



Worth the Candle:
The Exclusionary Principle

by Alexander Wales
with assistance from Robert Winslow and others

Worth the Candle: The Exclusionary Principle, 9th Edition

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Summary: This document is a homemade splatbook for my webnovel *Worth the Candle*, containing descriptions for sixty-seven of the “exclusion zones” found within it, Zones of Adventure and places where arcane energies seethe and churn.

Acknowledgements: Special thanks to Makin, Empiricist, bacontime, lupoCani, Maddo Henrysto, and Mink for help with editing and early feedback. The writing of this document was streamed live on Twitch and had valuable input at a number of points from people whose names largely flew by on the screen, but I was happy with how the streaming process turned out, and grateful to be doing it in front of an appreciative audience, and I think this turned out better for having people to talk to while I was in the middle of the writing process. Finally, thank you to Robert Winslow for help preparing the pdf version of this document.

Art Sources: Exclusions are accompanied by AI-generated art, which were made by me using MidJourney. Some of these images have minor additional editing:

- RLEZ - Midjourney AI art, extended manually
- DPEZ - Midjourney AI art, extended with Stable Diffusion
- DDEZ - Midjourney AI art, extended manually and with Stable Diffusion
- ZEZ - Midjourney AI art, composited with backpackers cut from a public domain image published by the US National Park Service (flickr.com/photos/131856925@N02/22509525748) They’re very tiny, but they’re there.

The map of Aerb on page 148 was made by Robert Winslow.

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This document is, essentially, a homemade splatbook for my webnovel *Worth the Candle*.¹ In it, you'll find a list of exclusions, places where magic went haywire or got too powerful and was contained by the Warden, a secret deity responsible for making sure the setting didn't get too out of control. Some of these are presented more as histories, while others are largely descriptions of what things are like there.

You don't need to have read *Worth the Candle* to read this document, though it would probably help, and there are occasional notes from some of the characters giving their thoughts on the zone (either this edition or earlier ones: multiple editions are held by the characters throughout the series, some of them from possible futures). Sometimes it's just them making jokes. Each entry will have a little warning if it has what I'd consider to be spoilers, but they're generally pretty mild, especially if you're past the opening of the webnovel.

Much of this document was written with Dungeon Masters and Game Masters in mind, and all of it is free to steal, tweak, or riff on, sometimes with notes from me about how I personally would go about doing this if I wanted to plop one of these into whatever tabletop campaign I was running. An exclusion zone is a geographical area in which some person or magic has been imprisoned or confined. If you're taking from this document, you don't need to take that concept, but I think it's a neat one, and you're more than welcome to have it. Instead, you can have other reasons that the calamity doesn't spread, whether that's because of concerted effort by a ragtag group of heroes, the interference of the gods, or natural limitations. You can even forgo the idea of exclusion entirely, especially if you want to place an adventuring party right at a time when the catastrophe is still unfolding and might still be stopped by a lucky or well-prepared group of adventurers.

With only a few exceptions, exclusion zones are bad places to be, which is part of what makes them good Zones of Adventure. This document features a lot of people dying, sometimes foreseen or perhaps preventable, at other times suddenly and without warning. The world of Aerb is often not a nice place, for various reasons throughout its history, and the nature of exclusion means that the world is slowly losing magic over time, each of those magics trapped away somewhere rather than just fading from the world. I wouldn't say this is a particularly *happy* document, so bear that in mind.

Each exclusion is accompanied by AI-generated art. The technology was in its absolute infancy when I started this project, and has grown in leaps and bounds since then, but still has some obvious room for improvement.

An Aerbian Primer and Glossary

Aerb is a large, wild, kitchen-sink world. There are dozens of magic systems, hundreds of 'mortal species', magical flora and fauna, and a world beyond that includes twenty-nine elemental planes, a large number of 'disjoint' planes, and roughly a hundred other sticky things that happen when the author deliberately smashes together dozens of different homebrew campaign settings. The official worldbuilding document can be found online,² but this is the short(er) version.

Athenaeums: Aerb is home to thirteen large institutions of learning, the athenaeums. Athenaeums are typically located in a large city, have a significant amount of distance between each other, and have an imperially-mandated stranglehold on the teaching and licensing of at least one commonly used magic.

Cosmology: Aerb is connected to a wide variety of different planes, though this is largely irrelevant to discussion of exclusions. Aerb has twenty-nine elemental planes, corresponding to the Inner Planes of the Great Wheel cosmology, and thirty-seven disjoint planes, corresponding to the Outer Planes. There are approximately eight of what D&D would call transitive planes, three of which get some details within this document. The prime material plane is Aerb, but "Aerb" is also used to refer to the cosmology as a whole.

Magic: Aerb has a lot of magic systems, especially when including those which are excluded. These systems exist at varying levels of hardness, strength, depth, and ability. While some share similarities, most are different from each other, not existing within the same framework or needing each other to function. The one exception to this is warding, a form of anti-magic which allows both the limited blocking of magic and the ability to see and diagnose magical effects.

Pseudomagic: In Aerb, mundane skills can sometimes be taken to a level beyond what can be explained through conventional physics. The two most well-known of these are the bladebound, who have incredible abilities with swords, and the Elon Gar, who are capable of going without sleep, have perfect memories, and have supernatural control of their physiological reactions. Pseudomagic's function is largely to diegetically explain some of the upper-tier D&D feats or things possible through skill checks that wouldn't be possible in a "realistic" setting. People understand that it's weird for a swordsman to be able to parry a bullet, but accept that this is the sort of inexplicable thing that happens when you're Just That Good.

¹royalroad.com/fiction/25137/

²archiveofourown.org/works/20629112

Entads: ‘Entad’ is the term that applies to most magic items on Aerb. These are created through ‘forge frenzy’, a fit of compulsion/inspiration where the creator has no control of the end result. Entads are unique, except for those created in sets. From a worldbuilding and writing perspective, this allows them to be more of oddball forces of nature than the systematized magic systems, and individual entads don’t need to be balanced around wide availability.

Timeline

~30,000 Before Empire (BE) to 0 First Empire (FE) covers the pre-Imperial and prehistoric period on Aerb, marked largely by smaller polities and pre-industrial civilizations, with only a few expansive kingdoms or empires of note.

0 FE to ~81 FE is the period of the First Empire, founded by the legendary Uther Penndraig, master of eight magics, driving force of early industrialization and standardization of magic, and responsible for saving Aerb from ruin on numerous occasions. Following Uther’s disappearance in 30 FE at the height of his power, the First Empire began a slow decline and balkanization.

~81 FE to 176 FE is the period of the First Interimperium, marked by the Internecine Wars, a series of conflicts that occurred in the wake of the collapse of the First Empire, many of which were only loosely related to each other as old grudges flared up and greedy polities made attempts at capturing land or valuable resources.

176 FE to 324 FE is the period of the Second Empire, formed largely through the efforts of the longer-lived of Uther’s allies, partly in response to the horrors that happened in the wake of his disappearance. They placed a heavy emphasis on progress, partially in the hopes of accelerating past what they saw as the inevitable resurgence of horrors and near-world-ending scenarios that had plagued that Utherian era.

324 FE to ~432 FE is the period of the Second Interimperium, which saw war, famine, and violence as the revolutionaries who had stood in opposition to the Second Empire swept through Aerb. This is largely seen as a reform and rebuilding period, which ended with the signing of an accord between seventeen member polities of what would later become the Empire of Common Cause.

~432 FE to 539 FE is the modern era of Aerb. *Worth the Candle* takes place primarily in 527 FE, but this document is pulled from a possible future. Modern Aerb shares many similarities with the modern day, particularly in terms of globalization, but the technology level more closely resembles the 1930s. Bulk teleport transports goods across Aerb, while teleportation keys

work similarly to air travel and rail lines crisscross the plane. The Empire of Common Cause is a relatively weak organization, gridlocked even on issues where the vast majority of members are in agreement.

On the Nature of Exclusions

There are two questions central to the study of exclusions. First: what is an exclusion? Second: why do exclusions happen?

An exclusion is a *static geographical bounding* on some phenomenon.

This simple definition immediately runs into some obvious problems. The first is that certain phenomena are, by their nature, geographically bounded: an example might be a species of bird found only in a specific forest which won’t breed outside of its native environment. All but the most argumentative of scholars would agree that a definition of ‘exclusion’ which included such a bird simply does not work. There are, however, some examples of static, geographically bound, unique phenomena which are commonly agreed to *not* be exclusions.

The Boundless Pit in Senol is a hole of seemingly infinite depth into which the Boul River continually empties itself. Surveys of the Boundless Pit have shown that it grows in width in proportion to its depth, ever-widening, with no known bottom. Some degree of space-warping is thus clearly in place at the Boundless Pit.

Is the Boundless Pit an exclusion zone?

The citizens of the city of Cidium on the continent of Widders claim that it has existed in perpetuity since before even the creation of Aerb itself. They further claim that the city is possessed of its own special phenomenon which has been the key to its extended existence even through periods of famine, war, plagues, and other calamities that have resulted in other cities being abandoned or destroyed. There is no good way to test this claim.

Is Cidium an exclusion zone?

The Fekling Sherpa is a man who sits upon the top of Mount Sanak. He is a mystic capable of changing his species, as confirmed through entads that respond only to a certain species. He has, though his own free will, not left the mountaintop, and it seems likely that he will die there.

Is this an example of an enpersoned exclusion zone?

In practice, the discussion of exclusion zones has largely been defined by the outsized impacts of both the calamities that have followed in the wake of ‘exclusion events’ and the loss of major magics from the world. Many of the most well-known exclusion zones are some of the most dangerous places on Aerb. A great number of them need specialized monitoring or surrounding defenses; despite the inherent dangers — or in some cases because of them — some people continue to live in

the exclusion zones, venture into them, or research the phenomenon. Because of this, common understanding of *what an exclusion zone is* gets dominated by clear, obvious, dangerous, bright-line cases.

It is entirely possible that any of the three examples listed above *are* subject to the meta-phenomenon of exclusion. It is also possible that a number of the exclusions contained within this book are *not* actually subject to exclusion.

Exclusions have inevitably been tied up in the nitty-gritty of government bureaucracy, and the distinctions between ‘Major’ and ‘Minor’ exclusions in particular often say more about the political forces at work and the monetary, logistical, and legal machinations at play than about the actual danger of any given exclusion. Similarly, because of the funding available for exclusions, certain things which are manifestly *not* exclusions have occasionally been labeled as exclusions, though reforms have curbed this practice.

That brings us to the second question, one which is of arguably greater importance: why do exclusions happen? Sadly, there is no one specific answer to this question, but the best working understanding at present is that *exclusions happen in order to prevent degeneracy*.

As with our working definition of what an exclusion *is*, our definition of *why* an exclusion happens immediately runs into some difficulties. What does ‘degeneracy’ mean? What does ‘prevent’ mean? And does this apply to all exclusions?

The easiest and most central examples are those phenomena which would, if not checked through exclusion, spread throughout the entire world. Bowdler’s contagious redaction would have removed core ideas from the minds of most mortal species. The entire world might have fallen under the spell of Herront, loyal to the bitter end. Aerb might have been overrun with Doris Finches, or smothered in a layer of glass, or merged together into a solid piece of metal.

Yet there are other exclusions where the question of ‘degeneracy’ causes some scratching of heads.

The world would be *different* if Elisha Blue’s ‘zombies’ could be created by any necromancer with a bit of schooling and skill, but it wouldn’t mark the end of civilization as we know it. In fact, given the sanctions and restrictions that have been levied against Blue-in-the-Bottle, there’s a strong argument to be made that nothing much would change at all: imperial society as a whole has rejected that approach to labor, so exclusion does nothing in particular, the ‘degeneracy’ or even just ‘change’ having been stopped through terrestrial political means.

The people of Corflowers are compelled to protect an entad hat, but is this ‘degenerate’? It’s very difficult to say. Certainly the Hat of Brilliant Protection is powerful, and the Cult of Brilliance is strong, but it doesn’t appear that they would be all that much stronger if the

hat weren’t excluded. When people invoke ‘degeneracy’ arguments, they might imagine that the hat would have spread its influence far and wide, infecting every head of state, turning all of mortal society towards the singular purpose of guarding a long hat. This seems far from an assured outcome though, and was even less likely at the time of its exclusion.

Demiplanes, a historical phenomena of created extradimensional spaces of immense size, do not seem degenerate *at all*. Why should it matter at all whether there are ten or a thousand of them? If demiplanes still existed, we might find them at the heart of major cities, expanding real estate and providing fertile farmlands, but in what sense is this degenerate? How does that exclusion fit within our working definition?

Contrarily, we can look at certain things which have *not* caused exclusion.

Radio is now an accepted and widespread technology, but at the time, there was significant concern that instant mass communication of voice would cause exclusion. Certainly radio is widely accepted as one of the most notable advancements in the last two hundred years, responsible for reshaping society and culture. Why was it not excluded?

Similar questions can be applied to a number of historical advancements which have served to reshape society in different ways. The extensive train networks that crisscross Aerb, the Bessemer process of steel production, the ubiquity of warding, the integration of teleportation keys as a mass transit solution, all of these things are examples of things which have demonstrably changed the world and society writ large in various substantial ways. Many of these *might* have caused exclusion, or were, at the time, thought to possibly call down exclusion.

One of the things we can see when looking at things which *weren’t* excluded are those which have had wide-ranging effects which didn’t apply to mortals. From this, we conclude that exclusion is *mortal-centric*, though this isn’t a firm rule. Through history, many events have killed entire species, sometimes in a single fell swoop, other times more sedately, as with the slow withering of the Calmandar. On occasion, this has even happened to one of the mortal species. Yet while rampant magic has wiped entire genres of creature from the biology books, this has not happened to the mortal species as a whole. Notably, certain exclusions cover effects whose rampancy would *only* affect the mortal species, such as those that impact consciousness, reading, or civilization.

In the end, exclusion leaves more questions than answers, each new one pinning the puzzle more firmly in place but not resolving it. We can but stand back, hoping that it will be revealed in time for us to do something about it before the last of the magic slips out of the world.

DM: An exclusion is whatever I want it to be!

Exclusions and the Empire

The Empire of Common Cause is the large, dominant umbrella government of Aerb, and has laid judicial claim to exclusions through consent of its member polities. While this claim is relatively uncontested, many exclusions were once a part of member nations, and certain other exclusions are themselves *still* member nations, or non-member nations which are a party to certain treaties. The muddled legal nature of exclusion jurisdiction aside, the EoCC has been largely successful in staking claim to the world's exclusion zones, and a small portion of the imperial budget is set aside for administration, defense, and research of exclusion zones.

The Department of Special Threats: The EoCC's sprawling Department of Special Threats is responsible for exclusion zones and exclusions, including exclusion response, diplomacy with empersoned exclusions, exclusion monitoring, and exclusion research.

Most exclusions under the purview of Special Threats have little more than a field laboratory somewhere on the edge of the exclusion, manned by a handful of scientists, many of them on loan from an institution of learning rather than actual employees of the empire. These facilities are often run-down, some dating back to the Second Empire, in part because of a perception that there is little to be learned from many of the exclusions and no possibility of exploitation.

In cases where there exists some threat to those outside the exclusion, a utilitarian magestone watchtower is often constructed, offering a view of as much of the exclusion zone as possible. This is often accompanied by a magestone wall around the exclusion zone.

Minor exclusions, which often have people living within them, are often administered completely by Special Threats, which acts in the stead of any local government. This is only a rule of thumb, however, as

certain exclusion zones are not conducive to anything resembling governance, and others have functional governments which have survived the exclusion.

A typical outpost on the edge of an exclusion zone contains at the very least an outpost commander, research director, warden, and arcane specialist, though these roles sometimes overlap, and the size of any given outpost depends on the specifics of funding, the involvement of other institutions, and the nature of the exclusion itself. Typical activities include reconnaissance, policing the border, and handling any potential breaches ('spillover' in the parlance of Special Threats, as distinct from an exclusion break).

Many major exclusions are survivable with the right equipment, and a Special Threats outpost is always equipped with the capability to safely enter the exclusion zone, where possible. Additionally, those at the outpost are subject matter experts at the phenomenon within the exclusion zone, usually with some built up institutional knowledge of the conditions and problems within.

DM: Who is 'in charge' of exclusions is one of those things that's easy to change for a tabletop campaign if you're intending to lift one of these out and transplant it. Most exclusions don't actually need big daddy government to be a part of things, but the EoCC can provide some good hooks, since on occasion they might require the services of contractors who are willing and able to venture into the exclusion zones, a job that might be suitable for your adventuring party. Alternately, the EoCC or its equivalent might take on an antagonistic role within your campaign, the cancerously large bureaucracy taking on the role of a secondary antagonist, or at least a speed bump that becomes part of the adventure.

It's just as easy to not bring in all the imperial baggage and have the exclusion zones be 'free' places within the world, not anyone's responsibility. If adventurers want to go there in order to loot or gain some forbidden knowledge, their lives are forfeit, but it doesn't necessarily need to be the business of a government somewhere.



PUBLICAN

Code: PUEZ

Types: Minor

Date: 254 FE

Summary: The Publican Exclusion Zone (PUEZ) is home to roving taverns looking for people to sleep and eat inside of them. The aggressive nature of these taverns makes the zone dangerous and chaotic, though a properly prepared visitor can follow certain rules and learn to thrive within the environment.

History: The world originally held a large number of wandering inns, places that were able to pick themselves up when business was slow and settle themselves down in a more prosperous area. The original inns were classified as a type of domesticated magical beast, though they are not biological in nature, and ‘domesticated’ has always been suspect. Each was ‘piloted’ by a publican, who helped to serve customers and make occasional repairs to the taverns, which greatly extended their lifespan.

As time passed, the care and feeding of taverns became more streamlined, and being publican for one of these taverns became a well-regarded job, with institutes of learning devoted to teaching the craft. With this came demand for more taverns, which were by this point being used for other purposes, such as hospitals and markets. The reproductive cycle of the moving taverns was a mystery until 193 FE, when it was discovered that taverns lay eggs under certain conditions, and from that point forward, effort was made to collect and nourish these eggs, done largely by sleeping next to them and providing warmth and psychic energy. In 213 FE, the

method of fertilization was discovered, and from that point forward, breeding programs were started by the Second Empire in an effort to create mobile housing and other buildings.

The exclusion in 254 FE appears to have been the result of a new strain of tavern, this one with a low lifespan and high reproduction rate. Once exclusion occurred, every tavern outside the zone became immobile, and the profession of publican slowly died away. The taverns became feral, and little effort was put into the problem until it was too late to do so effectively. The wide open plains in the area of exclusion were also, at the time, unexploited, which meant that the costs involved in killing off the last of the roving taverns would have been much higher than the expected returns. Additionally, it was policy of the Second Empire to continue investigation into exclusions in the hopes that they could be turned to productive use.

In the modern era, the taverns are allowed to run around as they please, though there are only perhaps a hundred mortals within the exclusion zone to serve as patrons. Most taverns have a lifespan of ten years and never have a single patron before they are eventually worn down by younger, more virile taverns. The final fate of most taverns is to collapse, with their parts eaten by the others.

Features: The taverns largely move with the help of legs which are made of magical wood, generated from thin air by the magical nature of the tavern itself. When young, most of the material the taverns are composed of is generated from nowhere (or possibly from different

elemental planes, particularly the elemental plane of wood), but as they grow older, more and more material is scavenged. In its resting state, a moving tavern tends to be difficult to distinguish from a man-made one, as the legs tuck up inside, though they always lack a proper basement.

The PUEZ consists largely of the Trampled Plains, an area where approximately a hundred thousand taverns roam. Taverns are capable of taking in materials for use in their own construction, at least when they're young, and have long since eaten any tree in the area, which creates a stark border on the eastern edge of the PUEZ.

In the southeastern area of the PUEZ is a graveyard of taverns. While the taverns will take in building materials in their younger ages, they also generate material as they grow to their minimum size. This results in extra material being added to the zone whenever a tavern dies, which is a somewhat regular occurrence. The 'graveyard' appears to be a result of the peculiarities of the tavern's lifecycle, where older taverns are likely to seek out materials for their self-repair. As these attempts at self-repair often fail without a publican, a feedback loop has resulted, with the injured taverns going to the site of dead taverns and dying there themselves. A few taverns have been able to sustain themselves here, and tend to be large, old, and mean.

The northern regions of the zone are populated by a small group of mortals, who largely live in taverns that have been cared for by a handful of remaining publicans. These taverns are relatively safe places to be, as the large, old, well-kept taverns can fend off the small, young taverns that would try to steal their customers.

Outside those older taverns, the zone is considered uninhabitable, as the small, young taverns would bash

against each other attempting to pick up a patron, usually resulting in the potential patron's death. Even if a person could safely enter one of the smaller taverns, they would find that conditions are not amenable to long-term living.

JUNIPER: These had a brief appearance in one of our games, though there it was just one moving tavern, and the implication that they were a species of their own didn't come until later. I think I have a tendency to create moving or thinking buildings, which might just be a general instinct to anthropomorphize. These are sub-sapient, which I'm incredibly thankful for, since it would have been very easy for them to have human-level intellect. That would have made the exclusion zone a very sad factory of suffering, instead of just being a bit depressing.

DM: This one works well as not being an exclusion at all. Maybe there's just a fertile valley full of these moving taverns, where conditions are just right for them to grow, run around, and thrive, and only the oldest and strongest of taverns can survive outside it. A good hook would be for the party to fall asleep in a tavern on the road and wake only to find that their tavern has moved at night, returning to the valley in order to lay fresh eggs. Alternatively, they might learn about the valley from whispers and go there in order to secure one for themselves. An animal-like tavern serves as a great base of operations, and provides fodder for all kinds of adventurer-friendly quests, like wanting a special type of wood to increase the tavern's speed and vitality, or needing the equivalent of a vet when it's eating something it shouldn't have.



DORIS FINCH

Code: DFEZ

Types: Major, Empersoned

Date: 436 FE (approx.)

Spoilers: Yes

Summary: The Doris Finch Exclusion Zone (DFEZ) contains millions of identical copies of a woman named Doris Finch.

History: At the age of fifteen, a young human girl by the name of Doris Finch discovered a novel field of magic that allowed her to create copies of herself and whatever she wears or holds. For several years after that, she came to grips with her power, creating more and more duplicates, until eventually taking over the entirety of the area of what is now the DFEZ. It is theorized that this magic is actually a distant relative of the same magic that allowed the copyclans of the Higarth Kingdom to function, though the slow speed of historic copyclan growth calls that into question, and the copyclans themselves did not survive to the time of the First Empire.

Since the overrun of the exclusion zone, numerous attempts have been made to accomodate the so-called Republic of Doris Finch. These attempts have met with limited success, if not backfiring outright. Entads, which Dorises can keep eternally if they're willing to create and kill copies of themselves every twenty-four hours, are one of the strongest advantages the Dorises have, but attempts to introduce entads into the DFEZ often result in one-sided use, hoarding, and other unanticipated knock-on effects that primarily result from the Dorises

being their own worst enemies. Deals made with the Dorises are often reneged on, and in the modern day, entad introduction is banned by the Empire of Common Cause pending certain concessions. These include an elimination of void weapons and a total ban on research projects within the DFEZ, both of which are sticking points for the EoCC.

The ability of the Dorises to make temporary copies of entads and materials would have made it a valuable trading partner. Instead, it didn't take long for outside forces to begin the unethical exploitation of the Dorises, which largely consisted of creating warded bunkers on the edge of the DFEZ and inducing duplication through threats. The bodies were then tossed through a particularly strong annihilation ward, or less sustainably, dumped further into the zone, with the entad copies and materials harvested. The EoCC eventually put a stop to this practice, and currently prohibits entry into the DFEZ.

Features: Doris Finch can create copies of herself, given relatively short amounts of time (originally five minutes, now as little as half a second) and with no cost in terms of resources. These copies have minds of their own and are physically real for almost all purposes, with very few exceptions, the biggest of which is their inability to leave the exclusion zone. At present, there are approximately nine to ten million copies of Doris Finch within the exclusion zone. These copies have a variety of divergences, primarily in terms of training, with various 'strains' or 'branches' of Doris Finch having learned blood magic, star magic, steel magic, pustule

magic, bone magic, fire magic, and a few others. Now visibly in their thirties, these copies of Doris Finch no longer age, for reasons unknown, even to the Dorises themselves. Copies retain all materials and equipment that the original did, but this material likewise cannot leave the zone, and will decay to nothing after twenty-four hours. Duplicated materials can be duplicated ad nauseam, which allows for something that was about to decay to be copied with a full ‘timer’. These copies cannot be made without creating another Doris Finch.

Once consisting of temperate forest, the DFEZ has long been stripped bare of any trees, leaving the area desolate. Because the Dorises commonly create copies and then kill them in order to reset the timer on their equipment or engage in cannibalism, corpses are a common sight. Ad hoc dumping grounds have given rise to a unique biosphere of flora and fauna which feed upon human food sources, with many examples of hypertrophied fungi, mosses, and vermin. Some of these are used by the Dorises in their makeshift economy, but many are simply pests that the Dorises are forced to live with and unable to fully kill.

The central location of the DFEZ is Dorisopolis, a city made almost entirely using crude steel magic, where

the large majority of Dorises live and work. The city is divided up by its buildings, almost all of which are their own coherent entities, guarded so that there is some semblance of controlled entry and exit. The city itself is typically controlled by one of the larger gangs, though whether in whole or in part varies depending on the fortunes of the individual strains of Dorises, with the combat mages typically being the most powerful and the utility mages enslaved or otherwise coerced into doing work.

Outside of Dorisopolis are the Outskirts, which are often used for farmland, though the farms require heavy fortification in order to prevent theft or destruction. A large portion of the land is unusable for crops as a result of oversaturation with bodies.

The DFEZ is surrounded by a thick magestone wall, largely to prevent anyone from entering. At various points near that wall are former exploitation facilities, where Dorises were used in highly unethical industrial processes. Following an imperial ban, these facilities are all now shuttered, with some of them having become housing for Dorises.



ZENTRIA

Code: ZEZ

Types: Major, Entad

Date: 91 FE

Summary: The Zentria Exclusion Zone (ZEZ) is a circular area approximately twenty-eight miles in radius where space is warped to an extreme degree. Starting from the edge, driving to the center of the exclusion would take hundreds of thousands of years. Travel toward the center of the exclusion, even by degrees, greatly exacerbates the time needed to travel away from the center.

History: The appearance of ZEZ immediately followed the forge frenzy which created the Zentria Scepter in 91 FE. As no one has seen the entad in question, the name for the zone is apocryphal, coming from a local legend. From the time of the exclusion, the ZEZ has been remarkably stable.

Starting in 93 FE, numerous expeditions into the ZEZ have sought the center of the zone so that the Zentria Staff can be recovered and possibly shut off. As the exclusion is relatively small from the outside, the impetus for these expeditions is largely due to curiosity or prospects of financial exploitation.

Beginning in 112 FE, the zone began seeing use as a dumping ground. Because conventional escape from the zone quickly becomes practically impossible once someone has traveled into it, and because available space within the zone is so expansive, it makes for a good

place to put problematic things that are difficult to destroy. These things include dangerous monsters, powerful weapons, hazardous entads, and material waste.

In 211 FE, the first of the 'Zentrian Natives' went into the zone, seeking to establish a colony there. They had entad support for material needs and a plan to work around the warping space by arranging their town in an arc following the curvature of space, such that members wouldn't become irrevocably separated. This group, like a few others that followed it, was fleeing from the persecution of the Second Empire, and was never heard from again, though some later survey methods have suggested that at least one of the colonies survives to this day.

Features: The ZEZ is a circular zone with a twenty-eight mile radius, largely featureless due to the expanded space. The further into the zone you travel, the more difficult it is to get out of it, and after a mile into the zone, escape becomes practically impossible through non-magical means. If magical means to escape the zone are available, travel into the zone is relatively safe, so long as none of the native dangers are encountered.

From the outside, the zone appears to be simple flat land, tapering off to a false horizon beyond the limits of visual acuity. From inside, the same happens, eventually reducing the view in all directions to a similar false horizon. Because the height of the exclusion zone extends up through the projection layer of Aerb, all areas of the exclusion zone are equally well-lit in accordance with the non-parallax principle.

Little is known about either the Zentrian Natives or the refuse that's been dumped within the ZEZ. While in

theory some of it can be located, the space within the zone is so vast that no explorer would expect to stumble across any of it by accident.

The effect of the entad appears to be a permanent alteration of space, making it impossible to ward against. Because of built-in or physical limits on many forms of teleportation, it is imperative that visitors to the zone know the full capabilities of their equipment and means of escape.

RAVEN: The Zentrian Zone has long been a dumping ground, but most people aren't fully aware of *what* gets dumped there. Both the Infinite Library and Uniquities, along with precursor organizations, have had cause to move the worst of the worst in there, things that we can't destroy, things that we need to indefinitely imprison, things that would kill lots of people if they were to escape. More than once there have been fights won by the skin of our teeth where we had just enough time to wrap something up and teleport it in, sometimes losing a valuable entad as the cost of doing business. The zone itself is relatively harmless, but the things *inside* the zone are worth keeping someone up at night, especially because no one has a full catalog of what's in there.

DM: The ZEZ is good mostly if there's some impetus to travel there, as otherwise it's just a whole lot of nothing. The Zentrian Natives are a good plot hook, whether someone has managed to get a message out, someone took some treasure in and was never heard from again, or whether one of the things that got dumped into the zone needs to be retrieved — or is growing uncontrollably. The particulars of the ZEZ also mean that you can do some interesting battle map stuff: a simple doubling of space in a single direction and halving in the other direction means that players need to pay attention to the compass rose, and those with range need to account for the fact that space compression means they're far more effective from 'upwind'.

Also, from the wording of the exclusion, it should be clear that this *isn't* conclusively excluded, and the Zentria Staff (or whatever is actually at the center) might actually be retrievable with the right plan. Once it *is* retrieved, it would be a powerful weapon to drop in the center of a populated city, but could possibly cause a calamity if it were 'turned off' and all the expanded space collapsed down, releasing who knows what.



FUNNELIN

Code: FNEZ

Types: Major

Date: 66 FE

Summary: The island of Funnelin is surrounded by flying papers that will descend on trespassers to cut them edge-on or pierce them at supersonic speeds.

History: Speciekinesis was a historical form of magic that relied upon duplicates of a crafted item. In its early history, the magic was weak, as the ability of mortal species to make truly identical objects was quite limited: the materials were not homogenous and the level of craft was much lower than in the modern day. The invention of precision tools allowed for far more exacting duplicates through stamping and casting, and as time went on, it became easier to remove impurities from the base materials, particularly through the use of wards. A master speciekineticist would stake their claim on a particular object, gaining power over that object in proportion to its number in the area and the specificity of their production. This power could be used to see and hear through the objects, as well as to move them.

Early speciekinesis was used largely by people who served as Masters of the Mint, as a group of them could have coverage over a number of different denominations of coinage. Given the power of the coins, they could listen to conversations miles away, and often served a dual role of spymaster. In combat, they would summon hundreds of pounds of coins and fight in a swirling cloud of money, but more often, they would be employed in

a more utilitarian role, checking to see whether coinage was clipped or counterfeit. Because so few objects could support a speciekineticist, the magic was relatively niche for a long time.

During the era of the First Empire, several advances were made which were of enormous help to speciekinesis. Consistency of materials, large-scale factories, standardization, interchangeable parts, an interconnected population, and a number of other innovations led to far more potential keystone objects, which allowed more working speciekineticists. Items which had never been regular enough now became candidates: paper, nails, candles, textiles, containers, bricks, and all sorts of others allowed a flourishing of the magic, along with unprecedented opportunity for spying. Because of this proliferation, secrecy became much more difficult, and it became standard practice for politicians and military personnel to wear custom-fitted clothing, to empty their pockets before meetings, and to sit in 'bespoke' rooms.

By 66 FE, the sheer scale of replication had made speciekinesis into one of the most powerful magics of its time. The number of coins minted by the First Empire under their common currency program meant that whichever mage had claimed it would have kinesis out to a range of a hundred miles and senses out to a thousand. While staked claims were unique, and no object shared by practitioners, they were also uncontrolled, and any unclaimed object could be staked by anyone at any moment. Late in 66 FE, the speciekineticist who had control of the standardized paper used throughout

the then-crumbling First Empire died, and his claim was picked up by an unknown person.

Where the unassuming bookkeeper and librarian had tracked books, the new mystery practitioner caused havoc, ripping pages from books with seeming abandon and moving them hundreds of miles through the air in a vast stream of paper. Almost the entire continent of Auberlo was divested of its books, with libraries, bookstores, and home collections raided from afar. As the pages reached the island of Funnelin, the power of the (presumed) speciekineticist at its center grew, allowing greater range, and for a few brief days, it seemed as though the entirety of the world might lose every scrap of written material. Instead, exclusion struck, and while Funnelin became an island of moving paper, polities around the world were suddenly rendered deaf and blind by the loss.

While it has never been confirmed that there *is* a practitioner at the center of Funnelin, which was largely uninhabited prior to the Migration of Pages, some presume that this is an empersoned exclusion zone. Attempts to breach the zone's border and test with the help of a former speciekineticist have proven difficult, as the hostility of the zone and need for large stores of identical objects are complicating factors.

Features: Funnelin is a small island in the Sea of Ffarm, subtropical and with generally pleasant weather. At any given time, millions of sheets of paper flock around the island, and if anyone breaches the borders of the zone, they will descend with incredible speed, folded

up to pierce through armor or coming in by the edge to slice through flesh. The velocity of these pieces of paper exceeds that of a bullet leaving a rifle.

Who or what lies at the interior of the island is unknown, and the purpose for their book pilfering is *also* unknown. If the zone is empersoned, no one has yet been able to prove it, and given how long the zone has stayed active, it would necessarily be one of the long-lived species. The zone has not appeared to slow or stop at any time, leading to some speculation that the potential empersoned being does not need to sleep, and contrarily, to speculation that the magic has somehow been detached from a person.

While the exclusion zone is relatively innocuous at present, and the inciting incident largely a matter of property damage and theft as books and pages flew toward the island, it has remained of special interest for centuries, namely because a few of the books that were stolen were irreplaceable. Careful monitoring of the papers that fly around and defend the island have shown that they are largely blank, leading many to believe that the more valuable stock might be located within some sort of unseen fortress.

JUNIPER: The whole ‘masters of the mints spy through coins’ thing is apparently the source of a whole host of expressions on Aerb. It’s why they say ‘money talks’ and why they call their smallest denomination ‘cents’ (they were historically used to sense things). These are some terrible puns, even by Aerb’s standards.



CONTRA-ETHEREAL

Code: CEEZ

Types: Minor

Date: 171 FE

Summary: The Contra-ethereal Exclusion Zone (CEEZ) contains a hole which leads to the astral plane.

History: The astral plane was known to star mages for centuries before any way to enter it was discovered. Long thought to be a cousin to the ethereal plane, and occasionally called the ‘contra-ethereal plane’, the astral plane was considered to be a curiosity that was lacking a purpose for the mortal species, of interest primarily to scholars and philosophers.

In 45 BE, the first successful breach into the astral plane took place, fueled by the creation of an ink mage. The journey lasted for five seconds, seriously wounding the mage, but it proved that such a trip might be possible. For a decade, scholars at a number of athenaeums attempted to replicate the feat with better magical and mundane precautions, and in 33 BE, a method was devised which required only a handful of feathers from a transient myna, a magical beast which was capable of natural transit through the astral plane. With protections in place, repeated trips to the astral plane could be safely made, allowing detailed study of its features. By 29 BE, it was discovered that extended time within the astral plane awakened some small ability to manipulate it, and the first astralnauts were inducted.

Use of the astral plane remained limited for much of this early history. The astral plane was largely a black void, navigated through instrumentation rather than vi-

suals, and the only major feature that could be exploited was that when one left the material plane, one didn’t necessarily need to re-enter it in the same place. This allowed a very careful and slow form of movement from place to place, done with mathematical precision, which appeared to outsiders as being a form of teleportation. Given the dangers involved, many early astralnauts lost their lives attempting to set records for long voyages.

By 11 BE, a method of transit to the ethereal plane had been discovered, allowing it to be reached without star magic. In 7 BE, the first true cross-planar journey was made, reaching the elemental plane of water, with the elemental plane of earth being reached not long after that. Later journeys to other planes, including the disjoint planes, took successively more preparation and time, with a journey to the elemental plane of iron taking eight months. With the harsh requirements for extended travel, exploitation of the other planes was frighteningly slow.

By 13 FE, astral travel was becoming systematized, with astral ships competing against trains to become the dominant mode of transport. It was roughly at this time that astral natives were first discovered, entire species that lived entirely outside of the planar ecosystems on generation ships. The arrival — or discovery — of the astral natives warranted the intervention of Uther Penndraig, himself an amateur astralnaut, and after a brief period of warfare, the astral natives were scattered to the disjoint and elemental planes. Uther’s astral ship, the *Weatherlight*, sits in a museum to this day.

By the time the First Empire came to a close, the state of the art in astral travel had been advanced to the point of being nearly unrecognizable. As a number of animals and plants native to the material plane could temporarily dip into the astral plane, there were a number of ‘engines’ made which could manipulate a ship, and speeds increased with every passing decade, as well as the ease of entry and exit. Nonetheless, ‘landing’ was almost always a tricky thing, with entry into the material plane being especially fraught when it needed to be done quickly.

In 171 FE, seeking a better method of both launching into the astral plane and returning from it, an attempt was made to create a standing breach. The idea had been that a number of these might be constructed throughout Aerb and on the elemental planes, allowing navigation by more than instrumentation and astral buoys, and bringing the costs of astral travel crashing down. The breach, created by a number of astralnauts with multiple decades of experience each, was successfully placed, but exclusion followed immediately after.

Features: While the astral plane itself is not excluded, travel to and from the astral plane is only possible within the CEEZ. This exclusion appears to have applied to every creature capable of astral travel, as well as all astralnauts. Because of this, anything that exits into the astral plane will have nowhere to go. Attempts at inter-planar travel have not succeeded.

The astral plane is an unforgiving environment. There is no air to breathe, no light to see by, and no way to navigate except through specialized instruments which no longer exist or through the skills of a veteran astralnaut, who are all either dead or long-retired. There is nowhere to go. While there are very few creatures that inhabit the astral plane, those that live there have congregated around the portal, greatly increasing the density of threats in this one particular area.

When the breach was first created, huge amounts of air rushed in through it, a consequence that had been unforeseen by the astralnauts who created it. The low pressure and rushing winds in the area killed much of the plant life, and it wasn’t until 178 FE that the portal was partially blocked off via warding. In 211 FE, the Second Empire built a domed structure to contain the portal, both protecting against the loss of atmosphere

in the area, as well as from creatures capable of getting in from the astral plane. Following the collapse of the Second Empire, the structure went without repairs, and the collapse of a section of the dome in 442 FE caused a shift in allocation of funds by the EoCC to ensure that safety could be maintained in the region. Warnings have been issued that deterioration of the dome is ongoing and more funding is needed. Roughly two hundred thousand people are considered ‘at risk’ if the dome should suffer catastrophic failure, though many of them would have time for evacuation before low pressure made the area uninhabitable.

JUNIPER: It’s not actually the astral plane, within the cosmology of the world. I think it’s better to think of what they call the ‘astral plane’ here as being the place where other things *aren’t*. The hells have some distance between them and the elemental planes do too. Clearly there’s some concept of things being apart from each other. To me, calling it a ‘plane’ would be like acknowledging that there’s some distance between houses, then calling the space between houses ‘the astral house’. I guess you do want a name for it, but it’s fundamentally different.

AMARYLLIS: This is a key case of an exclusion whose ultimate cause is less clear. We know that exclusion often happens to limit something that would destroy the world, but this one *wouldn’t*. It was a dangerous and stupid thing for the astralnauts to do, but if they had built a containment structure before creating the breach, and done their math properly to know that the in-rushing air would be a problem, there was no particular reason that the general idea of standing portals through the astral plane to connect cities was a bad one. This is a historically important exclusion not because of what was lost, but because it set the stage for the Second Empire’s ERMLs some two decades later. If those laws had been put in place when this had happened, rather than after the fleshsmithing exclusion, lots of pain might have been avoided. There are arguments to be made that the ERMLs and the RDLLE Acts have stifled the progress of technology, but if you look at what a mystery the exclusionary principle really is, most people agree that limitations make sense.



ADAMHAM

Code: ADEZ

Types: Major

Date: 184 FE

Summary: The Adamham Exclusion Zone (ADEZ) is filled with a complex ecosystem of plants and animals, almost all of them deadly to the mortal species.

History: Creationism was an ancient power, possessed by few, which allowed the fabrication from whole cloth of new species of flora and fauna. This process was delicate and time-consuming, requiring specialist knowledge of many biological systems, but the results were bound only by the complexity of the creation. Through Aerb's history, there are many plants and animals that are thought to have been initially created in this way, and as the exclusion did not kill or hinder those creations outside the zone, in many cases it's impossible to tell. Even a few of the mortal species, such as the salin, are suspected to have been created through creationism rather than through other means.

In 874 BE, a creationist elf named Xufo Dirtmarch embarked on a project to create a perfect ecosystem, one that would endure all natural disasters, could thrive in any climate, would resist efforts to remove it, and could endlessly repair itself. His vision was grand, and he knew that the work would take significant amounts of time, but he put himself toward the task along with a group of other creationists who worked under his direction. The Eden Project, a shortening of 'Environmental Den' faced a number of technical issues right from the start, the largest of which was that the interdependent members

of the ecosystem would have to be introduced all at the same time, lest a creature be born which could only eat a plant that was yet to bloom. The solution to this was to ensure that all creatures could come forth from eggs, which could be stored long-term until they were needed. In this way, the ecosystem and components within it could be prepared for later release.

It wasn't until 176 FE, more than a thousand years later, that the founding of the Second Empire allowed serious expansion of the long-running project. Dirtmarch was given the resources he needed, but also reined in, his ambitions confined in scope, changes locked in place. Where Dirtmarch had envisioned a comprehensive ecosystem that would flood across Aerb for the benefit of all mortal species, the Second Empire had been more pragmatic in their goals, if ideologically motivated. What they demanded from the project was resilience against threats, pockets of life that would survive and flourish in the event of various calamities, including some of those prevented in Uther's time and others which were prophesied.

In 184 FE, a first test of the ecosystem was conducted on Zealandia's North Island. While the test was a success, and the spread of the species was contained as planned, it led to exclusion — no further acts of creation could take place, save for within the quite dangerous zone. With great effort, a small area of the zone was carved out by the Second Empire, and Dirtmarch's work continued. Eventually, guerilla efforts in 196 FE created a breach in the laboratory area, leading to Dirtmarch's death, and

any hope to salvage something from Project Eden along with him.

Features: The created ecosystem of the ADEZ consists of 513 unique species of flora and fauna, though the intervening period has naturally led to some drift in the ecological makeup. The complicated web of life within the zone is incredibly robust, by design, and the dispersal of species over the hundreds of square miles that make up the zone mean that attempts at eradicating any given species are almost certainly doomed to fail without extreme care.

Clades of predators present within the zone possess a wide range of abilities and hunting strategies. The *punjai* are small and leopardlike, with rifled barrels of bone on their back capable of launching high-speed projectiles, as powerful as a high-caliber gun. The *exquicka* are fast, flying snakes, which spit acidic venom at their prey before retreating to a distance to wait for them to die. *Orchidaxi* are large, lumbering predators which can regenerate from almost any form of damage, growing stronger in the process. Each of these were created to counter a specific outside threat, though all of them will respond to members of the mortal species who enter.

Aside from the actively hostile species, half of the flora and fauna within the zone are harmful or potentially fatal in some way. Many of the plants give off noxious gasses or spores, have sharpened spikes or hairs that break off and burrow into flesh, or possess hooks, secretions, or other defenses. Some of the smallest animals, outwardly harmless, may give a quick nip to a passerby that will poison them or transfer a local disease. As creationism was capable of creating unique magical abilities in a species, a number of plants and animals have these defenses (and offenses) as well: the *mirrimi* bird will put a person to sleep, the *choxidac* will scramble memories, and the *beddicac*'s gaze can melt flesh.

While the creatures and plants within the zone are capable of leaving it, the tightly interwoven ecosystem ensures that any one individual which escapes will most likely die without the support of its brethren. To prevent

the ecosystem from pushing out, deep trenches have been dug around it and high steel mage walls have been erected. Additionally, regular efforts are made to prune the edges, where the ecosystem is weakest, either with fire, magic, or other tools. In the event that the ADEZ was left to its own devices for a significant length of time, it's thought that its position on an island would prevent or at least slow down its spread to the rest of Aerb.

Entry into the ADEZ is prohibited by imperial law, and was likewise prohibited during the Second Empire. Despite this, the zone had a long history of poaching, and the extensive border is impossible to effectively secure against a well-funded adversary. While none of the species survive well outside of the ADEZ ecosystem without their dependents, and almost none can reproduce, the high number of magical species still make poaching worthwhile, as there are species within the zone that can be obtained nowhere else.

DM: The ADEZ is a horrible jungle where everyone is trying to kill you, and to my embarrassment, I haven't actually made a full list of 513 species. Most of the dangerous plants can be modeled as environmental hazards, with some of the inflicting diseases and others status conditions. Most of the dangerous animals would serve as combat encounters.

As for what the players will actually *do* within the zone, the idea of a biolab buried in the jungle is my idea of a good hook, not only because it sparks the imagination, but because there are all kinds of neat twists that can be done across a few different stages. The jungle gives way to a ruined laboratory, and the ruined laboratory gives way to a refurbished section where some wannabe Dr. Moreau does his work. If that's not enough for you, poachers make for good bad guys, especially if they're not just in it for the money. The plants and animals in the jungle don't just represent money, they represent *power*, dangerous abilities and toxins that might be used for all kinds of nefarious purposes.



VALLEY OF CARDS

Code: VCEZ

Types: Major

Date: 58 FE

Summary: The Valley of Cards Exclusion Zone (VCEZ) is a valley where a self-casting magical deck of cards repeatedly throws out spells at semi-regular intervals.

History: Tarot magic was one of the old magics of Aerb, often eclipsed in its effects by others. A tarot mage would build cards from special materials in a process somewhat similar to ink magic and tattoo magic, which would imbue the cards with magical powers. What made the tarot mages unique was their method of casting, which required pulling one of these cards from a shuffled deck. When a tarot mage cast a spell, he would only know what spell would be cast as the card came up, and would need to make a split-second decision about how that spell would be used.

Generally speaking, tarot mages handled the variance in two different ways. The first was to create a special deck with extremely little in the way of variation. The second was to get as good as possible at dealing with the randomness present in their deck. Due to the diminishing returns on similar spells, elimination of variance was almost never pushed to its limits, as it would reduce the power of the magic too much. Similarly, while tarot mages could bind to more than one deck and use different decks for different situations, this was generally avoided because of the problems inherent in building two decks, binding to them, and making them powerful.

The greatest tarot mage of Uther Penndraig's time was a man named Berria Langmore, who was younger than Uther by a few decades. He served as a companion to Uther's squire Helio and was a contemporary of the Red Mask in Cidium in his later years. He held a deck of enormous power and variety, consisting of three hundred cards, and he had a knack for using unexpected cards in clever ways.

As Berria aged, he became consumed with the intricacies of tarot magic and the possibilities of the cards. Like ink magic and tattoo magic, the possible effects of the cards had a very wide range, and Berria thought that he could grasp possibilities that were completely beyond others, enough to become a legendary master of a magic like Uther had been. Unfortunately for him, all the low hanging fruit had been picked by tarot mages before him, and the costs of pushing the boundaries of the field were only increasing, especially as the First Empire began its slow decline and eventual dissolution. Given that, Berria sought out the patronage of a shah, who was willing to fund the acquisition of rare materials necessary to create novel, experimental cards. The process began in earnest in 45 FE, with Berria's workshop and assistants dedicating themselves to the task.

The first breakthrough came with manipulations to the deck and the process used by the magic itself. While 'riders', cards which added their effect to a next card that was drawn immediately had been known and used for a long time, Berria was able to push this idea to its limits by adding to his immense deck new cards that would immediately draw and cast two additional cards,

display future cards, or seek out specific counterpart cards. This improved the consistency of tarot magic enormously, with the variability of Berria's enormous deck plummeting over the following years. This, in turn, made testing of future cards much easier. Because each of these cards had to be individually crafted at great expense, Berria was one of the only beneficiaries of these advancements, though he had pledged that upon his death the deck would be passed on to the shah's nephew.

Berria was driven by his love of tarot and the systems inherent within it, the possibilities that could unfold from the cards and the ways in which the effects from the deck could spread out into the world. Berria's thoughts are known from an extensive personal journal, a copy of which happened to be outside the zone at the time of exclusion. In it, he talks largely about the wonder and mystery of the rules that governed the magic, and his ideas for how they might be manipulated, going into heavy technical detail with an unmatched enthusiasm. It cannot be overstated how comparatively rare tarot magic was at the time, with perhaps only a thousand practitioners across the whole of Aerb. Berria was pushing the magic for its own sake, consumed by what he thought he might uncover.

In 58 FE, the Deck of Many Things came into what would be its final form. The combination of cards within it allowed for an unending chain of spells, and unfortunately for Berria, this chain proved to be unstoppable. By that point, the deck held well over five hundred cards. It was a thing of raw power and possibility, and while Berria attempted to contain it, it soon laid waste to the valley in which his workshop was located. Berria himself perished while trying to get the deck under control or divert the stream of spells in harmless ways, but the deck continued on, as it has to the present day.

Features: The Deck of Many Things currently sits in the center of the Valley of Cards, casting one spell every six seconds. This rate is approximate: because of the nature of these spells, some are cast two or three at once, and every month or so, a calamitous chain of spells known as the Straight Flush occurs where almost the entire deck is cast in a single go. Due to Berria's journal, the contents of his deck have been almost entirely reconstructed (see Addendum II). Inherent randomness of deck ordering and card selection effects gives rise to the variation in how the Deck of Many Things expresses itself, and several statistical treatises have been written analyzing the interactions and chains of events that could be produced by the deck.

The outer rim of the exclusion zone, which has been traced with the help of tarot mages, is largely safe from the effects of the Deck of Many Things, save for occurrences that only happen semi-annually due to specific interactions of cards. Closer to the deck, the effects get so thick and intense that they cannot be survived, as trees spring up from the ground, are set on fire, exploded, frozen, put back together, turned to stone, and dissolved into sand by rapid sequences of spells. Specific cards within the deck amplify different spells, combine them, speed up casting, multiply effects, and otherwise vary the raw power of the deck, largely explaining the rare instances of effects suddenly traveling into areas of the zone that had seemed safe.

In 387 FE a researcher analyzed the list of cards within the Deck of Many Things and mapped out a possible natural end state of the chain of spells, which he believed might happen through natural variance if the correct cards were drawn in the correct order. The Deck of Many Things is not actually self-casting, except in the sense that a chain of spells is still ongoing, and if the generated sequence of events were worked to its natural end, the deck would go inert until a new tarot mage tried to use it again.

DM: I wouldn't suggest actually using this zone in a game, not unless you have a compelling hook to get the players in there. Even then, you'll need to put in some work making sure that the phenomena isn't just 'roll on a table of bad effects' and is instead understandable, able to be reacted to, maybe with some kind of flowchart or something. This version of the Deck of Many Things makes for a great McGuffin for players to track down, with a lot of power that might lead to calamity, built by a genius from a nearly-lost magic.

Tarot magic is a great magic for a villain, and I've used it in past D&D campaigns. A standard Rider-Waite tarot deck has 78 cards, and you can just map them to different spells, or invent some new spells, and also do 'inversions'. The major arcana are the cool ones. It's great to have a prop that lets you flip over new cards with an air of drama. Personally, I stacked the deck beforehand, mostly so I wouldn't have to map out 78 cards and write descriptions for the effects that were being used, but also so that I could draw 'The Chariot' at an appropriate time to give the villain a getaway.



SUNSPOTS

Code: SSEZ

Types: Major

Date: 266 FE

Summary: The Sunspots Exclusion Zone (SSEZ) is a wide area of desert where fluctuations in the projection layer cause random bursts of extremely bright and hot sunlight.

History: Aerb's projection layer modulates sunlight, with the yearly variations in the projection layer giving rise to seasonality, and with the regional variations in thickness causing differences in climate. While only known since Utherian times, investigation into the projection layer has been intensive since that point, as the ability to alter the layer would help to change weather, seasons, and climate. Analysis of the projection layer also helped to explain numerous phenomena around Aerb, including the flash-droughts of Limerick, the historical seven-year Deep Winter of the Isles of Cristatus, the Isle of Eversummer, and the boil season in the Tooretoon Sea.

In 231 FE lenticular magic was discovered. This new magic could change the projection layer largely through the dispersal of particulate matter that interacted with the layer's phlogiston. This needed to be accomplished while flying high, and without the interference of dragons, but the effects could be quite powerful.

In 266 FE, efforts to alter the projection layer above Nostrail in order to bring more rain caused a destabilizing event. From that point on, alteration of the projection

layer became virtually impossible, and the destabilized projection layer in the area caused numerous ill effects, effectively destroying hundreds of miles of (largely unpopulated) land.

Features: Technically speaking, the exclusion zone itself — the area in which the magical phenomena occurs — is high in the air, super-atmoplanar and accessible only through flight. The effects of the magic that still roils through the layer at that point have a heavy effect on the ground, which is considered to be a part of that 'zone'. Because the conditions within the exclusion-bounded projection layer are chaotic (if not wholly random), the ground can be affected dozens or hundreds of miles away with little warning, with effect severity mostly depending on projection layer conditions and time of day.

The worst of these conditions are lensing effects, which occur rarely and focus sunlight in a specific spot, creating areas of intense light and heat strong enough to flash boil water, melt sand into glass, and kill anything in its path. While this effect — often depicted as a moving beam of light — is most strongly associated with the zone, it's quite rare. A much more common effect, often happening directly below the area of the zone, is a gradual increase of light and heat beyond survivable temperatures. Because of this, much of the area directly below the zone had turned into a desert, though several extremophile plants can survive all but the worst of the 'sunstorms'.

While the zone is hostile during the day, at night it's quite docile, with the only danger coming from super-

heated areas of rock, or from the extreme weather that sometimes occurs near the edges of the zone in places where heated air comes into contact with cool air.

Similarly, life at the fringes of the government-mandated ‘zone’ beneath the altered projection layer can be quite pleasant, more similar to a minor exclusion zone than a major one, especially with early warning systems in place. Most public areas have small bunker-sized wards set up against light and heat, which can help to protect people, if not structures, in the event of a calamity.

The SSEZ is often noted as being somewhat the opposite of the NSEZ, which has wrapped a city in darkness. In fact, both exclusions share a source, the projection layer, but where the SSEZ occurs because of chaotic weakening and churning of the projection layer, the NSEZ represents a thickening of the projection layer that lets no sunlight in.

JUNIPER: Aeris is weird. This totally should have been some bad guys trying to make some space lasers rather than well-meaning geoengineering. I mean, if I were designing a setting, and I decided to include space lasers, it would be some kind of James Bond villain thing, and this exclusion zone would be the result of Bond not being able to stop the villain in time. Where’s the villain? Is the villain just people trying to improve their lot in life and failing to take proper precautions? Haven’t been able to find any kind of Rogers Commission Report on this fiasco, but maybe the villain was people ignoring the warning signs.

I’m probably tempting fate here, but there’s no way that I would ever go into an EZ like this one. It’s not a Zone of Adventure, it’s just a hellscape. No loot, only some whack-job people who don’t want to live somewhere sensible. Of course, sometimes someone has a lead on some loot that’s buried deep enough to not be melted through, and sometimes you have to track down a whack-job who’s chosen to live on the fringes of society.

Also I just checked with Amaryllis and if you have a solar-powered entad she thinks that my idea of going to the SSEZ in order to supercharge it would probably work. I might have just talked my way into a showdown in a ruined city as a giant magnifying glass is focusing on me.

AMARYLLIS: People will find a way to live with anything. When I was Special Liaison, I had a chance to meet a few people who represented different populations living in or near exclusion zones. One of them was a nice young man from just outside the SSEZ who had only known that life before getting an appointment by his elders and then taking the long trip to the capital. He was mostly concerned with getting back to his farm. I had occasion to ask him how he could live in a place where he was under threat of lancing sunlight, and to him, it was no different from a place with tornadoes, earthquakes, or flash volcanos.

This adaptability is sometimes considered a uniquely human trait, though there’s not much literature on the subject. Human adaptability is highest among any of the mortal species, and it might be that our propensity to put up with objectively terrible conditions and very dangerous threats stems from the same sort of trait that causes Human Derangement Syndrome.

The man I spoke with shrugged at the notion that he and his countrymen were dying at rates far, far above the imperial average. He thought it was normal to go hide inside a tiny, expensive ward when the sun looked like it might roast him alive. He marveled at houses that were built of wood — wouldn’t they burn down? — and felt ill at ease not knowing where the closest ward was, or failing that, the closest body of water to jump in. In meetings, he would always position himself near a window, and never went long without glancing at the sky.

There were times I’ve looked at the empire, or at Anglecynn, and wondered whether it was all just the same as the SSEZ. The way we did things in committees was ‘the way things were done’, insane to any outside observer. Probably. For a long time, I accepted that, like the farmhand, there was nothing to be done about any of it.



PAPILLION

Code: PPEZ

Types: Minor

Date: 100 FE

Summary: In the Papillion Exclusion Zone (PPEZ), a certain strict list of actions, clothing, and speech must be refrained from in order to prevent sudden accidental death or injury.

History: Butterfly magic was a probability manipulation magic prevalent during the Utherian era. A butterfly mage would release butterflies at specific times and places, ensuring a desired outcome so long as other butterfly mages did not interfere. The most commonly cited example of butterfly magic was its use in warfare during the pre-Utherian Gellim Wars, when competing butterfly mages wreaked havoc across three nations, unleashing powerful storms and disrupting the national financial systems. It is now known that butterfly magic works best on chaotic systems, such as weather, but in its heyday, the exact strengths and limitations of the magic were unknown.

One of the things that made butterfly magic so powerful was that it sat very near the top of the priority ordering of the historical predictive and future-altering powers, second only to pathism. Butterfly magic took into account entads, other magics, other *predictive* magics, chaotic systems, personal choices, elven luck, memes, and almost everything else. The glimpses of the future that a butterfly mage could see were nearly absolute, incapable of being diverted from except through pathism or

other applications of butterfly magic. Several limitations kept it from being a cornerstone magic that saw regular use by every major nation, but in its time, it was among the best at what it did.

As Uther began to implement his reforms, the ordered regimes of the new polities and bureaucracies reduced the chaotic nature of the world, and the butterfly mages lost a fair bit of their power. As a reaction, butterfly mages began to specialize in those areas which could not be touched by the process of reform, and formed communities around their specializations. Two of them — Hurricanitrixes, focusing on weather manipulation, and the Broken Shield which concerned itself with accidents, became especially prevalent. This tight focus on a few areas had the unintended side effect of increasing the depth of understanding of the magic, as the new groups, largely corresponding over huge distances, were able to hone their skills and get better feedback on what worked and what did not.

During the chaos of the Internecline Wars, the Broken Shield school rose to prominence, using their powers for targeted destruction and in some cases, by skilled users, assassination, which came in the form of a butterfly released miles away a week earlier. Used in concert with armed hit squads, the results could be devastating and outsized, allowing a fireteam to kill high-value targets and shift the tides of a war. As the Broken Shield was largely working in concert with each other, very little resistance was possible against them: the butterfly mages had always had, as their greatest weakness, each other.

Toward the end of the Mercio War in 100 FE, a trio of butterfly mages found themselves in a city under siege, trapped by superior forces. As the enemy was aware of their presence, every possible step was taken to minimize their impact, leaving nothing to the whims of chaos or chance. In order to turn the tide, the trio of mages pushed deeper and further with the magic than ever before, and unleashed an entire horde of butterflies at a precise time, intending to rout the enemy army. In this endeavor they were successful, but the magic was excluded, and left a permanent stain on the area, as well as marking the end of butterfly magic.

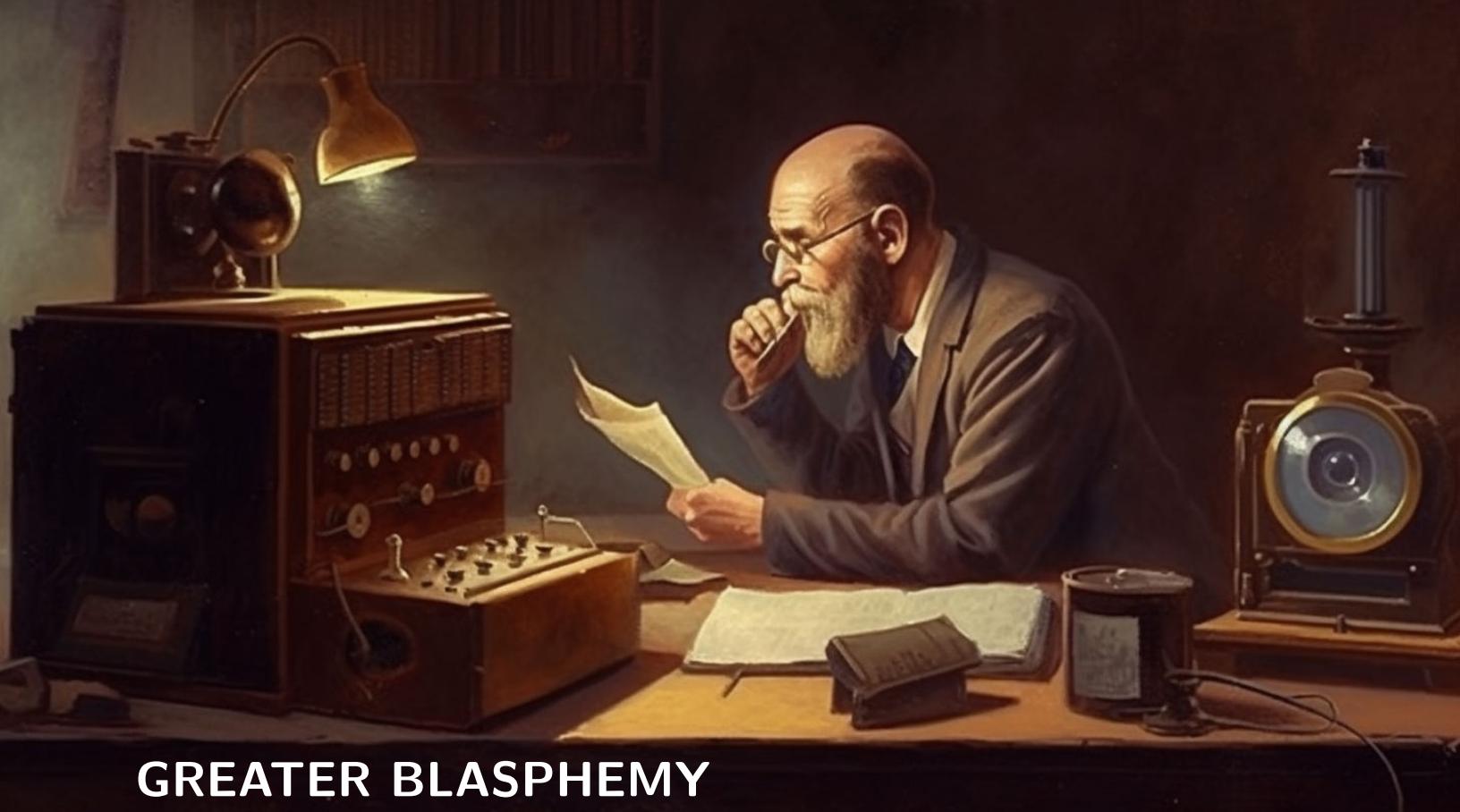
Features: The grand ‘spell’ of the Broken Trio still persists in the PPEZ, in part because they pushed the magic as far as it would go without realizing that it would (or could) last for hundreds of years. The end state they were aiming for was the complete removal of all occupying soldiers from the surrounding area, including those on ships in the nearby bay and beyond. In this, they were successful, but unexpectedly, the chosen effect persisted, and everyone within the zone must still live under its strictures.

The Broken Trio had foreseen soldiers stumbling and falling, snapping their necks, which now happens to cobblers and simple farmers. They had foreseen ships

crashing up against the rocks from unexpected waves, which now happens to merchant vessels and dredging barges. These are all still common occurrences through the Widder Island and the region beyond, manifesting as ‘bad luck’. Particularly affected are those who match with historical accounts of the enemy, who is now so far in the past that neither of the two nations still exist. Specific actions are also known to bring down ‘bad luck’ upon the inhabitants of the island, including the carrying of brooms (believed to be too analogous to polearms or spears), the wearing of the color red (the color of historical opposing officer tabards), and going through certain tunnels or archways (for unknown reasons). The full list of known activation conditions stretches to more than a hundred, though modern scholars are skeptical about its complete accuracy. The small villages that still persist in the zone follow these rules to the letter.

While typically framed as ‘bad luck’, the actual mechanism at play was a form of ‘persistent’ future sight from 100 FE, with the outcomes foreordained but imprecisely specified. Various attempts to disrupt the magic have failed over the years, or worked briefly before failing again. The cause of this is unknown.

Butterfly magic itself was practiced in the zone following the exclusion, but it was severely underpowered due to the confined area, and has now died out entirely.



GREATER BLASPHEMY

Code: BLEZ

Types: Minor

Date: 414 FE

Summary: In the Greater Blasphemy Exclusion Zone (BLEZ), the existence of high-powered transmitters make radio communications dangerous, and conductive materials must be muffled in order to prevent death.

History: The knowledge of certain words of power has long been known to Aerb, but these come in many different varieties, from the common spells, to those within a specific school of magic, to activations on entads, to triggers built by several varieties of wizard. The field of blasphemy studied a subset of these words of power, distinguished by the interactions between different words.

As some of these ‘words’ were quite short, and unstructured spells could be created by accident, most cultures and languages naturally developed a prohibition of certain sounds. In particular, the pharyngeal non-sibilant fricative (‘h’) is used in a full sixty percent of blasphemes, often with repetition, which puts pressure on Aerbian languages to either not include it, to avoid it, or to ensure that other sounds common in blasphemes are not used near it. Languages with a near sound, e.g. the glottal fricative (‘h’), will almost never contain the near low front rounded vowel (‘E’), as mispronunciation might lead to injury or death. With blasphemy now fully excluded, linguistic experts have observed some shifts in speech, and expect more in the coming centuries.

Dedicated study sometime around 2000 BE finally allowed these unstructured words of power to be strung

together in specific, highly formal ways in order to produce purposeful effects — in those early years, this was largely in the form of blasts and beams, raw energy made manifest from the mouths of mages, who called themselves blasphemers (though this ‘blasphemy’ had nothing to do with the gods). These ‘spells’, actually individual ‘notes’ of magical effect strung together in different ways, were quite long, and later study would show that much of what early practitioners had included was redundant to producing the desired effect.

As the centuries passed, the field of blasphemy slowly developed, though given the danger inherent in the magic, and the lack of institutions dedicated to its study, advancement was ponderous and careful. This was particularly due to the fear that someone might come across a written spell and use it without the proper training or precautions — an incomplete or misspoken spell could easily result in the deaths of dozens. Less altruistically, blasphemers, who were kept comfortable by kings and presidents, had plenty of incentive to keep power from the masses. Specialized scripts were used in part so that one would first need to be trained to read them before any spells could be spoken.

During the era of the First Empire, the widespread proliferation of written text that resulted from Uther’s invention of the printing press began to threaten the blasphemers, as did the hugely increased literacy rates that followed in the wake of cheap books and pamphlets. In 36 FE, a book was published titled *Practical Blasphemy*, which contained a full list of spells and a pronunciation guide, intended for home use. Unfortunately, due to a

printing error, one of those spells would cause the release of a noxious gas, resulting in thousands of deaths. Additional ‘spellbooks’ followed though, and for a number of years, household blasphemy was considered an essential part of civilized life. The massive destructive potential of the art was used for lighting fires, chopping wood, killing pests, and other minor tasks. While the spells needed to be cast somewhat carefully, they had been written in such a way as to make slips of the tongue non-lethal.

In 47 FE, as the First Empire was in a slow process of collapse, a new book of blasphemy was put in print, this one meant for war. As literacy was wide-spread and most people had experience with blasphemy through *Practical Blasphemy* and other works, the distribution of these texts led to a spike in the fatality rate of battles at a time when war was becoming more commonplace. During the Battle of Lobster Hill, fully seventy-five percent of both sides were killed or severely wounded. Over the next decade, these extremes would become worryingly common.

In 58 FE, for reasons that are not wholly known, blasphemy was partially excluded to a stretch of land in what is now the Kingdom of Pan. The effect of this exclusion was to knock out a single blaspheme from the dictionaries, which rendered vast swaths of blasphemy that relied on that sound non-functional. This decimated the books that had been used, and rendered certain effects impossible even with workarounds, essentially killing blasphemy as a practical pursuit for well over a century. That area of exclusion is, under current conventions, called the Lesser Blasphemy Exclusion Zone (LBEZ), though it is now dead.

Over time, as more exclusions happened around Aerb, blasphemy once again became an attractive prospect for those seeking power. When the magic found its revival — it had a small core of practitioners through what the blasphemers called the Great Silence — it was in a very different form. With the crucial blaspheme removed, constructed spells needed to be much longer, and blasphemers needed to be more precise, as there was less room for error. Spells were more akin to grand speeches or acts of oration, though the effects produced were only as strong as the much shorter historical blasphemies had been. Nevertheless, the resurgence of blasphemy meant that it had come back into its own, and while it was tightly controlled, its effects proved useful, especially to a few of the Second Empire’s military and peace-keeping campaigns.

In 413 FE, radio was invented by a company called Gallium Ergonomic and swept the world, particularly because a radio could be created using readily available parts from earlier technologies. Its uses for blasphemers were obvious. While recording technologies predated radio by many decades, and had already been used by blasphemers to cast their spells from a distance, radio was on an entirely different level, and with the number

of radios cropping up through different cities, it seemed as though blasphemy would become a dominant magical power. Instead, in 414 FE, it was excluded following the destruction of New Majorit by a spell that went out from hundreds of radios.

Features: The BLEZ was, at the start, what would now be classified as a free exclusion, a place where people could live without any particular worries about the excluded magic, and which was no different from most of the rest of the Empire of Common Cause. For nearly two decades, it was hardly an exclusion zone at all. This state of affairs lasted until 432 FE, when the primary city within the BLEZ, Tapas, underwent a period of terrorism and civil strife. Books of blasphemy were distributed by both sides, including the most compact and readily castable spells (which were still quite long by historical standards).

While both sides of the conflict quickly banished radios, it was discovered that a powerful enough transmitter could turn many conductive objects into accidental resonant antennas. During the conflict, high-powered transmitters were employed that caused immense destruction with huge amounts of collateral damage. Many such transmitters were built, most of them aimed but some omni-directional, and though the conflict has now largely passed, the persistence of these transmitters, many of them ‘ghost’ transmitters of unknown provenance, possibly located outside the zone, represents the largest threat faced to those still living in the zone.

JUNIPER: I tend to hate Words of Power: they’re a staple of fantasy, and they’re also boring. Say spell, get effect is so *simple*, and there’s not that much that you can do with it. Speaking as an activation condition leaves a lot to be desired, and you don’t really get many of those cool moments from it. The best I ever managed was to put a lot of focus on the verbal components of spells, then have a character with two tongues, which actually wouldn’t help you with speech all that much, but worked at the table.

Blasphemy is much more like computer programming than it is like normal Words of Power, and maybe I’m just using programming because that’s what I’m most familiar with. Arthur might have compared it to debate club, or oration, or something like that, the ways in which you can describe anything if you use enough words, the ways you can weave rhetoric and argumentation in order to make your case.

As a magic system, it still kind of sucks though. All the activation conditions in the world don’t make it cool. Watching out for resonant frequencies when designing a toilet because rogue transmitters might turn it into a bomb? *That’s cool.* I mean, it’s not cool, because peoples’ toilets are exploding, but conceptually it works.



MENDEL

Code: MFEZ

Types: Minor

Date: 231 FE

Summary: The Mendelian Fauna Exclusion Zone (MFEZ), also simply known as Mendel, is an exclusion zone and city-state, home to an isolationist species created through magical breeding.

History: Mendelian breeding was a form of magical breeding used to create many species of flora and fauna throughout Aerb's history. Although often compared to creationism, the key difference between the two was that while creationism allowed for the creation of organisms *de novo*, Mendelian breeding required breeding stock and deviated from that stock only through successive generations of offspring.

While most breeders worked in husbandry and agriculture, ensuring that each generation of crops or animals would be better than the last, by the time of the Second Empire, concerted efforts were made to improve the populace at large as part of the imperial eugenics programs. Mendelian breeders had long used their magic on their own offspring, often in secret, but starting in 117 FE, efforts were put into pursuing targeted breeding of the mortal species on a large scale. As breeding magic required close proximity at the actual moment of fertilization, this presented some challenges, and was easier to accomplish for species where this process could be controlled, especially egg-laying species with external fertilization.

The tywood, a lizard-like species that lived in the deserts, were eventually chosen as a grand project of the Empire. The empire sought to have a 'new' species which would make up for underpopulation concerns and allow for rapid expansion of new cities. While not the first created species, the eventual 'ur-tyr' were one with the most time, money, and expertise put into them. Because rapid generational turnover was helpful to breeders, new generations were made as soon as the previous one had reached sexual maturity, at which point the prior generation was discarded. By 231 FE, many decades of effort had been put toward the effort, and the first full 'crop' of ur-tyr were born to test the traits that had been selected for. It was hoped that they would provide an injection of physical and intellectual power to the Second Empire.

Instead, the ur-tyr engaged in a structured revolt, killing those involved in the project, slaughtering those who were supposed to be organizing their society, and establishing their own city-state with independent governance. The response of the Second Empire to these events was uncharacteristically slow because of the remote location, the lack of strategic assets in the area, and the political black eye of having a major program fail to such a spectacular degree. When it was clear that Mendelian breeding had been excluded, perhaps because of the ur-tyr's efforts rather than the efforts that created them, a decision was made not to spend resources eradicating their micronation.

Features: While relations with the ur-tyr were eventually normalized, the city-state of Mendel has been isolationist for its entire history. Almost no trade goes in

or out of the city, and little is known about its internal workings. Per the current agreement with Mendel, the mortal species are not allowed entry, and those that enter (against imperial orders) will be killed on sight.

Species created by the excluded breeding magic *can* leave the zone, but it is thought that the particulars of the ur-tyr society demand that births of new ur-tyr be selected for by their breeders, which, along with their extreme isolationist stance, has prevented the species from spreading. While the ur-tyr consider themselves to be intellectually and morally superior, they are a relative non-factor on the world stage, which appears to be by their own design. The ur-tyr have a number of colonies on Notstrail, all away from other cities, but their people return to Mendel at regular intervals.

The MFEZ is classified as a minor exclusion, though this is disputed. People can and do live there with ease, but they're all ur-tyr, and arguments have been made that it should instead be classified as Major or Free, depending on particular political arguments. Much of the classification as 'Minor' by the Empire of Common Cause relates to the distribution of resources and personnel that come with that designation, rather than the nature of the zone itself.

RAVEN: The MFEZ isn't a proper exclusion, which creates all kinds of headaches. While the Empire of Common Cause considers it to be a largely harmless city of people who want nothing to do with the world, breeding *does* still work within the zone. As a rule, the ur-tyr aren't directly hostile if left to their own devices, but they've had a long time to take the reins and create their own kinds of horrors, most of which they keep hidden away. Then *I* find out about it because for all their so-called superiority, sometimes they let something slip out that they shouldn't have. The Library has saved the world from the ur-tyr's messes on at least eleven separate occasions. Thankfully, that kind of calamity is easy to spot and stop.

DM: Isolationist cities are a staple of tabletop games, though I think for a proper campaign I would relax the rules slightly, allowing in outsiders under heavy monitoring. It's that, or furnish the party with sufficient disguises that they wouldn't be immediately caught out. The fact that the ur-tyr are born from a magical equivalent to genetic engineering and have a stranglehold on said engineering gives plenty of motive for mucking about in their business. The way they isolate themselves and let no one in gives them an air of mystery and creates some questions about their ultimate plans. It's also *lovely* for international incidents, either for the party to resolve or create.



THE GATES OF LERON

Code: GGEZ

Types: Major

Date: 17 FE*

Spoilers: Moderate

Summary: The Gessim Gall Exclusion Zone (GGEZ) is a blasted landscape of poison, radiation, and environmental hazards of unknown origin.

History: The history of the GGEZ is unclear. Apparently discovered in the Utherian era, it was later rediscovered by the Second Empire hundreds of years later, and not made public until revolutionary forces began sifting through classified documents. There appears to be no magic within the zone to exploit, and no real explanation for the hazards that beset the area, especially as these hazards appear to be weakening over time.

Features: The GGEZ has many poisonous plants and animals in their own hostile ecosystem, though a few attempts at eradication of these species have proven surprisingly effective. More dangerous for the mortal

species is the radiation, which was an unknown property for much of the Second Empire's early exploration and mapping of the area, a creeping death that they had no explanation for. In addition, a number of memetic and antimemetic threats exist within the GGEZ, some of them carved into stone by persons unknown — possibly the Second Empire — and others laying in wait as traps.

The deadliness of the GGEZ has slowly declined over time, largely as a result of the process of erosion and decay rather than because of any active efforts to make it safe. The radiation has weakened considerably from its peak, the poisonous and deadly flora and fauna have grown softer or been killed, and many of the other threats have been neutralized.

Some have suggested that in the modern era, the GGEZ might be reduced to a Minor exclusion, but there has been no one particularly interested in the land. In fact, some have argued that the term 'exclusion' might not apply at all, given that it's unclear what might be excluded there. The labeling of the GGEZ is sometimes seen as a holdover from the Second Empire, but their rationale for that label has not yet been found.

RAVEN: In actuality, the GGEZ hides the Gates of Leron, which lead to a place called the Other Side. Uther traveled there accidentally some five hundred years ago, then had to find his own way back, which took a considerable amount of time and eventually led him to the Gates, which exist there as well as here. He came through, leaving bodies in his wake, buried the Gates in a vault with powerful wards around it, then transformed the surrounding area into as deadly of a place as he could manage, which at the time was incredibly deadly. He had always expected that the Union Empire would find a way to follow him, and the death traps and wards don't just serve their purpose of dissuading people on Aerb, they're also a defense against intrusion.

The Other Side is, essentially, an alternate Aerb, supposedly the opposite 'surface' of the tesselating plane. It has its own magic systems, its own landmasses, its own mortal species, and has two gods rather than Aerb's five. In almost all respects, it's as vast and complicated as Aerb itself is. The major difference, and the reason that Uther did his best to keep it at arm's length, is that the Other Side is under the control of the hegemonic Union Empire. They have a command of resources that the First Empire never had, even at its peak, and a strong expansionist bent. To the extent they ever knew about Aerb, it was with a gleam in their eyes about a new place with billions of people and lots of new magic.

When Uther left, he did his best to block all travel except for the Gates, and he was largely successful in that endeavor. We have a few pieces of equipment that let us spy on them, as well as the ability to remotely monitor the Gates. In recent years, it appears as though they've rediscovered their side of the Gates, excavated out the site, and have started probing at the defenses. It's still more or less the same Union Empire as it was in Uther's day, which should put fear into any right-thinking person, given that keeping imperial control of an entire world for more than five hundred years takes an obscene amount of power. Aerb has fractured apart twice during that time, largely accompanied by war and destruction.

The primary threat from the Other Side in terms of their military capacity is the widespread biomanipulation available to them through two of their major magics. They have a better developed athenaeum system, all under central control rather than butting up against their empire, and they mix their magics more freely, with a 'fusion' approach that has created defined fields of cross-sectional study. The two biomanipulation magics in question are a growing magic and a binding magic. The former allows fleshy plants to sprout fresh limbs and organs, while the latter allows them to integrate with a person. Lifespan is a lot higher than on Aerb, with easier prevention of senescence. Uther had always said that a single one of their soldiers was worth ten of ours, not just because they had better bodies, but because they

typically had decades of training and remained at the peak of youth.

They have souls, but never seem to have discovered soul magic, instead using something called phrenology, which allows them to predict a person's behavior from the shape of their skull, and conversely, alter that behavior by putting bumps or dents in just the right places. It was never clear to me whether the people of the other side were capable of soul magic or not, but from the way Uther talked about it, they were operating under different rules.

Cosmologically, they're in the astral 'shade' of Aerb, cut off from the rest of the cosmology, though they have their own version of demiplanes, which Uther described as being warts on the bottom of the material plane. These pockets of space are smaller than the elemental planes and less varied, but duplicated some of the cosmological functions, including giving access to their own magics, many of which would thankfully not be usable if they made their way to Aerb. There was something I always found terrifying about how Uther described the demiplane of slugs, which he caught a glimpse of while fighting against a trio of slug mages. Slugs, oils, leaves, hair, coal, copper, scales, soy: these all have their own magics associated with them, and are essentially elemental demiplanes, if I understand right. They don't share the hells with us, instead having only a single hell, which is so overcrowded that their version of infernoscopes see nothing but a writhing mass of bodies, the occasional infernal nearly unable to move.

Humans are the only mortal species that the Other Side shares in common with Aerb. They don't have animalia, but do have awakened animals, which have human-like intelligence but not human-like physical features. They've got their own version of halflings, which they call hobbits, with furry feet and rounder features. Instead of elves, there's a race of gemfolk that seem to fill somewhat the same niche. It's difficult to draw comparisons, but you can make them. They have their own dwarves, somewhat similar in appearance to ours, but they're carved from stone which slowly turns to flesh rather than being birthed.

Uther always found there to be something obscene about the Other Side, which went beyond the iron grip of the Union Empire. Having so much *there* left a sour taste in his mouth, and I felt a bit of it too. It was like seeing a plate of food put in front of you when you knew you couldn't possibly eat it all, a bowl of soup that would fill your stomach twice over. For all the adventures that Uther took part in on Aerb, the Other Side seemed like it had just as many, a doubling of what was available to learn and do. I never felt quite so nauseated by the thought as he seemed to be, but I empathized deeply with it.



DOMESTIC

Code: CHEZ

Types: Major, Entad

Date: 233 FE*

Summary: The Domestic Exclusion Zone (CHEZ) is an enormous ‘house’ in a state of constant expansion. While certain areas of it are safe, the vast interior and unpredictable nature of the rooms makes it too dangerous for anyone to live in. The exterior of the house is currently two miles wide and eighty-two stories tall, though its interior is much larger.

History: Created following a forge frenzy in 233 FE, the house at the center of the CHEZ has stayed remarkably steady through the following centuries. It continues to grow at a relatively slow rate, though steadily increasing over time. In 411 FE, the house reached the eastern edge of the CHEZ, and is expected to fully encompass the zone within another fifty years from present.

Through its history, the house has been ‘mined’ for materials. This has always been somewhat dangerous work, since the nature of the rooms the house will create is unpredictable. A relatively low level of worker deaths was long considered acceptable, but on several occasions a fire, explosion, poison, or other sickness would result in so many deaths that the practice of extracting materials from the house would be called into question.

In 455 FE, two incidents brought an end to the practice. The first incident was an explosion from the house, of unclear origin, which killed fifty-eight workers, seventy-two civilians, and destroyed much of the infrastructure which had been used for transporting extracted

material. Nearly all structures in a half-mile radius were obliterated, including significant damage to the house itself, which immediately began regrowing rooms. The explosion, one of the largest recorded in that century, brought into question the continuation of ‘house-mining’, especially as many of those most experienced in delving into the house had perished.

The second, more serious incident, was only uncovered in the wake of investigations following the explosion. It was discovered that a batch of exported wooden beams were toxic to the mortal species and had been responsible for more than three thousand instances of cancer, many of them in children.

In the wake of these two events, the exclusion zone was listed as Major, and entrance was prohibited by Special Threats.

Features: The house, originally named Mercer Manse but now simply called CHEZ, grows on its own, adding new rooms both through conventional outward expansion and through interior extradimensional expansion. When a room is ‘grown’ a door first appears, then struts push out and walls are built until the room is finished. Once it is, interior furnishings appear, and after that, the room is finished. This process happens frequently, especially in the interior, where the rooms exist in extradimensional space.

The architectural style of the rooms largely depends upon the style of other rooms it’s close to, so a trip through the house might start in Utherian Anglecynn style and then shift, over the course of ten rooms, to mid-millenia Francorish. Each room, when created, is fully

furnished, with all the things that would be expected to be found within a room of a specific time and place. While some consistency exists with regard to style, and while the distribution of room types roughly matches those found in the civilizations of the mortal species, two rooms that are next to each other have no internal consistency or relationship. While traveling within the [house](#), it is entirely possible to go through eight living rooms in a row, or find a dining room with three bathrooms coming off it.

The [house](#) has stairs going between its levels, and within the deep interior, multiple sets of stairs have been known to lead an entire mile up or down within the space before ending. For unknown reasons, interior hallways and sets of rooms can dead end, having no further growth. Rooms have not been known to repeat, and while instances of similar rooms have been found, there are always minor differences between any two rooms, such as a different baseboard, wallpaper of a different color, or a couch with six legs instead of four. Given this non-repetition, it is suspected that given enough time, the [house](#) might ‘grow’ one of every possible room, though the [house](#)’s self-destructive tendencies mean that some stable state of generation and destruction might be achieved without any actual ‘completion’. The [house](#) is capable of generating almost any material, seeming to draw from the elemental planes, though is not known to ‘grow’ living material (only dead). Once a room has been fully grown, the [house](#) makes no further changes to it, and will not reset or regrow it, nor repair it, unless it has been more than half destroyed.

The [house](#) grows rooms which are hostile to mortal life, sometimes extraordinarily so. Rooms are grown with poisons in them, which can spread as gas to other rooms, making entire regions of the [house](#) inhospitable. Rooms can be grown with flames in them, which under certain circumstances can spread to other rooms, though the lack of outside air usually stifles these fires before they’ve destroyed too much. Rooms can be so cold that they would freeze a human solid, though temperatures average out over time. Rooms can explode if grown with certain materials, though the relatively slow growth is more likely to mean a continuous reaction than a proper explosion. While rooms do not grow with living things inside them, they are vulnerable to invasion by living

things, and many of the wood rooms have been eaten through by aggressive insects which move in swarms through the [house](#). Certain rooms contain materials or mortal inventions that are dangerous or deadly to mortal life, including bombs, weapons, or traps. Rooms are sometimes grown with liquid, and entire sections of the [house](#) are submerged. Because the rooms are not grown with air in them, there is a constant low pressure area around the exclusion zone, and far into the interior of the extradimensional areas, the air is thin enough that a human might have trouble breathing.

RAVEN: There are strong parallels between the Domestic Exclusion Zone and the Infinite Library, and in a certain sense, one might say that one is for rooms and the other for books, though of course the implementation details differ. Our work is more vital, and so *must* be done in the face of the risks, the poison gasses and volatile materials, the traps and the ways that it becomes so easy to get lost. I’m thankful that the [house](#) doesn’t seem to create books — just squiggles on bound paper — as otherwise we might have been in trouble. I do also wonder about what ‘every room’ might mean, and whether it’s like the Library, only those that have ever been, or if it includes those that might exist, or is simply pulling from its own entad ‘ideas’.

BETHEL: The [house](#) is curiously limited. The rooms are mortal rooms. It anchors the idea of ‘room’ to the mortal experience, a room as a place where a person can enter and do something, or store something, or fulfill some function. The rooms have mortal purpose, and the [house](#) does not create things which are hostile, except in ways that a mortal would make things hostile, on purpose or by accident.

My own rooms are not so limited. There was a time when I would delight in making rooms that no mortal would ever make, when they were absurd and impossible places, outside of mortal conception, rooms that would challenge the meaning of the word and prove not just its subjectivity but the constructed nature of the concept, ‘room’.

Then I would put people in those rooms and watch as they broke.



IRON CHANE

Code: IREZ

Types: Minor

Date: 288 FE

Summary: Within the Iron Chane Exclusion Zone (IREZ) a number of magically enforced rules create oppressively structured living conditions.

History: Jurisdiction was a historical magic capable of enforcing rules onto a geographical area. Little used for most of history, the most common application of jurisdiction was in small, confined areas where a prisoner or suspect could be placed, creating controlled environments. A skilled practitioner could use their magic to envelop a madhouse, school, or other institution, creating strict rules on the grounds. The rules came in two varieties: those which people were forced to follow, and those that held some consequence if broken. While the former was generally preferred, it was more costly and time-consuming to implement, so many institutions went with the latter.

For obvious reasons, jurisdiction was of great interest to the Second Empire, which ran more schools, madhouses, and civic buildings than any single power before it. Intensive research into the precise bounds of jurisdiction followed, and new practitioners were trained up at what was meant to become a new imperial athenaeum — one which gathered together institutionally useful magics which were ‘unclaimed’ by the other athenaeums. Pushing the boundaries of the rules began to cover gaps in what jurisdiction was capable of: while it had never been able to prevent a person from telling a lie, very careful use of the magic could allow, in certain circumstances, a person to suffer a wound across the forearm if they had certain sympathetic responses while speaking. Jurisdiction couldn’t stop a person from ‘running’, but could prevent them from moving at above a certain speed.

The institutional jurisdiction period was an important one during the Second Empire, as two full genera-

tions went through strictly controlled classrooms where the rules were ironclad. Those raised during the period placed a special emphasis on knowing what the rules were, crafting rules to cover corner cases, and punishing those who disobeyed, and historians widely consider the change in schooling to be responsible for some of the major social changes that happened during the middle Second Empire. Jurisdiction worked primarily on directly observable physical phenomena: it would not stop a person from shouting, but rather, stop them if they produce sound above a certain decibel level. Jurisdiction made no judgments on rightness or wrongness, or whether some particular action belonged in a class, only on material facts, and children grew to understand this quickly, carrying it into adulthood.

Further research into jurisdiction allowed it to take on new forms and new paths. The most important of these, and the one which eventually led to exclusion, was the ‘consent of the governed’, a feature of the magic which had relatively little to do with the governmental policy for which it was named. When a practitioner had enough laypeople working together to construct the set of rules, giving their voice to the shape of it and agreeing with the principles as laid out, the magic grew stronger, capable of instituting harsher penalties, covering more ground, and prohibiting actions with greater force.

Exclusion came in 288 FE as a result of attempting a large-scale jurisdiction in the city of Iron Chane. Long beset by crime, one of the ‘fallen cities’ that had been ravaged by the Internecine Wars, the Second Empire saw it as ripe for experimentation in order to help make it a more productive part of their civilization, especially given its prominent position on the Outer Jeshi Sea. The city was enveloped by a number of practitioners working together, and the relatively simple rules were agreed upon and boosted by an absolute majority of the citizens. In total, there were ten strictures that would be followed by all.

The exclusion of jurisdiction was considered a major blow to a number of civil services, particularly education, but for approximately fifty years, the city of Iron Chane was considered proof that the concept had been sound. Crime plummeted, the streets were kept clean, and productivity soared. Retrospective analysis done after the Second Empire had collapsed showed that much of this might have been because of the pressures that the rules created: those who could not handle them fled elsewhere, and many who were ideologically disinclined to this method of law-keeping left the city. By this analysis, the city was not a success for the empire, it only off-loaded burdens to elsewhere.

In 337 FE, the rules in Iron Chane were changed once more, partly in response to the influx of refugees from Lankwon following the collapse of the Second Empire. The initial jurisdictional structure was modified, this time without the full consent of the governed, as attempts were made by the city government to ‘do something’ about the integration of so many people. These efforts, in contrast to the earlier regime, were widely considered to have gone much too far, and roughly ten thousand deaths followed in the wake of the change in rules. These deaths largely stemmed from the anti-vagrancy laws, which delivered harsh corporal punishments against those who had no home.

The loss of population in Iron Chane made adjusting the rules they had constructed difficult, and as the years went on, the population within the city eventually dropped low enough that the rules were essentially fossilized. All modern attempts at changing the rules that govern the city and outlying areas have failed, and efforts to get more people to move to the city have not had much luck.

Features: The city of Iron Chane is bound by the restrictive rules, not all of which are obvious to outsiders, and many of which have loopholes or caveats which are unclear to those who have not lived there long.

The anti-vagrancy laws within the city, originally created in order to force the housing or evacuation of the Lankwon refugees, require that no person can sleep without shelter, defined as a room with four walls and a roof. The penalty for sleeping without shelter is a single deep cut on the upper arm. Unfortunately, the construction of this rule has resulted in the largest number of deaths, particularly because jurisdiction required heavy specification of ‘sleep’. In certain circumstances, falling unconscious counts as ‘sleep’, which means that fainting in the middle of the day while moving between buildings can result in a series of cuts until a person wakes back up, which becomes less likely to happen due to blood loss. For this reason, injured persons are always moved indoors.

The anti-theft laws within the city require payment for all goods, and common custom is to double and triple check your person before leaving any building. This law prohibits both gifting and barter, though the city uses a

system of widely-available ‘chits’ in order to circumvent the rule. These chits must be carefully tracked though, lest they be considered stolen. Given the magic of jurisdiction is unintelligent, the law can also be used to attack a person, as a piece of merchandise slipped into a person’s bag would cause them to suffer the consequence.

The city’s anti-violence laws *do* work to prevent the majority of deliberate physical harm, but surgery is also prevented in roughly half of necessary cases, making the city more reliant on magical healing than other places. The understanding of ‘deliberate’ is also encoded into jurisdiction in imprecise ways, which occasionally results in accidental harm from the rule being applied to the person responsible for the accident — or sometimes the person who had the accident. A person who gets in a car accident can often be hurt twice, once by the accident, and again by the punishment for the harm they caused. The anti-violence laws are also troublesome for another reason, which is that they can be used for nefarious purposes, particularly cornering a victim and assaulting them in ways that jurisdiction does not count as harm. The criminal element within Iron Chane is well aware of the precise limits of these rules and has adapted to them.

For all the problems that arise from these rules, many people prefer living in Iron Chane, particularly because the laws are very straightforward, even if they’re wrinkled in various ways. Many within the city have argued that it should be reclassified to Free, as avoiding harm is, to them, easy, and with the various adaptations around the laws, incidents are relatively rare.

JUNIPER: It sometimes happened on Earth that institutions were chained by the decisions of the past, unable to pivot from them because of built up pressures rather than some magical bullshit. Arthur liked to talk about it some, particularly in the context of law. The Constitution sets up a requirement of two thirds of both Houses, which is a crazily high number when voting pressures will trend toward two parties with equal shares, and the consequence is that the document is basically never going to see a successful amendment in my lifetime. The other big one was *stare decisis*, the principle that precedent needs to be followed when a judge makes a ruling, which he thought was responsible for all kinds of dumb stuff. A single judge, or handful of judges, could make a bad ruling that would constrain all future judges.

It doesn’t match one hundred percent, but I’m pretty sure that I made a magic like this once. The *goal* was to keep the players from using their weapons in the city, since there had been a spate of lawlessness within the party, but they took having magically enforced laws as a challenge. Because I was a good DM, I went along with it, and mapped out some rules for the city they were in that allowed all kinds of heist shenanigans that circumvented very specific understandings of ‘ownership’ and ‘property’ and ‘theft’ and ‘wanton violence’.



LUNAR

Code: LEZ

Types: Major, Empersoned

Date: 357 FE

Spoilers: Minimal

Summary: The Lunar Exclusion Zone (LEZ) is a zone where time repeats at an interval of approximately one month.

History: The Lunar Exclusion happened in 357 FE, which for all intents and purposes is when the ‘lunar magic’ first began. There are some scattered reports from earlier periods which might describe the same thing, but no corroboration can be made that these are the same specific effect. It took some time for the exclusion zone to be identified, as it engulfed a few small villages and not much else. When someone crossed into the exclusion zone, which could be done accidentally, they would be stuck there, a part of the looping time, preventing reports of what was happening in the zone from being made. The zone was eventually discovered through investigations of missing persons, but it took nine months for the border to be mapped: by that point it was winter outside the zone and spring within it, and warning signs were placed around the zone.

Once the effect was known, a brave volunteer crossed through, intent on discovering the nature of the magic, and if possible, stopping it. He would make repeated forays into the heart of the zone, then return to the border to report his findings, his mind wiped every month by the effects of the magic. In this way, it was discovered that at least one entity within the zone, Mikhail Zaman, retained

his memories through the looping time, changing what he did with every iteration. Zaman had started the loops as a young boy of sixteen years old, but was mentally developing as the loops continued. For reasons of his own, Zaman never approached the border of the zone, and so never spoke directly with those outside it.

Circa 382 FE, Zaman began a policy of killing interlopers. The reasons for this change in behavior are unclear, but by this point he had been living the same month for twenty-five years, and certain attempts had been made to disrupt the loop, which might have angered him. At the time, twenty-some operatives from various governments were inside the loop, many of them with quite out-dated knowledge of Zaman and the conditions on the outside.

When radio was invented in 413 FE, it was found that radio waves could freely cross the border of the zone, and efforts were made to equip in-loop operatives with them, which allowed for two-way remote communication with the outside world. This presented some difficulties — the concept of radio and instructions on how to operate it needed to be given ‘fresh’ to operatives — but it gave a better picture of the inside of the loop than before, and Zaman quickly commandeered a radio in order to speak with the outside world. From there, it wasn’t long before he began to make demands using what little leverage he had, asking for remote training on magic or for various things to be pushed through the zone boundary so that they could be a part of the loop.

In the modern day, unsteady relations with Zaman continue. Due to the nature of the loop, it is difficult to

know what he's doing inside the zone, though he appears to be steadily growing in power over time. As no signs of aging or soul decay have been observed in Zaman after more than one hundred and fifty years, there is a good chance that within another few decades he'll be one of the most powerful mages hex-wide. His non-compliance with the mages pact has been a point of contention in repeated attempts at negotiation with him, as has his bouts of cruelty toward those trapped within the loop.

Features: Within the zone, every month is the same crisp spring of 357 FE, with two exceptions. The first is Zaman, who maintains his skills and memories with every reset of the zone, and who is believed to be the individual around whom the magic is enpersoned. He presents as a teenaged human boy with no other notable features, though in the present day his command of both magic and his environs is significant. The second exception concerns the barrier between the zone and the normal world, which allows nothing out but a number of things in. Some exceptions also exist for 'simple' substances, as water and air, which pass through in both directions with some resistance, ensuring that the air pressure inside the zone is not constantly rising and that the zone is not flooded by rain.

The LEZ is shaped roughly like a rectangle with a slight pinch in the middle. The northern end is hilly, while the southern end is more forested. A river winds through the exclusion zone, ending in a lake that pools against the zone's edge. At the time of exclusion, the

area was largely farmland, though now the entire zone is surrounded by a security perimeter to ensure that no one accidentally or intentionally crosses the boundary.

Each month-long loop typically begins with Zaman rapidly gaining resources, many of them from operatives across different eras, who he kills and then loots. Additionally, the zone contains many caches introduced during earlier eras as part of attempts to negotiate with Zaman. Once Zaman has dealt with the operatives, his behavior varies, though he seems to spend much of his time on research or training.

Aside from the murder of operatives, Zaman has been observed committing a number of crimes against other people in the loop, who he does not have any moral consideration for. While reports from within the zone are constrained by Zaman's efforts to control the flow of information, it is known that he is guilty of many counts of assault, battery, murder, unethical testing, vivisection, and theft against the other residents of his zone.

Entrance into the zone is currently prohibited by Special Threats.

DM: I've been trying to figure out a way to run this for years. Having the party 'trapped' within the time loop, knowing that they've been through this a bunch of times before but failed and remember nothing, is a great hook. Unfortunately, if they *do* fail, then the players still remember but the characters do not, which isn't ideal. Also, as set up, there's no victory condition here, which you would have to add in. I think this is ideal as a one-shot, but would take a lot of work to make it serviceable.



BARREN REEF

Code: BREZ

Types: Major

Date: 254 FE

Summary: The Barren Reef Exclusion Zone (BREZ) is a place of spewing lava, creating an ever-expanding island.

History: The elemental plane of lava was once more readily accessible than it is today, and could be called upon by lava mages of a certain level of skill. A basic lava mage could telekinetically spin rocks about himself until they had achieved a certain level of flow and energy, at which point they would transition to moving rings of lava, which could then be used for offensive or defensive purposes. At deeper levels of skill, the lava mage could bring more lava into being during this flow state, pulled from a connection to the elemental plane of lava, and the most skilled practitioners could control natural lava within the world using these techniques.

Outside of their combat roles, where they were used extensively, lava mages had a number of civilian roles, particularly in bringing molten lava from the elemental plane to work with. In this way, entire buildings could be cast, usually with earthen supports that would be removed later, or in some cases, by having the lava mage control and shape the lava directly. These structures would take a long time to cool, and the construction work was dangerous, but before widespread steel magic, lava magic was a bedrock structural discipline.

Due to some inherent heat resistance, lava mages were also prized in mining and underground exploration,

where magma could often be found from connections to the elemental plane of lava. A lava mage would be capable of redirecting lava flow, or in some cases, closing the connection to the elemental plane, if it could be found. As a consequence of this, lava magic became an important part of many dwarf cultures, as a lava mage could save their colony from months of work and potential loss of life, especially in the case of a spontaneous connection to lava.

Starting in 211 FE, a young dwarf named Haegmil Firebrand began using lava magic at a scale unseen before to add new land, either creating islands or extending peninsulas from existing landmasses. Over the next few decades, this approach saw widespread use, particularly in areas where land was limited, and in seaside locations where water was readily available to rapidly cool the rock. While Haegmil's early projects were more utilitarian in nature, especially in making wave breaks and dams, in their later life they were more concerned with large, splashy projects which would serve as art pieces of their own, making marks on the shape of the land itself.

In 252 FE, Haegmil began their largest project to date, a private island nestled in the protection of the crescent continent of Croso. In order to pull in the immense quantities of lava that they would need for the project, Haegmil teamed up with a small collective of star mages, who he hoped would enable a wide connection to the elemental plane of lava. At first this worked, to an extent, though the flow of lava was slower than planned, and the projected rate of island expansion meant that the project would have taken more than a decade. When

an alteration to the connection was attempted in 254 FE, the lava flow increased far more than expected, causing the death of Haegmil, the star mages, and the exclusion of lava magic.

Features: The BREZ is a large island which expands with every passing year. No lava mage, star mage, or warder has been able to close the connection to the elemental plane of lava, in part because of the fast rate and extreme heat. The portal sits high up in the sky in order for the flow of lava to not be impeded by what has come out, and is projected to keep the lava flowing for at least a thousand years until it plugs itself.

Because the elemental plane of lava is not uniform and has its own planar ecosystems, native creatures often spill out through the portal, living briefly within the cooling lava pools, and sometimes escaping the zone entirely, though few are adapted to the marine environment that surrounds the Barren Reef landmass. In some cases, it's thought that these creatures have burrowed down through the island to the rock beneath Aerb's waters, allowing them to travel virtually anywhere, and several faraway incidents have been linked to the zone.

While the zone itself is comparatively small, the effects of the zone, namely the large quantities of lava

which cool to rock, go much further. The Barren Reef island now stretches three hundred miles to the northwest, and will continue to grow over time, though with some natural slowdown. In recent years, some of the land at the edges of the island has become considered habitable, and the long-ago contracts put in place during Haegmil's time have finally come to fruition. While the zone and the outlying area are currently under the administration of Special Threats, most of the land is held under a hereditary title, that of Baron Reeve.

JUNIPER: This is just the plot of *Superman Returns*, but I guess if it's good enough for *Superman Returns*, it's good enough for Aerb. The funny thing is that Aerb isn't short on land, not at all, though I guess a lot of it is out of the way or hard to develop.

DM: It's the Elemental Plane of Lava, now in your backyard! Really, this could work with almost any of the elemental planes, even the Elemental Plane of Fire from the basic D&D cosmology, though that has some nasty monsters that definitely *could* survive outside of the zone.



GLASSY FIELDS

Code: GFEZ

Types: Major

Date: 47 FE

Spoilers: Minimal

Summary: The Glassy Fields Exclusion Zone is coated in a foot-thick layer of extremely sharp and durable glass. Any object left in the zone will be slowly swallowed by the glass until it is covered.

History: Glass magic was a form of magic which allowed the manipulation of glass to material and immaterial effect. The most common form of glass magic was a method of slowly forming glass into hardened weapons or durable armor, which served as a replacement for iron in the times before large-scale foundries using the Bessemer process. As Utherian industrialization began to grip the world, glass mages realized that their magic might become a lost art, and some efforts were made to find a competitive advantage. Master glass mages worked to make new types of magical glass, those that could deaden vibrations, self-repair, hold together after shattering, deflect heavy weapons, and had many other uses, though costs tended to be high. Over the course of the First Empire, glass armor and weapons became a status symbol, standing in contrast to mass-produced metalwork.

The GFEZ appears to have resulted not from attempts at exploitation of glass magic, but rather from the synthesis of a new type of glass. The kingdom of Terrormoor, where the exclusion zone formed, was not particularly known for its glassworks, which might

have been why they were importing magical materials from elsewhere. However it happened, the particular type of glass they created slowly spread, and a lack of proper response to the disaster meant that the zone was eventually engulfed, leaving it in its current state.

Features: The GFEZ is approximately a hundred miles across, with a shape that's narrowed on one end and bulbous on the other. Once largely temperate, the original biome is now encased in a foot of glass. While the former landscape has been covered and to some extent mummified or preserved in glass, water flows freely within the zone, and a small ecosystem thrives within the hostile environment.

There are two varieties of living things within the GFEZ: plants and animals that have adapted to the glass, and those that had no need to. Plants are capable of living in the ponds and puddles of the GFEZ, as the glass does not encase water. Similarly, an animal might move across the glass safely, so long as it doesn't stay in one place for too long. Aside from the moving glass itself, there are sharp edges that need to be avoided, some of them so sharp that they could kill by being brushed up against. Of the larger non-specialized animals, birds are the most common, though they typically retreat out of the zone when they're done feeding on plants and insects.

The second variety of creature within the GFEZ are those creatures which have special affinity for glass. The most iconic of these are vidrics, small fox-like animals with a glassy coat that resists the zone's magic. Vidrics have the magical ability to teleport through reflections,

and in packs can be quite dangerous. Originally from the disjoint plane of Erborea, the vidrics have found a home in the GFEZ where they have no natural predators and plenty of food, an ideal environment.

Due to its natural beauty, the GFEZ is a common destination site for ‘exclusion tours’, though entry into the zone is prohibited. Towers (and one hotel) have been set up along the edge of the zone, providing a place to look in at the glass-covered land.

Did You Know? Exclusion tourism refers to the commercial operation and organization of vacations and visits to exclusion zones. Exclusionary tourists are most often motivated by education, entertainment, and thrills, or some combination thereof. Many exclusion zones have infrastructure built up to facilitate this tourism, particularly for the more benign exclusions. This can include hotels, viewing towers, shops with souvenirs, and driven tours.

For many exclusions, tourism ends at the border, whether because of imperial law or the deadly nature of the exclusion zone itself. For others, an experience beyond passive viewing and merchandise is possible with tightly controlled exposure or interaction with the zone. In many cases, a ward built directly at the edge of the zone can allow a person to temporarily enter the zone with little risk of harm.

Responsible exclusion tourism follows safety guidelines mandated by Special Threats. Tour operators undergo inspections, licensing, and personnel checks to ensure adherence to protocols. Guides are extensively trained by Special Threats, and in some cases, Special Threats hires directly from tour guides. These protocols are especially important in places with a local population, as seeing people living and working within the zone can give a false sense of security.

Critics argue more restrictions should be in place, while proponents claim the industry provides income to communities near exclusions and valuable education about the zones. Though controversial, interest in exclusion tourism has expanded in recent decades, with new tours, hotels, and viewing towers opening every year.

While exclusion tourism is, in many cases, good for local communities, not all exclusion zones are suited to it, and Special Threats has placed blanket bans on tourism in several zones.

AMARYLLIS: Slow response has been one of the constant complications when it comes to exclusion zones. A frightening number of them could have easily been kept liveable if someone had acted decisively, and Glassy Fields is one of the obvious ones where it didn’t even take foreknowledge or an understanding of greater-than-linear growth curves. If they had seen the growth and acted with ten times more force than seemed necessary, the entire thing could have been contained, and even though that might not have prevented glass magic from being excluded, it would have saved the region.

Decisive action is not a thing that most governments are built for, even monarchies or dictatorships, where in theory absolute control rests in the hands of a single person. There are always stakeholders that must be thought of and in some circumstances assuaged, and the slow movement is almost always a benefit rather than a detriment. In cases such as this, there is also the paradox of preparedness, where the same decisive action that was warranted would look like an overreaction if it had actually been followed through on.

The issue isn’t academic. When we look at the history of exclusion, we see the same problem occurring over and over, with no action taken until it’s too late, the responses too weak. Any student of history can easily predict the future, and it seems unlikely that this won’t happen again.

DM: Glassy Fields is a ‘classic’ exclusion zone, just a weird place with its own weird mechanics and biosphere. I think it’s most appropriate for a low-level adventure, when you can’t just solve every single problem with ease. As far as what there is to do within the zone: rescuing an exclusion tourist, capturing a rare glass beast, or delving into a castle whose exterior has been consumed by glass but whose treasures might be ripe for the taking.



MOLJER

Code: MEZ

Types: Major, Dead, Empersoned

Date: 255 FE (Closed, 259 FE)

Summary: The Moljer Exclusion Zone (MEZ), while active, was a place of immaculate cleanliness to the extent that it was hostile to life. An empersoned exclusion zone, its namesake, Moljer, was killed by the Second Empire just four short years after the exclusion zone formed.

History: The bloodline magic of *gelnid* was, for much of history, used in order to perform simple cleaning and ritual purification. Practitioners could cleanse meats to remove the results of putrefaction, and sterilize surfaces, making them clean and orderly. Typically prized within any community they found themselves a part of, *gelnidir* were originally human, though the bloodline magic spread freely to other species through mating, surviving most dilution.

During the time of the First Empire, the *gelnidir* became even more valued, particularly because of their utility in various industrial processes introduced by Uther Penndraig, such as those in chemical or manufacturing industries. Systemization of practices and scientific inquiry into their mechanisms yielded many good results.

After the rise of the Second Empire, imperial eugenic directives helped to spread the bloodline magic further than before. In particular, this magic was prioritized in efforts to ‘breed down’ various ‘problematic’ species, such as orcs. The half-orc half-human Moljer was born from one of these breeding efforts in 235 FE and raised through

the Second Empire’s boarding schools, and enrolled into *gelnidir* classes from a young age. By 253 FE, she had been fast-tracked into an imperial program for gifted mages.

The source of Moljer’s extreme control of her cleaning bloodline magic is unknown, but imperial research is commonly blamed. Prior to 255 FE, she was capable of cleansing any surface in a matter of seconds from a distance of up to a hundred yards, without line of sight. She had also developed mild telekinetic powers, as had a few of the others in her cohort, allowing them to straighten and organize things as an extension of *gelnid*. In 255 FE, the magic was excluded, which accompanied a massive expansion of Moljer’s powers, extending her range out to a full five miles.

For two years, Moljer kept her powers restrained and worked within the Second Empire’s systems, exploring the limits of these new abilities within the new exclusion zone. The upper end of the ‘cleaning’ power was quite high, allowing the repositioning of anything ‘out of place’ to within generous bounds of the definition. Likewise, cleansing — the removal of material — could be applied to almost anything that Moljer could conceptualize as unclean, including materials like stone, metal, and flesh. During that time, it became increasingly clear that Moljer was not entirely mentally stable, and imperial soul mages made a number of modifications to her soul in an attempt to keep her docile and cooperative.

In 257 FE, Moljer killed her handlers and took full control of the zone. What went wrong with the soul magic to allow such a thing is unknown, though it has

been speculated that she may have applied her power to work on her own soul. Following her rebellion, more and more of the zone was taken over by Moljer as the people and things within it were wiped away. Some reports from that time describe people as simply vanishing mid-stride. Eventually, late in 259 FE, much of the material of the zone had been removed, with the ground stripped down to flat, smooth, perfect bedrock.

Moljer was assassinated by the Second Empire late in the year after three earlier failed attempts and the catastrophic loss of life within the zone. Moljer's motives were never fully known, and few records survive, but most modern biographies focus on the ideas of adulteration of the blood, impurities of species, and other concepts that were taught to her and her cohort at their imperial school. This self-loathing might have been responsible for her turn toward madness. Most of this must be understood as informed speculation.

Features: The former Moljer exclusion zone is largely flat, featureless rock, and because so much was removed, much of it is below the level of the water, submerged. While life has returned to the zone, and there's some mortal habitation, it's unlikely that the area will ever fully recover.

DM: I think Moljer makes a good villain, so I would probably place this zone into a campaign at some point following her rebellion but before her death. The nature of the zone is that it's almost completely 'clean', devoid of imperfections, but a moderate tweak to that which creates some usable stakes is that there's a city close by which might be subject to Moljer's whims. If you need some cannon fodder, it's very easy to expand this one into a cult or other organization obsessed with their version of cleanliness and purity. I would *probably* cut the implied save-or-die mechanic of people vanishing mid-step, though I do like the drama of it.

The cult angle is also good because you can work in an increasing level of strident purity as the party works their way up to the leaders, and you can have a diverse cast of characters that keep the central concept entertaining, particularly if there are hypocrites and opportunists among their ranks, or internal tensions. Also note that Moljer has some overlap with the BEZ's Bowdler, and they would make for a good team-up if you want a multi-part campaign arc.



MILLION NATIONS

Code: MNEZ

Types: Major

Date: 229 FE

Summary: The Million Nations Exclusion Zone (MNEZ) is filled with millions of magically instantiated bureaucratic states. While each ‘state’ has its own name, policies, and procedures, these were all magically created and continue to exist autonomously, with the actual confirmed population of the MNEZ as a whole being in the low single digits.

History: Bureaucratic magic offloaded numerous functions of governance to a magical weft. This included state functions like the census, taxation, border control, elections, and others. While this proved useful in many cases, it was largely eschewed by kingdoms, and the First Empire recommended against its widespread use, as the magic was considered to be somewhat unstable and capable of putting control in the hands of the national mage rather than the rightful authority of the polity. The magic consisted largely of information, allowing data-gathering and legibility of activity that took place within the state. Late into the history of the magic, it was used in an offensive capacity rather than its bureaucratic function: nation mages would set up a new ‘nation’ that extended into a battlefield and use it to track the movements of troops and the flow of battle, for example.

In 229 FE a prominent nation mage more concerned with theoretical limits of the magic than its practical applications made an attempt at creating what she called an ‘autonomous minimum viable nation’. In theory,

the nation would be capable of carrying out all tasks of a polity on its own, creating and enforcing its own laws. The applications for this were considered manifold, as each house could be its own ‘nation’, which would enhance security and the flow of information. Unfortunately, one of the early autonomous minimum viable nations was capable of creating a vassalized territory for itself, which autonomously declared independence. Repetition of this process led to rapid multiplication of nominal nations, and exclusion along with it.

Features: The MNEZ is coated with magical nations, some of them no more than a single yard across — while the zone is called ‘Million Nations’ there are likely well in excess of one hundred million. Each state has its own policies and procedures, determined by autonomous magic. The borders of these nations are in constant flux, and the exact numbers vary from day to day as repeated balkanization, vassalization, and reunification occur.

What makes the zone dangerous and unpleasant for people is largely the result of a few limited interactions: autonomous taxation and autonomous border control. The magic allows removal of goods, placed within extradimensional coffers controlled by the nation, which can sometimes see a person stripped of everything they own depending on the tax policies of the nations they pass through, which might be as many as a dozen in a few short strides. Similarly, a nation can have strict border control, physically preventing people from entering or exiting, or demanding the submission of magical paperwork, or the fulfillment of certain requirements. Because

a person can be prevented from leaving the nation, it is a real possibility that a person can be trapped, eventually dying of dehydration. These borders are invisible and can only be felt by the prohibitions they enforce.

As each of these ‘nations’ is entirely autonomous, there is no requirement for any of their rules to make much sense, and as they continue in perpetuity, self-sustaining, there are no real costs that the nation must meet. A few studies of these piconations have shown increasingly complicated rules, policies, and procedures as time goes on.

There are several exceptions to the rule that nations are quite small, and a few of them are large enough to hold a house, which some do. Very few people live within the zone, but they live within these relatively large and relatively stable ‘tame’ nations which usually allow some level of automated voting on ‘national’ issues.

DM: Normally, this isn’t a place you’d ever want to go, and in fact, in its original form as I used it at the table, it wasn’t degenerate, it was just a nation-supporting magic that handled voting, taxes, tariffs, inheritance, etc. I think this was perfectly fine, but it does mean that you’re playing in a more structured democracy with legible states rather than the typical kingdom where the taxman can’t even get a census.

As for using this *zone*, the best way to get players there is through the taxation effect: specifically, where the taxes *go*: extradimensional space, to be saved for later and paid out under terms specific to each of the piconations. All you need is a sufficiently large treasure lost to one of these nations, and suddenly you have some incentive to make your way into the MNEZ to deal with some automated bureaucracy in the hopes of getting ‘funding’. Along the way, they’ll have to deal with esoteric import and export regulations, tons of border control, and the risk of being taxed to death. This, in turn, probably means doing a bunch of preparatory work, fodder for more adventures.

I also really like the idea of drawing boundaries on a battle mat where each region is a different nation with its own unknown-but-discoverable ‘rules’ about what’s allowed. The prospect of telling a wizard that he can’t export a fireball just tickles me, I guess.

GRAKHUIL: Warding is a complicated business. People think that a ward can stop all magic cold. They think a wand is waved, the magic is blocked, and there’s no problem. This is fanciful nonsense rooted in a layman’s misunderstanding.

There is a reason that wards work best underground. Bedrock shifts little. The next best place to build is in a sturdy building with the ward put in place as the rocks or bricks go in. Wards function on firmness, solidity. A ward placed on cloth will fray faster than the hem does. A ward that stretches beyond the bounds of its anchor will move in the wind and disintegrate. Warding the interior of a space is always easier. Warding an exterior leads to fraying and depletion.

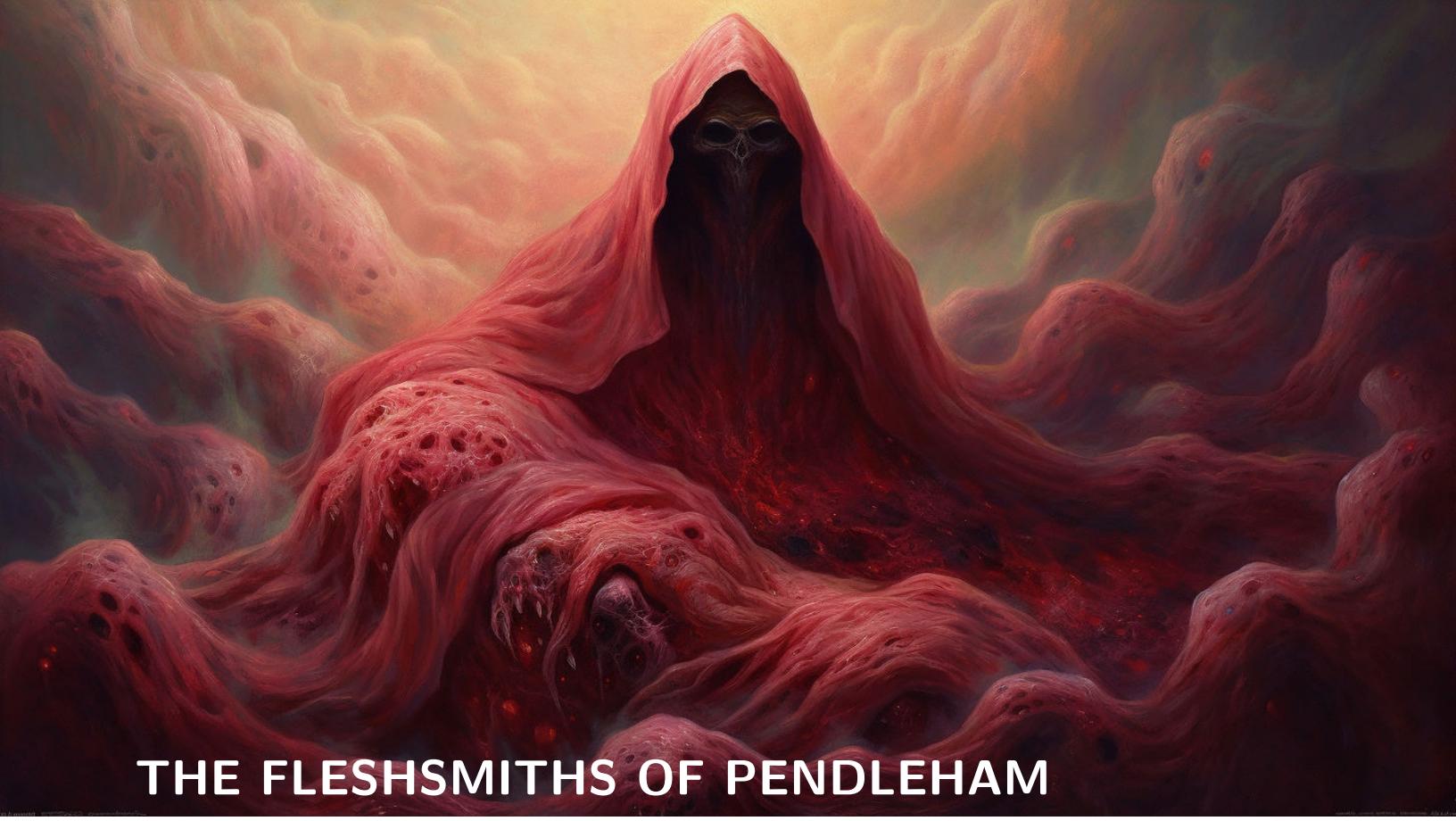
A moving ward will always be a quick and crude thing. People imagine a bubble ward around a person, protecting them. This is possible to construct, but it is also as insubstantial as a bubble, by its nature. In certain circumstances this can be enough. In exclusion zones, this is rarely the case. When danger is ever present, a ward must last forever.

Some phenomena simply cannot be warded at all: memetics, antimemetics, pseudomagic, and physics are the major categories. There are many minor categories. Even when warding against wardable magic, problems occur. A naive ward affects magic, not the effects of magic. A blood ward will not stop a rock thrown by a blood mage. Additional wards are always required for safety. It is not one ward, it is many.

Simply warding up and walking in rarely works. People continue to suggest it for many circumstances. For the handful of times it has worked, there are many, many more where a warder or their client has died.

JUNIPER: There are a lot of excluded skills on my character sheet, and I’ve been trying to line them up with the exclusions, hoping that the process of elimination or the mapping of one to the other might reveal something. Sometimes this is easy, like with Butterfly Magic, but other times, it’s more difficult, and I think in *some* cases it’s intentionally misleading. I’d originally thought this one would be Jurisdiction, but no, that one is probably Iron Chane, so I went through the list again, trying to see if anything jumped out at me.

Then it hit me with all the force of a shoe to the head: this one is Divination.



THE FLESHSMITHS OF PENDLEHAM

Code: PHEZ

Types: Minor, Empersoned

Date: 194 FE

Summary: The Pendleham Exclusion Zone (PHEZ) is a region overtaken by numerous fleshsmiths and their fleshy creations.

History: The city of Pendleham had long been home to the fleshsmiths, who could disassemble biological materials and reconstitute them, making extensive changes to biological species. While these changes could be extreme, they tended to need constant maintenance and supervision, and could not be passed down to their offspring, limiting the utility of fleshsmithing. Despite their efforts, the fleshsmiths were never able to fully eliminate the curse of aging, largely because of the phenomenon of soul degradation.

In their prime, the fleshsmiths consisted of a large guild in Pendleham, with only occasional offshoots into other cities. Their need for abundant raw materials meant that they required a large operating base, and the location of ‘their’ city on the Jesh River allowed for a constant influx of new animals from foreign trade. As inter-polity infrastructure and continental transport improved over the course of the First Empire, and new colonies were established in previously inhospitable lands, the power of the fleshsmiths grew. Much of the fields outside Pendleham were occupied by specialized breeding projects tailored to their needs and further refined

through fleshsmithing and mendelian breeding, producing creatures that could spill out eggs by the ton or repeatedly regenerate strong muscles that could be harvested.

Leading up to the founding of the Second Empire, the fleshsmiths became more extreme in what they were willing to do, especially to themselves. Where before they would only make additions to their bodies that could be concealed or fit within the baseline of the mortal species, by 150 FE they had new and exaggerated forms. With this came a shift in philosophy away from well-tested, self-contained systems, and toward what was euphemistically called outside compensation. One notable fleshsmith of the time would take thirteen supplements in the morning and soak in a bath of epsom salts for an hour every night, without which his body would begin to fail. Many fleshsmiths would need to devote a full half of their working day towards the maintenance of their own bodies.

When the Second Empire came to power, they saw fleshsmithing as one of the most promising paths toward securing a better future, not just for the most important members of their society, but for everyone within it. Under an imperialization scheme in 178 FE, readily agreed to by the fleshsmiths’ guild, training and education in the practice of fleshsmithing was widely expanded at the various centers of learning. This included not just Pendleham, but Claw & Clocks, as well as Flesh and Bone, which changed its name with the adoption of fleshsmithing as a core field of study. As the magic became popularized, the focus of study shifted towards the healing arts, though the rush of money and labor

benefited all areas of research. There was much interest in enhancing different biological systems, especially those of magical species, and the transplantation of their magical organs. A notable branch of fleshsmithing was also prominent at the Vervainium, where it worked in synchronicity with pustule magic.

In 194 FE, largely as a result of extreme experimentation, fleshsmithing was excluded. This directly led to the creation of the Exclusion Risk Mitigation Laws (ERMLs), which were a precursor to the EoCC's modern Research Deemed Likely to Lead to Exclusion (RDLLE, or "Riddle") Acts.

While not immediately apparent from the state the PHEZ is currently in, it is technically an enpersoned exclusion zone. For a period of approximately one year, there was a single fleshsmith within the PHEZ, the last remaining member of a rogue cabal, a madman whose creations ran rampant, and whom the Second Empire managed to bring to heel without killing him. In 195 FE, he was coerced into fleshsmithing a piece of himself into another (former) fleshsmith. This proved capable of restoring their fleshsmithing ability, and from there, fleshsmithing slowly spread back throughout the city as his creations were slain and his body distributed to anyone who could be trusted with it. The original practitioner is now long past the age of soul degradation, alive only in the technical sense that his body lives on in the remaining fleshsmiths, each of whom carry a Fiber of his being.

After the fall of the Second Empire, material support for the fleshsmiths evaporated, and the fleshly city fell into chaos and cannibalism as the fleshsmiths consumed each other and their creations. People scavenged for the supplies needed to sustain themselves and died of hunger. Some of the chaos inherent in the fallen Pendleham was because of the interruption of the complex supply chains, some from the departure of the managerial class, and some from the nature of the fleshsmiths themselves, as the profession attracted a certain sort of person.

Features: Pendleham is home to thousands of fleshsmiths, some working in concert but most independently. The city has flesh covering many buildings, with vast vats of flesh exposed to the open air, much of it designed to capture energy wherever it can. While most of the creations of a fleshsmith require dedicated maintenance, something of a stable ecosystem has developed in certain respects, most of it dating back to the early Second Empire.

Red vines — actually cobbled together from an exotic venous system — creep over and cover many of the city's structures, punctuated with purple bulbs that form a respiratory system. These red vines form the bottom of the food pyramid within Pendleham, and are eaten almost as soon as they grow. Biomass mats feed on a variety of nutrient slurries and hydrate through rain, converting cast-offs into more usable forms. Leftover breeding organisms produce livestock, and are coveted by the remaining fleshsmiths.

The fleshsmiths themselves are the primary danger within the City of Flesh, largely due to their constant desire for more flesh to work with, more nutrients and other forms of support, and the overall poor culture, lawlessness, and lack of governance. A visitor to the PHEZ is likely to be descended upon by a fleshsmith or one of their creations, carved up and used for parts, at least unless they have sufficient personal might to overcome attackers. Heavily trapped and later abandoned fleshsmithing laboratories fill the city, presenting an environmental danger as well as spewing rogue creations into the streets.

Despite all these problems, the PHEZ sees a small but steady influx of new people, some of them attracted by the possibility of a new and better body, others by the potential for a miracle cure for medical conditions that are beyond the help of modern magic. While travel into and out of the PHEZ is tightly controlled by the EoCC, it has not been stopped entirely. Intermittent efforts to reform the zone are hobbled by large differences of opinion on what should be done with the fleshsmiths whose actions within the zone constitute major crimes against the mortal species.



SPECT

Code: SEZ

Types: Major

Date: 91 FE

Summary: The Spect Exclusion Zone (SEZ) is deadly to mortals, though perfectly benign to other living things and the materials within it. Death occurs within three hours of entry. Additionally, large numbers of small, inert golems are scattered throughout the zone.

History: The Niveau system of power was a complicated arrangement of magic where hundreds or thousands of lesser mages would funnel power to greater mages. The fundamental mechanism of the magic heavily encouraged recruitment of new mages and buy-in from lower level mages to maintain their position within the hierarchy. Even prior to exclusion, the Niveau system was considered to be a blight on the world, as innocent or gullible people were encouraged to divest themselves of their life savings, largely to the benefit of an elite few. As with tattoo magic, spells covered a wide range of effects. Once ‘purchased’, each spell appeared as a small red chit with a design on it, which could be spent for effect.

While originally divided into clades with their own elite at the top, in 31 FE a consolidation of power resulted in a single mage reigning supreme. For the next six decades, the Niveau system spread through the world with aggressive campaigns of enrollment, until exclusion in 91 FE resulted in the vast majority of members being immediately and painlessly disenrolled. The exact ‘cause’

of the exclusion is unknown, to the extent that exclusion has a cause, but it is speculated that those at the top had grown too powerful.

Post-exclusion, the Niveau system was a shadow of what it once was, largely as a result of the far, far lower number of mages, all of whom only had power within the geographical area of what is now the SEZ. As mages could freely leave the SEZ, many of those most invested in the magic traveled far afield in order to recruit new members to bring back to the zone, but the higher level mages could not sustain their power, as recruitment could not offer enough incentives. Starting in 96 FE, the rulers of the SEZ began a policy of ‘population containment’, which was akin to slavery. This lasted until the rise of the Second Empire in 176 FE. As part of the Second Empire’s policy of exclusion exploitation, the ruling class of mages within the SEZ were forced out, and new mages selected by an imperial committee were put in place.

The Second Empire treated the zone as a research opportunity, and to that end, began making attempts at exploring the fringes of the magic. A breakthrough came in 186 FE when a parallel development of a separate type of magic led to the creation of small golems that could be recognized by the Niveau system. This eliminated the need for lower level mages, and the power available to the higher level mages was constrained only by the golem construction costs they were willing to pay. With millions of golems active, research was able to make many leaps forward, though questions as to the efficacy of devoting imperial budget toward this project began to

arise. The number of useful spells, from an imperial perspective, was only perhaps a dozen, including invoking plant growth, duplication of expensive materials, microkinesis, instant scribing, complete mending, and a handful of others.

In 334 FE, ten years after the collapse of the Second Empire, the remaining research magicians within the SEZ, having lost the bulk of their funding, began to embark on attempts at altering the fundamental nature of the Niveau system. After three years of work, a system of automatic ‘enrollment’ and ‘payment’ went into effect. This removed the need for mortal intervention in golem enrollment, greatly lowering the costs the mages were facing. It is presumed that as a result of further experimentation the zone was wiped of all mortal life in 337 FE (see Features). Later attempts to enter the zone have resulted in death. Remote monitoring of the zone has shown no signs of mortal life.

Until clay magic was excluded in 399 FE, the golems continued to function, though much of what they did was not productive, and their rudimentary systems did not allow much independent thought.

Features: In the modern day, the changes or subsystems set up by post-imperial researchers mean that anyone who enters the zone will be automatically ‘enrolled’ in the Niveau system, then automatically ‘pay’ for as many spells as possible. As there are no living mages within the system, these spells will all be of a low level, with trifling effects. In one notable example, a daring mortal who entered the zone was seen dead a hundred feet from the entrance of the zone, surrounded by thousands of red chits that each gave a minor cleaning ability.

Aside from the magic, the zone is filled with lush, untouched forests, with the remains of buildings covered in vegetation. In places where the plants have not spread, numerous golems can be seen, though they are non-functional. The SEZ is clearly marked with high walls around it to prevent entry.

AMARYLLIS: This is one of those occasions when the Second Empire’s attempts at exploitation actually worked. Using golems as a stand-in for unwitting people was one of the things that, in the modern era, would probably be stopped by the RDLLE Acts before it got to the planning phase. It’s the kind of example that gets trotted out every now and then, blunted somewhat by the fact that both the Niveau system and the golems were eventually excluded, though not for this reason.

DM: There are some exclusions that I think work best at a specific time period, and for this one, I think it’s *several* time periods, though none of them are the end state. The magic system was (obviously) inspired by multi-level marketing schemes, with higher level mages roping in lower level ones, and the majority of these mages not having a whole lot more than simple cantrips. Already you’ve got a cabal of high-level mages, which for the average party would probably be enough, but there are plenty of hooks there, like a friend who’s in over his head and needs help, or a player taking up a deal that seems too good to be true.

Once there are golems on the scene, the whole area takes on a different character, since the golems are the ones that are standing in for the low level mages, and the powerful guys on top who control everything. That again leaves an underclass for the players to help, and since it’s a hierarchy, there’s plenty of opportunity for the usual backstabbing and politicking. Depending on your needs, the spells available can be almost anything, including a McGuffin, but as conceptualized, it’s mostly a collection of utility powers that allow it to be a hub for refining materials or crafting precision instruments. It’s one of the only places that you could reliably get a hot enough fire to work some of the more exotic materials in the setting, for example.



MANIFOLD

Code: MAEZ

Types: Major

Date: 399 FE

Summary: The clay golems of the Manifold Exclusion Zone (MAEZ) have consumed their entire island, going down into bedrock and living beneath the ocean waves. Any material brought into the exclusion zone will be quickly taken and used to make more golems.

History: Clay magic existed as one of the key systems of magic within a number of societies in pre-imperial times. A skilled conglutinor could replace four or five unskilled laborers by producing golems and having them do the work instead. Conglutinors were limited by their ability to repair the golems, as well as the psychic load necessary to direct their actions. Clay magic was most often used in places with harsh, arid weather, as the mages could stay inside while their golems worked through the day.

Beginning in 29 FE, a new method of instruction was discovered. This method used a rare variety of psychic tree found on the other side of the world from the main bulk of conglutinors, but offered immensely expanded capabilities for their golems. Originally, clay magic used the active thoughts of the conglutinor, but the psychic wood could be imprinted with thoughts, and this ‘recording’ of thoughts could be used inside the golems. The approach was very different, more akin to encoding instructions than remote control, but with it, a single conglutinor could field more than a hundred golems, and golems would continue to function beyond the death of

their maker. Due to the slow growth of the trees the wood was secured from, adoption by the conglutinors was sedate, but several seeds were taken to the Vervainium and new orchards were planted for use decades later.

During the time of the Second Empire, labor was in short supply, and efforts were made to rejuvenate the profession of conglutination, which had suffered losses and decay during the First Interimperium. The new Clay Corps were tasked with widespread replacement of manual labor, and demands were made to expand coverage of golems wherever possible. Unfortunately, the process of recording thoughts onto wood chips was laborious and prone to error. In 261 FE, a new process was developed that allowed chip ‘cloning’, removing one of the main remaining restrictions on golem creation.

During the remainder of the imperial era, and past its collapse, clay magic became increasingly specialized, complicated, and concentrated in the hands of a small cabal. In 399 FE, one of the few successful attempts at deliberate invocation of exclusion occurred, creating an exclusion zone around the uninhabited island of Malteddor. The person responsible was a former member of the cabal who had been exiled from their citadel and spent several years of her life attempting to create the degenerate conditions necessary for exclusion. Within a year, the bulk of the island had been converted into self-replicating golems. Brief attempts at clearing the area so it could be turned to productive use occurred in 415 FE and 432 FE, but neither were successful.

Features: The MAEZ is located in an area of open water in the Northern Ocean, marked by buoys. One of the only outwardly visible features of the zone is a structure, apparently of golem construction, which takes place of the previously existing island. Careful analysis in 452 FE revealed that it is responsible for de-mineralization of the surrounding ocean, sucking up floating silt and particulate matter, presumably for the production of more golems.

While individual golems appear to be mindless automatons, there is evidence of higher reasoning within the zone which allows them to sustain their continued self-replication. The wood chips which are needed for their operation are likely produced at some sort of facility beneath the water, though long-range surveys have shown nothing of the sort.

With the island largely deconstructed, the golems appear to have moved down into the stone below the ocean floor, where the majority of them continue their endless toil, engage in self-repair, or otherwise continue their opaque mission. At current estimates, the golems might be as deep as two miles below the water, having yet to hit the vertical limit of the exclusion zone.

JUNIPER: Classic gray goo. Don't get me wrong, I like gray goo, but I think it's conceptually better when your nanite equivalents are constrained in some way, either with a crippling weakness or some need for resources. Classic gray goo is also uncaring and unfeeling, which can be fun, but sometimes lacks a little drama, since you don't get the messy human emotions, factionalism, etc. I've always found conceits like e.g. Kerrigan, Gravemind, and the Borg Queen kind of a copout, but I guess I can understand why people keep redoing the trope.

DM: By itself, the zone is relatively uninteresting. If you need to add in some 'spice' to it though, I think some kind of hive mind would work great, as would the discovery of some kind of facility beneath the water, particularly one which has this special kind of psychic tree. Most of the golems can be relatively inert, with relatively few combat-specialized ones. The underwater facility can take the shape of a relatively 'normal' dungeon, especially if there are, against the odds, people secretly living down there, which is a nice mid-adventure twist that explains why there would be human-sized tunnels with breathable air. If the party comes for the trees, they might instead get diverted in the direction of whatever dark purpose the golem-minders have been working at.

Is this canonically true in Aerb? I guess I'll leave it ambiguous.



RISEN LANDS

Code: RLEZ

Types: Major

Date: 519 FE

Spoilers: Yes

Summary: The Risen Lands Exclusion Zone (RLEZ) is inhabited by millions of undead creatures, some of which have accumulated into larger autonomous entities of great destructive potential. Anything that dies within the zone will become a new undead.

History: One of the most recent exclusions, the RLEZ appears to have happened due to research into the necrotic field effect (NFE). When a creature dies, a burst of low-level energy is emitted from it, which then clings to the body. For unknown reasons, this energy is much higher in the Risen Lands, and is thought to cause much of the effects seen through the zone.

Prior to exclusion, NFE was seen as a promising alternative fuel source to soul power. Crystals mined en masse from Pseudami, known as blackthornes, would

naturally store this energy, and could be induced to release it with minimal loss. These crystals, placed at the heart of any major city, could accumulate enough energy to power any compatible vehicles in the area without any additional engineering necessary to generate more NFE. Efforts to expand NFE generation, particularly in order to operate vehicles outside of population centers, were ongoing at the time of the exclusion, with the most promising approach being small animal farms.

Features: The RLEZ encompasses a sizable area within the Kingdom of Francorum, most notably including Silmar City, once a major population center. The area surrounding Silmar City was largely farmland and so sparsely populated that travel through the area can be mostly considered safe. Because anything that dies within the zone becomes one of the undead, it is unlikely that the zone will ever be reclaimed. Nonetheless, the number of undead is expected to be greatly reduced over the next decade due to weather and general deterioration, making the zone much safer.

FENN: Why would you be reading about this in a book when you have me? I *basically* made a career of going in and out of the zone. Heck, I actually talked to a scientist guy who wanted to know about it from firsthand accounts, and for all I know, that's what ended up in the book. So this is straight from the source.

Alright, imagine that everyone in a city died. Millions dead in an instant. Horrible tragedy, etc. What happens? Well, you get a bunch of corpses, sure, but what you *also* get is a bunch of *stuff* that those people leave behind, most of which no one has a claim to, and if there *was* a claim, who would enforce it? All the police in the city are dead. There's no law anymore, because no one is around. And there's a *bunch* of stuff. Mansions have paintings, jewels, clothes, and all kinds of other things. Banks have huge stacks of obols in them. You can break into a bone mage's place and steal their special bones, easy as pie. There are entads everywhere, absolutely free for the taking, and even the bound ones are still bound to someone that would probably want them back.

Now in the Risen Lands, that's not quite how it happened, because all the people who died didn't stay properly dead, which was quite impolite of them. And of course with the Risen Lands — sorry, RLEZ — there were a bunch of people with the same idea to loot the place, at least once the dust cleared. That meant that the Empire felt like they had to come swinging in and try to stop people, because it was a bit ghoulish. So if you go into the RLEZ, it's not as easy as just picking up some jewels, especially not eight years on, but it's about as close as you're going to get.

The singular ones, the shamblers or walkers or whatever you want to call them, are pixie farts — basically harmless. You can kill them with the dagger you bring along, so long as they're not armored, which almost none of them are, because what idiot goes around their home or work in armor? They'll try to grab you and bite you, but they're terrible at it. *In numbers*, sure, you have something to worry about, but you can outpace them without even really having to run, and they're stopped by most doors. For a normal human — and they're about eighty-percent normal humans — breaking down a door takes some muscle and a *plan*, and these guys are not so much about the plans. The heart is what you aim for, which can be tricky if you're in the middle of a fight, but it's something you get a knack for pretty fast, if you

don't wind up dead. Personally, I never died. Hitting them in the head doesn't work to kill them, but they've still got eyes, and they're even less of a threat blind, if that's how you want to handle it.

The bigger ones, you run from. They're cobbled together from some of the best corpses around, usually, stuck together with NFE — necro [ed. necrotic] field effect — and they're faster, stronger, and smarter. You can't really run from them, since they're too fast, and a dagger won't cut it, so you need a grenade, or some kind of entad that can fire a hundred arrows at once and pierce through enough hearts somewhere in the mass of bodies. I've done that a few times, it's great fun.

The biggest ones, you *really* run from. They're slower, because of all the bodies that make them up, and they have trouble taking a corner. If you stay indoors, they'll mostly leave you alone, though I did once have one smash its 'hand' straight through a fifth-story window and try to grab me. I nearly shit myself. Do not recommend.

The NFE didn't just kill *people*, it killed pretty much anything with a pulse, and a lot of things without one. You come across dogs from time to time, which move a little better than people, but the worst are the birds, who drop down from the sky like locusts and will do their best to peck you to death. Again, here's where something like an entad that shoots tons of arrows can be great, if you have one of those. The tiny hearts are almost impossible to hit, but it's hard for a dead bird to fly with an arrow stuck through it, or with a gaping hole in one wing.

Now, it's been eight years. Things are starting to crumble. Only the best structures are still standing. Most of the best stuff has been taken. Those big houses on the edge of Silmar City have mostly had their wards decayed by now, and they're also mostly looted. So if you want the good stuff, you need to think like a thief and hit places that are down the tier list a bit. Personally, I go for upper class places, including apartments, because you can easily make a few hundred obols from each one of them, between the money, the jewels, and everything else. I think a gold mage must have come by at some point, because I saw a few places smashed in with force, but there's still silver and diamonds left over.

If you're a princess of a major polity or have gobs of wealth from somewhere else, maybe slumming it with the undead isn't necessary, but if you're down on your luck, there are far worse ways to make some coin.



LALONEI

Code: LLEZ

Types: Free

Date: 281 FE

Summary: Within the Lalonei Exclusion Zone (LLEZ), all objects will trend toward a prototypical example of their broad kind, within the 4th level of the Borringer Object Classification scheme. All trees become the same three types of tree, animals are found in only ten distinct species, and people will trend toward the appearance of a prototypical person. This magic applies to nearly everything within the zone, and special care must be taken if this transformation is unwanted.

History: The origins of the magic within the LLEZ are still unknown, though warder analysis places it as a once-major magic. The exclusion of this magic is the first time it is known to have been recorded, and the appearance of the exclusion zone does not coincide with the removal of a major magic that was in use.

When the exclusion happened in 281 FE, all people, buildings, plants, and animals, as well as elements of the geography, began physically changing to have similarities with others of their broad type. All trees became the same types with distinctive species becoming more common ones, all people the same type of people, and so on. The Second Empire evacuated the zone within the first eight days of the effect being noticed. The extent of the zone was quickly determined, in part thanks to observations of trees and rocks, with defensive perimeters set up in order to contain it. After several weeks had passed, no significant threat from the magical effect was found, and

people were allowed to return to their (changed) homes or relocate elsewhere. As the LLEZ was in a relatively rural place, only a few hundred people were displaced, and much of the population that eventually settled in the LLEZ came from across the broader Empire.

The LLEZ has had a remarkably stable existence from then until the modern day, surviving through the Second Interimperium and the formation of the Empire of Common Cause without much change. The zone has more visitors than permanent residents, as it can save people from certain slow-acting and otherwise incurable diseases, at the cost of fundamental changes to their biological makeup. The zone is also used for trade, as people can bring in materials which are slowly transformed into more valuable versions, and a large part of Lalonei City is taken up by warehouses where goods wait on the transformation process to be complete.

Features: The LLEZ is primarily a flat area with only a few rivers running through it, and little in the way of farmland. A small city exists on one edge of the zone, used mostly for trade and with sanatoriums straddling the edge for long-term health care. While entrance into and out of the zone is currently unrestricted, there are crumbling walls surrounding the zone that date to the Second Empire's early containment procedures.

The 'native' population of the LLEZ are all physically identical people, though they still maintain individual thoughts and memories. The typical resident is relaxed and has a communal nature, though this is likely a result of their reputation as a center for healing and a selection effect from having people that do not mind conformity.

Distinction between individuals is usually accomplished through clothing, which is worn in different ways, or through makeup, which does not transform fast enough while worn to make a person indistinct. The LLEZ is technically a city-state within the laws of the EoCC, but the population remains small enough that it has next to no political power.

AMARYLLIS: There was a proposal a while back to bring EoCC members to the zone and enforce conformity, on the theory that this would help reduce a whole raft of tensions between various actors. It was a non-starter for a number of reasons, and probably wouldn't have worked even if they could have figured out a way to implement it. That the effect on most of the mortal species turns them approximately human made the proposal untenable, and was seen as highly insensitive to the distinctions between species.

'Everyone is the same, so everyone gets along' is very reductive, and if you meet anyone from Lalonei, they'll be sure to tell you that. They have their own squabbles, power struggles, crime, domestic issues, all the usual problems, and some new ones on top of that. Some of the people who've grown up in the zone are surprised by their reputation, because it's not at all how they see themselves. I *do* think that they're more polite and empathic than people from other places, it's just not as exaggerated as all that. Some of it must come from the fact that you can never be *quite* sure who you're dealing with, which I would think would make people less likely to start random arguments.

DM: The LLEZ is a place of healing, quiet and relaxed, which for me usually means that it's a great place to put a seedy underbelly, especially if the players are there as part of recuperation from a major battle. The entire area is much less necessary if your setting/system has really good magical healing though. (And do note that not *everything* can be fixed there.)

The idea that everything of a certain 'class' becomes the same is fodder for a few good plots. Two people who look identical to each other is good fodder for a doppelganger, spy, or mistaken identity plot. The element of disguise and hidden identity might also make it a good place for criminals to lie low, including members of the party. Similarly, because the zone wouldn't affect underlying magic, someone might bring a magical artifact to the zone in order to disguise it as something there are literally thousands of. Alternatively, you could decide that the zone *does* affect underlying magical properties, and might become a place to dispose of something dangerous. Finally, it might be the case that someone is using the zone for some nefarious purpose: because things slowly become their central example, you could potentially bring some minor evil in and make it a major evil. Those warehouses might contain *secrets*.



GLACIAL

Code: GEZ

Types: Free

Date: 4 FE

Spoilers: Minimal

Summary: The Glacial Exclusion Zone (GEZ) is a small area of active ice magic where microscopic self-replicating ice totems coat the ground. Once thought to be a lost art, in 541 FE the exclusion zone was finally found, conclusively proving that ice magic was excluded rather than merely forgotten.

History: Historically a niche magic used by a small ethnic contingent, ice magic came to prominence in 4 FE with the Invasion of the Ice Wizards. This event had its roots some ten years prior when power was consolidated by the Council of the First Frost, of the newly built Glacial Minaret. Following the consolidation, the corps of ice wizards was quickly expanded, and in 4 FE, with the continent of Twain fully under their control, their forces crossed the Northern Ocean on ships of pykrete to land upon the shores of Bretaigne, striking right at the heart of the newly founded First Empire.

Ice magic worked through the construction of totems from ice, which in certain configurations could bring changes in material conditions in the area, largely those related to ice, cold, and wind. Prior to consolidation, the totems were used to grant boons to individual ice wizards, who often lived in palaces of ice with chilled rooms that would maintain their power even during the mild summers in Twain. These boons reduced their sensitivity to cold and granted them the ability to call

forth the power of cold with the wave of a hand or an outthrust palm. The melting of a totem would destroy its power utterly, which is why the skill never made the leap to other, warmer continents.

Starting in 1 FE, more focus was put onto totems that would project area effects rather than granting individual ice wizards the magical power to engage in martial combat. The first use of area totems, built within special chill rooms, brought on a near-permanent winter in northeastern Twain, which allowed the First Frost to maintain a stranglehold on the population and effectively put them under permanent siege. This strategy was employed around Twain for several years to quell rebellions and act as a threat on the populace, but an unfortunate side effect of this was that lower temperatures decreased crop yields, increasing unrest.

The invasion of Anglecynn was, in part, spurred by a desire to loot other polities through the overwhelming might of the ice wizards. In the early stages of the invasion, one of the first things sent back to Twain on the wizards' great ships were grains and animals to feed the nation.

Once the ice wizards had made a beachhead, they began establishing totems, first in the chilled rooms of their ships and later in caves and other places where cold temperatures could be assured. Once the temperatures were low enough, frost forts were constructed, adding to their military might. Ice wizard armies were followed by carts carrying ice totems, granting them a significant tactical advantage that the relatively magically unintegrated Anglecynn forces struggled to cope with.

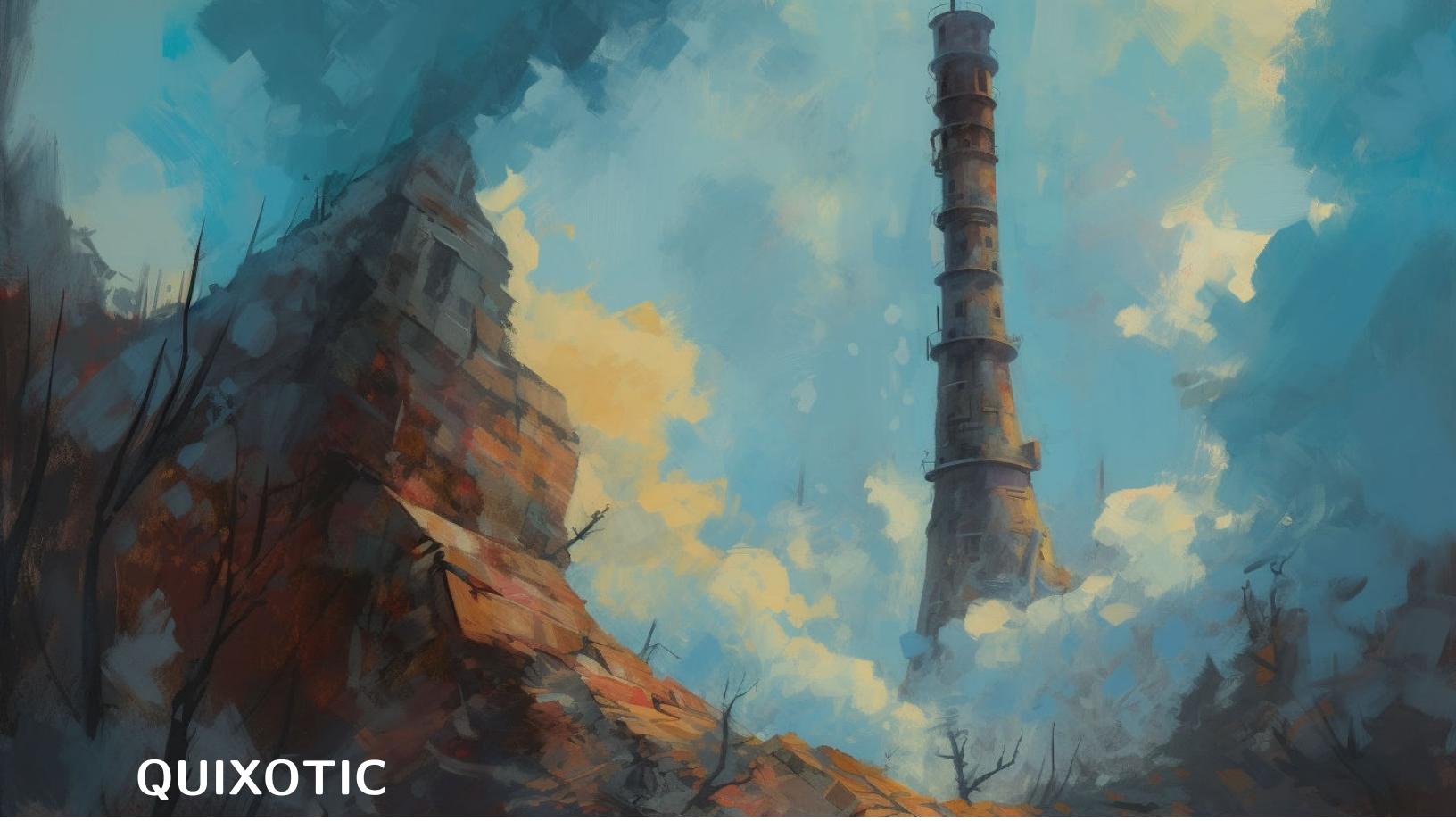
Uther Penndraig's command of his forces and personal impact on the battlefields of the time was instrumental in repelling the invasion. Having broken their forces, Uther journeyed far to the north and took the fight to the ice wizards, fearing that they would attack again if they were given time to regroup. After a pitched battle at the Glacial Minaret, the First Frost was defeated, the nation shattered, and Uther triumphant.

Features: For many years, ice magic was considered a lost art, but as understanding of the exclusionary principle grew, it became more and more apparent that the pattern of its disappearance closely resembled that of exclusion, particularly because the magic was 'lost' following rapid advances in the art and discoveries of new uses of the magic.

Located in an uninhabited area of northern Twain, the GEZ presents merely as a thin coating of snow and ice across its thirty square miles. As that part of the GEZ is cold year round, the actual exclusion remained unnoticed for centuries, though it was known to the few locals as a magical effect. On close inspection, each piece of ice within the zone is a small totem capable of stabilizing local conditions and creating more totems upon contact with ice. The zone is not hostile to life, save for the cold weather.

RAVEN: Knowing what we know now, there are two main possibilities. One is that the ice wizards, in an attempt to turn a loss into a victory, pushed the power further than it had ever been before. The other option is that it was Uther himself that caused the exclusion. Troublingly, I don't know which is true. Juniper has said that Uther is, at the very least, implicated, but if Uther deliberately saw a path toward excluding the magic, then he never whispered a word of it to anyone else. That would be in character for him, I suppose. The number of exclusions which have been caused intentionally is very low, but if we include Uther, and assume that he bears responsibility, it might be much, much higher.

DM: Exclusion is a handy tool for never dealing with something again once a campaign or arc is finished. Breaking the back of a magic is narratively useful in that way, offering a guarantee that old problems won't rear their ugly heads after a brutal beatdown that doesn't address the underlying causes for the conflict.



QUIXOTIC

Code: QEZ

Types: Minor

Date: 356 FE

Summary: Within the Quixotic Exclusion Zone (QEZ) fragrant gasses alter perceptions, which in turn alter reality around the perceiver.

History: The burning of herbs for magical effect is one of the most ancient of the known magics, given the name ‘smoke magic’ during the First Empire in an effort to standardize fourteen different historical practices and combine their teachings. Under Vervain, the growth of magical herbs useful for smoke magic became far more streamlined, and the cross-pollination of strains, as well as some selective breeding and biological manipulation magics, allowed for both the mass production of charged smokes and for increasing potency. By 200 FE, smoke parlors were common in every city in the world, with the perceptual effects granted by them seen as a necessity for dealing with the hustle and bustle of the ‘modern’ world. Common blends included “Cinnamon Sunrise”, which made the world feel more lively, “Sweet Meadow”, which dulled feelings of discomfort, and “Forest Echo”, which made things seem more organic and natural. It should be noted that at the time, smoke magic worked primarily on *perception* rather than *mood* like some other, similar effects — an alteration of mood simply followed from an alteration of perception.

Continued herbal breeding, along with innovations from other magics that could affect plants, greatly increased the potency of smoke magic. Additionally, the

sheer number of practicing stokers — almost twenty million, at their peak — meant that innovation within the magic was happening at a much greater pace than almost any other field. As it was not restricted to the athenaeums, teaching was widespread, and many were capable of practicing both herbology and stoking within their house, requiring minimal investment.

By 300 FE, the heightened perceptual effects of smoke magic had grown more extreme, allowing not just a difference in how the world was viewed, but additional sensory information that was unavailable to a person’s normal senses. Using certain strains of herbs and herbal blends, a user could see higher and lower spectrums of light, view magic like a warder, smell radiation, feel the contours of the ethereal plane, or have out-of-body experiences where they would see as though in another room. The Second Empire made some attempts to regulate these strains, in certain cases burning entire fields of plants, but to little avail given the integration of smoke magic in the daily life of the citizens. Smoke magic continued to get stronger, with the effect of blends lasting much longer — on the order of days rather than hours.

Starting in 322 FE, it was found that certain varieties of smoke magic had not just sensory effects on the person who had inhaled, but material impacts on the world they were seeing. The ‘perceptual overloading’ effect was lauded as the next stepping stone for smoke magic, and while research was prohibited over fear of exclusion, private citizens with their own powerful strains and home laboratories forged ahead. The power of perceptual overload was found to be strongest under

a hallucinatory effect, when what was perceived could be divorced from what was in the real world, and with strong enough perception, the hallucination could become reality. Applications were difficult, limited by the ability to create consistent working hallucinations, and other approaches were tried, bringing in other magics, particularly those which had some effect on the senses. Success was eventually had shortly after the collapse of the Second Empire, possibly because imperial law no longer stifled innovation.

In 356 FE, the first commercial smokestack opened up in a small test site in Fricase, intended to have a high enough ‘charge’ and potency that the surrounding small city would enjoy the benefits of a perpetual fog of mild smoke. Instead, perhaps because of contaminants or the strain which was intended to perpetuate the effects, reality within the city was fundamentally and irreconcilably altered, with the smokestack warping into a mammoth tower of incredible power and permanence.

Features: Within the QEZ, a perpetual fog of smoke enhances and alters perception. While the sensory impacts are a boon, the hallucinogenic impacts are not, and they are the primary detriment to living within the zone. Citizens of the QEZ regularly venture out in gas masks, and bedrooms are often warded against smoke to give a reprieve from the magic.

The hallucinogenic effects tend to be mild if a person’s mood is stable and mindset is focused. Consequently, the impact of the average person on reality is also mild. When mood or mindset are unstable though, a spiraling effect can quickly occur: a person’s concern about their body can cause a hallucination of minor bodily disfigurement, which causes distress, amplifying the hallucination, which then becomes real, which further amplifies distress, deepening the effect. These feedback

loops are the primary danger of the QEZ, and one of the things that those who live there try their best to avoid. Effects are strongest when a person is by themselves, the only perceptor to the features of their reality.

Numerous protocols exist within the QEZ to save people from the worst of the effects, including warded booths where people can get a reprieve, as well as emergency response warders who can erect temporary shelters to ensure that the feedback cycle doesn’t worsen.

Since exclusion, numerous attempts have been made at exploiting the zone, typically through induced hallucinations. These efforts have seen middling success, and the primary export from the zone remains sheep, which have been bred there since before exclusion.

AMARYLLIS: The Second Empire takes a lot of heat for causing all kinds of exclusions, but this is among the first of those that cropped up during the Second Interimperium. The Second Empire played fast and loose with exclusions, that’s certain, but they *did* have ERML Acts. In the gap between the ERML Acts of the Second Empire and RDLLE Acts of the Empire of Common Cause, people got up to a lot, and the only reason I think it wasn’t worse was because people just didn’t have the resources for major capital-intensive projects.

I hate being the person defending the Second Empire, but I also hate people mischaracterizing how and why these major failures happened. I’ve heard people say that the RDLLE Acts are too strict, too stifling, that exclusions have always primarily been the fault of the abject evils of the Second Empire, as though this was karma visiting itself upon them for their misdeed.

The truth is that exclusions happen for complex reasons, and where we can attribute some blame for them, that blame can’t just be put on the shoulders of a well-hated foe.

DEMIPLANAR

Code: DPEZ

Types: Other

Date: 26 FE

Summary: Demiplanes were a product of extradimensional magic which created a large ‘bubble’ of dimensionally distinct space. These demiplanes had their environmental conditions set at creation, or when they spontaneously formed, and slowly grew over time. Method of accessing a demiplane was typically established during creation, which for natural demiplanes was either a portal or weak area of space connected to the prime material plane. Today, demiplanes can only be accessed via star magic, at great difficulty and expense. Only a single demiplane can be accessed through normal means: its entrance is in possession of the EoCC’s Department of Special Threats.

History: Demiplanes date back to Aerbian prehistory, and some are thought to predate the prime material plane itself. Similarly to other extremely long-standing phenomena, such as the city of Cidum, the veracity of these claims is difficult to verify. Starting around 10,000 BE, artificial production of demiplanes became possible, though it was incredibly costly and the ability to define starting conditions of the demiplanes developed only slowly over time, likely as a consequence of the overall costs involved in experimentation.

Demiplanes were used primarily as highly defensible retreats, as most had only a single point of entry. With the right conditions within a demiplane, it could be entirely self-sufficient, or even provide a surplus of food. As all demiplanes slowly expanded, they were, in effect, producing material from ‘thin air’, which meant that they could also be used for resource extraction. In most cases, the steep costs of demiplane creation, as well as the slow rate of growth, meant that in purely economic terms demiplanes were not viable. However, their ability to ensure privacy, as well as their defensive nature, meant that they were relatively common for those who could afford them — largely state-level actors.

As overall magical understanding progressed, the creation of demiplanes grew more controlled, as well as more expensive due to the desire for more complex demiplane

conditions. By the start of the First Empire, individual demiplanes were being created at a rate of one per year, far faster than historically possible, using teams of hundreds.

In 26 FE, demiplanes were excluded. All portals to demiplanes disappeared, all magical entrances closed, and no new demiplanes could be created. After some experimentation with early cross-planar communication, it was discovered that the demiplanes continued to exist, disconnected from Aer. They could be communicated with so long as they had cross-planar communication set up, and through heroic uses of star magic by Uther Penndraig, many stranded people were rescued. Some, however, refused rescue, preferring to remain in their self-sufficient demiplanar homes, while others could not be located in planar space.

It wasn’t until 374 FE that the presumed cause of the demiplane exclusion was found, when a group of urban explorers discovered an old First Empire research facility which housed a standing portal of the sort that had vanished centuries ago. This portal connected to a demiplane of immense size and complexity, with its own natural dirt, bedrock, and an ecosystem. Modern surveys of the demiplane have put its size at approximately ten quadrillion square miles, with an implied growth rate of two and a half yards per second. This would make the demiplane’s area roughly five million times greater than Aerb itself.

Features: Formally, the DPEZ refers to the singular oversized demiplane and its entrance, but among star mages, DPEZ is sometimes used to refer to any extant demiplane, many of which are well-mapped enough to be reached with some preparation or effort.

The DPEZ is an area of immense size with normal Aerbian gravity, a false sun that mimics Aerb’s own, and temperate, controlled weather with regular rainfall and magical drainage. While the demiplane is expansive, it is relatively shallow, with soil going down ten feet and another ten feet of bedrock, and a maximum height of fifty feet before an impenetrable barrier is reached. An ecosystem exists around the demiplane entry point, spreading through the demiplane at the rates expected

of normal vegetation, hindered by a relative lack of wind. As such, the vast majority of the demiplane is empty, if fertile, soil.

For various reasons, the DPEZ had been kept secret since its discovery. Given the extreme size of the demiplane, it cannot be considered clear of dangers, and the heavy protection around the facility, as well as the fact that it was kept secret during the First Empire, imply that it might have been used as an area for containment. The existence of the DPEZ was also known to a few star mages who have independently discovered it.

AMARYLLIS: In the current timeline, rather than the one this entry is from, the DPEZ is still a fairly well-kept secret, presumably for the same reason that it was a secret during the First Empire: it's a hidey-hole. The idea, I'm assuming, was to build an escape from Aerb, a controlled space where nothing bad was brought in. There were to be no monsters, no problematic cultures, no killer plants or rogue magicians, just 'civilized' people. In that respect, it was no different from many other demiplanes of the past, redoubts created by people whose isolationist streak went deep.

For the DPEZ, the goal was just on a grander scale, and I don't think Uther — who had obviously been instrumental in the project given its cost and scale — really cared about exclusion. No, to my mind, he had wanted a place that would protect the last germ of intelligent life from whatever was out there, a colony ship of sorts that would sail off into the comparative void of planar space. No matter what happened on Aerb, there would be a civilization of sorts to continue on past the apocalypse.

The fact that there's no community there represents a failure of some kind, but it's so far in the past that it's hard to know what happened.

Of course, there are already plenty of self-sufficient demiplanes floating out there which will probably survive Aerb's destruction or scouring, so we must understand the DPEZ as either a cowardly plan to save the lives of high-ranking officials or a nationalist plan to ensure the continuation of the First Empire. It makes sense to put some amount of time and effort into those goals, but not at the expense of the ultimate goal, which is the preservation of the rich diversity and billions of lives of our world.

RAVEN: I learned about the DPEZ in my first week in the library. I don't know why Uther would have thought he needed to keep it secret from me, if he really was involved with its creation. He never mentioned it during the two weeks he spent star maging his way across planar space to save those who were trapped. It's possible that exclusion wasn't a side effect, but a goal: by 26 FE, he was growing tired of the world and its endless battles, and he might have thought that he was cutting off possible adventures or avenues of attack. I don't know. I don't want that to be true.

JUNIPER: I personally love demiplanes, and it's a bummer that Aerb doesn't really have them, not unless you want to spend a fortune hiring a star mage, and you can track it in planar space. Functionally, they don't exist anymore.

There are, however, a lot of problems with the idea of a demiplane, at least how it was in D&D. There are all kinds of things we take for granted living on Earth or Aerb that you would need to replace. You can see some of this with space stations, where you need to replace gravity with either constant acceleration or spinning e.g. an O'Neill cylinder. You need artificial light, at least once you get away from the sun. You need systems to handle oxygen, you need food, you need water recycling, all kinds of things, and even that is only to get you to the point of 'people can actually live here'. Mostly, space stations are resupplied from Earth, not self-sustaining.

For demiplanes, it gets even weirder, since you *need* to replace the sun unless you want to live in perpetual darkness, and gravity isn't a given, and there's all sorts of weirdness at the border where the demiplane stops being 'real' space.

For Aerb, the answer was just 'hey, whatever you want'. That's one of the things that made demiplanes so ridiculously expensive to induce, since there are a lot of ways to build a tiny little world that will swiftly or slowly kill someone who sets foot within them. This was even harder back in the old days when people didn't know as much, since they were pretty ignorant about the kind of atmosphere people and plants needed, about nutrients in soil, about what kind of rays a false sun should give off that would allow plants to grow, people to synthesize vitamin D, and all that stuff, without also giving off the kinds of rays that might fry a person or give them cancer or something. Gravity can be what you want it to be in a demiplane, so long as your induction methods are right. Maybe there's constant downward force, or constant acceleration through nothingness, or you stick to the sides of the demiplane, or there's no gravity at all, or gravity rises and falls like a sunset, or only certain things experience gravity, or whatever.

I love the freedom of a demiplane, and the inherent worldbuilding, I just wish they were actually a part of Aerb instead of this thing that happened in the background, having run its course five hundred years before I arrived.

DM: Four notes! A new record!



THERABA ISLAND

Code: THEZ

Types: Minor

Date: 39 FE

Summary: The Theraba Island Exclusion Zone (THEZ) is home to a lost magic whose resurrection might spell doom for everyone who lives there. Additionally, pockets of the island are off-limits due to the extreme danger of the materials there.

History: The sculptrices of Theraba Island were a force to be reckoned with, their matriarchal society having perfected a magical art whose secrets were jealously guarded. While the ancient practice was poorly understood, and remains so even today, the sculptrices were capable of pulling materials, tools, and even creatures from thin air in a way that no other magic could match. Their limits, if they had any, were secret, but it was known that they would never lack for food or drink, that they could pull weapons from nowhere, and that no cell could hold them.

In 39 FE, Theraba Island violently exploded, destroying every building on it and killing everyone living there. Beyond that, it sent enormous hunks of rock sailing through the air, impacting other landmasses. The explosion was recorded as one of the strongest in Aer's history, so powerful that the shockwave traveled across the entire hex and reached Theraba Island, where it had started.

Resettlement of the island has seen uncertain success, as radiation, poison, and other elements continue to crop up from time to time, including the occasional explosion. Research into the magic of the sculptrices is forbidden, but is obviously the main draw of Theraba Island.

Features: Theraba Island is largely a sedate place where a person can live a comfortable pastoral life, though several areas of it are prohibited to live in because of radiation or poisons. Total prohibitions on attempting to revitalize the magic of the sculptrices are in place, on penalty of death, though a lack of knowledge about what the sculptrices even functionally *were* stops most people before they could even start. With time, the radiation fades further and the poisons are naturally diluted and neutralized. It has been seventy years since a major calamity has befallen the island.

The classification of Theraba Island as a minor exclusion remains a sticking point, and every few years there's a new debate on it. Some argue for reclassification to Free exclusion, as roughly a thousand people have lived there without incident for some time, taking few special precautions. Others argue that the extreme danger the lost magic presents, particularly to those outside the zone, require a reclassification of the zone to Major, which would bring it under the full scope of Special Threats, with greater scrutiny.

RAVEN: We fought the ‘sculptrices’ on at least two occasions. Matriarchal societies were like catnip to Uther, for obvious reasons that weren’t so obvious to me when I was young. When we had, in full, a picture of what their magic was and could do, he had declared that it was too dangerous for them to continue using. They listened to his advice only for as long as he stayed on Aerb, and it was no surprise to me that it was excluded not long after, especially with the more permissive attitudes that the Utherian age had brought with it. Certain prohibitions and strictures *were* unimportant superstitions built up over time, and they could safely be torn down for the betterment of the mortal species. Others were vital practices that served as glue to keep societies from killing each other. It was hard to tell which was which.

The full list of prohibitions the sculptrices were supposed to follow is too long to recount here, but I think of all the fates that could have befallen them, an explosion that blasted them from existence was at least merciful.

While the magic is lost, that doesn’t mean that it can’t be rediscovered, and it has, a few times. Unfortunately, with the sculptrices gone, there’s no one around to tell people what is or isn’t a good idea. Most practitioners kill themselves very early on by accidentally making a bomb, which doesn’t take all that much: they can create matter from nothing, and if that matter is too tightly packed, it will expand with great force. There are poisons too, accidental or otherwise, diseases, and on a few occasions, these nascent sculptrices have brought gold mages to themselves.

The Library has intervened a few times. It’s a problem exclusion, one which would have been better if the knowledge of what was there had been wiped from the minds of every person on Aerb. Instead, Theraba Island is one of the places on our checklists if we see that the world has been destroyed in some way, and we have agents stationed there on a permanent basis to catch the worst of it before it even starts. Some of the tragedies we allow to happen, such as when poison sweeps across the island, and this helps to keep people away. It’s grim, obviously, but necessary, and a part of the Library’s function.

Interestingly — and horrifyingly — the sculptrices are capable of creating duplicates of themselves. Unfortunately, these new bodies have no souls, which makes them in some technical sense non-anima, which can then be possessed by infernals. An infernal with the knowledge of this magic is obviously a problem, and might have been the cause for the island’s initial explosive end.

DM: The magic associated with this zone is Ex Nihilo, the ability to create objects from nothing. ‘You can create anything’ is something that you should never say to a player or protagonist, because there will immediately be a very large number of things that come to mind, many of which can absolutely wreck a campaign or story.

The sculptrix is another villain pulled from a D&D campaign, inspired by the idea that she was an Ultimate Master of Conjunction, capable of some really crazy things that would be a lot of work to homebrew for a player, but which could be more permissive for an antagonist. This included things like smoke and poisonous fog, but also replicating a corpse of herself to make them stop following a trail of blood as she fled from a fight, putting up a wall in an alleyway to make it look like a dead end, and creating half-mad clones to fight on her behalf.

This exclusion zone is one of relative mystery, a place where the precise nature of what was lost isn’t quite known, and which is safe because of it, which attracts all kinds of people wanting to resurrect it, whether that’s legal or not. Most exclusion zones are relatively well-studied, but there are lots of options for those which have more questions about their nature and a tinge of the unknown.



BLUE FIELDS

Code: BFEZ

Types: Major

Date: 426 FE

Summary: While active testing and deployment of nuclear weapons only rarely occurs within the Blue Fields Exclusion Zone (BFEZ), large portions of the zone are irradiated and considered uninhabitable. As a consequence of the particulars of the zone, radiation is not confined to within the zone, nor are the effects of nuclear blasts. While the exclusion zone itself is relatively small, the imperial border covers a much larger area because of these dangers.

History: The theory behind the construction and use of nuclear weapons was known as early as the Second Interimperium. In 415 FE, a group of scientists from different polities banded together with the express purpose of creating nuclear weapons in the hopes that they would be excluded. With funding from a number of sources, a largely empty site was selected and work was begun on building the first nuclear bomb in the hopes that no one would ever have cause to build a second.

In 426 FE, the first nuclear weapon was detonated. When its raw destructive power was witnessed, there was some worry among the people who had worked on the project that it would not be excluded after all. As the test was successful, a second bomb needed to be built in order to determine whether the bombs were actually excluded. The second bomb was taken to the backup site, three thousand miles away, where it failed to detonate, and the project was largely considered a success: it was

one of very few successful invocations of the exclusionary principle to the benefit of the world. Due to the actions of this group, no nuclear weapon has ever been used in warfare.

Later in the history of the zone, more weapons were made, largely for the purposes of testing and exploitation. When the zone fell under the control of the Empire of Common Cause, there was some interest in whether various devices could be powered by these explosions. As part of that pursuit, nuclear cannons were constructed which could, in theory, send large payloads far outside the zone to strike against the empire's enemies. By 501 FE, these had been decommissioned.

Features: The BFEZ is largely an irradiated wasteland, though not all places within the zone are as affected as others. Some areas of the zone which have not seen significant testing for decades flourish with life, though the radiation appears to have warped many of the plants and animals in unnatural ways. This is a cause for concern, as such flora and fauna are able to freely leave the zone.

Did You Know? The term 'magic' is considered by many to be one of the most imprecise words in Common, thanks in part to overlapping and competing definitions. It is a common misconception that Blue Fields excludes some variety of magic, or that exclusion zones are all 'magical' in nature, a confusion that persists thanks to fluidity of language and different groups using the same term to refer to different things.

Researchers understand nuclear weapons to be a part of ‘physics’, a constrained set of natural phenomena which are distinguished by the small set of reducible rules necessary to explain a great number of effects. ‘Physics’ is considered to be replicable, measurable, and consistent. Physics excludes any phenomenon related to information, thought, communication, intention, understanding, or conceptualization. A more restrictive subset of physics, known as ‘acustodial’ physics, excludes anything which can be affected by warding, including all entads. An even more restrictive subset of physics known as ‘basal’ physics, excludes even more, largely in an attempt to explain as much as possible about the world with the fewest number of rules.

Nuclear explosions are considered to be a consequence of basal physics, which, with their exclusion, gives valuable information on the nature of the exclusion. That exclusion was not exclusive to magic was already well-known to scholars, but an example of basal physics being excluded raised new questions about just how far the exclusionary principle could extend. Some contest that the exclusion of nuclear explosions is not an exclusion of laws, only results, but this finding is contentious.

DM: Nuclear weapons only work in specific types of fantasy settings. This zone has been typically noted as one of the weirder ones, because ‘extra’ systems being excluded feels like it makes more sense than having ‘real’ systems excluded. If you want to use it in a game, I think ‘nuclear cannon’ is probably the place to go with it, because who doesn’t love stopping a superweapon from firing? Of course, in real life, most historical ‘revolutionary superweapons’ were actually bunk, either propaganda or an attempt to siphon funds for vaporware.

JUNIPER: A brief word on superweapons in tabletop game: they’re awesome, but they need to be used sparingly. Obviously they’re great as MacGuffins (*Editor’s Note: an object or device in a movie or a book that serves merely as a trigger for the plot*), but I think that sells them short. You can also use them, and if they’re something that the antagonist is after or that the antagonist *has*, then I think you’re almost obligated to. Vader blew up Alderaan, right? And pretty much all the Bond villains show off a taste of what their killer weapon is. That’s partly to set up some stakes, but in the best case scenario, it can lead to some awesome setpieces, whether that’s to stop the weapon from going off, the lead-up to the weapon going off, or the worst coming to the worst and the weapon actually firing. You can get the dead rising up from their graves, the cobblestones coming to life, the temperatures rising to a boil, time running in reverse, buildings floating up off their foundations — all kinds of things that make a great backdrop to an epic this-time-is-really-your-last-chance battle.

Nukes make for a pretty terrible weapon in this context, mostly because they’re all or nothing and the effect happens nigh-instantly. There’s not really a way to ratchet the tension with a nuke, though I guess if you were using an ICBM you could move from ‘oh no, this guy is going to launch a nuke, we have to find some way to stop him’ to ‘oh no, the nuke is going to explode when it comes down, we need to stop it in mid-flight’. I am fairly sure I’ve seen that plot a few times.

For tabletop, you need to be really aware of failure states, and *ideally* the superweapon should be crafted so the failure state isn’t just ‘the campaign is over’. My first campaign was the only one that I ended with ‘rocks fall, everyone dies’, and it was because an asteroid slammed into the planet. That wasn’t the consequence for failure though, it was a consequence for a *number* of failures. They had opportunities to stop the weapon that called the asteroid down, they had opportunities to do a Bruce Willis in *Armageddon* and stop the asteroid as it was approaching, and they had opportunities to go on quests to build a huge shield, and on and on. But they decided not to do those things, and so a rock the size of Lake Superior slammed into the planet and killed everyone, bringing the campaign to a decisive end.



FLAGUHAN

Code: FLEZ

Types: Entad, Major

Date: 112 FE

Summary: The Flaguhan Exclusion Zone (FLEZ) contains an area of effect which hypermaximizes all entads placed within it. Due to the entads that were either in the zone when exclusion occurred and have since been placed there, it is uninhabitable and extremely dangerous.

History: The Beggar's Quilt was created through forge frenzy in 68 FE. One of the rare meta-entads, its effect was to increase the numerical parameters of up to one entad that it touched, once per day. A staff with three charges per day would be permanently increased to four charges per day, or a wand which worked on objects within seven yards would thereafter work on objects within eight yards. Once its effect was discovered, it was highly prized, especially as it could work more than once on a given entad. The entad was seized by the Kingdom of Panic not long after its first use, and was then used for governmental maximization.

In 111 FE the kingdom entered into a fiscal crisis and a young king began looking through their magical inventory in order to find a way out of it. He settled on the Beggar's Quilt as the most likely way to escape their debts, and talked with the keepers of the quilt about how it could produce more money for the kingdom. Eventually a course of action was settled on which would lead to exclusion: they would attempt to use the quilt

on itself. Finding a workable solution to this took some months, but once it was accomplished through the use of mirror magic, a feedback loop started which proved impossible to undo.

The magic of the Beggar's Quilt depended upon undergirding definitions that are a part of entadic magic. Notably, an entad with a one mile range would have its range increased to two miles, while an entad with a five foot range would have its range increased to six feet. At the time, it was thought that the quilt itself was relatively simple: it increased all numbers within the undergirding definitions of the entad by one. It is believed that the Beggar's Quilt began functioning on itself without intervention because of some hidden numbers internal to the entad's undergirding definition, one of which seemed to be that it wouldn't affect entads that it *touched*, but instead entads that were within a few inches of it.

Once the runaway effect began in earnest, exclusion was almost immediate, though the effects did not hit their current maximum for some time. Many entads were stored near the quilt for ease of access, and a number of them became so dangerous that evacuation was necessary. The relatively small zone became virtually uninhabitable within three weeks of exclusion as the entads inside were supercharged.

During the time of the Second Empire, attempts were made to exploit the zone. While affected entads cannot be removed, effects, information, and materials created by those entads can. These efforts resulted in systems for extracting value from the zone, namely in terms of

material wealth, though difficulties were posed by the chaotic nature of multiple maximized and interacting entads. Certain failed experiments still color the zone's nature to this day, and are one of the cited reasons for the current bans.

Since 381 FE, all interaction with the zone has been prohibited by the Kingdom of Panic and the EoCC.

Features: The FLEZ lies within the Kingdom of Panic, though it is partially administered by the EoCC. Regular guard towers surround the twenty-square-mile zone. All entrance into the zone is prohibited, and there is a total ban on research involving the addition of new entads.

The center of the zone was once a small city which has been reduced to dust. The quilt is thought to reside there, though its effect extends to the very edges of the zone. Any entads that were left behind during evacuation and not destroyed by subsequent magic still reside there and continue to produce their effects. Most prominent among these are streams of magical energy that extend out for half a mile and demolish anything that comes near. Because of the effects of one particular entad that causes other objects to be more durable, most entads in the zone are now virtually indestructible. While the Quilt continues ceaselessly, most entads have hit internal limits of some sort. A sword which could grow to incredible size stopped when it was more than a mile long. A staff which extends has crossed the zone. Many of the entads which let out regular effects (e.g. a cup which creates a gallon of water a day), have plateaued (e.g. creating ten thousand gallons of water a day). Particularly dangerous are those entads which function at a regular interval rather than requiring activation, though both can be dangerous in the zone.

Toward the edges of the zone are the remains of the Second Empire's exploitation efforts, some of which are still used by the modern Kingdom of Panic. This includes substantial amounts of textiles and metals, which stack up next to the relevant entads. Additionally, there has been some exploration of power generation from energetic entads at the zone's border, though so far none have beaten current technology.

JUNIPER: This one was based on a magic item that I gave to my friends in one of our campaigns. Reimer had loved it, but loved it a little too much, and a supremely dangerous wand that shot off a continuous undirected stream of magic missiles had been the result. Reimer had hated that as a way of nerfing it, and argued that the *magic missile* spell couldn't possibly work that way because it didn't have an attack roll, but I didn't really care about trying to appease him.

The undergirding definition thing is *weird*, but people just sort of accept it. The entads don't just operate in terms of inches, feet, and miles, they *also* have baked-in preferred units. It would make a lot more sense if the meta-entad increased effects by a set percent, but Aerb has never been particularly concerned with making sense.

DM: I would probably not include this in a game, mostly because breaking the limits on magic items is a really bad idea. The Quilt works better as a limited-use item, each square of the quilt getting filled in with an item that it gets used on until the quilt is 'full' and stops functioning. Still, if you really want to include the Quilt, my suggestion would be to keep the exclusion of affected items in place. A good justification for visiting the zone would be to maximize a magic item, but I'd be *very* careful about that, especially if you're in a setting with e.g. Ring of Three Wishes. There's a reason that Aerb has an extremely limited number of meta-entads.

I do think that upgrading magic items is an under-used part of most D&D campaigns. There's something nice about replacing an old trusty weapon with the new hotness, but there's also something that really resonates when something you've been carrying around for ages suddenly gets a power up. Generally speaking though, numerical increases *aren't sexy*. They're *nice*, but there's no exploration of applications and limits, no fresh new ideas, etc.

I find the Beggar's Quilt cool because it strips off limits to the point of absurdity, allowing there to be a part of the zone where thousands of doves spontaneously erupt from a bassoon every quarter-hour, or a blistering hot and freezing cold entad mean that there's a narrow corridor of safe temperatures that an adventuring party can wend their way through. You can have a map that just has an area marked 'constant fireballs' or another cone that no one ever goes through because they'd be instantly vaporized. Especially if you have a setting with weird magic items (if not necessarily wholly unique like entads are supposed to be) you can introduce all kinds of weird rules that adventurers have to follow, like 'don't bring wood into the zone because your bow or staff will grow into a tree fast enough to kill you' or 'anytime you bleed, it's going to erupt into hard crystals that cause more damage'.



SEMBLANCE

Code: SMEZ

Types: Major

Date: 9 FE

Summary: The Semblance Exclusion Zone (SMEZ) is a place where physical effects such as age, damage, burns, and others multiply and ripple out. Largely centered around the now-abandoned City of Paints, the effects of the magic make it largely unlivable.

History: The City of Paints was home to Gray Magic for thousands of years, though for much of that time, it was a closely guarded secret of an elite few who largely used it to make themselves impervious to aging and physical damage. The name came from the position of the Gray mages as a ‘neutral’ force within the color-coded castes of the city, unknown and, they hoped, unnoticed.

In its original form, a Gray mage would link themselves to a physical object that closely resembled or conceptualized them, then lock that object away. All forms of damage would be transferred from the gray mage to the object: when they were slashed with a knife, the linked object would be cut instead, and when they aged, the linked object would instead deteriorate. Once the linked object — be it a painting, a sculpture, or even a novel — had suffered too much, it would crumble, leaving the Gray mage vulnerable until a new object could be linked.

Leading up to the conflict with Uther, Gray magic had begun to advance, largely as a consequence of, or in response to, Utherian ideals. Gray mages began linking

to multiple objects, linking objects to each other, and finally, linking unwitting victims to objects, often by stealing a piece of hair or a cut nail, which allowed them to inflict invisible damage from a distance by poking or prodding a facsimile.

In 9 FE, following Uther’s sweep through the City of Paints and his defeat of the ruling Gray mages, the magic fell into the hands of a number of intellectuals within the city’s chemical caste, those who had a great deal of trade knowledge and a desire to install themselves in the thrones of the old mages. Their experiments with Gray magic went much further, and they threatened to become more powerful than the Gray mages of old had ever been.

The exact cause of exclusion is, in this case, known. One of the historical problems with Gray magic as a protective measure was that the link could be broken simply by overloading the linked object with destruction, stabbing someone dozens or hundreds of times until their paintings were worn through and unlinked. An enterprising Gray mage studied the process of association closely and attempted to prise apart the magical mechanism by which it happened, chiefly so that a new link would be formed. The end result of this endeavor was the total collapse of Gray magic, as every object within the zone began linking with every other object. If not for exclusion, it’s expected that this process would have linked every person and object of sufficient similarity on Aerb.

These ‘natural’ links were a disaster for the City of Paints, as a single person at the end of the graph of

links received all aging from everyone in the city. As the city had more than a million people in it at the start, a person died from rapid aging roughly every half hour. Worse, every broken bone, burn, cut, and so on would be transferred to the same individual. During the initial period, when people didn't quite understand what had happened, many thought they had become invincible, exacerbating the effect through self-inflicted injuries.

Less noticeably, the effect applied to other objects in roughly the same categories. All buildings linked to a single building, re-selecting once that building was destroyed. All clothes linked to other clothes, all animals to other animals, all foods to other foods, and so on. From the perspective of the average citizen of the City of Paints or the outlying areas, materials and objects would seem to be spontaneously destroyed or vanish, though this happened with such rarity that most people were more likely to be aware of the sudden (perceived) imperviousness of plants, animals, and objects — a saw could not cut through wood, as all wood was conceptually linked, and any attempt at killing an animal at slaughter would be transferred to a random animal within the zone.

Once the scale of death and destruction became apparent, the city was swiftly abandoned, with more people dying during the violence and chaos of evacuation. Some stayed behind and attempted to live with the exclusion as it was, on the thinking that it was no worse than a more chaotic version of the damage that they would normally suffer in life — a chance at near-instant aging compared with the certainty of slow and inevitable aging, a chance at suffering immediate horrible injuries against the chance of suffering a single injury — but the city was drained of its population over time, and the socialization of damage, injury, and aging proved too much for the remaining citizens to deal with.

Features: The SMEZ is not, by itself, dangerous, so long as you do not link to anything else within the zone. Even if a link forms, this is not dangerous so long as the link is pointed away from you rather than toward you, or so long as no damage is distributed to you along the link. Most of the time, the zone is partially inhabited, allowing links to other mortals to form, but with a small, stable community that has its own rules, there's less risk of calamity. Many of those living in the zone are either more durable members of the mortal species, mages with a capacity for reducing damage, or those with other magical protection.

The primary use for the zone is the prevention of either aging or damage. As the original, non-automatic,

Gray magic still functions, links can still be made to objects, and useful work or protection can be provided. The Gray mages number in the dozens, severely reduced from their Utherian peak, but modern methods of quick sculpture, color printing, and others allow more in the way of links than ever before. Given the risk to everyone involved, the Empire of Common Cause attempts to closely regulate entrance into the zone, though the large borders make that difficult.

AMARYLLIS: There are certain magics that I mourn the loss of, and this is one of them. Yes, there are cases where the magic can be used as a weapon, but it was *very* good defensive magic, and if it had made it to the modern day, it's one that I feel would have been used en masse. With modern production methods, as well as modern learning, we could have protected every man, woman, and child from not just accidents and disease, but from aging as well.

There's a recurrent line of thought that exclusions *protect* us, and perhaps that's correct in some respects, but I think it must also be acknowledged, especially in light of what I now know, that exclusions also operate in the opposite direction. They prevent dystopias, but they *also* prevent utopias. I don't imagine that a world with fully unleashed Gray magic running wild would end up being a good one, especially with the pains that people in the zone must take to engage in destructive processes like eating, but there's something about it — how it happened — that makes me feel like something was taken from us.

DM: Gray Magic obviously takes its inspiration from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, but also from voodoo and other magical methods of simulacra and simulation. Remote attack is a great hook, and can make for a wonderful battle as you need to defeat not just the gray mage, but all the things that the gray mage is hooked up to. This can be initially run as a heist, similar to finding and destroying a lich's phylactery before you fight the lich himself.

Beyond that, gray magic allows for some really bonkers quests, such as a king being very concerned about a stolen hank of his hair or some nail clippings that have gone missing. This doesn't *quite* work within the exclusion zone framing, since the king would be safe so long as he remained outside the zone, but there's no need to set the magic post-exclusion.



MANIFEST

Code: ICEZ

Types: Major, Empersoned

Date: 324 FE

Summary: The Manifest Exclusion Zone (ICEZ, formally, the Imperial City Exclusion Zone) is tightly controlled by Manifest, a long-lived human of uncertain origin. Manifest can remotely control up to a thousand people at a time with absolute precision and perfect awareness, which he uses to keep the City Made Manifest tightly locked down.

History: Lankwon was a major city in Ankja, sitting on the River Jesh, acting as a bridge between the Inner and Outer Jesh Seas. While bulk teleport eventually made its geographic position less important, the city was always a large and prominent one, arguably the most important place west of Bretaigne. For that reason, it became the eventual capital of the Second Empire, with the name being changed to the Imperial City in 200 FE. It was the site of many government functions, including major imperial courts, the legislatures, and the workplaces of the most important soul mages.

Through the city's history, especially following a number of prominent exclusions, major efforts were made to ensure the city's survivability. Research into any magic was forbidden in Lankwon, forge frenzies were swiftly directed to at least a hundred miles outside city limits, and heavy wards were put in place around every building of any prominence as well as the homes of imperial officials above a certain rank. Elite military regiments stationed in and around the city were kept in

a constant state of rotational readiness, their numbers and funding increasing over time, with especially large growth late in the Second Empire's lifetime. Intelligence services employing the best in well-tested clairvoyance, clairaudience and predictive abilities were used to ensure that an attack against the capital could be stopped before it happened.

From his first appearance, Manifest has been as powerful as he is today. His ability to control up to a thousand people at once allowed him to rip through Lankwon, taking over anyone he pleased.

The first hour of killing was largely silent. Manifest focused his attention on specific buildings, one at a time, systematically taking over everyone inside, then having them kill themselves and each other with whatever was on hand to reduce the number of individuals under control. He would leave only the strongest mages alive, as well as key officials with authority over the city's systems, particularly those in charge of the city's extensive surveillance. As his control over the city solidified, Manifest expanded his campaign of suicides and homicides, focusing on neutering the Second Empire's ability to react to his actions. The captured mages were formed into fire teams, and he used the full extent of their powers to sow havoc without caring about their own survival. Often, when one of the mages under his control ran out of their resources — flower buds, blood, tattoos, bones — he would simply force them to commit suicide like playthings tossed aside. Whenever any of his hosts died, he would immediately acquire another one, always keeping near the cap of a thousand captured.

Manifest's control ability requires line of sight, but this can be established through magical means, and so the city's surveillance worked against it in spectacular fashion. Within the course of a day, the Second Empire had been decapitated, losing not only its seat of governance, but also the majority of the most important imperial soul mages. Coming against the background of widespread revolutionary and reform sentiment within the member polities of the Second Empire, this exclusion is considered to be the pivotal event responsible for its eventual collapse, and thus is considered by some to be the single most important exclusion with regards to the current shape of the world.

Following his debilitating strikes against the Second Empire, some had hoped that Manifest would relax his grip upon the city and return power to the people. Instead, his control persisted, and Manifest took actions to ensconce himself in a defensive position against any and all comers. Because Manifest can fully surveil the zone, he is capable of taking control of anyone he likes within the zone's limits at any time, and he had used this power strategically. At any given time, the majority of people in the zone are not controlled by him directly. Instead, Manifest employs a combination of blackmail, intimidation, as well as holding the loved ones of the key people hostage in order to coerce their obedience. The threat of his powers is enough to keep the working population effectively imprisoned within the zone, ensuring that his army is clothed, fed, and supplied.

The city had been abandoned to Manifest. His position in the city remains virtually unassailable to this day, as even if his ability to immediately take over any invading force was taken away, the great variety of tools stolen from the Second Empire and his powerful army of mages would rival any member polity of the Empire of the Common Cause.

Features: The City Made Manifest is essentially deserted, save for the small collection of people who Manifest exhibits complete control over, magically or otherwise. This population is self-sufficient, producing more than enough food to feed itself, and with adequate provisions for everyone under Manifest's control. This control is absolute and inescapable, with some individuals from long-lived species having been under his continuous command since 324 FE.

Little is known about Manifest himself, as he does not often engage in conversation and even then, only through one of the host bodies. Regular attempts to establish trade in exchange for better conditions for those afflicted have been made and rebuffed, and it's known that a few attempts at profit-motivated trade by non-government parties have also been turned down. If Manifest has aims beyond his small kingdom, they are not known to anyone, and do not appear to require the help of anyone from the outside world.

Given his role in the defeat of the Second Empire, some are willing to forgive his crimes, including the absolute control over the minds of his pawns, especially since many of them are soul mages and imperialists who would have been executed or sentenced to fates worse than death by the revolutionaries. It is also supposed that, given his actions, Manifest might have been a revolutionary himself, acting nobly with the aim of bringing the Second Empire to an end. However, as the decades go on, his treatment of those under his control continues to draw fresh bouts of outrage, and his status as a folk hero to some has started to fade.

RAVEN: I met Manifest. You'll think it's stupid, but I was trying to save what was left of the Second Empire. I had seen what was coming with the Empire dead and gone, the way that everything would fracture apart, and all the old things that would bubble up from beneath the waters. There were things the Empire had been keeping under lock and key, and other horrors that they'd been brewing up themselves. So much of it seemed like it was going to escape off into the night.

Manifest had killed a lot of people, though maybe fewer than the average exclusion, all things considered. He'd slaughtered thousands getting the city under his control. We weren't sure exactly who was still alive and under his control, but it was possible that he had a few members of the imperial government, people he could release that would be instrumental in getting everything back together. It's hard to overstate how central that city was to the Second Empire. It was the beating heart of international politics.

I went in with an entourage to shield me. So far as we knew, the only way to be safe from him was to not be in the zone, so I didn't go into the zone, not as myself. I was a projection from outside, a shell of a person while I, myself, was inside a heavy metal bunker twenty miles away.

He didn't like that. It made him furious, actually, though I didn't know that until I was face to face with his thrall. All I had wanted to do was to talk, to see what concessions he would be willing to give, to find some way that we could salvage something from the calamity. Really, the rescue operation wasn't just about the people there, it was more about having a symbol. I was willing to be that symbol in order to hold it all together, to act in Uther's stead, to take a fragment of his name and say that yes, the great and mighty Uther is still here with us, here in the form of *me*, able to fight back against this thing that's happened. That was the Second Empire's entire

gimmick, really, pretending that they had the authority of the Great One.

I never talked to Manifest himself, only to one of his hosts that he was controlling. He wanted more than I had to give, and more than I was *willing* to give. It was all about what I could do for him, and *that* was all about control, not just of the city, but of *everything*. He wanted control of destiny itself, control of death, control of time. He thought — hoped — that I might have those things. He wanted to control more than just his thousand people. He wanted to break past that limit, but wasn't willing to tell me anything about how he was doing it, because that too was a matter of control.

He was smart and capable. Those are the only things that I'll give him.

Manifest never admitted to it, but I think his plan went off the rails. I think in his ideal world, his takeover would have been silent and far more complete. If his limit was a thousand people at once, that would have been more than enough to control the Second Empire's ruling committee. But the problem with being obsessed with control is that when you lose it, you're left scrambling to get it back. When he did that, it spilled out into the rest of the city. People talk about the fall of Lankwon as though it was the masterstroke of a prepared individual, but to me, it's a desperate attempt to get things to go the way he'd planned.

He saw himself as a concertmaster, conducting things with perfect precision, and I think when it went wrong, it broke him. Off the rails, as I said. I almost feel sorry for him.

Two hundred years on, it's hard to say if he's still anything like that. He has his horrible little fief where he maintains an iron grip, but I think the lack of ambition he's shown has been a symptom of whatever was wrong with him in the first place.

Excerpt from 'The City Made Manifest', 324 FE

Manifest had secured a stable base of operations, his eyes peering into every corner of the imperial capital, their systems of control having proven to be their undoing. There were only the first flickerings of concern at the guard stations at the capital's periphery, worried men and women who had noticed that the proper check-ins hadn't happened. Manifest did not concern himself with them though, not yet. The beating heart of the Second Empire wasn't in the guards who kept their boots against the necks of the populace, it was in those who gave the orders.

The soul mages had twisted people, violating their very minds again and again in their hubris, and believed that their magic made them untouchable. He entered their offices as their assistants, their maids, their sniveling functionaries, passing through heavy wards that had

not been prepared for the likes of him. He attacked them with whatever was on hand, driving pens through necks, slitting throats with shattered bottles, and sometimes throwing them bodily from a nearby window. Some he took control of, only for long enough to have them end their own life in swift and brutal fashion, gutted on their own swords, impaled by their own silverware, which had been set out for a late lunch. Some he forced to kill each other, two monsters choking each other to death, fingernails dug in deep and drawing blood.

He spared none, not the petty bureaucrats, the sniveling accountants, the decadent diplomats who looked down their noses at the teeming masses. All fell before him.

Precious peace had been bought in blood, the only way it could possibly have happened.

Excerpt from 'An Oral Record of the Manifest Exclusion', 337 FE

I didn't know anything was happening until it was well underway. I had been in school, and my mom was one of the first parents to come rushing in, past the teachers, to grab me out. As we were leaving, I saw a few of the other parents, running in a way that I had never seen adults run before. My mother took me home as quickly as she could, always urging me along, half-dragging me by the arm. I was ten years old. I kept asking what was wrong, and she told me that it was all going to be fine. She must not have had much more of a clue than I did. No one really knew anything.

My father and uncle were home, and that felt strange too. It was like everything was a dream, running adults and leaving school early and my father sitting at the dining room table in the middle of the day when normally he worked nights. They were all arguing about whether to 'hunker down or bug out'. In the middle of that, we heard a loud bang from outside, so loud it rattled windows. My father and my uncle looked at each other and then grabbed their weapons. They went out the front door, and that was the last we ever saw of them.

An hour later, my mother made the decision to leave. I kept asking about my sister, and my mother kept saying that we would get her later. She was in a boarding school on the other side of the city, and I accepted what my mother said, that we would make the trip there later.

We were far from alone when we left. The city streets were packed, clogged. Too many people had the same idea. We had the clothes on our backs and a pack that my mother had packed. We were trying to move fast, and so was everyone else, which meant that we were all going slowly. Sometimes the bodies would press together, and it felt like a river of flesh I would get swept away in. I stepped on a girl, my own age, my shoe pressing against her arm. I saw her underfoot for only a moment before she was behind me. I don't know if she was alive or dead.

The river of people was attacked twice, once by lanc-ing fire, the other time by a man who flew in with a sword. It was impossible to tell who or what was being targeted, but I was never harmed. My mother clamped her hands down over my ears, but I could still hear the screams.

AMARYLLIS: As the article states, the public perception of Manifest has changed a lot over the years. In the first weeks and months after the exclusion, especially on the other side of the world, people thought that it was a miracle, or just desserts, or the second coming of Uther Penndraig to smite the pretenders to his throne. Even after reports began to come out from the people who had actually been firsthand witnesses, there was a lot of praise for Manifest and the deathblow he'd dealt the Second Empire.

There was a novel that must have been absolutely rushed to market given the timelines, one which gave a fictionalized account of Manifest and his triumph over the Second Empire. It gave practically pornographic descriptions of the evisceration of imperial caricatures, and I have to imagine that it was a matter of catharsis for people who had been living under the regime at its worst. Scientists, soul mages, bean counters, politicians, spies, all lovingly killed in the pages of that book by the heroic Manifest, who wanted them to suffer for their crimes and complicity, sometimes with a little speech from him. I give it three out of five stars, unless I'm rating on accuracy, in which case it gets a one.

When enough time had passed, accounts were collected by those who had actually been there, mostly those who'd been missed or passed over for whatever reason. It was published in one of the imperial holdouts, and then not read by anyone much outside of it, mostly because it was dismissed as being imperialist propaganda rather than a work of journalistic merit. There are plenty of

people speaking out against the Second Empire in its pages, which lends it some credibility, and the fact that there are conflicting accounts of what happened actually does too. The eyewitnesses were all just going about their day when *something* was happening in their city, and it would have been odd, years later, for them to all hew to some official version of events.

It took decades for people to come around to what had actually happened, and I honestly believe that if Manifest had closed up shop in that time, he'd still be hailed as a hero, or possibly an antihero. Eventually though, the fact that he'd taken up residence got public opinion to turn on him, and stories were unearthed or retold, the horror of what he'd done becoming clear without being denounced as jealousy, attention-seeking, imperial sentiments, or whatever other excuse people had been giving not to listen to evidence.

Manifest used his minions to burn through streets crowded with evacuees. He had his bladebound slice through those who were fleeing. He spread fast-acting diseases. He killed children. For some of these things, we can imagine a rationale, construct some scenario where it would be permissible — we could say that it was collateral damage, or a trade-off of interests. No one believes that any longer though.

There are so many lessons to take from Manifest, but I think the most stunning one, for me, is how and why the public believes what it does. It was a form of control that was seemingly unknown to Manifest. I've committed myself to not remain so ignorant.



THE DATURA DESERT

Code: DDEZ

Types: Major, Double*

Date: 331 FE

Spoilers: Yes

Summary: The Datura Desert Exclusion Zone (DDEZ) is home to thousands of thaum-seekers, hostile creatures which will race across the desert at high speeds in order to destroy and consume magic, including latent magics. Within the center of the Datura Desert lies Barren Jewel, a place protected from the thaum-seekers by an effect called Alvion's Word.

History: What's now known as the Datura Desert was once a temperate zone, populated by settlers from the early Bret culture, and sharing some similarities with what would later become Anglecynn and Francorum. It was a rocky area with large stretches of plains that were easily converted to farmlands, and noted for its strong winds and subdued summers. The course of life on the continent of Leche mirrors much of life on Breteaigne, with the rise of strong kingdoms and eventual integration into the First and Second Empires, diverging from those only with the spreading blight of 331 FE.

The root cause of the exclusion is unknown. The first effect to be felt was the death of crops, wildlife, and livestock, which happened over the course of six months and seemed as though it might engulf the entire continent. When the effect reached the zone's borders, there was widespread relief, but millions of people had been displaced, there was a significant impact on the world economy, and the lands had begun to turn to desert, making a place where nothing would grow.

It was during this early period that the wizard Alvion had done something to create a magical effect in the city of Farst, which is now called Barren Jewel. A flower mage by trade, the spells that Alvion had created were unconnected to that magic, and could be used by anyone in the region. Two spells existed: the first was the spell of Barren Bread, which created bread to eat in limitless quantities, while the second was Barren Milk, which would produce a nutritious drink into outstretched hands. These were widely credited with saving Farst from starvation, and the city became a liferaft for those in the region who were hoping that some cure to the blight might be found.

A full year after the blight had spread and killed almost all plant and animal life in the zone, the thaum seekers first began to appear. They would violently attack any source of magic they could find, and appeared to have some kind of long-range ability to sense magic, similar in application to a warder's sight. The creatures were killed en masse, and the city of Farst was protected, but more kept coming, and their origin was unclear and could not be divined. As the exclusion had happened after the fall of the Second Empire, collective resources were in scarce supply, and the world had been wracked by wars. This left the people of Farst, the only holdout in the zone, largely on their own.

In 333 FE, Alvion made a third spell, again of unknown origin, which permanently protected the city of Farst, which was then already becoming known as Barren Jewel. This spell, Alvion's Word, has endured to this day.

In modern times, Barren Jewel has become a backbone of civilization, with the cheap, ready supply of

barren bread and barren milk providing nutrition to those who more desperately need it. For some time it was produced through the repetitious chanting of the spells, until it was discovered a sufficiently clear audio recording, as from a record player, could also produce the effect. The city is now home to a number of factories which process and bulk teleport the milk and bread for consumption throughout the hex.

Within Barren Jewel, Alvion is regarded as the ultimate folk hero, having saved the city and given his life in the process. The exact nature of the three spells is contested, though Alvion was a flower mage, and many have made comparisons to the extremely advanced magic of Vervain. Modern scholars consider them more akin to the ‘universal spells’ of Aerb, such as the sleeping spell known to all, though it’s unclear how Alvion would have brought one into existence. The spell which protects Barren Jewel is called ‘Alvion’s Word’ because it’s supposed that it was the last thing he spoke before he died. While it is unclear whether these spells are “excluded”, a geographically confined magical effect with a high impact so closely maps to the concept of exclusion that the term is often employed. This would make the area a rare double exclusion.

Features: Plant life does not grow outside of Barren Jewel, nor does it properly grow within it without extreme care and support. Livestock within the city are fed barren milk and barren bread, or processed variants thereof, but suffer some from the weakening effect that blankets the region.

The thaum-seekers are the largest threat the region poses. They are large, red, dog-like creatures with extended claws and sharp teeth. Aside from these natural weapons, their speed makes them very dangerous, as they can achieve sixty miles per hour across flat stretches of land. Because they can sense magic at range, all travel across the desert is typically done without entads and with all other magic suppressed, where possible. Outrunning the thaum-seekers is possible, but they seem to signal to each other, and what seems like a successful maneuver to get away from one can often lead straight into another. In packs, they are ferocious, and can tear apart a vehicle in moments. Because of this, air travel is preferred where possible.

The lifecycle and origins of the thaum-seekers is little-understood and much debated. There is no apparent food source for them in the desert. They seem to appear in limitless quantities no matter how many are killed. The current accepted theory is that they are tightly linked with the effect that drained the area of its life, and possibly spring from a well of stored or stolen magical energy, or from hidden eggs or invisible spores. If this is the case, it would be expected that the population of thaum-seekers would decline over time, or vary depending on what magic is used outside Barren Jewel, but no such variation has been found.

JUNIPER: Obviously there are three separate effects here, and just as obviously, it would make the most sense for those three to all be linked to each other somehow. You have the dying of the land, the monsters, and the bread and milk thing. I have *literally no evidence whatsoever*, but Alvion obviously fucked up while in the noble (or possibly capitalist) pursuit of limitless milk and bread for everyone, created a horrible monster that sucked mana from the land, and then just never told anyone what had happened.

There are a few problems with what I’m generously calling a theory though. One of them is the timeline, which doesn’t seem to match up. Everyone agrees that the bread and milk thing came *after* the crops started dying, and everyone *also* agrees that the monsters didn’t show up until much later. Maybe it makes sense for the lands to start dying while Alvion is still in research mode, after he’s made the spells but is still keeping them under wraps. Or maybe we can disconnect one of the three things: the monsters come to the desert not to eat, but because it was one of the few places that’s been drained of magic. Maybe they feed on a lack of latent magic, or need it for their mating cycle, which sounds dumb, but wouldn’t be the weirdest thing on Aerb.

On balance, I prefer Alvion as a guy who pulled a miracle out of his hat when everything was going to shit, however it was done. The world needs heroes like that, and Aerb sometimes seems like it’s tripping over its own dick trying to sUbVerT eXpeCtAtIONs.

AMARYLLIS: My trip to Barren Jewel was relatively brief. I went out into the desert, which most people don’t do, but I wanted to have some sense of this vast, lost area, and to be able to speak on it when discussing exclusions with other people. It’s really not much to look at, but I drafted up an anecdote, and the few times I used it, it seemed to play well.

Barren bread and barren milk are vital to the global economy, and there have been arguments for decades that the site should be completely taken over by the EoCC, simply in the name of imperial stability. Unfortunately, there are a lot of entrenched interests, the EoCC ‘doesn’t’ have an army, and Barren Jewel keeps itself going *just* well enough that no one actually ends up starving. I’ve tried making the argument that the exclusion zone technically falls under the authority of Special Threats, but that’s pretty obviously just me trying to convince other people that something is a nail because all I have is a hammer.

It makes me *very* uncomfortable that something which so many people depend upon is under the control of a city whose ‘leaders’ are essentially criminals and whose stability isn’t guaranteed. I can understand why nothing is done, though it frustrates me to no end: the people who eat barren bread and drink barren milk only do so because they have to, and getting people interested in helping the less fortunate is always a struggle.



BOWDLER

Code: BEZ

Types: Major

Date: 79 FE

Summary: The Bowdler Exclusion Zone is a place devoid of ideas. While entering the zone is not fatal, permanent damage to memories and cognition will set in after twenty-four hours, and after three days within the zone, most mortals will lose the very idea of food, leading to starvation. After a person has been removed from the zone, serious mental work is necessary to rebuild or restore thoughts and abilities of the affected.

History: Redaction magic, also known as expurgation, allowed for the viral removal of ideas or information. Contracting a purge required nothing more than brief contact with another person who had been affected. Redaction mages were a very small and secretive clan, often at war with each other, which might explain why records suggest that redaction was lost and rediscovered numerous times over the course of Aerb's history. Above a certain threshold of public awareness, it was statistically guaranteed that someone would learn expurgation and use it against the redaction mages, creating a lost art or scattering the redaction mages to the winds.

Starting in 63 FE, an enterprising young redaction mage named Nathaniel Bowdler, who came to his trade by way of familial lineage, began embarking on a quest to use this power in order to improve the world. Bowdler thought that society could be much improved if a number of 'harmful' concepts could be removed from it. These concepts ranged from those relating to crime (as crimi-

nals would be unable to think of criminal behavior), to those involving sexuality (which Bowdler thought should only be the realm of procreation). His worldview, steeped in the ideas of Uther Penndraig and the various reforms of two generations prior, saw progress as an inevitable outcome. Like many who had grown up under Uther's cultural canon, Bowdler saw himself as the obvious agent of change.

Due to the contagious nature of redaction magic, large-scale projects such as these had rarely been embarked upon, as redaction mages had few ways to protect themselves against their own redactions. Bowdler did not see this as a problem, since he believed that he too would be made better with the removal of certain ideas from his mind. He began with certain sexual ideas, which he saw as being corrupting and immoral, and did his best to spread the magic in highly populated cities. When this met with relative success, he pushed the 'reform' he was inflicting further.

An unfortunate result of Bowdler's approach was that he himself did not remember what had been redacted, as the very ideas that had been expurgated would leave his mind. He was aware that the magic was likely working, but not what it was working on. As this frustrated his sense of moral purpose, the goal of his reforms began to shift over time, and he added more extreme redactions which spiraled out into the world, widely spread. By 74 FE the decline in hexal birth rates was being noted by several kingdoms, though very few had the ideas necessary to articulate what had happened, and ironically, attempts at getting the best and brightest minds together

to investigate or solve the issue resulted in further spread of redaction (a magic which was then unknown to the public at large).

By 78 FE a special international team under complete wards had discovered the root of the problem, largely by way of slowly remembering things they had forgotten. From that point forward, efforts were made to understand the nature of the magic afflicting much of the ‘civilized’ world, and a manhunt began to find the person or persons responsible. In 79 FE, Bowdler, by then quite mad, was cornered. In response, he unleashed a powerful spell he had been working on, intended to create the perfect ascetic society. Redaction magic was immediately excluded, and the curse that Bowdler had placed upon Aerb began to slowly unwind itself as people rediscovered old ideas and reconnected old memories.

Bowdler’s lasting impact on Aerb is generally seen as minor in the scheme of history, but population statistics from the Imperial Remnants period paint a picture of his outsized significance. Additionally, while the viral redaction effect cannot survive within books, it does affect printed material, and after the exclusion, there was no mechanism by which the text would reappear. Because of this, many books, including some historical documents, have been ‘Bowdlerized’, removing sexual references, instances of crime or violence, and a number of other features depending on how much and how often they were handled by those affected by the magic.

Features: While it was once thought that the BEZ would fade over time, the magic within the zone is still quite strong, and thought to be contained within animal reservoirs. While the animals are unaffected by the redaction magic — possibly because they weren’t the target, or because they don’t have ideas in the same way — these animals continue to spread the magic within the zone.

While it is commonly said that no idea can survive the BEZ, careful testing at the border has shown that some ideas, particularly in the abstract or mathematical realms, can continue without being impacted. Additionally, since 232 FE there exists a series of Bowdler protocols which a person can follow to live indefinitely within the zone in a reduced state. While Bowdler’s redaction of food-related topics is thought to have been his attempt at curbing gluttony, someone under the full effects of the Last Redaction can follow instructions to insert objects into their mouth at regular intervals, to masticate, and to swallow, so long as these instructions work around the prohibited ideas.

AMARYLLIS: Bowdler was one of the reformers that followed in Uther’s wake, but he certainly had a lot of company. As I consider *myself* a reformer, I’ve tried to learn from the lessons of those who have come before, especially the insane ones who have either caused exclusions, made everyone fear the very word ‘reform’, and those who have done both.

Bowdler is one of those people who makes reforms harder the world over. He’s held up as a shining example of what happens when you try to ‘nanny’ people. It’s terribly difficult to argue against, because you can say ‘but *my* reforms would work’ or ‘but *I’m* not insane’ until you’re blue in the face and it won’t make one whit of difference. The conversation becomes not about the reform in question, but about reform *in general*, which is usually a stupid conversation to have when you’re talking about, for example, revamping the assignation of authorization for radio waves. Of course, the protest against reform-in-general is almost always a rhetorical tactic rather than a good-faith objection. The problem is that it’s an *effective* tactic, often bringing in strong emotions and tying a debate over tax reform to historical horrors and societal traumas.

One of the things that is desperately in need of reform is education across the empire, so I suppose I’ll consider myself lucky that most people won’t have heard of Bowdler.

DM: As a campaign idea, I think it’s much better to use the idea of Bowdler spreading his magic than it is to use the zone as laid out here. There are some concerns with player knowledge not matching up with character knowledge, so make sure you have some buy-in.

If you *do* want to use the zone, I think persistent checks to make sure characters retain basic concepts are the way to go, which isn’t how it’s supposed to mechanically work, but which would be a lot more interesting than just having characters slowly degrade. You also need some reason for them to be going into the zone, but there are a lot of options there, from bog standard treasure to some *idea* that’s been placed there to be suppressed. Redaction magic isn’t actually dead, it’s just that it doesn’t have any reach, so there’s nothing to stop a disciplined person working within Bowdler’s rules from making their own new redactions that only work within the zone.

Thomas Bowdler was an English physician most well-known for publishing ‘family-friendly’ versions of Shakespeare’s plays and novels that he felt were ‘more appropriate’ for women and children.



HERRONT

Code: HEZ

Types: Minor, Enpersoned

Date: 331 FE*

Summary: The Herront Exclusion Zone (HEZ) is home to a goblin who compels allegiance through magical or pseudomagical means.

History: Very little is known about the origins of Herront and his exclusion zone. Reports of a goblin who had amassed a large motley crew of pirates on the northern peninsula of Zealandia began in 311 FE, but as no known magic is associated with Herront's power, it is difficult to say whether he was excluded at that point.

Where early goblins were obsessed with the hoarding of wealth, and later goblins following Kel'e'thar's revolution were obsessed with books, it was clear early on that Herront had an obsession of a different sort: friends. Each of the large pirate crews that Herront commanded swore undying loyalty to him, and when pressed, typically at swordpoint, would list off his good qualities. Suspicion that something more than admirable leadership was going on started to surface in 322 FE, but the collapse of the Second Empire in 324 FE scuttled an attempt to kill him. Following that, trade dried up, and Herront's pirate colony became a proper polity of its own, largely out of necessity. 331 FE is usually given as the date of exclusion, but this is simply the last time Herront was noted as having left Zealandia, and may be inaccurate. (It is technically possible that Herront himself is not excluded at all.)

As time passed, recruitment efforts reached a fever pitch, and in 389 FE, thousands of people were immigrating to Herront every day. It was during this era that spies managed to slip in and, crucially, slip back out without falling under Herront's control, reporting on conditions within the city. While Herront inspired something in people, most lived in squalor, nonetheless tithing to the goblin and doing their best to justify why he was incapable of giving them aid, or speaking with conviction about how he would surely turn things around in the coming year. When word spread, immigration collapsed overnight, and the city was largely shunned by the rest of the wider world.

Starting in 438 FE, the EoCC began a remote study of Herront, with a report published in 441 FE detailing Herront's operations, limits, details of the functioning of the city, and personal information about Herront himself. This further curtailed Herront's ability to affect change outside his city.

At present, Herront is classified as a minor enpersoned exclusion and exists in a state of cold war with the EoCC. Efforts by Herront to reform the conditions within the city have largely failed, and without better care for its citizens, it seems unlikely that it will ever have exclusionary status revoked or be granted admittance to the Empire.

Features: The exact mechanism by which Herront gains the fanatical loyalty of people is unknown, but certain limitations have been observed. First, Herront needs direct physical proximity with the subject and must talk with them. Second, the ability takes some time

to work. Third, nothing that Herront does or says directly contradicts existing beliefs of the subject: instead, he integrates with their worldview. Where Herront's ability was originally thought to be a form of high-level soul magic, this last factor distinguishes it.

An equalist would see Herront as an equalist, pointing to the relatively flat command structure, and ignoring or explaining away Herront's position as the chief executive with ultimate authority. A centralist would see Herront as a centralist, arguing that power vested in supreme authority was the ideal of the philosophy, ignoring or explaining away the ways in which Herront had broken down existing hierarchies and created a city in which power was spread out. Those who personally know Herront describe him in different ways, and where these descriptions fail to match each other, long disagreements ensue. He has been described as religious, anti-theistic, introverted, extraverted, rooted in deep traditions, and wildly free from the constraints of the past. Generally positive traits are also commonly described to him: he is said to be tall, muscular, intelligent, philanthropic, competent, and charismatic.

Remote study of Herront has shown him to be a somewhat above average example of goblinkind. Crucially, the observed reality of those under his thrall has not been substantially altered, or no more than that of any fanatic when speaking about the object of their devotion. Physical descriptions of Herront by his followers are largely accurate to within expectations, they simply perceive his physical traits in positive ways. This does not appear to be the source of their loyalty and admiration, only a side effect of it.

For all that Herront commands loyalty, the city suffers. The reasons for these poor conditions are complicated, but are usually explained through general incompetence of the leadership. This combines poorly with the clashes that often happened between the citizens, who still retain their prior beliefs and personalities. There is agreement on Herront and Herront alone, and disagreement on nearly everything else.

Herront appears to spend all of his time in his palace, largely ignoring the city and world around him. A bevy of defenses protect him against direct attack. While Herront himself has not left his city, and may not be able to, those whose loyalty he's 'won' are perfectly capable of going off to serve him in one way or another, which would make him exceptionally dangerous if he did this

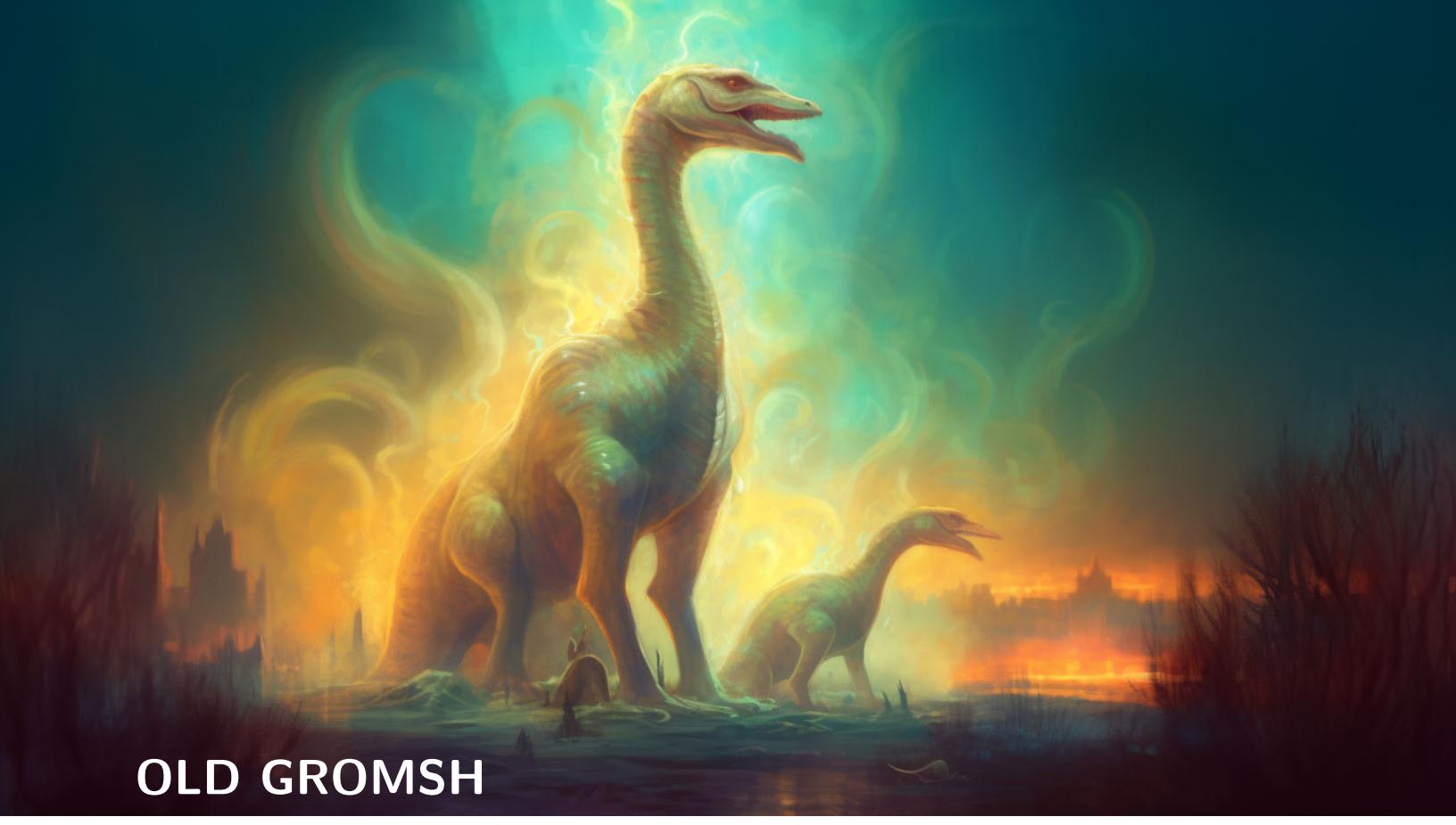
with any regularity or with concrete plans for expansion and control in mind.

JUNIPER: Fanatics are *great* for tabletop games. It's a solid way of explaining why someone would keep fighting long after it's clear that the battle is lost, and it gives you leeway for all kinds of crazy self-sacrificing stuff. In my experience, most people won't question it too much, because fanatics seem utterly alien to us, these weird people who are willing to give up their friends, families, careers, etc. for what feels like basically no reason. In my long nights of research that started with Wikipedia and ended with random websites on the ass end of the internet, I read some accounts from *actual* fanatics, people who had been in cults or spiraled into obsession. Some of them knew that their life was out of control and just felt helpless to stop it. I kind of wonder what's going on inside of the minds of the people who Herront has trapped, whether they have some awareness that they've gone insane.

RAVEN: There's a common view of history which states that goblins switched from hoarding gold to hoarding books, and I've seen it repeated ad nauseum by people who really should have known better. Goblin hoarding behavior is complex, and I would compare it more to squirrels burying nuts for the winter than dragons creating huge hoards of valuables. The origin of goblin hoarding seems to have been almost exactly that, though if they ever hibernated, they don't any longer.

I've known and worked with a large number of goblins, as their culture of books meshes well with the Infinite Library, and I've never seen that 'hoarding behavior' interfere with either their work or their personal relationships. They do often have collections of books in their personal quarters, but never to the detriment of our operation. If it's a fixation, it's a mild one, nothing like a dragon's hoard. A dragon will put himself in actual danger in order to add yet another knife to his knife collection, if that's the thing he hoards.

So I'm skeptical of the line of thought that goes 'oh yes, Herront placed his fixation on *friends*'. It places all the blame on hoarding behavior, and stains all of goblinkind in the process. For their part, goblins tend to be sensitive about Herront, I think especially because he came by *after* the reforms that turned them into one of the more well-respected of the mortal species.



OLD GROMSH

Code: OGEZ

Types: Major

Date: 200 FE

Summary: The Old Gromsh Exclusion Zone (OGEZ) is a place where a large number of colorful translucent beasts roam.

History: The élan vital was a form of both magical and material energy noted to have been prominent during the early period of Aerb's creation, with its era of highest use around 20,000 BE. The 'vital beasts' of the era were enormous creatures that fed on the psychic energy of the mortal species, or sometimes, on the spectral bodies of each other. Additionally, some members of the mortal species could manipulate this essence, and were known as vitalists. Both were known for vibrancy of color, as the vital beasts were of a wide range of bright hues, while the vitalists gave off immense colorful auras when using their powers.

In 15,000 BE, a sudden event killed all of the vital beasts and vitalists in a single fell swoop. The nature of this event is hotly disputed, with theories ranging from an epidemic that affected those with a connection to the élan vital, to a deliberate campaign of extermination (for which there is no evidence), to a major disruption in the élan vital. Whatever the cause for these deaths, everything else on Aerb was spared.

During the Utherian era, exclusions began to happen in greater numbers, and the phenomena began to be more well-understood. It was then that historians began to look through the history of Aerb and take stock of

historical events in this context, trying to determine whether exclusion had been a phenomenon prior to Uther. Numerous historical examples were found and argued over. The term 'proto-exclusion' was coined to refer to these historical events, as there was significant debate among historians about whether this was the same phenomenon. Among the most significant of the points made was that none of these proto-exclusions had an associated exclusion zone, and while it was (and is) true that magics have been demonstrably excluded with no known zone, it was considered suspect that the same was universally true of so many historical examples.

In 164 FE, historians searching for evidence of what had happened to the élan vital began to discover fossilized brains with some trace of magic still in them. This was confirmed by warders to be an unknown magic. Scholarly efforts were made to identify the magic, and it was termed vitalism by association with the old magic. Starting in 187 FE, efforts were made to do something with the brains using tools and techniques that had not been available to prior generations. In 193 FE, at great expense, the first of the vital beasts was resurrected, a small glowing creature the size of a housecat that moved about on six limbs and seemed to feed upon the invisible and largely undetectable élan vital.

Starting in 195 FE, a man named Yannick Villetor laid out a plan for Élan Park which would house these vital beasts as they were resurrected. As there was concrete proof that the vital beasts had not actually been excluded, it was meant to be seen as a mark of progress. Villetor raised money from various investors, including

from the then-new Second Empire. A site was selected near the city of Gromsh, just up the river, and the park was constructed over the course of five years, with the aim to be finished in time for the second centennial anniversary of the founding of the First Empire.

Unfortunately, on the opening day, tragedy struck. The vital beasts had been confined to magestone pens, with the walls hidden by foliage and one side left open for viewing by the spectators. To keep the park visitors safe and keep the beasts from leaving, a deep and wide trench had been dug in front of the open side of the pens. Unbeknownst to the architects of the park, some of the vital beasts were capable of crossing the open air when there was enough disturbance of the surrounding élan vital: stepping on pooled energy in the air, extending their spectral bodies, or swimming through the aether. As soon as a sufficient mass of people had entered the park, the flux of élan vital was pushed over that critical limit, allowing the first beasts to escape. Once the visitors were running scared, the élan vital became even more thick and disturbed. The chain reaction led to more and more beasts escaping confinement, and in some cases, cascades of failures led to the opening of pens.

Dozens were killed in the initial breakout. Attempts were made to kill or contain the beasts, but eventually they moved on the city of Gromsh, forcing evacuation as the beasts grew in power from the concentrated vital energy of the urban areas. The area has been inhabited almost exclusively by the vital beasts since that time.

Features: The vital beasts of the OGEZ are sustained largely by the élan vital, a web of invisible and intangible energy that flows through the entire world. This energy emanates primarily from the minds of the mortal species in quantities that are too small to be detected by normal means. The immense vital beasts are sustained by this flow of energy, and will be for as long as there are people on Aerb.

The largest of the vital beasts are more than sixty feet tall, glowing pink, while the smallest are yellow, the size of chickens. Almost all of the vital beasts glow in some way, and they range from almost completely opaque to translucent. While they feed largely on the élan vital, many of the ‘species’ are aggressive, attacking anyone who enters their territory. Due to their nature, the vital

beasts are extremely difficult to kill through conventional means, and the primary historic method of dealing with them — vitalism — is a lost art.

So long as the web of élan vital stays intact, the vital beasts will keep roaming the area in and around Old Gromsh, their revived ecosystem now stable.

JUNIPER: There are no psionics on Aerb, and when I look at exclusions, I try to think about whether maybe psionics used to be around but then got excluded. This one seems like it *might* fit the bill, but it’s all about psionic beasts rather than the psions themselves, who died out ages ago and were never resurrected. I guess since the élan vital itself isn’t excluded, just the beasts, it’s possible that there could be some vitalists out there, and I would have to see one to know whether it was actually psionics like I’m thinking.

We were playing a D&D 3.5 campaign when Reimer came and slapped the Expanded Psionics Handbook down on the table, saying that he wanted to be a Soulknife. I said sure, because I was young and naive, and then it caused all kinds of problems. Psionics were a special system that didn’t really interact with magic as it was laid out in the normal books, with psionic resistance and magic resistance trying to live side by side with each other, and psionic beasts, and all kinds of other things that were a pain for me to keep track of. We clashed on it a lot, and after two campaigns and a one shot where he explored the limits of what psionics could do, I said it just wasn’t a part of the worldbuilding and convinced him to try other stuff that I could handle better.

A lot of what the historical vitalists could do seems to like it might line up with some kind of psionic ability, though it’s ancient, from what on Earth would be before written history, and it’s hard to tell. The way that vitalism is ‘special’ really makes me think that it’s a match, given that it doesn’t mesh with the other definitions of magic all that well, and warders can barely even see it, and can’t interact with it. If vitalism *is* psionics, then I’m glad it’s excluded. It seems like a pain. I would like to go visit the vital beasts sometime, if we had time for a vacation. I’ve heard they have some observation towers set up at the edge of the zone, along with a little hotel with a gift shop.



GATESMITH

Code: GSEZ

Types: Major, Empersoned

Date: 456 FE

Summary: The Gatesmith Exclusion Zone (GSEZ) contains millions of portals, some large, some small, all of which are razor sharp and lead only to other locations within the zone.

History: Caldwell Gatesmith has the unfortunate distinction of being responsible for two separate exclusions, and while the first is now closed, the second saw him empersoned. Gatesmith's first exclusion, in 452, happened when he was just sixteen years old, a bright and eager cauldron mage (a bloodline magic). Cauldron mages were capable of great feats of mental acuity so long as they were within their cauldrons, being boiled. While protections against heat would often cause the magic to fail, it was Gatesmith who had the key insight that 'boiling' could be achieved through lowering the pressure within the cauldron. This eventually led to a calamitous exclusion, which Gatesmith escaped, and with his home and fortunes destroyed, he was left to forge a new path forward.

Portal magic had always been one of the weakest of the historical travel and communications magics, in part because of the time, effort, and cost involved in creating distant portals. Gatesmith attacked the magic with unimaginable fervor, attempting to solve problems that had plagued the practical side of portal magic for ages. He rapidly grew in skill, learning from a number of masters, helped in part by his earlier training in

cauldron magic, until he eventually had a breakthrough while led directly to exclusion. Portal mages had, until that point, needed to consciously maintain their portals, which severely limited utility and stability, but Gatesmith's portals were capable of standing on their own, and he was able to sustain any number of them without any seeming thought.

Gatesmith did not take to empersoning well. His view of himself seemed to be as someone who was brilliant and talented, and who was owed the world, but portal magic, which had seemed destined for weaving the cities of the plane together, was restricted to an exclusion zone only fifty miles wide. A series of escalations and threats led to the GSEZ, already sparsely populated, being abandoned. Further sour interactions with the EoCC ensured that Gatesmith would be barred from civil society, especially after Gatesmith demonstrated his 'strike capability' more than two hundred miles from his exclusion zone. Violent and erratic, Gatesmith is treated with extreme caution.

Features: Gatesmith's portals pepper the GSEZ, numbering in the millions. The two primary uses for these portals are surveillance, which Gatesmith seems to spend most of his time engaged in, and attacks, which are launched against anyone who approaches without explicit invitation or by prior arrangement via radio.

Gatesmith can create a portal anywhere that he can see, and given that he can see through his portals, interlopers have a potential to be sighted from anywhere within the zone. He appears to have a supernatural sense of his portals as well, and knows where each of them is at any given moment, making his command of

them powerful beyond anything prior portal mages were capable of. It is suspected that his sense of his portals is also useful for surveillance, given that his response time to outside threats is quite fast, even when threats are staggered in the hopes of catching him asleep.

The edges of the portals are incredibly sharp, capable of cutting through steel, and serve as a method of precise attack, especially when portals are moved swiftly or created to bisect someone.

From the perspective of the EoCC, Gatesmith's most troublesome weaponization of portal magic is through the 'infinite tunnel'. A single portal can allow an object to quickly reach terminal velocity, or in a vacuum, to reach such incredible speeds that its destructive power is nearly unmatched. Once the desired speed is achieved, Gatesmith can simply open a portal beneath the falling object to direct its immense accumulated power elsewhere. Through this method, Gatesmith is capable of long-range strikes against distant targets, limited primarily by his accuracy and the thickness of the atmosphere.

A secondary difficulty when it comes to Gatesmith are the layers of defenses he's set up for himself. His location within the GSEZ is unknown, and suspected to shift constantly. If someone comes for him, he can move himself to the opposite end of the zone in an instant. A few attempts on his life have been made and failed. Portals have also been used as traps at various points, either within doorways to lead an unwitting fireteam into a death maze, or at ankle height to slice down anyone walking. It is suspected that he has more tricks held in reserve.

Gatesmith's existence within the exclusion zone is said to be somewhat comfortable, though a psychological profile put out by Special Threats has postulated that he was always more interested in his own intelligence more than he was interested in hard work. His lifestyle is constrained by what was left in the zone when it was evacuated, his food scavenged from across the zone rather than farmed.

As he had previously borne the blame for the exclusion of cauldron magic, there is some worry that he

would try his hand at some other magic instead. Caldwell appears to be aging normally though, slowing in recent years, and it is hoped that one day the exclusion zone will join the ranks of those that have solved themselves.

AMARYLLIS: How'd he do it though? The problem with the enpersoned exclusions is that there's precisely one person who knows the 'trick', if there even is a trick, and most often, they don't want to tell you. There's some common speculation that Gatesmith was using some kind of entad, but I think that's somewhat unlikely to be the answer. Knowing what I know now, I have a different answer: he discovered spirit magic, or a subfield thereof. If portal magic requires continuous thought to maintain, it's possible that you could go into your thoughts and just make a loop that runs on its own without being conscious. It takes thought to *establish* those portals as well, and I think it's possible that spirit might help with that too, though we don't have a precise mechanism at the moment. It was known that portal magic *did* offer some extrasensory perception, and if that scaled with the number of portals, it might explain everything. That's *pure* speculation though, and even if we knew, he's enpersoned, so it wouldn't make much of a difference.

GRAKHUIL: Many exclusions are vulnerable to warders, either in theory or in practice. Gatesmith is not one of them. A warder can close portals in the area, using expensive unanchored wards, but Gatesmith can likely sense this closing. The infinite tunnel attack generates so much energy and can be aimed so precisely that an additional extremely strong ward would need to be placed on top of the one that stops portals. All of that would be just to ensure the safety of a small team, and wouldn't solve the issue of Gatesmith himself, who is difficult to locate and harder to pin down.

JUNIPER: Now you're thinking with portals! Please stop thinking with portals.



THE CITY OF LASTING BLOOD

Code: LBEZ

Types: Minor

Date: 36 FE

Summary: In the City of Lasting Blood (LBEZ), people leave blood trails as they walk. It is now known that this is the work of nearly invisible parasites which densely populate the hair and skin of almost everyone who lives in the city.

History: The origins of the exclusion that engulfs the City of Lasting Blood are unknown, though it's been theorized that the mites responsible for the trails of blood were bred for some specific purpose, or possibly introduced from the elemental plane of blood (intentionally or otherwise). In 36 FE, blood began appearing in the wake of certain pedestrians, pooling around their footsteps. By 37 FE, the phenomenon had spread to almost every citizen of the city, and the borders of the exclusion were made quite clear.

The City of Lasting Blood was formerly known as Anahelia, with the current name informally adopted in the years following the exclusion and then formally changed after the collapse of the Second Empire. The city lies at the juncture of the Berlung River and Bont's Bay, on the continent of Berlo, and still to this day is an important site for trade, even with as much difficulty as the city has faced.

The blood left by people fills their footprints, which means that any busy street runs red with blood. The City of Lasting Blood is slightly sloped leading down to the bay, and rivulets of blood routinely empty there, whether through the city's sewer systems or simply

through the downward flow of liquid. When the city was first responding to the crisis in 36 FE, they issued an edict that people should stay in their homes as much as possible, but as the effect occurred even when people were inside buildings — anywhere a person walked — it was eventually decided that people should instead be outside, where municipal resources could be used to direct the flow of blood.

Over time, there have been numerous attempts at stopping the blood. Richer areas quickly put up wards against blood, but the blood left in someone's wake perfectly matches their own blood, making direct blood wards difficult. Other methods of magical blood removal are more common, including creatures that clean up after the blood, stones that absorb the blood, and entads that dry a person out.

The City of Lasting Blood and the citizens within it have had to deal with a number of calamitous impacts from the blood, though many of these calamities have since passed. The blood attracts disease and vermin, stinks, and soils whatever it touches. Additionally, the ready blood has also attracted a number of predators, invasive species, and entrepreneurs, and such threats have needed to be fended off in various ways over the years. Currently, the city has a quite large department of pest control, along with a dedicated disease control agency.

In 289 FE, the source of the effect was finally traced to a nearly invisible mite. For a time, there was hope that the mites could be eradicated, but by that point the city was in no state to undergo full eradication, and the efforts to monetize the effect would have been threatened,

which likely would have led to the city's financial collapse in the event eradication were successful. The primary effect of the discovery was instead the advancement of wards, which became much cheaper, and the integration of the mites by the local pustule mages.

Features: Generally speaking, the LBEZ values higher elevation and buildings, as blood drips down. Most materials used in construction are either impervious or resistant to blood, particularly flooring. Where the flow of blood cannot be prevented, floors are sloped with adequate drainage that leads down to the local sewer system where blood can be captured. Different strategies toward blood are employed depending on class, either favoring fastidious cleaning or a live-and-let-live policy. While the effect can be prevented by not stepping, this is not always possible, and not considered a good way to live. Additionally, some incidental blood almost always finds its way to various surfaces.

The sewer system of the LBEZ is one of the most complicated and well-engineered on Aerb, having been installed during the time of the Second Empire and tightly maintained since then. The blood from the millions of footsteps in the city flows down into the sewers, where it's captured, separated using wards, purified, processed, and pumped. In this way, the blood is put to productive use, becoming food, fertilizer, glue, and occasionally building material. The blood pumps that rise up from the sewers go to a number of factories within the city, and once the blood is processed, it's teleported out all over the world.

The outflow of blood from the LBEZ has had detrimental impacts on Bont's Bay, and the area outside the zone is home to its own unique collection of marine creatures that feed on the blood. Starting in 352 FE, ships were no longer allowed in that area of the Bay, given the large and dangerous creatures that lived there, feeding either on the blood or the blood feeders. Modern efforts to capture more of the blood before it hits the water have largely been in vain.

The LBEZ's status as a minor exclusion is disputed by the residents and city officials. The official reason for the designation is that significant efforts need to be made to make the zone livable. The city contests that, saying that for the vast majority of those who live there, these efforts have already been made and are now trivial for newcomers. Still, the incidence of disease and prevalence of vermin, in spite of the city's best efforts, have meant that it hasn't been able to shake the stigma nor the designation.

AMARYLLIS: The City of Lasting Blood generates approximately seven thousand tons of blood every day. This presents several enormous engineering challenges, and the sewer system that deals with (and recaptures) all that blood is one of those projects that will never grace a postcard, but is nonetheless an impressive testament to the ingenuity of the mortal species.

Blood coagulates as it cools and is exposed to air, and the pipes have needed to be designed so they can handle clotting. The organic matter leads to the formation of biofilm, which contributes to slowing the flow of liquids and to the corrosion of pipes. There are extensive sanitation and health risks. Also, they're not just trying to flush all of this blood away, they're trying to reclaim it for productive use, which presents all kinds of challenges, especially since the system *also* needs to deal with rainwater and everything else that goes into a sewage and wastewater system. The blood that comes into those factories doesn't start out even remotely clean, and once the source blood goes through high-capacity wards, there's really no option for the waste but to be returned to outflow into the same system that the blood was captured from, complicating the whole thing enormously.

Water mages are always in high demand in the city, providing the rain to wash away the blood and give the city brief moments of cleanliness, but this puts even more demands on the sewer systems, and also contributes to other problems within the city, whose buildings and people need to be able to withstand all the problems that come with the blood *and* near-perpetual rains.

I find it a miracle that the City of Lasting Blood actually *works*. They have a level of competence in dealing with their issues that I wish I could find a way to export to other places. There are bumps in the road, to be sure, but they're met with intelligence and resolve, and for whatever reason — I have always thought it was the culture — the city is able to tackle its challenges without the usual budget overruns, grafting, cancerously oversized management class, or all the other problems that typically plague both governments and corporations.

DM: The City of Lasting Blood is mostly interesting to me because people are dealing with the horrible reality of having blood everywhere. I think there's a lot of interesting worldbuilding details that you can use for adventures here, but most of the blood stuff isn't particularly ripe for adventure, it's just a background detail. The lower classes will tend to be more blood-soaked, especially around their pants, rich places will be strikingly spotless, the blood processing factories and extensive sewers lend the city its own particular flavors, etc. It's a great place for vampires, blood mages, and different creatures that ordinarily dwell in the elemental plane of blood.

There are lots of neat plot hooks too, especially because it's a 'civilized' area, and I like the idea of someone with 'special' blood coming in to covertly make more of their (dangerous) blood, or someone feeding a creature tons of blood to build them up as a weapon to be unleashed. Because it's the only place in the world with this much blood aside from the Fountain of Everblood, it can attract all kinds of strange and unusual people with plots and plans of their own.



TORN TAPESTRY

Code: TTEZ

Types: Major

Date: 112 FE

Summary: Within the Torn Tapestry Exclusion Zone (TTEZ) connections between people wither away and die.

History: The secluded duchy of Villeham-upon-Chase was home to a relatively peaceful if insular community known primarily for its textile production. Starting in 112 FE, the duchy began experiencing social upheavals which were reckoned to be caused by the changes that had swept through world textile production and the rise of the factory owner as a member of new nobility. As time went on, the extent of the problem became more severe, with numerous indicators which didn't seem tied to existing social problems: infant mortality had greatly increased, social trust was plummeting, economic output had cratered, and violence and theft had both increased dramatically.

It wasn't until 115 FE that the cause of the problem was first proposed to be magical in nature, and swift investigation showed that the people of Villeham-upon-Chase were undergoing marked changes in how they viewed others, something attributed to social or cultural change until that point. Trust and camaraderie broke down within a few weeks in the zone, and started fraying long before that. Parents lost their bonds with their children, fraternal organizations continued largely out of inertia, and brothers would treat each other like strangers. The condition was endemic among people

within the duchy, and once it was uncovered and news of it spread, all of the problems within the duchy were immediately exacerbated.

By 118 FE, Villeham-upon-Chase was largely abandoned, with the rudderless population scattered to the winds. The villagers were shunned from a number of places given that their ability to engage fruitfully in communities had been severely damaged, and while most weren't bad people, they had trouble with concepts of duty, honor, trust, loyalty, and shame. Many became criminals, in part because their dislocation meant that they arrived in foreign lands without money.

Beginning in 253 FE, a facility was built on the border of the zone, which had to be carefully discovered by imperial surveyors. One half of the facility was within the zone, including a number of prison cells, while the other half was given over to researchers and administrative personnel. The facility had two functions in mind: the first was the production of thinkers and engineers who would be unhampered by feelings toward others, instead focusing on pragmatic problems whose solutions could best be reached without bias. This process was voluntary. The second function was the incarceration of 'problematic elements', largely those involved in cult-like behavior, resistance to the empire, or other organized movements. Those subjected to the prison would lose their allegiance to whatever cause they'd been a part of, and could typically be counted upon to turn on their companions for negligible incentives. This practice was largely done in concert with or as an alternative to direct modification of the soul.

Following the fall of the Second Empire, the facility was razed. The EoCC considers placing a person in the TTEZ to be a crime against the mortal species.

Features: The actual magic that causes the effect of the TTEZ is unknown, but has been classified by imperial warders as ‘Thread Magic’ as a placeholder until more is known. Studying the phenomena has proven nearly impossible, since warding is necessary to keep the magic at bay, and warding likewise prevents the magic from being studied and manipulated. Some success has been had with affecting animals, but there are ethical concerns, and the contingent of researchers at the edge of the TTEZ is small. If the root magic were ever discovered, the pall over Villeham-upon-Chase might be lifted and the zone exploited for whatever magical effects are possible with the full spectrum of Thread Magic. This dream is one that keeps people coming back to the zone.

Those afflicted by the magic of the TTEZ lose their connections to others, instead seeing friends, family, and polity as being more of a collection of cold, impersonal interactions. The afflicted experience trust in a different way, more as a prediction of what a person will do in the future rather than a firm belief. While not all of those afflicted turn ‘selfish’, this is a common symptom. Likewise, violence, theft, and other antisocial behaviors do not always result from affliction, but for some people, connections to others are what prevented them from these actions in the past.

JUNIPER: This one is just grim. Most of them are grim, but sometimes there’s an obvious hook in there, and if I dissociate, I can see how it might make for a fun adventure, just not one that I would particularly look forward to doing in person. There’s nothing here but heartache though, maybe with a dose of Second Empire scientific amorality, which they *really* seemed to think was a good idea. I can see the appeal of that, I guess, rigorous logic that doesn’t bend to ‘what about the children’ or NIMBYism or whatever other moronic thing there is.

But it’s not a Zone of Adventure, and I don’t think it could *be* a Zone of Adventure. There’s nothing to compel anyone to go into it, there’s no one living there, there aren’t monsters unless you count the people who have been made into psychopaths or sociopaths (I never remember the difference, it’s one of those). It’s terrifying, I guess, but I kind of scratch my head wondering why there’s this grim exclusion zone sitting around with no real point to it.

Maybe the grimness is the point.

DM: The *worldbuilding* is the point. Once you’ve established that a place like this exists, you can weave it into a campaign in whatever way you want to. Stripping a person of his connections is prime villain material, and you’ve gotta believe I love a good blacksite and/or secret research facility. Only one thing is known about ‘Thread Magic’, which is that it does this one thing, but you can extrapolate a whole magic system out from it. The threads are connections between people, or possibly more, connections between people and *institutions*, ideals, gods, stuff like that. It’s a little bit redundant with this setting’s soul magic, but being more narrow in scope means that it can be used more liberally and with more creativity.

Also, the magic being unknown means that this can be either a fake exclusion (only geographically restricted due to environmental conditions, a focus at the center of the zone, or something else), or a partial exclusion, with the magic freely available elsewhere in the world. For a campaign, this exclusion zone would probably be the first step, and evidence would then lead in some other direction, where thread mages are secretly practicing their craft in the wider world.



GLASS WALL

Code: GWEZ

Types: Minor, Partial

Date: 311 FE

Summary: Crystal magic is a form of magic which allows for the creation of both structures and agents through the growth of crystals. Unusually, the Glass Wall Exclusion Zone (GWEZ) is only a partial exclusion of crystal magic, as these constructs can freely leave the zone.

History: Crystal magic was long thought to be one of the weaker magics of Aerb, as growing crystals took a significant amount of time and materials. A semi-sapient crystal would take the better part of a decade to grow, cost a year's wages, and would only be capable of unskilled labor. This began to change during the period of the First Empire, when movement of materials became much cheaper and centers of learning became more common. At the start of the Second Empire, it was possible to grow a useful crystal from several pounds of sand, a half pint of a practitioner's blood, and a single month's time.

By the time the Second Empire was celebrating its centennial, these crystals were a common sight in major cities, having taken the place of a number of jobs, usually simple ones. Larger, stationary crystals were developed, which led to the construction of the first crystal factories using assembly lines of many specialized crystals, with the aim of replacing brute labor. These advances came with several drawbacks though, the largest of which was the lack of ontological inertia: if a practitioner died, all

crystals they had made would stop functioning. As a consequence of this, crystal mages were often trained very young, or were members of mortal species with very long lifespans, the better to justify the investment of resources and prevent any one person from becoming a lynchpin.

In 311 FE a partial exclusion of crystal magic caused all crystal production to fail. As the crystal creations themselves still worked, it took some time to find the associated exclusion zone. Once it was discovered on the continent of Gon, action was taken immediately.

In one corner of the exclusion zone, in what is assumed to have been the home of a reclusive crystal mage, a large and growing crystal structure was quickly surrounded before it was determined that it was non-threatening. There were no signs of life inside, but new crystal constructs would sometimes come out of it, which led to the theory that someone had cracked the problem of self-replication, possibly eliminating the issue of ontological inertia.

After the fall of the Second Empire, the crystal structure, then termed 'Glass Wall' for the appearance of its outer defenses, began to grow. While there was some alarm at this from the crystal mages who lived in the zone and had continued to ply their trade there, no imperial authority existed to help them, and their efforts at pushing back the wall ended in failure. Still, the entity did not seem violent, only territorial, and once the crystal mages were either driven off or confined to a small section of the zone, it stopped its push.

In the modern day, Glass Wall has flooded its zone with all manner of crystals, most of unknown purpose.

A small fraction of these are sent out into the world for the presumed purpose of exploration. While Glass Wall itself does not appear to be a threat, the zone is carefully monitored, as an offensive by the army of created crystals would be catastrophic for the surrounding area. No attempts at communication with Glass Wall — if it is a single entity — have succeeded, whether through verbal, written, or entadic means. It is unknown whether Glass Wall is even sentient.

Features: The interior of the zone has been largely taken over by these crystal creations, though there are several spaces which are occupied by mortals. Crystals come in a wide variety of hues, shapes, and colors, with the smallest of them the size of a water drop, and the largest the size of a truck. Most of the crystals levitate, though some instead move around by rolling. While the crystals are capable of limited manipulation through the use of effector fields, they appear to largely prefer physical manipulation.

The majority of the GWEZ is a single crystal entity which has spread over and consumed every surface, built spires up to the vertical limits of the exclusion zone, and pushed down hundreds of feet into the ground. The most common color of crystal in the main structure itself is pink, though translucent areas were once more prominent, leading to the name. The function of different locations within the vast crystal structure have yet to be determined.

At the north edge of the GWEZ is the Crystal Pavilion, where the remaining crystal mages — all from long-lived species — still ply their trade. A small town exists just beyond the zone, connected to the Pavilion, where most of the mages live when they aren't working. While the zone is officially a minor exclusion, there is still significant concern that aggression from Glass Wall might result in the deaths of the remaining crystal mages and the town they reside in, which has created a chilling effect on the magic.

AMARYLLIS: A part of me believes this to be one of what I'll call the 'utopic' exclusions, those which exist not to prevent some calamity from killing the world at its roots, but which exist because if they didn't, the world would fundamentally change *in a good way*. Crystal magic was, at one point, seen as the silver bullet for labor shortages, allowing menial labor to be done by dumb crystals and true intellectual or social work to be the work of people. There was a promise of better living conditions, higher wages, and possibly the end of work itself for the majority of people.

It's all moot now, but the cynic in me wonders whether the utopic dream would have worked out. While the Second Empire was still around, my guess is that what would eventually happen is that they'd have found their excuse to 'liquidate' huge swaths of the population, something that they already did to some extent *without* crystals. The Second Empire looked down on the laboring class as a vile necessity, though the diplomatic ones wouldn't have put it like that. The highest form of labor was soul magic, obviously, but just below that, complex and intricate magic. The utopian dream of having crystals take out the trash, tend to the crops, make the food, and so on was a way of eliminating something that the Second Empire had no respect for.

I don't actually think that the crystals *could* tend to the crops or make food, given those things are more complicated tasks than people often give them credit for, but that was the dream. I've seen many well-respected people, competent professionals in their field, who have given a cursory glance of some other field and said, 'oh how hard could it be'.

So perhaps, on reflection, this wasn't a utopic exclusion at all. Or maybe it's foolish to ascribe purpose to exclusions.

DM: Tons of crystal constructs floating around, going about their business, seems like good fun, and being able to tie them back to this mysterious crystal factory feels like it helps give the world a bit of depth. Crystals behaving oddly or badly are a good plot hook to get adventurers to learn about and explore Glass Wall, which can either lead them to the crystal entity itself, or to the Crystal Pavilion where the few still-living crystal mages practice their art. A crystal can be found on the body of a fallen enemy, or be seen observing a battlefield, and there's a natural chain of logic and locations that can lead to a short adventure.



THE CITY OF FENG

Code: NGEZ

Types: Major

Date: 302 FE

Summary: Within the Feng Exclusion Zone (NGEZ), turbulent flows of energy kill people through an excess of health and prosperity.

History: Shuism was a historical practice of ‘energy’ manipulation practiced by the geologi, who were charged with the proper placement of buildings, roads, settlements, and other large-scale structures. Like star mages, the geologi consulted the positions of the heavenly bodies and the movements of the stars, along with more general surveying of the landscape, the structures on it, and the flow of energy. Auspicious locations would be selected, then further consultation with one of the geologi would be made to ensure that the flow of energy around and through the structure would be unimpeded, which was thought to ward off bad fortune. Shuism had large overlap with dibbling, and was sometimes used to help channel earthly energy for dibblers, though proper shuism considered latent energy from all sources, including the winds, waters, and nature.

During the early Second Empire, a greater focus on empiricism and deeply exploring the nature of various magical systems revealed that large portions of shuism were not grounded in material reality. Numerous structures were built according to the principles of shuism and the advice of the geologi, then compared to each other, and over the course of three years, ninety percent of the practice was thrown out. The understanding of

shuism needed to be rebuilt from the ground up through empirically verified claims. The new models of shuism allowed the magic to flourish once more, and the new geologi were consulted for most major building projects, colony settlements, and other sites that would have a great impact on the world.

The biggest revelation from the Shuist Reformation was the field of microshuism, in which the geologi could manipulate minor energies within a single house or room. While it was felt that proper siting of buildings was important, it turned out that the large-scale effects were much less acute than the small scale ones, and with proper tuning, a shuist parlor could have effects that were immediately noticeable. This required the positioning of up to hundreds of objects, the contouring of walls, and typically the attentions of a specialized warder to measure the flow of energy. Microshuism was grounded in mathematics and science, and once certain configurations had been set up once, it was generally easy to set them up a second time. Shuist parlors were, for a time, a staple of the Second Empire and a mark of the empire’s overall success.

Little is known about the city of Feng, which appears to have been constructed around a much smaller village starting in 288 FE. For much of its construction, it was an imperial secret, visible in the historical record only as a series of imports, exports, and movement orders. Following the death of most people within the city in 302 FE, some efforts were made to bury the project from public view, which resulted in the destruction of many records involved in the city’s planning and construction.

Additionally, there are some rumors that soul magic was used to erase memories of those who had survived, cloaking the origin of the disaster in secrecy — something which was only possible because the city was relatively out of the way on the coast of West Ankja. If comprehensive records were taken to Lankwon, they are now inaccessible.

While the entire city of Feng was killed in a matter of minutes and records are scarce, the exclusion zone appears to have been the result of combining microshuist precision, star magic space-warping, and large-scale urban engineering. The intent might have been to create a city that would have no need to sleep, where every worker could operate at their peak at all times, and where everyone would be at optimal health. Instead, possibly through misunderstanding, incompetence, sabotage, or some combination of them, everyone died.

Features: Positive energy swirls around within the city of Feng, which is perfect and sterile. Stepping foot within the exclusion zone will wash a person in energy, vitality, and health, curing most ailments. Death follows swiftly, sometimes at the same time as healing, largely through an overload of biological and mental systems. The few who have escaped for long enough to report on its effects show hypertrophied muscles, rictus smiles, and overstimulated minds. Most of the mortal species are affected by the positive energy, though lenssi are immune, and bellad are resistant.

Numerous attempts to shut down or exploit the swirl of energy in Feng have proven unsuccessful. The largest issue with the swirl is that it's self-reinforcing, with the flow of energy correcting misplacement of objects. This self-sustained and reinforcing nature, along with its ability to multiply itself to its current levels, is likely the reason for both the calamity and the exclusion.

Due to their immunity, a small group of lenssi have formed an isolationist community within Feng. To them, the death that visits the other mortal species is a boon, and their numbers have grown large enough that they might soon qualify as a polity, which would place pressure on the EoCC to reclassify the zone.

Because the zone depends on star magic to warp space (and thus change the flow of energy), it's thought that either a star magic exclusion or a number of properly positioned wards against it would be capable of shutting

down the movement of energy within the NGEZ. Since lenssi occupation, no attempts at closing the zone have been made.

While shuism is excluded, the energy it manipulates still moves through Aerb, unencumbered by the shapes and positions of buildings. While there is no longer magic associated with it, geologi still practice, and bring in their old expertise as a cultural and historical approach to architecture and urban planning.

RAVEN: The City of Feng was covered up, which was somewhat unusual for a large Second Empire project. The official story was that it was a rogue shuist, and possibly an enemy of the empire, but no one believed that at the time. The biggest thing the coverup did was to minimize the sheer size of the calamity. In the newspapers, the deaths of tens of thousands became the deaths of hundreds.

A comprehensive report on the city was published for internal review, and there aren't really many surprises there. They were weaving different magics together, combining disciplines, pushing everything to its limits. But of course, creating the 'perfect city' wasn't the *real* goal, that would only represent an increase in productivity that probably couldn't be justified by the costs involved. What they wanted was the energy, especially because it was of a sort that could be translated into other uses. This was nine years before dibbling was excluded, and dibbling was one of the plans they had for their energy surplus.

Many people, on reading about the City of Feng, will think to themselves 'well hang on, all that energy is still floating around there, right, couldn't we —' and the answer is 'yes, sometimes, but it's very unlikely to go how you think'. Healing is probably the easiest and most realistic, but there are significant problems that everyone who's tried it runs into, the biggest of which is that this 'healing' is applied unevenly. It would be great if you could get your stomach wound healed up, the problem is that every other part of your body will suffer 'overhealing' in the process.

The bigger issue is the massive amount of energy available for capture. Rune magic is one of the last standing magics capable of harnessing it, and almost by default it makes a bomb. It's possible that someone will crack the problem at some point in the future, but so far it's only caused some very explosive problems.



MOOT

Code: MUEZ

Types: Minor, Entad

Date: 45 FE

Summary: The Moot Exclusion Zone (MUEZ) contains a large number of antimemetic objects and creatures whose source appears to be an entad.

History: In 45 FE an incidence of mass amnesiac events was noted in the city of Moot. People were noting injuries that they could not remember getting and seeing buildings suddenly destroyed without knowledge of how or why it had happened. The number of missing persons was rapidly rising, sometimes with confusion about the biographical details of those who had been reported. The city was evacuated under imperial protocols, and has been largely abandoned since that time, with a current population of only a thousand people, largely living at the edges of the affected area.

Features: Within the MUEZ, an entadic effect causes objects and creatures to take on antimemetic properties. Any object or creature under this effect will not be capable of being sensed by a member of the mortal species, and any effects of the object or creature will not be sensed until three to five hours later.

Affected objects will cause problems for members of the mortal species. A small table left in the center of a street will be bumped into by numerous people who cannot sense its presence, and who will only be able to infer the bump had happened several hours later from a bruised shin. In most circumstances, these objects

are tracked down by looking at the body of evidence, tracking pathways that resulted in injury, and running repeated experiments to see what effects become apparent later. In this way, any object can eventually be cleared, though not without expense and injury.

Affected creatures are a much larger problem for those attempting to live within the zone. Vermin such as flies and rats become impossible to sense, and can bite a person with impunity. These bites will not be noticed until three to five hours later, and the vermin must be inferred from the wounds — sometimes with the vermin still taking more bites, unknown to the victim. People have died in this way, consumed by unseen creatures that are normally a nuisance. Because of evolutionary and adaptive pressures, vermin within the zone are much more aggressive. Additionally, some larger animals are also affected, though a full catalog has never been made.

Affected people are generally rendered insensate by the effect and die not long after, with the only exceptions being when proper protocols were set up ahead of time. Among thinking creatures with self-awareness, including all of the mortal species, an inability to sense themselves proves debilitating. Those who have been rescued from the condition report a total unawareness of self, as though they were an outside observer with no vested interest in the world.

Anything affected by the entad can leave the zone, retaining its properties. Over time, attempts at weaponizing affected objects have proven a partial success.

Given that the entad at the source of the exclusion has never been found, and that affected objects

do not seem to be bound to a particular area, there is some speculation that the entad is not actually excluded. Nevertheless, dangerous magic within a tightly bound geographical area fits certain definitional requirements of an exclusion so well that it is included within any list of exclusions. The exact boundaries of the zone are unknown.

Did You Know? Entad exclusions represent a large portion of all exclusions, but also the largest portion of ‘closed’ exclusions, given that entads have no natural defenses against extreme forces or deliberate attempts to break them. While it can’t be said to be common, there are numerous examples of entads catching fire, shattering, being ripped apart, exploding, or otherwise self-destructing in the hands of an incautious user.

Entads are created through a process known as ‘forge frenzy’, which occurs randomly and causes a person to become obsessed with the creation of the entad to the exclusion of all else. They spend time gathering materials and building the entad, coming out of the frenzy — which can last months — only after the entad has been created. It is currently unknown how forge frenzy happens, nor how entadic magic is imbued into the entad, which happens toward the very end of the frenzy.

Under current imperial law, those under a frenzy are first removed from major population centers, then given whatever they request in order to start building the entad. Removal, oversight, and materials allocation are overseen by a branch of Imperial Affairs called Entad Certification. Once the forge frenzy is complete and the entad has been finished, it is quickly taken for identification and testing, which is typically done under heavy wards. Assuming there are no foreseeable problems with the entad, it is then returned to the person who created it, or sometimes, depending on local laws, given over to the government. If the entad is determined to be ‘problematic’, whether due to high energy, replication, potential for misuse, or revealing of state secrets, Entad Certification will enter into negotiation with the member polity and, sometimes, the individual affected by the frenzy, which often results in a large lump sum payment. Contrary to common

myth, Entad Certification has no legal authority to seize entads from those who have created them except during the certification process, after which they must be returned.

AMARYLLIS: Guns from within the zone are one of the ultimate tools of assassination. They can slip through any security checkpoint without anyone having to make any actual effort. Once they’re near the target, it gets tricky, because the assassin needs to pull out the gun and fire it without being able to sense that it’s even there. The assassin also can’t confirm that they’ve actually killed the target, but a direct hit won’t be dealt with for three to five hours, which is more than enough time for even a wound that wouldn’t normally be life-threatening to kill. It’s *also* enough time for an assassin to slink away.

To my knowledge, this has happened three times before, and each time, it’s caused a stir. Important people demand new wards to be created that will protect against this specific threat, and the warders are happy to line their pockets. In my opinion, it’s always completely overblown, but people will hyperfocus on recent and well-publicized threats.

Interestingly, all three assassinations have happened with regular firearms. A void pistol doesn’t quite have the same range, but there’s effectively no chance of defending against one that’s been made anti-memetic in this way.

DM: For a number of reasons, this is a bad zone to have in a tabletop game. I’ve used anti-meme monsters before, and it’s best for them to be one-offs, because the mystery can unravel itself, tricks to getting around the effect can be found, etc. Telling a player that their health is dropping and letting them figure out what’s going on is cool. Telling a player the rules ahead of time and having them make plans to work around those rules is not, at least in my opinion — the planning is fun, the execution of those plans is probably not.



CORFLOWERS

Code: CFEZ

Types: Entad, Major

Date: 357 FE

Summary: The Corflowers Exclusion Zone (CFEZ) is a relatively populated zone filled with people whose primary purpose is the protection of an entad hat at the center of the zone. The entad, the Hat of Brilliant Protection, causes substantial changes to the psychology of anyone who puts it on.

History: The Hat of Brilliant Protection was created via forge frenzy in 341 FE. At the time, it had limited power, and only affected the person whose head it was on. The first wearer of the hat refused to remove it, fearful that he would destroy it once it was off his head. He spent enormous sums of money attempting to expand the power of the hat, which was eventually done with the help of other entads, in particular, a needle that allowed clothes to be worn by multiple people at the same time. The 'Cult of Brilliance' eventually grew within the city of Corflowers, with forcible conversion of the city's elites. Eventually, a combination of entads allowed widespread indoctrination, and exclusion occurred.

Once the exclusion was in place, the hat could no longer be removed from the zone, though those who had been indoctrinated could leave. Once they realized this, the behavior of the cultists changed: they bunkered down within the city and put an emphasis on secrecy. They built their First Cathedral, where the Hat of Brilliant Protection would be protected for all time, to within the limits of the Cult's ability.

It wasn't until 382 FE that the existence of the Hat and its Cult were discovered by the world at large, as Cult members were uncovered infiltrating neighboring governments through a process of inviting people to their city and placing the hat upon their head. After this was widely reported and the spies were rooted out and executed, relations with the city of Corflowers — still with the majority of its population unindoctrinated — were soured to the point of potential war. A council was called within the Cult of Brilliance, and it was decided that relations needed to be improved, at which point significant concessions were made in order to appease the aggressive neighbors and defuse tensions. At the same time, the cult began a process of mass conversion, and more citizens were brought into their ranks, enough so there was some semblance of majority rule within the city.

In the modern era, the City of Corflowers exists as an exclusionary city-state. Travel to the city is prohibited by the Empire of Common Cause, except under armed guard and with constant monitoring, while travel out of the city is highly restricted due to fear that a cult agent will attempt offensive action. Relations with Corflowers have been normalized, and five decades have passed without major incident. The hat is located in the Third Cathedral of the cult, where it is utterly protected. The public stance of the Cult is that a strong Empire is better for the protection of the hat than fractured states.

Features: The CFEZ approximately encircles the City of Corflowers out to a radius of three miles, though the city center was moved following exclusion in order to offer

better protection of the hat. At the outskirts, the exclusion zone doesn't look much different from anywhere else in the EoCC, with a number of farms with small families on them. Once closer to the city itself, more defenses become visible, with numerous walls, wards, checkpoints, and the heavily armed Brilliant Guard stationed at regular intervals. While the city contains only one hundred thousand people, they are highly organized and active, and leisure activities are virtually unknown.

In the city center is a building known as the Third Cathedral, a heavily guarded and fortified location where the hat is kept. The hat sees regular use as new citizens must be converted in order to continue the Cult's hold over the city, as well as to further the aims of the Cult. The hat is protected by every ward known to mortals, multiple shells of defensive materials, and heavy rotations of guards.

While everyone converted by the hat has the protection of the hat as their primary goal, there is considerable difference of opinion on how that goal should be attained, and this has given rise to a certain level of dysfunction within the CFEZ, as well as their own brand of politics. The current ruling class believe in steady, respectful relations with the EoCC, overwhelming and quite public defense, and limited expansion of the population. Other political powers exist within the CFEZ though, as people have different and quite strong opinions on what should be done with the hat and the world at large in order to keep it safe. These political opinions range from rapid expansion of the population to within the limits of

their ability to feed everyone, to an outright war against the EoCC. Notably, the Second Cathedral was partially destroyed in one of these internal conflicts, and outside observers suspect that the situation within the CFEZ is not entirely stable.

DM: It's a city of hats! Or of just one hat, actually. And that hat gives rise to different factions, so ... You can think of this as being like a Helm of Opposite Alignment, except the alignment is Hat. The obvious thing to do here is have the protagonists go in to destroy the hat (ideally structured as a multi-part heist), but there are a few less obvious things that I think are interesting enough to warrant a brief campaign arc. Having the players uncover the Cult is more interesting than having them learn about this city from outside sources, and spies or Cult agents are interesting and good fodder for a few fights. Keep in mind that the cultists *aren't stupid* and will do basically anything for that hat, which means that it should be easy for them to get involved with malevolent forces. Less directly, the players might get drawn into internal conflict within the Cult, as different Cult members have different ideas about how to keep the hat protected.

If you introduce something like this to a game though, you should be prepared for one or more of the players to try to put it on. I don't have any good advice for this, but I've been DMing long enough to know that someone would inevitably try it, or failing that, allow it to happen.



CHTHONIC

Code: CTEZ

Types: Major

Date: 27 FE

Summary: The Chthonic Exclusion Zone (CTEZ) is a largely subterranean, vast, densely-packed series of rooms, traps, and monsters created by abyss magic. A small, fortified city sits at the entrance to the underground area, but for various reasons, the surface is considered to be hostile and unsafe for habitation.

History: Abyss magic generated ‘dungeons’, underground areas filled with monsters and treasures in approximately equal measures. Typically, an abbess would go into an unpopulated area with accessible bedrock and jam her prepared staff down into the ground, which would spread the dungeon from that point and create an entrance. Once that was completed, the primary objective of the abbess would be the extraction of whatever good things were in the dungeon, while typically (but not always) killing whatever lurked there. The rewards of dungeoneering were approximately in line with the risks, though a large part of the abbess’ work was attempting to bias the risk/reward ratio when charging their staff.

The magic items that could be pulled from the dungeons were more restricted than entads and the monads of ink magic, and generally less powerful. Still, their quality was high enough that there was demand for abbesses, and many of them created their own companies with armed soldiers to enter the newly created dungeons.

The dynamics of generation meant that larger dungeons were preferred over smaller ones, and over time, dungeons grew to prodigious size.

In 27 FE, abyss magic was excluded. The dungeon at the headwaters of the Styx River was the last dungeon to ever be created, spanning forty miles horizontally and twenty miles vertically. At the time of exclusion, every magic item ever taken from a dungeon immediately stopped functioning outside the zone.

Features: The surface of the CTEZ is largely covered by a humid tropical forest, as it was prior to the creation of the zone. However, over time, a number of secondary entrances to the dungeon have been formed by monsters or explorers breaking through. While monsters will typically stay in the dungeon, and typically stay within a single room of a dungeon, there are occasional escapes, and certain effects emanating from within the dungeon can be fatal to those on the surface.

Around the entrance of the dungeon is The Abbey, a small city that’s tightly packed within protective wards and built largely to exploit the magic items pulled from the dungeons. Unlike prior dungeons, there’s a regenerative quality to the gigadungeon, and efforts have been made to map it as completely as possible, avoiding the worst of the monsters and seeking the best of the treasures. Even with advanced knowledge of what’s in the dungeon and expert outfitting, expeditions are still dangerous, and deaths are somewhat routine, especially for those attempting to push the furthest edges of exploration.

The dungeon itself is divided into different tiers of difficulty: Upper, Mid, and Lower. While the name might suggest that these are vertical tiers, the difficulty tends to increase with distance from the entrance to the dungeon, meaning that a part of the ‘Lower’ dungeon might be at the far edge of the zone only a hundred feet below the surface.

Many of the magic items pulled from the dungeon are of use only in assisting further exploration and exploitation of the dungeon, given that these magic items cannot leave the zone. Strong weapons and hardened armor have been pulled by the cartload from the dungeon since its creation five hundred years ago. As these are as common as dirt within the zone, they are more likely to be melted down for metal, which can leave the zone, than to be actually used by a person. Many items confer protection of one kind or another, which helps to make expeditions less lethal. The most prized of the magic items, however, are those which create something that can leave the zone, and these are the primary reason that The Abbey exists. Given the long history of the CTEZ, entire factories have been set up with identical or near-identical magical items which output silk, fermented foods, nails, serving platters, and other miscellaneous items.

GRAKHUIL: There are many dwarfholds that began their life as dungeons. Once they have been scoured, dungeons sit empty, allowing others to move in. The layouts are not good for living in. Modifications need to be made. There is some disagreement over these non-traditional dwarfholds that have not been carved out by sweat and blood. Traditionalists find the idea of moving into such a place cowardly or weak.

DM: The idea for abyss magic takes its inspiration from old D&D megadungeons, those huge sheets of paper with more than a hundred labeled rooms that each contain a trap, monster, or treasure of some kind, sometimes all three. I’ve never liked those megadungeons, and don’t typically like to run more than two bouts of combat in a session. If I had this zone in a campaign, I would almost certainly center it around The Abbey and invent some competing forces there, rather than having the party down in the ‘dungeon mines’ for more than a session.

If you really insist on having a party delve into a dungeon like this, I think a fun twist might be to give them a map ahead of time, one that just directly shows where likely traps, treasures, and monsters are. The challenge then is at least a little bit about routing and making sure that they’re playing to their skills, rather than wandering around blind and stumbling upon fights.



CADIAN

Code: CEZ

Types: Major, Enpersoned

Date: 45 FE

Summary: The Cadian Exclusion Zone (CEZ) is a desolate place dominated by a single figure who sits in a chair at the center of the zone. Those who enter into the zone are drawn toward the center and subjected to tests, which they invariably fail.

History: The CEZ sprung as though from nowhere in 45 FE, with no known precursors. Analysis by warders showed that the entity at the center, Cad, could not be warded against, which means the effect is either mundane, pseudomagical, memetic, antimemetic, or one of the rare ‘unwardables’. The creation of the zone interestingly appears to have caused little to no loss of life among the mortal species, as it appeared in the wilderness, overlapping with no known cities or towns. This might make it one of very few exclusion zones of its sort which were not accompanied by pain, death, or displacement.

Initial forays into the CEZ proved fatal, with those entering the zone vanishing suddenly, and warnings were put up around the border which were eventually replaced by magestone walls. It wasn’t until more than a hundred years later that serious attempts at exploiting or at least understanding the zone were made, and the entity at the center was discovered. Since then, numerous attempts at passing the entity’s trials have been made, but failure to pass results in instant death.

Features: The entity at the center of the CEZ, which has been labeled ‘Cad’, will teleport anyone who willingly enters the zone to him. For those who enter the zone unwillingly, he will wait until they’ve taken their first step in his direction.

Cad presents as a withered human man locked in a metal chair, seemingly ageless and not sustained by food or water. Over the years, a number of entads have been left at the chair, allowing high fidelity remote viewing, and it has been observed that Cad does not move, sleep, eat, drink, or otherwise act in any animated way except when someone has been brought to him for questioning.

When an applicant is first presented to Cad, a scripted speech follows, explaining that there will be three trials. At the conclusion of three trials, a successful applicant will be granted entrance to Cad’s ‘inner sanctum’, which many believe to be a wellspring of rewards or powers, especially given Cad’s enormous power within the exclusion zone. The speech is always given in the native tongue of the applicant, with some changes due to translation, but is always approximately the same, with no reference to either the dangers or rewards.

The questioning follows three phases, during which escape is impossible except through long-range teleportation to outside the zone. In the first phase, basic moral questions are asked of the ‘applicant’ which get more convoluted as the phase progresses. Answers which Cad deems ‘incorrect’ result in immediate execution, which happens through an unknown mechanism that pulls the applicant apart at more than a hundred points of contact. Circa 152 FE, answers to each of these moral questions are known and mapped, available in book form for studying.

In the second phase, Cad engages in a ‘conversation’ with the applicant. This phase lasts anywhere from one hour to several days, with breaks for biological necessities of the subject, though no food or water is provided, and these must be brought with. Lying to Cad results in immediate execution as per phase one. Cad’s ability to tell lies from truth is phenomenal, though flawed in several ways, and will not work on someone with training from the Elon Gar, nor on certain of the mortal species

including bellad and lenssi. In addition to lying, certain answers to biographical questions will also result in immediate execution. Admission to various crimes is the most common cause for failure in the second phase. Circa 267 FE, an ongoing catalog of questions and their responses has been available for those making an attempt, with ‘disqualifying’ biographical details known ahead of time. During this conversation, evasion or circumlocution is sometimes permitted, but seems to also be cause for execution if done too often.

In the third phase, the applicant is subjected to various scenarios which a number of survivors describe as being like having a hundred dreams at once. From the outside, this presents as the applicant standing in one spot for a great length of time, immobile. Often seen as an extension of the first and second phases, the focus appears to be on different situations and questions of morality, done as intensively as possible. No one has completed the third phase, and those who have survived it have done so by being pulled out through magical means while the phase was ongoing.

DM: Honestly, the thing I like most about this one is that it’s different. In some other work of fiction, it would be a central focus, but in Aerb it’s just one of those things, an ‘oh yeah, Cad, he just sits there and does his tests that kill people, why do you ask?’ The entry is spooky, but the reality is pretty mundane, and the people of Aerb approach it with science, which neuters a lot of its conceptual power and replaces that with what, to me, gives a nice sort of feeling.

All his first round questions are known. All the questions he’ll ask that might get you fried for something in your past are known. Maybe not entirely known, as there are chances for hiccups and the unexpected, moments of terror when an applicant goes off the beaten path ... but mostly this is a contained, known thing. There’s a little community just outside the zone that does research and occasionally makes attempts, books that have been written to catalog and theorize. Maybe there’s a little bar where ‘survivors’ tell their stories and ‘applicants’ do their staging.

So what do you get if you pass the trials? Are there only three, or is there a fourth that no one has gotten to? And how do you pass the third trial, if no one has done so before?

In a tabletop game, my general rule is to think up three workable solutions, plan clues for them, and then be ready to accept whatever solution the players are sufficiently enthusiastic about. People describe the third trial as being like rapid-fire dreams, so maybe it intersects the plane of dreams in some way, allowing outside manipulation. Cad is obviously interacting with a person’s mind in some way, so while his effect is unstop-

The area around Cad is littered with the remains of previous candidates, whose bodies and equipment are not moved away by Cad following their failure. It is considered proper protocol, when making an attempt, to respect the remains of those who have come before as much as possible.

Cad appears to be invulnerable to conventional attack, though attempts to attack him are met with immediate execution for those inside the zone, which has limited the options available for attackers. Remote strikes on the zone have proven fruitless, though have resulted in the desolation of the area, which is unconnected to Cad’s dominion over the CEZ. At current, there is considered to be little benefit in killing Cad, though a reward is in place in the event someone manages it, largely in exchange for the large tracts of land that would be made available.

Attempts to pass Cad’s trials must first be run through the EoCC’s Department of Special Threats, which helps to vet candidates and provides a list of best practices, sometimes denying attempts if they seem too unlikely to succeed, or if rescue from the CEZ seems difficult.

pable, maybe something like mentalism or psionics or a homegrown device works. Cad kills people when they fail the test, but if you can get yourself some clones, you can potentially brute force it and treat it like the other trials — a matter of filling in missing data. Or hey, maybe you just need to be the Chosen One. As I said, I expect that any players presented with this would think up their own thing that ‘should totally work’.

As for the reward, I think that’s not something I would ever reveal to a player ahead of time, since the mystery is part of the fun. However, because we’re friends, I guess I can tell you what I had in mind — full zone control. Cad’s power is fearsome, and now, it’s yours. Congrats! You become a local god, though you can step out of the zone if you’d like. There are a few reasons that I like this: first, there’s a spooky implication that without exclusion, your power would stretch across the entire world, but second, there are people champing at the bit to have that land and the resources within it, some of which have been holding onto deeds issued centuries ago in the hopes that the zone would close out. If the reward is total control of the zone itself, the dynamic is instantly one of hostility with these stakeholders, or at least the opportunity for diplomacy. You can kick off a castle-building arc, or use it as a tool to lure in a dark lord and obliterate him, there are lots of things, depending on how far ‘full control’ is taken.

Really, you could put anything there as a reward, I think it’s not super important so long as it’s satisfying. That’s what I would do though.



DREAM WALKING

Code: DWEZ-P

Types: Presumed

Date: 10 FE

Features: Dream walking was presumed excluded in 10 FE and has been given a provisional designation.

History: Dream walking was a practice of exercising control of one's dreams, then using that control to traverse the Plane of Dreams in order to enter the dreams of others. While initial entry required the ingestion of hallucinogenic plants, a deep coma, or extensive lucid dreaming, a skilled dream walker could slip in and out of dreams at will.

Through much of its history, dream walking was used for spycraft and other information gathering, with the dream walkers going into the dreams of their targets to extract battle plans or state secrets. As the practice advanced, skilled practitioners became capable of afflicting their targets with gruesome dreams that would bleed into the real world. A woman who dreamed of being cut to ribbons would wake with slashes on her arms. A man who dreamt of drowning in feces would suffer from violent sickness in the morning. This new breed

of 'nightmare walkers' eventually drew the attention of Uther Pendragan, and while the exact nature of the exclusion is unknown, it aligns almost exactly with a story told, in brief, by his Knight Raven.

The account of Raven hints at a deeper level to the plane of dreams, through which dreamers and dream walkers traveled. She describes a vast society living in the collective dreams of the mortal species, and speaks obliquely of a difference of rules in a place called the Deep Dream. The specifics on what happened there, and why dream walking was excluded, if the exclusion was related, remain sparse.

RAVEN: I really wish that I'd never mentioned dream walking to anyone. It was a whole adventure, taking about three weeks, which was on par with some of the others from the period. It was also one of those that Uther wanted to keep quiet, though I never entirely learned why. I think he knew that the collapse of dream walking might reflect on him in some way. He was growing scared of his legend. It might also have been that he wanted to keep the dream walking in his back pocket for later, so he could pull it out in a moment of need, resurrecting a 'dead' magic in that typically Utherian way.

Author's Note: This is the only exclusion zone in this document with a -P designation, but per canon, there are a few dozen of them. Some exclusions don't have a known exclusion event or zone associated with them, and are thus subject to speculation. So-called 'lost' exclusions are interesting in the sense that they're a mystery, and I do like the idea for 'the hunt for the lost zone', but most of any entry would be 'oh, there was this magic in the world that did such and such, and then it disappeared', which I don't find very interesting.

It had started with the dream assassins. People would have nightmares, night after night, and wake feeling like they couldn't claw the bad dreams from their brains. Some of them would do anything to escape the affliction, and their sleep suffered for it. Eventually, the assassins came for Uther. He had a rare loss against them the first night. When the second night came, he failed again, waking with a wretched feeling. On the third night, he caught his assassin by the throat. There's a specific feeling in dreams, of punching someone and feeling like it didn't connect, which makes fighting there difficult. It didn't matter to Uther. He held the assassin down and made her surrender. She escaped when he woke, but not before he'd gotten information from her. Against the odds, he was able to remember it well enough to write it down.

From then he was on the warpath. He immersed himself in dreams with a draught, and after three days, came up from the depths to bring the rest of us in with him. I wasn't awake when any of this happened, instead going through a long period of sleep common to the Ell, but Uther found me in my dreams and pulled me alongside him. I didn't take to the land of dreams like he did, especially because I never once woke until the whole thing was over. After that, I didn't sleep or dream again.

Once beyond a dream, the plane of dreams was a twisted place. It followed its own logic. Things were there one moment and then vanished the next. Uther said that it was all about what you expected it to be, that it was a matter of observers. He said that nothing existed unless we knew about it or sensed it. You would place a mug on a table and turn away, and the mug would vanish, only to reappear when you looked back at it. It was hard to handle for everyone but Uther. The awkward logic was hard on us, but not him, not there. He had a way of twisting things around. He was good at having these dream arguments where nothing made coherent sense. He would argue against insane people from a position of superior insanity, freewheeling and unhinged. It was in total opposition to the rhetoric and empiricism he employed to get the First Empire founded, a switch that was almost frighteningly easy for him.

We made our way to the ruler of the place, the Lord of Dreams, fighting and arguing our way through dozens of men, women, and the genderless dreamfolk. Uther's command of language came into play more than once, in part because he could turn things around. Free association had been one of his strong suits, and in the plane of dreams, confusion about whether you meant to meet someone or whether you were eating meat abounded.

The dream assassins hadn't actually been the work of the Lord of Dreams, we learned, they had only been a result of his hedonism and lack of care toward his domain. The dream invasions had, in fact, been an attempt to summon Uther to depose the Lord of Dreams, but one that ultimately failed given that the Lord of Dream's

position was a result of the collective consciousness of dreamers on Aerb. This whole time we had been traveling with the assassin that had first attacked Uther. She broke down in tears, admitting that it was true, that it hadn't been the Lord of Dreams at all. I had thought we were all set to return to the land of the waking, as there was no real conflict to be had with the Lord of Dreams, but perhaps there was something in the governance that rankled Uther. Maybe he just didn't think leaving would be a fitting end to the story, though I don't know if he had gone so far in his paranoia at the time.

Uther went to war in an unconventional way, which was how he liked to fight his wars. He poked and prodded at the Lord of Dreams, not through direct action, but through manipulations. Uther became a member of the Lord's demesne, with us Knights his courtiers, and he worked the politics of the situation, such as they were. The other members of the demesne didn't want for land or jewels, they wanted for other things, ethereal dreams and gifts spun from words. Uther could spin the best words. He had the iron will and confidence to bring almost anything into existence. By that point, two weeks into our trip through the plane of dreams, there was no risk to him of getting turned around in that place, nor being tricked by the creatures that inhabited it. The Lord of Dreams had Aspects, powerful dreamfolk of incredible talents, and these Aspects were turned by Uther, one by one. Some he wooed and others he bribed, but where a person had a lever, Uther would find it.

This all took place in an area of the plane of dreams called the Deep Dream, far away from the dreams of the mortal species, distant from the full weight of their influence. The final stroke of the plan, once Uther had turned those he could and deflected those he couldn't, was to bring a thunderingly large dream right into the Lord's living room. It was Uther's own dream, one he had planned to perfection, and it provided an inescapable reality to trap the Lord in. It had been centuries since the Lord of Dreams had been in a mortal dream. He was unprepared, and folded within two hours of the assault, fenced in as he was by his once-loyal Aspects.

In the end, no one was killed. It was hard to kill people in the plane of dreams anyhow, but there was really no cause. All Uther had wanted was for the Lord of Dreams to be a proper king to his people, to police his fluctuating lands as best he could, and it had not just been an assault on the Lord's person, but on his conceptions as well. We left on good terms, though the Lord of Dreams brought a permanent end to dream walking, confining the mortals to their own dreams. We were also granted a boon, of sorts, with our need to sleep removed from us, which felt more like a security measure than something done as a favor to a friend.

I have always suspected that Uther would have no problem getting back, if it ever came to that. For myself, I haven't slept a wink in five hundred years.



FLINTONSTELE

Code: OYEZ

Types: Major

Date: 83 FE

Summary: The Flintonstele Exclusion Zone (OYEZ; formerly the Old Yonder Exclusion Zone, designation change pending) is an area of merged objects.

History: Conjoinery allowed the practitioners to fuse different objects, giving the combined object the properties of both, or in some cases allowing the property of one to override the property of the other. In this way, fused objects could be lighter, stronger, and more resilient, with skilled practitioners even capable of affecting the supernatural properties of magical or pseudomagical materials. Historically, this magic has been relegated to supporting roles, primarily in construction and in production of arms and armaments.

As the practice of conjoinery required a deep understanding of materials, conjoiners were intellectual by nature and investigative as an occupation, often becoming engineers, early scientists, and multimages. Because conjoinery was a partial bloodline magic (only those born to it could become part of the practice, and it tended to run in families, though imprecisely), the practice of it tended to monopolize economic and political power into familial lines. Most conjoiners ran a large shop of some kind where they would do their work with the help of assistants who weren't so gifted.

The arrival of Uther Penndraig into the world of conjoinery was greeted with some skepticism, but his mastery of other magics above and beyond his peers quickly made him a leading force among the conjoiners. To this, he brought his mastery of steel magic and wood magic. The buildings he was able to construct using conjoined steel alloys were far and away superior to anything his contemporaries could muster, and the wooden armors and weapons he gifted to his soldiers were beyond comparison. During Uther's time, two separate conflicts with other conjoiners served to shrink and limit the field, one against a fellow steel multimage engaged in acts of war, the other against a fellow wood magic multimage who was supplying an enemy. Following Uther's dis-

appearance the practice of conjoinery rebounded, and though his feats were never matched, the field seemed fairly healthy until its abrupt exclusion in 83 FE. For many years, the location of the exclusion was unknown.

Some years later, a tragedy at Flintonstele began which would unfold over the course of decades. A two hundred pound piece of metal of unknown provenance had been brought to a local metalshop. When touched with any other metal, it would slowly convert the touched piece into a material whose properties matched its own, which could then be taken off and used elsewhere. The produced metal was hard but light, making for a perfect combination of properties for many engineering applications. For more than a decade, this process continued, without anyone properly understanding what was happening. All the metalworkers knew was that they had something special that could save them enormous amounts of money, turning junk metals into something expensive, almost as if by a miracle. Converted metal was largely shipped out of Flintonstele and to other parts of their kingdom, which unknown to them were beyond the limits of the exclusion zone. They had some awareness that the original hunk of metal wasn't 'special', and that a separate piece of metal held to it for long enough would take on the changing property as well, but they were cautious to avoid this for fear of losing their position of market monopoly. Flintonstele grew from a town to a city on the back of this trade.

In 123 FE, the metal shop was acquired by an altruist who had been apprised of the miracle metal. Seeking to assist Flintonstele, which was at the time a place of great poverty aside from the noble classes, she set out to use this metal for the good of the city, especially in the renovations of the city's pipes, which were a cause of many sanitation issues. Because of the conversion property, the pipes could be quickly made from impure base metals, then converted in place, with the property slowly spreading through a network of pipes.

For a time, the pipe conversion had seemed to be a boon, but beneath the surface of Flintonstele, the interconnected network of pipes was coming into contact with more and more bits of metal, and where they

came out on the surface, they were having more chance encounters with other materials. While the conversion process was quite slow, nobody became aware of the problem until it was too late. In 146 FE, a piece of ironwood had extended contact with one of the city's pipes, and thereafter, the material had made a 'bridge' to wood. Any piece of wood which was touched by the metal would convert to it, and the properties of mundane, magical, and pseudomagical wood were added to those of the conjoined material.

From that point, the calamity accelerated. Wooden structures that touched the pipes were converted to the strange metal. As the material took on the properties of wood as well as metal, it could suddenly 'bridge' through anything that was jointly wood and something else. New bridges were quickly formed so that the material would take on the properties of stones that touched it, as well as converting stone into the conjoined material, which was no longer entirely metal. Soil soon followed. Each of these bridges accelerated the process, and by 153 FE, it was clear that it couldn't be stopped. Much of the city had, by that time, been evacuated, but some stubbornly remained, or attempted to solve the problem that was slowly eating the city and spreading to the surrounding areas. In 201 FE, the conversion process began to apply to flesh. The material that made this bridge is still unknown.

For most of its history until present day, the exclusion has sat abandoned and unused, and attempts to exploit it have largely failed, as mining the material out has proven difficult, and working with it outside the zone has presented significant problems. It was not until 529 FE that a dwarf warder discovered the connection between the exclusion zone and conjoinery, solving a centuries long mystery. That it had not been solved before this point owes mostly to the decades-long gap between the exclusion of conjoinery and the emergence of the problem, by which point the practice of conjoinery had fallen out of use.

Features: Within the OYEZ, any material which stays in contact with the conjoined mass will be converted. This has already affected the vast majority of the material within the zone, with certain species of plants being one notable exception. However, even these unusual plants struggle with hydration and nutrition, unable to find purchase on the metallic ground of the zone. Curiously, the material never made the bridge to bone, so while most of the mortal species will be killed by the conversion, their bones will stay intact within the metal corpse.

While the zone is incredibly dangerous throughout, its properties are not uniform. Conversion speeds are high in certain areas, and there exists at least one island of relative safety where bare skin is not converted. It is now believed that this is the result of competing zones of conjoinery where the initial expansion absorbed two

or more properties at different times and places. As these properties spread out throughout the zone, they eventually reached each other, and being incompatible, established zones of material difference.

Entrance into the zone is forbidden without authorization by the EoCC's Department of Special Threats. New materials might create additional bridges, and are carefully guarded against.

JUNIPER: Alright, do you want to hear my theory? Of course you do. Conjoinery is one of those weird bloodline magics that only partially follows a bloodline. If you're worldbuilding, there are lots of reasons to do that, mostly because having strict bloodline stuff has impacts on society in a pretty boring way, at least to me. Having a bloodline magic that flows down to only one in every five children is way cooler; there's more tension, more conflict, resentment, all that kind of thing, and having it pop up in some random nobody is also cool, in a Chosen One kind of wish fulfillment way where it turns out that you were super special and different all along. So I was looking at conjoinery, because it's part of Uther's bag of tricks, and I was thinking about what kind of mechanism you could have that wasn't just totally random or DM fiat.

The answer I came up with, which I have no evidence for but which feels right, is that maybe this happens semi-randomly because of something called fetal absorption. What happens, in some cases, is that when a woman is pregnant with twins, one will eat the other, or they just merge together, or something like that. I'm not super clear on the details. Anyway, because this happens to (potential) twins, it logically follows that you'd see it in families with a lot of twins. Maybe you could do a demographic survey or something to see if that checks out, looking into the family history of conjoiners.

Mostly I think it's true because it's almost, kind of, if you squint, a pun.

AMARYLLIS: This is another classic failure of governance and a reason for a strong, definitive response whenever something like this comes up. Flintonstele wasn't a large city, the tragedy wasn't enormous, but a great many people died because no one acted in time.

DM: There's a little hidden wrinkle here, which is that conjoinery requires a conjoiner: as laid out, it's not something that materials just do on their own. However, there's a second tiny mystery you might not have noticed that solves the first: the origin of that original two hundred pound block of mystery metal. Imagine a conjoiner who accidentally or intentionally attempts to conjoin himself with metal, possibly through the use of some extra bit of magic to turn himself into living metal. Trapped in the material, unable to do anything but try to reach out, an enpersoned exclusion zone that no one has any idea about ...



NIGHTSMOKE

Code: NSEZ

Types: Minor

Date: 32 FE

Summary: The city of Nightsmoke (NSEZ) is the smallest exclusion zone, covering fifteen square miles, much of it urban. Also called the Skulldark City of Evernight, the zone is covered in perpetual night, and famed more for the city that sits in the gloom than for the actual magical effect.

History: The city of Nightsmoke was always a gloomy place, with few clear days in the year, and low temperatures that are now known to have come from a deformation in the projection layer that influences sunlight across Aer. The exclusion appears to have involved a deliberate alteration to the projection layer, possibly as an attempt to give the city more sunlight. Whatever the intent, the result was that Nightsmoke was pushed into perpetual darkness, with no sunlight falling on the city at any point during the year.

Following exclusion, Nightsmoke suffered from an exodus of much of its population, particularly among those who could afford it. A lack of money led to a decrease in city services, and for some time it seemed as though the city might collapse entirely, becoming abandoned. However, because the city is located in a bay at the terminus of the Edgewater River, it hobbled along, maintaining a steady population after the initial crash. During the Interneine Wars, the city became a city-state, divorcing itself from the surrounding kingdom of Nebrus.

Nightsmoke's relationship with the surrounding polities has often been fraught, largely due to the high rates

of crime and the idea that the city spreads its institutional, social, or cultural diseases elsewhere. Nightsmoke also has a history as one of the worst places in the world in terms of mortal rights, and falls at the trailing edge of imperial law with regards to such contentious issues as corporal punishment, slavery, and drug use. Its current classification as a minor exclusion is thought by many to be a reflection of the extremely low quality of life in the city, rather than the lack of sunlight.

Features: Starting in 157 FE, a system of 'Towers' was created within the city as a formalization of gang activity and the relationships between organized crime. While the number of Towers has varied over the centuries, the system has stayed remarkably steady, evolving only slightly from the original form. Each Tower is responsible for a specific aspect of the city and a defined territory within it, with these borders and responsibilities being a source of intense conflict. Relationships between Towers vary between warfare, subterfuge, betrayal, or cooperation.

Currently, five Towers exist within the city of Nightsmoke, and most people who come to the city for whatever reason are expected to align themselves with one of the Towers for the purposes of protection. The controlling Tower at the time of this writing is the Tower of the Blade, run by Byttepenge, a master velocity mage of ill repute who keeps her workers in a state of near-slavery.

Owing to the complete lack of sunlight, the temperature within the city is much lower than the surrounding region, though it doesn't quite rise to the level of perpetual winter. Most plants that rely on sunlight do not grow within the zone, though mushrooms and tenebrific

plants are capable of thriving. Likewise, species with photosensitivity, including those accustomed to living underground and the penumbra, are well-adapted to conditions within the zone. Drizzling rain and cloud cover are common owing to the difference in temperatures inside and outside the zone.

DM: Nightsmoke is a wretched hive of scum and villainy, controlled by gang warfare that's so far out of control that the gangs are the law. The Skulldark City of Evernight was an import from a D&D campaign, with most of that campaign arc being about the warfare between the five towers. The fact that it's in perpetual darkness has some interesting worldbuilding implications, particularly for those species or monsters that love the dark, and it's a good place to put drow, vampires, and other creatures. While a full detailing of the towers and their inhabitants is beyond the scope of this document, a good rule of thumb is to make each of them as philosophically distinct as possible with their own brands of sympathetic evil. For the campaign I ran, this was done mostly by having each 'tower' be a reflection of a different player character.

Actually, you know what, why should it be beyond the scope of this document? This is my document, I'll do what I want. This isn't canon to Worth the Candle for a few reasons that will be obvious, but the campaign this was from cross-pollinated a ton with *Worth the Candle*, so there are some familiar names and magics. Here, have a mini lore dump from campaigns past:

Society: At the top are the Obscuris, those who cast shadows. These are the leaders and commanders of the various factions, the central sources of authority within Skulldark. They are similar to nobility in some ways, and often take similar titles (Duke Blackwater, Lady Frostwhistle), but their power derives more from their personal might and merit, less so from inheritance and the patronage of someone above them, since they are by definition at the top. The Obscuris are replaced very infrequently, mostly because the reputation game in the city is hard to break into, and it's very difficult to kill an Obscuris without violating the built up rules, thereby taking a reputational hit in the process.

The Umbra, those who are within shadow, directly serve the Obscuris and are given some autonomy in pursuit of that service. These are the people from whom loyalty is expected and received. They usually lead comfortable lives, since that loyalty is rewarded. They are stereotypically "the muscle", but that's largely because the most physically powerful of the Umbra are those who are seen out and about in the world most often. There are also sorcerers and slink-thieves among their number.

The Penumbra, those at the shadow's edge, have a more formal relationship with their Obscuris. Stereotypically, these are men and women with trades of one

The lack of sunlight does not happen at a hard edge, but rather, upon entrance into the zone, the sun appears to 'set', growing lower on the horizon as the perimeter is crossed. By the time the city is reached, there are only stars in the sky, with the moon being as absent as the sun.

kind or another: the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker. In exchange for the protection the Umbra provide, the Penumbra give a tithe, either in a percentage of what they make or through special orders to be fulfilled. Penumbra can also have pressure put on them in other ways, like having to quarter Umbra in times of need, being obliged to marry off a fetching daughter, or basically to do whatever else is asked of them.

The Effulgent, those who shine brightly, are those without any affiliations except perhaps informal or unofficial ones. There are two ends of this spectrum: on one side are the homeless and utterly downtrodden, those with ruined reputations or no skills or wealth to contribute, while on the other side are free agents who feel no need to ally themselves.

Major Players: The Tower of the Rose is headed by Lady Frostwhistle, a vampire priestess who worships the God of Murder. She practices "chaining" such that killing her will kill her chattel slaves she uses as blood sacks, as well as all of the vampires she made, as well as their slaves. She has plenty of non-vampires to keep the organization from having a single point of failure.

The Tower of the Clock is headed by Emit Lortnoc, the sole human revision mage in all of the Skulldark City of Evernight. His faction is held together with glue and without him would be very weak. He is the weakest of the Obscuris, and survives largely by making temporary alliances with others, and by not having great territory.

The Tower of the Blade is headed by Byttepenge, a secret-ish doppelganger and master velocity mage. She is at the upper tiers of velocity mages, essentially a speedster capable of extremely rapid movement and fast hits.

The Tower of the Claw is headed by White Tail, a particularly ferocious (yet erudite) elven werewolf. His faction is the most learned among in the Skulldark City of Evernight.

The Tower of the Flesh is headed by Captain Blue-in-the-Bottle, a powerful lich necromancer who surrounds himself almost exclusively with the worst variety of gods. His base of power exists mostly to ensure that he can continue his work delving into the mysteries of the universe uninterrupted. (His work deals largely with the Planar Bough and the nature of the soul; he intends to never die, and doesn't think he would have a preferential afterlife, so he's fine wielding a scalpel and fixing the tree, at the cost of soul death for others.)



PAI SHEP

Code: VFEZ

Types: Major, Enpersoned

Date: 136* FE

Summary: The Pai Shep Exclusion Zone (VFEZ), formerly the Verdant Fields Exclusion Zone, is home to large, immaculate fields of various crops, and a lone farmer who tends to them. Anyone who breaches the exclusion zone will be killed on sight by Pai Shep. This zone is a rare pseudomagic exclusion, and the difficulty of being unable to ward against Pai Shep is one of the reasons that the zone is considered so dangerous.

History: Pai Shep, a broshe man, began life as a simple farmer, tending to fields inherited from his father, who passed early in his life. His natural talent for farming brought him acclaim from within his village, and his diligence and hard work soon saw his crops growing better and faster than any of his neighbors. By the time he was in his thirties, he had expanded the amount of land he controlled, and was farming the entire area single-handedly. People who knew him at the time noted that he was fastidious and exacting with his crops, and would walk his fields with a religious fervor, looking for every last weed, driving off every last pest, and working with exactitude and precision.

By the time Pai Shep had turned forty, he had six fields to his name. Several apprentices and workmen were in his employ, and he held them to the same standards he had set for himself, which included many hours of hard labor, standards of work that very few people were capable of meeting. As he aged, and as his farm expanded, he became renowned for the beauty of his crops, his knowledge of the land, and the sheer yields he could derive from a single plant. Whispers of magic moved through the community, and a warder from the Kingdom of Volmin was sent to check, but nothing was found.

In 133 FE, Pai Shep killed a man who had trespassed on his property. This began a series of events which

culminated in exclusion three years later. While on his property — as defined by those fields he had tilled, sown, and watered — Pai Shep was an inexplicably capable fighter, and attempts to bring him in to answer for the first (likely justified) killing resulted in hospitalization of the guards. As this happened during the time of the Internecine Wars, and as Pai Shep was producing incredible amounts of food, this offense against the kingdom was overlooked, and Pai Shep was allowed to continue farming. This was not the first time that someone had noticed something unusual about Pai Shep, but because of the benefits of his farming, no further action was taken against him.

Over the course of the next three years, Pai Shep engaged in a series of transgressions, largely by expanding his fields, though sometimes by using force against others. The perfectionism that drove him early in his life seemed to take hold of him, and he would see failures as being a mark against a person, devaluing them, at least as reported by his one-time workmen. By 135 FE, Pai Shep was working eleven fields entirely alone. By 136 FE, it is believed that Pai Shep was excluded, though this determination is difficult to make given that he must have been one of the only people affected. The evidence is largely found in a hexal decrease in crop yields, which align with a theory of unrecognized pseudomagic.

The systemic expansion of Pai Shep's farmlands brought him into conflict with the other farmers. He reasoned that he was a better farmer, and could do more with their fields than they could ever do, while they argued that they had been on those fields for generations, and no price he could offer would make up for the loss of family history and tradition. Eventually, Pai Shep took those fields by force.

These aggressions led to confrontation in 139 FE, the year after the local kingdom finally brought an end to its war with their neighbor. With the food no longer so badly needed, and a large number of trained soldiers, the kingdom determined that Pai Shep's transgressions could no longer be tolerated in a polity that respected

the rule of law. A large platoon of soldiers was sent in with a plan to bring him to justice. None survived the encounter, and little is known of the exact means of their defeat, save that when it came to Pai Shep and his crops, he would — and could — do anything to protect them.

The following weeks saw a series of escalations between Pai Shep and the kingdom, as more troops and magic specialists were sent to bring Pai Shep to heel. At one point, an attempt was made to set his fields on fire, but it was found that his crops were resistant to the flame, and the farmer himself showed up shortly afterward, bare-chested and angry. During this period, Pai Shep is thought to have killed more than a thousand men, though records and accounts are difficult to come by.

The Kingdom of Volmin, finding itself in a losing battle with the farmer, offered a truce, which was rejected. Rather than seeking further engagement after their heavy losses, the kingdom began a policy of capitulation and retreat, and Pai Shep expanded his reach with every passing month, transforming fields into thick rows of crops, all seemingly by hand. Watching from afar, there seemed to be nothing special in how he would till and then plant, but he was capable of maintaining dozens of fields all on his own, and in combat, he moved with such speed and grace that he was declared one of the most proficient fighters of the era.

Eventually the expansion of Pai Shep's fields began to butt up against an invisible line that traced an arc through the kingdom, which was later realized to be the line that marked the end of the exclusion zone. Tracking the slow expansion of fields showed that they would eventually reach the major city of Cornelia. Rather than evacuate, much of the city settled in for a siege, with additional mercenary forces hired on from their neighbors. In the era of the Second Empire, it seems likely that Pai Shep could have been fought off, but the Second Empire was yet to be founded, and cooperation between polities, especially those recently at war, was rare.

The city fell to Pai Shep over the course of a month, and between bouts of fighting, people could sometimes see the farmer continuing his endless toil. He would till the ground in parks, cut down trees, plant seeds, and make the land arable, sometimes while people watched from a block away. Eventually, all hope of defeating Pai Shep was gone, and the city was swallowed by fields.

By 174 FE, the entirety of the exclusion zone had been covered in Pai Shep's fields. He killed thousands and displaced hundreds of thousands. Since then, there have been numerous attempts to kill Pai Shep, whether through assassination or overwhelming force, but none have met with success.

In the modern day, the exclusion zone is largely left alone, and Pai Shep is rarely heard from. The last recorded conversation with him dates to 457 FE, an attempt to normalize relations. He expressed no regrets

at how he behaved, and showed no interest in cooperation with the kingdom or the new empire. A member of the long-lived broshe, Pai Shep is now over four hundred years old, and from recent sightings, shows the wrinkles and white hair of age, if not a lack of constitution. If he lives as long as the other members of his species, it is likely that he will die of old age within the next five decades, putting a natural end to the zone.

Features: The entirety of the VFEZ is covered with Pai Shep's fields. At a current count, from remote viewing, there are 47 distinct crops, including several large orchards for stone fruits, apples, citruses, and other plants. It is unclear whether the observed variety is somehow necessary to Pai Shep's abilities.

To the south of the zone is a large entryway, which leads to a small town outside the zone. At regular intervals, Pai Shep brings food out from the zone, some of which is consumed by the locals, with the rest being sent off to the rest of the world. Pai Shep demands no payment for these deliveries, and seems to harbor no ill will to those outside his zone, for as much as he might kill any who enter.

AMARYLLIS: In the modern era, it would be relatively easy to kill Pai Shep, I think. There's very little in it for anyone though, and while Special Threats has their own outpost not too far from the exclusion zone, there is absolutely no political will to engage in any action against him. His crimes are many, but they're so far in the past that most people have completely moved on. The survivors are only of the long-lived races, and they number in the hundreds, if that. If Pai Shep were to keel over, I don't think there would be celebrations in the streets, not like for Blue-in-the-Bottle or Doris Finch.

DM: I ran a Beatrix Potter one-shot with the players as animals and old man McGregor as the big bad. It was tons of fun, and I think the format might work well for an adventure in Pai Shep's lands, but to do that, you need something that the zone itself doesn't have: a reason to go there. Given the man has godlike farming ability, this really isn't that difficult, though I think I would prefer a smuggling approach to a heist. The players aren't trying to get something *out*, they're trying to get something *in*, perhaps some new crop that they really need to grow but can't find purchase elsewhere. Tricking the master farmer into growing something very difficult to grow feels like it's got lots of interesting problems to solve.

Pai Shep himself isn't some angry farmer though, he's a perfectionist, a craftsman at the absolute pinnacle of his craft. That's one of the things that I find interesting about it, and for the sort of story that I like to tell, I think I would place that near the heart of it. That said, this is a hard thing to get across in a tabletop game, and even harder to work into a resolution.



UNITY

Code: UNEZ

Types: Major

Date: 24 FE

Summary: The Unity Exclusion Zone (UNEZ) is generally considered safe unless it's actively on fire. When on fire, flames will spread quick and hot, engulfing the zone in a supercharged inferno from which there is little hope of escape. Under the classification system of the Empire of Common Cause, the zone is considered to be a major exclusion, but many consider it to be a free exclusion instead, so long as it remains unlit.

History: Uniquomancy was a system of magic with a centuries-long history prior to exclusion. Uniquomancers were capable of casting many varied and dangerous spells, largely but not exclusively relating to the elements. These spells came with severe restrictions: if a uniquomancer cast a spell that any uniquomancer had cast before, they would be prohibited from casting further spells for an amount of time that would increase with their number of violations. Uniquomancers therefore kept careful track of the spells they had cast and talked often with other uniquomancers about what patterns had been used before. Spells were often cast with 'tweaks' that altered parameters only slightly in order to fulfill the requirements of uniqueness. While the set of all possible unique spells was considered to be finite, it was only technically so.

Starting in 11 FE, possibly in response to Utherian reforms, the uniquomancers began forming a collective

whose goal was complete sharing of information. Prior to this point, uniquomancers were largely solitary, trading their information on what was and wasn't prohibited only when it could gain them some advantage. By 15 FE, ninety percent of uniquomancers were part of the Unity of Casters.

In 23 FE, the Unity of Casters was a thriving force within the First Empire, capable of bringing real pressure against their nominal enemies. With their pooled knowledge, the uniquomancers had virtually no fear of the repetition penalty, and began using large, defined lists of variations for each caster. Uniquomancers were largely located in a single geographical area, with more inducted as the benefits of working together became clear. In early 24 FE, the Unity of Casters committed a soft coup against the Kingdom of Leddercester, which had been threatening nationalization of the group. This directly led to Uther Penndraig's involvement. By the end of 24 FE, the uniquomancers had been decimated and the rightful king had been restored to the throne. It is believed that exclusion followed soon afterward, possibly as a result of a last desperate attempt at revenge or retaliation.

Until 145 FE, the exact location of the uniquomancy exclusion zone was unknown. Upon rediscovery, the few remaining long-lived uniquomancers relocated and set up a fief for themselves, which held only minor political power until late in the Second Empire. By that point, desperate for relevance, the new uniquomancers had been working on spells at the limits of the magic, including powerful ones that could be used at long-

range. An initial demonstration of a hundred-mile range outside the zone — a thousand-pound rock launched at a distant target — earned greater consideration for the New Unity. The unqulomancers were then used by the Second Empire to suppress growing rebellions in that region of the world, with their ‘cannons’ being used for precise bombardment of hardened targets.

In 326 FE, counter-imperial forces stormed the New Unity castle, which caused the unqulomancers to unleash a new spell they had been developing. Fire washed over the entire exclusion zone and spread outside it, killing many in the region. The spell, dubbed Flame Wash, persists to this day.

Features: The UNEZ is located in an area of hilly woodlands, with a variety of species of flame-resistant trees. The borders of the zone are marked with large stone bollards, though the danger from the zone extends beyond that point.

Due to the still-extant Flame Wash spell, any flame within the zone will burn brighter, hotter, and spread further. This results in any conflagration within the zone spreading uncontrollably until no fuel is left to burn and nothing but ash and specially hardened materials remain. During periods when no flame is present, the zone might look like normal forest, depending on how much it has been allowed to grow. As might be expected, plants present in the zone and the outlying areas have adapted to the fires in various ways, such as by developing flame-retardant sap or seeds which can grow quickly in the ash.

There are currently no known unqulomancers practicing within the zone.

JUNIPER: Ironically, a magic system based around uniqueness is beset by a repeating spell. At least, I think that’s ironic.

AMARYLLIS: The precision and power of the unqulomancer cannons allowed them to have significant range outside of the zone, though from historical reports, the precision is sometimes overstated, and it wasn’t as simple as ‘fling a rock’ because air friction and turbulence get in the way if aerodynamics aren’t taken into account or a complex and expensive ward is placed to prevent air from being a problem. Still, the ability to project power outside of the zone became something that was widely sought ever since that first proof of concept, and it’s a high that scientists, engineers, and politicians have been chasing for centuries. There are a great many exclusions which are ‘high energy’, and as these magics and effects are already excluded, there’s little pressure to keep people from doing research.

DM: A wildfire that starts quite readily offers a great two-part adventure. The first part is whatever mission you cook up — something flameproof that was hidden or left in the forests some hundreds of years ago would do nicely — while the second part is the escape from the fast and furious wildfire. Do be ready for some unwary, malicious, or too-clever party member to start the fire themselves though.



OSTER

Code: OSEZ

Types: Major

Date: 195 FE

Summary: Within the Oster Exclusion Zone (OSEZ), magical clockworks have made alterations to fundamental reality, resulting in inhospitable abstraction processes.

History: The Oster Exclusion Zone was once the site of the city of Megergium, which contained the premier academy for horologists. At one time thought likely to be the next large athenaeum, the Academy of Logical Transgression was a sizable campus and major point of pride for the city. Horologists took quite a bit of time to set up their clockwork creations, sometimes on the order of years for the more complicated ones. These expensive creations often took many years to pay off the debt incurred in their construction. As a consequence of this, clock magic was primarily state-sponsored or capitalist in nature. The city had a number of prominent factories where the fundamental nature of reality was changed in order to expedite certain manufacturing or material processes. Uses included compacting materials, generating high amounts of heat, and the production of expensive substances from cheap feedstock.

In late 170 FE, progress began to be made on analytical clockworks, a field created with the express intent of reducing the onerous costs and time commitment of clock magic. By 191 FE, construction of the LesCim had been completed, a clockwork which reduced perceptual time

necessary for the creation of more clockworks in a large area. By 193 FE, the LesCimEs had been completed, increasing the reach of the LesCim to a half mile radius around the academy campus. The much faster pace afforded by these large projects allowed for greater experimentation and the reduced costs of clockworks caused new designs to flourish.

For a generation of horologists who were educated and trained in the LesCim era, the practice of dealing with clock magic was much different than for their forebears. The reduction in constraints meant that they could be less precise and more experimental, and didn't need to wait months or years to see the fruits of their labor. Fearing exclusion, the Academy of Logical Transgression put in place a number of limitations and regulations on the creation of clockworks, but these measures proved too little and too late. Clockworks had already been started which would lead to the reality breaks.

When the exclusion happened, most people within the area were able to safely evacuate, with some professors and students staying behind in the hopes of containing it. Almost all lost their lives in the process, and those that didn't were transformed into unrecognizable entities.

Features: The OSEZ is not recognizably real. Beyond the exclusion barrier, as seen from Aerb, it presents as abstract shapes in disorganized patterns. Traversal across the boundary is often fatal, though not always. Entads and magic cease functioning.

Reports from those who have returned from within the zone are often fragmented, but have some commonalities. One of the primary findings is that the OSEZ is disconnected from p-space, something which was done in order to remove constraints on the creation of clockworks, and in theory might have led to enhanced exploitation of entads. The effects of this disconnection are thought to be one of the major reasons that the OSEZ is hostile to life, though there are bound to be a number of other dangerous effects.

If a person can survive the barrier transition, they will find themselves floating through abstracted space. Prior experience has shown that the fatal event that sometimes occurs at transition results in more features being added to this abstracted space: one notable example was that a green backpack being pushed in resulted in the color green being smeared across the space, with elongated threads from the textile material stretching out to miles. This ‘barrier event’ is thought to have occurred throughout the zone as the clockwork took hold, and much of the shapes, colors, flavors, and other sensations are a result of material from within the zone becoming conceptually disconnected.

Toward the nominal center of the OSEZ, certain entities can be found, creatures that are made of abstractions. While they avoid the edges, they circle the center of the

zone, either because that’s where the clockwork effect is stronger, or in order to protect it. These entities are extremely dangerous to mortal explorers and form their own abstracted ecosystem, about which little is known.

In theory, the zone could be collapsed by finding and destroying the clockwork, but it’s unknown where the clockwork is, whether this is the result of one or more clockworks, and how it might be destroyed given that it’s a part of this area of broken reality. As it is unknown whether the disruption of the clockwork would return the area to its prior condition, no funding has been secured for an attempt at exclusion closure.

DM: I think this one would be a hard one to run, and if you do, I suggest that you go all out on it and transition to an entirely different conflict resolution system. Set the character sheets aside and make up new rules, using playing cards instead of dice, make it feel like none of the usual rules apply and they’ll be lucky if they get their proper bodies back.

As for why a person would go into the zone, maybe there’s some treasure that was in the city that can be reconstructed, maybe the clockwork can be destroyed and the exclusion shuttered, or maybe someone fled into the zone in order to avoid the weight of the law.



Æ

Code: AEEZ

Types: Minor

Date: 221 FE

Summary: The Æ Exclusion Zone (AEEZ) is an extremely hot place populated by hostile spectral creations.

History: Ash magic allowed for the creation of ghostly forms and apparitions from the ashes of things that had been burnt. The ashes of a burnt wood sword could be invoked to create a spectral version of the sword in the caster's hand. The ashes of a suit of armor could be invoked to clad the caster's body. And most importantly of all, the ashes of the dead could be invoked in order to create a shade of the person who had died, which could be spoken with, at least for a time.

It was this last ability that was most prized, and for which the ash mages (known as cashters) were most well known, though their raiments of ash were distinctive in their era. The creation of shades took careful preparation and planning, as well as a piece of the body which was to be burnt, but they could speak the secrets of the dead in a way that has been incredibly rare through the history of Aerb. The practice of ash magic was jealously guarded, monopolized through violence, but they would lend their aid from time to time in pulling back a semblance of a person. Through the First and Second Empires, this was used largely for imperial purposes, especially in rooting out threats against the stability and structure of their respective governments. During the Second Empire,

revolutionaries and malcontents would kill themselves rather than be put under the control of a soul mage, but ash magic allowed even death to no longer be an escape.

The shades produced by ash magic were no true copies of the deceased, and did not interact with the anima exa or anima ipsa at all, having no connection to the soul. Instead, the ash recreates as if from nothing, and while a shade knows everything the original did, and can follow some of the same patterns, it's a hollow, shallow recreation only barely capable of carrying on a conversation, and then only with a limited window of attention and recollection. It was still the closest thing to resurrection that Aerb had to offer, and with the right admixtures to the ash, one of these recreations could last almost indefinitely.

In 217 FE, a disaffected hætan man named Fyrest Treow proved to be a prodigy in ash magic, and was quickly trained up by the cashters guild. The hæt had been one of the disfavored species of the Second Empire, and while Fyrest had been a model citizen, his resentment toward the Empire grew as time went on. While he was outwardly a loyal and noble cashter, he was plotting what he thought was a minor rebellion of his own: the mass resurrection of his people as they had once existed. In 219 FE he conducted a raid on an old hætan burial ground, taking thousands of 'samples' from warriors and priests. This went largely unnoticed and uninvestigated. By the time he had been in the service five years, he was ready to act.

The hætan people were notorious thermophiles, capable of enduring extreme temperatures that most other

mortal species could survive only with extensive magical assistance and proper preparation. Fyrest traveled to the continent of Apes, where high mountains exposed to intense sunlight created what he considered the ideal environment, and began his work, which would become the largest (and last) mass resurrection done by a cashter. He had stolen a number of admixtures for the ash from the office he worked in, expensive and rare ingredients that would boost the power of the shades he was invoking. Multiple resurrection was rare, given there was hardly ever a cause for it, but Fyrest was able to complete his ritual, resulting in the creation of 13,451 shades which have persisted to this day.

Unfortunately for Fyrest, who had hoped to create a ghost community where he could bask in the way his people had once been, the samples he had collected from the burial grounds were from across several different centuries. The peoples created from those ashes were so different from each other that even within their short working attention they were in immediate and almost constant conflict with each other. Against outsiders, this conflict was even worse, and Fyrest soon found himself ousted, especially since he wasn't fluent in their various dialects of the language.

It took over a decade for the ash magic exclusion zone to be found, in part because Fyrest had engaged in his project in secret, and because the location was uninhabited. In 253 FE, hikers stumbled across the zone and were accosted by the shades, who seemed hostile and whose words could not be understood. Upon their return to civilization, several reports were filed, new investigations were done, and the Second Empire moved on the exclusion, attempting to salvage something from it. This was made difficult by the zone's extreme remoteness and heat.

From 254 FE to 324 FE, a small group of expert cashters worked at a warded facility within the ÆEZ, carrying on the work of prior eras, largely in service of the Second Empire's goals and particularly with regards to rooting out conspirators and rebels. Given the gap between the exclusion and its discovery, expert knowledge had been lost, and the collection of cashters at the site stayed very small, especially given the secret nature of their work. Following the collapse of the Second Empire, the site was closed down, and with it gone, ash magic became a lost art. The ash magic resurrection rituals may still be possible within the zone, but none have been performed in the past two hundred years.

Features: The primary impediment to a journey into the ÆEZ is not the large collection of hostile ash magic ghosts, but rather, the extreme heat of the region, which is unrelated to the exclusion there. Temperatures regularly rise hot enough to cause burns on the skin of a

human if not covered, and the same is true for most of the mortal species. While extreme heat should in theory have no impact on the exclusion zone's listing, in this case the harsh conditions are almost always cited.

Beyond the heat, the ash magic apparitions of very old hætan peoples plague the ÆEZ. Most are hostile and all speak various dialects of their native tongues, and even if measures are taken to converse with them, the short attention spans of the creations make speaking with them difficult. During the time of the Second Empire, these creations were allowed to wander freely in order to cloak the hidden facility, but in the modern day, they are allowed to exist largely because of their historical importance. The site selected by Fyrest was, knowingly or otherwise, a place where there are no natural resources, no fertile soils, and no interest in habitation.

A small colony of modern hæt do live at the edge of the zone, enduring the heat, largely in order to honor their heritage and glean historical insights into their marginalized species.

JUNIPER: Resurrection is kind of a default spell in D&D, and as a worldbuilder, it's achingly painful to work around. One of the ways that most D&D settings do it is by making the spells 'expensive', but they never get the economies quite right, and of course you do want the players to be able to come back to life under most circumstances. So resurrection is among the spells that I most commonly nix, and if I don't do that, I change it up to not have the same problems that it does under the default assumptions. Aerb doesn't have easy resurrection, but it does have a few things that are close to resurrection, and those come with very heavy restrictions and circumstances, or they're abjectly terrible.

Ash magic is the latter. Everything I've read says that the interrogation aspects were completely overblown, probably with good reason given that the Second Empire wanted to have that resurrection as a threat. 'If you die, we'll simply take the answers from your corpse, so don't do that.' Yeah, sure Mr. Second Empire Man, whatever you say.

The ash creations — shades — have some kind of equivalent to extreme dementia, barely aware of where they are and what's going on, slipping in and out of lucidity, the things they talk about more like rambling stories. The whole idea of resurrecting ancestors and living with them seems like it was dead from the very beginning, which makes it a lot sadder to me. He must have known that it couldn't really work, unless he was some kind of deluded narcissist, which I guess given the history of exclusion zones has to be a very strongly considered possibility.



CELESTAR

Code: CSEZ

Types: Major, Empersoned

Date: 121 BE

Summary: Formerly believed to have been a mundane cataclysm, the Celestar Exclusion Zone (CSEZ) has now been confirmed to be a pre-Utherian exclusion. The CSEZ covers the entirety of the moon Celestar. Anything placed upon the moon will revert to a ‘perfect’ position.

History: Celestar has too long a history to recount here, and from the records and stories kept by the elves, predates Aerb itself. Once home to the elves, Celestar has had five successive waves of emigration, with the last of them occurring in 121 BE as the elves fled the calamity. Travel to and from Celestar is one of the most difficult journeys that can be taken, even including some forms of inter-planar travel, and especially in the modern day when various forms of transportation have been excluded.

The exclusion on Celestar appears to have been related to matters of elven philosophy and an attempt to achieve the apotheosis of perfection. In this, they appear to have succeeded, with a new type of magic developed by their philosophers and perfected by their wizards.

The pink spot that marks Celestar’s surface is, from recent expeditions, known to be home to the remaining archwizards responsible for the calamity on the moon. Brief contact has been made with them, which turned hostile. They are presumed to be engaged in attempts to reverse the imperfections of their design, though the magical power they wield is enormous, and their professed hatred toward imperfection has led them to strike out at anyone landing on the moon’s surface.

Features: The magic that envelopes Celestar enforces perfection upon the moon. Trees and plants do not grow. Air hangs stagnant. Erosion does not occur. For six hundred years, the planet has stayed static, save for the bright pink spot that marks the location where the elven wizards worked their magic. Damage to the surface of the moon, or even its interior, will reverse itself given time. The flaw in this perfection seems to largely be in the sheer scope of it, especially the stillness, which does not appear to have been intended by the arch wizards. Left alone too long, the creeping perfection of Celestar will kill most things, or in some cases, put them into a state of suspended animation when they can be integrated with the ideals of perfection.

The pink spot on Celestar’s surface marks the enclave of elven wizards, who number at least seven. Their magic is the power of perfection, though the exact details are unknown. Against imperfect creatures, which includes even elves themselves, it can be used as a weapon, and perfection protects their citadel from harm. Remote viewing of their operations has shown that, curiously, all seven wizards work in sync with each other. Due to the philosophy of perfection, all appear identical, and through their magic, it is possible that this similarity descends down to their core.

JUNIPER: We want the moon to be perfect! Wait, no, not like that!

DM: Aerbian elves have been displaced from their home, some by necessity, others by choice. This was partly to explain why the elves were so different from each other, allowing me to pack in a bunch of elf varietals, many of them imported from different campaigns. In the primary campaign Aerbian elves were taken from, the calamity with the moon had spread them across the land, and the elven king wandered from place to place with his stately court, eternally mourning the loss of the elven home. I can't say for certain where that idea came from, but many many groups have been displaced from their homelands throughout history, and diasporas are a little underrepresented in fantasy fiction ... with the one major exception being *The Hobbit*, whose main plot revolves around the dwarves reclaiming their ancestral homeland.

I think if you want to include Celestar as more than a background detail in a campaign, the best thing to go with is probably some kind of 'return to the homeland' plot. Much of the fantasy genre was built off ripping off Tolkien, but for some reason this particular beat hasn't been ground into the dirt like the others.

Elf (General) Generally speaking, elves are a tall humanoid species of obligate carnivores with uncanny non-magical luck and an obsession with perfection. In many respects, they have significant advantages over humans and most of the other mortal species, being stronger, faster, and more intelligent, but these features come with significant psychological and sociological limitations. Elves live long lives, but have difficulty with (and hostility toward) change, especially in their later years. Almost every elf of historical note has been aberrant.

Elf (Star) Star elves were the first wave of elven immigrants from Celestar, though as their name suggests, they had originally meant to colonize the stars around Aerbian before finding them inhospitable. They are characterized as being the most bloodthirsty of the elves, difficult to conduct diplomacy with, incredibly proud, and very much set in their ways, even more so than the other elves. The story of their emigration from Celestar is complicated and largely lost to history, but appears to stem from a lack of adequate living space.

Elf (Moon) Moon elves were the second wave of immigrants from Celestar, coming to Aerbian directly through then-new (and then-unexcluded) teleportation methods. In this case, the proximate cause of emigration was a

bloody civil war whose topic was the proliferation of variant forms, fundamentally a disagreement over the nature of perfection, as many elven disagreements are. Moon elves were on the losing fundamentalist side, and the descendants of the second wave remained, to large extent, hardliners.

Elf (Dark) Dark elves are nominally the third wave of immigrants, though their own history is largely lost to time. It is theorized that during the Flourishing Era which followed the schism that the moon elves came from, a band of elves adapted themselves to a more perfect form suitable to living underground in complete cold. Their transfer to Aerbian is likewise shrouded in mystery due to gaps in the historical record, but they were found living in the Gelid Depths circa 4 FE, with scattered sightings prior to that. They are noted for their teeth, which are flattened and human-like, and their general goodly nature in comparison to their counterparts. The majority of the dark elf population still lives within the Gelid Depths.

Elf (Wood) Wood elves mark the fourth wave of immigration from Celestar, and the last prior to the cataclysm that permanently scarred their moon. Similarly to the moon elves, the wood elves were on the losing side of an ideological debate, this one primarily centered on whether the struggle for perfection (not the term they would use) should be oriented toward the past or the future. The wood elves, largely possessed by a desire to return to a time and society that never really existed, immigrated to Aerbian and established nature-oriented ideal communities, isolationist beyond all reason. Wood elves put a lot of stock in ritual and ceremony.

Elf (Partite/Cataclysm) The final wave of elven immigration immediately preceded the cataclysm, and was much more varied than the other waves. Partite elves come in a much wider variety of skin color and body shape, though they still tend to have the pointy ears characteristic of elves, along with being tall and lithe. Partite elves, as a general rule, place a lot of importance on personal perfection, but they're much less invested in any elven society. Some mistake them for being free thinkers, which is simply not the case; they are as rigid and carnivorous as their cousins, but simply more independent as a rule.



[REDACTED]

RAVEN: This entry comes from our future — they all do in this edition, technically — where it was presumed that the exclusion was no longer a threat to anyone. Infohazard protocols apply. DO NOT READ!

Code: XEZ

Types: Free, Dead, Enpersoned

Date: 410 FE (Closed, 531 FE)

Summary: Following the death of Bastian Tolivar in 531 FE, the Xylum Exclusion Zone (XEZ) is now Safe. Prior to that, Bastian was capable of collecting enormous amounts of information, which could be magically leveraged.

History: Information brokerage was a field of pseudomagic whose heyday was approximately 3000 BE. At its highest levels, information brokers were capable of learning new information based on prior information through methods that went beyond inference or conjecture. The master brokers of the Candidan Empire could make a study of a person in their fullness, and used this for the selection of emperors until the collapse of the ancient empire and decimation of the brokers, possibly through memetic pollution of their information channels.

Various attempts at reviving information brokerage were made over the years, but the changing nature of how information was handled seemed to limit the acquisition of this information pseudomagic by those who handled information. The written word, in particular, seemed to be a barrier beyond which the development of pseudomagical ability could not happen, and modern information brokers, who placed more importance on learning through other means, out-competed those attempting to break through to pseudomagical ability, even with government backing.

Bastian Tolivar was born in the wake of the fall of the Second Empire, his parents refugees from Manifest. He had an obsession with information from an early age, and in his youth, became a musician of some repute. Learning difficulties meant that he never did well with the written word, preferring instead to talk and listen, and through this, his first pseudomagical abilities began to develop. He was capable of remembering any number of names and faces, and would recognize people he'd met briefly a decade prior, something for which he was well-known. Gregarious and talented, for a time Tolivar plied his trade as a musician through various kingdoms, picking up more contacts along the way.

Starting in 367 FE, Tolivar's popularity as a musician began to wane, and it was at this point that he began a career in information brokerage at the suggestion of a friend. His dense network of contacts helped propel him to a place of prominence, and his ability to remember small details blossomed into a pseudomagical ability held by the old information brokers: the ability to gain more details as though from nothing. One of the things that helped Tolivar along was a greater understanding of what the pseudomagic worked on, particularly the key insight that new inventions like telephony were enough for him to enhance his understanding of others. For a time, Tolivar was a key player in intelligence circles, his powers lending him the ability to sniff out spies and, contrarily, to gain key insights into important figures.

In 403 FE, Tolivar developed an additional expansion to his power, one which prior information brokers might never have reached. Information, it seemed, was a two-way street, and any information gained about Tolivar allowed him to know something about the person who'd learned of him. Shortly thereafter, Tolivar began borrowing money to start on a program of publicity, which largely included sending out leaflets, writing and

publishing autobiographies, and putting out records with his music and some salient facts about him. For a brief few years, he was among the most famous people in the world, which meant that he had an enormous wealth of knowledge about millions of people. He used this level of information primarily for coercion and to live a good lifestyle.

Starting in 410 FE, pseudomagical information brokerage, of which Tolivar was one of the only ‘practitioners’ in the world, was excluded and long-believed to be enpersoned in Tolivar. Stuck within the city of Xylum, for a time Tolivar was able to continue on with his business, though unable to leave. While the power worked beyond the bounds of the exclusion, gaining him information from those outside the zone as they learned about him, the exclusion remained unknown to the world.

By 417 FE, Tolivar had made enough enemies that there were serious threats on his life, at which point he revealed yet another level to his growing power: the ability to change the information he had gathered, though only within the confines of his exclusion zone. With sufficient understanding of a person, Tolivar could simply alter them, changing key details of their life to turn them from threat to, if not ally, then at least a harmless distraction. As soon as his abilities became widely known, the information beyond his control, countermeasures began to be employed against him, and escalating conflict expanded into full blown warfare.

Starting circa 443 FE, Tolivar ruled Xylum as a warlord, with a declining population that was reduced to just dozens by 458 FE. As knowledge of his power grew outside his exclusion zone, efforts were made to reduce information about him, which weakened his ability to react to outside threats considerably. His records were crushed, his autobiographies burned, and almost all information about him was redacted in an extended campaign which saw success largely because his popularity and fame had been artificially propped up. In 467 FE the exclusion zone was declared Major by the EoCC, which further enraged Tolivar, who struck out as best he could, sending information outside the zone in an attempt to destabilize the ruling class. A number of scandals were uncovered in this way, but the EoCC stayed strong as a whole, and a state of tension existed until Tolivar’s natural death in 531 FE.

In his later years, Tolivar suffered from something akin to dementia, which made his final few decades exceptionally dangerous to those few people who still lived in Xylum. Tolivar had an incredible command of information, but he could ‘misremember’ information, which would then propagate into reality. Harmless examples would include Tolivar changing a person’s name or their appearance, but there are much more dangerous examples on record. For those he knew very well, or who knew him well, Tolivar misremembering their death could be lethal.

It should be noted that much of what’s known about Bastian Tolivar comes from his lengthy and comprehensive biographies left in the zone after his death. Because most information about him was destroyed during the time he was excluded, the biographies must be trusted for their accuracy, and it is possible that Tolivar was capable of using his power on himself, which would mean that truly knowing him would be impossible.

Additionally, as training in this specific pseudomagical talent is undoubtedly extremely difficult and time-consuming to acquire, there is little confirmation on the precise nature of what’s excluded.

DM: I frankly don’t think that this is workable for a tabletop campaign, but I’d love to hear a report of someone attempting it. In my head, the money shot is the DM leaning over, grabbing your character sheet, and rewriting it, or maybe handing you a new backstory, or a new stack of backstories, one after the other. It would require a lot of planning, along with some hard rules in place to make it all fair. One of the things that Aerb notably eschews are saving throws, which I think you’d want in place so there’s at least some recourse for the players.

If you know Bastian Tolivar’s name, he knows your name. If you know he was a musician, he knows every profession you’ve ever held. If you know what his face looks like, he knows yours. If you know his location, he knows right where you are. If you know the precise bounds of his powers, he knows yours. Worse, in all of these cases, is his ability to alter that information, maybe even down as far as to your memories. The logical thing to do is to go in with as little information as possible, and I feel like that presents some interesting challenges of its own — how do you plan when that planning puts you in more danger?

For gameplay purposes, I think doing actual bi-directional tracking is probably a bit much, though I guess I can see a simplified version of it working where you check things off one by one as they learn more about Tolivar. I also think that you need to include some limits to the power, making it change a person but not changing their actual power level, so someone who’s level 15 stays level 15, even if they have a different backstory, name, class, etc. But there are some inherently unworkable elements, and the need to go meta with it would probably be a deal-breaker for me.

And of course for a proper adventure, you would need something more than a powerful man sitting in a squalid castle. You need at least a town of uncertain alliances, people living in the shadow of a powerful man because they’re desperate, brainwashed, or state-sponsored agents. Because the information brokering extends beyond the zone, there’s plenty of possibility for people coming to take advantage of Tolivar, hoping to get the best of him. A small town of spies might be workable.



LI'O

Code: LIEZ

Types: Free

Date: 527 FE

Spoilers: Major

Summary: Li'o was the site of an attack by a large monster. In the course of defending the city, the monster was killed and skin magic was excluded. Following extensive reconstruction efforts, the city is now a Free exclusion.

History: The city of Li'o is located in the P'emp'te Valley, and has a long history of association with magical learning. The Li'o'te Temple allows access to still magic through meditation, and during Uther Penndraig's time, he brought the Rod of Whispers to the campus, ultimately allowing the formation of what is now the Athenaeum of Sound and Silence.

On Halig 23rd, 527 FE, the skies over Li'o filled with clouds that turned dark, then green. Enormous legs were seen descending from the skies, and as the clouds lifted, the monster made itself known. Its size rivaled the greatest known monsters of antiquity and its footsteps could crush entire buildings. Its back, which was seven hundred feet from the ground, was wriggling with fleshy hair and teeming with hostile creatures that descended en masse to terrorize the city. From the creature's eyes came a laser of immense power, more than once. Perhaps more terrible than any of that was an effect that fell upon the minds of anyone who left the area: they would forget

that the creature existed. This prevented aid from being rendered to the city from imperial forces at that crucial time.

The origin of the creature is unknown, with some speculation that it might have appeared because of rogue skin magic, given that skin magic was excluded that same day. Other sources speculate that it was somehow caused by vibration magic or still magic, as these were practiced at Sound and Silence, though the mechanism by which they might have caused the creature's appearance is an open question. At the time, there was also a widespread confusion among the populace, including reports of persistent chanting, but it's speculated that this was an effect of the creature, which is known to have affected minds.

Not long after its appearance, local forces ineffectually engaged with the monster, hampered by the failures of local leadership. Eventually, a small collective known as the Council of Arches from the Republic of Miunun, which had happened to be in the area, engaged the creature with overwhelming force, killing it before it could do more damage. When the body fell, more buildings were destroyed, and more of the creatures which had been living inside it spewed out, causing their own casualties.

The following weeks and months saw the first invocation of Article 86 by the EoCC, bringing in material aid to the city-state and re-establishing governance of the area. While the creature had been killed, the numerous smaller beasts that it had brought with it were free, and many of them killed their way through the city before they could be put down. Most had some

sort of antimemetic effect to them, being impossible to remember when they were close, capable of removing themselves from senses, not being able to be talked about, or with similar abilities in that vein. Swift response from Republic of Miunun forces and Uniquities were able to counter, contain, or kill the worst of these, though some have traveled far from the site and established themselves as a part of the local ecosystem.

Reconstruction of Li’o began with the removal of the bodies, including the large creature, which took the work of star mages to shunt enormous pieces of it elsewhere. Once the city had been cleaned and the worst of the damage had been moved away, steel mages came in to construct temporary housing for those who had been displaced, as well as permanent structures to replace those that had been smashed, including a new City Hall.

Following the exclusion of skin magic, the Athenaeum of Steel and Sweat created a satellite campus in Li’o and helped to fund part of the reconstruction efforts. While skin magic is excluded to Li’o, it does not appear to be changed or hampered in any way, and some vital functions of skin magic, including translation, are still conducted there. Tattoos that have left the exclusion zone go inert, but reactivate once within the zone, and as a consequence, an entire world’s worth of high-value tattoos have concentrated themselves within the zone.

As the skin magic exclusion also included scar magic, a contingent of elves have relocated to Li’o, establishing

a colony for themselves at the city’s outskirts, causing no small amount of tensions as they formally refuse to recognize the authority of the city-state. Negotiations are ongoing.

Features: Li’o is currently a Free exclusion. While significant destruction happened in 527 FE, the city has been largely rebuilt, though its population is nowhere near its pre-exclusion peak. The fabled domes of the city have all been restored to an approximation of what they once were, and Sound and Silence continues to operate from within the city, as does the Steel and Sweat campus nearby it.

While the majority of the monsters that came from the creature have been killed, their nature is such that extermination is difficult to be sure of, and occasional deaths or accidents are investigated closely to make sure that there is no unseen threat.

The unknown cause of the creature’s appearance has raised questions about the possibility of a second one appearing, which have not been adequately laid to rest. There have been certain intimations by the EoCC which lead people to believe that more is known and that the situation is well in hand, but has been rendered secret for reasons of imperial security. It is no small wonder that people find these cloaked assurances less than reassuring.



PARSMONT

Code: PEZ

Types: Free

Date: 29 FE*

Spoilers: Minor

Summary: In the city of Parsmont, magical voting elects the Abswifth and the Bendon to positions of power which give them control of the weight of objects that are close to them.

History: The kingdom of Coleraine was once tied to a powerful bloodline magic, with the successor to the crown chosen by the people of the kingdom. The votes of the people would empower their chosen, granting long power, and as those votes could be revoked, their king (or sometimes kings) would be inspired to do good. Around 1000 BE, a fracture in the court resulted in two kings who worked in opposition to each other rather than together, an early example of Uther's Law of Coalescing Democracy. This state of affairs continued within Coleraine, in spite of efforts to reunify the branches of the noble house, or contrarily, for one half of the house to kill the other. Coleraine became known as the Kingdom of Warring Kings, the duties divided between the kings.

As the First Empire flourished, Coleraine did as well. The population began to dramatically rise, largely as a result of better nutrition and magical healing. As a consequence, the two kings, styled the Abswifth and the Bendon, began to grow in power, each additional vote swelling their abilities. The Bendon at the time had an expansive family with many branches, as part of a generational effort to ensure that power would be vested

in at least one of their members. As a result of the voting, a tertiary power began to rise within Coleraine, made possible largely because of that expansive family. The sheer population of the kingdom meant that even a small fraction of the vote could empower someone, shifting more power outside the established system of two kings. In 27 FE, perhaps because of the unprecedented number of candidates — well over a thousand — the bloodline magic spilled out, becoming universal, at least within the region of Coleraine, with anyone becoming a candidate for votes. In spite of this, and perhaps because of the threat that the other side might win, the Abswifth and the Bendon held onto their power. With the changed conditions, the cold war between the Abswifth and Bendon threatened to fracture into a hot one.

In 29 FE, Uther arrived in the city of Parsmont, which had by then grown large enough that it was considered a city-state, seeking to settle the dispute between the two leaders. After a long period of negotiation between them, he established a doctrine of separation of powers, with the Abswifth and the Bendon being responsible for different functions within their government. To this end, he gifted the city with two large towers, each of them tall and needle-thin: the white Tower of Probity and the black Tower of Perfidy. With these towers placed, the roles were established within a more coherent and planned framework, and the ongoing dispute between the two sides was reduced to a simmer.

Through the era of the Second Empire and leading into the time of the EoCC, the city-state of Parsmont

(having stretched to the borders of historical Coleraine), has remained more or less as they were, changing with the times but with the system of governance largely intact.

Features: When in Parsmont or the surrounding area, a person becomes aware of two ‘pools’ within their mind, one empty, representing who has voted for them to have power, one full, representing their ability to vote. Votes are done with a thought, and can be revoked at will. Each ‘vote’ gives a negligible amount of power, undetectable under normal circumstances, with the full effects known primarily when the amount of votes gets to within one hundred thousand.

The power granted is that of weight control, allowing the Abswifh and Bendon to clad themselves in heavy armor, swing enormous swords, leap high into the air, and make incredibly powerful downward strikes. While outwardly impressive, the nature of this power, the manipulation of the downward force of gravity, means that it’s quite restricted in practice, especially as the range is relatively limited. The most powerful attack available to either is the ability to increase a person’s weight in an instant, which can be fatal if applied in full force. Colloquially, this is called ‘bending the knee’.

The Towers of Probity and Perfidy are magical in nature, but despite the fact that their effects are known to both Abswifh and Bendon, the precise nature of that power has been successfully obscured. It is known that both possess temporary mind-altering power, though different in nature. Those that visit the tower report their thought processes taking on changes which fade as they leave, and these changes are used by the Abswifh and Bendon in the execution of their duties.

While the Abswifh and Bendon make their offices in the Tower of Probity and Perfidy, respectively, the position of each is determined by the votes, with the Bendon below the Abswifh. In practice, this means that on occasion the Abswifh and Bendon change places, taking each other’s title and office, a process which occurs following a challenge of strength.

RAVEN: Uther found Parsmont to be troublesome, in part because of his rocky relationship with democracy. He thought that in theory the people should govern themselves, and that rulers should have the consent of the governed, but he was also a king, and by some accounting, de facto Emperor. He saw the people of Parsmont as choosing poorly for themselves, largely because of a lack of coordination, and possibly because of poor information.

I’m actually not sure that the Towers did anything to help the situation in Parsmont. He’d taken them from one of the disjoint planes on a prior adventure, and had been looking for a use for them. His idea had been the canonization of roles and the attachment of offices, a concession to the idea of there being these two opposing forces no matter what.

The towers altered people, though only for a bit, changing the ways they thought. The Tower of Probity makes people good, in a way that’s specific to the tower; Uther had always hated it, because he disagreed with it, and before handing it off, he’d sat there sometimes, holding debates in his own mind as the tower tried to give him thoughts. The Tower of Perfidy was the opposite, and he’d sit there sometimes too, grappling with what evil it was trying to point out within him. His conclusion was that they were useless except in the sense that they helped people to reflect upon their own moral understanding of the world, and their ability to force that reflection on others, as well as the influence they had once you were in them. In some sense, he saw them as being the same thing, since both would point out good and evil, just from opposite sides.

From what I’ve read, the towers are weakening, possibly because of their distance from the small disjoint plane they were a part of. I think that’s probably for the best.

There is the separate question of the bloodline magic ‘spilling over’ into the common people. Of course it wasn’t a bloodline magic, given that the common people were a part of it from the start, but there doesn’t seem to me to have been any particular inciting incident to cause it to no longer be hereditary. There were all sorts of magics flying around in 27 FE though, so it’s entirely possible that something got snipped or altered in some way. It’s not entirely impossible that it was one of the partial exclusions of soul magic, or a partial exclusion of something else. There was a lot going on that year. Aerh has quite a lot in the way of unsolved mysteries, even for me, and I think this is one of those that just has to be added to the pile.

JUNIPER: I guess they get elected by throwing their weight around, or maybe by putting their finger on the scales. They probably do a lot of weight training to keep up their power. But you know what they say, heavy is the head that wears the crown, and I guess they’ve got the weight of the world on their shoulders.



RAVENOUS

Code: RVEZ

Types: Major

Date: 296 FE

Summary: The Ravenous Exclusion Zone (RVEZ) contains three hundred and thirteen different (now deceased) groove casters within it whose spells are still active. Effects vary.

History: For much of its history, groove casting was a niche magic. With the expenditure of energy, usually but not always mental, a groove caster could bring forth magical effects, which helped to deepen a ‘groove’ in their mental fabric. Deeper grooves allowed faster and more efficient casting. Their spells largely presented as splashes of color in the air, with the effects spreading to the things touched by these splashes in accordance with the concentration of magic, which dissipated quickly over time. Effects within the realm of groove casting included rot, hardening, dyeing different colors, bleaching, fossilization, and a host of others. Most effects that could be accomplished with the application of different reactants to a material could be replicated with groove casting.

One of the reasons that groove casting saw little use was because it took a large amount of either time or energy to properly build up a good ‘groove’. A normal human, using only groove casting, could achieve two or three good grooves by the end of their working life. This was enough to ply a trade, but underwhelming compared to what was possible for other mages. Because grooves did not decay, and would stay potent even during long

periods of inactivity, they were much more favored by long-lived species. By an elf’s third century, they could have a full repertoire of powerful grooves, capable of rusting away a metal door with a single casting or slowly converting coal into diamonds.

By the end of the First Empire, the possibilities of groove casting had been greatly expanded, largely by finding compatible magics that could be funneled into the grooves. This greatly increased the speed with which a groove could be formed, and reduced the reliance on sheer mental effort. Compatible systems included ash magic, clock magic, crystal magic, and dibbling, and fueled a brief resurgence of interest in groove casting.

Toward the end of the Second Empire, groove casters were beginning to form their own small conclave within the imperial bureaucracy. An accredited school was founded, and students went there to learn and to use specialized instruments to help with the relatively rapid creation of deep grooves — by that point as little as a year each. Interest grew in so-called ‘terminal grooves’, which would go as deep as possible into the mental fabric of a person, and require almost nothing in the way of energy input.

In 296 FE, a drug cocktail began to be passed around the campus, promising a temporary weakening of mental fabric in order to rapidly deepen grooves. A groove that might once have taken a decade to mark, and had been reduced to a year, would now be made in a matter of weeks. For a time, this seemed like a revolutionary miracle, and it spread quickly around the small campus. Two months later, most of those who had taken the drug

had grooves so deep their spells were not just free, but compulsory, and exclusion followed not long after. Even in death, the grooves continue to leak significant amounts of magic, and it does not appear that decay of the corpses will stop the terminal grooves from functioning.

The RVEZ is not beset by a singular ill effect, but by many of them, as the particular groove from each corpse is different. In one area, rapid rust will eat away at weapons and armor, going so far as to rust the blood in a person's body. In another area, mold and fungus stretch out for hundreds of yards. A full catalog of effects and their locations has been made by researchers, but the zone as a whole has been marked as a major exclusion, and uninhabited since shortly after the campus was evacuated.

Features: The RVEZ is only approximately five miles across, with the vast majority of its effects concentrated in the center of the zone. Due to the concentrations of magic involved and the nature of these 'splashes', shifting winds can carry the effects as far as the edge of the zone, depending on the weather. Within the former city of Teardor, effects are so concentrated and often overlapping that they can be lethal within seconds.

RAVEN: Groove casting should never have been excluded. If you look at what actually happened, it's not degenerate, and while not all exclusions are for degenerate magic, it is one of the common threads. This is a good example of a self-limiting catastrophe; people take the drug looking for a cheap shortcut to power, then it kills them and creates a permanent hazard unless it can be locked down tight by a warder. There's no effect larger than a few miles. No one would willingly take the drug once they knew what it did. So why the exclusion? If groove casting was still around, and the drug were still around, it's not like the magic would be running amok. Mostly, no one would be using groove casting to any greater extent than they were before the drug, and no one would use the drug. The overall impact of the drug was only to cause this calamity, but it wouldn't have been ongoing, and didn't actually offer transformative power to the groove casters.

One of the things that makes exclusion so frustrating is the number of questions we still have about how and why it happens, and what we can do to prevent it.

GRAKHUIL: Almost all magics interact with warding, but not all interact with each other. Groove casting was an exceptionally compatible magic, for reasons not yet understood, though it was one-way, from other magics into the 'grooves'. A properly trained groove caster, after Raven's advancements, would be a multimage of considerable power even if they were a novice in each of their fields. Given my understanding of exclusion, compatibility is a weakness, an invitation to degeneracy and uncontrollable power. Groove casting's compatibilities suggest that it would not have survived to the modern day.

Compatibility is a weakness, and almost all magics interact with warding. It is cause for much concern.

JUNIPER: Is this a reference to Raven somehow? She was a groove caster, but also the fact that she was a groove caster wasn't in her official biography, which I did end up reading. So she was a *secret* groove caster? And if so, why? I don't want to reopen old wounds, but having an exclusion zone for a magic you spent a lot of time working on named after you must suck, especially if you weren't involved.



WILLIAM'S NET

Code: WNEZ

Types: Major

Date: 5 FE

Summary: Within the William's Net Exclusion Zone (WNEZ), demonic energies easily bind to a person without any act of will on their part. These energies will often immediately kill a person through overwhelming strength, and if they don't, will result in firm possession of a body capable of extreme feats of raw power.

History: The hells have been known for most of Aerb's history, but were only properly investigated starting in 20 FE with the invention of the infernoscope. Prior to that point, infernals were better known than the hells themselves, primarily through possession, but also through breaches, where infernals, usually those who were weak, would come to Aerb, and through cults, which would attempt to summon forth an infernal or bind it to their will.

The single most common outcome for any attempt at demonic binding was death, particularly because the infernals wrote and spread their own instructions on binding during either moments of possession or through a breach. Over time though, hard-won knowledge was passed down from cult to cult, and beginning in 11 BE, new practices in demonic binding were capable of reliably providing martial power, though with the cost of some amount of control being passed to the demon providing power. These practices were first used in warfare by the

Dark King of Anglecynn, though were temporarily lost following his defeat. New techniques were developed in secret, boosting power even more.

Possibly unknown to the Aerbian practitioners, the techniques which had been uncovered by the Dark King and his researchers were also useful for the hells they were being used on. A lesser demon in the highest hell could use the same rituals, adapted slightly, to bind with a demon in the hell below. Importantly, he could only do this if he was himself bound to someone in Aerb, but this effectively allowed demons to bind each other in 'chains' that descended down into the hells. The end result was an enormous amount of power for the mortal on Aerb, but contrarily, an enormous amount of control for the 'final' demon in the hell. The effect was often compared to a whip, where a sharp movement of the bulky handle would translate into the tiny tip cracking through the air. Unknown to the mortals, these long demonic 'chains' persisted even though death, and could be reattached to a new mortal with far more ease than a 'fresh' binding.

Exclusion came in 5 BE following Uther's defeat of a 'chained' cult. The demons had, in secret, been working on a plan for a maximal chain, one which would extend from a mortal on Aerb and have a link through every single one of the nine thousand hells. This, in theory, would allow for a demon in the Omega Hell to generate enormous power for the mortal on Aerb, as well as to connect with a mortal without so much as their consent.

In the end, the maximal chain misfired. Intended to capture Uther Penndraig, it instead captured one of his assistants, and he fought a brutal battle with her, now

largely seen as the prelude to the Apocalypse Demon's War. Curiously, the exclusion zone, which appears to exclude only the connection of a chain, lay far from the site of that possession, on the continent of Limousin. Uther would visit it nearly twenty years later, discovering the exclusion zone to his detriment and engaging in another large battle there against more seasoned demonic powers, winning handily.

Features: Travel into the WNEZ is completely barred, though there is almost nothing to look at or see there, with the region being largely underwater and with no current mortal habitation. Once inside the zone, binding does not happen automatically, but generally occurs within twenty-four hours. While in theory a mortal might bind to a different chain, the two maximal chains still known to exist are far easier to bind with and require no input from the mortal.

As the binding is the only thing excluded, not the link, a bound individual may freely leave the zone. Once they do, the demons will lay in wait, watching through the senses of the person who is bound, holding back power until it can become a disaster. While the chosen moment is, in theory, a moment of maximum cruelty, such as a moment of uncontrolled super-strength when a mother is holding her child, in practice there are nine thousand demons on the chain, all with diverse interests and wills of their own. Often, lethal action is taken within a day or two of binding. A footstep gets amplified to become

a thousand foot leap, with no subsequent constitution or strength applied to the landing. A person is made to blink so hard that their eyeballs pop. A gentle hand on the shoulder of a companion pushes them so hard they break dozens of bones.

Because of the threat that bound individuals present, current policy is to kill those seen in or leaving the zone on sight. This is sometimes easier said than done, given lightning fast reflexes and incredible strength.

AMARYLLIS: The hells are a terrifying spectre that looms over Aerb, but there have always been those who dream of somehow turning the tables on either the infernals or the hells themselves. There are some who decry this instinct as being a foolish pursuit destined to end in tears, but I'm not so sure that I agree. There's nothing to say that the supremacy of the hells must always be unchallenged, that every battle with them must stay unwon.

With that said, the body of knowledge about the hells has clearly been influenced by millenia of infernal meddling, and if you think you've found some secret to controlling the infernals, it's much more likely that you've in fact found a trap that's been left behind to kill or ensnare you. And if someone comes up to you and says that they've found the perfect way to use the infernals for good, you'd be out of your mind for trusting a single word they said.



NECROLABOREM

Code: NLEZ

Types: Minor, Empersoned

Date: 276 FE

Spoilers: Yes

Summary: Elisha Blue, known to most as Captain Blue-in-the-Bottle, is capable of creating and controlling undead servants of particular mobility and dexterity. He uses these ‘zombies’ in both the defense and administration of his zone, as well as a labor replacement for many different occupations.

History: Elisha Blue was a necromancer, and as such dealt largely in animating the dead in order to allow them to do useful labor. The son of two wealthy necromancers before him, he had a fair bit of material backing, business acumen, and facility with the magic itself. He was able to make several novel (if minor) breakthroughs in necromancy, which along with his resources and aptitude for business meant that he was able to expand his shipping company. After the death of his parents, he inherited their fortune and turned his efforts toward research, seemingly with the intent of founding his own athenaeum for necromancy.

Twelve years after his laboratory was founded, exclusion struck, restricting the magic to an area which surrounded Blue’s laboratory and ancestral manor, along with much of the land around it. While the Second Empire used its own classification scheme, the Empire of Common Cause would have termed it a Free exclusion. Not long after the exclusion, several manufactories were built which employed the labor of a new variety of

undead, which Blue dubbed ‘zombies’. A scheme was introduced whereby ill people would be brought into the zone to die and be turned into zombies, with a dividend paid to their families.

It was only after the formation of the EoCC that the true nature of the zombies as thinking, feeling people trapped inside bodies they do not control was discovered. Given the relatively wide range of goods produced within the Necrolaborem Exclusion Zone and the horror of what was needed to make them, opinion quickly turned on Blue. To this day, he remains an outcast, and his dictatorship is under a complete embargo from the EoCC. The classification of the NLEZ as a minor exclusion, in spite of its relative safety, is contentious. Proponents argue it is necessary due to the dangers posed by the governance of Elisha Blue.

Features: People who have become Blue’s so-called zombies are fully conscious and aware of the feelings that their bodies produce, unable to control any of the actions that their body takes. While lesser forms of necromancy available to Blue do not require such suffering, it is these zombies which the exclusion zone is most known for.

Blue’s zombies are fully autonomous and capable of following complex orders given to them by Blue. Additionally, he is able to see and sense through them. It is difficult to get good estimates of the population of the zone. A complicating factor in dealing with the zone is Elisha Blue’s claim that there are hundreds of thousands of zombies waiting to be sent to the hells if offensive action is taken against him.

Did You Know? The legal status of enpersoned exclusion zones can differ wildly depending on the circumstances of the exclusion and the personality and actions of the enpersoned individual. While no current enpersoned individual is a member in good standing with the EoCC at the time of this publication, there have been a number of historical examples of worthwhile trade and diplomacy which give some hope for the future.

As a matter of policy, Special Threats assigns at least one on-site diplomat to each of the enpersoned exclusion zones who is then tasked with attempting to engage in dialogue with the enpersoned individual. Additionally, the diplomat or a member of their team will be charged with creating a psychological profile of the individual, maintaining a dossier on their life, and maintaining a record of their actions. In many cases, long-range viewing entads are used for semi-regular surveillance of the individuals. It is the official position of these unique diplomats that no individual, whatever their crimes, is beyond redemption, and that even those who show no remorse can be fruitfully dealt with, whether that would mean improving conditions for those trapped within the zone or through trade.

Trade is the primary tool of the exclusionary diplomat, as the EoCC has proven willing and able to effectively embargo exclusion zones. Once an embargo is declared, the Special Threats team, including the diplomat or diplomatic team, has special dispensation to act as a corridor through which goods and sometimes people flow — in both directions.

The diverse nature of the enpersoned exclusion zones dictate vastly different diplomatic responses. A number of enpersoned exclusion zones are effectively city-states ruled by the individuals, particularly Herront, Manifest, and Captain Blue-in-the-Bottle. While both places are completely embargoed, the driving goal of the diplomatic

mission is the reduction of suffering within the zone. In largely uninhabited zones, diplomatic efforts are instead focused on reducing damage both within and without the zone, especially for those individuals with some manner of force projection, particularly Zaman.

A secondary goal of exclusionary diplomats is dealing with any factions within the exclusion zone, which can include cultists, loyalists, opportunists, rebels, and more. Diplomats must be careful to balance the sometimes complex interplay of people within the zone.

AMARYLLIS: It's hard to understand how wide-ranging Elisha Blue's marketing campaign was. He was pouring enormous amounts of money into it, commissioning comics and paintings that he hoped would make the whole thing look a bit silly and innocuous. A part of me wants to believe that he knew how the world would react if they found out the truth, but it's hard to say for certain what motivated him. There was a time when he was lauded as being a stroke of good fortune, the rare enpersoned exclusion that was a benefit to the world rather than being a hindrance. When the truth came, the world turned on him, as though flipping a switch. I actually think part of the reason that the change was so dramatic was because he'd been taking up space in the public consciousness. Blue and his zombies were a known quantity. If he'd been in the background, people might simply have shrugged and moved on with their lives, in the way that they do for all kinds of horrible things that are far away. Blue *wasn't* far away, he was a brand, up close and personal in spite of the distance.

The spotlight can be a powerful thing. I understand him wanting to harness it. But the spotlight can also be so bright it burns, which is a danger that anyone trying to ride it must understand.



KNOTTED NOOSE

Code: KNEZ

Types: Minor

Date: 101 FE

Summary: In the Knotted Noose Exclusion Zone (KNEZ), thinking about the past in too much detail will result in death.

History: Chronomancy was the historical magic responsible for divination into the past. A finicky and imprecise magic, it nevertheless allowed for a unique insight into ages past, though was much clearer and more precise with periods of roughly a hundred years from when it was used, falling off sharply toward the present of the practitioner and falling off weakly toward the distant past. The chronomancer's tool of choice was a clock, which they bound to in order to greatly increase their pastward vision.

Traditionally used by the long-lived species in order to resolve decades-long disputes over wrongdoing, or issues of parentage among the other mortal species, chronomancy was generally of more interest to archeologists, historians, and other academics. Many books on historical events were written by chronomancers, or with their assistance, and the view of history has been heavily influenced by the magic. Because of the necessary precision required for time, location, and subject, it was seen as better suited for those events which were already well-known, or when a historian desired a broad overview of life.

All this changed with Uther Penndraig, who had a power over chronomancy that was unrivaled in all of

history — he joked that he was the only one who could be sure of that. With a special clock by his side, he could peer into the past with unerring accuracy and depth, and in the course of his storied career, used chronomancy to solve a number of outstanding disputes among nations. He could read the near-past clearer than anyone else, and had a knack for finding the right place and time to do his readings. It was even said that he had some minor influence over the past itself, though these rumors were given little weight until long after his disappearance. If he was capable of changing the past, there would be no record of it except that which he left himself.

In 101 FE, for unknown reasons, the magic was excluded. The exclusion zone wasn't 'found' until more than a decade later, when the lethal effect of the zone was matched up with the disappearance of chronomancy from the world.

Features: Anyone within the KNEZ who thinks about the past for too long will die from a brain aneurysm or similar. Aside from this, the KNEZ is perfectly safe to live in.

The prohibition on thinking of the past has been identified as explicitly being an effect of chronomancy, as it can be effectively warded against. As the effect persists even though there are no known chronomancers left in the world, there is one clear theory as to where the effect might be originating from: the future. Under this theory, some unknown chronomancer, possibly yet to be born, can see into either the minds of people within the zone or identify them through the historical record, and

use the power of chronomancy against them, changing history. The how and why of this change is unknown, and most people who live within the zone have adapted to the prohibition.

Outside the zone, or in warded rooms within it, attempts have been made to counteract or identify this theorized future chronomancer, to no avail. The effect has been in place for over four hundred years, and even a precise time frame of where the future chronomancer might originate has not been nailed down.

RAVEN: Uther and I worked together on chronomancy. At least part of the reason he was so good at knowing where and when to look into the past was that I would spend hour upon hour combing through books and translating passages. It was as deep of collaboration as we ever really did, when I wasn't just serving as his informant. We would feed into each other, with what he saw giving me hints and clues for where to pull the next book from.

Could Uther actually *change* the past? I have no idea. If he could, he never told us, and I have to imagine that it would be a difficult thing to accomplish. There seems like so much that he would have changed, if he could have. He claimed to hate time travel in stories.

JUNIPER: Time travel is awesome, and also sucks. It's awesome because you get to dive straight into the past and change things around, which is almost like doing editorial work on something you've created, or reliving the greatest hits. It's terrible because it's *really* easy to get yourself tied up in knots. The name of the zone, 'Knotted Noose', seems to be pointing at that, which I have to admit I chuckled at (though the in-world etymology is different and predates the zone). There are a couple of different models of time travel, and it's really hard to do them in D&D, but I've tried them all, because of course I did. Diverging timelines is easy, but you've got to add stakes to it, because otherwise it seems like you're spitting out too many universes, or like every mistake can be undone. Stable time loops, where everything is self-consistent, work really poorly when you're doing what's effectively collaborative storytelling with people who aren't always privy to your plans, or are sometimes actively working against your plans. Still, I tried the stable time loops thing in a game, and the trick was that no matter what happened, I would just fudge and say 'oh yeah, that was always what happened, this is a part of it'. It got pretty tortured, pretty fast. There are also more exotic forms of time travel, but they have all the same problems, so at a certain point you're just being cute, not that I don't like being cute.

Does the Knotted Noose actually have some future chronomancer killing people? That would have some implications. If I were running the show, I think I'd just fake it, which seems easier. And the 'fun' thing is that there doesn't *need* to be someone there if history can be changed, because maybe they erase themselves with every alteration they make, and reappear with every thought of the past. Or something. I *do* know that this is one zone I'm staying far, far away from.



DO NOT

Code: DNEZ

Types: Minor

Date: 87 FE

Summary: In the Do Not Exclusion Zone (DNEZ), power is regularly conferred onto two groups of people with a bitter hatred for each other.

History: Force magic consisted of two opposing forces, most often termed ‘shadow’ and ‘life’, which were locked in constant struggle with one another. Force mages could employ a system of ‘marks’ where marked objects could be manipulated, honed, or altered, allowing the force mages some degree of telekinesis and precognition, and lending power to their iconic swords. The most unique aspect of the force mages, however, was the way in which these two sides acted against each other, reacting with utter animosity even if the participants had never met each other. Anytime two opposing force mages met, one of them was almost guaranteed to die or be crippled from the violent conflict. Contrarily, two aligned force mages would be fast friends. These two sides took the names of Tene and Vita, corresponding to shadow and life.

Through the history of Aerb, force mages were rare, and their instinctual hatred of each other kept the numbers on both sides low. During the period of the First Empire, as the world became more connected, the Tene and Vita sides grew more organized, their clashes more deadly. As this happened, both grew more powerful, and in 11 FE it was discovered that the death of a Tene would increase the power of all other Tene in the world over the course of a few weeks, and similarly, the same was true

of the Vita. This understanding changed the nature of the conflict entirely, and the two sides came to blows in a way that had never been seen before. In the course of this new conflict, the Tene dwindled, until there was only one, but he was of such great power that it took Uther Penndraig himself to put an end to his reign of terror.

For three decades, force magic had only the Vita. Eventually though, as the magic was not hereditary, new Tene were born and came into their power, which was immense. The sides came to blows once more, but this time the Vita were eliminated with a coordinated strike, possibly largely because most of them were older veterans who had fallen out of practice. At the time, it had seemed as though there might be a cycle of victories and losses that would persist through Aerb’s history.

Things changed in 81 FE when an eager soul mage attempted to get to the bottom of the split between the Tene and the Vita. While the two sides had built up their own ideologies and practices over time, and even religious affiliations (the Tene to Skaduwee, the Vita to Karakter), there seemed to be little practical difference between the two, and nothing but their history of violence to motivate them. Given that the reactions between Tene and Vita were so strong, it was suspected that some element of magic was causing the animosity, and the soul mage had thought that the answer might reside in the soul. What he found was not the source of the hatred, but instead a method of reining in that hatred. The soul magic application needed to be applied with stunning regularity so that it wouldn’t return to baseline, but it worked. With an eventual team of soul mages, both the

Vita and Tene were brought to their senses, and both sides contributed to the safety and security of the world as peacekeepers and diplomats, each with a soul mage as their companion to keep them sane.

In 87 FE, one of these soul mages slipped, and their Tene escaped. What followed was a series of deaths and acts of violence that shook the status quo of force magic. Rather than killing the Vita, this more disciplined Tene worked to keep them enslaved by soul magic while ‘freeing’ the other Tene from control. Within three months, most of the Tene had been reverted, and it was common for them to move in groups of three, with one Tene, one Vita, and one soul mage to keep the Vita in check.

Exclusion in 87 FE came by surprise, and the ultimate cause is unclear, though some scholars suggest that the disruption to the balance between sides was the major factor. As the exclusionary principle is still hotly debated, a clear answer might require deeper understanding, though it is also possible that some historical aspect of the conflict could shed further light on the matter. In any case, the magic was excluded and force magic stopped functioning, bringing an end to the world-spanning conflict.

Curiously, while force magic vanished from the rest of the world, it became no less strong. Instead, all of the power was concentrated within an area of Cawlswop, and dozens of otherwise normal people were granted the powers of the Tene and Vita. Because the exclusion zone was small relative to the rest of the world, the conflicts happened much faster, and the two sides tore into each other, destroying buildings and killing civilians in the process. Because of the constrained area and the low birth rate within it, force power will sometimes land upon someone already born, for lack of other options. These flare-ups of conflict have lasted until the present day.

Features: Life within the county of Hamill is not that much different from anywhere else, save for the bouts of violence. While the Tene and Vita have an absolute hatred of each other, they do not recognize each other on sight, so there are prohibitions in place against displaying any of the powers of either. This approach has worked, for the most part, though some feel the hatred so strongly that they itch to fight, and might make a public display of power in an attempt to bait out the other side. If that works, the other side will counterattack, which will reveal them, and this in turn will cause the conflict to spread.

At present, the state of cold war between the sides has lasted for some twenty years. The actual number

of Tene and Vita, along with their power levels, are unknown, but there has been some recent speculation that ongoing organization among their ranks might be keeping their conflict unseen, more a matter of spycraft and assassination than open conflict.

JUNIPER: I don’t think this one is me. There’s something interesting about an unmotivated conflict, a hatred that doesn’t have a wellspring, but there doesn’t seem to be anything *there*. If you had a story about two sides that hated each other for no reason, the obvious thing to do would be for them to realize that they were killing each other for nothing, maybe with some kind of star-crossed lovers angle. If it was good enough for Shakespeare, it’s good enough for me.

Or if you were going to have a power system where people gain power *but* that power comes at the cost of being embroiled in a war or having this irrational hatred, maybe that could work too. It would be a story about people who had paid a price, people who are half-mad because they wanted power, something like that. But that doesn’t really work here either, because under normal conditions people are born with force magic and never really get a choice about it, and under the revised system in the exclusion zone, it’s pretty much random, not something you have agency about.

So much of the worldbuilding in Aerb is *mine*. It either comes directly from a game I DMed, or it’s very much in the vein of what I would have made. Sometimes I just spot the punchline and I think ‘yeah, okay, that’s pretty funny’. Other times I can see what I was going for. I think the reason this one got stuck in one of my brain ruts is that I’m trying to figure out the angle for it. I mean yeah, the period of peace is cool, having ‘attendants’ whose job is to keep their powerful swordsmen from going insane is dope, and dripping with all kinds of potential. There’s also the diegetic Conservation of Ninjutsu thing going on, leading into a pitched battle for Uther, sure. I also *kind of* see the shape of the exclusion zone, assuming that there’s any reason for me to ever go there. Power dumps into people ‘randomly’ and that sure as hell means that it could happen to me, which would put me in the middle of this crazy power struggle. It’s not a trick I would pull on a player, but the DM is an asshole.

I feel like I’m on the edge of figuring out what it’s trying to *say*, about conflict, about tribalism, about something. But it’s eluding me.



FOOL'S GELDSPIEL

Code: FGEZ

Types: Minor

Date: 31 FE

Summary: Within the Fool's Geldspiel Exclusion Zone (FGEZ) a number of self-replicating creatures that live within the mental realm cause various problems for people, ranging from forgetfulness to headaches.

History: Espers were a historic sort of mage with extensive access to the mind, at one point considered stronger than even soul mages. Among other differences, they required more training and knowledge, and with their work conducted over the course of weeks rather than hours. Espers worked largely within what they called the esperial realm, which they described as being composed of different places, each of them tied to a different person, called a domain. An esper could enter their own esperial domain, or with some effort, breach into the esperial domain of someone else. Once there, they could read and alter memories, read and alter moods, or create constructs modeled from themselves or others. The primary drawback to this form of magic was the time that it took: espers would describe each person's memories as being like a disorganized library, their emotions like a confusing kaleidoscope that took dedicated study to figure out if any manipulation was to take place.

While the number of espers in the world was relatively small, their impact was outsized, and they set up geographic areas of influence, almost always at odds

with each other. The constructs in particular could be proliferated somewhat easily, and many minds in the esperial realm had an 'esper guardian' within them. A single esper could create hundreds of such guardians.

The espers interfaced with a number of other magics: gem magic and dream walking both had significant ties to the espers, being greatly enhanced by their powers, and passion mages benefited from esperial interventions as well, which could greatly inflame and in some cases control their emotions.

In 31 FE, attempts at combining multiple magics together greatly increased the power of the esperial constructs, leading to strong self-propagation of a kind that had never been seen before. When an esper attempted mass infiltration of the minds of everyone in Fool's Geldspiel, the magic was excluded.

Features: Within the city of Fool's Geldspiel and much of the surrounding countryside, every individual's esperial domain contains at least one strong esperial construct. Attempts at esperial breaching will be rebuffed, though in the modern day, there are no known specialists capable of such a breach in the first place.

From day to day, these esperial constructs do relatively little within their domains, with their activities focused mostly on cataloging memories, checking personal connections, and ensuring that the mind has proper defenses. These activities have no impact on the mind of their host, and go completely unnoticed.

On somewhat rare occasions, usually not more than once per week, a construct will attempt to create a clone of itself, to breach into other minds, or to modify

memories. These actions are much more noticeable, and because the esperial constructs do not work well with each other, many problems are created through the occasional battles between them. If a construct succeeds in breaching into a neighboring esperial domain, a battle between constructs will almost always ensue. For the host, this can result in brain fog, lost memories, or powerful headaches. Similarly, if multiple constructs exist within a person's head without cannibalizing each other, cognition can be slowed or impaired.

Within Fool's Geldspiel, knowledge of what's going on within your esperial domain is considered quite important, and attempts have been made to control the domain without any actual esper, sometimes through diet, meditation, or other remedies. Coercing your construct into building up a strong defense is considered paramount in order to prevent the destruction that comes with a battle. Similarly, preventing the construct from cloning itself is also considered vital. Because of the strong constructs in every domain, experienced espers are unable to make breaches, though they can shore up their own defenses and are generally immune to the problems that others experience. However, the amount of training and time required make it an unattractive profession within the zone.

The FGEZ is considered most dangerous for newcomers whose esperial domain is untouched and unguarded, as incoming waves of constructs can debilitate a person. Entry into the zone is controlled, with set acclimation areas where a construct can be introduced without all out warfare. While esperism is excluded, the esperial realm still exists outside the zone.

AMARYLLIS: If not for the risk of death and the long time necessary to become an esper, I would consider going here. It's a zone that comes with risks, but unusually, it also comes with fairly significant rewards. Inside the zone, you can dive into your memories and view them in vivid detail, make constructs from models of friends and enemies to get their input and advice, alter your emotions, and all sorts of other things. Assuming I had that ability, I could set up a base there and a mode of fast travel to have ready access to my esperial domain. And even if you aren't in the zone, so long as there's an esperial construct in your domain you can still reap some rewards. Most people report better memory, slight improvements in cognition, and a bit of mood stabilization. Still, it's five years at a minimum, and doing that kind of time inside a hyperbolic time chamber would be ... a lot.

DM: The key to using the esperial realm in a campaign is to first of all give the players a way to access them, and second, give them something to do there. If you want to stick with the exclusion zone as written, this would *mostly* be an internal journey for a single player, maybe with them letting their allies come in. I have a particular love for metaphorical inner demons turning into literal inner demons, but maybe that's just me.

In an esperial domain, mood is often represented by weather, while memories can take all kinds of forms: books are the obvious one, but a collection of bottles could lead into memories, or leaves on a tree, or maybe rocks in a garden. This is one of those things that I think you'd do well to consult with players on, given that the nature of their character's headspace is probably important to them.

And because you've been such an extra good reader, here are some non-canonical esperial domains of some characters from *Worth the Candle*:

- Juniper's esperial domain is a house in the middle of a cornfield, but the house has seventeen sub-levels, each of them themed after a campaign that he's run (or thought about running).
- Amaryllis' esperial domain is a white tower overlooking a manicured garden. The interior of the tower contains walls of weapons, each of which is a link to a memory.
- Fenn's esperial domain is an elven home at the base of a large tree, perfection incarnate, with even the individual grains of wood in place.
- Grak's esperial domain is a clifftop of hard stone with holes lacing through it, many of them exiting out the cliffside.
- Raven's esperial domain is a fractured castle with hundreds of rooms, each of them filled with mismatched furniture. Time moves slower there — a minute inside is a hundred minutes on the outside.

There are definitely some possibilities to go with something different and unexpected, but there'd be no reason to expect that Valencia or Bethel would have a domain. The locus's esperial domain is just a one-to-one copy of its actual domain.

DM:

For your consideration, here are some possible esperial domains to use:

- 1 An alabaster tower surrounded by colorful flowers.
- 2 A tranquil bamboo grove, where the wind whispers secrets through the leaves.
- 3 An intricate labyrinth constructed of towering bookshelves, filled with dusty tomes and ancient scrolls.
- 4 A serene moonlit lake, nestled between snowy mountain peaks.
- 5 A bustling marketplace filled with colorful tents and exotic wares.
- 6 A silent forest of giant mushrooms under a starlit sky.
- 7 A secluded desert oasis surrounded by towering sand dunes.
- 8 A complex clockwork city, all brass gears and steam.
- 9 An underwater grotto glowing with bioluminescent life.
- 10 A cozy burrow under a blooming apple tree in an endless orchard.
- 11 A floating steampunk city in the heart of a storm.
- 12 A sprawling vineyard under the warm sun.
- 13 A towering mountain peak surrounded by ethereal mist.
- 14 A forgotten ruin swallowed by a lush jungle.
- 15 A vast field of wheat under a golden sunset.
- 16 A lush tropical island in the heart of a calm sapphire sea.
- 17 A Victorian-style railway station, echoing with the sounds of steam engines and the hustle of passengers.
- 18 A magical woodland glade filled with glowing plants and creatures.
- 19 A colossal statue overlooking a tranquil valley.
- 20 A cave with wiggling cilia that retreat into holes at the passing of a person.

It just wouldn't be a splatbook without a long list of options, so I will consider that checked off my splatbook tropes list.



THE FOUNTAIN OF EVERBLOOD

Code: FEEZ

Types: Entad, Major

Date: 311 FE

Summary: The Fountain of Everblood Exclusion Zone (FEEZ) is a spherical exclusion zone several miles across which is filled with pressurized blood.

History: While it's unknown when the Fountain of Everblood was first produced, the flood of blood started in 311 FE, eventually causing the evacuation of the area. While it might have been possible to stop the production of blood early on if action had been taken, it was determined by the Second Empire that enough damage had already been done to make the area uninhabitable. Once the matter was taken over by the Exclusion Office, it was made into a deliberate experimental site, partially with a view toward exploitation. By 353 FE, the spherical boundary was entirely filled with blood, and earthquakes in the area had begun as pressure was exerted on the bedrock beneath the main mass of blood. Attempts were made to commercialize the site through extraction or processing of the blood, but those largely ended in economic failure, and the facilities now sit abandoned.

The Fountain of Everblood is situated in the area of Wettring, which has periodically attempted to drum up support for the blood 'dome' as a tourist destination, to middling success. A train ride tours the exterior of the exclusion zone, and a small town is situated outside the northern edge of the exclusion zone with hotels, gift shops, and the opportunity to walk inside a warded portion of the zone, separated from the blood and the immense pressure it's under by nothing more than magic.

The FEEZ is considered to be relatively benign as far as exclusion tourism goes, as the exclusion resulted in relatively few deaths and its continued existence is mostly a curiosity.

Features: The blood from the Fountain of Everblood originates from the elemental plane of blood, though the immense velocity with which the blood exits the Fountain would kill almost any living creature that makes the journey. Additionally, the extreme pressure is far too high for any known creature, especially those from the plane of blood, which has an approximate pressure of 17 psi, only slightly higher than that of Aerb's atmosphere.

Blood brought into the FEEZ through the Fountain appears to be 'marked' in some way, incapable of passing through the exclusion barrier. In the case of the FEEZ, the exclusion barrier appears to be approximately spherical, which gives rise to the FEEZ's characteristic dome shape. While the created blood cannot pass through the barrier, attempts at processing the blood into another non-'marked' form have met with some success, stymied largely by the immense pressure within the zone.

DM: Here, the adventure isn't in the zone, it's outside it. Picture a small town outside a giant dome of pressurized blood where both capitalists and researchers have gathered to attempt to make some money. Aerbian blood mages wouldn't be able to use any of the blood extracted from the 'taps' in the side of the blood dome, but in other systems and with different worldbuilding, this is a great place to put a blood mage. Likewise, there are a number of different species that feed on blood (notably vampires) which might be attracted to the blood dome.



ROVE

Code: ROEZ

Types: Major, Empersoned

Date: 475 FE

Summary: The Rove Exclusion Zone (ROEZ) contains a large ball of various objects which has crushed people and cities in the area.

History: Troving was a niche magic for most of Aerb's history, practiced by few and valued by fewer. The magic revolved around the accumulation of treasures, which granted power to the trover, allowing these items to take on a life of their own. A typical trover would carry their items with them, becoming laden with them, slowed down in a fight but assisted by the life that their love had granted their items. During the reign of the Second Empire, attempts were made at utilizing troving in other ways, but soul magic interacted poorly with the magic, and later attempts were blocked through Exclusion Risk Mitigation Laws (ERMLs). Trovers tended to be eccentrics, especially as their magic was deemed low utility.

Little is known about Adabara Yushin, save that he was failed by the polity. That his name is recorded at all is a minor miracle, but from what has been recovered, and what's known about him now, he grew up in poverty without much in the way of support. His obsessive relationship with objects and hoarding likely came from a childhood in which he had almost nothing, and his disdain for people came from interactions with a world that must have seemed cold and uncaring. It is unclear how Yushin was introduced to troving, and

it's entirely possible that he discovered it on his own given his relationship with his possessions, but he took to it as though it had been built with him in mind. Various reports recount his presence in the city, usually wandering the streets, covered from head to toe with his small, worthless treasures.

On Yaub 13th, 475 FE, something changed. In the morning, Yushin began accumulating many more possessions, enough that his figure was obscured from view. By sunset, he was an unstoppable ball of junk, crushing his way through buildings and stealing things from within them. Where certain historical trovers had collections numbering in the thousands of pieces, Yushin had pushed the magic beyond that in what seemed to be several ways at once, accumulating faster and more freely, and in much greater numbers. Rerzi City was quickly evacuated, though with staggering casualties, and Yushin, whose name was then unknown, was dubbed Rove as the ball of material rolled through the area, flattening people and houses, growing in size.

Features: Several assaults on the large ball of material have failed, largely due to its sheer size. While the material that makes up the ball can be destroyed, the ball continues on, picking up more material from the ground as needed. The exterior of the ball contains many large rocks, providing dozens of feet of hard material to get through if attempting a strike of overwhelming force.

In the two months following the exclusion, Rove wandered all through the zone, clearly marking its limits for outside observers and enveloping more material into the ball while simultaneously killing more people and causing

further destruction. Initial attempts to kill Rove and limit the destruction failed, and as time went on, the zone was given up for lost, mainly because so much of it had been reduced to waste and rubble.

During the day, Rove moves seemingly at random, scouring the zone for anything more to add to the hoard. Material is occasionally dropped, with other pieces replacing it, though the reason for this is unknown. Since 491 FE the ball has stopped growing, staying roughly a mile in diameter. At night, Rove stops, presumably to sleep. While the exterior has quite a bit of ‘filler’ material of dirt, rocks, and wood, it’s thought that the interior still has an extraordinary amount of crafted goods, and that Rove is still eating from either stored food supplies or one of the many entads that he must have collected during his initial rampage.

While awake, Rove has a full awareness of everything that happens within the immense hoard, and while he sleeps, the hoard defends him. At present, there is no particular danger from Rove for anyone outside the zone, but if he senses someone stepping foot within it, he’ll attack in a moment, a rolling ball of material that can easily crush even a very well-prepared assault team.

JUNIPER: Na-na-nanananana-na-na-na, katamari damashii.

REIMER: I actually played a trover specialist that Juniper had made some rules for. He was super enthusiastic about it, with this idea of a wandering junk salesman with wares piled high on his back, six swords at his hip, all that kind of thing. He even made a little crappy sketch for me. I think he picked some of the wrong abilities for it though, especially at the upper end, where he’s always been a little sketchy on balance, and it didn’t take that long to crack it wide open, even with all the patches he kept trying to apply to it like not being able to put your stuff in extradimensional space. The result was basically the same as Rove, and the character got retired in a hurry.

DM: I like the idea that troving and funnel magic from the FNEZ are different branches of the same magic, as both have to do with collection. Aerb scoffs at the idea that everything needs to be related to everything else, but I like for there to be connections that reveal themselves.

Rove, as a standard campaign destination, would need to be sanded down pretty significantly. You’d make the interior of the ‘ball’ filled with tunnels, and add in some encounters, maybe with junk golems, which would lead up to the final boss battles. I can see that working, since it follows the narrative flow in tabletop games better, but ... eh. Rove isn’t some megalomaniac who’s going to give some huge monologue when you meet him. I mean, he *could be*, but you’d need a rewrite of who he is for that to work.

The better thing, I think, would be an approach with empathy and healing in mind, but that’s *super* out of scope of traditional tabletop campaigns, and would require a radically different approach. Maybe researching the past using chronomancy, or going into his mind with mentalism, or stepping into his dreams with dream-walking, or something from left field might work. My ideal solution to the zone would be humanizing, rather than involving velocity calculations or blood wards set up at just the right height.



WHIFFLE

Code: WHEZ

Types: Major

Date: 119 FE

Summary: The Whiffle Exclusion Zone (WHEZ) is a zone of extremely high winds, home to a number of specialized plants and animals. While the surface is hostile to mortal life because of the persistent high wind speeds, mortal habitation beneath the surface is largely unaffected.

History: Invocation magic was a simple system of magic whereby standing elemental effects could be created through the recitation of words of power. Because invocation did not require a mouth, only the proper sounds, tools were eventually made to assist with invocation, resembling woodwind instruments that produced a mimicry of speech. Later, standing structures were created that would invoke when enough wind was channeled through them, which allowed the use of invocation from a safe distance. Because the effects would increase in power with continuous invocation, these siege instruments could channel enormous power before tearing themselves apart.

In 92 FE, breeding magic was used to create a tree which was capable of invoking wind under the right circumstances as air moved through the hollows and branches. While commonly thought to be developed for the purposes of warfare, the historical record is muddled. The first early orchard succeeded beyond the breeders'

wildest dreams, and due to poor control over the spread of the seeds, the trees propagated beyond the control of their creators.

By 114 FE, the invasive species of woodwind trees had spread to the area surrounding the early orchard. On windy days, the trees would invoke more wind, multiplying weather conditions. It wasn't until 119 FE that the position and number of trees allowed for a feedback loop which caused perpetual heavy winds in the area and led to exclusion. Over time, as more of the trees grew, the wind speed increased, eventually leading to widespread loss of topsoil. Aerophilic plants and animals moved into the zone, some of them by chance, and others through deliberate introduction, hoping to out-compete the woodwinds and 'settle' the zone. These efforts have not borne fruit.

Features: The majority of the WHEZ is wind-eroded rock, as the constant winds have removed the large majority of the soil from the zone. All plants and animals within the zone have adapted to the high winds in one way or another. Many plants dig into the rocks or 'find' lees that protect them from the winds. Parasitic plants are common, latching themselves to the trunks of the woodwinds. Some plants are hard and rigid to resist the winds, while others flop or sway with the winds to reduce the energy imparted to them. For animals, finding crevices is a common practice, and a wide variety of flying or gliding animals inhabit the zone, many of them aerophilic, sustained by the winds.

The woodwinds that precipitated the zone are ubiquitous and well-adapted to the zone after many dozens of

generations of natural selection. The woodwinds exhibit a robust population equilibrium: if there are too many woodwinds, the winds get high enough to start killing off the trees, and when the winds begin to drop, more woodwinds can flourish. Woodwinds typically dig their roots into cracks in the rocks, needing minimal ground nutrients to survive. Woodwind seeds are released in abundance during early spring, carried by the winds.

The winds produced by the trees extend well beyond the zone, and so the regulatory boundary of the zone extends beyond the strict limits of the exclusionary effect. Winds within the zone are mostly circular, though they vary with the heavy turbulence.

While the surface is considered lethal to most mortals, the zone is home to at least one dwarfhold, which had been there since before the spread of woodwinds. This community still has practicing invokers to this day, with limited transportation in and out of their underground hideaway.

DM: This one is a pretty standard deathworld, with lots of difficult weather conditions, strange plants and animals, and plenty of opportunity for weird set pieces. Any kind of ranged attack is going to be hampered by the heavy winds, and people need to walk carefully, lest they slip and tumble due to the wind, which you can mediate with something like a Dexterity check depending on what system you're running. Similarly to climbing, you can also have handholds, pinions, rope ladders, and other systems for preventing yourself from a fatal fall.

It's noted within *Worth the Candle* that this zone was once used for 'trial by adversity' where people are dropped in with the expectation that most won't survive and those who escape will be conscripted into military service, which makes for a good starting scenario. Alternately, because there are underground settlements, a party made up of imperial adventurers bureaucrats might be sent to investigate a settlement which has stopped reporting.



ZESTSEZ

Code: ZEEZ

Types: Major

Date: 378 FE

Summary: In the Zestsez Exclusion Zone (ZEEZ), reflective surfaces allow the emergence of hostile mirror clones.

History: The plane of mirrors was one of the congruent planes of Aerb, overlapping it almost entirely and providing a ‘copy’ of its environs and denizens. Often compared to the ethereal plane, the plane of mirrors was a more exact rendition, particularly in those areas which were reflected by mirrors. The interior of the plane of mirrors looks approximately the same as the material plane in those locations where a mirror reflects, but where a mirror *doesn’t*, it’s often described as ‘blue’, lacking some of the ambient light and color. It is in these ‘blue’ areas where the divergence between the two happens, as unreflected things continue on existing until they’re reflected once again, which resets their position to match the material world.

Mirror magic depended upon the concept of the mirror self, a being which exists ‘untethered’ within the plane of mirrors when a person is not reflected in any surface. Under normal circumstances, the mirrorself acts as the normal self, and reflections are common enough that not much divergence can take place. With careful training, a person can recognize when they are in the plane of mirrors rather than the material plane and act of their own accord. Should they manage to escape from the plane of mirrors, their normal self will no longer

have a reflection, and the two selves can work together. Historically, the escape was accomplished by having the normal self stand before a mirror under some kind of invisibility effect, requiring the self and mirrorself to coordinate.

Mirror mages could dip in and out of the plane of mirrors virtually at will, and the ‘duplication’ of the mirrorself was its own benefit, allowing them to be in two places at once. The primary tell of a mirror mage was a lack of reflection, or their appearance *only* in a reflection if they were looking in from the plane of mirrors. Their ability to wander unseen through a parallel world with all the same things in it was an incredible boon, especially for those interested in either spying or mischief. While things could not be taken from the plane of mirrors without extensive preparation at the site, diaries could be read, private conversations could be observed, and secret locations could be scouted.

The plane of mirrors was not without its dangers, especially in those areas which had not seen a reflection in many years. The plane had flora and fauna that grew within the ‘blue’ zones, along with feral men and women who had unsynced with their material counterparts. Certain creatures were capable of surviving in the reflected areas of the plane of mirrors, and a rare few could either affect the material world by directly attacking reflected objects or people, or could move through a sufficiently large mirror into the material world to cause havoc.

As time went on, mirrors became stronger, with larger size and fidelity. Glass windows, once opaque and bubbled, were made clear and shiny, reflective enough to

have an effect on the plane of mirrors. The mirror mages themselves were given many more opportunities to see the world, and the sterilizing effect of reflection on the plane of mirrors kept the worst of the plants, monsters, and overall ‘mirror rot’ at bay.

Starting in 356 FE, some skilled mirror mages were, in concert with star magic, capable of performing a new technique known as multi-mirroring, which allowed the generation of a multitude of mirror selves. At its peak, the most famed of the mirror mages had more than a thousand mirror selves, establishing his own fiefdom. Further research was done rapidly, especially given that the collapse of the Second Empire meant that there were no enforced laws that would limit what mages would try. Among mirror mages, there was an understanding that it was a free-for-all: duplication was extremely powerful, and whoever fully mastered it could take over the entire plane of mirrors virtually overnight, putting the others firmly out of business. Exclusion seemed inevitable, but treaties among the mirror mages failed to materialize.

In 378 FE, mirror magic was excluded for unknown reasons, though almost certainly related to what was later dubbed the Replication Crisis.

Features: The ZEEZ is among the smaller exclusion zones, notable primarily because it offers the only path to or from the plane of mirrors. Attempts have been made to destroy all reflective surfaces within the zone, which would permanently seal off the plane of mirrors, but several outbreaks of mirror selves have led the area to be largely abandoned.

The plane of mirrors is, so far as can be understood from limited surveys, overrun with mirror duplicates who are locked in an eternal battle with each other. As the entire plane of mirrors still exists, simply ‘unreflected’, the flora and fauna that were once constrained have grown and flourished to levels that had been unimaginable before, and the mirror selves, who number in the millions, fight savagely over the last remaining link to the material world, desperate to escape. There is some evidence that these mirror selves are capable of making even more of themselves, but the state of affairs in the plane of mirror is largely unknown, save that it’s soaked in violence.

Given the monsters that are now growing large and strong within the plane of mirrors, concerns have been raised about their possible escape, especially as it’s unlikely they would be excluded in the same way the connection is. For this reason, manned watchtowers have been established at the zone’s borders by Special Threats.

JUNIPER: My favorite splatbook ever was the 3E Manual of Planes. The splatbooks really varied in quality, but this one was a banger, mostly because it was dense with ideas and descriptions, with piece after piece of interesting worldbuilding that you could slot into any campaign. The plane of mirrors was one of my favorites, and I ran variations on it twice. There was something about placing my hand on the bathroom mirror and imagining the world on the other side that I was in love with.

Here, of course, it’s an overrun place of horror.



DEGENERATE EARTH

Code: DEEZ

Types: Major

Date: 311 FE

Summary: The Degenerate Earth Exclusion Zone (DEEZ) is an area of hypercharged energetic earth. Frequent explosions rock the area, making it unlivable, with only a few highly adapted species to be found.

History: Dibbling was a close cousin to warding, capable of drawing power up from the latent magic of the earth through use of a tool called a dibble, a cousin to the wand. The wards were either large ones, created by making multiple precise points over a large area, or smaller ones that were useful in combat, created by tapping quickly at the ground in specific patterns. These wards were useful for preventing physical intrusion, but could be subverted by changing the ground beneath where the ward was dibbled, or by counter-dibbling at the ward from the outside.

While warding was used largely for static defenses, dibbling was used in a more temporary and mobile way. Because dibbling drew upon the latent magic of the earth, energy was always in ready supply, though two dibblers could temporarily drain an area. Prior to exclusion, it was considered a safe and stable magic with relatively little risk of degeneracy.

In 246 FE, dibbling was added to the repertoire of Ink and Ardor, with training and best practices becoming more strictly codified in the process. At the time, it was

feared that warding would be excluded, and plans were put in place to supplement wards with dibbling if the worst were to happen.

Much to the shock of the world, in 311 FE, dibbling was excluded; this came as a particular surprise as it was the third exclusion that year. The exclusion zone was in a little-visited part of the continent of Cawlswoop, encircled by the Roundabout River. Within the zone, energy is rapidly drawn from the earth in sharp bursts, which, being undirected, result in explosions rather than wards. As dibbling normally requires a practitioner, the nature of the phenomena is unclear, and efforts to stop the explosive force have failed. Shortly after the exclusion, a contingent of dibblers moved to a temporary research station outside the exclusion zone in order to study it, but little resulted from their research, and by the end of the Second Empire thirteen years later, all attempts at exploitation had been abandoned.

Features: The DEEZ lies within the Roundabout River on the continent of Cawlswoop, and is largely separate from its local environs. The repeated explosions within the area vary in their timing and size, and have been likened to the buildup and release of static charge. Movement through the zone is still possible with some small degree of safety so long as travelers deliberately attempt to release energy from a safe distance. As energy build up varies, safe distance can be very difficult to determine. Explosions are typically triggered by force, with the amount of force necessary decreasing as charge builds.

The land in the area is pockmarked with craters, and mostly devoid of larger plants. Due to the nature of triggered explosions, any animals that live within the zone move slowly and quietly. During times of inclement weather, or sometimes even a light rain, the zone will suffer repeated explosions from the force of raindrops, as infamously happened to the Second Cawlswop Expedition.

Several varieties of (largely non-native) extremophile live within the zone, including those that absorb explosive impacts or are otherwise resistant to them. A particular species of large tree has small nuts which scurry along protruded vines to find recently made craters; these are considered a delicacy, and farmed at the border with careful management.

RAVEN: There are actually a substantial number of differences between warding and dibbling, and conflating the two is a common problem for those writing about dibbling from a historical perspective. Uther was a warder and I was a dibbler, and these were not the same. The biggest point of difference between them was that warding was much more concrete, involving magical spectra along which all magic it could interact with was placed. Dibbling, by contrast, was more fluid, and the range of things a skilled dibbler could dibble against was much broader. Because it was a conceptive magic, a dibbler could potentially dibble against abstractions like disease or decay, or could dibble away specific types of people. It was adaptable in a way that warding is not.

Also, the magic of the exclusion was at least relatively well known to the research scientists of the late Second Empire, though their reports never went anywhere of interest. Dibbling draws upon the energy of the earth, and the explosions are one of the first things a dibbler learns not to do, a consequence of concentrating energy in one place. That energy could actually be put to productive use aside from just dibbling, in a process called bifeld dibbling, which I used for funneling energy into groove casting. Dibbling without a practitioner — so called ‘natural’ dibbles — were also known, and this seems to be a subset of that.

JUNIPER: Dibble on DEEZ nuts!

A Dungeon Master's Post Script

There, it's done! You've read the exclusions document, all 67 of them, or perhaps have just jumped to this final 'chapter' for some reason. I'm not going to sum up anything, since that was pretty much done in the preface, but I did want to go into what's *not* here, and what you might be interested in if you wanted to take the concept in a different direction.

Benevolence

The exclusions aren't *universally* bad places and tragedies, but most of them are. They're places that would provide a challenge to an adventuring party, miniature hellscapes, hives of scum and villainy. They're Zones of Adventure by design, but they're particular *kinds* of Zones of Adventure.

I think there's a lot of room for making exclusion zones that are wildly different from this, and if I wasn't constrained by the canon of *Worth the Candle* and this were just a splatbook, I would definitely have included some. One of the things at the forefront of my mind when writing the exclusions was 'exploitation', partly because I think that's a natural human instinct, and you can see it in bits and pieces of the entries, places where someone looked at whatever was going on in the zone and thought 'I can use this'. Sometimes they even succeed.

A benevolent exclusion zone would be one where a specific sort of magic works, and this is mostly a boon to people. I don't even think you necessarily need to frame it as being where the magic *still* works, because a magic which once blanketed the world and has been constrained by some unknowable force or entity has a much different vibe from a magic which has just always only worked in one spot.

Benevolent exclusion zones have the opportunity to be very different Zones of Adventure, and they might be places that people make pilgrimages to for specific reasons. They can be bustling cities with their own guilds and interests, much more 'alive' than the average exclusion, their name renowned rather than feared.



I actually have a setting where something like this is in place. Every city has a 'theme' to it, so you have City of Birds, City of Swords, City of Books, City of Flowers, and so on. Every city has industries built around their theme, and often has one or more magic systems centered around the theme. In this setting these aren't *quite* exclusion zones, since the 'magic' can definitely leave the zone in the form of goods and casters — I don't need to get into the nitty-gritty of it, but while you can only work the magic if you're born in the city, you can definitely leave and practice the magic elsewhere. Still, the best swords come from the City of Swords, and their swordsmen have a mystique throughout the world.

You don't even really need to invoke 'exclusion zone' as a concept, since in the course of worldbuilding it's very possible for cities to end up like this naturally. A city can easily become so renowned for a particular product that what's made everywhere else is considered a shallow imitation. And if you're doing fantasy, you can have rare resources found in one specific place, which will naturally master their use. When you think about it, isn't Wakanda kind of an exclusion zone?

Some examples from this very document:

- Captain Blue-in-the-Bottle using his zombies for their labor
- Extracting blood from the Fountain of Everblood
- A small portion of Glass Wall where crystal mages still ply their trade
- Corflowers has a really awesome hat

But the more I expound on this, the further I get from the core idea of an exclusion zone, and I want to get further from it in a different direction.

Shifting Borders

An exclusion zone is, by definition, static. But what if they moved or changed over time?

An exclusion zone that moves randomly is terrifying, though depending on where and how it moved, and what it was like inside, people might get used to it. The closest real world example would probably be hurricanes, and I can imagine some version of Aerb's Special Threats issuing warnings about the movements of various exclusion zones. These might be fast, sudden movements that necessitate bunkering down and then might pass, or they might be slow and relatively gentle, giving people a month to evacuate from their homes. I don't know why, but I keep imagining fish falling from the sky, some kind of moving 'rain of fish' exclusion that blankets the land with flopping fish and occasionally caves in a roof with a whale.

On the other hand, you could have exclusion zones that aren't unpredictable, like storms, and instead have them be periodic or cyclic, charting known paths through the world. An exclusion which moves in a straight line across Aerb at a rate of a hundred miles a day would take something like a year to return to where it began, somewhat depending on how the line was positioned. Obviously a more sedate pace might see decades or even centuries between the return of an exclusion, and a straight line is only the most simple and obvious route.

I live in a cold place, and there are 'snow birds', people who only live here during our cool summers and then move somewhere warm for the winter. I can imagine that being the case for moving exclusions, with people leaving the path of the zone for a month or two and coming back once it's gone, ready to clean up whatever the magic has done and resume their normal lives. This is likely to be *much* more manageable than simply living in an exclusion zone, and if the exclusionary magic 'takes care of itself' in some way, people wouldn't even necessarily need to do cleanup.

If the zone is slow enough, people might build with the understanding that they would likely be dead before the zone came back ... but people being who they are, some would get 'locked in', not having the funds to evacuate or move, or hoping to leave someone else holding the bag. There are probably some parallels to rising sea level and global warming here, though I think there are *also* some parallels to hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, and other natural disasters that people keep building in the way of. I'm imagining a march of golems across the world, a slow pace of ten miles a day, their path eventually leaving a canyon worn down with their yearly footsteps.

Exclusions could also grow or shrink over time, their borders changing. This could be cyclic, as though the exclusion is breathing, or constant, with the exclusion theoretically covering the entire world in time. This is *far* more grim than Aerb is, and everyone would be living

under different 'clocks' as each city would be marking the time it would take for the nearest exclusion to encroach and require evacuation. Eventually, the world would be covered in exclusions, which would no longer be 'exclusions' at all. Exclusion would instead be a reprieve.

Which brings us to the next variation on the idea.

Non-Exclusive

Exclusion zones are limited by 'the exclusionary principle', and beyond their borders, the magic (or whatever) simply doesn't work. But what if that weren't true?

There are, as I see it, three outcomes:

- The magic isn't degenerate, and gets used by people outside of the zone. This is just a regular magic system, it's not related to exclusion zones as a concept, and nothing further needs to be said about it.
- The magic is so degenerate that the whole world turns into a hellscape. This *might* be your basic post-apocalypse, but more on this later.
- The magic is degenerate, but the degeneracy can be physically contained.

The world turning into a hellscape is fine and everything, I guess. There are plenty of stories to tell in a fallen world, and in fact, this is its own entire genre, with even the sub-genres (like zombie stories) so large that they've grown their own bountiful harvests of tropes. Personally, I'm a little disappointed by how samey the hellscape of modern media are, the zombies and robots and things I've seen one too many times. Especially if you're willing to dip into fantasy, there are a lot of cool hellscape you can make, exotic bad endings for civilization as opposed to embattled city-states and roving bandits.

Potentially more interesting, it might be known that the magic can be degenerate, but efforts to keep that degeneracy from happening are in place. I guess the closest parallel is nuclear weaponry, where everyone knows that the world might end, but no one has the correct incentives to actually end it, and efforts are made to keep the world-enders from falling into the wrong hands. It's not a perfect metaphor, given that no single nuclear weapon could actually end the world unless a false flag attack activates dead hand systems, but it's close.

World enders make for great MacGuffins, but there's also the opportunity for suppression of *all* of that magic by a government, secret societies trying to keep it alive, inquisitions, information and misinformation campaigns, dangerous cultists, and all kinds of things. I think the biggest thing stopping this concept from working is that the threat needs to be credible to everyone, and that means some kind of show of power ... which then needs to not be so powerful that it's the end of the world.



But I think it's the third possibility that's most interesting to me, and offers the most promise. Some exclusions might be dangerous, but were also able to be stopped or stalled given time. This requires them to be in a relatively narrow band of containment, since if they were too easy to contain, whoever is in charge would just have everything all bottled up in a citadel or wiped from the face of the earth.

I think you could have a different version of Special Threats who had a thousand times the personnel and much more of an impact on the setting, rather than being mostly observation towers and a handful of scientists. The high walls would be more serious, the training more rigorous, the response to threats more deadly. If things could escape from the exclusion zones, the defensive perimeter would have to look a lot different, and be more tailored to whatever the threat was. And if the thing they're trying to keep contained is a *person*, someone who can look out at the defenses and make strategies, there's a good chance they could escape. This would also mean that 'closing' or 'containing' the exclusion would be of much more vital interest, giving way to campaigns to push the perimeters back or kill whatever is inside.

There are shades of this in this document, here and there, where I could fit them in, but they're a tiny minority.

There Wasn't Enough Time

The Exclusionary Principle took a long time to write, and ballooned in scope as I wrote it, which I think made it better than it otherwise would have been. With that said, there were a few that didn't make the cut, and I think here is as good a place as any to talk about them.

First, there should have been at least half a dozen more 'dead' exclusions, if this document was meant to represent everything known about exclusions. Some enpersoned exclusions die of old age, while others are killed by strike teams, and the exclusion zones are then either reclaimed or left abandoned. I think it would have been cool to have more than just Moljer. I imagine a city built around a giant tree, as I've seen in so many fantasy books, but here it would be a relic of someone having gone too far with a magic that's now completely dead.

The same applies to entads, which can be killed in the same way that people have, and there should probably have been more 'dead' entad exclusions than enpersoned exclusions. (I say 'should have been', but canonically they *do* exist, they're just not shown here.)

Second, the very format of *The Exclusionary Principle* means that there are entire classes of exclusions that wouldn't be in it. Any exclusion that's been kept secret or couldn't have been conclusively confirmed wouldn't have been in the book. There's one of those that was in *Worth the Candle*. It would have been pretty easy to just break the format for them, or possibly just bend the format with entries that go back and forth on the evidence, but this project was already big enough as is.

Third, there should maybe be more multimagic exclusions, places where there's no single degenerate magic, but instead, two or more magics that together act degenerate. In tabletop games, this is actually the number one cause of exclusion-worthy things, especially once you start bringing in splatbooks: a single magic system or class feature *usually* isn't completely broken, it only gets broken when combined with something else. This happens especially if two authors were writing without knowing or caring about each other. But for the exclusions doc, it felt like a lot of expository overhead, and less conceptually clean. The ultimate form of this would be something that's degenerate only with the combination of five different magic systems. (There was a separate idea beyond the scope of *Worth the Candle* where two magic systems are prohibited from working in the vicinity of each other except within the exclusion zone.)

Fourth, there were a few that were just cut for time at the point where the scope was feeling so large that it wouldn't get done if it were any larger.

The idea for **Necrodancy** was "dance with dead", and the concept that I had in my head was of someone doing a tango with a corpse. At first, you're just moving a limp corpse around, but as you dance, the corpse starts to get in sync, and eventually animates to move in time as you lead. Once you're doing a proper dance, you can start to suck out pieces of their soul, gaining knowledge of their past, their skills, their powers, etc.

The idea for **Necronatalism** was related to either stillbirth or a (real) thing called a lithopedia. There wasn't really a way to do it that didn't feel a little grim in an unfun way, and I think the dry tone of the exclusion entries doesn't really lend itself to personal trauma very well.

The idea for **Necrophagy** was the eating of death itself. When you would die, instead you 'eat' the death, making the abstract death a part of you. Your body then probably still needs to be healed, but you come through stronger, revitalized by your second life and the death you've stored away within you. Never really found a good power for this one though: generic speed and strength felt weak. This was at least partially inspired

by the movie *Flatliners*, which was about med students inducing near death experiences.

The idea for **Unsurrectionism** was a resurrection process that works only halfway, bringing a damaged soul back into a body. This was taken from an old D&D campaign, but had too much overlap with the other undead exclusions. I think it's one thing to say 'Aerb is just like that sometimes', but another to bore people with too many variations on a theme.

The idea for **Dream Stalking**, not to be confused with Dream Walking, was a secondary magic that interfaced with the Plane of Dreams, allowing preternatural powers so long as you had dreamed about using them in approximately the same scenario the night before. This is obviously only powerful if you have a bit of control over your dreams, and obviously results in complete disaster if uncontrolled.

The idea for **Salt Magic** was dehydration as a cost, with salt mages gaining more power when they're really dehydrated. In order to further lower the amount of water in their bodies, they would undergo ritual amputation of both their legs and one of their arms, leaving only the arm necessary for casting. Their power was the creation of salt, which could be done at some distance, but with no attendant ability to move or remove the salt or anything. They could build giant walls of salt, palaces of it, and trap someone in salt with a gesture. Eventually, other magics came along and allowed the mages to have not so much as a body, and the magic was excluded.

The idea for **Tapping** was that you would get power from trees, stealing the energy that they would otherwise be using to grow. A tap would be a small piece of metal pounded into a tree, and you'd need hundreds of them to get any reasonable amount of power. The advent of mass manufacturing and the cratering cost of iron meant it was easy for a tapper to instead have massive forests tapped. The energy could then be used for raw creation, 'growing' anything the tapper touched, whether that be a rock growing into a castle or an opponent's leg growing into an unwieldy mass of flesh. This was going to be an exclusion zone without any particular breaking point, since we don't have one of those: it would be interesting to have an exclusion where there's just a straw that broke the camel's back rather than some bright line that was crossed. The degenerate stuff would come later as tappers fought to control the forests.

The idea for **Untapping** would be a third counter-magic after warding and dibbling, where the counter-magic would act as fuel for the untapper's mechanical creations. An untapper is usually either building nonsense creations to burn off excess energy, or completely starved for energy and having to hunt down new and powerful magic to destroy. Exclusion happens when there's a positive feedback loop of some kind, a multimage that can go infinite. (This would be especially funny if it happened with tapping, since these are both Magic: The

Gathering terms, and repeatedly tapping and untapping things is one of the main causes of infinite loops.)

The idea for **Slugs** was that you could turn yourself into a bunch of slugs and then back again. I never really cracked what the actual exclusion would be, it was just weird and gross and exploitable enough that it's got a little spot in my mind. Maybe changing your torso to slugs lets you tank a punch to the stomach better. Maybe you can leave a slug behind somewhere as a listening device. Maybe reforming from the slugs lets you heal, minus the slugs that die in the process. Slugs grow fast, relative to humans, and maybe the slugmancers have vats of slugs connected to them, ready to join the main mass for healing. I imagine these slug mages as huge people with big bellies and a slight odor to them.

The idea for **Puncture Magic** was a riff on acupuncture, though I think the end result (which exists only in my head) looks more like geothermal vents or something. You would use a little tool and stab a hole in yourself, which would release magical energy rather than blood. Stab yourself between the fingers and get claws like Wolverine, except made out of magic being expelled at high speed. Stab yourself in the feet and fly like Iron Man. Stab yourself in the back and vent out magic into the air for your enemies to breathe. With high pressure, there's a natural expectation that the pressure will run out, making it time-limited. The end point for exclusion was people popping like balloons if they get the wrong kind of puncture, which is funny, but I didn't want to put in the work to make that plausible.

The idea for **Cities** was actually one mentioned in *Worth the Candle* and the preface to this very document: a city which exists along geological timescales, infinitely enduring but in such a way that it's hard to notice anything at all is going on. Cidium is an immortal city, one which existed long before Aerb and which might endure long after. Few people even agree that there's something weird going on there, and no one knows the limits of the city's endurance.

The idea for **Iron Magic** was irons falling from the sky. That's it, that's the whole magic, you drop irons from like five miles up. It would be easy to do but hard to control, and given that the iron would tumble in the air, most of the work of an iron wizard would be figuring out how to make sure that it actually kills or destroys what they want it to — that or getting powerful enough that they could take a shotgun approach.

The idea for **Wrinkle Magic** was that, contrary to its name, it irons out wrinkles. At its highest power level, it can unbend anything that's bent and straighten anything that's curved. Applied to a person or a person's armor, this is probably fatal.

The idea for **Faces** was that it would be based around dice or coins in a similar way that Tarot Magic was based around a deck of tarot cards. It felt a little too derivative to have randomness as a cost or complication,

but I did like the idea of a face mage writing their own random tables that are balanced to have neutral outcomes. There's also a fair amount of probability manipulation and prognostication that makes it broken with little effort.

I had like five ideas for **Metamagic**, but didn't really like any of them. Jailbreaking other magics, mixing and matching rules, transforming rules, all seemed like they might have some promise, but I kept feeling like even with restrictions this was the sort of thing that was so stupidly and obviously broken at its core that there wasn't much to do with it.

The idea for **Antimagic** was that it would be an oppositional magic, capable of giving you the opposite of any magic that was used against you. Part of what's funny about it is that there are dozens of magic systems on Aerb to make opposites of, but I think without actually executing that idea it's not nearly as funny. On the other hand, spending the time to list out and then make an opposite for every Aerbian magic system isn't funny enough to justify doing.

The idea for **Ordering** was that you would be able to reorder things according to some criteria of your choice, essentially short-range multi-object teleportation. I saw it as being a form of battlefield control, at least at the highest level, allowing a mage from the Order of Orders to instantly regroup soldiers by rearranging the two sides by color, or putting everyone in alphabetical order. Maybe you'd get armies renaming themselves for strategic advantage.

Some of these I made up just now. A few of them were my seven-year-old son's ideas.

And that is, finally, it. You're free to take these concepts and do something neat with them. Heck, do something boring, if that's what tickles your fancy. Most of these were built to be used in something approximating a tabletop game, but if you want to slot one into a novel or videogame or whatever, feel free. You can't actually copyright an idea or concept, only the execution of that idea or concept, so there's literally nothing that anyone could do to stop you from doing something iterative or derivative with these ideas. I just want you to know that's what they're all here for, if you want them.

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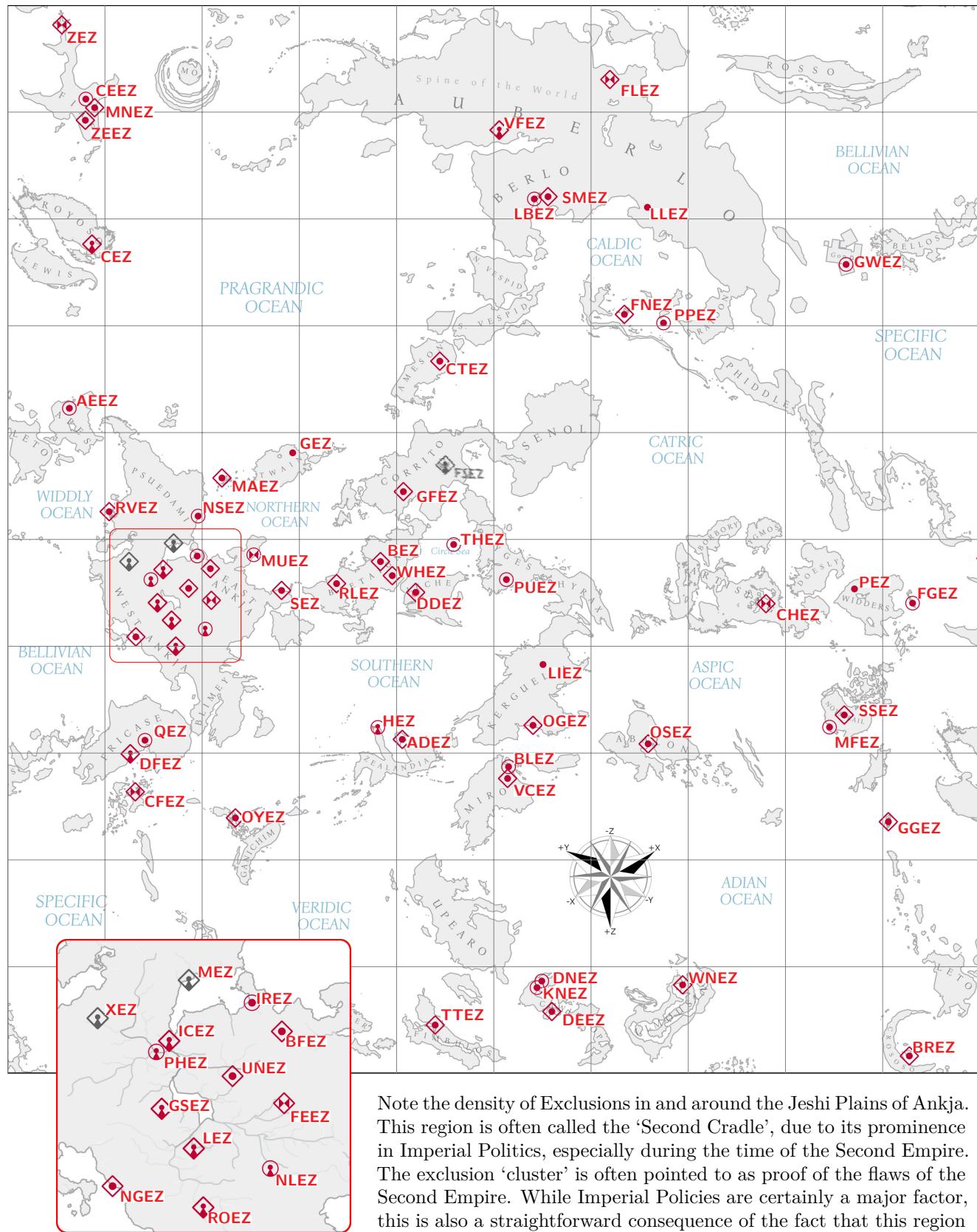
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- BFEZ - 426 FE - Blue Fields 61

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- DFEZ - 436 FE (approx.) - Doris Finch 7
- GSEZ - 456 FE - Gatesmith 79
- ROEZ - 475 FE - Rove 133
- RLEZ - 519 FE - Risen Lands 49
- LIEZ - 527 FE - Li'o 115

If you came to these addenda looking for Berria Langmore's decklist, I must regretfully inform you that it does not exist. The reference to such an addendum was purely diegetic. It was, in other words, fictional. A lie. You have been bamboozled. My deepest apologies. – *The Dungeon Master*

Map of Aerb with Exclusions



Note the density of Exclusions in and around the Jeshi Plains of Ankja. This region is often called the 'Second Cradle', due to its prominence in Imperial Politics, especially during the time of the Second Empire. The exclusion 'cluster' is often pointed to as proof of the flaws of the Second Empire. While Imperial Policies are certainly a major factor, this is also a straightforward consequence of the fact that this region is one of the most densely populated on Aerb.