

# DAR SILVERCLOAK

On the **Writhing**  
**Earth**





Cracks gleamed along the surface of the planet. Not the glowing breaks a molten world might have, or the fractured earth of a stony one, but weird lines between otherwise normal stretches of land and sea.

"What are we waiting for?" Lavin asked.

The Kelln had been halted clear of the atmosphere for an hour already. "It feels wrong."

"Looks weird," he agreed, "but not near so weird as Solaria or The Jungle."

He notably didn't mention Calrivi, as everyone thought their home was normal. He wasn't wrong, though. Still, I worried.

"Circle around it."

He shrugged, gave the orders. The foresails were raised, the aethereal rudder unlocked, and we began to drift. I focused on the world. It wasn't easy. It seemed to vibrate when I stared too hard. I closed my eyes, pinched the bridge of my nose.

I leaned on the gunwale, head down, for a long minute. I looked again. Everything seemed scattered, a jigsaw of a world, not assembled. But no, just a trick of the mind. Or a trick on the mind.

I closed my eyes again. "Lavin, steer the ship around the planet at random, then tell me when a minute has passed."

"Sar, I-- You know what, fine. I'll sail around a bit."

"There's a Volpithi Synchron in my cabin. Desk, bottom-left drawer. Time it exactly."

Eyes still closed, I leaned my forehead against the rail, waiting.

An annoyed grunt, footsteps leaving. Returning. "Found it thirty-two seconds ago. Probably been a minute by now."

"Time the full minute." People stop where it made sense to stop, no matter how they try. I wanted to be somewhere genuinely random.

"Fine." After a dragging silence he said, "There's your minute."

I opened my eyes. Scattered pieces, suddenly aligning into a

planet. "There's a Volpithi chap back at the club, he was showing off this optical illusion, where it looks like one object, but then you turn it and you realize it's just blocks at the right distances to look like they line up. Have you seen one of those?"

"Sounds like a silly rich-person toy."

I bit my lip. After some thought, I unfocused my eyes, forcing myself to look straight ahead. Slowly, I turned, keeping my eyes steady. The world splintered apart, snapping my focus back to it. Whole again.

Having found the trick, I got Lavin and the Scalies to try it. Most couldn't get it or didn't want to try, but enough saw it that the consensus opinion was that we should not go down there, but my contract with the Scalies was not a democracy and I wasn't going to ignore such a fantastically-strange world as this.

As the sun orbited to the far side, we sat and watched it, considering.

"No lights at night, so where would we even go?" Lavin asked. "An empty, dangerous world."

"You just want to finish the contract without any more work," I joked.

A growl of annoyance. He wasn't in the mood.

"Lavin, you're too used to The Ring," I said. "Most worlds don't have large enough cities to see at night. And sure, it is dangerous. The aether around it is weird, and I'm not certain how easy it will be to leave. So, I should go down alone. If I'm not back in a month, leave and trust that I'll make my own way."

"I think we've been over the fact that you're done going alone." The big lug sounded like he'd never led a pirate raid.

I gave him a friendly rap with my knuckles. "In that case, we find a river and sail up it. Even if they don't have cities, people live near rivers."

Six hours of sailing up-river and a flicker of firelight gleaming on a hillside proved me right. Miles inland, almost hidden by hills, so a few of us left the ship behind. I prefer not to terrify the natives, and flying ships are terrifying to those

who haven't even seen a city. Lavin and two of his Scalies accompanied me, them trudging through tall grass tangled into dense mats, me drifting on aethereal dust, cloak belled wide and glowing silver.

Valk gave a loud rumble.

"What's wrong?" Lavin asked, the guttural sound meaning more to him than me.

Valk stood tall, pointing back the way we come. We all looked back. "Where's the Kelln?"

His question settled a lead weight into my gut.

"Alright," Lavin said, impressively managing to keep his voice steady, "some dumb campfire doesn't matter. We head back."

"No, wait." I bit back words, wanting to just tell him no, but sure that wouldn't convince anyone. Pulling in more aether, I drifted higher. "Let me look."

Keeping my eyes straight down, ensuring the trio stayed in view, I floated fifty feet above the knotty grasses, looking south-east across a vast expanse of grass-covered hills. My heart started to race. Panicking for an instant, I looked down, calming myself when I saw Lavin, Valk, and Martam still present.

I dropped back to them. "The river's gone. Wait, wait!"

Lavin, the onky one who hadn't immediately gone wide-eyed with worry, said, "We go back. Now."

"There is no back," I snapped, wishing I was as calm as I wanted him to be. "The Kelln is on the river, but the river isn't there."

"So we find it."

"First rule, find out how a world works. That fire is still shining ahead. Steady fires mean locals, locals know about the world they're in, knowledge about the world is how we find the Kelln again."

I'd learned to read Lavin best by how the lightning flickered through his eyes. It was steady, but bright and sharp. Not calm, but definitely not panicked. "And if they're dangerous? If they

see a few scalebacks and think we'd be good roasting over that fire? There's no running back to the Kelln."

"Then you take charge, fight or run as you will. But for now, we need to get to those people before they disappear like the river did."

Martam and Valk, tails lashing in worry, looked to Lavin. He took a deep breath. His eyes flashed, then steadied to a flickering crackle. "Very well."

Worry speeding our steps, we made better time. Each walk down a hill had my heart in my throat, loosening as I topped another rise and saw the flames still.

We cleared a rise, and there they were, a ring of domed tents. The sun was brushing the sky, a hint of its light painting the tents golden on one side, deep shadow on the other. One person sat in the center of the circle, poking at a fire that was smoldering towards nothing.

It's not the best sign when small tribes like that tend a fire all night. That usually means there are beasts they need firelight to scare off. Perhaps it was pure luck that we'd not been attacked as we walked.

I studied the person for a moment: female, orcish height, vulpine muzzle, fine auburn fur across clear muscles and sharp tendon lines, clothing a patchwork to make something of a smock, and large ears that twitched about to hear behind. "Alright, I'll lead."

I made it halfway down the slope when someone slipped out of one of the tents, half the height of that woman, hiding giggles as they furtively slipped around then tent. Another youth, a bit shorter followed in their wake.

The woman heard them sneaking, turned to say something, and saw us approaching. Screaming, she seemed to conjure a spear from nothing.

I raised my hands to show they were empty—probably not the most soothing gesture as I floated on a glowing silver cloak—and Lavin growled to his Scalies, "Keep your blades



sheathed."

People boiled from the tents. Parents dragged youths to the center. More spears popped into existence, brandished our way. Commands were bellowed, order descending as we remained still and silent. A block of fifteen, spears ready to throw, approached.

Definitely not a safe land, with a response like that.

I floated forward, just enough to separate from Lavin and make myself the focus. "I am Sar, called the Silvercloak. I and my comrades, Lavin, Martam, and Valk, come with open hands."

They regarded us askance. Whispered discussion passed between the people. Soon, a man said, "What land carried you here?"

A strange phrase. "I come from a distant world, by magical means, and am uncertain of what you speak."

More discussion. Another speaker, smaller and with many rings piercing into their ears. "What magical means?"

"I have a vessel that flies between worlds." I gestured skyward. "The stars at night? We travel between those. Some of those stars are worlds like your own. We explore them."

More discussion. Be happy when they discuss, no matter how long they take. Those open to discussion are likely open to your continued breathing. After some back and forth, one who had until then been silent raised his voice. Smaller, decorated with white slashes where scars broke their auburn fur. "Does it matter where they are from? If they were attacking, they would have rushed in while we were unawares. You already said they had the chance."

Whether it was the speaker or the sentiment, the discussion ended. Dense grass mats were piled onto the failing fire and space was made for us as the cooking began. There was mostly silence as breakfast was prepared, a grain that cracked when heated, smeared with a crushed purple berry.

The offered it to us. I took a bite. Tart and crunchy.

As is often the case, that sharing of food was an important ritual. Properly welcomed, introductions were given.

The scarred one, titled Wanderer, was named Muunkhep. The head of their hunters, titled Spearkeeper, was named Hkisaap. Two others of social importance were Basketweaver Wish-Dance who seemed to manage the food and Snapper Kipeimu who had woken up to watch the children.

If her name were not a give-away of being from elsewhere, Wish-Dance was also visibly distinct. She and six others had fur and skin black as midnight, with bright red tips to their thicker fur. They had stouter builds and were barely half the height of the others, only a head taller than me. It's a good sign when outsiders have respected positions.

The other outsider—Kuvak-Ur—was a quiet woman with spines instead of fur and spade-like hands, long claws tipping each of four fingers. She didn't have any title, but people seemed to respect her. Or possibly that was fear.

In this group, my soft flesh drew more notice than the scales of Lavin, Martam, and Valk.

I think. I also have a glowing, crystal cloak that's smooth as glass but soft as down. The children all wanted to touch it, and Snapper Kipeimu didn't intervene.

After introductions, I got to the point. "The world we are from, it is not at all like this one. The land itself seems to be different. We walked from a river--"

Gasps, all around.

"Well, where we're from, that's a normal thing to do. Except now the river is gone, and our ship and the rest of its crew are on that river. We're hoping you can help us find them."

Some worried murmurs. Wanderer Muunkhep outright laughed. "You want to find the same river?"

"I see we misunderstand this world."

"Sounds like you misunderstand how to go for a walk."

"Maybe you explain to us how, then?"

Tension pervaded the space. The air felt charged, the



moment of a duel before a blade is drawn. Valk, even to my eyes, was palpably worried, and a nine-foot crocodilian spreads worry into anyone about them. Lavin was calm, but had a tension that seemed ready for violence. Martam, scarred from enough battles that he'd never run out of war stories, looked no different than normal, but that wasn't soothing.

As for the locals, hands were near their waists, next to cuts in their smocks, as if they were going to conjure up spears again. I hoped they didn't. They seemed reasonable sorts, but anyone who attacked Lavin's Scalies found themselves in dire straits.

I stood, holding the mostly-eaten bowl of grain and berries plainly, a reminder that we were guests. "Wanderer, we mean no offense. We are not from here, we do not know the way of things here. If you can aid us, we will find a way to repay you."

Kuvak-Ur spoke up, her claws clicking in time to her speech. "They look like they can hunt. Perhaps they prove that."

Lavin snorted, almost a chuckle, and a noise that jostled my mind to make the leap. Saying we could hunt was her way of telling the others that, whatever they thought about helping us, Kuvak-Ur thought we were dangerous, not the sort of strangers to pick a fight with. She managed all that without insulting us, too.

Judging by the slow ripple of reaction through the tribe, they were as slow on the uptake as I had been. Not Spearkeeper Hkisaap. He immediately nodded agreement.

Another local, not introduced to us, said, "I'll wager my second knife I can hit on the first throw."

She'd gestured at a tussock of grass thirty paces distant, and suddenly the challenges were pouring in. Apparently this was a typical game, and it opened with Hkisaap demonstrating his prowess as Spearkeeper, his throw plunging dead-center into the grassy tangle. They wanted us to show how dangerous we could be.

Men and women stretched on display, focusing as much on

being seen as making the throw, now that the game had begun. Few hit perfectly, but most were close.

Martam and Valk got drafted. Martam threw wide and short, but his general familiarity with weapons still shone. Valk, clearly not caring about the game, hurled the spear as far as he could and growled at the onlookers. The actual purpose being to show that both the tribe and ourselves were dangerous, clearing the entire hill was a fine enough trick.

Lavin, it turned out, could hurl a spear. Flat and low, his throw sheared through the tussock and embedded in the dirt past it.

I begged off with, "I don't throw spears," but they insisted that everyone participate. I sent a searing silver lance into the tussock. The aether warped and twisted the grass, sliding shards through reality to scatter as dust nearby. They didn't ask for more of a display.

The challenge over, people broke into small clusters, kinship groups just below the level of tribe sharing quick words before a hunt. I was with the Scalies, but I could feel the ears listening in.

"You worry about hunting," I said. "I'll see if I can learn about how to get back to the Kelln."

"Think we can't learn that?" I'd heard Martam speak perhaps a dozen times in five months, and never so sharply.

Lavin lifted a hand to me, looked at Martam. "It's fine. If nobody hunts, they stop trusting us. This is the thing Sar's good at."

A bit demeaning to imply this was all I was good for, but it kept Martam quiet.

As the troop of hunters—twelve of them and four of us—set out, Muunkhep stepped up beside me. "So, it's you who studies me." Clearly we had been eavesdropped on.

"We truly don't know how to get back," I said. "Hopefully, the people on the ship don't realize we magically disappeared or they'll start panicking."

"How can you not understand this?"

This was one of the hardest parts. The nature of a world was so deep in the mind of the people who lived it that they didn't know how to explain. Most would be just as confused if asked why a rock went down when dropped. "The river seemed to cease to be. We don't know why."

He frowned. "You're in Vilder, not the river."

"But where is the river?"

He frowned.

Some word was a problem. "Well, if you were to get to the river, how would you?"

"I would need to know which river."

"Well--"

Hkisaap sharply raised a hand, stopping where he was. Lifting his head high, he scanned about, then turned left. The hunters followed, spears at the ready.

I kept silent as we slowed to a stalking pace. A bird-head popped up from the grass, sharp beak perched atop a long neck, easily ten feet up. The slow approach continued, unflinching as the bird took off at a run.

Stillness. Arms high, spears ready. A burst of motion, spears flying into the grass. Something grey-white broke the grass, many somethings. They disappeared, and we all trotted to where the spears lay. Two beasts, like rabbits except near my height at the haunches, lay there. Hkisaap finished the wounded one, then there was raucous congratulations to the people whose spears scored the kills.

With those beasts on poles, we got back to talking.

I went circles with Muunkhep until the sun neared the horizon. We turned directly around and walked about two-hundred paces back to the camp. That was not the direction we had come, nor was it the distance.

"Any progress?" Lavin asked.

"Yes and no."

"What's the yes and what's the no?"

"I've learned a lot of ways not to get an explanation, and have a better sense of what's wrong. How long until Clō starts panicking about us not returning?"

"I give it two days. She's pretty steady."

"Even though they might be flying about and not seeing us where they expect?"

He chuckled. "Two days. She's pretty steady."

Dinner next, then sleep. They invited us into their tents, one each in a tent with only hunters.

The second day went much the same. With a glance back as we left, seeing those left behind tending to children, I realized why we were hunting all day, even though they clearly had enough meat: They trusted us, just not around their children. More than fair.

I didn't get much from Muunkhep, but I did finally see where they were hiding their spears: All of the locals had a flap of skin on their gut, and they would reach in from the open sides of their smocks to pull things out. Some sort of magical storage, just a part of their bodies. I fantasized a bit about having my own magical pocket.

Later, one hunter spotted an odd, muddy basin where we stopped to dig up roots with no sprouts. They were amazed when a trivial spell bubbled all the tubers to the surface and another cleaned away the dirt. I was toasted a hero, and I discovered that, in addition to the fermented grains they had served before, the berries could make a tart, sharp liquor.

Finally, on the way back, Muunkhep said something just the right way. I asked him, "Why did you take this path back?" and he said, "This is what the way back looks like."

Like. This wasn't the path back, it was like the path back, and that meant it was the path back. He didn't know the way anywhere, he knew what the way was like, so he just went where it felt like the right path.

"I've been watching and listening," Lavin said when we were back, "and none of this world makes to me."

I told him my thought and he said, "It still doesn't make sense."

"Well, I think I know what to ask tomorrow."

Tomorrow, instead of breakfast, I woke to, "Trees eastward!"

The camp became an orderly riot. All I could do was duck as tents collapsed and disappeared into pockets. Parents bellowed for children and gripped them tight. Hkisaap, Wish-Dance, and Kipeimu directed all.

I had little attention for them, eyes focused eastward. The sun had set over rolling plains, but its rise was occluded by the thick growth of woodland that has never been cut for lumber. There was something else off.

I scanned, trying to figure what bothered me. Muunkhep wasn't in the crowd.

I filled my cloak with aether, rising enough to see more clearly, finally spotting him atop a rise to the west. Kuvak-Ur was with him. Both stared west, talking softly.

Getting Lavin's attention, I joined the pair.

As forest had replaced plains to the east, so too were the westward plains gone. A dark fog lay low, aboil. Twists of fog spun skyward. A rocky rise or, no just a shadow, a trick of the light.

I forced that thought way. This planet hid itself in tricks of the light. I focused harder, finding hints of form behind the fog. I couldn't bring it into focus, but something was there.

I looked to the woods again, searching for such trickery. Here a bird darted between treetops. There was a tree choked by vines while those about stood strong. Moss on the boles of a cluster, where moisture trapped it, but not across everything. No twinge of doubt formed from watching it.

Below that, the tents were gone, the tribe organized. Approaching.

"Wanderer Muunkhep?" Hkisaap's tone begged for guidance.

Scars shifted with a heavy breath. Muunkhep turned, face grave. "We make for the woodlands."

The response was immediate. "What will we eat without grain?" "The children will forget the sun!" "We've been in Vilder since my mother and my grandmother and her grandmother and back before."

"If we flee south, we can try the narrow route and pray for guidance," Muunkhep said, "but this seething is not quiet."

Silence, until Snapper Kipeimu said, "We've always lived in the plains."

Muunkhep let a heavy breath slide loose, deflating before the silent unity of the tribe. "Then we run."

Some started to move, stumbling as those about them stayed still. The other half moved, stumbling as they found others stopped again.

Hkisaap yelled, "Have you never migrated before? Second-spears with Muunkhep. Move! Snapper, children and aides. Move! Basketweaver, weavers and holders. Move! First-spears with me. Move!"

We fell in with the First-spears, the tail of a suddenly-orderly procession. Like any nomadic tribe, they knew how to travel.

We paused, though. Hkisaap looked back. Kuvak-Ur had not moved. Her spines were up, her claws splayed as if ready for battle. Eyes glassy, she looked our way. "You're all mad."

She ran, alone, for the trees.

Hkisaap let out a shuddering breath. A shake, and he yelled to those who had stopped with him, "We're running guard, so run!"

We ran. Footfalls drummed a steady beat as the tribe loped over hills. I flared my cloak and rose clear of the grass, flying easily. The Scalies had more trouble. The grass, always twining, knotted into huge mats. The locals leapt onto it, kept running with odd high-steps that were fluid for them but most people couldn't have managed.

The Scalies had to run in a file, whoever was at the front hacking at the grass when the tangles got tight. One would clear a mat, then trade the lead. They managed, but I started sorting



my runes, searching for a spell to clear their way, or perhaps speed their steps.

Floating freely, I turned sideways, my focus on the stony protrusions now visible between waves of thick, sooty fog. We ran, but had gotten no further from it. Of course not. We weren't on a path that led away from it yet. In fact, I wasn't sure if distance really existed here. It bordered us, and it would continue to border us until we were in it or we found another route.

Trying to look far ahead, to find the routes Muunkhep searched for, my vision splintered and I almost fell.

I focused on Muunkhep, instead. He sprinted ahead of the tribe, zigging and zagging in wild swerves, calling directions behind. The tribe followed his words, not his path, a far simpler course.

His commands kept coming, faster and faster, as we fled. The path began to twist, turning as though navigating a maze. Try as we might, the towering wood encroached on our left, the darkling fog on our right.

More twists, into a defile, now running. I wasn't sure if it was a wall of trees or raw stone to our left. The baying of wolves echoed forth, so that wall was probably trees.

"Keep close!" Muunkhep swerved sharply right. The fog parted for him, tiny black vortices where he'd entered. Panicked yelps, Kipeimu yelling to keep the children moving. Parents grabbed arms and shoulders, dragging crying youths.

The second-spears disappeared into darkness, the children, their minders, the weavers, the first-spears, the Scalies, and finally myself.

Canyon walls were riddled with holes, widening into gaps whenever I blinked. Not a canyon. Towers of weather-sculpted stone, a maze of paths between them. Spires moved, closing like the fingers of some colossus, trying to grab me. A blink and they were still.

Ahead, a cry of panic, a child weeping for his mother, people

yelling about which way Muunkhep had gone.

"Keep moving!" came echoing from the fog. "We can push--"

Echoes came back, and again, sounding from every direction. Instinctively, I cast a seeking spell for the man. All I got was a tangled skein of paths, as confusing as those echoes, instantly overwhelming my focus.

I blinked back watery tears, both from the pain of that casting and the sting of soot. Ahead, the tribe was stumbling, choking smog rolling from rough stones all about. Wish-Dance and Hkisaap were focused, yelling and pushing to drive the crowd onward.

The soot was thinning, patches in low points as the air cleared. Rocky outcrops were clear above, sunlight pouring cruelly down. That burning glow was harsh as the hottest desert, fit to parch grass and sear skin.

Martam and Valk were looking about wildly. Lavin grabbed Martam's shoulder, dragging him back when he started to bolt. "Stick together."

The tribe's leaders were doing the same, Wish-Dance and Kipeimu stilling the children and most of the people, Hkisaap getting the spear-wielders into tight formations. We'd stopped moving, though. Eyes were casting about, searching for I-knew-not-what.

I drifted upwards, resting a toe against Lavin's shoulder to ensure I didn't lose him as I searched. Above it all, distant mountains, spindly as the spires about us, loomed. Or perhaps not so distant. A flock of birds rose from them. Or that was a flight of rocs from mountains. I couldn't focus my eyes right to comprehend distance. Trying to made my eyes ache.

I turned my gaze lower, to the ground about us. Rocky protrusions and soot-black fog and the burning sun flashing back from bleached-white earth, crisping grass-- grass.

Before I could call attention to it, Muunkhep rushed from behind a rise, stopping in that patch of dying grass. "Almost there!"

We ran.

A shadow passed overhead, massive as a roc. The earth shook as it landed between two spires of stone. Squat and broad, wings heavy with winter-thick fur, the blue-white beast looked half dragon and half bear. People skidded to a halt, leaping back and raising spears. There was no confidence in the hunters. They were backpedaling, pushing spouses and children behind them.

Tucking tight, my foot resting on Lavin's shoulder as I bent to his ear, I said, "This is where we earn their aid."

He hissed back. "We prepare to fight monsters, we don't just rush in."

"You'll be fast enough. Trust me."

He spoke again, but my eyes were closed, my mind away from the world. I'd surfaced a rune of temporal twisting already, thinking about trying to speed our flight. Now, I arranged a dozen facets together, a complex spell in their confluence. Pulling a torrent from my well, I funneled raw aether, chanting as I poured power forth.

I bound a spell to my cloak, dropping me to the stony ground as its energies stopped fueling my flight. I bound a spell to my soul directly, feeling the world shudder as the aether tried to pull me out of it. The channel through my core abraded, my bones warping under the strain. Forcing the paired spells into being, I split the threads again, sending tendrils of energy out. Aether-dust enwrapped Lavin, suffusing his scales with a silvery shine, tracing like glowing veins the ligaments and tendons that strung him together.

Another thread to Valk, the glow latching onto the ridges of his powerful back. Martam, a faint shine through the gaps in his armor. Hkisaap, the tips of his every hair trailing aethereal dust.

The forms of power locked in place, the world stabilized, and I could see properly. All four were looking at me, as if carefully considering what they were feeling. As if they had time to

ponder.

They looked to the beast, which had drawn in breath for a mighty roar, or perhaps to spray forth power, if it were more draconic than it appeared.

They moved. Valk sprinted with a second wind, legs blurring across the ground. His sword plunged into the creature's thigh, out and in again. Its roar of threat turned to pain, maw straining vast with a glimpse to the void beyond.

Martam was there as it bit at Valk, driving a spectacular lunge into its haunch, slashing across its flank as he sprang past. It reared back from this pain, and Lavin was already striking, claws gripping fur, pulling it wide so his jaws could clamp down on flesh. Blue flickers suffused him. A crack of thunder.

Blackened fur and flesh where he'd bitten, the beast twitching back, muscles spasming from the jolt. As it reared, in came javelins from Hkisaap, one-two-three with pinpoint accuracy, bleeding the revealed throat.

Finally, it's maw snapped shut, denting and mangling Martam's shield, swiftly abandoned to its bite. Its writhing tossed Valk clear, slicing a new gash down its rump as he went. It crashed down where Lavin stood and found him gone, bloody slashes in his wake.

Blooded, the beast tried to fly, and a hail of javelins from other spear-carriers pierced its wings, more slices from Lavin and his warriors, more javelins again.

The beast fel. Gasping for breath, I spooled in the silver threads. Lavin stumbled, Martam and Hkisaap fell to hands and knees. Valk vomited in a quantity only a crocodilian can manage.

I dragged myself upright and staggered after them.

By the time I reached the beast, people had thrown tent-ropes about it. Grabbing straps, they pulled. Fifty paces to green grasses, a spiteful pride in their eyes as they moved. They needed to reach that grass, but they wanted their trophy as

well.

"You know how hard it is to get a shield that sits right?" Martam muttered as we stumbled after.

Entering the grassland fully, I looked back and saw the mountainous spires distant on the horizon, miles of grass between us and there. There wasn't a single tree in sight.

We had survived whatever that was. I fell to my knees, then flopped back in the grass. Me and everyone else. For a time, we just lay there, gasping for breath.

Wish-Dance broke the silence with a sharp clap of her hands. "It's not gonna skin itself."

Back to work. Tents reappeared. Fires were made. Meat was cooked. Drink was shared, long into the night.

Grand stories were told. We heard about past migrations and hunts and close escapes. A glorious tale was mournfully told about Kuvak-Ur, who fought off something called a kurambi, which sounded like some sort of snake.

They got from me the tale of a world where fire doesn't exist and the night is ruled by creatures made of shadow. I thought that was a great story, but I guess it was too frightening for the young ones. Lavin revived things with tales of revolution, Martam and Valk eager to join in.

Tales I knew already. I walked to the outermost edge of the circled tribe, taking a seat beside Muunkhep. "Where are we?"

"Vilder Grasses," he said.

"And where were we yesterday?"

He looked at me strangely. "Vilder Grasses."

"That's what I thought. So, if I need to figure out how to find the Kelln on my own, I'll need to learn what sort of path would lead to that river." I frowned. "Except it won't be that river, because the Kelln is now flying about, looking for us."

"Flying about?"

"That's how we get between worlds, ships that fly through the air instead sailing across the water." I bit at my lip, trying to sort things out. "Just to check that I'm understanding correctly,

when we were hunting, Hkisaap wasn't looking for tracks at first, he was looking for the sort of path that might lead to hunting grounds. Meanwhile, you were always making sure there was the sort of trail nearby that would lead back to the camp. And both of you were making sure every path seemed like the sort that would still be in Vilder?"

He frowned. "You didn't understand this?"

I sighed. "If you ever visit another world, you will find it very.. strange. If I need to, I suspect I can start looking for the Kelln. That said, if you can spare the effort, I would appreciate the help."

"You just helped kill a yurngarl. Everyone will be glad to aid you. Besides, that much fur is more than we need, so we'll be meeting some other tribes. Perhaps they will have some ideas."

I snorted a laugh, realizing how simple things could be. "You just look for a path that would probably lead to the tribe you're looking for, don't you?"

He said, "Any decent wanderer can find a tribe that wants to be found. A little effort, I should be able to find a gathering. The furs will trade better there, and with twenty or thirty tribes together, someone will probably have seen your flying thing."





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## Notes on Taykhi

I have never tried to describe a world like Taykhi. Normally, I would tell you of empires, of the lands in which they lie. Taykhi offers nothing so simple.

There are no empires, there are no kingdoms, there are not even cities. The land belongs to tribes and to beasts, but most of all the land belongs to itself.

In Taykhi, it is the moods and wanderings of the lands that define everything about life. You are always a few steps away from the other side of the world.

Adventurers will surely come, grand enterprises of the bold and the greedy. They will find that Taykhi does not bend. Taykhi is wild. Taykhi will remain wild.

## The Taykheen

The natives of this land are incredibly diverse. In the two gatherings and six other groups I met, we encountered forty-seven tribes in total. From these, I saw seventeen distinct heritages, with multiple heritages in all but one tribe. There is little value in giving details on each and every native lineage, so I will fall to generality.

Most were furred, less often covered in spines or scales. None had bare flesh.

Heights are inside the normal range, from gnome to crocodilian, although most were closer to orcs or dwarves.

Unifying these diverse peoples are their pouches. Every native of Taykhi has a pouch on their belly, a tiny flap seemingly with nothing behind it. They can store about fifteen pounds of goods in their pouches without feeling the weight. Everyone keeps some spare preserves on hand, and most also have winter clothes or a thick blanket. Objects like tents are shared between a family.

Young Taykheen—toddlers and infants—don't have developed pouches yet, and during this period it is apparently safe for them to ride in a parent's pouch. With it being so easy to keep their young safe from strangers, you are unlikely to see an infant outside of a gathering.



*Top row: gulambi, koantal, and durang  
Bottom row: nynyhan and poirinnah  
Note the open-sided tunics for access to their pouches*

## **Wild Animals**

Just as the people have pouches, so too do the beasts. For most, this is the same as for the people, a pouch on the belly somewhere.

Predators will eat most of a meal, then rip away chunks to store within for later. Herbivores browse until full, then start tearing up grass or leaves to save. In lean times, you can see them sitting in little loops, nose in their own pouch, munching.

It is worth noting that the beasts, relying on instinct, almost never get lost. Unless pursued by a predator or hunter, no animal will leave its native habitat, no matter how intrusive the adjacent territory.

## **Void Monsters**

On Taykhi, the line between beast and monster is clear. Creatures that we might think of as normal, looking like rats or wolves, are considered monsters if instead of a pouch, their maw feeds directly into the void. Monsters are the only creatures that thrive in a seething, if their devouring maw did not already make their evil clear.

When cut into, they are found to have no digestive system and no lungs. They consume directly into their void, somehow deriving sustenance from that.

There are legends of people with a void-maw, perhaps because they sold themselves to evil or entered the service of a seething, although I've seen no evidence of this.



# On Regions of Taykhi

Regions exist. You may wander to any random forest, and you may in one step leave one forest and enter another, but each forest is a unique place, and will have consistent patterns

For example, the Vilder Grasses that we traveled through are a broad, low valley. A river is always near the center, wandering somewhat. That river is a different region. Which river is passing through Vilder varies, but there is always a river.

## The Land is Alive

**The land is alive.** This is not some abstraction. Each region is an actual, living deity.

**The lands clash.** These deities do not all like each other.

The flight of my hosts from a seething and weald was not because those two just happened by, but because they were fighting. In theory, some weeks of battling later, one of the seething or weald would be weakened and scarred, possibly even dead.

**The lands care.** If you assault a tribe in their home, the land itself will be against you. It will be subtle, a raised root tripping you or a gust of wind turning your arrow, but it does favor its own.

## **Personalities of the Land**

**Friendly.** This land lets people enter and leave with ease. Plains and some forests are friendly, but nothing is friendlier than a river.

**Jealous.** A jealous land is difficult to enter, but also difficult to leave. Mountains, dense woodlands, and deserts tend to be jealous.

**Hungry.** A hungry land is easy to enter and difficult to leave. Hungry lands include seethings, deadlands, and hungry castles.

## **Finding Your Way**

**Trust the locals.** They know their way around.

**Look for similarities.** Places overlap where there are similarities between them.

**Trust familiarity.** If something reminds you of somewhere else you've been, there is a link.

**Don't try to backtrack.** If you do not see where you were when you look back, going backwards will muddy your intent.

**Keep trying.** You cannot force the lands to obey, but persistence allows luck to pay off.

## Seeking people

First, **try to reach a friendly land.**

In that land, **stay focused on the person you seek** and look for things that remind you of them.

If you know someone is trying to find you, go to a type of land you both agreed on, then focus on them while staying there.

## Leaving Taykhi

As below, so above. The air is featureless, so there is no sign that the paths it takes are strange and twisted. Looking down, the world will look normal, right until you blink and for a moment see it twist and shift.

This is while flying overland. It gets more difficult if you try to leave.

**As you fly upwards**, you will find the way does not exist. Taykhi is not built to be left behind.

**Just keep trying.** The land is not actively trapping you, it's just not helping.

**Expect leaving to take at least a week.** It will be exhausting, constantly flying skyward. Keep at it. You'll get out eventually.

## **Types of Land**

**Deadlands (Jealous).** Dead trees, wilted grass, bare stone expanses. A deadland is a drain on anyone fool enough to enter. Every day is exhausting, sapping the souls of its residents.

**The Hungry Castle (Hungry, but rare).** Once, there were cities. The myth goes that a vile ruler built a castle so vast it became a new land and consumed the cities, adding them to itself.

Based on the stories, I suspect that the locals don't understand buildings properly and there are actually many such lands.

Whatever the details, they are extremely dangerous. Doubtless, a bunch of fool adventurers will decide to raid the lost castles of Taykhi. I would suggest that, if you see a building, run.

**Lakes and Rivers (friendly).** Approaching water may send you anywhere, so use care. Get what water you need and run, before you are taken.

**Mountain Ranges (Jealous).** Secure and safe for the residents, mountain ranges are difficult to enter and dangerous to outsiders.

## **Types of Land**

**Lone mountains (Jealous).** Feared and loved, a lone mountain is mighty. If not given sufficient sacrifices, it may become a volcano.

**Plains (Friendly).** Rolling hills covered in thick grass, these fields are considered the best to live in. Food is plentiful, weather is moderate, and predators are happier hunting smaller prey.

**Seething (Hungry).** The seething boils up from nothing, overwhelming the land it intrudes upon.

Seethings come in all types, some flat and empty, some towering mountains, some the spires and canyons I encountered. All are preceded by a stinging black fog, and are home to monstrous predators.

**Taiga (Friendly).** Although these are easy to enter and leave, they are home to dangerous beasts, although usually not void monsters.

**Weald (Jealous).** Thick with trees, dark beneath a heavy canopy, these forests are dangerous but not cruel. The weald is a haven for beasts, so the danger of jaguar and griffalo is real, the trees a maze that confuse all paths. However, the land itself is consistent, less likely to strand those who range further.

## Lavin's Notes on Survival

Stay close.

That is the rule on Taykhi, above all else. The locals know this, but so do the monsters and beasts, life in this strange place giving them some instinct for how to use the world to their advantage.

If you watch wolves in most worlds, they will try to separate a weak elder from the herd, running it along until it collapses. On Taykhi, I saw wolves just split a herd entirely. Part runs one way, part the other, and soon the folding land has two small herds instead of one large one.

They will try to do this to you, and if you let them you may never see your fellows again.



## Cló's Notes on Trade

Taykhi is a spectacularly dangerous world. I'm supposed to write about trade, but Sar has this blasé attitude to exploration that completely misstates the risks of some places. Taykhi will leave you perpetually lost, desperate to ever return home.

We were stuck there for almost a month after we decided it was time to leave, everyone terrified that if they stepped one foot off the ship they'd never find it again. This place is a horror.

That said, it remains the most valuable land I have ever visited. With such diverse, small tribes, it goes without saying that the art is varied and beautiful, craftwork goods always ready to fill out a hull. Even better, the lack of permanent settlements with any hint of modernity means high-complexity goods trade well here, especially common and inexpensive tools.

The true value, however, is in the hunt. The beasts native to Taykhi all have pouches that fold space. We returned with several, and the consensus of all the enchanters I consulted was that, even dried and cracked, they were a valuable reagent. If properly preserved, they could be key in the construction of less expensive objets de portage.

I would be worried about Taykhi being overrun by prospectors, but I suspect it will just gain a wealth of magical odds and ends from all the dead adventurers.

While visiting Taykhi,  
remember:

1. Stay close to your allies. Being out of sight for an hour may put them on the other side of the world.
2. Let the locals guide you.
3. If you cannot get a guide, look for similarities and trust the feel of the land.
4. Be respectful of the land, it is literally deific.
5. Beware seethings, deadlands, and void beasts. They are always trying to kill you.
6. Never enter a building.

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