

Sap Core – The Heart of the Sap

The sacred place where the Vale Bearers are born—mystical warriors imbued with fragments of the primordial meteor that once fell upon Ezrute. It is here that orcs, dwarves, humans, elves, and other races renounce their names, clans, and histories, surrendering themselves to the living essence of the Vale to be reborn as instruments of its will.

1 Points of Interest

1.1 The Ascent to Purification

After the implant, the candidates slowly climb a rustic ladder made of wood and vines, which leads to the Central Pool—a seemingly serene but deeply magical body of water. As they are submerged, the initiates' bodies are swallowed by the waters and the earth, in an ancient trance of symbolic drowning. No words are spoken. Only the elements act.

1.2 The Ruins of the Opening

An ancient stone construction carved centuries ago. Today, it serves as a shelter for those preparing for the ritual. Here, the future Bearers rest and meditate for three nights, watched over by older Bearers. During this time, their names are erased in ceremonial silence, and their old belongings are burned in bonfires.

1.3 The Circle of Sap

A circle of monumental stones, carved with archaic runes, through which exposed roots and luminous sap flow. It is in this ritual ring that a Meteoric Shard—a crystal of cosmic origin—is implanted in the initiate's chest.

The process is both painful and symbolic: the chest is magically opened, and the stone is imbued with living sap before being fused to the heart. The transformation begins here.

1.4 Earth's Mouth

The Bearers emerge through the roots of a cavern below the pool, completely transformed. The new body exudes primal energy: the skin becomes thick and opaque, the texture of tree bark—as if the flesh has been fused with the essence of the Vale. The eyes glow with a faint amber light, and the crystal in the chest pulses in sync with the earth around it.

2 The Ritual

The Sap Core Ritual is a brutal and transformative process, where the initiate's body and soul are offered to the will of the Valley, in a marriage of flesh, sap and stars. Inspired by ancient practices, the ritual is a spectacle of pain, ecstasy and rebirth. Each stage leads the initiate to a physical and spiritual limit, where death and life walk hand in hand.

1. The Vigil of Pain

For three days and three nights, the initiate remains in the Ruins, a sacred and forgotten area, surrounded by stones covered in fluorescent lichens and living roots that exude a bittersweet smell.

- **Total Deprivation:** During this period, the initiate cannot speak, eat or drink. His only company are the guardians, who observe every reaction of the body and mind.
- **Hallucinogenic Herbs:** The vigil begins with the consumption of a mixture of sacred herbs—purple leaves and black flowers that induce profound hallucinations and open the mind to the whispers of the Vale.
- **Dreams and Tremors:** The weakened body begins to tremble, the lips dry until they crack, and visions of the Vale's energy flows invade the mind. The initiate sees dancing shadows and hears guttural voices speaking in ancient tongues.
- **Test of Endurance:** The guardians drive small wooden thorns into the initiate's palms and feet, symbolizing his connection to the Vale's roots. Each thorn causes a constant, throbbing pain, but the initiate cannot scream.

2. The Renunciation of the Flesh

On the fourth day, the initiate is led, staggering and feverish, to the Circle of Sap, a sacred place surrounded by ancient monoliths that shine with a faint golden glow.

- **Shedding the Past:** The initiate burns all of his or her belongings on a pyre. The fire is fed with black resin that releases thick, choking smoke.
- **Uttering the Last Name:** Before entering the circle, the initiate must shout his or her last name (the name by which he or she was known in the mortal world). The cry is repeated into the wind, echoing like a lament.
- **Ritual Scarification:** With an obsidian blade, the guardians carve symbols into the initiate's chest, representing his or her surrender to the Vale. The blood runs in rivulets and is collected in ceramic bowls to be poured over the sacred roots.

3. The Sacred Implant

This is the most painful and transcendental moment of the ritual, where the initiate's body is literally molded to receive the meteoric crystal.

- **Invocation of the Living Sap:** The masters chant hypnotic chants, rhythmmed by drums. The surrounding roots begin to move, dripping the living sap, which forms a viscous and living mass.
- **Opening of the Chest:** Without metal tools, the initiate's chest is opened through natural magic. The roots, controlled by the masters, pierce the skin and separate the ribs, exposing the still beating heart.
- **Insertion of the Crystal:** The fragment of meteoric crystal is soaked in sap and inserted directly over the heart. The pain is indescribable — the crystal burns, and the body vibrates as if it were being consumed from the inside out.
- **Spiritual Engraving:** The living sap invades the body through the wounds, merging with the bloodstream and causing intense spasms. Each spasm is accompanied by visions: the Valley, the stars, and the ancient Carriers dance before the initiate's mind.

4. The Ascent of the Soul

After the implantation, the initiate, weakened and at the same time in ecstasy, is led up a living ladder made of intertwined roots that move like serpents.

- **The Weight of the Body:** With each step, the weight of the body itself seems to increase, as if the Valley were testing its willpower.
- **Songs of Lament:** The masters sing songs that mix pain and celebration, echoing like a call to the spirits of the earth.
- **The Blood of the Ladder:** The roots stick small thorns into the initiate's bare feet, absorbing the blood that drips with each step.

5. Immersion in Transition

At the top of the stairs, the initiate finds a natural pool of crystal clear, turquoise water.

- **Diving into Eternity:** The initiate is pushed into the pool. Cold water invades the lungs, and the body is sucked into the depths, where natural energies envelop it.
- **Extreme Pain:** During the immersion, the initiate feels every fiber of his body tear and rebuild itself. Bones crack, muscles contract, and the skin seems to burn with the fusion of sap and crystal.
- **Spiritual Transition:** The mind is separated from the body, and the initiate floats between visions of a starry vastness and an absolute void. Ancient spirits whisper incomprehensible secrets.

6. The Rebirth of the Bearer

The initiate awakens alone, naked and transformed, in the darkness of the sacred cave, where the only light emanates from a large green crystal.

- **Living Scars:** The marks made during the ritual glow faintly, as if they were veins filled with sap instead of blood.
- **The New Connection:** The Bearer realizes that he is no longer just flesh and bone. He feels the Valley pulsing within him, every tree, every root, every stone is now part of his essence.
- **Solitude and Understanding:** Before leaving the cave, the Bearer understands the depth of his sacrifice. His soul is irrevocably fused with the Valley, and he no longer belongs to the world he knew.

Conclusion

The Sap Core Ritual is a brutal and mystical experience, where extreme pain serves as a bridge to transcendence. Inspired by practices of sacrifice and spiritual transformation, the ritual transforms the initiate into something more than human—a living instrument of the Valley's will, forever marked by the union of sap, stars, and blood.

3 The Story of the Sap Core

Not all eyes saw the impact.

When the Meteor crashed into the heart of the Vale, the skies darkened for seven days and the continent fell silent. The crater from the fall became a living wound, where the primordial crystal fused with the ground and gave rise to the magical sap that now pulses beneath the land.

But not all the power fell on a single point.

Living fragments, smaller pieces of the celestial stone, were thrown far away - and one of them traveled a hundred kilometers from the central crater, until it rested in a remote region, covered by warm vapors and lush vegetation. There, amid the hot springs, a smaller fragment fell asleep... and the Sap Core was born.

The First Visitors - The Wandering Elves

The elves were the first to find their way to the Sap Core. They were a group of wanderers, driven from their lands after a war against a greater force. Frail and desolate, they wandered aimlessly through the forest of Ukra Dor until they found the entrance to the Vale.

As they stumbled upon the entrance to the vale, they felt the living pulse of the place. The Horticulturists guided them to the sanctuary. They promised them a new purpose: to merge with the earth and reconnect with their lost magic. The first elf to accept, known as Krakudo of the Ash, underwent the ritual. His transformation was painful: the fusion of the

meteoric fragment and the sap tore his flesh and altered his form. His thin ears grew even longer, and small branches sprouted from his head like a living crown.

When Krakudo emerged from the waters after three days, he was no longer a pure elf. He had become a guardian of the Vale, connected to nature. Other elves, inspired by his transformation, followed in his footsteps, becoming the first Bearers.

The Exiled Orcs

Years later, a group of orcs, hunted by enemy tribes, took refuge in the heart of Ukra Dor. Hungry and wounded, they found the Vale's warm waters and lush vegetation. But unlike the elves, the orcs were not drawn by the promise of reconnection or redemption—they were drawn by the raw power they felt there.

The Horticulturists, observing the orcs, saw an opportunity. Though strong and wary, the orcs had strong bodies and resilient souls, perfect for enduring the ritual. They were promised immeasurable strength and a place to live in exchange for their submission to the Vale.

The first orc, Gharuk Bonebreaker, underwent the ritual. His sturdy body endured the excruciating pain of the insertion of the shard. When he emerged from the waters, he was unrecognizable. His dark green skin was now marked by pulsing black veins, and a crust of crystal mineral covered part of his face and chest. He became a force of nature, moving like an extension of the Vale. Other orcs, inspired by the promise of power, followed his example.

The Broken Humans

Humans were the last to arrive at the Node, drawn not by force or magic but by hopelessness. Many were fugitives, lost, or mentally sick. Some had lost everything to war or famine; others carried trauma and burdens that kept them from their humanity.

They saw humans as a paradox: fragile in body, but infinitely adaptable in spirit. They were able to bend to the will of the Vale without breaking completely, making them ideal for merging with the Sap Core.

The first human to accept the ritual was Elena of the Ruins, a woman who had lost her family and her sanity after a barbarian invasion. She believed she had nothing to lose. During the ritual, she screamed for three days, her visions a mix of nightmares and ecstasy. When she emerged, her skin was marked by golden lines that formed patterns resembling roots. Her hands resembled wooden claws, and her voice carried the echo of the Vale's trees. She became a living symbol of rebirth for other humans who came to the Node in search of a new purpose.

The Rise of the Bearers

Over time, the Bearers grew into a diverse order, comprised of elves, orcs, humans, and even dwarves and other races seeking a new purpose or drawn by promises of strength, connection, or redemption.

Each Bearer, regardless of their origin, bears the scars of ritual and the mark of the Vale. The Horticulturalists promise to the Vale was fulfilled: the meteoric shard continued to pulse, fueled by new bodies and souls, making the Sap Core a living sanctuary—and a place of eternal sacrifice.

5 Transformations of the New Bearers

5.1 Common Traits of All Bearers

After the ritual in the Sap Core, every reborn Bearer bears the following visible and sensory marks:

- **Skin with the Texture of Living Bark:** The epidermis acquires a resistance similar to that of an ancient tree, varying between shades of dry bronze, mossy gray and burnt green. This “bark” may present natural grooves that resemble growth rings.
- **Sap-Eyed Eyes:** Their irises acquire a greenish, golden or amber glow, depending on the depth of their connection with the Vale.
- **Visible Veins like Roots:** Under the skin, some veins become visible, winding like roots. They pulse in synchrony with the Heart of the Vale — a collective beat felt only by the Bearers.
- **Smell of Wet Earth:** A natural odor accompanies the Bearer, subtle and constant, similar to damp earth after rain. Animals and plants react instinctively to it.

5.2 Possible Deformities

Not everyone endures the ritual in the same way. Some Bearers are reborn with unusual or frightening alterations, considered by many to be deformities, but by others as signs of a higher purpose.

1. **Hollow Branches Growing from Shoulders:** Stiff and resonant in the wind, they emit whispers when the Bearer dreams.
2. **Mossy Limbs:** Parts of the body are covered in living moss that never dries. It has the power to slowly heal the Bearer's wounds.
3. **Glowing Cracks:** The skin cracks like dry soil, revealing green or amber light beneath. The light pulses with intense emotions.

4. Pupilless Eyes: Replaced by translucent orbs that reflect scenes from the past of the place where they are.
5. Rooted Tongue: The forked tongue looks like a thick root; speech becomes deep and reverberating, as if the voice were coming from inside a cave.

5.3 Natural Blessings (Gifts of the Vale)

Those who fully attune to the shard gain permanent gifts. These are seen as marks of choice, signs that the Vale has deeply accepted them:

1. Controlled Growth: They can sprout small branches or flowers from their own bodies for ritual or medicinal use.
2. Violet and Healing Blood: When spilled, the blood strengthens nearby plants and can be used as a healing salve.
3. Voice of the Soil: They can hear murmurs in buried rocks or roots, like distant echoes of emotions or events.
4. Sap Sight: They see flows of life energy coursing through living beings and nature, distinguishing rot, purity, or corruption.
5. Heart of Wood: Immune to effects that manipulate emotions in times of great danger.

6 Random Tables for Quickly Creating Bearer Characters in the Fertile Valley Setting.

Table 1 — Post-Ritual Appearance (1d6)

How was the Bearer's body marked by the ritual?

- 1 Grayish skin with grooves of golden sap; eyes like liquid amber.
- 2 Arms covered in moss and lichen; thin roots sprout from the palms.
- 3 Chest with symmetrical grooves around the embedded crystal; skin cold as wet bark.
- 4 Opaque green eyes, without pupils; voice with a natural echo.
- 5 Visible veins under the skin resemble a map of roots; constant smell of crushed herbs.
- 6 Hair replaced by plant fibers; to the touch, they feel like living vines.

Table 2 — Rare Deformities (1d6)

An unexpected (or sacred?) consequence of the ritual.

d6 Deformity

- 1 A third arm slowly grows under the full moon.
- 2 A hand has become gnarled like ancient wood; fingers creak as they move and grant increased strength.
- 3 An extra eye has formed on the forehead, closed—except during dreams or visions.
- 4 The skin on part of the body is permanently cracked, leaking mist or dim light.
- 5 Voice reverberates as if speaking to multiple subterranean mouths.
- 6 When stepping on the ground, footprints sprout for seconds with small green leaves.

Table 3 — Blessing of the Vale (1d6)

A spiritual gift granted.

d6 Blessing

- 1 Can heal light wounds by singing to the earth for 1 minute.
- 2 Detects corruption in plants and creatures within 20 feet.
- 3 Can grow small vines with effort.
- 4 Small animals do not fear your presence and follow you wherever you go.
- 5 Once per day, can make your skin as hard as tree bark for 1 turn.
- 6 Can speak to ancient trees as if they were sleeping people.

Table 4 — Spirit Scar (1d6)

Something is... missing, or different. An invisible mark on the spirit.

d6 Scar

- 1 Dreams of the ritual often—but with voices that were not of this world.
- 2 Cannot feel natural warmth, even in the sun.
- 3 Sees shadows of ancient Stargazers in reflections and on water surfaces.
- 4 Wild animals refuse to look directly into the Stargazer's eyes.
- 5 The Stargazer's shadow sometimes moves slightly on its own.
- 6 When touching the ground, feels brief pains that come from far away places.