards the party.
2	A new vent breaks open and ejects toxic fumes into the air.	8	Lava streams flow around a tree, setting its bark on fire. You can hear a desperate scream emanating from the treetop.
3	A pool of lava is surrounded by enraged fire elementals that are attacking everything in sight.	9	The path leads into a field of steam vents, each about to erupt in a random order.
4	A new eruption ejects a massive lava stream that flows in the direction of the party.	10	Dozens of salamanders, with flaming ridges, start to crawl out of cracks in the ground.
5	A cloud of singeing ashes envelops the party, robbing them of sight and burning their skin.	11	Hot rain starts to pour from the sky, its acidic nature corroding every metal it touches.
6	A giant, fire-scaled lizard emerges from the lava and charges at the party.	12	Red lightning strikes the ground in constant, but random, succession.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

D10	ADVENTURE
1	The volcano has been dormant for many centuries, but something has awakened it. The party needs to find what has caused it and stop it, before it erupts.
2	Cultists have discovered the entrance to a temple deep within the volcano, and are now performing sacrifices to awaken a banished god.
3	Eons ago, a dangerous demon was imprisoned within the volcano. It has started to strip off its bonds and will imminently break free if the party does not stop it.
4	A dwarven excavation team is heading toward the volcano to harvest rare gems before an imminent eruption covers them forever. The party has been hired to accompany them, as protection.
5	While the other local towns have already been evacuated, one is behind in its preparations. A massive lava stream is heading towards it, and the party must find a way to stop or divert the stream so the townspeople can escape.
6	A soothsayer in the village is convinced that the local volcano is not going to erupt. They demand that the villagers stay at home and wait it out, as a demonstration of their faith. The party must find evidence that an eruption is imminent, before it is too late.
7	A mountaineering expedition has been taken by surprise by the volcano erupting. The party needs to get to them quickly and rescue them, before they are surrounded by lava.
8	The party is in possession of an item with such a foul and powerful curse upon it that only the scorching fires of a volcano can destroy and cleanse it. The party must travel to the volcano in order to throw it into the crater and remove the curse.
9	A weaponsmith has promised to forge their most powerful blade yet, but needs the fires of an active volcano to do so. The party must accompany and protect the smith to receive the item, once forged.
10	A volcano has been extinguished unexpectedly, but a group of gnomes needs it reignited to continue their work. The party must travel to the volcano's core to investigate.

INTRODUCTION

When two colliding tectonic plates are unequal in density, one plate sometimes is pushed under the other, forcing the subducted plate to melt under extreme pressure. The melted rock is called magma and, since it is lighter than the surrounding rock, it slowly rises. The magma collects in chambers and, as the pressure increases, it can erupt from the surface, forming a volcano. In other cases, two continental plates that rub against each other in different directions can cause weaknesses in the planet's crust, allowing volcanoes to form. A giant laser drilling into the core of a planet has a similar effect.

Volcanoes are a dramatic, unpredictable, and deadly location.

FUNDAMENTALS

Several different types of volcanoes exist in the world, and all are interesting in unique ways from a narrative perspective. Three types of volcano are likely to be represented in active regions, where the risk of eruption is high - stratovolcanoes, shield volcanoes and cinder cones. All three leak gasses from the ground, foretelling an imminent eruption. Some ooze lava constantly, but still erupt later.

Stratovolcanoes are layered mountains with an active, volcanic core and a cone-shaped peak. A chamber of magma sits beneath the cone, building pressure; when the pressure exceeds the tolerance of the rock forming the cone, a devastating eruption occurs. Shield volcanoes resemble their namesake, laying flat across the ground. These domes of dense rock trap weaker rock underneath. As magma builds pressure, cracks form in the weaker rock, forming several fissures that lava can erupt from. Cinder cones are smaller siblings of stratovolcanoes, though they themselves can reach quite massive sizes. They are the simplest form of volcanoes, since they are formed by rock layers and are, more-or-less, direct vents that eject lava. In the last two thousand years, Mount Vesuvius, a stratovolcano, has erupted roughly 36 times, most recently over a 30 year period that lasted until the 1940s.

In contrast, dormant volcanoes show no outward signs of imminent eruption. They are fertile mountains with rich soil and unusual rock formations, and pose no current threat of fiery death. This will not, however, likely be the case forever. Some dormant volcanoes remain so for years, others for centuries, until a tectonic shift displaces magma sufficiently to cause it to awaken. When it does awaken, the eruption of a dormant volcano is no less devastating than an active one.

Extinct volcanoes are those that will never be active again. The magma chamber, or the channels that once fed the volcano, have sealed up solid and the reasons for the volcano's existence – subduction or other tectonic activity – no longer affect the immediate area.

THE SHAPE OF A VOLCANO

Generally, the shape is based upon the type, heat and contents of its lava. Particularly viscous lava tends to form shield volcanoes, as its thickness makes it spread more slowly. Less viscous lava builds into cones with angled sides. The lava flows freely and quickly, and cools just as fast, creating the shape. Pressure from underneath pushes the ground upwards, helping to form their unique peaks.

FUNCTIONS

Volcanoes have so many awesome features that they easily lend themselves to compelling and climatic stories. A few of the following warning signs might clue you in to a volcano's imminent eruption.

FISSURES AND VENTS

Volcanic fissures, or fissure vents, form when lava erupts along an elongated crack, rather than a central crater. Elongated fissures can form beautiful - yet dangerous - fiery curtains, spitting lava several feet into the air. These eruptions, however, are rarely substantially powerful or explosive.

EARTHQUAKES

Active volcanoes often shake the surrounding region in the form of an earthquake. If the frequency and intensity of the quaking increases, it can prompt a new eruption, or even start a chain reaction. Earthquakes are generally caused by a build-up of stress on the underlying rock.

TOXIC FUMES

Gasses, typically, carbon dioxide and sulfur dioxide, build up within a volcano's magma chamber. Neither are pleasant at the best of times but, when super-heated, these energetic clouds of gas can boil an unsuspecting victim alive whilst simultaneously suffocating them. Vents can form all over a volcano, and spontaneously belch forth great quantities of gas with little to no warning. At other times, the entire area might become pocketed with thousands of little gas vents, all pumping into the atmosphere and creating zones with little-to-no oxygen.

HOT SPRINGS

Ground and subterranean water can be warmed, or even boiled, by the magma that builds up beneath a volcano, leading to the formation of hot springs. Depending on the springs' location, it might start to dissolve more and more of the mud around it as the water heats up, turning into a boiling mud bath instead.

MIGRATIONS

Animals are well documented for their ability to sense shifts in the climate and ground, as well as the associated impending danger suggested by the shifts. Frequently, an eruption is preceded by a migration of animals off the slopes of the volcano, heading for safety.

THE ERUPTION

When the volcano erupts, all manner of carnage is unleashed upon the earth. The most immediate

event is the explosion. The top of the volcano is ejected, along with several thousand tons of liquid rock and lava, into the air. Typically, this becomes ash as it ascends and cools although, lower down, great globs of lava simply drop to the ground as lava bombs, exploding upon impact and showering liquid rock all around. The ash can reach upwards of 20 miles into the sky, blocking out the sun, or severely reducing the amount of sunlight reaching the Earth for weeks. Furthermore, ash suspended in the sky can precipitate terrible lighting storms.

Once the ash column begins to fall, it can cover vast areas and bury everything several feet deep. Buildings can collapse under the weight of ash. All tracks and trails get obscured, and the landscape takes on a very different appearance. Those unfamiliar with a location may find themselves very easily lost in this dimly lit, surreal landscape.

PYROCLASTIC FLOWS

Lava, rock, ash, and gas avalanches down the sides of an erupting volcano at incredible speeds. Extremely hot, these flows cook anything organic and instantly coat it in a concrete-like substance that, once cooled, is extremely hard.

LAVA FLOWS

Rivers of lava can burn their way across the ground, slowly cooling around the edges and leaving great, black, veins across the landscape. Sometimes, these formations are less than an inch thick but, with lava continuing to flow underneath, these fragile extrusions are deadly to the unwary.

LAHARS

After such a tremendous disruption to the atmosphere, plus the expulsion of gas, an eruption can prompt torrential rain which, when mixed with ash, becomes mud. This mud can form rivers called lahars. These lahars flow very quickly, and can drown anyone unlucky enough to find themselves in their path in ash. The fallout, once the eruption is over, is tremendous, and leaves the landscape forever changed. A river can be diverted for miles, its original course blocked by rock. This can cause flooding in areas that have never before been prone to it, and drought in areas that are used to it being very wet.

The eventual upside of a volcanic eruption is the incredibly fertile soil it creates. Rich in minerals, and not bleached by sun or drained by rain, the soil usually yields excellent crops. As a result, despite the risks, farms - agriculture, in particular - are popular establishments on the flanks of volcanoes.

FINESSE

Volcanoes combine all that is dangerous and wondrous about mountains, and adds in the very real risk of annihilation via lava. What makes a volcano unique however, is its potential to be a gateway into the underworld. The caldera – the heart of a volcano – is a natural elevator shaft into the dark.

The caldera itself is usually a high ridge surrounding the central depression formerly occupied by the magma chamber, but now might, perhaps, house a lake - crystal clear, and seemingly without bottom - or surround a field, full of amazingly lush growth. It may just contain an oval plain of boiling mud and poisonous gas or, occasionally, it will simply be a hole leading down into the bowels of the earth.

HOME TO IMMORTALS

There are many cultures that worship volcanoes as gods, or that believe them to be the home of the gods. Sometimes, they are viewed as the prisons of evil beings, or the lairs of monsters, both of which could be true in your story, and not mutually exclusive. Because of this, volcanoes often have shrines, temples, or more complex structures built around their bases, on their peaks, or even within the caldera itself. Though these structures are not likely to survive an eruption, they might offer an intriguing point of interest for a group of heroes in the days or weeks leading up to one.

AN UNSEEN CALDERA

The Yellowstone Caldera, in Yellowstone National Park, is gigantic – over 43 miles long and 28 miles wide – a huge oval covered in rivers, forests, pools of liquid mud, geysers, and gas pockets. A party of adventurers may not even be aware they are inside a caldera of this kind of scope until a quake starts. Strange formations may give clues: figures covered in rock-hard substances, geothermal pools, or the geysers themselves, starting to spout.

HIDDEN HOLES

Due to the erratic nature of lava cooling during and after an eruption, great hidden holes might litter the surrounding landscape. Inch-thick crusts might support the weight of grasses but not an adult humanoid. These sinkholes can drop individuals into dark pits full of deadly gas or shards of glass. Certain rock, when melted, turns into volcanic glass like obsidian, as sharp as its mundane counterpart but is also remarkably strong. Rocks can become coated in this glass, leaving deadly edges if it shatters and breaks .

CHIMNEYS AND TUNNELS

Fissures or vents can form circular tubes which, sometimes, empty their contents, leaving behind unusual-looking, naturally occurring caves. Some are vertical (called 'chimneys'), while others run at angles throughout the volcano. They may appear to be safe highways to traverse the area, but are frequently full of poisonous gas.

A NOTE ON LAVA

Lava is very, very hot: on average, around 2200 degrees Fahrenheit, or 1250 degrees Celsius. Water boils at 100 degrees Celsius. Like any substance above boiling point, lava will burn you badly if you make contact with it though, should you try to approach, the air above will burn you before you even get close. Although a humanoid can theoretically survive a hand dipped in lava, the coating of rapidly cooling rock would continue to cook whatever muscle and bone remained.

Lava is not dense enough to run over - you would sink very quickly if you tried. Your lungs would suffer the most, however, as each breath would scorch their linings until you suffocated. Lava is not a nice substance.

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

Characters attempting to climb into a volcano in the early stages of eruption will have already struggled with the climb, poison gas vents, and pockets of boiling water and mud. Unfortunately, the point of no return for a volcano has nothing to do with getting there; it is more about getting away when it erupts. When considering this, the size of the volcano is important.

Volcanoes of moderate size have an effective blast radius of around 20 miles. Super volcanoes – such as the aforementioned Yellowstone – have an effective blast radius in excess of 100 miles from the epicenter. The ash fallout and associated after-events that a volcano causes can affect an area ten times the size or greater. Characters caught within the effective blast radius are in immediate danger of death. Nowhere is safe; falling debris, traveling at terminal velocity, can strike without warning. Earthquakes may have opened up chasms,

and gas may already be seeping from the ground.

Thus, the point of no return is when the characters are still in the vicinity of the volcano when it begins erupting. After that moment, there is no going back to what was before.



Playing fetch with lava balls is fun!

DESIGNING EPIC VOLCANOES IN FANTASY SETTINGS

Add any of the following features to your location, or use them for inspiration, to create a volcano that is clearly not of our world.

HIGH FANTASY

Eruptions of fiery hot lava are always devastating, regardless of the setting. In fantasy, coupled with unstable, magical forces, volcanic eruptions can be truly cataclysmic.

AN UNSEEN VOLCANO?

In a fantasy setting, a volcanic threat, and the telltale signs of imminent eruption, might present in a different way. If the volcano itself is hidden, perhaps because of a magical anomaly, or because of an active attempt to conceal it by an antagonistic force, it could be an even more deadly threat. You can decide how likely or unlikely it is to have a completely invisible volcano in your world, and what kind of fantastical force might make it occur. A hidden volcano is almost always preceded by unusual events that no one seems to connect with volcanic activity - until it is too late.

MAGIC CAN BE > SCIENCE

It might not always be science that triggers a cataclysm. Some sort of malignant, dark, sorcerous force might force magma to the surface from much deeper below the earth to induce a volcanic eruption. Geology is irrelevant, and the type of rock

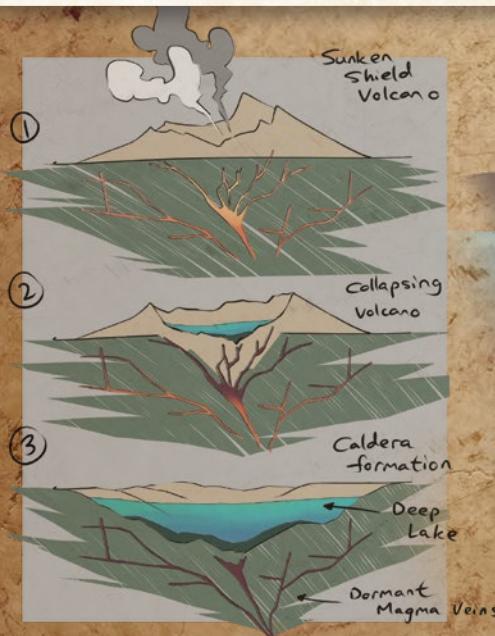
or the location is meaningless, when the forces of magic compel an eruption. The usual forerunners of this kind of eruption are dire warnings, ransom demands, or some other direct threat from the mastermind behind the impending eruption.

WHERE LEGENDS ARE BORN

The awesome power of volcanoes can be a catalyst for world making (or breaking) events, or beings. Something great and terrible might be birthed from an act of extreme, fiery violence, or an ancient, powerful entity might need a volcano to open a doorway to, or between, worlds. Volcanoes can birth, but they can also destroy. Some might burn extra hot for magical reasons, making them prime locations to destroy the most powerful of artifacts.

CONSIDER THE GODS

When the gods are involved - and they do like to get involved - volcanoes can pop at random. Displease a goddess, and she might cause the local mountain range to spew fiery retribution. Sacrifice the wrong animal on a Tuesday, or put together a pitiful spread on a feast day, and there goes the mountain again.



UNDERFELL

Technically, a volcanic eruption underground is just magma breaking its way to the surface and would not normally be considered a volcano. Those who claim this have never seen an Underfell eruption.

WHAT A GAS!

Down in the dark, pockets of superheated gas might erupt at any time. The gas is deadly, but boils you alive before the poison could ever kill you. The only warning is a sharp, cracking sound and a sudden blast of hot air, followed instantly by a cool gust. Depending on how far one is from the epicenter, a second blast of hot air follows before the gas' arrival tolls your doom.

GONE SIDEWAYS

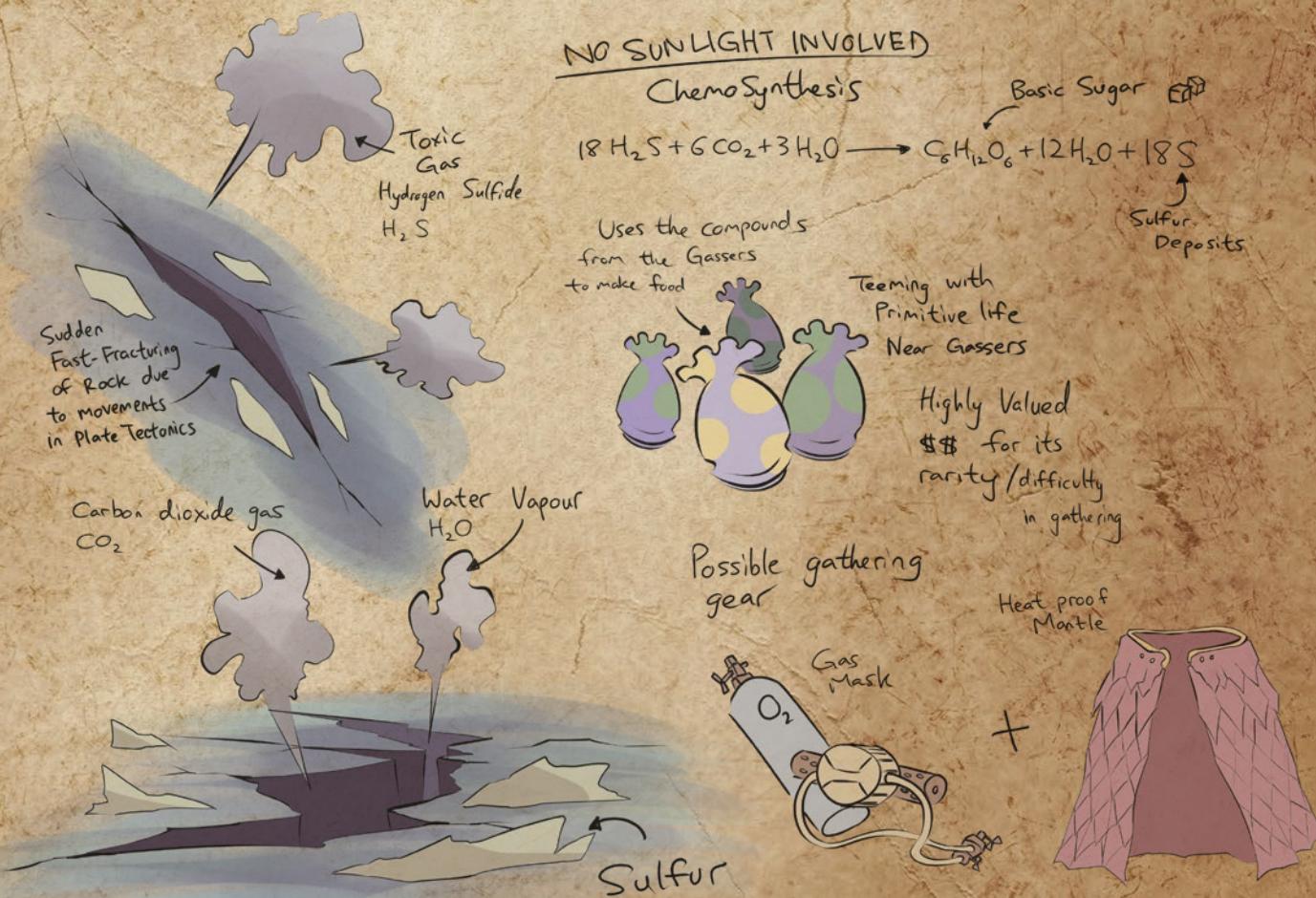
Instead of erupting vertically, sometimes, because of the unusual geographical setup of the Underfell, a cave wall might explode sideways and flood magma into the chamber, and quickly. Some magma can travel at over 50 miles per hour, enough to cover a wide area very quickly. Since the magma is contained, it continues to be liquid for a long time.

HEART OF GLASS

Some chambers are comprised almost entirely out of glassified sand, making the walls reflective and faceted. Magma boils away below or around these chambers, making them incredibly hot and brightly illuminated. Because of the glassification, these chambers are much more heat resistant, and so are a welcome discovery in a sweltering world.

DOUBLE DOUBLE, TOIL AND TROUBLE

One particular large, cauldron-shaped chamber has walls that look like melted, black rock, and the whole space is almost a mile in diameter. The curved bowl of the floor is warm to the touch and trembles from time to time as magma builds beneath; it will soon flood, before becoming a volcano higher up. Unusually, the shape is almost perfectly regular, though no one is entirely sure why. Is this chamber entirely natural, or was it created for some dark function?



FYE DOMAIN

Sometimes, the ground just needs to let off some steam, and cover everything in lava. It is an established thing, and happens everywhere. Like in all things, however, how it happens in the Fey is just a little different.

FIELDS OF GOLD

A source of great wonderment to many, and a prize for many more, some mysterious volcanoes spew out liquid gold, silver, or other precious metals. There might also be molten rock – from the cap mainly – but, for the most part, these volcanoes create rivers of precious metal that flow downhill until they eventually pool and harden. Are they usually forgotten, or are the pools fiercely fought over and then guarded by the victors?

RUNDEL'S INFREQUENT

Rundel was a Fey denizen who loved to live dangerously. Twice, he tried to fly one of his weird flying machines over an active volcano to see if dropping lumps of ice into them would stop an eruption. Twice, his machine was blown sky-high by the thermal vents. However, he finally proved that a cube of

ice from the heart of a glacier could quell a volcano and render it dormant. But for how long?

ILMER'S VERY FREQUENT

Unlike those tampered with by Rundel, Ilmer's volcanoes run like clockwork. The Followers of Ilmer dig massive chimneys around volcanic areas that let off pressure, leading to frequent, weak eruptions which light up the sky, but in a controlled manner. Consider what those in the area think about Ilmer's system, both in the Material and the Fey. Are they pleased with the lack of fiery death, or horrified by the perversion of the natural order?

'WARE THE MINICANO

In the Fey Domain, maybe more than anywhere else, many phenomena defy logic. Here, a volcanic eruption the size of a molehill can have long-term devastating effects. Small cones explode with a shrill pop, and then lava flows from the sides. The lava does not stop but, because the mounds are so small, it begins to pool around them until a searing-hot pond of lava is formed. Adventurers had better watch their step.

THE HELLS

Fire and brimstone are to be expected in this fiendish realm, and volcanoes supply both in spades. But volcanoes in hell burn...

WHEN HELL FREEZES OVER

With massive, frozen eruptions of methane – both liquid and gas – that instantly freeze anything in their path, cryocanons excellently preserve their surrounding landscape environment, but indiscriminately destroy all flora and fauna. They erupt more frequently than their fiery cousins as their outbursts are not caused by tectonic activity, but by the melting of surface ice and build up of sub-surface gasses.

METAL: IT COMES FROM HELL

Spewing out liquid iron instead of magma, the flood that follows a ferocano eruption is horrific. Coating and burning anything it touches, the hard smell of metal is seared into the nose of anyone nearby. The flows tend to harden on the outside but remain liquid and scorching within for much longer than regular magma, to the doom of would-be miners trying to capitalize on free raw material.

BOILT ALIVE

When the inner pressure exceeds the outer resistance of a structure, something has to give. For a volcano, this means eruption. The Hells are the realm of the damned, and the mountains of corpses that pile up over thousands of years slowly create these conditions, getting covered and compressed. 'Boilts' are mountains of these exploding corpses, releasing liquified remains that have become super-heated due to compression.

DRAG CAREEN

A 'drag' is an inverted volcano. The eruption opens a hole into a massive magma chamber below the surface that sucks in air and melts the surface, dragging in anything around it. Large cones appear before promptly breaking down, their sides tumbling down into the chamber below. There is no escape from a volcano of this nature, which is probably a cause for relief; no one needs to find themselves in a place below the Hells.



SHADOW REALM

A mountain that burns is not a common sight in the Shadow Realm. A mountain that smokes is far more common.

STACK ATTACK

A stack spews black smoke into the atmosphere, assisting with keeping the Shadow Realm in a constant state of dark and dank. There is no lava or magma here, but the smoke obscures countless other dangers in the gloom, and the addition of winds can render the whole mountain practically invisible.

HERE COMES THE SMOLDER...

Smolders produce the ash which covers so much of the Shadow Realm. They never erupt, but constantly produce lava which hardens and then flakes into ash. When the wind picks up, it turns the Shadow Realm into a dust-covered carpet of sadness.

IN HOT WATER

First-time visitors to the Shadows must be wary indeed of 'burnt swamps' - which are neither swamps nor burnt - but are, in fact, hidden lava flows. Ash and light debris falls over the lava's path and does not sink into it, accumulating instead above it. Those in the know can easily blow the ash aside but, to the unwary, the detritus looks to be covering solid ground, so the sensation is more like walking in a swamp... but made of lava instead of water.

POP GOES THE BELCHER

Belchers are sometimes called 'lazy volcanoes'. Instead of spectacular eruptions or huge explosions, belchers vomit out thick clumps of lava, ash, and pumice stone into the air. Usually, this is in the form of a single large pop, which then produces nothing for weeks or months. The danger comes from never knowing when the next clump will be belched.



CHAPTER 4: DESIGNING YOUR OWN EPIC LOCATIONS

The Creator's Guide to Epic Locations focuses on the three principles of Fundamentals, Functions, and Finesse when designing locations but, as well as geological information, it is important to expand your thought process into the space of entertain-

ment. Without a sense of drama, you could simply download maps from our own planet every time you need a valley, or a mountain – the basic geology is there. As creators, however, we hold the power to transform the basic into the beautiful.

LOCATION CONCEPT GRID (LCG)

The location concept grid (LCG) is a tool developed to help you collect all the important and necessary components into a working space. It acts as a quick-reference guide when initially defining your narrative and location.

The LCG makes use of a narrative structure which is not meant to be a restrictive or prescriptive

journey that the heroes must follow, but rather a guide for you as the creator to be inspired by as you create the location.

What follows is a three step breakdown of the LCG and how you can use it most effectively. You can download the guide in printable format from www.greatgammaster.com.

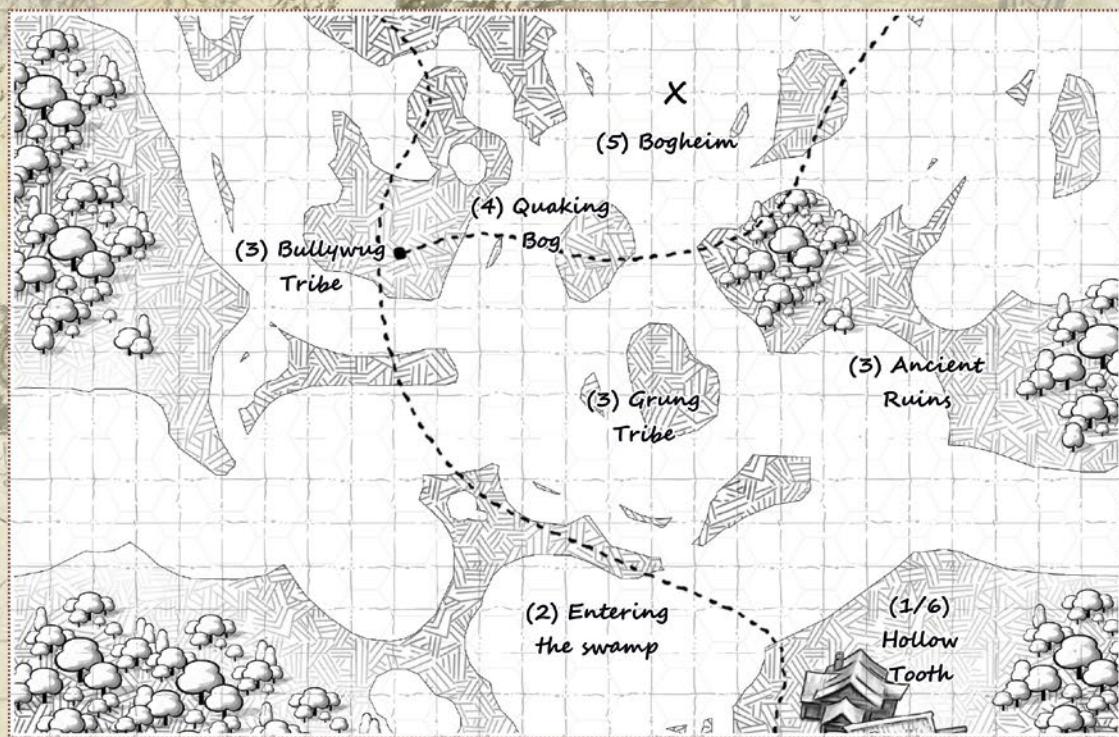
- BY USING BOTH THE ART OF DRAMATIC STORYTELLING,
AND AN UNDERSTANDING OF AESTHETIC DESIGN PRINCIPLES,
OUR MAPS CAN BE ELEVATED TO TRULY EPIC STATUS. -

Location Concept Grid | Outlines

Title	The Whisper Swamp		
Logline	<p>Legend says that the mire is ruled by a mystical queen, the Lady of the Mire. She rules the mire from her palace hidden somewhere deep in dark waters. Everyone entering her domain is well advised to honor her dominion.</p>		
The Villain	<p>The Lady of the Mire O - Protector of her domain and ruler G - Expand her kingdom, find lost love A - Deceptive, luring, seductive S - Bound to lure lovers in, needs to find true love or never get free</p>		
Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Save the lost fiancé, who got lost in the mire while searching for flowers. Find an entrance to the lost kingdom 'Bogheim' in the center of the swamp, where the quaking bog opens to the realm beneath. Find a way to appease / deceive the Lady, or fight her (she will always come back). Learn about the ghost army and the bonds keeping them in the swamp. 		
Climax	<p>Face the Lady of the Mire Free Claire's fiancé and the ghost army</p>		
Tone	Descriptive Words	Location Functions	
Tragic Love Triangle: Bride - Fiancé - Lady of the Mire Spooky, creepy, tragic story of lost love, rejection and revenge	rank black mud, taste decay, cluster of crude huts, humidity and sweat, endless despair, hollow depths, dark waters, eerie lights	peat mining, fishing, hunting, rich feeding grounds for livestock, one trade route and secret paths through the swamp	
Areas	Description	Resources	
#1 Set-up <small>Entrance & Guardian</small>	'Hollow Tooth' small peat mining town. The desperate bride asks for help. PCs learn of dangers in the swamp.	Explore Map	
#2 Challenge <small>Puzzle and/or Roleplay Challenge</small>	Traverse the dangerous bogs, encounter wild creatures and hostile monsters. Find path through the swamp.	Battle Map	
#3 Exploration <small>Exposition & Point of No Return</small>	Discover sunken ruins, old altar and be confronted with the rivalling tribes of Bullywugs and Grungs.	Theater of the Mind	
#4 Setback <small>Major Setback & Complications</small>	Find the heart of the swamp in the quaking bog area and be denied of access to Bogheim by the ghost army.	Battle Map	
#5 Climax <small>Last Push & Final Conflict</small>	Encounter the Lady and her army, fight or parlay and save the fiancé. Learn about her despair and her curse.	Lair Map	
#6 Aftermath <small>Resolution & New Goals</small>	Bring fiancé back. Decision: Help the Lady, or move on.	Theater of the Mind	

Location Concept Grid | Pacing & Tension

LOCATION MAP



PROGRESSION



CREATE TENSION

Set-Up	Challenge	Exploration	Setback	Climax	Aftermath
(1) Hollow Tooth Quest by Claire the bride	(2) Entering the swamp Travel in swamp is dangerous Guide could help	(3) Ruins, tribes and secret passages Encounter monsters, find ruins, meet tribes	(4) Quaking bog and ghost army Ghost army denies access Fiancé is charmed	(5) Into the Lair in Bogheim Lady of the Mire Swamp Lair - lair actions!	(6) Back to Hollow Tooth

Point of No Return

Complications & Consequences

- Guide runs off and leaves party stranded
- Navigation checks when trying to find way back
- Weather changes

SECTION 1: BUILDING THE STAGE

An understanding of how locations and stories are tied together helps us to design concepts, decide what types of maps we might need, and craft each map as both a small part of a consistent, fantastical

world, and an individual masterpiece. To make the most of this process, it helps to understand how stories are (usually) built.

Location Concept Grid | Outlines

Title	The Whisper Swamp	
Logline	Legend says that the mire is ruled by a mystical queen, the Lady of the Mire. She rules the mire from her palace hidden somewhere deep in dark waters. Everyone entering her domain is well advised to honor her dominion.	
The Villain	The Lady of the Mire G - Protector of her domain, and ruler G - Expand her kingdom, find lost love A - Deceptive,uring, seductive S - Bound to true lovers in, needs to find true love or never get free	
Climax	Face the Lady of the Mire Free Claire's fiancé and the ghost army	
Tone	Tragic - Love Triangle: Bride - Fiancé - Lady of the Mire Spooky, creepy, tragic story of lost love, rejection, and revenge	
Descriptive Words	rank black mud, taste decay, cluster of crude huts, humidity and sweat, endless despair, hollow depths, dark waters, eerie lights	
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Areas	Description	Resources
#1 Set-Up	Hollow Tooth small peat mining town. The desperate bride asks for help. PCs learn of danger in the swamp.	Explore Map
#2 Challenge	Traverse the dangerous bogs, encounter wild creatures and hostile monsters. Find path through the swamp.	Battle Map
#3 Exploration	Discover sunken ruins, old alien and be confronted with the rivaling tribes of Bulwings and Grangs.	Theater of the Mind
#4 Setback	Find the heart of the swamp in the quaking bog area and be denied of access to Bogheim by the ghost army.	Battle Map
#5 Climax	Encounter the Lady and her army, fight or play and save the fiancé. Learn about her despair and her curse.	Lair Map
#6 Aftermath	Bring fiancé back. Decision: Help the Lady, or move on.	Theater of the Mind

Location Concept Grid | Pacing & Tension

1 Building the stage
Fill in title and logline at the end

- Start with the villain
- Decide on location & place the climax
- Identify goals & tone
- Note descriptive words & location functions
- Create title & logline

CREATE TENSION

Set-Up	Challenge	Exploration	Setback	Climax	Aftermath
(1) Hollow Tooth Quest by Claire the bride	(2) Entering the swamp Travel in swamp is dangerous Guide could help	(3) Ruins, tribes and secret passages Encounter monsters, find ruins, meet tribes	(4) Quaking bog and ghost army Ghost army denies access Fiancé is charmed	(5) Into the Lair in Bogheim Lady of the Mire Swamp Lair - Lair actions!	(6) Back to Hollow Tooth
Point of No Return Complications & Consequences					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Guide runs off and leaves party stranded. Navigational checks when trying to find way back. Weather changes. 					

SECTION 1

This section of the LCG focuses on the villain or antagonistic force in the location, what the narrative present in the location could be, and how it can help inspire and guide you.

START WITH THE VILLAIN

Starting with the villain, or the antagonistic force, helps with avoiding cliches. It is easy to fall into the trap of using the same locations (or location types) over and over, but handing this decision to the villain can spark new ideas for cool locations.

One might argue that the region or world map dictates what locations are within it, and that the villain therefore can only make use of what is present. This is definitely one way of looking at

things, however, consider that the villain is living and working in the world whether or not the heroes are or not. They will still be making use of the location according to their own needs, and so looking through their eyes, or their perspective, might recolor how the world is utilized. Perhaps your villain has built a magical laboratory and is pumping magical waste products into the lake?

OGAS

'OGAS' is a shorthand acronym that acts as an easy reference and reminder about the nature of the villain and, indeed, any NPC it is applied to. OGAS stands for Occupation, Goal, Attitude, and Stake. The 'occupation' of the villain guides how they work, or what tools they have at their disposal. Their 'goal' defines what their objectives are and, should the heroes thwart their initial attempt to achieve those goals, what might inspire them to reattempt in an effort

to succeed. Their 'attitude' determines how they go about achieving those goals. Is it with contempt? Perhaps with loathing or with glee? The 'stake' determines how fixated they are on their occupation, goal and attitude. A low stake means they are likely to abandon their plan or change their attitude quickly, without much pressure to do so. A high stake means they are more likely to fight to the death to achieve their desired outcomes.

VILLAIN VERSUS ANTAGONISTIC FORCE

It is important to determine whether your location has a villain or antagonistic force; perhaps it has both, either working separately or apart. Is there a difference between the two? No, not dramatically.

Both have a plan of action, attempt to follow those plans, and should react and adjust in response to the heroes' actions. A villain does so consciously, while an antagonistic force does not.

A tsunami does not have intention. It has stages, of course: sucking water away from the shore, the wave, the impact, flooding, the debris, and then

the slow recession back. However, you are responsible, as the creator, for directing how the tsunami follows those stages; if the heroes are on a boat for the initial stage, for example, it might appear as if the tsunami is trying to drag them out to sea, even though it is simply completing its natural first stage. It might seem to be following the heroes as they flee from it but, in reality, it is merely moving onto the next stage in its process.

You must consciously choose how the antagonistic force reacts or behaves, and when.

GIVING THE VILLAIN PERSONALITY

There are three broad types of villains, or antagonistic forces: never present, mentor, and blunt force trauma.

Never present villains hide and manipulate from the fringes or shadows. The heroes may never encounter them, dealing with or getting into combat only with their minions and henchpeople. Professor Moriarty, from the Sherlock Holmes novels, is always implied to be implicated, but never directly involved. A never present antagonistic force could be something like drought, famine, or climatic changes. These have significant influence but cannot be challenged directly.

Mentors are there to help and guide the characters on their journey, but with an outcome that is actually favorable to the mentor, not the characters. Senator Palpatine from the Star Wars films is initially a mentor to Anakin Skywalker, yet secretly manipulates him to serve his own ends. Volcanic eruptions, floods, and other large-scale natural disasters that have a forewarning are mentor-like antagonistic forces. They warn, they guide, and then they release their energy.

Blunt force trauma villains are all about direct, open conflict. They are not subtle or silent but are very present and very real. Shredder, from the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles series, is constantly battling the team in open, direct combat. In antagonistic force situations, these are flash floods, tsunamis, asteroids, squalls – things that are unpredictable and that happen suddenly.

Once you have chosen a villain type, you can refine and demarcate it further, if you choose to,

into one of four groups: racers, chasers, heavy hitters, or shadows.

Racers attempt to get places and to the objective before the heroes. They choose favorable terrain for themselves and try to sabotage the characters' pursuit from in front. A racing villain might conjure a flood or unblock a dam to block off the exit to a valley, for example, or an antagonistic force might be the unblocked dam itself.

Chasers are at the heels of the heroes, nipping and biting. They wear the heroes down over time. Lava flows and melting ice that turns into a torrent of rushing water are both wonderful antagonistic forces that do this.

Heavy hitters, as the name implies, prefer to deal directly with heroes. They want to disadvantage the heroes whilst at the same time advantage themselves, choosing to ambush a party from a hill with high ground, for example. Geysers that erupt randomly and without warning, or avalanches that have hair-triggers, are great heavy hitters.

Shadows strike and withdraw, and then strike and withdraw. There is an element of cunning and also of self-preservation in these tactics. Changing environments, swamps that flood then recede, and plains with dangerous hail storms all do the work of a shadow.

Once the villain has some definition, it should become increasingly clear how their attitude, goals, and approach to the location will influence and change it. It is then time to apply narrative rules.

- DON'T BE AFRAID TO EXPLORE DIFFERENT OPTIONS WHEN IT COMES TO YOUR VILLAIN. THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A WRONG OPTION. ALL CONTRIBUTE TO YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHARACTER. -

PLACING THE CLIMAX

If the villain itself does not naturally present a location for a climactic final showdown (their home or secret base, an event they have orchestrated, or just the eye of a storm), think about what cool, cinematic areas in your location that you could use. Whichever way the finale location is decided, ask yourself how your maps can enhance this showdown.

Knowing where the climax is going to take place helps answer more questions. If the confrontation is likely to result in a battle, how much space will be needed, are there places that allow for cover, or will there be terrain that should be overcome?

The climax for a volcanic eruption might be something like a high cliff that the heroes need to leap from, into the ocean below to escape the deadly lava flow. They have been guided there (as the volcano is a mentor type antagonistic force), so how can that cliff jump be made more challenging, a harder choice, or a more frightening prospect? Perhaps a lava waterfall cascades down into the ocean, filling it with steam, hiding the outcome from the heroes. Maybe there are razor-sharp rocks?

The options are limitless, but additional hurdles and details instantly make a location that much more interesting.

IDENTIFY THE GOALS

Goals help to understand when and how the story can be resolved. But what is a goal in terms of the LCG? This is your goal – as the creator. You might have simple goals, such as making your encounter feel as real as possible, or capturing a feeling of dread and terror. Various tools and resources can help us achieve these goals, and each location should embody a different set of goals that you define for yourself.

A popular goal is wanting to make an audience laugh, for good reason. If this is the case, you must add potentially comedic elements to your location and to your map to achieve that. Perhaps in a plains location, there is a single tree and the characters ride into it. It's funny to hit the only tree in six hundred miles! This is, however, just one gag. You need several options, or even customizable elements, if you really want to achieve your goal. Players are so very good at actively avoiding set-pieces planned in!

The goals of your villain should also guide you. If the villain wants to strip-mine the entire region, you need to have a mine in place, or visible geological resources to support this. Think about the type of villain you have chosen and how they would make the most of, or alter, the location to suit their needs.

FINDING THE RIGHT TONE

Every situation should have a distinct tone. It could be grim and dark, tragic and twisted, or comedic and fun. Knowing about – and planning for – what feeling or mood the story should have helps to implement atmosphere and color, especially to enhance map design.

TONE	ATMOSPHERE
Tense	an atmosphere of unease and uncertainty, often used in horror or survival situations
Epic	a grandiose atmosphere in a huge location, often used in fantasy or adventure stories
Lighthearted	a relaxed and easygoing atmosphere, often used in comedy or slice-of-life scenarios
Intense	a high-stakes and action-packed atmosphere, often used in action or thriller environments
Thought-provoking	a reflective and contemplative atmosphere, often used in philosophical or moral dilemma situations
Melancholic	a sad or contemplative atmosphere, often used in tragedies or stories that deal with loss
Dark	a gloomy, sinister, or terrifying atmosphere, often used in horror or thriller scenarios

The tone can – and should – vary to some degree throughout your entire narrative and, ideally, no two locations should be experienced back-to-back with the same tone.

DESCRIPTIVE WORDS

This box allows you to throw down all the descriptive words you think are appropriate to your villain, your location, the mood you have chosen, and your goals. For best results, put down as many words as you can think of. Each word should inspire or guide you in the journey.

LOCATION FUNCTIONS

What does this location do? Is it a wilderness? Is it at a crossroads and contains a small village that survives off selling peat mined from a nearby bog? Jotting down a few notes on how the location works, and is worked, can be a helpful reminder in the future.

SECTION 2:

BRINGING THE STORY INTO THE LOCATION

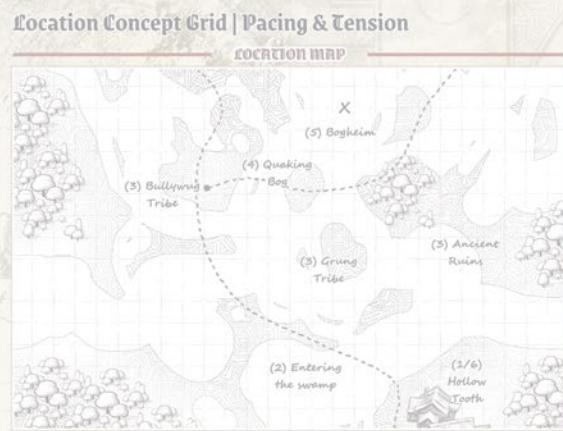
Now that the villain, the mood, and the goals have been established, it is time to move on to story structure. Every good story uses methods to create tension, excitement, and moments of relief to give the audience enough room to experience the story and not become overwhelmed by it.

Michael Hauge, in his book 'Storytelling Made Easy', posits a six-stage structure for telling a story.

Johnn Four, author of '5 Room Dungeons', suggests visualizing a five-room dungeon from which the heroes might find a journey. Joseph Campbell, in 'The Hero's Journey', created the structure of the same name. All of these are great means of achieving the same thing: a cohesive narrative structure.

The Creator's Guide to Epic Locations has combined them into a six-area structure.

Location Concept Grid Outlines			
Title	The Whisper Swamp		
Logline	Legend says that the mire is ruled by a mystical queen, the Lady of the Mire. She rules the mire from her palace hidden somewhere deep in dark waters. Everyone entering her domain is well advised to honor her dominion.		
The Villain	<p>The Lady of the Mire O - Protector of her domain, and ruler G - Expand her kingdom, fuel lost love A - Despotic, boring, reclusive S - Bound to love others on; needs to find true love or never get free</p> <p>Chimax</p> <p>Face the Lady of the Mire. Free Client's fiancé and the ghost army</p>		
Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Save the lost fiancé, who got lost in the mire while searching for flowers. Find an entrance to the lost kingdom 'Bogheim' in the center of the swamp, where the quaking bog opens to the realm beneath. Find a way to appease / deceive the Lady, or fight her (she will always come back). Learn about the ghost army and the bonds keeping them in the swamp. 		
Tone	Tragic Love Triangle: Bride - Fiancé - Lady of the Mire Spectre, cryptic, tragic story of lost love, rejection, and revenge		
Descriptive Words	rank, black mud, taste decay, cluster of crude huts, humidity and mold, endless despair, hollow depths, dark waters, eerie lights		
Location Functions	peat mining, fishing, hunting, rich feeding grounds for livestock, one trade route and secret paths through the swamp		
Areas	Description	Resources	
#1 Set-Up Entrance & Guardian	Hollow Tooth's small peat mining town. The desperate bride asks for help. PCs learn of dangers in the swamp.	Explore Map	
#2 Challenge Puzzle and/or Roleplay Challenge	Transverse the dangerous bogs, encounter wild creatures and hostile monsters. Find path through the swamp.	Battle Map	
#3 Exploration Exposition & Point of No Return	Discover sunken ruins, old elder and be confronted with the rivaling tribes of Bullywugs and Grungs.	Theater of the Mind	
#4 Setback Major Setback & Complications	Find the heart of the swamp in the quaking bog area and be denied of access to Bogheim by the ghost army.	Battle Map	
#5 Climax Climax & Final Conflict	Encounter the Lady and her army, fight or parley and save the fiancé. Learn about her despair and her curse.	Lair Map	
#6 Aftermath Resolution & New Goals	Bring fiancé back. Decision: Help the Lady, or move on.	Theater of the Mind	



Bringing the story into the location

- Identify areas & events
- Write short descriptions
- Decide on resources for each scene

Point of No Return	ruins, meet tribes, convinced.
Complications & Consequences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Guide runs off and leaves party stranded. Navigation checks when trying to find way back. Weather changes.

SECTION 2

This section helps you plot the potential narrative journey of the location, a step which is of great value in terms of helping you understand what the location needs, and what can be added to it to enhance its dramatic capabilities.

SIX AREA STRUCTURE

Area #1 Set-Up	Area #2 Challenge	Area #3 Exploration	Area #4 Setback	Area #5 Climax	Area #6 Aftermath
Setting up the location	Can't solve with steel	Learn to own the place	Build tension	Final conflict	Keep the story going

Area #1 – Set-Up: Setting up the location

This may be a map or just a description, depending on how you want the heroes to encounter the location. This sets the mood of the location and hints at what might happen within it.

A grim village squats at the edge of a dark forest. Lichen and moss shroud each dead tree; they look like specters holding their boney fingers to the sky in grief.

A description of this kind may be all that is needed, with perhaps the addition of a few surly village inhabitants, to set the scene. You may want a map of the village, or perhaps of the outlying forest if you have planned combat or something that requires positional knowledge.

Area #2 - Challenge: Can't solve with steel

After Area #1 has set the mood, Area #2 should present the heroes with something difficult to get past as an initial test. Perhaps they need to cross a massive chasm, or find some way across a river without swimming.

Area #3 - Exploration: Learn to own the place

The heroes should now have a good idea of what the location is, but how to cope or deal with it should still be a mystery. The more the heroes engage with the region, the more they should adapt and learn, so that they feel like they are making progress.

Traditionally, at the end of Area #3, the heroes reach The Point of No Return. From here, the 'exit' is closer than the entrance, so they have no choice but to continue forward. This might be because of a dramatic change to the location, or simply a resource issue as the heroes are running out of supplies. You need to provide them with clear guidance (and assurance) that going forward is a better option than trying to go back.

Area #4 - Setback: Build tension

Just as the heroes have learned to deal with the location and are feeling comfortable, a situation that presents an alternative challenge should begin to develop. The river might suddenly turn into rapids, or the mountain inexplicably becomes a plateau. New information needs to be learned or discovered in order to overcome this obstacle.

Area #5 - Climax: Final conflict

The heroes face and defeat the villain (whether or not for good is up to you), or accomplish the end goal of the location. This area should contain the majority of the 'meat' and drama of the location. After this great quest has been completed, the location should be relatively easy to orientate through.

Area #6 – Aftermath

Rewards, Revelations, Twists: Area #6 should drip feed players or readers little pieces of intrigue that keep the story going, or excite them for the next installment. They should know that this is not the end but is, in fact, just part of a bigger narrative – unless this is the end, in which case no further options should present themselves and loose ends should be largely tied up. Reward the heroes and leave as quickly as possible, either to set up the next location or end the story.

Using the Six Areas

Structuring your story in this way using the six areas does not mean that you need six maps. Each area might indeed have a map, or two maps, or no map at all. Think how you can best utilize the location to help you create a dramatic narrative. If there is no drama or intrigue when the characters move between areas – what is the point of having areas at all? If you cannot think of anything that would prompt a dramatic moment, it is perhaps an indication that the location, the villain, or the goals you have chosen for this location do not warrant a story or arc of their own, and should instead be only briefly mentioned en route to a different location that is more exciting or engaging. It is unwise to spend much time or effort on a boring space where nothing much happens. In the LCG, fill in ideas for each area. You can define the scene – does it need to be a map, several maps, or perhaps just a description?

If you cannot identify an idea for a particular area, skip to the next, work on it for a while, and then return to any you have missed. If you find it hard to fill them all in (Areas 2,3, and 4 are often particularly difficult), relax. Ask yourself what your villain would do, perhaps with or without the heroes' involvement, and then consider how the heroes might find out about it.

SECTION 3:

DEFINING PACING AND TENSION

Every area, scene or map created should have one core principle baked into its DNA: It needs to contribute to a fun encounter for the heroes. ‘Fun’ is defined, in this context, by the amount of decisions that need to be made in a given space of time. More decisions in less time puts more pressure on each correct choice, and the rewards are greater if

good ones are made. Fewer decision points in longer intervals of time has the potential to make play boring, as nothing is being presented to engage or invest in. Learning to strike a balance between rapid-fire decision making and moments of downtime is critical to making locations epic. It all comes down to pacing and tension.

Location Concept Grid | Outlines

Title: The Whisper Swamp

Defining pacing and tension

- A) Sketch the location and where important areas/scenes are located
- B) Plan progression types
- C) Define moments of tension

Areas		Description	Resources
#1 Set-Up	Entombed & Quarantine	Hollow Tooth's small peat mining town. The desperate bride asks for help. PCs learn of dangers in the swamp.	Explore Map
#2 Challenge	Petterson Riddle Challenge	Treasure the dangerous bogs, encounter wild creatures and hostile monsters. Find path through the swamp.	Battle Map
#3 Exploration	Exposition & Point of the Return	Discover sunken ruins, old altar and be confronted with the rivaling tribes of Bullwings and Grungs.	Theater of the Mind
#4 Setback	Maple Berth & Complications	Find the heart of the swamp in the quaking bog area and be denied of access to Bogheim by the ghost army.	Battle Map
#5 Climax	Fate Paths & Final Conflict	Encounter the Lady and her army, fight or poetry and save the fiancé. Learn about her despair and her curse.	Lore Map
#6 Aftermath	Reunions & New Goals	Bring fiancé back. Decision: Help the Lady, or move on...	Theater of the Mind

③

Location Concept Grid | Pacing & Tension

LOCATION MAP

PROGRESSION

```

graph LR
    1((1)) -- "go in swamp" --> 2((2))
    2 -- "explore & make choice" --> 3_1((3))
    2 -- "explore & make choice" --> 3_2((3))
    3_1 -- "help Bullwings" --> 4_1((4))
    3_2 -- "help Grung" --> 4_2((4))
    4_1 -- "get aid" --> 5((5))
    4_2 -- "get aid" --> 5
    5 -- "face Lady" --> 6((6))
    6 -- "return to town" --> end(( ))
    3_1 -- "help none" --> 3_2
  
```

CREATE TENSION

Set-Up	Challenge	Exploration	Setback	Climax	Aftermath
(1) Hollow Tooth Quest by Clever the bride	(2) Entering the swamp Travel in swamp is dangerous Guide could help	(3) Ruins, tribes and secret passages Encounter monsters, find ruins, meet tribes	(4) Quaking bog and ghost army Ghost army denies access Fiancé is charmed	(5) In the Lair in Bogheim Lady of the Mire Swamp Lair - Lair actions!	(6) Back to Hollow Tooth

Point of No Return

Complications & Consequences

- Guide runs off and leaves party stranded.
- Navigation checks when trying to find way back.
- Weather changes

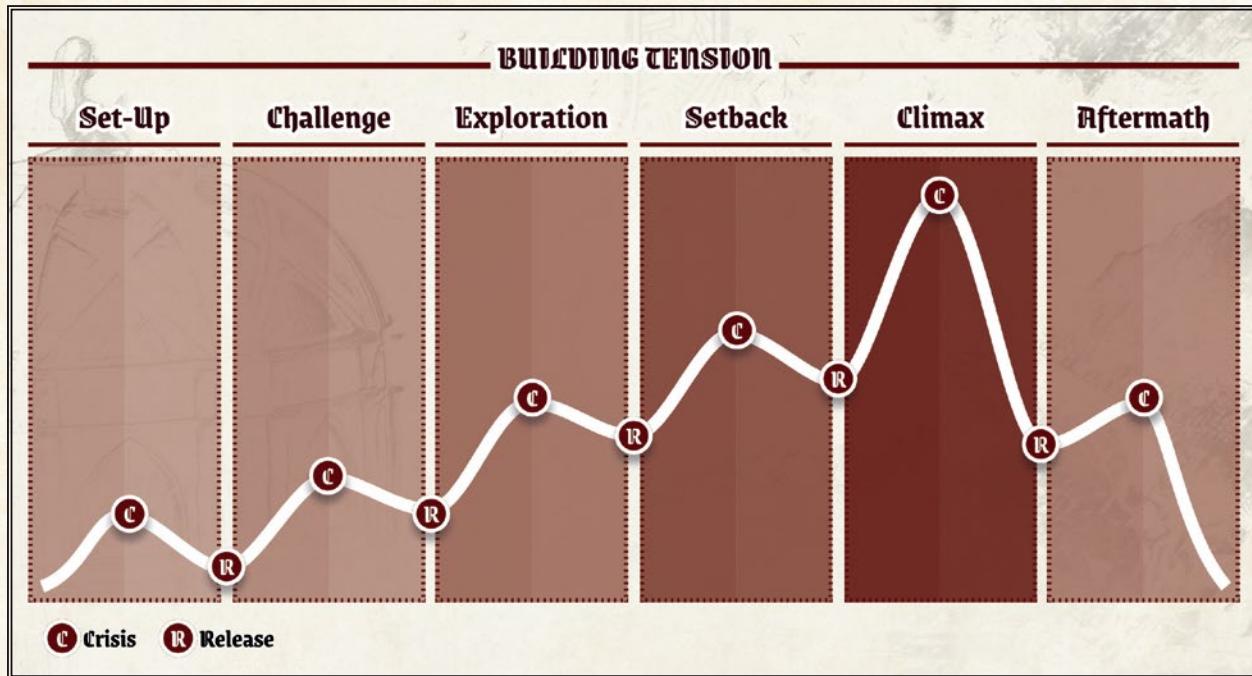
SECTION 3

This section is a visual guide to help you represent your journey, your location, and some basic reminders of maps you might want to prepare

BUILDING TENSION

As a general rule of thumb for tension and pacing, every time the characters shift into a new area of the story, the tension should start to build until the area is overcome, and then release to give the heroes time to reflect, gather their thoughts, and

prepare for the next area. This proceeding area should build even more tension and release a little less, creating constantly increasing tension with small releases to punctuate it. This ebb and flow is called crisis and release.



CRISIS

Moments or sections of crisis are often the set-pieces of narrative in an area. A rope bridge spanning the gorge leading into the mountains, for example, is a great set-up area; the heroes likely know that it leads to the location, and there is a small amount of tension in the crossing of it.

Not every crisis needs to have a map. Some are straight forward, and a verbal description will do. More complex crises require more information, and maps are great at providing those. As a rule of thumb, a crisis is an important moment in the location, and so should be resourced and planned accordingly.

RELEASE

Moments or sections of release are moments when the heroes are not in imminent danger of death or catastrophe. These are times to gather their thoughts, and maybe light a campfire and take stock of their situation. Since these moments should not be denied, according to narrative theory, they should be protected. Mapping these

locations can seem unnecessary but, sometimes, a map of a campsite or other transitional area can be useful for inspiration, understanding geography, or to establish the next area. It can help a simple piece of narration - "From here, safe in your camp, you can see the next part of the mountain. It seems sheer and something is moving about on its rock-face." - be more clearly visualized.

PACING

Given that, in general, using maps increases the number of decisions that players are faced with, providing them slows down the pacing of an area. Though the absence of a map may make it feel like options are unlimited (which they, technically, are), having them presented visually provides information to reflect upon, or even a level of meta-gaming - why would that pathway be part of the map if it wasn't important? Why would the game master have added this cave to the map if there was not something exciting to be found there? Descriptions limit the number of decisions and options and, as a result, increase pacing.

This might seem counterintuitive, since maps seem most appropriate at crisis points and yet a map usually slows down the action, which, at the crisis point, is the opposite of what you might want. Having the forethought to plan this in advance, however, is a great power; you can elect when and when not to use maps, and how those maps should be presented to appropriately control your pacing.

The LCG exists for this purpose. You can, at a glance, see where you have rising tension, and where you need to increase the pace or slow it

down. It also means that if, as so often happens with heroes, the plan changes and you have had a moment of great pacing and high tension in an unexpected place or time frame, you can elect not to use a map you made, so as not to run the risk of slowing the pacing down. You might choose to use the map anyway, but add a new element into it to force the heroes to move quickly, and therefore drive the tension way up, and put pressure on the decision-making process.

The final section of the LCG is a space to outline the general location, and plot it out using the six areas that you have - hopefully! - now identified. This allows you to look at the flow of the location, to refer to your goals and the villain's approach, and to adjust the location and the areas as needed.

To summarize: if the scene is straightforward, with no tactical complexity involved, and you wish to keep control of the pacing, it is usually advisable to use descriptions and phrases.

A map can alleviate a storyteller – and their players or readers – from long, descriptive monologues, bring structure to a location, and help participants to make better decisions; if you think your location would benefit from one, create one!

THEATER OF THE MIND

Theatre of the mind is a popular game style as it can be a faster way of playing out a thrilling, fast-paced combat if a game master is a creative narrator and good at describing creatures and surroundings. Battles can be made to feel exciting and epic while only taking a few minutes to resolve. Some game masters prefer to play in this style only with more experienced players, however, as, despite its

many positive qualities, there is the potential for the opposite: a game that is significantly slowed down due to having to reiterate and explain more than if a battlemmap was used.

When it comes to tension, quick reactions are key. The best way to build tension in a theater of the mind encounter is to modulate speed and pauses while combat is narrated.

"I PERSONALLY USE A COMBINATION OF MAPS AND THEATER OF THE MIND. I LIKE TO EXPLORE SOME SPACES WITH MY HEROES, AND OTHERS, I LIKE TO CHALLENGE THEM WITH PREMADE OBSTACLES."

- GUY SCLANDERS

BATTLEMAPS

Encounters with battlemaps always take more time than theater of the mind because maps have to be set up, tokens and minis placed, and players need time to study the combat situation to plan their next move. While the setup is more substantial, and the length of a turn is likely to increase as players tactically consider their options, many

players and game masters like to use maps and minis as it helps them easily visualize combat positions, sight lines, and options, allowing for complex combat without much risk of confusion at the table.

To easily create tension when using battle maps, several tricks can be utilized:

TENSION-BUILDING TRICK	DESCRIPTION
The Build Up	Do not reveal a battlemmap without building it up first. Describe what the party can see, hear, and smell, and narrate the encounter they are facing so they start to form an expectation in their head. Let it sit for a second and then start the combat encounter. While players are rolling dice, you can bring up the map.
All Their Fears	Play with your characters' fears. Place ominous and mysterious things on the map that might jump to life or activate at any minute. A spider lair should contain egg sacs, a crypt should have sarcophagi, and a forest should have small burrow holes. This keeps a party on edge; they are always expecting something to spring out and bite or mess with them. This might be the case, or the mapped objects might be just decoys, but it keeps them on their toes..
By Design	Let your map design work for you. Use shadows, ambient lighting, and colors. The way a map is designed adds to the tension by underlining the mood of the situation. You can even transition between different map states - be it in terms of weather conditions, changes to the surrounding area, or the outcome of smaller sub-battles happening around them - as combat evolves, showing your heroes how the space changes as battle progresses.

PROGRESSION MAPS

Progression maps are huge, sprawling and continuous maps, created to be moved through and explored like a level of a computer game. Mega-dungeons are often presented as progression maps, as the goal is to have a party crawl through the dungeon step by step, corridor by corridor, or room by room, investigating every

item placed on it, and moving extremely carefully (at least at the beginning!).

Because players need to reposition their tokens all the time, moving about a progression map takes considerably more time than any other map. So how can you build or maintain tension using a progression map?

These tension-building tricks are useful for progression maps specifically:

TENSION-BUILDING TRICK	DESCRIPTION
Map Foreshadowing	The only thing that creates more tension than being told there is a blood smear on the floor is discovering the blood smear for yourself. Moments of foreshadowing such as this can be very effective; perhaps, around the next corner, the remains of a shredded corpse become visible on the map.
Shadows & Darkness	Shadows become even more powerful on progression maps, because players are always considering, in the back of their mind, why their game master put them there. If the players then have to move their tokens into the shadow to progress, they start to wonder what it is they are not seeing.
Sensory Overload	While players at the table have to divide their attention between the map, their tokens, and other visual information they are processing, the game master is freed up to build tension by adding smells, sounds, and other sensory information as they progress, either in description form, or physically at the table, for added immersion.
Traps	Traps are a great way to build tension; if they are introduced early on the map, players start to question every floor tile and piece of furniture for the foreseeable (even if there are no more surprises). If they are introduced later, particularly after a longer period of relative safety, their attention might have waned and you can surprise them. The important thing is to design floors and walls in a suspicious manner, so that traps are expected (and feared) everywhere.

LOGLINES AND TITLES

It is at this point that you can return to the first two entries on the LCG. A title is always useful for keeping an easy-reference catalog of locations you have created. Just because you have made the location and planned out the areas, it does not mean the heroes will get there; they can go where they please. As mentioned previously, you can save the location for another adventure. A memorable title helps keep track of each location, so you can draw upon it in the future.

Loglines distill the important elements of a location—setups, conflicts, antagonists—into a clear, concise teaser. The goal is to write a logline for each location that is so enticing, it hooks the reader into asking for more details. By creating loglines for locations, you can focus on the essential requirements of the goals and not forget anything important. Test your loglines on your friends to check whether they are exciting enough to attract a group of characters.



ADVANCED AREA PROGRESSION TYPES

Designing maps for locations is closely akin to level design for video games. Depending on the narrative, different map progression types can be utilized.

LINEAR PROGRESSION

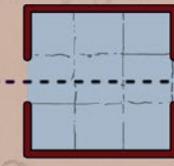
Linear progression is by far the most common layout for maps and, once you have internalized the difference between narrative progression (the six areas you defined in the LCG) and map layout, you are ready to create great maps.



LINEAR PROGRESSION

Simple Linear Progression

#1 Set-Up

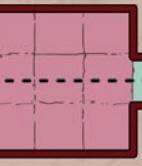


#3 Exploration

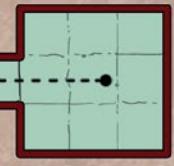


#2 Challenge

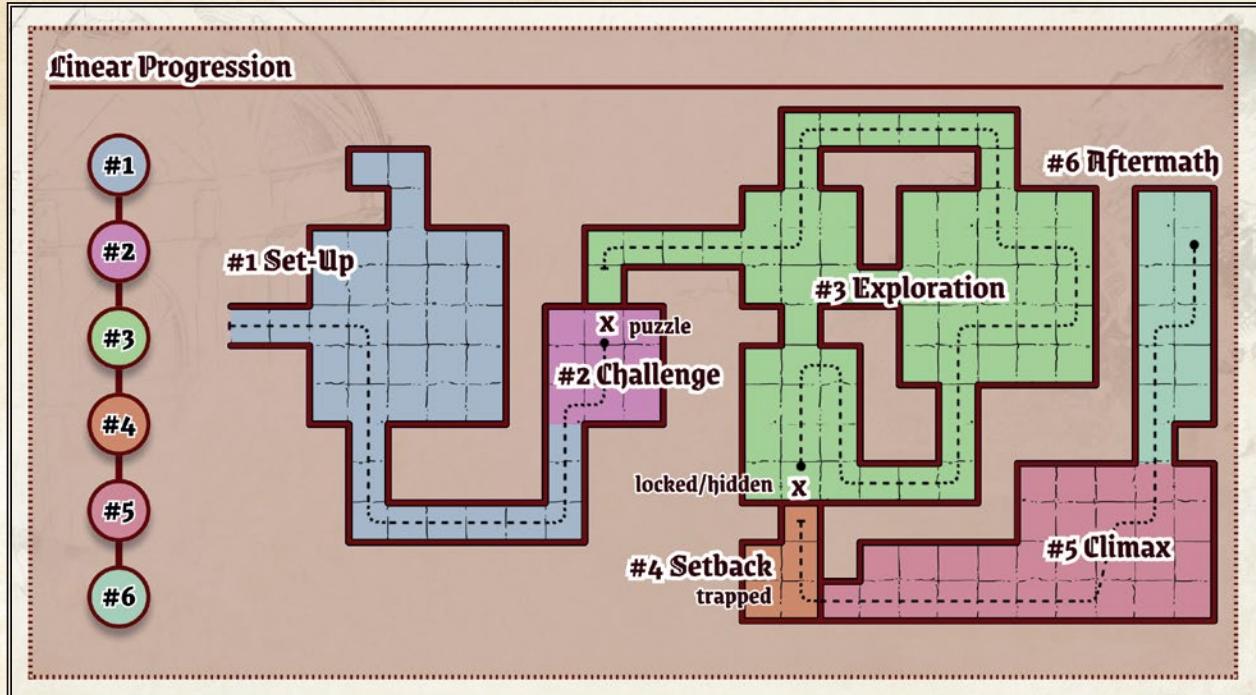
#5 Climax



#4 Setback



#6 Aftermath



In this style of map layout, detailed in the image above, the areas are designed to underline the linear plot progression throughout the map. By mapping the progression to the layout, it is possible to ensure that the heroes encounter the elements you have planned in the 'right order', and are therefore adequately equipped to deal with each subsequent challenge. There is an element of free reign in the explorable area, they then face a setback that creates tension, and they are finally led to the final climax and revelation.

There is no alternative route for the heroes, or a way to circumvent any story element; they are following a linear narrative.

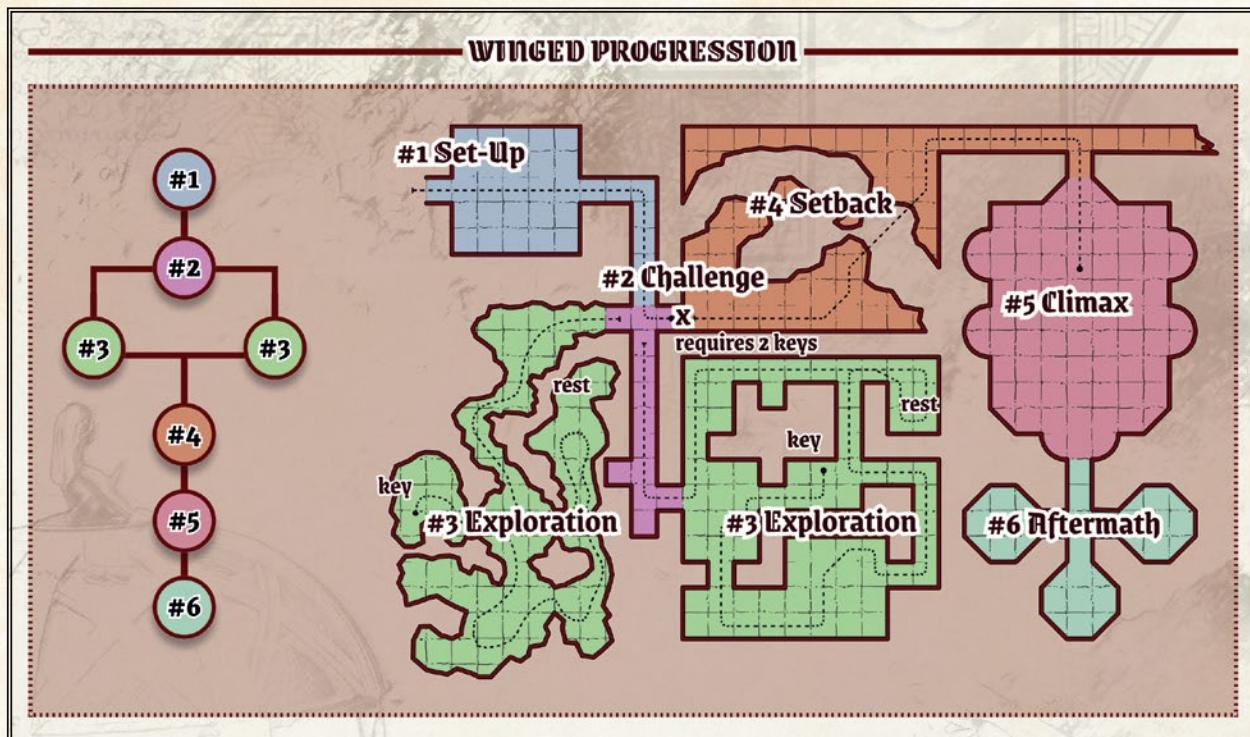
This is a very basic way to design a map, but this technique is very common for adventures. The example graphic is a very simplistic representation of this kind of layout, but the sections of a map of this kind are not always single areas. They can, in fact, be quite complex. Area #1, where the prerequisites of the map are set up, could be a vast system of rivers or islands, or a labyrinth of tunnels that guard the entrance.

Regardless of how the final layout ends up looking, the important element of this style is that characters progress through areas in a predefined pattern with only one option for how to progress - forward.

WINGED PROGRESSION

This layout structure splits the map into separate ‘wings’, and features a blocked-off area that keeps

the party from progressing until they have completed specific tasks in each wing.



For example, a chasm might block the path forward for the heroes. They need to cross, and therefore need to find or construct a bridge – a forest to the left and an abandoned mine to the right present options. The narrative structure is changed by the introduction of a second exploration area, and it is important to consider how to treat this split; it is very easy at this point to inadvertently create linear progression, which is not the intention of this layout, and runs the risk of unnecessary backtracking.

Backtracking hardly ever creates tension or excitement. It is very difficult to add story while backtracking without changing its progression, and it can lead to increasingly complex stages and arcs, which risks destroying your LCG plan and any tension you have built.

Winged progression is different from linear progression, and therefore the tactics that need to be utilized by a game master to make it stand out and offer a different experience to the party are different too.

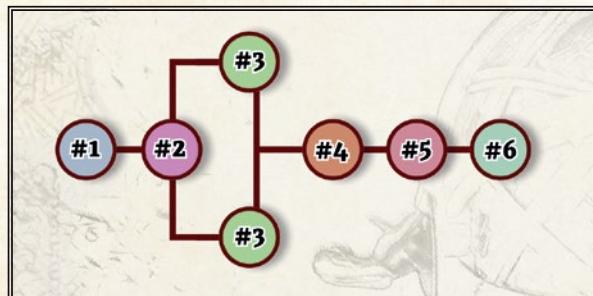
- WHETHER A DUNGEON OR A RIVERBED - IT MAKES NO DIFFERENCE - THE PROGRESSION PATH MUST BE CLEAR.
EVEN HIDDEN OPENINGS NEED TO BE HINTED AT. -

CONSEQUENCES AND CHOICES

Only by offering heroes a meaningful choice that has consequences on the ongoing story can linear progression be broken. The heroes first choose where to go, but their subsequent decisions must then consequently have an impact on the dynamics of the story.

- There could be multiple factions of humanoids or monsters living in exploration areas. Helping or eliminating one faction consequently makes the other faction weaker, stronger, or non-existent.
- An event might be triggered in one exploration area that causes the other exploration area to change drastically (this might require different maps for different choices).

- A time-sensitive event might force the party to choose one exploration area over the other. Be mindful that, whatever this time-sensitive event is, it should not affect the story as a whole, unless you plan on changing your entire structure going forward (in which case, you might consider using split progression, detailed below).

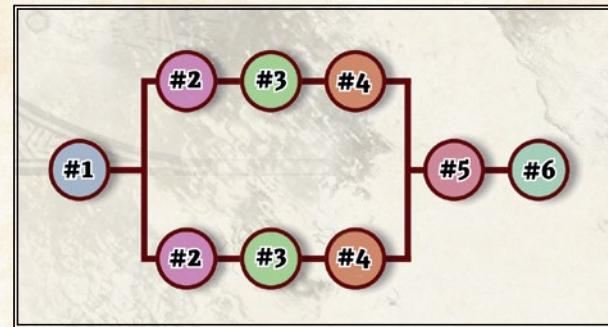


SPLIT AND RETURN PROGRESSION

The heroes reach a decision point where they must choose a course of action that irrevocably takes them onto a separate path. The climax is positioned, however, in a way that, regardless of which path they take, the outcome remains the same, and the same climax is faced. Antagonistic forces utilize this kind of progression layout very well.

For example, a volcano is about to explode. The heroes choose to head to high ground with a group of refugees, rather than escape via a nearby lake with a group of soldiers. A split occurs, with the heroes and refugees facing different struggles to the soldiers in the boat. However, when the volcano erupts, both groups face the eruption and the chaos that ensues. Both are rewarded with escape and survival (hopefully).

There are countless variations of how to plan a story, which is why it is so important to know the story structure before you start creating your location. As long as the six area structure is adhered to in some way and remains in sync with your map layouts, you are more-or-less guaranteed to never accidentally ruin the tension build-up of your story.



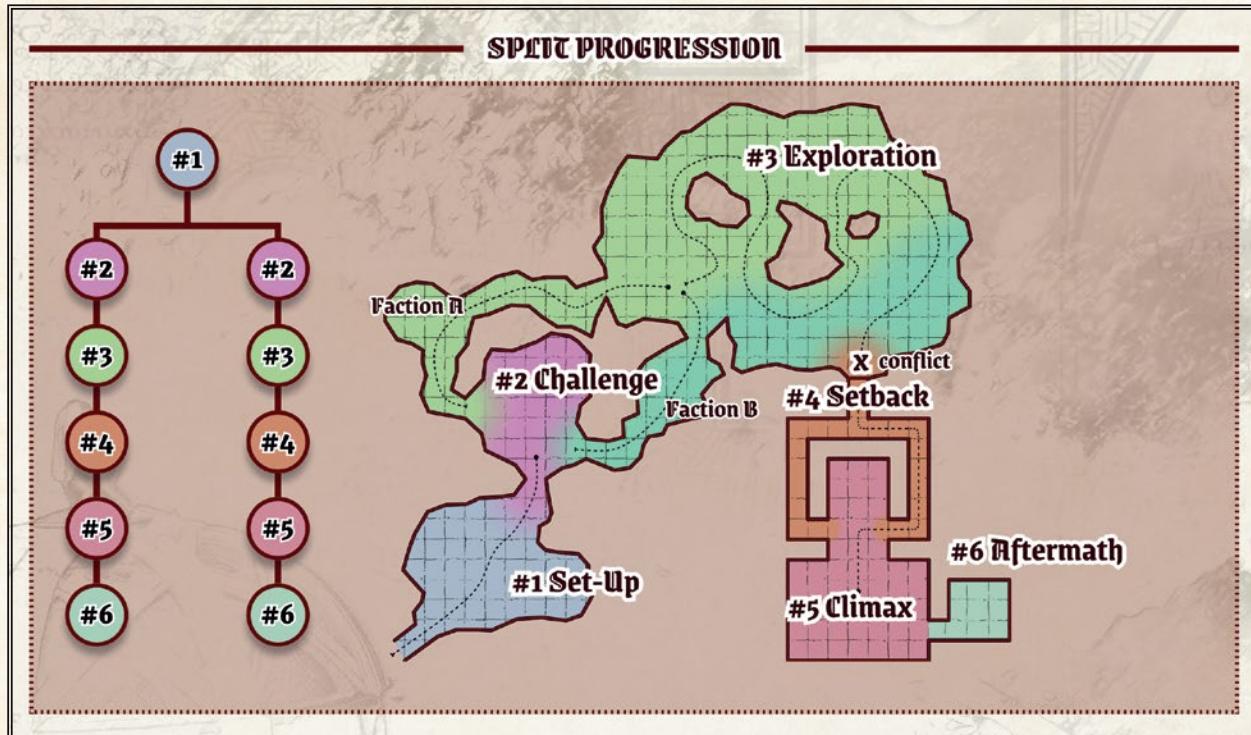
- THINK OF LOCATIONS AS YOU MIGHT THINK OF YOUR OWN BEDROOM. EACH THING IS IN A PLACE FOR A REASON. YOUR LOCATIONS SHOULD BE AS ORDERED, OR NOT, AS YOUR BEDROOM. -

SPLIT PROGRESSION

If you want the heroes' choice to affect the whole story more drastically, the six-area structure itself needs an overhaul.

The character's choice always alters the story without a chance of going back (unless they can time travel).

The two separate stories need to be able to unfold on the same map but, depending on the choices the heroes make, they change not just the way they approach the same final goal, but instead alter the story fundamentally. It is helpful to illustrate this with an example.



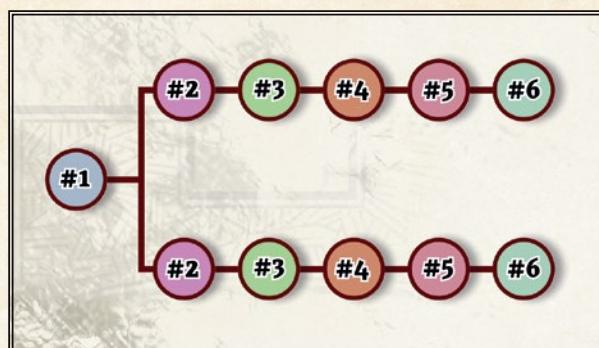
Area #2 is inhabited by two factions who are fighting over dominance of this location and the players must pick a side. Once they have chosen which faction they want to side with, they cannot go back or change their mind; bad feeling has been created with the other faction, and the story has progressed along.

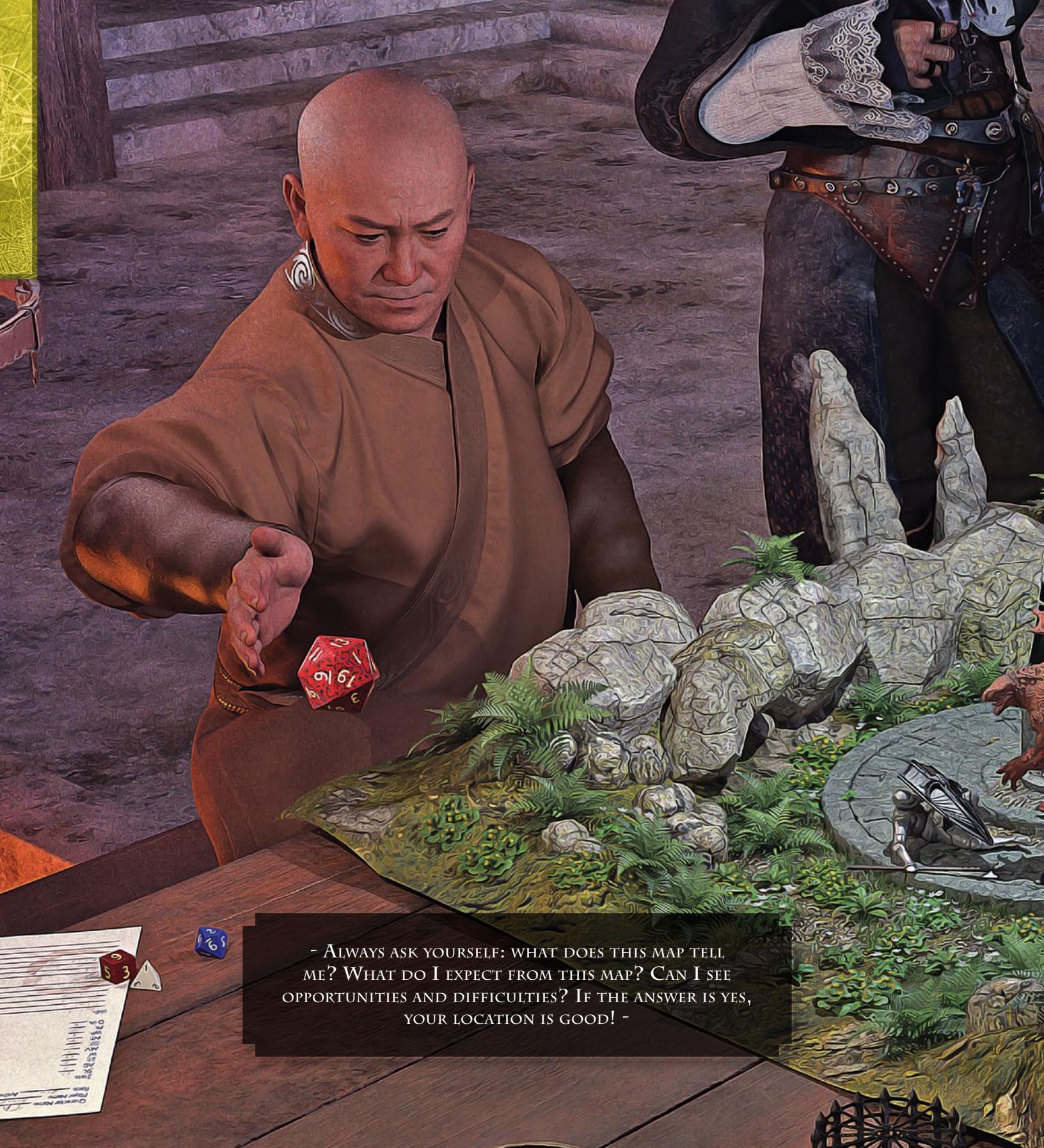
The choice the players make needs to be substantial. If both factions are simply nameless, faceless soldiers, there is no justification for the split in story structure. It is simply a case of 'fight for faction A' or 'fight for faction B'. But if, for example, one faction is a group of scientists who want to preserve the location and its unique biology, whatever the cost, while the other faction is a group of divination wizards that want the place destroyed as they have foretold a great disaster here, the characters will experience completely different stories, depending on the side they pick.

While exploring Area #3, the neglected faction tries to hinder their efforts. When the party reaches

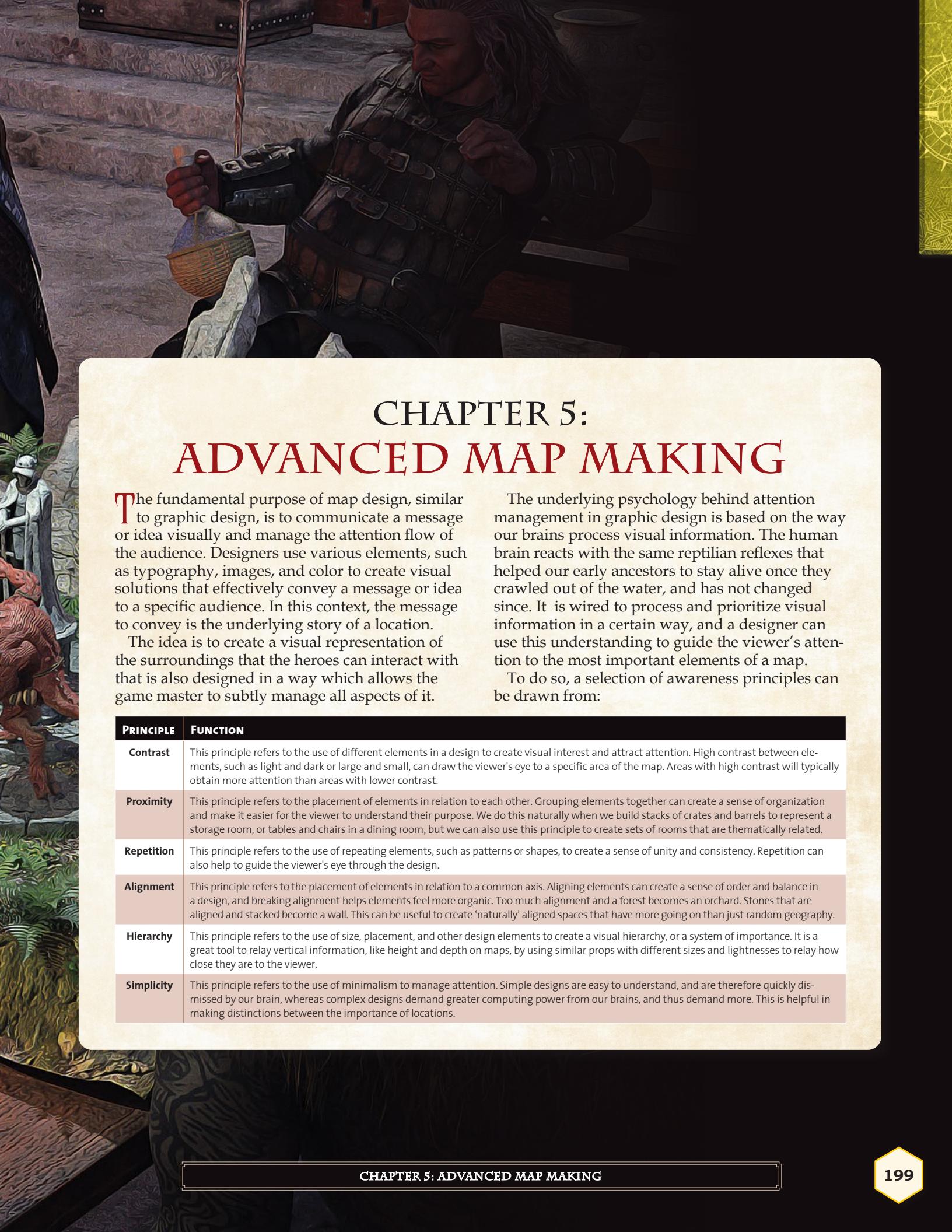
the setback, they learn that the neglected faction has already gained an advantage and they now need to hurry to prevent whatever is about to happen.

The climax then has the leader of the neglected faction attempting something they the party needs to stop and, depending on which faction they chose, their revelation and reward are very different.





- ALWAYS ASK YOURSELF: WHAT DOES THIS MAP TELL ME? WHAT DO I EXPECT FROM THIS MAP? CAN I SEE OPPORTUNITIES AND DIFFICULTIES? IF THE ANSWER IS YES, YOUR LOCATION IS GOOD! -



CHAPTER 5: ADVANCED MAP MAKING

The fundamental purpose of map design, similar to graphic design, is to communicate a message or idea visually and manage the attention flow of the audience. Designers use various elements, such as typography, images, and color to create visual solutions that effectively convey a message or idea to a specific audience. In this context, the message to convey is the underlying story of a location.

The idea is to create a visual representation of the surroundings that the heroes can interact with that is also designed in a way which allows the game master to subtly manage all aspects of it.

The underlying psychology behind attention management in graphic design is based on the way our brains process visual information. The human brain reacts with the same reptilian reflexes that helped our early ancestors to stay alive once they crawled out of the water, and has not changed since. It is wired to process and prioritize visual information in a certain way, and a designer can use this understanding to guide the viewer's attention to the most important elements of a map.

To do so, a selection of awareness principles can be drawn from:

PRINCIPLE	FUNCTION
Contrast	This principle refers to the use of different elements in a design to create visual interest and attract attention. High contrast between elements, such as light and dark or large and small, can draw the viewer's eye to a specific area of the map. Areas with high contrast will typically obtain more attention than areas with lower contrast.
Proximity	This principle refers to the placement of elements in relation to each other. Grouping elements together can create a sense of organization and make it easier for the viewer to understand their purpose. We do this naturally when we build stacks of crates and barrels to represent a storage room, or tables and chairs in a dining room, but we can also use this principle to create sets of rooms that are thematically related.
Repetition	This principle refers to the use of repeating elements, such as patterns or shapes, to create a sense of unity and consistency. Repetition can also help to guide the viewer's eye through the design.
Alignment	This principle refers to the placement of elements in relation to a common axis. Aligning elements can create a sense of order and balance in a design, and breaking alignment helps elements feel more organic. Too much alignment and a forest becomes an orchard. Stones that are aligned and stacked become a wall. This can be useful to create 'naturally' aligned spaces that have more going on than just random geography.
Hierarchy	This principle refers to the use of size, placement, and other design elements to create a visual hierarchy, or a system of importance. It is a great tool to relay vertical information, like height and depth on maps, by using similar props with different sizes and lightnesses to relay how close they are to the viewer.
Simplicity	This principle refers to the use of minimalism to manage attention. Simple designs are easy to understand, and are therefore quickly dismissed by our brain, whereas complex designs demand greater computing power from our brains, and thus demand more. This is helpful in making distinctions between the importance of locations.

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

Expectation plays a significant role in battle map design, as it can influence how the map is interpreted and understood. Everyone has certain expectations about the layout and composition of battle maps based on past experiences. Rivers probably have a waterfall at some point, mountains need passes and sheer drops, jungles need trees and are likely to have a hidden temple or two.

By adhering to these conventions, attention can be guided to the most important elements of the map and make it easier to understand

the design. This is mainly achieved by using elements that are commonly found in the real world and placing them in yours. Walls should look like walls, and decorative objects, mostly referred to as 'props', should be easily recognizable in their purpose.

For custom props or buildings, or representative icons for the sake of simplicity, especially on hand-drawn battle maps, it is helpful to stick to the following guidelines to make sure maps are easy to understand and fit the expectations of players:

PRINCIPLE	FUNCTION
Minimalism	This can be achieved by using a small number of design elements and avoiding the use of unnecessary or redundant details.
Clean Lines	Using clean lines in the design of props can create a sense of order and balance, making it easier for players to understand the prop's purpose and how it can be used.
Uncomplicated Forms	Using uncomplicated forms in the design of props can make it easy for players to recognize and understand it. Avoiding overly detailed or complex designs can help to make the prop easy to distinguish and identify.
Functionality	Simplicity in the design of props also means designing them with functionality in mind; props should serve a clear purpose and be easily recognizable by players.

By creating your own well-defined style guide and sticking to it as you create more and more maps, you can slowly establish a personal style that is unique and recognizable. Through repetition of the same style over different maps, you can educate your viewers and help them form their experience into new expectations.

Breaking Expectations: Expectation management can be used to create a sense of surprise, or to guide attention to something out-of-the-ordinary. For example, by purposefully breaking with convention, or using unexpected elements in the map, an element of surprise can be generated, which can divert players' attention to specific areas of the map. This only works if expectations have been clearly set from the outset, however.

FORESHADOWING

Foreshadowing is when the heroes encounter something that seems of little relevance in the moment. Later on, however, it becomes clear that - had they known more or been more observant - they would have been able to predict the situation they now find themselves in. A mule that is stuck

in the mud on the side of the road may foreshadow that the swamp ahead is full of sinking pits and traps, or that there is a secret mule-smuggling operation going on within the swamp.

Different techniques can be utilized to foreshadow events:

TYPE	FORESHADOWING
Objects	By placing certain objects on the map, events, characters or other elements to come can be foreshadowed.
Repetition	Through increasing repetition of objects or patterns, a 'drum beat' effect can be created that starts to build tension. An example might be something like increasing the amount of webs in the trees as the heroes head deeper into a forest, hinting that they are approaching a spider lair.
Tracks & Prints	Fresh footprints, tracks, or smears can indicate that someone else was in the area shortly before, or perhaps still is. This is a powerful tool to foreshadow events; the tracks not only hint that someone is nearby, but also allows players to work out where they might be found, and follow their trajectory.
Recent Activity	Burning torches, half eaten meals, or scattered tools can indicate that this location is still frequented and might be visited again in near future.
Tonal Changes	A subtle way to use foreshadowing is by using transitional changes in lighting and color on the map to hint at a change in mood and atmosphere. This is obviously much easier to do with digital maps.
Layout	Another way to foreshadow is to use distinguishable patterns in the layout of the location. This allows player characters to anticipate that layout and make a guess at what to expect as they progress.
Unusual terrain	A sudden change in terrain, an ominous opening in the wall, or a chokepoint all hint that something might happen in this location. This, again, creates tension and anticipation at the table.

COLOR THEORY

Color theory is the study of how colors interact with one another and how our brains perceive them, as well as how they can be used to create a particular effect or mood in art and design. The psychology behind it is based on the way in which different colors can evoke different psychological responses; understanding this can help create a desired mood or emotion in a map.

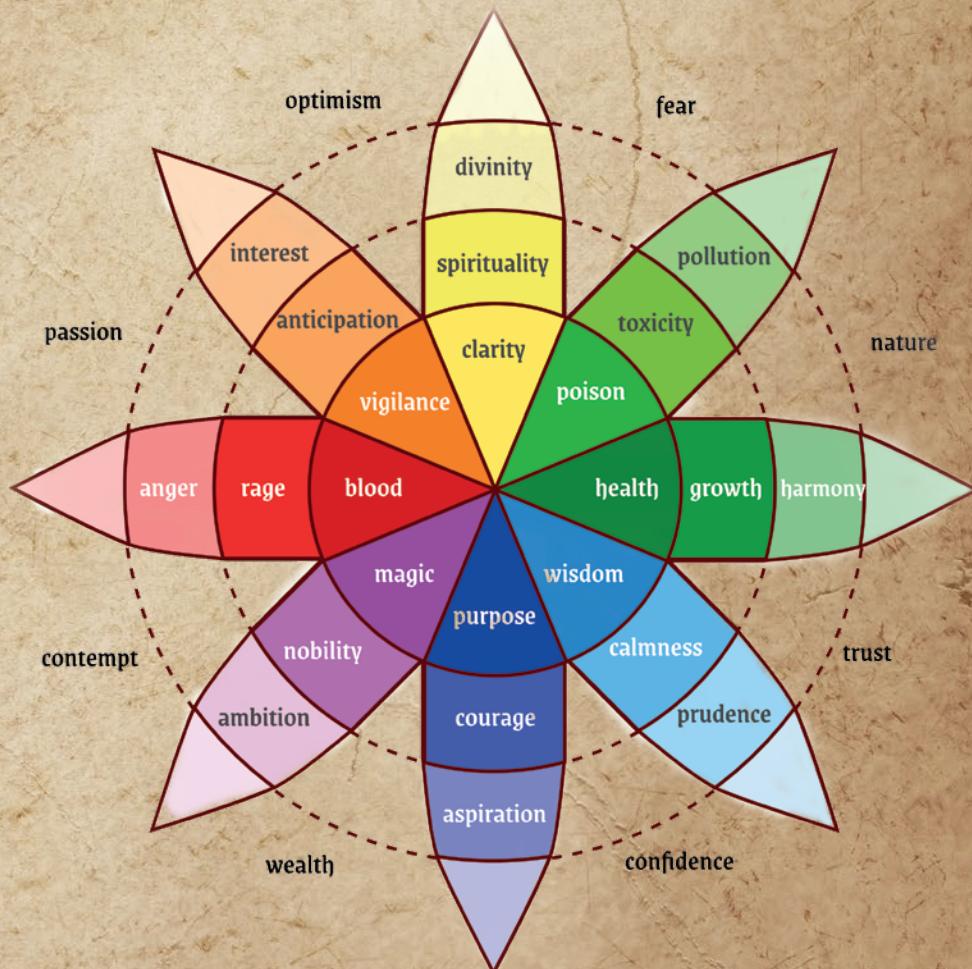
Warm colors like red, orange, and yellow are associated with feelings of energy, warmth, and excitement. These colors can be used to create a sense of urgency, or to draw attention to a specific area of a map. Cool colors like blue, green, and purple are often associated with feelings of calm, tranquility, and serenity. These can be used to create a sense of calmness and stability in a design.

Colors can also be associated with specific meanings or cultural associations. In some western cultures, red is often associated with danger, love, and passion, whilst blue is often associated with trust, reliability, and wisdom.

Some colors have a different meaning based on the context under which they appear. Green is typically associated with nature, growth, and fertility, but it can also be associated with poison, envy and greed, especially when emphasized by a glow. The same goes for purple; it is common to associate purple with royalty, as purple dye was expensive to produce in the past, and so it became a symbol of wealth and prestige. Under a different context, however, it can represent magic, odd world technology, and mystery.

Furthermore, color can also have an impact on our physiological processes. For example, blue light is known to promote calmness, and to help with sleep and improve focus, while red light can increase alertness, heart rate, and blood pressure.

By understanding the principles of color theory, it becomes easier to choose colors that complement each other, create a desired mood or emotion, and make maps more easily legible and understandable.



MAKING YOUR OWN PALETTE

One common application of color theory in map making is the use of color schemes and collecting useful colors into a personal map palette. The goal is to have a color palette that can always be drawn from and

used as reference, to make sure that the map design follows the principles of expectation and awareness.

Different types of colors on the wheel can help us achieve this, and are outlined below:

Complementary colors	Complementary colors are opposite each other on the color wheel, and create strong contrast and visual interest. They are often used to manage awareness and highlight certain areas of a map.
Analogous colors	Analogous colors are next to each other on the color wheel, and usually create a harmonious and cohesive look. They are mainly used to create cohesive backgrounds, like ground and floor colors, and as transitions between areas.
Monochromatic colors	Monochromatic colors are variations of a single color, and can be used to tone back the attention span of repetitive objects.

To make a palette, start by combining two color schemes - a primary set that is informed by

real-world inspiration, and a secondary set that is inspired by the narrative of your story.

PALETTE CREATION ELEMENTS	STEP-BY-STEP GUIDANCE
Research	Research the story world and the intended theme of the battle map(s). Consider the mood, atmosphere, and historical period of the setting, and use this information to guide your color choices.
Color Theory	Use color theory to create a palette that evokes the desired mood and atmosphere. Refer to the color wheel presented in this book to establish the tone that you want to relay through your design.
Primary Set	Use a primary set of colors that are realistic and true to the world. These colors should be used to create a sense of realism and immersion.
Secondary Set	Use a secondary set of colors to create mood and atmosphere. These colors can be more vibrant or saturated than the primary set, and can be used to create a sense of contrast and emphasis.
Color Wheel	Use the color wheel to create a complementary or analogous color scheme. This can help to create a sense of balance and harmony in the map (or the opposite, if this is your intention).
Test and Adjust	Test the color palette on the battle map, taking into consideration the lighting, and adjusting as needed.

Working with Premade Texture and Prop Packs

Maps do not need to be all drawn by hand or created completely from scratch. Tools like the Battle Map Editor by DungeonFog (www.dungeongfog.com) can help you speed up the process of drawing, and give additional options on color adjustments. Many artists create prop packs that offer premade icons for decorating maps which are often either freely available in your chosen program, or offered for purchase. Most of these packs already follow an inherent color scheme, and so already work together in color and tonality.

When using those helpers, all we need to do is take care that the items we used follow our predefined color palette for the map.

- COLOR THEORY CAN SEEM COMPLEX; YOU CAN CHOOSE HOW MUCH YOU WANT TO ADHERE TO IT.
THE BOTTOM LINE IS: IF IT LOOKS GOOD TO YOU, AND IS FIT FOR PURPOSE, THAT IS ALL THAT MATTERS -

ADDING PERSPECTIVE

One major challenge of battle map design is the nature of the viewers 'camera angle'. The angle at which battle maps are drawn depends on the specific needs

of the situation and the desired perspective it needs to convey. Most of the time this is a top-down perspective, but other options might also be appropriate.

MAP TYPE	USABILITY
Top-Down	To make them work in conjunction with tokens and minis, most battle maps are drawn with a bird's-eye perspective. An important consideration of top-down perspective is ensuring that the underlying grid is not distorted in order to work properly as a reference for distance and movement.
Isometric	An isometric angle provides a three-dimensional view of the world. This can be useful for showing the layout of multi-level locations within the terrain, and can help players understand the layout and orientation of how those levels are connected.
Oblique	An oblique angle is a combination of an isometric and top-down angle that tries to overcome the problem of distorted ground grids. Older video games such as The Legend of Zelda and Final Fantasy use this type of perspective to emulate a three-dimensional lookalike while still using turn-based movement on the ground. It is a rarer type of map making nowadays, as there are few benefits to this perspective

PERSPECTIVE IN TOP-DOWN MAPS

The greatest difficulty for top-down maps is relaying information with regards to elevation and height. How can it be made clear that the riverbed is lower than the surrounding terrain? How can

walls in structures be distinguishable as such? There are several techniques that can be used to emphasize elevation, and make it clear to viewers how to perceive that visual representation.

TECHNIQUE	DESCRIPTION
Color	Using different colors to indicate different elevations can be an effective way to convey height information. For example, using darker colors for lower elevations and lighter colors for higher elevations can help clarify.
Texture	Adjusting the scale of textures and making them larger indicates that certain areas are closer to the viewer, while scaling down textures in areas that are of lower elevation makes them look further away. In combination with the color technique described above, this can be very powerful.
Shading	Using shading techniques such as hatching or cross-hatching can help to create a sense of depth and dimensionality on top-down maps. Apply more shading to lower elevations and less shading to higher. Shading is also useful to clarify which areas of the map are inaccessible.
Shadow	Shadows can be used to indicate elevation on a map by creating the illusion of depth and dimensionality. When a light source is present, it casts shadows on the terrain, and the length and direction of these shadows indicate the elevation of different areas of the map.
Symbols & Contour Lines	Contour lines encompass areas of equal elevation and can help with understanding the elevation of different areas of the map. To further enhance this, use symbols such as arrows or numbers to indicate the level of elevation and quantify it for easy reference.

LIGHTING AND MOOD

The use of light, shadow, highlights, and reflections affects the level of visual detail in a battle map; they create a sense of texture and detail that makes each map appear more realistic and immersive. Lighting can guide attention to specific areas of the map, control the level of visual detail in different areas, and create a sense of importance and emphasis, while shadows obscure other areas to

create ambiguity and mystery.

When considering light and light sources, it is important to refer to universal and fundamental principles of lighting and how we can utilize it for our needs. The best examples to refer to are set and stage lighting elements in movies and TV shows, as their requirements and purposes are comparable to those of game masters and roleplayers.

BASIC REQUIREMENTS

When placing light sources, an understanding of why light is such a powerful tool in the first

place is key, so it can be used for what you want to achieve.

PRINCIPLE	FUNCTION
Realism	The use of light is appropriate for the time of day and the geographic location of the scene, and casts realistic shadows.
Focus	The use of light focuses attention on specific areas of the map, such as by highlighting a treasure chest or important clue using a spotlight.
Contrast	The use of light creates contrast between different areas of the map, such as by using different intensities to create a sense of depth and dimensionality.
Mood & Atmosphere	The use of light sets the tone, such as by using cool colors to create a sense of calm, or warm colors to create a sense of tension and excitement.
Style	The use of light in a specific color palette, specific lighting techniques, or other visual elements creates a distinct look and feel for the map or world.

PROPER LIGHTING

Even if a location does not 'explain' or visually show the existence of light sources, they should still be present to underline the narrative. Think about scenes in movies and TV-shows that might realistically be argued to contain no light source (like anything at night in a forest) - they are not lit brightly or harshly, but still perfectly allow

viewers to grasp what is currently happening on screen.

Invisible, omni-directional light sources are particularly useful for creating a sense of realism because they emit light in all directions, simulating the way natural light sources, like fire or glow-in-the-dark objects, work.

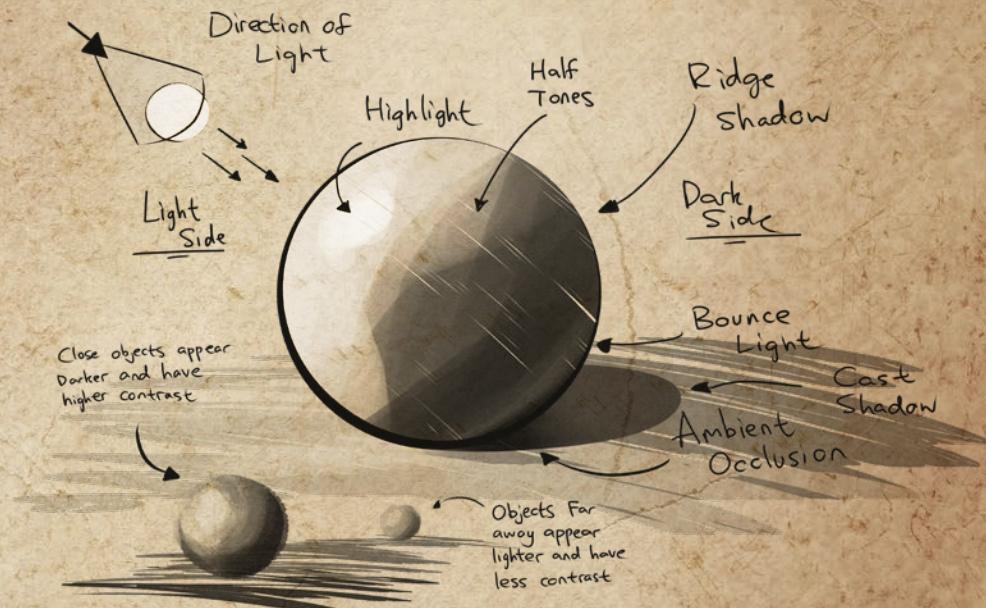
PLACING LIGHT SOURCES

When deciding where to place light sources, consider the underlying story. Do heroes need to be guided through a network of tunnels? Do certain areas need to be illuminated on the map? Finding the right position is as much about realistic representation as it is about guidance.

It is important to make sure that there is a good balance between lit and dim areas. Too much in either direction affects the contrast between light and shadow and can result in oversaturation or dullness. The goal is to find a good radius for each light that illuminates enough of the area while still maintaining any required dim corners and ominous areas of darkness that add gloom to the atmosphere.

The vertical position of the light source affects the shadows of objects around it. Elevated light sources cast shorter, angled shadows, while light sources near the floor (like a fireplace) cast elongated and distorted shadows.

Atmospheric lighting contributes a subtle addition to battle maps. Its primary goal is not to illuminate the scene, but rather to enhance the mood or atmosphere by adding a colored highlight to the scene. It does not necessarily cast shadows, but can be used as a diffused highlight, primarily affecting textures and props, but that does not add any additional visual complexity. The goal is to create cohesive and harmonious lighting that enhances the realism and the atmosphere of the map.



GETTING SHADOWS RIGHT

Shadow is created whenever light from a light source is blocked by an object. The darkest shadows are created by opaque objects that block all light, but softer, more diffused

shadows are still created by translucent ones. Depending on the relative position, proximity, and surface attributes of the blocking object, different shadows form.

SHADOW	EFFECT
Proximity	Objects or terrain that are at a higher elevation (and therefore closer to the light source) cast wider shadows than those at a lower elevation.
Distortion	Objects or terrain that are at a higher elevation cast more distorted shadows than those at a lower elevation.
Diffraction	The combined effects of diffraction and multiple light sources creates a blurry border around shadows that gets larger as the distance between the shadow and the surface it is cast upon increases.

Shadows can be used in combination with other techniques, such as contour lines, color, and symbols, to indicate the elevation of different areas on

a map, but it is important to be mindful of their direction; it can be confusing for players if they are not consistent.

SET DESIGN PRINCIPLES

When it comes to decorating a map with props, it is a good idea to borrow a few concepts from set design for stage and theater. The set designer is responsible for creating the visual concept for a production, and then oversee its realization from concept through to construction.

As the set designer of each location's maps, ensure that the composition of textures, brushes, props and clutter maintains a good balance between visually exciting storytelling and attention management.

Some core principles of set design can be applied to map-making:

PRINCIPLE	APPLICATION
Functionality	The set must serve the needs of the story, providing an appropriate backdrop and space for the action to take place. This means that the props used should explain the function of the location, and leave enough space for heroes to move about. If the set is a campsite, props should be iconic to a location of that nature for it to be immediately recognizable (like a campfire and bedrolls), and it should strike the right balance of set-dressing clutter and space to move.
Unity	The set must be cohesive and visually consistent, with elements that work together to create a sense of harmony. If a map is drawn by hand, each prop is likely to be drawn in the same style. If using ready-made props from artists, be careful when combining them so not to make any appear jarring or out of place.
Scale and Proportion	The set must be designed to an appropriate scale and proportion in relation to the space. If a map is designed for minis or tokens, bear in mind that props and other elements should be proportionate to their size. Choose a scale and then maintain it for everything that is supposed to be consistent. This might change when portraying depth or perspective, but objects and terrain on each 'level' must be consistent in scale and proportion.
Spatial Relationships	The set must be designed to create a sense of depth and dimensionality, with elements used to establish spatial relationships between different parts of the set. Positioning elements in front of or behind each other helps with making the set feel more three-dimensional. Chairs partially hidden by a table, crates stacked upon each other, and statues that overlap the walls they are standing on all help to create a more dynamic map.
Symbolism	The set must be designed with elements of symbolic meaning that enhance the story. Symbols are often used instinctively when decorating maps, such as by placing skulls and bones in areas where battle took place, or spiderwebs to indicate that a passage has not been used for a long time. Small details like these can be used to create a deeper level of meaning within the set, and to enhance players' understanding and engagement with the story.

Combining the principles of set design with the attention and awareness principles mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, it can be surmised that the most important rule for map decoration is 'less is more'. Keeping map clutter to a minimum helps to focus attention on the most important elements and create a sense of visual clarity. When

there are too many props, a map can become overwhelming and difficult to navigate. By only using necessary props, a battle map can be more visually appealing and easier to understand. This also helps tremendously with pacing, as the map tells the story clearly on its own without the need for lengthy explanations.

- THE MOST IMPORTANT RULE FOR MAP DECORATION IS 'LESS IS MORE'. KEEPING MAP CLUTTER TO A MINIMUM HELPS TO FOCUS ATTENTION ON THE MOST IMPORTANT ELEMENTS AND CREATE A SENSE OF VISUAL CLARITY. -

MAP SIZE AND RESOLUTION

Depending on the medium of presentation, it is vital to think about the size and resolution of each map. The size determines the physical dimensions of the

map image in terms of both width and height, while the resolution determines the number of pixels (PPI) or dots (DPI) within each inch of the map.

PRINT MAPS

Battle maps usually are formatted and designed on a 1 inch grid, with each grid square representing five feet, which many roleplaying games use for increments of movement. A standard tabletop miniature (of a Medium creature) normally

fits exactly into one grid square of 1x1 inches, making it easy to determine the right size for a printed map.

Refer to the following table to see how many 1 inch grid squares fit on different standard sizes of printer paper:

PAPER FORMAT	WIDTH X HEIGHT (MM)	WIDTH X HEIGHT (IN)	PIXELS AT 150DPI	PIXELS AT 300DPI	GRID*
A4/Letter	210 x 297 mm	8.3 x 11.7 in	1240 x 1754	2480 x 3508	7 x 11
A3 (2 x A4)/Ledger	297 x 420 mm	11.7 x 16.5 in	1754 x 2480	3505 x 4961	11 x 15
A2 (4 x A4)	420 x 594 mm	16.5 x 23.4 in	2480 x 3508	4961 x 7016	15 x 22
A1 (8 x A4)	594 x 841 mm	23.4 x 33.1 in	3508 x 4967	7016 x 9933	22 x 32
A0 (16 x A4)	841 x 1189 mm	33.1 x 46.8 in	4967 x 7022	9933 x 14043	32 x 45

*The grid count factors in the average cut of printers, reducing the amount of available grid squares per page.

DPI AND RESOLUTION

DPI (dots per inch) is a measure of print resolution, and refers to the number of dots of ink per inch on a printed page. The higher the DPI, the more high-quality, detailed, and sharp the image appears when printed, so it is an important factor to consider when designing a map for print.

Note that the DPI should match the final output size of the image. For example, an 11 x 15 inch map, with 1 inch squares, printed in high resolution (300dpi), requires $11 \times 300 = 3300$ pixels in one direction, and $15 \times 300 = 4500$ pixels in the other direction, and therefore an image size of 3300×4500 pixels.

These values differ from the table above, because household printers usually cannot print seamlessly, and need a margin on each side of the paper, which is factored into the table.

For household printers, 300dpi is usually not necessary, and it is possible to work with 150dpi without sacrificing too much of a loss in quality. The image size can therefore be halved to 1500 x 1750 pixels, reducing the amount of ink needed to print the map. A resolution of 150dpi is normally suitable for most homemade maps; 300dpi is considered standard for high-quality printing for publishing, and 600dpi or higher is typically used for high-end printing or large-format printing, such as for posters.

DIGITAL MAPS FOR VIRTUAL TABLETOPS

The biggest advantage of digital maps is the lack of need to print them, reducing the cost per map drastically, and allowing the presentation of the map to players via a virtual tabletop (VTT). It also reduces the stress of figuring out the right balance between size and print demand, as a digital map can be scrolled in any direction.

However, it is still necessary to pay attention to the size requirements of all maps – even digital ones. The resolution of an average monitor is typically around 1920 x 1080 pixels (referred to as 1080p), also known as Full HD. This means that the monitor has 1920 pixels horizontally and 1080 pixels vertically.

Modern monitors have a resolution of 3840 x 2160 pixels, roughly four times higher than Full HD, meaning that the monitor has 3840 pixels horizontally and 2160 pixels vertically. This resolution is commonly referred to as 4K or Ultra HD, and is considered high-resolution.

Printed maps and digital maps have different demands, so size and resolution need to be considered differently.

DPI is not directly equivalent to monitor resolution, which is measured in pixels. However, PPI (pixels per inch) is a similar concept. It is a mea-

sure of the pixel density of a display, and it refers to the number of pixels per inch on a screen. For example, a monitor with a resolution of 1920 x 1080 and a screen size of 24 inches has a PPI of around 92, and fits approximately a 20 x 11 inch grid map on screen. It is important to note that PPI is not a standard measure for monitors, and is not used as commonly as resolution. It can, however, give an indication of the sharpness of an image on the screen; the higher the PPI, the sharper the image will appear.

Most VTTs still work around the older PPI standard of 72ppi, and all of them offer tools to adjust the grid size manually. The reason it is not common practice to produce 300ppi maps for VTTs – although the grid could easily be adjusted to fit those requirements – is that such high-resolution maps have a very high demand on loading times and performance.

Depending on the file compression format of images (PNG, JPG, WEBP, etc.) an A3 map at 300ppi can easily have a file size of over 100MB. This puts a lot of stress on the VTT when it comes to loading the map or keeping it in its memory when switching between multiple maps. Keeping maps at a lower, screen-adequate resolution of 70-90dpi reduces the file size, and therefore improves the loading times and performance drastically.

DIGITAL MAPS IN HOME GAMES

With technology like projectors, TV-table setups, and up-and-coming digital game boards, digital maps are becoming increasingly popular in home games. A game table is usually set up to facilitate the display of a digital map through a VTT, while the game still takes place physically. This makes a combination of digital maps and physical miniatures possible, but adds another consideration when designing maps: in such a setup, the map can be any size, but the miniatures on the table might need

to be moved if the game master has to scroll through the map. When designing for such a scenario, it is therefore prudent to reduce the amount of scrolling required, and do our best to keep the maps within the space that can be displayed.

Since there are so many different factors to consider (including screen resolution, projector distance, etc.) this book does not cover this scenario specifically, but with the knowledge from this chapter should allow you to adjust for your games.

THE MAP ENDS HERE...

There is so much more to creating maps than what is presented in this book - that is the joy of any artistic hobby. Whether you never draw a map and simply describe a location in prose, or draw a thousand maps that never get used, the joy of thinking through spaces in these terms opens up a world of possibility. You - and those involved in your story - can visit anywhere and, knowing the principles presented here, you can find adventure wherever you go.

Never be afraid to look at the space around you, whether on a hike through the woods, a walk down

the street, or a trip to the mall, and think about the location in terms of drama and pacing, and apply the six areas to the space. It is good practice, and you might discover for yourself that the best places are the ones that follow the guidelines, whilst the worst ones ignore them completely.

So what are you waiting for? A thousand locations await your creative touch, and a million stories remain untold. Go on, go make an epic location, we dare you not to!



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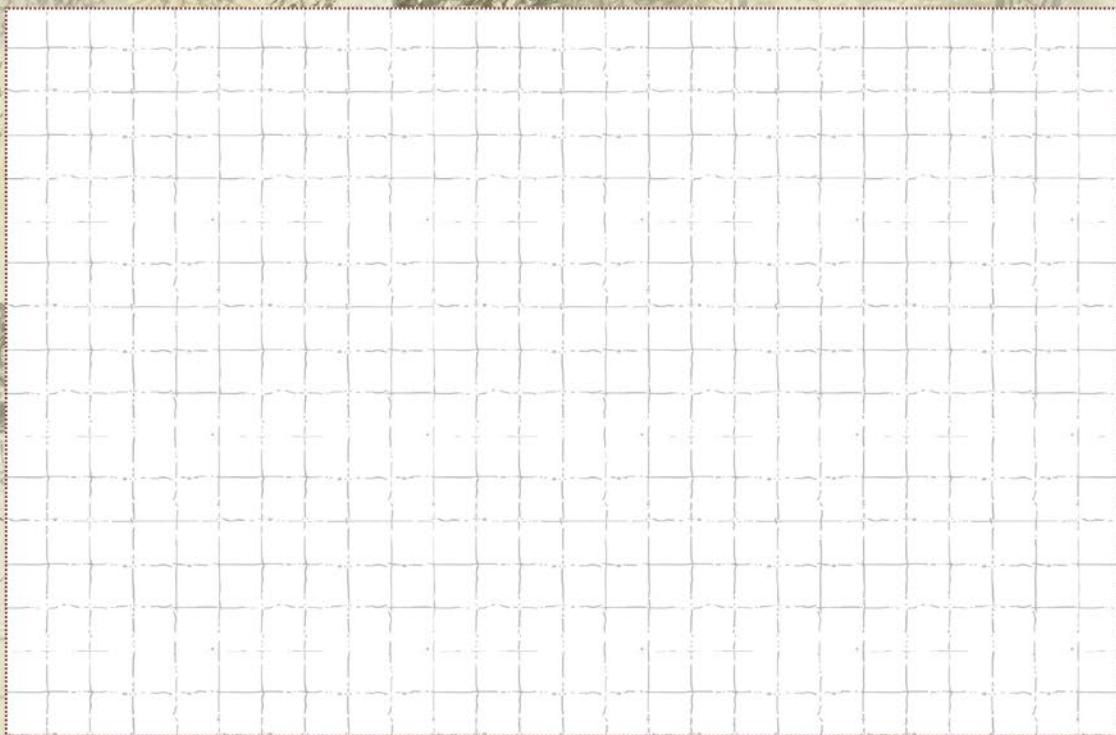
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Location Concept Grid | Outlines

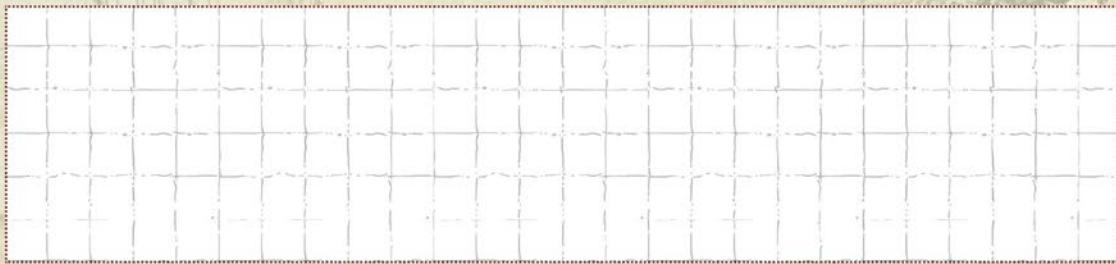
Title			
Logline			
The Villain	Goals		
Climax			
Tone	Descriptive Words	Location Functions	
Areas	Description	Resources	
#1 Set-up Entrance & Guardian			
#2 Challenge Puzzle and/or Roleplay Challenge			
#3 Exploration Exposition & Point of No Return			
#4 Setback Major Setback & Complications			
#5 Climax Last Push & Final Conflict			
#6 Aftermath Resolution & New Goals			

Location Concept Grid | Pacing & Tension

LOCATION MAP

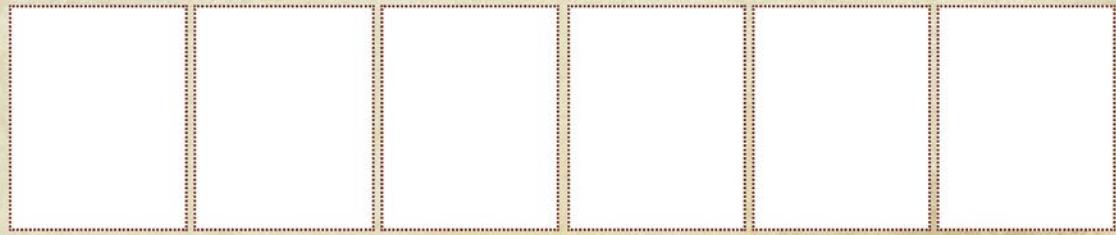


PROGRESSION



CREATE TENSION

Set-Up Challenge Exploration Setback Climax Aftermath

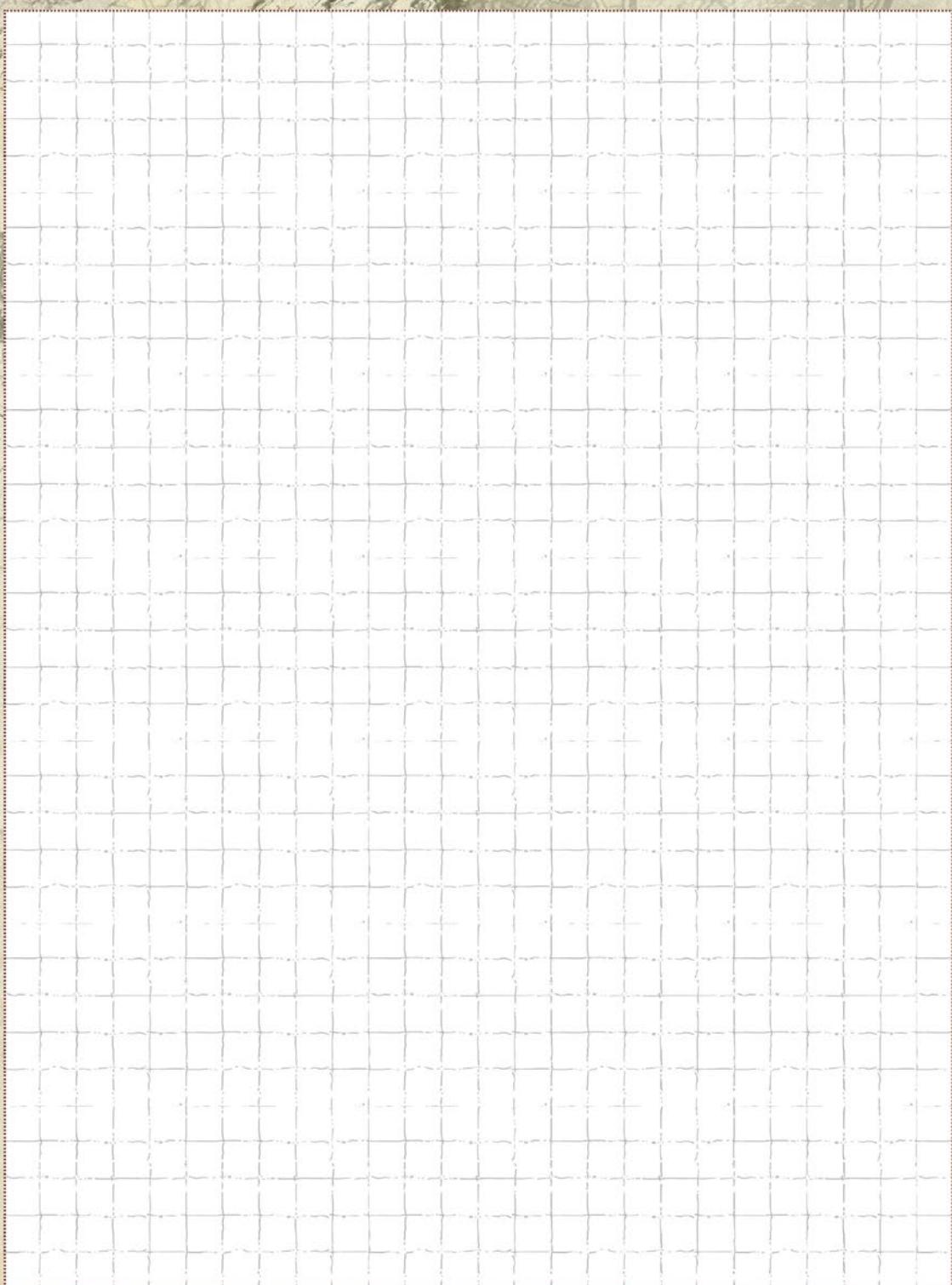


Point of No Return

Complications &
Consequences

Location Concept Grid | Map Sketches

Title





THANK YOU

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NATURE

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The Locations

Barren Wastes

Coasts

Ice Shelves

Plains

Bayous

Deserts

Jungles

Swamps

Campsites

Forests

Lakes

Underwater

Caves

Glacial Mountains

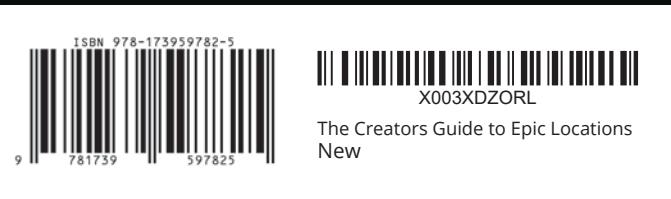
Mountain Ranges

Volcanos

If you are wondering how to make your locations even more fantastical, each entry contains five incredible settings: High Fantasy, the Underfell, the Fey Domain, The Hells, and the Shadow Realm. Each give you even more insight into how to make your locations even more epic!

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