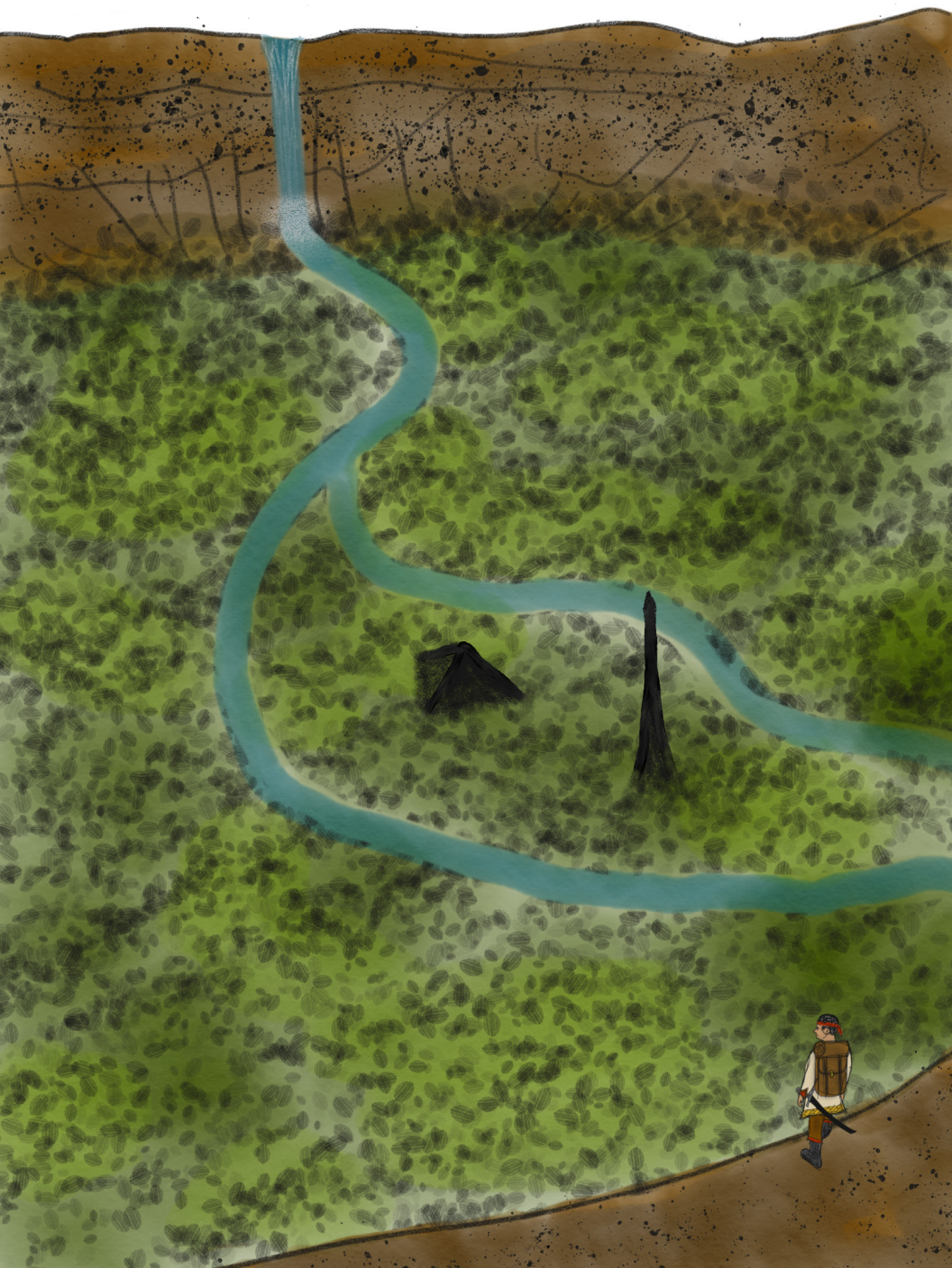


FORKING PATHS

ISSUE #1

an analog / tabletop / live-action / roleplaying game zine



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COLOPHON

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published May 2019 in Portland, Oregon

text typeface is Garamond Premier Pro. title typeface is Argon, by Tom Anders Watkins. other typefaces used are Alexander Quill, Calder, and Mostra Nuova

quotes excerpted from "The Garden of Forking Paths" by Jorge Luis Borges, as translated by Andrew Hurley in *Collected Fictions*

the rules: wanna hack, remix, or build off my stuff? drop me a line & let's chat!

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this zine is supported in part through my Patreon:

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Welcome to issue #1 of Forking Paths, a zine for roleplaying games, storygames, and other types of emergent narrative!

A starting point exists within these pages. From here, rays shoot out in all directions, traced by choices from minds I'll never meet. My hope is to spark something like the namesake of this zine, from the story by Borges: *an infinite series of times, a growing, dizzying web of divergent, convergent, and parallel times*. Or at worst, like that labyrinth's other description: *a contradictory jumble of irresolute drafts*. (Storytelling games are ideal for both results.)

The focus of this inaugural issue is a wilderness sandbox setting I've been working on, in the form of a **Guidebook to the Viridian Maw**. Flora, fauna, and other phenomena endemic to the Maw are detailed in brief entries, along with notes, random tables, and some amateur sketches by yours truly.

Here's the macro-level overview of the setting, as a summary or pitch:

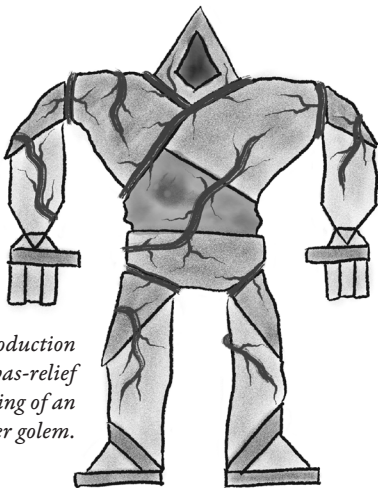
The Viridian Maw is a bowl-shaped valley dozens of miles wide, set within a surrounding wilderness of temperate forest but clearly a biome unto itself. It is defined by overgrowth: thick vegetation; flora and fauna of prodigious size; bizarre centuries-old stone ruins slowly reclaimed by moss, root, and vine. Fungi of all kinds flourish in the lush misty dampness of the Maw, and fungal influence has given rise to strange new lifeforms and ecologies. Resting at the Maw's heart: the ancient Gardenfort. Seized, once upon a time, as seat for the court and riches of a grandiose bandit-king, and renamed as his Velvet Palace. Now a long-abandoned grave for that same host — all claimed one fateful night by swift, obscure disaster.

This issue exists to kindle ideas and serve as fuel for playing a game of hazardous exploration amidst rampant, alien overgrowth. The material assumes a campaign of the D&D or OSR variety, and is aimed at the facilitator running a game, but is written to be as system-neutral as possible. I think a lot of this content would feel equally at home in an Apocalypse World game, too! The ruined Gardenfort is intended as a site for a megadungeon, for example, but could be reworked into a hardholder's outpost in a jiffy. (Advice on using this material, what kind of game this best fits, and other thoughts on pages 20-21.)

Reshape the Viridian Maw that appears at your table to suit your whims! Just as the Maw has been shaped by the whims of other minds before...

Amber golem

Lumbering bipedal forms twelve to twenty feet tall, assembled from root-bound stones, often scored with time-weathered carvings and faded designs. Each golem has a large exposed chunk of semi-opaque amber in its torso with the silhouette of a vitrified creature visible within; this is called its *heartstone*. No two golems are exactly alike, nor are their heartstones. These constructs roam the Maw in restless circuits with obscure intent. If they attend to specific tasks or duties, it has not been witnessed by any willing to tell. Those following an amber golem inevitably tire: the golems are nearly always on the move, and rarely linger longer than an hour in any spot. The best known attempt kept pace with a golem for six straight days of wilderness marching, before the follower-band succumbed to sleeplessness.



reproduction
of a bas-relief
carving of an
amber golem.

Amber golems pay little attention to other creatures, showing hostility when provoked by attacks or other interference. Since amber golems do not speak, it is unclear to those encountering them if a golem's mind is its own, that of the encased creature, or something else — perhaps only drawing on the creature in its heartstone as an animating force, and ultimately mindless. Descriptions have identified at least five unique golems patrolling the Maw. Speculation about the golems' age, purpose, and creator is popular tavern conversation. Crossing paths with each of the named golems is subject to its own superstition, among explorers and locals alike.

d6 golem encounters & omens

1. **Nightvine.** Foul-tempered & easily provoked. Casually cruel. *Betrayal.*
2. **Lux.** Seems curious; flickers of light spark within its heartstone. *Traps.*
3. **Shambles.** Badly damaged; broken posture; limply drags its long left arm. Oblivious & distracted. Sometimes wanders out of the Maw causing mayhem, but rumors of kindness persist as well. *Good luck.*
4. **Ogre.** Biggest; a clumsy brute. Stubborn, unaware, programmatic. *Something lost or forgotten.*
5. **Almanac.** Predictable. Covered with fine carvings. Vain, arrogant. *Change in weather.*
6. **Nameless.** (A golem not described by locals. If ever mentioned, only as a taboo or oath. Decide its quirks, appearance, behaviors, omen, etc.)

Belltower beetles

Social insects the size of a hen's egg with glinting coppery carapaces. Also called "clatterbugs" by some. Groups nest inside stumps and among the roots of dead trees. When disturbed, a swarm will fly en masse to a treetop or other high perch, sounding a clanging alarm easily heard a mile away. Many other creatures of the Maw take note of this clangor, whether as danger sign, call to investigate, or another signal. Territorial folk in the Maw actively foster nests of belltower beetles as an early warning system, especially near sites where security through obscurity is preferable to a conspicuous guard presence. Thus, careful searching near a nest may reveal a hidden cache or other site of interest.

d4 beetle alarm results

1. No consequence.
2. Wildlife flees. (Lowered chance of random encounter on next roll.)
3. Predator attracted. Roll d6:
 1. mycanthrope, 2. mosswolves,
 3. driftnettles, 4. muck-eels,
 5. umbra serpent, 6. webworm.
4. Sentries alerted. Roll d6:
 1. triclops, 2. scalefolk, 3. explorers or traders, 4. bandits, 5. fungid,
 6. lone hermit (a druid).

Bloomslug

Seldom seen in person, despite the obvious sign of one's passing: a trail, or *furrow*, of fresh growth and healthy

soil left in its wake. Even in dense forest, a furrow is easily spotted by the relative youth of the plants within it, as well as by the path seemingly cut through any surrounding vegetation. Judging by their furrows, bloomslugs range in size from about that of a piglet up to a full-grown hog. On the rare occasions when trackers have caught up to a bloomslug, the creature reportedly moves much slower than expected based on the apparent range its furrow has covered. Also from these accounts, bloomslugs are described as vibrantly green and as sporting a shaggy moss-covered mantle reminiscent of a *knitmoss* colony. Rumors hold that forays into the Maw have stumbled onto lush trails wider than a carriage. Whether these are ordinary overgrown paths or the furrows of gigantic, cottage-sized bloomslugs is not yet known.

following the trail

Depending on a furrow's freshness, a bloomslug's trail can make foraging much easier. Typically, provisions are doubly easy to find and doubly more are gathered. If a bloomslug is found and killed, its *knitmoss* mantle can be draped like a cape across the skin of a creature's back. The mantle grafts onto the flesh of the neck, and the creature slowly regenerates while outdoors. The grafted mantle also bears a curse: the wearer dies if the mantle is ever removed. If the curse is broken, the mantle can be removed without the wearer's death, but the mantle itself will wither and die once detached.

Brine fern

When dried, crushed, and powdered, the fronds of this plant serve as a cheap and readily available replacement for salt in seasoning food, with a pleasant earthy aftertaste. Eaten raw, the juicy stalk of a brine fern tastes strongly of seawater and dulls the appetite.

fern rations

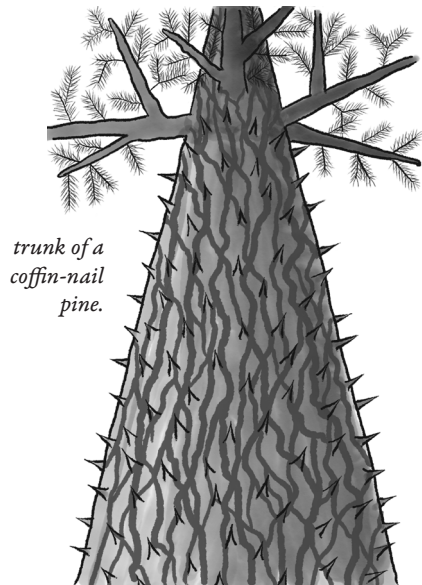
Eating fresh, uncooked brine fern reduces how many rations an eater needs for that day by one, in terms of avoiding any negative effects of hunger (rather than actual nutrition). If eaten to replace more than three meals over a three-day span, raw brine fern brings on severe intestinal pain and diarrhea.

Coffin-nail pine

Carcasses, bones, and similar debris frequently ring the base of a coffin-nail pine. Strong, black, sharply-tapered thorns sprout through the tree's bark and cover its trunk up to a height of 30 feet, above which normal branches grow. Puncture wounds from the nail-like thorns often prove swiftly fatal, due to potent toxins on a thorn's exterior. Further, if a thorn is broken or snapped off, the tree and its close neighbors will blindly launch a volley of thorns out 20 feet in immediate response. Despite these dangers, some inhabitants of the Maw harvest coffin-nail thorns for use as poisoned arrowheads. A lone burnt coffin-nail pine is a common sign of this activity:

a low fire set at a pine's base (typically with *rock rust* embers) results in repeated volleys as flames spread up the trunk, and the loosed thorns can be carefully gathered from the forest floor after the fire dies.

These thorn-bearing trees are not a unique species, but typical pines altered by a symbiotic fungus. The fungus extends under the bark, down to the roots and throughout the soil. One fungus will usually interconnect several colonized pines. The fungal network funnels raw nutrients to colonized trees, and siphons off a portion of metabolized sugars in return, helping both to flourish. The "thorns" that pierce through the tree's bark are also grown by the fungus, and the fungal network is what causes other colonized pines nearby to react when thorns are disturbed.

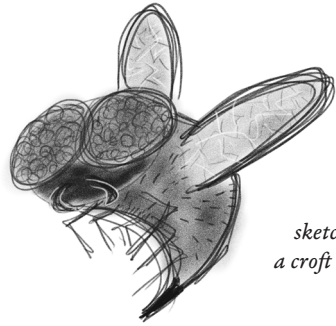


Croc-a-log

While aswim, this variety of crocodile bears an uncanny resemblance to a floating log. The croc-a-log capitalizes on this resemblance by spending much of its time very still, drifting through bodies of water, ready to ambush prey. It secretes a sticky sap-like fluid between the woody scales along its back, the better to trap and drown its prey. Due to this sap, aged croc-a-logs build up noticeable deposits of debris atop their backs. Debris from former prey can then entice new prey: feathers, bones, body parts, or (for humanoids) coins and other lost things. Larger croc-a-logs have been spotted with live saplings rooted on their backs. Opinions divide on whether these accumulated prey-lures are due to happenstance, instinct, or deeper intelligence. At the very least, croc-a-logs have been seen forcing down trees with their bulk and dragging them to dam up streams into new hunting ponds.

d12 lures stuck on a "log"

1. Animal skull or bones.
2. Humanoid bones.
3. 2d4 gold coins.
4. Vibrant plumage.
5. A leather satchel, & contents.
6. A weapon.
7. Small animal, stuck in sap & alive.
8. A fungal fruit body.
9. Shiny thing! (*belltower beetle shell*)
10. A scrap of parchment with writing.
11. A sapling *silverwhip willow*.
12. One boot, just the right size.



*sketch of
a croft bee.*

Croft bees

Thick forest parts to reveal rolling fields abloom with flowers exotic and familiar, tended by these sheep-sized overseers. More than mere pollinators, croft bees actively mind their fields just as gardeners do: tilling earth with their forelegs, rooting up weeds, fertilizing soil with gathered animal dung, and driving off pests. Their most remarked-on habit is a tendency to cultivate their fields into vast whorl patterns. As such, the territory of a hive of croft bees is called a *gyre*. Though varied in species and shape, the pollen and nectar of blooms favored in a gyre share unique psychoactive compounds, and as a result the central beehive is a trove of "mad honey."

Drones are docile in most cases, unless dealing with a perceived threat to the integrity of the gyre. In particular, unconditional aggression is shown to all fungi and fungus-bearers. Drones may pursue fungal interlopers for miles, and a concentration of mere spores alone can be enough to trigger

this response. The toxins injected by the death-sting of a croft bee can kill anything smaller than a mammoth, and rapidly dissolve the flesh of fungal lifeforms. Regular encounters with trespassing *grave manikins* have trained many croft bees to sting directly into the eyes when fighting creatures of humanoid shape.

Death's chalice

The cup-shaped fruit body of this fungus produces a sweet-smelling liquid that attracts insects: a potent brew of toxins and paralytics, killing the insects for the death's chalice to feed on. The liquor of a single death's chalice is strong enough to kill a half-dozen adult humans.

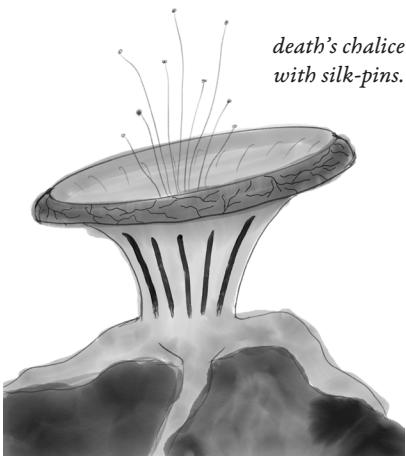
chalice silk-pin

Carried dormant in the innards of flying insects, this symbiotic fungus only fruits when bathed in the cup of a

death's chalice. Telltale pin-like structures grow up from an insect as silk-pins draw nutrients from its drowned body and the liquid itself, slowly altering its properties. In time, the liquid is transformed from a fatal poison into an inebriating solution, able to amplify magical potency and psychic ability. As the transformation process continues, the silk-pins intensify the liquid's sweet-smelling odor, attracting more insects for both chalice and silk-pin to digest.

Dreamthistle

Known by the blue flower fringed with white at its head, ranging in color from soft sky-blue to the near-black of a swollen thundercloud. When the flower matures, the head of the thistle droops. Swaying in the breeze, it seems to be nodding off to sleep. Indeed, legend says the dreamthistle sprouts up in places where sapient creatures have laid their head, slept, and dreamt. This is partly true. Consuming part of a thistle sows an ephemeral seed in the mind. As it grows, the host develops acute insomnia, with the only relief coming while sleeping outdoors. After a few days, the seed exits the mind, crosses the veil of dreams, and takes root in solid earth. The seed will have taken a memory from the host with it, nourishing the seed while it sprouts. The host may realize what has been forgotten, but even if reminded, will always struggle to recall that memory or fact. The thistlehead is a soporific if



*death's chalice
with silk-pins.*

brewed into a tea, allowing a drinker to relive the sleeper's dream. Any who drink of the same tea can share the same dream. The tea will sow seeds in the minds of all who partake as well.

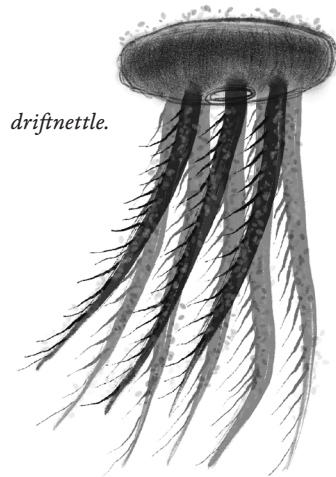
d10 thistle-dreams

1. A grove with an awakened willow, & a dryad living in its bole.
2. Scafolk talk to an *amber golem*.
3. A masked ball turned massacre.
4. The hidden hoard of a *webwurm*.
5. An open door behind falling water.
6. What lies beneath the Gardenfort.
7. A left path bypassing a sealed gate.
8. The face of a traitor or murderer.
9. Long-ago rituals of the druids.
10. Buried treasure & its landmark.

Driftnettle

Simple animals that float through the skies of the Maw, resembling a jellyfish made from strands of kelp. While they do share similarities with plant life, mistaking these creatures for passive (if fantastic) growths can prove a fatal error. Driftnettles are patient, deadly predators that move in total silence — as inexorably dangerous as an approaching thundercloud. Their sense organs are finely attuned to heat, motion, and bodily electromagnetism, which allows them to follow potential meals at a safe remove almost indefinitely. If their prey remains exposed when eventually settling down to sleep, pursuing driftnettles will detect the change in motion and metabolism, quietly approach, and

descend. At other times, driftnettles will congregate in overgrown areas where prey already travels (such as a game trail, or the cave-mouth exit for a bat colony, etc.) and let their natural camouflage bring meals stumbling into their embrace. Dangling vine-like strands paralyze a victim on contact, and the baglike upper body lowers until the mouth-sphincter on its underside is in direct contact with the paralyzed body. The mouth attaches like a sucker and secretes chemicals that slowly soften flesh until liquified, ready to consume.



driftnettle.

This digestion process takes hours. Those who have escaped a driftnettle's kiss report they remained numbly alert and aware the entire time, though blessedly free from pain (or any other sensation). Should a victim break loose before death, those body parts gone numb during feeding eventually regain their function, but their feeling never returns.

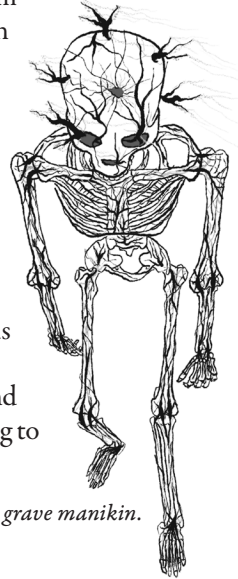
Fairy wineskin

A spongy, tan, somewhat-oblong mushroom. Its volume is almost entirely water, absorbed with such speed that patient observers may watch the fairy wineskin swell before their eyes. If the fruit body is squeezed while developing, its water is released, red-tinged but drinkable. Developed fruit bodies, however, have swollen to the literal breaking point and will explode at a touch. The mushroom's internal fluids will have also catalyzed into a potent acid that can burn and even melt exposed flesh.

Grave manikin

Skeletal remains that walk the earth, but are not undead: mindless puppets of bones dancing on fungal strings. The fungus creating grave manikins infects the marrow of living creatures, spreading a network of rooty tendrils from bone to bone. Typically, hosts die of a blood disease as their marrow is consumed. After death, the fungus absorbs any marrow remaining, strengthening the lattice it has built throughout and between the bones of the body. During this period, its host-corpse seems to slowly move its limbs again as the root-like structures flex and tug within. Once the fungus is strong enough, and the flesh weak enough, the skeleton breaks out through the soft viscera, driven by the many fungal tendrils. The skeletal automaton is then manipulated to

walk toward a ruin or place of power where other manikins are assembling. Though slow and witless individually, groups of manikins become cleverer and nimbler as numbers increase. A group will tread southwards once its collective intellect reaches critical mass (usually six to a dozen members), spreading spores from the fruit body within the skull over a broad territory. Similar to some zombies, the fleshy reproductive fruit body within the skull must be destroyed in order to prevent the fungus from repairing its scaffold of tendril and bone, and continuing to spread its infection.



grave manikin.

Hydra vine

Found in dense tangles near trails, rivers, and other high-traffic areas. Severing a hydra vine causes each end to sprout two fast-growing creepers. Repeatedly severing vines triggers a terrific flurry of new growths, probing out in all directions with aim to entrap and strangle. Killing or thinning hydra vine is possible through controlled burns, or by cutting with acid-dipped blades. Inhaling smoke from a burning hydra vine can lead to the plant taking root in the lungs.

Knitmoss

Tight-growing, dark green moss most commonly found on wounded trees, and renowned for its powerful healing properties. On the wounded trees it prefers, it gradually repairs damage and decay, and seems to repel pests and parasites as well. A creature's injured limb or body part will also heal faster if tightly swaddled in knitmoss. Using this remedy, however, exposes the injured person, tree, etc. to the chance that they will become colonized by the moss. Subsequent injuries will result in spontaneous moss sproutings at the affected areas, which may be permanent mossy scars. While aesthetically unpleasant to some, this symbiosis staunches blood loss and quickens recovery time to such a degree that some local peoples intentionally cultivate knitmoss colonies among their members.

Knotmoss

This dark green moss mimics the appearance of *knitmoss* to near-perfection. It boasts no healing properties, but still targets wounded hosts to grow upon. If successful in colonizing an animal host, it spreads rapidly through blood vessels, capillaries, pulmonary tubes and so on. As it grows, its grip tightens within the host, first twisting and contorting their body and limbs, and eventually leaving

them trapped in a permanent, torturous full-body "knot."

A reliable method known to folk in the Maw to distinguish knotmoss from the benign plant it mimics is to drop an earthworm onto a suspicious growth. Earthworms will not react unusually to knitmoss, but frantically writhe to escape knotmoss. However, an important caveat to this method is that an earthworm already colonized by knotmoss will not show this reaction. Time-to-death for colonized earthworms is brief enough for this circumstance to be rare, but possible.

Mer-crown

The thin fleshy stalks that ring the mouth of this cylindrical fruit body glow faintly blue in darkness. Folk wisdom holds that digging straight down in a place marked by this mushroom will eventually uncover a freshwater spring. Those who test this wisdom will always unearth a pocket of at least a gallon of drinkable water, though not always a spring. This quality of mer-crown is exploited by some to mark hidden caches, by including a sealed jar, pot, jug, etc. of water along with other buried goods.



mer-crown.

Mosswolf

Do not be deceived: in truth, there are no “mosswolves.” No, a single mosswolf prowls the Maw, dispersed in countless parts — one supreme tree with many branches, many fruit. At a distance, a pack appears mundane. Typical lupine forms, if mildly unusual for their windswept greenish-brown pelts. Drawing nearer, sight makes plain the pelts are not windswept, but writhing; the shaggy green “fur” clearly more akin to a dense mass of hedge or bramble; and the whole pack hunting with uncanny coordination, like a flock of birds or school of fish that moves as if possessed of one mind.

A fair assumption, as their legions are splinters of a single super-organism. Which most prey first learn, frozen in awestruck witness, when a pack’s manifold bodies swiftly reweave into a prodigious gestalt predator. Individual mosswolf forms merge freely, but always split into equal pairs. The mosswolf has not been known to subdivide into forms any smaller than that of the average fox, but the upper range of its size is, distressingly, unbounded. Limited only by the scope of its distributed mass, of which there is no accounting.

A discrete mosswolf body does not instantly transmit its memories to the host while split, but disperses its knowledge unto others immediately

upon merging. Safest, then, to treat any subsequent mosswolf encounter as if well-remembered by each beast before you. It is likely true.

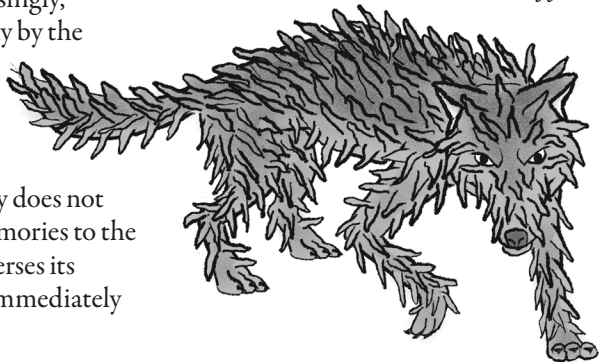
Muck-eel

Full-grown muck-eels are as thick as a human’s leg, and twice as long. They wriggle and burrow through mud and thick vegetation like worms, and can writhe overland like snakes (though in a violent thrashing motion, unlike the sinewy grace and poise of a serpent). Muck-eels are social predators, lairing together in dens that resemble soggy rabbit warrens. These slickened tunnel complexes are never far from mud, riverbanks, quicksand, or other sorts of sodden terrain. Weak vestigial gills allow muck-eels to breathe water for short periods, but they otherwise rely on lung-like organs to breathe air.

bloody brew

Muck-eel blood is toxic to warm-blooded creatures, but boiling their blood neutralizes the toxin. Scalefolk

*an individual
mosswolf form.*

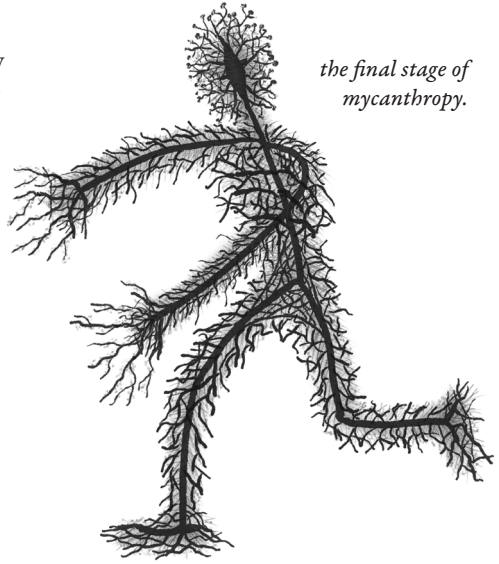


can safely drink muck-eel blood raw, but also ferment it into a potent savory alcohol dubbed *eelwine*. Reportedly, it is only dangerous to warm-bloods if over-indulged. Neutralized toxins in eelwine also fortify the body against poisons, as long as a drinker remains tipsy (or more).

Mycanthrope

Disease and curse intertwine to twist the flesh of humanoids struck with this fungal affliction. Once infected by spores from another mycanthrope, transformation of a sufferer's body is triggered by heavy precipitation: rainstorms, floods, and similar weather. Heavy mist or fog can trigger a full transformation in some cases, but more often will result in a stable hybrid between the being's original and fungal forms. The affliction will not worsen while in this condition, making such environs the preferred home territory of a mycanthrope.

While transformed, a mycanthrope's thirst is endless, and its body can swell to twice its original size by drinking a corresponding volume of water. Tips of fingers and toes develop gaping pores and bracket-fungus growths emerge all over the body, all of which stream a steady haze of infectious spores. Each successive transformation worsens the affliction, with the fungal form ultimately manifesting as a seething mass of mycelium — an angry, many-tendriled slime mold the



the final stage of mycanthropy.

same rough size and shape as the creature's original body, but bearing little other resemblance to its former self. Before mycanthropy reaches this final irreversible stage, the curse can be removed by suitable magic, or by three days spent ingesting only mad honey, found in the hives of *croft* bees.

Pauper's meadcap

Golden, button-sized mushroom that grows on stumps and the undersides of fallen logs. A handful of caps left in a canteen for a day results in a sweet-tasting, mildly intoxicating beverage, due to a psychoactive substance in the caps. Steeping longer than a day raises the beverage's potency, to harmful levels after a week. Hallucinations from meadcaps are consistent enough that some believe the effect is a sort of mystical sight into another realm.

Rock rust

This clumpy orange-red moss grows exclusively on stone, especially favoring freshly exposed surfaces (such as from stone-cutting). When burned, rock rust produces remarkably long-lasting embers. This property can cause doused forest fires to reignite, and also makes the moss a preferred fuel in the firepots carried by scalefolk.

moss-ember firepots

Scalefolk are cold-blooded, and rely on external heat sources to remain active. Clay firepots are a key tool to venture from swamps warmed by geothermal vents, or deal with cold weather while in the wilds. Each scalefolk carries one or more slung against their body, using them additionally as firestarters, or, in extreme situations, as fire bombs.

Silverwhip willow

Long, supple branches reach from crown to earth for this tree, giving it a similar appearance to a weeping willow. On a sunny day, the gentlest breeze reveals the difference, as the twisting, turning branches glitter with metallic brilliance. The flexible branches are strong as sword-steel and sharp as razors at their tips. The threat of incidental laceration leads most creatures to steer clear, but those clever or tough enough to avoid the danger are as safe behind the tree's curtain as if a dozen duelists stood between them and harm. In particular, scalefolk's

hardy skin allows them pass through without injury, using the hollow beneath a willow's boughs as a hunting blind, lookout post, or safe haven to evade pursuit.

silverwhip blade

A branch freshly-cut from a silverwhip willow (difficult, but possible with fire, magic, a hacksaw, etc.) can be used as a weapon, if a suitable grip can be fashioned to wield it without injury. Such a blade does damage as a short sword, and is otherwise treated as a whip, including melee reach. Despite the tree's common name, it is not a silvered weapon, nor does it count as "metallic" for druids. A silverwhip branch stiffens over time as it dries out, becoming unusable as a weapon 1d4 weeks after it is cut free.



*silverwhip
willow.*

Sporehorn elk

The antlers of this elk do not shed and regrow annually, but bear the telltale velvet covering of new growth year-round. In fact, this “velvet” is a symbiotic fungal covering that draws nutrients from the antlers while also altering and strengthening them into permanent horns.

The velvety fungal covering grants the sporehorn elk several advantages: punctures from their antlers are more painful and deadly to other creatures due to the taint of toxic spores (to which the sporehorn is immune), and when the host elk is sufficiently threatened or distressed the fungus will release a massive cloud of spores to daze and disorient pursuers. The antlers of a sporehorn are vibrantly colored, and develop into ever-more exotic and bizarre shapes over an elk’s lifespan. In darkness and dim light, such as in deep forest or under heavy canopy, the antlers of a sporehorn glow softly in a rainbow of shades.

Umbra serpent

Existing halfway between reality and another dimension, only the shadow of this snake is visible — and only while its shadow is cast can the umbra serpent strike. In total darkness, prey are safe. Its bite causes a type of astral projection, swiftly separating the soul from the body. Thus separated, the victim’s body falls unconscious and



*young
sporehorn elk.*

their spirit comes face-to-face with its stalker. The gaze of the umbra serpent hypnotizes its prey’s soul, allowing the serpent to swallow the untethered spirit whole. The victim’s body then remains mindlessly sleeping as long as its organs hold out, or until it is found and devoured by other predators.

ghost-fruit

To bear its young, the umbra serpent bites the branch of a budding tree with its fangs, injecting it with reproductive matter. Miniscule eggs are deposited and cause the formation of a ghost-fruit: a gall the size of a plum. If a one is cooked and eaten before the larval young hatch from the gall, the eater will fall asleep, bodily disassociating. Their spirit is released to wander the physical realm invisibly (except for a cast shadow), until they re-enter their sleeping form or their body is roused.

Webwyrms

Wingless, solitary draconic beasts that spin massive webs to entrap their prey. A webwurm possesses intelligence similar to an elephant or mammoth, and the sinuous body of an adult has similar mass. Their webs also make up the raw material used by master weavers to spin fine, strong wyrmsilk into luxury garments and fantastically light, durable ropes.

Instrict drives a webwurm to amass treasures much like its larger cousins, though it specifically manifests as an urge to collect the most varied and impressive array of a certain sort of item. To that end, a webwurm will try to attract and catch those creatures it deems “interesting,” to hopefully expand its collection. Item and owner are then displayed together in the macabre museum of its secluded lair-web. This often lends itself to a magpie-like fondness for creatures sporting shiny ornaments (fine armor, powerful artifacts, etc.) but ultimately each webwurm’s tastes are unique.

While webwyrms possess no magical or spellcasting abilities of their own, their senses are fine-tuned for such abilities in others, who may soon find themselves (and their belongings) prized morsel-possession. Bargaining with a webwurm can be a rewarding venture, provided the proper gifts are offered for that individual, and that the bearer is not more enticing than the gift being offered.

d12 lair-web collections

1. Strange locks & stranger keys.
2. Alcohols, drugs, & other mind-altering substances.
3. Murder weapons.
4. Timepieces, sundials, hourglasses, clocks, pocket watches.
5. Unique sounds: birds, singers, instruments, devices, etc.
6. Fine clothing for variously-shaped peoples & cultures.
7. Poisons, toxins, venoms, & lifeforms that possess the same.
8. Games of chance, wits, & strength.
9. Skulls of powerful, notorious, or beautiful people.
10. Maps of earth, sea, & sky.
11. Children’s toys & dolls.
12. Speakers of rare or dead languages.

Whisper grass

Rolling fields not claimed by *croft bee* gyres are the domain of tenacious whisper grass. A staple of herbivore diets, the grass grows high as a horse’s shoulder, and is named for the soft whispering heard as winds rustle its blades. Whisper grass remembers all it has ever heard or been told, if you ask.

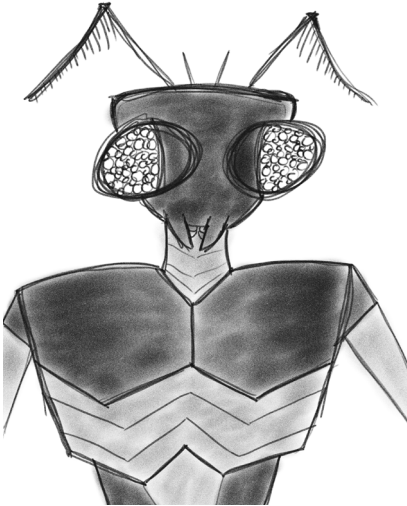
whispering divination

The voice of whisper grass is as like to speak lies or rumors as it is the truth. Its memory is vast. Deep concentration is needed to discern a worthy answer, and avoid being led astray by mischief. Triclops have long meditated in whisper grass fields for this purpose, listening for voices of their ancestors.

Major peoples of the Maw

Anclex

Insectoid people from long ago, known only from their many abandoned ruins. Though their true name echoes in legend, some instead call them Maw-devils (for their arguably fiendish appearance) or Sculptors (for their legacy of statues and stoneworks).



Druids

Active in the Maw for centuries, but believed to have dwindled to a tiny number. This is a deception: druids persist and thrive, secretly serving the “Cult of the Harvest” bent on turning the Maw’s prodigious fertility to evil.

Fungid

Fungal bipeds with enclaves varying wildly in appearance. All fungid are genderless, and able to link bodies to share thoughts and memories. Each fungid is akin to an ambassador for a massive underground mycelial core.

Polyps

One-eyed purple creatures with soft fleshy bodies, about two feet tall. Elusive dwellers of tunnels, caves, and so on. Polyps habitually avoid Anclex ruins, and are said to be the only Maw folk left from that era.

Scalefolk

Lizardly humanoids from a nearby region, forging a new home. Their clans, the Uk’taba, were defeated in war with other scalefolk, and fled to the Maw to escape total destruction.

Triclops

Mutant tusked giants with pale grey skin and three milky-white eyes. Semi-nomadic, they mostly keep to grassy areas of the Maw. All triclops perceive triplicate visions of themselves in three different near-futures, using this *echosight*, as they call it, to avoid hazards and make weighty decisions.



History of the Anclex and the Maw

Millennia ago, a metallic fragment not of this world streaked down from the heavens and formed the crater of the Viridian Maw. No mere meteor, the stone has a mind — *is* a mind. When the mind called out, the Anclex heard.

A caravan of outcasts first reached the crater following the visions of their prophetess: a charismatic leader & gifted telepath. (All Anclex possess reciprocal telepathy, limited to mutual interaction; her powers were unilateral in addition to their vast range.) Anclex elsewhere had no gods or traditions of religious worship, but her followers founded a monastic order venerating their deity: the Astrolith, stone mind from the beyond; an alien intelligence buried deep within the earth. Setting to work, the Anclex began excavations as well as construction of a sprawling complex above, known as the Archive.

When the Astrolith was uncovered centuries later, catastrophe set into motion. Subtle fungi grown by it reactivated vestigial anatomy, linking the Anclex into a rigid hive-mind with a central queen, with the queen in turn dominated by the Astrolith. The only individuals spared were the Silent: those Anclex severed from telepathy by anomaly, injury, or ritual amputation. The Silent sealed off the deepvaults in desperation, shifting those lowest subterranean levels into another phase of reality. The Astrolith, queen, and her hive-mind swarm were

trapped within, their bodies no longer aging but unable to cross the barrier.

Immediate disaster was averted, but eventual disaster was merely slowed: over centuries, the Astrolith has been able to exert influence in the physical realm once more. Its efforts perpetuate the Maw's flourishing of fungal forms and networked minds. The Astrolith is also audience to all telepathy among those in the Maw. Natural telepaths or any often using it are sought out by the Astrolith's fungid ambassadors. (Not all fungid are in the Astrolith's sway. Many are autonomous; others are vessels for the minds of the Silent, who abandoned their dying bodies.)

In the millennia spent connected with the Astrolith, the prophetess-turned-queen has slowly reclaimed a shard of her own mind without its notice. She waits for the right moment to sever their link and turn on it, but bides her time and gathers strength until then. The Astrolith is not totally reliant on the queen's telepathic prowess to exert an influence on other minds, but has unknowingly hobbled itself by relying on her power for so long. Its own powers will be diminished, but not extinguished, if she severs their link.

All Anclex carry a genetic disease that gradually weakens minds. Telepathic prowess and mental fortitude extend the lifespan, as they hold the cerebral wasting disease at bay. Most Anclex

live multiple centuries, but much longer is possible: the prophetess was already over a millennia old when the Archive's deepvaults were phased out of reality. The disease's effects on the mind and nervous system eventually disrupt all basic life functions.

Anclex burial rituals entombed the aged in living, crystallized ooze before death, in suspended animation. Their telepathy is weakened and their minds are slowed; a liminal moment between slumber and dream that exists without time. Their torpid minds can still be consulted by the living for brief conversations. If a cure for the disease were found, Anclex entombed behind the Graven Gate could be brought out of suspension and live fully once more. It is in this hope that Anclex preserved those nearing the end of their lives.

The completion of the Archive, some centuries before the excavation of the Astrolith, brought changes to Anclex death rituals. The Anclex worked wonders not through magic, but via carefully engineered lifeforms and biotic phenomena. The proliferation of fungal growth in the Maw inspired new methods. Rather than endure a slow, inevitable fade, healthy Anclex voluntarily released the mind from the body, transferring it into a mycological lattice to live indefinitely: a biological "network" of minds. This fungal network still persists today. Though concentrated inside the Gardenfort, it has also spread underground, along the leylines of the Viridian Maw.

Timeline

- 10,000:** original meteor impact & formation of crater
 - 5,000:** arrival of Anclex caravan, seekers of the Astrolith. Founding of the Archive
 - 4,500:** construction of the greater Archive complex completed. Excavations to reach the Astrolith itself continue
 - 4,000:** Astrolith unearthed. Anclex population disappears
 - 3,000:** tribes of hill giants settle in the wilds of the Maw
 - 2,500:** giants' descendants have mutated into triclops
 - 2,000:** first fungid arise
 - 1,500:** wars between triclops and fungid. Triclops are defeated and scattered into a lesser remnant, and fungid fall back to regrow
 - 700:** druidic sect, Cult of the Harvest, establishes hidden sites throughout the crater
 - 200:** displaced Uk'taba scalefolk clans find refuge in the Maw
 - 130:** nearby village of Ochen (rhymes with "lock-in") founded outside the crater
 - 80:** an infamous bandit-king claims the Gardenfort as his courtly home, dubbing it his Velvet Palace
 - 60:** collective death of all within the Velvet Palace, in a single night
- present day**

Facilitator advice: how to use all this

The key advice for bringing the Viridian Maw to life is this: *What doesn't kill you, makes you stranger.*

Mortal consequences are probably on the table, sure; life is dangerous and this is a dangerous place. But in the Maw, death by bolt-from-the-blue ought to be rarer than a slow change into unrecognizability. You come out of the Maw a different person than you went in. So when things go wrong, I recommend thinking in terms of change as the default. (For example, see the list of ***d8 fungal infection symptoms*** to the right.) If you spot an open door to make the life of a character stranger, instead of making it end, go for stranger every time.

If the above makes sense for the game you're playing, the Viridian Maw is probably a good fit! The particulars may need adjusting to suit a setting or mechanics, but the idea-seeds ought to find purchase in the fiction. Many of the ideas are half-finished, or leave major questions unanswered. *Draw maps, leave blanks* is what a game called *Dungeon World* advises, and so it is with the blanks I've left. The rundown of backstory specifics also sits in its own section to emphasize its optional-ness. It's one take on what's going on in the Maw, but it isn't gospel.

The two tables in the next section are for improvising in the Maw. For both, roll 2d6 for each column (the detailed

method) or roll once and read straight across (the quick method). Either way should produce a usable result, though the latter will result in more repeats. You might stick to whatever the dice dictate, reroll until it feels right, pick and choose; anything works! Interpret results however makes sense to you.

On the **Encounters** table, under *who/what*, "wayfarers" means any outsiders or travelers. When a *motivation* says to roll again, it's to fill in a two-parter: who's being hunted? What's being quested after? The last two columns add extra detail to a scene: some past element for *remnants*; nearby wildlife for *flora & fauna*. The **Ruins** table generates an ancient Anclex site, as most Maw ruins are theirs. (After rolling a new ruin, keep track of the hex it's in so players can return later. Each 2-mile hex accommodates up to three ruins, in addition to any noted sites.) The columns *before*, *after*, and *right now* weave a short history of the site as originally made, a later change or new context, and what's happening at the very moment players arrive. The result from *holds/hides* is something non-obvious, but that could be found by careful searching or investigation.

What's to be done about the Maw? It's an open question, and there's a host of competing agendas. The **Astrolith** wants to keep transforming the Maw into a mirror of its home, with itself at the center. The **Anclex remnant** want

to break the Astrolith's influence and return to physical reality. The **Cult of the Harvest** wants to keep the Maw and its surroundings populous and growing, to eventually sacrifice it all for a dark purpose. **Scalefolk** want to make the Maw more hospitable for themselves and inhospitable to others. **Outsiders** want to catalog the Maw's uniqueness, or profit from what they find there (for drugs, alchemy, etc).

The core assumption for the Viridian Maw, as an impact crater gradually transformed by its buried meteor, is intended to mitigate some of the negative tropes in D&D and similar games — as a designer I want the premise to be more than a pretext for grave robbing, land grabs, reflexive killing and so on. The Maw isn't the unspoiled wilderness of settler myth, but a wildly overgrown land thanks to compound disasters wrought by nature and people; akin to Pripyat, post-Chernobyl. Thanks to those catastrophes, the Gardenfort is a hot zone of fungal hazards as much as it's a megadungeon site, avoided by all but the most desperate or ambitious. The people eking out a living in disaster's shadow are just that: people. Of all the ways you could use the Maw, then, don't waste time trying to undo that framing. It's nothing I could stop, but it's the opposite of my intention. Or, to invoke Borges once again: *Dejo a los varios porvenires (no a todos) mi jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*. "I leave to several futures (not to all) my garden of forking paths."

d8 fungal infection symptoms

1. You hunger only for rainwater and that most solid of solid foods: stone. Stranger still, you eat, digest, and live off rocks without trouble (save your ruined teeth).
2. A new consciousness joins your own. Mostly you've got a confusing second set of memories and a constant sense of being watched... but sometimes the other mind takes over.
3. Your skin, hair and sweat all thicken considerably, leaving you with a rooty wood-like hide. You're tougher to wound now, but when you are, the pain is mind-meltingly intense.
4. You never forget your dreams after waking, but how could you? Each spans a lifetime of events, or several. Unclear what makes "real" life the one to care about.
5. Whatever else you are: now you're pregnant, too. Or perhaps just something very like it. All you know for sure is something new is growing inside you, growing fast.
6. All you eat is rapidly fermented by your body, leaving you perpetually drunk except when you fast for a full day, minimum. On the bright side, poisons no longer harm you.
7. You're always clammy, have no heartbeat (yet still must breathe), and nothing moves in your veins. If you cut into one, little wriggly things patch you back up. Hm.
8. Your flesh glows in the dark, and you've become *very* popular with the local insect population.

ENCOUNTERS

2d6	who/what	activity	motivation	site	remnants	flora & fauna
2	Druids	Ritual	Part of a foul plot	Strange monument	Traces of blood sacrifice	Death's chalice Bloomslog
3	Polyps	Mealtime*	For pure pleasure	Underground cave/tunnels	Scaled door/entrance	Met-crown Webwyrn
4	Triclops	Competition	To prove something	Well-trodden clearing	Razed croft beeyre	Whispergrass Drifnettle
5	Fungid	A gathering	Commune/discuss	Leyline convergence	Topped croft beeyre	Hydra vine Belltower beetles
6	Seafolk	Scouting	Defend vs. threats*	Wetland/waterway	Irrigation gone feral	Silverwhip willow Croc-a-log
7	Wayfarers	Quest**	For personal gain	Fork of a rough-hewn path	Landmark built from debris	Brine fern Muck-eels
8	Grave manikins	Migration	Claim territory	Ancient ruins	Graffiti/markings/carvings	Fairy wineskin Croft bees
9	Mosswoles	Attack/Hunt*	To survive	Game trail	Defaced shrine	Knitmooss Sporehorn elk
10	Webwyrn	Trap/Am bush	Aesthetic concerns	Labyrinthine woods	Signs of former inhabitants	Coffin-nail pine Mosswoles
11	Amber golem	Patrol	Driven by impulse	Overgrown causeway	Broken statues	Knitmooss Umbra serpent
12	Mycanthrope	Massacre*	Spread chaos	Freshwater spring	Crumbling aqueduct	Dreamthistle Bloomslog

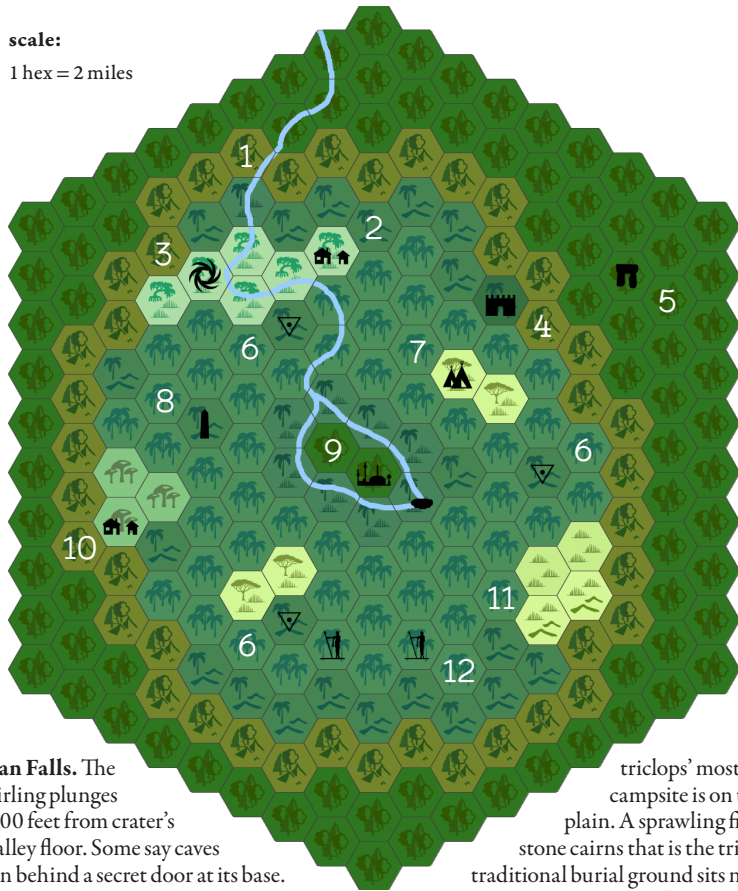
*also roll on who/what or flora/fauna as appropriate **also roll on who/what, flora/fauna, or site for focus of quest

RUINS

2d6	structure	condition	before	after	right now	holds/hides
2	Amphitheatre	Oddly pristine	Made from natural formation	Ground zero of a ritual	Site of a makeshift market	Old, dormant automatons
3	Tower	Thorn-covered	Bolstered with enchantments	Clumsily expanded	Aftermath of a fatal struggle	A door to strange dimensions
4	Leyline marker	Sunken	Placed in precise alignment	Corrupted by malignance	Thrumming with arcane power	Path to a long-forgotten place
5	Font + pool	Weed-choked	Adorned with mosaic murals	Gripped by a massive tree	Home to simian creatures	Valuables recently lost by others
6	Obelisk	Broken	Inscribed on every side	Deeply gouged by claws	Being harvested for parts	Histories & tales from antiquity
7	Garden	Overgrown	Walled, artfully landscaped	Damaged, partly repaired	Travelers' camp with cookfire	Rare specimens, unique mutations
8	Shrine	Vandalized	Unusual material/technique	Familiar sketch subject	Grave manikins drawn here	Small treasures in secret niches
9	Quarry	Flooded	Decorated with bas-reliefs	Site of a dwelling or village	Home to basking creatures	Secret passage to the Garden fort
10	Tomb	Plundered	Ornamented with statues	Fortified for last stand	Amber golem stopped here	Artifacts cached for future use
11	Idol + altar	Gore-stained	Vividly painted (in UV hues)	Ringed by markers of taboo	Set aflame by fanatics	Spirits keen to bless or curse
12	Ziggurat	Weirdly warded	Built by outcasts/exiles	Hidden with great effort	Physical laws plainly broken	A great, esoteric machine

scale:

1 hex = 2 miles



- 1. Viridian Falls.** The River Thirling plunges nearly 1000 feet from crater's edge to valley floor. Some say caves are hidden behind a secret door at its base.
- 2. Scalefolk village.** Raised on stilts above the steaming swamps. Not the only Uk'taba settlement, but the largest and oldest.
- 3. Geomancy focus.** Here, scalefolk practice rituals to draw up fire from deep in the earth, warming their swampy region of the Maw.
- 4. Graven Gate.** A colossal pair of sealed doors is carved into the sheer crater wall. A sect revering the "Sculptors" gathers at the gates, praying for them to open and reveal the path to the afterlife.
- 5. Stone circle.** Thousands of years old. Visited by druids today, but not built by them. The size of the megalithic stones suggests the triclops (or their original hill giant ancestors) may have raised it.
- 6. Druid mound.** Each of these three mounds is precisely aligned around the ancient impact site of the Astrolith. The overgrown mounds appear as natural hills, with buried entrances well-hidden.
- 7. Triclops camp.** Though semi-nomadic, the

- triclops' most common campsite is on this grassy plain. A sprawling field of stone cairns that is the triclops' traditional burial ground sits nearby.
- 8. The Needle.** A tall spire of glinting metal. Sleepers in the Maw eventually realize the Needle is a constant in their dreams, forever jutting up in the distance, no matter how incongruous.
 - 9. Gardenfort.** Once the Archive of the Anclax, and much later, the Velvet Palace of a bandit-king. Bridges to the island lay fallen, but stout stone walls still ring the ruin, the dark green glass atop an enclosed garden has never broken, and the river still drains into a yawning bell-mouth spillway.
 - 10. Fungid commune.** Home to a dizzying array of fungid spawned by disparate mycelial cores. Well-tended rot and mushroom beds abound.
 - 11. Blooming Fields.** A botanical garden gone rampant. Alchemists and their ilk brave croft bees and worse to collect rare specimens and reagents.
 - 12. The Sentinels.** Fallen long ago. Two towering Anclax statues once gazed across a span of miles, with a route into the crater passing between them.



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