



WORLDBUILDING MAGAZINE

CREATURES

MONSTROUS, MAGICAL, AND MUNDANE

04 World Showcase

Paul's The Fifth World, interviewed by Adam Bassett

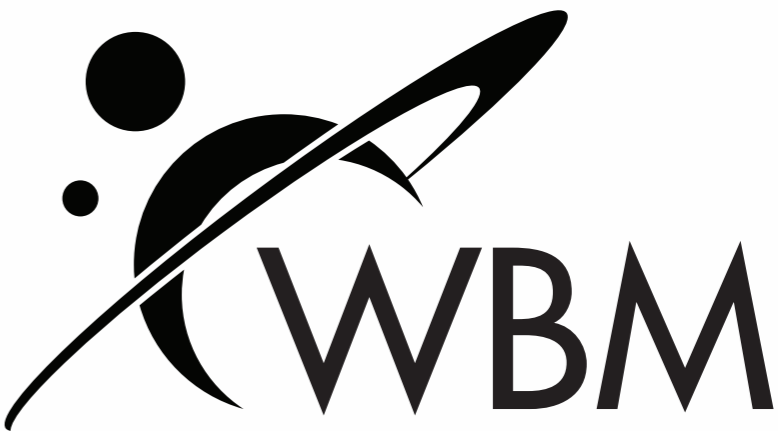
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by Tristen Fekete

LETTER FROM THE TEAM



Dear Worldbuilders,

It's time once again for a brand new issue of Worldbuilding Magazine. We put a lot of effort into ensuring that each and every issue is filled with high quality worldbuilding content, and Creatures is no exception. If you haven't read them yet, you can find all of our past issues on our [website](#).

This issue is our longest yet, and you'll find plenty of informative articles regarding critters, creepy or otherwise. In addition to our normal content, we have a special inclusion: the winner's and two runner ups' entries to the Frightful Fauna [World Anvil](#) contest! Plus, we are featuring interviews with Paul about his [Fifth World](#) and Michael Ross of the [RPG Academy](#).

As always, we welcome new artists, writers and editors. If you'd like to help us make the magazine, contact us at contact@worldbuildingmagazine.com. Have any questions or just want to hang out? Join us on [Discord](#). Happy worldbuilding!

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*Cover: Anna Hannon
Logo: Tristen Fekete*

WORLD SHOWCASE: PAUL'S FIFTH WORLD

Interview

Interview conducted by Adam Bassett

Paul (also u/a_kas_kadian on Reddit) is creating [The Fifth World](#), a project which began deeply rooted in comedy that has grown a great deal since it began in 2016. We spoke about The Fifth World, its governments and the magic, discussing details such as the war against the sun and panomancy.

Yes, you read that right.

This is what Paul had to say about his world.

Kaskada (and with it, the Fifth World) started as a parody of serious nation building. I basically took some silly tropes and ideas from things I liked and built on that. Obviously that grew old after while. Today, while the setting is still focused on humor, there are also strong dystopian and mysterious themes scattered around. A strong focus lies on the governments of the three nations the Fifth World is made up of and their highly different approaches towards authoritarianism. The high majority of worldbuilding so far has been directed at the "Republic" of Kaskada, which has been described as a "Pratchettian dystopia".

Currently, the Fifth World consists entirely out of a supernaturally terraformed Antarctica that has been raised out of the sea. More continents are due to come eventually, but only after this part of the world is at least mostly coherent with itself.

Something, something, magical global warming?

Like that, yeah. Exactly like that.

I really want to talk about the three nations you mentioned earlier, but first we have to address the magic. What sort of magic is present in The Fifth World and how did it come to be?

There's two kinds of magic in the Fifth World. The first is raw, unbound, and can only be wielded by gods. They distort reality on a level that makes human comprehension almost impossible. Some parts of the Kaskadian Wastelands, the area between the Cities, are almost polluted with residue from ancient, unknown times.

The other type is bread magic, also known as Panomancy.

Raw magic works on a reality-affecting level. Kaskadian scientists call residue of war magic "Hegel Fields." The intensity is measured in Hegels. One Hegel would be standard reality, everything below that indicates that reality has started to break down. It's a bit like radioactivity, but your cells don't get corrupted. Instead they start trying to speak Sewungese or grow wooden tentacles or install a parliamentary democracy inside your body. There's a reason people don't like to divert from the main roads when travelling in the Kaskadian outback.

Panomancy is different. It is wielded by humans, and was probably created by them as well. It is assumed that Panomancy is a survival tactic by ancient colonists, arriving on the shores of the Global Sea. In short, Panomancy is the magical art of bread summoning, transformation and teleportation. It is wielded by Panomancers, who basically are black-belt bakers with a magical talent. They have their own schools, representation in the government, and are even worshipped in some parts of the Fifth World. They deserve it, too.

At the moment, only the worshipped entity of the Sewungese god-cult wields raw magic, but it has been mostly inactive for the last couple of centuries. Before that, it gave a lot of fun, promising power to people in turn for their immortal souls. You know, the usual Faustian Pacts. There's bound to be other gods, capital G or not, but they have been largely silent for much of recorded history. It is theorized that raw magic might be a finite resource like oil.

Alright, well on that note let's talk about the nations. Can you give us an overview of each, what they seek to accomplish, and a glimpse at what life there is like?

Definitely.

Sewung Chonbai, as mentioned, is ruled by a god-cult, obsessed with building a temple for their divine leader. National lore goes that ten thousand

years ago, the king sold the country's souls for his own immortality. Since then, everyone born on Sewungese soil needs to work to win their soul back. The exact mechanics of this are still in the works.

And now, Nu. Its defining characteristic is the castal system, a kind of technological class-based society. The most popular philosophy in Nu is technological "Purity," in which self-worth is measured by a lack of technological augmentations. This works fine for the upper classes, who rule the country in something called a "Castal Oligarchic Noocracy." Noocracy is a real word, and means "aristocracy of the wise". In Nuese context, "wise" means "pure," because the poorer you are, the more technological augmentations you need to keep living. If you work with machinery, a back and hand augmentation might make sense, accountants want to have eye implants, and so on. Some people have nearly completely replaced the bodies they were given at birth with machinery—they are considered barely human by anyone above them.

Now for Kaskada, which enjoyed the majority of my worldbuilding: Here we have a mind-boggling bureaucracy, lead by the mysterious State Council. The government is segmented into two hierarchies, that of the General Ministry, and the Secret Police, which is much less secret than the name suggests.

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To be filled out in black letters only - do not use abbrev.

Level of Protection (refer to DoP) - 0

Alias - **THE COMMISSIONER**

Other Pseudonyms - **DR. ALAN SALMON**

Current Residency - **CITY TWO, F.A.R.K. FACULTY** Gender - ☐ Yes ☐ No **NOT SURE ACTUALLY**

Positions, Date of Appointment Primary Loyalty - ☐ SC

1) - **MINISTER OF FAKE AND REAL KNOWLEDGE** ☐ SecPol ☐ CoP ☒ Other NODO (X)

2) - **UNDERSECRETARY OF FAKE AND REAL KNOWLEDGE** Heretic Tendencies - ☐ No

3) - **SCIENTIST AT F.A.R.K. FACULTY** ☒ Yes - **PURSUER OF KNOWLEDGE (APPROVED WITH C2HQ)**

4) - **SCIENTIST (LICENSED, EMPLOYED)** Known Threats (outside of Gov.) -

5) - ***SCIENTIST*, LICENSED** **THE ARCHITECTS (GDI), SEVERAL RADICAL FRINGE GROUPS (SEE ADDENDUM)**

Summed Paygrade (refer to table) -

Notes **TELEGRAM FROM STATE SECRETARY PETERS: YOU HAVE READ ORIENTATION REGARDING SCIENCE STOP ESPECIALLY MINISTRY OF FARK STOP ALWAYS HAVE OBSERVERS NEARBY STOP COMMISSIONER PLEDGED NEUTRALITY STOP VERY IMPORTANT STOP FURTHER INQUIRY CONSULT DEPARTMENT OF INSPECTION END**

Estimated Value (EV) - **LOW PRIORITY**

Sign. **(THE SECRETARY)**

INTERNAL - DEPARTMENT OF DISBELIEF
MINISTRY OF FAKE AND REAL KNOWLEDGE

Artist: Paul

Conspiracies are rampant, everyone is in one. Surveillance is nearly limitless, a third of the nation works for the Secret Police alone.

There's a saying here: "The Sewungese have no souls, the Nuese have no bodies, the Kaskadians have no brains."

How do the three get along? What is their foreign policy?

On an international level, Sewung exports cheap labor, Nu exports cheap gadgets, and Kaskada is frowned upon and told to go back to counting its fingers. The State Council has been trying to close down the country entirely, although there is still a lot of smuggling going on, especially between Sewung and Kaskada. There is a Kaskadian city called Uppernull right at the border. You can imagine Uppernull smuggling a bit like in, say, Eastern Germany. Products that exist in the country, but of far better quality, exotic fruits, foreign media, ancient weapons of unthinkable power, that kind of thing. The Secret Police tolerates it, but only because they want to keep Uppernull as a base of operations for foreign missions.

While Sewung and Nu do have a shared border in the northern Fifth World, due to the vast distance between anything worthwhile, the closed borders of Kaskada have effectively cut them off from each other. Sea travel is unpopular for a wholly different reason that has nothing to do with politics. Let's just say skippers try to stay close to the shore, don't go fishing, and do regular Hegel measurements. Who knows what else is out there. As of yet, Antarctica is the only continent known to both the population of the Fifth World and to me. It is more likely that they are going to find other planets before finding other continents, however.

The Kaskadian government has been trying to close Kaskada down?

Imagine you're an alien that only knows human society by reading Wikipedia articles translated into Chinese and back—that's pretty much the understanding the State Council has of its people's needs. There are some things that are easy to convey, but other concepts are harder. Kaskada is currently in a state of cold war, and the State Council has decided that the best way to stop the enemy from trespassing is to close the borders.

That enemy? The Sun.

After the State Council seized power about a hundred years before the moment in time I'm referring to as Now, they really did their best to be good leadership. Some say the Sun provoked Kaskada, others say it only came so far because of Kaskadian aggressions, but a few years ago the constant back-and-forth became a full-on assault war.

To be fair, it worked. It is now perpetual night in Kaskada, only in border cities like Uppernull can you see even twilight. What we know that the State Council doesn't know: a day is a year long in Antarctica. The Sun will return in a few months, and remain a constant threat. They are going to see it as a temporary setback, double their rocket-launching efforts, and they will be right: six months later, the Sun will show itself intimidated and leave the strong Kaskadians alone again.

It's my take on the dystopian "We have always been at war with Eurasia" trope, and it works as a plot point to make Nu and Sewung wary of anything Kaskadian.

How is it they would discover things in the solar system as opposed to explore their own planet?

The first country able to explore space is probably going to be Nu, although Kaskada has made considerable advances in their rocket technology by continuously firing rockets towards the Sun.

However, the easiest way to get off the ground would be raw magic, which is Sewung's mastery. They just need to finish that temple first, they have been building on it for centuries. Who knows, maybe it *is* a rocket?

So now that we've discussed the war against the sun, the aliens in control of Kaskada, and a bit about the 3 nations...I'd like to ask: what's your favorite thing in The Fifth World?

Oh, that's a hard one. I think I'm split between the Sun War, which is actually a very important issue in the Kaskadian daily grind and is mentioned in the media every other day, and the Kaskadian Department of Fake and Real Knowledge, which studies everything from sapient ants to more efficient ways to play Scrabble.

The FARK Department, as it is also called, is part of the Administrative branch of Kaskada known as the General Ministry. Its main responsibility is the



State Secretary Peters and the State Council of Kaskada, by Tara Kleusch

funding of education in Kaskada. The other task is to rule whether a piece of information, any information, can be considered harmful to the state. If so, it will be censored and the affected parties sent to Reeducation. It often works closely together with the Secret Police's Department of Inspection.

The Commissioner of the FARK Department is Dr. Alan Salmon, who was also the leader of the mentioned Glussian Ants research team in the Zoological Institute of City One. He's a nice guy, and has been fighting for years to legalize public use of photography, and he has slowly made progress: While color imagery is still employed exclusively by the Secret Police, every citizen is now allowed to register for black-and-white camera ownership. He also successfully collaborated with Edgar Jenenemem of the Congress of Panomancers on distinguishing Science from Magic: they are now considered separate, but equal.

How does the department enforce and make the rules about what is legal media?

As a rule of thumb, if you enjoy it, it's forbidden. The Department of Inspection (of the Secret

Police), together with the Department of Judgment create the guidelines about what is allowed and what will send you off to Reeducation. Generally, things that outline a different worldview, are religious in nature, mention the Sun, or are in some other way considered improper for an authoritarian dictatorship, are banned.

The Secret Police's Department of Enforcement employs Legal Hounds, which can smell crime. They are trained with the use of the Kaskadian Criminal Code, commonly known as the 'Rubber Book'. Other than that, state indoctrination, random searchings, spies, surveillance. All the good stuff.

What other media inspired the Fifth World? You mentioned it was originally a satire but it seems to have grown a lot. ie: what other works inspired the world?

This may sound counterproductive, but when I started out, spite. I was annoyed by these people that take their writing so seriously that everything needs to fit together perfectly, otherwise it isn't considered acceptable. So I did the opposite of that, and started adding things I liked together. A mysterious leadership, a country on Antarctica, bread magic. I mean, come on! Other obvious influences are the classic dystopian novels like 1984 and weird fiction like the Cthulhu mythos or Welcome to Night Vale.

At some point, however, it started to grow together, become more original, and—worst of all—make sense, which honestly scared me a little. It's always been a lot of fun, though, and I don't plan to stop now.

If I need to condense my worldbuilding down to one rule, that rule is going to be: *Never, ever throw an idea away.* You can always fit something in there somehow.

Good advice. And if not in one project then surely for another!

Is there anything about the Fifth World we haven't discussed that you would like to share?

I'm currently writing about the Public Board, a secret (well, “secret”) Kaskadian quasi-government organization consisting of representatives of various fields. The arts, science, various pieces of the

government, and even the criminal underground are a part of it. Once a year, they hold a "Public Truce" which is like a normal meeting but you aren't allowed to murder someone. They've been doing it for a few years now, and to the surprise of everyone involved actually managed to improve a few parts of Kaskadian society somewhat, proving once and for all that communicating works much better for getting a point across than a bullet to the chest or a formal complaint filed with the Subdepartment of Reeducation.

I'm doing a little series about this as well, giving each member of the Public Board their own segment, a collage, and a bit of lore. Lots of fun.

I'd also like to say “Hi” to my buddy Beo, who inspired a lot of this project. Thanks man.

One last question. What's the end goal here? Do you plan to write stories based in the world or create anything more out of it? Or is this all just a fun project?

It started out as a language exercise—English isn't my mother tongue and I wanted to learn how to write longer stuff in it. I've been expanding to image collages and things related to that. Other than that, I've been publishing short stories and lore snippets on my website.

I do plan to write a longer piece set in the world, and a German multi-chapter story set in Kaskada's capital of City One will be released later this year in a paperback story anthology. The details on that are still a bit vague, so I will put the specifics on my blog when I know them. So yeah, while it's mostly fun, the chance to do something professional with it, all while improving my abilities as an artist, is thrilling.

Currently I'm looking for a visual artist who would like to draw a few pieces set in my world. My dream would be to collaborate on a comic set in the Fifth World.



Thanks to Paul for spending some time with me today and sharing a bit about The Fifth World with us. If you would like to share your world in an upcoming issue of Worldbuilding Magazine please [email](#) or contact us on [Discord](#).

EXCLUSIVE: MICHAEL OF RPG ACADEMY

Interview

Tabletop Gaming

Interview conducted by Adam Bassett and WithBestIntentions

Michael Ross, otherwise known as Professor Fluff, is an avid tabletop gamer and has been playing role-playing games since the age of 12. Today, he is a co-host on the RPG Academy Network, the host of the Faculty Meetings podcast, and a Dungeon Master known for narrative-driven games. Faculty Meetings, an educational show which delves into different topics about role playing games, has been nominated for multiple ENnie awards. The network also hosts a variety of other shows such as general discussions, live games, and interviews.

WithBestIntentions, a long-time listener of RPG Academy Network podcasts, joined me for this discussion. The three of us discussed Michael's history, worldbuilding through the lens of tabletop RPGs, and more.

The podcast, which was originally called Dice Monkeys and then shortly renamed D&D Academy and then a while later re-branded as The RPG Academy—was started to sorta chronicle the process of my original co-host (Evan) as he started running his first D&D campaign.

I was the grizzled vet who would give advice, feedback, and critique the sessions he ran.

Our earliest episodes (originally called Dungeon Talks, then Table Topics and now Faculty Meetings) were exactly that. Evan would talk about his prep or recap the most recent game and we'd discuss things—good and bad.

It was early in one of those episodes when Evan expressed apprehension that he wasn't doing a good job and I told him that as long as the players were having fun he was doing a good job—and thus our motto! (about the only thing that hasn't changed over and over) was born—"If you're having fun, you're doing it right!"

Since this the podcast has evolved. Evan eventually decided to step away from the podcast for life reasons and Caleb joined as a temp host and then became full time when it was clear Evan wasn't coming back.

Now that we had two experienced DMs we switched the format a bit and began talking more about differing

approaches to the hobby. Caleb is a numbers/mechanics guy. He loves to dig deep into systems, build characters and understand how things work. I just like to make stuff up and maybe roll a die or two to make it seem like we're still playing an actual game. So we adopted the monikers Prof. Crunch (Caleb) and Prof. Fluff (me).

We also expanded to a variety of new and different show types. Including several types of actual plays and an Interview show (Show & Tell) and a laid back talk-show like show called Detention. But Faculty Meetings will always be the meat and potatoes of what the Academy does.

Adam: How did this all start?

It was all Evan's idea. He and I worked together and became friends pretty quickly. I could tell he was one of my tribe, and we started playing MtG together. I kept dropping hints about D&D, but at the time I still held on to a lot of gamer shame and was afraid to be openly associated with it. Finally he got the hint and I invited him to play with me—at the time I was playing 4e at a local store. Evan came to a few games and thought it was okay but didn't love it. I told him that playing a home game would be more his style and we left the store and I started running a game for him at my house with a couple other friends. He played for about 6 months and then just stopped one day, saying he just didn't want to continue. A few months went by and out of the blue he called me and said he wanted to play again but he wanted to run the game—but didn't know how. So I told him I'd make a safe space for him with a couple hand-picked players and that he could run the game (story) and when it came



time to apply any rules I'd help him if he needed. In preparation to start running, Evan started listening to some RPG podcasts, specifically Fear the Boot. It was his idea to document this process. He was a hobby musician and had access to microphones and recording gear. So we just set up one day and started recording.

Like most things, I quickly became more impassioned and wanted to do more and more. I kept pushing to record our actual games in addition to the discussion shows, but he wasn't interested so I took over that duty. Those early AP (Actual Play) eps have awful audio because it's much harder to record multiple people playing than two people talking—but after a lot of experimentation and, frankly, money, we got to a place where our audio sounded really good. And I take a lot of care to edit them well.

WBI: Did you see any changes in gameplay when you started recording?

Not right away. We had such a small audience when we began to record our APs that it was basically the same sorta game, but as our audience grew and we realized people were actually listening to us we did begin to self censor a bit and focus more on role playing and tried to minimize table talk (which I cut out anyway). Over time I've changed how I DM when I'm running to record with a lot more emphasis on broad strokes story and letting the PCs really drive the game rather than having a complex plot. It's more fun to play and listen in my opinion.

Adam: Interesting. I know that all DMs and players have their own style. However I'm fairly inexperienced/new to tabletop RPGs. What would you say are the advantages of the more "broad strokes" style you're describing? And what advice would you give somebody looking to do something like that?

WBI: Does that include broad strokes vs. detail in worldbuilding as well?

1st question—when I first started DMing I was around 12. I was an avid reader and, by my own standards, a pretty good story teller. So running

games for me was creating a story in which the PCs were characters. It was my story they were playing. I would set up a situation (there's a bad wizard) and expect them to follow the script (go fight the wizard) but my players always had other ideas. It led to some frustrations on both sides, but being

kids and friends we kept playing. Eventually I got a bit better but it was still MY story. Once I started podcasting and began to play with new people, listen to other podcasts, go to conventions to run and play in games, I got exposed to a wide variety of DMing styles. Many still followed that DM as the Story Teller method, but

others didn't. I began to gravitate to a style where I would start a story, much like a prompt for an improv game—there's an evil wizard in the swamp and children are going missing—and GO! and then let the PCs loose into the world. They didn't have any sort of path to follow that I had already thought of (go here, fight something, learn a thing, go somewhere else, rinse and repeat) they were free to interact with that story (or not) however they wished. It made the game so much more fun for me and the players. I think it's harder to craft a complex story that way because the game is at the mercy of the player's whims and player 1 may be really focused on the plot and drive forward, but next week they've had a bad week at work or family issues and are not as focused on the game at all. So now player two is sorta in the driver's seat and they'd rather go follow this other thread—or some such. So rather than focusing on trying to tell a grand sweeping epic story that would rival Tolkien or Martin or Jordan, we have a lot of fun in short 2-3 hour bursts and I try to tie each session together as best I can.

There are some other AP podcasts that have managed to do more of both (Godsfall comes to mind), but with my family responsibilities and the realities of my player's lives, we have never been able to keep a consistent schedule and let a campaign build to that level.

That goes to the 2nd part—most of my campaigns die. It sucks, but it happens. I used to spend hours and hours creating the world/campaign for the players and most of it, easily 80% of that work never came out at the table before the campaign came to an end.

“
*If you're having fun,
you're doing it right!*
”



And when I invariably mess something up, I use my #1 DM tool—I lean forward, smile and say, “yeah that is weird, isn't it?”



I don't have the time to do that anymore. Between real job, wife, kids and just running the podcast (and now a network), I can't spend 5 hours a week prepping for a game. So when I'm creating a new world/setting I think in big picture. Come up with a few details and then we start playing. I see what the players are interested in and create in that direction. Think of it this way—imagine as the DM I was setting up a museum of art. Before, I would spend the time to populate every room, fill every wall and table with art and then no matter which way the player's explored that museum I'd be prepared—but most of the time they never got through more than a couple rooms before they burned it down. Now I create the lobby—see which room they head to and then before the next session I fill the room they are going into with art (story, hooks, npcs, encounters) and then just keep (trying to keep) one step in front of them.

One of the first pieces of advice I give to anyone that's thinking of becoming a DM (or GM or whatever) is to have a “Session 0”*. We say it so much it's become a joke on our show that we 'take a drink' any time someone says it. If you do a good session 0, you and the players can collectively create a lot of the details that you need to start. If a PC is a spiritual person (whether a class that uses divine magic or just a background element), we create a god or gods. If they have a military background, we create the nation/kingdom they served and who they fought and so on. As the DM I have a few hard lines about the setting that are untouchable, but beyond those, all the players (which includes the DM) work together to create a lot of these details/elements. Then I, as the DM, go back and expand them. Is the church of the god we created infiltrated with heathens or actually righteous? Is there a dark force guiding them in the name of justice? That kingdom that the PC served, are there secrets they didn't know about (like

the King was actually a doppelganger who had replaced the true king decades ago)? I try to add some depth and flair. I'm not trying to corrupt or supplant the original idea, but add/change enough that the players can discover stuff through play and still have a sense of mystery as new elements are discovered.

WBI: So, besides a larger framework created by the DM or GM, the players initially supply the details most related to their characters.

Yes—I let the player's do the heavy lifting in session 0 and then just add a bit on top. Then as we play, if they go in a new direction, I'll create as needed. And when I invariably mess something up, I use my #1 DM tool—I lean forward, smile and say, “yeah that is weird, isn't it?” You heard X did Y but now it seems like that's not true (or whatever) and then I try to figure out how to make that make sense before the next game and let them uncover some mystery that explains it (doppelganger is ALWAYS a good option). Also time travel.

We create background info for each PC and collectively fill in details we think are relevant. We may just say, “we need a city across the sea” and come up with a name and for now that's all it is—just a name. However, if the PCs decide to go there or search for someone from there then I'll create details, enough to get by and can always expand later.

I also do this at the table. If they travel somewhere new I may ask a player: what has your character heard about this place? Or what is the first thing your character sees or notices as you enter?

WBI: Now, does this process change depending on if players are newer to RPGs (or new to this kind of collaborative process)? I imagine more experienced players are familiar with this kind of improvisation.

Adam: I can speak from experience that new players get nervous just speaking.

WBI: Oh yeah, I was definitely that nervous new player.

It really depends on the players. Not really by experience but preference (in my experience). Some players just don't like doing this. They want to believe that the DM has everything figured out and if they open a door and find a key it was because the DM put that key there. Other players enjoy the freedom to being able to create. I generally try to gauge the table (if I'm not already familiar) and ask a few basic questions early and then go from there. I'd not want to put someone on the spot, but generally in my experience, once you start, it gets easier.

I like to, as I say, put a box around it. If the player is new I may ask them to describe what's unique about their sword or armor. Something small, personal to their character and ultimately insignificant to how I'm running the game. Later, during combat I may ask: what did that attack look like? or describe the killing blow on that Ogre you just defeated. If the player seems to be connecting with this I'll ask more broader questions like "who knows someone in this town?" or "Who are they and how do you know them?"

In my current group we've played enough I don't have to ask very much. Players will just say "well we know we need to talk to the town guard, luckily I know someone in the watch. We grew up together but I haven't seen them in years."

Adam: I wanted to ask in particular what sort of creatures you use, either as allies, antagonists, or setting pieces?

Most of the time, the games I run are more urban and/or political—meaning they are not out fighting monsters in the forest as much as they are fighting other human(oid)s like guards, bandits, rival thief guilds and the like. That said, I'm a big fan of doppelgangers for political games where you don't know who you can trust.

As for actual monster monsters I like ogres at early levels. They're big enough to be scary but dumb enough to allow for creative problem solving (tricking, bribing, seducing). I like to try and use monsters/creatures in unexpected ways. Like needing to find a goblin who can lead you through

a secret forest rather than finding a goblin you have to hit with a stick till it's dead. One of the segments we do on our Detention show (and used to do on Faculty Meetings) is called Cryptozoology and we take a monster and try to find interesting ways to use them. We discussed needing to find a cockatrice which in 5e can turn someone to stone for 24 hours, and then they recover, so the PCs can be turned to stone to travel through a poisonous wasteland and then revive on the other side. One of my favorites was to find a banshee and "capture" its wail to use against something even worse (like using the Medusa head against the kraken in *Clash of the Titans*).

WBI: So you commented about the campaigns you run. What setting in particular has been the most fun for you? I'd love to learn some more about it.

As far as published settings I LOVE Eberron. It's by far my favorite. It's an odd combination of high magic and pulp action, but most of the time I play in a homebrew world I create for each game.

Adam: Could you tell us a bit about one of these homebrew worlds?

I'd say my favorite is this most recent one, the Dark Discovery campaign. With the drow (I called them darklings, but basically drow) who had switched bodies and taken over and ruled with an iron fist. It was basically Firefly (the TV show) in D&D. The "empire" was the "alliance." Our PCs were a crew on a ship and smuggled under their nose. It included a few personal elements I liked, like Dark Iron which was a substance very deadly but once processed could mask magical signatures. Mage hounds which were machines (basically warforged from the Eberron setting) that were immune to magic and used to hunt down rogue spell casters from the empire. One of the PCs had their character killed by one in their backstory, but their mind got switched and they were inside of it. Originally they were a sorcerer, but inside the body, they couldn't cast magic but were basically a unstoppable killing machine. Another PC had contracted Dark Iron poisoning and had to amputate their arm and were given a magical device that provided them with a magical force phantom arm. The player was playing an Eldritch Knight which has an ability to magically summon their weapon, so we combined and their weapon was also of this magical force and could just form into the magical arm.

The players were given the backstory of how years ago the humans, elves, dwarves and halflings had formed an alliance to defeat the darklings and that after the victory the elves quickly turned on their former allies and took them over and formed the empire. The truth about the darklings and why the elves were a-holes was not common knowledge but as the game moved on they began to figure things out. They had free reign to create things in the world but those elements were mine (and hidden).

I think for many, if not most DMs, that's enough to start. A hook. A unique thing about this world that's interesting enough to set the game there, but there's no need (again in my opinion) to spend 20 hours creating a 100 page backstory to a world that may never be explored by the players. If the DM enjoys that work then it's not wasted time, but that's a lot of time they could have been working on other things that the players would interact with.

WBI: Okay, real quick- what's been your favorite class to play, in any RPG?

Wizard. Always. Any game—if it has a wizard or wizard like class that's what I go to. One of our show types is called 'the Trials' and this is where we try out a new game and if there's a wizard that's my go-to. I'm the type of player who loves to come up with overly complex solutions to mundane problems and wizards excel at that.

Adam: So you enjoy making things difficult for the DM?

Not really. Now that I get to play more (I was DM for like 99% of my career until the podcast), I try my best to help the DM where I can, and my overly complex solutions often give the DM lots of opportunity to make the game interesting.

WBI: That's the excuse I'm going to use next time I wreck havoc.

I try to be a good DM helper. If it seems like the DM is leading us toward a cave I'll get my PC into that cave, even if it doesn't make a lot of sense for my PC to want to go into the cave, but once we're in the cave...I may get a little wacky.

I'm a big fan of failure. I love when my PCs fail, as long as it makes the scene more interesting and doesn't punish the other players—like get their PC killed because I'm casting Grease instead of Magic Missile.

Adam: I'd like to bring us back to the podcasting side of things for a moment. Specifically, I'm curious to know your thoughts on podcasting. What challenges are there and what draws you to that medium? Do you have any advice for somebody who might be reading and interested in trying it out themselves?

When we started (roughly 6 years ago) we focused a lot on audio quality and editing. Our discussion shows sounded really good right away and were edited tightly. That set us apart from many other shows. It took us a long while to get our AP audio right but we eventually did and we sounded better than many other AP shows - but not any longer. Almost every show out there these days sound great. It's not a bar anymore but an expectation. A single Yeti mic in the middle of the table isn't good enough. Every person needs a dedicated mic and someone needs to edit, and editing takes a lot of time. For discussion shows, I used to spend about 4 hours editing for every hour of posted audio. I've gotten much faster and now I'm at about 2 hours for every hour. For actual plays with 4 or 5 audio tracks I can easily spend 6 hours per hour and I know some shows that are closer to 8 or more. So, know going in that it's hard work, but it's also a ton of fun.

It's important to set reasonable goals. For every show that comes out and explodes and gets thousands of listeners and fan art and a patreon that pays them money, there are dozens if not hundreds that struggle to get 300 downloads an episode.

Do it as long as it's fun to do. Find something that makes your show unique and lean into it. DON'T start a show and then end up doing 7 different show types (talking about myself).

Adam: Going into this, did you have any inspirations that you looked to?

Evan was a fan of *Fear the Boot* and we started out trying to emulate them: discussion shows about 45 min in length. Good audio and edited. I'm an avid podcast fan these days. I have a bunch of shows I listen to regularly and usually have one or two new shows I'll dip into to see if I like what I hear.

Adam: Thank you for spending some time with us, Michael, it's been fun! Before we part ways is there anything you'd like to discuss that we haven't gotten to?

When it comes to DMing—just do it. It'll be fun even if you do a bad job and you'll get better the more you do it. Listen to podcasts (mine or others) to get perspective. Go to conventions and play with new DMs and new games. My D&D games have gotten much better as I've incorporated ideas from other game systems.

Also, if anyone is near Ohio or willing to travel—we host our own gaming convention called Acade-Con (Academy + Convention) in November.

And “Session 0”—everyone take a drink!



Worldbuilding Magazine would like to thank Michael Ross for taking the time to speak to us. Below is a list of suggested listening for podcasts by the RPG Academy, others can be found at [The RPG Academy](#) website, iTunes, and Google-Play. Acadecon found at www.acadecon.com.

If anyone would like to contact me via [Email](#) or [Twitter](#), I'd be happy to answer any questions people may have and elaborate on anything we touched on.🐦

Suggested Listening

Discussion Shows:

- [Faculty Meeting 99](#) - Armor Slippage
- [Faculty Meeting 104](#) - Contested rolls
- [Faculty Meeting 106](#) - Session 0
- [Faculty Meeting 109](#) - Sideways Success
- [Faculty Meeting 112](#) - Limited Time Only

In Depth:

- [1st GM Master Class Series](#)
- [Dark Discovery Campaign](#)

Glossary

- RPG** - Role-Playing Game
- D&D** - Dungeons and Dragons
- AP** - Actual-Play, podcasts where games are played instead of discussed
- MtG** - Magic the Gathering
- DM** - Dungeon Master
- Session 0** - Pre-campaign session in which players and DM decide on character and story details



WEIRD BEINGS

Theory & Analysis

Creatures

StronglyOPlatypus

The primary connection between all things strange is understanding, or rather the lack thereof. Familiar things are not weird. At least, we don't think of them as weird. A dandelion, an ant colony, or a penguin could all be considered extremely odd and alien from another perspective but since we understand these organisms we don't pay attention to their weirdness. In order to make a creature or monster feel strange, there needs to be a mystery involved. There needs to be missing information. There needs to be questions about it that nag at the back of one's mind, making it impossible to view as "normal," whatever definition of normal one goes by.

This is not to say that you, the worldbuilder, should simply neglect certain details. Cultivating the unknown and misunderstood is an art, and requires an understanding of the nature of mystery. There are two main definitions that this article uses for its subject matter: that of a monster, and that of weirdness. A monster, in the sense that this article is focusing on, is a being that strikes fear into people's hearts and acts as a source of mystery and intrigue. There are other ways to view monsters, but this article is about the unknown, and "monster" will be used as a shorthand for an unknown, fearsome being. Weirdness, in the sense of a monster or being, is unfamiliarity relative to some observer. This observer could be a viewer, a ghost hunter, a detective, the world at large, the being itself or any number of other possibilities. Weirdness is a spectrum, and contains a wide range of different creatures. For ease of explanation, I will divide the vast domain of unknown beings into three main categories: the scientific, the supernatural, and the unknowable.

First, though, I'd also like to lay down a baseline for normality. A typical creature, such as a lion or squirrel, is well-understood and not generally thought of as strange. These are animals that would not be difficult to study. One could make a passing reference to them and be confident that the listener knows what the creature is. They are, in essence, known. Weird beings are not.

The Scientific

This category comprises all the beings which can be understood using the means available to the observer, but aren't yet. Scientifically strange beings, as the name suggests, are typically associated with science fiction worlds in the forms of aliens and their ilk. However, there is no reason why a fantasy world can't possess them, and in fact many do. *The Witcher* video game series, for example, largely revolves around tracking down and killing monsters, which are usually well-taxonomized. If a being is consistent for an established magic system, or is not fundamentally different from other fantastic beasts in the setting, it falls under this category.

These beings are typically elusive, stealthy, and/or live far from civilization. The more people see and learn about a monster, the less monstrous it becomes, until eventually it's just mundane. Being mundane does not negate the threat they pose, but it becomes a known threat. However, when it lurks only in the periphery of people's visions, traveling faster through rumors than on legs or wings, then it becomes a monster. Imagination takes over where eyewitness accounts and senses lack detail. People see parallels between ghost tales or science

Artist: Tristen Fekete



fiction stories and the creature. Multiple unrelated incidents are connected through sightings of this phantom beast. Wild guesses are made. “It’s a hybrid!” “It’s a ghost!” “It’s a mutant!”

Sometimes these guesses get close to the truth. Ultimately, people love a good story, so whatever is scariest or most compelling will win out, at least until real evidence and explanations are provided. This new information is more or less inevitable as there will always be people willing to search for the truth behind a well-known mystery.

For a real example of such a creature, look no further than the chupacabra. The mysterious, vampiric creature which sucked the blood of livestock across Latin America was once an enigma. What possibly could have caused the strange puncture marks found on the creature’s victims? What else could the disgusting, hairless canid corpses that began popping up be? In reality, it was all likely just mange-ridden coyotes conflated with vampires and movie monsters, but that didn’t prevent a host of stories and myths from popping up around it.

The Supernatural

If “normal” creatures are the well-written, illustrated pages in a bestiary, then supernatural ones are the hastily scribbled notes with a few sentences of description and an inexplicable warning written in big, messy letters saying something like, “Gods, don’t touch the bones!” These monsters are the ones that seem to violate the familiar natural laws, whether they be the laws of physics, biology, or sorcery; “supernatural” literally comes from the Latin for “above nature.” These are far more alien, and often far scarier, than the beasts in the previous category.

A supernatural monster results from reality contradicting perception. It could be a magical beast in a world where magic is thought not to exist. It could be a ghost that seems unaffected by holy charms in a world where people trust their gods to protect them from the undead. It could be a species that manipulates space and time, violating causality, gravity, the speed of light, or Einstein knows what other natural principles. There are as many possibilities as there are rules to be broken.

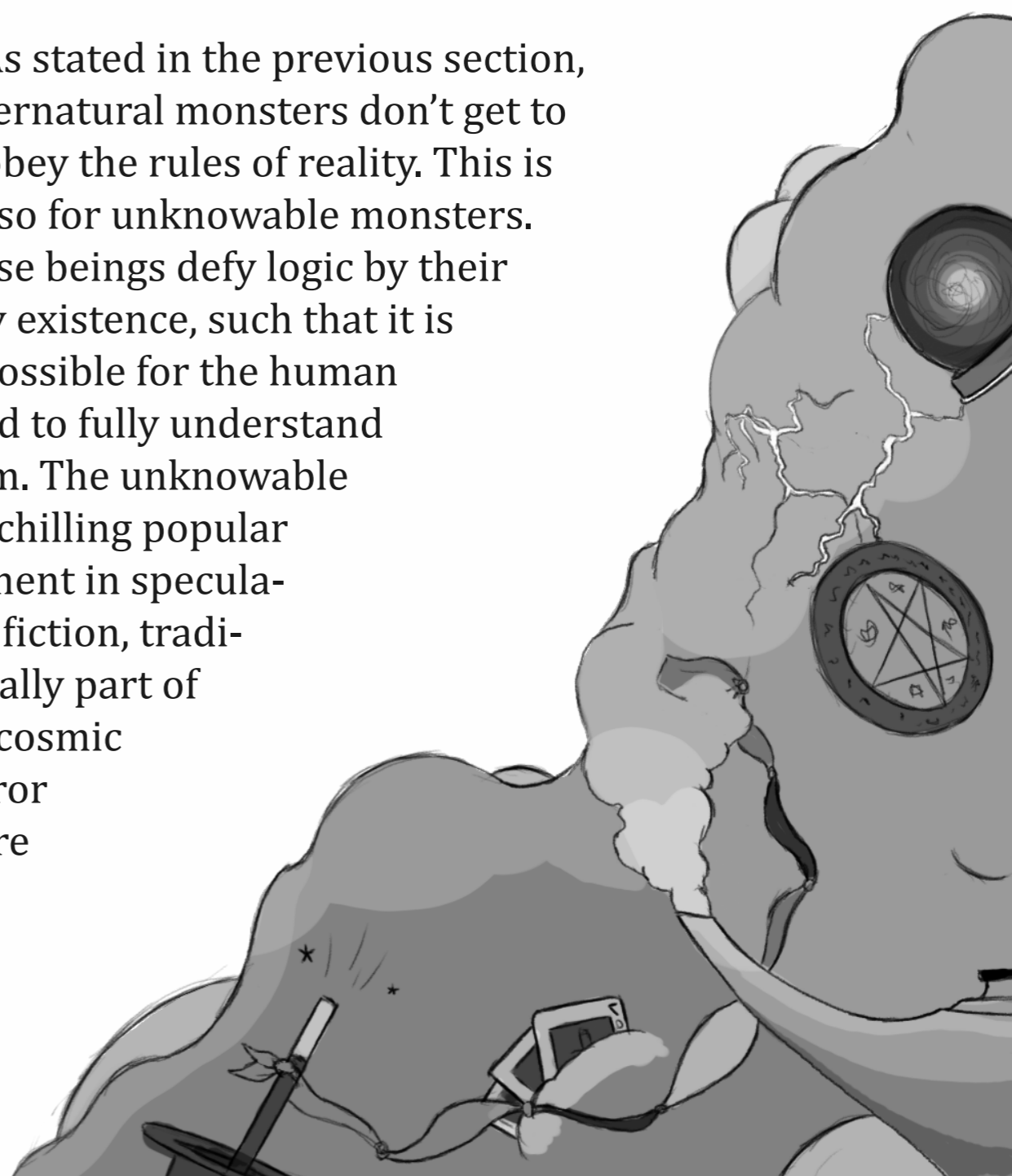
These creatures are typically the stuff of folklore and urban legends by necessity. If many people began to learn of their existence, then a great deal of evidence for them would collect, and the world

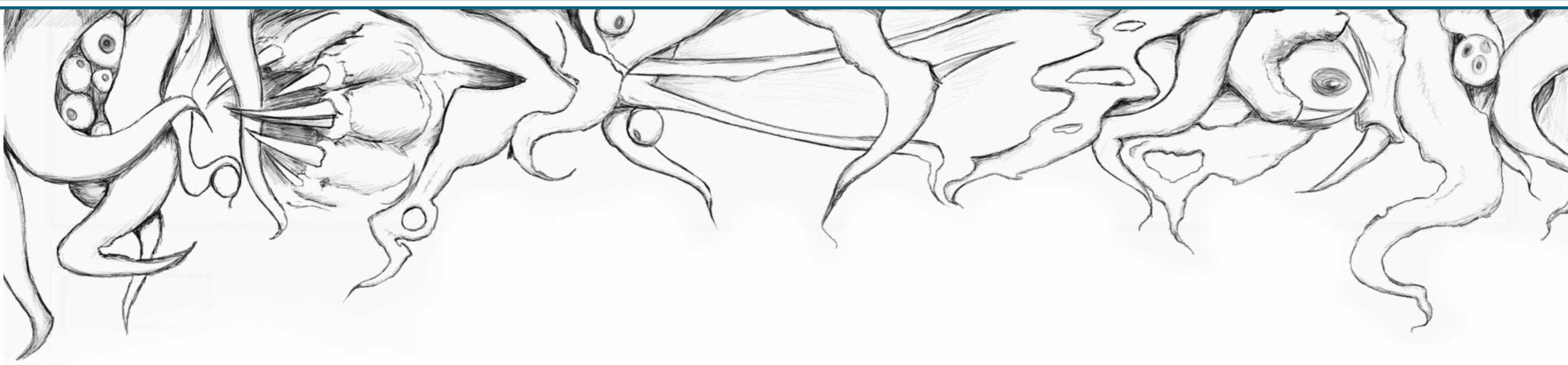
might begin to understand the supernatural. This could lead to the supernatural becoming... natural. Then, the supernatural becomes the scientific. But, if they only occasionally show themselves in dark alleyways or in the deepest parts of forests, they will instead be considered a mere fantasy or a misinterpretation of more mundane things. Alternatively, many people could learn about them but still lack the means to truly understand them. Awareness of a creature is not equal to real knowledge of it. Though, widespread awareness could often result in a push for understanding, be it through wild theories or dedicated research. So, the most stable place for such a creature is in the dark. In this way, supernatural beings exist somewhere between being normal animals and being completely unknown.

Do not, however, interpret the supernatural’s seeming violation of a set of rules as an excuse to break the actual rules your world abides by. A supernatural monster still has to obey the natural laws of the world. They do not have a “Get Out Of Logic Free Card.” Instead, supernatural monsters inhabit the gaps between the way people think the world works and the way it actually does. If a world has ghosts, then there has to be rules regarding death and the soul, even if the average person might not be aware of them. Essentially, somewhere along the way someone drew a wrong conclusion about the world, and supernatural monsters pop up to show people the truth.

The Unknowable

As stated in the previous section, supernatural monsters don’t get to disobey the rules of reality. This is not so for unknowable monsters. These beings defy logic by their very existence, such that it is impossible for the human mind to fully understand them. The unknowable is a chilling popular element in speculative fiction, traditionally part of the cosmic horror genre





and pioneered by authors such as H.P. Lovecraft, a name that inevitably comes up a lot in discussion of these monsters.

There are plenty of tropes and common elements in unknowable monsters—causing insanity, a general disregard for human affairs, god-like powers—but in truth *there are no rules*. Rules are used to understand how something behaves, and these monsters cannot be understood. These beings are the closest thing to absolute creative freedom a worldbuilder can have since they diverge from our reality, which most fiction is based on. An unknowable monster can have any motivation, take any form, or do anything that the creator desires so long as some part of it doesn't fully make sense or sit right with the audience.

This is not to say that some executions of these monsters aren't better than others. Sometimes a combination of weirdness, confusing explanations, and poor format can make stories involving unknowable monsters hard to follow. Lovecraft himself was no exception; plenty of his writings were vague and left a lot for the audience to figure out. Unpredictability can be fun, or terrifying, or both, but if there isn't sufficient grounding for the reader to keep their bearings, then it's just boring and weird. For this reason, such stories are often delivered from the perspective of a human or humanlike character who is also encountering unknowable weirdness for the first time, trying to figure out, avoiding, or fighting the being. This way, the reader isn't dumped directly into an unfamiliar world they literally have no hope of understanding; instead, they're given a relatable perspective as a foothold while they scale a mountain of madness.

In addition to the traditional Lovecraftian cast of Cthulhu, Yog-Sothoth, Nyarlathotep, etc., plenty of other examples exist. One great example of an unknowable horror is the Eldrazi from *Magic: The Gathering* lore. Beings native to the void between worlds, they devour entire planes of existence. It's hard to truly understand what exactly they are. Although the Eldrazi appear to number in the thousands, all of them are really just extensions of three

gargantuan beings. They are killable and imprisonable, but not really. They are both an enemy to unify against and a force that divides worlds. The story of the worlds of Zendikar, and later Innistrad, is an interesting exploration of what happens when something completely alien shows up and refuses to leave.

Many readers are familiar with cosmic horror and unknowable monsters. Unfortunately, familiarity is not always a good thing. In a realm with such infinite possibilities, it would be a shame to limit ourselves to only the beaten path of betentacled madness-inducing monstrosities and their ilk. If this article does nothing else, let it get you thinking about other possibilities for such monsters. Perhaps they are weak, rather than strong. Perhaps things seem normal at a macro scale, but when scientists begin looking at the creature under a microscope, then the weirdness sets in. Perhaps the beings are benevolent rather than malevolent. Perhaps instead of indifference, the unknowable cosmic beings take an extreme interest in human affairs, guiding people towards some indecipherable goal.

With these categories set down, one more thing is left to say about them. Unknown things are often monsters simply because we make them monsters. Monsters are cultural phenomena, the villains in horror stories. The unknown gives a gap for stories to fill. It is very important to remember that monsters don't need to be real, even in-world. The difference between a creature and a monster is that creatures are made of flesh and blood, whereas monsters live in the imagination. Monsters may have their origins in real beings, and they may be inextricably linked to them, but it is fear of the creature and of the unknown that earns something a place in campfire stories. And if people are afraid of a monster, it exists in some way. Take a cave where an evil witch is said to live. She will kill anyone who so much as steps into the darkness, and some townsfolk swear they can hear her chanting. No one dares enter the cave. So, does it really matter if she is in there, if the story keeps people out of the cave? Fiction has real effects in the real world.

It can have real effects in fictional worlds too.

These are some examples of each type of being, existing in generalized worlds:

Scientific

A mostly sedentary silicone based alien life form has all but completely colonized the surface of a planet. An astronaut team lands on a planet to find waste, high levels of oxygen, and strange trails in the sand. Occasionally, they hear a clicking sound in the night, but can't see where it's coming from. The weird rock formations they see are actually an alien plant/animal/fungus *thing*—but they don't know that. Until they take one of the rocks back for testing and see cells underneath a hard mineral shell, the astronauts are confused and afraid. They have the ability to understand the creatures which they are faced with, but up until the moment they do, the aliens are unknown entities. The entire planet seems at once alive and dead.

Supernatural

The leading theory in academia regarding chimeras is that they are created from random bursts of magic which cause nearby creatures to combine into one. This holds true for most observed chimeras, and some scholars have even witnessed the process happening firsthand. It is taken as fact that a violent magical explosion with a great deal of power is required for chimeras to exist due to their innate sorcerous abilities. These assumptions are turned on their heads when an enterprising young alchemist creates a chimera with a relatively small amount of magic and various mundane materials. It's nothing special, just a combination of two different breeds of dog, but it has equal magical abilities to other observed chimeras. Even stranger, its powers seem to improve by the day.

Unknowable

A shape appears in the sky over a major city. It stays in the exact same position, whether it is night or day. Some see it as a sphere, others a cube, others a complicated, shifting mass of both. After a week or so of floating, it starts spinning. Once it does, a couple dozen unrelated people disappear. This happens multiple times, seemingly randomly and without warning or explanation. Some worship it as a god or a herald thereof, others flee and

cower in fear. Members of both groups continue to disappear until the thing vanishes, too, leaving people to wonder whether it was a weapon, a divine being, or just some hungry higher power devouring creatures that appear to it like a bunch of ants. 🐜

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FINDING THE FENS

Fantasy

Tabletop Gaming

Biology

All footnotes and sources can be found at the end of the article on [page 22](#).

The Overprepared GM

If you have ever wanted to see inside the mind of a game master (GM) while she creates a fantasy ecosystem for her players, this is your chance. Be warned that my mind is not a formal place. There will be chattiness, false starts, random allusions, and mildly crude humor. Skip to the end for a concise list of techniques and creatures covered. Otherwise, continue on.

I don't remember when I first got the idea to put the Great Fens in my world, but I do know why I did it. It was the name. Some names are just ripe with ambience. Patagonia. Kathmandu. The Great Fens.

I had a vague feeling that fens were some sort of temperate inland wetlands, but I didn't have any details to go with that impression. Nonetheless, they loomed large in my imagination as an impossibly gothic landscape. Like the isolated moors of a Bronte novel. But soggy. And without the excruciatingly proper Victorian manners.

So when I created my campaign world, I put my own Great Fens in the far southern hemisphere. I eagerly anticipated the journey my players would experience crossing this moody region. When it came time to actually prepare for their adventures in the Great Fens, I confidently began looking in the usual places—monster manuals and bestiaries and subreddits.

They failed me.

Although "The Great Fens" sounds evocative to my ear, fens aren't commonly used in monster manuals and bestiaries. The RPG content creators like to focus on forests, swamps, cities, caverns, deserts, mountains and oceans. Those are the popular biomes, with a bounty of specially designed monsters and descriptive articles. Stories and modules set in those beloved ecosystems are lushly described with inspiring detail. But fens? Not so much.

I thought perhaps I could just use swamp creatures, but I thought I should check to be sure.

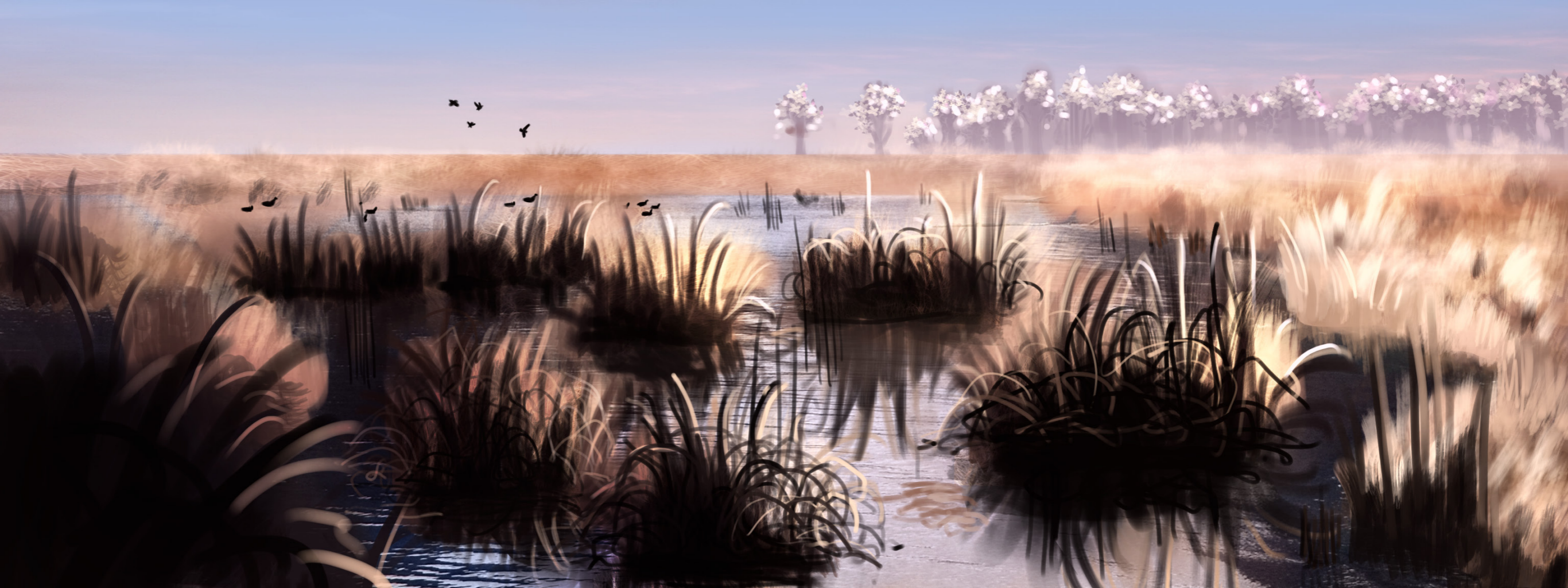
The Research

The happy thing about living in the future (unevenly distributed) is that curiosity and ignorance are so very easily satisfied¹. So my next step was clear. To the internet!

According to the US Forest service website², "there are several types of wetlands: swamps, marshes, bogs, and fens." Here's how to tell the difference:

- **Swamps** are dominated by woody plants. A canopy makes them distinct in feel and population from the other wetland types. Also, they're mostly nearer the tropics and warmer temperate regions.
- **Marshes** may be tidal salt or freshwater marshes which are inundated a couple times a day by the tides, or they may be inland freshwater marshes. In either case, they form on the boundaries of true water ecosystems - rivers, lakes, and seas. Some marshes are seasonal, drying out on occasion. All are dominated by herbaceous (non-woody) plants.
- **Bogs** are a type of peatland where the plants die faster than they can decompose and slowly accrete into peat. The soil is starved of oxygen, so you end up having different plants and animals with marshes. Also, the word "bog" sounds more miserable than marsh, like bogs just have to have a greater mosquito/fly density based purely on consonant sounds.
- **Fens** are peatlands like bogs, except the water comes up through the ground rather than through inundation or precipitation. They're less acidic and have more nutrients than bogs. They're mostly found in the far north.

So, I had my first answer. No, fens are not like swamps. In particular, I definitely couldn't use most of the RPG swamp monsters I had unthinkingly assumed would work. No reptiles or amphibians, because fens are too cold for them, especially in late fall when I wanted the adventure to take place. Maybe a cold dragon would have worked, but not for my first-level party. It's not really the right place for vine monsters or living trees either,



Artist: Anna Hannon

because the landscape of a fen is tree-deprived and the vines need trees to climb on.

So, that's what I couldn't use, but how to find what I could? To the internet, again!

Except this time I looked more at travel/visitor web sites. I found an inspiring one at the Great Fen Project³. It has evocative descriptions of what a person would experience if they visited the fen at a different time of year, including objective information on local animals and weather, as well as subjective sensory impressions. For example:

"Winter can be a very good time to see wildlife on the Great Fen. Winds can be harsh as they sweep unhindered across a vast bare landscape, but on clear days, with the sun low in the sky, colours seem brighter and clearer. The flocks of wintering wildfowl on the meres in Holme and Woodwalton Fens become larger and more vocal: listen for the whistle of Wigeon, sometimes drowned out by the yelping of Greylag Geese."

Now that's ambience.

For my campaign, I took these beautiful descriptions and edited and repurposed them so that each adventuring day, I read the players a quick sentence or so to give them an idea of what they were experiencing. For example:

"Day 1: Although you're not too far from Greentongue keep, the winds are harsh as they sweep unhindered across the vast bare landscape. In the distance, you hear the yelping flocks of geese wintering on the meres."

Or

"Day 2: Dawn rises late, but the colours in the sky seem brighter and clearer in the bitter cold air. Rabbits scurry through the straw-colored grass."

The Real Ecosystem

I now had a general feel for the fens. By looking at a number of sites, I put together a picture of the real life critters and plant life that inhabit the fens, as well as details of climate and landforms.

There would be both small mammals – mice, voles, and rabbits – and larger mammals such as badgers, water deer, foxes, and otters. The skies would be filled with birds: everything from the seasonal visits of the migrating swans, ducks, and geese to the tiny wrens, treecreepers, and goldcrests singing in the trees and bushes that occasionally dot the landscape. Hunting from above would be the hen harriers and barn owls.

But the land is defined by water, so when I planned out the animals, I had to think of the eels. Apparently they were a cornerstone of the dark age economy of the British Fens, being "used as currency and for payment of rent."⁴ Eels made me think of lampreys which are the most terrifying of all the wiggly organisms (in my mind that's a clear and useful category that includes eels, snakes, caecilians, and worms). Lampreys are creepy enough that I clearly needed to include them in my census to have a properly monstrous Great Fens.

Not all the species in the water would be horrible, though. The fens would be home to fish such as bass and perch and pike and bluegill. There would be snakes and frogs and mosquitoes, but not for my players to see; the real amphibians and reptiles would be hibernating during the late autumn session.

In terms of plants, fens are dominated by water-loving grasses, reeds, and rushes. There would be wildflowers in spring perhaps. A few berry-bearing bushes such as hawthorn and blackthorn would be mostly picked over. Flowering ash could perhaps dot the sparse patches where the ground stayed firm. Heath and bog myrtle and sphagnum mosses could live in the firmer ground. Fungi of every kind would fill the landscape: familiar mushrooms, spreading mold, coral-like structures, and shapes too alien to be easily named. And below everything would be peat.

But I was writing an RPG campaign, not creating a scientific study, so I could also put in creatures that don't exist in the real world. The trick to making the ecosystem feel cohesive is in using real-world details for inspiration.

Bringing in Extinct Species

Since I was creating a fantasy ecosystem, I didn't have to limit myself to the current-day species that inhabit the fens. In fact, I didn't want to. So I broadened my net to include species which could have lived there in some alternate dimension where extinct species coexist with modern day ones. And my first sources of inspiration were the fungi.

Since the descriptions of fens made them out to be fungi heavens, I thought of prototaxites from the Silurian and Devonian periods⁵. I had run across a picture of them in my twitter feed the week before, dotting the landscape like living monoliths. The idea of *10-foot tall fungi* impressed me greatly, so they had stuck in my mind. I decided they were definitely in my fens. Giant phallic fungi for the win.

And that made me wonder what other critters existed alongside the prototaxites.

A quick Google search led me to the formidable sea scorpion. It wouldn't really have survived in my chilly Great Fens because its normal habitat was a warm, salt water environment, but I loved the look of it. So I waved my World Builder's Wand™ and created the ever-so-slightly smaller and more

cold-hardy fen scorpion. I reasoned that lobsters do perfectly well in cold waters, and sea scorpions were related to both lobsters and real scorpions, so I could see a fen version having slightly more lobster-ish front claws and doing well in the colder fens. Real sea scorpions grew to 8 feet long, but I'd be reasonable and make the fen version a piddly four-to-six feet long.

And there were also lots of insects – butterflies, dragonflies, mosquitoes, millipedes, and centipedes, but I couldn't see them being part of the winter landscape. I made a note to include giant, creepy fen-i-pedes breaking out of the mud after spring thaw if the party ever came back in warmer weather.

Since we already have eels, I just had to look to see what horrible, ancient, eel-like creature was even more terrifying than the lamprey but is now extinct. Unfortunately the search didn't turn up anything more impressive.

Lampreys are just hard to top. I imagine even the sandworms from Dune are all, "Yeah, they're small, but did you see the teeth on those things?"⁶

The creature that really caught my eye was the Tiktaalik Rosae. It's sort of an evolutionary link between the lobed fishes and the first of the tetrapods, popularly called a fishapod⁷. Its amphibian-like ribcage allowed it to venture onto land. But what

caught my eye was that it had the scales, gills, and fins of a fish but the head and neck reminiscent of a crocodile. Can you imagine a shark-o-gator that blends into the muddy fen banks but can follow you onto land when you try to get away?

Adding Magical Creatures

As I developed an understanding of fens as a natural ecosystem, I also started to think about the magical creatures. An easy place to start was the elementals, which are easy to find among RPG monster resources. I just chose a couple that looked likely – small enough to live in the shallow waters, ornery when attacked, and at home in still or slow-running fresh water. Mud and fungi creatures are a bit less common in published RPG resources but still plentiful. Moss monsters are



The trick to making the ecosystem feel cohesive is in using real-world details for inspiration.



even more rare, but it's easy enough to repurpose generic plant or ooze creatures to have a sphagnum or brown moss flavor. They could have a spore attack, probably one that messed with the mind or made breathing difficult.

I was setting my adventure in the subarctic with winter drawing close, so I imagined magical creatures of ice and cold migrating just behind the geese and swans. As the weather cooled enough to support them, these elementals could spread out to breed or eat. Cold elementals are common in published resources, so populating the land was just a matter of deciding on a couple favorites.

Although some days are clear, I imagine sometimes there is fog and mist rising from all that water, especially when the weather turns a bit warmer. So, there could be creatures swirling in those mists, fooling the players' senses and feeding off the energy of the living. Fog is inherently creepy. The fens are inherently damp. Therefore, through logic, a creepy, damp place like the Great Fens would just have to have fog.

When I populated my mythical landscape with people, I used the ancient Welsh as a source of inspiration. So I read up a bit on Welsh folklore to see what they had that could work in the fens. A few legends especially caught my eye. The first was the Afanc, a lake monster variously resembling a crocodile, a beaver, or a dwarf (depending on the source), but which is generally considered to be a type of demon.⁸ I already liked the idea of the prehistoric shark-o-gator, the Tiktaalik Rosae, but Afanc is a much cooler term, so I combined the two ideas. My Afanc would look like the prehistoric version, and would live in the shallow mud and act as an ambush predator. And like a beaver, it would be a builder – making traps to help catch its prey. I wanted it to still be a natural creature, but the demon aspect was interesting. So I decided that the species is particularly susceptible to getting possessed by demons. The possessed version casts illusions to make its traps harder to spot, and killing it only makes it pause before the demon fully takes over the corpse. Thus my demon-susceptible, trap-making shark-o-gator Afanc was born.

The Cŵn Annwn also seemed perfect - they're spectral hounds with red ears, associated with undeath, the wild hunt, and migrating geese.⁹ I reflavored ghost wolves, a monster from the D&D 4th edition compendium, to fit the description. My new version looked somewhat like a wolf or hound

but was undead and insubstantial. They were especially aggressive in the fall, following the migrating geese. They had a necrotic bite, and they blended into the mists to help hide them in their hunt.

The Cyhyraeth or Hag of the Mist, was another mythological creature that I liked.¹⁰ In folklore, she's a harpy-like wraith, mostly invisible but appearing out of the mists at crossroads or in streams to foretell your death. I combined that idea with one of the higher level undead mist elementals to have a Mist Hag that appears in foggy conditions. She can change her shape to mimic the appearance of anyone whose death she saw, using trickery and guile to lure travelers close before feasting on their fear and life force.

Like many cultures of the British Isles, the Welsh also have a variant of the phooka.¹¹ Shape-shifters associated with water, they can be helpful or harmful or tricky, depending on the story told. They are always intelligent, though. I felt like they belonged in the fens, but I didn't have a good encounter for them yet, so I reluctantly left them out of my planning.

Another one I didn't have a good place for was the Adar Llŵch Gwin.¹² They are giant birds that understand human languages. I kept them in mind in case we ever came back to the Great Fens, but decided to treat them as exceptionally rare. My players didn't see any in this adventure.

The Takeaway

Now, my guess is that you won't have an immediate need to create an adventure in the fens. Few people do. But fens are hardly the only ecosystem so underserved. You might want to be inspired by the deserts of the American southwest or the Australian outback rather than the Sahara. Perhaps the spiny forests of Madagascar or the bamboo forests of Japan whet your interests rather than the more commonly used European forests.

Regardless of the details, if you want to build a fantasy ecosystem that is inspired by a real one, here is the quick take on my technique:

1. Pick a specific place and use search engines, studies, or national park sites to familiarize yourself with it. Go to your library and see what resources are available. Take notes.
2. Especially note the species, climate, and landforms that characterize it.

- 3. Try travel sites for evocative descriptions. Try the weather channel or a similar site to get a feel for typical weather at a particular time of year.
- 4. Research extinct species in similar climates to inspire creation of new creatures.
- 5. Look up magical species in RPG bestiaries and monster manuals, focusing on ones that have elements you recognize from your research.
- 6. Choose a culture, preferably one that inhabited the area you chose, and research its folklore.

And if you do want to set your own adventure in the fens, here are some critters with which to populate it. 🦉

| Type | Plants/Fungi (W) | Water | Land | Air |
|---------|--|--|--|---|
| Mundane | Reeds Grasses Rushes Hawthorn Blackthorn Flowering Ash Heath Bog Myrtle Sphagnum Moss Brown Moss Fungi | Eels Bass Perch Pike Bluegill Lampreys Badgers Otters | Millipedes (S) Centipedes (S) Frogs (S) Snakes (S) Mice Voles Rabbits Water deer Foxes | Butterflies (S) Dragonflies (S) Mosquitoes (S) Swans Geese Ducks Wrens Treecreepers Goldcrests Hen harriers Barn Owls |
| Magical | Prototaxis Moss elementals (S) | Fen scorpions Puca Afanc Water Elementals (S) | Ice Elementals (W) Mud elementals (S) | Adar Llwch Gwin Cŵn Annwn Mist Hag |



¹ William Gibson said “The future is already here — it's just not very evenly distributed.”

² https://www.fs.fed.us/wildflowers/beauty/California_Fens/what.shtml

³ "Autumn and Winter Wildlife." Benefits of Grazing | Great Fen. Accessed July 11, 2018. <http://www.greatfen.org.uk/wildlife/present/autumn-winter>.

⁴ <http://www.greatfen.org.uk/heritage/Norman-Medieval>

⁵ For more information on prototaxites, try <http://blogs.evergreen.edu/fungalkingdom/prototaxites-the-largest-organism-of-its-time/>

⁶ Herbert, Frank, and Neil Gaiman. Dune. Penguin Books, 2016.

⁷ <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1181611,00.html>

⁸ <https://folkrealmstudies.weebly.com/welsh-legends-the-afanc-of-the-river-conwy.html>

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/C%C5%B5n_Annwn, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Undead>, and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wild_Hunt

¹⁰ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyhyraeth>

¹¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/P%C3%BAca>

¹² <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095350319>

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DESIGNING CREATURES USING FOOD CHAINS

Creatures

Non-Fiction

Biology

Tristen Fekete

Millions of creatures live in our world, so fauna should be one of your main focuses when building a world. While it's not feasible to populate your world's many habitats with millions of species, understanding how creatures interact and evolve naturally will provide a useful avenue for design. Food chains and webs, animals populations, and evolutionary traits can diversify your world.

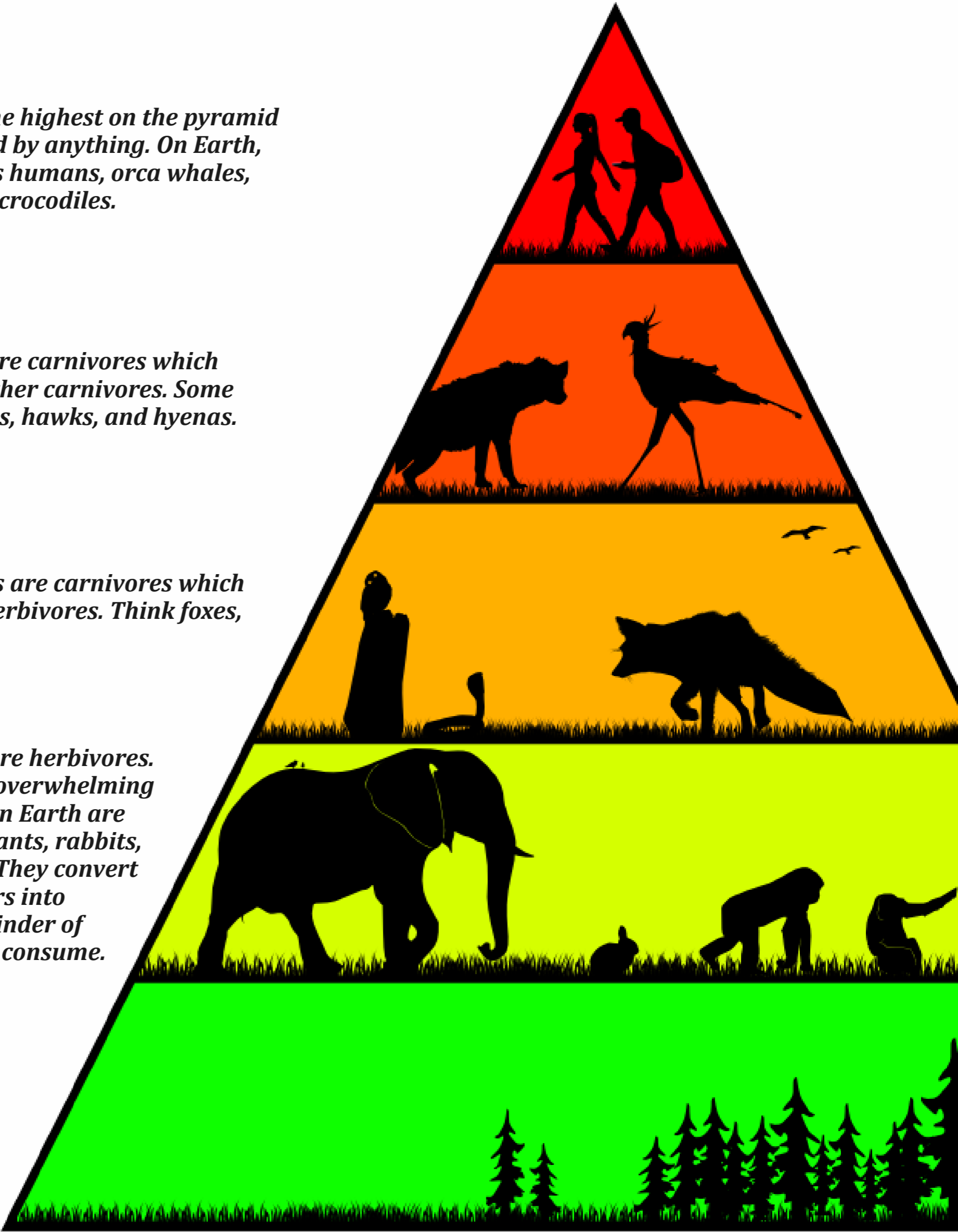
Food chains and webs are networks used to describe predator-prey relationships in a given environment. For our purposes, they will dictate how your creatures coexist and interact with each other, hopefully opening up new methods of creature design. Food chains and webs are broken down into six trophic levels: producers, primary consumers, secondary consumers, tertiary consumers, apex predators, and decomposers.

Apex predators are the highest on the pyramid and are not consumed by anything. On Earth, this category includes humans, orca whales, tigers, and saltwater crocodiles.

Tertiary consumers are carnivores which primarily consume other carnivores. Some examples are dolphins, hawks, and hyenas.

Secondary consumers are carnivores which primarily consume herbivores. Think foxes, pelicans, snakes.

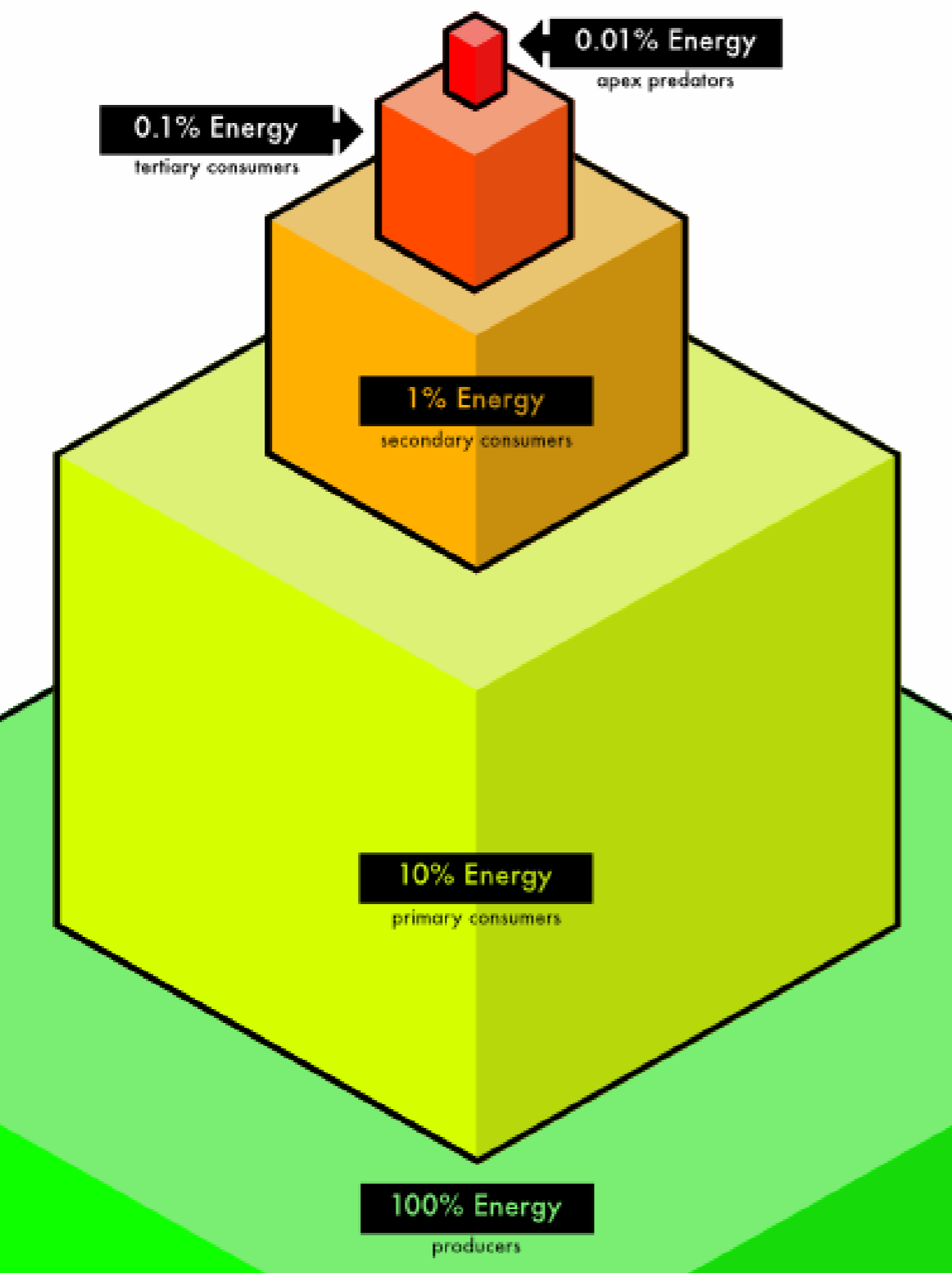
Primary consumers are herbivores. Percentage wise, the overwhelming majority of animals on Earth are primary consumers (ants, rabbits, phytoplankton, etc.). They convert energy from producers into energy that the remainder of the trophic levels can consume.



Artist: Adam Bassett

Earth’s food chains form an energy system, where the sun is the primary generator of energy and consumers are energy users. Due to the amount of energy the sun outputs, billions upon billions of producers are able to flourish and become the supporting pillar of all higher trophic levels. However, consumers are not energy efficient when it comes to eating. Primary consumers are the most populous because they have a vast source of energy to draw from: plants. This energy inefficiency results in far fewer primary consumers than producers. Secondary consumers, now working from a much smaller pool of energy, cannot support as large a population as the lower levels. The same holds for tertiary consumers and apex predators. An ecosystem may contain thousands of species of producers, hundreds of primary consumers, tens of secondary consumers, and only one apex predator.

Artist: Adam Bassett



The 10% law states the energy transfer of organic food from one trophic level to the next is only 10% efficient. This loss shapes food chains and webs into pyramids.

A food chain must follow this model in order for an ecosystem to be stable and self-sustaining. Your world, too, should abide by this example. An ecosystem consisting of only apex predators would not last long; one species would eventually come out on top or they would too quickly consume the population of prey. In the end, the whole ecosystem would collapse. The main exception is an intelligent species. Humans are apex predators yet have a massive population compared to other high-level consumers. We make up for our lack of energy efficiency by using agriculture and animal husbandry to artificially increase the energy we can draw from. Your intelligent species, human or not, will do the same unless they find an alternate, sustainable energy source, or they may succumb to another apex predator.

Knowing this, begin considering a food chain for your world. Start small and come up with a primary consumer. If you’ve already got some plants populating your world, think about what kind of creatures would eat them and how. If the edible vegetation is far above the ground, their consumers may be tall or have developed a way of reaching or climbing to the top. If the plants are small and difficult to find, the consumer will have a strong nose and possibly a way of digging the plant up, such as with claws, horns, or a pointed snout. Primary consumers will be your most diverse type of fauna so make a point of creating varying shapes and sizes. Just remember that the larger a primary consumer is, the more producers you’ll need to support it.

Now consider secondary consumers to prey on your primary consumers. They’ll have to be faster, stronger, or smarter than the herbivores. Predators of larger primary consumers won’t be larger than the prey themselves, so smaller secondary consumers will have to work around their size disadvantage using methods such as pack hunting or wearing their prey’s stamina down. Smaller prey means the carnivores can be quick and powerful to kill in one attack or perhaps set traps for prey. Use these tactics to go back to your primary consumers and develop countermeasures, such as stealth, stronger senses, or a social nature.

Tertiary consumers are a middle ground for design. Oftentimes what would be a tertiary consumer is an apex predator in its given food chain. Specialized design and direct weaknesses can play major roles here and make building them more

enjoyable. If your secondary consumers are slow, a predator with precision and speed would be able to hunt them easily. If their prey has strong armor, a smarter tertiary consumer could break it with rocks or gravity.

Apex predators are everyone's favorite nigh-invincible killing machines. Consider, however, the amount of energy apex predators need to use and how sustainable that may or may not be. On Earth, the highest on the food chain is never the largest nor the most interesting in appearance. Many apex predators in media are designed with the mindset of form over function when in a realistic environment form follows function. In a realistic world, they should be designed similarly: built for energy efficiency and masters of only a few trades. Apex predators have very little need for defense as well, and any apparent defensive features or traits are caused by adapting to their environments.

Evolutionary traits exist to promote the survival of a species. In a food chain, survival of the fittest is just that. Traits develop to assist lower trophic levels against higher, and vice versa. In other cases, they emerge as a result of mating competition, variations in the creatures' environment, and changes in food sources. Adaptations can manifest in peculiar ways; look at desert horned lizards' skin, owls' asymmetrical ears, and the mudskipper's amphibious limbs. Balancing evolutionary traits between your food chain is a game of back and forth with giving and counteracting.

Camouflage is often the most noticeable trait when examining a creature. Various types of camouflage exist in the animal kingdom with methods such as countershading, masquerading,

background matching, and more (Skelhorn and Rowe). Primary consumers exhibit these traits the most since avians are their main predators and rely on sight to locate prey. However, camouflage exists all the way to the apex predator level. Predators use it to approach prey, and prey use it to hide or disorient predators. When designing camouflage, keep in mind how secondary and above consumers locate their prey and design the level below to counteract that with camouflage.

Blending in doesn't always work, though. Higher level consumers often evolve to have stronger olfactory and auditory senses or develop 'super powers' to locate prey. Sharks, most notably the hammerhead shark, possess electroreceptors to locate other creatures only by the electric signals their muscles emit. Certain snakes have pit organs above their nostrils which essentially give them thermal vision to track nocturnal animals. Try giving one of your species an ability like this and design a food chain around it.

Environmental effects appear on all trophic levels. In vegetation-scarce areas, primary consumers may adapt to become omnivorous. On Earth, no carnivore's diet consists exclusively of meat; *hypercarnivores*' diet consists of over 70% meat while *hypocarnivores* eat less than 30%. When creating secondary or higher-level consumers, try giving them a few characteristics of herbivores to reflect their dietary needs.

Extreme environments bring out the most drastic traits in creatures. Arid-dwelling animals will develop water-conserving traits, ways to minimize contact with the scorched ground, or natural cooling. Polar conditions bring out heat conservation



Zebras stand out from the backgrounds but blend into their own herds, making it difficult for lions to single out a meal.

Photo: Jean Wimmerlin on Unsplash

features, such as hibernation in bears, the thick blubber of seals and walruses, or the emperor penguins’ group huddle. Intense pressure on the ocean floor would kill any surface-dwelling animal instantly, yet some of the most interesting creatures thrive there. Designing organisms for these environments really lets you cut loose.

A major exception to evolutionary traits are invasive species. Evolving in a foreign environment means invasive species must compensate for a lack of food sources. Some invasive species will die off if they do not adapt while others, such as the cane toad, thrive in their new environments. They can completely disrupt a food chain by consuming plants and animals that would otherwise be eaten by a native species, driving any apex predators out and replacing them or destroying an ecosystem in its entirety. Invasive species can render useless the defensive and offensive traits of native species. For you, these factors can serve as a challenging obstacle for characters in your world to face and a way to disrupt the order by introducing new predatory mechanics to an ecosystem.

With all this in mind, let’s design some creatures.

Design any non-decomposer organism. It can be as large or small as you want. Give it traits according to which trophic level you want it in. Knowing what environment you’d like the creature to exist in will help but is not necessary.

Now that you’ve created one, consider the next level, whether above or below, in the food chain. How will this new creature hunt the first? What traits have each species developed to avoid and detect one another?

Continue this process until you have at least one creature of each trophic level. Keep in mind that for every ecosystem, the higher one stands in the food chain, the fewer species at that level will exist. Think of it as a pyramid where primary consumers comprise the large base part and apex predators occupy the small point on top.

Mutualism, parasitism, and commensalism are interspecies relationships which break the norm of the predator/prey chains. Creatures that might normally be eaten may be given a pass if they can provide some service to their predators. Mutualism allows cleaner fish to rid larger fish of parasites and bacteria in exchange for survival—both benefit from the interaction. Commensalism is a midway

point between the other two, permitting one creature to benefit off the other without harming the other or giving it anything. Parasitism occurs when one organism gains off the others loss—think Xenomorphs from the Alien franchise.

Use these relationships to help design a food web rather than a chain. Take the creature you made before, and think of a how a different creature would interact with it in both a food web and in one of the three relationships. This can lead to some interesting effects: multiple wasp species zombify other insects to make them hosts for larvae; birds can often be found on the backs of bison, cleaning the fur in exchange for protection and a free ride. When considering different interspecies relationships, try to briefly describe the interactions you want between your creatures before creating them. Doing so introduces variety in both function and form, keeping your animals interesting.

Thinking of the creatures in your world as they relate to other creatures helps them feel cohesive with their environments. Designing with food chains creates a sense of independence from your influence and be more immersive for your audience. 🐾



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ART FEATURES:

NGUYEN MINH NHAN AND DENIS ISTOMIN

Art

Feature

Curated and Written by Wynter

Nhan (aka Ren) is a freelance illustration artist. He has been passionate about art since he was young but started painting and learning about concept art during his second year of college. When he first gets an illustration commission, he always researches for references about the story, action, costumes, culture and descriptions for that illustration. After that step, he makes some rough sketches and lets the client choose what they are interested in. Then he will continue the piece in black and white as an underpainting and add color over that until it is finished. He often plays video games like *Final Fantasy* and researches legendary creatures in a story or game he has played; the information he has gathered inspires him to make the concept more interesting. He loves to play the Trading Card Game *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, and it has inspired him to be great illustrator. These interests have influenced him to create his own designs for a board game project he is currently working on. 🐾

See more work at [Artstation](https://www.artstation.com/ruanmingren).

Lion



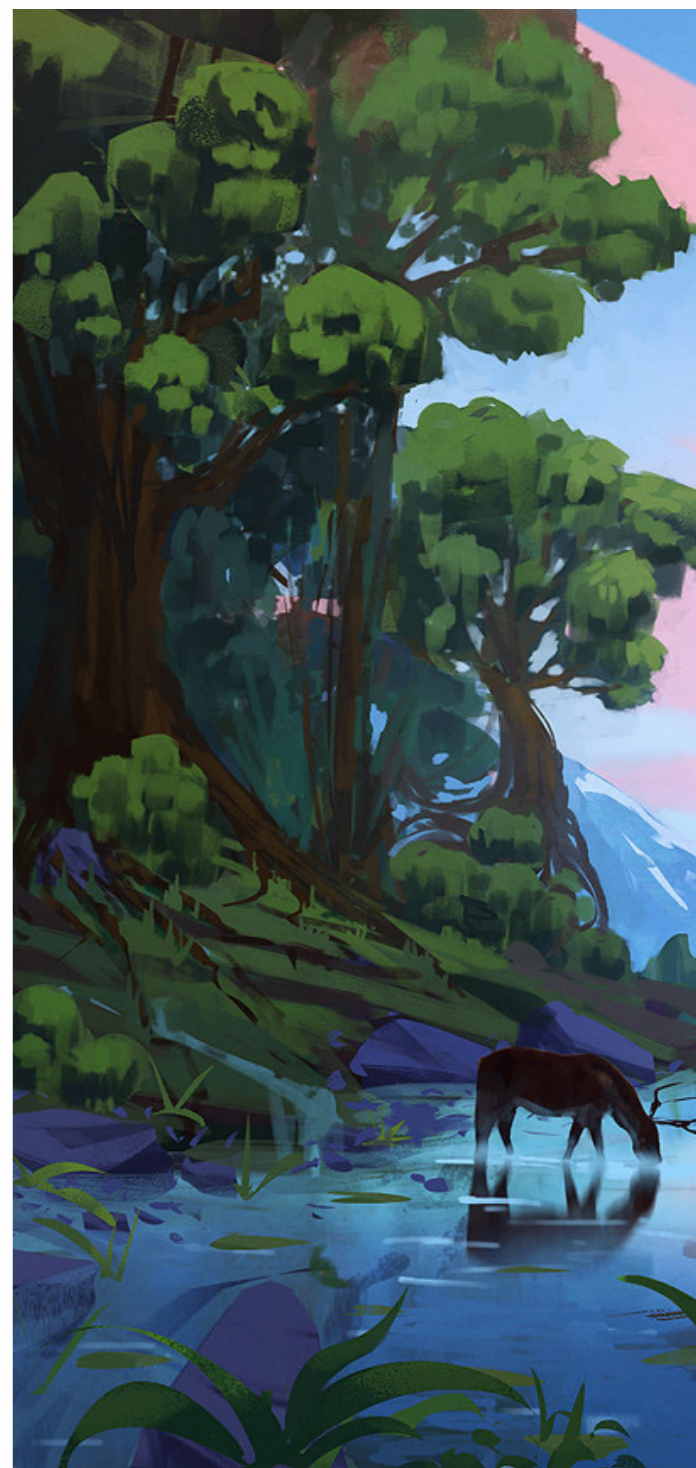
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RMR
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Side: The Queen
Below: Playing Card





*Top: Follow You
Left: Hope
Right: Melancholy*



Denis Istomin is from Russia, Tambov. At the moment, he is still studying in university while working as a freelance artist. Most of his works are inspired by those of Hayao Miyazaki and Makoto Shinkai, as well as the work of Studio Ghibli's Kazuo Oga. They inspired him to paint landscapes with bright, vibrant colors which invoke feelings of wonder within the viewer. In his works, he wants to convey his emotions to the audience and bring to them the beauty of the surrounding expanses, which he believes are some of the main features in an artist's work. 🐼

See more of his work at [Artstation](#).



Special thanks to Nguyen Minh Nhan and Denis Istomin for letting us share their work. If you are interested in being featured in an upcoming issue of Worldbuilding Magazine please [email](#) or contact us on [Discord](#).

THE PRICE OF IMMORTALITY

Monsters

Culture

Daniel Baker

"I am a blasted tree; the bolt has entered my soul; and I felt then that I should survive to exhibit what I shall soon cease to be—a miserable spectacle of wrecked humanity, pitiable to others and intolerable to myself."

Victor Frankenstein

The behemoth and the leviathan are all too easy to call monsters. The towering beast and wretched sea monster have struck fear into the hearts of many throughout history. Among many other creatures, they are classified by inhuman physical traits, a barrier of communication, and a tendency towards destruction. More despicable than any beast of legend, however, is the human that becomes a monster to serve his own ends. Folklore and literature provides numerous reasons why one would sacrifice their humanity for personal gain, and the devil is all too happy to proffer them a deal. One temptation of note carries a grave warning—do not tamper with life and death.

The pursuit of immortality has been a literary theme for so long that the idea of the human seeking immortality can be traced back as far as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. The poem's precise origins are obscured by its age, but it's considered to have been written during the Third Dynasty of Ur. This places it near 2100 BCE and makes it possibly the oldest remaining text of its kind. The poem describes a Sumerian oral tradition, the subject of which is Gilgamesh, king of Uruk. Gilgamesh suffers trials in his search for immortality. First, he is rebuked by a ferryman for his foolishness. He then endures a vigil of seven nights as a test of self-denial. Failing this, Gilgamesh attempts to find an aquatic plant that grants youth. Once he has gathered the plant from the bottom of the sea, it is stolen from him. He ends his journey and returns home.

The allure of immortality is well established and explained in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. The king is motivated to find immortality so that he can cement his legacy and establish his name in history. Others throughout history and legend are motivated by the fear of death. Such motivations

are said to have driven the Chinese emperor Qin Shi Huang to seek out immortality by any means possible—mythical mountains, ingested substances, or eternal protection from the supernatural that might claim him. Finally, there are those who seek power over life and death not out of fear or desire to achieve more in life, but instead seek to reverse the power dynamic between humanity and mortality. Mortality holds humanity in an iron grasp, and for humanity to free itself would be the ultimate power.

Mortality is a topic deeply ingrained into humanity. How apt that some of the longest lasting literature touches on the topic. The epics, however, seem to only touch on the futility of the search for physical immortality. Gilgamesh has eternal life stolen from him. King Arthur never retrieved the Holy Grail. Certainly, somewhere in millennia of literature and folklore, there exists the story of someone who succeeded?

Bram Stoker's eponymous **Dracula** hardly needs to be described. More than one hundred years of study, adaptation, and depiction across several mediums have edified him as the archetypal vampire. What's more interesting than the fangs or immortality is who Count Dracula used to be. Count Dracula, before he was undead, was a human and a scholar. Stoker describes the living Count:

He was in life a most wonderful man. Soldier, statesman, and alchemist—which latter was the highest development of the science-knowledge of his time. He had a mighty brain, a learning beyond compare, and a heart that knew no fear and no remorse.

The living Count is a specimen of bravery who defended his brethren against the invasion of the Turks. He is an accomplished scientist and loves knowledge. He is also a purveyor of the arts, displaying interest in architecture. This is to be compared against another depiction of Dracula from the novel, in which Stoker describes him as a monster. He is utterly despicable, something to cleanse the world of—"Surely God will not permit the world to be the poorer by the loss of such a creature." Stoker's use of two depictions of the same character—the admirable and the abominable—is not only an interesting and effective literary device, but also provides a juxtaposition between the human and the immortal. The two are not reconcilable, and Count Dracula has given up his humanity to defeat death.

Is Bram Stoker's Dracula the first example of the monster that is human-become-immortal? Certainly not. One fairy tale with roots in Slavic religion has been passed down as a folk legend. The central legendary figure is Koshchei the Deathless, a wizard who has cheated death by use of magic. He is featured in multiple tales and is slightly different in each telling, but certain aspects remain the same. He is consistently evil and the antagonist of the tale. He is not a beast or a god—he is a human, albeit an immortal one. As a wizard, he has gained immortality through a spell. These traits fulfill the archetype of a human who, in search of immortality, becomes a monster. What is interesting about Koshchei, however, is the exact mechanism behind the spell that grants him immortality, and how that has influenced later fiction.

"Whereabouts is your death, O Koshchei?"
"My death," he replied, "is in such a place. There stands an oak, and under the oak is a casket, and in the casket is a hare, and in the hare is a duck, and in the duck is an egg, and in the egg is my death."
- (Russian Folk Tales: W. R. S. Ralston)

Koshchei cheats death by tying his soul to an object. This concept should be familiar to purveyors of late 20th and early 21st century fantasy fiction. The concept of the undead wizard was edified into the Lich, a staple of fantasy novels and roleplaying games, including the Dungeons and Dragons series of role-playing games which has included the lich in every edition.



Artist: Anna Hannon

The Kraken may be known for pulling ships into the depths, but the person who has willingly relinquished their humanity for power creates a deeper terror than any monster from the darkest forests. Beasts may be dangerous within their domain, but the siren's call of immortality—and the inhumanity that lies underneath—can come to anyone. Dear reader, who are the monsters of your world, and who did they use to be?

Daniel Baker is a student of language and history. He believes that the most interesting patterns in nature are the ones created by humans. Contact him at sailingyarddb@gmail.com if you are so inclined.



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ON THE BONDING OF AN EOUL, PART 1

Fiction

Fantasy (High)

Ianara Natividad

Alexandre du Faeien, famed archmage of the Arcane Society, hero, and scholar in the continent of Varia, counted among his many exploits a grand tour of the Feylands—a neighboring continent known for its magically suffused environments. Much of what is known about du Faeien’s journey comes from his later work, *Fantastic Fauna & Flora: An Anthology on the Inhabitants of the Feylands*. The compendium was among the first to document the continent’s native denizens.

Scholars later found that the archmage recorded the bulk of the information in a series of travel journals written over the excursion. Select pieces made it to publication in *Fantastic Fauna & Flora*. Perhaps the most popular examples of these writings involve du Faeien’s experiences with the *eoul* (plural: *eouli*), an endemic species of bioluminescent fey creatures. The four eoul subtypes appear in all known biomes of the Feylands, arguably making them the most visible and populous creature in the continent. Du Faeien’s entries detail his journey as a distant observer of the eouli to becoming the bondmate of a specimen.

Entry 1: 27 Faenrul 3306 3E

My trip towards the Kingdom of the Evergreens, colloquially known as the Evergreens, began on the first of the month of Faenrul. Our retinue launched from the great city of Nostruville in Varia. Reaching the border to cross into the neighboring Feylands took about eighteen days, nearly two Varian weeks. This trip will mark my second time visiting the kingdom.

I took my first excursion nine years ago. The intent had been for study and, according to my late father, direction. I remember him telling me that “the greatest of mages begin with mastery over one school first.” It’s one of my earliest memories, that moment. However, as a mage, I had developed into a “generalist with no sense of expertise,” by my father’s standards. Being the sole son of the leader of the Arcane Society, that would not do. For thousands of years, the du Faeien line vehemently asserted that our blood had been blessed by the gods of magic. Each generation of the family had produced an archmage, after all. That legacy, I had to continue.

My studies brought me then to the Evergreens’ capital city of Eryll Tahl’Rei. I apprenticed under the kingdom’s greatest mages, though only of one led me to my passion: the phenomenal art of bladesinging. Weaving magic with swordsmanship. To be able to dance through the battlefield, blade in one hand and arcane powers in the other, the beauty and elegance of the school resonated with me. I found my direction then, in the Feylands. Years later, I chose to return. For this second trip, I had the opportunity of direct teleportation into Eryll Tahl’Rei. My illustrious connections in the Evergreens afforded me that much. Yet, I chose the manual trek for my return, eschewing that exclusive privilege so as to experience more on this journey.

Travel in the Feylands is a logistically arduous affair: the treks long, riddled with dangers, and the ways muddled by the magicks within the



continent. The Evergreens' border is among the friendlier areas to cross into the Feylands, however, and the resident elven populations prosper for it. Using magic, difficulties associated with traditional travel ceased. More importantly, I feel that I have more to gain by spending my time experiencing the wondrous realm of the Feylands from the trail, rather than immediately being whisked away to my destination. As fate would have it, I have nothing if not time for now.

There is tedium in the exertions of travel, unsurprisingly. Days slip by. Despite the occasional encounter with an exotic creature or plant, much of my time is filled with a steady travel pace. The repetitions of daily errands, like setting up and taking down camp, exacerbates the monotony. I go on foot some time during the traveling day, becoming a habit in itself. I would step off the wagon to walk alongside the head guide, Lethune. I became well-acquainted with the elven scout during my last visit to the Feylands. We speak casually, more so than I can with the others of our retinue, and I often am the listener.

Lethune speaks of his homelands with a cool passion that I find both envious and infectious. I do understand the source of his enthusiasm, though. The cross from Varia into the Evergreens is like pouring a can of verdant paint on an otherwise drab canvas. In the week since we crossed the border, I had the chance to acclimate to the Feylands' ambient energy. The presence of magic is palpable, and only the Grand Arcaneum could even come close to simulating this experience in Varia. I have no perfect way to express the change but that the lands simply feel more alive! Buzzing, teeming, and exuding a vital energy that could muffle lesser beings. We now traverse a region brimming with magic, and no moment is silent when the living world sings with every one of our steps. The fauna and flora never cease to amaze me! Beasts which meld into plants, and plants that move like stilted creatures especially blur the lines of their categorization.

I believe we'd have gotten much farther in progressing the trip if not for my constant requests to pause and sketch something I'd spotted. Just yesterday, I asked to stop as a flower dangling from a branch caught my eye. It had blue, puffy petals that had an almost leathery appearance. As I approached, I caught whiff of a mildly sweet fragrance. Lethune yanked me back when I got within a foot of it, and I watched as the flower

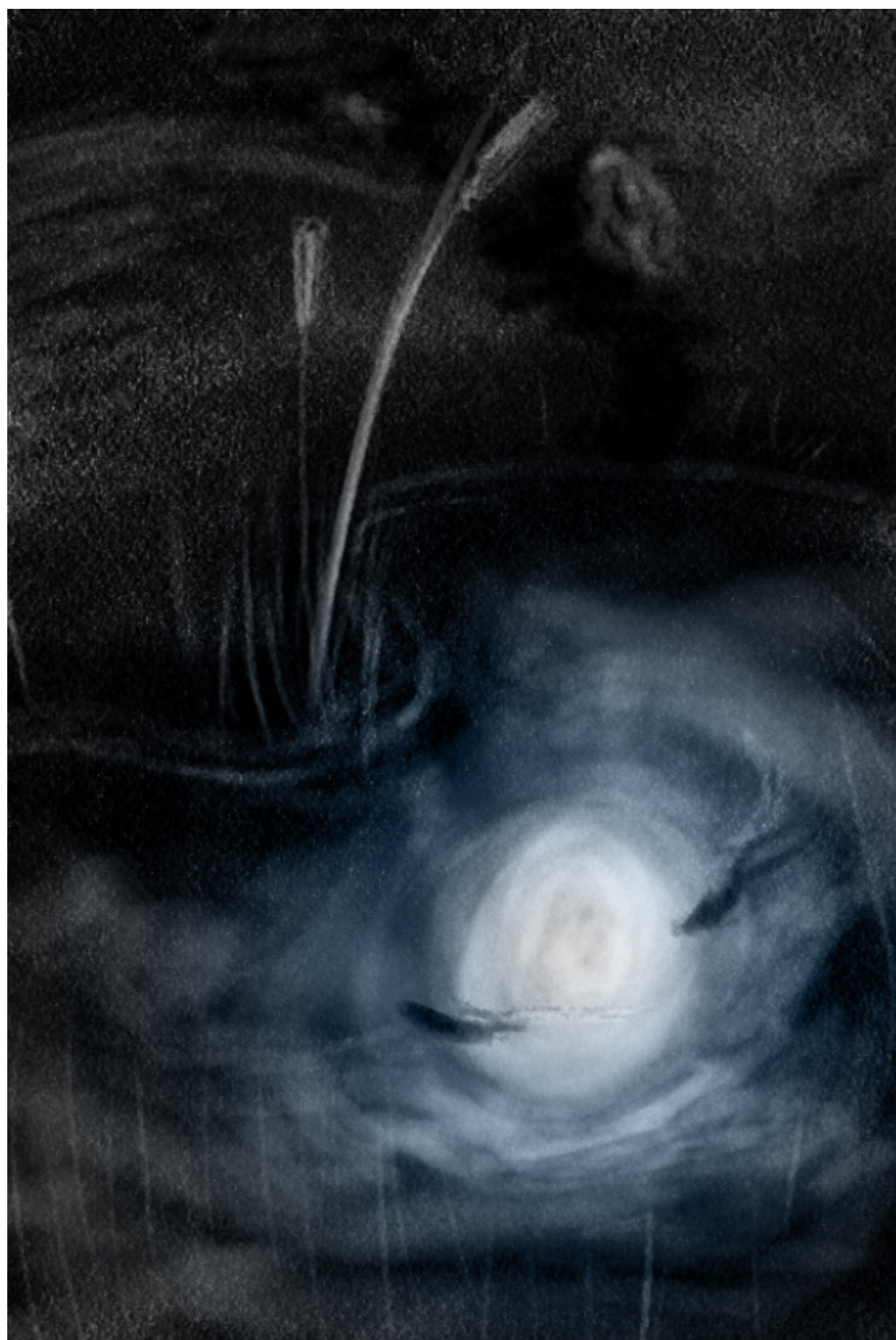
bared a pair of fangs! Apparently, I found a *kiovdul*, a "venom vine"—translated from Sylvan, the primary language of classification used throughout the Feylands. The closest analogue I can provide to it is a snake, except it behaves more like a parasite. The *kiovdul* attaches to trees and uses its scent to attract small prey. Its bite also contains venom; for humanoids, the venom causes a swelling, deep purple rash at the point of contact. Lethune described the bite as "hardly lethal" whereas the rash "feels like ants constantly crawling and nipping at your skin, and the ants are on fire." I counted myself quite fortunate to have avoided the bite.

Regardless of the tedium and assorted dangers, I cannot complain. The trek has generated much excitement for me. I've actually been mulling over the purpose of my tour for a while now. A purpose beyond wayless soul searching. Beyond plain studies. Magical research—dissecting the why's and how's of magic through time-tested processes—was always a reliable activity for me. My father disapproved of my "wasting time" with most other pursuits. The Arcane Society's headquarters certainly have excellent and secure facilities to accommodate the work I did take on. For this journey, I left behind several projects that lost my interest. Now, finally, I possess the opportunity to explore the natural world, a topic that had intrigued me since the brief childhood I spent with my mother. Though infused with magic, the wilds of the Feylands provide such a stark contrast to my previous studies, which were so purely magical, theoretical, and saturated with rigid methodology.

During that first visit of mine to the Feylands, those nine years ago, I had much to learn and be fascinated about. However, nothing came quite as close to my amazement at seeing the skies absolutely riddled with beads of color. The stars shone every minute of every hour of every day, and so especially brightly during the nighttime. Yet, they were not stars, like I initially presumed. At least, not in the sense that we in Varia have come to know those distant specks of light.

The stars of the Feylands are alive. Their colors span all range of the spectrum visible to humanoid eyes. They are a type of fey known as *eouli*: living masses of light whose name appropriately means "star." From distant dots whose sparkles could be individually discerned to clumps of multicolored clouds, the *eouli* put on a wondrous show for the entire continent. I spent hours sketching. No, coloring them in my books, trying to find some pattern.

Artist: *Tristen Fekete*



I did so nearly a decade past when I first laid my eyes upon them, and now. However, I’ve come to realize that there seemed to be no rhyme nor reason to their colors and their movements. It was so much pure, unadulterated instinct to move and to be. Absolutely beautiful...

Entry 2: 28 Faenrul 3306 3E

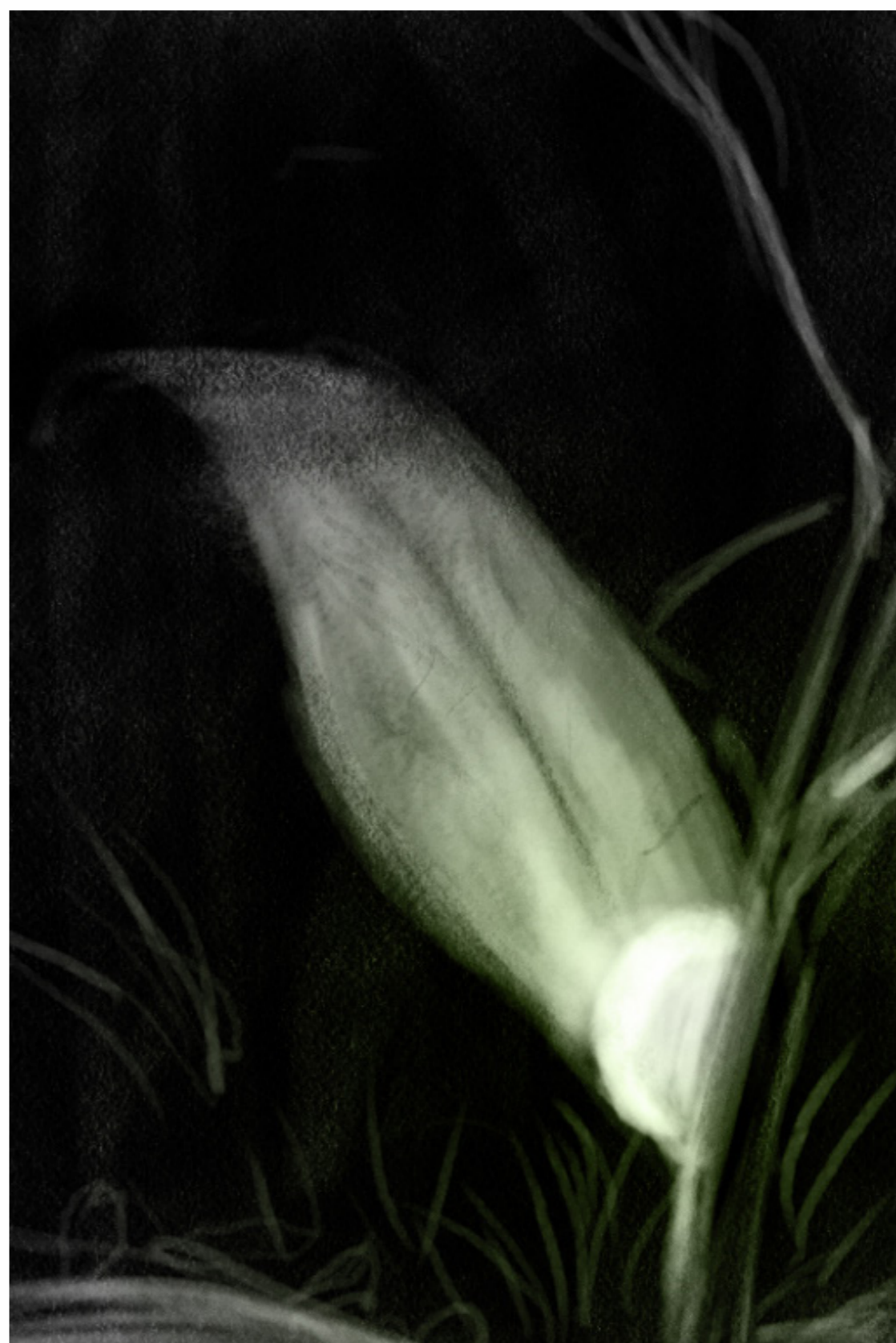
Today, I learned that the eouli exist beyond the skies. After the day’s travel, my retinue set up camp in a grove for the night. As I accompanied Lethune to fetch water from a nearby pond, we noticed an illuminated bright spot, about six feet in diameter, beneath the surface. He explained that we had more than likely stumbled upon a community of aquatic creatures centered around a *maen-eoul*, meaning “water-star.”

The maen-eouli features prominently in the Feylands’ waters. Their constant luminescence attracts various underwater creatures to them, including whole settlements of aquatic elves in the Cascades—the kingdom encompassing the major flooded, maritime regions of the continent. In cases where less predatory beings gather, a community then forms around a single maen-eoul.

The sheer brightness made it seem like the eoul was rather near the surface, but Lethune estimated that they were at least “fifty sprigs” below, translating to approximately fifteen feet by Varian measurements.

We filled our canteens easily, and without disturbing the eoul’s community. I stayed for at least an extra hour sketching the scene in addition to writing observations. The maen-eoul’s light remained constant, wavering only slightly as I surmised creatures moved around it. Unfortunately, there was little else to report from my view above the water’s surface. Lethune also kept me company and provided some fascinating insights on the different types of eouli at large.

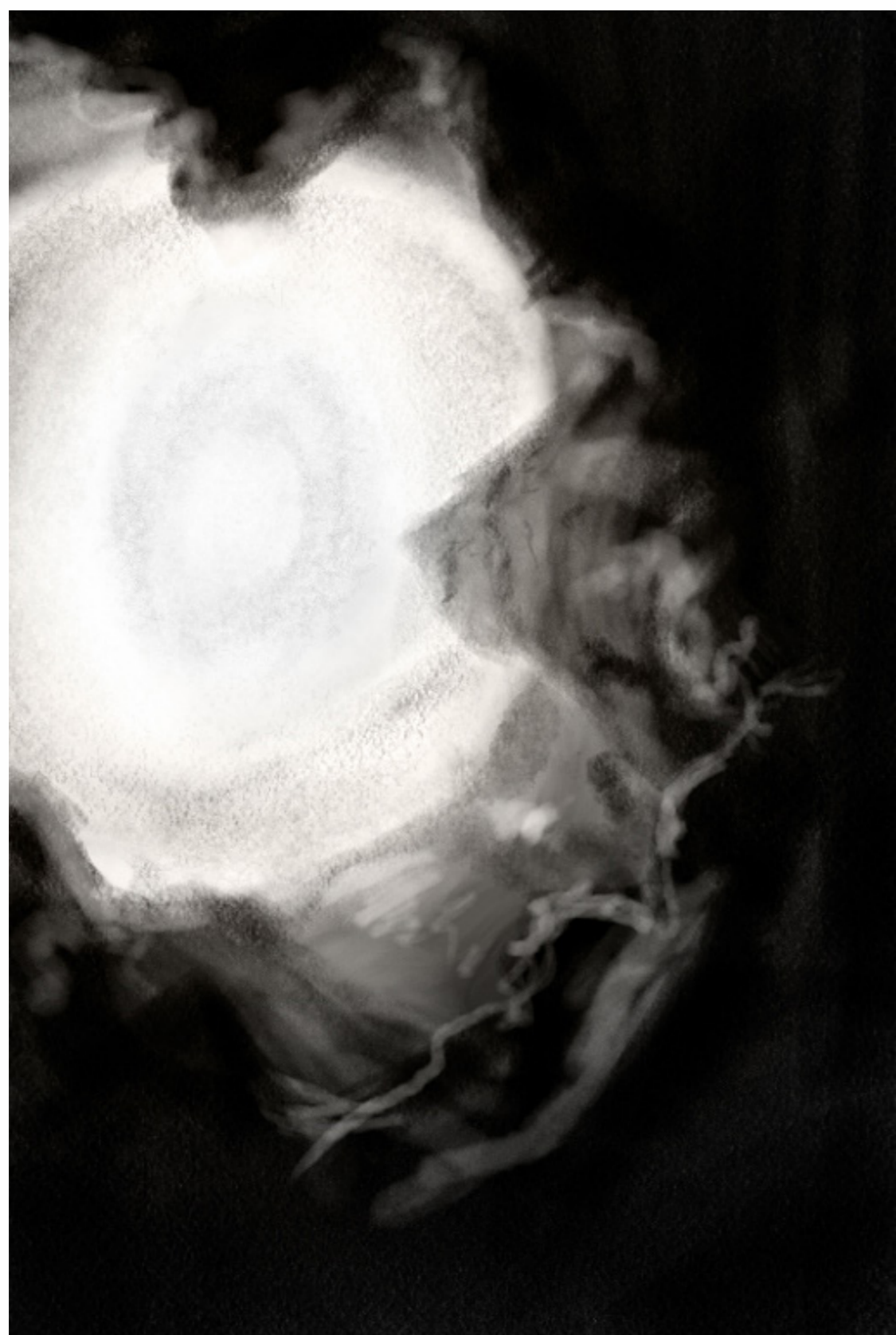
For one, the eouli of the skies are formally known as *el-eouli* (“sky stars”). Due to them being the most prolific of the species, native Feylanders typically refer to them as just eoul, and how I first came to know them. As the most visible subtype, they appear almost anywhere in the Feylands where there are open skies. While I colored that night’s pattern of el-eouli, Lethune recollected an instance when he witnessed several el-eouli coalescing over the waters right above a maen-eoul’s community. Apparently, congregations of



Artist: *Tristen Fekete*

multiple types of eouli are a rare sight. Moreover, according to Lethune, most eouli are “mindless, beautiful, and instinctively guarded.” I asked him to explain, for the latter description seems contradictory to the maen-eoul’s community within our sights. He answered that eouli typically group only with one another, as we constantly witness with the “clumps of stars” in the skies. Otherwise, most creatures would be hard-pressed to gain close proximity to them—the maen-eouli being an exception.

Then, Lethune added that another more “docile” type of eoul is the *oirte-aed*. The *oirte-aedi*, meaning “seed gems,” are an immobile subspecies that attaches to flora for sustenance. Those eouli are the rarest of their kind. I mused that perhaps we may even encounter one throughout our trek. Lethune admitted there was a chance. The Evergreens, painted heavily with swathes of lush forests, possess the most varied plantlife I’ve ever had the pleasure to see. Some trees grow hundreds of feet tall while a species of creeping plants can stretch the same distance in width. There is life from the forest floor to the canopy: vibrant plants, bustling critters, winged creatures above; each affected by the magic permeating the forests. Such an ideal environment no doubt contributes to the



Artist: Tristen Fekete

odds of finding *oirte-aedi*. Though, I theorize the region’s density and inaccessibility can simultaneously impede attempts to locate them.

When I asked if there were any more types of eouli, Lethune added one more. He admitted to knowing little of the final type: the “living gems” known as the *buir-aedi*. What he heard of them came from acquaintances that traversed the subterranean areas of the Dustdoms and the Obsidian Glades—the continent’s major desert and volcanic regions, respectively. They attach to stones and spend most of their lifespans in isolation within the earthen terrain. Until our discussion reached this point, I had not considered the eouli’s means of sustenance beyond the *oirte-aedi*’s. If one subspecies could entirely subsist underground surrounded with nothing more than rocks while another relied on plant life, then how do the others fare?

However, by that time in the night, what was intended to be a brief errand for water had become an affair several hours long, mostly of me sketching and Lethune explaining the eouli. We returned to camp soon after, and I bid him a good night. Then I retired to my tent, only to turn my efforts to scribing this entry. I had to rest, for Eryll Tahl’Rei is at least a month’s trek out—no thanks to my dallying. Yet, I could not help but record my day’s observations and reflections.

I haven’t felt so excited to write of my findings in months. The eoul seem even more fantastic just from a cursory discussion with my guide. From the earth to the seas and the skies, they seem so iconic. A testament to the eternal, expansive mystique of the Feylands. I surmise their natures to be more magical than natural, if only for their basis as fey. When we reach Eryll Tahl’Rei, I must make sure to inquire on the eouli with my colleagues, and the capital’s royal library will also prove a valuable resource in my research. At least knowledge is in no short supply within the elven civilizations. Yes, a study of these creatures would be a great focus.

And mayhaps it shall expand into something more.🐉

[Zentrem - World Anvil Page](#)

THE RISE OF VALKYRIES IN THE VALKYRINE GALAXY

Fiction

Science Fiction

Psycho Romeo

The distant planet of Apex is home to an exotic forest. Lush, colorful plants spend their time idly bathing under the sun. Life on this planet knows nothing of death, as if untethered from the cruel grip of time. There is no breeze, no sound, and not a single animal—yet, in one corner of the forest, the rustling of leaves breaks the absolute silence. By chance, fate, or the design of a bored god, a single sapling ascends above the others. It uproots its stalky limbs and stretches outwards, parting the nearby vegetation and bathing itself in light. The Valkyrie has come to be. But unlike its fungal cousins, the Valkyrie has the gift of movement and thought.

For thousands of years, the first Valkyrie slowly wandered Apex as the only moving entity on the otherwise motionless planet. There were no predators, threats, or danger of any kind. Just a single Valkyrie, the forest, and all the knowledge that Apex could offer. Slowly lumbering around on the mess of vine-like appendages protruding below its head, it studied the mysteries of the world. Working with dirt, then wood, then stone and metal, it built. With reflective walls, a crude sunlight chamber allowed for optimal sunlight gathering when the sun was out. Shelter offered comfortable rest when it wasn't. The Valkyrie made all these advancements alone, for the same ascendancy that had blessed the creature with intelligence had also cursed it with infertility. It would be the first and last of its kind. Or so it thought.

Under circumstances as obscure as the first, another Valkyrie came to be. This second one embarked on its own journey, reaping Apex for knowledge. One day, the two Valkyries met.

The release of chemicals through direct contact enabled the two to communicate. With some difficulty, they created language. There was much to discuss. Knowledge was shared and crude culture began to form. Together, the first and second

Valkyries existed for thousands of years. But that was all they could do: exist. Their naturally resilient bodies coupled with the pristine peacefulness of Apex meant they had no fear of death. However, without the ability to reproduce, there was no legacy for them to pass on. Their sentience was a prison of stasis.

The two Valkyries decided to give purpose to their lives and escape the confinement of their existence through the advancement of their technology. Dirt paths were replaced with concrete ones. Wooden shelters were rebuilt using plaster. The crude tools and vehicles that the Valkyries manually worked with their viney appendages were honed into automated instruments, allowing for the construction of complex operations to harvest the planet. Apex had not seen so much activity since its formation from the cosmic soup. This era of progress continued until, one day, the Valkyries realized they could gain nothing more from Apex and took their pursuit to the stars.

After spending a painfully long time discovering space faring technology, the Valkyries traveled to other planets, discovering new creatures and—for the first time ever—aggression. A beast critically wounded the first Valkyrie, tearing the stalks and vines that formed its body asunder. It survived, but would forevermore be confined to a medical chamber. This event marked the Valkyrie's first real encounter with a hostile threat. With a new awareness of their own mortality, their priority turned to the preservation of their species, by any means possible.

The first step to self-preservation would be to overcome their inability to reproduce. The Valkyries scoured the galaxy, looking for more of their kind. Over an eon of cautiously searching, three more were discovered: two from Apex, and one from a nearby planet that featured similar biology. Like their predecessors, these Valkyries too had

ascended from plants. The three were integrated into the group, and the the now five became united in the goal of preserving their species. However, disappointed with nature's production rate of Valkyries, the group turned to science to further increase their numbers.

The Ascended began with genetic modification. Despite their caution, for reasons science could not explain, the attempt resulted in the death of the fourth Valkyrie, unmade from the inside out when its artificial reproductive organs became parasitic. This major setback forever stained Valkyrine perception of genetic alteration on a living creature. The focus instead turned to cloning, which proved extremely successful. The cloned Valkyries mimicked the original ones in every way with two exceptions: the sapling clones awoke having already achieved adolescent levels of intelligence and had a limited lifespan of about 400 years.

While these traits could be considered major defects, the four remaining original Valkyries (now the "*Ascended Valkyries*") instead saw it as freedom from the walls that imprisoned them. They determined that the best course of action would be to allow the clones to live their lives blessed by the fear of their own mortality, a luxury not given to the Ascended on Apex. Using long-ranged Valkyrine-developed warping technology, groups of clones called *Pods* were sent to colonize distant and dangerous planets. Each pod had no knowledge of the cloning process that birthed them and were given no instruction or guidance to survive. Many groups did not last long in the hostility of their new home while others immediately killed each other upon awakening.

The Ascended watched, studying how their children fared in the myriad of situations they were placed in. They deduced the influences that led to undesirable behavior such as malice or indolence, and ensured that future pods were sent to places where the saplings would be less likely to develop those traits. However, watching from afar could only tell them so much. In an effort to produce more data, driven by an ardent desire to perfect their offspring, the Ascended donned protective gear and retrieved the bodies of the fallen cloned Valkyries for analysis. Once all data was extracted, the biomatter that comprised the corpse would be recycled to create a new sapling. The data acquired allowed the Ascended to improve the next iteration of saplings, implanting them with knowledge and personality traits that made them more likely

to survive and even flourish. Through this cycle of unnatural rebirth, the Ascended's desire for preservation slowly transformed into an obsession with cultural enlightenment.

The few successful Valkyrine colonies were given extra attention. Occasionally they were sent additional pods, allowing the colony to expand and grow. When a Valkyrie from these colonies would fall or wither with age, an Ascended would grace the colony with their presence, collect the body and leave. To the clones, the magical nature of Ascended technology gave them the appearance of the divine, and culture took a very mystical tone. Grand ritualistic funerals were held, and the Ascended would be showered with reverence on arrival. It was believed that if the colony could earn the Ascended's favor, they would be more likely to receive a new pod of saplings to replace their numbers.

Valkyrine colonies grew into religious societies, advancing in technology while blissfully unaware of the true nature of their precursor's position in their lifecycle. The Ascended continued their cultural study, producing more clones and sending them to create new colonies or spur existing ones into sprawling civilizations. The first Valkyrie, still bound to its medical chamber, never imagined that eons of work would have brought them to this moment. The clone saplings were subjected to fear, death, and birth in ways the Ascended never were. The Valkyrine civilizations indulged in a full range of cultural experiences: prosperity, hardships, war, and faith. To the Ascended, they had created the perfect species.

Then, on some distant planet, by chance, fate, or the design of some bored god, a single beast ascended from the others. The human had come to be.

Thus began the fall of the Valkyrine empire. 🐉

FRIGHTFUL FAUNA CONTEST: CANDLE GHOSTS

Contest

Explicit

Horror/Suspense

Fantasy (Low)

Malkuthe, Contest Winner for Candle Ghosts
Warning: The following contains descriptions of self-injury and suicide.

2.1.1.4.140.30 NL

Maybe in our yesteryears, obstinance of this kind would have been understandable, but we have been enlightened to the existence of the Shardscape for almost sixty years now. And yet my colleagues continue to ask the inane question of whether my time would be better spent studying other aspects of the cosmos. What other avenue proffers insights not only into the heart of science, but also to the questions of philosophy which we have been grappling with for as long as civilization has existed? It is intolerable the way that they sneer at what they believe to be mere superstition, when there is quantifiable proof that something, anything believed in hard enough could manifest in our world through this vehicle.

Yesterday a woman came to me with her son in tow. She claimed that he saw a res iter and I loathe the fact that I thought it was mere paranoia at first. It was a sign, a reminder that I was not as open-minded as I wanted to be. Still, a candle ghost...

It was hard to believe that such a thing existed, but I saw the state of her son. Outwardly he displayed the hallmark signs of depression, and nothing else, but I couldn't and can't help but feel as though there is something more insidious afoot. I will keep an eye on him. I doubt that he has indeed encountered such a being, and if he has, I doubt that it is as bad as the rumors make it out to be.

However, what sort of scholar would I be if I allowed my doubts to hinder my study of this phenomenon?

Named for their appearance which evokes the trail of smoke rising from the wick of a snuffed candle, candle ghosts (*Res Iterem* in Arventiri) often appear innocuous enough. But since their first reported sighting in 139.30 NL, candle ghosts have ostensibly been the reason for a minor but nonetheless dramatic rise in the rate of gruesome self-mutilations in the Päll-tanír. The vast majority of these are attributed to individuals coming into contact with these strange beings, particularly those who reside in rural areas.

So. My friends and I, right? We was new to this fuck-big desert place. We thought it'd be a good idea to camp out in these hills they called Eeefalta or some shit. And jus as the sun was settin', I saw this real pretty lady, right? Real pretty, y'know? But she was smokin'—and like I don't mean she was hot or anythin'. But she was totally made of smoke. Anyway, it was so weird, y'know? Cus the wind was blowin', right? But like, the smoke wasn't blowin' with it. Totally freaked me out so I got my mate to look, and the fucker damn near pist himself.

So I wasn't going to stay, y'know? Braem here wanted to touch the thing, though. But it was a fuckin' ghost, man. Don't fuckin' touch it! Right? It was pretty, yeah, but scared the shit outta me, too. Din't learn 'til later what it was. Thank the fuckin' gods I had the boys pack up and get the fuck outta there, y'know? Din't wanna end up like one of them poor dead-eye bastards in those 'facilities.'

Ever been to one of them, man? Fuckin' torture's what it is, right? They're all in there jus screamin' and wailin' and wantin' to die and they can't do nuthin' 'bout it. Fuckin' terrifyin', y'know?

— Aellir, Wood Elf Adventurer
Drunkenly recounting his encounter with a candle ghost.

Anatomy & Morphology

As transient as the rippling sheets of smoke that their appearance evokes, candle ghosts are mutable, changing form from one moment to the next in their brief, fleeting lives. The glimpses caught by those fortunate enough to only see these elusive creatures, as well as the babbling of those driven mad by their touch, confirm that candle ghosts often take on a humanoid shape. The tendrils of translucent smoke that comprise their bodies form into faint shapes reminiscent of a head, a torso, two arms, and two legs.

Physical Appearance

Candle ghosts, as their name suggests, possess an ethereal appearance. Their bodies are seemingly comprised of curling wisps, tendrils, and sheets of clean white smoke. Despite this, they do not appear to be affected by the motion of the air around them, the smoke that comprises their bodies seemingly following the currents and eddies of imperceptible winds. This aspect of their appearance lends an unearthly grace to their ephemeral forms and yet marks them as inarguably not of this world.

The understated elegance of their translucent form is enhanced during the evenings. The same ethereal appearance that makes them so beautiful makes them difficult to see in any sort of harsh brightness—particularly during the day. When night falls, however, candle ghosts almost seem to glow with whatever little ambient light there is. This appearance is most notable during nights when the moons are high and bright in the sky, where they not only appear to glow but shimmer beautifully. This state, however, is when they are at their most dangerous as their appearance is spell-binding, and it takes only the briefest moment of contact before it is too late.

Genetics and Reproduction

People often speak in hushed tones of how candle ghosts draw the souls from the bloodied sockets of their victim’s hollowed-out eyes to create new candle ghosts. However, modern scholarship

Haariyya... Even writing your name hurts. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry...

Ever since I lost you I've blamed myself. They say that they come for lonely people... Was I not enough? Should I have been there more? I held you in my arms and I'll never forget the way your blood trickled from your eyes.

Every day I remember how your cold body felt against my skin... How your last breath ghosted across my cheek... How your warm blood trickled over my fingers... How I screamed my throat raw calling for help... Gods. It hurts. It hurts so much. I don't want to remember anymore. I just want to forget. I need to forget.

Don't worry. I'll be with you soon. They came for me, too... Soon I'm going to fade like you. I'm going to forget. And then maybe we'll be together again.

— Letter scrap recovered from a candle ghost victim

has uncovered no conclusive evidence that this occurs, much less that this is the means by which candle ghosts reproduce. Remarkably little is known about the creatures, though it is believed that they proliferate by spontaneous genesis in the Shardscape. This hypothesis is supported by an account found in the bloodstained journal of a spelunker who reportedly bore witness to a candle ghost emerging from a small temporary rift before succumbing to madness.

Ecology and Habitats

Although candle ghosts have left victims in most every known region, they appear to favor manifesting in the Päll-tanír. Locals attribute this to the desert continent's large swathes of empty, unlivable land. Smaller communities say that candle ghosts answer to the melancholy call of the spirit of the desert, often portrayed as a lonely and disconsolate soul by the traditional belief systems still followed in these rural settlements.

Modern academics contend that since candle ghosts appear to be drawn to forgotten places, the Päll-tanír, with its disproportionate amount of abandoned townships and villages, and crumbling ruins, is the most likely place for these creatures to manifest. While this is the most widely accepted explanation, especially in academia, the truth is that the prevalence of candle ghosts in the Päll-tanír remains inexplicable.

Dietary Needs and Habits

No specimen has ever been seen to partake in traditional sustenance of any sort. The few individuals that have been studied to any extent lived such brief lives that it is widely believed that they have no need for food or water. As for whether they require some unorthodox or abstract substance to sustain themselves remains an open question, with some academics positing that it is possible they feed on negative emotion, especially nihilistic thoughts.

Popular belief, however, stands in stark contrast with scholarly opinion. Particularly in isolated communities, it is believed that candle ghosts feed on blood, the eyes of their victims, and, ultimately, their souls. Often, parents will scare their children into doing hard work, being kinder, or studying by telling them that candle ghosts will come after them if they fail to make anything of their lives. This practice is prevalent in rural areas but has started gaining traction in even urban communities.

One account, dated to around a hundred years after the first sighting of a candle ghost, however, seems to corroborate the popular belief. An explorer, who decided to split with his companion to look around a new ruin to the north of Tan'Ayya, alleges that upon his arrival at the agreed-upon rendezvous point, he found his friend clawing at her eyes. The account continues on, describing the way that the candle ghost seemed to loom over the thrashing, screaming, babbling victim, the wispy tendrils of its ethereal form turning crimson as it drained the woman's blood.

Supporters of the popular belief point to this account as proof positive that the candle ghosts are malicious. However, it is often discounted in academic discussions not only because it stands in stark contrast with centuries' worth of other accounts, there also appears to be no record of the explorer having suffered any psychological damage—a certainty if he had, indeed, observed the "attack" for as long as the account implies.

Biological Cycle

It is believed that the birth of a candle ghost is a highly rare occasion. In the centuries that they have been known to exist, not even shardborn

academic correspondents have borne witness to such an event. However, it is thought that like most other shardscape creatures, they emerge fully-formed from one of the many mirrors scattered across the Shardscape wilds.

Perception and Sensory Capabilities

Without eyes, noses, ears, or any sense organs to speak of, it is unknown whether candle ghosts possess any sort of sensory capabilities, and most scholars familiar with the creatures believe that if they have any ability to sense the world around them, it is through a means beyond the understanding of modern science.

They are often spotted aimlessly wandering around empty houses in rural areas, and, in at least one case, roaming the streets of dusty ruins uncovered by the harsh desert winds. One thing is known for certain: though often appearing listless in their wanderings, the candle ghosts are inexplicably drawn to the lonely and the morose. It is theorized that somehow they can perceive the miserable, especially the ones that suffer alone, and seek them out.

Origins

The exact nature and origin of the candle ghosts is unknown to this day, with the first reported sighting tracing back to just 139.30 NL at a small, now-abandoned village near the border of Tan'Ayya with the Republic of Sibor. Whether this sighting (reported by a close relative of one of the instructors at the academy of Al Zeresh) was the first instance of a candle ghost appearing in the material realm or simply the first reported case is perhaps unknowable. There is, however, evidence to suggest that physical contact was made with a candle ghost prior to this first sighting, but with only the account of the Fane who prepared the body to go by, it is difficult to make any definite pronouncements.

Two facts are known: candle ghosts do not originate from the material world, and they are not, as their name and appearance might suggest, the souls of the departed made manifest. Instead, it has long been posited that candle ghosts originate from the Shardscape, and recent evidence gathered from the testimony of magically-inclined shardborn citizens supports this hypothesis.

Due to their nature and their consequent behavior, it is believed that candle ghosts are born from society's collective dread with regard to being forgotten—an existential fear made manifest. They are known to dwell near ruins, abandoned homes, deserted villages, unmarked graves, and even gravesites where there is little personifying information on the markings, all places associated with the forgotten dead, and unremembered legacies. Furthermore, as far as the literature suggests, they appear to be attracted to the solitary and the beleaguered, a fact that can be explained by examining the very real psychological tendency to either want to forget one's troubles or to question whether life has any meaning during times of loneliness or hopelessness.

There are some who challenge this hypothesis on the grounds that it is based largely on circumstantial evidence. However, to date, no compelling argument backed by evidence has been made against it. Not to say that conventional wisdom is correct in this case, but rather it is testament to how difficult these creatures are to study.

Effects of Exposure

For reasons that are yet to be understood—but have been attributed to magic, the eldritch nature of the Shardscape, or simply a "glitch" in the mortal mind—prolonged exposure to the mere presence of candle ghosts has proven to be catastrophic to sapient creatures. Not even shardborn are exempt from this effect. Even certain individuals who are either possessed of copious amounts of willpower, or have honed their minds to repel outside influence, can nonetheless fall victim to the insidious thoughts that candle ghosts can plant in the minds of their victims.

To date there has been only one comprehensive study on the effects of exposure to candle ghosts. Often, this is attributed to a lack of resources, viable test subjects, specimens, or any number of details both major and minor, but many in the academic community are convinced that what would otherwise be an unconscionable lack of action and desire to study a new and relatively unknown phenomenon is the result of a lack of courage. Although useful data was collected during the first comprehensive direct study, it came at the unfortunate cost of the academy of Al Zeresh losing one of its best and brightest.

Further studies have been restricted to the first two stages of physical exposure as well as visual exposure. Originally, it was thought that studying the third stage was safe, but it was a coin flip risk at best, with some researchers developing symptoms of their own after performing the studies. So, general policies were changed to restrict direct research to the first two stages.

What other research has been accomplished in the years since has been largely based on bloodsworn written and spoken accounts. Although bloodsworn testimony lends a level of credence to the knowledge gathered in this manner, it suffers from all the normal pitfalls of anecdotal evidence. While bloodsworn testimonies are known to be true as far as the sworn is aware, there are no direct means by which to ascertain whether they in fact bore witness to what they claimed to or merely misapprehended their circumstances.

Visual Exposure

Generally, it appears that the effects of visual exposure to candle ghosts can vary from utterly benign to moderately harmful. One thing that is certain is that rarely, if ever, does visual exposure lead to the same destructive impulses that accompany physical contact. This is not to say that visual exposure cannot cause death as the psychological effects are detrimental to important cognitive functions, such as self-preservation, critical thinking, and inhibition.

It has been established to a reasonable degree of confidence that the ultimate effects of visual exposure come down to four variables: the length of visual exposure, the proximity to the candle ghost, the number of companions, and the proximity of said companions. As such, it perhaps comes as no surprise to know that watching a candle ghost from nearby while alone invites the most grievous effects.

At best, visual exposure causes an individual to enter an involuntary state of torpor for 8 to 24 hours. While mostly benign and transient, this effect can nevertheless prove fatal, especially when volatile circumstances or situations that require active participation arise. At worst, prolonged visual exposure to candle ghosts can cause intense, intermittent bouts of depression, as well as a general feeling of apathy. In addition, prolonged visual exposure can lead to sudden and inescapable panic attacks as a result of unwanted existential thoughts.

3.1.1.4.140.30 NL

The subject continues to be unresponsive. More and more I begin to think that there is something to the story that this boy was exposed to a res iter, but so far the subject has failed to display the erratic behavior reported in the rumors.

I spoke with one of my colleagues from outside Al Zeresh, as I had become aware he had compiled accounts from the last year with regard to the res iter. He says that the first day is the most important, in case of actual exposure, as apparently most symptoms associated with visual exposure passed within 24 hours.

I unfortunately failed to confirm with the subject's mother that the boy merely saw a res iter and did not, in fact, come into physical contact with it. If the latter is the case, and my colleague is correct, then I'm afraid there might be nothing I can do.

It is thought that long-term visual exposure (upwards of an hour) might trigger the same effects as physical contact, but this has either not occurred, or it has not been reported. Regardless, while there is reason to believe that this might, in fact, be the case, there is no evidence to suggest that this hypothesis is true.

Physical Exposure

According to the literature, physical contact with candle ghosts has a mortality rate of 100%. Creatures of forgotten places and unremembered people, candle ghosts represent the desire for escapism, especially in the face of overwhelming odds or a world that seems frightfully unfair. However, they appear to embody this idea taken to the logical extreme, sparking a desire in their victims to not only forget, but to be forgotten, a desire so insidious and overwhelming that their victims eventually end up wishing to forget themselves, to fade from history. Like an ember placed in a bone-dry field, this seemingly-innocuous idea of wanting to forget eventually grows into a raging inferno that is almost, and in fact has so far proven to be, impossible to stop.

Initial Exposure

After coming into physical contact with a candle ghost, the symptoms are remarkably similar to effects experienced through long-term visual exposure and in fact track quite closely to the same progression. Long-term visual exposure causes effects that decline in severity over time, but can persist for years after initial visual contact. In contrast, the effects of physical exposure remain at a constant severity for up to three days after initial physical contact, after which the victim becomes asymptomatic.

The first three days are highly indicative of how severely and how quickly symptoms will progress following initial exposure. According to the literature, a relatively quick recovery is prelude to a long, drawn-out period of suffering, while failing to recover until the third day often means that the individual will succumb rapidly.

Semi-Functional Stage

After the first three days, the victim appears to resume some semblance of normalcy, even being able to carry out intelligent conversations. Accounts differ on this point, but the majority of reports state that the victims often suffer from fatigue, even after walking just a little bit in their own rooms. Some complain of lethargy and a general lack of motivation, but these are in the minority, as are those who attest to increased levels of energy and heightened emotional sensitivity.

Over the course of this period, the victim will gradually become more frenetic unless provided with a means to slake their boredom. Typically, mental puzzles have been found to help, but any mindless activity appears to satisfy this need to be occupied. Conversations with some individuals during this stage have revealed that this behavior has to do with drowning out an annoying buzz in the backs of their heads. Those interviewed later on during this stage say that it has more to do with not thinking about a particular thought that refuses to go away.

It is once the buzz develops into a thought that observation becomes critical, as progression to the second stage can come rapidly and without warning.

The subject remains despondent. While it may be too early to rule out an acute depressive episode, it is unlikely that this is the case. I conferred with the subject's mother yesterday after my classes, and it appears that she found the boy standing two feet from a fading candle ghost. I'm afraid she is in denial and kept asking me if there was a chance that he had not touched it or had been touched by it. Unfortunately, my knowledge is limited in that case, and I could not give her a conclusive answer in good conscience.

Yesterday saw a marked improvement in the boy's state. The mother showed up and the two had a tearful reunion. He seemed fine, as though the previous three days had not transpired. She wanted to take him home, but I insisted that he remain for continued observation. My colleague had warned me that in the accounts, often, following the first three days, victims appeared to return to some semblance of normalcy.

I was told to keep an eye out for any complaints, and just as my assistant and I were helping the boy to dinner, he expressed that he was feeling quite fatigued. I had hoped that everything was alright, but it was just as my colleague said.

It remains to be seen whether boredom becomes an issue, but I'm afraid that the boy has indeed come into physical contact with the spectre. My friend tells me that there is no cure, but clearly this affliction has not felt the weight of my scrutiny yet. I might yet save the boy, but I must prepare for the worst.

The Scratching Phase

Once the victim begins scratching, which typically starts with the arms, the affliction has proceeded to the second phase. Early on, this is somewhat unconscious and reflexive, a response to the memories that are resurfacing. It starts with embarrassing or humiliating experiences. Victims recount that the physical aspect of their recollection is heightened during this time, and it is believed that this is the reason for the scratching.

Victims typically remain functional at this point, though they suffer from momentary lapses of concentration. Short-term memory becomes unreliable as well with victims often forgetting what they were doing halfway through their activities. It is not uncommon for the afflicted to start over in the middle of a sentence or entirely forget to end a sentence, often launching into another topic after a few moments of distraction. Regardless, at this point in time, victims are relatively lucid.

As the second phase progresses, the victims' sleep becomes fitful, plagued with nightmares as the memories that surface become darker, filled with anger and fear. It is not uncommon for victims to wake up in a cold sweat in the middle of the night. Lack of rest compounds the already great strain on their minds and worsens the lapses in memory and concentration. Morning brings brief respite from the nightmares, though, and victims' moods markedly improve as the sun rises.

Self-Mutilation

The first waking nightmare signals the beginning of the third phase of the affliction. This is pre-saged by an uncharacteristic agitation on the part of the victim, often following a few sleepless nights in a row. It is not uncommon for victims to experience this first waking nightmare in the middle of doing something, typically something that reminds them of a bad experience in the past and especially when it involves a tactile sensation.

At this point, the scratching becomes desperate. During this time, some victims that experience a limited degree of functionality are able to express that touch of any sort, even the lightest tactile sensation, even the brushing of clothes against skin, triggers traumatic or otherwise repressed memories. It is also at this point that they express a desire to forget and, perhaps more disturbingly, a desire to drown the recollections in pain as it is the only sensation acute enough to mask their sense of touch.

Left to their own devices, the victims will leave deep gashes on any section of skin that they can reach. Arms are usually the first target, then legs, and then the stomach, chest, neck, and

The subject has progressed to scratching. He does it when he thinks that no one is looking, or he does it absentmindedly, often when he is reading one of the books that I have provided him for entertainment. Though he comes from a poor family, it is testament to the Dominion's ability to educate the next generation that he is actually quite a proficient reader. I enjoy our conversations, but more and more he is becoming distracted, his eyes scrunching up as though remembering something in his past.

I informed both the subject and his mother earlier as to what is in store. The boy appeared to take it in stride, but he was visibly perturbed. The mother, however, was inconsolable. She wanted to take him home, but I told her to say her goodbyes. For her sake and the boy's, I convinced her that she would not want to bear witness to what happened next if I was right. I could tell that the subject was relieved, as well. She complained at the unfairness of the whole thing, that a mother should outlive her only son.

The real tragedy is that such a nice young man has to suffer this. It would be more merciful to put him out of his misery now, but I cannot do that in good conscience. Not when there is a chance that I might still find a cure for his condition. I can only hope that I find it quickly. From what I understand, he is on borrowed time.

face. Restraining victims at this point is an option to minimize damage, but it has been found that bound victims attack anything and everything that they can, instead, often chewing on the insides of their cheeks. A bit gag can prevent this behavior, but victims have been found to bite down so hard on the gag that they break their teeth or jaws, ultimately rendering the effort futile.

The best option at this point is to prevent infection of the opened wounds. As long as the pain persists, the afflicted will not open new wounds, but this is a stopgap measure at best as from this point on, the affliction accelerates in its progression.

Rapid Descent

Once the mutilation starts, it does not stop. The relief that the afflicted might feel from scratching themselves is short-lived. Soon after, hearing becomes the primary trigger for unwanted memories. Common phrases ("Hi"; "Hello"; "How are you?"; "Good morning!") become invariably linked to some dark and terrible memory. It is unclear whether the memories are still real at this point or whether the victim's mind starts concocting some horrors to haunt itself.

They start babbling, first quietly, and then loudly. They scream, trying to drown out the

recollections, but it does not work. Sharpened rods, one to each ear does the trick. If unavailable, the victims reportedly bang their heads against the wall until their hearing just stops working.

Vision follows. All that they see reminds them of something dark and horrific. Without hearing themselves, they scream and claw at their eyes. By this point they know that the only thing they can do to stop the memories is to destroy the sense that keeps reminding them. By now they are so obsessed with forgetting that they will do anything to achieve it. Often, eyes are ripped out of their sockets with no shortage of wailing.

Less than an hour later, victims will take out their tongues, the mere taste of their own mouth somehow triggering a memory. If they have a knife, they'll use it. If not, manage without. Choking on their own blood, they often begin smashing their faces with their fists, knowing that smell will come next. They want to forget so badly that they will do anything to get ahead of their affliction.

As they lay there dying, alone in the dark and in excruciating agony, peace seems to settle on them. They know that their suffering is at an end. They can be forgotten soon. They can forget soon. For good.

4.2.1.4.140.30 NL

There is no question. The symptoms are unmistakable. The subject is progressing faster than I expected, and I feel in my gut that I will not find the cure soon enough. There is blood. So much of it. The smell is nauseating, the sensation of it on my skin revolting. But I must be strong. Despite everything I am still a scholar and I must record my observations for posterity.

5.2.1.4.140.30 NL

I've closed the door to the subject's room. I check on him every now and again, but I forget on occasion. There is just so much to do. So much to write down. The search for a cure continues. I might be too late to save him, but I might be able to help someone else. It's hard to work here. Between the incessant wailing and all the work that has piled on me over the course of this study, I can't concentrate on what I need to do.

6.2.1.4.140.30 NL

The screaming has stopped. But the subject is still alive. He gurgles now. I don't dare look. But the smell of blood is overpowering. I'm afraid that this might spread. Like a contagion, the idea spreads. Wanting to forget. Be forgotten. I have already watched my assistant absently scratching her arm. I need to take precautions. She can't possibly mind staying for a few days in a room just in case. And I need to inform the administration.

6.2.1.4.140.30 NL

I can't believe what I just did. I barged into a meeting with the headmaster. What is going on with me? Couldn't I have waited for them to finish? No. This needed to be done. If this can spread, I need to make sure that no one gets into this place. I feel like I'm forgetting something, but I can't remember. My head is pounding. It sounds like someone's banging on a door. But I can't afford to think about that right now. I need to find a cure. I need to maintain this quarantine.

7.2.1.4.140.30 NL

I think... I think I might have found what I was looking for... But I can't remember what it was... At least the screaming's stopped. But it smells like blood. It's revolting. The pounding's stopped, too. Finally some peace of mind. But I need to keep working. I can't stop working. Right. I was looking for a cure. I think I found it. But what if the cure doesn't work? I need to make sure it's right. I can't afford to stop now. I don't want to stop now.

8.2.1.4.140.30 NL

I can't do this. I can't stop thinking about barging in on the headmaster. It was so embarrassing. It was humiliating! I can't work like this. I can't look for a cure like this. Why can't I why can't I get it out of my head? It was so embarrassing! It was humiliating! I can't work like this! I can't look for a cure.

I need to remember to feed my assistant. But where did I put her again? Last I saw her, it was before I went to see the headmaster. Oh gods I barged in on the headmaster. Oh gods I barged in on the headmaster. Why can't I stop thinking about the headmaster? I just need some peace. Gods please. I need peace. I don't want to keep remembering this embarrassment.

I just need to forget!

Glossary of Terms

Al Zeresh - A renowned academic institution based in the city of Tan'Ayya.

Arventiri - Lingua franca of the Päll-tanír.

Ayyaneshi Caliphate - The biggest, most prosperous kingdom in the Western Ward of the Päll-tanír. Also known colloquially as Tan'Ayya.

Dominion, the - The greatest empire in the history of the world, having survived thirty millennia and holding dominion over the vast majority of the known world.

NL - Nalvë Lanakhaltë, the Age of the Dominion.

Päll-tanír - The northern continent. Also known as the Desert continent.

Republic of Sibor, the - A democratic state border the southern edge of the Ayyaneshi Caliphate.

Shardborn - Creatures that are born from the eldritch energies of the shardscape.

Shardscape, the - A cognitive realm where myth can become reality.

Tan'Ayya - The crown jewel of the Ayyaneshi Caliphate, a center of commerce as well as the administrative capital of the western region of the Päll-tanír. 🐉

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FRIGHTFUL FAUNA CONTEST: RUNNER UPS

Contest

Horror

Ongleon by Ademal

“An unending hunger, a hivemind of gore.”

An ongleon is a hiveminded organism designed and created by the Apple of Hedonism. It eradicates life in a cold, tactical manner by assimilating all biomass in an ecosystem.

“Ongleon. You’re a fool if your blood doesn’t run cold at the name. They’re Hedon bioweapons. They’ve created something beyond their control.”

The arrival of one marks the death of a world. Even after cleansing, infected planets are quarantined for 30 years—the risk of even a single spore remaining is too great.

“These days you don’t need four horsemen to end a world. A single ongleon can do the job just fine.”

They have some learning capabilities, and can self-modify. They consume worlds by subsuming them—swallowing up every ounce of biomass they can find and using it to self-replicate and mutate into predators better suited for the task. They will fill lifeforms with spores and lay dormant before eventually rupturing out and spreading the infection through the populace.

“They do not tire. They do not hesitate. They have no morals. They have no fear. They are ongleon.”



Artist: Ademal



Artist: Tristen Fekete

Deflesher by Arka

The invocation worked. The nightmarish demon, Deflesher, was summoned from Hell. A black mist hovered in front of my eyes. A cold sweat tumbled along my spine and I vigorously checked the fuel in the lamps that surrounded it to block its escape. I had hours to study the monstrosity before the light would fade away. You see, Defleshers are very sensitive to bright lights and dissipate when subjected to them. Temporary or forever, we don't know.

I felt the black mist slowly turning to me. They have no face but that's how I felt it. Then, it

morphed and took the shape of a very scary and demonic looking wolf... I'm frightened by wolves... I was prepared for it but I still backed away anyway. You should always keep your distance with a Deflesher. One touch, that's all there is to kill a man you know. And no weapon can kill that demon anyway...

I was there to study it, but I didn't... I fled... because of the horrendous scream! It was like my soul was split in half! I can't bear to hear that scream! Never! Ever! I want to forget that sound. Please! I beg you. Make me forget it... 🐾

ASK US ANYTHING

Additional Materials

BH Pierce

This Ask Us Anything is presented by a senior member of the Amalgamated Order of Interdimensional Persons, Percival Aluminus Illumnius, Adjunct Professor of Gateways, 3423 WestNorth Street, Dunny-on-the-Spire.



1: How does one create a concept for an ethnicity in their world? Are they based on species, geography, cultures or simply lifestyle? -Nugget-

Yes, absolutely correct.

2: Many worlds contain creatures common on earth or in earth mythology, like sheep, cows or dragons, but there's a wealth of more obscure creatures as well that aren't included. Can I also use axolotls and such in my world, or should I make unique animals for every niche but the big ones? -StronglyOPlatypus-

To answer this rather complicated question, you must determine how important creatures are to your world and to do this, you must ask yourself two questions. Do you want unique creatures and do you need unique creatures? If the goal of your worldbuilding is to create a planet with strange and diverse life for interstellar explorers to discover, they're you're going to want and need a variety of life Linnaeus would be proud of. On the other hand, if the goal of your worldbuilding is to create a unique political system and legal code, you won't need much in the way of a bestiary. Just how deep you want to go is entirely up to you, but how deep you need to go will depend on the nature of your world.

3: How do you choose names for characters, countries, and the like? -Tristen-

Ah, allow me to introduce you to the wonderful world of naming languages. A naming language could be considered a stripped-down version of a constructed language used for, as you may have already guessed, naming things. To build one of these helpful tools, you need three things: sounds, words and grammar. I know, I know, very technical, but do try to keep up. First, determine the sounds contained within your language. You can map them all out, or simply identify a few common, recurring ones, such 'th' or 'eh'. Second, create a list of common nouns for features like city, town, river, lake, that sort of thing. Then make a list of adjectives for things like color, age, shape and the like. Thirdly, and finally, come up with a few basic grammatical rules for this language. For example, if we had a river named for its red hue, would it be called the Red River or the Riverred? This advice applies mainly to maps, but this same process can be used to make names for people. Start with sounds, determine what people in that culture would want to name their children after, make up some suffixes, prefixes and flourishes that would be attached and you have a long list of names to draw from. A naming language will help you create a unique world, keep it consistent and hopefully make it uniquely consistent.

If you would like to have one of your questions answered by me, please send it to one of the following locales: contact@worldbuildingmagazine.com, [Discord](#), [Twitter](#)
Some Junior members of the Amalgamated Order of Interdimensional Persons will sort through them and select the most pertinent ones for my perusal.

4: How does one create a concept for an ethnicity in their world? Are they based on species, geography, cultures or simply life style? -Nugget-

One of the junior members has asked me to elaborate on my previous point about ethnicity for their sake, so please bear with me. On a broad level, an ethnicity is a collection of people who are identified as a group based on something they have in common. This common aspect can be any kind of language, art, ancestry, religion or any number of things. There are ample examples throughout history and fiction to draw from. However, the important thing for a worldbuilder to know is whether or not this identity is being generated internally or externally. A self-identified ethnic group will be quite specific and focus on the history, practices and qualities that make them different from everyone else. An externally identified ethnic group will be very general and painted with a broad brush. All members of this religion or citizens of this country are similar, despite said religion or country having a population in the hundreds of millions.🐼



PROMPTS

It's easy to get stuck, hit writer's block, or overlook small details. We would like to combat these issues by asking our readers questions about their worlds that they may not have thought of, and as well as by offering writing prompts to spark their imagination. If you would like to write a short story based on one of the writing prompts, or have a prompt you would like to share with us, please submit it to us at worldbuildingmagazine@gmail.com or [social media](#).

Submission Requirements:

- The file must be no longer than 5,000 words
- The file must include title and author(s)

Worldbuilding Prompts:

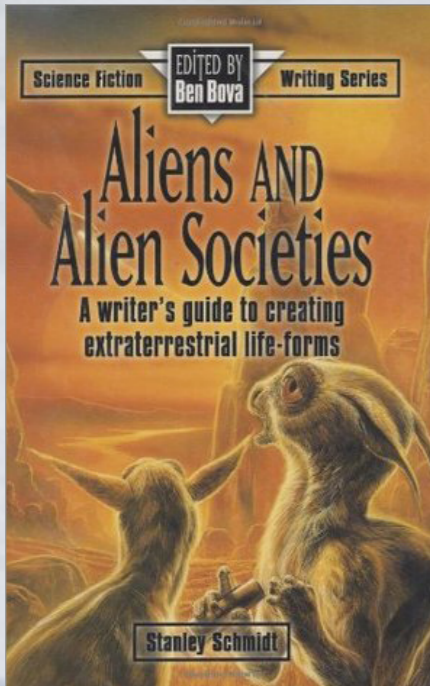
- Try making a circle of life for a particular ecosystem. What eats what? What are the apex predators and how are they kept in check?
- Detail the most infamous creature that resides in each country you've created. How has it gained such notoriety? This infamy may not always be because the creature is deadly. Maybe it provides a resource or just tastes good.
- Do the people in your world perform rituals during marriages/funerals? If so, how and why do they do it?
- What are some sports that involve animals in your world?

Prompt by Elizabeth from World Anvil.

Writing Prompts:

- A character made a mistake and hurt someone's feelings, but when you try to fix it, the person they're trying to help dies tragically.
- End a story with a creature gaining sentience.
- *"She's the last of her kind."*
- *"Ah, our newest addition to the zoo! I call it the..."*

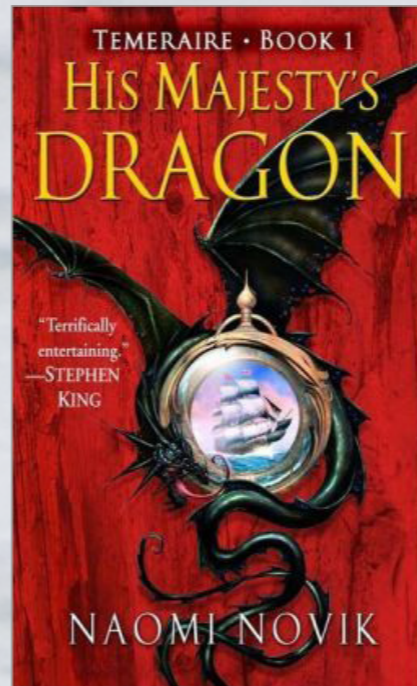
STAFF PICKS



Title: *Aliens and Alien Societies*
Author: Stanley Schmidt
Original Publisher: Writer's Digest Books
First Edition: 1995

Part of a series of writing reference guides geared towards science fiction writers, *Aliens and Alien Societies* uses real science to guide you through creating plausible extraterrestrial lifeforms. While over 20 years old, much of the information holds up well and makes for an engaging read.

Chosen by: Brotatofarm

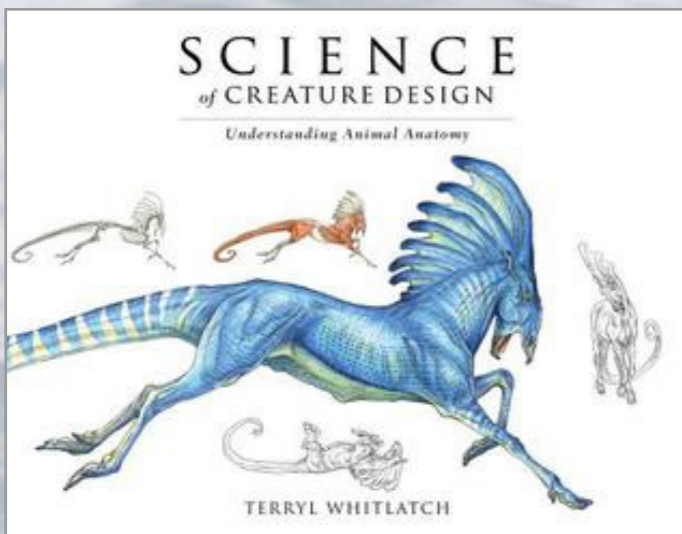


Title: *His Majesty's Dragon*
Author: Naomi Novik
Original Publisher: Del Rey Books
First Edition: 2006

In the midst of the Napoleonic Wars, Captain Will Laurence of the HMS Reliant captures an unhatched dragon egg from a French frigate. He is sent to the Aerial Corps where he bonds

with his new companion Temeraire, and they learn the tactics of aerial combat in preparation for war against Napoleon.

Chosen by: WithBestIntentions



Title: *Science of Creature Design: Understanding Animal Anatomy*
Author: Terryl Whitlatch
Original Publisher: Design Studio Press
First Edition: 2015

Science of Creature Design contains brilliant anatomical illustrations of creatures extant and extinct, real and imagined. By learning the basics of animal skeletal and muscular anatomy, one can apply these lessons to their own creature design. This book is part of a series by Terryl Whitlatch.

Chosen by: Brotatofarm

MEET THE STAFF

Wynter, Chair of the Art Department

Hi, I'm Wynter. I am the Chair of the Art Department, so I help make the magazine pretty. As Chair, I manage the art teams, review potential artists, and curate the Featured Artist article.

Currently, I am working on two personal projects outside of the magazine: a graphic novel featuring a magical girl and a rework of my thesis in literary painting. Both are set within a world I've been developing for the past 12 years but at very different points of its timeline. The world is heavily Norse and Gaelic inspired with a little influence from Greek, Egyptian, French, and Assyrian cultures for spice. The world itself was created from a pantheon of mixed Norse and Gaelic gods, and the creatures which inhabit the world reflect that. Danu created the first creatures, the fae (my personal favorites), and then the other gods, in their jealousy of her creations, followed suit. They made poor imitations of the fae: the Alvr, the Havfolkene, humans, titans, and nightmarish monsters. My thesis' story is set in a period similar to 17th century Europe and focuses on an assassin named Vivienne who's trying to clear her sister's name. My magical girl story is set several thousand years later and features crystal-based magitech with ideology and fashion similar to current trends, though with my own personal flair. This one focuses on Sylvi, 14-year-old half-fae trying to find her way in a human magic school and life; as a magical girl, she is tasked with finding the spirits of the zodiac in order to reseal the sealed evil-in-a-can and save the world as she knows it.

I'm excited to share these two stories soon and will be posting works related to them at my [Tumblr](#). 🐾



Photo: Wynter



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