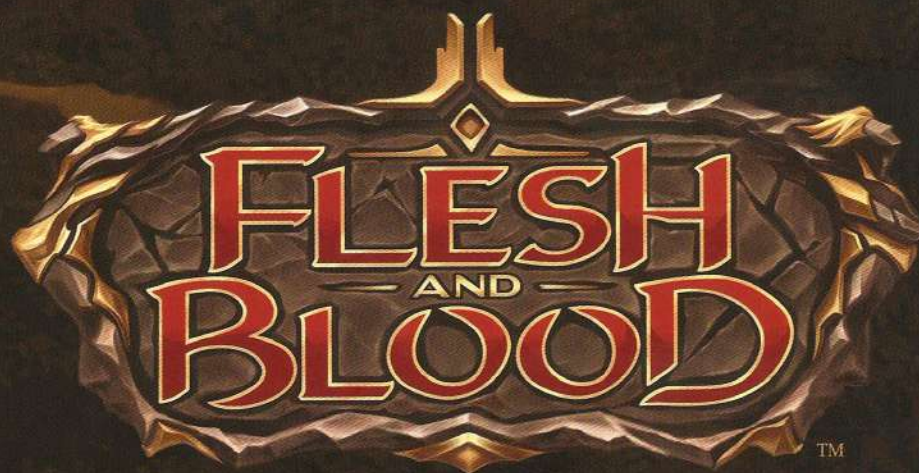


Trading Card Games are an incredible medium for bringing people together. Their unifying force transcends age, race, religion, gender and even social status, through a common language of "playing great games."



◆ THE NEW CLASSIC TCG ◆



◀ WELCOME TO RATHE ▶

LEGEND
STORY
STUDIOS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When we first embarked on this journey, all we wanted was to make a TCG we'd be proud to call our own.

Countless obstacles and challenges littered our path, yet overcome them we did, with the help of many great people.

I cannot express enough my thanks to MJ and Nicky, whose skill, passion, and tireless work have brought to life the fantastical world of our dreams.

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And you, dear gamer.

We hope you enjoy our work.

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more on

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Flesh and Blood World Guide Volume 1: Welcome to Rathe

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WELCOME TO RATHE

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WORLD OF RATHE

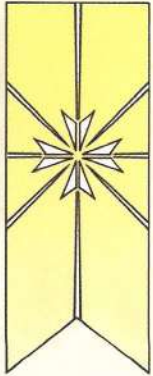
Long ago, humans arrived on the shores of Rathe from a distant land, seeking a place to build their homes. They found a world of vast mountain ranges and volcanic plains, dense jungles and sheer cliffs, verdant meadows and iridescent forests. This is Rathe, a land fuelled by magic. Once home to incredible beings beyond imagination, humans have overtaken the land, spreading across the continent and changing the land around them. Some learned to harness the innate magic in this world and wield it in battle, others choose to rely on technology and human innovation.



Once, the humans of this world were at war, clashing in devastating battles that decimated the land. For a time, it almost seemed as if humanity would be incapable of living alongside one another - but after many hundreds of years, Rathe finally entered a new era of peace. The people of Misteria withdrew into the mountains, Aria erected great barriers to protect their realm from outsiders, and the kingdom of Solana shifted its focus to spreading the Light. Volcor's empire unravelled into a state of constant warfare, as its many Generals fought amongst themselves for land and resources, while far to the north, a glittering city of copper and glass emerged, calling to like-minded individuals who looked toward the future.

Now, this era of peace threatens to descend into chaos once more. The people of Rathe have become restless as seeds of dissent take root across the continent, and the world balances on the brink of war once again.

REGIONS



SOLANA

At the centre of Rathe lies Solana, a radiant beacon of hope in a world on the brink of chaos. For thousands of years, it has thrived under the guidance of devout scholars, seeking to spread the glory and teachings of Sol throughout Rathe, and unite humanity under a single banner.



ARIA

A fantastical realm where the landscape is ever-changing, fuelled by a magical energy known as the Flow. Amongst the peaceful villages of Aria, celebrations and festivals are a regular occurrence, filled with performers, musicians and entertainers.



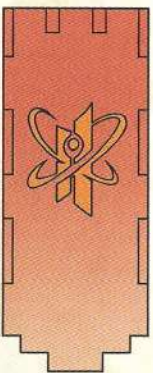
SAVAGE LANDS

A primordial jungle, this treacherous and unforgiving landscape is filled with hidden dangers and horrific beasts. From massive predators to vicious scavengers, poisonous fungi to carnivorous plants, the Savage Lands is home to some of the most treacherous wildlife known to Rathe.



MISTERIA

Among the mountain ranges of Misteria lies a hidden world, concealed by a thick veil of mists. Removed from the struggles and conflicts of the outside world, they find satisfaction in introspection and self-discipline, training rigorously to strengthen their bodies and sharpen their minds.



METRIX

A vibrant and bustling city, Metrix is the largest hub of commerce on the continent, taking pride in the pursuit of progress and the future of technology. Whether scientist or inventor, merchant or miner, Metrix calls to all those seeking their fortune and the promise of a better tomorrow.



PITS

Deep beneath the city of Metrix, centuries of mining have left a series of massive underground caverns. Thieves, mercenaries, slavers and smugglers have settled within the darkened caverns of the Pits, providing all manner of immoral and illegal services to the world above.



DEMONASTERY

Far beyond the shores of Rathe lies an island shrouded in mist, a massive, derelict manor looming over the desolate landscape. The Demonastery calls to magicians and scientists alike, offering a place to study taboo and forbidden subjects without the threat of punishment or retribution.



VOLCOR

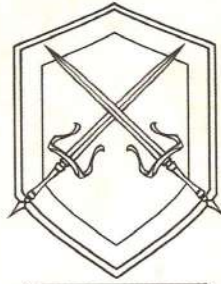
Rivers of lava run throughout Volcor, pooling into massive lakes of molten magma. The citizens of Volcor are resigned to a life of servitude under the Generals, locked in constant warfare, battling for their lives beneath the watchful gaze of the royal family.

PROFESSIONS

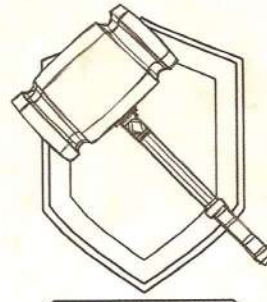
In a world plagued by war and conflict, the people of Rathe developed ways to keep themselves safe, and fight back against their enemies. Even after centuries of peace, these professions live on, passed down from generation to generation, evolving with each passing year. Where some pursued a more offensive profession, relying on weapons and power, others took the path of defense, finding ways to protect themselves and aide their allies in battle.



ALCHEMIST



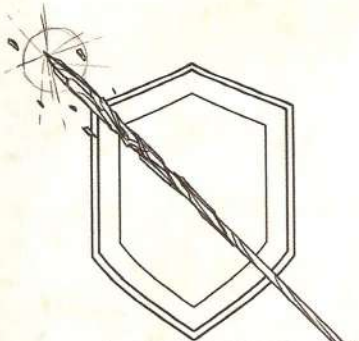
ASSASSIN



GUARDIAN



BRUTE



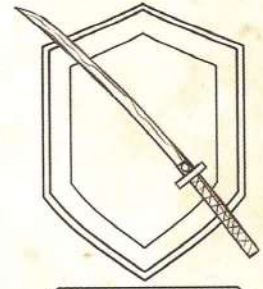
WIZARD



BARD



ILLUSIONIST



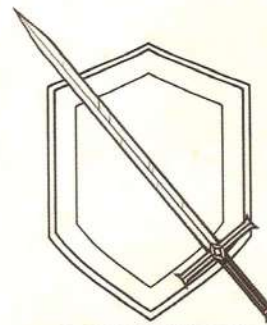
NINJA



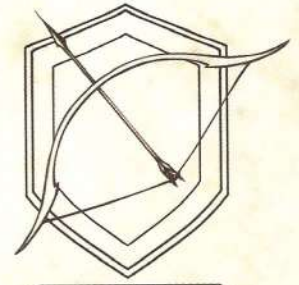
NECROMANCER



CLERIC



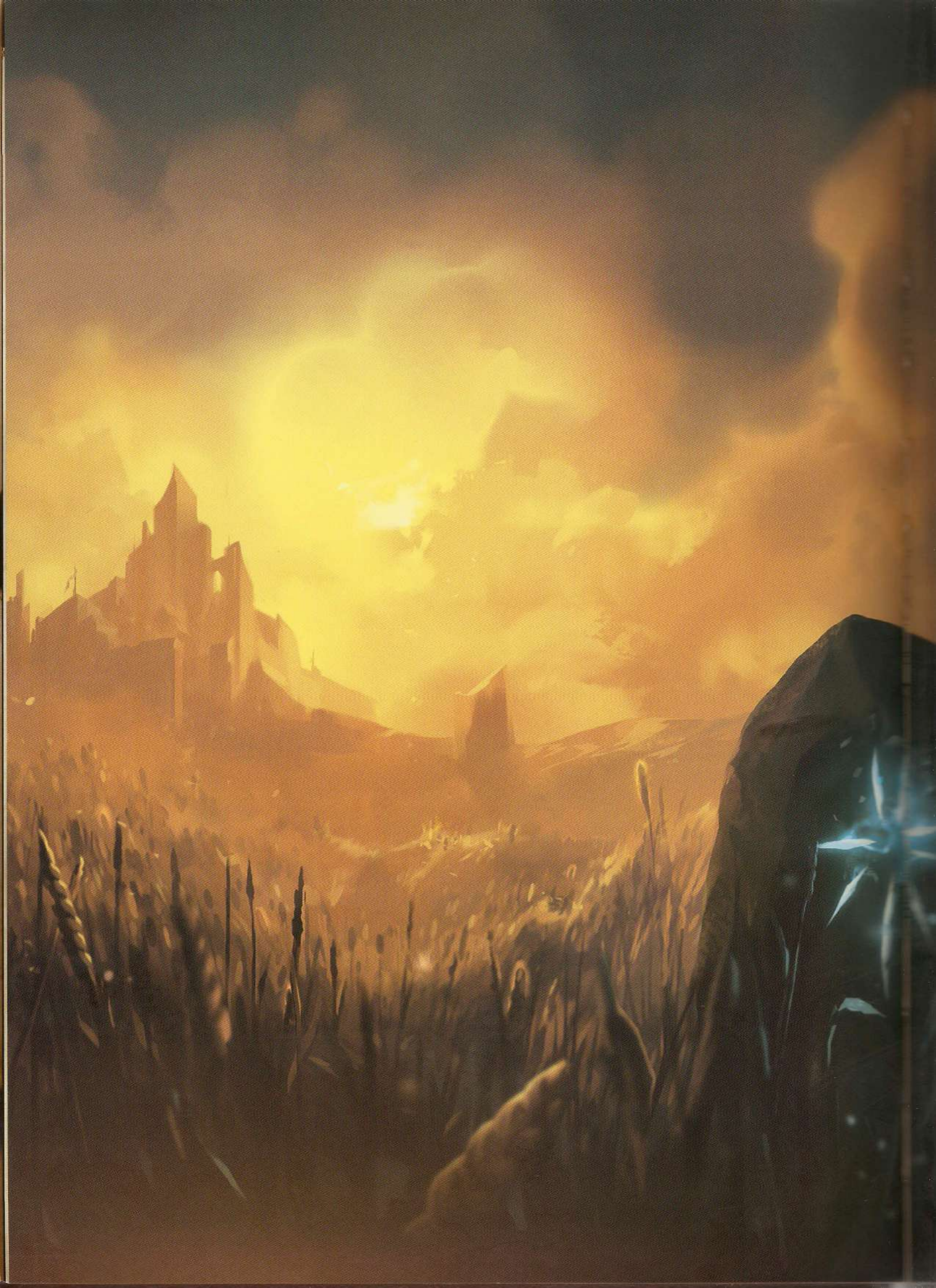
WARRIOR



RANGER

AND MANY MORE...

Whether you draw power from magic and spellcasting, wielding any number of manmade weapons, or by utilising the power within, the outcome is the same. In a world plagued by conflict, you must fight for the chance to determine your fate. Will you succumb to the machinations of others, or will you choose your own path? Pick up your sword and prepare for battle; for no matter where you run, war will find you.





SOLANA

KINGDOM OF ILLUMINATION

Legends speak of blessed pilgrims from a distant land, drawn to Rathe by the will of Sol. Upon sacred ground, they built Solana, a shining kingdom that would stand eternal against the Shadow.

The city has stood tall for thousands of years, thriving under the guidance of devout scholars and wizards of light. Knights and templars patrol its walls, defending it from those who would trespass against its divine purpose.

One day, the light of Sol will radiate throughout the land, and bring its blessings to all of humanity.

TO BE A SOLANIAN

The people of Solana honour Sol in every aspect of their lives. From the young to the old, scholars to farmers, from those who live within its walls to those who live beyond; all rejoice under the infinite wisdom and glory of Sol.

Solanians take great pride in upholding Sol's will, believing that they are Sol's divine emissaries. Each Solanian must act with courage and honour, as they are living embodiments of Sol.

Carrying the glory of Sol within their hearts, they seek to spread the teachings of the light to the rest of humanity, and welcome any who seek out the blessing of Sol.

All who fully embrace Sol's light are welcomed by the people of Solana as one of their own. Those still on the path to illumination are instead given a place among Solana's outer villages.

These settlements, as well as any community that would embrace Sol's divine light are granted protection by the power of Solana.



A RADIANT KINGDOM

At the centre of Rathe lies Solana, a radiant beacon of hope in a world on the brink of chaos. Beyond its grand gates is a beautiful city of marble and stone, beloved to all the faithful and righteous people that call it home.

Once a small township, the wisdom of Sol has guided the city throughout the ages. All for Sol's Divine Purpose. Now a mighty kingdom, the most powerful in the land, its people seek to spread the glory and teachings of Sol throughout Rathe and unite humanity under a single banner.

Beyond the city is darkness. Crime, corruption, greed, and all manner of evil. Worst of all, a jungle of monsters and beasts to the west desecrate the land with their putrid existence. It seems everywhere one looks, there is nothing but corruption and despair; a dark stain on the hearts of man that spreads like poison.

But there is still hope. Hope in the Solanians. Hope for a future of redemption and salvation.



THE GOLDEN CITY

At the centre of Rathe stands a magnificent city, towering over the golden fields that surround it. Its shining walls reflect the light of the sun, gleaming brightly, while knights clad in silver and gold patrol its borders. In the fields beyond, villages lie tucked amongst the fertile plains, safe under the watchful gaze of their great protector. This is the kingdom of Solana, a beacon of hope amongst the darkness of the world.

Those that pass through its grand gates discover an extraordinary city, built to exemplify the divine majesty of Sol. From wall to shining wall, its stone streets are

lined with cheerful homes and vaulted rooftops, colourful banners swaying in the gentle breeze. At the heart of the city, a massive series of towers rise above the streets below - the magnificent Solarium, prized jewel of Solana.

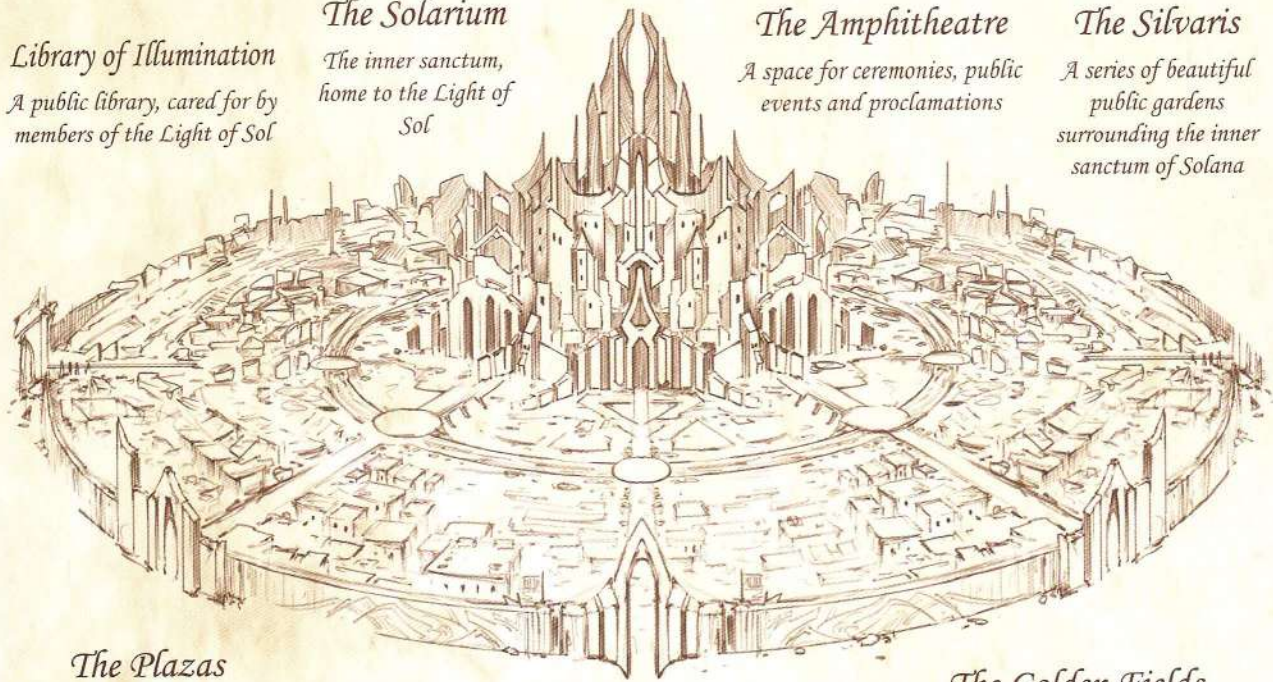
The city's elegance and symmetry are apparent to all who enter. Beyond its eight imposing gates lie eight city sectors, with eight grand walkways leading through the city to the Amphitheatre at its very core. It was built in accordance with Sol's divine will, imbued with magical wards to protect all who call it home.

Library of Illumination
A public library, cared for by members of the Light of Sol

The Solarium
The inner sanctum, home to the Light of Sol

The Amphitheatre
A space for ceremonies, public events and proclamations

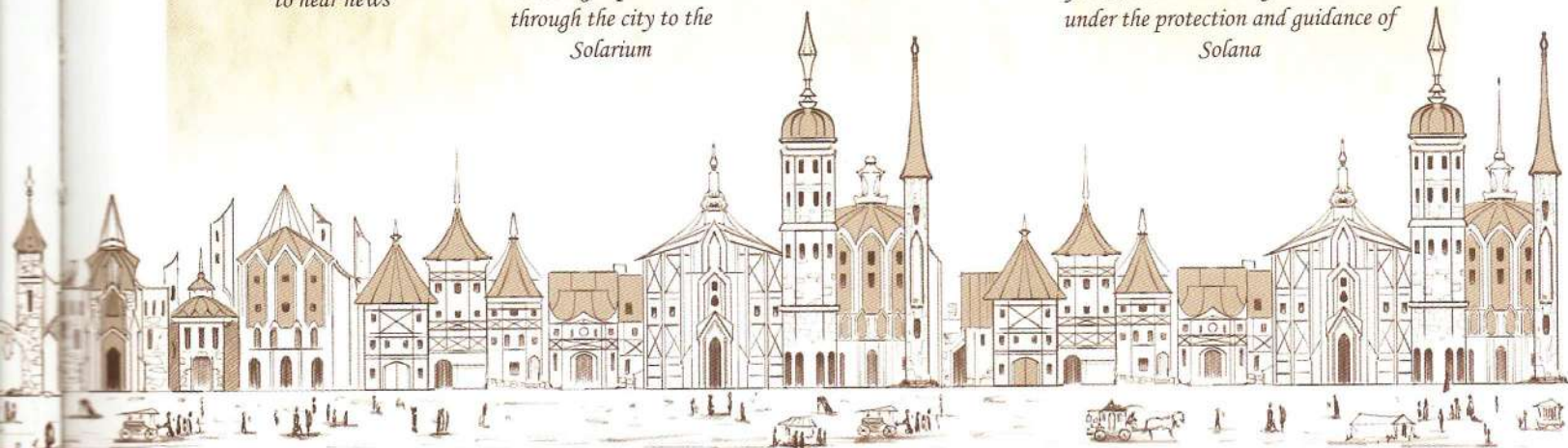
The Silvaris
A series of beautiful public gardens surrounding the inner sanctum of Solana



The Plazas
Connect the outer city sectors, a space to gather to hear news

The Great Gates
These eight paths lead through the city to the Solarium

The Golden Fields
Beyond the outer walls are grand golden fields, numerous villages and towns under the protection and guidance of Solana



SOLARIUM

At the heart of the city lies the Solarium, a massive complex of shining towers that rise above the streets of Solana. Constructed long ago from the finest materials, it stands eternal, a timeless reminder of Sol's glory. Cast in white and gold, it remains visible from every corner of the city, and can be seen from far beyond the golden fields. Every street leads to the Solarium, and to the massive Amphitheatre at its core; a space for all Solanians to gather to hear the word of Sol. There are even those that travel from distant lands in the hopes of witnessing the grandeur of the Solarium.

Between the Solarium and the rest of the city, a wide spread of gardens encircle the radiant towers in a blanket of vibrant colours. The people of Solana frequently visit the gardens, walking amongst the trees and enjoying the many plants that grow along its borders. From grand, tall trees of verdant green, to striking, vibrant purple flowers; the gardens are a burst of colour against the brilliant, shining white of the Solarium. Almost any plant in Rathe can be found within Solana's gardens, including restorative herbs and ingredients for spellwork, carefully cultivated by the Light of Sol.

AMPHITHEATRE

Down the length of the Great Hall, beneath vaulted arches, stands a great open door. Within, a massive structure of pale marble and shining stone; the Amphitheatre. Located at the heart of the Solarium, it is a welcome sight for all who would seek out the wisdom of Sol. Even standing at the highest level of the Amphitheatre, one can still clearly hear the words spoken at its ground floor. Through the magic of Sol, the Grand Magister can address his people, heard clearly by all who gather. At noon, when the sun is at its apex, it floods the Amphitheatre with light, rising high above the heads of those who have gathered within.

SIGNARUS

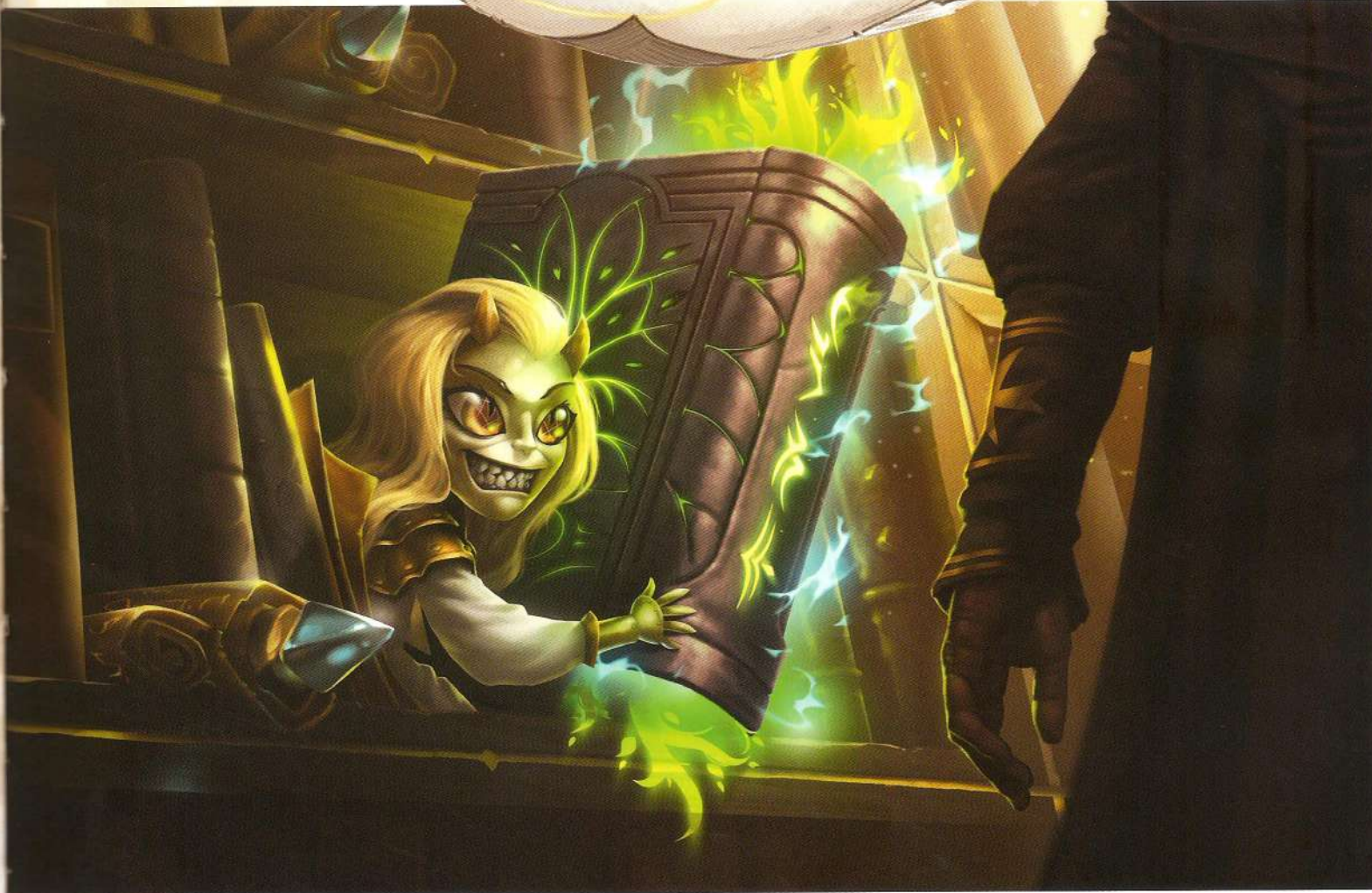
Hidden beneath the earth is a massive vault, guarded by both physical defenses and powerful wards. Throughout history, many ancient artefacts have surfaced, and since the time of the first Grand Magister, Solana has been retrieving these items and keeping them safe from those who might use them for nefarious purposes. The Signarus remains a well-guarded secret, known only to the highest-ranking members of the Light of Sol.

LIBRARY OF ILLUMINATION

Those seeking knowledge travel to Solana for the sole purpose of visiting the Library of Illumination, a vast library located at the base of the Solarium. A grand sight, the floor is constructed from lustrous marble, with floor-to-ceiling shelves containing thousands of tomes and volumes, as well as bound parchments authored by the scholars of Solana. Great mosaics decorate the floors, depicting the history of Solana and its people. Massive statues stand in a semi-circle at the centre of the main foyer, depicting the five Grand Magisters in ivory and gold, their impassive masks silently watching the scholars working below.

Any Solanian can enter and read the tomes found within the library, which include Solanian history, and

information on the various districts of Solana. It also houses public records, such as family trees or details on significant individuals. Great tables line the hallways of the Library of Illumination, with spaces for any visitors to read and study. Travellers visiting Solana from beyond the city are also welcome to spend time here. The lower levels of the library, however, are located beneath the earth, and are only available to members of the Light of Sol.



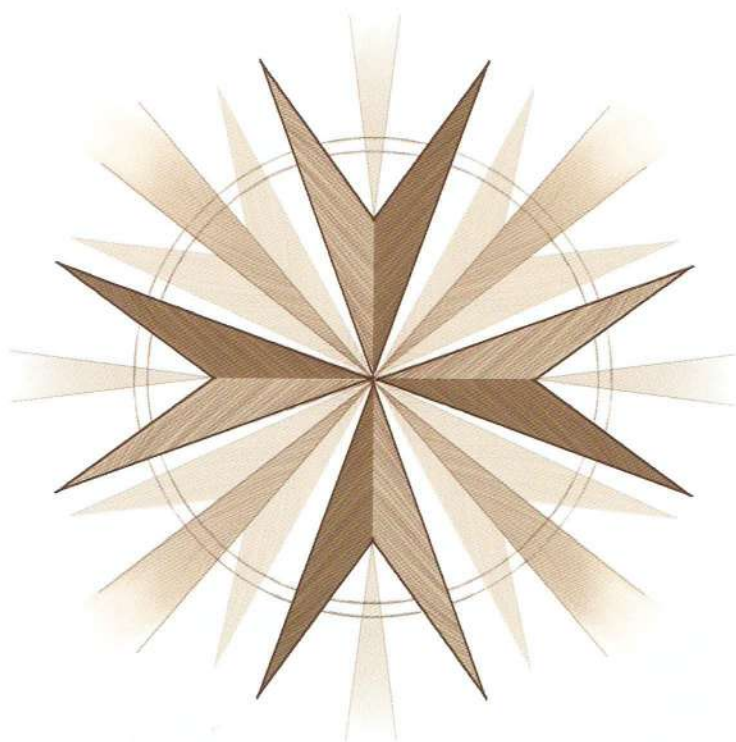


CHILDREN OF THE LIGHT

While all those who accept Sol into their hearts shall receive Sol's blessings, only those who have fully eradicated the darkness within can be known as Children of the Light. These are the true Solanians, citizens who live within the city walls, many of whom are descendants of the original founders of Solana.

Villages and towns beyond the city walls are home to those who once lived outside of Sol's guidance, but chose to welcome Sol's light into their hearts. With time, they may work toward true illumination, and their children may one day be accepted into the city proper and given a home within the city walls.





ORDER OF THE LIGHT

The Light is the lifeblood of Solana, a radiant energy borne of Sol. It is knowledge, wisdom and integrity; it is valour and loyalty. The Light guided Solana's founders to the shores of Rathe, it showed them where to build their home; it is what protects the city from the Shadows. Solana is blessed by the splendour of Sol, a radiant figure that has guided Solana to become the shining example for all of Rathe to follow.

The Order of the Light was borne of these ancestors, noble men and women who seek to spread Sol's blessings and watch over the people of Solana. The Light of Sol is comprised of scholars, those born with a connection to light magic, studying spells in order to help their fellow man. The Hand of Sol are Solana's warriors, dedicated to protecting and watching over their people.



SEEKERS AND SCHOLARS

Every scholar first starts their training as a seeker, chosen by Sol to fulfil a divine purpose. Their affinity with the light gives them an incredible gift, a spark that can be cultivated into light magic, the very essence of Sol's blessings. A seeker's training begins with academia, studying the history of Solana and learning arithmetic.

Once the first eight years of training are completed, seekers graduate and become acolytes, and begin working in the Library of Illumination. In addition to clerical duties, organisation, and recording information, acolytes will study light magic, and begin the delicate process of developing and training their magical abilities. It can take up to twenty years for an acolyte to become a scholar, depending entirely on their talent, skill and dedication.

THE LIGHT OF SOL

There are over thirty thousand scholars in the Light of Sol. Trained in light magic, they study aether and the doctrine of Sol in order to spread the blessings of the Light. Scholars are the lifeline of the kingdom, providing a variety of services to their people. Many scholars work within the Library of Illumination, recording and preserving information for future generations. Working in the library is considered a great honour, as their work serves to preserve the history and very soul of Solana. Some scholars will go on to contribute their own works to the library, expanding a vast collection of original manuscripts. Other scholars may journey outside the city walls, working alongside knights from the Hand of Sol, and joining the parties in their expeditions and patrols.

Some scholars help to maintain sigils and protective wards around the city; some act as healers within the community, aiding the sick and injured; others work as teachers,

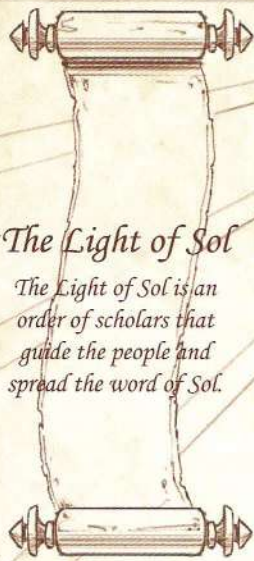
THE AWAKENING

When a child of Solana turns eight years old, an archon will come to lead them to a room within the Solarium, in order to conduct the Awakening ceremony. This sacred space is filled with items, from ancient tomes to swords and shields, smithing hammers to aprons and looms; every trade and profession in Solana is represented within. Once the ceremony begins, one of the items within the room will resonate with Sol's light and begin to glow, revealing the child's divine purpose.

Many families within Solana have passed down their trades through the generation, honing their craft through Sol's divine guidance.



THE SACRED HIERARCHY OF SOLANA



~The Light of Sol~

The Light of Sol is an order of scholars that guide the people and spread the word of Sol.

Grand Magister

Magister

Archon

Chancellor

Scholar

Acolyte

Seeker

Templar

Lieutenant

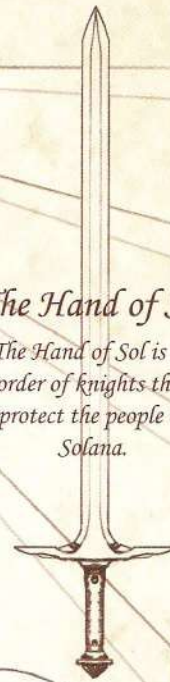
Knight

Squire

Trainee

~The Hand of Sol~

The Hand of Sol is an order of knights that protect the people of Solana.



instructing both seekers and acolytes within the Light of Sol, and trainees in the Hand of Sol. The role of academic teaching for the modicus, or trade and craft professions in Solana, generally falls to acolytes.

The Light of Sol also includes Chancellors and Archons, who represent the myriad of districts and sectors throughout Solana. While all members of the Light of Sol are beloved to their city, Archons command incredible respect from their people, as each represents a single district within Solana. Archons have a unique connection to the people that they represent, and are well-loved by their charges. Solanians see their archon not only as a messenger of Sol, but as a guardian to watch over them and guide them through their everyday lives. In the event that an archon is chosen to become a Magister, the celebrations within their district can last for days at a time.

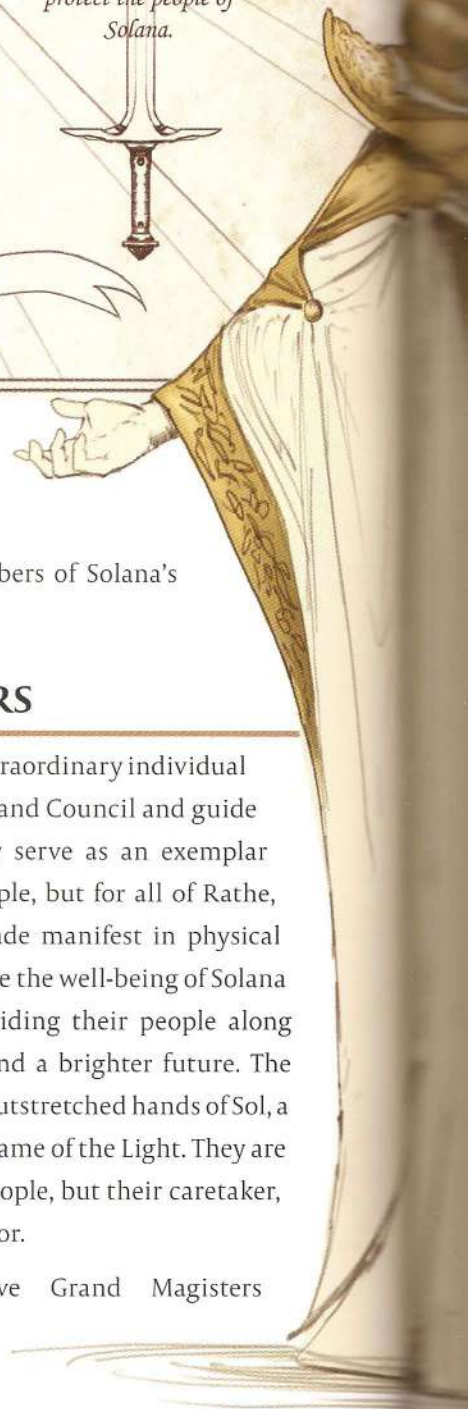
Magisters are the guiding light of Solana, the champions specially chosen to execute the will of Sol. There are eight Magisters, each representing one section of the city. Their ornate masks mark them as messengers

of Sol, who work to deliver the word of Sol to the city as important members of Solana's Grand Council.

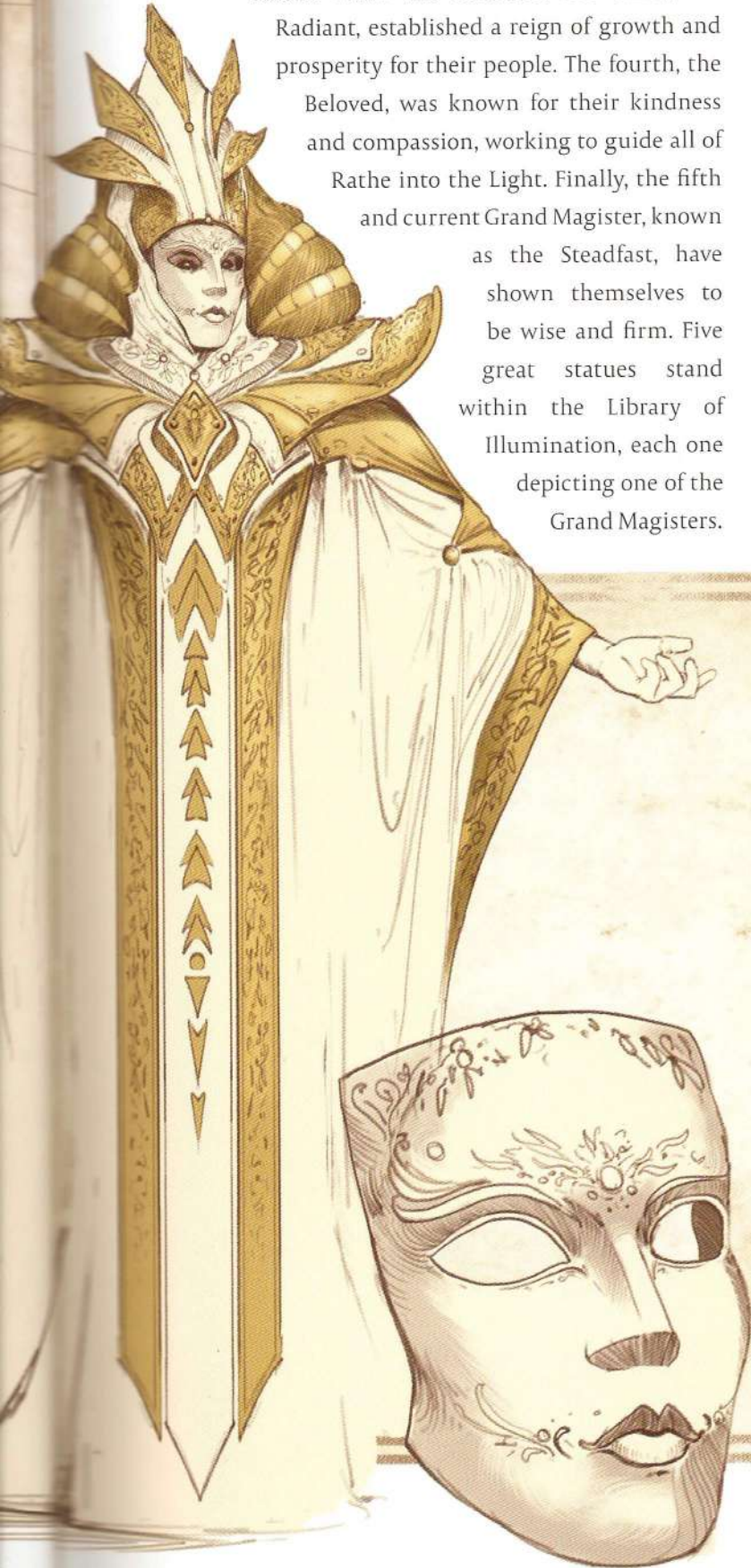
GRAND MAGISTERS

The Grand Magister is an extraordinary individual chosen by Sol to lead the Grand Council and guide the people of Solana. They serve as an exemplar not only for their own people, but for all of Rathe, the embodiment of Sol made manifest in physical form. It is their role to ensure the well-being of Solana through Sol's blessings, guiding their people along the path to illumination and a brighter future. The Grand Magister acts as the outstretched hands of Sol, a custodian of Solana in the name of the Light. They are not only a leader to their people, but their caretaker, their herald, and their mentor.

There have been five Grand Magisters throughout the history



of Solana. Each is bestowed a title that represents their vision for the people of Solana. The first Grand Magister, the Devout, established the Grand Council, and helped to grow the Light of Sol. The second, the Adamant, defended Solana from vile invaders. The third, the Radiant, established a reign of growth and prosperity for their people. The fourth, the Beloved, was known for their kindness and compassion, working to guide all of Rathe into the Light. Finally, the fifth and current Grand Magister, known as the Steadfast, have shown themselves to be wise and firm. Five great statues stand within the Library of Illumination, each one depicting one of the Grand Magisters.



THE GRAND COUNCIL

The Grand Council is a divine assembly which represents the pinnacle of human existence, its members hand-selected by Sol from amongst the Light and Hand of Sol. Paragons of virtue, they embody Solana's divine purpose, to elevate humanity above the reach of the Shadows. The members of the Grand Council serve not only to lead Solana, but to inspire the Children of the Light in their journey toward illumination, and seek to strengthen their relationship with Sol. The Grand Council is led by the Grand Magister, comprised of all eight Magisters, and a selection of archons and templars.

All matters of state pass into the hands of the Grand Council, who ensure the continued happiness and wellbeing of their people, and of Solana as a whole. Gathering in the inner sanctum that floats above the Amphitheatre, the Grand Council makes decisions on behalf of Solana.

FIRST GRAND MAGISTER

The first Grand Magister of Solana was known as the Devout, for their dedication and service to the glory of Sol. Under the guidance of the Devout, construction of the city began, starting with what is now known as the Library of Illumination. The Grand Magister decreed that knowledge was sacred to Sol, and that Solana could not become a grand kingdom without first becoming a well-educated one. The Devout sent out scholars to gather ancient tomes and scrolls from all over Rathe and founded the Grand Council to help manage the growing city. The Devout also called for the construction of a wall to protect the city, designed to combine physical defense with magical wards and sigils. This wall would be the beginning of Solana's transformation into a grand and wondrous kingdom. Solana owes its strength and splendour to the wisdom and dedication of the first Grand Magister, who believed that their people could one day save all of Rathe from the Shadows.

THE HAND OF SOL

The Hand of Sol is Solana's order of warriors, who defend the city from outside threats. While all knights of the Hand of Sol call Solana home, they frequently travel outside the city walls; scouting for threats, collecting information, and watching over the settlements beyond Solana. The Hand of Sol is comprised of five different ranks: trainee, squire, knight, lieutenant, and templar.

The Hand of Sol travels in parties, which range from smaller parties of eight, to the largest war brigades with sixty-four members. However, most parties travel with between ten and fourteen members. Each party of knights is led by a templar and lieutenant, and accompanied by a scholar from the Light of Sol. Squires, during their training, will join smaller

parties of eight to ten. These parties travel the fields outside of Solana, checking on outlying villages and patrolling the golden fields beyond the city walls.

Most knights in the Hand of Sol prefer armour with a mixture of plate and chainmail, providing a strong defense while still allowing a fair amount of mobility. While knights typically wear simpler armour, templars and lieutenants wear armour with more ornate designs, with engraving and gold embellishments to show their dedication to Sol. Parties travelling outside the walls commonly bear standards, proudly displaying their connection to Solana. All knights in the Hand of Sol take great pride in their role, and dedicate themselves fully to serving their people, their city, and the glory of Sol.

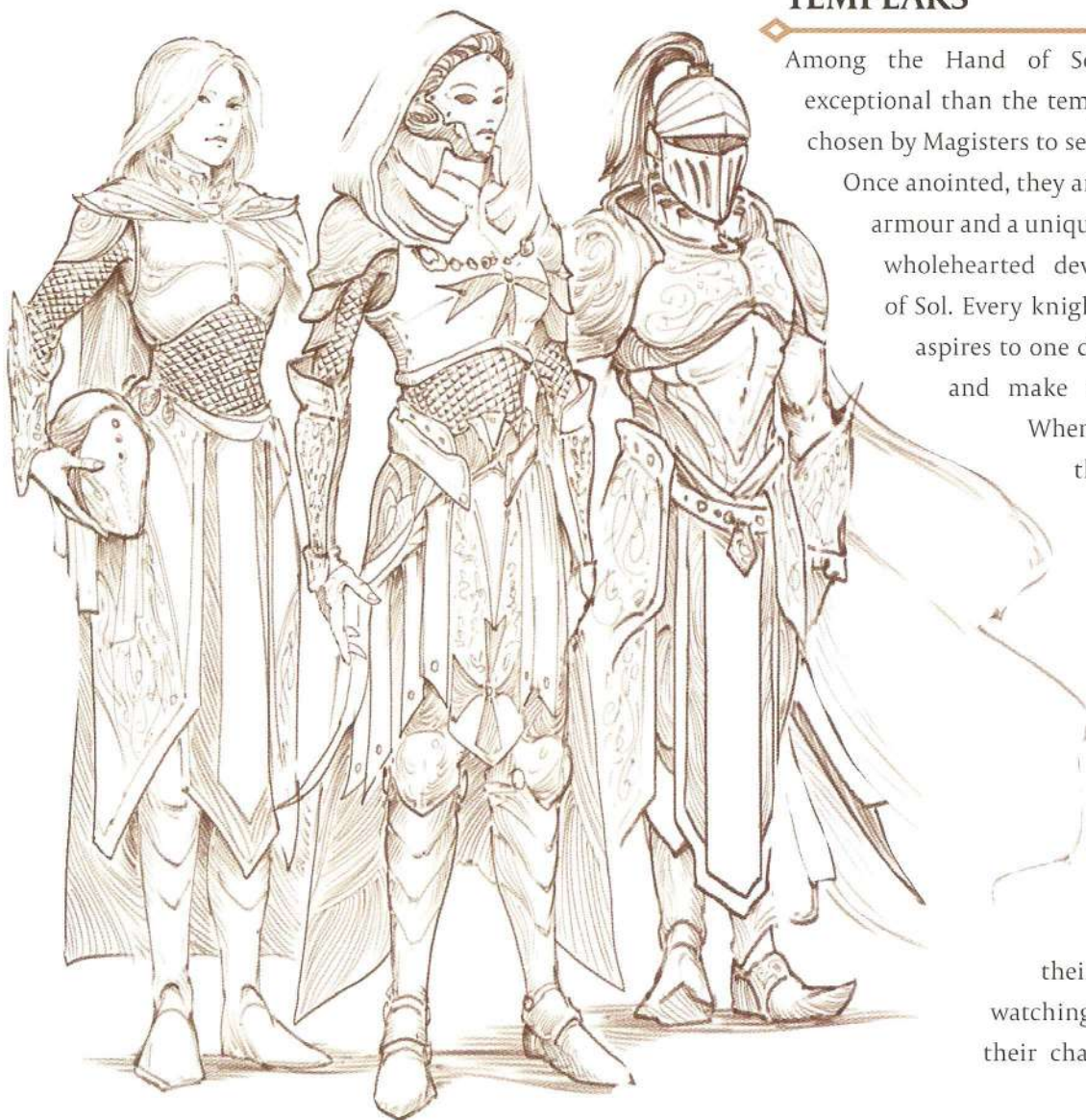
TEMPLARS

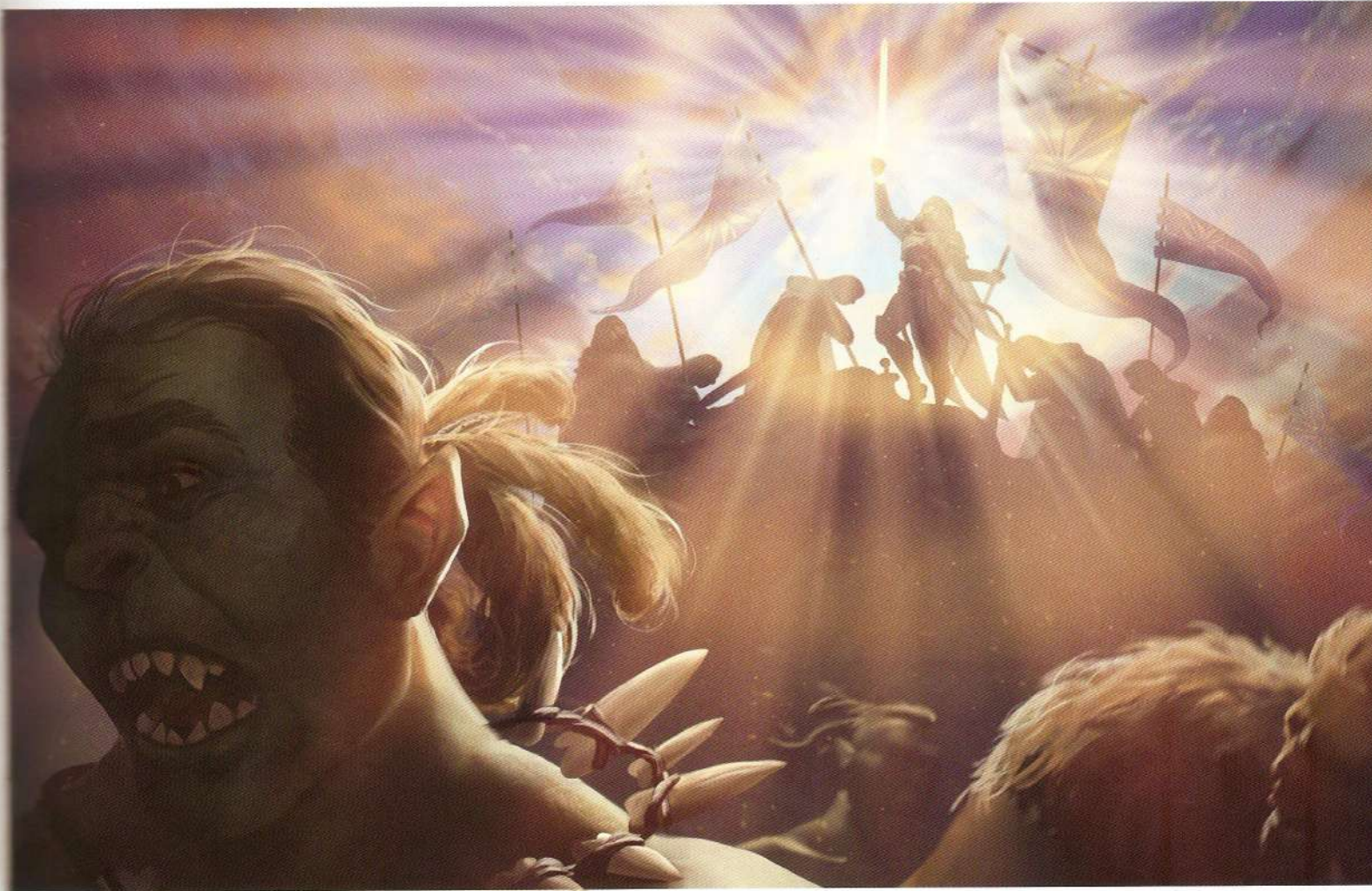
Among the Hand of Sol, none are more exceptional than the templars, who are hand-chosen by Magisters to serve a higher purpose.

Once anointed, they are gifted a new suit of armour and a unique mask, to show their wholehearted devotion to the glory of Sol. Every knight in the Hand of Sol aspires to one day become a templar and make their people proud.

When a templar passes through the gates, they draw stares of admiration from onlookers, as they embody the iron will of Sol.

Templars serve not only as leaders, but as an example for all of Solana to follow. They guide their parties to glory, watching over the warriors in their charge, and working to





SOLSTICE OF LAURELS

A ceremony for the Hand of Sol, taking place once a year. During the Solstice, older squires are promoted to full knights, while others are promoted to higher roles within the Hand of Sol. The Solstice begins with a great procession of knights, making their way from the outer walls of Solana to the Solarium, where the ceremony takes place.

It is common for Solana to receive visitors in the days leading up to the Solstice, who travel from far and wide to witness the ceremony. Whether Solanian or visitor, all marvel at the sight of noble knights marching, resplendent in ceremonial armour.

protect their home and their people.

Aside from their duties within the Hand of Sol, a number of older templars also serve Solana within the Grand Council, helping the Grand Magister to guide their people.

GEMINI

There are rumours of a secret branch within Solana, neither Hand nor Light of Sol, but somewhere else entirely. These mysterious individuals, often born outside the walls of Solana, help to gather information from around Rathe, travelling undercover and completing their missions in total secrecy. It is said that this group functions to serve where the knights cannot, and aide Solana in whatever form is necessary. If the rumours are true, they are yet to be proven.



DORINTHEA IRONSONG

Tale of the Gifted Knight

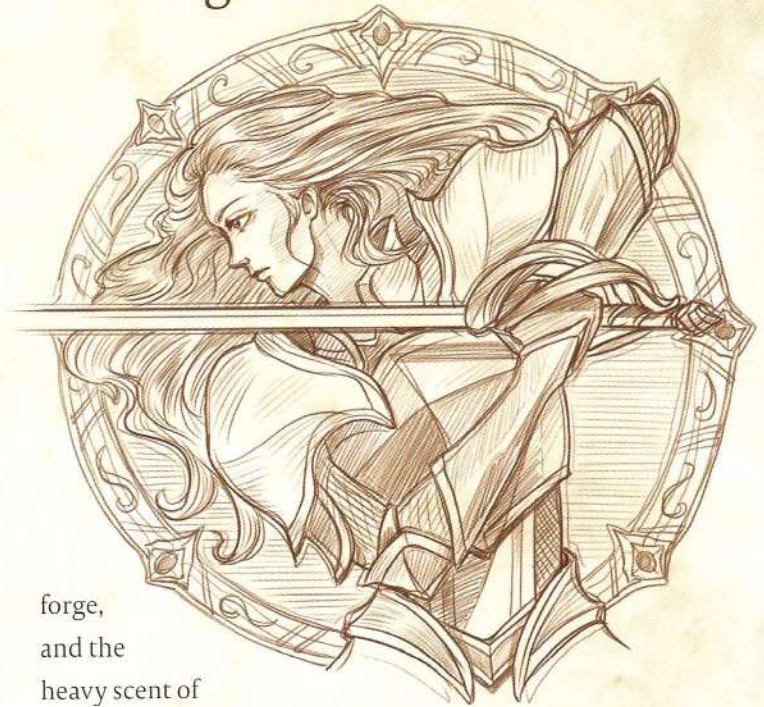
Centuries after the end of the great wars, Solana is experiencing an era of peace and prosperity, with the last of its great defenses completed, and its people watched over by noble protectors. And yet, a strange wind has begun to stir once more, sowing seeds of unrest across the continent. Strangers hail from the East, bringing their unusual customs and mystic rites to the outskirts of the grand city. To the South, blasphemous cults gather, driven by greed and gluttony. Worst of all, the savage packs of the west gather near the outskirts of the jungle, creeping ever closer to the villages under Solana's protection.

Amidst the brewing storm, the Hand of Sol gathers in ever larger patrols, permanently stationing knights in villages across the golden fields. As terrible beasts begin to emerge, Solana's scholars continue to search for a possible cause, and a way to take out the creatures once and for all. The knights of the Hand of Sol are needed now more than ever, to defend innocent lives from the horrors that threaten to overwhelm them all.

Childhood

For centuries, the Ironsong family have prided themselves on their reputation as master blacksmiths. The first generation of the bloodline were awarded the name of Ironsong for their work with weapons and armour, forging some of the finest in all of Solana. In the years since, they have passed down their trade secrets from generation to generation, preserving the Ironsong name.

Dorinthea Ironsong was an only child with a penchant for mischief. Her earliest memories are of the



forge, and the heavy scent of smoke hanging in the air as she watched her parents work, expertly crafting graceful blades and sun-blessed shields. Her mother would often talk to her while smithing, explaining everything to her curious daughter.

When she wasn't in the forge with her parents, Thea could usually be found with Minerva, the reserved, steely-eyed woman who ran the Golden Chariot next to the Ironsong forge. Her parents had known Minerva since they were children, long since passing the line between friends and family. While Thea knew that Minerva had been born outside of Solana, the innkeeper was incredibly private, and rarely spoke about her past.

In the mornings, Thea helped out with minor chores, sweeping and cleaning the tavern before returning to the family forge in the afternoon. Then, as all the guests were settling in for their evening meal, she would take up residence next to the fire and listen to the chatter around her.

Thea was fascinated by the patrons that came to the inn, many of them travellers visiting from outside of Solana. She loved to listen to them tell stories from their hometown or describe the things they had seen

Family



Lucius Herodion

Caring, kind-hearted and easy-going, he has always been close to Thea, and often encouraged her innate desire to question the world around her. While Lucius lacks the long heritage of his wife, he is a proud member of the Ironsong family, with a talent for forging shields.



Vesta Ironsong

Descended from a long line of blacksmiths, Vesta is incredibly dedicated to her work. While firm and disciplined, she believes in her daughter wholeheartedly, and loves her dearly. Vesta has a special talent for creating weapons, and enjoys creating more elaborate designs for the templars that visit their forge.



Minerva Themis

The owner of the Golden Chariot, a tavern next to the Ironsong family forge. Minerva is abrupt, direct and incredibly stubborn, yet thoughtful and wise beyond her years. Minerva's calm guidance was a constant throughout Thea's childhood, as she attempted to rein in the unruly, inquisitive young girl.

on their travels. Most travellers came from the villages under Solana's protection, following one of the many paths leading to the grand city gates. Others, however, came from further afield to visit the great Library of Illumination, or listen to speeches in the Amphitheatre. The busiest time of the year, however, was during the Solstice of Laurels.

The Solstice took place once a year, equal parts celebration and ceremony for the Hand of Sol. Great processions of knights clad in ceremonial armour strode through the streets of Solana, gathering at the base of the Amphitheatre. Templars, radiant in gold and ivory, marching with their weapons held high, their masks gleaming in the light of the sun.

Trainees, squires, knights, all stepping forward to receive the blessings of the Grand Magister. Where some were commended for completing their training, recognised before all of Solana, others were commended for their excellence and dedication, proudly accepting their promotions. After them, a few blessed individuals stepped forward to be inducted as Templars, receiving their masks with honour.

Thea always looked forward to the Solstice. Sitting high above the arena, she would watch as the knights of Solana marched forward in perfect unison, their heads raised high with pride. Visitors came from all over Rathe to witness the ceremony, and see the noble men and women who would become the new generation of knights in the Hand of Sol.

After the ceremony had concluded, she would make her way back to the Golden Chariot to listen to travellers talking in hushed whispers, their voices full of awe as they spoke of the Solstice, and the radiant knights who marched beneath the light of the sun.

The Awakening

While Thea admired the Hand of Sol, she already knew her destiny. Her family had been chosen long ago to serve Solana as master blacksmiths, and she was proud to continue the Ironsong legacy. So, when the day finally came for the Awakening ceremony, on the eve of her eighth birthday, Thea was ready to don the blacksmith's apron and join her parents in the forge.



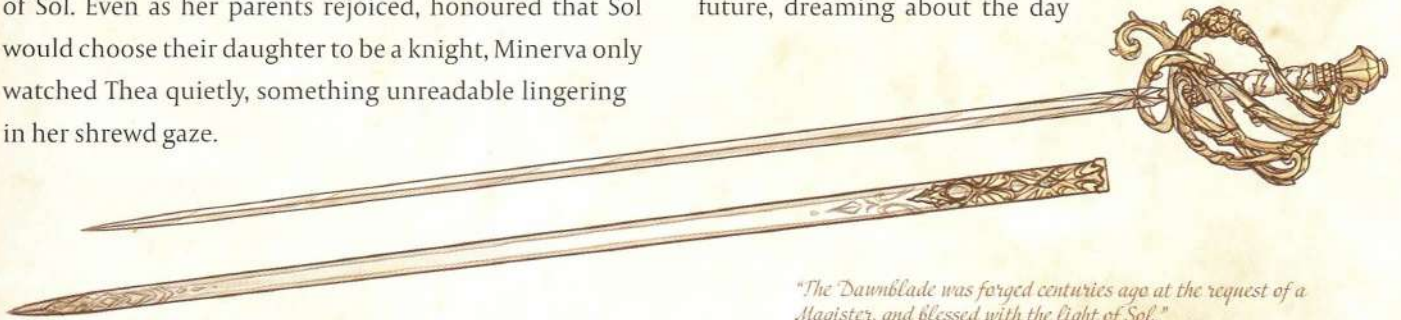
Following the chancellor into the ceremonial chamber, Thea went to stand at the centre of the room, looking around at all of the objects lining the walls. She searched for the gentle light of a blacksmith's hammer activating, awakening, glowing like a dying ember in the heat of the forge. Yet, as Thea waited, she did not see a hammer, nor an anvil, tongs, or the blacksmith's heavy apron. Instead, hundreds of swords all began to shine, resonating with the light of Sol. They darted into the air, flying around her like stars around the sun. Their glow was so bright that they began to illuminate the entire room, the darkened hall flooding with the vibrant light of the noonday sun.

One sword in particular caught Thea's attention, a graceful, thin blade with a gilded hilt. It circled closer and closer, and on its next pass, Thea reached out and plucked it from the air, grasping it tightly in her tiny hand. All at once, the rest of the swords fell to the ground with a sharp clatter, still and silent upon the marble floor.

The next day, the Archon of Thea's district proclaimed her a prodigy swordsman of great potential, and Thea was immediately enrolled into training with the Hand of Sol. Even as her parents rejoiced, honoured that Sol would choose their daughter to be a knight, Minerva only watched Thea quietly, something unreadable lingering in her shrewd gaze.

more experienced. Finally, Vesperides would come a day of rest, for the trainees to do as they pleased, and enjoy the company of their family and friends.

Thea, Valeria and Felix often spent Vesperides either in the Golden Chariot, listening to travellers' tales, or in the Amphitheatre, listening to the Magisters who spoke the word of Sol. On their way home, strolling amongst the verdant gardens of the Silvarium, they would often talk about the future, dreaming about the day



"The Dawnblade was forged centuries ago at the request of a Magister, and blessed with the light of Sol."
- Chancellor Hypatia

Genesis

Thea's training began with simple classes, taught by scholars from the Light of Sol. Their lessons covered everything from the history of Solana, to the lands beyond the city walls, to the many creatures of Rathe. As their training progressed, this grew to include theory relevant to their training, such as the structure of different weapons and armour, how to identify their opponents' weaknesses, and how to play to their own strengths.

Thea quickly made friends with two of her fellow trainees. Valeria, short and stubborn, was determined to live up to her family legacy, and spoke of her desire to one day become a templar. Felix was a dark-haired, light-hearted, enthusiastic young boy, excited about their training and filled with gratitude to Sol for giving him the chance to become a knight. The trio were inseparable, spending almost every waking hour in each other's company.

Every day, Thea rose from her warm bed above the family forge and travelled to the outer walls to begin training. Solides through Verides were spent with scholars and knights in the classroom, learning theory. Exorides and Merides were spent training, beginning with drills to learn footwork and technique, before progressing to sparring as they grew older and a little

that they would journey outside the walls as knights of Solana. They wondered aloud about distant lands, imagining what they might see beyond the golden fields. The tales they heard in the Golden Chariot fuelled their imaginations, and they dreamed together about the day they would step forward to uphold their sacred duty. Most of all, they dreamt about their future party, and the radiant templar that would lead them beyond the great gates of Solana.

Over time, their schedule began to shift, allowing for more time for physical training to perfect their fighting abilities and prepare them for battle. Their lessons covered everything that they might need to survive, information that would be crucial to protecting themselves from the horrors of the outside world.

"You have no need to fear the world beyond the walls," Charis told them. Their main instructor, she reminded them to put their faith in Sol. "The glory of Sol will protect you from any threat. Sol knows all and will always guide you to the path of the Light."

Even as Thea revelled in their training, finding joy in the structure and purpose granted by the will of Sol, she struggled with the rigid beliefs of her teachers. Meanwhile, her fellow trainees grew quieter and more reserved with each passing year, settling into their roles

Training



Valeria
Sunstrike

The daughter of a templar and a lieutenant, Valeria comes from a long line of knights, and is devoted to following in her mother's footsteps by becoming a templar. She has three older brothers, all in the Hand of Sol, one of whom became a templar at just 26 years old. Valeria is fiery, determined and outspoken.



Felix
Amarus

Felix spent the first eight years of his life working alongside his father in the markets, while his mother patrolled the borders of Solana as a knight in the Hand of Sol. He was delighted when he was chosen for the Hand during his Awakening ceremony and hopes to make his mother proud. Felix is cheerful, caring and incredibly loyal.



Charis
Steelsworn

A knight in the Hand of Sol, Charis teaches young trainees, helping to polish not only their swordsmanship, but their minds as well; teaching them patience, self-discipline, and confidence in their own abilities. While she is a strict and firm teacher, she's fair, and has faith in her students.

within the Hand of Sol.

Come Together

After six long years, Thea, Valeria and Felix journeyed to the Amphitheatre, excited to meet their party and receive the weapons and armour of a squire. The Solstice of Laurels commenced as a procession of noble warriors marched onto the stage, bowing their heads before the cheering crowds. As the trainees crossed the stage, pausing to receive the Magister's blessings with a humble bow, Thea turned to look out over the crowds before her, all rejoicing under the light of the sun. The Solstice continued long into the day, the figures of proud lieutenants stepping aside to give room to the templars, resplendent in their gilded ceremonial armour.

Thea and Valeria, assigned to the same party, stepped forward to meet the templar striding toward them. A masked figure cast in gold and silver met their gaze, armour polished to a bright shine, the features of her mask pulled into an aloof expression, with eyes that made it seem as if she were staring straight through them.

The templar, Hala, introduced them to their lieutenant, a younger man named Farris; the knights of their party, Vitus, Pallas and Darius; and Marcus, a scholar from the Light of Sol.



The party left Solana the following day, and ventured out into the villages, patrolling and offering help to those in need. Repairing damaged buildings, tracking down lost livestock, bolstering defenses, digging wells, building fences, hunting wild beasts, tracking and exterminating groups of bandits; anything that the villagers needed. Marcus, as a senior scholar, helped to heal the sick and injured, and gave speeches about Sol and the blessings of the Light.

They roamed the plains beyond Solana, staying in villages for weeks, sometimes months at a time. By day, they worked tirelessly to help their neighbours, and by night, sat by the local inn's fire to hear stories from grateful villagers.

On their travels, the party often told stories to pass the time, sharing their own experiences or stories from Solana's history. Thea's memories of her time as a squire were often fond recollections of these moments, spent laughing and chatting under the light of the sun. She often went forward to join Hala at the front of the party, finding moments to talk to the radiant templar. Hala indulged the young squire, sharing tales of her past and lessons she'd learned while in the Hand of Sol.

Occasionally, Thea would manage to convince Hala to spar with her, taking advantage of the tiny breaks between their patrols. Wielding Dawnblade, the sword that she had been bestowed during her Awakening ceremony, Thea was quick and agile, darting around her opponent with ease. However, the templar was a

relentless opponent, constantly one step ahead. In all their time together, Thea only managed to get past Hala's shield three times, basking in the quiet pride in Hala's voice as she congratulated her.

Several months into their patrol, one villager spoke to them in whispers, describing a massacre that had been discovered within the jungles to the west. They described a party of knights that lay strewn across the earth, armour torn open, blood coating the ground in a layer of muddied crimson. The tale was not unusual, in and of itself - the Savage Lands were known for their dangers, and occasionally, a party was caught off guard by the beasts that lurk within.

However, rumours began to spread of horrific beasts emerging from the jungles, charging along the outermost reaches of the Savage Lands in a mindless frenzy. As reports poured in of increased attacks on outlying villages, the party spent more and more time in the villages on the outskirts of the golden fields, patrolling the area in an attempt to lessen the attacks.

They found villages ransacked, bodies lying in the fields, dusty roads littered with blood and entrails. From packs of smaller beasts, to massive creatures with armoured hides, the beasts of the Savage Lands were travelling further than ever before; frenzied, relentless, they fought with reckless abandon, tearing a path through the village until they were finally struck down. Sometimes the party arrived in time to fend off the creatures and save innocent lives. At other times, they arrived to find an empty village, as if its townspeople had vanished in the middle of the night. The only signs of conflict came from the occasional bloodstain, smeared along the side of a building, a streak of crimson left amongst the grassy fields.

Five years after the party had left Solana, Marcus woke the party before dawn. In the morning twilight, he relayed a message sent by an archon, summoning them to one of the forward camps located on the outskirts of the Savage Lands.

They travelled for almost two weeks before they finally arrived at the forward camp, finding a clearing filled with silver and gold. Knights, lieutenants and templars were packed into the camp, almost completely drowning out

the merchant's stalls lining the border of the clearing. The templars' masks gleamed in the pale sunlight as they conversed with scholars, gathered near the centre of the clearing. Hala disappeared into the crowd to find the archon who had summoned them, Marcus close behind. Behind them, the rest of the party lingered at the edge of the clearing, watching as the sea of knights parted before Hala's determined stride.

Into the Wilderness

Along the outskirts of the Savage Lands, forward camps lie hidden between the trees, constructed long ago by the Hand of Sol. They serve as entry points to the jungle beyond, and as a safe space for knights and adventurers alike to rest and restock supplies. The camps usually accommodated for one or two parties at a time, and were mostly occupied by merchants, traders, adventurers, and the occasional band of mercenaries. Now, however, the forward camps were overflowing with warriors from Solana, bedrolls lining the clearing.

Any party near the Savage Lands had been summoned. Templars and scholars stepped aside to gather in meetings, planning patrols and keeping the camps running as they discussed the growing threat from the Savage Lands. For weeks, they remained within the jungle, awaiting news from the Grand Council.



Party



Hala
Goldenhelm

A templar in the Hand of Sol, Hala is serious, distant and reserved, dedicated to her role as a templar. Hala has a rigid code of conduct, strong morals, and little patience for those who do not take their role seriously. She believes that Thea has the potential to become an incredible warrior, if she could only put aside her rebellious streak and listen to her elders.



Farris
Lucretius

The lieutenant has worked with Hala since he was a trainee. Friendly and optimistic, he is the heart and soul of the group, and cares very deeply for his fellow party members. Despite his easy-going nature and good sense of humour, he is a skilled warrior and takes his role as lieutenant seriously. Farris has a soft spot for Thea, who reminds him of his younger sister.



Vitus
Kallistos

Affectionately named 'Smiley' by Farris, Vitus is sombre and taciturn, preferring to focus on the task at hand rather than wasting time on idle chatter. When he does speak to one of his fellow party members, he displays a keen intelligence, and a deep respect for those around him. He's the second eldest member of the party at 51 years of age but has no interest in switching to a teaching role.



Darius
Sunstrike

A young warrior in the hand of Sol, eager to begin his first mission as a fully-fledged knight. He is devoted to the glory of Sol's light, and holds a deep respect for the Light of Sol. In another life, he may have been a scholar, but was instead chosen by Sol for his talent with a sword. Darius is a distant relative of Valeria.



Pallas
Laverna

Staunch, unwavering, and determined to ascend to the role of templar. She practices her swordsmanship rigorously, and often asks to spar with the other members of the party so that she can perfect her skills. Pallas can find it difficult to hold a conversation, and despite her best efforts, seems to possess a remarkable talent for saying the wrong thing at the wrong time.



Marcus
Artorius

A scholar in the light of Sol, who adores his role within Solana and is looking forward to the opportunity to work with a party of knights. Intelligent, thoughtful and perceptive, he enjoys experiencing new challenges, and is eager for the chance to teach the two young trainees in his party.



Valeria
Sunstrike

After being promoted to squire, Valeria has joined the party alongside Thea. While she's happy to be in the same party as one of her friends, she struggles with feeling inadequate next to Thea, and can't help but get frustrated with Thea's need to question everything. Valeria quickly developed a strong friendship with the older knights, and deeply respects all the members of her party for their skill and dedication.

Then, finally, the scholars received their orders. Templars, scholars and veteran knights were to group together and search the jungle for information. While the senior members banded together, the lieutenants gathered the remaining knights and squires into parties to patrol the borders, and maintain a line of defense between the savage wilds and the golden fields. Farris took control of their party, leading them on minor scouting missions along the outskirts of the jungle.

For months, they patrolled the borders of the jungle, hunting down any creature that emerged from the depths of the Savage Lands. Hala and the rest of her squadron were gone for days at a time, travelling deep into the jungle in increasingly longer journeys. In her moments of rest between missions, Hala would rejoin the party to check in on her charges and pass on any updates. In the time between all of the travel, meetings and planning, Hala would occasionally find a spare moment to spar with Thea between the trees, a tiny respite from the quiet frenzy of the forward camps.

The Road of Trials

One day, Thea's party was returning from patrol when they caught a glimpse of smoke between the trees. When the camp finally came into view, the sight was bloodcurdling. Scraps of torn fabric were strewn across the camp, littering the dirt with white, red and gold; one of the tents was on fire, billowing black smoke, while another hung limply from the branches of a nearby tree; blood was smeared into the dirt, a dark crimson stain against the dusty earth; a single corpse lay out in the open, head torn from its shoulders. The merchants, mercenaries and warriors that had been in the clearing hours prior were nowhere to be found, only a single fragment of dented metal left behind to mark their presence.

After several minutes of silence, Farris relayed their orders from a nearby scholar - secure the camp, guard the remaining supplies, and wait for the parties to return. Thea tried to convince Farris to go after the missing people, that they could be out there somewhere, still alive, dying in slow, silent agony as they waited for someone to come for them. However, it didn't work. Quietly, gently, Farris repeated their orders, reminding

Day	Phonetic	Pronunciation	Equivalent
Solides	səʊlɪdiːz	(sole-eh-dees)	Sunday
Lunedes	ˈluːnɪdiːz	(loon-eh-dees)	Monday
Aedes	eɪdiːz	(ay-dees)	Tuesday
Verides	ˈvɪərɪdiːz	(veer-eh-dees)	Wednesday
Exorides	ɪgˈɒrɪdiːz	(ex-oh-reh-dees)	Thursday
Merides	mɪərɪdiːz	(mare-eh-dees)	Friday
Vesperides	vɛˈspɛrɪdiːz	(vess-pear-eh-dees)	Saturday

her that Sol knew best.

Thea was certain that there had to be a mistake. She had seen first-hand the brutality and savagery that the creatures of the Savage Lands were capable of. Surely Sol, a being of wisdom and mercy, wouldn't tell them to leave innocent people to their fate, torn apart by vicious beasts, disembowelled and left to slowly bleed to death.

For a while, Thea continued to help her party clean up the camp and secure what was left, but by sundown, she had made up her mind. As the sun began to set and those present were working to secure the camp, Thea took her chance. She stole several weapons from the stockpile and disappeared into the shadows.

At first, she struggled to find any tracks, but eventually stumbled across some blood smeared against a tree trunk. Thea followed the tracks for several hours, stopping every so often to gather her bearings and find the next part of the trail. Then, at last, Thea found her missing people.

Four brutes lay within the clearing, while a fifth sat watch near the captives, its head bowed in sleep. Eleven people were tied to the trees next to it. Thea recognised six of them as merchants, and two more bore the armour of the Hand of Sol. The remaining three appeared to be mercenaries, judging by their light armour. Slowly, quietly, she made her way over to the two knights, untying them and handing them a weapon each. While she worked on the mercenaries, she looked over,

expecting the two knights to already be on their feet and helping others - yet they were still sitting against the tree.

On closer inspection, Thea saw the wounds seeping crimson against their armour, the way they were slumped forward, faces waxy and pale. They were barely going to be able to walk, let alone wield a weapon. The rest of the group were little better. Many of the captives appeared to be badly wounded, exhausted, or suffering from extreme blood loss.

Just as she began to wonder how she was going to help these people escape, she heard the distinctive rasp of metal against wood. Behind her, the guard rose to its feet, club clenched tightly in one fist. Thea drew her blade, already moving in an attempt to silence it before it could alert the rest of the pack, but it was too late - with a bellowing roar, it roused the other brutes from their slumber. As the pack lurched to their feet, Thea noticed one of the warriors out of the corner of her eye, struggling to rise, leaning heavily on the tree as he straightened.

Raising Dawnblade before her, Thea placed herself between the pack of brutes and the camp survivors. She was preparing herself for battle when she noticed a faint flash of light between the trees, the metallic shine of silver armour. Hala and the rest of her party burst into the clearing, the templar holding her shield out before her as she charged the brutes, brandishing her sword, shining with the light of Marcus's magic. Within seconds, the group was under attack, and the sounds of

fierce battle filled the clearing. The party began to make some headway as one of the brutes ran into the jungle, badly injured. For a moment, it almost seemed as if they could all make it out okay.

Yet before they could defeat the remaining brutes, before they could help any of the captives to their feet, before they could even try to get anybody back to camp, a great bellow echoed throughout the clearing. Nine more brutes emerged from the line of trees, one of them towering high above the others, skin grey and craggy, eyes dark as it charged toward them. They were outnumbered, overpowered, and outmatched.

The party had no choice but to flee. As Hala sounded a retreat, charging at the brutes to give the rest of the party enough time to flee, Thea started forward to help the captives struggling to their feet. Then Marcus appeared before her. Blocking her path, he pulled her away, dragging her out of the clearing and forcing her to run toward the camp. As they dashed through the trees, the air was filled with the sound of pained screams, echoing from all those they had left behind.

When the morning came, the sun rising to flood the forward camp with light, only three members of the party had emerged into the campsite. Marcus and Thea arrived first, supporting Hala between them, grey-faced from blood loss, her head hanging limply from her shoulders. While, with some difficulty, Thea had been forced to leave the others behind, she had refused to return to camp without Hala. The pair found her on the brink of death, badly injured from her battle with the brutes. Even as the scholars rushed to lie her down on a bedroll, calling light to their fingertips, her breathing grew shallower, her wounds still seeping blood.

Several hours later, just as Thea was about to give up hope, another group of knights entered the clearing, one of them carrying an unconscious Valeria over one shoulder. For hours, the camp was bustling with activity as other parties returned from scouting missions and damage control. Thea watched silently, oblivious to the commotion around her as she observed her friend.

As Valeria finally began to stir, Thea felt a flood of relief wash over her, rising from her bedroll to make her way over to her friend. Yet when Valeria glanced in her

direction, her expression shuttered, and Thea watched as she turned her face away, a burning anger in her eyes.

Return to the Fold

In the years since leaving Solana, Thea had imagined their return to the city more than once: the party marching through the gates, welcomed by their people, pleased to return to their home. Yet at the age of nineteen, Thea found the reality to be much different. Their quiet procession through the fates was sombre, the walls pale in the light of dawn as they passed through the city streets.

Valeria marched ahead of her, carrying Vitus' shield on one arm, completely silent. Hala sat atop a dark mare, her face still pale, clutching her side with one arm as Thea slowly led her horse forward. Thea could feel Marcus' gaze upon her back, and she wondered idly if Sol was watching her as well, looking on in disapproval.

After handing in her armour, Thea made her way back to the smithing district. As she walked down the main street, gaze fixed on the outline of Minerva's tavern, she began to slow, coming to a halt in front of her childhood home. Through the open doors, she could see the forge burning brightly, smoke wafting out into the gentle breeze as her parents rushed toward her with open arms.

She spent several hours with her parents, answering all of their questions with a growing sense of exhaustion. Finally, she found an opportunity to slip away to the Golden Chariot. The moment that she stepped through the front door; Thea came face to face with the tavern owner's steely gaze. For a moment, both stood completely still, staring silently at one another.

Streaks of grey had appeared in Minerva's vibrant auburn hair, dark circles hanging beneath her eyes, fine wrinkles lining her skin. She looked so much older than Thea remembered, and yet somehow, it seemed as if she hadn't changed at all. Just as she opened her mouth to say something, Minerva suddenly lurched forward, wrapping Thea in a tight hug.

In the familiar comfort of the inn, Minerva listened silently as Thea described the last few years. She spoke of the rumours that had spread, of the fear and unease, of the village that they'd found in ruins. She spoke of travelling

to the Savage Lands and patrolling the outskirts of the jungle. She spoke of coming back to find the forward camp in chaos, of the captives that had been taken and the people still missing. She spoke of leaving to find survivors, of stumbling across the pack of brutes, and trying to help them, and how it had achieved nothing. That four of her party members had died trying to make up for her mistake. That they hadn't even managed to save any of the captives in the end. When Thea was finished, Minerva smiled sadly. "I know that you were only trying to do the right thing. That's what matters, Thea."

Yet even as Minerva comforted her, Thea felt the burden of her mistakes weighing on her shoulders, unable to forget the deaths that she had caused.

Redemption

For months, she waited, helping to serve customers in the tavern, working in the forge, and travelling to the outer walls for sparring sessions. The Solstice came and passed, and while her fellow squires were inducted into the Hand of Sol as full knights, Thea remained on the outskirts of the ceremony with the other Solanians. For a time, it almost seemed as if she would never don her armour again, and she wondered what happened to those who failed to fulfil their chosen role. And then, she received a summons from Hala.

The templar stood tall, radiant in the centre of the antechamber. Her shining armour hid any possible signs of what had happened, and Thea struggled to tell if Hala was fully healed, or if she had suffered any lasting injuries or scars. Thea struggled to meet her gaze; head bowed as she murmured her greetings. For several moments, silence filled the room, until finally she looked up. Hala's impassive mask stared back at her, even as she gently placed a hand on Thea's shoulder.

"Are you ready to prove yourself?"

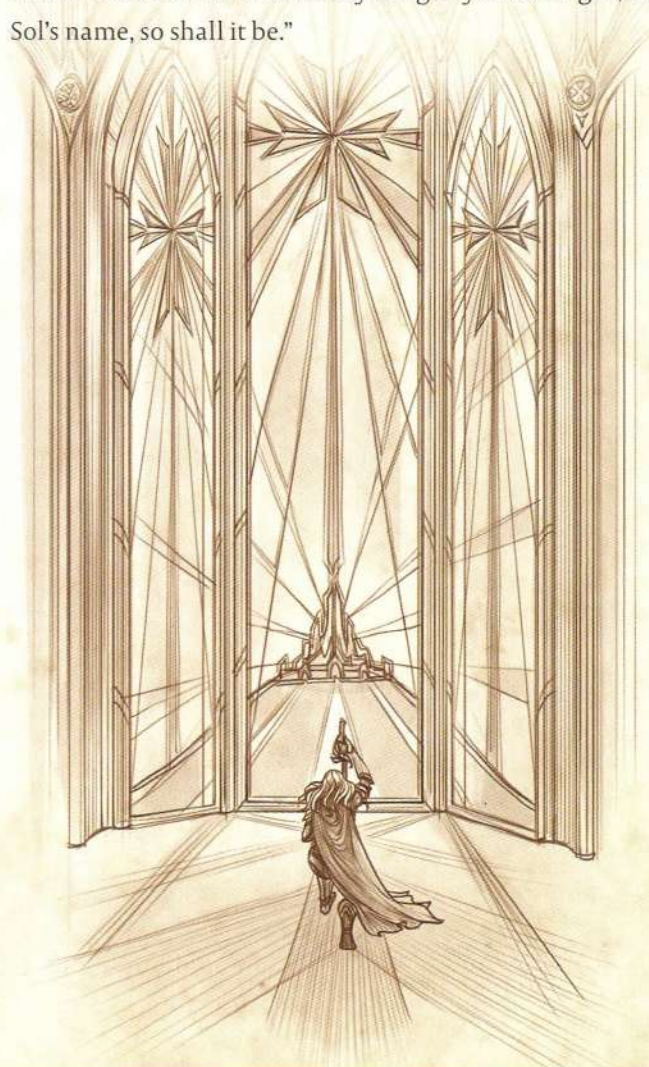
Rite of Passage

Once a year, the kingdom of Solana holds the Solstice of Laurels, a celebration of the Hand of Sol. Templars, resplendent in their ceremonial armour, lead great processions of knights through the city streets, gathering at the base of the Amphitheatre. Then, at noon, the ceremony would finally begin. Squires completing their

training step forward to stand before the Grand Magister, heads bowed as they proudly receive the blessings of Sol. Thea slowly stepped forward, bowing deeply before the radiant figure of the Grand Magister.

Despite the prestige of her accomplishment, promoted to lieutenant at just twenty-one years old, Thea remains strangely solemn. She cannot forget the events that have led to this moment, or the people that she has lost along the way. With her mistakes weighing heavily upon her shoulders, Thea is determined to do better, and become an exemplary lieutenant worthy of her position. Before the people of Solana, Thea makes a promise to herself - she will learn from her past, follow the will of Sol, and honour her people.

"In the name of Sol, I swear that I shall serve Solana to the best of my ability, until death relieves me of this sacred duty. I swear that I will protect Solana, and all those who live within its walls." Her voice rang out, cutting through the hushed quiet of the crowds watching over her. "By the blessed light, I shall carry out this oath, and never shall I knowingly nor willingly violate this, my solemn oath and obligation as a lieutenant of Solana, the outstretched hand of Sol. By the glory of Sol's light, in Sol's name, so shall it be."







SAVAGE LANDS

EAT, KILL... SURVIVE

An ancient primal wilderness, the Savage Lands is a jungle that sprawls far to the west of Rathe. This seemingly endless expanse of dense growth is unrepresented by any map, due to its sheer size and the dangers that lie within. It remains untouched by the passage of time, as generations of humans try and fail to tame or settle any part of the vast jungle.

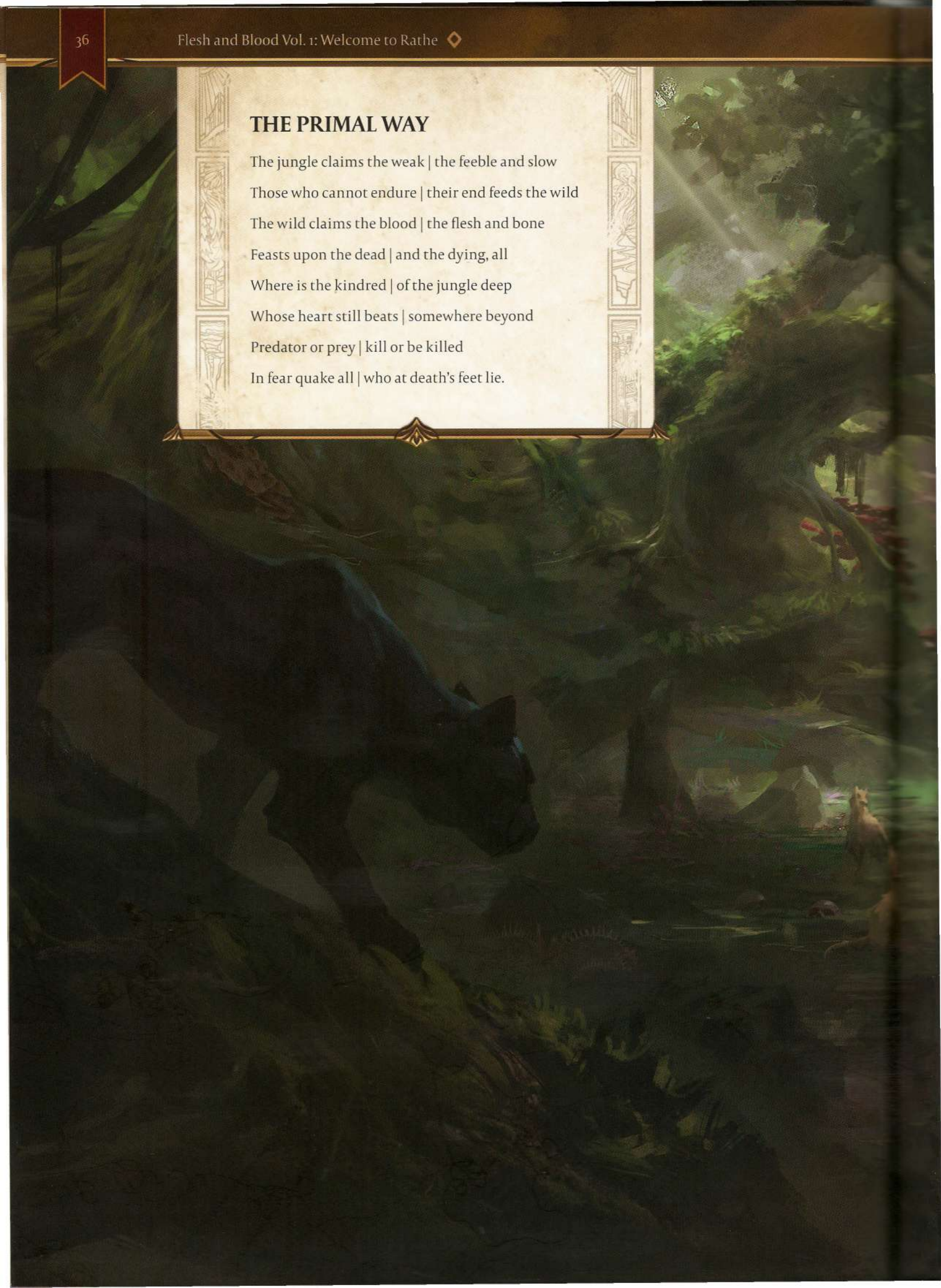
The first known explorers to survive the Savage Lands described a treacherous and unforgiving landscape, filled with hidden dangers and horrific beasts. With no landmarks to mark their passage through the jungle, they found themselves lost within an endless expanse of trees, with no way to navigate the jungle. Many members of that first party lost their lives within the wilderness, their corpses left to rot amongst the trees. However, those that survived returned with a wealth of information on the dangers and mysteries of the primordial jungle.

From massive predators to vicious scavengers, poisonous fungi to carnivorous plants, the Savage Lands are host to some of the most unique, treacherous and vile wildlife known to Rathe. Explorers have described being hunted by dark creatures that stalk their prey from the shadows; or watching their fellow adventurers writhe in agony as a deadly toxin spreads through their bloodstream; or trying in vain to hide from some massive, rampaging beast, trampling anything that crosses its path. The Savage Lands is a minefield of unknown dangers, waiting to claim the lives of the careless and the ill-prepared.

Despite the dangers, foolhardy adventurers gather from all over Rathe, attracted by the stories of successful hunts and famed explorers. A growing number of encampments have appeared on the outskirts of the jungle as more adventurers continue to arrive, risking their lives in hopes of achieving fame and fortune.

THE PRIMAL WAY

The jungle claims the weak | the feeble and slow
Those who cannot endure | their end feeds the wild
The wild claims the blood | the flesh and bone
Feasts upon the dead | and the dying, all
Where is the kindred | of the jungle deep
Whose heart still beats | somewhere beyond
Predator or prey | kill or be killed
In fear quake all | who at death's feet lie.





CALL OF ADVENTURE

A vast and mysterious jungle, the Savage Lands attracted many prospective explorers, all eager to discover what lay hidden within its depths. Adventurers who entered would inevitably disappear, their bones abandoned amongst the undergrowth, a legacy of the lost. Occasionally, rumours would surface of some brave adventurer who had re-emerged, telling tall tales of horrific beasts and hidden wonders. Many stepped forward to explore the jungle, and yet no one could survive long enough to bring back information on what lay within.

No one, that is, until Theodore Hamilton Scarborough. A researcher who sought to uncover the jungle's secrets, he amassed a large team of mercenaries and explorers, and led the first successful expedition into the Savage Lands. Of the original twenty-four team members, only five would emerge alive. Scarborough wrote at length about his experiences, an account that would soon be published as the first known information on the fauna and flora of the Savage Lands.

DEADLY FLORA

Scarborough's notes speak at length of the toxic and poisonous plants that lay within the jungle, and the effects that they had upon the people he worked with. Whether it was a team member who decided to try their hand at jungle cuisine, to one man who merely touched a fungus with his hand, he relays their fate with horrifying detail. Convulsing on the ground; foaming at the mouth; eyes rolling back into their skulls as blood seeps from every pore; screaming as they writhe in agony; all of these and more numbered amongst Scarborough's descriptions.

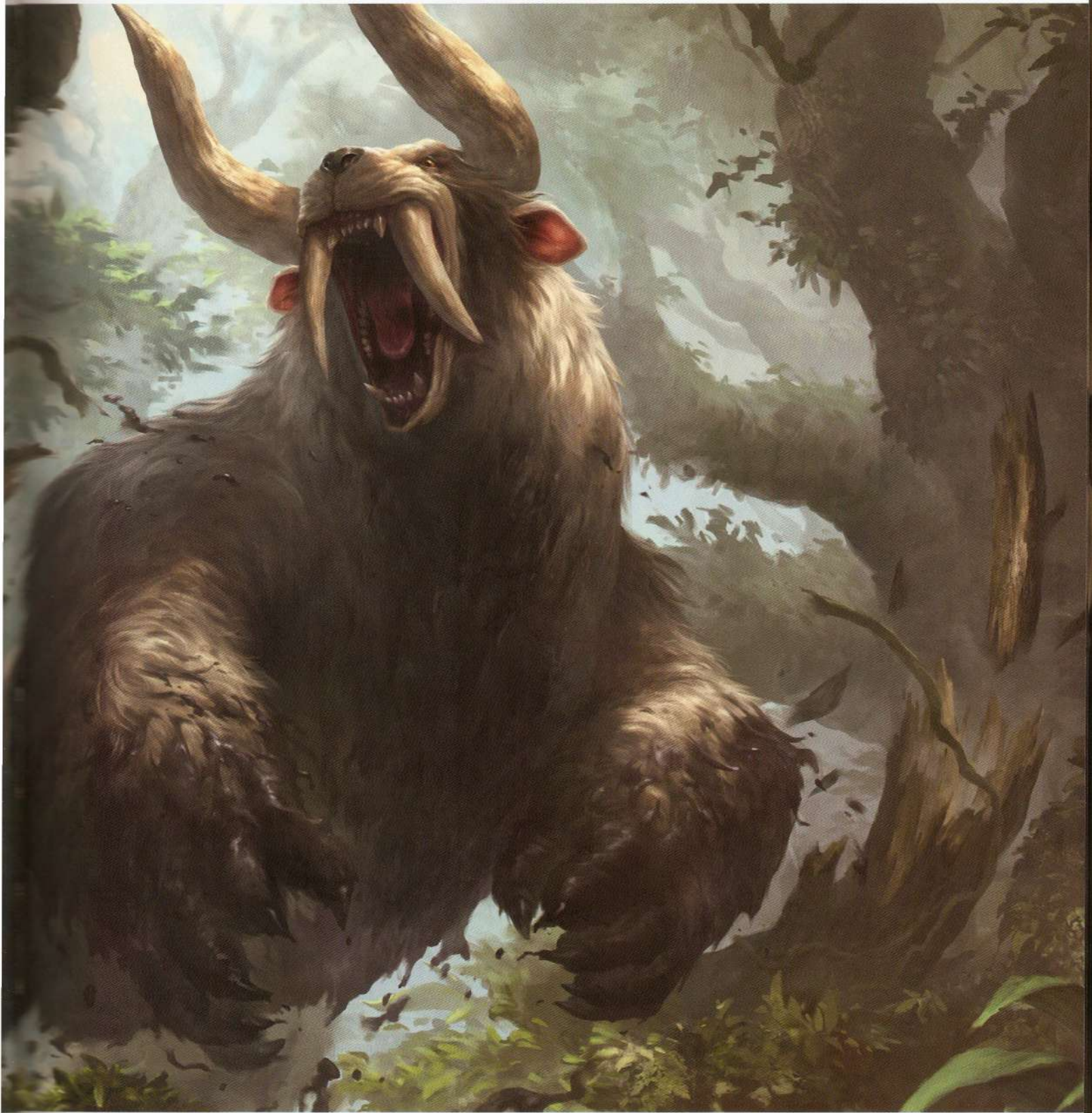
Yet not all of the plants found within the Savage Lands seem to have such disastrous side-effects. Scarborough hints at the existence of a small number of beneficial and restorative species from the jungle's depths, though his work provides only one account of such a plant.

DANGEROUS FAUNA

The bestiary notes from Scarborough's work detail an even more horrifying reality. From great, scaled beasts with dripping fangs, to creatures with crystalline skin and



serrated limbs, the creatures in the Savage Lands seem to be nothing short of lethal. Elite predators and monstrous beasts populate the jungle, striking down their prey with deadly accuracy, tearing apart their prey to glean every last scrap of muscle and marrow; their gaping maws



drip with blood, beady eyes gleaming in the dark as they devour the raw flesh of their prey. In the shadows behind them, small scavengers lurk, waiting for the opportunity to pick apart the remains for scraps of muscle and marrow.

Primal, aggressive, and deadly, the creatures of the Savage Lands possess traits that make them deadly to anything that crosses their path. It is these exact traits that were the basis for Scarborough's extensive research.

BESTIARY OF SCARBOROUGH

Theodore Hamilton Scarborough was a prominent researcher who spent his life studying the creatures of the Savage Lands. He was fascinated by the primal instincts of the beasts within the jungles and sought to understand what made these creatures so deadly.

Journal Entry No. 6

Day 9

One of the men died this morning fighting off a rather large beast. It moved deathly quick, covered in some form of fur. It nearly decapitated one of the men with its claws. Whilst it did move quickly, I managed to catch a glimpse of its curved beak, and of its large, barbed tail, which appeared to have a sort of stinger at the end. Sadly, it seems to have disappeared further into the jungle... I do hope that we can manage to find another.

Peluda

A large creature, the Peluda moves surprisingly quickly given its size, with a thick fur coat interspersed with sharp spikes. Its muscular legs are the source of its apparent speed.



Its muscular tail is capable of sweeping any animal off of its feet, leaving it vulnerable to the peluda's deadly hooked claws. While the tail appears to have a stinger, further tests have shown that the barb does not contain any form of toxin.

Journal Entry No. 8

Day 11

We first spotted this massive creature battling with a much larger, furred beast. While we attempted to avoid catching its eye, it appeared to have followed us. Fire seemed to do the trick for warding it away, and all of the men survived. However, as the creature disappeared, I am left with questions, and no specimen.

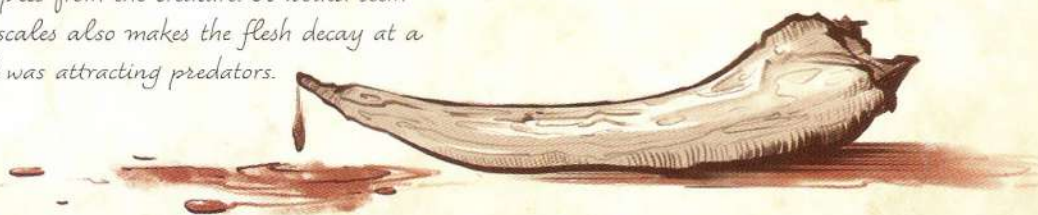
Rek'vas

A swift and deadly creature, the Rek'vas has brightly patterned scales that are highly toxic. Its massive head is framed by some form of hood, brightly coloured skin that flares from either side of its neck.



Its large fangs and claws are retractable, used not only to attack prey, but to help it tear through the tougher skin of creatures such as the Brawnhide. In addition to the toxic coating covering its scales, its teeth can inject a deadly poison into its prey.

We retrieved this tooth from the remains of a rek'vas. Unfortunately, we could not risk staying near the carcass long enough to retrieve any samples from the creature. It would seem that the toxin coating its scales also makes the flesh decay at a rapid pace, and the smell was attracting predators.



Journal Entry No. 11

Day 18

Today, we encountered a small group of long-legged, feathered creatures. Horrid little things. They didn't seem afraid of us, but did not attempt to attack, either. They seemed to have recognised our swords as some form of talon. We weren't sure what they were doing, at first, but one of the men got close enough to see the corpse they were tearing apart with their beaks. I shall see if I can obtain one of these creatures at a later date for dissection.

Strix

A relatively weak creature built for speed rather than strength. Strix travel in groups to ensure the safety of the herd. Their long legs allow them to reach incredibly high speeds, their primary form of defense against the jungle's many predators.



The diet of a strix is primarily carnivorous, scavenging carcasses of prey left behind by larger predators. Their sharp, hooked beaks allow them to tear even the smallest remnants of flesh and muscle away from carcasses. A highly acidic stomach allows them to digest small bone fragments, swallowed whole.



Feathers cover the majority of a strix's body, but their soft bellies are protected by a layer of tiny scales.



Journal Entry No. 16

Day 23

Several men died before we had a chance to realise that the creature was upon us. Its hide was smooth and clear, almost appearing crystalline, with sharp teeth that appeared to be made of the same substance. It appeared to have no interest in us, instead directing its attention to the strixes I had been dissecting. Before the men had a chance to fight it off, it snatched one of the corpses in its mouth, climbed straight up the side of a cliff and disappeared.



Ank'is

This crystalline creature does not bleed. It shatters. Its teeth are harder than stone, with serrated edges and a needle-like tip to tear through flesh.



Its limbs are long and thin, with sharp points to allow it to grip onto most surfaces, and scale the difficult terrain of the Savage Lands.

Journal Entry No. 19

Day 28

We almost walked straight into one of these. The beast was massive, the height of a man and half again. Its thick hide was covered in fur, two great canines protruding from its mouth, both thick as a man's arm. With great difficulty, we hid in the trees, waiting for hours until the beast finally left. Luckily, it appears to be rather short-sighted.

Brawnhide

A giant, furred beast with long, thick canines, and small, dark eyes. Its long fur protects most of its body, dark grey in colour, fading to an off-white at the tips. It appears to make up for its poor sight through its incredibly powerful sense of smell - I have witnessed it track prey through the jungle by scent alone.



Their canines are almost impossible to break, both thick and incredibly strong.



The brawnhide has a set of claws at the base of their feet, though their feet are far too large, and their legs too short for the claws to be of any use.

Journal Entry No. 23

Day 32

Only a few of us remain after what happened this morning. Yet another beast attacked us, a ghastly amalgamation of fur and scales. Its four eyes were staring straight at me, blood dripping from its curved fangs, when Thomas had the idea to throw his torch at it. The fire caught immediately. The scent of its burning flesh was very distinctive - it must contain some kind of acidic compound. A toxin, most likely.

Skera

One of the Savage Lands' most skilled predators, they are almost completely nocturnal, relying on the darkness to help mask their movements while stalking prey. Their four eyes are likely to help it see in the dark, in order to hunt its prey.

Avoid their poisonous spikes at all costs.

The barb at the end of its tail is also highly toxic.



Large, muscular creatures with two pairs of eyes, and long, curved claws similar to talons. Skera are covered in a mixture of fur and spikes, patterned with dark, irregular spots. While the spikes do not appear to be poisonous, they do make it rather difficult to dissect.

BOTANICAL COMPENDIUM

Here is the section of Scarborough's notes regarding botanical studies. Despite our best efforts, some of the journal entries have been lost in our attempts to compile his works.

Journal Entry No. 4

Day 6

These brightly coloured bushes are found all over the jungle, notable for their thick, glossy red leaves. I took some samples and crushed the leaves into a fine paste, which I then added to one man's gruel. He was dead within minutes, the poor fellow, without even a chance to finish his dinner.

Vis'ura

A short, dense bush with thick roots. The leaves of the Vis'ura are poisonous to humans, but most creatures in the Savage Lands are immune to the toxins found within. Its roots, however, are a potent energy source, and safe to eat. One must be absolutely certain to remove every trace of leaves before boiling the root, as the toxins will release into the water and contaminate the entire batch.



Pata

A vibrant red fungus found within the Savage Lands, it grows in large, flat, parallel formations, somewhat resembling a series of shelves. Its brightly coloured surface is covered in a thin layer of a deadly neurotoxin, which can cause seizures and death within minutes of skin contact.

Using the fungi in any form proves incredibly difficult - crushing it will cause its toxic spores to release into the air, burning the pata releases toxic smoke, boiling it contaminates the water. Any alchemist who wishes to use the pata as a poison will struggle to do so without killing themselves.



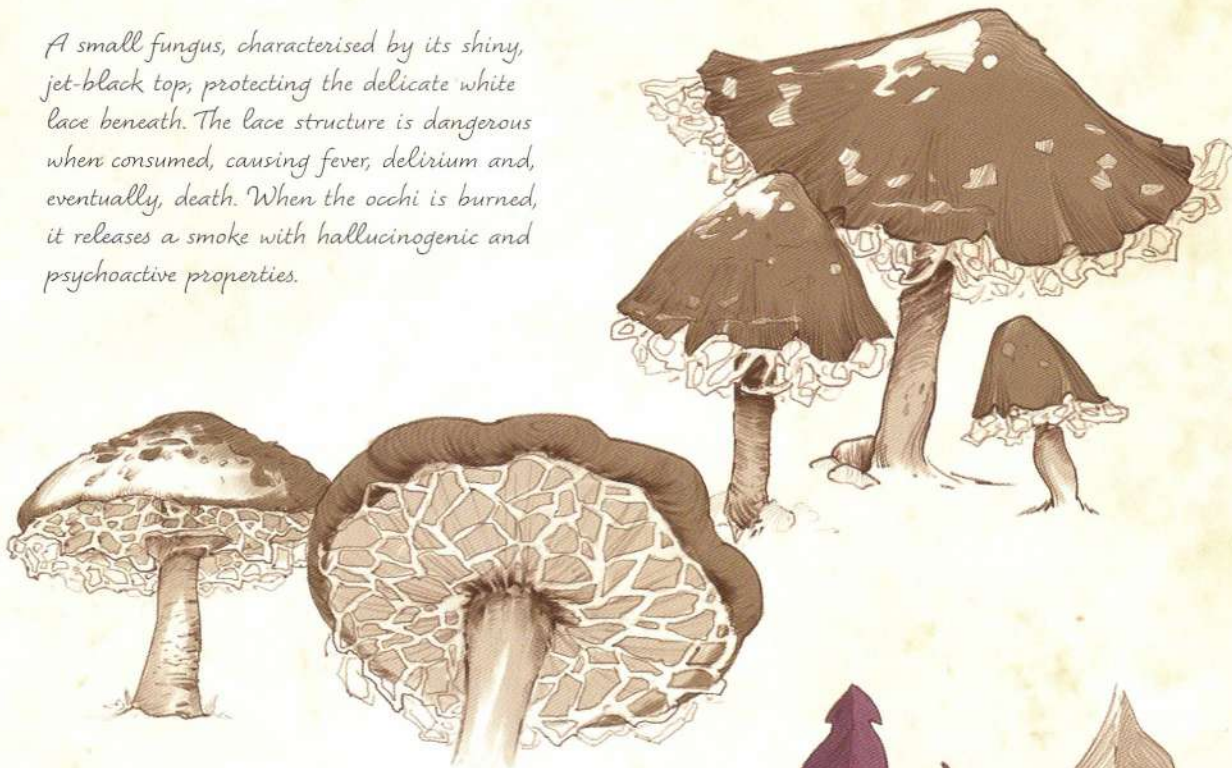
Journal Entry No. 5

Day 6

After the last incident, I did not seek to test this on any of my men - I only have so many, after all. However, Drew was determined to prove that it was edible. It's only a mushroom, he said. Toward the end, he began to ramble nonsensically, and while I took notes on what he said, I cannot seem to make sense of them. One of the men then tossed the remainder of the fungi into the fire without my knowledge, after which we all experienced vivid hallucinations.

Ochi

A small fungus, characterised by its shiny, jet-black top, protecting the delicate white lace beneath. The lace structure is dangerous when consumed, causing fever, delirium and, eventually, death. When the occhi is burned, it releases a smoke with hallucinogenic and psychoactive properties.



Hilen

Found near the base of large trees, hilen is a small, feathery plant that ranges from pale lilac to a bright violet in colour. Perfectly harmless until digested, after which point it will slowly begin to work its way through the body, causing intense pain as the body begins to shut down. Its root system is equally toxic.

The hilen spreads through the release of tiny seed pods, which hang from a light, delicate flower. This flower allows the seed pods to be caught by the breeze, allowing them to travel great distances with a single breath of wind.



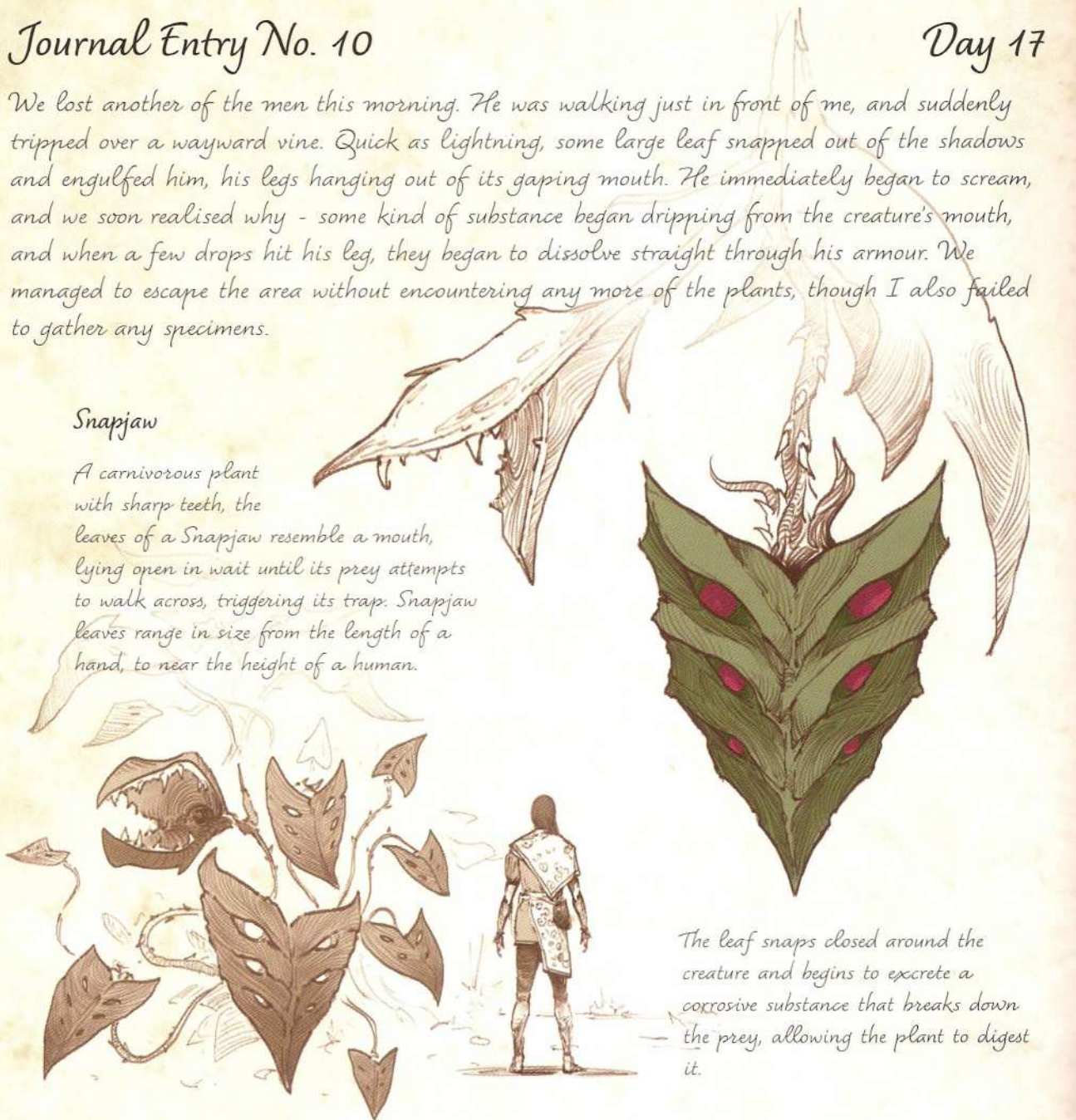
Journal Entry No. 10

Day 17

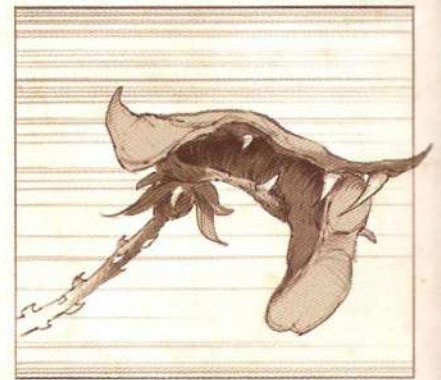
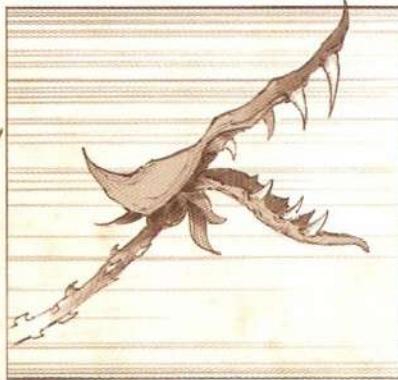
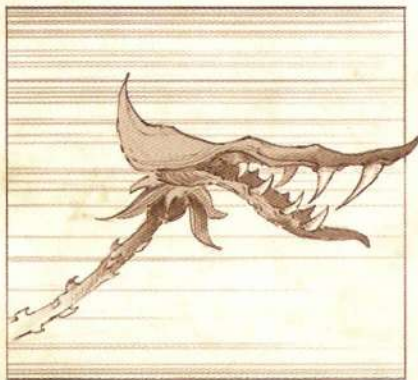
We lost another of the men this morning. He was walking just in front of me, and suddenly tripped over a wayward vine. Quick as lightning, some large leaf snapped out of the shadows and engulfed him, his legs hanging out of its gaping mouth. He immediately began to scream, and we soon realised why - some kind of substance began dripping from the creature's mouth, and when a few drops hit his leg, they began to dissolve straight through his armour. We managed to escape the area without encountering any more of the plants, though I also failed to gather any specimens.

Snapjaw

A carnivorous plant with sharp teeth, the leaves of a Snapjaw resemble a mouth, lying open in wait until its prey attempts to walk across, triggering its trap. Snapjaw leaves range in size from the length of a hand, to near the height of a human.



The leaf snaps closed around the creature and begins to excrete a corrosive substance that breaks down the prey, allowing the plant to digest it.



Snapjaw plants move incredibly quick once triggered, trapping prey within their barbed leaves.

Journal Entry No. 12

Day 19

Simply marvellous. We discovered a cluster of pale blue flowers, with thin, blade-like petals. For the longest time, I failed to discover any properties whatsoever. Harold has become quite ill of late, likely the result of losing his hand. With the man on his deathbed, I decided to feed him some petals, as willing subjects were in short supply, and at worst, it could only put an end to the man's agony. Yet before my eyes, the most remarkable thing happened. Within hours, Harold was walking around the campsite as if he had never been ill at all. I shall have to conduct further studies, to test the limits of the plant's apparent healing properties.



Wintergold

An extremely rare flower with medicinal properties, found in the depths of the Savage Lands. It grows in large clusters near the base of trees, with thin, blade-like leaves. The flowers only bloom for two weeks in the middle of winter, with pale blue petals and small orange centres.

I have struggled to retain any samples of the wintergold. Even removing the plant whole and carrying it in a basket of soil has proven futile, as the plant begins to wither within a matter of hours, and was dead two days later. I attempted to dry the flowers, preserve them in alcohol, press them, all to no avail.

In a moment of desperation, I purchased some lower-grade alchemical equipment from a merchant, and attempted to create a potion from the flower on-site. That, too, failed.

The flowers of the Wintergold are incredibly delicate, and wither very quickly upon removal from the plant. If there is a way to successfully preserve them, I have yet to discover it.

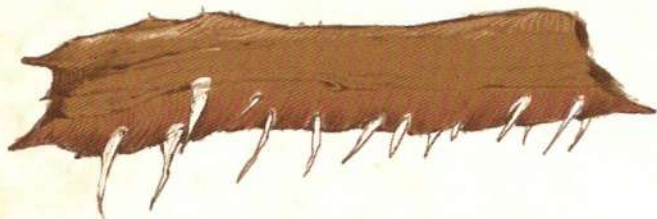
Journal Entry No. 15

Day 22

We stumbled upon some strange form of plant today. It appeared to be some thin, climbing plant that had taken the shape of a tree. I believe these may once have been smaller vines that grew up the side of a host tree, retaining its shape once the host died. However, even when the tree itself had rotted away, the vines remain, seemingly no worse for wear. I shall search for a smaller sample of this plant, so that I might study its full growth cycle.

Thieves' Ladder

These vines start out small and thin, taking root at the base of a large tree. The plant then begins to climb upward, setting down roots that slowly work their way through the tree bark. Just yesterday, I found a brawnhide skull with one of these vines attached, and the root system had burrowed its way through solid bone.



Once established, the thieves ladder roots then seek out nutrients and water within the host tree, as the vines climb up the surface of the tree, weakening the host. Once the host dies, the Thieves Ladder is left behind, a shell relying on its own root system to provide water from the soil. One has to wonder, then, if it eventually suffers a similar fate at the hands of another Thieves Ladder.



Journal Entry No. 18

Day 27

After the success of the Wintergold flower with Harold, one of my men demanded to use it as well. Copper has been suffering from some form of respiratory illness as of late. I refused to allow him access to my Wintergold samples, and so he decided to consume the glowing berries that we found. I barely had time to realise what he had done before he died. Needless to say, the men will hesitate before disobeying my direct orders again.



Kindleweed

A plant known for its small, glowing red berries and thorny black leaves. While its colourful berries may appear to be a welcome source of energy, the Kindleweed is among some of the most poisonous plants in Rathé.

Ingesting just one of these tiny berries can kill an adult human within minutes.



Bloodroot Moss

A seemingly delicate violet plant, with small, soft leaves. However, this invasive species seeks out living creatures rather than soil, absorbing nutrients and glucose from their blood.



Adult plants produce an abundance of fine, airborne seeds, which are easily carried on the wind. Once they land in a creature's fur or skin, they will sprout thin roots, which work their way through the creature's skin in search of blood. The plant will then begin to spread very rapidly, coating the animal in moss.



Journal Entry No. 20

Day 29

The trees of this jungle are far more hardy than those found anywhere else in Rathe, putting down large roots to aid survival. Many of the jungle's fiercest predators lurk within their branches, watching their prey from above, waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike. They have dense wood which, although difficult to light, can burn for hours at a time once properly stoked. One fire exceeded temperatures found in any forge or factory I have visited to date.



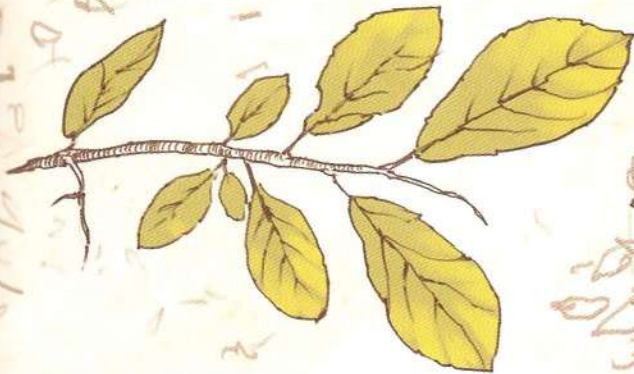
Druden

The wood of this tree is incredibly dense, making it one of the strongest and most viable trees in the Savage Lands. Their branches grow in unusual, twisted shapes, with broad leaves to soak up any available sunlight. The leaves, while bitter, are non-poisonous.



Haldor

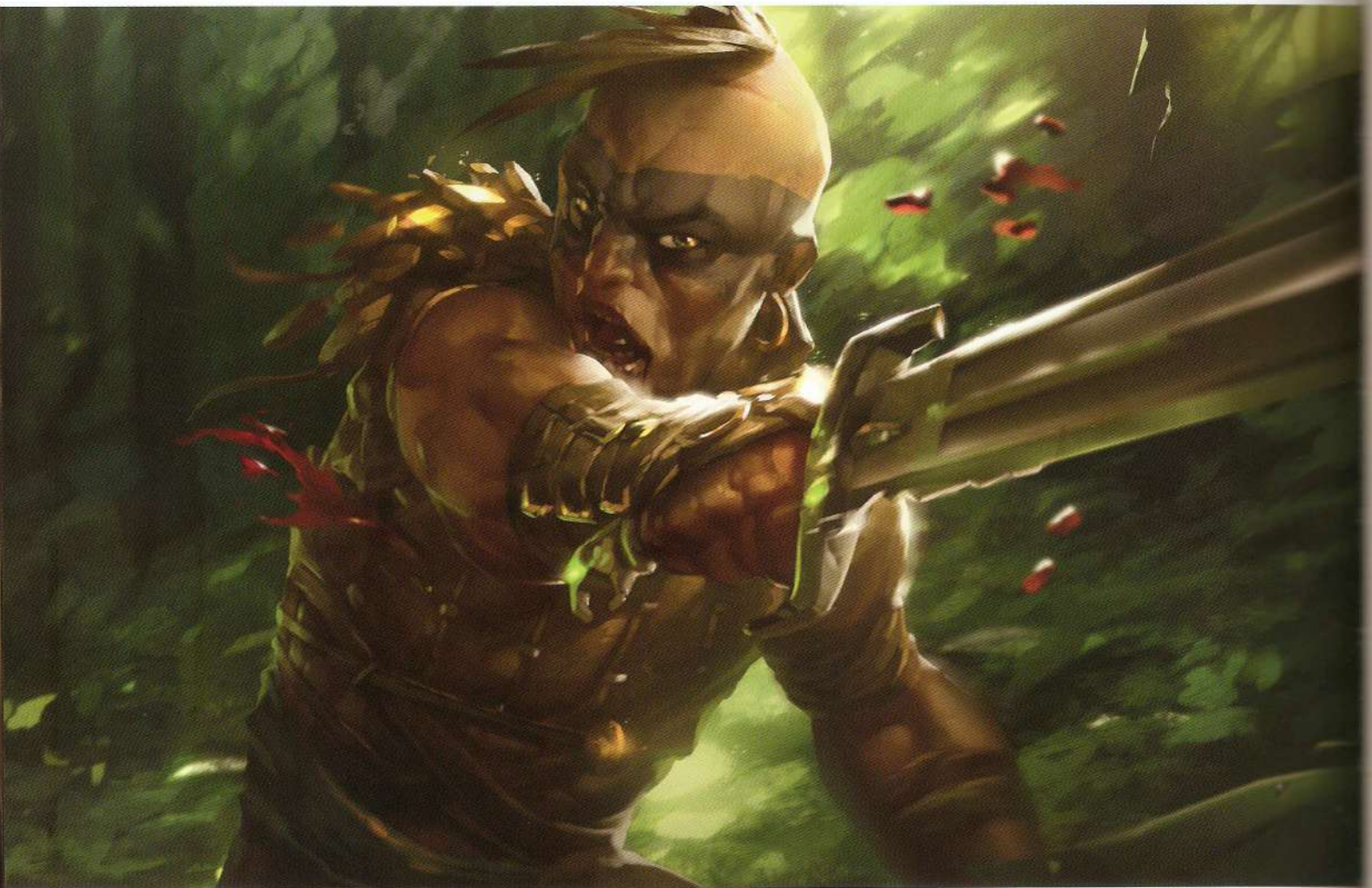
A large, slow-growing tree, with an incredibly thick trunk. The favoured nesting ground of multiple species of birds, haldor trees can survive for hundreds of years, and are often used as shelters due to their roots lifting off the ground once they begin to mature.



Stoneberry Tree

With long, thin trunks and massive leaves, the stoneberry tree is somewhat of an oddity. Its berries are very large and hard as stone. Falling stoneberries are more than capable of crushing bone, and have decapitated more than one unsuspecting adventurer.





HECKLERS

Perhaps hecklers were once human, lost within the jungles long ago. Left to fend for themselves in an unforgiving landscape, they left behind their humanity in order to survive.

Hecklers are ruthless, feral and violent, attacking anything that crosses their path. They travel in small groups, wearing makeshift armour made from leather and furs. Groups of hecklers have been known to ambush travelling parties, raiding their corpses for anything useful, taking weapons, tools, food, or other supplies.

FIRST ENCOUNTER

On one of his expeditions, Scarborough and his crew were taking an opportunity to rest when a group of feral humans ambushed them just before dawn. This was the first recorded encounter with hecklers, thus named by Scarborough for their quick and quiet attacks.

"It is my experience that hecklers rarely seek true confrontation. Like tiny birds, they flit in, snatch what they desire, and disappear just as quickly as they had arrived. Despite my best efforts, I have failed to encounter many hecklers, only catching glimpses on the occasion that they ambush my crew."

Of course, this could not begin to compare to Scarborough's next encounter with a sentient creature inside the jungle. On the very same

expedition, his campsite was once again ambushed, yet this time the experience was markedly different.

"A pack of great, hulking beasts came charging out of the trees. They were one and again the size of my largest man, with thick hides and beady red eyes. I barely had time to escape with my life. I witnessed several of the beasts hunched over one of my men tearing open his flesh with their bare hands, entrails hanging from their gaping maws. While I fled, their screams followed me, echoing through the trees."

After this encounter, Scarborough managed to escape the jungle alive, and soon returned on another expedition. In later years, he returned home to pursue his research, and conduct experiments based around his time in the Savage Lands. It is these experiments that led to the creation of the invalesco serum, and the work that would make him famous across all of Rathe.

BRUTES

These massive beasts are vicious, bloodthirsty, and incredibly hostile. Brutes are deeply territorial, and one of the deadliest creatures within the Savage Lands. They tower over all humans, almost double the height of the average man, and the muscle mass to match. Their immense strength and violent natures make them incredibly dangerous opponents.

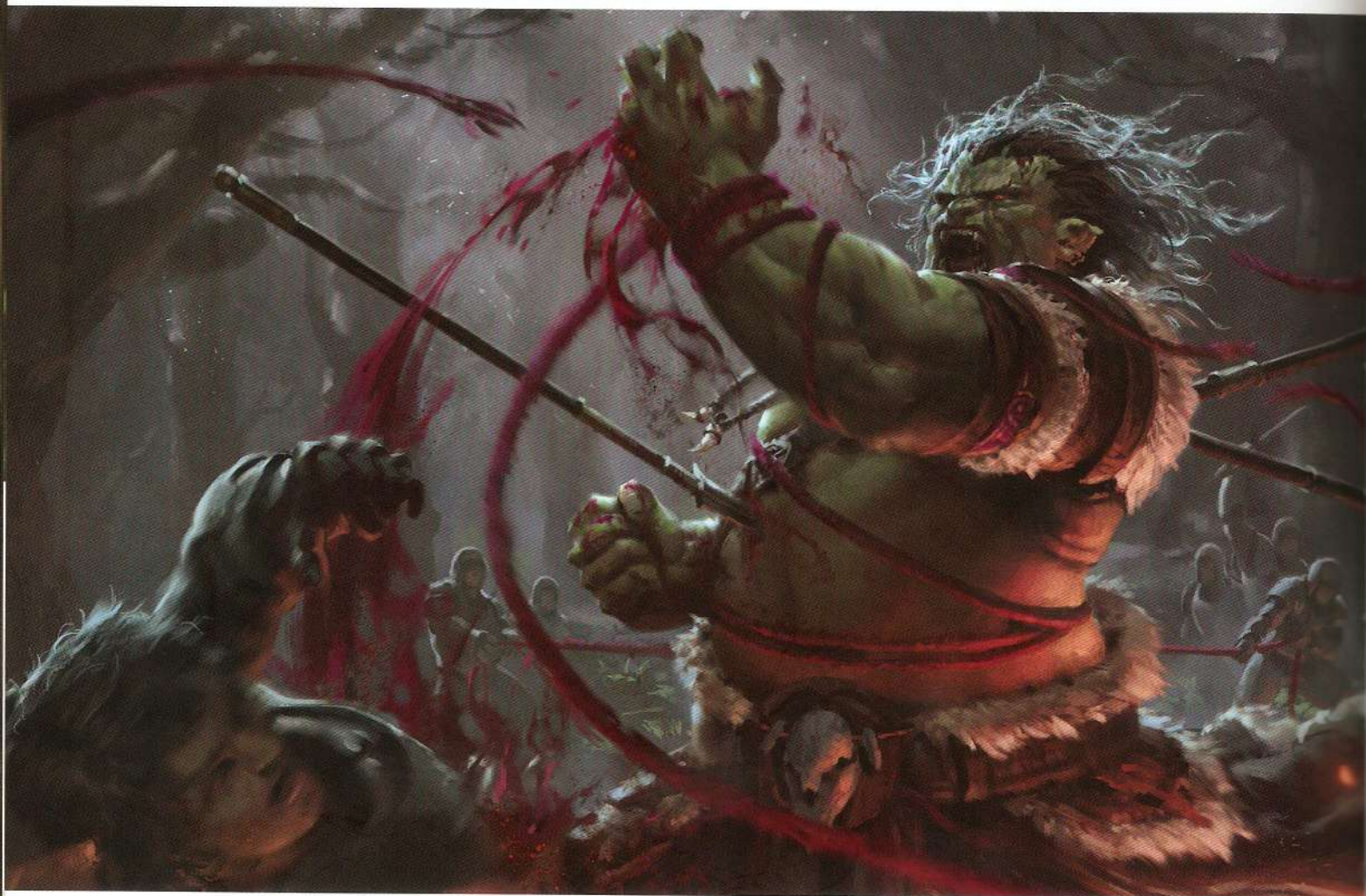
While sentient, they are slow and unintelligent, relying mainly on strength and brute force to decimate their prey. They often collect trophies from their fallen prey; from small skulls tied onto their armour, to locks of hair or ears attached to a belt, or armour decorated with hides and fur.



LEGENDS AND FOOLS

Tales of Scarborough's time in the jungle have attracted adventurers from all over Rathe, drawn by tales of monstrous beasts and incredible battles. The allure of the untamed wilderness proves impossible to resist for many, a mysterious region filled with legendary creatures. One after another, would-be heroes arrive to challenge the wilds within.

For some, it is a chance to prove one's own abilities, pitted against dangerous beasts and the jungle itself in a savage battle to the death. For others, it is a chance for fame, to reach the legendary status that Scarborough has achieved. Yet others arrive seeking fortune, pursuing the lucrative contracts offered by corporations, researchers, and those wishing to cull the beasts within.



FORWARD CAMPS

Forward camps have appeared along the jungle outskirts, small makeshift towns of ramshackle huts and tents, built by merchants looking to profit from the high demand for supplies.

The clever trader sets up contracts with the scientific community back home, taking requests

from biomancers and alchemists in advance. Then, the trader buys several wagons' worth of supplies, and travels to the forward camps, where they set up shop and get settled in. While there, they can not only sell supplies to those who come through, but buy samples and specimens from those returning from the jungle. Once they've acquired all of the items on their list, they simply

pack up shop and return home to sell their goods at inflated prices.

This system has become the groundwork for a network of forward camps, scattered along the perimeter of the Savage Lands. Adventurers will trek into the jungle, see what they can salvage, and return to the forward camps to sell to merchants seeking samples from within the jungle. There are also a growing number of mercenaries who travel to the forward camps, looking to accept a contract on a particular beast. These creatures are often difficult to find and incredibly dangerous, but for those willing to risk their lives, these contracts are also incredibly lucrative.

Some researchers come to the Savage Lands themselves, setting up in the forward camps to make contracts directly. Occasionally, one particularly reckless researcher may decide to

employ a small team of hired hands and enter the jungle themselves. Sometimes, this is to study their field of research hands-on, looking at plants and creatures in their natural environment. Sometimes, this is because they are searching for a rare item, one that only an expert could identify. Other times, it is to conduct their experiments somewhere secluded, where nobody can hear the screaming...

Of course, not everyone who comes to the Savage Lands is a trader, researcher or fortune seeker. The knights of Solana are also a regular sight within the camps, helping with defense in exchange for a safe place to rest in-between patrols. These knights pursue a nobler cause, hunting down the beasts within in order to protect the villages that lie beyond the outskirts of the Savage Lands.



Those venturing into the jungle must be well-prepared. Whether a mercenary, explorer, or a knight, those who enter the Savage Lands all carry the same essential items.



◆ RHINAR, RECKLESS RAMPAGE ◆

Laws of the Hunt

A vast, primordial jungle, the Savage Lands are uncharted by any map, and its true size remains unknown. Ancient trees tower above the crowded canopy, casting shadows on saplings struggling toward the light. The dense vegetation casts a heavy blanket of silence over the jungle, broken only by the sounds of massive beasts crashing through the undergrowth. Deep within the jungle, savage predators prowl through the shadows, while vicious scavengers fight to the death over scraps of meat. All those that call this place home, from the smallest insect to the largest tree, must fight tooth and nail for their continued survival.

With creatures venturing further and further beyond the jungle's outer limits, wandering into golden fields and attacking villages, the townsfolk have sought out the help of their great protector. Shining knights march into the jungles, hacking down anything that crosses their path. The beasts of the Savage Lands seek out the intruders, preying on any warrior who leaves themselves open to attack. As tensions begin to rise, the jungle itself seems to be stirring, preparing to eliminate any human that steps within its bounds.

◆ Hide

This is the harshest habitat in Rathe, a massive jungle filled with vicious predators and savage wildlife. Inside a small hollow, beneath the roots of a haldor, a small pup opens its eyes for the first time. This is a brute, one of the fiercest predators in the Savage Lands. Yet, as he crawls out of the pile of rotting carcasses, he is no more dangerous than a newborn jacara.

Hunger drives him to leave the safety of his burrow, following the scent of fresh blood on the air. This will be his very first hunt - and may very well be his last. Small, weak and defenseless, the young brute is easy prey for anything that finds him.

However, nearby, a pair of strix lurk within the dense undergrowth. They notice the brute immediately, lunging straight toward the helpless infant. With a wail, he tries to roll out of reach, struggling against the strix' iron grip. Even newborn brutes such as this one have incredibly sharp teeth, his canines tearing through one of their wings. In their panic he slips away, quickly fleeing back to the burrow. He curls up in his pile of bones once more, hungry, but alive. Perhaps later, he will have better luck finding a meal.

◆ Kill or be Killed

After a successful hunt, the brute feasts upon his prey. However, the scent of blood often draws nearby creatures, who come searching for a free meal. Even when he bellows in an attempt to intimidate them, the young brute is rarely seen as a threat.



Skera, peluda, ank'is, brawnhide; kings of the jungle, fighting tooth and nail in a primordial wilderness. There is no rest, no respite. From the first light of dawn, the predators begin to roam, and their prey must constantly be on the move if they wish to survive. Ensnaring vines and vibrant flowers entice their prey into drawing closer, their curiosity proving to be their downfall. Even after the sun sets, the predators continue to stalk through the darkness, searching for sleeping prey to feast upon.

This is a lesson repeated across the Savage Lands - you must always be ready for a fight. If you cannot defend yourself, you become another beast's meal. If you cannot protect your own meal, you go hungry. The brute is up for the challenge, but these predators have sharp talons and massive tusks. Even with the brute's claws and strength, he struggles to hold his own. Yet while he often suffers injuries, he refuses to back down, either fending off the

beast or escaping with some scrap of food.

It is in this endless wilderness that the brute grew up, battered by the constant fight to survive. Some days, he is hunted, constantly on the run. Days would go by as he withered and wilted in starvation, hiding from a predator following his scent. Yet others would see him become the hunter, lounging within a secluded den with a full belly.

As each season passes, the young brute grows. He becomes stronger, standing his ground against predators, no matter how large. The jungle sees him become a predator in his own right, marking out a place of his own within the Savage Lands.

Bide Your Time

Straying further and further from his birthplace, the brute travels north, to lands filled with larger, more dangerous predators. While the prey is plentiful, the beasts here are massive, powerful masters of the hunt. Roars and howls echo through the trees, fragments of bone coating the earth, carcasses scattered across the jungle floor. Toxic fungi, poisonous berries, and meat-eating plants spread across the landscape, preying on the weak and the unaware.

However, any creature can fall victim to their primal curiosity. The brute continues to investigate that which should be left alone. Abandoned camps, narrow caves, hollows and burrows and barren wastelands, even the rare trails leading to the outer reaches of the jungle.

He finds all kinds of things - metal carapaces; large clubs of wood; handheld talons and massive canines; furs and leathers and hides; shards of metal; carcasses, skulls and bones from unfamiliar creatures. Some things he takes, making a protective hide for himself, and a massive wooden club. He feasts on strange creatures, with crystalline hides and stone shells.

Yet the further he travels, the more dangerous the land becomes, with ever more predators lurking in the shadows.

The jungle has become far more complex. Beasts roam in massive packs, while savage predators stalk through the shadows. Venomous bites and toxic scales ensure a

slow, painful death; scavengers roam between the trees in packs, searching for easy prey. The injured, the ill, the young and old; in this part of the jungle, any sign of weakness will spell demise.

Meanwhile, furless, leather-clad creatures gather to the East. With no talons or fangs to speak of, they wield pieces of metal, their large packs and sheer determination outweighing their weaknesses. Tracks and bones left in the earth speak of hunters wearing silver shells, trampling everything in their path. While the brute has yet to encounter these strange creatures, he prepares himself for a fight, keeping a wary eye out for the tracks they leave behind.

For even the most experienced hunter, these are treacherous lands, and biding your time might well save your life. The brute lies in wait, skirting along the edges of a tall cliff face, avoiding the largest and fiercest beasts that would spell certain death. He avoids the barren wastelands and the strange lakes, the acrid scent of death in the air.

After all, it is not only beasts that spell danger in the Savage Lands. Some areas of the jungle are dangerous in their own right, unfamiliar territories that promise a slow death to any creature foolish enough to enter.



Never Back Down

It does not last forever. The brute soon becomes a predator. Rhinar marks a place for himself amongst some of the most dangerous beasts in the Savage Lands. This is his territory, his kingdom, and any creature who dares to step foot within his land will die for it.

Now fully grown, the fear and caution have given way to aggression, an overwhelming urge to carve out a territory for his own. Yet Rhinar grows ever larger,

towering over the other predators of the jungle. He drives scraps of metal into his club, the rashari branch he'd once scavenged from the forest floor; adds the jawbone of another brute and the tusk of a young brawnhide.

Rhinar begins to hunt down predator and scavenger alike, any possible threat, any creature that consumes the prey that belongs to him. He fights tooth and nail, beating them down with his club and his fists. The first beast to challenge him pays dearly for it, a peluda that attempts to drive him away from its hunting grounds. He crushes its skull into the cold, hard rock, brain matter dripping onto the stony earth. The curve of his club sends skull fragments flying across the clearing, blood pooling onto the earth, strips of fur and hide hanging limply from the jagged wood. Rhinar tears into it with his bare hands, shoving mouthfuls of steaming viscera into his gaping maw.

One by one, he destroys any predator on his land, devouring them whole. Scale or fur, crystal shell or venomous fang, he hunts them all. The crack of bone echoes through the trees, creatures fleeing from the overwhelming stench of decay that hangs in the air. Rhinar grows ever stronger on the constant feasting, consuming flesh, cramming the fresh organs down his throat by the handful.

The silver-shelled hunters still lingered near the edges of his kingdom, elusive, only leaving faint tracks or an unfamiliar scent to mark their passing. Even as he roamed further from his hunting grounds, he could not follow their scent for more than a moment. Despite the warnings he left behind, they failed to retreat, tramping through the jungle as if set on a predetermined path.

The hunger drives him further still, beyond the boundaries of his territory. He hunts larger and larger beasts, crushing them into the earth, throwing himself into fights with reckless abandon. Rage overpowers any remaining instincts for self-preservation, abandoned in favour of the steaming entrails that he devours from fresh carcasses.

Ripping tusks from skulls with a single swing, toxic scales torn clean from their hide; not even the venomous bite of a rek'vas can deter him from the overwhelming

urge to destroy. His skin turns almost grey, covered in a slimy coating of marrow, blood streaked through his hair, viscera collecting beneath his nails. His rampage drives him ever further from his lands, seeking larger beasts and tougher fights. Rhinar's territory grows larger and larger, as he massacres more and more creatures in his endless need to consume and destroy.

Bones and teeth form a chain around his throat, his body decorated in the trophies of his hunt. Rhinar's kingdom is silent, empty. Every remaining creature has fled; prey and predator, hunter and scavenger, all running from the beast that has carved out a home for himself in flesh and blood.

◇ Strength Rules All

Dusk is the most dangerous time within the Savage Lands. The darkening night would strike terror into even the most seasoned hunters, as vicious predators emerge from their dens to stalk through the shadows, hunting sleeping, defenseless prey. In the dim light, a hulking shape storms through the overgrowth, mindless of the racket that it was creating.

Rhinar returns from a successful hunt, his hide streaked with blood, stomping through the shadows as if daring any nearby beast to challenge him. Yet as he drew closer to his lair, he caught an unfamiliar scent on the wind, faint tracks marking the earth. Something had entered his territory, a pack of creatures hunting on his lands. Despite the blatant disregard for all warning signs, entering his land without hesitation, a faint smell of fear lingered in the air.

His clearing was filled with strange creatures, with shells of silver and gold metal. The critters flocked around his hut, poking it and barking at one another. While they looked small and sickly, something about the creatures gave him pause. Rhinar released a bellow, the roar echoing through the trees like a thunderclap.

With a sharp clatter, the nine creatures turned to face him. Immediately, they sprung into action, the pack barking at one another as they moved to surround Rhinar, wielding massive metal talons. One member of

the pack, clothed entirely in fabric, threw open his arms, revealing a stream of sunlight that burst through the air. The bolt grazed his side, searing his thick hide.

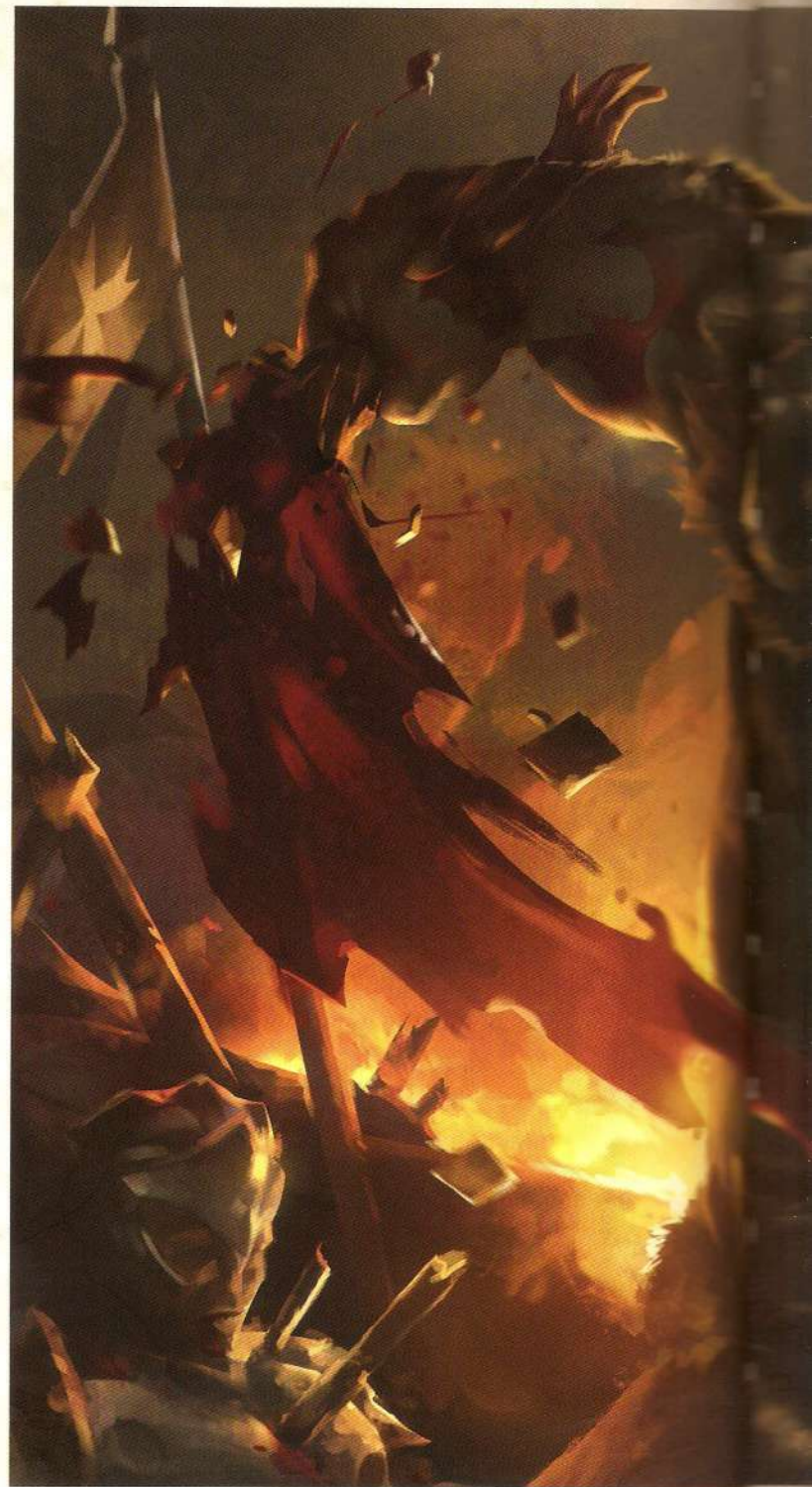
The pack began to close in, brandishing their weapons as they yelled, drawing closer and closer, leaving nowhere for Rhinar to escape. More bolts of pure light blasted through the air, white-hot and almost blinding. Two of the creatures revealed large, pointed sticks, attached to lengths of white rope. They threw the weapons at him, and as the sharp prongs flew through the air, they pulled the rope taut over the top of his body.

Struggling against the restraints, Rhinar fails to dodge their attacks, silver talons slashing through his thick hide with ease. Blood streams from the open wounds, coating the earth in crimson. When he tries to strike out at them, pulling at the ropes, he finds that their silver shells are as hard as stone, a sharp, hollow clang ringing through the trees. Even his claws fail to rip through the shell, and his strongest blows only serve to knock them off balance. Slowly but surely, Rhinar began to grow weaker, the world dulling to a hazy, burning red.

A memory surfaced, taking him back to a warm, mid-autumn day; a young pup at the mercy of the wilderness, overwhelmed by fear. The endless fear turned to rage, fuelling a fire that flooded through his veins, bringing with it an all-consuming bloodrage.

Rhinar charges forward, tugging himself free of the ropes, sustaining several gashes in the process. He bowled over one of the larger creatures, leaping toward one of the smallest members of the pack. Her fear was a sharp note in the air, the acrid scent stark against the fire of his bloodrage. A single blow to the side of her head sent her flying to the ground, and before she could struggle to rise, Rhinar leapt upon her. Tearing away her silver shell, he drove his fists into her, the loud crack of crushed bones echoing through the clearing.

The rest of the pack faltered for a single heartbeat, and in that same instant, Rhinar charged at another, crushing the creature's skull between his hands. Another crashes into a tree with a sickening crack, while a third falls to their knees, screaming. The scent of blood drove him into a frenzy, tearing through the clearing in an



unbridled rampage. The rest of the pack rallied, holding their weapons aloft as they charged. Their talons slashed through the air, one of them cutting Rhinar's tough hide, a trail of blood streaming down his shoulder.

He stormed into the heart of the fray, ripping one creature's head clean off its shoulders, its corpse



dropping to the earth with a dull thud. One by one, they began to fall, faltering, bones crushing easily beneath the might of his blows. Even as they tried to escape, Rhinar felled them one by one, crushing their bodies into the earth.

Finally, all was still.

Standing above the carnage, Rhinar bellows, a challenge to fall on empty ears, no surviving beast to hear his challenge. His bellow echoed through the trees, signalling the birth of an apex predator, an alpha unmatched by any other.



MISTERIA STEEPED IN TRADITION

Behind a veil of mist lies a hidden world, tucked amongst the mountain ranges of Misteria. Vibrant trees rise from the steep cliffs, birds soaring through the canyons, flashes of silver coursing through the rivers far below. The sun streams through the clouds, illuminating the buildings rising from the mist.

Carved into the rock and hanging from thick vines, the villages of Misteria are home to a people as steadfast and mysterious as the mountain ranges they call home. From birth, they learn to traverse the steep landscape, relying on their own strength and agility to travel from one building to another. Hanging gardens are suspended between the cliffs, a burst of green against the backdrop of stone and rock. Even the largest villages are home to close-knit communities, founded long ago by the Great Houses of Misteria.

Yet the veil of mist hides a wealth of secrets, far beyond those of the villages tucked into the mountainside. Grandmasters roam the land, equal parts mystery and legend, gifting their time and wisdom to those determined enough to seek them out. Secret organisations work behind the scenes, ensuring the safety of their people, while long-forgotten clans hide from those that would see them extinguished.

The world beyond the mountains holds little interest to the people of Misteria, who prefer to lead simple lives in the company of their fellow villagers. Removed from the struggles and petty conflicts of the outside world, they find satisfaction in introspection and self-discipline, training rigorously to strengthen their bodies and sharpen their minds.

Despite the difficulties of living in such a place, Misterians would argue that the beauty and tranquility of their home more than makes up for any inconvenience. Their hard work and dedication are rewarded with the experience of living in one of the most beautiful environments in all of Rathë, as the light of dawn breaks through the mists and illuminates the deep gullies below.



AMONG THE MISTS

The steep landscape of Misteria is equal parts treacherous and tranquil. The sun streams through the clouds, illuminating the mists in shades of white and gold, broken by the patches of greenery that have made their claim amongst the rock face. Yet those who are not born within Misteria would struggle to survive in such an inhospitable environment, where one wrong step can send you plummeting down to the sharp rocks far below.

The villages of Misteria are built in some of the most inaccessible areas in Rathe, and those who live here must rely on their strength and agility to travel amongst the mountains. Racing along suspended ropes, scaling cliffs, and jumping across platforms are all second nature for the people of Misteria, who have built their lives around the unique environment.

A persistent layer of mist blankets villages across Misteria, broken only by beams of sunlight streaming through the clouds. With the dawn, the village stirs, as Misterians rise to begin their daily tasks. Farmers begin to tend to the hanging gardens, caring for plots of rice and vegetables. Others journey down to the waters below, laying out their nets to catch fish for the morning markets. Inns open their doors to the morning air, teahouses begin to make their food for the day, and students make their way to the dojo for training.

The people of Misteria value hard work and dedication, traits necessary not only to survive, but to thrive in the unforgiving landscape that they call home.

BENEATH THE VEIL

Misterians follow in the footsteps of their forefathers, working to preserve ancient traditions and teach each new generation in the way of their ancestors. Over thousands of years, Misterians have developed a unique way of life



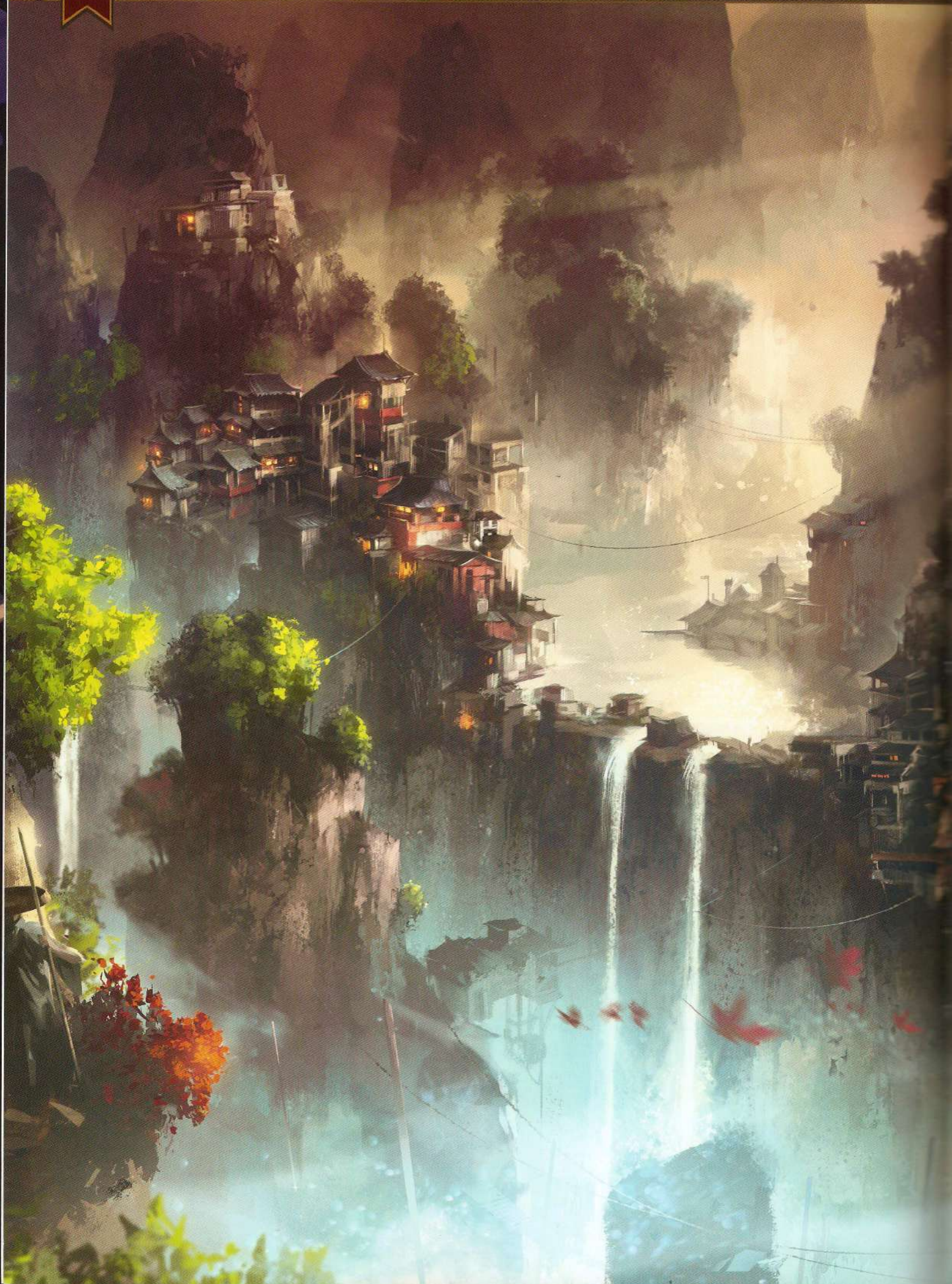
intrinsic to their environment, encompassing creative endeavours, practical arts and martial styles. From elaborate ceremonies and festivals, to their education in the Seven Arts, to the existence of groups such as the Grandmaster's Guild and Aui's Scales, Misteria is deeply rooted in ancient customs and rituals dating back to the beginning of human civilisation.



◇ RITE OF PASSING

According to legend, the Rite of Passing is held on the one day of the year when the veil between worlds is thinnest, and the world of spirits is closest to the world of the living. The Rite honours the dead by welcoming the spirits home and inviting them to take part in the celebrations.

When night falls, all Misterians don an ornate ceremonial mask that hides their face from view and makes the living indistinguishable from the dead. Lanterns are lit and raised into the sky, floating among the stars, illuminating the dancers below. The celebrations last through the night, and do not end until dawn, when the spirits return to the realm of the dead.



MISTCLOAK GULLY

The ancestral home of the House of Sanjing, Mistcloak Gully is a sprawling collection of steep cliffs surrounding a natural lake. The waterfalls within the gully produce a thick blanket of mist, which obscures many of the buildings that lie deep within. Far below, a fast-moving stream travels through the gully, the sound of rushing water echoing up the stone walls.



BETWEEN THE CLIFFS

Hidden between the mountains are a wealth of villages and towns, following ancient traditions. The treacherous landscape and thick blanket of mist hide these villages from outsiders, concealing the buildings from view. Individual houses hang between the cliffs, suspended from massive networks of rope that can support the weight of entire villages. Larger communal buildings are carved into the mountainside - taverns, inns, teahouses, dojos, spaces for markets and shops, as well as places to eat, and spaces for sparring.

The villages of Misteria were founded by the Great Houses of Misteria, who live in larger clusters of buildings, constructed on the highest levels of the village.

THE HIDDEN VILLAGES

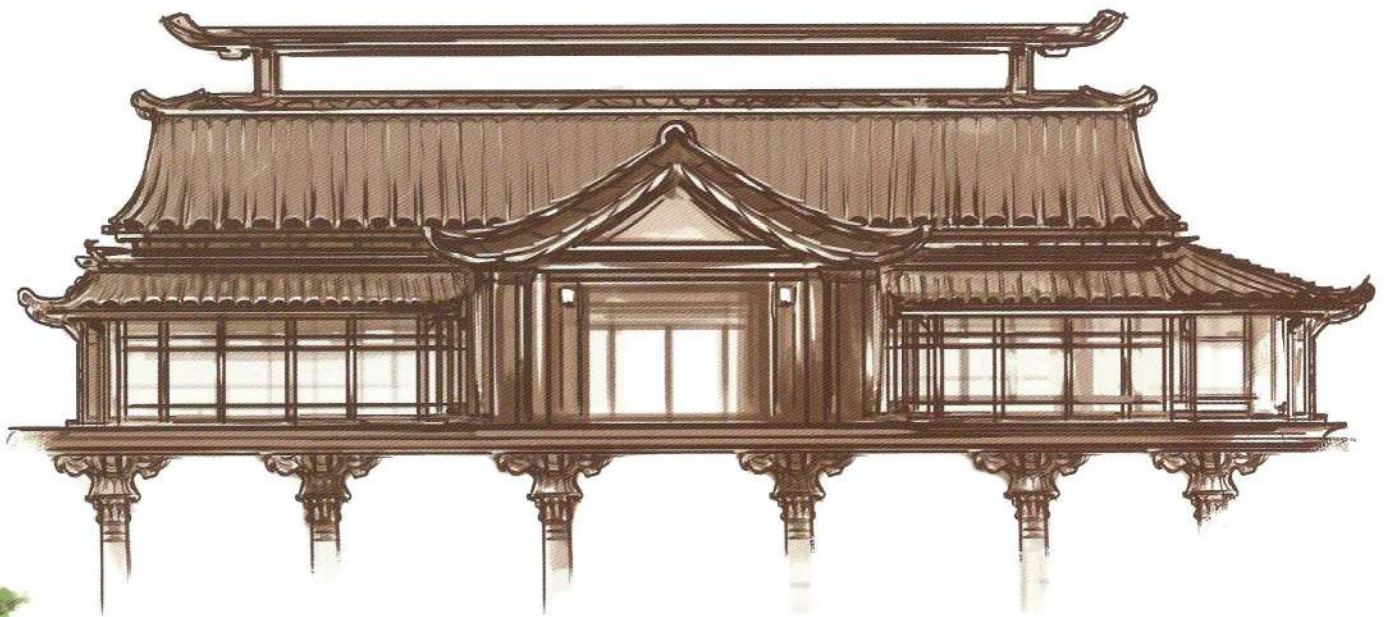
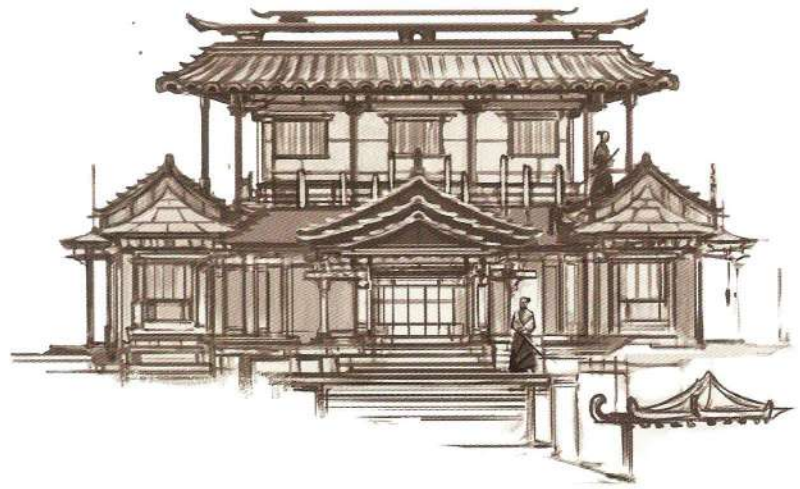
The steep mountains and jagged cliffs of Misteria make traditional styles of building impossible, so the people of Misteria have learned to construct their homes in tandem with the treacherous landscape. Buildings are suspended from vines and ropes, constructed atop bamboo poles, or carved into the mountainside itself. Misterians commonly traverse the narrow gorges by running atop vines or ropes, suspended between buildings.

While villages, towns and cities elsewhere are constructed horizontally, many villages within Misteria are constructed vertically, traversing the space between the highest peaks, and the ravines below. Some buildings are even constructed on top of the water itself, only partially anchored at the sides in order to rise and fall with the water levels.



Homes and inns

The size, scale and style of a house depends entirely on the family who resides within, and their standing within the village. Members of the Main House commonly have their homes grouped together, with a small courtyard to connect the buildings. Inns, however, are much larger than the average home, and usually built for stability.



Dojo and training grounds

A space for training is built near the heart of a village, as the building is used by all Misterians for combat practice, and to maintain their strength and agility. A dojo, however, is a place for formal training, and built in a more isolated area in order to provide a quiet, tranquil training environment.

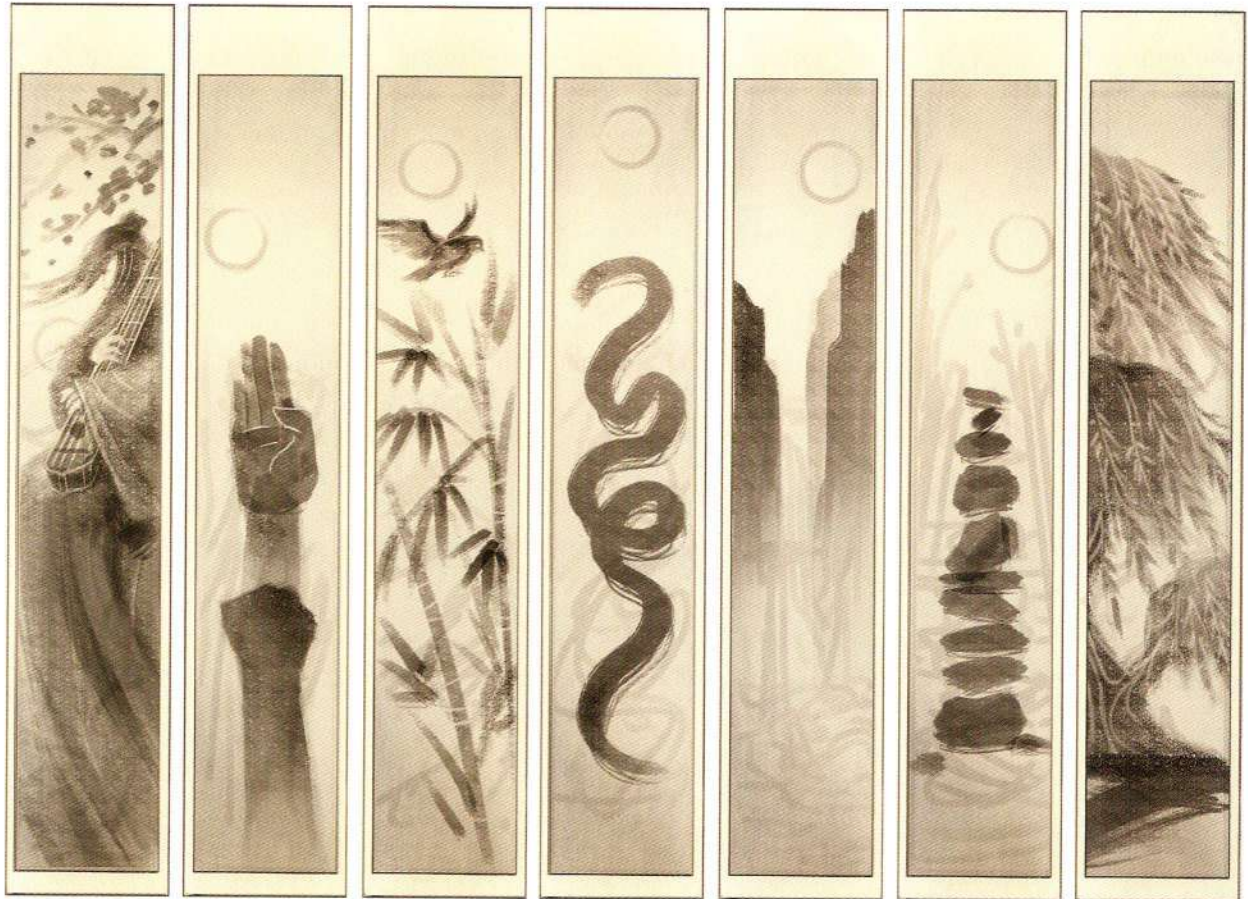
Teahouses

A place for people to gather after a day's work to chat, socialise, and enjoy a cup of tea. Teahouses can be found built into the rock face, suspended from a cliff overhang, or, in villages near lakes, built atop the water.

Guard posts

These are integral to the communication between villages, serving as an early warning system for attacks and other dangers.





THE SEVEN ARTS

The Seven Arts encompass every occupation and role within Misteria. Education for every Misterian begins with a foundation in all seven arts, slowly reducing the number of subjects as the child chooses their path.

The Seven Arts have been a part of Misterian culture for generations, curated from centuries of traditions and customs. Through the Seven Arts, ancient skills and practices have been preserved, so that they can be passed on for generations to come.

MAJOR ARTS

There is a particular focus on the Major Arts, which include the fundamental lessons for a child of Misteria. Language, agility, and basic combat are all incredibly important for anyone living within Misteria, and so the Major Arts are an area of focus during education.

Signs

The first art, the Art of the Signs, is comprised of the study of language and culture. Those who study this Art help to record history, compose poetry and songs, and guide the many ceremonies across Misteria.

Hand

This Art is the study of basic combat. While some students of the Hand may go on to study the Art of the Sparrow or the Art of the Serpent, many choose to continue studying the Art of the Hand, which contains a wide variety of martial arts and combat techniques.

The Art of the Hand is perhaps one of the most versatile, providing a foundation not only in combat, but in teaching young Misterians the importance of strength and balance; both fundamental skills for living amongst the mountain ranges.

It does not focus exclusively on hand-to-

hand combat, but rather involves a series of techniques and fundamentals that cover the basics of most martial styles. The Art of the Hand teaches combat techniques which can be used for both offensive and defensive purposes.

The Hand includes both armed and unarmed combat styles, though training typically begins with the two fundamental unarmed martial styles; the Tao Strikes, and the Feito Technique.

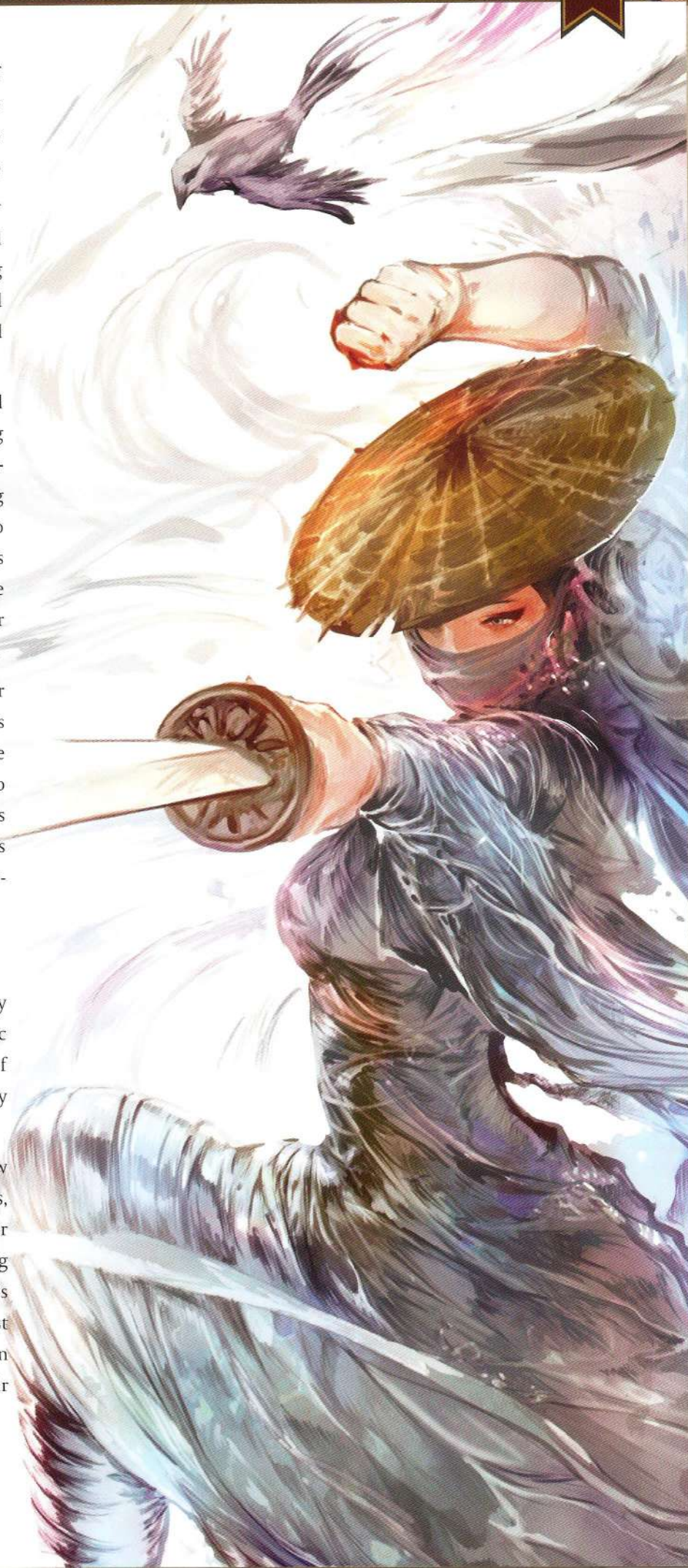
The Tao Strikes are a basic striking and parry system, which focuses on quickly getting close to an opponent and locking in melee-range physical combat, while also protecting the ninja's vital organs. Meanwhile, the Feito Techniques utilise footwork, which emphasises maintaining balance through a central line of power, allowing the student to anchor themselves and apply force from any position.

Those students who choose to train for armed combat may study multiple weapons or specialize solely with one. Alongside the various types of swords, weapons may also include metal fans, called gunsen; long staves known as bo; long-handled weapons such as the naginata; a longbow, the yumi; or three-pronged weapons known as sai.

Sparrow

The Art of the Sparrow is the art of agility and balance. While all Misterians have basic training in the Art of the Sparrow, masters of this art are a sight to behold, weaving their way across a battlefield with ease.

Those who train in the Art of the Sparrow practice more swift, graceful martial styles, using their speed and agility to their advantage. Rather than blocking or disarming their opponent, they slip past their opponent's defenses, using their own momentum against them. A master of the Art of the Sparrow can deflect attacks, turning them back on their opponent as if diverting the flow of a stream.



MINOR ARTS

The Minor Arts, while included in the basic education of every young child in Misteria, are not a main focus of their studies. Despite this, the minor arts still play a vital role within Misteria.

Serpent

The Art of the Serpent encompasses stealth and assassination techniques. Those who study the Art of the Serpent are all but invisible, taking down their opponents with deadly precision.

The best students of the Serpent can hide in plain sight, using their surroundings to their advantage, able to navigate their way through a crowd without ever being seen.

Earth

The second minor art, the Art of the Earth, covers herbalism, farming and tending to nature. Those who study this Art help not only with growing food for those across Misteria, but provide aid to villages through herbalism and healing.

Life within Misteria would be almost impossible without their unique agriculture, carefully cultivated by students of the Earth. Hanging gardens provide a space to grow rice, vegetables, herbs, and other essential plants, all necessary in order for a village to survive.

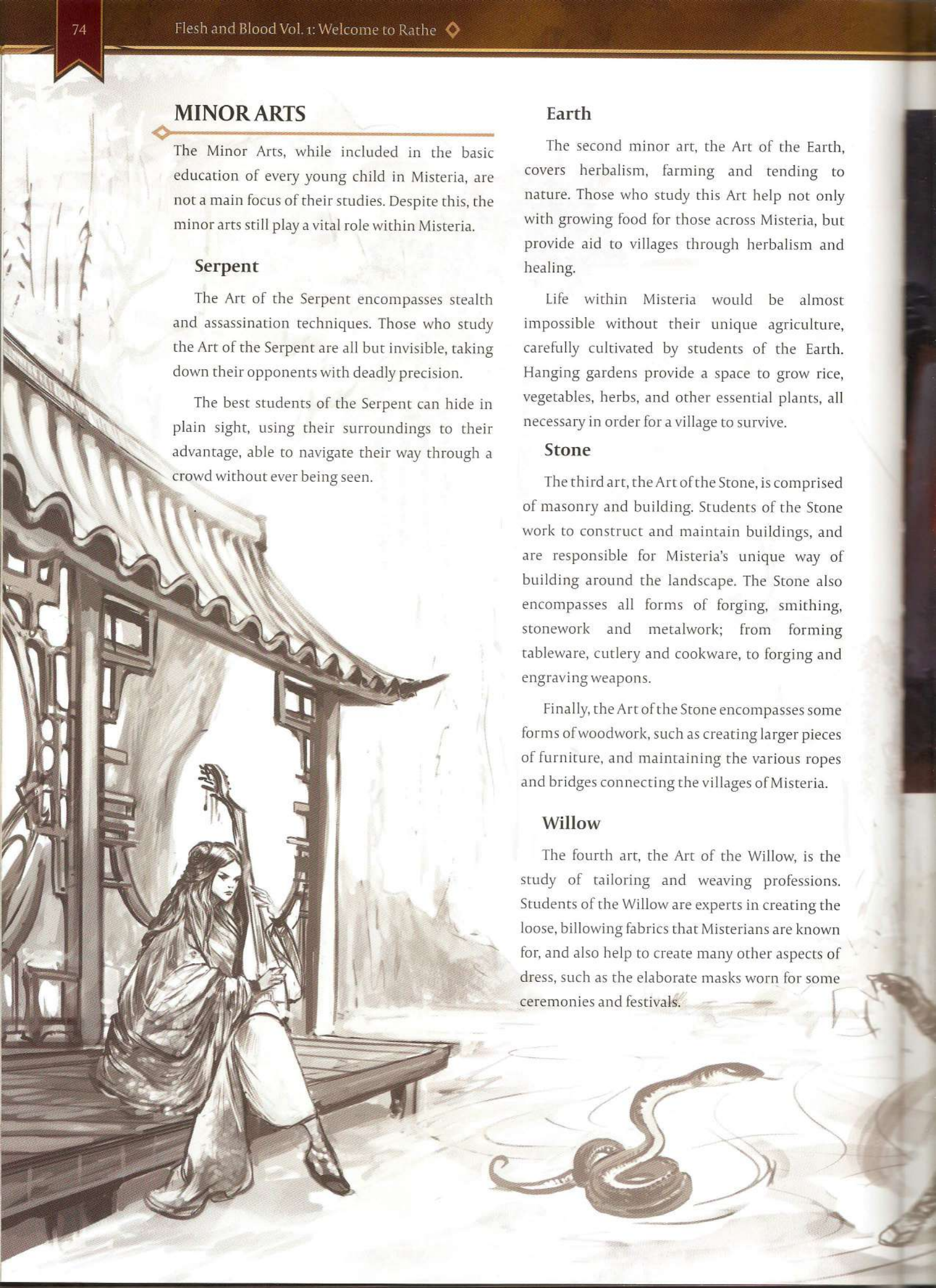
Stone

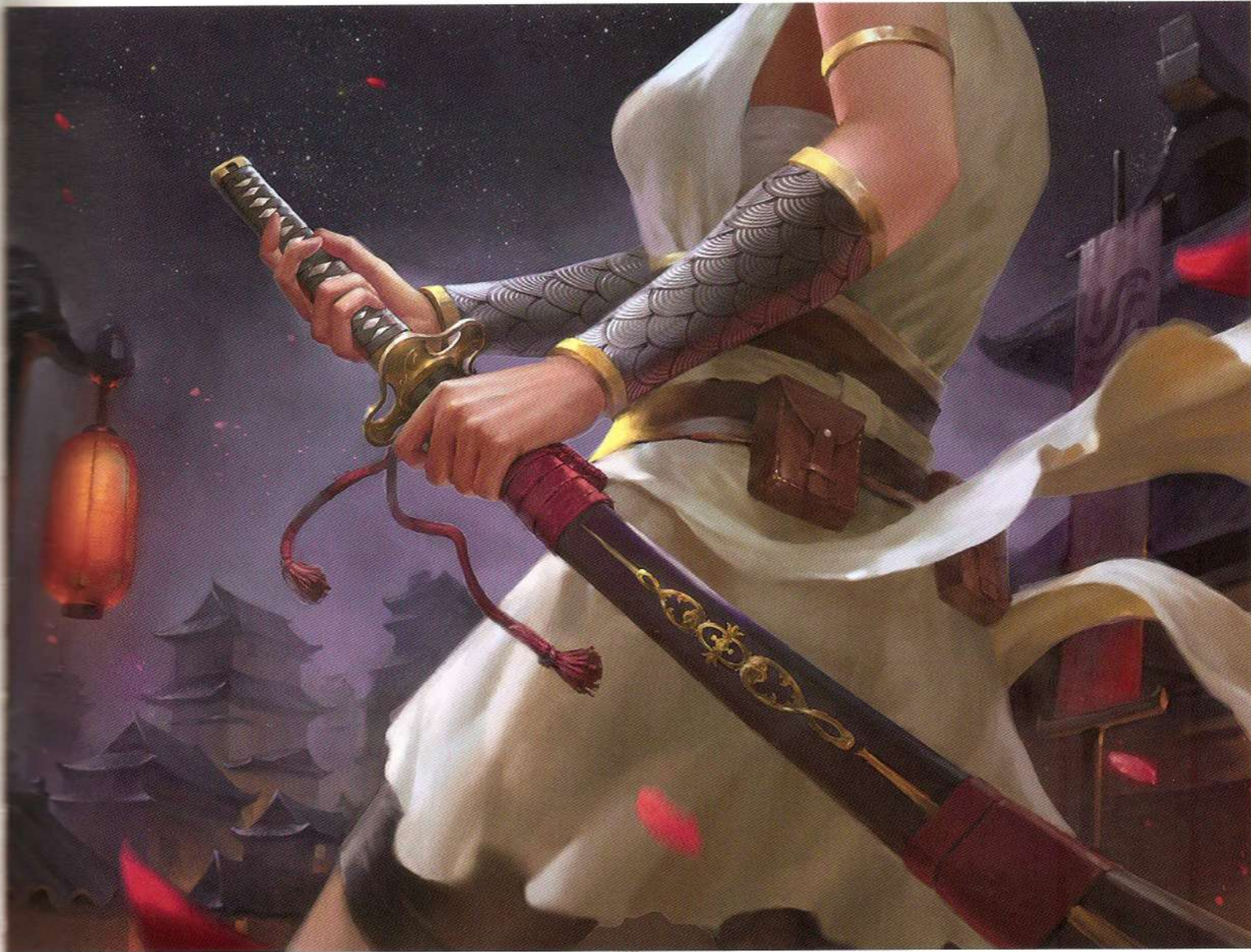
The third art, the Art of the Stone, is comprised of masonry and building. Students of the Stone work to construct and maintain buildings, and are responsible for Misteria's unique way of building around the landscape. The Stone also encompasses all forms of forging, smithing, stonework and metalwork; from forming tableware, cutlery and cookware, to forging and engraving weapons.

Finally, the Art of the Stone encompasses some forms of woodworking, such as creating larger pieces of furniture, and maintaining the various ropes and bridges connecting the villages of Misteria.

Willow

The fourth art, the Art of the Willow, is the study of tailoring and weaving professions. Students of the Willow are experts in creating the loose, billowing fabrics that Misterians are known for, and also help to create many other aspects of dress, such as the elaborate masks worn for some ceremonies and festivals.



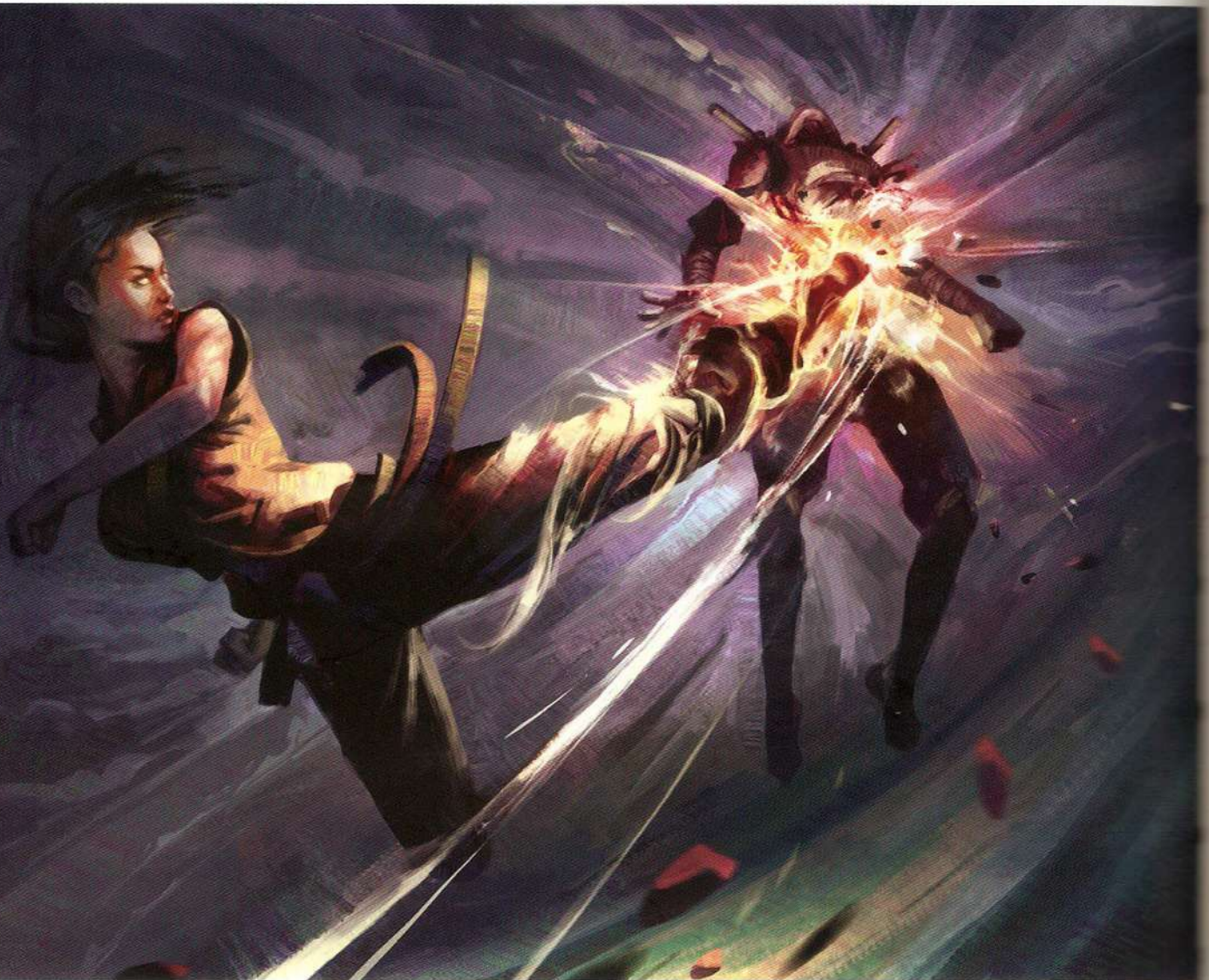


SECRET ARTS

Every major household in Misteria has their own secret art, combat-related or otherwise. While some households have secret arts in the skills of weaving fabric, forging weapons, or constructing buildings; most households have a secret art for use in battle. From the 'Eternal Crane' to 'Dance of the Falling Petals', each secret art is associated with a different house, and each art is only taught to members of the house. Teaching a secret art to an outsider is the worst form of betrayal a Misterian can commit.

However, the households of Misteria are not the only ones to possess secret arts. Many Grandmasters are credited with creating their own secret art, something that they might occasionally

teach to a student or apprentice. Occasionally, a Grandmaster may pass away without teaching their secret art to anyone, ensuring that their art dies alongside them.



PRESTIGIOUS HOUSEHOLDS



SANJING

The Sanjing house is the largest clan in Mistcloak Gully, the home of their ancestors. The most famous member of the Sanjing house is Master Fang Min, who created the secret art of the Eternal Crane, a balanced combat style that combines evasive manoeuvres, and quick, sharp counterattacks.



MIHARU

This house creates some of the best armour in Misteria, formed from leather and toughened cloth. Flexible enough for hand-to-hand combat, yet tough enough to defend against attacks from a sharp weapon, the Miharu house provides armour for some of the largest houses in Misteria.



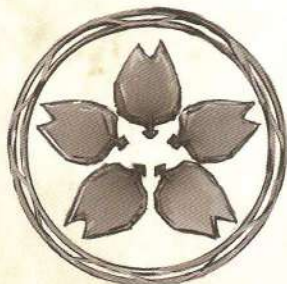
YIJUN

A house that prides themselves on their weaving, members of the Yijun house create some of the most remarkable items of clothing imaginable. Many people of Misteria purchase items for festivals and celebrations from the Yijun house. Fabric woven by members of the Yijun house can resemble anything from the shimmering ripples of a slow-moving stream, to the gentle glitter of sunlight streaming through the mists.



ISHIGAKI

The village surrounding Mistcloak Gully exists, in part, due to the talent and skill found within the Ishigaki house. The work of stonemasons from this house is incomparable, as in carving buildings into the surrounding cliffs, they utilise the stone itself to prevent water damage and structural problems.



IKARU

The Ikaru Clan, also known as the House of Blossoms, was one of the great houses of Misteria that perished during the Night of the Dark Tide. Founded by Mistress Ikaru four hundred years prior, the Ikaru were adept at defensive martial styles, and were home to some of the best carpenters and woodworkers in all of Misteria.

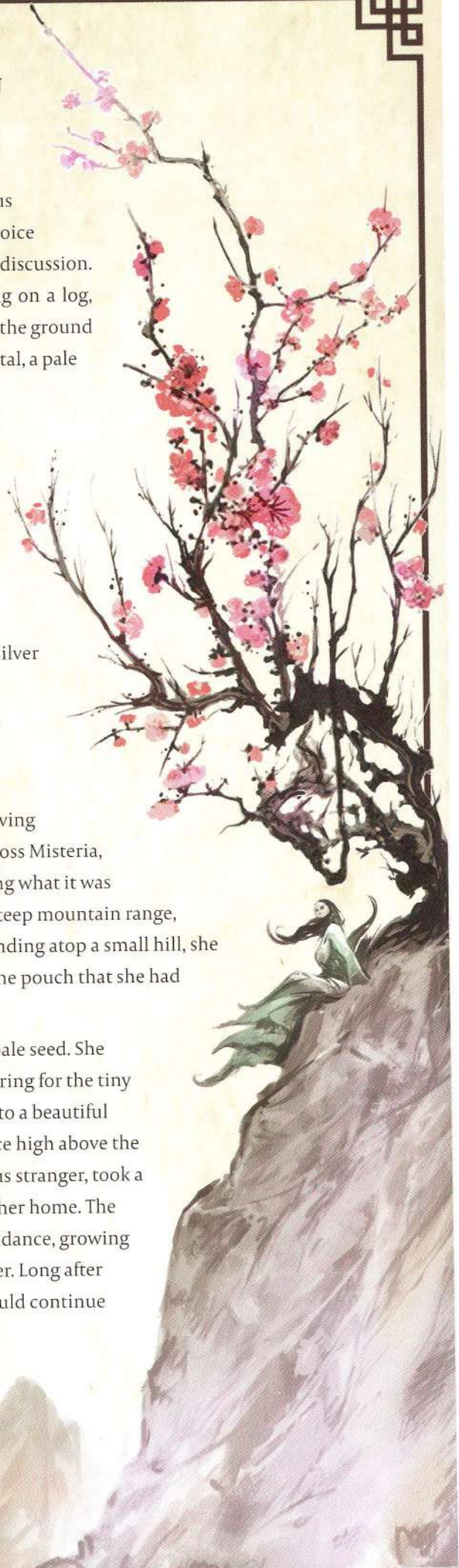
THE LEGEND OF MISTRESS IKARU

Long ago, a mysterious woman landed on the shores of Misteria. She came from an unknown land, travelling from village to village. This mysterious young woman rarely spoke, occasionally giving voice to a question, or engaging with someone in quiet discussion. One day, she came across a wizened old man sitting on a log, carefully setting out his wares on a worn blanket. On the ground before him lay five items: a chunk of rock, a dark crystal, a pale branch, a vibrant flower, and a tiny pouch.

Looking over the items, the woman found herself drawn to the pouch. Old and faded, its drawstrings were tied in a simple knot, concealing the contents within. Curious, she asked if he knew what lay within, and if she might open it. Silently, the old man shook his head. After a moment's deliberation, the woman removed a ring from her finger, a deceptively plain silver band.

"Would this be a fair trade?" The old man merely smiled in response, offering a small nod. Thanking him, she passed him the ring, taking the pouch in exchange. The woman continued on her travels, moving from village to village. For months, she travelled across Misteria, seemingly searching for something, yet never finding what it was that she was looking for. Finally, she came across a steep mountain range, carefully picking her way down the rocky slope. Standing atop a small hill, she looked down upon a rolling valley, and pulled out the pouch that she had traded for, so long ago.

From the pouch, the woman removed a single, pale seed. She planted it with her own two hands, watering and caring for the tiny seedling that sprouted. The seedling slowly grew into a beautiful cherry blossom tree, bright and cheerful in its stance high above the village built below. Mistress Ikaru, once a mysterious stranger, took a name in honour of the tree that now watched over her home. The House of Blossoms flourished under her careful guidance, growing from a tiny village into a house worthy of its founder. Long after the Mistress took her last breath, the Ikaru Clan would continue to grow, thriving under the branches of the cherry blossom tree.



THE KEEPERS OF THE SEVEN ARTS

A guild of instructors and academics with close affiliations to the Grandmaster's Guild. Due to their strong presence and noble cause of promoting learning and progress, the Keepers are much loved and revered by Misterians. Almost all Misterian instructors are trained and stationed by the Keepers of the Seven Arts.

Occasionally, a Keeper may take on an apprentice, a young student who lives with the Keeper and studies their way of life. With time, the apprentice will be trained to take over the Keeper's position as a teacher and preserve their unique techniques and skills.

GRANDMASTER'S GUILD

The Grandmaster's Guild is not an organisation, but a collection of individuals with mastery over their respective arts. The exact requirements and selection process are shrouded in mystery, but the Grandmasters' legacy is well-known across Misteria, as they work to promote the Seven Arts, and improve villages across the region.

AUI'S SCALES

An elusive organisation of spies and assassins, known only by the symbol that they leave behind. Members of Aui's Scales are rarely seen, lurking within the mists as they watch over the people of Misteria, protecting their home from potential threats.

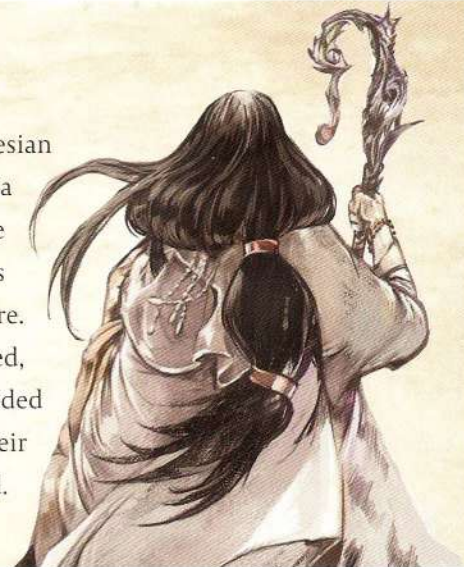
XI, THE BLIND FERRYMAN

Every year, those seeking enlightenment make the journey to Skylark Peak. On the banks of a grand river, the Blind Ferryman awaits these travellers. For some, he is a guide, transporting them upstream to the final stretch of the trail. Others awaken at the base of the mountain, left to return home, empty-handed.



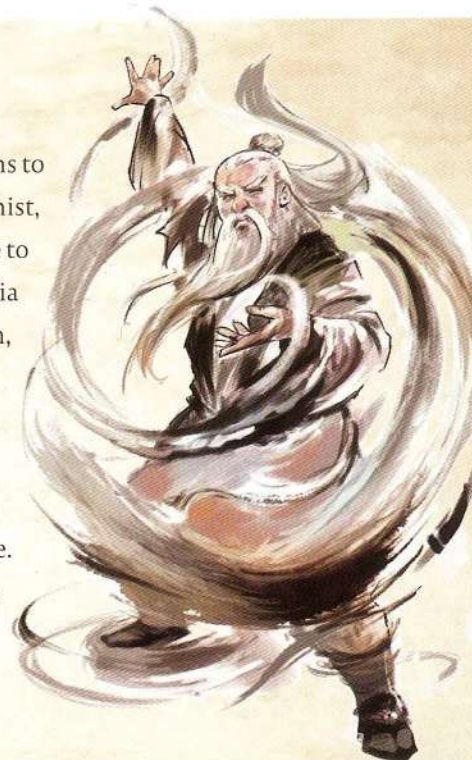
THE ORACLE, VALDIS

A woman travels amongst the Milesian Ranges, in the space between Misteria and the land beyond. Occasionally, one may seek her out, searching for answers and the chance to gaze into their future. Those who succeed return changed, wide-eyed, wishing that they had heeded her warning - for few who see their futures are pleased with what they find.



GRANDMASTER ZHAO

At the break of dawn, as sunlight begins to stream through the thick blanket of mist, Grandmaster Zhao appears in a village to begin his work. Villages across Misteria claim to have been visited by this man, tall and willowy behind his pale robes, healing the ill and repairing buildings. Every village he visits soon experiences a change of fortune, as their crops flourish and people thrive. Legend speaks of the Grandmaster's secret art, mirroring the shifting waters, fluid and graceful.





KATSU, THE WANDERER

The Winds of Change

Amongst the isolated, peaceful quiet of the mountain ranges, long-forgotten clans hide themselves beneath a blanket of mist. They remain a secret to the other villages of Misteria, their names struck from every record, their continued existence a testament to the determination of their ancestors. Yet some of these clans would emerge once more, and reveal the secrets of Misteria's history.

The Mugenshi clan, having secluded themselves long ago, remain afflicted by an ancient curse that continues to take lives long after their self-imposed isolation. Each year, a number of their clan waste away, their physical and mental wellbeing deteriorating as they descend into despair. While many believe that a cure is all but impossible, some wonder whether the possibility of a cure is worth risking the mountains beyond their ancestral home.



Stalemate

Silence. The last of Katsu's words echoed through the room as he watched the grandmasters turn their faces toward him, expressions cool and unaffected, as still as a lake in the midst of winter.

"It is not yet time." Master Takumi spoke, his voice a counterpoint to the stillness of the room. "There are things that have to be taken into consideration. Autumn is already upon us, and you know well that the winds are more active at this time of year. That aside, the clan is not prepared FOR such a journey."

"I am not asking for the entire clan to leave. Let me take just a couple of Grandmasters with me, and we can begin the search." Katsu gestured to the doorway, to the distant sounds of people sparring outside. "I know others who would join me, if it meant possibly finding a cure."

Another grandmaster raised his hand, waiting for silence before clearing his throat.

"The clan has been dealing with the Seikan for generations. If there was a cure to be found, it would have been discovered years ago. As head of the clan, you have duties here that you must attend to. You have a responsibility to your people."

"How can I be responsible for my people when they continue to wither and die from an illness that we do not understand? During my Jokyoku, I spent years travelling across Misteria and never once saw its like. Perhaps the

way to a cure lies beyond these mountains..."

"Absolutely not," Master Saori interjected, shaking her head. "We cannot risk revealing ourselves to the rest of Misteria, least of all to the Great Households. It is not yet time, Katsu."

"When will that be? We lose members of the clan to the Seikan every year, as we have for centuries. When will it be the right time to finally begin searching for a cure, and find a way to save our people from this fate?"

The room fell to silence once more, every gaze fixed firmly on Katsu.

"We will know." Takumi's voice broke through the quiet, as usual, his tone level and calm. "When the time comes, you will be the first to know, Katsu."

Divergence

The village was tranquil in the early evening, as the clan had their evening meal and prepared for sleep. Only a handful of senshi were wandering between the buildings, some returning late from their training, others keeping a watchful eye over the Mugenshi Gorge. Each of them bowed to Katsu as he passed, as he stopped to bow back before continuing on his path.

As leader of the clan, no one questioned Katsu's presence at this late hour. The very air around him was still as he made his way to the ancestral shrine, kodachi

sheathed at his side. A faint breeze stirred as he passed into the shrine proper, slowly lowering himself to kneel upon the cool stone.

It's been almost two years, and I am still no closer to convincing them. Katsu looked up to gaze at the sliver of night sky visible at the edge of the shrine, faint stars dotted against a sea of inky blue. *They never have a reason, only excuses. They are afraid of leaving the gorge, afraid of change - they may never agree to my idea, or to look into a cure at all. Not when the information lies beyond the clan grounds.*

Slowly, he pulled a long bundle from behind one of the statues, peeling open the layers of fabric to reveal his supplies. For several weeks, he had been slowly gathering supplies to bring to the ancestral shrine, preparing for this exact moment. Despite their age and detached composure, the grandmasters were sharp as a tack. If any of them caught wind of Katsu's movements, they likely would have found a way to bring his plans to a halt.

Quietly muttering an apology, he rewrapped the bundle and slung it over one shoulder, darting atop the shrine to balance on the edge of the rockface above. In a fluid motion, he pulled himself through the gap and out into the fresh air above, climbing onto the edge of the cliff.

Crossroads

The crescent moon was a thin sliver of silver in the night sky, its soft light muted by the dense storm clouds lurking on the horizon. In the cool night air, a figure slowly emerged from the mists, a straw hat casting his face into shadow. Howling winds coursed through the gorge behind him, echoing deep into the mountains and disturbing the peaceful quiet of the evening air.

He turned to survey his surroundings, gaze sweeping over the landscape before him. Yet nothing else stirred, and he remained alone amidst the trees, a single figure cast in dark grey. His muffled footsteps carried him forward as he darted along one of the ropes swaying between the cliffs.

A well-worn map lay tucked into his shirt, marking the paths from village to village. Over his years of wandering, he had long since found the trails leading to Mistcloak Gully, marked only by the passage of travellers

such as himself. While several years had passed since his last journey to the town, the path remained unchanged, cloaked by a thick blanket of mist.

Two nights and two days passed in quick succession, sleeping in the warm sunlight, and travelling by the pale



light of the moon. A peaceful silence hovered over the mountain ranges, a layer of mist coating the plants in glistening dew. The calm evening air brought a lightness to Katsu's chest as he traversed the cliffs, wandering along the faint mountain trails.

It had been many years since his return to the Mugenshi Gorge to take over as the head of the clan, and in the time since, he had almost forgotten how it felt to travel in this way. While a part of him longed for those peaceful days, taking his time as he journeyed from village to village, he remembered his purpose for leaving, and the duty he had to his clan.

Yet on the third night, shortly after rising and continuing his trek, he paused, slowly drawing his kodachi. Eleven figures emerged from the mists, faces obscured by half-masks, eyes flashing in the dark.

"Be on your way," Katsu warned, voice low and calm. "There is nothing for you here."

"It has been some time since we met a member of the Mugenshi." One man stepped forward, hands held palm-up before him, showing that he was unarmed. While his mask remained, obscuring the lower half of his face, a scar rose from beneath the fabric, the mark of a burn marring his skin. "We were simply curious - why would the head of the clan leave the gorge? We were under the impression that you already passed the Jokyoku."

"Interesting that you should mention the Jokyoku by name, when not one of you belongs to the Mugenshi clan." A wry laugh met Katsu's words, muffled by the cloth covering the stranger's face.

"There is much that we know about your clan. We mean the Mugenshi no harm - you and your people keep to yourselves, and cause no trouble, so we shall not cause any trouble for you. We have not known a single leader to leave Mugenshi Gorge after completing their Jokyoku. If there are storm clouds on the horizon, we would be grateful to know of their presence."

"These mountains have weathered many storms, should a simple sun shower cause so much concern?"

"Even in the largest pond, a single raindrop causes ripples. We would know that rain is coming, so that we might prepare for any ripples heading our way."

"There are no ripples to be found, nor any rain." Katsu shook his head slowly, fingers grasping the hilt of his kodachi.

"I see." The man's hand settles onto the hilt of his own blade, eyes narrowing. "It is a simple request; I would not think honesty to be so complicated."

"If it's such a simple request, why are you so quick to draw your weapons?" Katsu shook his head. "I have no quarrel with you - I would prefer to continue on my way. There is no need for us to come to blows over this."

"I'm afraid that isn't entirely true. If you are so reluctant to share your plans with us, we shall have to convince you otherwise."

The masked figures moved as one, darting through the shadows to strike at Katsu, their blades a flash of silver in the pale moonlight. Twisting out of the way, he called upon the wind, the air swirling around him as he moved to attack. The wind rushed outward in a torrent, streaming past his foes as he dodged past their blows.

With a quick flick of his wrist, he slashed open one of the figures, turning on his heel to cut down another in the moment before they struck. The wind curling around him helped to deflect some of the assassins, pushing them back several feet, yet others continued to get closer. The flow of battle shifted as Katsu went on the defensive, gathering the wind around him as he began to prepare

for another blast.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noted a streak of crimson as more men raced into the clearing. They immediately joined the fight, closing in on his opponents with pinpoint accuracy. As most of his assailants were drawn away to defend themselves, Katsu struck out at the remainder with a blast of wind, sending them tumbling to the earth. His kodachi sung as he struck, quick as lightning, storming through the clearing to descend upon them.

The group quickly banded together, gathering around their leader. He turned to glare at the crimson-clothed ninjas surrounding them, neither of the two sides moving to close the gap.

"You rebels need to learn to stay out of our affairs. You cause far more trouble than you're worth." With a quick, sharp whistle, the man motioned for the group to retreat, maintaining eye contact with Katsu all the while. Every member quickly disappeared into the dark night, some of them clutching at their injuries as they darted into the line of trees.

Those who remained in the clearing all turned in unison to look at Katsu, identities obscured by pale masks covering the top half of their faces. One of the men removed his mask to nod at Katsu, his cheek marred by a small, curling scar. He gestured over his shoulder to where the other men had disappeared, raising an eyebrow.

"Interesting, that the Scales should single you out. It appears we have a common enemy." The rest of the group slowly gathered just behind their apparent leader; crimson robes draped over their armour.

"What would make you think that I'm their enemy?"

"They don't stop to talk to just anyone. For them to meet with you personally, you must have done something to catch their eye."

"Not quite." Katsu shook his head in response, eyes narrowed. "If they do not often speak to those outside their organisation, I find it curious that you would be so familiar with them."

"We are a group known as the Crimson Haze. We've been at odds with Aui's Scales for a couple of centuries

now. They didn't exactly take well to our founder's agenda - and judging by the pendant hanging from around your neck, I'm assuming that they have a problem with your clan, as well."

"Is a simple jade pendant so rare? I have seen many others on my travels."

"It is the symbols carved into it that give you away. Usually, only members of the Great Households wear seals such as yours, but the one that you wear is different to any of the other clans. I can only assume that you're from one of the hidden households."

"You speak as if you belong to one as well."

"Its name would mean nothing to you." The man shook his head. "Your struggle is ours, stranger. You should join us; we may be able to help one another."

"You have no way of knowing that." Katsu straightened, slowly sheathing his kodachi, though his hand remained on one handle. "I'm not sure that our agenda is the same."

"This land no longer knows freedom. Our people are caged birds who have never flown. They do not know to miss it. They are hardly aware that they have wings at all. We would remind them."

"Not every creature with wings is destined to fly. Would you also see them tumble from their nests like a newborn chick, unable to use their wings to soften their fall?"

"I would give them the freedom to make that choice for themselves. In any case, we may be able to help each other. What is it that you seek, wanderer?"

"What I look for remains a mystery to us both."

"A burden shared is a burden lightened."

A pause stretched between them, silence reigning as Katsu sized up the man before him. Despite the mask, he did seem genuine, and sincere about his offer of help. Beside which, if there were any chance that this man might know a possible lead on a cure, it was his duty to ask.

"My clan has suffered from an illness for generations. It is a curse, and we have yet to find its source or why it continues to afflict us. I search for a way to help, perhaps even cure the illness altogether."

After a long moment, the man nodded, looking thoughtful.

"While we may not have a cure to give you, there might be a way for us to help. Across Misteria, there are several hidden locations built by Aui's Scales to store and conceal anything that they want hidden from the public. Most hold scrolls, information collected by the Scales over the centuries, but some also hold artefacts.

The Crimson Haze were planning to send a team to infiltrate one of these strongholds. The particular building that we are targeting also holds several powerful artefacts. There may well be one there with curative properties. If not, you may still have the opportunity to find some information on what might be ailing your clan."



"You would let a stranger accompany you into the heart of your enemies' home?"

"We would give a fellow wanderer a chance to free his people from their burden. Our paths are not so dissimilar."

With no other leads on the disease, and little to lose, Katsu finally nodded in agreement.

"If you are willing to have me accompany you, I would be grateful for the opportunity."

Culmination

Through the blanket of mist, the entrance to the building was completely obscured, a hairline fracture in the cliff face. Yet as they drew closer, the fracture slowly opened up to reveal a stairway leading down into the mountain itself. As they stalked down the hallway, the others slowly

peeled away, leaving Katsu winding through the shadows alone.

While he lacked a map for the building, the rebel's instructions were detailed, leading him past the guarded entrances and rooms, and into the heart of the stronghold. Those few times that he crossed paths with one of the Scales, he slunk back into the shadows, a simple breeze wrapping around him to obscure his presence. Finally, he reached his destination, not a single person alerted to the intruder in their midst.

The darkened hall slowly opened up to reveal a large chamber, shelves lining the walls. Not a single artefact was anywhere in sight, nor any item that could possibly help him. Instead, hundreds of scrolls were stacked upon the shelves, neatly organised and covered in a very light layer of dust.

Katsu stepped toward the centre of the room, where a single pedestal stood, constructed of white polished marble, with a jade tray containing six more scrolls. They were larger than many of the other scrolls in the room, free of dust and clearly well-cared for.

Just as Katsu began to consider how to carry the scrolls with him, he suddenly paused, slowly turning toward the person slipping through the entranceway. Immediately, he noted the lack of weapons on the man's person, the light wrappings on his hands and feet, unobscured by the same fabric that hid his face and the rest of his body from view.

Katsu drew his kodachi just in time, stepping forward to block the grandmaster's attack. Quick and strong, the master darted around Katsu, striking out with sharp, swift strikes. His bindings bobbed back and forth as he struck out, using pure skill to work his way past Katsu's defenses. Katsu quickly whipped up a gust of wind, using the blast of air to push the master backward.

It earned him only a fraction of an instant, but it was enough for him to shift the flow of battle, putting him back on the offensive. The pair danced around one another, blocking and dodging, trying to break through their opponent's defenses. Despite his speed and agility, the master was rooted to the earth, as if there was a chain physically connecting him to the ground. Even Katsu's strongest attacks could only make him budge an inch,

earning a single second to try and land another blow.

As he called the wind to him, he lashed out at the master, finally driving him back once more. Yet in one fluid motion, the master quickly struck out at a small, barely noticeable metal disc attached to the nearby wall. The quiet chime that sounded in response slowly grew, reverberating until it had reached the intensity and pitch of a large, brass gong. The sound echoed through the chamber, and Katsu heard more of these begin to ring in the distance, a warning to any member of Aui's Scales in the building.

More men ran into the room, drawing their weapons as the master descended on Katsu once more. Within moments, he was defending himself on all sides. Calling the winds toward him, he felt the air whip into a gale, circling him with the force of a growing storm. The energy coursed through his kodachi, answering his beck and call.

Growing stronger with each passing second, the wind coursed through the room, circling the chamber.



The roar of the wind blocked out all other sounds as it reached the pitch of a full tempest, dragging each and every man in the room into its wake, Katsu standing steadfast in the eye of the growing storm. The gust struck the master with a sharp crack, sending him flying into the stone wall. In an instant, the fight was over as every member of the Scales was flung into the stone, knocking them unconscious.

Yet as Katsu began to sheath his kodachi, more ninjas came down the hallway, heading straight towards him, swords drawn and ready to attack. With a quiet sigh, he began preparing for another fight, drawing the winds about him - but suddenly stopped to glance at the

entranceway.

Members of the Crimson Haze slowly began to make their way into the room - many more than the six that he had initially arrived with. The red fabric they wore did little to disguise the crimson stains marking their clothes, blood spatter coating their chests and arms.

The ninjas belonging to Aui's Scales, taking note of the numbers before them, almost moved as if to retreat - yet before they could, the Crimson Haze were upon them, cutting them down without hesitation. Many of the rebels' present began slitting the throats of those lying on the ground, not bothering to wipe the blood from their blades. Slowly, their leader stepped forward once more, gesturing to the pile of scrolls, still sitting neatly in their jade tray upon the pedestal.

"I see you found what we were looking for."

"What happened to your small task force?" Katsu intoned; his voice low.

"It doesn't matter." The man lifted his hand, curling his index finger. "We're here to take those scrolls, anything else is yours."

"Not until you tell me what information it is that you're looking for." That gave the man halt, Katsu watching as his hand dropped back to his side.

"None of your concern. What was it that you said to the Scales?" He paused for a moment, before nodding to himself. "My plans are no business of yours."

"They become my business when you trick me into doing your dirty work." Katsu nodded to the people lying around him, fingers tightening around his kodachi. "It's obvious that you were using me as a distraction. Did you expect me to defeat the Grandmaster guarding the scroll, or had you intended for me to act as a buffer while you took care of the rest of the Scales in the building?"

The rebel leader sighed heavily, pointing to the pedestal.

"Just let us take them, wanderer. There's no need for conflict over such a simple task. You don't even need to lift a finger."

"No. I may not know what your plans are, but I wager that they're not as altruistic as you choose to believe."

"...very well, then." The man shrugged. "It's clear that you are well on your way to ascending to grandmaster, but facing these odds, even the most talented ninja cannot fight alone and expect to walk away. I would prefer that we ended this without conflict, but you have clearly made up your mind. You will tire sooner or later."

Yet before any of them could take a single step, Katsu held out a hand, halting the group. He turned his head slightly, looking over his shoulder at the air behind him.



"I have felt the wind stirring for some time now. If you are so determined to keep an eye on me, you might as well join us."

After a moment's pause, a breeze rolled through the room, revealing four grandmasters standing behind him. Each slowly drew their weapons, scrolls fluttering as a wind began to stir, rousing at the promise of a fight. As one, the Crimson Haze slowly began to retreat from the room, leaving the leader standing at the forefront.

"We will remember this." With that, he left as well, disappearing into the shadowed hall.

Katsu turned to face the grandmasters, bowing his head.

"I appreciate the support, though I'm not sure why you followed me. I thought none of you were ready to leave Mugenshi Gorge just yet."

"It was not the right time." Before Katsu could respond,

Takumi held out a hand, pausing. "When you decided to leave, it became the right time. You have shown that our clan is a secret no longer."

"So, you were following me from the beginning?"

"You are Mugenshi. We would not let you face this alone." Takumi gestured to the scrolls.

Katsu turned to inspect the contents of the jade tray, slowly unfurling the topmost scroll. A list of unfamiliar names stretched down the length of the parchment, each with some description of their last known location and current status. Some were held within Misteria, while others were scattered across Rathe. While the names of some seemed to hint at their abilities or properties, none were properly described, only their titles carefully noted down. Katsu turned to recite some of the names to the Grandmasters, watching as their expressions visibly changed.

"Do you recognise any of these?"

"Many of these were thought to be lost, though it seems as if Aui's Scales has been tracking them all along." Master Saori paused, looking thoughtfully at the scroll in

Katsu's hands.

"The Crimson Haze mentioned that one of the artefacts might be able to lead us to a cure for the Seikan. It's possible that they were lying, but this is our best lead." Katsu gathered the scrolls, wrapping them carefully in his bundle. "We must find them."

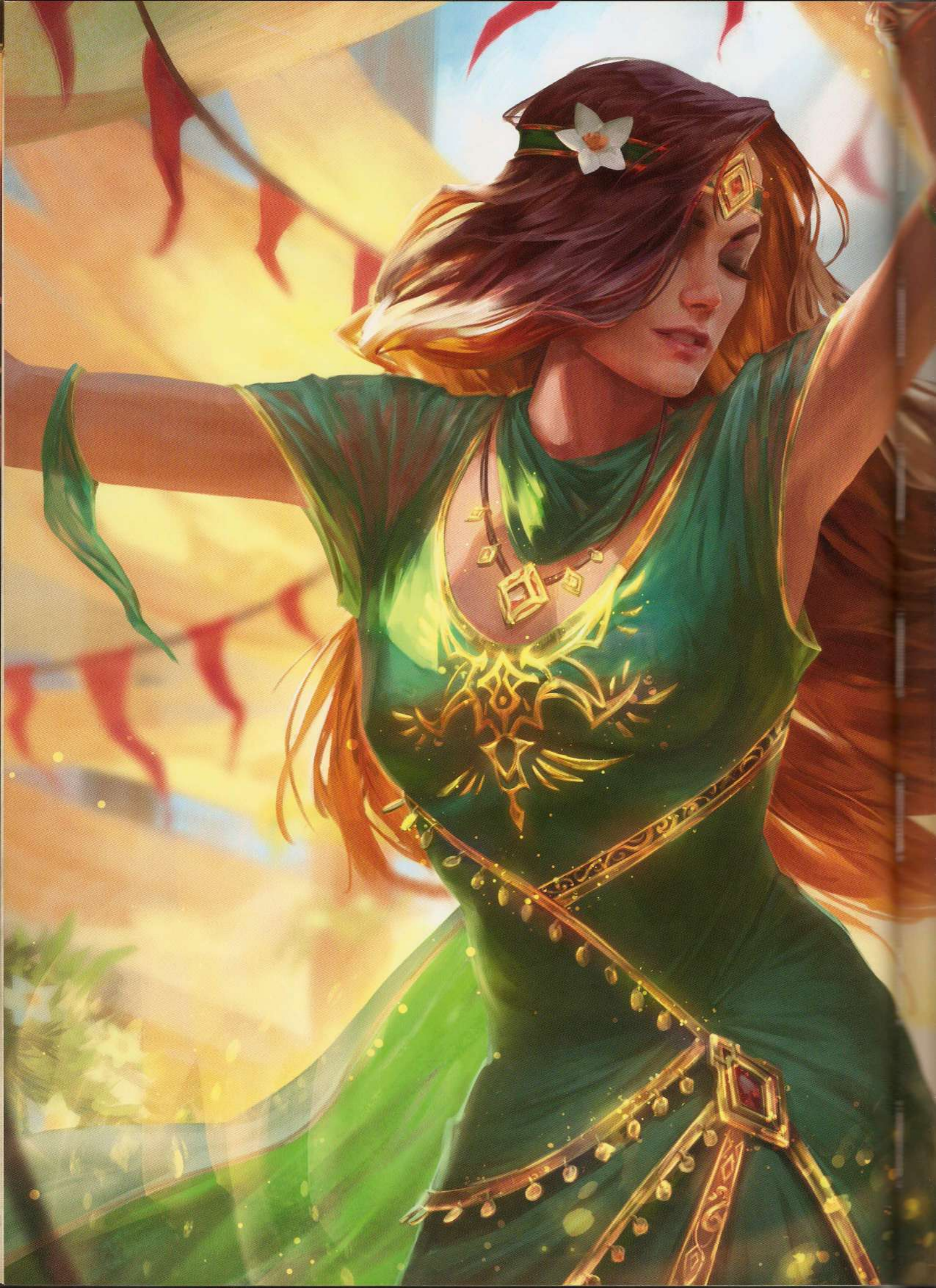
"While many of these items are unknown to us, we can start by telling you of the ones we know. The Blades of the Seasons, the Masks of Misfortune, the..."

"You support this?" Leading the way through the darkened hall, Katsu glanced toward the grandmasters. "I thought that you might try to stop me."

"If you do not enter the tiger's cave, you will not catch its cub. We have sat idle for too long, and now that we have a lead, it is our duty to find a cure for the clan." As they emerged into the pale light of dawn, Takumi turned toward Katsu with a nod.

Adjusting his bundle, Katsu turned to lead the way back home, leaping from the cliff face and disappearing into the mists below.







ARIA

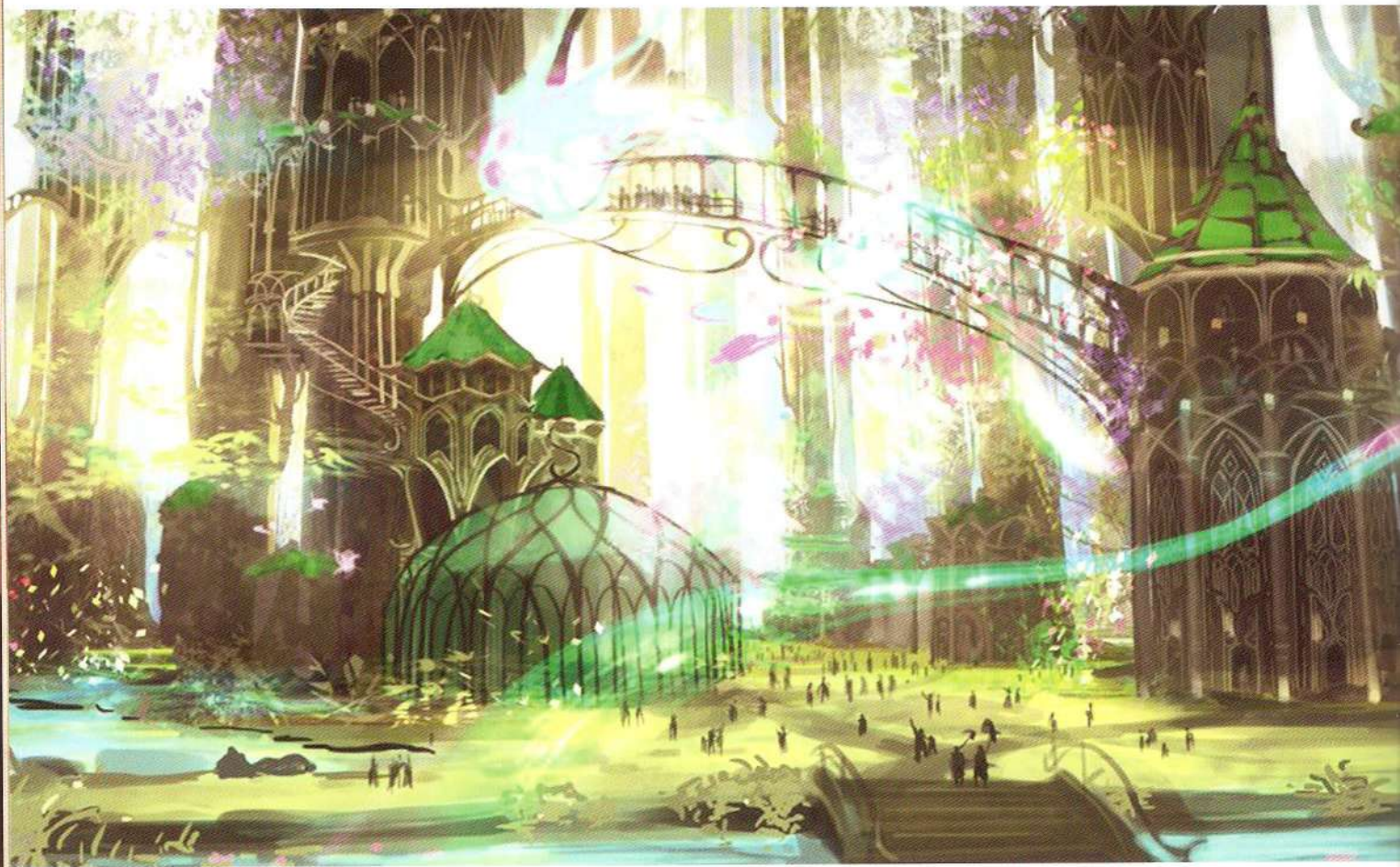
A MYTHICAL SANCTUARY

For thousands of years, the fantastical realm of Aria has remained untouched by the passage of time, far removed from the chaos and struggles that affect the rest of the world. Iridescent flora and verdant trees cover the landscape in brilliant colours, as vibrant as the people of Aria themselves. From great mountain ranges glittering with ice and snow, to vast forests and lush meadows, the rolling hills of Aria are teeming with life.

A true sanctuary, Aria's abundant resources are nurtured by the mysterious energy known as the Flow. The Flow shapes and changes the landscape as it passes, transforming mountains into valleys, forests into plains. The energy of the Flow has created some of the most incredible scenery in all of Rath, giving life to plains of constant thunderstorms and forests of translucent fungi.

The people of Aria are accustomed to a life of comfort, living in a rich, plentiful landscape. Natural defenses and ancient magics protect its people, hiding Aria from the outside world. Generations of a peaceful, carefree lifestyle have cultivated a society rich with bards, musicians, performers and entertainers, with taverns serving some of the most fantastical liquors and spirits known to man.

Yet, in recent years, Aria has experienced a transformation. The barriers that once concealed and protected Aria have begun to fracture, revealing its existence for the first time in centuries. Outlanders threaten to breach the borders and enter Aria, while the Flow has become unstable, transforming the land at an increasing rate. This once peaceful region has entered a new era of uncertainty, as its people rise up to defend their homeland from the outside world.



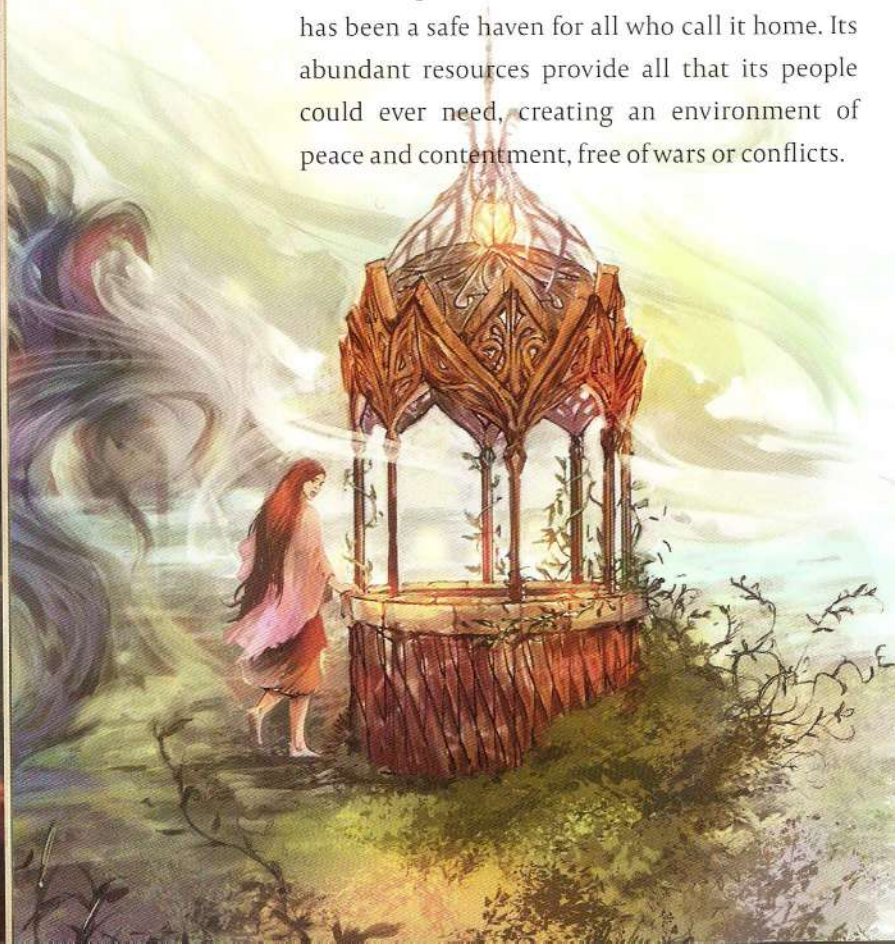
A TRUE SANCTUARY

For as long as humans have lived in Rathe, Aria has been a safe haven for all who call it home. Its abundant resources provide all that its people could ever need, creating an environment of peace and contentment, free of wars or conflicts.

THE FLOW

A wild, unpredictable force of nature, the Flow shapes the landscape around it as it ebbs and flows. It shapes all of Aria, folding mountains into valleys, sculpting rivers out of stone, and shifting whole forests from place to place. In areas where it is particularly strong, the Flow manifests as streaks of light across the sky, a shining array of vibrant colour high above the earth. Everything in Aria, from soil to stone to living creature, is borne of the Flow, and when their time in this world is over, they will return to the Flow once more.

The Flow has given life to some of the most remarkable scenery in all of Rathe. A great expanse of ice, frozen solid even in the heat of summer; deep, dense forests where steam rises from crystal-clear rivers; tiers of shining waterfalls, water pink as the first light of dawn; luminescent stone formations that glitter with the light of a thousand stars.



CESARI

Ethereal creatures borne of magic, fading in and out of existence based on the ebb and wane of the Flow. While they appear sentient, Cesari are mirages, mere echoes of ancient beings that once roamed this land. They appear as iridescent, semi-translucent phantoms, shimmering as they ripple through the air. Cesari can range from small, floating wisps that drift along with the breeze, to massive, twin-tailed comets that leave streaks of vibrant light in their wake.



FOLKTALES OF ARIA

Wishing Wells - Hidden around Aria, wishing wells are almost impossible to find - at least, intentionally. Most of the people who come across wishing wells find them by accident, drawn to the well by some unknown force. When drinking of the water within, a person can make a wish, though it may not always come true in the way you might expect.

Askra - These rare trees are pale and delicate, their branches drooping downward, their wilting leaves dragging along the ground. However, each of these trees possesses a single fruit, bright red and filled with seeds. The people of Aria commonly believe that these fruits can be used to communicate with the dead.

The Otherworld - Legend states that the oldest tree in any forest has a door beneath its roots, which can be used to access a different realm, one known by many different names. Anyone who enters may emerge years later, unable to remember what they saw on the other side.

Tempest Plain - A large plain that is plagued by perpetual thunderstorms. The ground is stained black, burned to a crisp by the sheets of lightning striking the earth. Anything within range of the Tempest Plain is immediately struck by a bolt of lightning, turning to dust in an instant.

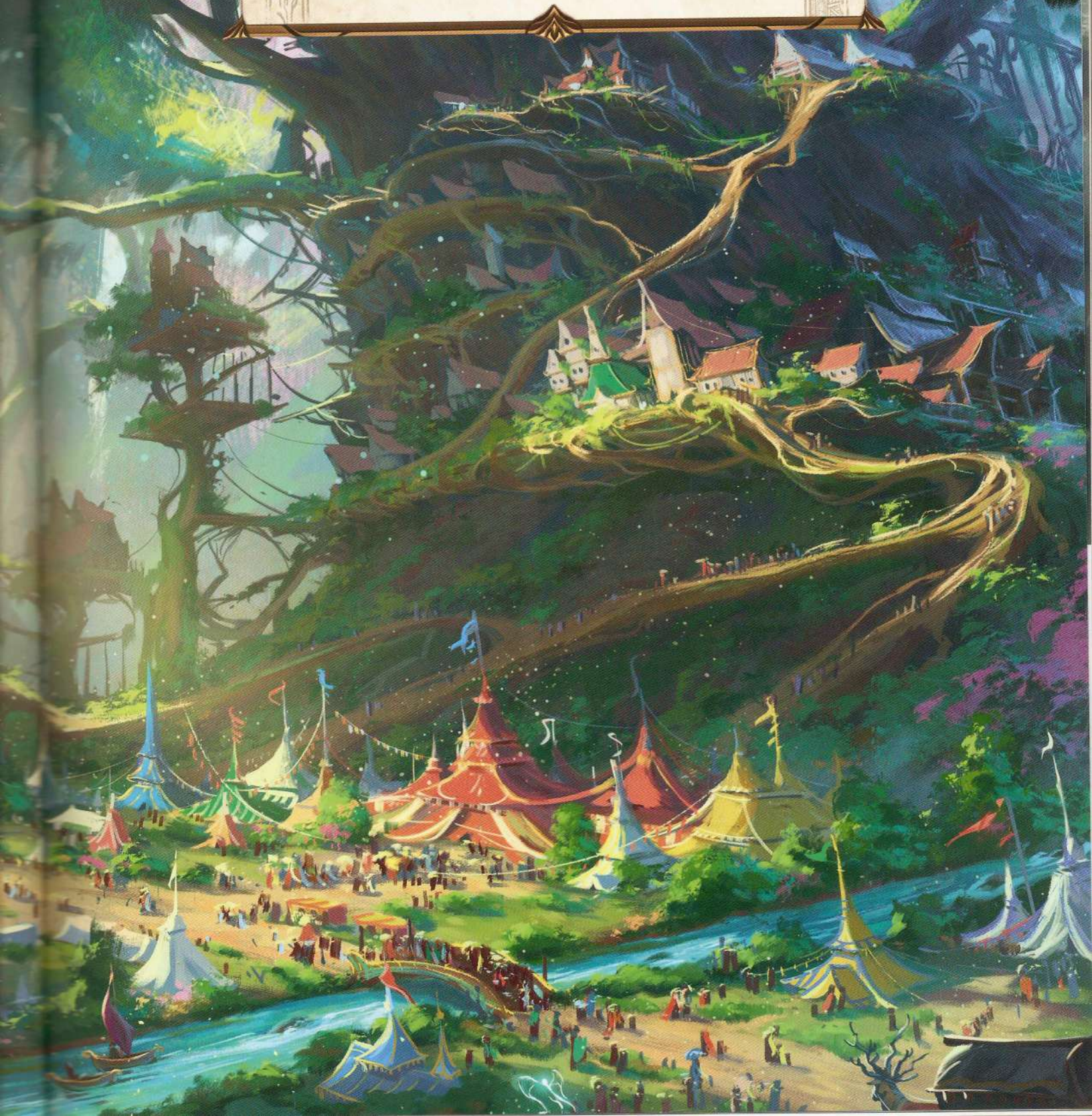
Fensalir - According to legend, those who drink from the 'eternal spring' known as Fensalir will be healed of any injury or illness.

The Bleak Expanse - A frozen wasteland plagued by constant snowstorms, which remains all but impossible to navigate. Only one path exists through the Bleak Expanse, and any deviation will lead a person back to the point at which they started. The blinding snow and biting cold are devastatingly fatal for anyone who approaches the Expanse unprepared.



CROSSING THE THRESHOLD

Occasionally, a wayward soul might find themselves transported to Aria, waking at the base of the Great Tree of Korshem. The Korshem acts a gateway, welcoming newcomers into Aria with open arms. It is said that the Flow may power the Korshem's ability to pull others through to Aria, attracting those who seek a better life, providing a place for them to start anew.

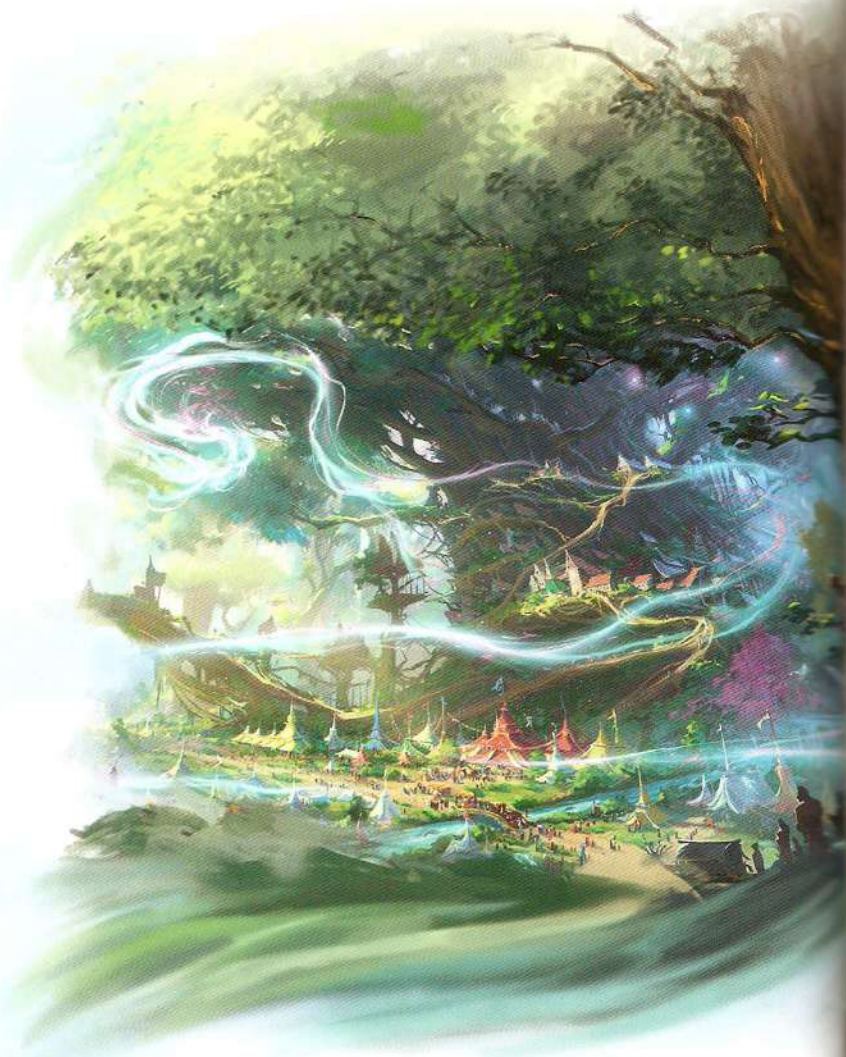


THE KORSHEM

A massive tree at the heart of Aria, sheltering the village built amongst its branches. The Flow is incredibly strong here, breathing life into everything that grows nearby. With sunlight streaming through its leaves, illuminating the many buildings clustered around its base, the Korshem is a welcome sight for newcomers as they chance upon this magical realm.

ISEN'S PEAK

A great mountain that has watched over Larinkmorth for generations. Despite the passing of time, it remains untouched by the passage of the Flow, as if exempt from the transformations that affect the rest of Aria. Larinkmorth's best-known liquor, Isenri Sake, is named in honour of the mountain, as its pale, icy blue colour mimics the gleaming snow of Isen's Peak.



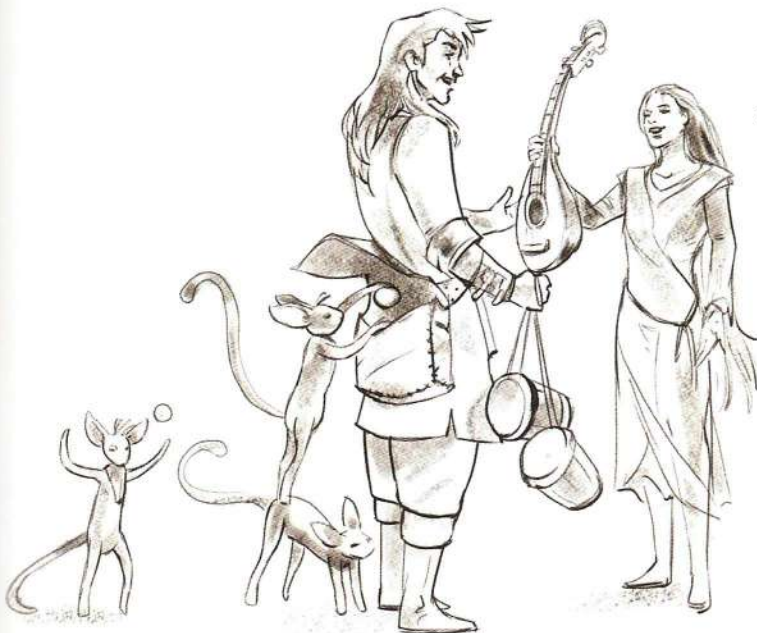
LARINKMORTH

A small town tucked into the mountainside, Larinkmorth is surrounded by perpetual snow, peaceful and tranquil above a sea of white. Its taverns are a source of warmth, a place to shelter from the cool mountain air.



PEOPLE OF ARIA

The Flow fuels everything that grows within Aria. The plants here are large and plentiful, providing everything that its people could ever need. Trees never stop producing fruit, plants grow at a rapid pace, and the creatures are docile and tame. As a result, the people of Aria are free to pursue a more idyllic lifestyle, with many choosing to become musicians, performers, or entertainers. The people of Aria flock to the region's abundant taverns for drinks, stories, music and entertainment, taking advantage of any excuse for celebration or festivity.



While many choose to settle in villages, some pursue a more nomadic lifestyle, travelling across the region. As these nomads pass through villages, they offer help or entertainment, and the village provides for them in return.

Aria has no form of currency, as its people function on a simple bartering system, based on the idea of equivalent exchange. As a peaceful region abundant with natural resources, its people feel no need to hoard wealth, food or goods, readily sharing their home with others.



◆ THE EVERFEST CARNIVAL

The people of Aria are never more excited than when the Everfest Carnival is near. A giant, travelling circus, the Everfest Carnival is the size of a small town, boasting hundreds of tents and attractions. The Everfest has been a staple within Aria for centuries, travelling from village to village, growing larger with every passing decade. Some of the oldest families in Aria are part of the Everfest, their ancient traditions evolving to number among its most popular acts.

One of the most well-known sections of the Everfest is the Maela, a group of fortune-tellers, seers, oracles, enchantresses and conjurers.

Those within the Maela have talents in the realm of magic, performing acts of mystery and enchantments for those with an open mind.

Another section of the Everfest Carnival is the Valdur, known for strongman acts and their work with animals. From massive Fianna to fierce Vitre'o, these creatures perform before crowds to rousing applause. Some of these creatures also help to transport the Carnival, using their strength to pull carts and carry goods.

Many other acts exist within the Everfest. Some, such as the Legendarium, are larger acts staged with the help of a team; others are smaller, the work of small families or individuals.

ENDLESS ENTERTAINMENT

The magic of the Everfest comes from its people, those who have made a home within the travelling carnival. Some set up food stalls, weaving spools of spun sugar, making tiny handheld pastries and hot toasted bannock; others run small bars providing unique, magical spirits and liqueurs. Yet nothing in the Everfest Carnival is more enchanting than its entertainers and performers.



Trapeze artists flying above the audience, silk dancers weaving their way through the air, escape artists freeing themselves from chains and barrels filled with water, stunt performers who set themselves on fire and throw themselves through a maze of razor-sharp blades. Animal trainers, strongmen, fire breathers, sword swallows, jugglers, acrobats, contortionists, jesters, harlequins, hoop divers, knife throwers, and actors recreating the legends of old.

Some stage their performances within the circus tents, while others perform in the open, enchanting passers-by. Stilt walkers wade through the crowds, as bards tell stories and music drifts through the air. Rings of tents hide fortune-tellers and oracles, curtains drawn back to reveal the candlelit tables within. Illusions and displays of light weave their way through the air above, while below, the enchantresses and illusionists dance, their golden jewellery chiming with every movement.



CRAFTS

Aria is home to a variety of unique skills, crafts and talents, not found anywhere else in Rathe.

Braumeister

While taverns are not an uncommon sight in Aria, and many have tried their hand at brewing spirits and ale, Braumeisters are among the most elite of their trade. Spirits made by a Braumeister possess unique effects, depending on the kind of spirit, the ingredients used, and the person brewing it.

Wayfarers

The first step of any wayfarer's training is the creation of a dowsing disc, a finely tuned instrument that allows wayfarers to read the changes in the land around them. In an ever-changing landscape, the help of a wayfarer is invaluable, as they map out new paths and discover new locations.

Defenders

In an era of change, where the ancient barriers between Aria and the outside world are breaking down, defenders have risen to protect their home from outsiders. Those who break through and



enter Aria with ill intentions, whether to steal or harm, will quickly find themselves at the mercy of patrolling defenders. Groups of defenders can be found travelling between villages, ensuring the safety of their home, and keeping an eye out for trouble.

Diviners

While wayfarers can read the lay of the land, diviners learn to read the Flow itself. They can see the currents within the Flow and follow patterns to predict how the Flow will shape the world around it. Diviners are also able to follow these currents to discover where the Flow is strongest, and areas more susceptible to change.

Shamans

Legend speaks of powerful shamans who created incredible displays with a wave of their hand. Now, shamans are best known for their work within the Everfest, creating fleeting mirages by manipulating the Flow around them.

Dreamers

A dreamer is a person with a natural-born gift - the waking sleep, a state in which dreamers can glimpse fragments of the past, present and future. For some, visions can even come to them when fully awake, glimpsing echoes of what once was, and what might yet be.

LEGENDS OF THE GUARDIANS

Long ago, when Aria was surrounded by war and strife, the people of Aria were protected by the Guardians. The Guardians were blessed with a connection to an elemental, gifting them with extraordinary abilities. Through years of training, they learned to hone their abilities and transform into incredible warriors, blessed with supernatural strength and elemental skills. The Flow shaped them, moulding them into the perfect protector, tasked with guarding their people and their home.

However, as Aria entered an era of peace, and the elementals began to fade away, the Guardians soon lost their ancient traditions. Now, as their barrier between Aria and the rest of the world begins to fade, the Guardians are re-emerging, tasked with defending Aria once more.

LEGEND OF THE EXALTED ONE

Long ago, the world of Rathe was cast in darkness, and its people cried out in fear. No plant could grow, no creature could see, and all was silent and still. And so, the Exalted One, great creator of Life, gave light to the world, plucking two stars from distant skies. One star became the sun and was placed within a chariot of radiant gold. The other became the moon and was placed within a chariot of shining silver. However, all was not yet complete.

The Exalted One gave life to two new beings, a pair of divine beings known as Badr and Asra. Bright, lively Badr was given the golden chariot, and two swift steeds of vibrant flame. Quiet, thoughtful Asra was given the silver chariot, and two gentle steeds of pale frost. At once, the twins took to the sky. The light of golden Badr brought day to the children of Rathe, a time of life and of creation. The light of silver Asra brought night, the time to rest and to recharge. Thus, the people of Rathe flourished beneath the light of the stars, and the twins have proudly fulfilled their duty ever since.

TIDES OF CHANGE

Great barriers and magical landmarks once protected Aria from the outside world, hiding its existence from the rest of Rathe. However, after many centuries, these barriers have begun to wane, and the ancient magics that once concealed Aria's existence from the rest of the world are failing. More and more outsiders are entering Aria in an attempt to steal from its people, weakening the land in the process.

These outlanders are clashing with the people of Aria, as they seek to strip Aria of all that makes it magical. They attack anyone who dares to challenge them, taking whatever they wish without a hint of remorse. Defenders and guardians have risen once more to challenge the outlanders and protect Aria from those who would harm it.

Yet even as trespassers threaten Aria's borders, the Flow has become increasingly unstable, changing and transforming the land faster than ever before. The paths between villages are all but lost, with even the most dedicated wayfarers struggling to mark the rapid changes of the Flow. Some of the longest-standing landmarks in Aria, great mountains and magical formations that have persisted through centuries of constant change, have since been lost, pulled into the Flow's rapid transformation.

A LOST TOME

This unnamed, damaged journal was found in a cave revealed by the changing of the Flow. It is unknown how old the journal is, or who owned it, but it remains a dubious record of someone called a "Guardian", assumedly related to Aria's history in some way. Some of the pages are missing, others show signs of water damage, and the cover is marked with what appears to be burns. We have managed to extract a small excerpt of the tome, despite the heavy damage.

Several months and still nothing, the book keeps telling
 haven't found anything yet. It's been weeks and I'm still
 travelling around, waiting for something to happen. It
 did lead me to a lake. There was an old woman there, but
 she didn't know anything about any Guardians. She
 didn't even know what a Guardian was. Is this book
 ? Maybe it's just a book that's been written
 understand how
 they would get it to write all by itself. The messages keep
 on appearing. I've

disappeared for hours yesterday, I spent the whole day
 searching before I finally found it next to a cave, and I
 swear it changed while it was missing - it's larger now, I
 have to hold it with

When I opened it this morning, there was a
 drawing of a Kai'e next to a fallen tree trunk, but it
 didn't tell me anything about where to find it or why it
 was there. I've be

haven't
 completed any of the deeds or tasks that it described, I
 don't know if I'm ever goi

at this point.

kind of gem buried in the earth next
 to my campsite. There was this great furry creature sitting
 nearby, with s
 se, I can't understand it. I wonder if it has an

iliar creatures, I didn't think there were many left.

79

CREATURES

The creatures of Aria are incredibly diverse, fantastical and magnificent beings unlike anything found elsewhere on Rathe. Years of living in a plentiful environment have made them docile, and friendly toward most other creatures.

VITR'EO - A majestic creature with a thick mane, crowned with a series of large crystals that grow out of the top of its skull. In addition to its dense coat, it grows large tusks on either side of its jaw.

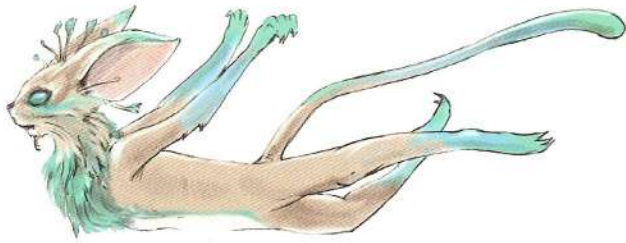


KAIE'O - These shy, reclusive mammals are notable for their luxurious fur. Their bodies are long and thin, with short legs and a narrow head. Their long, white fur is incredibly soft, keeping them warm in winter and cool during the summer. They shed their coats each spring along with the uppermost layer of their hide, and will grow a new coat of fur within a few days. These discarded coats are often used in clothing across Aria.



NA'SHARI - A large beast with a crystalline hide, the na'shari has skin harder than most forms of metal. In spite of its tough appearance, this creature is known for its docile and friendly nature. Its round eyes and fuzzy tail make the creature incredibly popular with children, who often flock to na'shari in hopes of playing with the creature.





MEEP - These tiny, mischievous creatures are recognised by their long limbs and tails, and colourful feather crests. Meeps are usually found in the vicinity of the Everfest Carnival, travelling along with the Carnival and stealing food and shiny objects from its patrons.



FIANNA - These majestic creatures are tall, with long flowing tails, tough skin, and massive antlers crowning the top of their head. Fianna are often used by the Everfest Carnival for their strength and placid nature, helping to move the Carnival's many attractions from location to location.



“One cannot visit the Everfest Carnival without encountering the meeps. Small, quick, and far too intelligent for their own good, they will quickly single out any patron who is not paying close attention to their belongings. A flash of blue out of the corner of your eye, and poof! They’re making off with your grandmother’s necklace. It’s not always jewellery, of course - food, potions, crystals, hats, scarves; anything small enough for them to grab. I’ve even seen one particularly ambitious meep try to steal the dowsing disc right off a wayfarer’s arm! Above all else, there is nothing in this world that meeps love more than something shiny.”

- excerpt from the ‘Chronicles of Aria’
by Saga Skalda, Bard of Edda



BRAVO, SHOWSTOPPER

The Star of the Show

Once a land of fables, Aria was disconnected from the rest of Rathe, protected from the conflicts and troubles that plagued the rest of the world. Its people were well-cared for by a plentiful land, nurtured by the energy of the Flow. As the landscape changed, shaped by the passage of the Flow, the transformations shaped the people of Aria as well. Its cheerful and carefree people have cultivated a culture rich in music, entertainment and celebration.

However, in recent times the Flow has become increasingly unstable, and a growing number of outsiders are entering Aria. The volatile energy of the Flow is changing the landscape of Aria faster than ever before, bringing a sense of unease and confusion to its people. Amongst the uncertainty and disquiet, the traditions and festivals of Aria have become more important than ever, bringing a measure of peace to the hearts of the people.

A Rising Star

Even amongst the many taverns and festivals of Aria, nothing could possibly compare to the excitement of the Everfest Carnival. A massive, moving circus, the Everfest travels throughout Aria, a sea of brightly coloured big-tops boasting the biggest collection of performances in all of Rathe. Yet of all its acts, none were so famous or beloved as Bravo's Legendarium.

Bravo was raised amongst the strongmen and animal acts of the Valdur, growing up alongside great, majestic cesari, and tiny meeps that darted from stall to stall. Many of his closest friends were members of the Maela; oracles, bards, skalds, enchanters and fortune-tellers, all breezing about the Everfest in loose silks and layers of golden jewellery.

One of the Maela elders, a woman with fine white hair and a single eye, always made time for the young boy. She often spent time sharing the tales of Aria with him, spinning both fantastical tales and old legends. Bravo listened to tales of powerful enchanters and mysterious shamans, of magical artefacts and hidden wonders. It sparked a hunger for stories untold, and even as an adult, Bravo continued to seek out more.

One day, when he was eighteen years old, Bravo decided to perform one of the old legends within the Everfest, bringing it to life upon the stage. Joined by a bard, two strongmen and an enchantress, he recreated

one of Aria's most beloved tales; the legend of Magnus the Vigilant.

The performances quickly became a staple of the Everfest, transforming into the Legendarium. As the act's popularity continued to grow, so did the size of Bravo's troupe. By the age of twenty-six, Bravo had amassed a troupe of over thirty performers and stagehands, and an act that was beloved by audiences across Aria.

While the troupe had their fair share of followers, it was Bravo who often found himself at the centre of attention. He often found himself overrun by avid fans, his charisma and confidence earning him admirers everywhere he went. Yet even as he enjoyed performing, there was a part of him that still longed for more.

Call to Adventure



Growing up in the Everfest Carnival, Bravo had visited every village in Aria - yet no matter how many he travelled to, Aldevyr remained one of his favourites. A sprawling village, its buildings were scattered across the plains. In the midst of summer, the Everfest made its way to Aldevyr once more, greeted with the sight of lush, dense meadows overrun with flowers.

With the Legendarium on hiatus, many of the troupe members had scattered across Aria, taking their time to visit other villages and explore. After spending the previous day helping to set up the many tents and stalls of the Everfest, Bravo was looking forward to spending his morning in the company of a nice, tall glass of alder cider inside the local tavern.

However, just as he was fastening the buttons on his favourite crimson coat, he heard someone clear their throat. In the open doorway of his tent, Gawain and Morgan stood, imposing in the light of the morning sun.

Bravo had met the duo many moons ago, when they first arrived within the Everfest. Seeing their broad shoulders and muscles, their old-world appearance, and their stalwart natures, Bravo had approached and asked the pair to join his troupe. Reserved and taciturn, they were excellent at supportive roles, and quickly became staple members of the Legendarium.

With the act currently on break, it was hardly surprising to see the pair with packs and travelling gear. However, when Bravo asked about their plans, they stared at him blankly.

"The wayfarers have summoned us." Morgan was the slightly more talkative of the pair, his deep timbre echoing in the small space. "We leave for the Fractal Scar."

Bravo looked from their grim expressions to the packs upon their shoulders, to the weapons clasped at their sides. While Gawain and Morgan originally arrived at the Everfest with a pair of finely crafted greataxes, Bravo rarely saw the weapons. To see the greataxes once more, in the same moment that Gawain and Morgan were departing for the Fractal Scar at the request of a wayfarer.

It reminded Bravo of the tales that they performed, of noble defenders leaving on a quest; an adventure that would take them across Aria in the pursuit of protecting the innocent. Gawain and Morgan, leaving on some grand journey; clad in armour and furs, wielding their greataxes with pride. Travelling for months, perhaps years; a journey taking them from village to village in search of their target, helping townsfolk and rescuing fair maidens from harm. At last, when they arrive at their destination, a great evil would appear before them, one that they are destined to defeat...

Gawain and Morgan stood toe to toe with an ancient creature, something long forgotten by the people of Aria. Covered in scales, it raised its head with a bellowing roar and launched itself toward them. They fought valiantly, taking blow after blow as they worked together to defeat the beast. At last, Morgan got close enough to the creature to find an opening in its defenses. With a single swing of his greataxe, he beheaded the great beast, silencing it once and for all. They return to the townsfolk with the creature's head, arriving to the sound of cheering. The townsfolk hold a festival in their honour, a token of thanks for their valiant heroes...

Bravo clapped once, decisively, nodding his head.

"I'm coming with you."

Gawain and Morgan looked to one another, the taller of the pair silently raising an eyebrow. After a long moment, they turned back toward him. To anyone else, Gawain's expression would have looked exactly the same, but Bravo had known him long enough to glimpse a hint of resignation in his fixed stare.



Morgan shrugged. "We leave at noon."

It didn't take long for Bravo to gather his things, his pack still mostly untouched from arriving in Aldevyr the previous day. The last thing he gathered was his beloved mallet, Anothos, forged from polished wood and finely hammered silversteel. He stopped to visit his companions amongst the Maela, and those of his troupe who had stayed within Aldevyr. Once he had said his goodbyes, he left to meet Gawain and Morgan just beyond the outermost circle of tents.



The Hero's Journey

The trio began their journey across Aria, making their way toward the massive crystalline cliffs of the Fractal Scar. The long days and balmy evenings of midsummer allowed them to spend more hours travelling during the day, spending their nights sleeping beneath the gentle light of the stars. The towns they passed through were more than happy to give them a place to rest, gifting them fruit, bottles of ale, and loaves of fresh bread for them to take on their journey.

While travellers were common across Aria, the trio encountered more travellers than usual heading in the same direction as themselves, mysterious individuals that seemed out of place amongst the quiet, peaceful villages. An enchantress garbed in fine, iridescent silks; a strongman wearing simple stage armour; a wayfarer dressed in verdant broadcloth and worn brown leathers; a young woman with pale hair dressed entirely in kaie'o fur; a giant of a man wearing a massive horned helm; and all of them travelling toward the Fractal Scar.

However, as they grew closer to their destination, the atmosphere began to change. The towns and villages they visited seemed a little quieter. Despite the bright sunshine and balmy warmth of midsummer, there was no birdsong, no kaie'o darting across the fields, no fianna roaming the landscape. It seemed as if there were no animals to be found at all, and none of the towns

they visited seemed to know why all the creatures had disappeared. Each person they spoke to only described the feeling of waking up one morning to an unusual silence and venturing outside to find the plains empty.

The three men began to feel an increasing sense of urgency. Every wayfarer they passed on their journey seemed to fly across the earth, racing past with their dowsing discs aglow. Some travelled on foot, traversing the rolling fields with surprising speed; others rode on the backs of fianna and vitr'eo, their long braids streaming behind them as they sped past, in the opposite direction to the Fractal Scar.

One night, they stopped in a village close to their destination, arriving to find the buildings dark and quiet. The townsfolk were nowhere to be found, their belongings left behind, plates still set on tables, mugs of cider and mulled wine strewn about, half-empty.

While Gawain and Morgan scouted out the rest of the village, Bravo searched the local tavern, looking for some sign of the people that had abandoned their homes. All of the casks were intact, chairs left sitting at their tables, the beds upstairs half-made. Some of the rooms still had packs in them, though none revealed any clues about their missing owners.

As Bravo began to make his way downstairs, he heard a quiet chitter. Anyone who visited the Everfest Carnival knew to keep an eye out for the mischievous meeps. Growing up within the Everfest, Bravo had developed a keen awareness for the distinct sound of a meep making its move, the only warning one might get before the creatures made off with one's purse.

Sure enough, Bravo turned to find a meep sitting on the balustrade, its beady little gaze fixed pointedly on one of Bravo's golden earrings. It was incredibly rare to find a meep outside of the Everfest Carnival, the perfect environment for the tiny thieves. Yet here one was, and in a deserted village no less.

Several minutes later, Bravo descended to find Gawain and Morgan waiting for him, leaning against the tavern's counter. As they turned toward him, he watched their gaze flick to his missing earring, and then to the meep sitting happily on his shoulder, a single gold ring strung onto its tail. In response to their confused looks, the

meep chattered happily, waving its prize in the air.



Transformation

According to Morgan, the wayfarers had set up camp near the Fractal Scar, rallying those who came to offer their aide. Marbles, drawn to the flash of sunlight reflected by dowsing discs, led them from wayfarer to wayfarer, all making their way to the Fractal Scar. They were soon pointed in the right direction, and without Marbles' help, it may have taken them weeks to find their way through the icy plains.

However, when they finally arrived at the village, the scene before them sent a chill down their spines. Unlike the gentle, rolling meadows of Aldevyr, the village that lay before them was an ashen husk of its former self. Houses lay abandoned, open doors swinging in the wind, blood smeared against the charred wood.

The wayfarers had claimed a small section of land at the edge of the village, making use of the blacksmith's forge as a meeting place. Bravo approached one of them, a slender young man in the process of restringing his bow. Like many of the other wayfarers, he sat with his shoulders slumped, dark circles hanging beneath his eyes, skin sallow, eyelids drooping as he struggled to stay focused on the bow in his hands. Clearing his throat, Bravo politely greeted the young man, receiving a small, tired smile in response. Both stared silently for a moment, speech faltering, before Bravo finally gestured to the village around them.

"What happened?"

With a sigh, the young man began to share a report from one of the older wayfarers. Many years ago, a group of wayfarers had come across a massive sinkhole to the south of Aria, where the earth had suddenly caved in. Assuming that it was the work of the Flow, they filled in

the sinkhole with the help of some local townsfolk and thought nothing more of it.

Then, several months ago, in the early hours before dawn, a deep, rolling rumble woke several villages from their slumber. The ground quaked as people emerged from their homes, searching for the source of the sound - but found nothing. No changes had affected the land around their town, no shimmer in the air to show the influence of the Flow; it seemed as if the earth itself had mysteriously woken from a deep slumber.

Some of the townsfolk set out to check the surrounding area, only to stumble across the cause by accident. They witnessed the surface of the earth begin to crack apart, and before anyone could think to get to safety, a swarm of creatures burst out of the sinkhole, clawing their way through the pile of loose dirt.

The swarm descended upon the town and any villages near the Fractal Scar in a mindless rampage, slaughtering anything that crossed their path. The wayfarer called them dregs, humanoid figures with bloated, rotting bodies; their faces were a mass of melted, discoloured skin, dripping the length of their bony, twisted limbs. When they attacked, the air was heavy with the smell of burning flesh, bile and decay, steam rising from their open wounds.

After giving Bravo, Gawain and Morgan some advice on how to kill the creatures, he told them where to go next; a village heavily hit by the attacks, where their help was desperately needed.

For months, they travelled along the edges of the Fractal Scar, hunting down dregs and helping others who had stepped up to the task. Some of the villages that they came across were still occupied, their townsfolk carefully guarded by defenders in makeshift armour. Other villages lay abandoned, left vacant by fleeing townspeople, destroyed by the swarm of dregs following in their wake.

Marbles helped in his own way, darting onto Bravo's shoulder to chatter at drained defenders and anxious townsfolk. His tiny, expressive face often brought a smile to people's faces, bringing some amount of levity to the tension hanging in the air.

Even as his heart grew weary, Bravo began to grow

accustomed to this new way of life, learning to use Anothos for true battle. Hunting dregs alongside Gawain and Morgan, Bravo developed skills necessary to keep himself alive, and eliminate the creatures that threatened his home.

Final Battle

The trio were making their way back to the wayfarer's base, seeking another quest, when they received word of a large swarm of dregs advancing further into Aria. A call went out to anyone within range, asking them to gather at a nearby valley. The trio immediately changed course and made their way to the meeting point, arriving to find a small crowd preparing themselves for battle.

Even to one who had grown up in the Everfest Carnival, the collection of people gathered in the valley were mysterious and unfamiliar. Makeshift armour, worn leathers, faded silks and mended linens were worn alongside ancient helmets and layers of golden jewellery. Some looked as if they had stepped straight out of an act in the Everfest, others as if they'd just emerged from the tavern for the first time in months.

Yet all of them were prepared to fight, weapons at the ready, from bows to greataxes, hammers to daggers, enchantments to potions and poisons. The defender at the head of the valley, a towering man dressed in a patchwork collection of various pieces of armour, called everyone to arms. Those gathered leapt into action, following him toward the village to face the swarm.

A massive group of dregs milled about the buildings, eerily silent as they moved. Some of them dragged chains behind them, still attached to manacles around their neck. Others had scraps of torn fabric hanging from their skin or clutched at pieces of armour and leather. One had a human hand clasped in its claws, still wearing a strange metallic gauntlet on what remained of its forearm.

As a battle cry went up, the swarm turned towards the commotion. The dregs were faster than Bravo had expected, moving quickly despite their bent and twisted limbs. The pungent smell of decay filled the air, thick and cloying, building at the back of his throat until it burned. Swinging Anothos overhead, he slammed the hammer into a dreg's skull, sending it colliding into the earth.

Turning on his heel, he caught another in the temple before it could sink its claws into him.

One of the larger dregs towered over him, a snarl escaping from somewhere behind the mass of melted skin covering its face. As it lunged toward him, he stumbled, and couldn't raise Anothos in time to stop it from tearing into his arm. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of another dreg advancing, its mouth hanging partially open as it threw itself forward.

In that instant, Bravo suddenly felt the world tilt sideways, and a number of things happened in quick succession. A sharp pain burst to life behind his eyes, almost blinding him. The world took on a bright, hazy glare, an unnatural heat coursing through his veins. For just a moment, he could have sworn that he saw a spectral shape in the air before him, curling through the light in the same way that a cesari moves through the air. That same iridescent light coiled up his arm, charging through the polished wood of Anothos. The hammer shimmered, and a rainbow of colours burst forth, radiant and shining.

Instinctually, he swung Anothos in a wide arc, and the mallet collided with the bottom of the dreg's jaw. Its skull immediately exploded, fragments of bone dropping to the grass at its feet. Bravo charged at the other dreg on his left, taking its head off its shoulders with a single swing, and a sickening, liquid crunch. Gawain and Morgan appeared in the midst of the fray, their greataxes a flash of silver in his peripheral vision.



Dreg after dreg collapsed to the ground, bodies dropping to encircle Bravo as he made short work of the creatures around him. Every swing sent another dreg slamming into the earth, bones cracking beneath the

force of every hammer strike. Before long, the last dreg fell, leaving the village silent as every person present slowly turned to look at their surroundings.

A cheer sounded through the valley, ringing between the buildings as everyone gathered themselves, pleased to see their companions still standing. Gawain and Morgan turned toward Bravo, mostly unharmed, relief and pride colouring their usual deadpan expressions.

In the coming days, they helped to search the hills for any remaining dregs, but with the majority of the force dealt with, it seemed as if peace would reign once more. Some of the townsfolk even began to return to their original homes, as defenders helped to set up protective measures and begin repairs.

Bravo spent most of his time with the villagers, talking with the townsfolk and putting on short performances alongside Gawain and Morgan. Many of those present recognised him from the Everfest Carnival, and he soon found himself the star of the show once more.

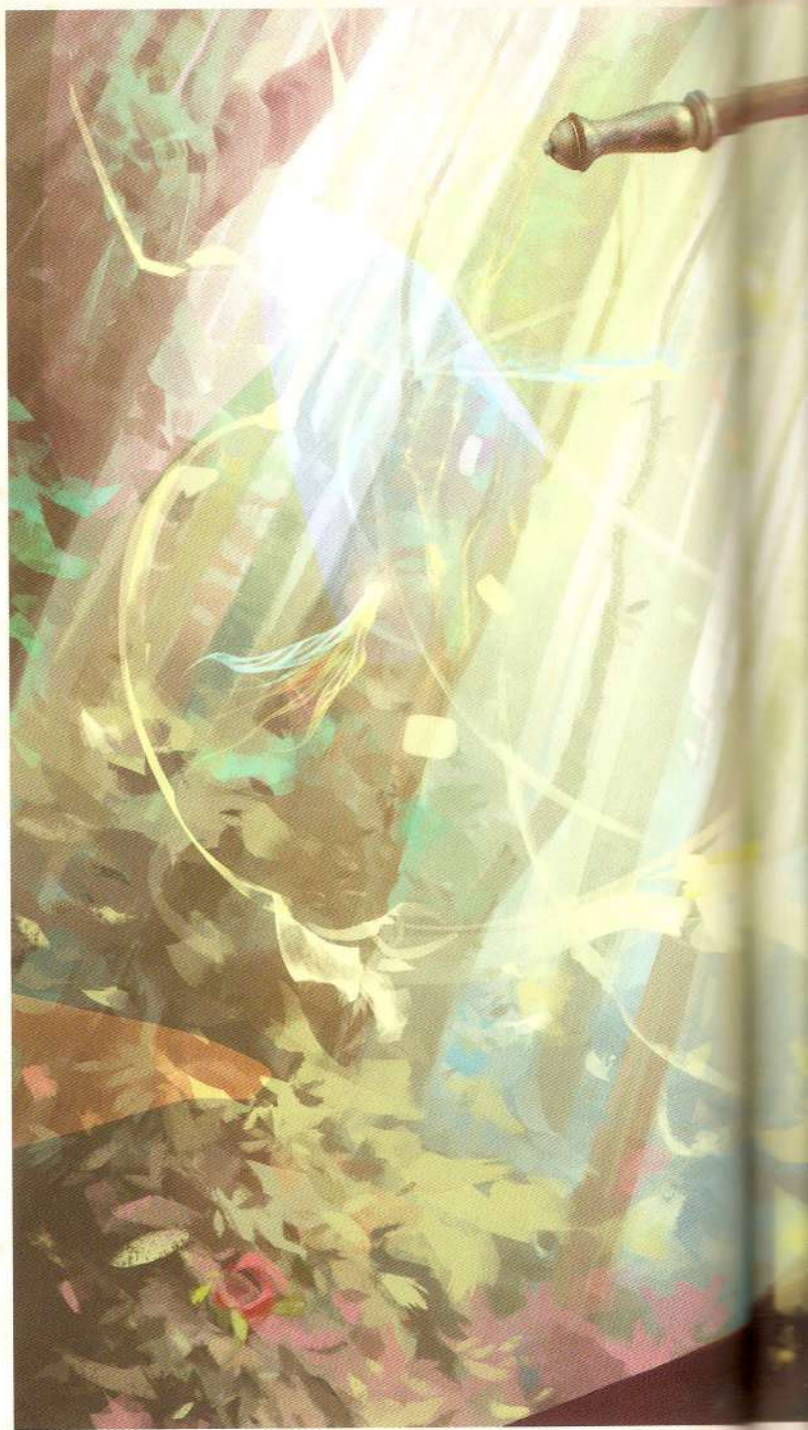
While the villages had only just begun the long road to recovery, they put on a festival to celebrate their victory, making Bravo one of their honoured guests. He stopped to talk to each person that wanted to offer their gratitude, accepting their kind words with a smile and wink.

After many months away from their home, Bravo and his companions finally decided to return to the Everfest Carnival. Saying their goodbyes, they began to make their way north, Marbles in tow.

Homecoming

The entire troupe was waiting for them when they arrived, welcoming them home with wide smiles and no small amount of celebration. The Legendarium's bard, Mikael, was bursting with new ideas, launching into a report of all the new stories he'd learned while in the Milesian Ranges. Meanwhile, Marbles emerged from Bravo's pack, greeting the troupe with an excited chitter.

While he was happy to see his family and friends once more, it felt strange to return to the Everfest after spending so many months away. Even as he greeted



his troupe, his mind drifted back to the battles and the creatures they faced, the happiness expressed by each villager as they finally returned home.

He had heard wayfarers speak of unusual changes in the Flow, and one had hinted that the dregs were not the only threat to Aria. Change was coming rapidly, and the events at the Fractal Scar were only the beginning. Bravo would not lose the Everfest to creatures like the dregs,



and he would not let it be destroyed, like the barren villages that they had come across in their travels. He vowed to find a way to protect the Everfest Carnival, and all the other villages and towns that they visited across Aria.

As Bravo greeted his companions, following them into the sea of tents with a broad grin, a single figure remained near the edge of the tents. An old woman,

dressed in the loose silks and woven fabrics of the oracles, her golden jewellery marking her as one of the Maela. Her single eye gleamed as she watched Bravo leave, a small smile tugging at the corners of her lips.

“At last, it is time. The Guardians shall return once more.”

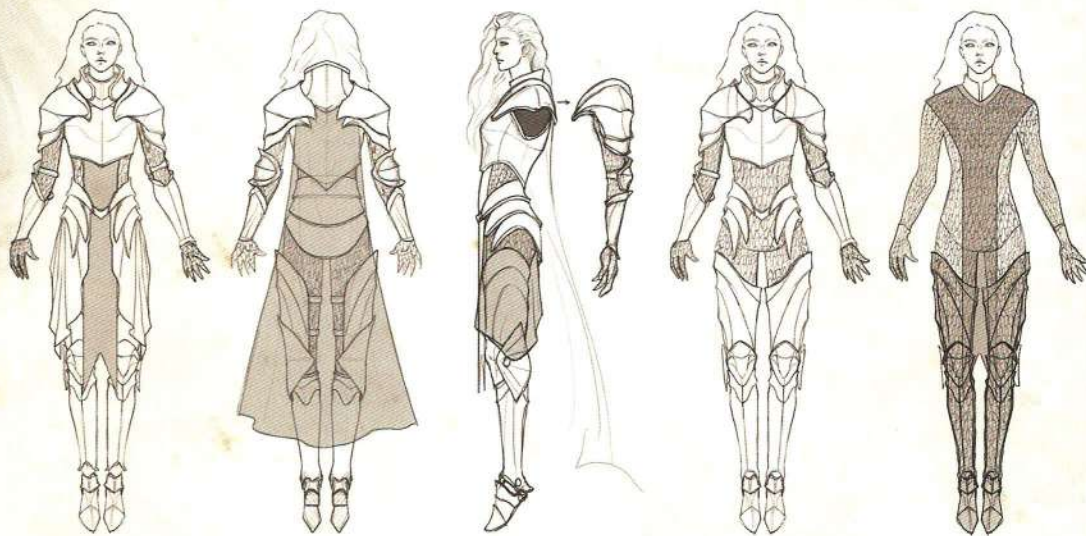
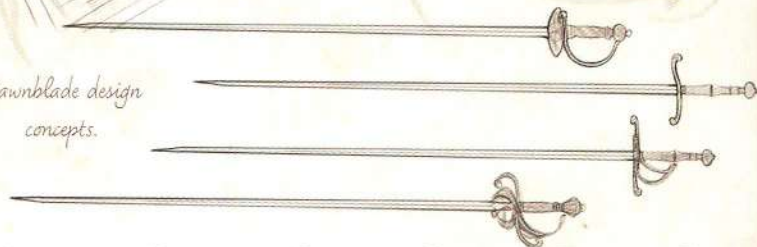
DEVELOPMENT CONCEPTS

Dorinthea Ironsong



Thea's lieutenant armour design. Layered, tapered, and fitted in a classic Solanian style.

Dawnblade design concepts.



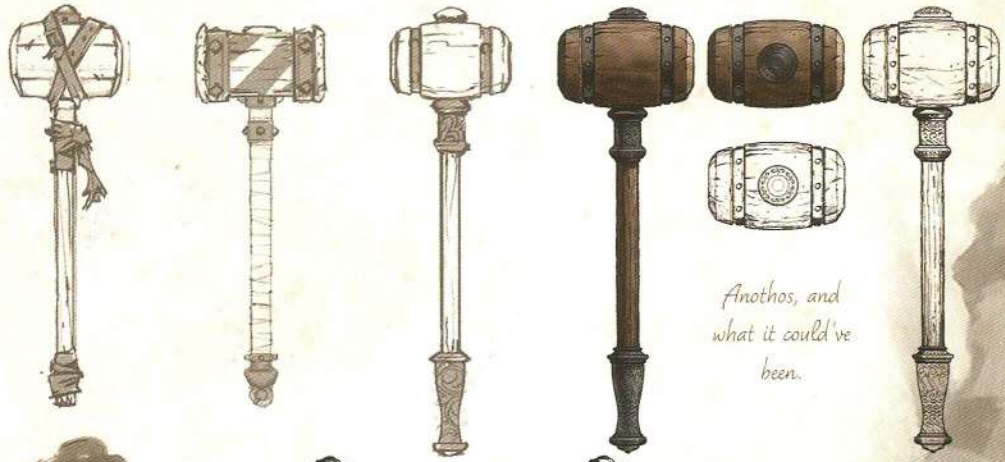
Hero art, Steelblade Supremacy, and Singing Steelblade concept sketches.





Bravo, Showstopper

Exploratory "mood poses".



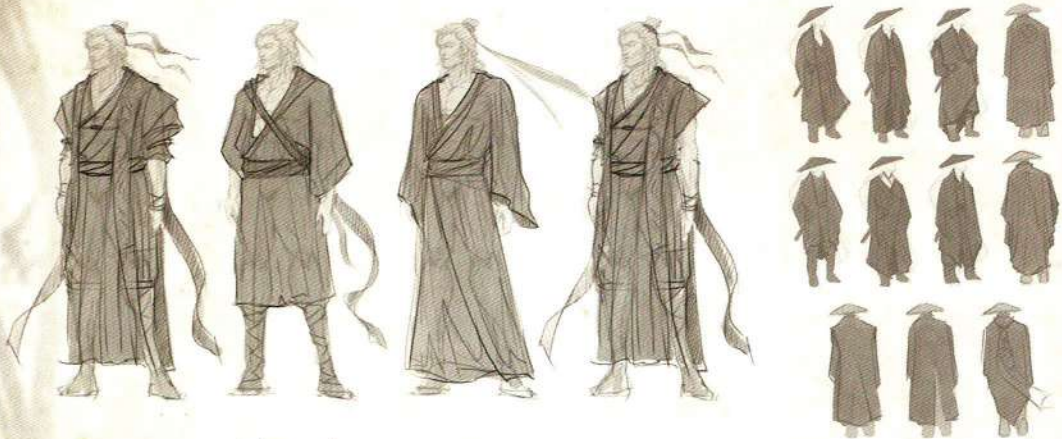
Anothos, and what it could've been.



Katsu, the Wanderer



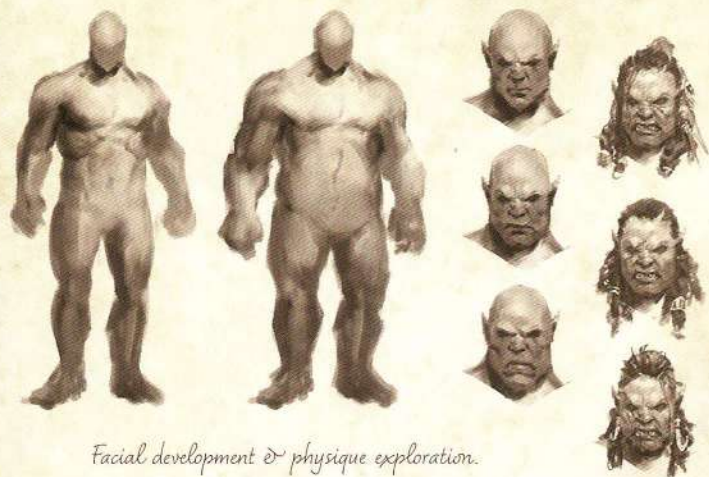
Signet of the Mugenshi.



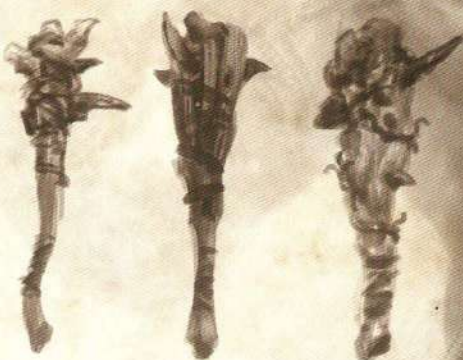
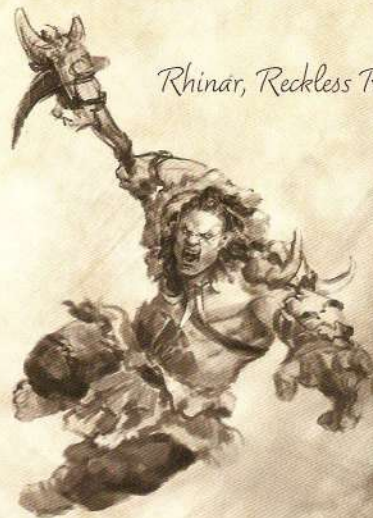
Clothing and armour concepts.



Rhinar, Reckless Rampage

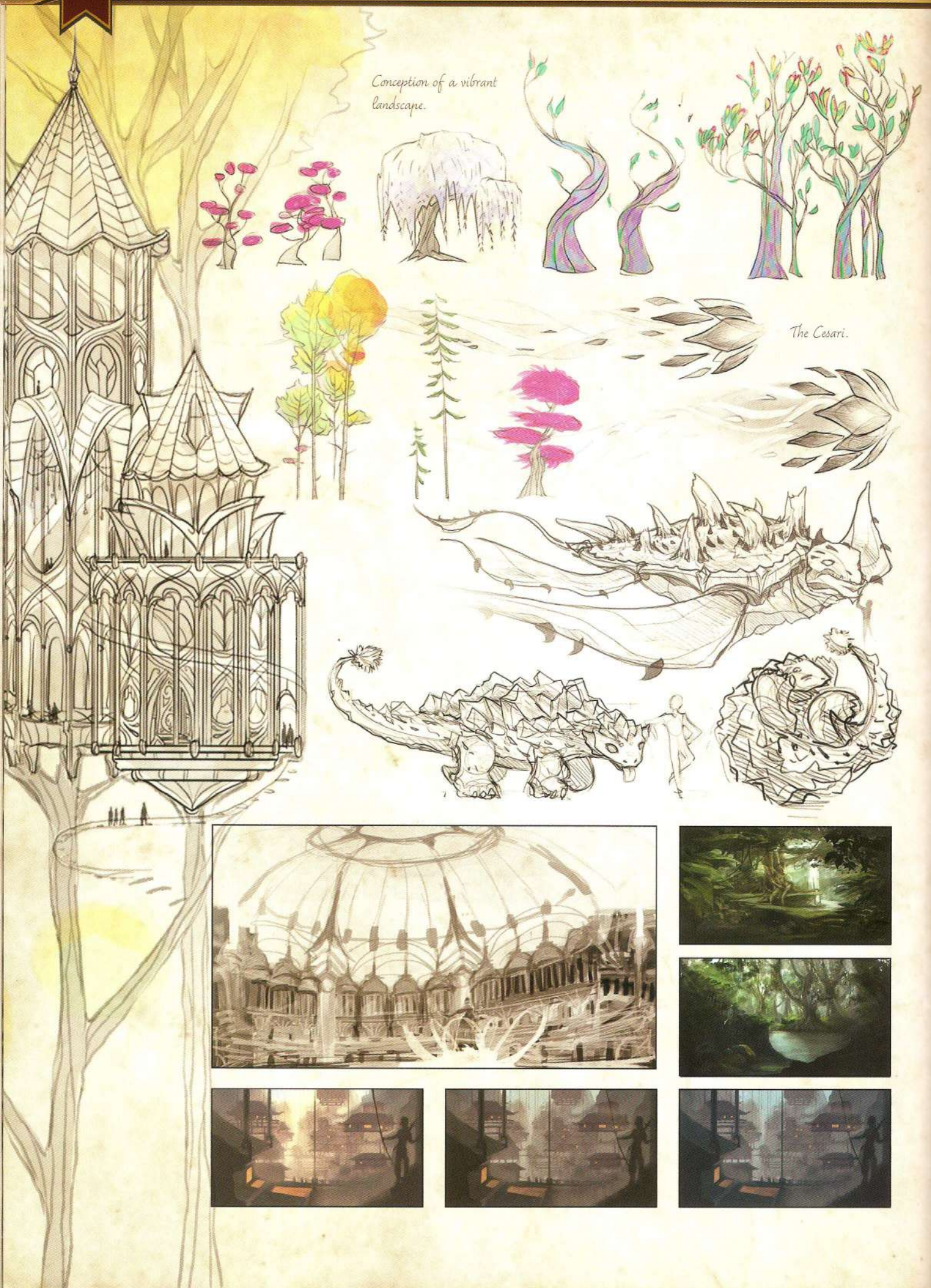


Facial development & physique exploration.



Colour test.





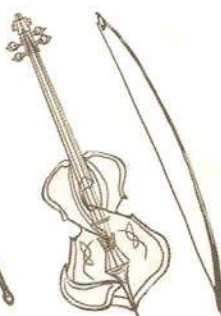
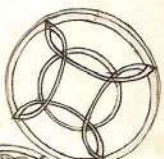
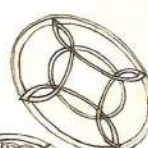
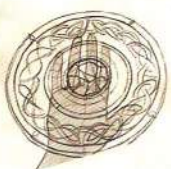
Conception of a vibrant landscape.

The Cesari.





The Dowsing Disk, a Wayfarer's best friend.





Tom



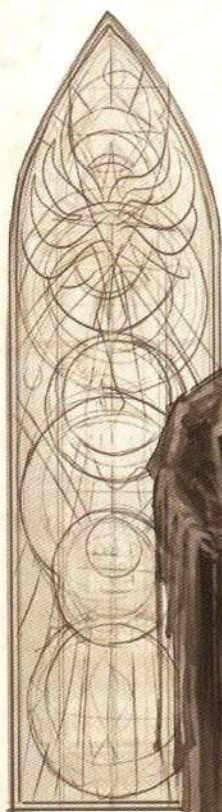
Greenbird



L'apocalypsa



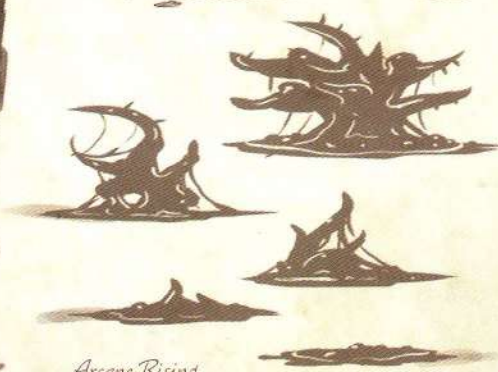
Mortis



Whisper, fount of Lies.



The Gatekeeper.



Arcane Rising coming 2020.

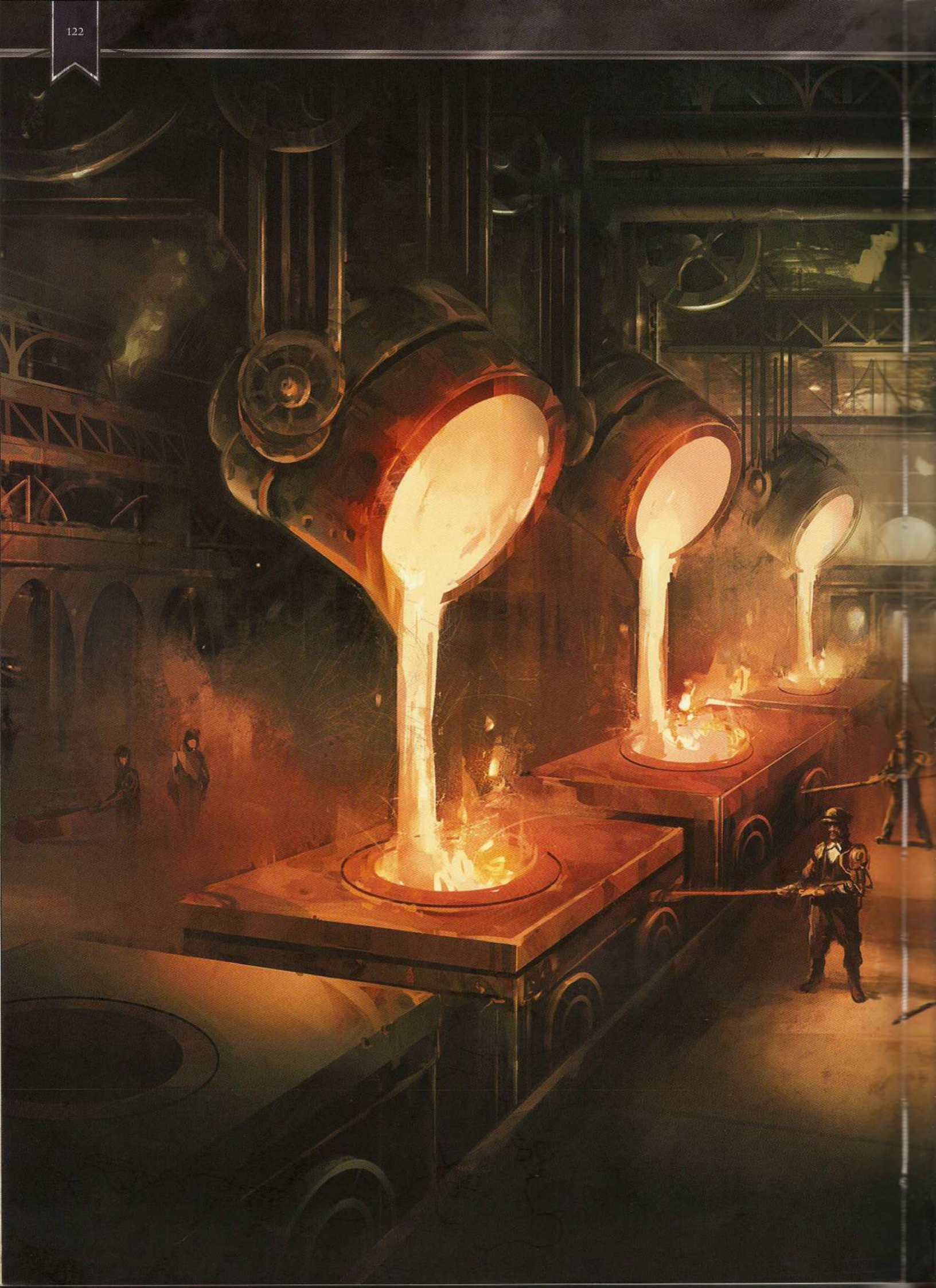
COMING SOON

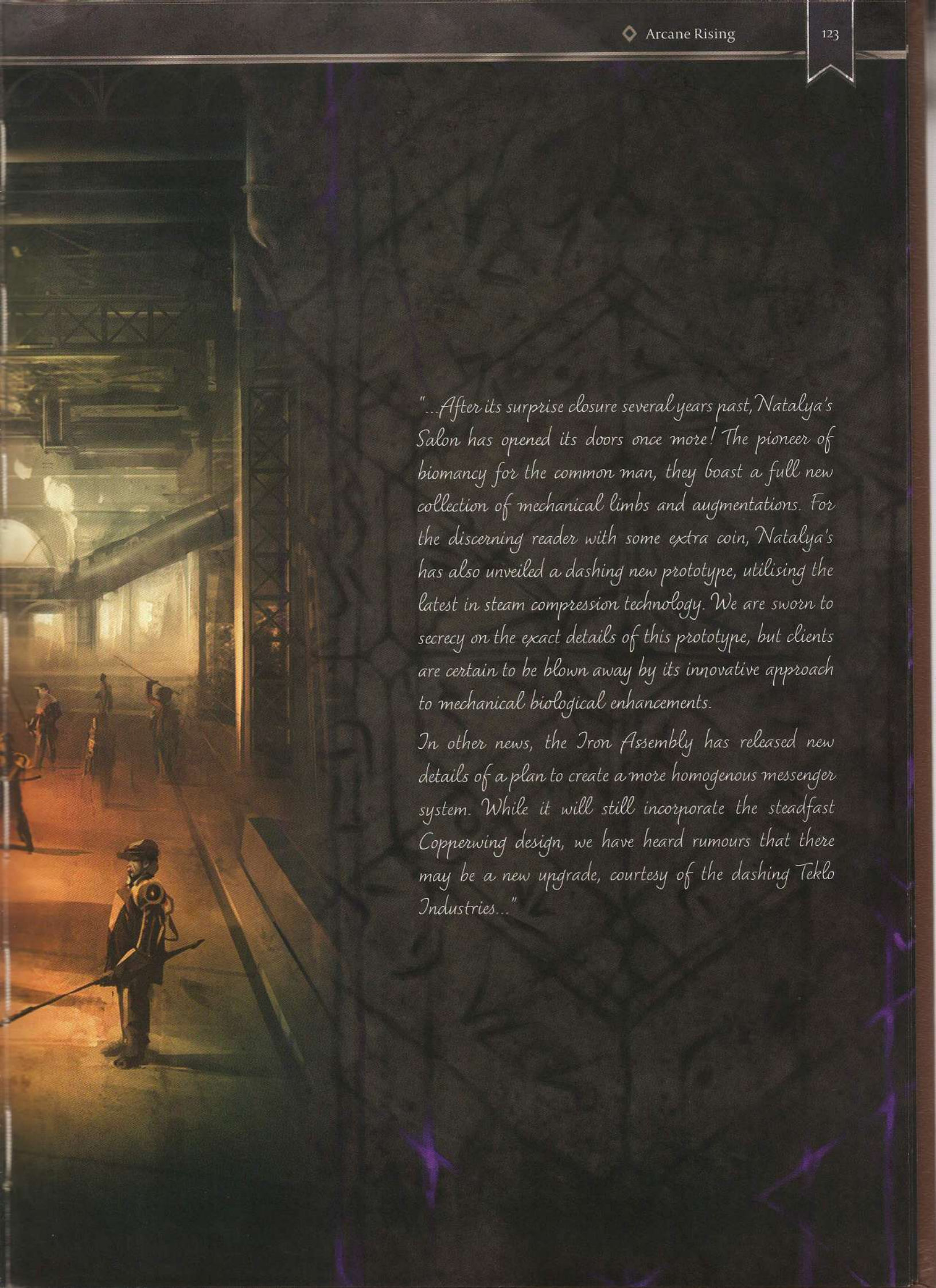
ARCANE RISING

2020

There is a darkness spreading across the land.

As grotesque creatures rise from the shadows, a long forgotten power reemerges, with dark machinations that threaten to upset the delicate balance of Rath.

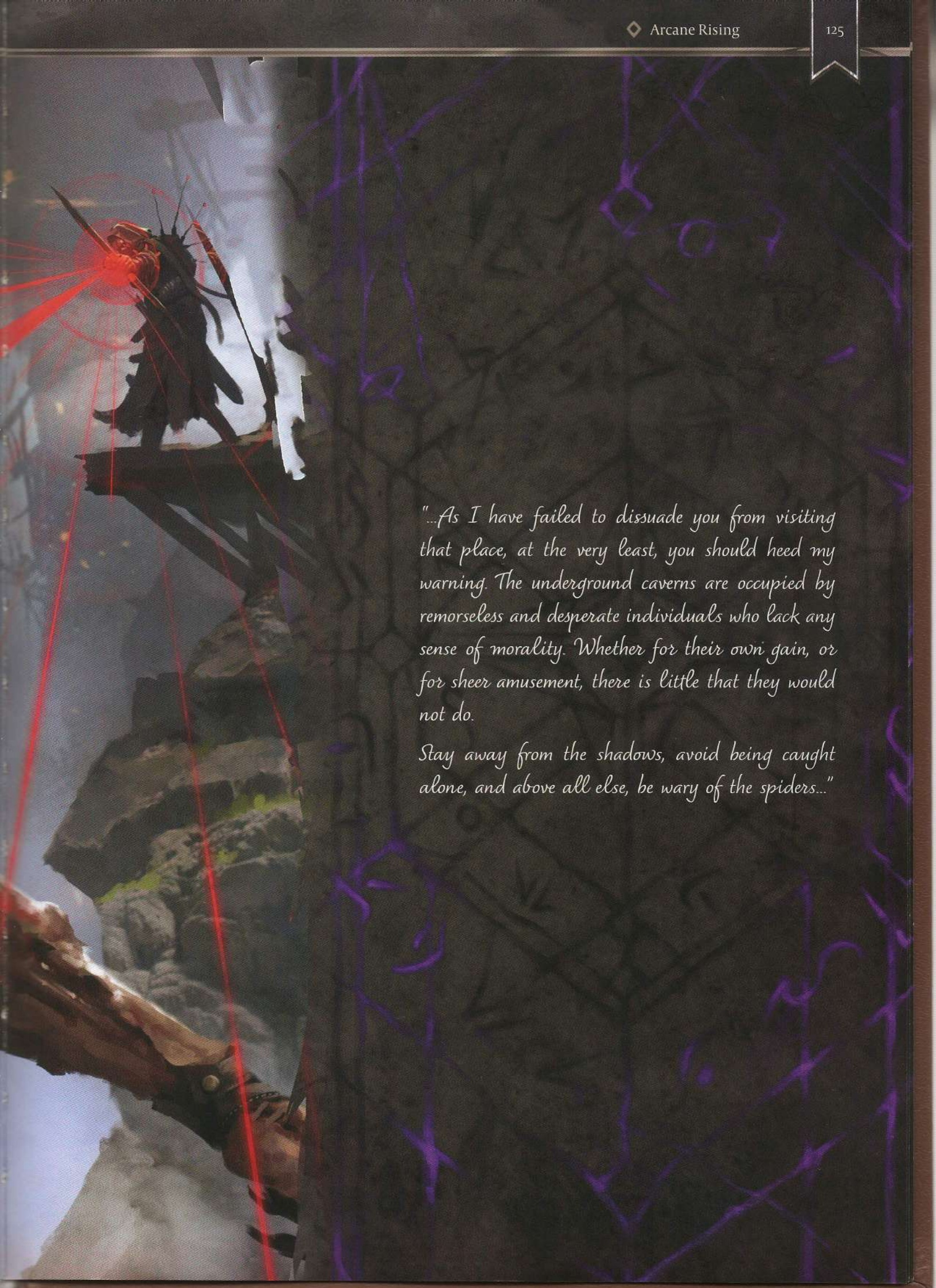




"...After its surprise closure several years past, Natalya's Salon has opened its doors once more! The pioneer of biomancy for the common man, they boast a full new collection of mechanical limbs and augmentations. For the discerning reader with some extra coin, Natalya's has also unveiled a dashing new prototype, utilising the latest in steam compression technology. We are sworn to secrecy on the exact details of this prototype, but clients are certain to be blown away by its innovative approach to mechanical biological enhancements.

In other news, the Iron Assembly has released new details of a plan to create a more homogenous messenger system. While it will still incorporate the steadfast Copperwing design, we have heard rumours that there may be a new upgrade, courtesy of the dashing Teklo Industries..."

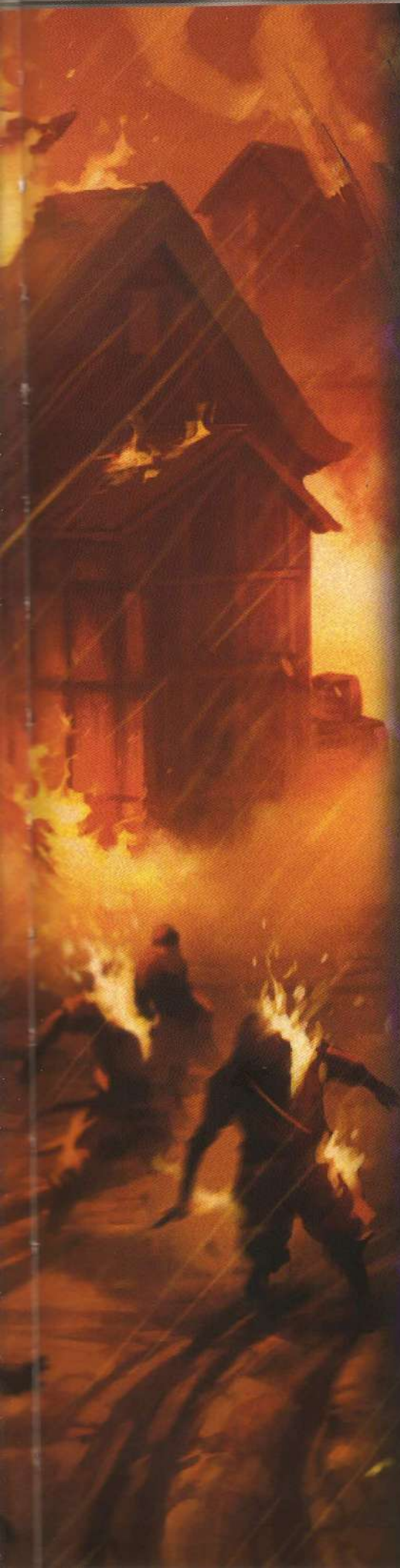




"...As I have failed to dissuade you from visiting that place, at the very least, you should heed my warning. The underground caverns are occupied by remorseless and desperate individuals who lack any sense of morality. Whether for their own gain, or for sheer amusement, there is little that they would not do.

Stay away from the shadows, avoid being caught alone, and above all else, be wary of the spiders..."

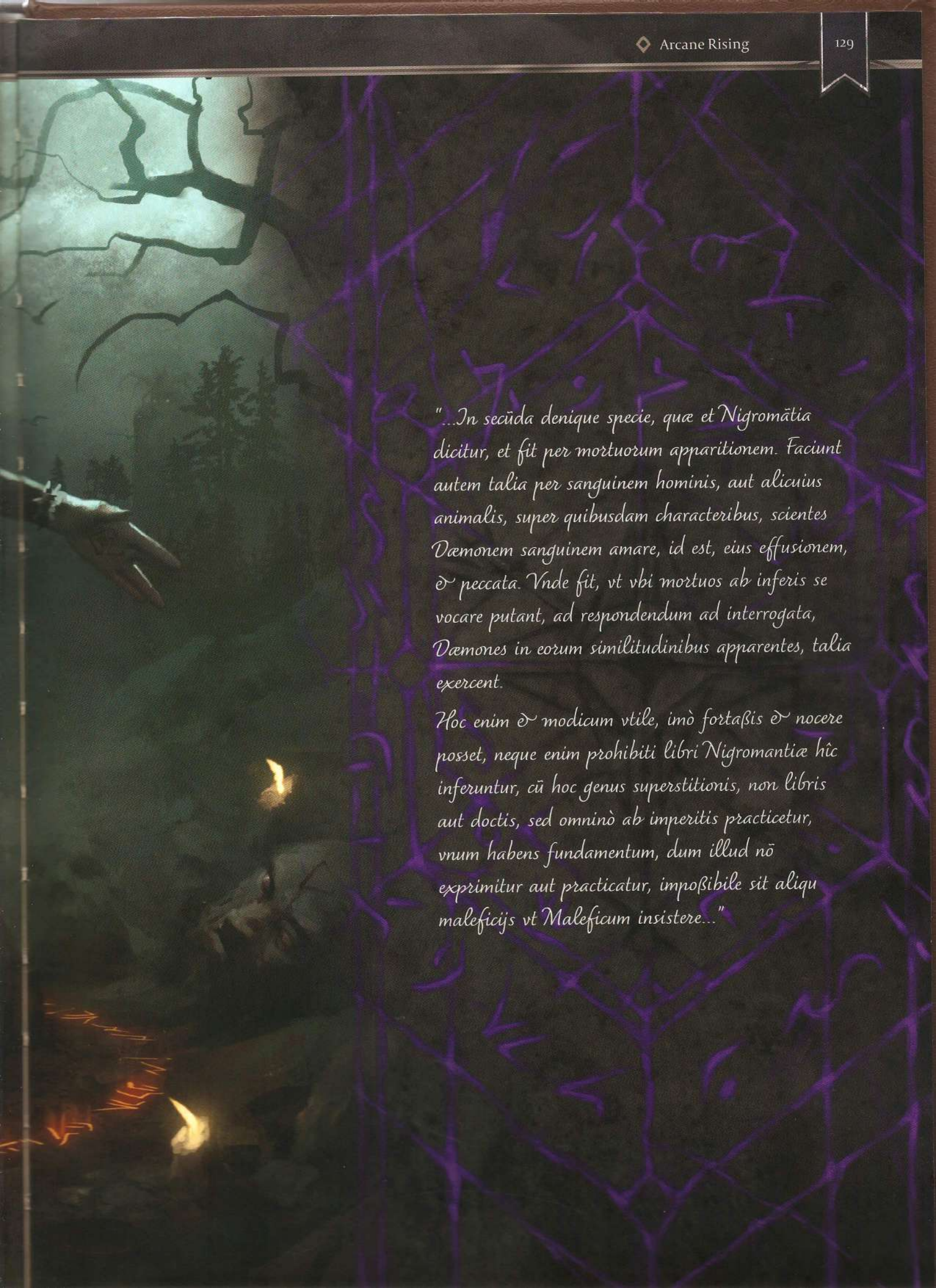




"...The attack was a complete success. In addition to eliminating the main structure, we found a small number of fledgling crops that they had managed to establish. There was little to be harvested, so we razed the lot to the ground. The wizard you sent conjured a firestorm to finish off the remainder of the settlement, and the deserters quickly turned themselves over to our forces in an attempt to escape the flames.

With everything reduced to ash and smouldering ruins, those few who did not appear have likely been reduced to ash as well. If anyone did survive the attack, they will quickly starve - the only other settlement in the area is run by General Souta, whose reputation concerning runaways is well-established with the court..."





"...In secūda denique specie, quæ et Nigromātia dicitur, et fit per mortuorum apparitionem. Faciunt autem talia per sanguinem hominis, aut alicuius animalis, super quibusdam characteribus, scientes Dæmonem sanguinem amare, id est, eius effusionem, & peccata. Vnde fit, ut ubi mortuos ab inferis se vocare putant, ad respondendum ad interrogata, Dæmones in eorum similitudinibus apparentes, talia exercent.

Hoc enim & modicum utile, imò fortassis & nocere posset, neque enim prohibiti libri Nigromantiæ hîc inferuntur, cū hoc genus superstitionis, non libris aut doctis, sed omninò ab imperitis practicetur, vnum habens fundamentum, dum illud nō exprimitur aut practicatur, impossibile sit aliqui maleficijs vt Maleficum insistere..."

