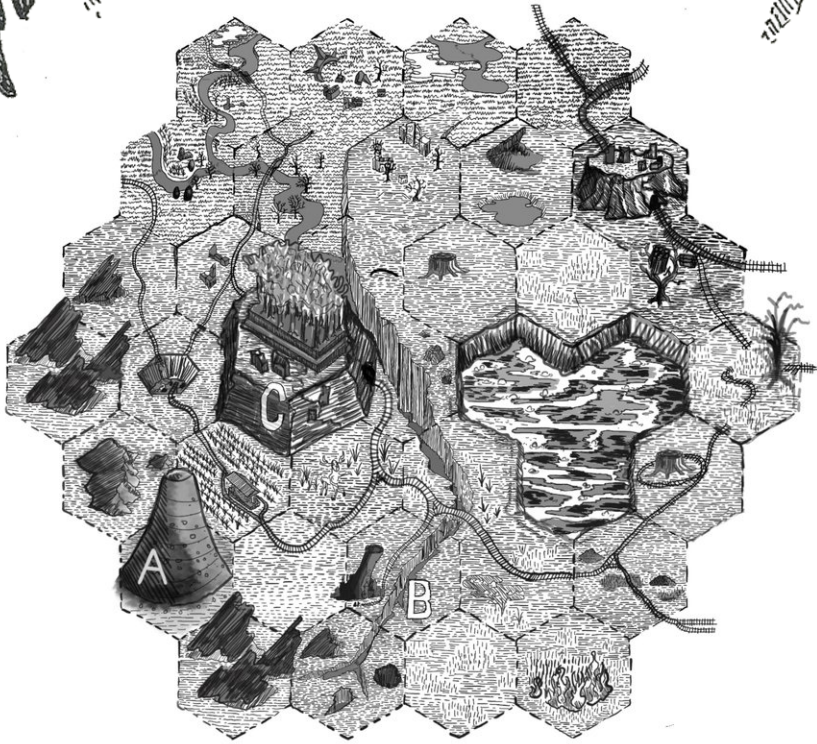


THE SAGA

February 2025
Issue 19



The Hex Crawl of Newtopia,
The 10 Question Dungeon,
and the Navirim, another universe
filled with demons.

THE SAGA

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**Into the Strange Utopia
of Newtopia**

Interview with Connor Sites-Bowen

I met Connor through the Vintage RPG community, where he was a positive force for other peoples works, as well as sharing a huge swath of creativity of his own. He is a game creator and artist, traveler and toy photographer. Today, I get to explore a little more of his worlds.

Mike:

Hey Connor, thanks for talking with me. I am excited to finally discuss all these things I see you post and see how they all fit together! So lets start with what seems to be your flagship of creativity, Newtopia. In a nutshell, what is Newtopia?

Connor:

Newtopia is an artificial planetoid built by big metallic salamanders who live underground and keep the planet cycling. It is the Utopia they have made, or at least they perceive it to be operating as intended, a positive expansive force which recycles dying worlds.

In the space of vintage role-playing games, where we met, Newtopia is located in the deep astral realm, the heart of the aetheric ocean, quite far from the interface with real time, where the prime material planes float but above the true deep abyss of nothing.

As a campaign setting, it is my effort to provide a world which can be crafted out of the other toys that linger from childhood, the half-forgotten kingdoms and experimental repainted animals. The experiences to be had on Newtopia are post-apocalyptic, post-human, science fantasy, and a pretty big dash of theosophy and other American folk religion, or my positive spins on such.

Mike:

That sounds really interesting and a bit out of the box for most TTRPG games and settings! So the planet is made up of hexes, each with individual strange landscapes, features, and fauna, correct? And how does a player enter this world, or rather, what ways would excite you to hear about how players interact with this world?

Connor:

It's a nested pointcrawl. There are hexagons at multiple levels, as well as many repetitions of the number six.

Hexagonal mapping is older than RPGs, back to the Outdoor Survival board game's use as Gygax's early world map.

On one pentagonal face of the planetoid are inscribed 36 hexagonal Big hexes, the regions you mentioned, arranged around a central secret city, they form a hexagon themselves.

Peering closer at each of the 36 regions one finds that they are also made of (Small) hexagons, arranged in a hexagon around an unnamed central hex, with some fuzzy dreamlike border regions to glue the whole place together in the style of Annihilation (the movie, or the Area X trilogy of books which spawned it).

To bring this place to life, the field guide I am writing provides an illustrated map for each region, rendered as well in traditional hex crawl ecological zone format and point crawl transportation route format.

The field guide presents these maps as well as a large set of random tables for encounters in each region. Keeping with the hexagon format, there are six encounters for each of six categories - Flora fauna geology, ritual rumor and Titansign.

Using the book a game warden or an individual player can navigate across the 1100+ Small hexes at the pace the narrative requires, with random table entries providing a simulation of the kind of natural variation in travel experience, as well as innumerable side quests.



Mike:

So, with it being a time out of space world, how weird are you getting? And also what sort of adventurer do you see exploring this landscape? Like could I fall out of my desk chair and end up there, right next to a Conan-esque Berserker?

Connor:

Tonally, I think Newtopia falls between Guardians of the Galaxy and the Eternals. As it is recycling multiple childhood worlds at a time, the place is a bit of a hodgepodge of fancy goblins and cryogenic dwarf ancestors and a long dead crow empire, to name a few. The general framework of a planet with a control manual adds an element of speculative engineering and social questions.

To explore the place successfully, you have to be curious and humble and inquisitive and open to new experiences. Brittle structures fall. You have got to change your ways or die.

I think Conan would thrive there, because adaptability and raw survival power are such strong traits of his. The biodiversity of the place would Doom the various necromancers and foul sorcerers he deals with to extra dimensional flu or their first aboleth experience.

Mike:

So much to unpack there! It sounds wild. What is your creative process like for a new section of the world?

Connor:

The book has gone through many distinct phases starting with planning and scope. I'm happy to get into the detail of some of those design decisions a little later.

As I often do let me bring up a point of interesting historical Pittsburgh detail. There is a skyscraper on the University of Pittsburgh campus called the Cathedral of Learning. It is amazing! The first three floors are in a Gothic style, and when they started building it they definitely did not have the money to finish building it. The project manager insisted that they put the steel framework up all the way to the maximum designed floor, more than 40, and then find the money as they went to complete the building. Once they had committed to the steel skeleton, the University turned to the dozens of ethnic communities in town and offered each of them a chance to raise money to finish the building and decorate a room in the best craft work their community could produce. Those decorated classrooms are still in beloved use.

Following this logic, I committed very early on to 36 regions with the map arranged as it is, and then let those regions accumulate detail over the next few years of development.

My earliest drawings show the inner ring of mountains in the hexes adjacent to the central one, the coastline on the western side of the continent, and the polar wastes to the South. Then I started thinking about weather patterns and where different dry and wet and cold and hot areas would naturally be, so that the regions had some logical basis. I wrote the Flora and fauna entries next, realized I needed to add geology, and then reflected upon what I had so far and committed to six categories, the whole rest of the project as originally designed, A set of table entries which can be uniquely indexed by rolling four six-sided dice, d6666 as some are shortening it to.

Mike:

I have seen you post photos of dioramas, often built from kit bashed old toys, how much does that play a part in your design?

Connor:

When I'm really out of my own ideas, I can always find inspiration in the endless plastic little guys humans constantly manufacture for each other. In a prior professional life I spent a decade doing logistics for non-profits, orchestrating the retrieval and redistribution of surplus food and medical supplies. Now I visit the local Goodwill distribution warehouse, and amenity not available in every Goodwill area, and pick through the donations looking for items which could conceivably exist at a 5 ft to 1 in, or 1 to 60 scale; the established RPG battle mat scale of the era of my



teenage years, the end of second edition and the dawn of third edition Dungeons & Dragons.

Often, adventure scenes will be packaged with a sprue of related items, which looks okay without clipping them out as a kind of background translucent wall behind the figurines. Taking the steps the most children don't, and carefully clipping those objects out and painting them reveals manufactured details which were never implemented by the original company. Super gluing one of these these industrial tools like a hammer or a lantern or a spear fishing gun to the back of a triceratops figurine immediately gets the mind going.

I'm one of those elder millennials that had a very analog childhood and a very digital high school and college life, so my best drawing is done from reference. Making little scenes to figure out the right angle to draw them from, starting a drawing and then looking for the right toys to chop up to make it happen, it's a process I'm happy to run in whatever direction is necessary to move the book forward.

Have you read TS Eliot's the wasteland?

Mike:

I have not.

Connor:

It is a very modern poem. It is composed of snippets of pre-World War 1 literature, but speaks of the thoroughly modern post-apocalyptic landscape the author saw a century ago. "These fragments I have shored against my ruins."

These days you have to take a multiple week class to unpack every reference, but in its day it would have been as lively as how we view that century of dance in 7 minutes YouTube classic.

Mike:

So, Newtopia is you building this future from the fragments of our past?

Connor:

Newtopia's past is our present, mixed with six or seven other 'present times.' It is in the process of weaving pasts together to knit a future. There is a process of interexchange, similar to when continents reconnect.

I try not to think of myself as the agent of its construction, but some kind of large awkward human salamander that is able to write down the details of a place that already exists.

My favorite mentor, the late Lowry Burgess, would have called it a 13-dimensional object beyond the end of time, a novelty attractor or escape vehicle.

Once the book is out, folks who use it in their campaigns or who enact RPG campaigns in it will become the agents of its reality too, adding more history and detail than I could ever do alone. In this way, it's a little bit like a simulation - it wants to be run on as many computers as possible.

To encourage this widespread adoption, I'm giving myself a 14-year limit on exclusive commercialization. I think the original copyright term was a good law. I don't want Newtopia to wither once my book ceases publication. Once the book comes out, it will enter the public domain along with the art and maps, 14 years forward.

I'll be publishing system reference documents and other open source documents related to the book well before that 14-year limit. In fact, many of them will come out when the book comes out or before.

Mike:

So when will the full book be finished? And is there a playtest or sample that people can start to explore now?

Connor:

I hope to finish it by the end of 2025. but it will be done when it is done, on its time. Because it's my first big product, it sets the tone for all the books that support it, and I want it to set a tone I like and I think I can keep up with.

The question of a sample is rapidly changing. There is a little booklet for 21 the preservation on itch.io, but I will have a real sample book chapter on itch in the coming weeks.

Mike:

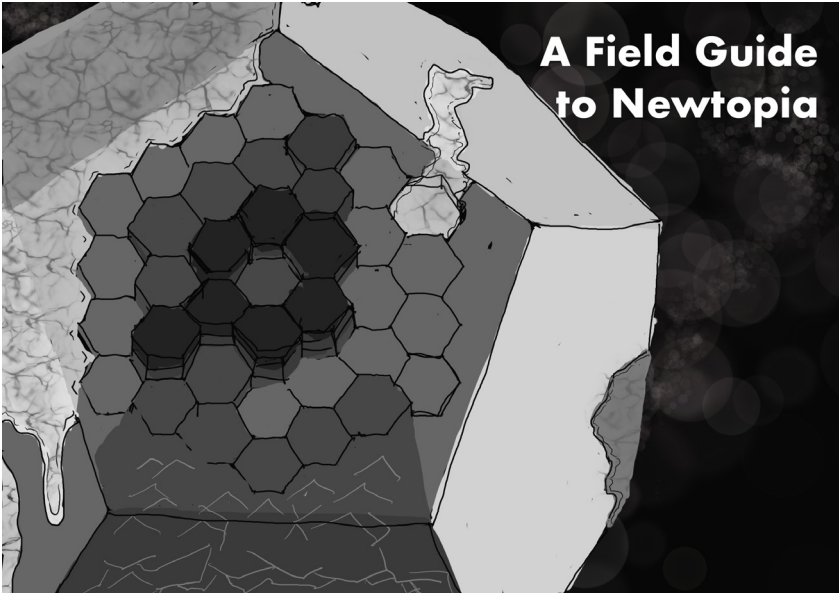
That sounds great! I look forward to the small and full release! So, as we finish up here, I want to thank you again. Got any last minute thoughts for the readers?

Connor:

I guess I just want to emphasize the power of play. Our brains are enormously clever things. You don't know what to do. Just start mashing dinosaurs together. Play gives us a chance to try things that would never work in real life, like building a Utopia.

Mike:

Thanks Connor! I look forward to seeing Newtopia out in the wild!



Find out more at

www.connorsb.com/newtopia



SAGABORN INKLINGS

THE 5 ROOM DUNGEON? WHAT ABOUT THE 10 QUESTION ADVENTURE?

So this is really for me. I wanted to make a quick form that I could fill out to create an outline to make an adventure, encounter, or dungeon exciting. These questions led to the 5 Room Dungeon by John Four of www.roleplayingtips.com/ and the tons of videos basically just saying the same thing:

- Room 1: Entrance And Guardian
- Room 2: Puzzle Or Roleplaying Challenge
- Room 3: Red Herring
- Room 4: Climax, Big Battle Or Conflict
- Room 5: Plot Twist

There are some really good add-ons and expansions to this idea, and the internet is filled with blog posts dedicated to reworking the 5RD. But as always, I wanted something a little different. I just wanted a checklist to see if I have enough interesting stuff in an adventure.

1 What is the theme?

Pretty basic. What do you want this adventure to be about.

2 What is the goal for the heroes?

Knowing a concrete goal will really shape the adventure. It needs to be more specific than “reach the end of the dungeon.” More like, the heroes reach the final room of the dungeon, defeating the goblin warlock, only to find out that they were reporting to someone more powerful.”

I will also come up with a feel as well. It can be very simple, like “spider web, creepy.” This gives me a jumping off point for any locale descriptions needed.

3 What is the challenge that sets up the rest of the adventure?

In the 5 Room Dungeon, this is marked as the Entrance Room. But I think of it as the starting chapter. What happens that sets the stage for the adventure. It can be skeletons in the first room of the dungeon. Or it could be a scream of pain coming down an alley.

4 Is there a macguffin to pull the heroes back and forth between two parts of the adventure?

The 5RD marks this as the Red Herring, but I like to think of it as something that breaks up the monotony of the story. Do they meet an ally? Does a room need a specific key to open it? The idea for me is to break up the linear flow. If its a dungeon, what is the challenge that makes them use something the found, or need to find.

5 Is there a place for lore?

One of my most memorable times of roleplaying was back when I played Neverwinter Nights with my friends. Not the MMO, but the old Bioware game that allowed you to make adventures and run them as a GM. I was pretty involved in the NWN community, running a well-known website Neverwinter Tavern, and wrote modules for distribution with a focus on being friendly for DM's to run. I spent long nights setting up the dungeons and writing lore in small books that I put on bookshelves throughout the dungeons.

One night, the druid Jyrek realized these bookshelves had readable books on them, and the whole party just spent the rest of the night finding and reading the books I had put in the world. So this question checks to see if I put in places to discover some lore about the adventure or the larger world.

As I design Sagaborn d100, I am also trying to make in-world lore and books give bonuses to game mechanics. For example, if a player has a Creature Compendium in-game, and they successfully roll a Monster Lore check, I give them the name of the monster, and they can read about it in the real world Creature Compendium. This gives players reasons to collect lore, and to value it.

6 Is there a moment where the climax is hinted at?

I love when stories, video games, or movies give a hint of whats to come. Seeing deeper in the dungeon. An overheard conversation. I like to give my players a feel for what is ahead. It gives them time to plan and strategize. But I also keep in mind not to let them go down too many rabbit holes. Sometimes, players will overthink a simple clue until it becomes a hindrance.

7 Is there a fun encounter?

Is this combat? A great roleplay moment? I like to look over the plan for an adventure and make sure there is at least one thing that stands out. If its an undead dungeon, fighting hordes of skeletons gets boring if thats all that is happening.

8 What is the climax?

Is it a battle? Is it a puzzle? Is it a book? Was the real treasure the friends they made along the way? For me, I want there to be a solid challenge that lets them know this is it!

9 What is the Reward?

And a difficult challenge means a good reward! It doesn't have to be only treasure, it can be renown, in world lore, or a clue to the next adventure...

10 Is there a hook for the next adventure?

Everyone likes twists, but really, I hate the idea of always having a gotcha moment. So, how about the idea of what makes this adventure mean something? Where does this lead?



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DARK RETURN

INTO THE WORLD

THE NAVIRIM - THE DREAM WORLD OR ANOTHER REALITY?

The most mysterious source of energy is the dream world. Called the Navirim by the ancient elves, these days it is more often called the Never by superstitious folk. In the tomes, it states that the Navirim is a mirror of our world in many ways...a dark twisted version, but with many similarities. It is said to be inhabited by shadowy creatures and beings that many believe haunt our dreams. In the past, there are accounts of things crossing over, but thankfully there is no proof of recent breaches into our world.

Treatise of Magic, by Deen Hyton of the Mage Tower, 5701

Many would curse those who betray them to the Never...that dark fairy land where horned creatures bake children in giant fires, gray skinned devils sink hooks into the skin of the cursed, hanging them from chains, and beautiful, cruel sirens seduce us in order to consume our spirits. It was safe to speak of this in the past, because these were just fairy stories, but now we know that the Navirim is indeed an actual place, just out of reach, but forever there. How do you fight the immaterial inhabitants of your nightmares?

Dask Muerd, Chronicler, Druid

THE NAVIRIM

From “The Guide to Uteria; A View of a Strange, Dark World.” by Aledyn Wayfarer

There are many thoughts, beliefs, fears, and maybe even some hopes that are all rooted in the strange place called the Navirim. Some call it the Never, a name that conjures a misty place somewhere other than here. But what is the Navirim, and what is its connection to us?

HISTORY

The Elves and Eldar

Historical Notes about the Navirim and Other Realms

When we look at history, we always start with the elves, as they are the oldest species still inhabiting the world. And their history is intermingled with the eldar, whose tomes and histories are mostly long lost to time. So while I focus on the elves, know that this is also reflected in the lost eldar histories as well. Many times in elven lore there is a reference to the time they “walked among the stars,” and while some believe this to be a mere myth, I think there is something to that. We have waystones here in Atheles, marked with strange eldar runes and seemingly lost of purpose. Some larger waystones even resembled empty gates or doorways. The elven myths talk of the elves being able to quickly travel between places on our world in the past, so could it not be that these were also once portals to other worlds?

We also know of the In-between, the strange place that is both connected to our realm and yet separate. So did these waystone portals once connect different places by way of the In-between?

The Scrolls of El’zamar

I found some writing in a text I could not decipher deep in the Southlands in a cavern deeper than should naturally occur. These old leather scrolls were barely held together, but they survived a trek back to Bordon where I and others spent months doing our

best to decipher them. We understood the language as eldar, but there is a strange quality to their language, almost as if it changes for each person who reads it, which makes it almost impossible to translate. What we did gather was the following fragments:

“The host burst through a distorted star and began to devour the worlds.”

“The worlds of known stars united could not push back this tide.”

“Hoards emerge from the void and the dream.”

“A hunger that never ends and a mind that always sees.”

“The avvaith* can only be contained if we sever the source.”

“The avvaith hate.”

*Avvaith is a word that we could find a few references to, but never an exact meaning. I believe it to mean enemy.

This eldar scroll references the stars and worlds as if it is common to think of them like we think of cities. And the resemblance of the avvaith coming into their realm mirrors our experience with the Navirim. Did this happen before? Did the elves and eldar cut off their link between the stars to contain the avvaith?

The different elven cultures all hold onto their past with love and reverence; the issue is that each culture sees these roots differently, leaving us with no solid evidence. Anytime we deal with histories that span the time of the elves, we are bound to find that the need for myth has outbalanced the truth of facts.

The Dwarvs Long Sleep

As the dwarfs slumbered in their cold caves in the north for most of the history of the world, they all had one shared experience. The original tribes who woke from that long slumber all wrote of the horrific dreams they shared. A place of destruction and distortion, beings that suffered and were tormented by their universe falling apart and the forces that ruled over them. This has led some dwarven scholars and theologians to believe that they had touched some sort of hell in their long sleep.

Terans

We terans, who came much later to the history of Uteria, lack the experience with the world or universe the others do. While any teran may wake with terror in the night, I don't think we experienced anything close to what the older cultures have. Maybe somewhere inside, deep in our instincts, we recognize the Navirim as a place before us and our time, and that can lead to a deep dread all on its own.

Navirites

Dreams of soul-sucking monstrosities. Tales of a universal enemy invading our place of existence. It is common for rational beings to have irrational fears of the unknown, or to make the unknown the cause of our problems. What are the creatures that inhabit this strange place?

There is no easy answer to this. The creatures, beings, and monsters that have found their way here from the Navirim are more varied and diverse than anything we have on Uteria. Some may have a horrific visage, and yet be able to communicate with us through our minds. Others are terrible and beautiful, filled with an anger and hate against those of us born in this realm. Etahn and Delgon, authors of the Creature Compendium, have debated with me for years over the core of what a navirite is. Our current consensus is that we must give them just as nuanced and careful review as we would give some of our own people and cultures. While I have conceded that their definition of monster, as a creature lacking intellect or empathy and only wishing harm, does fit a good portion of creatures from this other realm, it does not fit all.

While I can not divulge names, I have an acquaintance or even, say, a friend in Kowal who was born in the Navirim and now resides here. They blend in with us and wish nothing more than to carry on with their life in this realm, showing both care and love for the peoples of this land. Through discussion with them, I have started to learn and surmise that the Navirim may be more than

some sort of alternate planet to ours, but more a whole alternate universe. A place whose core physics and make up are a little different than our own. And for some reason, pathways, or portals, have begun to open or merge with this world. If this is true, how could we ever even begin to understand and categorize what a navirite is? A whole planet's worth of fauna is one thing, but a universe?

But there is a reason so many see the navirites as demons. It is because there is something at the core of many of these beings that hate us. It seems almost instinctual, some thread between the two places that has pulled them over to here and has grown with a burning anger at what we are.

THE CONNECTIONS

There are connections that are undeniable between the two realms, manifesting in even the most daily of things like dreams. While we theorize about the connection, we have little concrete proof.

One important connection seems to be magic and the Navirim. When magic began to flow back into the world after the Disappearance (more on that later), so did the beings from the Navirim. Hegosh, a scholar of magical history at the Druid Grove in Bordon, believes that part of the energy of magic, which we call mana, comes from the other realm. What could the ramifications of a mage drawing energy from another plane? Would it draw the universes together? Bind them? Or would the slow trickle of lost energy begin to destroy the other universe? And if the loss of energy could suck the life from a universe like some cosmic vampire, what would it do to ours gaining that energy?

The Disappearance, while still greatly an unknown, was what stopped the Great War 700 years ago. The Warlock King and his wizard led armies had marched down and destroyed the Aradan Kingdom, but they did not stop there. The terrible magics they wrought continued to destroy the land, twisting it and leaving it a barren waste. As those armies turned to the West, something

happened. Like a breath blowing out the candle, one day all magic just stopped working. Whole armies of elves disappeared into a misty morning. Empty forests sat where once thriving elven settlements stood. We had all the knowledge of how to use magic, but none of it worked. We know now that the elves had been pulled into the In-between, a limbo where they were trapped for those 700 years. But where did the magic go? Did the link between us and the Navirim, the basic source of our mana get cut off? And by whom?

WHAT WE KNOW

It seems I have asked more questions than I have answered. So maybe it is best if I cover the things we know about this other realm.

The Navirim is a separate universe that is somehow connected to ours. It seems we are intertwined with them, and become bound more tightly as time goes on. The Navirim is different than our world, it seems somehow less bound to physical restraints. Ovys, head wizard of the Tower of Eredar, believes that the Navirim is bound by the minds of its inhabitants, that their subconscious pulls together and binds their realms in surreal and strange worlds and communities. Where he came about this theory, I am not sure, but the wizards are known for keeping their secrets. I will state that many of the navirites I have encountered do seem to have a control over the minds of others, a way of bending reality. This can lead into a whole other discussion, but I will stay focused on the Navirim. I have also encountered mention or references to the Old Ones and the Great Void, both references as gods or all powerful beings, though with a dark and sinister bend. One navirite once growled at me during a heated battle, “You will never understand, your mind can not comprehend the lasting void.” Which maybe should have been the title of this article.

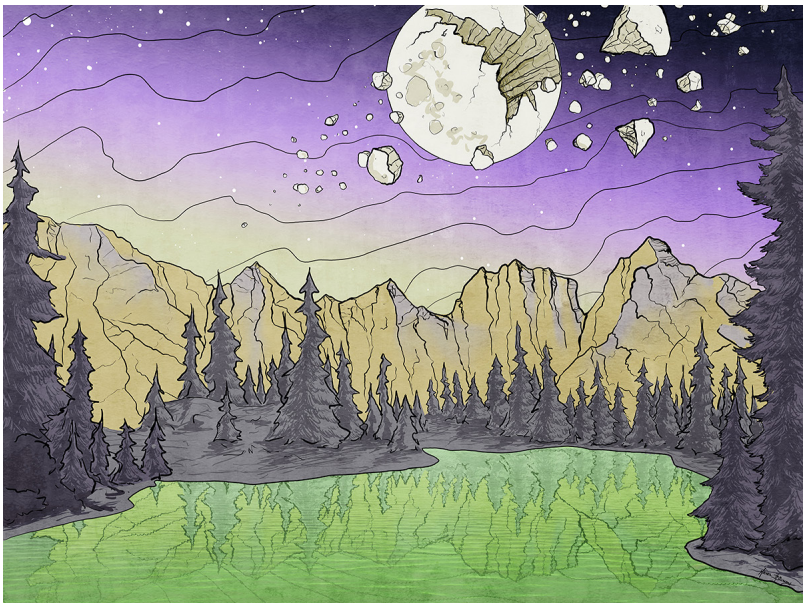
The other fact that we know is that the realm of the Navirim is, for lack of a better word, crashing into our reality. As magic has started to flow back into the world, so have instances of the Navirim,

from creatures to places. And these are becoming more and more commonplace. In the deep wastelands, I came across a village that had, for lack of a better word, merged with an elven village that had seemingly returned instantaneously in the night. Buildings folded into each other, and I was shown evidence of living beings having been horrifically fused within the masonry of both sides. Luckily, the two forced communities banded together and helped as best they could. Now, they still live among this strange fused architecture in peace, but forever frightful that something like that may happen again. The Losvari elves who were in this community claimed to have returned from the In-between, but pointed out to me stranger and more alien forms that they say were not part of their buildings. This combining of realities, is this the fate of all our world?

WHAT WE DO NOT KNOW

There is much that we don't understand about the realm of the Navirim, and even our own. We do not know what is causing this attraction and merging of realities. We do not know how to stop it or how long it will take to finally completely merge.

We know that we are linked, and that our destinies lie together, but what that future is or how it looks is still a great mystery.



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