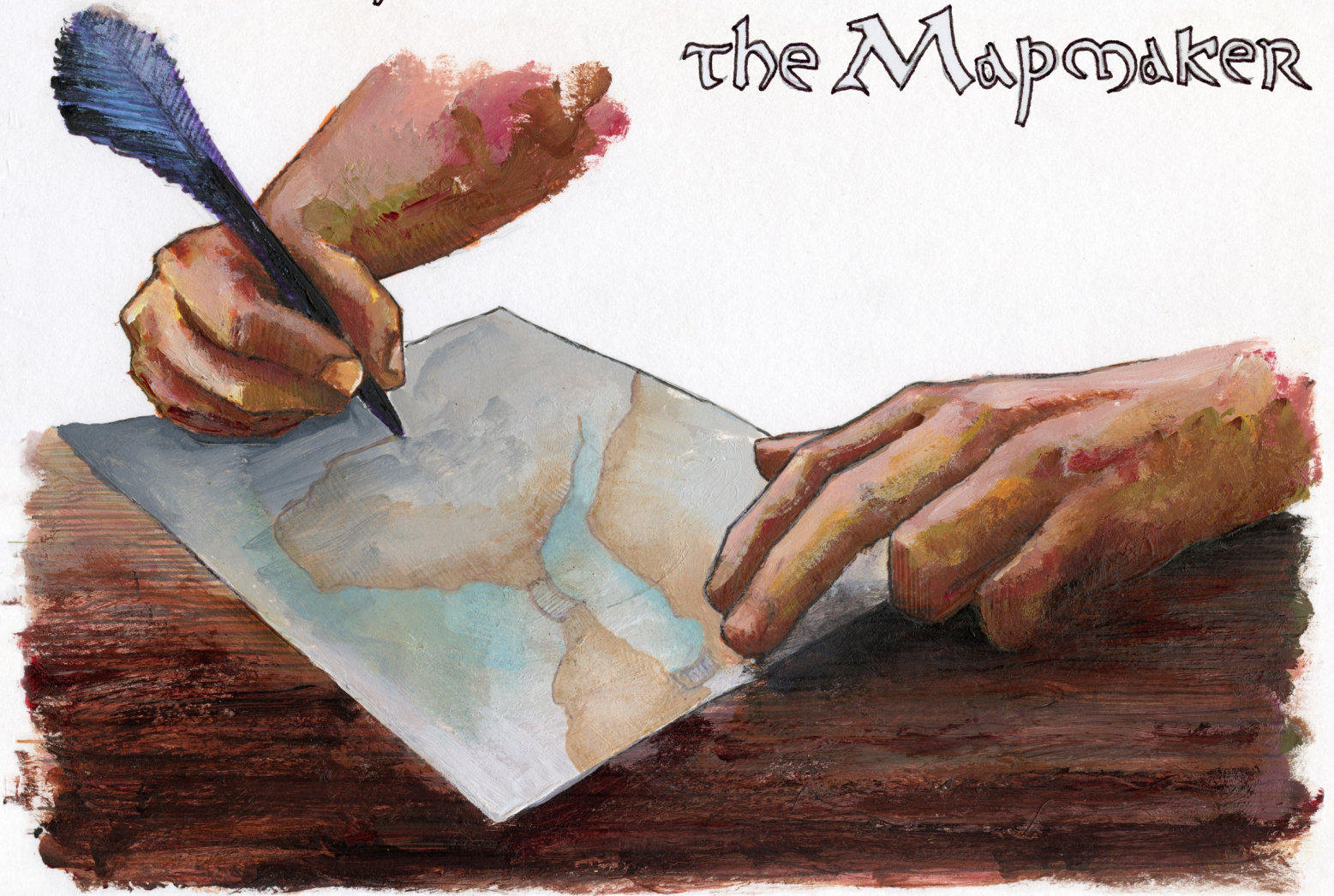


Epistle of Mundus the Mapmaker



I bid you three greetings, sons and daughters: One for morning, one for slumber, and one for adventure.

In my younger mornings, I read of the fables and the faraway lands that built them. Later, in my slumber, I imagined myself among those lands and kin. Finally, on my adventures, I found them. And I have drawn them forever in my maps.

There are nineteen settlements, and a few lonely outposts, on the five Connected Continents and their coastal isles. The paths between them are bordered by a deep wilderness from which the fables have emerged and into which no one has trudged.

When I strayed from the paths, I counted my paces through every pasture, I measured the height of every hill, the depths of the streams, and their distances to the sea.

In my journey, I've seen a river that runs backward from that sea. And in the gulf that suckles it, at the lowest tide, I saw the highest spire of the Drowned Citadel. Inside, and nowhere else, grows the River Rose; they say its nectar gives life to the waters.

I've passed the Storm-Torn Crag, nature's great stoneberg steeped in the winter surface, the last discernible landscape as you march into the northern snows. Its edifice has come to signal life behind and abyss beyond. Still, there are those who visit, and attempt its beyonds. When they arrive, the fractured, foreboding monolith assures each of them that there's nothing ahead, and it remains true to its word. Those who pass north, hoping to hear the Hymn of the Melanchoir, are met with death.

I've seen the Mossveil Cliffs that change color with the turning seasons. On the highlands above, I've looked upon the endless green of its sprawling meadow, where the air itself blossoms. On the lowlands beneath, I've watched the restless valley of the wandering vines, winding, coiling, never surrendering to stillness.

I have stood at the Chattering Trees and heard them awaken. Through the night, they slumber silently. At dawn, they begin to speak, and they reminisce until sundown. The creaking of their trunks, the rustling of their leaves, the whistling of wind through their branches: these are the words, the syntax, and rhetoric of Nemus, incanting its oldest spells.

I've been to Yaga-Goro, inland from the Wren Reef, outland from the Wren Ridge, and impossible to see until nightfall. From a distant vantage, I saw its light in the darkness, guiding my way. When I arrived, I found a darkness in its light.

I've seen vast desert barrens with their tides of dry waves. The sands come in every morning, and every night, they return to their dunes. They sway back and forth until the summer withdraws its warmth. Then they begin their journey south. At summer's close, I watched those desert sands join the red winds; I followed behind and heard the tender song they howl as they pass through the Bloodcleave Canyon.

Beyond the Burned Wilds, I crossed the Deadlands with its stone trees. I treaded carefully, silently, marking my paces through Shadowhome. There, I saw the night breeze gently pluck the petals from a Dusk Lily during the brief and briefly vulnerable moment of her bloom, and carry those petals to the heart of that land. And in that heart, I saw its swamp, sheltered by gloom, with bog lamps glowing from beneath.

I've been to the Vanishing Isles off the eastern shore of the Connected Continents. They only appear when the sea is at its lowest and they always sink by noon. For generations, those coral-encrusted sandbars have been home to both the fishermen's workday and the fishermen's graveyard.

I have sailed around the Nameless Isle off the western shore of the Connected Continents, the only inhabited territory unconnected to Thorn, and the only other land I have neither breached nor mapped. There is no dock, no landing, no beach; the water is met by a thick wall of jungle, a verdant haven guarding its hostile inhabitants.

And at the center of the world, I have stood at the rim of Thorn and looked upon its leafless trees, ornamented with drops of red sap, rising from the thickets like granite pillars. Ominous, black bark encases black heartwood, and yet they grow tall. At the base of their immense trunks, fog creeps in and out of the knots, piercing the cores. And atop their cold, calligraphic branches, perched like statues, rest the Elder Crows, vigilant at their post.

Excepting the center glades of Thorn and the Nameless Isle, the peak of the Peakless Mountain, the depth of the Pale Mountain, and north of the Northern Range, I have explored every fathom and cubit of the known expanse. Along my way, I met the folks who gather in the settlements and outlying encampments. And I have made my maps of all the lands I can reach by foot, donkey, and raft.

In the west, there's Laberyn, land of melodies. It is the home of every minstrel wealthy enough to travel there, lucky enough to be born there, or born there and what else is there to do? Here, tales are not told, written, or recorded in any library; they are sung.

There's Garin, the skyward-reaching brick barracks and capital of the west, where minstrels perform and natives protect.

There's Lir, where the Great Gardens grow. It his home to sights so vibrant, scents so alluring, and fruits so delicious that neither resident nor guest ever leaves.

Down and across the River Glass from Lir, there's Firth, the never-visited. It's just hovels and history, the oldest establishment on its continent, and the smallest. Quaint, quiet, and sensibly forgotten. The few who stay do so because they value tradition; it's the exodus of the ambitious that protects it from change.

Farther west is Druinham, where the caves, caverns, and catacombs are home to the strange and the secretive. And still farther west is Shadowhome. The folks of Druinham seem cordial by comparison. And in the farthest west that west can go are the Nameless folks on their Nameless Isle. They live in isolation, tending their land, nurturing every leaf as a child, and they're violent to outsiders.

In the east, natives value the sciences, but dendrology is preferred to cartography, as their landmass is home to Nemus, the Grey Woods. That's where Nemusenex, the First Tree still lives. It's not as big as you'd think it would be. Trees have gotten a lot bigger since then. But its roots grow deep; they're said to touch all five continents.

Neighboring Numus, there's Lonvaraka, eastern locus of the arts. Partly a permanent encampment, partly an impermanent settlement. It seems to move as if it's floating on the land, but it stays in the east. It crosses no waters and no bridges.

Where the two tributaries of the River Grey meet, sailors and traders find Rivervale, the port town, where all life floats, drifts, and sinks, and where all advances in maritime navigation are devised.

Downstream, at the Grey Delta, is Lyonhall, the famed fortress and the capital of the east. Its towering turrets and opulent halls give more glory to its masons than to its soldiers, whose strength of training and wealth of equipment ensure that they're never tested.

Just beyond sight from Lyonhall, in the hills and the flats, coexist the twin villages, Thevro and Estevro. That's where the highblood and the lowblood pretend to have differences. To have visited one is to have known both.

In the southern reaches of the continent, there's Charwarg, bordering the Sizarhorn Strait. It's the nearest city to the south and the place where rumors are born and never die. Often, there are fictions in their histories and truths in their rumors. The less believable the story, the more probable its truth.

Lastly, there's Farhearth, the farthest east settlement. It's where books dream of living, and one day go to retire. And it's where folks go to learn about everything to its west. That's where I was born. The maps and libraries inspired me to leave; my own maps and letters ultimately returned to its shelves.

The Stone Lands are in the south. That's where all the dormant lava sleeps. The farthest north city on the southern continent is Bazuzu. It has the largest market and it is a place to be avoided. From the edge of Charwarg, Bazuzu can be seen across the Sizarhorn Strait. That's as close as one should come.

Southeast of Bazuzu, there's Yaga-Goro, the hidden. And west of both, there's Moonkrug, which is just taverns and drunkards. Those who drink enough in its taverns might find their way to Bazuzu on purpose, or perhaps find themselves in Yaga-Goro by accident.

Farther south is where Cinderheim is, the westward sibling of the Twin Capitals. It's populated by rocksmiths who are harder than their tools. Grandmothers have calloused hands, children are covered in soot, and the ground is always aglow with embers from those smiths at work. Very defensive folks. A half day's walk east will deliver you to the second southern capital, Stromgard, where the rest of the hardened inhabitants live. Very offensive. In both cities, even if you're invited, you're never welcome. The masonfolk don't open and close doors; they build and unbuild walls. And inside of those walls, history is never written, told, or sung; it is melted, bent, hammered, and fashioned. And the night's sky is not populated by stars, but by sparks.

The northern continent is the Snow Lands. Tundra buried under tundra. And nobody knows what's buried under that. Or how far north it goes. It's just a view. Nothing more. It's not for folks to be in or trek through. The only thing it's good for is to look at from south of it, and see the endless expanse of peaceful air resting on pale sheets of horizon.

East of west, west of east, north of south, and south of north: that's where Thorn is. And where the Thorn King is from. For as long as the continents have been divided into neighbors, Thorn has been connected to them by four bridges:

The Thawing Bridge to the north. The Thicket Bridge to the west. The Salt Road Bridge to the south. The Sap Stone Bridge to the east.

Nobody dares enter the woodlands of Thorn, or even approach its perimeter, but they journey between continents by its coastline. Every day, hundreds of feet tread the southern and eastern bridges. Few cross the Thawing Bridge, and just as few travel by its northern shore, as the icy passage binding the two lands endlessly tempts the piercing air over the tundra to the dunes of Thorn's northern beaches. So the voyage between the east and west follows the southern pass. However, those who enter or leave the west no longer use the Thicket Bridge. After the Thorn King came to Firth, the spared folks burned it when the unspared were lost. It grew back, but bore the black, gnarled, roots and branches of Thorn. So folks don't cross it anymore; they cross the western waters aboard the Ferryman's boat.

I crossed the Thicket Bridge. I stood on it and felt the texture of its cold, dark wood with my hand, and I measured the width and the distance it covered from shore to shore. I also boarded the Ferryman's boat and paid him with offerings from the laurel tree so that the winds might gather. I cannot say he is less menacing than his alternative, but as he guided me down the waterways, I recorded the location of every bend, every stretch of rapids braiding the river's kelp, and every swath of floodplains where the water lay still.

In all my travels, I have captured my surroundings in the scrolls and sheets of papyrus and parchment. But the moment I have finished drawing my maps, what I look down on is a younger world than what I look out on. It's a portrait of a moment. Dead paper can only capture past lands. The world is alive, and it goes on living, changing, outgrowing its maps.

— Murch of Fairhearth