



THE ECOLOGY OF THE ISLE OF DREAD

THE JOURNAL OF LARISSA VANDERBOREN

Today I leave the safety of the colony for the village of Tanaroa. We've been here for several months on the Isle of Temute, establishing the Farshore colony and attempting relations with the local Olman villages. While these proceedings are important for our family's and, indeed, all of Sasserine's designs on these far-flung shores, I find them rather tiresome. Thus, I've convinced my husband Verik, who leads the expedition, of the value in exploring and documenting the mainland of this, the Isle of Dread. While obviously concerned for my safety, he knows that my magic and experience as an adventurer will keep me from harm.



Within the Fangs of Zotzilaha

6th of Wealsun, 593 CY

I have returned from a journey with the Tanaroan natives to the volcano Nextepeua, one of the twin volcanoes known as the Fangs of Zotzilaha. The Tanaroans make annual pilgrimages to offer appeasements to their bat-god Camazotz. I had agreed to the trip to display our good intentions to our Olman neighbors, hoping to help Verik's goal of establishing mutual trade with them.

The Fangs are an imposing sight, rising up to dizzying heights and dwarfing the scenery around them. From their heights billow pillars of black, acrid smoke visible for many miles, polluting the air with ash and debris. Muffled rumbles growl from deep beneath the peaks, suggesting the incredible activity of the world's bowels. The fields surrounding the Fangs steam with slag and knee-deep ash, while the grounds closer to the peaks are riddled with lava tubes. Some evidence of flowing magma colliding with



underground water exists, as poisonous gas belches from deep vents and fissures. It's no wonder the natives fear this place—they live under constant threat of an explosive eruption.

The Tanaroans explained that we must wait until nightfall, when the volcanoes' sacred baboon guardians retreat to their caves. The baboons—omnivorous and dangerously ravenous—live out a pitiful existence, surviving off sparse vegetation and huddling together around the few pools of stagnant rainwater.

When twilight fell, hordes of great bats swept out from the lava tubes and fissures, blacking out the smoke-clouded sky. I was startled by the creatures' physical size, some with wingspans up to 15 feet. In spite of their mass, they exhibited surprising maneuverability, both in the air and on the ground. The sight of so many of them, a colony several thousand strong, instilled a primal fear within me. Although they drove the baboons hooting back to their caves, the bats

ignored us completely, enabling us to approach unchallenged—an event that, to the Tanaroans, was a sign Camazotz himself had granted safe passage.

Once inside Nextepeua, the shaman leading the pilgrimage began repeating a tribal, rhythmic chant. Whatever incantation he worked upon us proved sufficient, for we withstood the heat emanating from the walls and the occasional blasts of scorching air. The searing volcanic fumes made breathing difficult, even with the cloth masks we used, and the muffled rumbles heard outside were deafening this close to the volcanic core. The smoke and heat waves also made navigation nearly impossible. I would have surely been lost within those hellish depths forever had not the Tanaroans been so familiar with the way, seemingly capable of making the trek without the need for sight.

After what seemed an eternity, we arrived at the Shrine of Camazotz. We hurriedly placed our offerings at a soot-covered carving of a bat in the far wall. Within the shrine I placed a memento my daughter Lavinia had made for me when she was a child, offering something near to my heart as the Tanaroans suggested. I am hopeful that through my obeisance I have earned at least a marginal respect from the Olman natives.

Ecology of the Phanaton

24th of Wealsun, 593 CY

While wandering the central jungle, stubbornly classifying the island's endless varieties of flora, I caught sight of a strange, diminutive primate. Carrying a spear, it had a satchel slung across its shoulders and appeared to be rummaging for mushrooms on the spongy ground. It hadn't noticed me so I approached for a closer look.

Little more than 2 feet tall, the creature looked like a raccoon, with dark fur around its eyes and ringed stripes on its tail. It also had primate-distinguishing features, such as opposable thumbs and a prehensile tail, but displayed a thin membrane of skin stretched between its front and back legs (later I would observe its use for gliding between trees).

*My first meeting
with Hatoi*



Its eyes suddenly met mine, and for a brief moment, I thought the creature looked inquisitive, but then it started shrieking in a shrill, warbling cry. Almost instantly, more of the creatures came rushing through the bushes and dropping from the trees—too many to count. Before I could act, a primitive net made from vines ensnared me, and the creatures began pummeling me with their clubs and the butt-ends of their spears until I lost consciousness.

I awoke with my hands tied behind my back, lying on a wooden platform supported by the boughs of an ancient deklo tree. I could sense that I was high up in the jungle canopy, and I noticed my provisions and research notes dumped out next to me. As I looked around, I could see more platforms in the surrounding trees, connected by treacherous-looking bridges made of knotted vines and strewn with simple wooden huts. These creatures had built an entire village among the trees. Scores of the small creatures watched from nearby platforms, through tiny hut windows, and from the foliage of branches above, spying on me curiously as I came to my senses.

As I composed myself, one of the tiny creatures, their leader by the look of his unique, brightly feathered adornments, approached me and untied my hands. He shocked me by speaking a crude sort of Sylvan—distinguishable phrases interspersed with soft hoots and odd clicks of the tongue. He apologized for the inconvenience and explained that I had surprised a group of his people while they gathered medicinal herbs from the forest floor below. He had looked through my journal, discovered my druidic beliefs, and was very apologetic for the misunderstanding. He invited me to a village feast and the following grooming session that evening as a token of their good will.

I stayed with the creatures—who I came to know as phanaton—for three days thereafter, learning of their society and culture. When I left, the one that I had spied on the jungle floor, named Hatoi, offered to join me as a guide—a sort of peace offering from these creatures. At first, Hatoi was shy, but with

Cualoco zacatl or
"loco weed"



his consumption of a toxic weed that grows in patches along the lake's eastern banks.

Several minutes after eating the weed, the ankylosaur begins taking short, shallow breaths, and seems a bit unsteady on his feet. Once the drug fully takes hold, he exhibits an increased blood flow—evidenced by his overall pinkish hue—and begins to drool. Other effects of the plant are rapid eye movement, loss of balance, occasional vomiting, and highly aggressive behavior.

The amount of weed consumed has a proportional effect on the ankylosaur's belligerence. On a normal day, he eats only a small quantity—enough to

only to run headlong into a tree trunk. He became so enraged that he smashed down nearly thirty trees before disappearing into the jungle.

After about two hours, the drug begins to wear off. The specimen exhibits loss of hunger, lethargy, and impotent irritability; usually collapsing wherever he finds himself after the plant's effects have run their course. Once he is fast asleep, the herd resumes its daily grazing.

The ankylosaur shows signs of physical addiction to the plant, refusing to let any members of his herd near a patch. When he can't find sources of the weed, he goes through stages of extreme depression, although social rejection might account for this behavior, as he is an outcast among the group.

When I asked the Panitube natives about the weed, they smiled and laughed to themselves as if privy to some private joke, which I take to mean that they are indeed familiar with it. I overheard one of them call it "cualoco zacatl," which roughly translates from Olman to "angry grass." The few natives who speak the trade tongue, however, have made a broken translation, calling it "loco weed."



What could have made this?

time I began to connect with him by letting him look at my journal. He is fond of my sketches, particularly of the island's plant life, and he will no doubt prove invaluable in classifying the jungle flora.

The Effects of Loco Weed 7th of Richfest, 593 CV

For the past several days, I've been observing a herd of ankylosaurs that graze near an inland lake in the northwestern reaches of the isle. Within this group, one male in particular has been exhibiting very curious behavior, of hostile and unsocial bearing. I've come to blame this comportment on

become easily agitated. The rest of the herd has learned to avoid him during these episodes, as he swings his tail at anything that approaches. Even when docile and not under the influence of the plant, the herd and other local herbivores give him plenty of space, not wishing to incur his wrath. A bruised shin is apparently enough to make even the largest diplodocus wary of him.

Larger meals of the plant have a more powerful effect on the giant reptile, causing him to become extremely aggressive and attack anything he sees. His depth perception seems altered during these episodes, as yesterday I observed him charging into the jungle

Territorial Behavior of *Terror Birds*

10th of Reaping, 593 CV

Concerning the flock of terror birds that I have been studying near the isle's eastern peninsula, today I witnessed a pack of males force a dimetrodon away from its kill. The creature had wandered into the high grasses of the flock's territory and brought down a giant scorpion, an easy catch with little signs of struggle. This was soon to change, though, for the terror bird scavengers can be very persistent when it comes to robbing meals.

The tall birds slowly encircled the predator, assessing the situation. At first, the dimetrodon seemed indifferent to their presence, continuing to eat while only occasionally snapping at birds that got too close. As the flightless avians gained confidence, they began flaunting—rising up to their full



*Terror birds of the
northern peninsula*

height and fluffing their head plumes. They strutted back and forth, low resonating grunts emanating from deep within their chests. When their displays failed to intimidate the feeding predator, some of them began turning their hindquarters toward it and kicking dirt into its face. This immediately garnered the reptile's full attention.

Unwilling to give up its kill, the dimetrodon flushed the sail on its back, bared its teeth, and began belching at its attackers. This show of force came too late, though, as the birds had worked themselves into a frenzy. The flanking terror birds nipped at its tail, hitting and running, much to their target's frustration. While doing little harm, it made the dimetrodon spin around to snap at them. Taking advantage of this momentary distraction, the other birds rushed in for quick strikes, butting and quickly biting with their powerful beaks. At one point, the dimetrodon actually staggered to keep its balance. Finally having had enough, the giant lizard abandoned its meal and fled at a waddling gait. The birds gave pursuit, screeching as they drove the creature from their territory. Once the threat of the predator was gone, they dragged the half-eaten scorpion back to the waiting chicks and females of their flock.

In other parts of the Flanaess, these flightless birds are top predators of

their habitats, but here they are clearly bottom-feeding scavengers. If it were not for their strength of numbers, they would certainly be ill equipped at defending their nests and might have long ago disappeared from the island. They have adapted quite well to their situation and exhibit a remarkable ability to drive off most predators that threaten their nesting grounds.

Tyrannosaurus Rex!
22nd of Reaping, 593 CY

In gathering data for my documentation of the island's food chains, Hatoi and I witnessed a tyrannosaurus consume a lesser theropod in the northeastern grasslands. The prey was too small to sate the giant beast's hunger, and once it caught our scent and spotted us, it charged—frighteningly fast for a creature of such size. Terrified, and against all instinct, I held my ground, knowing that fleeing would certainly be my last act.

I attempted to speak to it to try to calm the massive beast, but it ignored me, slowing its advance only slightly. My heart pounding, I redoubled my efforts and the rex came to a reluctant halt. I have heard tales of druids who consort with these beasts, but that seemed a dangerous proposition. Verik would surely scold me if he knew I had even attempted it.

The titan lowered its head to sniff me with one great nostril, its scimitar-sized teeth scant inches away. Fascinated, I

reached out a trembling hand to touch it, and just then, Hatoi jumped from his tree and landed squarely on the top of the tyrant's skull. I yelled at him to stop, but it was too late. The tyrannosaurus raised its mighty head and let out a deafening roar. It began thrashing and spinning its body to shake off the small nuisance, snapping its great jaws in anticipation of the morsel. As Hatoi raised his spear, I cried out to prevent what was to occur, but too late. He plunged his spear deep into one of the tyrannosaurus's eyes, blinding the giant and sending it into an uncontrollable rage. Between roars, it swung its tail wildly while clawing impotently at its face, unable to remove the tiny spear.

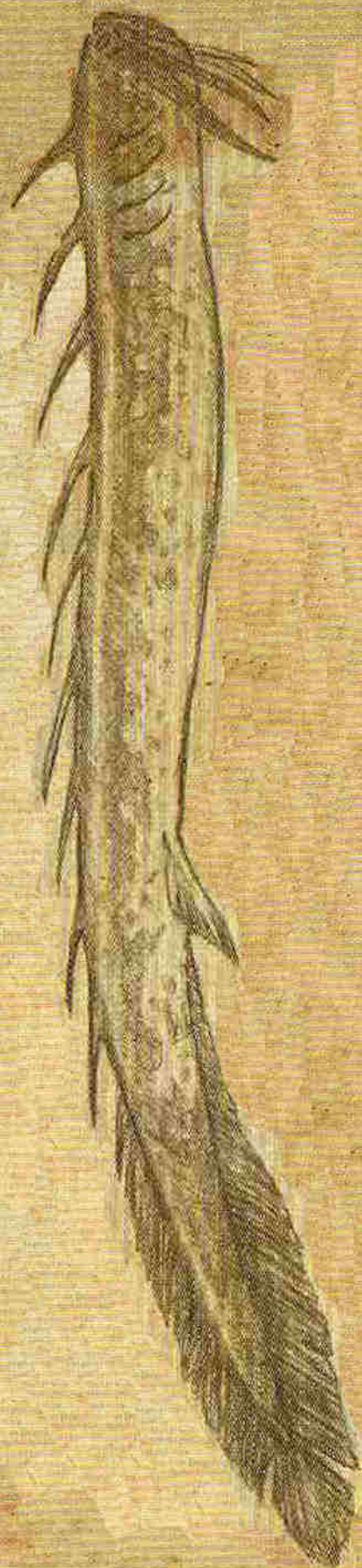
The last I saw of the rex, it was bullying its way into the jungle to the west, splintering the innocent trees as it ran. The sound of its flight turned to sounds of intense struggle, the trees began shaking violently and a shocked reptilian roar reverberated through the jungle. Reappearing from the undergrowth, Hatoi began frantically waving his hands as if warding off some perceived evil. When the tyrannosaurus abruptly became quiet, choked off in mid-roar, and the tops of the trees stopped moving, wide-eyed Hatoi started making loud, agitated ticking sounds. He wanted very desperately to leave the area, pulling my hand to lead me away from the mysterious and disturbing sounds.

Not questioning my native guide's obvious urgency, we quickly journeyed back to the village. Later, when I asked, Hatoi refused to speak of his actions, becoming frightened and emotional. For the first time, I've come to realize the phanton is keeping certain truths pertaining to the isle a secret from me.

Ecology of the Masheri
5th of Goodmonth, 593 CY

My interactions with the natives are beginning to bear fruit, as they have begun trading with Farshore, eager to exchange pearls harvested from oysters that live around the coral reefs of the island. Following rumors of

All creatures fear
the isle's terrible
thunder lizards



huge pearls, we've bartered two canoes with the fishermen of Burowao, the easternmost peninsula village, in exchange for guides to lead a Far-shore expedition to a reef where they claim giant oysters make their homes. I went along with the explorers to investigate the reports of such giant mollusks and learn more about the isle's aquatic inhabitants.

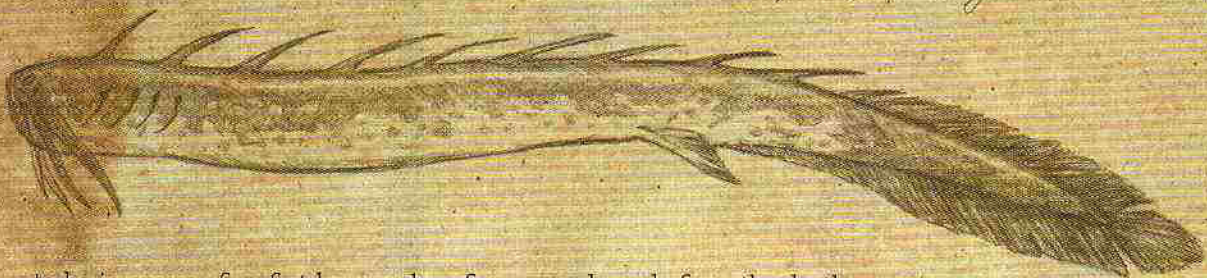
We anchored at a reef off the northeastern shores of the island. Our guides spoke of monstrous, territorial eels that feed on the coral there—a trait that has since earned them the name "mashers." With the help of the fishermen, we devised a strategy for stealing the pearls from their homes.

Approaching the reef in outriggers, we maneuvered into the shallow water over the reef—less than 2 feet deep—and disembarked. Walking on the reef proved difficult—if you weren't careful, you could easily break an ankle. Our mission was to attract the attention of the mashers by dislodging chunks of the reef with long poles, hoping to provoke a feeding frenzy, giving our divers the necessary distraction to gather the pearl-bearing oysters.

Within moments of breaking off the first coral chunks the mashers responded. Several sets of the eels' wicked black spines broke from the water, serpentine in their movements as they approached. Some looked



*Adult mashers can grow
up to 30ft long.*



to be in excess of 30 feet long, making them more than a match for the aquatic reptiles lurking in these foggy waters. As the monstrous eels gained speed, I realized their intentions and began yelling for my comrades to retreat. The mashers' skulls bear thick growths of bone, with which they began relentlessly ramming the reef, sending jarring shockwaves through it, knocking us from our feet. A great schism opened in the coral we stood on, and the solid surface beneath us was suddenly gone, sunk into the lower underwater mazes, leaving us treading water that was now deep enough for the mashers to navigate. Two of our men who chose to swim to the canoe are no longer with us. One moment they were there and the next they were simply gone, nothing marking their presence other than a cloud of turbulent bubbles of blood.

As we emerged onto the standing reef, I noticed one of the native's arms hanging limp at his side, quickly turning black—he had brushed against one of the poisonous spines on the mashers' backs. Cursing myself for lacking the vital spell, I tried to treat the poison but was unsuccessful—the black discoloration quickly spread to the rest of his body, coursing across his skin. He began shivering and babbling incoherently with dementia. Finally going into shock, fits of vomiting and convulsions took over. When his eyes bulged, I knew it was too late, for inflammation of the brain is fatal. The poison had killed him within moments.

We had suffered three fatalities and our divers managed to bring up only

four normal pearls from the depths. Appalled, Verik has decided that further risk outweighs the value of the still-rumored giant pearls and has forbidden all future diving expeditions.

Physiology of the Greenwise

19th of Goodmonth, 593 CY

Today I came upon a clearing where it seemed a herd of dinosaurs had recently stampeded. The footprints were massive and the devastation to the area immense—likely caused by a herd of diplodocuses or other large herbivores. There were no signs of an attacker's footprints, leading me to believe that the panic's source had come from the sky.

As I was studying the ruined landscape, I discovered a large plant, a

greenwise once nearly 15 feet tall, fatally trampled into the ground. Its still huge, flytraplike mouths twitched violently—seemingly hungry even in death—and spasms ran down the length of its main stalk, causing the plant's tendrils to flutter and make a sound like someone shaking a tree.

About halfway down the stalk that served as the greenwise's throat a pulsing bulge appeared to be the source of the plant's post-death contractions. Whatever was inside the carnivorous weed was still alive, struggling to escape. When I sliced open the stalk to try to free whatever was trapped within, I encountered some resistance—the greenwise's thick stem proving tougher to carve than a ripe melon. Viscous froth spewed from the incision and

*Even the plants of
the isle can prove deadly.*



oozed its way to the ground, reminding me of the saliva of a fleshy creature—except that this reeked of sap.

Lining the inside of the stalk ran rows of dense thorns protruding down toward the plant's gut, arrayed in such a fashion as to prevent captured prey from escaping back up to the maw. I could see a sizable frog peering up at me through the thorns, desperately trying to push past the barbs to reach the opening I had created. I spoke to it in an attempt to calm it, but the traumatized thing was fully intent on escape. The frog must have kicked one of the rooty organs that once guided the greenwise's locomotion, for one of the plant's tendrils convulsed, knocking me off my feet and pinning me to the ground.

Struggling to free myself, I heard the flap of powerful wings and stilled myself at the sight of a pair of wyverns scouring the carnage. These creatures were likely the culprits behind the stampede, returning to pick over the devastation. Instinctively, I shifted myself into a small snake and slowly slithered away from the remains of the man-eating bush, seeking a hiding place where I could wait for the predators to depart. Behind me, I heard the lesser dragons tearing into the greenwise, not discriminating between frog and plant. At least the poor creature did not suffer long.

Aranea Habitat

15th of Harvester, 593 CY

I cannot put to words the sense of grief and guilt that consumes me. By now, Hatoi is surely dead, a victim of an unspeakable fate I unwittingly had a hand in weaving. If only I had heeded his warnings, he would still be here with me as I write this. For the thousandth time I ask why I ignored him, foolishly venturing into a darkened hollow in the eastern jungle where I noticed even the thunder lizards feared to tread. There, my curiosity cost me and my friend dearly.

As we entered the vale, made eternally dark by the dense jungle canopy, I immediately felt something was



*An unlucky victim
of the Aranea.*

watching us. At first, I shrugged it off as nerves, but it became increasingly difficult to keep Hatoi calm. When he suddenly stopped and started hissing, staring intently into the darkness, I halted in deference to his keener senses. It was then that I became aware that we had been walking beneath a floating maze of spider webs strung through the trees above. Disgusting corpse husks dangled from the rope-thick strands like macabre Midwinter ornaments. Yet, even more terrifyingly, something had purposefully positioned the carcasses, forming rotting shelters as sickening as they were crude.

All of the hairs on my body stood on end when I caught a glimpse of movement. Praying for my eyes to adjust to the darkness, I could barely see them: giant, horrifying spiders slowly descending from their webs, seemingly hovering in mid-air and gesturing with their front appendages—disgustingly elongated arms with multi-knuckled hands. Although I had never seen one,

I took these creatures for aranea—rare and rumored spiderlike beings storied to carry ill-mannered children off to their evil forest kingdom.

I didn't have the opportunity to look closer or attempt to speak to the creatures as the surrounding jungle suddenly came alive with indistinct, sinister shadows and the sounds of slinking things. Despite the activity, I could sense nothing other than Hatoi, the spider things, and myself. Even now, I don't know if something was actually there, or if those images and noises were mere figments meant to drive us to some deadlier trap.

Regardless, an overwhelming need to flee consumed me, and I prayed to Ehlonna to steel my nerve. I don't know what came over poor Hatoi, though, because he bolted, heading deeper into the hollow as if charging one of the spiders, a terrified but determined look on his face. I can't help but wonder if he was trying to defend me. I had scarcely a moment to call out before I saw his peril, each bound into the undergrowth covering him more and more in thick strands of webbing, ghostly ropes slipping around him like wet nooses. The sounds of him calling out to me as he was hefted into the silken nightmare above still ring in my ears, and through my own screams I thought I heard a chattering arachnid laughter that will ever torture my nightmares.

Conclusion

1st of Sunsebb, 593 CY

Some time has passed since I left Farshore and—in light of the recent tragedy—this is likely to be my last entry. When we return to Sasserine, I shall deposit the bulk of this work into the family vault for safekeeping until such a time that I can organize my notes and publish a full dissertation of the island's ecosystem. Whatever final form my observations take, though, I plan to dedicate the work to those souls who lost their lives in that unforgiving land. I hope their sacrifices might serve as a warning of the savage nature and primal ferocity that epitomizes the aptly named Isle of Dread. ☐