

Spring 2008 Issue

FANTASEUM

Journal of the Creative Community Alliance

The Greenstone Monastery

A monastery mapped
By Torq

An Interview With Nathan Ellsworth

The Creator of
The Plotstorming speaks

Westward Ho!

Game Printer brings
The Wild West to life.

Dancing In Place

Fantasy Fiction by
Robin Webb

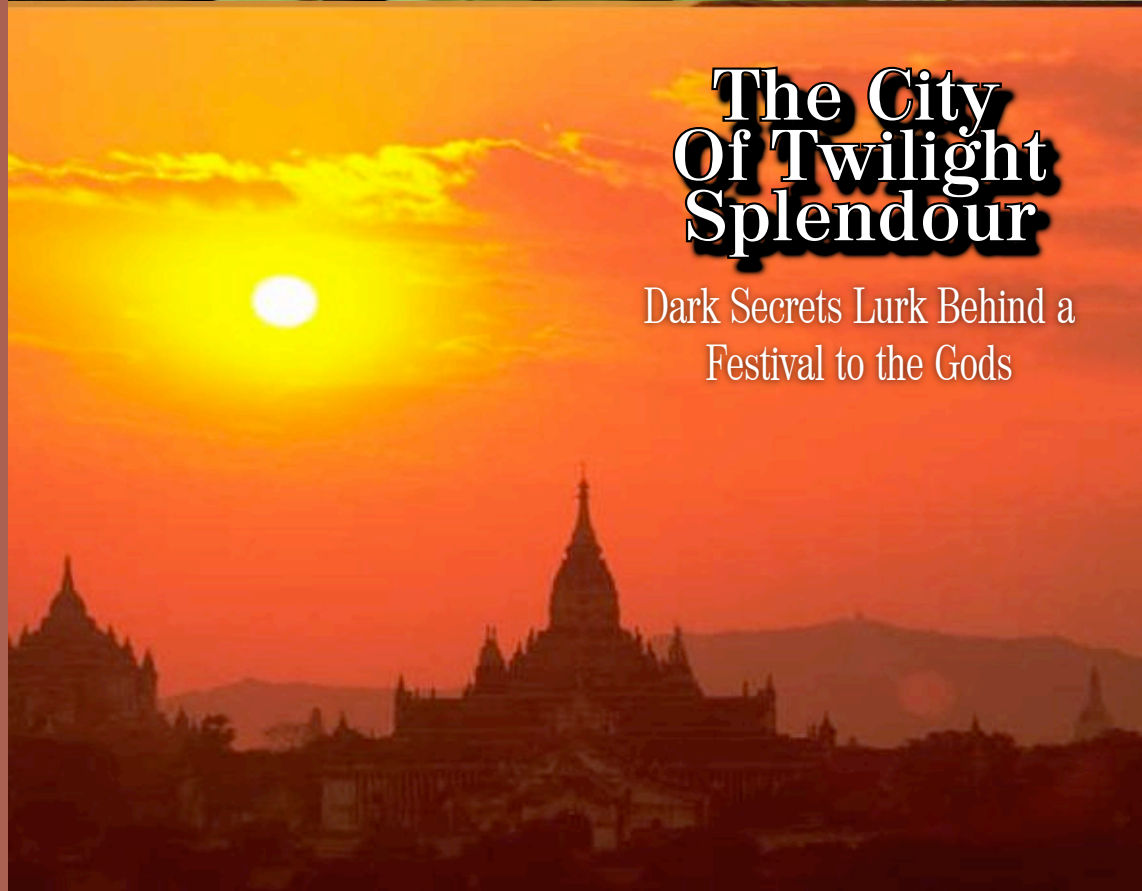
The Glass Ocean

Maps, Fiction and
a Scenario set in a
Deadly Desert Frontier



The City Of Twilight Splendour

Dark Secrets Lurk Behind a
Festival to the Gods



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Editorial

Hello Readers,

You are reading what was originally called “The Campaign Builders' Guide,” which was a zine published by the Campaign Builders' Guild. This issue marks the first true collaborative ventures of Fantaseum, the Alliance of Creative Communities, and within these pages, you can see that we're instituting many changes from previous issues. The zine is larger, more diverse, more graphically appealing, and, I think, more interesting than ever before. All three sites of the Alliance – PlotStorming, the Cartographers' Guild, and the Campaign Builders' Guild – have contributed equally to the creation of this zine, and will continue to do so. Our goal is to provide all kinds of tools for any of your creative works, not just your campaign setting building, and therefore, it no longer makes sense to call it, “The Campaign Builders' Guide.”

With that all being said, I would like to say a few things about those involved with Fantaseum. I'm being called the editor for this zine, but quite frankly, the zine would be nothing without the contributions of some very important people. First and foremost, I would like to extend a very important thank you to Ravells, who is the layout editor of the zine, but also so much more. Without rav's dedicated work for the project, we would still most likely be in various planning and discussion stages. Secondly, Arcana and Nathan Ellsworth, the leaders of the Cartographers' Guild and PlotStorming (respectively) deserve some special thanks. The three of us have been tossing around Alliance ideas for awhile now, and now we finally have something to show for it. Next, I would like to thank all the contributors for their brilliant work, as well as their patience, as we have finished this zine. It's been a long time coming, but I'm sure that all involved will be proud. Finally, a special thanks is reserved for two members of the Campaign Builders' Guild – Raelifin, and Elven Doritos. Raelifin was the previous editor of the zine, and did so much work to get us to where we are now that he deserves a statue in honor of his work – unfortunately, I'm broke, so I hope he will accept this thanks. And Elven Doritos, the former moderator of the Campaign Builders' Guild started the very first Campaign Builders' Guide, which led to where we are now. If I have forgotten anyone, I humbly apologize, and ask that you shoot me an email so that the error can be rectified.

Cheers, and Happy Readings for a New Beginning!

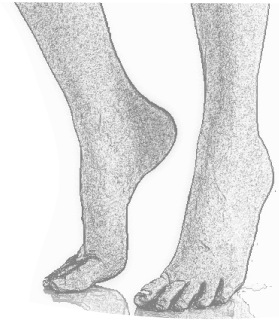
-Ishmayl

Acknowledgements

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Dancing in Place

by Robin Webb



Robin Webb was the winner of the November PlotStorming contest, 'No Matter What Happens, Remember it's only a dream'.

Jalen Aresai was eleven years old. Normally this would have afforded him the honor of being wedged between the end of his childhood and the beginning of manhood with all the awkwardness and embarrassment such an age entailed. Being the youngest of three brothers, he should have borne the brunt of ire and abuse, provided his parents encouraged such aggressive competition as many Mezulcan families did. But in any case, Jalen Aresai should have been like any other child in the entire nation of Mezulca and thus should know his place. Had not the goddess Uvra'Shgal gifted him with her sight.

The priest Iordhan rubbed the sleep from his eyes, trying to muster interest in hearing yet another drug-induced dream from yet another hysterical youngling adept. The first dosing always entailed sleepless nights and terrified wailing. Iordhan once lobbied the Heirophant to move such dosing to the daytime, thus affording the recording clerics their own rest. But the children's screams unsettled temple patrons, specifically noble parents who then questioned the wisdom in donating their wealth and blood to the holy temple of Uvra'shgal.

Iordhan submitted. He knew his place. Fifteen years in the service of the Heirophant and the noble house of Damoz elevated him to a pleasant perch in Uvra'Shgal's order. However, such rank held responsibility.

"More nightmares?" he muttered to the guard when he reached the adept's cell. The guard stifled a yawn into his gauntleted hand and gestured absently at the paperscreen. Iordhan winced at the light from the brazier and moved the screen to one side.

"The goddess doomed me!" Jalen Aresai gasped upon the priest's entrance to his cell. His skin was the sickly pallor of old cream, his eyes bulging and stark against his skin. The child would have been handsome were it not for the scar from lip to nostril. Or the fresh crossing of scratches over his eyelids.

"Now, now," Iordhan shushed, grunting as he sat upon a thin pillow and pulled his legs beneath him. He placed a tablet upon his bony knees and set his stylus to the page, noting the adept's name, his name, the Year of the Horse and House of the Serpent, the hour of night. It was early. "Speak only of the vision, child," he said in a voice that had

once been gentle. "And don't delay. If you think too much upon it, you may lose images our goddess has chosen for you."

Jalen shook his head a bit too furiously. "No, I cannot!" he said, grasping his robe with white-knuckled hands, his words lisping together. "I cannot forget what she sees!"

"Begin," Iordhan clucked impatiently. "At the beginning."

He walked upon the path.

It was cold here, ice in his eyes and a chill in his bones. His skin was peppered with gooseflesh and his fingers and toes itched to go numb. For the longest time all he cared to know was his discomfort, his thoughts sour and his shoulders hunched. But then he remembered that he was chosen.

Chastising himself for his selfishness, he threw himself upon his knees, the stones cutting into his flesh. In a tumble, the words of contrition flowed, old and ancient and familiar as his milk tongue. The cold around him deepened and he felt the world grow dark, heavy upon his back and hard upon his brow. He prayed, though he was no warmer for it.

When he rose, the path lead away from him and through a map.

He had seen this map before, claiming the western wall of the library. Painted with bright colors, a great figure of a woman danced over the nations of the world, Mezulca strong and mightiest among them. As he watched, she danced over the fringes of the empire and her feet smudged the delicate calligraphy, reshaping the borders and eradicating them completely. The eastern nation of Valin flowed deep blue between the broken barriers, mixing with the golden northerners of Rell and blending into patterns within Mezulca's scarlet fortress cities, so chaotic and strange it hurt him to watch. When her thunderous footfall finally ceased, she climbed back into the sky, leaving a watercolor ruin of the world beneath her.

He hitched up his trousers to follow his path into the sodden map. The once dry and slightly yellowed parchment now sloped with muddied countries, sticking to his feet and sucking at his tread. As he waded, the colors of the world continued to bubble and flow until they boiled, great bulges rising up from the mire and then sinking again. He recognized the shapes of swords and shields, some still grasped

by clutching hands. He watched a crown of jade float by, cracked down the center. He couldn't see the capital or the emerald star denoting the holy temple, even when he was sure he was standing atop the blessed mountain.

The map came up to his chin by the time he saw the other side, crinkled parchment on a leather shoreline. But before he could reach it, the colors ran cold and the squelching mud beneath his feet shook, pitching waves over his head until he was stained with the peoples of the world. The edge of the map tore with a screaming sound and lampblack ink bled from the wound. A hand emerged from within the yawing fault, pulling a stone body through the split in the earth to rise magnificent.

But she could not see. He knew this because she was the statue of Uvra'Shgal, from the sacred temple. He had seen her once during his dedication ceremony. The eyes had not been in place and would only be set into her face upon the Day of Divining. In sanctified ceremony, the king would place garlands of flowers upon her shoulders, set his jade crown upon her brow and then shed his own blood to bless the emerald eyes before giving sight to the Goddess again.

"You are my eyes," she said from within his breast and beneath the waves and through the clouds in the sky. "See what cannot be seen. What will be forgotten. What will doom us all."

She reached down and plucked him from the mire, nations flowing down his legs and clinging to his toes. He trembled as she tucked him against her breast as a suckling child, the stone chafing at his spattered skin and leaving the mark of the world upon her.

The goddess showed him the matched pair of emerald eyes in her other hand, each cut to resemble the swirling of her iris. They were not perfectly circular but chiseled to a sharp point where the light could be reflected outward. With a quick motion, she tipped back his head and gave unto him her sight.

"See," she said from all places. "And despair."

He knew only green and pain.

Through her eyes, he saw the sacred crucible catching the blood of the king, which mingled with the blood of the Heirophant. Every year the blood was spilt and stirred and washed over her eyes. Every year the goddess wept crimson tears down her stone visage while the king knelt before her and the Heirophant spoke her words. The world turned to the rhythm of blood, season after season in one long, unbroken chain.

She danced and the map widened to encompass the world.

The moon whirled through every house, following her dance and flowing back and forth from the midnight seas. He watched it count the centuries to the Year of the Horse, the House of the Serpent, the Day of Divining. But here, the blood of the king was shed into the crucible and mixed

with poison. There, the king knelt supplicant but the Heirophant swallowed the words of the goddess and hissed his own.

The goddess wept and danced and the map cracked beneath her feet.

Jalen buried his head in his hands and shook, his voice long broken into hoarse whispers. Iordhan considered the child and then the careful citations upon his tablet, scripted in his neat and precise hand. He swallowed and cleared his throat.

"Child," he said, soft as wind. "Do not be afraid."

"Her eyes!" Jalen sobbed. "I can't ... her eyes!"

Iordhan shifted from the pallet and set his tablet aside. He reached out and wrapped his arms around the child's shoulders, skin so hot it seemed baked in the sun, and pulled him close.

"Take heart," he shushed, rocking the adept. "The goddess shows you only her dreams. And the dreams of gods are too great for us to understand. This is not your burden anymore, young one." He gestured to his tablet. "I have taken it from you."

Jalen sniffled loudly. Iordhan knew his robe was stained with snot.

"Really?" the boy asked pitifully.

"I am her servant," Iordhan said, pulling away to show a comforting smile. "It is for this that I have been chosen, to take the dreams from the dreamers and give them to the Heirophant and the king. You do not need to hold on to the fear any longer. Let it go."

The child burst into tears anew but settled just as quickly, relaxing his tired body and falling back against his mattress.

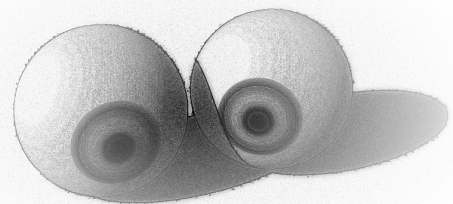
"Be well, young one," Iordhan said. "For you know your place in the goddess' design."

The adept was snoring by the time Iordhan cleared the room and snapped his fingers for the guard to heed him.

"Kill him," he said. "He speaks heresy."

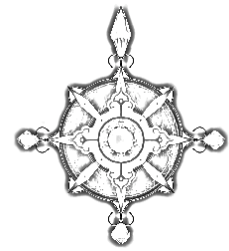
The guard bowed, turned and trotted back down the hall at a clip. With quick motions Iordhan tore the parchment from his tablet and set it upon the brazier. The flames leapt suddenly and then faded into ash.

"We all must know our place." ❁



Featured Map

by Helium 3



The Domains of Heva and Surrounding Lands, is drawn by Helium3. Helium3's objective was to create a map in the style of a coloured woodcut. The final result is a beautiful amalgam of Japanese Ukiyo-e, traditional European Woodcut and Fantasy. The outstanding points to this map are the cartographer's individual style and the beautiful simplicity of the composition.

Artist's Notes

L suppose you could say that I started working on this map in January of 2007, when I put together a piece for ENWorld's map contest for their War of the Burning Sky campaign saga. I decided pretty early on while doing that piece that I wanted something that looked sort of like a medieval woodcut print. I did some google searching to get a better idea of what that might look like and stumbled across the famous Hokusai print "The Great Wave off Kanagawa." I had seen that image many times before but when I saw it this time, I knew

that I wanted my map to have bold colors with no shading other than what could be done with black ink-like lines.

I was never very happy with my *War of the Burning Sky* entry and kept playing with ways to make what I was imagining in my head real. After playing around I eventually fixed most of what I didn't like about the original piece by:

(1) Discovering the GIMP software package and using it to finally get my line based shading right (big thanks to S. John Ross for his tutorial on how to make woodcut style water.)

(2) Realizing how critical it is to keep the thickness of your line's consistent, even if you draw something larger and then scale it down.

(3) Working out a procedure that allowed me to draw something in Inkscape and then render it into what looked like a hand-drawn line, even though it wasn't.

As for what the map depicts, it's the basic starting map for a 3.5 edition D&D game I'll probably start running in January. I'm putting together a website for my players that will contain all the necessary character generation content. One of the things they'll need to decide on is where their characters are from, this map is for that section. Also, because I created using vector graphics, I'll be able to zoom in and use it for smaller regional maps and other things.

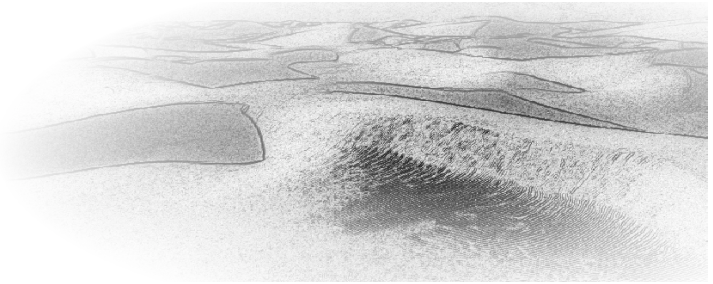
I'm not quite sure what my next project is going to be. I just got a cheap copy of Illustrator CS2 off eBay and I'm itching to see what I can do with that package. I've got a couple of maps I need to put together for my Heva campaign, but there are some other maps I've wanted to work on just to play around. Only time will tell. I've been really impressed by the maps that TheRedEpic has been posting on the Cartographers' Guild lately, and I'm desperate to see if I can put together something that looks even a quarter as good. But, it would be a completely new style for me, which means another year or so to get to a point where I'm producing something I even like. ☀



The Glass Ocean

by *Luminous Crayon*

We are delighted to bring you the first of our combined guild challenges. First, the Campaign Builders' Guild held a monthly competition to create a frontierland. The winning result, The Glass Ocean by Luminous Crayon was then used as the basis of a monthly challenge for the Cartographers' Guild and Plotstorming to draw a map of Luminous Crayon's winning entry and write a fictional piece set within it.



The Challenge

To create new frontier, beyond the boundaries of a typical campaign area. Whether it is "beyond the black," several light years past the last planet in your sci-fi solar system, or if it just "over the hill," one mile beyond the cliché old, one-street village, what defines this frontier?

Necessary Includes:

- * A detailed description of the area, in terms of climate, landscape, geology.
- * A brief description of the closest governed area, whether it be the last planet in a system, or the last city-state in the region.
- * A detailed reason for why the closest governed area has not attempted to (or succeeded at) fully explore and gain control of the frontier.
- * A brief description of the final outpost/city/etc within the governed area before crossing the boundary into the frontier.
- * At least one growing threat within the frontier that could be detrimental to the governed area.
- * At least one detailed adventure location in the frontier (preferably with map, but that is not necessary).

Possible Includes:

- * A list of random encounters.
- * A list of mythological references and superstitions to the frontier.



t's almost as if some cosmic painter ran out of paints, or perhaps out of attention, leaving a patch of blank canvas sprawling to the horizon.

Wind rushes by-- not howling, for there is nothing for it to howl against-- as if in a hurry to be somewhere else. As far as the eye can see, fine, pale sand lies in lazy dunes, shifting slowly with the wind, delicate pink as a pressed-upon fingernail. The rippling sands' languorous flowing seems almost a grisly caricature of an ocean in the hands of some idle god, its waves turned solid, ground into dust, slowed to an intolerable crawl. The color seems leached out of even the sky here.

The sight is somewhat disturbing, but there's no time to stand and watch. Already, the powder-fine sand is shifting beneath your feet, drifting up around your ankles, getting started on drowning you. It's anybody's guess how many similar explorers have been buried alive out here, seeking wealth. It's enough to make a person hesitate before hiking off toward that pale horizon. Better not hesitate for too long; the Glass Ocean demands movement.

Your footprints vanish moments after you pass, and the landscape is a blank sprawl of canvas once again.

Copperhead Rock

The land-side boundary of the Glass Ocean is a low line of stone cliffs, knobbly and smooth from their constant exposure to the Ocean's sand-laden winds. So named because of their resemblance to the half-buried fingers of giant hands clawing their way from out of the earth, the Knucklebones are, for much of their length, little taller than the height of a man. They mark an abrupt drop in altitude for travelers entering the Glass Ocean, and it is perhaps due to some undocumented quality of their mineral composition that the Glass Ocean's strange weather stays confined to the desert.

Copperhead Rock is a small outpost atop the Knucklebones, built in the partial shadow of a large and prominent rock formation by the same name. The stone formation juts upward like an irate, scolding finger, leaning slightly over the edge of the desert, a welcome landmark for explorers returning to safety and civilization. The outpost is a scattered collection of brick-brown tents of varying sizes, some of which function as rented lodging for explorers and observers of the Ocean, others of which function as primitive supply depots stocked by entrepreneurial traders, and one which acts

Properties of Desert Glass

The precise value and effect of desert glass can be adjusted by the GM based on a number of factors, not least of which are the world's magic/tech level, features of economy, and the GM's determination to lure players into the Glass Ocean. Some suggested uses are given below.

Smooth-Polished Glass.

- * ...gives weapons an X% chance to bypass damage reduction they would not normally bypass.
- * ...gives armor and protective gear a +X bonus to the wearer's saving throws against a randomly chosen school of magic.
- * ...gives wands, staves, and similarly charged items an X% chance not to consume a charge when used.

Crystal-Faceted Glass...

- * ...gives weapons an X% chance to inflict bonus electrical damage on a successful attack.
- * ...gives armor and protective gear an X% chance to temporarily boost one of the wearer's ability scores when the wearer takes damage in battle.
- * ...gives wands, staves, and similarly charged items an X% chance to act at an increased caster level when used.

as barracks for a handful of wind-worn guards tasked with protecting Copperhead Rock from thieves or possible attacks from desert creatures.

Nothing in Copperhead Rock is self-sufficient-- there's no food or water to be had for miles. The outpost has no resident craftsmen, and even the simplest tools and supplies must be brought by caravan from Lemis Keep, the nearest city. Those that work at the Rock rely on funding from glass hunters in need of a staging area from which to explore the desert, and on the availability of supplies from the keep. Without either, Copperhead Rock would be abandoned.

Lemis Keep itself is small by castle standards, a white stone edifice perched on cliffs overlooking the sea. It stands about a half-day's swift ride from Copperhead Rock, though most travel, especially supply caravans, takes significantly longer. The keep and its surrounding lands are governed by the Duke of Lemis, a shrewd and logical man appointed to the position to curtail problems involving bandits and monsters in the region. The Duke of Lemis has become interested in the lucrative desert glass trade, but has yet to take official action on it, unconvinced that the profit is worth the Glass Ocean's risks.

Oceanic Weather

The most easily noticeable weather feature of the Glass Ocean is its incessant wind. The constant, fast-moving gusts sweep the desert at all times, hastening or slackening their pace or changing direction in no predictable pattern. Those who have studied the winds say their uncanny behavior matches no other wind patterns in the world, but this lends them no useful insight for predicting when the winds will be comparatively mild and when they will be at their worst. Furthermore, the cause of the strange winds is unknown, and theories range from air-shaping channels in the Knucklebones to naturally occurring magical anomalies. Regardless, fine particles of windblown sand polish stone to a smooth sheen, assail unprotected skin, and lend a pale haze to the air, while causing the creeping dune phenomenon so reminiscent of ocean waves.

However, it is the lightning in the Glass Ocean that draws explorers and profiteers to the region. Though the sky is dry and cloudless, heat lightning strikes frequently in this desert, particularly at night. Ground strikes melt and vaporize patches of sand with their heat, and the frozen puddles of glass formed by the cooling molten sand bear unique properties-- and great value. This naturally-occurring desert glass contains its own unique arcane resonance, and can be used to create objects of power. When the desert glass is smoothed and polished into orbs or cut and faceted into artificial "crystals," it amplifies magical energy, a property that makes the material understandably coveted and expensive. Explorers in the Glass Ocean often brave its hazards in hopes of finding these lightning strike locations before the blowing

sand conceals the valuable glass.

The lack of water to act as a heat reservoir means that temperatures in the Glass Ocean fluctuate wildly from day to night. The constant wind ameliorates the noonday heat somewhat, but temperatures at night can drop to freezing and below. These extremes are milder in the region of the desert nearest the sea, and the most seasoned travelers know that gradually warmer nights will indicate an approach to the shore several days before the smell of salt will.

Hazards!

In addition to the blowing sand and temperature extremes, travelers in the Glass Ocean must prepare adequate food and water supplies, and conserve them zealously. Foraging is all but impossible in this desert, and immoderate or careless explorers may easily find themselves dying of hunger or thirst. The bewildering winds, shifting dunes, and lack of landmarks magnify this problem; even with careful rationing, travelers may become lost in the desert, unable to find their way out to safety before supplies are exhausted.

A more familiar hazard wears humanoid form-- explorers must be wary of each other, because the high value of a successful desert glass find can ignite murderous avarice, and brigands have been known to kill desert travelers on the mere suspicion that they might be carrying raw glass out of the desert.

Things Malfunction

A combination of fierce winds, lingering electrical discharge, and hypothesized magical "background noise" make many things unreliable here. The following is a partial list of things that should probably not be relied upon.

- * Carrying sound (including speech, shouting, and sonic-based magic)
- * Spells and abilities that allow flight, or approximate it
- * Ranged weaponry (projectiles are easily blown off course)
- * Most devices with moving parts
- * Wheeled vehicles, pack animals and riding beasts (which often become mired in the sand)
- * Magnets (including compass needles)

Creatures that Call This Place Home

Life in the Glass Ocean is scarce, and some explorers go for days, weeks, or even entire expeditions without encountering living creatures. Only the hardiest of beasts can survive the punishing climate, and competition, particularly against ill-prepared humanoid explorers, can be fierce.

Extra Creepy Creatures

The Glass Ocean seems mostly empty, but that's no good reason to make assumptions. GMs may wish to populate it with a few tougher, scarier monsters, in addition to the smaller creature hazards and difficult weather conditions. The best choices for inclusion are creatures that can stay well-hidden, maintaining the desert's illusion of relative

emptiness. Sand-burrowing dragons and wind-riding zephyrs are among my favorite choices, with various reptiles, carrion birds, and burrowing nasties taking honorable mention.

Glassflies can be found in most parts of the Ocean, and many explorers jokingly attribute their presence to the spiteful curse of some god or wizard. These beetle-like insects can fly for short distances and can burrow in sand, and their translucent shells are quite strong. They vary widely in size, from the width of a fingernail to the size of large rats, and tend to travel in swarms. Because of the vast numbers of glassflies in the Ocean and the lack of plant matter, most people assume that the flies are the beginning link of desert food chains, and that they eat the desert's sand, adding its minerals to their glossy exoskeletons. They sting painfully and occasionally attack larger creatures, though their reasons for doing so are unknown. A popular theory is that they use carcasses to lay their eggs, but this has not been confirmed. Their stings raise painful welts and induce mild fever, but the true danger lies in the desperate thirst that results from the injury. Only the largest of glassflies are capable of significantly injuring the typical explorer, but once stung, a victim's chances of surviving the desert must be severely reevaluated.

Keeping Challenges Challenging

Most of the dangers of the Glass Ocean involve environmental hazards--hunger, thirst, and exposure. Even the creatures fit this theme, being primarily dangerous because they increase explorers' chances of being caught without sufficient supplies to escape the desert. This means that magic can very easily short-circuit this entire area, since standard D&D rules give even neophyte spellcasters tricks to survive the desert. Spells that conjure food and water, help casters navigate, teleport, or weather the elements can take much of the desert's sting away. A group with rings of sustenance or a few bags of holding stashed with provisions could survive here indefinitely, assuming they can avoid bandits. For these reasons the Glass Ocean works best in low-magic worlds, or worlds where access to these spells is limited.

For games in higher-magic settings, the GM is obligated to short-circuit the players' problematic magical abilities and resources to preserve the Glass Ocean's challenge. The easiest way to do this is to accentuate the effects of the Ocean's peculiar magical "background noise," so that it interferes with conjuration and teleportation effects that attempt to move or create objects or people within the desert. This also nicely explains why no other groups of adventurers have used magic to conquer the Glass Ocean, but be prepared for players to (rightly) label this a cheap trick.

Certain hardy species of large lizards dwell in the Glass Ocean as well, tending to stay within a short distance of Shale-Table Cay or other sources of water. They use glassflies as a source of food, cracking the tough shells with their overdeveloped jaws, protected from stings by their leathery scales. These lizards do not typically attack travelers unless threatened. However, they are intelligent enough to steal food and water supplies, and can bite through most types of containers to get access to their contents. They tend to sun

themselves by day, becoming active at night, so travelers are advised to sleep lightly and guard their supplies well.

Getting Lost...

Navigation in the Glass Ocean is nigh-impossible. The area is unmapped, unexplored, and devoid of landmarks. No guides know the secrets of its constantly-flowing wavelike dunes. Compass needles drift aimlessly, with no confidence in the idea of "north." Only the careful and prepared explorers choose to tackle these difficulties, and the smart ones pack extra water and rations to account for the likelihood of getting lost.

It takes very little time for a traveler in the Glass Ocean to move out of sight of the Knucklebones. With a bleak, flat horizon on all sides and a constantly-shifting wind erasing one's footsteps, it can be difficult to maintain a straight course. Unwary or unlucky wanderers can trek in circles for days without realizing their peril.

... And What You Might Find

The following is a short list of some of the most common things travelers may stumble upon in the Glass Ocean. Some travelers have reported seeing such strange and remarkable things that heatstroke and dehydration-induced hysteria are the most credible explanations, while others may travel for weeks and see nothing but sand.

- * **Stones.** Occasional boulders litter the desert, worn smooth by eternities of blown sand. Travelers use them for landmarks or for places to rest, creatures burrow beneath them for shade, and on rare occasions, a few sips of water may collect in concavities in their surfaces. The largest and most fabled of these stones is Shale-Table Cay.

- * **Glass Deposits.** For most people, these are the goal of a trip into the Glass Ocean. Escape the desert with this solid puddle of murky glass, and it's payday!

- * **Lightning Storms.** Frequently occurring at night, these strange, dry storms light up the sky with flickers of power. If lightning strikes the ground, you may be able to locate the site of freshly-baked desert glass.

- * **Whirlwinds.** The constantly-shifting wind is always fast, strong, and unpredictable, but it is at its most dangerous when whipped into a swirling funnel. The force of such winds can fling travelers to the ground, bombard them with debris, and leave them bloodied and reeling.

- * **The Same Place You Just Were.** Between the constantly shifting wind, the moving dunes, and the dearth of landmarks, it's easy to get turned around and end up walking in circles. Don't feel too bad (unless you're still lost when your supplies run out.)

- * **Glassflies.** Singly or in swarms, these creatures have been known to make glass hunters particularly uneasy. Their

quickness, (usual) small size, and tough shells make them difficult to kill, and they often emerge from the ground to the surprise of travelers who unwittingly disturb their burrows.

* Lizards. By day, they lounge, nearly immobile. By night, they hunt food, in the form of glassflies or travelers' provisions. Many glass hunters have awoken to find supply sacks and metal canteens bitten in half, their contents consumed.

* Bandits. Some people are of the opinion that delegation is a vital part of any entrepreneurial endeavor. These people delegate oft-unwitting others to search the Glass Ocean for glass finds, and delegate themselves to collect and redistribute that glass. In all honesty, many of the occupational hazards of glass hunting have little to do with the harsh desert, and everything to do with this sort of workplace competition, if you catch my drift.

* Corpses. Many people die in the desert. Some of them are still carrying useful supplies of some kind when they do, though food and water are not to be expected.

Shale-Table Cay

Several groups of explorers have reported finding a broad, flat shelf of stone in the midst of the Glass Ocean. Because its shape and size give it the impression of an island amid the sandy "waves," career desert trekkers trade stores of "Shale-Table Cay" in Copperhead Rock's homely inn. The strange "island" is a difficult landmark to spot from a distance because of its low profile, and even those who have found it before are often unable to rediscover it on subsequent expeditions. Nevertheless, Glass Ocean explorers often arm themselves with vague directions and attempt to head out into the general area where they think Shale-Table Cay might be found.

What is a Cay?

A typical cay is a low island formed by accumulations of coral or sand. The term applies to Shale-Table Cay with a healthy dose of irony. The word "cay" is pronounced exactly like the word "key."

According to travelers' descriptions, Shale-Table Cay is an elongated sheet of smooth, flat rock, perhaps one hundred feet in width and three times as long, which rests on the Glass Ocean's sandy surface. It serves travelers as a welcome piece of solid ground, where one can rest without being half-buried in sand upon awakening. The sun-warmed rock offers little protection from the wind and heat, but astounded travelers claim that fresh water collects in natural basin-like indentations in the stone, and that the rock is host to various lichen growths that are tasteless but nourishing.

The presence of water and food make Shale-Table Cay a natural gathering place for wild creatures. Glassflies and desert reptiles can usually be found there, and the latter may become violent if they feel their water source is in danger from interlopers. Some travelers are wary of Shale-Table Cay because of possible ambushes arranged by glass thieves, and others are convinced that the Cay is merely a fable constructed by thieving explorers to lure gullible searchers

to their dooms. Other sorts of speculation involve complex networks of caverns beneath the Cay, where some travelers claim to have found shelter, discovered fantastic treasures, or narrowly escaped swarms of carnivorous glassflies.

Hornbeam's Hypothesis

Copperhead Rock has been weathering an increased number of glassfly attacks in recent weeks-- one guard killed a burrowing glassfly the size of a small dog that had appeared outside the inn tent, and now wears a part of its shell as a clasp for his cloak. While some deny that this represents an uncomfortable trend, there is one observer who does not; Hagil Hornbeam's controversial studies of sand, desert-glass, and glassfly carapace samples have not endeared him to Copperhead Rock's treasure hunters, who have derisively labeled him "sandrat," but he spends much of his time outside the supply tents just the same, studying his samples and urging passing entrepreneurs to leave any valuable glass discoveries in the desert where they find them.

Hornbeam's research has led him to believe that the desert lightning, glass formation, and wind-driven erosion represent an energy-preserving cycle. Specifically, buildups of the Glass Ocean's peculiar, naturally-occurring arcane energy accumulate in the air until they are discharged to earth in the form of lightning. These lightning bolts deposit their energy in the formations of desert glass they create, accounting for the magical properties of the glass. Erosion eventually reduces the glass deposits back to fine sand, releasing the stored energy back into the air, where it can build up for another lightning strike. The problem, according to Hornbeam's theory, is that by removing glass deposits from the Ocean for processing and commercial use, glass hunters are disrupting a vital natural cycle in the area, causing dangerous energy imbalances that are driving the glassflies to frenzy.

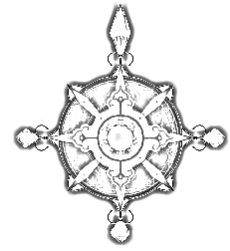
Hornbeam insists that the increase in glassfly activity, as well as the unprecedented large size of glassflies that have attacked, is only the first symptom of the imbalance. His theory that the lightning cycle acts as a safety valve on the Glass Ocean's wind and weather also states that this valve is the only thing keeping the desert's size in check. He predicts that unless desert glass collection ceases, the Glass Ocean's weather anomalies will intensify and spill out over the protective cliffs of the Knucklebones, spreading the area of the desert itself, with no foreseeable end in sight.

The sandrat suffers insults and threats from explorers and traders who accuse him of baseless alarmism, or even deliberate sabotage of the desert glass trade, and has begun to fear for his life. Still, he travels between Lemis Keep and Copperhead Rock, urging magistrates and passing travelers alike to believe his theories. ☀

September Mapping Challenge Winner

The Glass Ocean

by Amonite



The Challenge



September's challenge was the first Alliance cross-over challenge. Luminous Crayon had won the August Glass Ocean challenge at the Campaign Builders' Guild (see page 19). Matthew Funk had won the plotstorming August challenge with Rushon, City of Splendor (see page 28). The Challenge for the Cartographers was to map either the Glass Ocean or the City of Rushon.

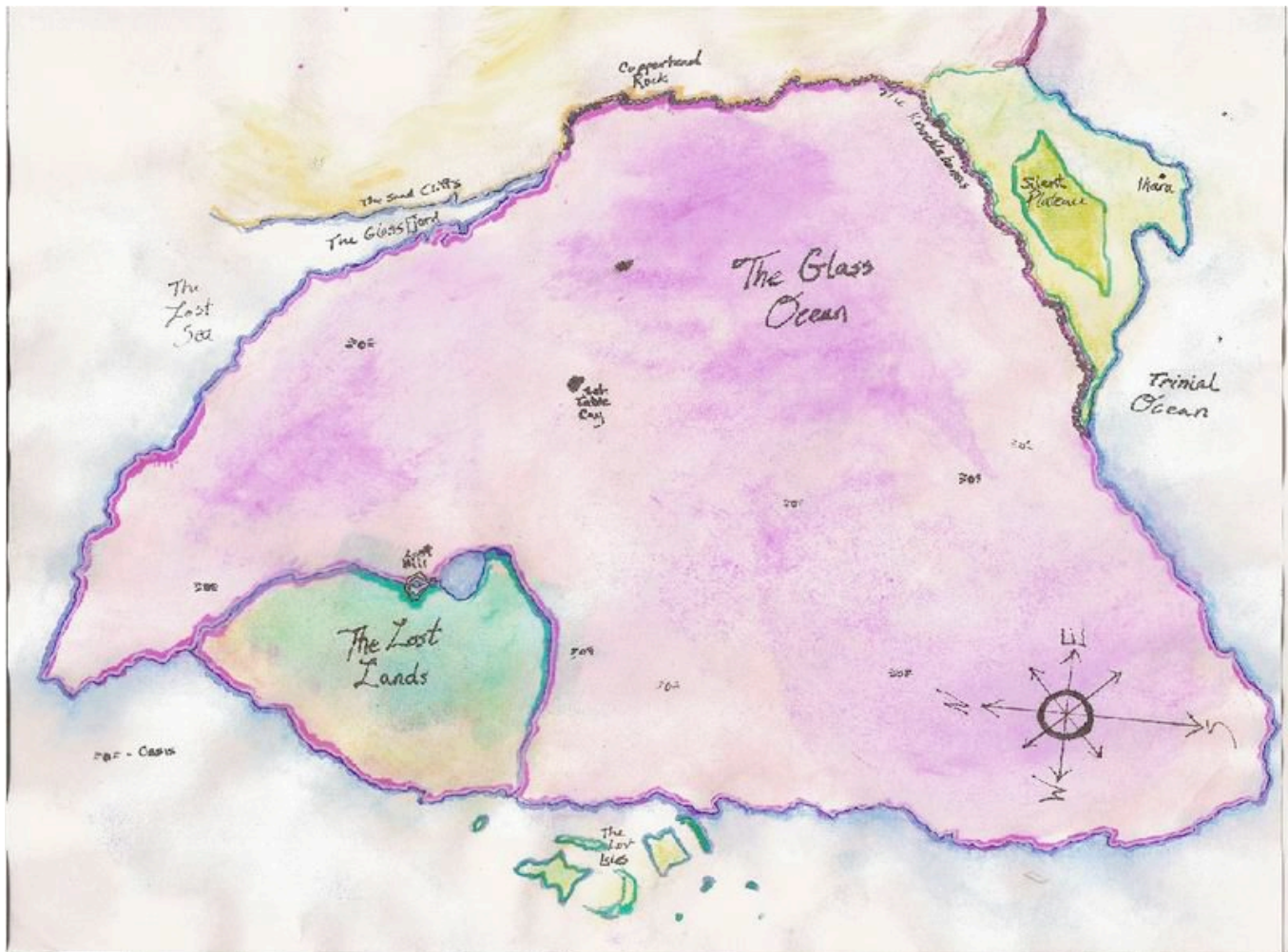
The Guidelines

To create a map of the information provided in the CBG and Plotstorming September winners based on the information

provided and to stay true to the information provided.

The Winner

CG newcomer Amonite produced a *tour de force* entry which not only comprised a map but an entire illustrated story to go with it. Amonite's entry was hand drawn and scanned, representing the journal of a map-maker in the Glass Ocean, on a quest to find her father. The Guild watched in wonder as Amonite posted entry after entry to produce an entire journal of the protagonists journey to the glass ocean with an implied tragic ending. We hope to see many more entries from Amonite in the future.



The Glass Ocean

by Amonite



Introduction

With the disappearance of my father over the Ocean of Glass, it has been left up to me to continue his work. While there are some that insist the exploration required for proper cartography is far too dangerous an undertaking for a girl, it has not deterred my search. The maps I draw become less and less unique, the lines of the Earth constricted and confined by their proper positions. Yet there is one place that defies all attempts to constrain it to a world of logic. If I can chart this wild land of wild magic, and discover what has happened to my father, I can vindicate his work and clear his name. The Glass Ocean will open its secrets to me, no matter what the cost.

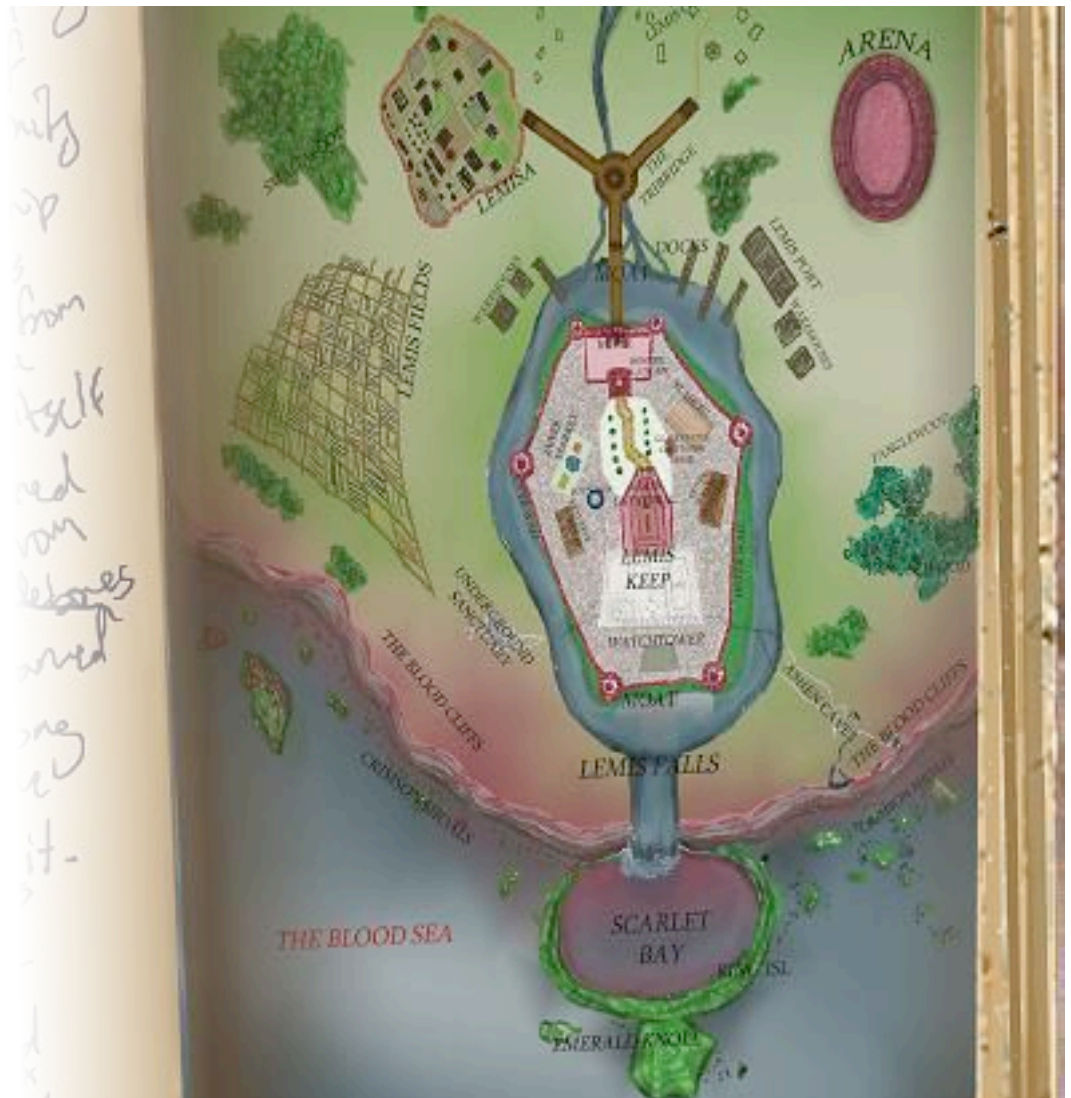
Day Four ~ Plain of Weeping

The few maps I have found of the Glass Ocean leave much to be desired. While preparing for my journey, which shall officially begin at Lemis Keep, I have purchased several of the cheaper maps one can get from any trader. All promise riches if one only follows their 'real' treasure map. The map I have copied here purports to show two routes, via land and sea, to the best lightning grounds. It also shows the fabled Shale-Table Key, which I am convinced must exist. I am also convinced that anyone following such a shoddy excuse for a map will likely meet with an untimely end.



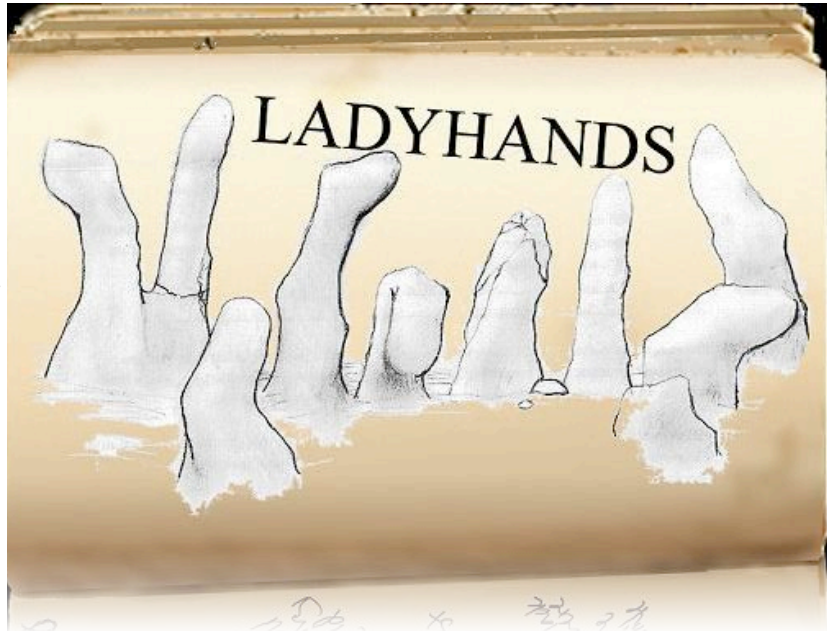
Day Seven ~ Plain of Weeping

I arrived at Lemis Keep ahead of schedule, so have taken the opportunity to scout the area while my airship takes on fresh supplies. Lemis is an inspiring place, much of it built from the crimson stones common to the region. Surprisingly, Lemis Keep itself is white. It was made not of rock from the blood cliffs, but from white stone hauled in from Copperhead and the knucklebones. More intriguing, however, is the famed glass cathedral of Lemis Keep. It was built centuries ago during the Lawless Age, and the Keep was later built around it. How so much desert Glass was amassed remains a mystery, but standing inside the rose tinted cathedral was a beautiful and tranquil experience that lifted my soul.



Day Seven ~ Plain of Weeping

We left Lemis early this morning and should reach Copperhead before nightfall. On the way, I ordered the airship to land to better examine the first of the knucklebones. These first few on the southern fringe are very finger like, almost delicate, and are all smaller than myself. This is interesting, because if the stories and pictures hold true, the knucklebones farther on are both larger and more knobby. The strangeness of the first few hundred knucklebones in comparison to the rest has led the area to be dubbed Ladyhands. The sand about our feet showed quite the variety of color.



Black and tan sand was predominant, but there was pale pink in the mix as well. The ground was littered with very tiny white pebbles and small white stones, presumably eroded from the knucklebones. A thin layer of white dust coated the base of the knucklebones. After lunch, we continued our journey on to Copperhead, which we should reach before nightfall.

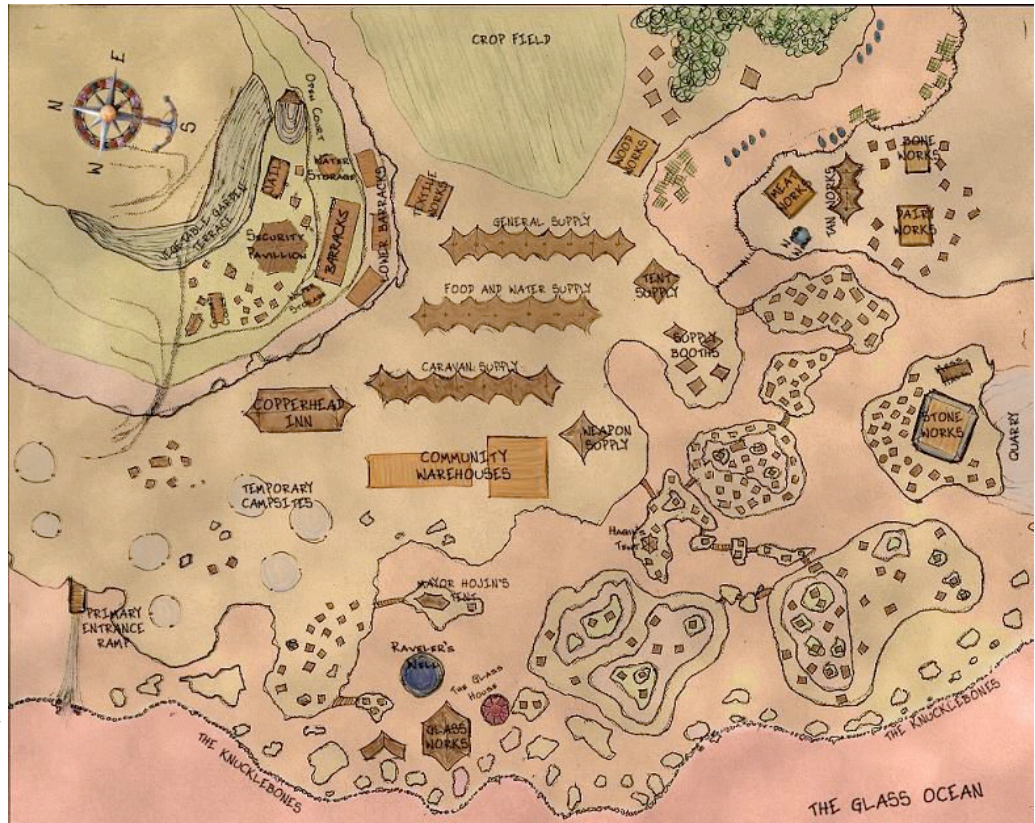
Day Ten ~ Plain of Weeping

We have safely docked at Copperhead, and have caused quite the stir. We tied the airship off to Copperhead Rock itself, which means we are hovering directly above the city. While the more diplomatic members of my team have disembarked to assure Mayor Hojin of Copperhead that we are not here to attack them, I have taken the opportunity to sketch a quick contour map of the region. While to measure exact elevations would take precious time that we do not have, I find the view quite pleasing. Perhaps when I have found my father, we can return and finish the map together. Tomorrow I will begin my explorations of the city, and find out all I can about the Glass Ocean from the Copperhead tent dwellers who live right next door to it.



Day Eleven ~ Plain of Weeping

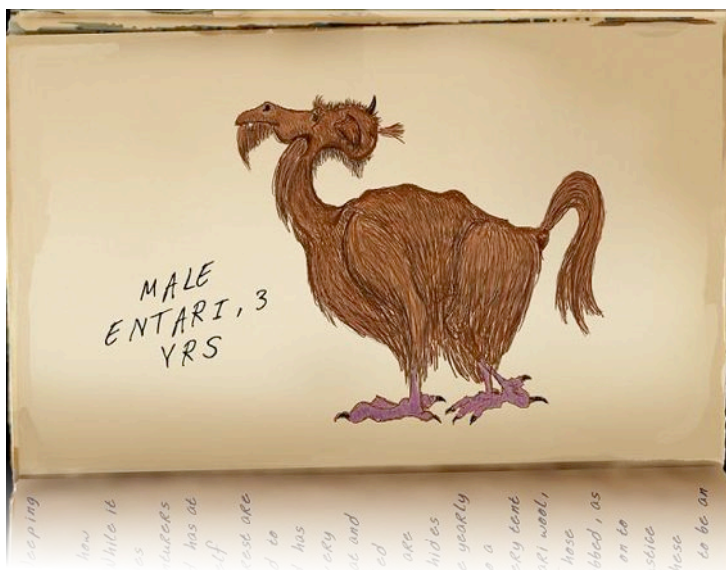
I spent the day exploring Copperhead Rock, which has grown much since my father last mapped it. While it retains its tent city roots, there are now a few wooden structures and a highly complex legal system has evolved. Refugees flocked to Copperhead Rock when the former Duke of Lemis was overthrown and a minor civil war ignited. They brought with them a strong desire to govern themselves. Since no autonomous government exists this far west of Lemis on the Dorean Continent, Copperhead constructed its own miniature 'nation'. It is a great feat for a city only just over a



mile square. Still, this would not have been possible without the help of Kizad, a Raveler-Mage who keeps his well- and the city in turn- stocked with water magically transported from the mountains.

Day Twelve ~ Plain of Weeping

I spent the morning learning more of how Copperhead Rock 'supports' itself. While it is still heavily reliant on the territories around it for trade and on adventurers passing through for coin, Copperhead has at least taken the first steps towards self sufficiency. Perhaps of the most interest are the Entari, hairy creatures well suited to life in this arid region. Copperhead has amassed quite a herd, and almost every part of each Entari is used. The meat and milk they provide supply much needed food for the community, Entari bones are sold for tools and runecrafting, the hides make durable desert clothing, and the yearly shearing of their coats lends itself to a thriving tapestry business. Almost every tent in Copperhead was woven from Entari wool, hence their distinctive brown color. Those with tents of other colors are soon robbed, as bandits and thieves are quick to latch on to the easy marks. The Copperhead justice system tends to turn a blind eye to these crimes, as every victim is guaranteed to be an 'outsider'.



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Day Twelve ~ Plain of Weeping

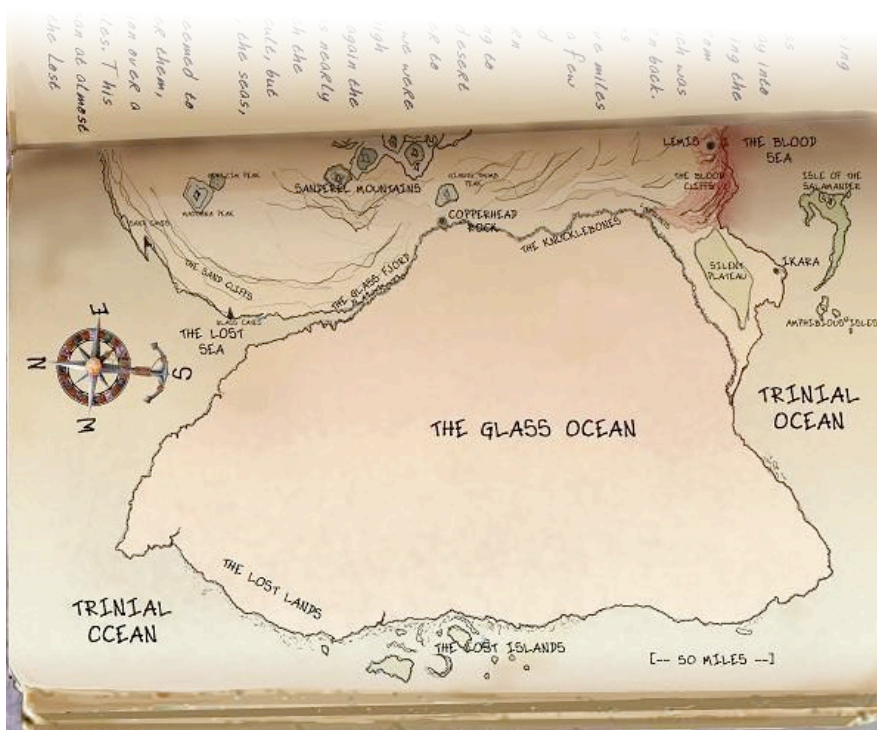
For a community that shares all resources amongst itself, there are still many disagreements. When Kizad brought with him his skills with water transportation, he marked an important day in the city's evolution. His gift of water to the community, however, was not without price. Kizad set up a Glassworks right along the Knucklebones, where sand can easily be carried in from the desert and struck by lightning spells from him and his apprentices. The Glass is inferior to the natural, not having the magical properties of the ocean lightning to increase its magical properties - and the sand loses its more special properties after only a few hours outside the desert. Still, Kizad's glass is a superior building product to most and perfect for building equipment meant to be used in the desert as the glass is highly resistant to many of the deserts effects. Most of the city sees this as a very good thing, even if Kizad only shares his glass at a cost and seems above the community legal policies. Hagil Hornbeam, however, is quite against Kizad's practices and insists that everyone should just leave the desert well enough alone. And there are more than a few who agree with Hornbeam, on an almost fanatical level. Copperhead may be in for some turbulent times.



Day Thirteen ~ Plain of Weeping

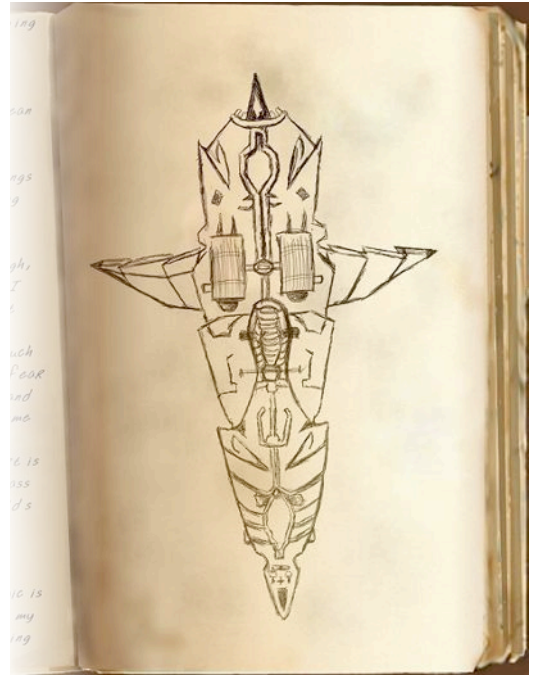
We began the first steps of mapping the Glass Ocean itself today, and surprisingly our foray into the unknown went better than expected. Utilizing the airship, we first traveled inwards straight from Copperhead Rock as far as we could go, which was just less than five miles before we had to turn back. Several erratic wind layers created problems adjusting the airship's altitude. In those five miles there was little to mark the terrain besides a few scattered boulders, which had somehow moved position several hundred yards by the return journey only fifteen minutes later. Returning to Copperhead, we then circumnavigated the desert sticking only to the very perimeter. In order to accomplish the round trip in

under a day, we were traveling at approximately 40 miles per hour. This high speed meant we lost much detail, but then again the sands shifted so frequently that detail was nearly meaningless. We had to navigate by eye, which the sand laden lower winds made quite difficult, but we followed the edges of the knucklebone, the seas, the Lost Lands, and the Trinial Ocean before returning to Copperhead. The edges of the desert seemed to rewrite themselves even as we passed over them, but we inscribed a roughly trapezoidal region over an averaged perimeter of two hundred and fifteen leagues. This leaves the current size of the Glass Ocean at almost 2,300 square leagues, minus the area of the Lost Lands which is unknown -yet.



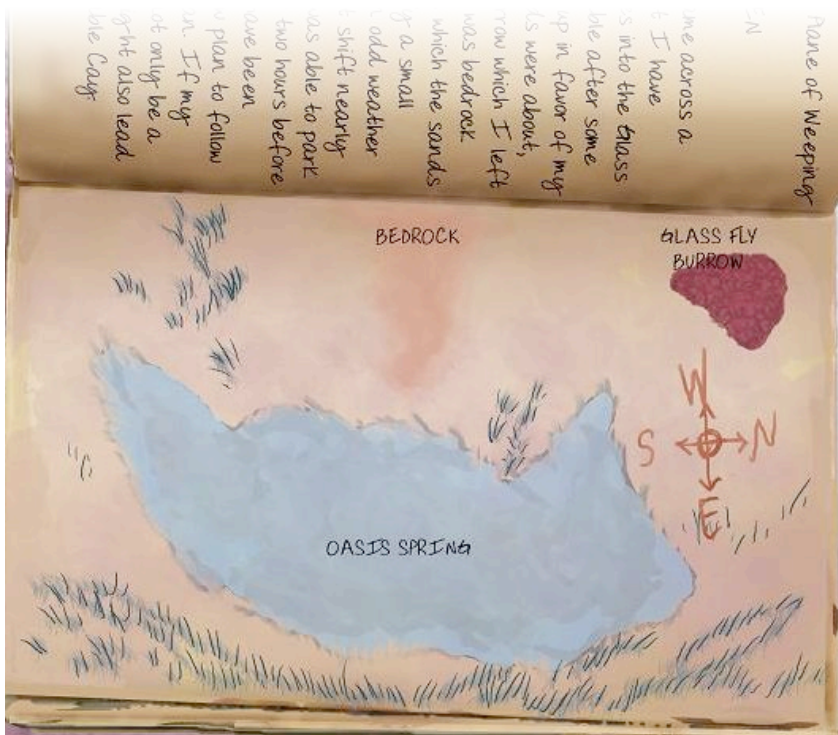
Day Fourteen ~ Plain of Weeping

After loading the last of the provisions aboard the desert skimmer, I set out into the Glass Ocean early this morning. From the standard entry point from Copperhead I left alone with no small amount of trepidation. All familiar things were quickly lost to me, swallowed by the blushing horizon. My skimmer provides some comfort, though, with its blend of gears and magic it glides over the sands easily and quickly. (Though, it sometimes has trouble handling large dunes.) I have food and water enough for a month, if not more, but it seems of little comfort. The atmosphere of this strange desert causes me much anxiety. While in the skimmer I do not have to fear that I will sink into the depths of the Ocean and be lost, I can only stop the skimmer when I come across a large sheet of glass to set it down on. (While the glass will eventually sink, the desert is slow to reclaim it. Currently, the skimmer is parked on one such sheet as I write. Larger sheets can be found every few miles.) I have taken many small glass samples and stowed them away in the magic holds of the Skimmer, but I wonder just how long magical assistance will hold out. The Skimmer seems to be fine, despite the malfunctioning compass which was expected, but my image magic is faulty. I seem to be unable to fix pictures to my journal as easily as I should, so I may be doing much more hand drawing in the future.



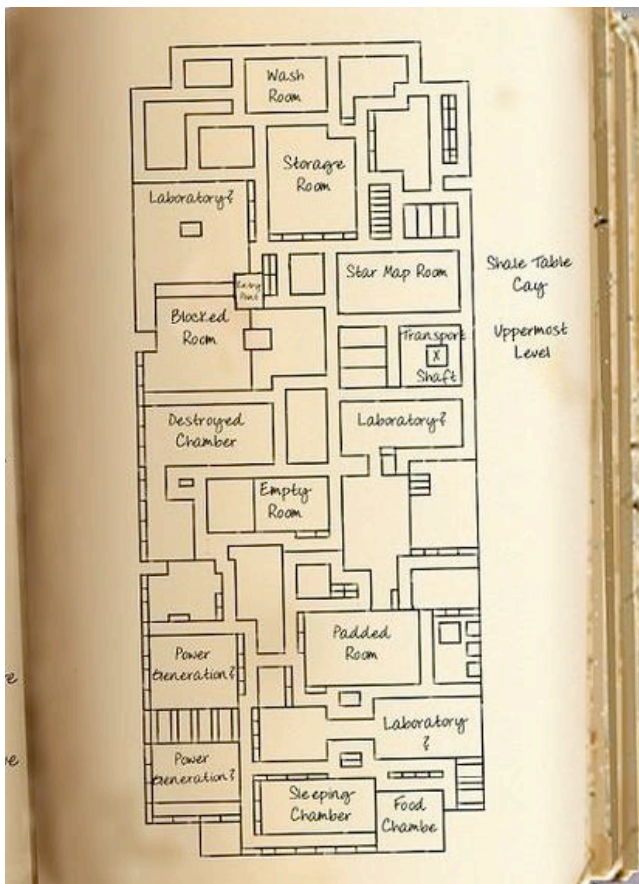
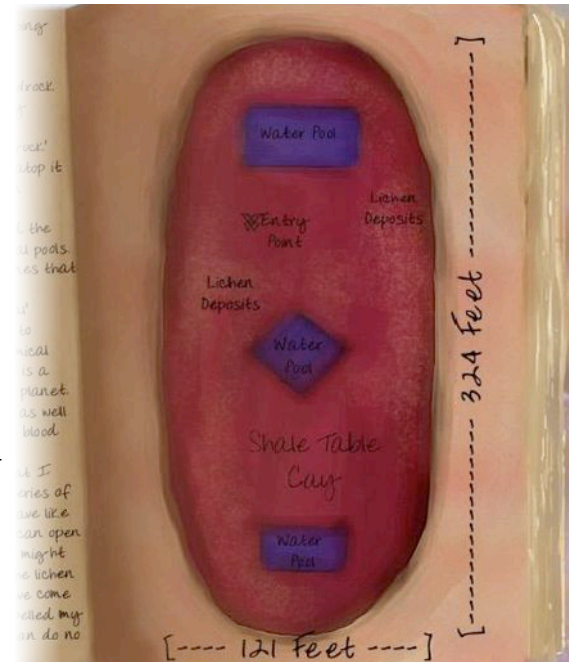
Day Sixteen ~ Plain of Weeping

This afternoon the skimmer came across a strange Oasis. It is the first I have encountered, nearly sixty miles into the Glass Ocean. Testing proved the water was drinkable, though I passed it up in favor of my own supplies. Some large lizards were about, and I found a glass fly burrow which I left undisturbed. I noted bedrock that the sands did not cover to the west of the Oasis. This may signify a small elevation change or perhaps an odd weather pattern, but the sands did not shift nearly as much around the Oasis. I was able to park the skimmer on the bedrock for two hours before any sand neared it. While I have been traveling in a straight line, I now plan to follow the bedrock as nearly as I can. If my hunch proves correct, it might not only be a more stable desert route, but might also lead the way to the fabled Shale Table Cay.



Day Sixteen ~ Plain of Weeping

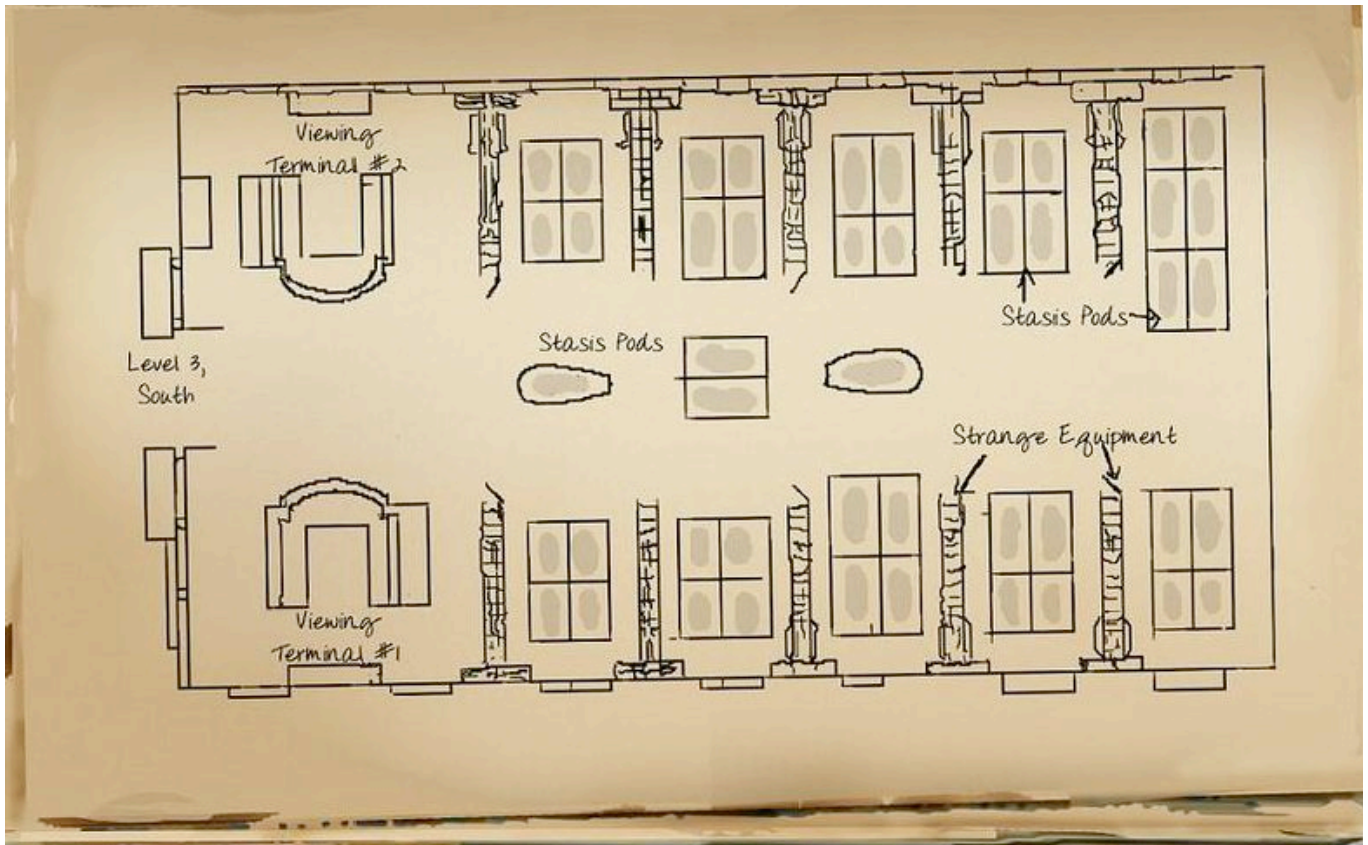
My hunch has proven well founded; following the bedrock as nearly as possible led me to Shale Table Cay by midmorning. It could not possibly be mistaken for anything else, and studying the secrets of this 'rock' has occupied my day. After parking the skimmer atop it and collecting water and lichen samples, I began measuring Shale-Table and discovered something strange. The symmetrical landform is 121x324, and the 'water basins' atop it are geometrically symmetrical pools. Despite the overgrowth of lichen and the sand dunes that come right to its base, this uniformity of design indicated that Shale-Table Cay was not a 'natural' landform at all. It took my hardest instruments to scrape off a sample of the 'rock', and several chemical tests before I determined that Shale Table Cay is a mineral alloy unlike anything encountered on the planet. It shares some properties with the desert glass, as well as some commonality with the crimson stone of the blood cliffs - but otherwise it is wholly unique and very strange. Exploring further, I have discovered what I guess to be an entry point - a 4x4 seam with a series of button like depressions. The stories claim that a cave like system lies beneath Shale-Table Cay, and if I can open the hatchway.....perhaps my father went below. I might have missed finding the entry way at all, but the lichen over it had been scraped away. Someone must have come this way, and recently. Curiosity would have compelled my father to uncover Shale-Table's secrets, and I can do no less



It took three hours and four-hundred seventy-six code permutations, but I finally accessed the entry hatch. It could be called little else, as the 'caves' below are not caves at all. At first, they appeared to be -oddly symmetrical walls of rock. It took me sometime stumbling through the small maze of passage-ways before I somehow fell through a rock wall. Everything went blurry for a minute, and then the world resolved itself into what Shale-Table Cay really is - and not the illusion it pretends to be. It is some sort of strange building, constructed of gray and crimson metal alloys. Many of the rooms have been ransacked or appear destroyed as if by a massive magic blast or troupe of thieves, but some of the rooms are intact. I could spend years studying the strange equipment and objects I have found, but my time is limited. I must find my father, and I cannot leave the skimmer parked atop Shale-Table unguarded. I spent the day exploring just this level, however, even though I have found what I believe to be the way further down. I have taken little, for I do not believe it is wise to disturb this place. I did find strange rations in a few of the un-looted storage bins, however, and took samples. I have also uncovered a room full of star maps and strange equipment, in which I would have loved to spend much time. Unfortunately, an almost invisible barrier guards the doorway as in many of the rooms, and not even rune-magic could break its force.

Day Twenty one ~ Plain of Weeping

It has been a most productive day! I spent the morning mapping the third level down from the surface of Shale-Table, just as I had for the two levels before it. Some of the walls bore scorch marks - recent, and at the south side of the level I discovered traces of blood on some of the walls. I abandoned my sketch of the layout, for the moment, and followed these to their source. The trail of growing blood led to a body, a bandit by my estimate, who had been stabbed several times. The dead man reeked, but I searched his corpse and uncovered a knife half buried in his side. My father's knife. I entered the room just beyond him, where bloody dried handprints littered the floor between smudge marks. It appeared someone had been wounded and crawled towards the center of the room. The room itself was filled with strange equipment and stranger pods, most empty. (I later found two dead bodies in damaged capsules in the room). I went to the pod the blood led to, and inside was a body. It was encrusted with dried blood, but the features below I would know anywhere. Father. I did not open the pod, but examined it. To all appearances it was some sort of stasis chamber, whether from magic or science I do not know. Probably science, guessing from the coils and wires and glowing panels in the room. It took me an hour to get back to the surface and retrieve my healing equipment and supplies from the skimmer (thankfully untouched) and return. Opening the pod was tricky, but I managed, and found his pulse stable if weak. I set to work washing the blood away and tending minor injuries, though could do little for the deeper wounds. I am not a healing mage, after all. Father stirred but never woke, and I surmise that he had been in a knife fight with the dead man outside. And where there is one bandit, there may be more. With the help of a few runes, I managed to levitate my father out of the pod and keep him light enough to carry to the surface where I placed him in the rest chamber near the front of the skimmer. What happened to the rest of his team, or those he fought, I do not know. I ran back through Shale Table searching, but found nothing but strangeness. It is eight levels deep, and full of so many things that I have no reference from which to describe. I saw no one. Returning to the Skimmer and my father, I have turned back towards Copperhead. Healing my father and finding out what happened takes precedence over my explorations, but one thing is certain. We shall both return to this place, my father and I, and seek out all its secrets.



Epilogue



Day Six, Plane of Jubilee

It has been ten years, to the day, since the disappearance of world famous map-maker An'Tarez and his daughter Ina. Discussing the mystery is still in vogue among the upper classes, and more than a few claim to have theories. I have a theory of my own. The classic story is thus:

After recovering her missing father from the Glass Desert, Ina claimed to have rescued him from bandits in the caves under Shale-Table Cay. An'Tarez corroborated her story, but the two never gave any details. They then took two years to map the Glass Ocean properly, giving the world not only generic maps but wind currents and pages of algorithms meant to predict the ways in which the coastline would reroute itself. During this time, they based their operations from Shale Table Cay, a mysterious choice that no one questioned. Other adventurers passing by were given food and water, but only members of An'Tarez's team were given access to the 'caves' below. Everything seemed normal, and their maps allowed better exploration and glass extraction from the desert. Everything seemed well....

And then there was the explosion. At least, that is the official story. One day, Shale-Table Cay vanished, leaving behind a two mile crater in which a glass works has since been built. No one alone knows exactly what happened, but the light of the 'explosion' could be seen from Lemis Keep and beyond.

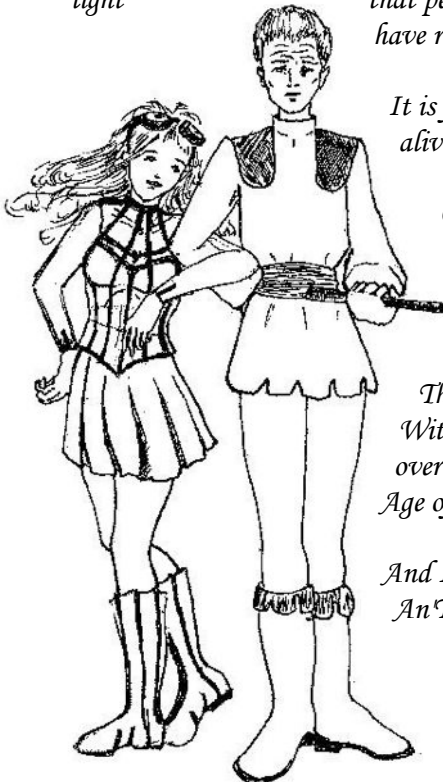
Yet it is here the story ceases to make sense. Only a powerful magic could undo as large a stone as Shale-Table, and there were no people capable of such destruction living on the continent. No traces of caves or anything were found. And the light that people saw, rather than mushrooming and fading like a typical explosion, was said to have risen to the sky before fading out.

It is for this reason that I, personally, think that Ina and An'Tarez and their team are still alive somewhere - perhaps among the very stars.

One thing however is certain. After Shale-Table vanished, the desert seemed to calm. Rather than rewriting its borders drastically almost every day, it now changes by a slow creep over many years. In the past decade, it has varied only two miles over the border of the last created map of An'Tarez.

This led to a massive increase of glass exportation from the desert, ushering in a new era. With the rose glass readily available, both scientific and magical studies advanced rapidly over the course of the next few years. Five years ago, the Age of Steam ended and the Glass Age officially began.

And I hold that this new era of prosperity would not have come so soon without the help of An'Tarez and Ina, whom the world will miss. ✪



The Magic Mirror

by *Matthew Funk*



This is the fiction entry to the 'New Frontier' Challenge. Set in the Glass Ocean, it tells the tale of Tavia an adventuress who makes a very interesting, and possibly fatal discovery.

The plummeting glass compass spun - end over end, a slice of misplaced sun - as all around it flew a gate of arrows.

Tavia didn't have time to gasp. Compass or censer; one had to be dropped. The censer dangled in her hands where she'd just lifted it off her saddle. The compass twirled, having slipped her fingers. She could only lean and catch one while steering her galloping steed. Arrows sang their urgency.

Her hands left the censer. Its chain unraveled; it began to slip from the thrashing flank of the riding lizard. She hauled the reins to the side with one hand, reached for the diving compass with the other. Fingers lashed at the compass, only just grazed it; flipped it forward, up. Arrows sliced the space she'd been in into shrieks and high hums.

The compass now spinning upwards, Tavia snagged the end of the censer's chain. One spin of the silver ball by its leash and she hurled it in the direction her lizard was bolting. It arched like a shooting star getting a second chance.

Her tawny legs hauled the lizard back in the other direction. More arrows buzzed by. She bit the pink cushion of her lip into a tight line. The censer was falling too fast; the lizard running too slow. The compass was already spinning down again. And it was hot; so hot the sun felt to be scraping the skin off of her with a palette knife.

All this was not to mention the sixty Marib marauders behind her, dressed like pitted teeth, in black garments and enamel armor plating, who insisted on having their lizard back.

If Tavia had had worse days, she didn't have time to think on them.

In the space of that thought alone, the compass had fallen to waist level. She slapped her leg tight against the opposite side of the lizard, yanked hard for the compass, and bent nearly double reaching for it. The lizard hissed like a tub of hot coals taking a sudden cool shower. She hoped it was some form of lizard prayer. She needed it.

She needed that compass.

Her fingertips fell short.

Her fingernails closed with a satisfying click.

Tavia knew the grip wouldn't last long; no sooner gained, than it was turned into a headlong throw, casting the compass a few feet ahead, a few feet up. She watched it arc up again, glanced towards the censer - which had nearly fallen into the sand - and nearly missed the sight of the compass being hit by an arrow.

A curse chiseled its way past her bitten lip.

The compass, ricocheting, was speeding towards the endless, shapeless sand of the Glass Ocean - towards vanishing.

Censer, compass; again too close to choose. She let instinct take over. The soft, panther-lithe lines of her body went to iron cables in anticipation. She lashed out.

Her body turned sideways on the lizard, balanced on her tucked right leg. Her right hand shot out, snagging the censer's chain and catching it up like a spinning bolo. Her kick landed on the compass, knocking it up.

Third time's the charm. Like a dervish, Tavia twisted her body to angle in the other direction, snatching up the compass. She held onto it like it was a piece of her own skeleton.

Glancing at her neck confirmed an earlier suspicion - the arrow that had first sent the compass spinning into the air had entirely cleaved the leather braid she'd had it hanging from. She weaved the lizard back and forth as she surveyed her meager apparel for some place to stow the compass. Buffalo-skin pouch; shot off and lost. Quiver; fully loaded. Loin cloth or bra; out of the question.

In the process, Tavia looked back at her pursuers. Not one of the sixty-two bow-wielding maniacs had decided it better to just let her have the lizard for now and trust she'd return it. Desert cultures were always so possessive. Probably had something to do with the overabundance of scalding hot sand and the total lack of most everything else.

The Marib were all outfitted with black cloaks and robes that whipped from them like burnt pennants from a besieged castle. Their armor was a calamity of sun-leached enamel plates, studded here and there with a glinting badge or a crude iron weapon. The hungry lean to their posture, their weightless riding stance, the speed of their salvo - all these things set them high in Tavia's esteem as remarkable warriors.

Good thing she had magic on her side. Now to free up two

hands to use it.

Without too much hesitation, she slid the compass between her teeth. It was wholly unpleasant; just as one would imagine sucking on warm glass to be. The sand that sliced at her eyes and nose immediately plunged into the wet seams of her lips and began peppering her tongue. Breath became an abrupt sniffing.

She couldn't open the censer fast enough. The Magician had told her sixteen turns to the left would release the silver orb's lid and let the incense within pour forth. Bracing it with one hand, twisting its lid with the other, Tavia would have sworn she turned it at least forty-three times. She began to wonder if she had been supposed to stop at sixteen, even though it could still turn more.

That was the point when the lid fell into the Glass Ocean.

At least Tavia assumed it did. The lizard, goaded by her legs' rapid pinching and her earlier yanking, was veering wildly from side to side, making it next to impossible to see behind her. One second the censer lid was present; the next, gone - there was just the sound of arrows, enraged tribesmen and their hissing lizards. At least, she thought, she had decided on a name for her borrowed mount.

You shall henceforth be known as 'Dizzy'. She spat the compass into her free hand. A squint at the compass, then at the island of what looked to be coral looming ahead - a "Cay" they called it in the Glass Ocean - confirmed she'd almost reached her destination. Now to get rid of her unwanted guests.

Tavia grinned like a canary-fed cat as she noticed the censer billowing with great, trunk-thick goutts of purple-gray smoke. The aroma was something like hazelnuts sauteed in feline pee. According to the Magician, Sand Drakes just couldn't resist it. Judging by the rumbling of the Ocean sand, one of those six-hundred-foot-long flippered lizards was swimming from the earth's crust right away.

Time to introduce her friends to one another. Tavia twisted in the saddle, preparing to fling the censer at the lead rider she now faced, swinging it by its chain behind her.

Dizzy obediently caught the chain in his jaws, snatching it from her hand.

For a moment or two, Tavia felt the Glass Ocean snickering behind its hand. Silence sped between her ears. She did not even hear the arrow shoot the strap of her top in half. All she heard and saw was the gawping jaw of her mount, gleefully beaming at her with the censer dangling from its teeth far out of reach. Dizzy hissed happily. The Sand Drake's tremors were becoming volcanic.

She absently brushed the bearskin of her top back on. Fingers twisted the severed strap ends together; they instantly fell apart. Oh well; she grabbed her spear instead - a beaded monstrosity that was part ash tree, part narwhal horn. She leaned forward on Dizzy's spine and spurred him onwards. She would fix her

clothes later. Now to ensure that there was a later.

As if to drive the point home, an arrow shot clean through her boot. She ignored it. She slammed her feet into Dizzy, driving the lizard into a flurry, and wrinkled her nose at the purple smoke now bathing her.

She landed with her spear slashing, slamming into bodies that twisted away at sickening speed and angles, keeping a storm of insectile motion off of her.

One hundred meters off. The Cay was one hundred meters off. That's not far.

The sand around her began to sink in. The rumbling had become convulsive. The riders pursuing her slowed. At least that was something.

Seventy meters. The outline of jaws plumped from the sand. She pinched her feet on either side of Dizzy's flanks and

bent her legs. Balancing on him was like trying to tip-toe on a stampeding water buffalo.

Fifty meters. The sand dropped down. The actual jaws of the Drake were turning, angling for Dizzy. They had to be nearly thirty meters wide. Their edges looked like igneous rock, vomited from some ceaselessly active caldera, raw and dark. The teeth were the size of hunting hounds. She put her knees together; she held the compass in one hand, the spear in the other; she stood.

Thirty meters. The jaws exploded up around her. She chose a tooth. She fixed her eye on it like a fishing hook.

Tavia jumped.

The world yawned in awe. Sounds of rushing whipped about her. She'd missed; she was sure of it.

Her boot caught the side of the tooth directly in its center. She balanced; she stood.

The Sand Drake fountained from the surface of the Glass Ocean, shattering the ranks of the pursuing Marib like ants around an oil geyser, and on its pitted canine, Tavia stood.

Stood and leapt again.

As she spun, somersaulting towards the Cay from the altitude of some fifty feet the Drake had launched her to, Tavia wished Dizzy a fond farewell. Perhaps not too fond. Then the brown cake of the Cay was rushing up at her, and she loosened her legs, positioning them feet flat, knees bent, for impact.

Tavia hit the Cay, the last salvo from the discouraged Marib clattering around her like an old woman's chiding. She landed firm. What she landed on proved less than firm.

The surface of the Cay cracked, and under its surface she tumbled.

Everything was movement - sunlight scattered like twigs, and movement. She was hitting a coarse, leathery wall; she was rolling down it, scraping herself; she was rolling to a halt with thrashing motion around her - dust, the brittle shale she'd broken through, and something else: Claws, carapace, wings like pressed lightning.

She landed with her spear slashing, slamming into bodies that

twisted away at sickening speed and angles, keeping a storm of insectile motion off of her.

The Magician's briefing came back to her, the recollection ragged at the edges with present urgency. "Glass flies everyone knows and worries about," he'd rasped in that restless tomb of a voice, his long, hot fingers playing the compass between them. "But it's the wasps that are the real bother."

He hadn't been exaggerating. They struck like lions and moved faster than the Marib's arrows. Swatting them off with the narwhal spear was all she could do to survive. A single hit from one of the willowy, whipping arms, Tavia knew, and she would be laid open like wet parchment.

"Worst of all," the Magician had concluded, "they drag what's left of you back and incubate their young in it until you expire."

Knowing how the Magician was, she had been surprised he'd not asked for a sample. Now it wasn't surprise Tavia felt, but shock, crystal-keen and cold. The impact, the injuries, the chaos of the wasps - it had come crashing down on her nerves and her nerves had begun to bleed a stark white calm. Frost knocked through her with every beat of her heart. She had to focus on something; something other than desperation.

Tavia gripped the compass. She could feel the final directions carved onto its case by the Magician scraping against her palm, and tried to recall the words.

4th stone sentinel

205 steps WNW

Did she remember right? A wasp arm nearly cleaved her hand off. She jabbed; jabbed in the other direction before her shoulder was filleted. She shifted the compass to peek at its case, all the while beginning to shuffle back, hoping to get the wall to her back.

Sure enough, the case read, in the Magician's spiderweb writing:

4th stone sentinel

205 steps WNW

Direction wasn't her strong suit, but she gazed about the chamber she was in, following the bearing of the compass.

Dust. Wasps. Smoke. Wasps. Spear. Dirt. Blood - had she been hit? She supposed she had; nothing felt missing; yet. Dust. Wasps.

And there, against the distant wall, stone sentinels.

Stylized like Hittite deities, the sentinels had the round, regular features of desert sculpture - the kind that suggested even the Gods would be worn smooth by edgeless ages of heat and dust. Bearded and burly, each held a sword topped with a pinecone - a symbolism Tavia had never entirely understood, despite her months spent as a for-hire temple raider for the Magician who lived near her tribe. But the shining eyes concave in each sentinel's forehead - those she understood. Each was the exact

size of the compass.

A lock for a key. And a lock meant a door, a door an escape - an escape at the fourth stone sentinel.

Tavia counted. Fended wasps and counted, from 205 steps west-north-west.

One stone sentinel. Two?

A wasp arm sheared her spear in half and took a ribbon of skin with it.

Counting, Tavia realized in a flash of agony that turned her insides into hot wire, was not going to have long enough to work.

She dashed, raising the compass. What followed her looked like a tornado of blades, pureeing the air. It came on silently, and at speeds reserved only for fevered nightmares.

Her last step was a leap. She aimed the compass at the forehead of the sentinel and slammed it in place. Wasp limbs drove home for her, and in that moment, Tavia realized that the door would not open fast enough, nor her body duck quick enough, nor anything living surpass the speed of the wasps. The agony in her pumped pure neon as the wasps whistled in. She shut her eyes.

She would curse herself for it later. It was a coward thing to do. After the shock, the violent nausea, the sobbing worked through her, she could be concerned about such things. But at that moment, Tavia shut her eyes and was as dead.

Until she realized she wasn't.

She was still in terrific pain, after all. Still as hot and anxious as the edge of a bonfire. Still breathing, bleeding, shaking.

But not hearing the wasps anymore.

Tavia opened her eyes. Her field of vision bloomed with a garden of lights.

There, streaming from the compass set into the sentinel's head, was a prismatic flood of color. All the awesomely intricate inner workings of the glass compass had hatched into light so bold it could be tasted. Tavia ran her hand through the beams to feel if it felt different. She was positive it did.

It was the kind of beauty you can smile the rest of your life about; the kind that never goes stale, but lives like a drop of water inside a sealed vessel of glass. A snow

globe moment.

And best of all, it had driven off the wasps.

Tavia glanced below the shining compass, and noticed that the space beside the sentinel, separating the fourth from the fifth, had opened into a thin passage. She slipped inside.

Beyond, there was a small, dusty chamber. Egg-shaped, it was remarkably cozy compared to the vast temple chamber she had expected. The Magician had so talked up the destination of her

A wasp arm nearly cleaved her hand off. She jabbed; jabbed in the other direction before her shoulder was filleted.

raid - "An alcove immemorial, in which resides the drink of deities; ambrosia, wisdom and warp of the Gods, the magic mirror." Instead of wisdom, Tavia thought as she cradled her wounded arm and glanced about the dingy hollow, this looked like where an adolescent deity snuck off to hide and read.

She almost missed what she was looking for at first glance.

There, in the room's center, stood a modest pillar. Upon the pillar was a bowl. And within the bowl, something shimmered. Something spilled reflections the way the sky spills rain.

Tavia approached the bowl, shock gone and triumph raising its warm, golden glow like a torch within her.

The more she saw of the substance shining in the bowl, the more thoughts of reward came to her, putting a tingle in her skin and a feline purr in her blood. The Magician had promised great things in return for the mirror - had sworn no less than the secrets of demolishing the city that plagued her tribe. That promise had led her to cross the pirate-ridden straits, steal from the Marib, and bait a Sand Drake. She'd bled and suffered and nearly died a dozen times for it. And here was the key to it, right in her hands. She slipped her grip about the base of the bowl.

Right before she lifted, she saw.

The entirety of the shining liquid's surface caught her eye. Liquid mirror it had been suggested as, and liquid mirror it was - she looked into it and saw a flood of her own reflection. Then, in the instant she remained looking, images spread like water, flowing into other forms, leaking away until a single image resolved at the bowl's center, as if drawn directly from the well of Tavia consciousness and reflected within the liquid mirror's sharply shining borders.

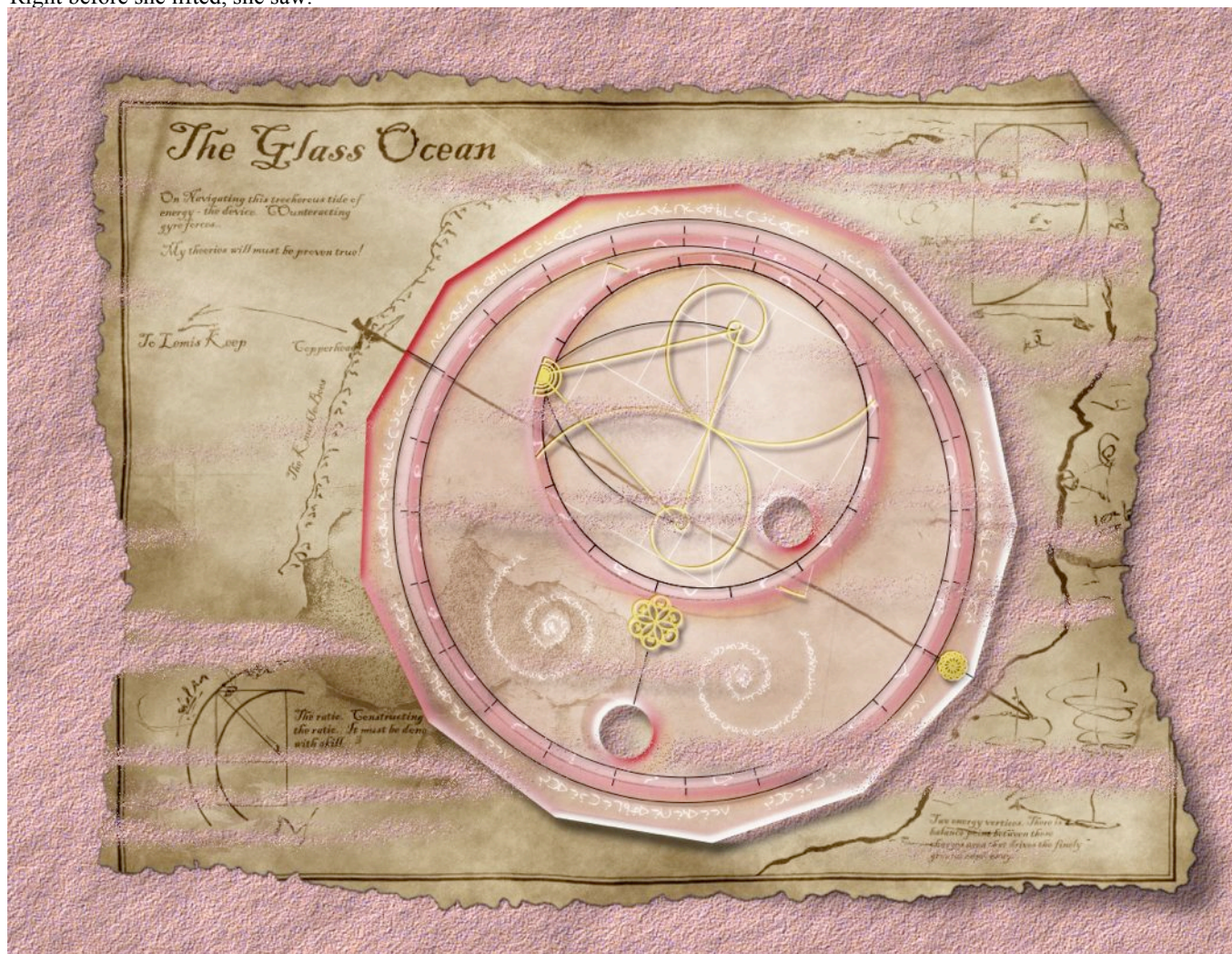
She saw herself in the Magician's study. She handed him the bowl containing the mirror. She smiled. He smiled. He pointed behind her. She turned.

In the mirror, she saw the Magician run her through the back with a blade.

Tavia stood in the dusty cocoon of the Cay chamber, the desert heat and filth sticking to her like phlegm on a sore throat, cradling her arm, letting the time pass in drops of blood and flickers from the mirror.

Well, Tavia thought to herself after awhile.

This is one adventure I'm not going to return with the treasure from. ✨



An Interview with Nathan Ellsworth

by R.D. "Turin" Heesen

Today, we're paying a visit to our friends at the other side of the Alliance. Specifically, we'll be talking to Nathan Ellsworth, creator, admin "and bottle washer" of PlotStorming. While at day he does innocent work as a mechanical engineer, at night he goes around in his SuperWriter-suit saving the day for poor, inspiration-less writers. Now that we have established his secret identity, Nathan talks freely about both of his occupations for the first time in this exclusive interview. Not only does he tell us about his site and the Alliance, he also reveals his setting (working title "the Merge", which smells like SinkSet but is really DivSet). Luckily, he pays proper reverence to cabbage, so that can only bode well for the future success of his writing projects.

Welcome Nathan. Before we get started, please introduce yourself to the reader. Who are you and what are you up to in "real life"? Mechanical engineering pays the bills, but to collect I have to live for 9 hours in a beige cube in a beautiful windowless cinder block building that hasn't been renovated since it was built in the 1960's. I count the minutes until the end of the day when I can escape. The gym is a necessary step to blow off some steam, and then I can sit down to writing.

I'm sole admin, designer, and bottle washer at PlotStorming.com. I'm also a member of the Wandering Men, a group of writers that has banded together to create some really great fiction. Our first book, *Skein of Shadows*, is available through Barnes & Noble now. Between the website, the writing group, and trying to work on my own writing projects, I have a tough time figuring out when to sleep.

Now that we've got that cleared up, let's get into some more detail. First off, I'd like to hear some more about PlotStorming. What is it and why should we campaign builders all visit it daily? PlotStorming.com was founded to encourage writers and gamers to gather and revel in the creative process and their art. It's a place for people to find help in developing their plots (or adventures) and character ideas. It has also evolved into a community that tries to help writers improve their craft through sound critiques. The site also provides daily writing prompts and monthly contests that get a writer writing and flexing their creative muscle.

Everyone should visit it daily because there's always a new bit of fiction to read. Whether it's the daily writing prompt, contest

entries, or a new story hour post, they're all entertaining and worth the read.

How and why did you start PlotStorming? I blame it on the Wandering Men. We were throwing plot ideas around for *Skein of Shadows*, and it made me realize how much I love the brainstorming stage of writing. If I could get paid to help other people brainstorm cool fiction, I'd quit my job in a heartbeat. I thought there must be other people like me - I knew a couple of the Wandering Men felt the same way - so it sounded like a worthy idea for a website. I rolled in the daily writing prompts, to help give struggling writers a kick start, and the site was born. I wanted to help burgeoning writers create and write, and I hope I'm shaping PlotStorming.com to do just that.

You and Ishmayl also originally founded Fantaseum, the Alliance between our sites that now also includes the Cartographers' Guild. What were your original intentions, and how did they turn out? World domination, wait that wasn't this group. Our intention was to create a supportive community of sites, whose membership shares creative interests. We wanted help each other and our members by promoting the Alliance sites, encouraging the communities to interact because Alliance sites are great resources for their focus. I think it's worked out great, and it's an ever evolving friendship. The Fantaseum leaders are constantly thinking of ways to help and improve our sites.

Your excellent contribution to the latest Guides (the Uncommon EVIL series) showed us you're also into roleplaying. What games do you play? Hmm, I honestly haven't played since D&D 2nd Ed. I did run a short HERO Planescape play by post game that died quickly - it made me quite sad. I am well versed in D&D 3.5E, HERO, Rifts, Mage, Werewolf, and Mutants & Masterminds however. If I was going to play a game, I'd love to run or play a M&M Planescape game.

What are your experiences in the area of GMing and worldbuilding? I've only GMed one short PbP Planescape game, but I'd love to GM again. I enjoy crafting stories, and roleplaying is one method of creating an amazing collaborative story.

As to worldbuilding, I am a hobby writer, so every story I write has to have an implied setting. Almost all of my own work takes place in the Merge, my all encompassing setting. At its core, it's

a grand space opera settings that blends fantasy and science, but it has so many time periods, factions, and locations that I'm able to tell whatever story I want: pulp, gumshoe, epic space opera, dark fantasy, to name a few.

I'm an advocate of only building as much of the setting as I need to tell the story. I always check what I've already written, to make sure the fundamentals line up and I don't contradict myself. If I do, I at least develop a good and entertaining reason why. Thus, at the rate I'm going, the Merge may never be fully detailed or developed because I'm painting a mural with a pencil-thin brush.

What would you consider to be the most important guideline for worldbuilding? How about three: Only focus on what you need to tell the story, remember your players - your audience, and be consistent.

Do you read the Guide yourself? What are your thoughts on it? That'd be silly of me to submit to it and not read it! *smile* I've read and enjoyed it since #4. I feel both the editing and writing are above average to very good for a fan created gaming e-zine. It needs more fiction of course, but PlotStorming.com is trying to help out with that.

GM or player? I'd love to just be a player for a game. But GMing calls to my personality and love of creation.

Fluff or crunch? Nathan: Fluff all the way.

Inside-out or outside-in? Again I have to fall back on the writing response - whatever the story requires, but I probably

default to outside-in. I always think on the macroscopic level to try and determine how that shapes the particulars: locations, people, monsters, nations, etc. I've written a number of short stories to examine some inside facet, but I always try to weave in some of the outside to give it context.

Theme Wars: Ethocentric or DivSet? Both have their merits. Couldn't a DivSet have Ethocentric subsettings? That's what I strive for.

Favourite RPG-related product? Dungeon Magazine

Cabbage: vile Fiend or exalted Deity? Exalted Deity, plus tasty in lasagne.

Thank you very much. To round things up, please tell us a bit about your current projects. What are some things we should look out for in the future? I think I've dropped enough hints throughout the interview, but definitely consider the upcoming Wandering Men book: *Skein of Shadows*. Yes, I have a short story in it, and my friends wrote the rest, but I honestly think it's a well written book. All five short stories mesh, and that's an amazing feat for five writers. The characters interact with each other, and the plots weave together to tell a much larger story.

I don't know if I'll get to any more Uncommon EVILs for the Guide, but I'll try to write one every month or so. Stop by PlotStorming.com or WanderingMen.com to find it.

I'll always be working with Ishmayl and Arcana to improve the Alliance. And, of course, visit PlotStorming.com for more fiction from me and even better writers. ☼



A Storm is Brewing...

On the eve of the Festival of the Long Night, a raucous holiday which commemorates the onset of the Demon Scourge, a mysterious ship has entered Crown, captained by an enigmatic elf in the service of the dreaded Ice Skull League. On board is a mysterious and evil relic that could bring ruin and despair to the proud city and forbidden power to the inscrutable Grey God. Beneath the waves, a stalwart alonn druid has begun a crusade to banish the relic, while in the city's slums; a cunning elven assassin has been hired to kill the captain in cold blood. As the storm approaches, a celebrated dwarven gladiator is manipulated to kill for blood and the Grey God's glory as a colossal oltreggan barbarian has been set free from prison and placed on a path with destiny. All the while, an ethereal who serves as the Queen's Intelligencer frantically pulls together the pieces, trying to discover the identity of the half-demon who is behind it all. In a race against time, the unlikely heroes come together in clash that could mean the end for them all. When the storm hits, will Crown survive?



The Wandering Men

From Left to Right: Davis Riddle, Brannon Hollingsworth, Corey Blankenship, Nathan Ellsworth, and Brannon Hall.

Websites Mentioned in this article

Plotstorming:

<http://www.plotstorming.com>

The Cartographers' Guild:

<http://www.cartographersguild.com>

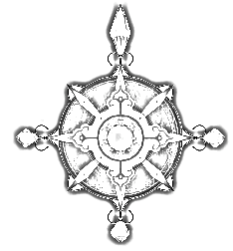
Theme Wars:

http://www.thecbg.org/wiki/index.php?title=Theme_Wars

The Wandering Men:

<http://www.wanderingmen.com>


October Mapping Challenge Winner



A Picture is Worth a Thousand Maps

by Torq

The Challenge

orking from an image prompt of a monastery entrants were to base their map on the premise that a cult had taken over a local monastery and had made prisoners of the monk caretakers who are transforming the monastery into a temple where they intend to worship and perhaps summon their dark gods. The image was kindly provided by Nickdan, a regular at deviant art.

The Guidelines

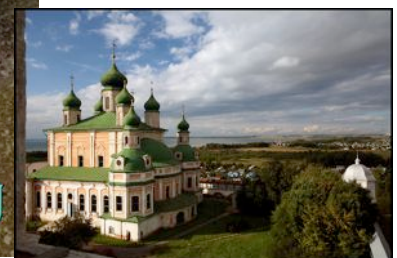
The map should match the shape of the building given only the view you have from the picture

- Adhere to the story seed as best as possible
- Provide a scale for the map
- Bonus consideration for mapping some of the surrounding countryside (does not have to conform to photo)



The Results

There were five entries to the competition with Torq winning by a total of 17 votes. In second place was Game Printer with eight votes. The amount of detail invested in this structural map is stunning, down to the runes carved on the alter. Perhaps more importantly, the map tells a story. The blasted wreckage of the pews, the dead priest and the shattered door fulfil the brief of telling the story. The use of textures, particularly in the outer grounds (note the mosaic floor washed over by soil and other debris) give some indication of the thought and effort that went into this work. A superb effort for October! 🌟



The Festival of Splendor

by Koor

In Rushon, the City of Twilight Splendor, an important festival is about to take place. However, on the horizon, "something wicked this way comes." This was the September challenge given to the members of the Campaign Builders' Guild. The winner was Koor with this splendid, and somewhat sinister entry.

Setting

The night of the Festival of Splendor is drawing near, and great anticipation abounds amongst the peasant class. Tales of the mysterious city can be found on the lips of even the most downtrodden of serfs. Mostly adaptations of the children's stories about the city, each tale brings hope for the people, and a desire to witness the beauty of the sleeping city, and the festival it reveals with its reappearance. Many amongst the common folk dream of making the journey to the spot where Rushon is believed to appear, but few have the courage to risk their livelihood for what may be simply a fairytale. To the young nobility, however, the prospect of being one of the few to attend the Festival and be envied by their fellow nobles is an opportunity too good to miss it out on.

Hook

When the time of the Festival of Splendor draws near, the players may begin hearing rumors, or seeing notices posted in the city in which they currently reside. The rumors/notices inform the Party that the King (or any other official) is offering a bounty for information on the City of Splendor.

If the party decides to accept the task and meet with the official, they will discover that the aged King seeks to learn what happened to his sister who disappeared on her trip to Rushon 80 years ago. From this meeting, the party will find out that not all tales of Rushon are good, and that despite the wondrous tales of the populace, no one in living memory has returned from Rushon to share any tales. He warns you that if you decide to go, you must be on your guard, always searching for a way out.

Characters

King (or whatever title fits into your campaign) - He sends the party to Rushon in order to find out why his older sister never returned from the previous Festival. He's 87, and has been waiting for the chance to unravel this mystery since his sister disappeared 80 years ago. His life is nearing its end, and before it does, he wishes to finish his lifelong quest. He will go to any length to complete it, and sacrifice everything he

has. Unwilling to rely on only one party, he will no doubt send anyone that takes up his offer into the heart of Rushon.

The Musicians - The musicians of Rushon. Their melodies spur the visitors of the city into a forced dance. The musicians aren't all that they seem, however. Their jovial playing hides a dark secret.

The Spirits of Rushon - Not all of the victims of the City of Twilight Splendor went peacefully into the long dark sleep. There are traces of the former victims within the shadowed areas of the city. Many of these spirits have become mindless entities that lash out at anything living that makes the mistake of wandering into their quiet corner, however, there are also elements that held on to pieces of their humanity and may be able to help the Group with their efforts within the city.

Locations

The Salt Flats - The arrival of the City of Twilight Splendor is first signaled by the recession of the sea from the coast line. Over the course of a day, a section of the sea appears to boil off, and in its place is a plain of salt which one must cross to get to the now visible Rushon. Visitors traveling to the festival will cross the salt in droves, many running due to the excitement of being within sight of the magical city.

The Rushon gates - The Rushon gates are narrow, forcing the crowd to fall in to a single file line. This line proceeds through the gates, and upon entering passes a resident of Rushon who hands every visitor a mask to wear for the festival. Although this is the first resident of Rushon that the visitors encounter, most simply take the mask and continue on, paying no attention to the man. Once through the gates the music begins to pull at the guests, and they tend to ignore everything but the music.

The Streets - Narrow and winding, the streets are a veritable maze, though easily navigable when following the music coming from the town square. In fact, no matter which way you turn, you always seem to end up right back in the square. Buildings lining the streets are invariably locked up and barred shut, with few exceptions.

The Town Square - The source of Rushon's music, and the place where the festival takes place. Most visitors don't make it past the playing of the musicians. The town square is lined with closed up buildings, and on its northern side, overlooking the town square is a large mansion that looks like it might belong to a mayor if the town had one.

The Mansion - This is the building in which the musicians reside with the master of Rushon.

The Storehouse - Beyond the mansion, and on the northern side of the square is a large locked up store house. This storehouse holds a secret for any players that stumble upon it.

Happenings in the City of Splendor

The Mask - Upon entering the city, if any of the party members accept and don the mask given to them, they will have a +10 added to their difficulty to resist the playing of the musicians in the square.

The Town Square - If the players fail to resist the playing of the musicians, they will find themselves dancing uncontrollably until their endurance gives out on them and they collapse. If this happens, the players may be given the chance to join the musicians/master in his eternal game. If they refuse, they will die, and may join the spirits of Rushon. If any member of the party resists the playing, he can add a +5 to the chances of his group members to resist the music.

The Storehouse - If the players stumble upon the storehouse, they will immediately notice something different about it from its surroundings. Once inside the group will discover that the storehouse is the repository for the corpses of Rushon's victims. Countless bodies have been drug into the building and shoved into a massive pile at the back of the storehouse. A rough estimate of the number of bodies shows it to be about 3000 bodies, though estimating is difficult due to the state of preservation. Inside the storehouse the party may encounter one of the victims of Rushon. The spirit may warn the party of the musicians, and the tell them about the only way to escape the city, the glass compass.

Streets - Chance encounters with angry spirits. The spirits keep to the shadows, away from the burning lights of the Festival. They will attack anyone not dancing, assuming the non-dancers are residents of the city.

The Mansion - Visiting the mansion while the music is still playing will bring the players into contact with the master of the city, without his musicians as guards. Obviously the master will not take kindly to their presence. Visiting shortly after the music has stopped playing will have the party arrive in an empty house. If they had previously encountered the kind spirit in the Storehouse, they will find the compass in the Master's room. The compass is the only way for the players to navigate the winding streets and exit the city.

The Big Showdown

If the party chooses to confront (or accidentally stumbles upon) the master of the town, they will soon find themselves in a fight with a fallen paladin. If his musicians are near, they will join the fight as bards. Defeating the master will bring an end to the festival of splendor. The city of Rushon will no longer disappear for 80 years at a time, but will instead remain in place, with the sea no longer swallowing it.

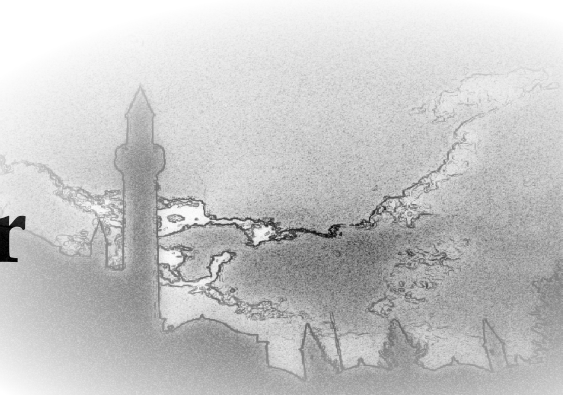
How Rushon came to be

The master of the city of Rushon was its ruler before it was swallowed by the sea. Rushon was indeed a city of splendor, a jewel of a city known for its beauty and the wondrous festival it had every year. The City was a blessing for all of its residents, for their mayor kept the criminal elements out, and the residents safe. The city's downfall came when the mayor, who was becoming too old to protect the city, feared what would happen to it after he passed away. The Paladin spent the majority of the town's treasury to procure a single wish. His mistake was arrogance, and it would lead to his city's destruction. He wished that he would live forever, without specifying the how. The wish worked, but as is the nature of such wishes, it became a curse. His mind was twisted as his body took control. He reached into the eye of his loving wife and tore from her her remaining youth. Next he ripped the youth from his son, and he felt himself growing stronger. Rushon soon emptied as those who he once protected were forced to flee from their protector. The Mayor's bard remained behind, trying to find a way to help his old friend, but he too was soon corrupted. Rumors of the atrocities committed in Rushon soon spread, and a group of mages from across the border soon arrived to put an end to the horrors. However, the most they could do was curse the city and banish it into the sea. Everyone thought the danger was passed until 80 years later Rushon reappeared. At this time the stories of the tragedy had passed, and most had only ever heard of Rushon for its wonderful festivals. So when music was heard coming from the City of Twilight Splendor, tales spread far and wide that the festival had returned. ☀



The City of Twilight Splendor

by *Matthew Funk*



And here is the fictional counterpart of the previous adventure.

The sea had given up on land, and drew back stinging with its salt, leaving a plane of its dried tears behind, before the town of Twilight Splendor

Over this edgeless bright barren we rushed, Diana and I, hand in hand. Imagining ourselves discoverers first setting foot on the skin of a star -- imagining the galaxies ours -- we ran along, the crowd around unseen -- through the gates of Rushon.

Rushon's great gates, vast as fossils, loomed above our entry. I looked on them, on how they shone, and pondered quick their secret source of endless youth -- how Rushon killed age, killed loss, and how, each four score years, would open its gates one night to share a most splendid festival -- the Festival of Twilight Splendor.

I saw no hint of the ages they'd stayed shut -- no hint of grasping rust or warp of wood -- a cape of captive light alone, caught by their iron in flight from countless lamps. It was their blue that held my eye -- the pink of Diana's hand was lost, the saffron of her dress forgot -- only blue that drew us in. The darkest blue were Rushon's gates, the blue of coral kept bright behind the restless lid of dreaming sea. And into them we happily skipped, though memory's weight still pulled my every form.

No escape could I find those days; no matter what shape I assumed. Not dancing, reading, stretched long in sleep -- the manacles of loss held firm. Even with her hand in mine, Diana's words past I felt most: "I'll not, I'll not -- you'll not be mine," an echo like a lion's jaws. No matter how I fought their sound, and shut that day in nightmare's cage, I knew them more than I knew her hand, her smile's shine here at Rushon. Here at Rushon, at the East World's edge, where we'd been drawn by festival's fame, if not as lovers, then as friends.

And so as mere friends we danced within; to piping's trill we skipped and turned. The crowd around so brightly clad, as if to spite the shade around -- the black basalt Rushon was carved of, now decked in lanterns, ribbons, light. The mammoth brow of the cityscape, denied to eyes for dec-

ades gone, lay gray upon the land that slept: Primordial Colchis, realm of night. But for this eve, the endless night was fettered on the party's edge. Paper lamps and garish masks were stars enough to block the dark.

Would it block the dark within me? I capered on, to slough off such thoughts. On Diana my tired hopes fixed; Diana tanned with travel's hue. Diana now turned to pluck a mask from an servant's proffering hand. Supplied to all who'd come for the fest, the mask was spun from thick, white floss. She donned it then, hid her grin, whose failings since her damning words were clear as glass lodged in my eye. And yet I faltered to see it gone; to see the mask's lips in its place. She dragged me on -- "The dance insists," she said and spun. I held her hand the tighter then. An anchor's weight lived in that palm.

Another mask shoved in my hand: the attendant forced it there. Instinct refused its brittle stick; the man forced it back. I took it then. And yet it felt like a splinter there. No sooner had he looked away to give another traveller theirs, I cast mine to the stones below -- watched it trampled by senseless feet.

Into Rushon's throngs we whirled, Diana tugging me to lead. Her gait was halting -- fierce but shy -- to feed me speed to guide us both. I did not want to guide her though; my compass was broken in my breast. My steps they dragged while all around leapt; my balance still lost despite our game. Again I sought to see only Rushon -- the cause that made us cross the sea. The famed delights of decades' lore, at last admitting in the world. It seemed the world had joined us there -- hundreds come for Twilight Splendor.

Candy fine and midnight sweet, the gilding on the towers shone. Brass and ochre, lapis blue, fixtures blazed chthonic light. All around a central square, lamps were raised on old oak poles. Into this fence, dance led us there; the tabor beat breathed in our limbs. And for a moment, absence fled. The hundred hundreds burned as one. I burned with them, abandon's shell.

Abandon wild and set to flutes, I saw its source within the

group: A player's troupe, decked out with jewels, who smoldered over their instruments. They alone wore no mask, but for the intent carved in their flesh -- the fixed look of wizards' work: brilliant eyes in skin like wood. Set apart by smoke they were; with abalone shells around, which wept great lines of pallid soot from spiced incense burning there. My eye felt caught upon their squad, leashed like hound to master's thigh. But soon Diana's urgent turns had lost them in the thrashing crowd.

I tried with all I had to dance. The faun's high step thrived in the mob. I stumbled though, shackled still, reflection's hand more firm than hers. She then tried to force a laugh. Her leering mask showed only mirth. Our fevered step was synched, then broke, then joined again to break anew. And all the while, Rushon loomed on -- its majesty a monolith. Its cerulean fingers grabbed the sky, and spun it round at sound's command. Nothing could escape this dance; nothing but the void in me. That hollow place was mine alone; the whole town capered -- they laughed, they flew.

Hours passed like seamless cloth; the weave of tune stitched into tune -- of step that led to urgent step, to urgent dozens more to come. The sea's rank smell was drown by wine, that poured from pitchers passed about. An open throats imbibed, gave song, gave oaths of love and joy and life. And time dissolved in music's sea, memory lost to all save I. Once I nearly felt it slip, but then Diana's hand broke free. She spun away, and quick returned, but by then my blood was tar. She dragged me to another spin; I tried my frown out as a smile. Then failing that, I looked away, and saw a cherub wrought in iron. Set over an archway's alley gate, the little angel form was pocked. Smooth contours had weathered rough, its infant form caped in decay. I looked on that, on other sights -- on flowers thin on lantern hide; on bullock meat in marinade troughs; on flashing teeth and braided hair. Anywhere but on her face -- on the mask Rushon supplied.

Then at last, the music peaked -- the trilling was a razor's width. The drumskins roared like solid rain, drowning heartbeats in their call. The paving stones trembled hot -- fevered children in a sweat of feet. And every foot could nigh keep pace; sandals broke and dresses tore. And yet the dancers kept in step, as single steps blurred to a sea. A sudden runnel of ice found me, lancing from my heart's deep rift -- a savage fear with leopard claws, which tore my thoughts to bloodless shreds. Diana danced but wilder yet -- I called to her. My voice was mute. Sitar bray and cry of flute had slaughtered it while in my throat. No sound alone could survive Rushon, as climax broke its endless song.

Finale pounded from the troupe, burst from their group at

dancing's core. Diana, called again, just laughed, as thousands did in unison. My frantic yells seemed quieter still, the more I gave them utterance. The more I screamed and fought the step, the more she hauled me after her. And yet I did not question this -- all around were wild in kind. All around the festival grounds, bodies twitched on brink of fall. A horde of fingers joined Rushon's, and with its towers, raked the sky. I looked above and saw stars blurred; smeared with motion to dull glass. There would be no fleeing this -- the piping's chain had now pulled taut. I looked instead to those at fault, and saw the players' faces grim. Expressions set just before, but now shown cruel with ruthless task. And mirrored in the veil of smoke, I saw the image of the dance -- reflections of all those around, shown as solid as paint on silk.

I tugged away, then stopped myself. I could not lose her to the song. We'd come this far, the whole sea's breadth -- ten leagues away from tragic words. I had to keep her in my hand; even though the dance now ruled. Even though the song had her, I struggled hard to own her grip. But the piping's grease was strong, stronger still than I could match. And soon I felt doubt work into me, a subtle strain like waking's shock. And just as once my dreams had broke, at "I will not, I will not," now the sinews of my hold began to split on music's edge.

"Diana!" cried was crushed by drums. "Diana!" strangled by the flutes. Diana turned once more and leapt. I stumbled then. I lost her hence.

An instant more, the mob shoved hard -- a last convulsion of their form. And tears cut from my rigid face, now strangers' bodies all I saw. In the tears might be seen a field -- an amber place beneath ripe trees. Their salt might also then smelled sweet, like sangria or flesh on flesh. And if touched, they'd felt like her, the moment fore she spoke her words -- that moment cut, indelible; a shard of glass from shattered panes. That reflection was more real than any fevered dance could be. No matter how the mob could push; no matter that I fell beneath. No matter all the trampling feet. My tears were real; Rushon was false.

But through their tide, I saw a truth -- an image that was real as loss: I saw the spinning strands of smoke, around the players, thick as gold. And in their glister, there the dance was framed in stillness, halted, bright. Like a burn on infant skin, that image set, denying all time. Scalded into hourglass sand, climax's moment was held inert. Then with a crash, the music ceased. The dancers fell. The players stood.

I lay among the fallen mob. The bodies around me smoked

***My horror rolled like living oil,
twisting tight within my gut.
For as I watched, the fingers
dipped, and entered eyes and
mouths like cups.***

with heat. Cloth both coarse and fine shed wisps, vapor curling from their mess. Tangled limbs lay locked in joy, now made to sleep by quiet's hand. I listened hard for any sound; even breath exchanged unheard. The dancers breathed, but made no noise. The players' tread alone dared live.

With steady step, like funeral dirge, they exited the gate of smoke. From out its bright portrait, as one they walked, peering down with vulture's eyes. I killed the urge to flee and lay, acting as the stricken mob. I watched the garish troupe then bend and search the crowd with fingers wide.

My horror rolled like living oil, twisting tight within my gut. For as I watched, the fingers dipped, and entered eyes and mouths like cups. Into vacant stares they reached, rooting about as if in sacks. Into lips fixed open wide, the players sifted hungrily. And sickness fought with wonderment, as I saw them find their prize.

From the left eye of a young girl, a female player pulled a brooch. Its glistening chain wound like a web; the player pressed it to her breast. And there it stuck, hung as if draped, as if by a lover's hand was set.

Another player revealed a ring, exhumed from an old man's mouth. Another still pulled a cape, struggling it from out an eye. He donned it then, and preened around; a cadaverous chuckling oozed from him. His companions paid no heed, intent on raiding, lost in search. Soon, I knew, they'd come to me. Seconds beat my brow like hail.

I set my face upon the ground. Only scraping sounds were heard. Moistened ripping noises came, as their plunder left their shells. I shut my eyes; I saw them still -- the ghoulish players, drawn and white. I saw them in the darkness there, robbing the dancers' precious things.

Then a boot broke my cursed dreams, kicked against my resting head. I ignored it once, a second time, then looked up to find its source.

A scowling man stood above. He glowered down. His face was whey. A sallow sneer curdled there; hungry fingers gnashed at his belt. I had no words, and nor did he. Wordless, all his comrades came. They made a prison of themselves.

"You're still awake," he at last said. I'd no reply, and he leaned in.

"Now you know."

I nodded then. He pulled me up to my full height. I stood amidst the garish troupe, feeling naked while they all shone -- finery bright, draped in great heaps from shoulders lean

and bent by time. And then the man swept wide his arm, gesturing to those about.

"This is the price of endless youth," he told me in a prophet's tone. "That every score of years gone by, we rob the dreams of those still young."

"Young?" I asked, and then glanced left, where lay a man of middle age. The whey-faced player spread his grin, following my meaning's aim.

I had no words, and nor did he. Wordless, all his comrades came. They made a prison of themselves.

"All are young that thrive in love. No matter what their sum in years." I nodded, knowing well my age. A dozen years' weight had borne on me, since weeks ago my lover spoke. And as if sensing my guarded thoughts, the player grew grim, and seized my neck.

"Now you know, and must decide," he growled with venom on his tongue. "One of us, or dead like them? Tell me now, Mammon Graves."

He said my name; I felt no shock. Decision fixed me, action called. My fists formed stiff, their grip made tight as anger flexed within my heart, and seized on thoughts of an amber day. I breathed in deep. I smelled for fruit -- for a field long lost, for sepia light, for the moments before words wore spoke.

I'll tell you now what I did then, as I wait for your own words -- you who came to blue Rushon, seeking Twilight Splendor here. You asked me how I, like you, was brought to dance and yet somehow stayed awake. You wondered now what you might do, now that you know the festival's truth.

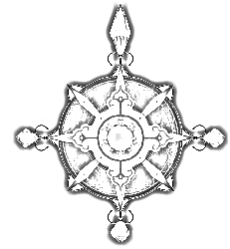
I found Diana in the mob; her face transfixed under the mask. I reached into those changeable eyes, and felt my fingers inside her head. Their coarse brown flesh pierced the blue; I sifted there in sticky strands. "Is this the matter of her soul?" I wondered, briefly, as I searched. Yet still I searched, and found what's mine.

I took the ring that she'd denied. I pondered why she'd kept it still -- why the gold she'd pushed away, had seeded in her memory. I've ceased to wonder, my dear friend. I keep it, here, upon my hand -- its worth is mine alone, not hers.

Perhaps the dead are then reborn. Perhaps they somehow leave this place. But something made you refuse the mask; something kept you from the mob's play. And so long as you hold to that thing -- so long as you eat others' joy -- so long you'll live as you are now. Ageless here, beyond the sea.

So long, so long, so long you'll live: An endless life of twilight splendor. ✨

November Mapping Challenge Winner



Westward Ho!

by Game Printer

The Challenge



November's Challenge was a departure from conventional map making for two reasons. First, the map had to be entirely created by symbols and second, the theme was Western rather than fantasy with the symbols simple yet stylized. Compulsory symbols were:

Towns
Cactus/Brushland
Mountains/Mesas
Some form of hazard or warning

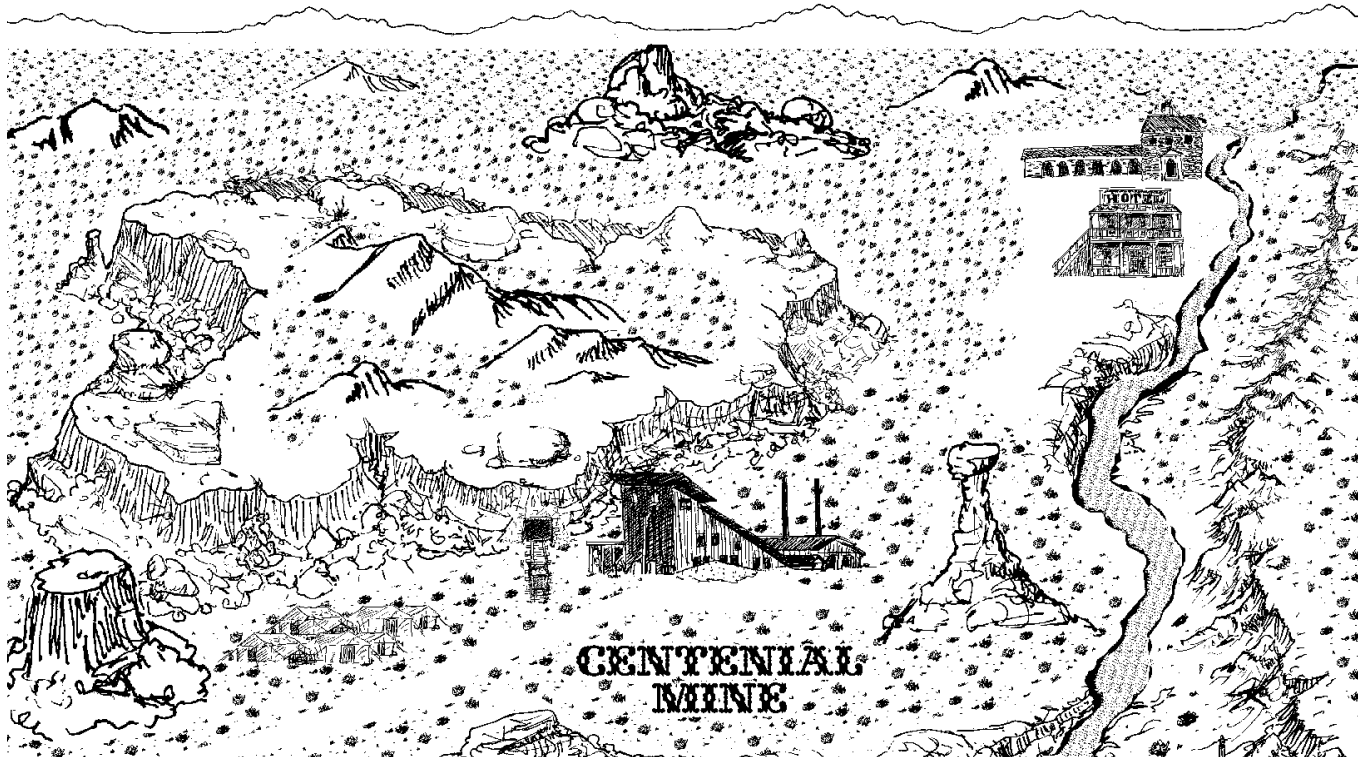
Oases
Hills
Desert
Rail lines

The Guidelines

- Create symbols that can be used by any graphics or mapping application (png preferred)
- Adhere to the Western theme
- Ensure the list of required symbols is met
- Bonus consideration for making additional, unlisted symbols
- Bonus consideration for making a matching compass rose
- Bonus consideration for making a map utilizing the symbols

The Results

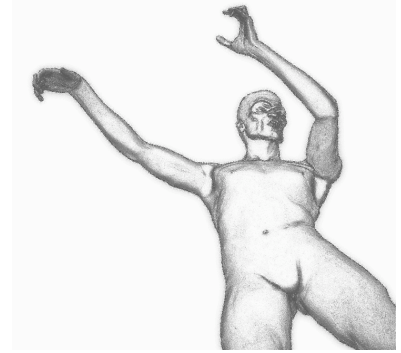
There were only two entries for this competition. Partly because the winner, Game Printer produced an abundance of so many beautiful symbols so quickly that others did not compete. An honourable mention goes to RobA who provided an entry to field a semblance of competition to what was a stunning winning entry. ☼



Uncommon Evil

The Harvester

by Nathan Ellsworth



In Nathan Ellsworth's continuing series of creatures of uncommon evil we present 'the Harvester': a Golem with a taste for human flesh!

"We found her, well that's being generous. We found the body less than an hour ago - bloated by the water an eaten by the fish," the sergeant said with a wave of his hand. The magistrate held a scented cloth up to his nose and clenched his jaw to stop from gagging. "Current must have taken it north from the harbor," the guardsman was saying.

"Yes, yes! I want it disposed of, quickly and discretely!" He eyed the corpse - it was missing a leg. The body had been gnawed on by the fish, but there was no mistaking the killer's handiwork. This made five victims, that they knew about.

Break the Stereotype

Golems are mindless constructs bound to unquestioningly follow the commands of their creators. Often serving as simple guardians and brute force destroyers, golems waylay adventurers and hold the front line in combat, so their magical masters can safely blast opponents with spells from a distance or make a clean get away. Like animals, golems usually don't make memorable villains because they lack the intelligence to be devious.

What if, through some twist of magic, a wizard created a golem with a spark of consciousness? What if the construct became a killer out of its own need to survive? What if the golem began to enjoy the murders it committed? The Harvester is the embodiment of these questions.

Mad Wizardry

The wizard Marrador wanted to make his flesh golem unique. He altered the creation spells in significant ways, and used only the finest components and "parts" in its construction. As the powerful magic coursed through the construct, a semblance of life returned to the dead flesh, and the golem actually awoke on the table.

The results initially pleased Marrador. His flesh golem was quicker than the shambling monstrosities of his fellow wizards, and it had a glimmer of intelligence, allowing it to perform more complex tasks. Though his golem did have a unique problem - its appendages (arms and legs) did not keep the semblance of life for long, a couple months at most. Once the magic began to fade, they suffered accelerated necrosis and

rotted away until they didn't function. This condition was simply not acceptable to the wizard.

Marrador researched the problem to see if he could salvage his work, and in the interim, he sent his creation out to "harvest" from the closest graveyards and morgues. Unfortunately the wizard's research came to a dead end, and they ran out of suitable corpses. His golem drew unwanted attention one month when it brought home a "fresh corpse." Unbeknownst to Marrador, the glimmer of intelligence in the golem had continued to grow, and when it didn't find any suitable corpses in its foray, it made the logical leap and created one.

The wizard could sweep the incident under the table using his clout and a little intimidation, but that didn't solve the golem problem. Marrador decided it was time to accept the failure and rid himself of his troublesome construct. The wizard took the golem deep into the wilderness, told it to guard a tree, and then rode off. Accepting its master knew best, the golem stood at its post and waited.

It waited until one of its legs almost rotted off, and then the spark of intelligence flared. It realized its master was never coming back, it was on its own, and if it wanted to survive it better find a replacement. An unfortunate woodsman was the golem's second victim, and he even provided the coarse thread to sew the leg on. Foreign to the concept of freedom, the golem wandered the wilderness until another limb began to rot.

Lucky for it, it stumbled upon a road and followed it to a small farming village - unlucky for the village. The golem had learned from the problems it had faced in its first life: don't waste time with the graveyard because fresh limbs last longer, and don't get caught or it would be punished. Thus, the golem came in the night, relied on stealth, took what it needed and returned to the woods.

One gruesome death scared most of the villagers witless. Their best trackers and woodsmen formed a small party and hunted for the murderer - it was relatively easy to follow the golem's trail. They attacked without question, but they were unprepared for the creature itself and the golem killed them all. The village went hysteric when their brave men didn't return. Believing they were cursed, they packed up all their belongings and fled to the closest city. The golem followed.



kills. It revels in the infamy and power it wields over the simple citizens. It's the master of the slums, manipulating the populace through fear.

The Harvester

The Harvester is a flesh golem, but one unlike any that's been constructed before. Namely, the golem is intelligent, and its intelligence continues to grow in more devious and fiendish ways. It's a predator that stalks the streets and the shadows as capably as any skilled thief, and its quite nimble and quick considering its seven foot (2.13 m)

The golem saw the city and knew it never had to fear about finding replacements again. It slipped past the guards in the dark of night and claimed a rundown and abandoned house in the worst part of town. Now as intelligent as a human, it began to observe and learn. Soon it could predict the customs and actions of the citizens, even if it didn't understand the reason behind them. When it next struck, it knew where to hunt and who to kill, and it moved like the night itself. The Harvester was born.

Evolving Evil

The golem now known as the serial killer "The Harvester," has struck many times since its initial murder. Once a month the killer selects its victim from the weak and drunk of the slums, and because it's a port town, the golem has plenty of potential donors. Since it hunts and kills the dregs of the city, the guard isn't moving quickly to find and stop the killer, but news of the gruesome attacks and fear is spreading. Eventually the wealthy and powerful will want the blight hunted down and removed from their city.

Until then, the mood in the slums continues to grow darker and more desperate. Dread and fear is palpable in the air, and the regular residents are paranoid even in the day. The smart ones are looking to get out, and those that can't lock their doors and never go out at night. The Harvester hasn't broken into a house yet, but no one is taking any chances.

The golem used to kill only to keep itself alive and mobile, but it has embraced The Harvester persona. It's evolved far beyond basic survival, and it now experiences a vile joy every time it

frame. The golem hides in the shadows and attacks its opponents from behind. It prefers to overpower its victims with its tremendous strength and snap their necks, but it does carry a keen short sword to help harvest its prizes. If faced with a determined party, The Harvester will make multiple hit-and-run strikes, targeting spell casters first.

The Haunted House

The house is a few blocks from the docks. It's one of a handful of older estates built when the city was younger. When the first trade barons wanted to live nearer to the sea and their warehouses, and when the harbor didn't smell like it does now. The house had been abandoned for at least a decade when The Harvester moved in.

Since then, the house has earned a reputation for being haunted - mostly due to the crashes and bangs The Harvester makes when it rearranges the house to suit it. The golem has rigged the house with numerous vicious traps, preparing for the off chance that someone might come and snoop around the house, or the even unlikelier event someone comes hunting it.

About the author

All work and no play...Is it strange that Nathan begins dreaming up EVIL after he's spent too many hours coding database routines, or sat in the third useless meeting of the day before 9 am? You can thank a certain aerospace company for this month's EVIL. When he's not sitting in meetings or daydreaming about demented dolphins, he spends his time haunting PlotStorming.com raving about creativity, and urging people to write more.

Making Not so Random Coastlines

by Rob A

Rob A's weapon of mapping choice is GIMP, a free raster graphics editor which the open platform equivalent to adobe photoshop. In this, one of his most popular tutorials, Rob explains how to make a 'not so random coastline'. Very useful if you want to translate a hand-drawn scanned map into digital and you do not have a tablet and pen to draw 'wiggly bits' of coastline (very difficult to achieve with a mouse). With a few (if any) minor adjustments, this tutorial can be used with most raster graphics editors.

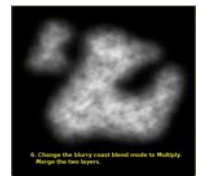
Step 1

Start with a black image



Step 6

Change the blurry coast blend mode to multiply and merge the two layers.



Step 2

Use the magic wand tool to select an area (or areas) and fill with white. This is the general land shape. The random coast will be contained inside here



Step 7

Threshold the merged layer. Adjust the slider to get the coast you want.



Step 3

Blur with 100 px or so radius. The smaller the blur the tighter the random coast will follow the original outline.



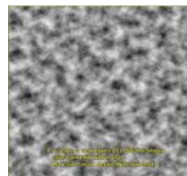
Step 8

Run an edge detect of choice. Depending on the one used the result may be white on black.



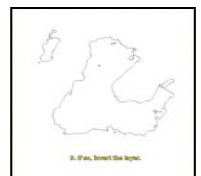
Step 4

Create a new layer below the blurry coast and fill with noise - max size, max detail (not turbulent).



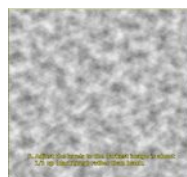
Step 9

If so, invert the colours of the layer.



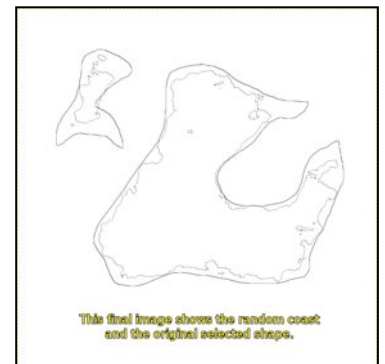
Step 5

Adjust the levels so that the darkest part of the image is about 1/3 up (dark grey rather than black).



Step 10

The final image shows the random coast and the original selected shape.





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