

A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of Alfred University

The Art of The Calamity:
Character Design and Worldbuilding
By
Polina Arteev

In Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for
The Alfred University Honors Program

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Under the Supervision of:

Chair: William Contino, Associate Professor, Expanded Media

Committee Members:

Joseph Scheer, Professor, Printmaking

Danielle Gagne, Associate Professor, Psychology

My senior thesis exhibition, for the completion of my Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, is linked to my thesis project for the honors program. This exhibition, titled “Ode to Our Calamity,” showcases the contents of the character design and concept art book I created, titled “The Art of The Calamity: Character Design and Worldbuilding,” which acts as the crux of my honors thesis. This introduction will begin with my artist statement, followed by an exploration of the ideas which drove my intent and process.

Artist Statement

I have always been drawn to fantasy themes, and this love for the genre pushed my passion for illustration and concept art. These fields of art, while entirely different in practice, bear many of the same general creative principles. The depiction and exploration of ideas, images, and concepts are core to both, though where illustration seeks to create finished works of art, concept art focuses on development and play.

My primary source of inspiration comes from the artwork produced within the gaming industry; this includes video games, tabletop roleplaying games, and more. The visual stories told by these illustrators and concept artists in the industry, and the evolution of concepts into final decisions, are the things I bring into my own practice as an illustrator. By taking stories and concepts from my own adventures in these roleplaying games, I focus on visually developing and illustrating the narratives created as part of the stories generated during gameplay.

The collaborative nature of these games opens the door to a great realm of possibilities beyond what I can pull from my own imagination. Through my artwork, I share with others the magic of coming together with friends and creating a story.

Inspiration Meets Imagination

Though the fantasy and gaming industry have shaped my practice as an artist, I have always been fond of storytelling and creating new worlds, whether through writing prose, laying out tables of fictional names and family lines, or drowning myself in documents containing bits and pieces of information on conlangs. Inspired by many of the icons of the genre, especially the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, I developed a passion for worldbuilding early in my life.

In the world of fantasy, whether in games, novels, or film, worldbuilding is an essential cog in the wheel when it comes to the creation of a functional story. I grew up seeing detailed world maps at the beginning of all of my favorite novels, reading about the intricacies of fictional nations and their empires, and even learning about the local flora and fauna of a biome in a story's setting. The idea of creating my own world someday was always exhilarating, but I never found the right outlet--that is, until I was introduced to the world of tabletop roleplaying games.

Tabletop roleplaying games are a realm of imagination and storytelling driven forward by witty banter and the rolling of dice. There are hundreds of thousands of potential settings to find oneself in when starting up a new game, and many have opted to campaign in worlds they've created themselves, from scratch. Bending the canon of pre-existing settings in these games is often the first step one takes before making the leap into large-scale world creation. One might create a new continent, perhaps even new gods and schools of magic for players to toy with. These "homebrew" mechanics have grown exceptionally popular among casual players.

Worldbuilding as a Medium

After playing through over a year and a half of a campaign with a group of local friends, we ended up with a magical and memorable story. Originally, I planned to take the adventures we had as a group and simply record them as they were, illustrating the key story points in the form of a storybook. Soon after settling on this idea, I began to think about the setting of our story, and the place of each named lore character who had a role in our characters' backstories.

Because we started our game from a pre-existing game's framework, much of our character-building involved ideas and names which were part of that game's intellectual property. These pieces of our characters, the ideas and names taken from these books, were not truly our own, but the concepts behind our choices were. The idea struck me later on: I could use our story and the characters we've invented together and adapt them to a world of my own. They would be molded into something wholly original and new in what was now not only an artistic endeavor but an exercise in worldbuilding.

I had conceptualized a world of my own not long beforehand. I had a framework and an idea; I just needed something to push me forward, to motivate me to flesh it out further. This was my push.

From here began a long process of communicating with my fellow players, gathering information, ideas, concepts, and more regarding their characters. Everyone was marvelously cooperative, going so far as to submit new material with backstory never explored in the game itself.

The Characters

Though the campaign on which this book is based saw many different characters and even players over time, it began with a humble party of four:

- Katiyana Val'dolen
- Trinneiros DiGrigori Monorchadis
- Jonoren Snowfoot
- Skrit

Katiyana was the character I piloted during this campaign. When I first came up with her concept, I imagined her as a young and naive girl heading out on her first adventure. Though she considered herself to be a cleric, there was something peculiar about her powers and the relationship she had with the goddess whom she worshiped.

Borne of the celestials, the essence of a god flowing through his veins, Trinneiros was a human, but of a variant known as the Exalted. This is a racial variant I created to apply to those who have divine or celestial ancestry. Guided from a young age by an angelic voice, Trinneiros lived and trained as a paladin following the path of good.

Jonoren was one the Anima, specifically one of a feline variant known as the Koshan, who gave himself fully to his instincts of curiosity and exploration. After a chance encounter while traveling and the viewing of a miracle within his village, he made his choice to pursue a celestial pact which would grant him healing abilities.

Skrit was a goblin with aspirations much larger than himself. Born to an “in-between” social class, he sought to prove himself enough to advance up the ranks, as he felt he so deserved. He had something of a superiority complex and made an attempt to subjugate any being he saw as below him.

Each of the characters brought with them a set of information which could be gleaned about the world, and these connections are explored through the book with visuals and descriptions. Beginning with personal backstory about the characters, the pages within each chapter follow with imagery and insights as to their armor choices, the god(s) they worship, and the natures of their races.

Recontextualizing Concepts

The challenge came when making decisions on how to portray the gods our characters followed. Naturally, I did not want to take the gods from the pre-existing world we began our game in and simply give them new names. I wanted any changes to make sense in the world I've created--for the new pantheon(s) of gods to have a structure of their own. However, I recognized that I needed to preserve the essence of the deities present to ensure the characters who worshiped them were not heavily impacted at a base design level.

The same was true for the races chosen by the players for their characters. This was not as much of an issue, as many were already common fantasy races and not unique to the original setting. Some, however, were quite unique to the game we were playing. These needed to be modified and recontextualized in order to properly absorb them into the new setting I was creating. In the end, even the common or cliché fantasy races were recontextualized in a way to suit the new world environment I've created.

The book I created as part of my thesis project brings these four characters together in a way that explores their relationship with the world they were now a part of. Exploring the perspectives of four different players with four completely different characters allowed for a diverse spread of information to be pulled from each, and the analysis of player choice and some creative liberties led to the creation of meaningful content that was connected to our original ideas in a way that a pre-written set of information couldn't be.

A World Yet Undiscovered

Though the book itself was my own making, with my own art, writing, and concept building, this experience was undeniably a collaboration. We, as an adventuring party, built our own story together. It was only from there that I was able to pull bits and

pieces of information and expand them into something greater. There is a strange comfort in knowing that this would not have been possible if not for the relationships that we, as a group of friends playing a game, developed over the past year.

The end result of this thesis project was a collection of artwork, information, and new connections that was deeply personal. Even when focusing solely on the characters and their connections, there was an abundance of routes to take in developing the world around them. This was an immense undertaking and knowing where to draw the line and where to carry forward was integral to both the cohesiveness of the project and its eventual completion.

As a result of this, I see this finished book not as a standalone project, not as a completed thought, but as a foundation on which I will continue to build long after I leave this university. There is so much of my world yet left undiscovered. I hope that I may be able to spend years to come exploring it and building new connections, both with the ones I love and the friends I have yet to meet.



The Art of
THE CALAMITY

CHARACTER DESIGN
AND WORLDBUILDING

POLINA ARTEEV







Artwork and Illustrations

Polina Arteev

Contributors

Ryan Martin: Game Master

Polina Arteev
Katiyana Val'Dolen
Half-elf Warlock

Garrett Vander Stouw
Skrit
Goblin Ranger/Rogue

Charles Bellows
Trinneiros DiGrigori Monorchadis
Exalted Human Paladin

Justin Wisniewski
Jon Snow
Koshani Warlock

Special Thanks

I wish to extend my appreciation and most gracious thanks to the academic advisors that made this project possible, through feedback, support, and enthusiasm. I could not have picked a better committee for this thesis project.

Thank you Will Contino, Joseph Scheer, and Dr. Danielle Gagne for making my last semester at Alfred University especially memorable and successful. Your guidance and encouragement to pursue what I loved made all of this possible.

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ALFRED UNIVERSITY BFA 2019
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DEDICATION

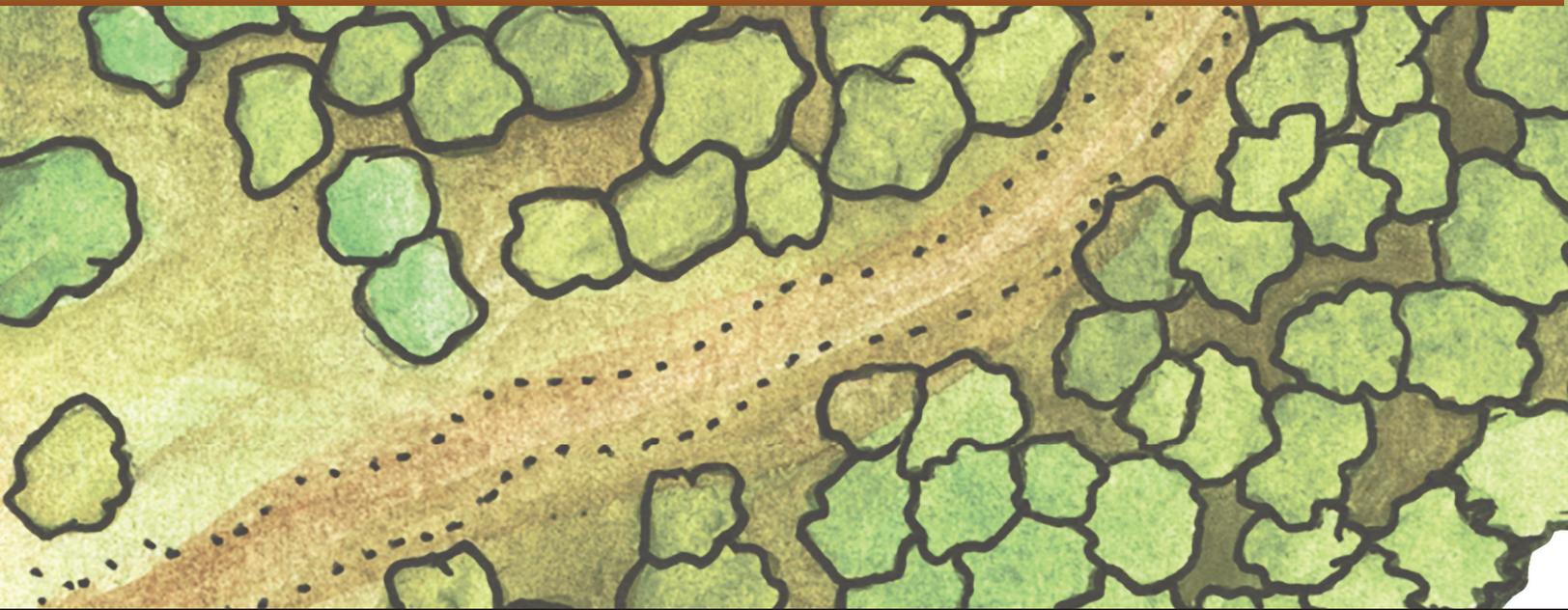
Thank you Ryan, Justin, Garrett, Charlie, and all those we added to our party over time.

When I first came into tabletop RPGs, I wasn't sure what I was really getting into. I was a bit nervous, not sure how well I'd fit in with the more experienced players that greeted me at the table my first game. I didn't know how anything worked, and I'd never roleplayed outside of text-based platforms.

I truly did not expect to come out with such wonderful new friends, and an exceedingly positive set of memories to hang on to in the end. Though all great things do eventually conclude in some way or another, I look forward to the days ahead where we may once again find one another rolling dice together at another game's table.

This book is an ode to the characters who kicked off the campaign that gave us over a year of adventures shared over long nights of excitement and comraderie. How amazing it was, and continues to be, to experience this game to the fullest with all of you.

May all of your future adventures leave you with more friends than you started with!



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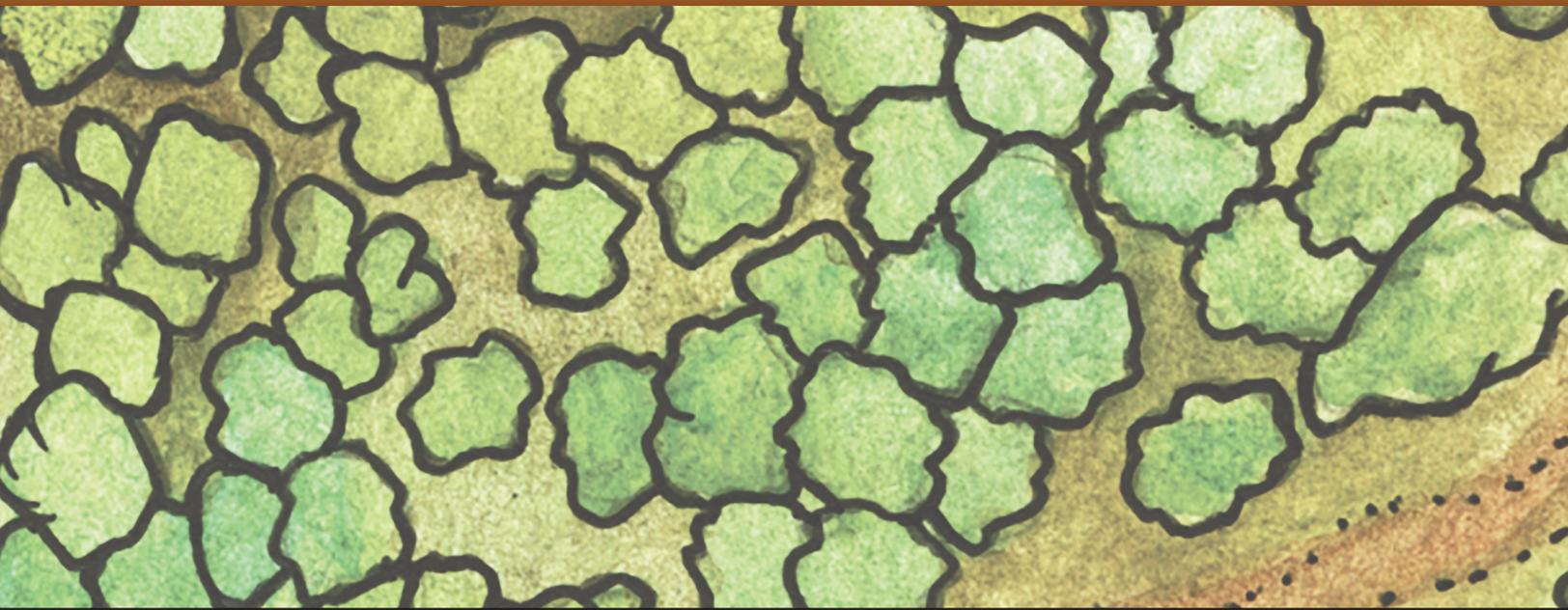




INTRODUCTION

This book was created in partial fulfillment of my Alfred University Honors Thesis and highlights the characters with which we began a year-and-a-half long TRPG campaign.

Equal parts art and creative writing, this project was an exercise in worldbuilding that recontextualizes our original character design ideas to fit into a brand new world.

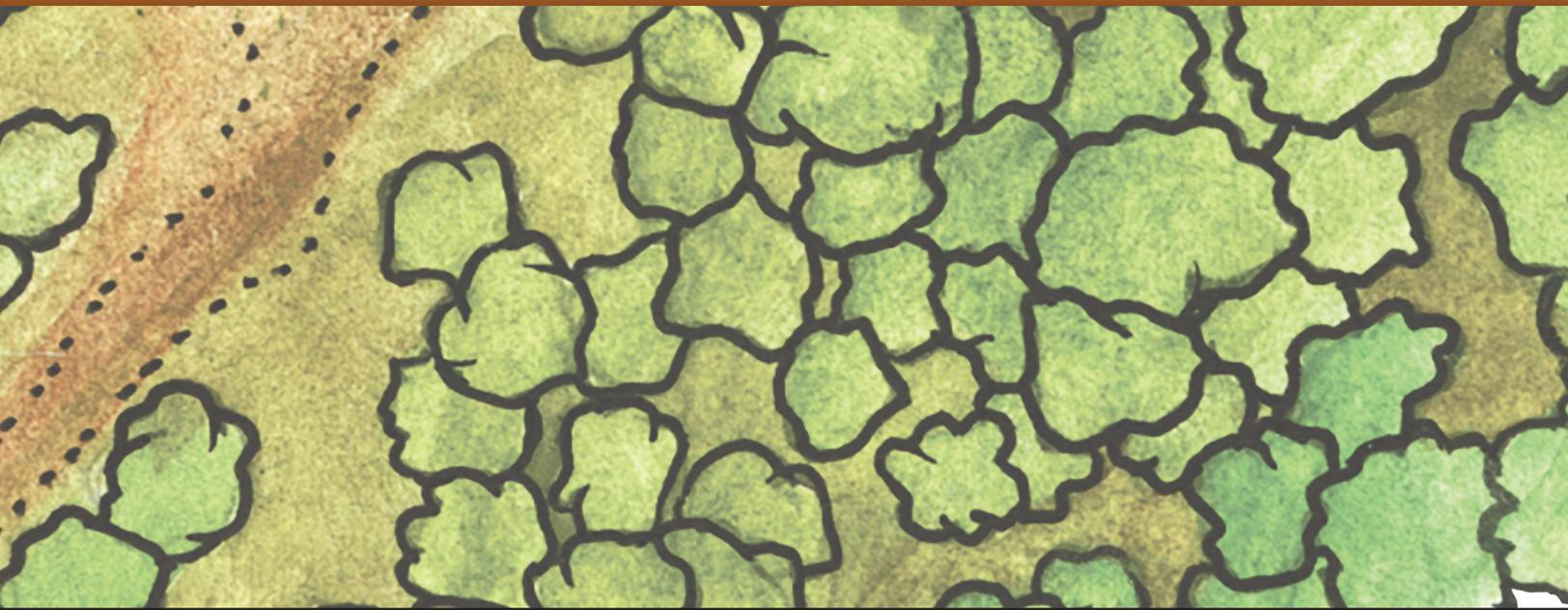


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WORLDBUILDING AS A MEDIUM

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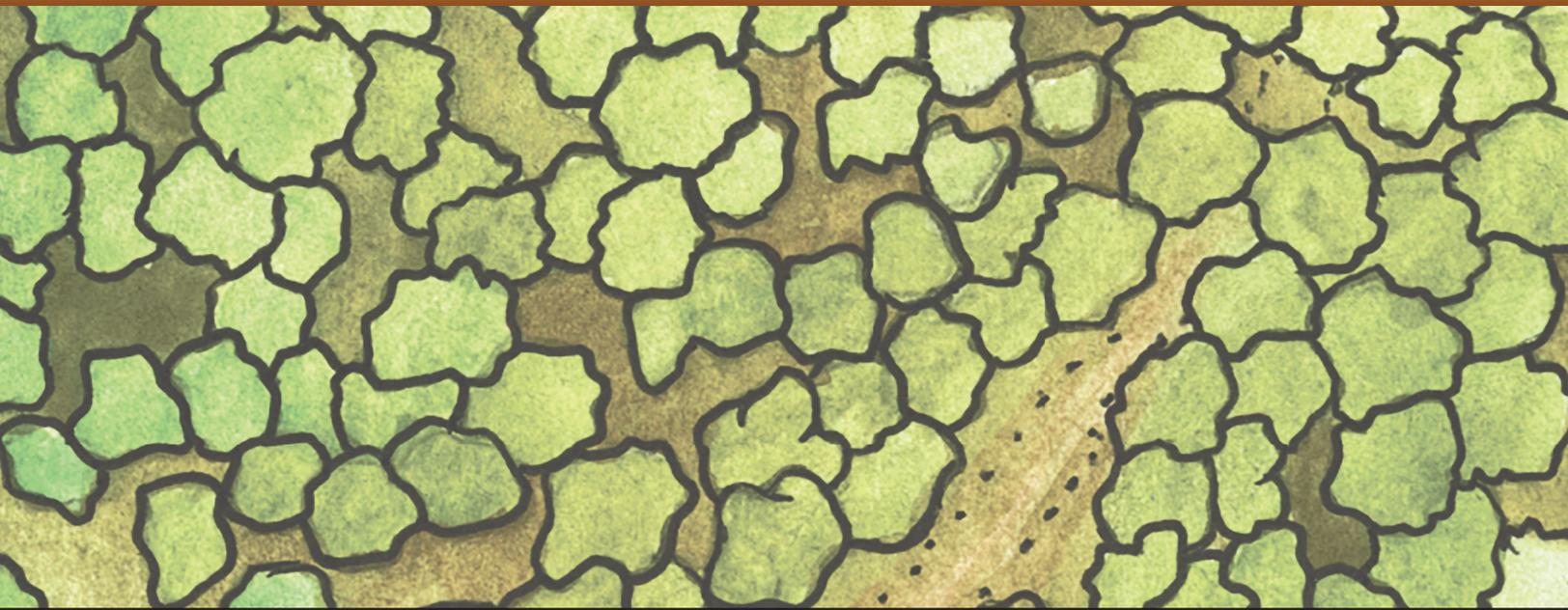
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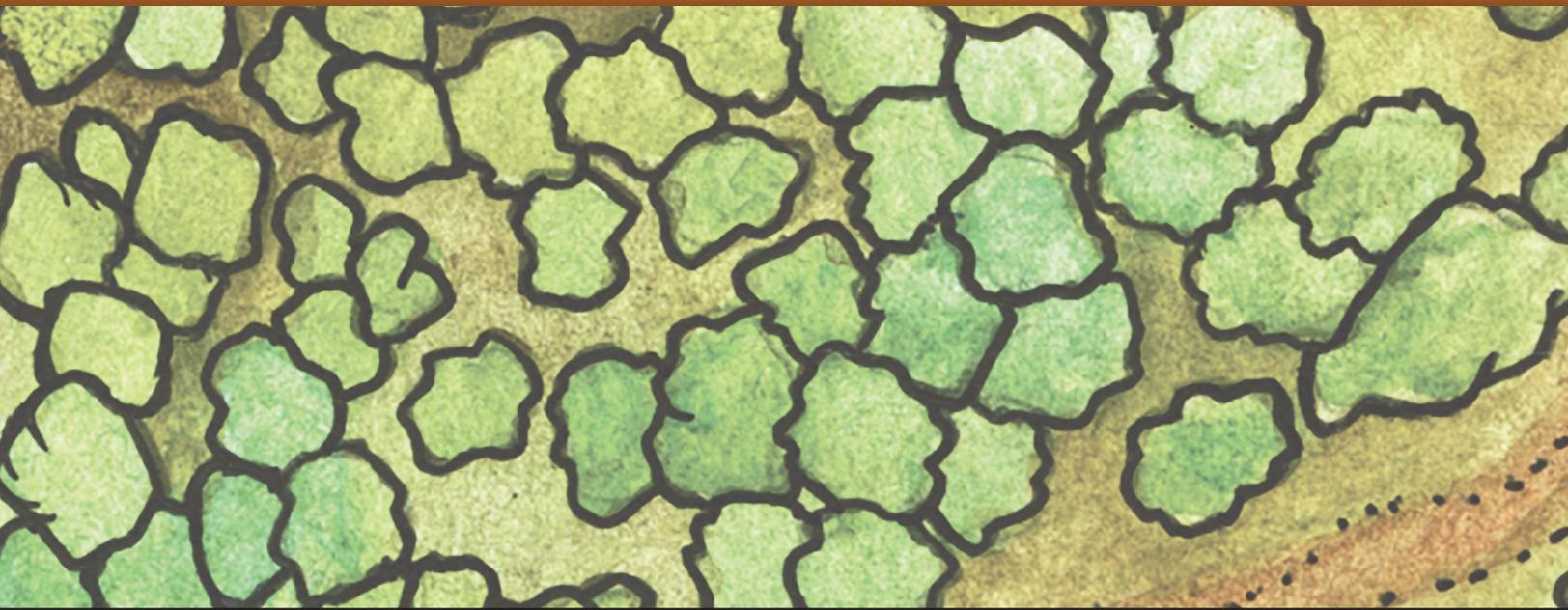


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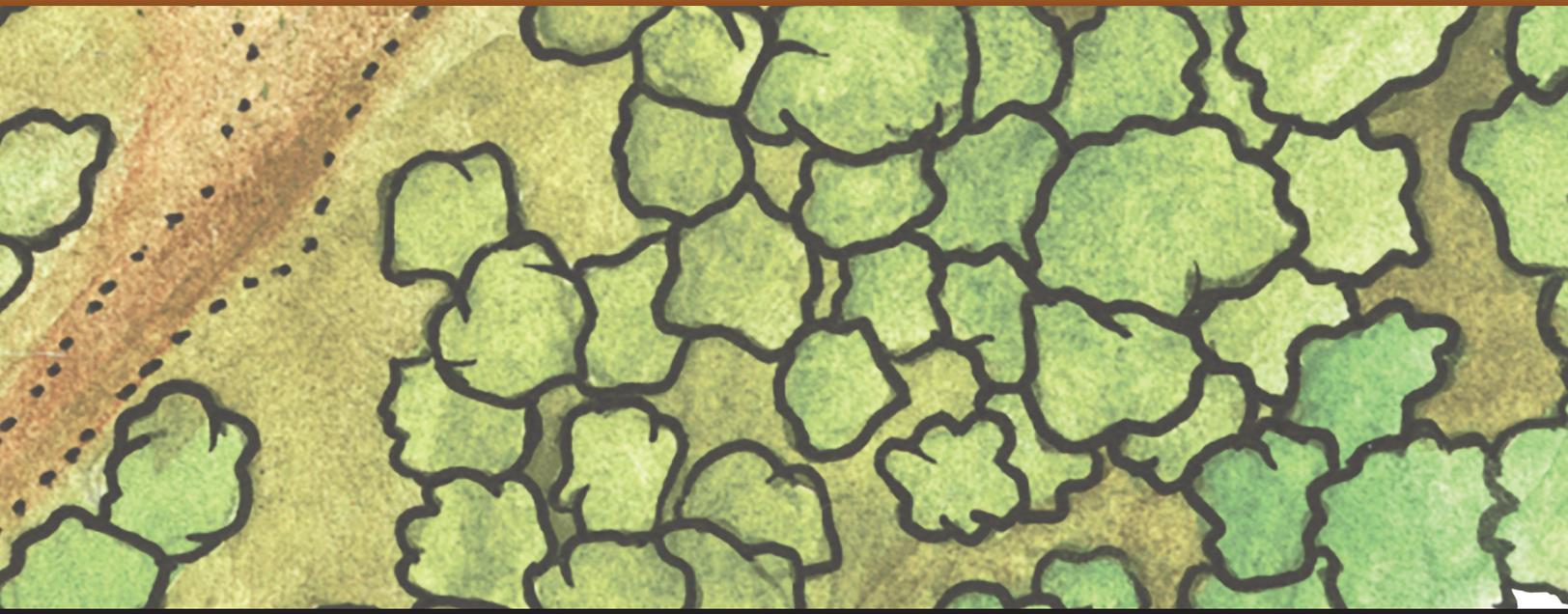


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ABOUT THE WORLD

With much of its history shrouded in darkness and lost to the ages, **Malkora** is a world that owes its current state to the generosity of a goddess in a time of great strife. The coming of the New Dawn brought with it not only the rebirth of global humanoid populations but the birth of other gods and facilitated the founding and development of new empires.

Recorded history begins with the life of Mal'kor, an orcish woman whose fevered prayers set in motion events which changed the course of history for the entire world. It was through her perseverance and strength that a new world was forged, and a new hope found for the withering populations spared by faith.

Today, the land of Malkora faces great strain as an ancient bastion of protection turns on its people. Facing a violent crusade, entire populations are displaced or slain as their own protectors turn on them. In this land of seeking opportunity, it is up to brave adventurers to bring balance back to their lands, before another great darkness sweeps the plane.



THE INHABITANTS OF MALKORA

Malkora is home to a great many humanoid races, all of which have built great empires for themselves after the end of the Dark Era.

From the humans and halflings who are fond of their homes and of the winds of trade, and the orcs of the far north who bend the elements by the blessings of their ancestors – to the elves who lose themselves in the energy of the world around them, and the anima who are molded by the beast gods – to the numerous other races which call Malkora home.

There is a diverse spread of races inhabiting Malkora, further diversified by the prominence of mixed magical bloodlines. The Exalted are touched by the grace of the divine, the Temniir by the lingering darkness, and the Iskani by the elements themselves.

Our party of adventurers represents only four races from the world, and one magical bloodline.