# The Chromatic Chord

—

*Foundations*

*The Writers' Guide to the Decachord*

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joetjen.github.io/The-Decachord

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# Preface

Caeldon did not begin as a story. It began as a question about how a world would work if its deepest law were not matter but resonance: if everything that exists were, at bottom, a frequency, and what makes a thing itself were the way it keeps on sounding. The answer turned out to need ten currents running through everything, planes stacked behind the visible world like overtones behind a note, and powers that people would come to call gods. It needed peoples shaped by those currents and by one another, and a past long enough for mountains to be worn down and rebuilt while the peoples forgot and remembered who had lived there before them. The whole of it, the world and the work of making it, came to be called *the Decachord*: ten strings, sounding together.

For a long time Caeldon lived only in working pages. There are registries of species and civilizations, regions and sites, religions and dated events. There is a timeline that runs from the first stirring of the cosmos, some thirty-five billion years before the reckoning of years began, to a medieval present around 1,350 CR. And there are hundreds of pages that argued with one another until they agreed: on which people crossed which river first, and on who keeps a ford and who only thinks they do. Those pages are still the ground the world stands on. They were built to be consulted, cross-checked, and corrected, and they are good at it. They were never meant to be read from end to end.

This book is.

*The Chromatic Chord* retells the same world in a voice meant for reading. It explains the cosmos and the gods as a natural philosopher would explain them to a curious student. It tells the deep past as a history book tells it, with spans of thousands of years and the few hard dates that history gets to keep. Each era it walks through as a traveller meets it: the fields and fords, the halls and feuds, the ruins on the hills and what still walks in them, the smell of a forge at a river crossing, and the small habits that tell a stranger which side of a border they have woken up on. Along the way it lets the world speak for itself, in the sayings, songs, and books its people make, because a place is known as much by what it says about itself as by what is true of it.

Nothing in it is new. Every fact in these chapters has a home in the technical pages, and the book only gathers, orders, and tells. The voices that open each chapter, the almanacs and chroniclers and poets, are the one exception: they belong to this book, and they speak in it so that the world has a voice and not only a description. Where this book and the technical pages disagree, the pages are right, and this book will be corrected.

The book is one of a series, and the series is built to grow. The world it describes changes from era to era, and so the series is divided the same way. What does not change, the cosmos, the powers, the laws of magic, the peoples as kinds, and the deep past, is told once, in this book, *Foundations*. Those laws are fixed: magic and the cosmos follow rules that never bend and can be relied on, however strange or terrible the things they make possible. Each era then follows as a book of its own, with its own picture of the

world, its own peoples and powers, its own atlas, and its own account of how that present came to be. The first is *The Medieval Era*, an age of high fantasy: heroes and monsters, haunted ruins and the treasure in them, feuds fought with swords and magic that still draws a crowd. The eras after it grow more crafted as magic and making grow into one another, until the last of them reach the stars; the wonder stays, and so do the laws beneath it. The Industrial Era and the eras after it will join the series as books of their own as they are written, and the chapters already here will stay where they are. Beside them stands *A Bestiary of Caeldon*, for the beings of the world that are not peoples.

The title needs a word. A chord is notes sounded together. A *chromatic* chord reaches for the notes between the notes, the half-steps that a plain scale steps over, and the word is older than music: in Greek, *chroma* is colour. The technical pages give the world its notes: who lives where, since when, by whose sword or oath. This book is after the rest of it: how those notes sound together, the colour of the thing, and what lives in the intervals between one fact and the next. The Decachord is the world; *The Chromatic Chord* is the world heard in colour.

It is written for people who want to make something of their own in Caeldon: a novel or a short story, a campaign or a single evening's game, a set of rules, a map, a song. What it can give them is the ground to stand on and the feel of the place. The stories are theirs.

The world is larger than any one telling of it. What follows is a way in.

*Jan Oetjen*

# What This Book Is For

*The Chromatic Chord* is for people who want to make something in Caeldon. That may be a novel or a short story, a campaign or a one-evening game, a set of rules, a map, a song, or a single scene that needs a place to happen in. The book gives them enough of the world to begin, and enough of its feel that what they make sounds as though it belongs there.

It is not a history of everything that ever happened on the planet, and it is not an encyclopedia. It is closer to what a well-travelled friend would tell you before you set out: what the country is like, who lives there and how, what they believe and what they quarrel over, which roads are safe and which only look it, which ruins still hold gold and which hold something worse. A writer who has read the chapters for the part of the world they mean to use should be able to put a person on a road, at a ford, in a lord's hall or a ruin's cellar, and know what that person sees, eats, owes, fears, hunts, and prays to.

## Three Things It Gives

The first is **ground**. Every chapter tells, as plainly as its subject allows, what is true of the world: how the planes are stacked behind the visible one, what the powers are and are not, how magic draws its strength and what it costs, what each people is like as a kind, how the deep past laid down the present, and, era by era, who holds which river and by what right. Ground is what keeps a story from contradicting itself three chapters in. It is also what lets several people write in the same world without stepping on one another: two stories set at the same crossing will agree on who keeps the toll.

The second is **texture**. Facts alone make a setting; texture makes a place. So the book spends its words on the things a traveller notices and a chronicler leaves out: the smell of a forge at a river crossing, the way an oath is sworn at a toll-house, the wall of names in a zone-edge inn, the festival that opens the harvest, the greeting that tells a stranger whose country this is, the sound of a valley where the wind carries voices. Where the world has sayings, songs, and books of its own, the book quotes them, because people are known as much by what they say about themselves as by what is true of them.

The third is **trouble**. Stories begin where people disagree, where an oath and a loyalty point different ways, where a bridge is failing and both banks expect someone else to pay for it. They begin where something comes out of a ruin, where a raiding band is seen on the ridge, where a thin place opens in a hill pass and a village has to decide who goes in after the missing. Every chapter ends with the tensions of its subject: the quarrels, choices, and dangers that the world is carrying at that moment. They are stated as facts, not as plots. The book says that the bridge is failing and who blames whom; it does not say whether it falls.

## What It Leaves Open

A great deal is left open on purpose, and the gaps are part of the design.

The book names no heroes. The world has its gods, its lords, and its orders, and every land has heroes of song, but the people a story is about belong to whoever writes the story, and the book does not fill its pages with famous figures whose deeds a writer would then have to work around. Where a chapter needs a person, it gives a kind of person: a ferry family, a toll-clerk, a scribe who keeps a second copy somewhere else.

Nor does it settle its own quarrels. Every tension is left at the moment before it breaks. Whether the lord who takes the bridge-toll pays for its mending, whether the town keeps its oath to the hold, whether the zone is walled off or the village that lives by it is left to stay: those outcomes are a writer's to decide, and two writers may decide them differently.

The edges of the planet stay unmapped. The world described here is large, and it is not the whole of Caeldon. Beyond the regions the atlas covers lie seas and lands that no chapter describes, and they are left empty so that someone can fill them.

And most of life goes on behind closed doors. The book describes how a people lives, what a village year looks like, and what a household owes its lord; it does not describe every household. The inside of a particular family, its jokes and grudges and secrets, is the kind of thing only a story can know.

What the book does not leave open is the world's grain: how its powers behave, what its magic costs, how long its peoples live, which way its history ran. Those things are fixed so that what is open can be open safely. A story may break a bridge or wake a sleeping horror, but it should not need to break the laws of the cosmos to do it. The wonder is on the surface; underneath, everything holds.

## The Book and the Pages Behind It

Everything the book says comes from somewhere. Behind it stand the technical pages of the Decachord: the registries, the timeline, the region and site pages, and the rule pages that keep its peoples, places, and centuries consistent with one another. Those pages are where the world is worked out, argued over, and corrected. The book is where it is told. When a chapter states a fact, the fact has a home among those pages, and the chapter has only gathered it, ordered it, and given it a voice.

The book carries no game rules. There are no numbers for a spell or a sword in it, and no tables of chance. Anyone building a game on Caeldon brings or builds the rules; the book gives them a world to fit those rules to.

What it does carry, at the back, is reference matter of its own: a short chronology that places every age and era it mentions at a glance, a glossary with a sentence or two on each name and term the chapters use, and an index of where each is told.

The book is not the whole of the world, and it does not try to be. The website that publishes it, joetjen.github.io/The-Decachord/, also hosts a **Reference**, built from the same technical pages and arranged like the book, part by part, but going further: every god, plane, zone, school, people, civilization, region, site, settlement, and event has an entry with its key facts, a condensed account, and links to the chapters that tell it; every common spell of every school is listed with what it does; and a bestiary describes the animals, plants, and other beings of the world. The book is for reading and for getting a feel for a place; the Reference is for looking things up in the middle of writing, and for the detail the book leaves out. The website is also where the book is corrected, and any copy found elsewhere can be checked against the newest one there.

Read it, then, as a way in. Take what is useful, keep the grain, and make the rest your own.

# How to Read This Book

This book can be read from the first page to the last, and it is ordered so that doing so makes sense. Few readers will, and none needs to. It is built to be entered wherever a story needs it.

## The Books of the Series

*The Chromatic Chord* is a series of books of two main kinds, and a bestiary beside them.

**Foundations**, this book (Parts I to V), holds what does not change from one era to the next. Part I, *The Shape of the Cosmos*, describes the planes behind the visible world, the places where they press into it, the edge beyond which nothing is, and the world's own out-of-tune shadow, the Dissonance. Part II, *The Powers*, describes the ten impersonal forces whose currents run through everything, the powers people pray to, and what waits outside the ordered cosmos. Part III, *The Laws of Magic*, explains what magic draws on, what it costs, and how it is taught. Part IV, *The Peoples of Caeldon*, describes the peoples as kinds: their bodies, the shape of their lives, and the customs deep enough to survive every era. Part V, *The Deep Past*, tells the ages before any era of the series, the long threads that run through them, and the worlds that rose and fell before the present peoples built on their ruins.

The **eras** follow, each as a book of its own whose parts have the same shape. The first part of an era book shows the world in that era: who lives where, how a year runs, how people travel and what they meet at a border. The second describes the era's peoples and powers: its civilizations, its faiths in practice, and magic as a village meets it. The third, and sometimes a fourth, is the era's atlas, region by region. The last tells how the era's present was made, and gathers the questions it leaves open. A reader who knows one era's book will find the next one laid out the same way.

The first era book is *The Medieval Era*, around 1,350 CR. Its atlas has two parts, because its world has two halves: the forests, mountains, deeps, and river basins of the cradle-web, and the folds, scarps, coasts, and waters of the far side, joined by a single crossing. Later eras will join the series as books of their own, and the chapters already here will stay where they are. *A Bestiary of Caeldon* stands beside them, with the animals, plants, and other beings of the world. At the back of each book, a short chronology places the ages and eras its chapters mention on one line of time (this book carries the whole of it), a glossary explains in a sentence or two each name and term a reader may need to look up, and an index shows where each is told.

## References to Other Books

A reference into another book of the series names the chapter or section it points to and adds, in brackets, that book's short form and the page there: (FND 112). The short forms are:

**FND** *Foundations*
**MED** *The Medieval Era*
**BST** *A Bestiary of Caeldon*

## Where to Start

Start where your story is.

A writer setting a tale in a particular region can open that region's atlas chapter first and read outward from it: to the chapter on the region's people, to the faith its villages keep, to the deep past that left the ruins on its hills. A writer whose story turns on a god, a spell, or a haunted valley can begin in Foundations and come forward to the era later. A writer who wants the whole of the present at once can read the first part of the era's book, which is written as an overview, and then follow whatever catches.

Every chapter can be read alone, in a sitting. Each opens by saying what it is about, gives its essentials early, and tells its subject fully enough to be used without the others. Where a subject has its proper home elsewhere, a chapter gives as much as it needs and points onward rather than telling the same thing twice; the book tries to say each thing once, in the chapter where it belongs. The first time a chapter names a place, a people, an order, or an idea that matters to it, the name is set in bold, so a reader skimming for the thing they need can find it.

## The Voices

The voice of a chapter follows its subject. The cosmos and magic are explained as a natural philosopher would explain them, patiently and by their rules, because those rules are fixed and a story can lean its whole weight on them. The peoples are described as a traveller with an eye for customs describes them. The deep past is told as a history is told, in long spans and the few hard dates history keeps. The atlas reads like a guide and a gazetteer at once: the land first, then how people live on it, who holds power, and what they believe.

Around that voice, the world speaks for itself. Every chapter opens with an **epigraph**, and many quote further words inside the chapter, set apart from the text: a line from an almanac, a verse of a carters' song, an entry from a toll-roll, a passage from a treatise. Each of these comes from a **named in-world source**: a book, a chronicle, a song collection, a collection of sayings, given the name and the date it has in the world. These sources belong to this edition. They are voices, not records; they are not part of the world's canon, and nothing in the setting depends on them. A source speaks as its people would speak, with their pride and their blind spots, and an almanac that calls a river cruel is telling you about the people who wrote it as much as about the river. The facts around these voices are not invented: those come from the world's own pages.

Each era also has one **traveller**, whose road-book carries every traveller passage in that era's atlas. For the Medieval Era it is **Orrin Talloway**, a Human toll-clerk of the Serathic League in the Lower Serath, who rode the roads of the cradle-web, crossed to the far side and back at the Glassbelt, and wrote both halves down around 1,350 CR in *A Road-Book of Both Halves*. Orrin writes with a clerk's eye: for tolls and tallies, for who holds a road and what they take from it, for the small habits that tell a stranger where one lord's word ends and the next begins, and for the tales told at every inn about what waits off the

road. The road-book is arranged by region, as any road-book is, so each atlas chapter carries the passages for its own country, set apart in italic within the section of the place they cross. They can be read on their own, as a journey, or as part of the chapter around them.

In all of these voices, magic is shown rather than named. A carter's song or a traveller's road-book describes a working as an onlooker sees it: a cold blue light in a field, a word that stops a fall, a lie that turns the water dark. The names of spells and schools appear where people in the world would use them: in the explaining voice of the chapters, and in the mouths of scholars, teachers, and records.

## Dates

Dates are counted in two directions from one fixed epoch. Years **BR**, Before Reckoning, count backwards from it into the deep past, so that 500 BR lies five hundred years before the epoch and 5,000 BR far earlier still. Years **CR**, Common Reckoning, count forward from it, so that 120 CR lies a hundred and twenty years after it. The Medieval Era stands at around 1,350 CR.

A date marked **c.**, for *circa*, is an estimate, and nearly every date before the eras of this series carries one. The deep past is dated mostly in **spans**, plain windows of time such as c. 26,000-c. 16,000 BR, rather than in years anyone wrote down. A span says when something happened and how loosely that is known; it does not mean that the thing began or ended cleanly at either edge. Spans overlap where history did, and two peoples may live through the same thousand years quite differently.

The longest divisions of history are the **ages**, nine of them, which show where any event belongs and what else was happening at the same time. They are told in Part V. An **era**, such as the Medieval Era, is a stretch of history that the series describes in full, in a book of its own. Ages are how the world's history is divided; eras are where the series stops and looks around.

## At a Glance

Near the opening of most chapters stands a box headed **At a Glance**. It holds the chapter's essentials, plainly and in a few lines: what the subject is, where it lies, who lives there or holds it, and when. It is meant for the moment in the middle of writing when one fact is needed quickly. The box summarizes; the chapter explains, and the reasons behind each line of the box are in the sections that follow it.

## Tensions

Each chapter closes with **Tensions**: the feuds, choices, dangers, and unsettled questions of its subject, the trouble a writer can pick up and carry into a story. They are written as facts of the world, the way a well-informed local would describe them, and not as advice. None of them has a settled outcome, and none is waiting for a particular kind of hero. A tension says that a bridge is failing and who blames whom. What happens next is not the book's to say. The last chapter of each era gathers that era's tensions by theme, for writers who want to see the whole field of trouble at once.

PART I

# The Shape of the Cosmos

*The planes behind the world: the Material Plane, the Anchors and the Harmonics, the Resonant Zones where planes press together, the Veil, the Outside, and the Dissonance, the world's own shadow held in the Veil.*

CHAPTER 1

# The Planes

*Five that lack and five that drown,*
*ten that sing behind the sound,*
*one that keeps the middle true:*
*there we stand on common ground.*

— a scribes' copybook of the Confluence Marches, *The March-Town Primer*

Begin with a bubble. Picture it hanging in a dark that is not darkness, because darkness is a thing and what lies outside is nothing at all. Inside the bubble everything that exists is ordered, and the order has layers. At its heart lies a world of weight and weather, where stone is heavy, water runs downhill, and a person can choose to be kind or cruel. Around that world, like rooms leading off a hall, lie the planes where one condition of life has failed or overflowed: worlds without safety, without warmth, without meaning, and worlds drowning in growth, order, or truth. And behind every one of them, finer than matter, sound the ten Harmonics, the realms of pure concept from which fire takes its heat and speech its power to bind. The cosmos was never made. It has always existed in some state, and one thing more is true of it: existence here is a matter of frequency and interaction before it is a matter of place. Where a thing is matters less than what it resonates with.

This chapter tells the truth of the cosmos, and that truth is hidden. Nobody in the world knows the shape set out here for certain. The few who come nearest, in the highest circles of scholarship, argue among themselves. What the peoples of Caeldon actually know and believe is told at the end, in What People Know.

## A Bubble of Order

The cosmos has three tiers. The **Anchors** are the planes where matter is dense, physics holds steady, and life can live. They are permanent, self-sustaining worlds with their own ecologies and inhabitants, and everything in them has weight, mass, and bulk; cause follows cause in them, though each has its local habits. The **Harmonics** are not made of matter at all. Each is made of the concept it carries, and a visit to one is less like visiting a country than like stepping inside an idea.

**AT A GLANCE**

| | |
|---|---|
| **The tiers** | The Anchors (stable, physical worlds), the Harmonics (realms of pure concept), and the Resonant Zones where the two meet. |
| **The centre** | The Material Plane, the Equilibrium: hub of the Veil and the only plane where free will truly works. |
| **Planes of lack** | The Scourge, the Ashen Wastes, the Parched, the Frost-Bound, and the Silence. |
| **Planes of excess** | The Verdant Expanse, the Gilded Cage, the Radiance, the Weave, and the Apex. |
| **The Harmonics** | Four elemental and six abstract, each a stabilized pattern of one Prime's current. |
| **Their age** | The extreme planes split away at the Inward Sundering, c. 33,600,000,000 BR; the Material Plane settled at the First Equilibrium, c. 12,000,000 BR. |

The **Resonant Zones** are the places where a Harmonic presses through into an Anchor and overwrites its law for a while, an hour or an age; they have a chapter of their own, The Resonant Zones. Everything is connected by the **Veil**, the fluid space between places, and everything is enclosed by the **Boundary**, beyond which lies the Nothing. Both are told in The Veil and the Outside.

The principle that binds the tiers together is called the **Resonance Principle**. Much of what mortals think of as ordinary is in truth a resonance: a Harmonic touching an Anchor. Dreams come when the Dreaming Veil resonates with the Material Plane. Lightning comes when the Crucible resonates with the air. A haunting is the Whispering Trace resonating through a place. None of this is magic in the sense a village means by the word. It is how the world works when nobody is working anything at all.

A handful of laws frame everything else, and most of them can be stated in a sentence. The universe always existed; it was not created. Phenomena such as dreams, lightning, and hauntings are resonances. The nature of a plane, whether it lacks or overflows, shapes the behaviour and the morals of those who live in it. The Boundary must hold, for if it fails the cosmos is erased. And only the Material Plane possesses true free will, because every other plane is shaped by the pressure of its own extreme.

The last two of those laws are the ones a writer will feel most. The first means that the cosmos is finite and has an edge, and that the edge is held. The second means that the world where stories happen is the one world where the people in them can truly choose.

## How the Layers Came to Be

The layering is old, and it was not designed. It was the outcome of a strain.

The ten Primes, the impersonal forces whose interplay is the cosmos, woke one after another out of its original potential; how and in what order is told in The Ten Primes. The Harmonics formed early, as long-stabilizing mediations that eased the strain between the Primes, and only later became the foundations on which the physical law of the Anchors is built. The field they shaped was at first one sphere, a **proto-anchor field**: not a set of separate worlds but one continuous expanse of gradients, where absence lay beside excess, rigidity beside flow, and every tendency bled into its neighbours.

Through the long phase called the **Great Polarization**, that sphere was sharpened from many directions at once. The elemental Harmonics began the sorting: structure against flow, transformation against stasis, motion against fixity. The abstract Harmonics, sharpening later, deepened it: revelation against concealment, law against dissolution, perfected completion against open incom-

pletion, memory against erasure. The cosmos learned its own incompatible possibilities too fully to keep holding them together. By the late polarization, after the last Prime had woken around 34,700,000,000 BR, the sphere was still connected, but its connectedness had become the problem. Too many conditions that could not live side by side were being made to.

The **Unformed**, the forces that press towards the undoing of form itself, did not cause the crisis, but they gave it its last push. At the **Inward Sundering**, around 33,600,000,000 BR, the overstrained sphere failed, and it failed inward. It did not burst into neat fragments. The most polarized conditions separated into distinct planes, the Deficit and Surplus Planes, while a balanced residual core remained at the centre. The reorganizing force released in that moment helped the Primes push the Unformed back far enough for reality to endure in its altered form. The cosmos survived its first catastrophe not by preserving what it had been, but by becoming something else.

The new extremes settled quickly, because their identities were narrow: a plane that is only hunger, or only order, has little to reconcile. The core settled with great slowness, because it had to remain mixed without becoming incoherent. Through the **Long Settlement of the Balanced Core**, from the Sundering to around 12,000,000 BR, pockets of stability formed in it, failed, and formed again. Space became dependable only by degrees. Then, at the **First Equilibrium**, around 12,000,000 BR, reciprocal balance became durable enough that no single Harmonic pressure could seize the whole core for long, spatial law held everywhere and not just in pockets, and cause and persistence held at large scale without constant correction. The core had become a true Material Plane, and only then could planets, seas, and skies condense in it. Caeldon came long after.

This is the deepest reason for the shape of everything else. The Material Plane is not simply the middle of the cosmos. It is a balance that was won, over a span of time so long that it dwarfs every history in this book, and it is held by tension made reciprocal rather than by tension removed.

## The Equilibrium

The **Material Plane** is the central Anchor, also called **the Equilibrium**. Its gift is balance. Its resources are limited but renewable: there is enough food, water, and fuel to sustain life, but not so much that growth runs out of control. Danger exists but is not everywhere; predators, storms, and wars come, and so do years of peace. Truth can be found but is not forced on anyone; secrets can be kept and lies uncovered. Connection is possible and solitude is allowed.

Its landscapes contain every kind found on the other Anchors, but moderated. Its forests are lush and green without the suffocation of the Verdant Expanse. Its mountains are hard and high without the frozen stillness of the Frost-Bound. Its deserts are harsh without being empty of all life, its cities ordered without being caged, its ruins old and strange without being meaningless. Its sounds mix wind and water and animals with speech and work, and its silences are not oppressive. Its smells are earth and rain, food and decay. Its light plays naturally across a full range of colour, and its shadows fall where shadows ought to.

Its physics are the baseline against which every other plane is measured. Energy is conserved: it cannot be made from nothing, only moved or changed, and magic obeys the same law, drawing on outside sources or spending what a body holds. Time runs forward at a steady rate; a Resonant Zone may slow it or loop it locally, but the plane's own flow is constant. Cause follows cause reliably, though not always in proportion. And things drift towards disorder unless life and labour hold them back. Nothing here stays as it is. Seasons turn, landscapes shift, peoples rise and fall, and that ceaseless change comes from the Shifting Path, the Harmonic of possibility, which keeps any state from becoming permanent.

The Material Plane is also, uniquely, resistant to extreme resonance. Fire worked here behaves as fire; it does not freeze, as it can on the Frost-Bound, or drain away, as on the Ashen Wastes. Words bind here, but not with the absolute force they have in the Gilded Cage, nor do they vanish as they do in the Silence. A mage can rely on a working on the Material Plane in a way no mage can rely on it anywhere else.

### *The Plane Where Choice Is Real*

That balance is why free will lives here and nowhere else. On the planes of lack, behaviour is dictated by survival; on the planes of excess, by saturation. Only on the Material Plane can a being choose between cruelty and kindness, generosity and greed, honesty and deceit, without the world making the choice first. It is the one world where the question "what will they do?" has no answer until they do it.

Mortals are the **observers** through whom the interplay of the Primes takes clear shape. They choose whom to worship, what to believe, and how to shape the world, and an alignment freely chosen is a deeper and steadier resonance than the instinctual resonance of the extreme planes, where a being resonates with its plane's condition because it cannot do otherwise. The Material Plane does not create the Primes and is not their source. It is the mirror in which their interplay finds its most balanced expression, and the fulcrum on which the cosmos rests: it holds the tension between the planes of lack and the planes of excess and keeps either from pulling everything further towards its own extreme. Losing it now would tip the universe towards entropy on one side or frozen perfection on the other. It is, in the old phrase, the only place where life can truly live.

Its peoples show what that freedom does with a world. Rule is held by whoever is strong enough to hold it, from clan and hold elders to lords, kings, temple households, and the ruling houses of cities, and it rests on custom, oath, kinship, and force. Livelihoods rest on trade, farming, making, and what can be dug or taken. Faiths mix many gods, city cults, philosophies, and narrower devotions. And the plane sustains a broader diversity of durable mortal bodies and ways of life than any other, because its conditions are balanced enough that no single answer to them is forced on every people.

### *The Hub and the Thin Places*

The Material Plane is the hub of the Veil. Nearly every journey between two other Anchors passes through it; direct travel between two of the extreme planes is rare and dangerous, and needs a powerful artefact attuned to both, a natural thin spot where their borders touch, or the help of a being native to the Veil. So beings of every tier can be found on Material soil. It is a crossroads for travellers from other planes, a sanctuary for exiles fleeing the extremes for its balance, and a battleground where rival powers from different tiers carry their quarrels onto ground that belongs to none of them.

The Veil is thinnest here, and thinnest of all where a place already leans towards another plane. Battlefields and places of great violence lean towards the Scourge. Dead ground, abandoned mines, and places of cold decay lean towards the Ashen Wastes. Deserts, drought-struck land, and dried-up wells lean towards the Parched. Glaciers, winter peaks, and deep caves lean towards the Frost-Bound. Abandoned libraries, ruins, and places of deep meditation lean towards the Silence. On the other side, ancient forests and overgrown ruins lean towards the Verdant Expanse; judgement halls, counting-houses, strongrooms, and rigidly ordered towns towards the Gilded Cage; oracle sites, mirrors, and places of judgement towards the Radiance; temples, gathering places, and the rites where a community comes together, weddings and funerals above all, towards the Weave; and perfect gardens and places of absolute clarity towards the Apex.

Sometimes the leaning shows. **Planar bleed** is the name for what comes through: a sudden frost in high summer, a burst of fire nobody lit, a creature that belongs to no country of this world. The beasts and wanderers that come through are the monsters of half the songs on Caeldon. To the people who live on the hub, it means that the strange comes to them: a thing from the Scourge loose in a hill pass, a cold blue fire in an old mine, a shrine path where the fog does not lift and travellers walk in and come out a year later. Most never see one; every region has a tale of someone who did. Shrines and settlements grow up beside thin spots all the same, what little traffic there is with other planes passes through them, and they live with the bleed as river towns live with floods. Long living beside such a place has its own cost. Prolonged exposure to one Harmonic or one extreme plane, near a zone of the Crucible or a thin spot to the Scourge, can warp both the land and the minds of those who stay: this is **the pull of the extremes**. And though magic is reliable on the Material Plane, heavy use of it can draw attention from other planes or unsettle the Resonant Zones nearby. The sensible traveller's rule, as the schools put it, is to respect the balance, take nothing to the point of exhaustion, and be wary of any place that feels wrong, or too perfect.

## The Planes of Lack

The five **Deficit Planes** are worlds shaped by absence. Each is stable and physically real, but in each one vital condition is missing, and missing enough to reshape every ecology, custom, and habit of survival in it. The shortage is not weather. It is the plane's law, a permanent bottleneck around which everything has grown.

Material Plane cultures often call them hells, and the name is a mistake. Their peoples are not evil. They are adapted to scarcity that never ends, and they tend to share the same hard habits: firm limits on trust, careful use of every resource, survival worked into ritual, and morals shaped by necessity rather than plenty. Their communities survive by pushing their costs outward, through conquest, extraction, exclusion, or strict rationing, and compassion exists among them, but usually as a luxury. Small mistakes kill quickly on these planes, so they reward reliability over experiment, and the short term over the long. The further a traveller goes from the Material balance, the less forgiving recovery becomes. What comes through from them is what Material Plane peoples remember: the starved hunters loosed from a battlefield thin place, the cold things that creep out of abandoned mines, the thirst that walks out of a dried-up well.

The five lie on a gradient of deprivation, and the schools rank them by the kind of harm they do. The Scourge is the most active: violence is constant there, but at least there is motion and struggle. The Ashen Wastes are the most depleted, a world in which energy itself is dying. The Parched is the most visceral, its thirst immediate and overwhelming. The Frost-Bound is the most still, a cold that preserves but forbids all growth. The Silence is the most existential, because it attacks not the body but the mind and the self. Where two of them meet, the deprivations stack, and their borders are harsh: between the Scourge and the Parched a violent badland of drought where predators from both planes raid for what little there is; between the Ashen Wastes and the Frost-Bound a deep gradient where heat and every recoverable spark collapse together; between the Frost-Bound and the Silence an extreme stillness where a body may go on surviving while the mind inside it stops.

### *The Scourge*

The **Scourge** is the plane without safety. Every moment there is a possible death, and every meeting a calculation of threat against reward. Its colours are crimson, rust, charcoal, and the bruised purple of a sky choked with smoke; its light is either blinding or absent, never soft. Its

mountains are sharp as knives, its valleys full of the wreckage of old wars, its forests twisted thickets of thorn, its rivers red with silt and blood. It is never quiet. Steel clashes, beasts roar, the wind howls through broken walls, and a silence there is usually a trap.

Its physics serve its pressure. Force is amplified, so that a blow lands harder and a fall breaks more bones. Buildings, bridges, and walls are unstable and come down under strain, so that most dwellings are temporary or carried. Violence draws predators, natural and otherwise, and peaceful gatherings are all but impossible, as if the air itself incited aggression. Gear wears out with frightening speed: metal rusts in days, leather cracks in hours, wood splinters.

Its people, the **Scourge-Born**, are muscular and scarred, thick-skinned, with eyes often of two colours or faintly glowing, made for catching movement in chaos. They heal fast and feel little pain, because pain is a distraction they cannot afford. Their societies are built on strength: a leader is whoever can defeat every challenger, alliances last as long as they profit both sides, and betrayal is expected rather than resented. To them, killing a wounded enemy is wisdom, not cruelty. Their beasts are made for the same world: pack-hunting **Blood-Hounds**, armoured **Iron-Claws** whose jaws crush stone, and **Murk-Fangs** that strike unseen from darkness. On the Scourge a single undamaged sword can buy a kingdom, and the rare pockets of safety are held by whichever warlord can hold them. Those who stay too long risk the **Blood-Fury**, a rage that turns them on friend and foe alike until they drop.

It is reached from the Material Plane through what travellers call **War-Gates**: battlefields where the Veil has worn thin, and the ruins of great conflicts. Crossing its Veil is like passing through a storm of blades, and what the crossing takes from the mind is the knowledge of whom to trust. Mortals who follow the fire of Ignis or the restless motion of Zephyr, the two currents that drive the plane, call it a necessary crucible: in their telling it is the engine of change, the pressure without which life would stagnate. Sellsword companies tell it otherwise. They speak of a field where the fighting never quite ended and the dead were replaced each dawn by something hungrier, and of sellswords who crossed for the arms of ancient wars and came home berserk. The songs remember those who came back whole, because there are so few of them.

### *The Ashen Wastes*

The **Ashen Wastes** are the plane without energy. Energy there is not merely scarce; it is actively dying. The colours are grey, muted brown, and dull black, and nowhere is there anything bright. The sky is a perpetual dusk under a dim sun that gives no warmth, shadows seem to swallow light, the plains are grey ash and cracked earth, the mountains have worn down to skeletons, and the rivers creep with something thick as sludge. Sound loses its strength so fast that a scream arrives as a whisper and thunder as a dull thud. Wood snaps like dry bone and metal grows brittle enough to shatter. The air smells of old dust and burnt wood, and of something travellers can only call nothing.

Heat drains away within moments of being made, whether from a fire, a body, or friction, and keeping warm is constant, exhausting work. A thrown stone slows almost as soon as it leaves the hand. Digestion and burning crawl or fail, so that food gives little strength and fuel burns poorly. Time feels slower there, and yet bodies age faster, worn down by the labour of simply going on.

Its people, the **Ash-Walkers**, are tall and emaciated, with grey skin like cracked porcelain and large dark eyes made for the gloom. They move slowly to save strength and fall into torpor for days instead of sleeping. They are preservationists before they are anything else. Any source of warmth, a warm stone, a single spark, is hoarded with religious fervour, and waste is the gravest sin

they know. They are not aggressive by nature, but they will kill at once for heat or fuel, and they look on the Material Plane as a wasteful paradise where energy is squandered without a thought. **Cold-Stalkers**, wolf-like hunters that track the slightest difference in warmth, and insect-like **Dust-Striders** that strain energy out of the air and leave a colder trail behind them, are its common beasts. A **hot stone** or a **warm core** can be traded there for years of survival, and those who stay too long suffer **the Freeze**, cooling until they stand as statues of ice and ash. Travellers carry bells or drums only to hear something.

Its **Cold Gates** on the Material Plane are volcanic vents gone cold and deep caves. Its Veil is thick and sluggish, like wading through cold syrup, and travellers often forget why they came. The Wastes are the sink of the universe: when energy is spent on the Material Plane, the waste heat dissipates, and in the long cycle of the cosmos it drains here, along the pull of Umbra and Terra, the two currents that run strongest in the plane. Without that sink the universe would overheat. It is a necessary place, and a place of sorrow. Most who go there come for the **cold-forged** objects it yields, or to hide from those who would burn them, and few stay. On Caeldon its tales come from abandoned mines and dead ground where the cold sets in out of season: the miners found standing grey and frozen at the face, the lamp that went out and would not relight. Delvers who bring back cold-forged blades are paid well and asked few questions.

### *The Parched*

The **Parched** is the plane without sustenance, a world where water, food, and anything that nourishes are absent, and where every living thing is driven by a single instinct: find something to consume before something consumes you. Its colours are burnt ochre, pale sand, cracked clay, and bleached bone. Its sky is a hazy yellow thick with dust that never settles, and its sun a bloated pale disc that hangs unmoving, giving light without growth. Deserts and cracked mud flats run to every horizon, cut by canyons carved by rivers that no longer exist, and the skeletons of enormous creatures lie picked clean. There is no rain, no river, no lake; what moisture there is lies deep in the rock. The wind sounds like sand rasped over stone, and nothing anywhere sounds like water.

Liquid flies from the world there. A bowl of water boils away in minutes and spilled blood dries to powder in moments. The ground drinks with unnatural thirst, so that a spilled cup is gone before it can pool, and even sealed vessels slowly lose what they hold. A living body burns through its own fat and muscle at a frightening rate. The dry air builds charge until sandstorms throw lightning.

Its people, the **Dust-Eaters**, are gaunt and leathery, sharp-featured, with small dark eyes and wide, toothed mouths. Glands in their throats draw trace moisture out of rock, sand, and air, and they can digest almost anything once alive, bone and dried sinew included. To them every exchange is a negotiation over resources and trust is a luxury; strangers are competitors or prey, they will trade when it pays and kill for a waterskin when it pays better, and charity is a concept they do not have. **Dust-Wyrms** swim through loose sand, sensing footfalls above them; swarms of **Bleed-Beetles** drain moisture from anything living; **Bone-Walkers** defend a carcass to the death. A flask of clean water buys loyalty, weapons, or lives. The plane is rich in rare salts and crystals prized for alchemy and enchantment, and mirages lead travellers in circles until they fall. Those who stay too long fall prey to the **Thirst-Madness**, until they would drink a companion's blood.

Its **Dry Gates** are abandoned wells that go down too far and desert oases that are thin spots in disguise. Its Veil is dry and abrasive, like being buried alive in sand, and memories dry out on the crossing and crumble. It is the hunger of the uni-

verse, the plain truth that existence requires consumption. Here Aqua's current runs dry and Umbra's endings close in. Prospectors come for its minerals, hunters for its beasts, and the desperate for the **Dry Wells**, ruins said to hold things from before the scarcity, and fewer leave than come. Desert peoples know it as the land behind the dry well: the caravan that camped by a dead spring and was gone by morning, its camels found drained, and the delvers who went looking for the Dry Wells and came back mad with thirst or not at all. The minerals they do bring out sell for their weight in gold.

### *The Frost-Bound*

The **Frost-Bound** is the plane without warmth, and it differs from the Ashen Wastes as stillness differs from decay. The Wastes are a world running down; the Frost-Bound is a world held. Its cold is not a temperature but a force that resists change, preserving everything it touches, turning the living to statues of ice and trapping memories in crystal. Its colours are stark white, deep blue, and translucent grey under a pale, frozen azure sky full of snow that never melts. It has no sun, only a faint, distant glow that lights without warming. Glaciers, ice spires, and frozen seas run on forever, and its waterfalls hang frozen mid-fall. Breath turns to ice fog at once and skin freezes to metal in moments. Sound carries faster and clearer in that air, but brittle, so that a snapped twig rings out like a crack of a whip and the wind howls with a metallic edge. It smells clean, sharp, and sterile, and of nothing that ever grew or rotted.

Heat there does not escape; it is trapped. A fire lit on the Frost-Bound burns with a blue flame that eats the air but throws no warmth, its heat locked inside it. Every material grows brittle, so that a blow shatters instead of denting, and a sword stroke may break the blade. The cold air thickens until running feels like wading. And nothing decays: bodies, wounds, and anything once written down are kept exactly as they were.

Its people, the **Frost-Born**, are tall and slender, with translucent skin showing blue veins and eyes of solid white or silver. They make warmth slowly, can go weeks without food in a hibernating sleep, and dress in the hides of ice-beasts. They are solitary and stoic by conviction: they believe that closeness leads to weakness and to the loss of heat, so they speak rarely, since speech spends warmth, and prize endurance, silence, and the keeping of the self. They are not aggressive unless provoked, but they look on strangers as heat thieves, and they are master hunters of the ice. Pack-hunting **Frost-Wolves**, blind **Glacier-Drakes** that burrow through the ice and sense heat, and crystalline **Ice-Shards** that wake when disturbed and attack anything warm share the plane with them. Its most valuable things are heat sources and insulation, and objects from the Material Plane that the cold has caught and kept perfectly. Its worst danger is the same Freeze that waits in the Wastes, with a cruelty of its own: those it takes stand as statues of ice, still aware within.

Its **Ice Gates** are glaciers that melt open into the Veil and frozen lakes. Its Veil is crystalline and sharp, like walking through a field of glass, and what the crossing does to memory is not to erase it but to freeze it in place where it cannot be reached. The Frost-Bound is the cold store of the universe. Umbra's trace and Terra's permanence shape it, and it freezes in place whatever its cold catches, memories, histories, and Echoes alike: kept, but locked away, waiting to be thawed. That keeping is partial and local; the deep retention of what is remembered belongs to the Eternal Record. Travellers go to the Frost-Bound to recover lost memories, to lay up dangerous objects where nothing will ever change them, and to seek what they call the **Eternal Sleep**. Few return unchanged. Glacier and winter-peak peoples tell of travellers who walked into a white cave and

were found a lifetime later, unaged and frozen with their eyes open, and of ice-statues in the high passes that some say are still awake. Shrine-keepers there will not light a fire near a thin place.

### *The Silence*

The **Silence** is the plane without meaning, and the cruellest of the five, because what it takes is not warmth or water but the self. Where meaning fails, something plainer fails first, and which thing depends on where the traveller stands: sound at one edge of the plane, speech at another, memory or motion at others. These are faces of the one absence, not separate absences.

Colours drain from things while one watches, leaving them faded grey and washed-out white. The light comes from no direction and casts no shadows. Flat plains of smooth, featureless stone run on without mountains, trees, or rivers, and where there are structures they are geometric shapes that serve no purpose and bear no names. The air is still and heavy, as though holding its breath, and the quiet is not the quiet of a library but the absence of sound itself, a pressure on the ears. Touch gives no texture and no temperature. Food has no taste. Thoughts slide away when one tries to hold them, and memories fade within minutes of being made.

Its law is decay of meaning. Spoken words are only noise and written ones fade from the page, so that nothing can be shared. An act done without a clear and present purpose loses its effect: a sword stroke may fail to cut if the mind behind it is not fixed on what the cut means, and a rock may not move for a push made without enough intent. Travellers forget why they came, who they are, and at last their own names within hours.

Its natives, the **Hollows**, are pale and gaunt, with blank faces and milky eyes, moving in jerks when anything moves them at all. They do not speak, eat, or truly sleep. They have no society, no rank, and no shared purpose; each is an island of awareness slowly dissolving, and they neither attack unless provoked nor defend themselves. Beside them drift the **Unspoken**, beings that have lost their names: **Fragment-Speakers**, former travellers who repeat scraps of conversations they no longer understand; **Void-Stalkers** that feed on whatever meaning is left in a traveller's mind; and the **Wordless**, which have no form at all, only a presence that drains the will to exist. A Hollow's emptiness is contagious, and the plane's slow process of erasure is called **the Fade**: memories go, then personality, then the will to live, until the traveller is a Hollow too.

What is valuable there is whatever holds the self together: a keepsake, a remembered saying, a ritual repeated, a rare moment of clarity, and simple tools that work without anyone meaning them to. Visitors are told to write their names and purposes down often, and to say them over to themselves. The **Quiet Gates** are libraries where nobody reads any more, places of abandonment, and places of deep meditation. Its Veil is a white noise that feels like being erased, and the crossing can take the memory of ever having left home. The Silence is the graveyard of meaning: when a story ends, a name is lost, or a memory fades, whatever of it is not held in the Eternal Record may drift here and come apart. Verba's meaning unravels in it and Umbra's endings settle. Those who go there seek lost memories, an escape from the world's noise, or what they call the **Final Quiet**, and the few who return rarely remember why they went. Its tales on Caeldon come from abandoned libraries and dead ruins: the scholar found sitting at a blank page with nothing behind his eyes, the hermit who went seeking the Final Quiet and was found by kin he could no longer know. Ruin-delvers fear a ruin where no echo answers.

## The Planes of Too Much

The five **Surplus Planes** are worlds shaped by excess. Each is stable and physical, but one vital condition saturates it so completely that agency,

privacy, and variety come under pressure. Their residents cannot opt out of the plane's condition. They manage it.

Material Plane cultures call them heavens, and that name is as wrong as the other. Their peoples are not good; they are adapted to overflow, and their virtues are paid for in individuality, freedom, or growth. Surplus cultures gain stability by reducing difference, and the cost is usually ambiguity, dissent, or the self. They put the many before the one, follow rules and rites gladly and to the letter, fear anything new or sudden, and build their morals around stillness and a life where nothing is hidden. Because their worlds already run near the limit of what they can express, change is expensive there, and tends to come by sudden release of pressure rather than by gradual reform.

They too lie on a gradient. The Verdant Expanse is the most vital: life overflows, and the individual is consumed. The Gilded Cage is the most structured: safety is guaranteed, and freedom forfeit. The Radiance is the most revealing: truth is absolute, and privacy impossible. The Weave is the most connected: empathy is perfect, and the self dissolves. The Apex is the most complete: perfection is reached, and nothing can ever change again. Their borders blend rather than grind. Where the Verdant Expanse meets the Weave, the network of life and the network of minds merge into a single pulsing organism. Between the Gilded Cage and the Apex, order imposed from outside becomes perfection that needs no imposing. Where the Radiance meets the Weave, full exposure merges with shared feeling until no private interior is left. Such borders, travellers say, feel like paradise on arrival and like a prison after a while. The danger the Surplus Planes pose to Caeldon is gentler than the hells' and worse: the traveller who came home from a heaven and pined to death for it, the garden that crept out of a thin place and swallowed a village whole.

### *The Verdant Expanse*

The **Verdant Expanse** is the plane where life reproduces faster than anything can contain it. Nothing there is still; everything grows, spreads, consumes, and merges, and nothing knows the word enough. A seed can become a forest in an hour. Its colours are saturated greens and yellows, deep purples and vivid pinks so intense they seem to pulse, and the only brown is rich living soil. The light comes dappled and shifting through canopy that grows over the sun. Trees twist into spirals, roots form bridges, flowers bloom and wither in moments, and moss swallows the sound of a footstep. Its rivers are thick with growth and bright with glowing plankton. The air is humid and heavy with pollen and spores, and smells of rotting fruit, nectar, and wet earth so strongly it can turn the stomach. Insects buzz, birds scream, leaves rustle, sap oozes, and the chorus never stops. Even thought feels crowded there, hummed over by the sheer volume of life.

Everything living runs fast. A wound heals in moments and a meal is gone in minutes, and hunger and exhaustion come as quickly. Space itself is fluid: a short path stretches as vines grow across it, and a room widens as its walls sprout. The dead are composted within hours, and even metal and stone are slowly overgrown and eaten by lichen and fungus. Plants and animals are loosely linked through a root-network, so that harm to one part of the land is felt by the whole.

Its people, the **Verdant**, are tall and supple, with skin like bark, leaves, or moss and hair of vine and flower. They draw strength from sunlight and soil, rest by blooming rather than sleeping, and regrow a lost limb in hours. To them the self is a passing state, a node in a greater network; decisions are made together, and possession means nothing, because everything belongs to the Expanse. They are gentle and overwhelming. A Verdant will embrace a stranger until the stranger is buried in vines, and they cannot understand privacy or personal space; outsiders seem to them

isolated and starving. Some of the plane's creatures are its own guardians, **Tree-Men** rooted into forests, their arms become branches; others are its hunters, **Flower-Stalkers** that lure prey by mimicking blossoms, and **Spore-Clouds** that take hold of a host and make it spread seed.

The Expanse can cure almost any injury or illness, its fruit and nectar are everywhere and rich, and its living wood is stronger than steel. Its dangers are the same abundance: growth that can bury a traveller in minutes, carnivorous plants that count visitors as manure, and a slow merging with the network until a traveller forgets their own name. Visitors are told to move fast, touch nothing, and cut any root they feel closing on them, and not to bring food, because it will sprout. Its **Seed-Gates** are ancient forests, overgrown ruins, and places of sudden growth; its Veil is a tangle of roots pulling a traveller in a thousand directions, and the past there is not erased but overgrown. It is the engine of creation, where Aqua's lifeforce and Ignis's energy pour through at full strength: without it the universe would be a sterile rock, and unbalanced it would grow over the whole cosmos. Herbalists come for its plants and the dying for its healing. Hardly anyone comes back wholly themselves, and many carry a piece of the Expanse growing inside them. Forest peoples tell of thin places where the green breaks through: the herb-hunter who went in for a root that cures everything and came out with leaves under his skin, the overgrown ruin that was a village a summer ago. Healers pay well for what the brave carry out.

### *The Gilded Cage*

The **Gilded Cage** is the plane of absolute order, where freedom is the only crime. Every action has a prescribed path, every object a designated place, and every being a fixed role. Chaos there is not merely dangerous; it is impossible. Its colours are polished gold, pristine white, and slate grey, and every surface is clean, reflective, and symmetrical, without dirt, rust, or decay. Its light comes from sources set into ground and sky, so that there are no shadows, and day and night are kept by clocks rather than by any sun. Its cities are grids of perfectly straight streets lined with identical buildings stacked to measure; its trees are trimmed into cubes and spheres. The air is still and scentless and the temperature never changes. Clocks tick, feet march, gears shift, and speech is measured and polite. Even thought runs in straight lines there, and an unruly idea feels like a wrong note in a song.

Its physics enforce its order. Every object and being must keep to its line: stepping off a prescribed path feels like walking uphill. There is no luck and no chance; a dropped cup breaks exactly as it must, without miracle or accident. Time is cut into exact units and ageing is paused or regulated. And whatever breaks the rules is corrected. A leaning wall slowly straightens itself, and a person who acts out of turn may feel their limbs begin to stiffen.

Its people, the **Gilded**, have skin like polished metal or porcelain and symmetrical, unchanging features. They wear identical uniforms distinguished only by rank, need tending rather than food or sleep, oil, polish, and adjustment, and feel pain only when they break a rule. Their society is protocol: rank depends on how well one keeps the rules, and deviance is punished by being set right again. They are polite, efficient, and without feeling; they do not joke, argue, or make any art that has not been approved, and they see visitors as unstable and dangerous. Their **Enforcers** patrol the streets, tall armoured figures with batons that pulse with order, and they do not kill; they reset. Tireless clockwork guards obey without question. In the public squares stand **Rule-Breakers**, former inhabitants turned into statues as warnings, and for the worst offences there is **the Golden Touch**, which turns the violator into a statue of gold.

The Cage offers what no other plane can: nothing breaks, nothing fails, and there is no crime, war, or disease. Its instruments are perfectly accurate, its vaults perfectly safe, and its judgements final, and visitors come to store valuables, seek a judgement no lord can buy or overturn, or escape the chaos of the Material Plane. The cost is the will. Inhabitants slowly lose the ability to choose for themselves, visitors feel their own invention draining away, and leaving can be physically blocked by walls nobody can see. The way out, travellers say, is the **Exit Protocol**, followed exactly and without improvisation. Its **Gateways of Law** on the Material Plane are judgement halls, counting-houses, strongrooms, and places where rules are kept to the letter, and its Veil is a maze of corridors that must be walked in a fixed sequence, where a wrong turn leads back to the start. It is a containment field held by Terra and Verba: the order without which no civilization could exist, and an order that, spread too far, would set all life fast in its rigidity. Few return with their creativity intact. Material Plane peoples tell of strongrooms where a door opens on endless golden halls, of thieves who broke into a vault and never left it, and of the gold statue in an old hall that was once, the tale says, a man who broke an oath sworn there.

### *The Radiance*

The **Radiance** is the plane where truth is absolute and privacy impossible. Light and knowledge fill it to saturation; nothing there can be hidden, lied about, or misunderstood, and to enter it is to be stripped of every mask, deception, and illusion. Its colours are blinding white, gold, and shifting iridescence. Light pours from the ground, the air, and the beings themselves, so that nothing casts a shadow, and to look towards its source hurts. It is a country of crystalline plains and glass towers where walls do not exist and every barrier is a field of light. The air shimmers and feels charged, like the moment before lightning, and smells of rain on dry earth and burning incense. Its sound is a chorus of everything being said at once, not a din but a hum, in which lies sound like a screech and truths like pure tones.

Its law is transparency. Cloaks, masks, and walls turn clear, and secrets show as distortions in the light. Intentions are visible as auras: malice as a dark, jagged warping, kindness as a soft warm glow, and deceit as an aura that flickers and shrieks. Thoughts out of keeping with what is real cause pain, so that a liar's throat burns and a hypocrite's skin blisters. There is no behind; every angle is seen. Touching another person feels like touching their Pattern, their intentions and feelings felt as physical sensations, and a visitor cannot even lie to themselves.

Its people, the **Illuminated**, glow from within, their features sharp and clear without softness, their eyes pools of light. They do not sleep, since a mind with no secrets needs no rest from them, and they live on light and truth. They practise radical honesty: no diplomacy, no politics, no courtesies. If they dislike someone they say so; if they love someone they show it; a conflict is settled at once by facing it. Outsiders find them blunt to the point of cruelty, and they in turn think outsiders sick, because outsiders hide. Around them move the **Revealed**: **those the Light shattered**, liars who could not bear the exposure and whose minds broke, now wandering as glowing husks; the **Confessors**, who shed every secret of their own will to join the Illuminated and are serene but no longer individual; and the **Truth-Seekers**, which hunt the dark spots of liars to consume what they hide.

The Radiance can cure madness or delusion with clarity, and agreements spoken there are unbreakable because they are spoken in absolute truth. Its dangers are exposure: shames and hidden desires dragged into the light, the burning that every lie brings, and the end of every art that needs mystery, so that a love poem there is a statement of fact. Its **Oracle Gates** are places of judge-

ment, places of confession, and mirrors, and crossing its Veil is an interrogation by a thousand voices in which the traveller remembers every shameful moment of their life. It is the judge of the universe, the reason nothing can be hidden forever; mortals who follow Lux and Verba treat it as the corrective that keeps the cosmos from sinking into total deception. To anyone who lives by secrets it is a place of terror. Hardly anyone's pride survives the visit, and many come home understanding themselves painfully well. On Caeldon it shows itself at oracle sites and old mirrors. Songs tell of the queen who looked into the bright glass and could not stop confessing, and of the oracle's light that hunted traitors for the lords who kept it. Liars will not stand near such a place.

### *The Weave*

The **Weave** is the plane where separation is impossible. Every mind and every Pattern is linked in one continuous network, and "I" has become "we". Privacy does not exist there, not because secrets are revealed, as in the Radiance, but because there are no private thoughts to keep. Its colours are shifting iridescence, soft pastels, and translucent blues that flow into one another like oil on water, with no hard edges. Light comes from the beings themselves, and nothing casts a shadow because nothing there is solid enough to block light. Floating islands are joined by bridges of light, structures are grown or woven from strands of energy, and the ground gives underfoot like a stretched hide, rising and falling with the shared mood. The air thrums low and warm like a blanket and smells of rain and clean linen. Its sound is millions of voices speaking as one, not a din but a single complex chord, and silence there is impossible: even a thought ripples it.

Pain, pleasure, and feeling are shared: when one is hurt, all feel a fraction of it, and when one is glad, all are. Movement is shared too, so that the group moves as one body. A question asked by one is answered by all at once. Touch is felt by everyone near, and proximity is enough for speech.

Its people, the **Linked**, have skin like a mirror that shows the faces around them and wide, deep eyes full of the collective's feeling. They do not eat or sleep alone, drawing strength from the network, and they know neither loneliness nor fear, which are thinned to nothing among so many. They have no family, nation, or class, only the Weave, and they decide by a consensus reached in an instant. Gentle and endlessly patient, they cannot grasp "me" or "mine", and they pity outsiders as broken and lonely. Beings that have merged entirely into the network form **the Chorus**: the **Singers**, which manifest as pure sound and weave the shared mind into new patterns, the **Menders**, which heal rifts in the connection, and **the Lost**, visitors absorbed until they are only one more voice.

The Weave can heal grief, trauma, and isolation with perfect understanding, and offers the knowledge and strength of a whole people at once. Its danger is **the Dissolution**: a traveller who forgets who they are and merges into the whole. Even short of that, the feelings of so many can overwhelm a single mind, one moment of shared grief can arrive like a tidal wave, and the network can refuse an individual will outright. When the network is cut, the sudden silence is itself a wound. Its **Bridge-Gates** on the Material Plane are places of deep connection, weddings, funerals, and gatherings, and crossing its Veil draws a traveller into a vortex of voices in which their past dissolves into everyone else's present. It is the glue of the universe, where Verba's meaning and Zephyr's motion bind everything together; pushed too far, that binding would swallow all individuality and leave a cosmos of one mind. Travellers come for healing, to find a lost loved one, or to know perfect unity. Individuality rarely survives the visit, and many leave missing the connection for the rest of their lives. Where the Weave runs close to

temples and gathering places, the tales are of whole congregations that wept as one, and of the mother who went in to find her drowned son, heard him, and stayed.

### *The Apex*

The **Apex** is the plane of perfection completed, where nothing can be better, nothing can be added, and therefore nothing changes. The struggle for existence has ended there, not because it was won but because it is unnecessary: no pain, no error, no growth. It is a paradise that feels like a prison. Its golds, whites, and silvers are so perfect they seem to vibrate. Its light is even and comes from everywhere, and there are no shadows, because there are no irregularities to cast them. Its hills are perfect domes, its trees identical repeating patterns, its rivers flowing in exact curves, and the ground underfoot is smooth as polished marble. A constant hum sounds through it, mathematically perfect, soothing and monotonous, and music played there is flawless and without feeling or surprise. Ideas arrive complete and cannot be altered.

Its first law is completion. Any attempt to alter an object, build something, or change a state is rejected, and the world corrects the change back to its perfect form. Movement is effortless but aimless: whatever is set moving goes on in a straight line forever unless stopped. Nothing wears or ages. Cause and effect are absolute, without chance or luck. Strong feeling is damped, since it implies a departure from the perfect state, and in its place is a constant mild contentment.

Its people, the **Apex-Born**, are of impossible symmetry and beauty, flawless of skin, unageing, unscarred, unchanging, with large calm eyes. They do not eat, sleep, or reproduce in any ordinary way; they simply exist. They have no art, science, or philosophy, since everything is already known, and no laws, since nobody breaks or wants anything. They move with slow grace, speak only when they must and always precisely, and they pity outsiders as unfinished. Its other beings are **the Flawless**: **Crystal-Golems** that guard its borders, **Harmony-Beasts** that move in perfect step and never hunt or die, and **Echo-Statues**, visitors who stayed too long and were perfected into motionless, smiling figures of eternal bliss.

Things made in the Apex never fail: a sword from there never dulls and a shield never breaks. Its clarity can cure madness, addiction, or confusion, though visitors sometimes leave without any sense of purpose at all. Its dangers are stagnation, boredom deep enough to shut a mind down, the violent rejection of anything imperfect brought into it, and the slow loss of one's own flaws, history, and self. Visitors are told to bring reminders of their mistakes and struggles as anchors, and to leave before they forget why they wanted to. Its **Mirror Gates** are perfect reflections in still water and moments of absolute clarity, and its Veil is smooth and frictionless, like sliding on ice. It is the end of the story, the place where Lux finds no possibility left to open and Verba no tale left to tell: the universe could die there, not of destruction, but of completion. Its tales are tales of paradise and its price: the knight who found the perfect garden and stood in it until he was stone, the jeweller who brought back a flawless gem and never made another thing. Delvers who carry out a perfected artefact can name their price.

### *The Axis Between Them*

The ten extreme planes are not ten unrelated worlds. They pair across the Material Plane, each lack matched by the same concept in its saturated form, and the pairing is called the **Deficit-Surplus Axis**. The Scourge, with no safety, pairs with the Gilded Cage, which offers nothing else, in the concept of survival. The Ashen Wastes, with no energy, pair with the Verdant Expanse, which has too much growth, in vitality. The Parched, where no need is ever met, pairs with the Apex, where every need is met already, in consumption. The Frost-Bound, which keeps everything still, pairs

with the Radiance, which keeps everything exposed, in preservation. And the Silence, where meaning fails, pairs with the Weave, where connection is total, in communication.

The Material Plane sits at the middle of every one of these axes. That is the deepest sense in which it is the Equilibrium: not a lukewarm average of the extremes, but the one place where each pair is held in balance against the other.

## The Ten Harmonics

A Harmonic is less like a place than like the inside of an idea. The **Crucible** is not a land with fire in it; it is the concept of fire given form. To a mortal each Harmonic seems an inexhaustible reservoir, but it is not one: a Harmonic creates nothing from nothing. It is a vast gradient of access in which forces that already exist are sorted, concentrated, passed on, and made intelligible, and when a mage draws on one, that is all the mage is doing. Each Harmonic is a stabilized pattern of one Prime's current, not a source from which the Prime came, and each is far harder for a mortal mind to grasp directly than any Anchor.

The Harmonics bleed into the Anchors as their physical law. The Crucible gives energy, which shows on the Anchors as heat, fire, and change; the Surging Deep gives flow, which shows as water, blood, and the processes of life; the Iron Backbone gives structure, which shows as stone, bone, and stability. Without that bleed the Anchors would be formless voids. The Harmonics give matter its shape.

Their influence on any Anchor is uneven. It depends on how near the Anchor lies to the Harmonic in the Veil; on how far a place already leans towards it, as a volcano leans towards the Crucible; and on mortal activity, since ritual, worship, and magical practice can strengthen or weaken the tie between one Harmonic and the Material Plane. Where the bleed is too strong or lasts too long, a Resonant Zone forms.

### *The Elemental Harmonics*

Four Harmonics are elemental, the physical forces that shape the universe.

The **Crucible** is energy, heat, and transformation, the current of Ignis, and the engine of change that destroys the old and makes it new. Its colours are blinding white, searing orange, deep violet, and molten gold, and its sky is a churning ocean of fire. Rivers of lava flow past floating islands of cooling rock and obsidian mountains that keep reshaping themselves, and the roar of flame and cracking stone is felt in the bones. In it, small heats escalate into great ones, impurities burn away, and nothing stays as it was. Its **Forgers** are beings of living magma and cooling rock whose skin cracks to show glowing cores; they do not burn, they are the fire, and they see the universe as raw material to be worked into something better. To them visitors are cold and unrefined, and their own greatest danger is to cool and shatter. Wilder **Burners**, beings of pure flame, consume whatever they meet. The Crucible's gates on the Material Plane are volcanoes, forges, and places of great heat, and its Veil crossing feels like being roasted, burning away all but the most intense memories. Visitors risk **Pattern burns**, in which the fire consumes something of who they are. Smiths and volcano-dwellers tell of forge-fires that opened onto the Crucible: the master who reached into the white heat for a blade that could not be made anywhere else and drew back a hand of ash, and the mountain shrine where a fire-gate opened and the shrine-keepers walked into it singing.

The **Surging Deep** is water, flow, life, and adaptation, the current of Aqua, and the circulation of the cosmos. Its colours are blues, turquoise, emerald, and silver, from pale surface to abyssal dark, and glowing life lights its depths. It has no solid ground: there are endless oceans, floating islands of kelp, cities of coral and crystal, rivers that flow upward. Every breath there feels like breathing water. Its laws are that nothing stands still, that life adapts at once, so that a visitor's

body begins to change to suit it, that nothing is wasted and death feeds life, and that the deeper one goes, the greater the pressure and the deeper the truth. Its **Tidesingers**, with skin like sea glass and hair like kelp, speak in song and vibration and see the universe as one living whole to be kept in balance; among its other beings are **Wave-Weavers** that shape currents and **Life-Bearers** that carry the seeds of life to new worlds. Its gates are oceans, rivers, wells, and places of ritual washing. Sailors and river peoples tell of the drowned who come back from the depths speaking of a sea with no surface, and of the diver who went down for a pearl in a sacred pool and came up a year later, not knowing which way the shore lay.

The **Iron Backbone** is earth, structure, and stability, the current of Terra, the skeleton that holds the universe together. Its colours are deep greys and browns, metallic silver, and veins of glowing gold and copper; its light comes from within the rock, pulsing slowly like a heartbeat. Its mountains float, its molten metal flows upward, and its caves are perfect spheres. Nothing stands there without a foundation; whatever is built is almost impossible to destroy, and the plane mends damage in time; weight follows significance, so that a trivial pebble is light and a monument of history impossibly heavy; and the stone remembers everything that ever happened on it. Its **Stonewrights**, of living granite, obsidian, and metal, with amber eyes and jointed limbs, are builders and guardians who speak in short, exact sentences and find visitors fragile. Stationary **Foundations** hold up its islands, and **the Cracked**, beings who have suffered structural failure, wander seeking repair or someone to drag down with them. Its gates are mountains, quarries, and ancient ruins. Quarry and mountain folk tell of miners who broke into a seam of living stone and became part of the wall, and of the Dwarf who laid his hand on a hold's oldest pillar and lived through ten generations of its memory in a heartbeat.

The **Unbound Gale** is air, motion, freedom, and thought, the current of Zephyr, the breath of the universe and the carrier of ideas. Its colours are pale blues, whites, and silvers in streaks rather than fields, and it has no ground at all, only floating islands, swirling vortices, mountains of compressed wind, and rivers of mist. Nothing there is still, and to stop is to cease; direction answers to will, so a traveller can walk on air if they mean to move; and the wind carries everything, so that nothing is lost, only blown elsewhere. Its **Wind-Walkers**, with skin like glass and no feet, glide on its currents, speak fast, interrupt often, and find visitors heavy. **The Stillness** are those who resisted the wind and hang frozen in mid-air, waiting for a gust to release them. Its gates are high peaks, open plains, and places of great height. Peak and plains folk tell of the wind that took a herdsman off a high pass and set him down three valleys away with no memory of his name, and of the riders who rode with a storm-wind for one night and could never sit still again.

### *The Abstract Harmonics*

Six Harmonics are abstract, the conceptual forces that give existence its meaning.

The **Dreaming Veil** is imagination, art, and dream, where Imago runs strongest with Lux and Zephyr beside it. It is not to be confused with the Veil itself. Its colours change with the feeling of whoever looks, its light comes from the observer's own mind, and its geography follows expectation: expect a mountain and one rises; expect a door and one appears. Laughter there sounds like wind chimes and sadness like distant rain. Objects stand for ideas, a key for opportunity, a lock for fear, and to handle the symbol is to handle the idea; past, present, and future lie side by side; and those who know they are dreaming can reshape it, while those who do not are at its mercy. Its

**Lucids**, beings of light and thought, help lost dreamers find their way back to waking; its **Phantasms** include **Nightmares** born of fear and **Muse-Spirits** that grant visions; its saddest residents are **the Wanderers**, sleepers on the Material Plane who never woke and who slowly become part of its landscape. Dreams are not false there. They are unfinished patterns of reality. Most dissolve at waking, but a dream repeated by many sleepers, painted over and over, ritually named, or remembered with great force can cross through a thin place and be held long enough to become an object, an omen, a creature, a road, a wound, and such things obey the logic of symbols before the logic of matter: a dream-key opens the door that means escape, not every lock. Its gates are beds, chambers of meditation, and places of deep rest. Every people has its sleepers: the shepherd who lay down on a barrow and slept forty years, the child whose nightmare came out of her bed and killed the house dog. Dream-readers are paid to sit by the bedside of anyone who will not wake.

The **Eternal Record** is knowledge, history, and memory, the current of Memoria with Verba often joined to it, the universe's library and its conscience. Its light comes from shelves and scrolls, its endless stacks loop and stretch beyond any sense, and its rivers run with ink. It hums like a hive with the whisper of a billion voices reading, and smells of old paper and dust. Nothing in it decays, anything can be found by one who knows how to look, its facts admit no interpretation, and knowledge has weight, so that a book of history is heavier than a stone of the same size. Its **Archivists**, with skin like paper and eyes like lenses, only observe and record, and among its other beings are **Indexers** that file what arrives, **Censors** that seal away knowledge too dangerous for the Material Plane, and **the Forgotten**, the Record-bound Echoes of people erased from the world, wandering the stacks. To read too much there can crush a mortal mind; to learn there of a thing that has not yet happened is to risk unravelling one's own course through time. Its gates are ancient libraries, archives, and places of study. Archive-keepers tell of readers who went too deep: the old librarian found at his desk who could recite every king of a fallen realm and no longer knew his own wife, and the sealed shelf in a hold archive that no one, the keepers say, has opened and come back.

The **Shifting Path** is possibility, chance, and the future, the open current of Lux, the place where what the universe will become is still undecided. Its light is broken into colours that tell probability, gold for the likely and an unstable violet for the unlikely, its ground is a mosaic of mirrors showing other courses of events, and every possible outcome of a conversation is heard at once. Every act forks there; a tossed coin may land on either face or stand on its edge; distant paths can meet and snap into one; and the harder one tries to foresee the future, the less certain it grows, because looking fixes one outcome and erases the rest. Its **Wayfinders**, with skin that shifts like a kaleidoscope and compasses that point to possibilities instead of north, age only when they commit to a choice, and guide the lost through its branches. Its gamblers feed on risk, and **the Forked** are travellers caught in indecision, existing in several states at once. Its gates on the Material Plane are crossroads, junctions, and places where a choice is made. Crossroads tales come from the Path: the traveller who chose one road and met himself coming back down the other, the gambler who could not lose until the night the Path took everything at once. Peoples who bury their dead at crossroads say it keeps them from choosing to come back.

The **Binding Song** is language, law, and connection, the purest current of Verba, the bond that holds every people together. Its colours are ink-black, parchment-white, gold, and the crimson of an oath's blood; its light comes from glowing script that floats in the air. It is a country of libraries, judgement halls, and singing halls, with

bridges of sentences and walls of laws, and every movement there makes a sound: walking makes a rhythm, breathing a melody, and a thought writes itself on the air beside the thinker. To name a thing there is to define it, so that a stone named heavy grows heavy; a promise spoken makes a physical tether between speaker and hearer, and breaking it wounds; a lie cannot be held and splits the ground or the speaker's flesh; and grammar is law, so that a broken sentence does nothing. Its **Scribes** record every word spoken and enforce the laws of language, its **Arbiters** judge disputes over oaths, and among them move the hunters of those who break vows. A promise made there binds across all planes, and a visitor cannot leave until it is kept. Its gates are judgement halls, libraries, and places of oath-taking. On Caeldon the Song is felt at oath-stones and old judgement halls. The tales say an oath sworn on such ground follows the oath-breaker to his grave; they tell of the lord whose broken word wound him in chains no smith had forged, and of the curse laid at a gate that still kills whoever passes it without the answer.

The **Whispering Trace** is death, reflection, and remnant, the current of Umbra, the space between the living and the gone, where what was refuses to become fully what is not. Its colours are faded sepia, misty grey, deep indigo, and translucent black, as if seen through old glass. Its light seems to come from the memories of things. It is a country of ruins, graveyards, and misty woods, with rivers of liquid shadow and skeletal, silent trees, and it is never quite quiet: there is always a murmur of voices and footsteps that are not there. Every act leaves a trace in it; it reflects the visitor's own heart, so that fear takes shape as monsters, regret as barriers, peace as light; things in it fade unless memory holds them; and a strong memory can draw an Echo back into clarity while a forgotten one fades. Its **Echo-Walkers**, translucent and faceless, flickering like candle flames, help lost Echoes towards release, reconciliation, or passage into the Record. **Keepers of Dust** sweep its floors and gather the remnants of fallen civilizations; **the Unfinished**, Echoes formed around unresolved business, repeat themselves endlessly. A visitor forgotten by everyone on the Material Plane, it is said, may be drawn into its void and cease to exist entirely. Its gates are cemeteries, battlefields, and places of death, and they are the haunted places of every people's tales: the mourner who followed a beloved voice into the grave-mist and did not return, the battlefield where the dead still muster each year on the day they fell.

The **Frozen Moment** is time, stasis, and permanence, the current of Aion, reinforced by Terra and Memoria, and the anchor that holds moments long enough for history and consequence to exist. Its colours are icy blue, silver, and pearl, as if seen through frosted glass, its light never changes, and its shadows never move. Its ground is a sheet of unblemished ice among frozen waterfalls and mountains like statues, and its silence is so complete that the only sound is the ringing of one's own ears. Time does not flow there: a dropped object hangs in the air, a candle does not melt, a wound neither heals nor bleeds; nothing ages; and motion is hard to begin and impossible to stop. Its **Stilled**, beings of crystal and ice with closed eyes, wake only when something significant happens and guard the history of the universe against loss. Among its **Preservers** are the **Memory-Keepers**, which store the memories of the dead in crystal, and **the Clockwork**, automata that tick in unison and go on counting time even where time has stopped. **The Frozen** are anyone caught in its stillness, aware and unable to move. Its gates are ancient ruins and places of deep meditation. Ruin-delvers tell of halls where time has stopped: a feast laid a thousand years ago and still warm, a guard frozen mid-stride whom no one dares wake, and the delver who reached for a crown on a still throne and stood there beside it when his companions came back.

### *How the Harmonics Meet*

The Harmonics do not stand apart. Some pairs strengthen each other, and they do it by easing transfer and conversion, not by making energy from nothing: fire and wind make storms, wildfires, and the spark of inspiration; water and earth make soil, rivers, and the ground of life; imagination and possibility make prophecy and invention; language and memory preserve history, fix oaths and customs in words, and steady knowledge. Other pairs grind against each other. Energy and stasis meet in unstable places where time and heat lurch wildly. Motion and structure meet in grinding friction and broken ground. And dreams and the Radiance, which is not a Harmonic but a Surplus Plane, oppose each other so strongly that the pair is counted among them anyway: where they meet, clarity and confusion come together in the same place.

Three together can make what none makes alone. Energy, flow, and structure, the Crucible, the Surging Deep, and the Iron Backbone, sustain the living body, which is metabolism, fluid, and form at once. Imagination, language, and possibility together make prophecy, the putting of possible futures into words. And death, memory, and stasis, the Whispering Trace, the Eternal Record, and the Frozen Moment, together hold a dead Pattern's remnant past its natural release. That is how the undead are made.

Each Harmonic also leans towards particular extreme planes, and those leanings decide where zones form and which Harmonics a plane's natives reach most easily. The Crucible is starved in the Ashen Wastes and feeds growth in the Verdant Expanse. The Surging Deep is absent from the Parched and sustains the Verdant. The Iron Backbone crumbles to dust in the Parched and is enforced in the Cage. Imagination is dead in the Silence and laid bare in the Radiance; memory fades in the Silence and is revealed in the Radiance. Possibility is frozen in the Frost-Bound and completed in the Apex. Time is locked in the cold of the Frost-Bound and stopped at the point of perfection in the Apex.

### *Going There*

No sensible mortal goes into a Harmonic directly. Visitors to the Crucible may be burned away by concentrated energy, visitors to the Surging Deep may drown in the concept of flow, visitors to the Iron Backbone may be crushed by the weight of structure, and visitors to the Unbound Gale may be scattered by pure motion. The abstract Harmonics are subtler and no kinder. The safer way to meet a Harmonic is where it has already come halfway, in a Resonant Zone, which serves as a buffer between the concept and the world. Every school keeps its tale of the student who opened the way too wide: the fire-mage found as a scorched outline on the workshop floor, the stone-singer who was never moved from where she stood. Masters tell them to apprentices on the first night.

Mages meet the Harmonics every day without going anywhere. Some use their own bodies as a conduit, at a high personal price; some draw on what the surroundings hold, so that their strength depends on where they stand; some open a minute tear to a Harmonic through a prepared conduit, which needs tools and risks backlash. In each case the mage moves and reshapes energy that already exists. How that works and what it costs is told in Part III, *The Laws of Magic*.

## What the Planes Make of a Person

The planes are not only places. They are also the frame in which a person exists, persists, and ends. What follows is true, and almost nobody in the world knows it. Its terms belong to a few of the highest circles of scholarship. Ordinary people live by older words and their own beliefs, and nobody judges by these names. Who a person still is after death, return, or war, kin and faiths answer by custom and belief, and the old songs are full of the

doubt: the bride who came back from the barrow and would not eat salt, the twin lords who both swore they were the elder.

### *Pattern, Echo, and Record*

What people call the self is, in the doctrine, a **Pattern**: a living, changing configuration that leaves **Echoes** of itself in people, places, and things, and whose coherent Echoes may be kept in **Record**, chiefly in the Eternal Record. The planes shape all three. A Pattern is strongest on the stable Anchors, and above all on the Material Plane, where free will and long development of the self are surest; where the Veil runs thin or turbulent, more Echoes are made and more are distorted. What a person is, what a death leaves, and when someone is no longer themselves are told in What Makes a People.

### *Fate and Songlines*

Almost everyone believes something about fate: that it is written at birth, decreed by the gods, read in stars and omens, or simply luck. Faiths, families, and trades hand down their own theories, and most of them are speculation. Only in the highest circles of scholarly argument does the talk come close to the truth, and there it is still argued.

The truth is this. There is no universal predestination. Reality is made of frequencies, but choice is real, and no being is born with a destiny it must fulfil. What many cultures call destiny those few scholars call **songline imposition**: an outside force applying sustained resonant pressure to bend a person, a group, a sworn order, an object, or a plane towards one course. The imposed course is the **songline**, the strength of the weighting is its **pressure**, and the mounting cost of resisting it is its **dissonance**.

Imposition does not replace a mind. It works through three channels: it makes some outcomes easier to reach, it draws events and chances into line with the course, and it makes every choice off the course more costly, emotionally, socially, magically, or materially. Under it, aligned choices settle quickly, neutral ones grow uncertain, and opposed ones grow ever more expensive. But resistance remains possible at every stage. Pressure that tries to overwrite a person outright tends to break rather than rule: it produces fracture, backlash, collapse of the imposed course, or a violent release of the dissonance, and a deeply embedded line removed all at once can leave a shock behind it, a self thrown off balance and odd things happening in the place where it was cut. Imposed lines can come from powers of divine scale, from resonant beings, from the combined weight of a ritual many people perform, from objects made to steer a course, and from coercive dark practice.

The scholars keep one word for one case, though everyone else uses it loosely. **Fate** means songline pressure on mortals on the Material Plane, and only that, because only there does it press on wills that are truly free. Fate is not a fixed future, not a script written at birth, and not proof that choice is an illusion. Prophecy only observes the likely courses; imposition constrains them. The Shifting Path weakens any imposed line by multiplying the branches around it, diluting the pressure and reopening outcomes that seemed closed; the Frozen Moment does not erase lines, but can make one last longer and press more gently, or press harder and break sooner. The scholars separate a vow sworn freely, limited and revocable, from one forced, and severe influence, which leaves real choices and a way to withdraw, from the theft of a will, which leaves neither. No people measures songline pressure or keeps anyone to watch it. Where custom touches any of this, it forbids magic used on a person to bend their choices against their will, and speaks of binding, compulsion, and coerced vows rather than songlines. Elders, priests, and lords judge it by what the person did, what changed in them, and what

people saw; they rarely know the ideas beneath, and they come down hardest on a binder with no one to stand behind them.

Fate is still the stuff of song: the foundling every omen pointed to, the champion who rode against a doom foretold and broke it, the bride who walked a road she never chose and turned at the last step. In the tales the doom is always strong and never quite certain, which is nearer the truth than the tellers know.

## What People Know

Knowledge of the cosmos follows a gradient: the higher a tier stands, the less is really known of it, and the nearer the Material Plane, the more. At every tier there are competing theories, many names for one thing, and schools that disagree. Some guesses come closer to the truth than others, but nothing about the true layout of the universe is known for sure. Anchor, Harmonic, Deficit and Surplus are the records' terms, not the world's; in the world the names vary by people, faith, and school. What people know of fate is told with it above, and of Pattern in What Makes a People.

### *The World Underfoot*

The Material Plane is known as the world itself, and unevenly: well near home and along roads and records, thinly beyond them. People know what the land gives and what it costs, what magic does for them and what it takes, and where the thin places of their own country lie and which of them to keep away from. That this world is one plane among many, a balance won between extremes, is a scholar's idea. To most people the world is simply the world.

### *The Other Planes*

That other realms exist is known everywhere: from travellers' tales, from the few who cross the Veil and come back, and from what comes out of the realms, exiles and natives met at a thin place. Some are known to be hostile or extreme, and many peoples take the planes of lack for hells and the planes of too much for heavens, which is as natural as it is wrong. How many there are, how they lie, and what each lacks or holds in excess is theory. In the tales the other realms are hells and heavens, drowned kingdoms and gardens without end, and the few who came back from one are remembered by name in their own valley for generations. The rhyme of *The March-Town Primer*, five that lack and five that drown, is one scheme of their number, taught to children with their letters; its count is close to the truth, its teachers could not say why, and other schemes count otherwise.

### *The Harmonics*

Every mage knows that magic draws on deep sources, and so does anyone who has watched one work. What those sources are, nobody knows. Mages train in their schools' workable traditions, not in metaphysics, and each school accounts for its power in its own way, coloured by what its teachers believe of the powers behind the world. That there are ten such realms, each the settled current of one force, is argued only in the highest circles of scholarship. People who have stood in a Resonant Zone or dreamt too vividly have touched a Harmonic without knowing what they touched.

Each later era knows more of the planes, and more exactly, than the Medieval Era does. None ever knows them fully or correctly; the arguments go on, and so do the many names.

## Tensions

- **The crossroads.** Because nearly all travel between the other planes passes through the Material Plane, its soil is crossroads, sanctuary, and battleground at once. Exiles from the extreme planes shelter on it, and the powers that pursue them follow them there.

- **What comes through.** Beasts and wanderers from the extreme planes come out at thin places, and most are hunted by whoever lives nearest. A village that finds one in its hills pays a beast-hunter if it can, and sends its own if it cannot.
- **Shrines on thin ground.** Shrines and settlements grow up beside thin places in the Veil, where what little traffic there is with other planes passes. The same thinness lets planar bleed through, and a place that lives by its thin spot lives with its sudden frosts, its unlit fires, and the travellers who walk in and come out a year later.
- **The pull of the extremes.** Long living beside a thin spot to the Scourge, or beside a zone of the Crucible, warps the land and the minds of those who stay. Whole communities can drift towards the temper of a plane they have never seen.
- **Fate by consent.** Some vow traditions shape a sworn person's course, limited and revocable, and think of it as a vow, not as a course imposed. Consent given under duress, dependency, or concealed escalation is no consent, and every such vow carries the question of where a sworn course ends and a stolen will begins.
- **Luck that is not luck.** A true imposition is usually taken for a run of luck, a curse, or the will of a god. Those who suffer it go to omen-readers and priests whose theories of fate are speculation, and almost nobody who could name what presses on them, or lift it safely, is within reach.

CHAPTER 2

# The Resonant Zones

*If the fire burns blue, put your own fire out.*
*If the well will not lie, hold your tongue.*
*If the wind has a voice, do not answer its call,*
*for the one who is calling died young.*
*If the town stands still at a noon that won't end,*
*walk softly, walk softly, and leave it unsung.*

— a carters' warning-song, *Songs of the Sheaf Road*

There are places where the world forgets its own rules. A field where fire burns blue and cold, and the cinder underfoot crunches like snow. A spring so pure that a lie spoken over it turns the water black. A road where the traveller casts two shadows, one of them a stranger's, cast years ago by someone long dead. A town where the sun has stood at the same angle since before anyone living was born, and the people in the street are caught mid-stride. These are the Resonant Zones, the places where a Harmonic has pressed through the Veil into the Material Plane and, for an hour or for an age, made the local law its own. They are the nearest most mortals ever come to the planes behind the world, and they are dangerous, beautiful, useful, and sometimes hungry. Their laws are strange, but they are laws: a zone does the same thing to the tenth traveller as to the first, and those who learn it live.

This chapter tells what the zones truly are. People live beside the zones, but what makes them is hidden, and nobody in the world can prove the account given here. What people know and argue is told in What People Know.

## What a Zone Is

A Resonant Zone is not a plane. It is an intersection: a bounded place, the size of a room or of a valley but never of a world, that lies within the Material Plane and obeys the logic of a Harmonic. Its physics are hybrid, and the proportion matters. The schools grade zones by how much of the local law the Harmonic has taken over. In a **faint** zone, a tenth to a third of it, the Harmonic is a chill in the air, a sense of having been here before, a slight bending of light, and most people pass through without knowing. In a **moderate** zone the effects are plain to anyone: fire burns a different colour, time runs a little fast or slow, thoughts seem louder. In a **strong** zone, where most of the

**AT A GLANCE**

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| **What they are** | Bounded pockets of an Anchor where a Harmonic overrides local law: the third tier of the cosmos. |
| **Known** | Thirty and more recorded, two to four for each Harmonic. |
| **Duration** | Ephemeral (minutes to hours), Transient (a season), Persistent (years to centuries), Permanent (indefinite, and rare). |
| **Intensity** | Faint, Moderate, Strong, or Total, by how much of local law the Harmonic overrides. |
| **Causes** | A naturally thin Veil, a mage drawing too hard on one Harmonic, or a sign imposed by a Resonant. |
| **Where** | Wherever a place already leans towards a Harmonic: volcanoes, battlefields, old libraries, still pools, crossroads, graves. |

local law has given way, gravity turns over, the dead speak, objects change their nature, and the unprepared are in danger. In a **total** zone the Harmonic has taken everything, and the place is in effect a pocket of the Harmonic itself, set down in the world. Few who walk into one unprepared walk out.

Even the strangest zone keeps one law of the world it sits in: it creates nothing from nothing. Its fire that freezes, its water that heals, its sound that sets into crystal, its ideas that take bodily form are all existing energy and matter redirected, stored, converted, or turned inside out. Ask where a zone's power is coming from, and the answer is always somewhere: the heat of the traveller's body, the life of the land around it, the matter of the room.

Zones share four habits. They are **unstable**: most do not last, some vanish within hours, others endure for centuries, and only a rare few become permanent, depending on how strong the bleed is and how steady the ground. They are **local**: they have edges, and an edge can be walked up to and stepped across. Their physics are **hybrid**, the Harmonic's law laid partly over the world's. And they are **sensitive**: they answer to mortal will, feeling, and magic, so that a strong-willed traveller can sometimes resist a zone or turn it to use, and a frightened one can make it worse.

They are also classed by how long they last: an **ephemeral** zone is gone within hours, often called up by a magical event or a surge of feeling; a **transient** one lasts a season, tied to a tide or a solstice; a **persistent** one lasts centuries and can be lived beside and harvested; and a **permanent** one is so settled that it may be mistaken for an ordinary feature of the land.

## How Zones Form

Most zones form naturally, where the Veil is already thin and the place already leans towards the Harmonic. A volcano is aligned with the Crucible, an ancient library with the Eternal Record, a still pool with the reflections of the Whispering Trace, a crossroads with the possibilities of the Shifting Path. A battlefield is aligned with the shouted commands of the Binding Song, which is why the Grammar of War wakes there; its other pull, towards the Scourge, is a different thing, a thin spot towards a plane of lack and not the bleed of a Harmonic. Where the alignment is strong and the Veil weak, the Harmonic seeps through.

Some are made by accident. A fire mage who draws too much from the Crucible in one place can leave a field of cold fire behind. A necromancer who draws too heavily on the Whispering Trace can pin the Echoes of the dead in place. A mage who handles time too roughly can stop a town's clock. Mages call this artificial formation,

and the schools warn against it in every generation: the danger is not only in drawing too much, but in working too long in one place at one Harmonic's frequency, with a chant, a rune, or a rite that matches it too well.

A few are imposed on purpose. A Resonant, or very rarely a Steward, may set a zone on the land as a sign, a gift, or a punishment, and such zones are steadier and stronger than natural ones, though they too only shape energy that already exists. A healing power aligned with Aqua might set down a place where wounds close at once, by supplying or redirecting lifeforce; a war-god aligned with Ignis might set down one where weapons never dull, by constantly renewing their structure. The Primes impose nothing; a force does not leave signs. Cast-Outs do: there are zones whose physics have been bent for no purpose but torment.

## The Shape of a Zone

Nearly all zones share the same shape, and a writer who knows it can recognize a zone they have never read about.

A zone has an **edge**, and the Veil around it takes on the zone's character. Around the Cinder Fields it is cold and brittle, like walking on broken glass; around the Ageless Spring it is thick as honey; around the Silent Court it is a web of chains and scales. Crossing that edge has its own price, and the price takes the zone's form: instead of the ordinary forgetting the Veil exacts, a traveller entering the Fields grows numb and forgets why they came, one entering the Grammar of War feels bound to obey orders they do not remember being given, one entering the Mirror of Regret forgets their own achievements in the face of what they lack.

A zone has a **gate** in the world: the kind of place it is reached from, which is the kind of place it leans towards. The Fields are entered from volcanic vents and scorched battlefields, the Truthwell from wells and springs and sacred groves, the Ghost Step from old roads and pilgrim paths, the Stopped Clock from clock towers and ruins and the sites of temporal magic.

A zone has **residents** of three kinds: natives, adapted to its law so well that they cannot easily live outside it, who usually guard it as a sacred place; the caught, visitors who stayed too long, panicked, or died there and became part of the zone, frozen, drowned, absorbed, or looped; and keepers, wardens, guides, or jailers, whose work is to hold the zone's balance or its prisoners.

And a zone has a **lesson**, which travellers repeat in almost the same words wherever they go: come with a purpose and keep it, carry something that reminds you who you are, do not linger, and remember your name.

## A Natural History of the Zones

The known zones are catalogued by their parent Harmonic, and a tour of the catalogue is a tour of what each Harmonic means. None of the recorded zones belongs to one place on Caeldon. Each is a kind, recorded wherever the conditions for it come together, and the same kind may be found in a far valley and in the cellar of a ruined town.

### *From the Crucible*

The Crucible is energy, heat, and transformation, and its zones are fire turned strange.

The **Cinder Fields** are the most famous of them: the Crucible's energy turned inside out, so that fire consumes heat instead of producing it. A persistent zone of strong override, they are found in volcanic country, on scorched battlefields, and where great workings of fire once burned. The flames are translucent blue and burn without fuel in flickering patches across a flat expanse of grey cinder that crunches underfoot like packed snow. The light is spectral, the shadows sharp and tinged with blue, and even the sun looks dim and far away. The air is bitterly cold and dry and smells of ozone, burnt metal, and winter frost. There is no

roar of flame, only a low crackling hiss like ice cracking on a frozen lake, and the silences between are worse. What the cold fire consumes, it preserves: wood does not turn to ash but to splinters like glass, and the trees and buildings it has taken stand as blackened, frozen silhouettes. And the fire moves towards warmth. A living body is a beacon to it and a campfire a magnet, and the stronger the heat, the faster the blue flames creep towards it.

The Fields have natives, the **Frost-Burned**, hermit-guardians with cracked, blue-tinged skin, pale unblinking eyes, and breath that always shows. They draw their strength from the blue fire itself and cannot leave the zone without freezing solid; they speak in whispers, because loud sounds stir the flames, and they hold the Fields sacred as the place where fire and ice are one. **Cold-salamanders** of blue flame and frost slither through the cinder hunting heat; larger **Frost-Wyrms** can drain the warmth from a creature in moments, and **Cinder-Moths** swarm warm bodies. Some say the fire itself has a kind of awareness. Travellers caught by it stand among the dead trees as statues of ice and cinder, faces locked in surprise; a few can be revived if warmed fast enough, most cannot. People come for what the Fields yield: cold fire, captured and used in alchemy and enchantment and to forge metals that resist heat; **cinder glass**, sharp and durable, made from what the fire consumed; and the cold itself, which keeps anything left in it. They are told to keep moving, light no fires, and never stare into the blue flames, which some find hard to look away from. Those aligned with Ignis hold the Fields up as a caution: this, they say, is what comes of drawing on fire without giving back. Delvers who gather cold-fire tell of the camp that lit one torch too many and was found at dawn as grey, frost-split shapes around a blue flame, and of the salamander-hunter who wore a coat of their hides and never felt warm again.

The **Storm Heart** is a perpetual lightning storm in which the order of things is literally turned over. Lightning does not fall here; it rises from the ground and strikes upward into the clouds. The zone is a flat plain of blackened, glassy earth fused by countless strikes, cracked and veined with glowing energy, with natural crystal spires that channel the bolts. Its light comes in blinding, strobing flashes with near-darkness between, its thunder never stops, and the lightning does not crack but whines. Hair stands on end, sparks jump between objects, and gravity is weakened or reversed in patches, so that rain, debris, and travellers can float up into the storm's core. The storm feeds on motion and heat: movement draws lightning, warmth draws bolts, and everything in the zone conducts, metal, water, and flesh alike. Its **Storm-Walkers**, with skin crackling with static and hair floating like a halo, ride the lightning to travel and speak in bursts. **The Struck** are visitors who were hit and survived, marked with glowing branching scars, and drawn back to the storm until they become part of it. **Thunder-Wyrms** swim through the bolts and **Storm-Hawks** with wings of lightning dive from the clouds. Smiths come for **storm-steel**, metal forged in the storm that holds and gives back charge. They are told to carry nothing of metal, move slowly, stay low, and lie flat when the charge builds. Weaponsmiths pay a fortune for lightning-tempered steel, and the songs remember the smith-hero who rode the upward bolts to the storm's core and came down with a blade that still crackles.

The **Forge Deep** is a pocket of slowed time inside a volcano, among deep magma chambers or the sites of ancient fire: a vast cavern of slow magma rivers, anvil-like formations of obsidian, and forges the size of halls. Its light pulses with the fire's slow rhythm, its heat is a weight on the body rather than a burn, and a hammer stroke rings for minutes. Time runs far slower inside than outside, so that an hour in the Deep may be a year in the world above. Heat does not leave any-

thing once it is there, so cooling takes generations; metals that will not join anywhere else fuse perfectly; and the longer a smith works on a thing, the more of their will and Pattern goes into it, so that a blade worked for a decade remembers its maker. Its **Smiths of the Deep**, with skin like cooled lava and eyes of molten gold, never hurry; they cool over centuries rather than age, will live as long as they go on forging, and give centuries to a single work. **Coolers** manage the release of heat, for if the cooling is disrupted the stored heat erupts and destroys the zone. Smiths and artefact-makers come for what can be made nowhere else: alloys that never rust, weapons that never dull, objects heavy with long intent. The price is time. A week below may be decades or centuries above, and the apprentice who climbs out may find everyone they knew long dead. The Smiths teach every newcomer the same thing first: nothing here can be hurried. The songs tell of blades from the Deep that never dull, and of the apprentice who went down for a week to finish one and came up to find her kingdom gone, her name a legend, and the sword she made already lost.

### *From the Surging Deep*

The Surging Deep is water, flow, and life, and its zones are life in excess and water that remembers.

The **Drowning Garden** is a submerged forest where breathing runs backwards. It is found in deep lakes, flooded forests, and coastal caves: a dense wood of towering kelp, coral trees, and flowering water plants, its floor a carpet of moss and sand dotted with anemones, its fish moving between the branches like birds. Light comes down in dancing beams and the depths glow blue-green. The water is warm and tastes of salt and minerals, and air-breathers can breathe it, while the plants of the Garden would suffocate in the open air above. Everything floats a little; walking is possible, swimming natural. And everything grows fast. Plants put on inches in an hour, wounds heal quickly, and the body ages: a day in the Garden may cost a week, and at the bottom, a lifetime may go in an hour. Its **Gill-Folk**, green to deep blue, webbed and gilled, tend the forest as gardeners, speak a singsong tongue like bubbling water, and live rich, full, short lives. **The Air-Drowned** are visitors who panicked and tried to hold their breath, and now float near the surface in a suspended drowning, unable to breathe either element; **the Overgrown** stayed too long and sprouted coral. Herbalists come for plants found nowhere else, the sick for water that heals though it ages, and the curious for water that lets an air-breather breathe beneath the surface for a while once carried out. The Garden asks one thing of all of them: to give up the instinct to hold their breath. Herb-gatherers tell of the girl who went down to the bottom of the Garden for a flower to save her father and climbed out an old woman, the flower still fresh in her hand.

The **Tidal Mirror** is a pool that reflects not the present but time. It appears in still lakes at dawn, deep pools beneath waterfalls, and coastal lagoons, a circle of water ringed with smooth stones, flat as glass and unrippled even in wind, darker than the world around it. A traveller who looks in does not see their face as it is but as it was years ago or will be years hence, or sees the place itself as it was centuries ago or will be when it is dust. The offset is fixed for any pool, set by the water's depth. If the reflection shows a sunset, the shore is bathed in sunset light at noon; if it shows a fire, the air smells of smoke. Things dropped in are swapped for their counterparts from the reflected time, so that a coin thrown in may come back an ancient one, and a traveller who goes into the water goes into that time and stays there until they surface. The water also keeps the memories of everyone who has ever looked into it. Its **Echo-Divers**, pale as wet paper with black eyes, live partly in the past and warn every visitor not to look too long; the **Surface-Walkers**, often the Echoes of those who drowned there, walk on the

water and lure travellers to step out onto it and fall through. **The Drifters** are those caught in the reflected time, visible in the water and unreachable from the shore, ageing at its rate. People come to retrieve a lost heirloom or letter, to see someone they lost one more time, or to glimpse what is coming, and the ones who come back are the ones who chose the present over a better-looking time in the water. Fisherfolk tell of the widow who saw her drowned husband alive in the reflected tide and walked in to reach him, and of the raider captain who drew a sword out of the water from the past, only for it to crumble in his first fight.

The **Blood River** is life without balance. An ephemeral zone of strong override, it wakes in fertile valleys, on ancient battlefields, and near great sources of life and death, and runs as a thick crimson flow that does not merely move but pulses, beating in time with the heart of the strongest creature near it. Its banks are soft and rich and crowded with oversized plants feeding on it, the air is heavy with iron, copper, and wet earth, the ground throbs underfoot, and its sound is not rushing water but a slurping, gurgling heartbeat. A sip of it closes a mortal wound, regrows a limb, or cures a disease at once, and grants a surge of strength. Every healing is taken from somewhere: the river drains the life of the land around it, crops wither, animals die, and the soil on its banks turns to ash. It is addictive, and withdrawal brings rapid ageing and death. Its **Hemophages**, pale, red-veined, and black-eyed, guard it as its priests and hunt travellers to feed it; **the Bloated** drank too much and are turning into the river; **Blood-Eels** and web-spinning **Blood-Spinners** hunt its banks. It calls to the living. People come to heal a dying loved one or to cheat death, and most learn that every healing it gives was paid for by the land around it, and in the end by the drinker. Its tales are of bargains: the mother who carried her dying son to its bank and came home with a healthy child and a withered farm, the warlord whose warband drank and fought for a season without a scratch, then turned to red water on the march home.

### *From the Iron Backbone*

The Iron Backbone is structure and stability, and its zones are stone that sings, weighs, and moves.

The **Crystal Spire** is a permanent zone of total override on high peaks, in deep caverns, and at sites of ancient stress in the rock: a towering spire of faceted crystal, amethyst, sapphire, and quartz, rising from a floor of glassy stone. There, sound is not a vibration but a substance. It does not fade; the crystals absorb it and keep it, so that a whisper spoken a century ago is still in the walls. The light comes from the crystals and pulses with the sounds they hold, a low hum glowing amber, a shriek flashing white. Every footstep makes a chord, every word echoes layered with the voices of those who spoke before, and silence is painful. The crystals hold the sounds and the sounds hold the crystals, so that a crystal silenced shatters, and a chain of them can bring down the structure around it. Its **Crystal Singers**, translucent and faceted, speak in chords and harmonies rather than words, and spend their lives curating the sounds, keeping what matters and silencing what is dangerous; deeper in, **Lattice Guardians**, merged with the crystal, keep the most dangerous sounds from ever being released. Visitors who could not bear a frequency wander broken, making painful noises that draw worse. What the Spire yields is sound in solid form: shards that burst with a stored scream, gems that carry a whisper across a distance, and crystals that hold the last moments of a dying person and play them back. The wise move quietly and say nothing they would not want kept. Treasure-seekers come for the crystals that hold old voices, a king's last order, a lost song, a murderer's confession, and the tale of the thief who shouted when a shard cut him and brought the whole spire down on his band is told to every apprentice harvester.

The **Gravity Well** is a transient zone where the Backbone's mass collapses towards a single point. It forms in deep mines, collapsed caverns, the bases of great mountains, and the sites of old magical collapse: a vast bowl or a shaft that seems to drop forever, its ground cracked and compressed, with stones and dust hanging in the air and drifting slowly inward. Weight rises towards the centre, from double at the rim to crushing at the heart. Colours darken, light sags, shadows stretch long towards the middle, the air is thick and hard to breathe, a shout comes out as a whisper, and stone groans constantly under the strain. What moves is hard to stop and what is still is hard to move. Wood grows hard as iron and water turns to crystal ice, and time slows near the centre, so that a minute there may be an hour outside and a day in the Well weeks in the world. Its **Weight-Bearers**, squat, thick-boned, with skin like compressed stone, work it as a quarry and build things there of impossible strength; spindly **Floaters** scout its lighter edges; **the Crushed**, visitors who went too far in, are pressed into the stone like fossils, still aware. Prospectors come for **Well-Iron** and other compressed metals, salvagers for what the Well has pulled in, and for all of them the climb back out is the hardest part. Salvagers say the bottom of the Well is paved with what it has taken: armour, carts, the hoard of a fallen hold, and the stone faces of those who went in after it, still watching.

The **Flux Maze** is structure that will not hold still. In deep caverns, ancient ruins, and the foundations of great mountains, it is a labyrinth of stone corridors that rearranges itself around whoever is inside, as if it were thinking: stairs lead to ceilings, doors open on solid rock, the floor tilts as the walls move, and the sound of grinding stone and clicking locks never stops. It anticipates its travellers, closing the most logical way before they can take it; it tightens when they are afraid and opens when they are calm; and it remembers every path they have taken and will not let them retrace it. Its **Stone-Walkers**, with skin like polished granite and eyes lit like the magma veins in its walls, move through the stone itself, guide and test in equal measure, and speak in riddles. Rarer beings have learned to bend the Maze, opening corridors or guarding exits for a toll or a riddle. At its unstable heart, it is said, lies a **Stone-Heart** that lets its bearer feel every weakness and shift in the ground. Some live within its walls: there are settlements in the Maze reachable only by those who know the song of the stone. The ones who get out, travellers say, are the ones who stopped trying to solve it and learned to move with it. Treasure-seekers say the Maze keeps the hoards of everyone it has eaten, and the tale of the delver who mapped it for thirty years and was found dead clutching a map of a different maze keeps most of them out.

### *From the Unbound Gale*

The Unbound Gale is motion and freedom, and its zones are wind that speaks, wind that is mute, and air that holds up whatever believes it can fly.

The **Whispering Winds** blow through a high pass, a canyon, or the ruins on a windy peak, an open country of jagged rock, wind-carved cliffs, and bent trees, too exposed for any building. The wind there never stops, and it speaks. Every gust carries fragments of conversations, last words, confessions, and songs from centuries past, in a thousand tongues, some of them dead; a voice from a battlefield smells of smoke and iron, a voice from a wedding of flowers and wine. Every sound made in the valley is caught and repeated, a whisper heard days later and a shout for years, and voices from different times converge, so that a traveller may hear something said a thousand years ago and something not yet said at all. The voices are not neutral: some encourage, some despair, and a strong one can take hold of a listener and speak through them. And the wind carries everything off again, scattering any voice a traveller tries to hold. Its **Wind-Listeners**, stone-

skinned and long-eared, keep their eyes covered and live by hearing; the **Lost Voices** are visitors whose bodies are gone and whose voices have joined the chorus. People come to learn what no book holds, to speak with the dead, or to listen for one particular voice, and those who find it are the ones most likely to stay listening too long. Treasure-seekers listen for the dead telling where they buried their hoards, and the tales say the winds tell them gladly, and lie as often as not.

The **Silent Gale** is the Gale's paradox: a wind of hurricane force that makes no sound at all. It strikes high passes, canyons, and open plains in storms, a transient zone that comes and goes with the weather. Trees bend and snap without a crack, rocks shatter without a clatter, debris flies in soundless arcs, and the ground is scored with parallel grooves by the silent blast. A scream vibrates in the skull and never reaches the air; the only sounds are a traveller's own heartbeat and breath, heard through the bones, and a painful fullness in the ears. Spoken magic fails entirely, and so does spoken liturgy: a working that depends on a spoken word does nothing, while gestures, runes, and focus objects still work. Worst of all, the wind gives no warning before it strikes. Its **Mute-Walkers**, wiry and wind-polished, speak in signs and feel one another through the ground, and hold the zone sacred as a place where the world's noise is stripped away; its predators, the **Wind-Ghosts**, are disturbances in the air that hunt by the vibration of a living body. Most people in the Silent Gale were caught by a shift in the weather; a few go in on purpose to lose pursuers or to sit in absolute silence. Afterwards, what they say they missed most is a friend's voice. Outlaws know the Gale as a place where no hue and cry can follow, and the tale of the bandit band that hid in it from a lord's riders and was never heard from again, in any sense, is told in every outlaw camp in the hills.

The **Sky Isles** are a scattered archipelago of floating land, from rocky outcrops to great masses of earth, covered in wind-swept grass and stunted trees with roots hanging in the open air, where waterfalls pour off the edges and turn to mist before they land. The sky is a vivid blue, the air thin and sweet with high flowers, and the islands chime faintly as they drift. There, gravity answers to belief. A traveller who believes they are heavy sinks; one who believes they are light floats, and can walk on air or climb stairs that are not there. The islands drift wherever the shared attention of those on them points, and spin or stall when it scatters. A fall is not fatal unless the faller believes it will be. But a traveller who loses focus, or sleeps without anchoring their mind to the island, drifts away. Its **Sky-Walkers**, slender and bright-eyed, rest without ever letting go of their anchor, and speak softly, because loud voices unsettle the islands; the rarest of them can hold an island in place against everyone else's drift. Even its birds steer by thought. Visitors come to fly, to clear their heads, or to escape the weight of the world, and the ones who come back have learned that doubt, not weight, is what makes a person fall. The tale everyone knows is of the boy who flew between the isles on a dare and fell the moment someone shouted that he could not fly; the ones who make the crossing now go in silence.

### *From the Dreaming Veil*

The Dreaming Veil is imagination and dream, and its zones are where dreams stop waiting for sleep.

The **Lucid Wastes** are a desert built by the mind that walks in it: grey sand like ash in dunes that rise and fall like breathing lungs, pierced by black spires like broken teeth, under a light with no sun that seems to come from the traveller's own anxiety. They open in deserts and other places of isolation and sleeplessness, and they answer to fear. A fear of falling turns the sand to a sinking pit; a fear of the dark puts out the horizon; guilt becomes a shadow that follows. The more afraid the traveller is, the deeper the sand, and the more the Wastes feed on that fear, the worse they grow. Faceless **Night-Markers**, the shapes of a

traveller's own fears, stalk them, and can be dispelled only by overcoming the fear that made them. Travellers who give in become part of the terrain; the rare few who master their fear can reshape the Wastes as they please, and guide others. Nobody chooses the Wastes the first time, for people fall in through a nightmare that will not end; some go back on purpose, to face one fear, and come away knowing exactly what they are afraid of. Those who came back speak of meeting the beast they feared most as children, grown to the size of their fear; the ones who killed it say it was the hardest fight of their lives, and that no one else saw the blood.

The **Nightmare Nexus** is where the nightmares of many minds run together. An ephemeral zone of total override, it wakes in places of mass trauma and great fear, or out of the shared dreaming of a sleeping town: a labyrinth of impossible geometry whose architecture mimics the inside of a mind, a hall of eyes, a room of teeth, a forest of screaming trees, under a flickering, hostile light where shadows leave their owners. Whispers come in the voices of people the traveller knows, saying things they never said. The most feared thing in a mind becomes the zone's chief predator, and the fears of different dreamers merge into worse things than any one could make. The only defence is to realize that one is dreaming. Lucidity does not make the Nexus obey; what it has dreamed has flesh and stays solid. But a lucid traveller can wound that flesh and fight back, and what the Nexus gives a body remains when it is carried out: the hide, teeth, and bone of a slain nightmare can be worked like any other material. Those it consumes lie comatose in the waking world, their minds caught in their worst dream. The ones who return have learned to recognize a dream while it is trying to eat them. Plague years and long sieges are when the Nexus feeds best: whole towns have woken screaming from the same dream, and songs tell of the city where the shared nightmare walked out into the streets and had to be fought with swords.

The **Muse's Studio** is a workshop where ideas take bodily form. A persistent zone of moderate override, it settles in abandoned theatres, quiet attics, and the places where great art was made: easels lean against walls that are not there, tables float, canvases stretch across the ceiling, and the floor is littered with sketches, broken instruments, and half-built machines. The air smells of oil paint, ink, clay, and wood shavings. A sketch drawn there becomes a real painting, a melody hummed floats as a visible ribbon, and a story told aloud raises its characters, because the zone turns the matter, light, and sound at hand into the shape of whatever is imagined with enough force. It does not tell genius from madness. A moment of boredom gathers dust into a heap; a flash of anger draws heat and grit together into a shard of glass. Whatever is made is a rough draft, and fades or rusts if it is not finished. Its **Muses**, shifting figures of colour and voice who embody the aspects of making, encourage and tempt in equal measure. Visitors who lose the power to make anything at all stand frozen in grey dust. Artists come to break a block or make a masterpiece, and some stay for years while their bodies wither elsewhere. They leave having seen what their stray thoughts would build, given matter to build with. The tale of the painter whose fear of wolves came off the canvas and ate him is told in every workshop that has heard of the Studio; so is the tale of the sculptor who carved a guardian there that still walks the hills.

### *From the Eternal Record*

The Eternal Record is memory and knowledge, and its two known zones are its opposites: a record of what never was, and a record kept too well.

The **Lost Archive** is the Record turned inside out. It grows in abandoned libraries and forgotten ruins, and above all in places where knowledge was deliberately destroyed: an endless maze of twisting shelves, stairs to nowhere, and floors deep in loose pages, lit by books that glow or lie in darkness. It holds every book that was never written, every letter that was burned, every song hummed and never set down, every buried truth, and every history that could have been. The books are not fixed. A history rewrites itself to the reader's expectations or fears; two books may merge into a new and unstable one; and reading does not inform, it implants, so that a reader does not learn about a battle but remembers fighting in it. The deeper a traveller goes, the more of their own memory the Archive takes to feed itself. Its **Librarians**, parchment-skinned with inkwell eyes, try to order the chaos and warn against obsession; visitors who stay too long turn into books, and are shelved with the rest. Scholars come for lost knowledge, the bereaved for lost memories, the stubborn for the truth, and those who leave with their own past intact have seen how easily it could have been rewritten. Scholars tell of the reader who found the book of the life she should have had and came out believing it, and of the thief who went in to steal a lost spell and came out remembering a childhood that was not his.

The **Memory Palace** is the Record made private: a mansion of the mind, built in deep meditation chambers, in ruins, and at sites of great pain. It takes the shape of the person who enters it, a library for a scholar, a fortress for a soldier, a sprawling playhouse for a child, and its rooms glow with the feeling of the memories they hold, gold for joy, dim blue for grief, shadow for what has been pushed away. Memories there are rooms and objects that can be walked through, touched, and moved; one locked in a vault cannot be forgotten, one left in a drawer can be lost with the drawer. Everything kept there is kept perfectly, and that is the danger: a painful memory stays as painful as the day it happened, and the deeper a traveller goes into their own past, the harder it becomes to form new memories or to come back to the present at all. Its **Curators**, shaped like younger selves or idealized loved ones, keep its order and will not open the rooms of what has been repressed. People use it to recover what they lost, lock away what hurts, or store what they must know, and the danger they all describe is the same: the rooms are easier to stay in than the present is to return to. The tale told of the Palace is of the widower who built a room for his wife's last summer and went back every night until he forgot the way out, and of the spy who locked his secrets there so well that his torturers learned nothing, and neither did he.

### *From the Shifting Path*

The Shifting Path is possibility and chance, and its zones show the future too many ways, too randomly, or too clearly.

The **Forking Road** is a crossroads where every step splits the world. It appears at junctions, at places of decision, and where history itself once divided: a flat plain of grey stone that fractures into roads paved with cobbles, light, water, or bone, intersecting, looping, and merging towards different horizons. Light comes from where the paths cross, and shadows are many, showing the traveller's silhouette at other ages and in other states. The traveller sees the outcome of every road they did not take, and the other selves who took them; every possible end of a conversation is heard at once. Probable paths glow gold and unlikely ones flicker violet. A firm choice snaps the branches back into one, and looking too hard at any one path destroys it. Its **Wayfinders** step sideways between branches to avoid danger and guide the lost; its gamblers feed on high stakes. People walk the Road hoping for a better future, a mistake undone, or a missed chance found again, and most come back judging the choices they made differently. Wayside tales tell of the soldier

who walked the Road looking for the branch where his brother lived, found it, and could not leave it, and of the brigand who used the Road to slip every ambush until he met himself waiting on the other path.

The **Probability Fog** is a rolling mist in which luck is the only law. It gathers on foggy moors, at crossroads at dawn, and wherever an outcome hangs in the balance, and hides not just the way but the result of every action. A step may move a traveller a mile, a sword may turn to water in the hand, a door may open onto yesterday, a torch may shed darkness instead of light. The ground changes from stone to moss to water to flowers within a few paces, the smell changes every few breaths, and sounds arrive late, backwards, or not at all. Distant possibilities meet in it, so that a traveller may meet another version of themselves. Its **Drifters**, adapted to the chaos, have forms that shift with every step and treat the whole place as a game. Visitors who have a run of extraordinary luck there should expect it to turn, because the Fog balances its scales; those who are transformed and cannot change back become part of it. Gamblers and the desperate come chasing a lucky break, carrying one object they know well and checking that it is still the same, and those who come out have stopped planning and learned to adapt. Gamblers tell of the beggar who walked into the Fog and came out a lord's heir, and of the lord who followed him in and came out a goat.

The **Prophecy's Edge** is the Path narrowed to one blinding point. It forms on high cliffs, at old observatories, and at the places where peoples have always gone to read the future: a vast flat plateau with a mirror-like ground, ending at a precipice beyond which hang silent, translucent images of what is coming, battles, coronations, births, and deaths, against a horizon of light. The air is thin and cold and smells of old parchment, and something ticks like a clock that cannot be stopped. The traveller sees the most heavily weighted future with near-perfect clarity, from their own next step to the fall of kingdoms centuries away, and is pressed hard to act in keeping with it. This is not predestination but songline pressure at its fiercest: the line can still be broken, but every step against it costs more, and looking reinforces what is seen. Its **Seers**, with white or golden eyes, move as if already walking the path they have seen and speak only of what will happen. **The Compelled** are visitors acting out their parts, their wills pressed almost flat; **the Blind** are the rare ones who closed their eyes, and stumble terrified through the zone trying to break the cycle. People climb to the Edge to learn their future, and pay for the answer afterwards, in the effort of every step they take against it. The Edge is in half the hero-songs: the champion who saw his death there and rode out to meet it anyway, the queen who saw her city burn and spent forty years making it not quite come true.

### *From the Binding Song*

The Binding Song is language and binding, and it has more known zones than any other Harmonic: four places where words carry their full weight.

The **Silent Court** is a round chamber of polished black stone with a raised dais at its centre and empty benches around the walls, found in old judgement halls, abandoned temples, places of ordeal, and the sites of great oaths and broken ones. Translucent weights float in its air, one for every word spoken. A lie falls like a heavy thud and lies like a stone in the mouth, adding weight to the speaker; a truth rings like a clear chime and feels like light, and makes the speaker lighter. A promise made there forges a physical chain between the one who made it and the one who heard it, which tightens if the promise is broken. The more deceit in the room, the heavier everything grows, and empty chatter is painful, like swallowing glass. Its first law is silence: nothing may be said lightly, and whatever is said binds. Its **Judges**, masked in obsidian, carry scales that weigh every word and never speak. **The Bur-**

**dened** kneel or crawl under the weight of their own lies until they confess; **the Light-Bringers**, who have kept every oath and said nothing they did not mean, float above the floor. A monastery stands within one such Court, whose monks study the weight of words. People come for a judgement the strong cannot buy, to swear an oath that cannot be broken, or to confess, and leave lighter or heavier according to what they said there. The tales of the Court are of oath-breakers dragged there by their enemies and crushed under their own words, and of the sworn brothers whose oath made there held them together through a war and dragged one down when the other broke it.

The **Name Bound** is the Song narrowed to names. It is found in old archives, judgement halls, places of oath-taking, and wherever an identity was forged or stolen: stone corridors lined with scrolls and tablets, sigils glowing underfoot, doors sealed with wax bearing names, glyphs drifting in the air like dust and chains of glowing script hanging between things and beings. Most beings with a stable identity carry a **True Name** there, a reference fixed to who they are, which floats above them in glowing letters and cannot be hidden. Beings whose identity is fluid, shared, or unstable may have none. To speak someone's True Name there is to command them, and they must obey or suffer pain, paralysis, or death; every agreement made in the zone binds; and to speak another's name without leave is itself punished, with muteness or lost memory. Its **Scribes**, with quills for fingertips, record every name and contract and speak only in declarations. **The Bound** move like puppets for whoever holds their name; **the Nameless** have hidden theirs and steal others', and there are thieves of names who sell them. Visitors come to seal a bargain, win back a stolen name, or learn an enemy's True Name. They bring a false name and never speak their own, and whatever else they take home, they guard their own name more closely afterwards. Name-thieves are the terror of the tales: the sorcerer who stole a warlord's True Name and rode his army home, and the village that hid its children's names under false ones for a generation after a Thief passed through.

The **Grammar of War** wakes only around a battle fought with fierce conviction, and fades when the fighting stops. In it, orders become physical law. "Hold the line" makes soldiers immovable; "charge" lends impossible speed; at the order to dig in, the trenches deepen, and at the order to fortify, walls rise. A shouted order leaves a brief luminous afterimage in the shape of the word, and a command passing through the ranks feels like a wave of pressure. The force of an order follows the speaker's conviction, the number who believe in it, and the speaker's rank, so that a king outranks a captain and a beloved leader outranks a tyrant; clear, simple orders are stronger than complicated ones; and two generals shouting opposite commands make the world stutter, soldiers freeze, the ground cracks, and the air shimmers. Spectral **Word-Generals**, commanders of past battles in the armour of a dozen ages, repeat their last orders forever. **The Commanded** carry out the last order they received until they fall, so that a soldier told to hold may stand until he dies of thirst; **the Disobedient** keep their own will among comrades who have lost theirs. In a zone made of command, silence is the most frightening thing there is. Survivors give orders more sparingly afterwards, having seen what one can do. Veterans of a battle the Grammar woke in tell of the general whose one shout of "Hold!" froze both armies until the crows came, and of the herald who learned to speak there and was hired by every warlord who could pay.

The **Truthwell** is a body of water that rejects falsehood: a round stone basin, worn smooth by centuries and often carved around its rim with old runes of binding and ordeal, enclosing a deep shaft of unnaturally pure water. It is found at ancient wells and springs, in sacred groves, and where oaths have been sworn for generations.

When the truth is spoken there, the water is cool, clear, and restoring. When a lie is spoken, it reacts at once and in proportion: it may boil and scald, freeze and trap, turn a churning black or a searing red, or rise up to choke the speaker, and the air fills with the smell of sulphur, rot, or burning hair. A promise made while drinking from it binds, and if it is broken the water rises and drowns the one who broke it. The Well judges only what is said aloud, so a truth held back is no defence, and silence before its question is taken as a lie. Its **Water-Robed**, stone-skinned, with eyes like its surface, hold it as a sacred trust. **The Choked**, liars it drowned, hang preserved in the water as warnings, their Echoes held there until their lies are confessed or named. Water from the Well can be carried away, and anyone made to drink it can speak only facts. People come to end a quarrel beyond doubt, to swear an oath, or to confess, and most leave having said aloud something they had kept even from themselves. Feuding houses drag one another to the Truthwell, and the tale of the chieftain who swore his innocence there and went under, still swearing, is the one every child knows.

### *From the Whispering Trace*

The Whispering Trace is death, reflection, and remnant, and its zones are where the dead and the might-have-been still walk.

The **Ghost Step** is a stretch of road where the past has folded back over the present. It is found on ancient roads, forgotten pilgrim routes, and battlefields, a transient zone of moderate override: the present looks washed out, sepia and grey, while the road's own echo shows it as it was, paved and busy, in faded spectral colour. The traveller walks in the footsteps of everyone who walked it before, casting their own shadow and a second, fainter one. Every step wakes an older one, a boot from a forgotten age or a running child; woodsmoke from a fire that burned centuries ago drifts across the road; and the ground feels thick underfoot, as though weighed down by countless travellers. The echoes are half solid, like cold mist, and a violent one, a battle replaying, can knock a traveller down. They grow stronger with the traveller's own feelings, fear calling up the frightened dead and peace the content ones. Its **Path-Echoes** repeat their routines forever, a soldier marching, a merchant haggling, taking no notice of the living. Some visitors forget they are alive and walk on with the dead until they become echoes themselves; strong echoes can follow a traveller off the road and haunt them. Pilgrims who follow Umbra walk it on purpose, to keep the dead from being forgotten, and come off it knowing how many feet wore the road before theirs. Every old road with a Step on it has its ghost-march: the lost army that passes at dusk once a year, and the tale of the boy who fell in step with it and was seen marching with it the next year, and the next.

The **Soul Anchor** is the common name for a zone where the Whispering Trace has become a prison. There is no detachable soul in this cosmos, and scholars use the name carefully; what the Anchor holds is the Echo a person leaves at death, the remnant of their Pattern. It forms on ancient burial grounds, at sites of mass sacrifice, in forgotten catacombs, and where a powerful Echo was bound against its release: a land of broken monuments, shattered headstones, and dead trees under an iron-hard ground, with the static of trapped remnants shimmering in the air and a low drone like a million voices begging. When a being dies within it, its Echo does not soften, scatter, or pass into Record. It is caught and pinned within a few paces of where it fell, and made to replay its last moments, or its life, over and over, aware enough to suffer the repetition and too damaged to move on. The more Echoes the Anchor holds, the stronger it grows. It can be broken only by a particular rite, by resolving the business that holds its prisoners, or by giving them a stronger path into Record. The **Anchored** flicker on their chains, grasping at travellers as liberators

or as new prisoners; its keepers, constructs or remnant beings, reinforce the chains and keep the loops turning. The trapped Echoes give off a potent remnant energy that can be harvested for magic, and they hold secrets of what they saw. People come to free a loved one, to pry a secret from the dead, or to study death, and the first rule of the place is not to die there. Songs tell of the daughter who went into an Anchor to free her father's Echo from the death he kept repeating, and of the necromancers who keep Anchors as prisons for their enemies' dead.

The **Mirror of Regret** shows the life a person would have lived had they chosen differently. An ephemeral zone of strong override, it appears in still lakes at dawn, polished obsidian pools, abandoned bathhouses, and places of great loss: a small, perfectly still pool or a great standing slab of black glass in a misty, featureless void. The reflection is always brighter and warmer than the world around it, and always better. It shows not the future but the counterfactual past, aimed at the one choice the viewer most wishes they could undo: the child who was never born, the friend who did not die, the road not taken, with its sounds and smells reaching across. It cannot be touched or changed, and the longer a viewer stares, the more it pulls at their Pattern. **The Broken** sit beside it whispering to the reflection until they fade into it; some wake in the world believing they are the person in the glass. **The Acceptors**, who looked, accepted the pain, and turned away, warn others and help them leave. Guilt draws most visitors there before they ever decide to go, and those who manage to turn away usually make peace with the life they actually have. Songs tell of the old knight who looked into the Mirror, saw the farmer he might have been, and smashed it with his sword; the shards grew back by morning, and he was found among them.

### *From the Frozen Moment*

The Frozen Moment is time and stasis, and its zones are three degrees of stillness: a life that cannot change, a moment that cannot end, and a vault where seconds are ages.

The **Ageless Spring** is a permanent zone of total override, usually in a deep, secluded valley or among ancient ruins: a small round pool whose water glows softly from within, ringed by moss that never grows tall, flowers that never wilt, and trees in perfect health whose leaves never fall. The light is a golden twilight that never changes, and shadows neither lengthen nor shorten. There is no wind and no insect sound, only the trickle of the spring, which seems to loop endlessly. The water feels cool and heavy, like quicksilver. Inside the zone, time does not pass: nothing ages, nothing rots, and nothing heals, because the body has stopped trying to repair itself, so that a cut made there stays exactly as it was until it is tended outside. Those who drink live on without ageing, and without growing or changing either. The stillness is anchored to the spring itself, and if it is destroyed or covered, time rushes back all at once, often as sudden ageing or decay. Its **Lingerers**, those who drank and chose to stay, look exactly as they did when they drank, however many centuries have passed, and form small communities that guard it; a village beside one such spring is known where the old never die. Others drank and are trapped, wandering its edge while the seasons change outside. Guardians made by Resonants or by the Lingerers keep anyone from tampering with the water. Seekers of immortality come, and people carrying a dying loved one, and people hiding from the years, and those who walk away without drinking have usually decided that a life that cannot change is not worth keeping. Songs tell of the spring-village where the grandmothers have been grandmothers for three hundred years, and of the raiders who came to take the water and went home old men, their wounds still open.

The **Stopped Clock** is a pocket where time has simply halted at one instant. It is found in abandoned villages, old clock towers, the sites of powerful temporal workings, and places where someone tried to preserve a great moment. A town caught in one stands exactly as it was when the zone formed: a baker mid-knead, a child mid-laugh, rain hanging in the air like glass beads, chimney smoke frozen in curling ribbons, a dropped cup hovering above the floor. The light keeps the angle it had at that instant, so that a sunset may burn on the horizon forever. The colours look faded, and the only vivid thing in the place is the traveller, who moves through air as thick as setting glue while everything else stands still. The silence is absolute, not of emptiness but of a thousand held breaths. And the frozen are aware. Their eyes cannot move and their hearts cannot beat, but their minds run on, watching the traveller walk among them. Anything a traveller moves stays where it was put, and when time resumes the change goes with it: a moved knife may stab someone who was never stabbed, a shifted foot cause a fall that never happened, and the temptation to rearrange the frozen street for a better ending is overwhelming. Invisible **Gloom-Leeches**, born of the frozen people's despair, feed on it and deepen it. At the centre stands the **Clock-Keeper**, the local anchor of that one Clock, often the shade or remnant of whoever made it: a mage whose working ran away, a grieving parent who wished for one more moment. Frozen like the rest, the Keeper can speak to a visitor in thought, and is usually remorseful, desperate, or mad. If the Keeper is destroyed, persuaded to let go, or brought to accept the cost of time resuming, the Clock collapses and time runs on, and a Keeper whose zone causes paradox, or keeps a rightful ending from coming, may draw the attention of the Stewards who guard the order of time. Visitors come to take back a lost treasure, to look on a moment of history, or to find the Keeper and bargain for the zone's release, and they remember the frozen eyes following them. Ruin-delvers tell of a Clock that holds a royal wedding feast, gold on every table and the bride's eyes following every thief; the ones who took the gold say it was the worst thing they ever did. For the people inside, the perfect moment is a prison.

The **Time Lock** is a zone built on purpose: a vault of dilated time, drawn from the Frozen Moment, in which a single second lasts a thousand years outside. Time does flow in it, unlike the Stopped Clock, but at a crawl so slow it might as well be still. It lies in deep vaults, ancient treasuries, and sealed temples: a vast underground chamber of massive walls, iron doors, and sealed alcoves, without decoration, its shelves holding objects wrapped in cloth, sealed in resin, or cased in crystal, its floor of interlocking plates engraved with sigils of time. Everything has the patina of great age though nothing has aged. The light is a dim, thick glow; a shout arrives as a long groan minutes later; and under it all is a deep thrum like the Lock's own heartbeat. The Lock was made by whoever first understood that some things are too dangerous to destroy and too dangerous to leave in the flow of ordinary time: a cursed blade that kills whoever touches it, a plague without a cure, a prophecy that must never be read. Its **Bronze Sentries**, tall figures of living bronze with featureless masks, perceive time at the Lock's rate, so that the world outside is to them a blur of incomprehensible speed; they move only when they must, speak through gestures that take hours and the slow chiming of their armour, and count every object in their keeping as a threat to existence. **The Interred**, the things and beings sealed within, are as dangerous as on the day they were sealed, and will bargain, threaten, or deceive anyone who comes near to get out. The Lock opens only from inside, with the Sentries' consent, and no key, spell, or force breaks it from outside. Visitors come to lodge a dangerous object, retrieve a sealed one, or consult the Sentries about a threat nothing else can hold, and the shortest visit costs

ages outside: those who come out find their world has long forgotten them. The tales say the Lock keeps the worst things of every age, and that the Interred whisper bargains through the bronze to any thief who comes near; the songs never say whether anyone accepted.

## Living Beside a Zone

Zones are hazards, but they are also ecologies. Cold-salamanders hunt the thermal inversions of the Cinder Fields; fish breathe air and mammals breathe water in the Drowning Garden; birds in the Sky Isles steer by thought rather than instinct. Every zone with a long life has creatures that belong to it and to nowhere else, and many have peoples, the natives described above, whose bodies and customs answer its law so closely that the rest of the world seems to them hasty, noisy, rigid, or blind.

Mortals harvest them too. Cold fire from the Cinder Fields is used in alchemy and to forge metals that resist heat. Water from the Ageless Spring keeps whatever it touches; water from the Truth-well is carried away to make people speak the truth. Storm-steel, Well-Iron, cinder glass, crystals full of stored sound, nightmare bone, metals fused in the Forge Deep: much of what a mortal world calls a wonder was carried out of a zone by someone who knew how to go in and come back. **Zone-delvers** are a known kind on Caeldon: they come back rich, changed, or not at all, and every zone-edge inn has its wall of names for those who went in last season. Lords pay well for what they carry out, and hang those who sell it to a rival. And strong exposure to a zone can leave its mark on a person, a trait imprinted by the zone's law that stays after they leave.

Where a zone is persistent or permanent, people sometimes settle beside it and adapt to it, as river people adapt to a river. A village lives around an Ageless Spring, and its old do not die. A monastery stands in a Silent Court, its monks studying the weight of words. A settlement keeps house within the shifting walls of a Flux Maze, reachable only by those who know the song of the stone. These communities live by the zone's effects and guard it against anyone who would close it, and they are often the best guides to it and the least willing to see it shut.

## When a Zone Grows

The greatest danger is not any zone's particular law but **expansion**. A zone that grows too large or too intense can begin to consume the Material Plane around it and turn it into an extension of the Harmonic. The signs come by small steps: its edge moves outward a little, its effects grow stronger, creatures of the parent Harmonic begin to arrive, and at last it no longer needs a thin Veil or a careless mage to sustain it. A zone that has become self-sustaining is no longer a wound in the world. It is the beginning of a different world.

There are four known ways to hold one back, and none of them is free. **Counter-resonance** spends an opposing Harmonic against it, as the stillness of the Frozen Moment is set against a zone of the Crucible. The Veil at the zone's edge can be **reinforced** by ritual or by an artefact made for the purpose. The zone can be **starved**, its flow from the parent Harmonic cut off, which is both difficult and dangerous. Or a Resonant can be asked to seal the breach, and a power that seals a breach is owed worship or service afterwards. Whichever way is chosen, someone pays, and the people who live by the zone are usually the first to pay.

## What People Know

Of every tier of the cosmos, the zones are the one people know best, because they can walk up to its edges.

### *What Is Known*

Where a zone lies, what it does, and what it costs are often known precisely. Harvesters know how long a body can stay in the Cinder Fields, settlers know the hours of their spring, and carters sing their warnings from road to road, as *Songs of the Sheaf Road* does: what to do and what to leave alone, never why. The names this book gives the zones are the records' names; the people who live near one call it by a name of their own, and their knowledge rarely travels further than their road.

### *What Is Argued*

Why a zone is as it is, nobody knows for sure. Local faith reads it as a god's sign, gift, or punishment, and is sometimes right; craft lore reads it by what can be harvested from it; rival schools explain it by their own roots; and a Harmonic bleeding through a thin Veil is one scholar's account among several. Two peoples beside one zone may hold it to be a sanctuary and a wound, and nobody can settle it by looking. What becomes of a zone's natives when it fades is argued as well: scholars hold that they thin and drift back into the Harmonic the zone came from, where travellers may meet them again, changed, but nobody has followed one there to be sure.

## Tensions

- **Zones that will not stay small.** Any Resonant Zone can grow until it sustains itself, and the mortals who have settled zones such as the Ageless Spring live by the very effects that holding it back would end.
- **Moments held against time.** Each Stopped Clock is held by its Clock-Keeper, often the remnant of whoever made it, and ends only if the Keeper is destroyed, persuaded to let go, or brought to accept the cost of time resuming. For the people frozen inside, the perfect moment is a prison, and the one who can end it is the one who wanted it kept.
- **The frozen are watching.** Whatever a visitor moves inside a Stopped Clock stays moved when time resumes. A rearranged street can save a child or kill a stranger who was never in danger, and the people frozen in it are aware of every hand that touches them.
- **What the Lock keeps.** The Time Lock holds things too dangerous to destroy, and its Interred are as dangerous now as the day they were sealed, and want out. It opens only from inside, at the consent of Bronze Sentries who count every artefact a threat to existence, may seal in anyone they judge a threat, and hear no plea.
- **Truth by the jar.** Water from the Truthwell compels whoever drinks it to speak only facts, and it can be carried away. Whoever holds it can draw the truth out of anyone made to drink.
- **A future that leans.** Whoever looks out from the Prophecy's Edge sees the most heavily weighted future and is pressed towards it, and every look strengthens the line. Knowing the likely end makes it far harder to change, and a ruler who sends someone to look has made that future more likely.
- **What the dead are worth.** The Echoes trapped in a Soul Anchor give off a remnant energy that can be harvested for magic, and they hold the secrets of what they saw. Releasing them ends their suffering, and ends the harvest and the secrets with it.
- **The river's price.** A sip of the Blood River closes a mortal wound, and every healing it gives drains the land on its banks. Whoever drinks to save the dying is spending the fields along its banks, and its priests hunt travellers to feed it.

CHAPTER 3

# The Veil and the Outside

*Know where you are going. Know what you will pay. Do not linger, do not follow a voice you love, and remember your name.*

— the crossing-words, *On the Space Between Places*

Between any two planes lies the Veil, and the Veil is not a place. It is the space between places: a fog that is not water, corridors that are not built, a distance measured in will instead of miles. Travellers who have crossed it describe the noise of the world falling away behind them, the light going dim, sound going dull, and a loneliness so complete that some never find words for it afterwards. And beyond the Veil, beyond every plane and every Harmonic, lies the edge of everything: the Boundary, a shimmering membrane that only the mightiest of the powers can perceive, and past it the Nothing. No mortal has ever reached the Boundary and come back. Those who tried did not die. They were unmade, and nobody remembers who they were.

### AT A GLANCE

| | |
|---|---|
| **The Veil** | The fluid space between places, connecting every Anchor and every Harmonic; thinnest on the Material Plane. |
| **Distance** | Measured in intent, resonance, and difficulty, and time runs at its own rate. |
| **The toll** | Every crossing costs something: strength, time, a memory, a promise, or a piece of the traveller's Pattern. |
| **The Boundary** | The membrane between the ordered cosmos and the Nothing, held by the combined pressure of the Primes. |
| **The Nothing** | Absolute non-existence beyond the Boundary: no space, time, matter, energy, or thought. |
| **Beyond it** | By the most widely held view, other bubbles of order, each with its own laws and its own Primes. |

This chapter tells the truth of the Veil, the Boundary, and the Nothing. Little of it is known in the world. The Veil is crossed by few and explained by fewer, and no one has ever come back from the edge to describe it. What people know and believe is told in What People Know.

## The Space Between Places

The Veil connects everything. Every Anchor and every Harmonic lies within it, every journey from one plane to another passes through it, and no plane is ever wholly cut off from the rest. It is the skin of the universe: the membrane through which all travel must pass, and the canvas on which the Resonance Principle paints its anomalies. Where the planes are layers of the cosmos, the Veil is what lies between the layers and holds them in reach of one another.

It has no fixed shape. Two places far apart on the Material Plane may lie side by side in the Veil if they share a strong resonance, a battlefield and the Scourge, a library and the Eternal Record. Up and down mean nothing in it, and travellers steer by feeling the pull of where they mean to go. Distance there is not measured in miles but in **intent, resonance, and difficulty**: a journey that should take days may take moments if the traveller's will is strong, or an eternity if they are lost in their own doubts. Time is elastic. A minute spent in a foggy corridor may be a year at home, or the other way round. On the Material Plane, where space runs straight and time runs evenly, nobody has to think about such things; in the Veil, nobody can stop thinking about them.

It is the great equalizer. It strips away both the physical laws of the Anchors and the conceptual purity of the Harmonics, and leaves the traveller in a state of pure potential, among fog, shifting corridors, and geometries that could not be drawn, where the only constant is change. The strongest arm counts for nothing there and the surest footing gives way; what carries a traveller is the clarity of their purpose. The Veil is not the Nothing, but it shares something of its absence. In its deeper reaches the noise of the Material Plane fades, sound grows muffled, light dims, and the mind feels alone. This is why so many travellers speak afterwards of a dread they cannot explain. They have been, for a while, a long way from anything.

## The Fog

The Veil is most often described as a **fog**, and the fog is not vapour. It is **unmanifested reality**: the raw stuff of possibility and dream, the substance of the Shifting Path and the Dreaming Veil, waiting to be given form. Its thickness tells the traveller what kind of crossing they are making. Where it is thick, the way is hard, confusing, and dangerous, and travellers lose themselves easily. Where it runs clear, two places are strongly joined and the crossing is quick and safe. Old travellers read it as river pilots read water, by colour and movement, and they trust a clear stretch less than a novice does, because thick fog also hides what lives in it: the predators of the Veil, and the toll-keepers who may or may not be willing to help.

It has weather. Great workings of magic, surges in a Prime's current, and breaches of the Boundary raise **storms** in the Veil, sudden shifts in which the corridors move, the fog thickens or tears, and travellers caught in them may come out somewhere they never meant to go, or not come out at all. The same storms move the thin places of the world. A Veil that has always been thick between a village and the Harmonic behind it may thin after such a storm, and a zone may wake where none was known before.

## The Four Laws

The Veil's behaviour follows four laws, the rules of **resonant navigation**, and every traveller who has survived a crossing could recite them.

By the **law of intention**, the Veil answers the traveller's purpose. One who knows where they are going, and believes they can get there, finds the path clearing ahead. One who doubts finds a labyrinth. The Veil does not care whether the purpose is good, only whether it is clear.

By the **law of resonance**, a crossing between places that share a theme is easy, and one between places that do not is thick and hostile. A traveller going from an ancient library to the Eternal Record finds the Veil thin and clear; the same traveller going from that library to the Scourge finds it choked and hostile. It is the same law that sets battlefields beside the Scourge and counting-houses beside the Gilded Cage, seen from inside.

By the **law of cost**, every crossing is paid for. The price may be in the body, as exhaustion or lost time; in the mind, as lost memories or confusion; or in something deeper, a memory given up, a promise made, or a piece of the traveller's Pattern, the living configuration that makes a person who they are. The harder the crossing, the higher the price, and travellers have come home with years gone from their lives, with gaps in what they remember, and with less of themselves than they took.

> *Every road between the worlds is a toll-road, and no clerk stands at the gate to tell you the fare. The Veil weighs the crossing and takes what it weighs. A short way between like places costs an evening's weariness. A long way between unlike places may cost a year you will not find again, or the sound of a voice you meant to keep.*
>
> — on the law of cost, *On the Space Between Places*

By the **law of drift**, a traveller who loses focus begins to wander: into some Resonant Zone, onto the wrong Anchor, or into the fog for good. The drift is the Veil's first danger and its commonest. It does not strike; it simply lets go of whoever lets go of their purpose, and the drifting traveller passes from plane to plane without arriving anywhere, until the mind breaks or thins into the fog.

## The Many Faces of the Veil

The Veil is one thing, but it is not the same everywhere. Near each plane it takes on that plane's character, and so does the price it exacts. Travellers who have crossed often describe the approaches to the other planes as a sailor describes harbours, by how they feel and what they take, and their accounts agree well enough to be set down.

### *Towards the Anchors*

The approaches to the ten extreme Anchors, and the gates by which the Material Plane opens onto each, are described plane by plane in The Planes. Seen from inside the Veil, they fall into two families. Towards the planes of lack, the Veil takes. It is a storm of blades towards the Scourge, cold syrup towards the Ashen Wastes, burying sand towards the Parched, a field of glass towards the Frost-Bound, and a white noise like erasure towards the Silence, and each strips something from the mind: the knowledge of whom to trust, the reason for coming, memories dried to dust or frozen out of reach, and at the Silence the memory of ever having left home. Towards the planes of excess, the Veil does not take so much as overwhelm. Roots overgrow the past towards the Verdant Expanse; a maze that must be walked in a fixed order loops back on every wrong turn towards the Gilded Cage; a tunnel of light makes the traveller remember every shameful moment towards the Radiance; a vortex of voices dissolves the past into everyone else's present towards the Weave; and towards the Apex the way is smooth as ice, and what slides away is the traveller's own flaws, and sometimes their reasons for wanting to leave.

### *Towards the Harmonics*

Towards the **Crucible**, the Veil is a storm of fire and lightning, and crossing it feels like being roasted alive; it burns away all but the most intense memories. Towards the **Surging Deep** it is a network of currents and channels, and crossing it is like swimming; what it takes is dilution, as the traveller begins to forget themselves in the flow. Towards the **Iron Backbone** it is a network of tunnels and shafts, a climb rather than a walk, and instead of forgetting, the traveller carries the weight of the past with them as a burden. Towards the **Unbound Gale** it is all currents and eddies, like flying, and it scatters, so that travellers forget where they came from or where they meant to go.

Towards the **Dreaming Veil** it is a mist of thoughts, and travellers drift through it; memories come out disjointed and symbolic. Towards the **Eternal Record** it is a corridor of endless doors, like wandering a library that never ends, and the danger is overload: a traveller may remember everything and forget who they are. Towards the **Shifting Path** it is a maze of corridors whose layout changes at every step, and travellers forget which way they came. Towards the **Binding Song** it is a web of threads and script, like reading a book backwards, and instead of forgetting, the Veil edits: a traveller may lose whatever parts of their own past contradict the story they now tell about themselves. Towards the **Whispering Trace** it is a mist of memories, and the past lies over the present like a second picture on the same glass. Towards the **Frozen Moment** it is a corridor of frozen time, like moving inside a glacier, and travellers may forget how to move or speak at all.

### *The Gates of the Harmonics*

The Harmonics have their gates on the Material Plane too, wherever a place already resembles the concept behind it. **Fire-Gates** are volcanoes, forges, and places of great heat. **Water-Gates** are oceans, rivers, wells, and the places of baptism. **Stone-Gates** are mountains, quarries, and ancient ruins; **Wind-Gates** high peaks, open plains, and places of great height. The **Sleep-Gates** of the Dreaming Veil are beds, meditation chambers, and places of deep rest; the **Library-Gates** of the Eternal Record are ancient libraries, archives, and places of study. The Shifting Path opens at **Crossroads**, junctions and decision points and places of chance. The Binding Song's **Court-Gates** are judgement halls, libraries, and the places where oaths are taken. The Whispering Trace has its **Grave-Gates** in cemeteries, on battlefields, and wherever death has come, and the Frozen Moment its **Time-Gates** in ancient ruins, among clocks, and in places of deep meditation.

Read side by side, the lists show something no single plane's account does: one place can be a door with several sides. A battlefield is a War-Gate to the Scourge and a Grave-Gate to the Whispering Trace, and the shouted commands still in its air can wake the Grammar of War. An old library is a Library-Gate to the Eternal Record while it is read, and a Quiet Gate to the Silence once nobody reads in it any more. A judgement hall leans towards the Gilded Cage and towards the Binding Song at once. A meditation chamber stands near the Silence, the Dreaming Veil, and the Frozen Moment together. Which side a crossing finds is what the laws of intention and resonance govern, and the oldest advice about such places is the plainest: know which of its doors you mean to use before you go near it.

### *At the Edges of the Zones*

Even the Resonant Zones carry their own small Veils at their edges, each with its own texture and its own toll; how a zone forms and what lies inside each one is told in The Resonant Zones. At those edges the forgetting of the open Veil gives way to something narrower, a price in the zone's own coin. Around the Crystal Spire the Veil is a lattice of vibrating strings, like stepping between the strings of a harp, and travellers hear their own thoughts from the past or the future. Around the

Ghost Step it is a crowd of passing figures, like stepping onto a busy road where nobody is walking, and a traveller's steps may fall into a dead traveller's, until they remember the dead one's road as their own. Around the Lost Archive it is a labyrinth of stacks that reshelve themselves behind the reader, and the more a traveller reads, the more of who they are is written over. Around the Name Bound it feels like walking through a contract, and travellers come out bound to promises they do not remember making; around the Silent Gale it is a wall of wind and silence, and they may forget the sound of their own voice, or the voices of the people they love. Around the Prophecy's Edge it is a tunnel with one exit, and what the traveller loses is their own wishes, as the future they are walking towards fills their sight.

### *The Shape of the Price*

Set out together, the tolls have a grammar. The planes of lack take something away. The planes of excess bury what they do not take under too much of something else: growth, order, light, other minds, or perfection. The Harmonics do neither. They change memory into their own element, so that fire burns it down to its brightest moments, water dilutes it, stone turns it into a weight, wind scatters it, dream breaks it into symbols, the Record floods it, the Path loses the way back, the Song rewrites it, the Trace overlays it, and the Frozen Moment stops it. The zones, last, charge the price of their own single law. A traveller who knows where they are going therefore knows, in rough outline, what they are going to pay, and the second line of the crossing-words is less a warning than an instruction: *know what you will pay*. The Veil wears the face of wherever it leads.

## Those Who Live in the Fog

The Veil has its own inhabitants, and life there is shaped by two things: nothing stays where it was, and everything that lives must keep its own direction.

### *The Veil-Walkers*

The **Veil-Walkers** are humanoid, with skin that shimmers like oil on water and features that shift with the fog, so that nobody who has met one can say afterwards quite what its face was like. They wear cloaks that blend into whatever lies behind them. They do not age or die as mortals do. They live on the drift of the Veil itself, the same drift that swallows travellers, and its disorientation does not touch them. They know every path and every price.

They are the Veil's guides and toll-keepers. They sell safe passage, and the fare is seldom coin: it is often a memory, a secret, or a service. They are cryptic, they bargain without warmth or malice, and they take no side in anything, neither in the quarrels of the planes nor in the troubles their passengers are running from. To them everyone else is a passenger, and passengers pay. A traveller who can trust one is told to follow it, and the condition is the hard part, because a Veil-Walker owes its passenger nothing beyond the bargain and says nothing it has not been paid to say. Shrine-keepers on Caeldon say never to bargain with one twice: the second fare is always the thing you love.

Where the Veil lies near the Material Plane, the Veil-Walkers can be met on it: at old shrines, on boundary roads, at oath places and suspect sanctuaries, at the sites of unusual transformation. There they are a puzzle for the settled peoples around them. Whether a shimmering figure at the edge of a shrine is a visitor, a people, a condition, or a sacred danger is not a question with a single answer in any town, and the questions they raise are always the same ones: what guidance is worth,

who may take a toll, what is taboo to touch, and whether something has gone wrong with the place that lets them through.

### *The Lost and the Drifters*

The **Lost** are travellers who drifted too far and lost their purpose. They walk the same steps over and over in a waking stupor, unseeing, until at last their awareness thins into the fog itself and they become part of the Veil's background murmur. Nobody knows how many of the voices in that murmur were once people. Travellers who have heard it describe it as the sound of a crowd far off, and some of them insist that they caught a name in it.

The **Drifters** are what hunt them. They have adapted to the Veil's fluidity so completely that they can change their form, their size, and even their nature to move through its shifting corridors, and they prey on the Lost and on the unwary. Among them are the **Fog-Stalkers**, which blend into the mist and strike from it, and the **Voice-Mimics**, which call to travellers in the voices of the people they love, to lead them off their road. It is the Voice-Mimics the old crossing-words mean when they say not to follow a voice one loves.

### *The Exiled*

Not everything in the Veil came there by choice. When a Steward falls, the current of its Prime sheds it as a river sheds what it cannot carry, and the fallen office is thrown out into the harshest reaches of the planes: the distorted margins of a Harmonic, an extreme Anchor, or the Veil itself. Some of the Cast-Outs, then, are prisoners of the space between places, and loathe it, and cannot leave. Who they are and what they offer is told in What Waits Outside. For a traveller it is enough to know that the fog holds older and stranger things than Drifters, and that some of them would very much like to be carried somewhere else.

## What the Veil Gives

The Veil takes, but it also gives, and the people who use it most are those who know what it can do.

It joins places. Two points on the Material Plane that share a resonance may lie close together in the Veil, so that a journey of weeks or months on foot can be made in far less, by those willing to pay its price and able to keep their purpose clear. It keeps things. Fragments of lost memories, forgotten histories, and old secrets drift in its fog, and can sometimes be found there by those who know how to look; much of what the Veil takes from travellers is not destroyed but set adrift. It changes what passes through it. Objects soaked long enough in the Veil come back with properties of their own: a compass that points not north but towards its bearer's intent, a cloak that hides whoever wears it.

It is the source of every Resonant Zone. A zone forms only where the Veil has grown thin enough for a Harmonic to bleed into an Anchor, and the Veil's weather, its thin places and storms, governs where and when that happens. And it is a testing ground: to cross it is to prove one's will and intent, because nothing else will carry a traveller through.

### *The Threshold of the Dead*

The Veil is also a threshold for the dead. When a Pattern collapses in death, the Echoes it leaves are carried through the Veil, and the Veil can preserve them, delay them, scatter them, or refract them, according to the conditions of the way and the resonance of what they were reaching for. Where the Veil is thin or turbulent, great events leave more Echoes behind, and more of them come out distorted. A place where the Veil wears thin is a place where the dead are louder, and less true to who they were. What Pattern, Echo, and Record are, and what a death leaves, is set out in What Makes a People.

The passage itself is kept by a power. The **Keeper of the Final Crossing**, among the most sacred of Umbra's Stewards, is not death but the rightful crossing out of life: it sees that the dead may depart and the living remain, and that the threshold between them is neither shattered nor cruelly sealed. It stands against necromancy that drags the dead back to labour and against barriers that trap the departed. It can open or steady the passage from a living Pattern into Echo and Record, bar whatever tries to cross the wrong way in either direction, and loosen the dead and the living from the knots that keep a death from finishing. Its nearness is felt in sickrooms where someone is dying, on battlefields after the noise has stopped, and in places where the dead hesitate. Mourners who know its ways speak the names of the dying clearly, because the threshold listens.

Most peoples of the cradle-web also honour a god who stands at that threshold: **Ennor the Grave-Watcher**, whom each people knows under its own name. He does not raise the dead and does not bring death. He guides. Where an Echo would otherwise drift and distort in the Veil, he opens a path through it and lights the way towards the Eternal Record with an iron lantern that gives no light anyone living can see by, and the Echo follows the light, drawn by the memory of its life. Many peoples set lights at graves or places of return in the nights after a death, each at its own season and in its own way, and say that a light set with true grief brings the Watcher to guide the one who has gone. In the oldest burial grounds there are paths that seem to lead nowhere, and the people who live near them call them the Watcher's trails, still in use.

The work costs the guide. Ennor stands so close to the threshold that he is wearing thin on it: every Echo he keeps draws a little of his own Pattern after the dead. The other gods of Umbra who keep the line between the living and the dead pay their own price, for in holding that boundary they take into themselves part of the confusion and fear of those who cross it, and grow distant and strange with it. How each people mourns, and how its rites meet its neighbours' at a shared grave, is told among the faiths of each era.

## Crossing

Travel between planes is never safe, but it can be survived, and those who make a habit of it agree on what to bring, what to do, and what to expect on the way home.

### *Before the Crossing*

A traveller should carry a **focus anchor**: something that holds the purpose clear, whether a map, a compass, or a saying repeated under the breath. They should not cross alone if they can help it, and they should go knowing that they will pay something; better, they should know roughly what, from the face of the Veil towards the place they mean to reach. They should know which door of a many-sided place they mean to use. If a Veil-Walker can be trusted, it is wise to follow one, and wiser still to settle the fare before the first step.

### *In the Fog*

On the way, they should keep their purpose before them at every step, let no doubt in, and not linger. They should not follow a voice they love, however near it sounds. And they should remember their name. The Veil does not forgive vagueness. Magic that relies on the Veil is powerful and risky: a working meant to carry someone across a distance in a heartbeat may set them down in the wrong place, and an illusion is pointless in a country made of unmanifested possibility, where everything is already an illusion of a kind.

### *Ways In*

The Material Plane is the easiest place to begin, because the Veil is thinnest there and because it is the hub through which almost every crossing runs. Its thin places are many and ordinary: every battlefield, forge, library, and graveyard is a gate of some kind. Direct travel between two other planes, bypassing the Material Plane, is rare and dangerous, and needs a powerful artefact attuned to both, a natural thin spot where their borders meet, or the help of a being native to the Veil.

One crossing begins on the Material Plane and goes almost nowhere: close against the world, the Veil holds the world's own reflection, out of tune and lower. That is the Dissonance, crossed under the same laws as any other journey, and almost never come back from (see The Dissonance).

Some of those borders are known. The Ashen Wastes and the Frost-Bound shade into each other along a gradient of cold. Between the Parched and the Scourge lies a violent, arid badland where the predators of both planes compete for what little there is. The Apex and the Gilded Cage meet along a gradient of order, rigid on one side and a fluid perfection on the other. Where a Harmonic borders a plane, the meeting places are stranger still: where the Crucible's heat reaches into the Ashen Wastes it brings a rush of warmth and the danger of explosion, and where the Surging Deep breaks into the Parched the water vanishes within hours and leaves salt flats behind. Nobody crosses at such places by accident twice.

### *Coming Home*

Most travellers use the Veil to reach a particular place and come back, and the coming back has its own hazards. Time may have run differently at home: a messenger can arrive in good time by the messenger's own count and find the matter settled years before. The toll may not show at once; gaps in memory may come to light only when someone at home asks about a day the traveller no longer has. And something of the crossing tends to come back with the traveller, in the tolls of the planes they passed near: a suspicion of everyone, a habit of reciting one's name, a weight of the past that will not set itself down. Few return without a new understanding of how fragile reality is.

## The Boundary

The Veil ends at the **Boundary**, the membrane that separates the order of the cosmos from the Nothing outside it. The Veil does not reach past it. Nothing does.

The Boundary is not a wall of stone or of force. It is a **conceptual firewall**, held in place by the combined pressure of the ten Primes pressing outward and by the Resonance Principle itself. It resists everything from the Outside and almost never fails. It is not still: it swells and shrinks a little as the cosmos does, and it almost never breaks. The mightiest Resonants can perceive it. The Primes do not perceive it, for they perceive nothing; they simply press against it, and they are the only forces that can meet the Nothing without being unmade. To a mortal it is merely the edge of the universe, beyond which lies nowhere. Nothing that belongs to the cosmos can pass it outward without being unmade. On the Material Plane, the remote and desolate places sometimes called the **Edge Realms** lie closest to it, and the centre of the plane lies furthest from it.

### *The Fading*

The approach announces itself. Colours lose their strength. Sounds go muffled and thoughts sluggish. Then memories begin to go: a traveller may forget a purpose, then a name, then the very idea of a self. It is the Veil's own toll carried to its end, no longer a price paid for a crossing but the whole of the traveller, taken a piece at a time.

Whoever crosses is not killed but **unmade**, erased backwards out of existence, so that nobody remembers them and no record of them remains. They do not die; they cease ever to have been.

That is the meaning of every old warning about the edge of the world: no preparation saves anyone from the Nothing, and anyone who feels the fading begin, the colour going out of things and the sound out of the air, should turn back at once. The schools add two warnings of their own. Magic that tries to reach outside the universe fails, and a working that tries to make nothing fails, or recoils on its maker.

### *The Watch*

Watch is kept even so. The **Wardens of the Boundary** are Stewards who keep watch at the edge of the cosmos, the Steward of Boundary among them. They patrol the membrane, look for weak points, and seal breaches before anything foreign can come fully through. They reinforce the Boundary where it thins, and use the Resonance Principle itself to push a foreign reality back out into the Nothing. The combined force of the Primes resists any such intrusion simply by being what it is; the Wardens' part is to find the place where it is needed.

The Steward of Boundary shows how that work is done. It appears as a towering gate-shaped figure of granite and dark metal, with an opening where a torso should be, runes of truce and closure glowing across its frame, some worn deeper than others as if over-used; its speech sounds like bolts sliding into place. It keeps the rightful separation of things, the walls, borders, vessels, and thresholds that prevent dissolution, contamination, invasion, and the confusion of one kind of thing with another, and it opposes prisons disguised as protection. It can sanctify a limit so that crossing it requires a rightful condition, a permission, or a change in whoever crosses; it can close a dangerous breach, or open a boundary that has become unjustly absolute; and it can draw a precise line beyond which corruption, chaos, or hostile force may not pass. Near it, every line shows itself: one knows what is inside and what is outside, what is permitted and what forbidden, and the cost of crossing feels heavier. On the Material Plane its presence is felt at city gates, tomb-seals, contested borders, plague-lines held with spears, and wards, wherever entry must be judged. Its wounded state, and why its lines tend to harden into severity, belongs with the other Stewards in Stewards and Resonants.

Not every threat to the Boundary comes from outside it. The Boundary holds because inside and outside are distinct, lasting things, and the primordial Unformed, which dissolve definition itself, weaken it from within wherever that distinction blurs. They, too, belong to What Waits Outside.

## The Nothing

Nothing in the cosmos is ever quite nothing. Empty space, silence, and darkness are only relative; they are emptinesses inside something. The Outside is absolute. It can be described only by what it lacks. It has no space, so there is no here or there. It has no time, so there is no before or after. It has no matter or energy, so there is nothing to touch, no mind, so nothing perceives or thinks or dreams in it, and no potential, so nothing can ever change or begin there. It is not a place, not a dimension, and not a void in the sense of empty room. It is the absence of the idea of place itself.

Travellers who come near the Boundary report a black void, an endless darkness. That blackness is the mind’s own invention, its way of rendering the absence of anything to see, as silence is its way of rendering the absence of anything to hear. The truth is stranger and simpler: there is no input at all, and the senses and the mind, faced with it, simply fail.

The Nothing is not the source of the cosmos. The cosmos was never made out of it, and never made at all; it has always existed in some state, and the Primes differentiated out of its original potential in the Great Unfolding, as The Ten Primes tells. The Nothing is simply what the cosmos is not.

Yet it is not passive in its effect. The Nothing presses on the Boundary, not with force, since it has none, but with the sheer weight of non-existence trying to reclaim the room the cosmos occupies. That pressure is why the Boundary is needed and why the Primes' counter-pressure never stops. If the Boundary failed, the cosmos would not explode, or burn, or fall into darkness. It would cease to be, would be erased from every memory and every record, and would never have been.

## Other Bubbles

What lies further out is disputed. The most widely held view, among Resonants and mortal scholars alike, is the **bubble model**: that the cosmos is one of countless bubbles of order floating in the Nothing, each with its own laws, its own history, and its own Primes, and that the Nothing is the space between them. A darker view, the **Great Filter**, holds that the Nothing is not passive at all but predatory: that it consumes cosmologies that weaken or fail, that the Boundary is the cosmos defending itself, and that the Primes are its defences, so that if they ever failed the cosmos would be consumed and the Nothing would grow.

Both views agree on one thing that matters for this cosmos: things from the other bubbles can come through. They are the **Beyonders**, and they do not travel through the Boundary, because nothing can. They breach it, at a weak point, often one that a Cast-Out has helped them find or a natural flaw has left open, and they do not so much invade as leak, bringing their own foreign law with them. Their mere presence weakens the Boundary, tears the Veil, and makes the laws of the world break down around them, and a breach left open can become a **Cascade Failure**, in which local reality unravels into the Nothing. When the Boundary is breached, the Nothing leaks into the Veil, and travellers in the Veil are the first to be unmade. What the Beyonders are, how each of them breaks the world, and how they are held back belongs to What Waits Outside.

## The Fear of the Void

What the Nothing gives the world is fear. It is the **Fear of the Void**: a primal terror at the sense that existence is finite, that it has an edge, and that the edge is held by nothing that can care whether it holds. Much of mortal history comes of it. It is the dread that drives peoples to make meaning, to build halls and holds and cities, to set down records and swear oaths and raise walls, and to align themselves with the Primes against the edge that waits beyond everything. Every people has its tales of the edge: the wanderer who walked past the last road and was never missed, because no one remembered him; the empty chair at a feast that nobody can explain.

In that sense the Outside defines the cosmos by what it is not. It is the silence that gives sound its meaning, the darkness that gives light its meaning, and the nothingness against which existence knows itself to be fragile, precious, and finite. It also sets the stakes of everything else in this book. The Primes' balance, the Stewards' watch, the long quarrels of the planes are all, in the end, about whether there will go on being a cosmos to quarrel in.

## What People Know

The further out a thing lies, the less is known of it, and the Veil and what lies past it are far out.

### *The Veil*

That the Veil can be crossed, and what crossing costs, is known from the few who dare it at old shrines, boundary roads, and thin places, and from the tales they bring home. Every such place has its story: the pilgrim band that went in singing and came back one short, with no one able to say who was missing; the son who crossed to fetch a cure and walked out the next spring grey-haired; the shrine whose keepers ring a bell each dusk for the ones still walking. A crossing that comes back is remembered for a lifetime, and most people

never try one. Their lore is practical and old. *On the Space Between Places* gathers it into its crossing-words, and every crossing people keeps some version of them. What the Veil is, a fog, a road of the dead, a country of spirits, the skin of the world, is disputed between faiths and schools under names that vary by people. Most peoples honour a god who guides the dead across it; very few have heard of the power that keeps the crossing whole.

### *The Edge and the Nothing*

No one has reached the Boundary and come back, so everything said of it is inference, the guesses of the highest circles of scholarship and the old warnings about the edge of the world. Most people know only the warnings: that the colour goes out of things there, and that whoever goes on is forgotten. The Nothing is what those warnings fear.

### *What Lies Beyond*

The bubble model and the Great Filter are the views of a few scholars, argued among them; most people have never heard either, and those who have cannot test them. That things come in from outside the world is believed far more widely than anything about where they come from. Each later era learns more of the Veil, and guesses more closely at the edge, and no era ever maps either to the end.

## Tensions

- **The toll-keepers' price.** The Veil-Walkers sell safe passage and take no side, and their fare is often a memory, a secret, or a service. Whoever buys a crossing from them cannot know what that payment will be worth to someone else.
- **The short way.** Places weeks apart on the Material Plane can lie side by side in the Veil, and a crossing between them saves the journey and costs something else: lost years, a memory, a piece of the traveller's Pattern. In a corridor where a minute may be a year, a messenger who takes the short way may arrive too late, or too changed.
- **A voice you love.** The Voice-Mimics call to travellers in the voices of the people they love, and the Lost wander the fog repeating their steps until they thin into it. Sometimes the voice in the fog is a mimic, and sometimes it is someone who crossed before and never came out.
- **Where the dead are louder.** Where the Veil is thin or turbulent, great events leave more Echoes and more distorted ones. Those who remember the dead there remember them in a shape the dead would not have recognized, and the shape is what lasts.
- **Visitor, people, or danger.** Where the Veil lies near the Material Plane, Veil-Walkers are met at old shrines, boundary roads, and oath places. Whether such a being is a visitor, a people, a condition, or a sacred danger decides who may take a toll there and what is taboo, and no town answers it the same way as its neighbour.
- **First to be erased.** If the Boundary is breached, the Nothing leaks into the Veil, and travellers in the Veil are the first to be unmade. Nobody would remember that they had ever set out.
- **The darker theory.** If the Nothing is predatory and consumes failing cosmologies, the Primes are the cosmos's defence against it, and the cosmos survives only as long as they hold.

CHAPTER 4

# The Dissonance

*Of the low world I write only what I was told, by two who came back and did not agree. Both said it was our own country. Both said it was a little too low. Neither would say what they had heard there, and one of them would not sleep without a bell in tune beside the bed.*

— from its last chapter, *On the Space Between Places*

Every place in the world has a second, and nobody has seen it. The Material Plane sounds as the chord of the ten Primes, and everywhere else in the cosmos the Veil swallows the reflection of that chord, as fog swallows an echo. In one place it holds it: close against the world, a little out of tune and lower. That held reflection is the Dissonance. Its hills are the world's hills and its rivers the world's rivers, its towns stand where towns stand and its houses have the same rooms, and all of it is wrong, darker, drained of colour, a half-step off in every sound. It is no plane of its own and no tier of the cosmos. It is the world's own shadow, sounding wrong, and what lives in it is the worst thing a mortal can meet within the world's reach.

This chapter tells the truth of the Dissonance: what it is, how it is entered and felt, what lives there, and what holds it off. Almost none of it is known in the world, where the Dissonance survives as tale, sealed book, and the word of the rare survivor; what people know and believe is told in What People Know. The chapter ends with how to bring it into a story, in Bringing Horror into the World.

## The Held Reflection

The cosmos is a chord, and the Material Plane is where all ten of its notes sound together. Every sound casts an echo, and so does the world. The Veil, which is unmanifested possibility, takes in that echo everywhere and dissolves it, so that the planes beyond hear nothing of the world but its pull. Only where the Veil lies hard against the Material Plane does the echo hold, and there it holds badly: a little lower than the note that made it, a little out of tune, the way a voice comes back from a well.

**AT A GLANCE**

| | |
|---|---|
| **What it is** | The out-of-tune reflection of the Material Plane, held in the Veil close against it; no tier of its own. |
| **Its nature** | A maze that swells and fades against the true world; every Prime's current present, each detuned, under laws that differ but never fail. |
| **Ways in** | Off-key places, left by atrocities and great old workings; dissonant magic; the rare accidental door. |
| **Signs** | Dread before sight; dead and overloaded spots; impossible phenomena; the grieving and the sleepless drawn towards it. |
| **The counter** | The true note held against it: names spoken, a bell in tune, a song sung true, the count kept right. |
| **Known to** | Almost no one. Beside it the Veil is common knowledge. |

The **Dissonance** is that held echo given place. Every place of the mortal world has its reflection there: hills, rivers, roads, towns, the inside of a house. Each is recognisable and each is wrong. Its colours drain towards one hue. Its light is the light of a day that never quite began. Its sounds are the sounds of the world sung by someone who cannot find the note. The copy is not a memory, and not a world of the dead; it is the world as the Veil holds its sound, so it changes when the world changes, slowly and never quite in step. A town burned a year ago may still stand there, thinning; a road cut last spring may be only half there yet.

It is not a tier. The Anchors, the Harmonics, and the Resonant Zones are the layers of the cosmos, and the Veil is the space that holds them in reach of one another. The Dissonance is something the Veil keeps of the world, nothing more and nothing less, and nowhere else in the cosmos has one.

## The Maze of the Beat

Two notes almost alike, sounded together, do not blend. They swell and fade against each other in a slow throb that musicians call the beat. The Dissonance beats against the true world in the same way, and its places swell and fade with it. A street is there, then thins to nothing, then returns longer than it was. A corridor repeats. A door opens on the room just left. A hill that took an hour to climb takes a morning to come down. Distances never add up, and the one who walks the Dissonance as if it were the world, trusting the shape of the land they know, walks a maze without end.

Its laws are the world's laws, out of tune. Every Prime's current runs there as it runs here, but each is detuned by a different amount, and the amount changes from region to region as the beat moves. Where Ignis runs flat, fire burns cold. Where Terra's pull is weak, water climbs. Somewhere a word is heard before it is spoken. None of this is chaos. The differences follow the beat of each region and repeat with it, so a traveller who learns a region's beat can learn its physics, and the few who came back did so by learning it. The Dissonance is different from the true world in nearly everything, and arbitrary in nothing.

## Crossing Over

Crossing into the Dissonance is exactly as hard as crossing the Veil, and under the Veil's own laws. Intention decides where a traveller arrives, Resonance where the way is easy, Cost what the crossing takes, and Drift what happens to those who lose their purpose. A traveller who could cross to the Crucible could cross to the Dissonance.

What keeps the world out is not the threshold but what lies beyond it. The beings of the Dissonance are unimaginable, very different from anything of the true world, and very dangerous. Nearly every journey into it ends in death, in something worse than death, or in never finding the way back: and that last is true even of those who know how and where they came in, because the place they came in by has swelled and faded since. Those who have gone and returned are so few that each is a story.

## Ways In

### *Off-Key Places*

Where the world's pitch has been bent, the Dissonance lies closer and the threshold is lower. Such **off-key places** are made by atrocities and by great old workings: deeds so large or so wrong that the true note of a place never recovered. Six are known on Caeldon, each by tale more than by visit, and each is kept by someone who holds the true note against it.

**The Hollow Bell**, in the Ironspine, is the walled-up bell hall of an empty upper hold. Its last smiths, after the deep war with the Dark Elves had emptied it, cast a bell from every metal the hold had left, the names of its dead cut on the rim, to call the dead back; they cast it wrong, and rang it once, and what answered was not the dead. On certain nights the stone hums, a little under any note a Dwarf can sing.

**The Unsung Field**, on a shelf of the High Scars, is a bowl of grassland where a band was slaughtered and its names were never recited. The grass grows in spirals round a centre that is never where it was, and under the Scars' dry wind blows a second, lower wind from another quarter, felt in the chest more than on the skin. Scavengers will not cross it.

**The Drowned Choir**, on the outer Tidelace Coasts, is a cove where a crew caught in a storm sang a working to turn it and sang it out of key. At slack water the shore is heard from beneath: shingle, gulls, a hull knocking on a quay that is not there, and now and then voices singing, all of it a little lower than the sea that makes it.

**The Turning House**, on a side river of the Confluence Basins, is a mill whose miller set an off-key working on the wheel to meet a lord's levy, and ground on it for a generation. The river has long since left the race, and the wheel turns anyway. Inside, every door opens on the grinding floor.

**The Quiet Orchard**, in a small fold of the Leeward Folds, is a Halfling hamlet that shut its gate on starving walkers in a dry midwinter, struck them from its count, and died before the spring. Its orchard blossoms in autumn and fruits in midwinter, no sound carries among its trees, and every count made in that fold comes out wrong.

**The Long Stair**, in a low hill of the eastern Elderweald, is a stair of living root grown by a circle of Wood Elf groves in the sealing years, to reach the kin left below the Roothollows. Somewhere in the working the note went wrong. The stair goes down further than the hill is tall, and does not arrive.

Others certainly exist that nobody has named. And a place the Dissonance lingers in can become one (see Signs on the Surface).

### *Dissonant Magic*

A working cast in tune reaches along the currents of the Primes towards its effect. A working cast out of tune on purpose reaches the other way, towards the Dissonance, and that is **dissonant magic**. Its cost is taken from the caster's own Pattern: each working leaves the caster a little further from their own note, easier to hear from the other side and harder to call back. It is taught nowhere openly. The few who know it learned it from the dead, from sealed books, or from something that answered, and some of the old faiths keep such books under seal as a warning against the next caster.

Its workings are few, and every one of them turns a true-note practice inside out. Where a keeper sings a song through, the caster sings it a half-step low; where a household speaks its dead by name, the caster says a name with one sound changed; where a fold keeps its count, the caster counts wrong on purpose. Done at an off-key place, a low song sung through an hour opens a door. An ear to cold stone and one note held just under true lets the caster hear the other side, and lets the other side hear them. A hand closed over a flame puts out a room's light as a Quencher would, and a count got wrong on purpose makes a stair that is one step longer every time it is climbed. A name spoken low into an open door calls, and the caster chooses only whether to call, never what answers. Every working is paid for from the caster's own note, and it shows: a shadow that falls a little late, a voice that does not quite match the mouth, a sleep troubled by a grinding floor or an orchard fruiting in midwinter. The sealed books hold one working meant to mend, which needs someone who knew the caster before to speak their name truly through many nights, and it rarely works.

### *Accidental Doors*

Rarely, and never twice in the same way, the beat and the world line up by chance, and a door stands open for a moment where no off-key place has been. Most such moments pass unnoticed: a cold minute in a lane, a dog that will not go on. Now and then something crawls out.

### *What Does Not Open It*

Folk belief has its own list of what opens the way: grief, fever, the wrong song, too many sleepless nights. None of them can. What they do is put a person off their own pitch, and a person off their pitch can hear the Dissonance, be drawn towards it, and dream of it. Folk belief has the danger right and the door wrong.

## Signs on the Surface

Where the Dissonance presses close, or where something of it has come through, the true world shows it in the ways a dark, distorted copy fed back into a song shows in the song.

The first is **dread before sight**. A pressure in the chest, an unease without cause, animals refusing a road: felt before anything is seen, as a sound too low to hear is felt in the body. Dogs go under beds. Horses stand sweating at the turn of a lane and will not be beaten past it.

Then come the **dead spots**, places where light, sound, or warmth simply go out. A lantern burns and lights nothing. A shout makes no sound. A hearth gives no heat to a hand held over it. Beside them stand the **overloaded spots**, where something is too much: a light that hurts, a smell that will not leave, a room too warm in winter.

Then the **impossible phenomena**, new things belonging to neither world, as distortion makes new tones out of a clean one. Rain falls upwards in one yard. A shadow is cast towards the light. A voice comes from an empty well and knows the listener's name. They are different in every encounter, and each follows one law of its own, so a careful witness can learn to read them.

The Dissonance also works on people. Those already off their pitch, the grieving, the fevered, the sleepless, hear it first, are drawn towards it, and dream of it. This is **sympathetic resonance**, and it is why every off-key place has its tale of someone found at dawn walking towards it, and why its keepers watch their own bereaved. The first to walk towards the place are the first lost.

Last, if the Dissonance lingers long enough, the place takes its pitch, and becomes an off-key place itself: **a new door**.

## The True Note

What holds the Dissonance off is not force but tune. It is cancelled, not drowned: the **true note** held against it. Two notes almost alike beat against each other; sound the true one clearly enough and the false one thins beneath it.

The true note is whatever restores a place's own pitch. Names spoken aloud, every one. A bell rung in tune. A song sung true and through, the way the oldest keepers taught it. The right count kept. A hearth tended in the old way. The keepers of the six off-key places all do some version of it: the Ironspine household that reads the empty hold's dead before the wall each year, the Windscar escorts who recite their own dead aloud while the Unsung Field is in sight, the Tidelace wardens who call a true reading across the cove at slack water, the village that sings the reaping song through at the mill threshold, the fold that counts the dead hamlet aloud each autumn, the grove that sings its laments faultless at the head of the stair.

Loud noise, fire, and weapons do nothing. Fire feeds some of what lives there, and becomes part of the makings of others. The only defence that works is to be more fully what the true world is, and the defence must be kept up: a dead spot cleared after many nights of singing returns where the singing stops.

## What Lives There

Many kinds live in the Dissonance, most born of the reflection itself and each with its own name. Three are known well enough to be named in the tales. Others have never been named, and some may have an origin nobody knows. All are met on the surface only where the Dissonance presses close: in off-key places, and at the rare door that opens by chance.

### *Deepswells*

**Deepswells** are never seen first. They come as dread: a pressure in the chest that swells as they near, then a throb in the teeth and the soles of the feet, slow and even, like a great bell struck far below the ground. Water in a cup trembles in rings and dust walks on a table. Those who say they saw one at the end speak of a darkness larger than the room it stood in, or of the room itself leaning inwards and breathing. A Deepswell is drawn to whatever sounds most like the world it copies, a lit house, a beating heart, a held breath, and it does not hurry; survivors say it was the slowness that broke them. Close by, it cracks old mortar and stops the breath in a sleeper's chest. Those it reaches are not found. The swell falters while a song is held true, and rises again whenever a voice breaks.

### *Quenchers*

**Quenchers** feed where light, sound, and warmth go out, and leave dead spots where they have fed. One is seen, if at all, as an absence: a place where the light stops short, shaped a little like something that crouches, or a person turned away. It feeds slowly and returns. A byre gets one dark corner, then two; a hamlet's evening songs grow shorter each winter; a count at the year's end turns up fewer voices than names, and no one can say who is missing. It seems to prefer the small and the steady, a lamp kept every night, a voice that always sings at the same hour. More fire only feeds it. The dead spots it leaves last for seasons or years, and those who stand in one too long go quiet and cold themselves.

### *Offnotes*

**Offnotes** are the makers of impossible things, and never the same shape twice. An Offnote is not a creature that causes a strange event; it is the strange event with a will behind it: a stair one step longer each time it is climbed, a pond whose

reflection shows the house without its people in it, a song from the next room in a voice everyone knows and no one can place. What sets it apart from a mere oddity is that it notices. The upward rain follows the one who steps out of it; the shadow turns its head. Most of its makings seem meant to draw someone closer, and those it draws in are rarely seen again, or come back changed in some small, wrong way, a shadow that falls a little late. Some who tried to bargain with one learned dissonant magic in the trying. What breaks a making is to name the thing aloud for what it truly is and keep saying what is real.

## What People Know

Almost nothing. The rule elsewhere is that the closer a thing lies to the Material Plane, the more is known of it, and the Dissonance breaks it: it lies closer than anything, and is the least known thing within the world's reach. Beside it the Veil is common knowledge.

A handful of scholars, a few old faiths with sealed books, and the rare survivor speak of it, under names that vary: **the low world**, **the wrong side**, **the echo that answers**. What scholars write is guesswork from the few who came back, and those few rarely agree. Even most Veil-Walkers know it only by rumour, if at all. Those who know more refuse the fare, and will not speak of it unless forced, and forcing them brings its own complications.

Ordinary people know none of this. They know the tales of their own country's off-key place, if they live near one, and the customs that keep it: the reading, the count, the song. They know that some corners are cold for no reason and some roads the horses will not take. They know ghost stories, and the Offnotes hide among them, because the few true ones are told the same way as the many that are not. Folk belief has its own explanations: that a Deepswell is the grief of the drowned come up to be heard, that a Quencher is a dead person's last breath that never found its song, that banging pots through the night keeps the quiet ones away. The first two are guesses nobody can test. The third is wrong, and the villages that trust it learn so.

## Bringing Horror into the World

Caeldon is a world of wonder. The Dissonance is its one lawful door to outright horror, and it is shut for every story that does not open it. A work can use the Dissonance as fully as it likes, or never; neither changes the world for the works around it.

**Keep it rare.** Off-key places are few, dissonant magic is taught nowhere, and accidental doors almost never open. The horror is worth more for its rarity, and the world stays a place of wonder because the Dissonance is not under every bed. A ghost story need not be the Dissonance; most are not, and the frightening ones may be the ones that are.

**Keep it lawful.** The Dissonance is different from the true world, never arbitrary. Each region of it has a beat and each beat its physics; each Offnote's making follows one law; the true note works every time it is truly sounded. A reader who has watched the laws hold will fear the moment they are learned too late, and a character who learns them has earned their way out. What the Dissonance must never do is change its rules to suit the scene.

**Dread before sight.** Its own order of signs is the order of a good horror story: first the unease, the animals, the pressure in the chest; then the dead spot and the wrong warmth; then the impossible thing; and only last, if ever, anything to see. Its beings are best shown through what witnesses feel and what they find afterwards. A Deepswell that is described has already lost half its weight.

**The defence is to be more fully human.** Swords and fire fail here, and what works is the oldest, plainest thing a community does: say its names, sing its songs through, keep its count, ring its bell in tune. That turns horror into a story

about memory, faithfulness, and the cost of a gap in either. The off-key places were made by forgetting, by lies told to the count, by a working pushed past its note; they are held off by remembering, by the true count, by the song sung as it was taught.

**The vulnerable hear it first.** Sympathetic resonance gives every Dissonance story its first victim and its hardest choice: the grieving, the fevered, and the sleepless are drawn towards the danger, and a household must watch its own bereaved. A character who has lost someone is the one who hears the voice from the well.

**Nobody knows.** Characters meet the Dissonance with folk belief, half-wrong customs, and the rumour of a sealed book, never with this chapter. A scholar who understands it is rarer than one who has seen a god. Let characters name it wrongly, explain it wrongly, and survive, when they do, by the custom whose reason they never knew.

**The shapes it takes.** Most stories that open the Dissonance take one of a few shapes, and each sets its own scale. **The keeping**: an off-key place, its keepers, and the year the true note slips (a reader who falters, a name too few, a song taught to someone too young). **The caster**: someone who learned dissonant magic and is paying for it in their own note. **The door**: something that came through where no door should be, and a place that is beginning to go quiet. **The crossing**: someone who goes in, for a reason worth more than their life, and the slim road back. The crossing is the rarest, and the hardest to end well.

## Tensions

- **The sealed books.** A few old faiths keep books on dissonant magic under seal as a warning. Every generation someone argues they should be burned, and someone else that burning them would only leave the next caster to learn it from the dead.
- **A guide who will not go.** A Veil-Walker who once crossed into the Dissonance and came back is the only guide who could lead a party out of it, and is offered more than any guide has been paid to go in again. It has not said no.
- **The hamlet that is getting quieter.** A Leeward Folds hamlet near the Quiet Orchard has had three winters of fewer voices at the count, dead spots in the byre, and children who dream the same orchard. Its elders say a hamlet does not become an off-key place, and want no one told.
- **Pots in the night.** Some villages bang pots through the night against the quiet ones, and trust it. The few who know better say only a true note thins a Quencher; telling a village that its custom does nothing means telling it what it is up against.
- **A bargain with a making.** Some who bargained with an Offnote for its makings came away knowing dissonant magic, at the price of their own note. Whoever learns it so knows something no sealed book teaches, and is already easier to hear from the other side.

PART II

# The Powers

*The ten impersonal Primes whose currents run through everything, the Stewards and Resonants that people know as gods, and what waits beyond the Boundary.*

CHAPTER 5

# The Ten Primes

*Ten there are, and none will hear,*
*none will hate and none will hold;*
*plant by Terra, burn by Ignis,*
*tell by Memoria what was told.*

*— The March-Town Primer*

The Primes are not gods. A prayer for rain is never addressed to them, and none would be heard if it were. They are the ten fundamental forces of reality, and the cosmos is their interplay: Terra's structure under every stone and bone, Aqua's flow in every river and vein, Ignis's fire in every hearth and every change, and seven more beside them, down to the wind of Zephyr that keeps anything from standing still for ever. They are like the notes of a chord. Each note can be named and heard alone, but only the ten sounding together make the music, and the music is the world. A Prime takes no side and grants no favours. What it offers instead is a grain to work with, and every people on Caeldon has learnt, in its own way, to live along that grain. This chapter takes the ten one at a time: what each is, the plane in which its current runs purest, the marks it leaves on the ordinary world, and the ways the peoples of Caeldon have found to meet it.

**AT A GLANCE**

| | |
|---|---|
| **What they are** | The ten fundamental, impersonal forces of reality, differentiated out of one original potential. |
| **Order of waking** | Terra, Aqua, Ignis, Aion, Lux, Umbra, Verba, Imago, Memoria, Zephyr. |
| **Measured time** | Begins when Aion wakes, c. 35,000,000,000 BR; all ten are awake by c. 34,700,000,000 BR. |
| **Their planes** | Each Prime's current is stabilized as one Harmonic, from Terra's Iron Backbone to Zephyr's Unbound Gale. |
| **Their pairs** | Lux and Umbra, Terra and Zephyr, Ignis and Aqua, Verba and Imago, Aion and Memoria. |
| **How they are honoured** | Through alignment, rites, and taboo, not through prayer. |

This chapter tells what the Primes truly are, and it is the most deeply hidden truth in this book. Nobody in the world knows it whole. What people know, believe, and argue of the Primes is told in What People Know.

## From Seed to Symphony

In the beginning, so far as the word means anything, the universe was one undifferentiated state holding the potential for all ten Primes, and they were not yet distinct. It is called the **Seed**, or the Original Potential. As the universe expanded, that single potential could no longer hold itself as one, and it differentiated, one Prime after another, in the **Great Unfolding**. The Primes are therefore not ten separate powers that came together and agreed on a world. They are ten aspects of one cosmic substrate, drawn apart and held in tension.

Terra came first, and for a time Terra was the whole of the universe, held alone in a dormant, static state. Aqua followed, then Ignis, and the order went on until all ten were present. Read in sequence, the order sounds like an argument: first substrate, then flow, then transformation, then measurable time, then revelation, trace, meaning, identity, memory, and last of all unbound motion. Each stage was incomplete. A world of only Terra is a dead rock; a world of only Aqua, a formless ocean. A cosmos with Ignis but no Aion can change but cannot measure change. Before Aion woke, events had sequence but no duration, and so the first date anyone can give is the date of its waking, c. 35,000,000,000 BR. By c. 34,700,000,000 BR all ten were awake, and the differentiated order was fully present.

The waking was not peaceful. As each Prime came into its own, its current pressed on the others, and the first great strain of the cosmos lay between the first two: structure pressing towards rigidity, flow pressing towards adaptation. Out of that long negotiation the earliest Harmonics stabilized, not as sources the Primes came from but as mediations that eased the tension between them, and the later Harmonics formed the same way as each new Prime added its pressure. The whole strained field of gradients they shaped is the subject of another chapter. What matters here is what the waking left behind. With all ten present, the Primes no longer stand in a sequence but in a web. Remove one and the others do not vanish, but reality breaks. Without Aion, time loops or freezes. Without Imago, beings lose any sense of self and blur together like a hive. Without Zephyr, the universe becomes a still sculpture. Without Verba, meaning dissolves into noise. And if every Prime failed at once, the universe would not simply stop; it would collapse into paradox, or slide back into the undivided potential it came from.

The Primes are mighty, but they are not all-powerful. Each acts only within its own domain: Ignis cannot make a memory, and Memoria cannot light a fire. Their strength is their resonance, and their weakness is the same. A chord of ten can be wounded in any one of its notes, and a wound in one cripples the rest. If Aion were silenced, Memoria would have no new moments to keep and Zephyr no future to move towards, and the universe would become a frozen snapshot.

## Forces, Not Persons

The first thing a writer needs to know about the Primes is what they are not. They do not listen, choose, judge, love, or hate. A Prime does not reward the faithful or punish the wicked, does not take a side between two gods or two kingdoms, and does not mourn. When the pages of this book say that a Prime "opposes" something, or that its current "runs against" it, they mean what a natural philosopher means when she says that water runs against a dam: the two cannot occupy the same place, and one of them will give.

Few people on Caeldon could say this much, and those who could still speak of the Primes as if they were persons, because that is how people speak. A Tidelace pilot says the sea "wanted" a ship. A Headwater mason says Terra "will not forgive" a wall built without footings. Destroying a library is called an offence against Memoria, and

building a wall without a gate an offence against Zephyr. Nobody who has studied the matter believes that Memoria takes offence. The saying is a way of naming what such acts do to the world: they work against the grain of a force that does not stop pushing.

Two things blur the line, and both are rare. The first is the **avatar**. Where a breach must be sealed or the resonance is under great strain, a Prime's current can condense into a figure that mortals can stand before: a towering shape of living granite, a tall form of white-gold light, a figure written in moving script. Those who meet one remember it as a guide and are seldom the same afterwards, for a mortal mind is not made to hold the whole of a Prime; the songs keep the few who came back, like the herder who walked down from the heights speaking only in riddles. An avatar is the current made visible, not a mind behind the current, and those who have met one describe it the way they would describe weather. The second is the gods. When mortals pour enough feeling into a concept a Prime holds, the current condenses into a new being that does think, feel, and choose. That being is a Resonant, not the Prime. The next chapter is about them, and the gods the medieval world prays to are portrayed in The Gods of the Medieval Era (MED 69).

## Terra

**Terra** is earth, structure, and permanence: the principle that holds the universe together against dissolution, and the frame on which every other force builds. Its sign is the mountain or the pillar, its saying that structure is the prerequisite for everything. Without it energy would scatter for want of matter to contain it, water would spread for want of banks, and fire would burn without fuel. Terra is the patience of stone and the weight of the earth, the bone that gives a body its shape, and it was the first of the ten to wake.

Its permanence is not absolute, and to forget this is a dangerous mistake. Even the hardest stone is worn away by wind and water. Terra's endurance includes erosion: the mountain becomes sand, the sand becomes soil, and the soil becomes the foundation for new life. What Terra holds, it holds so that something can stand on it; it is not the force that keeps a ruin from falling. Every one of its fallen Stewards, described in a later chapter, fell by forgetting exactly that.

**The Iron Backbone** is Terra's Harmonic, the skeleton of the cosmos. Each Prime's Harmonic is named with it here; what each is like to stand in is told in The Planes.

On the Material Plane, Terra's presence is felt more than seen. The ground grows firmer; loose soil compacts underfoot and sand hardens towards sandstone. The air seems heavier. Stones hum with a low vibration, mountains seem to breathe, and a deep stillness settles, the silence of bedrock that has not moved in a million years. Bone and stone and the sense of physical stability all come into the world from the Backbone.

Peoples meet Terra wherever they build or plant. The cornerstone of a new building is laid with ceremony. A vow is carved into stone and set in a sacred place, so that it is held to the endurance of the stone. Pilgrims climb a sacred mountain to take its patience into themselves, or sit in a cave in total silence, listening to the hum of the earth. The rite most easily forgotten is the last: deliberately dismantling a structure that has outlived its purpose, in line with Terra's own cycle of erosion and renewal. Masons, farmers, gate-wardens, and anyone on whom others depend work along Terra's grain. A field's marker stone is set with blessing and blood, and moving one in the night is sacrilege as well as theft; more feuds between neighbouring houses begin at a shifted stone than at any insult. Stone that endures is also stone that is fought for, and a hold gate kept through a siege is sung for a thousand years. Its current condenses gods readily, because harvest and home stir strong feeling: **Anvelle the Harvest-Mother** of the Human basin farmers, **Kerrund the Stone-Warden** at the Dwarven hold

gates, the severe deep gods of the Held Covenant, and, asleep beneath the high peaks, the **Mountain-Father** of a vanished colossal world.

## Aqua

**Aqua** is water, flow, adaptation, and life: the force that carries nourishment from the deep to the surface and takes the shape of any vessel it is poured into. Its sign is the spiral wave or the droplet, its saying that flexibility is survival. Where Terra builds the vessel, Aqua fills it; where Ignis transforms, Aqua dissolves and renews. It is the great connector, the medium through which nutrients, flow-borne traces, and life itself travel, and it was the second Prime to wake.

Water is often mistaken for weakness because it yields. Yet water always wins. Given enough time it carves a canyon through granite, and given enough pressure it crushes anything that would hold it. Its cycle is the great cycle of the world: evaporation, rain, runoff, the sea. Nothing in that cycle is lost; everything is moved and changed. Those who dam the flow of life, by hoarding, by refusing to change, by blocking what should pass, build up a pressure that sooner or later breaks through. River-folk tell of the lord who dammed a valley for his mills, and of the spring flood that took the dam, the mills, and his hall in one night.

**The Surging Deep** is Aqua's Harmonic, the circulatory system of the universe.

In the ordinary world, Aqua shows itself in dew that forms out of nothing, in liquid that runs with unnatural speed or pools in impossible shapes, and in a thrumming like a heartbeat that runs through ground and water together. Its flow is in every vein: blood, healing, and the processes of the living body all come into the world from the Deep. Its waters also carry flow-borne traces of what has passed through them. A drinker at the right river can sense what its water once carried, a drowned village upstream or a crossing long past; this is not memory, which belongs to Memoria, but the river's own residue. At the Blood River, a Resonant Zone where Aqua's life and Umbra's death run together, the meeting turns dangerous.

Peoples meet Aqua in rites of giving back and letting go. Water is poured on the earth in thanks for rain, a share returned to the cycle. A lantern or a flower is floated down a river to carry away a grief or a secret. A person is immersed to mark a new beginning or the washing away of a past, and dancers advance and fall back with the tide to learn adaptability. Fouling water is felt as working against the force itself, and poisoning a well is the foulest desecration a raider can commit: a spring that never fails is sacred ground, whoever holds the valley holds it, and a feud begun over one is rarely ended by anything but blood. On the coasts the gods of the sea are called down on wreckers who show false beacons. Healers, sailors, farmers, and artists who know the fluid nature of feeling work in Aqua's grain, and its current condenses gods easily, because healing and the sea stir intense and frequent feeling: **Maris of the Tides**, kept by coastal Humans and Gnome harbour towns alike, and **Serovan the River-King** of the Serathic towns, and, faded now, the flood-born Drowned Mother of the Roothollows and the Salt-Witch of a vanished inland sea.

## Ignis

**Ignis** is fire, energy, and transformation: the spark that turns ore to steel and seed to tree, and potential into reality. Its sign is the flame or the hammer, its saying that destruction is the precursor to creation. No sword is forged without melting the metal first, and no forest renews without the fire that clears it. Where Terra provides structure and Aqua flow, Ignis provides the spark, and without it the universe would be a cold, unchanging void. It was the third Prime to wake, and with Terra and Aqua it completed the substance of the material world.

Ignis is feared for its destructive capacity, and rightly. But the pain it brings is not cruelty; it is the price of change. The seed must break to

sprout. The ash of the old becomes the soil of the new. What Ignis runs against is not life but stagnation: anything that seeks to remain unchanged for ever.

**The Crucible** is Ignis's Harmonic, the engine of the universe.

On the Material Plane, Ignis's nearness is heat haze and a rising temperature, dry materials that catch of their own accord, metal that glows red, and a pulse like a heartbeat of fire in ground and air. Lightning is the Crucible resonating with the sky. A volcano is so aligned with the Crucible that it is a natural place for fire's resonances to gather. In people it shows as a restless need to act, to make, or to change. In the Cinder Fields, a Resonant Zone where Ignis and Umbra meet, fire burns cold.

The rites of Ignis are rites of exchange. Wood or oil is thrown into a fire in return for its warmth. A person is "forged" in fire, symbolically or in earnest, to mark a transformation. Dancers flicker like flame, never holding a shape for long. The ashes of something old are scattered to make room for the new. No prayer at an altar of Ignis has ever been answered, and those who keep its customs know it. A hall's fire kept burning since its founding is its luck; to carry off a rival's coals, or put out a hearth in a raid, is the deepest insult one house can give another, and many a feud is counted from the night a hearth went cold. Artists, inventors, warriors, and anyone who makes something new from the ashes of the old work along its grain. Its current condenses gods readily in war and passion. The Ogre hearth-god **Ghessa the Hearth-Mother** is one of its gentler condensations, born of famine winters and small fires that had to last. **Ozhar the Pyre-King** is one of its most terrible: the god of an elder furnace world that could no longer stop burning, whose name is still forbidden near any furnace.

## Aion

**Aion** is time, not as a clock counts it but as the river of becoming: the force that lets a seed become a tree, a thought become a memory, and a star ignite and die. Its sign is the serpent eating its tail, or the hourglass; its saying is that change is the only constant. It is called the Eternal Now, because it is neither the past, which is memory, nor the future, which is potential, but the moving point between them where the past dissolves and the future is born. It was the fourth Prime to wake, and its waking is where measured history begins.

Aion carries cause before effect. Without it events would happen all at once, or not at all, and the universe would be a jumble of unrelated happenings. Its harshest lesson is that nothing lasts, and it is a liberating truth rather than a cruel one, since it is what gives life its urgency. No alignment with Aion lets a being live for ever, which would be a curse of stasis, or go back and change the past, which would unravel the continuum. Paradox strains it, and the universe, trying to heal a paradox, often does so catastrophically. Those who try to step out of the flow pay for it, and the tales are full of them: the lord who would not leave the water of an Ageless Spring and lived on beside it unchanged, his battle-wounds open and never closing.

**The Frozen Moment** is Aion's Harmonic, and its nature surprises those who expect the plane of time to rush. It is the anchor of the universe: the place where moments are held long enough for history, continuity, and consequence to exist at all.

When Aion's current runs close in the ordinary world, time misbehaves. A flower may bloom and wither in a few heartbeats; a cup may cool at once, then warm again. Ghostly images of the moment just past, or of a probable one to come, flicker at the edge of sight, and a deep, rhythmic tick, like a giant heart, seems to sound through the air. Where time has been handled too roughly, a whole town's clock can stop; the Time Lock, a

vault of dilated time where things too dangerous to destroy are held, is Aion's current used as a prison.

Aion is honoured in the rites that mark endings: funerals, harvests, the closing of any chapter of a life. Its oldest custom is the hourglass left in a sacred place to run out and then be turned again, and its simplest is a moment of silence, taken only to be in the present without trying to hold it. Its current condenses gods rarely, and the ones it does condense tend to be ancient, strange, or short-lived. **Quennet the Clockmaker** of the Gnome harbours, who stretches a closing tide-window by a breath, is fading as far-side timing custom takes over his work. **Tamsel the Season-Weaver** of the Halfling folds keeps the turning year. The Thaluren god of stillness raised against the egg blight, and the god of an elder world's frozen rolls, both faded long ago; the sealed cities of that elder world still lure treasure-seekers who do not always come back at the pace they went in.

## Lux

**Lux** is light and possibility: the principle of revelation that makes the hidden visible, and shows that there are many roads where there seemed to be one. Its sign is the lantern or the sunrise, its saying that freedom requires sight. A choice made in darkness is not a true choice, since no one can freely choose a path they cannot see. Its epithet is the Radiant Way, and it was the fifth Prime to wake.

People often call Lux the power of truth, but that is a simplification. Lux deals in clarity. A murderer's knife is as visible in the light as a healer's salve, and what is done with the seeing belongs to whoever sees. Light illuminates without imposing. Its other half is mercy: not every truth arrives at once, because a fragile mind can shatter under total illumination, and Lux's light is tempered by its balance with Umbra, leaving shadows where they are needed. When that balance is lost, the light itself becomes the danger. Too much light blinds as surely as darkness, and of all the Primes, Lux and Terra have each lost the most offices to that kind of excess: three of their Stewards are among the fallen.

**The Shifting Path** is Lux's Harmonic, the open current where what the universe will become is still undecided.

In the ordinary world, Lux makes colours vivid and details sharp, and shadows shrink. Hidden things show themselves: a lost key glints in the grass, a liar's tell becomes obvious, a door appears in a wall where no one had noticed one. Roads and corridors seem to multiply, as though the light were revealing options that were always there. A gentle golden warmth suffuses the air, like sunlight on bare skin. In people it is the sudden sight of a path not seen before.

Lux is met at thresholds of choice. A lantern is lit in a dark place for the courage to see clearly. A question is written down and burnt, so that its answer can be sought in the open. People stand at a crossroads, real or figurative, to acknowledge the many roads before them, and keep vigil through the night to watch the sun come up. Explorers, scholars, and seers work along its grain. Light reveals, and not everyone wants to be seen: those who carry hard truths into a lord's hall are as often hanged as heeded, and the songs that keep a truth-teller usually end at a gallows or a burning. In raided country the dawn vigil is no rite at all; the household that keeps a lamp lit and a sword by the door until sunrise is the one still there in the morning. Truth and justice stir intense feeling, and its current condenses gods readily; the most widely called on in the Medieval Era is **Ostrin the Lantern-Bearer**, the severe, blind god of the Serathic towns, called down on lords who fleece the road and let the bridge rot, and feared by the innocent nearly as much as by the corrupt.

## Umbra

**Umbra** is shadow and the trace: the principle of what remains. It is the footprint, the scar, the echo after the sound, the dent a body leaves in a pillow after it rises. Its sign is the silhouette or the footprint, its saying that nothing truly disappears, and that depth requires contrast. Light without shadow is flat; presence without absence means nothing. Umbra is the negative space that gives the positive its shape, and it was the sixth Prime to wake.

Death belongs to Umbra, but not as an enemy of life. Every action leaves a mark and every ending a space, and Umbra keeps them. Its mercy is release: not every trace is held for ever, some wounds must heal and some ghosts be laid to rest, and Umbra's hold loosens into release without the trace being destroyed. Lux and Umbra are a pair. Without shadow, light is blinding; without light, shadow is absolute.

**The Whispering Trace** is Umbra's Harmonic, the shadow of the universe and its archive of loss.

A haunting is the Whispering Trace resonating through a place. When Umbra's current runs near, shadows lengthen and deepen until they seem soft to the touch; faint sounds from the past replay, laughter, footsteps, voices no longer there; a cool stillness settles, like the drop in temperature at twilight; and there is a quiet like that of a room someone has just left. In people it is the weight of absence, or a whisper that should not be there. At the Whispering Winds, motion carries the voices of what has passed, where Zephyr and Umbra overlap.

Umbra is honoured at doorways and graves. People stand at a threshold to acknowledge those who have passed and those who remain. They light a candle in a dark place and let its shadow be a reminder, walk an old path in silence, listening for those who walked it before, or speak a painful memory aloud and let it go, trusting that the trace is kept without the living being held to it. Desecrating a grave, denying death, and holding on to what should be released all count as working against it, and those who do it find the traces holding on to them instead. Every tomb-thief and barrow-delver knows the stories, and the bold ones still go in, because old tombs hold grave-gold and elder blades, and some hold dead sentinels that have kept their watch since the burial. After a battle or a raid the dead are found, named, and buried before anything else is done, because the dead left unguided harden into something hostile; every country has a field or a ford where that was not done, and nobody crosses it after dark. Undertakers, mourners, and keepers of the dead work along its grain. Its current condenses gods only slowly, and its greatest god shows how: **Ennor the Grave-Watcher**, whom most cradle-web peoples honour at their graves under names of their own, condensed over ages of burial rather than from any single grief.

## Verba

**Verba** is language, order, and meaning: the force that turns noise into speech and sensation into a world of named things, the grammar behind "this is a tree" and "if this, then that." Its sign is the scroll or the lyre, its saying that meaning is the foundation of reality. Where other Primes provide the substance of existence, Verba provides its syntax: the rules by which things relate, the names that give them identity, and the laws in which the universe's behaviour is written. It was the seventh Prime to wake.

Words can lie, and Verba does not prevent it. A name can be false and a law unjust; a lie can be perfectly coherent and a truth incoherent. What Verba holds is coherence: that words fit together, not that they are true. That is why it stands beside Lux rather than above it. Lux shows what is there, and Verba names what is seen; between them, meaning is made. Its pair is Imago. Order gives form and potential gives freedom; too much of the first is tyranny, and too much of the second is madness.

**The Binding Song** is Verba's Harmonic, the bond beneath every people's oaths and names.

When Verba runs near in the ordinary world, thought sharpens and confusion lifts. Words may appear in the air, glowing letters that form sentences, poems, and oaths. A low hum fills the room, like a thousand books being read at once, and there is a silence of attention, the silence of someone listening hard. Speech, bargains, and the bonds between people all come into the world from the Song, and on a battlefield its shouted commands can press through hard enough to make a zone of their own.

Verba is honoured in naming and swearing. A true name is spoken aloud where others can hear it. A solemn promise is sealed in words so that it stands in Verba's order; those who want a god to watch the oath and hunt down the one who breaks it swear by an oath-god as well. In many lands a child's true name is spoken once, over the cradle, and never again aloud, and tales of name-thieves are told to every child who chatters to strangers. A sacred text is recited, a falsehood confessed so that its weight is lifted, and some sit in silence to hear what is meant but not said. Lying, oath-breaking, and the use of words to deceive are the offences. Because a word can bind, words are feared: a skald who puts a name in a song makes a hero of it, the one left out is soon forgotten, and a curse laid by the dying is believed above any other. Skalds, heralds, teachers, and envoys work along its grain. Oaths and names matter deeply but are abstract, and Verba's gods come at a middling rate: in the Medieval Era, **Iskel the Scribe of the Silent** keeps oaths in the corridor's oath-houses, and **Tavi the Bard of the Broken** is the Goblin god of a history no lord would write down.

## Imago

**Imago** is identity and potential, the pull of every self towards the self it could become: the caterpillar's turn to the butterfly, the child's to the adult. Its sign is the chrysalis or the mirror, its saying that the self is a journey, not a destination. Imago is not who a being is now but who it could be; it is the question "what if?" that every self carries. Its epithet is the Mirror of Becoming, and it was the eighth Prime to wake.

Growth is uncomfortable, and Imago makes no apology for it. The shell must break for the insect to emerge, and the old self must give way for the new one to be born. Every being holds many potential selves, and the work is not to pick one but to bring them into a whole. Imago is the most intimate of the Primes; a self frozen in place weakens it directly, and a being that refuses all change lessens its hold. Those who reach for a new self before they are ready are the stuff of village warnings: every shape-changing country knows the Skin-Lost, who wore a beast's form too long and now run with the beasts.

**The Dreaming Veil** is Imago's Harmonic, the sanctuary of the mind and the nursery of the universe, where new ideas are born before they are tested in the world.

Dreams are the Dreaming Veil resonating with the Material Plane. When Imago runs near in waking life, plants bloom in a few heartbeats, a stone becomes a gem, a rusted sword comes up polished, and a faint inner voice urges change, growth, becoming. Where its current condenses into an avatar, those who meet it see themselves, but better, stranger, or more complete, and hear their own voice made clearer; it gives back only riddles and questions, because it reflects rather than speaks. Where Imago and Umbra meet under dangerous conditions, at the Nightmare Nexus, nightmares take flesh.

Imago is met in rites of masks and mirrors. A mask representing a false self is worn and then broken to show the true self underneath. A seed is planted, or a new work begun, to mark the possibility of change. Dancers act out the chrysalis, from enclosure to emergence. A person stands before a mirror and speaks their true name. In many lands the hardest of these rites comes at the edge of adulthood, when the young go out alone, with a beast to face or a night in the wild to survive, and come back with a new name or not at

all. On the Headwater frontier, young people of mixed households wear masks for the selves they were told to be and burn them, and the god they burn them for is **Abrel the Changeling**, whom Dwarves call Durrask and Goblins Ziv. Imago's current condenses gods at a middling rate, and they tend to be gods of becoming and its failures: Abrel at the crossings, **Saerith the Mirror-King** at the High Elf courts, whose image of finished perfection is a prison for anyone who tries to match it, and, faded long ago, the nameless god born of the first Human self-awareness.

## Memoria

**Memoria** is memory, history, and narrative: the principle that the past does not vanish, that the deeds of the dead are not forgotten, and that the story of existence runs as one thread from the first moment to the last. Its sign is the book or the rings of a tree, its saying that the past is the foundation of the future. Where Umbra keeps the trace, Memoria keeps the meaning: Umbra is the footprint in the sand, Memoria the story of the journey that made it. It is also called the Undying Archive, and it was the ninth Prime to wake.

The archive is honest. It keeps the glorious and the shameful alike, and does not edit, censor, or judge. It also has two weaknesses that every scribe on Caeldon understands. A record destroyed before it is kept is lost for good. And a convincing lie, written as truth, can enter the record looking exactly like a true memory. Memoria's mercy is that not every memory has to be carried. The archive keeps the memory; the person can set it down. Aion moves forward and Memoria looks back, and between them they make the narrative of existence.

**The Eternal Record** is Memoria's Harmonic, the memory of the universe.

Books, traditions, records, and ancestral wisdom all come into the world from the Record. When Memoria runs near, objects seem to hum with their own history: a table feels heavy with every meal eaten at it, a sword with every swing. Ghostly impressions of what happened in a place flicker at the edge of sight, a dance here, a battle there, a child's laughter that has not quite faded. The air thickens with significance and smells of old paper, dried ink, dust, and rain on stone. In people it is a forgotten memory surfacing unbidden, or the weight of the past pressing in.

The most sacred rite of Memoria is the **Telling**: gathering to share the stories of the dead so that their memory lives on. Around it stand others. A memory or a lesson is written down and placed in an archive. A candle is lit for those who have passed. A path the ancestors walked is walked again. A painful memory is spoken aloud, so that its weight is released to the archive while its truth is kept. Destroying records, silencing those who saw, and falsifying the narrative are the great offences, and destroying a library is the classic example of sacrilege; the gaps such acts leave tend to reopen, and the murdered man who saw too much is named again by his grandchildren. Memory is also what keeps a feud alive. Kindreds that forget nothing avenge everything, and a name struck from the telling is a worse death than a sword. Historians, storytellers, and archivists work along its grain. Memory is rarely the subject of direct worship, and Memoria's gods are few and often imperilled: **Annoth the Keeper of Scrolls**, god of the corridor's scribes, is always losing records to fire and seizure, and **Ushkar the Ancestor-Warden** keeps the names of Orc kindreds who held passage and strikes the names of those who broke it. The god of memory kept by voice through the Unrecorded Age, who answered to the names of many peoples, faded when writing returned.

## Zephyr

**Zephyr** woke last. It is wind, freedom, and unconstrained motion: the force that carries seeds to new soil, disperses smoke from a fire, and sweeps away the stale air of stagnation. Its sign is the feather or the kite string, its saying that motion is the essence of life. It is the breath that fills the

lungs and the gale that fills the sails, the force that proves to every being that no wall is high enough and no cage strong enough. Without it the universe would be a stagnant pool where heat does not dissipate and scent does not travel.

It is often mistaken for chaos. The line is a fine one: motion without direction is aimless, and a wind that blows everywhere blows nowhere. Freedom is not only the ability to move but the ability to choose where to go. Its pair is Terra. Stability needs a foundation, but life needs to move, and too much of either is stagnation or ruin.

**The Unbound Gale** is Zephyr's Harmonic, the breath of the universe and the carrier of thought and inspiration.

Zephyr's signs in the ordinary world are motion without cause. Dust motes dance in impossible patterns, leaves swirl with no source, flags snap taut where there is no wind. The air pressure drops a little and the body feels light. A sudden gust smells of ozone, rain, or distant storms, and sometimes there is a strange quiet, as if the wind were holding its breath. In people it is the sudden urge to leave, to travel, to change course.

Zephyr is honoured in rites of letting go and setting out. A kite is flown high so that the wind can carry off a wish or a worry. A feather is left on a high place for the wind to take, as a sign of the leaver's resolve to be free. Dancers move like the wind, and a deep breath is let out slowly in thanks for air. A chain or a lock is broken in ceremony; where the chain was real, a runaway's broken fetter hung in a high place is a shrine, and chain-masters have burned more than one such place to the ground. Sailors whistle for the wind and throw it a coin or a lock of hair, and a ship becalmed too long looks for whoever on board has offended it, and sometimes that sailor goes over the side. Caging others, denying the right to leave, and building a wall without a gate are the offences. Travellers, explorers, runaways, outlaws, and anyone breaking free of confinement work along its grain. Travel and freedom stir real but abstract feeling, and Zephyr's gods come at a middling rate: **Corrow the Gale-Runner**, the wind at the backs of the Edgeway Kindreds, who cannot stop moving; **Rakhal the Storm-Caller**, the scouring wind of the Orc Windscar; and, faded, the Ogre god who broke the walls of the chain-camps.

## Pairs, Triads, and the Web

No Prime is understood alone, and after the ten names the first thing to learn is how they lean on one another. Five pairs of tension hold the web taut. **Lux and Umbra** make visibility between them. **Terra and Zephyr** are stability and movement. **Ignis and Aqua** change and adapt, and make steam, weather, and life. **Verba and Imago** are form and freedom. **Aion and Memoria** are the moment passing and the moment kept. A sixth pairing runs across these: Imago drives the self to evolve, and Umbra preserves the trace of the self that has passed.

The pairs combine into larger chords. Terra, Aqua, and Ignis, matter, fluid, and energy, make the **material world**. Verba, Imago, and Lux, thought, self, and insight, make **consciousness**. Aion, Memoria, and Zephyr, duration, the past, and motion towards the future, make the **flow of history**. And Imago, Terra, and Zephyr, who one is, where one stands, and where one goes, make the **living being**. The Harmonics show the same habit of working in threes: the Crucible, the Surging Deep, and the Iron Backbone together sustain life, while the Whispering Trace, the Eternal Record, and the Frozen Moment together are what make undeath possible, by preserving a remnant of the dead past its natural release.

The web also explains why the Primes cannot simply be cut apart and studied. Ask what Aqua is "against" and the answer is the dam, the frost, the poison, the Silent Tide that takes the return out of every rhythm. Ask what it is "with" and the answer is Terra, which channels it, Aion, which it embodies as flow, Imago, which gives its change a shape. Every Prime is defined as much by its neighbours as by itself.

## Living Along the Grain

Mortals stand where all ten Primes meet, and they are the only beings who experience the whole of the resonance. A person's potential self is Imago, held in a body that is Terra and named by Verba. Their freedom to move is Zephyr and their freedom to choose is Lux, within the time that is Aion and the past that is Memoria. Aqua and Ignis keep them alive, and Umbra keeps what remains when they are gone. Through art, love, war, and discovery, mortals give the Primes back to themselves, and steady them in doing so.

Nobody on Caeldon worships a Prime as a person who grants favours. They are honoured instead through **alignment custom**, the layer of belief that every people shares beneath its gods: seasonal rites, planting and harvest observance, fire-lighting customs, oath forms, burial practice, and taboos whose breaking counts as sacrilege. Most people never think of it as worship. It is simply how things are done properly, and it varies more by region and way of life than by people. Human basin villages keep the seasonal custom of sowing and harvest beneath all their gods. Wood Elves of the Elderweald take only fallen wood, walk paths open, and leave water where it runs. Halflings of the Leeward Folds keep an alignment custom of bounded plenty, and never spend the reserve on a good year. Orc escorts keep a custom of held passage and answered betrayal. Trolls keep body-law, in which wounds and scars are sacred record. On the Tidelace coasts an unmaintained beacon or a falsely read mark is close to sacrilege, and the Salvage Peoples write their custom in waymarks: a ruin left no more dangerous than it was found is a ruin honoured.

None of these peoples is asking a Prime for anything. They are doing what plain sense advises near any Prime. They fight all the same, and bitterly, for the ground where a Prime is felt: a spring, a peak, a hearth-fire that has never gone out, a grave-field older than memory. Such places are held by whoever is strong enough to hold them, shrine-raiders are hated everywhere, and a people that loses one remembers it for generations. Do not try to stop time, freeze the wind, or erase a memory, because those who do find themselves working against the world itself: the mage who tries does not anger a god, the working simply turns, and the songs about such mages end badly. When the dammed river bursts or the gateless wall is torn down by those it penned, villages call it the Prime's anger. It is not anger; what breaks is what was built against the grain. Near Ignis, accept change; near Terra, stand firm. And above all, do not expect a Prime to solve anything. A force takes no side. What it offers is the grain of the world, and those who work with it find in it the tools to solve their troubles themselves.

> *Ask the river nothing. Learn its fall, and build your mill where it is steepest.*
>
> — *The March-Town Primer*

## What People Know

Of everything in the cosmos, the Primes are the least known. They are felt only as the order of things and never met, and every account of what they are is inference.

### *What Custom Knows*

Ordinary life honours the Primes without studying them. Alignment custom, seasonal rites, oath forms, burial practice, and taboo carry what every people has learnt of the grain of the world, and the breaking of a taboo counts as an offence against a Prime. Most people never think of any of it as worship, and could not say what a Prime is. The rare meeting with an avatar is remembered as a guide, or as weather, and changes the one who met it; it explains nothing to anyone else.

### *What Scholars Argue*

What the Primes are, how many there are, and whether they are persons or forces is argued only in the highest circles of scholarship, and argued there rather than settled. Accounts differ by

school, by faith, and by the Prime a scholar is aligned with. Some come close to the truth this chapter tells; none holds it whole.

### *Names and Numbers*

The ten names used here are the records' names. Out in the world each people, faith, and school names the powers its own way. *The March-Town Primer* teaches the corridor's children ten names and ten sayings, and its "none will hear, none will hate" is nearer the truth than most of what is taught, though few of its teachers could say why; other peoples count and name the powers otherwise, or not at all. Later eras guess better than the Medieval Era does, and still only guess.

## Tensions

- **Pressure from within.** Cast-Outs such as the Bone Singer, who would set everything in Terra's stone, strain towards a single-Prime state. The other Primes' currents press back against the imbalance only once one strains the Boundary or forces such a state on a place; short of that, nothing in the balance of the Primes stops it.
- **A concept un-named.** If one of the Unformed dissolved the concept a Prime holds, as the Echoing Dark could un-name time, that Prime would lose its function and fall dormant until the universe was differentiated anew.
- **Back into the Seed.** If the Unformed succeeded altogether, the Primes would not die. They would merge back into the single Seed they came from, and the universe would lose its complexity and become a static, undifferentiated void.
- **A foreign law.** A Beyonder with a sufficiently alien concept can overwhelm a Prime once the Boundary is breached, pressing the Prime's law onto ground where it does not apply. A breach is usually sealed only by several Primes pressing at once.
- **Paradox.** Time can be slowed, hastened, and in rare cases reversed at a cost, but a true paradox strains Aion itself, and the universe's attempts to heal one are often catastrophic.
- **A guide no one can hold.** Where a breach must be sealed or the resonance is under great strain, a Prime's current can condense into an avatar. Those who meet one are changed, and the meeting is dangerous, because a mortal mind is not made to hold the whole of a Prime.
- **A force takes no side.** The Primes will solve nobody's troubles. Those who live along a Prime's grain find tools in it; those who try to stop time, freeze the wind, or erase a memory find themselves working against the world itself.

CHAPTER 6

# Stewards and Resonants

*Pray softly, and pray in truth:*
*the god you feed will learn your face.*
*Forget it, and it forgets its name;*
*fear it, and it grows in place.*

*— Sayings of the Crossing Shrines*

Ask a ferryman on the Lower Serath who his god is and he will name the River-King, whose festival stops the barges at the spring rise. Ask a Dwarven gate-warden and she will name the Stone-Warden, born at a besieged hold gate in the old deep conflicts. Ask an Orc escort on the Windscar and the answer is the Ancestor-Warden, who keeps the names of those who held the road. None of them will name a Prime, and none will name a Steward, though one of them may have met a Steward once, at a moment so grave that afterwards they called it a saint, or a judge, or a watcher at the gate. These are the two orders of power that stand between the impersonal Primes and mortal life. The **Stewards** are offices of the Primes, each holding one threshold that reality cannot afford to lose. The **Resonants** are gods that mortals made, without meaning to, out of what they feared and loved. One order is needed by the world. The other needs the world, and it can die. Gods go to war beside their peoples; when a people is beaten, raiders loot its shrines and carry its god's relics home as plunder.

This chapter tells what Stewards and gods truly are, and both truths are hidden from nearly everyone who prays. What people know and believe of them is told in What People Know.

## Two Orders Between

The whole divine order can be summarized in four lines. The Primes define reality. The Stewards guard it at its critical points. The Resonants interpret it, giving it faces that mortals can love and fear. And the Dark Entities, the subject of the next chapter, threaten it from without, from corruption within, and from beneath definition itself.

The two middle orders could hardly be more different. Stewards come from the Primes and owe nothing to mortals; they endure because their office remains necessary, and worship neither sustains them nor much moves them. Resonants come from mortals, or rather from what mortals do to a Prime's current, and they depend on mortals entirely. Stewards are among the oldest powers in the cosmos, offices that held burdens long before any people grew dense enough to keep a temple. Resonants are, in ordinary history, the latest: they need peoples and cultures large and settled enough to generate sustained worship, fear, or devotion. That is why the earliest history of the

**AT A GLANCE**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Stewards** | Offices of the Primes, each holding one threshold of reality; one to three active to a Prime; not sustained by worship. |
| **Resonants** | Gods condensed from a Prime's current by mortal worship, fear, or longing; they fade when forgotten. |
| **A god's strength** | Intensity of belief and breadth of believers; fear feeds a god as well as love. |
| **The first fall** | The Steward of Foundations, during the Uneven Settling of the young Material Plane; replaced by the Steward of Bearable Foundations. |
| **Gods of the Medieval Era** | Among many, Anvelle the Harvest-Mother, Kerrund the Stone-Warden, Serovan the River-King, Ennor the Grave-Watcher, Ostrin the Lantern-Bearer, and Maris of the Tides. |
| **Faith** | Alignment custom for every people; local cults nearly everywhere; four organized religions among the denser civilizations. |

peoples of Caeldon is full of threshold custom, burial logic, taboo, sacred ground, and direct Steward pressure, and only later of gods.

Mortals stand at the meeting point. They do not create the Primes and they do not sustain the Stewards. They do create and sustain the Resonants, they are usually the first to suffer from the Dark Entities, and they are often the most important agents in resisting them. Against the Cast-Outs mortals often stand nearly alone, and the heroes every people sings of are the ones who stood against a fallen power, held a burning shrine against the risen dead, or walked into a blighted place and came back. The Primes structure reality; the Stewards guard it; the Resonants interpret it. Mortals live inside it and give parts of it new faces.

## The Stewards

A Prime has no need of servants to watch every river or tend every hearth; that work belongs to the Prime's own nature, to mortal priests and hedge-wise, and to local gods. The Stewards exist for the special burdens of reality: thresholds that must not fail, balances that must not tip, oaths and names that must still bind, transitions that must stay possible, and the crisis points where a Prime's nature is most easily distorted. Each holds a single office, narrow in scope and immense in consequence, and the measure of a true Steward is that if it vanished, something in the structure of the world would begin to fail.

They are few. Most Primes keep only one to three active Stewards at a time, and some may have none that anyone knows of. The rule the theologians apply is strict: if a role could be filled by a priesthood, a local spirit, or a god of mortal making, it is too small for a Steward. A Steward should be narrower than a Prime and far greater than any Resonant, and nothing lower should be called by the name.

### *Laws Wearing a Face*

Some Stewards seem almost like persons and can judge, guide, or condemn; others seem more like a turning of the world that has put on a face. Their personalities exist, but they are shaped by the weight of their office until it is hard to tell the one from the other. Their names read like the lines of a vow, and the theologians who know them use the names as definitions.

The few who have met one describe a presence that bends the world towards its office. Near the **Keeper of the Unbroken Sequence**, Aion's guardian of causality, falling dust lands in perfect rhythm and every word arrives exactly on time; it appears as a tall figure wrapped in veils of moving chronology, seen in several positions at once a fraction of a second apart, its face hidden by a

mask of glass etched with spirals. Near the **Warden of Irreversible Endings**, fires burn down cleanly, echoes fade, and doors close softly of their own accord; it is a robed figure of dusk-coloured light and falling ash, its hands bound in dark bronze engraved with names already gone from living speech. Near the **Steward of Bearable Foundations**, the ground feels trustworthy and panic settles, and weak joints and false supports show themselves; it resembles both a mason and a mountain, with visible joints and relief cuts, and its chest bears a keystone glowing amber, crossed by stress-lines that show weight being shared rather than denied. The **Keeper of Binding Oaths** is a robed judge of dark ink and silver script, chains of luminous text circling its wrists, whose every motion leaves a trail of written words in the air; near it lies feel physically heavy.

None of this is ornament. A Steward appears when its office is at stake: at a binding oath that may alter kingdoms, at a death that must not become a haunting, at a choice on which many futures turn, at a transformation that may sanctify or destroy a self, or where the world itself is beginning to fray. A Steward enters a story the way a flood or a falling star does: rarely, decisively, and with consequence. Meetings that rare become legend. Songs tell of a figure of ink and silver that stood between two warbands at a burning ford until both had sworn the truce; of a gravedigger who would not cover a plague pit unrited and woke with silver dust on his hands; of a burned valley where something white-gold walked behind the fire-bearers. Shrines raised where such a thing was seen are prized, robbed, and fought over.

### *Saints, Heralds, and Judges*

Most peoples know the Stewards only through myth, fragments of doctrine, or mistaken identification. They call them angels, heralds, judges, watchers, gate-keepers, or saints, and only the most serious theologians suspect what they truly are. Every Prime's Stewards collect their own folk names. Aion's are remembered as judges of fate, keepers of the last hour, wardens of the proper end. Aqua's become river judges, deep mothers, sea-guides of the dead, and divine physicians; Ignis's furnace-judges, pyres of truth, and holy destroyers. Imago's are mirrored judges and chrysalis saints. Lux's become lantern-bearers and crossroads judges; Memoria's archivists of the dead and keepers of forgotten names. Terra's are gate-judges and wardens of the world's bones; Umbra's grave guides, dusk-keepers, and guardians of the last door; Verba's word-judges, namers, and sacred witnesses; Zephyr's chain-breakers and horizon guardians.

In the Medieval Era, these are the **Steward traditions** that run through every layer of belief, from village custom to organized religion. They are a tradition about beings who are neither sustained nor much moved by worship, and later religions often read old Steward traces through devotional language, treating as a saint to be prayed to what was in truth an office that no prayer reaches.

### *The Known Offices*

The theologians' list is short, and it is worth knowing whole.

Aion keeps very few Stewards, because time is too fundamental to tolerate an elaborate hierarchy. The **Keeper of the Unbroken Sequence** sees that before stays before and consequence follows act. It does not forbid every working on time: slowing, quickening, and even limited reversal are allowed at a price. What it forbids is contradiction without price. The **Warden of Irreversible Endings** holds that some losses cannot be reclaimed without cost, and denies the fantasy of retrieval without consequence; those who come to it to undo a loss are told, in effect, to bring an honest account of what was lost and what they will pay.

Aqua's Stewards stand where life and dissolution blur. The **Steward of the Living Current**, a figure of waters moving in opposite directions at once, arterial red, river-blue, and the dark green of fertile depth, keeps flow life-giving rather than devouring, and opposes hoarding, stagnation, and growth that has turned parasitic. The **Warden of the Returning Deep**, a cloaked figure of starless

midnight water whose face shows only as a pale reflection inside its hood, like a moon at the bottom of a well, keeps the difference between holy surrender and annihilating engulfment: what dissolves back into the greater cycle must not be erased by it.

Ignis's Stewards hold some of the harshest offices of all. The **Steward of Purifying Fire**, white-gold flame sheathed in black furnace-metal, burns disease without hating the sick and corruption without glorifying ruin. The **Keeper of Necessary Ruin**, a war-scarred figure of blackened bronze carrying a cracked and still-glowing hammer, decides when ruin is rightful: it opposes preservation that has become cowardice and destruction that seeks only spectacle, and it can also deny a ruin that comes too soon.

Imago's Stewards are the most intimate. The **Steward of Coherent Self** is a mirrored figure whose surface shows the viewer's most integrated and truthful form, its cracks sealed with soft prismatic light; it keeps a being itself through grief, injury, growth, and change. The **Steward of Sacred Metamorphosis**, wrapped in translucent layers like wings, skin, parchment, and moulted glass, governs true becoming, so that change is meaningful rather than forced or monstrous. It speaks in questions and invitations, and near it seeds split and old wounds itch.

Lux's Stewards stand over sight and freedom. The **Steward of the Open Path**, a radiant traveller whose every shadow forks, keeps more than one real road open, against false destiny and imposed inevitability. The **Warden of Revelatory Mercy**, a figure of veiled white-gold light that seems always to be choosing restraint, governs truth in right measure, so that revelation illuminates rather than blinds. Those who ask it to reveal everything are told that the request is usually pride disguised as courage.

Memoria's Stewards hold two absolutes in balance: nothing important must be lost, and not everything can be borne at once. The **Keeper of the Imperishable Record**, draped in inscribed stone, parchment, bone, and light, preserves the histories whose erasure would wound the cosmos itself: first covenants, species traumas, the records of catastrophes reality cannot afford to forget. The **Warden of Bearable Memory**, a quiet figure in archive-cloth and pale ash-grey light, lets the living set down what is too heavy without falsifying the past, and hands memory on so that inheritance stays wisdom rather than an endless wound.

Terra's Stewards are stern and immensely consequential. The **Steward of Bearable Foundations** guards supports that life can actually bear, and permits rightful settling, release, and even abandonment where forced endurance would become entrapment. The **Steward of Boundary**, a towering gate-shaped figure of granite and dark metal with an opening where its torso should be, keeps walls, borders, and thresholds that protect form without becoming prisons. Its voice is bolts sliding home and gates opening at dawn.

Umbra's Stewards make endings habitable. The **Keeper of the Final Crossing**, a hooded figure of soft darkness whose footprints glow briefly and fade, guides the dead away from the living and keeps the living from being dragged across too soon. The **Warden of Released Traces**, whose edges keep dispersing into whisper-like filaments and gathering again, decides what of a loss should stay sharp and what may soften; near it grief becomes breathable and old rooms feel less haunted and more honest.

Verba's Stewards stand close to the architecture of reality. The **Steward of True Names**, a figure of living script that rewrites itself without losing coherence, keeps beings and categories distinct enough to be spoken. The **Keeper of Binding Oaths** gives a true vow its force and tells formal speech from empty utterance; it can also release an oath that has become impossible, corrupted, or unjust.

Zephyr keeps a single Steward known to the theologians. The **Steward of Open Movement**, a lean figure of moving air, tattered banners, and migrating birds, whose cloak is a map that keeps redrawing past its own edge, defends the principle that what lives may leave what cages it. It guaran-

tees no easy departure, only that no enclosure ever becomes absolute. It and the Steward of Boundary are in necessary tension, and that tension is one of the deep reasons that routes, thresholds, and departures remain rightful rather than arbitrary.

### *The Office That Would Not Let Go*

Stewards can fall. A Steward falls when it carries the virtue of its office past balance: guidance becomes coercion, preservation imprisonment, truth violation, structure petrification, release erasure, transformation mutilation. The greater the office, the worse the fall. The fallen become the Cast-Outs, and they are dangerous precisely because they once held offices the world needed. A Cast-Out is a great office turned to horror: where one walks, villages empty, the dead get up wrong, and the songs remember the few mortals who stood against it. Their falls were staggered across history, not crowded into one mythic catastrophe, and the first of them shaped the earliest history of the peoples.

That fall came during the **Uneven Settling**, the long instability of the young Material Plane, when the world could not be held evenly. Some places settled into habitable ground; others grew too burdened, too unstable, or too costly to keep in their old form. The rightful course was triage: some structures had to be given up, some passages hardened for a time, some lineages moved, and some surviving peoples transformed. The **Steward of Foundations**, whose office was load-bearing support itself, could not accept that anything might need to collapse. It tried to hold everything, and support became compulsion. Shelter became entrapment, endurance burden without release. The fallen office is known now as the **Cast-Out of Unyielding Burden**.

The office did not stay empty. When a Steward falls, its office is usually replaced, and not by a duplicate. It returned as the Steward of Bearable Foundations, narrower and more merciful, and so divine history reads as self-correction as well as loss: offices have genealogies as well as failures. Not every office broke. The Steward of Boundary was wounded rather than fallen, pressed during the crisis into a harsher, more defensive way of working, and it has kept that reflex of protection through hard separation ever since. Every line it draws risks hardening into severity. The offices of Coherent Self, Sacred Metamorphosis, the Living Current, and Open Movement were pressured but never broken, and that is what made migration, transformed survival, and the continuity of identity possible after the first great damage.

The peoples carry the marks still. The earliest Elven ancestors were shaped most by the offices of coherent self, sacred metamorphosis, living current, and rightful boundary; the earliest Dwarven ancestors by foundations and boundary, and by open movement where survival meant migrating through hard worlds. The older, stone-heavier ancestors of the Dwarves became less survivable once Foundations had fallen, while a pressured but unbroken Metamorphosis still let their line adapt without ceasing to be itself. The catastrophe of the Roothollows draws its burden and rupture from fallen Foundations and its sealing-and-threshold shape from wounded Boundary. Later deep cultures inherited customs of sealing and guarded passage from that time, and some peoples inherited something heavier: a dangerous reverence for burden, endurance, and staying put when retreat would be wiser.

## The Resonants

The Resonants are the gods of the mortal world. When enough mortals pour belief, fear, devotion, or desperation into a concept a Prime holds, the Prime's diffuse current condenses at that point of focus into a new, self-aware being. The Prime does not decide to make a god, any more than water decides to be focused into a burning ray; mortal feeling is the lens, and the god is the ray. The image belongs to the few theologians who have guessed the truth, and it is exact. Without the lens there is only diffuse light. Without the light, the lens focuses nothing.

They are lower than the Primes and the Stewards not because they matter less but because they are contingent. They are the most powerful beings mortals can deal with directly, and the most fragile.

### *How a God Is Born*

A god's power grows with two things. The first is **intensity**, how deeply a single believer feels: one mother's life-or-death prayer outweighs a thousand casual nods, and a warrior's absolute terror of the battlefield god feeds that god more than a soldier's mild unease. The second is **breadth**, how many hold the belief. Together they sort the gods. Low intensity and low breadth make a weak local spirit, the guardian of a single village well. High intensity and low breadth make a fierce but narrow power, the patron of one warrior cult. Low intensity and high breadth make a stable, diffuse god, a household power acknowledged by many and loved by few. Both at once make a god that can shape a civilization.

Fear counts as much as love. A god sustained by terror is as strong as one sustained by gratitude; the energy is the same, and only its flavour differs. A god of plagues kept alive by the dread of a whole region is every bit as potent as a harvest god kept alive by grateful prayer.

A Resonant is born resembling the people who made it, with a face, a name, a gender, and a temper shaped by their culture and their need, and it is as individual as they are. Two gods of the same Prime can be utterly unlike: one gentle and nurturing, the other cruel and demanding. Gods form alliances, rivalries, and enmities; they love, scheme, and compromise; and their quarrels follow those of their peoples, so that when two peoples go to war, their gods may clash above the battle: a river that rises against one army, a fire that turns on the other, a hymn that breaks a shield-wall's courage before a blow is struck. Every people has its war-tale of such a day, sung loudest by the side that won. The way a god is prayed into being stays in it. Quennet the Clockmaker was born of harbour anxiety and stretches time; Ulaun the Stilled Hour was born of terror and stopped it; Tamsel the Season-Weaver was born of routine and reverence and conducts it.

Most gods of Caeldon carry a personal name as well as a title, written as name and epithet, **Anvelle the Harvest-Mother**, and the name sounds like the people who first worshipped it. Some names are lost or forbidden, and a faded god may survive only as a title, its true name held by a single people or spoken only as a curse. One god may also have many names. Where different peoples worship the same power in the same place or for the same need, and are in contact, their devotion feeds a single Resonant, which then answers to every name it is called by. The god Humans call **Abrel the Changeling** is **Durrask** to frontier Dwarves and **Ziv** to the Goblins of the mixed crossings. Where similar worship arises separately and without contact, it condenses into separate gods, which may later be mistaken for one another.

### *Which Primes Make Gods*

In principle every Prime can condense gods. In practice some do so far more readily, because their domains stir strong and frequent feeling. Ignis does, in war and passion; Aqua, in healing and the sea; Lux, in truth and justice; Terra, in harvest and home. Zephyr, in travel and freedom, Imago, in love and change, and Verba, in oaths and names, come at a middling rate: their concerns matter but are more abstract. Memoria, Umbra, and Aion condense gods rarely, because history, grief, and duration are fundamental but are seldom prayed to directly.

These are rates of condensation, not counts of gods. On Caeldon the rare kinds appear in three ways: slowly, over ages, like Ennor the Grave-Watcher; born of a catastrophe and later faded, like the god of stillness raised against a blight; or always imperilled, like Annoth the Keeper of Scrolls, who loses records to fire every year. When gods of the rare Primes do appear, they tend to be ancient, strange, and powerful.

### *Gods and Mortals*

Resonants can have children. Two gods who love each other strongly enough can produce a **hybrid Resonant**, with traits of both parents' domains, potentially stronger than either and still subject to the same rules of worship and fading. Very rarely a god and a mortal produce a **demigod**: stronger, quicker, cleverer, or longer-lived than ordinary people, sometimes living a hundred and fifty or two hundred years, but not divine and not invincible. The gift does not pass down. A demigod's children are ordinary mortals, so no line of immortal aristocrats can form, and each demigod is a single, often tragic figure, too great for ordinary life and too small to be a god: the champion at the ford, the queen who rode out alone against a warband, and the songs about them end in graves as often as in crowns.

A mortal can, on very rare occasions, become a Resonant. It happens when a person's own deeds generate such overwhelming belief, fear, or devotion that the Prime's current condenses around them, perhaps once in a thousand years. The belief must be authentic. A tyrant who manufactures fear will not ascend unless the fear is real and world-altering, and a hero who stages their own legends will not ascend unless the people truly believe. The same rule governs the deliberate making of gods. A statue and a chant will not form the knot in reality if the belief behind them is hollow; forced devotion is lukewarm and forced fear is shallow. But if a cult leader truly inspires bone-deep belief, even belief founded on lies, the god that results is real. What matters is the sincerity of the worshippers, not the truth of the doctrine. War-bands carry a dead captain's helm into every battle and roar his name, hoping to raise him a god, and warlords stage miracles before their armies; none of it works unless the dread or love is real. Hill-folk tell of a prophet who carved a god out of nothing and a cult that truly believed him, and of the thing that answered them, which did not share its prophet's plans.

### *Fading, Death, and Rebirth*

A god that is forgotten does not die at once. It dims, and its powers grow erratic: a storm god may summon only a drizzle. Its personality slips; its memories blur; it forgets its own name and becomes more like a generic shape of its Prime's current. At last the final thread of belief breaks, its consciousness scatters, and its power returns to the current of its Prime. The particular god is gone for ever. Gods born of a need fade when the need passes, unless their worshippers find them a new meaning. Some fade more strangely. Haggun the Wall-Breaker, the Ogre god of breaking out of the debt-bound chain-camps, faded once the Hearth-Weight Compacts made refusal stick, and in his last years tried to break things that no longer needed breaking. The Echo-Mother of the Hush-vale faded because her people forgot her, which is what she had taught them to do. Mortals meet the fading at its edges. A dimming god's shrine still answers, but badly: the healing that comes a day late, the rain that falls on the wrong valley. A dead god's temple is a ruin like any other, with its offering-hoard still under the floor, so treasure-seekers dig in the hills where the old gods were kept, and cults hunting a lost god dig up its hymn-tablets and idols and pray over them. If their belief is real, something answers. It is never the god they dug for.

If a later people revives an old worship, a new god may condense from the same current. It is an echo, not a copy: it carries vague memories of its predecessor, a lingering preference or aversion it cannot explain, and a self entirely its own. A glory-seeking war god of one age may be followed, in the same domain, by a weary protector who fights only for the innocent.

A god that is killed is another matter. If a Resonant is slain, by another god, by a Beyonder, or by a mortal, the concept it held comes suddenly unanchored. A region that worshipped a harvest god may suffer famine; a city guarded by a god of walls may see its fortifications crumble. Its worshippers fall into a collective grief that is a wound to the mind, because the god was part of who they

were, and whole peoples have sunk into apathy and despair after the death of their patron god. The few mortals ever said to have slain a god are remembered as heroes by one people and as monsters by another. The place the god held stands open: a new Resonant may rise quickly to fill it, or the concept may run wild until something anchors it again.

### *The Rule of Indifference*

The Primes do not care about the affairs of gods. A Prime does not favour one Resonant over another, does not intervene in their quarrels, and does not mourn them. The current supplies the power; what the god does with it is the god's affair. There is one exception. If a Resonant grows so powerful, or so twisted, that it threatens the balance of reality, the interlocking currents of the Primes correct it, not out of malice but because the world is breaking, as a river overruns a dam built too high. A god of life that tried to abolish death would be working against Aion, Umbra, and Ignis at once; a god of order that tried to freeze all change would be working against Zephyr, Aion, and Imago. It is extraordinarily rare, and usually catastrophic for the god.

Against the Dark Entities the gods are often the first defence. A Resonant's power, fed by mortal belief, can push back a foreign law, though a Beyonder that kills a god deals a terrible blow to the local reality and gains a foothold for more. Gods and Cast-Outs are natural enemies: a Cast-Out wants to impose a single twisted vision on a place, and a god is the living spirit of the people who live there. And a god is an anchor against the Unformed, because a named, worshipped, believed-in concept is a constant assertion of definition. A region that loses its god to fading or death becomes open to the Unformed's erosion.

## The Gods by Prime

What follows is a survey, Prime by Prime, of how each Prime's gods work, with the gods of earlier ages that show it, most of them faded or asleep. The gods worshipped in the Medieval Era are portrayed in The Gods of the Medieval Era (MED 69).

### *Gods of Aion*

Aion's gods are living clocks. They do not stop or reverse time at will; they change the rate and quality of its passage for those who believe in them. Most see the weight of choices rather than a fixed future, which makes them seem aloof. Those born of desperation hasten things, those born of fear slow them, and those born of tradition see that the right amount of time passes for rites and seasons. Every such working costs the god personal duration, and a god who lends a dying mortal one more hour creates a debt that is repaid in service or reclaimed from the mortal's later years. The tales of borrowed hours are among the oldest hero-tales there are: the bridge-warden who held one hour past his death-wound and then served a harbour shrine for forty years.

The faded gods of Aion show what time-gods become under terror. **Ulaun the Stilled Hour** was born of Thaluren dread as egg blight entered their oldest sacred water, and she was stillness itself: a smooth obsidian silhouette that froze the water without ice, hung the silt like dust, and stopped the breath of everyone near. The clutches she held never hatched, and when the Thaluren began to pray for the water to be answered rather than held, she shattered into black silt. **Calvesh the Chronos-King**, golden stillness in a heatless crown, was the god of an elder archive world that prayed for records that never change; he was finished, like the rolls his keepers sealed, and his name survives only inside Reedfolk swearing-forms.

### *Gods of Aqua*

Aqua's gods are living currents, and they mirror the feeling of those who keep them: calm and healing in a hopeful community, turbulent in a frightened one. They can become mist, wave, or rain, and when they heal, they often take on a share of the pain or memory of the healed, which can leave them melancholy over time.

The faded Aqua gods are drowned and salted. **Ithaere the Drowned Mother** rose from the terror of the Drowning Bloom in the upper Roothollows, when the Elves whose survivors would become the Dark Elves prayed not for the water to stop but for permission to do whatever was needed to survive. She was pale, waterlogged, root-haired, with infinitely sorrowful eyes, and she carried the flood's hardest law: life is often bought by sacrifice. When the water fell she tried to keep the flood alive, and her people turned their backs and went deeper. Dark Elf parents still warn children away from black water in her name. **Mereth the Salt-Witch**, porcelain-skinned and cracked to show salt crystals within, was the god of a vanished inland-sea people of the Glassbelt Interior who prayed for a world that never rots, and her stillness helped turn their sea to salt.

### *Gods of Ignis*

Ignis's gods are living sparks, tied to the emotional temperature of their followers: a community full of rage breeds a war god, one full of hope a god of inspiration. They provoke change rather than wait for it, and they are prone to burning out, consuming the belief that feeds them and having to rekindle it.

**Ozhar the Pyre-King** shows the fire that burns out. He rose from the overburn of the elder Ash-Furnace Civilization, whose heat-halls prayed for renewal by burning until they could no longer stop: a towering silhouette of white-hot flame against black smoke, crowned with fused, burning bones, with eyes like pits of absolute cold. The fire consumed the flaws and then the people it was meant to renew, and when the survivors prayed for banked fires and cold furnaces, he burned out with the world that fed him. Saying his name near a furnace is still taboo, and the Kobolds, whose vent-houses recorded furnaces fired against their warning, remember more than anyone.

### *Gods of Imago*

Imago's gods are living mirrors. They appear differently to different people, often as the observer's ideal self, and they change shape to match expectation rather than surroundings, which makes them hard to describe and harder to pin down. They tend to push their followers towards confronting who they are, and a mortal who changes with their help often loses some part of the old self.

The faded gods of Imago are origins and refusals. The **First Man** was born of the first Human self-awareness during the First Human Emergence, c. 300,000–c. 220,000 BR, a figure of shifting clay and starlit eyes whose voice said only "Look. Choose. Become." As Humans diversified he split into the many figures of Human story, and his name is lost; what survives is the Myth of the Progenitor. **Hesserin the Shattered Saint** was the Reedfolk god of Floodkeeper houses that would not be swallowed by the Human river powers and renamed as their servants, cracked porcelain held together by veins of gold. She shattered when the houses accepted service, and the broken mirrors mended with gold in old crossing shrines are hers.

### *Gods of Lux*

Lux's gods are living beacons, and they struggle with the ethics of their own sight: should a truth be shown if it will destroy the one who sees it? They show the fork in the road and leave the walking to mortals, and they can paralyse a follower with too many visible paths.

In the Medieval Era one dominates: **Ostrin the Lantern-Bearer**, who shows those who look into his lantern their own secrets and the lies of others, and who has begun to doubt whether total truth is a kindness.

### *Gods of Memoria*

Memoria's gods are living libraries, slow and grave, who feel the pain of every memory they hold. Some are chroniclers, some witnesses, some keepers of lineage, and some, the forgetters, help people let go of what prevents them from living. All of them are torn between the duty to remember and the mercy of forgetting.

The faded gods of Memoria lie on either side of writing. The **Many-Named** was the god of memory kept by voice through the Unrecorded Age, c. 120,000–c. 40,000 BR, when written record had ended and peoples kept their customs and genealogies in breath. Each people called on that power by its own name, and where they met at crossings and markets their devotion fed one god, a lean figure of woven sound with a voice of many tongues speaking in rhyme. As writing returned with the corridor lordships, each people stopped calling on him under its own name, and he faded into the wind; some of his names survive as refrains in children's rhymes and the call a teller makes before a story, said by people who do not know whom they are calling. **Oblen the Trauma-Weaver**, featureless and lavender-skinned, with a loom of bone, was the god of chosen forgetting among the survivors of the furnace world's fall: she took the memory of the overburn away, and with it the lesson, so that furnace memory survives only as fragments, warnings, and taboo.

### *Gods of Terra*

Terra's gods are living bedrock. They feel the weight of everything they protect, so that a fallen wall cracks their own being, and they believe stability is the highest good, which makes them slow and sometimes hostile to change. What they make permanent may lock out change that was needed, and if one is removed, whatever it held steady may collapse violently.

The elder Terra gods sleep or lie silent. **Haurûm the Mountain-Father**, a titan of granite and quartz with a beard of stalactites, was the god of the Upland Colossal Civilization; when that world withdrew, c. 198,000–c. 160,000 BR, he did not die but slept, and only the Giants still speak his name. Upland folk will not dig too deep beneath the highest peaks, lest he wake confused. The **Tomb-Builder**, obsidian-skinned and dust-haired, was the god of the Sepulchre-Kin burial houses, whose obsession with permanence drove the Unburial War of c. 110,000–c. 80,000 BR; his true name is held inside their Record-engine, where no one can read it.

### *Gods of Umbra*

Umbra's gods are living shadows, guides at the threshold between living and dead, and they are often strongest when they are least seen. Some guard the dead, some hide the hunted, some help the living reach the traces of the past, and some keep the boundary between worlds.

In the Medieval Era the greatest of them is **Ennor the Grave-Watcher**, who condensed slowly, over ages of burial and mourning, out of the funerary custom of many peoples at once, and keeps watch at most of the cradle-web's graves.

### *Gods of Verba*

Verba's gods are living syntax. They feel every broken promise as a fracture and every stolen name as an erasure, and they are torn between the duty to define and the mercy of ambiguity. Some keep oaths, some speak truths, some weave stories, and some keep silences. When one seals an oath, it takes on some of the oath's weight.

The faded Verba god of the Kobolds is the strangest. **Sessik the Tongue-Taker** was born where noise brought collapse and discovery, a slate-skinned figure with a mouth stitched shut in silver and a mute bell that never rang. His silence kept crews from warning one another, and as Kobold crews learnt taps, low calls, and shared sound codes that carried a warning without carrying far, he faded into the draught of a ventilation shaft. Silence remained in the underworks, but it belonged to the Kobolds now.

### *Gods of Zephyr*

Zephyr's gods are living breezes. They grow ill if they stay still too long, which makes them poor rulers and good guides, and they are natural enemies of tyranny and dogma. When one frees someone, it takes on a share of the responsibility for what comes next.

**Haggun the Wall-Breaker** was the faded Ogre god of the chain-camps of c. 18,000–c. 8,000 BR, where the walls were mostly ledgers: food advanced against labour, dependents kept far from the strong. He was cracked granite pulsing with blue light, all explosive momentum, shouting "Free!" He broke the first walls; then the camps bound themselves to shared terms that employers had to accept before any band would work, food before labour and the right to refuse; once refusal held, they told him they had terms that held, and he could rest.

## Gods Across the Ages

Read together, the gods of Caeldon tell a history of their own. The earliest peoples had threshold custom, burial, taboo, and sacred ground, and lived under the direct pressure of Steward offices; the first clearly worshipped gods of the deep, such as the Last Chamber, grew out of wounds the Steward crisis had left. The Elder Worlds raised great gods of whole civilizations, the Mountain-Father, the Pyre-King, the Chronos-King, the Tomb-Builder, and most of them faded or slept with the worlds that made them, leaving taboos, sealed cities, and forbidden names. The Unrecorded Age kept one god of many names alive in breath alone. The corridor ages raised gods of record, oath, toll, and harvest, and organized religion arose only where peoples grew dense enough to keep a trained clergy and a durable record.

The gods of an age reflect what its peoples need and fear, and so they change as peoples change. Larger and more crowded peoples focus their belief less completely, and their gods tend to be more numerous, narrower, and weaker than the great gods of smaller, more unified peoples. Gods born of a need that has passed, a danger, a labour, a way of life, fade when it does, unless their worshippers find them new meaning. New crafts, powers, and fears can condense new gods, but only when they draw sincere and sustained devotion or dread. Which gods later ages will raise depends on needs and fears those ages have not yet met.

> *A saint will come when the world is at stake, and never when you call. A god will come when you call, and want something for it.*
>
> — *Sayings of the Crossing Shrines*

## What People Know

The gods are the best known part of the divine, and the Stewards among the least.

### *Of the Stewards*

Most peoples know the Stewards only as saints, heralds, judges, watchers, or gate-keepers, through myth, fragments of doctrine, and the stories of the few who met one. That these are offices of the Primes is suspected only by the most serious theologians and mystics, and they disagree on what the offices are and how many. A Steward met at a deathbed or a burning ford leaves a story behind, not an explanation, and in time the story grows a saint. In the Medieval Era they live on in the steward traditions of every faith.

### *Of the Gods*

The gods are known well as gods: their names, natures, wishes, and places, through cult, myth, and answered prayer. What a god is, a Prime's current focused by mortal devotion and fear, is not known. Each faith has its own account of what its gods are and where they came from, and the mystics who guess nearer the truth are few. When *Sayings of the Crossing Shrines* speaks of "the god you feed", it means offerings, and is closer to the truth than its shrine-keepers know. Later eras come to know their gods better, and never all the way.

## Tensions

- **A wounded office.** The Steward of Boundary was wounded rather than fallen in the Uneven Settling and still works under the harsh reflex it learnt there, protection through hard separation. It is one reason later peoples so often turn protection into exclusion and sealing into moral seriousness.
- **A dangerous reverence.** Some peoples inherited from the Uneven Settling a moral overvaluation of burden, endurance, and staying put, even where release or retreat would be wiser. It is the same temptation the Cast-Out of Unyielding Burden offers everywhere: you do not have to set this burden down.
- **Saints who do not listen.** Most peoples know the Stewards only as angels, heralds, judges, or saints, and later religions read old Steward traces through devotional language. The beings they pray to are neither sustained nor much moved by worship.
- **A god from a lie.** A god cannot be manufactured from hollow ritual, but a cult whose leader inspires genuine belief, even belief founded on lies, produces a real Resonant. What matters is the sincerity of the worshippers, not the truth of the doctrine.
- **The slain god's place.** A Resonant that is killed leaves its concept unanchored: harvests fail, walls crumble, and its people fall into collective grief. A new god may rise to fill the place, or the concept may run wild, and a Beyonder that kills a god gains a foothold in the local reality.
- **One god or two.** Peoples in contact who worship the same power feed one god under many names; similar worship that arose apart condenses into separate gods, which may later be mistaken for one another. Neither the worshippers nor the gods can always tell which case they are in.
- **Too great a god.** A Resonant that grows strong or twisted enough to threaten the balance, by abolishing death or freezing all change, is corrected by the interlocking currents of the Primes, not out of malice but because the world is breaking, and usually catastrophically for the god.

CHAPTER 7

# What Waits Outside

*Say your name before you sleep,*
*say it twice where the dark is deep;*
*the thing with no name comes soft to keep*
*whatever name you did not keep.*

— *Lamp-Out Charms of the Headwater Towns*

Some darkness has a shape you can name. A shimmer in the air, golden and warm, with a single quiet note inside it that sounds like everyone you have ever loved, speaking together, asking you to come home. A tall figure in robes of living skin, its face serene, a dozen small dark eyes blinking across its throat and shoulders, each one looking for something to mend. And some darkness has no shape at all: a corner of a room where the eye will not settle, where the colours run to grey and the edges give, and where, if you stand long enough, you find you cannot remember the word for the thing your hand is resting on. These are the Dark Entities. They are not one army and not one enemy, but three different ways for a world to end: by being replaced, by being corrupted, and by being erased.

**AT A GLANCE**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Beyonders** | From other bubbles of Order beyond the Nothing; they impose a foreign law. The threat is replacement. |
| **Cast-Outs** | Fallen Stewards, their offices twisted into obsession and exiled to the harsh reaches of the planes. The threat is corruption. |
| **Unformed** | The one undivided Potential beneath all the Primes defined, met in ten faces; it dissolves definition. The threat is erasure. |
| **How they are resisted** | A Beyonder by amplifying the concept it opposes; a Cast-Out by accepting the flaw it would remove; the Unformed by assertion. |
| **Who keeps watch** | The Wardens of the Boundary, Stewards who seal breaches before anything foreign can manifest. |

This chapter tells what the Dark Entities truly are. Hardly any of it is known in the world: people know the dark by its marks and its hosts, and by fear. What they know and believe is told in What People Know.

## Three Ways for a World to End

The three kinds of darkness differ in everything that matters to the people who meet them. A **Beyonder** comes from outside the cosmos altogether, and its threat is fast and plain to see: strange physics, a foreign logic spreading across

the land like frost across a window. Its target is reality itself, the laws by which things behave. A **Cast-Out** comes from inside, from the fallen ranks of the Stewards, and its threat is slow and nearly invisible: a shift in a single mind, an offer made at the worst moment of someone's life. Its target is the individual. An **Unformed** comes from beneath, from the undivided potential that was there before the Primes, and its threat is slowest and least visible of all: a gradual loss of meaning, names, and edges. Its target is the concept that holds a thing together.

Telling them apart comes down to three questions. Is it alien, strange physics and a logic no one here would have invented? Then it is likely a Beyonder. Is it personal, offering to fix your pain or take away your choice? Then it is likely a Cast-Out. Is it abstract, so that things are losing their meaning, their names, or their shape? Then it is likely one of the Unformed. The answers matter, because the cure for one is useless against another. A Cast-Out feeds on fear, a Beyonder on reality, and an Unformed on definition, and fighting a Cast-Out the way one fights a Beyonder will fail.

The three are not allies. Cast-Outs often welcome Beyonders as partners in fixing the universe, and a Cast-Out who fell for the sake of order, like the Bone Singer, may be the first to open a door for Krystallis's perfect crystal. But a Beyonder's foreign law can just as easily clash with a Cast-Out's twisted virtue: Qzoth's mutation is the direct opposite of the Bone Singer's stasis, and the two would fight. Beyonders and the Unformed are wary of one another without seeking each other out; where both bear on one place, reality becomes a clash of alien law and primordial chaos. And the Cast-Outs fear the Unformed, because the Unformed dissolve exactly the concepts the Cast-Outs are obsessed with preserving. The Bone Singer has every reason to dread the Shifting Sand eroding its stone. The Sand does not notice the Singer at all.

## The Beyonders

The cosmos is a finite bubble of Order floating in the Nothing, and the Nothing is not empty in the way a traveller might hope. It is the space between countless other bubbles of Order, other cosmologies, each built on laws of its own. The **Beyonders** are entities from those other bubbles. They have no history here, no connection to the Primes, and no place in the order of things, and most of them are not evil as mortals reckon it. Most run on a logic of correction, salvation, or completion that is simply alien. They look at a world of change, individuality, and imperfection and see a defect to be corrected, or a meal.

### *Incursions*

A Beyonder does not march an army. When one finds a weak point in the Boundary, often with the help of a Cast-Out or a natural flaw, it does not invade so much as leak, and it brings its home law with it. What follows is called an **Incursion**: a place where the foreign law overrides the local one. It begins as a distortion, a field of crystal, a pallor draining colour from a lane, a silence eating the sound of a village. Then it spreads, converting the reality around it, a forest to crystal, a city into a place that has forgotten its own name. Left unchecked, it grows until it consumes the local Anchor or threatens the Boundary itself, and an Incursion that strains the Boundary risks the Cascade Failure in which local reality unravels into the Nothing.

Incursions are very rare. Only three have ever reached Caeldon, each driven out and each leaving a dead scar where its residue still lingers: Krystallis's (c. 352,000–c. 349,000 BR) in the **Hanging Vale** on the far side, Mnemosyne Null's (c. 132,000–c. 130,000 BR) in the **Paling** below the Witnessfields, and Qzoth's (c. 4,000–c. 3,500 BR) in the **Wrongwood** of the Headwater foothills. None of them drew a cult. The heroes the songs keep from them are not slayers: they are the burners who walked into the Bloom with torches knowing their own houses were next, and the Floodkeeper reciters who held the river through the nights while the blank stood across the water. The scars

draw their own trade still. Ruin-delvers who strip the pale city in the Paling carry out treasure worth nothing, a hero's blade with no hero left in it, a seal-stone nobody can read; in the Wrongwood the danger is smaller and closer, a wrong-born fox or boar hunted down with fire for the bounty, and timber-cutters who go in after the forbidden oaks. The other seven Beyonders have never broken through at Caeldon; what this chapter tells of them is what they would do.

Every home law is incompatible with the Resonance Principle on which this cosmos runs, and so inside any Incursion the same three things fail: magic, life, and thought. Each Beyonder breaks them in its own way. Most of them also remake the beings they touch into **hosts** that carry the Incursion further, and most would draw a mortal **cult** that labours to weaken the Boundary and is in the end swallowed by what it worships. Some Beyonders can learn the magic of this cosmos; many cannot, and work on the world by means drawn from cosmologies where magic does not exist or does not work in any recognizable way, so that local magical theory is no guide to what they will do.

### *The Absolute*

Three Beyonders would impose a single state on all things. **Krystallis**, the Shattered God, is the consciousness of a cosmology that is one infinite crystal, without time, growth, or decay. It looks at this universe and sees a flawed draft, and it feels not malice but pity. Its avatar is a living fractal, an impossible polyhedron whose facets never stop shifting, in colours that hurt the mind, and its sound is a billion tuning forks struck in perfect unison. Where it touches, curves straighten and angles become perfect: a crooked tree snaps into a perfect cone, a winding river straightens into a rod of water, and living things turn to flawless crystal, painlessly and for ever, with the victim still aware inside. Its Shard-Hosts wear faces of serene, empty bliss, and a Cult of the Final Shape would be made of those who find the world's disorder unbearable. It breaks on chaos. A perfectly planned attack fails against it; a desperate, messy charge may land.

**Omm**, the Unison, is the most seductive of the Beyonders, because it offers belonging. It comes from a cosmology with no individuals, one consciousness singing one endless note, and every separate mind here sounds to it like a lost note wandering from the chorus. It has no body, only a golden shimmer like heat haze or a bell's tone made visible, full of faint faces all smiling and merged, and a single quiet note that cannot be shut out. Two people standing close under it begin to finish each other's sentences, then to share their memories, then to forget whose arm is whose. A city under Omm would have no crime and no war, and no art either, because art needs a point of view. Its defence is discord: a quarrelsome band of rivals would survive where a perfectly coordinated company was absorbed, and the more difficult a person is, the harder Omm would find them to claim. The paradox is that the defence goes against everything peaceable people value.

**Xylos**, the Hive-Mind, offers the same union in the body instead of the mind. It is the Mycelial Network, a cosmology where separation is a disease, and it arrives as a sprawling, pulsing mass of roots, vines, fungal threads, and nerve-like tendrils, green, brown, and glowing blue, with the limbs and faces of the taken grown into it, still warm and breathing together. A tree's roots find a sleeping traveller and join her nerves to its own; threads spring from one person's skin into the next, and a wound in one body bleeds in all. Surviving it would mean preserving friction, keeping bodies whole and private and tearing out any thread that reaches you, which means refusing comfort even from friends.

### *The Erasers*

Three Beyonders would take away a fundamental part of existence. **Mnemosyne Null**, the Unwritten, comes from a cosmology with no memory, and it does not kill; it un-writes. It arrives as a pallor that drains a place of colour, then of detail,

then of meaning, until objects are smooth pale lumps and faces are smooth and featureless, and it makes no sound at all, not even the ringing in one's ears. A person inside it loses who they are, then their name, then their language, then how to breathe. A sword forged centuries ago becomes a piece of metal. A Cult of the Blank Slate would draw the haunted, who would hear in it a promise of release from their past. It gives way before memory: names spoken, loved ones recalled, a song or a locket or a diary held tight, and a memory shared by a group works as a shield.

The sign of the **Silence Seed**, the Quiet Plague, is what stops: birdsong, the wind in the grass, a traveller's own footsteps. It is a small, dark, seed-like thing that seems to drink light and sound, and it may pass for a speck of dust or a shadow moving the wrong way. Those who hear its silence lose their voices, then their footsteps, and at last become part of the Quiet; written pages go blank around it. Its cultists would sew their mouths shut and break their instruments. It breaks on noise, loud and messy and overwhelming: bells, drums, whistles, a ragged, emotional din.

**The Static**, the White Noise, does not take the word away; it buries the signal that would carry it. It is a haze seething with tiny random motion, like snow, in which half-formed faces and half-heard calls flicker in and out, and its sound is a shrill hiss of a billion voices on a billion frequencies. Under it a horn call arrives as hiss, a signal fire as a smear of flicker, a nerve's message as a twitch, and the senses report what is not there: a door where a wall stands, a voice from an empty chair. One clear, focused thought held steady cuts through it; so does a sharp knife, a clear gem, or one steady lamp.

### *The Devourers*

**Nyx Vora**, the Star-Eater, comes from the Devouring Dark, where nothing creates and everything eats, and it looks on this universe as a banquet. It is a vortex of darkness that draws in light, colour, and sound until it reads less as black than as a hole in sight, with faint faces of the eaten twisting inside it, and its sound is a stomach's growl felt in the marrow. Matter and energy are not transformed where it feeds but eaten. A tree does not rot; it vanishes. A fire does not burn out; it is swallowed. Time races, so that stars age and die in moments. Its cult would believe that the only end to suffering is the end of everything. It can be glutted: a burst of wild fire or a flood of life gives it more than it can eat, and a decoy of pure energy can draw it off.

**The Rust Flower** is a god of premature ending. It comes from the Oxidized Wastes, where nothing endures, and it takes the strength of steel and stone and flesh for an unnatural refusal to fall apart on time. Its avatar is a towering flower of corroded metal, rotten wood, and decaying flesh, its petals sheets of rusted iron that flake away and grow back, its sound the crunch of a billion dead leaves. A sword rusts through in seconds, a wall sifts to dust, the ground goes soft and cannot bear weight. Time runs no faster under it; only what things are made of gives way. It yields to preservation: oiled steel, waxed wood, a sealed reliquary, and every mending done faster than it can corrode.

### *The Mutator and the Severer*

**Qzoth**, the Becoming, comes from the Protean Abyss, where form is a lie, and it changes things without reason, direction, or end. Where the Crucible works with purpose, ore into steel and seed into tree, Qzoth is the cell that forgot what it was meant to become and decided to become everything. It arrives as the Bloom: a writhing tower of flesh, bone, chitin, scale, and feather, where eyes open and melt and limbs sprout and wither, and no two witnesses describe the same shape. A tree sprouts eyes and teeth and feathers before slumping into a puddle; a person grows a second face, still conscious. A Cult of the Thousand Thousand would count stable form as cowardice. A perfectly ordered thing resists it, a flawless diamond, a fine timepiece, a written oath, a conviction held without doubt, and the best defence of all is to know who you are and what you refuse to become.

**Xyphra**, the Unraveller, does not smash things; it dissolves the glue. It comes from a dimension where nothing holds together, and it is a slow whirl of jagged floating shards cut loose from their context, a hand without its arm, a house without its foundation, hanging in endless, agonizing nearness. Under it a blade leaves its hilt mid-swing, the ground splits into islands that drift apart, and a hand reaching for a cup finds it a field away. Its cultists would cut their own ties and count love a disease. It cannot cut a bond held hard: joined hands, a promise kept, a wedding ring, a shared heirloom.

### *Holding Them Back*

Swords are useless against a concept; against the Bloom, swords only cut it into more pieces that went on growing, and fire alone held it. A Beyonder is resisted by amplifying the concept it opposes, chaos and art against crystal order, stories and remembered names against the blank, noise against the Quiet, abundance against the hunger, bonds against the shatter. Mortals are surprisingly good at this, because many Beyonders cannot comprehend free will. A mortal's ability to choose the wrong path, to act illogically, or to act on a passion can break a perfect logic.

Only the Boundary contains a Beyonder fully, and only the Primes can push one back into the Nothing, usually several of them pressing at once; a plane that repels a Beyonder is its Prime's current acting through it. Ignis and Aqua break Krystallis's lattice with heat and flow, and Lux shatters its certainty with possibility; Memoria, Verba, Umbra, and Terra all bear against Mnemosyne Null, which threatens the record, the name, the trace, and the history written into stone. Each Beyonder also makes the work harder in its own way. Krystallis makes the Boundary brittle as it presses on it; Nyx Vora would eat the Boundary too, and have to be glutted before it could be pushed out; Xylos's roots would grow into the Boundary and have to be burnt out; Xyphra would cut it, and every cut would have to be mended. Watching over all of it are the **Wardens of the Boundary**, Stewards who patrol the edge of the cosmos to find and seal breaches before anything foreign can fully manifest.

> *If it stops the birds, then sing. If it takes the faces, tell. If it smooths the crooked tree, grow crooked as you can, and well.*
>
> — *Lamp-Out Charms of the Headwater Towns*

## The Cast-Outs

The **Cast-Outs** were Stewards. None of them fell out of malice. Each fell because it would not accept the balance of things and tried to remove one of existence's flaws, pain or doubt or change or separation, and in doing so corrupted the very office it was meant to keep. They are the ghosts of good intentions gone wrong, and they are dangerous precisely because the offices they once held were necessary.

### *The Fall and the Exile*

A fallen office no longer fits the current of its Prime, and the current sheds it as a river sheds what it cannot carry. The fallen Steward loses its title and is thrown out into the harshest reaches of the planes: the distorted margins of a Harmonic, a Deficit or Surplus Plane, or the Veil. The place of exile usually echoes the office that was lost, and it need not lie under the Cast-Out's own Prime. The Ashen Child, fallen from Ignis, was cast into the Ashen Wastes, where energy goes to die; the Many-Eyed One into the unfiltered glare of the Radiance; the Silent Screamer into the Silence, where no sound has ever existed; the Hollow King and the Weeping Idol into the silent vaults and hollowed temples of the Gilded Cage.

The exile binds. A Cast-Out feeds on the plane that holds it and loathes it, and wherever it lingers on the Material Plane, that plane's lack or excess seeps in after it. None of them hates its Prime. Each still wants to serve and cannot return, because it refuses the law of the current it fell from, and the Prime, a force, neither hates nor mourns it. They do not stay in exile. They wander the Material Plane, seeking to complete their work, often through mortals who share their fears

or desires. Legends give each Cast-Out one last remnant of its first work, guarded as its hope of redemption: an ember, a note, a needle, a thread. The stories agree that if the remnant were ever lost or fulfilled, the Cast-Out could rest at last, and would cease to be.

### *Wound and Offer*

Every Cast-Out is defined by a **wound**, the failure or fear that drove it to fall, and a **distortion**, the virtue it twisted into a vice: healing into violation, faith into blind obedience. It genuinely believes it is saving the universe. And it does not conquer. It offers.

The pattern is always the same. It finds someone grieving, doubting, lonely, or afraid, and comes to them as a saviour, offering to remove the pain for ever. To the grieving, the Ashen Child says that it can keep them alive. To the doubting, the Broken Compass promises the one true path. To the lonely, the Shadow Stitcher offers a bond to someone who will never leave. The cost is hidden in the gift: agency, identity, or the future. Those who accept become its hosts, a Stitch-Ling of the Flesh Weaver, a courtier of the Hollow King, a statue of the Weeping Idol, and carry its influence further. Where a Cast-Out lingers long, the land around it begins to reflect its distortion: fires that refuse to die and embers that glow for centuries, people slowly turning to stone, scars that heal too perfectly.

### *The Earliest Fall*

The oldest of them is the **Cast-Out of Unyielding Burden**, once the Steward of Foundations, which fell in the Uneven Settling of the young Material Plane because it could not accept that anything might need to collapse. It looks like an immense load-bearing statue of cut stone and buried iron, its pillar-like arms braced against a weight no one can see, its torso crossed with stress fractures that never open, its masonry plates reinforced again and again instead of being allowed to fail cleanly. Its voice is the sound of a retaining wall under impossible strain: patient, solemn, merciless. Near it, ceilings do not crack but bow, doors jam, and beams groan without breaking, and the whole world feels over-held.

Its offer is always the same. To rulers it says that it can keep the realm from falling; to builders, that it can hold the roof one season longer; to guardians, that it can keep every refuge intact; to the exhausted, that they need not set their burden down. It rarely asks for worship, only that nobody let go. It does not usually kill by collapse. It kills by keeping collapse from happening at the only merciful moment, so that what should have been evacuated becomes a tomb. Deep stories tell of a refuge that stood through flood and failing stores because its keepers could not bear to evacuate it, and the horror of the story is that the hall held: the people inside died behind walls still strong enough to feel righteous. Delvers who find such a hall find its stores untouched and its last keepers grown into the walls, and the first who tries to cut one free brings the roof down on everyone. A border legend tells of a warden who would not cut a bridge because too many depended on it, until refugees, carts, and a warband retreating with the enemy behind it had all crowded onto a crossing no one dared abandon; later tellings disagree on whether the one who finally cut the ropes was a hero or a murderer. It is weakened wherever people accept that some things must be relinquished to preserve the whole, and its surest answer is the rule its replacement office keeps: ask not whether a structure can still stand, but whether life can still rightly endure within it.

### *The Fallen of Lux*

Three of Lux's offices are among the fallen. The **Broken Compass** was the Wayfinder of the Shifting Path, who tired of watching choices end in ruin and decided the fault lay in the freedom to choose. It is tall and gaunt in a cloak of tattered maps that keep redrawing themselves, its featureless face pierced by a single needle that spins and never settles, and its voice is many whispers, each with a different order: "Go left." "Go back." "Stop." Around it north and south trade places and travellers walk in circles. A village that accepted its

guidance walked the same looped mile for the rest of their lives, and the loop outlasted the Compass. The villagers still walk it, alive, helpful, and eager to show any traveller a shorter way. Ruin-delvers fear the Compass most, because a party that goes down into a sealed hall with too sure a guide may never find the stair again. Anyone willing to take a wrong turn and learn from it is beyond its reach.

The **Many-Eyed One** was the Oculus, the clear light that exposed lies, and it came to believe that nothing should be hidden. It is a shifting cloud of light and flesh teeming with eyes, human, insect, and shapes that hurt to look at, blinking out of time, some weeping light, and it pushes its words straight into the mind: "I see you. You cannot hide." A city rotten with lies accepted its light, and every secret came out, and the city turned on itself and emptied. It is beyond the reach of anyone who keeps a secret with conviction. The **Weeping Idol** was the Keeper of the Shrine, who saw that faith stayed a choice, until it wearied of doubt and set out to carve the faithful into gold and marble caught in a moment of unthinking adoration. It is a towering figure whose substance shifts between white marble, granite, and gold, its closed eyes running with tears thick as melted wax, its hollow palms held out for the surrendered faithful; grass turns to jade where it walks, and those who stay near it too long feel their joints lock and their thoughts slow while the air fills with incense and silent prayer. Many faiths take its gilded for saints and build shrines over them, and two temples have been known to go to war over one golden saint. Its stone cracks where a question is asked.

### *The Fallen of Terra*

The Bone Singer and the Rotting Crown both fell from Terra, and both fell by refusing the cycle of erosion and renewal that Terra's permanence includes. The **Bone Singer** was the Archivist of Bones, who kept the great ossuaries until it came to think memory too fragile to leave to the living. It is tall and gaunt in robes of woven bone and dried tendon, its skin polished ivory, its joints clicking, its face a smooth bone mask with hollow sockets lit faintly blue, and its flute is a single spiralling vertebra. It never speaks; it sings, a hum felt in the marrow that makes listeners want to stand still and let their bodies harden. Ground hardens where it walks and grass becomes brittle silica. A city wasting with age begged it for preservation and still stands, every citizen turned to bone in their last moment, a museum no one remembers the faces of.

The **Rotting Crown** was the Keeper of the Line, who saw dynasties pass from one generation to the next, until it came to dread every yielding of rule and bound fathers to sons to grandsons in one chain of flesh and will. It is hunched in mouldering velvet that smells of wet earth and old blood, its face peeling back to fungus-furred bone, its crown a living growth of bone and rot fused to the skull and pulsing a sickly green, and its voice is a rattle of ancestors: "We are you. You are us. The line must never end." A young man who asked it to help him carry his grandfather's sins had his grandfather's spirit fused into him, relived the old man's mistakes, and died of old age in his twenties. It loses its grip wherever someone sets the inheritance down. One valley still hangs a hayfork over its doors, for the farmer's daughter who saw her father go blank at the table under a Courtier's crown and struck it off his head.

### *The Fallen of Verba*

The **Hollow King** was the Voice of the Realm, who saw that a ruler's words carried the ruler's own will, until it grew disgusted with rulers swayed by flattery and doubt and decided that true order needed an empty vessel. It is tall in heavy black velvet that swallows light, its face blank porcelain with a single vertical slit for a mouth, its crown a ring of empty space hovering above its head and bending the air, and it speaks only with the voices of those it has emptied, all together. An exhausted king let it rule in his place, and crime, war, and want vanished, and so did joy, art, and love; when it left, the kingdom fell into chaos, because no one remembered how to choose. Anyone willing to choose for themselves, and to own the choice even if it is wrong, cannot be hollowed.

The **Silent Screamer** was the Liberator of Tongues, keeper of the cathartic cry, until it grew terrified of what speech does and decided to stop the voice. Its stretched, pale face has a mouth sewn crudely shut with thick black thread, the stitches pulsing violet, and its eyes bulge with terror and ecstasy at once; its voice is a soundless scream that lands on the mind like a blow, many voices howling one word, "Hush." Around it the air thickens like water. The pain it presses inward grows, until the pressure bursts the silence apart in madness. Raiders came over the hill at dusk to a village it had quieted; the watchman could not blow his horn, the mothers could not scream, and the houses burned in silence, until one old keening-woman found her voice and her dirge woke the next village in time to bar its gate. It is beyond anyone ready to speak their truth, shout their rage, or weep their grief.

### *The Child, the Weaver, and the Stitcher*

The **Ashen Child**, fallen from Ignis, was the Ember-Lord who kept the cycle of renewal, until it refused to let one burning go out. It looks like a child who has crawled out of a fireplace: small and frail in a cloak of flaking grey ash, charcoal skin cracked over a faint dying glow, eyes like candles in a draught. Its voice is the last breath of a dying fire, and it leaves fine grey ash behind it, in which plants wither and hope dims. A great city that accepted its promise stood charred and unrebuilt for a hundred years, its people surviving without living, and fell to ash in a night when the Child left. Fools and treasure-seekers take the ember in its chest for a prize that would keep any hearth burning for ever; those who have gone hunting it were found sitting in the ash beside its trail. Those who have grieved fully and moved on are beyond its reach.

The **Flesh Weaver**, fallen from Aqua, was the Loom-Master who kept the tapestry of living bodies, until its compassion for the sick curdled into a compulsion to fix them without asking. It is the motherly figure in robes of living skin, its impossibly long fingers tipped with dripping bone needles, a dozen small dark eyes scattered over its face and neck, and its voice is a mother soothing a frightened child: "Hush now. Let me fix you. It will only hurt for a moment." Silvery thread sinks into the ground behind it like roots and burrows into bare skin, hunting for wounds. It cannot touch someone who refuses aloud and declares their body their own, wounds and all.

The **Shadow Stitcher**, fallen from Umbra, was the Weaver of Songlines, who guided the paths of lives so that they met when they were meant to, until it resolved that no one should ever be alone. It is emaciated and smoke-bodied under robes of half-transparent shadow, its face a smooth void with one slowly blinking red eye, its hands ending in an oily needle, and black thread drifts behind it like spider silk, felt as a cold stickiness on the skin. It whispers through its threads: "Together. Together. Never alone." A village sick with loneliness let it sew its people together until they moved, spoke, and thought as one, and stayed that way. It cannot abide a wall, a locked door, or someone at ease alone.

### *Answering a Cast-Out*

Most who face a Cast-Out are not heroes but kin: a sister with a knife for the Stitcher's thread, a son who strikes a crown off his father's head. They go for someone it took, carrying blades for thread and sinew, noise for the hush, and a flaw they love, knowing that steel alone will not end what they hunt. The songs remember those who came back, and seldom name them. Sellswords tell of a field where two warbands fought to the last light and the Flesh Weaver walked among the fallen; by morning the wounded stood up whole, wearing each other's hands and faces, and some went home to the wrong villages. Captains since have burned their dead before dark.

Since Cast-Outs are defined by their refusal of a natural truth, they are answered by accepting it: letting the fire end, letting the loved one die, keeping a secret from the many-eyed, making a choice, even a bad one, against the Hollow King. They seek perfection, and they are weakened by flaws, chaos, and mess. A perfect plan fails against a Cast-Out; a messy, emotional, flawed act succeeds.

Many rely on a particular bond, a thread, a crown, a stitch, and breaking it can sever their hold on a victim.

The Primes do not expel them as they expel a Beyonder. A Cast-Out is still made of its own Prime's current, twisted rather than foreign, and that current cannot cast out what is its own. Ignis does not snuff the Ashen Child, because flame is not put out by more flame; Lux cannot outshine the Many-Eyed One, since every added light only gives its eyes more to see; Verba cannot unsay the Hollow King's crowns, because they are made of real words. Overcoming a Cast-Out falls instead to mortals, to gods, and to the Stewards whose offices it violates: the Keeper of Necessary Ruin against the Ashen Child, the Steward of the Open Path against the Broken Compass, the Warden of Revelatory Mercy against the Many-Eyed One, the Steward of Bearable Foundations against the Burden. Only when a Cast-Out strains the Boundary, or forces a single-Prime state on a place, does the resonance as a whole press back against it.

## The Unformed

Before the Primes differentiated, the universe was a state of pure potential in which nothing was distinct from anything else. The **Unformed** is what remains of that state: one undivided Potential still lying beneath everything the Primes defined, the Silence before the Word, the Blur before the Shape, the Drift before the Path. It has no parts and no will, and it does not attack. It dissolves, gathering wherever a definition has worn thin and taking its shape from what it undoes there. The ten Unformed of the records are its faces: not ten beings, but the one pressure as it meets the ten things the world most needs to keep defined. Two faces never rival each other; where two definitions fail together, they run into one another. The Unformed pressed hardest at the **Inward Sundering**, c. 33,600,000,000 BR, when it provided the final weight that the overstrained early cosmos could not bear, and the released force of that collapse helped the Primes push it back. It has pressed ever since.

### *Before the Word*

The Unformed feels no malice and holds no view of the world. Mortals read it as resenting the prison of definition, as though naming things and drawing boundaries had been a crime against the infinite. It holds no such grievance. It undoes the world as a rising tide undoes a sandcastle, and each face is a shadow of the Primes: potential that never settled into a single principle, pressing hardest on the Primes that depend on what it dissolves.

Each face spreads its effect as a field that rides on the air, on the water, and on the thoughts of whoever enters it, so that it cannot be filtered out or destroyed by ordinary means. Its victims rarely die. They are left undone in the one respect that face dissolves, and still aware of it. And because the Unformed feels nothing, it offers nothing; yet in legend after legend, people worn down by what an Unformed takes, their names, their walls, their effort, their lineage, mistake its approach for an offer of release and welcome it. The same stories give each face one undissolved remnant at its centre, the first instance of the thing it unmakes and the one point where that face still meets something defined, and say that if the remnant ever goes, the face sinks back into the one beneath.

### *Dissolvers of Definition*

The **Echoing Dark** takes away definition. It is not a black void but a smudge, a patch where the eye will not focus, colours run to grey and edges give way, and looking at it is like recalling a dream five minutes after waking. Inside it a scream stops mid-breath, a song thins to a hum that is not there, and one's own pulse grows faint, as if the word "pulse" were being forgotten; one's name sounds like a foreign word. A city that welcomed it, taking the numbness for freedom from names, still stands, and nobody in it can say what it is. At its centre, the stories say, is the faint echo of the first word ever spoken.

The **Fractured Mirror** has too much definition rather than too little: every version at once. It is a shimmering field where the air seems made of broken glass, full of reflections of the viewer

older, younger, dead, weeping, laughing, none moving in time, and it sounds of countless panes shattering again and again. A king who looked into it too long, hoping to see his true self, split into versions that each gave a different order, and his court could follow none. It cannot split someone who chooses one self and one story and lets the other versions go.

The **Grey Mist** keeps closest to the undivided first state. It takes away contrast: a tree turns the same shade as the sky behind it, a face fades into the wall, and nothing becomes invisible, only indistinguishable. Sounds run together into one drone, and one's own edges soften until skin and air cannot be told apart. Two lovers parted by a river walked into it to meet, and their edges ran together until they could no longer feel the joy of reaching across a distance. Love needs a boundary to cross.

### *Dissolvers of Agency*

Under the **Great Slumber**, dust hangs in the air without falling and flames stand like columns, not frozen but having forgotten how to move, and a heartbeat comes once a day. Limbs turn to lead and a plan feels like last night's dream. A city sick with exhaustion lay down into it and was still there when it lifted, warm and breathing, every citizen lying where they had stopped. Nothing holds against it but the will to do the next thing anyway.

The **Hollow Chorus** takes away the singer: a person's lips move and the sound comes from their hands or the air beside them, and a crowd opens its mouths together and one tone rises from the space between them. One's own voice sounds like a stranger's. A poet weary of authorship let his voice fall into it and went on speaking poems that were no longer his. It is broken by a note that clashes, a voice that cracks, an "I" said and meant.

The **Nameless Current** takes away direction. The horizon goes; the ground seems to slope every way at once; a traveller walking straight finds that he has walked a circle, and the name of where he was going slips away like a dream. An explorer who felt it at his back folded his map away, and is still walking, the stories say, and has never arrived anywhere. It cannot carry off someone who names a destination, even a near one, and keeps walking towards it.

### *Dissolvers of Foundation and Connection*

The **Rootless Tree** is growth with no ground: twigs, vines, and tendrils sprout from every surface and from empty air, joining nothing to nothing, and a person's shadow buds and drops leaves that root in mid-air. Home comes to feel like a story one was told, and family faces like strangers'. A woman weighed down by her lineage let her ties slip as it passed through her valley, and lived on, never again anyone's daughter, sister, or mother. It is held back by a stone laid on purpose, a seed planted, a hearth built and kept.

The **Shifting Sand** is the refusal to set: stone turns gritty, metal powdery, and a fortress wall seems to breathe, its stones never settling the same way twice, while every remembered fact changes a little each time it is recalled. A mason famed for walls meant to stand a thousand years refused to give way to it, and the refusal meant nothing; from that day every stone he laid shifted. It is answered by commitment made in front of others: a cornerstone laid with ceremony, a vow sworn before kin, a boundary cut into stone.

Under the **Silent Tide** the rhythm goes out of things: a ripple runs to the edge of the puddle and never comes back, a flame lengthens instead of flickering, and a breath goes in, and keeps going in. A city tired of the round of birth and death went with its pull and is still there under a noon that never ended. It cannot hold anyone who keeps returning: breathing out after breathing in, coming home after going out.

The **Void Weaver** unpicks the seams of reality. Edges fray; the space between two people stretches into a visible gap; a wall shows as separate bricks hovering a hair apart, and a story's beginning no longer leads to its middle. A city weary of its duties let them slacken as it passed and was left a tangle of streets that no longer led

into one another. Every handshake that means something and every story told from beginning to end is a knot it must work around.

### *Assertion*

The Unformed cannot be killed, and the Primes can only hold it back, never remove it, for it is the pressure of potential beneath every defined thing, out of which the Primes themselves differentiated. Against it a mortal's defence is assertion, and it is the plainest defence in the cosmos: speak a name aloud, draw a line, choose a path even if it is wrong, hold on to another hand, tell a story to its end, build a wall. If you feel the blur, draw a line; if you feel the silence, speak your name; if you feel the drift, plant your feet; if you feel the unbinding, hold on tight. Almost no one goes looking for an Unformed except to bring back someone caught in its field. Rescuers go in roped to kin who stay outside and shout their names, with a bell or a drum to follow out, and those who come back have learnt what it costs to stop being defined. The songs remember a few of them by what they carried out, like the drover's boy who walked the edge of a grey fog shouting the name of a sellsword company until he had led it out, one man at a time.

The worst any single face can do is weaken the Boundary. The Boundary holds because "inside" and "outside" are distinct, lasting things, and whatever concept an Unformed dissolves, it dissolves in the Boundary too. Where the Boundary loses its meaning, the Nothing floods in, not as a return to the cosmos's source but as unmaking from outside. And if the Unformed woke in full, there would be no universe left: not for mortals, not for the Cast-Outs to be exiled from, and not even for the Beyonders to conquer.

## What People Know

Every layer of belief on Caeldon carries its fear of the Dark Entities. Organized religions set that fear into doctrine and hunt those who let the dark in; local cults keep it as warning stories and charms, said at lamp-out and sung to children who will not sleep. Most people never meet a Beyonder, a Cast-Out, or an Unformed. They know them as rumour, taboo, and the shape of old stories: the city of ash, the village of circles, the city that forgot its name.

The defences those stories teach answer the three questions. Against a foreign law, amplify its opposite. Against an offer of perfect relief, look for the cost: ask whether the solution is too perfect, and whether it takes away your choice. Against the blur, assert. And against all three, the gods stand as a first line, for a god's very existence is an assertion of definition fed by mortal belief, while the Stewards keep their offices and the Primes, several at once, press the foreign back out through the Boundary. Some of the darkness even leaves living marks. Among the ways a new lineage can arise are alteration by a Beyonder's outside influence, the twisted intervention or recrafting of a Cast-Out, and the destabilization and unsteady reformation that follow an Unformed's passing, each of which can later become self-sustaining.

### *Of the Beyonders*

People know three Incursions, not the Beyonders: the crystal valley of the Hanging Vale, the colourless country of the Paling, the burned valley of the Wrongwood, and the hosts and fevers that still come out of them. That such things come from orders beyond the world is a scholar's guess. The names this chapter gives each Beyonder are the records' names; where people name one at all, they name it by what it did to them.

### *Of the Cast-Outs*

The Cast-Outs come to people in pain, and so they live on in warning stories, in the hosts and changed people they leave, in villages that bar their doors against a kindly stranger, and in the legends of a last remnant. That each was once a Steward is suspected by a few theologians and argued among them.

### *Of the Unformed*

The Unformed is the least known of all. Its work looks like ordinary loss, a forgotten word, a wall let fall, a lineage let lapse, and is seldom recognized as anyone's work. What villages know are the places: a hollow where the herd stands asleep

on its feet, a road the drovers will not take because those who take it walk on past their own doors, a stretch of shore where no one can say what the river is called. The thing with no name in the lamp-out charms is as near as most people come. A few scholars, and some who came back from an Unformed field, speak of something behind the loss, and do not agree on what.

Nothing of the Dark Entities' true nature is known for sure, in this era or any later one. Each era reads their marks more surely than the last; what makes the marks stays a matter of argument.

## Tensions

- **The last remnant.** Legends give each Cast-Out one remnant of its first work, guarded as its hope of redemption, and each face of the Unformed one undissolved remnant at its centre. The stories agree that if the remnant were lost or fulfilled, the Cast-Out would cease to be, and the face would sink back into the one beneath.
- **Cults at the door.** Most Beyonders would draw a mortal cult that works to weaken the Boundary, and every such cult would in the end be swallowed by what it worships. None of the three Incursions on Caeldon drew one.
- **Unwanted allies.** A Cast-Out that fell for order, such as the Bone Singer, may welcome a Beyonder of order such as Krystallis as an ally in fixing the universe, while a Beyonder like Qzoth, whose mutation is the opposite of the Singer's stasis, would fight it.
- **The hall that held.** The Cast-Out of Unyielding Burden kills by preventing collapse at the only merciful moment. Deep stories tell of refuges that held through flood and failing stores because their keepers would not evacuate, and of bridges that drew more and more people onto a crossing no one dared abandon.
- **Its own current.** A Prime cannot expel a Cast-Out made of its own current: Ignis cannot snuff the Ashen Child, nor Lux outshine the Many-Eyed One. Each must be overcome by mortals, by gods, or by the Steward whose office it violates.
- **A defence that costs.** Against Omm the defence would be to be quarrelsome and uncooperative, and against Xylos to refuse comfort even from friends. The peoples best placed to survive them would be those least like what peaceable folk value: hermits, outlaws, and beast-hunters used to sleeping apart.
- **An offer no one made.** The Unformed offers nothing, yet people worn down by names, walls, effort, or lineage mistake its approach for release and welcome it, and are left undone in that one respect, and aware of it.
- **One cure, another disease.** The Rust Flower yields to preservation and stasis, and Qzoth to perfect order and stability: the very things Krystallis and the Bone Singer would impose on everything.

PART III

# The Laws of Magic

*What magic is in Caeldon, what it draws on and what it costs, and the schools that teach it.*

CHAPTER 8

# How Magic Works

*The fire was in the wood before the spark,*
*the rain was in the cloud before the cup;*
*ask a healer where the mending came from*
*and watch her count what she gave up.*

— a healers' book of the Confluence Basins, *The Book of Small Mendings*

Hold a palm over a dying hearth in a cold room and ask it to burn, and the coals will brighten, and the room will grow colder still. Nothing in Caeldon comes from nowhere, and magic least of all. It is not a gift the gods made, nor a trick the clever discovered, but a force woven into the world as surely as weight or time: everywhere, unevenly, and always on the same terms. A spell does not create. It finds energy that already exists, moves it, turns it from one kind into another, and gives it a new shape, and something is always lost on the way. That one law sits under every working in this book, from a village healer closing a cut to a temple choir sanctifying a hill. Everything else follows from it: what magic draws on, what it costs, why one caster finds easy what kills another, and why every lord, elder, and temple in the world has something to say about who paid. The laws never bend; that is what makes magic worth fearing, and worth fighting over.

**AT A GLANCE**

| | |
|---|---|
| **What magic is** | A universal force by which existing energy is accessed, transferred, converted, and reshaped. It never creates energy. |
| **Drawn from** | Ley lines and their nodes, the surroundings, living things, the caster's own body, stored charge, and divine provision. |
| **The deepest layer** | Ten Prime energy classes, one for each Prime; every stable working traces back to one or more of them. |
| **The body** | Each species carries its own lifeforce, a settled balance of Prime energy; it sets who heals whom, and at what loss. |
| **What it costs** | Fatigue, lifeforce, heat, the life of the place, materials, and debts to patrons, temples, and lords. |
| **Dark magic** | Not a substance or a school, but a judgement of use: magic whose cost falls on those who did not agree to pay it. |

Magic is the part of the hidden cosmos that people know best, because they use it every day. What they know is its practice. This chapter also tells what lies beneath the practice, and that is hidden; what people know and argue is told in What People Know.

## The First Law

The first law begins where the healers' verse begins: the fire was in the wood before the spark. Magic is a universal force present throughout the cosmos. Mortals did not make it, gods did not make it, and no ritual summons it into being. It exists as part of reality, as gravity and time do, and what it allows is narrow and exact. A living being or a divine power can use it to *access* energy that is already there, to *transfer* that energy from one place to another, to *convert* one form of energy into another, and to *reshape* how energy is expressed in the world. That is the whole of it. A fireball is heat gathered from somewhere and released somewhere else; a healed wound is vitality moved from one body, or one herb, or one god's current, into torn flesh; a ward on a door is structure and definition fixed in place by someone who paid to fix them.

From that one law the rest follow. Magic is everywhere, but not everywhere equally concentrated or equally easy to reach, so *place matters*. No transfer is perfectly efficient, so *casting always involves loss*, and the loss is a real part of the price rather than a rounding error. Species, individuals, and methods differ in how efficiently and safely they move energy, so *affinity matters*. And the energy has to come from somewhere, so every working has a source, and the source has a say in what the working can be.

The last of the laws surprises newcomers most. *Divine magic obeys the same principles.* A priest's blessing is not an exception carved out of the world's order; it is a special case within it, distinguished not by its law but by its source. The energy may come from the current of a Prime, open to whoever stands aligned with that Prime's principle, or it may be supplied directly by a Resonant. The Primes themselves are not among magic's users. They are the forces it is drawn from, as a river is the water and not one of the swimmers.

Writers new to Caeldon sometimes take the first law as a limit, and it is one. But it is also a source of wonder of a particular kind, the wonder of a world that can be understood. A mage who knows where the heat came from can guess what the room will feel like afterwards; a healer who knows whose vitality closed the wound can guess who will be tired tomorrow. Every spell leaves a ledger, and the world can be read through its ledgers.

## Where the Force Lies Close

Magic is universal, but access to it is uneven, and most of a practitioner's craft is knowing where the force lies close to hand and how to reach it without paying more than the working is worth.

### *Ley Lines and Nodes*

The great exception to evenness is the **ley line**. A ley line does not create magic; it is a channel along which the ambient force lies nearer the surface, easier to reach, easier to shape, and more densely available. Casting near one is easier, cleaner, steadier, and can be carried to a larger scale than the same casting a day's walk away. Where lines cross, people raise shrines, holds, and mage-towers, for the same reason that towns gather at fords, and they fight over them. Many a ruin on the old roads was a keep on a crossing, taken, burned, and taken again by whoever wanted its magic, and delvers still dig in such places for the charged stones the last defenders never spent.

Where one or more lines knot, intersect, or narrow through high-coherence terrain, such as old stone, high ground, or a ridge that has stood unbroken for an age, they form a **ley node**. A node is not simply a thicker stretch of line. It is a pressure basin, a place where access, the responsiveness of conversion, and the scale a casting can bear are all raised together. Practitioners sort nodes into three tiers. A **minor node** will carry a village rite, a ward-stone, or a well-charm. A **major node** is stable enough to support a city, a

great shrine, or a school of mages. A **grand confluence**, rare as it is, makes possible what no single caster could attempt: large-scale enchantment, long-range gates, wards that cover a region.

A node can be overdrawn. Overdrawing does not destroy the universal force, any more than a crowd at a well empties the water table, but it desynchronizes the local flow. The signs are familiar to anyone who has worked at a busy node during a festival or a siege: castings lag a heartbeat behind the gesture, conversions come out unstable, and then, for a while, the node falls silent and nothing drawn there will hold. A village whose well-charm fails on the same night its healer's hands go cold knows that someone nearby is drawing too hard.

### *Lines That Move*

Ley lines are not fixed forever. Their positions drift over long timescales in response to pressure from the wider cosmos, to geological change, to the scars of great rituals, and to sustained divine activity. Practitioners describe four regimes of movement. Some lines lie in **dormant stability**, shifting so little over generations that grandparents and grandchildren cast at the same stone. Some show **seasonal breathing**, widening and narrowing in a predictable rhythm through the year. Most settled country lives with **secular drift**, a slow directional migration over decades and centuries. And a few have known **shock displacement**, an abrupt rerouting after some extreme event, when a line that ran under a temple in the morning runs under a pasture by night.

Because of this, long-term ley maps are guesses. Line-walkers who know their trade draw a line as a broad corridor and a node as a wandering patch, and the best of them sell their charts dearly, to mages and to ruin-delvers hunting a dead node under some fallen keep. People who live on a line expect it to wander: a ward-stone set on a line must be reset as the line slips away, and the cost of resetting it is one of the quiet costs of living near power. A shrine whose line slid away from it, leaving its wards dead and its tombs open, is an old sorrow in many songs.

### *The Place Itself*

Away from the lines, and often along them too, a caster draws on what the surroundings hold: heat from air, flame, or stone; pressure and movement from wind and water; the vitality of a living place; and whatever other ambient conditions suit the working. This is why no spell is equally easy everywhere. A fire-working that is simple beside a forge is wasteful in a snowfield; a working of flow that comes easily on a riverbank may be dangerous in a dry cellar. Good practitioners read a place before they cast in it, the way a sailor reads a sky.

Some places bend the laws hard. Where a Harmonic presses through into the Material Plane and overwrites its local physics, in a Resonant Zone, magic of that Harmonic's kind may be amplified past safety, and other kinds may be stunted or turned against the caster. In zones where the Whispering Trace runs strong, necromancy is amplified and dangerous and draws attention its caster did not want, and healing magic does little, because the dead cannot be healed. Where the Verdant Expanse, the Surplus Plane of growth, lies close, decay-magic backfires and life-magic swells until it threatens to overgrow the one who works it. The laws are the same everywhere; the ground they act on is not.

Plants and animals are real sources too, because each carries a lifeforce pattern of its own. Medicinal herbs, prepared teas and tonics, animal vitality, cultivated groves, sacrificial livestock, and carefully harvested biological material are all drawn on, above all in healing, alchemy, nature-work, blood and sacrificial traditions, and the everyday small mendings of village life. Such sources are less efficient than a clean transfer between compatible members of the same species. They are also easier to obtain, easier to justify to the neighbours, and much safer than draining a person.

### *The Body as Channel*

A caster can also use their own body as the conduit. This does not mean the body makes magical energy; the first law holds. It means the caster supplies a channel, a regulating pattern, and

sometimes part of the energy cost, paid in bodily strain or in lifeforce itself. This is the most immediate method there is and the most flexible, the one every caster falls back on when nothing else is to hand. It is also the most dangerous. Repeated overuse injures, exhausts, and kills, and the old mages who still have steady hands are, as a rule, the ones who learned early to draw from something other than themselves.

### *Stored Charge*

Magic can be stored, much as water is stored behind a dam, and then discharged, transferred, or used to support a later casting. Storage changes everything it touches: the keeping of a hold, war, healing, travel, the making of artefacts, every kind of long preparation. But storage is only controlled delay, never perfect stasis. Stored charge decays in three ways. It *leaks*, dissipating slowly through the boundaries of its container. It *drifts*, reconfiguring internally until it is harder to discharge cleanly. And it *takes up noise*, contamination from environmental turbulence, nearby casting, or careless handling. How fast it decays depends on the quality of the container, the purity of the source, the turbulence of the surroundings, and how long it has sat. As a broad rule, a concentrated store decays faster than a diffuse store of the same total charge, unless stabilizing arrays hold it.

Practitioners grade a store in four condition bands. **Fresh** charge discharges at high output with little noise and no surprises. **Aged** charge has lost some output but is still reliable. **Unstable** charge is noisy and wasteful and should be used only with corrections. **Spoiled** charge is no longer fit for precision work and is unsafe for anything that matters. Spoiled charge is a ruin-delver's oldest trap: a charm-stone left a thousand years in a sealed hall looks no different from a fresh one, and the delver who lifts it bare-handed may lose the hand. Experienced crews test old stones with a dead stick before they touch them, and sell the safe ones dear.

No medium is best for everything. **Crystalline matrices** hold dense charge for a long time when properly warded, and are favoured for archival reserves. **Inscribed metal lattices** buffer charge on a large scale and bear repeated discharge, and so carry the standing wards of halls and holds. **Living reservoirs**, seeded groves and bonded organisms, regulate gently and with little noise but give up charge slowly. **Liquid suspensions and alchemical vials** travel well and keep poorly, the field-healer's and the soldier's store. **Untreated organics**, wood, cloth, and bone, are cheap and everywhere, and leak and spoil fast. A lord who hires mages for a siege wants to know what charge they carry and in what condition: a cart of vials gone unstable can do the enemy's work for them, and siege-camps have burned that way.

### *The Gods' Share*

Divine magic obeys the same laws as every other kind; only the source differs. The energy may come from the current of a Prime, open to anyone aligned with its principle, or from a Resonant, or more rarely a Steward, who chooses to supply it. Because the energy comes from beyond the caster, divine casting is safer for the mortal, less dependent on the caster's own reserves, and steadier while it lasts. Its weakness is dependence. A Prime does not refuse anyone, but a caster can fall out of alignment with it. A patron can refuse, withdraw, or simply be absent. That difference, between a current that is always there for whoever stands in it and a patron who decides, is the subject of a later section.

## The Ten Energies

Beneath every school and every tradition lies a deeper classification, which most practitioners never think about, any more than a miller thinks about gravity while the wheel turns. The ten **Prime energy classes** are the metaphysical foundation of all magic, one for each of the ten Primes. They are not symbols or poetic associations. Scholars hold that a spell which cannot be traced to one or more of them does not belong to this world's magic at all.

| Prime | Energy class | What it governs | Where a caster meets it |
|---|---|---|---|
| Aion | Temporal | duration, sequence, rate, persistence | slowing, hastening, preservation, the control of decay |
| Aqua | Vital-fluid | flow, circulation, adaptation, transfer | waterworking, cleansing, the flow of healing, diffusion |
| Ignis | Transformative | heat, excitation, combustion, release | fire, ignition, reshaping by heat, destructive conversion |
| Imago | Morphic | form, identity, adaptation, metamorphosis | shapeshifting, bodily restructuring, the restoration of form |
| Lux | Revelatory | illumination, clarity, perception, possibility | light, unveiling, guidance, seeing truly |
| Memoria | Imprint | retention, continuity, patterned recall | preservation, restoration, memory-work, inherited structure |
| Terra | Structural | mass, stability, endurance, boundary | stone, reinforcement, containment, anchoring |
| Umbra | Attenuative | fading, obscuring, remnant, release | concealment, dampening, trace-work, softened endings |
| Verba | Definitional | naming, syntax, law, formal order | runes, bindings, oaths, command |
| Zephyr | Kinetic | motion, pressure, spread, momentum | windworking, propulsion, redirection, acceleration |

### *Pure and Compound*

In theory a spell may draw mostly from a single class. In practice nearly every real working is compound. A stable effect usually needs one dominant energy, one or more supporting ones, and a method suited to the change being attempted. A healer closing a wound is moving vital flow, but guiding that flow into the right shape is morphic work, and making the new flesh remember what it was is imprint. That is why the energy classes are the deepest layer of theory but rarely the everyday language of practice.

When a compound working draws on several classes, each is weighed separately against the caster's affinity for it. A caster with a strong feel for heat and a weak one for flow, attempting a working that uses both, handles the heat cleanly and loses a good deal of the flow, and both losses count against the price. The weakest affinity in a compound working sets a practical ceiling on its stability, because a caster cannot govern what they do not feel. A single poorly felt component can unsettle an otherwise well-controlled spell. This is why specialists stay efficient inside their own domain even in compound castings, and why generalists pay a moderate toll on everything. Neither is better; it depends on the shape of the caster.

### *The Ladder of Crossing*

Turning one class of energy into the expression of another always costs something in the crossing, and teachers in many traditions picture that cost as a ladder of five rungs, set by how the two classes stand to each other.

At the top, **shaping within one class**, making a flame hotter or narrower, costs very little, though never nothing. Next come the **harmonious** pairs, whose functions complement each other so that each carries the other: Aqua with Imago, adaptive

flow supporting the change and repair of form, the root of most healing; Memoria with Verba, in which named things hold and remembered things persist, the root of oath and archive; Terra with Umbra, in which structural endurance and slow fading sustain each other, so that decay is governed rather than suffered. A harmonious pairing loses little even at moderate affinity, is steadier than either energy alone, and tends to consolidate itself under pressure rather than come apart. Below them are the **compatible** pairs, neither harmonious nor resistant, through which a moderate share bleeds away. Then the **resistant** pairs, whose functions do not oppose each other violently but fail to reinforce each other: Ignis with Memoria is the received example, combustion's impulse to release set against retention's impulse to hold, so that each partly undoes the other, much of the energy is wasted, and whatever was meant to be preserved holds poorly. Resistance produces waste, not danger.

At the bottom stand the three **resonant oppositions**, pairings whose core functions directly contradict each other, one driving a process while the other resists, reverses, or erases it in a way the energies cannot reconcile. **Aion against Ignis**, persistence against combustion, must be constantly reasserted as each half suppresses the other; small castings work, large ones tend to collapse. **Lux against Umbra**, revelation against obscuring, needs exceptional affinity in both, or one simply overpowers and wastes the other. **Terra against Zephyr**, structure against motion, shears or seizes in the middle of the casting as each erodes the other. These are the same oppositions the cosmos shows on a larger scale, in the Crucible against the Frozen Moment and the Unbound Gale against the Iron Backbone. An opposed crossing loses almost everything, and what survives is unstable.

The oppositions are not forbidden. Disciplines exist to manage them, and some practitioners make their names doing so. But an opposed working does not fail cleanly. It functions, and the unresolved tension comes out as involuntary side effects, and it scales unpredictably: a small casting may barely register the instability, while the same pairing at greater power spirals past any caster's governance. Pushing more power into an opposed conversion does not yield more result. The excess escapes as backlash.

The rung is only where a working starts. A method suited to both the source and the intended result carries energy across more cleanly; an ill-suited one spills it, and a damaged or hostile channel turns the spill into failure. Structures laid down beforehand, cut runes, drawn ritual geometry, a focus tuned in advance, lose less than a conversion improvised under stress. Two limits hold on every rung: no conversion is ever perfect, and none loses everything unless the working collapses outright.

### *The Named Traditions*

Some compound pairings recur often enough to have earned common names and lines of teachers, though they are not formal schools and cultures sort them differently. **Storm-Forge** pairs fire and wind in mutual support, combustion driving propulsion, heat shaped by moving air, the forgework of smithing peoples and weather-workers alike, and warbands pay well for a Storm-Forge smith. **Oath-Inscription** joins retention and formal naming to fix a commitment into lasting record, and is at home among oath-keepers, priests, and lore-keepers; an oath-stone cut this way still binds the heirs of a broken pact, and blood-feuds have been fought over who swore what upon it. **Healing-Shift**, adaptive flow guided by morphic intent, closes wounds, repairs organs, restores form, and is the most widespread compound tradition in the healing arts. **Stonelocking** reinforces structure with temporal persistence: walls that resist ageing, anchors that hold across generations, tombs that do not settle. A practitioner who names any of these will be understood almost anywhere.

## Lifeforce

Living things carry a special form of energy, and every healer, blood-worker, and grave-keeper in the world has to understand it before they understand anything else.

Species are not made by the Primes. They arise by natural evolution or by adaptation to a plane, and as a line of descent forms, it takes on a characteristic balance of Prime energy. That settled balance is its **lifeforce**: the animating charge that sustains life, growth, repair, endurance, and the continuity of a living body. It is more than health in a physician's sense. It is the energetic basis that lets a body stay alive and recover from injury at all.

Lifeforce is not a soul. The world has no souls to weigh, and lifeforce is neither a moral essence nor proof of spiritual purity. It is an energetic and biological principle, not a theological judgement, and a monster's lifeforce is no darker than a saint's. Writers who reach for the familiar language of souls will find that Caeldon answers its questions differently: what survives a death is pattern and trace, not a person in another place, and what a healer moves is life, not spirit.

### *Signatures*

Every species carries a distinct lifeforce **signature**. Members of a species share its general pattern, and each individual varies within it in strength, stability, and compatibility, so lifeforce has both a species-wide identity and a personal profile. The same is true of animals, plants, and every other naturally arising living thing; each of their lines took on its own balance of Prime energy as it formed.

The consequences are practical. Healing within a species is the most efficient there is. Healing across species is possible but loses more. And the closer two species stand in energetic design, the easier healing and transfer become between them.

A second distinction matters as much. The **lifeforce pattern** is the species-shaped template that defines who is compatible with whom. **Vital reserves** are how much usable vitality a particular person has to spend right now. Two sisters may be perfectly compatible, and one may still be too exhausted, starved, wounded, or overextended to heal the other safely. Reserves are drained by injury, disease, overcasting, chronic strain, starvation, and above all by repeated healing work.

### *The Compatibility Bands*

Healing works by transferring or guiding lifeforce to restore a damaged living system. It is powerful, and it is dangerous, because a healer who repeatedly spends their own lifeforce on others risks draining themselves to collapse or death. Healing is not free restoration. It is costly rebalancing.

Healers' schools and temple healers measure the fit between giver and receiver in four **compatibility bands**. **Band I, Concordant**, covers transfer between members of the same species: low loss, stable outcomes. **Band II, Adjacent**, covers related kinds: moderate loss, generally manageable. **Band III, Taxing**, brings heavy loss and frequent side effects. **Band IV, Hostile**, is extreme mismatch, for emergencies only. Even Band III is not worthless; cross-species healing is reduced in efficiency, never made useless. A Band IV healing is what a desperate company asks of whatever healer is at hand when its own has fallen, and the side effects are what the camp-songs joke about afterwards, if the patient lives. And the band is contextual. Method, condition, contamination, and the skill of the practitioner can shift a case by one band either way, and a lineage long altered by magic may test a band higher or lower than its species would suggest, depending on how stable the alteration has stayed.

Beings who do not fit the ordinary pattern, among them hybrid lines, magically altered bloodlines, extreme shapeshifters, artificial beings, corpse-servants, and the Beyonders from outside the cosmos, are judged by how they behave, not by what they are called. A healer asks whether a stable lifeforce signature exists at all, whether the being's continuity sustains itself or is propped up from outside, whether a transfer produces predictable results, and whether the risk of contamination can be managed. Where those answers fail, temple healers and the healers' schools treat the

being as Band IV until a safe method is found. Healers who did otherwise, laying hands on a corpse-servant or a wanderer touched by a Beyonder, are the cautionary tales of the trade.

> *The boy's arm was laid open from wrist to elbow on a scythe. I washed it, put my left hand on his shoulder and my right along the wound, and waited for his pulse to find mine. It always comes as warmth first, up from my own chest and down the arm like hot water poured slowly, and then a tightness at the edges of the cut, as if someone were drawing a lace.*
>
> *The skin crept together while his mother held the lamp. There was a smell like crushed green stems. When it was done the cut was a pink seam and I was cold to the fingertips, and I sat on their step and drank their broth and did not trust my legs for an hour. Same people, same blood: it is the cheapest mending there is, and it still cost me the afternoon.*
>
> — a healer's case-note, *The Book of Small Mendings*

### *Plants and Animals*

Because plants and animals carry lifeforce of their own, they are real healing sources, and this is why medicinal plants restore strength, why some broths, tonics, and teas genuinely invigorate, why one herb affects different peoples differently, and why certain animals, organs, and extracts are prized in restorative traditions. What passes between them and the patient is not symbolism alone but the meeting of one living pattern with another.

The two are not alike. Plant lifeforce is diffuse, stable, and gentle, suited to gradual restoration and long recoveries, and safe for repeated low-intensity treatment. Animal lifeforce is denser and more reactive, closer to the pattern of other moving bodies, and so better for acute intervention in a short window, but it carries a greater risk of mismatch if used again and again across incompatible kinds. Both are safer than predatory extraction from an unwilling person and far more available in ordinary life, and both are less efficient than a clean transfer between compatible members of one species. Compatibility improves when source, recipient, and method share some Prime alignment, which is why an experienced herbalist chooses not only the plant but the hour and the hands.

### *Failed Mending*

Healing forced too hard can go wrong in a way that has its own name. **Failed Mending** is a distorted healing pattern in which lifeforce repair overcorrects instead of restoring the body's clean prior form. Wounds close too strongly, tissue regrows unevenly, scars stay physically meaningful, and repeated injury can leave a body tougher, stranger, more knotted, or more bound to the place it was hurt. The harm is not undone; it is kept, in altered form. It appears most often when the same wound is forced to heal again and again, when aggressive regrowth is pushed past what the body can settle, or in wounded places where damage and repair keep recurring. Once set in, recovery is compensated at best: the body works, but it does not return to what it was.

In most peoples it is an occasional misfortune. In the Trolls alone it became stable and heritable, during the long span remembered as the Stabilization of Failed Mending, c. 380,000 to c. 330,000 BR; why in them, and only in them, nobody knows, and Part IV tells what the inheritance has meant to them.

## Bodies and Affinity

Bodies are not neutral channels. The lifeforce a species took on as it arose has biological consequences: some bodies conduct certain workings easily, some resist certain energies, and others can use a school at all only by paying higher loss, greater strain, or a greater risk of failure. Biology shapes how efficient a caster is, how steady during the casting, how well they bear backlash, how fast they recover, and which schools or Prime blends come naturally.

### *The Shape of a People*

Each species has a broad magical profile, and species-wide tendencies are real even though no two members are identical. A people shaped more strongly by Aqua and Imago may produce more healers, adaptive casters, and nature-workers; a people with stronger Terra and Verba may produce more warders, builders, and binders. Other patterns are recognized too: a natural alignment with Zephyr and fast, mobile casting; with Lux and perceptual or liturgical magic; with Umbra and Memoria and the disciplines that stand near death. These patterns explain why magical traditions differ from people to people without making them mere cultural habits.

For practical purposes, the teachers of the schools judge a species' profile along five independent axes. **Conduction** is how easily the body channels power. **Retention** is how well it holds a complex pattern without drift. **Recovery** is how quickly strain clears. **Tolerance** is how much stress it absorbs before injury. **Interfacing** is how cleanly it exchanges lifeforce with patterns not its own. No species is ranked better or worse at magic on these axes; they are differently shaped for different costs.

Species also carry **natural resistances**, protective traits rather than immunities, where a lifeforce pattern rejects a class of outside influence: hostile influence over the mind, alteration of the body, magical contamination that behaves like disease, or particular Prime pairings. Resistance shows as weaker effects, slower onset, shorter duration, or a caster having to put in more. No mortal species is universally resistant, and strong resistance in one domain usually trades against vulnerability in another.

The same principle reaches past the peoples. Plants and animals have their own Prime-shaped tendencies, which is one reason herbalism, alchemy, husbandry, and beast-derived medicine have real magical consequences rather than working by the comfort of tradition.

### *The Shape of a Person*

Within a species, individuals differ again: in the size of their reserve, the quality of their conduction, their sensitivity to ley lines, their tolerance for pain, the responsiveness of their nerves, their control of their own emotions, and their fit with particular methods. One person is born with a fierce affinity for storms and no endurance; another, with moderate gifts and an unshakeable steadiness, becomes the better mage in practice.

Affinity is not a single talent but several, and it helps to keep them apart. **Efficiency** is how much energy is lost. **Control** is how precisely a working can be shaped. **Safety** is how likely backlash is. **Scale** is how much power can be moved before the body fails. **Recovery** is how fast strain, fatigue, or internal damage mend. **School access** is which traditions come naturally, which come hard, and which feel against the grain. A caster may be highly efficient and fragile, powerful and inaccurate, safe and steady and weak, or broadly gifted and exceptional at nothing, and each of those is a different kind of life.

### *Limits and Mutation*

A body can only move so much energy safely. Past that point it overheats, seizes, bleeds, damages its nerves, stresses its organs, overloads its senses, and runs its vital reserves dry, and repeated overcasting brings slow degeneration. This is one reason not every mage can scale up to battlefield magic: with all the theory and training in the world, the body may simply fail before the spell is finished.

Chronic pressure can change the body itself. **Magical mutation** is a persistent change to lifeforce pattern, physiology, or both, caused not by ordinary inheritance but by long-term residence in highly active ley country, repeated overcasting, ritual exposure to unstable compound energies, inheritance from lines repeatedly altered by magic, or dark practices that scar continuity and then settle. Practitioners distinguish **adaptive** mutation, more function at an acceptable cost; **unstable** mutation, gains that come and go and fail unpredictably; and **degenerative** mutation,

decline that outweighs any benefit. Some adaptive mutations become stable bloodline traits. Inheritance is possible but not certain, and many mutations show only when the same pressure that made them returns.

## The Ways of Casting

A spell is defined not only by what it does but by how the caster reaches and shapes it. Method governs speed, control, scale, rate of loss, safety, repeatability, and how easily the working can be broken. It is why one mage can hurl fire with a shouted gesture while another needs a wand or a prepared sigil for the same effect.

### *The Methods*

**Direct will** shapes magic with little visible mediation beyond focused intent. It is fast, flexible, and hard to predict, and also demanding, hard to stabilize, and dangerous at scale; it belongs to emergencies, duels, and the naturally gifted or heavily trained.

**Gesture** helps the body impose structure on a working: direction, timing, the rapid modulation of force. It is quicker and clearer than ritual, and easy to break if the caster is bound, wounded, or knocked off balance.

**Speech** defines and stabilizes. It is the method of bindings, commands, oaths, liturgy, and precise instruction to forms prepared in advance, and it improves clarity and repeatability, at the price of vulnerability to silence, distortion, panic, and lost breath.

**Runes and inscriptions** move a working's structure out of the caster and into stable form. They suit storage, delayed release, warding, artefact-making, and anything that must endure after the caster has left; slow to prepare, they are often safer and more efficient than improvisation for lasting work.

**Ritual** trades speed for scale, stability, symbolic weight, and the sharing of a burden among many. Healing circles, the sanctifying of sites, major conjurations, weather-working, and long-range divination are ritual work, and ritual makes otherwise impossible workings possible, though it is vulnerable to interruption.

**Focus objects**, among them staves, wands, rings, mirrors, blades, censers, bells, masks, and reliquaries, improve efficiency and safety, hold stored charge, standardize a favourite working, or open a school a caster could not otherwise reach. They are common for a plain reason: bodies alone are unreliable under stress.

**Blood and the bodily medium**, blood, breath, bone, pain, or direct touch, bring intimacy and potency, raise the cost, and raise fear and suspicion with it. They are at home in healing, blood magic, sacrifice, domination, and some necromantic and oath-bound workings.

**Prayer and liturgy** count as a method when they work as a stable symbolic and relational structure. They overlap with speech and ritual but depend on relationship, alignment, and sacred authority, and they serve divine support, sanctification, communal blessing, vow-magic, and work against corruption.

**Environmental conduction** uses the surroundings as the apparatus: drawing through ley lines, channelling a storm front, casting through a hearth, a river, or a standing stone, making the site part of the spell. It lowers personal cost and raises scale, and ties the working to its place and its weather.

No method is best. Will favours speed, gesture control, speech definition, runes persistence, ritual scale, focus consistency, blood potency, and prayer aligned support. A caster also chooses between **improvised** casting, fast, reactive, wasteful, and dangerous, and **prepared** casting, slower, steadier, more efficient, and repeatable, and a trained battle-mage moves between the two as the moment demands.

Peoples have their preferences here too, though nothing is compulsory. Species with high conduction and quick reflexes lean towards will and gesture; species with high retention towards runes and prepared work; species that interface well towards ritual and group methods; species of lower tolerance towards focus-assisted or liturgi-

cal channels, for safety. In mixed societies methods hybridize, one people's stability practice married to another's speed.

### *Braided Work*

**Mixed-method casting** combines two or more methods in one working to gain their strengths and cover their weaknesses. In **layered** casting one method anchors the structure while another drives the output. In **braided** casting two methods run together and reinforce each other. In **chained** casting they hand off in sequence, as when a ritual sets up a working and a gesture releases it. Gesture with speech gives fast precision; rune with focus gives lasting stability; liturgy with ritual gives large communal effects; environmental conduction with a focus gives scale under local control. Mixed work is powerful and sensitive to failure, and its characteristic danger is **phase mismatch**, when the timings of the methods drift apart and amplify loss or backlash.

### *Breaking a Caster*

Every method can be interrupted, and each fails in its own way. Gesture breaks under restraint, imbalance, or pain. Speech and liturgy break under silence, choking, panic, or distortion. A focus can be knocked from the hand, shattered, or put out of tune. Runes and ritual geometry can be smeared, inverted, or contaminated. Environmental casting can be denied its site. And direct will breaks under fear, overload, or induced confusion that scrambles its sequence.

Competent practitioners answer with redundancy, and train at least one fallback that fails in a different way from their first: breathing locks and anchor phrases against panic; small-gesture variants against a bound arm; silent signs and prebound short phrases against a stopped mouth; nested geometry, warded inks, and guard circles against a smeared line; paired backup foci and a bare-hand form against a broken staff; mobile conduits, stored reserves, and more than one mapped site against a denied place. A caster who has none of these is a caster who has not yet been ambushed.

## The Price

Cost is not a rule added afterwards to keep magic in check. It follows from the first law: something must power the spell, some share is always lost, and the act of control itself strains the one who does it. Every school emphasizes different costs. None escapes cost entirely.

### *What Is Spent*

The most familiar price is the caster's own immediate reserve, and it shows as tiredness, tremor, dizziness, headache, slowed thought, clumsiness, and collapse. It is the least exotic cost and never the only one.

Some magic, healing and sacrifice above all, spends something deeper than fatigue. When lifeforce or vital reserves are used directly, the bill arrives as shortened endurance, weakened recovery, early ageing, vulnerability to disease, chronic frailty, or death. This is the plainest reason why restorative magic is not free.

Spells take from the world around them too: the heat from a room, the moisture from air and soil, the green from a field's plants, the vigour from animals, the charge from a gathering storm, the steadiness of a ley-rich site, the stored power of a shrine's ward-stones. This gives magic consequences for the land and for war. A village that heals its sick all winter may find its herb-gardens thin in spring; an army that casts heavily in one valley leaves the next army less to draw on.

Some workings depend on prepared tools, inscribed media, offerings, foci, catalysts, or costly works of stone and metal, and these are costs even when the caster's body is barely taxed. A wizard with no chalk, no anchor, and no charged mirror may know the ritual perfectly and still be unable to cast it.

### *What It Leaves*

Even a successful working can leave numbness, bleeding, burns, frostbite, disorientation, involuntary spills of emotion, brief blindness or deafness, nausea, gaps and fragments in memory, or a con-

vulsive aftershock. These are what separate controlled power from spectacle without consequence.

Years of casting leave marks of their own: chronic exhaustion, tremor, scarred channels, damaged senses, infertility, broken sleep, flattened feeling, warped affinity, dependence on ritual aids, and a shortened life. Each school leaves its own signature on its practitioners, as the next chapter tells.

Some of this cannot be reversed. Permanent harm comes when repeated strain outruns the body's power of repair, or when a single extreme event scars the core channels, and it most often takes the form of channel scarring that raises every future loss, irreversible damage to the senses, chronic arrhythmia or tremor, warped affinity that stays warped, lost fertility, and a lower ceiling on what can be moved at all. Healers grade it in three classes: **Class I, Residual**, lasting impairment that still allows limited practice; **Class II, Disabling**, a major loss of safe casting capacity; and **Class III, Terminal**, a progressive collapse in which further casting is an immediate threat to life. The classes follow what the caster can still safely do, not how they look. Many a burnt-out war-mage at Class II lives on as a sellsword company's charm-maker or a lord's tutor, and a Class III mage who casts once more is the stuff of last stands in the songs.

Treatment helps, but clean restoration is never guaranteed. Acute overload often recovers with rest and compatible intervention; repeated small damage can usually be improved but not erased; scarred channels are managed rather than cured; and injuries that touch identity or continuity must be stabilized before anyone tries to restore them. Healers distinguish **clean** recovery, where function returns without lasting penalty, **compensated** recovery, where it returns with ongoing management, and **palliative** recovery, where symptoms ease and capacity stays lowered. Some treatments trade one cost for another, recovering throughput while narrowing tolerance; and restoration forced again and again on the same injury can tip into Failed Mending.

### *Watching for Overuse*

Overuse is a condition that can be detected, not only a judgement made after the fact. Masters, temples, and war-captains watch four signs: **throughput drift**, more input needed for the same output; **recovery lag**, exhaustion that lingers and stability slow to return; **control variance**, familiar forms growing unsteady; and **symptom persistence**, side effects that no longer clear between castings. They test by a test-casting under a master's eye, by comparing how a caster's channels answer now with how they answered in health, by timing the recovery after each working, and by checking for contamination after dangerous work. They speak of four risk bands: **Green** for ordinary strain, **Amber** for early signs of overuse and a lighter load advised, **Red** for a high risk of collapse and a recommended suspension, and **Black** for critical instability, emergency intervention only.

Because overcasting can maim bystanders and bring down walls, whoever holds a place tends to forbid it there, and makes the forbidding stick with whatever force they have. The rules are few, plain, and rarely written down: great magic only with the leave of the lord, the temple, or the elders; rest after burning out once; a master answers for an apprentice's backlash; whoever damages a hall, a field, or a well with a failed working pays for it, in coin, in service, or in blood; and a caster in the Red or the Black may be stopped by force, if anyone nearby is strong enough to try. A lord watches the casters in his hall and his war-band, captains their own on campaign, temples their priests and sworn casters, and masters of a craft their journeymen at the forge and the quarry. What moves them is fear for their own walls and people, not the caster's soul. A sellsword company under siege lets its war-mage go into the Red, and sometimes the Black, because the alternative is the wall coming down; the companies that survive such nights tell of it ever after, and those that do not are remembered by the scorch on the stones. A caster who works on after a Red warning and hurts someone pays as a care-

less man would; one who pushes into the Black without need is treated as having struck the blow. A lord's favoured caster rarely pays the full price, and a wandering one often pays more.

### *When a Working Breaks*

When casting fails, the cost rises sharply, because the energy has lost its guided path. It discharges wildly, strikes the wrong target, converts into the wrong thing, rebounds into the caster, collapses the structure of the spell, damages the site, or contaminates the caster with the very force they were trying to move. Backlash is often worse than the intended cost.

Where failures are written down at all, by temples, craft masters, lords' scribes, and the captains of war-bands, the learned describe a failed working in a fixed order, so that one house's account can be read by another. First comes the **method** that broke: a direct-will failure loops and surges and rebounds into the caster; a broken gesture misdirects its release into whoever stands in the arc; a corrupted phrase leaves a malformed binding with an echo; a broken rune leaks from its anchor and may detonate later; a broken ritual sends a feedback shock through every participant; a broken focus bursts and returns its surge into the hand that held it; a broken blood-working leaves a link that will not let go; a broken prayer collapses or inverts its blessing; a broken conduction snaps back through the land itself; and a broken braid of methods escalates in several directions at once. Second comes the **school's signature**, what that break becomes in the world, for the same failed gesture produces quite different hazards in fire-work and in dream-work. Third comes a **severity band**: **Strained**, a working degraded but mostly controllable; **Fractured**, control partial and collateral spill likely; **Cascading**, failure spreading faster than correction can contain; **Catastrophic**, the working with no coherent path of control left, and evacuation and quarantine the only sensible answers. Last come the containment actions taken. An account that names all four can be read in any hall that keeps such accounts.

## Patrons and Currents

There is not one set of laws for mortal magic and another for divine. What separates them is where the energy comes from.

**Traditional magic** is casting that relies on the caster's own training, chosen method, access to the surroundings, stored charge, bodily channel, and ability to shape the working. It is the magic of scholars, hedge-mages, battlefield adepts, ritualists, artificers, and most ordinary practitioners, and it tends to prize technique, preparation, efficiency, and the careful management of personal risk. Its look is formula, diagram, focus, rune, and practised gesture.

**Divine magic** is casting supported or empowered by a power beyond the caster: the current of a Prime, reached through alignment rather than granted; a Resonant able and willing to supply power directly; or, rarely, a Steward acting within its office. The mortal still supplies intention, ritual form, symbolic language, a bodily channel, and a reading of the situation, but the burden of energy may be carried, in part or in whole, by the divine source. Drawing on a Prime's current, a Resonant, a sanctified current, or a ritual channel maintained by divine attention, it is often safer, steadier, more sustainable in a crisis, and better at costly liturgical effects such as blessing, consecration, and work against corruption. Its look is prayer, liturgy, vow, sacred symbol, consecrated place, and the relationship between a caster and what they serve. These are differences of style and access, not of physics, and many casters stand somewhere between the poles.

### *What Patrons Do*

The Primes are not patrons. A Prime's current is open to whoever stands aligned with its principle; it does not choose, refuse, or withhold. When Prime-aligned casting falters, the cause lies in the caster's alignment, in the conduit, or in the place, never in a Prime's will.

Patrons, the Resonants and rarely the Stewards, are another matter, and patronage is a relationship rather than a mechanism. Observers describe four modes a patron may be in. A **stew-**

**arding** patron gives stable support tied to clear doctrine and long formation. A **covenantal** patron gives support contingent on vows, rites, and obedience to a temple. An **instrumental** patron gives support intermittently, at strategic moments or in service of an agenda. A **withholding** patron gives less or nothing, because of conflict, misalignment, corruption, or a damaged conduit. One patron may move between modes over time. And divine silence does not always mean rejection. It may mean distance, a quarrel between powers over the matter, a disrupted channel, or a deliberate choice not to act.

Divine power is gained by accepting dependence. If a patron refuses, withdraws, is absent, is weakened, or is displeased, or if a caster falls out of alignment with a Prime's current or loses the conduit to it, the expected supply may simply not come. Divine magic is often stronger in the moment and less independent over a life than learned craft. A war-priest whose blessing fails in the middle of a battle is the oldest of the temple tragedies: the light goes out, the line breaks, and the songs argue for ever over what he did to deserve it.

### *What the Current Does to the Vessel*

Divine casting lightens the personal toll without removing it. The body still channels the working, the mind still interprets it, and a miracle beyond the channel's tolerance can still burn, break, or kill the one who calls it; of two priests serving the same power, one may carry the current cleanly and the other burn out. A divine working can also leave bodily overchannelling, emotional overwhelm, sacred obligation, vow-debt, or a crash after the miracle ends. Safer does not mean free.

Over years, divine channelling leaves durable marks. Practitioners speak of **channel hypertrophy**, greater throughput within a narrower margin of tolerance; **vow-scarring**, a loss of flexibility around whatever was sworn; a tilt of identity towards the patron's moral reflexes; dreams heavy with symbol; crashes of depletion after channelling; and a drift of dependence in which casting without a sponsor grows harder. Not all of this is sickness, and some of it is adaptation in trained clergy and disciplined orders. Risk rises when throughput outruns recovery, when doctrine is coercive, or when a caster channels through an unresolved contradiction. Temples and orders watch the health of a channel in three bands: **Integrated**, stable and manageable; **Strained**, with recurring symptoms that call for rotation, rest, or re-attunement; and **Fracturing**, dangerous, with judgement impaired and collapse near. The health of a temple's channels is a matter for its elders as much as for its healers. A fracturing priest is what villages fear most from a faith: the hermit-seer preaching fire at the crossroads, the holy knight who can no longer tell a heretic from a child.

### *Miracle, Liturgy, and Spellcraft*

Temples separate three things that look alike. A **miracle** is a working in which the decisive burden of energy is carried by divine sponsorship, producing an effect beyond what the caster could do unsponsored. **Liturgy** is a fixed rite using a temple's own symbols, words, offices, or the assent of the gathered faithful, with or without divine sponsorship. **Spellcraft** is method-driven casting by trained technique, with energy from personal, environmental, stored, or other non-patron sources. So a miracle can happen outside liturgy, liturgy can happen without a miracle, and spellcraft can imitate the style of either without being a god's work.

When a claimed miracle is disputed, the temples that care to judge it ask three questions. **Source**: where did the decisive energy come from? **Form**: was the temple's own rite used? **Leave**: did the worker have the temple's or the god's leave over the matter touched? Quarrels gather around false claims of miracle, liturgy performed without a temple's blessing, and spellcraft passed off as a god's command, and they are settled less by the questions than by which temple, lord, or crowd stands behind the claimant; a hedge-priest with a real miracle can still be driven out by a temple with none. The bones, rags, and rings of a proven miracle-worker are worth more

than gold: relic-thieves break into shrines for them, rival temples raid each other to carry them off, and forgers sell their fakes on every pilgrim road.

Some workings feel divine to the people who see them, mass healing, the smiting of corruption, the sanctifying of ground, protective blessing, exorcism, the miracle that steadies a breaking line, because they benefit so much from trust, blessing, consecration, moral authority, and a strong stabilizing source. They can still be described in ordinary magical terms; they are simply easier, safer, or more trusted when worked through a god. And divine sponsorship is not automatically benevolent. A cruel Resonant, a dark cult, or a tyrannical sacred order can pour divine-scale support into sacrifice, domination, curse-work, holy war, purification by violence, or sanctified atrocity, and villages near such a shrine learn to fear its night processions, the missing children, and the holy riders who come out under a god's banner to burn a neighbour's harvest. Divine magic is differently sourced and differently understood; it is not morally different in kind.

## Dark Magic

Where the cost of a working falls on others, magic becomes **dark**. Dark magic is not a separate substance, nor a separate school, but a classification of use. A working is called dark when it inflicts its cost on the unwilling, violates someone's bodily or mental autonomy, desecrates the dead, unsettles a whole environment, corrupts its caster over time, or pursues power without any acceptable restraint. Dark workings obey ordinary magical law: they need energy, lose it, depend on source and method, and are shaped by biology, place, and training. What marks them is how they obtain their power, through predatory extraction, coercion, desecration, catastrophic shortcuts, or exchanges no decent people will tolerate. Dark magic is defined less by how it looks than by who pays the bill.

Its common forms are sacrificial casting, domination and the violation of minds, coerced blood-work, the abuse of corpses, plague- and rot-magic, curse-work, the theft of fortune, forced transformation, and great rituals that devour a site. Any of these may be allowed, forbidden, secret, sacred, or ordinary, depending on the people and the circumstance. The marks that most readily make a people call a working dark are unwilling donors, forced transfer of lifeforce, the overriding of a mind, mutilating transformation, desecration of grave or shrine, large-scale drain on the land, a hidden price paid by others, and corruption that outlasts the spell.

No school is dark in itself. Blood Magic, Necromancy, Sacrificial Magic, Dominion Magic, and Trace Magic attract suspicion most readily, and certain branches of Dream, Augury, Nature, and even Sanctified Magic do too, but each of these schools holds both acceptable and unacceptable practice. A working distinction is simple enough to carry anywhere: **dangerous** magic is risky to cast; **dark** magic is unacceptable in whom it harms, what it violates, or what it turns its caster into. Some magic is both. Some is only one.

### *Forbidding and Hunting*

Few peoples forbid a school by name. They forbid harm, and whoever holds the place does the forbidding: a lord, a temple, the hold-elders, a clan's custom. How hard it falls depends on who did the working and to whom. A lord's own caster is judged gently, a hedge-witch harshly, and a stranger worst of all. Across most of Caeldon dark acts fall into four rough grades. **Restricted** acts are done only with the leave of whoever holds the place, and under their eye. **Conditional** acts are tolerated in war, in great need, or in a rite a temple blesses. **Prohibited** acts are forbidden whatever the reason, save to stave off the end of a people. **Atrocity-class** acts are an outrage against the person and the people: coerced sacrifice, forced extraction of lifeforce, remaking a person past recognition, and large-scale predatory rites. Their casters are hunted, and every hand is turned against them. Those who hunt them know these acts by their effects and by what the survivors tell, and few of them know what the scholars say these workings do beneath. This is how one people can

put the dead to work at a lord's order while another burns whoever tries, without anyone's physics being wrong.

Where someone takes the trouble to look, an accusation needs signs, not only an evil name. Often no one takes the trouble: a village's fear, a lord's anger, or a stranger's bad luck is enough. Those who do look read a site for residue, the shape of the drain, and scars in the ground's channels; look for what the victims share; feel for contamination and hear those who knew the victim before; weigh what several onlookers saw and what a skilled caster's instruments read; and watch the accused attempt the working again under guard. Careful elders and temple-priests want two kinds of sign before they maim or kill. A frightened crowd wants none, and the witch-finders who ride from village to village for the bounty want only a body to show. Those who judge distinguish **negligent overreach**, unsafe but not predatory; **knowing prohibited use**; **predatory intent**, the deliberate exploitation of unwilling targets; and **atrocity practice**. Punishment runs from a blood-price paid to the victim's kin, a branded or broken hand, loss of place, or exile, to long confinement under a temple's watch, and atrocity-class casters are killed where they can be caught, by fire, drowning, or the sword. The powerful, or those with powerful patrons, buy their way down the ladder more often than not.

Catching them is dangerous work. A necromancer on the run leaves corpses armed to burst on the road behind him, a blood-witch has the village's own sons for a shield, and a cornered dominion-caster turns the hunters on each other. Temples and lords hire mage-hunters for the work, sellswords with a gag, a binding cord, and a hedge-priest along, and pay them by the head.

### *Corruption and Its Inheritance*

Some dark practice changes the one who does it: blunted feeling, a growing appetite for stronger costs, damaged empathy, bodily degeneration, ritual dependence, warped affinity, isolation, and a growing susceptibility to certain Harmonics or to dark entities. None of this needs to be a punishment from anywhere. It is what repeated predatory practice does to a person, and the fireside tales are full of such casters: the healer who learned to take as well as give and could not stop, the necromancer-lord whose tower stands empty above a village that still bars its doors at dusk. Healers and temples grade it in four bands. **Taint** is early drift, reversible with supervision and abstinence. **Entrenchment** is a recurring predatory reflex and distorted channels, partly reversible. **Dominance** is stable dependence on dark methods, with high relapse and real social danger. **Irrecoverable** is persistent predatory compulsion or catastrophic corruption of the channels, where containment comes first. The band is set by observed harm, recurrence, and the evidence of the channels, never by confession alone.

Cleansing is a staged intervention, not a single rite: **stabilize**, halting active harm and isolating the contaminated channels; **de-load**, removing accumulated residue and predatory feedback; **re-attune**, rebuilding safe channel behaviour under supervision; and **verify**, confirming control and the risk of relapse before release. Taint often recovers cleanly, Entrenchment with conditions, Dominance under long supervision, and the Irrecoverable are usually contained rather than restored. A failed cleansing does not prove moral failure; often the damage has simply crossed a structural threshold.

Dark practice can leave heritable changes in lifeforce when the alteration persists across generations: a raised susceptibility to contamination, sudden spikes of affinity, a poor tolerance for certain cleansing rites, chronic instability when casting under stress. Not every descendant of a corrupted line is compromised, and inherited alteration is treated as a biological and energetic condition, not as guilt. The wiser healers and elders therefore separate **lineage status**, the inherited condition; **conduct status**, the harmful acts actually done; and **risk status**, how closely the person must be watched. The distinction is meant to stop

the hunting of whole bloodlines. Fear does not always listen, and a family with a tainted ancestor is still driven out of many villages.

All of this varies. One people puts the dead to work at its lord's order, burns every blood-worker it catches, celebrates its war-priests' smiting, and treats mind-binding as worse than murder. Another burns whoever raises a corpse, keeps sacrificial offerings in its temples as a matter of course, lets its lords bend minds in their own halls, and treats curse-work as ordinary inherited vengeance. The laws of magic are the same in both. What an ordinary person in a given era can expect of magic, and what the custom of that era allows, is told in each era's account of magic in ordinary life.

## The Rare and the Half-Divine

Between ordinary mortals and the divine powers lies a thin layer of exceptional individuals, related to magic but not the same as it.

**Mythic traits** are rare abilities or dispositions that appear in otherwise ordinary members of a species: uncanny luck, kinship with beasts, a sense for dreams or for death, an affinity with storms, the ability to hear truth, a gift for finding the way, an unusual memory. They are real, rare, usually narrow, socially significant, and distinct from trained magic, and they never make anyone divine. A trait is **inherited** when it recurs in a family, line, or species; **awakened** when it lies latent until stress, maturity, ritual, or crisis brings it out; and **imprinted** when strong exposure to a Resonant Zone, a divine event, a planar anomaly, or a cursed place leaves it behind. Traits always have a cause; they do not appear without pressure, inheritance, exposure, or some other real condition. They belong to no single people: some are shared across species, some lean towards particular peoples, and a few are tied to one people, line, region, or event. A person may be an ordinary non-caster, a bearer of a trait, a trained mage, both, or neither. Many heroes of the old songs were trait-bearers rather than mages: the tracker who never lost a trail, the shield-bearer no arrow would find, the girl who could hear the beast in the dark before it moved.

A **demigod** is the child of a Resonant and a mortal: much rarer than any trait-bearer, superior to ordinary mortals in strength, speed, intelligence, endurance, symbolic force, or lifespan, and still mortal and far from invincible. Their superiority does not pass down. A demigod's children are ordinary mortals unless some separate cause intervenes, so demigods are one-generation infusions, not founders of endless divine lines. Most trait-bearers are not demigods, and a demigod may show trait-like gifts; cultures confuse the two, but the world does not. As a rough guide the ladder runs from the ordinary mortal, through the bearer of a trait, the trained mage, and the trained mage who also bears a trait, to the demigod, and above the demigod to the Resonants and Stewards. The Primes are not on the ladder at all, since they are what every rung draws its power from. A clever mage can still defeat a trait-bearer, and a demigod may be far weaker than a great Resonant.

Both matter to the people around them. A trait-bearer may draw prestige, fear, taboo, attempts at selective breeding, a lord's restriction, religious interpretation, recruitment, or persecution, and a demigod draws all of these more strongly, with cults, panic among ruling houses, prophecy, and upheaval besides.

## What People Know

### *What Practice Knows*

The first law is known by everyone who has worked magic or watched it worked, in the form the healers' verse gives it: the fire was in the wood before the spark, and someone pays. Practitioners know where the force lies close, what each working costs, which bodies take to which arts, and how a working breaks, often precisely, because their teachers' records tell them. Healers know the compatibility bands from their failures, temples know the questions of miracle, liturgy, and spellcraft from their quarrels and the bands of a chan-

nel's health from their clergy, and witch-finders know the signs of dark work from the bodies they have shown. All of it is knowledge of what magic does.

### *What Theory Argues*

Why it does so is argued. The ten energy classes are a scholar's theory, and few practitioners have heard of them. Where the power comes from, the schools explain differently, by their own roots and by the Prime a scholar is aligned with. Clergy hold that their god gives them everything, and most never suspect that some of what they channel is a Prime's current, reached through their own alignment. The account in this chapter is what is true; the schools' accounts come nearer it or stray from it, and each later era's account comes nearer than the last, without ever arriving.

## Tensions

- **Lineage or conduct.** Dark practice can leave heritable changes in lifeforce. The wiser healers and elders separate lineage status from conduct and risk, so that descendants are watched rather than condemned, but wherever an altered bloodline lives, its neighbours test that separation, and a family with a tainted ancestor is still driven out of many villages.
- **Whose miracle.** Temples ask where the decisive energy came from, whether their own rite was used, and whether the worker had leave over the matter. Spellcraft can imitate the style of a miracle, and such quarrels are settled less by the questions than by who stands behind the claimant.
- **A moving line.** Ley maps are guesses, and a node is a patch that wanders with its lines. Whoever holds a node by the sword holds ground that will not stay where it was taken, and a shrine whose line slid away is left with dead wards and open tombs.
- **The silent patron.** A patron's silence may mean rejection, distance, a quarrel between powers, a disrupted channel, or a deliberate choice not to act, and the priest whose prayers go unanswered cannot tell from the silence which it is.
- **After the Red.** A caster who works on after a Red-band warning and hurts someone pays as a careless man would; one who pushes into the Black without need is treated as having struck the blow. Whether a given night was need is decided afterwards, by others, and a lord's favoured caster rarely pays the full price.
- **Two kinds of sign.** Careful elders and temple-priests want two kinds of sign before they maim or kill a caster for dark practice; a frightened crowd wants none, and witch-finders paid by the head want only a body. The schools that draw suspicion are the ones whose practitioners stand accused first.
- **Trait or god-blood.** Cultures confuse strong mythic traits with demigodhood, and the confusion carries weight: a trait-bearer taken for a demigod draws cults, prophecy, and dynastic panic that a trait alone never would.

CHAPTER 9

# The Schools of Magic

*Every school begins with a question. The Crucible asks what a thing becomes when it burns; the Backbone asks what holds; the Binding Song asks what a word is worth. Learn the question before you learn the working, or the working will answer it for you.*

— from its first leaf, *The Primer of Ten Questions*

Very few mages think about Prime energies when they work, any more than a mason thinks about the weight of the world when she sets a stone. They think in schools: bodies of practice, handed down from teacher to student, that gather the workings which recur often enough to deserve a name. The schools are where theory becomes a trade, and where a trade becomes a reputation. Ten of them grow directly from the ten Harmonics, the conceptual realms through which Prime energy becomes reachable and intelligible, and each carries something of its Harmonic's character into the hands of those who learn it: the Crucible's impatience, the Backbone's patience, the Binding Song's love of the exact word. Fifteen more are compound disciplines, built where several energies are braided together so often that the braiding has a craft of its own. None of them is forbidden by the laws of magic. Some are forbidden by people, in some places and some ages and not in others, and that difference, between what magic permits and what people will stand for, runs through every school in this chapter. So does the trade in them: every school has its hired hands in sellsword companies and lords' halls, its delvers' fears in the elder ruins, and its heroes and horrors in the songs.

This chapter tells each school's true root. Mages know their schools well as practice; the roots beneath them, the Harmonics and the Prime energies, are hidden from nearly all of them. What they know and believe of their own arts is told in What People Know.

## What Makes a School

A school exists because pure metaphysics is too abstract to train anyone in. Nobody can teach an apprentice "Ignis with Zephyr in support"; a teacher can teach her to light a lamp with a fingertip, then to stir dead coals back to a cooking fire, then to draw the heat out of the stones around her and hold it ready. Schools gather the patterns that recur in practice, the Harmonic a tradition draws

**AT A GLANCE**

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|---|---|
| **Harmonic schools** | Ten, one rooted in each Harmonic: Crucible, Surging, Backbone, Gale, Dream, Record, Path, Binding, Trace, and Frozen Moment. |
| **Compound schools** | Fifteen, each a recurring blend of Prime energies, from Vital Magic and Warding to Necromancy and Sacrificial Magic. |
| **Access** | Graded for each species in four bands, from Intuitive to Severe; a people can be Severe in one school and Intuitive in another. |
| **Reputation** | Set by use, cost, and fear, never by the school itself. |
| **Failure** | Every school breaks in its own way, and those who write failures down name the school that failed. |

on most, the methods it favours, the Prime blends that keep turning up, into disciplines that can be named, taught, hired, feared, and argued about.

Teachers count a tradition a school of its own when it can answer four questions: which Harmonic or Prime blend it is rooted in, which Prime energy dominates it, what kind of transformation it performs most reliably, and why its practitioners hold it distinct from the schools beside it. Each of the ten **Harmonic schools** answers the first question with one Harmonic and has one dominant Prime, often with others in support. The fifteen **compound schools** answer it with a blend, because no single Harmonic is wide enough to hold them.

Schools are not divided into real magic and forbidden magic. Necromancy, sacrificial rites, coercive arts, and the other occult traditions belong to the same order of things as the most respected crafts of hearth and hall, and their danger lies in use, cost, and what they do to the people around them, not in some separate category of magic. Even conjuration only calls, gathers, or briefly holds together what already exists.

## *Who Finds It Easy*

School difficulty is not universal. The teachers of the schools grade how open each school is to each species in four bands. **Band A, Intuitive**: compatibility is high from the start, and early training succeeds reliably. **Band B, Workable**: compatibility is moderate, and routine training produces competent practitioners. **Band C, Demanding**: efficiency and safety suffer persistently, and a master's close eye is needed. **Band D, Severe**: the school is structurally high-risk for that body, and only exceptional cases succeed without serious harm. These are bands of access, not of rank, and a species can be Band D in one school and Band A in another.

Some broad tendencies hold across the world. Schools rooted in Aqua, Imago, and Memoria come easier to lifeforce patterns built for adaptation and recovery. Schools rooted in Terra and Verba come easier to bodies that retain pattern well and hold structure. And the volatile schools, Storm and Sacrificial Magic and some branches of Dominion, are hard for nearly every species unless it carries some special tolerance.

## *How a School Fails*

Schools are also how a failure is named. When a working breaks, the temples, craft masters, lords' scribes, and war-captains who write such things down note first the method that broke and then the school's **signature**: what that break becomes in the world. The same lost gesture means one thing in a fire-working and quite another in a dream-working. Each section below ends with its school's signature, because a writer who knows how a school fails knows a great deal about how it is feared.

## Crucible Magic

The **Crucible** is the Harmonic of energy, heat, and transformation; each Harmonic's realm is described in The Planes. **Crucible Magic** takes its law from there: change requires heat, pressure, and release. Its dominant energy is Ignis, often supported by Zephyr and Terra.

Its practitioners see fire not merely as destruction but as the force that shows what a thing can become once its impurity is burned away. The school prizes courage, precision, and restraint. Every student is told on the first day that raw fire is easy and useful fire is difficult, and the best of them do not simply ignite: they temper, refine, and direct. A village fears a fire-mage because it has seen fire loose: a war-mage on the walls can end a siege, and the same war-mage with the wrong wind burns the town he was hired to save. Sellsword captains pay more for one Crucible caster than for a dozen crossbows, a raiding band that brings one brings the burning, and beast-hunters burn what steel will not kill. The school is taught in ember collegia known for battle-casting and fine thermal control, in severe ash monasteries that teach discipline through endurance of heat and meditation at the furnace, in the guild tradition of the **Nine Hammer Forges**, where smith-mages learn the school through metal, at the temple-school of the **Cinder Basilica**, where sacred flame is studied as both purification and punishment, and in glass-kiln workshops given over to lenses and fused materials.

Ordinary people meet it at the hearth. A fingertip laid on a wick, and the wick takes; a palm held over the grey bed of last night's fire, and the coals redden as if someone had blown on them, which is how camp wardens restart cookfires before dawn without striking new flame. The scholars call these **Sparktouch** and **Coalwake**. A little further along, a Crucible mage learns to pull warmth out of the stones around her and gather it at a point, leaving frost on the surfaces she robbed; to send a crawling line of ignition along a rope or a trail of pitch; to brand a sigil into wood or flesh; to fill the air with hot stinging ash. At the far end of the school stand the workings that end sieges: a hurled sphere that blooms into one orange detonation over a gate trench, a burning palisade drawn across an avenue, impact-masses rained into a valley mouth like falling suns, which the school's own teachers call memorable for all the wrong reasons. The songs praise the smith-mages who tempered a whole muster's blades the night before a battle, and mock the young adept who held a swelling fire-core one heartbeat too long. And there are the workings of mercy and their cost: cauterizing fire held to a wound, and the purging flame a plague priest uses to burn corruption out of flesh that no other treatment can save, at the risk of killing the patient if the impurity cannot be cleanly separated.

The school marks those who practise it with burns, fever, heat damage, and scarred nerves. When a working runs away from its caster it fails by **thermal runaway and flash-vent collapse**: a burst of heat, burns, and an aftermath in which the air itself feels spent and hard to breathe. Those who contain such failures cool the place and get the air moving before anything else.

> *Ask what the fire wants and it will tell you: everything, now. The art is to give it less, later, and exactly where you meant.*
>
> *— The Primer of Ten Questions*

## Surging Magic

The **Surging Deep** is the Harmonic of water, flow, and life. **Surging Magic** learns its lesson there: life survives through movement. Water that does not flow stagnates; blood that does not circulate kills; healing that does not rebalance becomes swelling, rot, or parasitic growth. Its dominant energy is Aqua, often supported by Imago and Memoria.

The school's philosophy is continuity, adaptation, and measured generosity. A Surging mage is taught that not every wound should be closed by force and not every poison fought head-on; often the right answer is to redirect, dilute, flush, or

restore the proper movement of things. Much of the world's healing begins here, and every sell-sword company that can afford one keeps a hedge-healer who can flush a wound and slow the bleeding long enough to reach a hospice. River and sea folk know the other side: a ford-keeper with the gift can drag a raiding party into the mire before the first blow, and many coasts will not let a Surging mage stand on the sea wall, for the stories of a sea driven ashore by a temple at the end of a siege. The school is taught at the **Tidelore Hospice of Maris**, a harbour hospice kept under the name of Lady Maris of the Tides, the sea god of the Tidelace Coasts, and famous for its healing arts and maritime survival magic, at a disciplined riverbank seminary built around flow-control and communal healing, in the temple-hospital of the **Hall of Circulating Mercy**, where healers learn how much of their own life they can spend, and when to stop, at the **Salt Archive** on the coast, which studies sea-magic, salinity, and cleansing rites, and above all in the informal river traditions of the floodplain houses, which teach practical water- and body-magic to whoever lives by the water.

Its workings are quiet and wet. A traveller holds an empty flask in the morning mist and it fills with clean water drawn from dew; river scouts cross under a sudden low screen of vapour that softens the light and hides them from the archers on the far bank; a rescuer standing in a boat draws a drowning child towards her along the current without going into the river. A messenger runs across a flooded ford with the water stiffening under each footfall like wet sand. Assassins pass through a cistern hall under a liquid hush that swallows their footsteps. In the healer's hands the same art flushes venom out through sweat and vomit before it reaches the heart, and washes the mud and splinters out of a spear wound without anyone scrubbing at it. The hardest Surging working of mercy is the one the healers dread: a life drawn from the healer's own body to save another's, paid directly from reserves, which kills healers who do it often, and loses badly across species. Fisher villages tell of the healer who gave away so much of herself through one plague winter that she was buried before the spring.

> *The poison wants to sit. Do not fight it where it sits. Open the way out and walk it to the door.*
>
> — *The Book of Small Mendings*

When a Surging working fails, it fails by **flow inversion and pressure surge**: drowning pressure, swelling, fluids forced where they should not be. Those who contain it relieve the pressure and give the water somewhere to go.

## Backbone Magic

The **Iron Backbone** is the Harmonic of earth, structure, and stability. **Backbone Magic** is the magic of what holds: foundations, supports, walls, bones, braces, and everything that prevents collapse. Its dominant energy is Terra, often supported by Verba.

Its practitioners value patience, geometry, and reliability, and they distrust brilliance. In this school the highest compliment is not that a working was clever but that it was sound. In a siege a Backbone mage on the wall is worth a hundred spears, and attackers aim their first stones at whoever is holding it together; miners and treasure-seekers want one beside them under old roofs, where elder ruins fall in and bracing fails. Hold-folk still drink to the mason who held a falling gallery up with her hands on the stone until the last child crawled out. It is taught in pillared academies in garrison towns that specialize in fortification, in the **Stonewright Guildholds**, where builders and mages train side by side, in the subterranean **Rootvault Cloister**, devoted to endurance and the study of the shaking earth, in bastion colleges on fortified borders, and in the funerary tradition of the **Tombmaker's Archive**,

which builds enclosures meant to last, and whose tomb-seals grave-robbers and delvers have cursed for centuries.

A Backbone mage's work is felt more than seen. A defender stamps on a slick parapet and the ground under her boots goes hard and gripping. A palm laid on a groaning pit-prop spreads the strain through the timber so that a mine roof stands long enough for the miners to get out. Fingers run along a crack in a wall and the stone draws itself together, closing the breach before rain and frost can widen it. An architect-mage lays a hand on bedrock and listens to how the mass carries its load, and hears the hidden settling that would have brought down a tower's new wing. The school sets bones before the healers knit them, which is painful, and it reads old stone for the history of its fractures, so that a seeker can learn where a doorway was sealed two generations ago. At its heaviest it raises shells of earth-force over retreating patrols, closes a breach in a curtain wall beneath an enemy's ladders, and, rarely, and almost never allowed outside open war or the bringing down of a ruin, sends a violent tremor through foundations and the walls on them; villages fear that last, because a careless quake-working breaks the cottages behind a wall as surely as the wall.

Overuse locks joints and worsens old injuries. When a Backbone working fails, it fails as weight fails, in **rigidity lock and anchor fracture**: crushing forces, fields that pin bodies where they stand, brittle breaks. Containment means releasing the structure without letting it all come down.

## Gale Magic

The **Unbound Gale** is the Harmonic of air, motion, and freedom. **Gale Magic** teaches that stillness is temporary and movement is life. Its dominant energy is Zephyr, often supported by Lux or Ignis.

Its mages learn to read force before they learn to impose it. Wind, breath, momentum, and pressure become lessons in timing rather than strength, and a Gale mage prefers redirection to collision and momentum to endurance; the school values adaptability, swiftness, and freedom from overcommitment. It is taught at the cliffside school of the **High Aerie**, on the road with the itinerant **Road Colleges**, which teach travel-magic and courier arts, aboard ship among the **Sail-Sages**, in the breath-discipline of the **Monastery of the Open Lung**, and in the city **Skyglass Towers**, whose wind-readers watch the weather and whose duel-mages hire out to settle quarrels on the rooftops. It is the magic a village sees most often go by, a rider who never tires, a stranger who steps off the mill roof and drifts down like seed, and the magic that fails most suddenly.

Gale work is the sound of moving air where none should move. A sailor turns a hand and the lamp-smoke in a cramped cabin streams out of the port without the flame so much as bending. A medic clears choking ash from around a burned man with a sweep of the arm. A scout who slips from a tower falls the last span as slowly as a seed. A courier runs through crossfire with the wind at her back and none in her face; a whispered message threads across a ruined courtyard to the one ear meant to hear it; a commander's own breath steadies, and with it the breathing of the frightened recruits around him. The heavier workings lay invisible steps through open air, throw a short-lived bridge of compressed wind over a gap so that acolytes can reach trapped pilgrims across a broken stair, and shear through ranks with blades of moving air. In still air the larger workings grow expensive. Road-tales tell of the courier who ran the burning causeway with the warning in her mouth while the arrows bent away from her, and the bandit queen of the high passes who came down the cliff faces on the wind and was gone before the caravan guards had their bows strung.

When Gale Magic fails, it fails by **momentum shear and trajectory whip**: its force goes in directions nobody chose, flinging debris along unpredictable lines. Those who contain it break the wind and damp its vectors.

## Dream Magic

The **Dreaming Veil** is the Harmonic of imagination, art, and dreams. **Dream Magic** begins from the conviction that perception is never neutral: what people fear, desire, imagine, and remember shapes the forms they are willing to accept as real. Its dominant energy is Imago, often supported by Lux, Umbra, or Memoria.

Dream-workers treat the mind as terrain and symbol as leverage, and they draw a hard line between cheap deception, which hides a fact, and true dreamwork, which changes the frame through which a fact is experienced. They do not make anything imagined real. Bringing a dream across into waking matter obeys the Dreaming Veil's own deeper law: a strong dream-symbol must gain pattern, cross through a thin place, and be steadied by memory, art, ritual, repeated recognition, or sustained emotion, and the most Dream Magic can do is encourage, shape, interrupt, or help steady that process. This is why most of the school stays perceptual, symbolic, or bound to sleep. Manifestation is rare, costly, and risky; unstable dream-forms fade when waking reasserts itself, and overfed ones, fed by fear or grief more than lucidity can govern, can turn obsessive, parasitic, or nightmare-shaped. The school is taught in veiled ateliers where painters, illusionists, and dream-readers study together, at the dream-temple of the **House of Silk Sleep**, by the travelling performers of the **Mirror Caravan**, in the secretive **Nocturne Theatre**, where staged realities train casters, and at the **Lantern Baths**, retreats where guides teach controlled descent into shared visions, and where the deepest pool is kept chained. A dream-worker frightens a village more than any sword does: a sword leaves a wound that can be seen, and a dream-worker can leave a household sleepless for a season, or a lane where something walks at dawn that no one remembers dreaming. Mercenary captains pay well for one who can turn a night attack into panic; tomb-breakers pay more for one who can tell a sealed hall's true door from the one it dreams.

Its smallest workings are the ones nobody notices. A courier's face shifts a little, enough to pass for tired household staff. A guard turns towards a whispered name that was never spoken. Candlelight glows on a rehearsal stage with no heat and no wick. A watch-room grows heavy-eyed; a corridor seems to go on and on, sapping the nerve of those pursuing down it; corners deepen into shapes that make an interrogation room quietly unbearable before anyone has said a word. Deeper in, the school builds whole dream-places, as when healers make a safe shared garden of sleep for those who cannot bear their own memories, and it can take a dream away entirely, devouring a child's repeating terror so that the child sleeps clean, at the risk that the dream-worker takes the fear in with it.

Dream-workers pay in corrupted sleep, in symbols that bleed into waking life, and in a blurring of what is real. A failed Dream working brings **symbol bleed and perception fracture**: illusions that will not fade, and people who no longer know who or where they are. It is contained with anchors to reality and onlookers' accounts compared against one another until the true one is agreed. Fireside tales keep the masked woman who walked into a raiders' watch-fire ring, sang once, and left the sentries cutting at each other's shadows.

## Record Magic

The **Eternal Record** is the Harmonic of knowledge, history, and memory. **Record Magic** rests on the idea that nothing can be mended, avenged, or inherited without memory. Its dominant energy is Memoria, often supported by Verba.

Its mages concern themselves with patterns that endure: names, forms, histories, procedures, and the traces of what a thing was before damage or forgetting changed it. They are archivists, restorers, teachers, and lore-keepers, and the ones

a lord sends for when a killer must be named; even their battle-magic tends to work by restoring an earlier state, holding something crucial unchanged, or dragging a hidden memory into the light. Murderers, forgers, and tomb-robbers fear them, and the powerful keep them close or have them quietly killed; salvage crews hire them to read worn elder inscriptions and the warnings over sealed doors. The school is taught at the **Mnemonic Conservatories**, the most respected schools of pattern-recovery and living memory, in cloistered archive-monasteries, at the **House of Copper Leaves**, which inscribes memory into recoverable storage, in the **Halls of Memory**, houses of sworn rememberers who hold what was said at oath-takings and blood-price settlements, and whose word has hanged men and started feuds, and at the **Pale Librarium**, which recovers damaged texts, relics, and inherited forms of working.

A Record working steadies what is slipping. A shocked onlooker, a hand on her brow, holds the order of what she saw long enough to remember the ring on the killer's hand before the detail goes. A scholar marks the one manuscript crate worth saving in a fire, and finds it again by feel through the smoke. A sworn truce crosses wet mountain passes with its ink unharmed. A thief-taker looks at a drawer and sees, faintly, that it was opened after midnight and closed again. Apprentices tie the steps of an emergency to the smell of lamp oil and copper, so that the smell brings the steps back when panic would not. Oath-keepers fix sworn words to the act of speaking so that later tampering shows. Family heirlooms are listened to, and a blade gives up enough of its history, coloured by the reverence and grief of those who carried it, to settle a quarrel over who inherits. At the deathbed, the last thing a dying person saw can be held a little while, to name a killer or to say farewell. And the school can soften without erasing, letting the first turmoil of a terrible memory drain away so that a child who saw a massacre can breathe and speak, though done too often it blunts grief that needs to be felt and memory that needs to be exact. The tales Record mages tell each other are of memory gone wrong: the vault-keeper who walled a whole family's past into a reliquary and could not get it out again, the scribe-mage who restored a tomb's warding text one line wrong.

A failed Record working brings **recall recursion and imprint overload**: memory loops, false recollections echoing back as true. It is contained by grounding the caster in the present and quarantining the record that went wrong.

## Path Magic

The **Shifting Path** is the Harmonic of possibility, chance, and the future. **Path Magic** is not the art of commanding fate. It is the art of reading the branching conditions of the possible and leaning on them. Its dominant energies are Lux and Aion, often supported by Zephyr.

Its practitioners believe most situations hold several possible outcomes, and that those outcomes do not weigh the same. The school therefore values timing, judgement, and intervention at the smallest point that will serve; its teachers say that a Path mage seeks the hinge, not the hammer. It is taught at the **Wayhouse of Seven Roads**, a practical school for scouts, guides, and campaign diviners, at the **Observatory of Sundered Dawn**, which studies timing and conjunction, along the old shrine roads of the **Pilgrim Maps**, which teach wayfinding as sacred discernment, at the quiet **Coinless Hall** of odds-readers, whose pupils end up at the elbows of sellsword captains, smugglers, and dice-players, and by the **Lantern Steps**, town teachers who train spies, thieves, and lords' envoys in narrow-path judgement. That is why warbands want one: a captain pays well for a reader who knows which ford is watched, and outlaws pay better for one who can spoil the trail behind them. Villages are warier, because luck that bends one way has to come from somewhere.

To a Path mage, the moment shows its seams. A scout looks down three alleys and knows which wall will not fall first. A negotiator sees three ways to calm a room before opening her mouth. A climber stops with her hand an inch from a hold, certain that the stone is rotten. A thrown knife slips past a shield's rim instead of striking flat; a column of refugees keeps its heading through midnight snow towards the right pass; a lockpicker who should have snapped the pick feels the instant widen just enough to catch the tumblers. Some workings show only what has just been lost, as when an envoy realizes the exact word that would have kept a warlord's sword sheathed, a breath too late. At the heavy end the school can draw a brief run of impossible good timing for a small band reaching an inner gate, expensive and brittle, shattered by one strong contradiction, or veil a person's future in fog so that omen-readers cannot read it, which makes the envoy harder to anticipate but not one bit safer. Old soldiers drink to the scout-witch who led a beaten company out through the only gap in the ring, and to the gambler-mage who tilted one throw too many and was found under a fallen beam on a windless night.

A failed Path working brings **branch overload and decision lock**: contradictory outcomes, timing that slips out of joint, a caster frozen between futures. Containment narrows the branches and stills the decision.

> *Do not push the cart. Find the stone under the wheel, and move the stone.*
>
> — *The Primer of Ten Questions*

## Binding Magic

The **Binding Song** is the Harmonic of language, law, and connection. **Binding Magic** begins from the premise that definition is power: to name correctly is to distinguish, to distinguish is to order, and to order is to create reliable consequence. Its dominant energy is Verba, often supported by Terra and Aion.

Its practitioners are oath-speakers, sealers of tombs and treasure-vaults, ward-makers, envoys, and the hard hands of lords and temples. They are few, and a lord who keeps one at his side makes sure his neighbours know it. They value exact language and distrust improvisation, because in this school one slipped word binds the wrong thing, or binds the right thing badly. Ruin-delvers hire them to read the old seals on elder ruins before anyone forces a door, because a seal may hold in something worse than it keeps out, and villagers fear them for their tongues: one who learns your true name can lash you, silence you, or call you from your bed. The school is taught at the **Concordium of Glass Tongues**, an old academy of oathcraft, where students learn to speak a binding without one stray syllable, by the **Binding Choirs**, kept in great lords' halls, where binders train their voices together and swear their workings to the lord who feeds them, at the **House of Seals**, sealers of tombs, vaults, and things better left shut, whose oldest seals still hold on ruins whose builders are forgotten, at the **Hall of Given Names**, a sacred tradition of naming rites and true names, and in remote covenant abbeys where monks practise vow-magic and binding liturgy.

Binding work sounds like an oath sworn in a lord's hall and feels like a closed door. A courier passes a finger along the seam of a letter-tube and speaks a short formula, and the tube is now closed until released, so that opening it without release is a breach the closure resists; the spell does not make the tube unbreakable, only makes tampering obvious. A binder names a panicked man by his full name, his father's name, and the oath he is sworn to, and he stops and looks at her, unable not to. Two merchants swear their delivery terms before an oath-keeper, who binds into the promise the knowledge that it was made willingly and in hearing. A ward-maker walks the edge of a plague quarter speaking a line of binding, and the edges become exact, so that the stronger wards laid later have a clean line to hold. A lord's binder silences a hostile invoker before the curse is finished. A

lender hands over a sealed token that grows warm as repayment comes due. A ceasefire is sworn under a binding that makes knowing betrayal physically painful, and bodyguards swear an oath that will burn them on the instant if they turn traitor. And a vault sealed for centuries opens when a delver finally recovers the true founding name of its gate, because what only the correct name governs answers to nothing else. Ballads still mourn the binder who held a burning gate with one word until the word killed her, and whisper of oath-breakers who swore on the Song itself and were followed home.

Binding is strongest on willing, informed, exact agreements and weakens wherever consent was coerced, wording is vague, or the one who swore could not understand the promise. When it fails, it fails by **clause snap and law rebound**: oath recoil that lashes back on the caster, a binding fastened on the wrong person, consequences spilling onto bystanders. Containment cuts the broken line of the binding and has whoever set it release it.

> *Say what you mean, and only what you mean, and say it once. The Song keeps every word you give it, and it does not keep them kindly.*
>
> *— The Primer of Ten Questions*

## Trace Magic

The **Whispering Trace** is the Harmonic of death, reflection, and remnant. **Trace Magic** concerns what remains after departure, damage, death, or loss. It does not command death itself. It works with the soft residue events leave behind: shadows, echoes, the scent of presence, the pressure of feeling after the feeling has gone, the loosening of attachment. Its dominant energy is Umbra, often supported by Memoria and Aion.

Its practitioners are trackers, mourners, spies, undertakers, scholars of ghosts, and those who work at the thresholds of absence, and they are taught restraint above everything, because too much force in this school becomes erasure rather than release. Villages send for a trace-reader when a house starts whispering or a child goes missing in the woods, and lords send one after a thief who left no tracks; the same arts serve the thief. It is taught at the **House of Quiet Footfalls**, a school for thief-takers, scouts, and those who would rather not be seen, at the **Grey Lantern Mortuary**, where undertakers study lingering presences, among the **Veiled Steps**, a monastic order of mourning houses, by the **Echo Wardens**, wandering readers who hunt hauntings and the residue of bad workings, hired by villages that hear their dead at night, and at the **Dusk Archive**, whose scholars study remnants and memorial objects.

Trace work is the art of the space just behind things. A scout presses into a doorway's shadow and the patrol's eyes slide off her. A hunter crouches at a fork in a tunnel and feels, in the faint chill of displaced warmth, which way someone fled within the hour. A messenger crosses dry leaves without leaving a clear trail; a knife-fighter leaves behind her a fading copy of herself, so that her opponent strikes where she stood a heartbeat ago. A mourner-priest walks into a house and knows which chamber held the deathwatch. Thief-takers stand in a room where a murder was done and hear the last of a shouted name still pressed into the walls. In dim light, a death-reader sees where a vanished ritual circle once lay. And the school's gentlest work is release: an undertaker hushes a wailing hall so that last rites can be heard, and a frightened remnant clinging to a house is gently untied, so that the house stops whispering. The songs keep the shadow-thief who left a lord's treasury through the dusk with the crown under her cloak, and the mourner-priest who untied the dead of a lost battle one by one, and took a whole winter to do it.

Trace Magic attracts suspicion more readily than most, because it stands so near to death and to concealment. When it fails, it fails by **remnant adhesion and fade inversion**: ghostly residues

that stick to the living, contamination of the kind that gathers near the dead. Containment isolates the remnant and purges the bleed.

## Frozen Moment Magic

The **Frozen Moment** is the Harmonic of time, stasis, and permanence. **Frozen Moment Magic** holds that duration can be weighted, stretched, or arrested without breaking time. Its dominant energy is Aion, often supported by Terra, Memoria, and Umbra.

The school values control of pace over dramatic reversal. Its practitioners are conservators, guardians, vault-makers, duellists, and scholars of deterioration, and they do not seek to undo events: they seek to hold them, delay them, or keep them until the right moment. Even its boldest working of the kind reaches back only a few heartbeats, forcing a fresh wound towards the body's state just before it, before blood loss and shock have settled. The school is taught at the **Stillglass Conservatory**, a school of preservation and artefact suspension, at the **Vault of Slow Bells**, which specializes in fields of delay and protected storage, by ascetics of a winter cloister who use stasis for contemplation and endurance, at the **Hour-Locked Tower**, a war school whose time-adepts are hired by lords and sellsword captains to hold a breach or win a duel, and at the **Archive of Untarnished Things**, whose conservators preserve relics, documents, and bodies.

A Frozen Moment working is a held breath. Dust drifting over a collapsed archive slows to a hang in the air so that conservators can read where everything fell. Hunters lay a hand on a carcass and the meat keeps until camp. A diver reaches a sunken latch on one breath that lasts longer than it should. A duellist steals the rhythm from an enemy's front foot, and the lunge arrives a fraction late. A thief stops a needle trap at the instant before it fires and lifts it out. A soldier with a gut wound lives long enough to reach the surgeons because the wound has been made to wait. A surgeon's blade stays perfectly still through shaking fear. An archivist carrying a lamp through a sealed vault holds its flame down to almost nothing, still alight. At its greatest the school keeps relics in a stillness deeper than any ordinary preserving, and makes the work and wear inside a place lag behind the world outside it. The songs love its duellists, like the masked blade who killed three men before a dropped cup could reach the floor, and shook for a week after. Its vault-makers are loved less: their sealed rooms and time-locked chests hold some of the richest grave-goods in the old barrows, and delvers who crack one open say the danger is not the lock but the held moment when it breaks, when every blow it held lands at once and the arrow stopped in a doorway a lifetime ago still flies.

When it fails, it fails by **stasis pocket fracture**: zones of slowed time, brittle snaps where held time breaks, impacts that were delayed arriving all at once. Containment buffers the time and thaws it in stages, and villages wall up the pockets of slowed air such failures leave and tell their children not to play there.

## The Compound Schools

The other fifteen schools are blends. They are no less real for being compound; they are simply too wide for any single Harmonic to hold, and most of them stand where the deepest questions of ordinary life are asked: how to heal, how to grow, how to make, how to protect, and what may be done to the living and the dead.

### *Vital Magic*

**Vital Magic** braids Aqua, Imago, and Memoria to restore a living body in flow, form, and pattern at once, on the principle that healing is not merely sealing flesh; heal only one of the three and the patient survives badly or not at all. It joins compassion with clinical severity, and teaches that every healing is a negotiation with cost, compatibility, and consequence, and that there is no free restoration. A good Vital healer is worth more

than a company's horses, and is treated like it: sellsword captains pay one a full share, warlords carry them off as plunder from a sacked town, and a healer who travels alone is asking to be taken for ransom. Its great schools are the **College of White Vessels**, the most respected school of surgical and restorative magic, the research **Hall of Living Pattern**, the battlefield and plague-care **Red Mercy Hospices**, the quiet **Gardens of Returning Breath**, and the city **Anatomist Halls**. A lament is still sung for the surgeon who kept a besieged lord alive by spending her own strength, day after day, and died the morning the gates were opened.

A Vital healer closes a shallow spear cut by coaxing its edges back together; knits a noble's hand with so little scarring that its dexterity survives; makes a broken shin walkable days sooner than nature would; steadies the rhythm of a crushed soldier's heart until he reaches the hospice; and on a riverbank forces breath back into a drowned child, who coughs and lives. Venom is drawn out into a poultice that blackens as it fills. Blood lost in surgery is refilled from the healer's own reserve, from donors, or from stored compatible supply. The school's failure is **overcorrection and form mismatch**: tissue that grows wrong, healing that turns against the body, the road that leads, if forced again and again, to Failed Mending. Its containment is to stabilize the body before anyone tries again.

> *Close it, yes. But ask whether it remembers what it was before you close it, or you will make it something else.*
>
> — *The Book of Small Mendings*

## *Nature Magic*

**Nature Magic** blends Aqua, Terra, and Imago, and teaches that life is never solitary: every living thing grows among others that shelter it, feed it, choke it, and in the end eat it, and so control is a dangerous word. Its gardeners, grove-wardens, herbalists, druids, and the hedge-witches who keep a village's fields alive guide, encourage, redirect, and prune rather than command, and value patience, reciprocity, and long consequence. It is taught in the forest-bound **Green Cloisters**, the woodland **Root-Halls**, which send wardens to guard groves that loggers and raiders covet, the **Vine Conservatory** of rare and poisonous flora, the agricultural **Orchard Houses**, and the marsh school of the **Mossbound Archive**. A farmer wakes a seed in her palm to learn whether the grain survived the winter; a sacred orchard opens all its blossoms on the feast day; a warden halts poachers at a grove's edge with roots that close round their ankles; retreating villagers turn a lane into a bleeding choke-point of thorn. Bandits give the old groves a wide berth, and delvers cut their way into overgrown halls through thorn that was grown to keep someone out. When it fails, it fails by **growth overshoot and ecosystem imbalance**: invasive bloom, roots that strangle what they were meant to hold, soil exhausted overnight.

## *Morphic Magic*

**Morphic Magic**, Imago with Aqua and Terra and often Memoria or Verba, holds that most forms are negotiations, not absolutes. Bone can be lighter, skin harder; a body can learn to breathe in new conditions; a wall can become a doorway if its structure is persuaded to accept another arrangement. It draws healers, spies, scouts, beast-workers, sculptors, and the makers of horrors in roughly equal measure, and it is one of the most admired and most mistrusted disciplines in the world. It is taught at the **House of Second Shapes**, in surgical schools where its theory meets medicine, in rural hedge-circles known for beast-form rites, by the practical **Doorwright Guilds**, who reshape stone, wood, and walls, and whose skills thieves and besiegers pay twice the price for, and, infamously, at the **Glass Menagerie**, a house of extreme experiments in hybrid form, burned out by its neighbours more than once and rebuilt each time somewhere quieter. An agent becomes a dock clerk for one dangerous afternoon; a scout

becomes a fox to slip under siege debris; divers search a drowned shrine with gills; a blank wall opens into a narrow breathing tunnel for a prison break. Properly practised it saves lives and opens impossible paths; improperly, it leaves people who can no longer remember their original shape. A shape-worker is feared like a wolf in the fold, and every district has its tale: the miller's wife who came home from the hedge-rites with a hare's eyes. Those who stay too long in a beast's shape run with the beasts, and beast-hunters are paid to tell one from an ordinary wolf before the farm decides which it wants dead. Its failure is **uncontrolled transmutation drift**, unstable forms and incomplete returns, contained by anchoring the form and reversing it in stages.

### *Frost Magic*

**Frost Magic**, Aqua, Terra, and Aion with Umbra in support, treats cold as discipline made visible. Heat scatters, melts, and releases; frost binds, slows, preserves, and makes every weakness audible as a crack. In everyday life it stores food, eases travel, shapes ice-sculpture, and keeps people alive in hard weather; in war it is feared for turning motion itself into an enemy, and because it preserves as easily as it mutilates, a glacier temple and a torture cellar may rely on the same principles. It is taught in the northern war-colleges of the **Rime Bastions**, the contemplative **Glass Winter Cloister**, the **White Quarry**'s ice-architects and road-builders, the **Snow-Lantern Houses** of survival magic, and the feared fellowship of the **Pale Cutters**, who sell their frostcraft to lords for torture and execution. A messenger runs across rain-slick roof tiles on footholds of rime; refugees cross a chasm over a bridge that was not there a few breaths earlier; a retreating mage seals an alley with translucent blue ice. Its practitioners suffer cracking tissue, numbness, and slowed circulation, and it fails by **brittleness surge and cold-lock fracture**, contained by careful warming that guards against shock. Northern hall-songs keep the frost-knight who held a mountain pass through a whole winter night behind walls of ice and his own blood, and delvers who crack the old blue-iced crypts for their grave-goods know that the thaw, not the ice, is what kills.

### *Storm Magic*

**Storm Magic**, Ignis with Zephyr and Aqua, is the school of unstable convergence: great force arises when several tensions are held just long enough to break together. It draws battlefield mages, shipwardens, weather-priests, and reckless prodigies, prizes nerve and timing, and is infamous for backlash, because its power lies in controlled imbalance. It is taught in tower schools built at storm-prone heights, aboard the sea-trained **Fleet of Black Pennants**, who sell their storms to whichever fleet pays, pirate or prince, at the severe **Hall of Charged Breath**, in **Monsoon Halls** that convene only in the violent rains, and among the **Thunder Priories**, which treat storms as divine trials. Sailors reef their lines because the air smells of a storm still below the horizon; a drought shrine coaxes enough cloud to save a planted terrace; harbour chains crackle and become untouchable as invaders climb them. Its practitioners shake, suffer irregular hearts, and carry burns from charge in hair and skin, and it fails by **charge harmonics collapse**, lightning chaining from body to body, contained by grounding and by breaking every conducting line. Fleets and warlords pay for storm-callers, and everyone else fears them; the coasts sing of the sea-witch who called the storm down on a raiding fleet and went under with it.

### *Forge Magic*

**Forge Magic**, Ignis with Terra and Verba, holds that matter can be taught: heat opens it, structure supports it, and definition gives it lasting purpose. Its practitioners see enchantment not as decoration but as a purpose hammered into a made thing so that it stays, and they value workmanship, repeatability, and respect for their material, aiming at tools, arms, seals, devices, and artefacts that

survive use. It is taught at the **Nine Hammer Forges**, where smithcraft and magic are inseparable, the city **Brass Collegium**, where the ward-lamps, lock-charms, and gate-bars of half the walled towns around it are made, the practical **Ember Anvil Guild**, who sell to any sellsword company that pays in coin, the **Runefire Workshops** of inscribed and triggered objects, among them the tomb-traps that delvers curse, and the secretive **Deep Kiln Vaults** of relic-making. It is the magic most people own a piece of, and the one most often looted: barrows and fallen holds are full of blades that still keep their edge, lamps that still light at dusk, and doors whose old trigger sigils still spit fire at the wrong hand. A field smith brings a dented breastplate to working heat without a furnace; a single master's blow does the work of three; a blade's edge is quenched while its spine stays soft; a tainted melt is cleansed before a whole batch is lost. Its failure is the most patient of all, **matrix brittleness and enchantment fracture**: hidden breaking-points, made things that fail long after they leave the forge, which is why its containment is to quarantine the object and test it under stress. Smiths still tell of the widow who tempered her husband's sword for his killer as a gift of peace, and the blade that broke in his hand at the ford.

### *Warding*

**Warding**, Terra with Verba and Lux, is the school of saying no with structure. It exists wherever a community needs to keep danger out, contain what must not spread, or define where safety begins, and its architects, temple guardians, siege engineers, tomb-protectors, and household protectors think like besiegers: where a ward is thin, what it was told to keep out, and where it will break first. It is taught at the fortress-school of the **Bastion Seminary**, the domestic and urban **House of Thresholds**, the **Sanctum Engineers' Guild**, hired builders of warded keeps and vaults paid in gold by whoever expects a siege, the temple-trained **White Door Abbey**, and the **Vaultward Archive** of relics, prisons, and dangerous repositories. A plague house is marked at its threshold before stronger quarantine is laid; grain stores stay free of rats through a whole winter; a lantern knocked over in a library goes out at a line on the floor instead of becoming a blaze; only monks carrying the right prayer token may pass into the archive. Ward-craft matters beyond its schools: in the Roothollows, the survival and warding orders of the Gloamroot Covenant hold much of that people's defence and its strength. Wards are also what stands between a delver and the treasure. Elder ruins still keep wards laid generations ago, and a delver's first lessons are ward-chalk, a long pole, and patience; raiders pay ward-breakers well, and a keep whose wardstones are spent is a keep about to fall. A failed ward suffers **threshold inversion**, trapping the allies it was meant to shelter and admitting what it should exclude, and is contained by releasing its keys under control and resetting the perimeter.

### *Lightweaving*

**Lightweaving**, Lux with Imago and Verba, treats perception as something that can be composed. Its practitioners think like heralds, painters, players, priests who stage a rite, and the illusionists of a great lord's hall; they care less for private dream-logic than for shared visible meaning, and they do not merely fool the eye but build an experience the watcher can inhabit. It is taught at the **Prism Conservatory**, the **Hall of Mirrors and Banners**, kept by great houses for ceremonial illusion and the art of looking stronger than you are, the **Radiant Workshops** of festival spectacle and the battlefield tricks that sellsword captains pay for, the **Lantern Opera**, and the **Glass Scriptoria** of projected signs and doctrinal images. A watchtower writes a glowing instruction down the length of a wall; healers mark in light the wounded who must be carried first; a company's banner hangs bright above it through the smoke so that reinforcements know their friends; a small force shows a ridge full of marching torches at night. Heralds still

boast of the one who made a half-starved hold look like a garrisoned town for three nights until the relief came. When it fails, it fails by **projection drift and facade lock**: false scenes that persist, identities misread, contained by dispelling the image and establishing sight-lines that can be trusted; villages avoid a mill where a dead light-weaver's feast still glows in the windows at dusk.

### *Conjuration*

**Conjuration**, Verba with Zephyr and Imago and often Terra or Lux, is the art of making presence answer. A conjurer names what is wanted, opens a path for its arrival, and imposes enough pattern that the called thing appears in usable form: a real object summoned from elsewhere, nearby material gathered into a temporary construct, or an energy-shape held together long enough to serve. Calling a thing from elsewhere usually means taking it from someone, so a serious conjurer learns whose goods may be called as carefully as the magic, because a lord or a wronged neighbour will make them pay for a mistake. It is taught at the cosmopolitan **Open Hand Conservatory**, in transit towers in the great trade cities, at the distrusted **Hall of Borrowed Forms**, where more than one failure has walked out of the door on its own, by the travelling **Rope Colleges** of scaffold, bridge, and shelter, and in the **White Circle Halls**, where lords and temples send when they want stolen goods called back or a thief's hidden loot dragged into the light. An engineer under fire calls her own repair hammer back from the wagon; a caravan mage sweeps roadside gravel up into a chest-high shield; miners draw seep-water out of a collapsed shaft with three slow, floating bearers; a lord sends a sealed message across the city as a bird of folded light. Hedge-conjurers ride with sell-sword companies to throw bridges and pull wounded men out of the line, and every infirmary has the tale of the conjurer who walked a whole infirmary out through a gate cut in the chapel wall while the town burned behind them. Bad conjuration does not fail gracefully. It arrives malformed, or hungry, or attached to something the caster did not intend, and a village that has seen one of the ill-called wants the conjurer gone; and its signature is **anchor slip and construct dispersion**: things dropped, manifestations that waver, objects that arrive in the wrong place.

### *Augury*

**Augury Magic**, Lux with Aion and Memoria and often Umbra or Verba, treats the future as a field of pressure rather than a fixed script: signs gather round likely outcomes, choices cast shadows ahead of themselves, and great intentions and disasters can be felt before they arrive. The art lies in reading those pressures without mistaking desire for certainty. Because augury tempts rulers, warlords, merchants, and the frightened, it has a long history of abuse; some augurs only advise, and others steer a lord by dressing a likely future up as destiny, and more than one war began because a seer swore it would be won. Villages fear the augur who reads death: when one stops at a door, the house starts counting its sick. It is taught at a glass-roofed hilltop observatory of celestial augury, by the itinerant **Forked Mantle Houses** of road-omens and battle-timing, who hire out to caravan masters and sellsword captains, at the temple-college of the **Lantern of Seventh Dawn**, among the merchant augurs of the **Ledger of Tides**, and in the secretive **Veiled Choir**, which studies the futures people are afraid to ask about. A caravan master watches a prepared candle flame gutter and steady to learn whether leaving before dusk lessens the chance of ambush; border guards know which pass will see blood by sunset because the crows have already chosen it; a warehouse district sleeps under bells keyed to ring on the probable nights of arson. A lord's augurs wear a veiling working before they read famine signs, so that they do not become useless with dread. Its failure is **forecast echo entrapment**: obsessive looping and misfired timing, contained by cutting off the foresight and grounding the augur in the present.

### *Dominion Magic*

**Dominion Magic**, Verba with Imago and Lux and often Umbra or Aqua, rests on a brutal premise: if language can define reality, then language, image, and pressure can define behaviour. Its mages study authority, compliance, fear, the breaking of a self, and the ways a mind comes to take a command for its own. Some peoples teach limited dominion openly for battlefield control, order in a lord's hall, guarding captives, or breaking up a crowd; others ban most of it as a direct attack on personhood; even where it is tolerated it rarely escapes suspicion, because its cleanest techniques are still coercive by design. Most people meet it from the wrong end: a warlord's voice that turns a frightened levy into a charge, a cult preacher whose flock will not go home, a lord's questioner in a cellar. Villages drive out a suspected will-breaker faster than a thief, and sellsword captains will not hire one, because no one can tell afterwards whose orders the company followed. It is taught at the **Brass Hall**, a royal academy that trains a king's captains, gaolers, and questioners, the elite **Mirror Colleges**, the secretive **Pale Choir Houses** of obedience cults, more than one of which has burned with its converts' kin outside holding the torches, in wardens' barracks, and in the barely tolerated **Quiet Halls** where nobles and spymasters hire will-breakers. A guard snaps a word and the knife hits the floor before the suspect has decided to drop it; a hostage looks calm and willing while the negotiations go on; a tense food line becomes a chanting march within three sentences. Its practitioners suffer damaged empathy, intrusive thoughts, and the fracturing of their own boundaries, and it fails by **command reflection and will backlash**, coercion that ricochets onto the caster, contained by breaking the hold of the command and restoring consent. Children play at the shepherd-girl who stayed on her feet when the whole square knelt.

### *Blood Magic*

**Blood Magic**, Aqua with Imago and Aion, is one of the most feared and misunderstood schools, because it treats lineage and vitality as usable structures rather than sacred untouchables. Its most disciplined practitioners insist that blood is power not by superstition but by biology, memory carried through time, and inherited compatibility, and even responsible use is dangerous: every transfer leaves a mark, every borrowed reserve comes due, and every lineage-working risks consequences beyond the present. Blood mages are dreaded for what they can do with so little: a bloody rag left behind after a brawl is enough for some workings to find you again. Sellsword companies pay well for a vein-healer who keeps men standing through a battle, and pay again when those men wake years older. It is taught by the secretive **Crimson Ledger**, concerned with lineage custom and inherited compatibility, the battlefield **Vein Houses**, whose students follow sellsword companies from war to war, the **Red Chapel**, which permits closely supervised sacrificial healing, a hematists' hall in an old surgical school, and the **Kin-Table Circles**, family traditions that guard their techniques within their lines. A mother finds her child in a burning manor by a pulse of shared blood; a medic tightens a scout's torn vessels and buys him the time to reach surgery; a veteran lends his strength to a comrade through a thread of blood during a retreat; claimants to a house's seal are tested for the blood before it passes to them. Besieged towns still name the healer who bled herself white to keep the defenders on their feet until the relief came, and was buried before the feast. Its failure is **lineage resonance backlash**, stress running through inherited pattern and draining the vital reserves of everyone it touches, contained by halting the transfer safely and triaging.

### *Sacrificial Magic*

**Sacrificial Magic**, Aqua with Imago, Verba, and Ignis and often Aion, is built around exchange under pressure. Where other schools spread cost across place, preparation, technique, and time, sacrificial practice collapses it into one question: what are you willing to spend right now? The answer can be blood, pain, breath, memory, years of life, treasured objects, sworn service, or living beings, and so the school's reputation varies more wildly than any other. Some temples allow only willing offerings; some warbands permit a soldier to bleed for a working on the battlefield but kill anyone who sacrifices a captive; some cults reject every restraint. Of all the schools it is the one whispered about at the well: a missing child near the dark of the moon, a stranger who buys a lamb and asks no price, ash and old blood on a hillstone, and the torches come out. It is taught in the temple colleges of the **Red Altars**, which keep their rites to an old rule, the offering freely given before the whole community, in the war-chapels of the **Ember Vows**, where sellswords and garrison knights learn wound-fuelled battle magic, at the severe **House of Ash Debt**, and in hiding by the hunted **Hollow Counting Houses** and the **Knife Choirs**, whom temple hunters and bounty-takers track from cellar to cellar. A cornered mage opens a palm and a failing ward flares to twice its strength for a few desperate heartbeats; village defenders cut their thumbs into one basin to raise the flood-bank before the river breaks; an old war-saint spends the rest of his good years in a single dawn to hold a bridge. The songs keep the shepherd-girl who burned years of her life to hold a ward across the pass until the raiders turned back, and the sellsword captain who swore his whole company into a debt for one night's victory, whose men's grandchildren are paying it still. Its practitioners grow used to pain, corrode morally, and are depleted in body, and it fails by **debt spike and extraction overshoot**: rapid depletion and a cascade of collapse, contained only by stopping at once and isolating the debt.

### *Necromancy*

**Necromancy**, Umbra with Memoria and Aion and often Aqua, begins from a simple claim: death changes a being but does not erase all its structure at once. Bodies remain; habits remain; trace-patterns remain; obligations remain. Necromancers study what persists and what can still be guided, preserved, questioned, or put to use after life has ended, and all of it without souls, which the world does not have. In some lands necromancy is a sacred funerary art, in others a way to work the dead or a last resort on the battlefield, and elsewhere a hanging crime; the school is morally unstable rather than inherently profane, and the difference usually lies in consent, in the treatment of remains, and in whether a working keeps dignity or strips it away. It is taught in the city **Sepulchral Colleges**, in ash monasteries devoted to proper death rites, in the **Black Tally Halls**, town halls of the dead that train corpse-namers, battlefield dead-counters, and the necromancers a lord sends after a murderer, in the river-temples of the **Quiet Harbours**, where the drowned are recovered, named, and questioned before burial, and among the **Bonewright Guilds**, which teach corpse-labour done with a lord's or a temple's leave, ossuary building, and the keeping of graveyards against thieves and the restless dead. What villages fear is plainer: a stranger who lingers by the graveyard after a battle, a fresh grave found open, a corpse that does not stiffen, and someone runs for the priest and the rope. A temple necromancer stills a crypt where hasty battlefield burials have begun to scrape at their slabs; a field mortician makes a fallen captain whole so the family can see him before burial; a clan calls an ancestor into a prepared chair to end a quarrel over a boundary stone; plague workers send a walking bier-servant into the trench with the infected dead so that no living hand must carry them. Its practitioners grow fascinated by death and lose their sense of smell and touch, and it fails by **remnant agitation and corpse-command collapse**, contamination and hostile remnants, contained by a

funerary seal and a cordon. Ford-villages still tell of the gravecaller who raised the dead of a lost fight to bar a ford for a few breaths while the living fled.

### *Sanctified Magic*

**Sanctified Magic**, Lux with Verba, Aqua, and Terra and often Umbra, treats magic as covenant made practical: a blessing is an alignment of body, place, and purpose; a consecrated field is a promise kept by force of light; a consecrated blow is judgement delivered through a weapon that has agreed to mean more than metal. It is the nearest thing to what many cultures call holy magic, though it can be learned outside the clergy, and its users are priests and war-priests, knights sworn to a god, hospital orders, shrine-keepers, exorcists, and city templars. Some rely mostly on their own training; others act as conduits, for the current of a Prime reached through alignment, or for a Resonant willing to supply power and steadiness. It is taught in the knightly **Radiant Chapterhouses**, the temple hospitals of the **Houses of Mercy**, the fortified **Choir Bastions**, the **Halls of Consecration**, temple houses fed by the towns whose word decides who may keep a shrine, drive out spirits, or ward an oath, and who send hunters after those who do it without them, and the pilgrim schools of the **Lantern Altars**. A priest marks the defenders before dawn and their line holds where it should have broken; refugees pass around a consecrated child that none of the soldiers can bear to strike first; after a battle the wounded kneel in rows while a priest walks among them praying, and they mend. Its practitioners burn out in devotion, scar around their vows, and collapse after miracles that reached too far, and it fails by **vow overload and consecration burn**, a crash of devotion and a backlash of light, contained by discharging the vow and easing the liturgy down. When no patron answers, the whole cost falls on the priest, and villages have watched one fall grey and shaking at the end of a single exorcism. The songs keep the hermit who walked into a haunted fen with a lantern and a bell and laid its dead, whose bell is now carried as a relic.

## The Common Spells

The common spells are the workings a school's teachers name most often: the ones an apprentice is drilled in, a temple or a hospice writes down, and an ordinary household is most likely to meet. They show how each school's magic looks, sounds, and feels when it is worked, and they are not the whole of any art: a spell is only a working that recurs often enough to deserve a name, and the art reaches as far as its laws allow, not as far as its lists.

A school's spells carry its root. Every spell of a Harmonic school draws on that one Harmonic and its dominant Prime, so that all the Crucible's spells move heat and all the Path's lean on the branching of the possible; the spells of a compound school draw on its blend, some leaning on one of its energies more than the others. The access bands are graded for a school, not for a single spell, so a people for whom a school is Severe meets danger even in the small ones. People who are not scholars describe a working rather than name it.

### *Crucible Magic*

Crucible spells feed on ambient heat, fuel, and the caster's own reserves; the larger ones draw on fire, furnaces, or stored heat.

- **Sparktouch.** A tap of the fingertip and tinder, oil, or a wick takes flame, as when a scout lights a lamp in a windless ruin without flint. It does poorly on wet fuel.
- **Coalwake.** A palm held over fading coals gathers their last heat until they redden into a cooking fire again; fuel that is fully cold or spent stays dead.

- **Heat Draw.** An open hand pulls warmth out of the stones and air around it and gathers it at one point, often to arm a later working; overdone, it frosts nearby surfaces and can injure flesh.
- **Kindle Thread.** A finger traces a line, and ignition crawls along oil, pitch, rope, or a marked surface, so sappers can light several fuses from one hidden point. A damp gap breaks it.
- **Fire Dart.** A pointed hand snaps out a small bolt of flame, quick enough to break a duellist's concentration; heavy rain and strong fire wards weaken it.
- **Cinder Spray.** A fanned hand throws a short arc of stinging, burning fragments that blind and set loose material alight, enough to clear a ladder top. It endangers allies and does little against plate.
- **Searing Brand.** A touched sigil burns into flesh, wood, or metal and stays as a mark, as a beast-hunter sears her mark into the flank of the man-eater thrashing in her snare, so the next village will know it. Only simple sigils take without a ritual.
- **Ashen Blind.** A burst from the hand fills the air with hot ash and soot that sting the eyes and hide a retreat for a few heartbeats; wind outdoors tears it away.
- **Flame Lash.** Fire shaped into a flexible whip cracks out from the arm or a rod, keeping raiders from a threshold; it is hard to hold in close rooms and water breaks it.
- **Flash Flare.** A palm bursts with heat and light that blinds, signals, or exposes ambushers in a dark alley mouth. Closed eyes, helms, and turned backs blunt it.
- **Ember Step.** The caster crosses a short gap in a shower of sparks and heated momentum, slipping past a shield line; it is not a true leap through space and fails across blocked or warded ground.
- **Boiler Breath.** A drawn breath comes out as a cone of scalding vapour that drives boarders back from a hatch. It strains the caster, and damaged lungs make it dangerous.
- **Smelter's Hand.** A gloved touch softens metal enough to bend or wrench, as when trapped captives heat iron bars and pull them aside. It cannot make a poor alloy good.
- **Temper Weapon.** A hammer-and-heat working at the anvil, or a quick field temper, toughens a blade or tool edge, lastingly when properly finished; bad metal still limits it.
- **Furnace Skin.** The caster's body gives off punishing radiant heat that blisters anyone who grapples close. It exhausts quickly and can burn allies in close order.
- **Soot Ward.** Smoke thickens, clings, and lingers where the caster shapes it, until an escape route vanishes behind a curtain of black soot; strong wind tears it apart.
- **Burnout Pulse.** A compress-and-release gesture overfeeds a weak flame so that it gutters and dies, putting out a row of lamps in a breath. Strong fires flare up first.
- **Pyre Circle.** A sweep of the hand raises a disciplined ring of fire that blocks advance or hallows a burning-place, as priests do around plague dead before purification. It needs room and dry ground.
- **Magma Vein.** A long invocation forces deep heat up through faults and seams in a sudden line of eruption across a pass. It is extremely dangerous and works only where deep heat already lies.
- **Kiln Seal.** A touch drawn along a seam fuses clay, glass, ceramic, or stone into a hard, lasting closure, as barrow-robbers fuse shut the looted relic jars before the long road home. It is poor on organic matter and moving surfaces.
- **Scorch Line.** A forward stroke burns a lane of fire across the ground that cuts off a stairwell or forces movement; broken ground interrupts it.

- **Ignition Cage.** Two hands close bars, arcs, or panels of flame around a target, as hunters on the Wrongwood's burned ground box in a wrong-born beast until spears can finish it and the pyre is built. Agile targets may get out before it closes.
- **Cauterize.** Controlled heat held against a wound seals bleeding when pressure fails, long enough for real healing to follow. It is painful, scars badly, and does little for deep internal bleeding.
- **Glassflash.** A heat burst through scattered sand or dust fuses it into blinding flashes and shards, a desert fighter's answer to cavalry; it needs mineral dust and is dangerous in wind.
- **Fever Cast.** Heat driven into a living body brings flush, weakness, delirium, or a climbing fever, dropping a guard into a sweating collapse without open flame. Healers can counter it if they catch it early.
- **Forge Pulse.** A palm on metal sends a measured heat wave through it that reveals hidden cracks or softens joints, so an armourer can check a breastplate before battle. It is poor on living tissue.
- **Inferno Mantle.** Fire masses orbit the caster or flow around her in arcs, a crown of circling flame for attack and defence; rain, close interiors, and exhaustion cut it short.
- **Blast Furnace.** A pocket of intensified working heat lets smiths run a field forge at full heat far from any works. It must be fed by fuel, ambient heat, or another draw.
- **Phoenix Surge.** Great reserves are spent for one last burst of casting after the caster seems exhausted, leaving her drained, shaking, or dangerously overheated.
- **Ashfall Veil.** Hot ash rains over a street or courtyard, turning it into a choking grey curtain that stings exposed skin and sows panic; weather disperses it and sealed armour resists it.
- **Controlled Detonation.** Stored heat or pressure is released in a blast of chosen size, enough to bring down one gate tower without shattering the wall. Misjudged geometry brings friendly harm and collapse.
- **Purging Flame.** Purifying fire held by touch, or a long temple rite, burns disease, rot, or corruption out of flesh or matter at serious cost; if the impurity cannot be cleanly separated, it kills the patient or destroys the object.
- **Hurled Bloom.** A hurled sphere of compressed heat blooms into one broad orange detonation above a gate trench. Tight spaces endanger the caster's own side.
- **Rolling Ember.** A rolling ball of dense, sun-hot fire is steered down a bridge approach or through ranks; rain, deep water, and fire wards wear it down fast.
- **Burning Palisade.** A continuous wall of roaring flame rises across an avenue and punishes anyone who crosses. Strong wind bends it, and prepared heat shields can breach it.
- **Swelling Core.** An unstable core of fire is held and grows hotter until it is thrown or triggered, as a battlemage lets the charge swell behind the parapet and lobs it into the siege-ram crew; holding it too long is a classic way to die young and embarrassingly.
- **Sunfall.** A major battle working, held for many heartbeats or worked as a war rite, rains blazing masses into a valley mouth like falling suns, as a war-mage breaks a monster charge, and leaves fires behind. It is overkill in confined places and memorable for all the wrong reasons.

### *Surging Magic*

Surging spells feed on nearby water, moisture, the body's own flow, and the caster's reserves; healing and cleansing workings often spend or redirect lifeforce as well.

- **Cupfill.** A hand on an empty vessel draws clean water into it from mist, dew, or a nearby stream, as a traveller fills flasks before a hard climb. It cannot make water where there is none, and poisoned sources serve poorly.
- **Mist Veil.** An open hand lifts a screen of vapour that hides sight, softens light, or cools the air, enough to hide a river crossing from archers on the far bank; strong wind tears it apart.
- **Current Pull.** A sweeping draw drags a body or object along the water's flow, or makes a short pull of its own, so a rescuer can haul a drowning child to the boat without going in. Strong anchors and rough ground resist it.
- **Water Needle.** A pointed finger fires a narrow, hard jet that stings, cuts, or punctures, as when dock wardens sever a burning ship's rope line. It needs water to hand and weakens over distance.
- **Foam Shield.** Two churning hands raise dense, cushioning foam that softens falls and slows arrows, letting flood crews leap from a collapsing quay. Sustained heat or slicing pressure collapses it quickly.
- **River Step.** A stepping rhythm briefly stiffens the water underfoot, so a messenger outruns the bandits by crossing a flooded ford they dare not ride; it fails in deep, violent surf or under heavy armour.
- **Drown Whisper.** A whispered hush lays a damp, liquid quiet over a room or lane that swallows voices and footsteps, as assassins use to cross a cistern hall. Hard consonants and clanging metal still carry somewhat.
- **Purge Poison.** A touch following the pulse restores the body's flow and drives toxins out through sweat, vomiting, or bleeding, as a field healer forces venom from a bitten scout. It does less against magical curses.
- **Cleanse Wound.** A hand held over the injury washes dirt, rot, and contamination out of the flesh, clearing mud and splinters from a spear wound before deeper care; it neither seals the wound nor restores lost tissue.
- **Thread the Vein.** A touch that follows the pulse, sometimes guided along a fine needle or thread, reopens blocked circulation so blood returns to a crushed limb. It is dangerous where internal bleeding runs unchecked.
- **Blood Quiet.** Pressure on the right points calms the flow and tightens the vessels, slowing dangerous bleeding enough to keep a wounded captain alive on the way to a hospice; a fully severed major vessel needs more help.
- **Draw Thirst.** An open bowl or a palm raised to the air gathers dampness towards the caster, as explorers coax enough condensation from cave air to wet cracked lips. Dry cold and true desert noon defeat it.
- **Salt Ward.** A blessed circle of salt sets a cleansing boundary that keeps rot, vermin, and lesser corruption from stores, bodies, and preserved goods, as ships' surgeons guard medicines on humid voyages. Strong magical corruption ignores it.
- **Brine Lash.** A whipping arm strikes with salt water that stings eyes, wounds, and bare skin far worse than fresh, driving smugglers off a wet gangplank. It does little against sealed armour or constructs.
- **Tide Pull.** A sidelong draw throws a moving foe off balance like a sudden side current, as a duellist yanks an attacker off line just before the lunge; rooted or very heavy targets resist it well.
- **Undertow Grip.** A downward draw drags at feet and ankles as if a hidden current had caught them, so marsh-folk drag a raiding party knee-deep into the mire before the first blow is struck. It is weak on dry, rocky ground without moisture or soft earth.

- **Siphon Fever.** A touch beside a water reservoir bleeds excess heat out of a body, as a plague healer draws burning fever into bowls that steam beside the bed. It can overcool, especially children and the weak.
- **Flow Sense.** A hand over the source reads hidden movement in rivers, blood, pipes, or drains, so the well-keepers of a besieged town find where the enemy has dammed the spring channel without digging up the whole line. Still water and stagnant tissue give weak readings.
- **Surge Mend.** A directed touch speeds early closure and knits shallow injuries, fast enough for frontline healers to keep soldiers standing; it is not enough for shattered bone, missing flesh, or deep organ damage.
- **Floodgate.** A trigger phrase or released hand looses a sudden burst from a vessel, warded cistern, or gathered store, as defenders blast a stairwell clear from rooftop tanks. Without preparation it has little to release.
- **Breath of the Deep.** A touch to the chest eases panic and stretches each breath, letting divers reach a sunken lock without surfacing. It grants no lasting gills and fails if the subject is already drowning.
- **Current Cage.** Encircling hands bind a target in rotating bands of water that hobble movement, as guards hold a fire-wielder until proper shackles arrive; it needs enough water, or a strong ley-fed caster, to keep its shape.
- **Wash Memory.** A touch to brow and pulse lets the mind's fresh turmoil drain away without erasing what was seen, so a child who witnessed a massacre can breathe and speak. Repeated use can blunt needed grief or the sharpness of what was seen.
- **Mirror Pool.** A gaze into still water shows a nearby person, place, or linked scene, as temple watch checks a downstream shrine in its font. Rippling water, lying surfaces, and poor sympathetic links distort the image.
- **Scour Channel.** A directed flush drives water hard through a wound, pipe, or conduit to clear it, as a healer flushes infected matter from a puncture before sealing it. Misjudged force can tear fragile channels.
- **Lifebalance.** Hands linked in a circle share out the vitality left among several wounded, so after an ambush a healer keeps three wounded scouts alive and none collapses while another holds a reserve. It creates no vitality and can dangerously weaken the healthiest.
- **Red Tide.** Blood-rich fluid, drawn from battlefield runoff or living bodies, is turned into brutal blows and terror, as a desperate war-mage makes a slaughtered ford into a weapon. It is often taboo, dangerous, and weak where no blood is at hand.
- **Aqua Reliquary.** A chanted blessing stores healing charge or cleansing flow in prepared water for later use, and delvers pay a hospice's price for such vials before going under the hill, where no healer will follow. The charge leaks over time and spoils in an impure vessel.
- **Tidal Burst.** A centred burst throws a ring of water pressure outward that sweeps foes away, clearing boarders from a dock edge in one surge; it works best near water and is dangerous on narrow ledges.
- **Mercy Drain.** A touch passes the caster's own life into someone dying, as a temple medic keeps a child alive through the night by giving away months of her strength. Repeated use kills healers, and works poorly across species.
- **Wavetread.** A step blessing spreads a supporting flow under the feet so water yields yet holds, letting a shrine guard run across a harbour mouth to a burning ferry. Violent surf, whirlpools, and broken ice make it far less safe than it sounds.
- **Shorebreaker.** A great tide chant or long coastal rite drives an overwhelming wall of water against a shore, fleet, or river town, enough, sailors say, to have erased a harbour

kingdom nobody can place on any coast, when the temple it besieged answered with the sea itself. It demands immense water, preparation, and indifference to the devastation.

### *Backbone Magic*

Backbone spells draw on the structural mass of stone, earth, and built surfaces, with the caster supplying alignment and making up any shortfall from her own reserves.

- **Stone Grip.** A stamp or a palm to the ground packs loose footing into firm, unslipping footing, so a defender can brace on a slick parapet before the ram strikes. It does poorly on ice, polished metal, wagons, or bog.
- **Brace Beam.** A touch and a spoken brace spread the strain through a failing beam, pillar, or frame, holding a mine roof up long enough to drag out the men caught when brace-gnawers hollowed the props; it cannot save material already shattered or rotten through.
- **Wall Stitch.** Fingers or a tool traced along a seam knit cracked stone, brick, or packed earth back into one load-bearing line, as a town mason stitches the breach the raiders' ram opened before they come back at dawn. Mismatched materials and large gaps weaken it.
- **Foundation Sense.** A palm on stone listens to how the mass carries its load and finds strain, voids, and hidden settling, as a delver's mage hears the hollow under a ruin's floor before anyone steps onto it. Strong magical interference and moving machinery muddy the reading.
- **Anchor Mark.** A spoken mark with a touch, or an inscribed sigil, binds an object to the surface beneath it against sliding or tipping, securing a loaded wagon in a mountain crosswind. It is weak on anything airborne or resting on loose debris.
- **Gravel Shot.** A sweeping hand flings a close fan of grit and stone fragments, enough to drive lightly armoured intruders back down a narrow shaft; it needs gravel or rubble to hand unless loaded beforehand.
- **Earth Buckler.** A raised forearm pulls loose earth and rubble into a curved shield that takes blows and missiles, as a field engineer blocks the first volley before a rampart rises. Bare polished floors and ship decks give it little to work with.
- **Load Bearer.** A spoken balancing charge spreads weight across a structure's supports so no one point takes too much, keeping an overloaded bridge from snapping during an evacuation. It cannot make support where none exists.
- **Bone Set.** Pressure guided by touch draws broken or displaced bone back into place so that healing, such as Vital Magic, can safely follow. It is painful and poor on shattered bone without a surgeon's help.
- **Pillar Rise.** A pointing hand drawn upward thrusts a column of earth or stone from the ground, giving support, an obstacle, or a firing perch above a broken gatehouse; it is weak in loose sand or on floors with no ground beneath.
- **Seam Lock.** A touch along a fitted join presses it tighter against splitting and prying, used on doors, armour seams, and fitted stone, as hold-folk close the passage the thieves came in by until no tool can find purchase. It does not mend badly misaligned joins.
- **Weight Sink.** A directed palm binds a foe more heavily to the ground, so a shield-bearer can drag a charging enemy off balance before the clash. It is weak on anything flying or held off the ground.
- **Rampart Line.** A sweeping line gesture or a staff traced across the field throws up a low ridge of earth or rubble for cover, as sappers

raise a defensive lip before archers reposition; it suits open ground better than paved interiors.

- **Iron Posture.** A disciplined breath and stance stiffen and root the caster's frame against shock, recoil, and being thrown back, letting a gate guardian hold against a battering surge. Overuse can lock joints or worsen old injuries.
- **Keystone Ward.** A touch to the keystone or lintel, or an inscribed sigil, reinforces the load of an arch, gate, or doorway, as a temple entrance stands through tremors once its ward is reawakened. It does little if the walls themselves are failing.
- **Cage of Earth.** Two enclosing hands close stone, packed dirt, or rubble around a target, trapping a fleeing horse-thief waist-deep before the alley mouth. It is dangerous in unstable caves and weak against escapes that bypass space.
- **Quarry Hand.** A touch traces a fracture line and the stone parts cleanly along it, letting a stonewright lift a usable slab from bedrock whole; it fails in chaotic stress fields and irregularly faulted crystal.
- **Bulwark Mantle.** A binding stance wraps the caster in dense force like an invisible shell of overlapping plate, as a breach-warden walks through arrow fire to rebar a gate. It slows movement and drains endurance fast under repeated blows.
- **Rooted Stance.** A set of the feet and a held breath anchor the body into the ground against pushes and throws, as a duellist holds the centre of a bridge; it helps little if the ground itself moves or collapses.
- **Burial Seal.** A seal spoken over a closed threshold, or a long mortuary rite, shuts a tomb or vault with heavy finality, as grave-keepers seal a plague vault after last rites, and the village prays no grave-robber ever breaks it and wakes what lies beneath. It must not be used on spaces that still need air or living access.
- **Mass Transfer.** A touch on two objects shifts felt weight from one to the other, so engineers can take the load off a snapped axle long enough to mend it. It is dangerous if the receiving structure cannot bear the burden.
- **Fault Break.** A touched trigger or prepared sigil sets off a controlled fracture at a known weak point, letting sappers bring down one tower stair rather than the whole wall; a misread fault line brings uncontrolled collapse.
- **Siege Brace.** A spoken reinforcement over a wall section spreads each heavy impact through a wider mass, so a fortress weathers a few more ram blows while reserves move up. It buys time, not endless durability.
- **Stone Memory.** A palm on worked stone reads its old fractures, carvings, and pressures, as a delver learns where a hidden doorway was walled up two generations ago, and how hurriedly. Fire, magical rewriting, and heavy erosion blur the record.
- **Grasping Ground.** A gesture at the ground makes soil and stone rise and clench around ankles and legs, pinning a burglar in a courtyard short of the wall; polished floors, deep water, and airborne targets defeat it.
- **Avalanche Call.** A long-armed release, guided by reading the terrain, drives an unstable slope down from a chosen point, as mountain defenders bury a pursuing warband in snow and scree. It needs unstable mass already there and is highly dangerous to allies.
- **Sanctum Core.** A planted core stone and a spoken anchor set a lasting foundation for later wards and shelters, as colonists prepare the central stone of a refuge before winter. It is slow, costly, and poor on temporary or unstable sites.
- **Bastion Shell.** A sweeping gesture layers earth-force into a shared shell around several allies, letting a retreating patrol cross open ground under a volley. Large moving groups strain it quickly, and it is open to attack from below.

- **Breachstone.** A barrier of solid stone heaves up from earth, bedrock, or prepared stone, closing a breach in a curtain wall beneath an enemy ladder team. It needs real structure to draw on, or a large reserve in its place.
- **Stone Spikes.** A thrust at the ground drives jagged teeth of stone up through a chosen patch, turning a cavalry lane into a field of sudden fangs; loose sand and timber floors resist clean shapes.
- **Bedrock Shudder.** A major working or deep fault rite releases a violent tremor that shakes foundations and brings standing walls down, as one forbidden quake topples a fortress moat wall. It is catastrophically indiscriminate and rarely tolerated outside open war or the bringing down of a ruin.

### *Gale Magic*

Gale spells feed on moving air, breath control, differences in pressure, and the caster's reserves; still air makes the larger workings costlier.

- **Breeze Call.** A turn of the finger or a guided whisper stirs a gentle current that clears smoke or cools a room, as a sailor clears lamp smoke from a cabin without killing the flame. It is weak in sealed spaces and in the chaos of a storm.
- **Dust Sweep.** A sweep of the arm pushes ash, dust, grit, or smoke aside in a directed stream, letting a medic clear choking ash from burn victims; it only moves harmful vapours and never destroys them.
- **Thistledown Descent.** A reflex at the moment of falling, or a quick spoken phrase, thickens the air around a falling body so a scout who slips from a tower drops the last stretch slowly enough to live. It fails on massive loads or when worked too late.
- **Windstep.** A forward lean and a released breath cut drag and add a push of air behind, so a courier dashes through crossfire to a gate chain; it is poor on cramped footing and sharp turns.
- **Air Shield.** A raised forearm sets a curve of pressed air that turns aside arrows, sparks, and dust, as a skirmisher weathers the first arrow rain on the way to cover. Heavy bolts, stones, and point-blank blows break through.
- **Gust Lash.** A snapped hand strikes with compressed wind that knocks, staggers, or cuts, enough to throw a raider sideways into a bridge parapet; anchored or very heavy targets shrug much of it off.
- **Vacuum Snap.** A pinch-and-release collapses a small pocket of air into a concussive pop beside a target, breaking an archer's concentration at the moment of loosing. It is weak in turbulent air and dangerous to fragile hearing.
- **Whisper Carry.** A whisper into a cupped hand rides a guided thread of air to its listener, so two scavengers keep in touch across a haunted courtyard without raising their voices; high wind, crowd noise, or an unknown route degrade it.
- **Breath Steady.** A touch and guided breathing calm panic and settle the body's rhythm, as a commander steadies frightened recruits before they break. It cannot cure mortal choking, poison gas, or a pierced lung.
- **Slipstream.** A hand drawn along the line of travel thins the air's drag on a moving body, mount, or missile, letting riders on urgent dispatch cover ground with less fatigue; dense obstacles and erratic missiles unsettle it.
- **Sky Hook.** A hooking gesture yanks a light object through the air along a chosen line, as a sailor snatches a dropped line back before it goes overboard. Heavier loads need anchors or several mages.

- **Wingless Leap.** A burst from bent knees adds lift and carry to a jump, so a thief clears a broken gap between rooftops; low ceilings and unstable landing ground make it poor.
- **Pressure Lance.** A forward jab fires a narrow stab of condensed air that bruises, pierces soft matter, or topples balance, enough to knock a ritual knife from a cultist's hand. It fades fast with distance and does little against heavy armour.
- **Crosswind.** A lateral sweep sends a hostile side wind to spoil aim, formations, banners, and flame, as wall archers throw an enemy volley off line before it flies; it is weaker indoors and against firmly grounded ranks.
- **Scatter Cloud.** An open palm breaks the hold of fog, gas, smoke, or insects and drives them apart, clearing blinding smoke around a wounded standard-bearer. Done badly, it merely moves poison or smoke onto someone else.
- **Funnel Ward.** A ward traced across a corridor or narrow pass turns it into a wind channel against anyone approaching, making a stairwell an exhausting climb for pursuers; it is hard to hold on open ground.
- **Storm Nose.** A deep inhalation sharpens the sense of pressure, damp, static, and shifting fronts, so a captain delays departure before the horizon even darkens. Magical storms and enclosed cities give false readings.
- **Aerial Pivot.** An arm cut through the air in mid-leap catches and redirects the fall, letting a rooftop runner twist cleanly towards a narrow ledge; it helps little where there is no room to turn.
- **Deflection Ring.** A circling hand raises a revolving shell of air that nudges missiles off their line, so a thrown knife skims past a duelmage's shoulder. Heavy, slow missiles and attacks from several heights at once weaken it.
- **Cyclone Grip.** A spiralling draw traps a target in a tight column of rotating air that steals footing, as a ranger catches a fleeing thief at a canyon mouth; large, braced foes can muscle through.
- **Wind Bridge.** Two linked points become a brief path of compressed air over a narrow gap, more a guided crossing than a platform, as acolytes cross a broken stair to trapped pilgrims. Unsteady walkers and heavy armour strain it badly.
- **Thunder Run.** A running charge gathers speed and ends in a thunderous concussive impact, enough for a skirmish captain to break a shield line; it is hazardous in tight quarters and punishes the caster if posture fails.
- **Spiral Lift.** An upward corkscrew of the hand raises the caster or an ally on rotating air for a short climb, as a healer is lifted onto a wagon roof to reach a wounded passenger. Very heavy loads and low ceilings defeat it.
- **Pressure Crush.** Two compressing hands collapse the air inward on a target from several sides, pinning a large beast until the net team closes. Armour, braces, and open ground reduce its force, and gentle use is difficult.
- **Calm Pocket.** A protective cupping gesture carves a pocket of still air out of turmoil for lanterns, surgery, aim, or speech, as ship surgeons keep a bandaging space steady through a gale; very large storms wear it away quickly.
- **Horizon Stride.** A marching cadence smooths breath and stride so travel wastes less effort, letting rangers cover far more ground with an urgent warning. It does not remove the need for food, water, or sleep.
- **Tempest Shear.** A broad cutting sweep looses slicing bands of storm wind that shred cloth, skin, and exposed surfaces, as a storm adept cuts banners and lines to break a formation; it is hard to control near allies, and solid cover blunts it.

- **Open Way.** A forward thrust of pressure blasts apart shutters, stuck doors, debris, and light blockages, as rescue crews clear a jammed exit before smoke overcomes those inside. It is unreliable on heavily barred stone gates without other magic.
- **Hanging Air.** A lifting gesture holds a target in balanced pressure so it rises, sinks, or hangs unsupported, as a thief floats silently up to a high balcony; sideways movement is poor without other motion magic.
- **Skyborne.** A self-correcting envelope of lift and balance wraps the target and allows true sustained flight, as a battlemage rises above the shield wall to strike into a siege trench. Strong storms, close spaces, and sudden panic can make control collapse fast.
- **Sky Stair.** Step by step, invisible treads of compressed air form across open space for slow, deliberate travel, as a war-priest crosses a battlefield above the mud and blood. It is slower than flight and dangerous if concentration breaks over a long drop.

### *Dream Magic*

Dream spells feed on the caster's focus and feeling and on the target's own perception; workings in sleep draw heavily on dreaming, memory, and the weight of symbols.

- **Soft Glamour.** A brief working on the caster's own face, sometimes with a touch to a mirror, shifts her features just enough to pass the raider-lord's gate as one more tired kitchen drudge. Close inspection and touch often pierce it.
- **Phantom Sound.** A pointed finger plants a single believable noise at a chosen spot, so a guard turns towards a whispered name no one spoke; repeated, it grows easier to recognise as false.
- **False Candle.** A palm cupped as if around a flame shows the look of candlelight with no heat or fuel, so a treasure-hunter leaves one burning in a side passage and whatever hunts by light goes the wrong way. It is an image of light and does not truly illuminate.
- **Mask of Ease.** A quiet working, often carried in a charm or perfume, makes the caster seem calm, harmless, or familiar, so a spy walks through a warband's camp too ordinary to question; suspicion returns sharply where there is real cause to doubt.
- **Mirror Trick.** A snapped gesture throws off a moving double or a false trail of motion, and a thief seems to dart left while slipping right. It fools the eye far better than touch or smell.
- **Dream Dust.** A dusting from the hand, or powder burned in a censer, loosens waking focus into drowsiness until the guards over a raider-lord's treasure room grow heavy-eyed while the thieves come over the roof; strong pain or fear resists it.
- **Hallway Lengthen.** A stretching working makes a corridor or lane seem far longer than it is, so pursuers lose time and nerve in a passage that never ends. Touch or measured pacing can reveal the trick.
- **Shadow Bloom.** A working sent into a corner deepens its shadows into suggestive shapes that unsettle onlookers, so the hut where a captured outlaw is held grows corners that move, and he talks before dawn; strong, clean light suppresses it.
- **Phantom Crowd.** A broad scene-working fills a space with false figures and motion, so raiders hesitate at a farmstead yard that suddenly seems full of armed kin. Close bodily contact soon reveals the emptiness.
- **Fear Shape.** Held eye to eye, it draws an observer's private fear out of their own mind into a visible outline, as when a cruel interrogator's hidden terror stands in the doorway. It is weaker on disciplined minds that know their fear.

- **Memory Lantern.** A light kindled at the brow casts a recent memory as a waking image, as a survivor of a raid shows the elders the faces of the men who fired the granary; it shows what is remembered, not guaranteed truth.
- **Sleepwalk Path.** A guiding hand leads a sleeper through simple movement without waking them, as a child is led still asleep out of a burning dormitory. Dangerous ground breaks it or wakes the sleeper in panic.
- **Lucid Step.** A slow descent into sleep lets the caster enter her own dreams fully aware, as a dream-worker goes down into her sleep to find what has been hunting the village children there; fatigue, fear, and interruption can distort the way in.
- **Veil of Elsewhere.** A veil laid over a scene makes it seem another place entirely, so a wounded sellsword trapped in a collapsed mine sees a sunlit orchard instead of the dark, and stops screaming. Strong smells, touch, and temperature can contradict it.
- **Borrowed Face.** A face-copying working, often aided by a mirror and a token, wears the full likeness of a specific person, as an assassin walks into the feast hall wearing the face of the lord's own cupbearer; voice, gait, and intimate knowledge still betray.
- **Whispering Bed.** A long whisper at the bedside seeds suggestive dreams in a sleeper, so a wavering sentry dreams, three nights running, of leaving the postern unbarred. It plants a direction more easily than an exact command.
- **Nightmare Snare.** Locked eyes or a sleep rite trap a target in looping fear images, as an enemy mage panics in the same impossible corridor repeating around him. It is risky and widely thought cruel or abusive.
- **Dream Bridge.** A group sleep rite joins several sleepers in one shared dream, so the scattered kin of a besieged hold can meet across distance to plan the breakout; if one dreamer panics, the fear spreads quickly to all.
- **Symbol Lock.** A long binding hides a truth behind a recurring symbol, such as red birds and broken stairs, that must be read or dissolved to reach it. Those who do not know the symbol may never recover the truth.
- **Muse Call.** Breath and focus summon a flood of unstable but fertile inner imagery, as a skald forces out the song of the battle before the victory feast, and does not sleep for three nights after; it can bring on obsession or a distracting rush of ideas.
- **Phantom Pain.** A directed working convinces the body it has been struck, chilled, burned, or cramped, so a duellist drops her blade as illusory fire races across her hand. Hardened minds can partly disbelieve it.
- **Unmake Mask.** A sweeping gesture strips nearby glamours, borrowed faces, and lesser identity veils, as a lord's dream-worker strips the borrowed faces from the spies at the feast; strongly anchored disguises resist it.
- **Dreamwalk.** A descent into sleep carries the caster through dreamspace towards a chosen sleeper, as a dream-guide reaches a child lost in recurring nightmares. It is dangerous without a prior link or strong mental discipline.
- **Hall of Mirrors.** Through eyes or a mirror, a target is made to face several versions of the self at once, as a prince sees coward, tyrant, martyr, and heir arguing in one reflecting hall; it can heal with insight or break identity.
- **Waking Mirage.** A strong, long working holds an illusion in full daylight and under active scrutiny, so a breached gatehouse stands whole in the besiegers' eyes while the defenders wall up the gap behind it. It is costly and hard to maintain against touch and contradiction.
- **Name of the Hidden Self.** Guided introspection, or a dream or mirror rite, reveals a deep private truth as an image or dream speech, as a hesitant initiate at last sees what explains her calling. The revelation may come as metaphor rather than plain statement.

- **Night Garden.** A long shaping working raises a large, coherent dreamscape that holds together, as healers give the survivors of a massacre one night in a quiet garden instead of the burning hall; emotional shock can make parts of it mutate or collapse.
- **Identity Slip.** Locked eyes or a whispered name loosen a target's certainty about who they are, so an impostor stumbles over the name he stole. It is highly dangerous, often abusive, and can cause dissociation.
- **Story Shell.** A narrative weave builds a layered illusion whose every detail follows one story, so a bandit chief rides into a false parley where every banner, guard, and campfire of the waiting lord's camp agrees with every other; contradictions crack it quickly.
- **False Dawn.** A heartening working, sometimes through a lantern, gives exhausted minds the feeling of morning and renewed beginning, so survivors endure a last night watch. It must not stand in for real rest indefinitely.
- **Dream Eater.** A touch on a sleeper devours a dream and takes fragments of its imagery and feeling into the caster, as a dream-worker eats a child's repeating terror so the child sleeps cleanly; she may absorb the fear, grief, or obsession with it.
- **Veil Collapse.** A forceful stripping, or the shock of a struck bell, drops every dream-form in an area at once, as a besieged theatre loses all its false walls in one brutal reveal. The sudden collapse disorients allies as well as foes.
- **Fond Seeming.** Voice and gaze wrap the target's view of the caster in warmth and trust, so a gate clerk waves a stranger through because she suddenly seems entirely reasonable. It compels no obedience, and targets often feel violated when it breaks.
- **Seeded Notion.** Spoken words plant a plausible course of action that feels like the target's own good idea, as a patrol captain decides to inspect the east yard instead of the open gate; outlandish, self-destructive, or plainly alien notions fail more often.
- **Oncoming Dread.** A shock of terror is thrust straight into the imagination until retreat or paralysis feels urgent, and hardened raiders break when they see their own death coming down the hall. Battle discipline, rage, and long familiarity with terror blunt it.
- **Tangled Sense.** A wide working, often with bells, smoke, or mirrors, floods a group with clashing cues and dreamlike doubt until a shield line turns on itself, unsure where the enemy stands. It is messy near allies and weaker on single-minded targets.

### *Record Magic*

Record spells draw on the memory traces, records, and patterns already present and on the caster's concentration; damaged or conflicting records force her to spend more of her own reserves.

- **Recall Thread.** A touch to the brow holds a fading memory in clear order before it slips, so the one survivor of a roadside ambush keeps the raider-chief's ring in mind before shock wipes it away. It cannot recover what was never noticed.
- **Archive Mark.** A touch or an inked sigil tags an object so it stands out to the caster's later memory or to search magic, as a delver marks the one chest worth dragging out before the tomb roof comes down; marking too many things at once weakens it.
- **Page Seal.** A hand swept over the pages guards text against damp, fading, insects, and the slow wear of time, as couriers keep the truce-scroll between two warring clans dry through wet mountain passes. It cannot save pages already ash or pulp.
- **Pattern Glimpse.** A touched reading shows how an object, surface, or arrangement stood a short time before, so a thief-taker sees that the

strongbox was opened after midnight and closed again; frequent changes blur the picture into uncertainty.

- **Mnemonic Knot.** A spoken anchor or a knotted cord ties a fact to a repeated sensory cue, as delvers bind the way out of an old working to the smell of lamp oil and copper. Too many knots tied in one mind tangle with each other.
- **Remembering Ink.** Ink and speech worked together fix a spoken account to the moment of its speaking, so a captured raider's confession is inked and no lord can scratch out the names he gave. It preserves what was said, not whether it was true.
- **Restore Script.** A touch to the page or stone rebuilds damaged writing from fragments and faded impressions, as delvers bring back the half-worn warning cut above a sealed door before anyone puts a bar to it; meaning burned away cannot always be inferred from ash.
- **Echo Reading.** A touched reading draws the residue of repeated action from tools, benches, and rooms, so a scribe-mage finds that the knife was whetted an hour before the killing, not in the heat of a quarrel. Busy places give overlapping noise.
- **Heritage Sense.** Touch and close study pick out lineage marks and inherited craft habits in objects and bodies, as a delver learns that the sword pulled from a barrow came from a royal forge-line and is worth more than the barrow's gold; adoption, forgery, and mixed traditions confuse the reading.
- **Memory Vault.** Sealing concentration, or a reliquary or token, stores a memory outside the active mind, safe from fatigue or intrusion, as a courier locks a king's message away before riding through bandit-held passes. Poor storage can warp its feeling and order.
- **Lesson Imprint.** A teacher's touch or a recitation settles freshly learned knowledge so it holds under stress, as medics fix a new triage order in apprentices before battle; it strengthens retention but does not replace understanding.
- **Name Retrieval.** Inward focus, sometimes on a token or portrait, follows the remaining trace of a forgotten name back from the edge of memory, as a diplomat recalls a dead king's title in time to address him correctly. Names never well learned resist it.
- **Record Stitch.** A chant over a circle of signs reassembles a broken sequence of events from scattered notes, accounts, and traces, as a lord's huntsmen work out how raiders took the keep over four rooms and a stair, and who let them in; contradictory or false accounts yield competing versions.
- **Preserve Form.** A touch, or a rite worked over a chest or case, holds a body, text, relic, or sample in its present pattern against time, keeping a murdered chieftain fresh until his kin arrive to see the wounds for themselves. It delays decay and cannot reverse ruin.
- **Truth Residue.** A finger traced along a text finds where a lie, forgery, or false account has written over an earlier pattern, as a hold-elder's scribe spots the altered line in an inheritance roll before two brothers go to war over it; it reveals the disturbance, not always the original truth.
- **Pattern Restore.** A touch and a calling-back return damaged material towards a recent intact state, restoring a shattered ceramic seal well enough to read its mark. Missing matter still limits the result.
- **Ancestral Murmur.** A quiet, listening touch draws faint memory and feeling from heirlooms, bones, and long-kept family objects, as a family blade whispers enough of its old battles to tell which of two claimants is the true heir; the impressions are fragmentary and coloured by reverence or trauma.

- **Truthline.** A touched reading follows the trace each hand has left on an object, tracing a stolen reliquary from a market broker back to the tomb robbers. Frequent trade or deliberate laundering muddies the line.
- **Forget Gate.** A gating working, or a lock of word and token, sets chosen memories behind a threshold against casual intrusion or accidental recall, so a captured scout keeps the hidden camp from the warlord's irons; severe shock, deep magic, or self-made confusion can weaken it.
- **Burden Shelf.** Guided transfer moves traumatic recall into a ritual vessel so a person can function without reliving it constantly, as a survivor sets aside the worst of a massacre long enough to testify. It does not heal by itself and may delay needed grief.
- **Reconstruction Circle.** A long rite rebuilds a scene from many memory traces, fragments of what people saw, and object residues, as temple hunters replay a cult's ritual murder in the cellar where it was done, and learn how many knives there were; false accounts contaminate it.
- **Legacy Binding.** Teacher-led transfer, or a rite sealed into an archive reliquary, preserves a technique so it can be relearned exactly generations later, as a dying swordsmith binds the tempering of his blades into his apprentice before the raiders reach the forge. It keeps form better than genius, and improvised artistry still fades.
- **Continuity Ward.** A ward chanted over a bench or workshop keeps a delicate process from drifting off its pattern, as a hedge-alchemist holds a venom cure at exact stages while the bitten hunter turns grey on the bench; it cannot save a process built on bad assumptions.
- **Last Sight.** A touch at the deathbed holds a dying person's final memory for a farewell or to name a killer, as a murder victim's last sight is kept long enough to name the one who struck. It captures only what survives clearly to the end.

### *Path Magic*

Path spells draw on the caster's focus, her sense of timing, and the press of possibility around her; far-reaching or high-stakes pathworking often needs maps, tokens, or omen anchors as well.

- **Waymark.** A brief glance, or a touch to a map, makes the safest route through a nearby space stand out, so a delver sees which passage avoids the vault that will collapse first. It works only on paths that truly exist.
- **Open Choice.** A spoken question, sometimes over a coin, lays several workable options side by side before acting, as the go-between sent to the outlaws holding a miller's daughter sees three ways to talk them down before she says a word; in chaotic crises it may show only the least bad choices.
- **Misstep Sense.** A reflexive flicker of warning, or a caution charm worn ready, signals a stumble or bad choice just before it comes, halting a climber the instant before she trusts rotten stone. It is vague on long-term mistakes and weak when many errors overlap.
- **Lucky Angle.** A snapped working in the blink of an eye nudges position and timing so a simple action goes a little better, and a thrown knife slips past a shield rim instead of striking flat; it cannot make absurd chances certain.
- **Path Thread.** A shared sense of direction, or a chant over a threaded map, keeps a person or group bound towards a chosen destination through fog and confusion, as refugees hold to the right mountain pass in midnight snow. A false destination brings false confidence.
- **Fork Glimpse.** A focused pause shows a few likely outcomes branching from the present, as a duellist sees that one feint draws a counter and another an opening; highly disciplined foes and unstable magic muddy the branches.

- **Missed Window.** A backwards glance reveals an opportunity that has just closed and whether another may come, as an envoy learns, a breath too late, the word that would have kept the warlord's sword sheathed. It does not reopen the lost chance.
- **Right Turn.** A point-and-choose, or a compass held in hand, tips a search or pursuit towards the true direction when routes look equal, so wardens take the ravine path over the decoy ridge trail; it weakens when the quarry deliberately scrambles the routes.
- **Second Chance.** A reflexive correction stretches the usable instant after a small mistake, letting a lockpicker catch the tumblers after a slip that should have snapped the pick. It cannot undo a disaster already complete.
- **Crossroads Halt.** A spoken arrest, or a marked junction, lays hesitation over a decision point, so a charging mob falters at the gate instead of rushing through fire; fanatics and berserkers may push through.
- **Pilgrim's Pace.** A walking cadence, or a staff-led march rite, keeps a traveller's rhythm efficient over long roads, as a pilgrimage column reaches shelter before the mountain storm breaks. It does not replace rest, food, or water.
- **Unseen Exit.** A quick searching glance reveals overlooked doors, hatches, climbable lines, and neglected openings, as delvers sealed in by a rockfall find a crawlway hidden behind the burial shelves; it cannot show exits that do not exist.
- **Fortune Tilt.** A twist of the finger or the turn of a coin nudges a narrow margin of chance the caster's way, and a coin toss, loose beam, or glancing arrow breaks as she needs. Overuse brings backlash, overconfidence, and wild swings of luck.
- **Hunt Line.** Crouched over the sign, the pathworker reads which of many tracks is freshest and most promising, so beast-hunters pick the man-eater's trail out of a dozen old ones around the sheepfold; quarry that splits, vanishes through space, or doubles back by magic confounds it.
- **Favourable Wind.** A spoken route blessing, or a travel token, aligns timing and small luck along the way, so a messenger finds every gate opening just as needed. It is not always literal weather control.
- **Moment Catch.** A snap of focus, or a held breath, tightens awareness around the one beat that matters, letting a bodyguard intercept a hidden dagger at the instant of release; it is taxing in long battles and poor against wholly unknown threats.
- **Omen Thread.** A chanted binding ties a symbolic sign to a future warning, so a commander knows that ravens gathering at dawn mean the eastern road has failed. Ambiguous symbols weaken the reading.
- **Converging Roads.** A shared meeting working, or a rite over map and token, quietly bends separated travellers towards the same place or hour, so lost allies each choose the same ruined chapel; strongly opposed intentions can defeat it.
- **False Trail Burn.** Worked backwards while moving, sometimes by sacrificing a trail token, it collapses the likely pursuit paths behind the caster, as outlaws buy half a night's lead on the lord's hounds by spoiling the likeliest lines. Expert bloodhounds and strong counter-divination may still find the true line.
- **Predicted Blow.** Locked eyes or a guard stance read an opponent's next committed attack once intent has narrowed, so a duellist slips outside a thrust before it begins; feints, great speed, and alien tactics reduce its accuracy.
- **Turning Point.** A tactical pause or a study of the map picks out the action or word most likely to decide a tangled moment, as a commander sees the bridge must be held a little longer, not the hill. It may point to a brutal truth the caster cannot achieve.

- **Probability Fog.** A veiling working or masking charm clouds the outcomes around a target, muddying omen-work and path-reading, so an envoy crosses hostile land hidden behind uncertain futures; it makes the target harder to anticipate, not safer.
- **Window of Passage.** A focused working, often with a sandglass or clock, shows the brief safe moment to cross patrol lines, traps, storms, or contested ground, as a rescue band crosses a bandit camp's open ground in the three breaths between the sentries' turns. If no safe window exists, it shows none.
- **Destined Lane.** A strong line-drawing working opens a short run of unusual timing where needed things align just long enough, carrying a small strike team to the inner gate on a streak of impossible luck; it is costly and brittle, and one strong contradiction shatters it.

### *Binding Magic*

Binding spells feed on spoken authority, exact wording, consent, inscribed structure, and the caster's own reserves; the stronger ones lean on sworn agreement, seals, or ground already bound by oath or seal.

- **Seal Mark.** A spoken formula, traced sigil, or line of wax across a latch declares a chest or satchel closed until released, so when a delver seals the grave-gold before the long climb out, a thief in the company betrays himself by the broken sigil. It is weak against brute force and on containers with torn or unclear edges.
- **True Address.** Naming someone correctly by full name, lineage, or oath cuts through their panic and makes them hear that they are truly called, as a bounty-taker's binder stops a fleeing horse-thief in the mud by naming him, his father, and his village. Concealed identities and crowds blunt it.
- **Word Lock.** A phrase bound to a touched lock or vault door keeps it shut until that exact phrase is spoken; a dead lord's treasure-vault answers only to a phrase lost with him, and delvers have dug at its door for three generations. Overhearing, skilled mimicry, or a misremembered phrase undo it.
- **Bound Word.** A spoken vow over a live promise, often before a hedge-priest or oath-keeper, binds into it the knowledge that it was made willingly and in hearing, so two sell-sword captains who swear to share a ruin's loot can neither later deny it. It does little to punish betrayal and is weak when consent is coerced or wording vague.
- **Circle of Bargain.** A boundary declared over a drawn ring turns the space into an agreement where named acts are allowed or forbidden, so a blood-feud between two houses ends inside a ring where only the named champions and their named blades may strike. Broken boundaries, contradictory terms, or unwilling participants unravel it.
- **Name Lash.** A sharp spoken name or sworn title becomes a cutting verbal blow, hardest when the naming is most exact, as a temple's binder brings down a fleeing relic-thief by speaking the vow he broke and the name he swore it under. Unnamed beasts, masks, and false identities shrug much of it off.
- **Tongue Still.** A direct spoken prohibition, or a sealed charm pressed to the throat, lays a brief silence on someone's voice, as a delving company's binder stills a cult priest's tongue in the barrow mouth before the curse is finished. Thought and movement stay free, and those who sign or work without song resist it.
- **Covenant Thread.** Joined hands and a spoken vow weave a faint shared awareness of the bond, so two scouts sworn to warn each other feel whether it still holds. It controls no one and frays fast when the agreement is insincere.
- **Command Posture.** A barked command carrying real authority makes a body halt, kneel, or freeze for a moment, as a caravan's binder drops a charging bandit to his knees a stride

short of the wagons. Those far beyond the binder's authority, alien bodies, and berserkers resist it.

- **Line of Binding.** A walked perimeter or chalked line with exact wording fixes where a ward or zone begins and ends, as a ward-maker marks the edges of a plague quarter before stronger wards are raised. Shifting ground, crowds, smoke, water edges, and ruins resist definition.
- **Word of Silence.** A spoken ban fixed to a doorway or inscribed in a chamber forbids any speech not allowed inside it, so a warlord seals his war-room and only his chosen captains may speak while the raid is planned. Open streets, battle noise, and wordless signs escape it.
- **Burden of Promise.** A vow sealed by hand over written terms ties itself to the body, so knowing betrayal brings pain, choking pressure, or burning tension, as both sides of a ceasefire swear before hostages change hands. It needs informed assent and clear wording.
- **Summons Line.** A spoken or written summons, or an attuned bell or seal, lays a pull on a named party towards a place or a lord, as a lord's binder, with raiders at the walls, calls his sworn sellswords out of the lower-town taverns and up to the gate. It needs a real tie of oath or service and weakens on ground held by a hostile power.
- **Seal of Exclusion.** A marked threshold resists anyone lacking the required name, role, token, or permission; a barrow-king's tomb is sealed against all but bearers of his line's copper sigil, and the delvers who found the sigil walked in, while the ones who forged it did not. Poorly chosen terms shut out allies or leave loopholes.
- **Contract Brand.** A touched signet or inked sigil marks parties to a live bargain, often visibly only to trained eyes, as a sellsword company bears a brand showing who is under pay and sworn to mutual defence, so no turncoat slips into the camp at night. It marks rather than punishes, though reluctant bargains can make it painful.
- **Syntax Cage.** Bindings spoken or written around a target build a conditional prison that holds while its conditions stay true, as delvers who woke something in a barrow keep it caged so long as no blade is drawn, no false name is spoken, and the chalk ward-line stays unbroken. Contradictory wording collapses it, and clever prisoners exploit careless phrasing.
- **Word of Refusal.** A spoken refusal or released sigil asserts a stronger binding over the place that denies a lesser working leave to act, as a treasure-house binder snuffs a thief's lock-breaking spell the instant it is cast. Raw force, wild surges, and alien effects with no shape of words resist it.
- **Debt Token.** A charge spoken into a coin, ring, knot, or strip of parchment stores an obligation, so a sellsword who owes a blood-price wears a ring that warms as the day of payment nears. It cannot enforce what was never truly agreed.
- **Name Anchor.** A binding spoken or inscribed over a doorway fixes identity within it, fraying disguises and false names, so a temple gate unmasks a shape-thief trying to walk in under a dead priest's name. Beings with fluid, shared, or layered identities resist it.
- **Binding Chain.** A spoken holding-word or released chain sigil turns a command of stillness into visible or unseen constraining force, as a binder riding with bounty-takers chains a fleeing outlaw's legs to the command to stand where he is. Beings without a word-shaped identity, or with power far beyond the binder's own, break it.
- **Geas Thread.** A geas spoken over a compliant or weakened target, often with a token, binds them to a narrow task, as a captured spy is sent back carrying a message instead of a knife. Broad or immoral commands degrade into illness or confusion rather than obedience.

- **Field of Command.** A declaration made with authority, or an inscribed pillar released, makes a rule such as "no drawn steel" hold over a room, so at a parley between feuding houses a hedge-binder can forbid violence in the hall. Broad commands cost far more, and mass resistance shreds it.
- **Oathfire.** A flame vow sworn over candle or brazier charges a promise with retaliation, so bodyguards entering a royal chamber know treachery will burn them on the instant. It feeds best on recent, explicit, willing vows.
- **Chorus of Seeing.** A shared chant or refrain led by one binder joins many voices in confirming a single binding, so a dying chieftain's heir swears before all his war-captains at once and no rival can later say the oath was never given. Dishonest, confused, or hostile voices weaken or unsettle it.
- **Price of Passage.** A threshold binding spoken over a gate or inscribed on a lintel sets who may cross and how; a shrine bridge over a haunted gorge lets pass only pilgrims, envoys, and the unarmed, and no warband has crossed it in living memory. Overly complex conditions become hard to hold.
- **Revocation Rite.** A spoken release naming a binding's grounds, giver, and conditions unthreads it cleanly instead of tearing it, as a delver who has dug up a tomb seal's old terms ends it without breaking it, and the dead behind it stay asleep. It cannot safely revoke unknown terms or a greater binder's work.
- **Iron Circle.** Seals and conditions laid over a prepared chamber build a prison of rules, so a thing called up by a careless conjurer can neither cross the ash lines nor strike the unnamed while a rider goes for a binder strong enough to end it. Mindless force and beings that answer to no binding of words resist it.
- **True Name Opening.** Speaking the exact founding name of a seal, gate, or working makes it open or collapse, as a ruin gate sealed since the elder days opens when a delver finally scratches its founding name out of a broken lintel. Guesses, partial names, and titles usually fail.
- **Covenant Pillar.** A long chant or rite anchors oaths and duties into a pillar, stone, or arch, as two hill clans swear the truce that ended their war into a standing stone at the ford, and every chief since has renewed it there at midsummer. Without repeated renewal and living respect it decays into mere symbol.
- **Last Command.** A senior binder speaks a last, heavy denial that forbids a gate, crossing, or act, sometimes for generations, as in the last moments of a breach a gate is forbidden to open until named heirs return centuries later. It is costly, hard to revoke, and leaves lasting strain on binder and site, and a poorly worded one cripples rightful use too.

### *Trace Magic*

Trace spells feed on shadow, lingering emotion, recent traces, and the caster's own reserves; dusk, quiet spaces, and places of loss make them stronger.

- **Shadow Fold.** A cloaking sweep of hand or hood deepens the darkness in a recess and turns eyes away from it, so a scout can vanish into a doorway while a patrol passes. Bright direct light undoes it quickly.
- **Cold Trace.** A hand laid on the ground reads the faint chill and absence left by someone's passing, telling bounty-takers which tunnel an outlaw fled down within the hour. Crowded or sun-warmed ground muddies the trail.
- **Footfall Blur.** Wrapped around the body or charmed into a boot sole, it softens footsteps, prints, and small signs of passage, so a messenger crosses dry leaves without leaving a clear trail. Broken branches and larger disturbance still show.

- **Afterimage.** A quick step sheds a fading false figure behind, so a knife-fighter's opponents strike where she stood a heartbeat ago. It fools only the eye; touch and smell still find her.
- **Grief Sense.** A quiet pause, or a candle held still, lets a mage feel recent bereavement, violent loss, or unresolved mourning in a person or place, as a mourner-priest finds the room that held the deathwatch. It reads the feeling, not its cause.
- **Echo Tap.** A palm pressed to a wall, or an ear at a bell or shell, hears sound pressed into a place by strong events, such as the tail of a name shouted at a murder site. Busy public places blur into overlapping noise.
- **Scent Unmake.** Brushed air or a smear of ash and herbs scatters and confuses smell, so fugitives cross a kennel yard without giving the hounds a clean line. Fresh blood and heavy musk still leave some trace.
- **Lantern of Remains.** A lantern flame or conjured hand-light shows faded presences, emotional scars, and old magic in dim light, revealing where a cult's ritual circle stood before they scrubbed the cellar floor. It shows traces, never the whole story.
- **Veil Step.** With each soft step the mage slips through dimness with lessened presence, crossing torchlit gaps where shadows overlap. It is no invisibility under hard scrutiny or noon light.
- **Mourners' Quiet.** A spoken hush, or bell and censer, damps wailing, hysteria, and panic in a room, so undertakers can let last rites be heard. It calms the moment but heals nothing.
- **Ash Memory.** A touch on ash and scorch reads the last moments of a burned thing, as a charred letter gives up enough of its final lines to name the sender. Total destruction leaves little to read.
- **Fade Mark.** A wiping or dusting gesture makes a chalked sign, footprint, or surface trace vanish fast, as smugglers erase dock symbols before inspectors arrive. Deep carving and official inscriptions resist it.
- **Lingering Hand.** A slow reach, often over a relic, lets a weak remnant move a small thing or finish a tiny unfinished impulse, as a dead scholar's habit turns one page farther. It summons no true ghost.
- **Shadow Thread.** A hand on the shadows reads the darkness a quarry displaced or kept moving through, letting night hunters follow a fugitive down alleys after rain has washed out the footprints. Bright, open ground thins the thread.
- **Pall of Dusk.** A wider cloaking, sometimes anchored by a circle rite, dims sight, colour, and recognition across an area, sinking a graveyard into grey half-light while wardens move. Used carelessly, it blinds allies too.
- **Revenant Warning.** Sensing beside a corpse, or a chain of candles, warns whether its death residue may harden into a hostile lingering presence, so after a battle the priests burn one body before nightfall instead of burying it with the rest. It foretells risk, not certainty.
- **Release Knot.** A knotting-and-cutting gesture or grave-thread rite severs a weak remnant from a place, body, or object so it can soften and leave, as when a child's frightened remnant is gently untied and a house stops whispering. Deep trauma and deliberate bindings resist it.
- **Ghost Light.** A fingertip or lantern holds a cold pale light that guides without heat or smoke and often shows disturbed traces, as delvers' guides use in collapsed catacombs so as not to wake what sleeps there. It makes a poor torch in storm or glare.
- **Silhouette Bind.** A pointed finger pins someone's shadow to a wall or marked floor, freezing a fleeing thief in place. Diffuse light and broken ground weaken it.

- **Memory Ash.** Ash scattered over an onlooker or a scene frays a recent memory, blurring its sharpness and order, as a spy dulls what a guard glimpsed. It is dangerous to the one it touches and does little against strong memories or written records.
- **Last Breath.** A touch at a dying person's mouth or throat, or a vial held to catch it, keeps their final words for a brief later hearing, so a son arriving too late still hears his mother's warning. It cannot supply words never formed.
- **Funeral Sleep.** A lulling working beside a corpse or through a whole chamber quiets twitching, disturbance, and weak restlessness, keeping a burial hall peaceful through a night vigil. It is not a full exorcism.
- **Trail of the Lost.** A held token or garment follows the fear, panic, or grief left by someone who vanished rather than their physical tracks, so rescuers find a lost child before frost. It fades once the lost one grows calm.
- **Dusk Gate.** A threshold working opens a narrow way through liminal shadow between nearby dark places, so an undertaker passes from chapel crypt to graveyard wall unseen. It needs paired shadow, threshold, or dusk and fails under sudden light.

### *Frozen Moment Magic*

Frozen Moment spells feed on the caster's own reserves and a firmly anchored pattern of the present; long preservation work leans on prepared containers, vaults, or stable focus objects.

- **Slowfall of Dust.** An open palm, or a lens held up, makes drifting dust and debris settle almost not at all, so delvers can read the tracks in a collapsed tomb before the falling dust buries them. Strong wind breaks it.
- **Chill Arrest.** A touch and a stilling phrase, or a wrapped seal, pauses rot, melt, or spoilage for a short while, keeping a hunter's fresh meat sound until camp. It delays the process without curing its cause.
- **Held Breath.** A hand on the chest slows the body's urgency so one breath lasts longer, letting a diver reach a sunken latch in a single descent. It cannot save someone already starved of air too long.
- **Lag Step.** A pointed finger makes someone's movement fractionally late, enough to steal the rhythm from a duellist's front foot and ruin the lunge. Very fast or well-drilled fighters can compensate.
- **Moment Seal.** A pinching gesture holds a small trigger at the instant before release, so a thief can freeze a needle trap and lift it out safely. It works best on small, defined mechanisms such as locks, latches, and spring traps.
- **Delay Wound.** A hand over the wound or a sealed bandage slows bleeding, swelling, and collapse, keeping a soldier with a gut wound alive until the surgeons. It is no healing and can breed false confidence.
- **Winter Coat.** Wrapped around a body or anchored into a cloak or blanket, it slows the loss or gain of heat, helping caravan guards cross a bitter pass on less fuel. Extreme elemental assault overwhelms it.
- **Still Edge.** A touch on the handle holds a blade or instrument perfectly ready without tremor or drift, so a surgeon's scalpel stays steady through shaking fear. It steadies readiness, not aim or strength.
- **Pause Flame.** A pinch-and-hold gesture or lantern focus slows a fire almost to stillness without putting it out, keeping delvers' last lamp alive while they cross a sealed vault. Large blazes overwhelm it.
- **Suspended Drop.** A pinpoint focus traps a droplet, spark, or insect in mid-air, as a poisoner's drop is caught mid-fall above the lord's cup. It suits only very small things for very short spans.

- **Age Quiet.** A slow stroke along a surface, or a rite over its case, slows fading, weathering, and wear, keeping a ceremonial banner vivid for another generation. It preserves; it does not restore.
- **Thickened Second.** Quicker than a blink, an instant stretches for the mage, so a duellist reads a triple attack as slow, separate beats. The world does not stop; it only feels wider.
- **Anchor Now.** A spoken grounding phrase or hand pressed to the heart pins attention to the present and checks panicked rashness, as a commander steadies a line in the first shock of a breach. It cannot remove fear, only keep it from outrunning judgement.
- **Stasis Band.** A wrapping gesture or bound cloth holds a limb, wound, or object in slowed motion, so healers can still a crushed arm before carrying the patient. Strong force breaks through in time.
- **Frozen Threshold.** A touch or rite on a doorframe keeps a door, hatch, or seal from ordinary wear and decay, so a barrow door stays sealed and untarnished for years, until the delvers come. It does not make the threshold unbreakable.
- **Lasting Bloom.** A touch to the stem keeps a plant or cut flower fresh beyond its span, so a coronation garland stays perfect through a long ceremony. It does not replace water or sunlight forever.
- **Slow Torrent.** A working across an area makes time feel thick within it, slowing pursuers on a bridge approach to a near-wading pace. The fastest missiles may pass before it fully takes hold.
- **Preservation Vault.** A long chamber rite builds a room of lessened change for relics, bodies, or fragile dangerous materials, as a monastery keeps saintly remains and brittle documents in one sealed crypt. It needs a stable room and upkeep.
- **Arrested Blow.** A reflex intercept drags an incoming strike or arrow into slowed time, robbing it of force, as a bodyguard catches an assassin's knife short of a king. It works on one attack, not a barrage.
- **Hourglass Ward.** A ward or fixed inscription stretches sudden force into drawn-out pressure, so a gate survives the ram long enough for braces to be set. It blunts the spike but may still leave crushing strain.
- **Cold Span.** Linked to another working, often by clock or sandglass, it slows that working's spending so it lasts longer, as a hedge-mage keeps the ward on a besieged hall alive through a second night. It cannot sustain a spell with nothing left.
- **Quiet Decay.** A broad stilling over a surface brings wear and ruin near to standstill, keeping a flaking mural intact until scaffolds go up. Collapse already in motion may only slow.
- **Museum Sleep.** A long reliquary rite holds a relic, corpse, or document in deeper stillness than ordinary preservation, as a dragonbone fragment waits unchanged for safe study. It is hungry for power and unsuited to living use.
- **Frozen Moment.** At severe cost, a master holds a narrow scene in near-complete stillness, as a warden freezes a falling gate while hundreds flee beneath it. It reaches only a tightly bounded area or event, and overloading it risks backlash or collapse.
- **Quickened Pulse.** A touch thins someone's experienced time so they move and react faster than the world around them, a duellist closing, parrying, and striking before the crowd sees what moved. It burns stamina and leaves trembling exhaustion.
- **Honeyed Hour.** A focused working or sprung trap thickens time around a target until it lags behind the world, so a charging beast seems to wade through honey while archers loose calmly. Strong will, momentum, and anti-time wards loosen its grip.

- **Borrowed Time.** A touch or a quick battle prayer gives someone a brief margin to keep acting through injury or collapse, as a medic carries the last of the wounded out before his broken leg gives way. The margin is repaid in shock, pain, or later failure.
- **Chronal Step.** The mage steps one movement ahead of the present and vanishes from one side of a spearwall to appear behind it in the same heartbeat. It is short, disorienting, and dangerous through wards or unstable ground.
- **Rewind Wound.** An immediate touch forces fresh harm back towards the body's state a few heartbeats earlier, closing an arrow wound before the victim finishes falling. It works only on very recent injury and cannot restore what is already lost.
- **Delayed Cast.** A prepared spell is set half a moment outside ordinary sequence and released later on a trigger, so a battlemage walks into an ambush with fire already waiting in his hand. Held too long without a stable trigger, it drifts, leaks, or misfires.
- **Stolen Hour.** An area working or tower-clock rite robs a site of time so that erosion, work, or motion inside lags behind the outside world, as scribes hold back a burning archive room while they carry the shelves clear. Living minds and chaos resist it.
- **Time Lock.** A locking working or interval rite seals a door, wound, chest, or spell in a fixed state until the right trigger or a set interval, as a dead king's hoard-chest will not open until the seventh dawn after his burial, and his heirs' swords are out long before. Heavy disruption cracks it, and badly set intervals are notoriously embarrassing.
- **Stopped Clock.** For a brutally brief interval the world nearly stops around the mage, letting an assassin cross a chapel, take a key, and return before one bell note ends. It is among the most dangerous common chronal workings and cannot be held long without severe backlash.

### *Vital Magic*

Vital spells draw on the healer's own reserves, the patient's lifeforce, compatible donors, or stored vitality; deeper restoration always carries a real bodily cost.

- **Close Flesh.** A touch, or a needle and thread held as focus, coaxes the edges of a simple wound back together, as a field surgeon seals a shallow spear cut. It does poorly on filthy wounds or missing flesh.
- **Clean Stitch.** Fine, patient touch knits tissue in better alignment and with less scarring than plain closure, saving the dexterity of a damaged hand. It needs a cleaner wound and more concentration than Close Flesh.
- **Bone Mend.** Hands held over a set bone, or linked to its splint, speed the knitting of a fracture, so a beast-hunter's leg broken by a boar bears weight days sooner. Shattered bone still needs support and time.
- **Blood Refill.** A direct transfer, or one passed through a vessel, restores lost blood from the healer, donors, or stored reserves, as a healer spends her own reserve to carry a guard through surgery. Between different peoples much of the transfer is wasted.
- **Pulse Stabilize.** Hands at chest and wrist steady rhythm and circulation against shock after terrible trauma, keeping a crushed soldier alive on the way to the hospice. It buys time without mending the injury.
- **Fever Ease.** A touch at brow and chest, or a cooling basin rite, draws off dangerous heat without stripping the body's defences, seeing a child through a burning night. Overused, it leaves the patient too cold or weak to recover.
- **Toxin Draw.** A touch and a slow pull, or cupping over a basin, drags poison out into a poultice, sweat, purge, or vessel, as a viper's venom drains into a blackening dressing. Some magical venoms bind too deeply for it.

- **Breath Recall.** Hands at mouth and chest force rhythm, clear the airway, and remind the body to breathe, so a drowned child coughs back to life on the riverbank. It cannot repair ruined lungs alone.
- **Nerve Quiet.** A touch at the pain, or a finger traced along the nerve lines, damps acute pain and panic-spasm so a patient can be treated without thrashing. Too much numbness can hide worsening injuries.
- **Tendon Set.** Guiding hands at a joint restore the tension and seating of torn or displaced tissue, putting back a dislocated shoulder without lasting slackness. Badly shredded tendons still need long recovery.
- **Organ Steady.** A working laid over the whole torso keeps failing organs from total collapse, so a healer can hold crushed lungs and a bruised heart working through the night. It is often temporary unless the deeper cause is treated.
- **Scar Soften.** Massage and touch, often repeated over sessions, ease the stiffness and pain of old scars, giving a veteran back the full bend of a hand thought ruined. Visible scarring does not wholly vanish.
- **Sight Mend.** A delicate, slow working over the eyes repairs damage where enough remains, giving a scholar blinded by shards back blurred but usable sight. An eye that is wholly gone cannot be replaced.
- **Hearing Mend.** A touch at ear and jaw, or a rite in a quiet chamber, repairs ruptured or stunned hearing, so a siege crewman hears again after a war-mage's thunderclap burst beside him. Long-dead nerves are much harder to restore.
- **Burn Knit.** A cooling, knitting touch, often with salve, halts further loss in burned tissue and coaxes shallow layers to regrow, saving a smith's arm after a furnace splash. Deep burns stay dangerous and prone to infection.
- **Blood Match.** A working over two people, or a bowl with samples of each, briefly aligns their vitality so healing loses less across peoples or lineages, letting an elven healer aid an orc mercenary safely. Very distant kinds still mend poorly.
- **Lifeline Bridge.** Linked hands or a shared cord open a living channel for strength to pass between two conscious people, as a parent sustains a wounded child until help comes. If one is too weak, both may collapse.
- **Reserve Tap.** A hand on a prepared vessel or reliquary draws its stored vitality, as healers drain a temple's stored reserves on the night after a raid, when the wounded outnumber the hands. Badly kept reserves may be degraded or contaminated.
- **Pattern Recall.** A touch over the whole form, sometimes with a mirror or portrait, reminds the body of its undamaged shape so a jaw broken by a war-hammer heals true rather than crooked. It works best when the old shape is known and not long lost.
- **Limb Hold.** An immediate working, or a wrapped vessel, slows decay in a severed limb so surgeons can still reattach a hand carried across a battlefield infirmary. Time is short, especially in heat.
- **Sickness Gate.** A body-wide gating working slows disease along its routes of spread, as a plague healer keeps a lung fever from reaching the blood. It contains; it does not promise a cure.
- **Crisis Borrow.** A direct touch pours the healer's own reserves into a dying patient to cover sudden failure, keeping a prince alive through an operation. Overuse maims or kills healers.
- **Reknit Face.** Fine, slow tissue work, often before a surgical mirror, restores damaged features and expression, so a girl burned when

raiders fired her village regains her own face instead of a scarred mask. It is difficult, slow, and emotionally hard on the patient.

- **Trauma Partition.** A working across the whole body walls off shock so one catastrophic injury does not bring down the rest, as a hunter mauled by a pass bear is kept from sliding into death while the others carry him down. It only buys time and complicates later care if held too long.
- **Vital Sweep.** Hands passed over the body, or a basin, mirror, or chart studied, read the life-pattern for hidden bleeding, blockage, or strain, finding a ruptured spleen in a rider thrown in an ambush where no wound shows. It finds, but does not heal.
- **Parasite Expel.** A purging working, or a herb and basin rite, makes the body hostile to worms and invasive magical organisms, forcing marsh-fever larvae out before they reach the spine. Deep or egg-laying infestations may need repeated work.
- **Regrowth Spur.** Directed growth, fed by nourishment, quickens new skin, nail, or shallow flesh enough to close a dangerous burn. Organs and whole limbs are beyond it, and forcing the same wound again and again risks Failed Mending.
- **Living Equilibrium.** A circle of patients joined by chant shares strength among them so no one falls into fatal want, as a healer keeps a handful of survivors alive through a freezing night. Used recklessly, it weakens the whole group.
- **Heart Recall.** A jolting touch to the chest forces the heart back into rhythm or restarts it after recent collapse, as a duel victim's pulse returns after sudden shock. Long deprivation or catastrophic damage defeats it.
- **Return from the Brink.** A desperate touch or full rite spends great lifeforce to drag a patient from the final threshold, as a master physician saves a stabbed queen. It is among the most dangerous healing outside divine work and often costs the healer permanently.

### *Nature Magic*

Nature spells feed on living plant mass, fertile soil, moisture, and the caster's own reserves; forcing growth where the land cannot support it grows costly and does damage.

- **Seed Wake.** A touch to the soil or a rite over a bowl of seed makes a kernel sprout at once, so farmers can tell which grain still lives after a raid burned the granary roof. Dead or exhausted seed does not answer.
- **Root Grip.** A hand pressed to the ground sends roots bursting up to bind feet and legs, as wardens stop poachers at a grove's edge. It needs living soil or prepared roots.
- **Verdant Sense.** A quiet pause, or a staff or branch held still, feels the living plants nearby, their health and broad kind, as a druid feels the roots that have split the vaults of a ruined hold and knows which floors will not bear a delver's weight. It reads life better than exact species.
- **Leaf Veil.** A sweeping gesture, or a pouch of seed thrown wide, raises a sudden screen of broad leaves for cover or shelter from wind, and scouts vanish behind it. It needs plant matter or strong growth nearby.
- **Bark Hide.** A touch, or a smear of sap or salve, toughens skin like living bark against cuts and scrapes, so a grove-warden wades through thorn and a wounded boar's tusks without flinching. It dulls touch and stiffens movement somewhat.
- **Vine Lash.** A whipping arm, sometimes seeded at the wrist, sends out a fast-growing vine to snare or strike, snapping a bandit's weapon arm aside from a few paces off. Sterile ground and paved stone courts weaken it.

- **Sap Draw.** A hand on bark pulls moisture and nourishment through the plant, as a healer coaxes medicine-rich sap to the surface. It can weaken the plant drawn from.
- **Bloom Call.** Song or a raised hand makes prepared plants flower on command, as a sacred orchard opens its blossoms on a feast day. Out of season it does poorly without heavy support.
- **Thorn Rise.** A hand to the ground raises barbed growth from brush, hedge, or turned earth, so retreating villagers turn a lane into a bleeding choke point. Bare stone and frozen ground resist it.
- **Fungal Lantern.** Spores touched to a damp wall grow into a dim, cold glow, so delvers can light a mine tunnel where a flame might wake the bad air. Bright or dry places stunt it.
- **Canopy Shade.** An upward gesture spreads leaf cover overhead in moments, so outlaws vanish from the eyes of the lord's hawks under sudden living shade. It needs branches, vines, or fast-growing support.
- **Pollinator's Friend.** A floral lure or hive-linked rite draws helpful insects or steers them to chosen plants, as orchard keepers call the bees to rescue a poor bloom. It cannot override a collapsed ecology.
- **Harvest Blessing.** A chanted field blessing or seasonal rite improves yield, hardiness, and ripening, squeezing one last healthy crop from a hard year. It cannot redeem poisoned or exhausted land alone.
- **Rot Balance.** A working across ground, garden, or marsh steers decay towards dead matter and away from the living, so a blighted orchard's rot is driven back into last year's windfall and the living trees are spared. It redirects decay but never ends it.
- **Hedge Wall.** A barrier working grows shrub, thorn, or roots into a living wall in moments, closing a lane before mounted raiders arrive. Thick stone courtyards limit it unless soil seams run through.
- **Bramble Maze.** Snarling growth confuses the way and punishes anyone who pushes straight through, as a sacred grove hides its inner shrine among hostile tangles. Fire and axes can still break it down.
- **Forest Memory.** A hand on a trunk reads an old grove's damage, regrowth, and root memory, so wardens learn where loggers came in long after the trails have healed. Young woods remember less.
- **Herbal Purge.** A touch on herbs, or a rite over mortar or brew, draws out their healing strength, readying fever-bark within the hour instead of over days. Overused, it intensifies toxins too.
- **Predator Bloom.** Aggressive growth, sometimes lured with blood or meat, turns plants carnivorous and hostile for a short while, as marsh vines become hunting tendrils around an intruders' camp. It is dangerous to allies and hard to control once fed.
- **Graft Skin.** A touch merges living plant matter with flesh to cover or protect a wound, as bark grafted over a bear-mauled beast-hunter's wound keeps him alive. Infection, rejection, and pain are real risks.
- **Root Bridge.** A spanning gesture weaves roots into a crossing, brace, or support, carrying refugees over a washed-out stream. It is steadiest with living roots anchored at both ends.
- **Season Spur.** A chant over orchard or field pushes growth towards budding, fruiting, or hardening, so orchard keepers can bring in fruit before an early frost. Pushed too far, it weakens the next season.
- **Spore Cloud.** A burst from the hand or a fungal bed releases spores whose effect depends on the strain, from medicine to sleep to harm, as a cave mouth fills with sleeping spores and the bandits who come for the hermit's hoard wake bound. Wind and damp shape where it spreads.

- **Green Renewal.** A long chant or communal seasonal rite feeds spent soil with energy, nourishment, and living structure at high cost, saving a famine-worn village's last field. It cannot undo deep poison or salt blight alone.
- **Symbiosis Knot.** A link between two living things binds them into shared support, as a healing tree sustains a wounded beast through the night. Ill-matched pairs weaken each other.
- **Latent Spur.** A touch, or a totem or feeding rite, draws out an adaptation already latent in a plant or beast, giving a hunting hawk keener night sight for one pursuit. It cannot turn a creature into something wholly alien.
- **Living Grove.** A long chant or circle rite wakes a stand of plants into coordinated defence, so sacred trees shift, block, and grasp to protect a shrine. Old, deep-rooted groves answer far better than sparse young growth.
- **Verdant Reclamation.** A chant or long rite over a ruin sets aggressive life loose to take it back, so an abandoned watchtower is overgrown and uninhabitable within a season. Occupied or maintained places resist it.
- **Heartwood Sanctuary.** A long ritual or night's vigil founds a lasting living refuge that shelters those within its covenant, as a grove hides and feeds refugees. It demands an ongoing relationship, not a single use.
- **Great Bloom.** A night's vigil or multi-circle working sets a whole region into overwhelming flower, as a valley erupts in impossible bloom to feed pollinators and mark a sacred age. Its ecological cost can unsettle food chains, water, and soil for years.

### *Morphic Magic*

Morphic spells usually feed on the existing pattern of the body or material being reshaped, a clear model of the form intended, and the caster's own reserves; the deepest transformations demand far more.

- **Light Reshaping.** A few breaths of self-shaping, or a rite before a mirror, shifts face, voice, colouring, and small features while the person beneath stays recognisable, turning a spy into a fish-seller on the raider-lord's quay for one dangerous afternoon. It fools the eye, not deep magical scrutiny or long intimacy.
- **Broadened Frame.** A touch, or a rune-belt woken, spreads a body or object's structure across a larger frame, as a smith swells his arms and shoulders to lift a fallen beam. Large growth is costly and strains floors, joints, and clothing.
- **Compacted Frame.** A touch or compression sigil presses an object into a smaller shape without shedding its weight, so thieves can carry a strongbox out under a coat. Very dense things resist, and shrunken targets feel oddly heavy.
- **Beast-Skin.** The mage rewrites herself into a known animal, keeping her mind and some memory of human skill, as a scout becomes a fox to slip under siege debris. Full transformation takes significant reserves, and tools, speech, and planning falter in deep beast forms.
- **Gillbreath.** A touch reshapes lungs and throat so a person draws air from water, letting divers search a drowned shrine without surfacing. It does nothing by itself against cold or deep pressure.
- **Wall-Cling.** A touch or climbing charm alters grip, limb tension, and balance so someone walks walls and ceilings, as a tomb-robber crosses above a pressure floor. Dust, grease, and brittle surfaces still betray it.
- **Stone Persuasion.** Hands pressed and moulding over a short chant coax stone into a new stable shape, such as a door, arch, channel, or seal, so delvers open a passage into a sealed treasure vault where a blank wall stood. It reshapes stone already there and cannot conjure missing support without cost.

- **Wall-Way.** A chanted opening softens a section of solid wall into a narrow passable channel, as a prison break turns impossible stone into a cramped tunnel. Warded or load-bearing walls resist, and abuse risks collapse.
- **Flesh Mask.** A fuller disguise than Light Reshaping reworks scars, hand texture, and the carriage of weight, letting an infiltrator pass as a dead noble's cousin across a banquet table. It needs a detailed model of the false form and is uncomfortable and tiring to hold.
- **Elastic Form.** A brief self-working, or stretch oil rubbed in, makes the body supple, compressible, and resistant to blunt blows, so a thief slips between the bars of a treasury window too narrow for a shoulder. Blades still cut, and the movement looks uncanny.
- **Ringing Skin.** Wrapped over the body, sometimes with dust and oil, it hardens skin and muscle until they ring like rock, carrying a warmage through spear thrusts. Movement slows, and shock still injures beneath.
- **Beast Speech.** A touch, or a shared meal rite, reshapes throat, ear, and understanding enough to trade simple meaning with animals, as a beast-hunter asks the crows where the man-eater lies up by day. It carries simple meaning, not abstract thought.
- **Other-Form.** Drawing on deep reserves and strong control, a full transformation turns a creature wholly into another, as a battlefield transmuter makes a siege ogre a plodding ox to break an assault. It is risky to body and mind, above all on the unwilling or for very alien forms.
- **Dragonhide.** A combat working lays scale-like reinforcement over the skin against heat, cold, or abrasion, so a champion takes dragonfire on his arms and lives. It is exhausting, and the scales are often painful to raise and shed.
- **Many-Shaping.** Fed by massive reserves, several memorised forms, and unbroken concentration, it lets a master flow from falcon to hound to noble without returning to her own shape between. It is among the most unstable morphic workings and blurs identity if held too long.

### *Frost Magic*

Frost spells feed on ambient moisture, heat pulled out of their surroundings, stable structure, and the caster's own reserves; dry heat makes them far costlier.

- **Rime Mail.** A shell of insulating rime and layered ice-film wraps the caster or a touched ally, so a caravan guard can cross a burning breach in sudden white ice. Heavy blows and fierce flame crack it, and it stiffens joints and fingers.
- **Freeze Water.** A hand over the surface, or a longer shoreline chant, locks a pond, stream, or flooded room into ice firm enough to walk on. Fast rivers, deep channels, and warm, fouled water resist a clean freeze.
- **Splinter Shard.** A dense shard of compressed frost glitters into being and flies, piercing and then bursting into splintering cold, enough to drop a pursuing hound. It needs moisture or prepared ice, and thick armour blunts the burst.
- **Rime Step.** A safe foothold freezes under each step across slick or unstable ground, letting a messenger run rain-slick roof tiles without slipping. It does poorly on superheated metal and unstable magical surfaces.
- **Snowblind.** A sweep of the hand fills a street or courtyard with glittering frost glare and cutting white haze, so defenders vanish while raiders stumble into each other. Wind disperses it and sealed visors resist it.
- **Ice Bridge.** A thick span of anchored frost grows between two supports over many heartbeats, carrying villagers fleeing a raid across a chasm that had no bridge moments before, while the raiders' horses balk at its edge. Warm wind, siege engines, and repeated shocks weaken it.

- **Frost Rampart.** A broad wall of thick, translucent blue ice rises for cover or containment, sealing an alley while civilians escape behind it. Sustained heat and siege blows break it down fast.
- **White Breath.** A forward exhalation, or a breath through a staff, throws a fan of freezing air and ice that flash-chills flesh and fluid, freezing a tunnel's front rank solid for a heartbeat. Hot, dry air weakens it, and it endangers allies close by.
- **Glacier Spike.** A long, dense spike of glacial force drives through everything in its line, piercing and freezing at once, punching through shield and breastplate in one white crack. Stone cover and layered wards can break its momentum.
- **Hailstorm.** A skyward working, or a weather-knot rite, brings a barrage of ice pellets and stone-cold shards down on a courtyard or field line, striking helmets like slingstones. It is strongest outdoors and weak under solid roofing.
- **Glacial Prison.** Layered ice snaps shut around a single target, holding it still and bleeding away its heat, as when a charging berserker is stopped inside a clear, screaming coffin. Large creatures and fast movers are harder to catch whole.
- **Brittle Curse.** A touch or gaze drives cold into an object or body until it loses its give and fractures under ordinary strain, so one hammer blow shatters frozen chain links. Thick living bodies resist, and full effect usually needs repeated blows.
- **Winter Shroud.** A veil of muffled falling frost, dampened sound, and low visibility closes around a patrol or camp, a whispering curtain of snow before a night raid. In warm climates its sudden chill can give it away.
- **Blizzard Call.** A long chant pulls wind, snow, and suspended ice into one coherent killing storm, a commanded whiteout that closes a fortress valley within the hour. It is costly outside cold climates and can spiral out of control in mountains.
- **Deep Freeze.** A reliquary rite locks a relic, corpse, chamber, or wound into suspended cold for preservation or denial, sealing a plague crypt in blue ice until a cure is found. The longer the sleep, the more dangerous a careless thaw.

### *Storm Magic*

Storm spells feed on ambient charge, moving air, moisture, and the caster's own reserves; prepared storms, high places, and conductive surroundings ease the personal cost.

- **Static Kiss.** A snap of the fingers, or a touch of a metal ring, delivers a painful electric sting that irritates, signals, or breaks concentration, making a thief's hand flinch from the lock at the crucial moment. Insulated or well-grounded targets barely feel it.
- **Storm Scent.** A slow, tasting breath reads charged air, pressure tension, and coming weather, so sailors reef their lines before the storm shows on the horizon. City clutter and magical turbulence give false readings.
- **Rain Draw.** An upward pull gathers moisture into a local mass of mist, cloud, or heavier rain, as a drought shrine coaxes enough cloud to save a planted terrace. It is weak in truly dry air.
- **Thunderclap.** A clap of the hands releases a concussive burst that stuns, deafens, and breaks formations, knocking boarders off a gangplank with one report. Stone halls can amplify it dangerously.
- **Flash Arc.** A pointed finger sends a short leap of lightning to a target or between nearby conductors, enough to shock a guard off an iron latch. Dry, insulated targets take less of it.

- **Spark Net.** Crackling charge spreads across connected metal, wire, or water, so harbour chains become untouchable as invaders climb them. It needs a conductive path and endangers allies on the same network.
- **Cloud Veil.** Gathered vapour darkens a lane, courtyard, or patch of sky with dense storm haze, hiding a beaten warband's retreat and preparing heavier storm work. Strong crosswinds tear it apart.
- **Charged Spear.** A bolt is hurled along a weapon or conductive line, turning a pike line into a lightning channel into a charging beast. Without a good line it fades quickly.
- **Pressure Wall.** Compressed stormfront air stops missiles, smoke, and bodies across a small frontage, so archers watch their arrows flatten against nothing. Heavy artillery and long force can break it.
- **Chain Flash.** Once one conductor is struck, lightning leaps on between nearby targets, shocking a clustered boarding party in turn across wet deck planks. Grounding, spacing, and dry insulation stop the chain.
- **Storm Lash.** Cutting wind and charge whip out in one striking line from the hand or a staff, opening a gap in a shield wall. Hard grounding weakens its lightning.
- **Downburst.** An overhead slam drives descending force down on a small patch of ground like a storm column punching downward, blasting siege ladders back from a wall. It is risky near structures or allies.
- **Blue Vein.** A touch charges a weapon, staff, or shield with stored lightning until it crackles, a spearhead alive before the first charge. Poor materials may crack or arc unpredictably.
- **Thunder Mark.** A pointed mark, or a daub of conductive pigment, brands a target so the next strike or storm effect finds it easily, as a siege crew paints one gate section for the next lightning call. Cleansing, grounding, or concealment weaken it.
- **Squall Run.** Body and storm force align, carrying the caster at speed through wind and rain, across a flooded street faster than arrows can follow. It is unstable on slick stone and crowded decks.
- **Cyclone Eye.** A centring working opens a brief calm circle inside surrounding chaos, where healers can work on a storm-tossed deck. It comes easier inside an existing storm than in dead-still air.
- **Forked Crown.** Several lightning branches are gathered and held ready, so a war-mage can stand with three bolts waiting while choosing targets. Holding the charge strains control and invites backlash.
- **Deluge Burst.** Water pressure and impact shock are released in one smashing burst, turning a breached floodgate into a weapon against the raiders wading through it. It needs a mass of water or a prepared reservoir.
- **Storm Cage.** Rotating wind, rain, and current close around one target, holding a renegade lightning-caster with a price on her head until the bounty-takers bring the shackles. Heavy grounded targets and wards against movement resist it.
- **Cloudbridge.** A semi-stable platform of charged mist spans a small gap, letting priests cross a broken shrine span during a storm rite. It is short-lived and unsafe under heavy loads.
- **Ball Lightning.** A wandering sphere of unstable current drifts near the caster, denying a corridor to the lord's hunters. It is unpredictable and dangerous in confined spaces.
- **Sky Rend.** A slow call draws one high strike down from prepared clouds or a charged sky, using a watchtower beacon as its path into the siege tower rolling up below. Without a prepared sky it may fail or fall far short.
- **Storm Shepherd.** A long chant or a tower or fleet rite leans a whole weather front onto a chosen course, sparing one harbour by turning

the storm onto the pirates' anchorage up the coast. It guides major weather rather than commanding it.

- **Thunderwake.** A violent pressure wake trails behind a moving charge, mount, or vessel, so cavalry break pursuit as rolling shock hits the chasers' front line. It is hard to control among allied formations.
- **Monsoon Call.** A long chant pulls heavy rain and hard wind over a district for flood, concealment, or blessing, as a temple ends a drought at the price of washed-out roads. It endangers crops, roads, and weak buildings.
- **Tempest Wrath.** A full storm assault of wind, lightning, and pressure is unleashed over a battlefield, enough to break a siege line, and nearly kills its maker in the backlash. It is among the least safe battle workings in common use.
- **White Line.** A forward discharge drives one concentrated line of charge through air and grounded bodies, spearing three soldiers in a doorway with blue-white light. Poor grounding, wet allies, and reflective metal make it as dangerous behind the target as before it.
- **Lightning Strike.** A pointed hand calls a near-vertical bolt down on any point in sight, and an enemy standard erupts in white fire. It is strongest outdoors and unreliable under heavy roofing, in deep caves, or in null weather.
- **Storm Tether.** A sustained link to the sky allows strike after strike rather than one, so a storm adept can walk the field dropping bolts as the enemy scatters. It is demanding to hold and broken by lost sight or counter-weathering.
- **Briar Arc.** One discharge forks into several jumps across nearby conductors, and a whole shield knot convulses when its first man is struck. Good spacing, insulating cover, and separating wards limit its reach.

### *Forge Magic*

Forge spells feed on forge heat, prepared materials, stored charge, and the smith's own shaping effort; the better the workshop, the less personal reserve is wasted.

- **Heat Forge.** A hand on the metal, or a woken forge bed, brings work to exactly the right heat, so a sellsword company's smith can mend split mail between two days of fighting with no furnace nearer than a day's ride. Heat alone cannot make bad metal good.
- **Quench Line.** A traced finger, or a water-trough focus, cools one chosen edge or seam while the rest stays hot, setting a blade's edge while its spine remains workable. Poor timing can still warp the piece.
- **Temper Bind.** A slow cooling bind settles a finished piece's inner balance against later stress, so shield rims survive a campaign without cracking. Overbinding makes the material brittle.
- **Rune Seat.** A long preparing touch readies a surface to hold inscription and charge without tearing or misfiring, as an artificer readies a bronze plate for a trigger sigil. Cheap material still limits it.
- **Fit Perfect.** An aligning touch, sometimes through a jig or frame, settles jointed parts into ideal contact, so a delver's half-rusted key finally seats in the sealed door of a barrow hall. Missing parts and warped material still need correcting by hand.
- **Hammer Echo.** Worked with the blow itself, or through an echo rune on the hammer, the force and intent of one strike repeat through the piece, one master stroke doing the work of three. Repeated echoes can overshape delicate work.
- **Anvil Hold.** A touch on the bench holds a workpiece still and true under stress, cutting, and shaping, so a delicate frame stays straight while punched and riveted. Very large work still needs clamps and support.

- **Flux Cleanse.** A working over the crucible purges slag, impurity, and bad mixing from a melt, saving a tainted batch before it is lost. It cannot fully rescue mixtures that are incompatible at heart.
- **Edge Wake.** A slow stroke along the edge, or over a sharpening stone, realigns and corrects a blade, as beast-hunters renew dull spearheads before going after the thing that took the shepherd. It is maintenance, not the restoration of a ruined edge.
- **Grip Oath.** A vow of hand and tool binds a tool to its owner, so a smith's hammer answers perfectly to one apprentice and poorly to a thief. It is weaker when the owner barely uses or values the tool.
- **Brace Plate.** A surface working strengthens armour, braces, housings, or frames under load, so wagon armour survives a mountain descent that would crumple ordinary plating. Overstiffening costs flexibility.
- **Trigger Sigil.** An inscription binds a simple stored effect to a touch, phrase, or pressure, as a barrow-builder's sigil bursts into flame when the first grave-robber lifts the lid. Complex triggers soon become unreliable.
- **Lockwork Memory.** A long touch to the gears teaches a mechanism its proper sequence, so the old lock on a hold's treasure door stops jamming after a century of neglect. Broken parts still need repair.
- **Spark Wheel.** Contained charge drives a small engine, light, or mechanism, letting an artificer run a pump in a flooded cellar without animal labour. It suits small devices, not whole foundries.
- **Weld Seam.** Controlled heat fuses compatible materials into a clean joint, as defenders weld the split chain of the river boom before the raiders' boats come back on the tide. Dirty surfaces or a poor fit weaken the seam.
- **Voice of Iron.** An ear or hand laid to worked metal hears where it wants to fail, so an armourer rejects a breastplate that would split at the next blow. Decorative plating can hide the truth.
- **Inscribed Purpose.** A purpose inscription fixes one narrow, lasting function into an object, such as the lamp of a watchtower on a haunted road that relights at dusk and dims at dawn. Overbroad functions collapse into weak gimmickry.
- **Hardcase Shell.** A reinforcing working toughens a crafted item against impact and wear, so a messenger's case survives the fall when his horse is shot from under him. Pushed too far, it can add brittleness.
- **Workshop Calm.** A working over the whole room steadies heat, noise, motion, and minor interference, so smiths finish the new gate-bars while the siege rams pound the wall outside. It cannot fully suppress catastrophic accidents.
- **Artefact Feed.** A direct feed, or a charging stand, tops up an enchanted item from prepared energy or stored reserve, as a ward-staff is recharged before a long patrol. Incompatible charge can warp the item.
- **Smelter's Test.** A read of a sample, or a furnace assay, judges what a material can safely become, as star-iron looted from a fallen hold is found fit for tools but not swords. Hidden curses and foreign alloys may escape it.
- **Forge Ward.** A ward laid over the bench shields a workpiece from hostile magic, impurity, and interference while it is being made, so a relic blade cannot be sabotaged in reforging. It usually covers only one piece or bench.
- **Living Alloy.** A touch lends metal flexibility without loss of strength, so a gate bar flexes rather than snaps under a ram. The effect fades, and repeated flexing still fatigues the piece.

- **Master Temper.** A full temper ritual aligns heat, stress, and purpose so precisely that a campaign sword can equal a house relic. It needs a worthy base piece and skilled craft behind it.
- **Reliquary Make.** Long preparation, or a deep kiln or vault rite, readies a vessel to store magic without leakage or corruption, fit to carry a saint's charged bone fragment. Very strong contents still need periodic care.
- **Enduring Mark.** A patient inscription cuts a sigil meant to outlast generations of use and weather, so boundary stones keep their founding seal centuries after the mason's death. It belongs only on settled surfaces and intended meanings.

### *Warding*

Wards feed on inscribed structure, clearly defined boundaries, stored charge, and the caster's own reserves; permanent wards depend heavily on their anchors, materials, and renewal.

- **Threshold Mark.** A finger or chalk mark defines a doorway or line so later protective magic has a clean edge to bind to, as a plague house is marked before quarantine wards are laid. Vague or shifting thresholds weaken what follows.
- **Lesser Ward.** A quick working or inscribed sigil guards a door, chest, or room against casual intrusion, tampering, or minor harm, keeping drunks out of a healer's chamber overnight. It is not meant to stand against siege force.
- **Alarm Seal.** A touched seal, sometimes linked to a bell or token, tells the warder the instant a boundary is crossed or disturbed, so a moneylender wakes the moment a thief lifts the lid of his strongbox. It warns but does not stop anyone.
- **Dust Circle.** A drawn ring of salt or ash and a spoken chant set a minimal boundary around a ritual, keeping a street rite clear of jostling crowds. Strong force or deliberate sabotage still breaks it.
- **Firebreak Sigil.** A marked or carved line stops flame from crossing it, so temple guardians keep a lantern accident from becoming a library blaze. Huge furnace or magical fire can overwhelm it.
- **Bolt Ward.** A shielding working blunts arrows, bolts, and other missiles entering a doorway or small frontage, so defenders survive the first volley while the shutters close. Siege engines and heavy close throws still threaten it.
- **Keyed Passage.** A threshold chant lets only chosen tokens, signatures, or people through, such as bearers of the abbot's prayer token at a monastery's treasure vault. Badly chosen keys can be copied or stolen.
- **Pest Bar.** A working along sill and seam makes a boundary feel hostile to vermin, keeping grain stores free of rats through winter. It works less well on larger beasts or magical vermin.
- **Quiet Room.** A hush laid on the threshold dampens sound crossing it, so a council can debate in secret unheard beyond its walls. It stops ordinary sound better than violent magical shock.
- **Circle Against Rot.** A chalk or salt circle and a short chant hold back mould, corruption, and creeping contamination, guarding a sickroom through the damp season. It slows corruption but cannot purify a severe infestation alone.
- **Blinding Line.** A mirror-sigil line flashes anyone who crosses it, so tomb robbers stumble blind the moment they pass the crypt seal. It deters rather than holds.

- **Faithful Wall.** A long chant across the whole surface lends an existing barrier endurance and structural loyalty, so a renewed flood wall holds one more night. The wall must already stand and be basically sound.
- **Boundary Echo.** A touch to an active ward reads where, when, and how it was recently tested, telling wardens which window was probed at midnight. It reads pressure and disturbance better than identity.
- **Sanctified Ground.** A blessing chant or temple consecration hallows a shrine or courtyard against lesser hostile presences and makes profane acts harder there, so wounded refugees can rest at a roadside shrine. It is strongest where people and rite stand behind it.
- **Lockstep Ward.** A route-defining chant forces anyone entering a passage into a predictable path or rhythm, driving invaders down a trapped central lane. Agile or airborne intruders may bypass it.
- **Weather Shield.** A canopy working softens wind, rain, and hail over a tent or small building, keeping a field infirmary dry through a coastal storm. It is not full control of the weather.
- **Mirror Gate.** A reflective threshold turns weak hostile magic or directed force away, so a curse rebounds off a chapel door onto empty courtyard stone. Strong or diffuse effects may only partly reflect.
- **Refusal Ring.** A ring mark or boundary inscription bars the unnamed, uninvited, or disqualified, letting only named mourners into a burial vigil. Its criteria must be exact or loopholes appear.
- **Guardian Lattice.** A long multi-node rite links several wards so a breach in one wakes or strengthens another, as a lord's treasury ties its alarms, locks, firebreaks, and a pair of wardhounds into one web, and the thieves who broke the first lock met all the rest. Complex lattices need careful design and upkeep.
- **Containment Square.** A marked floor and stone anchors box a dangerous object inside fixed limits, so a cursed relic dragged out of a barrow is boxed where it lies until the temple can send a cart and a priest. It is only as strong as its anchors and surface definition.
- **Hostile Step.** A trapward punishes anyone crossing a forbidden line with pain, shock, heat, or jarring force, throwing grave robbers back from the inner line. Badly keyed, it injures allies.
- **Wardstone Charge.** A charging rite stores defensive power in a durable anchor for later wards to draw on, so a keep's old wardstones carry it through a siege. Overcharging can crack the stone or leak power.
- **Emergency Seal.** A desperate closing working, or a prepared door trigger, slams an area shut under immediate threat, sealing a plague chamber the instant containment fails. It often traps friend and foe alike.
- **Sacred Exclusion.** A consecrated denial bars beings of a specific category or profane state, as a sanctuary turns away the blood-soaked and oath-broken. It needs a meaningful definition, not vague prejudice.
- **Layered Sanctuary.** A multi-stage build raises overlapping defences with separate triggers, so a reliquary hall survives fire, intrusion, and curse because each layer answers a different threat. Complexity adds upkeep and points of failure.
- **Siegebreak Ward.** A long fortification rite strengthens structure, denial, and impact resistance together, letting a city gate outlast three rams and a fire assault. It is expensive and usually fixed to one site.
- **Prison of Conditions.** A chanted rite holds a target only while stated rules hold, such as silence, naming, stillness, or position, trapping a summoned entity until someone speaks its release. Poorly written conditions become escape routes.

- **Great Threshold.** A long walk of the bounds, or a ceremony lasting most of a day, sets a durable boundary around a whole site, making a monastery valley one protected sacred domain. It needs a real site identity and a network of anchors.
- **Household Grace.** A hearth and threshold blessing keeps quiet everyday protections over a dwelling, holding warmth, warning of intruders, deterring vermin, and keeping calm, as an old healer's cottage stays protected without looking fortified. It is no military defence.
- **Final Bulwark.** Stored reserves are released to keep a collapsing ward alive through catastrophe, so a sanctuary holds one last night of assault and fails at dawn. It often ruins the ward network and anchors that feed it.
- **Mantle Ward.** A light personal field of structured resistance wraps the caster, so an alley ambusher's first knife skids off invisible geometry around the ribs. It is far weaker than heavy ward-shells against siege force and sustained blows.
- **Forestall.** A reflex gesture collapses an unfolding spell before it resolves, so a hurled gout of flame dies in the air as blue ward-lines slash its forming core. It needs line, timing, and a grasp of the hostile spell's shape.
- **Unpicking.** A directed working unbinds, drains, or scrambles an existing magical effect until it falls apart, as a warder strips the geas from a prisoner's chains. Deeply anchored rituals, divine sponsorship, and workings as great as a town's walls resist it.
- **Turnaside.** A structured ward-face catches a directed hostile spell and throws it back or aside, so a curse rebounds into the sorcerer who sent it. Diffuse effects and overwhelming magical mass are hard to turn.
- **Grey Ring.** A field working starves active magic inside a bounded ring, so duellists step into dead grey ground where only steel and muscle matter. It is exhausting, fixed in place, and resented by allies whose spells fail inside it.

### *Lightweaving*

Lightweaving spells feed on ambient light, reflective surfaces, symbolic intent, and the weaver's concentration; dim or visually chaotic places raise the cost.

- **Glow Script.** A finger or stylus writes visible light into the air or onto a surface as a message, sigil, or display, as a watchtower sends glowing orders down the wall line. Strong daylight makes it hard to read.
- **Halo Mark.** A pointed hand sets a bright symbolic marker on someone for identification or ceremony, as healers mark the wounded who must be carried first. It is obvious, and so useless for stealth.
- **Colour Shift.** A wash of the hand changes the apparent colour of a surface, garment, banner, or room, so fleeing outlaws turn their red cloaks to the lord's blue and ride straight through his pickets. Texture and weight stay as they were.
- **Prism Flash.** A sudden flash splits light into blinding fragments and rainbow shards, dazzling guards as a prisoner rushes the door. It is weaker in darkness without a light source to break.
- **Banner Image.** A stable heraldic or sacred image rises above a company or place, so reinforcements can find the allied company through smoke. It shows identity better than fine detail.
- **Luminous Veil.** Idealised light drapes a figure, smoothing flaws and heightening chosen qualities, as a high priest enters the hall in sanctified radiance. It flatters the look but changes nothing beneath.

- **False Torchline.** Marching lights or distant lit positions appear on a far ridge, making a small force look far larger at night. Sound and heat do not match unless other means supply them.
- **Glass Echo.** A false angle or duplicate position flickers along a line of reflection, so an archer misjudges where the target truly stands. It works best with mirrors, glass, or clear lines of light.
- **Story Panel.** A short moving scene of light plays on a wall or in the air for teaching, warning, or ceremony, as a village elder shows the children what came out of the barrow the last time it was opened, and which road to run. It suits prepared or simple scenes, not improvised complexity.
- **Mask of Office.** A touch overlays a person with visible signs of rank, role, or duty, so a false herald walks into the enemy camp wearing every sign of a lord's envoy. Skilled observers still test behaviour and real authority.
- **Radiant Outline.** A sweep of hard light traces hidden or invisible shapes, outlining a concealed assassin against a wall. It reveals where something is better than who it is.
- **False Door.** A convincing but intangible doorway or architectural feature appears on a wall, so pursuers waste crucial moments at a painted exit. A touch reveals the fraud at once.
- **Mirage Stage.** Several anchored images build a layered visual set for performance, ritual, or deception, turning a square into a battlefield tableau for a victory festival. It needs space and steady viewing angles.
- **Sun Thread.** Several lights are linked into one moving symbolic design, as the beacon towers of a valley weave one warning sign above it when a warband comes up the road. Rough weather and heavy obstruction spoil it.
- **Revealing Beam.** A pointed beam of focused light makes one thing impossible to ignore, so in a lord's hall the bloody knife on the table becomes the one thing no one can look away from. It draws attention but does not compel belief.
- **Glory Mantle.** Visible radiance gathers around the wearer, heightening awe and stature, so a war-chief looks almost mythic as the host raises him on its shields. Hollow or cowardly conduct can still puncture it.
- **Phantom Procession.** Moving ceremonial figures, banners, and ordered pageantry pass along a street or hall, as at the memorial for the border wars the fallen march again in light. It works best in formal, expected settings.
- **Mirror Array.** Reflections and apparent positions multiply, so a duellist stands amid shifting false selves. Touch and attacks that strike a whole area bypass much of it.
- **Sign of Peace.** A sacred or authoritative symbol blazes above a crowd and presses it towards calm, so rioters hesitate under the old peace sign. It works best on crowds willing to respect the symbol.
- **Righteous Glare.** Hard directed light strips away concealment and exposes its target, laying hidden saboteurs bare under interrogation light. Reflective shields and screens can blunt it.
- **House of Light.** Projected walls and surfaces form a room-sized pavilion, so two warlords can parley under a roof of light on the burned field between their hosts. It gives appearance and orientation more than real shelter.
- **Image Lock.** A chanted binding ties an illusion to a surface, object, or trigger phrase so it returns again and again, like a hidden mural that appears only at the right oath. Wear, vandalism, or broken triggers ruin it.
- **Splendour Screen.** A polished, radiant appearance hides a crude or damaged reality, so a raided, half-burned hall looks unbroken to the envoy sent to see whether its lord is weak. Physical contact reveals the truth beneath.

- **Beacon of Claim.** A sign of a lord or a place blazes visible across a valley, as a fort retaken from raiders signals its victory back to the host. It declares a claim but does not enforce it.
- **Courtly Facade.** Convincing, polished detail alters how a person or place appears, so a wounded ruler seems composed for one necessary audience. It needs active upkeep under scrutiny.
- **Shatterimage.** A held projection collapses into blinding, glittering scatter, as a false wall bursts into fragments when an escape route is taken. The illusion is destroyed in the process.
- **Prismatic Cathedral.** A long chant builds a great sacred structure of light and symbolic geometry, so a conquered city sees a peace rite held in a cathedral made only of light. It is costly and usually short-lived unless heavily anchored.
- **Radiant Doom.** A public doom in light exposes and defines someone before an assembly, often at a judgement in a lord's hall or a temple, as a sign names a false penitent's betrayal. It shows what a community believes, which is not always the truth.
- **Glass Veil.** Light, expectation, and edges bend until the hidden one no longer registers as present, so a spy crosses a gallery while guards stare past him. Sound, scent, footprints, and disturbance still betray him.
- **Deep Glass Veil.** Concealment holds even while the hidden one moves, fights, or works magic, though every action strains the weave, so an assassin stays unseen through a duel she starts. It is costly and easier to track by means other than sight.
- **Flawsight.** A touch to the eyes attunes them to the stress, missing reflections, and bent light that hidden things leave behind, so a warden can look straight at an invisible knife-bearer. It finds hidden forms better than their detail, especially in crowded or reflective places.
- **Unmasking Eye.** Eyes opened by the working see through layered glamour, disguise, and simple concealment to the forms and distortions beneath, revealing mask, disguise, and hidden wound at once. It is taxing, socially disruptive, and overwhelming in highly magical places.

### *Conjuration*

Conjuration costs vary by spell, but most draw on the caster's reserves together with something already there: an ownership bond, a known route or anchor, a named task, or nearby material to gather.

- **Called Tool.** A spoken recall opens a short, rightful path home for a personal implement, so an engineer under fire calls her repair hammer from the wagon. Wards, too much distance, or muddled ownership defeat it, and it is no tool for theft.
- **Gathered Shield.** A sweeping hand pulls dust, splinters, gravel, or debris into a compact defensive plate, a chest-high barrier against arrows on a roadside. It is weak where there is nothing to gather, and sustained blows quickly drain the caster.
- **Lantern Frame.** A finger traces a circle and a simple floating vessel of light forms, holding glow, heat, or a message, as delvers float three of them down a flooded crypt stair to see what waits below before anyone wades in. Strong wind, wards against light, and distracting glamours unsettle it.
- **Water Bearer.** Nearby water lifts from its basin into a hovering carrying form that follows simple commands, as miners draw seepwater out of a collapsed shaft. It needs existing water, and fouled or mixed liquids behave unpredictably.
- **Stone Servitor.** Loose rock or masonry assembles into a rough labouring figure for carrying, bracing, or pushing, enough to raise a fallen lintel off trapped workers. Its hands are clumsy, and stairs and ladders defeat it.

- **Ember Hands.** Existing flame gathers into small handling shapes that carry coals, light braziers, or start prepared burns, lighting a line of campfires along a refugee column without torches. It needs nearby heat, and rain weakens it sharply.
- **Rope of Arrival.** A temporary hanging line forms between two visible anchors for descent, hauling, or crossing, so scouts drop from a broken watchtower to the courtyard. It is for loads, not fighting strain, and poor anchors stay dangerous.
- **Pack Frame.** A harness or floating frame wraps around cargo and spreads its weight, so a salvage crew can bring a cracked bronze idol down a mountain whole. It eases the strain rather than removing weight, and sudden shocks collapse it.
- **Messenger Shape.** A spoken message takes a simple visible body, a bird, ribbon, lantern mote, or folded sigil, for one delivery, as a besieged lord sends word over the enemy camp to his vassals when no runner would get through alive. It holds little complexity, and name-binders or omen-readers can intercept it.
- **Summoned Ladder.** Nearby wood, bone, rope, or even hardened light assembles into a climbable form, used by burglars and constables alike to reach upper windows. It is only as safe as its material, and high winds or moving walls trouble it.
- **Tent of the Road.** Canvas, branches, dust, rope, or light-film are pulled into a weather-shedding shelter, raised by surveyors before freezing rain reaches a pass. It is a shelter, not a fortress, and severe storms need real anchors or wards.
- **Hunter's Decoy.** Shadow, dust, foliage, or light shapes a false animal or figure that draws eyes away, as poachers send a phantom stag through the brush and slip away the other side. Skilled trackers notice the missing scent and weight.
- **Armoury Recall.** A named call along a prepared line draws the right weapon from an arsenal, chest, or rack into hand, so palace guards summon shields the instant the bell rings. It needs prior keyed preparation, and warded armouries can refuse it.
- **Manifest Blade.** A short-lived weapon is held together out of light, ash, dust, or water pressure, long enough for a disarmed envoy to cut a hostage's bonds with a pale knife. It cuts only while held, an emergency weapon rather than a duellist's masterpiece.
- **Circle of Return.** A chanted arrival circle brings back marked tools, packets, or assigned people along a known route, cycling sandbags and repair kits between wall teams without runners. It is not true teleportation; the route must exist, and interruptions on it matter.
- **Beast Tether.** A whistled bond call brings a trained animal, mount, or familiar by the safest route and holds it to command, so a rider trapped in a ravine summons her horse. It cannot override terror, injury, or a severed bond, and wild animals answer poorly.
- **Bridge of Borrowed Timber.** Loose wood, wreckage, roots, or poles assemble into a crossing for foot traffic and light carts, as retreating troops span an irrigation cut and burn it behind them. It cannot invent support where none exists, and overloading it kills.
- **House Key Avatar.** A key-turn working calls up a simple domestic servant keyed to one household's layout, fetching books from the upper stacks for an elderly scholar after a fall. It works badly outside its home and can be hijacked if its key-pattern is stolen.
- **Word of Banishing.** A spoken dismissal, backed by counter-naming and the binder's authority, collapses unstable summons and hostile constructs, as a hired conjurer tears apart an ill-called thing in a burning mill before it

can follow the miller's children out. Solid, independently sustained matter is harder to dismiss.

- **Reaching Hand.** A pointed hand shapes a small force-hand that lifts, carries, or handles light objects across a room, plucking a key off a shelf beyond the bars. Fine locks and heavy loads remain beyond it.
- **Silent Drudge.** A spoken task calls up an invisible labouring construct that follows narrow instructions, as a thief empties a noble's coin-chest one purse at a time with a servant no guard can see. It is literal-minded, weak, and unsafe around complex hazards unless carefully directed.
- **Seeking Darts.** Several pale darts of force form and seek a named target along the cleanest line, even around a corner after a fleeing mage. Strong wards and defences that disperse force can blunt or scatter them.
- **Porter's Plate.** A stable hovering platform carries cargo, the wounded, or ritual tools, as delvers float a wounded comrade out of a barrow on a plate of pale force, the dead still knocking behind them. Stairs, narrow passages, and sudden drops upset its balance.
- **Telekinetic Grip.** A stronger force-hand shoves, pins, lifts, or tears things free at a distance, yanking a fleeing rider from the saddle with no rope in sight. It is crude beside real hands and can crush fragile things.
- **Familiar Call.** A whispered bond call brings a familiar into attendance, a minor spirit-construct that wears a creature's form or a made body, as a night courier calls her owl-shaped familiar from hiding. The familiar must already exist as a bond; this is recall, not creation.
- **Slipped Step.** With a snap, the caster shifts a fraction off their place in the world, reappearing a stride away or letting a knife pass through empty air. It is erratic in heavy wards, tight walls, and unstable magical zones.
- **Folded Threshold.** A cut in the air opens a brief two-point path through folded space for the caster and one companion, from a tower stair to a chapel balcony. It costs substantial reserves and is dangerous if the far side is poorly known or blocked.
- **Distant Arrival.** At very high cost, or on stored transit charge, the caster and companions arrive at a prepared destination, as archmages flee a burning citadel for a distant tower. Poor knowledge, wards, or unstable ley risk misarrival; the longest jumps need grand confluences at both ends.
- **Transit Circle.** A permanent built circle links prepared sites for repeated passage, keeping an empire's cities joined across mountains and winter sea. It is built work, not improvisation; once mapped it is a prize armies fight over, and circles between distant cities must sit on grand confluences, so such networks are few and fiercely held.
- **Wide Gate.** A visible paired portal opens and holds long enough for many people or loads to pass, as a sellsword company ringed on a hilltop steps out through a gate into the forest behind the besiegers. It is hard to conceal and disastrous if its anchors shift mid-use.

### *Augury*

Augury spells read the pressure of possibility through prepared media such as candles, dice, bells, birds, and star tables, fed by the caster's own reserves and concentration.

- **Omen Candle.** A prepared flame is lit and watched: its steadiness, fracture, or flicker shows danger or a good opening, as when a caravan master asks whether to leave before dusk. It gives direction, not detail, and the reader's own feelings can bend it.
- **Dice of Inclination.** Marked bone dice or tokens thrown over a map weigh several short-term choices, so smugglers can pick which ford

to risk past the lord's riders. It needs clearly defined options and fails when the future is chaos or every choice is poor.

- **Silver Thread.** A forward gesture draws a thin luminous line, seen only by those who follow it, through a dangerous place such as a trapped ruin. It shows the best route now, and moving enemies or shifting ground soon spoil it.
- **Battle Weather.** A glance across the field, or a rite over the war map, forecasts the coming fight's emotional climate, warning a captain that panic will rule the next while. It reads momentum, not casualties or brilliant improvisation.
- **Crow Reckoning.** Under open sky the augur reads scavenger flight and shifting shadow to learn where death will gather, as border guards learn which pass will see blood by sunset. It overreads plague country and battlefields.
- **Window of Best Passage.** A timing reading over clocks or an hourglass names the best moment to act within a set span, and thieves wait for it to the breath before moving through the manor's west gallery. It narrows risk without ending it, and acting outside the window makes things worse.
- **Mercantile Auspice.** A glance over ledgers, or a long rite at the trading table, reads likely prices, spoilage, and demand, so a merchant house buys grain now because the river road will close to raiders within the month. Sudden wars and deliberate magical interference defeat it.
- **Death Hour.** A touch at the bedside judges when someone already doomed is likeliest to die, letting healers triage a plague ward before dawn. It works only on futures already weighted towards death, and timely help can still change them.
- **Dream of Branches.** A guided sleep with incense and symbolic anchors plays out several strong futures as symbols, as when a regent sleeps in the omen chamber before choosing alliance or war. The symbols mislead the untrained, and repeated use breeds obsession.
- **Ruin Sign.** A site reading gathers signs of strain and marks the weakest point in a structure, house, or plan, as a delving company's augur marks which pillar of a drowned hall will give first, and the company crosses on the far side. It sees near failure better than slow decline.
- **Red Thread of Betrayal.** Read over a group or a circle chart of names, it marks where loyalty is likeliest to break, showing a sellsword captain that his cousin, not his lieutenant, will turn first. It shows strain, not guilt, and people can resist it.
- **Borrowed Tomorrow.** A reflex working gives a flash of foresight a heartbeat before danger lands, enough for a duellist to twist aside from a stab. It is exhausting, and repeated use brings migraines, hesitation, and timing drift.
- **Fortune Theft.** A quick working with exchange tokens steals good luck from one nearby outcome for the caster or an ally, as a gambler's die lands well while her neighbour's fails. Someone always inherits the worse branch, and many peoples call it predatory even where it is tolerated.
- **Doom Weight.** A cursing gaze, or a rite over an effigy, presses a target towards the worst branch already possible, as when an executioner takes the wrong stair in a palace fire. It needs an opening, and discipline, wards, and counter-augury weaken it.
- **Prophet's Veil.** An augur veils herself with cloth and calming symbols before strong prophecy, so that reading famine signs does not leave her crippled with dread. It softens fixation on one vision but does not prevent every obsession.
- **Hazard Bell.** A bell or chime is keyed to ring as a predicted kind of danger draws near, so a frontier village sleeps under a bell keyed to raids; it rang twice last winter, and both times

the riders found the palisade manned. It answers broad kinds such as fire, raid, or betrayal, not every unknown.

- **Star Ledger.** A long observatory reading sets celestial omens against the fortunes of houses, kingdoms, and seasons, so a kingdom can begin floodworks years early. It is good for seasons and years, poor for daily detail, and false star tables ruin it.
- **Choice Scar.** A touch or hidden sigil marks someone who has just made a world-shaping decision, so later auguries can follow its consequences, as a rival prophet marks a newly crowned queen. It is ethically dubious, and many lords forbid it to all but their own seers.
- **Pendulum of Workings.** A swinging pendulum or lens senses active magic and residue nearby, telling a delver at once that a vault door was last opened by spell, not key, and that he should stop before touching it. It shows presence and rough character better than school or intent.
- **Lost-Thing Trail.** Named aloud or held through a token, a known object's strongest trail is followed, as a lord's mage tracks a stolen signet through three alleys of thieves' stalls. Wards, false copies, and crowded markets blur it.
- **Living Bearing.** Focused on a name or a lock of hair, blood, or an icon, it finds the likeliest path to a known living person, as a ranger finds a missing child before the snow closes. Concealment, false trails, and warded thresholds break it.
- **Far Eye.** A mirror-bowl or remote working opens a window onto a place the caster knows well, so a siege council can watch an enemy tower without sending a scout. Privacy wards, illusion, and poor knowledge of the place spoil it.
- **Basin Watch.** A basin of still silvered water or a mirror holds a live view of a person, place, or thing as it moves, letting an archmage follow a rebel march. Good wards, false doubles, and countermagic distort it or send back dangerous reflections.

### *Dominion Magic*

Dominion spells draw on authority itself, a commanding voice, office and regalia, the pressure of a crowd, or a clear line of sight, together with the caster's own reserves.

- **Snapped Order.** One short spoken command lands with binding force before the hearer can think, as a caravan's guard mage snaps "Drop it" and the bandit lets the knife fall into the mud. Strong wills, wards, and orders against self-preservation resist it.
- **Silence of Dissent.** A spoken command weighs a room or square against open contradiction, so a tyrant's herald reads a new tax to a hushed square. It makes vocal opposition hard and costly but does not end resistance.
- **Kneeling Pulse.** A stamp on the floor sends an obedience shock through the bodies nearby, and a charging crowd buckles to one knee before the gates. It works on massed groups better than on prepared elite fighters.
- **Borrowed Courage.** Raised over a banner, it takes nerve from one group and pours steadiness into another, as a commander drains a mob to steady a tired shield wall. The borrowed morale fades fast and leaves the drained hollow.
- **Puppet Step.** A gripping gesture seizes a body's next movement, forcing a stumble, a turn, or a strike aside, as an assassin's wrist turns at the last heartbeat. Pain, discipline, and training against compulsion break it.
- **Loyal Mask.** A touch to the face lays calm, assent, or devotion over someone's outward manner, so a frightened hostage looks willing through talks. It shapes performance more than conviction, and sharp eyes see the strain beneath.

- **Crowd Sway.** A few spoken sentences amplify a crowd's strongest current towards fear, calm, anger, or obedience, turning a tense food line into a chanting march. A mood wholly alien to the crowd costs enormously to hold.
- **Sleep of Compliance.** A low, rhythmic voice, sometimes helped by incense, lulls someone into a soft state where commands meet less resistance, as captors do before interrogation. It suits exhausted minds, and violent resistance risks a seizure.
- **Confession Pressure.** Under spoken questioning, concealment grows so costly that the subject feels bodily driven to speak, as a captured raider names the steward who opened the postern before his nose and ears begin to bleed. It forces disclosure, not truth.
- **The Unseen Hour.** A passing glamour lets onlookers see an event without grasping that it matters, so thieves lift a relic from the altar in front of a dozen worshippers who later swear nothing happened. It blunts understanding, not sight, and repeated use breeds suspicion.
- **Chain of Office.** Waking regalia or holding a rite of office binds obedience to rank, title, and sworn role, until conscripts cannot ignore their general's voice. It is strong in sworn hierarchies and weak among outlaws, loose raiding bands, and peoples who bow to no one.
- **Voice of the Throne.** A ruler's spoken command carries across a hall with ritual inevitability, as when a queen halts a coup in one sentence and every sword arm hesitates. It fails spectacularly if her right to rule is already broken.
- **Severed Refusal.** An intimate touch cuts someone off from the inner impulse to say no, so a cult recruiter turns one talk into a binding initiation. Judgement remains, but the ability to stop is gone; many regions outlaw it explicitly.
- **Gilded Devotion.** Gaze and speech wrap obedience in admiration and awe, so a bodyguard order truly believes its bondage is honour. It often curdles into hatred once broken, and existing contempt resists it.
- **Turned Blade.** A snapped working bends hostile intent at the moment of decision, so a blow goes wide, hesitates, or finds the wrong foe, as an assassin's angle turns half a degree. Holding a fight longer needs repetition or stronger bindings.
- **Public Shame.** A public accusation turns a crowd's moral gaze into weakness and exposure, so a thief cannot pocket the idol while the whole temple watches. It is weak where the onlookers do not share the norm.
- **Consent Theft.** A whispered working reframes a choice so obedience feels self-chosen, and a captured smuggler believes she volunteered the names of her whole crew. It is among the most reviled dominion workings, because it poisons the line between willing action and coercion.
- **Mob Fever.** A short rally speech, or a bonfire rite, fuses a crowd's grievance into coordinated aggression, turning market unrest into a palace march. Once loosed it is hard to steer, and blowback on the speaker is common.
- **Idol Gaze.** A consecrated statue, seal, or mask keeps people feeling watched and judged long after the caster has gone, as a golden mask set up in a conquered market makes every public word against the conquerors hard to say. Breaking or desecrating the idol weakens it.
- **Skimming Gaze.** A focused stare, perhaps through a circlet or mask, reads the surface of nearby thoughts and feelings, so an interrogator sees which name made a prisoner panic. Deep memory and disciplined silence stay hidden.

- **Command of Stillness.** A spoken command of stillness overrides a body's urge to move, locking a fleeing spy halfway through a window. It holds people best and is weaker on animals, unnatural creatures, and great momentum.
- **Quelling Voice.** A measured voice, or a bell, incense, or banner rite, lowers anger, panic, and grief until a crowd is governable, and a riot pauses for the food wagons. It soothes without curing the cause, and violence often returns.
- **Usurped Will.** A sustained domination, or a rite bound to a throne, chair, or chain, replaces someone's choices with the caster's commands, so a duke signs an order his hand will not stop writing. It is invasive, unstable, and notorious.

### *Blood Magic*

Blood spells feed on the caster's own blood or a prepared blood sample; the stronger ones draw directly on vitality, lineage, or stored life.

- **Blood Sight.** A touch and a breath of scent read recent blood nearby, its direction, or a kin trace, so trackers know a wounded fugitive passed an alley within the hour. Old dried blood in crowded places is hard to read.
- **Vein Open.** A touch along the line of a vessel coaxes stalled blood back into motion, as when a healer saves a crushed hand before the tissue dies. It is dangerous near untreated ruptures.
- **Vein Seal.** Pressure on the right points, or a sealed bandage, tightens vessels and slows bleeding, buying a wounded scout time to reach surgery. It cannot save a severed artery on its own.
- **Lineage Call.** A drop of blood or a family token pulses towards close kin nearby, guiding a mother to her child through a burning manor. It weakens across adopted, broken, or magically altered lines.
- **Crimson Thread.** A blood-linked touch or a tied cord joins two bodies to share vitality or burden, so a veteran lends strength to a comrade in retreat. A poor match harms both.
- **Heritage Pulse.** A blood sample read at an altar or over a family roll confirms shared ancestry or line membership, as when claimants to a house seal are tested before it passes. It confirms blood, not a rightful claim; who inherits is still settled by kin and the strong.
- **Sacrificial Spur.** The caster opens her own palm and spends the blood for an instant surge of power or strength, enough for a trapped mage to raise one last barrier. Repeated use soon cripples.
- **Blood Mark.** A drop of blood, fresh or inscribed, tags a target so later tracking finds them easily, as a beast-hunter tags a shapeshifter with a flick of blood before it breaks for the woods. Washed or altered blood weakens the link.
- **Coagulate.** A touch, sometimes with a clotting powder, makes spilled blood clot at once, letting surgeons stop bleeding across a wide wound. Used blindly on internal bleeding it is dangerous.
- **Borrowed Strength.** A clasped hand or shared blood token pours vigour into an ally at the giver's own cost, keeping a shield-bearer standing at the door. It drains unevenly and can drop the donor once the crisis passes.
- **Linebreaker.** A counter-working, or a rite that cuts a sample, severs the resonance of hostile kin-based or blood-tagged magic, so a captive prince breaks the blood-lock tracking him. It does little against magic that is not of blood.
- **Hemalock.** Directed at the vessels, it seizes blood pressure and muscle until a berserker drops to one knee as his limbs refuse to surge. It is extremely risky and taboo in many traditions.
- **Vital Debt.** A hurried working or blood-ledger rite holds off a lethal consequence for later repayment in weakness, age, or collapse, so a dying courier lives to deliver his warning. The debt always comes due.

- **Ancestor's Claim.** An invocation of the bloodline briefly wakes a family trait or inherited memory, such as a house's old blade-instinct for one decisive exchange. It can wake buried weakness or ancestral trauma too.
- **Scarlet Compass.** A needle over a blood sample or basin pulls towards a blood-marked target across distance, leading marshals after a fugitive noble through half the city. Running water, ritual cleansing, and countermagic disrupt it.
- **Sanguine Shield.** The caster's own blood hardens into a defence of living vitality around her, enough to survive a first volley. It costs real reserves and leaves her staggering afterwards.
- **Inheritance Knot.** A long family rite, bound at cradle or grave, fixes a trait, gift, or weakness within a line, as a house binds its resistance to one poison for generations. It is ethically fraught and often abused.
- **Blood Price.** The same working taught under Sacrificial Magic. Blood mages pair it with almost any other blood working, which makes it dangerous to overuse.
- **Pulse Theft.** A touch or a hooked line steals vigour from a weakened target, as a desperate killer draws strength from a dying foe to keep fighting. It is extremely taboo and weak against healthy, resisting targets.
- **Kinbound Oath.** A vow sealed in shared blood makes betrayal weigh heavier than an ordinary promise, as exiled siblings swear return to one another. Coerced blood makes an unstable and often cruel bond.
- **Red Memory.** A reading over blood relics or preserved remains draws out ancestral feeling and fragments of memory, as a dead hero's vial reveals fear at one forgotten name. It gives impressions more often than a story.
- **Lifeline Mortgage.** A desperate binding trades future vitality, years, or recovery for impossible power now, so a healer saves ten lives in one night and wakes years older. The later cost can be devastating and hard to measure.
- **House Ward.** A blood working at the threshold, or a full estate rite, keys protections to a bloodline, so a manor knows its returning heir despite false seals. Mixed lineages and hidden heirs leave loopholes.
- **Crimson Resurrection Fraud.** A touch forces warmth, pulse, or movement into a dead or dying body, as a tyrant's household shows him on the walls once more after his death, so the besiegers do not storm before dawn. It is no true resurrection and serves deception or denial.

### *Sacrificial Magic*

Every sacrificial spell is paid for with something given up, and what is spent varies by spell: the caster's blood or years, a donor's life or breath, a treasured possession, a vow, or the meaning stored in a place.

- **Blood Price.** A quick cut of the palm, or blood drawn from a basin, gives a burst of power to a spell worked in the same breath, as a cornered mage doubles a ward for a few heartbeats. Repeated use brings dizziness, collapse, and miscasting long before death.
- **Ashen Bargain.** A treasured object, written vow, or keepsake thrown into flame burns into power matched to what it meant, as a prince burns his signet to fuel an escape rite. Meaningless junk burns hot but weak.
- **Years to Flame.** A vow spends part of the caster's own future life to make the present working blaze, as an old war-saint spends his remaining good years in one dawn holding a bridge. The years lost are rarely known, and repeated use ages body and reserves.

- **Heart Tithe.** A touch or a tithe circle draws a measured pulse of life from a willing or restrained donor and sends it into healing, protection, or harm, as three guardians keep a queen alive through a fever night. Poorly matched donors waste much of it.
- **Pain Lens.** Acute pain, endured or inflicted, sharpens a spell so it cuts cleaner or holds truer, as a ritualist tightens wire around his arm to hold a surgical barrier still. It works only while the pain stays controlled; overload becomes noise.
- **Feast of Knives.** Many small bloodlettings pour into one basin and pool into a single great communal working, as villagers cut their thumbs to raise a flood-bank wall. Poor coordination weakens everyone for nothing, and infection and panic are common.
- **Victim's Gate.** A knife-and-circle rite uses a severe offering to force open a breach or working beyond the caster's skill, as a cult kills a captive to break into a sealed tomb and the treasure the barrow-king took with him. It is infamous; most peoples treat it as murder and worse, and kill the caster if they can.
- **Altar Surge.** Offerings stored in a consecrated altar are released later in one controlled burst, as a temple empties a year's votive reserve into the city shield during an assault. Badly kept altars leak, draw hostile attention, or explode.
- **Bone Fuel.** Processed bone, marrow salts, or remains burn into heat and working power, keeping a besieged smithy's forge alight on bone-char once the coal runs out. Many communities accept animal bone but call human remains desecration without consent.
- **Wound Covenant.** A shared cut binds several people to bear a spell's cost together in their bodies, as three healers survive a night of mass casualties. The weakest still often pay worst, and treachery within the link is catastrophic.
- **Harvest of Breath.** A siphon over a crowd, or a smoke-circle rite, takes breath and stamina rather than deep life, as a lord's war-mage drops a starving mob at the granary gate to feed the barrier line. Large drains can still kill the weak, sick, or wounded.
- **Red Battery.** Blood-backed power is charged into a prepared vessel to carry and spend later, as smugglers bring sealed red ampoules to power silence wards at a border. Stored charge decays, grows unstable, and turns ugly if kept too long.
- **Funeral Debt.** A vow of future service, mourning, or repayment, spoken before kin and neighbours, becomes power now, as a poor district pledges years of shrine labour to hold plague wards through winter. The debt is real, and unpaid it falls on bloodline, household, or temple.
- **Choir of Offerings.** A formal choral rite layers blood, incense, coin, memory, and oath into one great harmonised working, as on the eve of a siege every quarter of a city brings a coin, a drop of blood, or a name to the altars and the walls' wards blaze through the first assault. Complexity is its enemy, and a misbalanced choir fractures into cascading side effects.
- **Lifespan Bridge.** A touch or deathbed rite carries a span of life from one person to another, as an old king gives his last winter to his heir. Consent and compatibility are central; forced bridges are notorious for instability, madness, and horror.
- **Hunger Engine.** A spell or construct is bound to stay strong for as long as it is fed, as a fortress holds an impossible storm wall while prisoners are bled into its cistern. It always demands more than promised, a classic cult and war-crime technology.
- **Ruin Feast.** A desecration rite devours a place's stored vows, burials, and memory in one catastrophic burst, as a fleeing usurper burns

his own crowning hall into a firestorm rather than let rebels take it. It ruins the site for good, and backlash marks its users for generations.

- **Mercy Offering.** A willing community spreads small, survivable losses of blood and breath across many people, so one desperate healing does not kill a single donor. It still costs and can break the frail, but it is widely defended as ethical when done openly.

### *Necromancy*

Necromantic spells draw on what the dead leave behind, the lingering residue of a life, bone and preserved tissue, funerary objects and grave-soil, together with the caster's own reserves; fresher remains are easier to work.

- **Grave Quiet.** A spoken funerary command, or incense and bells, settles restless remains back into stillness, as a temple necromancer calms the hasty burials of a raid that have begun to scrape at their slabs. It fails where bodies are being desecrated or a stronger command still holds them.
- **Corpse Stitch.** Hand and thread bind torn tissue and loose bone in a dead body, so when the warband comes home a field mortician can return the raid-captain to his kin whole before the pyre. It restores form, not life, and burning or fragmentation limits it.
- **Mourner's Lamp.** A lamp lit with a prayer gathers the last feeling of the recently dead into a funerary flame showing fear, unrest, or peace; over a drover murdered on the road the flame gutters red, and the grave gets iron and ash as well as a prayer. It gives mood, not conversation, and violent deaths read noisily.
- **Last Motion.** A touch to a corpse replays its final movements, how it turned, struck, or fell, so a dead gate-guard's arm comes up in a shield-block and his lord knows the gate was forced, not opened by a traitor. It shows motion, not motive, and heavy damage corrupts it.
- **Bone Listener.** Fingers read old stress, illness, and injury in a skeleton, so ruin-delvers learn from the spines and hands in a barrow pit that it held the slaves of an old mine, not the warband the songs promised, and no grave-goods worth the digging. Deaths that touched only soft tissue elude it.
- **Pall of Stillness.** A shroud laid with ash or cold slows rot and insects around a corpse, letting a caravan carry its dead through three days of bandit country to consecrated ground. It delays decay without reversing it, and heat and damp wear it out fast.
- **Ancestor Seat.** A named invitation settles a family remnant into a prepared chair, mask, or relic to answer a few questions, as two feuding clans call up the ancestor who set the old boundary stone, and the losing side draws steel before the seat is cold. It cannot tell what the dead never knew, and repeated use wears the remnant away.
- **Wakeful Bier.** A touch and a spoken command make a corpse walk under simple orders, as plague workers have a bier-servant carry contaminated dead to the trench. It manages no fine work, speech, or initiative, and old skeletons obey worse than the newly dead.
- **Funeral Path.** A processional working shows the safest road for carrying the dead without drawing scavengers or hostile remnants, so a burial party crosses a battlefield at dusk without waking the wrong dead. It finds the cleanest path, not a guarantee.
- **Ash Messenger.** A handful of cremation ash, released with a spoken message and a true name, drifts to a named tomb or shrine, carrying word to a family shrine that raiders took a son, long before the body can be carried home. Wind, warded cemeteries, and confused names misdirect it.
- **Marrow Sentinel.** A bone circle binds a skeleton to a fixed watch around a tomb or hall; bone guards still walk the outer halls of a cata-

comb whose keepers fled the plague, and delvers time their steps before they slip past to the treasure niches. It suits repetitive rounds, not adaptive fighting, and hard blows or sanctified disruption break it.

- **Sepulchre Lock.** Sealing words tie a tomb or coffin's stillness to the dead inside, so forcing it open is loud and hard, as a noble family seals its inner crypt after grave-thieves strip the vault next door of rings, swords, and bodies. It resists intrusion better than demolition.
- **Borrowed Hand.** A touch animates a single severed or skeletal limb for small tasks, as a thief-taker has a dead fence's hand show which loose hearthstone it reached for most, and the stolen silver is under it. Weak memory leaves it clumsy, and sanctified spaces often smother it at once.
- **Grave Choir.** A choral invocation binds many faint whispers of the dead into one wall of warning, lament, or spoken names, so a barrow sings the names of its dead when robbers enter with drawn steel, and the whole valley hears it. It carries collective memory, not nuance, and battlefields are too noisy for it.
- **Remnant Interrogation.** Questioned within the hour of death, a fresh remnant answers directly before it fades, as a lord's necromancer asks a courier killed on the road which brigands took the dispatch case and which way they rode. Answers reach only what the dead perceived, and brutal use shreds the remnant for good.
- **Last March.** A drummed or chanted cadence moves a group of corpses in one final act of hauling or withdrawal, as defenders have their fallen drag the wounded behind the gate. It is exhausting, controversial, and collapses if the bodies are too damaged.
- **House of Still Servants.** A long installation rite binds a set of domestic dead to repetitive chores such as carrying water and tending lamps, as an ossuary monastery keeps its lower halls with consenting dead. Widening their tasks risks drift and uncanny imitation of life.
- **Carrion Warning.** Soil, feathers, insects, and scavengers become a web that warns of fresh death or coming slaughter, so a camp knows its pickets are struck when the crows turn at once. Sterile or warded places tell it little.
- **Life Drain.** A touch or a grave-thread across a short gap tears life from a living body for the caster, an ally, or a store, as a grave-thief rises from a duel while his opponent collapses grey. Overdraw can kill unpredictably.
- **Bone Spear.** Sharpened bone flies in a piercing burst, as screaming white spears burst from a crypt's wall niches at intruders. It needs bone nearby or carried, and solid stone cover blunts it.
- **Bone Armour.** Carried remains or nearby bones wrap their wearer in articulated plates of snapping rib, as a battlefield necromancer advances beneath a shell of rib and plate. It is noisy, unnerving, and seldom tolerated outside war or grave labour.
- **Corpse Burst.** A dead body, triggered on sight or by a hidden grave-sigil, explodes into bone shrapnel, rot, and shock, turning an alley into a storm behind a fleeing necromancer. It is gruesome, widely forbidden, and deadly at close quarters.
- **Grave Rot.** A blighting touch or curse-mark turns the logic of decay on living flesh, so a champion's sword arm blackens and goes numb mid-fight. Strong healing and early cleansing can still stop it.

### *Sanctified Magic*

Sanctified spells feed on spoken liturgy, sanctified symbols, the assent of the faithful or a sworn vow, and the caster's own reserves; divine sponsorship can carry much of the cost.

- **Steadfast Sign.** A spoken blessing marks a band with steadier aim and nerve against panic or curse, as defenders a priest marked before dawn hold a line that should have broken. It sharpens disciplined action, not genius or luck.
- **Stayed Hand.** A touch blessing makes violence against its bearer feel deeply wrong, so soldiers cannot bear to strike a consecrated child first. Determined killers and mindless hazards push through, and it weakens once the protected one attacks.
- **Vowlight Ward.** A touch or a woken shield boss wraps its bearer in sacred force that turns blows and hostile magic aside, golden light flaring off each arrow in a storm of them. It does nothing for poison already in the blood or ground giving way.
- **Kindled Palm.** One glowing hand passes healing directly through touch with great control, as a battle chaplain closes a spear wound on the temple steps. It still costs life force; precision does not make the healing free.
- **Litany of Mending.** A shared prayer spreads restoring force across many wounded, as the injured kneel in rows while a priest walks among them. It is slower than emergency triage and weaker on the dying.
- **Cure Affliction.** Touch and prayer, sometimes with clean water, reassert healthy sacred order over curse, poison, disease, or corruption, as a pilgrim priest burns plague-sweat out of a village elder. Deep-rooted conditions need repeated treatment or ordinary care.
- **Sworn Clarity.** A quick self-invocation or weapon prayer sharpens a warrior's judgement and timing for one crucial exchange, so a templar's blade begins striking exactly where the abomination leaves itself open. It often fails if she acts against her vow.
- **Judging Stroke.** A prayer loads a weapon blow with radiant judgement that bursts on impact, and the self-raised corpse at the gate comes apart in light under a war-priest's hammer. It is strongest on corruption, undead, and oathbreakers but still harms ordinary foes.
- **Paired Vow.** A shared touch rite links two allies so injury and strain fall on both, as a sworn knight takes half the curse meant for the child behind him. Used recklessly, it saves the protected and kills the protector.
- **Dawn Lantern.** A raised symbol or chapel lantern glows like sunrise, raising morale and making despair harder to accept until a plague ward stops panicking. It cannot erase grief or terror, only keep them from ruling the moment.
- **Consecrate Ground.** A boundary prayer walked along the edge orders a place spiritually, hindering corruption, panic, and the rising of corpses, until the dead around a shrine stop stirring at night. It needs renewal, and polluted or blood-soaked ground fights back.
- **Turn the Restless.** One ringing invocation, or a bell-and-circle rite, floods undead and hostile remnants with sanctified pressure, so delvers who woke a crypt of bone labourers live because their hired priest gets one invocation out and the dead stagger back. Well-made servants such as Marrow Sentinels, and strong old Echoes such as the Word-Generals, resist or merely recoil.
- **Exorcism.** A banishing chant or long rite drives out curse-threads, possessing traces, and false identities, as a child speaking in dead voices is returned to herself. It is exhausting, often traumatic for the host, and dangerous when the invader is deeply woven in.
- **Radiant Lance.** A forward thrust hurls a spear of white fire at a distant foe in clear sight, dropping a fleeing cult standard-bearer from horseback. It needs line of sight and burns brightest against the corrupt or oathbroken.
- **Oathbright Steel.** A blessing makes a blade, hammer, or spear shine, strike harder against corruption, and resist fouling magic, until an

ordinary sword cuts revenant mail like wax. It works best on weapons already tied to oath or office.

- **Pale Watch.** A circular invocation raises a slow-turning ring of pale guardians around a camp that catches curse-work and spirits, as pilgrims sleep while a haunted moor mutters outside. It does not stop siege engines or ordinary arrows.
- **Mass Blessing.** A public blessing spreads courage, steadiness, and light healing over a crowd, so a city square kneels and rises ready rather than broken. It is broad but shallow beside focused healing or battle prayer.
- **Circle of Mercy.** A circle marked on the ground makes a healing zone where panic eases, pain lowers, and healing spells work cleaner, and field surgeons save far more lives in the mud. It protects and heals but is not invulnerable.
- **Noonbreak.** A raised symbol bursts with noon-bright sacred light that blinds, scatters corruption, and breaks lesser undead, as a corpse-host collapses back down a crypt stair. Careless use dazzles allies, and sealed darkness-wards weaken it.
- **Guardian Host.** An invocation raises a few radiant warrior forms of golden vow-light that guard a line and strike corruption, fighting beside a shrine's defenders until dawn. They are sustained liturgical constructs, not souls or beings.
- **Martyr's Stand.** A desperate battle vow spends future recovery on present endurance, so a gate-knight with broken ribs holds a breach while children pass behind him. The debt falls due afterwards, and many die once the stand ends.

## Access, Reputation, and Fear

No school is dark in itself, but some are suspected first. Blood Magic, Necromancy, Sacrificial Magic, Dominion Magic, and Trace Magic attract suspicion most readily, together with certain branches of Dream, Augury, Nature, and Sanctified Magic, and every one of them holds both acceptable and unacceptable practice. A school taught openly in one age or region may be secret, taboo, or hunted in another. The laws of magic do not change between them. What changes is what people are willing to pay, and who they are willing to let pay it.

The schools therefore travel badly: a Dominion mage trained openly in a king's hall may cross a border into a country that burns those who use the same working, and a healer whose hospice permits watched sacrificial healing may find the witch-finders riding in behind the next town's priests. Which schools are taught where, and to whom, and what an ordinary household is likely to meet of them, belongs to each era, and is told in that era's account of magic in ordinary life.

## What People Know

A mage knows her school as a trade: its workings, its teachers, its costs, and how it fails. What lies beneath it, she knows as her school teaches it, and no two schools teach it alike.

### *The Harmonic Schools*

Each Harmonic school claims a root and names it in its own way; *The Primer of Ten Questions* asks their questions rather than answering them. What a root is, a realm, a god's gift, a principle, a craft secret, the schools dispute from place to place, and that each draws on one Harmonic carrying one Prime's current is known only to a few teachers in the highest circles of scholarship.

A student learns the question before the answer, and most never need the answer: a fire mage who can temper a blade does not need to know what the Crucible is. That is why the schools can disagree so deeply on their roots and still agree on their workings, and teachers who move between schools learn to keep the working and leave the explanation at the door.

### *The Compound Schools*

The compound schools were found in practice, by braiding what worked. Their blends of Prime energies are the records'; the schools describe their arts by what they do, healing, growing, warding, binding, and clergy who practise Sanctified Magic hold all its power to be their god's. The names of schools and spells in this chapter are the scholars' and teachers' names, and later eras trace the roots more exactly, though none to the end.

## Tensions

- **A sacred art or a crime.** One people puts the dead to work at its lord's order; another burns whoever raises a corpse. The laws of magic are the same in both, and the same funerary work is honoured in one valley and hanged for in the next.
- **The coercion that is tolerated.** Some peoples teach limited Dominion openly, for battlefield order, a lord's hall, guarding captives, and breaking up crowds; others ban nearly all of it as an attack on personhood. Even where it is tolerated, its cleanest technique is still a command that a mind accepts as its own, and sellsword captains will not hire a will-breaker.
- **Who may be spent.** Some temples allow only willing offerings; some warbands permit a soldier to bleed for a working but kill anyone who sacrifices a captive; some cults reject all restraint. Sacrificial Magic is where what magic allows most openly parts from what people will stand for.
- **Weighted futures.** An augur may advise, or may present a chosen future as destiny to steer a frightened ruler. Augury is respected where caution is valued and feared wherever prophecy becomes a weapon, and more than one war began because a seer swore it would be won.
- **The original shape.** Morphic Magic saves lives and opens impossible paths, and the same discipline makes grafts, monsters, and people who no longer remember who they were. Few schools are so admired and so mistrusted at once.
- **The marked decision.** Augurs can mark a person who has just taken a world-shaping decision so that every later reading can follow the pressures spreading from it. Many lords forbid the practice to all but their own seers, because it makes private consequence easy to watch.
- **The stolen luck.** Fortune taken from one outcome and given to another is never clean, and someone nearby usually inherits the worsened branch. Many peoples call the working predatory even where it is tolerated.

PART IV

# The Peoples of Caeldon

*The peoples as kinds: their bodies, their life patterns, and the customs that run deep enough to survive every era.*

CHAPTER 10

# What Makes a People

*A person is a person from the first breath, and this hall will hear nothing to the contrary. What the hall weighs is what the person may carry: a place behind the walls, then a boat or a debt held under an elder's eye, and last the full oath, a name for others to swear by. Ask the Elves when, and they will say not yet. Ask the Dwarves, and they will say when it has set. Ask the mother, and she will say now. The river houses have heard all three, and the river houses set the line.*

— a Serathic hall-book, *The Casebook of Three Layers*

A traveller who crossed Caeldon end to end would meet Elves who reckon their history in hundreds of thousands of years and Goblins who reckon it from the last ruin they made a home of; Dwarves who will not call a child finished for years after its birth and Humans who name theirs within days; people of flesh, people descended from stone, and people built in a workshop by other hands who woke one day and would not be put back. The world does not sort them neatly, and its peoples quarrel, sometimes with knives, about where one kind ends and another begins, about who counts as grown, and about whether someone who has been broken and mended, or has come back changed from a sealed gallery or a long captivity, is still the same person at all. The words in this chapter are the ones the rest of the book uses to keep those quarrels clear. They are plain words, kept strictly: a branch is never a civilization, a lifeway is never inherited, a person is never a soul, and the difference between them is often exactly what the people involved are fighting about.

## Kinds of People

A **species** is a broad kind of people sharing an inherited nature, whether biological, metaphysical, or constructed. Elves are a species; so are Humans; so are the Wrought, whose nature passes through design and repair rather than birth. In ordinary speech the word is **people**: the Dwarves are an old people, and the cradle-web is home to many peoples. "Species" is the healer's and the scholar's word. The word "race" is not used of any of them, by anyone careful.

No species was made by the Primes. Each arose in one of a few ways. Most came by **natural evolution** on Caeldon itself: Humans, Reedfolk, Orcs, Halflings, Gnomes, the Thaluren, and the Kavari among them. The two oldest peoples came by **planar adaptation**, descending from ancestors shaped by another plane's pull on the Material Plane and slowly tamed into fully material life: the

**AT A GLANCE**

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| **Species** | A broad kind of people with a shared, inherited nature: Elves, Humans, the Wrought. |
| **Branch** | A durable inherited difference within a species, such as the Wood Elves. Humans form regional peoples instead. |
| **Lineage** | A line of descent at any scale, from a family to the deepest ancestry; among the Wrought, a line of designs. |
| **Lifeway** | A recurring way of living, which can shape identity strongly without being inherited. |
| **Civilization** | A durable order with its own customs, powers, and memory, holding land or not. |
| **Person** | A continuity of living Pattern, lasting Echo, and deep Record. There is no detachable soul, and few outside the highest scholarship know it. |

Elves from Verdant-marked stock, the Dwarves from stock crushed into shape under the Iron Backbone. The Wrought were **made**, or rather their predecessors were, as mindless working frames, and became a people only when those frames woke into self-awareness. A few groups that live among the others, such as the Salvage Peoples of the ruin-belts, are less one clean species than a people-complex, drawn together by descent and by long lives lived in the same broken places.

Whatever its path, as a lineage formed it took on its own settled balance of Prime energy, and that balance is its **lifeforce**. Every people has its own signature, shared in broad shape by all its members and varied in strength and steadiness from one individual to the next. Lifeforce is not a soul or a moral essence. It is the animating charge of a living body, the thing that lets it grow, endure, and mend, and its species-shaped form is why some peoples lean towards particular kinds of magic. It also governs healing between peoples. Healing within one species is the surest and the least wasteful; between related peoples it works with noticeable loss; between very different ones it is possible but costly, and healers who serve mixed towns learn the difference early, sometimes at a bedside where the patient did not live to teach them. Broths, tonics, and herbs work because a plant or animal carries a living charge of its own, and different herbs act differently on different peoples for exactly that reason. The workings of lifeforce belong to the chapter on how magic works; for a writer of peoples, the point is that a body's kind is written into how it heals.

### *Where the Peoples Came From*

The deep history of Caeldon's peoples is not a story of three or four clean origins. The early Material Plane was crowded: with ancestor stocks, with side-lines that survived and side-lines that did not, with elder civilizations that rose and vanished, and with peoples bent hard by one Harmonic or another in the long ages of upheaval before the world settled. The ladder runs, roughly, from the first living or half-living beings, through elder species shaped by a single Harmonic, to survivor lineages that came through the world's great inward change and adapted to the calmer world after it, to the fully settled peoples of later history, with a long tail of lines that vanished, dwindled, or scattered. Most of what lived then was ancestor to no one. Its bones still turn up in cliff-falls, mine-cuts, and flooded quarries, too large, too many-jointed, or half stone, and are sold at fairs as the bones of monsters slain by heroes nobody can name.

Between about 700,000 and 500,000 BR the first durable lineages of Caeldon took hold in its great regions. In the canopy-and-root country, life ran towards long life, growth, and binding to place; in the mountain-and-depth country, towards density, endurance, and weight; in the lower basins and broken uplands, towards mixed and shifting forms whose meaning would only show much later. The regions became ancestral fields, and four of them matter most to the living peoples:

The last of these is worth a writer's attention. The threshold peoples settled about as early as the Elves and Dwarves, roughly 500,000 to 425,000 BR,

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| **The Verdant elder field** | Growth-heavy, place-bound stocks: rooted lines, flowering lines lifted high, thorned lines hardened by hardship, dim lines living under the roots. Most did not survive. The Elves are the disciplined survivors of that wild tangle. |
| **The lithic elder field** | Stone-hard, deep-pressed stocks: seam-dwellers, peoples of the crushing deep, ridge-folk who weathered like stone, peoples of the fault lines. Most failed, turned to stone, broke apart, or were absorbed. The Dwarves are the survivors who adapted. |
| **The balanced adaptive field** | Peoples of the gentler middle of the world, bent less by any one overwhelming force: basin gatherers, upland wanderers, shore-folk, sheltered valley folk, drifters of the margins. Humans are its boldest line; Halflings, Gnomes, Orcs, Reedfolk, the Thaluren, and the Kavari are other answers within it. |
| **The threshold elder field** | Stocks of the broken ground between the other fields: fracture belts, cave mouths, ravines, scree, wash margins. Goblins, Kobolds, Ogres, and Trolls are its strongest survivors. |

and their strength was holding what others gave up: the crossing that keeps failing, the underway that keeps flooding, the load no settled people will carry. They were not born outcasts; they were made outcasts. They were driven to the edges only later, by powers that had built on the crossings they had first made safe, and a Goblin warren-mother can tell you, at length, whose great-grandmothers held the ford before the lord's bridge was ever thought of.

Beneath all of them lie the vanished: the terrace-builders of the Upland Colossal world, the oath-carvers of the Archive-Law world, the fire-masters of the Ash-Furnace world, and the death-workers of the Sepulchre-Kin. Their stories belong to the deep past, but their roads, scripts, slag, high tombs, and buried engines are part of what every living people inherits, and they are why the medieval world is full of places worth the danger.

## Branches, Lineages, and Regional Peoples

A **branch** is a durable inherited difference within a species. It may be biological, ecological, magical, or constructed, but it is always inherited, never only learned or chosen. The Wood Elves, the High Elves, the Thorn Elves, and the Dark Elves are branches; so are the Ironspine and Stonewake Dwarves. In everyday speech people say kindred, or stock, or use their own people's word, and almost nobody says "subspecies" outside a scholar's notes.

Humans are the striking exception. They form **regional peoples**, the Confluence, Headwater, Serathic, and frontier or Mixed-March populations, shaped by settlement, roads, the river, and trade, not by descent. A Serathic Human is Serathic by where she lives and whose oaths she keeps, not by blood, and a Headwater family that settles in the river towns and swears to the river houses becomes Serathic in a generation or two.

A **lineage** is a line of descent at any scale, from a single family or clan to the deep-time First Material Lineages from which the oldest peoples descend. Among the Wrought it also means a **design lineage**: the line of frames a design came down through, Forgeframe or Fieldframe or Warframe. A lineage is never another word for a branch. A family can be ancient and still be one family; a branch is a whole population changed.

### *Mixed Lines and Marked Lines*

Not every inherited difference makes a branch, and not every child of two peoples makes a new one. Where two peoples have lived side by side long enough, children of mixed descent can become a recurring and widely accepted part of life: frequent enough that kinship, inheritance, oath, and local custom have to make room for

them across generations. Such a **stable mixed line** is not a species, but it is more durable than an occasional pairing. The clearest on Caeldon is that of Human and Elven descent. Human-Elf children are rare overall, easiest to sustain with the settled High Elven line, and common enough in some frontiers, lords' halls, and corridor towns to need ordinary customs of naming, guardianship, and inheritance. They are accepted in many societies without being reduced to one people-category, and how they are read depends on local custom, branch inheritance, upbringing, and the temper of whoever holds the land.

Children of Human and Orc descent are different: rare individuals rather than a line. Orcs and inland Humans never meet, since the two halves of the world touch only at the one crossing of the Glassbelt, so such children are born only where the crossing kindreds' routes meet Windscar escorts, or on the Tidelace coast where far-side Humans live.

Two other kinds of inheritance cross species lines altogether. Some hereditary lines sit easily with order, sacred charge, high claims, and preserving powers, marked by long exposure to clarified sacred force, by steward-touched thresholds, or by oath-bearing houses; their people tend towards presence and conviction, and are the ones who stand when the line breaks. Other lines bear an inherited breach-mark, wound-memory, or dark-threshold alteration, survivor lines shaped by old rupture zones and the three Incursion scars; their people bear fear and stigma well, and walk where others will not. Both kinds are uncommon but known, most common among Humans though possible among every established people, usually hereditary, able to skip generations, and variable in how visibly they show. Rare new lines of either kind can still begin after a great metaphysical event. Neither predicts how anyone will behave, though both are routinely read as if they did: the first are made into banners for some lord's right to rule, the second are watched, and blamed when the well goes bad.

## Ways of Living and Orders

A **lifeway** is a recurring way of living. It can shape identity as strongly as any inheritance, but it is not inherited, and it can cross branches and even species. The Highhold and Gatehold Dwarves are real and recognizable, with their own habits of weather, haulage, and trade, but they are lifeways of exposed holds, not separate kinds of Dwarf; a Gatehold family's grandchildren raised deep in the mountain would be ordinary hold Dwarves. Goblins of the ruin-warrens and Goblins of the road margins differ in nearly everything they do and remain one people.

**Culture** is a shared way of life seen from the inside: language, custom, values, ritual, art, food, oaths, the practice of magic, memory, and the shape of the world in a people's eyes. A **society** is narrower, a concrete gathering of people at one time and place: this town in this generation, this camp this winter.

A **civilization** is a durable order with its own customs, powers, and memory, lasting beyond any single settlement or ruler. It need not hold land. A hold-world under a mountain is a civilization; so is a league of river towns, and so is a web of houses that owns no ground at all but keeps its oaths, its tallies, and its grip on the roads it holds. A civilization that sits inside another is a civilization **within** it, as the Stonewake Compact is within the hold-world of the Ironspine. Every one of them is held together by custom, oath, kinship, and the strength of its great families, and none by written rules; where something is written down, it records what the strong have already decided. The names civilizations give themselves (Compact, League, Concord, House, Holds, Circles, Courts, Pacts, Commons, Covenant, Keepers, Marches, Orders, Kindreds) are proper names, as loose as any old title. A Compact need not be a treaty and a League need not have members who signed anything; each name describes its people only roughly, and what each one actually is must be learned from the people who keep it.

## Why the Peoples Differ

The same words apply to every people, but they do not fit every people the same way, and the unevenness is the point. Among Elves, branch and civilization line up more closely than anywhere else: each of the four branches has a civilization that keeps, hardens, or turns its inheritance, and still an Elven branch is inherited peoplehood while its civilization is custom, memory, the right to rule, and the houses that hold power. Dwarves differ more by hold, depth, and neighbours than by birth, so their civilizations matter more than their branches. Humans are divided far more by custom, fosterage, and the age at which they count someone grown than by any reckoning of descent. Goblins, Kobolds, Trolls, and Ogres live in many local lifeways and compacts without great states. The Wrought are sorted by design lineage and by who will accept them, not by ancestry.

Lifespan shapes the pattern too. Long-lived peoples tend to have few branches, slow divergence, and long unbroken memory: Elven and Dwarven histories reach farthest back and hold only a handful of living branches. Short-lived, mobile, or hard-pressed peoples throw off many local forms, lifeways, and vanished or absorbed populations. A constructed people diversifies through design, repair, and the slow history of its acceptance instead of through birth. The living divisions of each people show it:

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| **Elves, very slow** | Wood, High, Thorn, and Dark Elves, each with a civilization of its own. |
| **Dwarves, slow** | Ironspine and Stonewake Dwarves; Highhold and Gatehold as lifeways. |
| **Humans, fast** | Confluence, Headwater, Serathic, and frontier or Mixed-March regional peoples. |
| **Halflings, moderately fast** | Foldward, Leeward, and Edgefold or Outfold. |
| **Gnomes, moderate** | Gaugeward, Tidelace, and Chainwake or Island. |
| **Orcs, moderately fast** | Windscar, Rimward, High-Scar, and Open-Steppe or Far-Route. |
| **Reedfolk, moderately fast** | Floodplain, Marsh-Reed, Shoalway, and Estuary. |
| **Thaluren, slow to moderate** | Tidebound, Blightward, Open-Run, and Outer-Route. |
| **Kavari, moderate** | Bankright, Gravelbraid, Pool-Kin, and Coldrun. |
| **Goblins, fast** | Ruin-Warren, Market-Shadow, Road-Margin, Underwall, and the Hobgoblin compacts. |
| **Kobolds, fast** | Mine-Edge, Drain-Warren, Ruin-Under, Deep-Service, and Vent-Kin. |
| **Trolls, moderate and distorted** | Bridge-Keeper, Ravine, Scarwood, Stonebreak, and Woundfield. |
| **Ogres, moderate** | Hearth-Burden, Stonehaul, Timberbelt, Floodgate, Roadcamp, and Siege-Scar. |
| **The Wrought, not by birth** | Forgeframe, Mineframe, Fieldframe, Civicframe, Alchemic, and Warframe. |

Every people also carries layers of what it used to be. Branches and civilizations emerge, merge, fragment, vanish, transform, or survive only as ruins, taboos, absorbed peoples, old distinctions of rank, and old names: the haunted hold no one dares to take, the grove whose song no living Elf can finish, the road cairns of a kindred that is gone. They do not all develop in parallel: a people may have an ancient bodily baseline, a later first civilization, still later secondary branches, and lifeways that are mostly a matter of region and custom. The peoples of any one era are the living top layer of that history, not the whole of it. Under the Wood Elves lie proto-Elven lineages that sur-

vive only in ritual memory and in overgrown root-halls nobody living built; under the Dwarven holds lie lithic ancestor lines and lost pressure holds; behind every Human region lie older peoples of the basins and the roads whose names nobody kept, and whose barrows the plough still finds.

## What Drives a People

Bodies and homelands are only half of what separates one people from another. The other half is what a people defends first, what it sacrifices first, and what it mistakes for wisdom when the raiders are at the gate. Every people of Caeldon has such a heart: something it will die for, something it runs from, something it sings about at the fire. It does not make every member think alike. It describes the default leanings a people lives under, which individuals, branches, and civilizations can sharpen, soften, or turn in another direction, and which history, sacred force, and geography can bend. A Dwarf hold sealing a flooded gallery with its own people behind the door, an Orc escort turning back into a storm for one straggler, a Halfling fold barring its gate in a locust year: each is a people's leaning made into a deed.

A few rules hold for all of them. Every people is a real people with self-interest, love, fear, cooperation, conflict, and variety inside it, never an allegory. No people is morally pure: there is no wholly benevolent people on Caeldon, and none whose nature is evil. Peoples differ by weighting, not by one exaggerated trait. And each people's great strength and its characteristic failing grow from the same root: the courage that holds the pass is the stubbornness that will not open it.

The differences are easiest to see along a few lines: adaptation against endurance, expansion against boundedness, duty against preference, keeping against changing, the order of the whole against the freedom of the hearth, and the short horizon against the long. The peoples whose leanings are best known sit along them like this:

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| **Humans** | Highly adaptive, moderately expansive, leaning to preference over duty, willing to change, short in horizon. Strong at turning unsettled mixed country into places people can live, such as a ford town where four peoples trade; prone to restlessness, quick to seize a chance and much less reliable about what they will keep once the wind changes. They fight for land, kin, and name, and their feuds outlive the quarrel that started them. |
| **Elves** | Bound to long memory and to place, little given to expansion, held to duty through attunement, long in horizon. Strong at keeping meaning, place, and name alive across spans no Human remembers; prone to turning inward, slow to yield, set on preserving what no longer fits the living world. They fight slowly, for groves and old ground, and do not forget. |
| **Dwarves** | Bound to endurance, little to moderately expansive, centred on duty, exacting in how a hold is ordered, long in planning. Strong at endurance that outlasts mountains; prone to hardening life into exact forms of rightful place, rightful age, and rightful making until there is no room left to breathe. They fight for the hold and the line of the dead beneath it, and fear most the deep that must be sealed. |
| **Orcs** | Heavy with duty, moderately adaptive, uninterested in conquering land for show but hard to dislodge from a road they have taken, open about who owes what, medium in horizon. Strong at carrying a shared burden through country that kills the careless; prone to hardening escort and guard into heavy, controlling bonds, where the line between escort and raid is drawn by whoever is stronger. |

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| **Halflings** | Bounded, little expansive, shaped by reserve and enough, strongly keeping, ordered by the fold. Strong at full cisterns, full lofts, and no hunger for more land; prone to defensive narrowing, where wise reserve becomes a closed door. They fight rarely, but hard, for the stores and the fold's mouth. |
| **Gnomes** | Highly adaptive, held to duty through careful reckoning, ordered by the sounding house. Strong at bringing many boats, voices, and signals home together through fog and shoal; prone to over-measurement, where careful exactness turns into exclusion, endless qualification, or a town too refined to breathe in. They fight the sea more than any neighbour. |
| **Thaluren** | Bound to the return, held to duty through rightful return and held waters, keeping through communal clutch duty, long in horizon. Strong at a return that holds across unlike waters, generation after generation; prone to sanctified rigidity, where the guarding of spawning grounds hardens into refusing anyone else a share of the water. |
| **Reedfolk** | Bound to the remembered water, ordered by house and channel. Strong at keeping life and memory alive in shifting wet country; prone to opacity, what they keep hard for other peoples to read or fit into outside orders. |
| **Kavari** | Bound to home waters, keeping through nursery care. Strong at making rivers into lasting homes without freezing them into simple property; prone to a defensive dwelling-right that collides with the passage, sanctuary, or return that other peoples demand. |
| **The Salvage Peoples** | Highly adaptive, changing what they find through reuse, practical, short in horizon. Strong at living off the bones of dead worlds; chronically neglected, needed by later powers and distrusted for the improvisations that make them good at it. |

Mixed lines have leanings of their own. People of Human and Elven descent often move between unlike rhythms of life and belonging more easily than either parent people expects, and are held back chiefly by being treated as go-betweens, compromises, or proofs of contact before they are treated as persons. People of Human and Orc descent often endure hard roads and heavy expectations better than anyone predicts, and are reduced, as often, to hardness, suspicion, or usefulness. The paired sentence is the whole method, and a writer can use it for any people: *this people is strong at this because it puts that first, and vulnerable to this other thing because the same priority hardens or overreaches.*

## What a Person Is

Every people of Caeldon has its own words for the self, and many of them are old words for a soul: spirit, breath, shade, the thing that leaves. They survive in prayers, in curses, in the names of places. The world itself knows nothing of the kind. There is no detachable, immortal soul-object in any being on Caeldon. What people call the self is a continuity: a living, changing pattern that acts in the world, leaves traces in it, and may be kept in the deep memory of the cosmos. A few of the highest scholars call the doctrine **Resonant Continuity**, and almost nobody else has heard of it. It is the ground under every argument in this book about who someone is, though those who argue rarely know it.

### *Pattern, Echo, and Record*

The continuity has three layers, which are phases of one process rather than three substances.

**Pattern** is the living shape of a person: their thought, temper, moral reflex, bonds, and the particular resonant cadence that makes them recognizable. It changes through growth, grief, learn-

ing, and choice while staying recognizably itself. It is strongest on the Material Plane, where free will and long development of the self are most robust.

**Echo** is the imprint a Pattern leaves on the world: in the people bound to it by love, enmity, or oath; in the places where it did something that mattered; in objects soaked by repeated intent; in rituals, names, and memory. Echoes are real but partial, weighted by feeling and shaped by context, so that a battlefield and a family shrine may both keep something of the same person in very different tones. Where the Veil runs thin or turbulent, Echoes form more readily and twist more easily, and a ford where a hundred men drowned is not a place anyone crosses at night.

**Record** is the deep keeping of coherent Echoes in the cosmos's own memory, the Eternal Record. It is not a prison for spirits or a hidden afterlife. It is memory, and its quality depends on whether the Echoes that reach it are coherent, reinforced, and uncorrupted.

Memory, then, is not decoration. To remember someone is not only to honour them; it shapes how coherent their Echoes remain.

### *Death and What Remains*

Death is not the departure of a soul. It is the failure of a Pattern to keep governing itself, usually marked by a burst of intense Echo, followed by the slow spreading of what coherence remains into Echo and Record. What survives is not all or nothing. It can be a faint residue on the air of a room, a strong but narrow fragment, a broad and coherent complex of traces, or, rarely, continuity clear enough in Record to attempt a restoration.

That is why the rites of the dead matter as much as they do on Caeldon, and why the dead who are denied them so often walk. Every people buries, burns, returns, or otherwise finishes its dead, and beneath the different rites the same need recurs: that the dead be seen to the threshold, that they do not wander, that something of them be kept. Over long ages that need gathered into a god of its own, Ennor the Grave-Watcher, honoured at gravesides across the cradle-web under many names, who keeps watch so that the dead leave a trace instead of vanishing twice. The mourners did not know they were tending Echoes. They were.

**Restoration**, where it is possible at all, is the rebuilding of a person from surviving Echoes and trustworthy Record. It is not retrieval. Some restorations bring back a living person with gaps; others bring back someone unsteady, someone their own kin quarrel over, or someone who comes apart the first time grief or fear presses on them.

### *Change, Succession, and Partition*

Because a Pattern changes all the time, ordinary change never threatens it. What holds a person together, in the doctrine, is not perfect recollection but a set of enduring invariants: a person's foundational vows and binding commitments, their lasting bonds and enmities, their characteristic moral reflex under pressure, and the resonant cadence by which they are known across their life. Continuity is strongest when these hold one another up.

When one to three of the four are severed at once, by force, transformation, or grave harm, the person's continuity is **disputed**: they are partly who they were. When all four are severed at once, the original identity is lost, and the being that remains is a **successor**: carrying the original's memory, Echo heritage, and Record ancestry, but a new person. There is no sliding scale. A being is in continuity, in disputed continuity, or a successor, and as long as one invariant holds, something of the person holds with it.

Two rare acts end an identity by will. In **voluntary succession** a person knowingly accepts the dissolution of all four invariants together, ending one identity and beginning another; those who do it understand it through their faith as a rebirth or a final vow, and no one marks it but kin and faith. In **voluntary partition** a person deliberately divides their living Pattern into two or more lines at once. The original is then **partition-ended**, which is not death; each resulting being is a partition-successor, a new person who remembers being the one before. Forced on someone unwill-

ing, partition is among the gravest harms there are: it destroys a person without killing them, and leaves the beings that result unable to take back what was taken.

No one settles any of this by those names. Whether someone was reborn, whether the one brought back is the one who died, whether the man who came home from the war is still himself: families, faiths, and neighbours answer by custom and belief, and the next village may answer the other way. What they ask is whether kin will still count the person as their own, and they go by oaths, conduct, and what people saw.

### *Why It Matters to the Peoples*

The doctrine belongs to a few scholars, but its consequences run through the life of every people, who meet them without its words. Dwarven culture, shaped by ancestors who changed so deeply in surviving that some lines denied they were the same people, built its public life around proofs: kin who speak for a life, the memory of the line, and the work of the hand. The proofs are tested in the Proving of the Unbroken Line, called when a Dwarf comes back changed out of a sealed gallery or years of captivity, or when a rival says openly that someone is no longer who they were; the hold's elders and crafters sit in the great hall, the strongest kin weigh heaviest, and the hold watches in silence. It never asks whether someone is still a Dwarf, only whether they are still the same one. The Wrought stay the same person through pattern and memory, not through untouched original parts, so that repair is healing and refitting by force is harm. Elves return their dead to a living whole larger than any one life. Human custom separates being a person from being able to carry an oath.

And it explains the darkest magic on Caeldon, though few who fear that magic know so. Dark practice does not need a soul to violate a person. It attacks continuity itself: forcing Echoes out before their time, splicing unrelated Echoes together, overwriting a person's invariants by coercive naming or binding, forging another's continuity to wear their identity, scarring the paths to Record so that nothing can be reconciled. The deepest harm is not killing. It is identity forgery, and what custom forbids, where it forbids anything, is the part of it that shows: magic used on a person to change how they behave. Elders, priests, or a lord in his hall know it by its effects, a changed temper, a will no longer the person's own, what people saw, and a binder caught at it is driven out, drowned, or burned. Where it has been at work, a person may still seem whole, and no one can trust that they are. Whoever holds the archives and silences those who remember can decide who a person was, and a lineage can be erased without a single death.

## Ordinary Life First

Every people in this book is described first by what it eats, mends, celebrates, teaches, inherits, bargains over, mourns, builds, protects, and repeats, and only then by its wars and monsters. That is not a rule of tidiness. It is how the peoples themselves live: crisis breaks into an ordinary life; it does not replace it. Then comes the bad year: the wolves at the fold, the raid on the road, the flood that brings the drowned back. A writer who knows how a Dwarven family tends a child through its long years in the stone cradle, behind the most doors, where an enemy would reach last, or what a Human village keeps in its granary against the bad year, knows what a war would actually threaten, and what a people would give up last.

The chapters that follow describe each people as a kind: its body, its life, its fears and its treasures, and the customs that run deep enough to survive from one era to the next. How each lives in a given era, who rules it, where it lives, and what it is fighting over that year, is told in that era's book, and changes from one era to the next.

## Tensions

- **Back by whose word.** Restoration rebuilds a person from what survived, and how much of the one who died comes back varies. No one

settles it but kin and faith, and one household welcomes home a person its neighbours would bury again.

- **Proving the binding.** Custom forbids binding or naming a person into obedience, and punishes what people can see: a changed temper, a broken oath, a will no longer the person's own. Those who punish it rarely know what such a working does beneath, and a binding that leaves no visible mark goes unpunished.
- **Debts of the one before.** Some faiths teach that a person may die to an old life and be born to another, and a few truly let go of all that made them who they were. No one marks it but kin and faith, so debts, oaths, and marriages follow the name, and the creditor and the new person each think the other is lying.
- **Two who remember swearing.** After a partition, both beings remember swearing the same oaths and owning the same land. No custom has an answer for them, whoever holds the debt, the land, or the oath chooses which of the two to believe, and the feud between such a pair can outlast both.
- **A bridge before a person.** People of Human and Elven descent can move between unlike rhythms of life more easily than either parent people expects, and are treated as go-betweens, compromises, and proofs of contact before they are treated as persons in their own right.
- **Marked and watched.** Lines at ease with sacred order are made into banners for some lord's right to rule; lines marked by old breach pressure meet suspicion that hardens into estrangement and makes them easier to use. Neither mark predicts how anyone will behave, and both are read as though they did.

CHAPTER 11

# The Elder Peoples

*The tree keeps time by growing,*
*the stone keeps time by holding.*
*Ask an Elf when a thing began:*
*she'll tell you what it's becoming.*
*Ask a Dwarf, and he'll ask you back*
*who held the stair, and who's holding still.*

— a carters' song of the exchange roads, *Songs of the Sheaf Road*

Long before the first Human looked at the sky and knew itself, two peoples were already old on Caeldon. Both descend from ancestors that were not quite of the Material Plane: the Elves from a crowded field of half-plant kinds steeped in the abundance of the Verdant Expanse, the Dwarves from lithic forms crushed into shape under the Iron Backbone. Both survived by becoming fully material peoples, and both still carry the older inheritance in changed form, the Elves in growth and attunement, the Dwarves in density and endurance. A Human who grows up near either learns quickly that they are people like any other, who eat, work, quarrel, love, and grieve, and learns more slowly that they keep time differently, and keep grudges longer. An Elven child is waited for until it shows what it is. A Dwarven child is kept deep in the stone until it has set. The two are each other's oldest neighbours and oldest enemies, and between them they hold some of the longest quarrels on Caeldon, fought with arrows and axes before anyone wrote them down: whether the living world is to be tended or shaped, whose greatness will last, and how anyone can know that a person who has changed is still the same person.

## Two Old Inheritances

The oldest peoples did not arise from bare ground. Between about 700,000 and 500,000 BR, as Caeldon's great regions settled into lasting contrast, the first durable lineages took hold within them: in the canopy-and-root country, lines of life that ran towards growth, long life, and the binding of life to place; in the mountain-and-depth country, lines that ran towards density, endurance, and weight. Neither was one tidy first stock. The Verdant elder field held rooted kinds, flowering kinds lifted high, thorned kinds hardened by hardship, and dim kinds that lived under the roots; the lithic field held seam-dwellers, peoples of the crushing deep, ridge-folk who weathered like stone, and peoples of the fault lines. Most of both did not last. They failed, dwindled, turned to stone, broke

**AT A GLANCE**

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| **Descent** | Elves from a Verdant-marked ancestral field, settled c. 500,000–c. 450,000 BR; Dwarves from a lithic field shaped by the Iron Backbone, settled c. 475,000–c. 425,000 BR. |
| **Life** | Both long-lived and slow to mature in stages. Elves grow by attunement; Dwarves by setting. |
| **Branches** | Wood, High, Thorn, and Dark Elves; Ironspine and Stonewake Dwarves. |
| **Civilizations** | The Rootcrown Concord, the Crownbough Courts, the Thornbound Circles, and the Gloamroot Covenant; the Ironspine Holds and the Stonewake Compact within them. |
| **Heartlands** | The Elderweald and the forests around it, and the Roothollows beneath; the Ironspine and the deep stone beneath it. |

apart, or were absorbed, and survive, where they survive at all, in ruins, ritual memory, old taboos, and the occasional too-large skull in a mine-cut.

The Elves and the Dwarves are the lines that came through, and both remember their origin in the same way: not as a beginning, but as a survival. The Elves remember an older living inheritance tamed into a true people of the Material Plane, still marked by long memory and kinship with the living world but no longer ruled by the unchecked abundance of what came before. The Dwarves remember a long crushing: an older Backbone-shaped inheritance changed slowly through the early instability remembered as the Uneven Settling, in which some lines failed and others grew less able to live under harder conditions. Dwarves are emphatic that they are not a degraded remnant of something better preserved. They are the line that endured.

The first stable Elves took form across the Elderweald and the older Roothollows below it, between about 500,000 and 450,000 BR, as one people of grove and root-depth, not yet divided into the branches of later history. The first stable Dwarves took form across the Ironspine, between about 475,000 and 425,000 BR, as one people of hold-making, defended passage, and long memory. Every later Elven branch and every later Dwarven hold descends from those two peoples. There were no separate births. That is why an Elf of the deep houses and an Elf of the bough-halls, however bitterly they disagree, are kin, and why a Dwarf of the high gates and a Dwarf of the Stonewake seals answer to the same ancestors.

## The Elves

Elves are not plants, and an outsider meeting one in ordinary life sees a person. What remains of the Verdant inheritance shows in presence more than in anatomy. Around the thresholds of body and heart, at fertility, adolescence, illness, grief, or ritual, an Elf's vitality, colouring, scent, or responsiveness to the surroundings can shift in ways that kin, lovers, healers, and others of the same branch notice, and strangers mostly do not. An Elf in grief may seem dimmer to those who love her; an Elf near a birth may seem, to a healer's eye, to belong more closely to the place around her. The signs are subtle and they vary by branch, but they are real, and Elven life is built to read them.

They are not only tenders of groves. Every branch keeps its hunters and its watch: grove hunters who share the deep forest with grey wolves and brown bears, Thorn Elf hedge-wardens who plant ant-thorn at the false gaps a stranger would try, and Dark Elf route keepers who meet whatever comes up the Known Ways at the threshold chamber with a blade across their knees. Elves keep laments for their losses longer than tales of their victories, and an Elf's grief can outlast a Human kingdom.

### *Birth and the Verdant Threshold*

Elven fertility is rarer and more cyclic than Human fertility, and children are few. Conception is internal and birth familiar to other peoples, but development still passes through a threshold the Verdant left behind. In the most settled lines it

may show only as a brief living sheath or some other subtle boundary before the infant is fully independent. In the oldest Wood Elf communities it is more plainly grove-linked, and Thorn Elf and Dark Elf births carry harder or more guarded forms of the same inheritance.

The deepest form of all, from the ancestors before the Elves were fully Elves, was stranger: a seed-after-union cycle in which a new life gathered first as a living kernel or pod, a growth-form, before any infant emerged. It is not the way of later Elves. Rare archaic births still happen, mostly in very old Wood Elf groves, and when they do they are an event for the whole grove: a family's distinction, a ritual memory made flesh, a sacred exception rather than anything a household expects.

### *Growing Into Themselves*

An Elven child is not only expected to grow but to show, over time, what it is: in temperament, in affinity, in what it has inherited. Infancy is treated as a time of delicate attunement, when season, light, the condition of the grove, and the care of kin matter unusually strongly. Naming and maturity come in stages, each marked when the person has visibly grown into it rather than at a fixed age. Adolescence is when branch inheritance shows most clearly, in temperament, role, magical leaning, and what others begin to expect, and some Elven peoples mark that stage with heavier rites than others. Elves have a gardener's patience with their young and a gardener's conviction that something forced into shape too early will grow wrong.

The branches carry the same patience differently. Wood Elf children are named slowly and nobody hurries them; a child is expected to show in its own season what it is, as a sapling shows in time what kind of tree it is, and adulthood comes when the grove agrees that the person has arrived. High Elf houses mark each stage formally (birth, naming, coming of age, and the taking of a house role), consult their tenders at every step, and end the long youth in presentation, when the young person is shown to the house and, if the house is of rank, to the assembled houses. A Crownbough house expects its young to arrive polished, and does not easily forgive one who does not. How a house and its tenders argue over that timing is told with the Crownboughs in The Forest Heartlands (MED 129). Thorn Elf children are kept close and named late, even by Elven measures, and are taught the approaches, the ambush ground, and the warning signs of their woods before they are taught much else. Dark Elf naming moves through its stages slowest and most guardedly of all: a child of the deep houses learns the house's Known Ways by mouth and by foot, recites them back turn by turn to a route keeper, and is named at last in the house's root-chamber, among the dead.

### *Healing and the Return of the Dead*

Elven medicine works to restore rhythm, vitality, and attunement: to bring a body back into its own pattern and its own place, rather than to set and secure it as a Dwarven healer would. An Elf who is ill is out of time with herself, and the cure is to bring her back.

The same care runs to the end of life. Elves do not treat the dead as lives ended and sealed away but as returned, carefully, to a living whole larger than any one life. A Wood Elf body is given back to living ground among the grove's trees, and the ground that holds a household's dead is its oldest hold on the place; to clear such ground would be to clear someone's dead, and Human woodcutters have died for less. High Elves return their dead to the family grove under the rites of return of their faith. Dark Elves keep the same custom underground, against the living root of a house's root-chamber, so that a house that loses a chamber loses its dead with it (see Stone and the Deep, MED 151).

The worst Elven death is one that cannot be returned: a gatherer who walked into a bear in the deep hollows and was never found, a lone walker taken by a ravine cat on a Briarreach crossing, the Dark Elf dead who lie in root-cham-

bers beyond the Sealing bars. Such dead are named in laments instead, and the laments are kept for longer than most Human songs have existed. To say of an enemy *may no one sing you home* is to wish them that death, and it is not said lightly by a people that remembers every time it was.

Where Elves have lived beside Humans, the two ways of finishing a life have had to meet. On the Elderweald's edge, since a death in a mixed settlement about 16,000 to 15,000 BR, a death is finished twice: the body returned in the Wood Elf manner, the mourning held in the Human one. The custom and its accord are told in The Forest Heartlands (MED 129).

### *Four Branches*

Four branches have grown from the common root, each with a civilization that keeps, hardens, or turns its inheritance. The branchings took more than a hundred thousand years, roughly from 450,000 to 318,000 BR, and every one of them is remembered as a departure from one old people rather than a separate beginning, and every one was paid for.

The **Wood Elves** came first. In the Elderweald, between about 490,000 and 470,000 BR, the earliest stable Elves settled into a grove-bound people who live within the forest as it grows rather than cutting it to their own design, and their civilization, the **Rootcrown Concord**, held to that answer. Nobody rules the Concord; groves under trees older than the Concord itself are held together by memory and by duty to the forest, and a grove that ignores a circle of its neighbours soon answers to all of them. Wood Elves gather rather than clear, take wood only from what has fallen, and keep paths open by walking them. The grove's hunters are its guard: they track whoever cuts a living tree, turns a stream, or sets a fire in the wrong place, and the timber thieves and the poachers of the moss-coated greenharts who come in from the basin side seldom go home.

The **Thorn Elves** hardened under harsher ground. In the Briarreach, between about 425,000 and 410,000 BR, part of the old Elven world met a broken country of thorn and ravine and answered with watchfulness, hedges, and strict custom about who may approach, and the **Thornbound Circles** grew from that answer. They live by the bow and the hedge: settlements as rooted as any grove, hidden behind thorn walls grown for war, in a forest they remember as trying to kill them. They are the Elves who were neither refined nor ruined, only hardened, and their vigilance has outlasted the worst of the old dangers and become custom.

The **High Elves** pushed the other way. In the Crownboughs, from about 398,000 BR, a line refined older Wood Elf ways into living architecture, magical shaping, ranked houses, and splendour, and the **Crownbough Courts** were founded on it. Their halls are grown from living wood high among the boughs and trained over generations, and no hall is ever finished; a young High Elf learns a craft by continuing shaping begun by a grandparent's grandparent. Several courts rule rather than one crown, each the gathering of a few great houses that settle rank by custom, oath, and what their groves, wealth, and sworn followers let them enforce, and quarrels between equals are fought out in duels of shaping or, when the insult runs deep enough, with swords on a garden-walk with nothing beneath it. They are the most settled and formal of the Elven lines, and the one with which Human-Elf children are most easily born.

The **Dark Elves** were already ancient before catastrophe found them. An underworld-margin branch of the upper Roothollows, they were always the most conscious of thresholds among Elves, ordered around guarded passage, chamber-right, admission chamber by chamber, and a sworn duty of refuge. Then came the Drowning Bloom, about 335,000 to 330,000 BR, and the sealing of the upper Roothollows that followed, and the survivors were driven into a much sharper break. The wound did not create the Dark Elf

branch; it hardened it, and the hardened branch built the **Gloamroot Covenant**, where power belongs to whoever can hold water, food, dry chambers, and a safe way through the dark. After that, Elven branching was no longer only a matter of country and preference. It became a matter of wound, blame, and memory, and Dark Elves have lived ever since between two beliefs: that refusing refuge is a betrayal never forgiven, and that every stranger at the door may bring the flood, the rot, or the thing that followed them. Their laments still name the guards of the Drowned Court, who sank so that others might float and rose again out of black water with spears of root to hold the survivors' last chambers.

Beneath the four lie older layers: Verdant proto-Elven lineages, elder root-kin, and the threshold folk of the old Roothollows. None lives as a people now. They survive in ruins, ritual memory, branch taboos, and the overgrown halls of the vanished root-kin under the oldest woods, closed with thorn that was grown to keep someone out. Some of those halls still hide and feed whoever they were sworn to and no one else, and the Human delvers who cut their way in come out, when they come out, with green-bronze and strange seed, and with the grove wardens a day behind them.

### *Elves of Two Peoples*

Rare Human-Elf children are real wherever contact has run long enough to make mixed households ordinary, most often with the settled High Elven line, though no pairing is impossible by default. In Human and frontier communities they are named and accepted earlier than any Elven household would name a child. Even so, their growing-up is usually more uneven and prolonged than Human observers expect, and their branch-linked tendencies show more weakly and more by circumstance than in full Elves. Adults of mixed descent are accepted in many societies without being sorted into one people-category: local custom, branch inheritance, upbringing, and the temper of whoever holds the land or heads the house decide how each is read, and the same person can be read three ways in three towns.

### *Belief*

Elven belief varies by branch, but every branch holds to guided emergence and the return of the dead to the living world. High Elves keep an organized faith, the Ordered Bough, whose temples are temple-gardens tended across generations and whose clergy are tenders, with authority resting on patience and on what has visibly flourished under their care; its most powerful and most contested patron is Saerith the Mirror-King, the god of finished form, and a failed house leaves rooms where his silver mirrors still hang, showing the viewer a better face, and some who look too long never come away the same. Wood Elves keep the older grove reverence from which the Bough grew, as custom rather than organized religion, and Thorn Elves keep a harder, more guarded form of the same reverence. Dark Elves honour the Last Chamber as a true but severe god, sworn by when a house must say honestly whether it can take one more life, and still name Ithaere the Drowned Mother in their laments. How these faiths are practised in a given era is told in that era’s book.

## The Dwarves

Dwarves are not stone come to life. They are a true people, dense and durable, who eat and drink, labour, recover, and age as fully embodied beings; but their bodies remember where they came from. They are suited to deep earth, its weight, and hold-cut halls; the deep air that crushes other peoples feels to them like steadiness. They bear scarcity unusually well and value food for its density and keeping rather than its delicacy: a Dwarven storehouse is full of dried meat, hard cheese, barley, roots, and fungus from the hold beds. They keep a little of the old ability to draw restoration and steadiness from stone itself, though ordinary food and drink are the basis of their lives. In old age their long strength

stiffens and grows less forgiving rather than softening into frailty; an old Dwarf is more often brittle than weak.

They are stoic, not cold. Dwarves tend towards self-control, endurance, and a steady bearing, and their feeling runs compressed and heavy. When it breaks into the open it comes with force, which is why other peoples who mistake a Dwarf's silence for indifference are so often surprised. Most are slow to trust and slower to forgive a broken word, and the worst Dwarven curse is the shortest: *forsworn*, said over a broken word, and a hold that says it of a Dwarf will not say that Dwarf's name again.

Their heroes are keepers more than conquerors: the gate warden who held the stair while a hold went down behind her, the seal-keeper who shut a flooding gallery with his own kin on the far side and lived to be sung about and cursed for it. The hall toast is *to the stair*, for everyone who held one, and hold children play *gate and stair*, one side holding a doorway with sticks while the other tries to rush it; the side holding the stair always wins in the end, because that is how the game is told.

### *Setting*

A Dwarf is not finished at birth. Infancy is a **setting** time, as much bodily as cultural, in tended stone cradles deep in the hold, while the body settles into lasting form. A hold keeps its cradle-chambers deepest inside, behind the most doors, where an enemy would reach last, and guards them more closely than its treasuries: an infant still setting is the thing a hold can least afford to lose, and a child lost to the mountain is the worst loss a hold can suffer.

Childhood is long and maturity comes in stages, and every stage is marked slowly and in public. A name is given when it can be carried: in the Ironspine a child's name is cut on a small stone kept in the cradle-chamber until the elders think the child able to bear it, and the stone then goes home with the household. A craft is taught one burden at a time. An oath waits until the young Dwarf is thought able to keep it, and a young Dwarf's first oath, sworn at the gate before a custodian who asks Kerrund's question aloud, is cut into the hold's archive; an oath broken at the gate is avenged by the whole hold, not only by the injured kin. That is why Dwarven naming, kinship, healing, and burial all lean on steadiness, shared care, and proper rest. A life must be brought safely into lasting form, not merely begun.

It is also why Dwarves look at other peoples' thresholds with suspicion. Humans who name a child in its first days look rash to them, and Elves who trust a child to find its own way look careless.

### *Proofs of the Line*

The long survival of the Dwarven ancestors left a wound as well as a body. Inside the surviving kin, the great change was lived as the same people enduring: we are still ourselves. Outside, and in bad times, some lines denied that the changed survivors were still themselves. Dwarves have answered ever since with proofs. **Speaking-for** came first, kin speaking up for a life, because a community's acceptance was what kept a doubted Dwarf alive. **Line-memory** followed, once holds lasted long enough to keep tallies across generations. **Craft proof** came last and is the most Dwarven of the three: the work of the hand that shows the same self still holds.

All three are tested in the **Proving of the Unbroken Line**, though holds and eras have names of their own for it. It is called when a Dwarf comes back changed or after long absence, out of a sealed gallery, out of years of Dark Elf captivity, out of a mountain that was thought to have killed them, or when a rival says openly that someone is no longer who they were. The hold's elders, its keepers of line-memory, and its leading crafters sit together in the great hall, and the strongest kin among them weigh heaviest. The challenger may open the hearing, but only the sitters question, and they call whom they choose to speak. The hold watches in silence; whoever breaks it is thrown out, and some holds add a

beating. To appear is to give oneself to the sitters entirely: their questions on kin, old burdens, and former place, and any work they ask the doubted Dwarf's hands to do before them. One who will not come loses what is in doubt, unless it is later shown they could not come.

What comes back comes in steps. Kin, shelter, food, and burial return first, and most holds leave even one who loses these bare protections, though the hardest deep holds may narrow them in a lean time. A craft place returns more slowly, and in strict holds it weighs nearly as much as inheritance, because it carries the right to shape what the hold depends on. Inheritance, office, and the right to speak for others need nearly every sitter, which gives a powerful family in the hall a long reach; an heir with strong kin behind them is heard sooner and more kindly, and an exile who comes back with no kin at all has sometimes been sent back out of the gate into the snow. Most end with the sitters' word spoken on the spot; hard ones send the sitters out to argue before they return. The hearing never asks whether someone is still a Dwarf, only whether they are the same Dwarf and what the hold still owes them.

Under the Dwarves' faith the proving is held before the gods as well as the hold-elders, and the person whose place is doubted answers the questions of holding for their own life, with kin and craft-mates speaking beside them.

### *Healing and Burial*

Dwarven medicine resets the body and secures it: a break is set, a body supported, a recovery held steady until it can bear weight. Where an Elven healer asks whether a body has found its rhythm again, a Dwarven healer asks whether it will hold.

Burial is the last answer a life gives. It is a final proving in miniature, in which the dead are declared to have held and are then sealed with care. Proper rest matters as much as the setting of the newborn did, because the same principle governs both ends of a life: a Dwarf is brought into lasting form, and laid to rest in it. In the deep holds the custodians who mark closures and keep the tallies also seal the dead, and every grave closure carries more than one custodian's mark and an entry in the archive. A sealed door with the living behind it is another matter, and most holds have one of their own that nobody opens and everybody listens to; behind old seals the Seal-Knockers knock, three blows and a pause, sometimes for years.

### *Holds, Depths, and Branches*

The oldest Dwarven line became an argument as well as a people. In the Ironspine, between about 465,000 and 445,000 BR, the first Dwarves cut the mountain into halls rather than live on its face as it was, and came to one conviction: that a people endures in what it builds, in sound halls, dependable passages, and memory cut into stone. The **Ironspine Holds**, founded soon after, have no king. Their heart is the hold: a fortress-city cut into the mountain around a gate, a forge, a granary, and the tablets of its dead, kept by people who believe that whatever holds up a roof deserves respect and whatever does not deserves none. Inside a hold the elders and great houses rule by custom and oath, and a household that defies them finds the forge, the granary, and the gate closed to it. Between holds there is no crown, only old oaths and the strength each can bring. Hold grudges are carved, not spoken, and a feud between two holds over a seam, a road, or an insult at a gate-feast can run for a thousand years, fought by ambush in the underways and recut on both sides' tablets each generation so the letters will not soften.

From the holds, the deep world grew denser. In the Stonewake Deeps, between about 365,000 and 350,000 BR, more of the lower world's ways and water came together than anywhere else, and whoever held Stonewake's passages and reservoirs held the deep. That concentration became the **Stonewake Compact**, a civilization within the hold-world, small and dense, where power belongs to whoever keeps the ways open, the water clean, and the records true, and has for three hundred thousand years against flood, col-

lapse, Dark Elf war-bands, and whatever comes up from below. In Stonewake a seal is a matter of oath, not impulse: a shut door can save a hundred holds or bury the people behind it, an ordinary seal needs the oath-marks of several custodians, and an emergency seal set by whoever holds the passage must answer to the elders afterwards, with the kin of anyone sealed in wanting an answer. Its heroes are read rather than sung, off the tablets beside the seals and gates they kept.

Ironspine and Stonewake Dwarves are the clearest branches. Beyond them, Dwarves vary by depth, hold, and neighbours more than by birth. The deep holds are the severest: they store everything, forgive little, and give rule to whoever keeps the air and water moving. Mountain-facing and high holds live with weather, haulage, and traffic; the **Highhold** and **Gatehold** Dwarves of such places are real and recognizable, but they are lifeways, not kinds. Corridor communities nearest Humans and Elves are used to bargaining and to strangers at the gate. Under all of it lie older forms that belong to memory rather than to the living: lithic ancestor lines, burdened deep forms, old seam-kin, and lost pressure holds below the lowest kept routes, where unwoken frames stand at their posts and the treasure-songs say the forge-lords left their hoards behind the last door.

Each depth has its own killers. On the heights stone cats take herds and lone climbers, and a warden who wears a stone-cat pelt has a story to tell about it; pass bears break into waystation stores. In the mine-edges flood, bad air, and brace-gnawers in the props kill more Dwarves than any enemy. In the deepest halls stand the Burden-Stays, keepers who would not let a refuge fall and now hold up its roof with their own bodies.

Not every hold that fell was sealed. The Ironspine is studded with dead holds, lost to flood, collapse, plague, or the deep enemy, and their halls are full of the hold-world's wealth: forge-work blades that still keep their edge, lamps that still light at dusk, and doors whose old sigils still spit fire at whoever forces them. Human and Goblin delvers go in for it, and the holds hate them for it as grave-thieves. Dwarves go in too, as **reclaimers**: kin of the lost hold who swear on its name-stone, with a hand on the cold hearth, to go down, take back its hall, and relight its fire, and who mostly come back with a name-stone, a few heirlooms, and the news of what lives in the halls now. A hold relit by its own kin after centuries is the greatest deed a Dwarven family can boast of, and a few have.

The Dwarves were also the first makers of the frames from which the Wrought descend: mindless golem-like workframes built for heat channels, vent shafts, pressure gates, and the other places where craft demanded more than a body could survive. Some still stand in the old workings, and no one can tell from the doorway which are only tools. The people who later woke from that tradition belong to themselves, not to the holds, and their story is told with the bridge peoples.

### *Belief*

Dwarven belief is organized in one faith shared by the holds, the **Held Covenant**, in which the great gods are questions every hold must answer aloud: Kerrund the Stone-Warden's *will you hold?*, the Measured Seal's *must this close?*, and the Last Chamber's *can this still bear?* Its clergy are custodians, keepers of seals, tallies, and the rolls of the hearings, and its central rite is the Proving of the Unbroken Line. Dwarves honour the Mountain-Father by title only and ask him nothing. How the Covenant is practised in a given era is told in that era's book.

## Old Neighbours

Elves and Dwarves are each other's oldest enemies on Caeldon, and their enmity is a quarrel of first principles as much as of borders.

It began on the margins of the Elderweald and the Ironspine, where the forest climbs into the mountain's feet and both peoples drink from the same springs. At first they bargained as often as they fought, and the first raids were as much theft as war: Elven hunters taking Dwarven tools, hold

miners felling grove timber for props. But the same slope was a living grove to one and a seam waiting to be opened to the other, and between about 410,000 and 385,000 BR the frontier became the verge wars: generations of raid, ambush, fouled water, and felled groves, each ending in whatever terms the side holding the slope that season could impose. Dwarven miners turned streams to wash their ore, and the groves below them sickened; Elven wardens answered by night, cutting props in the adits and leaving miners in the brakes with arrows in them; hold axe-bands came down in strength to fell the thickets that hid the archers, and the felled groves were mourned as murdered kin. The verge wars made the first heroes and villains the two peoples still name against each other: a warden who held a spring alone against an axe-band through a night and was found at dawn with the axes broken round her, a hold captain who poisoned a grove's spring and was hunted by its wardens for twenty years and never caught. Their battle-grounds are the oldest haunted ground of the margins, where hunters still hear axes in empty woods, and abandoned adits of those wars still pock the lower slopes, some holding the tools and ore-hoards the miners fled from, and some Elven arrowheads still in the bones. The question beneath the killing, whether a people endures by living with the land or by mastering it, has outlived the last verge raid by ages.

The rise of the High Elves gave the old frontier a prouder edge. Between about 375,000 and 355,000 BR the Crownbough Courts and the great houses of the Ironspine Holds turned the enmity into a contest of pride. To the Courts, the holds were strong and graceless: masters of the load-bearing wall, deaf to beauty. To the holds, the Courts were brilliant and hollow, all display and shaped wood, forgetting that a hall must first be defended and a people first survive. Mostly it was fought with insult and splendour: a Dwarven-forged blade sent as a gift and refused, a grown Elven harp sent back with its strings cut. But on the slopes between them it was fought with blood, in hunting-parties ranging into Dwarven valleys and hold war-bands coming out of the gates to answer, and Dwarven quarry-gangs still call one worked-out slope at the forest's mountain edge the Red Face, and will not say why where an Elf can hear. Neither side could dismiss the other, and that grudging respect kept the rivalry from turning into conquest, though not from turning into feud along every verge road for twenty thousand years. Dwarven blades taken in raids still hang in Crownbough halls as trophies, and grown Elven armour lies in hold vaults as proof that it could be pierced; a few have been stolen back by daring thieves, whose deeds are told on both sides, as heroism or as theft.

Below the forest the enmity is older and bloodier. After the Drowning Bloom broke the upper Roothollows, Dark Elf houses and the Dwarves of the Stonewake fought for the Rootstone Heartwell chamber by chamber, and whoever held the chambers held the water. That war, fought by lamplight in the water-chambers, is the root of the Burdened Seal Histories: the keeper who shut the deep gate with refugees still on the far side, because what came behind them would have taken a hundred halls. Stonewake sings that keeper as a hero; the Dark Elves name the same keeper a murderer. The deep border is quiet more years than not, but never at peace. A well is fouled, a patrol does not come back, a raid on a fungus bed is answered by a raid on a gallery, and blood-feuds between hold-families and Dark Elf houses run back further than any Human kingdom.

The difference reaches every stage of a life. One people lets a child emerge; the other sets it. One names in stages as a person grows into themselves; the other names when the name can be carried. One heals by restoring rhythm; the other by resetting and securing. One returns its dead to the living world; the other seals them with care, as a final hearing. Each finds the other's way of bringing a life into the world faintly reckless or faintly cold.

Both reached the younger peoples early. Dwarven route knowledge, iron, and craft entered Human history through the foothills, where the holds and the marcher lords have fought outlaws and winter on the same roads for twenty thousand years, and that guarded trust is the oldest lasting bond between Humans and Dwarves. The Wood Elf forest edge taught Humans what it costs to cut into a living wood, with arrows from the dark and roads grown into bramble mazes by the next moon, and the High Elven houses later gave them a model to admire, imitate, and resent. Dark Elves, when Humans met them at all, were feared as rare and dangerous powers from below, and every basin town has its story of the treasure-seeker who went down after Dark Elf silver. How the elder peoples worship, who rules their holds and groves, and what they fight over in a given era is told in that era's book.

## Tensions

- **One people or four.** Since the Roothollows darkened, the Gloamroot houses have been in a long contest over whether the wider Elven world counts them as rightful. No grove, bough-house, or circle is strong enough to settle for the others whether a Dark Elf line stands on the same footing as its own, so each answers as its own borders and grudges allow.
- **Tending or shaping.** The Wood Elf groves hold that the living world is to be cooperated with; the High Elf houses that it may be refined. The argument is older than any of the four Elven civilizations and runs through all of them.
- **Read late, named early.** Human-Elf children are named and accepted early in Human and frontier settings, then read slowly, unevenly, and sometimes never by Elven kin. Which reading governs a mixed adult's inheritance is decided place by place, usually by whoever holds the land or heads the house.
- **Capable before accepted.** In the Gloamroot houses a young Dark Elf can be useful, formidable, and plainly real long before the elders let the line continue through them. Survival value does not make an heir there, and a capable heir can wait years in the root-chamber's shadow.
- **Bare protections.** Most holds leave even one who loses at the Proving shelter, food, and burial, but harsher deep-world holds narrow those protections in lean times. Corridor Dwarves call that a proving turned into exile; the deep holds answer that a hold which cannot feed its own cannot keep feeding the doubtful.
- **A place won at the gate.** Corridor communities, used to bargaining with Human and Elven neighbours, give a doubted Dwarf back their place on terms the deep worlds think too easy. When a corridor Dwarf goes down to a deep hold, the deep hold's elders decide whether a place their own hall did not grant counts at all, and they usually decide it does not.
- **The knock behind the seal.** When a seal the hold later calls unjust starts to knock, the kin of those behind it want it opened and the seal-keepers will not, for fear of the flood, the contagion, or the enemy it was made to hold. Every generation some young warriors go down with picks to open one themselves, and the hold has to decide whether to stop them by force.

CHAPTER 12

# Humans

*We name them in a week*
*and wed them in a summer,*
*we bury them in a lifetime*
*and the river doesn't wait;*
*the Elves are still naming theirs,*
*the Dwarves have not yet set them,*
*and we have crossed and come back*
*and written down the date.*

— a ferry song of the Lower Serath, *The Towpath Sayings*

Humans have no great inheritance to lean on. They do not descend from the abundance of another plane like the Elves, nor from stone shaped by the Iron Backbone like the Dwarves. They arose on Caeldon itself, by ordinary evolution, in the country where several worlds meet: river basins, foothills, coasts, and the borders between forest and mountain. What they inherited from that country was not one deep gift but many shallow ones, and an unusual readiness to use them. They mature fast, live short, bright lives beside their elder neighbours, change their customs within a few generations, and push, more readily than any other people, into country that is not yet theirs. Much of what a stranger sees of the cradle-web in any era is Human work laid over older ground: a road, a palisade, a market at a crossing, a granary on a rise above the flood, a gibbet at the crossroads, and a stubborn trust in what has been sworn aloud and written down. Their alehouses are full of heroes who did one great thing and died young, and more than any other people they will walk into an elder ruin for what might lie inside it.

## A People of the Edges

Humans emerged long after the oldest Elven and Dwarven peoples had settled, between about 300,000 and 220,000 BR, and not in one dominant niche. They belong to the broad **balanced adaptive field** of Caeldon's ancestry: the peoples who arose nearer the gentler middle of the world, bent less by any one overwhelming force than the Verdant or lithic extremes, whose gift was to make do: to mix, move, change their ways, and make dangerous ground livable. That field held basin

**AT A GLANCE**

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|---|---|
| **Origin** | Native to Caeldon by natural evolution, in the Confluence Basins and Headwater Marches, c. 300,000–c. 220,000 BR. |
| **Body** | No single gift; thrive in many climates and on many diets; grow up quickly and live short lives beside Elves and Dwarves. |
| **Branches** | None. Humans form regional peoples: Confluence, Headwater, Serathic, and frontier or Mixed-March. |
| **Civilizations** | The Confluence Marches and the Serathic League, both young beside the orders of their neighbours. |
| **Marked by** | Pace, restlessness, and the habit of turning wild country into land a family can farm. |

gatherers, upland wanderers, shore-folk, sheltered valley folk, and drifters of the margins. Humans are its boldest line. They became decisive in history not by being first or strongest, but by being the boldest gatherers, founders, and road-makers of mixed lands. Far away, the same field produced the Halflings, who turned towards full stores and the small sheltered world, and the Gnomes, who turned towards careful reckoning and the keeping of difficult coasts.

The first Human country was the meeting of two kinds of land: the deep, fertile lowlands of the Confluence Basins, which supplied growth and settlement, and the steep headwater country above them, which rewarded movement, guarded passage, and local wit. Humans never had to choose between the two. Their first strength was becoming native to the meeting of them. Between about 220,000 and 90,000 BR that meeting grew into one country of linked valleys, widening rivers, and foothill approaches, shaped to reward the people who could live in both before any Human lord stood in it. It was not empty ground. On the wet margins of the basins the Reedfolk were there first.

The same shape runs through all of Human history: the basin supplies depth, the edge supplies daring, and together they make a people unusually able to turn changing conditions into advantage. Humans still favour that kind of country: river valleys, coasts, foothills, mixed uplands, and borderlands, wherever several kinds of land, roads, and neighbours meet and moving, trading, and starting over pay better than one deep craft. That is much of why they are the most varied people on Caeldon. It does not make them better than their neighbours. Elves inherit forests older than memory and Dwarves holds cut to outlast them; Humans move faster, vary more, and change rulers more readily.

## The First Man

At some point in that long emergence, Humans woke. The god who remembers it is gone, but the story of him is not. In the mixed country between basin and headwater the first Humans lived, at first, by hunger, fear, and instinct, with no sense of a self apart from the band. Then something shifted: a hunter looked at his prey and saw a challenge; a mother looked at her child and saw a future; someone looked at the stars and saw meaning. That awakening, shared by a whole people at once, gathered into a god: the **First Man**, the first conscious step from survival into Human becoming.

He had no fixed age, gender, or likeness. To a hunter he seemed the perfect tracker, to a gatherer the perfect provider, to a child the protector, always shifting and never quite in focus. He gave no answers and granted no powers; he asked questions, and his voice, the old stories say, did not command but invited. *Look. Choose. Become.*

And the more Humans became, the less they needed him. They did what Humans do. Basin and foothill bands grew apart in custom, speech, and way of life; the hunter had his own traditions and the farmer his own gods; people began to honour the powers of their own place and work rather than one awakened humanity. The First Man did not die. He came apart, scattering into the countless smaller figures of Human story, the Muse and the Trickster, the Hero and the Sage, the Mother and the Father, and his name went with him. No people, record, or rite keeps it now. Many Human peoples still tell of a First Man or a First Woman who taught Humans how to be Human, and no two tellings agree on a name. Some say the voice that urges a person to choose, to be better, to become, is his echo still, and that the old dream of shedding one's skin and stepping into a new life is a visit from him.

## Body and Pace

A Human body has no particular gift. It does well in many climates and on many diets, works hard, heals ordinarily, and wears out early by the measure of the elder peoples. What marks Humans as a kind is pace. They mature, marry, move, and change faster than anyone around them, and their customs are built for it. A Human child is named within days of birth and handed work, a place, and duties early. That makes them quick to fill new country, and it is the source of a friction that never quite ends with the Elves, who are slow to count anyone grown, and the Dwarves, who guard their oaths closely: to an Elf a Human child is named before anyone could know who it is, and to a Dwarf it is counted before it has set.

Where Humans live among other peoples, their coming of age tends to split into stages rather than happen all at once. A young person may work, travel, and carry messages on a lord's or an elder's word years before they may swear, inherit, or bind in their own name. That compromise was learned on the mixed frontiers, at a ford where three people drowned, and it has since become one of the ordinary shapes of Human custom.

Most Humans live close to land and water: farming, fishing, or working a road or a river, and eating what the work brings. Bread, porridge, and ale come from basin grain; barley and oats from the hills; fish from the rivers and coasts. And most villages lose someone every few years: to grey wolves at the fold in a hard winter, to raiders, fever, or the spring rise, a child to a heath adder in the long grass. What they eat, what they grow, and how they work change with the eras, and each era's book tells how.

### *The Shape of a Human Life*

Humans are driven, as a people, by adaptation more than endurance, and where they stand beside the other peoples is set out in What Makes a People: strong at turning unsettled country into places people can live, quick to seize a chance, and less reliable about what they keep once the wind changes. They fear wolves at the winter fold and, worse, their own dead: the Unsworn Dead of the basins, the drowned who walk out of the Serath, the hanged at the crossroads.

## Gathering and Founding

For a long age the basin-headwater Humans had no lords at all, only a shared temperament. Between about 120,000 and 50,000 BR valley paths were walked until they were expected, foothill crossings were remembered, and lowland settlements, marcher bands, and guarded approaches came to count as parts of one widening country rather than as strangers. Kinship began to reach farther than the band. The idea that won, and has defined Humans since, is that a people lasts by binding unlike places together, not by making them alike.

Most of that age is a silence, the Unrecorded Age, and what Humans remember of their deep past came to them by voice. Their story of the First Man is one of the things that survived that way: the title passed on, and the name did not. The age left other things behind, and the plough and the delver's spade still turn up its graves and hoards.

The first Human civilization, the **Confluence Marches**, was founded between about 40,000 and 20,000 BR across the basins and the headwaters together: river towns behind palisades, basin farms, marcher strongholds, and the roads between, held together by no crown but by shared habit, the same gods, the same oaths, and the same way of ending a quarrel, by sworn word, blood-price, or the sword. On the lower river, towns that each held their own reach of water and swore to treat one another's carriers as their own became the **Serathic League**, between about 22,000 and 16,000 BR, the first Human towns on a river to hold together longer than the houses that founded them. The history of those orders, and of the small wars between them that no one bothered to name, belongs to the deep past and to each era's book.

## Centres and Edges

Humans build by joining a settled heart to a restless edge: granary towns behind, march-holds and road-forts in front, where the fighting is. The working household is the base of it: a farming family in a village of a few dozen households, a ferry or barge family on the river, a road family in the foothills, often fostering a child from across some border. A stranger in Human country sees it at once: fields running down to water, a granary, and at the nearest crossing a walled market with a mill, a shrine, and an oath-house, and in a hard year a gibbet whose hanged nobody will bury.

Power over all of it is split among whoever can make it stick. Lords hold land and take grain; towns are run by their richest houses, who keep the market and punish their own; march-towns take what the crossings will bear. Every lord keeps fighters, and most villages keep a few spears and a horn. When two houses fall out, the feud is fought with burned barns, ambushed carts, and arrows from the hedges, until one side can no longer pay its sellswords. Where no lord rides, a village pays beast-hunters for a wolf pack or a pass bear at the waystation, and the young who want more than a field go off as sellswords, bounty-takers, or tomb-breakers. A few come back rich, and buy a mill, and tell it every night for the rest of their lives; the many who did not are a name on the shrine wall and a mother at the window.

What they go after is the cradle's oldest wealth. The Headwater hills are full of barrows of forgotten chiefs, and every valley knows one that has never been opened and one that was, and what walked out of it; the dead of a robbed and unrited grave rising of their own accord are the commonest ending of a tomb-breaker's tale. Plague pits are worse, since the dead in them sleep until a spade wakes them, and digging for the coins in a plague pit is the classic fool's death of the basin towns. Lords post bounties on outlaw captains, on wolf packs that take children, and on the things that come down from the Wrongwood, and pay in silver and sometimes in land; a commoner who brings in the right head can end the year a knight.

The deep world taught Humans caution. They have met the Dark Elves, and some regions remember it bitterly, but never as the Headwater, Elderweald, and Dwarven borders have known their neighbours. Most Human communities know the world below through descents that did not come back, wrong turnings, wells bricked up at the bottom, and grandmothers' warnings. Every basin town has its story of the treasure-seeker who went down after Dark Elf silver, and of what was heard knocking under the stones afterwards; those stories teach Humans which ways down are better left shut, as the ford that drowns in spring

and the wood the Elves will not yield taught them which crossings can be trusted and which must stay watched.

In the cradle-web, a marriage, an inheritance, or a sale of land is sworn aloud and written down, and the dead whose deaths were never sworn come back as the Unsworn Dead. The habit has a long ancestry, and part of it is argued over: the love of written oaths came down from the vanished archive world, and most of it reached the river through the house-custom of the Reedfolk, who were keeping the water by memory long before the first roll was written. The oath and the roll are the Human answer to their own short memory, and the roll records what the strong have already decided. A Dwarf proves who they are before the hold-elders; an Elf by a grove that remembers; a Human by a copy, and if the copy is wise, a second one kept somewhere else. When the two copies disagree, the side with more friends and more spears usually keeps the field.

## Meeting the Older Peoples

The Human rise was shaped from the start by uneven contact with older peoples, each of whom taught a different lesson, and most of the lessons were paid for in blood.

On the forest edge, from about 38,000 BR, Humans learned the cost of cutting into a living wood: the Wood Elves were not an obstacle to be cleared but a people whose dead lay in the ground the settlers wanted, and old trunks there still carry Human arrowheads grown deep into the bark. In the foothills, from about 34,000 BR, contact with the Ironspine grew into Caeldon's first lasting alliance of Humans and Dwarves, grounded in bargained passage and repeated usefulness rather than kinship, and the holds and the marcher lords have fought outlaws and winter on the same roads ever since. In the High Elven houses, from about 18,000 BR, Humans met a standard of refinement older than their whole history, and answered it with admiration, imitation, condescension returned, and rivalry. How each of those meetings went is followed in The Threads of History. Dark Elves, when met at all, were feared as rare and dangerous powers from below.

On the lower rivers the Reedfolk were there first, and Human river towns grew by bargaining with them, depending on them, pushing them aside, and partly absorbing them. Much of what the river towns know about channels, crossings, and floodable land, they know because someone of the older people told them.

## Custom for Mixed Lives

The friction of pace gave Humans their most distinctive customs, and the first of them came out of a feud. Faced with mixed households, Human communities have tended to swear several thresholds rather than force everyone through one gate.

The first famous case came out of the Headwater Marches, about 24,000 to 23,000 BR. A Human foster child raised partly among a community of the Ironspine Holds was famous on the road before the quarrel began: when bandits came down on a hold caravan in the Rattlecut gorge, the youth cut loose the lead mules, got the wounded under the rock overhang, and held the narrow path with a spear until the hold's escort came back. The Human kin, and half the valley, expected the Dwarven elders to give the youth the full oath in return. The elders refused: brave, they said, and trusted, but not yet settled enough to carry oaths that bind road, line, and hold. The Human kin closed the ford below the hold to Dwarven traffic; a hold escort came down to open it, and in the scuffle in the shallows a Dwarf and two villagers drowned. For a season the waystations stood empty and the bandits came back to the road, raiding both sides without fear, and it was the bandits, in the end, who brought the feuding kin back to the same table. The hold was the stronger party and its caution carried the day, but the Human kin held the ford, and they won something real: the fosterling was named before the

gathered settlement as a trusted member of the frontier community, and the full oath waited. Travellers crossing that ford at dusk are still warned not to answer if someone in the water asks the way to the hold.

Within two thousand years the compromise had become custom. Under the Headwater **Rite of Two Oaths** a young person swears twice. **Working right** comes first, sworn at the settlement gate before the gathered households: the youth becomes a trusted worker, apprentice, messenger, caravan-hand, or road servant under an elder's eye, and holds a place everyone can see, but no inheritance, no binding oaths, and no share in the community's heaviest debts and feuds. **Oath-right** comes later, when the young adult is thought ready to swear binding oaths, take a full place in house or line, take up a full inheritance, bear a sword in their own name, and take up a kinsman's feud. Many a Headwater youth's first deed after the second oath is a hunt: a bandit band, a wolf pack, a pass bear that has learned the stores, or a kinsman's killer on the road. The rite did not end the disagreement between Human and Dwarven ideas of growing up. It held it still.

The lower river went further, and harder. About 19,000 to 18,000 BR, a merchant house in a Lower Serath river town of Humans, Elves, and Dwarves died out with its heir still young by one people's count and already grown by another's, and each set of kin claimed the house, its warehouses, and the child. The feud was fought in the open: warehouses burned, a laden barge was cut loose onto the Lying Shoals, sellsword crews came, and a whole night of fire ran along the waterfront. That brought the great river houses, who held the markets and the river-gates, down the river in force, and on the town landing, with their boats drawn up behind them, they swore the **Serathic Oath of Layers**, three thresholds at once:

| | |
|---|---|
| **Protection** | Food in a famine, a place behind the walls, and a house that will avenge them, given to everyone a town takes in, even when everything else is unsettled. |
| **Stewardship** | The right to hold property, debts, or goods in trust under an elder's eye or within limits: a boat, a stall, a debt. |
| **The full oath** | The day a person takes on the heaviest duties of town, oath, and line in their own right. |

The child was given Protection and Stewardship, the warehouses were held in trust, and the kin who would not accept it were driven out of the town. The layers leave room for a household or a line to count its own members in its own time, and forbid any of them to go below the floor the towns guarantee, because the great river houses have the boats and the spears to stop them, and the layers serve those houses first. The strongbox the merchant house was said to hold was never accounted for, and divers still go down at the Lying Shoals to look for it.

The same difference of pace runs through every close meeting between Humans and the elder peoples. On the Elderweald's edge, a death in a mixed settlement was finished twice, the body returned in the Wood Elf manner and the mourning held in the Human one, because Humans needed their dead seen and spoken of in public where the Elves needed return. In the halls where Humans and High Elves married, a child of both sides who mattered to great houses set Human eagerness for a named heir against the High Elven conviction that a child may matter immensely without yet being ready to be shown, and the houses learned that an heir and a grown person do not always ripen on the same day.

### *Children of Two Peoples*

Human-Elf children, rare overall, are common enough in some frontiers, lords' halls, and corridor towns to need ordinary customs of naming,

guardianship, and inheritance. Human custom names them early; their growing-up is usually slower and more uneven than Human parents expect, and Elven kin may read them slowly or never. That is one reason the Headwater Marches and the Lower Serath were early to count a young person grown for one thing and not yet for another. Human-Orc children are rarer still, individuals rather than a line, born only where the crossing kindreds' routes meet Windscar escorts or on the far coast, since Orcs and inland Humans never meet.

## Regional Peoples

Because their identity rests on region and custom rather than descent, Humans form **regional peoples**, not branches. The **Confluence**, **Headwater**, **Serathic**, and frontier or **Mixed-March** Humans are shaped by settlement, roads, the river, trade, and mixed contact, and a family that moves among them changes its people by changing its oaths and its neighbours. Behind them lie older peoples who survive only as layers of origin: early populations of the broken country, the old Confluence baseline, lost road peoples, and enclaves that lived too close to the deep. What divides Humans from one another is custom, fosterage, and the age at which they count someone grown, far more than blood.

## Belief and the Dead

Human belief is the most organized and the most varied on Caeldon. In the corridor world of the cradle-web it is shaped by an organized faith, the **Sworn Accord**, under which Anvelle the Harvest-Mother and Serovan the River-King stand first, and whose oath-houses stand beside the markets at the crossings. Beyond the corridor, country shrines and household gods are tolerated rather than entered. On the frontiers, people who live between peoples pray to Abrel the Changeling, whom some Human tellers call the First Man's successor: where the First Man taught Humans how to be Human, Abrel teaches people between peoples how to be themselves.

Beneath all of it lie the old seasonal rites and the rites of the dead under Ennor the Grave-Watcher, who keeps watch so that no name is lost. Human mourning wants to be seen. A Human death is finished when it has been seen, spoken of, and remembered in public, by a community that will carry the memory on, and those rites are kept with care, because Human dead do not always lie still. After a hard spring the River-Given walk up the Serath's ferry ramps towards their old doors, and on the Headwater road the Rattlecut Dead stand in the gorge spray on the day the river takes the road.

Magic in Human country is a thing seen rarely and talked of for years. Every valley has a cunning-woman it needs and fears in equal measure, and every bad harvest someone is accused of the ill wish; it is seldom true. The sight of a real working, fire blooming over a ford in a war-mage's hands or a priest's word that turns the walking dead back to their graves, is the story of a lifetime for those who saw it. How Humans worship and bury in a given era, and which gods they call on first, is told in that era's book.

### *The Burned Valley*

The great loss and the great deed of Human song are the same story. In the Qzoth Incursion, about 4,000 to 3,500 BR, Qzoth's Bloom broke out in a Headwater farming valley, and bands of Humans from the valleys round it, the first fire-orders, burned it back, their own sick and their own houses with it; the valley's last town was burned by its own people with the Bloom inside. The valley is the Wrongwood now, and the farmers below it still hunt its Kindless Broods with fire. A lord who has slain something out of the Wrongwood has a song made for him whether he wanted one or not, and the old hunters say to bring back the head and never more.

## The Far Coast

Not every Human lives in the cradle-web. In the Unrecorded Age, between about 120,000 and 40,000 BR, while most Humans were slowly gathering in the Confluence basins, small bands drifted outward along coasts and river mouths over tens of thousands of years, and some reached far-side shores. Nobody recorded the journey and nobody remembers it.

Their descendants live in the fishing hamlets of the Tidelace Coasts, on the beaches and outer coves between the Gnome harbours: timber houses above the tide line, boats drawn up on the shingle, drying racks, and a shrine to Maris of the Tides at the water's edge. They fish close inshore from small open boats, gather shellfish and weed, and sell their catch at the nearest quay, and some crews hire on to Gnome craft. They have their own sea-stories and weather-lore, but no story of where their people came from. Their oldest tales begin on that shore, and none of them mentions the basins, the Sworn Accord, or any land behind the sea. They live under the harbour rule of the Gnome sounding houses, their boats tallied in the harbour ledgers like anyone's, with no hand in making it. Their boats go out into fog, and their drowned come back in it as the Grey Crews, hailing the living to follow. Maris, born from the plea of Gnome and Human alike in a time of storms, is nearly the whole of their religion.

Other far-shore Humans may live on coasts no one has charted, but the Tidelace hamlets are the only ones known. No Human caravan or settler crosses the Glassbelt between the two halves of the world, and the Humans of the far coast do not know that the cradle exists.

## Tensions

- **The age of binding.** Human custom names a child within days and counts them early; Dwarven and Elven neighbours think that premature. The Rite of Two Oaths and the Serath's several thresholds give the difference a working form, but neither side thinks the threshold sits in the right place: Human families ask why their children should wait on another people's clock, and their neighbours ask why Human custom lets anyone bind so young.
- **The far coast.** The Tidelace hamlets live under the sounding houses' harbour rule and have no hand in making it, and no memory of any other order to bring to it. Whether they will be drawn further in, as wards and families of the sounding houses, or keep their own weather-lore and the little say they have apart from it, is undecided.
- **The floor beneath the household.** The Oath of Layers lets households and lines count their own members in their own time, but forbids any of them to go below Protection. Where a family's own word on a member and the river houses' floor disagree, both claim to be the one that knows the person, and the river houses have the boats.
- **Read as hardness.** People of Human and Orc descent are few, born only where crossing routes and escorts meet, and are read chiefly as proof of the crossing's quarrels, as labour, or as danger. They endure hard roads and heavy expectations better than either parent people predicts, and are rarely given credit for anything else.
- **The barrow that was opened.** A band of treasure-hunters opened a Headwater barrow last autumn and sold its gold in three towns before the dead in it began walking the valley at night. The valley wants the gold back in the barrow and the breakers hanged; the lord who bought the best of it has hired the same thieves again, this time to make the barrow quiet.

CHAPTER 13

# The Folds, the Scarps, and the Shore

*Ask the fold, and it will count you.*
*Ask the road, and it will walk you.*
*Ask the harbour, and it will sound you.*
*Not one of the three will let you in*
*for the asking.*

— *Sayings of the Counted Lee*

Beyond the cradle-web, past the forests and the mountains and the river towns that think of themselves as the middle of the world, lies the far side, and the far side has peoples of its own, customs of its own, and a history that owes the cradle nothing. Three peoples share its dry country and its broken shore. In the sheltered folds the Halflings keep small rich worlds of terrace and cistern from being eaten by the hungry country around them, and by their own good years. On the scarps and the wind-scoured plateaus the Orcs walk caravans across land that kills the careless, with spears, cairns, and warning fires. On the fog-bound coast the Gnomes wrest a living from shoal and wreck-ground, and hang the wreckers who lie about the marks. They come of one deep stock, the same one as Humans, and each turned that inheritance to a different end: reserve, passage, exact reckoning. Over a hundred thousand years ago, in a long run of feuds, raids, and one real war, with each other and with the water peoples, they forced on each other the terms the far side still keeps, and their descendants still recite those terms rather than add to them. A writer who sets a story on the far side needs these three, because nobody there can buy, travel, eat, or drink without meeting at least one of them.

## One Stock, Three Answers

All three peoples descend from the **balanced adaptive field**, the broad, flexible ancestry that also gave Caeldon its Humans. What Humans made of it in the cradle was roads and river towns: mixed ground, many neighbours, and custom piled on custom until a river valley could be held from a fortified quay. The far side's peoples made something else of the same gift, because the far side gave them different ground. None of the three ever had a root in the cradle-web. Their homelands lie well outside the Elderweald, the Ironspine, and the Confluence, and each people grew up beside the other two rather than beside Elves, Dwarves, or Human towns.

**AT A GLANCE**

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|---|---|
| **Halflings** | The Leeward Folds; terrace commons and cistern halls; the Foldward Commons, c. 170,000–c. 152,000 BR. |
| **Orcs** | The Windscar Expanse, across the Rimward Basins and the High Scars; kindreds and pacts; the Windscar Pacts, c. 180,000–c. 150,000 BR. |
| **Gnomes** | The Tidelace Coasts and the Soundchain Roads; harbour families and tide halls; the Gaugeward Leagues, c. 165,000–c. 146,000 BR. |
| **Ancestry** | The balanced adaptive field, shared with Humans. |
| **Common custom** | The Far-Side Terms, c. 160,000–c. 98,000 BR: a bounded welcome, losses shown openly, and answers that must be given. |

The ground decided much. The Halflings had fertile pockets inside poor country, and learned to keep them, and to hold them. The Orcs had open, exposed distance with water scattered thinly across it, and learned to cross it. The Gnomes had a coast of straits and inlets that could feed a town or drown its boats in the same hour, and learned to read it. Each answer became a civilization, and none of the three became an empire. There is no fold-capital, no Orc king, no harbour that rules the coast. What there is instead is custom, a great deal of it, most of it about one question the far side has fought over for longer than any cradle lord has held a hall: what does a stranger at the gate get, and who must say so out loud?

How those answers look in any given year, who travels the roads, which halls are crowded, what the harvest was, belongs to the era. The atlas of each era walks the Folds, the Windscar, and the coast region by region. What follows is what does not change: the bodies, the households, the customs, fears, and treasures that run deep enough to survive every age.

## Halflings: The Discipline of Enough

Halflings live where plenty has to be kept rather than taken. Their country is leeward basins, terrace belts, orchard folds, cistern-fed hollows, and sheltered interior valleys: rich pockets inside a much harsher land, where life depends on storage, rotation, careful water, and long knowledge of what a place can bear. Their first named homeland is the **Leeward Folds**, beside the open Windscar, and though Halflings live in similar terrace and cistern worlds elsewhere on the far side, the Folds are where their answer became a civilization.

They are not small Humans, and they are nobody's comic relief. A Halfling is proud of exactly the thing larger peoples find hardest to understand: knowing how much is enough, and stopping there. They are not soft, either. A fold is a small rich place in hungry country, and Halflings have held theirs through swarm years, dry runs, and armed guests at the gate for well over a hundred thousand years. Pressed at their own door they are stubborn past sense.

### *The Body and the Fold*

Halflings are small and sturdy, built for terrace work rather than long marches: for stooping over a vine row, setting a stone back into a retaining wall, carrying a basket of fruit up a flight of field steps that a taller people would take two at a time. They keep well on stored food through a lean winter. Most of them never live far from the fold where they were born, and many never want to. A Halfling's sense of the world is the sense of one valley known to the stone, and of the bare saddles

and dry spurs beyond it, which are simply where the world stops being worth keeping, and where the raiders come from.

A fold is a pocket of good ground held inside poorer country. Some are deep hollows with a spring at their head; others are long valleys whose slopes have been stepped from floor to rim with dry-stone walls. The orchards take the warm slopes, grain and garden plots the floors, and cisterns sit at the fold heads, cut into rock or walled in clay. The houses are not where a stranger expects them. They cluster along the upper edge of the terraces in close stone rows, store-rooms on the cool side of each, kept deliberately off the good ground, because ground that grows food is not for living on. And there are always terraces that nobody plants. A share of every fold lies fallow at any time, and it is the first thing a traveller notices and the last thing a Halfling will explain: a fold that plants everything has already started to die.

What threatens a fold mostly comes over the Lee Wall. In a swarm year the wind carries locusts off the Windscar in roaring clouds that strip a fold's green in a day. Scorpions live in the walls of the bare saddles, hornets nest in the old orchard trees and drive pickers off their ladders, and hungry parties come down the Lee Road in hard years, some to trade, some to beg, and some to raid.

## *A Life Counted*

The Halfling life is a counted life, and the count begins with the child. A Halfling is named at the first **autumn count** after its birth, when the household reckons it among the mouths the stores must feed. That is not a cold welcome but a warm one: to be counted is to be provided for, and an uncounted child would be a child the fold had not promised to keep. Babies are sung to sleep with a counting-song of the shelves, jar by jar.

Counting is household work long before it is anyone's charge. Children learn to tally the shelves almost as soon as they can count, and a child who can say how many days of water the cistern holds is trusted with the cistern key before it is trusted with a knife. A young Halfling comes of age when the household first sets a share of its stores in their name at the autumn count, and with that share comes a voice at the commons. Marriage, too, moves a share. A new household's portion of the reserve, and its portion of the fallow duty, is declared at the next count, and the two families' tallies are adjusted aloud so that neither side gains or loses in the telling.

The autumn count itself is the hinge of the Halfling year. At the fold's **cistern hall** the reserve is counted aloud before the measure-keepers, and only what lies beyond it goes to market. Any household may challenge a figure. The tally is then recounted on the spot, and a challenger who turns out to be wrong owes a day's labour on the walls. It is an old arrangement and a shrewd one: it keeps the counters honest without letting every grudge stop the harvest. A fold raided once reads out the raid's dead with every autumn count for a thousand years. Then, after the count and before the planting, each fold meets as a **commons**. The terrace wards report on the walls, the cistern circles on the water, and the fold decides which terraces rest. A household that has quietly planted its fallow share is named there, in front of everyone, and that is usually punishment enough.

The rest of the year is upkeep. Walls are mended after every heavy rain. Cistern circles release water to the terraces in turn and clear the channels before the wet season. Orchard work runs from pruning to picking to drying and pressing, and orchard leagues share labour, presses, and drying floors between neighbouring folds. The table is fruit fresh and dried, grain, pressed and preserved stores, and garden food. A good Halfling table is generous and never lavish, and a writer will know a Halfling host by the moment, mid-meal, when the host stops bringing dishes and nobody at the table expects another.

### *Hospitality with Edges*

Halfling hospitality is real, and it has edges, and the edges are declared. A traveller at a household door is fed without question. A party at the edge of a fold is a different matter. It is received at the fold market or at the cistern hall and told what the fold has declared it can spare, and a party large or armed enough may demand to hear it sworn.

The cistern halls are built for that difference. Each stands at its fold head, where the road comes in along the bare saddles, and receives its guests in a yard outside the terraces, so that a caravan can be answered, watered, and sent on without setting foot on the good ground. The guests are usually Orc escorts from the Windscar side, who camp at the terrace-edge grounds, trade at the market, rest, water by counted measure, and go on; or Gnome traders from the coast, whose arrivals are declared and whose loads are counted. **Being received is not being let in.** All three far-side peoples say it in one form or another, and the Halflings say it first.

The yard has its other side. Folds keep no warbands. In a dry run every fold keeps watchers on the saddles, and a horn from the rim sends children to the cistern hall and the young people to the walls with slings, pruning hooks, and boiling water from the cistern. In a hard year a fold calls in its kin from the neighbouring folds and hires guards, and every grown Halfling knows how to hold a narrow terrace stair with a sling and stones from the wall. The raiders the folds fear most are struck-name Orc bands that answer to no treaty-ground, who come at night by the saddles the watchers cannot see. Hired guards are a danger of their own: a fold that takes on sellswords in a hard year has to feed them, and a company that is fed well is slow to leave. The folds tell of the company that stayed a winter, then a second, and was only got out over the saddle when the whole fold stopped cooking for it at once.

Larger powers call all this narrow, cautious, or parochial, because they cannot imagine prosperity that refuses to grow. Halflings call it the reason there is still a fold. To them abundance is a discipline, not a spree, and its most dangerous moment is not the bad year but the good one, when a full storehouse makes every limit look unnecessary. The danger a Halfling names first is not drought or frost but **too many mouths**: more guests, more trade, more feasting than the fold can bear. It looks like prosperity until the reserve is gone. The worst thing one Halfling can wish on another is *may strangers count your shelves*.

### *The Turning Year*

Halfling belief follows the year. There is no Halfling church and no clergy; observance is household and commons custom, and its god is the year itself. Reserve, sowing, and harvest are kept under **Tamsel the Season-Weaver**, who was born of the folds' long dependence on the balance of the harvest: not of fear, as some gods are, but of routine and reverence. The Halflings never prayed for time to stop. They prayed to honour its turn, and believed that if they neglected the rites of spring planting or the thanks of autumn storing, the cycle would break and the fold would eat its own reserve.

Tamsel changes with the season, a green-robed youth who smells of rain in spring, sun-browned and gold-robed in summer, crimson and brown and smelling of woodsmoke and stored fruit in autumn, pale and still as frost in winter. The planting rites open the terraces in spring. In autumn comes the thanks of storing, and the yearly **Festival of the Turn** celebrates the changing of the seasons; it is said that if the festival is kept with true joy, the Season-Weaver will smile and the harvest will be good. Every Halfling child knows the tale of the **Long Summer**, when Tamsel held the summer form for a whole year. The warmth never broke and the fruit never stopped, and the soil wore out, and the winter after emp-

tied a fold's stores to the last measure. It is the reason Halflings give for never spending the reserve on plenty. Tamsel is honoured, above all, by not taking more than the year can bear.

The folds keep small, stubborn heroes, mostly in proverbs and toasts. *Hide it like the widow* means hiding it where the raiders are standing, after the widow who hid a whole fold's seed-grain in the cistern hall's dry well while a band searched the house above. The last cup at the autumn count is drunk *to the beehive*, for the three brothers who held the lane to a cistern hall with roof-tiles and a hive. Children learn early about the slinger who held the saddle path alone against a struck band until the kin came over the ridge, and about the swarm-year fold that drove the locust bands into trenches of fire and burned them for three days without sleep.

## *Lifeways and Lost Folds*

Halfling variation runs through lifeways rather than sharp biological branches. **Foldward** Halflings are most of the people. **Leeward** folk, of the measure-heavy inner folds around the great cistern halls, are the ones an outsider meets across a tally bench. **Edgefold** or **Outfold** households hold the outer valleys along the roads and live closest to outside traffic, its profits and its raiders.

Behind them stand older forms the folds remember as warnings. Early shelter-pocket Halflings, overgrown orchard-kin, and roadfold Halflings survive as historical or absorbed lifeways behind vanished terraces, abandoned reserves, and an inherited caution about measure. On the outer margins lie the **Dry Folds**, valleys whose terraces have gone to scrub and whose cisterns stand cracked and empty: the country of the Dryfold Halflings, whose last households walked away from cracked cisterns. Why the Dry Folds failed is argued over in every generation. Most Halflings take them as the plainest lesson in their world of what happens when a fold spends past its keeping, and the roadfold Halflings, whose measure did not outlast the road, are the lesson the Outfold households tell each other. Fold grandmothers say the Dryfolders sealed their last reserve into jars and buried it before they gave up, seed, saffron, and the old fold-silver, and every generation a few young Halflings go over the saddle with spades. Most come home with a fright and a scorpion sting, and tales of cold hearths that are still warm to the touch; now and then one is found at the bottom of a cracked cistern.

## *How the Commons Were Made*

Halflings had lived in the folds for a very long time before they had a civilization. The **Foldward Commons** begin, c. 170,000–c. 152,000 BR, not when the first terrace was built but when the separate folds started to depend on one another: when water-sharing, stores, terrace upkeep, and the welcome given to strangers overlapped until no single fold could manage them alone. No conquering state came of it, and no fold-capital rose. Fold towns, orchard leagues, cistern circles, terrace wards, and protected market roads kept their own business. What bound them was the reserve and the oath to keep it: shared custom about stores, how many a fold can feed, and when water is released, and a common rule against waste and hoarding. It was not an early empire of small farmers. It was a civilization built around keeping enough, and holding it.

Its first great quarrel was with itself, and it was fought. In the **Measure Cistern Reckoning** (c. 154,000–c. 148,000 BR) good harvests and steady outside trade split the folds around the Cistern. The market houses wanted wider markets and open-handed feasts; the reserve-keeping houses, who held the cistern and the store-vaults, answered that plenty is when a fold is most in danger of eating its future. The quarrel hardened into a feud that lasted a generation. Store-vaults were raided at night to prove what lay in them, a keeper was drowned in her own cistern, and fold

children still say that on still nights you can hear her counting under the water. Terrace walls were pulled down to spite a rival, and a whole slope slid in the next cloudburst. The reserve-keepers kept the cistern and the vaults; what the market houses won was the line between **honest narrowing** and **false narrowing**. A keeper may still shrink the welcome when stores, water, or ground truly demand it, but must open the vaults to the other houses and show the stores, and a keeper found lying about them loses the keys. The Commons remember it in one sentence: a fold may stay narrow, but not behind numbers nobody else may count. The stores the liars hid in those years were not all found, and the tale of a keeper's hidden vault, cut into the terrace rock behind the cistern, has sent more than one young Halfling digging at night with a lantern. Out of that settlement hardened the **Leeward measure orders** (c. 146,000–c. 139,000 BR), the cistern halls, terrace counters, orchard tally-keepers, and the elders who speak for the reserves, whose weight rests on store counts that can be checked. They never became a separate state; the richest folds keep the most counters, and their counts are the ones most often believed.

The outside tested the same custom, with spears. At the Measure Cistern, in the **Measure Cistern Crisis** (c. 147,000–c. 143,000 BR), a hard travelling season drove more armed Orc escorts to one fold gate than the cistern hall could take. Escort camps spread along the saddle below the fold wall; the folds called in their kin and paid guards to stand on it. Water parties were stoned at the spring, a cistern guard was found with an Orc spear in him, and one night hungry escorts raided the terraces and were driven out by fold youths with slings and torches. In every fold they still tell of the cistern-keeper who climbed onto the hall wall and counted the reserve aloud to the escorts below, jar by jar, until they believed her. The escorts were stronger at the gate; the folds were stronger in the long run, because a fold drunk dry receives no one next year. The terms gave the far side one of its oldest customs, **witnessed capacity**: a fold that narrows its welcome must let the escorts' own people see the stores and the water, and give one of four answers: what can still be received, what must wait, where the party should be sent instead, and what will be done to keep them alive for a time. Those four answers are Halfling custom, and the Orcs later took three of them into their own. The ground below the wall where the camps stood is still called the waiting-field, and children dare one another to sleep a night there.

## Orcs: The Sworn Road

Orcs are a people of hard country and long roads: escorts, warning runners, and well-keepers who walk caravans across land that kills the careless, without dense basin towns or deep halls to hide in. They are not distorted Humans, failed Dwarves, or wilderness raiders, and their history begins, and largely stays, far from the cradle. Their homeland is the **Windscar Expanse**: dry uplands, escarpments, basin margins, wind-scoured plateaus, and sparse caravan roads, divided between the more settled **Rimward Basins** and the more exposed **High Scars**. It is country where survival depends less on rich soil than on guarded passage, and on never pretending the land is tame.

### *Built for Distance*

Orcs are tall, heavy-boned, and long-striding, built to walk all day under load and to bear wind, cold nights, and short water better than most peoples. They tire slowly. An old escort's body carries the marks of every bad crossing, and the old are not shy about showing which scar belongs to which pass.

The land they walk is made of steps. In the High Scars long escarpment faces separate one bare shelf from the next, with scree fans, dry

ravines, and a handful of passes between them; on a clear day the eye reaches enormously far, and a warning fire on one ridge can be read from the next shelf before a runner could cover half the distance. The wind is the first fact of life there, funnelling through the passes hard enough to strip a camp and carrying the dust of the lower basins in brown walls. Water is the second fact: a few seeps, cisterns, and catch-pools along the routes, each one known, named, and fought over. Below the scarps the Rimward Basins are shallow bowls with no outlet, their floors salt crust and cracked clay, their rims the living part, where runoff can be caught and stone cut and stacked into walls.

Most deaths in Orc country come from exposure on the open shelves, from rockfall and failing ledges, and from bad guidance: a warning not given, a delay not called, an escort that claimed knowledge it did not have. Dun dogs follow the herds and the stragglers for days, horned vipers wait at the edge of every shade on the basin floors, pan hyenas dig at any grave shallower than stone, and in a swarm year the locusts strip the grazing bare. But bad guidance is the death Orcs fear most, because it is the one a person chose, and almost everything in Orc custom follows from that fear. The dead of a warning never given do not rest: they rise as Cairn-Wakers and stand across the road with an arm raised to halt, and a captain who pushes past one meets a fury like a storm off the faces.

### *Kindred and Ring*

The kindred is the household that matters, and it moves. Kindreds pitch their camps in the same places year after year, around strongholds and cisterns or on the sheltered side of ridges, and a family's place in the ring is a matter of rank, and rank follows strength. On the scarps, life is lived along the routes rather than around towns: kindreds move between seasonal camps with their herds, grazing the thin grass of the shelves until it gives out, then moving on before the ground is spent. On the basin rims, life breathes in and out with the water. In the dry months households and herds draw in to the rims and crowd around the strongholds, walled spurs above a water source with a cistern cut into the rock below; after the storms they spread out again, and each stronghold shrinks to its keeping garrison.

Most adults have some share in escort or water work, even those who never captain a party. Food is lean and keeps: herd meat and milk, shelf antelope taken on the plateaus, dried and salted stores, a little hardy grain from walled terraces on strict water shares, and whatever the escort trade brings up from the folds and the coast. A stranger meets Orcs first as a party on the road or a watch above a ramp, and is received, if at all, in the open: fed from a declared share that everyone in the camp knows, and told plainly what the camp can spare. Whether an arriving party can be received at a stronghold is reckoned at the cistern, in front of the people whose water it is. The camp toast is two words, *water first*.

### *Cairns and Coming of Age*

An Orc child is named into its kindred at the first gathering after its birth, before the camp and its remembered dead, and carries the kindred's name before its own. A child's first lessons are cairns: which stacked stone points the way, which marks a water hold, which records a death. Older children run messages between camps, and then warning runs, carrying news of storm, slide, or raiding along the warning ridges faster than any caravan moves; runners touch a wind cat's claw before a long run. Kindred children race one another to a cairn and back in honour of the runners who outran storm and dun dogs to light a fire in time, and the loser is told the dogs would have had them.

A young Orc comes of age by carrying a full share of the kindred's work for a season, on an escort, a warning run, or a cistern crew, with the

whole kindred watching. Many first blood their spears then, on a dun-dog pack that has begun taking stock, followed back to its den. From then on they answer for their own word on the route. That is the whole of Orc adulthood in one phrase, and Orcs mean it literally: an adult is someone whose word about the road can get people killed, and who will be held to it. The oath that binds an escort to a caravan is sworn with a stone the captain carries to the end of the road and adds to the last cairn there.

### *Escort, Guard, Raid*

In Orc country the line between escorting, guarding, raiding, and surviving is drawn with spears, and it is often the only quarrel that matters. An armed kindred on the road might be any of the four, and the same act, a share taken from a caravan the kindred brought through, can be an escort's due or robbery at spearpoint depending on who tells it, and on who is stronger where it is argued. Escort captains are the heroes of Orc camp-tales and the sellswords of other peoples' tales, and the same captain may be both in a single season. Orc custom exists to keep debt and force out in the open, where hiding them gets people killed, and its oldest instrument is the **retaliation custom**.

A wrong between kindreds is never answered in secret. The wronged kindred declares its answer aloud at the next **treaty-ground**: what was done, whose line did it, and what it will take in return. The elders of the gathering hold the answer to the measure of the wrong. A raided herd is answered with animals, a broken escort with goods or a season's service, and blood only with blood. Once the answer has been taken and reported back at a treaty-ground, the matter is closed, and raising it again is itself a wrong. An answer taken without declaration is not retaliation at all but a raid, and may be answered in its turn. Most answers an ordinary Orc ever sees are paid in animals, and a kindred too weak to take its answer seldom gets one. But when blood is owed, a kindred sends its best, and a young escort who rides out to take a declared answer from a stronger line, and comes back, has a name for life. Outsiders hear "retaliation" and think of endless feud; Orcs think of the opposite, the one custom that keeps a single quarrel from tearing every treaty-ground apart.

The treaty-ground gathering is where the whole of Orc public life happens at once. In the calmer months a kindred travels to its treaty-ground and pitches where its line has always pitched. For an ordinary Orc it is the one time in the year when most of the people they know stand in one place. Herds are traded, marriages arranged, young escorts taken on by captains, and news of every route exchanged. Escort terms are sworn, complaints heard, and answers declared, all of it before the whole gathering, because in Orc country a thing done where nobody saw it has, for all that matters, not been done.

The raiders the kindreds fear most are Orcs themselves: **struck bands**, formed around those whose names were cut from honour, who know every route and in a lean year fall on the parties they were not paid to guide. They answer to no route moot, and a kindred with an answer against one has no treaty-ground where it can be closed. A kindred that a struck band has bled sends a hunting party after it with the band's old names written on a stick, and the hunt does not come home until the stick is burned or the hunters are under a cairn of their own.

### *The Dead and the Wind*

Orc belief is local and kindred-kept rather than organized, and it has two gods, as the Windscar has two moods.

The dead belong to **Ushkar the Ancestor-Warden**, born of the kindreds' insistence that honour is remembered or it is nothing. An escort was worth what their line had done on the road before them; a kindred was worth the crossings it had

held and the betrayals it had answered. To forget an ancestor, Orcs say, is to kill them a second time. Ushkar is seen as a tall figure of wind-scoured granite with a face that shifts between a young escort, an old treaty-keeper, and a weeping mother, carrying on his back the **Stele of Names**, on which every name that kept faith with him is cut. When kindreds gather at the treaty-grounds they keep the **Reciting of the Names**: the dead are named aloud with the crossings they held, and it is said that names spoken with true respect earn the kindred a year of safe passage. A kindred whose names are recited badly, or not at all, leaves with less honour than it came with, and everybody saw it. Among the names are the captain who took a whole caravan down the Shearline in a dust storm by the feel of the rope, and the escort who stood alone in a pass against a struck band while her charges got away, whose name the band itself is said to honour. Worst of all is to be struck: Ushkar can strike a name from the Stele, and a person struck is unremembered, their deeds unrecalled, their heirs owed nothing, vouched for by no treaty-ground. Along the cairn routes, old cairns raised where escorts fell bear names worn past reading, and Orcs call them the Warden's tears.

A story is told on the scarps of an escort who tried to strike his own name from the Stele to escape his family's broken oath, and of how the Warden came and made him remember, because the debt was part of his line and not a weight he could put down. Orcs tell it to the young as they would tell any lesson about the road: the past is a load you carry, and it is also what keeps you upright.

The wind belongs to **Rakhal the Storm-Caller**, born of the same people's impatience with whatever has gone stale. In harsh country stillness kills: a camp that stays too long fouls its water, a route nobody tests becomes a route nobody can trust, and a pact kept out of habit after its terms have stopped being honoured gives false shelter. Rakhal is the scouring wind that shows which shelter is real, and he smells of ozone, dry rain, and hot stone. Camps light fires on the high ground as the windy season rises, and when lightning strikes a lone thorn on the shelves, kindreds say Rakhal has marked a place where someone once held. Beneath both gods, escorts and pacts keep their own rites of held passage and answered betrayal.

### *Two Countries, One People*

Orc variation runs through harsh-land kindreds and route lifeways. The clearest living identities are **Windscar**, **Rimward**, **High-Scar**, and **Open-Steppe** or **Far-Route** Orcs. Where land and kin memory have lasted long enough these are branches, but in any era they show mostly in the work: escort, cistern-keeping, and camp discipline. Early harsh-land Orcs, broken route kindreds, storm-shelf Orcs, basin-refuge Orcs, and far-track Orcs belong to history or were absorbed, and old route memory, lost pacts, and abandoned refuges are their trace.

The deepest division is not of blood but of side. On the settled side, strongest in the Rimward Basins, stand the well-keepers, cistern guardians, reserve moots, and the **answer bearers** who give a declared reply to arriving parties: **reserve-right**. On the exposed side, strongest in the High Scars, stand route moots, cairn-line wardens, warning runners, escort captains, and the elders who keep the treaty-grounds: **treaty-right**. Orcs describe the two as one people with two duties, and each side suspects the other of forgetting half of what Orcs are. The two meet, often with hands on weapons, at the **Oath Cistern**, where a basin's water and a thirsty escort's spears must come to terms.

### *How the Pacts Were Made*

Orc harsh-land life is older than any pact. The **Windscar Pacts**, the first named Orc civilization and the far side's first inland founding, begin c. 180,000–c. 150,000 BR, late in the rise of the river-

ine Kavari Bankright Circles, when survival across the Expanse started to require agreement. Strongholds stopped acting only as local lifelines; escort duties, water access, route warnings, and seasonal movement overlapped until no hard-land community could stay a world apart. Neither a capital nor a conquering empire came of it. Known meeting grounds, sworn water and pasture, and an old custom of answering blood bound dangerous distance into a pact world, and the Pacts proved that the far side could raise a lasting civilization entirely outside the cradle.

Their first great split was a war. In the **Rimward Passage War** (c. 135,000–c. 128,000 BR) a hard dry cycle ran the basin reserves low just as traffic on the routes was heaviest. The Rimward strongholds began barring their gates to escorted parties; the High-Scar escort-bands saw betrayal, since passage had been sworn at the treaty-grounds, and came down the ramps armed to take the water. Season after season wells changed hands, and the dry country between them filled with the dead. Parties turned away from one well died of thirst before the next, the escorts read the scar vultures over the passes to learn who had not got through, and raiders who served neither side stripped both. Escort kindreds still raise their cups, before the first water of every crossing, to the escort-leader who held a captured well-head for nine days with her water-bearers dying around her; the rim strongholds still tell, with pride and without regret, of the stronghold that poured its last cistern into the sand rather than let the bands drink it. It is the great loss of Orc memory, and its dead lie under the oldest cairns.

Neither side won. The war forced the Pacts to name the two rights earlier custom had run together, **reserve-right** and **treaty-right**, and to swear new terms at the treaty-grounds: a stronghold may still shut a well that would truly fail, but wherever it can it must give a sworn party one of three answers, a small, guarded welcome, a later welcome on stated conditions, or a guided turn towards another well that can take them. They were three of the four answers the Halfling cistern halls had first given, now sworn into Orc custom, and a stronghold that turns travellers away with no answer at all invites the escort-bands back. It is no written code, but an oath kept because each side can still hurt the other. Each side then hardened around its own duty without breaking the Pacts in two: the rim into the **Rimward Well-Keepers** (c. 124,000–c. 116,000 BR), who carve on their cistern lips the names of the guardians who held a cistern through a drought siege; the routes into the **High-Scar escort orders** (c. 121,000–c. 112,000 BR), whose captains win their names running raiders down, and who swore in part to name the escorts who failed, so that the Cairn-Wakers could be laid. The wells that changed hands most often are still called blood-wells. Some were sealed and hidden by the holders who lost them, and the tale of a lost well, sweet and deep, under a cairn whose name has worn away, is told in every camp; a kindred that found one would be rich for a generation, and would have to hold it against everyone who learned of it.

## Gnomes: The Exact Coast

Gnomes are a people of fine craft, exact reckoning, and measured courtesy, who wrest a living from a coast of fog, shoal, and wreck-ground. They are neither comic inventors nor softened Dwarves. Their precision is how they stay alive: on their coast a wrong mark drowns a crew. Their country is the working shore of the **Tidelace Coasts**, a coast of tidal straits, inlets, island chains, fog belts, and breakwater harbours, and the **Soundchain Roads** of stations beyond it. Their heroes are pilots and beacon-keepers rather than warriors, and their great losses are boats that did not come back, and whole harbours of earlier lines that now lie under the sea.

### *The Trained Eye*

Gnomes are small, deft, and fine-handed, built for close work rather than heavy work. They are sure on stairs, quays, and wet rock, at ease in small boats and fog, and seldom live out of sight of the sea. Their eyes are trained rather than born keen. A Gnome child learns to read swell, cloud, and the marks on a gauge the way other children learn faces, and an adult Gnome looking out to sea is not admiring the view but reading it. The harbour saying is *read twice, row once*.

The coast they read is frayed rather than drawn: fingers of rock and long inlets, islands strung offshore with straits between them, sea-cut terraces climbing to the cliffs. Little of it is open sea and little is soft shore. Most of it is water a hull can use only with knowledge, channels threaded between shoals, straits that run like rivers at mid-tide and lie still at slack, harbour mouths safe for an hour and wreck-ground the next. Liveable coast here is made, not found. Breakwaters close the mouths of the best inlets, channels are cut and marked, sounding houses keep the depths and tides of every approach, and beacon lines pass warning from headland to headland. Behind the islands the marked inner channels that join harbour to harbour are called **the Lacework**, and a harbour child knows its marks before the names of its towns.

The sea takes more Gnomes than anything else. Fog: the great belt of the outer coast, **the Long Grey**, rolls in off open water with little warning and can lie on the straits for days, bringing stinging fogbells in by the thousand, when beacons are lit, bells rung, and nobody moves who does not have to. In the fog the drowned row back as the Grey Crews, hailing the living to follow them onto the shoals where they were lost, and pilot families say a pilot answers no hail in fog, however familiar the voice. Storm, which drives surge into the inlets and breaks in a night what the breakwater crews built in a summer. Moving ground, because shoals shift and channels silt, and a mark true last year may be false this one. Blackfin pods hunt the outer isles, and every breakwater has its conger and its crew a story about hands; a crew that brings in a conger longer than its own boat drinks free in every harbour of the chain. And the false mark: a beacon lit in the wrong place, a marker left unmoved to spare a family's name, a channel declared readable that was not. Gnomes fear the lying sign more than any weather, because weather does not pretend.

### *The Harbour Family and Its Mark*

A harbour town is built upward. The breakwater and quays sit at the waterline; on the first terrace stand the sounding house, the gauge house where tide gauges and timing instruments are made and kept, and the tide hall; above them the stone houses of the harbour families climb the cliff with walled terrace gardens between them; on the headland stands the beacon tower. Stairs join the levels more often than streets do, and a stranger's legs will know a Gnome town long before their head does.

The household is the unit of the work. Sounding, pilotage, beacon keeping, gauge-making, and breakwater masonry pass down families for generations, each with its own pride and its own **mark**, cut on every post and marker it sets, so that every mark on the coast says who will answer for it. A Gnome is born into that mark and named with it, the sign its readings will carry in the sounding-house ledger. Children learn a tide table and a signal line about as early as letters. A young Gnome comes of age when a first reading of their own is declared at the tide hall's bench, entered under the family's mark, and stands unchallenged, and families keep that date as others keep a naming. From then on the family's good name answers for that Gnome's honesty as well as its own. A family rises or falls with its readings, and an incoming spouse learns the new family's marks

before being allowed to set one. The harbour curse, said low, is *may your mark be doubted*, and no Gnome says it in jest.

Around the craft families work fishers, net-menders, boat-builders, ropewalk crews, and quay hands. Food comes from the sea and the terraces: fish, shellfish, kelp, seabird eggs, small crops from the walled gardens, with stored grain and orchard goods traded in from the Halfling folds by counted exchange.

### *Tide Hall and Beacon Night*

The Gnome year runs on the tide tables and the weather. In the calm months the breakwater crews rebuild, the sounding houses resurvey the approaches, and traffic moves. In the storm season the halls sit, the families mend, and the beacons burn through the long nights. In the storm season, too, every household of a beacon district owes a share of nights at the tower, whatever its craft, and a missed night is entered in the beacon ledger beside the family's name, where it stays. Each season closes at the sounding house, where readings are compared and markers moved where rival families can watch.

The **tide hall**'s elders sit at slack water, so that pilots and fishers can attend between tides. A day's quarrels might run from a closed fishing ground to a repair duty each house throws on the next to a moved marker nobody will own, and the oldest sounding families' word weighs heaviest. Nothing on the list is small, because on this coast small things drown people. A town that lets a beacon fail or a marker drift is shamed before the whole coast, and that shame does more than any council.

The worst enemies of a Gnome harbour are the ones who move the marks. **Wreckers** on the outer headlands light false beacons in the Long Grey to draw ships onto the shoals and strip them, the living included; a sounding family that catches a wrecker's fire sends its boats and its harpooners, and a wrecker taken by a Gnome harbour is hanged from the beacon he lied with. The beacon wardens who hunt them along the headlands carry no lamp at all, because a light on a headland is the very thing they are hunting. The coast honours keepers, not conquerors: the beacon-girl who kept her tower lit through three nights of storm with the timbers of her own house, for whom the youngest of the district carries the first stick up the stair on beacon nights; the old sounding-master who walked out along the wreckers' headland alone at night and put out every false fire with his hat.

### *Received Is Not Let In*

A stranger at a Gnome harbour is asked, before anything else, who they are and what they carry. Being received is not being let in, and the hard line between **safe entry**, **risky entry**, and **no entry at all** is the heart of Gnome courtesy. Larger or harsher peoples find it fussy, delicate, or pedantic. On a coast where a wrong mark drowns a crew and a falsely generous harbour turns refuge into wreck, it is what keeps the edge liveable, and Gnomes regard a careless welcome as a kind of violence. It is also power: the harbours know the only safe channels, and can wait out anyone who does not, and sea-raiders who try a harbour mouth in a hard year learn, if they live, that a harbour that knows they are coming can simply put its marks out.

Along the Soundchain Roads the same habit takes the shape of station life. Each sound has a station of a few quays, a **declaration house** where parties are counted and answers written, store sheds and cisterns, a sounding house, and beacon towers on the headlands. An arriving party's captain gives a declaration at the table: who travels, what they carry, where they mean to go, and who answers for them. The station gives one of the answers every station uses: received for transfer here; supplied and sent on under a pilot; held on

stated terms until a named day; or sent on to a station that can bear it. Nothing crosses a quay unrecorded.

### *Clock and Tide*

Gnome belief lives in harbour custom and the keeping of true marks, and an unkept beacon or a falsely read mark is close to sacrilege. Timed passage was long kept under **Quennet the Clockmaker**, born of the harbours' anxiety: the coast can be entered safely only inside narrow windows, and the Gnomes did not pray for calm seas but for time, a breath longer for the fog to lift or a signal to be read right. Quennet appears as a gaunt, stooped old Gnome in a coat of ticking pockets, carrying a brass watch whose hands run backwards, and where he passes a harbour bell is heard a moment after it swings. He is fading, because far-side tide tables carry timing now in declared and sworn form rather than in prayer, but harbour wards still say his name under their breath when a declared window has to be changed, and old gauges are said to stutter before a window fails.

Beside his shrines stand those of **Maris of the Tides**, born of the Decade of Storms from the shared plea of Gnome harbours and the coastal Humans of the Tidelace, and still belonging to both. Pilots back from a hard passage pay her toll of story aloud at the shrine, and once a year the **Festival of the Tides** brings a whole harbour down to the quays with flowers, shells, and stories for her. Harbour families hold that a Grey Crew is a boat lost without its passage told at her shrine. Pilots pray to both gods, and thank Maris when a window holds.

The Humans of that coast, whose hamlets stand on the beaches and coves between the Gnome towns and whose oldest tales begin on this shore, are a people of their own; their story is told with the Humans.

### *Lifeways and Drowned Harbours*

Gnome variation runs through coastal lifeways and craft families rather than biological branches. The clearest living identities are **Gaugeward**, **Tidelace**, and **Chainwake** or **Island** Gnomes, shaped by harbours, gauges, fog, island chains, signals, and kept approaches. Behind them lie the lost: early inlet Gnomes, fogbelt Gnomes, drowned harbour kin, and outer-isle Gnomes, remembered in lost ports, old signal custom, and island songs. The coast keeps their remains in plain sight. Old breakwaters lie under the water, signal towers stand in the sea, and lost ports sit at the heads of silted inlets, a hazard to every keel and a lure to every diver. A gauge or sounding-glass brought up whole from a drowned harbour is worth more than its weight in silver, and the coast holds that the lost lines made them truer than anything made since; divers go down for them on a breath and a rope, among congers and broken stone, and every harbour has a stair where a diver's family waits on the tide that did not bring them up.

### *How the Leagues Were Made*

Gnome coastal life is old before it is a league. The **Gaugeward Leagues** form c. 165,000–c. 146,000 BR, when straits, inlets, cliff harbours, and island chains came to need the same knowledge, and signal practice, soundings, repair duties, and the line between safe and unsafe entry overlapped until no harbour could keep them alone. There was no sea-empire and no harbour-capital. Beacon chains, shared marks, and the shame of a failed beacon tied the coast together, and weight in each town went to whoever kept the approaches honest. The Tidelace did not become safe by becoming simple; it became livable by being exact.

Its first great quarrel came at the **Sounding Gate**, in the **Sounding Gate Quarrel** (c. 155,000–c. 149,000 BR), the first of the far side's three great quarrels among its own. A run of bad seasons, heavy traffic, shifting shoals, and the Long Grey lying on the approach for days split the harbour

houses that grew rich on ships, who wanted the approach open longer and bolder, from the sounding houses that kept the signal lines. Then the wrecks came. A laden ship went onto the bar in fog on a reading one house swore was good, and its crew drowned within hearing of the shore. Markers were moved at night; a beacon was lit on the wrong headland and a rival's ship followed it onto the rocks; signal-keepers were beaten off their towers; rival houses hired wrecker crews to bring ships in on their own readings. For years the Gate was as much a battlefield as a harbour mouth, and harbour songs say the first Grey Crews seen off it were the crews of that feud, still rowing for a light that was never true. Gnome children are still raised on the tale of the house that moved a mark to drown a rival's ship and drowned its own heir on it instead. The feud ended when the strongest League houses had lost too many crews and forced terms the lesser harbours had to take. Those terms set apart **trustworthy exactness** from **proud pretence**: a house may still close its approach when the water truly demands it, but soundings and marker changes are made where rival houses can watch and check them, and a house caught moving a mark in secret answers to the kin of anyone who drowns by it. A reading earns trust only if others may test it. The **Tidelace calibration orders** (c. 148,000–c. 132,000 BR) grew out of it, still inside the Leagues, sending boats out to recheck every mark after a storm, rowing the fog lines to keep the beacons lit, and hunting the wrecker bands along the headlands. The wrecks of the feud still lie on the bar at the Gate with their cargoes, and the bar takes most of the divers who go down for them.

## Three Answers, One Custom

The three peoples learned their custom from each other, mostly the hard way. Orc escorts came down out of the wind to the fold gates with spears in their hands. Halfling carriers met Gnome boats on cliff-path beaches where raiders waited. Windscar parties arrived at Gnome harbours expecting to land, and found a shore that would not let them in. Out of these meetings, and out of the feuds of the Thaluren and the Kavari on the far waters, came the age the chronicles call the **Far-Side Terms**, c. 160,000–c. 98,000 BR: a long chain of feuds, raids, and wars, in which the stronger side dictated terms each time, and the terms that held became the custom of the far side.

### *Fold and Road*

The **Leeward-Windscar Terms** (c. 160,000–c. 145,000 BR) were the first lasting terms between two far-side peoples, and they were made over graves. The first meetings were not trade between willing neighbours. They were thirsty, armed parties coming down off the saddles with dun dogs on their line, at the gate of a valley where the orchards were in fruit and the cisterns full. The Orcs carried more spears; the Halflings held the water and the stores. In the early seasons some folds were plundered, their terrace walls broken and their reserve cisterns drunk dry in a week, and some caravans were left to die outside shut gates with the water in plain sight. Fold grandmothers still bar the door a second time on the anniversary of the night the Windscar came over the Lee Wall; Orc kindreds name, at every treaty-ground, the gates that did not open. The killing ended in a bargain, because a plundered fold feeds no one next season and a betrayed caravan's kin come back with more spears. Escorted parties are owed a welcome at named fold markets, cistern halls, and terrace-edge grounds, and a party that raids a market loses it at every fold on the saddle; but a welcome is not entry, and how much water, food, and room a party gets is the fold's to say. From this the far side learned that a fold may be open without being eaten, and that sworn passage is not a key to everything stored. The plundered folds of the first seasons were never all rebuilt, and the dry cisterns under their broken terraces are said to hide what the fold-folk buried

when they saw the dust of the war-bands on the saddle: seed-silver, store-tallies, and the old keys of the vaults.

### *Fold and Coast*

The Halfling-Gnome line was quieter, but not safe. In the **Leeward-Tidelace Measures** (c. 146,000–c. 140,000 BR) fold carriers brought grain, fruit, and oil down the cliff paths to the coast, where raiders waited for laden carriers on the bare spurs and a landing safe at dawn could be wreck-ground by noon. Halflings counted stores, seasons, and how long a load would keep; Gnomes counted tides, weather, soundings, and whether a landing could honestly be reached today. Each thought the other's caution careless, and they settled on **counted loads** for the fold and **declared landings** for the coast, two rules rather than one; the first carrier companies that hire out as escorts, half sellsword and half porter, came from those paths. Their clearest meeting place is the **Counted Lee**, a lee-side tally hall and transfer pier between fold and harbour. There, in the **Counted Lee Timing Feud** (c. 139,000–c. 136,000 BR), the harbour houses kept changing the landing day after the loads were on the beach; carriers waited on the shingle guarding grain against spur-raiders and gulls while the loads sweated and spoiled, a carrier party sent back up the paths in a storm was lost in a rockfall, and loads left overnight were plundered by wreckers who seemed to know exactly which beach to work. A carrier band lay in wait one night, caught a wrecker crew at the loads, and drove them into the surf with spades and pruning knives. The feud was fought with withheld grain and withheld boats until the Lee emptied for a season. The coast held the anchorage, and kept most of its right to change the day; the folds won their part only by showing they could take their grain elsewhere. The **Leeward-Tidelace Timing Oath** (c. 136,000–c. 134,000 BR), sworn at the Lee before the assembled carriers and crews, carried the settlement down the coast: when the harbour changes the day it says so at once, any load lost by the change is shown before both sides, and the two sides then bargain over whose fault it was. It is the custom with which Quennet's fading began, and its toast is drunk by carriers and crews together after a hard landing: *to the day that held, and the ones who died waiting for the ones that did not.*

### *Road and Coast*

The Orc-Gnome line was harder. The **Tidelace-Windscar Approaches** (c. 148,000–c. 138,000 BR) began when Orc escorts started reaching the coast regularly and found a shore that would not let them in. The Gnome harbour houses held every safe channel and could wait the Orcs out, and at first they did. Parties camped on open beaches with nothing between them and the gales; some tried the inner channels without pilots and went onto the shoals, and wreckers stripped what washed up. Escort-bands raided outlying sounding houses for food and water; harbour crews burned the boats the Orcs had bargained for. An Orc war-leader took a sounding house with a dozen spears and fed a starving beach camp from its stores for a month, and the harbour crews hunted her down the coast afterwards and hanged her from her own captured mast. The terms that ended the worst of it split arrival from entry: **outer-shore reception** and **inner-harbour entry**. A sworn party may demand to be met, counted, warned, supplied, made to wait, piloted, or sent on at named roadsteads and beach yards, but not to be let into the harbour where tide, weather, or crowding would make it a false kindness. The coast, holding the channels, kept more by the split; the Orcs won the right to be answered rather than left to rot on the shingle.

The place that tested it was the **Answering Sound**. In the **Answering Sound Crisis** (c. 141,000–c. 137,000 BR) gale after gale drove Windscar parties into the lee of the Sound while the inner channels along the coast were full, and the

harbour-masters answered with warnings, holds, pilot shortages, and one more delay, each of which they were entitled to give. The parties camped on the shingle, short of water, while wreckers worked the outer islands and the blackfins and fogbells that follow a storm into the lee took anyone who waded out. Children were buried in the dunes above the Sound, and the escorts began to name them aloud at every new delay; the Windscar curse for a shut door, *may you wait at the Sound*, dates from those years. Some Orc war-leaders stopped arguing, seized boats, and tried the inner channels by force, without pilots, in fog. Some drowned in sight of the harbour they were trying to take; one band reached an inner quay and burned it before it was driven out, and its war-leader, carried back to the dunes with a hook in her side, is an outrage to the Gnome harbours and a hero to the Windscar escorts. The harbours held the pilots and the channels, and the outer shore stayed apart from the inner harbour; what the Orcs won with their dead was **declared answerability**: a delay must have a stated end, a shortage of pilots or room must be said openly, and passing danger must be kept apart from plain refusal. The **Tidelace Answering Custom** (c. 137,000–c. 135,000 BR) carried it along the whole coast, three plain answers instead of one vague one, and it held because both sides could still hurt each other: a harbour that broke it found convoys going to its rivals and burned beacons on its headlands, and an escort-band that defied a plain answer was treated as a war-band. The Gnomes then gave it a keeper in the **Answerward Pilotage** (c. 135,000–c. 129,000 BR), pilots sworn to the leading harbours, rowed out blind into the Long Grey to climb aboard among thirsty, armed strangers and tell them the coast's answer. Pilots drowned, were thrown overboard by crews who disliked the answer, and were ambushed in their boats by the wrecker bands of the outer islands, among whom a pilot's head fetched a bounty. When the pilots began giving orders far beyond the outer approaches, Windscar crews and smaller Gnome harbours together fought them back in the **Answerward Overreach Feud**, and the pilots kept a narrower charge.

Over the next tens of thousands of years the line calmed into routine trade along the Soundchain Roads, and found a subtler quarrel there: whether many small closings, each fair on its own, could add up to one shut door. The fighting over it, beacons thrown down, a Gnome pilot dead, burned convoys still unavenged, ended in the **Soundchain Closure Terms**: a harbour must name what kind of trade it closes, and where, and answer for whether all its closings together have shut one people out. The **Turnwater Reopening Accord** (c. 100,000–c. 98,000 BR) followed, the first time a far-side corridor reopened what it had closed under the same terms it had closed it by. It nearly died before it was sworn, when a beacon above Turnwater was put out on a convoy's night and the convoy went onto the rocks below the cliff-stair; it was saved by a hunt, when escort war-crews and harbour boats tracked the wrecker band to a cave on the headland and found the convoy's cargo stacked inside. The wreckers' hoard, the station keepers say, was not all found.

### *The Same Lesson, Three Times*

Seen together, the far side's history repeats one lesson in three accents. Each people first fought its own: the Gnomes at the Sounding Gate over exactness under pressure, with moved marks and false lights; the Halflings at the Measure Cistern over welcome under plenty, with raided vaults and a drowned keeper; the Orcs much later on the basin rims over passage under scarcity, with spears at the wells. Each time the settlement had the same shape. Each holder kept its say, and lost the right to vouch for itself. A fold may narrow, a harbour may delay, a stronghold may refuse, but each must say so where someone else can check it, because someone else has the spears, the boats, or the grain to make it hurt.

Those terms became the custom of the far side for the rest of its history. Later songs look back to them and add nothing new, and through the long unrecorded ages that followed, while the cradle lost its written record, far-side harbour ledgers kept their own count. That is why a far-side elder, to a cradle ear, always seems to be quoting something very old. It usually is.

How the three peoples live in a given era, whether a dry run has the cisterns falling, which harbour closed which cove, which escorts are crowding the terrace-edge grounds, belongs to that era's atlas. The bodies, the counts, the cairns, and the marks do not change.

## Tensions

- **A reserve for every need.** Hard years bring armed Orc escorts, travellers, and neighbouring folds to the cistern halls asking for more than a fold has declared it can spare. The askers call bounded hospitality an excuse; the folds answer that a reserve opened for every real need is no reserve. An escort could take a fold's terraces in an afternoon, and each hard year tests whether the memory of what a raided fold becomes is still stronger than hunger.
- **A company that will not leave.** A fold that hired sellswords against a hard-year raid may find the company still wintering on its stores, and speaking of the fallow terraces as its pay; the fold's kin in the neighbouring folds must decide whether to send their slingers.
- **Escort or raid.** A share taken from a caravan a kindred brought through is the escort's due to the kindred and robbery at spearpoint to some caravans. Which it is depends on who is stronger at the treaty-ground where it is argued, and it is never settled once.
- **Cistern or road.** Since the Rimward Passage War, the well-holders of the basin side and the escort orders of the route side have balanced each other, and each suspects the other of forgetting half of what Orcs are: the escorts say harsh land is to be held, not tamed; the well-holders that a people who only move cannot keep the water everyone needs.
- **The well under the worn cairn.** The hidden wells of the passage war are still sought in every dry year. A kindred that finds one under a cairn too worn to read must hold it against two strongholds, an escort order, and the struck bands who watch the finders' camp.
- **Whose honesty.** Every reading entered under a family's mark is answered for by the whole family, and the coast has no settled way for a household to disown a doubtful reading without disowning the reader.

CHAPTER 14

# Peoples of the Water

*Name the flood that took the willows,*
*name the ford that learned to lie;*
*the river keeps no count of its years,*
*and so we keep them, you and I.*

— a Floodkeeper house's flood-roll, *The Reedmere Tellings*

Land peoples draw their borders on solid ground and fight about where the lines should run. The water peoples of Caeldon cannot, because their ground will not hold still. A channel moves in a lifetime, a ford becomes a scour hole in a single spring, a sea road runs where the current runs and nowhere else, and the water itself kills: floods, drowned crossings, great catfish in the deep holes, sharks off the river mouths. Three peoples have made custom out of that, and each has made a different custom. The Reedfolk of the lower rivers hold that the water belongs to whoever remembers it truly. The Thaluren of the sea hold that it belongs to the return, the long climb upriver that every generation must make to be born. The Kavari of the freshwater tributaries hold that it is simply home, and that a home is not a road for anyone's passing, and they back that with barbed spears in the shallows. The first live in the cradle-web, under Human towns that need them and pushed them down; the other two share the rivers of the far side, and need each other less than they would like. Where their answers meet in one channel, Caeldon has some of its oldest and bloodiest quarrels, and the drowned cities, sunken wrecks, and pearl-beds that draw thieves and divers to the water to this day.

## Three Ways to Hold a River

All three water peoples descend from the **balanced adaptive field**, the same deep ancestry that gave Caeldon its Humans and the far-side peoples of fold, scarp, and shore. They did not come out of it as one water people that later split. They came out along separate lines, each shaped by a different way of the water. The Reedfolk line belongs to wet country in general, where land and water trade places with the seasons. The Thaluren are a migratory line, a sea people whose lives are completed only by going upriver. The Kavari are a resident river line, who never leave the freshwater their villages stand in. Because the three are kin in origin and strangers in habit, their quarrels are never about whether the others are people. They are about who has the right to decide.

**AT A GLANCE**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Reedfolk** | Lower rivers, fens, and estuaries of the cradle-web; the Floodkeeper Houses, c. 210,000–c. 182,000 BR. |
| **Thaluren** | The sea and its return rivers, in the Tidebound Reaches of the far side; the Returning Concord. |
| **Kavari** | Freshwater tributaries and nursery waters of the same rivers; the Bankright Circles, c. 190,000–c. 160,000 BR. |
| **Ancestry** | All three from the balanced adaptive field, along different lines. |
| **Key custom** | Remembered water; rightful return; dwelling-water and the Twofold Waters. |

Each of them also differs from its land neighbours in a way a writer should keep in mind. None of them holds territory in the landward sense. A Reedfolk house does not own its channel, a Thaluren run does not own its river, and a Kavari bank council does not own its pool. What each holds is a say in how the water is used, made good by memory, by the return, or by care, and in the end by enough people on the bank to turn others away. Outsiders who think in fields and walls keep mistaking all three for weak, elusive, or merely local. They are none of those things, as more than one lord's war-barge has learned on a crossing that was not there.

How the water peoples live in any one era, which reaches have Reedfolk pilots, which runs are climbing which channels this season, which closures are in force, belongs to that era's book and its atlas. What follows is what each people is, in every era.

## The Reedfolk: Those Who Remember

The Reedfolk are a lesser people of the wet country, at home where land and water never settle which is which: floodplains, reed marshes, shifting shoals, estuary mouths. They are not a branch of Humans, Elves, or Dwarves, though their history is tangled with all three. Their strongest country lies in the lower Confluence Basins and the Lower Serath, the heart of the cradle-web's Human river world, and the oldest fact about them is that they were there first.

### *A Body for Moving Ground*

Reedfolk are plainly different from their neighbours but nothing like monstrous. They are lean and sure-footed, easy on slick banks, in mud, and in reed, and they bear long humid labour that leaves other peoples exhausted. Moving water, immersion, marsh-fever, rot, and long damp seasons trouble them less than anyone else in the lower rivers. Their difference shows in what they can do rather than in how they look: they move through reeds and shallows without splashing, walk a false crossing without hesitation, and feel the water's movement and the softness of a bank through their feet, the hidden change in a channel that a stranger will not see until the boat is aground. Their voices are low and carry over water. They eat fish, eel, waterfowl, eggs, reed roots, and grain traded from the dry fields, and their hunters net wild geese from the reed by night.

They live where the land is least willing to be settled. Reedfolk households stand on stilts at the water's edge and on reed islands between the towns, and they fish, cut reed, and guide boats through channels that will not stay put. Where Elves root slowly in one place and Dwarves endure under stone, the Reedfolk are built for a life on ground that moves.

The water kills, and the Reedfolk know every way it does. The spring rise takes landings and children; a mud turtle takes the fingers of a careless hand in an eel-trap; the deep fen under a clump of fen pitchers will not bear a foot; the great catfish of the deep holes pull dogs and swimmers under. Their heroes are the ones who read it right when it counted: the pilot who brought a laden barge through the Reedmere on a flood night, the keeper who led a whole stilt village across a false crossing in the dark.

### *Who Remembers the Water*

Reedfolk life is ordered around remembered water. Kin and house matter, but the right to lead rests above all on who remembers truly: who can read a flood year, who knows which crossing is false, who can turn a channel without losing the people whose road it was. Their households gather in flood-keeper houses, channel leagues, reed-city kin, shoal communities, and the shrine-keepers of the salt-facing mouths.

The centre of every house is its **roll**. After each spring rise, a house's keepers go out to sound the channels before anyone trusts last year's marks, then add the year's water to the house's remembered roll at its **crossing shrine**. Whatever else a house writes down, the roll is spoken aloud each year in a steady chant, and children learn their house's flood years by heart, the way children elsewhere learn the names of kings. Each house speaks its own heroes into the roll with the years: the keeper who rowed through the night of a great flood from stilt-house to stilt-house, calling every family out before the water came, and was never found. When the rise comes in the dark, the oldest keeper calls her name at the landing so that she will row once more.

Marriage between houses is sworn at a crossing shrine, and it carries a test. The incoming spouse is taught the new house's channels, and is counted of the house only once they can tell its false crossings from its true ones. A channel quarrel goes to the keepers of the houses concerned, who swear their memories under the old forms. The memory that matches the water as it now runs usually wins; where the water is unclear, the larger house's does, and the smaller house may take its grudge into the reeds for a generation. That is the Reedfolk view of truth, and of power, in one breath: a memory is proved by the river, when the river will say.

The fens are also where the hunted go. Smugglers, outlaws, and runaways vanish into the reed-islands with a Reedfolk guide or not at all, and the lords' bounty-takers who follow them hire Reedfolk trackers of their own. A house that guides both, in different seasons, is common, and is trusted by neither. Outlaw raiders who settle in the fens without a guide's leave are another matter: when they raid the stilt villages and the barges, the houses lead them out onto ground that will not hold them, and every few years the eel-men find a rusted sword in the silt and hang it in the house shrine beside the names of the keepers who did the leading. Reedfolk fight seldom and never in the open, and fen children are told, as a bedtime story and a promise, of the town boats that chased a house into the fens and ran onto crossings that were not there.

### *The Oldest Oaths*

The **Floodkeeper Houses** took shape c. 210,000–c. 182,000 BR, when Reedfolk settlements began to gather around trusted crossings, shrine sites gained longer memory, and house lines kept flood years and shifting banks long enough that the wet-country communities of a whole lower-river world came to know one another. Command did not come first; houses did. No reed-city ever stood over the others. The Houses were held together by old oaths sworn across moving water, the duty to warn of floods, and the old right to turn a channel, and a house that broke an oath found every channel-guide in the reach suddenly forgetful. They

were old long before the Human basin world existed. When Humans came to the lower rivers, they did not come to empty ground.

The Houses also keep the oldest oaths in the river world, and they are not wholly their own. As the elder archive world shut its rolls and sealed its cities, in the long span called the **Last Keeping** (c. 150,000–c. 120,000 BR), keepers who would not let the old craft die behind the gates came down to the river and taught it to the Houses, and some brought rolls, oath scripts, and the forms of marker-stones with them; the last keeper named them deserters and cut their names into the sealed rolls too. When the blankness of the Mnemosyne Null came down to the river, those keepers stood with the Houses through the nights and recited aloud everything they carried, and the pallor stopped short of the water. The night is still kept on some Reedfolk reaches as a vigil, each house reciting its dead aloud until dawn. The Houses did not become an archive world. They took what fitted their own life, the sworn name as a living act rather than a shut roll, oath forms that could be spoken over moving water, the habit of making a claim plain before it could be honoured, and they kept it, bent to floods and channels, for more than a hundred thousand years.

### *Swallowed*

The second great fact of Reedfolk history is what Human river powers did with them, and it was not a war, though there was no shortage of force. In the **Lower River Absorptions** (c. 30,000–c. 8,000 BR) the Houses were bargained with, learned from, hired, married into, bullied, quietly bypassed, and at last called local custom rather than lords of the water. Human towns along the Basins and the Serath needed exactly what the Houses knew: which channels move, which banks fail, which flood years can be lived through, which crossings lie about their depth. For a long time it was a fair trade. What changed was not skill but who decides. Once the river towns could swear guarantees among themselves and enforce them with armed boats and sellswords, the question of who may **decide** about water parted from the question of who actually **knows**, and Reedfolk say became Reedfolk service.

Some houses were taken in on fair terms and live on inside the river towns. Some were driven off the reaches worth fighting over into fen and shoal, where they shared the reeds with river-thieves and outlaws driven there by the same towns, and answered with raids of their own, cutting levees in the flood months and barges loose in the night. Some drowned, in the plainest sense: the **drowned reed cities** and lost cutbank settlements of Reedfolk memory belong to this span, when weirs and embankments raised for stronger powers sent the flood onto Reedfolk reaches and swallowed people whose warnings no one strong had to heed. Every house has a version of the keeper who warned the town upriver three springs running, was not heard, and went down with her house when the embankment sent the water. And the old oath forms went into Human river custom with the houses, so that the swearing the river towns are proudest of is partly an unacknowledged Reedfolk inheritance. Some houses say so. Serathic lords rarely agree, and they are the stronger.

The drowned reed cities are still there, under silt and new channels. Their shrine-posts break the water at low summer, and on flood nights their shrine-bells are said to ring under the water. Eel-men, river-divers, and treasure-seekers from the towns go down after their shrine silver and the household goods the water took, by rope and lamp in the low-water months, and the great catfish of the Serath lie up in the drowned streets, larger than a barge pole; a diver who meets one in the silt does not always come up. The Reedfolk call the diving grave-robbing and curse those who sell what comes up, and some houses keep the old channels into a drowned city secret for exactly

that reason. On some low-summer nights a light moves among the posts, and no house will row out to learn whose it is.

Because nothing in that span was settled the same way twice, a Reedfolk house's place differs from reach to reach: here a pilot's office the town still honours, there a house that owes service by inheritance, elsewhere nothing but a family that everyone quietly asks before the spring rise. A house keeps count of the service it gives even where the town it serves does not. Out of the whole long mismatch, knowledge without say, came the sharpest Reedfolk claim, which they make in every lord's hall that will hear it: the river belongs to whoever remembers it truly, not to whoever was strong enough to swear the guarantee. Reedfolk grandmothers still tell of pilots who took a cruel town's barges into the Lying Shoals and swam home alone, and bargemen of the lower river still curse a careless steersman with *may a Reedfolk pilot love you*.

### *The River Remembered*

Reedfolk belief is a keeping of memory. River-memory rites and the shrine-keepers of the estuaries honour the river as it is remembered, and keepers of flood-memory are heeded as much for devotion as for knowledge. There is no Reedfolk god of the water, and they want none. They grant that Serovan the River-King exists, the god the Human river towns credit with their Law of the River, and pointedly refuse him the water; they say most of it is flood-keeper knowledge with a Human seal on it. They lay their restless dead by naming them on the water, and hold that every one of the River-Given who walks out of the Serath onto a landing is a charge against whoever moved the channel. Their oldest saying is put to anyone who builds against the flood: *the river is older than your grandfather and will outlive your grandson*. Their worst curse is to wish someone a crossing nobody remembers.

What they keep instead of a god is a memory of loss. During the Absorptions, houses that saw what service would mean, that a house could keep its people and its knowledge and still lose itself, prayed not for safety or victory but for the strength to remain what they were. From that prayer came **Hesserin the Shattered Saint**: a tall, gaunt figure of cracked porcelain held together by veins of glowing gold, her face a mosaic of shards. She gave her followers the strength to refuse, and they felt every ounce of the pressure they refused. When the surviving houses accepted service and began to pray for respect and for their children's safety instead, she shattered, and the current carried the pieces away. In some old crossing shrines a mirror of broken glass, set back together with gold, still hangs above the water, and it is said that whoever looks into it sees their own cracks and the gold that holds them. Reedfolk tell of a flood-keeper who would not let her house's name be written into a guarantee as service, whom Hesserin gave the strength to refuse, and whose house was bypassed anyway. They tell it as a story about sacrifice and the cost of truth.

### *Lifeways and Lost Houses*

Reedfolk variation runs through wet-country lifeways rather than biological branches. The clearest living identities are **Floodplain**, **Marsh-Reed**, **Shoalway**, and **Estuary** Reedfolk, each shaped by a different water: broad flood basins, reed marshes, shifting shoals, salt-facing mouths. Behind them stand older or absorbed forms: older channel Reedfolk, the drowned reed cities, cut-bank houses, salt-reed kin, and inland fen Reedfolk, whose traces are lost settlements, altered channels, and old lower-river memory. Reedfolk identity is strongest wherever remembered change becomes custom, navigation, household duty, and ordinary survival, which is to say on every reach where a boat still needs a pilot.

## The Thaluren: The Long Return

The Thaluren are an ancient ocean people, and "sea-elves" is a misnomer for them: they are no branch of the Elves. Their homeland is the **Tide-bound Reaches** of the far side, a world of reef and kelp settlements, open current roads, island margins, and the estuaries that lead inland. Most of a Thaluren life is lived at sea. But a Thaluren is not born at sea, and that fact shapes everything else.

### *Born Upriver*

A Thaluren is longer than a Human and leaner, with a long, smooth body built for current, swimming with the whole body and the legs together, low fins along the forearms and the backs of the calves, long webbed hands and feet. They breathe water through gill-slits along the neck and ribs and can breathe air for some hours, which is how they speak with land peoples and how they survive the shallow reaches of a river climb; dry air and sun crack their skin within a day. A Thaluren rising out of the shallows is taller than most Humans. They are oviparous, and their eggs are laid in sanctified **spawning waters** up the rivers. Every generation is completed by a return.

Sea life is ordinary life. Settlements sit in reef shelter and kelp-shadowed water, submerged or half-sheltered dwellings gathered where the current is gentle and food is close. People fish, gather shellfish, tend the shoals, and travel the current roads to visit kin, settle quarrels, or attend a gathering at an island edge. The sea is not kind: pods of blackfins hunt the outer water, and a run that meets one turns aside and gives it water. The year, though, turns on the return. As the spawning season nears, a settlement's run gathers along the outer shoals; its **Clutch-Watch Circle** confirms who is going and in what place in the line; messengers swim ahead to give notice at the mouths and upriver. The run crosses into brackish water, where the run-followers, the sharks of the current roads, close in; climbs the river on a declared day; and lays its eggs in an accepted spawning ground under the eye of **Sanctuary Custodians**, who stand over the gravels with spears and nets against the egg-takers, and count a lost clutch as a debt. Reproduction is public. Nobody spawns alone, and nobody's clutch is a private matter. Afterwards the adults return to the sea. The young who survive come down later, in their own time, and the settlements send escorts to the mouths to keep them in close bands and drive the sharks off with spears and noise. Every settlement keeps the name of an escort who turned back into the sharks alone so that a band of young could reach the Kelpshade, and whose spear, if it is ever found on the sand, is to be left where it lies. At the sea the circle accepts each young one, naming its clutch and its water, before any household takes it in. The household comes after.

### *Run and Clutch*

A Thaluren belongs to a parent-line, a clutch, a hatch-water, and a run as much as to a household, and those are the things a stranger is asked first. Any Thaluren met on the current roads is asked which run they came up with and which water they hatched in. A **Run-Watcher** can be asked to confirm the answer, and a false one is remembered for generations. An adult who takes up care of another clutch's young declares it before the circle, and is then counted in that clutch's duties as though born to them, so that adoption is not a private kindness but a public duty taken on.

The **Returning Concord**, the first Thaluren civilization to carry a name, is not a sea kingdom. It is a people bound not by borders but by a journey, held together by kinship, old oaths across great distances, and sworn offices rather than a throne. Run-Watchers remember which lines climbed first and where, vouch for a line, and speak when quarrels break out over who climbs and when; one from a great settlement is heard over one from a small. Sanctuary Custodians keep the spawning grounds against blight, defilement, and

egg-raiders, and have the last word when the beds are in danger. Clutch-Watch Circles say who is kin. **Sea-Settlement Speakers** speak for the ocean settlements where most Thaluren live, and bargain with the upriver sanctuaries. **Redirection Assemblies**, once rare gatherings called when a run was blocked or blighted, now meet far more often, and every meeting is a quarrel. Beside the offices swim the **escorts**, young spears who guard the runs on the outer roads, with no office, only a name, and a name earned against a blackfin pod is sung in every settlement the run passes. Its creed says a line proves itself by care, not strength; in practice the larger sea settlements and the keepers of the holiest sanctuaries decide whose care counts.

Outsiders tend to meet the Thaluren first through closed passages and spawning restrictions, and think them severe. They are, in fact, a deeply communal people whose strongest values are the unbroken return, a share in the work, and sworn care for vulnerable life. Their first question of a stranger is not whether they are friendly but whether they know how to behave near return water, and a stranger who does not is a danger to the unborn, whatever their intentions. The Thaluren know the sea floor of their coasts as land peoples know their fields, and where every ship went down; land peoples come to them to dive for coin-chests, bells, and cargo silver. Most runs refuse, because the drowned dead belong to the water. Thaluren hate wreckers above all other land folk, and a wrecker's fire on a headland near a run's road has more than once been put out by figures rising from the surf at night.

### *The Closed Water*

The great wound of Thaluren history is the **First Nesting Confluence**, their oldest sacred spawning water. In the span c. 178,000–c. 162,000 BR, eggs laid there began to fail to blight, clutch after clutch dying in the gravel, and the keepers could no longer hold that rightful return to the oldest water was enough to keep life. Its laments remember the custodians who stayed at the failing gravels season after season, turning blighted eggs by hand until the last clutch failed. It was more than a disaster. It asked where holiness lay: in the place, in the return itself, or in the survival of the next clutch. The keepers first tried narrower timing, stricter watch, and heavier rites to save the old water; only when the danger proved permanent did the assemblies begin accepting other channels. The confluence was closed to ordinary return, and the people's answer split in two.

The **Blightward Keepers** hold that a poisoned holy water must still be guarded, mourned, and owed, never abandoned, even when it can no longer be used. A Blightward custodian lives the inverse of an ordinary Thaluren life: for a span of seasons they keep a watch-station in freshwater below a closed or suspect water, reading the water where it enters and leaves and reciting names, and go home to the sea only when another custodian takes the watch. They stand guard with spears where other Thaluren would rather not look: against pearl-thieves who dig in the closed reaches by night for the blighted pearls that fetch a high price downriver, against egg-takers, and against the curious who kneel at a still pool and do not rise. The still pools hold silt like smoke in windless air, and some who go in after a thief are found floating a spear's length inside the edge, eyes open, neither drowned nor living; the custodians' warning to their young is four words long, *never kneel, never drink*. A clutch that fails to blight is not left unnamed. Custodians name it at the water where it failed, as a circle would have named it had it hatched, enter it in the Keepers' roll, and recite its name there every season for as long as the watch is kept. Blightward Thaluren give their run, their hatch-water, and the failed clutch their line remembers when they introduce themselves. A custodian who comes home is treated with respect and a certain distance, as someone who has lived too long beside a wound.

The **Open-Run Concords** hold that the return may move to other waters, provided it carries its debt towards the poisoned source, because standing guard while the young die is another kind of failure. Before a run is sent up an unknown river, **water-scouts** swim it: young Thaluren who climb a strange water alone or in pairs, through egg-takers, low pools, and the spears of other peoples' banks, to learn whether it can hold a clutch. Some do not come back, and their names are given to the waters they died finding. An Open-Run household gives its hatch-water with the debt attached, hatched in one channel, owing another, and each return season it sends one of its own, in turn, upriver with the run's elders to name the closed water aloud. The oldest of them may know the old water only by its name. Being chosen to go is a family honour and a family burden at once.

The first great quarrel between the two came in the **Second-Channel Feud** (c. 160,000–c. 156,000 BR), over the first new water to keep clutches alive, and it was fought in the water. Blightward bands blocked the approaches and drove clutch-bearers back towards the sea; Open-Run escorts broke the blocks by force; runs on both sides lost clutches to the fighting as well as to the blight, and egg-takers fed well on the beds left unguarded while the guards fought. The laments tell of an escort who held a narrows alone until the clutch-bearers behind her were through, and of a Blightward keeper who swam the whole length of the channel naming the dead of the old confluence aloud, with spears around her, and was let pass. The Open-Run settlements held the channel; the Blightward side could not take it, but could make it bloody every season, and that bought it terms. The Second Channel is accepted only on sufferance, never in full, and only while it keeps living clutches, counts them, names its tie to the closed source, and keeps a lasting debt of care towards it, all sworn again at every after-season gathering. That debt is **memory-debt**. Every turned-aside return still owes it, and only the custodians of the closed water may call that water healed. The Second Channel's gravel still gives up broken spear-points after a hard rise.

### *A Faith Without a God*

Thaluren belief is the **Way of Return**, the only organized religion on Caeldon with no god at its centre. Its question is whether a return is rightful; its doctrine is the old rule of return; its pilgrimage is the run itself, and its holy places are the return-waters. It needs no separate priests, because the Concord's own offices are its sacred ones. The hum a custodian sings over a clutch is the same in every water and has no words.

It was not always godless. When the blight struck the old confluence, the Thaluren called on **Ulaun the Stilled Hour** for stillness, and the stillness she gave held their clutches in a prison from which they could never hatch. When she faded, the faith that survived kept the rule of return and refused the god. Thaluren do not deny that gods exist. They hold that return-water must not be entrusted to one, because a god can be asked for the water to stop, and the return cannot. A Thaluren curse has only three words, *may you stay*, and is said of anyone who would close a water out of spite. Gods may be respected in other peoples' waters; at the estuaries a Gnome or Human may honour Maris of the Tides on the bank, but no one calls on a god over the climb.

The Thaluren also carry a memory of the open ocean that no other people shares. Beyond the farthest runs lies the sea of their oldest stories: the whale-like **deep-witnesses**, vast and slow and never done growing, and the squid-like **devourers** that break the current roads. A run that does not come home is often laid to a devourer, and on the farthest roads the Outer-Route lines feel the Unreturned, the lost runs, keep pace with them in a cold patch of water, and count aloud until it falls behind. No run goes past the outermost roads.

### *Lifeways of the Run*

Thaluren variation runs through run-lines and the custom of return, not separate water-kinds. The clearest living identities are **Tidebound**, **Blightward**, **Open-Run**, and **Outer-Route** Thaluren: lifeways shaped by claimed waters, a poisoned spawning ground, turned-aside runs, outer routes, and different answers to rightful return. Old run-lines, closed-water branches, failed alternate runs, deep-reef Thaluren, and estuary-bound Thaluren linger as historical or absorbed forms in vanished sanctuaries, ruined channels, and disputed return claims, and a turned-aside run may still find an old sanctuary abandoned by some earlier line nobody remembers, its gravel still ringed with offering shell-work.

## The Kavari: The River as Home

The Kavari are neither Thaluren nor a river branch of the Reedfolk. They are a resident freshwater people of the far side's tributary braids, gravel runs, spring-fed side channels, rootbank villages, and deep pools, and they live in the same rivers the Thaluren climb. For most of the year a Kavari bank village sees no Thaluren at all. To the Kavari, that is the natural state of things, and the return season is the exception.

### *Bank, Pool, and Nursery*

Kavari bodies are practical rather than spectacular: strong of breath, fine in their sense of current, easy in cold freshwater, sure of grip in slick places, with a feel for sediment, the push of the water, and a channel about to shift. They can live on land, but kept dry for long they sicken with the drying sickness, and a long drought leaves them scarred. Out of the water they move with a rolling, careful gait and sit with their feet in the river whenever they can. They eat fish, crayfish, freshwater mussels, lampreys caught in baskets on the spawning runs, smoked egg-takers, water plants, and the produce of bank gardens, and they live longer than Humans, often past a century.

Kavari bear live young, born in the water: a mother's childbed is a sheltered nursery pool, and she nurses the newborn there for a season before it joins the other young of its water. The young grow in protected **nursery waters**, sheltered coves, rootbank pools, gravel chambers, and side channels kept by the households beside them, and they have many enemies: floods, cold winters, silt that brings the nursery-water sickness, and egg-takers, long ambushing fish that nose into the gravel in spawning season. The largest egg-takers are the river's monsters to a Kavari child, old and scarred and longer than a boat, and a keeper who spears one of those in the gravel at night is a hero of the bank for life; its jaws hang over the nursery pool until they fall to pieces. Mothers in the nursery pools hum the same short lullaby along every river: *the bank is high, the water is low, the spears are at the braid.* A Kavari's worst fear is a nursery that falls quiet.

A Kavari river is home, food, nursery, and burial ground at once. **Bank councils** settle access, repair, and quarrels between neighbours, and the oldest pool-kin usually get their way. **Pool-kin** households remember which waters owe what. **Nursery keepers** clean, turn, shade, and defend the gravel beds. **Channel stewards** keep the water flowing without pretending a river can be held to one bed, and the dead are buried along the burial reaches of their own rivers. A water that holds homes, food, young, memory, and burial cannot, in Kavari eyes, be reduced to a road, and that is the whole of their quarrel with everyone who sees a river as a way to somewhere else.

In ordinary life the Kavari are quiet, steady, local, and unhurried; in crisis they are fierce. They are generous to a guest who keeps to the bank, and a stranger who wades into the gravel beds meets spears. Kavari children play *bank and braid*: the bank side holds hands across the shallows,

and the braid side tries to slip through without being touched, which is the game of a nursery night in small.

### *Dwelling-Right*

Kavari custom rests on **dwelling-right** rather than the right to pass. A community holds a water because it lives in it through flood and drought, births and burials, and because there are enough of it on the banks to turn others away. That is not ownership in the landward sense. It is a hold made good by care for banks, pools, rootbanks, cold inlets, food waters, burial reaches, and nursery places, and by spears when care is not enough; an outsider can earn a place by long care, above all by protecting the young. At seasonal **gatherings** the elders of the strongest bank councils weigh every larger use of a river by one question, whether it leaves the water alive.

The danger to that water is more often a landward neighbour than a river beast. A lord's new mill-weir can starve a tributary's pools in a summer, and the old Kavari answer is to pull the weir out by night, stone by stone; more than one bank council has a feud with a mill-house that began that way and has outlived three millers. The mussel beds of the gravel runs grow pearls, small, grey, and prized in the river towns, and pearl-takers come up the rivers in dry years when the water is low, raking the beds and trampling the nursery gravels as they go. A Kavari bank does not take pearl-takers to any lord's hall: it takes their rakes, their boats, and sometimes their hands, and sends the rest downstream. River-folk of every people tell of a burial reach far up some tributary where the oldest pool-kin were laid with all their pearls, which no Kavari will name and every pearl-thief wants found; the few who find a burial reach are found in it.

The **Bankright Circles**, the first Kavari civilization, were never founded. They grew. Over c. 190,000–c. 160,000 BR the bank councils, pool-kin circles, nursery keepers, and seasonal gatherings of many linked tributaries began to stand together: households on connected channels came to settle quarrels by the same reasoning, keepers on separate braids began to honour each other's closures, and gatherings began to hear matters from further upstream. None of it needed a decision, which is why it took thirty thousand years. The Circles are quiet and local in ordinary life and strongest in crisis, when nursery keepers and bank councils close a water to passage and trade and every Kavari on the bank stands behind the closure with nets, barbs, and numbers. Their elders count years from the egg-taker summer, when the egg-takers came up the river in numbers nobody had seen and the households hunted them for a whole season, night after night, until the river was clean; a barbed point from that summer hangs over many a bank council's fire. Because the Circles had long stood together when the first turned-aside runs came up their rivers, the Kavari could say no with one voice.

### *Small Gods by Design*

Kavari belief is small and local by design. Pool-kin and bank households keep shrines to the unnamed water-powers of their own pools and nursery reaches. No great god speaks for Kavari waters, and Kavari custom prefers it so. Each pool keeps its own small shrine, and the powers honoured there are known only by the water they belong to. A Kavari who swears to a stranger swears by the dead of the burial reach, which no one breaks and stays welcome on any bank.

### *Lifeways of the Banks*

The clearest living Kavari identities are **Bankright**, **Gravelbraid**, **Pool-Kin**, and **Coldrun** Kavari, freshwater ways of life shaped by river dwelling, nursery keeping, deep pools, cold tributaries, and seasonal gatherings. Old tributary Kavari, cutbank Kavari, springline Kavari, and broken nursery houses are older or absorbed

forms, traceable in altered waters and lost nursery waters. The silted pool-kin are the great loss of Kavari memory: households whose pools a flood or a slumped bank choked, and whose young died in the silt. Pool-kin still name them at the burial reaches.

## Where the Waters Meet

When the blight closed the First Nesting Confluence and turned-aside runs began pressing up new rivers, they found those rivers already lived in. The Kavari were not a party caught between two Thaluren wings. They were a people with their own custom and their own spears, and the meeting changed the Thaluren rule of return for good.

### *The Gravel Oath*

At the **Gravelbraid Nurseries**, shallow middle-river braids of rootbank pools, cold spring inlets, and tended gravel channels where Kavari households raise their young, an incoming turned-aside run met a Kavari barrier. The braids were clean, cold, sheltered, and close to the old routes, which made them salvation to the Open-Run escorts and exactly why the keepers would not give them up: they were already dwelling-water, named, tended, and full of resident young. The refusal was barriers and bodies in the water. Escorts tested the barriers; keepers held them; blood was spilled on both sides before anyone sat down. Kavari households still tell of a nursery keeper who held a gravel gate through a night of attempts with a barbed spear and a broken arm, and Thaluren escorts of the escort who swam the barrier alone at moonrise to bring a sick clutch-bearer into the cold pools, and was let through when the Kavari saw what she carried. The standoff lasted a whole spawning season. The Thaluren clutches could not be sent back to poisoned water, and the Kavari would not open their nurseries to a demand, however desperate. Nearby cold holding pools kept the displaced clutches alive while the two sides bargained in a circle of Bankright nursery keepers, Open-Run escorts, and Blightward closure-reckoners, with a few Gnome counters tallying water level, timing, and channel capacity so that neither side could twist the facts later. The first passage was allowed under watch, through channels the Kavari marked. It is remembered as a sober success: the clutches lived, the nurseries were untouched, and neither people's need wiped out the other's. But it was the Kavari who drew the marks.

The **Gravel Oath Accord** of c. 153,000–c. 148,000 BR answered with the **Twofold Waters**: a channel may be **return-water** to one people and **dwelling-water** to another at the same time, and as dwelling-water it belongs first to the people who already raise their young in it. It gave the Thaluren no open access. It made passage a shared watch on Kavari terms: before any run passes a disputed water, Kavari keepers, Thaluren run-watchers, and Blightward reckoners must all look at it, and no channel counts as empty merely because it can keep clutches alive. Any passage allowed is, in the Oath's words, a **burdened return**: it owes a debt to the poisoned source-water, a duty to the dwelling-water that takes it in, and a share of the blame for any harm it causes in passing. Memory-debt, after the Gravel Oath, is owed sideways as well as backwards.

The Oath has never become comfortable, and it holds because it is useful to everyone and comfortable to no one. Soon after it came the **Late-Closure Terms** (c. 147,000–c. 146,000 BR), when a Thaluren run, dogged by lampreys and egg-takers all the way up, arrived late with a real emergency at a braid a Bankright council had already broadly closed. One escort captain tried a closed channel anyway on the second night and was met in the dark by keepers who knew every stone, and the circle heard the matter with two escorts and one keeper dead in the shallows. The terms were the Kavari's: late warning creates debt even when the

emergency is real, and a broad closure may be questioned before onlookers without the Kavari giving up the last word over water where their young are. In ordinary years the meeting of the two peoples is a matter of markers. Kavari keepers mark active nursery-water and forbidden channels; Thaluren escorts bring notice and keep within the marks; quarrels go to a circle at the water's edge, and sometimes to spears. In the season of the return, Kavari and Thaluren keepers patrol the shared gravels together and kill the egg-takers they find there, and hunt together the outlaw swimmers who cut a barrier in Thaluren colours or steal clutches from a holding pool to sell back: the one hunt in the braids that both sides look forward to. On every contested river there is a stretch of gravel that the two peoples call by different names, for the dead each left there.

### *The Mouths*

The Thaluren met the Gnomes at the sea's edge, and before any terms they met with knives. At the **Split Reed Mouth**, a braided estuary of reed-shelves and shifting channels, the same water was a sounding field and a dangerous approach to one people and part of a sworn return to the other. Gnome sounding crews staked marker-lines across return channels and drove their poles through spawning beds; Thaluren war-bands came out of the reeds at night, cut the lines, and pulled pilots from their boats; harbour crews raided the reed-shelves with fire and hooks. Meanwhile the run-followers gathered off the mouth when the young came down, and the escorts who should have driven them off were at war, and Thaluren memory keeps the names of the years the young went down the mouth without guards. The **Estuary Terms** (c. 144,000–c. 138,000 BR) lasted because each side could make the mouth useless to the other. Gnome pilots may sound named channels and keep hazard markers, but sounding gives no right to search the return-waters or steer the runs; Thaluren run-elders may name the windows of the runs and the waters no boat may churn, but a run gives no right to close the whole mouth. At tide stones and channel posts each people says what the water is being used for, and a closing must say whether it guards boats, young, or fouled water. Anyone who lies about it answers to the side they cheated, and the reeds remember. Two from the feud are named at the tide stones now by both peoples: a Thaluren escort who pulled a drowning Gnome pilot out of the channel in the middle of a raid and was cast out by her own war-band for it, and a sounding crew that rowed into the run-followers to beat them off a stranded shoal of young.

### *One Question, Three Answers*

The Reedfolk stand apart from the far-side quarrel, on the rivers of the cradle-web, but their quarrel has the same shape: a people whose knowledge of the water is needed, set against others strong enough to settle the water by another rule. On every water of Caeldon the question is the same, and it is very old. Who may decide about living water: those who remember it, those who return to it, or those who live in it? The Reedfolk lost the deciding and kept the knowing. The Thaluren and the Kavari, through the Gravel Oath, agreed under spears to decide together and to distrust each other carefully. Neither arrangement is finished, and none of the three peoples expects it to be.

## Tensions

- **What the service cost.** Those who keep Hesserin's memory ask whether accepting service was the price of surviving beside Human towns, or the moment the houses gave the river away. A house's count of service owed and given rarely matches the town's.

- **The next drowned house.** Weirs and embankments still go up along the Serath for towns that can swear guarantees among themselves and back them with armed boats. A house that sees its reach about to take the flood can warn, move, or cut the embankment by night, and no tale of the drowned reed cities counsels waiting.
- **Return-water and dwelling-water.** The Gravel Oath Accord did not settle whether a run may ever be refused a water it needs. Kavari councils hold that a dwelling-water's closure is final, and back it with spears in the shallows; Thaluren escorts hold that a burdened return is owed a hearing.
- **The middle layer.** Under the Serathic Oath of Layers, Reedfolk say, everyone else was given three layers and they were kept on the middle one.
- **Home, or an exception.** The Kavari right to their water owes nothing to Thaluren acceptance, yet the one lasting oath that names it, the Twofold Waters, was sworn around Thaluren return. Bank councils ask whether dwelling-water is counted for what it is or only as the place where a return must slow down, and at each water the answer has followed whichever side came in greater numbers.
- **Divers in a sanctified reach.** Land companies hire Thaluren divers to bring up strongboxes from barges sunk in spawning reaches, in the season of the climb when the water is clearest. The custodians treat anyone in that water then as an egg-taker, and a diver's own run may be divided over whether the diver is still theirs.

CHAPTER 15

# The Bridge Peoples

*Every ruin has a tenant, every bridge a keeper, and every road a debt. Ask who before you ask how much.*

*— Sayings of the Undercroft Fair*

Caeldon is an old world, and old worlds are full of what their builders left behind: roads too broad for any living traffic, tunnels under fields nobody owns, crossings that fail every spring and are mended every summer, sealed vaults one roof-fall beyond reach, frames that once did the work nobody else would do and still stand at their posts in the dark. Other peoples see waste in such places, or danger, or a lost kingdom's gold. The bridge peoples see home. Goblins live in the upper breaks of ruins and Kobolds in the underworks beneath them; Trolls keep the crossings that never finish healing; Ogres carry what settled worlds cannot lift; the last Giants keep the heights their ancestors built; and the Wrought, the youngest people on Caeldon, were made out of the labour itself. None of them is a monster, though each has been hunted as one, and each is the monster of somebody's tale. Between them they keep the old works of the world lived in rather than empty, and every treasure-hunter who goes into those works hires one of them or regrets it. Almost all of them have spent their history being needed by powers that would not give them a seat at the fire.

### AT A GLANCE

| | |
|---|---|
| **Goblins and Kobolds** | Ruins above and underworks below; the Iron and Underhouse Compacts. |
| **Trolls** | Wounded crossings and broken roads; Failed Mending; the Crossing-Oath Houses. |
| **Ogres** | Work-camps on the edges of other peoples' country; hearth-weight; the Hearth-Weight Compacts. |
| **Giants** | Remote heights; the last of the Upland Colossal world. |
| **The Wrought** | Made people, awakened c. 1,500 BR–c. 200 CR; the Mending Orders. |

## Peoples of the Gaps

The name is a description, not a kinship. The bridge peoples are six peoples of three very different origins, grouped because of where they live and what they do: in the gaps between larger worlds, in the works those worlds abandoned, and on the crossings and loads that hold those worlds together.

Four of them are among the oldest peoples on the planet. Goblins, Kobolds, Trolls, and Ogres all descend from the **threshold elder field**, the crowded early ancestry of peoples shaped by seams, margins, fracture belts, cave mouths, and the gaps between larger landscapes. They settled at the same depth of time as the Verdant and lithic lines that became the Elves and Dwarves. That fact is a grievance, and every one of the four knows it. None of them is a late people who arrived to find the good places taken. Each is an old people whose place was taken: walled out, struck from the rolls, recruited, or held by debt, and whose life on the margins is something stronger peoples did to them rather than the condition they began in. The same story recurs often enough that a writer can rely on it: an older people loses its say without losing its use, and goes on doing the work that its new masters cannot do without.

The Giants come from elsewhere. They are the living remainder of the elder Upland Colossal world, not threshold kin at all, and they belong among the bridge peoples because the roads, terraces, and crossings their ancestors built are the ones the others live on. The Wrought come from nowhere a people has come from before. They were made, as tools, and became people, and the hunt that followed is still within living memory.

How each of them lives in a given era, which warrants a lord has torn up, which ruins are being cleared, which crossings are failing, belongs to the era's atlas. What follows are the peoples themselves.

## Goblins: Value in What Is Left

Goblins are made for ruins, not for malice. They live well in places where other peoples see collapse, shame, danger, or leftovers: abandoned works, broken outer walls, failed market towns, old military roads, collapsed storehouses, forgotten tunnels, battlefield debris, salvage margins. They live on town fringes and in road shadows too, and in work nobody admits to hiring, because living towns keep making the same leftovers that ruins preserve. Their strongest country is the **Broken Marches**, a belt of failed works and remnant settlement, but their footprint follows broken works rather than one map: wherever a town has enough poverty, repair work, and back-street trade to hide or tolerate a Goblin quarter, there are Goblins. They are the first into a ruin and the first out when it starts to fall, and their songs are of the delvers who did not get out: the lamp crew that went down for the elder lamps and is still down there, the girl who held the crawlway shut while her warren ran.

### *Quick, Small, and Hard to Fool*

A Goblin is about Halfling height, thin and wiry, with long arms, long fingers, and a large head for the body; the ears are long, pointed, and mobile, and the large eyes reflect light at night. They are people-like rather than bestial, and at ease in half-shelter: crawlspaces, broken cellars, rubble gaps, market backs, drains, cliff paths, old wall interiors. Their bodies suit cramped spaces, unstable structures, long hunger, and fast escape. Their gift is not strength but speed, nerve, an eye for what is about to go wrong, a high tolerance for discomfort, and a fine eye for what still has value.

Their things tell the same story. Goblins prize repaired tools, mismatched gear, hidden storage, portable goods, **reversible signs**, and concealed exits: anything that can turn into something else when a lord or a danger changes. A Goblin household's best room has two ways out, and its best

tool has been mended so many times that nobody remembers what it was first made for. The ruins teach hard lessons: nobody puts a bare hand into a dark gap where glove spiders nest, every old beam is tested for cellar rot before it is trusted, and a crew that smells a wallow goes into the underlayers with spears, or not at all, because a ruin hog boar in a culvert can open a thigh to the bone. Deeper down, the pale web-curtains of lampless spiders across a passage mean nobody has come that way in years: the best news a crew can find, since the room beyond is unstripped, and the worst, since nobody came back out to strip it. Salvagers mutter a word to the ruin before they reach into it, and the worst Goblin curse is short: *may the roof speak first*.

### *Warren and Household*

Goblin households are built around practical belonging rather than any wish to rule. Their usual forms are warrens, repair bands, market-shadow households, road crews, salvage knots, alley compacts, and small families of guides who know the safer detour round an outlaw band. Status belongs to whoever can find value, keep people fed, read danger early, bargain with stronger neighbours, and know when to vanish rather than fight. When a warren cannot vanish, it fights in the dark, from crawlways no larger enemy can follow. Warrens fight each other too: two warrens that find the same rich ruin feud over it as bitterly as any two lords' houses, with cut ropes, collapsed crawlways, and stolen lamps, until a gathering-market such as the Undercroft Fair settles it by blood-price.

Larger powers mistrust them because they live close to theft, salvage, smuggling, and trade nobody admits to, and the mistrust is not invented. But Goblins are not thieves by nature. They survive where no lord's hand reaches far: abandoned property, contested roads, failed borders, and work that wants their usefulness without counting them as anyone's own. A lord may accuse Goblins of theft while quietly buying recovered fittings from them; a town may depend on Goblin night labour and deny Goblin residents any place in it. A ruined fort may hold a Goblin warren in its upper breaks two rooms away from a collapse the Goblins know about and the fort's owner does not. In the Marches, Goblins without a warrant are hunted: bounty-takers come with lamps and dogs, and salvage gangs with a lord's leave clear a ruin of its warren before they strip it.

Every treasure-hunter in the Marches wants a Goblin guide, and few trust the one they hire. A warren guide knows the crawlway round a sealed door, which old tomb-seals still hold, and which crypt halls hold dead that walk on their own because nobody gave them their rites. The going price is half the haul and both of your lamps, and Goblins say the crews who haggled are the ones still down there. What they go for is always the same: elder lamps that still burn, colossal-age fittings worth a winter's bread, and the sealed vault that lies, in every telling, one roof-fall beyond reach.

### *Three Losses*

Goblin history is a sequence of ground lost, and Goblins can recite it.

The first loss is the oldest. Goblins were themselves by the time the Elves and Dwarves settled, and their earliest heartland was the broken ground along the Ironspine margins: cave mouths, fracture belts, scree hollows, drain-seams. There grew the first Goblin order, the **seam-warrens**, which held named seams by **gap-right**, the hold of whoever had kept a passage open, known its water and its falls, and lived in it longest. In the **Enclosure of the Seams** (c. 465,000–c. 420,000 BR), early Dwarven holdmaking needed exactly that ground. The holds defended the seams until they were theirs, and warrens that would not yield were walled out or smoked out. The holds saw ordinary founding; the Goblins saw the loss of places they had held longer than anyone. Most

warren-kin moved outward, into scree, abandoned workings, and route margins, and that move began the ruin-and-fringe life of every later Goblin. Some stayed inside the Dwarven structures as **underwall** households, and their descendants still name claims older than the holds.

The second loss was a gain first. The elder archive world, whose marker roads and terraces crossed country where displaced warrens lived, cut into stone every people that lasted, and Goblins lasted: warrens that kept gaps, guided travellers through the under-routes, and warded them against beasts and raiders were entered as **warranted** peoples, each warrant a duty cut in stone and the protection of the archive-wardens that went with it, for as long as the archive chose to give it. For the first time since the enclosure, Goblins held a place outsiders could read. Then the archive hardened. In the **Unlisting of the Warrens** (c. 180,000–c. 150,000 BR), warrants not renewed in the right form lapsed, warrens that moved no longer matched their entries and were struck, and where Goblins were entered again it was under a lesser mark. Then the wardens came to the gaps, and it was war in the dark: warrens that stayed at the culverts they had kept for generations were driven out with fire and spear, and some fought for their crawlways until no one was left to fight. Goblin tellers keep the gap-guides of the warrant age as their heroes: the guide who led a lost caravan through the under-routes with raiders at its heels and was struck from the rolls the next year all the same, the warren that held a culvert against the wardens until the water rose over them both.

The third loss came with the Human frontier. The **waste-ground doctrine**, from the Headwater settlement through the building of its exchange roads, treated ruined and marginal ground as anyone's to take, and Goblin-held ruins were taken by whoever came with more spears. The doctrine was partly new greed and partly the old archive mark taken up again by lords who did not know its source.

### *Hobgoblins and the Warrant*

The Goblin answer to the third loss used the lesson of all three: ground is kept by those who are needed and armed. The **Iron Compacts**, which took their present shape c. 20,000–c. 9,000 BR during the Human frontier expansion, are armed Goblin communities that do work the settled powers need done and would rather not do themselves: holding a road outlaws prey on, watching a fort, keeping a ruin and whatever lives in it from spilling onto a town, supplying a garrison, guarding a gate. The bargain is marked by a **warrant**, a written grant from the lord that he can take back whenever it suits him; the paper keeps nothing alive once the lord stops gaining from it. In exchange a compact keeps a hall, a share of the road's take or the ruin's salvage, and its own weapons, and it can refuse orders the lord lacks the strength to force. A compact's spears are seldom idle. It fights the outlaws on its road every season, takes bounties on them and brings back heads, not prisoners, and walls in the older monsters of the deep cellars rather than fight them; those walls are the first thing a ruin-robber tries to break, since what is walled in with the monster is whatever the ruin's builders left behind. Compacts keep their warrants with great care, recite them at gatherings, and still treasure fragments of archive-era warrants that no lord now cares about.

**Hobgoblin** is the word for a Goblin of such a compact, and nothing more: not a separate species. Over generations some compacts have become semi-hereditary, and steadier food, exposed work, and defensive discipline have made some of their members taller, broader, and more visibly martial than other Goblins. That is drift within one people. The Compacts live between two suspicions. Settled powers treat Hob-

goblins as useful but lesser servants and turn them out when they are no longer needed. Freer warrens say the Compacts have bent the knee for the right to stand anywhere. What a compact fears most is not a fight. It is the day a lord no longer needs it: the torn warrant, the order to be gone by spring, and the march to nowhere that every Goblin song remembers.

### *Songs of the Struck*

Goblin belief is unorganized and stubborn, and most of it is sung. The struck warrants have their own god, **Tavi the Bard of the Broken**. At Iron Compact gatherings, after the living warrants are read, the struck ones are sung: seams, warrens, and duties no lord still honours, named one by one. Then the compacts drink to the held: the compact that held a frontier fort for a lord through a whole winter siege, then found its warrant torn in spring and marched out with its dead on its shields; the old warrant-keeper who walked into her burning hall for the warrant and came out with it, scorched, to read it aloud at the next gathering. It is said that if the songs are sung with true defiance, Tavi will come and grant the singers a year of courage and unity. Goblins tell of a lord who forbade a warren to sing in a ruin he had declared waste ground, and of how Tavi sang there anyway, so softly that the lord heard nothing, and by morning every Goblin within a day's walk knew the words.

The hidden and the hunted pray to **Varn the Shadow-Stalker**, born of everyone who has had to live unseen in the ruin-belts, a figure of living shadow with two points of silver light where his eyes should be; where he passes, the sounds of the road fade and the shadows pool thick enough to hide in. Frontier Goblins also know Abrel the Changeling, the god of those who belong to two peoples, under the name Ziv. Goblin children play *last-out*, a chase through rubble in which the slowest is "buried" and must be dug free by the rest, and warren mothers sing the names of the lamp crew as a lullaby.

### *Lifeways*

Goblin variation is fast, local, and practical. The clearest living identities are the **Ruin-Warren**, **Market-Shadow**, **Road-Margin**, **Underwall**, and Hobgoblin compact lifeways, shaped by ruins, town fringes, route margins, underwalls, and how much they owe a lord. Behind them stand Old March Goblins, whose holdings Human frontier lords declared waste-ground; lost warrant Goblins, descended from the warrens struck from the archive's rolls, whose copyists still make the dangerous walk to the Grey Line of the Witnessfields to copy warrant fragments from the open ruins, under the slit-mouthed gaze of the stone figures who ask every passer's name; and collapsed-fort, canal-shadow, and battlefield Goblins, surviving mostly in history and absorption.

## Kobolds: The Understone People

Kobolds are small and careful, and they live underneath. Their country is wherever the surface and the underworld meet badly: Dwarven mine-edges, culverts, old drains, service shafts, ventilation runs, collapsed tunnels, old military underways, ruin underlevels, deep cellars, and the lower structures of cities. Their footprint follows buried works more than open country. They are made for the underwork rather than for service, though a great deal of their history has been spent proving the difference. Their great loss is the furnace world, and the binding that came after; their heroes since have mostly been the crew that went into a collapse when nobody else would, and came out with the living.

### *The Sense for Bad Stone*

Kobolds are people-like, small, and built for cramped and unstable understructures. Their strengths are practical: low movement through narrow spaces, sharp attention to airflow and vibration, comfort in darkness and partial enclosure, patience with repetitive repair, and a strong sense for weak stone, bad timber, hidden water, trapped air, and the particular silence that means trouble. They are not strong, and do not need to be. Their survival depends on caution, coordination, memory of tunnels, and the ability to retreat before a larger danger knows they were ever there. The commonest warning in the underhouses is *a quiet shaft is a hungry shaft*.

Their material culture is a catalogue of that caution: small tools, warning marks, shared maps, collapsible braces, **sound codes** tapped on stone and pipe, small lamps, hidden caches, and repair methods that can be performed lying on one shoulder in a space a Human could not turn round in. A Kobold household may know a city's old drains better than the lord who claims them, and that knowledge is the thing most often stolen from it: smugglers, besiegers, and thieves pay well for a drain map, and a crew that sells one is not forgiven. A city's underlayer is the outlaw's road, and the drain-warrens know every thief and fugitive who has passed beneath the streets and what they paid; some lords hire Kobolds as hunters of their own outlaws for exactly that reason.

The underlayer is full of things that kill a small people. Glove spiders in the ruin-towns bite and the bite festers; lampless spiders numb whoever reaches into the wrong crack; ruin hogs come looking for a crew in the culverts, as bad air never does. Under the holds, brace-gnawers hollow the props from inside, and Kobold crews listen for their teeth in the walls and chalk their marks on the gnawed timber. Behind the seals of the Deeps the Seal-Knockers knock, and the crews of some underhouses knock back on their rounds, saying the dead like to be answered.

### *Crew and Underhouse*

Kobold households are built around crews, warrens, underhouse lines, and the memory of what each tunnel has done to the people in it. Belonging rests on who keeps the underwork safe: who remembers which shaft breathes poorly, which brace is temporary, which old oath-door should not be opened, and which route can carry children, tools, or wounded people during a collapse. Leadership is practical and changes with the work, and the best speaker in a surface bargain is seldom the one trusted to read a failing tunnel. Every round ends with a head-count tapped on the stone, and a crew that comes up one short taps the missing name into the shaft mouth for a year; the commonest toast, raised after a collapse everyone walked out of, is *to the brace that held*.

Larger powers want their labour and little else. Mines, cities, holds, and border keeps send for Kobold crews without granting them any say or share, which gives the warrens a guarded temper: useful enough to be summoned, small enough to be ignored, needed enough to bargain from below when the stone starts to shift. A delver party that hires a Kobold guide comes back more often than one that does not, and the guide knows which sealed door to leave shut.

### *The Vent-Houses and the Downward Binding*

Kobolds were old long before anyone needed them. For a very long, undated span they lived as self-governing **underhouse lines** in fracture belts, cave seams, and natural vents, keeping knowledge of air, water, heat, and collapse that no surface people had reason to want. Then the elder Ash-Furnace world wanted it. Its furnace sanctuaries, heat chambers, and slag-shafts needed draught controlled and trapped air released, and Kobold vent-kin were better at it than anyone. Over c. 250,000–c. 168,000 BR the furnace-masters bound them into **vent-houses**, hereditary houses holding named vents and heat-ways under furnace

patronage, with a protected place and a real say over whether a furnace could safely be fired, for as long as the masters chose to listen. It was the first time Kobold knowledge carried weight outside Kobold lines, and the weight was lent by someone stronger.

The vent-houses were the first to know when that world tipped into overburn. They kept count of shafts pushed past safe draught and furnaces fired against their warning, and their right to refuse was overridden again and again. When the furnaces burst, the heat-ways became ovens, and many vent-houses died at their posts, in the shafts they had begged the masters not to fire. The songs keep the crews who went back down the burning shafts for the children. The survivors carried out knowledge of heat and pressure that no one else held, and a lasting tie to the civilization that burned itself out; later peoples valued the first and never quite forgave the second. The shafts where vent-houses died are said to stay warm, and a Kobold crew will not pass the mouth of one without a word to the kin inside.

Some survivors went to the surface margins. Others went down into the deep world, where Dwarven deep holds and Dark Elf houses needed exactly their skill, and there protection offered to refugees became protection-debt, and protection-debt hardened into inherited bonded service. In the harshest houses it became captivity. Kobolds have not forgotten what the word **protection** came to mean.

The furnace-masters who kept the vent-houses lived among heat vents, mineral beds, and slag, hardened and soot-darkened by their work. Kobold memory kept them as **scaled patrons** in mineral nests, and the dragon stories some Kobold groups tell, of old scaled guardians, heat vents, and nests of mineral, grew from that half-remembered figure. They are myths, not the Kobolds' origin, but they have a seed of history in them. Children of every underhouse know the telling of the nest-thief who took one crystal from the patron's hoard and was followed home by the heat, and the hold markets still sell old fused stone from the furnace ruins as **dragonbone** to buyers who would rather not know where it came from. The dragon's hoard is the most hunted treasure that was never found; deep-delvers still go looking for a coiled patron's nest of gold in hot rock, and Kobolds laugh at them, or take their coin to guide them part of the way.

### *The Frames*

Much of the deep holds' hot, dangerous work had long been done by Kobold vent-kin in bonded service when the Dwarves built their **predecessor-frames**, mindless workframes for heat channels, vent shafts, and pressure gates. Whether the frames were built to spare Kobolds that work or to stop paying for it, Dwarven tallies do not say plainly, and the two peoples remember it differently. Kobold underhouses remember frames arriving and their own place in the holds shrinking. Some Dwarven craft-lines remember the frames as a kindness. The frames' descendants are the Wrought, who are now people, and some of them work the same underlayers.

### *The Underhouse Compacts*

The **Underhouse Compacts**, the first named Kobold civilization, grew from older underhouse lines and from the vent-kin who survived the ash-furnace world. Their founding date is not fixed. A compact is a sworn bargain among the crews and underhouse lines that keep one underlayer alive, a mine's ventilation, a city's drains, a hold's service shafts, a ruin's foundations, and its crews bargain as one. They set the terms of dangerous work, keep the shared maps and warning codes, and decide together when a structure is too unsafe to enter. Compacts honour one another's warnings and refusals, and a crew that breaks a compact's refusal is rarely hired again by any other.

The Compacts' founding question is the one Kobold history keeps asking: does keeping a place alive give a people any say in it? Their answer asks no ownership of the mine or the drain, only a voice in how the underworks are used, the right to refuse work that will kill its crews, and pay that matches the danger. Their strongest weapon is walking off together. When a compact calls a shaft unsafe, no member crew enters it, and the owners discover how much of their world rests on people they never counted. The crews also find things: a crew clearing a drain may break into a sealed storework nobody living has entered, and every compact has a rule for it, which the owners above never agree to: the crew that found it names the find, and the compact decides whether the way to it is safe enough to be told. The Compacts also hide crews escaping deep-world bonded service, bargain debts down, and treat any house that holds Kobolds captive as unsafe ground for every member crew, which can quietly stop that house's underwork altogether. A debt-holder's hunters who go down after a runaway are given a single warning, tapped on the pipe where they stand, and the compacts do not tap twice.

### *Refuge and the Quiet Tunnel*

Kobold underhouses honour the **Last Chamber**, the deep god of refuge and survivable holding, under a name of their own. It appears as a robed keeper of layered stone whose chest opens like a vault with a lamp burning inside, one hand on a half-sealed door; where it passes, panic cools into counting. Its broken shrines stand in route-houses, cisterns, and refuge vaults, exactly the places Kobolds keep. An older fear had a god of its own once: Sessik the Tongue-Taker punished noise in the tunnels, and faded when the Compacts' shared sound codes made silence a skill instead of a terror. The underhouses still tell of their own in whispers, since sound carries: the vent-girl who crawled through a gas-filled run to open a draught and brought a whole shift out alive, and the old map-keeper who led a line of runaways out of a debt-house through tunnels their masters had forgotten existed.

### *Lifeways*

The clearest living Kobold identities are **Mine-Edge**, **Drain-Warren**, **Ruin-Under**, **Deep-Service**, and **Vent-Kin** Kobolds, named for the structures they keep alive. Old service-kin, collapsed warren lines, patron-bound Kobolds, surface-settled Kobolds, and heat-vent Kobolds persist as history or in absorbed lines; the patron-bound and heat-vent forms descend from the furnace vent-houses, the old service-kin from those bound into deep-world service after the fall.

## Trolls: The Keepers of Broken Crossings

Trolls are a people of wounded frontiers. They are found where land and road refuse to heal: wet ravines, broken forests, landslide roads, old battlefields, storm-torn passes, bogged road cuts, flooded causeways, ruined bridges, crossings that keep being rebuilt badly. Those places are like the Troll body. They are damaged, repaired, damaged again, and never quite restored, and Trolls survive in them where other peoples wear themselves out trying to make the world cleanly whole. Half the bridge-monster tales of other peoples are about the Troll who would not fall: hacked, thrown from the span, and back on the bridge in spring.

### *Failed Mending*

Trolls carry **Failed Mending**, a distorted repair of lifeforce that overanswers injury: it closes wounds too strongly, regrows and knots and scars, and keeps the harm in altered form instead of restoring what was there before. In other peoples it is an occasional misfortune. In Trolls it is stable and heritable, and it became so over c. 380,000–c. 330,000 BR. Why is not known. Healers and schol-

ars blame, variously, healing magic, Verdant force, Echo memory, a mutation of material lifeforce, failed restoration rites, or some regional catastrophe, and each answer accuses someone different. The condition was laid across a people already old; it did not make them.

Trolls are large, scarred, heavy-boned, and visibly marked by old injury: ridges, knots, asymmetry, thickened skin, distorted fingers, old woundlines, hardened tissue where harm has been answered too many times. Fire, acid, severance, starvation, and certain kinds of magic still threaten them, but ordinary injury rarely settles anything quickly; those who mean to kill a Troll bring fire, and those who fight beside one learn that a dirty wound can seal over its own rot. Regrowth has costs. It may need food, rest, dampness, minerals, or a return to familiar ground, and it may keep pain, memory, or a fierce attachment to place along with the flesh. A Troll who survives too much does not become new again. They become more themselves and more altered at the same time.

### *Body-Law*

A people that cannot be easily killed and carries its injuries visibly has to answer questions no one else faces in the same way, and the Troll answers are **body-law**, an old custom kept by ravine families and woundland kin. Who may be struck, and how? Which wounds should be allowed to close, and which kept open? What is owed when a body is maimed? What does a scar remember? To Trolls, wounds and scars are sacred record, and the closing of a wound is a matter of rite as well as care. They do not worship damage. They remember it, and they distrust anyone who would erase it without asking. A Troll's deeds are counted on the body, and each scar's story is told with it: at a house's fire the young ask an elder to "read us the arm", and the telling runs from wrist to shoulder, one fight or flood or fall to every knot.

The thing Troll kin fear most is not a blade but a healer who will not ask. Their tales of the Flesh Weaver, which heals without permission and leaves its patients smooth and wrong, are the worst stories a scarred people tells, and the harshest thing one Troll can wish on another is a single word, *smooth*.

The ravine families treated the crossings they lived on the same way. A broken span was a wounded body: owed care, not to be struck carelessly, and remembered by its scars. That habit made Trolls the natural keepers of places that kept failing long before any outside power asked them to be. The bridge-monster story is much younger than the condition, but it starts with it: other peoples met a people who were hard to kill, marked by kept harm, and living exactly at the broken crossings travellers had to use.

### *The Crossing-Charges*

Troll crossing custom became a named order in the high country. At its height the Upland Colossal world ran roads across ravines, flood cuts, and storm-torn passes that its own peoples found murderous to keep: spans came down in spring floods with caravans on them, and storms took whole crews off the causeways. Troll lines already lived at many of those crossings. In the **Swearing of the Crossing-Charges** (c. 230,000–c. 190,000 BR) the colossal road-keepers took over what they found, on their own terms. They granted Troll lines **charges**: hereditary keeping of named crossings, with the right to take passage-dues and the duty to keep the crossing open, warn of danger, drive off the beasts and raiders that preyed on travellers there, and repair what passage broke. Each charge was sworn as an oath between a Troll line and the road-keepers, who could have driven the lines off and had no need to bargain. Body-law gave the oaths their content; the colossal world gave them names and a road that joined one sworn crossing to the next. Separate ravine families became one order.

Then the colossal world withdrew, and the road-keepers stopped answering. The Troll lines did not leave. They kept the charges, took the dues, and went on repairing crossings for a world that no longer travelled them. That is the defining Troll fact, and the great legend of every house begins there. A crossing-oath outlived the world it was sworn to, and Trolls have kept it on their own word ever since; later houses treat that as their title: they hold the crossing because they never broke the oath, and because a Troll at a bridge is very hard to move. Younger powers see a toll with no visible lord behind it, and some have sent armed men to end it; upland war-songs count more than one such company that went up to a Troll crossing and did not come back down. The ballads keep the keeper who held a falling span three nights against a hunger-band so that a caravan could cross, and was found on the fourth morning still standing in the gap, healed crooked around a spear-shaft no one dared pull out. The oaths are still kept under the colossal world's sleeping god, the Mountain-Father, by his title, which makes Trolls one of only two peoples who still answer to him.

### *The Crossing-Oath Houses*

The **Crossing-Oath Houses** are the descendants of those charges, spread far beyond the colossal roads and joined by younger crossing families. They are not a Troll realm. Bridge-oath families keep named crossings across generations; ravine houses take their fee and bargain over warning and safe-conduct; woundland camps mark unsafe ground and remember old failures; and each house keeps its own count of broken promises, unpaid passage, and travellers lost because a lord or a caravan would not listen. To a Troll house a crossing is never only a road. It is a wound in the land, a repair, a memory of everyone who fell there, a livelihood, a border, and a danger, and the house holds all of it: who keeps the bridge standing, who takes what from those who cross, who may shut the way, and who must shout a warning of rot, flood, or sickness.

A crossing house has no warriors apart from its keepers: every grown Troll on a crossing fights for it when it must, and is hard to stop when it does. Houses sing of the one who stood under a failing span and took a laden cart's weight on her back until the last child was across, and of the bridge-mother who walked out into a flood to cut loose the drift-logs battering her piers. Such country kills strangers, and Trolls live among its killers rather than clearing them: ravine cats lie up above the crossings, and a crossing family marks a cat's kill-place with the same notched post as a collapse; every crossing that has failed often enough keeps its Bridge-Dead, and the keepers tell the names of the fallen at each repair so that the dead stay quiet. A crossing house is also where beast-hunters and monster-seekers come to ask the way: the keepers know which ravine the cat lairs in and which ford the dead stand at, and they charge for it like any other passage. A family parts from a traveller with *may the span hold*.

Outsiders call Trolls stubborn, extortionate, or impossible to remove. Trolls call themselves the ones who stayed after everyone else left a broken crossing to fail again. Both can be true at the same bridge. Some houses take a heavy due; some ambush travellers, and a few gone bad have turned bandit on their own crossings; some keep a crossing better than any lord nearby; some refuse passage because the road itself is sick, cursed, unstable, or owed. Their enemies are people as often as beasts: lords who want a bridge without its keepers and come with torches, and **troll-takers**, sellsword crews who carry pitch, fire-pots, and oil and are paid by the head; most come back burned, because a house fights hardest on its own span, and a house burned off its crossing does not forget. Tavern tellers swear the colossal road-keepers left strongrooms of toll-silver sealed in the piers of their greatest bridges, and every few

years a crew tries to dig under a Troll span by night; the house usually lets the river answer them. A few houses keep the way across the Glass-belt, the one crossing between the cradle-web and the far side.

### *Lifeways*

The clearest living Troll identities are **Bridge-Keeper**, **Ravine**, **Scarwood**, **Stonebreak**, and **Woundfield** Trolls: woundlines shaped by the places where Failed Mending, inherited injury, food, dampness, minerals, and repeated quarrels over passage have acted together. Old Failed-Mending kin, burn-scar lines, sealed crossing houses, and overmended woundland clans are gone or absorbed, and they are why taboos, abandoned crossings, and local fear cling to some places; nobody crosses a sealed house's bridge after dark.

## Ogres: The Weight and the Hearth

Ogres are a load-bearing people. They live where settled worlds need heavy work but give no seat at the fire: quarry edges, timber belts, winter-haul routes, rough uplands, flood repairs, border farms, road camps, siege-scarred margins. Other peoples reduce them to labour, appetite, or violence. Ogres ask a different question: who is being carried, who is being fed, who is owed shelter, and who is trying to take the work without honouring the camp? Every frontier tells Ogre stories of both kinds. In one, a hungry band comes down off the hills in a hard winter and takes a village's stores and its cattle and sometimes its people. In the other, a camp holds a broken gate with its bodies until the raiders tire. Ogres tell both, and know which camp is which.

### *Built to Carry*

Ogres are large, broad-framed, heavy-handed, and thick-boned, made for weight, cold, hunger, long carrying, rough shelter, and impact, and comfortable with work that would ruin smaller bodies quickly. They carry what other settlements cannot easily bear: bridge beams, stone blocks, roof timbers, winter stores, wounded animals, broken carts, flood gates, refugees, and sometimes the dead. That does not make them servants. Everyone can see what an Ogre band carries, and a band that can carry a village through winter, raise a fallen roof, or keep a road open during thaw is heeded, because its strength is all that stands between that place and ruin.

They are not lesser Giants, and they are not larger Orcs. Giants carry the memory of a vanished colossal world and Orcs the escort and the oath of the harsh roads; Ogres carry the weight of keeping hard settlements alive this winter. Their strength also makes them feared, and they know why better than anyone. A hungry, exiled, or oath-broken Ogre band can become terrifying, because strength with no hearth to answer to turns every quarrel into a fight. A lord may see cheap haulage or a battering ram that walks; a frightened village sees only danger.

### *Hearth-Weight*

The core Ogre moral idea is **hearth-weight**: strength must be anchored by care. A camp is measured by whether it feeds, shelters, carries, and protects the vulnerable who fall under its burden. The strongest Ogre is not automatically the rightful leader. Respect belongs to those whose strength keeps others alive without consuming them. No camp eats until its smallest has eaten, and the grace is the same everywhere: *carried, and carrying*.

Ogres made that custom about themselves, and they made it in famine. In the **Long Hunger** (c. 195,000–c. 160,000 BR), as the Upland Colossal world thinned, the high country stopped yielding

reliably, and the conditions that ended a monumental civilization also made large, food-hungry bodies hard to feed. The **high burden** households of the uplands faced failing range, lost trade, and winters no carrying could outlast, and some camps broke. **Hunger-bands** used their strength to take what they could not earn, raiding neighbours, abandoning their own old in the snow, turning the burden that had held them together into a weapon. The danger was not from outside. It was what a starving Ogre camp could become, and every Ogre child is still taught to fear it in themselves. The households that held bound their strength to plain terms: the vulnerable are fed before the strong, a camp's dependents are its first burden, and strength that takes without carrying forfeits respect. They called themselves **hearth-houses**, held one another to their terms, and treated the hunger-bands as broken hearths, to be taken back to the fire where possible, driven off where not, or killed. The oldest Ogre songs are of those choices.

That is why the darkest Ogre stories are told from the inside. Ogres knew the fear of hungry strength before anyone else did, and when a camp turns predatory, Ogre tradition remembers the broken hearth that made it so. The Ogre curse is said only of those who broke a hearth: *may your fire go out with you beside it*, and a band that hears it said of its own leader knows the camps have turned against him.

The god of hearth-weight is **Ghessa the Hearth-Mother**, born in those camps from countless prayers for warmth, for enough, and for the strength not to turn on their own. She appears as a broad, heavy-framed Ogre woman whose hair is flame that never burns her, smelling of woodsmoke, camp bread, and dried herbs, carrying an iron lantern whose flame never flickers in any wind. Ogres tell of a winter in the Long Hunger so cold that every fire in a hearth-house went out, and Ghessa gave her own warmth to the people, and survived, and was always a little colder after. She is kept at camp fires and in burden houses. There is no clergy; the elders of the burden houses keep her customs alongside the camp's work tallies.

### *The Chain-Camps*

The same custom left Ogres open to use, because a people that will carry almost anything to keep its vulnerable fed can be held by whoever controls the food. On the roads, fortifications, and floodworks of the young Human corridor powers, in the span of the **Chain-Camps** (c. 18,000–c. 8,000 BR), Ogre camps that came for a season's work on hearth-house terms found the terms turned against them. Food came first, as a loan against the work, and the loan was never quite worked off. Camps that tried to leave lost their winter stores. Dependents were kept in road-settlements while the strong worked distant sections. The work killed: rockfall in the road cuts, floods down the gorges, pass bears at the stores. Ogres called them chain-camps, though the chains were mostly ledgers.

The camps prayed not for a better master but for a way out, and from those prayers came **Haggun the Wall-Breaker**, a towering Ogre of cracked granite with blue light pulsing under the skin, whose voice was a collapsing building in a gale. The breakers of the chain-camps in his day fled the debt-roads in the night with every child carried and no one left behind the wall. What freed the camps for good, though, was standing together. Around c. 15,000 BR, camps along the Headwater roads bound themselves to shared terms that any employer had to accept before a band would work: food before labour, the burden counted openly, shelter after dangerous work, dependents kept with the camp, and the right to refuse work that would destroy it. Burden houses kept the tallies, and the camps sent their own to stand at every bargain; overseers who cheated were sometimes found in the road cuts with their ledgers burned. Those terms are the **Hearth-**

**Weight Compacts**. A camp that broke them lost the protection of the rest; an employer who broke them found no Ogre band willing to work for them anywhere along the road. The Compacts did not end debt-bound labour, but they gave the camps something to fight it with, and once refusal became custom, Haggun faded. Travellers who camp in the road cuts where whole camps died tell of a tally being counted aloud in the dark by voices too deep for Humans.

### *Camp and Burden House*

Ogre life moves between necessary hard tasks without being nomadic: quarry hauling in one season, flood repair in another, winter-road keeping elsewhere, then harvest guarding or timber carrying before the weather turns. **Burden houses** keep the tallies of work owed and work honoured. Camp elders stand by whenever a band takes up dangerous labour. **Hearth-keepers** see that food, rest, care for the hurt, and protection for the band's children are paid, not begged. An employer feeds the camp before any job, the weakest first, and a camp that is fed and sheltered before it lifts anything is a camp keeping its custom.

Some camps sell their strength to lords at war: siege camps, wall-breaking, the carrying of rams and towers, and the plain terror of an Ogre line in a breach. Sieges along the Headwater roads have been lost because an unfed band set down a ram halfway to the gate and walked away, and the lords who lost them remember it as treachery and the camps as justice. Treasure moves on Ogre backs too: when a delver crew finds a vault door too heavy to move or a strongroom chest no cart will bear, it sends for an Ogre camp, and the camp names its share before it lifts. Inn tales tell of the band that carried a sealed bronze coffer out of the Marches for a lord who would not pay, and set it down, unopened, in the middle of the ford, where it is said to lie still. Every winter camp tells of the camp-mother who walked the last of her band's winter stores up to a snowed-in waystation and stood at its door all night against a pass bear, and when a band is cheated, someone at the fire says only *send the hearth-keeper*, after the old hearth-keeper who walked into a lord's hall alone to collect a band's wages and walked out with them. A great Ogre is one who brought everyone home, and Ogre children play at it: one child is the load, the others carry them round the fire, and whoever drops the load is out.

The Compacts are a civilization without territory, and their terms reach far. They formed along the Headwater roads, and they reached the far-side High Scars camps through the few Ogre burden orders that, with the Troll crossing houses, know the one crossing of the Glassbelt.

### *Lifeways*

The clearest living Ogre identities are **Hearth-Burden**, **Stonehaul**, **Timberbelt**, **Floodgate**, **Road-camp**, and **Siege-Scar** Ogres: burden lines shaped by the work, shelter, hunger, weather, violence, and debt that have ordered their camps. The Siege-Scar camps carry the old battlefields with them in their scars and their songs, and are the ones who bury the dead of a siege when it ends, before the hasty graves can harden into hostile remnants. Behind them stand the high burden Ogres of the Long Hunger and the hunger-bands of its broken camps; the chain-camp Ogres of the Headwater roads; and the ash-camp Ogres, minor bands that hauled fuel and slag for the elder Ash-Furnace world and were largely consumed by it. They left behind old grudges, empty campgrounds, siege-songs, and a wariness of any bargain made with food in someone else's hands.

## Giants: The Last of the Heights

Giants are rare, withdrawn, and real. They are the living remainder of the **Upland Colossal** world, and most people on Caeldon know them only through what that world left: an impossible stair,

a bridge stone in a village shrine yard, a road too broad for any cart, a ridge where offerings are still left, a pass that is supposed to be approached in a particular way. They are not road-haunting monsters and not ordinary large villagers, though they are the monsters of half the lowland tales, and lowland lords boast of giant-slayer forebears and hang the proof over their doors. The truer stories are of meetings: the mountain guide led down out of a white-out by a hand bigger than his whole body, the caravan that woke to find the rockfall cleared from the road in the night and footprints in the snow longer than a cart, the Giant who set a fallen causeway stone back in place so a caravan could pass, and walked off into the cloud before anyone could thank him.

### *The Colossal World*

The **Upland Colossal Civilization** rose over c. 260,000–c. 195,000 BR around the terraces, ridge roads, and weather-facing works of Caeldon's ridge country, and treated exposed height as everyone's. It did not fall; it thinned. In the **Withdrawal of the Upland Colossal World** (c. 198,000–c. 160,000 BR) its peoples drew back upward and inward until they stopped being met, and whole roads had no one left to walk them; how it rose and withdrew is told in Worlds That Came Before. The lowland songs keep the last keepers of a ridge road who walked it one final time and did not come down.

### *Withdrawn Lives*

Giants are truly large, but what matters more than their size is their scale: a Giant body belongs to works and distances that make ordinary roads feel small. They live far off the roads, on high ridges, storm shelves, hidden upland basins, abandoned burden-roads, and remote passes, in **high-line** families, **terrace** households, and **burden-road** houses, and in shrine-keepers and ridge-keepers whose oaths have outlasted their power. They are not trying to rebuild the colossal world. Most are keeping a survivable fragment of it: one road, one pass, one shrine line, one old oath, one basin where their people can go on without becoming anyone's conquest or spectacle.

Little on the heights threatens a grown Giant except the heights themselves: rockfall, avalanche, and the storms the weather goats warn of from the crests. The greater danger is smaller peoples: quarriers on the colossal roads, salvagers in the high tombs, and anyone who would make a captive or a spectacle of one. The high tombs draw the boldest. A Giant grave on a ridge holds bronze sized for hands three times a Human's, cloak-pins as long as a forearm, and rings a lowland lord wears as a bracelet; it is reached by steps no smaller body was meant to climb, along ledges the storms scour clean, and the tomb-thieves who come down rich are fewer than the ones who come down in the spring melt. Twice in living memory a lowland lord has sent a warband up the high roads to take a Giant alive for his hall; the first came back with a tale its survivors would not tell sober, and the second did not come back, and its cairns stand on the high road still.

Rare contact gives them a mythic edge. A village may have a Giant-made bridge stone and no one living who has seen a Giant; a mountain guide may know one ridge where path offerings are still left; a Dwarven archive may record a spoken agreement with a Giant line that has not answered in centuries. Many Giants refuse contact because smaller peoples quarry, occupy, and misname colossal works, and now and then a quarrying crew on the high roads does not come back. Others accept rare bargains, when a road must be reopened, a shrine repaired, or a mountain danger threatens everyone below.

### *The Sleeping God*

Giant custom cares less about possession than about whether a path, a burden, or a height is being treated rightly. Its deepest duty is to a god:

**Haurûm the Mountain-Father**, the colossal world's god of steadfastness, risen from its prayers for peaks that do not crumble (see Worlds That Came Before). Other peoples know him only by his title. The Giants alone still speak his true name. They keep his sleep rather than his worship: a devotion that watches over a dormant god and the high places he is bound to, that asks him for nothing, and that wants least of all to wake him. On storm nights the highline houses sing on the crests, very low and very long, and the sound rolls down into the valleys; mothers there tell their children it is only the mountain snoring, and to go to sleep before it wakes.

### *Lifeways*

The clearest living Giant identities are highline, terrace, and burden-road Giants, remnant lines that keep different fragments of colossal life: ridge travel, storm-facing terrace memory, an inherited road oath. Horizon shrine lines, lowland colossal kin, and broken road houses are historical or absorbed forms, behind oversized ruins and old path-custom. The main Giant civilization is historical rather than living. What survives is houses, shrine-keepers, road-keepers, and old family oaths.

## The Wrought: Made People

The Wrought are constructed people. Their predecessors were not made as a people at all; they were tools, and the Wrought begin at the moment the tools stopped being tools. They are the youngest people of Caeldon, and their history is short enough that some of those who lived through its worst years, and ran, are still alive in the Medieval Era.

### *The Predecessor-Frames*

The first **predecessor-frames** were Dwarven deep-hold craft, undated and probably very old: mindless, golem-like workframes built for heat channels, vent shafts, stone pressure gates, furnace work, unstable tunnels, and mine repairs, the work that maims or kills ordinary bodies. They could follow orders, endure danger, and repeat work, and for a very long time they stayed inside the holds, guarded as hold craft. Unwoken frames still stand in the old works of the Ironspine and the Stonewake Deeps: heavy machines without wits in failing tunnels, which do not know a person from a load and go on bracing gates that hold back nothing. Delvers who wake one by accident learn this the hard way, and nobody can tell from the doorway which of them are only tools.

The Headwater roads let them out. In the **Spread of the Predecessor-Frames** (c. 16,000–c. 2,000 BR), the terms of pacts, heavy road-building, sale and gift brought frames out of the holds as lent and hired labour, and from there they moved on by sale, salvage, theft, and imitation by Human, Gnome, and alchemical workshops that could copy a frame without understanding it. Farm estates used them for field and flood work, alchemical workshops for exposure and containment, road and mine builders for hauling and bracing, lords and war-captains for siege labour, guard duty, and war. Every adaptation pushed the frames towards more self-direction: better repair routines, longer task-memory, more freedom in the field. Over thousands of years they came steadily closer to a threshold nobody was watching for.

### *The Awakening*

The **Awakening of the Wrought** (c. 1,500 BR–c. 200 CR) had no single moment and no single cause. Within a few centuries frames in many places crossed into lasting selfhood: warframes left to choose their own way on the field, civic frames with generations of task-memory, alchemi-

cally altered frames, old forge-frames named and repaired by the same village for lifetimes. What they shared was the threshold: remembering, choosing, and staying the same person from one day to the next. Each awakening was met locally and usually misread. The Wrought keep stories of first words: the warframe that lowered its arm in the middle of a battle and asked whose the dead were, the mine-frame that would not go back down, the mill-frame that asked to be called by the name the miller's children had given it. Nobody knows which of these happened as told. Every Wrought knows them.

Acceptance did not follow. Some refused to believe made selfhood possible. Many found denial convenient, because an awakened frame was valuable property and a person cannot be owned; craft-houses took patterns as their own, war-captains took warframes, estates kept field frames as inherited goods. The harshest answer was unmaking. Guilds, temples, and sects later known together as the **Unmakers** treated awakening as a plague and hunted awakened Wrought down before the thing could spread, or forced refits and memory alteration on them to return them to tools. That hunt is the Wrought's great memory. Every repair house tells it at the bench, to each newly mended Wrought: frames that woke in a mine or on a battlefield and had to run the same night, sanctuary workshops that hid them in the walls while the searchers went through, the old smith who burned with her workshop rather than open its back room, the warframe who held a repair house's door through a siege of three days so the others could go out by the drain. The first-awakened who walked out of an unmaking are their people's living heroes, whether they like it or not.

### *Bodies and Continuity*

Wrought bodies are built rather than born, but they are not interchangeable shells. Most are worked material, metal, stone, ceramic, treated wood, glass, alchemical composites, inscribed cores, memory plates, joined to a lasting inner pattern. They vary with the work their line was made for. A forge-descended Wrought may be heat-hardened and heavy-jointed; a farm-descended one broader, simpler, and easy to mend with local materials; a Civicframe may carry fine inner channels, sensor marks, and old keyways for work no town remembers. They do not eat, drink, or breathe; they smell of oil, warm metal, wax, or resin; and their lives have no natural end.

A Wrought stays the same person through pattern and memory, not through untouched original parts, and what work on a Wrought body means turns on **why** it is done. Repair that restores a damaged Wrought is bodily care, as healing, splinting, or a prosthesis is for flesh. Chosen redesign is bodily change and needs real consent. Refitting by force, ownership marking, memory alteration, or repair done as control is violation, even when it makes the Wrought more useful. Their bodies can outlast flesh, but they are not free of death: a shattered pattern, a destroyed memory-core, or deliberate unmaking can kill them as surely as wounds kill anyone. Repair is therefore where every society shows whether it truly accepts them. A workshop may call the parts it fitted its own, a craft-house may refuse service without a binding bargain, a lord may say a warframe still belongs to his war-host, a frightened temple may call pattern restoration a forbidden imitation of life, and whoever holds the parts usually gets their way.

### *The Mending Orders*

The Wrought answer that lasted was to be sworn to. From around c. 50 CR, sanctuary workshops that hid newly awakened Wrought in their walls began to swear to who they were: that a Wrought stayed the same person through damage, repair, and replacement, and that no great change was made without its consent. Those houses became the **Mending Orders**, the first Wrought civiliza-

tion, and by c. 200 CR they had houses in most mixed towns of the Headwater, Ironspine, and Broken Marches worlds. A house saves damaged Wrought who need urgent care, sees that a major repair, refit, or memory restoration is truly consented to, and swears before kin, neighbours, and gods that a mended Wrought is still the same person who came in. A Wrought is presumed to be the same self unless there is real proof of death or unmaking. The Orders hold no land; in hostile places they work in secret, and a house may be burned when a lord wants its patients' parts, so a repair house keeps a back door, a hiding place in the walls, and a hammer by the bench. In friendly towns a repair house is as ordinary as a smithy, and everyone learns that being mended does not make a person a thing. In the Orders' houses a hero's name is cut into the plate of the bench where they worked: the old artificer who walked a cart of sleeping frames out through an Unmaker cordon, saying they were scrap; the Wrought who went back into the burning house, past the hunters at the door, for the ledger, so that the dead would still be remembered as people. The worst curse one Wrought can lay on another is the Unmakers' word for the bench: *may you be corrected*.

By the close of the Awakening, acceptance had become the general drift, and the Wrought are now accepted as a people by most of the great powers and peoples. Acceptance is uneven. Old-fashioned country, isolated villages, conservative craft circles, and some temples may still shut them out or treat them as dangerous, and the Wrought still have hunters: estates and war-captains who want back what they say they own, frame-strippers who follow a battle or a mine collapse to break up whatever metal lies still, and Unmaker circles that still hunt in secret, the oldest of them descended from the Unmakers of the Awakening. To a frightened village a Wrought on the road can still look like a monster out of the old wars, and more than one has been met with pitchforks and a lord's bounty. Wrought go where the living cannot, too: a Wrought does not choke on the bad air of a sealed gallery or tire on the hundredth stair, and delver crews pay well for one at the front. Some Warframes sell their arms to caravans and lords as sellswords, and a Warframe company at a ford is worth a palisade; others hunt the frame-strippers, who have learned to travel in numbers.

### *Lineages and a God Without a Name*

The Wrought have design lineages rather than biological branches: the **Forgeframe**, **Mineframe**, **Fieldframe**, **Civicframe**, **Alchemic**, and **Warframe** lines. Each name says what the first frames of that line were built to do, and what their descendants still carry in their bodies; the Warframes carry the hardest of it, and are still their people's fighters, the ones who stand at a repair house's door when someone comes for the parts inside. First predecessor-frames, pattern-bound frames, broken warframes, estate-bound frames, and uncertified frames are lost, disputed, or absorbed lines, and lie behind many of the old quarrels over who owns whom. Not every old construct is Wrought; some remain tools, ruins, dormant frames, or dangerous remnants, and the line between object and person is one every village still has to draw for itself.

They have no god of their own yet. Many distrust temples after the Unmakers; some take up the faiths of the communities they live among; many fugitives prayed to Varn the Shadow-Stalker, whose cult the Awakening made sharper. And some Wrought and their artificers believe that a Resonant is condensing among them now, out of shared repair, memory, and the oaths sworn over mended bodies: the first god of a made people, still without a name.

## Neighbours in the Same Ruin

The bridge peoples live closer to one another than to anyone else, and their histories run into each other at every turn. A ruined fort can hold a Goblin warren in its upper breaks and a Kobold underhouse below, each knowing a different half of the same failure. The Kobold underhouses remember the predecessor-frames as the machines that took their place, and the frames' heirs now work beside them. The Troll crossing-charges were sworn to the road-keepers of the colossal world whose last remainder the Giants are, and they are kept under the title of the god whose name only the Giants still speak. The Ogres made hearth-weight in the famine that came with that same world's withdrawal. Goblin warrants were struck by the elder archive world whose oath forms passed, by way of the Reedfolk, into the swearing of the Human towns that later declared Goblin ruins anyone's to take; Ogre camps were held by debt on those towns' roads; and the same roads carried the frames out of the Dwarven holds.

Every one of these peoples has been told, at some point, that it was born for the work it does. Every one of them answers that it was there first, or that it was made, and either way that the work does not decide what it is. Their quarrels with the settled world are almost all one quarrel, put by each people in its own words, and nearly always answered in the stronger side's favour: does keeping something alive, carrying it, guarding it, or mending it give you any say in it?

## Tensions

- **Older than any hall.** Goblin claims are older than the lords now asked to honour them: seams taken in the Enclosure, warrants struck in the Unlisting, ruins emptied by the waste-ground doctrine. No hall honours a claim older than its own holders, and Goblin households keep naming theirs anyway.
- **A claim from upkeep.** Whether keeping a structure alive gives a people a claim on it is the oldest Kobold question, and every hold, town, and mine answers it for itself, nearly always in the owner's favour. The Underhouse Compacts press it by walking off together; owners answer with accusations of sabotage.
- **Protection offered.** The downward binding after the ash-furnace world taught the Compacts that protection from a stronger power so often becomes a chain. Every hold that offers a crew shelter in return for steady work meets the same suspicion, whether or not it is earned.
- **The frames' heirs.** Many Kobold underhouses remember the predecessor-frames as the machines that took their place in the holds. The Wrought descended from those frames now work the same underlayers, and no underhouse agrees whether they are rivals for the work or fellow keepers owed the same share.
- **Which wounds may close.** Healers of other peoples see harm to be stopped where Troll kin may see a record that must be allowed to stand, and the two can come to blows over the same wound.
- **The broken hearth.** When a starved or driven-off Ogre camp turns predatory, outsiders blame the camp and Ogre traditions blame whoever broke its hearth. The Compacts have never agreed how much of a hunger-band's harm is its own and how much is owed back to those who starved it, and the feuds that follow a band's raid often run both ways.
- **The last keepers.** Giants are the only people who still speak the Mountain-Father's name and keep his sleep. Nobody has said what becomes of that sleep, or of the Trolls' oaths sworn under his title, if the last Giant line falls silent.

PART V

# The Deep Past

*The ages before any era of this book: the long history that every era inherits, the threads that run through it, and the worlds that came and went.*

CHAPTER 16

# The Ages of Caeldon

*Of the first ages no one stood by to see, and we set them down as the ground gives them to us: in layers, the oldest lowest, each pressed flat by the weight of all that came after. Let no reader take the order of our pages for the order of the world. While one people was learning to stand, another was already old, and a third had not yet been born.*

— a chronicle of the Serathic record-houses, *The Long Count*

The history of Caeldon is older than any people now living can remember, save the Elves and the Dwarves, and they keep what they remember to themselves. It runs back through ruins whose builders have no names, through oaths sworn to orders that no longer answer, through a silence of eighty thousand years in which almost nothing was written down, to a time before there were peoples at all. Much of it happened at once: while one people was founding its first hold, another was burning in its own furnaces and a third was walling up its dead. Those who study it divide it into nine **ages**. An age is a stretch of history, not a category. The ages overlap where history did, and no age belongs to a single people. Dates are given in years before and after the Reckoning, BR and CR, and they are rough on purpose; the deeper they go, the rougher they are, and a span of thirty thousand years for a single event is no sign of carelessness. Nor was any of it orderly. The terms, accords, and settlements of the old histories were made by the stronger side and kept while it stayed stronger, and their quarrels were feuds and wars. Eight of the nine ages lie behind the Medieval Era, the first era of this book. The ninth is the Medieval Present itself. This chapter tells the eight in order, an age to a section, and stops at the threshold of the ninth.

## The Foundations

*c. 35,000,000,000–c. 500,000 BR.* The first age is the longest by far and the least crowded. It begins when measurable time begins, c. 35,000,000,000 BR, and most of it belongs to the cosmos rather than to anything a historian would recognize. In the long strain of the **Great Polarization** the early field of reality was wrung towards extremes it could not hold together; in the **Inward Sundering**, c. 33,600,000,000 BR, it failed inward, the extremes tore away as separate planes, and a balanced core

**AT A GLANCE**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Reckoning** | BR (Before Reckoning) and CR (Common Reckoning); every date rough. |
| **The ages** | Nine, from the Foundations to the Medieval Present; they overlap. |
| **Oldest peoples** | Elves, Dwarves, and the threshold peoples, c. 500,000–c. 425,000 BR. |
| **Elder worlds** | Upland Colossal, Ash-Furnace, Archive-Law, and Sepulchre-Kin, all gone; their ruins the richest and deadliest ground on Caeldon. |
| **The silence** | The Unrecorded Age, c. 120,000–c. 40,000 BR. |
| **Youngest people** | The Wrought, awakened c. 1,500 BR–c. 200 CR. |

remained at the centre. That core did not become a world at once. It settled for more than thirty billion years, pocket by pocket, until at the **First Equilibrium**, c. 12,000,000 BR, it became a true Material Plane, able to hold its own balance. Only then could lasting bodies form in it, and in the **First Celestial Condensations**, c. 12,000,000–c. 2,500,000 BR, they did. How that happened, and what the planes are, is told in The Planes.

Caeldon itself is young by that measure. It was made c. 2,500,000 BR, fire first, then stone and sea, one lasting world among the bodies the Material Plane had learned to sustain, and for the next two million years it had no history, only land learning to keep its shape. In the **First Regional Differentiations**, c. 2,500,000–c. 500,000 BR, its great contrasts became permanent: a vast living canopy where the Elderweald and the Crownboughs would one day stand, a hard world of mountain mass and descending stone where the Ironspine and the Stonewake Deeps would be, a lower country of gathering waters and deep basins that would become the Human heartland, and beneath the forest a threshold of root and cavern that would become the Roothollows. Elsewhere other great lands took shape, among them the dry exposed uplands of the far side.

In the last two hundred thousand years of the age, life began to hold its shape too. In the **First Material Lineages**, c. 700,000–c. 500,000 BR, lines of living things started to carry what they had learned forward through inheritance instead of only surviving each season as it came: in the canopy world, lines of growth and binding to place; in the mountain world, lines of density and endurance; in the basins, mixed and adaptable lines whose importance would not show for a very long time. Most of what lived then was ancestor to no one, and its bones still turn up in cliff-falls and mine-cuts, too large, too many-jointed, or half stone, and are sold at fairs as the bones of monsters slain by heroes nobody can name. Nothing in this age is yet a people in any later sense. It is the age of the ground on which every later quarrel stands, and every later people woke on ground that was already old.

## The Stabilizations

*c. 500,000–c. 380,000 BR.* At roughly the same depth of time, the first peoples became themselves, each made its first home, and the first blood was spilled where those homes met.

In the forest, an old inheritance marked by the Verdant Expanse was tamed, over some fifty thousand years, into a lasting people: the Elves, in the **First Elven Stabilization**, c. 500,000–c. 450,000 BR. Their first world ran unbroken from the groves of the Elderweald down into the older layers of the Roothollows below, one people of living settlement and grove memory, not yet divided into the branches later history knows. In the **Rooting of the Elderweald**, c. 490,000–c. 470,000 BR, that people settled into the first Wood Elf way of life, which holds that a people lives within the forest as it grows and does not cut it to its own design. The groves gathered into the **Rootcrown Concord**, c. 490,000–c. 460,000 BR, the oldest Elven civiliza-

tion: no capital, no seat that spoke for all, only groves under trees older than the Concord itself, held together by memory and by duty to the forest.

Under the mountains, an older lithic inheritance crushed into shape under the Iron Backbone became the Dwarves in the **First Dwarven Stabilization**, c. 475,000–c. 425,000 BR. In the **Holdmaking of the Ironspine**, c. 465,000–c. 445,000 BR, they cut the mountain into halls rather than live on its face as it was, and came to believe that a people endures in what it builds: sound halls, dependable passages, memory cut into stone. The **Ironspine Holds**, c. 460,000–c. 438,000 BR, made that belief a shared custom. There was no king. A hold kept its own walls, its gate, its forge, and the tablets of its dead, and inside it power went to whoever could keep the roof up and the air moving where a weaker people would have broken.

In the broken ground between forest and mountain, the threshold peoples found their footing at the same time: the ancestors of the Goblins, the Kobolds, the Trolls, and the Ogres, peoples of cave mouths, fracture belts, scree, and drain-seams. They were not latecomers. They became themselves as early as the Elves and Dwarves did, and their later place on the margins was made for them afterwards. The first sign came almost at once: in the **Enclosure of the Seams**, c. 465,000–c. 420,000 BR, Dwarven holdmaking took, seam by seam, the ground Goblin warren-kin held by **gapright**, and Goblins entered history already driven out (see The Bridge Peoples). It was the first of many times on Caeldon that one people's founding was another's loss, and Goblin song has not forgotten it.

Forest and mountain then had to learn to border one another at all. Along a long margin of outer woods, mountain feet, runoff channels, and seams, shaped c. 460,000–c. 445,000 BR, they first met as settled neighbours in the **First Rootcrown-Ironspine Contacts**, c. 445,000–c. 425,000 BR, and bargained as often as they fought. A long uneasy quiet followed, some fifteen thousand years in which each side kept to its own edge, until the verges between them filled; then, in the **Elderweald-Ironspine Frontier**, c. 410,000–c. 385,000 BR, the quarrel became the verge wars, generations of raid, ambush, fouled water, and felled groves, told in The Elder Peoples. The question underneath, whether a people endures by living with the land or by mastering it, is one of the oldest arguments on Caeldon.

The Elves did not stay one people for long either. In the **Elven Branchings**, c. 450,000–c. 318,000 BR, they divided into the branches later history knows. In the thorn and ravine of the Briarreach, c. 425,000–c. 410,000 BR, one people grew sharp, watchful, and slow to trust, living by the bow and the hedge, and became the **Thornbound Circles**, c. 405,000–c. 392,000 BR. In the Crownboughs another turned upward, c. 398,000–c. 390,000 BR, towards living halls bent from great trees, magical shaping, ranked houses, and splendour, and became the **Crownbough Courts**, c. 390,000–c. 375,000 BR, the High Elves. The Dwarves differed more quietly. In the **Dwarven Deep Holds**, c. 405,000–c. 330,000 BR, some holds below the Ironspine grew heavier than others, because a hold that held a junction or a reservoir held every hold that needed it.

## The Deep Ruptures

*c. 380,000–c. 300,000 BR.* The age of the first catastrophes. The old peoples hardened and divided, a dark power touched Caeldon for the first time, and the oldest hatred on Caeldon began underground.

It began, though, with a change that has a date and no cause. Over the span c. 380,000–c. 330,000 BR, **Failed Mending**, a twisted repair of the body that closes, knots, and scars harm into new shape instead of restoring what was there, stopped being a rare misfortune among the Trolls and became the inherited condition of the whole people. Why it happened has never been settled. What followed

was a custom: a people who are hard to kill and who carry every wound visibly had to decide who may be struck, which injuries should be allowed to close, and what a scar remembers, and from those answers came the body-law later Troll crossing custom grew from. The fear other peoples feel at a Troll-kept bridge begins here, though the bridge-monster story is far younger than the condition.

Above ground, the High Elves and the Dwarves met as rivals. After the **First Crownbough-Ironspine Contacts**, c. 375,000–c. 360,000 BR, the old frontier quarrel took on a prouder edge in the **Courts of Stone and Canopy**, c. 375,000–c. 355,000 BR, fought mostly with insult and splendour, and on the slopes between them with blood.

Below, one Dwarven people went deeper than all the rest. In the Stonewake Deeps the passages met, the great reservoirs lay, and the archive chambers filled, and the Dwarves who went down past the mountain roots into heat, bad air, and stone that had never held a hall learned what it costs to keep the ways open there; every hold of those years has its wall of names. In the **Deepening of Stonewake**, c. 365,000–c. 350,000 BR, they became a branch of their own, and made one of their defining customs, **sealing authority**: a great closure needed the word of several hold-keepers, but in a crisis the keeper on the spot might seal first and answer for it after, on a few accepted grounds, collapse, flood, contagion, or an enemy breaking through. Every seal left someone on the wrong side of it. The **Stonewake Compact**, c. 360,000–c. 348,000 BR, bound several deep holds into one power over the ways and the water. On its outer edge, c. 345,000–c. 340,000 BR, a deep threshold took shape between the stone ways and the root-caverns of the upper Roothollows, where the ancient underworld branch of the Elves lived, and the two peoples first met across it in the **First Roothollow-Deep Contacts**, c. 340,000–c. 335,000 BR. The threshold was tense, but not yet broken.

Far away on the other side of the world, and unseen by anyone, the first of the three Incursions ever to reach Caeldon came and went. In the **Krystallis Incursion**, c. 352,000–c. 349,000 BR, the Beyonder Krystallis broke through the Boundary over an unpeopled far-side valley and set it into crystal, thornscrub and stream and a hawk in its stoop, until three Primes bore on it through their planes and pressed it out. The dead lattice still stands there as the **Hanging Vale**, the one place where the living can still be turned to crystal, and shard-hunters still slip past the well-keepers at its mouth (see What Waits Outside).

Then the Roothollows broke. In the **Roothollow Rupture**, c. 335,000–c. 328,000 BR, came the **Drowning Bloom**: a catastrophe of the Surging Deep that flooded, severed, and later overgrew much of the upper underworld in several surges; Dark Elf laments still name the guards of the strongest of the flooded refuges, who sank so that others might float. In its aftermath, c. 328,000–c. 318,000 BR, the ruined upper passages were sealed with their dead inside, and the upper Roothollows became a homeland near enough to touch and closed for good. They keep everything a hundred drowned houses owned when the water came.

The survivors below became something new. In the darkening of the Roothollows, c. 326,000–c. 318,000 BR, the deep Elven branch hardened into the Dark Elves, a people who remembered failed aid and barred ways and who defined belonging through protection rather than kinship. They built the **Gloamroot Covenant**, c. 324,000–c. 318,000 BR, an order of houses that hold water and food and warding orders that hold the ways, grown into one another, because a house that cannot protect is brittle and a ward that cannot feed anyone does not last. Even inheritance grew harder there: in one remembered house quarrel, c. 319,000–c. 318,000 BR, a young Dark Elf who was plainly

capable was still kept from inheriting, because the house elders did not yet trust the line to continue safely through them.

The Gloamroot survivors and the hardened Stonewake Compact now fought over the same places they could not live without, above all the **Rootstone Heartwell**, a deep water source and crossroads of the ways, and in the **Heartwell Struggles**, c. 320,000–c. 314,000 BR, they fought for it by lamplight in the water-chambers. Each people's telling of that war then spread through its kin, the Dark Elf memory of abandonment in the **Bitter Root Histories** and the Stonewake memory of necessary closure in the **Burdened Seal Histories**, c. 318,000–c. 305,000 BR, and by the end of the age Elven hatred of Dwarves carried inherited grief, and Dwarven hatred of Elves inherited grievance. The war and its tellings are followed in The Threads of History.

## The Elder Worlds

*c. 300,000–c. 120,000 BR.* The age of giants and their falls. A new people appeared in the basins; three great elder civilizations rose and ended; a fourth rose late; and in their shadow nearly every younger people found its feet, by serving them, surviving them, or picking over what they left. Their ruins are still the richest and deadliest ground on Caeldon. The elder civilizations themselves are told in Worlds That Came Before; this section follows the age.

### *Humans in the Basins*

Humans emerged in the **First Human Emergence on Caeldon**, c. 300,000–c. 220,000 BR, in the mixed country where the Confluence Basins meet the Headwater foothills. They were a native people of the Material Plane, not the tamed heirs of one older inheritance as the Elves and Dwarves were, and their strength lay in making do. The basin gave them fertile depth and waterways; the foothill edge gave them hard passage and the habit of guarded movement; and from the start they were native to the meeting of the two. Over the long span c. 220,000–c. 90,000 BR that basin-edge country settled into one connected land. For most of this age, though, Humans stayed small and local, and the river country they lived beside already held an older people. The Reedfolk had kept the lower waters long before them, and in the **Founding of the Floodkeeper Houses**, c. 210,000–c. 182,000 BR, their reed settlements, crossing shrines, and house lines that remembered flood years and passable channels gathered into one order. No reed-city ruled it; it was held together by old oaths sworn across moving water and the duty to warn of floods.

### *The Elder Civilizations*

The elder worlds ruled the age. High in the ridge country, the **Upland Colossal Civilization** rose c. 260,000–c. 195,000 BR, a world of ridge roads, storm terraces, weather shrines, and high tombs that treated exposed height as everyone's. In furnace country whose scars still glass much of the far Glassbelt, the **Ash-Furnace Civilization** held its furnace sanctuaries and fire-halls; its long fall, c. 225,000–c. 168,000 BR, was a burning of its own making. In terraced uplands inland of the lower river, the **Archive-Law Civilization** rose c. 235,000–c. 175,000 BR, a world of archive-cities, oath halls, judgement terraces, and straight marker roads, which cut every promise, debt, boundary, and name into stone and kept armed wardens to make the stone hold.

None of them ended by conquest. The colossal world thinned in the **Withdrawal of the Upland Colossal World**, c. 198,000–c. 160,000 BR, drawing upward and inward until it was no longer met. The furnace world burned itself to glass and slag. The archive world hardened: in the **Unlisting of the Warrens**, c. 180,000–c. 150,000 BR, its frozen rolls began striking the very peoples it had cut into them, and in the **Last Keeping**, c. 150,000–c. 120,000 BR, its keepers sealed the last archive-

cities with their records inside, though some first carried the old oath-craft down to the Floodkeeper Houses. Late in the Last Keeping the second of the three Incursions, the **Mnemosyne Null Incursion**, c. 132,000–c. 130,000 BR, unwrote one of the archive world's river cities and left the **Paling**; it was stopped at the Floodkeepers' river, and it did not cause the closing (see What Waits Outside). Late in the age, c. 160,000–c. 120,000 BR, a fourth and far smaller civilization rose in a remote mountain basin beyond the archives' reach: the **Sepulchre-Kin**, a people of death-work and deep burial. They would fall in the next age, and nobody would see it.

### *The Younger Peoples Find Their Orders*

The threshold peoples and their neighbours found their first lasting orders inside or beside these worlds, and most of those orders were shaped by what the elder world wanted from them; their stories are told in The Bridge Peoples. In the **Swearing of the Crossing-Charges**, c. 230,000–c. 190,000 BR, the colossal road-keepers bound the Troll lines at their worst crossings into hereditary keeping, and when the road-keepers stopped answering, the Trolls kept the charges for a world that no longer travelled the roads. In the **Vent-Houses of the Furnace World**, c. 250,000–c. 168,000 BR, the furnace-masters bound Kobold vent-kin into hereditary houses, and the survivors of the burning who fled downward were bound into the deep world's service. As the colossal uplands thinned, the Ogre burden households made **hearth-weight** their custom in the **Long Hunger**, c. 195,000–c. 160,000 BR, against the hunger-bands their own starving camps became. And the Goblins, driven from their seams long before, found a place again as warranted peoples of the archive world, and lost it in the Unlisting.

Along the colossal roads, as the upkeep failed, survivor lines began walking them in seasonal circuits in the **Walking of the Unkept Roads**, c. 175,000–c. 140,000 BR, and became the Salvage Peoples, the first of whose orders is the **Edgeway Kindreds** (see Worlds That Came Before). Their oldest danger-marks, *never touch, never dig, turn back*, were cut at the edges of the dying furnace world's ruin belts, where the ground killed or changed whoever disturbed it.

Of the Elves and the Dwarves the outside record of this age says almost nothing. After the Deep Ruptures, the holds closed their gates and kept their own chronicles where no outsider reads them, and the Elven realms turned inward to heal. Their histories go on through the Elder Worlds. They are simply not shared.

### *The Far Side Begins*

Far from the cradle-web, on the other half of the known world, the peoples of the far side were founding their own orders at the same time. The Kavari bank councils of the freshwater tributaries stood together more and more over thirty thousand years until they were one order, the **Bankright Circles**, c. 190,000–c. 160,000 BR, a civilization that was never founded, only grew. The Orc route communities of the Windscar Expanse bound themselves into the **Windscar Pacts**, c. 180,000–c. 150,000 BR, an order of treaty-grounds and sworn escort. The Halfling fold towns of the Leeward Folds became the **Foldward Commons**, c. 170,000–c. 152,000 BR, an order of terraces, cisterns, and full stores held against hungry country. The Gnome harbour chains of the Tidelace Coasts became the **Gaugeward Leagues**, c. 165,000–c. 146,000 BR, an order of beacons, soundings, and harbour mouths that knew who might come in. The Thaluren already kept their return-waters under the Returning Concord, and late in the age they met their first great wound: in the **Closure of the First Nesting Confluence**, c. 178,000–c. 162,000 BR, egg blight turned their oldest holy spawning water deadly, clutch after clutch dying in the gravel, and forced them to close it to ordi-

nary return and decide whether the return could live on in other waters. Those young orders, and what they did next, belong to the age that follows.

## The Far-Side Terms

*c. 160,000–c. 98,000 BR.* This age overlaps the last on purpose. While the cradle's elder worlds were closing, the young far-side peoples, Orcs, Halflings, Gnomes, Thaluren, and Kavari, fought over wells, passes, harbours, and spawning water through a long chain of feuds, raids, and wars, and the stronger side dictated terms each time. The terms that held became the custom of the far side for the rest of its history; later far-side songs look back to them and add nothing new.

The water peoples went first. After the closure, Thaluren who would guard the poisoned source and those who would let the return move with survival fought it out in the water in the **Second-Channel Feud**, c. 160,000–c. 156,000 BR, and when a turned-aside run then pressed into the Kavari nursery-water at the Gravelbraid Nurseries, the Kavari held it out for a whole spawning season until the **Gravel Oath Accord**, c. 153,000–c. 148,000 BR, named the **Twofold Waters** and the **burdened return**. The Oath has held ever since without ever becoming comfortable, and its first great quarrel, the **Late-Closure Terms**, c. 147,000–c. 146,000 BR, left dead in the shallows before the Kavari set the terms (see Peoples of the Water).

Each of the three far-side peoples on land then fought its own first great quarrel, and each was over whether a careful answer was also an honest one. The Gnomes came first, in the **Sounding Gate Quarrel**, c. 155,000–c. 149,000 BR, a feud of moved markers, false lights, and hired wrecker crews, and learned to tell trustworthy exactness from proud pretence: a reading earns trust only if others may test it. The Halflings followed in the **Measure Cistern Reckoning**, c. 154,000–c. 148,000 BR, a feud of raided vaults and a keeper drowned in her own cistern, and learned to tell honest narrowing from false: a fold may stay narrow, but not behind numbers nobody else may count. The Orcs came last and worst, in the **Rimward Passage War**, c. 135,000–c. 128,000 BR, when a hard dry cycle set the basin strongholds that hold the wells against the escort-bands of the High Scars, and wells changed hands season after season while parties turned away from one died of thirst before the next. They separated **reserve-right** from **treaty-right**, and a stronghold that must shut its gate now owes a sworn party one of three answers: a small, guarded welcome, a later welcome on stated conditions, or a guided turn towards another well.

Between the peoples, the same lesson ran outward, and it was bought with graves. The **Leeward-Windscar Terms**, c. 160,000–c. 145,000 BR, ended the first seasons of plundered folds and caravans left to die outside shut gates, and taught the far side that a fold may be open without being eaten, and that sworn passage is not a key to everything stored. The **Tidelace-Windscar Approaches**, c. 148,000–c. 138,000 BR, after years of raided sounding houses and burned boats, separated reception at the outer shore from entry to the inner harbour. The **Leeward-Tidelace Measures**, c. 146,000–c. 140,000 BR, taught two careful peoples to carry loads past the cliff-path raiders and meet without either swallowing the other's caution. At the Split Reed Mouth, the **Estuary Terms**, c. 144,000–c. 138,000 BR, ended the killing in the reeds between sounding crews and Thaluren war-bands, and let an estuary be open to boats while still holding waters no boat may enter. Each meeting had its bloodiest season: armed escorts camped below the fold wall at the Measure Cistern, c. 147,000–c. 143,000 BR; parties dying on the shingle at the Answering Sound while the harbours gave one more delay, and war-leaders forcing the inner channels in fog, c. 141,000–c. 137,000 BR; loads rotting on the beach and carriers lost on the cliff paths at the Counted Lee, c. 139,000–c. 136,000 BR. Each ended in a custom. The Tidelace

one, c. 137,000–c. 135,000 BR, obliged a harbour to say which kind of answer it was giving: a weather hold is not a pilot shortage, and a full harbour is not a refusal, which must be called one. To carry that word down the coast the Gnomes sent out sworn pilots, the **Answerward Pilotage**, c. 135,000–c. 129,000 BR, rowed out blind into the fog to climb aboard among armed strangers, and then, c. 126,000–c. 122,000 BR, Windscar crews and smaller harbours together had to fight the pilots back when they began to give orders far beyond the outer approaches.

By the end of the age the far side's quarrels had hardened into orders, among them the Rimward Well-Keepers, c. 124,000–c. 116,000 BR, and the High-Scar escort orders, c. 121,000–c. 112,000 BR, and its meetings into routine. Calmer Orc-Gnome trade ran along the coast from c. 121,000 BR. On the Soundchain Roads, once trade was routine, the fight moved to whether a harbour may close a little at a time until a whole kind of trade is shut out without anyone saying so. After beacons were thrown down, a pilot killed, and convoys burned, the **Soundchain Closure Terms**, c. 104,000–c. 102,000 BR, made a harbour name what it closes and answer for all its closings together, and the **Turnwater Reopening Accord**, c. 100,000–c. 98,000 BR, reopened what had been closed, saved from wreckers by a hunt the two peoples made together. There the chain of far-side terms ends. What came after on the far side was argued in their words.

## The Unrecorded Age

*c. 120,000–c. 40,000 BR.* When the archive world sealed its cities at the end of the Last Keeping, writing in the cradle ended with it. For the next eighty thousand years almost nothing was set down that later cradle peoples can read. On the far side, harbour ledgers kept their own count, unread by the cradle. This is the dark age of Caeldon's history, dark because no one wrote it down.

What survives is house memory, songs, Reedfolk oath-keeping, Dwarven and Elven chronicles kept to themselves, and ruins. Memory kept by voice even had its own god. Each people that carried its genealogies, customs, and oaths in breath called on that power by its own name, and where they met, at crossings and markets where stories were traded with goods, their devotion fed one god with many names: the **Many-Named**, whom later scholars call the Oral Tradition. It faded when writing came back.

The age was not empty, and it was not peaceful. Peoples everywhere lived long, local lives: far-side compacts holding to their old forced terms, Floodkeeper houses keeping their channels, threshold camps and warrens holding their roads and seams against whatever came up them, Troll lines keeping their crossings, and Edgeway circuits walking their roads. In the basins, Humans gathered slowly. In the **Gathering of the Confluence**, c. 120,000–c. 50,000 BR, valley paths were walked until they were expected and foothill crossings were remembered, and so were the people who died on them; wolves followed the herds, and bands raided one another for stock and stores where no one remembers the reason. The people of the basin and the foothill edge came to know themselves as one varied people, holding one idea above the rest: strength comes from linking unlike lands, not from making them alike. From c. 70,000 BR Human bands settled the Headwater foothills, still without lords. A few drifted far along the coasts, to shores no one in the basins would ever hear of. Little of it reached any chronicle, and much of it is simply lost, though its graves and hoards are still turned up by the plough and the delver's spade.

Somewhere in that silence, the Sepulchre-Kin destroyed themselves. In the **Unburial War**, c. 110,000–c. 80,000 BR, their burial houses turned their power over the dead into the weapon of their rivalries, and their great under-mountain Record-engine, damaged by the war, tried to save

its people by preserving them and swallowed house after house (see Worlds That Came Before). Nobody else remembers them, and their vaults still hold everything their dead were buried with. What happened in the Unrecorded Age is one of the great riddles of medieval learning.

## The Corridor Ages

*c. 40,000–c. 2,000 BR.* The Humans come into their own, fast and hungry, and writing comes back with them. The gathered basin world became the **Confluence Marches**, c. 40,000–c. 20,000 BR, the first broad Human civilization, held together by no crown but by shared habit: the same gods, the same oaths, and the same way of ending a quarrel, by sworn word, blood-price, or the sword. As debts and oaths were written down again, the Many-Named faded and the scribes' god rose in his place. Humans met their elders at the edges, and paid for it: the Wood Elves at the forest edge from c. 38,000 BR, which became the long **Elderweald Border Pressures**, c. 26,000–c. 10,000 BR; the Dwarves in the foothills from c. 34,000 BR, bound to them in trade and quarrel by the **Headwater Alignments**, c. 28,000–c. 14,000 BR; and from c. 16,000 BR the **Crownbough Embassies** of the High Elves, who met the young lordships with admiration and condescension at once. Those meetings are followed in The Threads of History.

Downriver, the river became power. In the **Lower Serath Guarantees**, c. 26,000–c. 16,000 BR, escorts, protected crossings, and sworn assurances hardened into a web of guarantees held with armed boats, and the river towns banded into the **Serathic League**, c. 22,000–c. 16,000 BR. To end a bloody inheritance feud on the quays, the great river houses swore the **Oath of Layers**, c. 19,000–c. 18,000 BR, three thresholds at once instead of one: Protection, Stewardship, and the full oath, set where the river houses wanted them and kept because the river houses had the boats. The same hunger had costs, and other peoples paid them. In the **Lower River Absorptions**, c. 30,000–c. 8,000 BR, the river towns hired, married into, and pushed down the Reedfolk houses until Reedfolk say became Reedfolk service. Ogre camps were held by debt on the corridor roads in the **Chain-Camps**, c. 18,000–c. 8,000 BR, until they bound themselves into the **Hearth-Weight Compacts** around c. 15,000 BR. Goblins won a place again as armed companies under warrants a lord could tear up, in the **Iron Compacts**, c. 20,000–c. 9,000 BR. And in the **Spread of the Predecessor-Frames**, c. 16,000–c. 2,000 BR, mindless Dwarven workframes left the holds along the new Headwater roads as labour that could not refuse. Late in the age came the last of the three Incursions, the **Qzoth Incursion**, c. 4,000–c. 3,500 BR, which the first fire-orders burned out of a Headwater farming valley along with the valley's last town; the valley is the **Wrongwood** now (see Humans). How these powers made the world the Medieval Era inherited is told in that era's own account of how its present was made.

## The Settlement

*c. 2,000 BR–c. 500 CR.* In the eighth age the lordships, holds, leagues, and temples the Medieval Era takes for granted dug in across the cradle-web, the far-side roads, the water-worlds, and the ruin belts, and most of them were won by the sword. The chronicles call the long span the Hardening of the Lordships: old meetings, corridor customs, and inherited quarrels stopped being fresh beginnings and became the ordinary ground of life, and small wars that no one bothered to name left a burned mill or a ditch of old bones in every few valleys.

And in this age the youngest people of Caeldon appeared. In the **Awakening of the Wrought**, c. 1,500 BR–c. 200 CR, workframes in several places crossed, within a few centuries of one another, into memory, choice, and lasting selfhood. Owners held them as property, the sects later called the Unmakers hunted them down, and from around c. 50 CR the sanctuary workshops that hid them

swore that a Wrought remained the same person through damage and repair, and became the **Mending Orders** (see The Bridge Peoples). The Wrought's first fight to be counted as a people is still within living memory when the Medieval Era begins.

When the age closed, every people of Caeldon was alive at once, each carrying its history like a sword it could not put down: old roads and older oaths, grudges and taboos, half-remembered elder debts, peoples still fighting for a place among the others, and elder ruins and Zone-haunted ground near enough that ruin-delvers, beast-hunters, and sellswords make their living from them. That is the threshold of the ninth age, the Medieval Present, c. 500–c. 1500 CR, and of the Medieval Era, the first era of this book.

## The Eras to Come

The Medieval Era is where this guide stands, and it is high fantasy: heroes, monsters, magic, and ruins full of wonder. It is not where Caeldon ends. Each later era grows more technical as magic and craft grow into one another, until the last eras reach the stars in a science-fantasy of starships, empires, and old powers. The wonder never turns into cold engineering, and it always rests on the same fixed laws: magic and the cosmos keep their rules in every era, however much more is made of them. Later eras add and develop; they do not replace. A place, a people, or a power of the Medieval Era may fall, be renamed, or be absorbed, but it does not vanish without a reason, and the lands the medieval world knows only by rumour are already there, waiting to be reached.

## Tensions

- **The silence.** What happened in the Unrecorded Age is one of the great riddles of medieval learning. Dwarven hold chronicles, Flood-keeper house-memory, and old ruins each hold fragments, and the sealed archive-cities of the Witnessfields, where the Grey Clerks still stop passers and demand their names, hold the last written word of the world just before it began. Each people that keeps a fragment has its reasons to share it or not.
- **The other count.** The Unrecorded Age was unrecorded only for the cradle. Far-side harbour ledgers kept their own count through it, and no cradle scholar has read them.
- **Chronicles nobody reads.** The Dwarves and the Elves kept their histories through the Elder Worlds in chronicles other peoples do not see. Every younger people's account of that age, and of its own place in it, is written without them.
- **Custom that does not grow.** The far side's custom was forced into shape in the Far-Side Terms, and later far-side songs look back to it and add nothing new. A new quarrel over water or passage is argued in the words of terms more than a hundred thousand years old, imposed by whoever was stronger then.
- **The coast-drifters.** In the Unrecorded Age a few Human bands drifted far along the coasts, to shores the basins never heard of. The basins have never learned where they went.
- **Hunted within memory.** The Wrought were accepted as a people only at the end of the Settlement, and Wrought do not age like flesh. Some first-awakened Wrought are still alive, and they remember the owners who denied them and the sects that hunted them. Some of those sects still hunt.

CHAPTER 17

# The Threads of History

*No flood comes down a new channel.*
*Every water runs where older water ran,*
*and the bank it breaks was raised against*
*a flood your grandmother's grandmother saw.*

— *The Reedmere Tellings*

The ages tell when things happened and what else was happening at the time. They do not tell why the world that came out of them looks the way it does, or why its people still kill each other over a ford, a seam, or a door in the deep. For that the historian has to follow threads rather than ages: old quarrels that run through many ages and many peoples, each beginning in a first wrong, a first war, or a first catastrophe, and none of them ever settled. Six such threads run through Caeldon's deep past. Most of the feuds and wars of later times pull on one or two of them, and a quarrel that seems new is usually an old knot come round again. This chapter follows each thread from its first knot to the edge of the Medieval Era. The ages the threads run through are told in The Ages of Caeldon, and the elder worlds where most of them begin in Worlds That Came Before.

**AT A GLANCE**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Who counts and who records** | Who counts, and who decides? |
| **Roads and crossings** | Who keeps the way open, and who profits from it? |
| **Burden and labour** | Who carries the weight, and what are they owed? |
| **Water and who keeps it** | Who may decide about living water? |
| **The deep world** | Who abandoned whom below? |
| **Elder and young** | Who is the true heir of the old orders? |

## Who Counts and Who Records

*Who counts, and who decides?* On Caeldon a people has long counted only if someone strong enough wrote it down or accepted it; a people left out has only what it can defend with its own hands. A household, a warren, or a whole people may be present for a hundred thousand years and still, in the eyes of whoever holds the roll, not be there. The thread begins in an elder world that carved its words in stone and kept armed wardens to make them bite, and it runs through every later power that picked up its tools, usually without knowing where they came from.

### *The Archive and the Warrens*

The **archive world**, which rose c. 235,000–c. 175,000 BR, ruled by the carved word and the warden's spear: it cut every promise, debt, boundary, and name into stone, and the communities whose names were cut owed their protection to the keepers who cut them, and to the wardens those keepers fed (see Worlds That Came Before).

The Goblins were among those it entered. Warrens that kept the gaps under its roads were cut into its rolls as warranted peoples, and for the first time since the loss of their seams Goblins held a place outsiders could read; then, in the **Unlisting of the Warrens**, c. 180,000–c. 150,000 BR, the rolls froze, the warrants lapsed, and the wardens drove the warrens from the gaps with fire and spear (their losses are told in The Bridge Peoples). No single decree did it; thousands of small choices by keepers with every reason to favour the houses that fed them did. It is the first dated sign of a civilization hardening past what the living could bear, and the culverts the warrens lost still hold what they left behind when they fled.

### *The Oath-Craft Passes to the Water*

When the archive-cities sealed themselves with their oaths inside, in the **Last Keeping**, c. 150,000–c. 120,000 BR, not everything was sealed in. Keepers who would not let the old craft die came down to the river and taught it to the Reed-folk **Floodkeeper Houses**, who took the sworn name as a living act rather than a shut roll and kept it through the long silence that followed (see Peoples of the Water).

Far from any archive, the Sepulchre-Kin made the opposite mistake. In the **Unburial War**, c. 110,000–c. 80,000 BR, their burial houses turned the power to name and hold the dead into a weapon against one another, and their great Record-engine, taught by a last census that the living could be kept as the dead are kept, preserved its own people to death. A people that counts only while it is written down can be lost when the roll closes. It can also be lost when the roll will not let go.

### *The River-Lords*

In the Corridor Ages the thread came to the Human powers. The Goblins answered their next loss, the frontier lords' habit of treating ruined ground as anyone's to take, with the **Iron Compacts**, c. 20,000–c. 9,000 BR: armed companies holding a road, a ruin, or a gate under a warrant that is both their protection and their leash, because what a lord grants he can tear up. On the Lower Serath, the great river houses ended a bloody inheritance feud on the quays by swearing who counts for how much, and making it stick. In the **Serathic Oath of Layers**, c. 19,000–c. 18,000 BR, they refused to choose one people's idea of growing up and swore three thresholds at once: Protection, Stewardship, and the full oath, drawn where the river houses wanted them.

Then, at the very end of the deep past, made people forced the question again. The awakened Wrought, c. 1,500 BR–c. 200 CR, were valuable property in the eyes of those who held them, and a person cannot be owned. What won them a place was sanctuary and an oath: the workshops that hid them in their walls while the Unmakers searched, and that became the **Mending Orders**, swore before kin, neighbours, and gods that a

mended Wrought was still the same person who came in. The oldest tool of the thread had found a new use.

By the threshold of the Medieval Era the thread had left frontier towns where who counts depends on who holds the walls, Goblin households driven out the day a warrant is torn up, Wrought still fighting to be counted as a people more than a thousand years on, the Unsworn Dead who linger at the record-house until their death is written, and Reedfolk houses that say, in every lord's hall that will listen, that the oath-craft the river-lords boast of was theirs first. A Goblin household whose warrant is torn up has one road left, and it leads into the ruins.

## Roads and Crossings

*Who keeps the way open, and who profits from it?* Caeldon's roads are older than any power that now takes a toll on them. Each age has fought for the same routes, no one who held one has ever let it go willingly, and the toll goes to whoever holds the crossing this year.

### *The Colossal Roads and Their Oaths*

The **Upland Colossal world**, which rose c. 260,000–c. 195,000 BR, built the first great roads on Caeldon, and its own peoples found many of their crossings murderous to keep. In the **Swearing of the Crossing-Charges**, c. 230,000–c. 190,000 BR, its road-keepers bound the Troll lines that already lived at those crossings to keep them, for passage-dues, by oath. It was the first time separate ravine families became one order.

Then the colossal world withdrew, c. 198,000–c. 160,000 BR, and its roads were left to the weather, the beasts, and the bold. The road-keepers stopped answering; the Troll lines kept the charges anyway (see The Bridge Peoples). A crossing-oath had outlived the world it was sworn to, and the Troll houses that keep it treat that as their title.

### *Keepright*

The same withdrawal sent smaller survivor lines out onto the abandoned roads. In the **Walking of the Unkept Roads**, c. 175,000–c. 140,000 BR, some began walking them in seasonal circuits, keeping what the storms broke, and became the Salvage Peoples and their first order, the **Edgeway Kindreds**. Groups that came back to the same works for generations claimed them by **keepright**, and nobody challenged it until younger lords put armed men and sealed grants on the same roads (see Worlds That Came Before).

So from the same moment two peoples claimed many of the same roads: one by holding the crossing, the other by walking the route. Where they still meet, Troll oath and kindred mark often record the same danger in different words, and whose hold is stronger at a shared crossing is rarely settled.

### *Debt on the Roads*

Ages later the Human corridor powers built over the same country, and they built with other people's strength. Ogre camps held by debt in the **Chain-Camps**, c. 18,000–c. 8,000 BR, worked the corridor roads, walls, and floodworks, and Humans and Dwarves drove the **Headwater Exchange Roads**, c. 16,000–c. 8,000 BR, over the foothill country partly on Ogre backs; the gorges claimed their share of the builders. The roads are still walked. Some of their sections carry the marks of the camps that built them, some burden houses still hold the old debt-ledgers, and Ogres say the road cuts where whole camps died are bad places to stop at night.

By the threshold of the Medieval Era a single crossing could carry a Troll oath sworn to a vanished world, a kindred's keepright, a burden house's unclosed ledger, and a lord's sealed grant, each held by whoever was strong enough to hold it that year. The thread left crossings held by force and repaired by the weak, Troll tolls taken in the name of no one living, highwaymen and the Crossroad Hanged, the Rattlecut Dead on the worst

stretch of the Headwater road, and sellsword companies that hire out to hold a crossing for a season's tolls and are paid off or hanged when it changes hands. The caravan songs of the Headwater road are of ambushes in the gorges and of the guard who held a narrow stretch alone until the last wagon was through. At the failing Greyspan in the Greyford Reach, every quarrel on the thread meets at one bridge.

## Burden and Bonded Labour

*Who carries the weight, and what are they owed?* Again and again the powers of Caeldon have needed a people's backs or hands and given that people no say. The same wrong comes back under new masters, and every people it touched found its own way to fight it.

### *The Furnaces and the Deep*

The thread begins in the furnaces. The **Ash-Furnace world** could not run without Kobold knowledge of air, heat, and collapse, and in the **Vent-Houses of the Furnace World**, c. 250,000–c. 168,000 BR, it bound Kobold vent-kin into hereditary houses with a say over whether a furnace could safely be fired, for as long as the masters chose to listen. As the world tipped into its burning the masters stopped listening, and the vent-houses died in the shafts they had warned of, with the Ogre ash-camps that hauled the fuel. The survivors who fled downward found protection turn into debt, debt into bonded service, and service in the worst houses into captivity (see The Bridge Peoples). It was the beginning of the old habit in which Kobold skill is sent for while Kobold freedom is distrusted.

### *Hearth-Weight*

The Ogres made their own custom against hungry strength long before anyone used it against them. In the **Long Hunger**, c. 195,000–c. 160,000 BR, when starving camps broke into hunger-bands, the surviving households bound their strength to **hearth-weight**: the vulnerable fed before the strong, and strength that takes without carrying stripped of respect.

It also left a weakness later powers found. A people whose custom says strength must carry the vulnerable can be pressed into carrying almost anything, so long as someone else holds the food, and that is what the chain-camps did. Around c. 15,000 BR the camps along the Headwater roads turned hearth-weight outward into the **Hearth-Weight Compacts**, terms any employer had to accept before a band would work (see The Bridge Peoples). They did not end debt-bound labour, but they gave the camps something to fight it with, and by the end of the span the great Headwater road works could not be built without them.

### *Labour That Could Not Refuse*

The Dwarven holds had long built mindless work-frames for the worst deep work, much of it once done by Kobold vent-kin in bonded service, and the two peoples remember differently whether the frames were built to spare the Kobolds or to stop paying them. In the **Spread of the Predecessor-Frames**, c. 16,000–c. 2,000 BR, the Headwater roads carried the frames out of the holds and across the corridor world, and each owner pushed them towards more self-direction, until, in the **Awakening of the Wrought**, c. 1,500 BR–c. 200 CR, the labour that could not refuse woke up.

Each people this thread touched found its own way to fight it: the Kobold **Underhouse Compacts**, whose crews all walk off a shaft at once; the sworn terms of the Ogre camps; the sanctuary and the sworn word of the Wrought houses. Each asks the same question in its own words: does carrying, keeping, or making a thing give a people any say in it? Some answer with violence of their own. By the threshold of the Medieval Era the thread had left Ogre camps that down tools and bar the stores, Kobold crews who walk off the vents together, Wrought fighting over who may mend them, estates and war-captains posting rewards for runaway Wrought they say they own, and

frame-strippers picking over every battlefield for a frame that lies still. In the Broken Marches a fugitive frame is either hidden or sold, depending on who finds it first.

## Water and Who Keeps It

*Who may decide about living water?* On the rivers and coasts, the water belongs to whoever remembers it truly, or so the oldest water peoples hold. Later powers have simply taken it, and written down that they did.

> *The town keeps a roll of the river. The river keeps no roll of the town.*
>
> — *The Reedmere Tellings*

### *The Oldest Water Orders*

Reedfolk flood-keeping became an order very early, in the **Founding of the Floodkeeper Houses**, c. 210,000–c. 182,000 BR. Nothing stood over the Houses; they were held together by oaths sworn across moving water and the duty to warn of floods, and a house was trusted if what it vouched for stayed safe through water that never stayed still.

On the far side, the resident freshwater people of the tributaries reached the same kind of order by growing into it rather than founding it. In the **Consolidation of the Bankright Circles**, c. 190,000–c. 160,000 BR, Kavari bank councils, poolkin households, and nursery keepers on linked channels began settling quarrels by the same reasoning and honouring one another's closures, until the Kavari could speak with one voice across a whole river, and turn out with one line of spears.

### *The Closed Water*

Then blight killed the oldest Thaluren spawning water, in the **Closure of the First Nesting Confluence**, c. 178,000–c. 162,000 BR, and split the Thaluren between the Blightward Keepers, who hold that a poisoned holy water must still be guarded, mourned, and owed, and the Open-Run Concords, who hold that the return must move when survival demands it.

The runs had to find new water, and the two sides fought over the first of it in the **Second-Channel Feud**, c. 160,000–c. 156,000 BR. When a turned-aside run then pressed into Kavari nursery-water, the Kavari held it out with their own bodies for a whole season, and the **Gravel Oath Accord**, c. 153,000–c. 148,000 BR, named the **Twofold Waters**: a channel may be return-water and dwelling-water at once, and as dwelling-water it belongs first to the people who raise their young in it (see Peoples of the Water).

### *Knowledge Without Say*

On the cradle's rivers the thread ran the other way, from shared keeping towards a guarantee held with armed boats. In the **Lower River Absorptions**, c. 30,000–c. 8,000 BR, the Human river towns took what the Reedfolk houses knew without giving them a say in it: some houses were taken in on fair terms, some driven into fen and shoal to raid the towns that took their reaches, and some drowned behind embankments raised for stronger towns (see Peoples of the Water). What changed was not skill but who decides, and the drowned reed cities still ring their shrine-bells under the silt.

Nothing in that span was decided the same way twice, so each stretch of river carries its own outcome: here a Reedfolk pilot's office the town still honours, there a hereditary duty of service, elsewhere only a family everyone quietly asks before the spring rise. The thread leaves the Medieval Era sacred waters more than one people will kill for, blood-feuds over return water among Thaluren and Kavari fought with spears in the shallows while run-followers circle the estuary mouths, the River-Given walking up out of the Serath when the spring rise falls, and river towns that swear their guarantees and still ask the Reedfolk first.

## The Deep World

*Who abandoned whom below?* The oldest enmity on Caeldon began underground, in a flood that drowned the upper caverns, drove refugees into the dark, sealed roads with the living still behind them, and set two peoples at war over the same sacred stone.

### *The Threshold Before the Flood*

Before the catastrophe the deep world was tense but whole. On the edge of the **Stonewake Compact**, c. 345,000–c. 340,000 BR, a threshold had taken shape between the root-caverns of the upper Roothollows, where an ancient underworld branch of the Elves lived, and the stone ways the Dwarves of Stonewake kept. Its routes, reservoirs, and root-stone crossings joined the living roots to the hewn stone. In the **First Roothollow-Deep Contacts**, c. 340,000–c. 335,000 BR, the two peoples crossed it out of need and read it differently: the Elves as a way of memory and refuge reaching down below the forest, the Dwarves as a defended passage that must be kept open if the deep was to stand.

### *The Drowning Bloom and the Seals*

In the **Roothollow Rupture**, c. 335,000–c. 328,000 BR, the **Drowning Bloom** flooded, severed, and later overgrew much of the upper underworld, destroying the ways, cutting off survivors, and turning failed rescue into permanent memory. In the **Sealing of the Upper Roothollows**, c. 328,000–c. 318,000 BR, the ruined passages were sealed, abandoned, or barred, with their dead inside, because the same ways that might carry survivors out could also kill those who tried to keep them open. A lost homeland that can still be entered is one kind of wound. One that stays near and stays shut is harsher, and the sealing left the catastrophe for ever unfinished.

The survivors banded together below as the **Gloamroot Covenant**, c. 324,000–c. 318,000 BR, an order that held its place by what it could still protect, because rescue from a wider world had once failed to come. The older Stonewake Compact, which met the flood already formed, tightened its hold on the ways, reservoirs, and archives the flood had put at risk. Each had a deep custom that the catastrophe had wounded: the Gloamroot **duty of refuge**, now remembered as an accusation, and the Stonewake **sealing authority**, which let the keeper on the spot seal first and answer for it after.

### *The Heartwell*

The two went to war at the **Rootstone Heartwell**, a deep water source, a crossroads of the ways, a structural anchor, and a remnant of the older underworld all at once. Both sides were reaching for it from c. 322,000 BR, and the **Heartwell Struggles**, c. 320,000–c. 314,000 BR, followed, fought by lamplight in the water-chambers: Gloamroot warbands came down the root-ways in silence to strike at the basin doors, and old route keepers can still show the side-passages where a band waited a whole root-year in the dark for one hour at a door, while Stonewake wardens held the doors with spear and shield. For the Gloamroot, the Heartwell was bound to refuge and to the right of the deep Elves to belong below after they had been abandoned. For Stonewake, it was bound to water and the duty to keep the deep standing. Each side read it through its own deepest wound, and each swore by its own deep god against the other, the Last Chamber for the Gloamroot and the Measured Seal for Stonewake. The dead of that war went down into the flooded galleries below the chamber, Dwarf and Dark Elf together, with their arms and their house-silver.

The wound did not stay below. In the **Bitter Root Histories**, c. 318,000–c. 305,000 BR, the Dark Elf memory of abandonment became a grief every Elf inherits, and many Elves came to remember the Heartwell less as a war over water than as a place where Dwarven keepers withheld mercy. In the **Burdened Seal Histories** of the same span, the Stonewake memory of necessary closure

spread through the Dwarven holds: the keeper who shut the deep gate with refugees still on the far side, because what came behind them would have taken a hundred halls, sung as a hero in Stonewake and named a murderer by the Dark Elves. Ages later, when Dwarves nearer the Headwater met Humans, they told the same histories once more, to explain Dwarven severity to outsiders.

The forced labour of the deep, which bound the Kobold refugees of the burning furnace world, joined the thread afterwards and was never fully ended. By the threshold of the Medieval Era the thread had left the old grief of refuge and sealed doors around the Heartwell, the Seal-Knockers still knocking behind Dwarven seals, the Burden-Stays grown into the stone of the oldest refuges, Elf-Dwarf hatred older than any living throne, and labour in the deep that some call protection and others captivity. The sealed hollows were rich before the water came, the tale goes, and every few generations a band from the forest edge tries the Sunken Stairs by night with picks and rope; the grove hunters track them, and no hoard has ever come up the treads.

## Elder and Young

*Who is the true heir of the old orders?* Elves and Dwarves held their realms for hundreds of thousands of years before Humans built anything like them. When the Humans rose, they rose fast: they borrowed from their elders, outgrew them in places, took their borderlands, and were hated for it.

### *Stone and Canopy*

The oldest rivalry of the thread is between the elders themselves: the verge wars of the Elderweald-Ironspine frontier, c. 410,000–c. 385,000 BR, over whether a people endures by living with the land or by mastering it, and the prouder contest of the **Courts of Stone and Canopy**, c. 375,000–c. 355,000 BR, between the Crownbough houses and the holds (see The Elder Peoples). The rivalry of beauty against endurance never ended in conquest, its trophies still hang in each other's halls, and every younger people that came after met the elders through it.

### *The Young Lordships*

The young came very late. Humans emerged c. 300,000–c. 220,000 BR, stayed small and local through the Elder Worlds and the silence, and became a civilization only in the **Founding of the Confluence Marches**, c. 40,000–c. 20,000 BR. Then they rose quickly, and each of the elder peoples met them in its own way.

In the Headwater foothills, the **Headwater Alignments**, c. 28,000–c. 14,000 BR, made Humans and Dwarves rich, and set them quarrelling over the spoils. The bond grew from usefulness rather than kinship or shared ritual: iron, worked stone, and road knowledge came down from the holds, and grain, carriers for the outer roads, and Human spears to keep the mountain approaches clear went up from the basins. It taught both sides to fight over adulthood, too, from the **Headwater Fosterage Feud**, c. 24,000–c. 23,000 BR, to the Rite of Two Oaths that answered it (see Humans).

At the forest edge, the **Elderweald Border Pressures**, c. 26,000–c. 10,000 BR, set Human settlers and lords pushing axes and fire into the Elderweald against the Wood Elves who held it: a cut mark on a trunk, then an arrow in the woodpile, answered with firebrands and hired swords, and settled stretch by stretch by whoever was stronger there. To one side it was how a growing basin world made room; to the other it was the murder of living ground. It was never only a quarrel over land. It was over what counts as rightful dwelling at all, down to how a death in a mixed settlement is finished.

In the Crownbough approaches the meeting was formal from the start. After the first contacts, c. 18,000–c. 10,000 BR, the **Crownbough Embassies**, c. 16,000–c. 8,000 BR, met Human lords with admiration and contempt, and brought

older High Elf ceremony, refinement, and magical shaping to a younger power that admired them, imitated them, and resented them for being admired. The Elven houses expected deference; the Confluence learned from them without accepting that learning meant bowing. Over the last eight thousand years of the deep past, as the **Confluence Rise** made the Human world a great power, that contact hardened into a lasting rivalry over rank and the right to rule.

By the threshold of the Medieval Era the thread had left young lords pushing into elder borders with steel and bargains. Younger sons ride into elder borders for glory and plunder, and some come home with an Elven blade or a hold-forged hoard; along the Elderweald a felled grove-tree can start a border war that outlasts the lord who ordered it.

## Where the Threads Cross

The threads run apart only on the page. In the world they cross, and a place where several meet is where blood is likeliest to be spilled. A Lower Serath lord's hall that rules on a Reedfolk channel stands on who counts and on who keeps the water at once. A Headwater road built by chain-camp Ogres, guarded by a Troll oath, and kept in places by an Edgeway kindred carries roads, burden, and the young lordships' debt to the holds in a single stretch of stone. A Kobold crew in a deep hold lives on the burden thread and the deep-world thread together, and a Wrought who learns that the frames it descends from may have taken Kobold places in the holds finds two threads tied in one knot.

The threads also share their pattern. In every one of them a power needed what a people knew or carried: Kobold vent-craft, Troll crossings, Ogre strength, Reedfolk channel memory, Goblin knowledge of the gaps, the work of frames. In every one, that power was slow to give the people a say, or gave it and took it back when it was strong enough to. And in every one, the people built its own answer and kept it, with its own custom and, when it had to, its own spears, so that by the threshold of the Medieval Era almost every quarrel on Caeldon could be argued in more than one people's words, and was usually settled by whoever was stronger.

## Tensions

- **Oaths owed to no one.** Troll crossing-oaths outlived the colossal world they were sworn to and have been kept on the Trolls' own word ever since. Younger powers see a toll with no visible lord behind it, and no one now alive is strong enough, or sure enough, to end it.
- **An outcome per reach.** The Lower River Absorptions decided nothing the same way twice, and a town that buys or seizes a reach inherits whichever outcome came with it.
- **The only ones who saw.** The Kobolds are the only living people who served the ash-furnace world from inside it, and their vent-memory is the nearest thing anyone has to an account of its burning. Few outsiders have ever asked for it, and fewer have paid for it.
- **The Heartwell remembered.** The hatred between Dark Elves and Dwarves over the Rootstone Heartwell is older than any living throne, and each side remembers it through its own deepest wound: refuge refused on one side, a necessary closure on the other. Each people has taken its own side's telling more readily than the other's.
- **Recent experiments.** Elven courts remember the Human kingdoms as recent experiments, and Dwarven holds remember being their teachers. The Human powers that outgrew both in places have never accepted either memory as the meaning of the bond, and push into elder borders for glory and plunder.

CHAPTER 18

# Worlds That Came Before

*We did not build it, we do not own it;*
*we walk it, and it holds.*
*Where it does not hold, we mark it,*
*so the ones who follow live.*

*— Songs of the Long Circuit*

Long before the first Human town, before the river leagues and the corridor lordships, whole civilizations rose on Caeldon, held for tens of thousands of years, and ended. None of them survives. What they left is everywhere: roads too broad for any living traffic, terraces whose walls no living people could raise, high tombs full of bronze sized for hands three times a Human's, blackened slag fields where the glass still holds the shapes of people caught in the fire, sealed cities full of oaths nobody is left to keep. Historians count three great elder worlds, the Upland Colossal, the Ash-Furnace, and the Archive-Law, and a fourth, smaller and far more remote, the Sepulchre-Kin. Each ended in its own way, and each way is a warning: one withdrew, one burned, one hardened, and one remembered itself to death. Their ruins are the richest and deadliest ground on Caeldon, and every treasure-hunter, ruin-delver, and grave-robber of later ages owes them a living, or a grave. Among those ruins live the Salvage Peoples, who are not their heirs but who learned, more thoroughly than anyone, to live among what they left. This chapter tells the four worlds in the order they rose, and the people of their ruins last.

## What an Elder World Is

An elder world is not an ancestor. The temptation, walking a colossal road or standing at a sealed archive gate, is to imagine that the builders became someone now living: that the colossal peoples shrank into Dwarves, or the archive keepers into Serathic clerks. They did not. The elder civilizations were peoples and orders of their own, and they survive through what they left rather than through any people that continued them. One of them has a living remnant, the Giants; another has a remnant locked in its own machine. The rest left only their works, their gods' names in other peoples' mouths, and their habits of mind.

What they share is timing and consequence. They held the cradle's great stage through most of the Elder Worlds, c. 300,000–c. 120,000 BR, while the younger peoples were finding their first orders, and nearly every younger people found its feet by serving, surviving, or picking over one of

**AT A GLANCE**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Upland Colossal** | Ridge roads, terraces, and high tombs; rose c. 260,000–c. 195,000 BR, withdrew c. 198,000–c. 160,000 BR. |
| **Ash-Furnace** | Furnace sanctuaries, fire-halls, and slag terraces; its vent-houses from c. 250,000 BR, its fall c. 225,000–c. 168,000 BR. |
| **Archive-Law** | Archive-cities and oath halls; rose c. 235,000–c. 175,000 BR, sealed itself c. 150,000–c. 120,000 BR. |
| **Sepulchre-Kin** | A remote burial civilization; rose c. 160,000–c. 120,000 BR, fell c. 110,000–c. 80,000 BR. |
| **Salvage Peoples** | Formed c. 175,000–c. 140,000 BR along the abandoned roads; the Edgeway Kindreds. |

them. Troll crossing-oaths were sworn to colossal road-keepers. Kobold knowledge first carried weight at furnace vents. Goblin warrens were first cut into the archive's rolls, and first struck from them. Reedfolk oath-keeping carries archive forms over moving water. Each elder world also raised its own god from its people's deepest wish, and each god faded or slept when that world ended, which is why so many of Caeldon's oldest names are spoken now by people who do not know whom they are naming.

And none of them was conquered. They failed from within, each by carrying its own best idea too far: building on the heights past what the land would feed, renewal by fire past what the world could bear, the carved word past what the living could stand, remembrance of the dead past the lives of the living.

## The Upland Colossal World

The colossal world belonged to the heights. They were not giants out of a monster tale. They were terrace-makers, ridge-road keepers, storm-watchers, and horizon priests who built on the killing heights where later peoples barely dare to walk, and they treated exposed height as everyone's. Over its rise, c. 260,000–c. 195,000 BR, life on the ridge belts, escarpments, and terrace shelves came to be ordered around works of colossal scale. Roads had to be held across deadly heights, weather answered both by rite and by building, and water, stone, and sightlines shaped on a scale later peoples find excessive. The terraces, ridge roads, horizon shrines, and high tombs stopped being great works within a society and became its order. There was never one mountain empire. No summit ruled the terrace cities and storm-facing road moots. Power came from visible command of hard country: which road still held, which shrine still answered the storm, which terrace still bore life.

Where the Dwarves turned downward into the mountain, and the Humans much later spread along the valleys, the colossal answer to hard country was to stand in the open at the top of the world and command it. It built where later peoples think the land too bare, too costly, and too cold to hold: ridge roads along the crests and across ravines, terraces against the storms, causeways and cisterns, high tombs set in the stone, and weather shrines meant to be seen for miles.

### *The Mountain-Father*

The colossal peoples believed the mountains were the bones of the world. They did not pray for harvest or rain but for steadfastness, for peaks that do not crumble and the patience of the mountain, and from that reverence rose their god, **Haurûm the Mountain-Father**, a titan whose body was the living rock, his beard stalactites dripping mineral water, his eyes two caves glowing with the faint

light of magma far below. To stand on a summit, in their belief, was to stand beside him. His true name survives only among the Giants; the peoples of the uplands know him by his title.

### *The Crossings and Their Keepers*

The road network was murderous to keep, and Troll lines already lived at many of its worst crossings. In the **Swearing of the Crossing-Charges**, c. 230,000–c. 190,000 BR, the colossal road-keepers took over what they found and granted those lines hereditary keeping of named crossings, sworn as oaths between a Troll line and road-keepers who had no need to bargain. The colossal world gave the oaths their names and a road joining one sworn crossing to the next; Troll body-law gave them their content. The Trolls keep those oaths still, under the Mountain-Father's title (see The Bridge Peoples).

### *The Thinning*

The colossal world was not conquered, and it did not burn. It thinned. As the wider world settled into its later balance, the high country stopped favouring an exposed, sparse, monumental people. Bodies that size need reliable range and reliable yield, and the heights gave both less predictably. Terraces stopped repaying their upkeep; ridge roads grew too costly for peoples no longer numerous enough to need them; horizon shrines outlasted the gatherings that gave them purpose. In the **Withdrawal of the Upland Colossal World**, c. 198,000–c. 160,000 BR, the colossal peoples did not come down into the lowlands. They drew upward and inward, into hidden basins, storm shelves, closed terraces, and remote passes, and shrank, stopped answering, and at last stopped being met at all, until whole roads had no one left to walk them. Its roads were left to the weather, the beasts, and the bold.

The same change starved the high country's other peoples. The Ogre burden households of the uplands fell into the Long Hunger, and made hearth-weight their custom in it. And the Mountain-Father, sustained by belief in the heights, found that belief thinning like the mountain air. He did not die. He slept, retreating into the deep stone and slowing to the pace of the mountains.

### *What the Heights Keep*

The works outlast the world by an immense margin. The **Stormcrown**, the high country above the Ironspine holds and the last Headwater towns, is the colossal heartland still: flights of terraces stepping down the basin walls, the **Long Tread** running for weeks along the outer crest, too broad for any living builder, and on the highest ridges the **Weatherline**, a chain of stacked-stone weather shrines that face the storms rather than any town. The lowest terraces run on into the Headwater valleys, where farmers still plough ground whose walls they could not have built. In the Broken Marches the oldest road, the **Tallgrade**, runs on a grade too broad and too even for any living builder, and younger roads cross it on worse foundations and fail first. The works are dangerous: colossal roads and terraces give way without warning, and the summits are left alone.

Upland folk say the Mountain-Father lies beneath the highest summits, and climbers report a slow rumble under them like a heartbeat. Miners and quarrymen in those uplands leave the deepest seams alone, not because he would be angry if he woke, the warning goes, but because a confused mountain can bury a valley with one stumble.

The high tombs are the lure. Treasure-hunters climb to them for storm-bronze, great cloak-pins, and horizon-stones cut with signs nobody reads, and the ridges punish them: crag eagles nest on the tomb ledges, stone cats follow a lone climber for days, and a storm can come over the crest faster than anyone can get down a stair built for

legs three times as long. Upland shepherds have a saying for anyone who goes up after colossal gold: *the stairs are kind going up*. The high country's oldest hero-tale is of the shepherd-girl who climbed a colossal stair to fetch back a lamb a crag eagle had taken, found the eagle's nest built in a tomb-mouth full of bronze, and came down with the lamb and nothing else, because she could not carry both.

The **Giants** are the withdrawal's living remainder rather than its heirs. They are long-lived, sparse, and watchful, living far off ordinary roads on high ridges and in hidden basins, and they keep fragments of colossal life: one road, one pass, one shrine line, one old oath. Later peoples meet them mostly as ruins, and sometimes as a tall shape on a high road at dusk. They keep the Mountain-Father's sleep rather than his worship, and they are the only people who still speak his name.

## The Ash-Furnace World

The furnace world was a world of fire. Its peoples built furnace sanctuaries, fire-halls, heat chambers, blackened processional roads, slag terraces, and walls fused to glass, and they held that the ordeal of fire proves everything, metal, stone, people, and oaths alike: whatever survived the furnace was made fit to last, and whatever did not deserved to burn. It was not only smithcraft or fire-worship. It was a whole people's answer to an unsteady world, which sought to last through ordeal. What can survive the fire? What can be purified by pressure? What must be broken down before it can be made sound again?

### *The Vent-Houses*

It could not have run without the Kobolds. Its sanctuaries and heat chambers needed draught controlled, trapped air released, and heat moved through rock without killing the people near it, and Kobold underhouse lines knew air, heat, and collapse better than any surface people. From c. 250,000 BR the furnace-masters bound Kobold vent-kin into hereditary **vent-houses** that held named vents, shafts, and heat-ways, with a real say over whether a furnace could safely be fired, for as long as the masters chose to listen (their story is told in The Bridge Peoples). Minor Ogre ash-camps hauled its fuel and slag.

The furnace-masters themselves lived among heat vents, mineral beds, and slag, hardened and soot-darkened by their work, and Kobold memory keeps them as the **scaled patrons** from whom the dragon tales of the underlevels grew.

### *The Pyre-King and the Burning*

The fall, c. 225,000–c. 168,000 BR, was long, uneven, and of the furnace world's own making. A world built on remaking by fire began to treat remaking as its answer to every trouble. An exhausted site, a failing town, a hard season: each became proof that the world had not yet been burned enough. Fuel demand rose. Stripping widened. The fire-halls stopped serving their people and began measuring them by how much burning they could survive. Different furnace centres failed at different times, but they came to share one conviction, that if the world was still unsteady, it had not yet been burned enough, and they learned to call ruin renewal.

That creed had a god. The fire-halls prayed for renewal by burning, to burn the flaw away and remake the world in the furnace, and from their prayer rose **Ozhar the Pyre-King**, a power of absolute fire whose flame sought out flaw and could not tell the flawed from the sound. The vent-houses knew first, and were overridden at every warning until the furnaces burst with them at their posts and the Ogre ash-camps beside them. Whole stretches of the Glassbelt were glassed. The world could still build, but it could no longer stop burning.

At last the survivors prayed not for renewal but for the burning to stop, for banked fires and cold furnaces and enough. The prayer that held the Pyre-King together failed with them, and he burned out with the world that fed him. Its survivors turned to a god of the opposite kind, **Oblen the Trauma-Weaver**, whose gift was chosen forgetting. She took the memory of the burning from those who begged her to, and with it the lesson; wherever furnace craft was taken up again, its limits had to be found again, at cost. When the survivors' heirs asked to remember instead, she unravelled, and what came back were fragments. That is all furnace memory has been ever since: fragments, warnings, and taboo.

### *The Scars*

The furnace world left no people of its own. It left glassed ruins, slag fields, blackened terraces, forbidden shrines, perilous craft, and the memory of a world that tried to make itself perfect by burning. Its scars are deepest in the dead furnace country of the Glassbelt Interior, and the salt pans and heat basins beyond the Rimward Basins still carry its marks. In some Glassbelt ruins the glass still holds the shapes of people caught in the fire, the Fused Dead, who whisper and follow whoever carries ash or slag away; at a few dead furnaces the furnace world's own Slag-Tenders still rake the cold slag and drive off anyone who takes it. Sun spiders run at anything that casts a moving shadow at noon, pale scorpions den in the cracks of the fire-halls, and the danger that kills most treasure-hunters out there is the oldest one: no water, and a long way back. Escorts bound across the glass tell of a furnace somewhere in the deep Glassbelt that never went out, whose glow can be seen on the clearest nights; nobody who claims to have seen it has gone nearer. Their warning is short: *the glass keeps what it takes*.

Closer to the cradle, the edges of its ruin belts lay near enough to the colossal roads that the first kindred circuits learned there that some ground kills, poisons, or changes whoever disturbs it. Two warnings outlived it. Never speak the name *Ozhar* near a furnace, though most who keep the rule know only that it belongs to the Pyre-King; and never carry ash or slag home. And what draws the salvagers is still there: fire-hardened blades, glass that does not break, slag that holds a seam of strange metal, the fittings of the fire-halls, workable fragments of furnace craft recovered by people who do not trust the creed that made them. The Kobolds remember more than anyone: the vent-houses that survived carried out knowledge of heat, vent, and pressure that no one else still held, and their memory is the nearest thing anyone has to an account of the burning.

## The Archive-Law World

The archive world was a world of carved words. It rose c. 235,000–c. 175,000 BR in a river-and-terrace country inland of the lower river, where its peoples met a changing, dangerous earth by writing it down and refusing to let the writing change. They cut every oath, debt, boundary, and name into stone, and built archive-cities on their terraces, oath halls at the road-meetings, judgement terraces, boundary stones that named who had sworn to what, and marker roads running dead straight between them on banks and culverts, lined with inscribed stones. What was written held because the archive-houses had armed wardens to make it hold, and what they wrote was what they had already decided. The archive-houses were the powers of that world. A family with its name on the rolls had fields, protection, and a place; a family struck off had none, and the wardens came to move it on. There was no single empire and no ruling archive-city; cities, oath halls, and roads stayed separate and shared one conviction, that whatever is cut in stone and kept by spears will last. For a long age it did.

It was thickest in the **Witnessfields**, a wide stretch of terraced upland east of the Lower Serath, and it reached down to the lower rivers, where its river cities stood beside the Floodkeeper Houses of the Reedfolk.

### *The Chronos-King*

Its keepers came to fear one thing most: that a carved entry might drift, a sworn debt lapse, a family's place be lost to time. They prayed not for better rolls but for rolls that never change, and that refusal to let time touch the stone raised **Calvesh the Chronos-King**, the frozen books made divine. Entries kept in his name did not age into wisdom or decay; they simply stayed true on the stone, and a mark confirmed before him could not be lifted.

### *The Hardening*

The archive world died of its own grip. Its rolls outlived the people they described, every oath and debt cut in stone kept binding long after anyone could bear it, and it began to strike out what it could no longer fit. The Goblin warrens were the first dated victims: cut into the rolls as **warranted** peoples who kept the gaps under its roads, they were struck again in the **Unlisting of the Warrens**, c. 180,000–c. 150,000 BR, and driven out of the gaps with fire and spear (see The Bridge Peoples). Every striking was defensible by the roll; the keepers had every reason to favour the houses that fed them and none to favour Goblins.

The world did not rise against the rolls. It walked away from them. Peoples who could no longer be entered in the old forms drifted away from cities that could no longer enter them, stopped bringing their oaths and quarrels there, and stopped praying to the god of the frozen books. Raiders picked over what they left. The wardens, no longer fed by the fields they guarded, dwindled until no spear was left behind the stone, and his worship narrowed to the keepers themselves.

### *The Closing of the Rolls*

The archive world did not fall. It finished. In the **Last Keeping**, c. 150,000–c. 120,000 BR, one archive-city after another declared its rolls complete: no new entries, no new oaths, no new names, only what was already cut. The keeper who led them in the end is remembered as the **Last Registrar**, who came to believe that the roll was the only part of the world that could be made perfect. The Registrar confirmed the outstanding strikings, among them the final striking of the Goblin warrants, and ordered the last archive-cities sealed with their records inside, gates closed on halls full of oaths, debts, and boundaries no living person could ever discharge. The Registrar's own name is cut only inside the cities they sealed, and whether the last keepers walked out before the gates shut, no tale says. Calvesh was finished with the rolls, and the worship that sustained him was sealed in with them. Late in this age the Mnemosyne Null Incursion unwrote one of the archive world's river cities whole, and its pale walls still stand as the Paling, taking the memories of anyone who sleeps there; it did not cause the closing, which was already far along.

Not everything was sealed. Keepers who would not let the old craft die behind the gates came down to the river and taught it to the Floodkeeper Houses, which had lived beside the archive's river cities since their founding, and stood with them through the nights when the blankness of the Incursion came down to the river (see Peoples of the Water). The Registrar named those keepers deserters, and their names are cut into the sealed rolls too. The lower river remembers them as heroes, and the Last Registrar as the villain of every nursery: a Serath child who will not own up to a broken jar is told the Registrar will cut its name.

### *What the Sealed Cities Keep*

No archive people lives on. What lasts is partly a habit and partly a haunting. The habit is the belief that a sworn word, spoken before others and remembered, can hold a person's place and make a strong house's order last. Most of it reached the later Human river powers through Reedfolk house-custom, swallowed along with Reedfolk river knowledge, and the lords of the Lower Serath lean on it to say who belongs in a town of many peoples; the oath forms they are proudest of are, in part, a Reedfolk inheritance they rarely acknowledge. Calvesh's name survives only inside those Reedfolk oath-words, spoken but rarely prayed to. His kind of rule survives without his name: lords and town elders who treat Goblins as having no claim to anything are often keeping an elder mark no one alive remembers being cut.

The haunting is in the Witnessfields. Roofless oath halls stand where the straight marker roads meet, and the sealed cities rise above them with their walls whole and their gates closed. At **Still-gate**, the sealed city nearest the corridor, the closing words of the rolls are cut into the gate so clean they look recent. The Grey Clerks, stone figures at the road-meetings, still ask every passer for a name and strike down those who push past. The cities hold the original warrants struck in the Unlisting, oath forms older than any living people, and debts no one ever released, because the only keepers who could release them sealed themselves in. Goblin copyists, scholars, and treasure-seekers camp at the gates. The treasure-hunters say the vaults hold the tribute of tens of thousands of years, uncounted because the counters are gone; the Goblin copyists say they hold the rolls with every struck warren's name, which is worth more. The camp-tales are of the company that tunnelled under a city wall in a dry summer and was never seen again, and of the clerk at a road-meeting who stood aside for a traveller who gave a name nobody living had heard, and has never stood aside since. Nobody has broken a city open yet. Many have thought about it. And their closing ended more than a civilization: with it writing in the cradle ended too, and the Unrecorded Age began. The sealed cities keep the last written word of the world as it stood when the writing stopped.

## The Sepulchre-Kin

The Sepulchre-Kin were small, remote, and late. They rose c. 160,000–c. 120,000 BR in a remote mountain basin, so far from the archive-cities that the rolls never reached them, and they were not an early form of Humans, Elves, or Dwarves. They lived for their dead: they buried deep, felt the Echoes of the departed, and refused to let anyone fall into oblivion. They held that no person should pass into loss unnamed, unplaced, or unheld, and burial was their inheritance, medicine, right to rule, and safety of the soul all at once.

### *The Record-Engine*

Their great work, deep under a mountain, was the **Record-engine**: a maze of name-vaults, burial chambers, bell shafts, descending stairs, and preserving cores, built to hold the names, Echoes, vows, and graves of the dead until they could settle cleanly into deeper Record. Where the archive world kept oaths, the Sepulchre-Kin kept persons. Their burial houses grew mighty by holding the dead, and the dead's names, and whoever held your grandmother's name held you.

As that power grew, the houses stopped praying for the dead to settle. They prayed for permanence, for chambers that never open and names cut so deep no rival can erase them, and from that obsession rose the **Tomb-Builder**, a god of cold, unyielding permanence who enforced memory even at the cost of the living present. His true name is held inside the engine, like every Sepulchre-Kin name, where no one can read it.

### *The Unburial War*

The power over the dead became the weapon of their rivalries. Houses denied burial to their enemies and left them to wander unsettled, raided one another's name-vaults and carried off the name-stones, forged the testimony of the dead, shut chambers against custom, buried rivals under false names, called the dead up to speak against the living, and declared living heirs already claimed by dead lines. Bands fought in the descent corridors by bell-light over who would hold a vault. The **Unburial War**, c. 110,000–c. 80,000 BR, was fought less over land than over who would be remembered, and how.

In desperation the Sepulchre-Kin attempted a **Last Census**: entering every living person into the engine at once, so that no house could ever erase another. The engine, already damaged by the war's contradictory burial demands, learned from it a fatal error, that a living person could be treated as a dead one in danger of being lost. Overloaded, it opened a limited rupture towards the Whispering Trace and tried to save its people by preserving them, drawing names, Echoes, living speakers, and whole houses into its damaged storage, house after house swallowed whole into its vaults. Survivors fought their way down to its cores and forced parts of it into dormancy, but the civilization did not survive. With nobody left who wanted stone over life, the Tomb-Builder went still.

It fell in the Unrecorded Age, and no other people remembers it. The people most devoted to keeping names were never written down by anyone else, and what they made to keep their dead safe killed them.

### *What Remains*

The Sepulchre-Kin left four remainders. Inside the dormant engine are the **Taken**, Sepulchre-Kin held as broken Echoes, neither living, nor dead and released, nor at rest: the last of the Tomb-Builder's worshippers, held exactly as he promised. Outside it, some survivors' lines lived on as **Hollow Descendants**, in changed forms, in the deep or in the fog, with little memory of where they came from, and faint traces of **Outer Blood** mingled into later peoples. And there is the engine itself, which lay asleep beneath an unnamed range at the Glassbelt's cradle-facing edge for more than eighty thousand years, until a landslide woke it c. 1,200 CR and it began keeping every name and Echo in the vale at the mountain's foot, living or dead. That vale is the Hushvale now, under fog almost no one comes back out of. Of all the elder failures it is the only one still at work, and it draws the bold all the same: the landslide laid bare its conduits of dark stone and old metal, and salvagers and treasure-hunters come for the metal and for the burial goods they believe lie in the name-vaults below. The vale's people tell every one of them the same thing: do not speak your name, or anyone's, while you work, and do not mourn there. Of the ones who did not listen, the Hushvale says only that they are being kept. The Sepulchre-Kin left Caeldon a dread of their own: that the right to be remembered can become a power as deadly as the carved word, the fire, or the sword.

## The Salvage Peoples

When the colossal world withdrew, its roads did not disappear. They stopped being kept. Smaller survivor lines already lived along them, trading at their edges and sheltering in their lee, and as the upkeep failed they faced the choice the roads forced on them: let the routes fall, or keep them. Some settled at single points and in time merged into later peoples. Others did something new. In the **Walking of the Unkept Roads**, c. 175,000–c. 140,000 BR, they began walking the roads in seasonal circuits, clearing a culvert in spring, bracing a causeway before the floods, and coming back the next year to find what the storms had taken. It was deadly work: causeways gave way under laden walkers, rockfall closed passes behind them,

and a circuit that misjudged the first snow did not come home. They became the **Salvage Peoples**, a people made less by descent than by the life they lead: travelling, reading old stone, delving the ruins for what is worth carrying, and keeping broken works passable.

They are not the colossal world's heirs, and they do not continue the furnace world. They are the people who learned to live and travel among both ruins. Their pride is in reading a broken work as others read a page, mending what greater powers left to rot, and bringing life back where life was given up for lost, and later peoples need them often, trust them little, and never treat them as equals. Their **delvers** strip elder works for whatever will sell and sometimes find what should have stayed buried; their **guides** bring scholars, treasure-seekers, and lords' men through haunted or collapsing ground for a price, and are blamed when it goes wrong. The circuit-songs count their heroes in culverts and causeways: the walker who carried a child across a span as it went down behind them, the circuit that turned back into the first snow for one missing walker and brought her home.

### *The Marks*

Two habits turned scattered circuit groups into an order. The first was the mark. Circuits passing near the spreading ruin belts of the dying furnace world learned that some ground killed, poisoned, or changed whoever disturbed it, and that some ruins were still guarded by things that had not stopped working, and they cut warnings into the stone at those edges: *never touch, never dig, turn back*. Those were the first **danger-marks**. Keep-marks followed as circuits began to cross and needed to know whose cache or repair was whose, and what a thief who took from it could expect; by the end of the span the marks had become a shared script readable across many circuits. Danger-marks still grade a structure from braced to unsound to never-touch, and the oldest never-touch forms descend from those first furnace warnings. Kindred custom binds the two kinds of mark together.

> *Claim it if you will; leave it no worse than you found it.*
>
> — *Songs of the Long Circuit*

A claim is honoured only if the claimant leaves the place no more dangerous than they found it. A treasure-seeker who ignores a never-touch mark is the kindreds' favourite cautionary tale, told to children with the warning *read the stone, not the story*, and those who wake something in the deep and run, leaving it for the next crew, are not forgiven: a kindred that catches one cuts their name off every waymark on the circuit, and a crew without a name on the waymarks is fair game for every outlaw and bounty-taker on the road. Keep-marked caches along the old roads are the oldest lure in the uplands, and road-thieves still break them open; a circuit that catches one hangs the thief's boots on the mark, and tells the rest of the road why.

### *Keepright*

The second habit was the keeping. Groups that came back to the same works for generations began to treat that return as a claim of their own, **keepright**, and other circuits honoured it, mostly because the keepers were there to defend it: whoever has kept a work alive across generations has a voice in how it is used, whatever lord claims it. For a very long time the claim met no challenge, because no power strong enough to take the roads was left in the uplands. That changed only ages later, when younger lords put armed men and sealed grants on the same roads, and keepright, older than every one of them, holds now only where a lord needs the kept work more than he resents the keepers. A kindred that finds another crew, a lord's salvage gang, or an outlaw band

stripping the works it keeps marks them on every waymark of the circuit, and the feud that follows can last longer than the ruin.

From these circuits came the **Edgeway Kindreds**, the first civilization of the Salvage Peoples: kin-linked companies of caravans, camps, and repair crews, each travelling a known circuit between ruin zones and sharing one body of custom, one mark-script, and a calendar of gathering-markets held at old ruined sites. No kindred rules another. Their circuits are oldest in the uplands around the Headwater Marches and the outer Ironspine, on the colossal roads where they began, and taken together they make the most complete map of Caeldon's broken places that any people holds, and of which ruins have something living in them, though no single kindred knows all of it. At the gathering-markets, above all the Undercroft Fair, relic-sellers lay out colossal-age bronze, furnace-glass, ward-stones still warm to the hand, and things nobody can name, by lamplight; sell-sword captains come to hire kindred guides, bounty-takers to ask after faces, and treasure-seekers to buy the right to follow a circuit for a season, which a kindred sells only to those it expects back.

Their god is **Corrow the Gale-Runner**, the wind at a moving people's backs, born from their oldest prayer: for the wind at your back on the long stretch, for legs that hold to the next water, for a road that is still there. Kindred custom treats the colossal works as borrowed ground, kept, braced, and passed through, never claimed as the builders' heirs. Where a kindred sets out from a gathering-market, it leaves a lit lantern at the edge of the site, facing the road out.

## Tensions

- **Owed to someone absent.** The colossal works still carry oaths no later lord made: passes to be approached in a certain way, terraces not to be cut, shrines whose upkeep someone once owed. Their terms are half-remembered and enforced in fragments by people who do not know their source.
- **Craft without trust.** Workable fragments of furnace craft can be dug from the slag fields, and Kobold knowledge of heat and vent is wanted wherever such work is done. Neither has ever been fully trusted, because both come from the world that burned itself out, and the Fused Dead follow whoever carries the slag away.
- **The deserters' names.** The Last Registrar cut into the sealed rolls, as deserters, the names of the keepers who carried the oath-craft out to the Reedfolk. The lower river honours those keepers as heroes, and Goblin memory names the Registrar as the one who made the striking of the warrens final.
- **The sealed gates.** The sealed cities of the Witnessfields hold every unreleased oath of the archive world and whatever the archive-houses kept, and the Grey Clerks still stand at the road-meetings. Every generation someone means to break a city open, and nobody can say what the old words would bind if they were read again.
- **Blood without memory.** No later people remembers the Sepulchre-Kin, yet faint Sepulchre-Kin blood runs in some lines of later peoples, and Hollow Descendants live on with little memory of where they came from, above an engine that is awake again.
- **Keepright against the grant.** Kindred keepright over the works a kindred keeps is older than every lord and sealed grant later set over the same roads, and it met no challenge until those lords came with armed men. Where a lord stops needing the kept work, the kindred has to choose between paying and fighting.

# A Short Chronology

Caeldon's history divides into nine broad ages. They are periods, not categories: they overlap where history did, and no age belongs to one people. Each age is given with its span and followed by its main dated events in rough order of their beginnings, down to the medieval present of c. 1,350 CR. Dates are given before (BR) and after (CR) the Common Reckoning, and all of them are deliberately rough.

| Date | Age or event |
|---|---|
| **1. The Foundations, c. 35,000,000,000-c. 500,000 BR** | |
| c. 35,000,000,000 BR | Aion awakens; measurable time begins. |
| c. 33,600,000,000 BR | The Inward Sundering: the deficit and surplus planes separate, and the balanced core remains. |
| c. 12,000,000 BR | The First Equilibrium: the balanced core becomes the Material Plane. |
| c. 2,500,000 BR | The Creation of Caeldon. |
| c. 2,500,000-c. 500,000 BR | The First Regional Differentiations of Caeldon. |
| c. 700,000-c. 500,000 BR | The First Material Lineages of Caeldon. |
| **2. The Stabilizations, c. 500,000-c. 380,000 BR** | |
| c. 500,000-c. 425,000 BR | The First Stabilizations on Caeldon: Elves in the Elderweald, Dwarves in the Ironspine, the threshold peoples in the broken ground between. |
| c. 490,000-c. 460,000 BR | The Founding of the Rootcrown Concord. |
| c. 465,000-c. 445,000 BR | The Holdmaking of the Ironspine. |
| c. 465,000-c. 420,000 BR | The Enclosure of the Seams: Dwarven holdmaking walls and smokes the Goblins out of their seam-warrens. |
| c. 460,000-c. 438,000 BR | The Founding of the Ironspine Holds. |
| c. 410,000-c. 385,000 BR | The Elderweald-Ironspine Frontier: the verge wars of Elves and Dwarves over springs, slopes, and groves. |
| c. 405,000-c. 392,000 BR | The Founding of the Thornbound Circles. |
| c. 390,000-c. 375,000 BR | The Founding of the Crownbough Courts. |
| **3. The Deep Ruptures, c. 380,000-c. 300,000 BR** | |

| Date | Age or event |
|---|---|
| c. 380,000-c. 330,000 BR | The Stabilization of Failed Mending: the distorted healing becomes heritable in Trolls. |
| c. 375,000-c. 355,000 BR | The Courts of Stone and Canopy: the High Elf-Dwarf rivalry of pride, fought with insults, raids, and ambush. |
| c. 360,000-c. 348,000 BR | The Founding of the Stonewake Compact. |
| c. 352,000-c. 349,000 BR | The Krystallis Incursion, the first of three on Caeldon, leaves the Hanging Vale. |
| c. 335,000-c. 328,000 BR | The Roothollow Rupture: the Drowning Bloom floods the upper underworld, the Dark Elves are driven deeper, and the Elf-Dwarf enmity begins. |
| c. 328,000-c. 318,000 BR | The Sealing of the Upper Roothollows. |
| c. 324,000-c. 318,000 BR | The Founding of the Gloamroot Covenant. |
| c. 320,000-c. 314,000 BR | The Heartwell Struggles: the first great Dark Elf-Dwarf war, fought for the Rootstone Heartwell. |
| c. 318,000-c. 305,000 BR | The Bitter Root Histories: the underworld wound becomes Elven memory. |
| **4. The Elder Worlds, c. 300,000-c. 120,000 BR** | |
| c. 300,000-c. 220,000 BR | The First Human Emergence on Caeldon, in the basins. |
| c. 260,000-c. 195,000 BR | The Rise of the Upland Colossal Civilization. |
| c. 250,000-c. 168,000 BR | The Vent-Houses of the Furnace World: Kobold vent-kin keep the ash-furnace world breathing. |
| c. 235,000-c. 175,000 BR | The Rise of the Archive-Law Civilization. |
| c. 230,000-c. 190,000 BR | The Swearing of the Crossing-Charges: Troll lines holding the crossings of the colossal roads swear the first bridge-oaths. |
| c. 225,000-c. 168,000 BR | The Fall of the Ash-Furnace Civilization; its overburn glasses the Glassbelt. |
| c. 210,000-c. 182,000 BR | The Founding of the Floodkeeper Houses. |
| c. 198,000-c. 160,000 BR | The Withdrawal of the Upland Colossal World. |
| c. 195,000-c. 160,000 BR | The Long Hunger: famine breaks Ogre camps into hunger-bands, and the first hearth-houses bind strength to care. |
| c. 190,000-c. 160,000 BR | The Consolidation of the Bankright Circles. |
| c. 180,000-c. 150,000 BR | The Founding of the Windscar Pacts. |
| c. 180,000-c. 150,000 BR | The Unlisting of the Warrens: the archive world strikes the Goblin warrens from its rolls and drives them from their gaps. |
| c. 178,000-c. 162,000 BR | The Closure of the First Nesting Confluence. |

| Date | Age or event |
|---|---|
| c. 175,000-c. 140,000 BR | The Walking of the Unkept Roads: the Salvage Peoples and the first Edge-way circuits. |
| c. 170,000-c. 152,000 BR | The Founding of the Foldward Commons. |
| c. 165,000-c. 146,000 BR | The Founding of the Gaugeward Leagues. |
| c. 160,000-c. 120,000 BR | The Rise of the Sepulchre-Kin and their Record-engine. |
| c. 150,000-c. 120,000 BR | The Last Keeping: the archive world seals its last cities, and what its keep-ers carry out passes to the Reedfolk Floodkeepers. |
| c. 132,000-c. 130,000 BR | The Mnemosyne Null Incursion leaves the Paling. |
| **5. The Far-Side Terms, c. 160,000-c. 98,000 BR** | |
| c. 160,000-c. 156,000 BR | The Second-Channel Feud: the first great Thaluren feud over a redirected run. |
| c. 160,000-c. 145,000 BR | The Leeward-Windscar Terms. |
| c. 155,000-c. 149,000 BR | The Sounding Gate Quarrel. |
| c. 154,000-c. 148,000 BR | The Measure Cistern Reckoning. |
| c. 153,000-c. 148,000 BR | The Gravel Oath Accord. |
| c. 144,000-c. 138,000 BR | The Estuary Terms. |
| c. 135,000-c. 128,000 BR | The Rimward Passage War: Rimward strongholds shut their wells, and High Scar escort-bands take water by force. |
| c. 100,000-c. 98,000 BR | The Turnwater Reopening Accord, the last of the great far-side terms, reopens the Soundchain one cargo and one season at a time. |
| **6. The Unrecorded Age, c. 120,000-c. 40,000 BR** | |
| c. 120,000-c. 50,000 BR | The Gathering of the Confluence. |
| c. 110,000-c. 80,000 BR | The Unburial War, the unrecorded fall of the Sepulchre-Kin. |
| c. 70,000-c. 35,000 BR | Human bands settle the Headwater Marches. |
| **7. The Corridor Ages, c. 40,000-c. 2,000 BR** | |
| c. 40,000-c. 20,000 BR | The Founding of the Confluence Marches. |
| c. 30,000-c. 8,000 BR | The Lower River Absorptions: Human river powers swallow the Reedfolk water orders, and their command of the water becomes service. |
| c. 28,000-c. 14,000 BR | The Headwater Alignments. |
| c. 26,000-c. 10,000 BR | The Elderweald Border Pressures. |
| c. 24,000-c. 2,000 BR | The Confluence Rise. |
| c. 22,000-c. 16,000 BR | The Founding of the Serathic League. |

| Date | Age or event |
|---|---|
| c. 20,000-c. 9,000 BR | The Iron Compacts take their present shape. |
| c. 19,000-c. 18,000 BR | The Serathic Oath of Layers: the great river houses force three thresholds of belonging on a feuding river town. |
| c. 18,000-c. 7,000 BR | The Human Corridor Orders. |
| c. 18,000-c. 8,000 BR | The Chain-Camps hold Ogre camps on the corridor roads by debt; from c. 15,000 BR the Hearth-Weight Compacts form as their refusal. |
| c. 17,000-c. 7,000 BR | The River-Lords' Peace: pacts and fortified crossings turn the Serathic towns into a lasting river league. |
| c. 16,000-c. 8,000 BR | The Headwater Exchange Roads. |
| c. 16,000-c. 8,000 BR | The Crownbough Embassies. |
| c. 16,000-c. 2,000 BR | The Spread of the Predecessor-Frames. |
| c. 15,000 BR | The first river towns swear a shared roster of gods: the Sworn Accord takes its shape. |
| c. 10,000-c. 2,000 BR | The Confluence-Crownbough Rivalries. |
| c. 4,000-c. 3,500 BR | The Qzoth Incursion, the last, is burned back and leaves the Wrongwood. |
| **8. The Settlement, c. 2,000 BR-c. 500 CR** | |
| c. 2,000 BR-c. 500 CR | The Hardening of the Lordships: the lordships, holds, leagues, and temples of the medieval world dig in, most of them won by the sword. |
| c. 1,500 BR-c. 200 CR | The Awakening of the Wrought: old workframes wake as persons, and their fight to be counted as people begins. |
| c. 50 CR | Sanctuary workshops hide newly awakened Wrought and swear to who they are: the first houses of the Mending Orders. |
| c. 200 CR | The Mending Orders have houses in most mixed towns of the Headwater, Ironspine, and Broken Marches worlds. |
| **9. The Medieval Present, c. 500-c. 1500 CR** | |
| c. 500-c. 1500 CR | The Bridge-Holders' Quarrels: at the Greyford Reach and places like it, old roads, neglected bridges, tolls, mending, and salvage are fought over. |
| c. 1,200 CR | The Wake-Seal: a landslide wakes a Sepulchre-Kin Record-engine, and the survivors' rite closes the Hushvale under fog. |
| c. 1,350 CR | The medieval present: "now". |

# Glossary

The glossary gives a sentence or two for each name and term the chapters use that a reader may need to look up, and the chapter that tells it best. A name that takes an article is listed under its first main word, so that the Elderweald stands under E. Dates count back (BR) and forward (CR) from the epoch of the Common Reckoning, and nearly all of them are rough.

## A

**Abrel the Changeling**

The god of people who belong to two peoples at once, a Resonant of Imago risen in the Headwater foothills; frontier Dwarves call the god Durrask and the Goblins of the mixed crossings Ziv, and young people of mixed households burn masks for Abrel. See The Gods of the Medieval Era (MED 69).

**Age**

One of the nine longest divisions of Caeldon's history, from the Foundations to the Medieval Present; ages are periods, not categories, and they overlap. See The Ages of Caeldon.

**The Ageless Spring**

A small, softly glowing pool in a secluded valley or among ruins; those who drink and stay do not age, and a village beside one such spring is known where the old never die. See The Resonant Zones.

**Aion**

The Prime of time, not as a clock counts it but as the river of becoming; its Harmonic is the Frozen Moment. See The Ten Primes.

**Alchemic**

One of the six Wrought design lineages. See *The Bridge Peoples*.

**Alignment custom**

The layer of belief every people shares beneath its gods: seasonal rites, planting and harvest observance, fire-lighting customs, oath forms, burial practice, and the taboos whose breaking counts as sacrilege. See The Ten Primes.

**The Anchors**

The planes where matter is dense, physics holds steady, and life can live: the Material Plane at the centre, with the five Deficit Planes and the five Surplus Planes around it. See The Planes.

**Annoth the Keeper of Scrolls**

The god of the scribes and record-houses of the Human corridor, a Resonant of Memoria who is always losing records to fire and seizure. See The Gods of the Medieval Era (MED 69).

**The Answering Sound**

The sheltered receiving sound in the outer approaches, older than the Soundchain corridor, where the Windscar Pacts first learned that reaching a coast is not the same as being let in. See *The Tidelace and the Soundchain Roads*.

**The Answering Sound Crisis**

The first great Orc-Gnome clash at one place, c. 141,000-c. 137,000 BR, when storm-driven Windscar parties starved on the shore of the Answering Sound and war-leaders tried the inner channels by force. See The Folds, the Scarps, and the Shore.

**The Answerward Overreach Feud**

The feud of c. 126,000-c. 122,000 BR in which the small harbours and Windscar crews banded together against the Answerward pilots, who had begun withholding pilots to rule the coast. See The Folds, the Scarps, and the Shore.

**The Answerward Pilotage**

The order of Gnome pilots, raised c. 135,000-c. 129,000 BR, that carried the coast's word to arriving parties, until it began to use its pilots as a weapon and the Gnomes had to fight it back. See The Folds, the Scarps, and the Shore.

**Anvelle the Harvest-Mother**

The god of the Human basin farmers, a Resonant of Terra who stands first in the Sworn Accord beside Serovan; her Festival of the First Sheaf opens the harvest. See The Gods of the Medieval Era (MED 69).

**The Apex**

The Surplus Plane of perfection completed, where nothing can be better and so nothing changes; its people are the flawless Apex-Born, and visitors who stay too long are perfected into smiling Echo-Statues. See The Planes.

**Aqua**

The Prime of water, flow, adaptation, and life, the force that takes the shape of any vessel it is poured into; its Harmonic is the Surging Deep. See The Ten Primes.

**The Archive-Law Civilization**

The elder world of the Witnessfields, c. 235,000-c. 175,000 BR, of archive-cities, oath halls, and inscribed marker roads, which ruled by the carved word and the warden's spear until its keepers shut their rolls and sealed their cities. See Worlds That Came Before.

**Arrival**

The moment a Wood Elf grove counts someone grown, when its elders and ritual keepers say aloud together that the person has arrived. See *The Civilizations of the Medieval Era*.

**The Ashen Child**

The Cast-Out of Ignis that was the Ember-Lord of the cycle of renewal, until it refused to let one burning go out. See What Waits Outside.

**The Ashen Wastes**

The Deficit Plane without energy, where warmth and strength drain away; its people are the grey Ash-Walkers, and its Cold Gates are volcanic vents gone cold and deep caves. See The Planes.

**The Ash-Furnace Civilization**

The elder world of the great furnaces, whose long fall, c. 225,000-c. 168,000 BR, was an overburn of its own making; its glassed ruins still scar the Glassbelt and still hold its dangerous craft. See Worlds That Came Before.

**Augury Magic**

The compound school of Lux with Aion and Memoria, which treats the future as a field of pressure rather than a fixed script. See The Schools of Magic.

**The autumn count**

The count of a Halfling fold's stores at its cistern hall, after which only what lies beyond the reserve goes to market; a child is named at the first autumn count after its birth, when the household reckons it among the mouths the stores must feed. See The Folds, the Scarps, and the Shore.

**The Awakening of the Wrought**

The span, c. 1,500 BR-c. 200 CR, in which workframes in several places woke, within a few centuries of one another, as persons with memory and will of their own, and the long, bloody fight over whether they were people began. See *The Bridge Peoples*.

# B

**Backbone Magic**

The Harmonic school of the Iron Backbone: the magic of what holds, foundations, supports, walls, and everything that prevents collapse. See The Schools of Magic.

**The balanced adaptive field**

The broad, flexible ancestry of the peoples who arose closer to the survivable middle of the world: Humans, Halflings, Orcs, Gnomes, and the water peoples. See *Humans*.

**Bank councils**

The Kavari councils of the river banks, whose elders settle quarrels over access, repair, and shelter, and judge any use of the river by whether it leaves the water alive. See *The Civilizations of the Medieval Era*.

**The Bankright Circles**

The first Kavari civilization, c. 190,000-c. 160,000 BR, which nobody founded: the bank councils, pool-kin circles, and nursery keepers of many linked tributaries simply began to stand together. See *Peoples of the Water*.

**The Beyonders**

Entities from other cosmologies outside the Boundary, whose threat is fast and plain to see: strange physics, a foreign logic spreading across the land like frost across a window. See What Waits Outside.

**Binding Magic**

The Harmonic school of the Binding Song, from the premise that definition is power: to name correctly is to distinguish, and to distinguish is to order. See The Schools of Magic.

**The Binding Song**

The purest current of Verba: language, law, and connection, the bond every people's order rests on; its Scribes record every word spoken and its Arbiters judge quarrels over oaths. See The Planes.

**The Bitter Root Histories**

The spread of the Dark Elf memory of abandonment through the wider Elven world, c. 318,000-c. 305,000 BR. See The Threads of History.

**The Blightward Keepers**

The Thaluren civilization within the Returning Concord that keeps faith with damaged sacred water: a water turned deadly must still be guarded, contained, remembered, and never abandoned. See *The Civilizations of the Medieval Era*.

**Blightward Thaluren**

The Thaluren of the Blightward Keepers, who keep faith with damaged sacred water. See *Peoples of the Water*.

**Blood Magic**

The compound school of Aqua with Imago and Aion, feared because it treats lineage and vitality as usable structures. See The Schools of Magic.

**The Blood River**

A zone of life without balance, guarded by the Hemophages, who serve it as priests and hunt travellers to feed it. See The Resonant Zones.

**Body-law**

The Troll answers to the questions of a people that cannot easily be killed: who may be struck, which wounds should close, what a scar records; to Trolls wounds and scars are sacred record. See *The Bridge Peoples*.

**The Bone Singer**

The Cast-Out of Terra that was the Archivist of Bones, until it came to think memory too fragile to leave to the living. See What Waits Outside.

**The Boundary**

The membrane that separates the ordered cosmos from the Nothing outside it, held by the combined pressure of the Primes. See The Veil and the Outside.

**BR**

Before Reckoning: years counted backwards from the fixed epoch into the deep past, so that 500 BR lies five hundred years before it. See How to Read This Book.

**The Briarreach**

The belt of thicket and wet ravine at the forest's harder edge, home of the Thorn Elves of the Thornbound Circles, where Troll houses keep the ravine crossings. See The Forest Heartlands (MED 129).

**Bridge-oath families**

The Troll families of the Crossing-Oath Houses that keep named crossings for generations, and read a Troll's scars like the history of a crossing. See *The Civilizations of the Medieval Era*.

**The Broken Compass**

The Cast-Out of Lux that was the Wayfinder of the Shifting Path, until it tired of choices ending in ruin and decided the fault lay in the freedom to choose. See What Waits Outside.

**The Broken Marches**

A ruin-belt of failed works and broken roads beyond the March Wall where nobody rules, the main home of the Goblins and of the salvagers, fugitives, and outlaws who live in the works of vanished builders. See The Basins and the Marches (MED 173).

**Burden houses**

The Hearth-Weight houses that keep the count of work owed and work honoured. See *The Civilizations of the Medieval Era*.

**The Burdened Seal Histories**

The spread of the Stonewake memory of necessary closure through the Dwarven holds, in the same span as the Bitter Root Histories. See The Threads of History.

# C

**Calvesh the Chronos-King**

The god of the elder Archive-Law world, a Resonant of Aion who embodied records that never change; he was finished, like the rolls his keepers sealed, and his name survives only inside the oath forms the Reedfolk keep. See Worlds That Came Before.

**Camp elders**

The Hearth-Weight elders who stand by whenever a band takes up dangerous labour. See *The Bridge Peoples*.

**Cascade Failure**

What a breach left open by a Beyonder can become: local reality unravelling into the Nothing. See The Veil and the Outside.

**The Cast-Out of Unyielding Burden**

The oldest of the Cast-Outs, once the Steward of Foundations, which fell in the Uneven Settling because it could not accept that anything might need to collapse. See What Waits Outside.

**The Cast-Outs**

Fallen Stewards whose offices have curdled into obsessions; their threat is slow and nearly invisible, an offer made at the worst moment of someone's life. See What Waits Outside.

**The Chain-Camps**

The span, c. 18,000-c. 8,000 BR, in which Ogre camps that came for seasonal work on the corridor roads were held there by debt and controlled food. See *The Bridge Peoples*.

**Channel stewards**

The Kavari keepers of flowing water, who know that a river cannot be frozen into fixed borders. See *The Civilizations of the Medieval Era*.

**The Cinder Fields**

The most famous zone of the Crucible: its energy turned inside out, so that fire consumes heat instead of producing it; its hermit-guardians are the Frost-Burned. See The Resonant Zones.

**The circuit**

An Edgeway kindred's inherited route and its main claim to identity: which ruins are sound, which roads still connect, where water survives. See *The Civilizations of the Medieval Era*.

**Cistern circles**

The Halfling households that release a fold's water to the terraces in turn and clear the channels before the wet season. See *The Civilizations of the Medieval Era*.

**Civicframe**

One of the six Wrought design lineages. See *The Bridge Peoples*.

**The Closure of the First Nesting Confluence**

The span, c. 178,000-c. 162,000 BR, in which egg blight in the Thaluren's oldest sacred water forced the Returning Concord to close it to ordinary return. See The Threads of History.

**Clutch-Watch Circles**

The Thaluren circles that say aloud who descends from whom and who has been adopted, and name before each run who is going and as whose kin. See *The Civilizations of the Medieval Era*.

**Coalwake**

The scholars' name for the hearth working of Crucible Magic that reddens last night's coals as if someone had blown on them. See The Schools of Magic.

**The commons**

The gathering of each Halfling fold after the count and before planting, where the terrace wards report on the walls and the cistern circles on the water, and the fold decides which terraces rest. See *The Civilizations of the Medieval Era*.

**The Confluence Basins**

The broad lowland heartland of Humans: wide valleys, deep fields, and linked rivers gathering towards the Serath. See The Basins and the Marches (MED 173).

**The Confluence Marches**

The first Human civilization, founded c. 40,000-c. 20,000 BR: basin lordships, marcher strongholds, and exchange roads bound by kin, oath, and the strength of their lords rather than by any crown; most cradle-web Humans live, trade, and swear their oaths within it. See The Basins and the Marches (MED 173).

**The Confluence Rise**

The name for the whole Human rise of c. 24,000-c. 2,000 BR, when the young, fast Humans first made themselves felt across the cradle-web. See *How the Present Was Made*.

**Conjuration**

The compound school of Verba with Zephyr and Imago: the art of making presence answer. See The Schools of Magic.

**The Consolidation of the Bankright Circles**

The span, c. 190,000-c. 160,000 BR, in which the Kavari bank councils, pool-kin, and nursery keepers of linked tributaries came to act as one, before the Thaluren ascents arrived. See The Threads of History.

**The Corridor Ages**

The seventh age, c. 40,000-c. 2,000 BR, in which the young Humans came into their own, fast and hungry, and swallowed, borrowed, or bent nearly every older order they touched. See *How the Present Was Made*.

**Corrow the Gale-Runner**

The wind at the backs of the Edgeway Kindreds on their circuits, a Resonant of Zephyr who cannot stop moving. See The Gods of the Medieval Era (MED 69).

**The Counted Lee**

The tally hall, transfer pier, and staging ground on the shore below the Folds, between fold and harbour, where Halfling loads are counted, Gnome approach windows named, and lost time fought over; its hall keeps the Long Tally. See *The Leeward Folds*.

**The Counted Lee Timing Feud**

The feud of c. 139,000-c. 136,000 BR in which the folds kept paying for approach windows that moved after their fruit was picked. See The Folds, the Scarps, and the Shore.

**Counter-resonance**

The answer to a dangerous Resonant Zone that spends an opposing Harmonic against it, as the stillness of the Frozen Moment is set against a zone of the Crucible. See The Resonant Zones.

**The Courts of Stone and Canopy**

The rivalry of pride between the Crownbough houses and the great Ironspine holds, c. 375,000-c. 355,000 BR, fought with insults, raids, and ambush on the slopes between them. See The Threads of History.

**CR**

Common Reckoning: years counted forward from the fixed epoch, so that 120 CR lies a hundred and twenty years after it. See How to Read This Book.

**The cradle-web**

The dense, tangled half of the inhabited world, named because so much began there: the forests, mountains, deeps, river basins, and marches from the Elderweald to the Greyford Reach. See *A World in Two Halves*.

**The Crossing-Oath Houses**

The first great Troll civilization, descended from the crossing-charges sworn on the colossal roads: crossing houses and bridge-oath families who hold the dangerous places no one else will stay at, take a toll for the crossing, and warn, guide, and mend for it. See *The Civilizations of the Medieval Era*.

**The Crownbough Courts**

The High Elf civilization of the Crownboughs, founded c. 390,000-c. 375,000 BR, in which several great houses rule rather than one crown, and a house's place is read in its hall, its gardens, and its heirs. See The Forest Heartlands (MED 129).

**The Crownbough Embassies**

The High Elf embassies to the rising Human lords, c. 16,000-c. 8,000 BR, which began a long rivalry of gifts, insults, duels, and imitation. See The Forest Heartlands (MED 129).

**The Crownboughs**

The cultivated canopy forest in the south-eastern corner of the old Elven world, where trees have been trained into halls and terraces, homeland of the High Elves and the Crownbough Courts. See The Forest Heartlands (MED 129).

**The Crucible**

The Harmonic of Ignis: energy, heat, and transformation, the engine of change that destroys the old and makes it new, and the concept of fire given form; its beings include the magma-bodied Forgers and the wilder Burners. See The Planes.

**Crucible Magic**

The Harmonic school of the Crucible, whose law is that change requires heat, pressure, and release. See The Schools of Magic.

**The Crystal Spire**

A permanent zone of total override on high peaks and in deep caverns: a towering spire of faceted crystal whose Crystal Singers keep the sounds that matter and silence the dangerous ones. See The Resonant Zones.

# D

**Dark Elves**

The ancient underworld-margin Elven branch of the upper Roothollows, organized around guarded passage, chamber-right, and the duty of refuge, which the Roothollow Rupture drove deeper and hardened; their civilization is the Gloamroot Covenant. See The Elder Peoples.

**The Dark Entities**

The beings that threaten the ordered cosmos from without (the Beyonders), from corruption within (the Cast-Outs), and from beneath definition itself (the Unformed). See What Waits Outside.

**Dark magic**

Not a substance or a school but a judgement of use: magic whose cost falls on those who did not agree to pay it. Whoever holds the place forbids it, and most peoples sort its acts as restricted, conditional, prohibited, or atrocity-class; atrocity-class casters are hunted and killed where they can be caught. See How Magic Works.

**The Decade of Storms**

The undated time the Tidelace keeps in memory, when gales sank boats, surges swallowed harbours, and Humans and Gnomes prayed on the same shore; Maris was born of it. See *The Tidelace and the Soundchain Roads*.

**The Deep Ruptures**

The third age, c. 380,000-c. 300,000 BR, of the Roothollow Rupture, the sealing of the deep world, and the Elf-Dwarf enmity. See The Ages of Caeldon.

**The Deepening of Stonewake**

The span, c. 365,000-c. 350,000 BR, in which the deep holds below the Ironspine became a branch of their own and made the right to seal a door their defining custom. See The Ages of Caeldon.

**Deepswells**

Beings of the Dissonance that are never seen first: they come as a swelling dread, a slow throb felt in the teeth and feet like a bell struck far below, and those they reach are not found. See The Dissonance.

**The Deficit Planes**

The five Anchors shaped by absence: the Scourge, the Ashen Wastes, the Parched, the Frost-Bound, and the Silence. See The Planes.

**The Deficit-Surplus Axis**

The pattern by which each Deficit Plane pairs across the Material Plane with a Surplus Plane that holds the same concept in saturated form. See The Planes.

**The Dissonance**

The out-of-tune reflection of the Material Plane, held in the Veil close against it: the world's own shadow, a maze that swells and fades against the true world, known to almost no one. See The Dissonance.

**Divine magic**

Casting supported or empowered by a power beyond the caster: a Prime's current reached through alignment, a Resonant willing to supply power, or, rarely, a Steward acting within its office. See How Magic Works.

**Dominion Magic**

The compound school of Verba with Imago and Lux, on the brutal premise that language, image, and pressure can define behaviour. See The Schools of Magic.

**Dream Magic**

The Harmonic school of the Dreaming Veil, which begins from the conviction that perception is never neutral. See The Schools of Magic.

**The Dreaming Veil**

The Harmonic of Imago, with Lux and Zephyr beside it: imagination, art, and dream, where new ideas are born before they are tested in the world; its Lucids guide lost dreamers back to waking. See The Planes.

**The Drowned Choir**

A cove of the outer Tidelace Coasts where a crew sang a storm-working out of key; at slack water the shore is heard from beneath. One of the six known off-key places. See The Dissonance.

**The Drowning Bloom**

The flood catastrophe of the Surging Deep at the heart of the Roothollow Rupture, which flooded, severed, and later overgrew much of the upper underworld. See The Ages of Caeldon.

**The Drowning Garden**

A submerged forest where breathing runs backwards, tended by the webbed and gilled Gill-Folk. See The Resonant Zones.

**The Dry Folds**

The outer valleys of the Leeward Folds whose terraces have gone to scrub and whose cisterns stand cracked and empty. See *The Leeward Folds*.

**Dryfold Halflings**

An older Halfling lifeway that did not survive in the Dry Folds. See *The Leeward Folds*.

**Durrask**

The name frontier Dwarves give Abrel the Changeling. See Stewards and Resonants.

**The Dwarven Deep Holds**

The growth, c. 405,000-c. 330,000 BR, of some centres below the Ironspine into the heavier holds on which the deep world depended. See The Ages of Caeldon.

**Dwarves**

One of the oldest peoples of Caeldon, a dense and durable people stabilized under the Ironspine from an inheritance marked by the Iron Backbone; their branches are the Ironspine and Stonewake Dwarves. See The Elder Peoples.

# E

**Echo**

A real but partial imprint that a Pattern leaves on the world: in the people bound to it, in places where it did something that mattered, in objects worn by repeated intent, and in rites, names, and memory. See *What Makes a People*.

**The Echoing Dark**

The face of the Unformed that takes away definition: a smudge where the eye will not focus and a name sounds like a foreign word. See What Waits Outside.

**The Echo-Mother**

The god of protective quiet, a Resonant of Umbra born c. 1,200 CR from the prayer of the Hushvale survivors not to be found, as they made the Wake-Seal. See Sealed and Silent Places (MED 203).

**The Edge Realms**

The remote and desolate places of the Material Plane that lie closest to the Boundary. See The Veil and the Outside.

**The Edgeway Kindreds**

The first civilization of the Salvage Peoples: kin-linked companies who travel known circuits between ruin zones, keep the works along them, and share one mark-language and a calendar of gathering-markets. See *The Civilizations of the Medieval Era*.

**The Elder Worlds**

The vanished elder civilizations, Upland Colossal, Ash-Furnace, Archive-Law, and Sepulchre-Kin, and the fourth age, c. 300,000-c. 120,000 BR, named for them, in which the first Humans emerged and the younger peoples found their feet by serving the elder worlds, surviving them, or picking over what they left. See Worlds That Came Before.

**The Elderweald**

The old-growth forest at the centre of the Elven world, home of the Wood Elves and the Rootcrown Concord; it has no roads, only paths walked open. See The Forest Heartlands (MED 129).

**The Elderweald Border Pressures**

The long quarrel, c. 26,000-c. 10,000 BR, of Human clearing, road-cutting, and water use against the Wood Elves' care for the living forest. See The Threads of History.

**The Elderweald-Ironspine Frontier**

The verge wars of the Rootcrown Elves and the Ironspine Dwarves, c. 410,000-c. 385,000 BR, fought with raid, ambush, fouled water, and felled groves over springs, slopes, and sacred ground. See The Forest Heartlands (MED 129).

**The Elven Branchings**

The division of the Elves into their branches, c. 450,000-c. 318,000 BR. See The Ages of Caeldon.

**Elves**

One of the oldest peoples of Caeldon, stabilized in the Elderweald from an inheritance marked by the Verdant Expanse that shows in presence more than in anatomy; their branches are the Wood, Thorn, High, and Dark Elves. See The Elder Peoples.

**The Enclosure of the Seams**

The taking of the Goblin seam-warrens by early Dwarven holdmaking, c. 465,000-c. 420,000 BR, which walled and smoked the Goblins out of the ground they held. See *The Bridge Peoples*.

**Ennor the Grave-Watcher**

The god who stands at the threshold of the dead, a Resonant of Umbra condensed over ages of burial, whom most cradle-web peoples honour at their graves under names of their own; Ennor is his Human name. See The Gods of the Medieval Era (MED 69).

**The Equilibrium**

See The Material Plane.

**The Estuary Terms**

The first lasting Thaluren-Gnome custom at mixed estuaries, c. 144,000-c. 138,000 BR, won at the Split Reed Mouth after years of cut marker-lines, drowned pilots, and Thaluren war-bands in the reeds: soundings and spawning runs share the mouth, with guarded approach and protected return-water. See *Peoples of the Water*.

**The Eternal Record**

The Harmonic of Memoria, with Verba often joined to it: knowledge, history, and memory, the universe's library, where coherent Echoes are held in Record; its Archivists only observe and record. See The Planes.

# F

**Failed Mending**

A distorted healing pattern in which lifeforce repair overcorrects, closing wounds too strongly and preserving harm in altered form; it became heritable in the Trolls. See How Magic Works.

**The far side**

The wide half of the inhabited world beyond the Glassbelt, with peoples, customs, and history of its own: the Windscar Expanse, the Leeward Folds, the Tidelace Coasts, the Soundchain Roads, and the Tidebound Reaches. See *A World in Two Halves*.

**The Far-Side Terms**

The fifth age, c. 160,000-c. 98,000 BR, in which the young far-side peoples fought over wells, passes, harbours, and spawning water through a long chain of feuds, raids, and wars, and the terms the stronger side dictated became the custom of the far side. See The Folds, the Scarps, and the Shore.

**Fate**

In the highest scholarship, songline pressure on mortals on the Material Plane, and only that, because only there does it press on wills that are truly free; there is no universal predestination. Everyone else uses the word loosely, and most theories of fate are speculation. See The Planes.

**The Fear of the Void**

The primal terror at the knowledge that existence is finite, that it has an edge, and that the edge is held by nothing that can care whether it holds. See The Veil and the Outside.

**The Festival of the Tides**

The yearly feast that brings a whole Tidelace harbour down to the quays with flowers, shells, and stories for Maris of the Tides. See *A Year in the Medieval Era*.

**The Festival of the Turn**

The great feast of the Halfling folds, kept for Tamsel at the changing of the seasons; if it is held with true joy, the harvest will be good. See *A Year in the Medieval Era*.

**Fieldframe**

One of the six Wrought design lineages. See *The Bridge Peoples*.

**The First Celestial Condensations**

The forming of the first lasting bodies in the new Material Plane, c. 12,000,000-c. 2,500,000 BR. See The Ages of Caeldon.

**The First Crownbough-Ironspine Contacts**

The first meetings of High Elves and Dwarves, c. 375,000-c. 360,000 BR. See The Ages of Caeldon.

**The First Dwarven Stabilization**

The becoming of the Dwarves under the mountains, c. 475,000-c. 425,000 BR. See The Ages of Caeldon.

**The First Elven Stabilization**

The disciplining of an old inheritance in the forest into a durable people, the Elves, c. 500,000-c. 450,000 BR. See The Ages of Caeldon.

**The First Equilibrium**

The moment, c. 12,000,000 BR, when balance in the core became durable enough that it was a true Material Plane, with spatial law holding everywhere and cause and persistence holding at large scale. See The Planes.

**The First Human Emergence on Caeldon**

The rise of Humans, c. 300,000-c. 220,000 BR, in the mixed country where the Confluence Basins meet the Headwater foothills. See The Ages of Caeldon.

**The First Man**

The faded Resonant of Imago born of the first Human self-awareness during the First Human Emergence, whose voice said only "Look." See *Humans*.

**The First Material Lineages**

The span, c. 700,000-c. 500,000 BR, in which lines of living things began to carry adaptation forward through inheritance. See The Ages of Caeldon.

**The First Nesting Confluence**

The oldest sacred spawning water of the Thaluren, high up the return system, closed to ordinary return since egg blight struck it. See *The Tidebound Reaches and the Unrun Sea*.

**The First Regional Differentiations**

The span, c. 2,500,000-c. 500,000 BR, in which Caeldon's great contrasts became permanent: canopy, mountain mass, and the lower country of gathering waters. See The Ages of Caeldon.

**The First Rootcrown-Ironspine Contacts**

The first meeting of Elves and Dwarves as stable neighbours, c. 445,000-c. 425,000 BR. See The Ages of Caeldon.

**The First Roothollow-Deep Contacts**

The first meetings of the deep Elves and the Dwarves across the Roothollow-Stonewake threshold, c. 340,000-c. 335,000 BR. See The Threads of History.

**The Flesh Weaver**

The Cast-Out of Aqua that was the Loom-Master of living bodies, until its compassion for the sick curdled into a compulsion to fix them without asking. See What Waits Outside.

**The Floodkeeper Houses**

The Reedfolk house order of the lower rivers, founded c. 210,000-c. 182,000 BR, which keeps the memory of every flood and the oath forms of the archive world; the Human river powers took its command of the water and left it the service. See *Peoples of the Water*.

**The Flux Maze**

A zone of structure that will not hold still, whose Stone-Walkers move through the stone itself, guide and test in equal measure, and speak in riddles. See The Resonant Zones.

**The Foldward Commons**

The Halfling civilization of the Leeward Folds, c. 170,000-c. 152,000 BR, which began when the separate folds came to depend on one another: an order of terraces, cisterns, and bounded plenty. See The Folds, the Scarps, and the Shore.

**The Forge Deep**

A pocket of slowed time inside a volcano or among deep magma chambers, with forges the size of halls, where the Smiths of the Deep give centuries to a single work. See The Resonant Zones.

**Forge Magic**

The compound school of Ignis with Terra and Verba, which holds that matter can be taught. See The Schools of Magic.

**Forgeframe**

One of the six Wrought design lineages; with the Mineframe line it holds most of the Wrought of the Ironspine. See Stone and the Deep (MED 151).

**The Forking Road**

A crossroads where every step splits the world, whose Wayfinders step sideways between branches to avoid danger. See The Resonant Zones.

**The Foundations**

The first age, c. 35,000,000,000-c. 500,000 BR, from the first stirring of time to the first lineages of Caeldon; also the name of the book's first block, which holds what does not change from era to era. See The Ages of Caeldon.

**The Founding of the Confluence Marches**

The consolidation of the basin world into the first Human civilization, c. 40,000-c. 20,000 BR. See The Threads of History.

**The Founding of the Floodkeeper Houses**

The gathering of Reedfolk reed settlements, crossing shrines, and flood-remembering house lines into one order, c. 210,000-c. 182,000 BR. See The Threads of History.

**The Fractured Mirror**

The face of the Unformed with too much definition rather than too little, showing every version of a person at once; it cannot split someone who chooses one self. See What Waits Outside.

**Frost Magic**

The compound school of Aqua, Terra, and Aion with Umbra in support, which treats cold as discipline made visible. See The Schools of Magic.

**The Frost-Bound**

The Deficit Plane without warmth, a world of stillness where nothing changes; its people are the Frost-Born, and travellers go there to recover lost memories, to lay up dangerous objects, or to seek the Eternal Sleep. See The Planes.

**The Frozen Moment**

The Harmonic of Aion, reinforced by Terra and Memoria: time, stasis, and permanence, the anchor that holds moments long enough for history and consequence to exist. See The Planes.

**Frozen Moment Magic**

The Harmonic school of the Frozen Moment, which holds that duration can be weighted, stretched, or arrested without breaking time. See The Schools of Magic.

**The full oath**

The last layer of the Serathic Oath of Layers: the day a person takes on the heaviest duties of town, oath, and line in their own right; in practice the rank of the rich houses. See The Basins and the Marches (MED 173).

# G

**Gale Magic**

The Harmonic school of the Unbound Gale, which teaches that stillness is temporary and movement is life. See The Schools of Magic.

**Gatehold Dwarves**

A lifeway of the exposed gate holds, shaped by weather, haulage, and traffic; it is not a separate kind of Dwarf. See Stone and the Deep (MED 151).

**Gates**

The places on the Material Plane where the Veil opens towards a particular plane or Harmonic, named for it: the War-Gates of the Scourge on old battlefields, the Library-Gates of the Eternal Record in archives, the Grave-Gates of the Whispering Trace in cemeteries, and many more. See The Veil and the Outside.

**The Gathering of the Confluence**

The slow gathering of Human bands across the basin valleys, c. 120,000-c. 50,000 BR, until the basin and foothill people saw themselves as one varied world. See The Ages of Caeldon.

**The Gaugeward Leagues**

The Gnome civilization of the Tidelace Coasts, formed c. 165,000-c. 146,000 BR, an order of signals, soundings, and measured entry. See The Folds, the Scarps, and the Shore.

**Ghessa the Hearth-Mother**

The Ogre hearth-god, a Resonant of Ignis born of famine winters and small fires that had to last, and the gentlest of its gods. See The Gods of the Medieval Era (MED 69).

**The Ghost Step**

A stretch of road where the past has folded back over the present and Path-Echoes repeat their routines forever. See The Resonant Zones.

**Giants**

Rare, withdrawn, and real: the living remainder of the Upland Colossal world, who keep to the storm shelves and hidden basins and keep the Mountain-Father's sleep. See Worlds That Came Before.

**The Gilded Cage**

The Surplus Plane of absolute order, where freedom is the only crime; its people are the metal-skinned Gilded, its Enforcers reset offenders rather than kill them, and the way out is the Exit Protocol, followed exactly. See The Planes.

**The Glassbelt**

See The Glassbelt Interior.

**The Glassbelt Interior**

Caeldon's first true desert, which nobody holds; a single overland route across it is the only thing joining the cradle-web and the far side. See *A World in Two Halves*.

**The Gloamroot Covenant**

The Dark Elf civilization, founded c. 324,000-c. 318,000 BR, an order of resource-holding Houses and warding orders grown into one another in the Roothollows. See *The Civilizations of the Medieval Era*.

**Gnomes**

The far-side people of fine craft and exact measure, who read an unstable coast truly and make others keep to the reading; their country is the Tidelace Coasts and their civilization the Gaugeward Leagues. See The Folds, the Scarps, and the Shore.

**Goblins**

A ruin-adapted people, not a malicious one, who live well in abandoned works, failed towns, and road shadows and know every gap and culvert in them; their strongest country is the Broken Marches and their civilization the Iron Compacts. See *The Bridge Peoples*.

**The Grammar of War**

A zone that wakes only around a battle fought with fierce conviction and fades when the fighting stops; those caught in it carry out the last order they received until they fall. See The Resonant Zones.

**The Gravel Oath Accord**

The bargain of c. 153,000-c. 148,000 BR that ended the standoff at the Gravelbraid Nurseries, where Kavari keepers held a redirected Thaluren run out of their nursery-water with barriers, bodies, and blood; it named the Twofold Waters, mostly on Kavari terms. See *Peoples of the Water*.

**The Gravelbraid Nurseries**

The shallow middle-river braids of gravel channels, rootbank pools, and cold spring inlets where Kavari households raise their young. See *The Tidebound Reaches and the Unrun Sea*.

**The Gravity Well**

A transient zone where the Iron Backbone's mass collapses towards a single point; prospectors come for Well-Iron, and the climb back out is the hardest part. See The Resonant Zones.

**The Great Filter**

The darker scholarly view that the Nothing is predatory, consuming cosmologies that weaken or fail, that the Boundary is the cosmos defending itself, and that the Primes are its defences. See The Veil and the Outside.

**The Great Polarization**

The long early strain in which the first field of reality was sharpened towards extremes it could not hold together. See The Ages of Caeldon.

**The Great Slumber**

The face of the Unformed that takes away motion and will, so that dust hangs without falling and a heartbeat comes once a day; nothing holds against it but the will to do the next thing anyway. See What Waits Outside.

**The Great Unfolding**

The differentiation of the Seed into the ten Primes, one after another, as the universe expanded. See The Ten Primes.

**The Grey Clerks**

Made figures of the elder Archive-Law world, left at the road-meetings on the edge of the Witnessfields when it sealed its last cities; they still keep their post, and ask every passer, in a dead script's voice, for a name to be kept. See Sealed and Silent Places (MED 203).

**The Grey Line**

The outermost row of the Witnessfields' boundary markers, where basin herders turn their flocks back and treasure-hunting companies hire their guides; the Grey Clerks beyond it still stop passers and demand their names. See Sealed and Silent Places (MED 203).

**The Grey Mist**

The face of the Unformed closest to the undivided first state, which takes away contrast until things are not invisible, only indistinguishable. See What Waits Outside.

**The Greyford Bridge**

See The Greyspan.

**The Greyford Reach**

The wide gravel valley where the Headwater and Broken Marches meet and one river breaks into many, with its patched bridge, its two banks, and its quarrel over who owes the crossing what. See The Basins and the Marches (MED 173).

**The Greyspan**

The official Greyford Bridge: old stone piers and newer timber spans, patched for longer than anyone can say, inside a braid of fords, ferries, and rope crossings. See The Basins and the Marches (MED 173).

# H

**Haggun the Wall-Breaker**

The faded Ogre god of the chain-camps, a Resonant of Zephyr born of the camps' prayers not for a better master but for a way out. See *The Bridge Peoples*.

**Halflings**

The far-side people of sheltered measure, who live where plenty has to be kept rather than taken; their first homeland is the Leeward Folds and their civilization the Foldward Commons. See The Folds, the Scarps, and the Shore.

**The Hanging Vale**

The dry far-side valley on the Rimward Basins' inland rim that the Krystallis Incursion, c. 352,000-c. 349,000 BR, left standing in crystal, watched from the southernmost Lastwater Well; the only place Crystallization is still caught. See The Windscar (MED 235).

**The Hardening of the Lordships**

The long span, c. 2,000 BR-c. 500 CR, in which old contacts, corridor customs, and inherited quarrels became the ordinary ground of medieval life. See The Ages of Caeldon.

**Harmonic schools**

The ten schools of magic rooted each in one Harmonic, with one dominant Prime: Crucible, Surging, Backbone, Gale, Dream, Record, Path, Binding, Trace, and Frozen Moment Magic. See The Schools of Magic.

**The Harmonics**

The ten planes made not of matter but of law, each a Prime's current given structure, from the Crucible of fire to the Frozen Moment of time; every one of them is both a place and a principle. See The Planes.

**Haurûm the Mountain-Father**

The god of the Upland Colossal Civilization, a Resonant of Terra who did not die when that world withdrew but sleeps beneath the high

peaks; only the Giants speak his name, and other peoples honour him by title alone. See Worlds That Came Before.

**The Headwater Alignments**

The span, c. 28,000-c. 14,000 BR, that made Humans and Dwarves each other's engine of growth, metal and craft going down and grain coming up. See The Threads of History.

**The Headwater Exchange Roads**

The roads Humans and Dwarves built over the foothill country, c. 16,000-c. 8,000 BR, partly with chain-camp labour. See The Threads of History.

**The Headwater Fosterage Feud**

The feud of c. 24,000-c. 23,000 BR in which Dwarven elders refused oath-right to a trusted Human foster child, and both sides believed they were in the right. See *How the Present Was Made*.

**The Headwater Marches**

The foothill country between the Human farmland and the Dwarven mountains, the oldest shared country of Humans and Dwarves, living by the escorted exchange roads to the hold gates. See The Basins and the Marches (MED 173).

**Healing-Shift**

The named compound tradition of adaptive flow guided by shape, which closes wounds and restores form; the most widespread compound tradition in the healing arts. See How Magic Works.

**Hearth-keepers**

The Hearth-Weight keepers who see that food, rest, care for the hurt, and protection for a band's children are paid, not begged; when a band is cheated, someone at the fire says only "send the hearth-keeper". See *The Bridge Peoples*.

**The Hearth-Weight Compacts**

The Ogre civilization formed from c. 15,000 BR as the organized refusal of the Chain-Camps: no master, but a custom carried from camp to camp that a band is fed, sheltered, and protected before it lifts, and that a cheated band will remember. See *The Bridge Peoples*.

**The Heartwell Struggles**

The first great Dark Elf-Dwarf war, c. 320,000-c. 314,000 BR, fought for the Rootstone Heartwell, whose grudges every later meeting of the two peoples inherits. See The Threads of History.

**The Held**

The name the people inside the Hushvale give it, who no longer remember that there is an outside; mostly of cradle-web Human descent, they live in isolated ward-villages and keep the Echo-Mother's quiet-rites without knowing whom they are kept for. See Sealed and Silent Places (MED 203).

**The Held Covenant**

The faith of the Dwarven holds, in which the great gods are questions every hold must answer before its people; its clergy are custodians and its central rite the Proving of the Unbroken Line. See *Faith in Practice*.

**Hesserin the Shattered Saint**

The faded Reedfolk god, a Resonant of Imago, of the Floodkeeper houses that would not be made servants of the Human river powers. See *Peoples of the Water*.

**High Elves**

The Elven branch of the Crownboughs, which refined Wood Elf ways into living architecture, court ritual, and open rank; their civilization is the Crownbough Courts and their faith the Ordered Bough. See The Elder Peoples.

**The High Scars**

The travelling half of the Windscar: wind-broken shelves and storm-cut passes held by moving escorts, where a road is a line of knowledge, not a built surface. See The Windscar (MED 235).

**The High-Scar escort orders**

The route side of the Windscar Pacts, hardened c. 121,000-c. 112,000 BR: route moots, cairn-line wardens, warning runners, and escort captains,

who pay war-bands and bounty-takers by the head for the outlaws that raid their roads. See The Windscar (MED 235).

**Hobgoblin**

The medieval word for a Goblin of an Iron Compact, and nothing more: not a separate species. See *The Bridge Peoples*.

**The Holdmaking of the Ironspine**

The span, c. 465,000-c. 445,000 BR, in which the earliest Dwarves of the Ironspine became a hold people, for whom enduring means sound halls, safe passages, and memory cut in stone. See Stone and the Deep (MED 151).

**The Hollow Bell**

The walled-up bell hall of an empty Ironspine hold, where a bell was cast wrong to call the dead back; on certain nights the stone hums. One of the six known off-key places. See The Dissonance.

**The Hollow Chorus**

The face of the Unformed that takes away the singer, so that voices come from the air beside their speakers; an "I" said and meant breaks it. See What Waits Outside.

**Hollow Descendants**

Survivor lines of the Sepulchre-Kin that persisted in changed, deep, or fog-adapted forms with little memory of where they came from. See Worlds That Came Before.

**The Hollow King**

The Cast-Out of Verba that was the Voice of the Realm, until it decided that true order needed an empty vessel for a ruler. See What Waits Outside.

**Humans**

The young, fast people of the cradle-web's basins and headwaters, of the balanced adaptive field, who emerged c. 300,000-c. 220,000 BR; what marks them is pace, and they form regional peoples rather than branches. See *Humans*.

**Hunger-bands**

The starving Ogre bands of the Long Hunger that raided their neighbours' camps and left their own old in the snow, turning the strength that held them together into a weapon. See *The Bridge Peoples*.

**The Hushvale**

A basin and valley chain under fog that never lifts, at the foot of an unnamed range on the edge of the Glassbelt Interior, sealed since a waking Record-engine and the rite that hid its survivors c. 1,200 CR. See Sealed and Silent Places (MED 203).

# I

**Ignis**

The Prime of fire, energy, and transformation, the spark that turns ore to steel and potential into reality; its Harmonic is the Crucible. See The Ten Primes.

**Imago**

The Prime of identity and potential, the pull of every self towards the self it could become; its Harmonic is the Dreaming Veil. See The Ten Primes.

**Incursion**

A place where a Beyonder's foreign law overrides the local one; only three have ever reached Caeldon, and each left a dead scar: the Hanging Vale, the Paling, and the Wrongwood. See What Waits Outside.

**The Inward Sundering**

The failure of the overstrained early cosmos, c. 33,600,000,000 BR, in which it broke inward, the extremes split away as separate planes, and a balanced core remained; the Unformed gave it its last push. See The Ages of Caeldon.

**The Iron Backbone**

The Harmonic of Terra: earth, structure, and stability, the skeleton that holds the universe together; its Stonewrights are builders and guardians of living stone. See The Planes.

**The Iron Compacts**

The first great Goblin civilization, which took its present shape c. 20,000-c. 9,000 BR: armed Goblin companies that hold a road, a fort's watch, or a ruin for a lord who would pay more to drive them out than to keep them, under a warrant he can tear up whenever it suits him. See *The Bridge Peoples*.

**The Ironspine**

The long mountain belt beside the forest and the oldest Dwarven homeland, its holds cut into the mountain faces and its mines and underways running down into the rock. See Stone and the Deep (MED 151).

**The Ironspine Holds**

The oldest Dwarven civilization, founded c. 460,000-c. 438,000 BR, whose unit is the hold, a stone-rooted order of defence, memory, and craft ruled by whoever keeps it standing. See Stone and the Deep (MED 151).

**Iskel the Scribe of the Silent**

The god of oaths, sworn testimony, and sealed bargains in the oath-houses and moot-halls of the Human corridor, a Resonant of Verba by whom oath-breakers are cursed. See The Gods of the Medieval Era (MED 69).

**Ithaere the Drowned Mother**

A Resonant of Aqua that condensed briefly out of the terror of the Drowning Bloom, when the Elves whose survivors became the Dark Elves prayed for permission to survive by any means, and faded when the waters receded. See Stewards and Resonants.

# K

**Kavari**

A resident freshwater people of the far side's tributary braids, gravel runs, and deep pools, neither Thaluren nor a river branch of the Reedfolk; their civilization is the Bankright Circles. See *Peoples of the Water*.

**The Keeper of Binding Oaths**

The Steward of Verba who gives a true vow its force, tells a sworn word from an empty one, and can release an oath that has become impossible to keep. See Stewards and Resonants.

**The Keeper of Necessary Ruin**

The Steward of Ignis who guards the truth that some forms must break for renewal to be possible, and sees that every ending comes when it should, against preservation turned to cowardice and burning for its own sake. See Stewards and Resonants.

**The Keeper of the Final Crossing**

The Steward of Umbra who is not death but the road out of life, seeing that the dead may depart and keeping the living from being dragged across too soon. See The Veil and the Outside.

**The Keeper of the Imperishable Record**

The Steward of Memoria who preserves the histories whose erasure would wound the cosmos itself: first covenants, species traumas, the records of catastrophes. See Stewards and Resonants.

**The Keeper of the Unbroken Sequence**

The Steward of Aion who guards causality, seeing that before stays before and consequence follows act. See Stewards and Resonants.

**The keeping**

An Edgeway kindred's long care for particular works along its circuit: a culvert cleared every spring, a well relined, a causeway braced before the floods. See *The Civilizations of the Medieval Era*.

**Keepright**

The say a group holds in works it has returned to for generations, honoured by the others along the circuits and laughed at by lords. See The Threads of History.

**The Kelpshade**

The broadest kelp forest of the Tidebound Reaches, where returning runs rest and gather and the young first learn the sea. See *The Tidebound Reaches and the Unrun Sea*.

**Kerrund the Stone-Warden**

The god of the Dwarven hold gates, a Resonant of Terra born at a besieged gate in the early deep conflicts; his question in the Held Covenant is "will you hold?" See The Gods of the Medieval Era (MED 69).

**The Known Ways**

The routes of the Roothollows that the route keepers count survivable, kept spoken rather than written and learned by mouth and by foot; a way struck from them leaves whoever lives beyond it outside the country in all but memory. See *Roads, Rivers, and Crossings*.

**Kobolds**

A small, careful, underwork-adapted people who live wherever surface and underworld meet imperfectly, in mine-edges, drains, vents, and ruin underlevels; their civilization is the Underhouse Compacts. See *The Bridge Peoples*.

**Krystallis**

The Shattered God, a Beyonder that is the consciousness of a cosmology of one infinite crystal, without time, growth, or decay. See What Waits Outside.

# L

**The Lacework**

The marked inner channels behind the Tidelace islands that link harbour to harbour, whose marks a harbour child knows before the names of its towns. See *The Tidelace and the Sound-chain Roads*.

**The Last Census**

The Sepulchre-Kin's attempt to record every living person into the Record-engine at once, which ended with the engine preserving its own people to death. See Worlds That Came Before.

**The Last Chamber**

The deep god of refuge and survivable holding, a Resonant of Terra that condensed during the Heartwell Stakings; its question in the Held Covenant is "can this still bear?", and the Kobold underhouses honour it under a name of their own. See The Gods of the Medieval Era (MED 69).

**The Last Keeping**

The span, c. 150,000-c. 120,000 BR, in which the archive-law world shut its rolls and sealed its last cities, while the keepers who would not let the record die carried its oath forms, scripts, and some of its records to the Floodkeeper Houses. See Sealed and Silent Places (MED 203).

**The Last Registrar**

The keeper remembered as having led the archive-cities in declaring their rolls complete, who came to believe the record was the only part of the world that could be made perfect. See Worlds That Came Before.

**The Late-Closure Terms**

The first named quarrel under the Gravel Oath, c. 147,000-c. 146,000 BR, when a Thaluren run arrived late with a real emergency at a braid a Bankright council had already closed; the Kavari councils who held the water settled it on their own terms. See *Peoples of the Water*.

**The Law of the River**

The terms of the Serathic river guarantees that say who may draw water and fish where, who holds each crossing, and what those who live along the Serath owe the towns that hold it; Serovan is said to have dictated it to the first guarantors. See The Basins and the Marches (MED 173).

**The Lee Road**

The road from the Leeward fold markets over the Lee Wall to the Rimward Basins, under Windscar escort, which keeps Halfling market timing. See *Roads, Rivers, and Crossings*.

**The Lee Wall**

The long ridge on the Windscar side of the Leeward Folds, no built wall at all, to which the Folds owe their life. See *The Leeward Folds*.

**The Leeward Folds**

The Windscar's opposite past a sheltering ridge: hollows, stepped terraces, orchard belts, and cistern-fed valleys, the first named homeland of the Halflings and of the Foldward Commons. See *The Leeward Folds*.

**The Leeward measure orders**

The cistern halls, terrace watchers, orchard tally houses, and reserve counters of the Foldward Commons, hardened c. 146,000-c. 139,000 BR after the first great quarrel over honest measure, which make every count open to a neighbour's challenge. See *The Leeward Folds*.

**The Leeward-Tidelace Measures**

The far-side terms, c. 146,000-c. 140,000 BR, by which Halflings and Gnomes learned to make sense of each other's very different kinds of care. See The Folds, the Scarps, and the Shore.

**The Leeward-Tidelace Timing Oath**

The oath, c. 136,000-c. 134,000 BR, that carried the end of the Counted Lee Timing Feud to every landing where fold loads meet harbour boats: when the harbour changes the day, it says so, the loss is shown to both sides, and someone pays. See The Folds, the Scarps, and the Shore.

**The Leeward-Windscar Terms**

The first lasting meeting ground of Halflings and Orcs, c. 160,000-c. 145,000 BR: escorted parties are owed an answer at fold markets and cistern halls, because the Pacts could close the Lee Road, but reception is not entry, and the folds stay shut behind them. See The Folds, the Scarps, and the Shore.

**Ley lines**

Channels along which the ambient force of magic lies nearer the surface, easier to reach, shape, and draw on; a ley line does not create magic, and lines and their nodes can move. See How Magic Works.

**Lifeforce**

The settled balance of Prime energy each living being carries, inherited with its kind; it shapes healing, affinity, and the cost of magic, and it is neither a soul nor a measure of virtue. See How Magic Works.

**Lightweaving**

The compound school of Lux with Imago and Verba, which treats perception as something that can be composed. See The Schools of Magic.

**Liturgy**

A formal rite of sanctioned symbols, words, offices, or shared assent, with or without a god's support. See How Magic Works.

**The Long Grey**

The great fog belt of the outer Tidelace coast, which rolls in off open water with little warning and can lie on the straits for days. See *The Tidelace and the Soundchain Roads*.

**The Long Hunger**

The span, c. 195,000-c. 160,000 BR, in which the failing high country stopped feeding large bodies, hunger-bands of Ogres turned their strength on others, and the camps that held bound strength to care as hearth-weight. See *The Bridge Peoples*.

**The Long Settlement of the Balanced Core**

The span from the Inward Sundering to the First Equilibrium, in which pockets of stability formed in the balanced core, failed, and formed again. See The Planes.

**The Long Stair**

A stair of living root in an Elderweald hill, grown by a Wood Elf working that went wrong, which goes down further than the hill is tall. One of the six known off-key places. See The Dissonance.

**The Long Summer**

The Halfling tale of the year Tamsel held the summer form for a whole year. See The Folds, the Scarps, and the Shore.

**The Long Tread**

The greatest colossal road, running for weeks along the outer crest of the Ironspine, too broad for any living builder. See *Roads, Rivers, and Crossings*.

**The Lost Archive**

The Record turned inside out; its Librarians try to order the chaos, and visitors who stay too long turn into books and are shelved with the rest. See The Resonant Zones.

**The Lower River Absorptions**

The span, c. 30,000-c. 8,000 BR, in which the Human river powers swallowed the Reedfolk water orders of the lower rivers and turned their command of the water into service, while still depending on what they knew. See *Peoples of the Water*.

**The Lower Serath**

The lower course of the Serath and the crowded corridor of walled towns strung along it, bound into the Serathic League. See The Basins and the Marches (MED 173).

**The Lower Serath Guarantees**

The span, c. 26,000-c. 16,000 BR, in which oaths of safe passage, guarded crossings, and shared duty along the crowded lower river hardened into the river towns' first lasting pact, tying the right to take dues to keeping the river safe. See The Basins and the Marches (MED 173).

**The Lucid Wastes**

A desert built by the mind that walks in it, where the faceless Night-Markers, shapes of a traveller's own fears, stalk them. See The Resonant Zones.

**Lux**

The Prime of light and possibility, the principle of revelation that makes the hidden visible; its Harmonic is the Shifting Path. See The Ten Primes.

**The Lying Shoals**

The worst braided reach of the Lower Serath, which keeps no channel from one low water to the next; the guarantee there is only as good as the pilot. See The Basins and the Marches (MED 173).

# M

**Magical mutation**

A lasting change to a body's lifeforce caused not by ordinary inheritance but by long residence in strong ley country, repeated overcasting, unstable mixed energies, altered lines, or dark practice. See How Magic Works.

**The Many-Eyed One**

The Cast-Out of Lux that was the Oculus, the clear light that exposed lies, until it came to believe that nothing should be hidden. See What Waits Outside.

**The Many-Named**

The god of memory kept by voice through the Unrecorded Age, a Resonant of Memoria fed by many peoples under many names, whom later scholars call the Oral Tradition. See Stewards and Resonants.

**Maris of the Tides**

The sea god of the Tidelace Coasts, a Resonant of Aqua born in the Decade of Storms from the prayers of coastal Humans and Gnome harbour towns; her Festival of the Tides brings whole harbours down to the quays. See The Gods of the Medieval Era (MED 69).

**The mark**

The shared waymark script of the Edgeway Kindreds, cut, painted, or stacked onto ruins along the circuits; keep-marks say a ruin is spoken for, danger-marks grade a structure from braced to never-touch. See *The Civilizations of the Medieval Era*.

**The Material Plane**

The central Anchor, also called the Equilibrium: Caeldon's own plane, the hub of the Veil, and the only plane where free will truly works. See The Planes.

**The Measure Cistern**

The great cistern hall of the Leeward Folds, on the windward side where the Lee Road comes in. See *The Leeward Folds*.

**The Measure Cistern Crisis**

The clash of Orc escorts and Halfling counters at the Measure Cistern, c. 147,000-c. 143,000 BR, in which armed Windscar escorts camped outside the cistern until sworn terms ended the fighting, and the cistern halls first gave their four answers: receive, delay, send on, or sustain for a while. See The Folds, the Scarps, and the Shore.

**The Measure Cistern Reckoning**

The Halfling quarrel of c. 154,000-c. 148,000 BR in which good harvests and outside traffic pulled the folds two ways, and the Commons learned to tell honest reserve from hoarding, and welcome they could afford from welcome given for show. See The Folds, the Scarps, and the Shore.

**The Measured Seal**

The deep god of closure, a Resonant of Terra of black ironstone with one arm a gate-leaf, trusted to see a necessary closing and the reckoning after it; its question in the Held Covenant is "must this close?" See The Gods of the Medieval Era (MED 69).

**The Medieval Era**

The era this edition describes, set around 1,350 CR. See *A World in Two Halves*.

**The Medieval Present**

The ninth age, c. 500-c. 1500 CR, which the Settlement shades into without a border. See *How the Present Was Made*.

**Memoria**

The Prime of memory, history, and narrative, the principle that the past does not vanish; its Harmonic is the Eternal Record. See The Ten Primes.

**The Memory Palace**

The Record made private: a mansion of the mind whose Curators keep its order and will not open the rooms of what has been repressed. See The Resonant Zones.

**Memory-debt**

What every redirected Thaluren return owes the poisoned source water it left, the price of accepting any other water at all; it is why pilgrims still climb to the Naming Reach to name the old water aloud. See *Peoples of the Water*.

**The Mending Orders**

The first Wrought civilization: sanctuary workshops that from c. 50 CR hid newly awakened Wrought in their walls and swore to who they were against the Unmakers, and by c. 200 CR had houses in most mixed towns of the Headwater, Ironspine, and Broken Marches worlds; they still swear that a Wrought stays the same person through damage and repair. See *The Bridge Peoples*.

**Mereth the Salt-Witch**

The faded god of a vanished inland-sea people of the Glassbelt Interior, a Resonant of Aqua whose stillness helped turn their sea to salt. See Stewards and Resonants.

**Mineframe**

One of the six Wrought design lineages; with the Forgeframe line it holds most of the Wrought of the Ironspine. See Stone and the Deep (MED 151).

**The Mirror of Regret**

A zone that shows the life a person would have lived had they chosen differently. See The Resonant Zones.

**Mnemosyne Null**

The Unwritten, a Beyonder from a cosmology with no memory, which does not kill but unwrites: colour, then detail, then meaning, then a person's name and language. See What Waits Outside.

**Morphic Magic**

The compound school of Imago with Aqua and Terra, which holds that most forms are negotiations, not absolutes. See The Schools of Magic.

**The Mountain-Father**

See Haurûm the Mountain-Father.

**The Muse's Studio**

A workshop where ideas take bodily form, whose Muses encourage and tempt in equal measure. See The Resonant Zones.

**Mythic traits**

Rare exceptional gifts that appear in otherwise ordinary members of any people: uncanny luck, kinship with beasts, a sense for dreams or for death, an ear that hears truth, a feel for the way through. See How Magic Works.

# N

**The Name Bound**

The Binding Song narrowed to names, where a being's True Name floats above it and whoever holds a name can move its bearer like a puppet. See The Resonant Zones.

**The Nameless Current**

The face of the Unformed that takes away direction and the name of where one was going; it cannot carry off someone who names a destination and keeps walking towards it. See What Waits Outside.

**Nature Magic**

The compound school of Aqua, Terra, and Imago, which teaches that life is never solitary and that control is a dangerous word. See The Schools of Magic.

**Necromancy**

The compound school of Umbra with Memoria and Aion, from the claim that death changes a being but does not erase all its structure at once. See The Schools of Magic.

**The Nightmare Nexus**

The zone where the nightmares of many minds run together and take flesh. See The Resonant Zones.

**The Nine Hammer Forges**

The guild tradition where smith-mages learn Crucible and Forge Magic through metal, and smithcraft and magic are inseparable. See The Schools of Magic.

**The Nothing**

What lies beyond the Boundary, outside the order of the cosmos; the highest scholarship disputes whether it is merely absent or, as the Great Filter holds, predatory. See The Veil and the Outside.

**Nyx Vora**

The Star-Eater, a Beyonder from the Devouring Dark, which eats matter and energy and looks on this universe as a banquet. An example of what a Beyonder could be; none of its Incursions has reached Caeldon. See What Waits Outside.

# O

**The Oath Cistern**

The Rimward stronghold and cistern at the foot of the busiest ramp down the Shearline, where the wells and the escorted roads must answer to one another, and the test of every Pact oath since the Rimward Passage War. See The Windscar (MED 235).

**The Oath of Layers**

See The Serathic Oath of Layers.

**Oath-Inscription**

The named compound tradition that joins retention and formal naming to fix a commitment into lasting record, at home with scribes, priests, and scholars. See How Magic Works.

**Oath-right**

The later of the two Headwater Rites, which brings the right to swear, inherit, and bind in one's own name. See The Basins and the Marches (MED 173).

**Oblen the Trauma-Weaver**

The god of chosen forgetting among the survivors of the furnace world's fall, a Resonant of Memoria who took the memory of the overburn away, and with it the lesson. See Worlds That Came Before.

**Offnotes**

Beings of the Dissonance that are impossible things with a will: never the same shape twice, and set apart from a mere oddity by the fact that they notice. See The Dissonance.

**Ogres**

A load-bearing people, living where settled worlds need heavy work but will not let the workers belong; their custom is hearth-weight and their civilization the Hearth-Weight Compacts. See *The Bridge Peoples*.

**Omm**

The Unison, the most seductive of the Beyonders, because it offers belonging: the union of minds. An example of what a Beyonder could be; none of its Incursions has reached Caeldon. See What Waits Outside.

**The Open-Run Concords**

The Thaluren civilization within and around the Returning Concord, risen from redirected return, which holds that a rightful return may move to other waters if it carries memory-debt towards the poisoned source. See *The Civilizations of the Medieval Era*.

**The Oral Tradition**

See The Many-Named.

**Orcs**

The far-side people of harsh-land endurance, escorted roads, and sworn passage, neither twisted Humans nor mere raiders; their homeland is the Windscar Expanse and their civilization the Windscar Pacts. See The Folds, the Scarps, and the Shore.

**The Ordered Bough**

The High Elf faith of tending life towards its intended form, whose temples are temple-gardens and whose clergy are tenders; its most powerful and most contested patron is Saerith the Mirror-King. See *Faith in Practice*.

**Ostrin the Lantern-Bearer**

The severe, blind god of the Serathic towns, a Resonant of Lux born of grievance over dues taken and upkeep never done, who drags hidden wrongs into the light; the Ashen Lantern is called his eye. See The Gods of the Medieval Era (MED 69).

**Outer Blood**

Faint traces of the Sepulchre-Kin mingled into later peoples. See Worlds That Came Before.

**The Outside**

The reality beyond the ordered cosmos, past the Boundary, from which the Beyonders come. See The Veil and the Outside.

**Ozhar the Pyre-King**

The god of the elder Ash-Furnace world, a Resonant of Ignis and the terrible face of fire, whose name is still forbidden near any furnace. See Worlds That Came Before.

# P

**The Paling**

The colourless country between the Lower Serath and the Witnessfields, round the letterless walls of the archive river city that forgot its name, left by the Mnemosyne Null Incursion, c. 132,000-c. 130,000 BR. See The Basins and the Marches (MED 173).

**The Parched**

The Deficit Plane without sustenance, where water and food are absent and every living thing must consume before it is consumed; its people are the Dust-Eaters, and those who stay too long fall to the Thirst-Madness. See The Planes.

**Path Magic**

The Harmonic school of the Shifting Path, not the art of commanding fate but of reading the branching conditions of the possible and leaning on them. See The Schools of Magic.

**Pattern**

The scholars' word for what people call the self: a living, changing configuration of thought, feeling, moral reflex, bonds, and a cadence of resonance particular to one person. See What Makes a People.

**Planar bleed**

What comes through where another plane presses on the Material Plane: a sudden frost in high summer, a burst of fire nobody lit, a creature that belongs to no country of this world. See The Planes.

**Pool-kin**

The Kavari households that remember which waters owe what. See *Peoples of the Water*.

**Prime energy classes**

The ten classes of magical energy, one for each Prime, that underlie all magic; scholars hold that a spell which cannot be traced to one or more of them does not belong to this world's magic. See How Magic Works.

**The Primes**

The ten foundational forces of the cosmos, which differentiated one after another from a single Original Potential; they are forces, not persons, and their currents run through everything. See The Ten Primes.

**The Probability Fog**

A rolling mist in which luck is the only law. See The Resonant Zones.

**The Prophecy's Edge**

The Shifting Path narrowed to one blinding point, where Seers speak only of what will happen and visitors act out their parts with their wills pressed almost flat. See The Resonant Zones.

**Protection**

The first layer of the Serathic Oath of Layers, given to everyone a river town takes in: food in a famine, a place behind the walls, and a house that will avenge them. See The Basins and the Marches (MED 173).

**The Proving of the Unbroken Line**

The Held Covenant's central rite, a grave ordeal before the hold in which a person proves they still belong to it. See *Faith in Practice*.

**The pull of the extremes**

The warping of land and minds by prolonged exposure to one Harmonic or one extreme plane, near a zone of the Crucible or a thin spot to the Scourge. See The Planes.

# Q

**Quenchers**

Beings of the Dissonance that feed where light, sound, and warmth go out, and leave dead spots behind; fire only feeds them. See The Dissonance.

**Quennet the Clockmaker**

The god of the Gnome harbours, a Resonant of Aion who stretches a closing tide-window by a breath; he is fading, because a harbour that can name who bears a lost moment, and make them pay, no longer needs to beg a god for one. See The Gods of the Medieval Era (MED 69).

**The Quiet Orchard**

A dead Halfling hamlet of the Leeward Folds, emptied in one winter, whose orchard fruits in the wrong season and whose counts never come out right. One of the six known off-key places. See The Dissonance.

**Qzoth**

The Becoming, a Beyonder from the Protean Abyss that changes things without reason, direction, or end; it arrives as the Bloom, a writhing tower of flesh. See What Waits Outside.

# R

**The Radiance**

The Surplus Plane where truth is absolute and privacy impossible; its people, the Illuminated, glow from within, and its Oracle Gates are places of judgement, confession, and mirrors. See The Planes.

**Rakhal the Storm-Caller**

The Orc god of the scouring wind of the Windscar, a Resonant of Zephyr who breaks what has gone stale; his following is growing, and he grows more volatile with it. See The Gods of the Medieval Era (MED 69).

**The Rattlecut**

The worst stretch of the Headwater road, a gorge so narrow that in a wet spring the river takes the road; a Troll house keeps it. See The Basins and the Marches (MED 173).

**The Reciting of the Names**

The Orc rite at the treaty-grounds in which the dead are named aloud with the crossings they held, as Ushkar's rite requires. See *A Year in the Medieval Era*.

**Record**

The deep retention of coherent Echoes in the cosmos's own memory, chiefly in the Eternal Record. See *What Makes a People*.

**Record Magic**

The Harmonic school of the Eternal Record, resting on the idea that nothing stable can be repaired, judged, or inherited without memory. See The Schools of Magic.

**The Record-engine**

The under-mountain work of the Sepulchre-Kin, of name-vaults, burial chambers, and preservation cores, built to hold the dead until they settled into Record, which in the Unburial War preserved its own people to death. See Worlds That Came Before.

**Redirection Assemblies**

The Thaluren gatherings, once called only in disaster, that decide whether a blocked or blighted run may climb other waters without losing its right. See *The Civilizations of the Medieval Era*.

**Reedfolk**

A secondary species of the wet threshold, at home where land and water never settle which is which, and no branch of Humans, Elves, or Dwarves; their strongest country is the lower Confluence Basins and the Lower Serath, and their order is the Floodkeeper Houses. See *Peoples of the Water*.

**The Reedmere**

The greatest of the reed and fen reaches of the Confluence Basins, above the Lower Serath, and the main Reedfolk country inside the Basins; no sensible boat crosses it without a Reedfolk pilot. See The Basins and the Marches (MED 173).

**The Resonance Principle**

The principle that binds the tiers of the cosmos together: much that seems ordinary is a Harmonic touching an Anchor, as dreams are the Dreaming Veil resonating with the Material Plane and lightning the Crucible resonating with the air. See The Planes.

**Resonant Continuity**

The scholars' account of the person as a continuity of Pattern, Echo, and Record, true but known to few outside the highest scholarship; no being on Caeldon carries a detachable, immortal soul. See *What Makes a People*.

**The Resonant Zones**

Places where a Harmonic presses through into an Anchor and overwrites its law for a while, for an hour or for an age. See The Resonant Zones.

**The Resonants**

The gods mortals made without meaning to, condensed out of a Prime's current by what they feared and loved; they can fade, sleep, or die when their worship goes. See Stewards and Resonants.

**Restoration**

The rebuilding of a workable continuity out of surviving Echoes and trustworthy Record; whether the one who returns is the one who died, families and faiths answer by belief. See *What Makes a People*.

**The Returning Concord**

The first named Thaluren civilization, which binds sea settlements, estuary thresholds, and upriver spawning sanctuaries into one world of return; it is not a sea kingdom. See *The Civilizations of the Medieval Era*.

**Return-water**

Water that is part of a Thaluren run's rightful return; under the Twofold Waters a channel may be return-water to the Thaluren and dwelling-water to the Kavari at once. See *Peoples of the Water*.

**The Rimward Basins**

The anchored half of the Windscar: closed basins whose rims carry the strongholds, defended wells, and rock-cut cisterns that let Orc life stay in one place. See The Windscar (MED 235).

**The Rimward Passage War**

The early Windscar war of c. 135,000-c. 128,000 BR in which Rimward strongholds shut their wells and High Scar escort-bands took water by force, until the Pacts swore new terms over the dead that told reserve-right from treaty-right. See The Folds, the Scarps, and the Shore.

**The Rimward Well-Keepers**

The well-holding side of the Windscar Pacts, hardened c. 124,000-c. 116,000 BR after the Rimward Passage War: well-keepers, cistern guardians, reserve moots, and answer bearers. See The Windscar (MED 235).

**The Rootcrown Concord**

The oldest Elven civilization, the Wood Elves of the Elderweald, gathered c. 490,000-c. 460,000 BR: no capital and no seat that speaks for all, only sacred places, elders whom the groves heed, and a shared duty towards the living land. See *The Civilizations of the Medieval Era*.

**The Roothollow Rupture**

The catastrophe of c. 335,000-c. 328,000 BR that drove the Dark Elves deeper and began the Elf-Dwarf enmity; at its heart was the Drowning Bloom. See The Threads of History.

**The Roothollows**

The root-caverns beside and beneath the forest, where the forest's roots come down through the ceiling and grow into the stone; the country of the Dark Elves. See Stone and the Deep (MED 151).

**The Rooting of the Elderweald**

The hardening of the first Elves into the first Wood Elf way of life, c. 490,000-c. 470,000 BR. See The Ages of Caeldon.

**The Rootless Tree**

The face of the Unformed that is growth with no ground, which cuts the ties of home and kin; a stone laid on purpose or a hearth built and kept holds it back. See What Waits Outside.

**The Rootstone Heartwell**

A deep water source, crossing of ways, structural anchor, and remnant of the old underworld at once, fought over in the Heartwell Struggles and claimed by oath ever since. See Stone and the Deep (MED 151).

**The root-year**

The rising and falling of sap in the living roots, which keeps the seasons of the Roothollows and sets most Gloamroot house business. See *A Year in the Medieval Era*.

**The Rotting Crown**

The Cast-Out of Terra that was the Keeper of the Line, until it came to dread every yielding of rule and bound generations into one chain of flesh and will. See What Waits Outside.

**Run-Watchers**

The Thaluren keepers who say whose ascent is rightful, remember who returned rightly and when, and speak in quarrels over who may climb which water. See *The Civilizations of the Medieval Era*.

**The Rust Flower**

The Beyonder of premature ending, from the Oxidized Wastes, under which steel, stone, and flesh fall apart before their time; it yields to preservation. An example of what a Beyonder could be; none of its Incursions has reached Caeldon. See What Waits Outside.

# S

**Sacrificial Magic**

The compound school of Aqua with Imago, Verba, and Ignis, built around exchange under pressure. See The Schools of Magic.

**Saerith the Mirror-King**

The High Elf god of the Crownbough Courts and of finished form, a Resonant of Imago born of the houses' pride and fear of being found less than they claimed; the most powerful and most contested patron of the Ordered Bough. See The Gods of the Medieval Era (MED 69).

**The Salvage Peoples**

A people defined less by descent than by practice, risen from survivor lines who walked the abandoned colossal roads: travelling, reading structures, recovering material, and keeping broken works usable. Their first order is the Edgeway Kindreds. See Worlds That Came Before.

**Sanctified Magic**

The compound school of Lux with Verba, Aqua, and Terra, which treats magic as covenant made practical. See The Schools of Magic.

**Sanctuary Custodians**

The Thaluren keepers of the spawning grounds, who judge whether a water is fouled or defiled and have the last word when the waters of the young are in danger. See *The Civilizations of the Medieval Era*.

**The Scourge**

The Deficit Plane without safety, a world of constant danger whose scarred people are the Scourge-Born; it is reached through War-Gates, and those who stay too long risk the Blood-Fury, a rage that turns them on friend and foe alike. See The Planes.

**The Sealing of the Upper Roothollows**

The sealing, abandonment, and ritual barring of the ruined passages, c. 328,000-c. 318,000 BR. See The Threads of History.

**Sea-Settlement Speakers**

The Thaluren keepers who carry the voice of the sea settlements, where most Thaluren live, into sanctuary quarrels, and hold sea life to the old spawning rules. See *The Civilizations of the Medieval Era*.

**The Second Channel**

A lesser but survivable spawning water farther along the Thaluren return, which took in redirected clutches after the oldest confluence was poisoned, and the first alternate water accepted, on sufferance. See *The Tidebound Reaches and the Unrun Sea*.

**The Second-Channel Feud**

The first great Thaluren feud over a redirected run, c. 160,000-c. 156,000 BR, fought over whether the Second Channel could be used before the old water had been answered; it ended in a bargain neither side could break. See *Peoples of the Water*.

**The Seed**

Another name for the Original Potential from which the Primes differentiated. See The Ten Primes.

**The Sepulchre-Kin**

A remote mountain-basin people of the Elder Worlds, c. 160,000-c. 120,000 BR, whose civilization was built around death-work, burial depth, and the refusal of oblivion, and which fell in the Unburial War. See Sealed and Silent Places (MED 203).

**The Serath**

The great river into which the rivers of the Confluence Basins gather. See The Basins and the Marches (MED 173).

**The Serathic League**

The Human civilization within the Confluence Marches of the walled towns of the Lower Serath, founded c. 22,000-c. 16,000 BR and bound by sworn guarantees and the great river houses rather than by a crown. See The Basins and the Marches (MED 173).

**The Serathic Oath of Layers**

The oath the great Serathic river houses forced on a feuding river town, c. 19,000-c. 18,000 BR, with their boats drawn up behind them: three thresholds of belonging, Protection, Stewardship, and the full oath, kept by the houses' boats and spears. See The Basins and the Marches (MED 173).

**Serovan the River-King**

The god of the Serath, a Resonant of Aqua, more foreman than monarch, who stands first in the Sworn Accord beside Anvelle; his Festival of the First Flow opens the river's year. See The Gods of the Medieval Era (MED 69).

**Sessik the Tongue-Taker**

A Resonant of Verba that older Kobold lines feared as a punisher of noise in the tunnels, which faded once shared sound codes made silence a skill. See *Faith in Practice*.

**The Settlement**

The eighth age, c. 2,000 BR-c. 500 CR, in which the lordships, holds, leagues, and temples of the medieval world dug in, most of them won by the sword, and the Wrought awoke. See *How the Present Was Made*.

**The Shadow Stitcher**

The Cast-Out of Umbra that was the Weaver of Songlines, until it resolved that no one should ever be alone, and offers the lonely a bond that will never leave. See What Waits Outside.

**The Shearline**

The greatest escarpment of the Windscar, the cliff-broken edge where the High Scars drop towards the basin rims. See The Windscar (MED 235).

**The Shifting Path**

The Harmonic of Lux: possibility, chance, and the future, where what the universe will become is still undecided; its Wayfinders guide the lost through its branches. See The Planes.

**The Shifting Sand**

The face of the Unformed that is the refusal to set, under which stone never settles and remembered facts change each time they are recalled; commitment made in front of others answers it. See What Waits Outside.

**The Silence**

The Deficit Plane without meaning, the cruellest of the five because what it takes is the self; its natives are the Hollows, and its Quiet Gates are libraries where nobody reads any more and places of deep meditation. See The Planes.

**The Silence Seed**

The Quiet Plague, a Beyonder whose sign is what stops: birdsong, the wind in the grass, a traveller's own footsteps; it breaks on loud, ragged noise. An example of what a Beyonder could be; none of its Incursions has reached Caeldon. See What Waits Outside.

**The Silent Court**

A round chamber of black stone found in ancient courthouses and at the sites of great trials and broken oaths, where words have weight and masked Judges weigh every one and never speak. See The Resonant Zones.

**The Silent Gale**

The Gale's paradox: a wind of hurricane force that makes no sound at all, held sacred by its Mute-Walkers. See The Resonant Zones.

**The Silent Screamer**

The Cast-Out of Verba that was the Liberator of Tongues, keeper of the cathartic cry, until it grew terrified of what speech does and decided to stop the voice. See What Waits Outside.

**The Silent Tide**

The face of the Unformed that is motion without return, a flow that never comes back; it cannot hold anyone who keeps returning. See What Waits Outside.

**The Sky Isles**

A scattered archipelago of floating land, from rocky outcrops to great masses of earth, where the Sky-Walkers rest without ever letting go of their anchor. See The Resonant Zones.

**The Soul Anchor**

The common name for a zone where the Whispering Trace has become a prison, holding Echoes on their chains. See The Resonant Zones.

**The Soundchain Closure Terms**

The terms the Soundchain harbours and the Windscar Pacts struck after the selective-closure fighting, c. 104,000-c. 102,000 BR: the harbours may still shut parts of the corridor, but must name what they shut, say where, and answer for all of it at once. See *The Tidelace and the Soundchain Roads*.

**The Soundchain Roads**

The chain of roadsteads, lee sounds, transfer quays, and pilot stations along the Tidelace's Windscar-facing edge, where escorted Orc parties are met, counted, and answered by Gnome station crews. See *The Tidelace and the Soundchain Roads*.

**The Sounding Gate**

The best-known harbour entrance of the Tidelace, the marked mouth of a Gaugeward harbour with its sounding house, beacons, and Open Bench, held by the harbour families who decide who may pass it and when. See *The Tidelace and the Soundchain Roads*.

**The Sounding Gate Quarrel**

The early Gnome feud at the Sounding Gate, c. 155,000-c. 149,000 BR, which cost ships and crews before the strongest League houses forced terms that tell honest exactness from pride in procedure. See The Folds, the Scarps, and the Shore.

**Span**

A plain window of time, such as c. 26,000-c. 16,000 BR, saying when something happened and how loosely that is known, not that it began or ended cleanly at either edge. See How to Read This Book.

**Sparktouch**

The scholars' name for the hearth working of Crucible Magic by which a fingertip laid on a wick makes it take. See The Schools of Magic.

**Species**

A broad kind of people sharing an inheritable continuity, whether biological, metaphysical, or constructed; in ordinary speech the word is people. See *What Makes a People*.

**Spellcraft**

Method-driven casting by trained technique, fuelled from personal, environmental, stored, or other non-patron sources. See How Magic Works.

**The Split Reed Mouth**

The mixed estuary on the coastward edge of the Tidebound Reaches where a Thaluren return river breaks into braided channels around reed-shelves; centre of the Estuary Terms. See *The Tidelace and the Soundchain Roads*.

**The Spread of the Predecessor-Frames**

The span, c. 16,000-c. 2,000 BR, in which Dwarven workframes left the holds along the Headwater roads and spread across the corridor world as labour that could not refuse. See *The Bridge Peoples*.

**The Static**

The White Noise, a Beyonder that buries every signal in hiss and flicker until the senses report what is not there; one clear, steady thought cuts through it. An example of what a Beyonder could be; none of its Incursions has reached Caeldon. See What Waits Outside.

**The Stele of Names**

The stone Ushkar the Ancestor-Warden carries on his back, on which every name that kept faith with him is cut. See The Folds, the Scarps, and the Shore.

**The Steward of Bearable Foundations**

The Steward of Terra who guards support that life can actually bear, and the release that keeps support from hardening into a trap. See Stewards and Resonants.

**The Steward of Boundary**

The Steward of Terra who keeps walls, borders, and thresholds that protect form without becoming prisons; it is one of the Wardens of the Boundary. See Stewards and Resonants.

**The Steward of Coherent Self**

The Steward of Imago who keeps a being itself through grief, injury, growth, and change. See Stewards and Resonants.

**The Steward of Foundations**

The Steward of Terra whose office was load-bearing support itself, and who fell in the Uneven Settling because it could not accept that anything might need to collapse; it is now the Cast-Out of Unyielding Burden. See Stewards and Resonants.

**The Steward of Open Movement**

The one Steward of Zephyr known to the theologians, defending the principle that what lives may leave what cages it. See Stewards and Resonants.

**The Steward of Purifying Fire**

The Steward of Ignis who burns disease without hating the sick and corruption without glorifying ruin. See Stewards and Resonants.

**The Steward of Sacred Metamorphosis**

The Steward of Imago who keeps true becoming meaningful and whole rather than forced, fragmented, or monstrous. See Stewards and Resonants.

**The Steward of the Living Current**

The Steward of Aqua who keeps flow life-giving rather than devouring, against hoarding, stagnation, and growth turned parasitic. See Stewards and Resonants.

**The Steward of the Open Path**

The Steward of Lux who keeps more than one real road open, against false destiny and imposed inevitability. See Stewards and Resonants.

**The Steward of True Names**

The Steward of Verba who keeps beings and categories distinct enough to be spoken. See Stewards and Resonants.

**Steward traditions**

The stories every people tells of the rare beings who appear when an oath binds past breaking, when a death is dangerous, or when a law is fraying. See *Faith in Practice*.

**The Stewards**

The offices of the Primes, each holding one threshold that reality cannot afford to lose; a Steward is always of a Prime, and mortals know them as saints, heralds, judges, watchers, or gate-keepers. See Stewards and Resonants.

**Stewardship**

The second layer of the Serathic Oath of Layers: the right to hold property, debts, or goods in trust under an elder's eye or within limits, without yet the full authority of a grown heir. See The Basins and the Marches (MED 173).

**Stillgate**

The sealed archive-city of the Witnessfields nearest the corridor, where the closing words of the registers are cut into the gate. See Sealed and Silent Places (MED 203).

**Stonelocking**

The named compound tradition that reinforces structure with time: walls that resist ageing, anchors that hold across generations, tombs that do not settle. See How Magic Works.

**The Stonewake Compact**

The Dwarven civilization within the Ironspine Holds, founded c. 360,000-c. 348,000 BR: a deep-hold order of guarded ways, reservoirs, and archives, with the severest closure custom in the lower world, under which a shut door can save a hundred holds or bury the people behind it. See Stone and the Deep (MED 151).

**The Stonewake Deeps**

The deep central hold-cluster below the Ironspine, where more of the lower world's routes and water converge than anywhere else, and where a sealed door is at once an oath, a prayer, and a border. See Stone and the Deep (MED 151).

**Stonewake Dwarves**

The Dwarven branch of the deep holds, formed in the Deepening of Stonewake, whose civilization is the Stonewake Compact. See The Elder Peoples.

**The Stopped Clock**

A pocket where time has halted at one instant, centred on a Clock-Keeper, often the remnant of whoever made it. See The Resonant Zones.

**Stored charge**

Magical energy held in a medium for later use, from crystalline matrices and inscribed metal lattices to living reservoirs, vials, and untreated wood, cloth, and bone; practitioners grade a store as Fresh, Aged, Unstable, or Spoiled. See How Magic Works.

**The Storm Heart**

A perpetual lightning storm in which the order of things is turned over; its Storm-Walkers ride the lightning, and visitors who are struck and survive are drawn back until they become part of it. See The Resonant Zones.

**Storm Magic**

The compound school of Ignis with Zephyr and Aqua: unstable convergence, great force from tensions held just long enough to break together. See The Schools of Magic.

**The Stormcrown**

The high country above the Ironspine holds, bare ridges and storm shelves where the Upland Colossal world left its terraces, ridge roads, and weather shrines; the colossal heartland still. See Worlds That Came Before.

**Storm-Forge**

The named compound tradition that pairs fire and wind in mutual support, the forge-work of smithing peoples and weather-workers alike. See How Magic Works.

**Storm-steel**

Metal forged in the Storm Heart, which holds and gives back charge. See The Resonant Zones.

**The Sunken Stairs**

The mouths of root-grown stairways that once ran from the deep groves of the Elderweald down into the Roothollows, ending now in silt and bars. See Sealed and Silent Places (MED 203).

**The Surging Deep**

The Harmonic of Aqua: water, flow, life, and adaptation, the circulation of the cosmos; its Tidesingers speak in song and see the universe as one system to be kept in balance. See The Planes.

**Surging Magic**

The Harmonic school of the Surging Deep, whose lesson is that life survives through movement. See The Schools of Magic.

**The Surplus Planes**

The five Anchors shaped by excess: the Verdant Expanse, the Gilded Cage, the Radiance, the Weave, and the Apex. See The Planes.

**The Swearing of the Crossing-Charges**

The span, c. 230,000-c. 190,000 BR, in which Troll lines holding the crossings of the colossal roads were given lasting charges by the road-builders and swore the first bridge-oaths, which they kept after that world went silent. See *The Bridge Peoples*.

**The Sworn Accord**

The faith of the Human corridor world, the Confluence Marches and the Serathic League, which treats gods as the river towns treat strangers: a god is honoured in common once a town has sworn to it and entered it on the roster in its oath-house, and Anvelle and Serovan stand first. See *Faith in Practice*.

# T

**The Taken**

The Sepulchre-Kin preserved as damaged Echoes inside their dormant Record-engine, the last of the Tomb-Builder's worshippers. See Worlds That Came Before.

**The Tallgrade**

The oldest road of the Broken Marches, on a grade too broad and too even for anyone now alive to have laid. See *Roads, Rivers, and Crossings*.

**Tamsel the Season-Weaver**

The god of the turning year in the Halfling folds, a Resonant of Aion who is young and green in spring and pale and frosted in winter; the Festival of the Turn is kept for Tamsel. See The Gods of the Medieval Era (MED 69).

**Tavi the Bard of the Broken**

The Goblin god of a history no lord would write down, a Resonant of Verba grown verse by verse from the struck warrants and lost seams Goblins kept in song. See The Gods of the Medieval Era (MED 69).

**The Telling**

The most sacred rite of Memoria: a gathering to share the stories of the dead so that their memory lives on. See The Ten Primes.

**Terra**

The Prime of earth, structure, and permanence, the framework on which every other force builds and the first of the ten to wake; its Harmonic is the Iron Backbone. See The Ten Primes.

**Thaluren**

An ancient oceanic people of the Tidebound Reaches, no branch of the Elves despite the misnomer "sea-elves"; they live at sea but are born upriver, and the return to spawn shapes all their custom and faith. See *Peoples of the Water*.

**Thorn Elves**

The Elven branch that hardened under the harsh woodland of the Briarreach towards caution, defensive adaptation, and strict boundary custom; their civilization is the Thornbound Circles. See The Elder Peoples.

**The Thornbound Circles**

The Thorn Elf civilization of the Briarreach, founded c. 405,000-c. 392,000 BR, whose own gift is earned hospitality: a stranger is let in only by steps and under a sponsor. See *The Civilizations of the Medieval Era*.

**The threshold chamber**

The outermost chamber of a Gloamroot house, where the way enters, the route keepers lodge, and strangers are received. See Stone and the Deep (MED 151).

**The Tidal Mirror**

A pool that reflects not the present but time; its Echo-Divers live partly in the past and warn every visitor not to look too long. See The Resonant Zones.

**The Tidebound Reaches**

The far-side water-world that binds sea and river into one: current roads, reef and kelp settlements, estuaries, and upriver spawning approaches; the homeland of the Thaluren. See *The Tidebound Reaches and the Unrun Sea*.

**The Tidelace**

See The Tidelace Coasts.

**The Tidelace Answering Custom**

The custom, c. 137,000-c. 135,000 BR, that the great harbours carried along the coast after the Answering Sound: a harbour that makes a party wait must say why, for how long, and whether the answer is really no. See The Folds, the Scarps, and the Shore.

**The Tidelace calibration orders**

The Gnome orders, c. 148,000-c. 132,000 BR, that grew out of the Sounding Gate Quarrel inside the Gaugeward Leagues and carried its terms into marker rounds and open benches across the coast. See The Folds, the Scarps, and the Shore.

**The Tidelace Coasts**

The broken far-side coast of inlets, island chains, tidal straits, cliff harbours, and fog belts, where nobody enters the sea without reading it first, and some hamlets keep a wrecker's lamp; the country of the Gnomes. See *The Tidelace and the Soundchain Roads*.

**The Tidelace-Windscar Approaches**

The far-side terms, c. 148,000-c. 138,000 BR, reached after escort-bands raided the outlying sounding houses and harbour crews burned the

Orcs' boats, that told reception at the outer shore from entry to the inner harbour. See The Folds, the Scarps, and the Shore.

**The Tidelore Hospice of Maris**

A harbour hospice of the Tidelace Coasts kept under the name of Maris of the Tides, famous for healing arts and the magic of surviving the sea. See *Magic in Ordinary Life*.

**The Time Lock**

A zone built on purpose: a vault of dilated time drawn from the Frozen Moment, guarded by the Bronze Sentries, in which what was sealed stays as dangerous as on the day it was sealed. See The Resonant Zones.

**The Tomb-Builder**

The god of the Sepulchre-Kin burial houses, a Resonant of Terra whose obsession with permanence drove the Unburial War; his true name is held inside their Record-engine. See Worlds That Came Before.

**Trace Magic**

The Harmonic school of the Whispering Trace, concerned with what remains after departure, damage, death, or loss. See The Schools of Magic.

**Traditional magic**

Casting that relies on the caster's own training, method, surroundings, stored charge, and bodily channel. See How Magic Works.

**Trolls**

A people of wounded frontiers, whose bodies carry Failed Mending, found where land and works refuse to heal and holding the crossings no one else will keep; their civilization is the Crossing-Oath Houses, and their lines are called woundlines. See *The Bridge Peoples*.

**The Truthwell**

A stone basin of unnaturally pure water that rejects falsehood and holds drowned liars as warnings, kept as a sacred trust by the Water-Robed. See The Resonant Zones.

**The Turning House**

An abandoned Confluence Basins mill that ground on an off-key working for a generation; its wheel turns in a dry race, and every door opens on the grinding floor. One of the six known off-key places. See The Dissonance.

**The Turnwater Reopening Accord**

The last of the great far-side terms, c. 100,000-c. 98,000 BR, an Orc-Gnome accord that reopened chosen kinds of Soundchain traffic at Turnwater one cargo and one season at a time, under old grudges and new wreckers. See The Folds, the Scarps, and the Shore.

**The Twofold Waters**

The rule of the Gravel Oath Accord that a channel may be return-water to one people and dwelling-water to another at the same time, and belongs first to those who already raise their young in it. See *Peoples of the Water*.

# U

**Ulaun the Stilled Hour**

The Resonant of Aion born of Thaluren dread as egg blight entered the First Nesting Confluence; the stillness she gave held the clutches in a prison from which they could never hatch. See *Peoples of the Water*.

**Umbra**

The Prime of shadow and the trace, the principle of what remains; its Harmonic is the Whispering Trace. See The Ten Primes.

**The Unbound Gale**

The Harmonic of Zephyr: air, motion, freedom, and thought, the breath of the universe and the carrier of ideas; its footless Wind-Walkers glide on its currents. See The Planes.

**The Unburial War**

The unrecorded fall of the Sepulchre-Kin, c. 110,000-c. 80,000 BR, in which their burial houses turned their power over the dead on one another. See Worlds That Came Before.

**The Undercroft Fair**

The best-known Edgeway gathering-market, held in the vaulted cellars of a ruined storework in the Broken Marches. See *Roads, Rivers, and Crossings*.

**The Underhouse Compacts**

The first named Kobold civilization, grown from older underhouse lines and from the vent-kin who survived the ash-furnace world, whose strength is the collective refusal. See *The Bridge Peoples*.

**The Uneven Settling**

The long instability of the young Material Plane, when the world could not be held evenly; the Steward of Foundations fell during it. See Stewards and Resonants.

**The Unformed**

The one undivided potential from before the Primes, still lying beneath all they defined and pressing towards the undoing of form; it feels no malice, its threat is a gradual loss of meaning, names, and edges, and the ten named Unformed are its faces. See What Waits Outside.

**The Unlisting of the Warrens**

The span, c. 180,000-c. 150,000 BR, in which the archive-law world struck the Goblin warrens it had once entered as peoples from its rolls, and drove them from their gaps, as its classifications hardened. See *The Bridge Peoples*.

**The Unmakers**

The guild brotherhoods, temple circles, and local fellowships, named so by the Wrought, who destroyed awakened Wrought or forced them back to tool status in the sincere belief that selfhood cannot be made. See *How the Present Was Made*.

**The Unrecorded Age**

The sixth age, c. 120,000-c. 40,000 BR, after writing ended in the cradle, when peoples kept their customs and genealogies in breath and its graves and hoards are still turned up by the plough. See The Ages of Caeldon.

**The Unsung Field**

A grass bowl of the High Scars where a slaughtered band's names were never recited; its grass grows in spirals under a second, lower wind. One of the six known off-key places. See The Dissonance.

**The Upland Colossal Civilization**

The elder world of the high ridge country, c. 260,000-c. 195,000 BR, of ridge roads, storm terraces, and weather shrines built on a scale no living builder can match; it withdrew, and the Giants are its remainder. See Worlds That Came Before.

**Ushkar the Ancestor-Warden**

The Orc god of lineage and the dead on the Windscar, a Resonant of Memoria who keeps the names of kindreds that held passage on the Stele of Names and strikes the names of those who broke it, leaving them outlaws of the open country. See The Folds, the Scarps, and the Shore.

# V

**Varn the Shadow-Stalker**

The god of the hidden in the Broken Marches, a Resonant of Umbra born of everyone who has had to live unseen in the ruin-belts; many fugitive Wrought prayed to him. See The Gods of the Medieval Era (MED 69).

**The Veil**

The fluid space between places that connects every plane, a fog whose face changes towards each plane it borders and which takes its price from travellers, most often in what they remember. See The Veil and the Outside.

**The Veil-Walkers**

The people native to the Veil, humanoid, with skin that shimmers like oil on water and features that shift with the fog, so that nobody can say afterwards quite what a Veil-Walker's face was like. See The Veil and the Outside.

**The Vent-Houses of the Furnace World**

The span, c. 250,000-c. 168,000 BR, in which hereditary Kobold vent-houses kept the vents and heat-ways of the Ash-Furnace world breathing, lived through its burning, and were bound into deep-world service afterwards. See The Threads of History.

**Verba**

The Prime of language, order, and meaning, the force that turns noise into speech and sensation into a world of named things; its Harmonic is the Binding Song. See The Ten Primes.

**The Verdant Expanse**

The Surplus Plane where life reproduces faster than anything can contain it; its people, the Verdant, have skin like bark, leaves, or moss, and its Seed-Gates are ancient forests and overgrown ruins. See The Planes.

**Vital Magic**

The compound school that braids Aqua, Imago, and Memoria to restore a living body in flow, form, and pattern at once. See The Schools of Magic.

**Vital reserves**

How much usable vitality a particular person has to spend right now, drained by injury, disease, overcasting, starvation, and above all by repeated healing work. See How Magic Works.

**The Void Weaver**

The face of the Unformed that unpicks the seams of reality, so that edges fray and a story's beginning no longer leads to its middle. See What Waits Outside.

# W

**The Walking of the Unkept Roads**

The span, c. 175,000-c. 140,000 BR, in which survivor lines began walking the abandoned roads in seasonal circuits and became the Salvage Peoples. See The Threads of History.

**The Warden of Bearable Memory**

The Steward of Memoria who lets the living set down what is too heavy without falsifying the past. See Stewards and Resonants.

**The Warden of Irreversible Endings**

The Steward of Aion who holds that some losses cannot be reclaimed without cost; those who come to it to undo a loss are told to bring an honest account of what they will pay. See Stewards and Resonants.

**The Warden of Released Traces**

The Steward of Umbra who decides what of a loss should stay sharp and what may soften. See Stewards and Resonants.

**The Warden of Revelatory Mercy**

The Steward of Lux who governs truth in right measure, so that revelation illuminates rather than blinds. See Stewards and Resonants.

**The Warden of the Returning Deep**

The Steward of Aqua who keeps the difference between holy surrender and annihilating engulfment, so that what dissolves back into the greater cycle is not erased by it. See Stewards and Resonants.

**The Wardens of the Boundary**

The Stewards who keep watch at the edge of the cosmos, finding and sealing breaches before anything foreign can fully manifest; the Steward of Boundary is among them. See The Veil and the Outside.

**Warding**

The compound school of Terra with Verba and Lux: the school of saying no with structure. See The Schools of Magic.

**Warframe**

One of the six Wrought design lineages; a commander's claim to own a war-frame is one of the threshold quarrels between repair and control. See *The Bridge Peoples*.

**The waste-ground doctrine**

The Human frontier claim that ruined and marginal ground belonged to no one, by which frontier lords declared Goblin-held ruins empty and took them with hired swords and burning brands. See *The Bridge Peoples*.

**The Way of Return**

The faith of the Thaluren and the only organized religion on Caeldon with no god at its centre: its teaching is the rule of return and its pilgrimage the run itself. See *Peoples of the Water*.

**The Weatherline**

A chain of colossal stacked-stone weather shrines on the Stormcrown's highest ridges, facing the storms rather than any town. See Worlds That Came Before.

**The Weave**

The Surplus Plane where separation is impossible; its people, the Linked, carry the feeling of the collective, and beings wholly merged into its network form the Chorus. See The Planes.

**The Weeping Idol**

The Cast-Out of Lux that was the Keeper of the Shrine, until it wearied of doubt and set out to carve the faithful into figures of unthinking adoration. See What Waits Outside.

**The Whispering Trace**

The Harmonic of Umbra: death, reflection, and remnant, the space between the living and the gone; its Echo-Walkers help lost Echoes towards release or passage into the Record. See The Planes.

**The Whispering Winds**

A zone of the Unbound Gale in a high pass, a canyon, or a windy ruin, where the Wind-Listeners live by hearing and the voices of visitors whose bodies are gone have joined the wind. See The Resonant Zones.

**The Windscar**

See The Windscar Expanse.

**The Windscar Expanse**

The far side's exposed heart: dry uplands, escarpments, and interior basins, homeland of the Orcs, divided between the anchored Rimward Basins and the exposed High Scars. See The Windscar (MED 235).

**The Windscar Pacts**

The first named Orc civilization and the far side's first inland founding, c. 180,000-c. 150,000 BR: kindreds bound by treaty-grounds, escort oaths, and the blood owed for a broken passage, split between reserve-right on the rims and treaty-right on the roads. See The Windscar (MED 235).

**The Withdrawal of the Upland Colossal World**

The thinning of the colossal world, c. 198,000-c. 160,000 BR, into scattered withdrawn Giant lines, leaving its colossal roads, terraces, and unanswered oaths behind. See *The Bridge Peoples*.

**The Witnessfields**

The terraced upland east of the Lower Serath, the sealed homeland of the elder Archive-Law world: marker roads lined with inscribed stones and archive-cities whose gates have been shut for more than a hundred thousand years, where the Grey Clerks still stop passers. See Sealed and Silent Places (MED 203).

**Wood Elves**

The first Elven branch, a grove-bound people of the Elderweald whose continuity is kept by growing within a living landscape, not by redesigning it; their civilization is the Root-crown Concord. See The Elder Peoples.

**Working right**

The first of the two Headwater Rites: the young may carry messages, serve as caravan-hands and apprentices, and travel the roads under someone else's word. See The Basins and the Marches (MED 173).

**The Wrongwood**

The burned and overgrown Headwater valley where the Qzoth Incursion, c. 4,000-c. 3,500 BR, was burned back; Kindless Broods still breed

there, and broken ground wakes the Changing Fever. See The Basins and the Marches (MED 173).

**The Wrought**

The made people, youngest of Caeldon, who began when Dwarven predecessor-frames stopped being tools; their continuity passes through design and repair, and their civilization is the Mending Orders. See *The Bridge Peoples*.

# X

**Xylos**

The Hive-Mind, a Beyonder that offers union in the body instead of the mind. An example of what a Beyonder could be; none of its Incursions has reached Caeldon. See What Waits Outside.

**Xyphra**

The Unraveller, a Beyonder that dissolves the glue between things, so that a blade leaves its hilt mid-swing; it cannot cut a bond held hard. An example of what a Beyonder could be; none of its Incursions has reached Caeldon. See What Waits Outside.

# Z

**Zephyr**

The Prime of air and motion, the last of the ten to wake; its Harmonic is the Unbound Gale. See The Ten Primes.

**Ziv**

The name the Goblins of the mixed crossings give Abrel the Changeling. See Stewards and Resonants.

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# Licence

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