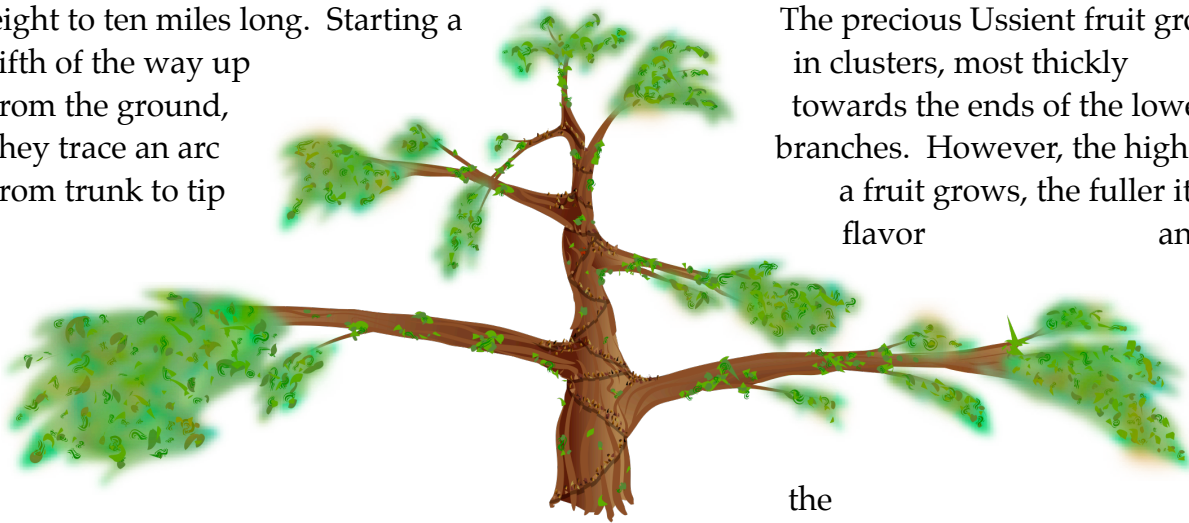


USSIENT TREES



Seen from afar, the mighty Ussients resemble bushes more than tall pines or mighty oaks. Their trunks, often completely covering an acre of land, look proportionately short until one realizes that squat outline is days' away and reaches four miles into the sky.

Radiating around the base of a mature Ussient are branches eight to ten miles long. Starting a fifth of the way up from the ground, they trace an arc from trunk to tip



that rises, then levels out, then descends. Often the ends are only a few thousand feet lower than the point where they attach. In some cases, low-lying branches actually touch the ground, forming a secondary route to the core. While these ground touches are often beneficial, since they can support a secondary colony of groundlings and give their produce access to the tree, they also provide a weakness in the usually well-protected Ussient settlements, simply by offering a second front for invaders in numbers. Fortunately, most trees with these arboreal highways are nearer the center of the woods.

Rarely are main branches level with one another. Rather, they tend to grow in a staggered pattern, radiating around the trunk in roughly one-sixth arcs, with each branch a quarter mile higher than the previous. It's something like a spiral staircase progression, with a strong taper, as both length and width dwindle quickly towards the top.

The precious Ussient fruit grow in clusters, most thickly towards the ends of the lowest branches. However, the higher a fruit grows, the fuller its flavor and

the thicker its skin (making for more durable leather).

The trees grow in clusters of twenty to thirty, usually separated by small rivers or outcroppings of stony hills. The trees that thrive are usually about six to eight miles apart, meaning that there are often several points where the lower branches cross, approach, or even touch. These are valuable trade routes and the launch points of many raids and brag-quests.

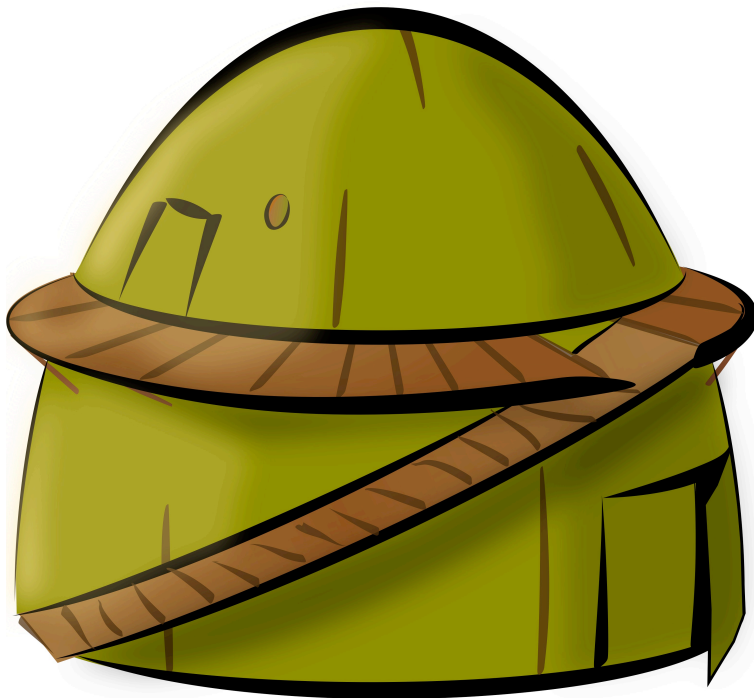
Ussient saplings sometimes sprout in the shade of the elders, when a cruscus or other herbivore gets to a fruit before the humans do. These trees rarely grow taller than a normal pine before the

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plainsmen fell them for wood. Often, they don't even get a chance to sprout more than one or two branches. The tribesmen know that once the third or fourth branch comes out, the tree is doomed. Starved of light by its parents, it dies from the top down and, if not dealt with, becomes a fire hazard, a dried-out hollow where chunk-biting monkeys can nest.

Some bold types have brought Ussient seeds to foreign soils and planted them, with indifferent results. While solitary Ussient trees have grown in the Confederacy and the Western Marches, they never fruit. Moreover, the oldest of these transplants is fifty years old and only a hundred feet across in diameter.



USSIENT CONSTRUCTION

The typical house throughout the known world starts at the ground, perhaps with a dug-out foundation, and then builds upwards with piled stones or cut timber. While the Ussients build some structures this way, at least as many are made by boring into a wooden surface or by building outward from a great trunk. Even when they start with dirt, the vertical spirit often infuses their architecture.

On the Ground

Groundling homes would look fairly familiar to outsiders, but there are still differences. Without typical-sized trees as a basis, they use shaped timbers stripped from the mighty Ussient's bark or from exposed roots. This often leads to houses with curved walls, reaching upward in a beehive shape. The bottom floor is for what livestock the farmers hold, and possibly a grain storage chamber with a secondary, external door. A staircase then winds around the building, spiraling upward to a balcony encircling the second floor. The "everyday door," facing the sun, opens to the family's living quarters, which are often one large room separated by curtains. On the opposite side, in the darkness, is "Nictus' door," leading to a

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single room, usually only large enough for a single bed or pallet. When someone in the family falls ill, he is sequestered in this room until well. With particularly dangerous or virulent diseases, the patient is served through a small window cut into the door, like a prisoner. This room is a ritual space where relics of dead relatives are stored and displayed (typically their severed life-cords), where prayers to Nictus are made before battles, and where corpses are prepared for their final journey from the tree tops.

The more fortunate groundlings have homes tunneled into giant tree roots where they've arced up out of the soil. These homes are larger, with the family's interior space divided into actual rooms, though often with interior windows from one to the other.

Various outbuildings are constructed of stone or dug into the ground, but even the most earthbound of Ussients like to have some height where they sleep.

Along the Trunk

The inhabited trees are almost all follow the same pattern. Two broad staircases gird the trunk, cut into the bark by decades of toil and re-cut yearly to offset the wear of hundreds of steps. One staircase spirals up the tree to the right and the other to the left, usually with the center of the groundling settlement stretched between the two entryways. Often the beginnings of these roads are actually tunnels, readily defensible, easy

to seal, and with periodic murder holes in the ceiling. Eventually, though, they emerge into the open air, wide enough for a cart. Those going upwards stay close to the trunk so that their journey is infinitesimally shorter. Those descending go on the outside edge because, if they fall and catch themselves with their life-cords, well, it's on their way. Whether rising, dropping or moving evenly, the higher one's social status the closer one walks to the rim. Really arrogant god-chasers walk the edge even when going up.

These twin staircases intersect at the level of the first branch, where the largest cluster of homes and businesses is located, usually around a public amphitheater (or "boasting place," in the Ussient tongue) hollowed out of the crotch where the branch attaches. Often homes line the staircase, on the inside only. These dwellings are bored directly into the tree's bark, and usually divided into one long central chamber with smaller rooms branching off it. Having a home that's the sole property of yourself, your spouse and your children is a minor luxury, but an attainable one. Since homes built into the tree can pass from generation to generation, they're durable and eventually one is bound to open up in your price range.

Other structures are home to extended families, separated by doors, stairways and (for families with silent feuds in their past) surprisingly long corridors. Long-established families with no ambitions to

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rise can dig deep enough to reach living wood and have their own springs, as explained below in the section on water management. But it's more common to expand upward or downward, because windows only save your lamp-oil costs if they're cut in exterior walls.

These dwellings also have a door for Nictus, but this is never accessible from the stair-road. Often a separate stairway leads up over the primary door to the chamber reserved for the ill, the dead, and those preparing to fight.

Branch Homes

Homes built out on the branches are halfway between the horizontal groundling layout and the vertical design of the trunk hugger. The flattest top surface of the branch is the main road. Stairways wind down off this road, carved out of the bark and curving down to a home's main entrance, which faces away from the road. The simplest of these dwellings are dug out like trunk lodges, only the door for Nictus is usually lower -- farthest from the road.

Often, however, the wood excavated is formed into blocks, which are used to build walls up on top of the home. Stacked and pegged together, and after many years grown into the surface of the branch, these "top houses" usually have doors facing the road and are used for businesses separate from the residences. Sometimes a ladder and trap door connect them, but more often not.

It is not unheard-of for longtime branch residents to tunnel under the road, preparing hidden barriers that can be pushed upward from beneath a layer of leaves to surprise an enemy raiding party, or even trapdoors to surprise them. Most locals know where these occasional pitfalls are and know that they're only armed to entrap during a crisis. They never, ever, ever talk about them to anyone they haven't lived next to for years. When a new spouse moves to a tree, acceptance comes when the neighbors casually mention where the trapdoors are, as if in passing. This usually takes about twenty years. On the other hand, when someone who's trying



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to ascend is told, it's often a sign that his neighbors think he isn't moving higher. Ever.

Shade Societies love hidden passages along branches (and between trunk residences for that matter, but they're simpler to bore horizontally on the branch -- on the trunk, you can only reach your neighbors easily). It's rare, but more than one established and influential family has expanded its home, digging inward, only to find a tiny crawlspace where someone had lay, listen to their private conversations. Naturally, by the time these spy holes are found, they've been long abandoned and usually thoroughly bricked up, the eavesdropper having heard the construction approaching. But the angry families often explore the network of tunnels as far as they can before falling prey to deadfalls, ambush or impassible barriers.

The higher one goes on the tree, the more likely one is to find these listening tunnels.

A Word on Water

Ussient leaves are broad and act as makeshift funnels. The dwellers in the trees have aped this design to build rain-collectors, both public and personal. Their system of channels that use gravity to take rainwater to central collection points are elaborate and often beautifully carved, if not as reliable and clean as the stone aqueducts of Uldholm.

The one luxury the farmers possess is ready access to well water and forest's clean rivers and springs. By the time rain water has reached a common pool, it's often pretty brackish and dark. Private collectors -- especially the ostentatious ones of foreign copper or bronze -- are much better, but don't gather nearly as much water. This is why most trunk and branch communities supplement their supply with either water hauled from beneath in kegs, or by processing sap.

The tree sap is close to the surface in areas where new leaves grow, farther out on the branches (where, conveniently, it's hardest to haul casks of groundwater) and higher up at the top. Low trunk families have to dig deep indeed to reach the living wood and bleed sap out of it, but many find it worth it. Some sap-wells have been in place for decades and are dug deep into branches.

A good tap can produce several gallons of sap a day. It can be drunk straight if you don't mind the syrupy consistency, and acrid tannin flavor, but more often its separated. Churns, as for butter, drive the heavier water to the bottom and force the heavy nectar to the top. The water is available for drinking (rarely bathing -- it's too pure for any but the most lavish to use for so base a purpose). The nectar, in turn, can be pressed to squeeze out a musky, foul-smelling liquid that, when fermented, is equally potent as at getting one drunk or creating bursts of flame. The pressed residue is a key ingredient for a decently strong glue.

THE FOREST'S DEVICES



While the tribes are regarded as somewhat backward and primitive by their neighbors, there are a few devices and technologies in which they have, by choice or necessity, become adept.

Ropemaking

The native Ussient tongue has one word for “life” and “rope.” It is rare to find any tribesman in the branches without a forty-foot lifeline. The rope is made the stringy cores of new-budded leaf stems, cut off when they’re still only wrist-thick and stripped down to fibers about the width of a tooth. These are cured, treated, pounded to remain supple, and then woven into ropes.

In most trees, children’s hair is not cut until they reach their maturity, at which point their closest relatives braid the hair into a rope for them, their personal cord of life. Dyed fur, thin leather thongs, or pieces of colored foreign fabrics are worked in to the rope in patterns unique to tribe and family. Twice yearly, in the fall and spring, there are festivals of life in which all Ussient examine their ropes and mend or strengthen them, often incorporating human hair. In addition to their own, they might weave in the hair of a close family member, a friend, or a defeated enemy. Thus, having someone steal a lock of your hair is a defeat. Hair thefts are more respectable when they’re the outcome of a lost fight, more humiliating when it’s the result of trickery or stealth.



For all the care they pay their rope, it’s really no stronger than the hempen cords common elsewhere. It’s just a matter of careful craftsmanship and close attention. Usually, the Ussient carry their personal cords tied in a recursive series of slipknots. This effectively makes the rope thicker and about a quarter as long, until either end is pulled, at which point the knots unravel, returning the cord to its full length as long as it’s under pressure. At the end of the rope, one carries a grappling hook so that, if thrown off the tree by wind, violence or misfortune, there’s a chance to fling the hook and catch something. If the hook is dropped, the tribesman might grab high before the rope has much of a chance to unravel, but the longer he takes to get it caught, the nastier the shock is going to be when the slack goes out.

THE FOREST'S DEVICES



Ussient funerals often strike outsiders as barbaric affairs, since bodies are taken to a high and sacred place and then flung outward into the void. Consigned to the sky, the family then cuts the life-rope in half, ties the opposite ends together, and hangs it in their lodge's sick room.

Lightfalls

The lightfall was invented by an Ussient traveler to foreign lands named Soessiem Urtaq. In her native tree, she is worshipped as a goddess of ingenuity, though this is disputed elsewhere (particularly in her tree's nearest neighbors).

Soessiem was an herbalist and while traveling throughout Heluso studying plants, she became fascinated by maple flyers. These winged pods fell farther and slower than other naked seeds. As a woman with ambitions to live up high, she started experimenting with ways to retard the rate of a free-falling descent.

Lightfalls are flexible wooden frameworks, with a stretched leather or fabric covering to mimic the shape of a wing. This is set into a well-greased socket. When a load is lashed to the socket and dropped from a precipice, the wing whirls violently on a horizontal plane. In this way, the speed of descent is reduced.

Riding a lightfall is dangerous, and the farther you ride it the more likely it is to come to pieces from the stress. People do

it, it's a popular and impressive brag feat. But people die doing it, too. Far more often, lightfalls are used to drop material from upper branches to the ground, or to another branch if a tether has been run through the center of the spinner.

Recently, some followers of Soessiem have removed the socket and used lightwings to drop liquids, achieving a powerful centrifuge effect. They use it to clarify liquor and strain out the sediment.

Manwings

Once Soessiem scaled maple flyers to human scale, it was inevitable that someone would try the same thing with bird wings. This resulted in numerous disasters and deaths until one of Soessiem's priests traveled to Uldholm to consult with Stormtongues about the sensation of flying and their personal observations of when wings functioned and when they didn't.

Eventually he learned enough that some sorcerers, distressed at the loose tongues of their fellows, imprisoned him in a high tower. This was not, it emerged, the wisest course. Using a fire charm to crack the stone of his window during a snowstorm, he escaped with a home-made lightfall (though he suffered permanent damage to his sense of balance from the twirling). Returning home, he constructed a sort of large kite, balanced so that a man might hang beneath it and, if not fly, at least glide for

THE FOREST'S DEVICES



short horizontal distances along the ground.

When deployed from miles up on an Ussient tree, greater distances were within its reach, and the manwing raid was born. These devices still cause dozens of deaths every year, but those who do master their use are universally admired and often permitted higher access on the trunk. Manwings are usually one-use items, but the most daring and skilled can use them either to travel from their home tree to a close rival, where they raid, steal or perform other dares or to escape from such boast-worthy exploits.

The largest group of manwings ever launched at the same time is eleven. Nine of them even managed within a mile of each other, and all eleven pilots survived.

