

Theestusick



A Borough Bound City



Reclamation

My dearest Elizabeth,

How I long to return home. This backwater rubbish heap has infested my very soul, and I fear a thousand baths will not rid me of its influence. How any of these wretched fenfolk tolerate the endless eels and snails is beyond me. The medley of putrid stench seeping out of the bog, the creek, and the perilous watchtower continuously amaze: were the smells not so offensive to my sensibilities, I may hope to write a treatise on the incredible olfactory diversity of this hellish swamp. With any luck, these new "specialists" Lord Fandry has employed will handle our remaining woes in due time. Let's pray the duke's recruiters have better judgment now than they had when they were putting together his pathetic ensemble of lackeys.

I shall be with you soon. Please purchase as much soap as we can afford.

Yours truly,

Edmund Algrove

THE PEACEFUL FISHING VILLAGE IN THE HAUNTED FEN

For decades, the tiny village of Thestwick-on-Alderham has been an afterthought. Once a military outpost of minor note, the marshy fishing village quickly drifted into obscurity once tensions with the neighboring duchy faded into memory. In the years that followed, a scant few residents decided to remain in the quickly abandoned town, living simple lives in thatched-roof shacks. Fishermen caught eels with the aid of their trained moorwings, and the once great watchtower slowly sank into the endless fen. For Alderham peasants seeking to enjoy peaceful lives far from the watchful eyes of the duchess, Thestwick was an unusual but reliable haven.

All of that changed when the duchess married. Lady Mabel Fandry had always been a cruel overseer of her meek territory, but at least those living in far-off Thestwick could avoid the brunt of her despotism. Unfortunately, her new husband has established Thestwick as the central hub of his grand schemes. Lord Nathaniel Fandry, Duke of the Alderham Fen has sunk incredible resources into the village, and now Thestwick is the epicenter of a grand infrastructural endeavor. As the water levels continue to fall, life in Thestwick is changing rapidly.

With one simple change, Lord Fandry and his gang of thugs have upended the way of life for every villager in Thestwick and the surrounding fen. Though he believes that a successful reclamation will yield nearly 100,000 acres of newly arable farmland, the fen dwellers who are losing their livelihoods don't see it that way. If they wanted to be farmers, they'd live somewhere else—despite the duchess's awful reputation, she supposedly treats her own serfs quite well. Thestwick's residents live in the fen because that's the life they have chosen. No amount of valuable soil will change that.

As the reclamation approaches completion, Lord Fandry's lead surveyor tells him that low-lying Thestwick will be the last village to be completely drained. With his goal in sight, it seems all but inevitable that the bleak but independent fishing village will soon be a cozy farming town. There's just one problem: the Alderham Fen is haunted.

A quartet of supernatural creatures have harried Lord Fandry every step of the way, and now that his success is close at hand, he has summoned a group of



adventurers to ensure that the villainous residents of his duchy don't interfere with his schemes. As guests of the duke and duchess, the party of adventurers will have to determine how best to confront the Lowland Reclamation Corps' greatest foes: Anise Bloodbirch, Black Alfie, Bulgreck, and Sin Ranulf.

ALDERHAM FEN

The duchy of Alderham Fen is just one of many such territories in the Veglenic Kingdom. With nearly 2,000 square miles of land, the Alderham Fen is one of the largest duchies, though it is also among the sparsest and poorest. This is due, in no small part, to the eponymous fen. Over half of the duchy's area is dominated by uncultivated marshland. It is difficult to live in the fen and even harder to find a way to make the fen valuable. As such, the duchy has always remained largely irrelevant in the politics of the great kingdom. Small border skirmishes occasionally brought attention to the sprawling duchy, though Alderham Fen has been at peace for decades now. While neighboring territories exert their political will in the Kingdom's capital, Lady Mabel has struggled just to keep her subjects well-fed and free from disease.

Thestwick is Alderham Fen's southernmost population center. Beyond it lies 20 more miles of murky marshland. Somewhere in this stretch of fen lies the border with Talmouth, a far wealthier duchy. The exact location of this border is occasionally disputed, but as it sits somewhere in an unlivable marsh, the two duchies mostly ignore the unclear border. When Lady Mabel's great-great-grandfather ruled over Alderham Fen, this territorial dispute was a flashpoint. He was so concerned that the Talmouth knights would attempt to annex his worthless marsh that he erected the Thestwick Watch, a stone garrison that later spawned the surrounding village.

The capital city of Alderham Fen is Lotthingham, a city of some 15,000 residents 60 miles to the north of Thestwick. Lord and Lady Fandry maintain Surley Manor, a quaint estate in Lotthingham Heath, high above the drudgery of the fen that they oversee.

FEN DWELLERS

Many of Thestwick's permanent residents are descended from soldiers once stationed at Thestwick Watch. After Alderham Fen and Talmouth peacefully resolved their border dispute, a few soldiers chose to remain in

the lowlands. Some even brought additional family from Lotthingham to join the nascent community. Gradually, they built up the fishing village in the shadow of the abandoned watchtower.

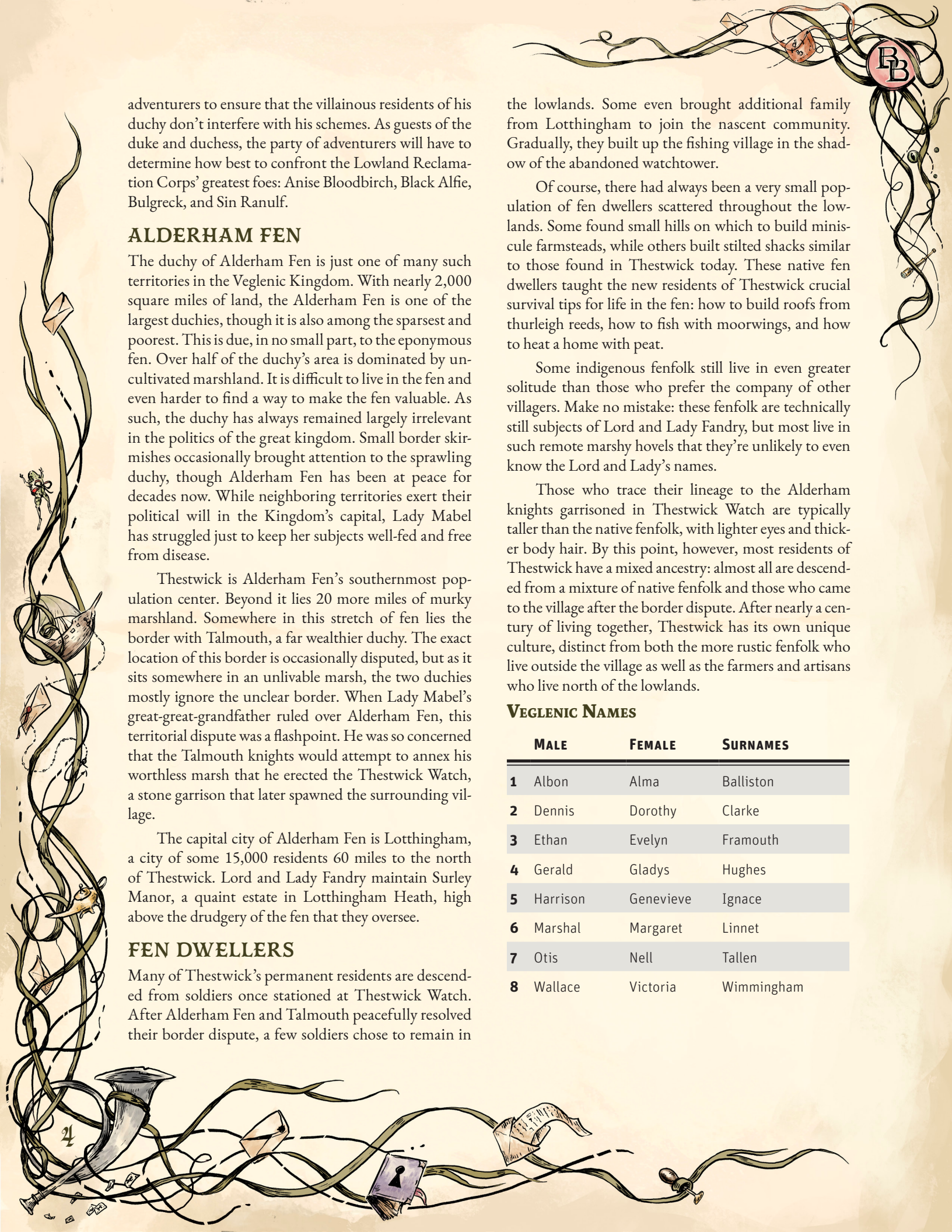
Of course, there had always been a very small population of fen dwellers scattered throughout the lowlands. Some found small hills on which to build miniscule farmsteads, while others built stilted shacks similar to those found in Thestwick today. These native fen dwellers taught the new residents of Thestwick crucial survival tips for life in the fen: how to build roofs from thurleigh reeds, how to fish with moorwings, and how to heat a home with peat.

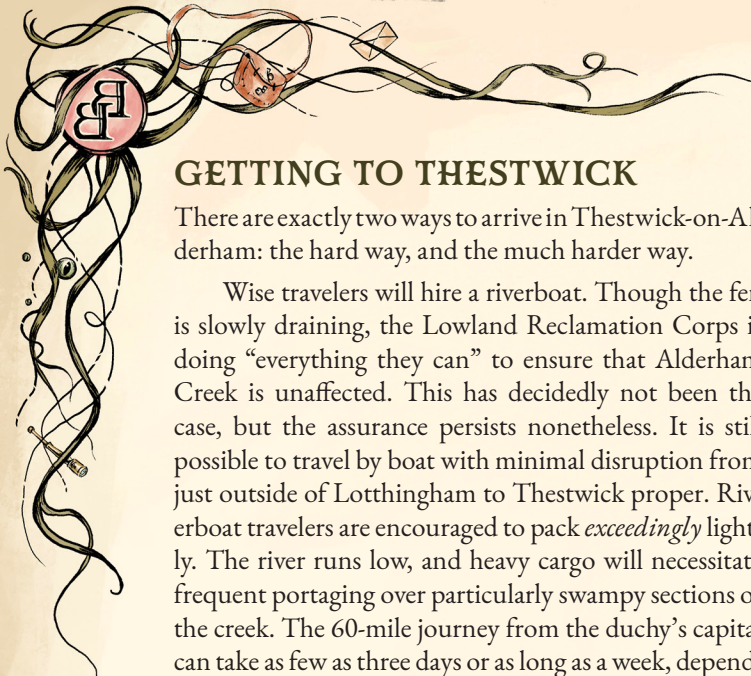
Some indigenous fenfolk still live in even greater solitude than those who prefer the company of other villagers. Make no mistake: these fenfolk are technically still subjects of Lord and Lady Fandry, but most live in such remote marshy hovels that they're unlikely to even know the Lord and Lady's names.

Those who trace their lineage to the Alderham knights garrisoned in Thestwick Watch are typically taller than the native fenfolk, with lighter eyes and thicker body hair. By this point, however, most residents of Thestwick have a mixed ancestry: almost all are descended from a mixture of native fenfolk and those who came to the village after the border dispute. After nearly a century of living together, Thestwick has its own unique culture, distinct from both the more rustic fenfolk who live outside the village as well as the farmers and artisans who live north of the lowlands.

VEGLENIC NAMES

	MALE	FEMALE	SURNAMES
1	Albon	Alma	Balliston
2	Dennis	Dorothy	Clarke
3	Ethan	Evelyn	Framouth
4	Gerald	Gladys	Hughes
5	Harrison	Genevieve	Ignace
6	Marshal	Margaret	Linnet
7	Otis	Nell	Tallen
8	Wallace	Victoria	Wimtingham





GETTING TO THESTWICK

There are exactly two ways to arrive in Thestwick-on-Alderham: the hard way, and the much harder way.

Wise travelers will hire a riverboat. Though the fen is slowly draining, the Lowland Reclamation Corps is doing “everything they can” to ensure that Alderham Creek is unaffected. This has decidedly not been the case, but the assurance persists nonetheless. It is still possible to travel by boat with minimal disruption from just outside of Lotthingham to Thestwick proper. Riverboat travelers are encouraged to pack *exceedingly* lightly. The river runs low, and heavy cargo will necessitate frequent portaging over particularly swampy sections of the creek. The 60-mile journey from the duchy’s capital can take as few as three days or as long as a week, depending on the height of the river, the weight of the cargo, and any necessary detours.

Those who choose to walk or ride horses to Thestwick will have a much harder time. The fen may be drying out, but there are no roads, and what solid ground a traveler may find is still deceptively moist and difficult to navigate. Every year, there are new reports of people going missing in the fen. Though the swath of bog may appear to be a minor annoyance to the unwary, the Alderham Fen is in fact a voracious quagmire. Accidental drownings are common. A *strong* adventurer may even have a *harder* time freeing themselves when sinking into the mud. The stronger the traveler, the more likely it is that they will simply dig themselves a deep hole. Travelers are advised to wear a pack that is easy to doff, carry a walking stick, and trek in groups.

Various predators also stalk the fen. Wolves, snakes, and swarms of bloodbeetles make the voyage far riskier than it might at first seem. If rumors are to be believed, travelers may have to contend with goblins, hobs, bog witches, ogres, bugbears, wights, and redcaps. There are plenty of corroborated tales that seem to prove the existence of one or more of these creatures, though which are genuine threats is anyone’s best guess. Fenfolk are a superstitious lot, and their own judgments and guidance may not be 100% reliable.

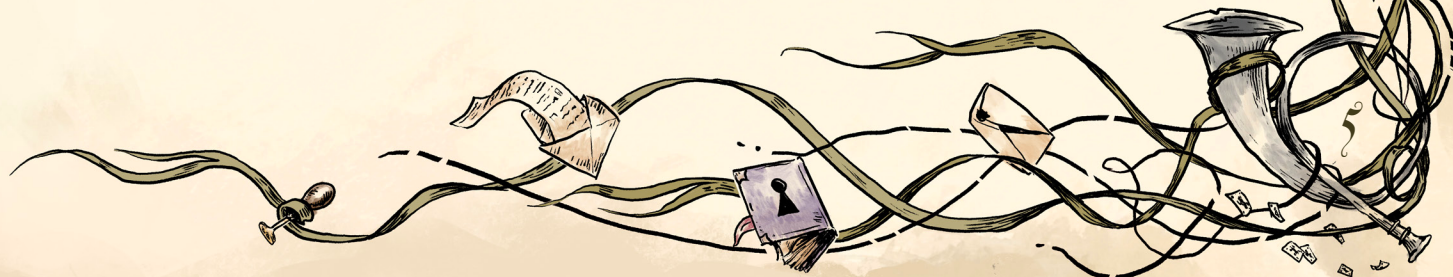
GM NOTE: “Canonically,” your players’ characters have been summoned to Thestwick-on-Alderham by the duke himself. The party of adventurers have been paid to ensure the monsters of the Alderham Fen don’t interrupt the drainage operation. There will be occasional reference to this fact throughout the borough guide, but adventures in Thestwick need not begin at the behest of the duke. It is entirely possible for the players to stumble on Thestwick while trudging through the fen, or perhaps they’re seeking out the aid of someone else in town. “The duke’s request” is a useful framing device for this guide, but it should not be prescriptive to your own storytelling. If that’s not how you want your Thestwick adventure to begin, ignore it entirely!

THE DUKE AND DUCHESS

At the center of Thestwick’s rapid transformation, one finds exactly what one comes to expect in Veglenic politics: a bold scheme, aristocratic maneuvering, and two nobles who despise each other. Throughout the Veglenic Kingdom, duchies are passed down matrilineally. It is the duchess’s firstborn daughter who inherits the territory. Nevertheless, the Veglenic Kingdom is highly patriarchal in almost every other way. Men are to be the soldiers, the craftsmen, and—rules of succession be damned—the proper monarchs. As such, a duchess is often extremely limited in what she is able to accomplish on her own. Most noble parents only pass their territory to their daughter once said daughter is wedded. The duchess is then able to rule with a great deal more authority. Without a husband, many citizens view a duchess as unfit to lead.

Lady Mabel assumed her position far earlier than she had expected. Both her parents died within the span of a month. Mabel was only 17 years old. Though most duchies would fall into immediate chaos with such a perilous power vacuum, the Alderham Fen managed just fine. Some minor barons tried to make bold claims about twisted family trees as a limp attempt to usurp the duchess, but most were happy to leave the poor duchy in Lady Mabel’s hands.

For the first few years, Lady Mabel sought out potential suitors to lend credibility to her rule. Some presented themselves, but none met the duchess’s high standards. It wasn’t until Nathaniel (then Baron Na-



thaniel Lemmith of Chestwick) pitched Lady Mabel his grand scheme for reclaiming the Alderham Fen that she decided to settle down.

Theirs was a marriage of strategy. Nathaniel offered no impressive title or valuable land, but he had a vision for the duchy that would be lucrative. He also had a band of cronies that showed him infinite loyalty. These ruffians were more valuable to the duchy than the well-trained knights who swear fealty to the duchess. Knights *could* fight on behalf of the dukedom, but they would be just as likely to defect or attempt a coup. Strong and faithful comrades might lack title or proper armor, but loyalty is far rarer in Alderham Fen.

The duke and duchess *do not like each other*, though few noble pairings in the Veglenic Kingdom do. Lady Mabel gave Lord Nathaniel the resources and the legitimacy to carry out his plan, and Lord Nathaniel has promised Lady Mabel a stronger future for her duchy. Beyond that, there is no affection. He fears her irredeemable cruelty, and she loathes his pathetic need for attention. Their union would make no sense outside the world of conniving royals.



LORD NATHANIEL FANDRY, DUKE OF THE ALDERHAM FEN

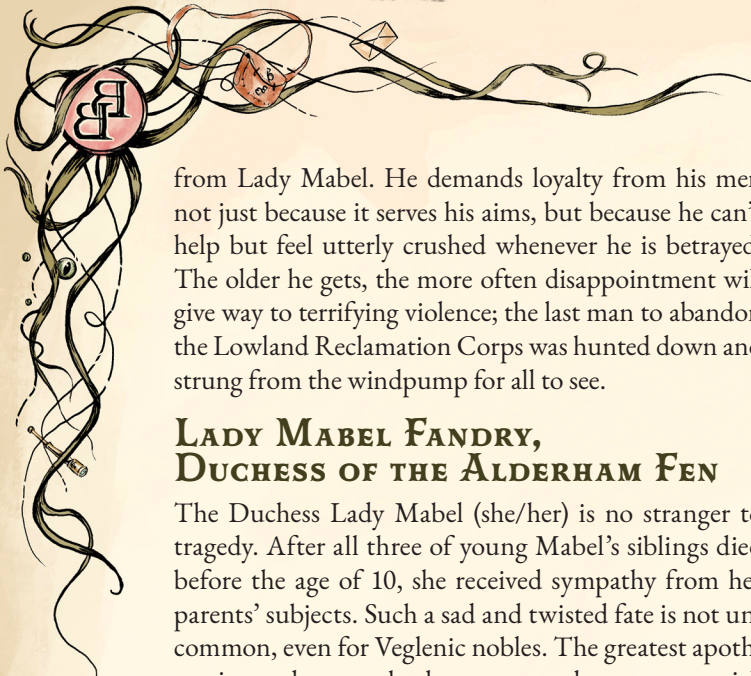
Despite his impressive station, Lord Nathaniel Fandry (he/him) had an inauspicious rise to royalty. The second son of a lesser baron, young Nathaniel was strongly encouraged to join the Alderham knights. His father paid for swordmasters to train Nathaniel from childhood, and when the boy came of age, Nathaniel's father purchased him a horse and a pricey set of plate armor. Fearing a lifetime of pointless border skirmishes, Nathaniel promptly sold both and moved to the city.

It was in Lotthingham that Nathaniel finally found his footing. He joined a gang, moved in with the Lotthingham Rotters (a ragtag assemblage that would later become the Lowland Reclamation Corps), and started conning travelers. He made a pittance, but it sure beat being a knight. Hell, most knights in Alderham Fen didn't even receive land, and if they did, it was some flooded plot of marshland to the south.

When robbing a carriage traveling from Talmouth, Nathaniel met one Louisa Terrowin, a watchmaker who was en route to Surley Estate to fulfill a commission for Lady Mabel. Louisa pleaded with Nathaniel not to hurt her or her companions, and Nathaniel gave her the same ultimatum he gave all his marks: "give me something more valuable to do, and I'll have no reason to bother you." Quick on her feet, Louisa pitched Nathaniel an idea she was workshopping for a wind-powered water pump that could theoretically drain a small plot of land. Tantalized by the idea, Nathaniel commandeered the carriage, rode on to Surley Estate, and presented Lady Mabel with a compelling reason to marry him.

Nathaniel does not think of himself as a bad man. He regrets his immoral behavior and the harm he and his gang brought to so many people, but he also recognizes the futility of life for so many in the godforsaken duchy. The Alderham Fen is a hopeless bog for so many. Louisa Terrowin and her ingenious contraption presents a way forward for the entire region. With high-quality, arable farmland, so many second sons will be able to live honorable lives tending to fertile fields instead of joining a purposeless defense force or a despicable gang.

More than anything, Lord Fandry desperately craves affection. His father was a tough and brutal man, and life with his gang was the closest he ever felt to being loved. Despite the total absence of romance in his marriage, he expresses a constant need for gestures of love



from Lady Mabel. He demands loyalty from his men not just because it serves his aims, but because he can't help but feel utterly crushed whenever he is betrayed. The older he gets, the more often disappointment will give way to terrifying violence; the last man to abandon the Lowland Reclamation Corps was hunted down and strung from the windpump for all to see.

LADY MABEL FANDRY, DUCHESS OF THE ALDERHAM FEN

The Duchess Lady Mabel (she/her) is no stranger to tragedy. After all three of young Mabel's siblings died before the age of 10, she received sympathy from her parents' subjects. Such a sad and twisted fate is not uncommon, even for Veglenic nobles. The greatest apothecaries and pagan healers cannot always save a sick child, let alone three. After the sudden death of her parents and her first fiancé, however, the people of Alderham Fen instead declared the duchess cursed. Everyone Mabel had loved was now dead, and the young woman was immediately expected to grieve in private while ruling her duchy and finding a "replacement betrothed."

Lady Mabel is now 32 years old, hardly young given the short life expectancy of those living in the fen. She cherished her simple life in Surley Manor, relaxing on her *chaise longue* and pressing flowers from her garden into treasured booklets. Lord Fandry, needy as always, stole her away from that peaceful existence. He dragged her alongside his cronies all the way out to Thestwick-on-Alderham to help him "oversee the operation." Of course, the real reason she was relocated to the middle of the marsh was so that Nathaniel never had to feel alone. As she withers away in the fetid swamp, Lady Mabel is beginning to wonder whether she actually is cursed after all.

Nevertheless, Lady Mabel refuses to resign herself to months of misery. She is dedicated to using her time in Thestwick to improve her image. Mabel has transformed herself into a bona fide errand boy, attempting to tackle any minor task that her subjects need. She'll fetch leashes for the eelers, she'll jot down measurements for Louisa, and she'll pour drinks for Nathaniel's cronies. And yet, no matter how simple the task, Lady Mabel always seems to fumble.

If anything, Lady Mabel's reputation has only further deteriorated throughout her tenure in Thestwick. Every person she helps ends up worse for it. She is clumsy, unlucky, forgetful, and—despite her good inten-

tions—lazy. Whenever she can cut corners to fulfill her "daily good deeds," she does so, and people often end up hurt because of it. It remains unclear whether Mabel is aware that she is failing miserably, or whether she believes that she is slowly making progress.

IS LADY MABEL CURSED?

Lady Mabel has had her fair share of tragedy. Her parents, siblings, and first beloved died before she was 18. Her entire duchy is a boggy wasteland. She married a man she can't stand, and now she has to live in the middle of nowhere, failing at task after task. The people say she's cursed. Is she? Does it matter?

In Thestwick-on-Alderham, curses are very real. Resident witch Anise Bloodbirch practices varieties of black magic that could be responsible for Lady Mabel's tribulations, but was she present years ago when the duchess's woes began? Are there other witches in the duchy that could be responsible? Has one of her vocal opponents weaponized dark magic against her?

The answer is ultimately up to you. Perhaps your narrative is stronger if the "curse" is simply a self-fulfilling prophecy. Tragedy begets tragedy, and it's hard to escape from a downward spiral of bad luck and worse decisions. Then again, coincidences cannot be "solved," whereas a curse may be lifted. It would be a great kindness if the party could ascertain the nature of Lady Mabel's hex and dispel it. The bigger question is whether Lady Mabel is worthy of redemption.

THE LOWLAND RECLAMATION CORPS

Once a dirty Lotthingham gang, the Lowland Reclamation Corps now acts as Lord Nathaniel Fandry's right-hand crew. While the duchess demanded that they bring a skeleton crew of Alderham knights as well, the Lowland Reclamation Corps—often referred to as simply "the Corps"—act as laborers, guards, and drunken lackeys.



Louisa Terrowin, the tinkerer who inspired the fen's reclamation, may have exaggerated how easy it would be to drain the marsh. The windpump is a powerful machine, but it's only effective if the Corps can successfully build and maintain dikes to keep the water from sloshing back in. The process of slowly building up mounds of earth around huge swaths of the fen took months and months of work, even after conscripting many of the duchess's serfs. Now that that first batch of work is nearly completed, the Lowland Reclamation Corps mostly just bullies around the locals, sees to Nathaniel's needs, and occasionally sends squads to various leaking embankments.

There is an uneasy power differential at play among the Lowland Reclamation Corps. Lord Fandry was *not* the leader of the gang prior to their departure from Lotthingham. He has assumed a leadership position along with his sudden elevation in title, but there are some among the Corps' ranks who don't particularly enjoy obeying the unlikely duke. Lord Fandry is not a born leader, despite his clever business sense and endless ambition. Members of the Lowland Reclamation Corp mock and belittle Nathaniel endlessly behind his back, and many of the delays in dike construction were due to wanton disregard of the duke's orders.



LOTTHINGHAM LICE

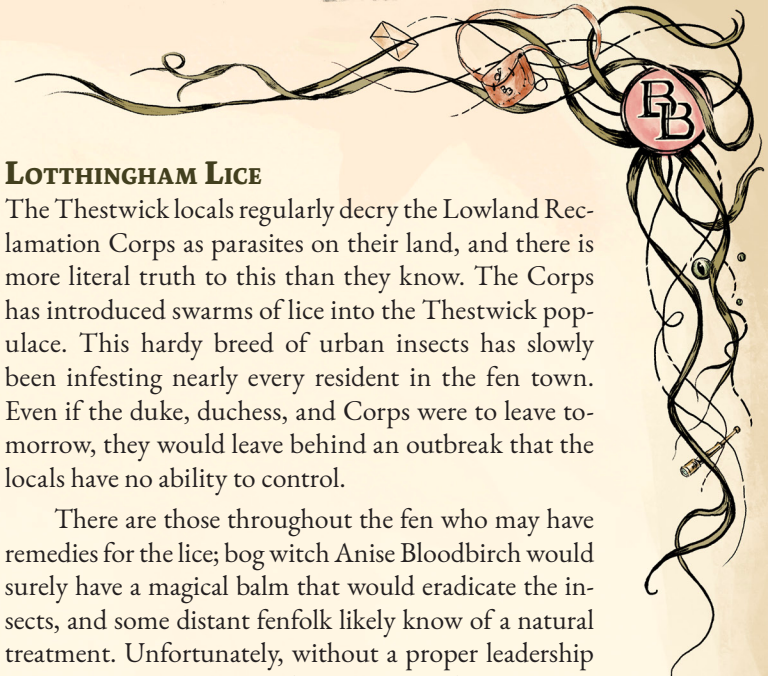
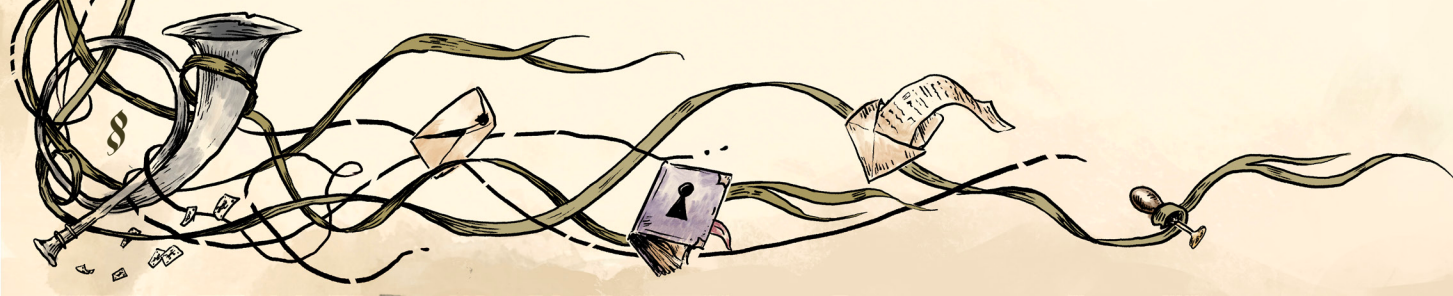
The Thestwick locals regularly decry the Lowland Reclamation Corps as parasites on their land, and there is more literal truth to this than they know. The Corps has introduced swarms of lice into the Thestwick populace. This hardy breed of urban insects has slowly been infesting nearly every resident in the fen town. Even if the duke, duchess, and Corps were to leave tomorrow, they would leave behind an outbreak that the locals have no ability to control.

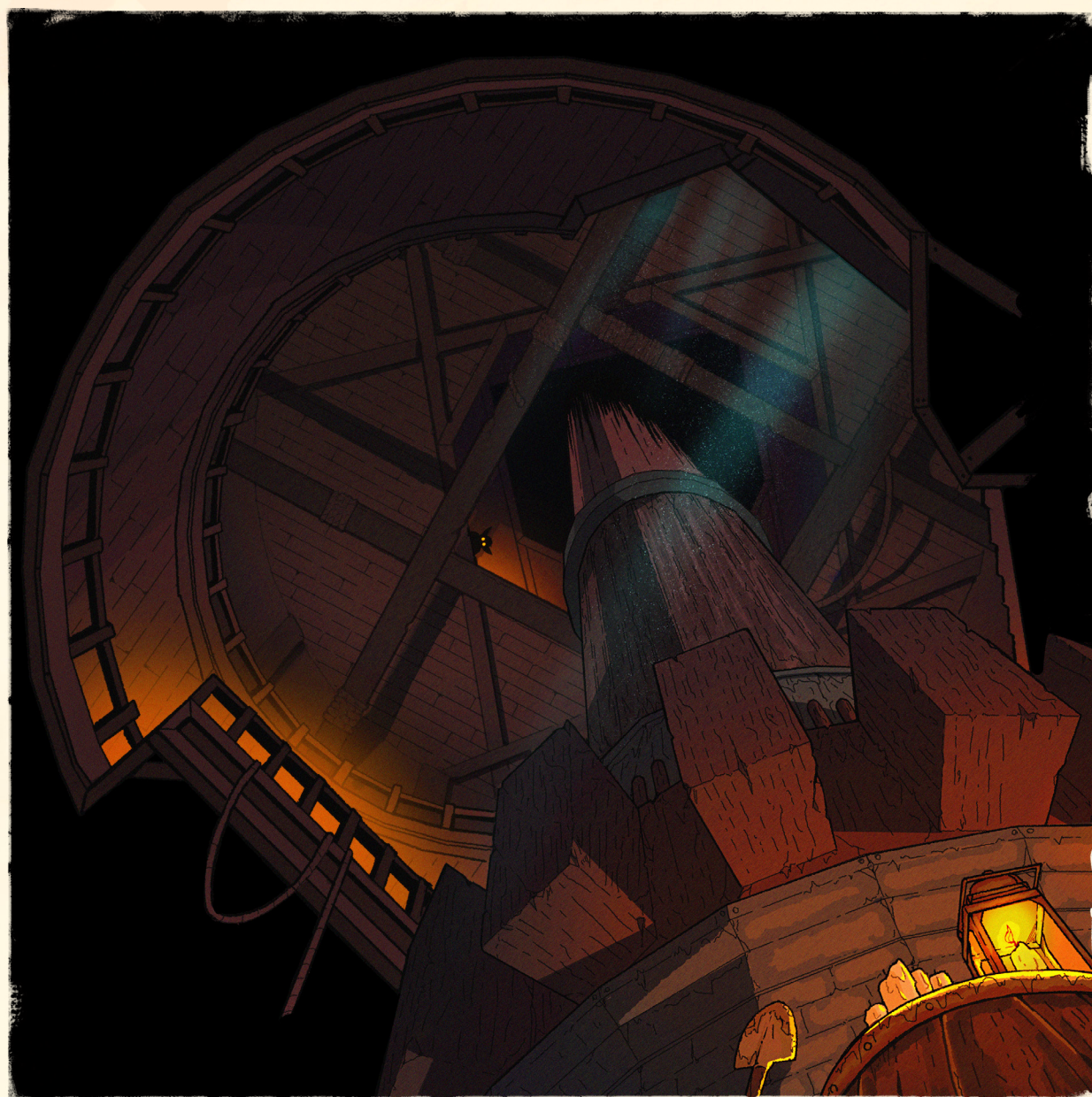
There are those throughout the fen who may have remedies for the lice; bog witch Anise Bloodbitch would surely have a magical balm that would eradicate the insects, and some distant fenfolk likely know of a natural treatment. Unfortunately, without a proper leadership structure in place to handle the outbreak, no one in Thestwick is making any effort to quell the spread. If no one takes action, this infestation may become uncontrollable.

THE FANDRY WINDPUMP

The cornerstone of the Alderham Fen reclamation is the mechanical marvel that looms over the surrounding marsh. The Fandry Windpump—so-named despite objections from Lady Mabel and the architect herself—is a surprisingly simple contraption. The reliable winds throughout the fen spin the blades, which turn a series of rods and gears. At the base of the windmill, a water screw pulls water up out of the basin on which Thestwick sits. From there, the water drains west past an embankment and eventually into the ocean beyond. Once the initial drainage is complete, the windpump should function for years to come with minimal maintenance, ensuring that nearly 100,000 acres of farmable land remain free from surging floodwaters.

The burdensome construction of the Fandry Windpump was the first indication that Lord Fandry's scheme may not be so easy to complete. Wood is hard to come by in the Fen. What few trees once lived in the marsh have mostly been cut down. Lumber is *scarce*, and the fishing village had already exhausted much of the surrounding timber. As such, wood was slowly shipped into the village over the course of months. Project-lead Louisa Terrowin was not able to convince Lotthingham smiths and tinkerers to join her in Thestwick, so many of the gears and gizmos were constructed off-site, prompting laborious and expensive tweaks and fixes. And of course, while Thestwick locals had become expert at





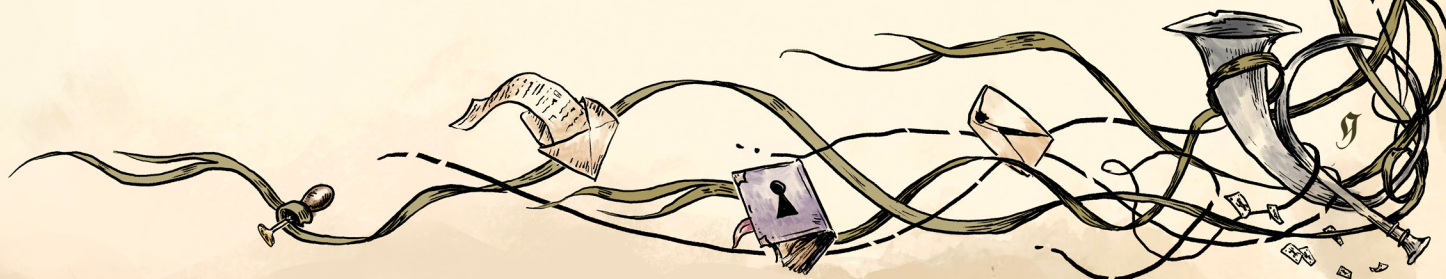
building and maintaining their small creekside shacks, the scale of the windpump exceeded their abilities.

Eventually, however, the pump was completed and began malfunctioning immediately. Louisa's blueprints severely underestimated the sediment in the water, leading to frequent clogs within the water screw. The wind was also never quite as reliable as she'd hoped, and without constant monitoring, a strong gust could crack a blade in a matter of seconds. Likewise, a week of minimal winds and heavy rain could undo days of work.

The windpump is also surprisingly dangerous. At

least three of Nathaniel's drunken lackeys have lost fingers to the iron gears. Moorwings adore perching atop the tower, invariably ruining the hats and overcoats of any brave enough to approach the structure.

Despite its faults, the Fandry Windpump is slowly but surely accomplishing its singular task. The water level across the fen is falling, and Lady Mabel is already bequeathing plots of land to her few loyal knights to farm. Assuming there are no catastrophic failures, Louisa predicts that the entire polder will be farmable in six months.





LOUISA TERROWIN

The second-worst mistake Louisa (she/her) ever made was traveling to Lotthingham. The worst was telling Nathaniel her plans for the windpump. There is nobody Louisa hates more than Lord Nathaniel Fandry, Duke of the Alderham Fen. Prior to being robbed by the gang that would later become the Lowland Reclamation Corps, Louisa was a respected watchmaker, honoring commissions from many of the nobles throughout the Veglenic Kingdom. Her services were in high demand, and she was lucky enough to have the flexibility to turn down as many commissions as she accepted. Like so few in the kingdom, Louisa could enjoy hours upon hours of true, uninterrupted, leisure time. It was in these free hours that she could let her mechanically minded thoughts wander. It was in these free hours that she devised her unmaking: the “Fandry” Windpump.

Louisa is a prisoner to a contract. When she and Nathaniel pitched Lady Mabel their idea to reinvent the duchy, she was simply trying to avoid the violence threatened by Nathaniel and his gang, and maybe earn some favor with the duchess. Instead, she got locked into a

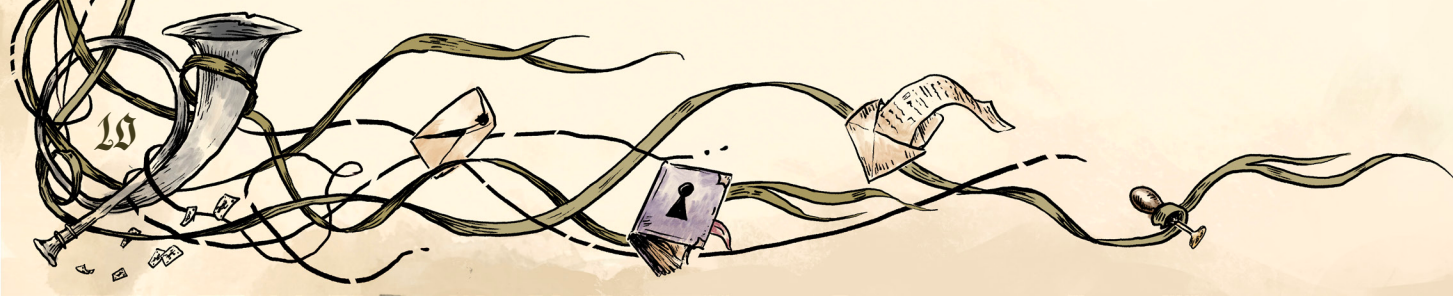
contract: live in Thestwick and oversee the reclamation through to its completion. Had she known the process would take so long, she would have known better than to sign the document. Unfortunately, a Veglenic watchmaker is a slave to reputation. If word were to spread that she reneged on a contract, it would severely hamper her ability to find new work throughout the kingdom.

Despite her outward hostility to Nathaniel, Thestwick, and the entire project, Louisa desperately wants to see the reclamation through. Notwithstanding the misery of living in the fishing village, she’s exceedingly proud of what her contraption has already accomplished. Consequences be damned. She will drain this fen.



WRONK: No one knows where Wronk (he/him) came from. The day after the windpump was completed, this big-nosed goblin just showed up, crawling around the rafters holding a small sign reading “WILL WORK FOR EELS.” Wronk claims to be a “windmill spirit,” or “kilmoulis” as they are known in certain corners of the fen. So long as Louisa keeps Wronk fed, the creature acts as a diligent worker, monitoring wind speeds, greasing the gears, and helping out with measurements.

Curiously, Wronk has no mouth. Instead, he has an enormous nose through which he inhales his food. As such, Wronk can’t speak, but he gets on just fine by writing on his signpost. Despite rampant illiteracy across the fen, Wronk has an impressive capacity for language.



Wronk has an incredible work ethic, but he is loyal to Louisa and Louisa alone. As such, he scurries away into rafters whenever Nathaniel or a member of the Corps comes to check on the operation. Many around Thestwick don't even believe Wronk exists. Despite his shyness, Wronk loves pranks. Louisa suspects he may be responsible for the loss of one or more Corps fingers—accidents that are currently attributed to drunken carelessness.



ANISE BLOODBIRCH

Those who whisper of dark secrets in the fen are not simply peddling superstition. There are, and always have been, strange creatures who inhabit this damp dark corner of the kingdom. Most famous of all is Anise Bloodbird (she/her), the bog witch of Thestwick. Mabel, Nathaniel, and Louisa all grew up with the threat of Anise Bloodbirch looming over them. There were dozens of variations of the fairy tale.

- ♦ If you don't finish your oats, Anise will replace your tongue with an eel.
- ♦ If you never learn to read, someday you'll make a wrong turn and end up in Anise's bog.
- ♦ If you curse your mother, Anise will come and steal your dreams.

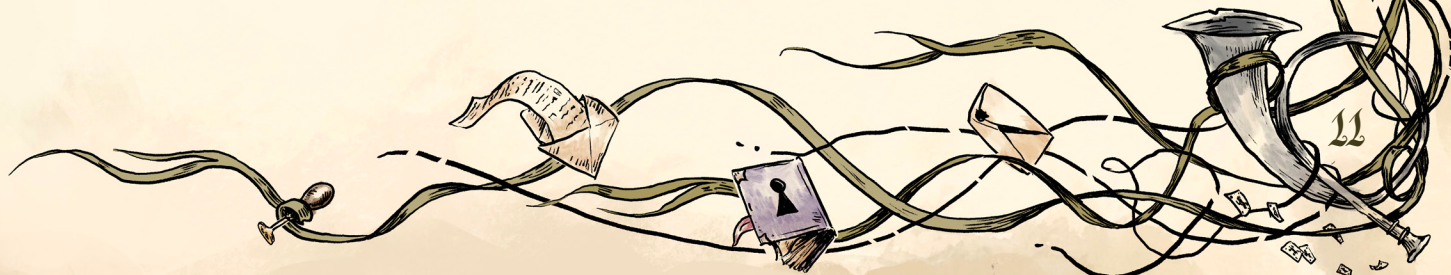
Anise Bloodbirch takes the rumors in stride. *Yes*, she's a bog witch. *Yes*, she practices dark magic. But *no*, she does not have any interest in cursing children or stealing dreams. Anise has goals of her own, and while she may resort to nefarious means as necessary, she does not believe that any of her aims are wicked. Make no mistake: there *are* witches who delight in malice for malice's sake. The matriarch of Anise's coven—the witch who taught Anise everything she knows—is one such elder hag. While Anise can understand the thrill of such aimless evil, her goals are loftier.

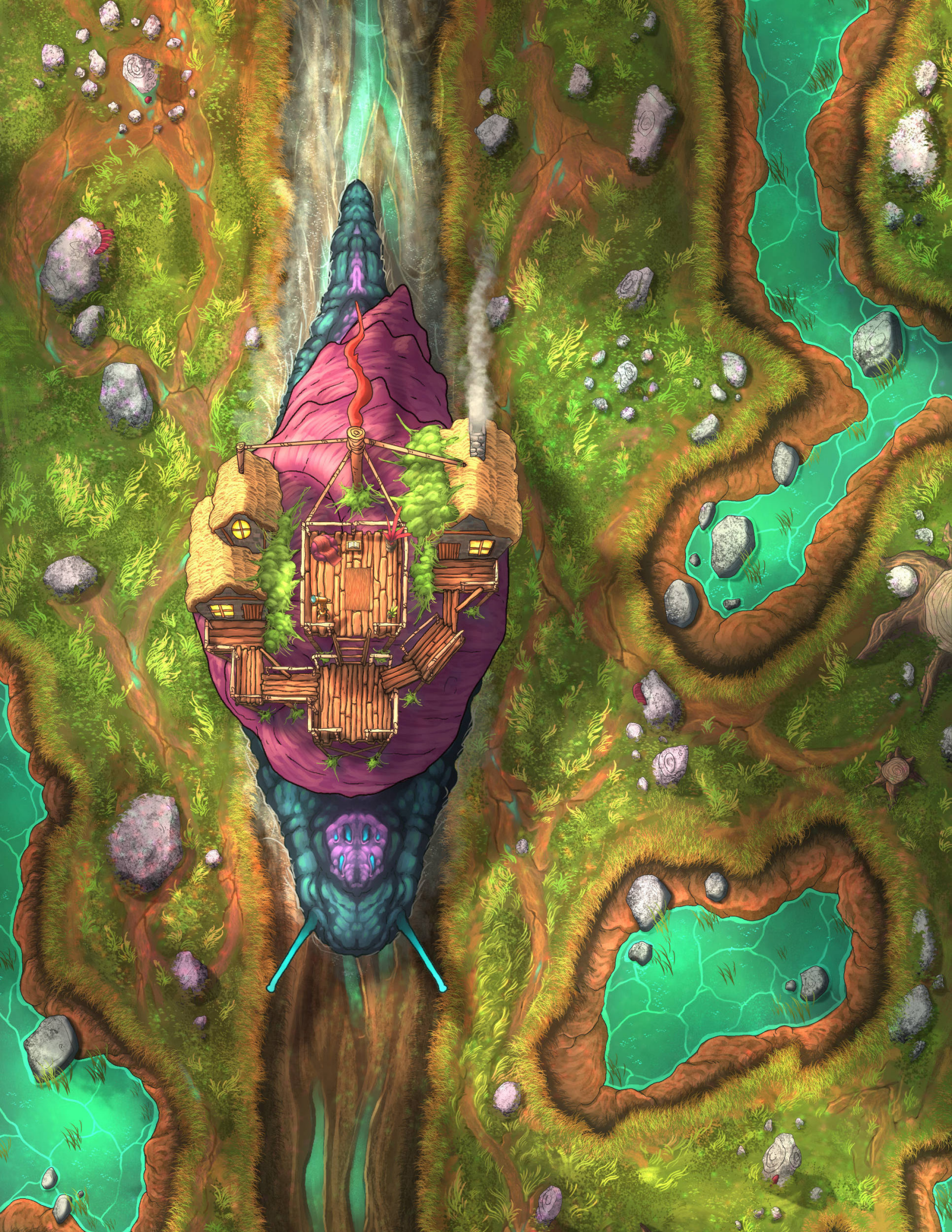
The fen has long protected Anise. Many of her sisters have fallen to urban threats; those who do not hide from cityfolk may find themselves atop a burning pyre. Out in the fen, Anise is far less concerned about close-minded bigots storming her home. But the endless marsh does more than just deter witch hunts. Anise's true power comes from the nutrient-filled peat itself. Her nomadic snail Gumperham gradually crawls through the fen, munches the biome's unique biomass, and then excretes the dense, arcane pellets known as fenbulbs. These murky orbs form the base of Anise's witchy brews, imbuing additional ingredients with the spark needed to catalyze magical reactions.

For decades, Anise had few true woes. She wandered the fen with plentiful access to her arcane fuel. She had all the time in the world to engage in her true passion: birdwatching.

Unlike the other members of her coven, Anise uses 90% of her spells just to aid her hobby. She creates illusory blinds, deploys infallible tracking spells, and amplifies perfectly replicated bird calls. When she spies a particularly elusive warbler, she'll crystalize the memory in a "vision print," a sort of sorcerous photograph. After Thestwick Watch was erected nearly a century ago, Anise also began carefully monitoring the nutrients and acidity of the fen to make sure her new neighbors weren't tampering with the ecosystem. For years, the fluctuations were negligible. Now that's all starting to change.

As the fen is drained, the peat withers and the birds begin looking for new homes. The Lowland Reclamation Corps is destroying everything Anise loves. While the rumors of Anise's wickedness are fabricated, the reclusive bog witch may now need to exert her territorial authority. She will not let the duke and duchess get away with destroying the fen.







GUMPERHAM

Few are so lucky as Anise to have a familiar, a home, and a best friend all in one. Gumperham (he/him) is more than just a colossal snail. He has been with Anise since they were both children. Now, Gumperham is somewhere between 100 and 1,000 years old, he's 40 feet tall, and he's seen every corner of his lovely fen. Gumperham doesn't speak, not even telepathically as so many witch's familiars might. However, Gumperham is *extremely* expressive with his non-verbal gestures. With a solemn head bow, a curious twitch of his eyestalks, or a timid retraction into his shell, this colossal snail can convey a surprising breadth of emotions.

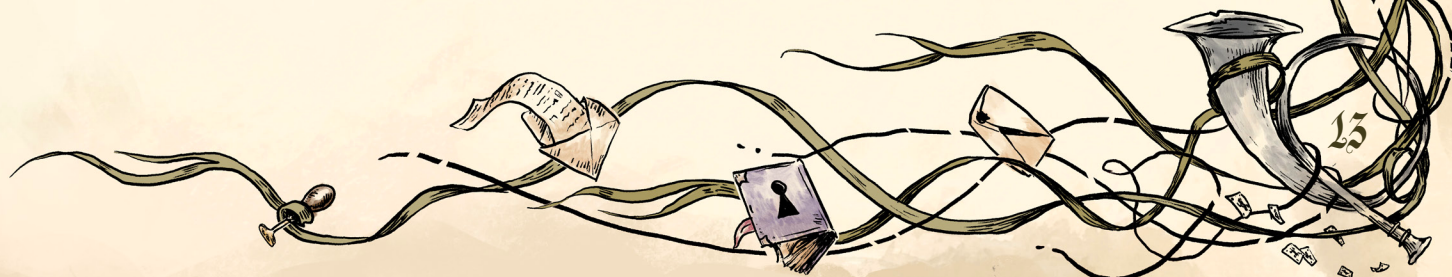
Gumperham has simple needs. He enjoys bird-watching just as much as Anise. After all, it's a hobby that a creature with independently moving eyestalks is predisposed to enjoy. Beyond that, he enjoys exploring the variety of different fen microbiomes, feeling the thurleigh reeds tickle his foot, and most all: devouring endlessly delicious peat. Gumperham munches the decaying biomass as though it were the nectar of the gods.

Gradually, Anise has built up her home atop Gumperham's shell. For years, she'd schlep a tent around while the two moseyed through the fen in peace. Once Gumperham became big enough, Anise simply plopped the tent atop his shell and fastened the corner with gluey bog adhesive. Next, she added a second tent so she could work in a different space from where she slept. Then she figured she might as well make the home more permanent. Now, Gumperham's entire shell is akin to a crawling witch's dreamhouse. Everywhere the duo goes, Anise has access to an alchemy chamber, a store of birdseed, bedchambers, a lookout, and some peat reserves for when they approach a stretch of dried-out fen. Anise would *certainly* never look down on her sisters who live in tiny shacks in forgotten forests... but she is quite proud of the home that she and Gumperham have built. A proper home for a proper witch.

PLOT HOOK: CONFRONT ANISE

Lord Nathaniel Fandry invited the party of the adventurers for one reason: he wants his chosen problem solvers to ensure none of the accursed ne'er-do-wells interrupt his reclamation. He doesn't care how they do it. The party can attempt to kill each of the marks, force them to relocate, or trick them into fighting each other. If the party feels particularly patient, they can simply keep watch indefinitely, acting as a permanent sentry outside the windpump and along the embankments. All Lord Fandry demands is the successful completion of his grand scheme, and then some assurance that the fen will *stay* drained.

Though each of the four creatures that haunts Thestwick is of great concern to the anxious duke, Anise Bloodbirch is his top priority. She's undoubtedly the smartest villain of the lot, and the duke is greatly concerned about the effect Gumperham is having on the residents. The giant snail is *imposing*, and his mere presence has led to an accelerating decline in morale. Worst of all, Lord Fandry rightly fears that Anise may be the linchpin in a collaborative effort against his operation. If Anise is able to coordinate an assault with the other creatures of the fen, Lord Fandry is almost certain that he and his crew will have to retreat back to Lotthingham.





GM NOTE: While you should trust your players to approach their task however they see fit, there are *broadly* three paths they can take during their time in Thestwick. They can side with Lord Fandry and help the Lowland Reclamation Corps drain the fen, they can ally with Anise to create a coalition to rout out the humans, or they can help the locals to take back their town from the duke. The plot hooks of each borough guide for Thestwick will present relevant information for these three approaches, but it is worth keeping in mind that there are countless variations on how your players might decide to proceed.

ANISE'S AIMS

Anise and Gumperham have relocated to Thestwick-on-Alderham, but they haven't yet begun to disrupt the activities of the Lowland Reclamation Corps. Currently, their highest priority is likely the same as that of the party: reconnaissance and fact-finding. Anise is an expert scout, and she's employing her birdwatching prowess to keep tabs on the town. Before attempting anything drastic, Anise is spending her days spying on Lord Fandry and Louisa Terrowin, analyzing the fen waters, and sneaking into the village in various illusory disguises. She wants to make sure she understands exactly what's going on before making her move.

Though Anise could theoretically burn the wind-pump to the ground in the middle of the night, that would only be a short-term solution. It would also be needlessly dangerous, and she might end up killed in the retaliation. Instead, Anise wants to find a way to rid Thestwick of *all* of its human residents altogether... even the locals who have been there for decades. That could mean turning all the villagers into frogs, or it could just mean convincing them all to leave. Anise isn't picky, but she does recognize that time is running short.

Regardless of what she decides, Anise believes her best shot at ridding her home of its destroyers would be to ally with the other oft-maligned creatures of the fen: Black Alfie the ghost dog, Bulgreck the cave troll, and Sin Ranulf the bloodthirsty revenant. Despite the bountiful folk tales of each of these beings and their relative proximity, Anise has never met any of them. After all, she and Gumperham tend to keep to themselves. Given the desperate situation, however, Anise feels it may be

worth quickly making introductions and subsequently joining forces.

APPROACH ANISE

Whether the adventurers wish to work with Anise or dispose of her, the party will first have to actually find her. To do so, they can either infiltrate her home—a feat made difficult by the wary and watchful Gumperham—or else find her while she's clandestinely navigating the village.

INFILTRATE THE SNAIL HOME

The first impediment adventurers will face while conducting a home invasion is Gumperham himself. He may not be able to talk, but he is intelligent and perceptive. Given his sensitive foot and antennae, he may be able to notice the adventurers trudging through the lowlands even if he can't directly see them. If the party is able to give Gumperham the slip, they will then have to figure out a means to get up into Anise's home. The witch herself has numerous rope ladders she can use to climb up into the structure without bothering Gumperham, but she can also cause these to deploy or retract with a simple incantation. The players likely won't be so lucky. They will have to either boulder up Gumperham's shell—invariably grabbing his attention in the process—or else bring their own ladder, pole, or magic spell.

Once inside, Anise's home is only minimally booby-trapped. Most of her defenses are magic alarms, or even cruder techniques. Her most successful trap—in terms of total intrusions foiled—is a bucket of bog water balanced atop a door frame. Anise knows she's playing with fire simply by parking Gumperham so close to town. She *is* prepared, but she also isn't about to blow some intruder to smithereens simply for trying to sneak around her home.

The biggest challenges for adventurers who attempt to break and enter into Anise's home will be navigation and quelling their own curiosity. The witch's complex is large, and while the party attempts to get their bearings, Anise will no doubt be planning countermeasures. Plus, the adventurers may want to inspect any number of magical doodads, or the highly reactive fenbulbs themselves. All but the most experienced spellcasters may inadvertently trigger an arcane mishap through their own ignorance and clumsiness.



SPOT ANISE IN THESTWICK

As soon as Anise and Gumperham made their way to the village, Anise began sneaking about. Often donning the visage of a villager, she discreetly skulks about while trying to learn the ins and outs of the operation. Depending on how long the party waits before trying to confront her, she may have learned any of the following:

1. Lord and Lady Fandry have crippling marriage problems.
2. The reclamation can be undone by destroying the embankments.
3. The windpump is a functional but flawed construction.
4. Louisa Terrowin hates Lord Fandry but wants to see the project through anyway.
5. Many individual members of the Lowland Reclamation Corps secretly mock Lord Fandry.
6. The locals are hatching their own scheme to sabotage the operation.
7. The windpump will need to operate in perpetuity to keep the fen dry.
8. Lord Fandry has plans to march the Alderham knights into Talmouth.

If the party would rather not invade her mysterious and intimidating snail home, they can attempt to intercept her while she is making her way through town. Crucially, the party will first have to come to the conclusion that Anise has in fact been walking amongst the villagers. No one else has yet realized. This may be accomplished through day-and-night surveillance, although the mists of the fen tend to play tricks on those unused to such thick morning fog. Anise will always make her entrances and exits under the cover of night or during periods of all-obscuring mist.

Seeing through Anise's disguise will require either excellent perception or deduction. Her "masks" (as she calls them) aren't foolproof, and if the adventurers take stock of *everyone* in town, they may be able to spot the duplicate. Short of seeing through the illusions, the adventurers may have to infer from evidence who Anise might be: the knight who keeps walking past the door to the windpump, the old lady who can't keep her eyes off the moorwings, or the gentleman with mysteriously wet trousers.

DEAL WITH ANISE

Once the players are able to track down Anise, they will have to decide what to do with her. Lord Fandry would be most pleased if they could simply fells the wicked witch, but he will also happily accept any solution that rids her from Thestwick altogether. Of course, the adventurers may see eye-to-eye with Anise, and if they're particularly persuasive, the witch of Alderham Fen could be convinced to collaborate.

KILL ANISE

Anise is old, but she is not immortal. Through potent elixirs and the aid of her coven, Anise has been able to indefinitely extend her lifespan, but she will not survive a sword through the heart. Nevertheless, landing that killing blow will not be easy. Anise is a master of disguises, illusions, and—if need be—transformation. While she may hate to interfere with the local ecosystem, she will not hesitate to turn an assailant into a frog.

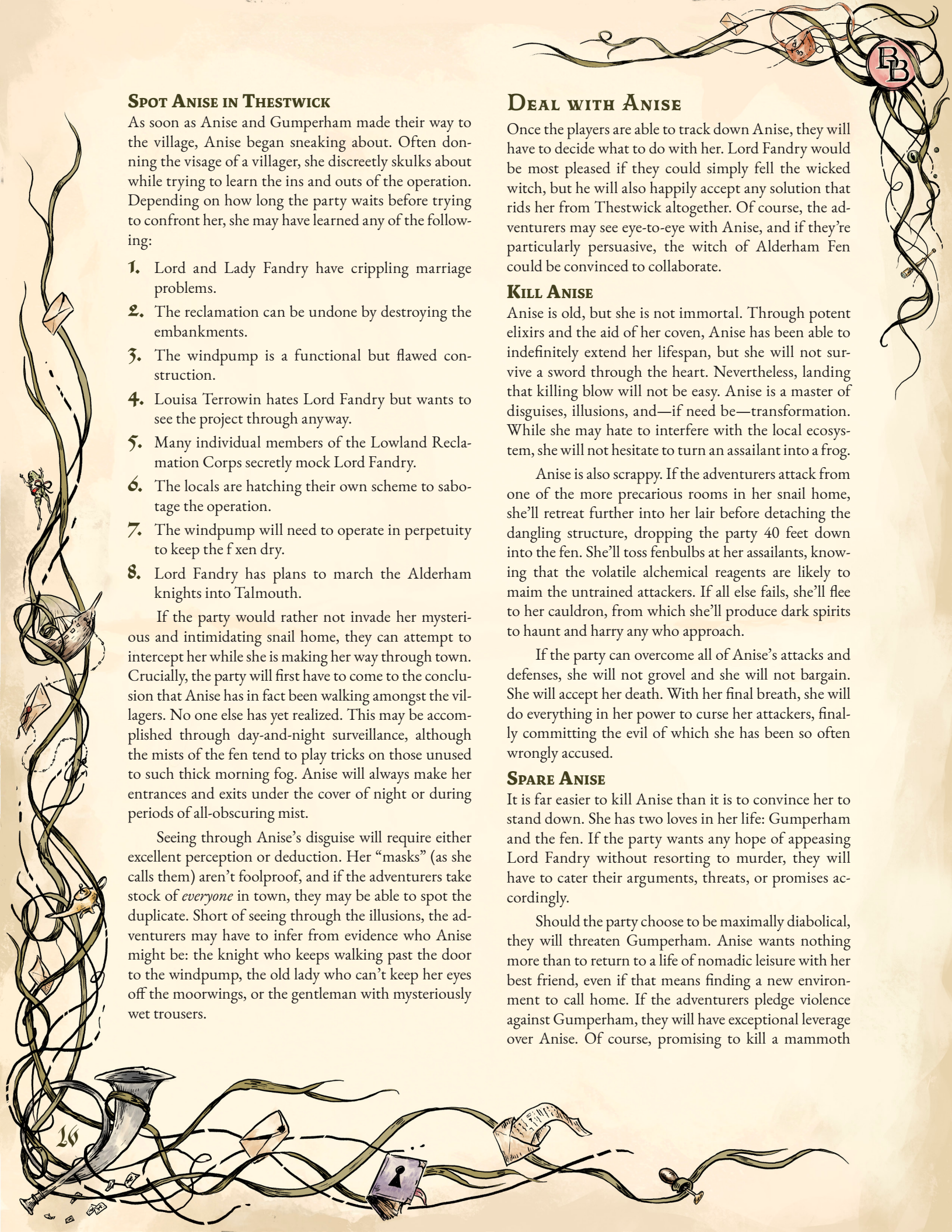
Anise is also scrappy. If the adventurers attack from one of the more precarious rooms in her snail home, she'll retreat further into her lair before detaching the dangling structure, dropping the party 40 feet down into the fen. She'll toss fenbulbs at her assailants, knowing that the volatile alchemical reagents are likely to maim the untrained attackers. If all else fails, she'll flee to her cauldron, from which she'll produce dark spirits to haunt and harry any who approach.

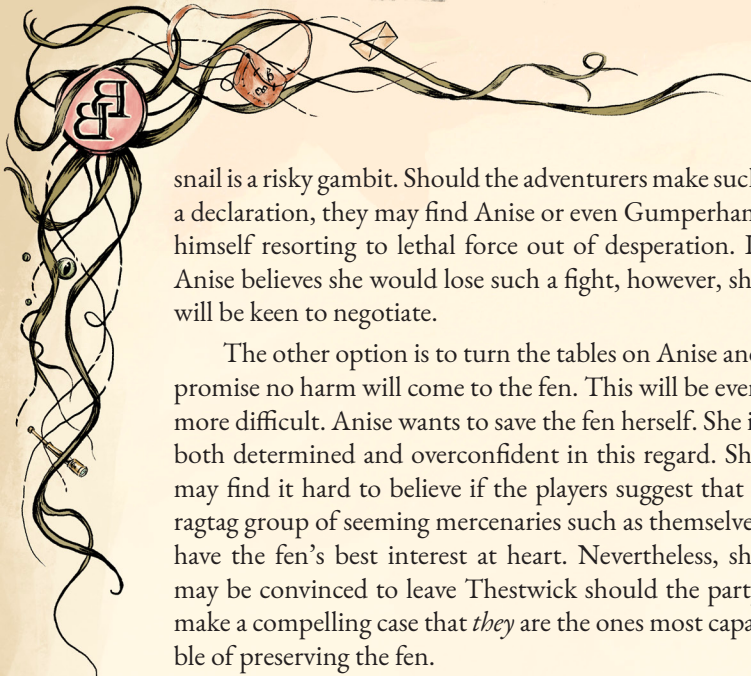
If the party can overcome all of Anise's attacks and defenses, she will not grovel and she will not bargain. She will accept her death. With her final breath, she will do everything in her power to curse her attackers, finally committing the evil of which she has been so often wrongly accused.

SPARE ANISE

It is far easier to kill Anise than it is to convince her to stand down. She has two loves in her life: Gumperham and the fen. If the party wants any hope of appeasing Lord Fandry without resorting to murder, they will have to cater their arguments, threats, or promises accordingly.

Should the party choose to be maximally diabolical, they will threaten Gumperham. Anise wants nothing more than to return to a life of nomadic leisure with her best friend, even if that means finding a new environment to call home. If the adventurers pledge violence against Gumperham, they will have exceptional leverage over Anise. Of course, promising to kill a mammoth





snail is a risky gambit. Should the adventurers make such a declaration, they may find Anise or even Gumperham himself resorting to lethal force out of desperation. If Anise believes she would lose such a fight, however, she will be keen to negotiate.

The other option is to turn the tables on Anise and promise no harm will come to the fen. This will be even more difficult. Anise wants to save the fen herself. She is both determined and overconfident in this regard. She may find it hard to believe if the players suggest that a ragtag group of seeming mercenaries such as themselves have the fen's best interest at heart. Nevertheless, she may be convinced to leave Thestwick should the party make a compelling case that *they* are the ones most capable of preserving the fen.

SIDE WITH ANISE

If Lord Fandry has his way, the fen will change drastically in ways that he cannot foresee. Yes, many wealthy subjects will gain land to farm, but countless fenfolk will be forced to abandon their centuries-old way of life. A rich ecosystem of birds, reeds, eels, and shellfish will be devastated. There will be countless unpredictable ripple effects as the dried fen reveals secrets that are better left preserved in the peat. Perhaps the adventurers feel as though the acres and acres of newly arable farmland are worth these sacrifices. Alternatively, they may agree with Anise Bloodbirch: something has to be done.

Anise has not cooperated or colluded with anyone but her coven and her snail for centuries. As such, the adventurers will have to painstakingly gain the witch's trust. She may ask them to willingly accept a minor hex, or she may give them a gruesome task to complete to prove their commitment. In either case, Anise won't simply bring them into the fold because of their honeyed words.

If the party is able to successfully convince Anise that their aims are compatible, they will still have the challenge of colluding with the witch without drawing the ire of the townsfolk. The party will have to work with incredible secrecy to make sure they don't arouse suspicion.

Anise's major task for the party will be to do what she has thus far been putting off: forging an alliance between the non-human entities in Thestwick. Anise will tell the party what little she knows of Black Alfie, Bulgreck, and Sir Ranulf, and she will give them any supplies and magical aids they may require, but she can

do little else. In the meantime, Anise will scheme about how best to ensure that a potential victory over the duke and his gang of bullies is not short-lived.

WHAT DO THE LOCALS WANT?

The moorwing eelers and thatching artisans who call Thestwick-on-Alderham home have their own plans for the village. They have been meeting in secret, attempting to form a last-ditch plan to rid their town of the Lowland Reclamation Corps for good. If the party wants to help the locals in their goal, it may be advantageous to encourage an alliance between Anise and the Thestwick residents. This will be a tough sell for the locals, however, as they fear the bog witch more than any. As far as the "haunted fen" goes, the locals feel surprisingly similarly to Lord Fandry. They want the monsters gone just as much as the duke and duchess. Their end goal is to take the village back for themselves, not to affiliate with dark magicians and undead soldiers.

Regardless, the full nature of the locals' plan will be explored in a future chapter.

