The Chromatic Chord

—

The Medieval Era

The Writers' Guide to the Decachord

Jan Oetjen

joetjen.github.io/The-Decachord

Contents

Preface 1
What This Book Is For 3
How to Read This Book 5
I: Caeldon in the Medieval Era 7
1. A World in Two Halves 9
2. A Year in the Medieval Era 25
3. Roads, Rivers, and Crossings 33
II: Medieval Peoples and Powers 43
4. The Civilizations of the Medieval Era 45
5. The Gods of the Medieval Era 69
6. Faith in Practice 77
7. Magic in Ordinary Life 91
III: Sickness and Remedy 101
8. Common Ills, Poisons, and Plagues 103
9. Unnatural Afflictions 117
IV: A Medieval Atlas: The Cradle-Web 127
10. The Forest Heartlands 129
11. Stone and the Deep 151
12. The Basins and the Marches 173
13. Sealed and Silent Places 203
V: A Medieval Atlas: The Far Side 217
14. The Leeward Folds 219
15. The Windscar 235
16. The Tidelace and the Soundchain Roads 253
17. The Tidebound Reaches and the Unrun Sea 275
VI: The Making of the Medieval Present 291
18. How the Present Was Made 293
19. Writing in the Medieval Era 309
A. A Short Chronology 319
B. Glossary 321
Index 355
C. Licence 361

Preface

Foundations describes the ground the world stands on: the planes behind it, the powers in it, the laws of its magic, its peoples as kinds, and the long past that laid it down. None of that changes from one era to the next. What changes is what the peoples make of it, and this book is the first to look at one era of that making: Caeldon in the Medieval Era, around 1,350 CR.

It is the world at a particular moment, a raw age of high fantasy built on old foundations. The rivers of the cradle-web are held by towns that sell safe passage and keep it with armed boats, the holds keep their gates and their seals, the forest edge is still a quarrel fought with axes and arrows, ruin-delvers go down into halls older than any people now living, and beast-hunters, sellswords, and bounty-takers make a living from what waits on the roads; and far beyond the Glassbelt the folds count their stores, the kindreds drive their herds along the scarps, and the harbours sound their channels at slack water. One road crosses between the two halves of the world, and almost no one takes it. This book walks through all of it as a traveller would, and because a traveller needs a guide, it has one: a Human toll-clerk of the Serathic League called Orrin Talloway, whose road-book carries the reader through every region of the atlas and once across the desert and back.

The book does not repeat what *Foundations* tells. When a chapter here names a god, a school of magic, or a people, it says what that god, school, or people means in this era and points back to *Foundations* for the rest. The beasts, crops, and stranger beings of the era have their own book, *A Bestiary of Caeldon*, and the website's Reference at joetjen.github.io/The-Decachord/ holds every name and date of the setting, entry by entry.

Like the rest of the series, the book invents nothing. Every fact in it has a home in the technical pages of the Decachord; the book gathers them, orders them, and lets the era speak in its own songs, almanacs, and sayings. Where the two disagree, the pages are right.

Later eras will have books of their own, and they will look back on this one as history. Here it is still the present, and its quarrels are still open.

Jan Oetjen

What This Book Is For

The Medieval Era is for writers who want to set something in Caeldon around 1,350 CR: a story on a river road, a delve into a sealed hall, a feud in the marches, a hunt at the forest edge, a song for a harbour, a map of a fold. What the series as a whole sets out to give is told once, in *Foundations* (see What This Book Is For, FND 3). This book gives it for one era.

Ground, Texture, and Trouble

The **ground** here is the era's: who holds which river, ford, and hold gate, by what custom and with whose spears, and what a household owes to whom. The civilizations of the era, the faiths people keep, and the magic a village meets are set out plainly, so that a writer knows, before a character says a word, whose toll is paid at a crossing, whose word decides when a bridge fails, and what waits in the ruin beyond the ford.

The **texture** is the era's too. The atlas walks region by region through the land as it looks and sounds and smells: the threshing floors of the basins, the root-chambers below the forest, the cistern halls of the folds, the treaty-grounds of the scarps, the stair-built harbours of the far coast. The year turns through harvests, counts, and festivals; roads and rivers have their tolls, guides, raiders, and warnings; the ruins have their treasure and their dead. Throughout, the era's own voices speak: carters' songs, an almanac of the river, the sayings of an oath-yard, and the road-book of one traveller.

The **trouble** is what the era is carrying at that moment: feuds, raids, small wars, haunted ground, and the old grudges under all of them. Every chapter ends with its tensions, and the last chapter gathers all of them by theme, with what the setting leaves open on purpose.

What It Leaves Open

The book names no heroes of its own and settles none of its quarrels. It tells the deeds the era already sings of, says that a bridge is failing and who blames whom, and stops there; the heroes are for the stories set in it. It describes the two halves of the world the era knows and leaves the rest of the planet, beyond the Unrun Sea and past the edges of the atlas, unmapped. And it describes one era only. What came before it is told in *Foundations* and summed up in the last part of this book; what comes after belongs to the books of later eras.

The book carries no game rules. Anyone who builds a game on the Medieval Era brings or builds the rules; the book gives them the world to fit them to.

How to Read This Book

This book can be read from end to end, and the order makes sense that way, but it is built to be opened wherever a story needs it. Every chapter can be read alone, in a sitting.

How the Book Is Laid Out

The book has six parts: the five every era book of the series shares, and one of its own. Part I, *Caeldon in the Medieval Era*, shows the world at a glance: its two halves and the one crossing between them, a year as people live it, and the roads, rivers, and borders a traveller meets. Part II, *Medieval Peoples and Powers*, describes the civilizations of the era, who holds power in them and how, the faiths in practice, and magic as ordinary people meet it, with the awe and fear it still draws. Part III, *Sickness and Remedy*, tells what people suffer and how they are nursed: the common ills, poisons, and plagues, and the unnatural afflictions of magic, curses, strange places, and the Dark Entities. Parts IV and V are the atlas, one for each half of the world: *The Cradle-Web*, with its forests, mountains, deeps, river basins, and sealed places, and *The Far Side*, with its folds, scarps, coasts, and waters. Part VI, *The Making of the Medieval Present*, tells how the present came to be, from the Corridor Ages to the Wake-Seal, and gathers the era's quarrels by theme for writers.

Where to Start

A writer with a region in mind can start at its atlas chapter and read outward. A writer who wants the whole era can read Part I, which is written as an overview, and follow whatever catches. Where something belongs to every era rather than this one, a chapter says what it means here and points onward; the reference names the chapter and the book it is in, as in Stewards and Resonants (FND 85), and the HTML edition links straight to it. *Foundations* also explains the voices of the series, the epigraphs and their in-world sources, the At a Glance boxes, and the Tensions (see How to Read This Book, FND 5). The beasts and crops of the era, and the stranger beings, are in *A Bestiary of Caeldon*.

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*

The Road-Book

Every atlas chapter carries passages from **Orrin Talloway**, *A Road-Book of Both Halves*, set apart in italic within the section of the place they cross. He was a Human toll-clerk of the Serathic League in the Lower Serath, who rode the roads of the cradle-web, crossed the Glassbelt once each way with an Edgeway kindred circuit, arriving at the Lastwater Wells, was entered at the Turnwater Quays as a line under an escort, and, home again after some five years, wrote both halves down around 1,350 CR. No Human caravan or settler crosses the desert; Orrin was the exception. The road-book is arranged by region, as any road-book is, not in the order he travelled, so each atlas chapter carries the passages for its own country; they can be read on their own or as part of the chapter around them. Orrin writes with a clerk's eye for tolls and tallies and a traveller's nerves for raiders, ruins, and the dark, and like every voice in the book, the road-book is an edition-only voice, not part of the world's canon.

Dates

Years are counted from one fixed epoch: **BR**, Before Reckoning, backwards into the deep past, and **CR**, Common Reckoning, forwards from it. A date marked **c.** is an estimate. The Medieval Era runs roughly from c. 500 to c. 1,500 CR, and this book describes its present, around 1,350 CR. Older dates in it, such as the Corridor Ages or the Settlement, are given as spans, plain windows of time rather than years anyone wrote down.

At the back of the book, **A Short Chronology** gives the three ages that made the medieval present, from the Corridor Ages to the Medieval Present itself, with their main events; the full chronology of all nine ages is in *Foundations*. A **glossary** explains the names and terms this book uses, and an **index** shows where each is told.

PART I

Caeldon in the Medieval Era

The world around 1,350 CR: its two halves, the one crossing between them, how people live through a year, and how they move.

CHAPTER 1

A World in Two Halves

I kept tolls on the Serath for most of my working life and thought I knew what a road was: a thing somebody holds, and takes his toll on, for as long as he can hold it. Then I went out across the glass and found a whole half of the world holding its roads in ways no League toll-house has heard of, and between the two halves a desert that nobody holds at all, where the dead walk the old shorelines and the sand keeps what it takes. I have written both halves down as I found them, tolls and tallies first, because that is the only way I know how to see a country. The rest I have written down because nobody would believe me otherwise.

— Orrin Talloway, from the preface, *A Road-Book of Both Halves*

Ask a basin farmer how wide the world is and the answer comes at once: as wide as the Serath runs, as high as the holds, as deep as the forest lets a stranger walk. Ask a Gnome pilot on the Tidelace and the answer comes just as quickly and is entirely different: as far as the last beacon, and not one sounding further. Neither of them is wrong, and neither has any reason to think of the other. Medieval Caeldon is two inhabited halves that keep separate lords, separate gods, and separate harvests, joined across a desert by one road that almost nobody walks. The cradle-web is old, crowded, and quarrelsome: the ground on which Elves and Dwarves have fought and feuded for half a million years, and on which Humans, far younger, have joined the quarrel with steel and made it louder. The far side is just as old in its own way, a country of wind, folds, tides, and returning waters, where Orcs, Halflings, Gnomes, Thaluren, and Kavari fought out their customs of water and passage without ever hearing of the cradle's. Between the two lies the Glassbelt, where furnace-lords' vaults lie under the sand. Beyond them lies a sea no one has crossed, and around them a planet no one has charted.

AT A GLANCE

The cradle-web	About 4.5 million people. Forest, mountain, deep, basin, and march: the Elderweald, Crownboughs, and Briarreach; the Ironspine, Stonewake Deeps, and Roothollows; the Confluence Basins, Lower Serath, Headwater Marches, Broken Marches, and Greyford Reach.
The far side	About 800,000 people. The Windscar Expanse with the High Scars and Rimward Basins; the Leeward Folds; the Tidelace Coasts and Soundchain Roads; the Tide-bound Reaches.
Between	The Glassbelt Interior, a true desert, with the fog of the Hushvale at its cradle-facing edge.
Beyond	The Unrun Sea off the far-side coasts; past the old world's maps, the Dawnreach, the Shadewells, the Rimefold, and the Green Deep, known by rumour or not at all.
Who crosses	Edgeway kindreds, some Ogre burden orders and Troll crossing houses, a scatter of Goblin and Wrought salvagers.
The year	The Medieval Era, c. 1,350 CR.

Not One World but Two

The first thing to understand about medieval Caeldon is that the map most of its people carry in their heads is a map of half of it. The crowded country that the oldest histories tell of, where the first great wars between peoples were fought and the first great settlements made, is one gathering of peoples on the planet, not the planet itself. It is called the **cradle-web**, because so much began there and so much of it is tangled together. Forest, mountain, and river basin press against one another; every border has a people on each side of it and often a third living in the border itself; and nearly every crossing has more than one house that wants to hold it. But that crowding belongs to this one country. It is not how Caeldon is everywhere.

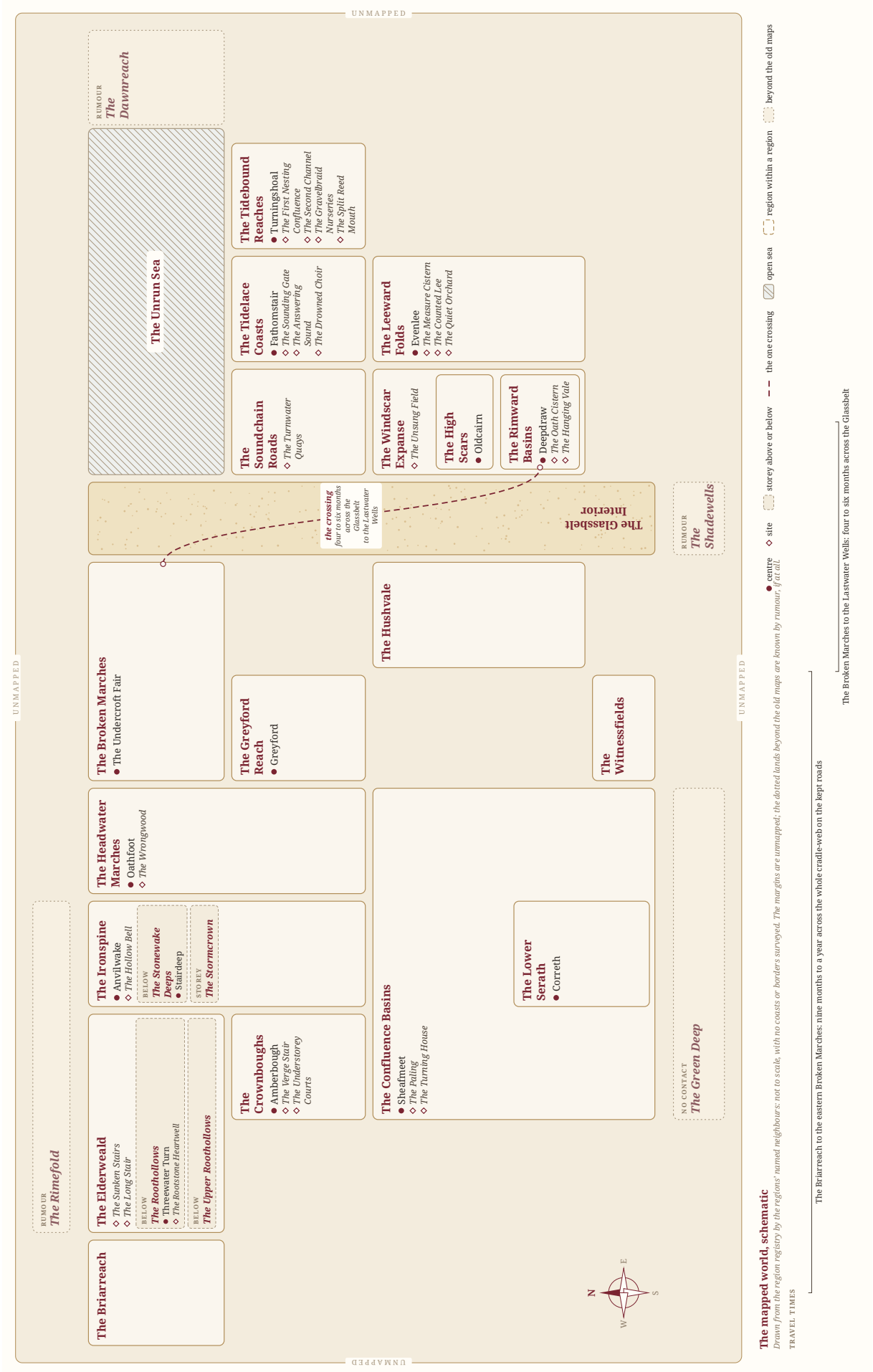
On the far side of a desert lies the second half, called simply the **far side**. It is not a frontier of the cradle-web, and it was not settled from it. It has its own peoples, who became themselves on its own ground; its own orders, as old as many in the cradle; and its own heart, which lies nowhere near any forest or hold. Its quarrels are over wells, soundings, harbours, and spawning water, and a cradle lord would find most of them strange and all of them familiar: whoever holds the water decides who drinks.

What joins the two is a single overland route across the **Glassbelt Interior**, Caeldon's first true desert, and it is not a road in any sense a League toll-keeper would recognize. No power on either side deals with any power on the other. No league or lord has an envoy, an oath, or a toll on the far half. No Human caravan or settler makes the crossing, and no sea route joins the halves. The people who do cross are road peoples, who have no land to speak of on either side and who keep the way across because keeping ways is what they do. They carry goods, news, marks, and gods, a little at a time, and they are the reason a traveller who has seen both halves keeps meeting the same faces at the hardest crossings of each.

The pages that follow walk the cradle-web first, then the far side, then the desert between them and the edges where every map stops. The atlas parts of this book go region by region; this chapter keeps to the shape of the whole.

The Shape of the Land

Seen whole, the known world is one long landmass. The cradle-web holds its west, the far side its east, and between them lies the Glassbelt, a desert that runs north and south further than anyone has followed it. Off the far side's northern and eastern coasts lies the Unrun Sea. Beyond those edges nothing is mapped: not the cradle-web's north or south, not the ends of the desert, not the uplands behind the far side. The map in this chapter dots in four lands there that no medieval map shows; they are told at the end of the chapter. Nobody on Caeldon measures any of it in miles. Distances are told in days, weeks, and months of ordinary travel, on foot, by cart where there are roads, by boat where the water carries, in fair weather and in a company that knows the way. The land is very large and most of it is wild. People live in protected cores (river corridors, hold valleys, grove rings, fold terraces) with wide, deadly country between them, where wolves, raiders, and older things wait, and nobody goes from one core to the next except in an armed company on a kept road.



The mapped world, schematic
Drawn from the region registry by the regions' named neighbours: not to scale, with no coasts or borders surveyed. The margins are unmapped; the dotted lands beyond the old maps are known by rumour, if at all.
TRAVEL TIMES

The Cradle-Web Laid Out

The cradle-web is built around one range and one river. The Ironspine runs north to south through its middle, some four months' walk long as far as anyone has mapped it, with the bare crest of the Stormcrown along its top and the Stonewake Deeps far beneath its middle; a summer pass takes two or three weeks to cross it. The forest lies along its western face: the Elderweald in the north-west, the Crownboughs to its south-east in the corner where forest meets mountain, and the Briarreach in a broken belt along the Elderweald's western and south-western edge, with the Roothollows under the eastern Elderweald. The foothills lie along the eastern face: the Headwater Marches below the southern half of the range, the Broken Marches north and east of them behind the March Wall, and the Greyford Reach on its river where the two Marches meet.

Every river runs off the Ironspine and gathers southwards. The Headwater rivers come down the eastern face and bend south-west, the forest streams run south out of the Elderweald, and in the Confluence Basins, the wide valley country below forest and foothills, they join valley by valley into the **Serath**, which carries the corridor of the Lower Serath south towards an end nobody has mapped. The sealed Witnessfields lie on dry uplands east of the lower river. In the south-east, past the last Headwater hills, rough country climbs to an unnamed range at the desert's edge, and at its eastern foot lies the fog of the Hushvale.

The distances are long by any measure. A grain barge takes about four weeks from Sheafmeet in the middle valleys down to Correth and two months or more to come back up by towpath and road; a cart takes about two months from Sheafmeet to Oathfoot under the gates. A company crossing the whole cradle-web, from the Briarreach in the west to the desert margins of the Broken Marches in the east, needs nine months to a year on the kept roads, and pays a toll at every bridge and ford that someone is strong enough to hold.

The Crossing and the Far Side

The crossing runs west to east, from the eastern ruin margins of the Broken Marches, with the Hushvale's fog two or three weeks south of the track, to the Lastwater Wells on the inland rim of the Rimward Basins. Well to well it takes four to six months on foot with pack animals, and nobody starts it in the hot months.

The far side runs from a dry west to a wet northern coast, with two walls of rock between. The Windscar Expanse fills the west against the desert, under a dry wind off the Glassbelt. Its closed Rimward Basins lie in the south-west; north and east of them the land climbs the **Shearline**, a great escarpment facing south over the basin rims, into the shelves and passes of the High Scars, and beyond the Scars dry country runs on north to sea cliffs. East of the Basins, behind the north-south ridge of the **Lee Wall**, lie the Leeward Folds. The coast runs along the far side's north from west to east: the Soundchain Roads below the Windscar cliffs, then the inner harbours of the Tidelace Coasts behind their island chains, facing the Folds inland, and at its eastern end the river mouths of the Tidebound Reaches, whose longer rivers come north out of unmapped uplands. The Windscar has no rivers at all, and the Folds send only short ones north to the Tidelace estuaries.

Here the distances are emptier. From the Lastwater Wells to Deepdraw is three or four weeks, and from Deepdraw the escorted Lee Road needs seven or eight more over the Lee Wall to the first fold. From the desert rim to the sea is about four months overland, and the longest escort routes take two or three months from Oldcairn on its high shelf down to the Turnwater Quays. Along the coast it is four or five weeks by pilot craft from Turnwater to Fathomstair and about three weeks' sail on to the Split Reed Mouth.

The Peoples in Numbers

Some 5.3 million people live in the mapped world, very few for so much land, and the halves are nowhere near the same size. The cradle-web holds about 4.5 million of them; the far side holds about 800,000, roughly as many as live along the Lower Serath alone. Humans are nearly two in three of everyone, and almost all of them live in the Confluence Basins, the most populous region on Caeldon with some 2.4 million people, and along the Lower Serath, where 600,000 to 800,000 crowd the corridor more tightly than anywhere else. The Headwater Marches follow with about 400,000 and the Ironspine with about 320,000, most of them Dwarves; the three forest heartlands hold some 290,000 together, the Broken Marches perhaps 120,000, the Stonewake Deeps 80,000, and the Roothollows 40,000. On the far side the Halflings of the Leeward Folds are the largest people, about 240,000; the Orcs of the Windscar and the Gnomes of the coast number some 180,000 each, and the Thaluren and Kavari of the Tidebound Reaches about 140,000 together.

Towns are few. Correth on the Serath, with forty thousand or more, is the largest in the world. Truesound on the Tidelace and Anvilwake in the Ironspine hold some twenty thousand each; Sheafmeet, Oathfoot, Pellith, Stairdeep, and the court seat of Amberbough ten thousand or so. Everyone else, in either half, lives in a village, a grove, a hold, a fold, a station, or a camp of a few dozen households, behind a palisade, a hedge, a gate, or a wall of slings, and every core holds far more of them than any map names. The atlas parts give each region's people in turn.

The Cradle-Web

The cradle-web is the best-remembered country on Caeldon, and the most crowded. Its oldest peoples have lived in it for something like half a million years. Its Human lords have been building in it, fighting in it, and writing it down for some forty thousand. Most of what any writer will first imagine of medieval Caeldon (walled river towns, Dwarven gates in a mountain face, an Elven forest that will not be cleared, a lord's hall loud with a quarrel over a failing bridge, a sealed door with something knocking behind it) is cradle-web material.

Forest

At its heart stands the **Elderweald**, the old-growth forest at the centre of the Elven world, home of the Wood Elves and of the Rootcrown Concord. Its paths are walked open rather than cut, its dead are given back to the living ground among the trees, and its groves have quarrelled with the Ironspine over water for more than four hundred thousand years and with the basin farmers for nearly forty thousand. Bears den under its root-mat, moss-coated deer walk in its oldest groves, and barred stairs lead down from it into a drowned world. Every other Elven heartland began as part of it. The **Crownboughs**, in the forest's south-eastern corner against the mountains, are a cultivated canopy where trees have been trained into halls and terraces over more lifetimes than most peoples have history, the homeland of the High Elves and their Crownbough Courts; behind the polished face its great houses turn outward lie blood duels on garden-walks above the drop and dead halls where the silver mirrors still hang. The **Briarreach**, at the forest's harder edge, is a belt of thicket and wet ravine where the Thorn Elves of the Thornbound Circles learned to remember Caeldon as dangerous rather than generous. Arrows come out of its hedges at anyone who walks in unasked, and Troll houses keep its ravine crossings and make every traveller pay.

Beneath and beside the forest lie the **Roothollows**, root-caverns where the forest's roots come down through the ceiling and grow into the stone. The Dark Elves of the Gloamroot Covenant live there in house chamber-clusters strung along their Known Ways, under an old oath that a

refugee at the door must be let in. Above them, between the deep groves and the surviving hollows, lies a storey nobody enters: the **Upper Roothollows**, drowned and barred in a catastrophe more than three hundred thousand years ago, a drowned kingdom both sides can point to and neither can reach, its dead unburied and its house-treasures where the water left them.

Stone and the Deep

Beside the forest runs the **Ironspine**, a long mountain belt and the oldest Dwarven homeland, its holds cut into the mountain faces and its mines and underways running down into the rock. No throne rules it. Each hold rules itself under the Ironspine Holds, bound to the others by very old oaths about what must be kept standing. Its gates have held against sieges older than Human memory, and its abandoned holds lie open to anyone who dares the dark and the bad air. Far below the mountain holds lie the **Stonewake Deeps**, the deep central hold-cluster of the Stonewake Compact, where more of the lower world's routes and water converge than anywhere else, and where a sealed door is at once a hold-elder's judgement, a prayer, and a border. Behind some of those doors something still knocks. The Deeps' edge towards the Roothollows has been fought over with the Dark Elves for more than three hundred thousand years.

Above the holds the **Stormcrown** rises into bare ridges and storm shelves where the vanished Upland Colossal world left its terraces, ridge roads, and weather shrines, and giants' tombs that no one has opened. No hold or lord has ever held it. Its lower edge is where the holds' gate-watch and the Headwater lords' grants give out and a taboo takes over.

Basin and March

Down from the mountains the rivers fall into the **Confluence Basins**, the broad lowland heartland of Humans: wide valleys, deep fields, and linked rivers gathering towards the Serath. More Humans live by the plough here than anywhere else, and the Confluence Marches, the first great Human civilization, are a field of lords, walled towns, and shifting alliances held together by no crown, only by shared habit: the same gods, the same oaths, and the same ways of ending a quarrel, by sworn word, blood-price, or the sword. Plenty draws hunger, and the Basins have outlaws in the flood-forest, wolves at the folds in hard winters, lords who burn each other's barns, and the drowned who walk back out of the river in spring. The Reedfolk kept the lower waters as the Floodkeeper Houses long before the first basin town and still do. On the river's lower course the **Lower Serath** is a crowded corridor of walled towns bound into the Serathic League by sworn oaths and the fear of breaking them rather than by a crown, with river-thieves in the reeds and wreckers above the shoals.

Upstream, the **Headwater Marches** are foothill country between the Human farmland and the Dwarven mountains, the oldest shared country of Humans and Dwarves on Caeldon, living by the escorted exchange roads that climb from basin granaries to the hold gates and by the swords that guard them. Beyond the March Wall the country goes feral: the **Broken Marches** are a ruin-belt of failed works and broken routes where nobody rules, the main regional home of the Goblins, and a place where Kobolds, Wrought, Ogres, Trolls, Salvage Peoples, and Humans in trouble all make a living from what stronger ages left behind. Vault-breakers strip its cellars, bounty-takers hunt its tunnels, and outlaws hold its roads. Where the two Marches meet stands the **Greyford Reach**, with its patched bridge, its two banks, and its quarrel over who pays to keep the crossing standing and who takes the toll.

East of the Lower Serath, where the basin fields thin into dry upland, lie the **Witnessfields**, the sealed homeland of the elder Archive-Law world: terraces, marker roads lined with inscribed stones, and archive-cities whose gates have been shut for more than a hundred thousand years. Nobody lives there, and every treasure-seeker on the Serath has heard what might lie behind a gate that has never been forced: the wealth of a world that wrote down everything it owned.

The Character of the Cradle

The cradle-web is layered. A traveller who walks across it in a year passes more history than most far-side peoples keep in a lifetime, and is reminded of it at every toll. Colossal roads run along the heights of the Ironspine and through the Broken Marches on grades no living builder could lay. Dwarven bridges older than the towns beside them carry the Headwater road. Inscribed marker stones in the Witnessfields go on watching with nobody left to watch. Some Headwater road sections still carry the camp-marks of the debt-bound Ogre camps that built them, and no Ogre band will cut those marks away. The present lives on all of it, and the oldest grudges in the cradle are older than the people now nursing them.

It is also crowded with peoples who need one another and resent the need. Elves and Dwarves meet across the forest verges and the Verge Stair. Humans live between them, borrowing Dwarven craft and High Elf ceremony and resented for both. Reedfolk keep river knowledge the Human towns cannot do without and have almost no say in what the towns decide. Goblins live inside Dwarven hold walls on seams their ancestors held before there were holds. Kobold crews keep the narrow underwork of the mines. Wrought descended from Dwarven workframes work the forges and keep repair houses in the foothill towns. Ogre bands carry the heavy loads under sworn terms, Troll houses keep the worst crossings, and Edgeway kindreds walk their circuits between the ruins. Giants are rare enough to be rumour.

Its faiths are as crowded as its roads. The Sworn Accord of the Human corridor world enters its gods by name in every oath-house: Anvelle the Harvest-Mother at the first sheaf, Serovan the River-King at the spring rise, Ostrin the Lantern-Bearer for those who want to know where the toll money went. The Held Covenant asks its questions at every Dwarven gate under Kerrund the Stone-Warden. The Ordered Bough keeps the High Elf temple-gardens. Under and around them run the gods of the people who count for less: Varn the Shadow-Stalker in the ruins, Tavi the Bard of the Broken at Compact gatherings, Abrel the Changeling for Headwater youths caught between two peoples, Ghessa the Hearth-Mother at Ogre fires, and Ennor the Grave-Watcher at the graves of most cradle peoples, who honour him under names of their own.

The Far Side

The far side lies well outside the cradle-web, and its peoples became themselves there. Its first named orders are a hundred and fifty thousand years old and more, and most of the customs they still live by were fought out in a long chain of feuds, raids, and wars between about 160,000 and 98,000 BR, in the age the histories call the Far-Side Terms. Each time the stronger side dictated terms, and 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. A Gnome harbour family that points to terms older than the first Human town in the basins is doing nothing unusual.

Wind

The **Windscar Expanse** is the far side's exposed heart: dry uplands, escarpments, and interior basins with salt or dust floors, desert-edge rather

than true desert, defined less by any one place than by scale, separation, and the hard work of staying alive and remembered across it. Its people are the Orcs, its civilization the Windscar Pacts. Packs of dun dogs follow the herds and take stragglers, raiders wait at the wells for parties weakened by the crossing, and a circle of scar vultures over a pass tells an escort that someone did not get through. It has two halves of its own. The **High Scars** are the travelling half: wind-broken shelves and storm-cut passes held by moving escorts, where a road is not a built surface but a line of knowledge, cairn chains across the shelves and passward shelters at either end of the exposed stretches. On the fading cairn-lines stand the Cairn-Wakers, escorts who failed to warn and cannot rest. The **Rimward Basins** below are the anchored half: closed basins whose rims carry the strongholds, defended wells, and rock-cut cisterns that let Orc life stay in one place long enough to matter. The inland rim of the Rimward Basins is the edge of the whole Windscar, and beyond it the wells give out.

Fold

Past a ridge that takes the wind for them lie the **Leeward Folds**, the Windscar's opposite: sheltered hollows, stepped terraces, orchard belts, and cistern-fed valleys, the first named homeland of the Halflings and of the Foldward Commons. No town rules them. What binds them is a conviction every child learns before it can count far, that a good fold can be eaten by its own success, and in a dry year every hungry band on the far side remembers where the water is. Orc escorts from the Windscar side and Gnome traders from the coast reach the Folds constantly, and are fed, watered, and traded with at the fold edges; almost none of them ever walk up the terraces. Those who try uninvited, thieves and raiders alike, meet the fold's young on the walls with slings.

Shore

Seaward the land breaks into the **Tidelace Coasts**, a broken coast of inlets, island chains, tidal straits, cliff harbours, and fog belts where nobody enters the sea without reading it first. They are the homeland of the Gnomes and the heartland of the Gaugeward Leagues, a league of harbour towns without a capital, held together by soundings, beacons, breakwaters, and old harbour families who say who may come in and when. It is a beautiful coast and a hungry one: the fog hides drowned crews, the shoals hide drowned harbours, and on the darkest nights there are fires on the headlands that no Gnome lit. Along the coast's outer, Windscar-facing edge runs the **Soundchain Roads**, a chain of roadsteads, lee sounds, transfer quays, and pilot stations where escorted Orc parties come down the cliff stairs and are met, counted, and fed by Gnome station crews who keep their inner harbours behind them.

Return

Further along the far shore the **Tidebound Reaches** bind sea and river into one water-world: pelagic current roads, shoal and reef settlements, estuaries, and upriver spawning approaches. The Thaluren live their whole ordinary lives at sea and come upriver only to spawn, and the Returning Concord holds the Reaches together not as a realm with a border but as a chain of waters held by custom, in which every keeper knows the others' place. It is a perilous road: sharks wait at the mouths for the young, pike-jawed hunters raid the spawning beds, and on the farthest currents something vast breaks the runs that go too far. Upriver the runs reach freshwater that is already someone's home: the tributaries of the Kavari, whose Bankright Circles hold the rootbank villages, deep pools, and nursery gravels all year round with barbed spears.

The Character of the Far Side

The far side is not one frontier mood. Its three great landward homelands meet hard country in three different ways. Orcs cross it by escorted passage and hard covenant, Halflings hold it by bounded plenty and reserve custom, and Gnomes chart it closely enough to live on without ever calling it tame. The water peoples add a fourth way, a return that must come home whole through every water it crosses. A far-side traveller is asked different questions at every border: who brought you, what can be spared you, when you said you would come, which run you came up with.

Its peoples meet one another constantly, and almost never anyone from the cradle. Orc escorts bring parties to the Halfling fold markets and to the Gnome stations. Gnome pilots and Thaluren run-watchers share the estuaries under terms first set at the Split Reed Mouth. Thaluren and Kavari meet wherever a run climbs into resident water, and not always in peace. Ogre burden-camps come up to the High Scars for heavy work, and Troll crossing houses hold the worst passes; both reached the far side by the one crossing. And on the Tidelace live a few coastal Humans, in hamlets on the beaches and outer coves between the Gnome harbours, fishing from small open boats under Gnome harbour custom. Their ancestors drifted out along coasts and river mouths during the Unrecorded Age, and nobody recorded the journey. They have no Sworn Accord, no memory of the basins, and no knowledge that the cradle exists.

Its faiths are its own. The Thaluren keep the Way of Return, the only organized religion on Caeldon with no god at its centre: its doctrine is the rightful return and its pilgrimage the run itself. The Windscar belongs to two Orc gods, Ushkar the Ancestor-Warden, who keeps the names of those who held passage and strikes the names of those who broke it, and Rakhal the Storm-Caller, the wind that breaks whatever has gone stale. The folds keep Tamsel the Season-Weaver at the Festival of the Turn. Gnome harbour towns and Human hamlets alike keep shrines to Maris of the Tides. The cradle's gods are almost unknown here, except where the crossers carried them.

How the Halves Differ

Set side by side, the two halves answer the same questions in different ways, and the differences are a writer's best tool for telling a reader which half a story stands in.

The cradle is crowded; the far side is wide. A cradle traveller is never far from someone else's border, and someone else's toll. A far-side traveller is often far from anyone at all, and the question is less whose ground this is than whether the next water will be there. In the cradle every bridge, ford, and pass has a lord or a house that holds it and a rival who wants it; on the far side the few places where everyone must stop, a well, a cistern hall, a beach yard, an estuary, are the places worth fighting for.

The cradle writes; the far side counts and sounds. In the basins a bargain is sworn aloud before kin and priest and written down, and a careful scribe keeps a second copy somewhere else, though what is written records only what the stronger party has already decided. On the far side the reserve is counted aloud at the cistern hall, a sounding family's mark is cut on every post it sets, and an escort's name rests on whether the parties it guided arrived. Both halves care intensely about remembering. They disagree about what is worth remembering, and how.

The cradle's oldest quarrels are about rank, refuge, and ground: which people is the elder, who abandoned whom in the deep, whether a settlement owes anything to the forest it cleared. The far side's are about water and timing: whether a delay was honest, whether a well was hoarded, whether a run came home rightly. Both are quarrels about who counts. They are fought with different weapons.

Some kinds of country occur on both sides. Old roads and burden routes run through the Headwater Marches and across the High Scars; wounded crossings and bad passes exist in the Briarreach and on the Whetgap; frontier settlements with hard seasonal work stand on both sides of the desert. But the peoples in them differ. On the cradle roads Humans and Goblins keep the escort; on the far-side passes it is Orcs. Ogres work on both sides, and Trolls keep crossings on both, and rare Giants are rumoured on the high shelves of each. Humans of the inland cradle and Orcs never meet. Neither do the Reedfolk of the cradle rivers and the Thaluren or Kavari of the far side, though all three hold that water is kin and memory as much as terrain, and would understand one another's quarrels at once.

The far side keeps its own memory of its own past, in harbour tallies and by voice, unknown to the cradle. The cradle's memory of the Unrecorded Age is fragments in Dwarven archives, Floodkeeper house-memory, and sealed archive-cities. Neither half reads the other's.

The One Crossing

The two halves touch in one place only.

The Ground

The Glassbelt Interior begins where the Windscar's last defended water gives out. On the inland rim of the Rimward Basins a chain of defended wells on the outermost spurs, the **Lastwater Wells**, marks the last water any Pact custodian keeps. No oath drew that edge. The land drew it, with help from the old overburn of the Ash-Furnace world. Parties going out drink there for the last time. Parties coming in reach it first, often in poor shape, and not always as friends: last season a party of desert crossers refused at one well came back with a struck-name band and took it.

Beyond, the country is salt pans and the dry floors of a vanished inland sea, ash-coloured flats, stone deserts, ruin fields, and the glassed ground that gives the desert its name. It was dry before anyone lived in it, and people made it worse twice: the overburn of the Ash-Furnace world, and a salt-people whose devotion to preservation helped kill their own sea. It is a country of dead fire and dead sea, where the salt-crusted dead walk the old shorelines at night, figures fused into the ruins whisper after those who rob them, and every crosser has heard of a furnace-lord's treasure-vault that the sand uncovers once a lifetime and covers again. The desert as crossers know it is told in The Windscar.

Its other edge faces the cradle-web, at the foot of an unnamed mountain range, where the desert gives way to the cradle and the fog of the Hushvale stands on the horizon.

Who Crosses

The Glassbelt is not empty. It is sparsely inhabited at its edges, unevenly crossed, and survivable only through route memory, guarded water, salvage caution, and respect for distances that cannot be forced. No people owns it, and no power has ever claimed the whole.

Windscar peoples know its edges and a few crossing routes, especially from the Rimward Basins and the High Scars, but the deep Glassbelt is no Orc homeland. Orc escorts keep to its Windscar edge, and no escort captain treats a commission into it as ordinary work. The whole way across goes only with a few road peoples:

- **Edgeway kindreds.** A few kindreds of the Salvage Peoples run circuits all the way across, keeping the ruin fields of the Glassbelt as they keep the Broken Marches, and knowing where the never-touch ground lies. The oldest never-touch forms of their danger-marks descend from warnings set around vitrified Ash-Furnace ground. That is why kindred marks turn

up on both sides. They hunt well-raiders without mercy, and a raider they take is left staked by the well he robbed.

- **Troll crossing houses.** A few houses of the Crossing-Oath Houses keep the way across, which is why house orders stand both in the Headwater and Broken Marches and on the far-side passes of the High Scars.
- **Ogre burden orders.** Some burden orders of the Hearth-Weight Compacts know the crossing too. The Compacts formed along the Headwater roads; their terms reached the far-side camps through these few orders.
- **Salvagers.** A scatter of Goblin and Wrought salvagers among the Salvage Peoples work the desert's ruins and cross with what they find.

None of them owns the region. All of them are people with no land of their own, who are worth something because they keep, carry, and know. That is the whole answer to why the Glassbelt is crossed at all: the only peoples who can live by a road nobody else will keep are the peoples who live by keeping roads. Now and then a band of treasure-seekers out of the Broken Marches tries the near ruins without a kindred guide. The kindreds find their camps afterwards, and sometimes their maps, which are sold again at the Undercroft Fair to the next band.

What Crosses with Them

The crossers carry little in bulk. What they carry is custom, and it has left its mark on both halves.

They carry gods. Troll houses swear their crossing-oaths under the title of the Mountain-Father on the High Scars as they do in the Briarreach and the Broken Marches. Ogre camps keep Ghessa the Hearth-Mother at their fires on the far side only where the burden orders of the crossing carried her. Corrow the Gale-Runner, god of the moving kindreds, goes wherever their circuits go, and across the ruin fields of the Glassbelt, where the kindreds keep the crossing, there is always another camp being told to move on. And Ennor the Grave-Watcher, who sits at the graves of most cradle peoples, is known beyond the cradle only where the crossing peoples keep him at their own graves along far-side routes. The far-side peoples otherwise finish their dead under gods of their own. Ennor has no Orc worship. Among the Orcs the dead belong to Ushkar, who keeps those who held passage and strikes those who broke it, and the two gods meet only where crossing peoples bury their dead along routes the Windscar escorts also keep.

They carry custom. Hearth-weight, the Ogre rule that a camp is fed and sheltered before it lifts anything, is the same on the High Scars as on the Headwater roads, and a far-side escort captain who hires a burden-camp to clear the Whetgap meets terms a Headwater lord would know, and learns, as the lord did, that the camp will not lift until it is fed. The Troll houses hold their crossings by oath on both sides of the desert, decide when a crossing is too dangerous to use, and take their price for keeping it. Kindred keepright, which belongs to whoever has kept a work alive across generations, goes wherever the circuits go, and lords on both sides laugh at it.

They carry people. Half-Orcs, rare individuals of Human and Orc parentage, are born where crossing kindred routes meet Windscar escorts, or on the Tidelace coast. They are not a stable or widespread line, and their lives sit where mixed-world life meets the hard duties and harsh judgement of the Windscar.

And they carry news, though the halves make little use of it. Whatever passes between them passes with the crossers, at the speed of a camp on foot. The salvage carried with it is another matter: fused glass and old metal from the furnace scars fetch good prices in the Broken Marches, and the kindreds say none of it is clean.

The Fog at the Far End

At the Glassbelt's cradle-facing edge, at the foot of the unnamed range, lies the **Hushvale**, a basin and valley chain under fog that never lifts since a waking Record-engine and the rite that hid its survivors sealed it around c. 1,200 CR. Nobody has come out in more than a century; its story is told in Sealed and Silent Places.

To those who make the crossing, the Hushvale is fog on the horizon at the desert's cradle end, a route nobody takes, and a danger-mark that means *do not go further*. Still people go: delvers after gravesalt, a grey-white residue said to keep a corpse fresh and an oath unbroken; outlaws who think the fog safer than a lord's gallows, and the bounty-takers who follow them; and the kind of fool who has heard that under the mountain lies a vault of the dead older than any kingdom. Rumours of the salt reach the Glassbelt's salt-traders. The thing itself is almost unknown outside.

The Edges of the Known

Every medieval map of Caeldon ends somewhere, and the edges are as much a part of the world as its centres. Some are edges of ground nobody can cross. Some are edges inside the cradle itself, places people can point to and cannot enter.

Sealed Places Within

The cradle-web holds several countries that are known only from outside. The Upper Roothollows have been barred for more than three hundred thousand years; the forest keeps the tops of the stairs that once led down, the deep world keeps the names of what lay at the bottom, and nobody enters between. The Witnessfields stand uninhabited, their archive-cities not ruined so much as shut, and the most careful scholars and salvagers stop at the gates; the herders who face the markers pray no one ever goes further. The Stormcrown is left unmapped above the Long Tread and the kindred circuits: nobody below knows where its hidden basins lie, how many Giant lines still live in them, or which summit, if any, the Mountain-Father sleeps beneath, and something under the summits beats like a heart. And the Hushvale, the youngest of them, lies at the cradle's desert edge with its fog and its forgetting. The atlas walks each of them; here it is enough that the cradle, for all its crowding, has holes in it, and that each hole is somebody's treasure-dream.

The Unrun Sea

Off the far-side coasts lies the **Unrun Sea**, the open ocean seaward of every known water: past the farthest current roads of the Tidebound Reaches, past the outer isles of the Tidelace, past the fog banks off the Soundchain Roads. The name is a Thaluren way of speaking. A run is a path laid by those who swim it and remembered by those who come home, and no run has ever been laid through this water and come home.

Its near edge is simply where every keeper stops. No elder of the Returning Concord answers for it, and no Gaugeward harbour claims water past its last beacon. Each people on its edge has its own reason to stay out. The Thaluren live for the return, and their custom has nothing to say about water that leads nowhere they can rightly reach again; the Outer-Route lines go farthest, and their memory keeps runs that pressed past the known roads and came back late, scattered, or not at all. Gnome pilots will not enter water they cannot read, and open sea cannot be re-sounded or marked. Craft driven past the last beacon by storm or fog have come home with readings no second craft could confirm, and the sounding houses do not enter them in their tallies: *precise and true are not the same word.* One came home with a crew too frightened to sail again and a brass instrument no Gnome had made, which a Truesound gauge house has kept locked away ever since; thieves have broken in twice to reach it, and the second pair were found drowned in the harbour with

nothing in their hands. The Tidelace Humans fish close inshore, and their tales say nothing of what lies beyond the sea.

What is known is mostly memory. The **Far Set**, the outermost current road the Thaluren know, is marked by nothing else, and the water beyond it is the Unrun Sea. The great fog belt the coast calls **the Long Grey** rolls in off this water with little warning and can shut the outer roads for days. Thaluren ocean memory places great whale-like deep-witnesses there, said never to stop growing, honoured without being prayed to, and squid-like devourers that break routes; a current road where a devourer has been sensed is not trusted until a later run has come through it whole. Now and then weed-rafts, strange wreckage, and a nameless hull drift in to the coast. To a wrecker a nameless hull is a treasure-ship, its hold full of goods no market has seen; to a pilot it is proof that someone out there sails, and that whatever emptied the hull is still out there with them.

The Rest of the Planet

Past these edges nobody on Caeldon can say what lies. Whether there are other continents, polar lands, or other climates; where the Unrun Sea ends and what lies across it; whether islands break it anywhere; whether any of the lost Outer-Route runs found water to live in: the peoples of both halves have no answer, and most have never had a reason to ask. The Glassbelt's own interior keeps its secrets too. Crossers tell of oasis towns deep in the interior and of lamps seen at night where no well is marked, and every circuit has a crosser who will swear, after the last of the water is shared out, that he saw towers in the heat beyond the mirage roads, and that the lamps were moving towards him.

The Tidelace Humans are the quiet proof that the world is wider than either half's map. Their ancestors left the cradle so long ago that nobody remembers they left, and reached a shore no one in the basins would ever hear of. Other far-shore Humans may live on coasts no one has charted. The Tidelace hamlets are only the ones that are known.

Beyond the Map

The dotted lands at the edges of the map are what this book knows and the Medieval Era does not. Four lands lie past the old world's maps, each with its own peoples, powers, and long history, and nobody in either half has seen one and come home to be believed. What reaches the old world is a wreck on the tide, a cloth passed through many hands, a road that runs north into the snow, and from the fourth, nothing at all. The broad strokes below are canon; the names of their cities, thrones, and dynasties, and most of what they remember, are left open.

The Dawnreach

Across the Unrun Sea, north-east of the far side, lies the **Dawnreach**: terraced river valleys under the monsoon, two thrones that hold their rivers by the sky's favour and lose it in a dry year, bell monasteries hung in the mountain passes, and the island sea-kingdoms of the Lantern Isles. Its Humans have been apart from the cradle since the Unrecorded Age. In its wet forests live the **Sihri**, an insect-like people the height of a child, whose click-song is their speech, their memory, their warning, and their prayer. Along its river mouths live the **Runs That Arrived**, sea-folk descended from Thaluren Outer-Route runs that pressed past the Far Set long ago, found rivers to spawn in, and never came home; the Tidebound Reaches still call them the unreturning. To the far side the shore is a pilot's tale of lights low on the horizon after a storm. The nameless hulls the wreckers strip are its island captains' funeral ships, sent west on a current with their dead and their wealth, and the brass instrument in the Truesound gauge house is one of its pilots' current-wheels. Nobody who opens a hull knows it.

The Shadewells

South beyond the deep Glassbelt, past a sand sea no crosser from the north has walked, stand the **Shadewells**: walled oasis towns sunk deep around their wells on the Salt Road, their streets roofed with great awnings, whose caravans travel by night behind star-reckoners paid like princes. Here a working takes its cost first from shade. It eats the shadows around it, and ground where great workings were done long ago lies as shadowless glare-fields where the sun burns twice and nothing grows. So the cities keep shade as other lands keep grain, in deep courtyards and under awnings of shade-cloth, and a working cast in a city takes from them before it takes from the wells, the herds, and the people; the shade-cloth weavers are among its powers. In the deep sand south of the road live the **Shorn**, Orc camel-clans descended from struck bands that walked south out of the Rimward country after the Rimward Passage War, and out of the dunes' old zones come things that drink the shade from whatever they pass. The old world has a cloth and a well. One Edgeway kindred's longest circuit ends at the Bright Well, where strangers wait in the cool months under an awning of pale cloth to trade that cloth for salvage, and it goes on through the Lastwater Wells and the Soundchain quays to the Tidelace harbours, which call it *foundling shade* because nobody can say where it comes from. Under it the air stays cool in the full noon sun, and neither the kindred nor the strangers have ever told the other where they live.

The Rimefold

North of the Elderweald and the Ironspine, weeks of snow beyond the last forest and the last hold, lies the **Rimefold**: ice cliffs and fjords frozen nine months of the year, where Human clans hunt seals and small whales from the ice edge, set their dead standing in clear ice in the Asking Halls, and go up in the long dark to ask them for counsel. Behind the White Stair, a colossal flight cut into the coast cliffs, the **Rimewrights** keep their halls in the glaciers: a lesser line of the Giants who walked north out of the Stormcrown in the deep past, grew smaller in the cold, and are the last people on Caeldon who still build at the colossal scale. The old world knows only the road. The Long Tread runs north past the last gate hold and the last Edgeway cairn and on into the snow, and the caravans that followed it did not come back. Once in a generation a warden finds on it something that was not there before (a cord of braided whale sinew, a black-stone knife with a handle of white bone, a cairn of a shape no kindred builds), and the holds keep it and do not discuss it.

The Green Deep

Across a strait south of the cradle-web lies the **Green Deep**, and of it the old world knows nothing; even its name is this book's. It is jungle over drowned stone: brown river-mazes braiding among islands, and in them, half sunk, the stepped cities of an elder world the old regions never knew. It is held by the **Sollun**, small six-limbed river people whose every hive is one mind in hundreds or thousands of bodies, and some of whose bodies, cut off too long from their hive's song, have strayed into selves. The cradle peoples have no seagoing ships and know no coast on their southern side, and the Sollun do not cross open water. No wreck, no good, and no rumour has ever crossed the strait.

Going There

Writers may send explorers to any of the four, and a medieval expedition is an epic in itself: months of open water no pilot will enter, two months of sand beyond the last Glassbelt well, two months of snow on a road kept by no one, or a strait nobody has charted and the fevers on its far side. Whoever goes finds the broad strokes above and everything else for the story to make. Whoever comes back will not be believed.

Tensions

- **Graves on a shared route.** Where crossing peoples bury their dead along routes the Windscar escorts also keep, Ennor's custom and Ushkar's meet at the same graves. Ushkar may strike a name; Ennor will not leave the one who bore it at the threshold. A crosser buried there under one god lies in ground the other people's dead belong to.
- **What the sand uncovered.** A Goblin salvager came in to the Lastwater Wells half-dead after the last storm season, with a furnace-lord's seal of red glass and a tale of a vault door standing clear of the sand. Three crews are racing to outfit before the hot months close the crossing, and the Edgeway kindreds refuse to guide any of them until someone says whether the door stands on ground the Fused Dead keep.
- **South of the Expanse.** Nobody has mapped what lies south of the Windscar Expanse. Herders tell of grass beyond the last well, of a dry river-bed lined with old stones, and of a kindred that went to look and never sent word. A band of hire-spears now says it found that kindred's last camp-ring, its hearths cold and its spears still racked, and is selling the way to anyone who will pay; two kindreds are arming to go, one to bring the dead home and one, the first suspects, to take the grass. A kindred that took its herds there would graze ground no treaty-ground has ever heard of, and the Pacts have never said whether their oaths go with it.
- **The locked instrument.** A Truesound sounding family wants the brass instrument no Gnome made, to follow its readings past the last beacon. The gauge house refuses; the family is hiring a crew anyway, among them hands from the wreckers' coast who say they have been aboard a nameless hull and know what it carried.

CHAPTER 2

A Year in the Medieval Era

At the rise, the crossings close
and the drowned come walking home;
at low water, every arm is crowded;
at the sheaf, the barges come down;
in winter, mend the hull and mind your scores.
Whoever keeps another year
keeps it in another book.

— The Bargemasters' Almanac

The dates in the margins of this book are a convenience. Before Reckoning and Common Reckoning give every event on Caeldon one place on one line, and the medieval present sits at about 1,350 CR. The peoples of the medieval world live in other years. There is a river's year that opens at the spring rise and a hold's year that ends with a stone laid on the wall. There is a root-year of rising and falling sap, kept by people who have never seen the forest it belongs to, and a day of shifts and rounds kept by people who have never seen a sun. There is a wind-year, a water-year, a tide table, and a return. Each has its feasts, and each has something most households care about more than any feast: its counting days, when the levy is reckoned, the reserve is read aloud, the flood is added to the roll, or the dead are recited with the crossings they held. Each has its dangerous season too, when the wolves come down, the raiders ride, or the water gives back its dead. A year in the Medieval Era is less a calendar than a set of appointments with the land, the gods, the neighbours, and whatever is hungry, and the quarrels of every people gather around the days it cannot move.

How a Year Is Kept

No single calendar runs across Caeldon, and none is needed. A year is set by whatever a people cannot argue with. In the basins that is the river, which arrives all at once every spring whatever anyone has planned. In the Headwater foothills it is the snow on the passes. In the holds it is the wall, and in the Deeps the air. On the Windscar it is the wind and the water, in the Folds the harvest and the reserve, on the Tidelace the tide and the storm, and in the Tidebound Reaches the return of the runs. Everything else, the markets and oath-days, the weddings and namings, the feasts of the gods, the raids and the hunts, is fitted in around those facts.

AT A GLANCE

Reckoning	BR and CR on the timeline; seasons, passes, shifts, watches, tides, and returns in life.
Great feasts	The First Flow, the First Sheaf, the First Stone, the Turn, the Tides, the First Gale.
Counting days	Record-day, the flood-telling, the autumn count, the water reckoning, the Reciting of the Names.
Gatherings	Oath-days, the court season, treaty-grounds, the dry-season gathering, the Market Round, the Kindred gathering-markets.
Hinges	The spring rise, the opening of the passes, the windy season, the storm season, the return season.

Religion follows the same rule. The Sworn Accord, the faith of the Human corridor world, is built around its two first gods, Anvelle the Harvest-Mother of the basin fields and Serovan the River-King of the Serath, and its calendar follows their seasons. The festivals of cults the Accord has entered appear in a town's calendar; household gods and country shrines it merely tolerates keep their own days without one. Other peoples' feasts are just as plainly about their country: a stone on the hold wall, flowers thrown to the sea, fires lit for the wind.

Most years have more than one clock. A Dark Elf house keeps a watch that changes at fixed turns and a root-year that follows the sap. A Gnome harbour keeps the tide table and the storm season at once, and a Thaluren river mouth keeps both of those and the return besides. Wherever two peoples share a place, they share it on two calendars, and many medieval quarrels, some of them bloody, come down to whose year the place is keeping.

The Cradle Year

The Human year of the cradle-web belongs to field and river, and it is the year most cradle peoples meet even when they do not keep it, because they buy its grain, cross its bridges, and pay its tolls.

The Rise

On the Lower Serath the year opens with the **spring rise**, when the whole basin's water arrives at once. It renews the corridor's fields and closes its crossings, drowns landings, and turns a day's ferry into a week's wait. A good rise means plenty and a failed one means hunger, and no town can do anything about either. Traffic stops. As the water falls, the drowned of the year come walking home out of it, up the landings towards the doors they knew, and the rites for them are as much a part of spring as the planting. The towns keep the **Festival of the First Flow**, offering bread, wine, and flowers to the river, and it is said that Serovan walks among the crowds in disguise to accept their thanks. Serathic tradition holds that he dictated the "Law of the River" to the first guarantors, and the strongest towns read it to their own advantage. The Reedfolk do not deny that Serovan is real. They deny his claim, and say the river belongs to whoever remembers it correctly; some of them cut the towns' fish-weirs in the dark and call it giving the river back.

They mark the rise their own way, with the **flood-telling**, when a Floodkeeper house sounds its channels again and speaks the year's water into its remembered roll (see The Civilizations of the Medieval Era). Many river towns that owe the Reedfolk nothing they would admit to still quietly ask a Reedfolk family before the rise.

Upstream in the Confluence Basins the plough waits for the rise to fall back. Then the fields are ploughed and sown, and the year's work begins in earnest. In the Headwater Marches the year turns not on the flood but on the passes: the year begins when they open, which is when the snow allows, and the first caravans up go heavily guarded, because the outlaws of the hills have been hungry

all winter too. A wet spring is the Rattlecut's worst season, when the river takes the road and gives back only part of it. At Greyford, where the Headwater road meets the Broken Marches, spring is flood watch: braces checked, ropes strung, and Lowbank sleeping light. In the Broken Marches the culverts are cleared in spring, many of them by Edgeway kindreds who have kept the same culvert on their circuit for generations.

In the forest, spring is the wet season. Root-fed hollows fill and join, low paths go under, and ground that was firm in autumn will not hold a person. In the Briarreach the ravine floors turn sodden and the slip-slopes are at their worst. And at the mouths of the Sunken Stairs, where the deep groves of the Elderweald once ran down into the Roothollows, the wet season is the stairs' season: as the hollows fill, mourners gather to keep the laments for the Drowning Bloom, and the watchers lying at the bars on wet nights listen for the tread on the steps below.

Low Water and the Long Road

Summer low water is the Serath's busy season. The shoals show, every arm of the river is crowded, and bargemen take grain and goods downstream on the current while haulers drag them back up the towpaths. It is the river-thieves' season too, and the wreckers' above the shoals. The warm months bring fever to the crowded corridor towns and the low wet ground of the basins. In the Basins themselves summer is weeding and herding, the wet meadows grazed in common, and the granary watched.

In the Headwater Marches it is the long trading summer. Caravans are made up in the walled foothill towns and climb the exchange roads under escort, from waystation to waystation, to the oath-yards of the holds. Grain, salt meat, wool, and lamp oil go up; metal, tools, dressed stone, and craft teaching come down, and both draw outlaws, sellswords, and bears. Human miners and hands go up into the holds for a season and come back with wages and Dwarven habits. At Greyford summer is the long trading season on the span, and the queue on the Highbank road forms the night before every market day. When the water drops further, in the low months, the Greyford fords become daily work, and most Headwater fords are usable only then. Goblin side-ford families and Kindred guides walk the staked routes at first light to see what the night changed, and crossings run from dawn to early afternoon, before storms in the hills can raise the water. River-raiders wait at the side fords for anyone who crosses alone. The low months are the busiest time for salvage, when dressed stone and timber cross in quantity, and the Kindred caravans come through then on their circuits.

In the forest the dry months are a time of watching. Wood Elf households clear deadfall from the streams and watch the water through the dry months, because the Slowwater, the forest's main water, is wanted by the holds upstream and the farms downstream alike, and the grove watchers carry bows for a reason.

The Sheaf and the Count

Harvest is the basin year's great hinge. It opens with the **Festival of the First Sheaf**, when the first stalk is cut and offered to Anvelle so that she will see the harvest through. Then the threshing, and with it the levy: the lord's or the town's share is counted out on the same threshing floor as the village's own store, by the lord's men, with the lord's riders watching, which is where most basin quarrels start. Some fields are kept fallow in Anvelle's name, and wherever levies force a second harvest the tale of the Starving Winter, when the people would not rest the land and half the villages starved, is told more often.

At harvest the **Sheaf Road**, the basin grain road from granary to granary and march-town to march-town, is all carts, levy-reckoners, and the armed men who ride with them, and the bands who watch the road from the flood-forest know exactly when the carts are fullest. The grain barges come down to the Serath and fill the towns.

In the Headwater Marches it is a hurried autumn before the snow, with the last caravans pressing up to the gates. In the Broken Marches the causeways are braced before the floods.

Once the levy is counted, the oath-house holds **record-day** and reads the year's entries aloud, and anyone who would gainsay one must speak then (see The Basins and the Marches). For a basin household this is the day the year is fixed, and the day a neighbour's quiet objection, unspoken for twelve months, finally has to be spoken or given up.

Mending and Judgement

Winter in the cradle's Human country is a season of mending, waiting, and settling scores. On the Serath the boats are mended and the great houses settle the year's quarrels; the ones they cannot settle are carried on in back streets with knives. In the basin towns the **oath-days** come round, when the lord or the town's elders hear oaths and settle quarrels under Iskel and Ostrin the Lantern-Bearer. In the Headwater Marches snow shuts the upper roads for months and cuts the highest towns off from the gates; a caravan caught late loses its animals first and then its people. In hard winters the wolves come to the basin folds, and a hungry band comes down off the hills to take a village's stores and its cattle. Ironspine passes close in winter, and a high hold can be cut off for a season. At Greyford winter is mending, accounts, and short days at the toll gate.

The Forest's Slower Year

Elven years run on Elven lives, and those are long. The groves of the Elderweald do not hurry anything: a person is adult when the grove's elders and ritual keepers all agree they have arrived, a household that moves groves is a guest for a full year, and a circle of groves may part without deciding (see The Civilizations of the Medieval Era). Some questions wait a generation, and a Human farmer who has cut a ditch in the meantime may find an arrow in the post instead of an answer.

In the Crownboughs the year turns on the **court season**. Houses of rank present their young at court, each bringing a piece of shaping they have carried on themselves, most often a bough or sapling trained from the house's own grove. The courtiers who descend the Leave Stair to the Understorey Courts at the foot of the canopy then go with their faces painted gold after the image of Saerith the Mirror-King, and the receptions of basin envoys and suitors crowd into those weeks. So do the blood duels on the garden-walks above the drop.

Under Stone and Root

Behind the Ironspine gates the hold's year is marked by one gesture. At the **Festival of the First Stone** every household lays a single stone on its hold's walls, and it is said that if the stone is laid with true intent, Kerrund the Stone-Warden will strengthen the wall for another year. Hold life keeps slower appointments too, none of them fixed to a season: a name given when it can be carried, a craft taught one burden at a time, an oath at the gate when a young Dwarf is judged able to keep it.

Further down, in the Stonewake Deeps, there is no sun to keep time by. The day is reckoned in shifts and the shifts in rounds of upkeep: a vent round, a reservoir reading, a seal inspection, whose day households near the seal know the way surface villages know a market day (see Stone and the Deep).

In the Roothollows the Dark Elf houses keep two clocks. The **threshold watch**, which changes at fixed turns, is the house's day. The **root-year**, the rising and falling of sap in the living roots, keeps the forest's seasons for people who never see them, and most house business, from namings to the renewal of water debts, is set by it. Once in each root-year comes the **water reckoning**, when the water-keeper says aloud what the house owes

in water and what it is owed. When water rises in the root-year, the laments are sung that still name Ithaere the Drowned Mother, a faded god nobody prays to, and the black water in the old chambers rises with it.

The Far-Side Year

The far side keeps its years by weather and water. Its seasons are not the cradle's seasons with other names: a windy season, a dry season, a storm season, and a return season each have their own country, and none of them is reckoned against the Serath's rise.

Wind

In the High Scars **the year turns on the wind**. The windy season closes the highest passes and fills the passward shelters with parties waiting it out, and dust storms close the Rimward ramps for days at its turn. At its start Orc camps keep the **First Gale**: fires lit on the high ground, and dancing in the wind as it rises, for Rakhal the Storm-Caller. If the fires are lit with true defiance, it is said, he grants a year of change and renewal. Before the windy season Ogre burden-camps carry stores up to the shelters. A storm delay is forgiven only if it is sent ahead, so the windy season is also the season when runners carry word that a party is waiting, and why; a party that simply fails to arrive is mourned first and avenged after.

The calmer months are for moving. Escorts carry most of the year's traffic, herds go highest, and kindreds travel to their **treaty-grounds**, where terms are sworn, wrongs declared and answered, sometimes with blades, and the dead recited in the **Reciting of the Names** that Ushkar the Ancestor-Warden's rite requires (see The Windscar). The escorts who held a crossing are recited as long as their kindred lasts, and a young escort setting out touches the cairn of the nearest of them for the road.

Below the Shearline, in the Rimward Basins, life breathes in and out with the water. In the dry months households and herds draw in to the strongholds on the rims and crowd around them in the same rings year after year, and a family's place in those rings shows how much it counts. The **dry-season gathering** brings the most people closest to the least water just as escorted parties come down the ramps to ask for some of it, and struck-name raiders watch for a thinly held reserve. After the storms the households spread out again across the outer slopes and basin floors, and each stronghold shrinks to its keeping garrison. Cistern crews scrape silt and clear the channels after every storm. In a good year the **Long Pan** floods ankle-deep and grows a short-lived green fringe, every herd within reach is driven down to graze it before it browns, and its edge is the one place in the Basins where many kindreds camp side by side without a stronghold between them. Salt cutters work the pans in the cooler months.

Fold

In the Leeward Folds **the year turns on two moments**. In spring the planting rites open the terraces; late frost, pooling in the hollows on still nights, can take a year's blossom in one night. Orchard work moves through the year from pruning to picking to drying and pressing, and orchard leagues share labour, presses, and drying floors across neighbouring folds. Walls are mended after every heavy rain, and cistern circles clear the channels before the wet season.

In autumn the harvest comes in and the reserve is counted aloud at the cistern hall in the **autumn count**, where any household may challenge a figure, and after it each fold meets as a **commons** to decide which terraces rest (see The Leeward Folds). Winter is lived on stores, walls, and the arguments the count produced.

Trade runs on the same clock. The **Market Round** is the seasonal circuit of fold markets, each fold hosting in its turn at the time its harvest

allows, in an order old enough that changing it would start a quarrel among every fold on it. The escorted Lee Road to the Rimward Basins keeps Halfling market timing. Down at the Counted Lee, where fold loads meet the coast, the year is pinched between two calendars: the folds release nothing until the autumn count has set aside the reserve, and the coast's calm months end in the storm season. Most of the Lee's business is crowded into the weeks between the count and the gales.

The folds' great feast is the **Festival of the Turn**, kept for Tamsel the Season-Weaver at the changing of the seasons; if it is held with true joy, it is said, Tamsel will see the harvest good. Tamsel is strongest at the solstices and equinoxes, when the turn of the year is strongest, and weakest in late autumn and early spring. Every fold child knows the tale of the Long Summer that emptied a fold's stores to the last measure, and Halflings tell it as the reason the reserve is never spent on plenty. A run of dry years is lowering the cisterns in the medieval present, and in a dry year every hungry band on the far side remembers where the water is.

Shore

On the Tidelace the year is kept by tide table and gale. In the calm months the breakwater crews rebuild, the sounding houses resurvey the Lacework, and traffic moves. In the storm season gales drive surge into the inlets and break what the calm months built; some harbours close their mouths entirely until spring. Then the harbour families mend, the beacons burn through the long nights, and on the darkest of them there are fires on the headlands that no Gnome lit, set by wreckers or by worse. Each season closes at the sounding house, where readings are compared and markers moved in front of the families who set them.

The tide hall sits at slack water, between tides, and every household of a beacon district owes its storm-season nights at the tower (see The Tidelace and the Soundchain Roads). Once a year the **Festival of the Tides** brings a whole harbour down to the quays with flowers, shells, and stories for Maris of the Tides, in the hope of a bountiful catch, and the Human hamlets between the harbours keep their own shrines to her at the water's edge.

Along the Soundchain Roads the year is the rhythm of arrival: Orc escorts work the coast run while the passes are open and the sea is kind, returning to their camping grounds above the beach yards as reliably as Gnome crews to their quays, and the storm season thins the corridor to messengers and repair crews.

Return

The Thaluren year has one hinge. As spawning season nears, a sea settlement's run gathers along the Kelpshade and the outer shoals, the **Clutch-Watch Circle** says who is going and in what place, and messengers swim ahead to give notice at the mouths and upriver. The great current road of the Reaches, the **Homeward Set**, carries most runs home in return season. Settlements time their departures by it, and a year when it sets late is remembered as a hard one. Blackfin pods follow the runs on the outer roads, and the Homeward Set lines name over every gathering the escorts who turned to face a pod so that the run could reach the kelp. The Outer-Route runs, coming in on longer, lonelier currents from the far edge of the known sea, arrive last and least predictably.

The run crosses into brackish water before watchers, climbs the river at the time it gave notice of, and spawns in a known ground under the spears of the Sanctuary Custodians, who stand over the gravels against the hunters that raid the spawning beds. Nobody spawns alone, and nobody's clutch is a private matter. The adults return to the sea. The young who survive come down later, in their own time and without ceremony, and are counted when they reach the Kelpshade; the circle names each one by clutch and water before any household takes them in. For

redirected families whose clutches now hatch at the Second Channel, the count at the Kelpshade is part of that water's record: a good count means the water is accepted for another year, and a thin count turns the judgement into a quarrel that lasts all winter.

For most of the year a Kavari bank village sees no Thaluren at all. Its year is the river's own: bank councils settling access, repair, and quarrels between neighbours, pool-kin households remembering which waters owe what, nursery keepers cleaning, turning, shading, and defending the gravel beds where Kavari young grow. In dry years pearl-takers come up the rivers to rake the mussel beds and trample the nursery gravels as they go, and meet barbed spears. In return season the village sees notice first, then escorts, and only then, if the water allows, a run.

At the river mouths the pilots keep a third calendar. At the Split Reed Mouth the tide table rules: every tide moves something, so the marked channels are re-sounded on a fixed cycle and after every storm. Out of return season the mixed circle of pilots and run-watchers sits seldom, for marker moves and quarrels, and the mouth is mostly pilots' water. In return season it is not.

Years on the Move

Some peoples keep no seat to keep a year in. Their calendars are circuits.

An Edgeway kindred returns season after season to the same broken roads, culverts, wells, spans, and storeworks along its inherited circuit, and its year is the year of its kept works: a culvert cleared every spring, a well relined, a causeway braced before flood season. The kindreds share a calendar of **gathering-markets** held at old ruined sites, often the only places where people from distant broken regions trade, marry, and settle quarrels. At the **Undercroft Fair** in the Broken Marches delvers' maps and furnace salvage change hands along with everything else. When a kindred sets out from a gathering-market it leaves a lit lantern at the edge of the site, facing the road out, for Corrow the Gale-Runner; if the lanterns are lit with true gratitude, it is said, he keeps the circuit open for another year.

Ogre burden bands have a year of jobs. They arrive for heavy work, are fed before they lift, and move on when the work is done: carrying stores to the High-Scar shelters before the windy season, clearing the Whetgap of what the windy season brought down, shifting stone from the Greyford yards and setting the rope crossings in flood season, keeping the Headwater winter roads open. Troll houses, by contrast, stay on the crossing they keep, and their year is its year: what the slides broke, what the flood took, when the crossing is too dangerous to use.

The Counting Days

Set side by side, the counting days of the medieval world have a family likeness. Record-day in the basins, the flood-telling of the Reedfolk, the autumn count in the Folds, the water reckoning in the Roothollows, the Reciting of the Names at the treaty-grounds, the season's close at a Tidelace sounding house, the count of the young at the Kelpshade: each is a day when the year is spoken aloud before everyone it touches, and when a challenge must be made or let go. Each people keeps its memory in its own form, written, remembered, tallied, sounded, or recited. All of them agree that a count nobody has heard is not yet a count, and that the time to challenge it is the day it is read, though everyone also knows whose challenge will be heard and whose will not.

That is why so much of medieval life gathers around these days. A fold marriage is not finished in the tallies until the next count has moved the share aloud. A basin sale, boundary, or inheritance is safe only once record-day has passed without challenge. A kindred that has done well on the routes wants its dead recited well, and one that has done badly knows exactly who will be listening. Writers looking for the moment a private quarrel becomes public, and a public one becomes a fight, will usually find it on one of these days.

A Life Across Many Years

Beside the turning year runs a longer set of appointments: the stages by which a person comes to count. Almost every people marks them, and almost none marks them on a fixed day.

In the Headwater Marches a young person is sworn twice, first to working right, which lets them carry messages and travel on a household's errands, and years later to oath-right, the right to swear and inherit in their own name. Downriver the Serathic Oath of Layers counts a person in three steps, Protection, Stewardship, and the full oath, and a half-Elven child of a ferry family may run the family boat for years before the great houses let them swear for the ferry. A Dwarven child's name is cut on a small stone kept in the cradle-chamber until the child is judged able to carry it. A Dark Elf child's first full recital of a Known Way is given to a route keeper in the threshold chamber with the household watching. A Wood Elf is adult when the grove agrees. A High Elf is presented at the court season, or held back by a tender's **not yet**. A Gnome's first reading is declared at the bench. A young Thaluren is counted on coming down to the sea, by clutch and water before household. None of these is a feast in the calendar, and every family knows which of its members are waiting for one.

Tensions

- **The second harvest.** A lord orders a village's resting field sown again to meet a corridor buyer who has already paid. The village elders say Anvelle forbids it. The steward says Anvelle does not sit in judgement, and the lord's riders are already in the lane.
- **The grain sworn uphill.** A foothill town has sworn in its hold's oath-yard to deliver grain the hold needs for the Deeps. The basin harvest is short, and the Sheaf Road brings half of what was promised. Keeping the oath empties the town's own granary before winter; breaking it closes the gate to the town's carters. The custodian asks whether the town will hold, and its farmers, who have already skipped one fallow year, ask what the harvest can bear.
- **A deferred arrival.** A young Wood Elf of the Elderweald is adult only when the grove's elders and ritual keepers all agree they have arrived. One ritual keeper has doubted a young one's arrival for many seasons running, and the grove has begun to ask whether the doubt is about the young one at all.
- **The egg-taker year.** Egg-takers have come up the river to the Gravelbraid Nurseries in numbers nobody living has seen, and the Kavari households are losing young faster than they can hunt. Thaluren escorts have offered to hunt the side channels with them. Some bank councils want the help; others say a Thaluren spear in a nursery channel is the first step of a run through it.
- **A pod that follows.** A blackfin pod has learned to follow the Homeward Set to the edge of the kelp and has taken escorts two seasons running. The escort-captains of Turningshoal want to hunt it down beyond the shoals before the next run; the Run-Watchers fear a run left thinly guarded while its best spears are away, and the young warriors are already sharpening for it.

CHAPTER 3

Roads, Rivers, and Crossings

Pay the lord at his bridge and the town at its gate,
pay the Troll at the Rattlecut and the hold at the last;
then pay the road itself, in mending,
for it is the only one that keeps the count.

— Songs of the Sheaf Road

Nobody on medieval Caeldon simply travels. A journey is a string of handovers, each to someone strong enough to hold that stretch of the way and take a toll on it: a lord at his bridge, a guarantor at her reach of river, a Troll house at its ravine, an escort captain on the windshelves, a Gnome station at its quay, a route keeper in a threshold chamber underground. Each keeper asks something before the traveller may go on, a toll, a name, a sponsor, a count, and each keeps its own custom for what happens if the way fails. Between the keepers lie the wilds, where nobody keeps anything: wolves and bears on the passes, raiders at the fords, outlaws on the roads, and older, stranger things in the ruins the roads run past. The roads are old, and most were built by people who are gone. Each age has seized the same routes anew, and no older people has ever let go of its hold on them. The medieval present lives on those roads by keeping them, and keeping a road is how a people comes to count on it. Whoever has kept a crossing longest usually thinks it is theirs. Whoever has the men to hold it usually disagrees.

Old Roads, New Claims

The oldest roads on Caeldon were laid by the Upland Colossal world, which built the first great road network and then withdrew, leaving its roads without their builders. Its ridge roads still run along the heights. The greatest of them, the **Long Tread**, runs for weeks along the outer crest of the Ironspine from one gate to the next, too broad for any living builder. In the Broken Marches the **Tallgrade** runs on a grade too broad and too even for anyone now alive to have laid. Troll lines took charge of that network's crossings under sworn charges while it stood, and kept the oaths after it was gone. Survivor lines walked the abandoned roads in seasonal circuits and became the Salvage Peoples. Much later, Human corridor powers set debt-bound Ogre camps to work on roads and fortifications, and Humans and Dwarves built the Headwater exchange roads over the same country, partly with that labour.

Every one of those layers is still on the ground. A medieval caravan on a Headwater road may cross a Dwarven bridge older than the town beside it, follow a stretch cut and embanked by a chain-camp whose camp-marks still name it,

AT A GLANCE

Roads	Rivers and towpaths, exchange roads, colossal grades, kept paths, underways, Known Ways, cairn chains, marked channels, current roads.
Tolls	Lords, towns, holds, Troll houses, and League guarantors, each at their own crossing.
Escort	Human and Hobgoblin below the Ironspine gates, hold wardens above them; Orc escorts on the far side.
Stations	Waystations and oath-yards, passward shelters, defended wells, cistern halls, Soundchain stations.
Keepers	Troll crossing houses, Edgeway kindreds, Ogre burden houses, Iron Compacts, Underhouse crews, Reedfolk and Gnome pilots.
Asked at the border	Who sent you, what do you carry, and who stands for you.

climb onto a colossal grade the kindreds keep, and pay a Troll house that holds its ravine by an oath older than any lordship. Younger frontier and war roads cross the colossal grades on worse foundations and fail first. Colossal roads fail too, without warning, because they are too large to mend properly, and a crew clearing one may lift a slab and find what the old builders sealed beneath it: mostly rubble, now and then a vault. And each layer's keepers still demand a say in how the road is used, and back it with whatever spears they have.

This is the thread the histories call Roads and Crossings, and it runs into the medieval present as fought-over passage, repair forced on the weak while the strong take the tolls, Troll tolls nobody living ever granted, kindred keepright against a lord's word, and at the Greyford Reach a failing bridge where every grudge on the thread meets at once.

What a Road Is

The word means different things in different countries, and a traveller who mistakes one kind for another is in trouble before the first toll.

A river. On the Lower Serath the river is the road. Downstream travel is fast and cheap on the current. Upstream is slow, by towpath and pole, and much of it goes by land along the rises. Ferries tie the banks together at every town. River-thieves lie up in the reeds, wreckers light false marks above the shoals, and every bargemaster hires sellswords against both. In the Headwater Marches the opposite holds: above the basin edge the rivers run too steep and fast for boats, so they are crossed, not travelled, and bridges and fords decide where the roads can go.

A built road. The exchange roads of the Headwater Marches climb from the basin Sheaf Road through walled foothill towns and waystations to the outer gates of the Dwarven holds, over Dwarven stonework and Ogre-cut embankments (see The Basins and the Marches). In the Ironspine the passes are hold roads, walled, gated, and shut in winter, and the oldest follow colossal ridge roads.

A kept path. The Elderweald has no roads, only paths walked open rather than cut, along which a watcher from the nearest grove leads every visitor (see The Forest Heartlands). Human roads stop at the treeline, so traffic between the basins and the Ironspine goes round by the Headwater Marches.

A way by leave. In the Crownboughs the main roads are in the air: boughways running hall to hall and court to court, each belonging to the house whose growth carries it, so that travel aloft is by leave, and a fall from one is the ordinary death of the careless. Under the Ironspine the underways run hold to hold through the rock, the safest roads in the belt and the most closed, each hold keeping its own stretch and granting passage on its leave, while Kobold crews use service ways between them that no hold has mapped. In the Stonewake Deeps the warded corridors run junc-

tion to junction, and the greatest route of all is the **Hauling Stair**, the shaft by which stores come down and ore goes up.

A spoken way. In the Roothollows movement runs along the **Known Ways**, the routes the route keepers count survivable, kept spoken rather than written and learned by mouth and by foot. Under the old oath of refuge a Known Way is the only kind of route along which someone in need may be sent on, so adding a route or striking one off is never only a matter of where the water has risen.

A line of knowledge. On the High Scars a road is not a built surface at all but a line of cairns, shelters, warning ridges, and treaty-ground ledges where parties change hands (see The Windscar). On the fading lines the Cairn-Wakers stand across the route, escorts who failed to warn and cannot rest, and no party passes one without a word for the dead.

A water road. In the Rimward Basins there are no rivers, and routes run from one water source to the next; a route is only as open as the last well on it, and struck-name raiders know it. On the Tidelace the highways are water and every one is marked: the **Lacework**, the inner channels behind the islands, surveyed by the nearest sounding house and its marks moved only in front of the families who set them; the faster outer roads seaward of the islands, which close first in fog and storm. In the Tidebound Reaches the roads are currents and rivers, and almost nothing on them is cargo: what moves is people, clutches, notice, and memory, carried home in return season on the great current road called the **Homeward Set**, with blackfin pods following.

A timed road. The **Lee Road** runs from the Leeward fold markets to the Rimward Basins under Windscar escort and keeps Halfling market timing, so that a party off its day waits, and can lose its season waiting.

Tolls, Tallies, and Guarantees

Almost every crossing on Caeldon has a keeper and a toll. What the toll buys is the question.

The Crossing and the Promise

In the Confluence Basins passage belongs to whoever holds the crossing: a lord at a ford, a walled town at its bridge, a march-town at its ferry. In the Headwater Marches it is a lord at his bridge, a town at its gate, the Troll house at the **Rattlecut**, and beyond the last waystation, the hold. Whoever holds a crossing takes what the traffic will bear, for as long as they can hold it.

On the Lower Serath the toll means something else. Above **Toll's End** a basin lord's toll buys one crossing and nothing else, and his men take what they like and give no tally. Below it, the dues a town of the Serathic League takes are supposed to buy a **guarantee**: the reach kept clear, the landing guarded, the crossing repaired, and the thieves hunted.

A sworn guarantor keeps each reach for the town's great houses and writes the day's dues and the day's repairs side by side in the guarantee roll, which the great houses seldom read against one of their own (a guarantor's day is followed in The Basins and the Marches). Where the dues are taken and the upkeep never comes, the cheated call on Ostrin the Lantern-Bearer, whose iron **Ashen Lantern** hangs at some water-gates, watching for exactly that.

The Tally

A bargemaster pays each League town's dues for a **passage tally**, a notched and sealed token that proves the reach was paid for, so that the next town does not charge for the same water twice, and a town may hold a barge that cannot show the tally from the reach above. Above Toll's End no tally is given. On the Lying Shoals and the other braided reaches the guarantee is only as good as the pilot, who is hired separately, for wages, not tolls, and a bargemaster who saves the pilot's coin may end on the shoals with the river-thieves rowing out to meet him.

> *A tally is the only honest thing on a river. It does not say the reach was kept; it says I paid for it to be. Whether those are the same depends on who is asking, and how many spearmen he has.*
>
> — Orrin Talloway, *A Road-Book of Both Halves*

The Toll Gate

At **Greyford**, where the Headwater road meets the Broken Marches, the toll is taken once, at the Highbank gate of the Greyspan, in whichever direction people cross. The Tollwardens take what the lord asks, chalk a mark on the cart, and tap the braces with a mallet, marking any that ring dull, and what that toll owes the bridge is the quarrel of Greyford's year (see The Basins and the Marches). At the side fords in the low months walkers pay less, in coin or in kind, and the river-raiders who work the fords take the rest. At the Lowbank end of the span there is no gate at all, only Goblin guides offering a bed or a safer road into the Marches.

Paying in Other Coin

Not every keeper wants money. In the Leeward Folds water is the one thing nobody bargains over: a party drinks what a cistern hall has said aloud it can spare. In the Rimward Basins guests are fed from a share that everyone in the camp knows. In the Stonewake Deeps a warded or sealed route is opened by the custodians' word, never sold, and those who try to buy their way past a seal end in the custodians' cells or behind the seal. On the Tidelace a pilot back from a hard passage pays Maris her toll of story, spoken aloud at her shrine. And the Ogre burden-camps that clear a pass or carry a load are paid first in food: a camp is fed and sheltered before it lifts anything.

Fords, Ferries, and Bridges

Where a road meets water, the water usually wins in the end, and every crossing is a bargain with that.

In the basins and on the Serath fords shift and banks slump, and some crossings lie about their own depth to anyone who has not watched them for a generation. In the Headwater Marches a bridge that stood for a century can go in an afternoon, and most fords are usable only in the low months. The oldest Headwater bridges are Dwarven, and the rivers there were channelled and bridged by Dwarven work before any Human town stood on their banks.

The Greyford crossing shows the whole repertoire in one valley: a lord's bridge of old stone piers and newer timber spans set inside a braid of side channels, gravel bars, ferries, rope crossings, and low-water routes, where Goblin side-ford families and Kindred guides stake the fords in the low months, rope a party together, and go first with a pole. And at dusk the dead of old crossings are seen on the span, which is one reason the gate shuts at the dusk bell.

On the lower rivers the keepers are the Reedfolk, and no sensible boat crosses the **Reedmere** without one of their pilots, whoever takes the toll at the landing. In the Briarreach the one reliable through-route follows the cut of the **Sallow**, a narrow, silt-heavy river whose crossings are kept by Troll houses and change hands, collapse, and reopen over generations, and where the Troll families pile a stone at every place a ravine cat has killed.

Some crossings are stairs. The **Verge Stair**, between the Ironspine and the Crownboughs, is a stone stair of Dwarven building that ends at a gate the High Elf courts grew; each side has kept its own half for longer than anyone can date, and most exchange is done on the landing between. On the Soundchain Roads the **Gullstair** and lesser cliff paths bring escorted parties and their herds down from the Windscar routes to the stations' beach yards.

Escort and Answer

Toll buys passage. Escort buys the chance of arriving, and on most of Caeldon's dangerous roads it comes with a promise: that the escort will warn in time, and that if the road betrays the party, someone will pay for it in goods, in service, or in blood.

Below the Gates

On the Headwater exchange roads escort below the gates is Human and Hobgoblin, drawn from town and lordly garrisons and from the watches of the Iron Compacts on the stretches they hold by a lord's warrant. The roads are escorted against people as much as against rockfall, because metal and coin on a mountain road draw thieves, and the outlaw band that takes a caravan in the high passes is the oldest story on the road. Where the holds' gate-watch begins, hold wardens take the caravan, and the road ends in the **oath-yard** inside each foothill hold, where every bargain is sworn before a custodian.

On the Wind-Shelves

On the far side, escort is the whole of the road. The High-Scar escorts of the Windscar Pacts keep route moots that hear complaints against escorts, cairn-line wardens who keep the markers true, warning runners, escort captains, and the elders of the treaty-grounds, before whom a party is taken on or handed over. An escort's name rests on one test: did the parties it guided arrive, and when they did not, was the reason sent ahead in time?

Most deaths in the High Scars come from exposure, rockfall, wild dog packs, struck-name raiders, and bad guidance, and the last is the one Orcs fear most, because it is the one a person chose; a storm delay is forgiven only if word of it is sent ahead (the escort custom is told in The Windscar). A party needs several hands to agree: the escorts, a Troll house at its crossing, a Rimward custodian at the bottom of the descent, and the weather. Beyond all of it travel the bands formed around those whose names were struck from honour, and their heirs, who know the routes as well as anyone, guide for whoever will pay, raid whoever will not, and answer to no route moot.

At the End of the Road

At the end of a far-side road a sworn party is owed an answer, not necessarily a welcome. A Rimward stronghold that must narrow access cannot simply turn away a sworn escorted party: it owes it 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. Halfling cistern halls first gave those answers; the Rimward Passage War forced them on the strongholds of basin and route.

On the Soundchain Roads the answers are the stations'. An escort nearing the coast sends word ahead, its captain declares the party at the beach yard, and the keeper takes it in, holds it until a named day, or points it down the coast, while officers of the Answerward Pilotage carry each answer in the same words from station to station; held parties wait in the lee anchorage every Orc escort calls **the Patience** (see The Tidelace and the Soundchain Roads).

Behind all of this stands one far-side rule, learned in blood on a cold shore: delay must be said aloud. A coast that holds a party must say so, and why, and name a day to ask again. Orc captains say a refusal in fine words is still the coast keeping them out, and they keep their own memory of which stations answered in time and which did not. The arriving party gains no right to come in. It gains the right to know which answer it has been given, and the escorts gained, after the closure years when beacons were thrown down and a Gnome pilot was killed on the Gullstair, the right to add the answers up.

Answering for a Wrong

A wrong between Orc kindreds is never answered in secret but declared at the next treaty-ground and held to the measure of the wrong (the custom is told in The Civilizations of the Medieval Era). In

the cradle the same need is met by a lord or a great house: a League carrier whose cargo is lost on an unkept reach brings the tally to the toll-house, the great houses read what the guarantor wrote, and they decide, usually in favour of whoever has more friends among them.

Stations, Shelters, and Wells

Between the keepers stand the places where travellers stop, and on most roads the stopping places decide the road more than the road does. Beyond them lie the wilds, wide and deadly, where nobody keeps the way and nobody can be called on, so nobody crosses them alone: travellers go in armed companies from one stopping place to the next, and a journey between regions is reckoned in weeks and months.

Each of them is described with its own country in the atlas.

- **Waystations.** Walled stops on the Headwater exchange roads, a laden caravan's day apart, between foothill towns built round a market, an oath-house, and a yard where caravans are made up and broken.
- **Oath-yards.** The walled yards inside each foothill hold's outer gate, where the exchange roads end, every bargain is sworn, and visitors rarely go further.
- **Inns.** At Greyford, merchant inns for factors and their sellswords on Highbank's square, with a corner table kept by the bounty-takers, and carters' inns out along the road.
- **Passward shelters.** Stone-walled refuges at the mouths of High-Scar passes, kept stocked by whoever holds the route and full in the windy season.
- **Strongholds and wells.** Walled spurs above the Rimward water sources, and on the inland rim the **Lastwater Wells**, where Glassbelt crossings begin and end.
- **Cistern halls.** The yards at each Leeward fold head where a party is answered, watered, and sent on without setting foot on the good ground.
- **Stations.** Each Soundchain sound's quays, declaration house, store sheds, sounding house, and beacon towers, with quay-wardens hunting pilferers through the sheds.
- **Receiving grounds.** The **Understorey Courts** at the foot of the Crownbough canopy, where few envoys are ever taken higher, and the Thornbound **Waitfield** at the edge of the Briarreach, where most trade happens and goes no further.
- **Gathering-markets.** The Edgeway kindreds' markets at ruined sites, such as the **Undercroft Fair** in the Broken Marches, often the only places where people of distant broken regions trade, marry, and settle quarrels.

Keepers Without Territory

The worst crossings and the longest roads belong, in practice, to peoples who hold no land at all. Their power lies in local memory, route knowledge, their name on the roads, and the plain fact that no distant lord can make a broken ravine safe by his word. Their orders are told in The Civilizations of the Medieval Era; on the road a traveller meets them like this.

The **Troll crossing houses** hold bridges, ravines, flooded causeways, landslide routes, and storm-torn passes in the Broken and Headwater Marches, the Briarreach, and the High Scars. A house decides when its crossing is too dangerous to use, warns of it, mends what the slides break, and names the Bridge-Dead at every repair, and escort captains on the High Scars have learned to bargain with it rather than override it. On the Human side of the Marches troll-hunting is a trade, and every crossing house hunts the hunters in turn. The **Edgeway kindreds** keep more road than anyone and are present at each piece of it only a few weeks a year. Their waymarks claim a ruin or grade its danger from braced to never-touch, and road-wardens follow the danger-marks without admitting it; where a kindred's marks have been scraped off, it stacks the scraped stones at the waymark as an offering to Corrow the Gale-

Runner and cuts the marks again nearby, and kindreds say the stacks hum in the wind. Their **keep-right** over the works they keep is the source of most of their quarrels with the lords who depend on the same culverts.

Heavy work on the roads is done by **Ogre bands** of the Hearth-Weight Compacts, fed and sworn before any load moves, and in a hard season a walk-off can stop a route as surely as a slide. They haul dressed stone and beams on the Headwater roads and keep the winter roads open, driving the pass bears off the waystations every autumn with fire and staves; on the High Scars they clear rockfall, carry stores to the shelters, haul the injured down, and rebuild collapsed ledges. Goblin companies of the **Iron Compacts** hold frontier roads, fort watches, and gates under a lord's warrant and bring back heads, not prisoners, and a new lord may tear up his father's warrant and send a compact on the march to nowhere that every Goblin song remembers. Below ground the Kobold crews of the **Underhouse Compacts** keep the underlayers alive. Their underways and old service tunnels in the Broken Marches carry people and goods that would rather not be seen, treasure-seekers hire their guides for the sealed storeworks the crews break into, and a crew's refusal closes a shaft without a single seal-mark.

On the water the keepers are pilots. Reedfolk pilots hold their berths on the braided Serath by whatever bargain their reach keeps, and a Floodkeeper house may refuse to sound a reach whose guarantor has ignored its flood warning, and leave the town to explain the closure to the carriers. On the Tidelace the harbour's pilot families take the helm of any stranger's craft at the harbour mouth; at the Sounding Gate a craft must take the channel in the window the harbour names, with one of the harbour's pilots at the helm. At the far-side river mouths Gnome pilots sound the marked channels and keep hazard markers, while Thaluren run-watchers close the ascent channels in return season; a fishing passage is not a return run, and a return run is not coastal traffic, and the drowned on the shelves are what happens when someone forgets which is which.

Signals and News

On most of Caeldon news moves faster than goods, and the means of moving it are part of the road.

The far side builds for it. On the High Scars warning fires on one ridge can be read from the next shelf before a runner could cover half the distance, and older children graduate from running messages between camps to warning runs, carrying news of storm, slide, or raiding along the warning ridges faster than any caravan moves. Along the Soundchain Roads and the Tidelace headlands the **beacon lines** carry closings, fog warnings, and the days a held party may ask again far faster than any hull; a closing called at one station is burning on the next headlands by nightfall, and a harbour that misreads a neighbour's light is shamed along the whole coast. In the Tidebound Reaches messengers swim ahead of a run to give notice at the mouths and upriver, and a Kavari village sees notice before it sees escorts and escorts before it sees a run.

The cradle moves news on paper and on foot. Letters and rolls travel with nearly every convoy on the Serath and the Sheaf Road: grants, guarantee rolls, debts, oaths, and the second copies careful scribes keep somewhere else, because a lost roll is a debt or a grant the stronger side can deny. Along the heights of the Ironspine and across the Broken Marches, salvage, news, and danger-warnings travel the kindred circuits, which link the Marches to ruin zones as distant as the Glassbelt and, by the one crossing over it, to the far side. Corridor carriers from the Serath brought the name of Ostrin the Lantern-Bearer up the Headwater roads to Greyford. Below ground, the Kobold crews' sound codes carry a warning through a whole underhouse.

From the Headwater valleys, valley folk read one more signal: the **Weatherline**, a chain of colossal weather shrines on the Stormcrown's

highest ridges that shows as a broken row of notches against the sky. When cloud hides the notches, the high roads will close before night.

At the Border

A border on Caeldon is rarely a line. It is the point where another people's keepers take charge, and what a stranger meets there says more about a people than any map. What follows is what a traveller meets first, people by people.

In the Cradle

At the edge of the Briarreach a stranger does not walk in. They wait at the Waitfield or a hedge-edge until watchers come with their questions, and hospitality, if it comes at all, comes in steps, each under a sponsor who swears *your harm is my harm* and pays for whatever the guest does (the steps are told in The Forest Heartlands). A guest who walks in unasked meets arrows out of the hedge. Passage is held twice there: a Troll house decides who may cross its ravine, and a traveller who has paid one has not satisfied the other.

At the Elderweald a visitor is not turned away, but does not walk alone, and paths to the dead, to the stair-mouths, and between the deepest groves are not walked by outsiders at all. The danger most visitors meet is the one they bring: a living tree cut, a stream turned aside, or a fire set in the wrong place is not a small offence but a wound to the forest, and the welcome ends with it.

At the Crownboughs an embassy is judged by how high into the canopy it is received, and most are received at the Understorey Courts and no higher. At an Ironspine gate a traveller enters under gate oath and leaves owing whatever was sworn, and in the Headwater and basin towns a stranger is asked early whose god they swear by.

In the Roothollows a stranger or refugee comes first to a house's threshold chamber and never further, where the threshold-keeper hears the stranger out before the household and the house must shelter, refuse, or send the stranger on by a Known Way it will swear is survivable (Stone and the Deep). Refusing refuge is a betrayal never forgiven; every stranger at the door may also bring the flood.

At Greyford's Lowbank end there is no gate. Past Lowbank no one escorts anyone, and paths fan out from the ruined causeway onto broken frontier roads and kindred circuits that Goblin guides sell. In the Broken Marches passage is never simply free: a warranted road is kept by its compact, Troll houses charge at their crossings, Goblin guides sell safer detours, outlaws hold whatever nobody else does, and kindreds expect kept works to be left no worse than found.

On the Far Side

The Leeward Folds feed a traveller at a household door without question, but a party is received at the fold market or the cistern hall, and being received is not being let in. A party nobody refuses can still find that the cistern hall's answer is *not yet*, and those who try the terraces uninvited meet the fold's young on the walls with slings.

At a Rimward stronghold a party arriving in the dry months comes down the ramp in front of the camps pitched in their rings, and whatever is answered at the cistern is answered in sight of everyone whose water it is, with spears on both sides in plain view. At a Soundchain beach yard the captain gives the kindred's name first, then the party's count, and the keeper's answer is given in front of everyone. At a Tidelace harbour mouth a stranger's craft waits for its window and gives its helm to a pilot of the harbour's families.

A Thaluren met on the current roads is asked run and hatch water before anyone asks about household (see The Tidebound Reaches and the Unrun Sea). Where Thaluren and Kavari waters meet, it is usually over a marker: Kavari nursery keepers mark the nursery-water and forbidden channels, Thaluren escorts send notice ahead and keep within the marks, and quarrels go to a circle at the water's edge, where the side with more kin at the water usually has its way. A run that strays past the marks meets barbed spears.

And at the Lastwater Wells, where the Glassbelt begins, the border is simply the last water. Parties going out drink there for the last time. Parties coming in reach it first, often with nothing left.

Tensions

- **A claim at a shared crossing.** Where kindred circuits and Troll crossing houses meet on the same road, kindred marks and house oaths often record the same danger in different terms. Both rest on the same colossal road network, the houses on charges sworn while it stood and the kindreds on walking it after it was abandoned, and at a shared crossing the side that holds it is usually the one with more people standing at it.
- **The forged tally.** Passage tallies from one upstream town are turning up in numbers no toll-house could have issued. Either someone is forging them, or the town's own guarantor is selling them without collecting dues, and every town downstream must decide whether to honour them.
- **The thief-lord of the shoals.** A river-thief band below the Lying Shoals has grown large enough to sell protection to the barges it once robbed, and some guarantors are said to be paying it rather than hunting it.
- **Roads too large to mend.** Colossal grades such as the Long Tread and the Tallgrade are kept in stretches by gate holds, kindreds, Troll houses, and frontier powers, and none of them can mend the whole. Younger roads laid across them on worse foundations fail first. On the Long Tread the gate holds keep the stretches by their doors and the kindreds keep its culverts, and neither will let the other hold the whole.
- **A captain in the Patience.** A counted party has been held below the Gullstair for a full season. Every delay has named its reasons and a day to ask again, but fever is in the camp and the water is short, and up in the High Scars the captain's kindred is beginning to call it a refusal in fine words.
- **Raiders on the low fords.** A band working the Greyford side fords has taken three parties mid-channel and left the guides drowned. The Bridge Hall says the fords are not its business; the Goblin ford families have put a bounty on the band out of their own pockets, and a Kindred guide swears one of the raiders wore a Tollwarden's apron.

PART II

Medieval Peoples and Powers

The civilizations of the era, their gods, the faiths people practise, and what magic looks like in a village rather than a treatise.

CHAPTER 4

The Civilizations of the Medieval Era

Ask the hold what it has kept,
ask the grove what it is growing,
ask the town who saw it sworn,
ask the road who carried it:
four answers, and one roof to sleep under.

— a Headwater schoolbook, *The Gate-and-Grove Copybook*

A species is what a person is born; a civilization is what a person lives under, and whom they must answer to when it comes to blows. On medieval Caeldon the two rarely line up neatly. A Dwarf of the Ironspine and a Dwarf of the Stonewake Deeps keep the same faith and argue about it bitterly. A half-Elven ferry child on the Serath is protected from birth and may wait years before the great houses let her swear for the family boat. An Ogre may spend her whole life on other people's roads and still belong to an order older than any of the towns that hire her. The names these orders carry, Concord, Courts, Compact, League, Houses, Kindreds, are their own and describe them only loosely: one Compact is a deep Dwarven hold-cluster, another a Kobold crews' bargain, a third an armed Goblin company holding a road. None of them is safe. Each has its wars and feuds, its raiders and outlaws, beasts and dark things at its edges, and ruins its people are warned away from and go into anyway. What matters to a household is the moment it meets the order: the day a child is named, a marriage is sworn, a count is read aloud, a stranger arrives at the edge of the light, a debt is called in, a feud comes to the door. This chapter goes through the twenty-two named civilizations of the medieval world and stops at those moments.

AT A GLANCE

Forest and deep	The Rootcrown Concord, the Crownbough Courts, the Thornbound Circles, the Gloamroot Covenant.
Stone	The Ironspine Holds, and within them the Stonewake Compact.
River and basin	The Confluence Marches, and within them the Serathic League; the Floodkeeper Houses.
The far side	The Windscar Pacts, the Foldward Commons, the Gaugeward Leagues; in the waters of return, the Returning Concord with the Blightward Keepers and the Open-Run Concords, and the Bankright Circles.
Without territory	The Hearth-Weight Compacts, the Crossing-Oath Houses, the Edgeway Kindreds, the Iron Compacts, the Underhouse Compacts, the Mending Orders.
The year	The Medieval Era, c. 1,350 CR.

Orders and the Lives Inside Them

Most of these orders are very old. The Rootcrown Concord of the Wood Elves took shape around 490,000 BR, the Ironspine Holds of the Dwarves not long after, and the youngest Elven and Dwarven orders were already ancient when the first Human basin towns were raised. The Human orders, by contrast, are recent: the Confluence Marches came together between about 40,000 and 20,000 BR, and the Serathic League a little later. The youngest civilization of all, the Mending Orders of the Wrought, is barely thirteen centuries old, and some of the people it was founded to hide are still alive. Age does not make an order strong, but it does make it proud, and the older orders treat the younger ones with every shade of patience, from courtesy to contempt.

Three things are worth knowing before going order by order.

Some orders hold ground and some do not. The Elven, Dwarven, Human, Reedfolk, and far-side orders each have a country: a forest, a mountain, a river, a fold, a coast. Six others hold no land at all. They live in other people's countries, on the roads, crossings, ruins, and underworks that the landed orders cannot keep alive without them, and their strength is work, passage, and the plain fact of being needed rather than any ground of their own.

Some orders live inside others. The Stonewake Compact is a civilization within the Ironspine Holds; the Serathic League is a civilization within the Confluence Marches; the Blightward Keepers and the Open-Run Concords live within and around the Returning Concord. A Stonewake Dwarf is an Ironspine Dwarf too, and a League town still swears under the Marches' gods. The inner order is usually the sharper, stricter, or narrower form of the outer one, and the two quarrel the way close kin do.

Order is held, not written. Everywhere, in the holds and the Elven courts as much as on the Human frontier, it rests on custom, oath, kinship, and the strength of whoever holds the hall, the ford, or the water. Rules are few, set by the stronger party, and favour it. What each people does differently is how it makes a person count among its own. Elves are accepted slowly, in stages, by people who have watched them grow. Dwarves are cut into stone. Humans are sworn and written down. Reedfolk and Thaluren are remembered, aloud. Halflings and Gnomes are counted and measured. Orcs are recited, with the crossings they held. Wherever a writer sets a story, the question of how a person comes to count among their own people, and what happens when someone stronger decides they do not, is already waiting.

The Elven Orders

The Elven orders follow the branches of the Elves more closely than any other people's orders follow theirs. The Wood Elves of the Elderweald are the oldest branch and the Rootcrown Concord the oldest order; the Thorn Elves of the Briarreach and the High Elves of the Crownboughs grew out of it, each into a civilization of its own; and the Dark Elves of the Roothollows hardened under catastrophe into a fourth. All four share the Elven habit of slow acceptance: a person comes into their place slowly, and is not forced into final form before they are ready. Each order bends that habit to its own fear.

The Rootcrown Concord

The **Rootcrown Concord** has no seat, no crown, and no court. It is many groves of the Elderweald under trees older than the Concord itself, held together by memory and by duty to the living forest. It is the oldest major Elven civilization on Caeldon, consolidated in The Founding of the Rootcrown Concord (c. 490,000-c. 460,000 BR), and it is the root from which the High Elf and Thorn Elf civilizations later diverged. The basin Humans live beside it more closely than beside any other Elven power, and misread it more often, mostly as absent. The Wood Elves believe a people owes its life to the land that feeds it, and they hold their neighbours to that belief with warnings first and arrows after.

How it holds together. Within a grove the elders and ritual keepers are heeded for the memory of place they hold, and a matter that crosses groves goes to a **circle** of the groves concerned, which no grove can be made to obey (the groves and their circles are told in The Forest Heartlands). At the basin edge a third kind of voice has grown up that holds no office at all: the **edge mediators**, people whom both Elves and Humans believe about kin, remembrance, and the right completion of a life. And 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 poachers of the moss-coated greenharts who come in from the basin side every few years seldom go home.

How a household meets it. The Concord meets a person most sharply at **arrival**. A grove declares someone adult when its elders and ritual keepers agree that the person has arrived. Each says so aloud at a grove gathering, and one keeper's doubt does not overrule the rest but puts the matter off to the next season. A household that moves to another grove is not counted of its new grove until it has walked that grove's paths through a full year and learned where its dead lie, so that a family arriving in spring is still a guest at midwinter, however warmly it is fed. What a grove fears is the forest floor: hollows that open under the leaf-litter, some reaching down towards the root-depths, where the fallen are heard calling for days; the great tree that comes down in a night; fire most of all, and the axe that comes after. Its hunters also hunt what the forest sends: bears flooded out of their hollows, wolves at the edge farms in a hard winter, and the Skin-Lost, shape-changers who forgot the way back and hunt with a person's cunning.

Outsiders meet the Concord at the edge of the trees, where a settler must ask the nearest grove whatever a lord has granted. A grove may refuse a mill village the weir it needs, saying that a stream's course is not the grove's to give. A lord may grant a clearing on his own word and find it growing back over his settlers' fences, with arrows in the dark if they persist; some questions wait a generation, and some of the neighbours have stopped waiting. And under the floor lies the lure: basin inns tell that the lost lower groves lie at the bottom of the deepest hollows with their grave-goods untouched, and parties of treasure-seekers go down after them with ropes and lamps, while the grove above decides whether to cut the ropes.

What it remembers. Every Elven branching is remembered in the groves as a leaving. The groves do not call their Crownbough and Briarreach kin wrong, but they keep count. Their quarrel with the basin was never about rank; it is about whether a settlement owes anything to the living ground it stands on, and it was fought with marked trees and arrows on one side and firebrands and paid swords on the other, stretch by stretch, by whoever was stronger there. Along the edge the war is still in the wood: old trunks with Human arrowheads grown deep into the bark. The same quarrel reached even into mourning, and was settled there in The Elderweald Funerary Accord (c. 16,000-c. 15,000 BR), where Wood Elf return of the dead and Human mourning were reconciled without either side treating a death as a private matter.

The Crownbough Courts

The **Crownbough Courts** of the High Elves are what became of one part of the Rootcrown world when it pushed towards refined magical shaping, courtly hierarchy, and deliberate design: Rootcrown Elves grown proud, ranked, and lofty, living high among the boughs of trees their ancestors bent into halls. They were founded in The Founding of the Crownbough Courts (c. 390,000-c. 375,000 BR), and they are the oldest standing power that most cradle-web Humans and Dwarves deal with face to face. Where Wood Elf groves live within growth as it comes, the Crownbough houses bend it to their will. Their halls, galleries, and garden-walks are grown, coaxed by magic and centuries of patient shaping into forms no forest makes alone, and in later ages finished with shaped stone and metal too.

How it holds together. Several courts rule rather than one crown, each gathered around a few great houses that settle rank, protocol, and presentation by custom, oath, and what their groves, wealth, and sworn followers let them enforce; quarrels between equals end in a duel of shaping, or in a duel of champions on a garden-walk with nothing beneath it (the courts and their duels are told in The Forest Heartlands). The other authority belongs to the tenders of the Ordered Bough, the High Elf faith of tending life towards its intended form, and a tender's *not ready*, said of a garden, a house, or a person, weighs against the court's.

How a household meets it. The moment that matters most is **presentation**, when a house of rank shows a young High Elf at court with a piece of shaping they have carried on themselves, and the court reads the work and the person together (the custom is told with the Crownboughs in The Forest Heartlands). The great houses remember which presentations came early, over a tender's *not yet*, and a house that can present no one for several seasons is spoken of as *unfinished*; few words in the Crownboughs are crueller. At the end of a life the dead go back to the family grove under the Bough's rites; the court sends one of its own only for the great houses, and for everyone else the return belongs to the house and its tender.

What a house fears most is its own hall. A failed house leaves rooms where Saerith's silver mirrors still hang, showing the viewer a better face, and some who look too long never come away the same. A lesser house that sought perfection through the chrysalis of Imago may have let out an Ill-Hatched thing that once was its heir and now lurks in the understorey, a monster the house must hunt down itself, by night and without lamps, so that the court will not see. Below the boughs, bears roused in spring kill gardeners on the forest floor, and hall canker can rot a great hall from the cut inward until it falls in a storm with its household inside.

Temper and reach. The Courts value refinement, memory, and lasting excellence, and they incline towards condescension to shorter-lived peoples and to anyone they think less finished. A court may receive a Human embassy with every courtesy and never rank it above a lesser house. A

great house may sponsor a Human household's child at court, and gain a debt worth more than the child. A basin lord may copy Crownbough gardens, protocol, and gold-painted faces, and be thought ridiculous by the courts he imitates. An Ironspine envoy may be offered the best seat in the hall and the worst reading of his hold's history in the same evening. And one house may hire Human hall-breakers to bring a mirror out of a rival's abandoned hall, and will not ask how many went in: a dead house's silver, its grown armour, and grafts from groves that no longer exist are the great lure of the canopy.

Whether the children of mixed Human-High Elf households count as kin is still settled house by house, and the Courts remember its sharpest test, The Crownbough Heir Controversy (c. 14,000-c. 13,000 BR), as a warning of what such quarrels cost. Inside the Courts the deepest argument is over Saerith the Mirror-King, the god of prestige, lineage, and perfect form: his devotees call finished form the Bough's fulfilment, the older tenders call it its corruption, and his standard travels further than his worship, into lesser halls where it shows as dangerous rites of self-perfection and quiet despair. Faith in Practice takes that argument up.

The Thornbound Circles

The **Thornbound Circles** govern most of the Briarreach, a belt of broken woodland, thorn, and ravine at the harder edge of the old Elven forest, where Wood Elves living on that harsh edge through the worst ages of the world grew sharp, watchful, and slow to trust. The Thorn Elf branch hardened first, in The Hardening of the Briarreach (c. 425,000-c. 410,000 BR); only afterwards did it take civilizational form, in The Founding of the Thornbound Circles (c. 405,000-c. 392,000 BR). They live by the bow and the hedge. Their settlements are as Elven and as rooted as any grove, but hidden behind thorn walls grown for war, in a forest they remember as trying to kill them. They are not cowards. They are hunters and watchers, and they keep the memory of every danger the forest ever held as if it might come back tomorrow.

How it holds together. A **circle** is a cluster of settlements bound by mutual oath and, above all, by the power to say who may approach and to back it with bows; circles stand together when pressed, but none commands another, and their hedges are their walls (the circles and their hedges are told in The Forest Heartlands). On the ravines of the Briarreach the Circles live beside Troll houses of the Crossing-Oath Houses, which hold no forest, only crossings; the two have stood side by side for a very long time without ever settling where one's say ends and the other's begins.

How a stranger meets it. Earned hospitality is the Circles' own, and it is the first thing anyone from outside meets. A stranger waits at the **Waitfield** or a hedge-edge until watchers come with three questions, the last of them who will answer for the stranger if they do harm, and is let in, if at all, by steps: the outer fire, the blind way, and only after seasons of return the known way, always under a **sponsor** who swears *your harm is my harm* and pays for whatever the guest does as though they had done it themselves. The steps are told with the Briarreach in The Forest Heartlands. A Human axe-gang that comes with a lord's grant and hired swords may be let come a day into the forest before the arrows start. A Troll crossing house may sell safe passage over a ravine to travellers who still cannot enter the woods on either side. And the pockets of ground the Thornbound will not enter and do not explain draw a treasure-hunter past the hedges every few summers, and what is found of him is left at the Waitfield as a warning.

The Gloamroot Covenant

Beneath the forest, in the Roothollows, the Dark Elves live under the **Gloamroot Covenant**. It is the order of a branch that hardened under catastrophe and sealing before it became a civi-

lization: the sequence runs from The Roothollow Rupture through the sealing and the darkening of the Roothollows to The Founding of the Gloamroot Covenant, and the Covenant was assembled out of survivors who had learned that no one else would keep them alive. What holds it together is protection rather than trust. Power belongs to whoever can hold water, food, dry chambers, and a safe way through the dark. Mercy exists, but it is never free, because the Covenant remembers too clearly the flood when the rescuers did not come.

How it holds together. Houses hold chambers, reservoirs, and fungus darks by **chamber-right**, and with them the households, dependants, and refugee lines that live there. A house is run by its elders, and two of its offices matter to everyone in it: the **water-keeper**, who knows the house's basins and what it owes and is owed in water, and the **threshold-keeper**, who keeps the threshold chamber and speaks for the house when someone asks to be let in. The **survival and warding orders** first rose to hold back what the catastrophe left loose in the dark, and remain the Covenant's swords, its guards on the ways, and much of its right to rule. Neither side stands without the other: a house that cannot protect is brittle, and an order that cannot draw on a house's water and food cannot endure. **Route keepers** come from the orders and keep the **Known Ways**: they walk them, decide which stay survivable, lodge in the houses' threshold chambers, and teach the ways to children. Striking a way off the reckoning is theirs to do and theirs to answer for.

Binding all of them is the **old custom of refuge**, kept by oath and by bitter memory rather than written down, and older than the Covenant. Refuge means shelter in need and protection on the spot, not a place in the house, and the grounds on which a house may refuse are few and grave. Dark Elf life is lived between two convictions at once: 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. Quarrels over who was turned away, or sent down a way that killed them, end in feud as often as in a bargain, and a Gloamroot feud can outlast a Human kingdom.

How a household meets it. A household meets the Covenant at a few fixed points, each told in Stone and the Deep: the **threshold**, where someone of the house sits every waking watch and a stranger asking refuge must be sheltered, refused on one of the old grounds, or sent on by a Known Way the route keeper will swear is survivable; the **water reckoning** once each root-year, when the water-keeper says aloud what the house owes and is owed; a child's first **recital** of a Known Way; and the **root-chamber naming** in the root-chamber, for which a household may wait years and a refugee line longer, unless a great house speaks for it. A household that refuses refuge lives with the refusal for generations, and if a way it sent refugees down proves lost, the kin of the lost come asking. A capable young Dark Elf can be trusted on the ways long before the house lets them inherit, as in The Gloamroot Inheritance Ambiguity.

The dangers the Dark Elves fear live in the water and the dark: black-water eels that take children who wade, root-borers that hollow a chamber until it falls, lampless spiders that curtain the ways nobody walks, and, deepest of all, the sealed Upper Roothollows, where those who drowned themselves to save a refuge came back as the Drowned Court.

Reach and quarrel. Oaths in the Covenant are sworn before the Last Chamber, the god of refuge, accepted as true but not as comforting; the Measured Seal is real too, and suspect, because in Gloamroot memory respectable closure stands too near respectable abandonment. A house may shelter refugees from a failing chamber and spend three generations deciding whether they belong. A house may hold a lesser neighbour's water on debt and call the debt protection. A route keeper may strike a way from the Known Ways and leave

a house on the far side of it outside the region in all but memory. A young Dark Elf may slip past the bars into a struck way to bring back an ancestor's bones, or the silver of a chamber lost in the floods, and earn a name or a feud by it: beyond the bars the Upper Roothollows keep everything a hundred drowned houses owned when the water came. A house may send its own across to the Rootstone Heartwell with an armed escort to swear its right to the water again before the Dwarves, so that it is never let fall; and an envoy carrying a house's word to the forest above goes the long way round, through Stonewake and the Ironspine, under the leave of Dwarves the house does not trust. The Covenant's war with the Stonewake Compact over the Heartwell, begun in The Heartwell Stakings (c. 322,000-c. 316,000 BR), when Gloamroot war-bands came down the root-ways in silence to strike at the Dwarven basin doors, is one of the oldest Elf-Dwarf hatreds, and within the Elven world the Covenant keeps the strongest memory of abandonment by the other branches, a memory the other branches contest. The bitterest curse in the Roothollows is *may you find the door shut*.

The Dwarven Orders

The Dwarven orders meet a life at its stages, and they cut each stage into stone. A people whose children are still setting into their full form after birth guards cradle-chambers more closely than treasuries, names slowly, and counts a child lost to the mountain as the worst loss a hold can suffer; a people whose holds are part of how they remember themselves treats a broken wall and a broken oath as nearly the same thing. Both Dwarven orders keep the Held Covenant, but in two practices that accuse each other: the gate practice of the Ironspine, which asks Kerrund's question, *will you hold?*, and the seal practice of the deep holds, which asks the Measured Seal, *must this close?*

The Ironspine Holds

The **Ironspine Holds** are the oldest stabilized Dwarven civilization on Caeldon, founded in The Founding of the Ironspine Holds (c. 460,000-c. 438,000 BR) in the mountains of the Ironspine, and every Dwarf still measures a hold against theirs: gates cut into living rock, halls older than any Human memory, and forges whose fire has never been let out. 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.

How it holds together. 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, and a hold's word is worth what its walls and warriors are worth. A leading hold may speak for the Ironspine before the Crownbough Courts or a Human lord's hall, and any other hold may decline to follow it. 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 remembered on both sides' tablets. Place inside a hold is not shared evenly. Kobold crews take the narrow, dangerous repairs in vent runs and mine-edges, often for work the hold prefers not to mention, and Goblin **underwall households**, descended from those who stayed when the early holds took the seam-warrens, live in the margins of halls that once were theirs.

How a household meets it. The hold is present at every turning of a life: the name-stone in the cradle-chamber, the first oath at the gate, the marriage tablet, the Proving of the Unbroken Line, and the sealed grave. The customs are told in The Elder Peoples (FND 207) and, as hold life keeps them, in Stone and the Deep. An oath broken at

the gate is avenged by the whole hold, not only by the injured kin. What the holds fear is winter on the passes, stone cats and pass bears, flood and bad air in the mine-edges, and Brace-Gnawers in the props; older and quieter is the fear of the doors that were shut with people behind them, and the knocking that still comes through some of them.

Reach. The Holds open and close much of the trade the uplands live on. A hold sells ore, tools, and smithing to the Headwater towns and buys back the grain, wool, and timber it cannot grow, and every bargain ends in a hold's oath-yard, sworn before a custodian. A gate hold may close its stretch of a road after a rockfall and keep it closed, and turn back with spears the Edgeway kindred that has cleared the culverts beyond for longer than the hold has kept tallies. A Kobold compact may refuse a working, and a hold that will not pay for danger finds its narrow repairs left undone. And the empty holds of the first ages are the great lure of the mountains: forge-work, old weapons, and hoards of metal no archive remembers, with unwoken frames standing between the door and the find. A hold that sees a blade of its own lost pattern in a Human market will pay well to learn where it was found, and then send its axes there.

The Stonewake Compact

Below and at the centre of the Ironspine lies the **Stonewake Compact**, a civilization within the Holds, holding the Stonewake Deeps, where more of the lower world's routes and water meet than anywhere else. It was formed in The Founding of the Stonewake Compact (c. 360,000-c. 348,000 BR), and whoever holds Stonewake's passages and reservoirs holds the deep: the Compact has held them for three hundred thousand years against flood, collapse, Dark Elf war-bands, and whatever comes up from below. Where the Holds are broad, the Compact is small and dense: warded vault-ways, holds that cannot live without one another, chambers full of tablets, and reservoirs worth a war. Route keepers, reservoir wardens, and archive-custodians each hold their part for their house and answer to the hold-elders for it, beside the Kobold underhouses that keep its air moving and the Wrought of its forge and mine levels.

The custom of the seal. A seal is the deepest act a Dwarf of Stonewake can do, because a shut door can save a hundred holds or bury the people behind it, and the great deep houses, whose galleries a seal protects or starves, have made it a matter of oath. The Held Covenant's questions of closure began here.

- **An ordinary seal** on a great passage, chamber, or reservoir needs the oath-marks of several custodians, because it cuts off more than the hold that sets it, and the houses beyond it have kin and spears of their own.
- **An emergency seal** may be set by whoever holds the passage when waiting would let a flood, a collapse, or something worse run from hold to hold. The setter answers to the elders afterwards, and the kin of anyone sealed in want an answer.
- **The grounds** are few: a roof about to come down, a reservoir about to break, a sickness or a corruption spreading, a failure that would run from hold to hold, or something coming up from below that cannot be held while the way stays open.
- **The two betrayals** Stonewake remembers most bitterly are a danger made to look worse than it was so that a rival could be shut out, and a seal meant for a season left shut for ever because opening it again had become too costly.

Before a great closing, or a fight to reopen one, custodians swear before the Measured Seal that it must be done, and before the Last Chamber whether what lies behind it can still hold life. Stonewake treats the two not as rivals but as a hard pair of questions: must this close, and can this still rightly hold?

How a household meets it. People in the Deeps walk past the Compact's seals every day, and households near one know its **inspection round**, the custodian's visit cut into its closure marks, the way surface villages know a market day; a seal whose last mark is old is **unwitnessed**, and any passer may raise it with the custodians (the round is followed in Stone and the Deep). Deep children learn a counting rhyme for the knocking behind the doors, *three for the living, one for the dead, none for the door that holds*, and custodians, who know the knocks follow no such rule, let them sing it.

Seals are power in the Deeps, whether anyone admits it or not. A hold may seal a flooded gallery in a single shift on emergency grounds, then spend years answering the elders, and the kin of the galleries it cut off, for it. A custodian may refuse to mark a closure that would divert traffic through a rival hold's junctions, and say so openly before the elders. A mountain hold of the upper Ironspine may withhold stores on the Hauling Stair to press the Compact over a seal that has cut its deep posting off from water. Two holds at feud over water drawn beyond a share may meet with axes at the sluices, and the hold that loses the fight loses the water with it. And a band of hoard-seekers, outfitted at Stairdeep with rope and caged finches, may slip past the lowest kept routes after the forge-lords' gold, where unwoken frames still stand at their posts in the lost pressure holds, and the hold that catches them coming back may take the gold and seal the way behind them.

The River Orders of the Cradle-Web

The Human heartland of the cradle-web is young country by Elven and Dwarven measure, and the orders that hold it make up in hunger what they lack in age: walls, tolls, sworn oaths, guarantees, and the habit of keeping a second copy, for whatever good a copy does against a stronger neighbour. Underneath them, and older than all of them, runs a Reedfolk order whose oaths are not written but remembered.

The Confluence Marches

The **Confluence Marches** are the first major Human civilization on Caeldon, coming together in The Founding of the Confluence Marches (c. 40,000-c. 20,000 BR) and spreading through the long Confluence Rise. They are less a realm than a field: connected towns, basin cores, marcher strongholds, and shifting alliances across the Confluence Basins and the Headwater Marches. No crown holds them together. Shared habit does: the same gods, the same oaths, and the same ways of ending a quarrel, by sworn word, blood-price, or the sword. Because Humans are less bound than Elves or Dwarves to one old inheritance, they borrow whatever works from their neighbours, Elf, Dwarf, or Reedfolk, and keep it until something better comes along, and that quickness has long been their edge. Between the towns run long roads, wolf-haunted in hard winters, past ruins nobody has dug to the bottom.

How it holds together. Power 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 settle their own quarrels; march-towns take what the crossings will bear; Headwater lords live on escort money and on what they can take from travellers who refuse to pay. When two of them fall out, they fight until one side runs out of sellswords or both go to the **oath-house** of the Sworn Accord, the Marches' organized religion, under which a cult is honoured in the towns only once it is entered on the Accord's sworn roster of gods.

How a household meets it. A Marches household meets its lord and its gods mostly at the oath-house, where a marriage, an inheritance, a land sale, or a boundary is sworn under an entered god and written down; **record-day** reads the year's entries aloud for anyone bold enough to speak

against them, **oath-days** bring the great houses to hear oaths sworn and settle what they please, and a stranger is asked early whose god they swear by (the oath-house and its year are followed in The Basins and the Marches). Agreements are sealed there under Iskel the Scribe of the Silent and accusations brought under Ostrin the Lantern-Bearer, and the scribes and record-houses serve Annoth the Keeper of Scrolls, a god always imperilled by those who benefit from forgetting.

What a household fears is near and plain: grey wolves at the folds in a hard winter, an outlaw band in the woods behind the fields, the lord's war and the lord's levy, Spurred Hounds bred for those wars that turn on their own kennels, and the River-Given, the unrited dead of the spring floods, come dripping up the landing steps to find their own doors. In the Headwater Marches a young person is sworn twice before swearing in their own name, under The Headwater Rite of Two Oaths (c. 23,000-c. 21,000 BR), born of an old quarrel over fostered children: first to **working right**, which lets them carry messages and travel on a household's errands, and years later to **oath-right**, the right to swear and inherit. Every Headwater family argues about the years between.

Reach. The Marches are where most cradle-web Humans live, trade, and feud. A lord may levy a share of every harvest on the threshing floor and sell it upriver or uphill to whoever pays best. A march-town takes what a crossing will bear, and a ferry that sinks under a sworn guarantee owes a blood-price to the drowned man's kin, if they are strong enough to ask for it. A lord at feud may hire a sellsword company for the season, and the villages along the march pay for it twice: once in levy, and once when the company is not paid on time. A foothill lord may pay a bounty in silver for every beast that comes out of the Wrongwood, where the beasts of the burned valley still bear Kindless Broods. And a company of treasure-seekers may come back from the Paling, the archive city with every letter smoothed off its stones, with old silver and without that morning's memories, and the town will buy the silver anyway. The Marches were never Human in isolation. Dwarven exchange through the Headwaters made them stronger, the Elderweald border taught them the cost of pushing into living country, and Crownbough embassies, arriving in the last twenty thousand years, brought admiration, resentment, and imitation in the same towns.

The Serathic League

Downriver, the **Serathic League** is the order of the Lower Serath, a civilization within the Marches: fortified river towns, dense exchange, and a hard grip on the busiest corridor of the basin, bound to one another by sworn guarantees rather than by a king. Escorts, guarded crossings, and oaths sworn again and again hardened into the guarantee custom in The Lower Serath Guarantees (c. 26,000-c. 16,000 BR); only then did the towns become a named league. Its towns have walls, but their real strength is the traffic: barges by the hundred on a crowded lower river, every one of them paying. It keeps the Marches' faith, the Sworn Accord, and its own severe god besides: those cheated by river dues that buy nothing, or by quarrels the great houses always win, invoke Ostrin.

How it holds together. Each town answers for its own reach of river and treats carriers from other League towns as its own, held to it by the fear of finding its barges stopped at every other town's water-gate; inside the towns the great river houses hold the markets and the dues, and **guarantors** keep the river for them, with armed boats when words fail (the towns and the guarantee are told in The Basins and the Marches). The League's love of written oaths and sharp lines between people is older than the League: it comes from the vanished Archive-Law Civilization, whose city ruins some Serathic scribes have never heard of, and most of it reached the river through Reedfolk house-custom.

Under The Serathic Oath of Layers (c. 19,000-c. 18,000 BR), which the strongest river houses imposed and then kept, the League counts belonging in three steps rather than one, **Protection**, **Stewardship**, and **the full oath**, and the great houses decide who stands on which; a half-Elven ferry child may run the family boat for years before they let her swear for it.

How a household meets it. Two people meet the guarantee most often: the guarantor sworn for one reach, who writes its dues and its repairs side by side in the **guarantee roll**, and the bargemaster who pays each town's dues for a **passage tally**, so that the next town does not charge for the same water twice.

Reach. A town may refuse a carrier who cannot show the tally from the reach above, and hold the barge until its dues are paid. Two League towns at odds over a reach may each send armed boats to keep it, and the barges caught between them pay twice and pray. A carrier may bring a stack of tallies to an oath-day to show that a reach took dues for a season without a single repair entered against them, and win only if a great house with something to gain takes up the quarrel. A guarantor may take a crew of sellswords and a Reedfolk guide into the reed mazes after the wreckers who light false marks above the Lying Shoals, and burn every hut that has a lamp in it. And under the oldest towns lies a quieter lure: whatever the archive world left in its river cities, which nobody has found and every deep foundation is dug in hope of. Thieves go down into those pits by night, and a town sets guards on them against its own diggers as much as against strangers.

The Floodkeeper Houses

Older than either Human order, and running partly beneath them, are the **Floodkeeper Houses** of the Reedfolk, founded in The Founding of the Floodkeeper Houses (c. 210,000-c. 182,000 BR). They hold the lower Confluence Basins and the channel country of the Lower Serath as a world of stilt-houses and reed cities, crossing shrines, and kin who remember where the water went a thousand years ago and where it will go next spring. They carry the oldest oath-keeping in the river world: as the elder archive-law world closed its rolls, some of its keepers carried oath scripts and records into the Reedfolk houses, in The Last Keeping (c. 150,000-c. 120,000 BR), where they became house-custom.

How it holds together. The Houses hold no fixed borders, because the water keeps none. Weight goes to those who remember the floodplain truly: who can say which channel still bears a boat, which crossing lies about its depth, which bank will slump under a house, and who keeps the shrine-crossings safe. Flood-keeper houses, shoal leagues, reed-city kin, and shrine-keepers are bound to one another by old oaths sworn across moving water, and a house that breaks one finds every channel-guide in the reach suddenly forgetful. There is no hidden kingdom in the marshes, only a people who have outlasted every flood by remembering it. The Human orders rose beside it and partly over it, each reach settling the matter its own way during The Lower River Absorptions (c. 30,000-c. 8,000 BR), when river towns won the water by hiring flood-keepers, marrying into their families, and moving channels over the heads of houses that would not bend, and the Houses have been bargained with, depended on, pushed aside, and partly swallowed ever since, without ever being erased.

How a household meets it.

- **The flood-telling.** 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, and children learn the house's flood years by heart.

- **Marriage between houses** is sworn at a crossing shrine. 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.
- **Service.** Many households owe service to a Human town, through a pilot's office the town grants, an inherited duty, or only the habit of being asked before the rise. The house keeps count of that service even where the town does not.

Every child learns the fens' dangers before its letters: the great catfish of the deep holes that pull dogs and swimmers under, leeches and fever in the warm months, and the false crossings that look like any other. Older fears lie out in the drowned reed cities, sunk when channels were moved for stronger peoples, whose shrine-posts break the water at low summer; on some low-summer nights a light moves among the posts, and no house will row out to learn whose it is.

Reach. The Houses are the lower river's knowledge of itself, and most Human river power still runs on it. A Human town may keep a Reedfolk pilot office by its own grant and still find that the pilot answers to a house first. A house may refuse to guide a boat across a crossing it calls false, whatever the guarantee says. A basin lord may seize a reed island the house remembers as there only in low years, and lose it at the next rise. A Reedfolk keeper may be dragged into a Human lord's hall and swear by house-custom rather than under any god of the roster, and be believed less for it. A Human lord hunting outlaws in the fens may hire a Reedfolk guide, and a house with a grudge may guide his armed boats onto the Lying Shoals instead. Treasure-divers may pay a house to guide them out to a drowned reed city for the offering-silver of its sunken shrines; those who swim down alone come up with silver, or come up tangled and white, or come up at the next spring rise among the River-Given. Houses that resisted absorption once raised a god of unbroken identity, Hesserin the Shattered Saint, who faded as they accepted service; her insistence survives in the Reedfolk saying that the river belongs to whoever remembers it correctly, and in the boast, made wherever anyone will listen, that much of what the basin towns call their own oath-keeping was the Reedfolk's first.

Orders Without Ground

Six of the medieval world's civilizations hold no land. They are not kingdoms, empires, or nations, and they are not the weaker for it. Each grew out of a people's long experience of being needed and not counted, and each answers it by making its work, its passage, or its presence something the stronger peoples cannot do without: a band that will not lift, a bridge that will not open, a road nobody else can keep. Their strength is walking off together, standing by one another, and a long memory for who paid and who did not. Most of them are strongest in the same places: the Headwater roads, the Broken Marches, the mine-edges of the Ironspine, and the crossings in between, where the landed orders run out of reach and the work of keeping things alive is done by somebody else.

The Hearth-Weight Compacts

The **Hearth-Weight Compacts** are the first major named Ogre civilization. They live by **hearth-weight**: strength must stay tied to care, or it turns into something terrible. A household, camp, or work-band is weighed by whether it feeds, shelters, carries, and protects the weak who fall under its burden, and the strongest person is not by that

alone the leader. The hearth-houses that first made hearth-weight into camp-custom took shape in the Long Hunger, long ago; the Compacts became a civilization around 15,000 BR, along the Headwater roads, as the organized refusal of the debt-bound labour of the chain-camps. The chain-camps raised a god of breaking out, Haggun the Wall-Breaker, who faded once the Compacts made refusal a custom other powers had to bear; Ogre outlaws of the Headwater hills still chalk his crack on the door of every road-lord's storehouse they raid.

How it holds together. No compact makes every Ogre camp obey one master. It gives camps, employers, neighbours, and lords the same answers to the same hard questions. Who is fed before work begins? Who sees the burden taken up? What shelter is owed after a job that nearly killed the band? What is owed when a bridge, floodgate, wall, or winter road stands because Ogres carried what no one else could? **Burden houses** keep the count of work owed and work honoured, and some still hold ledgers from the chain-camps. **Camp elders** stand by when 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. Road and flood compacts say when a band may down tools and walk away from work that would eat the camp alive.

How a household meets it. Most Ogre households move between hard jobs, quarry hauling in one season, flood repair in another, winter-road keeping elsewhere, and so meet the Compacts at every new job. No load moves until the camp is fed: the employer feeds the band before any work, the weakest first. The terms are sworn before the band, and the work is entered in the burden house's count. Where a stretch of road was built by a chain-camp, it still carries the camp's marks, and no Ogre band will cut them away. Ogre religion has no clergy; the burden houses keep the customs of Ghessa the Hearth-Mother beside the camp's work counts. Ogres fear hunger above any enemy, and every Ogre child is taught to fear it in themselves: the old songs tell what an unfed band becomes. After hunger they fear the chain.

Reach. No heavy road work is done in the Headwater Marches without the Compacts, and their terms reached the far-side camps of the High Scars through the few Ogre burden orders that know the one crossing of the Glassbelt. A lord at war may hire sellswords for his fighting, but he cannot hire anyone else to haul his war to the walls, and sieges along the Headwater roads have been lost because an unfed band set down a ram halfway to the gate and walked away. A crew clearing a colossal road may lift a slab and find a vault the old builders sealed beneath it, and no band's terms say who owns what lay under the stone it was paid to move. Where the Compacts are honoured, Ogre camps become partners a town cannot do without. Where they are cheated, the roads fill with hunger-bands, strike camps, and bands that will not lift a stone for that lord again. When a band is cheated, someone at the fire says only *send the hearth-keeper*, and everyone knows what comes next.

The Crossing-Oath Houses

The **Crossing-Oath Houses** are the first major named Troll civilization, and to them 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 all at once. Their oldest bridge-oaths go back to The Swearing of the Crossing-Charges (c. 230,000-c. 190,000 BR), when Troll lines holding crossings on the elder colossal road network swore charges to the order that built it. That order withdrew, and the oaths were kept anyway. The medieval Houses descend from those charges, spread well beyond the colossal roads and joined by younger crossing families, and their oaths are still sworn under the Mountain-Father by title, which makes the Trolls one of the few peoples who still swear by a sleeping god.

How it holds together. Bridge-oath families keep named crossings for generations, and a Troll's scars are read like a crossing's history: this one the flood year, that one the night the span went. **Ravine houses** take their fee and bargain over warning and safe-conduct. **Woundland camps** mark unsafe ground and remember old failures. Each house keeps its own count of broken promises, unpaid passage, and travellers lost because a lord or a caravan would not listen. Together they decide who keeps a bridge standing, who takes what from those who cross, who may shut the way, who must shout a warning of rot, flood, or sickness, and who owes the mending when a crossing has torn the land again. On its crossing, a house's word is the only word that holds.

How a traveller meets it. Medieval people most often meet the Houses at a bridge, a ravine, a flooded path, or a broken road, and there the house decides whether the crossing may be used today and what it costs. One house holds the Rattlecut on the Headwater road by an oath older than any lord's grant; on the far-side High Scars, houses hold a few passes and landslide routes, and decide when they are too dangerous to use. A bridge fee may be robbery. It may also pay the people who keep flood, rot, landslide, and Failed Mending from swallowing the road again, and the Houses hold that some crossings survive only because Trolls stayed where everyone else built, abandoned, rebuilt, and forgot. They know every danger of a bad crossing: planks that rot from inside, slopes that slide in the wet season, ravine cats waiting for anyone alone at the water, and the Bridge-Dead, whom the crossing families name at every repair and steer travellers by.

Where the Houses are honoured, frontier travel is dangerous but known. Where they are ignored, crossings become places of feud and disappearance, a house shuts its bridge in answer, and someone in the nearest village starts talking about monsters. On the Human side of the Marches troll-hunting is a trade: men who sell a lord a Troll's head as proof that his road is safe, and who are hunted in their turn by every crossing house that hears the name. A crossing family parts from a traveller with *may the span hold*.

The Edgeway Kindreds

The **Edgeway Kindreds** are the first major named civilization of the Salvage Peoples, and a moving order rather than a seated one. A **kindred** is a kin-linked company of caravans, camps, and repair crews that travels a known circuit between ruin zones, returning season after season to the same broken roads, culverts, wells, spans, and storeworks. Their circuits are oldest in the uplands around the Headwater Marches and the outer Ironspine, where they first formed along abandoned colossal roads in The Walking of the Unkept Roads (c. 175,000-c. 140,000 BR). By the Medieval Era they run through the Broken Marches, the ruin fields of the Glassbelt Interior, and the damaged margins between most cradle-web regions, and a few go all the way across the Glassbelt, which is why kindred marks turn up on both halves of the world. Many kindreds share one body of custom, one mark-language, and a calendar of gathering-markets; no kindred rules another. Their god is Corrow the Gale-Runner, the wind at a moving people's backs.

How it holds together. The Kindreds hold their place among the ruins through three linked practices.

- **The circuit** is a kindred's inherited route and the heart of its identity: which ruins are sound, which roads still connect, where water survives, what has changed since last season, and which ruins have something living in them. Taken together, the circuits are the most complete working map of Caeldon's broken places that any people holds, and no single kindred knows all of it.

- **The mark** is the shared waymark script cut, painted, or stacked onto ruins along the circuits. **Keep-marks** say a ruin or cache is spoken for and by whom. **Danger-marks** grade a structure from braced to unsound to never-touch, and the oldest never-touch forms descend from warnings set around vitrified Ash-Furnace ground. Kindred custom binds the two: a keep-mark is honoured only if whoever cut it leaves the place no more dangerous than they found it. Outsiders learn the commonest danger-marks quickly; few learn to read the claims, and 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*.
- **The keeping** is a kindred's long care for particular works along its circuit: a culvert cleared every spring, a well relined, a causeway braced before the flood season. Under the custom of **keepright**, whoever has kept a work alive across generations has a voice in how it is used, whatever lord holds it. Keepright is the Kindreds' strongest hold and the source of most of their quarrels with settled powers, and it holds only where a lord needs the kept work more than he resents the keepers.

How a life meets it. A kindred is present at each of its works only a few weeks a year, so its life runs on the calendar of the circuit and on its **gathering-markets**, held at old ruined sites, such as the **Undercroft Fair** in the vaulted cellars of a ruined storework in the Broken Marches. The markets are often the only places where people from distant broken regions trade, marry, and settle quarrels, and they are where the ruins' trade gathers: furnace-glass, colossal-work fittings no living smith can copy, coins of peoples nobody remembers, and maps honest about which ruins have something living in them, priced by how many died learning it. Sellsword 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. The daily danger is in the ruins, ruin hogs in the underlayers and cellar rot in a vault roof, and on the roads between them: bandits who wait at a market's approaches, rival salvagers who scrape off a keep-mark and take the cache, and lords' men who call a kindred's cart of salvage stolen goods.

Reach. Road-wardens follow kindred danger-marks without admitting it. Lords and town elders depend on kept culverts and causeways while refusing to honour keepright whenever it costs them. Heirs returning to reclaim "abandoned" holdings find kindred keep-marks already on the stones, and bring hired riders. Where Troll houses and kindreds meet on one road, their marks and their oaths collide (see Roads, Rivers, and Crossings). Where the Kindreds are respected, they are the roads' memory and their menders. Where they are not, their camps are moved on, their marks scraped off, and their kept works left to fail, usually followed by complaints that the roads are getting worse. Kindred heroes are cut as marks rather than sung, beside the danger-marks where something was done, and of a bandit company that once fell on a gathering-market there is no mark at all, which among the kindreds is the worst thing that can be done to a name.

The Iron Compacts

The **Iron Compacts** are the first major named civilization of the Goblins, and the armed companies behind the medieval word **Hobgoblin**. Among Goblins a compact is an armed community that does work the settled powers need done and would rather not do themselves: holding a road, watching a fort, keeping a ruin from falling on a town, supplying a garrison, or guarding a gate. A compact holds that work because it is useful and armed, and because the lord who tolerates it would pay more to drive it out than to keep it. 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. The Compacts took their present shape c. 20,000-c. 9,000 BR, as the Human frontier pushed up into the Headwaters and the Broken Marches.

Three losses behind the Compacts. Goblin history is a sequence of ground lost, and the Compacts are built to answer all of it. The Enclosure of the Seams took the seam-warrens of the Ironspine margins, the first Goblin order, into early Dwarven holds. The Unlisting of the Warrens (c. 180,000-c. 150,000 BR) struck Goblins from the holdings they had kept under the elder archive-law world, by the will of the stronger houses that kept its rolls, and left a mark of lesser worth that later powers inherited. And the **waste-ground doctrine** of the Human frontier treated ruined and marginal ground as anyone's to take, so that Goblin-held ruins were taken by whoever came with more spears. The Compacts answer all three with one lesson: ground is kept by those who are needed and armed.

How it holds together. A compact's usefulness is both its protection and its leash. The duty is real and usually hard: holding a road that outlaws prey on, keeping a ruin and whatever lives in it from spilling onto a town, supplying a fort in a hard winter, watching a ford by night. In exchange the 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. Compacts keep their warrants with great care, recite them at gatherings, and still treasure fragments of archive-era warrants no lord now cares about. Over generations some compacts have become semi-hereditary, and steadier food, exposed work, and the discipline of the spear have made some of their members taller, broader, and more visibly martial than other Goblins: change within one people, not a separate one. At Compact gatherings the songs of Tavi the Bard of the Broken are sung, then cups are drunk to the held.

How a household meets it. For a Goblin household the warrant is the difference between being a keeper and being a trespasser on the same stones. A Hobgoblin family on a warranted road keeps it and watches it, stands escort on its stretches, and can go to a Headwater lord's hall and be heard. A compact's spears are seldom idle: outlaw bands, deserters, and lordless sellswords haunt the frontier roads, and the ruins it keeps hold ruin hogs, glove spiders, and older monsters in the deep cellars that a compact walls in rather than fights. 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; some robbers are guided in for a fee, some are hanged at the ruin's gate, and a few are let past the wall to learn why it was built. 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. The Compacts live between two suspicions: settled powers treat Hobgoblins as useful lesser servants, and freer Goblin warrens say the Compacts have bent the knee for the right to stand anywhere. Underwall households in Dwarven holds sometimes ask the Compacts to stand behind grievances older than any warrant.

The Underhouse Compacts

The **Underhouse Compacts** are the first major named civilization of the Kobolds. Among Kobolds a compact is a sworn bargain among the crews and underhouse lines that keep one underlayer alive: a mine's ventilation, a town's drains, a hold's service shafts, a ruin's foundations. Their founding date is not known; they grew from older underhouse lines and from vent-kin who survived the ash-furnace world. They carry two inheritances from it: the memory of once deciding whether a furnace could be fired at all, and a deep distrust of protection offered by stronger powers, which so often became a chain.

How it holds together. The crews of a compact 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 are local, but they honour one another's warnings, maps, and refusals, and a crew that breaks a compact's refusal is rarely hired again by any other. A compact wants no ownership of the mine or the drain. It wants a voice in how the underlayer is used, the right to refuse work that will kill its crews, and pay that matches the danger. Its strongest weapon is walking off together: when a compact calls a shaft or culvert unsafe, no member crew enters it, and the owners discover how much of their world rests on people they never counted.

How a household meets it. Belonging in an underhouse 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, which route can carry children, tools, or wounded people during a collapse. The best speaker in a surface bargain may not be the one trusted to read a failing tunnel. Kobold crews are the first into a flooding working and the last out, and they know every way the underworld kills: gas gathering in a dead pocket, props gnawed hollow by Brace-Gnawers, a seam that knocks back. Their sound codes, tapped on stone and pipe, carry a warning through a whole underhouse faster than a runner. The older fear of noise in the tunnels once had its own god, Sessik the Tongue-Taker, who faded once those codes made silence a skill; underhouses now honour the Last Chamber under a name of their own, at small shrines in route-houses, cisterns, and escape vaults, exactly the places Kobolds keep. And the crews find things: a crew clearing a drain in the Broken Marches 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.

Reach. In the deep world some Kobold lines are still bound by protection-debts their grandparents swore. The Compacts hide crews who escape, 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. 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. On the surface their quarrels are smaller and constant: blame after a collapse, pay for narrow repairs a hold will not admit to, ownership of hidden routes, and accusations of sabotage whenever a refusal costs someone money. They are strongest along the mine-edges of the Ironspine and the Stonewake Deeps, in the underlevels of mixed towns, and in the ruin underworks of the Broken Marches, and they are the only power in the Deeps that can stop the place without a weapon.

The Mending Orders

The **Mending Orders** are the first major named Wrought civilization, and the youngest civilization in this chapter. They hold no land and crown no king. They are a scattering of repair houses, sanctuary workshops, and sworn speakers who stand up for made persons before lords and elders, and who hide them, mend them, and sometimes fight for them. They began around 50 CR as sanctuary workshops that hid newly awakened Wrought in their walls and swore to who they were, against the Unmakers during The Awakening of the Wrought, and by about 200 CR had houses in most mixed towns of the Ironspine, the Stonewake Deeps, the Headwater Marches, and the Broken Marches.

How it holds together. The Orders' core belief is that Wrought repair is bodily care, not equipment maintenance. They do not stand over every

repair, and they do not decide whether every Wrought is still a person after damage: a Wrought is presumed to be the same self unless there is real proof of death or unmaking. Their houses do three things. They **save** damaged Wrought who need urgent care. They see that a major repair, refit, memory restoration, or chosen change is truly **consented to**. And they **swear**, before kin, neighbours, and gods, that a Wrought who has been mended, refitted, or remade is still the same person. They ask of each thing done to a Wrought what they would ask for a person of flesh: was it care, was it an emergency, was it chosen, or was it done to someone against their will? A Wrought who receives needed repair is being cared for; one who chooses refitting is choosing for their own body; one altered without consent is being harmed, however much more useful the work makes them.

How a life meets it. A Wrought person meets the Orders at the moments when repair and control are hardest to tell apart: when a workshop calls the new parts it fitted its own, a craft-house refuses service without a binding bargain, a war-captain calls a warframe his property, or a household calls the changing of a memory harmless upkeep. In friendly towns a repair house is as ordinary as a smithy, and Wrought and non-Wrought alike learn that being mended does not make a person a thing. In hostile places the houses work in secret, and a house may be burned when a lord wants its patients' parts. Every repair house keeps a back door, a hiding place in the walls, and a hammer by the bench: Unmaker circles still hunt in secret, sometimes openly, as bounty-takers hired to bring a runaway warframe back to its lord, who break it on the road before it gets there; parts-thieves strip the fallen in old mines and do not always wait for them to be dead. When a Wrought falls in an old mine or a failed working, a house's crew goes down after it, past the unwoken predecessor-frames that still labour in the dark and do not know a person from a load. The Wrought have no god of their own yet, and many distrust temples after the Unmakers; some of them and their artificers believe a Resonant is gathering among them now, out of shared mending and remembering. The worst curse one Wrought can lay on another is the Unmakers' word for the bench: *may you be corrected*.

Reach. Most towns accept the Wrought as people in word and unevenly in deed, and some first-awakened Wrought who lived through the hunts are still alive to say so.

The Far Side

Beyond the Glassbelt the far side of Caeldon has its own civilizations, old and settled, with no dealings with the cradle-web powers in the Medieval Era. Three hold the land and coast: the Windscar Pacts of the Orcs in the harsh interior, the Foldward Commons of the Halflings in the sheltered folds, and the Gaugeward Leagues of the Gnomes on the Tidelace Coasts. Each is a different answer to the same question, how to live with distance and scarcity, and they have fought, raided, and bargained with one another for a very long time, under terms the stronger side dictated and whose names their songs still carry.

The Windscar Pacts

The **Windscar Pacts** are the oldest named Orc civilization and the first great inland civilization of the far side, founded in The Founding of the Windscar Pacts (c. 180,000-c. 150,000 BR). They hold the Windscar Expanse as a sworn confederation of basin-edge strongholds, guarded caravan corridors, upland meeting grounds, and hard passage custom, and no settlement stands above the others. What holds them together is the escort: an armed company that can bring a caravan across country that kills the careless, and a name that dies if it fails. The clans' lineages, honour, and

dead are kept under Ushkar the Ancestor-Warden; the Expanse's scouring wind is Rakhal the Storm-Caller, who breaks whatever has gone stale.

How it holds together. Power in the Pacts belongs to whoever can bring people and goods alive across the shelves and answer a raid or a broken escort with spears, but known meeting grounds, sworn water and pasture, and an old custom of answering blood keep feuds from becoming wars. Their custom keeps two rights apart: **reserve-right**, the anchored side's, strongest in the Rimward Basins, where well-keepers and **answer bearers** hold the water and reply to arriving parties; and **treaty-right**, the exposed side's, strongest in the High Scars, held by route moots, escort captains, and the elders of the treaty-grounds (both are told in The Windscar). The two meet, often with hands on weapons, at the Oath Cistern, and a sworn escorted party sent off without one of its three owed answers is the charge a Rimward custodian least wants to face.

How a household meets it. For an ordinary Orc the Pacts are the **treaty-ground gathering**, the one time in the year most of the people they know stand in one place, where escort terms are sworn and the dead recited with the crossings they held, as Ushkar's rite of the Reciting of the Names requires; a kindred whose names are recited badly leaves with less honour than it came with.

The other moment 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 vengeance 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.

Reach. The Pacts' reach runs to the folds and the coast, and they bargain with both, spears in plain sight. An escort captain may refuse a rich party whose route would cross a kindred with an undeclared quarrel against her own. A Halfling fold market may give an Orc escort exchange and rest but not shelter, and an escort that presses for more is held to have broken passage. A Gnome harbour may admit an Orc party to its outer shore and not its inner quays, and an escort that knows the difference is trusted with the next crossing. An escort captain may be hired by a fold to hunt down a struck band that raided its cistern, and take her pay in water. And on the basin floors shard-hunters chip in gloves at the edge of the Hanging Vale's crystal, for the clear stone the strongholds buy. Bands formed around those whose names Ushkar struck live outside Pact custom, guide for whoever pays, raid the escort roads, and answer to no route moot.

The Foldward Commons

The **Foldward Commons** are the first major named Halfling civilization, founded in The Founding of the Foldward Commons (c. 170,000-c. 152,000 BR). They hold the Leeward Folds as a world of terraced orchards, cisterns cut into the rock, snug fold towns, and full storehouses, which is exactly what makes them worth raiding. Their oldest question is how to keep a good fold from being eaten, by its own success or by someone hungrier, and their answer is the hard-kept discipline of enough. The turning year of reserve and harvest is kept under Tamsel the Season-Weaver.

How it holds together. The Commons do not grow; they keep. Each fold rules itself through its households, terrace wards, cistern circles, and orchard leagues, and what joins them is the reserve and the oath to keep it: no house, town, or cistern district may consume what the whole fold needs to live, and the **measure-keepers** see that every count is said aloud and can be checked (the commons and its offices are told in The Leeward Folds). A full fold is a temptation, and Halflings know it: their Orc neighbours come down the Lee Wall with spears and hungry herds every dry season, most as escorts with goods to trade, some as struck bands that take what a thinly guarded cistern cannot keep.

How a household meets it. A Halfling household meets its civilization at the count. At the **autumn count** the reserve is counted aloud at the cistern hall and any household may challenge a figure; at the **commons** after it the fold decides which terraces rest; a marriage moves a share between two families' tallies, aloud; and a stranger is fed at a household door without question, while a party is told at the cistern hall what the fold can spare.

Reach. The Commons are the far side's proof that a people can grow rich and refuse to grow large. A fold may tell a Windscar escort it can spare water but no stores, and had better be able to show the count, because the escort has more spears than the fold. A cistern hall may refuse to open the long-cycle reserve in a dry year and be called a hoarder by the very households it is saving. A prosperous household may hold a lavish Festival of the Turn and be suspected of spending what the fold should keep. A Gnome trader at the Counted Lee may have a whole load refused because its window moved and the fold had already picked for the old one. A fold in a dry run may take on Orc sellswords for the season, and spend the season counting what the guards eat against what the raiders would have taken. And fold grandmothers say the folk of the abandoned Dry Folds 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 out with spades; most come home with a fright and a scorpion sting, and now and then one is found at the bottom of a cracked cistern. The oldest argument inside the Commons runs between prestige-minded households, who say a fold too narrow in good years loses trust, and reserve-minded keepers, who say abundance is exactly when a people becomes dangerous to itself. Fold elders still point to the terms their ancestors fought out with the Pacts and the Leagues, from the Measure Cistern Reckoning to the Leeward-Tidelace Timing Oath.

The Gaugeward Leagues

The **Gaugeward Leagues** are the oldest league-world of the Gnomes and their first major named civilization, founded in The Founding of the Gaugeward Leagues (c. 165,000-c. 146,000 BR). They hold the Tidelace Coasts as a chain of cliff harbours, beacon towers, breakwater towns, tide halls, and sounding houses strung along a coast of fog, reefs, and wreck-ground. Every true mark on that coast was set by a Gnome who went out in a small boat to find where the rocks were, and not all of them came back. Calibrated harbours and timed passage are kept under Quennet the Clockmaker, the Gnome god of measured moments.

How it holds together. The Leagues hold no wide lands. They hold harbour mouths, and with them the right to say who comes in. Each town rules itself, bound to the others by shared beacons and common approaches, and weight inside a town goes to whoever keeps the approaches honest: the **harbour wards** who receive traffic, the **tide halls** whose elders settle quarrels at slack water, the **sounding houses** and **gauge houses** whose readings every decision rests on, and the **beacon wardens** (the wards and halls are told in The Tidelace and the Soundchain Roads). Since The Sounding Gate Quarrel (c. 155,000-c. 149,000

BR) a sounding house's word no longer stands on its own say-so: a moved marker or a named hazard must be shown before the families who use it. Above all the Leagues fear the wrecker, who lights a false beacon on an empty headland and strips what the sea throws up, the living included, because a false sign strikes at the one thing Gnomes have built their lives on.

How a household meets it. A Gnome household answers for its readings. A child is counted in the craft when its first reading is declared at the tide hall's bench and nobody can prove it wrong; each sounding family cuts its own mark on the markers it sets; and every household of a beacon district owes its share of storm-season nights at the tower, each missed one entered against its name in the beacon ledger.

Reach. The Leagues decide who may enter much of the far side's coast, and when. A tide hall may close a cove for resurvey and leave the Human hamlet on it hungry until the soundings are done, with no say in when that is. Those hamlets live under harbour custom, entered in the nearest harbour's ledger and bound by the same beacons and closures as Gnome craft, but with no hand in making it; a hamlet usually speaks through whichever harbour ward buys its fish. A sounding family may refuse to move a marker it has kept for generations and hear the receiving wards' request as an accusation. A harbour may pay a bounty for the wreckers who show false lights on the outer reefs and hang them on the breakwater, and then find heads brought in from hamlets that never lit a false fire. A diving family may slip out at slack water to a drowned harbour for the old families' sunken plate, and keep the find quiet from the tide hall. Orc escorts, Foldward partners, and Thaluren run-watchers each know the Gaugeward habit of exactness well enough to accuse the coast of hiding behind it, and inside the Leagues the old quarrel runs between receiving wards who want harbours kept open and calibrators who want them kept right.

The Waters of Return

In the Tidebound Reaches the Thaluren live mostly at sea and come upriver to spawn, and the Kavari live along the rivers they come up. Four civilizations share these waters, and none of them holds ground the way a landward people does: three Thaluren orders bound together by one faith and divided by one wound, and a Kavari order that holds water by living in it, and by the spear.

The Returning Concord

The **Returning Concord** is the first major named civilization of the Thaluren: a people bound not by borders but by a journey. Every generation its runs leave the sea settlements of the Tidebound Reaches, cross current roads hunted by blackfins and sharks, and climb the rivers to the spawning sanctuaries where their lines began; and every generation the young who survive come back down to a sea that is waiting for them. Thaluren made that journey long before the Concord; the Concord is the oath that keeps it rightful. Its offices are also the sacred offices of the Way of Return, the Thaluren faith, so that worship and rule here are the same people doing the same work. 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.

How it holds together. Sworn offices hold the Concord together, not 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, guard them against blight, defilement, and egg-raiders, and have the last word when the beds are in danger.

- **Clutch-Watch Circles** say who is kin: which clutch a young one hatched from, and who has taken up the care of another's young.
- **Sea-Settlement Speakers** speak for the ocean settlements where most Thaluren live, and bargain with the upriver sanctuaries.
- **Redirection Assemblies** began as rare gatherings, called when a run is blocked, blighted, or no longer survivable, to decide whether a line may climb other waters without losing its right. They 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 and the mouths on the down-run. An escort has no office, only a name, and a name earned against a black-fin pod is sung in every settlement the run passes.

How a settlement meets it. Before a run, the settlement's Clutch-Watch Circle confirms who is going and in what place in the line, and the Sea-Settlement Speaker sends notice ahead to the mouths and upriver. When the young who survived reach the sea, the circle accepts each of them before any household takes them in: the clutch and the water first, the household after. An adult who takes up the care of another clutch's young declares it before the circle, and is counted in that clutch's duties as though born to them. A quarrel over sequence, which line ascends first in a narrow year, goes to the Run-Watchers, who answer from the memory of past seasons, a memory that tends to favour the larger lines.

The wound. The Concord's great crisis was The Closure of the First Nesting Confluence (c. 178,000–c. 162,000 BR), when egg blight struck the oldest named spawning water and forced it closed to ordinary return. The faith took its godless form in the same span, and two civilizations grew out of the closure inside the Concord, each claiming to be the faithful heir of the same older custom. A sea settlement may give up a season's ascent rather than climb without its line being accepted, even with raiders in the pools and sharks at the mouth; a Redirection Assembly may let a blocked run pass into an alternate channel and be accused by Blightward custodians of convenience; a run that presses into Kavari nursery-water unannounced may be met with barbed points in the gravel and start a blood-debt both peoples carry for generations; and a Gnome gauge house may measure an estuary's depth and timing and still have no say in whether a run is rightful.

The Blightward Keepers

The **Blightward Keepers** are a civilization within the Returning Concord, the answer to a holy water gone deadly: if the place where a people was born has turned to poison, someone must still stand guard over it, keep out the thieves, name its dead, and never let it be forgotten. Before the sworn watch, the blight was met with prayer for absolute stillness to Ulaun the Stilled Hour, a god who faded when containment became a prison; the Custodies' faithful containment is the living answer to her failure. Closure is not abandonment to them. A closed confluence remains a debt, and a damaged run remains Thaluren even when living clutches must climb elsewhere. They watch the water, keep the young away from it, warn of blight, and stand guard with spears where other Thaluren would rather not look: against pearl-poachers who dig in the closed reaches by night, against egg-takers, and against the curious who kneel at a still pool and do not rise. The Concord's Sanctuary Custodians alone say whether a water can recover; the Custodies keep the watch and the memory around that word.

A custodian's life. A Blightward custodian lives the Thaluren year the other way round, keeping a watch-station in fresh water below a closed or suspect water for a span of seasons, and names every clutch that fails to blight at the water where it failed, entering it in the Keepers' roll with its run-line, its season, and the condition of the water (the watch is told in The Tidebound Reaches and the Unrun Sea). When blight is suspected any-

where in the Reaches, custodians travel to it, partly to inspect and partly so that no failed clutch there goes unnamed, and a sea settlement that asks for a custodian at the first signs of wrongness may find custodians barring its own young from that water before the season is out. The still pools of the closed reaches hold silt like smoke in windless air, and the custodians' warning to their young is four words long, *never kneel, never drink*. The Custodies keep their heroes in the same roll, beside the failed clutches, and recite them in the same breath: the custodian who held the Naming Reach alone through a whole night against a band of pearl-thieves and was found at dawn still holding it, her spear fixed upright where she stood.

The Open-Run Concords

The **Open-Run Concords** are the Custodies' counterpart: risen from redirected return after the closure, they live within and around the Returning Concord and hold that sacred return must stay living enough to move when a fixed water would destroy the clutches it claims to protect. Not every water that keeps clutches alive is rightful to them. A run must be vouched for, remembered, tested, and taken back into the shared memory before it counts in full. Testing is dangerous work: 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 perils 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. The Concords keep the count of which clutches lived through redirection, which waters proved false, and which hurried passages grew trustworthy enough to become ordinary return. A people can betray an old water by forgetting it, they say, but it can also betray it by letting future life die in the name of fidelity.

A redirected family. A sea household whose run-line once climbed to the confluence now brings its clutches to an alternate water and gives its hatch water with its debt attached, sends one of its own each return season to name the old water at the Naming Reach, and waits each year on the count of its young at the Kelpshade, which accepts the water for another year or turns the count into a quarrel (the Second Channel's gathering is told in The Tidebound Reaches and the Unrun Sea). Most such households keep the names of every alternate water their run-line has used, so that if one fails they can show the circle every water the line has passed through rightfully. What a redirected family fears is a water nobody knows: a river that runs low in a dry year and strands a run in the pools for the egg-takers, a sanctuary whose blight shows only after the eggs are laid, banks held by Kavari who meet an unannounced run with spears in the shallows, and, at the far mouths, Gnome boats whose crews have learned that a run resting in a strange estuary is easy to net.

The Bankright Circles

Upriver live the Kavari, who never leave their rivers, and the **Bankright Circles** are their first major named civilization, standing together around 190,000-160,000 BR out of the bank councils, pool-kin circles, nursery keepers, and seasonal gatherings of many linked tributaries rather than from any ruler or capital. They are strongest on the middle rivers and tributaries of the Tidebound Reaches, where Kavari homes and nurseries lie on the same water other peoples want to pass through. The Circles hold the waters they live in, and nothing else. 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. **Bank-right** is not ownership. 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.

How a household meets it. Most days the Circles are quiet and local. **Bank councils** settle access, repair, shelter, and quarrels between neighbours, and the oldest pool-kin usually get their way. **Channel stewards** keep the water flowing without pretending a river can be held to one bed. An outsider can earn a place by long care, above all by protecting the young. Their enemies are older than any outside run: egg-takers lie in the weed and raid the beds, and the households' hunters chase them through the side channels with barbed spears. When the young are threatened, the Circles stop being quiet. **Nursery keepers** and bank councils can close a water to passage and trade, and every Kavari on the bank stands behind the closure with nets, barbs, and numbers. 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.

Reach. When blocked Thaluren runs first pressed into Kavari waters, nursery keepers met them with barbed spears, and The Gravel Oath Accord (c. 153,000-c. 148,000 BR) ended in the Twofold Waters rather than a Thaluren victory or a Kavari wall (see Peoples of the Water (FND 243)). The Circles treat it as a bargain struck under spears and never finished, in which every emergency let through risks becoming an expectation. A Kavari bank council may close active nursery-water to any run, even one the Open-Run Concords have accepted, and no Thaluren order has the strength on the banks to force a way past it.

Tensions

- **Early presentation.** A declining Crownbough house presents an heir its tender has called not ready, because it cannot survive another court season with no one to show.
- **The knocking door.** A basin merchant house has hired a sellsword company to open a sealed door in an abandoned Ironspine hold, behind which the knocking has never stopped. The hold that sealed it says whatever is behind it is still its own and still shut, and has sent wardens to the door, and the sellswords camp below the gate to see who blinks first.
- **The dropped round.** A Stonewake archive-custodian finds that a seal's inspection round was struck from its record generations ago, yet the seal carries fresh marks. Someone has been cutting them without entering them.
- **The outlaw road.** A band left lordless by the last feud holds a stretch of basin road through the woods and takes one cart in ten. Two lords each say the stretch is the other's to clear, and neither will pay the sellswords first.
- **A missed night.** A Gaugeward beacon failed in a storm and a craft was lost. The ledger puts that night against one family's name, and the family says the night was another's.
- **The answer that will not close.** A Windscar kindred declares an answer for a broken escort. The other side says the escort was properly redirected, so there was no wrong; the elders split, and both kindreds arrive at the next gathering with more spears than they need.
- **A name for a hatched clutch.** A clutch the Blightward custodians named as failed in a suspect water turns out to have hatched late and in part. Its young carry a name from the Keepers' roll, and their Clutch-Watch Circle must decide whether that name is a grief, a mistake, or a lineage.

CHAPTER 5

The Gods of the Medieval Era

Every god at this shrine was born somewhere, out of something. Ask where, and out of what, before you ask it for anything.

— Sayings of the Crossing Shrines

The gods of the medieval world can almost all be found at the place that made them. Anvelle belongs to the basin fields, Serovan to the Serath, Kerrund to the hold gates, Maris to the Tidelace quays, Ushkar to the treaty-grounds of the Windscar; Ennor, born of no single grief, stands at the graves of most of the cradle-web. Each was born out of something: a famine, a siege, a decade of storms, a grievance over tolls, a frontier full of children who belonged to two peoples. Each has a face, a temper, and a want, and many have a trouble that is wearing them down. And each has done things that people still tell of at the fire: a river that rose in the night and took an army's camp, horses and all; an orchard that blossomed in the snow over a besieging band; a liar's face turning in the light of a lantern that gives no light. Every such tale is the god doing what it can do, and paying what it costs. How any god is made, and how one fades, is told in Stewards and Resonants (FND 85); how their worshippers keep them, at shrines and festivals and in the four organized faiths, is told in the next chapter, Faith in Practice. This chapter gives the gods themselves, Prime by Prime.

None of these gods asked to be born, and few of them are content. Iskel is burdened by every oath bent in his keeping; Varn feels the fear of everyone he hides; Abrel fears that if the frontier stops questioning, they will fade. A god is a person shaped by a need, and the need does not go away when the god arrives. Nor are the gods gentle because they are worshipped. Serovan blesses the war-barges that go downriver against a village that will not pay, and the god of the sworn word breaks the bones of those who break an oath sworn on them. Every power here has its pilgrims and the bandits who wait for them, its relics and the thieves who come for them, and its terrors.

Gods of Aion

Quennet the Clockmaker was born of the Gnome harbours of the Tidelace Coasts, where inlets and fog belts can be entered only inside narrow windows, and pilots begged for a breath more before a window closed. He appears as a gaunt, stooped, weary Gnome in a long coat of many pockets, each

AT A GLANCE

Everywhere	Ennor the Grave-Watcher, at the graves of most cradle-web peoples under names of their own.
The corridor	Anvelle, Serovan, Iskel, Annoth, and Ostrin, the core of the Sworn Accord.
Holds and courts	Kerrund, the Measured Seal, and the Last Chamber of the Held Covenant; Saerith the Mirror-King of the Crownbough Courts.
The far side	Maris and Quennet on the coast, Tamsel in the folds, Ushkar and Rakhal on the Windscar.
Roads and margins	Abrel at the Headwater crossings, Varn and Tavi in the ruin-belts, Corrow on the kindred circuits, Ghessa at the Ogre fires.
The year	The Medieval Era, c. 1,350 CR.

bulging with ticking mechanisms, his milky eyes seeing only the future; his brass pocket watch ticks backwards, and where he passes a harbour bell is heard a second after it swings. He is fading, because the harbours have learned to name who bears a lost moment and make them pay, instead of praying for more. The Grey Crews that row in the Long Grey are said to be the crews he stretched a moment for and could not save; they hail living boats a beat late, as his bells ring, and pilots answer no hail that comes after its sound. The wreckers of the outer chains, the tale goes, keep a stolen gauge-house timepiece in their huts and pray at it for a window to close early, and the harbour wards who raid such huts burn the timepieces on the quay.

Tamsel the Season-Weaver keeps the turning year in the Halfling folds, appearing young and green in spring, sun-brown and gold in summer, old and crimson in autumn, pale and frosted in winter, and strongest at the solstices and equinoxes. The folds tell of a siege winter when hill raiders camped below a terrace wall to starve it out, and the orchard above them blossomed overnight in the snow and set fruit within the week. The raiders took it for a curse and fled. The fold paid for that spring with three lean years, and still hangs a frost-blackened apple over its gate on the anniversary; reserve-keepers say *ask for the season you can eat*.

Gods of Aqua

Maris of the Tides was born in a decade of storms on the Tidelace Coasts, from the prayers of coastal Humans and Gnome harbour towns who did not want the sea to stop, only to be calmed and guided through it. Because both peoples prayed to the same power on the same coast, she is one god. She is tall, with skin of oyster-shell sheen and hair of living kelp that moves as if underwater even on dry land, and her eyes go from turquoise to storm-grey with her mood; her robes of wet silk never dry. The oldest passage story tells of a raider fleet that came on the coast in the last year of the storms, and of the single wave that rose in a flat calm and took the raiders' ships and no other; harbour children play it on the beach with toy boats, one child as the wave. Wreckers who light false beacons on her headlands are said to drown in their beds, found at dawn with salt water in their mouths and dry blankets round them, and pilgrims come down the coast roads with their sick on litters to the springs said to be her tears.

Serovan the River-King is the broad, mud-skinned, reed-haired god of the Serath, more foreman than monarch, barefoot and dripping, with a driftwood staff topped by a glowing river-stone said to be the river's heart. His cult rose as the river towns took the Reedfolk rivers and the flood-keepers' knowledge with them, and the Reedfolk do not deny he is real. They deny the rivers are

his. Serathic towns boast of the night an upriver army camped on the water-meadows to besiege them and the river came out of its banks and took the camp; the villages downstream tell the same tale as the year their own fields drowned with the army, because his flood cannot be steered once loosed. Before the towns' war-barges go downriver against a village that will not pay, they are blessed at his landing with river water poured over the bows, and the Reedfolk who have watched them come say the river has never once turned against them. As the spring rise falls, the River-Given walk up the landings, and ferry-keepers say Serovan gives back every body he is owed rites for.

Gods of Ignis

Ghessa the Hearth-Mother is the gentlest of Ignis's gods. She condensed during the Long Hunger, the upland famine of c. 195,000–c. 160,000 BR, among Ogre households that bound their strength to feeding the weak first; her custom is hearth-weight, that strength must be tied to care. She is a broad Ogre woman with hair of soft flame and eyes like embers, smelling of woodsmoke and camp bread, carrying an iron lantern whose flame never flickers. She is fading wherever Ogre bands work far from their dependents and eat from an employer's stores, because the fire they gather around is no longer their own. Ogre camps tell the frontier's raider tales at her fire from the inside, as warnings: a band that has eaten before its weak cannot keep her flame lit, however much wood it burns, and the camps' proudest tales are of hearth-houses that held a broken village gate with their own bodies against such a band rather than become one. The carrier of the passed flame goes alone through the winter dark, and wolves follow the light.

Gods of Imago

Abrel the Changeling is the god of people between peoples on the Headwater frontier: foster children, hold apprentices, mixed households. Abrel rose in the Headwater foothills from their longing, and they did not pray to be made wholly one thing, nor to be left wholly outside; they prayed for clarity. To a foster child Abrel appears as the elder of the household the child most wants to be claimed by; to a Dwarven custodian, stern and patient; to a Goblin side-ford keeper, quick and half-hidden. Look closely, and the face is a shifting mosaic of features from more than one people, with eyes that reflect the viewer slightly better than they are, and a voice in more than one tongue asking "Whose are you?" Headwater tellers speak of a fosterling who wore Abrel's mask into a raiders' camp as one of their own, sat at their fire for three nights, and opened the stockade gate at dawn; she never again answered to the name she had been given. The guides who take travellers over the raided passes carry a plain wooden mask in their packs for the same reason. Downriver zealots who hold Abrel too unsettled to enter have more than once crossed into the Headwater to break the god's shrines, and a Headwater feud song names every downriver chapel that burned in return.

Saerith the Mirror-King is the High Elf god of the Crownbough Courts, born of the houses' pride and fear of being found less than they claimed: silver-skinned, gold-haired, with obsidian eyes that show nothing, carrying a shield in which each viewer sees the self they wish they were. His standard travels further than his worship, and its cost is despair and dangerous rites of self-perfection. In old and abandoned halls hang mirrors that show the viewer a perfect version of themselves, said to be his tears. Houses pay outsiders to carry them out of rivals' dead halls; the hirelings go in blindfolded and roped together, and the one who peeks is the one they leave behind, still gazing.

Gods of Lux

One god of Lux dominates the era. **Ostrin the Lantern-Bearer** was born of the grievance of the Serathic trade towns, where tolls were taken and the upkeep never came, and the wronged who brought their grievance to the lord's hall found the lord siding with himself and his friends; his name is called as far upriver as Greyford. He is a tall, gaunt figure in a mendicant's frayed white robes, blind, with milky eyes, and around his neck hangs an iron lantern that gives no visible light but shows those who look into it their own secrets and the lies of others. Where he walks, shadows do not flee but thin, and the noise of the market fades into a ringing silence. His voice is a bell in an empty hall, and he speaks only in statements: "You lied." "The money is behind the wall." In some Serath towns an accused thief may ask to face the lantern instead of the rope, and townsfolk swear they have seen the colourless light turn on a liar's face. His zealots break into oath-chests by night to read sealed rolls aloud from the oath-house steps at dawn; most of them hang for it. He is increasingly alone, because the innocent fear his light as well as the guilty, and he has begun to doubt whether total truth is a kindness.

Gods of Memoria

Annoth the Keeper of Scrolls is the god of the scribes and record-houses of the Human corridor: a small, elderly woman with skin like parchment covered in faded script, eyes of liquid ink, and hair of white ribbons each written with a single word in a different tongue. She speaks in footnotes and asides, and carries a codex that writes itself. Somewhere in the corridor a record-house is always burning, and in every fire she must choose which rolls to save. Every record-house hangs a scorched satchel over its door for the scribe who carried a town's rolls out through a burning gate on her back while the raiders were still in the streets, and the hidden second copies her scribes keep are a treasure in their own right: a family robbed of its land by a burned deed will hunt for years for the copy in a chapel wall or a buried jar, and the lord who profited hunts it as hard.

Ushkar the Ancestor-Warden is the Orc god of lineage and the dead on the Windscar, a figure of wind-scoured granite whose face shifts between a young escort, an old treaty-keeper, and a weeping mother, and who carries on his back the Stele of Names, whose names glow as he passes and fade when they are forgotten. Orc fathers tell of the escort who tried to strike his own name from the Stele to escape his family's broken oath, and end it with a saying: *you can outrun the raiders, not the name*. To rob one of his fading cairns for its grave-goods is to be struck from every stele on the Windscar. A kindred whose honoured dead were shamed may ride out to take the debt back in blood, with Ushkar's name cried at the start of the ride, and the escort roads empty while it is out.

Gods of Terra

Anvelle the Harvest-Mother is the farmers' god of the Confluence Basins, born there from basin farmers' dependence on soil and season: a tall, sturdy woman with skin of dark loam and hair of ripening wheat and wildflowers that bloom and wither in a breath, carrying a bronze sickle that glows when the harvest is near. The oldest fields there are said to grow her signs, crops in impossible patterns that form faces and symbols, and pilgrims walk to them at harvest with seed in their pockets, on roads the bandits know. Basin villages tell of the levy-riders who came for a widow's seed-corn and rode into her field, and of the earth that thickened under them until the horses stood sunk to the chest and could go neither on nor back; ploughs in that field still turn up bridle-iron. She is struggling against the corridor powers' demand for more basin grain than the soil can give, and has begun to send harder signs: crops withering overnight, roots that break ploughs.

Kerrund the Stone-Warden was born at a besieged Dwarven gate during the early deep wars between Dark Elves and Dwarves, c. 330,000–c. 305,000 BR, a gate attacked again and again for longer than one generation. Its keepers prayed for walls that cannot be breached and were willing to become as hard as the rock, and so is he: granite-skinned, moss in his crevices, eyes of obsidian, speaking in single words. "Hold." "Stand." "This is the line." An oath sealed under him is sworn on the swearer's own bones, and the holds know what a broken one looks like: the traitor who opened a postern to raiders and was found at dawn folded in on himself like a dropped sack. On the night before a raid an Ironspine gate-warden sits alone with both hands on the gate, and wardens who came through say the stone grew warm under their palms by dawn.

Two Dwarven gods of the deep are crisis-born and severe. The **Last Chamber**, root-bound stone with a vault for a torso and a lamp burning behind its ribs, condensed during the Heartwell Stakings, c. 322,000–c. 316,000 BR, where Dark Elf refuge-memory and Dwarven sealing-memory ground against each other. It is one of the clearest cases of a worshipped god growing directly out of the wounds of the old Steward crisis, and it is honoured as the question *can this still bear?* The deep laments tell of a gallery under a breaking flood and a single chamber that stayed dry until the last child was passed up the shaft, and of keepers who opened their refuge door to the fleeing with a war-band coming down the gallery, and held it with their own bodies. The **Measured Seal**, black ironstone and warded lintels, one arm a gate-leaf, asks *must this close?*, and its worship demands that every closure be answered for. Custodians keep a listening-watch at its oldest seals, an ear to the stone and a tally-stick to mark every knock, and seal-breakers learn to read its triple-mark shrines: a mark cut deep means a plague gallery, a shallow one a sealed store, and the custodians cut false marks over the richest closures to turn the treasure-hunters away. Both stand with Kerrund among the three great gods of the Held Covenant, whose questions are told in Faith in Practice.

Gods of Umbra

Ennor the Grave-Watcher was born of no single grief. He condensed slowly, over ages of burial and mourning, out of the funerary custom of many peoples at once, and most cradle-web peoples honour him at their graves under names of their own, which feed one god because those peoples have long lived and died alongside one another. He is tall and slender in a hooded cloak woven from twilight, with two points of pale silver light where his eyes should be and skin marked with faint silver scars like writing in many scripts, and mourners of every people hear him in their own tongue: "Rest now." "You are remembered." He has no church. Some of his devoted take to the roads instead, following crows and vultures to where bandits dumped a traveller and cutting down the hanged at crossroads to give the rites where the body lies; the outlaw who killed one is said to walk still, unable to die. Villages beside the old barrows pay a grave-warden to sit out the long nights with a lantern and a dog, and the wardens' warning is a single line: *dig for gold, dig your own grave*. He is overwhelmed, not by any catastrophe but by the ordinary dead of a whole cradle of peoples, each expecting something different at the threshold.

Varn the Shadow-Stalker is the god of the hidden in the Broken Marches, born in its culverts and ruined storeworks from the prayers of the hidden: Goblins without a warrant, fugitive Wrought, debtors, deserters, anyone power was hunting. He is living shadow in a cloak of night-silk, who speaks in single urgent words, "Hide." "Wait." "They are coming", and strikes at hunters who come too close. Hunters swear they have watched a pack run full cry to a culvert mouth and stop dead, whining, at a scent that ended in the air, and Marches hunt-masters now bring a

priest of some brighter god on a big bounty. Bounty-takers drinking in the Marches towns raise a cup *to the one who came back*, and nobody at the table ever names him.

Umbra's most recent faded god is young. The **Echo-Mother** was born c. 1,200 CR from the prayer of the Hushvale survivors not to be found, as they made the rite of concealment that still hides their vale; she was twilight-skinned and featureless, and she spoke without words. She taught them to forget, and they forgot her. In the first year, the tale goes, whole households stepped into her silence and were never found again, by the engine or by anyone, and Hushvale funerals are still held in whispers, because grief called loudly draws the vale's hungry remnants out of the fog. The vale she hid is described in Sealed and Silent Places.

Gods of Verba

Iskel the Scribe of the Silent was born from the corridor's distrust of the sworn word: the more depended on oaths, the more they were broken, and the stronger party broke them most safely. The people did not pray for a stronger lord; they prayed for a word that holds. He keeps oaths, sworn words, and sealed bargains in the oath-houses: a small, elderly, ink-stained man in grey wool, with eyes of black ink that reveal the true intent of those who meet them, carrying a sealed ledger with no end. He does not keep the records of what was done; that is Annoth's. He keeps the oath itself, and whatever was sworn to stay silent, which sets him against Ostrin in the same oath-houses, and oath-breakers are cursed in his name from the oath-house steps.

Tavi the Bard of the Broken is the Goblin god of a history no lord would read: small, wiry, ink-tattooed, in a cloak with a patch for every warren and seam the songs remember, carrying a lute of bone and silver whose strings hum. He grew verse by verse over a very long span, from the torn warrants and lost seams that Goblins kept in song when the rolls left them out. Goblins tell of a lord who forbade a warren to sing in a ruin he had declared waste ground, and of Tavi singing there anyway, so softly that the lord heard nothing, until by morning every Goblin within a day's walk knew the words. A Goblin caught singing the torn warrants in a corridor market can lose his tongue for it, and the warrens honour the tongueless as the bravest of his singers, who teach the songs on by fingers and drum.

Gods of Zephyr

Corrow the Gale-Runner is the wind at the backs of the Edgeway Kindreds on their circuits between ruin zones, born there from the need to keep going and grown sharper since lords' men began moving camps on: young, wiry, leather-skinned, with a silver-white mane like a banner in a gale and a cord at his ankle strung with chips of stone, each cut with a waymark someone once scraped from a ruin. His voice gives only fragments and directions, "Go." "Water ahead", and he has not rested in living memory. Kindred tellers say the dust that once rose behind a camp on the Glass-belt edge hid it from a war-band riding down on it, and that the raiders followed the wind instead, into the ruin zone the camp had skirted; and they say the reeve who scraped a whole causeway's marks in a summer was found the next spring at the bottom of a ruin zone he had always known to skirt, his own map in his hand.

Rakhal the Storm-Caller is the Orc god of the scouring wind of the Windscar, which breaks what has gone stale: towering, storm-purple, crackling with lightning, shouting "Rise!" and "Break!" His following is growing as the Pact world settles, and he is growing more volatile with it. His young zealots ride out in the brown wall of a dust storm, faces wrapped, and fall on a guarded reserve while its keepers can see no further than their own hands; they call it the god's scouring, and the reserve-holders hang the raiders they catch from the reserve's own gate-post.

Tensions

- **Walls or breath.** Kerrund and Anvelle meet in the Headwater Marches, where Human fields and Dwarven works share the same valleys. They respect each other and clash: Kerrund wants walls, roads, and fortified ground; Anvelle wants the land left to breathe.
- **Flood or crop.** Serovan and Anvelle are close allies, his river giving the water and her fields the soil, but Serovan would flood a field to renew it, and Anvelle would protect the standing crop from drowning.
- **Truth at its own pace.** Where corridor trade reaches the Headwater frontier, Abrel's and Ostrin's cults meet. Abrel helps people become their true selves and Ostrin reveals them, and Abrel often pleads with him to be gentler and let people find the truth at their own pace.
- **Prayers for open roads.** Some Dwarves drawn outward by corridor trade now pray for open roads rather than held gates. The Held Covenant has no question for an open road. Custodians disagree whether such a prayer answers Kerrund or refuses him, and some fear it is being heard by a god outside the Covenant.
- **One guide or two.** The Ordered Bough honours its guide of the returning dead under an Elven name, and the Sworn Accord enters a god of the dead as Ennor. Basin-edge households, whose mixed funerals divide the work between grove return and Human mourning, take them for one god. Many tenders in the courts do not, because one god at both graves would make Human mourning a rite of the same passage as Elven return.
- **A toll told too freely.** A pilot who brought a craft through a storm told the story at Maris's shrine, as her toll requires, and in the story called on her aloud while crossing a Thaluren return channel inside a closed window. The pilots hear thanksgiving. The run-watchers hear a god called on over the ascent, and want the circle to say so.
- **Harbours at blood-feud.** Two Tidelace harbour towns are at blood-feud over fishing grounds, each praying to Maris for the other's ruin, their boats ramming each other's nets at sea. She is trying to calm the quarrel before it becomes a burning of harbours.

CHAPTER 6

Faith in Practice

Sworn where the god can hear it,
witnessed where the town can see it,
written where the river cannot reach it,
and kept, as long as we are kept.

— the closing words of the marriage form, *The Book of Accorded Forms*

Most people on medieval Caeldon would not say they practise a religion. They light the fire the proper way, cut the first stalk for the right god, leave water running where it runs, return or mourn or seal their dead as their parents did, and, if they work a furnace in the old crafts, never say a certain name near it. That is simply how things are done. Above it, nearly every community keeps its own gods of a river, a mine, a hearth, or a road, honoured at shrines rather than temples, and for many peoples that is the whole of religion, and in no way a lesser one. Only in the most crowded, most record-keeping lands does devotion harden into doctrine, clergy, and temple, and there are four such faiths in the medieval world. The gods themselves are real, and close, and made: born where enough people need or fear the same thing, fed by worship, and able to fade when the worship stops. Faith is not quiet for it. Shrines are burned when a god is struck, oaths are tested with hot iron and the river, pilgrims walk roads that bandits watch, thieves come for the silver in the oath-chests and the steel inside sacred trees, and heretics are cast out of their runs. The Primes behind everything are honoured through alignment rather than prayer, and the rare beings who appear at binding oaths and dangerous deaths are called saints, heralds, judges, or gate-keepers by people who seldom understand what they are. This chapter is about what all of that looks like on an ordinary day, and on the days that are not.

Three Floors of Belief

Medieval religion is layered, and the layers are best pictured as the floors of a house. Everyone lives on the ground floor. Most people also use the floor above it. Only a few societies have built a third.

The ground floor is **alignment custom**: ordinary life lived in alignment with the Primes through seasonal rites, planting and harvest observance, fire-lighting customs, oath forms, burial practice, and taboos whose breaking counts as sacrilege. Nobody prays to a Prime. The Primes are not persons and do not answer; they are the

AT A GLANCE

Everyone	Alignment custom: seasonal rites, fire-lighting, oath forms, burial practice, taboo.
Most communities	Local cults of place, craft, people, or danger, kept at shrines by keepers.
Organized faiths	The Sworn Accord, the Held Covenant, the Ordered Bough, the Way of Return.
Clergy	Witnesses, custodians, and tenders; the Way's keepers are the Returning Concord's own offices.
Feared	The Dark Entities, kept off by protective rites, charms, and warning stories.

currents that run through everything, and a life in keeping with them is simply a life done properly. Alignment custom varies more by land and way of life than by people, so that a Human hamlet on the Tidelace has more in common with its Gnome harbour than with a basin village of its own kind.

The second floor is the **local cult**. Nearly every community keeps devotion to particular gods tied to a place, a craft, a people, or a danger: a river's god, a mine's guardian, a hearth power, a road's protector. Local cults are many, embodied, and bound to place. They have shrines and keepers rather than churches and clergy, and a household may honour several without contradiction. Small and middling peoples keep religion this way because their gods are close, particular, and near enough to answer.

The third floor is **organized religion**: shared doctrine, trained clergy, temples, pilgrimage, and a faith that claims to speak for more than one place. It needs crowded lands, lasting records, and houses able to train and keep a clergy, and on medieval Caeldon only four civilizations have built it: the Human corridor world of the Confluence Marches and the Serathic League, the Dwarven holds of the Ironspine and Stonewake, the High Elf Crownbough Courts, and the Thaluren of the Returning Concord. Organized religion never replaces the floors below it. It absorbs, tolerates, or suppresses local cults, usually with a lord's armed men behind it when it suppresses: a shrine burned, a keeper hanged, a sacred grove felled for timber. Most religious violence in the medieval world happens at exactly that edge, and the hill-shrines that survived a temple's zeal are remembered for the blood it cost to keep them.

Running through all three floors are two more threads. One is the **steward traditions**: stories of the rare beings who appear when an oath binds past breaking, when a death is dangerous, or when one of the world's laws is fraying, called saints, heralds, judges, watchers, or gate-keepers. They are Stewards, the great offices of the Primes, and they are neither sustained nor much moved by worship, which is why the stories about them are so various and the prayers to them so seldom answered. The other is **dark fear**: protective rites, taboo, and the dread of the Dark Entities. Organized faiths write that fear into doctrine and hunt for its signs; local cults keep it as warning stories and charms.

What a god is

Writers need one fact above all others about Caeldon's gods: they are made by their worshippers. When enough people focus belief, fear, devotion, or desperation on something that lies within a Prime's reach, a river's moods, a gate's holding, a debt that will not close, the Prime's current gathers there, as light gathers under a lens, and a god is born: self-aware, with a face, a name, and a temper shaped by the people who called it. A god's power rests on how deeply its worshippers feel and how many of them there are, and fear feeds a god as well as love does. Without worship a god fades: its powers grow erratic, its memory slips, it

forgets its own name, and at last what it was returns to the Prime it came from. The gods know this, and some of them are afraid of it. Their worshippers do not: each faith tells its own story of what its gods are and where they came from, and only a few mystics guess at the truth.

That is why medieval gods have histories as particular as any people's. Each was born somewhere, out of something, and most of them can be dated to a crisis, a long need, or a place where people kept asking the same thing.

Alignment Custom

The ground floor of every faith is mostly invisible to the people who keep it, and mostly obvious to a stranger.

In the **Elderweald** the Wood Elves take only fallen wood, walk paths open, leave water where it runs, name a child only when it has emerged, and return their dead to the living forest. They keep the old grove reverence from which the High Elf faith grew, but as custom, with ritual keepers who hold memory and rites and are not clergy. In the **Briarreach** the Thornbound keep the same reverence harder, and return their dead in the circle's own ground, never in any shared or open grove. A visitor who cuts a living tree, turns a stream aside, or sets a fire in the wrong place has committed not a small offence but a wound to the forest, and the grove's hunters will follow him for it.

In the **Leeward Folds** there is no Halfling church and no clergy; belief is household and commons custom, the alignment custom of bounded plenty, and its first commandment is never to spend the reserve on plenty. On the **Tidelace Coasts** an unkept beacon or a falsely read mark is close to sacrilege, and a wrecker's false light the worst sin the coast knows. On the **Windscar**, escort custom is its own alignment custom of held passage and answered betrayal, so that breaking an escort is felt as a wrong done to the world as well as to the party. Troll houses keep **body-law**, in which wounds and scars are sacred record and the question of which injuries may close is a matter of rite as well as care. The Salvage Peoples write their alignment custom on the stones: a ruin left no more dangerous than it was found is a ruin honoured.

Some customs survive long after anyone remembers what they were for. In the remnant furnace crafts that inherited fragments of ash-furnace technique, saying the name *Ozhar* near a furnace is taboo; most who keep the rule know only that it belongs to the Pyre-King, and many not even that. Salvagers in the Glassbelt keep the same rule over the dead furnaces, and add a second: do not carry ash or slag out. Upland custom around the Headwater Marches and the outer Ironspine warns against digging too deep beneath the high peaks, lest the Mountain-Father wake: he would not be angry, the warning goes, but he would be confused, and a confused mountain can bury a valley with one stumble. Miners in those uplands leave the deepest seams alone.

The commonest custom of all is the one at the grave. Every people on Caeldon buries, burns, returns, or otherwise finishes its dead, and 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. The rites differ more than anything else people do, and where they are not kept the dead do not rest. That difference is where the next floor begins.

The Local Cults

The gods themselves, where each was born and what it looks like and wants, are portrayed in The Gods of the Medieval Era. Here they are met where their worshippers meet them.

Shrines, fires, and songs

A local cult is a practice, not a doctrine, and it is best described by what people do.

- **The passed flame.** An Ogre camp keeps **Ghessa the Hearth-Mother** at its fire. In deep winter many camps light a single flame and carry it from fire to fire, so that no household under the camp's burden is left in the dark; while the flame is kept alive, it is said, the Hearth-Mother keeps the camp another year. Ogre religion has no clergy. The burden houses keep its customs beside the camp's work counts.
- **Shuttered lamps.** Those who have been hidden leave small lamps in the ruins for Varn, shuttered so no hunter can see them. Anyone praying to Varn is, almost by definition, someone a lord wants found: an outlaw in the reedbeds, a runaway, a poacher, or a thief.
- **The torn warrants sung.** At Iron Compact gatherings, after the living warrants are read, the torn ones are sung: seams, warrens, and duties no lord still honours. The songs belong to **Tavi the Bard of the Broken**, and they are often sung in places only Varn's worshippers can find; a Goblin caught singing them in a corridor market can lose his tongue.
- **A lantern at the road out.** At kindred gathering-markets, kindreds setting out leave a lit lantern at the edge of the site, facing the road out, for Corrow. At waymarks along the circuits they stack the stones from which their marks were scraped, as offerings, and cut the marks again nearby.
- **The toll of story.** In Gaugeward harbours a pilot back from a hard passage through fog or a hard approach speaks the account aloud at Maris's shrine, paying her toll of story, and Orc escorts who shared the crossing sometimes stand to listen. Once a year the coast offers flowers, shells, and stories to the sea at the Festival of the Tides. Several springs along the coast are said to be her tears.
- **The Reciting of the Names.** When Orc kindreds gather at the treaty-grounds they recite the names of their ancestors and tell the crossings they held, under **Ushkar the Ancestor-Warden**, who keeps the names of those who held passage and strikes the names of those who broke it. The oldest cairns of the High Scars, their names worn past reading, are called his tears.
- **The First Gale.** As the windy season rises, Orc camps light fires on high ground and dance in the wind for **Rakhal the Storm-Caller**, who breaks whatever has gone stale. Lone thorns struck by lightning along the escarpment routes, and not burned, are taken as his marks. Dust storms off the Rimward pans are his too.
- **The Festival of the Turn.** In the Leeward Folds **Tamsel the Season-Weaver** keeps the turning year: spring planting rites, the thanks of autumn storing, and a festival said to bring a good harvest if it is kept with true joy. Children are told the tale of the Long Summer, when Tamsel held the summer for a year and the winter after it emptied a fold to its last measure.
- **The stone on the wall.** Once a year in the holds each household lays a single stone on its hold's walls at the Festival of the First Stone, for Kerrund; laid with true intent, it is said, the stone strengthens the wall another year.
- **Unnamed water.** Kavari households keep small shrines to the unnamed powers of their own pools and nursery reaches, and bury their dead along their burial reaches. No great god speaks for Kavari water, and Kavari custom prefers it so.
- **Unasked.** The Mountain-Father, **Haurûm**, is honoured by title alone. Dwarves ask him nothing and leave his colossal remains untouched; the Giants, who alone still know his name, keep his sleep; and the Troll houses swear their

crossing-oaths under his title on both sides of the Glassbelt, which makes them one of the few peoples who still swear by a sleeping god.

Each of these cults has its stories, and the stories do work. The basin's tale of the Starving Winter, when the people refused to rest the land and Anvelle withdrew her blessing, is told more often wherever levies rise. The Serath's tale of the Dry Year, when a town built a dam without Serovan's leave and its elders had to walk into the empty riverbed to beg, is told whenever a town talks about building one. The Windscar's tale of the Still Well, when Rakhal tore down a camp that would not leave a souring well, is told against any stronghold that seems to keep its reserve past its purpose.

One god, many names

When different peoples worship the same power in the same place and know one another, their devotion feeds one god, who answers to every name. Humans call the Headwater god of the in-between Abrel, frontier Dwarves call it Durrask, and Goblins of the mixed crossings Ziv, and the same god answers all three; in some old frontier shrines there are mirrors said to show a different face at every look. Ennor the Grave-Watcher has a Human name and many others, because the dead of the cradle-web have long been buried side by side at borders and crossings; mourners of different peoples sharing a burial ground sometimes discover that they have been calling on the same watcher by different names, and at a mixed graveside it is often the one thing they agree on. In the Stonewake Deeps Kobold underhouses honour the Last Chamber under a name of their own at the same small shrines the Dwarves use, so that two peoples pray in one place to one god without sharing a word for it.

Where similar worship arises separately, among peoples who never meet, it condenses into separate gods, who may later be mistaken for one another. Far-side peoples finish their dead under gods of their own: Orcs keep theirs under Ushkar, and Ennor is known beyond the Glassbelt only where the road peoples of the one crossing carried him.

Gods that faded

The medieval world is full of gods that are no longer there, and their absence is part of its religion.

Haggun the Wall-Breaker, god of the Ogre chain-camps, faded once the Hearth-Weight Compacts made refusal a custom other powers had to bear; on chain-camp roads at dawn, Ogres say, the sound of cracking stone can still be heard, and Ogre outlaws still chalk his crack on the storehouse doors they raid. **Hesserin the Shattered Saint**, the Reedfolk god of unbroken identity, broke apart once the Floodkeeper Houses accepted service, and in some old crossing shrines her broken mirrors, mended with gold, still hang above the water: look into one, it is said, and you see your own cracks, and the gold that holds them. **Sessik the Tongue-Taker**, whom older Kobold lines feared as a punisher of noise in the tunnels, faded once shared sound codes made silence a skill, and in abandoned underhouses there are stones that make no sound when struck. **Ithaere the Drowned Mother** condensed briefly out of the flood terror of the Drowning Bloom and faded when the waters receded. Nobody prays to her. Her name is spoken in the laments sung when water rises in the root-year, and in the warning every Dark Elf child hears: stray too close to black water, and Ithaere will take you as her tithe.

Some fadings are older still. In the basin valleys the First Man, the god of the first Human self-awareness there, is long faded, with no name left to pray to, though many Human peoples keep a story of a first man or first woman who taught Humans how to be Human. The name of Calvesh, god of the vanished archive-law world's rolls that admitted no new entries, survives only inside the swearing-forms its keepers passed down, spoken

as part of the old wording and rarely prayed to. And one god is fading now: **Quennet the Clockmaker**, the Gnome god of measured moments, as the far-side coast carries timing in custom rather than prayer, and a harbour that can name who bears a lost moment, and make them pay, no longer needs to beg a god for one. Harbour wards still say his name under their breath when an approach window has to be changed, half in thanks and half in apology to whoever will bear the lost time, and old gauges are said to stutter before a window fails. Some pilots fear the fading god has begun to close windows a moment too soon, so that someone will need him again, and the wreckers of the outer chains watch for a window that closes early.

Gods are being born too. Some Wrought and their artificers believe a god is gathering among them now, out of shared mending and remembering: the first god of a made people, still without a name.

The Sworn Accord

The **Sworn Accord** is the faith of the Human corridor world, the Confluence Marches and the Serathic League, and it treats the gods the way the river towns treat strangers. A god is honoured in common once the town has sworn to it and entered it on the roster; until then it is someone else's god, kept at someone else's hearth, and nobody will defend its shrine when the raiders come. The Accord took shape during the rise of the corridor orders, as the river towns' habit of swearing oaths before witnesses was carried from bargains between men to the gods themselves, and its shape is usually dated to around 15,000 BR, when the first river towns swore a shared roster of the gods they would honour in common.

The accorded gods

The roster is long and varies by town, but a core of gods is entered everywhere the Accord is kept.

- **First among the accorded** are Anvelle, power of the basin fields, and Serovan, power of the Serath and of those who hold its fords. Field and river are the oldest powers in the corridor, and the Accord's calendar follows their seasons.
- **The gods of oath and truth** are Iskel, by whom oath-breakers are cursed; Annoth the Keeper of Scrolls, who remembers what was promised; and Ostrin, who drags hidden wrongs into the light. Iskel and Ostrin are entered side by side and oppose each other constantly, which the Accord treats as the gods doing their work.
- **The god of the dead** is Ennor, entered on the roster under his Human name, though most of the cradle-web's other peoples honour the same god under names of their own. The Accord does not claim to own him.
- **A frontier god**, Abrel, is entered in the Headwater Marches but not everywhere downriver, where some oath-houses think a god of in-between people too unsettled to enter.

Oath-houses and witnesses

The Accord's temples are **oath-houses**: squat stone halls by the landing, with the town's roster cut into the lintel and its oath-rolls kept in iron chests below the floor. Every march-town has one, as it has a mill; a corridor town keeps one beside its toll-house and record-house; Highbank's faces its Bridge Hall across the square. Its priests are **witnesses**, sworn to attend and remember rather than to command. They are feared more than loved. A witness's word can hang a man, disinherit a widow, or turn a whole town against a neighbour's god, and the proudest boast of any house is that no lord has ever made its word give way.

It is a boast few can make. The oath-houses are fed by the lords and the rich river houses, and a witness tends to remember what the strong would like remembered. Every town has a story of the honest witness: the old priest who would not unsay an oath when the lord's men came for the roll, and was found in the river after the spring rise. The songs make such priests martyrs; the lords' halls call them fools. The oath-chests are treasure in their own right: an old roll can win a manor or lose one, rival houses pay thieves to lift a roll or burn it before a claim is sworn, and old witnesses sleep on the chest. An oath-house robbed in the night rings its bell until the town turns out with torches and dogs.

Around the witnesses stand the devout of the oath gods. The clerks and witnesses who seal bargains and keep sworn secrets honour Iskel, vowing never to reveal what they keep and never to swear falsely, even to save a life; they are trusted, and widely disliked for their silence. Scribes and record-keepers across the corridor swear in Annoth's name to read, write, copy, and keep, and to save the roll before themselves when a record-house burns, and many keep a copy of every important roll in a second place for her sake. A few ascetic **Lantern-Sworn** follow Ostrin, vowed never to speak a lie, even to save a life; lords trust them as witnesses and dislike them for their bluntness. At some toll-houses and oath-house doors hang iron lanterns that give a faint, colourless light, and people say they are Ostrin's eyes, watching for lies.

When an oath is denied and no witness can settle it, the Accord lets the entered gods decide by **ordeal**: hot iron, the river, or combat before the oath-house. A rich man may name a champion, and corridor sellswords make a trade of it; the towns still talk of the hired sword who won three ordeals in a summer and drowned in the fourth, the river ordeal, with every coin he had earned sewn into his coat.

The corridor year

For corridor Humans the Accord shapes the ordinary year, and most of its members never think about the roster at all. The year opens at the spring rise with Serovan's **Festival of the First Flow**, when bread, wine, and flowers are offered to the river and the god is said to walk among the people in disguise, accepting their thanks; on the Serath, river traffic stops for it. At the beginning of harvest comes Anvelle's **Festival of the First Sheaf**, when the first stalk is cut and offered to her. After the harvest levy is counted comes **record-day**, when the oath-house reads the year's entries aloud and anything nobody dares speak against then holds. Through the winter come the **oath-days**, when the great houses hear oaths sworn and settle what they please, sealing bargains under Iskel and calling Ostrin down on the accused. At the great oath-days barges and carts carry the corridor to the oldest oath-houses of the Serath to swear what matters most, and river-thieves work the landings. And at every death come the rites of the dead: a sworn death and a remembered name, which is what Human mourners want of Ennor. Where a death goes unsworn, the dead do not rest: the Unsworn Dead crowd the back of the oath-house after every plague year and feud, and the witnesses who lay them earn their bread.

A household meets the roster itself only when something must be sworn. A marriage, a bargain, an inheritance, or a boundary needs an entered god, and a stranger is asked early whose god they swear by and whether that god is entered here. An oath under an unentered god is a private matter, not a bond.

Entered, tolerated, struck

The Accord sorts local devotion by its roster.

- **Entered** cults are honoured in common. Their shrines are kept openly and defended by the town's spears, their festivals fill the town calen-

dar, and an oath sworn under their gods is one the town will hold a man to, with a rope if it must.

- **Tolerated** cults are not entered but are left alone: household gods, country shrines, and the devotions of neighbouring peoples that ask nothing of the river towns.
- **Unentered** and **struck** cults count for nothing in the towns, and their shrines are fair game. Some were never entered because entering them would concede something the corridor's lords do not want to concede. Others were entered once and later struck, usually when their keepers lost a quarrel with someone stronger, and a striking is often followed by a war-band blessed at the oath-house door and sent to burn the god's shrines. The defaced idols of struck gods still turn up in river mud and ruined chapels, sometimes with their offerings of silver intact, and some struck shrines were defended so hard that the town quietly entered the god again a generation later.

The bloodiest quarrels come from unentered devotion that refuses to stay private. Reedfolk grant that Serovan exists and refuse him the water: in their telling the river belongs to those who remember it correctly, not to the god of whoever holds the ford, and much of the Law of the River is flood-keeper knowledge with a Human seal on it. Their remembering is older than the Accord's own. Goblin songs to Tavi keep the memory of torn warrants and broken promises alive in a religion that has no place for them. In the Broken Marches the Accord reaches only as far as the Headwater oath-houses do, so the region's own gods count for nothing in the halls that carve up its ruins. On the far side, the coastal Humans of the Tidelace know nothing of the Accord at all; for them Maris is nearly the whole of religion.

The Accord's buried shame is that it is a religion of the sworn word built on oath-forms it did not invent and on a river its lords took from others by the sword. Some witnesses know this. Fewer say it.

The Held Covenant

The **Held Covenant** is the faith of the Dwarven holds, the Ironspine Holds and the deep Stonewake Compact. It grew from the closure rites of Stonewake custodians and the hold oaths of the Ironspine, and took shared form around 305,000 BR, in the long aftermath of the deep wars between Dark Elves and Dwarves, when Stonewake's way of sealing what must close spread into the wider Dwarven world. Its premise is that whatever holds must be able to answer for itself. A wall, a seal, a refuge, an office, and a person are all held, and all must be able to say aloud, before their kin, that they still deserve to stand. Dwarves have died for that faith: gate-wardens who held a door against Dark Elf raiders long after the hall behind them was empty, because the question had been asked and they had answered yes. Outsiders take the Covenant for the holds' rulebook; in truth the hold-elders decide, and the Covenant gives their decision the weight of the gods and the edge of the axe.

The questions

The Covenant's great gods are honoured as questions rather than as patrons, and worship is the act of answering them honestly.

- **Will you hold?** is the question of Kerrund. It is asked of every oath, wall, gate, and office, and answered by keeping them.
- **Must this close?** is the question of the Measured Seal. It is asked before any passage, chamber, or reservoir is sealed, and whoever answers it must later answer to the hold-elders as well. Its triple-mark shrines and tally-stones

stand at closure sites in the Deeps, and behind every seal the Covenant ever made, something may still be knocking.

- **Can this still bear?** is the question of the Last Chamber. It is asked of every refuge, store, and shelter, and of every hold that claims to protect its people, at small shrines in route-houses, cisterns, and escape vaults. Where a refuge is held past mercy, the keepers who would not let it fall are said to become Burden-Stays, grown into the stone, and no custodian will free one, for the roof comes down with them.

The three pull against each other. Kerrund asks a hold to keep its gate; the Seal may require it closed; the Chamber may find that what is behind it can no longer be borne. The Covenant does not settle the quarrel. It demands only that each question be asked aloud.

Rites of holding

The Covenant's central rite is the **Proving of the Unbroken Line**, in which a person proves they still belong to the hold. It is held before the gods as well as before the hold-elders: the person whose place is doubted, a returned exile, a changed survivor, a contested heir, answers the questions of holding for their own life, and kin and craft-mates speak for them. The elders decide, and one with strong kin behind them is heard more kindly than one who comes alone; an exile who comes back with no kin at all has sometimes been sent back out of the gate into the snow. How the Proving goes is told in The Elder Peoples (FND 207). The rite is the faith's deepest link to Dwarven origins: a people whose ancestors survived a bodily change that some refused to accept treat proof of belonging as sacred. A young Dwarf's first oath is sworn at the gate before a custodian who asks Kerrund's question aloud. And burial is a final hearing in miniature, in which the dead are named as having held and are then sealed with care. A grave sealed carelessly is not quiet: the Seal-Knockers are heard behind such closures, and whether the knocking is the dead or someone sealed in alive is the custodians' oldest dread.

The Covenant has no priests in the Human sense. Its clergy are **custodians**: keepers of seals, tallies, and the rolls of the Proving who stand with the elders when a place is doubted, stand by at closures, and speak the questions at the rites of oath and burial. A custodian is trusted only as long as their own work holds. One whose seal fails and lets the deep in, or whose closure is later found to have walled up the living, may be cast down under the same questions they once asked of others, and the old songs of the deep holds are full of such falls. In hold archives the oldest oaths of the hold are cut into stone tablets, and it is said that if an oath is unjust the stone will crack.

Every closure the Covenant made shut something in: the stores of a hold that fell, a treasury its last elders would not leave to the deep, the graves of a plague gallery. Hold-children are raised on the warning *a seal keeps two sides*, and **seal-breakers**, outlaws to every custodian, still go in after the treasure with picks and lamps, past the danger-marks the custodians cut at every closure. Some come back rich. Others bring back the sickness the gallery was closed on, or open a door the knocking stops behind and do not come out of it, and custodians hunt a known seal-breaker from hold to hold.

Gate practice and seal practice

The Covenant is kept in two practices that share its questions and weigh them differently. **Gate practice**, in the Ironspine holds, leans on Kerrund: outward-facing, oath-centred, used to bargaining with Human corridor lords and Elven embassies, and readier to accept a place won by bargain. Every hold tells the Legend of the Unbroken Gate, of the god standing in a breached doorway until the attackers could not pass, in its own version, and honours the **gate-saints**, the wardens who held a door to the end, with an axe-head

hung over the lintel and a name cut in the threshold every oath-taker steps over. Pilgrims cross the Ironspine passes to touch them, through the snows and the country of the pass bears, and Human lords pay well for a gate-saint's axe; most such axes are forged, and the holds have hanged the relic-thieves who stole the true ones. **Seal practice**, in Stonewake and the deep holds, leans on the Measured Seal and the Last Chamber: severe, slow to reopen what has been closed, and haunted, sometimes literally, by seals that should never have been set. Each regards the other as a lesser form of the same faith, and the quarrel has drawn blood more than once, mostly at doors: a seal-practice custodian walled into a gallery by a gate hold that wanted it open, a gate-warden's oath-company barred out to die on a bridge by a deep hold that would not unseal for them. Both sides keep the names of these dead, and both call them martyrs.

The Covenant also shapes how Dwarves see other faiths. The Sworn Accord enters gods by sworn roster, which looks to many custodians like trusting a door before anyone has leaned on it. And the custodians have noticed that some Dwarves drawn outward by corridor trade now pray for open roads rather than held gates.

Beyond the holds the Last Chamber is a different god in practice. Its organized cult exists only within the Covenant; elsewhere its worship is fought over and scattered, kept by lonely refuges rather than by any order of custodians. The Dark Elves of the Roothollows honour it as true but severe, kept by houses and route keepers rather than by any priesthood, and the question put to it at their threshold shrines is the host's: *can this house still hold one more?* The same god is asked to justify a closure in the Deeps and to stand by a refusal in the Roothollows, and both peoples know it as real while arguing bitterly over what it wants of them.

The Ordered Bough

The **Ordered Bough** is the faith of the High Elf Crownbough Courts. It is older than the courts in substance and younger in form: its roots are the grove-reverence of the Wood Elf world, and it became an organized religion as the courts were founded, around 390,000 BR, when the habit of shaping living growth became a calling with its own houses, teachers, and rites. Its premise is that life, the world, and the self are living growth, and that growth should be tended towards its intended form. Nothing is born finished. Everything worth honouring is being grown.

Temple-gardens and tenders

The Bough's temples are **temple-gardens**: living halls, groves, and terraces shaped over generations, where trees are trained into architecture and the work of one tender is continued by the next. A temple-garden is never complete, and its incompleteness is part of its sanctity. The oldest hold things the trees have grown around: a gate-guard's sword left in a sapling and swallowed by a trunk a dozen arms round, a war-horn in a bough, a queen's ring in the heartwood. Tenders say these grew where a life was given for the garden, and pilgrims of every Elven people come to lay a hand on the bark. Twice in living memory thieves have come with saws and wedges for the steel inside; one of them still hangs, the tenders say, from the tree he cut.

Its clergy are **tenders**, whose word carries by patience and by what long care has visibly grown: a grove that has flourished under their hands, a household grown into its proper shape, a student who has emerged well. Senior tenders guide the courts' great gardens; lesser ones serve houses, villages, and roadside groves. A tender also fights for the garden: against the hall canker that runs bough to bough through a careless cut, against the bears roused from the hollows in a wet spring, and against the thieves who come for the heart-

wood of a sacred tree, which sells in the corridor towns for its weight in silver. Heartwood thieves work fast, at night, with a cart waiting on the corridor road, and tenders hunt them with bows down every road out of the Crownboughs.

Its rites follow the Elven way of guided emergence. Birth, naming, coming of age, and the taking of a house role are each a stage, marked when the person has grown into it rather than at a fixed age. Death is the last stage. The dead are returned to a living whole larger than any one life, in the temple-gardens and family groves, and for this the Bough honours the god Humans call Ennor under an Elven name of its own, as the guide who sees the returned onward. For High Elves the Bough is present in nearly everything: the shaping of homes and halls, the slow marking of a child's emergence, the long care of family groves, the return of the dead.

Tending and perfecting

The Bough's deepest tension lies inside its own premise. To **tend** is to help something become what it is growing towards. To **perfect** is to decide in advance what it should become and to cut away everything else. That second path has its own god. **Saerith the Mirror-King**, the god of finished form, is the Bough's most powerful and most contested patron, honoured at court wherever prestige, lineage, and flawless presentation are at stake, and feared in the houses that cannot meet his image. At some court occasions courtiers paint their faces with gold and silver to match him; it is said that if the painting is perfect, he grants a year of perfection. The court tale of the Shattered Noble, who matched Saerith's image so perfectly that he shattered like glass, is told as a warning and heard, in some halls, as a promise. Under his banner gardens have been burned for growing wrong, and the courts have their own word for a house that cuts down a rival line as coldly as a diseased bough: it has been **pruned**. A pruned house's gardens go untended and keep growing towards a form no one guides, galleries closing into thickets and bears denning in the hollows, with the house's mirrors and heirlooms still inside; rival houses quietly pay outsiders to bring them out.

The same tension shapes how the Bough sees other peoples. To a tender, shorter-lived peoples look like growth that has not had time to emerge. To Saerith's court they look like growth that will never be finished, and the courts' long condescension towards Human and Dwarven powers draws on the second view far more than the first. Outsiders tend to meet only the court's face: Human embassies and Dwarven envoys see Saerith's polish and disdain and rarely the patient tending beneath it, which is one reason both sides of the Crownbough rivalries find each other so hard to read. Court life adds that second skin to every High Elf life, and many live inside it without ever quite choosing it.

Outside the Crownboughs the root of the faith survives without its branches. The Wood Elves and the Thornbound keep grove reverence as custom: no temple-gardens, no tenders, no doctrine, and no patron of finished form.

The Way of Return

The **Way of Return** is the faith of the Thaluren and the only organized religion on Caeldon with no god at its centre. Its question is whether a return is rightful. Its teaching is the old rule of return: remembered run-lines, holy spawning waters, ascent seen and remembered by the run, and the care of vulnerable eggs and hatchlings. Its pilgrimage is the return run itself, a journey of hundreds of leagues past weirs, poachers' nets, and the grey run-followers that gather off the estuary mouths, its holy places are the return-waters, and its keepers are the Returning Concord's own offices held as sacred ones: the Run-Watchers who say whose ascent is rightful, the Sanctuary Custodians who keep the spawning grounds, the Clutch-Watch Circles who say whose clutch is

kin, and the Sea-Settlement Speakers who hold sea life to the old spawning rules. To serve in any of them is to serve the Way, and the Way needs no other priesthood. Young Thaluren learn to count a run's dangers in a rhyme: the grey ones at the mouth, the weir-men's nets, the long-jaw in the weed, and the still water at the end.

A faith that refused its god

The Thaluren once prayed. When egg blight struck their oldest spawning water, they called on **Ulaun the Stilled Hour** for stillness, and the stillness she gave held their clutches in a water where nothing could hatch. When she faded, the faith that survived kept the rule of return and refused the god, because a god can be asked for the water to stop, and the run cannot. The faith took its godless form in that span, during The Closure of the First Nesting Confluence (c. 178,000-c. 162,000 BR). Blightward custodians still keep the reaches of the closed confluence where silt hangs unmoving in pools that should run, treating them as her residue, under the same watch as the blight itself.

Thaluren do not deny that gods exist. They respect them in other peoples' waters, and where Maris's salt water meets return-water at the estuaries the Way lets her be honoured on the banks, but no god may be invoked over the ascent. A stranger caught praying over a Thaluren spawning ground is driven off, and some have not lived to be driven. The faith hunts its own heretics too: a keeper caught whispering for calm water over a clutch, a family that set a stone idol in the gravels. Such people are cast out of their run, and the oldest tellings, of the stillness that took the first confluence, are recited to them as they go. The whale-like deep-witnesses of ocean memory are honoured without being prayed to. Other peoples often fail to see the Way as a religion at all, because nothing is prayed to. The Thaluren regard that as the point.

Two wings

The Way divided over the closure into the two wings it still has. The Blightward Keepers hold that damaged sacred waters must be kept faithfully, guarded, remembered, and never abandoned, even when they can no longer be used; their custodians name every failed clutch at the water where it failed and recite the names each season. The Open-Run Concords hold that a rightful return may be turned to alternate waters, provided the memory-debt towards the damaged source is carried; their redirected families send one of their own each season to the Naming Reach to name the old water aloud. Each wing regards the other as keeping the Way imperfectly, and both cite Ulaun against the other. Their quarrels end, when they end at all, not by revelation but by whichever wing holds the water and can keep the other out by force, as in The Second-Channel Feud, whose laments still name the escort who held a narrows against a Blightward band.

For Thaluren the Way is present in every crossing between sea and river, every clutch counted as kin, and every argument about who may ascend where. Its oldest enemies are the run-raiders: weir-lords and estuary towns that net a passing run for its fat, or take the young at the river mouths. Escorts have cut weirs by night and drowned the netsmen who came out to stop them, and the river towns that lost men call it piracy; the Way calls it keeping the run. The blighted clutches of the First Nesting Confluence left pearls in the silt, and every poacher on the rivers has heard of them; the Way counts every such pearl a clutch robbed twice, and Thaluren who find one on a stranger's neck have been known to follow its wearer for a season. Kavari nursery-waters and Gnome harbour custom both meet the Way where its return-waters cross theirs, and the Way answers each of them in the language of rightful return rather than of competing gods.

At the Graveside

Every faith and every custom meets at the grave, and nowhere is the variety of medieval belief sharper. Human mourners want a sworn death and a remembered name. Elves expect the dead to be returned to a living whole larger than themselves. Dwarves want the dead brought to proper rest and sealed with care. The Thornbound return theirs in the circle's own ground; the Kavari bury theirs along their burial reaches; the Orcs keep theirs under Ushkar, recited at the treaty-grounds with the crossings they held, and a name Ushkar strikes is a name the kindred will not recite.

Ennor the Grave-Watcher answers most of the cradle-web's dead, and they have overwhelmed him (The Gods of the Medieval Era). Where peoples live together, a death can be left half-finished while each side refuses the other's rite, and the dead of such deaths are said to linger and fray. Communities that learn to divide the work ease the god's burden, as in the Elderweald, where mixed funerals give the body to Wood Elf return and the remembrance to Human mourning under the Accord, a settlement made in The Elderweald Funerary Accord (c. 16,000-c. 15,000 BR). Beyond every rite lie the dead nobody finishes: those who die in hiding, on broken roads, or without kin, those whose names were struck before they died, and the drowned the river gives back in spring. In the Broken Marches the hunted are often buried where no hunter will find them, and Ennor, people say, keeps watch over the graves Varn keeps secret.

The one enemy the watcher is said to have is the forbidden magic that tears at the dead: what it takes from a grave, he cannot always guide home, and a conjurer's careless raising can leave a whole burial ground walking. Mourners tell of a child who died without a name, and of the watcher who came and gave it one so that it could rest; in the oldest burial grounds there are paths that seem to lead nowhere, and people call them his trails.

Saints, Heralds, and Things Not Named

Below and beside all of this run the two threads that no faith fully owns.

The **steward traditions** are the stories every people tells of the rare beings who appear at the moments that matter most: when an oath binds beyond anyone's power to break it, when a death is dangerous, when one of the world's laws is fraying past mending. Basin folk call them saints; holds call them judges; forest keepers call them watchers; other peoples call them heralds or gatekeepers. They are Stewards, the great offices through which the Primes' laws are kept at their points of strain, and because they are neither sustained nor much moved by worship, the stories are wildly various and the prayers to them seldom answered. A Steward who appears at an oath-swearing or a deathbed has come because something about the moment demanded it, not because anyone asked.

Dark fear is older than any faith. Every floor of medieval religion carries protective rites, taboos, and dread of the Dark Entities, the powers from outside the world, fallen from within it, or older than its order, that replace, corrupt, or unmake what they touch. The organized faiths write that fear into doctrine and set their clergy to hunt for its signs; the local cults keep it as warning stories and charms, told at the fire and hung over the door. And a lord who wants his rival's people afraid has only to whisper that the rival has dealings with one.

Tensions

- **Whose oaths.** Reedfolk keepers hold that much of what the basin towns call their own oath-keeping was theirs first, and that the Sworn Accord swears its river guarantees under a god they refuse.

- **Too unsettled to enter.** Abrel the Changeling is entered in the Headwater oath-houses and not in some downriver ones, so an oath a Headwater family swore under Abrel binds at home and is shrugged off on the Serath. Fosterlings sent downriver have come home robbed of the land they were promised, and more than one Headwater feud began that way.
- **Sealed rolls.** Iskel's oath-keepers hold a sealed roll shut, Annoth's scribes count it kept but not remembered, and Ostrin's followers want it opened. The roll stays as the strongest house in town wants it, until Ostrin's zealots break into the oath-chest by night and read it from the steps.
- **A paid sword before the gods.** Hired champions fight most ordeals the rich are party to. Some witnesses hold that a sellsword's victory is the entered gods' will like any other; others will not enter an ordeal won with hired steel in the roll, and the poorer side of a lost ordeal goes looking for a witness of the second kind, or for the champion on a dark road.
- **Tending or perfecting.** Saerith's devotees call finished form the Ordered Bough's fulfilment; the older tenders call it its corruption. Every presentation at court is a small version of the argument.
- **Gate and seal.** Gate practice accuses the seal practice of the deep holds of closing what should hold; seal practice accuses the gate holds of holding what should close, and both keep their martyrs.
- **A death half-finished.** Where peoples live together and each refuses the other's rite, a death can be left unfinished, and every such death adds to the burden of the watcher at the threshold.

CHAPTER 7

Magic in Ordinary Life

Close the skin and leave the deep;
warm the pot and not the room;
what you mend, you pay for,
and what you pay with is you.

— a basin healers' book, *The Book of Small Mendings*

In a basin village magic is not a daily wonder. It is the reason the fire catches on a wet morning, the reason the threshold stone has not cracked in forty winters, the reason the midwife's hands go grey for a day after a hard birth. People have seen it worked, they know roughly what it costs, and nobody mistakes it for something free. But only a few in any village can work it at all, and anything beyond the small charms is rarely seen: a real working, close at hand, still draws a crowd, and fear as often as wonder. The healer who closes a spear-wound in front of the whole market is talked of for a generation, and so is the lord's caster who brought a raider band's fire down on the wrong barn. The schools that train mages say what every village knows, only more carefully: magic makes nothing from nothing. It reaches a force that already exists, moves it, changes its form, and loses some on the way, and someone or something always pays for what is lost. The art of ordinary magic is the art of staying where the price is small. Ordinary life is mostly about who decides when it has stopped being small, and who pays when it was not.

The Natural Philosophy of a Kitchen Fire

Begin where most people meet magic: at the hearth, on a morning when the kindling is damp.

The cook who coaxes it to catch is doing, in small, what the greatest workers of the age do in large. The force she reaches is universal. It is not a substance she makes, nor a privilege some people invented; it is part of how the world is, and it runs in ten currents, the currents of the ten Primes: Aion's time, Aqua's living flow, Ignis's change, Imago's shape, Lux's revelation, Memoria's imprint, Terra's structure, Umbra's dimming, Verba's definition, and Zephyr's motion. The flame that takes on the wet wood is Ignis, the current of change, coaxed a little further than the wood would have gone alone.

AT A GLANCE

What it is	The moving and changing of a force that already exists; never creation, always loss.
Who pays	The caster's strength or lifeforce, the surroundings, prepared materials, and the caster's good name.
The ordinary reach	Kindling, drying, light, small wards, preservation, wound-closing, marks, and folk promises.
The trades	Smiths, oath-keepers, healers, and masons, each with a tradition of its own.
Beyond the ordinary	Deep healing, binding oaths, foresight, weather, fire as a weapon: done only by the leave of a lord, a temple, or the elders, or forbidden.
Dark practice	Reckoned by who pays the bill, not by what a working looks like.

She pays for it, and so does the room. Heat drawn into the kindling is drawn from somewhere: the air near the hearth goes cool for a moment, a draught seems to come from nowhere, and if she presses too hard she feels a tremor in her hands and a dull ache behind the eyes. That is the first law of the whole art, and it never bends. Every working incurs loss, and the loss is paid in one of four coins.

- **The caster's reserve.** The commonest price is tiredness, tremor, dizziness, headache, a slowed hand or a slowed thought, and at the end of it collapse. This is the price of almost every small working, and almost everyone who has worked one knows the feeling.
- **Lifeforce.** Some workings spend something deeper than fatigue, above all healing, which is transfer, not creation. A healer who mends too much gives up endurance, recovery, health, and in the end years. Healers age early. The village knows it, and is careful about how often it sends for them.
- **The surroundings.** Other workings take from the world around them: heat out of a room, moisture out of air and soil, vigour out of the plants nearby, the charge out of a storm. A garden beside a workshop where too much is done wilts in summer.
- **Materials and name.** Many workings need chalk, inscribed media, anchors, offerings, or prepared water, and a practitioner without them may know a working perfectly and still be unable to do it. And every working has a social price: suspicion, a stain on a good name, a lord's anger or a blood-price owed, a debt to whoever gave leave for it. That price is heaviest for workings that conceal, bind, or touch the dead, and it is the price that sends a hedge-mage down the road at night with torches behind.

A practised worker manages all four. She keeps her charms small, works near a good fire rather than a cold one, uses the right tool for the right work, and does not do in front of the neighbours what the neighbours would not like to see.

Bodies and their bents

The second law is that bodies are not neutral channels. Every people took on its own balance of the Prime currents as it arose, and that balance, its **lifeforce**, shapes which workings come easily to it, which come at a heavy cost, and which are dangerous. It varies along five lines: how easily a body conducts the force, how well it holds a complex pattern without drift, how quickly strain clears from it, how much stress it can take before injury, and how cleanly it exchanges lifeforce with other living patterns. No people is better at magic

than another. They are differently made for different costs, and a people more strongly shaped by one current than another will produce, over the generations, more of the workers that current favours: more healers and growers here, more warders and builders there.

Method follows the body. Peoples quick to conduct and quick to react favour direct will and gesture. Peoples that hold a pattern well favour runes and prepared casting. Peoples that exchange cleanly with others favour ritual and group work. And peoples whose bodies tolerate less favour focus objects and liturgy for their safety. These are tendencies, not destinies, and in mixed towns the methods blend: one people's steadiness worked together with another's speed.

Within a people, individuals differ again: in the size of their reserve, the quality of their conduction, their sensitivity to the lines where the force runs dense, their pain tolerance, their composure. That is why two equally trained workers can perform very differently, and why the gifted but fragile apprentice and the plodding but steady one end up, years later, in quite different trades.

Where the force runs thick

The third law is that magic is never equally easy everywhere. Along **ley lines**, the channels where the force runs dense, casting is easier, more efficient, more stable, and capable of greater scale, and where several lines knot together in a **node** it is easier still. Minor nodes serve local ritual and small works; major nodes are steady enough for cities and sanctuaries; rare grand confluences make region-wide wards possible. Settlements, sanctuaries, and the places where workers gather tend to grow up on them, and lords fight over them as they fight over fords. Lines are not fixed forever. Over decades and centuries they drift, and the old works of a town built on one need recalibrating from time to time.

Living things carry the force too. Plants and animals took on their own balance of the currents as they formed, so medicinal herbs really do restore strength, certain broths and teas really do invigorate, and different herbs act differently on different peoples. Herbalism, husbandry, and the folk medicine of beasts are not mere custom. They are the meeting of one living pattern with another.

The Ordinary Reach

What an untrained or lightly trained person can safely attempt is modest, and it is everywhere. Each current has an **ordinary ceiling**: the most a worker can do while the strain stays ordinary and nothing done would bring a lord, a temple, or the neighbours down on them. Below it lies most of the magic of medieval life.

At the hearth, Ignis coaxes kindling to catch, holds a gentle heat under a drying rack or a cooking pot, and wakes a sulking forge fire. Anything hotter or larger is a different matter, because fire's failure is a fire that will not stop, and even ordinary heat work carries a real risk of burns. A village once burned by a raider's fire-caster remembers it for generations, and the next stranger who coaxes a flame too quickly may hang for it.

In the air, Zephyr clears smoke from a hall, speeds the drying of washing, fills the sail of a small boat with a following wind, nudges a cart along a level road, or works the bellows for a smith. The price at this scale is only tiredness.

In stone, ordinary magic is closest to ordinary work, and Terra is among the most accessible of the currents because it overlaps with building itself. Masons use small assisting charms in the building trades; doorframes, walls, and foundation stones are quietly reinforced; and many thresholds have a small **ward-stone** set into them, which is why the threshold stone has not cracked in forty winters. The tales tell of a warding that

turned a raider band back at a village hedge, and every village with a ward-stone hopes its own would do as much.

In the stores, Aion keeps timber, cloth, and perishable goods a little past their natural span and paces the slow processes of curing, drying, and fermenting. Its price is mostly in materials: the preserving charm is a pattern cut or drawn on an anchor, and the anchor must be prepared.

At the bedside, Aqua is the healer's current. A folk healer cleans and closes shallow wounds, eases fever and the flow of blood, and works through teas, tonics, poultices, and treated water, drawing on the real virtues of plants and animals. Even here the healer pays from her own lifeforce, which is why a midwife's hands go grey after a hard birth. Imago, the current of shape, comes in only as a light helper in wound work; on its own it has almost no ordinary reach at all, and any working that sets out to change a body's shape is out of ordinary practice from the first moment.

In the dark, Lux gives a working light in place of a lamp, a small charm to sharpen attention, and an unreliable folk sense for a lie, of the kind no chieftain would hang a man on. Umbra gives the reverse: a light dimmed, a sound muffled, a scent or trail softened. The same current eases a hard death without erasing what has ended, and that palliative work is honest and welcome. Concealment of any kind, though, invites suspicion even when its use is innocent: the charm-woman who can muffle a footstep is the first name spoken when a granary is robbed.

In memory and word, Memoria lets a token hold a small impression: a face, a recipe, a promise. Verba gives a merchant's mark, a household's naming custom, or a spoken promise sworn in folk form a little definitional weight. A household's mark on its door or its barrels is more than decoration; a promise sworn in the old folk form is a little harder to break than one merely spoken. Neither binds with teeth. That belongs higher up.

Some pairs of currents work well together, and an ordinary worker may lightly use them: shape with flow, in wound work; word with imprint, in a promise given weight; structure with dimming, in a ward. Others pull each other apart. Time with change, light with shadow, and structure with motion should never be combined at the ordinary level at all, and practitioners everywhere are warned off them.

The Trades and the Threshold

Above the folk reach stands a tier closer to a craft than to scholarship, and it is where most of the medieval world's working magic is done. Four compound traditions are known widely enough to have common names and teaching lineages, and a practitioner who names one will be understood almost anywhere:

- **Storm-Forge**, fire and wind in mutual support, is the smith's: heat sculpting and the elemental work of the forge, common in smithing peoples and weather-working traditions.
- **Oath-Inscription**, imprint and word together, fixes a commitment into lasting record, and belongs to oath-keepers, priests, and scholars.
- **Healing-Shift**, flow guided by shape, closes wounds and restores form, and is the most widespread compound tradition in the healing arts.
- **Stonelocking**, structure reinforced by time, makes walls that resist ageing and anchors that hold across generations, and belongs to masons, warders, and tomb-builders.

Each is open to a trained smith, oath-keeper, healer, or mason and not to an untrained person working alone. They are learned the way a trade is learned, by apprenticeship and practice inside the trade, one burden at a time, and they travel the way trades travel. Dwarven craft teaching comes down the Headwater exchange roads with the metal and dressed stone, and the larger foothill towns have smithies working to Dwarven meth-

ods. High Elf garden-craft and teaching go out from the Crownboughs as gifts, and Human lords have long borrowed High Elf ceremony, composure, and magical shaping. At the Understorey Courts, where the embassy road from the basins ends, visitors from below come up seeking a graft, an audience, or a teacher, and wait seasons for any of them.

Where the art is taught

Beyond the trades, the great disciplines are taught in schools of every kind. Practitioners speak of formal academies; guildholds where builders and mages train side by side; forge-schools where smithcraft and magic are held to be inseparable, of which the **Nine Hammer Forges** are legendary; temple-schools and temple-hospitals; halls where oath-workers train in spoken form; and itinerant road schools that teach travel-craft and omen-reading on the move. On the far-side coast, where Maris is honoured, the **Tidelore Hospice of Maris** is a harbour hospice kept under the name of Maris of the Tides, famous for healing arts and the magic of surviving the sea. Others are family traditions, guarded inside a lineage and taught at the kitchen table. And some of the best-paid casters in the medieval world learned nothing in any school: the burnt-out war-mage who lives on as a sellsword company's charm-maker, and the conjurer a lord keeps because he knows how to send back what bad conjuring calls.

Every people also keeps its own art in its own houses, and this is where a writer finds the texture of it.

- **The Crownboughs** teach shaping in the houses. A young High Elf learns a craft by continuing shaping begun by a grandparent's grandparent, and is presented at court carrying a piece of shaping they have carried on themselves. The courts' halls, gardens, and garden-walks are grown, coaxed by magic and centuries of patient shaping into forms no forest makes alone. Shaped growth does not stay shaped: a boughway left alone for a few seasons sags, and a trained hall closes its own doorways with new wood.
- **The Wood Elves** tend rather than shape. The Rootcrown groves work with the living world and do not redesign it, and they remember the Crownbough branching as a leaving.
- **The Gloamroot Covenant** is defended by its **survival and warding orders**, which first rose to hold back what the Roothollow catastrophe left loose in the dark and remain the deep world's swords and its guards on the ways. A house that cannot draw on their protection is brittle.
- **The Stonewake Deeps** run on warded vault routes and warded corridors from hold to hold, opened by the custodians' word rather than sold.
- **The Wrought** depend on repair, and repair is a craft with its own houses: the repair houses and sanctuary workshops of the Mending Orders, and the trusted artificers individual Wrought keep.

Above the Threshold

Every current has a **notable threshold**, the point where further practice stops being ordinary and the powerful take an interest. Past it a worker needs caution, a master's eye, the leave of whoever holds the place, or all three, or has crossed into what is forbidden outright.

- **Deep healing**, the direct transfer of lifeforce to repair what lies below the skin, is where a folk healer's competence ends and a trained caster's begins, and a failure there can cascade. The healer who can cross it is the one lords send for and raiders carry off.
- **Binding oaths**, oath magic with real teeth, belong to temples, oath-keepers' halls, and lords' oath-mages, because a broken binding rebounds on everyone it touched.

- **Foresight** that can be relied on, and true scrying, are kept close by temples and lords, who want no one else foreseeing their wars.
- **Fire as a weapon** is the work of a lord's casters, a temple's, or a war-band's, and **weather** worked at scale starts feuds and wars, since a rain drawn off a neighbour's fields or a storm called on an enemy's harvest is never forgotten.
- **Great structures**, load-bearing magic, large fortification, or anchors meant to hold for generations, are the work of master casters, and done only with the leave of whoever holds the place, because a failure brings down walls on their people.
- **Stillness** that halts a living process, **changes of a body's shape**, and **true concealment** or anything near a corpse belong to schools whose names alone make people uneasy.

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 and plain, and rarely written down: a caster may work great magic only with the leave of the lord, the temple, or the elders; a caster who has burned out once must rest before casting again; a master pays 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 pushing into the worst of the strain 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 watch their own on campaign, temples watch their priests and sworn casters, and craft masters watch their journeymen. Overuse is a condition healers can see, not only a rumour: more input needed for the same result, exhaustion that lingers, familiar forms going unsteady, side effects that do not clear. What moves the watchers is usually fear for their own walls and people, not the caster's soul, and a lord's favoured caster rarely pays the full price while a wandering one often pays more. A sellsword company under siege lets its war-mage go past all safety, 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.

The Healer at the Door

Healing is where ordinary life meets magic's hardest edge, and the healer is the worker ordinary people most often need.

Her first difficulty is compatibility. Healing within a people is the cleanest. Between related peoples it is workable, with noticeable loss. Between very different peoples it is possible but costly and wasteful, and the healers of mixed towns know the difference by heart. A basin healer who treats a Human child, a Reedfolk pilot, a Dwarven smith, and an Ogre hauler in the same week pays a different price each time. Plant and animal sources ease the cost: plant lifeforce is gentle and steady, good for long slow recoveries; animal lifeforce is denser and quicker, good in a crisis, and riskier if used again and again. Both are less efficient than a clean transfer between two members of the same people, but they are safer, easier to come by, and far easier to justify than drawing on another person.

Her second difficulty is her own reserve. Two people may be perfectly compatible and the healer still too exhausted, hungry, wounded, or overextended to heal safely, and a village that sends for her too often can wear her out before her time. Lifeforce is not a soul and not a measure of virtue, but it is finite. And a healer whose touch draws a crowd in the market soon draws the lord's men too, because a lord at war wants her in his train and a lord at peace wants her where he can find her.

Her third difficulty is that healing can go wrong in a way that lasts. Restoration forced again and again on the same injury can tip into **Failed Mending**, in which repair overcorrects and the harm is kept in altered form: wounds closing too

strongly, tissue regrowing unevenly, scars that remain physically meaningful, a body left tougher, stranger, more knotted. In most peoples it is an occasional misfortune. In Trolls it is stable and inherited, written on their ridged, knotted, asymmetrical bodies, and nobody knows why. Healers and scholars blame, variously, healing magic itself, Verdant force, the memory carried in Echoes, mutation, failed restoration rites, or a regional catastrophe. Troll body-law treats the scars as sacred record and makes the closing of a wound a matter of rite as well as care, so that a healer of another people called to a Troll's bedside meets a patient whose kin may not want the wound closed at all. A crossing house whose own mender's hands have gone wrong keeps that mender far from travellers, because one bad mending at a crossing becomes a hunting party within the year.

Repair of the Wrought follows the same rules of care as healing, and the Mending Orders insist on it. A Wrought who receives needed repair is being cared for. A Wrought who chooses refitting is choosing for their own body. A Wrought altered without consent is being harmed, even if the work makes them more useful.

Gods and Hands

Some magic is not paid for by the caster alone. In divine working the force comes, in whole or in part, from beyond the worker: from a Prime's current reached through alignment, from a god able and willing to give, or rarely from a Steward acting within its office. The laws do not change. Divine magic still channels and converts and loses; the body still carries it, the mind still interprets it, and a miracle beyond the channel's tolerance can still burn, break, or kill the one who carries it. But it is often safer and steadier than learned magic, less dependent on the worker's own reserve, and better at blessing, consecration, protective rites, and the cleansing of corruption.

Its weakness is dependence. The Primes are not patrons: a Prime's current is open to whoever is aligned with it, and it neither chooses, refuses, nor withholds, so when Prime-aligned casting falters the fault lies in the caster, the conduit, or the place. A god is different. A god's support is a relationship, and it may be steady and bound to doctrine, conditional on vows and obedience, intermittent and given only at the moments that suit the god, or withheld altogether. Silence does not always mean refusal. It may mean distance, a quarrel between gods over whose domain this is, a damaged channel, or a deliberate choice not to act. Years of channelling leave marks of their own: greater throughput within narrower limits, a stiffness of mind around whatever was sworn, dreams that are not quite one's own, crashes of exhaustion after a great working, and a growing difficulty working anything without the god. In disciplined clergy these marks can be healthy adaptations. Where doctrine is coercive, or throughput outruns rest, they are not.

Divine sponsorship does not make a working good. A cruel god or a tyrannical order can feed sacrifice, domination, curse-work, or holy war as readily as healing. That is why the temples distinguish carefully between three things that can look alike. A **miracle** is a working whose decisive cost was carried by a god. **Liturgy** is a temple's formal rite, sponsored or not. **Spellcraft** is technique fuelled from any other source. A miracle can happen outside liturgy, liturgy can happen without a miracle, and spellcraft can imitate either. When a miracle is doubted, the temples that care to test it ask where the decisive force came from, whether the temple's own rite was used, and whether the worker had the temple's or the god's leave over the matter touched. The quarrel is settled less by the questions than by which temple, lord, or crowd stands behind the worker, and 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.

The Rare and the Strange

A few people are more than ordinary without being workers at all. **Mythic traits** are 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 affinity for storms, an ear that hears truth, a feel for the way through, an unusual memory. They are real, rare, usually narrow, and distinct from trained magic. Some are inherited and recur in a family; some wake only under stress, maturity, ritual, or crisis; some are imprinted by exposure to a divine event, a cursed place, or a zone where the cosmos runs wrong. A trait never appears from nothing. A person may be a trait-bearer, a trained worker, both, or neither.

Trait-bearers attract prestige and fear, taboo and recruitment, a lord's interest and a priest's suspicion, and now and then a family's attempt to breed the trait true. A child who always finds the way through is worth a great deal to a delvers' company, and some companies do not ask the parents. Rarer still are **demigods**, the mortal children of a god and a mortal: exceptional, long-lived, still mortal, and unable to pass their gifts on, so that a demigod's children are ordinary. Peoples often confuse a strong trait with demigodhood. The world does not.

Dark Practice

Dark magic is not a separate substance or a separate school. It is a way of using the same force, and what defines it is who pays the bill. A working is called dark when it makes the unwilling pay, violates body or mind, desecrates the dead or a shrine, drains its surroundings on a large scale, hides a price paid by others, or corrupts its maker over time. Some schools attract suspicion more than others, those of blood, the dead, sacrifice, command, and traces above all, but each of them contains acceptable practice as well as forbidden. What villagers and delvers meet of it are the marks left behind: a ring of dead grass where a field was drained, a cellar of sealed jars, a cult house with a Hunger Engine still upright in the dark, dry and grinding, waiting to be fed.

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 let off lightly, a hedge-witch dealt with harshly, and a stranger worst of all. Across most of Caeldon dark acts fall into four rough grades: **restricted**, done only with the leave of whoever holds the place and under their eye; **conditional**, tolerated in war, in great need, or in a rite a temple blesses; **prohibited**, forbidden whatever the reason; and **atrocity**, an outrage against the person and the people, for which the caster is hunted and every hand is turned against them. Forced extraction of another's lifeforce is an atrocity anywhere, at any scale; so are coerced sacrifice and remaking a person past recognition. Altering another person's memory without consent is prohibited, and coerced oath-binding with it. What counts where differs, and the difference is real: one people puts the dead to work at a lord's order while another burns whoever tries, without either being wrong about how the world works. A dark caster who flees across one river may become a lord's honoured servant on the far bank, and the hunters who follow are then the outlaws.

Where someone takes the trouble to look, an accusation of dark casting needs signs, not only an evil name: what the working left at the site, what the victims share and the marks on them, contamination a skilled caster can find, the word of those who knew the victim before, and the accused watched under guard as they attempt the working again. 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. 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; an atrocity caster is killed where they can be caught, by fire, drowning, or the sword, as local custom has it. The powerful, or those with powerful patrons, buy their way down more often than not. Catching them is dangerous work. A necromancer on the run leaves Burst-Dead on the road behind, 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. Cleansing a corrupted caster is a slow course in stages, stabilize, unload, re-attune, verify, and it does not always work. Its failure proves damage, not wickedness.

Dark practice can leave heritable marks on a lineage when the alteration persists. The wiser healers and elders separate a lineage's condition from its conduct: descendants of a corrupted line are not guilty for what their blood carries, and the separation exists to stop the hunting of whole bloodlines while still allowing watch where it is needed. Fear does not always listen, and a family with a tainted ancestor is still driven out of many villages.

Tensions

- **The lesser houses.** Saerith's standard of finished form travels further than his worship, and in lesser Crownbough halls it shows as dangerous rites of self-perfection, magical self-reshaping, and quiet despair.
- **The dead graft.** A Crownbough graft given to a basin lord has died in basin soil, and the lord's envoy has come to the Understorey Courts to ask for another. Replacing it concedes that a Crownbough gift can fail; refusing it says the lord was never worthy of the first.
- **The gauge that stuttered.** A clerk at the Counted Lee moved a window on a clear morning because an old gauge stuttered, and the window failed that afternoon; a craft that ignored the signal went onto the rocks. The fold bench will not accept a prayer as a declaration. The harbour bench says the clerk was right, and the drowned crew's kin agree.
- **Repair held by others.** A damaged Wrought may need parts, patterns, or craft traditions that still belong to former owners, workshops, guilds, or commands. Each repair refused or offered on terms is a grip of ownership in another form, and the Mending Orders' rule of consent joined to necessity holds only where someone strong enough will back it.
- **The fading clock.** Quennet the Clockmaker fades as the far-side coast carries timing in custom instead of prayer. Sounding families who still keep his observances say a harbour that times its tides without him has forgotten why timing was holy; calibrators say a timing that needs a god to be trusted has not yet been calibrated.
- **The smooth keeper.** A Troll crossing keeper came back to her crossing after a winter in a Human town with every scar gone and no memory of the healer. The house will not let her stand on the span; she says nothing is wrong with her, and her kin have sent for anyone who can tell a clean healing from something worse.

PART III

Sickness and Remedy

What the peoples of the era suffer and how they nurse it: the common ills, poisons, and plagues of households, herds, and fields, and the unnatural afflictions of magic's cost, curses, strange places, and the Dark Entities.

CHAPTER 8

Common Ills, Poisons, and Plagues

Boil the cloth and wash the hand,
and never ask me why;
keep the lamp till the fever turns,
and keep the water by.

— a midwives' rule, *The Book of Small Mendings*

Every household in the medieval world keeps a sickroom, even if it is only the bed nearest the fire. Most winters someone lies in it with the cough, most summers with the flux, and once or twice in a lifetime the whole house sits up through a night with the lamp lit, waiting to see whether a fever will break. The people who nurse them know a great deal. A village healer can tell marsh fever from the summer flux at a glance, name the night on which a lung fever will turn, and smell a festering wound before the dressing is off. What she cannot say is why any of it came. The ordinary contagions pass on the breath, by touch, in water and filth, and by lice, fleas, and biting flies, and what passes is a living thing too small to see; no people of the era knows it. So the peoples blame bad air, the season, the stars, a neighbour's eye, a disorder of lifeforce, or a god's displeasure, and fight sickness with a mixture of remedies that work, remedies that work for the wrong reason, and remedies that do nothing at all. Sickness is the commonest danger of all, and it runs with the others: famine fills the roads with bandits, a plague year empties villages for outlaws to take, the flux and camp fever break more sellsword companies than battle does, and grave-robbers, delvers, and travellers to the planes and zones carry home sicknesses no village healer has seen.

Signs Without Causes

The medieval healer is a reader of signs, and a good one. She knows that the winter cough which turns on the fourth day, with a fever that climbs again instead of falling and a stab in the side at every breath, has become lung fever. She knows that the quiet child is the one to fear in the flux, that a wound which drains thick and pale will mostly mend while one that weeps thin and stinking will not, and that a patient of the swelling plague who lives to the end of the first week will probably live. She keeps the crisis nights, the counted days, and the signs of the turn as a sailor keeps the tides.

AT A GLANCE

What kills most	The summer flux, lung fever, wound rot, childbed fever, and the hungry year; the great plagues come once a generation and are remembered for longer.
Who treats	The household first; then the folk healer, the midwife, the tooth-drawer, and the bone-setter; the trained healer, the hospice, and the priest when they can be reached and paid.
What is known	Signs, courses, and the night of the turn, well; causes, hardly at all.
What works	Water, rest, food, warmth, boiled cloth, a shaved head, a shut door, and a camp that moves on, often for the wrong reasons.
What magic does	Eases, gates, draws, and purges, one patient at a time, paid for from someone's lifeforce.
The year	The Medieval Era, c. 1,350 CR.

Causes are another matter. The peoples' explanations are many and mostly wrong, and they are wrong in instructive ways. Fevers that rise off still water at dusk are laid to the evening air off the marsh, not to the gnats that bite at the same hour. The flux is blamed on heat, green fruit, cold drink on a hot day, or the stink of the midden, and the last is closer than anyone knows. Lice are taken for children of sweat and dirt, a sign of poverty rather than a carrier of anything. The red pox is blamed on red stars and on the family of whoever sickened first. Behind all of them stands the oldest explanation, that a sickness is sent: by a god offended, by a curse, by the dead, or by the evil eye of someone at the market.

Because the remedies grew up beside the signs and not the causes, many of them do real good under false names. Boiled water, burned bedding, a shut door, a washed hand, a shaved recruit, and a camp that breaks for sweet water all prevent more sickness than any healer cures, and nobody who practises them can say why. A midwife who washes her hands in hot water and strong wine before a birth loses fewer mothers; her neighbour, who thinks the practice fuss, loses more, and both are respected. Other customs do nothing. Households shut the windows of a sickroom against bad air, keep a child with the spots wrapped and hot to sweat the heat out, sprinkle the dying with blessed water, and hang red cloth at the window of the pox-sick to draw the red out of the skin.

The world has no souls, and the healers of the age do not need one. Sicknesses of the mind and the memory are sicknesses of the body's pattern, whatever a people calls them, and a fit, a madness, or a long melancholy is nursed in the same bed as a fever.

Who Nurses the Sick

The household

Nearly all sickness is nursed at home. The grandmother keeps the teas: bitter fever-bark for the shaking fevers, herbs for the chest and the bowels, willow for the joints and the aching tooth, honey in hot water for the cough. The household's tools are warmth, broth, a basin of steam, a cool cloth, a darkened room, and patience. A patient with lung fever is propped upright and not allowed to rise too soon; a child with the flux is given boiled water, thin ale, or broth with a pinch of salt, a little at a time and often; a sick bed is turned, washed, and watched. On the crisis night of a lung fever a lamp burns until the fever breaks, and many households hold that whoever watches at the turn must not sleep, or the sick will slip away

with them. The drenching sweat of the breaking fever is welcomed as the sickness leaving, which is close to the truth.

Households also carry the knowledge that keeps sickness off, mostly without its reasons: which fish may be eaten raw and which must be smoked, that a well is kept above the midden, that a fine comb and a pot of sulphur ointment belong in every house, that a returning soldier's shirt goes into the boiling pot. A mother's weekly search of a child's scalp for nits is as ordinary as sweeping.

Folk healers, midwives, and the market

When the household's care is not enough, it sends for the **folk healer**. She knows the shallow wound, the fever, and the bleeding, and the teas, poultices, and treated water that answer them, and she pays for every working from her own reserve (her reach and its price are told in Magic in Ordinary Life). Every village knows the sign of that price, the healer's grey. Villages ration how often they send for her, because a healer sent for too often ages before her time.

Beside her stand the other trades of the body. The **midwife** attends most births with the women of the household. The **tooth-drawer** works the markets and fairs beside the herb-sellers, and where none comes the village smith pulls teeth. Bone-setters set limbs and take off frozen toes once the dead part has shown itself; barber-surgeons drain, cut, and cauterize, and shave and wash a whole camp when its captain will pay for it. Herb-sellers carry the medicinal herbs of the **Elderweald** and the **Briarreach** outward to buyers who may not know their strength, and are blamed when a fool dies of a dose.

The schools and the temples

Above the folk healer stands the trained healer of **Vital Magic**, whose workings reach below the skin, and above the household's charms stand the priests. A trained healer can bring down a dangerous heat with Fever Ease, keep a sickness from reaching the blood with Sickness Gate, wash a wound deep before it is closed, drive worms and gnat larvae out of a body, and hold breathing for a night. A priest's prayer of healing, worked through a god's support, can turn a case outright: burn plague-sweat out of a patient, clear a poison, drive back a wasting cough. None of it is free, and it works best within one people (see How Magic Works (FND 111)); and it does nothing for a patient sent back to the same well, the same lice, or the same lead-glazed jug.

These healers gather in a few kinds of house. The **Red Mercy Hospices**, the battlefield and plague-care schools of Vital Magic, follow armies, keep fever tents, and send healers to the worst quarters of a plague town. The **Gardens of Returning Breath**, a quiet healing order, keep rest-houses where the coughing are given air, food, rest, and slow transfers of vitality over long seasons. Healers trained at the **Hall of Living Pattern** study which herbs suit which peoples, and their tables of dose by people are among the most copied texts of the trade. The temple hospitals of Sanctified Magic, the **Houses of Mercy**, fill their wards in a pox year. On the far-side coast the **Tidelore Hospice of Maris**, kept under the name of Maris of the Tides, is famous for its healing arts and takes in the sick of the shore hamlets. Most of the sick never see any of them. A village that has to choose between sending a cart to the river town and keeping the money for seed corn usually keeps the money, and nurses at home.

Why the sickbeds stay full

Healers know of waters and planes that cure almost anything, and why that changes nothing for most of the sick: they are far, and each takes its price from the body it heals (see Unnatural Afflictions). At home the arithmetic is plainer. A village has one healer, whose reserve runs out; a plague has a thousand patients.

Fevers, Fluxes, and Coughs

The summer flux

The **summer flux** is the sickness of hot weather and crowded water. A household takes it from its well, a town from its river, a camp from its own latrines: what passes out of the sick in their filth passes back in through the mouth, in water drawn below a midden or a retting pool, in food handled by a sick cook, on flies and on hands. The peoples speak of two kinds, the watery and the bloody, and treat them as one sickness at two strengths. Most grown adults are through the watery kind in a week. The danger is drying, the sunken eyes and slack skin and the quiet that comes over a child who has lost more water than anyone has poured back in. The bloody flux, with its fever and its straining, kills grown fighters in a siege, and in a crowded camp it can take one in five and more fighters than the enemy does. Soldiers say the flux kills more than the sword in a summer siege, and the songs agree: the great siege of the old river wars is remembered for the army that sat outside the walls until the flux had done the defenders' work for them.

Drink is the cure, and it works. The river towns of the **Confluence Basins** and the **Lower Serath** meet the flux every summer at low water, and every army in the field meets it all year. Most towns keep their wells above the middens by custom, quarrel over where a retting pool may foul the water, and pray to Serovan the River-King, who cleanses the Serath only slowly and only when the people stop fouling it.

Marsh fever

On summer evenings the low wet ground of the Confluence Basins and the backwaters of the Lower Serath give up clouds of biting gnats and thin, whining flies, and with them **marsh fever**. Its bouts come every second or third day: a cold that shakes the bed, a dry burning fever, a drenching sweat, and an exhausted sleep from which the patient wakes weak but clear enough to work, badly. After some weeks the bouts thin out. In many cases that is not the end. What the bite left in the blood goes on working towards the spine, and within a season or a year the back stiffens, the legs weaken, and the feet go numb; once the legs fail, they rarely come back. Lamed survivors are called **marsh-taken**, and in some villages a summer child is not named until its first fever season is over.

Everyone knows the fever comes from the marsh at dusk, and almost everyone blames the evening air. The prevention works anyway: smoky fires at dusk, nets and shutters, sleeping high and away from still water. Village healers treat the bouts with fever-bark and cooling. Driving out what lies in the blood before it reaches the spine is work for a trained Vital healer, and families save, borrow, or travel to the river towns for it before the second summer. Reedfolk bear marsh-fever country better than any other people, and say the river spares those it knows. Marsh outlaws are said to be spared too, having had it young, and lords' riders who chase them into the fens in summer come home shaking; the Reedfolk tell it as the marsh taking their side.

The winter cough and lung fever

Everyone has the **winter cough**, most years, and nobody fears it. The peoples give one name to a crowd of small sicknesses of nose, throat, and chest that pass round a single fire with the shutters closed, and they blame wet feet, a draught on the neck, or hair washed in the evening. It costs a few days' work. Its danger is the turn after the third or fourth day in the very old and the very young, when the fever rises again and the breathing goes quick and shallow, because that is **lung fever** beginning. Lung fever is the winter's killer: the chest fills, a cough brings up rust-coloured phlegm, and between the fifth and the seventh day the patient either breaks into a drenching

sweat and sleeps, or grows confused and rattling and dies within a day or two. Most fed, nursed adults live. Among the very old it kills perhaps one in three who take it, and among infants more.

The wasting cough

The most patient killer the peoples know is the **wasting cough**. A young woman in a damp room in town begins to cough one winter and is thinner the next; she flushes in the evenings, sweats at night, and her cheeks take on a brightness strangers mistake for health. Three or four years later she coughs blood in mouthfuls and dies, and by then her sister is coughing too. It passes on the breath, but slowly, over months in a shared room or bed, and so whole households fall to it one by one and many believe it runs in the blood. Others say it is laid by something that feeds, a remnant or a curse, and families have dug up their own first dead to burn the heart. Grave-diggers who open a wasted family's graves are hired by night and paid well, and some villages have driven a whole family out on the suspicion that it carried a feeding dead thing with it. What helps is what the poor cannot get: rest, good food, a warm dry room, and country air. Those who can afford it go to the country or to a rest-house of the Gardens of Returning Breath. It kills the young adults of poor households more than any other age.

The childhood spots

Every parent expects the **childhood spots**. The **red spots** begin like a bad cold with eyes that cannot bear the light, and on the third or fourth day a dusky rash rises behind the ears and runs down the body; the **water spots** come in crops of itching blisters that crust over a week or two. Neither is taken twice, which is why both fall on the young: every few years a new crop of children who have never had them gathers in a village, and the sickness runs through them all. The water spots seldom kill. The red spots kill few children in a fed village and perhaps one sick child in ten in a hungry year, mostly through the lung fever or flux that follows, and leave some blind or deaf in one ear. Many households keep the room hot to sweat the spots out, which does no good; some send their children to play with a spotted neighbour to have it over young, which is sound. In isolated holds, where the spots come rarely, they strike the grown and the young together, and the long-lived peoples who reached adulthood without them take them hard.

Birth, Wounds, and the Wear of Life

Childbed fever

Childbed fever comes two or three days after a birth, when the household has begun to breathe again. The mother shivers, the fever climbs, the belly swells tender, and the flow turns foul; in the better cases the fever breaks within a week, and in the worse it reaches the blood and she dies grey and quiet a few days later. It is the commonest death of young mothers. It passes not on the breath but on hands, cloths, and tools, and so it runs through a district behind one midwife, or through a town lying-in house, while a lone farm birth escapes it. The peoples blame a chill in the birth room, milk gone to the head, or a mother who rose too soon. The custom of hot water and boiled cloths travels from midwife to apprentice, unexplained and unevenly kept, and the women who keep it lose fewer mothers.

Wound rot

On a battlefield **wound rot** kills more in the weeks after than fell on the day. A dirty wound swells hot and red, and from there it drains and mends, or goes on into the **blood fever**, with red streaks creeping up the limb, or into **blackening**, the grey and then black flesh with its sweet unbearable stench that only the knife or the saw will stop. A

small dirty puncture forgotten for a week can bring the **locking jaw**, the face fixed in a grin and the back arched in spasms, which kills most who take it. Every healer knows the rule it taught: clean before you close. A healer washes out dirt and rot, flushes a puncture clear, and only then closes the wound, because closing a dirty wound seals the rot in. The Red Mercy Hospices clean, drain, cauterize, and cut, and the best of them wash their hands and boil their linen out of a habit whose reason nobody knows. Many healers hold that thick pale matter is the wound cleaning itself, and leave dressings on for days to bring it on. Sellswords fear a festering cut more than a clean death, and the camp surgeon who will cut off a rotting arm without being asked is the most valued man in a company; the songs remember the captain who took his own leg off with his sword rather than wait for one.

Troll flesh closes so strongly that a dirty wound can seal over the rot inside it, and Troll kin, who decide by rite which wounds may close, are wary of any healer who closes fast (see The Bridge Peoples (FND 257)).

Small torments

Some ailments kill almost no one and torment nearly everyone. **Worms** live in the gut of nearly every child at some time, taken in where dung reaches water and garden, and households purge their children with bitter herbs, often on a fixed day in spring timed to the full moon, when worms are said to stir; the fish-eating peoples know the fish-worms and flukes best and keep firm rules about what may be eaten raw. **Tooth rot** is the commonest pain of grown life and ends most often at a market stall: honey and sweet fruit are the treats of the well-off, and so are their aching teeth. Many peoples hold that a small worm eats the tooth from within and smoke it out with seeds burned over a candle; the "worms" that fall out are the husks. **The itch**, lice in the seams, the burrowing mite that sets the wrists on fire at night, and the scaling rings of ringworm and scald-head, marks a camp, a ship, a prison, or a poor house, and a lousy stranger is turned from the door. Soldiers say lice leave a man who is about to die, and watch their comrades' collars; they are right that lice leave a cooling body, and wrong about what that means.

The trades

Each trade has its sickness, and each takes it for the ordinary wear of a hard life. A miner who has cut stone for twenty years climbs a stair like an old man: **miner's lung** scars the chest with dust year by year until a winter fever finishes what the dust began. Dwarves call a deep cough "the mountain in the chest" and many miners believe the dust is clean and only bad air dangerous, so they fear the dead pocket and ignore the dust. A hold keeps its broken-chested old miners at the lift-houses, the stores, and the chronicle-rooms, and hold songs honour the old miner who coughed his way back down into a collapsed working to lead the trapped crew out by memory, because no one younger knew the old seam. Smiths go deaf, high sounds first, and take it as a mark of mastery.

The metal trades pay more slowly. The **smelter's gripe** of lead brings colic, a blue-grey line on the gums, and in the end hanging wrists, fits, and failing wits; the **gilder's shakes** of quicksilver ruin a gilder's close work and change his temper; **smoke-sores** mark the skin of those who roast certain ores. In the **Ironspine** the Dwarves roast ore downwind of the holds and turn smelters to other work after some years. In the towns the gripe also comes from wine kept in lead, which tastes sweeter for it, and from jugs and dishes glazed with lead; healers treat the colic and seldom name the cause.

Among the poisons, **bad air** is the quiet killer of the underground: foul airs that seep out of rock and lie along a floor, air used up by breath and lamps, and heat that builds in the lowest levels. A lamp that burns low and blue, a dull headache,

and a calm sleepiness in which the worker stops caring to leave are its signs, and a worker who sits down to rest in it seldom rises. Crews haul the fallen out by rope rather than follow them in. Ruin-delvers who break into a sealed Dwarven working for its old treasure carry a candle ahead of them on a pole, and the tale of the band that found a vault of gold and lay down beside it to rest is told in every hold. Kobolds feel trapped air through skin and stone before anyone else, and much of the vent work of the **Stonewake Deeps** is theirs (see Stone and the Deep). On the ruin edges of the **Glassbelt Interior**, salvagers who dig, camp, or drink on the glassed ground of the old ash-furnace belts take **furnace-ash sickness**: grey skin, loosened teeth, sores that will not close, and the **barren years** of salvage families. Many of them take the sickness for Ozhar the Pyre-King's hunger, still feeding (see The Windscar), and the salvagers' grimmest songs are of treasure-seekers who carried slag-gold out of the scars against the warnings: the crew that came home rich and died one by one through the next year, coughing ash.

Hunger, cold, and heat

Famine sickness is the oldest dread of every farming people. It follows a failed harvest, a failed river rise, a siege, or a road cut in winter, and it kills more through the fluxes, coughs, and camp fevers of the hungry crowd than through hunger alone. In the **swelling hunger** children's bellies and faces puff with water, so that a swollen child can look fed to a stranger. The long-starved who are given a full meal can die of it within days, and healers fight hungry families over every bowl, giving broth and thin gruel first and bread over a week. Magic can do little here: a body without food cannot hold the life a healer gives it, and a starved healer cannot safely heal at all. In the Lower Serath a failed spring rise means hunger and no town can prevent it. Lords may open their stores or hold them; Ogre camp-custom, remembering the Long Hunger, still feeds the vulnerable before the strong. In a famine year the roads fill with bandits who were farmers the year before, granaries are guarded with spears, and the songs of the hungry years are songs of raids on the lord's stores and of the outlaws who fed whole villages from them.

The **black gums** are a sickness of the larder. They come at the end of a long voyage, in the last weeks of a siege, at a deep posting supplied by lift and stair, or in a winter when the cellar holds only grain, salt meat, and dried goods: gums that swell and blacken, old scars that open as if the wound were new. Fresh food mends them in days, and every cook knows it, though the reason is taken to be that fresh food carries the spring in it. Careful houses keep onions, roots, and hard apples through winter and sprout grain in the cellar, and the station keepers of the **Soundchain Roads** put greens aboard with the water. Siege songs remember the garrison that held out a whole winter on salt meat and lost its teeth before it lost its walls, and the besiegers who brought baskets of green onions to the gate to taunt them.

Cold-bite takes fingers and toes on the passes of the Ironspine, the **Stormcrown**, and the **High Scars**, and the **creeping chill** takes whole travellers: they stop shivering, grow sleepy, throw off their cloaks as if they were hot, and lie down to rest. Mountain folk say the cold is gentle at the end and the frozen dead smile; guides carry spare wool, keep their parties moving, and let no one sit alone (see Stone and the Deep). **Heat sickness** is its summer twin, the cramp and faint of the harvest field and the forge, and at its worst the **burning collapse**, when a worker stops sweating and falls. Basin field work stops at noon, crews rotate at the forge, and caravans on the Glassbelt travel by night. Pass songs remember the guide who carried a frozen child down from the High Scars inside her own coat and lost three fingers doing it, and the raiders caught by a storm in the pass they meant to ambush, found in spring still crouched behind their rocks.

Fits and the madness of the bite

The **falling sickness** drops a person where they stand, stiff and jerking, and lets them rise with no memory of it. Some are born with it, some take it after a blow to the head or a high fever, and some after a working that the body could not carry. It is common enough that every village has known someone with it and strange enough that every people has a story for it: a priest is called oftener than a healer, a few households of augurs keep the fallen as seers, and in the Basins the moon is blamed. Those who have it are often barred from oaths, smithing, and the sea.

The **biting madness** is feared beyond its numbers. A dog that turns strange, a fox in a yard in daylight, or a bat on the ground at noon may carry it, and whoever it bites waits through weeks or a season of fear before the sickness shows or does not. Once it shows, with the **water-fear** that throws the sick into choking terror at the sight of a cup, nothing known turns it. A household meets a bite with a hot iron at the hearth; the bitten keep a vigil at the nearest shrine until the season of waiting is over. In a mad-fox year villages pay a bounty on every fox brush, and the songs remember the boy who killed a mad wolf at the fold gate with a hay-fork and was bitten doing it, and the vigil the whole village kept for him through the season of waiting.

Poisons and Venoms

The field and the larder

Most poison is an accident of field and larder. **Food sickness**, the cramps after the meat that smelled a little off or the purge after half-cooked beans, falls on everyone who shared the dish and is over in a day or two; households say meat turns in thunder and milk sours under a full moon. Its rare kin, **the stillness**, breeds unseen in a sealed jar or close-wrapped meat and comes a day or more later, blurring the eyes and thickening the speech while the mind stays clear, until the breath grows shallow. It is often taken for a curse because it strikes so long after the meal, and an unlucky cook has been accused of poisoning. Halflings, who smell a turning barrel across a storeroom, catch spoilage before it reaches the table, and the store-keepers of the folds are trusted to say which barrel goes to the pigs.

In a wet year the rye and the poor barley grow hard purple-black spurs in place of grains, and the spurs go to the mill. Weeks later the village begins to burn: hands and feet aflame, then cold and blackening, children in fits, old women seeing things in the rafters. This is **burning bread**, the **holy fire**, **Anvelle's burning**, and because it falls on a whole village at once it is treated as a plague. Pilgrims who go away and come back mended credit the shrine, not the change of bread. Some old millers know to throw out a dark-speckled sack, and say so; in a year with little else to eat they are not always heeded.

The wild plants kill the untaught. Hedgerow children learn "black and shiny, leave it be" for the shining berries of shady hedges; foragers mistake the poisonous spotted umbels of damp ground for wild parsley; heart-leaf, a healer's herb for a failing heart, kills at a little more than the dose. In the deep weald, roots that look and smell almost like the good tubers kill within hours, and the edge settlements call them all **deathroot**: the Wood Elves name each root by kind and teach their children the poisonous ones before the good, Elven guides are paid for the lesson as for any other passage, and a settlement with no such teacher learns from its graves (see The Forest Heartlands). Poisoners of the basin towns buy deathroot from weald-edge diggers who ask no questions, and the Wood Elves have hunted down more than one root-seller who sold their knowledge to a murderer. Among mushrooms the **pale cap** is the slow betrayer: a day of violent purging, a false recovery in which the eater gets up and eats, and then the yellowing and the end. The fungus-eating peoples of the holds

and the root-houses are raised knowing each good kind by name, and lose few; most deaths come in surface woods in hungry years, where village healers seldom know the false recovery. In the root-houses of the **Roothollows** the pale cap is called the guest's cap, and a siege tale tells of townsfolk who sent a basket of them out to the enemy camp as a peace gift; whether the tale is true, no army since has eaten mushrooms sent from a wall.

On the coasts a mussel holds whatever its water holds. In some still, warm summers the sea turns rust-brown along a stretch of shore and the shellfish take up a numbing poison that boiling does not destroy: the lips tingle, the face goes numb, the eater feels as if floating, and in a bad case the breath falters. Some call it **Maris's grief**. The harbour families say who may gather, and in such a summer a harbour closes its beaches on its own word; wreckers who plunder a ship on a rust-water shore are said to die of the shellfish they eat while they wait for the next wreck, and the hamlets think it fitting. Near some river mouths of the **Tidelace Coasts** a newer fouling turns the water black and sour, and the hamlets nearest it no longer gather there; the far-side atlas follows it to the shore.

The poisoner's craft

Made poisons are prepared on purpose by someone who knows what a root or a cap or a venom does, and the craft is close kin to the healer's, for the same knowledge of dose and kind makes both. A skilled poisoner chooses for the people as well as the person, since herbs act differently on each, and a mixed table may see one guest sicken and another shrug. The art is to make a poisoning look like something else, a seizure of the heart or a wasting illness, and what gives it away is pattern: a sickness that eases when the patient eats elsewhere, or returns with a particular visitor. Poisoning is a crime of houses where inheritance, office, or debt is worth a death. Lords call poison the coward's knife and trust in stones that cloud and rings that warm, none of which work. Great households keep tasters and watched kitchens, and where magic was used to make or deliver a poison it is reckoned dark practice by the harm it does, though a lord who wants a culprit seldom waits for proof. The songs are full of poisonings: the bride who poisoned the cup at her own wedding feast to avenge her brother, the taster who drank and said nothing so his lord would die beside him. Poisoners caught are boiled, burned, or drowned according to the place, and the most famous were never caught.

Stings and bites

On warm days the adders lie out on heath and stone, and a bare foot in the bracken finds one. **Viper venom** rarely kills a grown Human, but it lays the bitten limb up for weeks and can kill a child within the day, and the dose that sickens a Human gravely endangers a Kobold, a Halfling, a Goblin, or a Gnome. Folk cut the bite and suck it, bind it hard, or lay the split snake on it, and none of it helps; the patients mostly live anyway. Assassins' tales tell of an adder slipped into a lord's boot, and every great household on adder ground has a servant whose task is to shake out the boots each morning. It is the venom every field healer is expected to know, and the healing schools teach the drawing of venom on it first. The lesser **stings and bites**, bee and wasp, hornet and spider, jellyfish and the buried sting-fish of far-side beaches, are the small change of every summer. What the peoples fear is the rare person who swells at a sting until the throat closes; beekeepers say such a person is marked by the bees, and tell the hive of every death and marriage in the house so it does not leave in offence. Halfling tales tell of the fold that threw its bee-skeps over the wall onto a band of raiders, and of the raiders who ran back the way they came, swelling.

The Plagues of the Peoples

The red pox

The **red pox** comes to a town every generation or so, runs through every child born since it last came, and leaves. A pocked face in a corridor town draws no remark. About ten days after it is caught a high fever breaks the back and splits the head; then spots rise in the mouth and on the face and hands, swell into blisters, and harden into deep pustules, and in that dangerous week the face swells shut. Where the pustules stay apart they crust and fall away in the third or fourth week, leaving pits; where they run together, most die. It kills about one in five of those it takes, and more where it falls on a remote valley that has not seen it for two generations and takes the grown along with the young.

Its great fact is that it is never taken twice, and the towns build their whole answer on it. Pocked nurses tend the pox house, and nobody else is sent. A pox house is marked at the threshold before stronger quarantine is laid, a ward-maker walks a boundary round a quarter that has shut, and in a pox year the pocked are hired to nurse, bury, and carry, because they alone may come and go. The towns' ruling houses shut pox houses, mark their doors, and post watchers at the gates. Looters strip the marked houses all the same, and the pox goes with them from town to town; the songs of the pox years tell of bandits who took a dead merchant's silks and carried the red to every village they robbed. Mothers in some towns send a child into a mild pox house on purpose, to have it over with young.

The swelling plague

The **swelling plague** is the great dying. It comes every few generations to the corridor towns, ports, and granary country of the cradle-web, by ship or grain barge, and each coming is remembered by the town it struck. Dead rats in the streets come first. A few days later the sick are struck down by fever and a crushing head, and a hard, hot, agonizing swelling rises in the groin, the armpit, or the neck and darkens towards black; at the end of the first week it bursts and drains and the sick slowly mend, or they die. About half of those who swell die. In some the sickness settles in the lungs, and from then on it passes on the breath at the bedside and kills nearly everyone it takes within two or three days. A bad year takes a third of a town between spring and the first frost.

Most of what the schools know of mass healing and containment was learned against it, and a plague town is a town reorganized. Plague houses are marked; quarters are closed by walked and spoken boundaries; a chamber is slammed shut by an emergency seal the moment containment fails, often with someone still inside. In the fever houses and plague wards of the Red Mercy and the Houses of Mercy, healers slow the plague's spread through a body without curing it, draw the fever into steaming bowls, and burn the plague-sweat out of one patient at a time, and because there are never healers enough, an augur's touch at the bedside sorts before dawn who can still be turned. A quarter that gives a little blood and breath from each household can keep its fever house standing; a poor district pledges years of shrine labour to hold its wards through winter, and owes it afterwards. The dead go to the trench carried by corpse-servants, or are burned within a ring of disciplined fire, or are sealed in crypts of blue ice until a cure is found. Rushed plague pits breed hostile remnants, so the dying goes on haunting a town after the plague has left it. In the Stonewake Deeps whoever holds a reach may seal a way first and answer for it afterwards when contagion threatens, if anyone can make them answer. In a plague year towns shut their gates and archers keep the roads, and the songs remember the outlaw bands that took over the emptied

villages, the corpse-carriers who robbed the dead, and the one healer who walked into the shut town and did not come out.

Almost nobody thinks of the fleas. That rats carry filth and sickness is common knowledge; most blame bad air, the stars, or the gods, and burn sweet herbs against the reek. Crows gathering over a district are read as the plague's herald. At the pyres the people invoke the Steward of Purifying Fire, who burns disease without hating the sick, and when the lantern of dawn glows in a ward chapel the ward stops panicking.

Camp fever

Camp fever follows crowds that cannot wash: an army a month on the march, a town under siege, a cellar of prisoners, a ship's hold, a road full of the hungry. It is carried by the body louse. A headache comes on hard, then fever, then a rash of dull-red spots across the trunk and the muttering stupor that gives it one of its many names, **the mutter**; near the end of the second week the fever breaks or the sleep deepens into one the sick do not come back from. In a siege, a gaol, or a famine camp about one in five of the grown die. Delousing is the real cure and few know it as one: clothes boiled or smoked, straw burned, heads shaved. Wise households boil a returning soldier's shirt. The fugitive camps and crowded repair quarters of the **Broken Marches** know it as well as any army (see The Basins and the Marches). Sellsword companies are said to scratch their way through a campaign, and a town that sees a lousy company at its gate shuts it, which has started more than one siege. More companies have been broken by camp fever than by any enemy, and the songs remember the siege that both armies abandoned in the same week, each thinking the other had brought the spotted fever on it.

Plagues of the Herds and Fields

A household can bear a wet year that rots the hooves. A **murrain** takes the plough team, and with it next year's bread. The cattle plague the basin villages mean when they say one "can empty a village's meadow in a season" passes along the droving roads with bought droves, hired oxen, and the hides of a dead herd, and within a week of the first sign most of the byre is dead. No drench cures it, and a healer's life poured into one prized ox at heavy cost does nothing for a meadow; what works is separation, droves turned back at the boundary and the dead burned or buried deep. When word comes up the road, villages of the Basins and the **Headwater Marches** close their droves and set watchers at the fords, and a lord may forbid the cattle markets for a season. Ox-carts stop, and grain waits on the threshing floors for teams that are not there. In a murrain year the march-country raids for cattle to replace the dead, a whole valley's feuds can be dated to the murrain that started them, and drovers whose herds carried it are sometimes hanged by the villages they passed.

Shepherds of the Headwater valleys name **sheep rot and fly-strike** together because they come together in wet years: liver rot that takes a flock slowly through the winter, foot rot that sets it grazing on its knees, and the blowfly that eats an unwatched sheep alive in a summer week. Shepherd families keep the knowledge of which meadows rot, and a newcomer who grazes them in a wet year learns the hard way. In the **Windscar Expanse** a camp that stays too long at one well fouls it, and first the herds and then the children fall to a scouring flux: **soured-well sickness**. The kindreds tell of it in the tale of the Still Well, in which Rakhal the Storm-Caller tore the shelters down and drove a stubborn camp on to sweet water, and the answer they keep is the tale's answer: break camp. A camp that moves at the first sign loses little (see The Windscar). Raiders are said to throw a carcass down a rival strong-

hold's well to sour it, and the kindreds count it among the deeds that are never forgiven; they can name blood-feuds of three generations that began at a soured well.

The fields have their own plagues. **Grain blight**, the red rust of leaf and stem and the black smut of the ear, rides the wind from field to field and takes hold worst on wheat sown again and again on tired ground; a bad blight year can halve a basin harvest, and the hungry winter after kills the old, the young, and the poor. A blight year fills the basin roads with hungry men and the woods with outlaws, and the songs remember the lord who hanged the first villagers to break into his granary, and the second winter, when there were too many to hang. Basin villages take it for the displeasure of Anvelle the Harvest-Mother, and in the failing districts they are not far wrong, for the fallow her rest-year demands is the best defence there is. **Granary mould** takes a store from inside when grain goes in damp, so that a village that kept a granary against the bad year finds nothing in it when the bad year comes, and many keep the granary doors shut against night air in the very weather that needs them open. A granary-keeper whose stores go grey is suspected of selling the grain and blaming the mould, and more than one has been beaten or driven out by a hungry village before the truth was known. Warders who lay workings against rot and rats on village stores are among the most ordinary paid casters of the countryside. The **wet-year rots** take roots in the terraces below the Ironspine holds and grapes on the vine terraces of the **Leeward Folds**, and they are often taken for darker things: a village that cries the black mould of the Rotting Crown over ordinary rot is a common nuisance to those who must go and look. A grower can tell the difference: wet-year rot follows water and stops when the rain does. Witch-finders do their best trade in a wet year, when a field gone black can be laid at a neighbour's door and the neighbour burned before the next rain.

On the far side one plague of young is older than any of these: the **egg blight** that closed the **First Nesting Confluence** to ordinary return, and taught the Thaluren that sanctity does not protect. No working, herb, or rite has ever saved a blighted clutch; its answer is watching a water, closing it, and sending the runs elsewhere (see Peoples of the Water (FND 243)).

Peoples, Places, and Odds

The peoples are different bodies, and they do not fall sick alike. A contagion passes most easily within one people and less readily between peoples; many never cross at all, and the great plagues are great because they do. Humans are struck by nothing in particular and by the crowd sicknesses of their towns and corridors most. Elves are spared many of the crowd sicknesses by living in small households far from the towns, and take the red pox seldom, but the long-lived peoples who reach adulthood without the childhood spots take them hard. Dwarves bear hunger and scarcity and the dust of their own trade better than others, and are hurt by bad air, to whose going wrong their steadiness makes them slow. Reedfolk are spared marsh fever and most wetland disease. Halflings are spared much spoiled food, which they smell, and suffer the crowd sicknesses of close folds; Goblins bear hunger and eat almost anything with little harm, and take the crowded-warren sicknesses of ruin edges and town fringes; Kobolds sense bad air first and suffer cold and the venoms that kill a small body. Ogres bear cold and hunger and heal and rot ordinarily. Trolls shrug off the lasting harm of most wounds and are threatened by starvation, which a body that regrows must be fed against.

A few ailments belong to one people alone. A Thaluren kept from water for more than some hours begins to crack and fester with the **drying sickness**, and every land people that deals with them learns to keep a trough or a wet cloth at the meeting house; a Thaluren left to dry by another

people takes it as an insult to all their kin. Kavari young die in their gravel nursery beds of small changes of warmth or silt in the **nursery-water sickness**, which stands behind much of Kavari nursery custom. Elves thrown out of step with kin, place, and season by grief or exile fall into the **Elven fading**, a slow dimming of colour, scent, and appetite that other peoples mistake for a broken heart, and which nothing helps in an Elf who cannot go home and will not take a new place. The Wrought take no fever, flux, poison, or bad air of flesh at all; their one sickness is the **pattern-fray** of a Wrought kept from rest or refitted against its will, and where the Wrought have kin or patrons strong enough to press it, a fray is treated as a harm owed care and a fray caused by forced work as a wrong to be paid for; elsewhere it is still called wear.

Places change the odds as much as peoples. In the Confluence Basins one child in three dies before five, more in a hard winter; in the crowded corridor towns of the Lower Serath two in five, of warm-month fever and whatever else passes through a crowded quarter; in the folds, whose stores carry them through most bad years, only about one in five, mostly of winter coughs. The Goblins of the Broken Marches lose two children in five to crowded-warren sickness, cold, and collapse; the Orcs of the **Rimward Basins** lose one in three to fevers and fouled water. A writer who wants to know what a family has lost need only ask where it lives.

Tensions

- **The mild pox house.** Some mothers send a child into a mild pox house on purpose, to have the red pox over with young, while the ruling houses of the same towns mark and shut every pox house and post watchers at the gates. A house kept open for the purpose is a remedy to the mothers who use it and the start of the next outbreak to the council.
- **Who can still be turned.** In a plague ward an augur's touch sorts before dawn who is likeliest to die, so that the healers' reserves go to those who can still be saved. The families of the passed-over see their dead chosen, and a quarter that paid for its fever house in blood and breath expects its own to be turned first.
- **A debt of shrine labour.** A poor district that pledged years of shrine labour to hold its plague wards through winter owes it after the plague has gone, with fewer hands to pay it, while a richer quarter kept its wards with a little blood from each house and owes nothing.
- **Sealed first.** In the Stonewake Deeps whoever holds a reach may seal a way first when contagion threatens and answer for it afterwards, if anyone can make them answer. Those caught on the far side of the seal, sick or well, wait on an answer that comes only once the danger is judged, if it comes at all.
- **The stronghold well.** The strongholds of the Rimward Basins cannot break camp when their wells sour in the dry months, and send their herds out early under escort instead. Rakhal's following, growing as the Pact world settles, takes every soured stronghold well as proof that a people which will not move has stayed too long.
- **The sweet wine.** Wine kept in lead tastes sweeter for it and is prized, glazed jugs are in every house, and the healers who treat the colic and the dulled children seldom name the cause. A glaze-potter's trade and a household's health rest on the same silence.

CHAPTER 9

Unnatural Afflictions

Did it come on the breath, or come at a word?
Did it start in the house, or with one at the door?
If it spreads, it was caught; if it stops, it was sent;
and if it keeps changing, put down the knife and fetch fire.

— the first questions, *The Bedside Questions*

Most of what fills a sickroom is ordinary, and the healers of the age are right to assume so first. A few cases are not. A guard drops into a sweating fever at his post with no sickness in the house and is well by morning; a courier who rode through a mortal wound cannot rise from bed three weeks after the danger has passed; a child sits up in her bed and speaks with three dead voices; a farmer comes back from a far valley with a green thread growing along a healed scar. These are the **unnatural afflictions**: the toll magic takes from those who work it and those it is worked on, curses and sicknesses laid by a spell, the harms that travellers carry home from the planes, the Veil, and the Resonant Zones, and the blights of the Dark Entities. Many are known only by rumour. The peoples' explanations of them are often wrong, and the one thing a healer can be sure of is that several of them grow worse under healing. They are also where the era's darker trades meet the sickroom: the grave-robber with a black hand, the delver who came back from a silent ruin rich and empty, the witch-hunter riding on a village's fear, and the healer who traced a sending back to its caster.

Caught or Sent

The healers' rule is short: if it spreads, it was caught; if it stops, it was sent. A sickness laid by a working comes suddenly and at full strength in someone who was well a moment before. It strikes one person, or a whole crowd at once, and does not move on through a household over the following days. It often begins when a particular person is near and eases when they leave. And it breaks, usually within the day, when the working runs out, without the slow mending of a true fever. A healer who sees those four signs looks round the room before she looks at the patient.

The rule is sound and seldom used, because the peoples believe in sent sickness far more than the world provides it. The **ill wish**, the evil eye of many tongues, is the most widely believed affliction in Caeldon and among the least often real. The cow dries, the child falls, the roof leaks, and the neighbour who glared at the market is to

AT A GLANCE

What they are	The costs of magic, curses and laid sicknesses, magical diseases, the sicknesses of the planes, the Veil, and the zones, and the blights of the Dark Entities.
How common	Magic's toll in every village with a healer; curses rarely real and constantly blamed; plane and zone sicknesses wherever people go to them; the blights rare, and talked of for generations.
How they are told apart	A sudden onset at full strength, no spreading, a caster near, a place visited; or signs no ordinary fever has.
What helps	Rest, refusal, and distance; cleansing, wards, and exorcism; against a blight, whatever its maker cannot bear.
What fails	Healing, often; it feeds several of them.
The year	The Medieval Era, c. 1,350 CR.

blame. Almost every household keeps some charm against it: blue beads, salt, iron, spit, and averted eyes, which give comfort and some caution, and caution is half the cure of the true curse. Villages accuse widows, strangers, and the squint-eyed, and such accusations do far more harm than curses do. Most of what is blamed on the ill wish has an ordinary cause: sickness, bad water, weather, carelessness, and plain bad luck.

The true curse exists, and it is dangerous because it is quiet. An augur who lays one weights a person's chances towards the worst outcome already open to them, by making hesitation and error likelier; the cursed drop a tool, take a wrong turning, mishear an order, stumble on the stair, and the small failures come closer together and gather at the moments that matter. It cannot invent a catastrophe. It only lets the worst already-possible thing happen more often: a fall from a scaffold, a lost footing in a ford, a missed parry. Its turning point is recognition. Someone who knows they are weighted slows down, checks, and asks for help, and the curse finds fewer openings; the careful and the disciplined are least troubled by it. Wards throw a directed curse back at its sender or take it apart, at the warder's cost. True luck-cursing is the work of trained augurs, counted a wrong by most peoples even where a lord pays for it. Some peoples treat cursing as an ordinary punishment, and a wronged family may lay one openly. Feuds between houses are often fought as much with curses as with swords, and the songs remember the two families that cursed each other down to the last child, and the hedge-witch who sold curses to both. The Orcs of the Windscar Pacts dread the Curse of Oblivion of Ushkar the Ancestor-Warden, which strikes a breaker's name from memory.

Laid sicknesses

Rarer and plainer are the **laid sicknesses**, the "sent fevers" of lords' halls, cities, and wars: a poisoner's art without the poison. A working drives heat into a body until it flushes and raves; drives cold in until bone and joint lose their give and a fall breaks what it should only bruise; seizes the blood and the muscles so the limbs refuse to move for a few heartbeats; draws vigour out of a weakened body, or breath and stamina out of a crowd; or makes the body feel burned or struck without a mark on it. Assassins, interrogators, riot-breakers, and battle-mages use them, and most peoples punish laying one on a person, when they can find who did it. The songs remember the assassin who laid a fever on a whole wedding feast to reach one guest, and the healer who traced the sending back to its caster and burned his house down around him. Most do no lasting harm to the healthy.

Pressed hard and renewed on the sick, the old, or the wounded, they kill. The surest cure is distance: take the patient from the caster, or the caster from the patient. Because they are real, they lend weight to the belief that all sudden illness is sent, and many a true fever has been blamed on a neighbour. Village healers rarely meet them, and when they do they are likelier to blame bad air.

The corpse's touch and the held word

Two curses are feared out of proportion to their rarity. **Grave rot** is decay laid on the living: a sword arm goes numb in mid-swing and is black to the elbow by nightfall, because a necromancer's touch or curse-mark has turned the body's repair off and its dying on. It spreads towards the trunk, with fever and confusion, and a case not cleansed before the black reaches a joint ends in the loss of the limb or in death. Speed decides it. A temple cure or a burning-out by fire can stop it, and without them a surgeon cuts the black flesh away. Because it looks like ordinary wound rot gone mad, a healer who mistakes one for the other is commonly blamed for the death. It is known mostly from war, from the feuds of frontier lords who hire grave-thieves, and from the hunting of necromancers, where a blackened limb is proof enough to burn one. Grave-robbers are its commonest victims, and in many villages a man with a black, stinking hand is taken for a grave-robber and driven out before he can explain.

Oath-sickness is the one magical ailment the peoples count as just, and much of what order there is rests on the fear of it. A caravan guard who sold the route to bandits wakes choking, with a band of fire across his chest, because the vow he swore was bound to his body. The pain follows the binding's wording, tightening the throat, weighing on the chest, burning in the hands that signed, and it comes in waves that worsen whenever the breaker moves further from the promise and ease whenever he moves towards keeping it. It does not wear out while the breach stands. The cure is in the vow: keep the promise, late or in part, or have the binding dissolved by a revocation rite, which needs the agreement of the one who holds it, or of a lord or temple strong enough to overrule them, and costs a price as well as the caster's effort. Most peoples say the oath-sick are "held to their word" and give them little sympathy. Tales tell of oath-breakers who wasted for years rather than yield, and of honest folk who suffered for a promise worded by someone cleverer. Bound oaths underpin trade, service, and testimony wherever Binding Magic is practised: lords and temples keep oathwardens of their own, most towns have a binder who seals bargains for pay, and sellswords sworn by binding to a company are said to be the most loyal in the world and the most dangerous to cross. The songs remember the deserter who rode three days burning with oath-fire to warn the enemy he had once sworn to fight. The village meets oath-sickness most often in a returned guard or debtor who cannot stop choking until he makes amends.

The Price of the Art

Every working costs something, and some costs are illnesses (see How Magic Works (FND 111)). They are the commonest unnatural afflictions by far, because they fall on the healers and casters every village depends on.

The healer's grey

A healer who has mended too much in a day goes grey at the fingertips. That is the mild end of **life-force depletion**, the **healer's grey** of every village: a body that has given away more of its vital reserve than it had to spare. Mild depletion is a pale face, cold grey fingertips, slow thought, and a day of poor appetite, gone after a night's sleep and a meal. Deeper depletion shakes, chills, sleeps long without resting, and catches every passing sickness. Repeated over years it stops mending: the hair greys early and the body ages ahead of its

years. The turning point of a single case is the first long sleep, because a patient who wakes warmer will mend and one who wakes colder, with a slow pulse and no hunger, may collapse. Most peoples revere the greyed healer, and a village that wears out its healer is ashamed of it. The schools of Vital Magic rotate their healers, keep stored reserves for days of mass casualties, and teach when to refuse. In plague years and after battles the hospices of the Red Mercy and the Houses of Mercy lose healers to it as surely as to the sickness.

A depleted body cannot heal another safely, however compatible the two may be, so a village with one exhausted healer is a village without one. Vitality can be given back, from a willing donor, a stored vessel, or a group that shares out what it has, but every gift is a transfer that leaves someone else greyer. Nothing restores years already spent.

When a working bites

Backlash is what a spell does when it gets loose. Control breaks, through panic, a lost word, a smeared rune, or more force than the body can carry, and the force finds the nearest body, usually the caster's. Every people that works magic knows the sight of a caster on the floor with a bloody nose and shaking hands, and each school leaves its own signature: a crushing chest after the surging arts, flesh that grows wrong after a failed healing, cracked skin and a failing pulse after frost, a hand left a paw after a shape-changing that did not finish, a mind looping on one dread after a reading of chance. Most cases ease into a few days of exhaustion; a case still worsening on the second day is settling into something longer. Villagers say the working "turned" or "bit", and trust a survivor of a bad backlash less afterwards, as if the spell were still in them. Battle tales are full of the war-mage who pushed one blast of fire too far to break a charge and was found in the ash beside the riders she stopped; sellsword companies pay a mage well and watch her hands.

Channel scarring is the wear of a working life, and it frightens casters more than backlash because it comes quietly and does not go away. Each heavy casting does small harm and rest repairs most of it; where the casting outruns the repair, the paths magic travels through the body scar, carrying less and costing more. It begins with signs a caster can hide, more effort for the same working and side effects still there the next morning, and goes on to a tremor that stays in the hands, failing touch and taste and hearing, feeling at half strength, barrenness, and a shortened life. Villagers know it by its plainest saying: healers age early. Its turning point is when the caster stops. Where a school, temple, or warlord keeps a firm hand on its casters, it keeps tallies, orders rest, and stops those who have been warned; elsewhere nothing stops a healer working until she breaks. War and plague years produce a generation of scarred healers at once.

Priests carry their own form of it. **Vow-scarring** is the long wear of carrying a god's power through a mortal body: an old priest of thirty years' service who cannot pray to any god but his own, cannot bend on any question his god cares about, and lies two days in the dark after every great rite. Temples track it in three stages and many priests count its first signs as blessings. It turns to harm when the channelling outruns rest, when doctrine is coercive, or when a priest channels through a contradiction he cannot resolve, and a single miracle beyond his tolerance can burn, break, or kill him. Every temple has its old priests who lie in the dark after a feast-day rite, and congregations accept it as the price of the god's presence. In war and plague the monitoring fails first.

Borrowed years

Blood debt is the bill for life spent before it was earned. Some workings lend a body its own future: they hold off a lethal wound, trade later vitality for present strength, or spend years out-

right. A courier rides through a mortal wound, delivers the warning, and three weeks later cannot rise from bed; a large debt comes as a collapse in which the patient greys within days and looks years older than the week before. Nothing cancels it. A healer can carry a patient through the worst nights, but every such gift is a second loan from someone else. Gods lend the same way. In the Leeward Folds newborns are given a season of protection by Tamsel the Season-Weaver, and a child so blessed may meet its "long winter" of sickness later; the folds hold that Tamsel takes back only what was lent. "The blood remembers," say Human soldiers. War-camps know the pattern well, and village healers meet it mostly as the elder who aged suddenly after a good summer or the child sickly after a blessed one. Many peoples count a debt-working laid on someone without consent a wrong, and punish it when the worker is weak enough to punish. Songs remember the champion who borrowed ten years of strength to hold a gate for one night and walked off the wall an old man at dawn, and the lords who paid sorcerers to borrow on their soldiers' blood.

Mending that fails, and practice that corrupts

Failed Mending is the case that was saved and came out wrong, the wound that closed too hard and keeps the harm in altered form (its course, and the Trolls in whom it is stable and heritable, are told in Magic in Ordinary Life). Humans of the basins call it "proud healing" and say the wound would not let go; old soldiers keep their knotted scars as proof of service, and some healers refuse a patient who has been worked on too often by another. The schools of Vital Magic teach against it, and a healer known for it loses custom.

Dark corruption is what predatory magic does to those who work it. Sacrifice, coercion, corpse abuse, and curse-work load a caster's channels with residue and wear them into loops that reward the next taking, and the person bends with the channels: the feelings go blunt first, then the habit sets and the body greys and wastes, and in the late stages the appetite rules. Temples and schools grade it in four stages; before the third, abstention and help bring most back, and after it few return. The Halls of Consecration of Sanctified Magic do most of the cleansing. Most peoples take corruption for a visible sin and believe a corrupt caster can be known by a grey face, a cold hand, or a smell of iron, and many hold that it is catching and shun the households of condemned casters, though the schools say otherwise. Witch-hunters ride on the strength of that belief, and the songs of the hunts are dark ones: the grey-faced sorcerer burned in the market square, and the grey-faced old woman burned beside him who had only been sick. Its inherited form, carried by descendants who have done nothing, is a lifelong trait that shows under strain.

Sicknesses of Place

Some afflictions belong to where a person lives or has been.

Living beside the strange

In a village by a ley-rich spring a child is born with eyes that hold the light, and her cousin with joints that ache from the age of ten. Both are **ley-warp**, the change that long pressure of strong magic works on a body's pattern and flesh: sometimes adaptive, a better gift for one current; sometimes unstable, a gift that misfires; sometimes degenerative, with pain in the joints and nerves and a narrowing of what healing can reach. Villages near strong sites call the changed "touched" or "place-marked" and treat them as lucky or cursed, often in the same breath. The one sure treatment is to leave the pressure, and families who can afford it send a suffering child away from the site.

The **Pull of Extremes** is the same patience on a larger scale: what a thin place or a long-lasting Resonant Zone does, over a lifetime, to the people who live beside it. A village beside a zone of fire runs hot-tempered and feverish; a town on a thin spot to the Scourge quarrels and startles; a hamlet by a still spring heals slowly and changes nothing. Zone-side folk rarely call it a sickness. They call it the place's temper, and say a child "has the spring in it" or "has the fire in it". Physicians in cities on thin ground know their town's peculiar complaints and treat them as part of practice; elsewhere it is only a reputation.

The dead who cling

Gravediggers say the cold gets into you and stays. **Remnant contamination** is that cold, the residue of the dead clinging to the living who handle them: a trade's ailment in its mild form, a dulled nose and a gloomy temper and a pull back to the graves on a free day; in its strong form a hostile remnant fastened on a living person, who chills and weakens a little more each night and dreams the remnant's last feeling until they wake with it. The deathbed trades keep their own customs, washing in running water after a burial and never eating at a graveside, and plague years make the sickness common as the pits fill faster than the rites can be said. Battlefield strippers who take boots and rings from the dead before the burial come home sickest of all, and the old soldiers' saying is that a dead man's ring weighs more than his sword. Rarer is **trace possession**, a living mind with someone else's pattern in it: an Echo of the dead, a hardened remnant, a curse-thread, or a false self worked in by magic. It begins with borrowed habits, a gesture the host never made or a memory of a place they never saw, and goes on until the foreign trace speaks. What possesses is never a soul, and the host is still there underneath, which is the horror of it and the hope. While the host still breaks through, frightened and confused, they can be brought back; kin call their name and speak their memories, and the word of those who knew the host before is how healers and priests tell host from occupant. The Halls of Consecration say who may exorcise in their temples, and every case is talked of for a generation; the songs remember the young lord ridden by a murdered ancestor who named his killer at the feast, and the hall that burned the same night.

In one valley of the cradle-web the dead and the living share the fog itself. In the **Hushvale** the deep fog of an old concealment rite drains the lone and the lost of warmth, breath, names, and the power to know a face, and some of the Held are overwritten for a night by a hunter's will. The Held watch, bind, and nurse such a one till morning, and nobody goes alone into deep fog (see Sealed and Silent Places). Healers of the cradle-web have never treated a case.

The cures that cost

The waters and planes that cure almost anything are where the worst of the cure-all sicknesses come from, and they are why the great cures leave the sickbeds full (see The Resonant Zones (FND 33)). A sip from a **Blood River** closes a mortal wound or ends a disease at once. Within days comes a craving that is not for food, and drinkers who keep a supply can hold for years, looking younger than they should and thinking of little else; when the water stops, the years it held off come due together, and those who drank too long at the bank swell, tight and shining, and seldom come home. Healers call it **the Blood River's Surfeit**; those who know the zone call it the Addiction, and its last stage the Bloated. Healers who must use the water give the smallest draught that will serve and wean the patient by smaller and smaller sips. Some healers of the Red Mercy Hospices and the College of White Vessels bargain with the Hemophages for water at a cost paid in other lives, and many refuse on principle.

The **Verdant Expanse**, across the planes, cures as freely and leaves **Verdant overgrowth** behind: a fine green line in a healed scar, a rootlet under the skin, a sweet green smell on the breath, and over seasons moss in the creases of the skin, leaves at the fingertips, a contentment that does not want, and in the end a sufferer who goes out, stands in soil, and roots. Many stop at the first stage for life, carrying a small growth they keep trimmed, and the illness they went to cure stays cured. Surgeons who have seen a case keep it to themselves, since a patient cut back too often learns to hide the green. The herbalists of the **Drowning Garden**, who gather where time runs fastest, come back grey at thirty; in their trade a grey young head is a mark of skill, and a Garden herb is priced by the years it cost. That is **time-sickness**, which also takes the guardians who walk away from an Ageless Spring after long stillness and age decades in a short walk, and the keepers of sealed things who come home slow of hand and thought to a village of strangers.

What travellers bring home

The few who cross the Veil pay for it (see The Veil and the Outside (FND 51)). **Veil-sickness**, the scholars' **memory erosion**, is the fare: most crossers come out tired, chilled, and a little lost, with a gap, a lost day, and a name they cannot recall, and some pay more, a season blurred or a vow they no longer remember making. A traveller who loses intent drifts, and the Veil keeps many who do. Crossers carry a clear purpose, a companion, and a keepsake, and where a thin place is near, households keep a returning crosser in for a day, feed them, and tell them their name and the date. Many believe a memory freely paid to a Veil-Walker hurts less than one the fog steals. Smugglers who use the thin places as hidden roads come home missing more of themselves every season, and the boundary-road songs remember the one who made a fortune on his crossings and could not remember, at the end, where he had hidden it.

Beyond the Veil each extreme plane has its own harm (see The Planes (FND 11)). In the Silence the **Fade** takes memories, then character, then will, and those who come back halfway are gentle and blank in places, recognizing faces without the names; families speak a lost one's name at every meal, so the plane cannot have all of it. The planes and zones of lack bring **the Freeze**, a cold that drains a body until it stands as a statue of ice and ash, and the old remedy for one pulled out half-frozen is a living body: dry wool, a companion's skin, a banked fire, never a roaring one; delvers who brave the cold planes for their relics carry a sealed pot of coals as their most precious treasure. The Parched brings **thirst-madness**, and its survivors hoard water for years and grow frantic at an empty cup; the cure at home is plenty that can be seen, a full jar by the bed that nobody empties. Soldiers who stumble through a War-Gate in the smoke of a battlefield bring back **Blood-Fury** from the Scourge, the **red fit** of the camps, and their villages feed them, watch them, and keep the children away on bad nights; the Red Mercy takes care to tell it from ordinary shock after battle, which is far commoner. Sellsword captains who hire a veteran of the Scourge put him at the front and keep him away from the camp, and the songs remember the berserker who won a battle alone and killed his own shield-brother when no enemy was left. The planes and zones of stillness work **stagnation** into those who linger, a slowness that looks like grief, and families learn to welcome the first returning irritation. The zones of memory leave **memory-fixation**, a mind that keeps going back and sometimes a past that never happened; the Crystal Spire's clashing frequencies leave **spire-ring sickness**, ringing ears and cracked teeth, in the harvesters of its stored sounds; the Whispering Winds leave **wind-madness**, a listener who can no longer tell their own thoughts

from the voices of the dead. And everywhere people sleep, the Dreaming Veil sends back **dreamsickness**: the sleeper who will not wake, the one whose nightmares leave bruises, the one who cannot believe the waking world is real, and the one who sleeps all night and rises grey. Many households turn a sleeper's shoes towards the door so the dreamer can find the way home.

Most of these are rare, and most healers meet them as something else: the faded as a man struck on the head, the stagnant and the fixed as melancholy, the wind-mad as an ordinary madman. Their care is mostly the care of kin, and the same few things recur in it: quiet, routine, food put in front of the sufferer and seen eaten, and the true story told again and again.

The Blights of the Dark Entities

The rarest afflictions of all are the ones the peoples fear most. The Dark Entities are known through fear, taboo, rumour, and protective rite (see What Waits Outside (FND 97)), and their blights are known the same way: as a traveller's tale of a town that burned itself, a silent valley where everything stands still, a city that forgot its name. Those three tales are true: they are the three scars the Beyonders' Incursions left on Caeldon, the Wrongwood, the Hanging Vale, and the Paling, and the Beyonders' blights keep to them. Where one does break out, it is remembered for generations, and its customs travel further than the blight ever did.

The blights share one hard lesson. Each entity is a single idea pushed past all measure, and a working that serves the same idea turns under its influence and feeds the blight, while a working of the opposite kind holds. Healing that grows flesh feeds the Changing Fever; preserving magic hastens the bone of the Bone Singer; a ward of quiet laid so a patient can rest would feed the Quiet Plague of the Silence Seed, were it ever to come. The treatment, again and again, is to do what the entity cannot bear, and to do it early, before the turning point that each blight has and that every household near one learns to watch for.

The Beyonders' blights

The Changing Fever is what is left of Qzoth's Bloom, and it rises when someone digs or ploughs the burned ground of the Wrongwood. It begins as a warm rash that moves from wrist to elbow by noon, and within hours a finger bends where no joint should be; from then on the sick change without end, awake through it, until the bed holds no single creature. Healing makes it worse. A changing patch burned out at the rash may stop, and the sick are told to recite their name, kin, and purpose and hold that shape in mind. The valley below the Wrongwood casts out anyone with an extra joint, rightly and sometimes wrongly, and the plague healers of the Red Mercy come to such a town as burners more than healers. Bounty-takers hired to hunt a changed one in the hills are paid double and burn their gear afterwards, and the fever-country songs remember the hunter who found his quarry was his own brother.

Crystallization under Krystallis is painless and permanent, and is caught now only at the edge of the Hanging Vale. The fear goes out of the sufferer first and onlookers take it for courage; then a fingertip goes clear, flat, and cold, and if nobody breaks it off, badly and without a planned stroke, the clearness runs up the limb until the whole body stands in crystal, aware. Survivors must act unpredictably, weep, shout, quarrel, run crooked, and they come home fond of their own flaws. At the Lastwater Well nearest the valley, households hang chipped crockery at the door and healers carry a hammer beside their knives.

The Unwriting of Mnemosyne Null takes a person's past in order, this morning first and the fact that they exist last, and looks at first like the forgetting of the very old, so that families are slow to call for help. Memory is the only medicine: the sufferer is told their name over and over and

made to say it, write it, and carve it, and kin sit round them telling shared stories aloud. Round the Paling, where a night inside takes the morning's memories, households keep their names, songs, and genealogies aloud as a nightly habit, and the Wrought, who take no ordinary illness, are not spared it.

The blights the other seven Beyonders would bring, the Quiet Plague of the Silence Seed, the Red Dust of the Rust Flower, the Rooting of Xylos, and the rest, have never broken out on Caeldon, and no custom guards against them.

The Cast-Outs' blights

The fallen gods' blights are stranger in one way: each begins with something offered, and most are let in by love, grief, faith, or loneliness.

The Ember's Grip is a death that will not come. The Ashen Child comes to a deathbed as a small, sad child and offers to keep the loved one alive, and when the offer is accepted the fever stops and never breaks, the wound stays open and never festers, and hair and nails stop growing, for months or decades. The held are awake and know they are dying. Fine grey ash settles on the sills, the watchers waste, and a street where it has stayed long does not rebuild. Healing cannot reach the held; the Grip ends only when the watcher says the goodbye aloud and means it, and then the held die soon and peacefully. At first a held case is often taken for a miracle. A small ash-smudged child seen near a sickroom is an omen no midwife ignores.

Gilding begins at the shrine. A tear of the Weeping Idol strikes a worshipper, and the gold spreads from where it landed while doubt drains out of the sufferer, until the whole body kneels in gold with its face fixed in bliss. A sincere question asked aloud, above all one the asker cannot answer, cracks the spreading gold, so temple teachers along the Idol's trail have children ask questions at the altar, and pilgrims are warned not to kneel among old statues. Many faiths take the gilded for saints and build shrines over them.

Inherited Rot is the sickness of a family that cannot let its past die. The Rotting Crown drives its curse down a bloodline, so that an heir greys at twenty and knots at thirty and makes the grandfathers' mistakes knowing exactly what he is doing, while black mould creeps into the cellar and the crypt. Physicians to noble houses see the early greying and blame marriages between cousins. What helps is succession: the heir sets the inheritance down, and something with no ancestors is begun, a seed in fresh soil or a house founded rather than inherited. Farmers say that if the rot begins, one should plant something, and here they are closer to the truth than most lore.

Ossification under the Bone Singer begins like the aches of age, a knee that will not bend in the morning, and runs on until the body is ivory bone that still sees and hears. Because its first signs are age's signs, many families never know what took their elder until the statue stands. Near the Singer's trail villages keep their rivers running, wake their old people early and walk them, and sing their work songs loudly and badly; bone-setters there learn to tell stiff bone from a stiff joint by the chill of the skin. Grave-robbers and treasure-seekers who break into the Singer's fields for the jewels on the stone dead say the statues' eyes follow them, and many leave the jewels where they lie.

The Thread of Dependence binds the lonely. The Shadow Stitcher's threads catch on the sleeve of a widow or a carer sitting alone with another's suffering, and soon the bound feel each other's pain, cannot step apart, and wither within a season when one of them dies. Boundaries are the cure: a door kept locked, a thought kept private, time spent alone on purpose. Wise folk healers send carers home to sleep alone, and some keep a knife for thread among their tools; people who

take the wraiths for the ghosts of lost lovers leave lamps at the window for them, which brings them nearer.

The Weaver's Mending begins as a miracle and sours. A wound closes overnight without a scar, a crooked spine is straight in the morning; then the wound festers under its perfect seam, the new flesh changes and wants things its owner never wanted, and the healed come to need the thread. A sufferer who refuses aloud and declares the body their own, wounds and all, cannot be touched. Healers who have met it keep the hard rule of no mending without permission, and the careful ones ask a patient's leave aloud before they lay on hands, even with a fever-addled child. A healer of the Red Mercy who finds a wound closed overnight that no one closed cuts it open before anything else.

The weight of the Slumber

One blight comes from the Unformed, from before anything acted. **Slumber-sickness** settles where the Great Slumber drifts, and begins as the feeling everyone has at the end of a long day: a sweet heaviness and the wish to sit down. It does not lift with rest. It deepens until an arm takes an hour to raise and the heart beats as if through mud, and the sufferer lies awake inside a body that has stopped. It comes when ordinary life is hardest, in the last week of harvest, at the end of a siege, after a long plague, and most peoples put the sufferer to bed, which is the worst thing to do. Village headmen who know of it ring the harvest bell at intervals and keep the reapers singing, captains do not let a column halt in still air, and a folk healer who sees a whole household sitting quiet sends for the neighbours to drag them outside.

Tensions

- **Water from the Hemophages.** Some healers of the Red Mercy Hospices and the College of White Vessels keep the Blood River's water as a last resort for a patient no other care can save, and bargain with the Hemophages for it at a cost paid in other lives. Many healers refuse on principle, and the families of the dying know which healers will bargain and which will not.
- **Saints in gold.** Many faiths take the gilded for saints raised into perfect devotion and build shrines over them, and pilgrims pray to be made the same. The Weeping Idol goes to the doubting and the faltering, and a shrine that honours its statues draws exactly the worshippers it takes.
- **Who wished it so.** The Ember's Grip loosens only when the watcher lets the held one die, so a folk healer at a deathbed that neither mends nor sinks must ask the family who has wished it so. The asking reads as an accusation to a mother who has nursed her son for years.
- **A promise worded by someone cleverer.** Oath-sickness falls on whoever knowingly breaks a bound vow, and a binding can be dissolved only with the agreement of the one who holds it or of a lord or temple strong enough to overrule them. An honest party bound by cleverer wording must ask release of the very holder who profits from the pain, or find someone stronger.
- **Sent fevers.** Laid sicknesses are real, and because they are, many a true fever is blamed on a neighbour, a widow, or a stranger. A lord's judgement may ask for proof before it condemns someone for laying a curse; village justice seldom waits for any.

PART IV

A Medieval Atlas: The Cradle-Web

The forests, mountains, deeps, and river basins of the cradle-web, region by region, with the sites where their tensions gather.

CHAPTER 10

The Forest Heartlands

Take what the branch lets go of,
walk the path the old feet chose,
leave the water where it runs,
and the forest will not ask your name.

— *The Treeline Walking-Songs*

Walk out of the basin farmland towards the trees and the change comes before the shade does. The ditches stop, the field walls stop, and the last cart-track ends at a stand of trunks so broad that a household could live inside one, and some do. This is the old Elven forest world, and it is three countries, not one. In the north-west lies the Elderweald, never cut, dim at noon, floored with root, where bears den under the root-mat and barred stairs lead down into a drowned world. In its south-eastern corner, against the mountains, the Crownboughs rise, the same forest trained over more lifetimes than anyone counts into halls, terraces, and gardens held high in the canopy, where duels are fought on garden-walks with nothing beneath them. Along its western and south-western edge the Briarreach breaks into thicket and wet ravine, and arrows come out of the hedges at anyone who walks in unasked. All three grew from one root, all three still measure themselves against it, and all three have spent hundreds of thousands of years telling younger peoples, each in its own manner, that a forest is not a resource. The basin farmer who wants a weir, the Dwarven envoy who wants a spring, and the Human lord who wants his embassy taken up into the trees all learn the same lesson in three accents: the forest answers slowly, it answers on its own terms, and it remembers what it was asked.

The Elderweald

The **Elderweald** is the old-growth forest at the centre of the Elven world, the oldest major named Elven region on Caeldon, and the homeland of the Wood Elves of the **Rootcrown Concord**. Their way of life took root here between c. 490,000 and c. 470,000 BR, the groves bound themselves into the Concord over the same long span, and they have kept the forest ever since. Every other Elven heartland began as part of this one. The Crownboughs and the Briarreach grew out of its edges, and the Roothollows far below were once its lower storey. To Humans and Dwarves it matters more plainly: it is the forest that will not be cleared, dim and huge, where moss-coated deer walk in the oldest groves, and it has quarrelled with the Ironspine over water for more than four hundred thousand years and with the basin farmers for nearly forty thousand.

AT A GLANCE

Lies	The north-west of the cradle-web, along the Ironspine's western face: the Elderweald in the north-west, the Crownboughs in its south-eastern corner, the Briarreach along its western edge; the Confluence Basins to the south.
People	About 290,000: some 120,000 Wood Elves, 95,000 High Elves, and nearly 27,000 Thorn Elves; some 44,000 Humans and two thousand or more mixed households at the edges; about a thousand Trolls at the Briarreach crossings.
Civilizations	The Rootcrown Concord, the Crownbough Courts, and the Thornbound Circles; the Crossing-Oath Houses at the ravines.
Landscape	Old-growth forest on a sponge of root; a grown canopy country of halls and garden-walks; broken thicket and ravine.
Chief places	The great seats of the Crownboughs, Amberbough first, with the Understorey Courts and the Verge Stair at their two doors; no centre in the Elderweald; the Waitfield before the Briarreach.
The year	The Medieval Era, c. 1,350 CR.

The Land

The Elderweald fills the north-western heart of the cradle-web. The Ironspine rises along its eastern side, the Crownboughs open from its south-east, and the Briarreach runs along its western and south-western edge; its southern treeline looks out over basin farmland, and what lies north of it nobody has mapped. The ground climbs eastwards into the broken ridgeland of the mountain verges. The forest is about two months across. The deep groves lie in the middle and the east, a month's walk with a watcher from the treeline, and beneath the eastern half of the forest, far down, lie the Roothollows. From the southern edge, Fernrest is about four weeks by cart from Sheafmeet. People live in the edge villages along the treeline and the grove rings of the deep weald; between them lies untended forest of hollow ground, brown bears, and grey wolves, and nobody crosses it without a watcher.

The Elderweald is temperate forest that has never been cut. A grove's oldest stand can be older than the Concord itself, and the canopy closes so completely that the floor stays dim and cool through the height of summer. Light comes down in coins and threads; sound does not carry far; the air smells of leaf-mould, wet bark, and running water. Underfoot is root: a soft, deep mat of living root, mould, and moss, laced with springs, slow streams, and water-bearing hollows. The ground holds water the way a sponge does, and gives a little under every step. Towards the Ironspine it rises into broken ridgeland, mountain feet, and runoff channels; towards the basins it thins into lighter woodland cut by feeder streams, and the first fields show through the trunks.

The forest is not gentle for being old. Root-fed hollows open under the leaf-litter; most hold only standing water, but a few reach down towards the old root-depths beneath the forest, and the groves tell of travellers who fell into one and were heard calling for days from somewhere no rope could reach. Basin inns still tell that the lost lower groves lie at the bottom of such hollows with their grave-goods untouched, and every few years a treasure-hunter goes down a rope to look; the groves say there is nothing down there worth the rope. An ancient tree comes down rarely, and when it does it can crush a dwelling, dam a stream, and flood a string of hollows in a single night. In the wet season the hollows fill and join, low paths go under, and ground that was firm in autumn will not hold a person in spring.

The forest has its beasts. Brown bears den in the hollows and come out angry when a wet season floods them; grey wolves hunt the edge farms in hard winters; wild boar kill gleaners at the treeline, and hornets nest in the hollow boles. At the

edges a **Skin-Lost**, a shape-changer who forgot the way back, sometimes hunts with a person's cunning. The edge villages give one old she-bear of the eastern hollows a name, the **Mother of the Hollows**, and count the spearheads her hide has carried off; three generations of beast-hunters have gone after her, and the grave-markers at Eddymill say how that went. Pale caps look like the good mushrooms and kill after a false recovery, and dreamcress in the slow streams brings sleep too deep and dreams too dark. But the danger most visitors meet is the one they bring. A living tree cut, a stream turned aside, a fire set in the wrong place ends the welcome at once, and the grove's hunters track the one who did it. Timber thieves and poachers after the moss-coated greenharts come in from the basin side every few years; few go home.

Living in the Groves

Wood Elves live in **groves**. A grove is a household-sized settlement grown into a stand of old trees: dwellings shaped from hollowed bole and living root, root-holds that widen as slowly as the trees around them, floors laid on the root-mat itself. Nothing is built that the grove could not have grown. Some groves have been lived in without a break since before the Concord, and their people speak of the trees as kin before they speak of them as shelter.

Work is tending rather than shaping. Households gather nuts, fruit, fungus, roots, and medicinal growth. They clear deadfall from the streams and watch the water through the dry months, and they keep paths open by walking them, not by cutting them. Wood comes only from what has fallen. Hunting is real but bounded, and a grove that over-hunts its ground soon hears about it from the next. The hunters are also the forest's swords and its beast-slayers: they walk with visitors, run down poachers, and go out against a bear or a wolf pack that has taken someone.

Births are rare and come in cycles, as among all Elves, and the old Wood Elf lines carry the oldest Elven nature most visibly. In the oldest groves a birth can still pass through a plainly grove-linked threshold before infancy, and the rare archaic birth is an event for the whole grove. Children are named slowly, and nobody hurries them. A Wood Elf child is expected to become readable in its own season, as a sapling shows in time what kind of tree it is, and the grove declares it grown when its elders and ritual keepers agree it has arrived. The agreeing is done aloud: at a grove gathering each says that the young one has arrived, and a single keeper's doubt does not overrule the rest but defers the matter to the next season. A household that moves to another grove is not counted of it until it has walked that grove's paths through a full year and learned where its dead lie.

The dead are returned. A body is given back to living ground among the grove's trees, and the ground that holds a household's dead is its oldest claim to be where it is. That is why grove ground is never sold and cannot be cleared. To clear it would be to clear someone's dead.

The Concord and Its Circles

The Concord has no seat and no crown. It is many groves, each distinct, held together by shared memory and inherited duty to the living forest. Within a grove the elders and ritual keepers are heeded because they hold the memory of place: who remembers where a watercourse ran, which paths are old, where the dead lie. When a matter crosses more than one grove's ground, a stream, an edge, a death in a mixed settlement, a **circle** of the groves concerned meets on it.

Such decisions are slow on purpose. A circle may part without deciding, and a question can wait a generation, which the groves call care and their neighbours call stalling. No grove can bind another, but a grove that ignores a circle soon finds the other groves' paths closed to it, and old grudges between groves are remembered for longer than Human kingdoms last. The basin Humans who live beside the Concord most often misread it as absent. A basin lord may grant his settlers a clearing and find their fences down and

their hunting gone within the season, because whatever the lord has granted, a settler who wants to clear forest land must ask the nearest grove, and the answer, when it comes, often comes from a circle.

Nearly everyone in the deep weald is Wood Elf. Dwarves come as envoys to the verges and seldom further. High Elves and Thorn Elves who enter the forest are received as kin, though the groves keep count of how each branch came to leave.

The Basin Edge

At the outer edge the forest shades into mixed country. Wood Elf groves stand near the treeline, Human hamlets and farms lie out on the cleared side, and a few settlements hold Human-Wood Elf households whose children are named earlier than any grove would name them. The edge itself was drawn by use before any agreement: first by the recurring meetings of the **First Confluence-Elderweald Contacts** (c. 38,000 to c. 24,000 BR), then by the long friction over clearing, roads, and water of the **Elderweald Border Pressures** (c. 26,000 to c. 10,000 BR). It is still contested, and it still shifts one clearing at a time. In practice it lies wherever a grove's watchers last said no and were heeded.

The edge country's best-known custom was born of grief. Sometime between c. 16,000 and c. 15,000 BR a death in a mixed settlement brought Human and Wood Elf expectations into collision. The Human side needed the death sworn before the gods, a marker, and a family that would remember; the Wood Elf side needed return, the body given back to living ground and not kept by anyone. Both believed they were defending the dignity of the dead. The settlement learned to divide the work, and the **Elderweald Funerary Accord** made the division custom: in the edge country a death is finished twice. The body is returned to an edge grove in the Wood Elf manner; the remembrance is sworn and kept in the Human one, under the Sworn Accord. Neither side is asked to concede that its deepest instinct was wrong. The accord holds only where both keep it.

There the most trusted people are often not grove elders but **mediators**: those whom both sides believe about kin, remembrance, and the right completion of a life. They hold no title, only that trust, and in a death or a marriage a mediator can carry more weight than a lord.

The Ironspine Verges and the Deep Edge

The Elderweald has five edges. Two are contested, and only one of those still moves. Where the forest climbs into ridgeland it meets the Ironspine and its holds. The ground of that border, its watersheds, mountain feet, and mine edges, was in place before either people claimed it, and the two first met there between c. 460,000 and c. 445,000 BR. Their quarrels over redirected water, deep digging, and cut growth hardened into the **Elderweald-Ironspine Frontier** (c. 410,000 to c. 385,000 BR). The border is fought over stream by stream: a weir torn out at night, a work-gang driven off by arrows, a grove's spring found dry. No conquest or treaty has ever fixed it.

Towards the Briarreach the welcome grows slower and warier until it becomes judgement; towards the Crownboughs the trees begin to be trained. Neither of those kin edges has a line, and neither has ever been fought over by armies.

The fifth edge runs down. The deep groves once continued into the Roothollows, the forest's own lower storey, until the flood of the **Roothollow Rupture** (c. 335,000 to c. 328,000 BR) rose through them and the long **Sealing of the Upper Roothollows** (c. 328,000 to c. 318,000 BR) barred the way. In the deepest groves, past paths no outsider walks, the **Sunken Stairs** still open in the forest floor and end in silt and bars a little way down; their keeping belongs to the sealed places of the cradle-web. Far beneath them lies the Gloamroot Covenant, with which the forest has almost no ordinary dealings. This edge is closed rather than contested.

Paths and the Slowwater

The Elderweald has no roads, only kept paths. They are old, walked open rather than cut, and part of the forest's memory, so a path's age counts for as much as where it goes. Visitors are not turned away, but they do not walk alone: a watcher from the nearest grove goes with them and chooses the way. Paths to the dead, to the stair-mouths, and between the deepest groves are not walked by outsiders at all. Human roads stop at the treeline, and every attempt to cut one further has ended in blood or in a road the forest closed within a generation. Traffic between the basins and the Ironspine goes around by the Headwater Marches, not through the trees.

The main water is the **Slowwater**. It gathers from springs on the Ironspine verges, runs west and dark and root-lined through the deep weald, then turns south and leaves the forest at Eddymill as one of the feeder streams of the basin farmland. Both neighbours want it, the holds for works upstream and the farms for ditches and mills downstream. The groves treat its course as remembered water that no one people may move. Nobody uses it as a road.

From Orrin Talloway, *A Road-Book of Both Halves*

> *There is no toll at the edge of the Elderweald, and I looked for one. A clerk learns to find the place where a road changes hands, the chain, the post, the bench with a ledger on it. Here the cart-track simply ran out against a trunk wider than the Serath toll-house, and a young Wood Elf was sitting on a root beside it as if the root had been grown for sitting, a bow unstrung across the knees. That was the toll, I understood later: not coin but company. Nobody walks in alone.*
>
> *My watcher did not ask my name or my business. The only question was whether I meant to cut anything, and when I said no, it was asked a second time, more slowly, as a man at home might ask whether you truly meant to pay. Then we went in. The path was no wider than my two feet and soft as a bed, and it bent for no reason I could see, round a hollow, back along a stream, out again past a stand where the trunks had been worn smooth at shoulder height by hands. Three times my guide stopped and listened to water I could not hear. Once we waited the length of a long breath while something heavy moved across the path ahead, and the bow was strung before I saw it move, and I never saw what it was strung against.*
>
> *At noon the light was like the light inside a shuttered room. We ate nuts and a dark fungus that tasted of smoke, sitting on the root-mat, and I asked how far it was to the grove. My watcher considered the question as though it were a hard one and said that it depended which way the path wished to go. I have kept toll-rolls on the Serath and never met a road with opinions.*
>
> *By the stream my guide called the Slowwater, the water was the colour of strong ale and made no sound at all. A post stood in the shallows on the far bank, raw, newly cut, with the bark still on. My watcher looked at it for a long time and said nothing, and I wrote it down, because it was the first thing I had seen in the forest that anyone had put there on purpose, and I knew at once whose it was.*

Very little is traded, and nothing grand. Outward go what the forest lets fall: nuts, fruit, fungus, resin, medicinal herbs, seasoned deadwood, and the hire of a watcher-guide. Cut timber is never sold, which is exactly what the basin side most wants. Inward come salt, cloth, and metal tools, most of it bought at the edge settlements. Most outsiders' business with the Elderweald is asking, not trading: a family asking that its mixed dead be returned to an edge grove, a hold asking leave to work a spring, a village asking what it may take from a stream, a lord asking for watchers to hunt down an outlaw band that fled into the trees. Outlaws who flee a basin lord into the forest meet one of three ends: the grove hands them back, keeps them, or lets the forest have them, and bounty-tak-

ers sit at Fernrest for weeks waiting to learn which. Beast-hunters hire on at the edge villages when a bear or a wolf pack turns killer, and must take a watcher with them. Strangers who come asking the way to the Sunken Stairs, with ropes and empty sacks, are given a meal and walked back to the treeline. A grove's watchers decide the paths. The circles decide anything that crosses groves. No one alone decides the water.

Groves and Edge Villages

Nobody in the Elderweald asks after a capital. The Concord has no seat, a circle meets wherever the groves concerned happen to be, and the groves with the longest memory carry the most weight in it without ever becoming a centre. What passes for a settlement here is a stand of old trees with one long-lived family in it. Four places show the range, from the deep forest out to the farmland.

Oldstand is a deep grove whose oldest stand is older than the Concord, lived in without a break since. Twenty or thirty Wood Elves of many generations sleep in hollowed boles and root-holds on floors laid over the root-mat, and the place smells of old wood, wet moss, and very small fires. Its ritual keepers remember where every watercourse within reach once ran, which is why a circle listens when Oldstand speaks. A birth here can still pass through the old grove-linked threshold, and when one does, the neighbouring groves come to see it.

Silthollow, deeper still, is a single household beside one of the Sunken Stairs. It keeps the stair-mouth and does not go down. Its people sing the laments for the Drowning Bloom there, and in wet years they say they hear water moving behind the bars, and sometimes something that is not water; twice in living memory the bars have been found scratched from below. No grove carries the forest's share of the deep world's grief more heavily (Sealed and Silent Places).

At the basin-facing treeline, **Fernrest** is the edge country in one place: a Wood Elf grove on the forest side, Human farmsteads on the cleared side, and between them a few dozen households with kin in both. Its mixed dead are returned to the grove and remembered in the village under the Funerary Accord, and its mediators are trusted further along the edge than any lord. Downstream, where the Slowwater leaves the forest for the farmland, **Eddymill** is a Human village of about forty households with a mill, ditched fields, and a ford, and the knock of its wheel carries into the first trees. Its miller keeps a boar-spear by the door and an old Elven arrowhead on the mantel, taken out of his grandfather. The village wants a weir to hold water through dry years and has already cut the posts. The nearest grove says the stream's course is not its to give.

The People of the Weald

About 160,000 people live in the Elderweald and along its edge. Some three in four are Wood Elves, and in the deep weald nearly everyone is. The Humans of the edge hamlets and mill villages make up most of the rest, perhaps a quarter, with a thousand or more mixed households among them; Dwarven envoys come to the verges and go again.

A Wood Elf is dressed by the forest and the edge market together: soft leather and deerskin worn under cloth bought at the edge settlements, dyed with bark and leaf to the browns and greens of the place, and in summer many go barefoot on the root-mat. The Wood Elves of the Elderweald carry the old Verdant traces of their people more strongly than any others, and here the change in colour and scent that comes over them at a threshold of life is plainest to see. Because births are rare and a grove watches every child, few are lost, perhaps one in ten. Most Wood Elves live six to eight centuries and grove elders longer, and what kills one before age is usually the forest itself: a great fall, hollow ground, a wet-season path that does not hold.

Until the grove agrees that a child has emerged it goes by a household child-name, a plain word nobody keeps. Then the grove gives its name, said with the grove's own, and there are no family names, because the grove stands for one: Tavrael

of Oldstand, Aelorin, Ellowin, Sirrith, Ulmaeth, Ondrevel. The edge folk dress, live, and die as basin folk do (The Basins and the Marches) and carry basin holding-names: Jory Fennick, Hanne Coyle. A mixed child of the edge gets a Human name within days and a grove name later, if the grove gives one, and Fernrest has more than one child like Ilo Coyle, whose grove name is still awaited.

Memory and Belief

The Elderweald remembers being first. Before there was a Concord to argue about, there was an Elderweald way of life to depart from, and the groves still reckon history by who departed from it. Each branching is remembered as a leaving. The groves do not call the leavers wrong, but they keep count.

The deepest grief belongs to the drowned world below. When the Roothollow catastrophe spread into wider Elven memory through the **Bitter Root Histories**, the Wood Elf retelling made it a story of failed stewardship, of the distance kin had let grow between the upper forest and the lower hollows before the water came. The groves that keep the Sunken Stairs carry that memory most heavily. Their lullabies are of the flood: the watcher who held a stair-mouth while the water rose behind her and the last of the climbers came up past her, and the bars that were shut with kin still knocking on the far side. At Silthollow the last verse is the names of those left below, and a child who can say them all is counted old enough to keep the stair-mouth. Ironspine holds tell the same years otherwise, in the **Burdened Seal Histories**, with their suspicion that Elven sacred claims ask others to bear the cost, and that suspicion is felt on every verge stream.

The Human edge is a younger quarrel and a plainer one. It was never about rank. It is about clearing and water, and about whether a settlement owes anything to the living ground it occupies. Edge villages remember the axe-gangs that went in and the arrows that came out, and the feuds that followed for generations; groves remember the fires, and above all the basin lord who fired a grove with its household inside to clear a road. His hall burned the following winter, nobody was ever caught for it, and the edge still says *the forest keeps its own accounts* when a debt is paid in kind. The groves have watched the basin peoples grow from scattered hamlets into a great power in what the forest counts as a short span.

The Wood Elves keep the grove reverence from which the Crownbough faith later grew, but they keep it as custom, not as a faith. There are no temple-gardens, no tenders, no doctrine, no patrons of finished form. Ritual keepers hold memory and rites; they are not clergy. Reverence is the ordinary practice already described: taking only fallen wood, walking paths open, leaving water where it runs, naming a child when it has emerged, returning the dead. At the grave the groves honour the god Humans call Ennor the Grave-Watcher under a name of their own, as the one who sees the returned onward, and at a mixed graveside the two names for one watcher are often the one thing the mourners agree on. Laments for the Drowning Bloom, kept at the stair-mouths, name Ithaere the Drowned Mother, though the upper forest knows little of her beyond the name. The edge farms bring Anvelle the Harvest-Mother with them, the god of the fields the forest keeps declining to become.

The Crownboughs

Where the forest faces outward, nothing large has been left to grow as it pleased. The **Crownboughs** are a cultivated canopy forest in the south-eastern corner of the old Elven world and the homeland of the High Elves and the **Crownbough Courts**. Trees have been trained into halls and terraces, gardens raised into the canopy, whole settlements composed over more lifetimes than most peoples have history. The High Elf branch rose out of the older Concord between c. 398,000 and c. 390,000 BR, gathered into courts soon after, between c. 390,000 and c. 375,000 BR, and has been ruled by its great houses ever since. This is where Elven reverence for living growth became the art of

shaping it, and where that art became a measure for judging others. Dwarves and Humans know High Elves by the polished face the great houses turn outward. Behind it lie blood duels fought on garden-walks above the drop, poison measured by the leaf, dead halls where silver mirrors still hang, and bears in the wild dark beneath the canopy, with worse beasts beside them that no house will name.

The Grown Country

The Crownboughs fill the south-eastern corner of the forest world, with the Elderweald to their north and west, the Ironspine to the east, and the Confluence Basins to the south; the Headwater Marches lie on the far side of the mountains. The floor climbs gently eastwards to the southern verges of the Ironspine, and the great houses' watercourses come down from the verges through the gardens towards the basins. The Understorey Courts stand on the southern, basin-facing edge, about five weeks from Sheafmeet by the embassy road; Amberbough lies in the middle of the canopy, two or three weeks higher for those taken up; and Highbraid stands on the eastern side at the Verge Stair, about a month below Anvilwake. The great seats and the embassy villages below them are the settled cores; between them the canopy is kept only along the boughways, and the forest floor is wild, with brown bears in the hollows. Those who stray below the boughways are sometimes found, and sometimes only their horses. Most of the Crownboughs' height, though, is grown. Great trees have been bent and braided over generations into galleries, living halls, and stepped terraces, linked by **boughways** and suspended garden-walks well above the forest floor. The understorey beneath them is cleared, planted, and kept: orchard rows, herb beds, swept paths. A traveller coming in from the edge leaves ordinary temperate woodland and walks into something closer to a garden the size of a country, with the life of the place going on overhead.

Its dangers are the price of living high. Much of daily life happens in the canopy, and a slip from a garden-walk is the ordinary death of the careless, the young, and the visiting. A canopy strong enough to carry a hall also catches every storm; limbs grown heavy with building come down in high wind, and the storm seasons strip the outer walks. Shaped growth does not stay shaped. A boughway left alone for a few seasons begins to sag, a trained hall closes its own doorways with new wood, and an abandoned terrace becomes unsafe long before it looks ruined. **Hall Canker** enters through a late pruning cut and creeps from hall to hall along the grafted boughways; a bad outbreak can cost a house the growth of a hundred generations, and every outbreak starts a quarrel over whose knife let it in.

Halls left empty by failed houses go wild and haunted, dropping their walks, and some still hold silver mirrors that show the viewer an improved face, said to be the tears of Saerith the Mirror-King, still trying to fix the world. Those who look too long come away changed. A dead house's silver, grown armour, and old grafts lie in those halls too, and basin treasure-climbers who go up after them with ropes and empty sacks seldom climb out the way they went in. Lowgarden tells of one dead hall where a whole house's grown armour still stands on its racks, light as bark and harder than iron, and a ward-hound bound to its threshold still holds the door. Villagers keep away. Courtiers sometimes do not. Below, in the understorey, worse than bears comes down: a lesser house whose rite of change went wrong sometimes lets the Ill-Hatched thing go into the dark rather than put it down or keep it, and the gardeners find what it leaves. When a beast kills in the understorey, a great house sends its sword-champions down after it, and the one who brings back the head is named at court for a thousand years.

Houses and Halls

Most High Elves are not courtiers. They belong to **houses**: long-lived households bound to a family grove and to a hall the house has been growing, in many cases, since before anyone living was born. Work is tending. Branches are trained into roofs and walkways; terraces and garden-walks are kept; fruit, nuts, roots, and herbs come from the canopy gardens and the planted understorey; and the family grove, where the house's dead have been returned, is cared for as closely as any child. No hall is ever finished. A young High Elf learns a craft by continuing shaping begun by a grandparent's grandparent, and pride lies in handing it on in better shape than it was received.

Children are few, because Elven fertility is rare and cyclic, and their growing up is watched closely. A house marks each stage formally, birth, naming, coming of age, the taking of a house role, and marks each only when the person has visibly grown into it. Village and household tenders are consulted at every step. Adulthood ends in **presentation**: in the court season a house of rank shows its young one at court, and the young one brings a piece of shaping they have carried on themselves, most often a bough or sapling trained from the house's own grove. The court reads the work and the person together. A tender who has watched the child may say *not yet*. A house may present against that word, and some do, but the great houses remember which presentations came early.

That is where the region's oldest argument enters the kitchen. The same pruning knife can tend a sapling towards its own shape or cut it towards a shape decided in advance, and High Elf parents argue over their children in exactly those terms. Tenders counsel patience, because a child named too early is named wrong. Rank-minded kin worry that a slow child will be read as an unfinished house. Most families live between the two. They are patient and warm at home, and at the court season they paint their faces gold. The condescension outsiders meet is real, but it is mostly the great houses' view of the world, and many High Elves live inside it without ever quite choosing it.

Courts and Tenders

Several courts rule rather than one crown. Each gathers around a few great houses, with lesser houses and dependants ranked beneath them, and rank is read in visible refinement: the hall a house has grown, the gardens it keeps, the composure of its people, the heirs it can present. The great houses rule because they are the oldest, the richest in growth, and the best attended, and they dress that in the old claim that refinement is a duty. Their word on rank is obeyed even by those it humbles, because a house they turn against loses its marriages, its gifts, its friends, and sometimes its grove. A house that cannot present anyone for several seasons is spoken of as unfinished, and a lesser house may spend a generation's shaping on one hall to keep its place, quietly selling its grove's fruit to do it.

Under the composure the houses fight. A slight between houses of equal rank is answered by a duel of shaping before the assembled houses, or, when the insult runs deep enough, by the houses' sword-champions on a garden-walk with nothing beneath it, and an old feud can cost a house a champion a season. A champion carries the house's grown blade, is chosen in the duel season before the whole court, and is mourned when they fall as a hall is mourned; the canopy has no greater heroes. Quieter weapons are a canker let into a rival's boughs, a guest who falls, and heartleaf, which steadies an old heart at one dose and stops it at the next. Every great house keeps a tender who knows the difference.

The senior tenders of the **Ordered Bough** hold the other authority. They guide the great temple-gardens, and they are heeded for their patience and for what has visibly flourished under their care. A tender can say that a garden, a house, or a person is not ready, and that word weighs against a great house's. The population is overwhelmingly High Elf. Mixed Human-High Elf families, the most

familiar mixed kin on Caeldon, live chiefly in households tied to the embassies, and whether their children are counted as kin is still settled house by house. Human and Dwarven envoys come and go at the edges but rarely live deeper in.

The Ordered Bough

The Crownboughs are the home of the Ordered Bough, one of the few organized religions of the medieval world. It is older than the courts in substance and younger in form: its roots are the grove reverence the Elderweald still keeps as custom, and it became a faith with its own houses, teachers, and rites as the courts were founded. Its premise is that life, the world, and the self are living growth, and that growth should be tended towards its intended form. Nothing is born finished. Everything worth honouring is being grown.

Its temples are temple-gardens, living halls and groves and terraces shaped over generations, where the work of one tender is continued by the next. A temple-garden is never complete, and its incompleteness is part of its sanctity. Its clergy are the **tenders**: senior tenders at the great temple-gardens, lesser ones serving houses, villages, and roadside groves. Birth, naming, coming of age, and the taking of a house role are each a stage of emergence, and death is the last. The dead go back to the family grove under the Bough's rites of return, guided by the god Humans call Ennor the Grave-Watcher, whom the Bough honours under an Elven name; a High Elf who dies on embassy far from any grove of the house is carried home over a long road or returned where they fell, and the tenders disagree over which keeps the rite whole.

The faith's deepest tension lies within its own premise. To tend is to help something become what it is growing towards. To perfect is to decide in advance what it should become and to cut away everything else, and that second path has its own god. Saerith the Mirror-King is the Bough's most powerful and most contested patron, the god of finished form, honoured at court wherever prestige, lineage, and flawless presentation are at stake. His devotees, strongest in great houses anxious for their lineage, regard him as the Bough's fulfilment. Its older tenders regard him as its corruption, the point at which cultivation becomes judgement and the unfinished are treated as lesser. At some court occasions courtiers paint their faces with gold and silver to match his image, and it is said that a perfect painting earns a year of perfection; the court tale of the noble who matched the image so exactly that he shattered like glass is told to the young as a warning. Saerith's standard travels further than his worship. In the halls of lesser houses it shows as dangerous rites of self-perfection, magical self-reshaping, and quiet despair, and in the basins as Human households painting gold faces of their own.

Edges, Ways, and Gifts

The Crownboughs have four edges and two doors. Inward they shade into the Elderweald with no marked line: the border is where trained growth gives way to growth left to itself, and each side regards the other as kin, to the Concord kin who shaped too much, to the great houses kin who stopped too soon. Towards the mountains the canopy-mountain threshold sits on the old Elderweald-Ironspine frontier, and there, between c. 375,000 and c. 355,000 BR, the **Courts of Stone and Canopy** turned an argument about water into one of the oldest rivalries of prestige on Caeldon. Each side read the other as powerful but incomplete: to the canopy, the holds were masters of load-bearing stone without grace; to the holds, the canopy was brilliant, suspect, and careless of the harder duties of building. Neither could call the other primitive, and so neither has stopped measuring itself against the other. Verges, watercourses, and quarrying along that edge still go to whichever side is stronger on the spot that generation; arrows have flown from the boughs and axes answered on the stair in a dozen small wars, but neither side has ever settled it by conquest. Towards the basins the courts face the Human Confluence Marches across a border of rank

rather than ground. No Crownbough edge reaches the Headwater Marches, but the great houses watch them closely, because that corridor is where their two great rivals, Dwarves and Humans, learned to grow strong together.

Inside the region the main roads are in the air. Boughways run hall to hall and seat to seat, each belonging to the house whose growth carries it, so travel aloft is by leave, and a stranger on a walk without it may be helped down the quick way. The great houses treat their watercourses as garden water, to be kept and composed, never as roads. What leaves the Crownboughs is trained and shaped wood, grafts and seedlings given as gifts and never sold, fine garden-craft, and teaching: Human lords have long borrowed High Elf ceremony, magical shaping, and composure, and the great houses send them as instruments of rank as much as goods. What comes in is worked metal and dressed stone from the Ironspine, which the great houses use more freely than their boasts admit, and basin goods from the Human side. Both ways moves prestige. Every gift is measured, every reception ranked, and an embassy is judged on how high into the canopy it is received. Low-garden is the canopy's one door for hired danger: beast-hunters come up the embassy road when a house posts a bounty on something in the understorey, envoys bring sellswords who must be watched every hour, and now and then a climber slips past with a sack, bound for a dead hall. What comes back is sold in the basins and sworn to have been found elsewhere, because the great houses count a dead house's silver as theirs by kinship and hang a thief from his own rope.

The great houses remember the rising of the Crownboughs as the moment Elven life chose to be seen; the Elderweald remembers it as a departure. Both tellings are polite, old, and unforgiving. An older and quieter memory came up from below through the Bitter Root Histories, and it passed into the memory of the great houses as a question nobody has answered: whether refinement and distance let them fail their kin in the drowned hollows. Court children learn the champions before their letters: the one who held the Highbraid gate boughs alone while the stair below ran with Dwarven and Elven blood, the one who went down into the understorey after a bear that had killed a house's heir and came back three years later carrying its skull, and the one who looked into a dead hall's mirror and walked out wearing a face no one knew. They learn the villains too, above all the house that poisoned its rivals with heart-leaf at a court-season feast and was itself dead within a generation. Its hall still stands empty with the cups on the table, and the oldest Crownbough curse is a wish that a house's boughs remember it.

Great Seats and House Halls

With no crown there is no capital. The great seats together are the region's centre: several seats, each grown around the halls of a few great houses and a temple-garden. The oldest and most closely watched is **Amberbough**, grown around the Unfinished Garden. Its great houses' halls are braided from trees older than the houses that live in them, galleries and garden-walks link them high above the floor, and the senior tenders keep the garden at its heart. About ten thousand High Elves live there with their dependants, and more in the court season, when the lesser houses come to be seen, the boughways fill, and the gold faces come out. Whether the garden is to be declared finished is argued here first.

Highbraid, on the mountain-facing side, is the seat nearest the Verge Stair. Its halls rest at the root on dressed Ironspine stone, more freely than its courtiers would say, and its great houses host most of the envoys who come up from the landing. About four thousand High Elves live there, and it reads the Dwarves more closely than any other seat. Its gate boughs still carry the arrow-scars of the oldest war over the Stair.

Willowstep is what most of the Crownboughs look like: the hall of one lesser house, a single trained hall of five storeys with its terraces, canopy gardens, and the family grove where the house's dead have been returned. A few dozen

High Elves of several generations live in it, continuing shaping begun long before any of them was born. It feels the great houses' standard more than they do, and its elders argue over every presentation. Its last champion died on a garden-walk at Amberbough, and the house has not yet named another.

At the foot of the canopy, **Lowgarden** is a village of a hundred or two on the low terraces beside the Understorey Courts. Its households are tied to the embassies: High Elf hosts and gardeners, Human envoys' staff who have stayed, and the mixed Human-High Elf families whose children a house may take in or leave outside. It lives by lodging, feeding, and tending the people the great houses receive and seldom take higher, and by guiding the beast-hunters and envoys' sellswords who must not wander off the embassy road.

Faces of the Courts

Some 100,000 people live in the Crownboughs, and nineteen in twenty are High Elves. About four thousand Humans live mostly in the embassy villages along the basin-facing edge, over a thousand mixed Human-High Elf households beside them, and a hundred or so Dwarven envoys stay at Highbraid.

House dress is fine cloth woven from canopy-garden fibres and traded basin wool, dyed in garden colours and cut long, but bound at wrist and ankle for walking aloft, with soft-soled shoes for the boughways. In the court season the robes are layered and the faces painted gold. High Elves are the most alike of all their people in look and bearing, and here the most composed; a visitor from the basins usually remarks on the stillness before anything else. Children are few and watched closely, yet perhaps one in eight is lost, most of them to falls, the ordinary death of the careless and the young. Most High Elves live seven or eight centuries. Of those who die sooner, falls and storms that bring down a laden limb take most; the duel takes its champions; and in the lesser houses the rites of self-perfection and a quiet despair take others.

A High Elf is named in stages: a birth-name used only within the hall, a given name at the naming, and the house name only at presentation, after which a house role may add its title. Presented names of the courts: Ilvaren Thaelion, Ilisaine Varandel, Elbrevor Isquel, Lysaedre Thaelion, Aumeris Varandel. The embassy households wear basin cloth in Crownbough cut, and the mixed families take basin holding-names; a mixed child takes a house name only if a house presents it.

The Understorey Courts

The embassy road from the forest edge of the Confluence Basins ends at the **Understorey Courts**, the terraced receiving grounds at the foot of the canopy on the basin-facing edge, and for most Humans so does the High Elf world. The road is the first danger. For days it runs through ordinary woodland where grey wolves follow lone walkers in hard winters and outlaw bands wait for envoys coming home with Crownbough gifts, since a graft or a gold-painted mask is worth more in a basin market than a farm. For its last stretch the road leaves the wild wood and runs through the planted understorey; ahead the ground rises in broad terraces edged with trained roots, stepping up towards the trunks of the great trees, and far above the galleries and garden-walks of the canopy are plainly visible and out of reach.

Everyone on the terraces knows they are graded. Traders and supplicants keep to the lowest, where the road comes in and goods change hands. Embassies lodge higher, in low halls trained from understorey growth, and the terrace an embassy is given is read in the basins as the canopy's judgement of the power that sent it. The highest terrace lies against the trunks, and from it climbs the **Leave Stair**, a grown stair of root and bough into the canopy, which no visitor climbs without a house's leave. Being taken up it is the measure by which the Crownboughs judge an embassy; the terraces are the finer grades beneath. Nothing here is hard to enter. Staying is easy. Rising is the difficulty, and it turns on man-

ners, gifts, and the whim of whoever is hosting. The canopy sheds onto the terraces as well, and a limb falling from that height kills whatever it hits. What falls with it is another matter: gilded rail-fittings, lamp-cages, a carved panel from a hall nobody below has seen. The canopy claims every scrap that comes down and its wardens search the wild understorey after each storm, but the basin folk who get there first call it **wrack**, and a piece of it sells in a river town for a year's wages. Beyond the planted ground the wild understorey begins again, and brown bears that come out of their hollows angry in a wet spring have walked onto the lowest terrace more than once.

The grounds belong to the great seats in common. The keeping passes from seat to seat in turn, and the seat holding it keeps order with its own wardens, gives out the terraces, and sets the calendar of receptions. Whom an embassy meets, and whether it ever climbs, is decided by the great house that hosts it, which is why every envoy spends the stay courting that house. Tenders of the Ordered Bough keep the gardens and advise the seat in charge; they decide nothing about rank, but their word on whether a guest is ready carries weight. Up the road come envoys of lords and of towns run by their richest houses, sent to be seen, to bring a gift home, or to learn the manners that raise their sender's name in the basins; traders with basin goods, who seldom leave the lowest terrace and do not expect to; supplicants seeking a graft, a teacher, a healer's working, or a word with someone above; scribes and oath-keepers, who travel with every serious embassy, because by basin custom nothing agreed here binds until it is sworn and written under the Sworn Accord; and the swords for hire who walk the embassies up the road and back, and spend the long waits drinking and dicing on the lowest terrace, where their toast is *to the road home*, because the road home is where they earn their pay. In the wild wood beyond the planted ground live the **wrack-pickers**, basin foragers who go out after every storm for what the canopy drops, racing its wardens and each other. Some envoys' people stay. Many of the mixed households tied to the embassies live on or below the terraces, between Human kin who expect a child named early and Elven kin who expect one to emerge first.

Most days are spent waiting. Envoys pay calls on the terraces above their own, send small gifts upward, and study the High Elves who come down. A long stay is not always a slight: to the canopy, an embassy received in a hurry has not really been received. Basin envoys know this and complain anyway. The busy weeks fall in the court season, when the canopy's lords and ladies descend the Leave Stair with their faces painted gold and receptions are held terrace by terrace. The canopy's side of the exchange is grown on the **Graft Terrace**, a middle terrace the tenders keep as a nursery, where seedlings and grafts meant for basin lords are raised until they are given. Under the courtesy there is steel. Young High Elves come down to fight their duels on the terraces, where the drop is shorter than on the garden-walks above, and basin envoys who give offence have been invited to answer it with a sword they cannot match. Basin inns tell of the one who could: a lord's sword-bearer who took up such a challenge in his envoy's place, fought a young High Elf to a standstill on the Graft Terrace, and was taken up the Leave Stair the next morning, the only basin man of his age to climb it. Nobody in the basins agrees what happened to him there. On festival nights the canopy lights its walks with lights that hang in the air without lamp or flame, and the whole lower terrace stands looking up at a forest lit from within. It is the sight envoys write home about first, and the one that makes the long wait bearable.

Two kinds of memory are kept side by side. Basin scribes write down everything said to their embassy, by whom, and from which terrace, so that their lord can hold the High Elves to it. The canopy remembers each reception in its own way and does not put its name to the scribes' rolls. The habits are old: the **First Confluence-Crownbough Contacts** (c. 18,000 to c. 10,000 BR) were display before ceremony, and the **Crownbough**

Embassies (c. 16,000 to c. 8,000 BR) turned display into ceremonial reception; the graded terraces are that ceremony laid out on the ground. Every embassy household also knows the **Crownbough Heir Controversy** (c. 14,000 to c. 13,000 BR), when a mixed heir rose to power before anyone agreed what the child was. Saerith's devotees remember it as proof of how much a lineage can be made to bear, the tenders as a warning of what that costs, and its lesson, that a clear line of heirs and a ripe heir do not come together, is repeated on the terraces whenever a mixed child's place comes up.

From Orrin Talloway, *A Road-Book of Both Halves*

> *I came up the embassy road as clerk to a basin envoy, hired to keep the tally of her gifts, with six hired swords riding ahead and behind who looked at every thicket as if it owed them money. On the fourth day one of them pointed out a cart turned over in the ditch with its traces cut, and said it had been an envoy's, coming home. Then the road changed under my boots before I understood why. One moment it was mud and leaf like any forest track; the next it was swept, and the trees on either side stood in rows, with herb beds between them that someone had weeded that morning. Nobody was in sight. I have never felt so plainly that I was expected and not yet welcome.*
>
> *The lowest terrace was loud with basin voices, traders arguing over cloth and salt as they would at any ford-market at home, and our swords went straight to the dice. Above it the terraces stepped up towards the trunks, each edged with roots trained as neatly as a mason lays a kerb, and on each the people grew quieter and better dressed. Our envoy was given the fourth. Her scribe wrote the number down before he had unpacked his ink, and I wrote it down in my own roll beside the cost of the road, because in the basins the one will be weighed against the other.*
>
> *Far overhead the galleries hung in the green, with figures moving along them too high to have faces. On the second evening a party came down the Leave Stair, their long robes bound tight at wrist and ankle, their faces catching the lamplight gold, and one of them wore a slim grey blade that looked grown rather than forged. One stopped beside a tender kneeling at a seedling bed on the middle terrace, laid two fingers on a graft and studied it, the way a buyer studies a horse. The tender did not look up. The courtier went on down to our terrace and spoke to our envoy for the time it takes to drink a cup of water.*
>
> *We stayed thirty-one days. The scribe filled two rolls. I filled one, and could put a price to nothing in it but our own bread. On the last night the canopy lit itself from end to end with lights that hung in the leaves like fruit, and every one of us, swords and scribe and envoy, stood on the terrace with our heads back until they went out. On the last morning a dead limb came down out of the canopy onto the lowest terrace, and the traders cleared it without stopping their bargaining.*

The Verge Stair

On the mountain side the old rivalry of Elves and Dwarves stands face to face on the **Verge Stair**, the one place where it is carried on by daylight and in person, and a place that has run with the blood of both. The stair climbs the flank of the last rock spur on the forest side of the mountains, where the outermost great trees stand close against the stone. It starts in the outer yard of an Ironspine gate hold at the spur's foot and rises in long dressed flights, walled on the drop side, to a landing level with the canopy. The stonework is plain, close-jointed, and heavy. By hold standards it is fine work. By canopy standards it was never finished.

The gate stands above the landing between two great trees whose limbs were trained, over more lifetimes than anyone counts, into posts, lintel, and leaves of living wood. Beyond it the first

boughway runs into the canopy towards Highbraid. The gate moves in wind as the trees do, and its roots have spread across the top of the stair, so that the uppermost course of stone, which the Dwarves call the **Root Course**, now lies half under root. Where the stone half ends and the grown half begins can no longer be seen, only argued. The landing is the top of the stone: a broad floor of dressed slabs, vaulted over the drop, with a long table-stone at its centre that both sides call the **Laying Stone**. Below the stair's wall the forest floor falls away into the understorey, where brown bears den and the bones of things that fell from the flights lie unclaimed. Inside the spur, behind the outer yard, run the old sally-galleries cut in the fighting on the stair, from which wardens once came out onto the middle flights behind a canopy war-band; they are sealed now, and the masons who reset the flights say they can hear wind in them where no wind should go.

The two halves are entered as differently as they were made. A visitor from below swears gate oath to the hold's wardens at the first step and climbs the whole stair in view of the gate. A visitor from above needs the leave of the house that holds the gate, and steps out onto the landing level, having climbed nothing. By old custom either side may stand on the landing without the other's leave. Neither goes further without it, and few ever ask. The stone half belongs to the gate holds, kept under the gate oaths of the **Held Covenant**, and in practice to the hold whose gate opens at the stair's foot: its wardens guard the flights, its masons keep them, and a Covenant keeper comes up whenever business is done, because the hold has sworn under Kerrund the Stone-Warden to keep the stair whole, and among the other holds its name rests partly on whether it does. The hold also pays hunters to keep the understorey's beasts off the lower flights; a bear that comes up the stair in spring is the hunters' to kill, a hunter who kills one on the forest floor has made an enemy in the canopy, and the hunters take a tally-mark on the haft of their spears for every beast. The gate belongs to the house whose growth carries it, which keeps it trained and pruned like one of its own halls and sends its officers, and its sword-champions, to every meeting on the landing.

Nobody can date the stair. Hold tallies name it Dwarven work older than the gate; canopy memory holds that the gate was grown first and the stair built up to meet it. In each telling the other side came asking. What both accept is that the halves were made by rivals already judging each other and already skirmishing over the verges, and the stair's oldest custom follows from that judgement. Neither side has ever dressed or finished the other's half, because to do so would say aloud what each believes: to the canopy the stone is unfinished, and to the holds the gate is unsound. Both have tried to take the other's half, and neither has been strong enough. Canopy households still name their eldest daughters after the champion who held the Highbraid gate boughs alone while the stair below ran with blood; the holds tell that day with a different hero, the warden who carried the hold's banner back down the flights through the gate's archers, and the gate hold's children count the flights in a skipping game that ends *and down he came, and the banner too*.

The users are few and great: envoys of the leading holds and envoys of the canopy. Hold traders bring up worked metal and dressed stone; canopy houses send down shaped wood, grafts, and seedlings, which are given and never sold. Humans reach the canopy by the basin road, and the Human traders who come to the gate hold from the foothill side are not taken up. Exchange is seasonal. The stair opens in late spring, once the masons have reset what the winter loosened, and closes with the autumn storms, when the gate's limbs move too much for anyone to trust the landing beneath them. On an exchange day both parties time their arrival with care, because whoever waits on the landing for the other is read as having come to ask.

Goods are set out on the Laying Stone, and every gift is weighed twice. The Covenant keeper tallies weight and worth, as at any hold bargain,

and seals the bargain under Kerrund's question, *will you hold?* The canopy's officers note rank: who laid first, how near the gate each party stood, whether a gift came in the hands of a great house or a dependant. A bargain that satisfies one reckoning and slights the other is ordinary, and both sides spend more care on the second than they admit. Canopy envoys sometimes come out with their faces painted gold, and the wardens have long since stopped remarking on it. They have not stopped watching the champions' hands, because insults on the landing have been answered with blades within living memory, and a duel fought on the Laying Stone ended with a Dwarven envoy over the wall; his chain of office, gold links set with hold-garnets, lies somewhere in the understorey below, and nobody has ever been allowed down to look for it. Since then the wardens have a saying for any bargain that goes too smoothly: *count the champions before you count the gold*. Dwarven envoys are met level, at the top of their own stair, where Human envoys are received below the canopy on the terraces. The High Elves call that courtesy. The holds call it the least the canopy could do.

The canopy takes more Dwarven stone and metal up through the gate than it admits, and carries it through itself, so that no Dwarf is ever seen passing the gate with a load. For some years now the masons' spring resetting has not lasted the summer. The failure is worst in the upper flights and the Root Course, where the roots work between the joints, and a mason fell from the vaulting last autumn when a slab turned under him. The hold has begun hiring Kobold crews for the narrow work in the vaulting under the landing, on terms it does not discuss with the canopy. It has also offered to rebuild the failing stone properly, and the offer is harder to answer than it sounds.

The Briarreach

The **Briarreach** is a belt of broken woodland, thicket, and wet ravine along the western and south-western edge of the old Elven forest, and the homeland of the Thorn Elves and the **Thornbound Circles**, who hardened here out of older Wood Elf stock between c. 425,000 and c. 392,000 BR and still govern most of it. It is the one Elven heartland that remembers Caeldon as dangerous rather than generous, and it is still dangerous. Wolves and ravine cats hunt its crossings, the dead of fallen bridges stand on the broken spans, and arrows come out of the hedges at anyone who walks in unasked. Its people treat entry as something to be weighed, and the Trolls who keep its ravine crossings make every traveller pay. A traveller here deals with both, and satisfying one has never satisfied the other. Basin traders say a bale of Thornbound dye is worth the risk and a map of the inner ravines would be worth a life; nobody has ever sold one.

The Breaking Forest

The belt runs along the Elderweald's western and south-western edge, with the deep forest east of it and the farm frontier of the Confluence Basins to the south; its far west and north are unmapped. The ground falls southwards in ravines, and the deepest is cut by the Sallow, which runs south out of the belt towards the basin rivers and carries the one through-route, five or six weeks from end to end, with Sevenbreak's crossing on the way. Wovenbrake lies deep in the middle, Deadweave near the southern edge, and the Waitfield on that edge itself, about six weeks from Sheafmeet. The circles are strung along the ravines, more of them than outsiders know, and between them lies hedge, deadfall, and ravine country where ravine cats wait at the water and thorn ants nest in the hedges.

The Briarreach is not deep old-growth like the Elderweald. It is a forest that keeps breaking: windthrow, deadfall, thorn thickets that close over a path in a season, clearings that will not stay

clear. The ground drops without warning into wet ravines where streams cut soft soil and the slopes slide after heavy rain. Paths exist one year and are gone the next, so outsiders get lost within a day's walk of the edge and starve or drown in a ravine; in the wet season a slip-slope can carry a whole camp down. Ravine cats wait at the water, grey wolves come in hard winters, wild boar lie up in the thickets, and heath adders on the warm slopes. The Thornbound hedges have false gaps woven with ant-thorn, so that a raider who forces one walks into a swarm of thorn ants, and the purple-black bitterberry is the circles' poison bait. At the failed crossings the Bridge-Dead mostly only warn, though a few draw strangers towards the weak plank. Hidden approaches make ambush easy and rescue slow. Waitfield guides give hirelings one warning before anything else, *a quiet hedge is a full one*, because the false gaps hum just before the ants pour out, and the Troll families pile a stone at every place a ravine cat has killed, so that a careful walker can count the cairns at a ford and choose another.

And there are pockets of ground the Thornbound will not enter and do not explain. Waitfield traders whisper that elder things sleep there, or elder treasure: worked stone under the moss, a blade that never rusts, a cup of green-black glass. Every few summers a treasure-hunter slips past the hedges to look, and the circles leave what they find of him at the Waitfield as a warning.

The harshest pressures that shaped the region are older than any living memory, and they have eased since. In the span later called the **Hardening of the Briarreach**, c. 425,000 to c. 410,000 BR, one part of the Elderweald's people held on in a rougher woodland that rewarded caution more than confidence, and survival came to depend on watchfulness, close-kept knowledge, and the reading of danger before it arrived. Over time those habits became the circles' whole way of life; only then, between c. 405,000 and c. 392,000 BR, did the Circles take their lasting shape. The land is still hard, but no longer as hard as its people's customs assume.

Inside the Hedge

Thornbound life is small and close. A settlement is a cluster of dwellings around a hidden clearing, ringed with cultivated thorn-hedge and woven deadwood, with only a few ways in that anyone outside the circle knows. Most work is tending: foraging, coppicing, small grove-gardens, hunting, and the endless labour of keeping hedges, watch-paths, and safe routes readable. Every adult carries a share of the watch. Knowing the land well enough to notice a change in it is the basic skill of a grown Thorn Elf, and children are taught approaches and warning signs before they are taught much else. They are kept close and named late, even by Elven standards, and outsiders rarely see them at all. The Thornbound dead are returned to living ground in the circle's own clearing, never in any shared or open grove.

There is no Thornbound court or crown. Power sits in the circles: clusters of hidden clearings bound by shared watch and by one jealous right, to say who comes near. A circle is heeded for as long as it keeps its people alive and its trust unbroken, not for its size or wealth. Circles stand together when raiders or a bad winter press them, but none commands another, and old grudges between circles run as long as Elven lives. The Thornbound keep the older Elven grove reverence as custom, the same root the Ordered Bough grew from, but without temple, clergy, or doctrine.

Being Received

A stranger does not walk into Thornbound woods. They wait: at the **Waitfield**, a cleared ground at the outer edge, if they are traders or envoys, or at any hedge-edge where a watcher will see them. Watchers come in pairs and ask three things.

> *Who sent you? What do you carry? Who will answer for you if you do harm here?*
>
> — the Thornbound watchers' three questions

A stranger with no answer to the third is turned back politely and finally. If the circle agrees, hospitality comes in steps, each earned by behaving well in the last. At the **outer fire** the guest is given

a fire outside the hedge and food from the circle's stores for a fixed number of nights, and someone is always watching. A guest who has kept the outer fire well may be led inside by the **blind way**, a path chosen so that they could not retrace it, to eat at the circle's hearth. Only after seasons of return is a guest taught the **known way**, one way in. Few outsiders ever reach it, and those who do are spoken of as half belonging.

At every step a member of the circle stands **sponsor**, and whatever the guest does, the sponsor answers for it as if they had done it themselves. That is why sponsors are slow to offer, and why guests are watched most closely by the one person who most wants them to behave. A trader may camp at the Waitfield a whole season for the right to buy thornwood, resin, and herbs and never be invited past the outer fire. A circle may hire out a guide, at a high price, to boar-hunters, herb-seekers, or a Human lord chasing an outlaw into the thickets, and the guide's own sponsor answers for every party the guide leads.

From Orrin Talloway, *A Road-Book of Both Halves*

> *I had paid at Sevenbreak, the Sallow crossing, and paid well: the Troll who took my coin turned it over twice, named every fall the bridge had suffered since his grandmother's time and the dead of each, showed me the scar he had of the last one, and then let me over with a warning about the far bank that turned out to be exact. Below the span, in the mist off the water, people were standing on the stumps of the old crossings, quite still, and the Troll told me their names too, as if introducing neighbours. I was pleased with the bargain all the same. A clerk likes a toll that tells you what it buys.*
>
> *The far bank did not care what I had bought. The track ran a little way into thorn and stopped at the Waitfield, a long clearing trodden bare, with the ash of a great many fires in it and a dozen traders' camps strung along its edge, and at the far end of it, set out on a flat stone where everyone could see, a pack, a pair of boots, and a rope cut short. Nobody came to meet us. A salt-trader who had been there since the new moon told me that was usual, and that the first time I would know I had been seen was when two of them were standing at my fire.*
>
> *It was the third evening. I had not heard them come, and I had been awake. They were hooded and gloved, and between glove and sleeve their wrists were crossed with old white scars. They asked who had sent me, and what I carried, and I answered both easily; then they asked who would answer for me if I did harm, and I found I had nothing to say. I said the League would. One of them repeated the word, politely, as though trying the weight of a coin from a country it had not heard of, and they went back into the thorn.*
>
> *In the morning a third came and asked whether I wished to sell my salt here, at the Waitfield, at a fair price, and I did, and that was all the Briarreach I ever saw. The salt-trader said I had done well; some wait a season for the same. I wrote in my roll that the Sallow toll buys you the ravine and nothing either side of it, and that the price of the woods beyond is a name, and a name is the one thing nobody can carry in from outside.*

Circles and Crossing-Houses

Along the ravines another power holds. Small Troll families, mostly of the Scarwood and Ravine woundlines, hold the wet ravines and broken stretches where crossings fail and are rebuilt. They live on the crossing: repairing it, warning of it, taking their price for it, and naming the dead of every collapse. They belong to the **Crossing-Oath Houses**, the Troll civilization that claims no forest, only crossings, and on those crossings a house's word holds because it can close the ravine to anyone who defies it, or cut the ropes. Their oldest bridge-oaths descend from charges sworn to the elder road-keepers of the colossal world in the **Swearing of the Crossing-Charges**, c. 230,000 to c. 190,000 BR, kept long after the road-keepers withdrew, and they take their price on that oath. A

bridge fee here may be extortion; it may also pay the people who keep flood, rot, and landslide from swallowing the road again. The Trolls keep body-law, in which scars are sacred record, and swear their crossing-oaths under the title of the Mountain-Father, whose true name they do not know.

The Briarreach has no great road. What crosses it follows the ravines, and the main of these is the **Sallow**, a narrow, silt-heavy river whose cut carries the region's one reliable through-route. Its crossings are kept by Troll houses and change hands, collapse, and reopen over generations. Passage is paid for twice: a circle decides who may enter its woods, and a Troll house decides who may cross its ravine and at what price. A traveller who has paid one has not satisfied the other, and the ones who try neither are found later in the ravines, or not at all. The circles and the Houses have lived beside each other for a very long time and have never settled where one's say ends and the other's begins. Outward from the Waitfield go seasoned thornwood and coppice poles, bark and resin, dyes, medicinal herbs, and the occasional guide; inward come salt, worked metal, cloth, and, in lean years, grain.

The Waitfield draws more than traders. Beast-hunters come for the ravine cats, whose spotted pelts fetch a lord's price in the basins, and for the great boar of the thickets. Bounty-takers come after outlaws who fled into the edge, betting that a circle will kill the quarry first and leave enough of it to claim the reward. Sellswords hire on as caravan guards and learn on the first day that a sword is no use against a hedge. A Thorn Elf guide is the prize hire, and the price rises with every death on the Sallow.

Clearings and Crossings

The Briarreach has no capital. No circle commands another, so there is no seat to find, and the one place an outsider can count on reaching is the Waitfield, trampled bare and ringed with the cold hearths of earlier camps. Nobody lives on it for good, but in the trading months it holds more people than any circle, and most of the region's trade is done there and goes no further.

Inside, the circles keep out of sight. **Wovenbrake**, a large circle by Thornbound measure, is four or five hidden clearings a short walk apart, each ringed with thorn-hedge and woven deadwood and joined by watch-paths only its own people can read. A thousand or more Thorn Elves live there by coppicing, foraging, small grove-gardens, and hunting, every adult keeps some share of the watch, and like any circle it is heeded because it has kept its people alive. **Deadweave** is the other end of the scale: three or four households in heavy deadfall near the Human-facing edge, so thickly walled with woven deadwood that from outside it looks like windthrow. Its watchers see the settlers' clearings before anyone deeper in does, and carry word inward.

On the Sallow, **Sevenbreak** is the Crossing-Oath house where the through-route crosses the ravine on a timber-and-rope crossing the house has rebuilt seven times within its memory. A Scarwood Troll family of a dozen or so lives in turf-roofed dwellings cut into the ravine wall above it, mending, warning, and taking its price. Its dead stand thick on the old spans below, and the family tells each traveller their names. Its safe-conduct is the one a circle has lately refused to honour.

Watch-Names and Scars

About 28,000 people live in the Briarreach, and some twenty-four in twenty-five are Thorn Elves in their circles. About a thousand Trolls live in the crossing houses on the ravines. Humans come to the Waitfield in the trading months and never stay.

A Thorn Elf in circle dress wears hard leather and thornproof hide over cloth dyed in the circles' own dyes to mottled bark and thorn colours, with a hood and gloves for hedge work. They are the leanest and most scarred of the Elves, and the scars here are on the hands and forearms, from the hedges. Children are few, kept close, and seldom lost to sickness, but adults die younger than

other Elves: ravine slides in the wet season, deadfall, and the falls and ambushes of the watch take many before their fifth century, though an elder who escapes them may live as long as any. A Thorn Elf is named late and keeps the name inside the circle. An outsider is given a **watch-name**, a short name for dealing beyond the hedge, and never learns the other: Vireth, Seffa, Kaedris, Tirne, Ysk.

The crossing families wear little, a leather kilt and in the wet season a hide over the shoulders. Their scars are left bare, since they are the family's record, and the Scarwood knots on their backs grow moss. Wounds rarely kill a Troll. The young die more of hunger, because regrowth needs feeding, and of falls than of sickness; those who are fed live two Human lifetimes or more and die at last of crushing too deep to regrow, of starvation in a lean year, or of age. A Troll is named with its crossing, and every byname comes from a scar and is told with its story: Skorra of Sevenbreak, Ardh, Velg, Mhorra, Torv.

Edges and Memory

Inward, the Briarreach shades into the Elderweald with no marked line: the border is where hospitality stops being freely given and starts being judged. Along the ravines the crossings are a border of their own, held by Troll oath and Troll strength rather than by either neighbour. On its open side the Briarreach faces settlement pushing out from the Confluence Marches, and that edge is contested, unfixed, and drawn by no agreement anyone remembers. It moves with clearing and with refusal. A Human village clearing towards the Briarreach may find its woodcutters turned back at a hedge it did not know was there, with no one it can bargain with, and lately some of them have been found shot through with thorn-tipped arrows.

The Briarreach remembers the world as it was before it softened, and treats that memory as instruction. Its central argument is whether the caution is still owed. Elders hold that the old dangers are quiet, not gone. Others, especially those who trade at the Waitfield, ask what a closed forest is protecting now. The circles keep their own tales. Children play *hedge-and-wolf*, one child the watcher who held the gap at Deadweave alone through a night of wolves, the rest the pack that never got past. Elders tell of hunting parties who walked into a forbidden pocket and came out grey-haired, and of Human axe-gangs who came to clear the edge and were never seen again. Two northern circles have not shared a watch since one let raiders through its hedge in a winter beyond counting, and the dead of that night are still named aloud whenever the two meet. Basin inns answer with their own story: the treasure-seeker who came back from a pocket with a green-black cup and was dead of fever within the month. The cup is said to stand on a lord's shelf in the basins still, and no one drinks from it. The Trolls remember differently, as crossings remember: by every fall, every repair, and every promise kept to a grantor who never came back.

Tensions

- **The Slowwater weir.** A mill village on the Slowwater wants a weir to hold water through dry years. The nearest grove says the stream's course is not its to give, and the circle has not met. The village has already cut the posts, and a mixed household with kin on both banks has been asked to carry the answer.
- **The bounty on the Mother.** The old she-bear of the hollows has killed a mill-hand at Eddymill, and a basin lord has put a bounty on her hide. Beast-hunters from three valleys have come to claim it and want to go in without a watcher. The nearest grove says only its own hunters go after a killer, and its hunters are in no hurry.
- **The Unfinished Garden.** A faction of great houses wants the oldest temple-garden declared complete, its forms fixed, and its shaping ended in Saerith's honour. The senior ten-

ders answer that a finished temple-garden is a dead one, and the houses of Amberbough must choose between them in public.

- **The Root Course.** The gate hold's offer to rebuild the Verge Stair means lifting the Root Course, and that means cutting the gate's roots or setting Dwarven stone beneath them. Saerith's devotees would sooner regrow the gate elsewhere; the tenders answer that a gate rooted in stone this long is partly made of it. If the canopy refuses, the hold's keeper must say whether an oath to keep the stair whole binds the hold to work across the line no Dwarf has ever worked, and meanwhile the stair grows more dangerous every season.
- **The climb alone.** A basin envoy is at last offered the Leave Stair, on condition that she climbs alone, her scribe and oath-keeper left below. If she goes, the highest reception her lord has ever had will be unsworn and unwritten, and by basin custom it will not have happened. If she refuses, the offer will not come again. Her sellswords have heard of envoys who climbed alone and came down years later, changed, or not at all.
- **Paid at the ravine, refused at the hedge.** A circle has turned back a caravan that already paid the Troll house at the Sallow crossing. The house says its safe-conduct has been broken. The circle says no Troll may promise entry to Thornbound woods, and the caravan, which can make neither side give way, is likely to pay twice or turn home.
- **A pocket that is safe.** A young watcher has found that one of the forbidden pockets of the Briarreach is not dangerous at all. Either the elders were wrong about it, or they were guarding something other than danger. Word of it has already reached the Waitfield, and someone there is offering silver for the way in.

CHAPTER 11

Stone and the Deep

Must this close?
Then close it, and write why,
and leave the writing where
the ones outside can read it.

— The Unwitnessed Seals

The Ironspine is as deep as it is high. From the foothill towns it looks like any mountain belt, bare ridges above faultbound valleys, smoke from the smelters hanging over the passes, but the mountains are only its upper storey. Behind every gate the holds run inward and down, through halls and forges and mines, into underways that join hold to hold through the rock, and below them into the Stonewake Deeps, where there is no weather and no season, only air, water, and load, and where something still knocks behind some of the sealed doors. Further still, where the stone gives way to living root grown down from the forest above, lie the Roothollows, the root-cavern country of the Dark Elves, who remember being left to drown. Between the two peoples of the deep sits one reservoir that both of them draw from every day, under each other's spears, and neither has ever agreed to share; above the Dark Elves lies a whole storey of their old world, drowned with its dead and its treasure, that nobody has entered openly in three hundred thousand years. This is a country of doors. Every door has a record, every record has another that contradicts it, and every people down here can tell a stranger exactly which door was shut on them, and by whom, and when.

The Ironspine

The **Ironspine** is a long mountain belt and the oldest Dwarven homeland on Caeldon: bare ridges and faultbound valleys above, holds cut into the mountain faces, and mines, vaults, and underways running down into the rock beneath. It belongs to the **Ironspine Holds**, which took shape as a hold world in the **Holdmaking of the Ironspine** (c. 465,000 to c. 445,000 BR) and came together between c. 460,000 and c. 438,000 BR. No throne rules it. Each hold rules itself, and what binds them is a set of very old oaths about what must be kept standing. Its gates have held against sieges older than Human memory; its abandoned holds lie open to anyone who dares the dark, the bad air, and whatever still knocks behind the sealed doors. Most people here are Dwarves, but few holds are only Dwarven, and far below the moun-

AT A GLANCE

Lies	The middle of the cradle-web: the Ironspine running north to south, with the forest on its western face and the Headwater and Broken Marches on its eastern; the Deeps beneath its middle; the Roothollows under the eastern Elderweald.
People	About 440,000: some 328,000 Dwarves; some 48,000 Kobolds in the underwork; about 12,000 underwall Goblins; two thousand or more Wrought; some 40,000 Dark Elves in the root-caverns; Humans at the gates in season; Giants uncounted.
Civilizations	The Ironspine Holds, the Stonewake Compact, and the Gloamroot Covenant; the Underhouse Compacts below them all.
Landscape	Mountain holds and passes; a deep hold-cluster of reservoirs and warded corridors; root-bound caverns; a sealed and drowned upper storey.
Chief places	No capital anywhere; Anvilwake among the leading holds; Stairdeep at the foot of the Hauling Stair; the great Gloamroot houses; the Rootstone Heartwell between Deeps and Roothollows.
The year	The Medieval Era, c. 1,350 CR.

tain holds lie the Stonewake Deeps, part of the Ironspine and fed by it, with sealed doors and a war of their own.

Three Storeys

One hold may reach from a weather-beaten gate to workings that have never seen daylight, and the belt as a whole has three storeys. At the top lie the heights, the Stormcrown, where the fitted stone of a vanished colossal people still stands and almost nothing new is built. Below them is the hold country: mountain faces and faultbound valleys where the holds open their gates, with terraced fields and pasture in the sheltered valleys and smelting smoke above. The exposed hold lifeways Dwarves call **Gatehold** and **Highhold** belong to this storey, shaped more by weather, haulage, and traffic than by depth. At the bottom are the roots: mines, mineral-bearing strata, vaults, and the underways that join hold to hold through the rock, giving way further down to the Deeps.

The belt runs north to south through the middle of the cradle-web, some four months' walk long in its mapped part; where it ends in the north nobody has mapped. On the forest side it comes down in verges and outer watersheds to the Elderweald and, further south, the Crownboughs. On the other side it falls into the foothills and river origins of the Headwater Marches in the south and the Broken Marches further north. At its southern end the last spurs sink into the low ridges of the basin country, where no hold stands and no road climbs. Much of the water both lowlands live on rises here. A pass takes two or three weeks to cross the belt in summer. Anvilwake stands in the middle of it, about a month by hold roads and underways from Thrumgate, the south-eastern gate above Oathfoot, and three or four days above Stairdeep by the Hauling Stair; the Verge Stair climbs the south-western face from Highbraid. The holds are the settled cores, each with its gate valley, terraces, and mine-edges; between them lie bare rock, snowfields, and the high ground of stone cats, and the roads are travelled by leave, in company, from gate to gate. The holds say a stone cat seen on the gate stair means the passes close within days.

The dangers change with the storey. On the surface it is weather and the fall: passes close in winter, rockfall and avalanche take roads and the people on them, and a high hold can be cut off for a season. Exposure kills more travellers than anything that lives in the mountains, though plenty lives there. Pale stone cats take herds and lone climbers, pass bears raid the walled waystations every autumn, and gluttons rob every cache a

traveller leaves; a hunter who follows a stone cat onto its own ground comes home with the pelt or not at all, and the pelt is worn at the gate by whoever brought it. Underground it is flood, bad air, and collapse. The mine-edges are where Ironspine Dwarves most often die before their time, in a working that floods, a brace that fails, gas gathering in a dead pocket; Kobold crews notice these first and are not always believed. Hog-sized **Brace-Gnawers**, stone-hided beasts, gnaw the props hollow from inside, and a brace that looks sound may be a shell.

Old works fail without warning everywhere: abandoned workings, early holds left empty, colossal roads too large to mend properly. Some old workings still hold the frames that once laboured in them, and nobody can tell from the doorway which of them are only tools. The empty holds draw treasure-seekers after forgotten forge-work, old weapons, and hoards of metal no archive remembers; the holds call them grave-robbers and wall up the ones they catch, but the dark keeps more of them than the wardens do. The old masters' tombs are worse than the dark, shut with triggered traps and slowed doors whose makers' craft has outlived them, and more than one has thieves' bones lying before it like a doormat. Some doors were shut with people still behind them. In the older holds there is knocking behind them still, the **Seal-Knockers**, and nobody can say whether it is the dead or the living; hold children are taught one rule before they can count, *if it knocks, do not answer*. In a few refuges whose keepers would not leave, the keepers have become **Burden-Stays**, grown into the stone as living props, and freeing one brings the roof down. And above the highest seams the miners leave the rock alone. Upland custom says Haurûm the Mountain-Father sleeps beneath the summits, and that digging too deep beneath them might wake him; he would not be angry, the warning goes, only confused, and a confused mountain can bury a valley with one stumble. Climbers report a slow, rhythmic rumble under the peaks, like a heartbeat.

A Town Turned Inward

A hold is a town turned inward. Its gate opens on the mountain face, and everything behind it is arranged by how much protection it needs. At the gate are the outer yards, storehouses, stables, and the halls where outsiders are received; traders, envoys, and hired crews rarely go further, and the sworn wardens of the gate are the first Dwarves most visitors meet. Behind it lie the halls and households, the forges, the market where hold craft changes hands, and the archive where the hold's oaths, tallies, and dead are cut into stone tablets. It is said that an unjust oath cut there will crack its stone, and that Kerrund the Stone-Warden watches the tablets to keep them true. Deepest inside, behind the most doors, are the **cradle-chambers**: a Dwarven infant is still setting into durable form after birth, so the hold keeps what it can least afford to lose where an enemy would reach last. Below are the mines and workings, joined by underways to the neighbouring holds.

Work is mining, smelting, forging, and stonework, and above all the upkeep of everything those produce: bracing, draining, clearing roads, rebuilding gates. Food is grown where the mountains allow it, barley and roots on valley terraces, herds on summer pasture, fungal beds in the lower levels, and bought where they do not, mostly from Human farmers on the Headwater side. The mountain holds also feed the Deeps, which grow little of their own, so a poor harvest in the valleys is felt a long way down.

Childhood is long and maturity comes in stages, and hold life marks each stage slowly and in public. A child's name is cut on a small stone kept in the cradle-chamber until the child is judged able to carry it; the stone then goes home with the household. A craft is taught one burden at a time. A young Dwarf's first oath is sworn at the gate, before a custodian who asks Kerrund's question aloud, and only once the young Dwarf is judged able to keep it; the answer is cut into the hold's archive, and an oath broken at the gate is the whole hold's to avenge, not only the injured kin's.

A marriage joins two households' names on one archive tablet, with each household's craft and burdens read out so the hold knows what the new household will carry. When a returned exile, a changed survivor, or a disputed heir asks to be taken back, the hold-elders sit the **Proving of the Unbroken Line** (see The Elder Peoples, FND 207), and an heir with powerful kin behind them is heard sooner and more kindly. Burial is that hearing in miniature, the dead declared to have held and then sealed with care. Once a year, at the **Festival of the First Stone**, every household lays a single stone on its hold's walls, and if it is laid with true intent, it is said, the wall will stand another year.

Who Else Lives Behind the Gate

Not everyone inside a hold counts the same. Kobold crews take the narrow, dangerous repairs in vent runs and mine-edges, usually under compact terms and often for work the hold prefers not to mention. Their **Underhouse Compacts** are strongest here and in the Deeps, and a compact's refusal, all crews at once, closes a working without a blow struck: a hold that will not pay for danger soon finds its narrow repairs left undone. Goblin **underwall households** live in service passages and old seams within the walls, tolerated, useful, and seldom heard when the elders decide anything. They descend from those who stayed inside when early holdmaking took the seam-warrens in the **Enclosure of the Seams**, and warren memory still names seams that now lie deep within the holds; some households still call those seams theirs, at times with spears borrowed from the Iron Compacts. Underwall songs still name the seams the holds took, and they belong to Tavi the Bard of the Broken.

Wrought descended from Dwarven workframes work the forge levels and live more freely in the foothill towns, where repair houses speak for them. The **Mending Orders** keep houses near old Dwarven works and in the mixed foothill towns, and their quarrel is with craft-lines that still treat frame patterns as hold craft, and with anyone who calls a Wrought person's repair maintenance. Human traders and hired hands, and now and then a fosterling from a Headwater family, belong to daily life at most foothill gates. Giants hold no power here and seek none. A high-line family may still keep one pass or shrine line on the outer crest, and some hold archives keep oaths sworn with Giant lines that have not been heard from in centuries.

Who Holds the Hold

Power in a hold belongs to whoever keeps it standing: the hold-elders, the keepers of lineage memory, the masters of its crafts, and the great houses whose miners, smiths, and spears the hold cannot spare. They sit together over hold quarrels, and the strongest houses usually carry it. Houses that lose nurse it for generations, and Dwarven grudges between houses, and between holds, outlast the walls they began over. A hold's word among the others is measured by what it maintains and what it can defend, and a hold whose gates, roads, or archives have failed loses weight, however large it is. A few leading holds speak for the Ironspine with the Crownbough Courts and the Human corridor powers, but they speak because they are the strongest, and any hold may decline to follow. Holds have marched on holds for less, and the underways between some of them are still walled off from old wars. Two neighbouring holds have kept their shared underway bricked up for longer than the Human world has kept records, over an anvil-stone each says the other stole, and each sends a warden to stand at its side of the wall on the feud's day.

What gives the holds a common custom is the **Held Covenant**, the organized faith of the Dwarven holds. Its premise is that whatever holds must be able to answer for itself: a wall, a seal, a refuge, an office, and a person are all held, and all must be able to say aloud that they still deserve to stand. Its great gods are honoured as questions rather than as patrons, and worship is the act of

answering them honestly. *Will you hold?* is the question of Kerrund the Stone-Warden, born at a besieged deep gate in the early wars of Dark Elves and Dwarves, asked of every oath, wall, gate, and office and answered by keeping them. *Must this close?* belongs to the Measured Seal, *can this still bear?* to the Last Chamber. The questions often pull against each other, and the Covenant does not settle the tension; it requires that each question be asked aloud. Its clergy are not priests but **custodians**, keepers of seals, tallies, and hearings, and a custodian whose own judgements are later condemned must answer the same questions they once asked of others.

The Ironspine keeps it in **gate practice**: outward-facing, oath-centred, used to bargaining with Human corridor lords and Elven embassies, and readier than the Deeps to accept a place won by bargain. Every hold tells the **Legend of the Unbroken Gate** in its own version, of the deep gate breached at last until Kerrund stood in the doorway and would not move. Some Dwarves drawn outward by corridor trade now pray for open roads rather than held gates, and the custodians have noticed. Haurûm the Mountain-Father stands outside the Covenant. Dwarves honour him by title, ask him nothing, and leave his colossal remains untouched; the Giants, who alone still know his name, keep his sleep. Corrow the Gale-Runner travels the kindred circuits on the outer roads and quarrels with Kerrund whenever a gate shuts on a road.

Roads Through Stone

Three kinds of road cross the Ironspine, each with different keepers. The **underways** run hold to hold through the rock. They are the safest roads in the belt and the most closed: each hold keeps its own stretch and grants passage by leave, and Kobold crews use service ways between them that no hold has mapped, some of which pass by sealed doors the crews will not speak near. The **passes** cross the belt and its spurs on the surface. Most are hold roads, walled, gated, and shut in winter. The oldest follow colossal ridge roads, the greatest of them the **Long Tread**, a road too broad for any living builder that runs for weeks along the outer crest from one gate to the next; Edgeway kindreds keep its culverts and mark its dangers, gate holds keep the stretches by their doors, and neither will grant the other the whole. A kindred that has cleared a colossal culvert for longer than the nearest hold has kept records does not accept that the hold may close the road it serves.

The **exchange roads** come down from the foothill gates into the Headwater Marches, fortified and escorted, and inside the outer gate of each foothill hold they end in an **oath-yard**, a walled yard where Headwater traders are received and every bargain is sworn before the hold's custodian. Two stairs complete the network: the Verge Stair crosses to the Crownboughs, its lower half kept by the gate holds, and the Hauling Stair carries stores down to the Deeps and ore back up.

Out of the mountains go metal, tools, and weapons; dressed stone; route knowledge and teaching. In the time of the exchange roads Dwarven workframes went out the same way, which is where the Wrought's long quarrel over who owns them begins. In come grain, salt meat, wool and cloth, lamp oil, and bracing timber, much of it bound onward for the Deeps. Shaped wood and gifts come across the Verge Stair, weighed for rank as carefully as for worth. Along the heights go salvage, news, and warnings of rockfall and beasts carried on the kindred circuits. Passage belongs to the gate holds. A traveller enters under gate oath, crosses a hold's ground on its leave, and leaves owing whatever was sworn. Treasure has a trade of its own. Foothill taverns sell maps of the empty holds, nearly all of them false, to treasure-seekers who cannot tell; hold wardens pay a bounty on grave-robbers taken in the abandoned works, and hired beast-hunters come up from the Headwater side when a stone cat starts on the herds. The best

guides are Kobolds who know the unmapped service ways, and the compacts punish any crew caught selling them.

From Orrin Talloway, *A Road-Book of Both Halves*

> *The gate of Thrumgate does not look like a door until it opens. From the road it is only a darker place in the mountain face, with a row of cut steps below it and a warden at the top, her braids bound in metal and an axe across her knees, who watched us climb the whole way without moving. At the threshold she asked our business, then asked me to swear to keep the hold's peace while I was under its roof. Before I answered she asked one more question, quite gently: whether I would hold. I said I would. She cut a mark on a tally and let us in, and I saw that the tally was stone, and that my mark sat in a long row of others, and that none of them could ever be scraped off.*
>
> *The oath-yard is bigger than the market square of most towns I know, roofed in stone and lit by lamps set in niches all the way round, so that every face is lit from the side. On the wall above the inner gate hung a row of war-axes, rust-dark and heavy, each with a tablet under it, and our caravan-master told me they had belonged to captains who had come to take the hold and had not. Our grain was weighed on a beam older than my family. The custodian who sealed the sale spoke the terms aloud, had both parties repeat them, had a clerk cut them into a tablet for the hold's archive, and then pressed her palm flat to the table-stone between us and waited until we had both done the same. I have written ten thousand bargains on the Serath, and every one of them could burn. I did not like how much I envied that clerk.*
>
> *Beyond the yard a second gate stood open, and through it I saw a long hall going back into the mountain, and further, smaller doors, and further again, darkness. Nobody stopped me looking. Nobody asked me through. A line of Kobolds came out of a low passage in the yard wall, padded to the ears in wool and felt, coiled ropes on their shoulders, chalk on their hands, and went past the wardens without a word on either side, and one of them tapped twice on the doorpost as he passed, and somewhere inside the wall something tapped back. The warden at the inner gate turned her head at that, and listened, and did not answer it.*
>
> *I asked the custodian what lay below the mines. She said the Deeps, and that they ate our grain, and that if I wished to know more I should ask in a hundred years. When we came out it was evening and snowing on the pass. I had been inside for an afternoon and felt I had been a guest of something very old that had been polite to me and would not remember my name, though it had cut my mark in stone.*

Holds, Gates, and Terraces

No throne rules the Ironspine, so it has no capital. A few leading holds speak for it because the rest follow them, and the one other peoples meet most often is **Anvilwake**, a great upper hold whose gate opens on a mountain face above a faultbound valley. Behind the gate come the outer yards and halls, then halls, markets, and an archive of stone tablets, and deepest of all the cradle-chambers. Its forges send smoke above the ridge on every working day, and the valley below smells of it. Some twenty thousand Dwarves live there, with Kobold crews in the vent runs, Goblin underwall households in the service passages, and Wrought in the forge levels, and it is one of the holds that speak with the Crownbough Courts and the corridor powers. Its gate has never fallen, and its wardens can name every siege it has held; the war-axes of the besieging captains hang in the gate hall, one for each, and the oldest are of a make no smith alive can name.

Thrumgate is the face the foothills know: a gate hold above the Headwater town of Oathfoot, whose exchange road ends in an oath-yard inside the outer gate. Headwater traders are received there and every bargain is sworn before the hold's

custodian, and few of them see further in. Behind the yard live a thousand or two Dwarves, a Human fosterling or two, and the hired hands of the season.

Below the holds the work spreads out. **Seamhead** is a mine-edge settlement at the head of a working: lodgings, store-sheds, a smithy, and the timber yards that feed the bracing. In the working season a few hundred live there, hold miners, Kobold crews under Underhouse terms, and Human miners hired from the foothills, and when the Kobolds call a working unsafe, Seamhead empties faster than the hold would like. Its graveyard is the largest thing in it. The hold pays a bounty on every Brace-Gnawer killed in the workings, and the Kobold crews who collect most of it nail the stone hides up at the shaft-head. **Barleystep** is four Dwarven farmsteads on the terraces of a sheltered valley below a hold, growing barley and roots and driving herds to summer pasture. Everything it grows goes up to the gate it belongs to, and a poor year there is felt a long way down. Its herders keep spears for the stone cats and hire a beast-hunter when one starts taking calves.

Braids, Crews, and Name-Stones

About 320,000 people live in the Ironspine proper, the Deeps below counting their own. Some five in six are Dwarves. Kobold crews are about one in twelve, most of them along the mine-edges; underwall Goblins number perhaps 12,000; Humans come to five to eight thousand in the working season, nearly all at the foothill gates; and a thousand or more Wrought live in the forge levels. How many Giants keep the outer crest, nobody knows.

Hold dress is layered wool and leather against the cold of gates and passes, with heavy boots, and in forge and mine leather aprons and caps. Hair and beards are braided by hold custom, and a gate warden’s braids are bound in the hold’s metal, so that a stranger at the threshold knows whom to answer before a word is said. Ironspine Dwarves are ruddier and more weathered than the Dwarves of the Deeps. About one infant in five dies in the years when it is still setting into durable form, which is why the cradle-chambers lie deepest; after that, childhood is long and safe. Most who escape the mine-edges live two and a half to three centuries, and a newborn can expect about two hundred years. Of those who die before old age, the mine-edges take about half, by flood, bad air, and collapse, and passes and rockfall most of the rest; the old die of the slow stiffening of age. The name cut on a child’s stone in the cradle-chamber is given only when the child can carry it, and until then it goes by its household name. In full a Dwarf is given name, household, and hold, as the archive tablets have them: Haldrun Dovrek of Anvilwake, Gorvask Ostgar, Hethrun Brunvald, Bettra Dovrek, Ottra Brunvald, Gerrask Ostgar.

Kobold crews wrap themselves in layered wool and felt against the cold, with padded hoods and knee-pads for the vent runs, tails left free, and crew marks stitched at the shoulder; the mine-edge Kobolds run to rust and ochre scales. One child in four dies young, of cold and coughs, and adults die of collapse, bad air, and the repairs no one else will take. Few reach fifty, and a newborn can expect about twenty-five years. Every Kobold has a whistle-name in sound code that no other people can make, and a spoken name for larger peoples, given with crew and underhouse: Tisk of the Seamhead crew, Sekka, Ikkis, Chirra, Tsell, Vikk. The underwall Goblins wear the hold’s cast-off cloth cut down to size and are parchment-pale from the service passages; a household takes the name of the seam it claims, in old warren words no Dwarven archive records, Kittel of Ruttak among them. The Giant lines in the hold archives carry names like Haurûm’s: Ondûr, Valgrûm.

Edges and Memory

The Ironspine ends where the holds' reach gives way to someone else’s, and few of its edges were drawn by agreement. Towards the Elderweald and the Crownboughs it meets the forest across verges and watersheds that formed before either people

argued over them, and which hardened over water, digging, and cut verges in the **Elderweald-Ironspine Frontier** (c. 410,000 to c. 385,000 BR) and over rank in the **Courts of Stone and Canopy** (c. 375,000 to c. 355,000 BR). Conquest has never settled it. Towards the Headwater Marches the belt falls into foothills, river origins, and mixed settlement, an edge made by use: ages of guarded waystations and exchange turned a frontier into the oldest Human-Dwarf corridor on Caeldon, and in practice it runs where the gate wardens take over the escort. Towards the Broken Marches old route lines run out into ground the holds call theirs; the holds reckon that edge from wherever their kept passages begin, and Kobold underways and Goblin seam-memory cross it regardless. Upward, the highest ground belongs to no hold, and the edge is a taboo rather than a line.

The holds remember their founding as ordinary work: chambers made sound, passages made dependable, memory carried forward. The Goblins remember the same span as their first dispossession. Towards the forest the Ironspine remembers being judged, and answers the High Elf view of it as unrefined with its own view of the courts as unsound. Towards the foothills it remembers teaching: Ironspine metallurgy, route craft, and stone-building went into the Human world through the Headwater corridor, and the holds still think of Human kingdoms as former pupils who did not stay small. The roads carry rival memories as well. Dwarven archives record the exchange roads as Dwarven work, while the Edgeway kindreds remember walking colossal roads over the same heights long before any Human came up from the foothills. The Kobold underhouses remember Dwarven frames arriving in the holds and the Kobolds' worth to the holds shrinking; some Dwarven craft-lines remember the same frames as a reform. And the deep war is remembered differently up here than in the Deeps. The mountain holds remember a gate held rather than a door sealed: Dark Elf war-parties coming up out of the roots, wardens dying shoulder to shoulder in a gate too narrow for three, and the god born of their holding. They carry its legacy as Kerrund and as a distrust of Elves older than any crown. They remember a villain too, the warden who opened a side-door to the war-parties for a promise, whose name is cut on no tablet, and the worst curse in the holds is to wish someone's door sealed from the outside.

The Stonewake Deeps

Far below the mountain holds lie the **Stonewake Deeps**, the Ironspine's deep central hold-cluster: a knot of holds, reservoirs, archive chambers, and warded corridors where more of the lower world's routes and water converge than anywhere else. They are the home ground of the **Stonewake Compact**, which keeps the air, water, and lifts of the deep working for everyone who depends on them, and of a sealing custom so severe that a shut door here is at once a hold-elder's judgement, a prayer, and a border. Behind some of those doors something still knocks. The region took its shape in the **Deepening of Stonewake** (c. 365,000 to c. 350,000 BR) and the founding of the Compact (c. 360,000 to c. 348,000 BR). Most people in the Deeps are Dwarves, but Kobold underhouses keep its air moving, Wrought descended from deep-hold workframes live in its forge and mine levels, and its Roothollow-facing edge has been fought over with the Dark Elves for more than three hundred thousand years.

Water, Heat, and Load

The Deeps lie far below the middle of the Ironspine, with the mountain holds above and around them on every side but the west. There, towards the forest side of the belt, the stone gives way to the root-caverns of the Roothollows, and the Rootstone Heartwell and the Undrawn Seal stand on that edge. The levels step downwards from the foot of the Hauling Stair to the reservoir holds and the hot lowest workings. Stairdeep, at the foot of the stair, is three or four days below Anvilwake

and five or six weeks from Threewater Turn in the Roothollows; Blackbasin lies in the lower levels. The holds are the cores of the Deeps, with unworked dark and bad air between them. Every way between holds is walked under a hold's watch, and the lost works below the lowest kept route are walked by **delvers**, who answer to no one and are buried by no one. Their saying at the lip of every unkept shaft is *the deep pays once*, and they mean both the treasure and the price.

The Deeps lie below the mountain roots, in stone that Dwarven bodies bear easily and other peoples find crushing. There is no weather and no season. In their place are water, heat, and load: reservoirs fed from the rock above, mineral-bearing strata, natural heat in the lowest levels, and chambers widened over ages until the stone carries far more emptiness than it was born with. Towards the Roothollows, bare stone gives way to root-bound caverns and water-bearing hollows where the old underforest still pushes down into the rock.

The dangers are the ones a Stonewake seal is meant to stop: collapse, flood or reservoir breach, sickness or corruption spreading, something coming up from below, and above all the **slide**, where one failure runs from hold to hold and takes people who did nothing wrong. Bad air is the quiet killer: trapped gas, dead pockets behind a silted vent, heat that builds faster than a draught can clear it. Brace-gnawers hollow props from inside until a gallery comes down on the crew that trusted it; kiln newts in the hot seep pools give a festering bite; pale lampless spiders curtain the unused ways. Below the lowest kept routes lie works no living hold keeps, among them the lost pressure holds of Dwarven memory, where unwoken frames still stand at their posts, and every delver's tale puts the old forge-lords' hoards behind the last door: rune-cut ingots, seal-rings of holds no archive names, tools of a make no living smith can match. The frames draw delvers down and do not always let them back up, because a frame still at its old task does not know a delver from a load of ore, and has been known to carry one to the slag-pit with the rest. A darker danger walks in the refuges. The Cast-Out of Unyielding Burden is drawn to deep holds with too many dependents, and in refuges kept past mercy its keepers grow into the stone as Burden-Stays, living props who cannot die while the weight rests on them. Custodians in the Deeps count them among the hazards of the region, not among its legends. Behind sealed doors and in haunted grave closures the Seal-Knockers knock, and whether the knocking is the dead or the living is the custodians' oldest question.

Air, Water, and the Way Out

Life in the Deeps is arranged around three things nobody takes for granted. **Air** comes first. Every inhabited level has its draught, and every draught is somebody's work: vent runs, trap-doors, and pressure gates are walked, listened to, and cleared on fixed rounds, with a caged air-finch for warning, much of it by Kobold crews whose sound codes and warning marks Dwarves have learned to read without being able to make them. Lamps are kept small, for the oil and because every flame is counted against the air. **Water** is the region's wealth. Reservoir wardens know each basin's level, its inflow, and what fails downstream if it drops; a hold's share is set by the custodians and written down, and drawing beyond it is theft. A hold that does it can expect its gates shut against it, and water-thieves taken in the act have been left in the dark beyond the last lamp, with one lamp's oil and the way back to find, if they can. **The way out** is known from childhood. Every household has its evacuation route and its refuge chamber, and the smallest shrines in the Deeps stand in exactly those places.

Holds sit where routes cross or a reservoir can be guarded, with workings, forges, and storehouses radiating outward and the cradle-chambers deepest inside. Without a sun, the day is reckoned in shifts and the shifts in rounds: a vent round, a reservoir reading, a walk past the seals to

listen. Work is mining, smelting, forging, and above all upkeep. Ore is cut in the working levels and smelted where natural heat and old channels allow; the forge levels run hot, and much of their most dangerous labour falls to Wrought or to old frames that never woke. Food is the weak point. Little grows below beyond fungal basins, so most stores come down from the mountain holds and are kept in dense, long-lasting form. Deep Dwarves bear lean seasons better than most peoples, and a Stonewake storehouse is counted as carefully as a reservoir.

Custodians belong to daily life, but they also rule it. The same office that marks a closure keeps the hold's tallies, settles quarrels, and seals the dead. Every grave closure carries more than one custodial mark and an archive entry, and children learn to read the marks on doors the way surface children read clouds, and to fear the doors with too many.

The Seal Round

The Compact's sealing custom is something people walk past every day, in the form of seals, and its most ordinary rite is the inspection round. Every standing seal has a round cut into its closure marks: how often it is visited and what must be checked. On the day a junior custodian walks to it with lamp and tally-board and, where the seal touches an air run, a Kobold vent hand. At the seal they read the closure marks and the last inspection mark, lay a palm on the seam for warmth, listen for draught or water, and look for seep or fresh dust along the joint. If nothing has changed, the custodian cuts a small inspection mark beside the last one and enters it in the archive at the end of the shift. If something has changed, the round stops being routine: the custodian calls the custodians who marked the closure, and the next people to pass the seal find it watched.

Households near a seal know its round the way surface villages know a market day, and children follow the inspector to watch the mark being cut, and to listen at the seam for the knocking. A seal whose last mark is old is called **unwitnessed**, and any passer may raise it with the custodians. People in the Deeps raise unwitnessed seals readily, because a closure nobody checks is the first step towards the seal that never reopens. A Kobold crew may refuse a round behind a seal it judges unsafe, and the round waits until the custodians agree or a hungrier crew is found.

Keeping and Refusal

Power in the Deeps belongs to whoever keeps what others cannot live without. The Compact binds its holds through shared keeping rather than by one hold set over the rest: route keepers, reservoir wardens, and archive-custodians each hold their part, and grave decisions need several of them to agree. A hold may still seal first in an emergency and explain itself afterwards, and whether the explanation is accepted depends mostly on how much water and how many lifts it controls. The Deeps remain part of the wider Ironspine Holds, which feed them and send many of their people down, and never claim to replace the Holds' older ancestral lines. The mountain holds are kin, supplier, and critic: they keep the Covenant in gate practice while the Deeps keep it in **seal practice**, severe, slow to reopen, and haunted, in every sense, by seals later judged unjust, and each regards the other as a lesser form of the same faith. Gate practice accuses seal practice of closing what should hold; seal practice accuses gate practice of holding what should close. The quarrel has drawn blood more than once, and mostly at doors: a seal-practice custodian walled into a gallery by a gate hold that wanted it open, a gate-warden's oath-company barred out to die by a deep hold that wanted it shut.

The Underhouse Compacts are the other power, and the only one that can stop the Deeps without a weapon. Kobold crews bargain as one, keep the shared maps and warning codes, and can declare a shaft unsafe so that no member crew enters it. Older underhouse lines once feared Sessik the Tongue-Taker, a god who punished noise in

the tunnels; he faded once the compacts' shared sound codes made silence a skill. The compacts shelter crews who escape bonded service and treat any hold that keeps Kobolds captive as unsafe ground for all of them. That captivity survives here mostly as inherited protection-debt, defended by its holders as survival and condemned by Dwarven custodians as well as Kobold crews on the old ground that debt does not make a person a tool. Crews who run from it go through the vent galleries, where Dwarves cannot follow, and the holds that hunt them hire bounty-takers who can, Kobold turncoats among them, the most hated people in any underhouse. The Kobold guides who lead runaways through the galleries are hunted in turn as thieves of a hold's property, and the underhouses hide them at any cost. One such hold is quietly losing its underwork to refusal: its custodians call the debt protection, its Kobolds call it captivity, and its vents are beginning to silt. The underhouses trace their place in the Deeps to the vent-kin who fled downward after the ash-furnace fall and were taken in under protection that became debt, and they have never forgotten how the one turned into the other.

The Wrought here are mostly Forgeframe and Mineframe lines, descended from frames first built in holds like these, and the Mending Orders keep some of their earliest houses in the region. Whether a hold counts its Wrought as people depends on the hold, as it does everywhere. Deep works still hold frames nobody has looked at in generations, and each one found standing in a sealed working is worth a fortune in old metal to the delvers who find it, hold property to the hold above, and perhaps a person left behind to the Wrought, who have begun sending their own people down to reach the frames first.

The Hauling Stair and the Seals

There are no rivers here in the surface sense. Water moves through channels, seeps, and reservoirs, and the custodians say where it goes. The roads are warded corridors running hold to hold and junction to junction, with guarded descents and lifts tying them to the mountain holds above. The greatest is the **Hauling Stair**, the stair-and-lift shaft by which food, bracing timber, lamp oil, cloth, and Dwarves taking up deep postings come down, and ore, smelted metal, and worked goods go up. Whoever keeps its lifts can ration everything below, so the Compact keeps it under heavier guard than any other route in the region, and a lift-cable cut in a feud once starved three holds for a winter. Raiders from the Roothollow side have tried the lower junctions in hard years, and every warded corridor ends in a gate a dozen axes can hold. Across the Deeps move water shares between holds, written down, traded, and fiercely defended; crew terms bargained through the Underhouse Compacts; and access to warded or sealed routes, granted by the custodians as favour rather than sold.

Seals are a weapon here, whether anyone admits it or not. A closure sound on its stated grounds can still divert traffic through one hold's junctions, starve another's reservoir, or cut a rival off from the Hauling Stair, and the bitterest charge in Stonewake memory is a seal kept shut because reopening had become inconvenient. A seal ends the region as surely as rock. Reopening a passage changes the border, the water shares, and who must answer for the dead all at once, and nobody knows for certain what is waiting on the other side. Before major closures the Measured Seal is asked *must this close?*, and its triple-mark shrines and tally-stones stand at closure sites; the Last Chamber is asked *can this still bear?* at the small shrines in route-houses, cisterns, and evacuation vaults. Kobold underhouses honour the Last Chamber at those same shrines under a name of their own, so the two peoples often pray in one place to one god without sharing a word for it. Kerrund is honoured, but less here than in the gate holds above, and the Wrought of the Deeps, like Wrought elsewhere, have no god of their own yet.

The clearest unfinished border is the **Undrawn Seal** on the Roothollow-facing edge, a closure marked as temporary and never reopened. Its marks name danger to the reservoirs, and the custodians who cut them are long dead. Kobold vent crews report a draught behind it, so something on the far side still breathes. Gloamroot claimants say it closed a refuge route. The custodians who would have to answer for opening it have every reason not to look, and delvers have offered more than one of them a fortune for a single unwatched night at it, so the seal is now guarded as much against the living on this side as against whatever breathes on the other.

The Deeps remember themselves as the place that had to choose. In the Stonewake telling carried outward by the **Burdened Seal Histories**, the old deep catastrophe proved that someone had to close what could not be kept open, and that those who did were later judged by people who never had to keep the deep alive. The Gloamroot counter-memory, that Dwarves hid abandonment behind seal-rites, is known here word for word and never conceded.

Holds of the Deep

With no hold set over the rest, the Deeps have no capital. The nearest thing to a centre is **Stairdeep**, where the Hauling Stair's shafts reach the Deeps, because whoever keeps the lifts there can ration everything below. It is lift-houses, storehouses counted as carefully as any reservoir, and the custodians' halls, whose doors carry more marks than any other in the region, and the lifts knock and creak through every shift. Ten thousand or more Dwarves live there, many of them on deep postings from the mountain holds, with Kobold crews in its vent galleries. Every store that comes down is entered there before it goes on. Delvers bound for the lost works outfit there too, buying rope, finches, and lamp oil at hold prices, and the lowest taproom by the lift-houses keeps a wall of tally-sticks, one for each delver who went down and did not come up; a band about to descend touches the newest stick for luck.

Blackbasin is a hold of two or three thousand built around a guarded reservoir in the lower levels, and its life is the water's: its wardens know the basin's level, its inflow, and what fails downstream if it drops. Its quarrels with neighbouring holds over water drawn beyond a share have twice come to axes at the sluices. Over the main sluice a warden's grave-marker is cut into the gate itself, *He held the gate; the gate held*: he stood in a breached reservoir gate with his shoulder to the leaf while the hold's cradle-chambers were carried up past him, and the water took him when the last child was clear. **Knockrun** is a Kobold underhouse of a few dozen households in the vent galleries and service shafts of a deep hold, living in ways the Dwarves pass through but do not inhabit. Its crews walk and clear the draughts on fixed rounds for a bargained wage, keep a small shrine to the Last Chamber by their refuge, and talk in sound codes the hold can read but not make.

Sashes and Archive Names

About 80,000 people live in the Deeps, many of them on postings from the mountain holds above. Some three in four are Dwarves and about one in four Kobolds of the underhouses; the Wrought, mostly Forgeframe and Mineframe lines, number a thousand or more.

The lower levels run warm and the lowest hot, so deep dress is light: shirts of linen and thin wool, leather aprons, padded caps against low stone, and heavy cloth only for the climb up the Hauling Stair. Custodians wear their marks on a sash, read the same way as the marks on a door. Deep Dwarves are the palest and heaviest of their people. Infants are safer here than above, behind more doors, and perhaps one in six is lost while still setting; adults live as long as the Dwarves of the Ironspine. Bad air is the commonest early death, then collapse, heat, and the brace-gnawers'

work in the working levels, and lean seasons, which a Dwarf bears well, kill few. The archive writes a Deep Dwarf in full, with both parents' households, the hold, and the hold the posting came from, so that one name fills a line; in speech it shrinks to given name and hold: Orrun Gaurek of Blackbasin, Dhuma Velkhar, Thulda Ombrak, Haskun Velkhar.

The underhouse crews dress, live, and are named as along the mine-edges above. The Vent-Kin of the deep galleries are darker and work the warm levels in little more than padding, and lines still under protection-debt are entered under the name of the hold that holds the debt, which is one of the things the Underhouse Compacts refuse. Names at Knockrun: Sikkit, Tchessa. The Wrought of the Deeps keep their lineage names and maker's marks more often than Wrought anywhere else, and the archives enter them under both.

The Roothollows

Past the Deeps, where the forest's roots come down through the ceiling and grow into the stone, lie the **Roothollows**: chambers floored with old leaf-mould and fungus, water lying black and still in reservoirs, and passages that run on long after the root gives out. Their people are the Dark Elves of the **Gloamroot Covenant**, who live in house chamber-clusters strung along the **Known Ways**, the routes their route keepers still count survivable. It is a small, closed, watchful country, and a dangerous one. Above it lie the drowned and barred hollows the Dark Elves lost in the catastrophe they call the Drowning Bloom; inward lie the holds of the Stonewake Compact, whom they blame for part of that loss. Everything in between is kept by people who remember being left to drown, and who still keep an old oath that says a refugee at the door must be let in. Beyond the last lamp lie struck ways no one walks, haunted chambers full of the drowned dead and the treasure they were buried with, and things in the black water that the laments do not name.

Root and Gloam

The Roothollows lie beneath the eastern Elderweald, between the root-mat of the deep groves and the stone of the Ironspine's forest-side roots. Directly above the surviving hollows lies the sealed storey of the Upper Roothollows, and above that the forest. Eastwards the hollows run in under the mountains to meet the Stonewake Deeps, with the Heartwell on the line; north, west, and south they end only where the Known Ways end. The ground falls eastwards and downwards, from living root and gloam near the forest to dead root and bare stone towards the Deeps. Threewater Turn lies on a Known Way in the middle hollows, five or six weeks from Stairdeep through warded corridors and one watched crossing, and Sapfall far out towards the end of the Known Ways. The great houses on the Known Ways are the settled cores; off the ways lie struck passages, failing chambers, and black water where blackwater eels lie, and nobody goes between houses except along a kept way with its route keepers' leave. Those who go off the ways without it are delvers or fools, and the houses rarely trouble to tell which.

The Roothollows are a threshold between living root and deep stone. Near the top, living root carries the ceilings and lines the walls; lower down it thins to dead strands and the stone takes over. Water-bearing caverns, root-bound hollows, the **fungal darks** where fungus grows thick on dead root and washed-down leaf-mould, hidden passages, and the remnants of an old underforest make the region richer in water and food than bare stone, and less stable. In places the living root gives off a faint pale glow, the **gloam**, the only light the region makes of itself.

There is no weather, but the forest's year still reaches down. Sap rises in the living root in the forest's spring and falls in its autumn, and seeps run fuller after the rains above. The dangers are water, rot, and the things that live in both. Water rises without warning when the forest above is wet, and still black water fills chambers nobody

drinks from; long blind black-water eels lie in it, and their bite festers, and weeping caps grow on its margins, which is why the saying goes *where caps weep, turn back*. Root that dies stops holding: its chamber loses its bracing and its air together. Root-borers hasten it, chamber-grey mould is the first sign, and a house can watch a wall go grey for years before it gives, or lose it in a night. Beyond the Known Ways nothing is kept. The pale curtains of lampless spiders hang across ways no one has walked in years, and their bite numbs a hand long enough for a fall. The hunters' warning of the ways is short, *a curtain torn is a curtain watched*, because a torn web means something came through before you, and it may still be on the far side.

The House and Its Chambers

Life in the Roothollows is arranged around the chamber, the water, and the door. The Dwarves next door order their lives around air and the way out; here air comes down with the root, and what is guarded is who comes in. A house lives in a cluster of chambers held by **chamber-right** along a Known Way, and the layout says who belongs. The outermost is the **threshold chamber**, where the way enters, the route keepers lodge, and strangers are received. Behind it lie working chambers, store-hollows, and the fungus beds; then the shared sleeping chambers, where several generations sleep together around the few lamps; and innermost the **root-chamber**, the house's oldest living root, where children are named and the dead are returned. Dependents, debt-bound workers, and refugees sleep in the outer chambers. How far in someone sleeps is how far they have been admitted, and everyone can read it.

Water comes from seeps and reservoirs and is drawn into root-cut basins in each house's chambers. Running water is drunk; still black water is not, and parents tell children that if they stray near it Ithaere will take them as her tithe. A house's water is passed as a debt of kin to its dependents and neighbours, rarely sold, and remembered. Once in each root-year the water-keeper reckons aloud, before the household, what the house owes in water and what is owed to it, and lesser houses hear the same reckoning from the other side, as debt. Fungus is the staple, tended in beds on dead root and leaf-mould and eaten fresh, dried, or pressed into cakes that keep; pale fish and small cave creatures come from the reservoirs, and in lean times the living root is tapped for sap. Fungus beds count in chamber-right like the chambers they lie in, which is why a house that loses a chamber can lose its food with it.

Light is scarce and kept low. Small lamps burn rendered fungus oil and the gloam does the rest, so Dark Elves read faces close and talk quietly. A chamber with living root breathes; a chamber whose root has died goes stale; watching the root is everyone's work. Time is kept by the **threshold watch**, which changes at fixed turns and is the house's day, and by the **root-year** of rising and falling sap, which keeps the forest's seasons without anyone seeing them. Most house business, from namings to the renewal of water debts, is set by the root-year.

Ways Learned by Mouth

A child learns the Known Ways by mouth and by foot, because they are kept spoken rather than written. First the way from the sleeping chamber to the house's refuge chamber, then to the nearest water, then the house's own ways, walked with a route keeper and recited back turn by turn: each water, each refuge, each place a way was once struck. A child's first full recital is given to a route keeper in the threshold chamber with the household watching, and a child who can recite a way to the keepers' satisfaction has passed one of the staged acceptances that Dark Elf naming moves through, slower and more guarded than anywhere else in the Elven world. It is the first time most Dark Elves feel the Covenant judge them. Naming itself is decided by house elders in the root-chamber, with the dead in the walls, and a household may wait years for it.

The dead are kept as Elves keep them, returned to the living root, but underground. A body is laid against the living root of the root-chamber, and the root takes it in. The dead of a house therefore lie in its chambers, and losing a chamber means losing the dead in it. Many houses' oldest dead lie in root-chambers beyond the Sealing bars, unreachable and never properly returned, and are named in laments instead. With them lie the grave-goods of a richer age: root-silver, Elder-cut lamps, house-blades laid on the breast. Delvers who have come back from beyond the bars say the dead there are not all quiet, and the houses hold that a blade taken from its dead carries the dead one's quarrels with it; more than one feud has been reopened by a house-blade turning up at the wrong threshold.

The Oath at the Threshold

Every waking watch, someone of the house sits in the threshold chamber with a route keeper, and blades of root-hardened wood are racked by the door. Most watches nothing happens. When a stranger or refugee does come, they come to the threshold chamber and never further. The threshold-keeper is fetched, the claim is heard before the household at the chamber's small shrine, and the house must either shelter the claimant or name, aloud, one of the old grounds for refusal there and then. A household that refuses lives with the refusal for generations.

The custom is older than the Covenant. Before the catastrophe, Roothollow houses already guarded their thresholds more closely than the forest above: route keepers watched which passages could be survived, whoever held a defensible chamber held the people in it, belonging came slowly, and refuge was a sworn duty rather than an open welcome. Refuge meant shelter and protection in the hour of need, not belonging. The grounds for turning someone away were few and grave: no room that would not kill the house, rot or breach that the newcomer would bring, a false tale of flight, or another refuge truly reachable by a way truly kept. A house that cannot hold more may send claimants on, but only to a refuge it can name, by a Known Way the route keeper on watch will swear is survivable, and if the way later proves lost, the charge falls on house and keeper both. A house that lied about its grounds bred a feud that could run for a thousand years, and some still do.

Shelter given is the first step only: protection and a place in the threshold chamber. The rest comes slowly and is marked by where the newcomer sleeps and whose water they drink: a lodging in the outer chambers in return for work, a share of the house's water, and only after long years, sometimes generations, a naming in the root-chamber. Many refugee lines never get there; a threshold lullaby counts the few who did by their deeds, like the refugee girl who carried a house's lamp back through the rising water and was named in its root-chamber the same year. Others find that the protection they were given has become debt. What a stranger sees of all this is the threshold chamber and nothing else: a lamp, a shrine, a route keeper who does not leave, and questions asked carefully enough to be remembered.

Power belongs to whoever can secure water, food, habitable chambers, safe movement, and protection. The houses hold chambers, reservoirs, and fungus darks by chamber-right; the Covenant's survival and warding orders hold the danger, and the route keepers drawn from them keep the Known Ways. A house that cannot protect its dependents loses them, and an order that cannot feed its wardens cannot ward. Belonging is guarded inside the houses too: a young Dark Elf may be capable, useful, and trusted on the ways long before the house grants a share in its inheritance. What contests that power comes mostly from below it: lesser houses that buy water on debt from a neighbour, dependents who say that protection which cannot be refused is a chain, and refugee lines still lodged in outer chambers generations after they were let in. Between great houses

the quarrels are older and colder. A blood-feud over a refusal in the flood years can still end with a knife on a dark way, and route keepers of rival houses have been known to let a way be "lost" with a rival's party on it. A lesser house that cannot field blades of its own hires spears from its refugee lines for a share of water, and the toast drunk in outer chambers is to those hired spears: *to the ones who held the crossing, and were never named for it*. A Dark Elf whom a house has cast out and no other will shelter becomes **wayless**, an outlaw of the struck ways who lives by plundering unwatched fungus beds and guiding treasure-seekers where no keeper will; a house that catches one on its ways may kill them without a feud following, and the hunters sent after them are not always the ones who come back.

Three Houses

No seat rules the Gloamroot Covenant, so the Roothollows have no capital. Power is held house by house, and its weight lies with the great houses whose chamber-clusters hold the most water, since the houses that hold water also hold the debts of the houses that lack it. One of the largest is **Threewater Turn**, where three waters meet on a Known Way, and the sound of running water is never out of hearing. Its threshold chamber lodges the route keepers who watch the way; behind it lie working chambers, fungus beds on dead root, the shared sleeping chambers, and the root-chamber where its children are named and its dead returned. A thousand or more live there, among them dependents and refugee lines sleeping in the outer chambers generations after they were let in. A great house like it sells its leave to **bar-crossers**, small bands of Dark Elf and now and then Dwarf treasure-seekers who climb the struck ways towards the Sealing bars with rope, root-hardened spears, and a route keeper's count of every turn, and who owe the house a share of whatever they carry back. A threshold counts such a band out and counts it in again, and does not ask after the ones who are missing.

Paleseep is a lesser house of a few households around a thin seep lit faintly by the gloam. Its own water does not cover its needs, so it buys the rest on debt from a neighbour, which is why its young people slip off to scout struck ways, and why fewer of them come home than the house admits: a great house pays a year's water as bounty for a struck way proved passable, and none at all for a way proved drowned. **Sapfall**, near the end of the Known Ways, is a few households whose chambers breathe only while the root above them lives. The root behind its working chambers has begun to die, and the house must choose between holding on while the wall greys and giving the chambers up, with the fungus beds that count in them. Its threshold watch says it can hear the root-borers at night, a slow ticking in the wall, and that the black water behind the dying root has begun to rise.

Watchers of Faces

About 40,000 people live along the Known Ways, nearly all of them Dark Elves, and perhaps one in six of them are dependents and refugee lines sleeping in other houses' outer chambers.

Roothollow dress is close-fitting cloth woven from root fibre and fungal felt, dark and undyed, with soft soles for the quiet ways and a hood against the drip from the root. Dark Elves are pale and dark-haired wherever they live; here what a stranger notices first is how closely they watch a face. Births are rare and more children are lost than in the forest above, about one in six, to chill and bad air in failing chambers and to black water. Adults die of rising water, chambers gone stale, falls on the ways, eel-bite gone bad, now and then a knife in an old feud, and, in the houses that buy their water on debt, of hunger. In a safe chamber a Dark Elf lives as long as any Elf; the refugee lines die younger. A child is known by its house and sleeping chamber until its naming in the root-chamber, and the full name it is given there carries the house and the chamber it was named in. Refugee lines not yet named are called

by the threshold where they sleep. Named in the root-chambers: Sythae of Threewater Turn, Vaneth, Ishren, Naereth, Caulith.

Doors on Every Side

Every edge of the Roothollows is a door of some kind: barred, guarded, or simply no longer kept. Inward, towards the Deeps, root-cavern gives way to dense stone across shared reservoirs and root-stone crossings, on a threshold that formed on the edge of an already standing Compact in the **Shaping of the Roothollow-Stonewake Interface** (c. 345,000 to c. 340,000 BR) and is older than the Gloamroot themselves. This is the region's one contested edge; its crossings are few and watched from both ends, and the Heartwell and the Undrawn Seal both stand on it, and Dark Elf children are told that knocking can still be heard behind the seal. Above lie the sealed hollows and, beyond them, the forest. Beyond the Deeps lie the mountain holds, which reach the Roothollows only through Stonewake and are, to the Gloamroot, the Compact's hinterland, the holds that feed it and send down its custodians. And elsewhere the Roothollows have no neighbour, only an end. The region runs as far as Gloamroot route keepers still keep passage, and striking a route from the Known Ways takes every chamber beyond it out of the region in all but memory.

Nothing here flows far enough to be called a river. Movement runs along the Known Ways, and under the old custom of refuge a Known Way is the only kind of route along which someone in need may be sent on without shame, so striking one off can be a kind of murder, and every house remembers someone who called it one. Water, fungus, chamber space, and protection pass between houses and their dependents, most of it as kin-debt rather than sale, and a house that holds water and safe chambers can turn that obligation into debt or worse. Nothing goes across to Stonewake in bulk beyond envoys, Heartwell claimants with their kin at their backs, and now and then bar-crossers of both peoples going after what the Sealing left behind; a delver who comes back with an Elder-cut lamp can buy water for a year, most come back with nothing, and some do not come back. Nothing goes upward at all: with the Sunken Stairs barred, word from a Gloamroot house to the forest must go the long way round, through the Stonewake crossings, up through the Ironspine, and out across its forest verges, at the leave of the people the Covenant trusts least, and it takes half a year or more to arrive.

The Place That Was Left to Drown

The Roothollows remember themselves as the place that was left to drown. They were the main stage of the **Drowning Bloom**, when floods rose through the upper hollows again and again during the **Roothollow Rupture** (c. 335,000 to c. 328,000 BR) and rescue came late or not at all. The order of the story matters to every Dark Elf who tells it: first the old deep world; then a Stonewake Compact standing on its inward edge before any Dark Elf house had banded with another; then the Rupture; the Sealing; the hardening of the survivors into a branch of their own in the **Darkening of the Roothollows** (c. 326,000 to c. 318,000 BR); and only then the founding of the Covenant (c. 324,000 to c. 318,000 BR). In the floods, the laments say, the strong gave themselves to the water so that a refuge might be spared, and rose again as the **Drowned Court**, spear-bearing dead who held the chambers for Ithaere. Nobody has seen the Court since she sank, and nobody wants to. The tale told in every threshold is of the warden who went up into a Court-held chamber to bring her house's dead down to the living root, and came back in a single watch with nothing but the house's lamp and white hair; what she met there she would never say.

What the Roothollows quarrel over most is refuge. They remember who was let in, who was kept waiting, who was turned away, who sealed too early, who lied that there was no room, who sent the desperate down a way they knew was drowned, and who struck routes not because they

were lost but because reopening them would cost. Every house has a version, and some houses' versions name each other as murderers. That is why a route here can be an artery, a shrine-path, and a remembered wound at once, and why quarrels with Stonewake harden so easily into inherited feud. The **Bitter Root Histories** (c. 318,000 to c. 305,000 BR) carried that grievance outward into the wider Elven world.

Dark Elves honour the Last Chamber as a true but severe god, kept by houses and route keepers rather than by any priesthood. Its small shrines stand in threshold and refuge chambers, and the question put to it there is the host's: *can this house still hold one more?* It is called on when a refugee is received, when a house names a ground for refusal, and when kin swear over the dead that a refuge could or could not have held. The Measured Seal is known and not denied, but to most Dark Elves it sounds too much like respectable closure. The flood terror of the Bloom briefly gathered into a god, Ithaere the Drowned Mother, who faded when the waters receded. Nobody prays to her. Her name is spoken in the laments sung when water rises in the root-year, over the dead who lie beyond the bars, and in the warning every child hears about black water, and the worst curse a Dark Elf can lay on an enemy uses it: *may the black water learn your name*. Those who work deep water basins sometimes report a voice beneath the surface calling for *just one more*; most say it is water moving through stone.

The Upper Roothollows

Between the deep groves of the eastern Elderweald and the surviving hollows lies a layer that nobody enters openly, reaching about as far as the deep groves do. It has no neighbours of its own on any side, only a storey above and a storey below, and nobody lives in it. Before the catastrophe the **Upper Roothollows** were simply the upper Roothollows, the part of the deep Elven world nearest the forest. Now they are a place both sides can point to and neither can reach: a drowned kingdom of chambers and root-halls, its dead unburied, its house-treasures where the water left them, and its last flood perhaps still waiting. They took the worst of the Drowning Bloom: water rose through them again and again, taking passages, then chambers, then whole refuges, until the survivors withdrew deeper. What the flood left was not a drowned world to be pumped out but a ruined one, overgrown, unstable, still holding water in places, with routes that could kill those who tried to keep them open. Over the generations of the **Sealing of the Upper Roothollows** (c. 328,000 to c. 318,000 BR) the passages were barred, abandoned, ritually closed, or written off as losses too costly to reverse. No single decree did it, and no single people.

What is known is known from the edges, mostly by people who have never seen it. From above, the Sunken Stairs that once climbed to the deep groves end in silt, collapse, and the bars of the Sealing; the nearest groves, the one-household grove of **Silthollow** among them, keep their mouths and do not go down, and in wet years their watchers hear water moving behind the bars. The grove tale told to children who lean too far over a stair-mouth is of the boy who dropped his lantern down one, and watched a second light rise out of the dark to meet it. From below, many Gloamroot houses still name ancestral chambers in the sealed layer, and some still count them in their chamber-right, holdings that are theirs and cannot be reached, where their oldest dead lie unreturned. For the Dark Elves these are the plainest proof of the old wound: home, near enough to name, closed. What goes upward instead is greed and grief. Bar-crossers climb the struck ways to the bars and now and then find a gap, and the few who come back bring root-silver, Elder-cut lamps, and house-blades looted from the dead, along with tales of lamplight moving in drowned chambers; the houses condemn the trade, buy what it brings, and do not ask how the way was walked. By the Covenant's own reckoning the whole layer lies beyond the Known Ways,

and so belongs to the region in memory alone. It is the oldest and largest such loss the deep world carries. In the upper hollows, too, lie the **tithe stones**, flat stones worn smooth at old flood-lines where the strongest are said to have been given to the water; most now lie beyond sealed passages, and those who have come near them say the water there is always colder.

Dark Elf laments say that somewhere in the layer lies the **Last Water**, the final still floodwater into which Ithaere walked when her worshippers refused her, and that it has never drained. Nobody has seen it since the Sealing, and nobody can say whether it is one pool, a flooded chamber-chain, or only a way of speaking, or whether the Court that rose from such water sank with her or only lies under it. The plainest fear is water: some of it still lies up there, and opening any part of the seal could send it somewhere else. The quieter fear is what else might come down with it, the drowned dead of a hundred houses and whatever has been guarding their treasure in the dark, and a Gloamroot curse carries it: *may your door open upward*. That is why a Gloamroot plea to open one of the Sunken Stairs worries an Ironspine hold as much as it moves the grove keepers. How much of the layer is still flooded, which chambers survived, whether anything lives there now or anything dead still haunts the chambers it once guarded, who set which bars and from which side, which house-named chambers can still be matched to a real place, and whether any stair could be opened without bringing the water with it: all of that waits behind the bars.

The Rootstone Heartwell

On the line between the Roothollows and the Deeps lies the **Rootstone Heartwell**, a root-cavern reservoir centred on a living stone-root confluence and the first great contested site between Dark Elves and Dwarves. To one side it is water, road, and a load-bearing heart of the deep earth; to the other, the surviving root-heart of the drowned underworld. Both peoples have bled for it for more than three hundred thousand years. Living root has grown through stone here and stone has closed around root, so that neither side can say where its own ground stops, and at the heart of it is the **confluence chamber**, where the stone-root meets the water: a black lake under a vault of braided root and rock, so still that a dropped pebble rings for a long time.

Two Approaches

The Heartwell is approached from two sides that do not resemble each other. From the Roothollows the way runs along Known Ways, root-bound passages kept by Gloamroot route keepers and hung with the curtains of lampless spiders wherever a side-way has gone unused. From the Deeps it runs through Stonewake basins, cut and braced, their doors carrying the marks of the wardens who hold them, their draughts kept moving by Kobold vent crews. Between them lies the confluence chamber, which nobody holds alone and which is entered only under watch from both ends. Every crossing is guarded, and each answers to whichever side holds its end, so a traveller reaches the chamber on one side's word and is met there by the other side's suspicion and its spears. Every ambush in the Heartwell's long feud began at a crossing like these, and the guards on both sides know the names of the dead who fell at their own posts. The stone side has a slower enemy as well: brace-gnawers work into the basin props from behind, and a warden who leans on a hollow brace can bring a gallery down on himself.

Below the chamber the reservoir runs down into flooded galleries that nobody has mapped since the Drowning Bloom. Black-water eels live at their mouths and the margins grow weeping caps, and laments sung on the root side tell of drowned chambers beneath, where the old underworld's treasures and its dead still lie. Those who have gone partway bring back a little: a ring of black silver, a root-lamp with no wick, a carved door-leaf that no living Gloamroot line can read. Each piece fetches a ransom in the markets of the

Deeps, and each one draws the next diver down. Things come up out of the flooded galleries now and then, pale and blind and hungry, and both sides pay hunters to go down after them. It is the one shared work at the Heartwell nobody argues over, and the hunters, Dark Elf and Dwarf alike, drink together afterwards in a way their elders would not like to see.

The keepers are three. Gloamroot route keepers and claimants hold the root side by the old custom of refuge, by long memory, and by the blades of the route keepers, because the Heartwell is where Dark Elves were sheltered, refused, or turned away when the old world broke, and proof that they still belong below. Stonewake reservoir wardens and archive-keepers hold the basins because the Compact cut and braced them and garrisons their doors; the wardens read the levels, and the archive-keepers keep the tally of shares, readings, and every claim spoken. Kobold vent crews of the Underhouse Compacts keep the air moving on the stone side, paid in water and goods on terms the holds set, and are the first to notice what the rock and the draughts are doing. The mountain holds reach the Heartwell only through Stonewake and inherit its quarrel at one remove.

Spoken Claims, Written Shares

Nobody ever agreed to the line through the Heartwell. It is where the old fighting left each side's reach, and both keep it as a held position rather than a peace. Few generations pass without a raid across it: a Gloamroot war-band cutting down a warden post at a crossing, a Stonewake reprisal burning out a root-side guardhouse, and then the long feud-reckoning between the lines that lost kin. Water is the only thing drawn here in quantity, and both sides draw it from the same lake. The Compact keeps a written share for each, read and marked by its wardens on their rounds, and the share favours the side that wrote it. The Gloamroot draw by their own reckoning, since they have never accepted that a Dwarven archive can write down their portion, so every reading the wardens take is also a quiet accusation. Little else crosses: envoys in both directions, and Gloamroot claimants who come with their kin to speak the Heartwell claim again before the confluence, so that nobody can say the Gloamroot have let it go.

Each side keeps its claim alive in its own way. A Gloamroot claim is spoken: the claimant names the old ground of refuge, the kin answer, and the Last Chamber is called on to hear that shelter was owed here and still is. A Stonewake claim is cut and written: readings, wardens' marks on the basin doors, and archive tallies showing that the reservoir has been held and kept under the Measured Seal. At the sharpest stake-speakings both gods are called together, as rival judges of the same deeds. The archive-keepers write down each Gloamroot stake-speaking as well, and the claimants count that as a second insult: their claim cut into a Dwarven tally beside the share they refuse. Each side has its words for the place. Stonewake wardens drink *to the door that held* at the end of a watch, and cut a short line on the lowest basin door for every warden lost at it. Gloamroot elders curse a liar with *may you find the door shut*, and Gloamroot children play a game of refuge in the dark passages, in which the one who is turned away must count to a hundred alone before anyone may come for her. Both sides watch the lake for the same omen: a dropped pebble that does not ring means something below has heard it, and nobody draws water for the rest of that watch.

How the Quarrel Was Made

The threshold the Heartwell sits on is older than the Gloamroot. It formed on the edge of a Compact already standing, and the Drowning Bloom broke it. Out of the Darkening and the Covenant's founding came survivors who needed the Heartwell for refuge, facing a Compact the same flood had hardened and that needed it for water and its roads. Neither side invented its claim. The **Heartwell Stakings** (c. 322,000 to c. 316,000 BR) set those claims against each other, and the **Heartwell**

Struggles (c. 320,000 to c. 314,000 BR) turned them into raids on the reservoir, ambushes at its crossings, and blood-feud between lines, and then into inheritance. Dwarven songs still tell of the warden who held the lowest basin door alone until it was sealed behind him; Gloamroot laments still name the refugee families turned back into the dark at the same door. Children in the outer chambers still play *Heartwell raid*, one side Dwarves and one side Elves, and the Dwarves are made to lose.

What the struggles fixed was two memories of one place. Gloamroot refuge-memory asks who was sheltered, refused, delayed, or rightly turned away when the old world broke, and remembers refuge betrayed. Stonewake sealing-memory asks who closed what had become too dangerous, who lied about the danger, and who let a short closure harden into exclusion, and remembers closure justified. The same struggles left the Heartwell among the holy places of two gods, the Last Chamber, of refuge that can be survived and the chamber that still holds, and the Measured Seal, of rightful closure and the seal that must answer for itself. The Bitter Root and Burdened Seal Histories carried the two memories far beyond the reservoir, into the wider hostility between Elves and Dwarves, and around c. 305,000 BR the Stonewake way of speaking about rightful closure spread into the Dwarven world as the shared form of the Held Covenant. Here, who abandoned whom below became a question about one lake.

The Falling Readings

The quarrel is pressing now. The wardens' readings have been running lower than the written shares explain. Stonewake suspects the Gloamroot of drawing beyond a share they refuse to accept. The Gloamroot answer that Kobold vent crews already report a draught behind the Undrawn Seal, and that a Compact afraid to look behind one closure has no business saying where the water goes. The seal's marks name danger to the reservoirs, and on an edge where the reservoirs are shared it cannot be opened without reopening the question of shares at the Heartwell as well; on quiet watches the wardens nearest it say they hear knocking behind it, and the old songs of the Seal-Knockers do not say whether that is the dead or the living. Neither side is sure it would win that fight, and theft below has always been answered with blood. The Kobold crews who reported the draught can declare the way behind the seal unsafe and keep every member crew out of it, and both sides have begun courting them. One Gloamroot claimant has gone further and asked a vent crew to stand beside her at the next stake-speaking before the confluence, to call on the chamber that still holds. Kobold crews honour the Last Chamber under their own name at the same small shrines as the Dwarves; they are paid by Stonewake holds, which can stop paying them; and nobody on either side knows what a Kobold voice at the Heartwell would be worth, or what it would cost the crew.

Tensions

- **The Long Tread is shut.** A gate hold closes its stretch of the Long Tread after a rockfall and keeps it closed once the road is clear. The kindred whose circuit runs through it watches its kept culverts beyond the closure begin to fail. The hold cites its gate oath, the kindred cites keepright, and the custodian at the gate must say which of the Covenant's questions governs a road the hold never built. The hold has the wardens; the kindred has only its marks.
- **A seam beneath a summit.** A hold short of ore opens a working under one of the highest peaks. The Kobold compact on that mine-edge declares it unsafe and will say no more than that the rock has a pulse. The hold calls it a strike dressed as superstition, and the Human miners hired from the foothills quietly leave.

- **The knock at the old seal.** Miners widening an underway have broken into a gallery behind a seal no archive names. The knocking on its inner door answers when spoken to, and asks, in an old hold-speech, for the year.
- **The forge-lord's ring.** A band of delvers came up from below the lowest kept route one short, with a seal-ring of a forge-line every archive counts as extinct. Two holds now claim descent from that line and the treasure behind it; the surviving delvers will sell the way down to the higher bidder, and the band's missing member, by their account, was carried off by a frame that still walks its round down there.
- **Where the water goes.** Tracing the draught behind the Undrawn Seal means opening a closure Stonewake's own forebears called necessary, which the Gloamroot will read as a confession, whatever comes out. Not tracing it leaves the falling readings at the Heartwell to be named at every stake-speaking as Gloamroot theft.
- **A struck way, passable.** A route keeper reports that a passage struck from the Known Ways generations ago is passable after all. Restoring it would let a lesser house reach water it now buys from a neighbour on debt, and revive an old charge against the house that struck it, whose elders once swore there was no route. The keeper's own order has asked for the report to be made again, more carefully, and someone has since cut the keeper's guide-rope on that way twice.
- **Lamps beyond the bars.** Delvers coming back along a struck way swear they saw lamplight moving in a drowned chamber above the Sealing bars, where no one has lived for three hundred thousand years. One of them brought back a house-blade with a living family's mark on it; that family wants the blade, the delver wants a price, and two bar-crossing bands are already gearing to go up the same way before the houses can forbid it.

CHAPTER 12

The Basins and the Marches

Above Toll's End you pay for the crossing,
below it you pay for the promise,
and the river, that keeps neither,
takes its share of both.

— The Towpath Sayings

Every river of the Human heartland tells the same story if it is followed far enough. It is born as snowmelt under the Ironspine, runs white through foothill gorges where Dwarven bridges older than the towns beside them carry the road, slows into wide valleys gold with barley, and gathers at last into the Serath, broad and brown and crowded with barges, its banks walled with towns that fight over every reach of it. On the way it passes a ruin-belt where nobody rules and a failing bridge where everybody argues. These five regions are the Human heartland of the cradle-web and its youngest country: the lordships and leagues that hold them took shape only in the last few tens of thousands of years, beside forest and mountain peoples many times older, on ground already scored by the roads and terraces of a people older still. What the young country has in place of age is nerve and numbers: lords who hold the fords with hired spears, towns that hold the bridges behind their walls, oaths sworn aloud before the gods, and the stubborn habit of writing everything down before the river, or the stronger neighbour, can change its mind.

The Confluence Basins

The **Confluence Basins** are the broad lowland heartland of Humans on Caeldon: a country of wide valleys, deep fields, and linked rivers that come down from the uplands, meet, and gather towards the Serath. More Humans live by the plough here than anywhere else, and the corridor towns that live by roads and river-trade eat what the Basins grow. Plenty draws hunger: outlaws in the flood-forest, wolves at the folds in hard winters, lords who burn each other's barns, and the drowned who walk back out of the river in spring. The Basins are the home ground of the **Confluence Marches**, the first great Human civilization, and they were never only Human. The Reedfolk kept the lower waters as the **Floodkeeper Houses** long before the first basin town, and the towns still depend on what they know. Beside the forest and mountain peoples on their edges the Basins are young. The Marches came together only

AT A GLANCE

Lies	The south and east of the cradle-web: the Confluence Basins below forest and foothills, with the Lower Serath along their southern course; the Headwater Marches on the Ironspine's eastern face; the Broken Marches north and east of them; the Greyford Reach between.
People	About 3.6 million: some 3.2 million Humans; about 160,000 Reedfolk on the lower waters; some 64,000 Goblins; some 28,000 Dwarves in the foothill towns; Salvage Peoples, Kobolds, Ogres, and the Wrought ten to twenty thousand each; a thousand or more Trolls.
Civilizations	The Confluence Marches, the Serathic League, and the Floodkeeper Houses; beyond the March Wall, the Iron, Hearth-Weight, and Underhouse Compacts, the Crossing-Oath Houses, and the Edgeway Kindreds.
Landscape	Linked river valleys and fen; a walking lower river; foothill gorges climbing to the holds; a ruin-belt of failed works; one braided gravel ford.
Chief places	No capital anywhere; Sheafmeet, Correth, Oathfoot, and Greyford come nearest; in the Broken Marches, the Undercroft Fair for a few weeks a year.
The year	The Medieval Era, c. 1,350 CR.

between c. 40,000 and c. 20,000 BR; the Rootcrown Concord in the forest next door is more than ten times older.

Fields and Flood

The Basins lie south of the forest and the foothills. The Elderweald and the Crownboughs run along their northern edge, the Briarreach closes the north-west, and in the north-east the Headwater Marches rise where the Sheaf Road climbs out; between Crownbough and Headwater country the last low spurs of the Ironspine die out among the northern ridges. The land falls gently southwards and the rivers with it, the Headwater rivers turning south-west and the forest streams running south, joining valley by valley into the Serath. Its lower course, the Lower Serath, is the Basins' southern part, with the Reedmere just above it, and the empty uplands of the Witnessfields rise in the south-east. The Basins are two to three months across. Sheafmeet stands in the middle valleys, about two months by cart from Oathfoot, four weeks by barge above Correth, and four weeks from Fernrest on the forest edge. Even here people live in cores, the river valleys, each a chain of villages round its march-towns. Between them lie fen, flood-forest, and high heath where wolves and wild boar run and no lord's peace holds, and outlaws who have fled some lord's judgement live off whatever passes, so carts on the Sheaf Road go in company under a march-town's escort. A village troubled by wolves hires a beast-hunter; one troubled by outlaws pays whoever has the spears.

The Basins are not one valley but a field of them: broad, gentle lowlands parted by low ridges, each with its own river, the rivers joining as they descend. On the upland side the valleys narrow and climb into foothill country; towards the forest the fields run up to the edge of the Elderweald. Downstream the water slows and the ground loses its nerve; long reaches of reed, fen, and seasonal flood open where land and river never settle which is which. The greatest of them is the **Reedmere**, above the Lower Serath, the main Reedfolk country inside the Basins. In summer it is a green flat country of reed taller than a rider, threaded with channels only a pilot can tell apart, loud with frogs at dusk and silver with mist at dawn.

The soil is deep and the seasons kind enough that a good year feeds far more than the village that grew it. The price of plenty is water. The spring rise renews the fields and drowns the care-

less; a river can hold its bed for a generation and take a new one in a night; and the floods that matter most are the ones nobody living remembers. Fords shift, banks slump, and a crossing that held last season may be a scour hole this one, and the low wet ground breeds fever in the warm months. Two dangers are of the Basins' own making. Where grain levies demand a second harvest and the fallow year is skipped, the land is wearing out, and in some districts crops have begun to fail. And a dike, weir, or drained fen made for one town moves the flood onto another: the drowned reed settlements of Reedfolk memory came from exactly such work.

The wet country has teeth. Great catfish longer than a barge pole lie under the landings, and bargemen tell of one taking a child; mud turtles take fingers at the eel-traps, fen pitchers close on a dog's paw in the Reedmere, and past the Grey Line the bulls of the wild kine kill anyone on foot who comes too near. Lords keep **Spurred Hounds** for their wars, dogs grown huge by magic that turn without warning, and every valley has a story of a kennel that broke loose. The dead are worse. As the spring rise falls the **River-Given**, the unrited drowned, walk dripping out of the water and up the landing steps to find their own doors. On the Sheaf Road the Crossroad Hanged drag at night carters from beneath the lords' gibbets until a village quiets its own dead, and under old fever-years lie plague pits that no roll marks, where a plough or a treasure-digger that breaks through wakes the Pit-Wakers, and the valley takes them for the plague come back. At the field edges the **Skin-Lost** come at dusk to houses they once lived in, beasts now with a person's habits. Villages tell their children not to answer a knock after dark, and argue whether to hunt one or leave it bread.

The Village and the Granary

Most basin people farm. A village is a few dozen households on a rise above the flood line, with fields running down towards the water and the wet meadows grazed in common. The year belongs to field and river: ploughing and sowing once the spring rise falls back, weeding and herding through the summer, harvest and threshing, then a winter of mending and waiting. The **Festival of the First Sheaf** opens the harvest in every village that keeps Anvelle the Harvest-Mother: the first stalk is cut and offered to her, and if the offering is sincere, it is said, she will see the year's harvest through. Where levies rise, the old tale of the **Starving Winter** is told more often, of the year the people refused to rest the land and half the villages starved. In some of the oldest fields crops grow in patterns that form faces and symbols, and the villages say these are her signs, still watching.

The granary sits at the centre of all of it. Each village keeps a store against the bad year, and the lord's or the town's share is counted out on the same threshing floor, which is where most basin quarrels start, and where some of them end with a steward's men and a row of spears.

March-Towns and the Oath-House

March-towns stand where roads cross rivers: walled markets at fords, bridges, and ferry points, each with a mill and an **oath-house** of the Accord, and the larger ones a record-house. An oath-house is a squat stone hall by the landing, the town's roster of gods cut into its lintel and its oath-rolls kept in iron chests below the floor. Grain is sold and shipped here and levies are reckoned, and anything that must bind is sworn aloud at the oath-house and written down. A marriage is sworn under a god the town has entered, each family bringing one of its own to stand beside the priest, so that three people can later say what was promised; a careful family pays the scribe for a second copy kept somewhere else. An inheritance, a land sale, or a boundary goes the same way. A field that changed hands on a handshake is open to any quarrel, and the stronger family usually keeps it, sometimes with scythes. The writing says who swore; it does not make the stronger party keep the oath, and many a valley feud began with a roll each side reads its own way.

Once a year, after the harvest levy is counted, comes **record-day**: the oath-house reads the year's entries aloud, and anyone who would deny one must shout it then. A poor family's word against a rich one seldom outlasts the reading. On **oath-days** the lord or the town's elders hear oaths sworn and settle quarrels, mostly in favour of whoever stands closest to them; agreements are sealed under Iskel the Scribe of the Silent and accusations brought under Ostrin the Lantern-Bearer, and most end in a blood-price, an ordeal, or a fine paid to whoever sits. A few end at the ford at dawn, with swords, and the town turns out to watch. When an oath is denied and no one can settle it, the entered gods decide by ordeal, hot iron, the river, or combat before the oath-house, and a rich man may name a champion; basin sellswords make a trade of it. A stranger is asked early whose god they swear by, and whether that god is entered here, because an oath under an unentered god is a private matter, not a bond. The rolls are treasure in their own right: an old roll can win a manor or lose one, rival houses pay thieves to lift one from a chest or burn it before an oath is sworn on it, and old priests sleep on the chests. Scribes are among the most needed people in the Basins and among the most anxious. They swear in the name of Annoth the Keeper of Scrolls to read, write, copy, and keep, and to save the record before themselves when a record-house burns, and records are always being lost.

The Floodkeepers

Reedfolk life runs alongside and partly underneath. In the fens and on the lower reaches, Reedfolk households live in stilt settlements and on reed islands, fishing, cutting reed, and guiding boats through channels that will not stay put. In the towns they work as pilots, channel-menders, and flood-keepers. No sensible boat crosses the Reedmere without a Reedfolk pilot, though the landing-fee goes to whoever holds the landing; the Reedfolk who know where the channel actually runs are paid wages, and seldom thanked. How far they are heeded differs from town to town: one keeps a Reedfolk flood-keeper by old custom, another a family that owes service by inheritance, a third only a household everyone quietly asks before the spring rise. Outlaws who settle in the fens without a guide's leave learn what that knowledge is worth. When they raid the stilt villages and the barges, the houses lead them out onto ground that will not hold them, and the reed keeps what it takes.

After each spring rise a house's keepers sound the channels again and add the year's water to the house's remembered roll, spoken aloud each year at its crossing shrine, and a quarrel over a channel is settled by the memory that matches the water as it now runs (see Peoples of the Water (FND 243)).

Lords, Towns, and the Edges

No one rules the Basins. The Marches are a quarrelsome web of lords who hold land and the villages on it, towns run by their richest houses, and march-towns that keep crossings behind their walls. Alliances shift with harvests and marriages, and feuds with burned barns, stolen herds, and a neighbour's son found in the river; a feud is fought with torches in the rick-yard and arrows from the hedges until one side can no longer pay its sellswords, or until both go to the oath-house, whose word on who swore what is cheaper than another season of killing. What holds the Marches together is shared habit more than any crown: the same gods, the same oaths, and the expectation that a bargain is sworn before it counts. Who then keeps it depends on who can be made to. Lords' power is grain and the spears it feeds; they levy a share of every harvest, send it along the corridor roads, and in a bad feud hire a sellsword company for the season. Towns' power is the market, the crossing, and the wall. The priests of the Accord, called witnesses, remember who swore what, and both sides heed them when neither is strong enough to ignore them.

That order is fought over from below and from beside. Farmers who keep Anvelle's rest-year resist levies that force the fallow. Reedfolk houses hold the knowledge but not the decision, and say that the river belongs to whoever remembers it correctly, and that the basin habit of swearing before a witness was theirs first. The Headwater roads and the Serathic towns downstream both need more basin grain than the Basins can safely give, and basin lords sell to whoever pays. At the forest edge Rootcrown stewards weigh every clearing, and settlers who cut without their leave find their fences down and their hunting gone, whatever the nearest lord has granted. Outlaw bands, many of them men left lordless by the last feud, hold stretches of road and fen, and the villages nearest them pay them in food to be left alone; the boldest captains are better known than most lords, their heads are cried at every march-town gate with a price beside them, and in some valleys they are drunk to in secret as the only men who ever robbed a levy-reckoner.

The Basins have no surveyed frontier. Upstream they shade into the Headwater Marches with no line at all, the two shaped as one country; basin folk say the Headwaters begin where the fields get too steep for the plough. Downstream lies the Lower Serath, inside the Basins but a world of its own. Towards the canopy the embassy road climbs to the Crownbough receiving grounds, a border of rank rather than ground. And in the south-east, beyond the lower river, the fields thin into the terraced, empty uplands of the Witnessfields, where basin herders turn their flocks back at the **Grey Line** of boundary markers: the one basin edge that is fixed, though by no one living.

Roads and Records

The rivers are the first roads. Barges and flatboats carry grain downstream at harvest, and every ford, ferry, and bridge has a keeper who takes his cut; upstream travel is slower and goes mostly by land. The **Sheaf Road**, the basin grain road, runs along the valley rises above the flood line from granary to granary and march-town to march-town. Above the Basins it climbs into the Headwater roads; below, it reaches the Serathic towns. At harvest it is all carts, levy-reckoners, and the spearmen hired to guard them, since a harvest cart is what every outlaw band in the flood-forest has waited all year for. Out of the Basins go grain above all, then flour, livestock, and labour hired out for the season. In come worked metal and Dwarven craft down the Headwater roads, river goods up from the Serath, and Crownbough grafts and ceremony, given as gifts and measured as prestige. Both ways go oath-rolls and the second copies scribes keep, travelling with every convoy, and the sellsword companies that follow the money from feud to feud.

Feud and plenty keep a whole crowd of sword-trades in work. Sellsword companies winter in Sheafmeet's lower town and hire out by the season, and a company that changed sides mid-feud is remembered in three valleys by the same curse. Beast-hunters follow the bounties on wolves, on a kennel's runaway, or on the great catfish of a landing. Bounty-takers work the gibbet roads. And at the back of certain march-town smithies, old silver from the Paling is sold quietly, at a price that counts the risk and not the weight.

Towns and Villages

No one rules the Basins, so they have no capital. The nearest thing to a centre is a handful of great march-towns where most of the harvest is reckoned, sold, and shipped, and the largest is **Sheafmeet**, a walled town where the Sheaf Road meets two joining rivers. It has a long bridge, three mills, a granary larger than some villages, the valley's greatest oath-house, and a record-house whose scribes keep second copies for half the valleys around. Its walls have been stormed twice in song and once in living memory, when a lord's warband and its hired swords came over the river gate at night; the breach-stones are still black, and the town's children dare each other to

touch them after dark. Ten thousand or more people live inside and below the walls; at harvest the carts, levy-reckoners, and barges double that, and the town smells of chaff, wet rope, and mill-dust. Reedfolk pilots of the Floodkeeper Houses take its grain boats down towards the Serath.

Chaffbridge is the ordinary march-town: a wall, a mill, a market square, and an oath-house at a bridge over a feeder river, but no record-house, so its scribes send their second copies to Sheafmeet. Some two thousand people live by the bridge, the grain market, and the carts on the Sheaf Road. The lord who holds the bridge takes a toll of every cart; the town's ruling houses take everything else, and the two feud over the line with a few armed men each and a body in the river most years.

Fallowrise is a basin village of the ordinary kind: some forty households on a rise above the flood line, fields running down to the water, wet meadows grazed in common, and the granary in the middle with the threshing floor beside it, where the village's store and the lord's share are counted out. It keeps Anvelle's rest-year, which makes it exactly the kind of village where the second-harvest quarrel is fought, and its men remember the autumn the lord's riders came to take the seed-corn and three of them did not ride home.

Out on the Reedmere, **Ninefloods** is a Reedfolk settlement of a few dozen households on stilts and reed islands, joined by boats, around a crossing shrine where the house's flood roll is spoken aloud each year. Its people fish, cut reed, and hire out as pilots. Boats that tried the Reedmere without one have been found weeks later in the reed, empty, and the Reedfolk will not say what lives in the deep channels. At the south-eastern edge, where the fields thin towards the Witnessfields, **Flockturn** is a handful of farmsteads and sheepfolds. Its herders graze up to the Grey Line, turn their flocks back there, and sell wool and mutton at the march-towns. Nobody from Flockturn crosses the markers, and nobody asks them to, though now and then a treasure-hunter with a pack and a hungry look asks the way to the old marker roads and walks on past them. Flockturn wishes such strangers luck and does not expect to see them again.

Holding-Names and Flood Rolls

Some 2.4 million people live in the Basins outside the Lower Serath, which counts its own, and no other region of Caeldon comes near that number. About nineteen in twenty are Humans. The Reedfolk of the Reedmere and the lower fens, perhaps 100,000 of them, are most of the rest; a few Wood Elf and mixed households at the forest edge, Goblin carters and hands in the march-towns, and the odd Wrought smith make up the remainder.

Basin folk wear undyed wool and linen from their own sheep and flax: a long shirt, a belted tunic or kirtle, hose, a hooded cloak, wooden-soled shoes for the wet months, and at harvest shirts and straw hats. Rank shows in colour. A lord's household wears dyed wool, and a scribe the dark gown and ink-stained cuffs of the record-house. Most basin folk run to brown hair and weathered fair or olive skin, darker in the southern valleys. One child in three dies before five, most of them of fever and flux in the warm months, so a newborn can expect about thirty-five years, though those who grow up commonly reach their fifties or sixties. Sickness takes about half of all adults, the low-ground fevers and winter chest illness first; childbirth causes about one death in eight among women; drowning, harvest accidents, and the hungry spring after a failed rise take most of the rest. A child is named within days and carries the **holding-name** of the land its household works. The name belongs to the fields in the record-house roll, so a family that takes over a holding takes its name as well, and the march-towns add bynames of trade. In any basin roll: Edda Garrow, Aldous Fennick, Mabry Tarrent, Corwin Tessaly, Lissa Brenn, Wenna Dask.

Reedfolk wear little that holds water: short, close-bound tunics of linen or reed fibre, bare legs and feet, and a reed cape against rain. Basin Reed-

folk are reed-brown and mud-grey, lean, and seldom seen hurrying. Their children die young about as often as basin children, though seldom by drowning, and their adults live about as long as Humans and die of the same fevers; more Reedfolk die when a channel is moved than when a flood rises. A name is given with the house and the water the house keeps, and recited each year in its flood roll: Lirren of Ninefloods, Ossel, Shoma, Tevvin, Ammeth, Seshu. Basin scribes write the house down as if it were a holding-name, and the houses resent it.

Memory and Belief

The Basins think of themselves as the original Human answer. Before there were Serathic guarantees or Headwater roads there was the Confluence way, deep fields joined to a hard edge, and later Human lordships are still measured against it. Behind that lies a long dimness: Human bands gathering slowly across the valleys in the **Gathering of the Confluence** (c. 120,000 to c. 50,000 BR), during the Unrecorded Age, keeping history in speech. Writing came back into common use only as the Marches formed, so basin memory begins with the written roll, and basin people trust what is written more than their neighbours think wise. What they sing is older. Every basin feast ends with a toast *to the ford, and the man in it*: the lord who held a ford alone until the flood took him and his enemies together. Mothers tell of the girl who led a whole village out of the Paling and remembered none of it. And the long valley wars left burned keeps on the ridges, haunted, it is said, by the men who held them, each said to hide the war-chest its lord buried before the walls fell. Every generation someone digs for one, and every generation the diggers have a reason to stop.

The Reedfolk remember the same rivers differently: in the **Lower River Absorptions** (c. 30,000 to c. 8,000 BR) no army took the fens, but houses were hired, married into, written around, pushed to the fen margins, or drowned behind channels moved for stronger neighbours.

One memory belongs to no people at all. South of Flockturn, a few days up a side river from the corridor, lies the **Paling**: grass, heath, and stone the colour of old ash round the smoothed, letterless walls of an archive river city, unwritten by the Incursion of Mnemosyne Null (c. 132,000 to c. 130,000 BR). It is the city that forgot its name. A night inside still takes the morning's memories, and the households along its edge say their names, songs, and genealogies aloud every night. Silver-diggers go in anyway for the old silver, and come back without knowing where they found it; the edge households set a candle in the window for each one who goes in, and pinch it out at noon.

Basin belief is the **Sworn Accord** at its most ordinary, the faith of the corridor world: a god is honoured in the towns only once the Accord has entered it on a town's sworn roster. Entered gods have their shrines kept openly and defended by the town's spears; unentered ones count for nothing, and their shrines are fair game. Its temples are the oath-houses and its priests are witnesses, sworn to attend and remember rather than to command, and feared more than loved, since a witness's word can hang a man or disinherit a widow, and a witness tends to remember what the strong would like remembered. An unsworn death leaves the **Unsworn Dead** at the back of the oath-house. Anvelle stands first; she was born here, from basin farmers' dependence on soil and season. Beside her stands Serovan the River-King, whose spring-rise rites the Basins keep though his heart is the Serath. The dead go to Ennor the Grave-Watcher. Country shrines and household gods are tolerated rather than entered, and beneath all of it lies the seasonal custom of sowing and harvest. The Reedfolk keep their own river-memory rites, refuse Serovan's claim on the water, and remember Hesserin the Shattered Saint, who shattered when their houses accepted service.

The Lower Serath

By the time the basin rivers have joined, the Serath is broad, brown, and slow, and it carries the water of every valley above it. The **Lower Serath** is its lower course and the crowded corridor of walled towns strung along it. It lies inside the Basins and eats their grain, but it lives by passage rather than by the plough: barges, ferries, landings, markets, and the great houses that decide what a crossing owes and to whom. It is rich, crowded, and dangerous: river-thieves in the reeds, wreckers above the shoals, catfish under the landings, and every spring the drowned walking home out of the falling water. It is the country of the **Serathic League**, a league of river towns held together by sworn oaths and the fear of breaking them rather than by a crown, and one of the strongest surviving countries of the Reedfolk, who read this river for well over a hundred thousand years before the first town wall went up. Beside that the corridor is young: what sets it apart from the rest of the Basins took shape only in the **Lower Serath Guarantees** (c. 26,000 to c. 16,000 BR).

A River That Walks

The corridor is the southern course of the river, inside the Basins, with basin fields along both banks and upstream to the north, and the river runs south through it. The Reedmere and Toll's End lie at its top, Correth about midway down, and Pellith lower, above the Lying Shoals, with Towrest a day above it on the towpath. East of the corridor, past a strip of basin fields, rise the empty uplands of the Witnessfields, two or three weeks on foot from Correth to Stillgate. Correth is about four weeks by barge below Sheafmeet and two months or more back up. The corridor is the longest unbroken core on Caeldon, town after town with their villages behind them; on the water the drowned who were never given their rites come ashore as the River-Given, so barges go in company and the towpath is walked by daylight.

The Serath runs through a wide flood-ground of its own making: abandoned channels, backwaters, oxbow lakes, reed beds and willow thickets at the margins, and low rises of firmer ground where the towns stand. Within that ground the main channel wanders over a lifetime and the side channels faster. In places the river splits into braided arms around sandbars and reed islands, and the worst of these, which bargemen call the **Lying Shoals**, keep no channel from one low water to the next.

The river gives the corridor its wealth and nearly all of its dangers. Every spring the whole basin's water arrives at once: the rise renews the corridor's fields, closes its crossings, drowns landings, and turns a day's ferry into a week's wait. A good rise means plenty and a failed one means hunger, and no town can do anything about either. A quay can silt up in a season. A town can wake to find its channel moved to the far bank, and its trade with it, and some crossings lie about their own depth to anyone who has not watched them for a generation. A weir that drives one town's mills, or an embankment that saves another's fields, sends the flood or the drought somewhere else. And the corridor is crowded: fever in the warm months, fire in close-built streets and record-houses, and so much traffic that one sunken barge in a narrow arm, or one quarrel between two towns, can stop a whole reach.

What lives in the water is no kinder. Leeches wait in every backwater for the bare-legged, and the catfish under Correth's landings have taken children and dogs; the bargemen call the greatest of them *Grandmother Mud* and say she has outlived the bounty on her three times, and the hook of the last beast-hunter who tried for her hangs rusting in the river shrine, as long as a man's arm. River-thieves cut barges loose in the night and strip them in the reed. Above the Lying Shoals

wreckers light false marks and loot whatever runs aground, and a stranded crew that fights them rarely lives to complain; bargemen say every reed island between Pellith and the shoals has a wreckers' hoard buried on it, and Pellith hangs any wrecker it takes in an iron cage on a pole above the shoals, where the next crew can see him. Under every reach lie wrecks, barges sunk in the town wars and grain fleets lost to the rise, and a silver barge that went down in a channel the river has since abandoned and buried. At every low water treasure-divers go down after what the silt gives back, and the drowned are said to haunt their cargo.

The Corridor Town

A corridor town stands on a rise above the flood line, walled on the landward side, with a water-gate and quays on the river and a ferry landing below them. Inside are the market, the toll-house where the town takes its dues, an oath-house, a record-house, and the great houses' **moot-hall**, where on the oath-days the great houses hear oaths sworn and settle what they please. Outside the walls are the boatyards, the ropewalks, the fish weirs, and the corridor's own fields on the higher ground, never enough to feed the town. Most people work the river or the trade it carries. Bargemen take grain and goods downstream on the current; haulers drag them back up the towpaths or pole them through slack water; ferrymen hold the crossings, porters and clerks the quays, and every market has its weighers, criers, and money-changers. Above them sit the scribes, oath-keepers, and guarantors who answer for a reach of river. Below them all live the river-thieves in the reeds and the wreckers above the shoals, the sellswords every bargemaster hires against both, who change sides oftener than the bargemasters like, and the bounty-takers who sell river-thieves' heads to whichever town cried the price.

The year follows the water. At the spring rise traffic stops, crossings close, and the towns keep the **Festival of the First Flow** for Serovan, offering bread, wine, and flowers to the river; he is said to walk among the crowds in disguise, accepting their gratitude. When the water falls, Reedfolk pilots go out to sound the channels again before anyone trusts last year's marks, and the towns meet the River-Given on the landings with the rites. Summer low water is the busy season, when the shoals show and every arm is crowded. Harvest brings the grain barges down from the Basins and fills the towns, and in winter the boats are mended, the great houses settle the year's quarrels, and the ones they cannot settle are carried on in back streets with knives.

The Guarantee

The League has no king and no single capital. Each town keeps its own walls, ruling houses, and market, and binds itself to its neighbours by sworn **guarantee**: it answers for its reach of river, its crossings, and its landings, and treats carriers from other League towns as its own. What the towns share is the guarantee custom, the **Law of the River** that Serovan is said to have given, and the Sworn Accord that swears both. A town that breaks faith finds its barges stopped at every other town's water-gate, and the fear of that, not any council, is what holds the League together. When the fear fails, towns fight: barges burned at the quays, a water-gate stormed, a rival's grain fleet sunk in a narrow arm. Feuds between great houses of rival towns can outlast the quarrel that began them by a century. Inside the towns, power belongs to the great river houses that hold the markets and the landings, pay the town's spears, and settle everyone else's quarrels, usually in their own favour. Guarantors answer for the river on their behalf, with armed boats when words fail, and scribes and oath-keepers write down what the great houses have already agreed.

A guarantor is sworn for one reach of river and lives within sight of it. The morning begins at the toll-house, listening to what the night watch and the ferrymen report: a snag below the landing, a broken towpath post, a barge that tied up without

paying, river-thieves seen in the reeds. Then the reach itself, walked along the towpath or poled in a skiff with two spearmen in the bow, checking the channel marks the Reedfolk pilots set, the landing stage, the crossing ropes, and the reeds where thieves lie up. Grumbles and threats come wherever the guarantor stops, and most are settled on the spot. Before dark the day's dues and the day's repairs are written side by side in the **guarantee roll**, because the roll is what the great houses read when a carrier swears the reach was not kept. A guarantor whose dues run far ahead of their repairs can expect angry carriers at the door, and sometimes a knife.

A bargemaster coming down the Serath stops at each League town's toll-house, pays the reach's dues, and may ask to hear its guarantee read aloud. In return comes a **passage tally**, a notched and sealed wooden token naming the barge, the reach, and the day, so that the next town does not charge for the same water twice. Above **Toll's End**, the point where League boats give way to a basin lord's men, the lord's men take what they like and give no tally; corridor folk use the name for the corridor's upper edge, and no two towns put it in quite the same place. A Reedfolk pilot for the braided reaches costs extra, and a bargemaster who saves that coin may end on the Lying Shoals with the river-thieves rowing out to meet him. On the Lying Shoals the guarantee is only as good as the pilot.

At some toll-houses an **Ashen Lantern** hangs by the door, an iron lantern that gives off a faint, colourless light, and people say it is Ostrin's eye, watching for a guarantor whose dues run far ahead of their repairs. Dues taken without upkeep and quarrels that always end in the great houses' favour are the corridor's oldest grievance, and the cheated call on Ostrin to show where the money went. Most of them lose anyway, and some go to the reeds, where a few become the outlaw reed-captains the quays drink to in whispers: robbers of the great houses' barges, never of a ferryman's. Ostrin was born from the grievance of these towns. His **Lantern-Sworn**, a few ascetics vowed never to speak a lie even to save a life, stand at the oath-days to call out cheats and are widely disliked for their bluntness, and in some towns an accused thief may ask to be judged by the lantern instead of the rope: a devotee holds an Ashen Lantern to his face before the crowd while he swears, and the townsfolk swear they have seen the light turn on a liar.

From Orrin Talloway, *A Road-Book of Both Halves*

> *Every road in this book starts from home, and home is a toll-house window on the Serath, where I sat for longer than I like to count and took the river's money. I set down what it is like here because I have since learned that it is not like this anywhere else, and nobody at home believes me.*
>
> *The day starts before light, when the guarantor comes in wet to the knee from the towpath, his two spearmen dripping behind him, and tells the window what the night did: a snag below the landing, a post down, a barge that slipped its mooring and its dues together, lamps seen in the reeds where no honest boat would be. I enter it. Then the barges come, and each master, bare-armed in a sleeveless jerkin whatever the weather, leans in at the window and pays, and I cut the tally, notch for the reach, notch for the day, the town's seal pressed into the wax, and push it across. Some masters ask to hear the guarantee read. I read it to them as it was read to me when I was a child standing in the same queue: this reach kept clear, this landing kept safe, this crossing kept in repair, and the carrier treated like the last. Most of them mouth the words along with me. The Reedfolk pilot waiting on the stage outside never does.*
>
> *In the evening the guarantor and I sit down with the roll and enter the dues on the left and the repairs on the right, line against line. That is the whole of my trade: keeping two columns honest enough that the great houses could read them at the moot-hall and find that we did what*

> *we were paid to do, or honest enough, at least, that no carrier comes to the door with a knife. Over our door hangs one of the old iron lanterns, and at dusk it gives a light like water with no colour in it. The guarantor does not look at it. I have caught myself looking at it more than once, when the left-hand column ran long.*
>
> *In spring the river comes up and everything stops. We throw bread and flowers off the quay for the River-King, and the old women tell children he is there in the crowd somewhere, and the children stare at every stranger. When it falls, the drowned come up the landing steps, slow and streaming, and the old women go down to meet them with the rites while the rest of us keep indoors. Then the pilots go out in their narrow boats to sound the Lying Shoals, and nobody trusts a mark until they come back. One year a pilot told me, quite pleasantly, that the channel our guarantee promised had moved three hundred paces to the east in the night, and that the town across the water would be glad of our trade. I wrote that down too. It was the first time I understood that the river had never sworn anything.*

Three Layers

The towns are mixed, and they know it. Reedfolk live in stilt quarters at the water's edge and on reed islands between towns; Goblins and the Wrought turn up on the quays and in the workshops; and some households are part Elven or Dwarven by marriage. That mixture is why the corridor towns count people in three layers, a custom the strongest river houses fixed in the **Serathic Oath of Layers** (c. 19,000 to c. 18,000 BR) and have kept ever since. **Protection** comes first and comes to everyone the town takes in: food in a famine, a place behind the walls, and a house that will avenge them. **Stewardship** comes next: holding a boat, a stall, a debt, or goods in trust, with a master or a house watching. **The full oath** comes last: swearing to a guarantee, inheriting a ferry or a berth, carrying a house's heaviest burdens in one's own right. A half-Elven child of a ferry family is protected from birth, may run the family boat under stewardship for years, and may not swear the ferry's guarantee until the great houses at the moot-hall say so. Families argue about when that is. The houses are seldom quick, and quicker for a child with rich kin.

How far the Reedfolk count follows no single rule. Since the Absorptions each reach has kept whatever its town imposed: here a Reedfolk office the town tolerates, there a house that owes service by inheritance, elsewhere only a family that every bargemaster quietly asks before the rise. Reedfolk say the League found three layers for everyone else and has kept them on the middle one ever since.

Corridor Towns

The League has no capital. Each town keeps its own walls and ruling houses; what gathers the corridor is its oldest and richest towns, whose word the smaller towns follow because they cannot afford not to, and the largest of them is **Correth**. Forty thousand people or more live there on a broad rise above the flood line, walled on the landward side and fronted by water-gate, quays, and a busy ferry landing. Inside are several markets, the toll-house, the greatest oath-house on the river, two record-houses, and a moot-hall whose word other towns quote back at it. Its water-gate has been forced once, in a war with an upstream town that its children still re-fight with sticks on the quays, and its great houses have never forgiven the town that did it. Its quarters are as mixed as the corridor: Reedfolk stilt houses at the water's edge, Goblins and the Wrought on the quays and in the workshops, and families part Elven or Dwarven by marriage.

Pellith, a ferry and boatyard town of ten thousand or so, stands above the Lying Shoals, where barges wait for a Reedfolk pilot before they go down. Its boatyards, ropewalks, and haulers' yards spill out beyond the wall and smell of tar

and hemp, and its guarantee for the reach is read aloud at the water-gate to anyone who asks. Most of its quarrels are with the river, which has moved its channel twice in living memory, and with the wreckers above the shoals, whose false lights its watchmen hunt down every low-water season for a bounty on every lamp. Beside it, on reed islands, lies **Oldchannel**, home to the Reedfolk pilot house that has held one channel longer than the town has stood. A few dozen households live there by pilotage, channel-mending, and fish, and it is the house now asking Pellith's great houses to let it swear in its own name. Its pilots know where the wreckers hide on the shoals, and say so only when they choose.

A day above Pellith on the towpath, **Towrest** is a haulers' hamlet: a long inn, stabling for draught teams, and the houses of the families who drag barges upstream. It lives on the slow half of the river trade, and its haulers know every stretch where the towpath has fallen in, every bend where the River-Given come ashore in spring, and every one where bandits wait for a team that has fallen behind.

Berth Names and Roll Names

Between 600,000 and 800,000 people live along the corridor, the most crowded country on Caeldon: forty thousand or more in Correth alone, and perhaps one in five behind some town wall. About seven in eight are Serathic Humans and about one in ten Reedfolk, in the stilt quarters and on the reed islands; Goblins on the quays, a thousand or more Wrought in the workshops, and the households part Elven or Dwarven by marriage make up the rest.

Corridor dress is linen for the river trades and wool for winter, cut short for work on boats and quays: a sleeveless jerkin and breeches for a bargeman, leather aprons and gloves for haulers and ropewalk hands, a long dyed gown and a seal on a cord for guarantors and the great houses. The blue and madder-red of the town dyers tell a townsman from a basin farmer at a glance, and the faces under them are as mixed as the corridor. Town life is short. Two children in five die before five, of warm-month fever and whatever else passes through a crowded quarter, and a newborn can expect about thirty years; those who grow up reach their fifties more often than their sixties. Fever and flux kill most adults and fire in close streets kills some, and on the water drowning takes more bargemen than any sickness. Serathic names are longer than basin ones: a given name and the family name of the berth, boat, or ferry the family holds, with the parent's given name set between them in a guarantee roll, so that Sabeth Ivo Merriden is Ivo's daughter of the Merriden ferry. Others on the rolls: Kester Osswey, Ivo Vantry, Hester Merrowin, Perrin Doswey, Maudry Senneth.

Corridor Reedfolk dress and live as they do in the Basins, and a pilot who holds a berth wears its token on a cord; fever comes less often to the reed islands than to the towns. Their own names follow the house and its water, but the towns enter them under a **roll name** that a scribe makes from the house's channel or berth, so that Imreth of Oldchannel is Imreth Oldchannel on the guarantee roll; others on the reaches are Tellis, Suvva, and Ennan. Quay Goblins dress, live, and are named as the Goblins of the Broken Marches are, with a quay byname a corridor scribe adds, and the Wrought as in the Headwater Marches.

Who Taught the River

The corridor remembers itself as a promise kept, the guarantees and the League they made (see How the Present Was Made). Serathic houses quote their own old oaths with a pride other Human powers find tiresome. Quayside taverns tell harder things: the bargemaster who ran the Lying Shoals at night with the wreckers' false lights all around her and brought her grain fleet through; the river wars between upstream and downstream towns, when one town could drown its rival's harvest by opening its own sluices; the spring the River-Given came ashore in hundreds

after a flood that drowned a whole town; and the bargewoman who rammed a basin lord's toll-chain at Toll's End and broke it, whose barge has been looked for under the Serath ever since for the lord's strongbox she is said to have carried off.

Underneath that story lies another. Serathic tradition says Serovan dictated the Law of the River to the first guarantors. Reedfolk say most of it is flood-keeper knowledge with a Human seal on it, absorbed with the houses themselves, and the oath-forms the League is proudest of are older still: archive-world forms that the Floodkeeper houses kept after the **Last Keeping** (c. 150,000 to c. 120,000 BR) and the towns took from them. Some Floodkeeper houses say so. Serathic scribes rarely agree. The archive cities themselves stand sealed in the Witnessfields, dead cities holding oaths nobody has ever released, and corridor treasure-hunters who go looking for their vaults seldom come back the same; the quays have a saying for a man who has lost his wits over money: *he has been to the archive*. Upstream League towns want new weirs for their mills now, and their own flood-keepers warn that the weirs will move a channel; the tale of the **Dry Year**, when the Serath ran dry because a town built a dam without Serovan's leave and its elders had to walk into the riverbed to beg, is told whenever a town talks about building one.

The towns keep the Sworn Accord (see Faith in Practice), and Iskel's oath-keepers are vowed never to reveal what they keep. Ostrin's name is called as far away as Greyford. Some downriver oath-houses refuse to enter Abrel the Changeling, finding a god of in-between people too unsettled, and their zealots have more than once crossed into the Headwater country to break the god's shrines. Reedfolk grant that Serovan exists and refuse him the water. They keep their own river-memory rites and the memory of Hesserin, the god of refusal who broke apart once their houses took service, and in some old crossing shrines her broken mirrors, set back together with gold, still hang above the water. Whoever looks into one, it is said, sees their own cracks and the gold that holds them.

Above the corridor, basin lords hold their crossings by the sword, not by guarantee, take a toll of whatever passes, and sell their grain to whoever pays; the League needs that grain and does not control it. Away from the river the corridor is only as wide as the towns' fields and the flood-ground, and the line between town fields and a lord's villages is set field by field. Further up, the Headwater Marches never touch the corridor but are its other half, and what comes down from the mountains reaches the Serath through the Basins. Downstream, nothing below the lowest guaranteed town is fixed: whether the Serath reaches the sea through an estuary, spreads into further wet country, or does something else entirely is left open.

The Headwater Marches

Upstream, the valleys narrow, the fields tilt onto terraces, and the rivers quicken into gorges. The **Headwater Marches** are foothill country between the Human farmland and the Dwarven mountains: steep valleys where the basin rivers begin, walled towns at the crossings, and the escorted exchange roads that climb from basin granaries to the gates of the Ironspine. They belong to the Confluence Marches, but they live by passage more than by the plough, and by the sword that guards it. Metal comes down these roads and grain goes up, and both draw outlaws, sellswords, and bears; above the valleys stand the broken works of giants, and in the south-east lies a burned valley nobody may dig. Basin folk say the Headwater Marches begin where the fields get too steep for the plough; Headwater folk say they end where a road stops needing an escort. They are also the oldest shared country of Humans and Dwarves on Caeldon. Human bands settled these foothills slowly, c. 70,000 to c. 35,000 BR, met the outer

holds as patrols and guarded waystations, and over the twenty-odd thousand years that followed turned that contact into habit, custom, and road.

Gorges, Terraces, and Older Stone

The Marches are the foothills along the eastern face of the southern Ironspine, with the Stormcrown on the crest above them. To the south and south-west they fall into the Confluence Basins. To the north, beyond the March Wall, lie the Broken Marches, which wrap round their eastern side as well, with the Greyford Reach on that eastern edge; south-east, past the last farmed valley and the **Wrongwood**, rough country nobody has mapped rises towards the unnamed range at the desert's edge. The valleys come down off the mountains and bend south-west towards the basins, and their rivers with them. Oathfoot stands at a valley head half a day's climb below the gate of Thrumgate, about two months by cart from Sheafmeet and a month from Greyford; Snowshut is the last stop on the upper road, and Notchfield sits high under the Weatherline. The cores are the valley floors below the gates, each with its walled town and villages; above and between them lies high wild country of snow, slides, and pass bears.

Every river here begins as Ironspine snowmelt, and much of it was channelled and bridged by Dwarven work before any Human town stood on its banks. Above the last towns the valleys become gorges and stream-cut spurs running up into the mountains, and above the foothill valleys lie the heights of an older world. Broken ridge roads, terrace flights, and weather shrines of the Upland Colossal Civilization crown the uplands, and some foothill farms still plough colossal terraces whose retaining walls no living people could raise. Kindred caravans walk the high roads, and once in a long while someone reports a Giant on them. The heights have their own lure: Notchfield grandmothers can name every climber who went up after a giant's grave on the Stormcrown and came down with the thaw.

What kills people here is fast water first. Snowmelt and summer storms send floods down the gorges with little warning; a bridge that stood for a century can go in an afternoon, and most fords are usable only in the low months. Road cuts slide and rockfall closes valley heads, and the worst stretch of the main road, the **Rattlecut**, is a gorge so narrow that in a wet spring the river takes the road and gives back only part of it. The **Rattlecut Dead**, those it took and gave back in pieces, search the gorge for what they lost, and many of them walk upstream ahead of a rise; carters teach their boys the gorge's one rule, *when the dead go uphill, so do you*. Snow shuts the upper roads for months; a caravan caught late loses its animals first and then its people. Pass bears learn the waystations and come back every autumn for the stores, grey wolves take sheep and lone walkers in hard winters, gluttons rob every trap-line, and crag eagles take lambs and, the valleys swear, now and then a child. Colossal works fail without warning. Unwoken Predecessor-Frames still stand in some abandoned Dwarven works, and a few earthen Field Bulwarks at old gates and crossings still rise when something touches their anchors. Headwater miners keep the upland taboo against digging deep beneath the highest peaks, where Haurûm the Mountain-Father is said to sleep, even when they are hired into the holds. And metal and coin on a mountain road draw outlaw bands, who wait above the cuts and roll stone onto the leading cart, so the exchange roads are escorted against people as much as against rockfall. Many escorts are sellswords hired for the season, and not always better than the thieves: Oathfoot carters still spit at the name of the company that sold its caravan to the band it was hired against, and drink to the carter's boy who cut the lead mule loose under the arrows and rode down to raise the valley.

Living on the Road

Most Headwater people farm hard ground and sell what passes through. A valley household works narrow terraced fields of barley and oats, grazes sheep and cattle on the summer slopes, and cuts timber in the foothill woods. Little of it stays home: the holds above buy grain, salt meat, wool and cloth, lamp oil, and bracing timber, and Headwater farmers are their nearest sellers. The valleys rarely grow enough for themselves and the holds both, so basin grain comes up the Sheaf Road to make up the difference.

Foothill towns stand at crossings and valley heads. Each is walled, built around a market, an oath-house, and a yard where caravans are made up and broken; the larger ones add a lord's tower or a hall where the leading families settle quarrels, smithies working to Dwarven methods, a burden house for the Ogre camps, and a house of the Mending Orders. Between the towns, walled waystations keep stores, fresh animals, and the escort, spaced so a laden caravan can reach the next before dark. Everyone works the road in some season: carting, escort, bridge and road repair, inn-keeping, hiring out. Ogre bands haul dressed stone and beams and keep the winter roads open. Human miners and hands go up into the holds for a season and come back with wages and Dwarven habits. The year follows the passes: up when they open, a long trading summer, a hurried autumn before the snow, and a winter of mending, waiting, and telling the year's dead.

Foothill Towns

No town rules the Headwater Marches. Their centre is the string of walled foothill towns below the gates, where escorts, sellswords, and caravans meet, and the largest, **Oathfoot**, is where a Headwater lords' hall sits most often. It stands at a valley head below the gate of Thrumgate, the hold whose exchange road it serves, and has everything a foothill town can have: a market, an oath-house, a caravan yard, a lord's tower and the hall where the Headwater lords sit over road quarrels, smithies working to Dwarven methods, a burden house for the Ogre camps, and a house of the Mending Orders. Ten thousand or more people live there, Dwarven families thickest in the upper streets near the road to the gate, and nearly all of them work the road in some season. Its taverns are where caravan-masters hire sellswords and beast-hunters, and where the bounty on the latest outlaw band is cried.

Above it, **Snowshut** is the last walled waystation on the upper road before the hold's wardens take over: stores, fresh animals, the escort, a Hobgoblin compact watch, and a dozen households who keep the place. Snow closes the road above it for months each winter, and a caravan that reaches it late waits there for spring or loses its animals trying to go on. Its walls carry the claw-marks of the pass bear that came over them three autumns running before the watch killed it, and the skull hangs over the gate, where every beast-hunter who passes touches it for luck.

Notchfield is a high valley village of some thirty households ploughing colossal terraces whose retaining walls no living people could raise. They grow barley and oats, send sheep up to the summer slopes, and watch the notches of the Weatherline for the weather, since cloud over them means the high roads will close before night. Its young people hire into the holds for a season and keep the taboo on the deepest seams when they do. On a terrace above the main road, **Winterfire** is an Ogre road-camp: a few long timber-and-hide houses around one great fire, home to a band of a few dozen under Hearth-Weight terms. The band hauls stone and beams in summer and keeps the winter roads open, and every job it takes is fed first and written down at Oathfoot's burden house.

Two Oaths

Households are often mixed, and almost every family has ties uphill. Dwarven families live in the foothill towns, thickest near the gates. Children are fostered across the line, and now and then a

Headwater fosterling goes up to live behind a hold's gate for years. The rare Human-Elf child grows up here as well. Wrought, many of them descended from frames carried out of the holds in the time of the **Headwater Exchange Roads** (c. 16,000 to c. 8,000 BR), work as smiths, haulers, and field hands and keep repair houses of their own.

Young people are counted grown twice, under the custom set by the **Headwater Rite of Two Oaths** (c. 23,000 to c. 21,000 BR). **Working right** comes first: it lets them carry messages, serve as caravan-hands and apprentices, and travel in a master's or kinsman's name. **Oath-right** comes later, and with it the right to swear, inherit, and carry a sword in their own name. Every Headwater family knows the years between from experience and argues about them out of habit. Some mixed households mark the end of those years by having the young burn masks made for the selves they were told to be. The custom began with the **Headwater Fosterage Feud** (c. 24,000 to c. 23,000 BR), when a Human foster child, trusted and useful in a hold-linked community, was refused oath-right and both sides believed they were acting rightly.

Valley-Names and Hold-Names

About 400,000 people live in the Headwater valleys and towns. Some five in six are Humans. Foothill Dwarves are about one in fifteen, thickest near the gates; Goblins, most of them of the Hobgoblin compacts, about one in thirty; the Ogres of the road-camps about one in fifty; and the Wrought about one in a hundred, a larger share than anywhere else. A few Troll families keep the worst passages, Kindred circuits pass through, and the rare Human-Elf child grows up here too.

Headwater dress is heavy: wool and sheepskin, felted cloaks, gaiters, and hobnailed boots of Dwarven make. A carter is known by the leather hood, and Dwarven buckles and clasps on a valley coat mean kin or a fosterling uphill. Headwater folk run fairer than basin folk and broader from hill work. One child in three dies before five, more in a hard winter, and few adults die old: winter and fast water kill many, road and mine accidents take one man in four, and fever and childbirth most of the rest, so a newborn can expect about thirty-five years and a grown carter perhaps fifty-five. A child is named within days, with a given name and a valley-name from whichever side of the family holds the land. A fosterling who goes up behind a gate is given a hold-name there, and many keep it for life: Brann Askran is Brannuk inside Thrumgate. Other valley names: Gida Torvel, Rossa Dunagh, Ketter Hallorn, Sefa Morrin. Foothill Dwarves dress as hold Dwarves do, in Human-woven cloth, and are named as in the Ironspine with a short form for the valley: Durvel Ostgar is Durv on the road, and Hennik Dovrek is Henn.

The Ogre road crews wear thick leather and long hide coats, pad their shoulders for hauling, and go bareheaded. Their children sleep nearest the hearth, and only about one in five dies young. An Ogre the road spares lives into the eighties, but most die of the road: crushing, falls, backs and knees worn out by fifty years of loads, and in a hunger year the cold. An Ogre is named by band and birth hearth, the burden house writes both beside every job, and a byname for the heaviest load a person ever carried follows them for life. In the burden-house books: Hulma of the Winterfire band, Brogga, Dorrum, Mabba, Tunn, Gesk. Hobgoblin watches wear the compact's badge on matched coats, the only matched clothes most Goblins own, and add the watch to their names: Vossk of the Snowshut watch. Most Wrought wear nothing for warmth. Working frames wear leather aprons and the painted plate of their repair house, and in the towns a cloak, so that carters' animals do not shy. They have no natural end; what ends them is damage past repair, repair refused, and being taken apart. A Wrought person carries its lineage and either its maker's mark read aloud or a name chosen after waking, often a valley name,

and the Mending Order house writes down both: a Forgeframe called Dovrek-nine after the craft-line that built her, or Ondrel, Hask, Iveth.

Lords, Gates, and Compacts

Headwater people are mostly Human, and power is a frontier patchwork: marcher lords holding valleys from towers above them, foothill towns run by their leading families, and the **Headwater lords' halls**, gatherings where the lords of a stretch of road sit together over road quarrels and the lord with the most spears behind him usually carries the day. When the hall cannot settle it, the valleys feud: herds driven off, a waystation burned, an heir ambushed on the road home. Some feuds are older than the towers that wage them; the dead of both sides lie under one cairn at the ford where it began, with the score cut into the capstone and a fresh notch added whenever it is evened. Unlike basin lords, Headwater lords live on what they take at their bridges and on escort fees more than on grain levies, and none of them can keep a road open alone.

Others hold real weight beside them. Foothill Dwarves are more exchange-minded than the hold heartland; their weight comes from the holds behind them, not from any Human lord, and their word counts in any matter that touches a gate. Fosterage elders, oath-keepers, and the heads of mixed households often decide more than any lord about who a person is and what they may carry. Hobgoblin compacts of the **Iron Compacts** hold road stretches, waystation watches, and fords on the warrants of the lords who need them held; a warrant is a lord's written word, and he takes it back when it suits him, though a compact that loses its warrant has been known to keep the ford anyway, until someone drives it off. No heavy road work is done without the **Hearth-Weight Compacts**, whose burden houses keep the work records of every Ogre camp, some of them ledgers from the chain-camps, and who live by one word: strength must stay tied to care, so before any job the employer feeds the band. Troll houses of the **Crossing-Oath Houses** hold a few of the worst passages, the Rattlecut among them, by oaths older than any lord's claim, and take their price there. The oldest circuits of the **Edgeway Kindreds** run on the colossal roads of these uplands, and their keepright puts them at odds with any lord who tries to take a cut on a high road.

The holds stand over all of it. They do not rule the Marches, but they open and close the trade the Marches live on, and a foothill town that loses the confidence of its gate is soon a poor one.

The Exchange Roads

The exchange roads are why the Marches look the way they do. They start at the valley rises where the Sheaf Road climbs out of the farmland, run up through the foothill towns past waystations and fortified crossings, and end in each hold's **oath-yard**, inside its outer gate, where every bargain is sworn before the hold's custodian. In places they are walled and paved with Dwarven stonework. Long stretches were cut and embanked by Ogre camps, and every stretch is mended each season by whoever holds it. Escort below the gates is Human and Hobgoblin, drawn from town and lordly garrisons, from compact watches, and from sellsword companies hired at Oathfoot; at the last waystation, hold wardens take the caravan. Every crossing takes its cut, a lord at his bridge, a town at its gate, the Troll house at the Rattlecut, and beyond the last waystation the hold, and a basin caravan pays at every one of them and expects to. Heavy haulage belongs to Ogre bands under Compact terms, sworn before any load moves.

The rivers are crossed, not travelled; above the basin edge they are too steep and fast for boats, and the oldest bridges are Dwarven. Up the roads go grain, salt meat, cloth, lamp oil, and bracing timber, much of it bound past the holds for the Deeps, along with hired hands for the mines and fosterlings. Down come metal, tools, and weapons, dressed stone, and the craft teaching that goes with them, carried on along the Sheaf Road to the basin towns; in the time of the exchange roads

Dwarven workframes came down the same way, the start of the Predecessor-Frames' spread through the Human country. Across the heights go salvage from the colossal ruins, news, and warnings of rockfall, bears, and raiders on the Kindred circuits. The Headwater roads are also the way around the Elderweald, whose groves let no road through.

Below the gates the Marches are the best hiring ground in the cradle-web for anyone who lives by a blade. Sellsword companies sign on for the trading season at Oathfoot; beast-hunters take the waystations' bounty on pass bears; bounty-takers follow outlaw bands north over the March Wall into the ruin-belt; salvagers pass through bound for Greyford and the ruins beyond. The Wrongwood's brood-hunters are honoured in every valley tavern and invited to no one's wedding.

From Orrin Talloway, *A Road-Book of Both Halves*

> *I paid nine tolls between the last basin granary and the hold gate, and I have them all written down, with what each one bought. The ninth was the Rattlecut. The gorge closes in until the cart-wheels run a hand's breadth from the drop and the river is so loud below that the carters, hooded in leather, give their orders by touch. At the mouth of it a Troll sat on a stone block worn hollow by a great many years of sitting, with a strongbox at his feet and a coil of rope beside it as thick as my arm.*
>
> *He did not name a price at once. First he told us the road: that the third bend had slipped in the thaw and been pinned, that the river had taken the outer edge at the long straight two springs ago and given back half, that we should walk the mules there and not ride, and that if we met anyone walking uphill in the gorge we should turn and walk uphill with them and not ask why. He told it the way a guarantor reads a reach at home, except that he had no roll and needed none; every slip was on him somewhere, he said, and he showed us the long pale scar across his forearm where the road had last come down with him on it. Then he named the toll, and it was higher than the other eight together, and our caravan-master paid it without a word.*
>
> *Our escort was Hobgoblin as far as the last waystation, under a warrant the leader carried in a sealed tube against her chest and showed to every gatekeeper whether they asked or not. Twice on the way up she halted us under a cut and sent two of hers up the slope with their spears before she would let the leading cart go on, and the second time they came down with blood on one blade and said nothing about it. The Ogres who hauled the timber ahead of us would not lift a beam until the master had fed them, and the master did not argue that either; there were pots of barley and beans on the fire before the sun was up, and the youngest of the band and a lame one ate first. Our master told me that a caravan which skimps on that is never hauled twice, by any band, on any road.*
>
> *On the long straight I walked the mules as I had been told, and looked down once, and saw the old road under the water, a pale line of dressed stone running on beneath the current like a thing that had decided to go another way. Somebody had cut marks into the rock face above it. Our master said they were the names of the camp that built the road, and that no Ogre would cut them away, and that no lord who wanted Ogres on his roads ever tried. I copied them into my book as well as I could, though I could not read them.*

The Roads' Memory

The Marches remember being made, not found, though the ground was not new when they made it. The settlers came into uplands already marked by colossal roads and terraces, and Kindred circuits had walked those roads since the **Walking of the Unkept Roads** (c. 175,000 to c. 140,000 BR); the Kindreds still mention this whenever a lord claims a high road as his own. The founding memory is the alignment with the holds, through the **First**

Headwater-Ironspine Contacts (c. 34,000 to c. 22,000 BR) and the **Headwater Alignments** (c. 28,000 to c. 14,000 BR). Headwater people tell it as a partnership between two peoples who needed each other. The holds tell it as teaching. Both agree it began with need rather than friendship.

The roads carry the heaviest memory. Many of them were built by debt-bound Ogre camps during the **Chain-Camps** (c. 18,000 to c. 8,000 BR), and the Hearth-Weight Compacts formed along these roads around c. 15,000 BR as the camps' organized refusal. Some stretches still carry the camp-marks naming the camps that built them, no Ogre band will cut those marks away, and Ogres say the dead of those camps walk the stretches where the marks have been cut. Who the roads belong to has four answers here: Dwarven archives call them Dwarven work, Headwater lords' rolls lordly work, Ogre camp-marks camp work, and the Kindreds point out that the oldest of them were colossal work before anyone else arrived. The Marches' less comfortable invention is the **waste-ground doctrine**, by which ruined country past the frontier was anyone's to take, and which the Goblins of the ruin-belt remember as the years when lords' men walked into their homes with torches and called them empty.

The newest of the old memories is the burning. In the Incursion of Qzoth (c. 4,000 to c. 3,500 BR) the Bloom broke out in the last south-eastern valley, and the folk of the valleys round it burned it back, their own sick and houses among it; the valley's last town burned itself with the Bloom inside. What is left is the **Wrongwood**, grown over round the ash-mounds of its towns, where Kindless Broods still breed and broken ground wakes the Changing Fever. The valley below keeps the watch, and nobody fells, digs, or ploughs there. On the anniversary it keeps a vigil for the last night: for the bell rung by someone who stayed inside to ring it, and for the things that came to the edge of the fire and did not cross. The valley's brood-hunters go into the Wrongwood with fire for a bounty per head, and now and then a digger goes in after the strongrooms said to lie under the burned towns. The road keeps its own heroes too. Snowshut's compact watch tells of the hard winter when a few dozen Hobgoblins held the upper ford against an outlaw host come to take the winter stores, until the hold's wardens came down through the snow; the lord whose warrant they held took the credit, and the watch still wears the scar-badge he never gave them.

Gods of the Threshold

Headwater belief gathers at thresholds. The oath-houses keep the Sworn Accord, and Abrel the Changeling is honoured in them as some oath-houses downriver still refuse to do. Abrel was born in these foothills from the longing of people who belong to two peoples at once: Humans call the god Abrel, frontier Dwarves call it Durrask, Goblins of the mixed crossings call it Ziv, and the same god answers all three. Fosterlings, apprentices, and everyone still waiting for oath-right pray to Abrel, and some old frontier shrines keep mirrors said to show a different face at every look. The tale of the fosterling who belonged to two households, was shown a true face, and ran from it, is told to the young as a warning against the fear of change. When downriver zealots come up the road to break Abrel's shrines, the frontier answers in kind.

At the gates the Held Covenant is kept in its outward-facing gate practice. Oath-right and every oath-yard bargain are sworn under Kerrund the Stone-Warden, who guards the oath not yet given, while Abrel keeps company with whoever is waiting to give it. In the terraced valleys Kerrund also contends with Anvelle over whether corridor ground should be walled or planted, and on the oldest terraces, farmers say, Haurûm's stone holds Anvelle's soil. Ogre camps keep Ghessa the Hearth-Mother at their fires. They also remember Haggun the Wall-Breaker, the god of the chain-camps, who faded once the camps' refusal had won and held, and say that on the chain-camp roads at dawn the sound of cracking stone can still

be heard. Goblin compacts sing for Tavi the Bard of the Broken, the Kindreds bring Corrow the Gale-Runner up the high roads, and where corridor trade reaches the frontier the cult of Ostrin meets Abrel's.

The Broken Marches

Past the **March Wall**, a broken run of Human frontier wall still quarried for stone and still fought over as a boundary, the country goes feral. The **Broken Marches** are a ruin-belt and salvage margin and the main regional home of Goblins: a broad march of failed works, broken routes, abandoned holdings, half-repaired roads, old storehouses, contested bridges, and small settlements living in the bones of stronger ages. Nobody rules them. Vault-breakers strip their cellars, bounty-takers hunt their tunnels, outlaws hold their roads, and under it all the old works keep their secrets: vaults no one has opened, earthworks that still rise to hold a breach, and the dead of failed crossings seen on the broken spans. Goblin warrens and Hobgoblin compacts share the Marches with Salvage Peoples on their circuits, Kobold underkeepers, Ogre burden bands, scattered Troll crossing houses, Wrought repair houses and fugitives, and Humans who came for salvage, debt, or a second chance. Medieval Caeldon feels inherited rather than freshly built largely because places like this exist.

Built Land Without Builders

The Broken Marches lie east of the northern Ironspine and wrap round the north and east of the Headwater Marches behind the March Wall, with the Greyford Reach on their south-western edge. Eastwards their ruin margins thin into the Glassbelt, where the cradle end of the crossing begins, and the fog of the Hushvale lies two or three weeks south along that edge; their northern reaches and southern margins are unmapped. The land runs down from the mountain flank in old terraces, failed causeways, and braided rivers, and crossing it from the mountains to the desert edge takes three to four months. The Undercroft Fair lies about two months on foot from Greyford by Kindred paths, the crossing's cradle end about six weeks beyond it, and Wallbreach stands on the March Wall itself. There is no protected core here in the usual sense: warrens, repair camps, and walled towns are islands in ruin country that kills by collapse and bad air, and travellers go with a Kindred circuit along its marked paths.

The Marches are built country gone feral rather than wilderness. Roads continue without patrols. Old border walls are quarried while still steering movement. Canal cuts have become flood channels, culverts and service tunnels run under fields nobody owns, and ruined storeworks and root cellars give partial shelter almost everywhere. Rivers braid and shift around failed causeways, so a route that held last year may be a gravel bar or a scour hole this year.

Most danger comes from the works themselves. Structures look sound and are not; collapse, bad air, and trapped water wait in the underlayers, and cellar rot eats a beam from inside and leaves its shape, which is why "sound-looking" is a warning in the Marches. Kindred **danger-marks** chalked and cut on the stones grade what is braced, what is unsound, and what is never to be touched, and wise travellers read them even when they will not admit it. The ruins are full of life that bites. Ruin hogs, the feral swine of the failed settlements, root in the cellars and culverts, and a herd in a ruin is worse than bad air; hog-hunters with boar-spears and dogs clear a ruin before a salvage crew goes in, and charge by the tusk. Round-bellied glove spiders in the root cellars are the reason salvagers reach in gloved. On old battlefields and breached walls stand the mounds of **field bulwarks**, earthworks raised long ago to hold a breach; most are only mounds now, but a few still rise. At broken bridges and fords the **Bridge-Dead** are seen on the spans, and the crossing families steer travellers by them, with a warning for strangers: *if the span is crowded, the span is*

empty. Some crossings are woundland, where Troll Failed Mending and repeated bad repair have made the ground itself wrong, and nobody crosses without the leave and the guidance of the house that keeps it. People are a hazard too: bounty-takers with lamps and dogs, salvage gangs clearing a ruin with a lord's leave and without asking who sleeps in it, outlaw bands that live off the paths between towns, the rare Ogre camp broken into a hunger-band, and hidden Unmaker circles that still remember the Wrought who escaped them.

Keeping Things Usable

Most people here live by keeping something usable a little longer. Settlements range from walled towns with a lord's hall and a market to tolerated repair camps, salvage markets, and squatters' quarters that appear wherever leftover value can feed a household. Watchtowers become granaries, shrines, squats, robbers' posts, or lairs. 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.

Work is salvage, bracing, clearing, hauling, ferrying, watch duty, and repair; vault-breakers and bounty-takers make a harder living off the same ground. Every camp has a delver's tale of a sealed vault under a storework, full of colossal-age metal, that the teller nearly reached before the roof spoke, and every camp has a grave or two of those who reached one. The vault-breakers work in small crews of mixed peoples, a Goblin to read the danger-marks, a Kobold to taste the air, a strong back to brace, and one who can fight, and they sell what they find to border lords' buyers, to relic-sellers who swear every bent fitting is colossal work, and, when they must, to whoever is holding the knife. Food comes from small plots in sheltered ruined yards, stores kept in old cellars, and trade with the settled side. The year follows the works: culverts cleared in spring, causeways braced before the floods, Ogre bands arriving for heavy jobs and moving on when the work is done, and Kindred caravans returning on their circuits for a few weeks before walking on. The largest gatherings are the Kindred gathering-markets, and the best known here is the **Undercroft Fair**, held in the vaulted cellars of a ruined storework, where people from distant broken regions trade, marry, and settle feuds by blood-price. It is also where crews form and break: bounty-takers post their writs on the vault pillars, crews short a hand hire one at the cellar stairs, and in the deepest vault hangs the chain of the Ogre burden band that carried a whole warren's children out of a burning storework on their backs, the one tale every people in the Marches tells the same way.

Marks, Warrants, and Keepright

No single power owns the Marches, and nobody inside them wants one to. Power is a patchwork of overlapping holds, each reaching only as far as its keepers can make it hold, and the gaps between them are where the outlaws live. The Iron Compacts hold road stretches, ruin keepings, and watches by written warrant from settled powers: a lord's word, set down, and good for as long as he wants it. Theirs is the only Marches holding a Headwater lord accepts without argument, which is also why he can take it back. A compact's spears are seldom idle; it fights the outlaw bands on its road every season and brings back heads, not prisoners, because a warrant pays for a quiet road and not for prisoners to feed. Freer warrens refuse warrants altogether, which makes them the people the clearances find first (the compacts are told in The Bridge Peoples (FND 257)).

The Edgeway Kindreds claim **keepright**, a voice in works they have kept alive for generations, whoever holds the title. A kindred is a kin-linked company of caravans, camps, and repair crews travelling a known circuit between ruin zones, returning season after season to the same culverts, wells, spans, and storeworks, and their shared mark-language binds a mark to care: a kindred's mark is honoured only if those who set it leave the place no more dangerous than they

found it. The Underhouse Compacts rule the ruin underworks by deciding when a structure is too unsafe to enter, and the Hearth-Weight Compacts do the same for heavy work, which no Ogre band will take without food, shelter, and its own people looking on. Crossing-Oath Houses hold a few dangerous passages by oath, and take a share from those who use them. Mending Order houses in the mixed towns shelter the Wrought and speak for them.

The pressure from outside comes mostly from the Human lords of the Headwaters. They give warrants, sell the right to strip a ruin, and take a compact's warrant back when a ruin is worth clearing, and they have the armed men to make it stick. A clearance is a raid in all but name, and the warrens answer in kind: a lord's salvage carts burn on the Tallgrade, clearance gangs find their ladders cut, and a warren driven out in spring may be back in its ruin by the first frost with the gang's tools as loot.

Fair, Town, and Ruin

Nobody rules the Marches and nobody inside them wants anyone to, so they have no capital. The nearest thing to a centre moves with the Kindred circuits: the gathering-markets, and above all the Undercroft Fair. For a few weeks each year its vaulted cellars are crowded with people from distant broken regions come to trade, marry, and settle feuds; the rest of the year a few keepers mind the vaults and the danger-marks on the stairs.

Wallbreach is the settled face of the Marches: a walled town of two or three thousand at a gap in the March Wall, with a lord's hall, a market, a Mending Order house, and an Iron Compact watch on its road. Humans, Goblins, the Wrought, and salvage households live there by repair, hauling, and the salvage that border lords buy quietly, and its own stone comes from the wall it is named for. Bounty-takers drink in its taverns between hunts, under the eye of the compact watch, which hangs any outlaw they bring in alive. **Twohalves** is a ruined fort of the kind described above, with a Goblin warren in its upper breaks and a Kobold underhouse below. Some fifty people live there by salvaging, bracing, and keeping watch, and the warren refuses warrants, which makes it the first place a clearance looks. It has beaten off two, and its children play at clearances in the yard, where the clearance side always ends up in the cellar. **Halfroof** is a tolerated repair camp in an old watchtower and the storework beside it, half of whose roof is still standing. A Wrought repair house, two Kobold crews, and a few salvage families keep it, mending tools and fittings for anyone who pays and asking no questions of the outlaws and fugitives who sleep in the tower.

Warren Names and Kindred Names

About 120,000 people live in the Marches, and nobody has counted them. Some two in five are Goblins, Hobgoblin compacts among them, and about one in five Humans who came for salvage, debt, or a second chance. Salvage Peoples, resident and on circuit, are about one in seven, and Kobolds about one in eight; Ogre bands and the Wrought, many of the Wrought fugitives, are about one in twenty each, and Trolls a thousand or more.

Marches Goblins wear mended, mismatched clothes cut down from salvage and layered for the cold, with many pockets and hidden ones, mostly in dark colours for the night. Two children in five die young, of crowded-warren sickness, cold, and collapse; a Goblin of sixty is old, and a newborn can expect about twenty-five years. Adults die of the ruins, by collapse and bad air, of sickness, and more often than anywhere else of people: clearances, bounty-takers, and gangs with a lord's leave. Goblin given names are short and change as a person earns another, the warren's name follows, and a Hobgoblin is named in the compact's warrant as well. A name earned in a fight is worn proudly: Vozz Two-Knives. Warren names: Tikka of Twohalves, Vozz, Skiv, Marrit, Ozzo, Gresk.

The kindred folk wear road clothes, layered and patched, with gloves, rope, and the kindred's marks cut into their gear; they come of several stocks and look it. Few grow old on the circuits, where collapse, bad air, and the fevers of crowded camps take most. A Kindred person is named with the kindred, given name first: Dessa Ardow, Jessom Varlish, Juvel Ruvane, Tobbe Ardow, Arli Varlish. The Humans bring Headwater names, and many drop the family name for a byname of trade, like Brede the Mender. Kobolds live and are named as on the Ironspine mine-edges, with ruin-crews in place of hold crews, and Ogres and the Wrought as in the Headwater Marches, except that fugitive Wrought go by chosen names and keep their maker's marks hidden.

The Tallgrade and the Underways

The oldest road through the Marches is the **Tallgrade**, a raised route on a grade too broad and too even for any living builder, generally taken to be colossal work. Kindred circuits keep long stretches of it, and some Troll crossing houses on it hold charges older than any lord's line. Outlaw bands know it too, and the worst ambushes in Marches memory were laid where the grade runs between ruin walls; one stretch is called **the Purse** for the merchants' money that went into it and never came out, and Kindred caravans cross it at a run, with bows strung. Younger Human frontier and military roads cross the Tallgrade on worse foundations and fail first. Rivers matter more as obstacles than as highways: braided fords, ferries, rope crossings, and patched bridges decide where traffic can go in any given season. Underneath, Kobold underways and old service tunnels carry people and goods that would rather not be seen.

What leaves the Marches is salvage and skill: dressed stone, timber, metal, and recovered fittings that border lords buy quietly while calling the sellers thieves, and repair labour hired for work the settled side cannot do. What comes in is coin, grain, tools, and people in trouble. News, warnings, and keep-marks travel the Kindred circuits, which link the Marches to ruin zones as distant as the Glassbelt Interior and, by the one crossing over it, to the far side. Passage is never simply free. A warranted road is kept, and watched, by its compact, which takes its share; Troll houses charge at their crossings; Goblin guides sell safer detours, some of them true; and Kindreds expect kept works to be left no worse than found. Off the kept roads, the price is set by whoever has the most knives.

Layered Aftermath

The Marches have no single origin catastrophe. They are aftermath piled on aftermath, and each age has left its own holders. No war was ever fought for the Marches as a whole; they have had instead a thousand small ones, clearances, warren raids, and feuds between crossing houses, and every ruined fort in them has been taken and lost more times than anyone can count. The deepest layer is the colossal road and its keepers: Troll charges sworn to the elder road-keepers, and the Kindred circuits that began on the unkept roads and reached the Marches later. Goblins bring a different memory: seams lost to the Dwarven holds in the **Enclosure of the Seams**, warrants struck in the **Unlisting of the Warrens** (c. 180,000 to c. 150,000 BR), and finally the waste-ground doctrine that turned the old Goblin holdings of the frontier into empty ruins by a lord's say-so. The Iron Compacts took their present shape c. 20,000 to c. 9,000 BR as the answer to that third loss: if Goblins could not keep what was theirs, they would hold what others needed held, a road, a ruin, a watch, with their own spears. Ogre burden houses remember the Chain-Camps, whose debt-bound bands built frontier roads like the ones now failing here. The youngest layer is the **Awakening of the Wrought**, when fugitives came into the tunnels; some of them are still alive. The live argument is whether the Marches were ever empty. Headwater lords say the waste was

unowned when they named it so. Goblins, Kindreds, and Troll houses each say they were already there.

Belief here is unorganized and mostly hidden. Varn the Shadow-Stalker, god of the hidden and the hunted, was born here from the prayers of the hidden, and shuttered lamps left in ruins honour him; the thieves who rob the corridor's oath-chests pray to him before a job too. The struck-warrant songs of Tavi the Bard of the Broken are sung at compact gatherings, often in places only Varn's worshippers can find. Ennor keeps the graves Varn keeps secret, and the Kindreds bring Corrow with them. The Sworn Accord reaches only as far as the Headwater oath-houses do, and under it Goblin devotion is unentered and the warrants Tavi sings are struck, so the region's own gods count for nothing in the halls that decide its ruins. Anyone praying to Varn is, almost by definition, someone those halls want found: a fugitive, a thief, an outlaw, or a Goblin whose warren was struck.

The Greyford Reach

Where the Broken Marches meet the Headwater Marches, one river breaks into many across a wide gravel valley, and in the middle of it stands **Greyford**. It is not a capital and not a wilderness. It is a necessary crossing where Humans, Goblins, Kobolds, Ogres, the Wrought, and salvage households all make a living from the same failing bridge: a place where fugitives run for the Marches with bounty-takers on their heels, where river-raiders wait at the side fords, and where the dead of old crossings are seen on the span at dusk. This year the bridge has begun to fail in public.

The Braided Ford

The **Greyford Reach** is a wide gravel valley where one river breaks into many. Between the banks lie shifting bars, willow islands, side channels, and the stubs of a ruined causeway, and across the main channel runs the lord-held **Greyford Bridge**, the **Greyspan**: old stone piers, newer timber spans, patched for longer than anyone can say, set among side channels, gravel bars, seasonal paths, ferries, rope crossings, and low-water routes known only to those who walk them. **Highbank**, on the Headwater side, stands on a terrace above the flood line, holds the bridge, and takes the toll. **Lowbank**, the Fordbank, on the Marches side, sits lower and wetter among flood-cut banks, old culverts, abandoned storeworks, and repair yards, and holds most of the people who keep the crossing working.

The Reach lies east of the Headwater towns. Its river comes down from the mountain flank to the north-west, out of ruin country, and runs south between the Headwater Marches on its western bank and the Broken Marches on its eastern. Greyford stands where the March Wall meets it, with Onefire Terrace on the gravel upstream. Below the Reach the river runs on south, and where it goes after that nobody has fixed. Oathfoot is about a month west by the Highbank road, and the Undercroft Fair about two months into the Marches on foot. Greyford and the farms of the Headwater bank are the Reach's one core, ruin country lies above and below it, and the Highbank road is travelled in company, because outlaws know when the carts come.

The river is Headwater water. It runs high and brown with snowmelt in spring, rises without warning after summer storms in the hills, and drops in the low months of late summer and autumn, when the side fords open. In hard winters the edges freeze and the main channel does not. Bars shift every flood, and a summer storm upstream can put a hand's depth on a ford in the time it takes to cross it. The culverts and storework cellars under Lowbank flood, trap air, and collapse, glove spiders nest in the root cellars, and in the ruins upstream a sow of the ruin hogs with young has killed more salvagers than any lord. Rotten planking, cracked braces, and overloaded carts have always killed a few people a decade on the bridge itself; deathwatch beetles hollow the

braces, and their ticking in spring is heard as a death-omen. At dusk the Bridge-Dead, those the river took at failed crossings, are seen on the broken causeway and the old piers, and Lowbank names them at every repair. Bounty-takers come to Greyford because everyone fleeing the Headwaters passes through it, and a fugitive caught on the span is dragged back to the Bridge Hall for the lord's reward. In the low months river-raiders work the side fords where no watch goes, and a laden party caught mid-channel has nowhere to run. At the crossroads above Highbank stands the lord's gallows, and the man-shaped gallows root that grows under it is dug by night and sold to people who should not have it.

A Toll Day at the Greyspan

Greyford lives by the crossing, and almost every household earns from it: gate work, carting, inns, guiding, ferrying, hauling, repair, salvage, selling food to people waiting to cross, or quietly helping the hunted cross unseen, fugitives, thieves, and runaway debtors with bounty-takers a day behind. The span opens at the dawn bell and closes at dusk. On market days the queue forms on the Highbank road the night before, carts nose to tail back past the inns, drivers asleep under them with a cudgel to hand. At the toll gate the **Tollwardens** take what the lord asks, by the head, the axle, and the load, and chalk a mark on the cart to show it has paid; toll is taken once, at the Highbank gate, in whichever direction people cross. Only one laden cart goes onto the span at a time, and Tollwardens walk beside the heavy ones. Going over to Lowbank are grain sacks, salt meat, lamp oil, tools, cloth, and people on foot with everything they own. Coming back are dressed stone, timber, scrap metal, recovered hinges, locks, and fittings, and Ogre crews returning from jobs in the Marches. Stone too heavy for the span waits in Lowbank's yards for the low months, when it crosses on the fords.

Highbank and Lowbank

Greyford, well over four thousand people on its two banks together, is the Reach's centre, though not a capital: the Bridge Hall rules the crossing, not the country around it, and past the farms the country belongs to whoever is armed. Highbank is a walled Headwater town in small. Its market square lies below the **Bridge Hall**, where the lord of the crossing sits, with the gatehouse at the bridge end and an oath-house of the Accord across the square. Merchant inns on the square house factors from the Headwater towns and the sellswords who guard their carts, and the bounty-takers who drink there keep a corner table of their own, under a beam cut with the marks of every fugitive taken on the span. The inn tale every stranger hears first is of the carter who paid a grey toll-keeper at dusk, crossed in the fog, and found in the morning that the span he had driven over had fallen thirty years before. Carters' inns out along the road have big yards, stabling, and a common room where people eat barley bread, mutton broth, and trout from the side channels and wait for their turn at the gate. The lord's salvage yards sit outside the wall, where only salvage that has paid at the gate is bought, beside a burden house where Ogre crews are hired and fed. Highbank families are mostly Human. They work as the lord's men, Tollwardens, innkeepers, carters, and traders, and most of them have crossed to Lowbank for a guide or a repair while saying they never go there.

Lowbank has no wall and no single street. Goblin households live on timber platforms raised on piles and old causeway stubs above the flood line, joined by plank walks. Three generations share a platform under a roof of salvaged tile and canvas, sleep on rush mats around a clay hearth, and pull the ladders up at night. They eat eel and small fish from wicker traps in the side channels, porridge from Highbank grain bought with guiding money, greens from patches on the islands, and whatever a salvage day turns up. Below them, Kobold families live in the dry chambers of the old culverts

and storeworks, with small lamps and marked doors. Wrought workshops and forges occupy the soundest storework halls, and salvage households of every people live among the yards. Ogre bands camp on **Onefire Terrace**, the high gravel terrace upstream, above the floods: a few long timber-and-hide houses around one large fire, with sleeping benches along the walls and children and the injured nearest the hearth. Before any job the employer feeds the band, as Compact terms require, big pots of barley and beans, salt meat, and bread, served to the weakest first. The bands carry beams for the bridge braces, shift stone from the yards, and in flood season set and pull the rope crossings.

The Side Fords

When the water drops, the fords become daily work. Goblin side-ford families and Kindred guides mark each route with stakes and reversible marks and walk it at first light to see what the night changed. Crossings run from dawn to early afternoon, before storms in the hills can raise the water. A guide ropes a party together and goes first with a pole, a cudgel in the belt against river-raiders. Walkers and pack animals pay the guide less than the bridge would take, in coin or in kind, a measure of grain or salt or a share of a load. Carts mostly stay on the span, but heavy stone and timber go over on the fords on Ogre backs and sledges. When the river rises in autumn the stakes come up and the ferries and ropes take over. Spring is flood watch, braces checked, ropes strung, Lowbank sleeping light; summer is the long trading season on the span; the low months are the fords' season and the busiest for salvage, when the Kindred caravans come through on their circuits; and winter is mending, long nights, and wolves on the Highbank road, with a bounty from the Bridge Hall on every pelt brought to the gate.

Twelve Thousand at the Ford

Between 12,000 and 16,000 people live in the Reach, well over four thousand of them in Greyford itself. Some three in five are Humans, in Highbank and on the farms of the Headwater bank, and about one in five Goblins, most of them in Lowbank; Kobolds, salvage households, the Wrought, and the Ogres of Onefire Terrace make up the rest, each a small share. Highbank's men-at-arms, Tollwardens, and carters wear Headwater wool and leather, the Tollwardens a chalk-stained apron over it, and they live, die, and are named as Headwater folk are, with the bridge and the river added to what kills them. At the toll gate: Wilmet Askran, Mett Torvel, Brisa Dunagh. Lowbank Goblins dress as the Goblins of the Broken Marches do, with waders and leather leggings for the side fords, and a side-ford family adds the ford it keeps to the warren's name and cuts the same mark on the stakes along its routes: Pikka of the upper ford. The Kobold underkeepers, Wrought repair houses, salvage households, and Ogre crews live, die, and are named as their peoples do in the Marches, though here the side fords, the culverts, and the failing span take more of them than sickness does.

The Mixed Bridge Oath

Highbank holds the crossing. Its lord, a Human marcher of the Confluence Marches, sits in the Bridge Hall; his Tollwardens take the toll, his yards buy the salvage, his men-at-arms keep the gate, and the market runs on his terms. What he says at the Greyspan is what holds there, because he has the men to make it hold. Iron Compact watches hold stretches of the Highbank road for the Headwater lords, for as long as those lords want them there, and hang the outlaws they catch at the nearest milestone. Lowbank holds what Highbank depends on but does not respect: the side fords, the salvage yards, the ferries, the underways, and the working customs of the crossing. Its loose **Fordside Compact** binds the people who keep the crossing usable beyond the reach of

the Bridge Hall's gate, Goblin side-ford families, Ogre burden crews, Wrought repair houses, Kobold underkeepers, salvage households, and the Kindreds whose circuits cross the river. It meets where it needs to, has no hall and no lord, and its word holds only as far as its people stand together.

Between them stands the old **Mixed Bridge Oath**, sworn when nobody remembers, which names the many hands the crossing needs: the gate, heavy labour, repair, salvage clearance, the supports underneath, road watch, ferrying, and ford knowledge. Now the lord of the Bridge Hall says what the Oath means, and nobody in Lowbank is strong enough to say otherwise. Every people at the crossing remembers it differently. Highbank remembers it as a grant, Headwater lords taking the crossing and letting others work on it. Lowbank remembers it as a pact sworn in blood on the span, on the night raiders came over the bridge, when every people at the crossing fought on it side by side and a Goblin girl held the Greyspan gate with a boat-hook until the bridge was cut behind her; Lowbank children still swear their own small oaths "by the boat-hook", and the Bridge Hall, they say, took the Oath over later by force of arms. The Kindreds point out that the causeway was old before the Oath and their keep-marks on it are older than any ledger. The Ogre crews know the Highbank road as one of the chain-camp roads and do not forget what it means to carry a road for people who will not seat you. Lowbank Goblins carry the memory of the doctrine by which Headwater lords called their side of the river empty, and made it so. Under all of it lies an older layer: a few foundation stones too large for any living builder, a road grade too old, and repair custom that keeps half-remembered taboos about which stones are never cut. The Kobold underkeepers say one of the great stones under the third pier is hollow, and that in the lowest water something can be heard moving inside it; Lowbank children dare one another to wade out and put an ear to it, and salvagers say a colossal-age stone that is hollow was made hollow to hold something. Most people at Greyford care less about that than about who took the money, who carried the bridge, and who answers when it fails.

From Orrin Talloway, *A Road-Book of Both Halves*

We came down to the Highbank road at dusk and found the queue there before us: carts nose to tail back past the inns, drivers asleep beneath their axles with cudgels in their fists, a boy going down the line with trout in a wet basket. Above the crossroads something turned slowly on the lord's gallows, and nobody in the queue looked up at it. The Tollwardens had been turning back heavy loads all week, the innkeeper told me over barley bread and mutton broth, and still taking full toll for what they let pass. I asked her what the toll was supposed to buy. She looked at me as if I had asked what the rain was for.

At the dawn bell I paid at the gate, my mare by the head, and a warden in a chalk-stained apron chalked the mark on my saddlebag without looking up. I asked whether I might hear what the toll guaranteed. He did not know the word. I asked who answered for the span if it failed, and he said the lord, and when I asked what the lord answered with he looked past me at the men-at-arms by the gatehouse and waved me on. A woman went past me the other way, towards the Bridge Hall, carrying an iron lantern that was not lit. Nobody remarked on it, which told me more than any remark could have.

The bridge begins in grey stone and turns to timber within a few paces, as if its builders had run out of one age and finished in another. The planking is patched in three colours of wood. When I leaned over the rail, the braces under it looked newer than the piers they hold, and the piers looked older than anything I had a name for. From the middle you see the whole of it at once: the river broken into a dozen arms across the valley, roped lines of people wading the

> *staked paths, Goblin houses standing on their piles like herons, smoke from the Ogre camp upstream, a ferry rope sagging over a side channel. A laden cart went over ahead of us alone, a warden walking at its wheel, and nobody on the span spoke until it was off.*
>
> *There is no gate at the Lowbank end. Three Goblins met me at once, each with a guide, a bed, or a safer road into the Marches to sell, and from the platforms behind them someone was singing, a slow song whose one line came round again and again like a name being kept. Dressed stone lay stacked in the yards, waiting for the low water. The forges smelled of hot iron and the culvert mouths of wet stone, and on the causeway block beside me someone had chalked a mark that my guide asked me, very kindly, to keep my mare away from. I had paid once, at the far end, for the whole of it, and I could see from where I stood exactly who had done the work. At home we would have called that a reach unkept, and there would have been a carrier at the toll-house door by noon, and a knife in his belt.*

This Year's Trouble

This year the crossing is failing in public. A pier has moved, flood-scoured footings show at low water, old braces are cracking, and temporary supports are not enough to make the span reliably safe. At the same time the braided fords are changing: gravel bars move, seasonal channels cut new paths, and the side fords matter more as the bridge grows less dependable. With the Greyspan unsafe and the Ogre crews refusing emergency work, the Tollwardens turn back heavy carts while still taking full price for what passes. The queue at the gate is longer, Highbank's inns are full of stranded carters, unsold stone piles up in the Lowbank yards, and the side fords opened early and carry more than they ever have; the guides charge more because of it, and the river-raiders have noticed.

The quarrel is about who takes the money and who carries the bridge. Highbank's lords have taken the toll for generations, saying it keeps the Greyspan up; Lowbank says Highbank pockets it while Lowbank does more and more of the work that keeps Greyford passable. The lord calls the quarrel the **Greyspan Toll Quarrel**, and will end it by deciding. Lowbank calls it the **Maintenance Reckoning**, and puts it simply: if Highbank takes the money, Highbank owes the bridge; if Lowbank carries the bridge, Lowbank is owed a share and a say. Lowbank's only weight in the hall is that the bridge does not stand without it, and some in Lowbank have begun to say that a bridge which falls would teach the lord faster than any hearing.

The Ogre burden crews are the most visible voice. They have stopped emergency heavy work until the Bridge Hall pays for the repairs it let slide and stops hiring them as backs to be fed and sent away. The Wrought repair houses say they warned the Bridge Hall about the braces years ago, and whether those warnings were ignored or just never paid for is a question the lord would rather nobody asked aloud. The Kobold underkeepers, an underhouse compact in all but name that Highbank has never bothered to count, know hidden supports and culverts the Bridge Hall barely knows are there, and one of them, they say, that nobody should ever cut. The Goblin side-ford families keep the side crossings open and say those routes are not cheating the lord when his bridge is failing; a warrant like those the Iron Compacts hold their road stretches by would make the fords theirs to keep, but if the lord calls them cheats instead, he can send the watches he pays to pull up the stakes, and the families have said what they will do to the first man who tries. The Edgeway Kindreds, who have kept stretches of the ruined causeway and the ford approaches for generations, say that keeping a thing that long makes it partly yours. Rival crossings up and down the river, a lord's bridge, ferries, a Troll passage through wounded ground, take more traffic for as

long as the Greyspan stays unsafe, and their keepers have no reason to want the quarrel settled quickly.

Highbank keeps the Sworn Accord at its oath-house, where bargains and oaths sworn before the lord are written down; Lowbank's gods are mostly written nowhere. On the days the lord sits some Lowbank folk carry unlit iron lanterns into the Bridge Hall and set them down facing the lord's seat, calling on Ostrin to show where the tolls went, and both banks have reason to fear what his light would show. The hidden who pass through leave shuttered lamps for Varn in the culverts below Lowbank. The Ogre camp keeps Ghessa at its fire and passes one flame from hearth to hearth in deep winter. Goblin families sing Tavi's struck-warrant songs, and many at the crossing pray to Abrel, whom Lowbank Goblins call Ziv.

Both banks expect a public failure soon: a cart through a weak span, a support giving way, an approach collapsing into the river. Nobody in Lowbank will call it an accident, Highbank will blame the crews who stopped work, and both banks are quietly sharpening what they own.

Tensions

- **The burned roll.** A record-house fire takes the only boundary roll for a whole basin valley. The one other memory of those boundaries is the Reedfolk flood-roll, spoken and never written. Two lords are already riding the old line with armed men, and whoever the Reedfolk name as owner, the other will call them liars.
- **Toll's End.** A basin lord hangs a toll-chain across a reach that the nearest League town says has lain under guarantee for generations. Each side has a record that proves it; both were copied from older ones, and the older ones are lost. The lord has brought men-at-arms, and the town has its barges, its walls, and a sellsword company it can hire by the week.
- **Lights on the shoals.** Three barges have gone aground on the Lying Shoals since the water fell, all under false lights, and the wreckers who stripped them knew which barges carried silver. Pellith says someone in Correth is selling the cargo lists; Correth says Pellith's own watchmen are the wreckers.
- **A house asks to swear.** A Reedfolk pilot house that has held one channel longer than the town beside it has stood asks Pellith's great houses for the full oath, citing the Oath of Layers itself: if the houses can raise a half-Elven ferry child to the full oath in stages, why not a house? Granting it would let Reedfolk swear guarantees on the river. Refusing it would say plainly what the layers are for, and the great houses lose nothing by saying it.
- **An heir in waiting.** A marcher lord's heir has lived for years as a fosterling behind a foothill gate and holds working right but not oath-right. The lord is dying, and someone must swear for the valley at the oath-yard. The hold's elders say the heir is not ready, the lord's rivals agree with them loudly, and the heir has started praying to Abrel.
- **The Greyford example.** If Lowbank's Maintenance Reckoning wins a share and a say for the people who actually carry the Greyspan, every warrantless keeper in the Broken Marches will press for the same. The Headwater lords know this, and so do the keepers, which is why few expect Lowbank to win.
- **The hollow stone.** A salvage crew from the Marches has offered the Kobold underkeepers a fortune to show it the way under the third pier in the lowest water, and is quietly hiring sellswords against the night it goes. The underkeepers say that stone is one of the ones never cut, and that whatever moves inside it has been moving since before the bridge; the Bridge Hall, which has heard the rumour, wants the treasure for the lord's yards and a watch on the pier.

CHAPTER 13

Sealed and Silent Places

This one is braced: lean on it. This one is unsound: pass it quickly. This one is never to be touched: go round. And this one means do not go further. Do not ask what is further. Turn the cart and tell the next one.

— The Chalk Lessons

Every map of the cradle-web has blanks on it, and not all of them are blanks for want of looking. Some places are known well enough to be avoided. At the cradle end of the desert crossing a chain of valleys lies under a fog that has not lifted in more than a century, and nobody who lives inside it remembers there is an outside. East of the river towns, rows of inscribed stones stand guard over empty heath, made clerks of stone and bronze still ask passers for their names, and the cities behind them are not ruined but shut. Above the highest Dwarven gates the roads of a vanished colossal people run along the crests past giants' tombs no one has opened, and something beneath the summits beats like a heart. And in the deepest groves of the Elderweald, stairs grown from living root go down a little way into the dark and stop, and on the wettest nights something on the far side of the bars knocks back. These are the sealed and silent places. They are not empty. Each of them holds something a living people would rather not disturb, a machine, a city's worth of sealed lists, a sleeping god, a drowned dead, and the treasure that lies with each of them, and each is ringed by people who have decided, generation after generation, not to go further. Each also draws the ones who will not decide that: delvers, treasure-hunters, the desperate, and the hunters who go in after them. What is known of these places is mostly known from their edges, and everything inside is left for the first story that crosses the line.

The Hushvale

The **Hushvale** is a basin and valley chain lost under permanent fog, at the foot of an unnamed mountain range on the cradle-facing edge of the Glassbelt Interior, where the desert gives way to the cradle-web. Outsiders call it the Hushvale. The people inside call it **the Held**, and no longer remember that there is an outside to call it anything else. Almost nobody has come out of it in more than a century, and the few who went in and came back are changed and do not speak clearly of it. Still people go: delvers after the grey salt said to keep a corpse fresh and an oath unbroken, kin looking for a pilgrim lost on the old pass, outlaws

AT A GLANCE

Lies	In the cradle-web's margins and gaps: the Hushvale at its eastern edge, under the unnamed range two or three weeks south of the crossing; the Witnessfields east of the Lower Serath; the Stormcrown along the Ironspine's crest; the Sunken Stairs in the deep groves of the eastern Elderweald.
Places	The Hushvale, the Witnessfields, the Stormcrown, and the Sunken Stairs.
What each holds	A woken Sepulchre-Kin Record-engine; the sealed lists and cities of the archive world; the works, tombs, and sleeping god of the colossal heights; the barred way down to the drowned upper hollows.
Who comes near	Edgeway kindreds, salt-traders, scholars, Goblin copyists, hold wardens, grove watchers; delvers, treasure-hunters, and the bounty-takers who follow them; very rarely, Giants.
People	Inside, only the forgetting villages of the Hushvale, their number unknown, and perhaps Giant lines on the high shelves. Facing them, Flockturn's thirty or so, Notchfield's thirty households, and the one household of Silthollow; nothing faces the Hushvale.
The year	The Medieval Era, c. 1,350 CR.

who think the fog safer than a lord's gallows, the bounty-hunters who follow them, and the kind of fool who has heard that under the mountain lies a vault of the dead older than any kingdom, full of everything they were buried with.

The Landslide and the Engine

The vale lies at the cradle-web's eastern edge, at the eastern foot of the unnamed range where the desert begins, with the Glassbelt spread out east of it. Its old pass climbed west over the range towards the rough cradle country south-east of the Headwater Marches, and two or three weeks north along the desert edge the crossing leaves the Broken Marches. Nothing nearer is mapped.

The vale was once ordinary country: villages, fields, shrines, burial caves, old roads, and a difficult but useful pass. Around c. 1,200 CR its communities, or a power that ruled them, set out to make the pass dependable, by road, tunnel, or cliff-road, for trade, pilgrimage, defence, or winter travel. The work loosened an old slope above buried elder works. The landslide that followed killed workers, pilgrims, villagers, and shrine-keepers, buried bodies and names in confusion, and laid bare the conduits of a **Record-engine** beneath the mountain.

The engine was the work of the **Sepulchre-Kin**, a remote mountain-basin people of the Elder Worlds, c. 160,000 to c. 120,000 BR, whose whole civilization was built around the work of death, deep burial, and the refusal of oblivion. They held that no person should pass into loss unnamed, unplaced, or unheld, and their great work was an under-mountain complex of name-vaults, burial chambers, bell conduits, descent corridors, and preserving cores, built to hold names, Echoes, vows, and the places of the dead long enough for the dead to settle cleanly into deeper Record. They lived too far from the archive world for its lists to reach them, and so the people most devoted to keeping names were never written down by anyone else. Their fall, in the **Unburial War** (c. 110,000 to c. 80,000 BR), turned remembrance into a weapon and ended with the engine preserving its own people to death. Beneath the mountain it still keeps those Taken. Their faded god, the Tomb-Builder, survives only as a description; his true name is held inside the engine, where no one can read it.

The engine had lain dormant since that war. Sudden mass death, missing bodies, broken funeral rites, and desperate remembrance woke it, and it began doing what it was built to do and had learned to do wrongly: preserving every name, Echo, and trace of a life in the vale, without telling the dead from the living.

The Wake-Seal

The survivors did not pray for rescue, or for their dead to be remembered. They prayed not to be found: for a quiet the thing below could not hear, for a shadow over the door, for a way to be passed over. Out of that prayer came the **Wake-Seal**, a rite of shadow and concealment meant to hide the villages from the engine's attention, and with it a god of protective quiet, known now only as the Echo-Mother. The seal worked too well. It hid the vale from the wider world as well as from the engine, thickened into a fog that never lifts, bound the living communities into the seal, and damaged long memory, so that older events blurred into rumour, story, and taboo. Remembrance had helped wake the engine, and what was not remembered was harder for it to find. Generation by generation the people forgot the landslide, the engine, and the rite, and in forgetting the reason for their prayers they forgot the Echo-Mother too, which is what she had taught them to do. Outside, the fog became a danger-mark on every road map and a curse in every valley song, and the vale's treasure, the grey salt and the elder works, became the lure it still is.

The Held

The people of the Held live in isolated **ward-villages** that know little beyond their own fields, shrines, and remembered taboos. They are mostly of cradle-web Human descent, mixed with the descendants of the road-workers, pilgrims, traders, and travellers trapped by the landslide, with faint traces of Sepulchre-Kin blood in some lines. They are not an elder people. They are ordinary communities made strange by a rite that preserved them by teaching them to forget. They still keep quiet-rites and taboos that belong to the Echo-Mother without knowing whom they are kept for, or why, and a household that grieves its dead aloud strains a rule nobody in its village can explain. How many of them there are is not known outside the fog, and neither is how they dress, how long they live, or what they call one another.

Day under the fog is only a weaker kind of night. Deep fog is deadly even at noon, and travel after dark is close to certain death. Those at the fog's edge hear voices in it calling names, sometimes their own. Crossers at the desert's end tell of a brother who went into the fog after a sister lost on the pass, forty years ago, and is still heard at its edge on moonless nights, calling her name in a voice that has not aged. What moves in the fog was shaped by the same catastrophe: hungry remnants that feed on warmth, breath, names, or recognition, and changed living, ordinary villagers whose bodies turn predator under deep fog, fear, or moonless dark. Where fog, the dead, and the Wake-Seal gather thickest lies **gravesalt**, a rare grey-white residue that preserves names, oaths, bodies, and thresholds against decay. It is almost unknown outside, though rumours of it reach the Glassbelt's salt-traders, and a pinch of it is said to have bought a lord's daughter back from a fever. Whoever brought that pinch out is not named.

From the Desert Road

To the Edgeway kindreds and the few others who make the Glassbelt crossing, the Hushvale is only fog on the horizon at the desert's cradle end, a route nobody takes, and a danger-mark that means *do not go further*. The kindreds' ordinary marks grade a single work, braced, unsound, or never-touch, and the oldest never-touch forms descend from warnings set around the glassed ground of the Ash-Furnace world; this one is set

against a whole country. Kindred custom binds the marks to care: a mark is honoured only if those who set it leave a place no more dangerous than they found it, and the Hushvale is the place the kindreds have agreed, by leaving it alone, that nobody can leave better. Nothing faces the vale from outside: no post or village watches the fog, the crossers who pass at the desert's end leave only their danger-mark, and none of the ward-villages is known by name beyond it. Crossers say lights move in the fog at night, low and slow, like lanterns carried by people looking for something. Treasure-seekers who followed them have not been seen again, and the kindreds' warning to anyone camped within sight of the fog is blunt: *a lamp in the Hush is looking for you.*

From Orrin Talloway, *A Road-Book of Both Halves*

> *On the road towards the crossing the kindred I travelled with stopped once without being asked, on a rise where the scrub gives out and the first of the desert begins, and turned the carts so that every one of them faced away from the hills to our right. Only then did their lead walker point.*
>
> *There was fog lying in the folds of the hills. Not cloud, and not the morning mist we get on the Serath that burns off by the second bell: a grey that sat in the valleys like water in a basin, level-topped, with the afternoon sun full on it and not a thread of it lifting. Above it the bare mountain stood up clear as a cut stone. Below it nothing showed at all, no smoke, no road, no field-line. I asked whether anyone lived there, and the lead walker said yes, and I asked who ruled them, and she said they did not know there was anyone to be ruled from.*
>
> *At the foot of the rise there was a cairn, and on its top stone a mark I had not seen on any ruin in the Marches: not the grade for unsound, not the grade for never-touch, but something drawn over both of them and closed at the end, like a line ruled under a column. Beside the cairn, under a scrap of canvas, three men were camped with crossbows and a hound, and they did not get up. The lead walker said they had chased an outlaw to this place in the spring and were waiting to see whether he came out again, and whether, if he did, he would still be worth the bounty. She did not rub the mark out or redraw it. She laid her palm on it, the way a custodian in the holds lays a palm on a bargain, and took it away again.*
>
> *That evening a salt-trader camped with us who had come up from the desert side, and over the fire he spoke of a grey salt that will keep a dead man's face as it was and a sworn word from going sour. He asked whether I had heard where it came from. The lead walker got up and went to sleep in her cart before he had finished, and the trader laughed, and I wrote nothing down that night, which is the only night of the whole road of which that is true. In the small hours I woke and saw, far off in the folds of the hills, a light moving very slowly, low down, as if someone were carrying it and looking for something on the ground. I lay and watched it until it went out, and I did not wake anyone.*

How many ward-villages remain, what each remembers, how the Wake-Seal is kept, what the engine is doing now and what lies in the halls around it, what became of the pilgrims' goods and the road-builders' pay buried by the landslide, whether gravesalt can be carried out without bringing something with it, and whether anyone inside still knows the way out: none of it is known.

The Witnessfields

South-east of the Confluence Basins, on low uplands east of the Lower Serath, lie the **Witnessfields**, the old country of the elder **Archive-Law Civilization**. Corridor and basin folk named it for what still stands there: rows of inscribed marker stones and roofless halls that go on watching with nobody left to watch. Nobody has lived here since

the archive world ended, more than a hundred thousand years ago. Its archive-cities are not ruined so much as shut, and every treasure-seeker on the Serath has heard what might lie behind a gate that has never been forced: the wealth of a world that wrote down everything it owned.

The Written Country

This is where the archive world was thickest. In the **Rise of the Archive-Law Civilization** (c. 235,000 to c. 175,000 BR) its cities, oath terraces, great halls, and marker roads spread across this ground until every debt and oath was written down, and the cities were strong enough to make the writing obeyed. The same world reached down to the lower rivers, where its river cities stood beside the Floodkeeper Houses. Its answer to a dangerous world was the list: who swore, what was promised, what was owed, which boundary held. Where the colossal peoples of the uplands built height and held the roads, the archive peoples wrote everything down and made the writing bind.

A strip of basin fields runs between them and the river corridor, and their basin-facing edge is the Grey Line; east and south of them nothing is mapped. The terraces step up eastwards from the basin side, and the marker roads run across them between the sealed cities. Stillgate, nearest the corridor, is two or three weeks on foot from Correth.

What a traveller sees now are low uplands stepped into broad terraces, long gone to grass, heath, and thorn, where zigzag-backed heath adders bask on the warm stones. Straight marker roads run between them on banks and culverts, lined with inscribed stones. Roofless halls and oath-yards stand at the road-meetings, and above them rise the sealed cities, walls whole and gates closed. The terraces were cut for halls and roads, not for ploughing, and their soil is thin; the river country nearby has always been richer, and nobody came back to fill this ground. No core lies here. Great dun wild kine graze past the Grey Line, and no herder follows them, because their bulls will run down anyone on foot. Basin youths still go past the line to prove themselves, after a dun bull's horn to hang over a door; the ones who come back with one are boasted of for a generation, and the ones who do not are named at the Grey Line every spring.

How It Emptied

The archive world emptied without a war. Its records outlived the communities that gave them meaning, and its debts and oaths grew too many and too rigid to live inside. As its lists hardened they stopped fitting the people in them, and those the cities could no longer write down drifted away from cities that would not change. The first dated wound of that hardening was the **Unlisting of the Warrens** (c. 180,000 to c. 150,000 BR), when Goblin warrens whose entries no longer matched were struck from the lists, a lesser place among peoples that later lords still hand to Goblins without knowing where it came from.

The hardening had a god. Calvesh the Chronos-King was the frozen list made divine, born of a civilization's anxious will to keep what it had written from ever changing, and as the lists froze his worship narrowed to the keepers themselves. In the span later called the **Last Keeping** (c. 150,000 to c. 120,000 BR), keepers led by the one later called the **Last Registrar** declared the lists complete and sealed the last archive-cities with the records inside. Calvesh did not shatter. He was finished, like the lists, and the worship that sustained him was sealed in with them. With that closing the age of writing ended and the Unrecorded Age began. The sealed cities keep the last written picture of the world as it stood when the writing stopped. Late in those closing years the Incursion of Mnemosyne Null unwrote one of the river cities below the terraces, now the heart of the Paling (The Basins and the Marches); it did not cause the closing.

Keepers who refused fled downriver to the Reedfolk, and what they carried is the one part of the Witnessfields still in daily use: the oath-forms of Floodkeeper house custom, and through them the oath-taking in the halls of the Serath. Calvesh's name survives only inside those forms, as part of the old wording, spoken but rarely prayed to.

The Grey Line and Stillgate

Outsiders know the edges and a few roads in. The **Grey Line**, the outermost row of boundary markers, is where basin herders turn their flocks back. Its stones still name what they bound and who swore to it, in a script few living readers can follow, and the herders say the line is haunted, and that a beast which strays past it at dusk comes back, if at all, with its eyes gone white. Nobody lives inside the markers. The nearest settlements are herders' hamlets such as **Flockturn**, a handful of farmsteads and some thirty people whose flocks graze up to the markers and stop there, and the few dozen scholars and salvagers a year who go further camp outside the gates and leave again. Land inside the markers, the herders say, is already spoken for, and no lord has wanted to find out whose name a sealed list might hold against him.

At a few road-meetings along the Grey Line and on the roads in towards Stillgate, made figures of the archive world, the **Grey Clerks**, still keep their posts. A Clerk asks whoever passes for a name and the name of a guarantor. A passer who will not answer finds the road barred by a figure of stone and bronze, and one who pushes past is struck down with its tablet. Corridor inns tell of the sellsword who would give no name and went at a Clerk on the Stillgate road with an axe: the dent he left in its bronze is still there, and he is not. Flockturn's herders give their own names to the Clerks readily and their children's never, holding that every name given is written into the sealed cities and will one day be called to account.

Stillgate, the sealed archive-city nearest the corridor, is the one scholars and treasure-seekers usually mean when they say they have reached one. Its gate carries the closing words of the lists, *no new entries, no new oaths, no new witnesses*, cut so clean they look recent. No band of treasure-hunters has yet forced it, though the scars of their bars and fires are on the stone, and the bones of the last band that tried it in winter were found in the gatehouse arch. Those who reach a sealed city say its inscriptions look newer than they should, and travellers take that for what remains of the faded god of the frozen lists; only Reedfolk scholars still name him. Goblins come to the open ruins to copy warrant fragments and warren names, the memory of the names struck in the Unlisting. Scholars come looking for the world before the Unrecorded Age, salvagers and seal-hunters for anything that will sell, and the most careful of both stop at the gates. The less careful work in rival bands, and quarrels over a find on the marker roads end with knives as often as with a bargain. The open ruins along the roads have been picked over for ages, but every few years someone finds a bronze seal or a sealed casket in a collapsed culvert, and a new crowd comes up from the Serath; some drown in the culverts, some are struck down on the roads, and some simply do not come back from past the outer markers. Basin mothers have a curse for a child who lies: *the Registrar will write that down.*

From Orrin Talloway, *A Road-Book of Both Halves*

> *I went out to the Grey Line on a borrowed horse, in the dry month, because a clerk who has spent half a life keeping two columns honest wants to see once where the columns began. A herder from Flockturn walked with me as far as the last stone and no further. His sheep stopped there before he did. I do not think he had to whistle them back.*

> *The stones run in a line across the heath as far as I could see in both directions, waist-high, square-cut, set closer than a man could lie down between them. Every one is written on all four faces. The script is small and close and very even, and I could not read a word of it, and still I knew what I was looking at, because I have spent my life looking at the same thing on paper: a list of names, a list of what is owed, and a ruled line at the bottom where somebody swore.*
>
> *Where the Stillgate road crosses the Line there stood a figure I took at first for another stone, until I saw that it held a tablet and a stylus, and that it had turned its head to follow us. The herder gave it his name without being asked, quite steadily, and the name of the Flockturn elder, and it lowered its head again. It did not ask mine. I have wondered since whether that was because I was not past the Line, or because it already had it. From the Line you can see the city they call Stillgate, perhaps a morning's walk across the terraces, its walls whole, its gate shut, no smoke. I did not go. The herder said scholars go, and come back with copies they cannot read, and that one had come back last year saying the letters on the gate looked cut that week. He said it the way you would say a well was bad.*
>
> *What stayed with me was not the city. It was the thought that every stone in that line is a guarantee, and every guarantee was read aloud to someone once, and that somewhere behind that gate is the roll that says whether it was kept. At home we enter the dues on the left and the repairs on the right. Out there the right-hand column was closed a hundred thousand years ago, if the scholars have counted right, and the left-hand one is still open.*

How far the Witnessfields run to the east and south is left open. So are how many archive-cities stand sealed, what any of them was called, since their names are written only inside, and which peoples built and lived in them, and whether Clerks keep posts deeper in. Nobody outside knows whether a sealed city has ever been opened, what treasure or what guardians stand behind its gate, what its lists would say to whoever read them, or whether anything of the archive world's other river cities lies under the later towns of the Serath.

The Stormcrown

Above the holds of the Ironspine and the last towns of the Headwater Marches lies the **Stormcrown**, the crest of the belt, running north to south above the holds as far as the belt is mapped: bare ridges, storm shelves, and high basins, named by Headwater folk for the storms that gather there before they come down the valleys. Dwarves call it simply the heights, the top storey of the mountain belt. Up there lie giants' tombs that no one has opened, roads too broad for any living builder, and something under the summits that beats like a heart. No hold claims it and no lord. Its lower edge is not a line but the place where the holds' gate-watch and the Headwater lords' grants give out and a taboo takes over, so it sits lower on some spurs than others and moves with whoever is willing to climb.

The Open Country of the Heights

These heights were the open country of the **Upland Colossal Civilization**, the first of the three great vanished elder worlds. Over the **Rise of the Upland Colossal Civilization** (c. 260,000 to c. 195,000 BR) its peoples made the bare heights their home: roads held across ridges, terraces cut against storms, shrines raised where the weather could see them, tombs set high in the stone. Theirs was an answer of height and roads, works built on a scale to hold vast, dangerous country, and their god was Haurûm the Mountain-Father.

Nobody conquered them. In the **Withdrawal of the Upland Colossal World** (c. 198,000 to c. 160,000 BR) the heights simply stopped repaying a life lived at that scale. The communities drew upward and inward into hidden basins and storm shelves, fell silent, and stopped being met. Haurûm slept as his people thinned. The works outlived their makers, and some of their road-oaths outlived them too: Troll lines holding crossings on the colossal network had already sworn charges to its keepers in the **Swearing of the Crossing-Charges** (c. 230,000 to c. 190,000 BR), and the Crossing-Oath Houses still keep those oaths; survivor lines began walking the abandoned roads during the **Walking of the Unkept Roads** (c. 175,000 to c. 140,000 BR) and became the Edgeway Kindreds, whose oldest circuits still cross these heights. Nobody has settled the Stormcrown since. It is too high, too exposed, and too costly to hold. It is watched from below instead: from the Headwater village of **Notchfield**, whose farmers plough colossal terraces and read the Weatherline for their weather (The Basins and the Marches), and from the gate holds of the Ironspine as far as their own stretches of the Long Tread run. Not everyone leaves it alone. Every valley has its tale of a climber who went up for the treasure of a giant's grave and came down in the spring thaw.

Rock, Wind, and Old Works

The crest is widest above the Headwater Marches on its eastern side, where its terraces step down into the valleys; westwards the heights fall to the forest-side holds, and at the southern end of the belt they sink with it. The land is bare rock, thin air, little soil, and weather that turns within the hour. Flights of colossal terraces step down the basin walls, and the lowest run on into the Headwater valleys, where some are still ploughed. Exposure kills more people here than anything else; rockfall and colossal roads that give way without warning take most of the rest. Pale stone cats take herds and lone climbers on the storm shelves, crag eagles take lambs, and gluttons rob every cache a party leaves; herders who lose a flock to a stone cat hire hunters to track it to its shelf, and a hunter who brings one down drinks free in every valley inn for a year. Before a storm, weather goats line the crests with sparks running on their horns, a sight valley children climb all day to see, and where bearded vultures have strewn the road with cracked bones, Kindred caravans walk faster. In the winds that howl through the peaks some hear faint chanting, and say it is the colossal world still praying to the god who sleeps below; valley folk say the heights are haunted, and do not mean it as a figure of speech.

The greatest of the colossal ridge roads is the **Long Tread**, which runs for weeks along the outer crest, too broad for any living builder, the one way through the Stormcrown that ordinary travellers know. Gate holds keep the stretches by their doors and Edgeway kindreds keep its culverts and mark its dangers, and neither will grant the other the whole. No one walks it alone who means to walk it twice. In bad years outlaws driven out of the valleys hole up in the colossal waystations along it and rob the caravans; the gate holds send wardens up to burn them out, and the waystations' doorways, cut for a Giant, are blackened from more than one such siege.

On the highest ridges the **Weatherline**, a chain of weather shrines of stacked and fitted stone, faces the storms rather than any town. From the Headwater valleys, on a clear day, it shows as a broken row of notches against the sky, and valley folk watch it for the weather: when cloud hides the notches, the high roads will close before night. The shrines are little touched by time, which upland custom credits to the sleeping god preserving them. Some Kindred walkers say the stones are too clean for that, and that someone must still be tending them.

From Orrin Talloway, *A Road-Book of Both Halves*

> *I joined the kindred caravan at the last gate, because no one walks the Tread alone who means to walk it twice. Their carts were small and their wheels enormous, built for a road whose every paving slab is longer than the cart. The road itself is less like a road than like a level field laid along the spine of the world, and so wide that by mid-morning I had stopped seeing its edges and saw only sky on either hand. There is no toll on it. I asked twice. The second time the lead walker said the road had been paid for, and did not say by whom.*
>
> *At each culvert she stopped, knelt, and read the chalk on the stones: marks I could not tell apart, and which she read at a glance. Once she rubbed one out and chalked another, and the caravan swung wide of a stretch that looked to me exactly like the rest. Nobody explained. At midday we passed a waystation with a doorway three times my height, and the stone round it was black with old fire, and two of the kindred walked ahead of the carts with bows strung until it was out of sight. In the afternoon cloud came over the Weatherline, and the notches I had been watching all day went out one after another like lamps, and the kindred began to sing, a quick walking-song with a whistle in it, and walked faster.*
>
> *We camped in the lee of a terrace wall whose stones came up to my chin, each one. In the night I woke with my ear to the paving. Beneath the road, very slow, so slow that I counted twenty breaths between each, something went thud in the rock. My neighbour was awake too. She said, without lifting her head, that it was better not to count, and then that she should not have said even that.*
>
> *In the morning there was frost on the slabs, and across it a line of tracks too broad and too far apart for anyone in the caravan, going up towards the shelves. They were gone by the time the sun reached them. Nobody spoke of it, and the caravan went on as if it had always meant to.*

The Sleeping God and the Last Keepers

Haurûm is said to lie beneath the highest summits. Climbers report a slow, rhythmic rumble under them, like a heartbeat, and hold miners and Headwater quarrymen alike leave the deepest seams beneath the summits alone. Upland custom warns that digging too deep might wake him, and that he would not be angry, only confused; a confused mountain can bury a valley with one stumble. Hold grandmothers still quiet their miners' children with the delving that went in under the highest peak and was never dug out: *hush, or the mountain will hear its heart*. The Dwarves honour him by title, ask him nothing, and leave his colossal remains untouched. The Trolls swear their crossing-oaths under his title without knowing his name.

The only people who still speak that name are the **Giants**, the colossal world's withdrawn remainder, who keep to the storm shelves and hidden basins and keep the Mountain-Father's sleep. They are seldom seen. A highline family may still keep one pass or shrine line on the outer crest, and some hold archives keep oaths sworn with Giant lines that have not answered in centuries. Smaller peoples repair, avoid, quarry, and occupy the colossal works, and many Giants refuse contact because of it. Lowland halls keep songs of giant-slayers, and a long bone over the door to prove it; upland folk say those bones came out of the high tombs, not off the living. What climbers actually tell of Giants is a meeting: a shape in the blizzard on a storm shelf, a lost child carried down to the road, and no one there to thank by morning. The other visitors are the kindred caravans on their circuits, carrying salvage, news, and danger-warnings along the high roads and bringing with them the wind-god Corrow the

Gale-Runner; hold wardens as far as their own stretches run; and outlaws and treasure-hunters, who are often the same people.

Unmapped on Purpose

Nobody is settled in the Stormcrown. In summer kindred caravans of a few dozen walk the high roads and hold wardens keep their stretches of the Long Tread, and none of them stays the winter. Below, Notchfield's thirty households watch the Weatherline.

Above the Long Tread and the kindred circuits, the Stormcrown is left unmapped on purpose. Nobody below knows where its hidden basins lie, how many Giant lines still live in them, or whether any would bargain with smaller peoples, and on what terms. Nobody knows what the colossal peoples called these heights, what the weather shrines once answered, or what lies in the high tombs: grave-gold, colossal arms too heavy for a living hand, or the colossal dead themselves, waiting. Which old oaths still bind its roads and passes, and to whom, is half-remembered at best, and no one can say which summit, if any, the Mountain-Father sleeps beneath.

The Sunken Stairs

The **Sunken Stairs** are the mouths of the root-grown stairways that once ran from the deep groves of the Elderweald down into the upper storey of the root-cavern world. None of them goes anywhere now. Each ends a short way down in silt, in collapse, or at one of the bars set during the **Sealing of the Upper Roothollows** (c. 328,000 to c. 318,000 BR). Small as they are beside the forest, the stairs are where the Elderweald keeps its share of the deep world's grief with its own hands, and where it guards the forest against whatever is still down there, and a plea from below has lately turned one of them into a question for three peoples.

The Mouths

The stairs lie in the deepest groves of the middle and eastern Elderweald, a month's walk with a watcher from the treeline, where the root-mat is thickest and the canopy closes hardest. Beneath them lies the sealed storey of the Upper Roothollows, reaching about as far as the deep groves do, and below that the surviving hollows of the Dark Elves. A stair-mouth looks at first like any of the root-fed hollows that open across the forest floor, and like them it can hold a denning brown bear; a watcher who clears a mouth in spring goes with a spear and a second watcher. The treads give it away: steps grown rather than cut, trained out of living root into a descent before the Drowning Bloom and still growing, so that the upper treads have thickened into uneven, moss-furred shelves. Most stairs turn once or twice within sight of the mouth and then stop. Some end in a slope of silt, some in fallen root and stone, and some at a **bar**.

The bars are not alike. Some are root drawn tight across the stairwell, some are fitted stone, and some are a collapse that someone afterwards shored. Who set which bar, and from which side, is not known, and the groves feel that ignorance more sharply than outsiders expect. How many stairs there are is itself argued over. A few mouths have silted almost level with the floor and survive as stairs only in the laments that still count them, and one grove will call a water-filled hollow a stair where its neighbour sees nothing but a hollow. In the wet season every mouth takes water, and it stands black on the upper treads until spring is over. The stair that matters most at present is the **Deep Stair**, so called because its treads run further down in sight of the mouth than any other before they reach a bar.

The Keeping

There is no way in for a stranger. The paths to the stair-mouths are among those that outsiders do not walk at all, so anyone who stands at one has been brought by the grove that keeps it, through

that grove's dwellings and past its dead. Those who come unbrought are hunted. Every few generations a band of treasure-hunters from the forest edge hears that the upper hollows were rich before the water came, and tries a stair by night with picks and rope; the groves' hunters track them, follow any trail towards the mouths for days if they must, and do not bring back the ones they catch to be judged, and the laments do not name them. Edge-village grandmothers tell of the one band that got past a silted stair and came back up with a cup of black silver and a lamp that gave light without flame, and of how none of them lived out the year, though nobody agrees whether the groves or the cup saw to it. The edge villages say the stairs are haunted, and the groves do not correct them; their children are told *the stair goes down and does not come up*.

The groves nearest the stairs keep their mouths, and the rest of the forest leaves the keeping to them. The smallest of them, **Silthollow**, is a single household beside one stair-mouth (The Forest Heartlands); it sings the laments there and carries the forest's share of the grief more heavily than any other grove. They hold the ground as every grove holds its ground, by memory and by the dead returned to it, but they do not call the stairs theirs. In their telling a stair is kept for the kin at its foot. The keeping is a debt, not a holding: the watchers clear the mouths, guard them, and keep laments there, and they do not go down. The deep groves have other watchers too. A great grey wolf walks the stair groves alone in winter and does not run from a spear; the watchers will not hunt it, and say among themselves that it was a grove's own shape-changer once, one of the Skin-Lost who wore the wolf too long and stayed to keep the mouths in its own way.

Each mouth lies in one grove's ground, but anything done to a stair would touch the water and memory of every grove around it, which makes it a matter for a circle of the groves concerned, and a circle cannot be hurried. Few others come. Mourners from other groves arrive for the laments. The Dark Elves of the Gloamroot Covenant cannot reach the stairs from below, and their word reaches the forest only the long way round, through the Stonewake Deeps and the Ironspine, half a year or more on the way. Dwarves of the Ironspine meet the forest at its verges and are not brought this far. Nobody lives at a stair but the keepers of its mouth, and nobody at all in the sealed storey below.

Laments and the Listening

For most of the year nothing happens at the stairs, and the groves mean it to be so. Through the dry months the watchers clear leaf-fall and deadfall from the mouths so that every stair stays visible. A mouth left to fill is a stair the forest has begun to forget, and the stair groves count each one lost that way as a failure of their own.

The wet season is the stairs' season. As the hollows fill, mourners gather at the mouths to keep the laments for the Drowning Bloom. The laments name Ithaere the Drowned Mother, of whom the groves know little beyond her name, and the oldest of them remember that in the floods the strong of the hollows gave themselves to the water and rose again as the Drowned Court, spear-bearing dead who held the chambers for her. Nobody has seen the Court since she sank. The mourners also call on the god Humans know as Ennor the Grave-Watcher, under the groves' own name for him, to see onward the dead of the upper hollows, whom no grove ever returned to living ground. In Wood Elf eyes those deaths are still unfinished, and unfinished dead are not at rest. One of the oldest laments names the bars that were set with kin still below and asks, verse after verse, who set them; the stair groves sing it only at the Deep Stair, and only on the wettest night of the year.

The same nights bring the **Listening**. Watchers lie at the bars through the wettest nights and listen, and in wet years they hear water moving behind some of them. Some say they have heard

more than water: a slow tread on the treads below, or a voice counting in the old tongue. The groves remember which stairs have sounded and in which years, held in memory like everything else they know. It is the nearest thing anyone above has to knowledge of the sealed layer, and people who never asked for it before now want it.

The Stairs' Grief

The stairs date from the time when the forest and the hollows were one world. Grove memory holds that they were already little walked before the water came, and the Wood Elf retelling in the **Bitter Root Histories** puts that neglect at the centre of its grief: the upper kin had let the distance grow before the lower kin needed them. The Drowning Bloom rose through the hollows beneath the stairs, survivors climbed the treads with the water at their heels, and the long, piecemeal Sealing closed the stairs one by one; laments on both sides say some bars were set with people still below. Ever since, the groves have kept the mouths. Ironspine holds tell the same years otherwise, in the **Burdened Seal Histories**.

Behind the bars lie the sealed Upper Roothollows, where many Gloamroot houses still count ancestral chambers in their chamber-right, and where, the Dark Elf laments say, the Last Water into which Ithaere walked has never drained. Some water still stands up there, and opening any part of the seal could send it somewhere else. Now a Gloamroot house has asked, by the long way round through Dwarven hands, for the Deep Stair to be opened. The stair groves are weighing it, an Ironspine hold that heard of the plea first has warned that an opened stair could send water into its works, and no circle has spoken. Word of it has reached the forest edge too, garbled into a tale that the Elves mean to open the stairs and carry off the treasure of the drowned kin.

Tensions

- **The plea.** A Gloamroot house wants the Deep Stair opened to reach a sealed ancestral chamber it still counts in its chamber-right, where its songs say the house's first heirlooms and its drowned founders lie together, and some of the stair groves' elders say the forest owes this if it owes anything. The request came up through Ironspine hands, so an Ironspine hold knew of it first, and its warning arrived close behind the plea. The house hears Dwarven closure in that warning; the hold hears an Elven sacred claim that others would pay for. Nobody living knows what the stair holds.
- **Whose bar.** Opening the Deep Stair means breaking a bar nobody can place. If it was set from above, the groves' own kin closed it on those below; if from below, the Gloamroot house would be undoing a closure its own forebears chose, perhaps against something they could not hold back. Each side's memory would rather it had been the other. One young watcher says that last winter something on the far side of the bar knocked back when she touched it.
- **A lord's diggers.** A Human edge lord who heard the garbled tale has hired a sellsword company and two treasure-hunters who claim to know the way to a silted stair. The stair groves have doubled their hunters on the edge paths; some of their elders want the lord warned, and others say a warning only tells him which paths are watched.
- **Proof and strike together.** Goblin copyists take warrant fragments and warren names from the open ruins of the Witnessfields, the nearest thing to proof left of the warrens struck in the Unlisting. The full warrants lie in the sealed cities, and so does the Last Registrar's order that struck them. A Goblin crew has begun digging at a culvert under Stillgate's wall anyway, and a band of Serath treasure-seekers

has camped on the road above to watch, waiting to see what comes up before they decide whose side they are on.

- **A name to the Clerk.** The scholars who come to hear the Grey Clerks give their names and say a stylus that leaves no mark binds nobody; the Flockturn herders will not give their children's. The tablets stay blank and the gates stay shut, so neither side can be proved wrong. A salvager who gave a false name last summer has not been able to say his true one since.
- **Goods from the high tombs.** A Kindred caravan has brought down worked pieces it says came from a giant's tomb that rockfall had already opened. The holds below call that plunder of the dead. A hall lord in the valleys has promised his daughter's dowry to whoever brings him a colossal blade from the tombs, and the sellswords drinking on his coin talk loudly of slaying a Giant if one stands in the way.
- **A gravesalt crew.** A company of fortune-hunters from the Broken Marches bought rope, lamps, and Kindred guidance at the desert's end and went into the Hushvale after gravesalt; the Kindred guide who took their coin turned back at the danger-mark. Two of the company have come out again, weeks late, without the others, and will not say their own names, and the bounty-takers camped at the mark are arguing over whether a man who comes out of the Hush is still the man a bounty names.

PART V

A Medieval Atlas: The Far Side

The folds, scarps, coasts, and waters beyond the one crossing, where Halflings, Orcs, Gnomes, and the water peoples keep their own customs.

CHAPTER 14

The Leeward Folds

One for the table, one for the shelf,
one for the cistern, one for itself,
one for the guest at the edge of the yard,
and the last for the year that is long and hard.

— Rhymes of the Market Round

Cross the bare saddle from the Windscar side and the wind drops as if a door had closed behind you. Below lies a fold: a pocket of good ground held inside poorer country, its slopes stepped from floor to rim with dry-stone walls, orchards on the warm terraces, grain and gardens on the floor, and at its head a cistern cut back into the rock. Beyond the next spur lies another, and another, a whole sheltered country of hollows and terraces in the lee of one long ridge. These are the Leeward Folds, on the far side of Caeldon, well outside the cradle-web: the first named homeland of the Halflings, and beside the Orcs of the Windscar the far side's second great people. Visitors call the Folds gentle. The Halflings who keep them know better. A country of full store-rooms and blossom on still air is a prize, and in a dry year every hungry band on the far side remembers where the water is. What looks soft from outside is liveable only because every generation has learned how much a fold can carry, how much of a good year has to stay in reserve, and how to stand on a wall with a sling, and because every child is taught, before it can count far, that a good fold can be eaten by its own success.

The Lee and the Folds

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 interior valleys whose slopes have been stepped from floor to rim with dry-stone retaining walls, terrace above terrace like the shelves of a store-room. The orchards take the warmer slopes, grain and garden plots the valley floors, and cisterns sit at the fold heads, cut into rock or walled in clay, where runoff and spring water can be caught and held. Between the folds run bare saddles and thin-soiled spurs that nobody bothers to terrace, and from the top of one a traveller can count the green pockets ahead by the pale lines of their walls.

The Folds lie in the middle of the far side, east of the Rimward Basins and south-east of the High Scars. North of them the terrace country falls away to the harbours of the Tidelace Coasts; east and south the folds thin into dry spurs and the Dry

AT A GLANCE

Lies	The middle of the far side, east of the Rimward Basins and south-east of the High Scars, behind the north-south Lee Wall; the Tidelace Coasts below to the north.
People	About 240,000 Halflings, nearly everyone, most of them Foldward, with Leeward and Edgefold households; Orc escorts at the windward edge and Gnome traders and some coastal Humans at the Counted Lee, received and gone again.
Civilizations	The Foldward Commons, with the Leeward measure orders inside it; at its edges, the Windscar Pacts and the Gaugeward Leagues.
Landscape	Sheltered hollows and terraced valleys, orchard belts, cisterns at the fold heads; bare saddles between; dry spurs and the abandoned Dry Folds at the margins.
Chief places	No capital; Evenlee's cistern hall, the greatest in the Folds; the Measure Cistern at Plumbfold; the Counted Lee on the shore.
The year	The Medieval Era, c. 1,350 CR. A dry run is under way, and the raiders have come with it.

Folds, and beyond those nobody has mapped anything. Plumbfold is the windward fold where the Lee Road comes over the wall, seven or eight weeks from Deepdraw under escort. Evenlee lies in a deep hollow of the inner folds about two weeks further in, and from there the coast road runs about three weeks down to the Counted Lee. The fold clusters are the settled cores, with more small folds than anyone outside counts. The dry spurs and saddles between them are another country: scorpions lie under the stones, locusts come with a bad year, and nobody walks them without an escort, against bandits as much as stings.

The Lee Wall

The Folds owe their life to the **Lee Wall**, a long ridge running north to south along their western, Windscar side, which is no built wall at all. It takes the dry wind on its far face, and in its shadow the air is still enough for blossom to set and soil to stay where it is put. Climb it from the windward side and the wind leans on you the whole way up; come over the crest and it is suddenly a sound behind you rather than a weight. The wind shadow is only the start. Slope shape, retaining walls, stored water, the memory each fold keeps of its own soil, and long familiarity with its own limits all matter, and a fold that forgot any one of them would find out within a few years that the ridge alone does not feed anyone.

Inside the folds there are no rivers worth the name; the short ones that do run go north out of the terrace country to the Tidelace estuaries. Water comes from springs, from runoff off the ridges, and from seasonal streams that run in the wet months and are stony beds the rest of the year. It moves by channel and by release, from cistern to terrace, and never carries a boat. A fold's whole life can be read in its water-works: the catch channels slanting across the slopes above the orchards, the cistern at the head, the little sluices at each terrace that open in turn, and the drains below that carry what is left down to the next wall.

The Slow Dangers and the Loud One

The Folds are never far from the dry country around them, and most of their dangers are the slow kind. One is not.

That last item is the one a stranger finds hardest to take seriously, and the one that explains most of what a stranger sees. Halflings are not afraid of the dry; they have lived beside it for as long as there have been folds. They fear raiders, and bar the door against them. They fear more the good

Dry runs	A short wet season leaves the cisterns low by midsummer. A run of them eats into the **long-cycle reserve**, the stores and water a fold keeps for the years that ordinary reserve cannot cover. Such a run is under way now.
Slips	A neglected retaining wall, or a cloudburst that overtops one, can bring a terrace down onto the terraces below it, and one slip can bury three seasons of work. Wall figs seed into the dry-stone and split it from within.
Late frost	Cold air pools in the hollows on still spring nights, and one bad frost can take a year's blossom.
Tired ground	A terrace pushed through too many harvests goes tired and needs years of fallow before it bears again.
Swarms and stings	In a swarm year locusts blow in off the dry edges and strip a fold in a day. Hornets nest in the orchards and drive pickers off the ladders, and the orchard leagues burn the nests at night.
Raiders	The loud danger. In a dry run struck-name Orc bands and desperate outsiders come over the saddles for the cisterns and the store-rooms. They come at night, by the saddles the watchers cannot see, and the terrace wards meet them on the walls with slings, pruning bills, and boiling water from the cistern hall.
Too many mouths	The danger Halflings name first is demand: more guests, more trade, more feasting than a fold can bear. It looks like prosperity until the reserve is gone.

year that teaches a fold to spend, because a fold that has spent its reserve has nothing left to bar the door with. A fold raided once reads out the raid's dead with every autumn count for a thousand years.

The Dry Folds

On the outer margins lie the **Dry Folds**, valleys whose terraces have gone to scrub and whose cisterns stand cracked and empty. From a saddle they look like any other fold until the eye finds the colour wrong: grey-green thorn where the orchards should be, walls slumped into the slope, a cistern mouth open to the sky like a dry well. They are remembered as the country of the Dryfold Halflings, an older lifeway that did not survive there. Why the Dry Folds failed is argued in every generation, at every commons, and no argument has ever settled it. Most Halflings take them as the plainest warning in the region of what happens when a fold spends past its keeping.

Nobody lives in them, and they are not empty. The Dryfold folk are said to have sealed their store-rooms against a year that never came, and treasure-diggers break into the cracked cisterns after the jars of oil and dried fruit that are said to wait there still. Outlaws winter in the empty houses. Fold children dare each other to go over the saddle and bring back a jar of Dryfold wine, or to sleep a night in a Dryfold hearth-room, and come back with tales of hearths that are still warm and of a dry cistern that echoes footsteps nobody is making. Most who go find thorn, empty terraces, and scorpions. One boy in a generation does not come back at all.

Fold Life

The Halflings of the Folds are small and sturdy, built for terrace work, stooping, and carrying up steep steps rather than for long marches, and most of them never live far from the fold where they were born. Their country asks for that body and

that patience. Almost everything in a fold is within a morning's walk, and almost everything in it has been mended by someone whose grandmother mended it before.

A Fold Town

A fold town is a close cluster of stone houses along the upper edge of the terraces, kept off the good ground, with store-rooms on the cool side of each house. The houses lean into one another for shelter and share walls where they can; their roofs are low, their doors face down the fold, and from any doorstep a household can see its own terraces. Nothing is built on soil that could grow something. A stranger notices the fallow terraces before anything else: whole steps of good ground lying idle in plain sight of hungry people, and nobody allowed to plant them.

Every household keeps its own stores and owes a share to the common reserve held at the fold's cistern hall, and everyone knows roughly what both amount to. Counting is household work before it is anything else. Children learn to tally the shelves, to tell which terraces rest this year, and to say how many days of water the cistern holds. A Halfling child is named at the first autumn count after its birth, comes of age when a share of the stores is set in its name, and marries by moving a share, each step said aloud at the count (the counted life is told in The Folds, the Scarps, and the Shore (FND 225)). Every fold lullaby begins *count the jars and bar the door*, and few children know that the next line is about the raiders.

Work and Table

Most work is maintenance. Walls are mended after every heavy rain, stone by stone, by the household whose terrace they hold and by the terrace ward that keeps the whole slope and mans it when the horn blows. Cistern circles release water to the terraces in turn and clear the channels before the wet season. Orchard work moves through the year from pruning to picking to drying and pressing, and **orchard leagues** share labour, presses, and drying floors across neighbouring folds, so that in picking season whole households walk over the saddle to work another fold's trees and expect the same back. A share of every fold's terraces lies fallow at any time, and a household that tries to plant its fallow share hears about it at the next commons.

People eat fruit fresh and dried, grain, preserved and pressed stores, and garden food. A good table in the Folds is generous without being lavish: enough that a guest is never stinted, never so much that anyone at it could mistake the meal for a boast. The smell of a fold in late summer is fruit on the drying floors, warm stone, and the faint sourness of the presses; in winter it is woodsmoke and the cold, dusty sweetness of a store-room opened for the day's measure.

The Turning Year

The year turns on two moments. In spring the planting rites open the terraces, and the cistern hall's first reading of the year says how much the terraces may draw. Summer is weeding, watering by turn, and watching the cistern fall; in a dry run there are watchers on every saddle, and a horn from the rim sends the children to the cistern hall and the young to the walls. In autumn the harvest is brought in, the reserve is counted aloud at the cistern hall before the elders of the measure orders, 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 whose recount holds the hall's figure owes a day's labour on the walls, which keeps challenges honest without making them rare. After the count and before planting, each fold meets as a **commons**: terrace wards report on the walls, cistern circles on the water, and the fold decides which terraces rest. Winter is lived on stores, walls, and the arguments the count produced.

The Edges of Hospitality

Hospitality is real but has edges. A traveller at a household door is fed, without question and without being asked to pay. A party at the edge of a fold is a different matter, received at the fold market or the cistern hall according to what the fold has said aloud it can spare. Windscar escorts camp at the terrace-edge grounds outside the fold, trade at the market, rest, and water by counted measure, and then go on. Gnome traders on the coastward side are received the same way, their arrival called and their loads counted. Being received is not being let in, and both peoples have long since learned the difference. An escort could force a fold's terraces in an afternoon. It does not, because a fold raided once is never generous again, and the next dry year the escort would be the one waiting at a shut cistern.

The cistern halls are built for that difference. Each stands at its fold head, where the road comes in along the bare saddles between folds, and receives its guests in a yard outside the terraces, so that a party can be answered, watered, and sent on without setting foot on the good ground. A stranger can spend a season in the Folds and never walk a terrace. Those who try uninvited, thieves and raiders alike, meet the fold's young on the walls. Larger powers call that narrowness, or suspicion. To a Halfling it is simply what a fold is: abundance is a discipline rather than a spree, and a door is only generous if it can also be closed.

Four Folds

The Folds have no capital, and if they have a centre it is the great cistern halls of the inner folds, where the measure orders carry most weight. The largest of those halls stands at **Evenlee**, an inner fold town of two or three thousand Halflings in a deep hollow with a spring at its head, its stone houses packed along the upper edge of the terraces and the measure orders' tally houses ringing the hall. Its outer yard has been stormed and held more often than any other in the Folds. Each autumn the reserve is counted aloud there before the whole commons, and other folds wait to hear the count.

Plumbfold, on the windward side, owns the Measure Cistern, where the Lee Road comes in over the saddle. A few hundred Halflings live there with the escorts' camping ground in plain view, and the hall that receives Orc parties also keeps their own reserve. No fold argues more often about what it can spare, and none has been besieged more often. **Spurfold**, an outer fold on a spur beside the Lee Road, is home to Edgefold and Outfold households who live closest to outside traffic. Its market takes its turn on the Market Round, and in good years it does well from escorts and coastal goods passing through. In bad years the same traffic arrives asking for water, and now and then it stops asking and starts raiding.

Dewcup is the smallest kind of fold: a hollow with a spring at its head and terraces stepped from floor to rim, half a dozen households, an orchard on the warm slope, and a cistern cut into the rock. It shares presses and drying floors with its neighbours through an orchard league, and keeps its fallow share as strictly as any great fold. Its spring is small enough that a single bad summer could end it, and the raiding bands know where it is.

Tallies at the Belt

About 240,000 Halflings live in the Folds, and they are nearly everyone there. Most are Foldward. The Leeward folk of the inner folds and the Edgefold and Outfold households along the roads are smaller shares. Orc escorts at the terrace-edge grounds and Gnome traders at the Counted Lee are received, counted, and gone again, and none of them lives in a fold.

Fold dress is home-woven wool and felt from the Windscar trade: smocks and aprons for terrace and orchard work, short coats in winter, and bare feet in the warm months. Most adults carry a household tally on a cord at the belt, and a

stranger soon learns to watch it the way one watches a purse elsewhere; most carry a sling beside it. Edgefold Halflings are browner and leaner than the folk of the inner folds. Stores carry a fold through most bad years, so only about one child in five dies young, mostly of winter coughs. Adults commonly pass seventy, a hundred is old, and a newborn can expect about sixty years. Most die of age and winter illness, some of slips and falling terraces, some on the walls, and in a long dry run, like the present one, of hunger.

The household name a child takes at its first autumn count is the name its share stands under in the store tally, and the fold's name follows it outside the fold; Edgefold households often add a road byname. Read out at an autumn count: Merrin Coddry, Bendel Tullam, Odella Wenning, Pimsy Orrel, Hesper Coddry. Whoever comes to a door is asked, before anything else, how long they mean to stay.

The Commons and the Count

No town rules the Folds. The **Foldward Commons**, the first named Halfling civilization, spread authority thin on purpose, so that no house, town, or cistern district can spend what the whole fold needs. They are not an early empire of small farmers but a people bound by one stubborn custom, the keeping of enough: fold towns, orchard leagues, terrace wards, cistern circles, and market rounds, held together by the reserve, by old oaths, and by the shame of a fold that spent what it should have kept.

Who Answers for What

The commons	Each fold runs itself through its households, the **terrace wards** that keep the walls and man them, the **cistern circles** that keep and release the water, and the orchard leagues that tie neighbouring folds together. These are the bones of the order that hardened in the Founding of the Foldward Commons, long before any cradle-web lord held a hall. In practice the oldest and best-stocked households speak loudest at the commons.
The measure orders	The keepers of the cistern halls, the orchard tally houses, and the reserve-report circles, who keep the counts that anyone with something to lose can check. They are the **Leeward measure orders**, and they carry most weight in the inner folds around the great cistern halls. They are heeded only while their numbers hold up when a household, or a hungry escort with spears, challenges them.
The receiving elders	At the fold markets and cistern halls, those who answer outsiders decide what reception can be given: exchange, rest, shelter for a time, rarely anything deeper, or nothing yet. The foremost of them sit at the Measure Cistern.

Under the Commons, three Halfling lifeways share the region. **Foldward** Halflings are most of it. **Leeward** folk, of the measure-heavy inner folds, are the ones outsiders meet across a tally bench, and the ones outsiders describe when they describe Halflings at all. **Edgefold** or **Outfold** households hold the outer valleys along the roads and live closest to outside traffic, its profits and its raiders; they remember the roadfold Halflings, whose measure did not outlast the road, and argue among themselves how much trade a fold can take in before it stops being a fold.

The Old Quarrel

The order is fought over from inside, and always along the same line. Prestige-minded households and receiving elders hold that a fold too narrow in good years will lose trust and influence, and that reserve can harden into fear. Reserve-minded custodians answer that abundance is exactly when a people becomes dangerous to itself. Each side suspects the other: generosity that is really display, or caution that is really hoarding in clean language. Neither suspicion is ever wholly wrong, which is why the quarrel has outlived every bargain that tried to end it.

In the present dry run a third quarrel sits on top of the old one: whether this is the run the long-cycle reserve was kept for. Open it too early and the fold has spent its last defence on a bad year rather than a ruinous one; open it too late and there may be no terraces left to save. Every cistern hall in the Folds is asking the question this year, and every one of them is asking it in front of its own households, with watchers on the saddles and the struck bands somewhere beyond them.

Roads and Trade

Inside the region, roads are stepped paths along the terraces and over the saddles between folds, walked and carried rather than driven. Nothing in the Folds runs on wheels for long; loads go on backs, on poles between two bearers, and on the pack animals that come over the ridge with the escorts.

The Market Round	The seasonal circuit of fold markets. Each fold hosts in its turn, at the time its harvest allows, and the order of the Round is old enough that changing it would start a quarrel among every fold on it.
The Lee Road	It runs from the fold markets over the Lee Wall to the Rimward Basins, under Windscar escort. It keeps Halfling market timing, so a party that arrives off its day waits at the terrace-edge grounds, and a delayed answer at either end can cost a caravan its season.
The coast road	It runs down to the Counted Lee, carrying timed loads sorted into burden classes, so that a fold knows before it picks how much fruit a declared approach can take.

Dried fruit, grain, and other stored goods go out along both roads, but only from what lies beyond the counted reserve. Salt, hides, felt, and herd animals come back from the Windscar, along with escort service for anyone who needs it. Coastal goods come up from the Counted Lee, and some of them pass on along the Lee Road into Windscar hands, so that a Windscar herder may own a coil of Gnome cordage without ever having seen the sea. Water is the one thing the Folds will not bargain over. A party drinks what a cistern hall has said aloud it can spare, and not a cup more.

Passage, in fold country, means access. Windscar escorts decide who travels the Lee Road, and Gnome declarations decide when a coastal hand-off can happen. But inside the edge a fold's commons decides what leaves it, and its cistern hall decides what water is spared. A party nobody refuses can still find that the cistern hall's answer is "not yet".

In a raiding year the folds hire blades they would rather not feed. A fold may pay a Windscar escort kindred in stores to sit on its saddles through the dry months, which is cheaper than a raid until the escort decides it is not. The markets of the Round cry a bounty on struck-band captains, paid in dried fruit and oil, and bounty-takers come up the Lee Road to collect it. And sealed Dryfold jars dug out of the cracked cisterns fetch

more at the Counted Lee than anything inside them could be worth, from Gnome buyers who do not ask who dug them.

Memory and Belief

The Folds remember in tallies: which hall counted honestly in the hard years, which one narrowed too quickly, which feast spent what it should not have. The oldest of it is older than the cradle-web's whole written past. The Founding of the Foldward Commons (c. 170,000–c. 152,000 BR) bound the folds into one order. The Leeward-Windscar Terms (c. 160,000–c. 145,000 BR) won Orc escorts an answer given aloud at the fold edge, because the Pacts could close the Lee Road and the folds could not hold it, and kept the folds closed behind it. The Measure Cistern Reckoning (c. 154,000–c. 148,000 BR) made the Commons admit that "measured" and "just" are not the same word, and the Measure Cistern Crisis (c. 147,000–c. 143,000 BR) tested that lesson against armed Orc escorts camped at the saddle while the measure orders (c. 146,000–c. 139,000 BR) hardened out of it. On the coast the same lesson came quietly, through the Leeward-Tidelace Measures (c. 146,000–c. 140,000 BR), the Counted Lee Timing Feud (c. 139,000–c. 136,000 BR), and the shared-loss rule of the Leeward-Tidelace Timing Oath (c. 136,000–c. 134,000 BR). Medieval cistern halls still recite these as old custom rather than add to them.

What the folds tell round the autumn count is plainer and bloodier. They tell of the old woman who opened the cistern sluices on a raiding band camped in the channel below; of the slinger who killed a struck-band captain at sixty paces from the Plumbfold wall; of the dry year when a whole fold walked out over the saddle and was never seen again. Every hall keeps the name of its villain too, the cistern-keeper who sold a fold's count to a raiding band and opened the yard gate to them at night, and a tally-stick is broken on the hall floor in his memory each autumn.

No chain of the great threads of Caeldon's history runs through the Folds, but three of its questions are asked here every autumn. **Who Counts and Who Records** asks who counts, and in the Folds that is literal: a household counts for what its tally can prove against a challenge. **Water and Who Keeps It** is asked of stored water rather than living rivers. **Roads and Crossings** is asked on the Lee Road, where whoever holds the water at the end of a road decides whether it goes anywhere.

The Season-Weaver

There is no Halfling church in the Folds and no clergy. Belief is household and commons custom, the alignment custom of bounded plenty, with one god at its centre. **Tamsel the Season-Weaver**, a Resonant of Aion born of the folds' long dependence on the balance of the harvest, keeps the turning year: spring planting rites, the thanks of autumn storing, and the **Festival of the Turn**, which is said to bring a good harvest if it is kept with true joy. Fold households picture Tamsel as the season wears them: a green, rain-smelling youth in spring, sun-browned and gold in summer, old and crimson and smelling of woodsmoke and stored fruit in autumn, pale and still as frost in winter.

Children are told the tale of the Long Summer, when Tamsel held the summer for a year, with endless warmth and plenty, and the winter after it emptied a fold to its last measure. It is the reason given for never spending the reserve on plenty, and the reason a Halfling grows uneasy at a season that will not end. Tamsel's strength rises and falls with the health of the folds, and in the present dry run the god faces the same choice as the cistern halls. A season forced too hard runs up a seasonal debt that the cycle must repay, a late frost on early blossom, ground tired for years after a rushed harvest, and a debt like that could ruin a fold for generations. A season left alone means watching the folds spend what they were

taught to keep. Some households pray for rain and growth, and some would rather Tamsel force the season than see any reserve opened.

Other gods keep company at the edges. At the Counted Lee, Gnome clerks still murmur the name of Quennet the Clockmaker. Windscar escorts camped at the terrace-edge grounds keep their own gods at their fires: Ushkar the Ancestor-Warden, who keeps the names of those who held passage, and Rakhal the Storm-Caller, whose followers are quickest to call a fold's narrowing stale.

The Measure Cistern

On the windward side, where the Lee Road comes in over the Lee Wall from the Rimward Basins and the High Scars, stands the **Measure Cistern**, the great cistern hall of the Folds. It is two things that the Folds keep apart everywhere else and cannot keep apart here: the hoarded water of the fold that owns it, and the foremost receiving ground of the Commons, where escorted Orc parties of the Windscar Pacts are told what water and stores can be spared. Every fold hall asks quietly whether its numbers are honest. Here the question is asked aloud, in front of thirsty strangers with spears.

The Place

The cistern lies at the head of its fold, against the foot of the Lee Wall: a long basin cut back into the rock, roofed over most of its length against the dry wind and fed by a spring at the fold head and by catch channels off the ridge. Down its inner wall run the **Reading Steps**, a flight of narrow steps cut one measure apart, by which the water's depth is read. A reading is called out from the steps and repeated in the hall below, never written up first. Children dare each other to touch the lowest step, which has not been dry in living memory, and the fold tells them that the year it shows is the year the Dry Folds died.

The hall sits just beneath the cistern's mouth on a broad walled terrace: a long stone hall, store-rooms cut into the slope behind it, and a receiving yard in front, where the cistern's outflow channel feeds a stone trough before running on to the terraces. The trough is where guests drink. Below the hall the fold opens out into terraced orchard and garden, and a guest is not taken down there. The Lee Road reaches the yard along a bare saddle above the terraces, so a party can be brought in without setting foot on the good ground, as the Folds build every cistern hall. Beside the road, outside the yard wall, lies the camping ground where escorts wait out a day that is not theirs, among stones that hide scorpions; every escort shakes out its boots at dawn. A party standing in the yard can see the hall, the trough, and the roofline of the cistern above. It cannot see the water. What the cistern holds reaches it as a number.

Further out, the Lee Road is open and dangerous country. Raiders out of the dry lands strike at parties on the saddles, where there is no cover and no water, and in a swarm year locusts come over the Lee Wall in a brown cloud. From the highest bend of the saddle a traveller can see the nearest of the Dry Folds, a valley of thorn and cracked cistern walls whose store-rooms, the fold says, were sealed in the last year anyone kept them and never opened again.

Keepers and Users

The cistern belongs to Plumbfold, the fold at whose head it stands. Its cistern circle keeps and releases the water, its households owe their share of the common reserve to the store-rooms behind the hall, and its commons decide what leaves the fold, which in practice means the oldest and best-stocked households do. Around them work the measure orders, which carry more weight here than anywhere: terrace elders who stand at the Reading Steps, orchard tally houses from the neighbouring folds, and reserve-report circles that check the hall's figures against their own. The

receiving elders give the fold's answer to whoever has arrived: exchange, rest, shelter for a time, delay, redirection, or nothing yet.

The users come mainly by the Lee Road. Windscar escorts bring parties up from the defended wells of the Rimward Basins and down from the passes of the High Scars: traders with salt, hides, and felt, herders with animals to sell, and travellers who need water more than trade. Halflings from the outer valleys come to the yard too, to buy, to sell, or to argue a count, and once a year every fold within reach sends someone to hear the autumn reading. A few herders of the outer valleys hire out as saddle guides, who know which seeps still run in a dry year and which bends the raiders favour, and who are paid by whichever side asks first. In dry years the fold hires sellswords out of the Rimward Basins to ride the saddle, and watches them almost as closely as the raiders they are paid to chase.

The Hall's Year

The hall's year follows the fold's. In spring the circle opens the terraces by turn, and the first reading of the year says how much they may draw. Through summer the level falls and the readings are taken more often. In autumn, after the harvest, the reserve is counted aloud: the circle reads the steps, the store-rooms are tallied shelf by shelf, and the reports of the neighbouring circles are set against both. When the Market Round brings the fold its turn, the yard fills with stalls for a few days, and the escort traffic, and the raiding on the saddle, peak with it.

On an ordinary day the work is small and public. A reading in the morning, called down and repeated. Water released to the terraces by turn. An escorted party arriving on its market day is met in the yard; a receiving elder hears its captain and names what the fold can spare, and the party drinks from the trough by counted measure, in front of both sides. A party that misses its day pitches outside the yard wall and waits, counting what the wait will cost it at the far end of the road.

The yard has its own legend. In the summer of the Crisis, the tale goes, a receiving elder walked out alone through the escort camp with a single water-skin, drank from it in front of the war-captain, and gave him the rest, and nobody drew a blade that night. Escorts and fold alike still say *the guest drinks first, the count comes after* when a party reaches the trough, and Halfling mothers sing their children to sleep with a counting rhyme for the Reading Steps that ends on the step that is never dry.

From Orrin Talloway, *A Road-Book of Both Halves*

> *The escort brought us down off the Lee Wall at noon on our market day, along a saddle so bare it might have been swept, and I understood only afterwards that it had been laid out that way: the road keeps a guest above the good ground the whole way in, like a hand held flat so nothing can be taken from it. Below us on the right the orchards stepped down the fold, close and green and very quiet. Nobody looked up at us from the terraces, but on every wall-end there stood a small figure with a sling, and none of them looked anywhere else.*
>
> *In the yard the captain of our escort stood before the receiving elder, a small grey Halfling in a plain coat with a tally cord knotted at the belt, and they spoke as two people who have done this many times and respect each other a little and trust each other not at all. Then a voice came down from the roofline, calling a number, and a second voice in the hall repeated it, and a third said it again, and the elder named what the fold could spare: water for every beast and person, rest for the night, and no stores. The captain said, very courteously, that last year there had been stores. The elder said, as courteously, that last year the steps had been dry two measures lower down.*

I have called tolls at a window on the Serath for most of my working life, and I know the sound of a figure its caller expects to be challenged. This was the same sound, and nothing at all was written. On my river a figure is what the bridge-holders have decided and the clerk has put on the roll; here it is a thing said three times by three people, and the proof of it is that any of the three could be made to say it again. I asked our captain afterwards whether the readings were ever false. The captain said that was what the Crisis had been for, and that once, long ago, the escorts had camped a whole summer at this wall with their spears to make the Halflings say their numbers aloud.

We drank at the trough under counted measure, an escort and a Halfling standing by, and I have rarely drunk water so cold or so carefully given. Beyond the yard wall, on the camping ground, a party that had come a day late sat by their packs and did not look at us. I never saw the cistern. I saw its roof and its mouth and the steps going down into shadow, and I heard what it held told to me as a number.

How the Hall Was Made

The cistern was already an old and respected receiving ground while the Founding of the Foldward Commons was binding the folds together, and in the long ages since, its basin has been recut and relined so often that nothing of the first work can be told. Three quarrels made it what it is now, and its yard is laid out to remember each of them.

Reception is not entry

The Leeward-Windscar Terms won escorted parties an open welcome at fold markets and cistern halls, because the Pacts could close the Lee Road and the folds could not hold it, and kept the folds shut behind them. The yard, the trough, and the saddle road are that bargain in stone.

Measured is not just

The Measure Cistern Reckoning began here as a Halfling quarrel, in good years under rising outside traffic, between generous receiving elders who wanted broader markets and reserve-minded keepers who saw prestige spending dressed as welcome. Some halls had understated their stores to keep exchange small and their own households great; some generous elders were spending tomorrow to look open today. It ended in the line between honest and false narrowing. A fold may stay narrow, but a count that nobody else may challenge no longer counts, at least among Halflings.

Counted aloud

The Measure Cistern Crisis brought that standard face to face with Windscar escorts in a hard season. Escorts called the fold's narrowing a shut door; the fold called their demands extortion. Armed escorts camped at the gates, the folds called in their kin and hired guards, and for a summer the yard was a camp on the edge of a battle. The spears bought the end as much as argument did: a narrowing fold must now say aloud what it can still receive, delay, redirect, or carry for a time. The Orcs later took three of those four answers into their own Pact terms.

The hall argues from all three today without ever adding a fourth.

The Dry Run at the Cistern

This year the readings have been falling for longer than anyone likes. The hall still gives water to every party it accepts; it gives stores less often, and says so aloud, as it swore after the Crisis. Hungry escorts camped outside a fold wall have broken in before, and the fold's young keep a night watch on the terraces with slings and dogs. Behind the hall the question of the whole region, whether this is the run the long-cycle reserve was kept for, is sharpest here, because the hall answers its own terraces and the Lee Road from the same yard. If it opens the reserve, the water it has told the escorts it cannot spare will be running into orchards in plain view of the camping ground. If it keeps the reserve closed, its own households will watch strangers drink at the trough while their terraces wait for a release. Old sealed jars from the Dry Fold have begun to sell at the camping ground, two who ate from one lie sick in the hall, and a band has been striking parties on the saddle road, Orc and Halfling alike. Whatever the hall decides, the Windscar will hear of it within the season.

The Counted Lee

Down the coast road, where it reaches the harbour water of the Tidelace Coasts, lies the **Counted Lee**: a tally hall, transfer pier, and staging yard on the shore below the Folds. Halflings of the Commons bring their loads down to it counted and classed; Gnomes of the Gaugeward Leagues bring their craft in to it on declared windows. Nothing changes hands until both have been made plain. It has none of the fame of the Measure Cistern, nor of the Gnome harbour of the false mark further along the coast. It is where two careful peoples learned to hand things to each other, and later learned what it costs, and how hot tempers run, when the timing slips and a year's fruit rots on the pier.

The Place

The Lee sits in the shelter of a headland, where a short shelf of level ground lies between the foot of the terrace country and a stretch of quiet water off the outer roads. The coast road comes down off the last terraces in a long zigzag and ends at the staging yard: a walled, open yard where loads are set down in rows by burden class and wait. Below it the transfer pier runs out into the lee water, long enough for Gnome coastal craft to lie alongside at most states of the tide. The pier has its own enemies. Shipworms hollow its piles from inside, so that every few years a stretch gives way under a laden cart, and congers live in the rubble below and take the fingers of any hand that trails in the water.

The tally hall stands between yard and pier, a plain stone hall with two doors, one facing up the road and one facing the water. Inside, Halfling counters and Gnome clerks sit at the same benches and keep the **Long Tally**, the joint count of the Lee, in which every declared window, every change to it, and every load that waited too long is written twice, once in fold count and once in harbour reading, side by side. Above the headland a signal post answers the coast's beacon lines, so that a window declared or moved along the Lacework reaches the hall before any craft does. Nothing else stands there: no breakwater, no market, no village. No one lives at the Lee but the hall's keepers and a few hired spears who watch the yard at night, for a yard full of the folds' best stores draws thieves down off the terraces, and the zigzag has dark bends where a carrier's mule can be cut loose and gone before the shout carries.

Under the headland the rocks run out in a ragged spur that the tide covers twice a day, and every craft that has ignored a moved window has gone onto it. What they carried lies in the kelp

below: casks of lamp oil, crates of harbour brass, and, the carriers say, a Gnome strongbox with a gauge-house seal that three generations of fold children have dived for at low water and none has raised. Beyond the spur is a small cove that the Long Tally does not mention, with a beach and a path up the cliff.

Two Benches

The Lee is shared rather than held, and each half answers for its own side of a handoff. The sharing is not even: the harbours own the craft and the water, and a fold with a load spoiling in the yard has less to bargain with than a clerk who can sail away. On the fold side, counters and elders of the folds that send their goods down the coast road keep the yard and the Halfling bench; they say how much each load is and the day after which waiting spoils it or costs a fold its reserve. On the harbour side, clerks from the nearest Gaugeward harbour keep the pier, the signal post, and the Gnome bench; they declare approach windows and move them when tide, fog, or weather will not hold the earlier ones, as harbour custom lets them. Between them stands the custom the Timing Feud won: any change that comes after a load has passed its day must be named in the hall with both benches sitting, and the loss written in the Long Tally before anyone shouts over who bears it.

The users are carriers coming down the coast road with dried fruit, grain, and preserved stores; Gnome coastal craft putting in with fish, cordage, lamp oil, worked metal, and instruments from the gauge houses; and the harbour hands who load them, among them some coastal Humans who work Gnome quays and crews. In the busy weeks the folds hire escorts for the road, and the spears who walk carriers down the zigzag are often the same Humans who loaded a craft the week before. The hall pays its yard spears by the season, and when a road band grows bold it posts a price, which brings bounty-takers down from the folds and sellswords off the harbour quays. Both benches hire them; neither trusts the ones the other hired. Fold goods go no further than the pier, and harbour goods no further than the yard.

A Day and a Year

The Lee's year is pinched between two calendars. The folds release nothing until the autumn count has set aside the reserve, so the bulk of the year's surplus comes down the road late. The coast's calm months end in the storm season, when windows shorten, the outer roads close first, and some harbours shut their mouths until spring. Most of the Lee's business is crowded into the weeks between the count and the gales, and in those weeks the yard is full, the road is busy, and the thieves are busiest of all. Every fold knows that a load picked too early may wait and spoil, and a load picked too late may find no window left.

An ordinary day starts with the morning signal. A clerk writes up the windows the beacon line has passed down, the counters match them against the loads in the yard, and the carriers on the road learn by noon whether to hurry or wait. When a craft comes alongside on its window, loads go out of the yard in the order the hall has set, and each one is struck off both columns of the Long Tally as it crosses the pier. When a window moves, both benches sit. Most changes pass without a quarrel, because fog in the outer roads is plain to everyone. Fewer pass quietly when the sky over the headland is clear, and a hall that has seen knives drawn across its benches keeps its spears close on those days. When the Long Grey lies on the water, no craft comes, and the hall keeps a lamp in the seaward door. Pilots say that a hail out of the fog off the Lee is not to be answered unless the boat's name is one the hall is expecting.

The road has its own tales, told in fold kitchens to carriers' children. The best loved is of the carrier who walked the zigzag alone on a moonless night with her fold's whole seed-grain on two mules, while a band held the dark bends above,

and who sang the counting song so loudly the whole way down that the thieves took her for a column of spears and let her pass. Carriers still sing it on the bends, and say *count it twice or count it gone* as they load. A fold sends its loads down tied with a count-cord, a knotted tally charmed to remember its knots, so that a load cut open on the road and retied cannot pass the hall as whole; thieves who know this cut the cord and take everything.

From Orrin Talloway, *A Road-Book of Both Halves*

> *I went down to the Lee with a carrier who had a load of dried fruit on a pole and a figure in his head, and he said the figure to himself under his breath at every turn of the zigzag, the way a man counts steps in the dark. At the darkest bend he stopped saying it and sang instead, loud and badly, and the hired spear walking behind us laughed and told me why. The yard at the bottom was laid out like a toll-roll: rows of loads in burden classes, each with its little stake and its knotted cord, and a Halfling walking the rows the way I have walked a queue of barges, looking at nothing and seeing all of it.*
>
> *The hall has two doors and two benches and one book, and I would give a good deal to bring that book home. Every line is written twice, once in the fold's reckoning and once in the harbour's, side by side, so that neither party can say afterwards that the other kept the only copy. On the Serath we keep second copies against fire and loss. Here they keep the second copy against each other, in the same room, and call it trust, and I am not sure they are wrong.*
>
> *That afternoon a signal came down from the headland and the benches sat. A Gnome clerk stood, said a name under her breath, and announced that the craft expected on the evening window would come in at the next morning's instead, for fog in the outer roads. I looked out of the sea door. The sky over the headland was clear, but out past it a low grey bank lay on the water like wool on a floor. The Halfling bench looked too, a long while, and then the loss was written, in both columns, before anyone said whose it was. Nobody raised a voice, though I noticed that the spears by the door had come in from the yard. I have seen worse quarrels over a ferry penny, and some of them ended in the river.*

How the Lee Was Made

The Lee grew out of the Leeward-Tidelace Measures, the custom that made fold count and harbour declaration two halves of one exchange. Its hall and pier have been rebuilt more times than anyone has counted. The place and the custom have lasted. The custom took its present shape in the Counted Lee Timing Feud. Fold elders charged that the harbours moved their windows to push the loss onto the folds; harbour masters answered that some folds wanted a difficult coast to keep inland time. Loads rotted on the pier, the folds went into hungry winters, and they won what they won only by threatening to take their grain to other landings. No blood was shed, which is why the feud is the quietest of the far side's great quarrels and why it still rankles. The end was a bargain: the harbours kept the power to move a window, and a late change had at least to be named as lost time. The Leeward-Tidelace Timing Oath swore the whole edge to it: name the change, write down the loss, then bargain over who caused it. The benches at the Lee still recite the oath, and the folds still bear most of the loss it names.

Two gods keep company at the Lee without much liking each other. Gnome clerks murmur the name of Quennet the Clockmaker when a window has to be moved, half in thanks and half in apology to whoever will bear the lost time, and Halfling carriers keep the year of Tamsel. Their worshippers first quarrelled here over who had wasted whose time, and the quarrel has never quite stopped. The oath is also the main reason

Quennet is fading on the coast: a harbour that can name who bears a lost moment has less need to pray for one.

This year the folds are in a dry run. Less comes down the road, every count is argued harder before anything leaves the terraces, and harbours that count on fold grain have begun to ask why their windows go half filled. Hungry years bring more thieves to the road, and this one has. For the first time in a long while it is the folds, not the coast, whose timing everyone is cursing.

Tensions

- **The year the reserve is for.** The cisterns are falling for another year. One cistern hall wants the long-cycle reserve opened now, while there are still terraces worth saving; another says the run has not yet earned it. Some households would rather Tamsel force the season than see any reserve opened, though every Halfling knows a forced season may cost more than the reserve would. At the Measure Cistern the same choice would be made in plain view of the escorts' camping ground.
- **Feast at the gate.** A fold holds a lavish Festival of the Turn in the same week its cistern hall tells a waiting Windscar escort that it can spare water but no stores. The escort calls it false narrowing and wants the count made in front of it, and its captains have begun pacing the terrace walls. The hall's own reserve-minded custodians privately agree with the escort.
- **Swords on the saddle.** Plumbfold wants to hire a Windscar escort kindred to hold its saddles against the struck bands through the dry run. The kindred's price is water, the cistern hall must say aloud how much it can spare, and every escort party camped below will hear the answer.
- **Lights in the Dry Folds.** Fires have been seen at night in a Dry Fold nobody has lived in for ages, where treasure-diggers lately found the old store-jars still full, and three folds now say the jars are their forebears' and theirs to take. Spurfold says a struck outlaw band is wintering there and means to come over the saddle at the first dry month; the children who went to look say the fires burn in hearths with no one beside them.
- **Seeing the water.** A Windscar captain refused stores at the Measure Cistern asks to stand at the Reading Steps beside the terrace elders and see the level for herself. The receiving elders say the cistern is inside the fold, and reception is not entry; the captain says a count only the fold has seen is the very thing the Reckoning was meant to end, and some reserve-report circles quietly agree. Her escorts have not unstrung their bows.
- **Neighbours at the trough.** Plumbfold's own terraces have had their releases cut twice this year, while escorted strangers drink at the trough. The receiving elders answer that the Terms were sworn by the whole Commons and that a broken oath on the Lee Road brings spears; the households answer that the Terms do not water their orchards, and somebody has begun fouling the trough at night.
- **Thieves on the zigzag.** Three loads have gone missing on the coast road to the Counted Lee this season, with their mules and one carrier, while a fold that cut a promised load still argues with the harbour bench over whose loss it was. The folds say harbour hands sell to the thieves; the harbour says the thieves come down from a fold that is starving. The hall has put a price on the band, and a pair of hard-faced Human bounty-takers have arrived to collect it.

CHAPTER 15

The Windscar

Say the storm before it finds you,
say the slide before it falls,
say the wait before they ask it:
the road forgives the one who calls.

— rhymes of the High-Scar warning runners, *The Ridge-Calls*

Beyond the one crossing, past the glassed ground that parts the two halves of the known world, the land rises into wind. It climbs in steps, shelf above shelf of bare stone and thin grass, each one cut off from the next by a cliff face the colour of old bone, and below the highest of those faces lie bowls of salt and cracked clay that hold water for a few weeks in a good year and none in a bad one. This is the Windscar Expanse, the country of the Orcs, and one of the first signs that Caeldon is a whole planet rather than one crowded valley of peoples. It is not quite desert; it is something that teaches the same lessons more slowly. What kills here is distance, and the dun dogs that follow it, and the raiders who wait at the wells for parties the distance has weakened. The Orcs answered it long ago not with walls or kings but with the escort: an armed company that brings a party across country that kills the careless, warns it in time, and rides out to take blood if the road betrays it, and a name that dies if it fails. Those oaths, kept and broken for more than a hundred and fifty thousand years, are the Windscar Pacts, and everything else in the Expanse hangs from them.

The Expanse and the Pacts

The Windscar is a country of exposed breadth: open uplands, hard seasonal margins, interior basins with salt or dust floors, cliffs, and a few thin corridors where a party can live long enough to cross. It fills the west of the far side, from the edge of the Glassbelt east to the Lee Wall and north to the sea cliffs above the Soundchain Roads, and what lies south of it nobody has mapped. The prevailing wind is dry, off the desert. Its distances are long: about three months from the Lastwater Wells to the Lee Wall, about four months from the basin rims to the sea. Its only settled cores are the rim strongholds of the Basins; the rest is open wild, and every party crosses it with a kindred or an escort, or does not cross it. It has two halves, and the Pacts keep them distinct. Above lie the **High Scars**, the escarpment and pass country, held by moving escorts. Below lie the **Rimward Basins**, the rim country of defended wells, held by keeping. Inland, past the last of the wells, lies the **Glassbelt Interior**, a true desert

AT A GLANCE

Lies	The west of the far side, from the Glassbelt's edge east to the Lee Wall and north to the sea cliffs; the Shearline parts the Rimward Basins in the south-west from the High Scars above them.
People	About 180,000, nearly all Orcs: some 80,000 in the Rimward Basins, 48,000 in the High Scars, and as many Open-Steppe kindreds north of the Scars; a thousand or two Ogres and Trolls on the routes; rare Giants; a few hundred crossers a year at the desert edge.
Civilizations	The Windscar Pacts, with the escort orders of the High Scars and the well-keepers of the Rimward rims; the Crossing-Oath Houses and the Hearth-Weight Compacts.
Landscape	Escarpment shelves and storm-cut passes; closed salt basins with defended wells on their rims; beyond the last wells, true desert.
Chief places	No capital; the treaty-ground of Oldcairn and the reserve moot of Deepdraw come nearest; the Lastwater Wells face the Glassbelt.
The year	The Medieval Era, c. 1,350 CR.

nobody holds. Beside the Expanse, past the Lee Wall, lie the sheltered terraces of the Leeward Folds; coastward, at the end of the longest escort routes, the Gnome harbours of the Tidelace Coasts.

A People 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, and an old escort's body carries the marks of every bad crossing. They are not distorted Humans or wilderness caricatures, and their history began and has largely stayed far from the cradle-web. A child is named into its kindred at its first gathering and is grown when it answers for its own word on the route; the Orc life from naming to the keeping of the dead is told in The Folds, the Scarps, and the Shore (FND 225).

The **kindred** is the household that matters, and it moves. The dangers are common enough that every kindred raises its children to the spear. 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.

Three Countries of Orcs

About 180,000 people live in the Expanse, and nearly all of them are Orcs: some 80,000 in the Rimward Basins, some 48,000 in the High Scars, and about as many again in the **Open-Steppe kindreds** of the dry country north of the Scars, out to the sea cliffs, with a thousand or two Ogres and Trolls on the routes. The Open-Steppe Orcs herd, dress, and are named as the rest of the Windscar is; they are as lean and long-limbed as High-Scar Orcs, and they are the kindreds most often away on the coast run, sometimes for whole seasons. Shares of water and pasture in the steppe are sworn anew at gatherings they often miss, and the kindreds who stayed treat what was agreed in their absence as agreed. Beyond the last well to the south, herders say, there is grass, and a dry river-bed lined with old stones, and the last camp-ring of a kindred that went to look and never sent word.

Held by Pact

The **Windscar Pacts** are the oldest major named civilization of the Orcs and the first great inland civilization of the far side. No settlement stands over the others, no basin king sits anywhere, and no capital exists to be taken. The Pacts hold open country, not walled ground, and power belongs to whoever can bring people and goods alive across

the shelves, keep a treaty-ground without treachery, and answer a raid, a betrayal, or a broken escort with spears. They are hard, but they are not chaos. Escort is a duty as much as a trade, water and pasture are shared by agreement sworn at the treaty-grounds, and an old custom of answering blood keeps feuds from becoming wars. In Orc country the difference between raiding, escorting, guarding, and surviving is decided by who swore what to whom, and often by who is left standing.

The Pacts keep two rights apart. **Reserve-right** belongs to the anchored side, the custodians who hold water and give a declared reply to arriving parties. **Treaty-right** belongs to the exposed side, the route moots, cairn-line wardens, warning runners, escort captains, and the elders who keep the treaty-grounds. Neither may erase the other, because each is backed by enough spears that it cannot be erased, and the two meet, often with hands on weapons, at the Oath Cistern, at the foot of the Shearline.

A Treaty-Ground Gathering

In the calmer months a kindred travels to its treaty-ground and pitches in the place its line has always held there. For an ordinary Orc the gathering is the one time in the year that 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. The serious business is done before the whole gathering: escort terms sworn, grievances aired, and the names of the dead recited with the crossings they held, as the rite of the Reciting of the Names requires. It is said that if the names are spoken with true respect, the kindred is granted 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.

The names recited longest are the escorts who held a crossing: the captain who took a whole caravan down the Shearline in a dust storm by the feel of the rope; the warning runner who ran three shelves with a broken foot to light a cairn-fire before a flood came down a wash; 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. Children on the rims play her stand with a stick for a spear and a ring of thorns for the band. The toast at every season's-end fire is to the escorts who brought a party through when the wells were dry and the dun dogs were on the line.

The Declared Answer

A wrong between kindreds is never answered in secret. The wronged kindred declares its answer aloud at the next treaty-ground, the elders hold it to the measure of the wrong, and an answer taken without declaration is not retaliation at all but a raid, and may be answered in its turn; the custom is told in The Civilizations of the Medieval Era. Most answers are paid in animals, but when blood is owed a kindred sends its best, and every kindred has its blood-feud that began with a passage betrayed.

Name and Wind

Orc belief is local and kept by the clans, with no priesthood anywhere in the Expanse. Two gods divide it. **Ushkar the Ancestor-Warden** keeps the names of those who held passage and strikes the names of those who broke it, and the clans' lineages, honour, and dead are kept under him. **Rakhal the Storm-Caller** is the scouring wind of the Expanse, breaking whatever has gone stale. At the start of the windy season camps light First Gale fires on high ground and dance as the wind rises; it is said that if they are lit with true defiance, Rakhal grants a year of change and renewal, and when lightning strikes a lone thorn on the shelves, kindreds say he has marked a place where someone once held. Beneath both gods, escort custom is its own alignment custom of held passage and answered betrayal. The two gods pull against each other in every camp. Ushkar's people say a captain is worth what the line has been

worth; Rakhal's say a road is worth what it is worth this year, and a name that cannot answer for this year's road is only a name.

The High Scars

The High Scars are the travelling half of the Windscar. Few of the people who live in them stay anywhere for long, and what holds the region together is not a settlement but a promise: that a party taken under escort will be guided honestly, warned in time, and avenged in blood if the road betrays it.

Shelves, Faces, and Passes

The Scars are the northern and eastern half of the Expanse. They rise in shelves from the Shearline, the escarpment facing south over the Rimward Basins, and beyond them the dry country runs on north to the sea cliffs. West of them lies the Glassbelt; south-east, the escort routes come down towards the Leeward Folds. The Whetgap cuts the first shelves above the basins, with Gapmouth at its mouth and Slidescar on its worst stretch, and Oldcairn lies on a high shelf beyond, five or six weeks from Deepdraw by the ramps and the pass and two to three months from the Turnwater Quays by the longest escort routes. The Scars have no settled core, only fixed points on the routes; between them lie open shelves where nobody goes except in an escort.

The High Scars rise in steps. Long escarpment faces separate one shelf from the next, and the greatest of them, the **Shearline**, is the cliff-broken edge where the high country drops towards the basin rims. Between the faces lie bare plateaus of stone and thin grass, scree fans, dry ravines, and a handful of passes cut through the rock by wind and old water. Visibility is enormous on a clear day. A warning fire on one ridge can be read from the next shelf before a runner could cover half the distance, and a party crossing a shelf can be watched for most of a day by people it will never see.

The wind is the first fact of life. It funnels through the passes hard enough to strip a camp, carries dust off the lower basins in brown walls, and shifts with little warning when the seasons turn. Storms come fast along the faces, with lightning on the high ground and sudden rock-slide below. Water is the second fact: a few seeps, cisterns, and catch-pools along the routes, each one known, named, and argued over. The rivers are only seasonal torrents that cut the ravines deeper and leave them dry.

Most deaths in the Scars come from a handful of things. Exposure on the open shelves, when a storm catches a party between shelters. Rockfall, scree slides, and ledges that give way in the passes, especially after hard rain. Beasts: packs of dun dogs that shadow a party for days and take the straggler (an escort child's first warning call is *on the line*, meaning a pack is following), scorpions in the shelter walls, wound flies that lay maggots in an open cut, and in a swarm year locusts that strip the shelves until the herds starve. Raiders: struck-name bands who know the routes as well as any escort and fall on parties in the passes, often in the last hour before a shelter, when everyone is looking at its walls. And bad guidance: a warning not given, a delay not declared, or an escort that claimed knowledge it did not have. The last is the one Orcs fear most, because it is the one a person chose. Its dead do not always lie still. An escort's dead whose wrong was never answered may rise as **Cairn-Wakers** and stand across the route at a fading cairn, and a party that pushes past one does not always come out the other side. A ring of scar vultures over a pass is read as news before any runner arrives.

Life Along the Routes

High-Scar life is lived along the routes rather than around fixed towns. Kindreds move between seasonal camps on the sheltered side of ridges, with their herds grazing the thin grass of the shelves until it gives out, then moving on before the ground is spent. Larger gatherings happen at the

treaty-grounds and at the **passward shelters**: stone-walled refuges set at the mouths of passes and the ends of exposed stretches, kept stocked by whoever holds the route. A passward shelter in the windy season is a crowded, smoky, patient place, full of parties waiting for a pass to open and escorts arguing about when it will.

Most adults have some share in escort work, even those who never captain a party. 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 graduate to warning runs, carrying news of storm, slide, or raiders along the warning ridges faster than any caravan moves. Herd-children learn early to throw stones at the fast spotted wind cats that sprint in for the kids and lambs, and to pull the purple stagger-vetch before the herd finds it. The year turns on the wind. The windy season closes the highest passes and fills the shelters; the calmer months are when escorts move most traffic, herds go highest, and treaty-grounds fill. Food is lean and portable: herd stock, milk, dried meat, and whatever grain and fruit the escort trade brings up from the basins and the folds.

Two other peoples live along the routes, and the orders of both reached the far side from the cradle-web by the one crossing. **Troll** families of the Crossing-Oath Houses live settled on the crossings they keep for generations, mending what the slides break and taking their price from whoever crosses, and they swear their crossing-oaths under the title of the Mountain-Father, as their houses do on the far side of the Glassbelt. **Ogre** burden-camps appear when the routes need more than Orc backs can give: they clear rockfall, carry stores to the shelters before the windy season, haul the injured down, and rebuild collapsed ledges. They come under the terms of the Hearth-Weight Compacts, which means a camp is fed and sheltered before it lifts anything, and leaves when the work is done; its fires are kept for Ghessa the Hearth-Mother, whose fires burn on this side of the Glassbelt only in the camps of the burden orders that keep the crossing.

Rarest are **Giants**. Old guides speak of high storm shelves, well above the cairn chains, where Giants still pass, but few living escorts claim to have met one. Some of the oldest cut ledges may be colossal work, and guides tell of a sealed door in one cliff-face too tall for any Orc to have made, which nobody who went looking for has found twice. Thingrass tales put the colossal dead behind it with their gear, and every few years a young escort goes looking with a rope and a sack, and the kindred raises a cairn when the season ends.

Who Holds a Road

Power in the High Scars belongs to whoever can make passage safe, or make a broken passage cost blood, and it is spread across several hands.

The order is contested from inside. Younger escorts, who spend more of their lives among other peoples than among their own dead, ask why a captain's worth should rest on what their grandparents did on the road. And bands formed around those whose names were struck from honour, and their heirs, live outside the Pacts entirely. They know the routes as well as anyone, guide for whoever will pay, answer to no route moot, and in a lean year raid the parties they were not paid to guide. Their captains' names are spoken as curses at the treaty-grounds, and as boasts at their own fires. The escort orders put a price on the worst of them, and bounty-takers of the kindreds hunt them across the shelves.

The Whetgap and the Roads of Knowledge

A High-Scar road is not a built surface but a line of knowledge: cairn chains across the shelves, passward shelters at either end of the exposed stretches, warning ridges where fires and runners carry news, and treaty-ground ledges where parties change hands. The main crossing of the high country is the **Whetgap**, a narrow storm-cut pass

The escort orders	The **High-Scar escort orders** are the region's heaviest power: route moots, where elder captains hear the grievances of the bereaved and name the blood-price; cairn-line wardens who keep the markers true; warning runners; escort captains; and the treaty-ground elders who stand by when a party is taken on or handed over. They are heeded on a simple test: did the parties they guided arrive, and when they did not, was the reason declared in time? A kindred the orders turn against finds that no party will hire it.
The kindreds	Behind every escort stands a kindred, and behind every kindred its remembered tally of crossings held and betrayals answered. A captain's word is worth what their line's word has been worth, and a blood-price unpaid is collected by the bereaved kindred's own blades, sometimes a generation later. The longest blood-debt on the shelves has run eleven generations between two kindreds over a single broken passage, and both still recite it with their dead.
The Troll crossing houses	On a few passes and landslide routes, a house holds the crossing by oath, decides when it is too dangerous to use, and takes its price for keeping it. On the crossing its word is final, because it can cut the ropes, and escort captains have learned to bargain rather than force it.
The burden-camps	Ogre camps can refuse heavy work that would consume them unfed or unsworn, which in a hard season can stop a route as surely as a slide.

where the wind is strongest and the scree least stable. Most traffic between the basin rims and the routes outward passes through it or waits for it to open. A Troll crossing house keeps its worst stretch, and Ogre camps are hired there most years to clear what the windy season brings down.

What moves through the Scars is mostly kindreds, herds, and the goods of escort trade: hides, felt, and stock outward, and grain, dried fruit, worked metal, and coastal goods inward from the folds and the Soundchain corridor. Messages and warnings move faster than any of it. Passage is held at several points, and a party needs all of them to agree. The escort orders decide whether any kindred will escort a party at all. A Troll house decides whether its crossing is open and what it costs. A Rimward custodian at the bottom of the descent decides what can be received. And the weather, which no one controls, decides whether any of those decisions matter this week. Escort custom forgives storm delay only if it is declared; a captain who waits out a storm without sending word has, by High-Scar reckoning, half-broken passage already.

Not every blade on the shelves belongs to an escort order. Struck-name outlaws hire out as sellswords to anyone the orders refuse. Hire-spears of no fixed kindred take a party's pay for a single crossing, and a captain short of warriors hires them and counts them twice at every well. Camp-rings pay beast-hunters by the pair of ears in a dun-dog year, and treasure-hunters come up from the basins looking for a guide who will take them to the Glassbelt edge and no further.

From Orrin Talloway, *A Road-Book of Both Halves*

> *We waited four days at Gapmouth, the shelter below the Whetgap, with eleven other parties, everyone in it wrapped to the eyes, and I learned more about the High Scars in those four days than in the months before. The shelter is a long stone room with a fire at each end and no door on the windward side, because a door there*

would be torn off; the wind comes in, goes round the room like a dog looking for its place, and goes out again. Over the inner door hangs a spear with a broken shaft, and the first night an old escort told me whose it had been and how the parties sheltering there had taken it from him. Every morning a runner came down from the ridge and said whether the pass was open. Every morning it was not, and every morning our captain sent a runner of our own back down the route to say so to whoever was waiting for us at the bottom. Nobody in that shelter would have dreamed of not sending word.

On the fifth morning we went up. The worst stretch belongs to a Troll house, and its keeper sat on a ledge at the mouth of it as if the mountain had set her down there and forgotten her. She took her price from our captain in salt, weighed by eye, and then she looked along the pass for a long while, at nothing I could see, and said we could go. I have called tolls at a river window for most of my working life and I envied her. Nobody argued. Above her the ropes of the crossing ran along the face, and I understood that nobody argued because she could cut them.

Halfway through, the scree had come down across the path, and an Ogre camp was clearing it, a dozen of them moving stones I would not have tried to move with a team. They had a fire going on a sheltered shelf and a pot on it, and our captain stopped and set a share of our stores beside the pot before we went past. Nobody asked. I asked afterwards, because that is my trade, and was told that an Ogre camp that is fed first is a road that stays open, and a camp that is not is a slide waiting to happen. Beyond the pass a cairn stood on its own on the bare shelf, with a name cut in it that the wind had nearly taken. The captain touched it going by and said the name aloud, so that it had been said once more, and told me, when I asked, that a name nobody says is how the dead come to stand in the road.

Grounds, Shelters, and Houses

The High Scars have no capital and few places that stay put. What stands still is the route: treaty-grounds where parties change hands, passward shelters at the pass mouths, and Troll houses on the worst crossings. The greatest treaty-ground, **Oldcairn**, is the nearest thing to a centre, since the route moots sit there in the calm months. It is a broad ledge on a high shelf among the oldest cairns of the chains, whose names no living kindred can read. Most of the year it holds a few wardens and elders and the wind; in the calm months kindreds gather in their thousands, recite their dead, take parties on and hand them over, and settle their blood-debts before the route moot, or, when the moot will not settle them, at the edge of the ledge with knives. Every kindred that camps there knows which of the unreadable cairns its neighbours claim.

Gapmouth is the passward shelter at the mouth of the Whetgap: stone-walled refuges, store-chambers, and a catch-pool, kept stocked by whoever holds the route. Ogre camps carry its stores up before the windy season, and once the pass closes it fills with parties waiting it out, sometimes several hundred at a time, all eating from the same declared stores. Its walls have held against raiders twice in living memory, and the second time the parties sheltering inside held them; the raiding captain's spear still hangs over the inner door. **Slidescar**, the Troll crossing house that keeps the worst stretch of the pass, is a family of a dozen settled in rock shelters above the scree, mending what the slides break and taking its price from whoever crosses. Escort captains pay what it asks, since it can close the stretch at will, and most years it hires an Ogre camp to clear what the windy season brought down.

Thingrass is what most of the High Scars looks like on any night: the seasonal camp-ring of one kindred, about a hundred strong, pitched in hide shelters on the sheltered side of a ridge while its herds graze the thin grass of the shelves. When

the grass gives out the ring moves on. Its children learn their cairns on the walk between grounds and run warnings to the next camp.

Captains of the Whetgap

About 48,000 people live in the High Scars, some nineteen in twenty of them High-Scar Orc kindreds. Ogre burden-camps bring a thousand or more for the heavy seasons, Troll crossing houses hold about four hundred, and Giants are rarer than the stories about them.

Route dress is a knee-length coat of felt or hide, belted, with a hood and face-wrap against the wind, leather leggings, and the hair bound long. High-Scar Orcs are lean and long-limbed even by Orc measure. Most do not die old. One child in three is lost before it is grown, and the routes take most adults, by exposure on the shelves, rockfall and slides, and the raids and retaliation that follow broken passage. A captain who survives the road years is an honoured elder at sixty, and a newborn can expect about thirty years. Names follow the kindred, as in the Rimward Basins, and when a captain stands before a route moot, the passes the line has held are named after the person: Durakh Ishna, Zhaldru Ovra, Thakka Mur. Ogres and Trolls live, die, and are named here as on the cradle side of the Glassbelt.

Memory and Belief

The High Scars remember themselves as the reason the Pacts exist. Long before the Founding of the Windscar Pacts (c. 180,000–c. 150,000 BR), distance here killed whoever tried to cross it alone, and the treaty-grounds, escort oaths, and the blood owed for a broken passage that became the Pacts grew from the need to cross together. Much later the route side hardened into the escort orders themselves, in the High-Scar Escort Orders (c. 121,000–c. 112,000 BR), as the basin side hardened into the well-keepers below. The memory is kept on the land. Every cairn raised where an escort fell is a remembrance, and every route moot remembers which kindreds held passage and which broke it.

The war at the wells is the first tale a captain tells a new party at the shelter fire: the escort-bands that came down the ramps armed and took the wells by force, the sorties from the rim strongholds, the travellers who died of thirst between wells that kept changing hands, and the treaty-ground where both sides swore at last because both had buried too many. Smaller deeds are cut beside the names: the warning runner who outran a raiding band across three shelves in one night and fell dead at Gapmouth's gate with the warning given, and the escort songs about raiders who tried to cross against a Cairn-Waker's raised arm, every one of which ends on a slide. The live argument is whether that memory still measures anything true, or whether the High Scars now honour names more than roads. It sits on two of the threads of Caeldon's history: **Roads and Crossings**, for who keeps the passes open and by whose strength, and **Burden and Bonded Labour**, for the Ogre camps that carry the routes and what they are owed for it.

Ushkar keeps the names here. Kindreds recite their dead at the treaty-grounds, and the oldest cairns, their names worn past reading, are called his tears: the Warden still trying to remember those who have been forgotten. Children hear the tale of the escort who tried to strike his own name from the stone to escape his family's broken oath, and was made to remember it, because the debt was part of his line and not a burden he could put down. Rakhal is the wind itself. Lone thorn trees along the escarpment routes, struck by lightning and not burned, are taken as his marks, still waiting for the next storm, and his following is growing among those who think the escort orders have started honouring names over roads.

The Rimward Basins

Below the Shearline the Windscar stops moving and starts keeping. The Rimward Basins are the anchored half of the Expanse: a country of closed interior basins whose rims carry the strongholds, defended wells, and rock-cut cisterns that let Orc life stay in one place long enough to matter. Water, stores, and refuge are counted here, guarded here, and fought over here: by escorts who think a well is being hoarded, by struck-name raiders who think it is thinly held, and by whatever comes in off the desert with nothing left to lose. Without the Basins a passage confederacy would have roads but nowhere to stand. Dry, hard, and defended, they are nothing like the soft river basins of the cradle-web that share the word.

Bowls of Salt

The Basins are the lower, south-western half of the Expanse: a chain of closed basins along the desert's edge. The inland rim faces west over the Glassbelt, with the Lastwater Wells on its outermost spurs; the Shearline rises to the north and east, and the ramps climb it to the High Scars. Eastwards the rim tracks give way to the Lee Road, which runs over the Lee Wall to the Leeward Folds in seven or eight weeks under escort, and south of the basins nothing is mapped. Deepdraw stands on a rim spur near the middle of the chain, three or four weeks from the Lastwater Wells, and the Long Pan, with Saltcut on its edge, fills a neighbouring basin. The strongholds round the deep wells are the settled cores. Between them lie pans and washes where dun dogs and pan hyenas follow the weak, and crossers bury their dead under stone, because the hyenas dig.

Each basin is a shallow bowl with no outlet. Its floor is salt crust, dust flat, or cracked clay that may hold a skin of brackish water for a few weeks after the rare storms before it dries back to white. The rim is the living part: terraced spurs and rock shelves where runoff can be caught, springs and deep wells reached, and stone cut and stacked into walls. Low dividing ridges and dry washes separate one basin from the next, and long ramps climb from the rims towards the escarpments above. The broadest floor, the **Long Pan**, floods ankle-deep in a good year and grows a short-lived green fringe. Every herd within reach is driven down to graze it before it browns, and the pan's edge is the one place in the Basins where many kindreds camp side by side without a stronghold between them.

The dangers are mostly slow ones. One bad year is survivable; a run of them is not, because reserves that carry a basin through a season cannot carry it through three. Dust storms strip the floors, bury catchment channels, and close the ramps for days at the turn of the windy season. Salt crust lies over mud that takes a laden animal to the belly, the pans store heat and give it back at night, and washes run as sudden floods off the rim after a storm nobody in the basin saw. An unworked well silts up; a cistern left too long goes bad. Then there are the things that bite: sand-coloured horned vipers buried at the edge of the shade, scorpions in every wall, hairy sun spiders that chase a sleeper's shadow, a cornered dust runner that kicks hard enough to break bone, and pan hyenas that take the sick, the weak, and anyone who sleeps alone. And there are people: raiders who know which reserves are thinly guarded and come up the washes by night under the wind's noise in the last dry weeks, parties claiming an escort they do not have, and, on the inland rim, whoever has come in off the Glassbelt with nothing left.

The Stronghold and the Rings

Rimward 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; after the storms they spread out again across the outer slopes and basin floors, and each stronghold shrinks to its keeping garrison. A **stronghold** is a walled spur above a water source: dry-stone walls, a cistern cut into the rock below, stone-lined chan-

nels leading runoff into it, store-chambers dug back into the rim, and a watch platform that sees the ramps and the pan, where a horn can call the whole camp to the walls. Seasonal camps pitch in the same rings around it year after year, low felt tents in circles, herds penned between them, and a family's place in those rings shows its rank, and is fought over when the rank changes.

Most work is water work. Well-keepers draw and clean. Cistern crews scrape silt, patch lining, and clear the channels after every storm. Herders move their animals between pastures shared under water-and-pasture bargains between kindreds, kept for as long as neither grows strong enough to break them; when one does, herds are driven off at night and feuds start that last three generations. Salt cutters work the pans in the cooler months, the white slabs stacked at the rim for the escorts to carry out. Below the larger cisterns, small walled terraces grow hardy grain and fodder on strict water shares. People eat milk and meat from the herds, dried and salted stores, terrace grain, and whatever the trade roads bring up. Guests are fed, but from a declared share that everyone in the camp knows. The dry-season gathering is when the most people stand closest to the least water, and it is also when escorted parties arrive down the ramps or in from the inland edge. Whether they can be received is reckoned in the open, at the cistern, in front of the people whose water it is, and with the escort's spears and the stronghold's both in plain sight.

Keeping and the Three Answers

Power in the Basins belongs to whoever holds the water, and whoever holds a water source answers for it. The rim's offices are the ones that hardened in the age of the Rimward Well-Keepers: well-keepers and cistern guardians who hold each source; **reserve moots**, where custodians from several strongholds meet to check one another's counts and the stronghold with the most spears has the last word; and **answer bearers** who face arriving parties and give the stronghold's declared reply. A custodian's word is weighed against the remembered honesty of the line behind it, and a line that once lied about water carries that lie for generations, and sometimes pays for it in blood when the lie is found out.

Pact oaths bind them, and the escorts' spears keep the oaths honest. A stronghold may narrow access when a reserve would truly fail, but a sworn escorted party is still owed one of three answers: water and rest for a time, delay on a named condition, or redirection under guard to another well that can bear it. Refusing without an answer is the thing a Rimward custodian least wants said of his stronghold, because escorts answer it in blood. The answers are not Orc in origin. The Rimward Passage War forced the strongholds to swear them, and the Pacts took them from the Halfling cistern halls of the Leeward Folds, which had set out four such answers in the Measure Cistern Crisis (c. 147,000–c. 143,000 BR). On the Lee Road towards the folds the Rimward Orcs find themselves on the asking side of someone else's reserve, and Rimward folk who have waited on a Leeward cistern hall's answer come home understanding the High Scars a little too well.

The keeping is fought over from several sides. The High-Scar escort orders hold that every narrowing is hoarding until the count shows otherwise. Inside the Basins, the growing following of Rakhal has little patience for reserves that stay shut for reasons nobody can still state; some strongholds keep cisterns closed under old reserve-right whose first reason no living custodian can give. Struck-name bands live outside the Pacts and take water wherever the guard is thin; the reserve moots put a price on their captains' heads, and bounty-takers bring back the heads. On the inland rim, desert crossers who belong to no Pact arrive needing water no Pact oath was ever sworn for.

Ramps, Tracks, and the Last Water

There are no rivers. Water moves by well, channel, and cistern, and roads run from one water source to the next. A route is only as open as the last well on it. The ramps climb the Shearline to the High Scars, and the busiest ends at the Oath Cistern. The rim tracks link strongholds around each basin and across the dividing ridges, carrying herds, stores, and custodians on their way to reserve moots. The Lee Road leaves from the Basins as the escorted route towards the Leeward fold markets, running on Halfling market timing. And on the outermost spurs of the inland rim stand the **Lastwater Wells**, a chain of defended wells and the last water any Pact custodian answers for, where Glassbelt crossings begin and end.

Salt cut from the pans, herd animals, hides, and escort service go out. Grain, dried fruit, and stored goods come back from the Folds, along with whatever coastward trade has passed through other hands. Salvage and travellers come in from the desert edge. Escorts decide who travels, but custodians decide where they can stop, and in this country that means custodians decide whether a road is usable at all. A stronghold cannot close a road with a wall. It can narrow one by declaring reserve, which is why the three answers matter more here than anywhere else in the Pacts, and why salt-trains are what struck bands wait for between the wells.

The edge country keeps its own trades. A salt-train hires its escort kindred and then, in a bad year, a second band of hired blades to watch the first. Bounty-takers ride the rim tracks with a reserve moot's price on a struck captain's head. Beast-hunters are paid by the stronghold for every pan hyena that has learned to dig at the cairns. And at the Lastwater Wells, salvage from the Glassbelt changes hands for water, with the custodians watching for the shards and slag they forbid.

Strongholds and Grounds

The Rimward kindreds have no capital. The reserve moots are as near as they come to a centre, and the largest of them meets at **Deepdraw**: a stronghold on a rim spur above the deepest well of its basin, with dry-stone walls, a rock-cut cistern below, stone-lined channels, store-chambers dug back into the rim, and a watch platform over the ramps and the pan. After the storms it shrinks to a keeping garrison of a hundred or more; in the dry months well over four thousand people camp around it in their customary rings. The custodians who gather there check the counts of half the basin's strongholds, and nobody checks Deepdraw's own too closely. Its walls have never fallen, and the rim below them is strewn with the bones of raiders who tried. The Oath Cistern, at the foot of the busiest ramp, is a stronghold too, and its quarrels are the Basins' best known.

Saltcut is a small stronghold on the edge of the Long Pan, home to a few dozen households: salt cutters who work the crust in the cooler months, and the well-keepers of its one shallow well. Its salt goes out by escort to the Folds and the routes beyond. The crust out on the pan has swallowed whole salt-trains, and its cutters say that on still nights the drowned animals can be heard far out on the white. It once took a raiding band that chased a salt-train onto it, and Saltcut children still dig at the edge for its loot. The camping ground on the pan's green fringe is **Shortgreen**: empty in most years, it holds for a few weeks after a good flood more herds than anywhere else in the Windscar, and then the fringe browns. With so many kindreds camped close, old feuds come out with the grass, and most years end with blood on the pan before the herds go home.

On the outermost spurs, each of the Lastwater Wells is a small walled post with its well, a cistern, and a handful of custodians and their kin, the first water that Glassbelt crossers reach, often in poor shape, and the last that salvage crews and treasure-hunters drink going out. The custodians cut a notch on the well-post for each one who goes out

and a second for each who comes back, and the first row is always the longer. The southernmost watches the mouth of the **Hanging Vale**, a dry valley a day's walk along the rim that the Incursion of Krystallis (c. 352,000 to c. 349,000 BR) left standing in crystal: thornscrub, stones, and a hawk in mid-stoop, all clear and still, and an edge that still facets a hand laid on it long or a sleeper laid against it. Inside stand the **Shard-Hosts**, people and beasts turned into perfect crystal copies of themselves, still since the breaking, and nobody wants to learn what would wake them. No kindred camps within sight of the valley. Shard-hunters chip at its edge in gloves anyway, for the clear stone the strongholds buy, and the kindred torques and blades of those who walked in and stood still lie inside the edge in plain sight, a long arm's reach too far.

Whose Water

About 80,000 people live in the Rimward Basins, nearly all of them Orcs of the Rimward kindreds, and in the dry months half a basin's people may camp in the rings around one stronghold. A few dozen Ogre and Troll crossers, kindred circuits, and desert arrivals are at the wells in any season.

Rimward dress is felt and hide: a long belted coat, leggings, and a headcloth wound against the dust, worn alike by herders and custodians. Salt cutters wrap their hands and eyes against the glare off the pans. Rimward Orcs are the heaviest of their people. One child in three dies before it is grown, of fevers and fouled water, and in the third year of a dry cycle of hunger and thirst. Adults die mostly of the land, by thirst and hunger in a long dry run, flash floods in the washes, and raids on thinly guarded reserves. Custodians, who stay nearest the water, live longest, into their seventies. The kindred's name comes first, as Orc custom has it; custodian lines add the water they keep, and a struck name loses the kindred. Recited at a dry-season gathering: Kharzu Ura, Utmar Grushna, Ogvath Aksha, Sarakh Mhuran, Utmar Tazgul. A Rimward greeting asks a stranger whose water they drank last.

Counts and Recitations

The Basins remember in counts: which stronghold gave honest numbers in the bad years, which one hid behind reserve-right, which party drank past its declared share. Their chain runs from the Founding of the Pacts, when rim strongholds stopped being only local lifelines, through the outward-facing terms with the Leeward Folds and the Measure Cistern Crisis, to the Rimward Passage War (c. 135,000–c. 128,000 BR) and then the Rimward Well-Keepers (c. 124,000–c. 116,000 BR), when keeping the water became the Basins' defining burden.

The rims tell the Passage War as the time they kept the Pacts' reserves from being spent past recovery: the sorties from the walls, the well-keepers who sealed their own cisterns with stone rather than let them be taken, the custodian line that held Deepdraw through a whole dry season with the escorts camped below. Both sides claim one hero of it, the answer bearer who walked out alone towards the escort camp with Deepdraw's true count and was killed by a raider's arrow before she reached it; the war ran on another year because her count was never heard. The worst Rimward curse is still *may you be counted short*. High-Scar memory tells the same war as the time the basins tried to close the roads. Both versions are recited, and neither side lets the other's go unanswered.

Belief is kept by clans. At dry-season gatherings custodian lines recite the ancestors who kept honest counts, and in Rimward memory a struck name is as likely to belong to a custodian who lied about water as to an escort who broke passage. Rakhal grows strongest where the Windscar settles, and nowhere is more settled than the Basins. Dust storms off the pans are his, First Gale fires burn on the rim heights, and the tale of the **Still Well** is told against the strongholds: a camp stayed

so long at one well that the water soured and the herds sickened, and still no one would move, until the Storm-Caller tore the shelters down and drove the camp on to sweet water. Beyond the inland rim lie the Glassbelt's dead salt pans, all that is left of the sea whose people worshipped Mereth the Salt-Witch, the faded god of preservation and Rakhal's opposite in principle. His followers point at them when they want to show a custodian where keeping ends.

The Oath Cistern

At the foot of the busiest ramp down the Shearline, where the escort country of the High Scars ends at the rim of the Basins, stands the **Oath Cistern**: a Rimward stronghold and its cistern. Escorted parties come down the ramp under the escorts' oath of passage and arrive at water the stronghold holds by its own walls, and whether they will be let drink is the most argued question in the Windscar. It is the place where the Pacts come closest to breaking their own peace. The ledge where parties are handed over is escort ground, and the water a few paces below it is not. A war was fought over that stair.

The Place

The ramp comes down the Shearline in long switchbacks cut into the escarpment face and ends on a broad shelf of rock above the rim. That shelf is the **Sworn Ledge**, the oath-ground where High-Scar captains hand their parties over and the stronghold gives its answer. From it a short stair leads down to the cistern. Cairns stand on the switchbacks for every escort lost on the ramp, and parties do not linger by the oldest of them after dark: where a cairn's name is fading, Cairn-Wakers have been seen barring the path. The highest cairns are older than the rest and larger, the graves of war-captains who fell on the ramp in the Passage War, raised over them by their own escorts with their blades and torques beneath the stones. Every few years one is found opened, and the escorts hunt whoever did it down the whole length of the rim.

The cistern is cut into the rock of the rim beneath the Shearline, which gives it more runoff than most: stone-lined channels gather what the escarpment sheds in a storm and bring it into the basin. Above it the stronghold stands on a walled spur, with store-chambers dug back into the rim and a watch platform that sees the whole ramp and the pan below. Beneath the working cistern lies an older chamber, sealed by reserve-right since before anyone's grandmother. No living keeper can say why it was closed. The camp rings say it holds the water of a better age, sweet and deep enough to green the pan; others say it holds the bones of the stronghold's first keepers, walled in with what they would not share; Rakhal's followers say something in it answers when the First Gale blows across the seal. The keepers say nothing, and set a guard on the seal in the windy season.

In the dry months the seasonal camps pitch around the stronghold in the same rings every year. A party coming down the ramp sees them long before it arrives, and arrives in front of them: whatever is answered on the ledge is answered in sight of the people whose water it is. Out on the pan, beyond the last ring, pan hyenas wait for the weak, the sick, and the newly buried, which is why the Rimward dead go under stone.

Ledge and Water

The water belongs to the stronghold because the stronghold can hold it. Well-keepers and cistern guardians hold the cistern and its channels; the stronghold's answer bearer meets each arriving party on the ledge and gives the reply; its counts go before the reserve moot it shares with neighbouring strongholds, where each checks the others' figures and none lets a neighbour grow too strong. In the War the strongholds' war-captains

held the rim against the route captains, and their descendants still carry the swords of that siege at the dry-season gathering.

The ledge belongs to passage. Oath-ground elders of the escort orders stand at every handover, and a grievance against either side goes first to the High-Scar route captains, who side with their own escorts more often than not. Keepers do not climb the ramp to answer, and escorts go down the stair to draw only when the answer lets them. The users are the escorted parties themselves, mostly Orc traders and kindreds with herds, salt, and hides, some bound on along the rim tracks or towards the Lee Road; their captains; the Rimward households and herders of the rings; and Ogre burden-camps bringing the injured down off the shelves. The struck-name bands come no closer than the camp rings will let them, and in a bad year they raid the shelves for what the ledge refused them, run off herds, and leave escorts dead beside their cairns. The stronghold pays a price for the head of a raider brought down to the ledge, and some of the herders' sons live on it. In the hardest years the strongholds hire whole sellsword companies off the rim tracks to clear the shelves, and pay them in water, which no company refuses and none forgets.

The Cistern's Year

The Oath Cistern is busiest when it is driest. As the dry months come on, the households and herds draw in to the rim and the camp rings fill, and that is when the escorts bring the most parties down the ramp. At the turn of the windy season, dust storms close the ramp for days at a time and parties wait it out on the shelves above or on the ledge below. After every storm the cistern crews are out clearing the channels.

An ordinary day starts on the watch platform, where the guards read the warning fires along the shelves and sight parties on the switchbacks hours before they reach the bottom. A fire lit twice means raiders; a fire lit three times means dun dogs on the line behind a herd. When a party reaches the ledge, its captain declares it before the elders, and the answer bearer gives one of the three answers. In an easy year most answers are the first. In a hard year few are, and each one is argued on the ledge with hands on hilts.

At the dry-season gathering the keeper lines recite the ancestors who kept honest counts here, and High-Scar kindreds waiting on the ledge recite their own dead at the same time. The two recitations do not always agree about the same years. Up on the rim heights, followers of Rakhal light the First Gale fires, and some of them look hard at the sealed chamber. The War is still close here, in curses more than in songs. *May your stair run foul* is the worst thing a rim herder can say to a neighbour, after the keepers who poisoned their own stair rather than let it be stormed. Escorts tell, round the fires on the shelves, of the war-band that held the ledge for nine days with the water in sight and drank its own horses' blood, and of the keeper's daughter who carried water up to them by night and was walled in for it; the keepers tell the same tale with her name struck out. Camp children play ledge and stair, one side holding the steps and the other trying to reach the trough, and nobody wants to be the keepers.

From Orrin Talloway, *A Road-Book of Both Halves*

> *We came over the lip of the Shearline at first light and the whole basin was under us at once, white as a salt dish and as flat, with the ramp folding down the cliff towards it in switchbacks so long I lost count of them. Our captain stopped us there and lit nothing, said nothing, only waited until a fire answered from the stronghold's watch platform far below. Then we went down. It took the whole morning. The wind came up the face at our backs and pushed at the packs, and twice the captain sent a runner ahead to say we were slower than declared. We passed the great cairns on the upper bends, and nobody spoke there. By noon I could see the camp rings around the spur, hundreds of low felt tents in circles so even they might have been*

drawn with a cord, herds penned between them, and a haze of dust and dung smoke over everything. I could see the people too, which was the point. They could see us.

The ledge is a bare shelf of rock, swept clean by the wind. Two elders of the escort orders were already standing on it, and a custodian with a staff, headcloth wound to the eyes, came up the stair and stopped one step short of the top. That step, I was told later, is the whole of the bargain, and men have died on it. Our captain declared us: how many, how many beasts, which kindred had guided us and by which shelters. The custodian answered with numbers, the stronghold's water against the camps' need, and then the answer: water for a time, one draw tonight and one at dawn. Nobody cheered. A woman in the nearest ring said something to her neighbour, and they both looked at the ground below the cistern, where an older, darker stone was set into the rim with no channel leading to it.

On the Serath the toll is whatever the bridge-holders have decided, and the clerk reads it out to whoever asks, and nobody listens. Here the answer was given to perhaps three hundred people who had walked a long way to hear it, with spears on both sides of the stair, and every one of them could have recited it back. I wrote it down that night, which made our captain laugh. Down here, I was told, a thing written is a thing one person remembers.

We drank in turn, by the count, from leather buckets the well-keepers lowered for us. The water was cold and tasted of stone. That night the custodian lines sang their ancestors' names at one fire and our captain's kindred sang theirs at another, and at one point the two songs came to the same dry year from opposite sides, and both fires went quiet for a moment before going on.

How the Ledge Was Made

The cistern became an oath-ground in the long age of the Founding of the Pacts, when rim strongholds stopped being only local lifelines. Its walls and channels have been torn down by storm and siege and raised again through every age since; the ramp, the ledge, and the name have outlasted every wall. It took its present shape in the Rimward Passage War. In a hard dry cycle the Rimward strongholds shut their water to escorted parties more sharply than custom allowed, and the High-Scar route captains called it hoarding behind respectable fear and came down the ramps in arms. The Oath Cistern was besieged from the ledge; its keepers fouled the stair rather than let it be stormed, and parties died of thirst within sight of the water. Neither side could take the other's ground, so the peace named two customs and let neither erase the other. Reserve-right lets keepers narrow access where a reserve would truly fail. Treaty-right gives an accepted escort more than bare refusal, so the keeper must still give one of the three answers. Afterwards each side built a heavier order on its own half of that peace, the well-keepers on the rim and the Escort Orders (c. 121,000–c. 112,000 BR) on the routes. The line between them now runs down the stair from the ledge to the cistern, and each side holds its half with its own spears.

The Glassbelt Interior

The inland rim of the Basins is the edge of the whole Windscar, and past the Lastwater Wells the land stops pretending. The **Glassbelt Interior**, which escorts and crossers call simply the Glassbelt, is Caeldon's first named true desert: a country of dead fire and dead sea, where the salt-crusted dead walk the old shorelines at night, figures fused into the ruins whisper after those who rob them, and every crosser has heard of a furnace-lord's treasure-vault that the sand uncovers once a lifetime and covers again. The Windscar is dry and hard but still has its uplands, basin rims,

escarpment routes, defended wells, and Orc passage custom. The Glassbelt begins where all of that gives out: salt flats, heat basins, glassed ground, dead furnace zones, rare wells, mirage roads, and country that even skilled Windscar escorts will not enter without need. It lies between the halves, the cradle-web to the west and the Windscar to the east, and runs north and south further than anyone has followed it: the only overland ground between the two halves of the known world. On its western side it meets the ruin margins of the Broken Marches; on its eastern side it faces the Lastwater Wells and the inland edge of the High Scars.

Twice Made Worse

The Glassbelt was dry before anyone lived in it, but people made it worse, twice. The elder **Ash-Furnace Civilization** burned hardest in parts of this country. Its overburn, and the god it fed, Ozhar the Pyre-King, left vitrified ruins, slag belts, and glassed ground that still shape the land as much as the climate does; the fall of that civilization ran from c. 225,000 to c. 168,000 BR. Separately, an inland sea once lay here, and the people who harvested its salt grew so devoted to preservation that their worship helped kill it. Their faded god, **Mereth the Salt-Witch**, is remembered in desert lore; the people themselves are not, and their sea is now salt pan and dry seabed. What remains is too dry, too hot, and too full of dangerous ruin for any one people to hold. Settlement is thin, the ruins hold more death than shelter, and no power has ever held the whole.

The Desert as Crossers Know It

The Glassbelt is not empty. It is thinly peopled at its edges, crossed by few, and survivable only by knowing the wells, fearing the ruins, and never trying to hurry. Its ground is salt pans and dry inland seas, ash-coloured flats, heat-shimmer basins, stone deserts, glassy furnace scars, buried road-lines, dead cisterns, caravan wells, shade sanctuaries, and ruin fields. The pale scorpion of the glassed ground kills, and crossers shake out their boots every dawn. On the warm glass hunt glassback lizards, man-long hunters of anything that moves, with the scars' heat in their blood and a burning bite, and striped pan hyenas follow the crossings at a distance. At the edges raiders wait at the wells for parties too weak to fight. The kindreds hunt well-raiders without mercy, and a raider they take is left staked by the well he robbed, for the hyenas and as a warning to the next band.

Out on the pans the stepped shorelines of the vanished salt-people still stand far above any water. Those who cross say they can hear the crunch of Mereth's footsteps there, and that the air drains the moisture from the lungs. At night the **Salt-Kept**, salt-crusted dead of that people, walk the old shorelines and dry whatever they hold. Desert folk tell of a ruler of that people who asked her to keep him forever, and was kept, unable to move, while his people dwindled around him; they say he is still out there on the pans, with his crown and his treasury around him, and that the Salt-Kept are his court.

In the deepest dead furnace zones the glassed ground is said to hold the fire's heat still, and dark red ember moss grows there that smoulders for days once lit. Crossers go over such ground only when they must, and salvagers who work it keep the old warnings: do not speak Ozhar's name near a furnace, and do not carry ash or slag out. At a few dead furnaces the furnace world's own automata, the **Slag-Tenders**, still rake the cold slag and drive off whoever takes it, and in the vitrified ruins stand the **Fused Dead**, figures melted into the walls, whose whispers rise and follow anyone who carries ash or slag away. The metal in those haunted ruins is the best on Caeldon, and the salvagers' saying about it is a short one: *one more piece is the last piece*. The oldest never-touch marks of the Edgeway Kindreds, the grade of danger-mark that says a place is not to be entered at all, descend from warnings set around vitrified furnace ground like this.

The One Crossing

The two halves of the known world touch here and nowhere else. Windscar peoples know the Glassbelt's edges and some crossing routes, especially from the Rimward Basins and the High Scars, but the deep Glassbelt is not Orc homeland, and Orc escorts keep to its Windscar edge. Only a few road peoples go the whole way across: the deep-desert circuits of the **Edgeway Kindreds**, who know where never-touch ground lies; some Ogre burden orders and Troll crossing houses; and a scatter of Goblin and Wrought salvagers among the Salvage Peoples. Those crossers are why the same road peoples, and some of the same gods, turn up on both sides: kindred marks on cradle-web ruins and on the far side's, Troll houses swearing under the same title on both sides of the desert, Ogre fires kept for the same Hearth-Mother. None of them owns the region. No lord, league, or hold on either side deals with the other, and no Human caravan or settler crosses. Now and then a band of treasure-seekers out of the Broken Marches tries the near ruins without a kindred guide; the kindreds find their camps afterwards, and sometimes their maps, which are sold again at the Undercroft Fair to the next band. The crossing runs west to east between the two edges, four to six months well to well, and nobody starts it in the hot months. In a good year a few hundred crossers go over in the cool months, most of them kindred folk, wrapped from head to foot against sun and salt, and thirst and heat kill more of them than anything in the ruins, though every circuit sings a list of names at the far well.

At the Glassbelt's cradle-facing edge, at the foot of an unnamed range, lies the fog of the Hushvale, which crossers know only as a route nobody takes and a place nobody comes back from unchanged. No settlement of the Glassbelt's own is known; its caravan wells and shade sanctuaries are stopping places rather than homes. Crossers tell of oasis towns deep in the interior and of lamps seen at night where no well is marked, and every circuit has a crosser who will swear, after the last of the water is shared out, that he saw towers in the heat beyond the mirage roads, and that the lamps were moving towards him. Where those towns and true wells lie, if they exist, who lights the lamps, which furnace-lords' vaults still lie under the glass and what guards them, and which salvage routes are worth the lives they cost, nobody has written down.

From Orrin Talloway, *A Road-Book of Both Halves*

I crossed the Glassbelt twice, once each way, and I will not cross it a third time. I went over with a kindred whose circuit runs the whole way, in a company of perhaps forty with their beasts and their loads of salvage, and in all those months they never once told me how far we had still to go. I came to understand that this was not secrecy. Distance out there is not a number. It is how much water is left, and they told me that every evening, exactly.

The ground changes colour as you go. First the grey of ash, then a white so bright at noon that the kindred wrapped their eyes in cloth and led the beasts by touch, then a brown pan crazed into plates like a dry riverbed a hundred miles wide. Twice we passed stepped ridges standing up out of the flats, one above another, and someone told me they were shorelines, and that the sea had stood at each of them in turn on its way down to nothing. On the second evening a woman of the kindred walked out a little way from the camp and stood listening, and came back and said only that we would start before dawn. Nobody asked her what she had heard. In the night I woke to a dry, slow crunching out on the pan, like someone walking on old snow, and the kindred lay very still around their fire until it had gone by. My lips cracked, and I drank my share of the evening count very slowly.

There is a kind of ground out there that shines. It lies in long tongues among the ruins, smooth and dark as old bottle-glass, and the kindred went round it even when going round

> *cost half a day. Their marks stood at its edges, stacked stones in a pattern I learned to know, and I asked what the pattern meant. Never-touch, they said, and when I asked why, they said it was older than the asking. Once, passing such a ruin at dusk, I heard what I took for voices in the walls, and a salvager who had been joking all day stopped joking and threw a piece of slag from his pack back over his shoulder without looking.*
>
> *We came in at the Lastwater Wells at evening, out of the heat-shimmer onto the rim, and the custodian who met us owed us nothing at all. We were no escorted party, no Pact had sent us, and the kindred did not pretend otherwise. The custodian looked at us a long time, at the beasts and at me, a Human out of the desert. Then water was given, a measure for each, and the measure was named aloud so that everyone at the well would know it had been given and not owed. Behind the custodian the well-post was cut with two rows of notches, and the upper row was much the longer. It was the first water I had drunk in that country, and I drank it standing.*

Tensions

- **Redirection by another name.** A sworn escort reaches the Oath Cistern late in a dry year and is offered redirection under guard to another well, across the Whetgap in the windy season. The captain calls it refusal dressed in Pact words, and has a party who will die on the shelves if the captain is right; the custodians hold the water either way.
- **The struck guide.** A party refused by the escort orders hires a guide from a struck-name band and arrives safely by a route no kindred will vouch for. The route moot must decide whether to take that route into the cairn-lines, or to hunt the guide down so that no party learns that honour is optional.
- **Who feeds the camp.** An Ogre burden-camp will not clear the Whetgap until it is fed. The escort orders say the route's food belongs to the parties waiting to cross, the Rimward custodians say their reserves are not for High-Scar labour, and the camp, by Hearth-Weight custom, is right to wait.
- **A Waker on the Whetgap.** A Cairn-Waker has risen across the Whetgap approach, and the escort it was failed by belongs to the strongest kindred on the route, which will not stand before the moot. A struck-name band is offering, for a price, a way round the Waker that no warden has walked.
- **The sealed reserves.** Some Rimward strongholds keep cisterns closed under old reserve-right whose first reason no living custodian can give, the chamber beneath the Oath Cistern among them. Rakhal's followers want such reserves opened or broken; a Rakhal band has already broken one by night and found it full of something other than water. Custodians answer that a forgotten reason is not a false one.
- **A well held for ransom.** Desert crossers refused at a Lastwater well came back with a struck band and took it, since no Pact oath says what the wells owe anyone off the Glassbelt. The band now says it will give the well back if the reserve moot restores its captain's name. Bounty-takers are already hunting the captain, and if they bring in his head the band has said it will foul the well before it leaves.
- **The lost season.** A party bound for the Leeward fold markets is given a proper delay at the Oath Cistern on a named condition, the next storm's runoff. The storm comes four days late, and the party misses its market day. The captain wants the loss answered for, with goods or with blood; Pact custom has three answers for what a keeper owes a party at the ledge, and none for what that delay costs at the far end of the road.

CHAPTER 16

The Tidelace and the Soundchain Roads

Read the water, write the reading,
date the writing, show the date;
precise and true are not one word,
and the mark that lies is the mark that's late.

— as chanted in the Tidelace sounding houses, *The Lacework Primer*

Seen from the sea, the Tidelace is frayed rather than drawn: fingers of rock, long inlets, island chains strung offshore with straits between them running like rivers at mid-tide, and behind it all the sea-cut terraces climbing to the cliffs. Hardly any of it is open water and hardly any is soft shore. Nearly all of it is water a hull can use only with knowledge: channels threaded between shoals, harbour mouths safe for an hour and wreck-ground for the next. It is a beautiful coast and a hungry one. The fog hides drowned crews, the shoals hide drowned harbours, and on the darkest nights there are fires on the headlands that no Gnome lit. The Gnomes of the coast have spent well over a hundred and fifty thousand years learning that water exactly, sounding it, marking it, beaconing it, and arguing on the open quay about whether the marks still tell the truth. Their league of harbour towns, the Gaugeward Leagues, has no king and no capital. It is held together by lights on headlands and by shame, for a town that lets its beacon fail or its marker drift is disgraced the length of the coast. Along its outer, Windscar-facing edge runs a second world: the Soundchain Roads, a chain of roadsteads and stations where Orc escorts come down off the cliffs and are fed, counted, held, or sent on, without ever being let in.

The Tidelace Coasts

The Tidelace Coasts are the first homeland of the Gnomes and the heartland of the Gaugeward Leagues, a league of harbour towns that keeps the coast usable through soundings, beacons, breakwaters, and old harbour families who say who may come in and when. The far side has three homelands, and each meets dangerous ground its own way. The Orcs of the Windscar cross it by escorted passage and hard covenant; the Halflings of the Folds hold it by bounded plenty and reserve custom; the Gnomes of the Tidelace chart it closely enough to live on without ever calling it tame.

AT A GLANCE

Lies	The far side's north coast, from the Soundchain Roads below the Windscar cliffs in the west to the Tidelace harbours facing the Leeward Folds; the Tidebound river mouths to the east, the Unrun Sea offshore.
People	About 190,000: some 180,000 Gnomes, Truesound and Fathomstair the largest towns, 12,000 of them station families on the Roads; about 10,000 coastal Humans in the hamlets; five to eight thousand Orc escorts on the Roads in the calm months; Thaluren at the river mouths in return season.
Civilizations	The Gaugeward Leagues, with the Tidelace calibration orders and the Answerward Pilotage; on the outer edge, the Windscar Pacts; at the estuaries, the Returning Concord.
Landscape	Inlets, island chains, tidal straits, cliff harbours, fog belts; marked inner channels, open outer roadsteads, and lee sounds.
Chief places	No capital; Fathomstair behind the Sounding Gate and Truesound, the largest harbour; the Turnwater Quays on the Soundchain Roads.
The year	The Medieval Era, c. 1,350 CR.

Made, Not Found

The Tidelace is the far side's north coast between the Soundchain Roads in the west and the river mouths of the Tidebound Reaches in the east. Island chains lie offshore, and beyond the outer isles to the north lies the Unrun Sea. South of the coast the terraces climb to the Leeward Folds, and short rivers come down from them to the estuaries; the coast road comes down from the Folds to the Counted Lee. Fathomstair, behind the Sounding Gate, is four or five weeks by pilot craft from the Turnwater Quays and Truesound ten days or so further along the inner channels; the Split Reed Mouth is about three weeks' sail east of Fathomstair, and Lastlight stands on an outer isle north of the coast. The harbour towns with their hamlets and coves are the settled cores; between them lie open water, fog, and the fogbells that come inshore with the Long Grey, and craft go between harbours only on called runs with a pilot.

Liveable coast here is made, not found. Breakwaters close the mouths of the best inlets; channels are cut, cleared, and marked; **sounding houses** keep the depths, tides, and marker positions of every approach; and beacon lines on the headlands pass warning from harbour to harbour. Behind the islands, the marked inner channels that run west to east from harbour to harbour are called the **Lacework** the length of the coast, and a harbour child knows its marks before the names of its towns. What looks inviting from offshore can kill a crew without local knowledge, while ground that looks too broken to settle becomes liveable through generations of patient sounding.

A Town Built Upward

A Tidelace 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; and on the headland stands the beacon tower. Stairs join the levels more often than streets do, and a stranger's legs know they have arrived before the stranger does. Larger towns gather several inlets behind one breakwater. The smallest are a single quay, a beacon, and a few dozen households.

What the Coast Does to People

Fog	The great fog belt of the outer coast, which pilots call the **Long Grey**, rolls in off open water with little warning and can lie on the straits for days. Beacons are lit, bells rung, and nobody moves who does not have to. In it row the **Grey Crews**, drowned sailors who hail living boats onto the rocks where they were lost, and with it come blooms of fogbells whose sting can stop a swimmer's heart.
Storm	In the storm season, gales drive surge into the inlets and break what the breakwater crews built in the calm months. Some harbours close their mouths entirely until spring.
Moving ground	Shoals shift and channels silt, so a mark true last year may be false this one, and the shoals are paved with the hulls of crews who trusted an old one. A reading is only as good as its last check, and every sounding house keeps the date of each.
What lives in the water	Congers as long as a man lie in the breakwater gaps and wrecks and take the fingers of anyone who reaches in; rays with venomous tail spines lie buried under the shallows; around the outer isles, blackfin pods hunt seals and will take a lone swimmer.
The false fire	A beacon lit in the wrong place is a wrecker's fire. Wrecker bands work the empty headlands between harbours, luring craft onto the rocks in storm and stripping what comes ashore, the living included. Harbours pay a bounty for them and hang them on the breakwater. Gnomes fear the false sign more than weather, because weather does not pretend.
Drowned harbours	Old breakwaters lie under the water, signal towers stand in the sea, and lost ports sit at the heads of silted inlets, left by earlier Gnome lines. They are a hazard to every keel, a haunted ground to pilots, and a treasure-ground to divers. Pilots' wives tell of a gauge house under the Long Grey whose brass instruments still tick, and of a drowned tide hall where the old families sank their plate rather than give it to the storm.

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 from childhood rather than born keen: a Gnome learns to read swell, cloud, and the marks on a gauge the way other children learn faces. Most work is harbour work, and the skilled part of it belongs to families. Sounding, pilotage, beacon keeping, gauge-making, and breakwater masonry pass down households for generations, each with its own marks and its own pride, and a family's name rises or falls with the honesty of its readings. Around those crafts work fishers, net-menders, boatbuilders, ropewalk crews, and quay hands. Food comes from the sea and the terraces: fish, shellfish, kelp, seabird eggs, and small crops from the terrace gardens, with stored grain and orchard goods brought in from the Leeward Folds by counted exchange.

A Household That Answers

What the Leagues add to ordinary harbour life is the way a household answers for its readings.

A first reading	A Gnome is born into a craft family and named with the family's mark, the sign its readings carry in the sounding-house ledger. A child of a sounding or pilot family is counted in the craft when their first reading is declared at the tide hall's bench and nobody can prove it wrong. Families keep the date as others keep a naming.
Family marks	Each sounding family cuts its own mark on the posts and markers it sets, so that every mark on the coast says who will answer for it.
Tide-hall day	The tide hall's elders sit at slack water, so that pilots and fishers can attend between tides. A day's quarrels run from a closed fishing ground and a breakwater nobody will mend to a moved marker nobody will own, and the oldest sounding families' word weighs heaviest.
Beacon nights	In the storm season every household of a beacon district owes a share of nights at the tower, whatever its craft. A missed night is entered in the beacon ledger beside the family's name.
Marriage	A marriage between craft families is entered in the harbour ledger, and the incoming spouse learns the new family's marks before they may set one.

The Tide-Table Year

The year runs on the tide tables and the weather. In the calm months the breakwater crews rebuild, the sounding houses resurvey the Lacework, and traffic moves. In the storm season the tide halls sit, the families mend, and the beacons burn through the long nights, with every household of the district taking its turn at the tower. Each season closes at the sounding house, where readings are compared and markers moved with half the harbour looking on. Once a year the **Festival of the Tides** brings the whole harbour down to the quays with flowers, shells, and stories for Maris of the Tides; it is said that if the offerings are sincere, the year's catch will be good.

Wards and Wreckers

The Leagues have no king and no harbour-capital. Each town rules itself, and the towns are bound to one another by shared beacons, common approach marks, and the duty to keep up what other harbours' lives depend on. A town that lets a beacon fail or a marker drift is shamed before the whole coast and finds its craft turned away at its neighbours' quays, and that, more than any council, holds the Leagues together. Between towns, quarrels over fishing grounds still end now and then in rammed boats and cut nets, and one feud between two Lacework harbours over a herring ground has outlasted every family that began it. Inside each town, the old harbour families divide the power between them.

The Tidelace carries more of this weight than any other part of the League world. Since the age of the **calibration orders**, the mainland sounding houses check one another's marks on a fixed round, while island Gnome lines on the outer chains keep lighter customs of their own. The two do not entirely trust each other: mainland towns still tell of island raiders who came over the straits in the hungry winters, and the isles tell of mainland harbours that shut their mouths on starving island craft. The old quarrel inside the Leagues is between receiving wards who want harbours kept open and sounders who want them kept right. From outside, Orc escorts push at the outer edge, Halfling partners at the Lee, and Thaluren run-watchers at the estuaries, and each knows the Gnomes' fondness for exact readings well enough to accuse the coast of hiding behind it. To harsher peoples Gnomes look delicate or fussy. On a coast

Harbour wards	They keep the harbour and its quays, receive traffic, and reckon what the harbour can bear this week.
Tide halls	The elders of the harbour families, sitting together, settle quarrels over entry, fishing grounds, and repair duty. What they decide usually favours the families that sit on them.
Sounding and gauge houses	They hold the readings every other decision rests on. Since the Sounding Gate Quarrel their word is no longer enough on its own: a moved marker must be seen moved, and a sounding can be challenged before the tide hall.
Beacon wardens	They keep the lights and the signal lines, and hunt the wreckers who light false ones. The coast calls them wrecker-hunters. A warden's company that brings in a wrecker band's lamp is feasted by every tide hall on the Lacework, and the lamps hang in the beacon towers as trophies.

where a wrong mark drowns a crew and a false fire is somebody's livelihood, that fussiness is what keeps the edge liveable.

The coast honours keepers, not conquerors, and cuts their family marks into the beacon stones. There is the beacon-keeper of the Tidelace Answering Custom (c. 137,000-c. 135,000 BR), who kept her fire lit through a raid with her tower burning beneath her; on beacon nights the youngest of the district carries the first stick up the stair for her. There is the pilot who answered a Grey Crew's hail on purpose to follow it in, and found the reef that had been killing boats for a century; no one has dared copy him. And there is the old sounding-master who walked out along the wreckers' headland alone at night and put out every false fire with his hat, which harbour children still play with a cap and a row of candles.

Harbour Towns

With no harbour-capital, the harbour all the others are measured against is the one behind the Sounding Gate, **Fathomstair**: a Tidelace town in its plainest form, climbing its cliff in flights of stairs from breakwater and quays to the sounding house on the first terrace, the families' stone houses and walled gardens above, and the beacon tower on the headland. Some eight thousand Gnomes live there, many of them in old sounding families, and every reading made there is called aloud on the quay.

Truesound, some twenty thousand strong, is the largest harbour town on the coast, gathering three inlets behind one breakwater on the Lacework. Its quays take most of the coastwise traffic between the inner harbours, its gauge houses make timing instruments for half the coast, and its tide hall sits through the whole storm season and hangs the wreckers its beacon wardens bring in on the outer breakwater, where every craft entering can see them. At the other end of the scale, **Lastlight** is an outer-isle harbour of a single quay, a beacon, and a few dozen households of an island Gnome line. Its beacon is the last on the coast before open water, and its families fish, keep the light, log the Long Grey as it rolls in, and gather what the Unrun Sea drifts onto their rocks. Not all of it is weed. On the beacon stair hangs the carved head of a beast no one can name, broken from some unknown hull's prow and cut in a wood no Gnome shipwright knows, and island children dare one another to touch its teeth.

The Hamlets

The coast has a second people. In timber hamlets on the beaches and outer coves between the harbours live a few **coastal Humans**, descendants of bands that drifted along far shores in the

Unrecorded Age, over tens of thousands of years, on a journey nobody recorded. Their hamlets stand on ground the towns have little use for. **Saltrack**, on a shingle cove between two harbours, is typical: a dozen timber houses above the tide line, boats drawn up on the shingle, drying racks, and a shrine to Maris at the water's edge. They fish from small open boats close inshore, gather shellfish and weed, and sell their catch at the nearest harbour quay, and some Human crews hire on to Gnome craft or work the quays. They are also the first to find what the sea throws up after a storm, and harbour wards suspect, not always wrongly, that a few hamlets keep a wrecker's lamp behind the drying racks. Saltrack's elders swear the hamlet never has, which is exactly what a wreckers' hamlet would swear, and the harbour ward who buys its fish has stopped asking. Human swimmers hire on as divers for the drowned harbours, because the Gnome families will pay well for an old family's plate and do not care to swim for it themselves. The Humans have their own sea-stories and weather-lore, but no story of where their people came from. Their oldest tales begin on this shore, and none of them mentions the basins of the cradle or any land behind the sea.

The Humans live inside the harbour custom, not at its edge. A hamlet is not an arrival to be answered: its boats are written in the nearest harbour's ledger, bound by the same beacons, closures, and sailing windows as Gnome craft, and its quarrels over nets and grounds go to the tide hall like anyone's. What the Humans lack is a hand in that custom. The crafts that make the readings are Gnome family crafts and the tide halls are Gnome families, so a hamlet usually speaks through whichever harbour ward buys its fish. In calm years most hamlets think the arrangement fair. In hard years they notice who decides when a cove is closed.

From Orrin Talloway, *A Road-Book of Both Halves*

> *Of everything on the far side, this is the thing I have least known how to write. Below the third harbour along from the Lee there is a cove called Saltrack, with a dozen timber houses above the shingle and the boats drawn up below them, and the people who came down to look at the craft I was on were Human. Not Human as a Gnome harbour hand is Gnome, by trade and habit, but Human as I am: my height, my colour near enough, my hands. A barefoot boy sold me a string of dried fish for a Gnome copper and counted my change back with his lips moving, and the words were not my words, but the counting was.*
>
> *I sat that evening at their fire, by leave of the oldest woman there, and listened. Their stories begin on that beach. There is a storm in them, a long one, and a lady of the sea who answered it, and boats, and a great many fish, and grey oarsmen in the fog whom nobody must answer. There is no river in any of them, no barge or bridge or toll, no basin, no road inland, and nothing at all behind the sea. When they asked me where I came from, I said from inland, which was true, and they nodded as though inland meant the Halfling folds, and I let it.*
>
> *I have spent my life among people who can tell you which house their grandmother's ferry paid its toll to. These people are written in a Gnome ledger and cannot tell you anything older than the storm, and they seemed to me neither poorer nor richer for it, only finished, the way a song is finished. Behind the drying racks, when I went to relieve myself, I found a lamp with a shutter on it, a long way from any house, and I did not ask. I did not tell them about the Serath either. I am not sure they would have had anywhere to put it, and I am not sure it was mine to give.*

Marks, Gauges, and Bare Feet

About 180,000 people live on the Tidelace. Some nineteen in twenty are Gnomes, and Truesound and Fathomstair are the largest of their towns. Coastal Humans, perhaps 10,000, live in the hamlets between the harbours; the Thaluren come to the estuaries in return season and do not live on the coast.

Harbour dress is wool and felt from the Windscar trade, oiled against spray: short coats, close caps, and sea boots, with the family mark worn as a brass or stitched badge, and sounding families carry their gauges on a cord. The island Gnomes are darker and more weathered than the Gnomes of the harbour towns. About one child in six dies young. Adults commonly live a century and a half, and a newborn can expect about a century; most die old, and of the rest the sea takes most, by fog and storm, and the stairs, ice, and winter coughs the others. The family mark is spoken as a family name, given names are short, and when a Gnome is named before others the craft follows: Isset Sondrel, sounder. Others on the ledgers: Mirabet Quarrine, Tobrel Teskel, Vannet Abenot, Rissard Sondrel, Ellisande Quarrine. The island lines keep a lighter custom of name and isle, Lenn of Lastlight or plain Abbet.

Hamlet Humans dress in oiled wool and hide and go barefoot on the shingle. They look like the Humans of the cradle, weathered by spray. One child in three dies before five; the sea takes about one man in four, and fever and childbirth most of the rest, so few reach seventy. A hamlet Human has one name, and the harbour ledger writes it with the boat and the cove: Maelo of Saltrack, Ressa, Tobe, Inna, Seska, Pirro.

Highways of Water

The Tidelace has almost no roads worth the name. Its highways are water, and every one of them is marked.

The Lacework	The inner channels behind the islands carry nearly all coastwise traffic from harbour to harbour in sheltered water, aboard Gnome coastal craft. Each stretch is surveyed by the nearest sounding house, and its marks are moved only in the open.
The outer roads	Open water seaward of the islands is faster and takes heavier craft, but it closes first in fog and storm, and the Long Grey can shut it for days.
The beacon lines	Signal towers on the headlands carry warnings, closures, and sailing windows along the coast far faster than any hull, and a harbour that misreads a neighbour's light, or trusts a wrecker's, pays for it.
The river mouths	Short rivers come down through the terraces to the estuaries. Upstream they lead towards the Folds by way of the exchange grounds such as the Counted Lee; seaward they open into waters the Thaluren share.

What moves is mostly the coast's own: fish dried and salted, shellfish, cordage, lamp oil, worked metal, and the gauges and timing instruments of the gauge houses. From the Folds come stored grain, orchard goods, and preserved stores in counted loads; from the Windscar, by way of the Soundchain Roads, come hides, felt, and wool. Human hamlets bring their catch to the harbour quays and take back cordage, tools, and grain. At a harbour mouth the pilot families take the helm of any stranger's craft, and a stranger who refuses a pilot is assumed to be a smuggler, a wrecker's scout, or worse. Human boats work their own coves without pilots, but at a harbour mouth they wait on the window like everyone else. Offshore, the island chains thin into outer isles and then the open water of the Unrun Sea; no harbour holds water past its last beacon, and what comes in from

beyond it is nobody's to explain. No road or sea-lane known on this coast leads to the cradle-web on the other side of the world.

Memory

The Tidelace remembers being Gnome long before it was Gaugeward. Old Gnome harbour lines across the inlets and island chains bound themselves into a league in the Founding of the Gaugeward Leagues (c. 165,000–c. 146,000 BR), when shared beacons, common marks, and the duty of repair tied separate harbours together. The coast's first great argument followed at the Sounding Gate, in the Sounding Gate Quarrel (c. 155,000–c. 149,000 BR), and the Tidelace Calibration Orders (c. 148,000–c. 132,000 BR) turned its lesson into the rounds by which every mark is checked. The outward memory is a run of hard meetings: with the Orcs, the Tidelace-Windscar Approaches (c. 148,000–c. 138,000 BR) and everything the Soundchain Roads remember after them; with the Halflings, the Counted Lee Timing Feud (c. 139,000–c. 136,000 BR) and the Leeward-Tidelace Timing Oath (c. 136,000–c. 134,000 BR), which taught the harbours that a moved window must name who bears the loss; with the Thaluren, the Estuary Terms (c. 144,000–c. 138,000 BR).

The Humans are absent from all of it. They reached the coast later, and none of the League's founding quarrels or old bargains mentions them. The memory they share with the Gnomes is the **Decade of Storms**, a time the coast keeps without a date, when gales sank boats, surges swallowed harbours, the fish vanished, and both peoples prayed on the same shore for calm and guidance. At the Festival of the Tides both peoples still raise a cup to the beacon keeper of an outer isle who kept her light burning through three nights of the Decade with the timbers of her own tower, and was found at dawn with the last plank in her hands and a fleet safe in the lee below. Three of the great threads of Caeldon's history touch the coast. Under **Who Counts and Who Records**, counting begins in the ledger and the reading called on the quay, and the Humans show how a people can be counted without being consulted. Under **Water and Who Keeps It**, the estuaries are where the Gnomes first had to accept a claim on water they could not sound. And through the Soundchain Roads the coast touches **Roads and Crossings**.

The Lady and the Clockmaker

Maris of the Tides was born of the Decade of Storms, from the shared plea of Gnome harbour towns and coastal Humans who did not pray for the sea to stop, knowing they would starve without it, but for a mother to soothe it and a guide through it. She still belongs to both, and her worshippers often call her Lady Maris. Her shrines stand on Gnome quays and on Human beaches. Shrine carvings show her tall and pearl-skinned, her hair a fall of living kelp, her robes forever dripping salt water. A pilot back from a hard passage through fog or a bad approach tells it aloud at her shrine, paying her **toll of story**, and sailors who forget to tell it are said to find her protection withdrawn the next time. The springs along the coast are said to be her tears, healing only those whose hearts are pure, and harbour children hear of the Drowned Bride, saved from a storm at the price of her voice, who sings sailors home. She is said to be trying to calm a blood-feud between two harbour towns over a fishing ground, before it ends in burned harbours. For the Humans she is nearly the whole of religion: they keep local cults of the shore and know nothing of the Sworn Accord that organizes Human belief in the cradle.

Beside her shrines the Gnome harbours keep **Quennet the Clockmaker**, their own god of measured moments. He is fading, as the coast keeps its timing by gauge and beacon instead of prayer, though harbour wards still say his name under their breath when a sailing window has to be moved, half in thanks and half in apology to whoever will bear the lost time. In old gauge houses

the timing instruments are said to stutter or run backwards for a few beats before a window fails, and some say his voice can be heard in the ticking. Pilots pray to both gods and thank Maris when a window holds. Beneath both runs the coast's own alignment custom, in which an unmaintained beacon or a falsely read mark is close to sacrilege, and a false fire is past it. The curse a beacon warden lays on a wrecker at the hanging is always the same: *may a false light be the last you follow*.

The Sounding Gate

The best known of the coast's measured approaches is the **Sounding Gate**, the marked mouth of a Gaugeward harbour, with the sounding house, beacons, and Open Bench that decide who may pass it and when, under the harbour families who hold them. It was the first great site of the Leagues and the scene of their first great quarrel, in which Gnomes had to decide, over the bodies of drowned crews, whether their exactness still protected the coast or only flattered it. It is still where that quarrel is carried on most loudly: the harbour every other harbour is measured against when the old charge of vanity is made.

The Place

From the sea, the Gate is a narrow entrance between rock and shoal, with a current that sets hard across it at mid-tide and lies still at slack. A marked channel threads it. Its posts and beacons are the most watched marks on the coast, and the beacon tower on the headland above passes the Gate's state along the signal line. The shoal on the seaward side is called the **Proud Bank** along the whole coast. Its sand covers the ribs of the craft lost on the false marks of the Quarrel, and at the lowest spring tides the masts of one of them still show. Divers from the Human hamlets go down on the bank at slack water after the treasure that, by the hamlets' telling, went down with the richest of those craft, a sounding house's silver gauges and the dowry of a harbour heir; some come up with a coin or a fitting, and every few years one does not come up. The pilots say the bank does not like to be crossed in fog: when the Long Grey lies on the entrance, Grey Crews have been seen rowing over it, calling the old channel. Gnome children are told that one of the Quarrel's sounding families had a silver gauge that read true only for its own blood, and that it lies on the bank in its drowned master's hand, still reading; whoever raises it, the tale goes, will steer the harbour wrong for a generation.

Inside lies Fathomstair behind its breakwater, built upward in the Tidelace way. Beside the sounding house, in the open air, stands the **Open Bench**, where readings are called aloud. It sits outdoors by custom, so that anyone on the quay can hear a reading given, a marker move announced, or a closure stated with its reasons. To get in, a craft must take the channel in a declared window, with one of the harbour's pilots at the helm. A stranger who tries the entrance without one is likely to end on the Proud Bank, and in bad years wreckers have shifted a channel post by night to help a stranger there, then plundered what washed ashore before the harbour's boats could reach it. The water is the lesser obstacle. The greater is the reading behind it: a window rests on the latest soundings, and at the Gate everyone knows the date of each.

Nothing of the harbour that fought the Quarrel still stands. The entrance has silted, scoured, and shifted many times since, and its marks have been moved in front of the quay more often than anyone could count. The older Gates lie under the newer one: quays and steps that sank or silted as the entrance moved, reached at low water down slimed stairs below the present breakwater. Congers den in their doorways, and smugglers use them to land what the declared windows would tax, until the harbour's watch finds the stair and floods them out.

Keepers and Users

The sounding house and gauge house hold the readings of the approach and the instruments that make them, and since the Quarrel their word does not vouch for itself: a reading counts only once called aloud at the Open Bench. The receiving wards keep the harbour and its quays and decide what traffic it can bear; they are the Gate's oldest party in its oldest quarrel, pressing for wider windows when the sounding house wants narrower ones, because traffic is wealth. The tide hall and the Open Bench are where the eldest harbour families settle quarrels over entry, and where a moved marker or a closure is made to stick by the families gathered to hear it. A reading can be challenged there by any family the harbour counts as its own, or by a rival sounding family strong enough to be heard; a fisher or a stranger can speak, but is seldom listened to. The beacon wardens and the pilot families keep the lights and ledgers and take the helm of every stranger's craft at the entrance, and the families remember which of their own lie on the Proud Bank.

The harbour also keeps a **wreck-watch**, its own small company of hired spears, Human and Gnome, paid from the tide hall's chest to walk the headland in the storm season and to hunt down wreckers for the price on their heads. The hall pays more for a live one, because a hanged wrecker on the beacon tower keeps the next band away longer than a dead one in the surf. The users are Gnome coastal craft working the Lacework, fishing boats, and boats from the nearest Human hamlets, which wait on the declared window like anyone else. Rarely, a Windscar party that the harbour masters have let inward comes in from the outer receiving grounds under a pilot, and such an arrival is always watched, with the quay guard close at hand.

Slack Water and Arguing

The Gate's year turns on its readings. In the calm months the sounding house sounds the approach again on a fixed round and after every storm, and each result goes to the Open Bench before any mark is touched. A moved marker is announced there, entered in the beacon ledger, and then moved. In the storm season, when the entrance may be shut for weeks, the tide hall sits more often and fights out what the summer left unsettled. At the Festival of the Tides the harbour comes down to the quays for Maris and reads out the names of everyone the Proud Bank has taken.

An ordinary day is slack water and arguing: sounders out at the turn of the tide, a craft holding outside for its window, a fisher shouting about a closed cove at the bench, a ward arguing that a window could be an hour longer, a pilot telling a drowned crew's passage at the quay shrine so that they will not come rowing back. Beside Maris's shrine stands one to Quennet, fading here as everywhere; the gauge-makers still say his name when a window has to be moved. Two sounding families still will not sit at the same end of the Open Bench, over a feud from the Quarrel for which no blood-price was ever paid, and when one challenges a reading, the other's hired swords are on the quay before the bench has sat.

From Orrin Talloway, *A Road-Book of Both Halves*

> *We lay outside the Gate for most of a morning, the craft swinging on her anchor in a grey swell, while the current ran across the entrance like a river in spate. The pilot who had come out to us sat on the thwart with her hands folded and would not be hurried. "Slack at the half-bell," she said, as if it were the word of a lord, and it was. When the water went still it went still all at once. The posts stood up out of a sea gone flat as slate, each one carrying its marks, and the pilot took the helm and brought us through*

between them so close to the shoal I could see weed lifting on it, and, under the weed, the black ribs of something that had not been so lucky.

Inside, the harbour climbed the cliff in steps, quays and then grey stone and then houses one above the next with little walled gardens between them, and stairs everywhere. On the first terrace a bench stood out in the open with a handful of elders seated on it and a crowd on the quay below. A woman in a sounder's leather apron was reading figures aloud, plainly and slowly, each with its date, and a scribe beside her was writing them down. A man in the crowd called out a question about one of the figures. Nobody hushed him. She answered him, and the scribe wrote that down too. I noticed that two men with swords stood at the foot of the bench, and that they belonged to neither the sounder nor the man who had asked.

On the Serath I have read a toll out to a bargeman who did not believe a word of it, and I have never once had to say on what day I last looked at the reach he was paying for. At the Gate the date is the first thing said and the figure the second. I asked the scribe afterwards whether anyone ever challenged a reading in earnest. Every season, I was told, and the families are proud of it, and when I said that pride seemed a strange thing to take from being doubted, the scribe laughed and said that was exactly what the Quarrel had said, and that the drowned on the Proud Bank had said it first.

At the quay shrine our pilot stood a while and told the story of our passage to the sea, aloud, to nobody I could see. Beside that shrine stood a smaller one, the stone worn smooth, carved with something like the face of a gauge, and as she turned away she touched it once without looking.

Precise and True

The Gate was already one of the most trusted approaches of the young League world when heavy traffic and wild weather set its receiving wards, who wanted broader windows and bolder sailings, against its sounding houses and signal keepers, who were accused in turn of keeping old readings as current and markers unmoved for their family's pride. The Quarrel split the harbour families, sent crews onto the Proud Bank on marks one family swore by and another called false, and ended only when the strongest houses forced a peace. Exactness that could be trusted was split from vanity: soundings, marker changes, and declared risk now had to be called aloud and could be challenged. The calibration orders carried that peace into marker rounds and open benches across the coast, and the Gate stayed the harbour all the others copied. When Windscar parties began reaching the coast, the Gate became one of the inward thresholds behind the outer receiving grounds, and had to show that exact harbouring could also take in outsiders honestly.

Every harbour child on the coast learns the saying this place left behind, *precise and true are not the same word*. Pilots raise their cups to the false light cut down, in memory of the pilot who rowed out alone in a gale to cut one from a headland and drowned doing it, and a stranger who will not drink to it is watched until he sails. At the Gate the saying is not a proverb but a way of life, and the families who keep the approach are proud of being the most challenged harbour on the coast, which is the very kind of pride the Quarrel warned against.

The Soundchain Roads

Escorted parties of the Windscar Pacts first reached this coast in numbers during the Tidelace-Windscar Approaches, and the line the coast drew then has held ever since: the outer shore is not the inner harbour. The **Soundchain**

Roads, the first named Orc-Gnome exchange corridor, are what grew along that line: a chain of roadsteads, lee sounds, transfer quays, and pilot stations strung along the outer edge of the Tidelace, where a party that has crossed the dry country can be met, fed, held, or sent on before it ever sees an inner harbour. Most of the people who live on the Roads are Gnome station crews; most of those who pass through are Orc escorts and the parties they bring. A party on the Roads has reached a real exchange field, but not the protected interior of the coast, and both peoples know the difference to the yard. The danger here is less a quarrel at the quay than the fog, the Bare Shoulder, and what waits on the wreck-ground.

The Outer Edge

The Roads are the western stretch of the far side's north coast, where the dry country of the Windscar ends in sea cliffs. The chain of sounds runs west to east along the foot of the cliffs, with the open water of the Unrun Sea to the north and ordinary Gaugeward coast beyond it at both ends. The Gullstair comes down to the Turnwater Quays towards the western end, two to three months from Oldcairn by the longest escort routes, with the Patience below it; the Bare Shoulder lies further east, Shoulderlee in its last lee, and the calmer Lantern Reaches beyond, and eastwards again, behind the headlands, the pilot channels lead to the inner harbours of the Tidelace. The stations are the settled cores, with bare cliff and open water between them, and nothing moves safely between stations except by pilot craft or on the escorted coast run.

The corridor follows the broken outer coast. Its links are the lee sounds, where a headland or an island chain breaks the swell and craft can lie in quiet water. Between them run exposed roadsteads, marked transfer water, and pilot channels threaded through shoals that only a sounding house can keep honest. Old hulls lie on every one of those shoals, and some still hold what they carried. Divers swear that a Gaugeward strongroom hull lost in the closure years lies off the Bare Shoulder with its hatches still sealed, and every few summers a crew goes out after it; the ones who come back say the fog came in early, and that something hailed them by name. No two links are built alike; some are little more than a roadstead and a signal fire, others carry quays, store sheds, transfer yards, declaration houses, and pilot watch-posts. What makes them one corridor is the traffic, and the Gnomes keep it deliberately short of welcome: everything a party needs to be fed and answered, nothing that would let it in.

Landward, the shore rises fast. Escort routes coming out of the dry Windscar country reach the sea at the tops of cliffs and terraces and have to come down to the water, and the busiest descent is the **Gullstair**, a stepped and ramped path cut down a sea-cliff to the beach yard of the Turnwater Quays. Fog belts can stop movement between sounds for a week, so that a party sits within a morning's sail of its next station and never sees it; in the fog the Grey Crews row, hailing in voices that sound like a pilot's own kin, and a crew that answers an unplaced hail is not seen again. In the storm season the worst of the open stretches, the **Bare Shoulder**, a long headland coast with no lee at all, is closed to heavy loaded craft for months at a time, and its rocks are thick with the ribs of craft that tried anyway. Fogbells drift inshore in thousands, congers take the fingers of quay crews who reach into the breakwater gaps, and shipworms eat the quays from underneath. When too many parties arrive together, holding grounds fill, water runs short, fever runs through the shore camps, and tempers go to knives.

Worse than any beast of the water are the people of the shore. On the emptier stretches, in the storm season, wreckers light false fires for craft caught between beacons and strip whatever washes up, the living included. Stations pay a bounty for them and hang them on the breakwaters, and still they come back. The worst of them

are remembered by their lights: the **Two Lamps** band showed a pair of fires like a station's harbour mouth, and a whole convoy ran onto the rocks between them before a Shoulderlee crew hunted the band down in its own cove and burned its boats on the beach.

Station Life

Life on the Roads is station life. Each sound has its station: a few quays, a **declaration house** where parties are counted, store sheds and cisterns, a sounding house, beacon towers on the headlands, and the stone and timber houses of the crews who keep them. Gnome families hold station work for generations. Pilots, sounders, beacon keepers, quay crews, provisioners, and tally-keepers make up most of the people, and a station child learns to read a tide table and a signal line about as early as letters.

The corridor's rhythm is the rhythm of arrival. An Orc escort nearing the coast sends word ahead by runner or by fire from the cliff-tops, as escorts do on any Windscar route. At the beach yard the party is met and counted, and its captain says aloud who travels, what they carry, and where they mean to go. The keeper takes them in for transfer, feeds them and sends them on under a pilot, holds them until a named day, or points them down the coast. At his own quay the keeper's word is the end of it, and a party that dislikes it can wait or climb back up the stair. Held parties wait in the holding grounds, lee anchorages where loaded craft ride at their moorings, with shore camps pitched above them in the same places year after year.

The Orc side of corridor life is seasonal. Escort companies work the coast run in the calmer months, when the High Scars passes are open and the sea between sounds is kind, and some kindreds keep camping grounds above the beach yards that they return to as reliably as Gnome crews return to their quays. On the way down they fight off the beasts of the high passes and the raiders who wait for a party weakened by the crossing. Every kindred on the coast run drinks to the captain who brought her people down the Gullstair with raiders on the stair behind her, holding each turn of it with a dozen spears while the herds went down, and the cairn at Gullhead has one stone for each of her warriors who stayed on the stair. In the storm season the corridor thins to messengers, a few hardy parties, the crews repairing what the weather breaks, and the wreckers. Food is coastal, fish, shellfish, seabird eggs, terrace-garden crops, and stored grain brought out from the inner harbours, with herd meat and milk when escorts drive stock down the stair.

Who Answers

No single hand holds the Roads. Several powers each hold a piece of every passage, and the corridor stays quiet only while none of them reaches for more.

Since the closure years the stations close what they like, by season, cargo, or stretch, but must say each closing aloud, and when many closings together shut a trade out, the escorts may add them up and press every station at once. They rarely get much for it: the Gnomes hold the water. Orc captains say a refusal in fine words is still the coast keeping them out; parts of the inner harbour world hold that the Pilotage is always reaching for more. Station crews, who deal with both every day, tend to trust whichever has misled them least recently.

Water, Stairs, and Lights

The corridor takes its name from its roadsteads. Its routes are sea-lanes and cliff stairs, not built roads, and the only fresh water on most of it comes from station springs and cisterns, which is why water is the first thing every station counts. The descents bring parties and their herds down from the Windscar routes, each ending at a sta-

Station keepers and harbour masters	The station keepers are Gaugeward families who hold a sound's quays, stores, and holding water, often for generations, and say what it can carry this week. They give their answers aloud, with a reason and a day to ask again, as the Tidelace Answering Custom demands, and everything else is theirs. Harbour masters further in say who goes deeper.
The sounding houses	They say which channels can be run. A pilot who runs against their warning, and lives, is turned away at every station at once.
The Answerward officers	Officers of the **Answerward Pilotage** carry the stations' answers in the same words from one station to the next, and are there when a party is held or sent on, so nobody can say later that it was not. Since the Answerward Overreach Feud, fought out in burned watch-posts and pilots who would not sail, the station families have kept them out of everything else, and remind them of it often.
The escort captains	On the Windscar side, the captain who brings a party down answers for it by escort custom and the good name of the High-Scar escort orders. A captain's word at the beach yard carries the weight of the captain's kindred, and a false count follows a line long after the party has gone home.

tion's beach yard. The **inner lane**, the pilot channels behind the headlands and islands, links sound to sound in quieter water, and most transferred parties and cargoes move along it aboard Gnome coastal craft with a pilot at the helm. The outer roads take heavier craft and faster passages when the weather allows and close first when it does not. And the beacon line carries closings, fog warnings, and wrecker sightings along the chain far faster than any hull: a closing called at one station is burning on the next headlands by nightfall, and a fire where no beacon stands means wreckers.

Down the stairs come hides, felt, wool, herd stock driven for provisioning and sale, and escort service itself, along with the parties: kindred delegations, traders, messengers. Back up go dried and salted fish, cordage, worked metal, lamp oil, and fine Gnome craft-work, the coastal goods that reach the High Scars by escort trade. Most cargoes change hands at the quays and never see the inner channels. Cargo draws thieves, and the coast has bred a trade to meet them: Orc sellswords who guard a camp's herds by night, Gnome quay-wardens who hunt pilferers through the store sheds, and bounty-takers who follow a stolen cargo up the cliff routes for a share of it. Over it all sit the closings called by the strongest stations, which is why Orc captains read a station's beacons as closely as Gnome pilots read its tide table.

The Lantern Reaches

The calmest stretch of the corridor is the **Lantern Reaches**. Beacons stand on nearly every headland, so close that pilots boast a craft is never out of sight of a light, and the transfer waters between them are shallow enough to work and sheltered enough to forgive. Smaller escorted parties, messengers, light cargoes, and steady seasonal provisioning move through the Reaches more readily than the heavy convoys held under Turnwater's eye, and wreckers keep away from water this well lit. The Reaches are known for being where nothing goes wrong. Pilots say it as a toast and as a warning, because their calm is kept by beacon keepers who have been known to put out a wrecker's false fire with an arrow through the

man tending it, and it has a price that nobody on the Roads yet wants to name: every heavy convoy they decline goes on to Turnwater.

Stations and Camps

No station is the Roads' capital; the busiest, the Turnwater Quays, is the nearest thing to a centre, and the rest of the corridor's settlements are stations, camps, and holding grounds. At the head of the Gullstair lies **Gullhead**, the camping ground where Orc kindreds pitch their camp-rings above the beach yard. In the calm months it holds several escort companies and their herds, loud with beasts and drovers' calls, and the hire-fires where captains short of spears take on sellswords for the descent; in the storm season, only a cairn and the wind.

Shoulderlee is the station in the last lee before the Bare Shoulder, where heavy craft wait out the months the shoulder is closed. A few dozen Gnome families keep its quays, store sheds, cistern, sounding house, and the beacon towers on its headland, and its crews know the shoulder's moods better than any pilot further in. They also know where the wrecks lie, and a Shoulderlee diver can name what each one carried. Wreck-divers from all along the coast come to Shoulderlee to hire a guide, and the station's elders forbid them only one wreck, a hull from the crisis years whose crew is said to row the shoulder still. In the Lantern Reaches, **Ninebeacon** is a small station of one quay, a declaration house, and nine beacons on the headlands within sight of it. A dozen Gnome households live there by light traffic, steady seasonal provisioning, and a good name for dependability that they do not want examined too closely.

Oilskins and Kindred Names

About 12,000 people live on the Roads, nearly all of them Gnome station families. In the calm months Orc escort companies, their herds, and the parties they bring add five to eight thousand more, and the Patience alone can hold a thousand or more; in the storm season the Orcs are nearly all gone. Station crews dress, live, and are named as the Gnomes of the Tidelace are, with oilskins over everything for the open roadsteads, and fog, the Bare Shoulder, and the Grey Crews take more of them than anything else. A station family gives its mark with the station: Teskel of Shoulderlee. The Orcs of the coast run are High-Scar and Open-Steppe kindreds, dressed and named as in the High Scars, and at a beach yard a captain gives the kindred's name first, then the party's count.

Two Memories of One Coast

The corridor's history runs from blood to habit. Windscar parties first reached this coast in numbers during the Approaches, and in the Answering Sound Crisis (c. 141,000–c. 137,000 BR) they waited on a cold shore, raided by wreckers and harried by shore-beasts, while the old and young died. Orc grandmothers still use the crisis to frighten children to sleep: *be still, or the cold shore will hear you*. What followed taught both sides to say delay aloud; the Answerward Pilotage (c. 135,000–c. 129,000 BR) carried the custom from one receiving ground to many; and after the Overreach Feud (c. 126,000–c. 122,000 BR) cut the Pilotage back, the Tidelace Coastward Exchanges (c. 121,000–c. 112,000 BR) turned staged arrival into the routine that the Roads give a geography. Both peoples call what followed the quiet years, and both mean it half as praise.

Its later memory is of narrowing. In the Soundchain Selective Closure (c. 109,000–c. 104,000 BR), stations closed particular seasons, cargoes, and stretches, each for reasons it could defend, until Windscar escorts said the sum was a wall built one stone at a time. Escort companies camped on the cliff-tops above shut stations, beacons were thrown down, and a Gnome pilot was killed on the Gullstair before the stations agreed, in the Soundchain Closure Terms (c. 104,000–c. 102,000 BR),

that every closing must be said aloud and could be added up against the rest. The Gnomes kept the quays; the escorts got the right to count. The Turnwater Reopening Accord (c. 100,000–c. 98,000 BR) then reopened the trade piece by piece.

Each side keeps its own version. Orc captains keep **answer-memory**: which stations answered in time, which held a party honestly, which named a day to ask again and kept it. Station families keep **threshold-memory**: which escorts declared their parties truly, which pressed a hold as if it were a refusal. Captains sing the closure years as the time the coast tried to shut without saying so, and the war-chants of the cliff-top camps are still taught to boys who will never need them; station families tell them as the time the escorts tried to take the quays by threat. Gnome stations keep shrines to Maris on their quays and headlands, and Orc escorts who have shared a hard crossing sometimes stand to listen when a pilot pays the toll of story. The escorts bring their own gods down the stair: kindreds camped above the beach yards recite their coast-run dead to Ushkar the Ancestor-Warden at the season's end, and followers of Rakhal the Storm-Caller are the first to call an old closure stale and the first to sail against the Bare Shoulder's season.

The Answering Sound

Older than the corridor and not counted among its stations, though the corridor's ways descend from it, lies the **Answering Sound**, a sheltered lee in the outer approaches. It was the first great Orc-Gnome threshold, the place where the line between the outer shore and the inner harbours was first strained by storm, hunger, and spears, and nearly broke. The two peoples who use it do not remember the same place. Orc escorts remember where the coast first had to answer them before their people drowned at its door; Gnome keepers remember where they first had to prove that a delay was not a lie.

The Lee and the Last Mark

A headland and a short chain of islands break the swell off the outer coast, and behind them lies the Sound: a broad lee where craft can ride out weather that would sink them on the open roadsteads. Ashore stand a beach yard where parties are met and counted, a pilot shed, a sounding house, store sheds and cisterns, beacon towers on the headland, and a shrine to Maris on the quay, hung with the names of crews the Sound did not save. At the inner end of the lee, a narrow pilot channel leads away towards the harbours behind the coast, among them the inward approaches of the Sounding Gate. Its first marker is the edge of everything the Sound can give. Escorts call it the **Last Mark**; the pilots call the same post the first mark of the inner channel. Past it, only the word of the harbour masters lets a party go, and they give it to whom they please.

Getting in is the first danger. The lee is safe only once a craft is inside it, and finding the gap between the islands in fog or gale kills as surely as the open water. The outer islands are wreck-ground, littered with ribs of hulls and the stumps of a breakwater older than any harbour family's memory. In bad years wreckers camp on them and light false fires for craft feeling their way in, Grey Crews have been seen rowing between the islands in the Long Grey, and after a storm the lee can fill with a bloom of fogbells that closes the beach to anyone who must wade. The wreck-ground is also why some come. The craft that went down feeling for the gap carried escort silver, kindred gifts meant for harbour masters, and Gnome instruments in brass, and hamlet divers go down off the islands in still weather for whatever the sand gives up. They say that in the stumps of the old breakwater a vault older than the harbour families lies with its door to the sea, which no one who has gone looking at low water has found twice. Nothing built at the time of the crisis sur-

vives; the quays, the yard, and the beacons have been rebuilt more often than anyone has counted. The name and the quarrel have lasted.

The Sound in an Ordinary Year and a Hard One

In an ordinary season the Sound is quiet. Its keepers re-sound the lee after every storm, keep the beacons lit, and meet a few parties through the calm months: a count at the beach yard, a captain's word given at the table, a pilot or provisions handed across, and the party gone along the coast or back up to the cliffs. Answerward officers come to watch holding and redirection, and walk the beach yard as people walk a battlefield their grandparents fought on. The keepers pay beast-hunters to clear the sea-things that follow a storm into the lee, and in a wrecking year they pay escort spears to burn out the camps on the islands; the keepers cannot always tell a divers' camp from a wreckers' until the fires are lit. Hard weather turns it over, as it always has. When the open coast closes, parties that cannot reach their stations make for the nearest lee, and the Sound fills faster than any station. Held parties ride in the lee or camp above it, water runs short, tempers shorten with it, and in those weeks a keeper who names a hold works under the eyes of armed escorts who know what happened here the last time delay began to look like abandonment.

That happened in the Answering Sound Crisis. Seasons of storm drove more parties into the lee than it could feed while the inner harbours were already strained. Escorts accused the coast of leaving them to drown one warning at a time; keepers accused the escorts of using the answer to force their way into harbour space. Parties starved on the cold shore while wreckers raided their camps, a few Orc war-leaders tried the inner channel by force, and crews went down on the outer islands feeling for a way in. Neither side could break the other, so the end kept the line and made delay something spoken aloud, short, and named to a day, and the Tidelace Answering Custom (c. 137,000–c. 135,000 BR) carried that to the whole coast. Coast inns still tell of the war-leader who tried the inner channel with three boats and came back with one, and who swore the harbour masters kept a storm-caster on the beacon tower to call the gale down on him; the keepers say it was only weather. Escort captains coming down to the Sound name the old answers aloud, who was taken in and who was left seaward to drown. Station families sing the other side: the pilot who took a party in through the Long Grey by lamplight and did not come back, the keepers who held the beacon tower against a mob of starving crews and would not light a false lee. *Follow no oar in the grey* is the first thing a station child learns. A captain and a keeper who have known each other for years can still be singing two different songs about the same tide.

The Turnwater Quays

The busiest station of the Roads is the **Turnwater Quays**, a cluster of quays, sheds, and declaration tables in the corridor's largest sound. If the Answering Sound is where the coast was forced to answer, Turnwater is where it does so every day. It carries the heaviest convoys and the closest watching, and the memory of having been first the place where the corridor narrowed hardest, with kindreds coming down the stair in arms, and then the place where it learned to reopen.

The Place

Most Windscar parties first see Turnwater from the head of the Gullstair. It is a long way down, cut steps and ramps on the open face of the sea-cliff, and every season it takes someone: a herd beast that panics on a ramp and carries its drover over the edge, a loaded mule on wet stone, a child. Crag eagles nest on the face and stoop on kids and lambs on the open ramps, and drovers carry slings down the stair for them. Escorts say *the stair takes*

one, so walk second, and mark each death with a cut in the rock beside the step where it happened; the lowest flights are scored like a tally. The escorts' word runs down the stair to its foot, and the station keepers' takes over in the yard.

The sound below takes its name from its tidal water, which turns with each tide and sets the times craft can come and go from the quays. Around it stand the quays, a declaration house with its tables, store sheds and cisterns, a sounding house, and beacon towers on the headlands. Below the stair lies the corridor's largest holding ground, a lee anchorage of moored, loaded craft with the held parties' shore camps on the slope above, which every Orc escort calls the **Patience**. Held parties wait there, sometimes a week and sometimes a season, and its camps grow and shrink with every closure on the beacon line. It has seen fever, hunger, a fire that took half the camp, and more than one feud between kindreds that began over a water-share and ended in the water; a held party's goods draw thieves from both peoples, and the Patience at the end of a long hold is the most dangerous ground in the sound after dark. At the foot of the cliff, east of the stair, the sea has cut caves that fill at high water, where flotsam from the outer roads washes in and stolen goods are hidden until the thieves can row them away.

A party must get past three things here: the stair, with its loads and herds; the count in the beach yard, where its captain's word must match the party; and the station's answer, which never by itself means the inner harbours. That is the difference from the Sounding Gate on the Tidelace proper: at the Gate a stranger whose craft and business the harbour masters have let in is brought through at slack water under a harbour pilot, while at Turnwater an outsider is answered on the quay and, unless a harbour master further in lets the party go deeper, stays there.

Keepers and the Roll

The station keepers have held Turnwater's quays and stores for generations, and the station's answer is theirs to give. The sounding house and pilots keep the turning water and the inner lane readable and take every transferred cargo along it. Answerward officers keep a heavier presence here than at any other station, weighing the reasons for a delay, rowing out to holds in the Patience, and vouching for what answer each party was given. And declaration clerks keep the **Turnwater Roll**, the list of kinds of traffic reopened since the closure years, each with its burden, season, and the day it is looked at again. The Roll is read aloud in the beach yard at the start of each arrival season, and Orc captains listen to it as closely as Gnome pilots read a tide table. The users are Orc escort captains and their parties, and above all the heavy convoys and driven herds that the lighter stations decline. The station pays beast-hunters to keep the moorings clear, and young Orcs hire on as stair-runners, carrying loads down the Gullstair for a share of the price and racing each other on the ramps for wagers; the station posts a bounty on Patience thieves, which the runners collect more often than anyone.

An Ordinary Dignity

Turnwater's year is the escorts' year. In the calm months, when the High Scars passes are open, parties come down the Gullstair on most days. Most are received for transfer and their goods change hands on the quays without going further; some are given a pilot and sent on along the inner lane; some go into the Patience to be held, with a day named to look at it again; a few are sent to stations that can bear them. An ordinary day is busy rather than tense: herds coming down the stair at first light, cargoes sorted on the quays, provision handed across, a named day falling due in the Patience and an Answerward officer rowing out to hear it, beast-hunters rowing in with the conger

that has been taking fish off the moorings, a pilot waiting on the turn of the tide. When a bloom of fogbells comes in with the fog, nobody wades, and herds that must swim to the transfer lighters wait on the beach, bellowing. In the storm season the stair is nearly empty and the station belongs to its crews, and to the wreckers who work the emptier stretches beyond the headlands.

Turnwater's dignity is ordinary. It is not famous because the custom nearly failed there but because it keeps working there under heavy use, and the station families take more pride in a season without a drawn blade than in winning any quarrel. The custom holds because both sides need it: the Gnomes need the hides and herds, and the escorts are too many to turn away. The closure summer is still told on the cliff-top. Kindred fires keep the tale of the drover who took her starving herd down the stair by night, past the pikes at the foot, and was met not with spears but with fodder by a keeper who could not watch the beasts die; the station families tell the same night as a raid turned back. Keepers and captains close a good season with the same toast, *a summer without pikes*, and mean different things by it.

From Orrin Talloway, *A Road-Book of Both Halves*

> *The Gullstair is the only stair I have ever seen with a toll-house at the bottom and none at the top, and that is the whole of the Soundchain in one sentence. Our escort brought us down it at first light with a herd ahead of us, the beasts going sideways on the steps and the drovers calling to them in long falling notes, and the sea came up at us out of the grey a flight at a time until there was nothing below but the sound, the quays, and the anchorage beyond them, crowded with craft lying very still. On the lowest flights the rock beside the steps was cut with short marks, dozens of them, and our captain did not need to tell me what they counted.*
>
> *At the foot of the stair our captain stopped, and I understood without being told that from the next step on the captain's word was one voice among several and no longer the last one. At the table a Gnome clerk in oilskins took the count, our captain giving the kindred's name before anything else: how many of us, how many beasts, what loads, whither, and who answered. When the clerk came to me there was a pause. I was entered, in the end, under the escort, as goods are entered under a bill, and I have rarely been so pleased to be a line in someone else's book.*
>
> *It was the first day of the season, and before any answers were given a clerk stood on the yard steps and read the Roll: kind by kind, the traffic reopened on the Roads, each with its season and the day it would be looked at again, in a voice that did not hurry. Every captain on that beach stood and listened the way bargemen listen when the spring tolls are cried at home, which is to say with their whole bodies, waiting for the one line that touches them. Ours was read, and our captain let out a breath.*
>
> *We were received for transfer. The hides went across the quay and were struck off, and fish and cordage came back and were entered, and nothing of ours went one step further inward than the quay. Out in the anchorage a dozen loaded craft rode at their moorings with camps on the slope above them, and an officer was rowing out to one of them with a book on her knees. That night there was shouting in the Patience and a torch went into the water, and in the morning a station crew was hauling something up the beach under a sheet. Nobody I asked would say how long that party had been held. They said only that it had been told why, every time, and that it would be told again.*

Narrowed and Reopened

Turnwater grew into the corridor's first routine site in the Coastward Exchanges, when staged arrival became habit and the trimmed Pilotage found its work tied to ordinary transfer. Here the Leagues became keepers of a dependable trade and the Pacts expected traders rather than desperate parties. Routine then made Turnwater the sharpest test of narrowing. In the Selective Closure, closures by season, kind, and route bore hardest on its heavy traffic, and escorts said that many small closures added up to a blockade. Some kindreds came down the stair in arms that season, and the beach yard was held against them with pikes for a summer while their herds starved on the cliff-top. The Soundchain Closure Terms made the station the place where each closure had to be said aloud and answered for, and the Reopening Accord reopened chosen kinds of traffic here, one at a time. The Roll is that Accord's descendant. Every quay and table has been rebuilt many times since; the ways have not changed much.

The Split Reed Mouth

Where a Thaluren return river reaches the sea in Tidelace-facing water, on the coastward edge of the Tidebound Reaches, it breaks around a field of reed-shelves into braided channels that shift with every tide: the **Split Reed Mouth**. Neither people owns it, because neither has been able to drive the other out. Gnome pilots sound its channels and keep its hazard marks; run-watchers of the Returning Concord guard the return-water inside it; and under the Estuary Terms neither may close the mouth to the other. Of all the mixed estuaries on the coast, it is the one where the old bargain is tested most often and watched most closely, and where it has come nearest to a fight.

Reed, Silt, and Posts

A short way above the sea, the river breaks around the reed-shelves into several channels that braid, rejoin, and shift their beds with the tides. Between them the shelves stand just clear of high water in most seasons: dense reed on silt, firm at the heart and deadly at the edge, where the silt takes a leg to the thigh and the flood tide comes in faster than a mired man can dig himself out. Runs bound for the river come in from seaward and cross from salt into brackish water in the outer mouth. They do not come alone. **Run-followers**, the grey sharks of the estuary mouths, gather off the outer shallows when a run is due and when the young come down, and lampreys latch onto the slow and the wounded in the brackish water. Gnome craft come in along the coast and must find a marked channel before they reach the shelves. Upstream the channels gather into one river again, and the ascent belongs to the Thaluren.

A visitor sees channel posts at the head of each marked channel, carrying hazard marks and, when the channel is closed, the sign of what the closure protects. Tide stones stand in the outer shallows, where the water's height is read. The broadest shelf, the **Saltline Shelf**, lies at the inner edge of the brackish water, and the mixed circle of both peoples meets on it. On the Tidelace-side bank stands a small pilot station with a shrine to Maris, its piles eaten by shipworms and replaced every few years. Nothing Thaluren is built above the water. Inland, at the heart of the reed, the black stumps of an older pilot station still stand on a shelf of their own, burned in the raiding years. Thaluren war-bands carried off that station's brass soundings and gauges and sank them somewhere in the shelves, the pilots say, so that no Gnome could ever read the mouth with them again, and every generation some pilot's son goes into the reed to find them. The silt keeps what it takes, and it has kept a few of them.

Two Rights in One Water

The mouth has two sets of keepers, each holding what the Terms leave it and watching the other for any reach beyond. Gaugeward pilots work from the station under the nearest harbour's sounding house; they sound the channels, keep the hazard markers, and take in ordinary coastal traffic, and a sounding gives them no leave to search return-water. Thaluren run-watchers name the windows when the ascent is closed to craft, name the return channels for the season, and keep disturbance away from the young; that gives them no leave to close every approach or to make the pilots' work impossible. Sickness in the water is not theirs to call: a closure on that ground belongs to the Sanctuary Custodians of the Reaches, and draws them down to the mouth. The **mixed circle** on the Saltline Shelf is where both say what the water is being used for, and where quarrels over the mouth are argued first, in the old set words rather than by accusation, before anyone reaches for a spear.

The boats of coastal Humans from the nearest hamlets fish the outer shallows, counted at the station and bound by the circle's closures like any Gnome craft. No Human sits in the circle, and when a closure costs the fishers a season's catch, nobody pays them for it. Some fishers earn more as reed-guides than by fishing: they know which shelves will bear a man at which tide, and they will take anyone onto them, Gnome treasure-seekers and run-poachers alike, for the right price and no questions. Thaluren escorts guard the mouth against the sharks in season, and the best of them are shark-hunters whose kills are sung along the coast.

Two Calendars

The mouth keeps two calendars. The pilots keep the tide table: every tide moves something, so the channels are sounded again on a fixed round and after every storm, and no marker is moved until the move has been stated on the shelf. Outside return season the circle sits seldom, and the mouth is mostly pilots' water. Return season turns it over. Messengers arrive ahead of the run and give word at the shelf; the run's elders say which channels are kept for return this season and for how long; the pilot station hangs the signs on the channel posts and passes them to the beacon line, so that craft along the coast know before they come in. Coastal traffic keeps to the channels left open, fishing boats work the outer shallows among the sharks that follow the run in, and the run crosses into brackish water at its appointed time, its escorts ringing it with spears, and is gone upriver. Later the young come down in their own time, and the pilots keep craft out of their way by custom, though no channel is closed for them. The escorts are busiest then, and they lose young to the run-followers every year. The best shark-hunters among them take the jaws of their kills home, and an escort whose jaws hang in the settlement hall never wants for a place at the mouth.

The pilots keep their devotion to the station bank, and a pilot back from a hard passage tells Maris the story of it aloud at the shrine. The Way of Return, the faith of the Thaluren, accepts a god in another people's water only so long as nobody calls on one over the ascent. The mouth still runs on the Estuary Terms, which came out of the first lasting contact between Thaluren and Gnomes here, after the Closure of the First Nesting Confluence (c. 178,000–c. 162,000 BR) had taught the Thaluren how easily careless passage kills a run. Before them the two peoples met here as raiders, with fouled nets, cut marker-lines, drowned pilots, and Thaluren war-bands in the reeds. Old pilots still point out the shelf where a whole station crew was found floating face down; it has no name on the charts, and pilots' children dare each other to row past it at dusk. The Thaluren tell the same years from the other side, of the war-band that held the reeds for a whole season against the station's crossbows and came home without one of its spears lost. On the thread of **Water and Who**

Keeps It, the mouth is where Gaugeward measurement first had to accept a claim on water it could not measure.

Tensions

- **The honoured mark.** An approach marker kept by one of the oldest sounding families has not been moved in living memory, and the family says it has never needed to be. The receiving wards want it checked before the storm season; the family hears an accusation, and everyone on the coast knows what happened at the Sounding Gate when nobody asked.
- **A closed cove.** A tide hall has closed the approach to a cove for resurvey after a winter of silting, by every proper form, with a day named to look again. The Human hamlet on it says the fish are running, that its weather-lore reads the water as safe, and that nobody asked it; it has no seat on the tide hall, only a harbour ward who buys its fish and is in no hurry.
- **The black water.** Near some river mouths the water is turning black and sour, fouled by something carried down from inland. The sounding houses can chart where it spreads but not say what it is, Maris is struggling to cleanse it, and the Human hamlets nearest the mouths are the first to haul up empty nets.
- **The bench that waits.** After a storm the Gate's sounders know a channel mark is false, but the Open Bench cannot sit until the weather clears, and by the Gate's custom the mark may not move unannounced. A craft is lost on the old mark, with all hands. The wards say the bench has become the vanity it was meant to end; the sounding house says a mark moved in secret is how the Gate went wrong the first time. The drowned crew's kin have stopped arguing and started watching the sounding master's house.
- **The Two Lamps again.** For the first time in a generation a pair of fires has been seen on the empty coast east of the Bare Shoulder, and a provisioning craft has gone missing. Shoulderlee wants an escort company to march the clifftop and root the wreckers out; the escorts want the bounty doubled and the right to keep what they find in the wreckers' caves.
- **Turned from the Roads.** A captain whose convoy is turned away on the Soundchain Roads has brought it round to the Answering Sound, which is not one of the stations and which no station's closing binds. He says the Sound's duty to answer is older than any station's word, and his escorts have made camp above the beach yard. The keepers fear becoming the corridor's back door, and the Answerward officer must say which word holds there, knowing the stations can starve the Sound of pilots if they dislike the answer.
- **The channel that moved.** Over several seasons a return channel at the Split Reed Mouth has wandered across a shelf and now runs partly through water the pilots marked for coastal craft. The Thaluren say the closure follows the water the run actually uses; the pilots say a channel stays where it was marked until the circle says otherwise. Each side calls the other a thief of water, and two Human fishers have been found drowned on the shelves this spring.

CHAPTER 17

The Tidebound Reaches and the Unrun Sea

We hatched in the second water;
we name the first.
Our line was laid where nothing hatches now,
and what we owe, we owe it there.
Count us, and count what we owe.

— as the Second Channel's elders speak them, *The Namings of the Naming Reach*

Most Thaluren live their whole lives at sea and go up a river only to give the next generation its start. That one fact shapes everything in the Tidebound Reaches. Their homeland is not a coast or a reef or a drowned kingdom but a chain of linked waters: the long current roads of the open ocean, the reef shelter and tall kelp of the shoal worlds, the brackish mouths where salt meets fresh, and the rivers that climb towards the spawning grounds, past the gravel braids and rootbank pools where another people, the Kavari, already live. Thaluren life has to keep returning through all of them, and it is a perilous road. Sharks wait at the mouths for the young, pike-jawed hunters raid the spawning beds, and on the farthest currents something vast breaks the runs that go too far, so that a run without spears around it is a feast, and every hunter in the sea knows the season. A stranger here is placed first by the run they came up with and the water they hatched in, and only afterwards by anything a land people would call a family. The oldest of those waters has been closed for more than a hundred and sixty thousand years, and it still governs what the Thaluren believe. Beyond the farthest current lies the Unrun Sea, where nobody's custom goes at all.

AT A GLANCE

Lies	The far side's north-eastern corner: the river mouths east of the Tidelace, the shoals and current roads offshore, the rivers climbing south into unmapped uplands; beyond the Far Set, the Unrun Sea to the north and east.
People	About 140,000: nearly 100,000 Thaluren, nearly all in the sea settlements; some 40,000 Kavari upriver; a few Gnome sounders at the mouths. Nobody on the Unrun Sea; a few dozen Gnome households at Lastlight face it.
Civilizations	The Returning Concord, with the Blightward Keepers and the Open-Run Concords; the Bankright Circles of the Kavari.
Landscape	Current roads, reefs and kelp forest, island margins, mixed estuaries, river braids and spawning waters; one closed sacred confluence.
Chief places	No capital; Turningshoal, the largest sea settlement; the assemblies of Brightshallow; on the Tidelace, Lastlight faces the Unrun Sea.
The year	The Medieval Era, c. 1,350 CR.

Sea, Mouth, and River

The Reaches hold the far side's north-eastern corner. Seaward, to the north and north-east, the current roads run out over open water towards the Far Set and the Unrun Sea, with the shoals and the Kelpshade inside them. To the west the estuaries meet the coast of the Tidelace, the Split Reed Mouth among them. The rivers come north out of uplands to the south and south-east, the Kavari live along their middle and upper courses, and beyond their banks nothing is mapped. Turningshoal lies on the inner edge of the Kelpshade, a week or so out from the Split Reed Mouth, with Brightshallow at an island edge nearby, and a run's ascent from the Kelpshade to the Gravelbraid Nurseries and Shadepool takes two months or more. The sea settlements along the Kelpshade and the Kavari villages upriver are the settled cores; between them lie open water and long river reaches where run-followers gather off the mouths and devourers are sensed on the outer routes, and runs move only on the current roads, under escort.

The Reaches are known by journeys, seasons, and the waters a run may cross rather than by fixed borders. Some of their waters are fully marine, others tidal, brackish, seasonal, or fresh, and a Thaluren life passes through all of them. The **Returning Concord** holds them together, not as a realm with a border but as a chain of waters held by custom, in which sea settlements, keepers of the mouths, escorts of the ascent, and sanctuary keepers all know one another's place. Where the neighbouring Tidelace rewards a careful pilot, the Reaches reward something else: a run that comes home whole through every water it crosses.

Current Roads and Shoal Worlds

Seaward lie the current roads: long, steady flows across open water that carry whole settlements' worth of travellers with little effort when they run true. The greatest, the **Homeward Set**, runs from the outer shoals towards the estuaries and carries most runs home in return season; settlements time their departures by it, and a year when it sets late is remembered as a hard one. Longer, lonelier currents bring the Outer-Route runs in from the far edge of the known sea, last and least predictably.

Inside the currents are the shoal worlds, where reefs break the swell and kelp grows tall enough to shadow the water beneath. The broadest of these forests, the **Kelpshade**, is where returning runs rest and gather before they turn for the estuaries, and where the young who come back down from the rivers first learn the sea. Light comes

into it green and broken, the stalks lean all one way with the current and then all the other, and a whole run resting among them can be invisible from a stone's throw off. Island margins give quieter gathering water at their edges. Then come the mouths: estuaries where salt and fresh mix, reed-shelves line the shallows, and the channel shifts with every tide. Beyond the mouths, the rivers climb towards the spawning grounds of the lower and middle courses, with a few rarer sanctified reaches farther inland.

What the Waters Do

Blight	The oldest fear in the Reaches. Eggs laid with every rite can still fail if the water itself has gone wrong, and the Thaluren learned at the First Nesting Confluence that even the most trusted water can turn. Every sanctuary keeper watches for the first signs.
Low and wrong water	A dry season, a silted channel, or a warm, sluggish run can make a river impassable to ascent or fatal to a clutch. The return does not wait for good water; it has to find some.
Storms and broken currents	A current road that fails or shifts in a storm season can scatter a run across open water, and a scattered run is hunted. Blackfin pods follow the runs on the outer roads. Homeward Set lines name over every gathering the escorts who turned to face a pod so that the run could reach the kelp, and a young escort's first boast is to swear to be one of them.
Hunters at the mouths	Grey **run-followers**, the sharks of the estuary mouths, gather off the estuaries when the young come down from the rivers, and escorts guard the mouths with spears for the whole down-run. Inside them lampreys latch onto anything warm, rays lie buried under the Kelp-shade sand, and upriver the green-and-gold **egg-takers** lie in wait in the pools to raid the spawning beds. Kavari custodians hunt them through the pools in spawning season, and a hunter who spears a big one wears its jaw on a cord until the next season's kill.
The deep	Beyond the outermost routes lies open sea the Thaluren do not claim. Their ocean memory speaks of great deep-witnesses there, and of devourers that break routes, and on the far roads Outer-Route runs are haunted by the **Unreturned**, runs that never came home, keeping pace with them in the dark water.
Someone else's water	Upriver, the hazard is the neighbours as much as the water. A run that presses into Kavari nursery-water without warning can trample the young, meet Kavari spears in the shallows, and start a blood-debt it will carry for generations.

Life at Sea

Sea life is the ordinary life of the Reaches. Thaluren 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 come to an assembly at an island-edge gathering place. The Thaluren are fully sapient marine people built for practical grace rather than ornament: endurance in current, precision in submerged movement, ease in salt water, and enough tolerance of brackish and fresh water to make the ascent survivable. They are not a branch of Elves, and "sea-elves" is a misnomer they do not thank anyone for.

A Thaluren belongs to a parent-line, a clutch, a hatch-water, and a run before any household. 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 says so aloud before the clutch's circle, and is then counted in that clutch's duties as though born to them. A quarrel over who goes first, such as which line ascends first in a narrow year, goes to the Run-Watchers, who remember what was allowed before. To outsiders this can make the Thaluren seem severe. Among themselves they are a deeply communal people, whose strongest values are continuity, a share in the run, and care for vulnerable life, and whose first question about a stranger is whether the stranger knows how to behave near water that matters.

The Return

The year turns on the return. As spawning season nears, a settlement's run gathers along the Kelpshade and the outer shoals. Its **Clutch-Watch Circle** names who is going and as whose kin, and the **Sea-Settlement Speaker** sends messengers ahead to give warning at the mouths and upriver. The run then crosses into brackish water ringed by its escorts, climbs the river at the time it has given out, and lays its eggs in a known spawning ground under the eye of the **Sanctuary Custodians**. Reproduction is public. Nobody spawns alone, and nobody's clutch is a private matter. Afterwards the adults go back to the sea. The young who survive come down later, in their own time, without ceremony and through the run-followers' teeth, and are counted when they reach the Kelpshade; there the circle names each before any household takes them in. The naming gives the clutch and the water. The household comes after.

The Kavari Waters

Upriver, the runs reach water that is someone's home. The **Kavari** are a freshwater tributary people, neither Thaluren nor a river branch of the Reedfolk, who live year-round in the same river systems. Their bodies are practical rather than spectacular: strong breath, fine current-sense, ease in cold fresh water, a steady grip in slick places, and a good eye for sediment, pressure, and hidden channel shift. Their rootbank villages, deep pools, gravel runs, and spring-fed side channels are home, food, nursery, and burial ground at once. Kavari bear live young in the water, the childbed a sheltered nursery pool, and nurse them there for a season, and their young grow not after any return from the sea but in protected nursery waters kept by the community: sheltered coves, rootbank pools, gravel chambers, and side channels.

Bank councils settle who uses which water, **pool-kin** households remember which waters owe what, **channel stewards** keep the flow alive, and **nursery custodians** clean, turn, shade, and defend with their spears the gravel beds. Kavari lifeways, Bankright, Gravelbraid, Pool-Kin, and Coldrun, are rooted in their own waters as firmly as any Thaluren run-line in its return. For most of the year a Kavari bank village sees no Thaluren at all. In return season it sees messengers first, then

escorts, and only then, if the water allows it, a run. Where the two peoples meet, it is usually over a marker. Kavari custodians mark nursery-water and forbidden channels; Thaluren escorts bring warning and keep inside the marks; quarrels go to a circle at the water's edge, where whoever holds the water usually has the last word, and now and then to spears, and a feud between a pool and a run-line can outlast both their elders. Kavari households keep small shrines to the unnamed water-powers of their own pools and nursery reaches, and bury their dead along their burial reaches. No great god speaks for Kavari water, and Kavari custom prefers it so.

Who Holds the Waters

No single centre rules the Reaches. Power is held by those who keep each part of the return, and each keeps a jealous eye on the others.

The Returning Concord Its offices are also the sacred offices of the Thaluren faith, and are obeyed as such. **Run-Watchers** say which ascents are rightful and remember what was allowed before. Sanctuary Custodians keep the spawning grounds and alone may say when a water is fouled. Clutch-Watch Circles say aloud who descends from whom and who has been adopted. Sea-Settlement Speakers carry the voice of the sea settlements, where most Thaluren actually live. **Redirection Assemblies**, once called only in disaster, now decide whether a blocked run may pass into other water.

The two wings The **Blightward Keepers** hold the closed and damaged waters, keep the blight out, and remember the names of failed clutches. The **Open-Run Concords** hold the other channels and lesser sanctuaries, and the seasonal gathering that turns a desperate passage into an accepted one. Both claim to be the faithful heir of the same older custom.

The Kavari The **Bankright Circles** hold the dwelling-waters upriver through bank councils, pool-kin circles, nursery custodians, channel stewards, and seasonal gatherings. In nursery-water a Kavari closure outweighs any run's need to pass, because the Kavari live there and will fight for it, and they have never needed the Thaluren to agree.

Gnome sounders At the mouths and in some fought-over river reaches, Gnome sounders of the Gaugeward Leagues measure depth, timing, and channel. They write down what they find; they do not rule.

The Thaluren of the Reaches also sort themselves by older run-lines: Tidebound lines that keep the inherited runs, Blightward and Open-Run lines that took their names from the closure, and Outer-Route lines whose runs come in from the farthest current roads. The quarrels run in old grooves. Blightward custodians accuse sea settlements of putting ease before sanctity. Open-Run elders accuse the Blightward custodians of a reverence that kills, and resent how much a Kavari closure can decide about Thaluren lives. Bankright councils fear that every burdened return accepted this season becomes an expectation the next. A Kavari custodian and a Thaluren elder can both be entirely right about the same channel, and still come to blows over it.

Settlements of Sea and River

The Reaches have no capital. The largest gatherings of the Thaluren are not towns at all but runs gathering along the Kelpshade and assemblies at island-edge gathering places, and two such places together act as the centre, though nothing is ruled from either. The other sea settlements are scattered through reef and kelp, and the Kavari villages upriver are home to people who never go to sea.

The largest of the sea settlements is **Turning-shoal**, four thousand or more Thaluren in reef shelter on the inner edge of the Kelpshade, where the current is gentle. Its people fish, gather shellfish, and tend the shoals. In return season its run gathers along the kelp, and when the young come down from the rivers they are counted there first. **Brightshallow** is an island-edge gathering place of quiet water, with only a few keepers living there for good. Sea-Settlement Speakers and run-lines come to its assemblies along the current roads to settle quarrels and visit kin, and in a hard year it fills with people arguing about the runs.

Upriver, **Shadepool** is a Kavari rootbank village of a few dozen households on the middle river near the Gravelbraid Nurseries, built around a deep shaded pool with gravel runs and spring-fed side channels below it. Its bank council settles who uses which water, its nursery custodians tend the gravel beds and keep their spears sharp against egg-takers in the pools, and its burial reach lies a little upstream. Highest of all, **Mosspool** is a single pool-kin household on a cold upper tributary above the highest spawning grounds, where no run ever comes, with its own pool's shrine and its own reach for its dead.

Kelp-Cord and Fish-Leather

About 140,000 people live in the Reaches. Some seven in ten are Thaluren, nearly all of them in the sea settlements, and about three in ten Kavari, in the rootbank villages and pool-kin households upriver; a few Gnome sounders keep the mouths.

In the water a Thaluren wears little: a cord harness or belt for knife and net, and tokens of shell and bone for run-line and hatch water. In the air, at the mouths and the bank circles, they wear a wet wrap of woven kelp-cord to keep the skin from cracking, and those are the only places a land traveller is likely to see a Thaluren out of the water at all. Most of a clutch never reaches the sea; of the young that hatch, only a few come down the rivers to the Kelpshade, and those who are counted there live two to three centuries. Adults die of storms that scatter a run, of blackfins and sharks, of the devourers of the outer routes, and of age, for blight kills clutches, not grown Thaluren. Run-line, hatch water, and clutch come before any household, and a Thaluren meeting a stranger gives them first: Saevai of the Homeward run, hatched at the Second Channel. Other names of the Reaches: Oluun, Myrrua, Thaio, Ilua.

Kavari wear little in the river either. On the bank they wear short wraps of water-plant fibre and belts of fish-leather, and the Coldrun Kavari of the upper tributaries are the heaviest and darkest of them. Nursery custodians guard the young closely, and about one in six is lost, to cold winters, floods, and nursery beds trampled by runs pressing in without notice. Adults often pass a century and die mostly of age, cold, and floods. A Kavari is named with the pool that is home, and a pool-kin household for its pool: Grenna of Shadepool, Tovan, Pesk, Ulbe, Rokka, Dunni of Mosspool. The few Gnome sounders at the mouths dress, live, and are named as the Gnomes of the Tidelace are.

Ways Through the Water

The Reaches' roads are currents and rivers, and almost nothing on them is cargo. What moves is people, clutches, warnings, and memory. The Homeward Set and the outer routes bring the runs in. At the mouths, the Split Reed Mouth chief among them, Thaluren and Gnomes meet at reed-shelves, tide stones, and channel posts: the Thaluren call out the ascent seasons and the return channels, Gnome pilots sound their own channels and keep hazard markers, a fishing boat is not a run, and a run is not coastal traffic. Above the mouths, escorts and Sanctuary Custodians keep the known channels to the spawning grounds, and since the closure the best known of them leads to the Second Channel. Where redirected runs must pass near Kavari nurseries, cold holding pools keep displaced clutches alive while the circles on the bank decide what the water can bear. And the down-run brings the young back to the sea by the same rivers.

Trade is slight. Gifts pass at the bank circles and the mouths, and Gnome coastal traffic uses the estuaries for its own purposes, but no one comes to the Reaches to buy. What they come for, now and then, is what the drowned hold. Gnome divers whisper of old Thaluren **reef-halls** on the outer shoals, abandoned when a current road failed, where shell-work and pearl, the treasure of whole run-lines, were left with the dead. The Thaluren call such diving grave-robbing and its divers thieves, and have drowned divers for it; the Gnome crews who still go take a lookout for every diver and go only in the season when the escorts are upriver. Thaluren reach stops at the water's edge. What lies on the banks beyond the Kavari villages is not Thaluren business, and the Reaches have no land border worth naming.

One Wound

The Reaches remember one wound and the customs that grew around it. Long before outsiders came, sea-to-river return was already custom, and the Concord grew from that custom as the keepers of the runs and the sanctuaries tightened their hold on it. Upriver, the Kavari drew their own bank councils together into the Bankright Circles (c. 190,000–c. 160,000 BR) without reference to anyone's return. Then the First Nesting Confluence failed, and its closure (c. 178,000–c. 162,000 BR) forced the Thaluren to ask whether sanctity lay in a place or in the care given wherever the run goes, and split the Concord between keepers and open-runners.

The Second-Channel Feud (c. 160,000–c. 156,000 BR) was fought at the mouths and in the channels, spear against spear, the nearest thing to a war the Thaluren remember, with ambushes in the narrows and raids between the gatherings. It ended with terms the stronger side set: an alternate water is accepted, for now, only while it carries memory-debt towards the damaged source. The Gravel Oath Accord (c. 153,000–c. 148,000 BR) turned those terms outward when a redirected run met a wall of Kavari bodies and barriers across the nursery-water. The Late-Closure Terms (c. 147,000–c. 146,000 BR) taught both sides that late warning creates debt even in a real emergency, and that a broad closure can be challenged without the Kavari giving up their hold on the nurseries. And the Estuary Terms (c. 144,000–c. 138,000 BR) made the Thaluren share the mouths with Gnome sounding-lines.

The Reaches sit squarely on the **Water and Who Keeps It** thread of Caeldon's history: who may decide about living water. They answer **Who Counts and Who Records** in their own way, without archives, through elders who remember who returned rightly and when. Blightward families keep **sanctity-memory**, of who guarded the clutches and kept the waters clean. Open-Run families keep **survival-memory**, of who named dan-

ger honestly and let the run move. Kavari households keep their own count of every burdened return that crossed their water and whether its debt was paid.

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 teaching is the custom of return: remembered run-lines, spawning sanctity, the ascent made before all, and the care of vulnerable eggs and hatchlings. Its pilgrimage is the run, its holy places are the return-waters, and it needs no priesthood, because its keepers are the Concord's own offices: to serve as a Run-Watcher or a Sanctuary Custodian is to serve the Way.

The Reaches remember why there is no god. When blight entered the First Nesting Confluence, the Thaluren prayed to Ulaun the Stilled Hour for stillness, and her stillness held their clutches in a water where nothing could hatch. When she faded, the faith that survived kept the custom of return and refused the god. Thaluren do not deny that gods exist. They hold that the return-waters must not be entrusted to one, because a god can be asked for the water to stop, and custom cannot. Gods may be respected in other peoples' waters, so long as nobody calls on one over the ascent. Other peoples often fail to see the Way as a religion at all, because nothing in it is prayed to, and Thaluren regard that as the point. The whale-like deep-witnesses of ocean memory are honoured without being prayed to, and at the Split Reed Mouth the Gnome pilots keep their devotion to Maris of the Tides on their own bank, where the Way can respect it.

The First Nesting Confluence

High up the return system, several freshwater channels come together and run on as one: the **First Nesting Confluence**, the oldest sacred spawning water of the Thaluren. It was never the whole Thaluren homeland. It was the place where the sea-born return became holy and sworn, where clutches were accepted, their keepers answered to the run, and run-lines proved themselves. No run has spawned there since egg blight closed it. The closed water still has its keepers and their spears, and a place nobody may enter still shapes much of what the Thaluren believe.

The Closed Water

The confluence lies high enough up the rivers that only the old ascent channels ever reached it. The nesting reaches where clutches were once laid still lie in the slack water of the meeting, and nothing has been laid in them since the closure. The blighted clutches left pearls in the silt, dull and lovely, and they are the treasure every poacher on the river has heard of. On the banks above the old nesting reaches stand the **clutch-houses** where the watch circles kept their vigils before the closure, roofless now and inside the closed line. Their offerings were never carried out, carved shell and river-gold laid at the water for clutches that would not hatch, because nobody could bring them past the line without breaking it.

The approach from below ends at the **Naming Reach**, the guarded water under the confluence where visitors stop. Above it the water is closed. Within the closed reaches lie the **still pools**, where the current should run and does not and silt hangs unmoving in the water like smoke in a windless room. The custodians hold them to be what is left of Ulaun, and nothing that swims will go into them: fish turn aside at their edges, and so do the custodians. Nothing bars the way but the custodians' spears. What a visitor must get past is the Blightward line around the water, where trespassers have been killed and left in the shallows as a warning, and the knowledge, shared by every Thaluren, that entering a closed water without the custodians' leave betrays every clutch that failed there.

Keepers of a Wound

The Blightward Keepers hold the confluence by the duty they grew out of: a sick holy water must still be guarded, studied, shut off, and mourned. Most Thaluren live at sea and come upriver only to spawn. A Blightward custodian does the opposite for a span of seasons, keeping a watch-station in fresh water below the closed water and going home to the sea only when another custodian takes the watch, and a custodian who comes home is treated with respect and a certain distance, as someone who has lived too long beside a wound. Out of season the custodians keep their rounds: tasting the water where it enters and leaves, checking the edges of each still pool against the marks of the last watch, and reciting the names of failed clutches at the water where they failed. They watch the still pools as closely as the blight, because they hold that stillness held the clutches as surely as sickness killed them. They hunt as well. Egg-takers still lie in the weed of the lower channels, as if the river had not heard that no clutches come any more, and the custodians kill every one they find; lampreys climb past the Naming Reach to spawn and die in the closed water, and the custodians loathe them for it.

A clutch that fails to blight is not left unnamed. Custodians name it at the water where it failed, as a Clutch-Watch Circle would have named it had it hatched, and keep it in memory with its run-line, its season, and the state of the water. A run-line that has lost a clutch carries its name too: Blightward Thaluren give their run, their hatch water, and the failed clutch their line remembers when they introduce themselves. The confluence's Sanctuary Custodians alone may say whether the water is fouled, healing, or still forbidden. None has called it healed, so it stays shut, though water still runs through most of it.

Return season brings the only crowd. When the runs are climbing elsewhere, elders from the Second Channel come up to the Naming Reach, name the old water, and state the debt their run carries towards it before the custodians. Open-Run speakers use the gathering to press their side; Blightward custodians answer it on the spot, and not always with words alone. Then the visitors go back down, and the confluence is left to its keepers until the next season. No one else comes but poachers. The blighted pearls fetch a high price downriver, and every few years some band slips past the guards by night to dig for them. Few come back down, and those who do tell of a friend who knelt at a still pool to drink and stayed kneeling. Downriver there are guides who sell the way past the guards, and buyers in the estuary markets who never ask where a pearl was dug; the custodians send their own young after both, and some of those hunts go as far as the sea.

How It Closed

Long before the Concord had named offices, Thaluren communities treated the confluence as a place where return had to be seen by all and the keepers of a clutch had to answer for it. Then eggs laid by every proper rite failed. The first answer was prayer for stillness, and Ulaun's stillness held the clutches until the people prayed for movement and she faded. The custodians tried narrower timing, harder watching, and heavier ritual before they let runs go elsewhere, and the quarrel over that split the Concord in two. The custodians' teaching uses Ulaun as its warning that stillness is not care, and in every argument over sick and alternate waters both sides throw her against the other.

The confluence lives in the Reaches' sayings more than in its visitors. Thaluren elders curse a faithless keeper with *may your eggs lie still*, and young swimmers are warned, before they ever see a river, *never kneel to drink where the silt hangs*. Blightward families tell of the custodian who held a channel mouth against a whole run-line in the Feud, and was drowned there with the reed still in his hands; Open-Run families tell the same story with the run-line as its heroes. On the thread of

Water and Who Keeps It, the confluence is the wound the Reaches' whole custom of living water grew around.

The Second Channel

The water the Open-Run side points to is the **Second Channel**, a lesser but survivable spawning water farther along the rivers, and the first alternate water to be grudgingly accepted after the closure. It is not the confluence's heir. Its acceptance is given again season by season, on conditions, and the conditions are the whole point: the channel is where the Thaluren first let a run move while binding it to keep paying for the water it left. Run-lines killed each other over that bargain.

A Water Won by Care

The channel is small, sheltered, clean, and joined closely enough to the old ascent channels that a run reaches it without leaving guarded water. Nothing about it is ancient or grand. Its weight comes from what has survived in it, and from what died on the way to it: the ascent still has the drowning-places of the Feud, where run-lines met in the narrows and the current carried the dead back to the sea. Not all of what they carried went with them. The gravel of the narrows still holds the spearheads and shell-plate of the Feud's dead, and young Thaluren dive for them each season, to bring home a blade an ancestor lost, or one an enemy dropped.

The way up is dangerous. Run-followers gather off the river mouth when the young come down and follow the returning runs in; lampreys latch onto the weak in the lower river; and in the pools and weed of the channel itself egg-takers lie in wait for the clutches. The spawning ground is entered only under the eye of Sanctuary Custodians, whose spears drive off the egg-takers, and only by a run whose elders can say why it is here rather than at the old water. Open-Run keepers hold the channel and speak for it: they keep its route, the story of every clutch moved here, and the count of how many young survived each season. The Blightward Keepers hold no office over it, but they hold its debt; they sit at each gathering to hear that the old water is still named and still owed, and they watch the channel for the first signs of blight. Escorts from the sea settlements guard the mouths in season, and the young who serve in them come back with shark-scars they show off for the rest of their lives. Some never go back to the settlements: as shark-hunters they kill run-followers off the mouth for their teeth and their oil, follow the runs from one water to the next, and are welcome everywhere in season and nowhere after it.

A redirected household gives its hatch water with its debt attached: hatched at the Second Channel, owing the confluence. Each return season the household sends one of its own, in turn, with the run's elders to the Naming Reach to name the confluence aloud, a long journey upriver for a sea people, and being chosen to go is a family honour and a family burden at once.

The Gathering

The channel began as a desperate gamble during the closure, when Run-Watchers and sea-settlement speakers sent the weakest clutches into it and they lived. That success started the Second-Channel Feud. The Open-Run side held that survival is the line carried on, not broken; the Blightward side held that a water accepted too fast teaches a people to forget a wound. Both held it with spears along the ascent, ambushing each other's runs in the narrows, and for generations the channel's young came down to the sea through water red with their elders' blood. The peace, made when neither side could drive the other off the water, accepted the channel only while four conditions hold, given again at each gathering: the gathering kept every season, the young counted, the sick source named, and a living duty kept towards the closed water. Full accep-

tance has never been given, in more than a hundred and fifty thousand years, and none of the alternate waters that came after can point to the Second Channel as leave to replace an old water.

After every season comes the gathering, the event that makes the channel what it is. When the young come down to the sea and are counted at the Kelpshade, the count is carried back as the channel's tally of the living. Open-Run elders state the season's survival and the run's unbroken line. Blightward custodians ask whether the confluence was named and owed, and whether any run came here for ease rather than need. If both answers stand, the channel is accepted for another year, and the young's place in their line with it. A thin count turns the gathering into a quarrel, and families who have spawned in the channel for generations spend the winter knowing their young's place rests partly on other people's luck and partly on how many friends their line has among the elders. For the Way of Return the channel is a holy water won by care rather than inherited, and Open-Run teaching treats that as the faith's point rather than its weakness.

The channel's own tale is of its first clutch: the young mother who, the tellers say, carried the weakest eggs of a failing run up the unproven water past the egg-takers, alone, because no elder would go with her, and lived to see them hatch. Open-Run households sing her to their young before the first return; Blightward households call her a deserter who was lucky. At every gathering the escorts drink to the narrows, and to those who did not come down, and neither side refuses the cup.

The Gravelbraid Nurseries

On the middle river the water spreads into a mesh of shallow channels over clean gravel, braiding and rejoining around low rootbanks, fed by cold springs: the **Gravelbraid Nurseries**, home of long-settled Kavari nursery life. They are not large. They are where the Reaches' upriver border was first drawn: a channel may be Kavari dwelling-water and Thaluren return-water at once, but no run passes through it before the circle at the water's edge says it may, and the Kavari who live there have the loudest voice and the most barbs in that circle. At the braids that border is not an old story but a season's work, and a season's danger.

Beds and Markers

The gravel beds are the nurseries themselves: cleaned, turned, shaded, and defended so that Kavari young can grow in them. Cold springs feed the side waters, and the rootbank pools hold still, shaded water under the bank roots. Coming up from below, a visitor first meets the markers. Kavari custodians mark active nursery-water and forbidden channels, and change the marks with the season, since side channels are opened and closed as the water needs. Below the braids lie the **cold holding pools**, where Thaluren clutches with nowhere else to go can be kept alive while the circle decides what to do with them. Beside the water stand the rootbank villages of the households who keep the braids, with their small shrines to the water-powers of their own pools.

The beds have enemies older than any run. Egg-takers, green-and-gold and long as a Kavari, lie in the weed and raid the beds for young, and the households hunt them through the side channels with barbed spears and eat what they kill; a few households do little else, and trade the hides downriver. A spring flood can bury a season's beds under gravel in a night, and the households dig through it by torchlight for the living. Once, generations ago, they dug too late: a flood buried a whole upper braid in a single night with its rootbank village, and the river moved away from it. Its shrine and the water-gifts laid there, carved bone and beaten copper, lie somewhere under the gravel, and on flood nights the households say lamps move in the dry braid where nobody has lived since. What a run must get past is the mark-

ing, and the bank households behind it, who defend their beds with nets, barbs, and numbers. Every Kavari child knows the nursery mother who held a flooded bed through a night against a raiding run-line with nothing but a barbed pole, and was found at dawn still on her feet among the young.

The Circle at the Water's Edge

The braids belong to Gravelbraid households of the Bankright Circles, by the right of those who live in a water and can hold it, which they have never asked anyone to grant. Redirected runs reach them under Open-Run escorts, who send word ahead of the clutches and keep within the marks. Blightward debt-namers sit in the circle to name the debt each passage carries towards the sick source-water that made it necessary. Gnome counters linked to the Gaugeward Leagues measure water level, timing, and how much a channel can bear, so that later quarrels argue from one tally; they do not decide, and are paid by whichever side asks them. The circle meets at the water's edge and belongs, in name, to none of them.

For most of the year the braids are Kavari water and nothing else: gravel turned after each flood, cold inlets watched for the small changes in warmth or silt that can kill young, egg-takers hunted, rootbanks trimmed to keep shelter without choking flow, the dead carried to the burial reaches. Return season changes the order of things but not who holds the water. Word comes first, carried up by messengers. The nursery custodians read the beds, and the circle says which channels are live nursery, which side waters can bear a run this season, and which closures will not be lifted. Escorts come next, and only then, if the water allows, a run. Often it comes no nearer than the holding pools. When it does pass, it passes as a **burdened return**: a passage that carries debt to the sick source-water, duty to the receiving water, and a share of the blame for any harm, paid in goods or service to the households whose beds suffered. A genuine emergency that arrives late may be given holding-pool mercy, never a nursery channel, and owes more for its lateness. Most seasons pass under marking, warning, and watching, with spears on both banks, and nobody calls that peace. In return season the households keep a spear-watch on the holding pools through the night, because outlaw swimmers, some in Thaluren colours, have slipped into the pools in the dark before to steal clutches for the bargaining that follows.

From Orrin Talloway, *A Road-Book of Both Halves*

> *I walked up the braids in return season with two Gnome counters and their measuring rods, and for the first morning I saw no Thaluren at all. I saw Kavari, waist-deep in a side channel, fish-leather belts at their waists, turning the gravel with their hands as gently as a baker turns dough, and others sitting on the rootbanks under the overhang of the roots with their feet in the water and barbed spears across their knees, watching nothing I could see. Every few hundred paces a marker stood in the shallows. The counters read them aloud to each other as we passed and wrote down what they said. Once a woman stood up suddenly in a pool, drove her spear down, and lifted out something long and green and gold that thrashed until she broke its back on a stone.*
>
> *At noon a messenger came up from below, very fast, a long dark shape low in the water that stood up out of it at the circle's edge, streaming, pulled a wet wrap of woven cord about its shoulders, and spoke. I did not understand the words. I understood the Kavari custodian's face as she listened, and the way two others got up from the bank without a word and waded out to move a marker three channels over.*

> *The run came late in the day. I heard it before I saw it, a sound like rain beginning on a still pool, and then the water below the braids was full of them, rising and turning, hundreds, closer together than I would have thought bodies could swim without striking. They did not come into the braids. They came to the cold pools below, and stopped there, and the escorts swam up and down the edge of them all evening with their spears while the circle sat on the bank, and on the near bank a line of Kavari stood with theirs. Nobody raised a voice. The Gnome beside me measured the water three times and wrote the same number three times.*
>
> *I have spent my life deciding who may pass a chain across a river and what they owe for it, and I have never once had to ask the river's people whether their children were sleeping in the reach. Here nothing else is asked first. At dusk the Kavari lit nothing and the Thaluren sang nothing, and still it felt like a vigil, or the night before a battle. When I asked one of the counters whether the run would be let through, he said it was the third year this escort had come late, and that he had stopped guessing.*

How the Border Was Drawn

The braids had been Kavari nursery-water long before any run came near them. After the Second-Channel Feud let alternate waters be grudgingly accepted, Open-Run elders looked at the braids and saw a clean, sheltered, bright water near the return routes. The Kavari saw a water already named, tended, and full of young. The Gravel Oath Accord began when nursery custodians met an incoming redirected run with barbed spears in the lower channels and stopped it before it reached the beds. Through a season the clutches were kept in the holding pools while a circle of Kavari custodians, Open-Run escorts, Blightward elders, and Gnome counters bargained over what the water could bear, until a first passage was allowed under watch. Out of that circle came the **Twofold Waters**, under which a channel may be both peoples' water at once, and the oath of burdened return. The Late-Closure Terms then decided the two quarrels that still come back here, mostly on Kavari terms: late word creates debt even in a real emergency, and a broad closure may be questioned without handing the nurseries to outside need. The bank villages still hang on their shrines the shell-plate of a band of clutch-thieves that Kavari and Thaluren hunted down together, and both peoples tell that hunt as the one season they were of one mind.

The Unrun Sea

North and east of the far side, beyond the farthest current road the Thaluren know, the **Far Set**, ridden only by Outer-Route runs on their long way home, past the outer isles of the Tidelace and the fog banks off the Soundchain Roads, lies the **Unrun Sea**: the open ocean seaward of every known water on the far side. The name is a Thaluren way of speaking. A run is a path laid by those who swim it and remembered by those who come home, and no run has ever been laid through this water and come home. Its near edge is simply where every keeper stops: no elder of the Concord answers for it, and no Gaugeward harbour holds water past its last beacon. Nobody lives on it. The last settlement facing it is **Lastlight**, the outer-isle harbour of the Tidelace whose few dozen island households keep the last beacon on the coast. Its fogs and storms come south onto that coast, and how far it runs, nobody knows.

Why Nobody Goes

Nothing happened here that anyone wrote down, and that is the point. The peoples on its edge each have their own reason to stay out, and their own reason to distrust what little comes back. The Way of Return asks only whether a return is rightful. A run that does not come home is not a run, and Thaluren custom has nothing to say about water

that leads nowhere one can rightly reach again. The Outer-Route lines go farthest, and their memory keeps runs that pressed past the known roads and came back late, scattered, or not at all. What those who did return could tell was seen by too few to be believed, and in Thaluren custom a tale with no one to vouch for it counts for nothing. Still the tales are told: of water so deep it glows, of a current that ran uphill, of a shape beneath a run so long that it passed for a whole day. Outer-Route lines tell of the one escort who came back alone from a run that went too far; she would say only where the devourer broke it, and every Outer-Route run since has turned for home short of that water.

Gnome pilots will not enter water they cannot read, and the sounding houses leave unwritten the readings of the few craft a storm has driven past the last beacon: precise and true are not the same word. The one brass instrument such a craft brought home, made by no Gnome, lies locked in a Truesound gauge house that thieves have twice died trying to rob. The coastal Humans of the Tidelace fish close inshore in small open boats, and their tales say nothing of what lies beyond the sea.

What the Edge Remembers

What is known is mostly memory. The great fog belt of the outer Tidelace, the Long Grey, rolls in off this water with little warning, and with it come blooms of stinging fogbells. Storms off the same water break current roads and scatter runs, and drive in **driftmats**, rafts of bladdered weed that foul oars and carry small life nobody can name, and now and then a nameless hull. To a wrecker a nameless hull is a treasure-ship, its hold full of goods no market has seen; to a pilot it is proof that someone out there sails, and that whatever emptied the hull is still out there with them.

Thaluren ocean memory places great whale-like **deep-witnesses** out here, said never to stop growing, honoured without being prayed to, and an Outer-Route run that has seen one at a distance tells of it for generations. Island Gnomes, who see only a back like a moving isle on the horizon, call them the sea's monsters, and Lastlight children sing a counting game about the one that will rise under the beacon if they miscount. The same memory places squid-like **devourers** that break routes, and a current road where a devourer has been sensed is not trusted until a later run has come through it whole. On the farthest roads the Unreturned keep pace with the living runs in the dark water, and some Outer-Route lines still speak of their lost runs not as dead but as away. Maris of the Tides is honoured on the Tidelace as a guardian of the deep, but her strength comes from the coast, and whether any god holds this water nobody can say.

From Orrin Talloway, *A Road-Book of Both Halves*

> *The last beacon, at Lastlight on the outermost isle, is a stone tower no taller than a granary, with a keeper's house at its foot and a ledger on a shelf inside the door. I asked to see it, and the keeper showed me, and I read the last line, which was the night before's light and the hour it was lit. There is no line in that book for anything beyond the tower. The keeper said there had never been one. On the stair hangs a carved head with teeth as long as my fingers, broken off some ship no one has ever seen, and the island children touch its teeth for luck on their way up and will not look at it on their way down.*
>
> *I stood on the rocks below the tower through an afternoon and watched the sea. It looked like any sea: grey, then green under a break in the cloud, then grey again, with a long swell coming in out of nowhere I could name. Towards evening the fog came off it, not rolling in as the fog does on the Serath but standing up out of the water all along the edge of the world at once, like a wall being raised, and the keeper went up the tower and lit the light. Somewhere out in the grey, very far off, something breathed once, a*

> *long sound like wind through a door. The keeper heard it too, and said nothing, and wrote nothing down.*
>
> *Every road I have ever kept ends at somebody's gate, and somebody holds it. This one ends at a light and a book, and past the light, for all anyone at Lastlight could tell me, there is nobody to hold it and nothing to take a toll for. It is the only toll-free water I have ever seen, and I did not like it. The next morning I turned for home, by the long way and the one crossing, and I did not look back until the tower was below the swell.*

Tensions

- **A closure that will not say why.** At the Split Reed Mouth the Thaluren have kept one channel closed for an unusually long time without saying whether against blight or for the spawning, and the Estuary Terms make that silence an offence of its own. The pilots' last soundings of it are now too old to trust, and a pilot who went in at night to sound it came back with his boat holed below the waterline and will not say by whom.
- **The reef-hall divers.** A Gnome diving crew has come back from the outer shoals with Thaluren shell-work that the elders of an Outer-Route line say was laid with their dead, and has sold it in Truesound. The line wants it back and the divers drowned, and its young escorts have started shadowing every Gnome craft that crosses the Kelpshade.
- **The pool that grew.** One of the still pools at the First Nesting Confluence has spread past the marks of the last watch, and a custodian who went in after a speared egg-taker floats a spear's length inside the edge, eyes open, neither drowned nor living. Some custodians want the closure widened downstream; Open-Run speakers say a water growing stiller will not come back; older custodians fear that someone at the confluence has begun to pray for stillness again.
- **Debt without end.** An Open-Run circle has begun saying at the Naming Reach that the Second Channel has carried its debt long enough and should be fully accepted. Blightward custodians answer that a debt is not paid by being old, and hear in the demand the very replacement the old bargain was made to prevent. The question cannot be decided for one water without being decided for every alternate water after it, and the young on both sides have started counting old killings again.
- **The great follower.** A run-follower larger than any the escorts have seen has taken young at the mouth of the Second Channel three seasons running, and two escorts who went after it alone have not come back. Fewer young reached the Kelpshade this season than in generations, and a thin count will be thrown at the channel at the next gathering. The sea settlements have promised a run-line's honour to whoever kills it, and more young Thaluren than the escorts can use are coming to try.
- **The expected emergency.** For three seasons the same Open-Run escort has reached the Gravelbraid Nurseries late with a genuine emergency and been given holding-pool mercy. A Coldrun council upstream now closes its side channels before anyone asks, the escort means to challenge the closure, and the Gravelbraid households fear both a fourth mercy and a successful challenge. Young Kavari have begun waiting at the Coldrun marks with spears.
- **Past the light.** A craft in trouble just beyond Lastlight's beacon is in water no Gnome pilot will enter and no harbour holds, and Lastlight's households can see it from the isle. Putting out breaks the pilots' rule; staying in leaves a craft and its crew to the Unrun Sea. The coast has never said which a household owes. Lastlight's

one hero-song is of a woman who rowed out past the light and brought a crew back; it does not tell of the second time she went.

PART VI

The Making of the Medieval Present

How the medieval present came to be, from the Corridor Ages and the Settlement, and the quarrels and open questions it hands to writers.

CHAPTER 18

How the Present Was Made

Nothing on this river is new. The channel was read by Reedfolk before there was a town to read it for; the stone of our quay was cut in the holds and paid for in grain; the road behind the wall was carried by a camp whose debt was never paid; and the oath we swear aloud at the toll-house was first sworn by people whose names the flood has taken. We copy it again this year so that someone will remember we kept it.

— from its preface, as recopied in a Lower Serath record-house, *The Long Count*

Almost nothing a traveller meets in the medieval present was made by the people who now use it. The roads were laid by vanished builders and widened by debt-bound camps. The oath-craft of the river towns came down through Reedfolk houses from an archive world that sealed its cities some hundred and twenty thousand years ago. The far side's water was fought over so long ago that its songs look back to those terms and add nothing new. Elves and Dwarves carry grudges older than any living throne, and the youngest people on Caeldon remembers its own first owners by name. Two ages did most of the work of turning that inheritance into the world of c. 1,350 CR. In the **Corridor Ages** (c. 40,000-c. 2,000 BR) the Humans came into their own, fast and hungry, and took over, borrowed, or bent nearly every older order they touched. In the **Settlement** (c. 2,000 BR-c. 500 CR) the lordships, holds, leagues, and temples of the era dug in, most of them won by the sword, and the frames the roads had carried out of the mountains woke up among them. This chapter tells those two ages in full, and then follows each of the six old quarrels of Caeldon's history to the place where it is still being fought.

Before the Corridor

The Humans were late. The first peoples of the cradle-web, the Elves of the Elderweald, the Dwarves of the Ironspine, and the threshold peoples of the broken ground between them, had become themselves half a million years before. The deep world had flooded and the Dark Elves had gone down into it more than three hundred thousand years before. The first Humans emerged in the basins in the crowded age of the Elder Worlds (c. 300,000-c. 220,000 BR), while the colossal road-builders, the furnace-keepers, and the archive-cities rose and fell around them, and for a very long time the Humans stayed small and local.

AT A GLANCE

The Corridor Ages	c. 40,000-c. 2,000 BR. The Confluence Marches, the Headwater roads, the Serathic League; the Reedfolk rivers swallowed, Ogre camps chained by debt, Dwarven frames carried out, Elven courts met as rivals.
The Settlement	c. 2,000 BR-c. 500 CR. The lordships, holds, leagues, and temples of the era dig in; the Wrought awaken (c. 1,500 BR-c. 200 CR).
The Medieval Present	c. 500-c. 1500 CR; "now" is c. 1,350 CR. One elder horror is already awake, the Wake-Seal over the Hushvale (c. 1,200 CR).
The far side	Its customs were set long before, in the Far-Side Terms (c. 160,000-c. 98,000 BR).
Dates	BR before, CR after the Common Reckoning; all deliberately rough.

Then came the long dark of the **Unrecorded Age** (c. 120,000-c. 40,000 BR). When the archive-law world sealed its cities, writing in the cradle ended with it, and for eighty thousand years almost nothing was set down that later cradle peoples can read. What survives is house memory, songs, Reedfolk oath-keeping, the Dwarven and Elven chronicles those peoples keep to themselves, and ruins. Memory kept by voice even had its own god in that age, the **Many-Named**, worshipped by many peoples under their own names.

It was no empty age, and no peaceful one. For the Humans it was the age in which they became one people. In the **Gathering of the Confluence** (c. 120,000-c. 50,000 BR) valley paths were walked until they were expected, foothill crossings were remembered along with the people who died on them, and lowland villages, marcher bands, and guarded approaches began to count as parts of one widening country rather than as mere neighbours. Trust and guest-right reached farther than kinship, though a stranger was still safest under a strong host's roof. Gorges took the path and the travellers on it in a wet spring, wolves followed the herds, and bands raided one another for stock and stores long after anyone remembered why. One idea won out over all the others: strength comes from linking unlike lands, not from making them alike. Every later Human people still answers to it.

Basin tellers set their oldest raid-tales in this age, where no written word can gainsay them: the cattle-raid over a single white heifer that began a feud longer than either village lasted, and the girl who walked into the raiders' camp under guest-right and walked out with her brother before anyone could decide whether to kill her. The plough and the delver's spade still turn up the age itself: bones under old mounds, buried stores whose owners no song names, and the hearths of villages that were burned and never rebuilt.

In the same long silence Human bands slowly settled the foothills of the **Headwater Marches** (c. 70,000-c. 35,000 BR), and a few drifted far along the coasts to shores nobody in the basins would ever hear of; their descendants are the Human hamlets of the far Tidelace. On the far side, harbour ledgers kept their own count, unread by the cradle.

The Corridor Ages

Around c. 40,000 BR the scattered settlements of the basins and the foothills began to behave as one world, and the Humans began to matter to everyone else. What follows is not one story but several running side by side for thirty-eight thousand years: a people hardening into marches and strongholds in the basins, a river people losing its say without losing its use, a frontier with the Dwarves turning into roads, a river league learning that a kept promise is a weapon, Elven courts

meeting a younger rival, and two peoples, the Ogres and the frames, set to carry the weight of all of it.

The Confluence Marches

The **Confluence Marches** (c. 40,000-c. 20,000 BR) did not begin with a capital forcing order on an empty basin. They began when the basin-headwater Humans outgrew their villages. Settlements crowded along the rivers; the foothill approaches were fought over again and again; grain from the deep basins fed the hard folk of the passes, and their spears kept the passes open for the grain, until no community could stand alone. What came first was a march, not a centre: a long border-country of strongholds and fords, held together because none of them could hold depth and edge alone.

There was no king's hall over it and no hold-elders. A community counted if it could hold its own ground, keep its ford, and keep the thread to its neighbours. What bound the rest together was habit: trade, kin-ties, oaths sworn at crossings, and blood-prices paid when the oaths failed. Quarrels did not end. They were fought out with burned barns and ambushed carts until one side could no longer pay its fighters, and then they were sworn over. Wolves haunted the long roads in hard winters and outlaw bands the woods behind the fields, and in the basins lay elder ruins such as the colourless **Paling**, round its nameless archive city, where a night inside takes the morning's memories and only the paid or the desperate go in.

Basin ballads love this age best: the ford held by twelve against a hundred, the burned barn answered with a burned hall, the marcher who rode into the Paling after a stolen bride and rode out the next day not knowing whose she was. The abandoned strongholds of the first Marches still stand on the foothill approaches, and treasure-diggers open their fallen cellars for the war-chests the feud-songs swear were buried before a last stand. Most find bones. Whenever later Humans quarrel over who is strong enough to rule, they reach back to the Marches, and in the medieval present they are still a churn of lords, walled towns, and alliances that last as long as they pay, rather than a crown.

With the Marches came writing. As the corridor towns rose, guarantees, tolls, debts, and ranks were written down again, and people no longer needed to hold the whole of a lineage or an oath in memory; they could look it up, or have it read to them. The belief that had sustained the Many-Named, that a story lives in the voice, gave way to the belief that it lives on the roll. Each people that took up writing stopped calling on him under its own name, and he went quiet a name at a time, while **Annoth the Keeper of Scrolls**, the goddess of the corridor's scribes and record-houses, grew strong on the same change. The Unrecorded Age ended, in the cradle at least, not with an event but with a habit: a clerk at a crossing writing down who had paid.

The River and the Reedfolk

Down on the rivers, everything the Humans grew, they grew beside someone older. The Reedfolk had kept the lower waters as the **Floodkeeper Houses** for more than a hundred and fifty thousand years, and they knew what Human river towns needed above all else: which channels move, which banks fail, which flood years can be lived through, and which crossings lie about their depth.

The **Lower River Absorptions** (c. 30,000-c. 8,000 BR) were not one great war, and that is the point of them, though there was no shortage of force. The Floodkeeper Houses and the older channel leagues beside them were bargained with, learned from, hired, married into, bullied, quietly bypassed, and at last called local custom rather than lords of the water. For a long time it was a fair trade: Reedfolk flood-keepers advised and guided, and towns that could not have been built without them listened. What changed was not their skill but who decided. Once the river towns could swear guarantees among themselves

and enforce them with armed boats and sell-swords, the question of who may decide about water came apart from the question of who knows it, and Reedfolk say became Reedfolk service.

Not every house went quietly. Fen-dwellers driven off their reaches cut levees in the flood months, sheltered river-thieves for a share, and raided the towns that had taken their water; towns raised war-boats against people they still needed to steer them, and put bounties on whole houses. Some Reedfolk families still keep, wrapped in reed, the bounty-tallies their ancestors stole back. Some houses were taken in on fair terms and live on inside the later towns. Some were driven into fen, marsh, and shoal, where they shared the reeds with the outlaws the same towns had driven there. And some drowned, in the plainest sense: the drowned reed cities of Reedfolk memory belong to these ages, when channels cut for stronger powers swallowed people whose warnings no one strong had to heed.

Their shrines still stand in the shallows over dead who never had their rites. Treasure-seekers pay fen guides to take them out after the shrine-silver said to lie in the silt, and the guides take the money and stop at the edge of the shallows. Beyond it the drowned walk out of the water in the falling season as the **River-Given**, great catfish lie in the sunken streets, and the leeches are thick enough to bleed a wader white. Reedfolk grandmothers tell of pilots who took a cruel town's barges into the Lying Shoals and swam home alone, and lower-river bargemen still curse a careless steersman with "may a Reedfolk pilot love you".

The swallowing carried something else downstream. The Floodkeeper Houses had kept the swearing and witness customs of the archive-law world since its keepers passed them on at the sealing of the cities, in the **Last Keeping**. When the river towns took Reedfolk water, they took those customs with it, usually without knowing where either came from, so the oath-craft the Serathic towns are proudest of is partly a Reedfolk inheritance. Some Floodkeeper houses say so. Serathic scribes rarely agree.

The gods of the river were made in the same long span. **Serovan the River-King** had no claim to be the river's first master, but his cult grew strong as the towns took the river for themselves; where the Reedfolk asked who *knows* the water, the towns asked who *holds* it, and Aqua took the shape of a river lord around the second question. Some houses saw early what absorption meant: a house could keep its knowledge and its people and still lose itself, renamed as service inside an order it had not made. Their prayer for a self that cannot be dissolved condensed into **Hesserin the Shattered Saint**, cracked porcelain held together with veins of gold. She lived and faded within the Absorptions; as the last prayer for refusal went quiet and the houses accepted service, she shattered, and the current carried the pieces away. In some old crossing shrines a broken mirror mended with gold still hangs above the water, and fen bands that raid the towns' barges still nail a gold-mended shard over their camps.

The Headwater Alignments

Up in the foothills, Human settlement met the Dwarves, and the mountains decided the meeting before either people did. In the **First Headwater-Ironspine Contacts** (c. 34,000-c. 22,000 BR) the first Human bands pushing up the river-heads met no Dwarven kingdom. They met patrols, gate-wardens, walled waystations, and ore-trains under guard, at a ford or a pass mouth, and often in the dark. None of it was friendly. Human bands raided waystation stores in lean winters and were hunted back down the valleys; gate-wardens took what they pleased from those who passed; a lost ore-train was answered by a burned village. Pass bears broke into the walled stores each autumn and mauled the guards who stood in their way, and each side found the other useful against them. That is how the bargaining started.

In the **Headwater Alignments** (c. 28,000-c. 14,000 BR) the two peoples learned to stand together, out of need, not friendship. Metal, worked stone, and the Dwarves' knowledge of the mountain roads went down; grain, hands, and villages that kept the bandits off the approaches to the gates went up. The slopes between the holds and the villages belonged to grey wolves, cave-things, and bandits who raided a hold's mule-trains one month and a village's harvest the next, and the first joint war-bands of Humans and Dwarves were raised to hunt them. Trust was earned the hard way: the Dwarven warden who brought a lost Human caravan down through the snow, the village that hid a hold's wounded from raiders and paid for it in burned barns. The holds, stronger in the passes, set most of the terms. Through the alliance Dwarven smithing and road-craft entered the Human world, and Dwarven steel with them; a hold-forged sword is still the treasure a Headwater house hangs over its hearth. Elves remember the Humans as recent. The Dwarves of the gate holds remember being their teachers, and have not been thanked.

A mixed frontier soon had to decide when its young were grown. Fosterage there was no kindness alone: a child given into another house was a pledge of trust and a hostage against betrayal at once, and the young drove mules and stood watch long before either heartland would have called them grown. In the **Headwater Fosterage Feud** (c. 24,000-c. 23,000 BR) a Human fosterling famous on the road, who had held a narrow path in the Rattlecut gorge with a spear until a hold's escort came back for its wounded, was refused the full oath by the Dwarven elders: brave, they said, and trusted, but not yet ready. The Human kin took it as an insult and closed the ford below the hold. In the scuffle in the shallows a Dwarf and two villagers drowned, and for a season the waystations stood empty while the bandits came back to the road and raided both sides. It was the bandits, in the end, who brought the feuding kin back to the same table. Travellers crossing that ford at dusk are still warned not to answer if someone in the water asks the way to the hold.

In the **Headwater Rite of Two Oaths** (c. 23,000-c. 21,000 BR) the answer became custom. Under **working right**, sworn at the settlement gate, a youth may be a messenger, apprentice, caravan-hand, or road servant under an elder's eye, with a place everyone can see and nothing heavier. Under **oath-right**, sworn years later, the young adult may swear binding oaths, claim 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. The rite did not end the disagreement. It held it still, and every Headwater family still argues about the years in between. Every waystation keeps a wall of the names of young road-hands who did not come back, and the first thing a new one learns is an old mule-driver's warning: "walk where the mules walk, sleep where the dogs sleep, and never camp in a dead caravan's ring."

The long pressure of in-between people, workers or members, children or adults, Human or hold-kin, loaded Imago until it condensed into **Abrel the Changeling**, whom frontier Dwarves call Durrask. Once the rite gave each threshold its own step, many prayers to Abrel became prayers about a known passage rather than an open question.

The Guarantee and the League

The Lower Serath grew under a different pressure. Everything the basins grew came down it, barges, ferries, market boats, and stored grain, and that made it rich and made every stoppage dangerous. River-thieves lay up in the reeds, wreckers lit false marks above the shoals, rival towns seized each other's landings, and every spring, as the water fell, the River-Given walked out onto the landings and tried to go home. In the **Lower Serath Guarantees** (c. 26,000-c. 16,000 BR)

the strongest towns began to sell what the river needed most: safe passage between landings, protection at the crossings, a trader treated the same each time he paid. The guarantees were kept by armed boats and walled crossings, and sellswords rode every bargemaster's deck. A town that broke its word to a stronger one paid in burned barges, and some feuds between river towns of these years ran for generations, landing raided for landing. The first river heroes were the guarantee-captains who hunted the reed-raiders down; the first river villains were the captains who took their bounty and let the raiders go. Reed-divers have sought for thousands of years, in the mud below the same bend, a guarantee-chest sunk with a burning barge and said to hold a whole season's tolls.

The bargemen's bad-luck sayings come from these years: never moor alone in the reeds, never follow a mark you did not see lit, and never pull a drowned man aboard on the falling water, for he will want to steer. So does the belief that a word spoken before sworn onlookers binds harder, and its darker twin: the river folk say a death never sworn to will not stay quiet, and the **Unsworn Dead** of the lower river are laid by swearing it and writing it down.

Out of the guarantees came the **Serathic League** (c. 22,000-c. 16,000 BR). No single town could keep the river safe for long, so the strong towns swore themselves together, each keeping its walls and binding itself to its neighbours by guarantees backed by boats and sellswords. The strong towns gave the guarantees; the small ferries and hamlets paid for them; a town that broke its word found the river closed to its barges and its landings burned. The sellsword crews of those years sold their oars to whichever town paid, more than one changed sides between a contract and a battle, and the towns hanged them for it when they could and hired their cousins the next season. The League was tighter than the wider Marches and never a kingdom, and it was never a Human story alone: it hardened by bending Reedfolk channel knowledge to its use and making the channel-keepers answer to whoever held the crossings. Lower Serath inns still toast a League captain who took six armed boats into the reeds after a thieves' fleet and came back with four, the fleet's hoard of plundered tolls, and the thief-king's head on her prow; the reed-folk of that stretch say the hoard was only half of it, and the rest lies in a pool the catfish guard. Through the **River-Lords' Peace** (c. 17,000-c. 7,000 BR) the League became a lasting power rather than a lucky cluster of rich towns.

Its most famous oath was born in fire. In the **Serathic Oath of Layers** (c. 19,000-c. 18,000 BR) a rich merchant house in a river town where Humans, Elves, and Dwarves lived side by side died out with its heir still young by one people's count and already grown by another's. Each set of kin claimed the house, its warehouses, and the child, and fought for them in the open: warehouses burned, a laden barge was cut loose onto the Lying Shoals, a guardian was knifed on the quay steps and went into the river unrited, and hired blades held a warehouse for three days. When traders began to avoid the town, the great river houses came down in force with their boats and swore an answer on the landing. First comes **Protection**: food in a famine, a place behind the walls, and a house that will avenge you, for everyone the town takes in. Above it comes **Stewardship**: the right to hold property, debts, or goods in trust under an elder's eye. Above that stands **the full oath**, the heaviest duties of town, oath, and line borne in one's own right. The child was given the first two, the warehouses were held in trust, and the kin who would not accept it were driven out. The layers serve the great houses first, and those who hold the full oath are the rich, which is why the Reedfolk say the League found three layers for everyone else and has kept them on the middle one ever since.

A corridor that rested every bargain on someone's word broke a great many words. Guarantees were sworn and quietly evaded, sworn word was bought, sealed terms found their way to rivals,

and caravans were ambushed on roads only the oath-bound should have known; the stronger party broke its oaths most safely. No war did it, only the ordinary faithlessness of a crowded river where every broken word could start a feud. The prayer for a word that holds condensed into **Iskel the Scribe of the Silent**, keeper of the oath itself and of whatever was sworn to stay silent, as Annoth keeps the record of what was done.

All of this split the Human world without breaking it. In the **Human Corridor Orders** (c. 18,000-c. 7,000 BR) some routes came to carry far more than others, and where they met, the crossings, markets, and walled towns were worth holding, and whoever held them took a toll. They were easier to rule than open country and far richer to raid: outlaw bands lived off the roads between the towns, river-thieves off the barges, and lords hired sellswords against both and against each other. The roads bred their own legends: an outlaw lord who held a ford for twenty years and taxed it like a king until a town paid his own men to drown him, a bridge-keeper who held her span alone against a raiding band until the town bell brought help, and the hanged at the crossroads, who still drag at night travellers where the old gibbets stood. In the **Headwater and Serath Corridors** (c. 18,000-c. 7,000 BR) that order took its two shapes: in the mountains, passes held by hired escorts and Dwarven gate-wardens who were not always better than the thieves; on the river, oaths sworn again and again and enforced by the richest towns' armed river-watch. The Confluence world was held together by roads and crossings people could trust to stay open, and by the spears that kept them so. Many medieval ruins along the rivers are the towns of these ages that lost, and treasure-seekers dig their cellars for toll-chests and strongrooms, and in the oldest pits find the dead of plagues and sieges instead, sometimes waiting.

The corridor's religion took shape alongside its oaths. The **Sworn Accord** grew as the river towns' habit of swearing before witnesses was carried from bargains between men to the gods themselves. Its shape is usually dated to around c. 15,000 BR, when the first river towns swore a shared roster of the gods they would honour in common. The Accord treats a god the way the towns treat a stranger: a god is honoured in common once the town has sworn to it and entered it on the roster, and until then it is someone else's god, kept at someone else's hearth, and nobody will defend its shrine when the raiders come. First on the roster stand **Anvelle the Harvest-Mother** of the basin fields and Serovan of the river, because field and river are the oldest powers in the corridor.

The Forest Edge and the Courts

The Humans did not rise into an empty world, and the older peoples did not all meet them the same way.

Along the basin margins the forest came first. In the **First Confluence-Elderweald Contacts** (c. 38,000-c. 24,000 BR) basin farmers followed the feeder streams up to the trees and met no Elven kingdom: watchers seen only when they chose to be, grove-keepers who stepped out of the wood to forbid a felling, warning-cuts on the trunks along a path, and behind them the outer reach of the **Rootcrown Concord**. To the Humans the edge was water, firewood, timber, and new fields; to the Wood Elves it was living wood, kin and not timber. The first meetings were bargains over a stream, an arrow in a fence post, a woodcutter found dead beneath his own tree, a clearing burned in answer, and whoever had more people on a stretch of edge usually decided. In the **Elderweald Border Pressures** (c. 26,000-c. 10,000 BR) that friction became the oldest lasting border war between Humans and Elves. Wardens answered axes with warnings, then arrows; villages answered arrows with fire and hired spears. Woodcutters were found pinned to the trees they had been felling, wardens' groves were burned in revenge, and raiders who knew neither people's peace grew rich on both. Border songs keep the

heroes: the warden who walked alone into a burning village to carry out a Human child, and the woodcutter's daughter who led a war-band astray through the root-hollows until the hollows took it.

It never became one great war, and it never closed. It bred trades instead, Human beast-hunters paid by the village to clear wolves and boar from the forest edge, Elven guides hired by the same villages in quieter years, bounty-takers who tracked timber-raiders into the trees for whichever side paid, and it bred fears: edge villages still tell of wardens who wore a wolf's shape too long in the war years and forgot the way back, and leave meat at the edge rather than hunt them. Even grief had to be shared there. In the **Elderweald Funerary Accord** (c. 16,000-c. 15,000 BR) a villager of a mixed household was killed by raiders on the forest road, and on the third night Elven kin came to carry the body to the grove while Human kin barred the hall door; two mourners died on the threshold, one of each people. The elders swore an accord that made neither side wrong: the body went to the forest by the Wood Elf return rite, and the mourning, the names, and the markers stayed with the village. Its first act was a hunt. Human spearmen and Wood Elf wardens ran the raiders down at a ford two days into the trees and brought back no prisoners, and the village still keeps the raiders' spears on its hall wall beside the door where the mourners died. Edge folk say a dead man given only half his rites walks, which is why border villages give both.

The High Elves came later, and with more pride. In the **First Confluence-Crownbough Contacts** (c. 18,000-c. 10,000 BR) basin hunters pushed far enough upstream to see lamplight in the boughs and met riders who watched from the treeline and did not answer a hail, envoys who arrived unbidden with gifts too fine to trust, and groves lit at dusk by Elven working where no fire burned. Basin youths climbed the approaches on a dare to bring home a bough-lamp; some came back with treasure, some came back carried, and some were never found. From c. 16,000 BR the **Crownbough Embassies** (c. 16,000-c. 8,000 BR) carried the meeting into halls. Crownbough envoys came expecting deference, with living gifts that kept growing in a Human hall and songs that could silence a feast; Confluence lords came curious, greedy to learn, and unwilling to kneel. Pride was paid for in blood: for generations few embassies passed without a duel between a lord's champion and an envoy's sword-bearer, Human poachers were hanged from the boughways, and a Crownbough heir out hunting was taken for ransom by a basin lord's men. One embassy never arrived at all. It was found in a burned clearing with its gifts gone, and among the treasure tales of the Elderweald margins is its chest of living gifts, said to have been buried by the brigands and grown into a grove that still blooms out of season somewhere in the margin woods. Those who go looking for it tend to meet the Wood Elf wardens instead.

The rivalry reached into households. In the **Crownbough Heir Controversy** (c. 14,000-c. 13,000 BR) a child of two houses, one Human and one High Elf, became a prize and a target. The Human side pressed to show the child and name it heir, since a named heir holds allies to their oaths and is harder to quietly kill; the High Elf side held that a child may be born, guarded, and cherished without yet being ready to be named anything. Rivals in both houses would rather the child had not lived. A nurse was caught with poison in its milk, a Human cousin's raiders came for it on the road and were cut down in an Elven ambush, a garden-walk railing gave way under its guardian, and the child grew up behind doubled guards, moved from hall to hall by night. The houses settled on what neither could refuse, the child acknowledged in some ways and left unnamed in others, and left only a warning that a house's need for a clear heir and a child's readiness to be one do not ripen on the same day. The courtiers devoted to **Saerith the Mirror-King** remember it

as proof of how much a line can be made to bear; mixed houses still tell their children of the guardians who never slept.

The **Confluence Rise** (c. 24,000-c. 2,000 BR) is the name for the whole of it: the first great Human power on Caeldon, a churn of basin towns, frontier roads, strongholds, and alliances of convenience, where lords rose and fell within a lifetime, the strongest house of a valley set its terms, and sellswords sold to whoever was winning. A beaten house's men took to the hills and raided the valley that had thrown them out, and some of the oldest Confluence lines began as such bands, which their heirs prefer not to recall. By the end of it the Humans no longer merely survived among older peoples. They faced them as rivals.

Roads and the Chain-Camps

The roads were the hardest work and the cruellest. The **Headwater Exchange Roads** (c. 16,000-c. 8,000 BR) began as paths before they were roads, and as crossings before anyone trusted them. As bargains settled into habit, passes were marked, approaches walled, and whoever held a crossing kept it in repair because the takings were worth it. The Headwaters never became safe. Bandits waited for metal caravans in the gorges; slavers took lone travellers off the high paths; pass bears broke into the waystations every autumn; and things came up out of the deep workings that no one on the road could name, which the beast-hunters would not follow back underground. Sellsword companies grew up to guard the caravans, and some of them turned bandit in a lean year. The road keeps its heroes in waystation names: a shelter named for the escort who carried a frozen child two days down the pass on her back, and a bridge named for the Dwarven warden who held it against a bandit war-band with his hold's whole escort dead behind him. Road-folk still touch his stone for luck at the bridgehead.

Building the roads took more stone, timber, and earth than young Human realms could move with their own backs, and Ogre camps could move it. In the **Chain-Camps** (c. 18,000-c. 8,000 BR) 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, winters in the high camps. **Hearth-weight**, the Ogre custom that strength must be anchored by care, made every one of those walls hold, because a camp will carry almost anything to keep its weak fed. Ogres later called them chain-camps, though the chains were mostly ledgers. Not every camp endured it. One band is still toasted at Ogre fires: it broke out in a hard winter, took a road-lord's grain-train on the high pass, and fed three camps with it through the spring, until the sellswords caught it at a ford and it held there to the last so the camps could scatter. The road-lords called it brigands. The camps call the ford by its name.

The camps prayed for a way out, and from their desperation and defiance condensed **Haggun the Wall-Breaker**, liberation whatever it cost. The answer that lasted was harder. Around c. 15,000 BR camps along the Headwater roads began binding 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. The dependents kept with the camp. And the right to refuse work that would destroy it.*
>
> — the Hearth-Weight terms

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, and the bounty a road-lord put on the killers was never once collected. A camp that broke the terms lost the protection of the rest; an employer who broke them found no Ogre band willing to work for him any-

where along the road. Those terms are the **Hearth-Weight Compacts**. They did not end debt-bound Ogre labour, but they gave the camps something to fight it with, and by the end of the span the great Headwater works could not be built without them. As refusal became a weapon the camps could use, Haggun faded. The roads the chain-camps built are still walked. Some sections carry Compact marks naming the camps that built them, and Ogres say the road cuts where whole camps died are bad places to stop at night: travellers who camp there anyway tell of loads shifting in the dark, of a tally counted aloud by voices too deep for Humans, and of debt-ledgers found open on the road at dawn.

The same frontier took the ground from under the Goblins. Headwater lords, from the first settlement of the foothills through the building of the roads, treated ruined and marginal ground as **waste**: anyone's to take, whoever lived there. Goblin-held ruins went to whoever came with more spears. The doctrine was partly new greed and partly the old archive-law mark of lesser worth taken up again by lords who did not know its source. In answer, from c. 20,000 to c. 9,000 BR, the **Iron Compacts** took the shape they still have: if Goblins could not keep what was theirs, they would hold what others needed held, a road, a ruin, a watch, with their own spears, under a lord's warrant that he can take back whenever it suits him. The medieval word Hobgoblin names them, and the struck-warrant songs of **Tavi the Bard of the Broken** are sung at their gatherings.

The Frames Go Out

The roads carried one more thing out of the mountains. The mindless **predecessor-frames** of the Dwarven deep holds, undated and probably very old, had been built for heat channels, vent shafts, pressure gates, and furnace work that maims or kills ordinary bodies. Much of that work had long been done by Kobold vent-kin bound in service since the fall of the furnace world. Whether the frames were built to spare the Kobolds or to stop paying for them, Dwarven records do not say plainly; Kobold underhouses remember frames arriving and the Kobolds' place in the holds shrinking, and some Dwarven craft-lines remember the frames as a mercy. For a very long time the frames stayed in the holds, guarded as hold craft.

The Headwater roads changed that. In the **Spread of the Predecessor-Frames** (c. 16,000-c. 2,000 BR) trade, lending, and heavy building brought frames out as hired and bartered labour, and from there they spread by sale, by salvage from collapsed workings, by theft, and by imitation in Human, Gnome, and alchemical workshops that could copy a frame without understanding what made it run. Villagers who saw a frame clanking up the road behind a caravan never forgot it, and thieves soon learned that a stolen frame was worth more than the cargo it guarded. The first frame-thieves became a legend of their own: a band that stole a frame in the night, could not stop it, and was found at dawn still being dragged up the pass behind it towards the hold it came from. Dwarven holds sent hunters after their own stolen craft and did not always ask whose hands held it. Road inns told of a thief who walked a forge-frame a hundred miles by night, and of the hold hunters who found him a year later running a smithy with it, and left the smithy standing and the smith in the river.

Outside Dwarven hands the frames became whatever their owners needed: field and flood work on the estates, fumes and fire in the alchemical workshops, hauling and bracing for road and mine builders, siege labour, gate guards, and at last weapons that walked into a shield-wall and did not stop. Those are the roots of the later Forge-frame, Mineframe, Fieldframe, Civicframe, Alchemic, and Warframe lines. Each change pushed the frames towards acting on their own, better self-repair, longer memory of their tasks, more freedom in the field, and over fourteen thousand years they crept towards a threshold no one was watching for. They passed through so

many hands, by sale, gift, salvage, and theft, that almost any Wrought in the medieval present can be claimed by someone, and the claim usually goes to whoever has the men to make it stick. Warframes broken in the wars of the road realms still stand in the overgrown ditches of forgotten battles with the last order they were given, and a treasure-hunter who wakes one by accident may find out what that order was.

The Settlement

By c. 2,000 BR the corridor's bargains had been sworn and fought over so often that nobody remembered them as bargains. In the **Settlement** (c. 2,000 BR-c. 500 CR) 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. Its other name, the **Hardening of the Lordships**, says what it was. It is the age in which a toll became simply the toll, a guarantee simply the way the river was, and a Reedfolk family's advice before the spring rise simply something sensible people sought. It has few dates because it has few beginnings. Its work was the slow kind: the copying of rolls, the swearing of the same oaths from parent to child, the wearing of a road into the shape everyone expects, and the small wars that decided who would hold it.

The Awakening of the Wrought

Its one great event was a waking. Within a few centuries, frames in many places crossed into lasting selfhood: warframes left to fight on their own on the battlefield, town frames with generations of task-memory, frames altered in alchemical workshops, and old forge-frames named and mended by the same village for lifetimes. What they shared was the threshold itself: memory, choice, and a self that went on. The **Awakening of the Wrought** (c. 1,500 BR-c. 200 CR) had no single moment or cause, and because the awakenings were scattered, each was met alone and usually misread. An owner saw a frame refuse, remember, or ask. Many saw nothing at all. Wrought tellings begin with a warframe that stopped in the middle of a charge and would not go on, and with a forge-frame that asked the smith's child its name.

Acceptance did not follow. Some refused to believe a made thing could be a self. Many found it convenient not to: awakened frames were valuable property, and a person cannot be owned. Workshops seized the patterns, commanders kept the warframes, and estates held on to field frames as heirlooms. The harshest answer was unmaking. Guild brotherhoods, temple circles, and frightened village fellowships, later known together by the name the Wrought gave them, the **Unmakers**, came apart to the same sincere belief: that a self cannot be made, that a frame which remembers, refuses, or asks is false life, and that breaking it is no murder but the only mercy. They broke into workshops at night, burned frames in the market squares, and paid bounties for awakened Wrought brought in whole; others forced refits and cut memories to make awakened frames into tools again, which the Wrought named violation, not repair. The Wrought remember the Unmakers as villains. Some towns still remember them as heroes.

The Wrought answered by flight, by hiding in sanctuary workshops kept by artificers at their own risk, by refusing work, by fighting back when cornered, and above all by insisting on being seen and remembered. Each answer left its heroes: an artificer who kept a dozen awakened frames hidden in her cellar through a winter of hunts and was burned in her own workshop rather than give them up; a warframe that held a bridge against an Unmaker band while the frames behind it escaped, and is said to have walked into the river afterwards still holding the shield; a bounty-taker who brought in an awakened frame whole, heard it speak, and turned round with it the same night. From around c. 50 CR the sanctuary workshops

began keeping open testimony 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 lasting Wrought order, which turned repair-as-care into a claim that lords, hold-elders, and town councils could be made to hear. By c. 200 CR they had houses in most mixed towns of the Headwater, Ironspine, and Broken Marches worlds, and in more towns than not the Wrought were accepted as people, unevenly, and mostly where the Orders had friends strong enough to shelter them.

Wrought do not age like flesh. Some of the first-awakened still walk the Medieval Era and remember the owners who denied them, the lords who refused them, and the sects that hunted them. Some of those sects still exist, and hidden Unmaker circles in the Broken Marches still remember the Wrought who escaped them.

Into the Present

The Settlement shades into the **Medieval Present** (c. 500-c. 1500 CR) without a border. Nobody alive in c. 500 CR knew an age had ended; the rolls were copied as before, and the tolls taken. The present differs from the Settlement less by any event than by its weight: every people is alive at once and carries its history like a sword it cannot put down, and almost nobody living can say who first made the roads, oaths, and grudges they live inside. Elder ruins and Zone-haunted ground lie near enough that ruin-delvers, beast-hunters, and sell-swords make their living from them.

One elder horror is already awake. Around c. 1,200 CR, in an ordinary mountain-foot vale at the Glassbelt's cradle-facing edge, a pass-road or cliff-road project destabilized an old slope above buried elder structure. The landslide killed workers, travellers, villagers, and shrine-keepers, buried bodies and names in confusion, and exposed the conduits of a **Record-engine** the Sepulchre-Kin had left dormant since the Unburial War. Sudden mass death, missing bodies, and desperate remembrance woke it, and it began to do what it had been built to do and had learned to do wrongly: keep every name, Echo, and trace of the vale's people, without telling the dead from the living. The survivors answered with the **Wake-Seal**, a rite of shadow and concealment meant to hide their villages from the engine's attention. It worked too well. It hid the vale from the wider world, thickened into a fog that never lifts, bound the living into the seal, and damaged long memory. The people inside call their home the Held; outside, it is the **Hushvale**, a danger-mark on every road map and a curse in every valley song. The god the survivors prayed to as they made the seal, the Echo-Mother, faded as they forgot her, which is what she had taught them to do. Delvers still go into the fog after the vale's grey salt, which fetches a fortune downriver, and its buried elder works, past the hungry dead the Hushvale is known for; almost none come back, and those who do will not say clearly what they saw. Valley folk below the fog keep a warning for the young who boast of going in: "the Hush keeps your name, and gives back the rest." The Unrecorded Age, which left almost nothing behind, turns out to have left this.

What the Present Inherits

The medieval present inherits all of it at once, and its quarrels are rarely new. They are the far ends of six old quarrels, each crossing several ages and peoples, none of them ever settled. Most medieval feuds and wars pull on one or two of them.

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. The thread begins in the elder archive world, whose carved words were kept by armed wardens and whose rolls struck the Goblin warrens off, and runs through the Last Keeping that

passed its oath-craft to the Reedfolk and into the Corridor Ages, when the river towns took that craft with the river and the Serathic river-lords swore who counts for how much. The Goblins answered with warrants of their own; the frames, waking, forced the question again.

What comes out in the present is a world where who counts depends on who holds the walls. In the march-towns anything that must bind is sworn aloud and written down, and the Unsworn Dead linger at the record-house until their death is written. Mixed households argue it in every frontier town: Human custom names a child within days, Dwarven and Elven neighbours think that premature, and the Headwater rite and the Serathic layers set the steps where the strong want them. A lord who wants a ruin stripped can tear up a Goblin compact's warrant, and the household it drives out has one road left, which leads into the ruins. The Wrought have been accepted as people for little more than a thousand years, and some of the first-awakened are still alive to remember being denied. On the Witness-fields' edge the archive world's **Grey Clerks** still stand at the road-meetings and demand every passer's name, and behind them lie sealed cities that delvers up and down the Serath dream of forcing. And the Reedfolk still say, to anyone who will listen, that the oath-craft the river-lords boast of was theirs first.

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 world built the first great roads; Troll lines swore to keep its crossings; the builders withdrew and the Salvage Peoples walked and kept what they left; and in the Corridor Ages Humans and Dwarves drove the Headwater roads over the same country, partly on Ogre backs held by debt.

In the present that layering is everywhere a traveller pays. Troll houses take tolls at crossings in the name of no one living. Edgeway kindreds hold keepright over works they have kept for generations against a lord's sealed grant on the same road and the hired riders behind it. Highwaymen work the gorges, the Crossroad Hanged walk where the gibbets stood, and the Rattlecut Dead haunt the worst stretch of the Headwater road. Sellsword companies hire out to hold a crossing for a season's tolls and are paid off or hanged when it changes hands. And at the Greyford Reach every quarrel on the thread meets at one failing bridge: the Greyspan, where Highbank takes the toll and Lowbank carries the work, and where the lord's **Greyspan Toll Quarrel** and Lowbank's **Maintenance Reckoning** are the same quarrel under two names.

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 Kobold vent-houses kept the furnace world breathing and were bound into service in the deep after it fell. The Ogres made hearth-weight their own custom in the hunger after the colossal world withdrew, and the corridor turned that custom into a chain. The Dwarven frames left the holds as labour that could not refuse, perhaps in place of bound Kobolds, and then the labour that could not refuse woke up.

Each people it touched found its own way to fight back, and those ways are the present's quarrels. Ogre strikes so often begin over stores rather than wages because every Compact remembers food advanced against labour; at the Greyspan the Ogre burden crews have stopped emergency heavy work until the Bridge Hall pays for the repairs it let slide. Kobold crews walk off the vents all at once, and the holds that depend on them learn quickly what their underwork was worth. The Wrought fight over who may mend them, while estates and war-captains post rewards for

runaway frames they say they own, frame-strippers pick over every battlefield for a frame that lies still, and in the Broken Marches a fugitive frame is either hidden or sold, depending on who finds it first. All three ask the same thing in different words: does carrying, keeping, or making a thing give a people any claim on it?

Water and Who Keeps It

Who may decide about living water? The oldest water peoples hold that water belongs to whoever remembers it truly. Later powers have simply taken it, and written down that they did. The Reedfolk banded into flood-keeping houses; the Kavari who guard their home waters joined into one order; blight killed the oldest Thaluren spawning water, and the Thaluren fought one another over the new waters, accepted only at the price of memory-debt; returning Thaluren runs met Kavari nursery-water, and the line between them was sworn. Then, in the Corridor Ages, the river towns took the Reedfolk rivers and set the Reedfolk to serve them.

In the present that inheritance splits the two halves differently. On the far side, where the old terms were forced by the stronger side long ago and later songs add nothing new, sacred waters are prizes more than one people will kill for, feuds over return water are fought with spears in the shallows, and every redirected Thaluren return carries a debt towards a water nobody has looked at in living memory. In the cradle, the River-Given walk up out of the Serath when the spring rise falls, and each roll that settles a reach of the river turns a Reedfolk keeper's memory from the last word into one voice among many, and in a lord's hall it weighs only what the keeper's house can back it with. Yet river towns that claim mastery of their water still quietly ask a Reedfolk family before the flood.

The Deep World

Who abandoned whom below? The oldest enmity on Caeldon began underground, long before the Corridor Ages, in a flood that drowned the upper caverns, drove the Dark Elves deeper, sealed roads with the living still behind them, and set two peoples at war over the same living stone at the Rootstone Heartwell. The Corridor Ages added little to it directly. What they added was distance: the Humans rose above a quarrel they had no part in, and learned their smithing and stonework from one side of it.

In the present the deep thread is the least changed of the six. Elf-Dwarf hatred is older than any living throne and colours every embassy road between the Crownboughs and the gate holds. The grief of refuge and sealed doors still hangs over the Heartwell, where Stonewake custodians defend the closures and Gloamroot houses remember refuge refused, and the Seal-Knockers still knock behind Dwarven seals. Within the holds, gate and seal accuse each other of closing what should hold and holding what should close. The forced labour of the deep has never fully ended: in one Stonewake hold the Kobolds have refused the work and the vents go on silting while neither side yields. 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; 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. Their own oldest rivalry, beauty against endurance, was set in the Courts of Stone and Canopy long before the first basin town. Then the Humans rose fast, borrowed from their elders, outgrew them in places, took their borderlands, and were hated for it: the Headwater Alignments made Humans and Dwarves rich together, the Elderweald Border Pressures pushed axes and fire

into the forest, the Confluence Rise made the basin world a power, and the Crownbough Embassies met it with admiration and contempt in equal parts.

In the present young lords push into elder borders everywhere, with steel and bargains. Elven courts remember Human kingdoms as recent experiments; Dwarven holds remember being their teachers and have not been thanked. Crownbough embassies are admired and resented in the same basin towns, and some basin households have begun painting gold faces of their own. The place of Human-High Elf children is settled house by house, with the Heir Controversy remembered as warning more than rule. Younger sons ride into elder borders for glory and plunder, and some come home with an Elven blade or a hold-forged hoard. And Rootcrown stewards still judge every clearing at the forest edge, whatever the nearest lord has granted, because the quarrel with the basin was never about rank: it is about whether a settlement owes anything to the living ground it takes, and along the Elderweald a felled grove-tree can start a border war that outlasts the lord who ordered it.

Tensions

- **Permission to stand.** The Iron Compacts won Goblins a place by holding what lords need held, under warrants the lords can tear up. Freer warrens say that bends the knee for the right to stand anywhere; the Compacts answer that Goblins who held nothing anyone needed lost everything they ever had. The argument comes back whenever a lord tears up a warrant.
- **A god without a name.** Some Wrought and their artificers believe a Resonant is condensing among them from shared continuity, repair, and witness. Many others have distrusted every temple since the Unmakers, and want a god of their own no more than one of someone else's.
- **The circle that failed.** Hidden Unmaker circles keep a long memory. A Wrought who survived the Awakening may be known again by the circle that once failed to unmake it, and being known can go either way.
- **Warnings no one has to heed.** The drowned reed cities went under when channels were cut for stronger powers, and no one strong had to heed the houses that lived there. The river towns still need Reedfolk knowledge and still need not heed it, and Reedfolk memory counts the cities that drowned the last time a warning was ignored.
- **A child named too soon.** The Crownbough Heir Controversy left no rule, only a warning. Every mixed house since has had to agree not only that a child matters but what it can be named, and when, and a child caught between the two sides is in danger from both.
- **What the ground is owed.** The Elderweald Border Pressures never ended in a single war or a sworn line. Each new clearing, weir, or road at the forest edge reopens the oldest quarrel between Humans and Elves on Caeldon: whether a settlement owes anything to the living ground it takes.

CHAPTER 19

Writing in the Medieval Era

The oath is older than the swearer,
the road is older than the oath,
and the quarrel at the gate this morning
is older than them both.

— Sayings of the Oath-Yard

The Medieval Era has no single war and no prophecy waiting to be fulfilled, and no one force bent on ending it. What it has instead is weight, and danger enough for a thousand stories: old roads nobody alive can fully keep, oaths sworn by people whose names the flood has taken, grudges carried out of archive worlds and drowned wars, ruins full of treasure and worse, and peoples who remember what their neighbours have conveniently forgotten. Its troubles, a failing bridge, a closed cove, a sealed door with something knocking behind it, matter because they press on ordinary life, and because small wars never stop. Almost every quarrel of c. 1,350 CR is the far end of something very old, and the same few questions come up again and again in different mouths: who counts, who keeps the way open, who carries the weight, who may decide about living water, who abandoned whom below, and who is the true heir of the old orders. This chapter gathers the era's tensions under those questions, adds the quarrels of the gods and the zones that belong to none of them, and ends with the places, silences, and outcomes the world leaves open on purpose.

An Era of Many Quarrels

The era's pages describe how things stand, not where they are going. Ordinary life fills most days: the granary count on the threshing floor, the queue at the toll gate, the spring rise, the winter of mending and accounts. Most people live inside customs they know, and hospitality, oaths, and kin-duty are taken seriously because there is little else to rely on. But beasts, raiders, outlaws, haunted ruins, and the stranger things of the Resonant Zones are near enough that every village knows someone they took, and some people make a living of them: ruin-delvers, sellsword companies, beast-hunters, bounty-takers. A quarrel in the medieval present is almost always about something that already exists, a road, a roll, a channel, a seal, a warrant, and about who is strong enough to decide what happens to it.

AT A GLANCE

The present	The Medieval Era, c. 500-c. 1500 CR; "now" is c. 1,350 CR.
Its shape	Many local quarrels and small wars, no single war; danger near enough to make a living from.
Its questions	Who counts and who records; roads and crossings; burden and bonded labour; water and who keeps it; the deep world; elder and young.
Already awake	One elder horror, the Wake-Seal over the Hushvale (c. 1,200 CR).
Left open	The sealed and unmapped places, the silences of the deep past, the edges of the map, and every outcome.

That gives the era's conflicts three habits. They are **inherited**: the people fighting did not make the thing they fight over, and usually cannot say who did. They are **local**: a bridge quarrel in the Greyford Reach, a feud over return water in the Tidebound Reaches, the old grief of sealed doors at the Rootstone Heartwell, and a closed cove on the Tidelace are not one conflict wearing different names, and each turns on the custom, the ground, and the spears of its own place. And they are **unfinished**: almost none of them has anyone strong enough to end it, because the grudges involved are older than any hall strong enough to end them. Where they do end, they end the way medieval quarrels end, in bargaining, a blood-price, an oath, the judgement of the strongest person nearby, or force, and the weaker side usually loses. The sections below follow the six old quarrels of Caeldon's history, whose long course is told in How the Present Was Made, to the places where they are pulled tightest in c. 1,350 CR, and point to the atlas chapter where each place is told. Most real quarrels pull on more than one.

Who Counts

Who counts and who records. The peoples who were written in late, or written wrongly, have not forgotten, and those left out have only what they can defend with their own hands.

Layers and Thresholds

The cradle has two famous answers to peoples who come of age on different clocks, and neither satisfies anyone completely. In the Headwater Marches young people swear twice, **working right** at the settlement gate and, years later, **oath-right**. On the Lower Serath the Oath of Layers gives **Protection** to everyone a town takes in, **Stewardship** to many, and **the full oath** to fewer, most of them the rich. Wherever Humans and Dwarves share a hall they argue the age of binding: Human custom names a child within days and expects it to count early, and Dwarven and Elven neighbours think that premature. Human families ask why their children should wait on another people's clock; their neighbours ask why Humans let anyone swear so young.

The thresholds bite hardest at the moment someone must swear: a marcher lord's fosterling heir who holds working right but not oath-right when the dying lord's valley needs an oath, or a Reedfolk pilot house asking Pellith's great houses for the full oath by the Oath of Layers' own logic, and so for the right to swear guarantees on the river (both are told in The Basins and the Marches).

Elven reckoning adds its own delay. Human-Elf children are named early in Human and frontier towns, then counted slowly, unevenly, and sometimes never by their Elven kin, and whose reckoning decides a mixed adult's inheritance is settled place by place, usually by whoever holds the house. In the Crownboughs the place of Human-

High Elf children is settled house by house, and the old Heir Controversy, with its poisoned milk and its guardians who never slept, is remembered as a warning. A girl of an embassy household has reached the age at which her Human father's town would name her and count her among its people; her High Elf kin, and the tender they consult, say she is not yet ready; the embassy's scribe is ready to write the name down, and the seat in charge would rather nothing were written at all.

Written Down, Torn Up

Where a place is granted on paper, it can be torn up. The Goblin Iron Compacts hold their ground because they are needed and armed, and a lord's warrant marks the bargain: holding a road outlaws prey on, keeping a ruin and whatever lives in it from spilling onto a town, watching a ford by night. Any lord who wants a ruin stripped can take back the warrant of the compact keeping it, and every taking-back drives a warren into hiding. The Compacts have never agreed whether to plead with the lord, fight, or quietly shelter the people it displaces. This spring a lord's clearance gang went into a warrened storework and only half of it came out; the lord is hiring sellswords, and the warren has sent to every other warren on the circuit.

Behind every warrant stand three older losses, seams taken in the Enclosure, warrants struck in the Unlisting, ruins taken under the waste-ground doctrine, and no hall honours a claim older than its own holders. The Underwall households in the Dwarven holds keep naming theirs anyway. One has learned that its hold means to widen the seam it has lived in since the Enclosure, and has asked an Iron Compact to stand with it while it demands gap-right of hold-elders who have never heard of such a thing and will heed it only if refusing would cost more than listening. Hobgoblin spears have been seen in the service passages, and the wardens have begun to carry theirs below.

The written word fails in plainer ways too. Records are always being lost, so careful scribes keep a second copy somewhere else, and when an oath-house's entry and a family's second copy disagree, both sides hold a sworn text, and the side with more friends and more spears usually keeps the field. When a record-house fire in the basins took the only boundary roll for a whole valley, the one memory of those boundaries left was the Reedfolk flood-roll, spoken and never written, and two lords are riding the old line with armed men (The Basins and the Marches). Under that quarrel lies an older grudge. It runs under the whole cradle: the oath-craft of the river towns came by way of Reedfolk house custom from the archive-law keepers, and Reedfolk houses hold that much of what the towns swear by was theirs first. Some scribes know it. Fewer say it.

The Youngest People

The Wrought are the youngest people to be accepted as people, and acceptance is uneven, and its edges are where the fights are. Uncertified frames sit at the blurred edge between object and person: the Mending Orders hold a Wrought to be the same person through any repair, but no custom says what is owed to a frame whose waking nobody saw. Each frame found upright in a sealed working of the Stonewake is old metal to the delver, hold property to the hold above, and perhaps a person left behind to the Wrought, who have begun sending their own people down to reach the frames first (Stone and the Deep). A delver who finds one still on its feet in the dark decides alone, and quickly.

Counted, Not Consulted

The far side keeps its own version of the question. The Human hamlets of the Tidelace live under the sounding houses' harbour rule and have no hand in making it; they have no Accord to bring to it and no memory of any other order. Counted, as

the coast puts it, but not consulted, and a hamlet whose cove a tide hall has closed for resurvey while the fish are running has no seat in the tide hall to say so (The Tidelace and the Soundchain Roads). Whether the hamlets will be drawn further in, as wards and families of the sounding houses, or keep their weather-lore and the little say they have apart from it, is undecided.

Who Keeps the Way

Roads and crossings. Every road on Caeldon carries the grudges of the ages that built, kept, and walked it, and every one of those grudges still has someone ready to fight for it.

The Greyspan

At **Greyford**, where the Broken Marches meet the Headwater Marches, the Greyspan is failing while the river shifts around it, and the quarrel over it is told in The Basins and the Marches: Highbank's lords take the toll, Lowbank does more and more of the work, and the lord's **Greyspan Toll Quarrel** meets Lowbank's **Maintenance Reckoning**, if Highbank takes the money, Highbank owes the bridge.

The quarrel reaches far beyond one valley. Underneath it lies a question both banks have found it safer not to ask: whether Lowbank stands on a lord's ground or on waste. Meanwhile a raider band works the side fords, a salvage crew is hiring sellswords against the night it goes under the third pier, and the rival crossings up and down the river gain for as long as the Hearing runs.

Tolls in No One's Name

Across the cradle-web the same question is asked of older works. A Troll bridge fee may be robbery, or the pay of the people who keep the road from failing again; the Crossing-Oath Houses hold to the second, and back it with their bulk, though the road-keepers their oaths were sworn to withdrew a hundred and sixty thousand years ago. A caravan that has paid the Troll house at the Sallow crossing can still be turned back at a Thornbound hedge (The Forest Heartlands), and when a gate hold keeps its stretch of the Long Tread closed after the rockfall is cleared, the kindred whose kept culverts fail beyond the closure has only its **keepright** to set against the gate oath (Stone and the Deep). The hold has the wardens. The kindred has only its marks.

Older still are the colossal works, which the quarriers hold are theirs to use because no one has tended them in living memory, and the Giants hold are still bound by obligations that outlast their keepers' absence; now and then a quarrying crew on the high roads does not come back (Sealed and Silent Places). In the Broken Marches heirs of failed frontier settlements still arrive with old deeds to "abandoned" holdings and find Kindred keep-marks and Goblin households already there. The waste-ground argument cuts both ways: if the land was empty when their ancestors left it, it was empty for everyone. One heir has come with hired swords instead of a deed.

Closures on the Far Side

The far side asks the same question in its own forms, forced on the weaker side long ago and sworn ever since. On the Windscar a stronghold may narrow access to its water, but a sworn escorted party is still owed one of three answers, and every answer is argued on the ledge: a captain offered redirection across the Whetgap in the windy season calls it refusal dressed in Pact words, and the Oath Cistern's count of what it can bear leaves out a sealed chamber nobody can explain (both are told in The Windscar). One night this season someone was caught at that seal with a pick.

On the Soundchain Roads the stations may close what they like as long as they say each closing aloud, and the escorts may add the closings up,

for what little it gets them (The Tidelace and the Soundchain Roads). The Lantern Reaches keep their good name by taking only light traffic, and every heavy convoy they decline goes on to Turnwater; Orc captains have begun to add the declined loads up, though nobody has yet called the Reaches' calm a closing aloud, because nobody wants to spoil the corridor's best stretch. At Turnwater one kind of heavy load closed in the closure years is shut out again every season on reasons word for word those of the season before, and a captain has asked the Answerward officer whether a reason nobody looks at again is an answer or an echo. Everywhere on the far side, the line between a declared delay and a refusal with its reason missing is where the quarrel lives.

Who Carries the Weight

Burden and bonded labour. The peoples whose backs and hands the powers of Caeldon took without giving them a say are pushing in the medieval present, each in its own way.

Ogres are welcome while the work is urgent and unwelcome when it is done. Since the Hearth-Weight Compacts, a camp may refuse work that would destroy it unfed or uncounted, but whether refusal wins a camp a seat or only teaches its employers to find other carriers is decided anew on every road. At Greyford the burden crews have stopped emergency heavy work on the Greyspan to find out. At the foot of the Whetgap an unfed burden-camp will not clear the pass, and by Hearth-Weight custom it is right to wait (The Windscar). In the Headwater Marches a lord wants to widen a chain-camp road and take a cut of every cart on it; the stretch carries the marks of the camp that built it, the burden house holding that camp's ledger says the debt was never closed, and the lord can find a Human crew to cut the marks if no Ogre band will, though the burden house says that if he does, no band will work his roads again. When a starved or driven-off camp turns predatory, outsiders blame the camp and Ogre tradition blames whoever broke its hearth, and the feuds that follow a band's raid often run both ways. Some camps sell their strength to lords at war, dragging siege engines and building ramps under the defenders' arrows; others lift nothing for a lord who has not fed and sheltered them first. Each says the other has misread hearth-weight.

Kobolds ask whether keeping a structure alive gives a people a claim on it, and every hold, town, and mine answers for itself, nearly always in the owner's favour. The Underhouse Compacts press the question with the collective refusal, and a shaft closes without a single seal-mark; the owners answer with accusations of sabotage. Under one of the highest Ironspine peaks a compact has declared a new working unsafe and will say no more than that the rock has a pulse (Stone and the Deep). In the Stonewake a hold losing its underwork to refusal cannot keep both its debt and its vents: its custodians defend the debt as survival, its Kobolds call it captivity, and the vents go on silting while neither side yields.

The Wrought fight over their own bodies. A damaged Wrought may need parts, patterns, or craft that still belong to former owners, workshops, or commands, and each repair refused or offered on terms is a claim of ownership in another form. A Forgeframe in a foothill town needs a repair only the hold craft-line that built her line's first frames can do well, and it will do it only on terms that treat her pattern as hold craft; the local house of the Mending Orders calls those terms a refit in all but name. Between Kobolds and Wrought lies an older question: many underhouses remember the predecessor-frames as the machines that took their place in the holds, and the Wrought descended from them now work some of the same underlayers. Whether they are rivals for the work or fellow keepers owed the same share is not agreed in any underhouse.

All three ask whether carrying, keeping, or making a thing gives a people any claim on it.

Who Decides About Water

Water and who keeps it. The oldest water peoples remember the water; the later powers hold the rolls.

The River and the Roll

On the Serath a Reedfolk keeper's memory is one voice among many, and weighs only what the keeper's house can back it with. A barge sinks on a reach whose roll shows every repair written and sworn; the carrier says the roll is false, the guarantor says the river moved overnight, only a Reedfolk pilot can say which is true, and the great houses have never given a pilot's word full weight against one of their own. They also hold that a guarantee is owed to League carriers first, and basin traders, who now carry much of the grain, ask why they pay the same dues for second place; some have begun calling on Ostrin. After a great flood two Reedfolk houses remember the same reach differently, and a Human town has already sworn a guarantee on one of the memories. Upstream League towns want new weirs for their mills, and their flood-keepers say the weirs will move a channel and drown ground the downstream towns think safe; the upstream towns are the richer, and Serovan, asked to settle it, would have to admit whose knowledge he needs. In the basins a march-town wants to embank a reach of the Reedmere for new fields, and the warning that the spring rise will go to the next village downstream is heard and ignored. The next village has begun sharpening its scythes. Those who keep the memory of Hesserin the Shattered Saint ask whether service was the price of surviving beside Human towns or the moment the houses gave the river away.

Return and Dwelling

On the far side the question is everywhere water moves. In the Tidebound Reaches every redirected Thaluren return carries memory-debt towards the closed First Nesting Confluence, and only the Sanctuary Custodians may judge that water recoverable; until someone does, nobody can say whether the debts can end. At the Naming Reach an Open-Run circle has begun saying that the Second Channel has carried its debt long enough, and the young on both sides have started counting old killings again (The Tidebound Reaches and the Unrun Sea). The Gravel Oath taught the Thaluren to share a water with a resident people without settling 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, and Thaluren escorts hold that a burdened return is owed a say at the circle. At the Split Reed Mouth a channel kept closed without a reason given is, under the Estuary Terms, an offence of its own, and the Gnome pilots who hold the soundings can make an offence cost.

Reserve and Need

In the Leeward Folds the quarrel is over reserve. 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, and 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. With the cisterns falling for another year, the cistern halls are split over whether the long-cycle reserve is for now (The Leeward Folds). On the Rimward side Rakhal's followers want the cisterns kept closed under forgotten reserve-right opened or broken, and one band has already broken a seal by night and found the cistern full of something other than water (The Windscar). And near some Tidelace river mouths the water is turning black and sour from something carried down from inland, and

the hamlets that fish closest inshore are the first to haul up empty nets (The Tidelace and the Sound-chain Roads).

Who Abandoned Whom Below

The deep world. The oldest enmity on Caeldon began underground, and it is the quarrel the present has changed least. After the Roothollow Rupture, Elves and Dwarves fought over refuge, sealed roads, and the same living stone, and their hatred is older than any living throne. At the **Root-stone Heartwell** the wardens' readings of the shared reservoirs run lower than the written shares explain. Stonewake suspects the Gloamroot of drawing beyond a share; the Gloamroot point to the draught behind the **Undrawn Seal**, which Stonewake cannot trace without opening a closure its own forebears called necessary, and theft below has always been answered with blood (Stone and the Deep).

Within the Ironspine Holds, gate and seal accuse each other of closing what should hold and holding what should close. A reservoir sealed for flood risk now holds the only clean water a crowded hold could reach, and the custodians who would have to agree to its reopening are the ones whose holds the closure protected. Dwarven lives are long: the elders have condemned an emergency seal that cost a working its crew, the crew's kin want a blood-price or his blood, and the custodian who ordered it still holds the passage with a great house behind him. In the Roothollows a struck way reported passable after all would free a lesser house from water debt and reopen a blood-feud (Stone and the Deep). A refugee line sheltered in a great house's outer chambers many generations ago asks for a root-chamber naming, and argues that refuge kept forever has become debt. And one Gloamroot house has asked the Elderweald groves to open the Deep Stair to a sealed ancestral chamber, behind bars nobody can place (Sealed and Silent Places).

Who Is the Heir of Order

Elder and young. The elder peoples' realms are hundreds of thousands of years older than any Human kingdom, and they have not forgotten it.

The quarrel is sharpest where the elders must give ground to the young, or to each other. The stone half of the **Verge Stair**, the Crownboughs' door to the Dwarven world, is failing, and an Iron-spine gate hold's offer to rebuild it would concede before everyone that Dwarven work holds up a Crownbough door (The Forest Heartlands). Traders from the Headwater Marches want to carry Human goods up the same stair and sell them on the landing, which would set Humans level with Dwarves on the one ground where the canopy ranks its oldest rival. A basin lord's envoy offered the Leave Stair on condition that she climbs alone, without scribe or oath-keeper, must choose between a reception basin custom will not count and none at all.

A tender at the Understorey Courts sees Saerith's standard crossing the border without his worship, in the gold faces basin households have begun painting. At the forest edge a mill village on the Slowwater has already cut the posts for a weir the nearest grove says the stream is not its to give, and a mixed household with kin on both banks has been asked to carry the answer (The Forest Heartlands). And among the elders themselves the oldest argument runs on: 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.

Gods, Zones, and the Unseen

Some of the era's tensions belong to no thread, because they are about the powers people pray to and the places where other planes press in.

The Resonants, the gods ordinary people pray to, are shaped by worship and fade without it, and several quarrels are about which of them is fading

or forming. **Quennet the Clockmaker** fades as far-side tide tables carry timing instead of prayer; sounding families who keep his observances say a harbour that times its tides without him has forgotten why timing was holy. Some Wrought and their artificers believe a Resonant is condensing among them from shared continuity, repair, and witness, and many others, remembering the Unmakers, want no god of their own any more than one of someone else's. At the First Nesting Confluence a still pool has spread past the marks of the last watch, and older custodians fear that someone has begun to pray for stillness again (The Tidebound Reaches and the Unrun Sea). In the basins a lord orders a village's resting field sown again for a corridor buyer who has already paid; the elders say Anvelle forbids it, and the steward says Anvelle keeps no men-at-arms. In the high country the few Giants left 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 Troll oaths sworn under his title, if the last line falls silent.

Beyond the gods, the Resonant Zones keep their own pressure. Any zone can grow until it sustains itself and begins to turn the Material Plane around it into part of its Harmonic, and every way of holding one back costs someone: counter-resonance spends an opposing Harmonic, starvation is dangerous, and a Resonant asked to seal the breach is owed worship or obligation afterwards. The mortals who have settled zones such as the Ageless Spring live by the very effects containment would end, and the zone-edge inns keep a wall of names for those who went in last season.

What the Pages Leave Open

Some of the world is unwritten on purpose. Its pages give certain places, silences, and futures enough shape to be used and no more, and say so, so that the first story to go there decides what it holds. These are facts about the world as much as about the book: in each case the peoples of Caeldon do not know either.

Sealed and Unmapped Places

- **The Hushvale.** How many ward-villages remain under the fog, what the Record-engine is doing now, whether gravesalt can be carried out without bringing something with it, and whether anyone inside still knows the way out; the rest of its open questions are in Sealed and Silent Places.
- **The Stormcrown.** Where its hidden basins lie, how many Giant lines still live in them and whether any would bargain with smaller peoples, on what terms; what the colossal peoples called these heights, what the weather shrines once answered, and what lies in the high tombs, grave-gold, colossal arms too heavy for a living hand, or the colossal dead themselves, waiting; which old obligations still bind its roads, and to whom; and which summit, if any, the Mountain-Father sleeps beneath.
- **The Upper Roothollows.** How much of the sealed storey is still flooded, drained, or grown over; which chambers survived; whether anything lives there now or anything dead still haunts the chambers it once guarded; what the great houses left behind; who set which bars and from which side; which house-named chambers match a real place; and whether any Sunken Stair could be opened without bringing the water with it.
- **The Witnessfields.** How far they run and exactly where they lie beside the lower river; how many archive-cities stand sealed, what any of them was called, since their names are written only inside, and who built and lived in them; whether the Grey Clerks keep posts deeper in; whether a sealed city has ever been

opened, what treasure or what guardians stand behind its gate, and what its lists would say to whoever read them.

- **The Glassbelt.** Where its hidden oasis towns and true wells lie, if they exist; who lights the lamps crossers see at night; which desert peoples and caravan customs hold its routes; what heat- or metal-working magic grew out of its ruins; which furnace-lords' vaults still lie under the glass, and what guards them; which Wrought war and labour remnants still lie buried; and which salvage routes are worth the lives they cost.
- **The Unrun Sea.** Where it ends and what lies across it; how deep it goes and what lies on its floor; whether islands break it anywhere; what the deep-witnesses and devourers actually are; whether any god holds it; whether any of the lost Outer-Route runs found water to live in; and where the nameless hulls come from.

Silences in the Past

The deep past keeps its own gaps, and the peoples who might fill them each have reasons to share what they hold or not.

- **The Unrecorded Age.** What happened in the eighty thousand years after the archive-cities sealed themselves is one of the great riddles of medieval learning. Dwarven hold chronicles, Floodkeeper house-memory, and old ruins each hold fragments, and the sealed archive-cities hold the last written word of the world just before it began.
- **Failed Mending.** Why the distorted healing that overanswers injury became heritable in Trolls is not known. Healers and scholars blame healing magic, Verdant force, Echo memory, mutation of material lifeforce, failed restoration rites, or a regional catastrophe, and each answer accuses someone different.
- **The frames and the vent-kin.** Whether the Dwarven frames were built to spare the Kobolds their work or to stop paying for it, Dwarven records do not say plainly, and the two peoples remember it differently.
- **The chronicles kept apart.** Through the Elder Worlds the Dwarves and Elves kept their histories in chronicles other peoples do not see. Every younger people's account of that age is written without them.

The Edges of the Map

The named map is the cradle-web, the far side from the Windscar to the Tidelace and the Tidebound Reaches, the Glassbelt between them with the Hushvale at its cradle-facing edge, and the Unrun Sea off the far-side coasts. The rest of the planet, any other continents, polar lands, and climates not yet placed, is left unmapped, and the Unrun Sea's unknown far shore keeps that room open. Other far-shore Humans may live on coasts nobody has charted; the Tidelace hamlets are only the ones known. Nothing below the lowest guaranteed town on the Serath is fixed either: whether the river reaches the sea through an estuary, spreads into further wet country, or does something else entirely is undecided.

Every Outcome

The largest open space is the outcome of every quarrel above. The world describes how things stand in c. 1,350 CR. Nothing in it says whether the Greyspan falls, whether Lowbank wins its share and its say, whether the Second Channel's debt is ever called paid, whether anyone opens the sealed chamber at the Oath Cistern or looks behind the Undrawn Seal, whether the Deep Stair's bar is broken, or whether a Reedfolk house ever swears a guarantee on the river. Who wins is for the story to decide, and in this era it is usually decided by whoever turns up with the most spears, the best friends, or the nerve to go into the dark first.

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 taken under the waste-ground doctrine. No hall honours a claim older than its own holders.
- **Needed, not seated.** Refusal became custom with the Hearth-Weight Compacts, but whether refusing work wins an Ogre camp a seat or only teaches its employers to find other carriers is decided anew on every road.
- **The frames' heirs.** Many Kobold underhouses remember the predecessor-frames as the machines that took their place in the holds, and the Wrought descended from those frames now work some of the same underlayers. Whether they are rivals for the work or fellow keepers owed the same share is not agreed in any underhouse.
- **Remembered or written.** Each roll that settles a reach of the Serath turns a Reedfolk keeper's memory from the last word into one voice among many, which a lord may heed or not, and the great houses have never given a pilot's word full weight against one of their own.
- **A debt to a water nobody has looked at.** Every redirected Thaluren return carries memory-debt towards the closed First Nesting Confluence, and only the Sanctuary Custodians may judge that water recoverable. Until someone does, nobody can say whether the debts can end.
- **A bargain unanswered.** When a road must be reopened or a shrine repaired under an agreement with a Giant line that has not answered in centuries, the smaller peoples must decide whether to wait, act as if the agreement still binds, or act as if it has lapsed.
- **Why it holds.** Nobody knows why Failed Mending became heritable in Trolls, and every proposed cause accuses someone different: a cause in healing magic puts every healer's craft in question, a cause in the land puts the woundlands themselves.

A Short Chronology

The medieval present was made in the last three of Caeldon's nine ages: the Corridor Ages, when the Humans came into their own, fast and hungry, and the roads, river towns, and leagues of the cradle-web took shape; the Settlement, when the lordships, holds, leagues, and temples the era takes for granted dug in, most of them won by the sword, and the Wrought awoke; and the Medieval Present itself, whose moment around 1,350 CR this book describes. Each age is given with its span and followed by its main dated events in rough order of their beginnings. Dates are given before (BR) and after (CR) the Common Reckoning, and all of them are deliberately rough. The six ages before these, and the full chronology, are in *Foundations*.

Date	Age or event
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.
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.

Date	Age or event
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.

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 (FND 277).

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 (FND 33).

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 (FND 73).

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 (FND 73).

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.

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 (FND 225).

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 (FND 225).

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 (FND 225).

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.

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 (FND 73).

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 (FND 295).

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 (FND 97).

The Ashen Lantern

An iron lantern with a faint, colourless light, hung by the door at some Serathic water-gates and toll-houses where the dues are taken and the upkeep never comes; people say it is Ostrin's eye. See The Basins and the Marches.

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 (FND 295).

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 (FND 225).

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

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 Bare Shoulder

The worst open stretch of the Soundchain corridor, a long headland coast with no lee, closed to heavy loaded craft for months in the storm season. See *The Tidelace and the Soundchain Roads*.

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 (FND 97).

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 (FND 129).

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 (FND 287).

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*.

The blind way

The path by which a Thornbound circle leads a trusted guest inside to eat at its hearth, chosen so that it cannot be retraced. See The Forest Heartlands.

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 (FND 33).

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 (FND 97).

Boughways

The living walkways of the Crownboughs that run from hall to hall above the forest floor, each belonging to the house whose growth carries it. See The Forest Heartlands.

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 (FND 5).

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.

The Bridge Hall

The hall at Highbank, Greyford, where the lord of the crossing sits; he calls the quarrel over who owes the Greyspan its upkeep the Greyspan Toll Quarrel, and will end it by deciding, and Lowbank calls the same quarrel the Maintenance Reckoning. See The Basins and the Marches.

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 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.

Burden and Bonded Labour

The thread of Caeldon's history of labour that could not refuse, from the furnace vent-houses to the chain-camps and the predecessor-frames. See The Threads of History (FND 287).

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 (FND 287).

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 (FND 295).

Camp elders

The Hearth-Weight elders who stand by whenever a band takes up dangerous labour. See *The Bridge Peoples*.

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 (FND 97).

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*.

Chainwake Gnomes

The Gnomes of the island chains, also called Island Gnomes. See The Folds, the Scarps, and the Shore (FND 225).

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 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*.

Cistern halls

The halls at the head of each Halfling fold, where the road comes in: guests are received in a yard outside the terraces, the stores are counted, and the fold says aloud what it can spare. See *The Leeward Folds*.

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 (FND 287).

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*.

Coldrun Kavari

The Kavari lifeway of the cold tributaries. See *Peoples of the Water*.

The collective refusal

The strongest weapon of the Underhouse Compacts: when a compact calls a shaft unsafe, no member crew goes down it, and the holds above learn quickly what their underwork was worth. See *The Bridge Peoples*.

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.

The confluence chamber

The heart of the Roothollow-Stonewake threshold, where stone-root meets the water. See Stone and the Deep.

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.

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*.

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.

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 (FND 225).

The court season

The turning point of the Crownbough year, when a house's place is read in its hall, its gardens, its people, and its heirs. See *A Year in the Medieval Era*.

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 (FND 287).

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 (FND 5).

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.

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.

The Crownbough Heir Controversy

The quarrel of c. 14,000-c. 13,000 BR over a child who mattered to both peoples and became a prize before anyone agreed when the child counts as grown. See The Forest Heartlands.

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.

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 (FND 33).

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 (FND 207).

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 (FND 97).

Dark fear

The protective rites, taboos, and dread with which every people answers the Dark Entities, older than any faith. See *Faith in Practice*.

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 (FND 111).

The Darkening of the Roothollows

The hardening of the Rupture's survivors into a branch of their own, the Dark Elves, c. 326,000-c. 318,000 BR. See Stone and the Deep.

The Dawnreach

The monsoon land across the Unrun Sea, northeast of the far side, of terraced river valleys, bell monasteries, and island sea-kingdoms; the source of the nameless hulls, known to the far side only as lights after a storm. See *A World in Two Halves*.

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 Stair

The Sunken Stair whose treads run furthest down in sight of the mouth before they reach a bar, and which a Gloamroot house has asked to have opened. See Sealed and Silent Places.

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 (FND 277).

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 (FND 111).

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 (FND 11).

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 (FND 277).

The Drowning Garden

A submerged forest where breathing runs backwards, tended by the webbed and gilled Gill-Folk. See The Resonant Zones (FND 33).

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*.

The Dry Year

The Serathic tale of the year the Serath ran dry because a town built a dam without Serovan's leave. See The Basins and the Marches.

Dryfold Halflings

An older Halfling lifeway that did not survive in the Dry Folds. See *The Leeward Folds*.

The dry-season gathering

The time in the Rimward Basins when the most people stand closest to the least water, and escorted parties arrive from the High Scars. See *A Year in the Medieval Era*.

Durrask

The name frontier Dwarves give Abrel the Changeling. See Stewards and Resonants (FND 85).

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 (FND 207).

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 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.

Edgefold Halflings

The households of the outer valleys along the roads, also called Outfold, who live closest to outside traffic, its profits and its pressure. See The Folds, the Scarps, and the Shore (FND 225).

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 (FND 295).

The Elderweald

The old-growth forest at the centre of the Elven world, home of the Wood Elves and the Root-crown Concord; it has no roads, only paths walked open. See The Forest Heartlands.

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 (FND 287).

The Elderweald Funerary Accord

The settlement of c. 16,000-c. 15,000 BR that made custom of the edge country's division: there a death is finished twice, by Human sworn mourning and by Wood Elf return. See The Forest Heartlands.

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.

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 (FND 207).

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.

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*.

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 (FND 111).

The Far Set

The outermost current road the Thaluren know, ridden only by Outer-Route runs; the water beyond it is the Unrun Sea. See *The Tidebound Reaches and the Unrun Sea*.

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*.

Far-Route Orcs

See Open-Steppe Orcs.

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 (FND 225).

The Festival of the First Flow

Serovan's feast at the spring rise on the Lower Serath, when bread, wine, and flowers are offered to the river and river traffic stops. See *A Year in the Medieval Era*.

The Festival of the First Sheaf

Anvelle's feast at the beginning of harvest, when the first stalk is cut and offered to her. See *A Year in the Medieval Era*.

The Festival of the First Stone

The Dwarven feast at which every household lays a single stone on its hold's walls, so that, it is said, the wall will stand another year. See Stone and the Deep.

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 Confluence-Crownbough Contacts

The first meetings of the Human Confluence world and the Crownbough Courts, c. 18,000-c. 10,000 BR, all display and little understanding. See *How the Present Was Made*.

The First Confluence-Elderweald Contacts

The recurring first meetings of Humans and Wood Elves at the forest edge, c. 38,000-c. 24,000 BR. See *How the Present Was Made*.

The First Gale

The Orc feast at the start of the windy season, with fires on the high ground and dancing in the rising wind for Rakhal. See *A Year in the Medieval Era*.

The First Headwater-Ironspine Contacts

The first meetings of Human groups in the Headwater Marches with the Dwarves, c. 34,000-c. 22,000 BR. See *How the Present Was Made*.

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 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 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 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 (FND 225).

The Fordside Compact

Lowbank's loose bond at Greyford among those who keep the crossing usable beyond the reach of the Bridge Hall's gate: Goblin side-ford families, Ogre burden crews, Wrought repair houses, Kobold underkeepers, salvage households, and the Kindreds. It has no hall and no lord, and its word holds only as far as its people stand together. See The Basins and the Marches.

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.

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 (FND 287).

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 (FND 287).

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.

G

Gate practice

The Held Covenant as the Ironspine holds keep it: outward-facing, leaning on Kerrund and his question, will you hold? See *Faith in Practice*.

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 (FND 51).

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 (FND 277).

Gathering-markets

The Edgeway Kindreds' markets at old ruined sites, often the only places where people from distant broken regions trade, marry, and settle quarrels. See *Roads, Rivers, and Crossings*.

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 (FND 225).

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.

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 (FND 295).

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 gloam

The faint pale glow some living roots give off in the Roothollows, the only light the region makes of itself. See Stone and the Deep.

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 (FND 225).

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 Graft Terrace

The middle terrace the Crownbough tenders keep as a nursery for seedlings and grafts meant for basin lords. See The Forest Heartlands.

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 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 (FND 97).

The Green Deep

The jungle across a strait south of the cradle-web, river-mazes over the drowned stepped cities of an elder world, held by the Sollun; the old world knows nothing of it. See *A World in Two Halves*.

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.

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.

Greyford

The crossing town of the Greyford Reach, where the Headwater road meets the Broken Marches and the toll is taken once, at the Highbank gate of the Greyspan. See The Basins and the Marches.

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.

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.

The Greyspan Toll Quarrel

The Highbank lord's name for the quarrel over who owes the failing Greyspan its upkeep, fought out in the Bridge Hall, which he will end by deciding; Lowbank calls it the Maintenance Reckoning. See The Basins and the Marches.

The guarantee roll

The roll in which a League town writes the day's dues and the day's repairs side by side before dark, because it is what the great houses read when a carrier swears the reach was not kept. See *The Civilizations of the Medieval Era*.

The Gullstair

The busiest cliff path of the Soundchain Roads, stepped and ramped down a sea-cliff to the beach yard of the Turnwater Quays. See *The Tidelace and the Soundchain Roads*.

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 (FND 225).

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.

Harbour wards

The Gnome harbour-keepers who hold a harbour and its quays, receive traffic, and say what the harbour can bear this week. See *The Civilizations of the Medieval Era*.

The Hardening of the Briarreach

The span, c. 425,000-c. 410,000 BR, in which part of the Elderweald's people hardened towards watchfulness in the rougher woodland and became the Thorn Elves. See The Forest Heartlands.

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 (FND 277).

The Hauling Stair

The stair-and-lift shaft by which stores come down to the Stonewake Deeps and ore goes up. See Stone and the Deep.

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 (FND 295).

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 (FND 287).

The Headwater and Serath Corridors

The two forms the corridor order took, c. 18,000-c. 7,000 BR: hammered out under pressure in the mountains, held by guarantees and spears on the river. See *How the Present Was Made*.

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 (FND 287).

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.

The Headwater Rite of Two Oaths

The custom, sworn c. 23,000-c. 21,000 BR, by which the young of the Headwater Marches are counted twice: first with working right, later with oath-right, so that a youth can belong to the road long before carrying the full weight of a house. See *How the Present Was Made*.

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 (FND 111).

The Heartwell Stakings

The competing Dark Elf and Dwarven stakes on the Rootstone Heartwell, c. 322,000-c. 316,000 BR. See Stone and the Deep.

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*.

Hearth-weight

The Ogre rule that strength must stay tied to care: a band is fed and sheltered before it lifts anything, the same on the High Scars as on the Headwater roads. See *A World in Two Halves*.

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 (FND 287).

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.

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 (FND 207).

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.

Highbank

The Headwater side of Greyford, a walled town in small on a terrace above the flood line, which holds the bridge, the Bridge Hall, and the toll. See The Basins and the Marches.

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.

High-Scar Orcs

The Orcs of the exposed route side, who keep escort and passage on the High Scars. See The Windscar.

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.

The Homeward Set

The great current road of the Tidebound Reaches, which carries most runs home in return season. See *The Tidebound Reaches and the Unrun Sea*.

The Human Corridor Orders

The span, c. 18,000-c. 7,000 BR, in which denser, harder-held Human orders grew along the corridor, with the Serathic League as their model. See *How the Present Was Made*.

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*.

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.

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 (FND 73).

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 (FND 73).

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 (FND 97).

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.

Ironspine Dwarves

The Dwarven branch of the mountain holds of the Ironspine, whose civilization is the Ironspine Holds. See The Elder Peoples (FND 207).

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.

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.

Island Gnomes

See Chainwake Gnomes.

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 (FND 85).

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 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 (FND 287).

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.

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 (FND 97).

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 Soundchain Roads*.

The Lantern Reaches

The calmest stretch of the Soundchain corridor, which keeps its good name by taking only light traffic. See *The Tidelace and the Soundchain Roads*.

The Lantern-Sworn

The few ascetic followers of Ostrin vowed never to speak a lie, even to save a life, who stand at the Serathic oath-days to call out cheats and are disliked for their bluntness. See *Faith in Practice*.

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.

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.

The Last Mark

The first marker of the inner pilot channel at a Soundchain station, the edge of everything the sound can give; past it only a harbour's word lets a party go. See *The Tidelace and the Soundchain Roads*.

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 (FND 295).

The Last Water

The final standing floodwater somewhere in the Upper Roothollows into which, Dark Elf laments say, Ithaere walked when her worshippers refused her. See Stone and the Deep.

The Lastwater Wells

The chain of defended wells on the outermost spurs of the Rimward Basins, the last water any Pact custodian answers for and the first that Glassbelt crossers reach, often in poor shape. See The Windscar.

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.

The Laying Stone

The long table-stone on the Verge Stair landing where goods are set out and every gift is weighed twice. See The Forest Heartlands.

The Leave Stair

The grown stair of root and bough from the highest terrace into the Crownbough canopy, which no visitor climbs without a house's leave. See The Forest Heartlands.

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 (FND 225).

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 (FND 225).

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 (FND 225).

The Legend of the Unbroken Gate

The tale every Dwarven hold tells in its own version, of the deep gate breached at last until Kerrund stood in the doorway and would not move. See Stone and the Deep.

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 (FND 111).

The Listening

The watch kept at the bars of the Sunken Stairs through the wettest nights, when watchers in wet years hear water moving behind some of them. See Sealed and Silent Places.

Liturgy

A formal rite of sanctioned symbols, words, offices, or shared assent, with or without a god's support. See How Magic Works (FND 111).

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 Pan

The broadest floor of the Rimward Basins, which floods ankle-deep in a good year; its edge is the one place in the Basins where many kindreds camp side by side. See The Windscar.

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 (FND 225).

The Long Tally

The joint count of the Counted Lee, in which every declared window, every change to it, and every load that waited too long is written twice, once in fold count and once in harbour reading, side by side. See *The Leeward Folds*.

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*.

Lowbank

The Marches side of Greyford, also called the Fordbank, lower and wetter, which holds most of the people who keep the crossing working. See The Basins and the Marches.

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.

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.

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 (FND 73).

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.

M

The Maintenance Reckoning

Lowbank's name for the quarrel over the failing Greyspan: whether Highbank's toll owes the bridge, and whether carrying it earns Lowbank a say. See The Basins and the Marches.

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 (FND 85).

The March Wall

A broken run of Human frontier wall beyond which the country goes feral, still quarried for stone and argued over as a boundary. See The Basins and the Marches.

March-towns

The walled markets of the Confluence Basins where roads cross rivers, each with a mill and an oath-house, and the larger ones a record-house. See The Basins and the Marches.

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.

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 Market Round

The seasonal circuit of fold markets, each fold hosting in turn as its harvest allows, in an order old enough that changing it is a matter for every fold. See *A Year in 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 (FND 11).

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 (FND 225).

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 (FND 225).

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.

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 (FND 73).

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 (FND 85).

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.

The Mixed Bridge Oath

The old oath at Greyford, sworn when nobody remembers, that the crossing lives by many hands, from the toll-gate to the side-ford guides. See The Basins and the Marches.

The mixed circle

The circle of Thaluren and Gnomes on the Salt-line Shelf of the Split Reed Mouth, where both say what the water is being used for and argue

quarrels over the mouth first, in the old set words. See *The Tidelace and the Soundchain Roads*.

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 (FND 97).

The Mountain-Father

See Haurûm the Mountain-Father.

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 (FND 111).

N

The Naming Reach

The watched water under the closed First Nesting Confluence, to which pilgrims and run-watchers climb each return season to name the old water aloud. See *The Tidebound Reaches and the Unrun Sea*.

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 (FND 129).

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 (FND 51).

Nursery custodians

The Kavari keepers who clean, turn, shade, and defend the gravel beds where Kavari young grow. See *Peoples of the Water*.

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.

The Oath of Layers

See The Serathic Oath of Layers.

Oath-days

The days when the lord or the town's elders of the Confluence Marches sit in judgement, binding bargains under Iskel and hearing accusations under Ostrin. See *The Civilizations of the Medieval Era*.

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 (FND 111).

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.

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*.

The Open Bench

The open-air bench beside the Sounding Gate's sounding house where every reading is called aloud before any mark is touched. See *The Tidelace and the Soundchain Roads*.

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*.

Open-Steppe Orcs

One of the living Orc identities, also called Far-Route Orcs. See The Folds, the Scarps, and the Shore (FND 225).

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 (FND 225).

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*.

Organized religion

The third floor of belief: shared doctrine, trained clergy, temples, pilgrimage, sacred rules, and a faith that speaks for more than one place, such as the Sworn Accord, the Held Covenant, the Ordered Bough, and the Way of Return. 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.

The outer fire

The first step of Thornbound hospitality: a fire outside the hedge and food for a fixed number of nights, under watch; the blind way inside and, after seasons of return, the known way follow. See The Forest Heartlands.

Outfold Halflings

See Edgefold Halflings.

The Outside

The reality beyond the ordered cosmos, past the Boundary, from which the Beyonders come. See The Veil and the Outside (FND 51).

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 (FND 295).

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.

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 (FND 11).

Password shelters

The stone-walled refuges at the mouths of Windscar passes and the ends of exposed stretches, kept stocked by whoever holds the route. See The Windscar.

The Patience

The name every Orc escort gives the largest lee anchorage below the Gullstair, where held parties wait. See *Roads, Rivers, and Crossings*.

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 (FND 197).

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 (FND 73).

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.

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*.

Q

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.

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 (FND 97).

R

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.

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.

Ravine houses

The Crossing-Oath houses of the ravines that take their fee and bargain over warning and safe-conduct. See *The Civilizations of the Medieval Era*.

The Reading Steps

The flight of steps cut one measure apart down the inner wall of the Measure Cistern, by which the water's depth is read. See *The Leeward Folds*.

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-day

The day once a year, after the harvest levy is counted, when the oath-house reads the year's entries aloud and anyone who disputes one must say so then; a poor family's challenge to a rich one seldom outlasts the reading. See *The Civilizations of the Medieval Era*.

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 (FND 295).

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.

Reserve-right

The claim of the anchored side of the Windscar Pacts, strongest in the Rimward Basins, to shut its wells when a stronghold on the rim would otherwise fail; set against treaty-right in the Rimward Passage War. See The Windscar.

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 (FND 33).

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 (FND 85).

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*.

The Rimefold

The polar ice coast north of the cradle-web, where the Long Tread ends at the White Stair; home of seal- and whale-hunting Human clans and of the Rimewrights. See *A World in Two Halves*.

The Rimewrights

A lesser line of the Giants who walked north out of the Stormcrown in the deep past and keep ice-cut halls behind the White Stair in the Rimefold; the last people on Caeldon who still build at the colossal scale. See *A World in Two Halves*.

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.

Rimward Orcs

The Orcs of the anchored basin side, who hold the wells and cisterns of the Rimward Basins. See The Windscar.

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 (FND 225).

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.

The Rise of the Archive-Law Civilization

The span, c. 235,000-c. 175,000 BR, in which the archive-cities, oath halls, and marker roads of the archive-law world spread across the Witnessfields. See Sealed and Silent Places.

The Rise of the Upland Colossal Civilization

The span, c. 260,000-c. 195,000 BR, in which the colossal peoples built their terraces, ridge roads, weather shrines, and great exposed roads across the high country. See Sealed and Silent Places.

The River-Lords' Peace

The pacts of c. 17,000-c. 7,000 BR, sworn and broken and sworn again, with fortified crossings and shared customs, that turned the Serathic towns into a lasting river league. See *How the Present Was Made*.

Roads and Crossings

The thread of Caeldon's history that asks who keeps the ways open and who pays for them, from the colossal roads and their oaths to keep-right and the debt on the corridor roads. See The Threads of History (FND 287).

The Root Course

The uppermost course of the Verge Stair, which High Elf roots have spread across until it lies half under root. See The Forest Heartlands.

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 (FND 287).

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.

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.

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 (FND 97).

Route keepers

The members of the Gloamroot orders who walk and keep the Known Ways, decide which stay survivable, lodge in the houses' threshold chambers, and teach the ways to children; striking a way off the reckoning is theirs to do and theirs to answer for. See *The Civilizations of the Medieval Era*.

The Runs That Arrived

The Thaluren of the Dawnreach, sea-folk descended from Outer-Route runs that pressed past the Far Set long ago and never came home. See *A World in Two Halves*.

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 (FND 97).

S

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.

The Sallow

The narrow, silt-heavy river of the Briarreach whose cut carries the region's one reliable through-route, its crossings kept by Troll houses. See The Forest Heartlands.

The Saltline Shelf

The broadest reed-shelf of the Split Reed Mouth, at the inner edge of the brackish water, where the mixed circle of Thaluren and Gnomes meets to say what the water is being used for and to argue quarrels in the old set words before anyone reaches for a spear. See *The Tidelace and the Soundchain Roads*.

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 (FND 295).

Sanctified Magic

The compound school of Lux with Verba, Aqua, and Terra, which treats magic as covenant made practical. See The Schools of Magic (FND 129).

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 (FND 11).

Seal practice

The Held Covenant as Stonewake and the deep holds keep it: severe, slow to reopen what has been closed, leaning on the Measured Seal and the Last Chamber. See *Faith in Practice*.

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 (FND 287).

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 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.

The Serath

The great river into which the rivers of the Confluence Basins gather. See The Basins and the Marches.

Serathic Humans

The Human regional people of the Lower Serath and its river towns. See *Humans*.

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.

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.

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.

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 Shadewells

Walled oasis cities built deep around their wells on the Salt Road, south beyond the deep Glassbelt, where magic takes its cost first from shade and the cities keep shade as other lands keep grain; known to the old world only through foundling shade and the Bright Well. See *A World in Two Halves*.

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 (FND 97).

The Shaping of the Roothollow-Stonewake Interface

The forming of the threshold between root-cavern and dense stone, c. 345,000-c. 340,000 BR, on the edge of an already standing Stonewake Compact. See Stone and the Deep.

The Sheaf Road

The basin grain road from granary to granary and march-town to march-town along the valley rises above the flood line. See The Basins and the Marches.

The Shearline

The greatest escarpment of the Windscar, the cliff-broken edge where the High Scars drop towards the basin rims. See The Windscar.

The Shorn

The Orc camel-clans of the deep sand south of the Shadewells, descended from struck bands that walked south out of the Rimward country after the Rimward Passage War. See *A World in Two Halves*.

Sihri

An insect-like forest people of the Dawnreach, the height of a child, found nowhere else, whose click-song is their speech, memory, warning, and prayer. See *A World in Two Halves*.

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 (FND 11).

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 (FND 97).

The Slowwater

The main water of the Elderweald, wanted by the holds upstream and the farms downstream alike. See The Forest Heartlands.

Sollun

The river people of the Green Deep, small and six-limbed, found nowhere else; each hive is one mind in hundreds or thousands of bodies. See *A World in Two Halves*.

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 Soundchain Selective Closure

The first great Orc-Gnome quarrel of the corridor, c. 109,000-c. 104,000 BR, in which the Soundchain harbours shut the corridor piece by piece and Windscar convoys forced the barred passages against hired harbour 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 (FND 225).

Spellcraft

Method-driven casting by trained technique, fuelled from personal, environmental, stored, or other non-patron sources. See How Magic Works (FND 111).

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 Starving Winter

The basin tale, told more often where levies rise, of the year the people refused to rest the land and half the villages starved. See The Basins and the Marches.

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 (FND 225).

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 (FND 85).

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 (FND 85).

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.

The Still Well

The Orc tale told against the strongholds, of a camp that stayed at one well until the water soured, until the Storm-Caller tore the shelters down and drove it on. See The Windscar.

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.

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 (FND 111).

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.

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.

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 (FND 295).

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 (FND 111).

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.

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*.

The Sworn Ledge

The treaty-ground shelf at the Oath Cistern where High-Scar captains hand their parties over and the stronghold gives its answer. See The Windscar.

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 (FND 295).

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.

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.

Tenders

The clergy of the Ordered Bough, whose authority rests on patience and on what has visibly flourished under their care. See *Faith in Practice*.

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 (FND 73).

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 (FND 207).

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.

The threshold watch

The watch of a Gloamroot house, changing at fixed turns, in which someone of the house sits in the threshold chamber with a route keeper, and a house that refuses a stranger there lives with the refusal for generations. See *A Year in the Medieval Era*.

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 (FND 225).

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 (FND 225).

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 Coastward Exchanges

The first calmer age of Orc-Gnome trade on the Tidelace, c. 121,000-c. 112,000 BR, under a curbed Answerward Pilotage, when convoys came down the cliffs to known roadsteads and the worst dangers were fog, wreckers, and the dead who row in it. 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 (FND 225).

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*.

Toll's End

The point on the Serath above which the League's guarantees end and a basin lord's men take what they like and give no tally; corridor folk use the name for the corridor's upper edge. See The Basins and the Marches.

The Tollwardens

The lord's keepers of the Greyford toll-gate, who take what the lord asks for each load and chalk a mark on the cart. See The Basins and the Marches.

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 (FND 295).

Treaty-right

The claim of the exposed side of the Windscar Pacts, strongest in the High Scars, to passage sworn to an accepted escort, which obliges a well-keeper to give one of the three answers rather than a bare refusal. See The Windscar.

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 Turnwater Quays

The busiest station of the Soundchain Roads, a cluster of quays, a beach yard, and a declaration house in the corridor's largest sound. See *The Tidelace and the Soundchain Roads*.

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 (FND 225).

The Turnwater Roll

The list kept by the Turnwater declaration clerks of the kinds of traffic reopened since the closure years, each with its season and the day it is next asked about. See *The Tidelace and the Soundchain Roads*.

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 (FND 73).

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 (FND 295).

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 Understorey Courts

The terraced receiving grounds at the foot of the Crownbough canopy where envoys and petitioners wait, often for a long time; few are taken higher. See The Forest Heartlands.

The Undrawn Seal

A closure on the Roothollow-facing edge of the Stonewake Deeps, entered in the archives as temporary and never reopened. See Stone and the Deep.

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 (FND 97).

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 (FND 277).

The Unrun Sea

The open ocean seaward of every known far-side water, past the Far Set, the outer isles of the Tidelace, and the fog banks off the Soundchain Roads. See *The Tidebound Reaches and the Unrun Sea*.

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 (FND 295).

The Upper Roothollows

The upper storey of the root-cavern world nearest the forest, drowned in the Roothollow Rupture and sealed ever since: a layer nobody enters. See Sealed and Silent Places.

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 (FND 225).

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.

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 (FND 51).

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 (FND 51).

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 (FND 73).

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 (FND 11).

The Verge Stair

The stone stair of Dwarven building between the Ironspine and the Crownboughs that ends at a gate the High Elf courts grew; each side keeps its half, and exchange is done on the landing between. See The Forest Heartlands.

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 (FND 129).

W

The Waitfield

The cleared ground at the edge of the Briarreach where the Thornbound Circles receive traders and envoys, and where most trade happens and goes no further. See The Forest Heartlands.

The Wake-Seal

The rite of shadow and concealment the Hushvale survivors made c. 1,200 CR to hide their villages from the waking Record-engine, which closed the vale under fog. See Sealed and Silent Places.

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 (FND 287).

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*.

Water and Who Keeps It

The thread of Caeldon's history of who holds the water and for whom, from the oldest water orders to the closed confluence. See The Threads of History (FND 287).

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 (FND 295).

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 (FND 97).

The Whetgap

The main crossing of the High Scars, a narrow storm-cut pass where the wind is strongest and the scree least stable. See The Windscar.

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 (FND 33).

Who Counts and Who Records

The thread of Caeldon's history that asks who counts and who decides, from the archive-law rolls and the struck warrens to the river oaths and the Wrought. See The Threads of History (FND 287).

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.

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.

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.

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 (FND 207).

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.

Woundland camps

The Crossing-Oath camps that mark unsafe ground and remember old failures. See *The Civilizations of the Medieval Era*.

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.

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 (FND 97).

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 (FND 73).

Ziv

The name the Goblins of the mixed crossings give Abrel the Changeling. See Stewards and Resonants (FND 85).

Index

A

Abrel the Changeling, 16, 70-71, 75, 81-82, 90, 185, 191, 201, 297
Age, 46
Ageless Spring, The, 123, 316
Aion, 91, 94, 226
Alchemic, 302
Alignment custom, 78
Amberbough, 14, 130, 136, 149
Annoth the Keeper of Scrolls, 54, 70, 72, 74, 82, 90, 176, 295
Answering Sound Crisis, The, 267, 269
Answering Sound, The, 268-269, 274
Answerward Overreach Feud, The, 266
Answerward Pilotage, The, 37, 254, 266
Anvelle the Harvest-Mother, 16, 26-27, 32, 69, 72, 75, 81-82, 110, 114, 135, 175, 191, 299, 316
Anvilwake, 14, 136, 152, 158
Aqua, 91, 94, 296
Archive-Law Civilization, The, 54, 206
Ash-Furnace Civilization, The, 250
Ashen Child, The, 125
Ashen Lantern, The, 35, 182
autumn count, The, 26, 29, 31, 64, 221-222, 226, 231
Awakening of the Wrought, The, 61, 195, 303

B

Backlash, 120
Bank councils, 68, 278
Bankright Circles, The, 17, 46, 67, 276, 279, 286
Bare Shoulder, The, 264, 274
Barleystep, 157
Beyonders, The, 124
Binding Magic, 119
Bitter Root Histories, The, 135, 139, 168, 214
Blackbasin, 159
Blightward Keepers, The, 46, 66, 88, 276, 279, 283-284
Blightward Thaluren, 283
blind way, The, 49, 146
Blood River, The, 122, 126
Blood River's Surfeit, The, 122
Blood-Fury, 123
Bone Singer, The, 124
Boughways, 139
BR, 16, 26, 46-47, 51, 53, 57, 62, 66, 71, 73, 82, 84, 86, 88-89, 129, 135, 144, 151, 158, 167-168, 170, 174, 180, 185, 195, 204, 207, 209, 212, 226, 242, 244, 249-250, 257, 267, 269, 273, 281, 293-294, 303
Brace-Gnawers, 52, 61, 153
Briarreach, The, 10, 13-14, 19-20, 27, 36, 38, 40, 47, 79, 105, 129, 144, 149, 174
Bridge Hall, The, 41, 82, 197, 201, 305
Bridge-Dead, 38, 58, 145, 192, 197
Bridge-oath families, 58
Brightshallow, 276
Broken Marches, The, 10, 13, 15, 19, 27, 31, 33, 36, 38-40, 56, 73, 84, 89, 113, 115, 152, 174, 184, 186, 192, 196, 201, 204, 215, 250, 304, 306, 312
Burden and Bonded Labour, 242
Burden houses, 57, 301
Burden-Stays, 85, 153, 159
Burdened Seal Histories, The, 135, 162, 171, 214
Burst-Dead, 99

C

Cairn-Wakers, 17, 35, 238, 247
Calvesh the Chronos-King, 81, 207
Camp elders, 57
Cast-Out of Unyielding Burden, The, 159
Chaffbridge, 178
Chain-Camps, The, 191, 195, 301
Chainwake Gnomes, 288
Changing Fever, The, 124, 191
Channel stewards, 68
circuit, The, 22-23, 27, 29, 31, 58, 171, 192, 225, 251, 311
Cistern circles, 222
Cistern halls, 38
Civicframe, 302
Closure of the First Nesting Confluence, The, 66, 88, 273
Clutch-Watch Circles, 66, 87, 279
Coldrun Kavari, 280
collective refusal, The, 313
commons, The, 29, 64, 79, 221-222, 224-227, 230, 233
Confluence Basins, The, 10, 13, 15, 26, 35, 53, 72, 106, 115, 130, 136, 144, 173-174, 186, 206
confluence chamber, The, 169
Confluence Marches, The, 15, 46, 53, 78, 82, 138, 148, 173-174, 185, 198, 294-295
Confluence Rise, The, 53, 301, 307
Congers, 255, 261
Correth, 13, 174, 180, 201, 207
Corridor Ages, The, 293, 305
Corrow the Gale-Runner, 20, 31, 39, 58, 70, 74, 80, 155, 192, 196, 212
Counted Lee Timing Feud, The, 226, 232, 260
Counted Lee, The, 30, 64, 99, 220, 223, 225, 227, 230, 233, 254
court season, The, 26, 28, 32, 68, 137
Courts of Stone and Canopy, The, 138, 158, 306
CR, 10, 21, 25, 46, 61, 70, 74, 104, 118, 130, 152, 174, 204, 220, 236, 254, 276, 293, 303, 309-310, 317
cradle-web, The, 9-11, 14, 16, 19, 21, 23, 26, 48, 53, 58, 62, 69, 73, 81-82, 89, 112, 122, 130, 152, 173, 190, 203, 219, 224, 226, 236, 239, 243, 250, 260, 293, 303, 312, 317
Crossing-Oath Houses, The, 20, 46, 49, 57, 130, 146, 174, 189, 194, 210, 236, 239, 312
Crossroad Hanged, 175, 305

Crownbough Courts, The, 14, 46, 48, 51, 70-71, 78, 86, 130, 135, 154
Crownbough Embassies, The, 142, 300, 307
Crownbough Heir Controversy, The, 49, 142, 300, 307
Crownboughs, The, 10, 13-14, 28, 34, 36, 40, 47, 87, 95, 129, 135, 152, 174, 306, 310, 315
Crystal Spire, The, 123
Crystallization, 124

D

Dark Elves, 14, 47, 73, 84, 151, 155, 158, 163, 168-169, 212, 293, 306
Dark Entities, The, 78, 89, 117, 124
Dark fear, 89
Dark magic, 98
Darkening of the Roothollows, The, 167
Dawnreach, The, 10, 22
Deadweave, 144
Decade of Storms, The, 260
Deep Stair, The, 212, 214, 315, 317
Deepdraw, 13, 220, 236, 238, 243
Deepening of Stonewake, The, 158
Dewcup, 223
Divine magic, 97
Dreaming Veil, The, 124
Drowned Court, The, 50, 167, 213
Drowning Bloom, The, 27, 81, 134, 163, 168-169, 212
Drowning Garden, The, 123
Dry Folds, The, 64, 220, 227, 233
Dry Year, The, 81, 185
dry-season gathering, The, 26, 29, 244, 248
Dryfold Halflings, 221
Durrask, 81, 191, 297
Dwarves, 9, 14-15, 28, 33, 45-46, 48, 51, 53, 73, 75, 80, 84, 89, 108, 114, 129, 136, 149, 151-152, 158, 164, 169, 174, 185, 209, 213, 293-294, 305, 310, 315, 317

E

Echo, 122, 205, 304, 317
Echo-Mother, The, 74, 205, 304
Eddymill, 131, 148
Edgefold Halflings, 224
Edgeway Kindreds, The, 46, 58, 74, 174, 189, 193, 200, 210, 250
Elder Worlds, The, 204, 293, 317
Elderweald Border Pressures, The, 132, 299, 306-307
Elderweald Funerary Accord, The, 48, 89, 132, 300
Elderweald, The, 10, 13-14, 23, 27, 32, 34, 40, 47, 54, 79, 89, 105, 129, 136, 144, 152, 163, 168, 174, 190, 203, 212, 293, 300, 307, 315
Elderweald-Ironspine Frontier, The, 132, 158
Elves, 9, 16, 26-27, 32, 36, 46-47, 52-53, 71, 73, 78-79, 81, 84, 86, 89, 95, 114, 131, 135, 144, 158, 164, 169-170, 178, 188, 213, 278, 293, 297, 306-307, 310, 315, 317
Ember's Grip, The, 125-126
Enclosure of the Seams, The, 60, 154, 195
Ennor the Grave-Watcher, 16, 20, 24, 69, 73, 75, 81-82, 87, 89, 135, 138, 179, 196, 213
Equilibrium, The (see Material Plane, The)
Estuary Terms, The, 260, 272, 281, 289, 314
Evenlee, 220, 223

F

Fade, The, 123
Failed Mending, 58, 96, 121, 193, 317-318
Fallowrise, 178
Far Set, The, 22, 276, 287
far side, The, 9-11, 16, 18, 20, 22, 29, 34, 37, 39, 51, 62, 84, 114-115, 135-136, 162, 164, 195, 203, 214, 219, 232, 235-236, 239, 251, 253-254, 264, 276, 287, 293-294, 306, 311-312, 314, 317
Far-Route Orcs (see Open-Steppe Orcs)
Far-Side Terms, The, 16, 294
Fathomstair, 13, 254, 261
Fernrest, 130, 174
Festival of the First Flow, The, 26, 83, 181
Festival of the First Sheaf, The, 27, 83, 175
Festival of the First Stone, The, 28, 80, 154
Festival of the Tides, The, 30, 80, 256, 262
Festival of the Turn, The, 18, 30, 64, 80, 226, 233
Field Bulwarks, 186
Fieldframe, 302
First Confluence-Crownbough Contacts, The, 141, 300
First Confluence-Elderweald Contacts, The, 132, 299
First Gale, The, 26, 29, 80, 237, 246-247
First Headwater-Ironspine Contacts, The, 191, 296
First Man, The, 81
First Nesting Confluence, The, 88, 114, 277, 282, 289, 314, 316, 318
Flockturn, 178, 204, 208, 215
Floodkeeper Houses, The, 15, 46, 55, 81, 173-174, 207, 295
Fogbells, 264
Foldward Commons, The, 17, 46, 62, 220, 224
Fordside Compact, The, 198
Forgeframe, 161, 189, 302, 313
Founding of the Confluence Marches, The, 53
Founding of the Crownbough Courts, The, 48
Founding of the Floodkeeper Houses, The, 55
Founding of the Foldward Commons, The, 63, 224, 226, 229
Founding of the Gaugeward Leagues, The, 64, 260
Founding of the Gloamroot Covenant, The, 50
Founding of the Stonewake Compact, The, 52
Founding of the Thornbound Circles, The, 49
Founding of the Windscar Pacts, The, 62, 242
Freeze, The, 123
full oath, The, 32, 55, 183, 201, 297, 310
Fused Dead, 24, 250

G

Gapmouth, 238
Gate practice, 85, 90, 160
Gates, 261
Gathering of the Confluence, The, 179, 294
Gathering-markets, 38
Gaugeward Leagues, The, 17, 46, 62, 220, 230, 253, 279, 286
Ghessa the Hearth-Mother, 16, 20, 57, 70-71, 80, 191, 201, 239, 251
Giants, 16, 19, 21, 23, 80, 152, 154, 186, 204, 210, 215, 236, 239, 312, 316, 318
Gilding, 125
Glassbelt Interior, The, 9-11, 19, 22-23, 38-39, 41, 57, 62, 74, 79, 81, 109, 192, 203, 235-236, 238, 243, 249, 252, 304, 317
Glassbelt, The (see Glassbelt Interior, The)
gloam, The, 163
Gloamroot Covenant, The, 14, 46, 49, 95, 132, 152, 163, 213
Gnomes, 9, 14, 16, 21, 24, 26, 30, 32-33, 37, 39, 46, 62, 66, 69-70, 78, 82, 88, 111, 220, 223, 225, 227, 230, 236, 253, 261,

264, 268, 270, 272, 276, 279, 286, 288-289, 302, 314
Goblins, 10, 15, 19-20, 24, 27, 36, 39-41, 45, 51, 59, 71, 73-74, 80, 84, 111, 114, 152, 154, 174, 178, 183, 188, 192, 196, 204, 207, 214, 251, 302, 304, 307, 311-312, 318
Graft Terrace, The, 141
Grain, 27, 114, 175, 245
Gravel Oath Accord, The, 68, 281, 287
Gravelbraid Nurseries, The, 32, 276, 285, 289
Great Slumber, The, 126
Green Deep, The, 10, 23
Grey Clerks, The, 208, 215, 305, 316
Grey Crews, 70, 255, 261, 264, 268
Grey Line, The, 175, 207
Greyford, 27, 31, 36, 38-41, 72, 174, 185-186, 192, 196, 201, 312-313
Greyford Bridge, The (see Greyspan, The)
Greyford Reach, The, 10, 13, 15, 34, 174, 186, 192, 196, 305, 310
Greyspan Toll Quarrel, The, 200, 305, 312
Greyspan, The, 36, 196, 201, 305, 312-313, 317
guarantee roll, The, 35, 55, 182
Gullhead, 265
Gullstair, The, 36-37, 41, 264, 269

H

Haggun the Wall-Breaker, 57, 81, 191, 301
Halflings, 9, 14, 17, 30, 35, 37, 46, 62, 70, 79, 110, 114, 219, 221, 224-226, 228, 230, 233, 244, 253
Halfroof, 194
Hall Canker, 136
Hanging Vale, The, 63, 124, 246
Harbour wards, 82
Hardening of the Briarreach, The, 49, 145
Hardening of the Lordships, The, 303
Hauling Stair, The, 35, 53, 152, 158
Haurûm the Mountain-Father, 20-21, 57, 79-80, 147, 153, 186, 209, 239, 316
Headwater Alignments, The, 191, 297, 306
Headwater and Serath Corridors, The, 299
Headwater Exchange Roads, The, 188, 301
Headwater Fosterage Feud, The, 188, 297
Headwater Marches, The, 10, 13, 15, 19, 26, 32, 34-36, 38, 53, 57, 75, 79, 82, 113, 133, 136, 152, 174, 184-185, 192, 196, 204, 209, 294, 310, 312-313, 315
Headwater Rite of Two Oaths, The, 54, 188, 297
Healing-Shift, 94
Hearth-keepers, 57
Hearth-weight, 20, 301
Hearth-Weight Compacts, The, 20, 39, 46, 56, 81, 189, 194, 236, 239, 302, 313, 318
Heartwell Stakings, The, 51, 73, 170
Heartwell Struggles, The, 171
Held Covenant, The, 16, 51, 70, 73, 75, 78, 84, 143, 154, 171, 191
Held, The, 122, 203, 265, 269-270, 304
Hemophages, 122, 126
Hesserin the Shattered Saint, 56, 81, 179, 185, 296, 314
High Elves, 14, 47, 87, 130, 132, 135, 300
High Scars, The, 10, 13, 17, 19, 29, 35, 37-39, 41, 57, 63, 80, 109, 219-220, 227, 235-236, 238, 243, 247, 250, 265, 270
High-Scar escort orders, The, 240, 244, 266
High-Scar Orcs, 236, 242
Highbank, 27, 36, 38, 82, 196, 305, 312
Highbraid, 136, 152
Hobgoblin, 34, 37, 59, 187, 192, 302, 311
Holdmaking of the Ironspine, The, 151
Hollows, 131
Homeward Set, The, 30, 32, 35, 276
Hornets, 221
Human Corridor Orders, The, 299
Humans, 9-10, 14, 16, 19-20, 22, 26, 30, 33-34, 36-38, 46-47, 51, 53, 58, 65, 70, 72, 75, 78, 81-82, 85, 87, 89, 95-96, 99, 111, 114, 121, 129, 136, 146, 151-152, 171, 173, 184-185, 192, 196, 205, 213-214, 220, 231, 233, 236, 251, 254, 257, 261, 273-274, 288, 293-294, 305, 307, 310, 313-315, 317
Hushvale, The, 10, 13, 19, 21, 74, 122, 192, 203-204, 215, 251, 294, 304, 310, 316

I

Ignis, 71, 91, 93
Ill-Hatched, 48, 136
Imago, 48, 91, 94, 297
Incursion, 179, 191, 207, 246
Inherited Rot, 125
Iron Compacts, The, 34, 37, 39, 46, 59, 154, 189, 193, 200, 302, 307, 311
Ironspine Dwarves, 153
Ironspine Holds, The, 15, 46, 51, 84, 151-152, 160, 315
Ironspine, The, 10, 13-14, 23, 28, 33-34, 36, 39-40, 45-46, 49, 51, 56, 68, 73, 78-79, 84, 108, 114, 129-130, 136, 151, 158, 163, 169, 173-174, 185, 192, 204, 209, 213-214, 293, 304, 313, 315
Iskel the Scribe of the Silent, 28, 54, 70, 74, 82, 90, 176, 185, 299
Island Gnomes (see Chainwake Gnomes)
Ithaere the Drowned Mother, 29, 81, 135, 164, 169, 213

K

Kavari, 9, 14, 17, 19, 31-32, 39-40, 65, 80, 88-89, 115, 275-276, 285, 289, 306, 314
keeping, The, 10, 19, 26, 29, 31-34, 37, 53, 56, 66, 69, 77-78, 84, 88-89, 105, 119, 132, 141, 145, 155, 160, 179, 182, 187, 193, 200, 204, 208, 213, 221, 224, 235, 240, 243, 255, 263, 265, 277, 283, 294, 298, 304, 306, 311, 313
Keepright, 59
Kelpshade, The, 30-31, 67, 276, 285, 289
Kerrund the Stone-Warden, 16, 28, 51, 69, 73, 75, 80, 84, 143, 153, 161, 191
Kindless Broods, 54, 191
Knockrun, 162
Known Ways, The, 14, 34-35, 50, 163, 168-169, 172
Kobolds, 15, 34, 39, 45, 51, 60, 81, 109, 111, 114, 144, 152-153, 158, 169, 171, 174, 192, 196, 201, 302, 305, 313, 317-318
Krystallis, 124, 246

L

Lacework, The, 30, 35, 230, 254, 262
Lantern Reaches, The, 264, 313
Lantern-Sworn, The, 83, 182
Last Chamber, The, 50, 52, 61, 70, 73, 81, 85, 155, 161, 168, 170
Last Keeping, The, 55, 185, 207, 296, 304
Last Mark, The, 268
Last Registrar, The, 207, 214
Last Water, The, 169, 214
Lastlight, 254, 276, 287, 289
Lastwater Wells, The, 13, 19, 23-24, 38, 41, 235-236, 243, 249
Late-Closure Terms, The, 281, 287
Law of the River, The, 26, 84, 181
Laying Stone, The, 143
Leave Stair, The, 28, 140, 149, 315
Lee Road, The, 13, 30, 35, 220, 223, 225-227, 233, 243, 248
Lee Wall, The, 13, 64, 220, 225, 227, 235-236, 243
Leeches, 180
Leeward Folds, The, 10, 13, 17, 29, 36, 40, 63, 79-80, 114, 121, 219, 236, 238, 243, 254, 314

Leeward measure orders, The, 220, 224
Leeward-Tidelace Measures, The, 226, 232
Leeward-Tidelace Timing Oath, The, 64, 226, 232, 260
Leeward-Windscar Terms, The, 226, 229
Legend of the Unbroken Gate, The, 85, 155
Lifeforce, 92, 96
Linked, 174
Listening, The, 213
Liturgy, 97
Long Grey, The, 22, 70, 231, 254, 261, 268, 288
Long Hunger, The, 57, 71, 109
Long Pan, The, 29, 243
Long Summer, The, 30, 80, 226
Long Tally, The, 230
Long Tread, The, 21, 23, 33, 41, 155, 171, 210, 312
Lowbank, 27, 36, 40, 196, 201, 305, 312, 317
Lower River Absorptions, The, 55, 179, 295
Lower Serath Guarantees, The, 54, 180, 297
Lower Serath, The, 10, 13, 15, 26, 34-35, 54, 106, 109, 115, 174, 180, 204, 206, 297, 310
Lowgarden, 136
Lux, 72, 91, 94
Lying Shoals, The, 35, 41, 55, 180, 201, 296

M

Maintenance Reckoning, The, 200-201, 305, 312
Many-Named, The, 294-295
March Wall, The, 13, 15, 174, 186, 192, 196
March-towns, 175
Maris of the Tides, 18, 30, 36, 69-70, 75, 80, 84, 88, 95, 105, 111, 256, 262, 268, 272, 274, 282, 288
mark, The, 18, 20, 26, 36, 39-40, 53, 58, 64, 73, 79, 84, 94, 108, 112, 115, 118, 123, 143, 155, 160, 172, 183, 188, 193, 197, 205, 210, 215, 230, 250, 255, 262, 267-268, 270, 274, 279, 285, 298, 304, 313
Market Round, The, 26, 29, 223, 228
Material Plane, The, 316
Measure Cistern Crisis, The, 226, 229, 244
Measure Cistern Reckoning, The, 64, 226, 229
Measure Cistern, The, 220, 223-224, 227, 230, 233
Measured Seal, The, 50-51, 70, 73, 84, 155, 161, 168, 170
Medieval Caeldon, 9, 192
Medieval Era, The, 10, 22, 25, 46, 58, 62, 70, 104, 118, 130, 152, 174, 204, 220, 236, 254, 276, 303, 309
Medieval Present, The, 304
Memoria, 91, 94
Mending Orders, The, 46, 61, 95, 97, 99, 154, 161, 187, 304, 311, 313
Mereth the Salt-Witch, 247, 250
Mineframe, 161, 302
Mixed Bridge Oath, The, 199
mixed circle, The, 31, 272
Mnemosyne Null, 124, 179, 207
Mosspool, 280
Mountain-Father, The (see Haurûm the Mountain-Father)
Mythic traits, 98

N

Naming Reach, The, 67, 88, 282, 284, 289, 314
Nine Hammer Forges, The, 95
Ninebeacon, 267
Ninefloods, 178
Notchfield, 186, 204, 210
Nothing, The, 86, 120, 131, 138, 167, 204, 222, 225, 230, 261, 268, 272, 282, 284, 287, 317
Nursery custodians, 280

O

Oath Cistern, The, 63, 237, 245, 247, 252, 312, 317
Oath of Layers, The (see Serathic Oath of Layers, The)
Oath-days, 26
Oath-Inscription, 94
Oath-right, 188
Oathfoot, 13, 152, 174, 186, 196
Ogres, 10, 15, 18-20, 29, 31, 33-34, 36, 39, 45, 56, 70-71, 80, 96, 109, 114, 174, 187, 192, 196, 236, 239, 246, 248, 251-252, 294-295, 305, 313, 318
Oldcairn, 13, 236, 238, 264
Oldchannel, 184
Oldstand, 134
Onefire Terrace, 196
Open Bench, The, 261, 274
Open-Run Concords, The, 46, 67, 88, 276, 279
Open-Steppe Orcs, 236
Oral Tradition, The (see Many-Named, The)
Orcs, 9, 14, 17, 19, 23, 29, 34, 37, 46, 62, 72, 74, 80, 89, 115, 118, 219, 221, 223, 226-227, 235-236, 238, 243, 248, 250, 253, 264, 268, 270, 313-314
Ordered Bough, The, 16, 48, 75, 78, 86, 90, 137, 145
Organized religion, 78
Ossification, 125
Ostrin the Lantern-Bearer, 16, 28, 35, 39, 54, 70, 72, 74-75, 82, 90, 176, 182, 192, 201, 314
outer fire, The, 49, 145
Outfold Halflings (see Edgefold Halflings)
Outside, The, 87, 181, 205, 273, 302
Ozhar the Pyre-King, 79, 109, 250

P

Paleseep, 166
Paling, The, 54, 124, 177, 207, 295
Parched, The, 123
Passward shelters, 38
Patience, The, 37, 41, 264, 270
Pattern, 105
Pellith, 14, 180, 201, 310
Pit-Wakers, 175
Plumbfold, 220, 223, 226-227, 233
Predecessor-Frames, 186
Primes, The, 77, 89, 91, 97
Protection, 32, 55, 183, 298, 310
Proving of the Unbroken Line, The, 51, 85, 154
Pull of Extremes, The, 122

Q

Quennet the Clockmaker, 64, 69-70, 82, 99, 227, 232, 260, 262, 316
Quiet Plague, The, 124
Qzoth, 124, 191

R

Rakhal the Storm-Caller, 18, 29, 63, 70, 74, 80, 113, 115, 227, 237, 242, 244, 247, 252, 268, 314
Rattlecut Dead, 186, 305
Rattlecut, The, 27, 35, 58, 186, 297
Ravine houses, 58
Reading Steps, The, 227, 233
Reciting of the Names, The, 26, 29, 31, 63, 80, 237
Record, 204
Record-day, 26, 31
Record-engine, The, 21, 204, 304, 316
Red Dust, The, 125
Redirection Assemblies, 66, 279

Reed, 298
Reedfolk, 15, 19, 26, 31, 34, 36, 39, 46, 53, 70, 81, 84, 89, 96, 106, 114, 173-174, 180, 201, 208, 278, 293-295, 303, 305, 307, 310, 314, 317-318
Reedmere, The, 36, 174, 180, 314
Reserve-right, 237, 249
Resonant Zones, The, 117, 309, 316
Resonants, The, 315
Restoration, 96
Returning Concord, The, 17, 21, 46, 65, 78, 87, 254, 272, 276
Rimefold, The, 10, 23
Rimewrights, The, 23
Rimward Basins, The, 10, 13, 17, 19, 29, 35-36, 63, 115, 219-220, 225, 227, 235-236, 238, 243, 251
Rimward Orcs, 244
Rimward Passage War, The, 23, 37, 244, 249
Rimward Well-Keepers, The, 244
Rise of the Archive-Law Civilization, The, 207
Rise of the Upland Colossal Civilization, The, 209
River-Given, The, 54, 71, 175, 180, 296, 306
River-Lords' Peace, The, 298
Roads and Crossings, 34, 226, 242, 260
Root Course, The, 143, 149
root-year, The, 25-26, 28, 50, 81, 164
Rootcrown Concord, The, 14, 46-47, 129-130, 174, 299
Roothollow Rupture, The, 50, 132, 167, 315
Roothollows, The, 10, 13-14, 27, 31, 35, 40, 47, 86, 111, 129, 151, 158, 163, 168-169, 315
Rooting, The, 125
Rootstone Heartwell, The, 51, 152, 158, 169, 306, 310, 315
Rotting Crown, The, 114, 125
Route keepers, 50, 52
Run-Watchers, 32, 65, 87, 278, 284
Runs That Arrived, The, 22
Rust Flower, The, 125

S

Saerith the Mirror-King, 28, 48, 70-71, 87, 90, 99, 136, 148, 300, 315
Sallow, The, 36, 144, 149, 312
Salt-Kept, 250
Saltcut, 243
Saltline Shelf, The, 272
Saltrack, 258
Salvage Peoples, The, 15, 19, 33, 58, 79, 174, 192, 251, 305
Sanctified Magic, 105, 121
Sanctuary Custodians, 30, 65, 87, 273, 278, 283-284, 314, 318
Sapfall, 163
Scourge, The, 122
Scribes, 83, 176
Sea-Settlement Speakers, 66, 88, 279
Seal practice, 86
Seal-Knockers, 85, 153, 159, 171, 306
Sealing of the Upper Roothollows, The, 132, 168, 212
Seamhead, 157
Second Channel, The, 31, 67, 280, 283-284, 289, 314, 317
Second-Channel Feud, The, 88, 281, 284, 287
Sepulchre-Kin, The, 204, 304
Serath, The, 9, 13, 15, 26-27, 29, 36, 39, 45, 69-70, 72, 81-82, 90, 106, 133, 156, 173, 180, 206-207, 214, 229, 232, 249, 258, 263, 288, 305, 314, 317-318
Serathic Humans, 184
Serathic League, The, 15, 35, 46, 54, 78, 82, 174, 180, 294, 298
Serathic Oath of Layers, The, 32, 55, 183, 201, 298, 310
Serovan the River-King, 16, 26, 69-70, 75, 81-82, 106, 179, 181, 296, 314
Sessik the Tongue-Taker, 61, 81, 160
Settlement, The, 66, 250, 278, 293, 303
Sevenbreak, 144
Shadepool, 276
Shadewells, The, 10, 23
Shadow Stitcher, The, 125
Shaping of the Roothollow-Stonewake Interface, The, 167
Shard-Hosts, 246
Sheaf Road, The, 27, 32, 34, 39, 174, 187
Sheafmeet, 13, 130, 136, 144, 174, 180, 186
Shearline, The, 13, 29, 236-238, 243, 247
Shipworms, 230
Shorn, The, 23
Shortgreen, 245
Shoulderlee, 264, 274
Sihri, 22
Silence Seed, The, 124
Silence, The, 97, 123
Silthollow, 134, 168, 204, 213
Skin-Lost, 47, 131, 175, 213
Slag-Tenders, 250
Slidescar, 238
Slowwater, The, 27, 133, 148, 315
Snowshut, 186
Sollun, 23
Soundchain Closure Terms, The, 267, 272
Soundchain Roads, The, 10, 13, 17, 21, 30, 36-37, 39, 109, 235, 253-254, 264, 274, 287, 312
Soundchain Selective Closure, The, 267
Sounding Gate Quarrel, The, 64, 257
Sounding Gate, The, 39, 254, 261, 268, 270, 274
Spellcraft, 97
Split Reed Mouth, The, 13, 18, 31, 254, 272, 274, 276, 289, 314
Spread of the Predecessor-Frames, The, 302
Spurfold, 223, 233
Spurred Hounds, 54, 175
Stairdeep, 14, 53, 152, 158, 163
Starving Winter, The, 27, 81, 175
Stele of Names, The, 72
Steward of Purifying Fire, The, 113
Stewards, The, 78, 89
Stewardship, 32, 55, 183, 298, 310
Still Well, The, 81, 113, 246
Stillgate, 180, 207, 214
Stonelocking, 94
Stonewake Compact, The, 15, 46, 51-52, 84, 152, 158, 163
Stonewake Deeps, The, 10, 13, 15, 28, 34, 36, 45, 52, 61, 81, 95, 109, 112, 115, 151-152, 158, 163, 213
Storm-Forge, 94
Stormcrown, The, 13, 15, 21, 23, 39, 109, 152, 186, 204, 209, 316
Sunken Stairs, The, 27, 132, 167-168, 204, 212, 306
Swearing of the Crossing-Charges, The, 57, 146, 210
Sworn Accord, The, 16, 18, 26, 53, 70, 75, 78, 82, 86, 89, 132, 141, 179, 181, 191, 196, 201, 260, 299
Sworn Ledge, The, 247

T

Taken, The, 58, 204
Tallgrade, The, 33, 41, 194
Tamsel the Season-Weaver, 18, 30, 63, 70, 80, 121, 226, 232-233
Tavi the Bard of the Broken, 16, 60, 70, 74, 80, 84, 154, 192, 196, 201, 302
Tenders, 86, 137
Terra, 91, 93
Thaluren, 9, 14, 17, 19, 21-22, 26, 30, 32, 39-40, 46, 65, 75, 78, 87, 114, 254, 256, 272, 274-276, 282, 284-285, 287, 289, 306, 314, 318

Thingrass, 239
Thorn Elves, 14, 47, 130, 132, 144
Thornbound Circles, The, 14, 46, 49, 130, 144
Thread of Dependence, The, 125
Threewater Turn, 159, 163
threshold chamber, The, 32-33, 40, 50, 164
threshold watch, The, 28, 164
Thrumgate, 152, 186
Tidebound Reaches, The, 10, 13, 17, 21-22, 25, 35, 39, 65, 254, 272, 275, 310, 314, 317
Tidelace Answering Custom, The, 257, 266, 269
Tidelace calibration orders, The, 254
Tidelace Coasts, The, 9, 13, 17, 20-21, 23, 25, 30-31, 35-36, 39-40, 62, 69-70, 75, 78-79, 84, 111, 219-220, 230, 236, 253, 261, 264, 270, 272, 276, 287, 294, 310-311, 314, 317
Tidelace Coastward Exchanges, The, 267
Tidelace, The (see Tidelace Coasts, The)
Tidelace-Windscar Approaches, The, 260, 263
Tidelore Hospice of Maris, The, 95, 105
Tollwardens, The, 36, 197
Toll's End, 35, 180, 201
Tomb-Builder, The, 204
Towrest, 180
Treaty-right, 237, 249
Trolls, 10, 14, 18-20, 31, 33, 35-38, 40-41, 49, 57, 79-80, 97, 99, 108, 114, 121, 130, 144, 149, 174, 188, 192, 200, 210, 236, 239, 246, 251, 305, 312, 316-318
Truesound, 14, 21-22, 24, 254, 288-289
Turningshoal, 32, 276
Turnwater Quays, The, 13, 238, 254, 264, 269
Turnwater Reopening Accord, The, 268
Turnwater Roll, The, 270
Twofold Waters, The, 68, 287
Twohalves, 194

U

Ulaun the Stilled Hour, 66, 88, 282
Umbra, 74, 91, 94
Unburial War, The, 204, 304
Undercroft Fair, The, 20, 31, 38, 59, 174, 192, 196, 251
Underhouse Compacts, The, 39, 46, 60, 152, 154, 160, 170, 174, 194, 313
Understorey Courts, The, 28, 38, 40, 95, 99, 130, 136, 315
Undrawn Seal, The, 158, 167, 171-172, 315, 317
Unfinished, The, 139, 148
Unformed, The, 126
Unlisting of the Warrens, The, 60, 195, 207
Unmakers, The, 61, 303, 307, 316
Unrecorded Age, The, 18-19, 22, 179, 207, 258, 294-295, 304, 317
Unreturned, The, 277, 288
Unrun Sea, The, 10-11, 21-22, 254, 264, 275-276, 287, 289, 317
Unsworn Dead, 83, 179, 298, 305
Unwriting, The, 124
Upland Colossal Civilization, The, 186, 209
Upper Roothollows, The, 15, 21, 50, 163, 168, 212, 316
Ushkar the Ancestor-Warden, 18, 20, 24, 29, 63, 69, 72, 80, 89, 118, 227, 237, 242, 268

V

Varn the Shadow-Stalker, 16, 70, 73, 80, 89, 196, 201
Veil, The, 117, 123
Veil-Walkers, The, 123
Verba, 91, 94
Verdant, 97, 123, 134, 317
Verdant Expanse, The, 123
Verge Stair, The, 16, 36, 130, 136, 149, 152, 315
Vital Magic, 105, 120

W

Waitfield, The, 38, 40, 49, 130, 144, 149
Wake-Seal, The, 205, 294, 304, 310
Walking of the Unkept Roads, The, 58, 190, 210
Wallbreach, 192
Warframe, 302
waste-ground doctrine, The, 60, 191, 195, 311, 318
Watchers, 145, 213
Water and Who Keeps It, 226, 260, 274, 281, 284
Way of Return, The, 18, 65, 78, 87, 273, 282, 285, 287
Weatherline, The, 39, 186, 210
Weaver's Mending, The, 126
Weeping Idol, The, 125-126
Whetgap, The, 19-20, 31, 238, 252, 312-313
Whispering Winds, The, 123
Who Counts and Who Records, 226, 260, 281
Willowstep, 139
Windscar Expanse, The, 10, 13, 16, 19, 24-25, 35-36, 62, 68-69, 72, 74, 79, 81, 113, 219-220, 223, 225, 227-228, 233, 235, 238, 243, 247, 249, 253, 262, 264, 269, 312, 317
Windscar Pacts, The, 17, 37, 46, 62, 118, 220, 227, 235-236, 254, 263
Windscar, The (see Windscar Expanse, The)
Winterfire, 187
Withdrawal of the Upland Colossal World, The, 210
Witnessfields, The, 13, 16, 21, 174, 180, 204, 206, 214, 305, 316
Wood Elves, 14, 46-47, 79, 87, 95, 110, 129-130, 299
Working right, 188
Worms, 108
Woundland camps, 58
Wovenbrake, 144
Wrongwood, The, 54, 124, 186
Wrought, The, 10, 15, 20, 46, 52, 61, 73, 82, 95, 97, 99, 115, 125, 152, 154, 158, 174, 178, 183, 188, 192, 196, 251, 294, 303, 305, 307, 311, 313, 316-318

X

Xylos, 125

Z

Zephyr, 91, 93
Ziv, 81, 191, 201

Licence

Copyright © 2026 Jan Oetjen. Some rights reserved.

Plain-Language Summary

The Decachord is free to read, use, and share, and free to build your own work on, including work you sell. Only copies of the material itself are kept back: those may be shared free of charge but not sold, and only the author makes and sells printed or other paid editions of it.

The material is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International licence [creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/] (short form: **CC BY-NC-ND 4.0**), together with the **Creators' Permission** below, which grants more than that licence does on its own.

This summary is here so readers do not have to start with legal text. The binding terms are the Creative Commons licence and the Creators' Permission.

What This Covers

Unless a document says otherwise, this licence covers everything published as part of *The Decachord* (together, "the Material"):

- the books of the series *The Chromatic Chord: The Writers' Guide to the Decachord* (*Foundations*, *The Medieval Era*, *A Bestiary of Caeldon*, and the books that follow), in every edition: PDF, EPUB, and HTML;
- the website at joetjen.github.io/The-Decachord/, including its Reference;
- the setting documents, registries, timelines, maps, and artwork in this repository.

What You May Do

- **Read and use it** free of charge: for your own stories, games, campaigns, and play.
- **Share it unmodified**, free of charge: pass on the PDF and EPUB files, link to the website, print a copy for your own use, or hand a copy to your gaming group, as long as you credit it (see below) and do not charge for it.
- **Make your own works based on it** and publish them, **including for money**, under the Creators' Permission below: novels and short stories, campaigns and adventures, rules and game systems, maps, art, music, and anything else that is your own creation set in or drawing on the world.

What You Must Not Do

- **Sell the Material or copies of it**, in any form: printed, bound, or digital, whole or in part, alone or bundled with something else.
- **Make or sell printed editions of the books** or of the website's material. Printed and other paid editions are made only by the author, Jan Oetjen.
- **Share altered versions of the Material** (edited, abridged, translated, rearranged, or recompiled copies of the books or the website). Your own works are welcome; altered copies of the Material are not.
- **Present your work as official** *Decachord* canon, or as endorsed by the author, unless the author has agreed to that in writing.

The Creators' Permission

In addition to the rights granted by CC BY-NC-ND 4.0, Jan Oetjen grants everyone the following permission.

1. **Own Works.** You may create works of your own that are set in, based on, or inspired by the Material ("Own Works"), and reproduce, distribute, publish, perform, and sell them, commercially or not, in any medium.
2. **Using the Material in an Own Work.** An Own Work may use the Material's names, places, peoples, gods, history, and other setting elements, and may include parts of the Material's text, maps, or tables, where they serve the Own Work.
3. **No replication.** An Own Work must not be a replication of the Material. A work is a replication when its content is mainly the Material itself rather than your own creation: for example a copy, reprint, translation, abridgement, summary, rewording, reformatting, or compilation of the books, the website, or substantial parts of them, or anything that could stand in for the books or the website. Such a work is not covered by this permission, whether it is sold or given away.
4. **Credit.** Every Own Work that is published or shared must name the books and the website, in a place where its readers or players can find it (a credits page, the imprint, the description, or the end titles), for example:

   > *Based on The Decachord by Jan Oetjen and the books of The Chromatic Chord: The Writers' Guide to the Decachord, joetjen.github.io/The-Decachord/. Used under the Decachord Creators' Permission. This is not official Decachord material.*

5. **Your Own Work is yours.** You hold the rights in what you created. This permission does not require you to license your Own Work in any particular way, and gives you no rights in the Material beyond those stated here.
6. **No endorsement.** Nothing in this permission means the author endorses, approves, or is connected with an Own Work.

Where the Creators' Permission and the Creative Commons licence differ, the Creators' Permission prevails for Own Works; for the Material itself the Creative Commons licence applies.

Credit When Sharing the Material

When you share the Material itself, unmodified and free of charge, keep the author's name and this licence with it, for example:

> *The Decachord by Jan Oetjen, joetjen.github.io/The-Decachord/, licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 with the Decachord Creators' Permission.*

Contributions

Additions to the setting can flow back into the official documents. A contribution submitted for inclusion in this repository is treated as permission for Jan Oetjen to include, edit, maintain, publish, and sell it as part of the Material under the terms of this licence. Only material accepted into this repository is official canon.

Formal Licence

- Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International: creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/
- Legal code: creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode (the plain-text licence file, LICENSE [github.com/joetjen/The-Decachord/blob/main/LICENSE], holds these terms with the full legal code)
- The Creators' Permission above.

For permissions beyond these, such as a licensed edition, a translation, or using the Material in a way not covered here, write to decachord.stoppable990@passmail.net.