
Habitat

The islands form an archipelago of thousands of islands of all sizes, all linked by the intertwining branches of the Trees, miles overhead. A pair of mature Trees can span more than 20 miles between islands, so all but the very largest channels has a distant partial roof of leaves. To the anaugi, the Trees are more a feature of the world than plants. The very weather patterns are shaped by the Trees, with storm clouds being deflected by their boughs.

Beneath the Trees, the meeting of ocean, root, and rot dominates existence. The world of the anaugi is one of decay, the end of life, and rebirth. The “land” that the Trees stand upon is actually the end of life upon the ocean. Most of the islands are not rock and dirt, but rather plant and rot. They are the accumulated detritus from upon and under the ocean, brought together in great floating masses, buoyed by the ever-rotting plant matter. In these masses of detritus, the Trees take root. As the Trees reach upwards, the floating islands are pushed ever downwards by the steadily-increasing weight. Thus, even those few plants that can live in the rotting, lightless realm at the base of the Trees are constantly in danger of being drowned from below, or buried from above.

The vast majority of lifeforms that actually live on the floating islands are saprophytes. Fungi of all sorts dominate the flora, and worms and insects are the most common fauna. There are only a very few species of vertebrates living under the trees. Most of these are rodent-like scavengers, living on the mushrooms and decomposing remains of things fallen from above.

The realm under the Trees is a muted place. It is usually eerily silent, with the buzzing of insect wings often being the loudest sound around. Further, the soft rotting surroundings absorb what sounds there are, muffling any noises that are not quite close by. There is little-to-no natural light, and if light is somehow created, everything is muted greys and browns. Only in the realm of scent is anything noticeable. Even then, the many scents of rotting in various ways are so pervasive that they all blend together, with only the very strongest of scents being even noticeable.

However, at the edges of the islands, where there is some light, a vibrant ecology begins. The further from the Trees one gets, out into the ocean, the livelier it is. The water surrounding the Trees is teeming with life: fish, aquatic reptiles and insects, and seabirds. Many of the seabirds nest in the eddies and tide pools at the edge of the islands, while others have their nests high above, in the lowest branches of the Trees.

The anaugi are strict scavengers, unable to digest proteins themselves. Instead, they must let them break down by rotting for a few days, first. Similarly, they require alcohols, rather than sugars – sugars (such as fruits) give them a buzz. However, they have a vibrant fishing and farming practice. But whatever they catch or harvest is laid out to rot before they can eat it. Further food preparation is essentially non-existent. Cooking is unheard-of.

Other than their consumptions, which are considerable, the anaugi have relatively little interaction with the other fauna of their biome. There are predatory fish and sea reptiles large enough to threaten an anaugi, but most of them don’t hunt near the surface, and none are a threat for a prepared, armed group of anaugi.

The Guilds

Anaugi society is dominated by one institution: the Guild. Every anaugi is a member of one or more Guilds. Each Guild is an organization dedicated to the furtherance of a particular craft. The Guilds are very jealous about their secrets, and there are often multiple Guilds claiming dominion over the same, or very similar, crafts. Despite this, membership is freely granted, and one may be a member of multiple Guilds without prejudice. Only sharing Guild secrets is forbidden.

The anaugi have neither family ties nor government as we think of these concepts. They have neither external sex organs nor sex drive, and no recognized offspring, so there is very little impetus to forming family ties of any sort. Similarly, sibling ties have very little meaning, since a single pool may hatch a score or more of eggs in a single season, and they are not technically related. In many ways, the Guild fulfills the role of family: it is often with other Guild members that an anaugi spends most of its free time, socializing and conversing. Most anaugi have a few close friends, with whom they share the emotional burdens of everyday life, its triumphs and tribulations, but these are often, again, people that share a Guild affiliation (or two).

Guilds also are as close as anaugi society gets to government. Most decisions are made by individuals, consulting whomever they feel can help, or should be

involved in the decision. If a problem seems too big for an individual to address, or it wants more people to have input on the solution, the Guild as a whole will be called upon. Sometimes, a Guild will take the initiative and discuss a situation before anyone has actually suggested it is a problem – though this usually means that *someone* in the Guild thinks it’s a problem. If a problem concerns all of anaugi society, a council of the Guilds may form up. Representatives from each interested Guild will gather and discuss.

Like decisions, solutions are often individually acted upon. Even when a larger group has discussed a problem, or even come to a conclusion, it is rare for the group to impose its will on the individual. Instead, each anaugi does what it feels is best. Some will pursue the consensus solution, some will ignore it in favor of their own ideas, and some may even actively work against the consensus. Needless to say, it is rare for a significant change to be made in a given village or larger group.

Trade & Technology

The anaugi are true craftsmen, neither engineers nor artists. A thing of beauty with no function is pointless, but so is a tool that is ugly or awkward. Instead, all things must satisfy both form *and* function.

Above all, the act of creation is paramount – what matters most is how much of the creator’s soul (figuratively speaking) has been put into a creation. Repetition has no value to the anaugi. Furthermore, it is creation, not possession, that is valued. One does not make a stool to own a stool, but to live the act of creating a stool. Thus, they have never developed mass production.

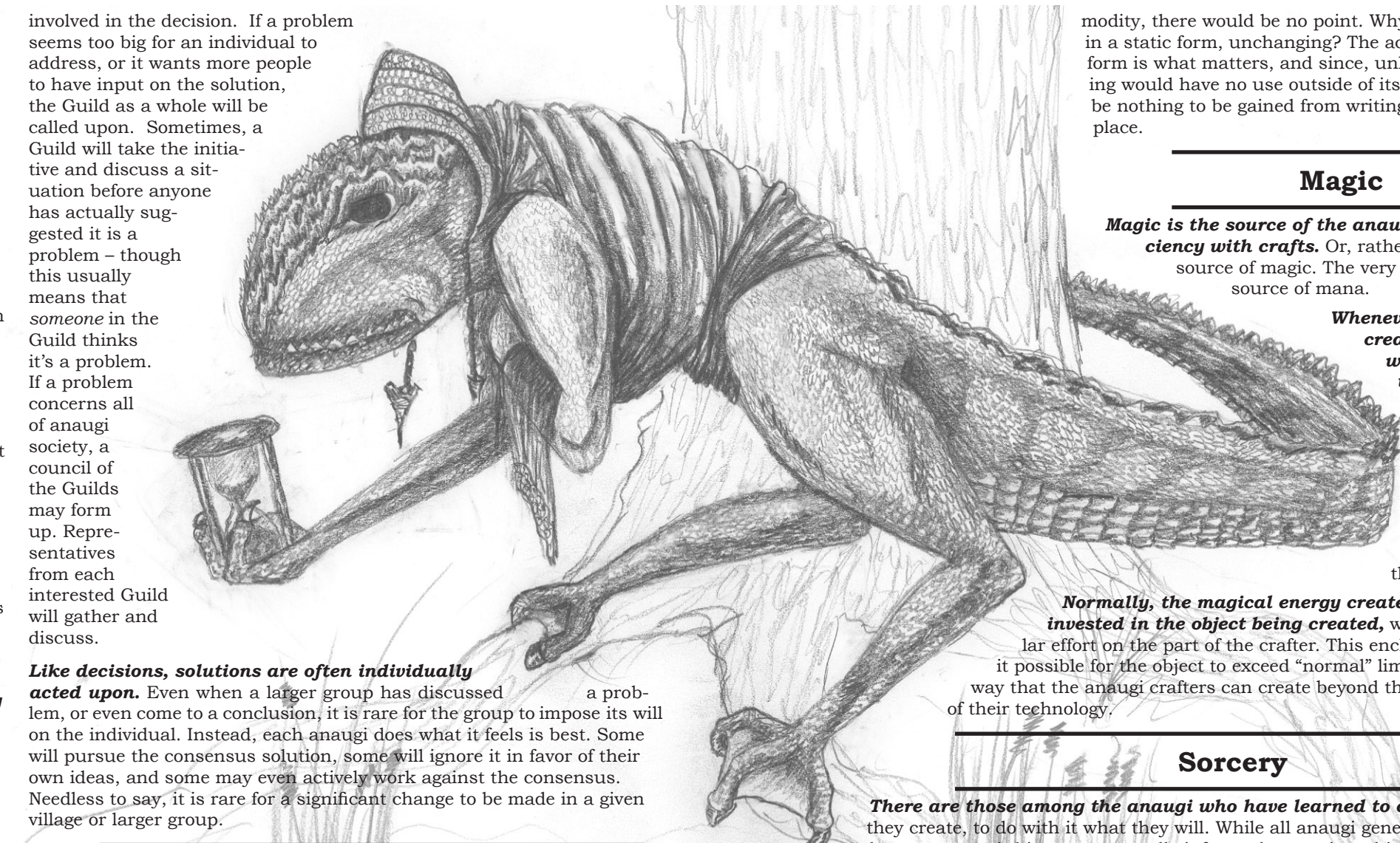
Instead, each item is personally crafted, and no two items are exactly the same. All anaugi place great stock in both originality and aesthetics. In addition to all objects being well designed, objects are almost always decorated. Most items end up being baroque elaborations on the basic form, covered in carvings or runes or embroidery, or whatever might be appropriate for the object.

Nearly any pre-modern trade can be found practiced by at least one guild of anaugi. In addition to crafters making tools and objects in every conceivable medium (metal, stone, wood, bone, glass, cement, leather, etc.), there are practitioners of many simple technologies. Water power, steam power, gravity, and even electricity are known to the anaugi, and utilized. Charcoal, and thus steel, have been long since discovered.

Furthermore, anaugi can often exceed the limits of their technology, creating objects that simply are not possible, given the tools and techniques being used. This is most obvious in their architecture, which often features impossible structures with nowhere near the necessary support.

The only common technological development which the anaugi lack is writing. Certain abstract decorative patterns have evolved to the point of conveying relatively consistent meanings, but it would never occur to the anaugi to take the next step and use these for recording or transmitting information. Since creation is the valued com-

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modity, there would be no point. Why record something in a static form, unchanging? The act of creating the form is what matters, and since, unlike a tool, the writing would have no use outside of its form, there would be nothing to be gained from writing it down in the first place.

Magic

Magic is the source of the anaugi’s amazing proficiency with crafts. Or, rather, the anaugi are the source of magic. The very act of creation is the source of mana.

Whenever an anaugi creates something, whether that something is physical or ephemeral, it generates mana. This mana is not inherent in, or coming from, the object, or the materials. It comes from the action – the creation.

Normally, the magical energy created is simply invested in the object being created, without any particular effort on the part of the crafter. This enchantment makes it possible for the object to exceed “normal” limits. It is in this way that the anaugi crafters can create beyond the apparent limits of their technology.

Sorcery

There are those among the anaugi who have learned to channel the mana they create, to do with it what they will. While all anaugi generate mana when they create, and this mana normally infuses the creation, this is not the only possible use for mana.

Sorcerers have learned to harness the mana they create, channeling it into other effects: magic. To do so requires skill at harnessing the magic, but this skill is independent of the ability to create in the first place.

Sorcery is limited by the type of creation undertaken. The mana created is strongly linked to the act of creation. While, in theory, the mana from any act could then be rechanneled into any spell, the further removed the spell is from the mana source, the less effective it will be. Thus, even sorcerers are best at magics relating to their craft(s).

Spirit Quests

It is only the act of creation which generates magical energy, and therefore it is the act of creation that usually has the most profound results. This simple truth has probably impacted anaugi society more than any other single factor. Most profoundly, this is true not just of anaugi craft skills, but of anaugi lives in general.

The anaugi carry, unbeknownst to them, the power to reshape reality in much more far-reaching ways than just the objects they touch. Much as the act of creation lets them reshape the object being created, the act of living lets them reshape the world being lived in. Thus, when the world is not right – such as a plague or other disaster – a group of anaugi will be selected to undertake a Spirit Quest.

The goal of a Spirit Quest is not a physical object, nor a specific result. Rather, the important quality is the act itself. The very fact that the anaugi undertake the Spirit Quest provides the energy that reshapes the world, causing the required object or circumstance to be found.

It is not a quest for an object, which purifies the soul, it is a quest for the soul, which creates the object.

Physiology

Anaugi are, in broad strokes, amphibious warm-blooded reptiles, standing bipedal but not upright, with powerful jaws, dextrous arms, and powerful tails.

Anaugi have long, sinuous bodies with a powerful swimming tail. Their entire body is covered in dry scales of a dull grey-green color. Most of the body is covered in fine snake-like scales, very smooth and close-fitting. However, the scales on the underside of the tail, belly, and chest are larger and harder, providing protection from easy scrapes and cuts. The top of the snout and head, as well as much of the back, including the top of the tail, sport large, coarse, jagged scales, like those on the back of a crocodile. In their ancestors, these provided a powerful disincentive for predators to bite down on the back. Now, they are a place for ornamentation.

At the front of the body is a large head dominated by a powerful lipless mouth full of jagged, tearing teeth. The ancestors of the anaugi were predators, near the top of their food chain, and they have the head to show for it. In addition to the large jaw, they have dark penetrating eyes, forward-facing. These provide excellent stereo vision, and are well adapted for light changes, from the brilliance of direct sunlight to the almost-total darkness of the lands under the trees. In dim conditions, the eyes appear to be nothing more than pools of glistening darkness. Only in direct sunlight can any iris be seen, and it is invariably black itself. In addition to being protected by a bony brow ridge covered in horny scales, the eyes have a transparent nictitating membrane that keeps them free of debris when swimming.

The nostrils are set on the top of the head and can be opened and closed both consciously and unconsciously. As much as sight, scent is indispensable to the anaugi. In the depths beneath the floating islands, at night on the water, and at times in the depths of the forest, sight is of no use, so scent must be relied upon. Anaugi have a hypersensitive “nose”, consisting of an extensive network of sinus passages lined with sensitive scent receptors, which are flushed and refreshed whenever the anaugi opens its mouth, swallows, or chews. These work equally effectively in water and in air, and are in fact an evolution of the gills they once had.

Anaugi have no visible ears. The ears are located behind and above the jaw, have no external lobe, and are protected by the cheek bone and jaw muscles. While small and hard to locate, the external timpanum is a very sensitive, vulnerable spot.

Their hind limbs are powerful digitigrade legs with large three-toed, webbed feet. The toes are tipped with powerful bone-cored claws, and the outer two toes can be brought into opposition, providing a relatively secure grip. On land, the hind limbs are the primary means of locomotion. In the water, the tail does most of the work, but the large webbed feet help with maneuvering, making exceptionally fast turns possible.

The front limbs, in contrast, have changed considerably from their non-tool-using ancestors. They are nearly as long as the hind limbs, but noticeably finer in build. Their proportions are also more even, with a longer upper arm, and short wrist. The hands have four long, slender, claw-tipped fingers, and are not webbed. The innermost digit is a true thumb, in complete opposition to the others, while the outermost digit can be brought into partial opposition for grabbing and running. Anaugi can drop onto all-fours for a surer footing, or to break into a very fast run.

Anaugi spend most of their time on land, on their hind legs. However, their posture is nearly horizontal, not really “upright” at all. The head and shoulders are generally the highest part of the body, but only slightly higher than the hips.

Anaugi are hermaphrodites, and have no external sexual characteristics. In fact, even other anaugi have difficulty telling one another apart visually, and rely on a combination of scent and clothing/decorations.

Anaugi display their creativity as much in their appearance as every other part of their society. In addition to ornate clothes and jewelry, tattoos, piercings, scale carvings, and other body decorations are very common. An unadorned anaugi would be looked upon as a freak. The only limitation on this love of adornment is the anaugi’s hands – no anaugi would willingly do anything that would impede its ability to pursue its craft.

Lifecycle

Anaugi have a very complex lifecycle, of which they are only partially aware. Approximately twice each year, an anaugi goes into a “heat” for a week or two. This heat has several noticeable effects.

First, the anaugi literally is hot, running an elevated body temperature and feeling feverish. To combat this, most retreat to tidal pools or other sheltered pools of water. Those who do not are all but useless unless cooled in some other manner, and often suffer permanent mental debilitation from the fever.

Second, the pheromones released during heat trigger heat in other nearby anaugi. Therefore, large groups – sometimes entire villages – tend to go into heat at once.

The unknown effect of heat is that the anaugi metabolism makes two significant switches related to reproduction. First, it begins producing a mild toxin which is exuded through the skin. Second, and most importantly, the body prepares and sheds large numbers of eggs. These eggs, like those of all animals, are haploid (having only half a set of chromosomes).

However, unlike most animals, the haploid stage is a viable being. These haploids mature into sexed (male and female) tadpole-like creatures the size of an anaugi’s fist, with a tail and two legs. These haploids live for a few years, barring

accident, before reaching maturity. The haploids seem to be about as intelligent as most pets, but are incapable of language. When the haploids are mature, they mate, each fertilized female laying a single egg about the size of an anaugi’s eye. A haploid may live as much as a year after mating, but they tend the eggs for only a week before abandoning them.

These eggs are then looked after by the anaugi, and after a month or so hatch into young anaugi, diploid and hermaphroditic. And then the cycle repeats.

Anaugi are perfectly aware that their “parents” are the tadpoles that they look after in the tidal pools, or build special habitats for. However, they have no idea that they are, in turn, the parents of these tadpoles. Instead, they believe that the tadpoles come from the open ocean, when they are too small to be seen.

This ties in to their beliefs about reincarnation: Anaugi believe that there is a “chain of being,” with all creatures arrayed along it. The tadpoles are one step lower than them on this chain, and the rumel are believed to be one step higher on the chain. Thus, when a tadpole dies, its soul is reincarnated as an anaugi, and when an anaugi dies its soul goes on to the rumel.