

chapter 10 - the wilds



Eclipse is considerably more than just cities and civilizations. More than half of the seven years of my research here were spent in the single guise of an intrepid explorer. It was during this time that I traveled the valleys, hills, mountains, and wastes of the Cauldron, a small, yet loyal group of rashers my only companions. Vast and sparsely inhabited for the most part, the wilds of Eclipse remain largely unexplored and enormously dangerous. Multiple factors deter would-be travelers, first and foremost is the simple difficulty of navigation here. The dark is ever present, and the fog is almost as relentless, keeping visibility to under sixty feet even in the best of conditions. Stars are seldom visible, and the lack of range of one's line of sight makes using landmarks impossible. A normal compass is worthless, and the magical ones used here are not entirely reliable; the sheer odds of getting lost prevent most explorers from ever departing the roads.

Those that take the plunge into the murky, ceaseless night risk more than losing their way. The dark hides horrors untold, creatures of all sorts of predatory natures have gravitated to the black kingdom—to them its shadows offer the perfect hunting grounds to strike at unsuspecting prey. Blind insects of unknown origins and inordinate dimensions abound here, hunting by pheromones and sound, yet even these are not as fearsome as some of the creatures that flock towards light sources. All travelers require light to move through the everdusk, and there are great monstrosities and swift-clawed stalkers that home in on such lights like a beacon. The simple light one needs to steer one's course is the very thing that may bring death down upon one's head. Wise travelers carry a luminescent stone, essentially a rock covered with luminescent lichens. Its light is part of the natural environment out here, and predators will not see it as being out of place unless they notice its movement. Lichen light also has the added bonus of causing some predators, especially those of insect origin, to glow faintly, often exposing their hiding places. At the very least, to travel the black kingdom, one should fully equip oneself with the necessary accoutrements for survival.

UP

It is a unusual fact of life in Eclipse that the bulk of the land is covered by a high rock ceiling, and thus has no direct access to the sky or the stars. Only the central parts of the Cauldron are open to the sky far above, though one wouldn't know the difference based upon the weather, as most rainclouds hover only a few miles above ground. Of course, there are a few extreme exceptions. Massive storms sometimes gather at the crest of the Forge and send torrents of water flooding downward, the raindrops coalescing into huge boulder-sized globes that can knock a full-grown man to the ground and smash through thatched roofs. Those that dwell under the cliffs are not much safer though, the walls and the crater of Eclipse are perpetually eroding and crumbling. Pieces of stone and rock regularly fall, striking the ground at terminal velocity. Even those who dwell below the land are not safe, as these falling rocks can crush through the tunnel-ridden ground, creating giant sinkholes and pulverizing whole villages, taking them with them into the ground. While violent rainstorms commonly dislodge them, there is little rhythm or reason as to when or how these rocks fall, though as a rule, the shell of the Cauldron becomes more stable as one moves towards the cliffs. Stone and earth are not the only thing to fall here; great trees

from the edge of Wildwood can come free, their branches and leaves being stripped away as they descend. Typically the wind aligns them along the path of least resistance, transforming them into giant javelins of death. Water will erode through the overhang too, draining lakes above in Wildwood and bringing with them all the flotsam and jetsam that have gathered within.

Not long ago there was a fairly large and growing suburb of Erebus that sprang up shortly after the upheaval in Penance. For a time, it even looked like the gate city might be soon overtaken by newcomers and swallowed up by this new town. However, a few months in, a rock about the size of a house fell on one of the main roads. No one was injured, and the rock became something of a destination for the newcomers—a point of curiosity and amusement for the recent implants who had never seen such a thing happen. Over the first quarter moon it was noticed that the rock seemed to always be wet. After a month, a clear small stream of water could be made out falling from high above. The newcomers made plans to build a fountain around the rock and turn it into a town square, but such a thing was not to be. It was less than a quarter moon before something high above snapped. In a matter of a few candle marks the majority of the suburb was washed away, with none too many of the settlers along for the ride. This violent greeting was the very reason that Highmark was formed across the Sea of Ink and outside of the lip of the Cauldron. It may be worth noting that many of the residents of Erebus not so secretly thanked their gods (and even Colopitiron himself), feeling as though the flood was an answered prayer.

Far above, the feral tribes of Wildwood sacrifice all sorts of things and people to the great pit. It can rain down bodies, food, or even magical items. There is a well-known location directly under one of these sites that is jealously guarded and controlled by a gang who strip the shattered bodies of the sacrifices that drop regularly. The gang takes their jewelry and their weapons as well as the many magic light stones that the tribes tie to their victims before dropping them into the dark. Enough revenue can be gaining from the sale of these items to support the group year-round without any other supplemental income.

If there is one natural event that strikes fear into the hearts of all who dwell in Eclipse, it is an earthquake. These can be extremely violent and powerful, not just shaking the ground beneath but the walls of the world itself. Earthquakes almost always dislodge huge chunks of rock and send foliage and trees spiraling down. They are also the most likely events to release lakes and redirect rivers. The hours following a quake are always tense, as residents wait to see if their world is about to change forever. There is a visible line of debris circling the land about a hundred miles from the cliff walls, showing where the edges of the land are high above. It stretches about two miles in width, and made up of trees, rock, earth, and bone. The soil of the strip is unusually rich for Eclipse, due to all the nutrients provided from the lighted world above, and massive mushrooms flourish here, also helping to mark the boundary. Locals know that no matter how tempting it may be due to the abundance of materials, to never build on the debris line. Still, every year some new seed or transplant attempts to strike up a life along the boundary. There is a common insult used in taverns here to infer that someone is an idiot: "Go back home to the boundary."

And finally, here is some good news. Due to the thickness of the air and the lessened gravity at the bottom of the Cauldron, falling objects tend to hit just a little bit less hard than in most places. Based upon some of the most entertaining research I have had the pleasure to conduct, I have been able to codify these numbers. In general, the damage an object does is based upon its mass (though objects with extra wind drag can reduce the damage even further). The following table summarizes my findings.

Object Size	Falling Damage
Tiny or Smaller	2d4
Small	3d6
Medium	5d6
Large	7d6
Huge	10d6
Gargantuan	14d6
Colossal	18d6

Note that damages may be lower if the objects are not dropped from at least 150ft. Of course, as Wildwood is located three-hundred miles above, this is not a concern.

INHABITANTS

Out beyond the safety of lit city streets and well maintained roads there are few intelligent inhabitants that flourish in the Cauldron. Those that do must be robust, tough, and vicious in order to survive. The aforementioned werran rule the wilds of the Northern Forest, but they are not the only race to take hold and make their way beyond the boundaries of city walls. The following is short catalog of the peoples of the wild.

NIGHTLINGS

Outside of the werran lands, the largest inhabitants of the wilds of Eclipse are the nightlings. Lizard-like goblins with foul self-concerned natures, these bumpy-scaled warriors with their large, dark eyes are perfectly suited to the harsh darkness. These creatures form large and loose mobile colonies just beyond the edges of the more-inhabited areas of the Cauldron. Nightlings are exceedingly lazy creatures in one respect—they believe in letting other creatures do their work for them. This means that they spend much of their time raiding the lands of others, taking whatever objects that they see as valuable. Now keep in mind, to a nightling, valuable is a very different concept than to most folk. Since nightlings steal whatever they want, money isn't important. Things like gold and silver are generally overlooked. Jewelry is only taken if it's interesting or attractive, not for its value. Nightlings generally are more likely to steal cheap costume jewelry than the real thing, and many merchants place such items at the tops of their chests and sacks to protect the real goods underneath. Nightlings will steal foodstuffs however, particularly alcohol. Nightlings rarely kidnap folk or take hostages, and generally don't rape (they simply don't find other species attractive) or make a point of pillaging. They will only make enough of a show to scare off their victims, and then go through their pantries and take what they want. Sometimes they take odd items out of curiosity, but they never take with them more than they can carry away on foot.

Nightling colonies are hard to wipe out, as they are always on

the move and they operate in large numbers. In Eclipse, the temperature is constant, so aside from a large pavilion tent for their chieftain, Nightlings don't have to bring much with them. Nightling colonies generally set up in one place for only a few days, then carry out a raid, and then move on. When they set up their camps they hold a big bonfire and a feast where they show off (and imbibe) their most recent haul. If threatened, the nightlings will scatter into the woods and then reform their colony later on somewhere safe. They seem to have a knack for finding each other. If they get really lost, they start a new colony, which really, for those attempting to stamp them out, is even worse.

The largest nightling colony in Eclipse operates outside of Baradume, to the northwest where they make camp in a small mushroom forest. From there they pull off raids against colonies, small caravans, and travelers, never over-farming any one road for fear of bringing down hunting parties from Baradume. They would have long ago gained the wrath of any other major city, but Baradume's natural understanding and indeed acceptance of thievery has made their actions less shocking. (Though it should be clear that most thieves in Baradume steal with skill, not with force of number and threats.) Still, one day this tribe may face danger if the guilds ever decide to join forces against them. Personally, I suspect the guilds are happy with things as they currently are, as it requires that merchants and travelers to Baradume obtain protection, coercing them into joining the guilds.

A typical colony of nightlings is ruled by a single king, always a male as nightlings are extremely sexist. The king is always discernable from the rest, as he will be morbidly obese and is usually carried on a litter. In nightling culture, being fat is a sign of power, and a tribe will happily show off their king to others, his fat proof that they are faring well. Below the king are his male heirs and any other male relatives, and then the hierarchy is divided through the rest of the men based upon their fighting skills. Below everyone else are the females, starting with the king's harem and then continuing on down based mostly upon looks. Females hold the responsibility of all menial tasks in the colony, from cooking, cleaning, and sexual duties to even carrying the king's litter. They are little more than slaves in the eyes of their males, and any form of self-expression or independence is met with a whipping. The lowest member of the colony is the "ugly woman", chosen by the males for what nightlings consider to be extreme physical unattractiveness. The ugly woman takes abuse from all in the tribe, she is laughed at and spit on wherever she goes, yet she is also seen as the only one who can remove bad luck, taking it upon herself. She is allowed to charge whatever she wishes in return for doing so, and sometimes her price may be very high.

A young male nightling I made a brief acquaintance of told me a tale of a time recently when he felt cursed with ill luck. His arrows kept missing their mark, and he kept falling off his mount. He stated that he sought the aid of his tribe's ugly woman. She gave him a choice; he could give up his left eye, or bed her for the night. Indeed his curse must have been lifted, for he was in the running for an archery championship when I met him. His story served as his explanation for why he wore an eye patch over his left socket.



PICKERS

Rambling throughout Eclipse, ever on the journey around the “great wheel” as they call it, are small bands of pale pickers. These pleasant traders can be encountered almost anywhere, and they are always willing to share stories and food with travelers. Plus, they have unique items for sale and are always interested in buying or trading for other interesting things. There are many reasons why these traders fare better than others. For one, they are well respected by many of the more hard-to-impress cultures. Vampires will not touch them, having long ago granted them a treaty of passage through their lands. They are unlikely targets for many slavers, as they tend to die quickly if forced into hard labor, and though cheerful and fun loving, are ill company if held against their will. They have gained the trust of the werran too, and most tribes not only offer them safe passage, but trade almost exclusively with pale pickers.

None of this explains though how they escape the dangers of the wild or bandits. For the first I can only say that I had it told to me by a female weretiger that no werran in their right mind would eat pale picker. It seems they not only taste bad, but are slightly toxic. She said you could smell it on them, so perhaps when you have a large traveling group of them, they just do not smell appealing to predators. In the case of bandits, I am sure that there are times that the pickers fall prey to them, but the only example I can give is from personal experience. It was at the end of my treks with them and we were almost to Baradume, when

a group of nightling bandits set upon the caravan. Rather than panic, the cheerful pickers simply started to set up shop, offering the nightlings wine and cheese while they got their wares ready to display. The nightlings seemed slightly confused, but were soon taken in by performers and drink, and before the candle was through what started as a robbery turned into a vigorous trading session where I dare say the pickers made out better, trading some rotten scales for a cache of nightling weapons. There was never a point when I could clearly tell you that it all changed, but the end result was for the good. I did have a wizard examine a flask of the pale picker wine to ensure it was not drugged or enspelled but to no avail. It is a story that I think illustrates that even in a land as dangerous as this, never underestimate the power of unassuming charm. Besides, who knows what sorts of magic they really have in those wagons.

SLAVERS

In addition to the nightlings and common bandits, there is another intelligent hunter who stalks and preys on small parties in the wilds. These are the slavers. Slavers make their living as mercenaries, capturing and selling slaves, either to the vampires of Stygia, to the thieves of Baradume, or to the goddust mines. Slavers are expert trackers, and often trail small groups who wander



out from the safety of the well-maintained roads and trade routes. They can be very persistent, following their targets and waiting for the perfect moment to strike. They plan their attacks well, generally waiting until their prey is prone, asleep, or indisposed to make their move. They will take advantage of terrain and attacks from others to separate their targets. They are also very cunning, setting up small taverns along the roads just a day's travel from major sites, offering food and drink and cheap prices and then drugging whole caravans. They might offer money to young warriors to join them on a quest, only for that unfortunate soul to find himself in chains at the slavers' earliest convenience.

Slavers can attack at any time when out in the wilds, though usually not farther out than a few days march from a major port or city. They are not like the nightlings; they understand that no one wishes to go into slavery in a land where you are more likely to end up a bloodsucker meal than a laborer. Those who come under attack by them use deadly force in return, and thus slavers must be swift and brutal in the execution of their subdual. They often employ wizards with strong sleep charms and holds to take out groups. One should note, that while numbers are important in many of the slave trades, a very attractive person is likely to fetch a good deal more than twenty average humans, so lookers best beware. Also, rare races are craved as delicacies on the tables of vampire lords and ladies. Indeed my deep fey companion was the target of slavers more than once in our travels, to the point that in or around cities we took to covering him completely. One sure way to put slavers off is to fake disease—after all, they have no wish to infect their other livestock.

SCYTHIN

In the wilds of Eclipse, even the central plains are littered with caves, holes and caverns. Sane rashers don't venture too far into these, and most don't even go near. First of all, falling into a dark hole is a good way to break one's neck. Secondly, frightening rumors of a strange race known as the scythin abound of late in Eclipse. These horrors of the deep are said to attack in overwhelming numbers. They are said to be fast, strong, and slick with skin thick enough to break a weapon on. Tales abound of whole cities falling in one night to their raids, leaving nothing alive with only scarce tracks or signs of where all the inhabitants have gone. Most scythin stories claim that they do not eat their victims outright, but rather drag them down far underground, perhaps to some city to be enslaved, to some hive to feed their young, or to some even more unimaginable fate. I had traveled above and below the land for several years, from one end of the Cauldron to the next, and had never seen sign of them. I, in truth, began to doubt they ever existed, but that was before the encounter.

Here I must tell you of the start of the worst of the tragedies suffered by me and my small party during the few years we traveled the land. At that time, I wore the disguise of a human explorer banded with a group of rashers. This was before I joined the pickers and after I left the vampire city. There were eight of us, a female lunar, a deep fey, a camo, two human warriors (twin brothers), a molice wizard, and a dover ranger. Long had we traveled to many of the far-flung places I shall detail later in this chapter. So it was, at the end of our association, that road weary, our packs stuffed with treasure enough to make us all rich, we

came to a small fort. It was still a quarter moon's travel until we could make Erebus, so we decided to rest here, secure our lodging, and spend a small portion of our wealth in the growing community. The first few nights were charming as we ate and drank and told the locals tales of our wild adventures. (The last had been a foray to a lost underground city. Utterly abandoned, it had been the source of much of our current wealth.) As we prepared to move on, a great fog descended upon the whole of the Cauldron, so we chose to try and wait it out in the fort. Though we were all skilled navigators, the fog is an intimidating force to even the best.

On that first night of the fog, the watchman told a strange story of how he had seen a figure dressed all in rags walking through the inside of the fort, pausing at windows and doorways. When the seemingly frail, tattered being he took for a beggar noticed him, it stood suddenly taller and then darted off into the fog. This tale was told around the blazing fire of the inn as little more than a ghost story—after all, there were no beggars here, and the fort walls were twenty-five feet high. On the next night however, when a sick child came up missing, the story took on more ominous tone. Over the next quarter moon, one by one, others disappeared with no tracks, signs, or bodies to show for it. Just as all was getting into an uproar and I and my companions were in danger of being arrested as some sort of slave ring, they attacked in force. Their slick forms scaled the walls like a swarm, their speed unmatched. They killed many who fought back, including the two twins and the lunar. The deep fey, the camo, and I were all taken by them. I could have transformed and stopped it all, but I was too curious to see what became of those taken by the scythin. So I let myself be dragged into the ground through newly-carved tunnels beneath the fort, and onward to darker places.

Do not think me without a heart. I did care for my companions, and their deaths still vex my soul, but I could not miss such a rare opportunity to venture into the unknown and to reveal the truth of a legend that many think is only a tale to scare seeds and children. I must confess that my sin may go deeper than failing to protect my friends; I wonder to this day if they had followed me and my companions to that fort from somewhere deep beneath the earth.

I will write more of this tale in my chapter about the tunnels and underground lands. Suffice it to say that the scythin are real, and that they do come up from the shadows and take whole settlements with them into the ground. They are careful and calculated, sending in exploratory scouts to examine defenses. They take the weak and sick first before becoming bold enough to strike en masse, and when they do... the terror their alien forms can muster, the screams from their multifaceted faces, their speed, those swift-fingered clawed hands, the swipe of their paralyzing tails—all make them one of the most frightening of creatures on the Forge.

SURVIVAL

There is much debris to be found out in the wilds, man-made as well as the natural kind. The ruins of scavenger-picked corpses and starved caravans can be found easily enough if one chooses to wander off the trails and meander about in the mists. Our band

You asked me to provide you with something for your journey that would keep you safe. I imagine you expected a talisman, or maybe a weapon of some kind. I'm sure your face sagged when you reached into the ebony case I gave you and pulled out this scroll. However, this isn't a slight or a joke... the knowledge contained herein you will find to be far more valuable for your survival than any magical trinket.

I have lived many lifetimes longer than you, and one of them was spent adrift in the mists. Though long ago this was, the land changes slowly (if ever), and still reflects these principles. I made my living then by seeking out lone travelers like yourself, picking up the trails of those foolish enough to not cover their tracks. By the time my men fell upon them, their lives were already forfeit, souls to be sold for the glory and power of the guild. No amount of lucky stones or magic swords could save them then... they were ours, and we were good at what we did.

First off, be careful to whom you tell your travel plans. Slavers hang out at taverns too, just like everyone else (maybe even more), and like nothing more than when some tipsy slob gives away his entire route along with everything else about his caravan. Why track if you don't have to? Rule of thumb is unless someone absolutely needs to know your travel plans, don't tell them anything. Word gets around fast.

Don't waste any time on camouflage. Once you get away from the city, it's black as ink, with thick mists that block anyone from seeing anything more than a hundred feet away. The things that will be hunting you out there won't be relying upon sight to find you. First and foremost, make sure you protect yourself from the following means of detection:

SCENT: Scent travels far out in the wilds. Flying creatures like volosaurs can cover a massive amount of territory in very little time, and any scent that wafts their way can be followed quite easily. Your first task—avoid any kind of city vanities like cologne or even soaps. Become one with the earth. Roll in the mud, grab handfuls of moss and rub it on yourself, do as much as possible to smell like any other part of the wilderness. If your cargo has a scent to it, put it in tight wooden casks or crates, and seal it in with wax. Do the same with your food. If you cross a river or stream, recheck your seals and recoat yourself with moss. A few particular plants, if you can find them, are common and have a strong scent that will mask your own. Black sage is the easiest to come by. It's pleasant, non-toxic, and even edible. Look for it.

SOUND: The wilds are a quiet place, and sound seems to travel quite far in the open air. Any sound you might make will be out of the ordinary. Do not make any unnecessary sounds, such as whistles or singing, they can attract attention. Wear soft-sole boots if you can, or put leather over your soles. Do not put metal shoes on your soles. One tip I have heard is to travel near the sea or along a river as the sounds of the tides will block out other sounds. However, slavers know this, and while you may elude certain brainless beasts, you are likely to fall prey to more dangerous foes. Watch your step as well. The ground is rocky and loose, and if you keep to the mosses you will find the way easier on your feet as well as stealthier.

TRACKING: If you leave a trail of trampled plants and litter behind you, you are sure to attract company. Pack out what you pack in. When nature calls, dig a hole and bury your droppings in at least four inches of soil. Avoid marked trails or places thick with brush where you will disturb the plants. Avoid muddy areas where you will leave wagon tracks or footprints. Stick to stone or mossy areas that aren't too soft. Also with moss, take care not to slip, as some mosses can be quite slick. If you have a large caravan, move slowly over muddy or dirty areas, and have one person follow up behind smoothing out the caravan's tracks with a broom as you go.

LIGHT: I know you are not one of those Markers who can't see in the dark, but just to be clear, avoid the use of light at all costs, particularly magical light. The last thing you want to do is light yourself up like a flickering beacon for everyone within miles. If you need light, take natural lighting with you, like luminescent moss, that will help you blend in to the natural world. Firelight, if small (like a candle), is hard to tell from mosslight, but anything from a torch up produces not only light but smoke, which can be scented a long way off. And as for those newbloods and their magical light spells, the quality of light that comes from these seems to carry farther through the mists, and has a slightly different glow to it, paler and more artificial. It's almost like having a giant flashing "devour me" sign on one's back. Avoid it at all costs.

MAGIC: Here's another reason I thought it wise not to give you some useless protective talisman or other. Magic is not a natural occurrence in the wilds. You may not be able to sense it, but magic spells and magic items give off a kind of radiation, almost like a scent, that is stronger than any kind of natural odor, and carries quite far on the open plains. Scythin in particular seem to have a sense for magical auras, and are drawn to them like insects to a flame. They aren't alone either. Most of the slavers I worked with had ways to detect these auras too, and made heavy use of them out in the most remote of areas. If you need to take magic with you, try the following: get a lead-lined crate to store your items in. This seems to keep their scent in. Don't be a fool and use slade... sure, your items won't be detected, but they won't work again when you pull them out. Secondly, you can try using very old magics. It seems that magic items lose their "odors" over time, and the most ancient and powerful of items have no pull at all to predators. Newly created items or spells practically give out a blast of aura. For magics, they seem to have a diminishing rate of about a hundred years, meaning for every hundred years they age their scent seems to dampen by about half.

May your journey be successful, your enemies falter, and the crows guide your way.

- Arvan

came across a broken wagon mid-way though our explorations. Its owner was nowhere to be seen, and any signs of a struggle had been long covered by nature. Whatever took him had more interest in food than goods of value, and we were pleased to find a few chests of treasures still mostly intact beneath the tarpaulin. Packed amongst some personal items and a sketchbook I was most pleased to find a letter I have included on the following page. I can only assume that the owner failed to take its contents to heart.

TERRAINS

For a kingdom completely cut off from light and separated from the flow of weather in the upper world, Eclipse is still full of wildly diverse terrain and assorted landscapes. Its topography is varied as well, from mountains and plains to rolling hills and flat wastes. All these, however, have one thing in common, they all gradually slope upwards towards the cliff walls. Thus mountains that may be the same size will actually be wildly different in elevation as they grow closer to the edge of the Cauldron.

In the wild disparate territories of the dark kingdom, all sorts of environments can be found, supporting life of almost any kind—so long as it does not explicitly require sunlight. The inhabitants of these wide-ranging worlds are like all creatures in the Forge, of a hardy stock—only here they have the added bonus of having adapted to live, hunt, feed, and mate in the dark.

The rest of this chapter gives a quick tour around the Cauldron's wild areas, starting in the east and moving clockwise around the Sea of Ink.

THE CENTRAL PLAINS

Located near and around Baradume, the fertile pastures and wild lichen groves of the plains are the hub of life in the Cauldron. In a place where grains and other common sources of food are not available, the fungus farms and glow lichen fields are the backbone of agriculture—only the kelpgrass grown on the edge of the seas provides near as much in the way of nutrition. These lands are dotted with many well-maintained and established farming communities, as well as several larger towns. They also play host to a smaller mushroom forest to the north and to several bands of nightling bandits. The roads here are better-established and policed than most. Farmers form militias to protect their lands, and armed patrols from Highmark keep order on all the roads between their city and Baradume. It is a relatively safe and structured place to travel, one of the few in all of Eclipse.

To the north beyond the farmlands and the forest, the roads give way and travel becomes more perilous. Here the ruins of a once-great culture that rivaled that of any in Eclipse scatter the landscape. The ruins have been adopted by raiders and foul creatures, and the remains of a raised highway cut back and forth between the dead cities, its use made impossible due to large chunks of missing pavestones and gross disrepair. It stretches all the way north to the Fal cannon river and its natural land bridge. Beyond this border no other signs of this forgotten culture endure.

THE SUNKEN CITY STATE

The remains of a great sinkhole have dug a ten-mile-wide crater

here. It is said (truthfully enough) that a great city-state, the capital of the lost culture of these plains, once stood here. It was many thousands of years ago that the city of Talis once dominated the landscape—a place of science and philosophy. The race that dwelt here knew no equal in the intellectual arts. Their influence stretched across the plains, giving rise to other free cities and wondrous inventions of technology. They lit the dark world with not only wisdom, but great glowing globes that mimicked the suns' light, allowing trees and crops of the upper world to grow. Their greatness rivaled Baradume, and word of their wonders reached the four corners of the Forge. Their fates were sealed however, when they chanced upon a technology that might allow them to escape the boundaries of this prison. They sent word far and wide for other great minds to come and join in their research, and in doing so, drew the wrath of a certain feathered fowl. A great chunk of the cliff above was dislodged, and it crushed their capital city, creating a sinkhole that dragged the whole of its ruin far beneath the ground. Now all that remains as a testament to its once-great promise are hundreds of elevated roads that fall off at the lip of the sinkhole, pointing towards what was once a proud culture.

There is now a small free city at the base of the sinkhole where a lake has formed. This town is devoted to the ways of the lost culture, and hopes to one day resurrect their way of life. The inhabitants are firm believers in the freedom of the individual and in deep self-examination. It is well worth keeping an eye on this place as they attempt to capture some of the light of their predecessors' strange science.

THE FALLEN RUINS OF THE INVERTED CITY

High above, out on one of the many arms of the great cliff, a marvel of architecture is rooted upside-down like a great cluster of stalactites. This blue-marble city is one of the oldest settlements on the Forge, made long ago by a talented race who my memory would long since have forgotten were it possible. So great was their skill at engineering their materials, that their city has remained for well over 100,000 years. However no mortal things are immune to time, and many of the extraordinary towers have fallen to the land below. So incredible was the construction, that rather than being pulverized, most remained intact, ramming deep into the ground and leaving odd-angled spires jutting out.

My band and I explored this place, well knowing the rumors of the cruel creatures that made their homes there. The place holds great power and still hides many magical items, yet it is a strange place to explore. Some towers have crashed through into others, some are still upright, if not a little askew, and others have landed upside-down (or would that be right-side-up?) We encountered beings of a demonic nature here. They became thicker and more foul the closer to the center of the city we got, and my companions were finally repelled. Later, while my associates slept, I returned in my true form. The lower devils cowered from me, but even in that form I was forced to overcome a burning, great-horned beast in order to gain entrance to the central tower. There I found a portal that led to the upper city, and soon discovered the source of the foul beasts.

This, however, is a tale for a later chapter. For now, I will only say that the lower ruins remain largely unlooted, and those

with powerful magics and foolhardy warriors of great skill may want to explore there. No doubt fortunes wait to be had by the bold. The twins both found magical rings while there that seemed to be part of a larger set of seven. One allowed the user's skin to transform into whatever material he was touching with the hand the ring was worn on; the other allowed the user to sprout wings made of metal that not only could bear him aloft but could be used as a weapon as well.

THE EASTERN STEPPES AND LAVA FIELDS

Shaped by cataclysmic earthquakes, massive landslides and violent volcanic activities, this treacherous domain draws victims with its promise of rare gems and wondrous forgotten magic.

This was one of the first places my band and I traveled to after departing Baradume. At the time, we also had a stout and rugged haze with us. He was one of the most seasoned of the group, yet he was also the first to fall. We were in the process of climbing the jagged peaks of the steppes when a bolder dislodged and our companion fell some forty feet, landing with a hard thud. He had not been tied off with the rest of us, fearing we would drag him down. Ironical, for if he had been, we would have been pulled with him. The fall itself did not kill or even harm our friend, but as he moved to right himself, the ground beneath him cracked and a spray of lava engulfed him.

The steppes are an unpredictable and harsh terrain, made up of massive fallen stones from above and upheavals of lava from below. Together, this forms a great mountain of crumbling stone and burning rivers, that in the course of several hundred miles, ascends to nearly a third of the height of the Cauldron's cliff. Many explorers come here, in part because it is one of the few places in Eclipse that is semi well-lit. The lava casts a red glow over the jutting landscape, creating flickering shadows and high contrasts for a kingdom used to eternal night. Those who come here do not always leave the worse for wear however, great veins of precious gems and metals are often heaved up, exposed for easy taking. Several small mines litter the area, maintained by vigorous frontiersmen, and for all the dangers, many turn a healthy profit. There are a sect of wise women here, living as hermits, who commune with the earth and are supposedly able to control its forces. They live in towers formed from lava spires that were shaped as they cooled. Deep fey are commonly seen here on the surface, and their presence always denotes a rich deposit nearby. The lava rivers provide great amounts of heat, and metal ores are common, so a great forge has been built here by dwarves and earthkin. This outpost produces some of the best weapons in the Forge, most of which are shipped off to Arena.

Of course, there are other threats here besides the natural ones. Though the dark-loving monsters of the rest of Eclipse skirt this place, creatures of all kinds that live in or are akin to fire dwell



here, and we had a fair share of run-ins with them. One must be a skilled mountaineer and have a good respect for the chaotic violence of nature if one is to travel here, but the effort is not without its rewards.

THE COLD BLACK TOWER

One of the greatest of oddities in the whole of the Cauldron is the Cold Black Tower. Located near the summit of the steppes where they join the great cliff is a lake of lava five miles in circumference. At its very center, amid the burning and bubbling, is a sleek, black tower standing over a mile in height. Its surface seems perfectly smooth and it has only one visible entrance, a small window located near its crest. The tower itself gives off so much cold that the lava at its base is frozen white. Those few have attempted to reach it through flight find that the lava spits up in targeted jets to bar their way. It is said that one great wizard who actually eluded the flames and made it to the window froze solid the moment he touched down on its sill, subsequently falling and shattering upon hitting the frozen stone below. Once in a great while, a white raven can be seen to come and go from the place, and some have claimed that through a spyglass they have seen a male youth of striking beauty staring out unto the world, his skin and hair pale as snow. I am sure that at one time I knew what was held there, but I have long put it out of my mind, and upon seeing the white raven of Orifelle move to and from the tower, I decided against further investigation.

THE GLOWING VISTA

Located in the southeast, and kissing the Sea of Ink where Highmark has made its mark, this land is lit by its miraculous long-stemmed phosphorescent lichen. This vast valley is one of the most tame of regions in the wilds of the Cauldron, no doubt a factor that has led to its being settled by the refugees of the Penance wars. The whole of this grassland is speckled with light from the lichens that grow in abundance here. This organism makes all aspects of life simpler for those who are not accustomed to the dark, and the locals of Highmark have taken to promoting its growth everywhere. The valley is dotted with small farming communities and quaint settlements. A great deal of the food and resources that help to support the rest of Eclipse are produced here and are shipped by road and river to the sea.

This is also a land subject to a new and growing conflict. Slavers used to run unchecked over this region, raiding villages and kidnapping travelers to sell to nearby Stygia, but with the advent of Highmark, the locals have found a new force for order and freedom taking hold. The open roads here, which at one time were little more than dirt trails, are quickly being upgraded, and frequent patrols now watch over traders and travelers, doing open battle with slavers and arresting thieves and bandits. For their part, the less than savory types have been dealt a unexpected blow, and only now are starting to organize and strike back. The borders with the steppes have started to be blurred as Highmark's rangers force bandits and slavers to retreat high into the hills for safety. The vampires are now more than aware of the aid that Highmark is funneling to the rebels, and now have started to taste the stink of these same interlopers disrupting their slave trade. It is not like the vampires to allow for an unwanted disruption in their ancient game of control. They have begun to infiltrate Highmark and its study its influence on the nearby region, and I

have little doubt they will act sooner rather than later.

THE GREAT LAKE

The largest body of water next to the Sea of Ink in all of the Cauldron, this lake is fed by deep underground springs that flow into Eclipse from above. The water is crystal-clear and rich in minerals, its natural health effects renowned throughout the land. Its shores are the homes to numerous thriving fishing communities of valco, pickers, and dovers. They all live in harmony with one other and trade with and support the local farming communities, helping with harvest times just as the farmers aid during fish-spawning season. If there is anywhere within the dark kingdom that one can find the charming rural life it is here. This is no doubt why of late a very powerful frey wizard, a transplant from Penance, has chosen to set up shop here. Providing the locals with remedies, elixirs, and magical items, she has also taken to building powerful feline-shaped golems that now guard and protect the locals from harm. These tireless sentries now sit in the middle of most towns and often patrol the surrounding areas; the locals can even request them as escorts. One of these mechanical monsters can easily bring down a troop of slavers or even give a vampire a go.

THE STYGIAN MOUNTAINS

Deep as they are high, and filled with more menace than just their vampire masters, the Stygian Mountains form a near impassable barrier between the Glowing Vista and the Southern Badlands. The few passable trails through these mountains are not safe, being overrun with slavers and even vampires hunting for sport. Only in the company of pale picker traders does one have any hope of passing safely through these hills on the known paths, and even the pickers say this is one of the few places that stirs fear in them.

The rebels that hide in these mountains under constant pursuit from vampire hunters have hundreds of hidden paths and tunnels known only to them. The Akai can be just as dangerous, if not more so, than slavers or their vampire enemies. The level of mistrust they have acquired has led them to attack first and ask questions later. If one should accidentally stumble onto one of their hiding places, do not expect to escape without a fight. The rebels live in the constant fear and shadow of their ancient and intelligent enemies, and they assume everyone they encounter is working for the vampires.

To hone one's own path through these mountains is equally undesirable. Great chasms line the lower-lying areas, and the fractured rock edges of the mountains make for dangerous travel and slow progress. Here, between these two extremes, lurk monsters that give even the vampires pause. The worst of these were once vampires themselves; here in these hills, some of the insane bloodsuckers who found themselves exposed to goddust now hunt, taking wing in their monstrous forms—ever hungry, and ever filled with lust and rage.

SCAR LAKE

The heart of farming and food production for the slaves of Stygia, this long, thin lake is skirted by tightly-regulated and controlled farming communities watched over by vampire patrols. The lands are farmed both for grain and for living beings to fill the slave

holds of the vampire capital. These communities are also famed for producing rebels and for hiding and aiding them whenever they can get away with it. The homes and farms here are riddled with hidden rooms and secret tunnels, and the ever-paranoid people who dwell here are not taken to generosity or kindness to outsiders.

REBEL HOLD

In the mountains far to the west, on the borders of the wastes, this small fort is the only established and well known rebel base. It is fortified on all sides with multiple walls, towers, and magical wards. The rebels who run the hold are all highly skilled and dangerous, and are most famed for running a secret caravan to freedom over the wastes to Erebus. If one is looking to escape the vampire lands, they may be willing to aid you for the right price, but rumors say the only reason that they have not been brought down by the vampires is that for every one they aid in escaping, they feed two refugees back to the bloodsuckers. Still, this is one of the last outposts before entering the wastes, and certainly one of the only chances to restock supplies before venturing forth into nothingness.

THE SOUTHERN BADLANDS

A trackless waste of wind and dust, the badlands' seemingly lifeless nature hides truly terrible predators, ruthless bandits, and desperate rebels. One can travel for days and never see a difference in the landscape. In a land where there was a sun to navigate by, this could still be daunting enough, but here where there is no light and almost never any stars to guide the way, the waste's greatest danger is simply becoming lost and dying of starvation. Beneath the surface of this waste, huge monsters make their way, burrowing underground and setting traps for those who pass above. I saw a great worm-like beast rise up here, the whole of its head and mouth lined with spider-like legs for digging. It was about to take a whole wagon with it into the dust when some massive shadow of a cliff-dwelling beast fell upon it and battled it to the ground. We did not remain to determine the outcome of this clash of titans, but the uproar they produced could still be heard roaring through the sands when we were miles away.

I have heard that the best time to transverse the wastes is during the red moon with hope that one can move non-stop and make it to the other side before the dark falls again. However, I cannot believe this advice was ever given by anyone familiar with the badlands, as they are perhaps two-hundred miles across and simply cannot be traversed on foot in a span of two days. The pale pickers travel along the debris line from the cliff edge high above, weaving in and out of the drop zone, ever mindful of the predators. Some also move along the shore, but it is famous for freak flooding and tsunamis. Towards the cliff end of the wastes, glider bandits are common, striking from the skies on makeshift aircrafts and robbing and pillaging those that would hug the wall for guidance. Moving through the open wastes without protection is an invitation to become yet another traveler lost to the wilds.

The lack of rain and general dryness of the air does make for an environment where inanimate objects tend to last longer, and it is no doubt that entire wagon trains, intact other than their owners, can be happened upon here. Many find riches and wealth open for the taking, but the pale pickers say it is very bad luck to take

such finds; they claim it will slow one down and give the wastes a better chance of catching you as well.

THE OASIS OF LIGHT

Ranking up at the top as one of the oddest of sights to behold in all of Eclipse, this strange little park is located almost at the center of the wastes. This oasis spans a rough square about two miles per side, and is an exact miniature replica of Eclipse itself. The cliff walls, the water, the mushroom forests, and all are reproduced exquisitely, with one important difference—magical light shines down upon this land, making it green and fertile and casting light upon the waters and the tiny forests. The oasis is a mirror image of the Cauldron if it were to get normal sunlight, complete with exacting models of Baradume and all the other major cities and towns. The one exception is Stygia, which rather than being portrayed accurately, is built as a utopian capital, complete with a pink palace at its center. The whole of this garden is tended by a single creature, a unique being as far as I know. This four-horned, cat-headed man spends his time giving tours, grooming the tiny plants, and building the miniature buildings and features. When I was there, I was led on a walking tour of the place, and even saw where he was furiously working to build the models for the newly sprung up Highmark. He also keeps an inn on the edge of his little wonder, where he housed and fed myself and others for free, with the understanding that we could remain for no more than three sleeps. I wondered at the power this creature must wield in order to remain unharassed by bandits or simply by desperate travelers that might wish to strip his little oasis for resources—but then I have the feeling he is far more than just a simple hobbyist.

THE WESTERN DESERT

The whole of this desert is entrenched in the mining and production of just one resource, the goddust. Everything that transpires here has to do with either finding, acquiring, or destroying the goddust. It is not a kind place to be found unprotected; for all the fear surrounding the vampires, becoming enslaved in a goddust mine is a far worse fate. The masters of these places are ruled by greed, and they will set their servants on an unending quest for the dust, not caring if they drive slaves to death through constant labor. Utterly unconcerned with safety, they work the slaves constantly, despite cave-ins, storms, marauding deep fey, or Stygian agents. I ventured to one of these gaping holes to see it for myself, and the smell of sweat and death was my only reward. The many mining companies here are embroiled in a land war with one another and with anyone else who would come in-between them and the dust. Fighters and warriors can find work here easily, but being constantly pitted against other swords for hire in a war that never makes anyone but the very few at the top rich is hardly the role for a true swordsman. Mercenaries who ever become less than effective will most likely find themselves betrayed, enslaved, and working themselves to death in the mines. If an ecosystem of any kind once thrived here, it is utterly usurped. Nature's wrath is felt here only through the harsh winds and storms that roll off the ink sea and by the costly toll in lives and money when an earthquake strikes these ill-conceived and badly-managed mines.

THE GAP

The deepest and oldest of the goddust mines, the shaft at the

center of this monstrosity cuts a full ten miles down into the ground, and its walls and sides are covered in tunnels and wooden walkways. When I headed toward its works, I found myself sickened by almost everything I saw there. The slaves here are forced to work with their own waste piled around their feet, and are not even allowed to stop to relieve themselves. Bodies littered the side tunnels, ignored as they rotted unless they got in the way of the work, at which point they would be carried out and unceremoniously thrown over the edge. The few poor haze I made eye contact with were devoid of souls, their beaks and cheeks sunken, their bodies stained with blood they had coughed up from overexposure to toxins. Most miners had taken to cannibalism of the dead to supplement their weak food rations. The slave drivers were not much better, fitted with magical collars that allowed them to go without sleep for weeks on end. They were exceptionally cruel, if only because of the cruelty shown to them by their betters. If anywhere in the lands of darkness I came upon true evil it was here. I thought back to the warm halls and dining rooms of the ancients who had hosted me in Baradume, and wondered at the volume of suffering their extended lives created and was sure it exceeded anything I had seen in the vampire capital.

THE NORTHERN FOREST

Where the harsh rule of hunter and prey is the law of the land, survival is a badge of courage. Though I have already detailed the werran and their interactions with the Mushroom Forest, they are not its only occupants. Here in the tangles and weave of roots and fungi, lost cities and long-forgotten citadels lie hidden and overgrown. The beasts of primitive ages, long-lost to their native worlds, thrive and hunt here, the eons having evolved them into blind horrors made of teeth and claws. There is a reason why the werran population never overwhelms the forest, they are just as likely prey as they are hunters. There are regions that even they skirt, like the primitive area surrounding the Lake of Teeth, a great depression in the forest caging great monsters of old. Then there are the white woods of the far north which are haunted by forlorn spirits that will eat the warmth out of living beings, freezing them to death in the Cauldron's mild temperatures. Everywhere where there is life and plants, one is more likely to die from the poisonous bite of an insect the size of one's thumb than to be eaten by a werran hunting party.

THE LOWER FALLS

A monster of a waterfall by its own right, this waterfall is only lacking when stacked next to the one that feeds the Sea of Ink. It is also the home to a very interesting hermit. If one ventures here, one will find that behind the waterfall are hidden well maintained and easily traversed stairs. These lead all the way up the back of the falls and then around and onto a stone path that leads into the tunnel of the falls' origin. Here can be found an ancient structure carved into the cave walls, the home of the "wise woman"—a wereowl and an oracle of awesome power. She always delivers two readings when granting future knowledge. One is usually bright, shining, and happy, while the other is dark and filled with pain. She offers then to tell the person what they must do to avoid the bad and to find their way to the bright future, but will only do this at a price. The person must give up a part of who they are to her if they wish to reach the bright future. What she takes is always different, it could be the memory of a loved one or the ability to ever be drunk again. It may be a skill with a

weapon or a talent for painting, however, she promises that whatever she takes, it will aid in the person finding their happy future. I have no doubt that I myself might be gladder if I were to let her take for me so much of what I know, but I would rather have the price than the happy ending.

THE RED DOOR

Located far to the north and deep beneath the lip of the great cliff is an overgrown kingdom that the werran avoid at all costs. The red marble that was used to build its walls and temples is not unlike that of the vampire nation, and many believe that this was once a settlement of their kind. Whatever happened to force them to abandon this kingdom it took its toll, ripping buildings in half and creating thin, deep crevasses. However, one landmark still stands unharmed or disturbed by the ages—the Red Door. Built directly into the cliff wall, the surrounding archway of this door stands close to a mile high and is embossed with swirling patterns. It rejects all moss and vines, which cannot seem to grow on its surface. At the base of this leviathan of architecture is a massive door made from the same red marble. It is utterly impossible to open, whether through force, magic or any other means that as of yet has been attempted. For some strange reason, thousands upon thousands of travelers have risked life and limb to travel here and try to gain access, all to no avail. What lies beyond the door is simply unknown; some claim it is a prison for a great vampire that betrayed the queen, others feel the door hides a weapon of unimaginable power, and some believe it is a doorway to anywhere you wish to go if you could only coax it open. Of late a rumor has been spread that a counterpart stands buried in Wildwood on the other side of the world's crust. One would need to consult with Hael to confirm this dubious claim. As for me, I saw it, touched it, and can say only this—whoever sealed it did so for a reason. I do not understand the need by so many to see what lies beyond it; one should rather have the wisdom to leave it be.