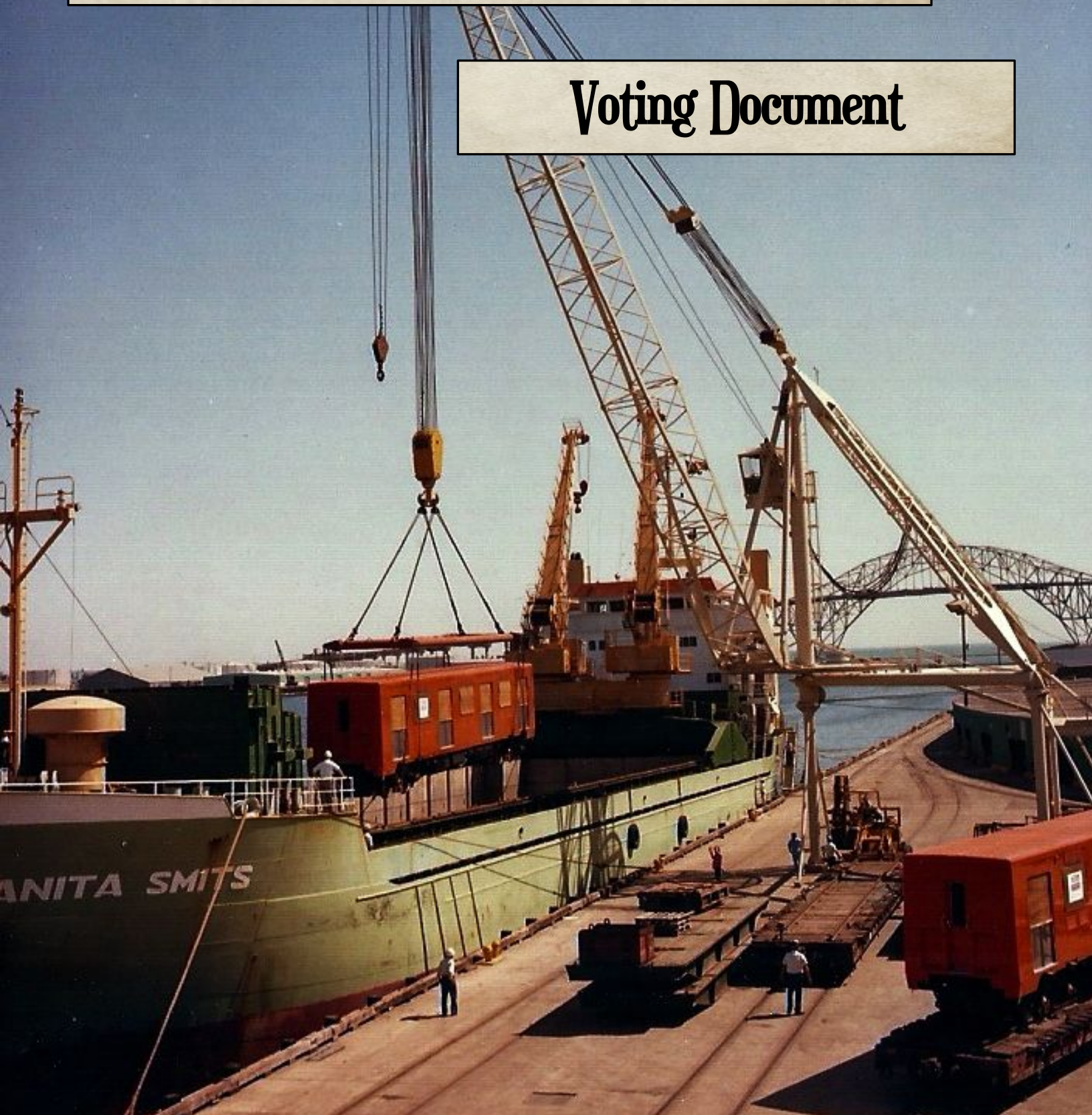


Right Here in River City

The Warlock's Journal

September 2016 - Contest #29

Voting Document



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The Warlock's Journal - Contest #29

Right Here in River City

Voting Document

Welcome to *The Warlock's Journal* Contest!

The Warlock's Journal is a roving contest, at a different blog or website each month. The host picks the topic and then solicits entries from the RPG community at large. When all the entries are in, they are shared with the community and a fan vote is taken for the most popular entry. These are the entries being offered for your voting consideration.

This month's topic is "Right Here in River City." The challenge given was to describe a city on a river, in any genre, in less than 800 words. The locations described range from island fortresses to alien planets to alternate realities. Writers were allowed to submit more than one piece, and a few people chose to do so. Each entry is presented anonymously, however, and listed simply in alphabetical order by title.

Voting will be handled through Survey Monkey and will be open through October 8th. You can see the voting form at:

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/JGYB565>

Read through the document, then go to the Survey Monkey site and vote for your three favorite descriptions. It doesn't even have to be the *place* you like best; if you think someone wrote a great description of a place you would never use in a game, consider giving the piece your vote! Expect some difficulty in making your choice, because there are many good entries. We ask that people limit themselves to voting once per person. Not only is that more fair to all entrants, but also Survey Monkey limits the number of votes which can be counted in the voting survey so people who vote more than once could be preventing another fan from voting.

After the end of the voting, the results will be tabulated. (Any tie will be broken by the Overlord, of course.) The winner will be announced by October 10th, and will receive \$10 from Tabletop Adventures either by PayPal or as a gift certificate to RPGNow, DriveThruRPG, or the Open Gaming Store. In a generous gesture, John Reyst at the Open Gaming Store has offered to match the prize should the winner select that gift certificate, resulting in a total prize amount of \$20! Following the announcement, a final version of the contest document will be made available which acknowledges the winner and credits the author of each piece.

We hope you enjoy each entry, and wish you good gaming.

The good people of Tabletop Adventures,

And the Overlord.

Right Here in River City

1. Ashfork, Kiln 5

(Population 230,000. Mostly variations on Human)

Kiln 5 was once a biologically rich alien planet that was blasted by a solar flare from its unstable sun. The blasted side is mostly glass and rock, but the far side is covered in organic ash. Several vast oceans have been reduced to extremely salty puddles and flats. The atmosphere was 99% burned off and is only slowly recovering. It is still far too thin to support anything larger than an insect above ground. UV radiation and weather extremes prevent the native plants from returning.

Still, there are valuable things on Kiln 5:

- Gigantic rain forests were reduced to hills of ash hundreds of meters deep. Refined ash is rich in organics and worth exporting.
- Undamaged genetic samples from the once rich biosphere are sometimes retrieved by fortune seekers. Well preserved (or living!) insect and animal samples in caves and crevasses could theoretically exist.
- Despite being devastated, Kiln 5 is still the most livable planet in the system. It sits in the “Goldilocks Zone”, has an active magnetosphere and even has some oxygen and water.

The city of Ashfork has sprung up on the Grey Ash River, the best source of “fresh” water left on planet. The headwaters of the Grey Ash River is an underground glacier region that is being pushed to the surface by a very active fault line.

The water is cleaner near the source, but constant earthquakes make that area unsuitable for permanent structures. Ash dirties the river almost immediately and the lower currents are entirely made up of lye. Although tectonic forces sometimes change its course, the river always finds the main channel about 30 kilometers before reaching Ashfork. The city itself is built on the point where the Grey Ash and its main tributary, The Bad Ash, meet.

The Ashfork city council has set a perimeter of 50 kilometers around the city where mining is not allowed. (This is, not coincidentally, the range which city militia weaponry can protect from attacks from space.) Several green house towns have been set up in that perimeter that provide 80% of the calorie needs of the planet. One town recently started producing several species of eggs. Meat and dairy have to be imported from off-world.

The city of Ashfork itself is rough and eclectic in character. Streets were created by firing mining lasers to create a grid of wide channels and then covering and sealing the channels. The grid spreads out far

beyond the practical limits of the city, all the way to the 50 kilometer defense perimeter. The developed part of the city only spreads about 7 kilometers at its widest.

The city council sells off entire blocks to developers and allows them to build in whatever style they desire. Connecting to city plumbing, electrical and data access are all up to the owner. Digging new “buildings” out of the ground with mining lasers is the most common choice, but prefabricated pods, domes, and corporate style towers are all popular.

Locations:

- Several major mining roads cut through the city from outside the perimeter. Isolated “suburbs” do exist, but most of the buildings are close to the spaceport and river (where its easier to connect to utilities)
- Space port: A large flat area paved with heat resistant ceramic tiles surrounded by warehouses and repair shops.
- Medusa Organics Mining – M.O.M.) Refines and packages ash for interstellar transport. Sometimes finds valuable things in the ash.
- Du Sang Institute : Buys genetic samples no questions asked.
- Survey Corps University of Mars (Kiln Campus): Main source of higher education. Buys genetic samples at better prices. Must have documentation.
- LaserKomm Tower: Frequent solar activity makes radio unreliable. LaserKomm Inc provides line of sight laser communication services to half the planet.
- “Suburb” of Nova Angular: Insular Art commune. Love guns, caffeine.
- The “Well”: A big hole that pays to have most sewage in town directed to it. Treats and mixes with local ash to make living soil for use on planet.

Adventure seeds:

- Someone's been painting on the mining transports. M.O.M. Will pay to have it stopped. The miners will probably bust your head if you do.
- Professor Olegsdottir at Survey Corps University of Mars has heard that miners are finding shaped stone after refining deep ash. Someone else is blocking the evidence.
- The city council bounty for “Mad Cat” Davinder, a notorious raider, has recently tripled. He is blackmailing the city for a huge sum or he will nuke the headwaters of the Grey Ash river. The city is keeping this secret for now and would prefer he be quietly eliminated.

2. Caer Hafoty: City of Summer

At the heart of the Kingdom of Eternal Summer, Caer Hafoty sits on the banks of the Mirrored Styx. This great planer river, the Styx visits all the many realms of the Cosmos. Sometimes the Styx is a single stream, while on other planes the river branches. Wherever the Styx appears, it embodies an aspect of the plane itself.

Here on Arborea, the vast woodland plane of the fey, the Styx divides at the central City of Seasons and flows separately to each Kingdom. The branch which flows to the Kingdom of Eternal Summer languidly snakes through sunlit water meadows. The water is sweet and cool for bathing.

This branch of the Styx is called the Mirrored Styx, for the surface is so still it forms a perfect mirror. The flawless azure vault of the Summerland sky is reflected in the calm surface of the Mirrored Styx.

Rumour tells of river sprites trapping clouds and even foolish travellers in the enchanted surface of the river. Wise merchants always carry silver mirrors as gifts for any sprites they meet as they drift slowly upriver to Caer Hafoty.

The Styx in Caer Hafoty

Once the Mirrored Styx reaches Caer Hafoty it narrows and soon ends in a series of meres and lilly-choked pools. These are all fed by a number of tinkling brooks, but none of those thin streams are worthy of sharing a name with the mighty Styx.

Along the upper reaches of the Mirrored Styx, and beside the marble quays of Caer Hafoty, the river is transformed into a watery pleasure garden. Graceful fountains shower into the Styx, with a few rising up from the waters of the river. Glittering sprays of water disturb the otherwise mirror sheen of its surface. All travellers on the river, merchant and reveller alike, are regularly sprayed with showers of cool water, sparkling in the bright sunshine.

At night, the river through Summer City is aglow with magical lights, will-o'-the-wisps drifting on the soft breeze and small paper boats carrying fragrant candles. Careful observers may spot glowing fish drifting beneath the dark surface of the river. Such fish are closely guarded by the river sprites, and not for anglers to catch.

At all times of day and night, the upper reaches of the Mirrored Styx are alive with fey punts, lively regattas and jolly pleasure barges. Every vessel is bedecked with glowing paper lanterns. River traffic is especially heavy if the Queen is in residence.

Caer Hafoty: City of Leisure

The city at the heart of the Kingdom of Eternal Summer is small, but beautiful. Wide paved boulevards are lined with lantern-decked trees. At the heart of the city is the Summer Palace, with its glowing golden dome, like a second sunset.

The streets are never dark and minstrels play on every corner. When the Queen is in residence, every day is a carnival and every night the air is filled with music until dawn. When the Queen is touring her Kingdom, then the city seems to sleep one long siesta.

Caer Hafoty is warm, welcoming and full of joy. For many travellers, this is their favourite destination on the whole of the great River Styx. The wine is always cool, the music lively and there is no shortage of dance partners. Many sail to Caer Hafoty, yet few travel back up the Mirrored Styx to the City of Seasons.

3. Carthage, Louisiana – Gateway to Kisatchie

The roads don't go where they should anymore.

They don't even go *when* they should. One day, we may get a wagon-train of lizard-man settlers heading west on Interstate 22 and the next afternoon watch a couple of flying saucers dog-fighting just south of town. Nazi combat patrols have been encountered hunting for survivors of the Sasquatch society they tried to nuke out of existence in the 50's. There's our nearest neighbors, the Tchalaq – a Paleolithic culture of very bright-red-skinned people who are genetically not human. Their city happened to end up precisely on top of a Mississippian Mound-Builder site about thirty miles the other side of the Kisatchie River. Naturally, we started calling them Indians. Follow I-57 north about an hour and you'll find Kor Klamath, an ancient castle-city full of wizards. Usually, that is. Some days, our neighbors simply don't exist.

That's just a snippet of the bizarre, mutable reality we've found Kisatchie Parish thrust into, with no warning. Carthage is the parish seat, of course. Probably two-thirds of the parish's thirty thousand residents live inside the city limits. I'd double-check, but live internet access doesn't exist for us now – just sporadic bursts of email and texts, which is how you in the “outside world” know anything about what has happened.

Before Labor Day, Carthage sat on the cusp of prairie changing to piney woods, perched on a small bluff overlooking the Kisatchie River. The river's name comes from a couple of Native words that effectively mean “long cane river,” and was the word used by a local tribe of Kichai to refer to themselves. Before The Event, the river lived up to its name. It was a placid, winding, marshy waterway. When the French first settled the area, they built a small trading post that would later become Spain's Fort Carthage, creating a “trail-head” of sorts. Under Spanish rule, the area grew into a solid frontier post, moving tobacco and cattle to distant markets by the Kisatchie. As the overseas tobacco market glutted, local growers migrated to cotton production. Eventually, in the early 1900's, timber mills became a staple of the area's economy. All this created a substantial warehouse district on the south end of town, serviced by a small railhead and dock where goods were stored until the next riverboat or train arrived to carry the area's cargo to points south, eventually ending up in New Orleans for shipment across the ocean, or west toward San Antonio. The Kisatchie is now almost a mile wide and the bluff the town sits on is significantly higher. Whatever force stole this chunk of Louisiana and brought us here extended the highway and interstate bridges, but not the railroad bridge nor any of the smaller city-street bridges.

So Carthage is bounded to the east by the now-mighty Kisatchie River, to the north by US Highway 14 crossing the river at “the Fort,” to the south by the Texarkana Railroad, and to the west by Interstate 57 as it parallels the river. Interstate 22 cuts this long box almost in half, running from San Antonio in the west to Hattiesburg and points east.

After the fires that gutted New Orleans under Spanish rule in the late 1700's, the fort's commander rigorously applied the new building codes to the area under his control. Stucco and tile roofs are the

order of the day on most public buildings even now, and many home-owners have chosen to keep that traditional look, giving the town an almost Mediterranean feel.

The town's skyline is dominated by the office tower of Valkrupp Industries, a sixteen-story white concrete plinth covered in their signature solar panels. Their R&D department has been very active in trying to determine how we got here and they make frequent forays putting out remote sensor stations. Also thanks to their efforts, a significant part of town is now solar-powered.

Other points of interest include Kisatchie Regional Medical Center and its Air-Med helicopter, Kisatchie State College and vo-tech with its NPR-affiliate radio station and local public-access television station, Kingston Airfield that houses three private crop-dusters and KSC's agricultural aviation department, and the fairgrounds and stockyard on the south side of the railyard.

Freight trucks show up on an irregular basis, like texts, so we still have sporadic access to most of modern civilization's amenities. National Guardsmen now man the old Fort, putting it back in military service. Caddoan Point State Park looks like a cross between the Middle Ages and a fantasy video game, thanks to a group of living-history reenactors who had been attending a festival there.

We've made it almost two years. I guess this is our reality now.

4. Circumference – The Grand Metropolis of the Impossible River

The city of Circumference was designed by the Wizard Mentario II Terif, sage of the court of Prince-Elector Pietro Della Nuncio. Using principles of natural philosophy, astrology and the sacred name he was able to manipulate gravity in a most clever and useful manner.

First he demonstrated his discovery by creating a staircase that went up while feeling like it was going down. (Such stair cases are common in Circumference, but not popular elsewhere.) This oddity earned him a purse of gems and an army of assistants. Using both, he then created a perfectly circular canal that regardless of which position you entered it, always flows down hill.

While perhaps a faster course than he originally intended, it was soon slowed to a reasonable pace by the application of a series of mill wheels at its edges. Using these mill wheels as motive force, he then erected a mechanical pleasure palace in the shape of a rotating solar orrery for his patron, Prince Pietro. This palace now lies in the absolute center of the city of Circumference. The circular canal would be the builder's model for his greatest work, "The Impossible River".

Having suitably impressed his prince, the wizard Mentario was granted 3 million crowns for a project to improve trade across the empire. After consulting with the Living Saint Carabaltus, he started work on a grand circular canal 365 miles in circumference on the outside and yet only 12 miles in diameter. Like the smaller canal, it also would always flow downhill. Engineers and theologians expressed concern at how much this would shrink the prince-electors' land holdings. However, Mentario the sage reasoned that the land would not be lost, merely set aside elsewhere. Also, since the land was mostly rocky wasteland and hill country held directly by the prince objections were soon put aside. (It has since been impugned that Mentario used the "missing" land to create a private barony somewhere in Limbo. Since no one has seen it, no charges were laid.)

Before this new canal or "Impossible River" was completed a city structure was designed on precise principles around the pleasure palace of Prince-Elector Pietro. It has 12 radial districts, each ordered and proportioned to match the months of the year. Each of these districts has a major road leading to a bridge that spans the outer canal. Each district is also overlapped by 12 districts built above them that correspond to the dates for the signs of the zodiac. Below are a series of sewers that are divided to match the 12 hours of the day flipped such that the January district above is served by the 6 o'clock sewer. Also, buildings designed by artists of the court to match the progression of the seasons were created ready for occupation

In anticipation of the completion of "The Impossible River", the families of the workers and the Prince's court moved into the city as well as the artists, and many enterprising souls looking to make their fortune. However, when the river was completed and snapped into place around the city; a most peculiar "flaw" became apparent. Due to some imbalance in the great spells used in its creation, no one in possession of both mind and soul could bear to stay within for a more than 11 hours and 59 minutes.

The city was immediately abandoned. Many valuables were left behind and the Prince-Elector, in a hasty wrath, exiled Mentario from the realm.

Soon, it was determined that the Impossible River itself was exactly as useful as promised. Cutting through the city, while unpleasant, became the preferred route of merchants across the empire. By setting a small toll at each of the exterior bridges and a license on barges on the river, the prince-electors soon made back his 3 million crowns 100 times over. While he officially forgave the Wizard Mentario his exile, the sage never appeared in his court again.

III Tidings:

- The soulless and mad are both perfectly content to live in the moldering streets of Circumference and will sometimes attack caravans in great mobs.
- Recorded dialogues of the Saint Carabaltus and Mentario mention required maintenance to both city and river. Neither have happened. Ever.
- One in a thousand caravans that cross into Circumference are said to end up in Mentario's Barony in Limbo. What could he want with them?
- The waters of the impossible river are never flushed into the sea and have no clean source but the rain. Boatmen of the river are often overcome by miasma and plague.
- The mechanical pleasure palace of the prince are loaded with the treasures left behind by his retreat. Those who have sought them mention mechanical servants and guards built into the palace, as if in a cuckoo clock.

5. City of Decay

None of the locals would set foot in the island City of Decay. Some of the eldest, after strong drink has loosened their tongues, would whisper its name, Rojdarsk, and explain that meant Honor to the River in some dead language. They claimed it was once a rich and exciting city. Huge stone buildings were erected, the largest a vast temple praising the god of the river flowing around the island, its swift waters helping to defend it in turbulent times. But the best part of the river was the secret treasure it delivered. Fabulous gemstones washed up on the northern side of the island, apparently dredged from far upstream and dropped there as the river was split by the island.

The city collected them, making taxes unnecessary. The city leaders grew wealthy, but made sure to maintain roads and buildings as the city grew to cover the entire island in the middle of the river and fund enough festivals so everyone felt they shared. And for many years the city prospered, and honored the river for its bounty.

Then something happened. Stories said it centered around the river god's temple, but what was unclear. It may have been a broken oath, an unholy desecration, a terrifying curse, or maybe just a lack of respect for the river that had brought the city so much. But the city began to decay. Wood rotted. Oak doors and tables crashed to the ground. Cloth and leather decayed. Curtains and ropes and clothes just disintegrated. Metal of all kinds rusted and corroded. Iron and bronze went first, but even silver and gold darkened and crumbled. And living things began to weaken and die. People grew weak, and then too weak to move, and unable to breathe. It took days, but in a fortnight there was no living thing, human, animal, or plant, in the city. Toughness and a strong constitution delayed the onset and the end, but no one who remained in the city survived. Even those who left continued to weaken for days, and only recovered over a period of weeks, if at all. The things they brought out-metal, wood, or leather-stopped decaying, but remained damaged. Nothing remained in the city but stone and dirt.

The treasure still washed up, but the danger remained. A swift boat ride over, a dash across the beach and back could earn a sapphire the size of a robin's egg. Sometimes the foolish or desperate landed and searched the beach, or ventured into the buildings. But the decay seemed to take hold rapidly, and many felt weak a day later, after only an hour's stay. Still, there were enough takers to have emptied those buildings nearest the shore over the years. There was certainly more, probably chests and piles and rooms of gems, in the temple and the city leaders houses in the center of the City of Decay. And perhaps there was a way to undo the curse...

6. Confluence

The city has no official name, but it has become known as Confluence. This is due to the three rivers that converge in the middle of the city. Two flow into the city from inland, merging to become a third which flows out to the sea. They are all large rivers; deep and wide enough to handle great numbers of watercraft from small boats to huge transport vessels.

The vast, slow-moving pool formed where the rivers meet was the perfect spot to transfer goods and personnel from the smaller, river transports to the larger, ocean worthy ships. Soon, merchants began setting up shops along the edge of the pool. This led to docks being built to allow the sailors to embark and disembark easily. Other amenities soon followed, and the area quickly grew into a city. The amount of traffic flowing to, and through, the city kept increasing until the city grew into the sprawling metropolis it is today.

Although the river traffic remains the largest influx of visitors, since almost anything can be found in the markets, both legal and illegal, many people are drawn to the city with no intention of ever visiting the water.

7. Cottonfeld, southern tip of Ayalin

Cottonfeld is a small town set on a rocky outcropping overlooking the floodplain of the Sciobtha River. The crenellated walls have broad flat tops, and are regularly patrolled by guards. These walls split the town into two districts, with a large gate between them. The River District houses the inn, merchant stands, and stores. The guard barracks and most of the houses are in the Kisa District. Stone and wood are the main building components, and the roofs have clay tiling.

Travelling merchants and caravans are relied upon to supply goods that are not produced locally. The blacksmith is to the right when you enter the River District and the tailor is directly across the street. Clothing is made mainly from local cotton with some wool and leather used. Almost everything is done by hand, from building the houses and furniture to carrying water-buckets up from the river. Couriers are primarily relied upon to send and receive letters and small parcels. The people are light skinned and have medium to dark hair.

8. Drown Town

The city used to have another name before the river broke its banks, now the remaining residents rarely refer to it as anything other than 'Drown Town'. Most of the streets lie submerged beneath the waters, only the buildings clustered upon its many hillocks or those with upper stories high enough to reach above the flood waters remain in use. These have been linked wherever possible by a confusing web of rickety gantries, though coracles and rowboats form the other main mode of locomotion among the residents.

Though disaster has befallen this once-proud city, its location remains a convenient hub for trade in The Riverlands, and proposals to re-site the city have thus far gone unheeded. During the day the city bustles with trade as barges unload and reload wares on floating docks salvaged from driftwood, but at night the city takes on an entirely different character. For as the river has broadened beyond its original banks so too has its current slowed, its once fresh waters have become polluted and swampish. As the sun sets cloying miasmas condense above the river, and clouds of insects swarm. Those who can afford it hang fine nets from every entrance to their homes, or keep oil lamps burning brightly to ward off fog and vermin alike. Few willingly go abroad in the evenings, and those that do are swathed in similar nets like supplicants to some weird godling.

There is one group of revellers who seem not to mind the troubles of the night city, a debauched posse who call themselves 'The Clowns of Drown Town'. Wandering around robed and grotesquely masked, these anarchists are as likely to reward a passer-by with bizarre gifts as shove them into the reeking river. Some locals mutter that these revellers are agents of a far worse power, though the ability of these mad men and women to organise any existential threat is questionable.

The other great trouble afflicting Drown Town is something the sages refer to as the Seeker Virus. Whether carried by the foul miasma or spread by insect bites, this illness causes fever and vomiting at first, followed by delirium. Sufferers are apt to wander about, eyes glazed, muttering to themselves, seemingly trying to locate something of importance. All too often the victims will appear to find what they are looking for in the waters besieging the city, and after a period of mournful staring will pitch themselves headlong into the river, making no attempt to save themselves and sinking to the bottom, to be washed away by the sluggish current. Those who are not washed away, perhaps snagged by debris hidden beneath the waterline, will sometimes crawl forth from the water's edge neither alive nor dead, and seek out the living, often their very own families, and visit murder upon them. Wise people will tie their sick relatives to their sickbeds until the effects of the virus pass, which they will in time, though former victims ever after have a haunted look about them, and speak tersely of half remembered nightmares of bad things lurking below.

9. Faalz, City of Goblins

Faalz was the city of goblin King Keigterx. It was somewhere in the Scoured Hills, a rocky wasteland shaped by violent winds and a few rushing rivers. It would have been of little concern, except the goblins harried caravans on the Serpentine Trail and the Track of Winds, two essential trade routes across the barrens. Under King Keigterx, the normally disorganized goblins managed to keep sentinal watch on all approaches, pounding stones in a simple code that carried for miles. This allowed any other goblins near enough to hear to hide. Though this suited their cowardly tendencies well, the real purpose was to keep them from leading outsiders to the hidden city of Faalz.

Faalz was huge. Dug into the side of a hill, it extended down for six levels or more, and far back under it. Thousands of goblins lived there, mostly in barracks-like rows, waiting to go out to raid the rich caravans, or make a longer trip to pillage a city in the rich Wormtrail Valley. The king and his favored few lived in underground splendor, dressed in glittering robes, surrounded by gold and jewels plundered from the passing traders. Supporting even a few goblins in that glorious life, let alone the troops, required continuous and costly raids on caravans and the nearest settlements. Tremendous rewards were offered for destroying, or even locating, the pestilencial city of Faalz.

No outsider had ever been inside Faalz, although some had passed by the entrance. The secret was that the only way in was through an unnamed and forgetable waterfall on the Brown River. Goblins dislike water, so searchers had passed within paces of the hidden entrance without a second glance. The sentinels warned goblins inside and out not to cross the barrier when any others were near, and so far no one had found the goblin city by the river. Keigterx had ruled for decades, and taken all manner of booty, which still rested within. It was far too good a prize to pass up, and even the knowledge of the location had a value of a fortune.

10. Grantsburg on the Ziibi

Grantsburg is situated on a bluff overlooking a sharp “hairpin” bend on the Ziibi, a major river. Most of the town lies a few hundred feet above the typical river level. The town is surrounded on three sides by the wide sweep of the river and partially isolated on the fourth side by extensive swampy marshlands kept perpetually full by the great waterway. Nearly an island, the town is accessed either from the river or from a raised “corduroy” roadway built through the swamp and ending in a sketchy road leading away through the wilderness. It has about eight thousand inhabitants. A small hamlet named Pemberton – really no more than a shipping terminal with about a dozen inhabitants - lies across the river from the town, and a sketchy road then leads away through the wilderness.

The town is dominated by strong palisade and wooden tower. The locals refer to it as the fortress, though in reality it's simple in construction. A strong detachment of militia is garrisoned in the fortress. The town's livelihood depends entirely upon the constant river traffic moving in both directions. Accessing the town docks is made much easier by the widening river and slow sweep it makes traversing the hairpin bend around the bluff. Commercially, the town depends on traditional waterfront industries – taverns, entertainments, and hotels. These all are offered in a wide range of quality, from the cheapest communal flop houses to the best hotel available in a thousand miles (which, after all, really isn't saying too much).

People not from the region consider it to be the “literal middle of nowhere” and wonder why on earth anybody would ever live there. Aside from serving as a welcome rest stop on the river, the town serves as a gathering point for all manner of goods – furs, rare foods, strange animals – drawn in from the surrounding countryside. These trade commodities are gathered in Grantsburg because it's the only place they could be so gathered. From there they are loaded onto ships in exchange for goods or, more commonly, food and other industrial items the town requires to survive.

Although the town has a nominal mayor, the real decisions are made by the garrison commander who reports not to the mayor but to a distant military figure. While the potential for friction between the military and civil leaders always is possible, the mayor has learned through difficult lessons that his sphere of influence ends where the military commander says it ends. Such is life on the frontier. However, this condition has assured the town's survival through many years in dangerous wilderness.

11. Hláka Aerie in the Falls

The blanched river flows from its source to the rim the highlands, where it falls over five hundred feet into the coulee valley. At the midpoint of its fall the river passes through the aerie city of the Hláka, the most unique aerie in Kilalammu. The city is built on a series of flying buttresses extending from the cliff face and anchored by ancient magic as well as luxuriant old growth jungle. The smallish and light Hláka are enormously distrustful of direct contact with liquid water, but they enjoy the tremendous air currents the waterfall generates as well as the perpetually cool temperatures the mists bring. They also realize the heavy veils of misty vapor obscure their city and keep it largely a place of legend – easily accessible only to natural fliers such as the Hláka. The aerie extends up and down the cliff face for about one hundred vertical feet. Structures are bored into the cliff face and extended outward on buttresses for up to fifty or sixty feet. From the distant ground or the distant cliff tops, the city appears as nothing more than a series of oddly protruding humps of vegetation doused in perpetual mists.

Non- Hláka visitors are exceptionally rare – and greeted with intense distrust if not open hostility. The town carries on a fairly intensive trade in commercial goods that are light enough to transit by individual flyer. Food, likewise, is gathered from a wide area surrounding the city. The Hláka dislike the liquid water so much, however, that they use it neither for transportation or as a potential source of food – it does carry away whatever they no longer want, however. The massive waterfall plunges through their city and cloaks it in mist, but the Hláka rather pretend that it's not there.

12. Inne Ute

Inne Ute is really a pair of mountain cities so completely dependent on one another that they need to be handled as one. If one should fail the other would shortly follow. A river that flows from inside the mountain connects the two, providing a means of transporting goods and materials back and forth, and allowing the continued survival of the cities.

Inne, meaning inside, is the underground half. It is a mining city, pulling ore from the mountain in which it resides. The raw ore, along with some metal processed by the local smelters, is placed onto barges and floated down the river to Ute.

Ute, meaning out, is the above ground half. It is the public face of the city pair. The metal and ore arrives by barge and is sold in markets locally, along with being sent off to other cities to be sold or traded there. Needed supplies, such as food, is purchased and sent back up the river on the now empty barges to Inne.

Aside from the barge tenders, most of those living in either city has never seen the other. Tourists occasionally visit one or both, but they are pretty rare. The cities pretty much continue to exist as they always have, transferring supplies up and down the river, each playing their part to keep the other alive.

As long as the river continues to flow, the symbiotic relationship of Inne and Ute will remain and allow them to survive, even flourish.

13. Kimberly at Coldwater

Thirty years ago gold was discovered high in the mountains along Coldwater creek. News spread and dreamers appeared all along the Coldwater. Many worked the creek but the real money came from the shafts they started punching into the hard rock of the high mountain valley. The town got named Kimberly, after Pete Kimberly built a general store and tavern, and hung out his shingle. If you need something in Kimberly, you buy it from Kimberly. It's going to cost you at least five or ten times as much as it should. You'll be lucky to get it at that. And if you set it down for even a minute, it's going to walk away.

The town is a typical mining burg with lots of tents and ramshackle dwellings, flop houses, saloons, and constant petty crime. A single muddy street runs along the river and the town's dozen actually durable buildings are clustered together along a boardwalk that keeps the wealthy influential people out of the mud. All handful of them. Everybody else lives in a tent (at best) and slogs in the mud. But everybody keeps finding gold, too. At least most of everybody. The locals here don't say it's the middle of nowhere. They say it's above everywhere.

The Coldwater is one of the best features of the town. Crystal clear, ice cold, and glacier fed. It's not permanently bridged but a couple ramshackle deathtraps span it at various points. There aren't too many fish but you might catch something. It's too cold to bathe in but just right to drink. Aside from the narrow valley the terrain is steep, treacherous, and unforgiving. Miners who slip, usually fall. Miners who fall, usually die. The weather is a horrendous mix of snowstorm or just plain freezing cold. Nobody would live here for anything except gold.

A couple miles and a few thousand feet lower and down the road is Mill Canyon. It's now mostly owned by Pete Kimberly like everything else around here. To an outsider, Mill Canyon probably looks like any other dump in the world. To listen to the miners up in Kimberly, Mill Canyon is paradise. The ground is flat and soft. There is no mud. The weather's nice. Most of the buildings have floors. You can buy a good meal for not much. The militia might not just string you up. And the Coldwater flows right through this town, too (still too cold to bathe in).

14. Mascionne

Mascionne, a medieval town accommodating itself to the demands of the late 21st century. This second storey apartment has seen many tenants and many uses before we came here tonight. The small windows are now glazed with a semi-biological membrane which is supposed to control humidity. They're sweating anyway, overloaded on a typically sultry night. Cicadas buzz in the topiary below.

Down below is a renaissance quadrangle, which has, over the centuries, seen nuns, scholars and decadent nobles disporting themselves in their different concepts of leisure. The red glow from the covered walkway isn't a votive candle - it is a vending machine. The former chapels down there are cafes and printshops and fac-outlets, pretending to originality, pretending that we're still in the Commercial Age.

The tables on the lawn (the grass is synthetic and faded) are served by identical waitresses. They're a batch of 2080 Nyokos, still in their original uniforms. As they nod and smile and bend from the hip to pick up trays, it is evident that their forever seventeen complexions are also sun-faded. Their hands and faces are darker at the edges, where they're more shaded by sleeves and wigs. Bistro Capuchin is operated by an anthropobic A.I. with a mean streak. So the staff aren't artificial intelligences. Their brains are sparked by the trapped souls of plague victims, desperate for life at any price. So the Capuchin is a good place for a business meeting or an assignation. The staff do not have eidetic memory or the ability to post a picture of your table directly from eyeball to the FreeMarket.

From the skylight on the other side of this apartment, the cobbled streets of Mascionne run down to the river quays: and the swirling, brown swell of the Ko River. A single Mascisch barge is lonely at the pierhead. Others lurk singly out in the pool. Despite the traditional pole platforms at the bulbous stern and the high forepeak, the barges on compressed hydrogen. From fear of Moker outrages, barges have to be kept two hundred meters apart, to avoid the possibility of a chain explosion.

There are rumoured to be Moker cells lurking in the Wetrooms. That means lurking on subterranean rafts in the flooded buildings along the 20th century riverbank. Sure, there are people and mechanisms living down there. Look down from the cable car and you can see movement. Or you could until a Murrican drone took out the cable last year. The City Council are still assessing bids to get a replacement. That's hit business for the tourist quarter on the other side of the river, around the old forts and equally useless lumbermills. But there are lots of water taxis back in business this year. A couple of drownings early on, and now the old skills are coming back and even some of the old Mascish boatman jargon, coming up on text feeds.

There are no bridges across the Ko. But be sure to get a selfie on the Barons' Bridge, arching over the Florithene. Mascionne's second river foams diagonally down the mountainside, eroding its bed down through overlying limestone and Mascish Dark Marble, to a ridge of hard basalt. The Florithene gave birth to the town, as a trading port on the pool where the smaller river crashes into the mighty Ko.

The Barons of the Ko squabbled over the town throughout the thirteen and fifteenth centuries. The original Barons' bridge was funded from fines levied on the squabbling barons by the Pope. The current bridge was built during the Sentimentalist period, partially funded by the comparatively civilized descendants of those barons and encrusted with carbuncular baroque figures. Their significance is forgotten. Every guidebook identifies them differently.

There's an early morning sparkle of lights along the line of Fischstrade. Tourists: recording themselves watching fishermen pulling their boats uphill from the pier. In the late summer, Mascionne traditionally eats lake fish. Over the back of the escarpement, in a different water table, is the Chiuse Lake. Ancient laws govern fishing rights but now that the lake levels are higher, new families have built the regulation model of boat and fish new waters among the semi-sunken ruins of the marble works, the quarry and the old prison barracks. Often, they trawl up bones. But there's a traditional four-line chant to ward off ghosts. And now even that is available on a cheaply printed T-shirt.

15. Moon City

In a crescent shaped bend of the river lies Moon City. Once a sprawling metropolis encompassing the river on both sides, Moon City now only sits on the concave side, its citizens protected by the physical barrier the river provides between the city and the inhabitants of the collapsed buildings and vast wasteland on the other side. Through a combination of luck and perseverance, the city retained its vibrant marketplace and nightlife opportunities making it a desired destination for merchants and tourists alike.

Although crime is on the rise, many sections of the city are still relatively safe, with the worst problems kept to the outermost areas. Many longtime residents believe this crime wave can be stopped, with the city remaining active and viable; others insist it is only a matter of time before the city will have to be abandoned and left to fall.

16. Neutral Grounds

Neutral Grounds started as a utopian experiment by two second-born princes. There was a large, long island in the river between their two nations, which had a long history of military conflict. The second-born sons originally set up Neutral Grounds as a small town for meetings, treaties, and trade. Rumors, tales, and bawdy limericks imply or outright state that the princes were lovers thus the town became a haven for lovers.

Since Neutral Grounds is technically seen as a colonial city of two warring nations by said nations, upon the island there were set up peacebonding laws. Before a person is allowed off a ship any weapons larger than a dagger, wands, and other dangerous items are either confiscated and stored in the guard post, tied and bound in such a way to prevent easy drawing, or must remain on board the ship.

That is only one law that makes this small city a bureaucratic nightmare. All items for trade brought in off the island must be inspected and approved by the guildhall responsible for such a product. An item like a magical ring must therefore be inspected by the magical merchants guildhall, the jewelers guildhall, the casters guildhall, and the weavers, clothing, shoes, and accessories guildhall before the merchants guildhall has the final say about its sale. Once the required guildhalls approve the item for sale and give the seller a written note as to that fact, the seller can then go and try to find a buyer. Items created on the island by a member of a guildhall in good standing need only show their guild membership and get approval by the merchant's guild and the magical merchant guild if it is a magic item.

Most things in the city come in twos. Each current "Second Prince" has his own residence. Each nation has its own bank and garrison. On the eastern bank is the waterfront district, including a council hall, bureaucratic offices, and guard post of the elven nation. On the western bank is the waterfront district, including a council hall, bureaucratic offices, and guard post, of the orc nation. The northern and southern banks are dominated by angler wharfs.

There are twenty-two guildhalls with the brothel owners included in the hostlers guild and shipwrights and fishmongers included with the mariners, but the oddest guild is the weavers, clothing, shoes, and accessories guild. They do have the more traditional artist, bakers, bookbinders, bowers, builders, clay and stone workers, casters, glassworkers, jewelers, tinkers, woodworkers, and financial transactions guilds too.

The city has four theaters; one for only orc entertainment, one for only elven entertainment, and one for only romantic entertainment. The fourth is for anything involving musical instruments.

There are a lot of magical items for sale in the city, especially rings and other jewelry. They are seen as expensive, romantic gifts for courting.

17. New Vienna

The city of New Vienna is a city of glass and steel, with soaring buildings dominating the landscape. Winding its way through the city is the river Daneuver, which would once have served as a major trade artery.

These days however Daneuver is used for recreation: The whole river is hangs suspended in mid-air, using anti-gravity technology and youngsters and daredevils ply the waters using various watercraft ranging from traditional surfboards and jet-skis for leisure to semi-professional jet-driven submarine races. Filters along the anti-gravity transmitters keep the waters clean and tractor beams grab the occasional tourist who manages to leave the anti-gravity field. Accidents are therefore rare, but not unheard of, especially among the submariners as these simply jet through the waters too fast for the tractor beams to catch them.

New Vienna itself lives mostly of the tourist industry, as there are no more raw materials in the surrounding areas. The city council therefore considers Daneuver to be its most important asset and they go to great lengths to ensure the safety of visitors, including frequent patrol-boats in the waters themselves as well as various aircraft being used for surveillance.

During the day New Vienna is therefore much like every other tourist hot-spot. During the night, it similarly, turns into a dance-trance haven for the young. Daneuver is then flooded with various (non-poisonous and bio-degradable) chemicals that leaves the river and anyone who swims in it luminescent for hours).

Of special note to the visitor is O'Hanrahan's. An old fashioned "beach-bum" pub, it prides itself on catering to the most daring of all the racers, and plagues memorializing feats (and unfortunate deaths) decorate the walls here. All drinks are served using the luminescent waters of Daneuver, leaving the place a riot of colors at all opening hours.

18. Quicksilver City Blues

*****REPORT COMMENCES*****

*****SUBSPACE COMMUNICATOR*****

*****QUANTUM ENTANGLEMENT NODE RX334231*****

*****DEEP SPACE SURVEY VESSEL 'GARUDA'*****

*****SURVEYOR-CAPTAIN GENEVIEVE BHUTTO COMMANDING*****

As an addendum to my earlier report on our continuing survey of the world we have named 'Brightspark' (reference #23548273/B) additional information has come to my attention regarding the 'holy city' which appears to be the local indigenes de facto capital in the north-eastern continent. As noted previously this city sits alongside a vast upwelling of what appears to be naturally occurring mercury, though a concentration of this magnitude has not previously been noted in any survey I am aware of, and the geological mechanism for this remains poorly understood.

It is only in this city which we have dubbed 'Ghat' that the native sentients seem to gather in numbers larger than their preferred semi-nomadic troupes, to conduct trading, arrange pair-mating and most significantly bring the elderly who are near to death to await their natural ending. It is regarding the latter practices that this report addendum shall mainly concern itself.

The eastern fringe of Ghat abuts an S-shaped flow of the quicksilver river which wells up from the surrounding desert. It is in this quarter of the city that those 'awaiting eternity' gather in temple-houses to fast and meditate, their families assembled close by and observing with reverent silence. If this is considered a time of grief we have not been able to detect any signs of this in the alien's behavioural patterns. The nearby flow of the mercury (and the cloud of mercury vapour that is boiled off by the intense desert sun) that is so dangerously toxic to our team members seems to provoke nothing but a mild euphoric and hallucinogenic effect on the indigenous physiology. When the dying elder is near to death they are moved close to the river's edge onto specially prepared platforms, where under their own power or with family assistance they are fed a little of the quicksilver. When they are ready, and before the moment of death actually arrives, they will roll or be pushed into the current, at which time their relatives take up a ritual song of such great complexity that our translators are having trouble deciphering it.

The natives seem to hold that the quicksilver river contains the memories and wisdom of all their ancestors, and indeed clan chiefs will often come here to commune with the ancestors on astrologically significant occasions. Indeed, if a native dies far away from the river it is considered a great tragedy and their bodies are semi-mummified for immersion into the river at the date of a later pilgrimage. While it would be tempting to dismiss this as yet another fascinating but ultimately groundless religious practice,

a report from our telepath, Ngarra, gives me pause. He insists that in proximity to the river, while observing the local rituals, it 'reacted' to his presence in a way that felt like a subtle empathic mind probe. Our medico, Dr Sorenson, postulates that micro-tears in Ngarra's enviro-suit may have admitted enough mercury vapour to have affected his judgement, but the jury is still out on this one. We will continue observations and report as more information becomes available. Needless to say the discovery of what is potentially a psionically active metal has our scientists greatly excited.

*******REPORT ENDS*******

*******SECURITY CLEARANCE 1/1A/2B-000*******

*******FILE 'ULTRAVIOLET' SENSITIVITY*******

19. Reddinsfield, South Kraynar

I look to my right, seeing a sign that said “Welcome to Reddinsfield!” Yes, I thought, very welcoming when you’re being hauled into the city in a slave boat. I had heard stories growing up about the wonders of Reddinsfield and always wanted to go, but I never thought that it would be under these circumstances.

The Güçlü river cuts through the center of the city, letting me have a nice view of everything as we float through. From the window I can see merchants lined up calling out their wares, beautiful silks, exotic animals, all different types of food. “Looks like it still is a bustling city,” I whisper to myself. Eventually we pass through the market area heading into what is, I guess, the residential area, as it is quieter now. I notice the closest buildings all seem to be two story and painted in bright colors. Looking up as far as I can through the window, I can see clothes hanging on lines strung over the alleys.

We pull into a dock, the slavers ordering everyone out, and pulling us to holding cells. I look around my cell, taking in the small cot in the corner and... nothing else, just the cot. “How lovely, nothing to do but sit and wait,” I sigh. I sit down on the cot and close my eyes, listening to the bustle of the nearby market street. At some point, I fall asleep.

I jerk awake, rudely awakened by a bucket of cold water thrown on me. “Get up, it’s time for the auction,” a gruff voice states from the doorway. I look down at my clothes, which are now soaking wet, giving people a view I would rather them not see. “Don’t worry, you’ll get fresh clothes when you get there.” Well, I thought, at least they have some decency, even if it isn’t much.

After they put us all on the chain again, with me somehow being the first person in line, we start for, what I assume, is where the auction is going to take place. To get there, it looks as though we are going to have to go through the crowded market. We turn a corner and I stop in my tracks, stunned by all the colors and the sheer number of people that are filling the street. Well, so much for them being “decent”. A sharp tug on the chain around my neck pulls me off balance. I catch myself and start forward again, the people in the street somehow making room in front of the slaver for us to pass through. At the end of the market we make a left and enter a building that is different from all the others, as it is painted a dark red, almost black.

They take us to a large room and let us off the chain. We are given fresh clothes, still smelling of soap, and told to exit into the hall in a single file after we are done changing. Slavers stand guard right outside the door so that there is no way to escape. After we are all changed, we exit the room into the hall, with me somehow, once again, being in front. We are led through a series of tunnels until we come to a theater-like room, a large platform on one end with seats opposite. We are led onto the platform and one by one made to stand in front of the others at the edge of the platform as we are sold off to wealthy merchants and nobles. I am the last to be sold and I stand there, wondering who my new master will be, hating the idea of being controlled for the rest of my life. There is a sharp tug on my chain, pulling me back to reality. I must have zoned out. My chain is now being handed to someone, but I can’t see their face as their back is turned to me, so I wait. I am taken to a carriage, and put in one seat, while the

person who bought me sits across and I am able to finally see their face. It is a man, he has dark olive brown skin, messy brown hair, and stunning green eyes. He looks at me with an amused expression. "My name is Talat Unsal. Welcome to Reddinsfield." Guess I better get comfortable, as it looks like I'll be staying for a while.

20. Ride the River City

Everyone considered doing it. The young wanted to prove themselves. The bored wanted adventure. The desperate would try anything...almost anything. It was something to talk about for the years between the appearances of the River City.

It just appeared overnight. A city was now on an island in the middle of the river that ran down one side of the town. Somehow, no one ever saw it appear. And the river seemed no wider, flowing along both sides of the island, yet the city was big. It looked like a part of the town that had always been there. It had the same wooden buildings, the deeply angled roofs, the lattice shutters. Even the people looked, dressed, and spoke the same as those in the town.

The river city was not exactly the same as the last time it had materialized. It had different buildings, different streets, even the shape of the island was changed. It still looked like it belonged with the town, but it was changed. The people were never the ones who had been there before, either. Always pleasant, not overly talkative, but fair. Their goods were slightly different, but no marvels, and they were traded honestly. They never explained why the city appeared, or where it went, or even what its name was. It was just the river city.

Everyone knew it would disappear again, and that brought out the young, the bored, and the desperate. Anyone could go with the river city, wherever it went. There always seemed to be a job available, and a place to sleep for anyone willing to go. Those with enough money put buy could find a room or a house on the island. Sleeping on the street was frowned on, as it was in town, but something always became available for the lowliest, youngest, or oldest who wanted to leave. There were no enticements, no coercion, no promises. Friends and family were welcome to talk anyone out of going. Somehow, the river city remained until all the decisions were made. No one knew where the city went, but everyone knew that no one had ever come back from the ride.

The final questions were when and how it would vanish. A score of schemes were put in place to see what happened to a whole city. People watched it all night in turns. Cords, even stout ropes, were quietly tied between docks in the city and town, some hung with bells. A few boats were "accidentally" left tied to its docks, some even manned by brave souls. It was all to no avail.

One morning, the cords and ropes where neatly coiled. The boats were tied to the town's docks, and all watchers either awoke or looked back to an empty river. All was as before, except for those who had chosen to ride the river city.

21. Rivervale

Rivervale was once a small village, built on the edge of the Steiner River. The area was all farmland, so food was in abundance. Fish pulled from the river supplemented the grains and red meat from the land. Soon, instead of passing through on the river, people began settling in the area.

The village soon grew into a town, and then a city. The traffic on the river kept increasing, driving up the population even further. Even with the conversion of most of the farmland into housing, more was needed. So they expanded up as well as out, continually making the buildings taller until they began to block the sun. The center of the city, the part surrounding the river, soon existed only in shadow even during the brightest day. Eventually, the ongoing construction covered the river completely, driving it from view. Soon it was driven from memory as well as most of the populace forgot it ever existed.

As the city grew upwards, so did the wealth. Those with money lived on the upper floors near the warmth of the sun, leaving those without to try and survive in the cold and darkness below. With the river functionally inaccessible, fishing was impossible and starvation began to be a reality for the poor. Occasionally a brave soul, driven by hunger, tried to find the mythical river the city was named for and see if sustenance could be found there. Most never returned, and those that did told tales of stagnant, contaminated water devoid of life.

The once cheerful river village had become an emotionless behemoth of a city, disconnected from its namesake.

22. Tawen: Queen of the Watch in a Field of Knights and Rooks

Once empty plates have been cleared aside and drinks refreshed, your Guide provides a little background about Tawen, capital of the island known as the Watch. *"The city has been a center for the People ever since the island was flooded with refugees during the aftermath of the Cataclysm. Many of the Young Races continued westward to the great plains and south to jungle lands. The Dwarves scattered to mountains here and there. The Elves founded an anchorage further south in the Watch."*

"South of here mountains rise across the southern part of the island. The source of the River Winding is high upon their slopes. Ridges of rock extend northward from the chain. Limestone it is called. The weather of the world has gnawed away at the rock and left a field of pinnacles, like pieces upon a chessboard, arrayed along the north slopes. The Winding, as it grows into a large river, cuts through the slopes and curves about the vast rocks, embracing them."

"Tawen, our city, is built into one of these spires, where the river has carved an opening in the plains. The side of the stone was revealed and ages ago a collapse created a hollow in the base. There the first of my Peoples built the Lower City of Tawen. Up in the air, atop the pinnacle, there is another space like a bowl or nest. In that opening, The Priest's People built the Upper City. Tunnels have been carved up and down through the stone, shored by magic and man, to connect the two."

"As Tawen grew, other Peoples and visitors settled in the area. Soon the pinnacle began to become crowded. And so the Outer City was begun across the River Winding and two great bridges built to connect it to the spire. Tawen thus continues to grow up, down and outward as you will soon see."

With that, everyone rises and departs the restaurant. The Steeds of Elemental Wind are corralled, mounted and spurred into the skies, your guide leading the party south to follow the River Winding inland. The wide swath of blue slowly narrows as the land gradually rises to the south. The first hours of afternoon take the party across verdant plains dotted with small settlements surrounded by fields, herds of animals and small clumps of forest.

Mid afternoon passes the land begins to rise rapidly. The Winding, now a narrow force of nature, begins to carve deeply into the landscape. Small round hills can be seen here and there. Soon those hills are replaced by more dramatic extrusions of rock, Limestone Karst rising into the air. Spelzen Heqtelt, "Field of Tall or Giants" as the Priest knows it. The river, now a hundred feet below the rising foothills, continues onward. The ravine turns into a canyon. Pinnacles dot the landscape to your left and right. The afternoon wanes, the river takes one last turn and then that familiar feeling of home washes over the Priest and your Guide.

A great pinnacle rises from the ground, the river carves a path along its eastern side. As the Guide described, the Lower City nestles in a huge opening in the stone along the river bank. The Outer City sprawls around two bridges crossing the canyon from the pinnacle to the eastern bank. And above, in the air, the Upper City is perched in the top of the limestone. The city of Tawen, full of the smells and sounds of life and the feel of home, welcomes People and others. Your Guide, a smile upon her face,

leads your group of Elemental Steeds towards the Outer City. There Caravan grounds provide adequate landing space.

Hopping from the Steed, she holds arms wide, as if embracing the city across the river, "*Welcome to Tawen, Queen of the Watch.*" She turns, gesturing across the plains dotted with pinnacles of all sizes and shapes, "*Ruler of a field of Knights and Rooks.*"

23. The City of Thousand Echoes

Underneath a huge city, there's a forgotten cave. Through the cave, a river flows. In that river there's The City of Thousand Echoes. It is a town of troublemongers, smugglers, cutthroats, and other criminals who feel the need to escape the long hand of law. Nobody knows how many citizens the town has, but it must be about a thousand. The proud inhabitants call it a city, in any case.

The name of the city is known above, but the location is revealed only to those who need it. Everybody in the city knows the authorities come as soon as they learn of the city, and the one responsible will have a long and painful death.

Sound echoes heavily in the cave, and the citizens quickly learn to listen in a new way in order to not get confused by all the sounds they hear. The name of the city was given by its founder, a famous pirate captain One-Eyes. He drowned in the river under mysterious circumstances three years ago.

The only known entrance to the city is behind thick, thorny bushes growing in a pass in a forest. The pass cannot be found in the maps. One-Eyes found the cave while running from the authorities after his last ship was sunk in an epic sea battle. He crawled behind the bushes, and found himself in a cave below the city. The pursuers went past him, and he decided to establish headquarters on an island he found in the middle of the river.

The water in the river is clear and teeth-shatteringly cold. It flows slowly, with white, blind fish swimming around. They taste bland, but are an important part of the diet of the city people. They call the fish ghost fish due to their color. The river is about three man-lengths deep, but you can clearly see the bottom. It is sand and shells. The shells double as currency in the city.

The City is lighted up with glowworms, thumb-sized larvae that glow green in the dark. The cave walls are full of them, and it is an easy task to collect them in a paper lantern.

The city sewers run above, behind a thin rock layer. Sometimes water comes through, along with small man-made things. These fall into the river below and are called heavensent. Then some bigger piece of rock or an object plugs the crack and everything is once again normal. The heavensent are considered holy and are very, very valuable. People have been killed for a heavensent fork.

The access to the city is via a wooden bridge, which can be destroyed quickly by pushing a button in the mayor's office. An emergency bridge can be erected in a few minutes on the other side of the city, allowing the citizens to escape into the river and the cave system beyond. Those who can't swim are left on their own, though.

The island the city lies on is long and narrow. The city has three avenues, running parallel to the river, and twenty five streets, all perpendicular to it. This forms small blocks, with two- or three-storey buildings. Anything is for sale here for a right price, since people bring back things from Above, as they call the city above the ground.

24. The Waters of Old Jur

On the bank of the forbidden river Kalys, in the lost city of Jur, there linger a few creatures who still honor the Old Ones. In spring when the waters of the Kalys swell with snowmelt from distant mountains, these faithful can be heard chanting to their sleeping gods by the light of the solstice moon. On that night, the canals threading ancient ruins again run red with the blood of stolen innocents, and the spires gleam as they once did. On that night, the dead rise from the waters. On that night in Jur, say the inscriptions in the Caverns of Madness, upon the shore before the Great Temple the pebbles turn to glittering rubies...

25. Toil

Toil is located underground at the junction of several freshwater rivers. Inhabited by dour duergar dwarves Toil is constantly in motion, both day and night, as its craftsmen work the forges, mass-producing weapons and armor for everyone able to pay the price.

The forges use the waters to drive their bellows, traditionally relying on waterwheels to drive the bellows of the forges and for moving their goods around. A new sound has joined the forges however, those of a manufactory.

The Hardstone clan has diverted a lavaflow into part of the river, and are using the resultant steam as the means to power their manufactory. Here, in the hellishly hot factory floor, slaves and duergar work around the clock, producing cheaper (and more) weapons and armor than ever before. As a result, the Hardstone clan has become enormously wealthy and now owns more than half the city outright, and they are planning on expanding their lava flows to further use their steam technology. Tensions are stirring as the older clans warn the young Hardstone clan against overreaching their authority, but the Hardstone do not listen to their elders anymore, believing that their ability and their might proves them to in the right.

Rumors persist that the Hardstone clan have found both an enormous lavaflow that they can divert into a surface river, creating more steam and thereby more power than ever before. They're now gearing up for war, and strange steam golems can be seen patrolling the Hardstone areas of Toil.

26. Way Down Upon The Swampy River

I never thought that I would go down this river so soon. The one city on it worth visiting is Port Genoble, a good trading post as long as you don't mind risking your life to get there. I think the blowfish toads are the worst. Those suckers weigh in at about five pounds and have three rows of sharp teeth. Their bite isn't poisonous, but they are ferocious when they attack don't stop till they stripped the meat from bone.

There are plenty of other creatures to make this swamp-river unappealing, too many to name. But the smell alone is enough to give one pause: one part moldy, one part fecal, and the rest of the parts unknown but just as bad.

So why am I boating in this smelly, dangerous wetland? As I said, there is a town that is a trading post. Often you can get a good trading, and make the journey worth it. But whether you do or not, you have to make the return trip with all the smell and danger, possibly with nothing to show for it, not even a good view of our world's three moons: the trees block out the entire night sky.

I finally sight the port and soon dock my boat. The buildings are all made of grass, which is good enough to keep out the rain but unfortunately not the humidity. I've already sweated so much on this journey that I'm surprised I have anything left to sweat.

The townspeople decorate everything with bright, colorful flowers and plants, and clothing with unusual, festive designs on them. It's a small place but the people are always happy. Right now I'm surrounded by young children trying to sell me anything they can make by hand, learning the art of bartering at an early age.

Next stop, the port office. I show my identification, although it's just a courtesy call. As I said, they know me here.

The port officer says, "What brings you here?"

"I got some live blowfish toads I want to get rid of. You got a 'quaria I can rent for 'em?"

"A couple 'round back," he replies, toweling off some sweat. He hands me a key.

"Thanks," I say, leaving the office. I go around and unlock an 'quaria, and open a round, deep, water-filled well for storing fish and amphibians meant to be sold soon. Then I return to by boat and fetch the two heavy nets that had been attached to the boat to keep them toads in the water. I drop the nets into a cart; I don't want the critters stinging me on the way back.

In no time I've got them back to the 'quaria and I dump them in, cut the nets open, and prepare to close the grid-type lid.

I hear a familiar voice behind me. "Got something to trade?" I don't have to look to know it's Izzny, but I turn around and see it's him, the brim of his blue straw hat doing nothing to hide the new scar on his face. You'd think that some day he'd learn how to fight properly.

"Yeah," I tell him. "Snow dog furs." They're a rarity in this part of the world, and that was what I was hunting when he stole Piara, my partner and mate away from me. Later one, it was said that someone saw her thrown into the swamp, and she was never seen or heard from again. And now here he was as if nothing had happened.

"What happened to Piara?" I ask him.

Tremors cross his face as he tries to concoct a lie. "She set out on her own. We really didn't get along together."

"Probably because you forced her to come with you to begin with. And don't even try to tell me anything different."

"Sorry you feel that way, but you just weren't man enough for her..."

I grab him by the collar of his gator-jacket. And shove him headfirst into the 'quaria. Before he even has time to react, I slam the lid shut, lock it, and drop the key through the grid, where I know it will sink to the bottom.

I head for the tavern. For a swamp, they can make some really good brews to drink, fermented from some of the plant life around the village. I get something to drink and find an empty table. I toast the memory of Piara. I miss her so much. But no one will miss him.