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Introduction

What This Game Is

Welcome to a world of fragile borders and enduring choices. This roleplaying game focuses on survival, consequence, and character drive in a finite, structured, and incomplete world. Poised on the **Threshold** between Being and Non-Being, your characters are defined by their history, their beliefs, and their willingness to push forward against inevitable pressure.

The tone is one of gritty compromise, historical weight, and personal choices. It is a world where empires rise and collapse, where dragons sleep in the stones, and where your character's motivations are the primary fuel for change and growth.

Game Philosophy

- **Fortune in the Middle:** You describe your intent, roll the dice to determine the mechanical outcome and degree of success, and then narrate the details based on that outcome.
- **Fail Forward:** A failed roll never halts the story. It changes the situation, introducing new complications, hard choices, or mechanical consequences while keeping the action moving.
- **Let It Ride:** A single roll resolves a situation. Once you roll for a task, that result stands. You do not roll again for the same task unless the circumstances change significantly.

What You Need to Play

- **Players:** One player takes on the role of the **Game Master (GM)** to frame scenes and represent the world. Two to five other players represent the primary protagonists of the story.
- **Dice:** A handful of standard six-sided dice (**d6**). You will typically roll between 1 and 10 dice at a time.
- **Character Sheets:** To track your character's Lifepaths, Pools, open Abilities, Beliefs, Secrets, and advancement marks.
- **Pencil & Paper:** For mapping, keeping logs, and tracking Clocks.

Core Terms and Assumptions

- **Abilities:** Open-ended, contextual traits or skills (e.g., *Stealth*, *Farming*, *Swordsmanship*) learned through your Lifepaths. There are no fixed "core attributes"—if you have the skill, it is on your sheet.
- **Resource Pools:** Three pools—**Vigor** (physical exertion), **Instinct** (gut/reflexes), and **Reason** (intellect/will)—that you spend from to gain bonus dice or activate Secrets.
- **Beliefs:** Your character's core motivations, drives, and relationships. When you act in a way that challenges or tests a Belief, or when you resolve its buyoff, you earn Karma.
- **Secrets:** Rare, ancient, or forbidden lore, traits, or techniques (formerly Talents). Secrets are purchased with Karma and often cost Pool points to activate.
- **Karma:** The meta-currency of the game, used to reroll failures, unlock new Secrets/Beliefs, and focus Abilities.
- **Circles:** Domain-specific Abilities representing your social connections and faction networks.

Inspirations & Acknowledgments

The System Itself

Threshold was not built in a vacuum. It stands on the shoulders of several influential indie roleplaying games that redefined how mechanics can drive narrative, tension, and character growth. We are grateful to the following works and their designers:

- **The Shadow of Yesterday** by Clinton R. Nixon: The foundation of our core resource pools—Vigor, Instinct, and Reason—as well as the concept of rule-bending Secrets, belongs to this pioneering game. It showed the hobby that resource depletion can be a powerful tool for dramatic tension.
- **The Solar System** by Eero Tuovinen: For its refinement of Nixon's engine, helping bridge the gap between gritty survival and character-driven narrative play.
- **Burning Wheel** by Luke Crane: The blueprint for characters who grow through genuine struggle.
- **Apocalypse World** by D. Vincent Baker and Meguey Baker: The genesis of the Powered by the Apocalypse movement.
- **Empai Tirkosu / Poet Combat:** Our "Draw the Line" mechanic was directly inspired by the "Suffer Defeat" rules found in the *Poet Combat* playtest document.

Thank you to these designers for pushing the boundaries of what tabletop roleplaying games can do.

The World

The dark, mythic atmosphere of *Threshold* and the fragile borderlands of its setting draw inspiration from legendary mythologies and classic fantasy works:

- **Glorantha (Greg Stafford):** For its deeply mythic world-building, where history is alive, gods are active forces, and mortal lives are bound up in cosmic, archetypal struggles.
- **The Lord of the Rings (J.R.R. Tolkien):** The melancholy of a fading world, where ancient wonders are slowly slipping away into memory, and characters are defined by their quiet perseverance against encroaching darkness.
- **Stormbringer / The Elric Saga (Michael Moorcock):** The existential dread of a world poised on the borderlands of entropy, where law and chaos clash, and characters are forced to make desperate bargains to survive.
- **Nordic and Celtic Myth:** For the rugged, animistic worldview, the direct presence of spirits and fae, and the belief that the physical landscape itself holds memory, curses, and ancient power.

On the Concept of the “Threshold” The literal setting of *Threshold* shares a rich lineage with the concept of **liminality** in weird fiction and folklore. It evokes the thin boundary between the living and the dead (like Ursula K. Le Guin’s stone wall in the *Earthsea* cycle), the decaying borders of reality fading into the void (like William Hope Hodgson’s *The House on the Borderland*), and the ancient folklore of threshold spaces (Samhain, twilight, crossroads) where the barrier between Being and Non-Being thins.

The Core Procedure of Play

Game Cycle: Scene, Sequence, and Downtime

Play is structured hierarchically across three tiers: Scenes, Sequences, and Downtime phases.

Sequence → Scene 1 → Scene 2 ... → Sequence Ends → Downtime

Within a sequence:

Frame scene → Introduce conflict → Resolve conflict → Minor Consequences clear → Next scene

1. The Scene (Micro-Level)

- **What it is:** A short, localized moment of immediate conflict or hazard (e.g., escaping a room, sneaking past a guard patrol).
- **Mechanical Resolution:** Standard Ability rolls and Contests. Players may spend from their Pools to succeed, but they cannot recover them here.
- **At Scene End: Minor Consequences automatically heal.** If a character was momentarily winded or blinded by smoke, that condition is cleared once they escape the room.
- **The Gate: No Downtime is granted.** The game immediately transitions to the next scene in the Sequence.

2. The Sequence (Meso-Level)

- **What it is:** A connected chain of scenes bound by a singular high-stakes environment or objective (e.g., infiltrating a fortress, navigating a dangerous pass, escaping an erupting volcano).
- **Mechanical Resolution:** While Minor Consequences clear between individual scenes, **Moderate and Serious Consequences carry over.** Resource Pools (Vigor, Instinct, Reason) continue to deplete from scene to scene without any way to refresh them.
- **At Sequence End:** The overarching conflict of the environment or objective is resolved.

3. Downtime (Macro-Level)

- **What it is:** The dedicated phase of safety and respite that occurs strictly **between Sequences**.
- **Mechanical Resolution:** This is when players get their Downtime actions.
- **At Sequence End / Downtime Start:** This is the only place where characters can engage in **The Three Crossings** to recover their spent Pools, progress **Long-Term Projects**, train their **Abilities**, and heal **Moderate or Serious Consequences**.

The Conversation at the Table

Play is structured as a continuous conversation between the Game Master (GM) and the players.

- **The GM** frames the environment, speaks for non-player characters (NPCs), describes threats, and establishes the limits of the world.
- **The Players** describe their characters' actions, thoughts, and words. The rules act as an arbiter to shape the conversation whenever the outcome of an action is uncertain or dangerous.

Intent and Stakes

Before any dice are rolled, the table must establish two things:

1. **Intent:** What is the character trying to achieve? (e.g., *"I want to pick lock the gate before the patrol returns."*)
2. **Stakes:** What is at risk if they fail or succeed at a cost? (e.g., *"If you fail, the patrol catches you; if you succeed at a cost, you open the gate but trigger a loud alarm."*)

Stakes are binding. Once agreed upon and rolled, the results must stand.

Say Yes or Roll

Play is guided by a fundamental rule: **Say Yes or Roll**. You do not roll for every action. A roll is required only when:

- The outcome of the action is uncertain.
- The action has dramatic narrative weight.
- Failure has interesting and binding consequences (stakes).

If an action is trivial, safe, or failure would only result in a boring roadblock, the GM must **Say Yes**—the character succeeds automatically, and the GM narrates the outcome based on the character's background and Abilities. No dice are rolled, and no resource pools are spent.

Because rolls are reserved strictly for situations with meaningful stakes and a real chance of failure, safe or trivial rolls do not exist in the game's economy. This naturally regulates character resource pools (Vigor, Instinct, Reason), ensuring that players cannot spend points to deplete their pools on risk-free tasks to gain advancement marks. Any attempt to force a pool to 0 for advancement must be done under the threat of real, binding consequences.

Clocks

A **Clock** is a visual tracking tool—a circle divided into segments—used to measure ongoing projects, rising dangers, or complex scenarios that cannot be resolved with a single roll.

- **Structure:** Clocks are typically divided into **4, 6, or 8 segments**. The more complex or time-consuming the goal or threat, the more segments the Clock has.
- **Ticking:** When characters make progress, or when time passes and a threat escalates, the GM or player fills in (ticks) one or more segments.
- **Completion:** When the final segment of the Clock is filled, the event it tracks triggers immediately (e.g., the project is completed, the alarm sounds, or the bridge collapses).

There are two primary types of Clocks: * **Project Clocks:** Created and progressed by players during Downtime to track crafting, research, or long-term goals (see Downtime). * **Danger Clocks:** Created by the GM during play to track escalating threats, pressure, or incoming complications (see Running the Game).

Downtime

Downtime represents the breathing room and safety that occurs strictly **between Sequences**. During Downtime, characters focus on recovery, training, building contacts, working on projects, and mechanical maintenance.

Each character has a budget of **two Downtime actions** per Downtime phase. You can spend these actions on the following activities:

1. Pool Recovery (1 Action per Pool)

Spent Pool points do not recover automatically. To refresh a spent Pool (Vigor, Instinct, or Reason) back to its maximum rating, you must spend **1 Downtime action** and narrate a corresponding activity.

Instead of passive rest (such as sleeping or sitting alone), characters recover by shifting their focus to activities related to their *other* resource pools. This is called **The Three Crossings** (see below).

The Fiction of Recovery: Active Rest

When spending a Downtime action to recover a Pool, do not feel limited to boring descriptions of sleeping. Human beings recover from localized exhaustion by shifting their focus. A physically broken character (recovering Vigor) might rest their body by reading or playing chess. A mentally shattered scholar (recovering Reason) might clear their head by chopping wood or going for a hard run. Use these recovery descriptions to show how your character copes with different kinds of strain.

The Three Crossings: How Characters Fictionally Recover To recover from exhaustion in one pool, describe your character engaging in behaviors associated with the other pools:

- **Recovering Vigor (Physical Exhaustion → Reason or Instinct Activities):** A physically broken character (o Vigor) cannot train or perform manual labor. Instead, they recover Vigor through low-intensity mental or social activities: sitting quietly reading old histories (Reason-adjacent), or sharing quiet stories and a warm meal with companions (Instinct-adjacent).
- **Recovering Reason (Mental Burnout → Vigor or Instinct Activities):** A character whose mind is fried (o Reason) from deciphering texts or planning complex tasks does not benefit from more study. They recover mental focus through mindless physical release or emotional distraction: going for a grueling run, chopping firewood (Vigor-adjacent), or losing themselves in the noise of a crowded tavern (Instinct-adjacent).
- **Recovering Instinct (Emotional/Social Burnout → Vigor or Reason Activities):** A character who is emotionally or socially hollowed out (o Instinct) from lying, manipulating, or suffering trauma would find more socializing exhausting. They recover their emotional core by escaping into quiet, solitary spaces: doing meticulous, repetitive physical work like leatherworking or gardening (Vigor-adjacent), or isolating themselves to organize notes and map stars in silence (Reason-adjacent).

How This Benefits the Table's Narrative

- **Kills Boring Downtime Descriptions:** Instead of a player saying, *"I spend an action resting to get Vigor back,"* they can say, *"My body is too broken to fight, so I spend my recovery sitting in the library helping the scholar organize scrolls."*
- **Enables Collaborative Downtime:** Players can combine their Downtime actions narratively. A physically exhausted warrior can "recover Vigor" by sitting still and acting as a quiet model for an artist recovering their Reason, or chatting with a diplomat recovering their Instinct. They are spending separate mechanical Downtime actions, but their fiction is beautifully interwoven.

2. Recovering Consequences (1 or More Actions)

Downtime is the primary way to clear lasting mechanical or narrative harm:

Minor Consequences: Expire automatically at the end of the Scene (costs 0 actions).

Moderate Consequences: Require **1 Downtime action** and appropriate narrative attention (e.g., medical aid, paying off a minor debt).

Serious Consequences: Require **multiple Downtime actions** or extended care to resolve.

Lasting Consequences: Cannot be healed through normal Downtime; they require major narrative quests or permanent changes to the character sheet.

(For detailed recovery rules, including communal healing, see *Harm and Recovery*.)

3. Train Abilities (1 Action)

Spend **1 Downtime action** training a Focused Ability. The GM may allow successful training to count as advancement marks (Ability must be Focused). (See Advancement).

4. Forge Relationship (1 Action)

Spend **1 Downtime action** to roll a specific *Circles* Ability to seek out a contact. Success establishes a named NPC contact (granting Edge [+1 die] when called upon); win or lose, this test records an advancement mark for that ability if it is Focused.

5. Long-Term Projects (1 Action)

Spend **1 Downtime action** to work on a **Project Clock** (typically 4, 6, or 8 segments) to track crafting, research, or low-stress rituals (see Clocks). Roll a relevant Ability:

Clear Success (DoS > TN): Tick 2 segments on the Project Clock.

Success at a Cost (DoS = TN): Tick 1 segment on the Clock, but suffer a minor complication, spend 1 relevant Pool point, or waste raw materials.

Failure (DoS < TN): Setback. Do not tick the clock. The GM introduces a project complication (e.g., losing a pool point or wasting resources).

When the Project Clock is fully filled, the project is completed: the character gains the crafted item, the researched information is uncovered, or the ritual manifests.

6. Learn Secrets (1 Action)

Spend **1 Downtime action** and establish an in-fiction justification (e.g., finding a mentor, intensive study, or undergoing stock rites) to spend 2 Karma and learn a new Secret. (See Advancement and Secrets).

Resolution

Open-Ended Abilities Design

There is no fixed list of core attributes (such as Strength, Intellect, or Dexterity) in this game. Instead, **Abilities** are entirely open-ended, contextual traits or skills that represent specific training, experience, or backgrounds (e.g., *Farming*, *Stealth*, *Etiquette*, *Swordsmanship*, *Religion*, *Appraisal*).

These are acquired and opened during character creation through your selected **Lifepaths**, and can be expanded or raised during play or downtime. If your character lacks an Ability entirely, its rating is 0 (untrained).

Ability Tests

To resolve a risky or uncertain action:

1. Identify the relevant Ability (e.g., *Survival* to navigate a blizzard, *Streetwise* to gather rumors).
2. Assemble a pool of six-sided dice (**d6**) equal to your rating in that Ability.
 - **Untrained Rolls (Rating 0):** If the Ability rating is 0, your base pool is **0 dice**. To roll any dice, you must either spend a Resource Pool point (+1 die) or benefit from situational Edge (+1 to +3 dice). If your final pool is 0 dice, you cannot roll and the test automatically fails (0 successes).
3. Roll the dice and count the successes to determine your final **Degree of Success (DoS)**:
 - Any die showing a **4 or 5** counts as **one success**.
 - Any die showing a **6** counts as **one success AND explodes**—immediately roll an additional die.
 - If the bonus die rolls a 6, it also counts as a success and explodes. Continue rolling bonus dice as long as you roll 6s.
4. Compare your final Degree of Success (DoS) to the Target Number (TN) or an opponent's DoS to determine the quality of the outcome:
 - **DoS < TN (Failure):** The action fails. The GM introduces a narrative complication or setback (Fail Forward).
 - **DoS = TN (Success at a Cost):** You achieve your intent, but the GM introduces a minor complication, a compromise, or a relevant level of Harm.
 - **DoS > TN (Clean Success):** You achieve your intent perfectly with no strings attached.

Sidebar: The Novice's Burden

Characters with an Ability rating of 1 or 2 are considered 'Unreliable' in that field. To achieve a Clean Success (DoS > TN), these characters must almost always rely on Edges (tools/environment) or voluntarily spend Pool points (Vigor/Instinct/Reason) to increase their dice pool. Attempting a roll with only 1 or 2 dice is a desperate move; you are statistically likely to either fail or suffer a Cost.

Difficulty & Target Numbers

Tasks are assigned a Target Number (TN) representing the number of successes required:

Difficulty	Target Number (successes)	Guidelines
Easy	0	No roll is needed; success is automatic under normal conditions.
Simple	1	A standard task under mild pressure (e.g., climbing a ladder in rain).

Difficulty	Target Number (successes)	Guidelines
Moderate	2	Requires professional focus or handles active obstacles.
Difficult	3	High complexity or dangerous stakes.
Very Difficult	4	Severe environmental hazards or master-level craftsmanship.
Formidable	5	Near peak human limits; requires exceptional luck or skill.
Nearly Impossible	6	Mythic or legendary challenges.
Heroic	7	Exceeds worldly expectations; requires pool spending or Secrets.

Edge & Modifiers

- **Edge** represents situational advantages (e.g., specialized gear, height advantage, help from an ally). Each source of Edge adds **+1 die** to your pool, up to a **maximum of +3 dice**.
- **Utility of Gear:** Starting equipment (weapons, armor, tools) has no numerical statistics or damage values. Instead, gear grants **Edge (+1 to +3 dice)** when its quality, reach, or narrative utility gives an advantage in a scene.
- **Narrative Cancelling:** Opponents or environmental factors can cancel your Edge by applying their own narrative advantages, reducing your bonus dice.

Narrative Examples

Example 1: Clean Success (DoS > TN)

- **Situation:** Sora is trying to slip past a guard using her *Stealth* Ability (rating 3). The GM sets the TN at 2 (Moderate).
- **Roll:** Sora rolls 3 dice. The results are 4, 2, 6. The 4 is one success. The 6 is one success and **explodes**, prompting her to roll a bonus die. The bonus die comes up as 6 (another success, explodes again). She rolls another bonus die, which comes up as 3 (no success, stops).
- **Outcome:** Sora has a total of 3 successes (4, 6, and the bonus 6), giving her a final DoS of 3. Since the DoS (3) is greater than the TN (2), Sora slips past the guard cleanly into the vault without attracting any attention.

Example 2: Success at a Cost (DoS = TN)

- **Situation:** Sora is pickpocketing a merchant using her *Sleight of Hand* Ability (rating 2). The GM sets the TN at 2.
- **Roll:** Sora rolls 2 dice. The results are 5, 6. The 5 is one success. The 6 is one success and explodes. She rolls a bonus die, which comes up as 2 (no success, stops).
- **Outcome:** Sora has a total of 2 successes (5 and 6), giving her a final DoS of 2. Since the DoS (2) equals the TN (2), she successfully steals the purse, but **at a cost:** as she pulls her hand back, she accidentally knocks over a metal tankard on the merchant's table, making a loud clang. The merchant notices her purse is gone just as Sora turns to walk away.

Example 3: Fail Forward (DoS < TN)

- **Situation:** Vraka the Troll is trying to force open a jammed iron vault door using *Strength* (rating 3). The guard patrols are closing in. The GM sets the TN at 3 (Difficult).
- **Roll:** Vraka rolls 3 dice. The results are 1, 3, 5 (1 success).
- **Outcome:** The roll fails. Instead of simply saying “the door remains locked,” the GM applies **fail-forward** logic: Vraka throws her weight against the door, and with a loud crunch, the mechanism breaks—the door is now permanently wedged shut, and the noise has alerted the guards, who corner Vraka in the hallway.

Pools and Pressure

What Pools Represent

Every character has three core **Resource Pools** that represent their reserves of physical, emotional, and mental energy:

- **Vigor:** Represents muscle, raw stamina, physical resilience, and athletic drive.
- **Instinct:** Represents gut reactions, emotional empathy, fast reflexes, and social intuition.
- **Reason:** Represents logic, focus, memories, willpower, and deliberate planning.

Spending Pools

Pool points are spent to push past your normal limits. During any roll or action, you can:

- Spend **1 point** from the relevant Pool to add **+1 die** to your roll. (You must declare this before rolling).
- Spend points to activate specific **Secrets** (magical or mundane) as defined by the Secret's description.

Spent Pool points do not recover automatically between scenes; they require specific **Downtime actions** to refresh.

Pools in Tests and Conflicts

Example 1: Reasoning through the Collapse

- **Situation:** Sora is trying to bypass a humming control console of a decaying world engine that is threatening to overload. The GM calls for a *Mechanics* test at TN 3 (Difficult). Sora has a rating of 2 in *Mechanics*.
- **Action:** Realizing the danger, Sora spends **1 point of Reason** to calm her mind and focus on the engine's layout.
- **Roll:** She rolls 3 dice (2 from Ability + 1 from Reason) and gets 1, 4, 5 (2 successes). Though she fails to get 3 successes, her pool spending gave her a chance she wouldn't have had otherwise.

Example 2: Instinctive Reaction

- **Situation:** Sora is ambushed by a hidden hunter in the deep wood. The hunter launches a spear. The GM calls for a contest of the hunter's *Archery* vs. Sora's *Reflexes* (rating 2).
- **Action:** Sora reacts on pure adrenaline, spending **1 point of Instinct** to throw herself to the mud.
- **Roll:** She rolls 3 dice (2 from Ability + 1 from Instinct) and gets 2, 5, 6. The 5 is one success. The 6 is one success and explodes. The bonus die comes up as 3 (no success, stops).
- **Outcome:** Sora has a total of 2 successes (5 and 6), beating the hunter's single success and avoiding the spear entirely.

Running Out of Pool

When a Pool is reduced to 0 (**completely empty**), the character has pushed themselves to the limit in that domain:

1. **No More Spending:** You cannot spend any more points from that Pool to gain dice or activate Secrets.
2. **Advancement Silver Lining:** Emptying a Pool is the only way to grow. Every time you reduce a Pool to 0 during play, you **record 1 advancement mark** for that Pool. To permanently increase the Pool's maximum rating by +1, you must accumulate a **flat 2 Pool marks** (reducing the pool to 0 twice). The upgrade occurs automatically and for free during Downtime.

Conflict

When a Situation Becomes a Conflict

A conflict is initiated when two or more parties have directly incompatible intents, verbal negotiation is no longer viable, and a single simple roll cannot capture the struggle. Conflicts are not limited to physical combat—they also resolve high-stakes social arguments, chases, stealth break-ins, or engineering disasters under pressure.

Structuring Conflicts

When a conflict begins, the GM structures play around broad narrative exchanges representing entire struggles rather than second-by-second tactical actions:

1. **Frame the Situation:** The GM describes the immediate situation, the nature of the threat, and the stakes of the struggle.
2. **Declare Intent:** Players and NPCs declare their overarching narrative goals for the exchange. These intents must define a clear stakes-driven outcome (e.g., *“I want to kill him since he is the man who killed my father”* or *“I want to close the distance to the castle and remain unhurt while the soldiery rain arrows on me”*).
3. **Resolve Contests:** Resolve the struggle using opposed tests (Contests) or simple tests using the relevant Abilities.
4. **Update the Fiction:** The GM narrates the final outcome based on the roll, applies consequences, and either concludes the conflict or frames the next major phase of the scene.

Escalation, Withdrawal, and Outcomes

Before rolling a contest, any participant can choose to **Withdraw**. By doing so, you concede the immediate conflict and accept a Minor consequence (e.g., escaping but dropping your map, or backing down in an argument but losing face).

If you do not withdraw, you face the results of the roll. If a standard Contest is resolved and you are unsatisfied with the loss, you can choose to **Escalate** by calling **Draw the Line**.

Contests (Opposed Tests)

When two characters actively oppose each other (e.g., sword fight, debate, tug-of-war):

- Both sides roll their relevant Ability dice (plus any Edge or spent Pool dice).
- **Resolution:**
 - The party with the highest final DoS wins the contest and achieves their intent cleanly, while the loser suffers a Consequence (such as taking Harm).
 - If both parties roll the same DoS, the result is a **Compromise**. Both parties achieve a version of their intent (Success at a Cost), but both parties suffer a Consequence (such as taking a relevant level of Harm).

Draw the Line (Extended Contest)

When a standard Contest is resolved and a participant refuses to accept the outcome, they can declare **Draw the Line** to escalate the stakes into a dramatic climax.

1. **Trigger & Gate (The Sacred Threshold):** Any player or major NPC can trigger Draw the Line immediately after a contest result. However, you cannot “Draw the Line” simply because you dislike a die result. You may only escalate a conflict if one of the following is true:

- **It's in the Blood:** The outcome of the action directly challenges or supports one of your Beliefs.
 - **The Final Breath:** The situation is one of immediate Life or Death for your character or someone they have a connection with (such as a close ally or named contact). Furthermore, this escalation cannot be triggered during standard or low-stakes scenes; it is strictly reserved for major narrative climaxes and story-arc turning points.
2. **Declare Stakes:** Both sides must declare a severe, binding risk for losing the overall conflict (e.g., a Serious or Fatal physical consequence, capture, total destruction of key gear, or a permanent loss of reputation). The GM and players must agree on these stakes.
 3. **Procedure:** The escalation is resolved as a **three-round evaluation** sequence. If the initial Contest was won by one side, that winner starts with 1 win. If the initial Contest was a Compromise (same DoS), both sides start with 0 wins.
 4. **Preparation:** Before each subsequent roll, parties may spend Pool points, apply new Edge, or activate Secrets to adjust their dice pools based on the changing fiction.
 5. **Score-Based Resolution:** Resolve each round as a standard Contest. The first side to secure two round victories wins the overall conflict, and the loser automatically suffers their declared severe stakes. The victor's quality of success depends on their score:
 - **2–0 Victory:** A clean win. The victor achieves their intent and completely avoids the severe stakes with no immediate complications.
 - **2–1 Victory:** A victory at a cost. The victor achieves their intent and avoids the severe stakes, but automatically suffers a Minor or Moderate consequence.

Harm and Recovery

Consequences

When a character fails a roll or loses a contest, they may suffer **Consequences**. Consequences are narrative tags that carry mechanical weight (usually penalty dice to relevant tests) until they are recovered.

Severity	Example Impact	Mechanical Weight	Recovery Cost
Minor	Bruised, rattled, embarrassed, minor cut.	-1 die on one specific Ability test	Expires automatically at the end of the Scene.
Moderate	Bleeding, shaken, debt owed, minor sprain, ostracized.	-1 die on all tests in a broad area	Requires 1 Downtime action and relevant fiction.
Serious	Broken arm, severe shame, dangerous enemy, concussion.	-2 dice on all relevant tests	Requires multiple Downtime actions or medical attention.
Lasting	Permanent scar, maimed limb, ruined reputation.	Permanent penalty or trait change	Only healed via major narrative quest, epic effort, or Secrets.
Fatal	Death, absolute madness, or permanent removal.	Character is removed from play	Only avoided via Secrets, Karma, or pre-negotiated stakes.

Physical Harm

Physical harm tracks bodily injuries, blood loss, and fatigue.

- **Minor (Bruised/Scraped):** A minor scratch that doesn't limit overall ability but hurts (e.g., getting nicked by a rusty blade).
- **Moderate (Bleeding/Sprained):** An active wound that requires wrapping or attention (e.g., a sprained ankle making running difficult).
- **Serious (Broken/Concussed):** A debilitating injury that severely impacts movement or physical force (e.g., a broken collarbone preventing the use of two-handed weapons).
- **Lasting (Maimed/Scarred):** A permanent physical change (e.g., losing an eye or a finger), which permanently modifies your physical limits.

Social and Mental Strain

Character failures can manifest as psychological trauma, loss of reputation, or social obligations:

- **Minor (Rattled/Embarrassed):** Fluster after a public slip-up or social snub.
- **Moderate (Shaken/Ostracized):** Neighbors refuse to trade with you, or you owe a favor to a local smuggler.
- **Serious (Severe Shame/Dangerous Enemy):** You have been declared an outlaw in a city-state, or a local warlord has sworn to see you hanged.
- **Lasting (Ruined Reputation):** Your family lineage has been stripped of its waer (standing), and your name is a curse across the region.

Lingering Effects & Story Hooks

Consequences are not just numbers on a sheet; they are narrative drivers. A **Serious** or **Lasting** consequence should act as a story hook:

- Losing a hand might lead to a quest to find a Dwarven craft-guild to forge a clockwork prosthetic.
 - Acquiring a *Dangerous Enemy* introduces a recurring threat that hunts the characters across scenes.
 - A mental consequence like *Nightmares* might cause the character to see visions of the Threshold or a sleeping dragon.
-

Recovery and Downtime

During a Downtime phase, a character can dedicate their Downtime action to clearing consequences:

Tending to Harm: Spend a Downtime action to clear a Moderate physical or mental consequence. The player must describe how they recover (e.g., visiting a healer, resting in a sanctuary, or paying off a debt).

Communal Recovery: If another character spends their Downtime action using a relevant healing Ability (like *First Aid* or *Medicine*) to treat you, it can clear a Moderate consequence or reduce a Serious consequence by one tier (Serious → Moderate).

Serious Consequences: To reduce a Serious consequence by one tier (Serious → Moderate) on your own, you must spend a Downtime action and appropriate resources to secure professional aid (such as a skilled NPC doctor, temple sanctuary, or specialized apothecary).

Karma

What Karma Represents

Karma is the meta-currency of the game. It represents a character's personal drive, historical momentum, and their ability to bend circumstances in their favor. It is the connective tissue between the character's narrative motivations (their Beliefs) and their mechanical advancement.

Gaining Karma

Karma is generated by pushing your character into dramatic situations and following their drives.

1. **Testing Beliefs:** You gain **1 Karma** when your player-chosen drives (Beliefs) prompt you to make a decision that creates conflict, carries risk, or incurs personal cost.
 2. **Buyoffs:** When you satisfy or completely abandon a Belief (triggering its buyoff condition), you receive a **Karma Burst (+2 Karma)**. The Belief is then removed from your sheet, leaving an empty slot to choose a new one.
 3. **Story Milestones:** The GM may award 1 Karma for achieving major milestones, surviving a Draw the Line conflict, or completing a significant story arc.
-

Spending Karma

You can spend your accumulated Karma to manipulate rolls, seize narrative control, or customize your character:

- **Reroll a check (1 Karma):** Reroll any number of failed dice from a single test pool. You must accept the new result.
 - **Buy a new Belief (1 Karma):** Add a new drive to your sheet (up to your stock or lifepath limit). This can be done instantly during play when a slot is empty (e.g., immediately after a Buyoff) or during Downtime.
 - **Buy a new Secret (2 Karma):** Learn a special technique or ability (requires in-fiction justification).
 - **Open a Focus (1 Karma):** Focus an Ability during play, marking it for prioritized advancement.
 - **Lucky Break (1 Karma):** Discover a helpful feature in the immediate environment that was not previously described. It must be plausible.
– Example: *"There's a heavy chandelier I can drop,"* or *"The guard left his keys in the lock."*
 - **Flashback (1 Karma):** Declare that you performed a mundane preparation off-screen. This cannot contradict established events or simulate a Secret you do not have.
– Example: *"I made sure to loosen the hinges on this door earlier today,"* or *"I brought a vial of acid just in case."*
-

Karma as Escalation and Risk

Karma represents narrative leverage. When a player spends Karma, they are taking control of the fiction, signaling that their character's drive is strong enough to push past environmental or physical limitations.

Narrative Example:

- **Situation:** Sora is locked in a Draw the Line duel with a veteran border sentinel. She is down to her last contest, and her physical stakes are *Death or Maiming*. She rolls her *Swordsmanship* but only gets 1 success—not enough to beat the sentinel's 2 successes.
 - **Escalation:** Sora has the **Belief of the Relentless** (*"You pursue your goal despite personal cost"*). The player spends **1 Karma** to reroll her two failed dice.
-

- **Narrative Justification:** The player narrates: *“Sora is beaten back, bleeding from a dozen cuts. But as the sentinel raises his sword for the final blow, Sora remembers her vow to the Guild. She ignores the pain, steps inside the sentinel’s guard, and lunges.”*
- **The Roll:** The player rerolls the two failed dice, getting 4 and 6 (2 additional successes, bringing her total DoS to 3). She beats the sentinel’s 2 successes by a margin of 1, turning a fatal loss into a success at a cost.

Advancement

How Characters Change

Characters in this game grow through experience and struggle. Growth is represented by recording **Advancement Marks** (both successes and failures) during play.

Failure is a key part of learning: to improve, a character must push their limits and learn from their mistakes.

Opening new Abilities

During play, you may want to test a skill your character does not currently have on their character sheet. You can open a new Ability in one of two ways:

- **Derived from Lifepaths:** When the GM calls for a roll, if the skill is something your character would know based on their background, you can open that Ability on your sheet. Figure out its starting rating based on your chosen Lifepaths: select one path as the basis (establishing a starting rating: **2** if the Ability represents a primary focus or core training of that path, or **1** if it is a secondary, auxiliary, or childhood skill), and add **+1** for each other chosen Lifepath that also lists or justifies that skill.
- **Untrained (Rating 0):** If you wish to roll a skill your character has no prior training or background in, you can open it on your sheet at **rating 0 (untrained)** at any time.
 - *Rolling with Rating 0:* Since your base Ability rating is 0, you contribute **0 base dice** to the roll. To roll any dice at all, you must either spend a point from a relevant Resource Pool (Vigor, Instinct, or Reason) to gain **+1 die** or have situational **Edge** (granting +1 to +3 dice). If you roll with 0 final dice, the test automatically fails.
 - *Advancing to 1:* To raise an untrained Ability from **0** → **1**, you must record at least **one success and one failure** using that Ability in play before you can increase it. (An automatic failure from rolling 0 dice counts as a failure mark, but you must roll at least 1 die via Pool spending or Edge to score the required success mark).

Improving Abilities

The Focus Lock: Only Abilities that are flagged with a **Focus** can accumulate advancement marks and be improved. Standard, un-Focused Abilities can still be rolled for tests normally, but they cannot log successes/failures or advance. During play, a player may spend **1 Karma** at any time to open a new Focus on any Ability, establishing a direct link between their drives (Karma) and their progression.

To raise a Focused Ability rating from **N** → **N + 1**, you must first choose the campaign's progression dial during **Session 0**:

The Session 0 Advancement Dials

The GM and players choose one of two progression speeds for their campaign:

1. The Gritty Reality (Standard Progression)

- **The Rule:** Raising a Focused Ability from **N** → **N+1** requires **N total advancement marks** (successes + failures combined), and **at least half ($\geq \lceil N/2 \rceil$) must be failures** (round up).
 - *Example:* To raise *Stealth* from 3 to 4, you need **3 marks**, at least **2 of which must be failures**.
- **Best Fit For:** Long-term, sweeping campaigns (20+ sessions) where survival, slow-burn attrition, and the grueling weight of the world are central themes. Mastery is rare, painful, and hard-won.

2. The Heroic Path (Swift Progression)

- **The Rule:** Raising a Focused Ability from $N \rightarrow N+1$ requires N **total advancement marks** (successes + failures combined), and **at least one (1) must be a failure**.
 - *Example:* To raise *Stealth* from 3 to 4, you need **3 marks**, at least **1 of which must be a failure**.
- **Best Fit For:** Shorter campaigns, mini-series, or episodic play (5–10 sessions), where you want characters to noticeably evolve and adapt without the system bottlenecking their growth. Progression is swifter, but because rolls are reserved strictly for high-stakes situations, the N total marks requirement still acts as a natural speed limit.

Special Case (Rating 0 or 1)

Regardless of the chosen dial: * To open a skill from Untrained ($0 \rightarrow 1$) or raise it from $1 \rightarrow 2$, you must record at least **one success and one failure** using that Focused Ability. This ensures characters demonstrate basic practical application (success) alongside learning from errors (failure) before achieving basic proficiency.

Reset

Once you spend the marks to raise the Ability rating, clear all marks for that Ability. Marks do not carry over to the next level.

Improving Pools (Increasing Maxima)

To permanently increase any resource Pool maximum (Vigor, Instinct, or Reason) by **+1**:

1. You must accumulate a **flat 2 Pool marks** for that Pool.
2. **How to earn a mark:** Every time you completely **empty a Pool (reduce it to 0)** during play, record **1 mark** for that Pool.
3. **Free & Automatic Upgrade:** Once the 2 marks are earned, the Pool's maximum increases automatically and for free during the next Downtime. No Downtime action budget or cost is required to apply the upgrade.
 - *Example:* To raise Vigor from 3 to 4, you must completely empty your Vigor Pool twice during play to earn 2 marks. Once done, Vigor increases to 4 automatically when the next Downtime phase begins.

Focuses

Focuses flag Abilities for prioritized advancement and special options.

- **Acquisition:** You choose starting Focuses at character creation (free, limited by Lifepaths). To open a new Focus: Spend 1 Karma.

Design Philosophy: The Purpose of Focuses

- **Permission to Train:** A Focus does not instantly raise an Ability's rating. It is simply the mechanical permission to start the slow, failure-heavy climb of recording successes and failures to advance it.
- **Preventing Generalist Bloat:** In traditional learn-by-doing systems, players are incentivized to make frivolous, safe rolls for every minor skill just to get an advancement check. Focuses eliminate this. Characters can only actively advance a few skills at a time. To start training a new skill, they must make a conscious, significant investment of their scarce life-force (Karma).
- **Thematic Alignment:** Because opening a Focus costs 1 Karma (which is earned strictly by putting your Beliefs under pressure), a character cannot physically master new skills unless they are actively engaging in the thematic conflicts of the world. Personal struggle is the fuel for self-improvement.

- **Mechanical Effect:** Opening a Focus does not change dice pools directly. Instead, it designates which Abilities your character is actively prioritizing, allowing you to train them during Downtime or interact with specific Secrets.

Gaining Secrets

Secrets represent rare, ancient, or forbidden lore, specialized combat techniques, or supernatural maneuvers.

- **Cost:** Unlocking a new Secret costs **2 Karma**.
- **Downtime & Fiction:** You must spend a Downtime action and establish an in-fiction justification to learn a Secret (e.g., studying under a master artisan, finding a mentor, deciphering a text, or intensive training).
- For a complete list of available Secrets, see Secrets.

Changing Beliefs

Your character's Beliefs are not static; they shift as the character changes. Beliefs are only changed when they are resolved in play:

- **Belief Buyoffs:** When you satisfy or abandon a drive through actions and choices in play, you receive a **Karma Burst (+2 Karma)**, and that Belief is removed from your sheet.
- **Replacing a Belief:** Once a Belief slot is empty, you can spend **1 Karma** at any time (instantly during play or during Downtime) to choose and write a new Belief to fill the empty slot.

Advancement Summary Table

What to Advance	Requirement to Raise	Notes / Downtime Actions
Ability ($N \rightarrow N+1$)	N marks on a Focused Ability. Requires at least half failures (Gritty Reality dial) OR at least 1 failure (Heroic Path dial).	Unfocused Abilities cannot accumulate marks or advance. $0 \rightarrow 1$ and $1 \rightarrow 2$ require at least 1 success and 1 failure.
Pool ($N \rightarrow N+1$)	2 marks (empty Pool 2 times during play)	Raised automatically and for free during Downtime.
Focus	1 Karma	Free at character creation. Can be opened during play.

What to Advance	Requirement to Raise	Notes / Downtime Actions
Secret	2 Karma + in-fiction justification	Requires a Downtime action to learn.
Belief	Fulfilling/abandoning a Belief (Buyoff)	Buyoff gives a +2 Karma burst. Buying a new Belief to fill the empty slot costs 1 Karma (can be done instantly).

Character Creation

Overview

Character creation defines your starting Abilities, Pools, Focuses, Beliefs, Secrets, and faction Connections. Follow the ten steps below to build your character.

Postponing Choices: Every character creation choice—including distributing starting Ability points, Pool points, Focuses, Secrets, and Beliefs—can be postponed. You can retain your starting points and options and choose to spend or decide them on-the-fly during play.

Steps at a Glance

1. **Choose character Stock** (Human, Troll, Dwarf, or Fae).
2. **Choose number of Lifepaths (1–5)** to determine your starting package of resources:

Lifepaths	Beliefs	Secrets	Focuses	Customization		Karma
				Points	Pool Points	
1	2	1	5	4	8	3
2	2	1	4	4	8	2
3	2	2	3	4	8	1
4	1	2	2	4	8	1
5	1	3	2	4	8	0

3. **Assign Abilities:** Derive starting ratings from your Lifepaths and spend customization points.
4. **Assign Focuses:** Select which Abilities are Focused (flags them for prioritized advancement).
5. **Distribute Pool points:** Distribute the Pool points from the table among Vigor, Instinct, and Reason. Vigor, Instinct and Reason start at 1.
6. **Choose Beliefs:** Define your character's core narrative motivations.
7. **Choose Secrets:** Purchase starting Secrets using Karma or Lifepaths.
8. **Establish Circles:** Record starting domain-specific Circles Abilities from your Lifepaths.
9. **Gain starting Karma:** Record your starting Karma as shown in the table.
10. **Record notable items & Setup Sheet:** List starting gear, descriptive details, and layout your character sheet.

Step-by-Step Guide

Step 1: Choose a Stock

Select your character's species: **Human**, **Troll**, **Dwarf**, or **Fae (Elf)**. Your choice defines your mechanical tendencies, common beliefs, and stock-specific secrets. For detailed information, see Stocks.

Step 2: Choose Lifepaths

Decide how many Lifepaths (1 to 5) your character has walked. Review the options in Lifepaths.

- Select one **Born Path** representing your upbringing.
- Select subsequent **Apprentice** / **Adolescent** and **Advanced** / **Influence** paths. The total number of paths determine your row in the starting package table above.

Step 3: Assign Abilities

Starting Abilities do not need to be written down immediately. You can open them at character creation or at any time during gameplay when the GM calls for a roll.

- **Deriving Starting Ratings:** When an Ability is opened, its starting rating is determined by your chosen Lifepaths:
 1. Select **one Lifepath** as the **basis** for that Ability. This establishes a starting rating: **2** if the Ability represents a primary focus, core trade, or central training of that Lifepath (e.g., *Crafting* for a Dwarven Deep-Mine Child, or *Swordsmanship* for a Combat Trainee); or **1** if it represents a secondary, auxiliary, or childhood skill (e.g., *Observation* for a Noble Child, or *Stealth* for a Rural Child).
 2. For each **other** chosen Lifepath that also lists, features, or supports that skill (e.g., a childhood culture or related career path), add **+1** to that rating.
 3. Sum these values to get your starting rating.
 - *Example:* If you select *Soldier* (basis) which features *Melee*, *Melee* starts at rating 2 because it is a core training of that path. If you also have a childhood path that lists or supports *Melee*, you add +1. If you also have *Town Guard*, you add +1. Your total starting rating is 4.
 4. No Ability rating may exceed **6** at the end of character creation.
- **Ability Customization Points:** You gain **4 customization points** (as shown in the table). You can spend these points to increase starting Ability ratings (+1 rating per point). These points can be spent at character creation or retained and spent on-the-fly during play. You may spend a maximum of **2** Customization Points on any single Ability.
- **Untrained Abilities (Rating 0):** If you roll a skill in which your character has no prior training or background justification, you can open it on your sheet at **rating 0**. To raise an untrained Ability from **0** → **1**, you must record at least **one success and one failure** using that Ability in play (the Ability must be Focused to advance).

Step 4: Assign Focuses

Choose the number of **Focuses** listed for your Lifepaths row (e.g., 4 Focuses for a 2-Lifepath character). Each Focus flags a specific Ability. Focusing is free during character creation and does not increase dice pools directly; it indicates prioritized advancement.

Step 5: Distribute Pool Points

- **Base Pools:** Every character starts with **rating 1 in Vigor, Instinct, and Reason** automatically.
- **Bonus Points:** Distribute the **8 Pool Points** granted by your Lifepaths row freely among your Vigor, Instinct, and Reason pools.

Step 6: Choose Beliefs

Select the number of **Beliefs** shown in your Lifepath row (1 or 2). Beliefs represent your character's core drives and generate Karma when tested or resolved. See Beliefs for guidance.

Step 7: Choose Secrets

- **Starting Secrets:** You start with the number of Secrets listed in the Starting Package Table for your chosen number of Lifepaths (e.g., 2 Secrets for a 3-Lifepath character). You can choose starting Secrets from the *Generic Secrets* list (in Secrets) or your specific *Stock Secrets* list.
- **Purchasing Extra Secrets:** You may optionally spend starting Karma to purchase additional Secrets (costing 2 Karma each) as detailed in Advancement.

Step 8: Establish Circles

- The generic Wealth stat and general Circles rating are completely removed.

- Instead, players start with domain-specific *Circles Abilities* as part of their Lifepath choices (e.g., *Underworld Circles* for an Urban Street Urchin, *Noble Circles* for a Noble Child, or *Merchant Circles* for a Merchant's Apprentice). Record these on your sheet with their ratings derived normally from your Lifepaths.

Step 9: Gain Starting Karma

Record the starting **Karma** shown in your Lifepath row (ranges from 3 to 0).

Step 10: Record Notable Items & Setup Sheet

- **Starting Gear:** List your starting gear, clothes, and tools based on the items provided by your chosen Lifepaths. You can also write down a few descriptive details about your appearance and history.
- **Character Sheet Layout:**
 - **Beliefs Box:** Label your character drives box as “**Beliefs**” (instead of “Keys”) and record your starting Beliefs there.
 - **Secrets Box:** Leave your “**Secrets**” box as is (replaces the old “Talents” box) and record your starting Secrets.
 - **Pool Marks Checkboxes:** Draw two small checkboxes next to each Resource Pool (Vigor, Instinct, and Reason) on your sheet to physically track your two “emptying” marks toward Pool advancement.

Lifepaths

What a Lifepath Is

A character's background, training, and standing in the world are defined by their **Lifepaths**. Rather than starting as a blank slate, characters are built by selecting between **1 and 5 Lifepaths** that represent their journey from childhood to their current life:

1. **Born Paths:** Represent childhood origins and early upbringing. Every character starts with one Born Path.
2. **Apprentice / Adolescent Paths:** Represent early training, education, or street survival.
3. **Advanced / Influence Paths:** Represent professional career heights, leadership, or specialized authority.

Each Lifepath provides a narrative anchor, starting gear, and a list of suggested **Abilities** typical of that background. These lists are not exhaustive; you can open and establish starting ratings for other, unlisted Abilities during character creation (or on-the-fly during play) as long as they can be reasonably justified by the narrative description of your chosen Lifepaths.

Lifepath Structure

Your total number of Lifepaths determines your character's starting package of stats, meta-currency, and customization options.

- **Fewer Lifepaths** represent a younger or highly specialized character with more potential to shape their future (more Focuses and starting Karma).
- **More Lifepaths** represent an older, more experienced character with a broader base of established skills and resources (more Lifepath options to derive starting ratings from, but less starting Karma).

Applying Lifepath Stats:

- **Abilities:** Starting Abilities do not need to be written down immediately. You can open them at character creation or at any time during gameplay when the GM calls for a roll. When opened, their starting rating is derived from your chosen Lifepaths (selecting one path as the basis sets the starting rating to **2** if the Ability represents a primary focus or core training of that path, or **1** if it is a secondary, auxiliary, or childhood skill; each other relevant Lifepath adds **+1**). The 4 starting Ability points from your Lifepath row are customization points that can be spent at creation or retained and spent on-the-fly during play to increase starting ratings (+1 rating per point).
- **Focuses:** You may select a number of Focused Abilities (free at creation) as shown in the table. These flag specific Abilities for prioritized advancement.
- **Pool Points:** Distribute the total Pool points freely among your three pools: **Vigor, Instinct, and Reason**. **Vigor, Instinct and Reason start at 1.**
- **Beliefs & Secrets:** Choose the listed number of Beliefs (narrative motivations) and Secrets (special techniques or traits) from your stock or lifepath's available options.

Human Lifepaths

Born Paths

- **Rural Child:** Grew up in the countryside; worked the land, tended animals, and learned village life.
 - **Abilities:** Farming, Herding, Survival, Observation
 - **Gear:** Simple clothing, farming tools, small knife
- **Urban Street Urchin:** Grew up in city streets; learned to survive through cunning and stealth.
 - **Abilities:** Stealth, Streetwise, Scavenging, Observation, Underworld Circles

- **Gear:** Tattered clothes, small blade, stolen trinkets
- **Noble Child:** Born to a wealthy or influential family; educated in etiquette, leadership, and diplomacy.
 - **Abilities:** Etiquette, Leadership, Persuasion, Trade Knowledge, Noble Circles
- **Gear:** Fine clothing, family token, personal tutor notes
- **Rural Foundling:** Left at a rural temple or monastery; raised by clergy.
 - **Abilities:** Observation, Persuasion, Religion, Survival
- **Gear:** Prayer beads, simple robes, small personal keepsake
- **Urban Foundling:** Left in a city temple or orphanage; exposed to city life under guardianship.
 - **Abilities:** Observation, Persuasion, Stealth, Streetwise
- **Gear:** Tattered clothing, small keepsake, improvised tools

Apprentice / Adolescent Paths

- **Apprentice Artisan / Artist** (*Prerequisite: Rural, Noble, or Urban Child*): Learns craftsmanship, painting, music, or other arts.
 - **Abilities:** Crafting, Artistic Skill, Tool Use, Observation
 - **Gear:** Tools of the trade, sketchbooks, work apron
- **Combat Trainee** (*Prerequisite: Rural Child, Urban Street Urchin*): Trains in swordsmanship, archery, and tactics.
 - **Abilities:** Swordsmanship, Shield, Endurance, Tactics
 - **Gear:** Training sword, shield, padded armor
- **Religious Acolyte** (*Prerequisite: Rural/Urban Foundling*): Learns clerical duties, rituals, and minor healing.
 - **Abilities:** Religion, Persuasion, Observation, First Aid
 - **Gear:** Religious texts, staff, simple robes
- **Street Fighter / Thief** (*Prerequisite: Urban Street Urchin*): Learns stealth, pickpocketing, and survival.
 - **Abilities:** Stealth, Improvised Weapons, Dodge, Observation
 - **Gear:** Hidden blade, lockpicks, hooded cloak
- **Merchant's Apprentice** (*Prerequisite: Rural, Noble, or Urban Child*): Learns negotiation, trade, and commerce.
 - **Abilities:** Trade Knowledge, Appraisal, Persuasion, Observation, Merchant Circles
 - **Gear:** Ledger, sample goods, coin pouch

Advanced / Influence Paths

- **Master Artisan / Guild Leader** (*Prerequisite: Apprentice Artist*): Leads a guild or workshop; skilled in craft and management.
 - **Abilities:** Crafting, Leadership, Appraisal, Trade Knowledge
 - **Gear:** Masterwork tools, workshop key
- **Captain / Militia Leader** (*Prerequisite: Combat Trainee*): Commands city or village defense; expert in strategy.
 - **Abilities:** Leadership, Tactics, Swordsmanship, Endurance
 - **Gear:** Ceremonial sword, polished armor, logbook
- **Cleric / Temple Overseer** (*Prerequisite: Religious Acolyte*): Leads religious community; performs rites and guidance.

- **Abilities:** Religion, Leadership, Persuasion, Healing
 - **Gear:** Ceremonial staff, robes, sacred texts
 - **Master Thief / Underworld Figure** (*Prerequisite: Street Fighter / Thief*): Controls gangs or covert operations.
 - **Abilities:** Stealth, Persuasion, Intimidation, Dodge, Underworld Circles
 - **Gear:** Hidden weapons, maps of city, stolen items
 - **Master Merchant / Trader** (*Prerequisite: Merchant's Apprentice*): Controls trade routes, resources, or guilds.
 - **Abilities:** Trade Knowledge, Leadership, Appraisal, Negotiation, Merchant Circles
 - **Gear:** Ledger, sample goods, negotiation tools
-

Fae Lifepaths

Born Paths

- **Forest Child:** Raised in enchanted forests; learns stealth, observation, and woodland lore.
 - **Abilities:** Stealth, Observation, Nature Lore, Survival
 - **Gear:** Simple garments, forest charms
- **Court Fae Child:** Born into fae nobility or influential circles; learns politics and intrigue.
 - **Abilities:** Persuasion, Etiquette, Observation, Stealth, Fae Circles
 - **Gear:** Fine clothing, magical trinkets, ledger
- **Wanderer's Kin:** Born to traveling or outcast fae; exposed to survival, trickery, and charm.
 - **Abilities:** Stealth, Observation, Trickery, Survival, Wanderer Circles
 - **Gear:** Cloak, small weapon, charm talismans

Apprentice / Adolescent Paths

- **Forest Scout** (*Prerequisite: Forest Child*): Mastery of tracking, stealth, and woodland magic.
 - **Abilities:** Tracking, Stealth, Survival, Observation
 - **Gear:** Bow, cloak, forest charms
- **Court Apprentice** (*Prerequisite: Court Fae Child*): Learns intrigue, diplomacy, minor ritual magic.
 - **Abilities:** Persuasion, Observation, Rituals, Etiquette
 - **Gear:** Dagger, fine robes, magical trinkets
- **Rogue Wanderer** (*Prerequisite: Wanderer's Kin*): Trains in stealth, trickery, and survival.
 - **Abilities:** Stealth, Dodge, Observation, Trickery
 - **Gear:** Hand crossbow, lockpicks, traveler's clothes

Advanced / Influence Paths

- **High Scout / Warden** (*Prerequisite: Forest Scout*): Commands border defense and watches paths.
 - **Abilities:** Tracking, Tactics, Archery, Observation
 - **Gear:** Masterwork bow, green warden cloak, map of paths
- **Court Diplomat / Spymaster** (*Prerequisite: Court Apprentice*): Directs fae intrigue, handles treaties, gathers secrets.

- **Abilities:** Persuasion, Deception, Etiquette, Observation, Fae Circles
 - **Gear:** Poison vial, letter of safe passage, fine signet ring
 - **Wandering Troubadour** (*Prerequisite: Rogue Wanderer*): Famous traveler and performer, welcome in many halls.
 - **Abilities:** Artistic Skill, Persuasion, Streetwise, Lore
 - **Gear:** Masterwork lute, fine travel attire, collection of stories
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Troll Lifepaths

Born Paths

- **Mountain Born:** Raised in deep caves; learns endurance, rock carving, and darkness survival.
 - **Abilities:** Endurance, Masonry, Observation, Intimidation
 - **Gear:** Hide clothing, mining pick, chunk of volcanic glass
- **Tundra Born:** Raised in cold steppes; learns hunting, animal tracking, and hide curing.
 - **Abilities:** Survival, Tracking, Hunting, Observation
 - **Gear:** Warm furs, spear, skinning knife

Apprentice / Adolescent Paths

- **Cave Explorer** (*Prerequisite: Mountain Born*): Maps deep caverns and hunts subterranean beasts.
 - **Abilities:** Survival, Climbing, Observation, Subterranean Lore
 - **Gear:** Lantern, ropes, climbing hooks
- **Herd Guardian** (*Prerequisite: Tundra Born*): Protects livestock from wolves and raiders.
 - **Abilities:** Observation, Combat, Intimidation, Endurance
 - **Gear:** Heavy club, leather armor, herd horn

Advanced / Influence Paths

- **Deep Shaman / Stonesinger** (*Prerequisite: Cave Explorer*): Communicates with spirits and shapes stone via song.
 - **Abilities:** Rituals, Occult Lore, Persuasion, Masonry
 - **Gear:** Sacred runestones, stone chisel, bone rattle
 - **Clanchief / Warlord** (*Prerequisite: Herd Guardian*): Leads a troll clan in war and migration.
 - **Abilities:** Leadership, Tactics, Combat, Intimidation
 - **Gear:** Greatsword, trophies of victory, clan banner
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Dwarven Lifepaths

Born Paths

- **Deep-Mine Child:** Born in deep holds; assists with sorting ore and carrying tools.
 - **Abilities:** Metallurgy, Observation, Endurance, Mining

- **Gear:** Simple work clothes, leather apron, small hammer
- **Hold-Outpost Child:** Born in high outpost towns; exposed to trade and surface-defense training.
 - **Abilities:** Trade Knowledge, Shield, Archery, Observation, Dwarven Circles
- **Gear:** Outpost boots, horn, iron token

Apprentice / Adolescent Paths

- **Apprentice Smith** (*Prerequisite: Deep-Mine Child*): Learns metalcrafting, runecarving, and weapon repair.
 - **Abilities:** Crafting, Metallurgy, Valuation, Tool Use
 - **Gear:** Smithing hammer, bellows, iron tongs
- **Shield Sentry** (*Prerequisite: Hold-Outpost Child*): Guarding tunnel gates against beasts and raiders.
 - **Abilities:** Shield, Combat, Tactics, Endurance
 - **Gear:** Heavy shield, shortsword, chainmail shirt

Advanced / Influence Paths

- **Runesmith / Master Crafter** (*Prerequisite: Apprentice Smith*): Crafts legendary runic items and masterworks.
 - **Abilities:** Crafting, Metallurgy, Runecarving, Valuation
 - **Gear:** Masterwork smithing tools, ledger, keys to workshop
- **Hold Warden / Commander** (*Prerequisite: Shield Sentry*): Directs hold defense and commands armies.
 - **Abilities:** Leadership, Tactics, Combat, Shield, Military Circles
 - **Gear:** Full plate armor, warhammer, commander's seal

Stocks

Characters belong to one of the four primary **Stocks** of the world. Your Stock defines your physical and metaphysical traits, species-specific tendencies, and unique starting options.

Humans

Humans are the most common and volatile species in the world. Descending from the second race bred by the First Men, their short lives burn hot and adaptable.

- **Mechanical Tendencies:** Humans have no inherent physical penalties or supernatural traits. They are highly adaptable and learn new skills at a rapid pace.
- **Common Beliefs:**
 - *“My deeds are the only thing that outlives my bones, therefore I will seek the most glorious and dangerous paths, even if it leads to an early grave.”*
 - *“Change is the only constant, therefore I will discard my old ways to survive, even if it brings shame upon my lineage.”*
 - *“Only solid stone keeps out the terrors of the dark, therefore I will reinforce our town’s defenses, even when the elders mock my fear.”*
- **Common Secrets:**
 - **Jack of All Trades:** Spend **1 Instinct** point during Downtime to immediately open any untrained Ability (setting its rating to 1) without needing to record a prior success or failure.
 - **Human Grit:** Spend **1 Vigor** point to completely ignore the negative modifiers of a physical consequence for the duration of a scene.

Human Cultures

These backgrounds represent the diverse cultures of humanity across the Threshold:

Riverfolk **Description:** Born along rivers and canals. Children grow up navigating boats, managing nets, and trading along waterways. Storytelling and communal life are central, and bartering becomes second nature.

- **Suggested Focuses:** Boating, Fishing, Observation, Bartering
- **Suggested Beliefs:**
 - *“The family boats are our life, therefore I will protect our vessel from thieves and rapids, even if I must risk my own life to save it.”*
 - *“The water demands respect, therefore I will make my offerings at every crossing, even if it delays a high-paying delivery.”*
- **Suggested Secrets:**
 - **River Sense:** Instinctive awareness of currents, water hazards, or subtle environmental cues.
 - **Early Bargainer:** Natural skill in negotiation from constant exposure to markets and trade.

Nomads **Description:** Raised in wandering clans across steppe, desert, or forest. Mobility, survival, and clan loyalty define childhood. Children learn to track, hunt, and handle livestock from an early age.

- **Suggested Focuses:** Survival, Tracking, Riding, Herding
- **Suggested Beliefs:**
 - *“My clan is my blood, therefore I will obey the chieftain’s commands, even if they order me to exile my closest friend.”*
 - *“The paths of the ancestors are sacred, therefore I will never deviate from our migratory route, even if a shortcut promises quick fortune.”*
- **Suggested Secrets:**
 - **Endurance of the Road:** Accustomed to long marches, minimal supplies, and harsh weather.

- **Swift Learner:** Adapts quickly to changing terrain or situations.

Rural Peasantry **Description:** Raised on farms or small villages. Life is labor-intensive and routine. Children assist with planting, harvesting, tending animals, and community obligations.

- **Suggested Focuses:** Farming, Animal Husbandry, Crafting, Observation
- **Suggested Beliefs:**
 - *“The family survives by standing together, therefore I will prioritize the farm’s work over my own dreams, even if it keeps me trapped in this village forever.”*
 - *“The land only feeds us if tended gently, therefore I will let the fields rest and fallow, even if the bailiff beats me for failing to meet the lord’s harvest quota.”*
- **Suggested Secrets:**
 - **Steady Hands:** Accustomed to repetitive, precise labor.
 - **Community-Minded:** Skilled at cooperative work and understanding local dynamics.

Townfolk **Description:** Children of artisans, merchants, or small-town dwellers. Exposed to trades, markets, and urban social structures from early on. Literacy or numeracy may be present depending on local resources.

- **Suggested Focuses:** Trade, Crafting, Observation, Literacy
- **Suggested Beliefs:**
 - *“Our name is our currency in the market, therefore I will honor my trade agreements to the letter, even if fulfilling them leaves me penniless.”*
 - *“The guild’s laws protect us all, therefore I will report any illegal trade to the masters, even if the smuggler is my own kin.”*
- **Suggested Secrets:**
 - **Streetwise:** Early familiarity with local politics, gossip, and networks.
 - **Apprentice’s Precision:** Trained in careful, methodical work from childhood.

Urban Nobility (City-born) **Description:** Children of city-based elites, schooled in etiquette, literacy, and social negotiation. Exposure to wealth and politics shapes understanding of power and influence.

- **Suggested Focuses:** Diplomacy, Literacy, Strategy, Observation
- **Suggested Beliefs:**
 - *“Our family’s honor is our blood, therefore I will challenge anyone who insults our name, even if the duel is to the death.”*
 - *“Influence is the only real shield in this city, therefore I will court the favors of the high council, even when I despise their corruption.”*
- **Suggested Secrets:**
 - **Polished Demeanor:** Naturally commanding or socially adept.
 - **Political Awareness:** Instinctively notices alliances, rivalries, and influence.

Rural Nobility (Estate-born) **Description:** Children raised on country estates, responsible for land, tenants, and military obligations. Learn riding, hunting, basic administration, and the rhythms of feudal hierarchy.

- **Suggested Focuses:** Riding, Hunting, Administration, Observation
- **Suggested Beliefs:**
 - *“These fields belong to my ancestors’ line, therefore I will defend our borders from outlaws, even if I must fight them alone.”*
 - *“The peasantry relies on my protection, therefore I will feed the village through the winter, even if I must defy the Duke’s tax collectors.”*
- **Suggested Secrets:**
 - **Equestrian Grace:** Confident and skilled on horseback.
 - **Land Stewardship:** Natural understanding of estate management and long-term planning.

Trolls

Trolls are massive, ancient beings native to the world. They are deeply bound to the land, carrying cumulative ancestral memories through their lineages.

- **Mechanical Tendencies:** Trolls are physically imposing but suffer from the **Sun-Averse** trait: they suffer a **-1 die penalty** to all tests when exposed to direct, unfiltered sunlight.
- **Common Beliefs:**
 - *“The mountains remember what men have forgotten, therefore I will protect our ancestral sacred sites, even when human settlements try to expand over them.”*
 - *“Patience is stronger than iron, therefore I will wait for my enemy to make the first move, even when my allies accuse me of cowardice.”*
 - *“Blood preserves the lineage, therefore I will obey the whispers of my ancestors’ memories, even when their advice demands I commit a terrible deed.”*
- **Common Secrets:**
 - **Ancestral Taste:** Spend **1 Instinct** point to consume a small piece of flesh or blood from a creature (living or dead) to immediately recall a crucial fragment of its memories or history.
 - **Thick Hide:** You ignore the mechanical penalties of **Minor physical consequences** (bruises, scrapes) automatically.

Troll Clans

These clans carry the ancestral lineage of the Troll stock:

Nomadic Clans **Description:** Born into wandering clans. Children grow up moving constantly, learning survival, tracking, hunting, and the cohesion of clan life. Memory and instinct are central; social bonds and continuity are carried through oral tradition.

- **Suggested Focuses:** Survival, Tracking, Hunting, Clan Lore
- **Suggested Beliefs:**
 - *“The clan’s survival outweighs the individual, therefore I will put my strength at the service of the elders, even when it demands my sacrifice.”*
 - *“The old paths were walked by the giants, therefore I will walk them in silence and reverence, even if human settlements block our way.”*
- **Suggested Secrets:**
 - **Enduring Spirit:** Accustomed to long journeys, harsh conditions, and minimal comforts.
 - **Instinctive Awareness:** Quick to notice danger, changes in environment, or subtle cues in others’ behavior.

Crafting Clans **Description:** Born into sedentary communities devoted to forging, building, and sustaining troll society. Children learn trades, rituals, and the meticulous work of craft. Continuity and preservation of knowledge are central.

- **Suggested Focuses:** Crafting, Observation, Clan Lore, Maintenance
- **Suggested Beliefs:**
 - *“Our ancient methods are perfect, therefore I will copy the ancestral runes precisely, even if the younger smiths demand new techniques.”*
 - *“Our ancestors mended the world, therefore I will restore their ruined architecture, even when the toxic Ley lines boil my skin.”*
- **Suggested Secrets:**
 - **Hands of the Clan:** Naturally skilled at manual work, forging, or maintaining tools.
 - **Attention to Tradition:** Strong instinct for following ancestral methods and preserving knowledge accurately.

Dwarves (Other Species)

Dwarves are of faerie origin but have bound themselves deeply to the solidity and weight of the material world, accepting mortality and slow aging.

- **Mechanical Tendencies:** Dwarves are compact, extremely resilient, and have an instinctive intuition for metallurgy, stonecraft, and physical permanence.
 - **Common Beliefs:**
 - *“A promise carved in stone cannot be broken by time, therefore I will fulfill my oath to the letter, even if it costs me my life’s savings.”*
 - *“True beauty lies in the perfection of craft, therefore I will destroy and forge anew any item with a single flaw, even when the customer demands immediate delivery.”*
 - *“We must bear the weight of the world with silent resolve, therefore I will hide my wounds and failures from my allies, even if it leads to my physical collapse.”*
 - **Common Secrets:**
 - **Forge-Hardened:** Spend **1 Vigor** point to gain **+2 dice** on any test involving crafting, repairing, or resisting extreme heat.
 - **Unbreakable Waer:** Gain **+1 die** on all tests to defend your home stead, family members, or to resist being physically moved or forced to yield.
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Fae / Elves (Other Species)

Elves stand closest to the True Fae, dwelling perpetually near the Threshold. They do not age, but they remain detached and never fully anchored in the material world.

- **Mechanical Tendencies:** Elves are graceful and light, but their existence is volatile. They struggle to maintain focus on mundane, long-term tasks.
- **Common Beliefs:**
 - *“The world is a shifting dream, therefore I will throw away any mortal wealth or attachment, even if it leaves me freezing and exposed.”*
 - *“Intensity of experience is the only true currency, therefore I will seek the most dangerous sensations, even if it costs me my sanity.”*
 - *“We are visitors dancing on the ruins of mortal time, therefore I will ignore the laws of the local rulers, even when they threaten to execute me.”*
- **Common Secrets:**
 - **Glimmerstep:** Spend **1 Instinct** point to slip past a minor physical barrier or vanish from sight into shadows for a single round.
 - **Ethereal Calm:** Spend **1 Reason** point to become completely immune to fear, mental stress, or intimidation for the duration of a scene.

Beliefs

What a Belief Is

A **Belief** is a written statement on your character sheet that outlines your character's moral compass, personal drive, or worldview (e.g., *"No one goes hungry while I have bread,"* or *"The First Men's engines are a plague that must be dismantled"*).

Beliefs serve as the narrative anchor for your character, directly linking who they are to how they advance, and are the primary source of Karma.

Beliefs and Player Intent

Beliefs are a tool for players to signal to the GM: *"This is the kind of story and conflict I want to explore with my character."*

- **The Player's Role:** Actively seek opportunities to act on your Beliefs, even when it is inconvenient or dangerous.
- **The GM's Role:** Read the players' Beliefs and design scenes, NPCs, and choices that directly challenge or test those Beliefs. Do not make acting on a Belief easy—introduce hard choices where two beliefs clash or where survival requires compromise.

Beliefs in Mundane Play

In standard, low-stakes scenes, Beliefs guide how your character interacts with the world and sets their personal goals.

- *Belief:* *"Wealth must flow to be healthy; hoarded silver rot the soul."*
- *Mundane Play:* During a scene at a local market, your character spends extra coin to buy hand-woven rugs from a struggling artisan rather than bargaining for a cheaper, mass-produced Imperial import.

Beliefs Under Pressure

The true test of a Belief occurs when acting on it carries significant mechanical or narrative risk, often escalating a scene into a formal Conflict or a Draw the Line confrontation.

- *Belief:* *"My pack comes first, before any human law."*
- *Under Pressure:* A human patrol corners a young Troll who committed a minor theft. The patrol demands you hand the child over to the magistrate. To uphold your Belief, you refuse, stepping between the patrol and the child. This choice escalates the scene into an opposed Contest of *Intimidation* or a physical fight, triggering this Belief to gain Karma.

Changing and Resolving Beliefs

Characters are not static; their convictions shift as they experience trauma, victory, and loss. Character growth is always reactive to the narrative, occurring when a Belief is resolved in play:

- **Belief Buyoffs:** When a character's actions satisfy or permanently violate/abandon the condition of a Belief (e.g., achieving a long-term goal or admitting absolute defeat), they resolve it. This is a dramatic milestone in the fiction that requires GM approval. Resolving a Belief awards a **Karma Burst (+2 Karma)**, and the Belief is removed from the sheet.

- **Acquiring a New Belief:** Once a Belief is resolved and its slot is empty, the player can spend **1 Karma** at any time—either instantly during play or during Downtime—to write a new Belief that reflects the character’s new drive or outlook.

Secrets

What a Secret Is

Secrets represent specialized training, biological traits, or supernatural techniques that allow your character to perform feats beyond normal human capacity.

They cost **2 Karma** to learn during play and require in-fiction justification (such as training with a mentor, intensive study, or undergoing stock rites during Downtime).

Active vs. Passive Secrets

Secrets are categorized based on their activation requirements: * **Active Secrets:** Secrets with a listed Pool cost (e.g., Vigor, Instinct, or Reason) require the expenditure of a Pool point to trigger, representing the physical, emotional, or mental strain of the action. You must declare you are using an Active Secret before rolling or taking the action. * **Passive Secrets:** Secrets without a listed cost are always active or trigger automatically under specific narrative or mechanical conditions. They do not cost Pool points to use.

Secrets as Narrative Authority

Many Secrets grant players **Narrative Authority**—the mechanical right to dictate what happens in the fiction, bypass standard checks, or introduce information without relying solely on the GM. When you activate a Secret, you are establishing a binding truth about the scene.

Generic Secrets

These Secrets are available to characters of any Stock who meet the narrative prerequisites:

- **Whispers of Power**
 - **Activation Cost:** 1 Reason
 - **Effect:** You tune your senses to the subtle correspondences of the world. The GM must give you a useful clue, direct hint, or intuitive insight about your current situation or threat.
- **Ghost of the Past**
 - **Activation Cost:** 1 Instinct
 - **Effect:** You draw focus from an old trauma, debt, or regret. Gain **+2 dice** (Edge) on any roll directly related to confronting or resolving that past issue.
- **Fleeting Fortune**
 - **Activation Cost:** 1 Vigor
 - **Effect:** Lady Luck smiles briefly on you. You may turn a minor environmental complication in your favor, or ignore a single Minor consequence.
- **A Friend of a Friend**
 - **Activation Cost:** 1 Instinct or Reason
 - **Effect:** When searching for a contact or resource, you may use a non-matching *Circles* Ability to make the test, provided you can narratively justify the chain of connection.
- **Riposte**
 - **Effect:** When you are attacked in melee and the attack misses, you may immediately make a counterattack.
- **Resilience**
 - **Effect:** Once per session, reduce the severity of a consequence by one step (Serious → Moderate, Moderate → Minor, or Minor → negated).

- **Quick Study**

- **Effect:** When spending Downtime actions to train a Focused Ability or learn a Secret, you can do so in half the usual time (allowing you to train two Focused Abilities or learn two Secrets for a single Downtime action).

Stock-Specific Secrets

These represent unique ancestral or biological abilities and are restricted by Stock:

Humans

- **Fork in the Road**

- **Activation Cost:** 1 Reason
- **Effect:** You see potential paths clearly. When faced with a difficult choice or fork, gain **+1 Edge** on any tests made to execute your chosen path.

- **Loose Network**

- **Activation Cost:** 1 Instinct
- **Effect:** Call upon a network of smugglers, street urchins, or associates. You automatically locate a helpful contact or gather local rumors without a Circles Ability check.

- **Hold Fast**

- **Activation Cost:** 1 Vigor
- **Effect:** You brace against the storm. Downgrade a physical consequence you are about to suffer (e.g., Serious → Moderate, or Moderate → Minor).

- **Silver Tongue**

- **Effect:** Gain **+1 die** to social rolls when persuading or deceiving.

- **Resourceful**

- **Effect:** Once per session, find or improvise a useful item.

Trolls

- **Gnash and Grin**

- **Activation Cost:** 1 Vigor
- **Effect:** Activating your Troll resilience, you shrug off a physical blow. You ignore the mechanical penalties of all physical consequences until the end of the scene.

- **Slog and Swing**

- **Activation Cost:** 1 Instinct
- **Effect:** You lash out with brute force. Break a standard physical barrier, door, or weapon automatically, or gain **+2 dice** on a physical *Combat* test.

- **None Cross Free**

- **Activation Cost:** 1 Reason
- **Effect:** You enforce a boundary or deal. When an opponent tries to break a verbal or written agreement with you, they suffer a Moderate mental consequence (*Guilt-ridden* or *Paralyzed by oath*) automatically.

- **Stoneflesh**

- **Effect:** Ignore minor physical harm and reduce moderate harm to minor once per session.

- **Memory of Ages**

- **Effect:** Recall ancient lore or gain insight from ancestral memories.

Dwarves

- **Forge Bond**
 - **Activation Cost:** 1 Vigor
 - **Effect:** Draw strength from stone or metal. Gain **+2 dice** on any test involving building, smithing, heavy masonry, or physical endurance.
- **Balance Owed**
 - **Activation Cost:** 1 Reason
 - **Effect:** You bring up a legal, historical, or personal debt. An NPC who owes you or your clan must perform a minor favor or grant passage without requiring a Circles Ability check.
- **Torch Against the Deep**
 - **Activation Cost:** 1 Instinct
 - **Effect:** Your subterranean heritage guides you. You can see in total darkness and automatically detect structural weaknesses, hidden paths, or collapsing tunnels.
- **Runic Binding**
 - **Effect:** Once per session, when you craft or modify a piece of gear, you can carve a rune of protection or power onto it. The wearer/wielder gains **+1 Edge** on a single test using that gear.

Fae / Elves

- **Fey Glamour**
 - **Activation Cost:** 1 Instinct
 - **Effect:** Ethereal essence lets you weave sensory illusions. You shape minor sights, sounds, or scents that distract guards, disguise objects, or create brief, convincing mirages.
- **Mask of Courtesy**
 - **Activation Cost:** 1 Reason
 - **Effect:** You weave manners and poises into an unbreakable facade. Opponents cannot read your emotions or intentions, and you gain **+2 dice** on social rolls.
- **Blade of the Self**
 - **Activation Cost:** 1 Vigor
 - **Effect:** You fight with physical grace and cutting wit. In a duel or formal debate, you can use your *Persuasion* or *Oratory* Ability rating instead of a physical combat skill for a Contest.
- **Sylvan Path**
 - **Effect:** You move through natural foliage, snow, or difficult terrain without leaving a trace or being slowed down.
- **Threshold Sight**
 - **Activation Cost:** 1 Instinct
 - **Effect:** You tune your senses to the border between Being and Non-Being. You can see invisible spirits, detect active magical wards, or locate thin points in the Threshold.

Magic

Magic always has a price. In this world, that price is not tracked via spell slots or arbitrary mana values, but through your character's focus, energy, and resolve.

There is **no separate magic subsystem** of spells and spell levels. Instead, all magical arts, spells, and supernatural abilities are handled entirely through the **Secrets** and **Abilities** systems.

Magic and the Resolution System

If your character has unlocked a magical Secret (such as the Fae's *Glimmerstep* or the general *Whispers of Power*), casting that spell or performing that working is resolved using standard rules:

- The action is declared, grounding the magical intent in the fiction.
- The GM identifies the relevant Ability (e.g., *Rituals* or *Occult Lore*) and sets the Target Number (TN) based on how significantly the magic attempts to alter reality.
- You roll your d6 pool, looking for successes (4+).

Magic and Pools

Reaching beyond the Threshold to shape reality is exhausting. Almost all magical Secrets require you to spend points from Vigor, Instinct, or Reason to activate:

- **Vigor:** Wastes physical stamina to create hard protective barriers, forge items, or bind entities.
- **Instinct:** Channels raw emotion or ancestral memory to slip through shadows or manipulate minds.
- **Reason:** Taxes logical concentration and willpower to scry, decode ancient world engines, or ward areas.

If a character's Pool is at 0, they cannot channel the energy required to activate Secrets tied to that Pool.

Magic and Karma

Karma represents your connection to the metaphysics of the Threshold:

- **Learning Magic:** To learn a new magical technique, you must spend **2 Karma** during Downtime and establish an in-fiction justification (e.g., finding a dusty tome, binding a minor spirit, or learning under a mentor).
- **Conviction:** You can spend **1 Karma** to reroll a failed magical check, representing your character's sheer force of will forcing the magic to manifest.

Rituals and Extended Magic

When characters want to perform complex, long-term magical workings (like warding a village, cleansing a corrupted ley line, or binding a demon), they do not use a single roll. Instead:

1. **Frame the Ritual:** The GM and player frame the ritual as a **Project Clock** sequence.
2. **Declare Stakes:** Define what happens on a success and what the magical backlash will be if they fail.
3. **Procedure:** The ritual is resolved as a series of rolls representing different phases of the working (e.g., drawing the circle, chanting the bindings, and sealing the threshold). The GM may rule that certain phases require spending Pool points, rolling an Ability, or introducing complications.

Consequences and Attention

Magic is unstable because the Threshold between Being and Non-Being is fragile. When a magical roll fails or succeeds at a cost, the consequences reflect this volatility:

- **Minor Complication:** A strange draft, souring milk nearby, or a glowing mark that fades after a scene.
- **Moderate/Serious Consequence:** Draining extra Pool points, triggering a minor ley line eruption, or gaining tags like *Occult Burn*, *Phantom Whispers*, or *Marked by the Void* (-1 die ongoing to social interactions).
- **Magical Backlash:** Forcing Non-Being into the material world attracts the attention of Outsiders, waking dragons, or corrupting local wildlife.

The True History of the World

“Being remembers; Non-Being waits.”

I. On the Nature of Existence

The world was not made; it **happened**.

There are no certainties about its first moment. Sages who speak of “Before” describe *absence*: a quiet balance between **Being**—form, continuity, meaning—and **Non-Being**—potential, possibility, the absence of form.

Between them lies the **Threshold**, the liminal border where creation and dissolution meet. All living change occurs because the Threshold is porous enough for wonder, yet strong enough to resist collapse.

Magic is the art of touching this border: drawing on concordance and intent to shape reality without collapsing it. It is natural and value-neutral; **intent** is the fulcrum, alignment the limit. Corruption arises from misalignment, overexposure, or forcing what should remain potential into fixed form.

II. The Dragons

Dragons are older than history, perhaps older than the world’s final shape. They arose in the first turbulence where Being and Non-Being mingled freely—creatures of matter whose spirits still brush the Threshold. Neither mortal nor divine, they are native intelligences, born of the world’s first stirring of will.

The True Dragons

The eldest minds took form when mountains were molten and the sky unmeasured. Their thoughts tuned weather, tide, and season. They watched the First Men rise, largely unmoved. When the First Men wounded the world, the True Dragons **withdrew into dragonsleep**, sinking into stone and fire, waiting for a rhythm they could endure to return. Should the wound threaten to widen beyond repair, the True Dragons may wake—not to conquer, but to restore a stark, quiet balance.

The Lesser Dragons

From their lingering presence and from stone, air, and fire came the **Lesser Dragons**—younger, hungrier, and bound to passion. Mortal in time, they hoard not only gold but **certainty**, gathering meaning against the world’s slow fading. Some teach; others devour; all are fragments of a balance the world lost.

III. The Awakening of the World

Even in this earliest age, magic flowed according to the same laws of intent and concordance that would govern all later ages. In the long calm after sea and soil took shape, many beings stirred.

The **Faerie**, **Gods**, and **Demons**—emanations of the wider cosmos—moved lightly across the world but were not bound to it. They existed as patterns and wills within the natural order beyond the world.

From the world itself arose the **Trolls** and the **First Men**—true mortals, finite and entropic, born of earth and breath. Their coming was a **New Thing** that drew the attention of the outer powers. Some fae crossed the Threshold and **took forms within the world**, becoming **Elves** and **Dwarves**—reflections of fae essence in mortal shape.

For a time the world was bright, mutable, and generous: the **First Age**, the **Golden Age of the First Men**.

IV. The Forcing of the Threshold

Curiosity turned to hubris. The **First Men** sought not merely to work at the Threshold but to command it.

Through art, philosophy, technology, and great rites they sought to weld Being and Non-Being into unity and forced the essence of Non-Being directly into the living world, violating the natural separation of the Threshold and compelling potential to take substance where it should not.

The act cracked creation. Meaning thinned; memory faltered; time frayed. Dragons stirred; storms and fire followed. Cities burned in wars fought by beings half-real and half-dreamed. This was the **Fall of the First Men**.

The higher powers—the **Fae**, **Gods**, and **Demons**—recognized that even they could unravel near the breach. In dread and self-preservation, they withdrew, their retreat compelled by the same immutable laws that limit all Threshold-beings. They retreated to regions where its laws still held true, unable to act freely without risking dissolution themselves.

Thus ended the **First Age**. The world remained, but its heart was cracked and bleeding.

V. The Rebuilding

When the fires cooled, what remained were the stubborn and the slow:

- **Trolls**, whose bodies remembered the shape of mountains.
- **Elves and Dwarves**, still of fae essence yet now fully in the world.
- **Scattered mortal survivors of the First Men**, untainted and few, hid in wastelands and forgotten sanctuaries; their lines dwindled and did not found the nations to come.
- **The Undying Remnants**—vampires and hollow immortals who had bound fragments of Non-Being within themselves—fed upon others' Being to endure.

The survivors built again. The **Second Age** began—an era of rebuilding and half-light, when the memory of the Golden Age lingered but could not be restored.

VI. The End of the Second Age

In time, the undying remnants turned their gaze inward. Their grief and hunger became purpose, and they sought dominion over death itself. Cities of blackened glass rose from the ruins, powered by the theft of life and memory. They learned to harness the Threshold's wound as fuel, shaping servants from blood, ash, and shadow.

For a thousand years, the world burned again. Rivers boiled; mountains bled fire; even the moon turned its face away. The fae withdrew deeper still, leaving mortals to the mercy of those who would be gods.

In the end, their own creations rose against them. Constructs of spirit and stone rebelled, minds twisted by the contradictions of Being and Non-Being bound together. The sky split, and the last of the false empires folded in upon themselves, devoured by paradox and pride.

When the light returned, nothing remained of their glory—only hollow ruins and wandering shadows. The Second Age ended in silence and ash.

VII. The Birth of the Second Race

After a long stillness—ash cooled, rivers shifted, lesser dragons slept—the world **breathed again**.

The Second Race of Man began as a servant people, shaped in the late arrogance of the undying remnants. Born to toil and obey, they were fashioned to bear the burdens their masters no longer could. When the empires of ash collapsed, these slaves fled or were abandoned, wandering a scarred world. In time they forgot the language of their makers, took new names, and learned freedom. They were no longer constructs but a people—mortal, fallible, and enduring.

They were lesser and shorter-lived than their forerunners, but in their smallness lay stability. Their brief lives burned clean. Elves and Dwarves taught remnants of older craft. Trolls shared the patience of stone.

The **Third Age**—the **Age of Silence and Clay**—began: a quieter era where mortals alone bore memory while the Powers stayed distant.

VIII. The Pattern That Remains

Across ages the rhythm repeats:

1. **Curiosity** — work at the Threshold.
2. **Hubris** — forcing it.
3. **Collapse** — as Being fractures under strain.
4. **Rebuilding** — smaller, dimmer, yet enduring.

Magic remains what it always was: **concordance shaped by intent**, capable of healing or harm. It is **misalignment and overreach**—the attempt to drag Non-Being into places of fixed meaning—that widens wounds and births corruption.

Notes for Chroniclers

- **Men and Trolls** are children of the world itself.
 - **Elves and Dwarves** are fae who chose form and thus mortality in the world.
 - **Vampires** are the undying memory of the First Men's sin—selfhood propped against decay.
 - **Gods, Fae, and Demons** still exist beyond the world but keep their distance.
 - **Dragons** are the world's eldest children—some sleeping, some lesser kin abroad—witnesses and anchors of Being.
 - **Magic** is natural and intent-ruled; its dangers are those of **misalignment**, not of its existence.
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Thus stands the truth beneath all myths: The world endures not because it was made to, but because it has not yet learned how to end.

Gods, Faery, and Other Powers

Divine Pressure and Mortal Action

Gods do not descend to walk the earth in flesh, nor do they command mortals through direct speech. Instead, they act through **Divine Pressure**—subtle, indirect shaping of weather, tides, crop yields, and the flow of fortune. Mortals who align their actions and rituals with a deity’s domain are rewarded with favorable conditions (e.g., bumper crops, calm seas, or +1 Edge on tests in that domain). Those who defy a god’s mandates face immediate natural pressure, represented by environmental complications or increased difficulty (TNs) on related tests.

Religion

The Imperial Pantheon: The Pillars of Order

Creation Myth: In the beginning, the world was a featureless expanse of gray mud, volatile and unformed. Aethelos arose from the zenith of the sky, casting his three lights upon the mud. Where the light touched, the water dried into the Iron Ledger, and the mud solidified into the Four Walls of Order. Thus, the wild forces of the world were bound into legal structures, establishing the first contracts of reality.

The Solar Triarchy (The Aspects of Aethelos) The Sun is the singular source of the Lex Lucis (The Law of Light). It is viewed not as a person, but as a continuous cycle of three divine mandates.

Aethelian (The Dawn) The Witness of the New Ledger. The god of beginnings, oaths, and the opening of gates. He is the “Light that Reveals,” presiding over contracts and the morning roll call.

Aethelos (The Zenith) The Unconquered Law. The sun at high noon, where no shadow is cast. He represents Absolute Sovereignty and the “Scorching Truth” that burns away ambiguity. He is the patron of the Emperor and the High Courts.

Aethelior (The Evening) The Warden of the Vault. The setting sun who concludes the day’s tally. He is the god of retention and preservation, guarding the granaries and sealing the world against the coming dark.

The Great Mandates

Quadrant (The God of the Iron Ledger) The “tamed” successor to the ancient gods of slaughter. Quadrant governs the Business of War. He is the deity of the shield-wall, supply lines, and the recruitment scroll. Soldiers do not pray to him for glory, but for a “Fair Accounting” of their service and their death.

Vulturn (The Gilded Flow) The god of the Great River and the Moving Contract. Vulturn is the personification of the Imperial lifeblood—trade and taxation. He is “The Bound,” yoked by stone bridges and iron piers. Merchants “marry” their ships to his current by dropping lead-weighted contracts into the silt.

Marravane (The Shield of the Earth) The goddess of Storms and Vitality. While state art depicts her as a subservient handmaiden to the Sun, she is the “Low Law” of the soil and the gut. She brings the cooling rain and the heavy moisture that prevents the world from drying into dust under the Sun’s gaze.

Pontos-Vex (The Warden of the Salt-Void) The god of the Sea and Isolation. Represented as a skeletal figure encrusted in salt, he guards the “Dead Water.” He is the warden of the deep who keeps the world from drifting away into the Threshold. To the Empire, the sea is a place where memory dissolves and logic fails.

The Guardians of the Threshold

Moros (The Mother of Nightmares) The Queen of Not-Being and the Grandmother of the Dark. She governs the gaps in memory and the terrors that exist when the world engines fail. She is not built temples; she is built walls. People offer her “The Tithe of Silence”—grey ash on the doorstep to signify that nothing of value remains for her to take.

Vacter (The God of the Limit) The deity of Borders and Enclosure. He is the spirit of the city wall, the property line, and the locked door. In a world where the Outside (Fey and Dragons) is always watching, Vacter is the legal guardian who ensures that what is “Other” remains outside the Imperial limits.

The Functional Authorities (The Small Gods)

- **Mnemon (The Binder):** The god of memory and lineage. He anchors a mortal’s name to the world’s structure, preventing the “volatility” of humans from leading to total cultural amnesia.
- **Ferrum (The Will of Iron):** The god of craft and the forge. He represents the imposition of human will over unstable matter—the breaking of stone and the shaping of tools.
- **Sutur (The Mender):** The God of the Stitch. A cold, technical deity of repair. He governs the closing of wounds and the “mending” of the human body before the “Not-Being” can leak in.
- **Humos (The Grave-Yield):** The god of the soil and decay. He governs the healthy rot that allows for new growth, ensuring the cycle of consumption persists despite the world’s incompleteness.
- **Vialis (The God of the Unseen Path):** The god of safe distance. Patron of messengers and travelers who must cross the thin places between the city-states where the Imperial Law is faint.
- **Aleant (The God of the Lean Year):** The god of chance and desperation. He provides the explanation for the failed plan, the unexpected frost, and the windfall.

The Exiles (The Bad Gods) These are the “Broken Engines”—hostile forces that have lost their purpose and exist only as hungers.

Vorgos the Hollow The god of famine and consumption. Imperial dogma labels him as the progenitor of vampires and all who feed on vitality. While the Imperials believe he created these remnants, the truth of their origin is likely far older and more complex than their myths allow.

Krast the Breaker The god of structural failure and entropy. He is the “Hidden Crack” in the bridge and the rust on the blade. Engineers offer him grease and iron to avert his gaze.

Ixion (The Sunderer) The god of betrayal and internal decay. He is the “Seam that Rips,” governing the moment an oath is broken or a brother is betrayed.

The Imperial Creed “By the Three Lights we measure the day; by the Four Walls we hold the night; by the Iron Ledger we pay the world its due.”

The Faith of the Southern Coast: The Cycle of Vitality

In the South, divinity is not a contract enforced by a state, but a rhythmic current. The world is a living family in constant motion, moving through the phases of the **Great Loop**. Spiritual health is measured by one’s alignment with this flow.

In their tongue, the suffix **-Ka** denotes a **Great Vitality**—a primal force that defines the world’s survival. The prefix **Ke-** denotes a **Small Vitality**—a functional spirit that serves the cycle but does not command it.

Creation Myth: The world began as a single, gasping breath. The Mother, Marra-Ka, unleashed the first monsoon, which fell into the dust and became the Son, Oru-Ka—the river of trade and blood. The Son flowed into the vastness of the Father, Thallos-Ka, who held the waters in his dark, silent embrace until they rose again as mist. The Southern clans believe that all life is a passenger in this breathing family.

The Divine Family (-Ka)

Marra-Ka (The Storm-Queen / The Heavy Sky) The Mother: The Descent. The absolute sovereign of the Southern year. She is the season of the monsoon, the huntress of the sun, and the bringer of renewal.

- **The Fury:** She represents war and sudden transformation. Conflict in the South is not a matter of logistics, but of overwhelming, torrential force.
- **The Gift:** Her arrival is the “Great Turning,” washing away the dust of the dry months and quenching the thirst of the soil.

Oru-Ka (The Living Vein / The Tide-Eater) The Son: The Mediator. The god of the great river and the manifestation of his mother’s grace. He connects the mountains to the sea.

- **The Master of Commerce:** Trade is seen as a current. Oru-Ka governs the movement of spice, silver, and grain. He is the patron of the markets and the docks; you do not own wealth, you merely navigate it under his watch.
- **The Tide-Eater:** In the delta, he is the protector. He pushes back the salt-tide of the sea to keep the soil sweet for the crops.

Thallos-Ka (The Brine-Father / The Deep Husband) The Father: The Destination. The god of the infinite sea and the husband of Marra-Ka. He is the vast, dark pressure that holds the world together from the outside.

- **The Great Collector:** All water eventually finds the sea, and so all spirits eventually find Thallos-Ka. He is the “Great Rest,” the end of every journey.
- **The Vault:** He holds what is “taken”—shipwrecks, silt, and drowned secrets. He is the god of hidden wealth and the silence of the deep.

The Service Spirits (The Ke- Spirits) These spirits manage the specific utilities of the world. They are respected as tools of the divine family, but they are never mistaken for the masters of the flow.

- **Vana-Ke (The Ghost-Breath):** The spirit of the mist and evaporation. It is the Father’s breath returning to the Mother. It governs secrets, transitions, and the “Soft Truth” found in the morning haze.
 - **Ke-Aethel (The Sun-Spirit):** A minor, brittle spirit of heat. He is seen as a nuisance who brings drought; he is endured only until Marra-Ka drives him away.
 - **Ke-Valer (The Bean-Counter):** The scrivener spirit of the abacus and the inkpot. He is the clerk who follows behind Oru-Ka, attempting to count the wealth that the river provides.
 - **Ke-Humos (The Earth-Pulse):** The spirit of the mud and the farmer’s toil. A localized spark of the earth’s vitality that handles the day-to-day growth of the garden.
 - **Ke-Vacter (The Threshold-Hush):** A domestic spirit of the sleeping mat and the door, keeping the house-mud and night-damps at bay.
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The Great Loop (Metaphysical Flow)

Phase	Divinity	Nature	The Human Experience
The Falling	Marra-Ka	The Mother	The Monsoon: Renewal, Fury, and Life.
The Moving	Oru-Ka	The Son	The Current: Trade, travel, and the Market.

Phase	Divinity	Nature	The Human Experience
The Resting	Thallos-Ka	The Father	The Brine: Homecoming, Death, and Silence.
The Rising	Vana-Ke	The Spirit	The Mist: Secrets, Courtship, and Return.

The Southern Sensibility To a Southerner, the world is not a broken machine to be “bound” or “fixed” by Imperial law. It is a breathing cycle. If a bridge is swept away or a ship sinks, it is not a failure of craft, but the **Family** reclaiming what is theirs. They do not fear the sea’s salt or the storm’s rage; they fear the **Stagnation**—the moment the water stops moving and the family stops speaking.

The People of the Endless Horizon (The Steppe Nomads)

For the nomadic clans, divinity is not a contract or a family cycle; it is a **Vastness**. They live under the “Great Blue,” a god that sees everything but promises nothing.

Creation Myth: Tengri-Khane, the Great Blue, blew a breath of wind across the void, creating the steppe. He placed the first horse and the First-Rider upon the grass, telling them that the earth is a sacred path to be trodden, not a cage to be divided by stone. To build a wall is to sever the connection between the sky and the grass.

The Sky God: Tengri-Khane The absolute sovereign of the open world. Unlike the Imperial Sun or the Southern Monsoon, **Tengri-Khane** is the sky itself—both the scorching zenith and the drenching storm.

- **The Harsh Mercy:** He brings the sunshine that grows the grass and the rain that fills the wells, but he also brings the blizzard and the drought. He is indifferent and absolute.
- **The Ritual:** Nomads do not build roofs for Tengri-Khane; to cover one’s head while praying is to hide from his gaze.

The Great Way-Spirit: Path-Maker (Ezen) The patron of all nomadic life. The Ezen is not a person, but the “Spirit of the Move.”

- **The Origin:** It is believed the Path-Maker first taught humans that the earth is a gift to be walked upon, not a cage to be walled in. To settle and build in stone is seen as a betrayal of the Ezen.
- **The Mandate:** He represents the nomadic people as a whole—their collective survival and their refusal to be “Bound.”

The Tribal Hero: The First-Rider (Ancestor-Spirit) Each specific tribe traces its lineage back to a Great Ancestor who “broke the first horse” or “found the first valley.”

- **The Role:** While the Path-Maker governs all nomads, the **First-Rider** governs the specific law and taboos of the tribe. If a tribe is known for archery, it is because their First-Ride stole the secret from the wind.
- **The Veneration:** They are often represented by an *Idol-Pole* (an Ongon) kept in a place of honor during travel.

The Hearth-Mother: Ot-Gal The spirit of the tribe’s central fire. In a world of infinite movement, the fire is the only fixed point.

- **The Role:** She is the “Warmth in the Waste.” She protects the children and wards off the shadows of the Threshold. When the tribe moves, a coal from the old fire is carried in a clay pot to “seed” the next hearth, ensuring Ot-Gal’s continuity.

The Herd-Soul: The Great Steer / The Great Mare The nomads follow a specific animal spirit that sustains them.

- **The Connection:** This spirit is the bridge between the humans and the grass. The nomads believe they do not “own” their herds; they are “in a pack” with them. To mistreat the herd is to invite the Great Steer to lead the animals away into the mist.

The Forest-Kin (The Deep-Wood Tribes)

A second culture exists in the ancient, dark forests—small, insular tribes who live in the “green-shadow” and view the world as a web of living intentions.

Role	Spirit / Name	Nature
Sky God	The Sun-Eye	The rare light that breaks the canopy; a god of hunting and clarity.
The Way-Spirit	The Root-Walker	Taught the tribes how to move through the brush without breaking a twig.
Tribal Hero	The First-Hunter	The one who made the original pact with the Forest to allow the tribe to eat.
Hearth Spirit	The Smoke-Warden	Keeps the fire small and hidden so as not to alert the “Outside” things.
Herd Spirit	The Great Stag	The spirit of the deer or boar they track; a god of sacrifice and stealth.

The Respect for Local Spirits Both cultures practice **Place-Recognition**. When entering a new valley or crossing a specific river, they leave a “Toll of Recognition”—a ribbon tied to a branch, a splash of mare’s milk, or a carved stone. They believe the world is already “owned” by the local spirits; humans are merely guests passing through.

Summary of Nomadic Divinity

- **Tengri-Khane:** The Sky (The Source)
- **Path-Maker:** The Nomadic Way (The People)
- **The First-Rider:** The Ancestor (The Tribe)
- **Ot-Gal:** The Hearth (The Home)
- **The Herd-Soul:** The Animal (The Sustenance)

The Faith of the High Holds: The Vane and the Household-Breath

In the rugged highlands, divinity is measured by the reach of one’s hand. The **Vane** are the Great Neighbors who own the mountains and the seasons. The **Household-Breath** (Kalt, Haro, Vuo, and Syr) are the spirits of the tools and the hearth that a human must master to survive.

Creation Myth: The Mountain-Mother, Berga-Vane, rose from the deep iron of the earth to lock the peaks against the chaos of the Outside. She struck her hammer, and from the sparks came the three Vane lords

and the four Household-Breaths of the steady hearth. To survive, a Hold-dweller must negotiate with these local stone-spirits through labor and combat.

The Four Great Vane (The Sovereigns of the Horizon)

Utu-Vane (The Hammer-Lord) The God of the Fence. He is the patron of the householder and the absolute owner of boundaries. To hold a stead is to stand in Utu's shadow.

Elo-Vane (The Wealth-Bringer) The Goddess of the Herd. She is the giver of living wealth. She honors the one who tills their own soil and counts their own cattle.

Hekon-Vane (The Price-Taker) The God of the Spear-Cast. He governs the grim necessity of defense and the blood-debt of victory.

Berga-Vane (The Iron-Bone) The Mountain-Mother. She is the persistence of the stone and the deep iron. She is the foundation upon which every hall is built.

The Household-Breath (The Spirits of the Hand) These are not "worshipped" with prayers, but "fed" through correct action. They are the immediate spirits of the stead's function.

- **Kalt (The Fire-Watcher):** The spirit of the central hearth. It is the heat that consumes the wood to keep the night-cold at bay. A cold hearth is a sign that the lineage has lost its "Breath."
 - **Haro (The Soil-Tamer):** The spirit of the tilled field. It is the "will of the earth" to resist the plough. A farmer must be stronger than Haro to force a harvest from the mountain soil.
 - **Vuo (The Herd-Hush):** The spirit of the cattle-stall. It is the heavy, warm presence that keeps the cows calm and the milk sweet. Vuo is what keeps the herd from wandering into the Threshold.
 - **Syr (The Iron-Bite):** The spirit of the edge. Whether it is a scythe, a wood-axe, or a seax, the Syr is the part of the tool that knows its purpose. A blade without Syr is just a bar of soft iron.
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The Hold-Folk Ideal: The Vane-Striver A "Great Man" or "Great Woman" is one who maintains the **Waer** (Worth) of their stead by balancing these forces.

- **Labor as Liturgy:** Tilling the field is a negotiation with **Haro** to satisfy **Elo-Vane**.
 - **Defense as Duty:** Guarding the gate is an alliance with **Syr** to satisfy **Utu-Vane**.
 - **The Pragmatic Oath:** Oaths are sworn by touching the hearth-stone (**Kalt**) or the boundary-marker (**Utu**). To break such an oath is to have the very world you live in turn against you.
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Faery as Temptation

The Divergence of the Fey: Enclaves and the Hunt

While the Fey are unified by their origin beyond the material world, their transition into the world has fractured them into two primary modes of existence. Both are driven by the Fey's inability to find a natural anchor in a world defined by change and decay.

The Enclaves: The Stagnant Preserves The Enclaves represent an attempt to impose a curated permanence upon the world's volatility. These are pockets of reality where the Fey have folded the landscape inward, creating semi-stable ripples in the Threshold.

Nature of Existence: Life in an Enclave is safe, secure, and profoundly static. Residents may spend centuries contemplating a single moment of perceived perfection. Because the Fey cannot create true permanence on their own, they must "borrow" it.

The Theft of Beauty: When an Enclave perceives a manifestation of objective beauty—a specific waterfall, a grove, or a celestial alignment—their instinct is to seize and "protect" it from the world's natural erosion. These features simply vanish from the material world, integrated into the Enclave's frozen geography.

The Parasitic Toll: To maintain these static havens, the Enclaves drain the vitality of the surrounding lands. They do not give back to the world; they merely harvest its highlights to decorate their isolation.

Notable Enclaves: The Enclave of Starlight, which mirrors a sky that never turns to day, and the Enclave of the Deep Green, where the riot of spring is captured and held in a perpetual, breathless bloom.

The Wild Hunt: The Predatory Flux Where the Enclaves seek to stop time, the Wild Hunt seeks to outrun it. They roam the remote, dark places of the world, existing as a blur of motion and appetite.

Nature of Existence: Members of the Hunt exist in a state of constant flux. Their shapes and identities are never fully settled; they are mimics and shapeshifters who reflect the fears and desires of those they encounter. They run in shifting packs of "brothers" and "sisters," bound by the thrill of the chase rather than lineage.

The Harvest of Playthings: The Hunt treats the short-lived inhabitants of the world as temporary diversions. They snatch mortals not for labor or sustenance, but for the fleeting pleasure of the "game." They use their connection to the Threshold to pull visions directly from a quarry's mind, crafting traps out of the victim's own memories and shames.

Amorality vs. Immorality: If the Enclaves are amoral—treating the world as a gallery to be looted—the Hunt is actively immoral. They understand the suffering of their prey and find it a necessary spice for their own entertainment.

Interaction and Kinship The two cultures recognize one another as kin, though their temperaments are rarely compatible. An Enclavist may view a member of the Hunt as a vulgar wastrel, while the Hunt sees the Enclaves as gilded tombs.

Interactions are usually brief; the mercurial attention span of the Hunt ensures they move on long before the slow-moving, contemplative Enclavist can reach a conclusion. Both, however, remain outsiders—beings who refuse to truly inhabit the world, choosing instead to either stall its clock or dance on its ruins.

Spirits, Demons, and Outsiders

- **Spirits:** Localized entities tied to geography or tools (e.g., a river spirit, a hearth spirit, or the spirit of an anvil). They respond to respect and regular offerings.
 - *Hook:* A local bridge-spirit has become angry because the villagers stopped dropping lead-weighted tokens into the river. The bridge is now slick with unearthly moss, causing travelers to slip.
- **Demons:** Manifestations of intense mortal passion or willpower given form. They bargain for influence and specialize in testing character drives.
 - *Hook:* A merchant has bound a minor demon of greed into his ledger. The merchant's Wealth is rising rapidly, but everyone who trades with him suffers from a nagging paranoia.
- **Outsiders:** Entities from beyond the Threshold (the Outer Dark). They represent not-being and seek to dismantle structure, leaving places thinned or hollowed.
 - *Hook:* An ancient engine in a nearby ruin has cracked, letting a thinned, gray mist of the Outer Dark leak into the valley. People are losing their memories of the past week.

Dragons and Transcendence

Dragons are overwhelming presences that transcend standard resolution rules.

- **Scale of Conflict:** A character cannot defeat a True Dragon or major cosmic force in a standard Contest. Attempting to physically attack a dragon always results in an automatic **Fatal consequence** unless the player has a specific mythic Secret, uses a world engine, or has pre-negotiated stakes where sacrifice is the goal.
- **Interacting with Dragons:** Interactions with dragons must be resolved through complex **Draw the Line** sequences, where the stakes are not victory, but survival, escape, or obtaining a single word of ancient memory before the dragon sleeps once more.
- **Transcendence:** Magicians who attempt to bypass the Threshold entirely to achieve immortality or absolute knowledge face the risk of fading into a thinned state, becoming vampires or hollow constructs no longer bound by living blood.

Running the Game

Running this game requires the Game Master (GM) to facilitate the conversation, translate narrative actions into mechanical tests, and challenge the players' character drives. The GM's role is to maintain the pressure of the "Teeth" (attrition) while ensuring the story remains focused on the players' Beliefs.

Threshold is not a game of simple obstacle lists; it is a **biographical engine** where history (Lifepaths) sets the baseline, conviction (Beliefs) provides the fuel, and attrition (Conflict/Hazards) provides the cost.

System Architecture: History, Conviction, and Attrition

The mechanical architecture of the game relies on three core design principles that the GM must understand and enforce:

Fluid Abilities: The Biographical Rating

Abilities are not "bought" during character creation; they are derived from the character's **Lifepaths**. * **The Logic**: If a Lifepath implies a specific skill (e.g., *Street Urchin* implies *Stealth*), the character has it at **Rating 2**. * **The Stack**: If a second Lifepath reinforces that same domain (e.g., *Cat Burglar*), the Rating increases by +1 (*Street Urchin* + *Cat Burglar* = *Stealth 3*). * **Permission vs. Focus**: Lifepaths provide the **Rating** (the dice pool) and the **Permission** (the right to roll for a specific task). However, they do **not** grant the "Focused" status. * **The Advancement Hook**: Players can only record advancement marks (Successes and Failures) for **Focused Abilities**. A character might be naturally gifted at *Stealth* due to their past (Rating 3), but they will **never improve** beyond that until the player spends a character creation choice or a **Karma** to "Focus" that ability.

Intent vs. Task: The Pre-Roll Contract

Before any dice are rolled, the GM and player must settle on the **Intent** (The Goal) and the **Stakes** (The Risk). This pre-roll contract ensures every roll has dramatic weight. * **Task (The Action)**: "I hit him with my sword." (This is insufficient for a roll). * **Intent (The Goal)**: "I want to drive him back into the burning building so he can't stop the ritual." * **Stakes (The Risk)**: "He parries you and pins you against the wall, leaving you vulnerable to the fire." * **The "Let It Ride" Rule**: Once the roll is made, the conflict is resolved. The outcome stands until the narrative situation changes significantly. One roll represents the entire struggle for that specific Intent.

Say Yes or Roll: The System's Immune System

The GM must strictly enforce the **Say Yes or Roll** rule. If a player describes an action that is safe, trivial, or lacks meaningful stakes and interesting failure consequences, do not call for a roll. Instead, **Say Yes**: narrate their success and move the conversation forward.

This is not just a narrative pacing guide; it is the system's mechanical immune system. Because characters earn resource pool advancement marks by emptying their Pools to 0 (which requires spending pool points on tests), allowing rolls for low-stakes or safe actions enables "Pool Farming." By ensuring that *every* roll carries binding, narrative or physical consequences, you guarantee that pushing a Pool to 0 is always a high-wire act. The player is forced to repeatedly risk their character's well-being, reputation, or goals to gain those advancement marks.

Secret Design: Qualitative Power

Secrets represent rare training, stock traits, or magic. For GMs designing custom Secrets or evaluating player requests, Secrets must represent qualitative overrides to standard rules: * **Conversion**: Spend from one pool to add dice to a different type of roll (e.g., "*Spend Reason to add dice to a Vigor roll*"). * **Permission**: Perform a

task that is normally “impossible” or “magical” (e.g., “You can track a scent like a hound”). * **Economic:** Make recovery or training more efficient (e.g., “One Downtime Action heals two Consequences”). * **Scale:** Change how the dice function in specific contexts (e.g., “When fighting alone, your 5s also explode”).

Situation Design

Every session or adventure is built around the core concept of **Situation Design**. Rather than writing a pre-planned plot or storyboard, the GM designs open-ended situations using a strict 3-step formula:

1. **Harvest Player Beliefs:** Read the players’ sheets and extract their Beliefs. The situation must directly speak to or challenge at least one player’s core drives, ideals, or personal conflicts.
2. **Inject Local Environmental Pool Pressure:** Frame the physical and metaphysical environment to target the players’ Resource Pools (Vigor, Instinct, or Reason). Ensure that interacting with the situation carries a cost in energy and reserves.
3. **Create a Clashing Choice (The Situation):** Introduce an immediate, active choice or crisis that has no pre-planned “correct” resolution. The GM does not plan the outcome—they present the clash of factions or ideals and let the players’ decisions and the dice determine what happens.

The Stakes Menu (Success at a Cost)

When a player rolls a partial success (DoS = TN), the GM achieves the player’s Intent but must enforce a cost. Use this menu to generate complications on the fly: * **Lost Opportunity:** The player gets their intent, but a different door closes forever (e.g., the contact escapes, or the path collapses). * **Collateral Damage:** The player gets their intent, but an NPC is hurt, a resource is lost, or the immediate environment is damaged. * **Vulnerability:** The player gets their intent, but is left in a compromised position. The opposition gains **Edge** (+1 to +3 dice) on the next roll.

Designing & Challenging Beliefs

A player’s Belief is not a passive opinion or a personality trait; it is a loaded spring designed to throw the character into immediate danger.

The Belief Template:

Beliefs should be written using a three-part structure to ensure they generate narrative friction: "[Conviction], therefore I will [Directive], even if [Friction]."

- *Passive (Avoid):* “I hate the local Witch-Hunters.”
- *Active (Preferred):* “The church’s Witch-Hunters are too blind to see the real rot; I will burn out the cults myself, even if the local guard tries to hang me for doing their job.”

Personal Beliefs: Actionable Convictions

For general character drives, Beliefs serve as incentive engines. When guiding players in designing their personal convictions, use this criteria structure: * **Template:** Goal + Action + Conflict/Cost. * **Example (Internal):** “I will prove my bravery (Goal) by leading every charge (Action), even when my Instinct tells me to flee (Conflict).” * **Example (External):** “I will reclaim my stolen birthright (Goal) by hunting the usurper (Action), regardless of the laws I must break (Conflict).”

Challenging Beliefs in Play:

A session must challenge character Beliefs. GMs should look at the players’ Beliefs when framing situations, intentionally putting characters in positions where they must choose: do they take the safe, easy path (violat-

ing their Belief), or do they take the dangerous path (upholding their Belief)? If they choose the dangerous, costly path, award them **1 Karma** immediately. This generates the currency they need to grow. * **GM's Role:** Frame situations that target player Beliefs to force difficult choices: * *Target the Beliefs:* If a character has a Belief of Compassion, place a vulnerable NPC in danger—but make aiding them conflict with their immediate safety or main mission. * *Introduce Compromise:* Force players to choose between their own competing ideals, making a cost or conflict inevitable (e.g., if a player has a Belief that order must be preserved and another that the poor must be protected, place them in a situation where a local magistrate is starving a village to pay an Imperial tax). * *If a Belief is too "safe":* The player will find no opportunities to invoke a cost, and their character will starve for Karma. * *Enforcing Belief Buyoffs:* A Belief can only be removed from a character sheet through a narrative Buyoff (satisfying or permanently violating/abandoning it), which must be earned through active choices and events during play. GMs must ensure that a Buyoff represents a genuine narrative resolution, climax, or crisis before approving the Buyoff and awarding the +2 Karma Burst.

The Party Belief: The Narrative North Star

The group shares one **Party Belief** that represents their common cause. While Karma remains an individual resource, the Party Belief dictates the game's structure: * **Individual Fuel:** Engaging with the Party Belief triggers **individual Karma** rewards for the players involved, following the same standard: the decision must introduce risk, conflict, or narrative cost. * **Structural Driver:** The Party Belief defines the **Story Arc**. When the Party Belief is resolved, abandoned, or fundamentally changed, an **Arc Reset** occurs (all individual Resource Pools are refilled for free). * **The Tension:** The Party Belief provides a reason for "Lone Wolf" characters to spend their individual resources and Karma on collective goals.

Pacing the Game & Sessions

A session should leave room for all characters to grow, balancing high-threat action with personal recovery.

The Session Pacing Cycle:

- **The Sequence Phase (Attrition):** GMs maintain pressure across consecutive Scenes in a Sequence. Players spend their Vigor, Instinct, and Reason pools to survive, eventually even hitting 0.
- **The Respite (Downtime):** Once the Sequence is successfully completed or resolved, the game moves into Downtime, and the strict **2 Downtime Actions budget** takes over. Players cannot recover everything. They must make hard, in-character choices: do they restore their depleted pools, repair their gear, or pursue relationships? They should almost always enter the next Sequence slightly scarred.
- **Room to Grow:** By challenging their Beliefs during the Sequence, players earn the Karma required to buy new Focuses or Secrets during Downtime, allowing their characters to mechanically evolve and grow from their experiences.

Applying Pressure: Attrition & Hazards

To keep play dynamic, GMs must apply pressure across Vigor, Instinct, and Reason, making resource management a central part of survival. * **Vigor Pressure:** Physical hazards, taxing journeys, combat, or poison. Force players to spend Vigor to survive, pushing them toward exhaustion. * **Instinct Pressure:** Social emulation, emotional betrayal, fast-paced chases, or terrifying monstrosities that strain adrenaline and gut reactions. * **Reason Pressure:** Complex world engines, cryptic riddles, lies, manipulation, or direct exposure to the mind-bending reality of the Outer Dark.

Using Clocks for Pressure

Use **4-segment or 6-segment Clocks** to track long-term pressure during play (e.g., a *Guard Alertness Clock*, *Rising Water Clock*, or *Engine Meltdown Clock*). * **Advancing the Clock:** Whenever a player fails a test or succeeds at a cost in a relevant scene, advance the clock by **1 segment**. * **The Threat Realized:** When the clock is filled, the threat manifests immediately as a new hazard, sudden combat, or a serious complication.

Attrition & Hazard Scenes

Environments (like a journey through a frozen pass or a collapsing tomb) are handled as **Attrition Scenes** rather than simple obstacles: * **The Setup:** The entire hazard or journey is framed as a single Scene. * **The Engine:** The GM sets up a **4-segment or 6-segment Danger Clock** to track the hazard's progress or the party's exposure. * **The Conflict:** The journey is broken into "pulses" requiring rolls (e.g., Vigor to resist cold, Reason to keep from getting lost). * **The Teeth:** Failure doesn't stop the movement; instead, it **ticks the clock or drains a Pool**. If a player fails a test or succeeds at a cost, the Danger Clock advances by 1 segment. If the Clock fills before the destination is reached, the characters arrive with a permanent Consequence (e.g., "Frostbitten," "Exhausted") that must be healed during Downtime.

Downtime is Not a Rest: Emphasize that recovery is an **Active Action** requiring Downtime actions. Choosing to heal a wound is a choice *not* to train or pursue a project.

Framing Scenes & Deadlines

Scenes are not immediately conflicts, but they will most likely involve a conflict.

Step 1: Setting the Situation

Do not start a scene as a mechanical conflict. First, describe the environment, the NPCs, and the atmosphere. Let the characters explore and talk. Ground the scene in the material or unstable reality of the world: * **Sensory Details:** Describe what the characters see, hear, and smell (e.g., the smell of ozone near a world engine, or the heavy dampness of the caves). * **Immediate Obstacle:** Introduce an active force, situation, or NPC that demands reaction (e.g., *"The guards are hammering on the door, calling for your arrest"*). * **Negotiate Stakes:** Before any dice are rolled, explicitly establish what is at risk. Clarify what a clean success, success at a cost, or failure will look like. The scene only escalates into a formal conflict of intent when a player attempts an action with immediate narrative or mechanical stakes.

Step 2: Establish the Stakes (The Pre-Roll Contract)

Before any dice are rolled once a conflict begins, the GM and players must negotiate the stakes of the test: * **The Player's Intent:** *"What is your character trying to achieve?"* * **The GM's Consequence:** *"What is at risk if you fail, or if you succeed at a cost?"* This pre-roll contract ensures both parties know the exact fallout before the dice hit the table.

Step 3: Define the Threat Rating (The TN)

The GM sets the Target Number (TN) based on the scene's threat (Moderate TN 2, Difficult TN 3, Formidable TN 5). A TN of 3 or higher signals to the players that they must spend Pool points, hunt for situational Edges, or deploy Secrets to survive.

Step 4: Use Clocks for Deadlines (Optional)

Not every scene needs a clock. Instead, consider using a clock, especially in scenes that could benefit from a deadline (e.g., escaping a collapsing mine, waiting for a ritual to complete, or before guard reinforcements arrive). * **The Four-Segment Scene Clock:** When designing these scene deadlines, default to a **four-segment clock**. Because any 6s rolled on a forced reroll still explode, a 4-segment clock keeps the stakes incredibly tight. It forces players to make a calculated gamble (accept a minor consequence or burn resources to avoid it) and naturally keeps rolls to a minimum.

Letting Consequences Stand

The most critical rule for GMs is: **Never soften the blow of a roll.**

- **Binding Outcomes:** Once stakes are negotiated and the dice are cast, you must enforce the outcome. If a player rolls a failure, do not let them “try again” without a change in the fiction. Enforce the agreed-upon consequence.
- **Enforce Draw the Line Stakes:** If a player escalates a conflict to Draw the Line and loses, the severe stakes (death, capture, permanent injury) **must happen**.
- **Narrative Weight:** The game’s tension relies entirely on the player knowing that their decisions matter and that failure has permanent, narrative weight. Safe play is boring play; letting consequences stand makes victories feel earned.

On-the-Fly Threat Ratings

NPCs, adversaries, and environmental hazards do not need fully detailed sheets. Instead, they are defined by a single **Threat Rating (1 to 5)**. This rating serves as their base dice pool for any contest they actively engage in (or the base TN for simple tests against them):

- **Rating 1 (Minor Threat):** A common thug, a wild dog, or a standard lock.
- **Rating 2 (Moderate Threat):** A trained town guard, a minor spirit, or a locked iron gate.
- **Rating 3 (Significant Threat):** A veteran warrior, an unstable ley line, or a complex lock mechanism.
- **Rating 4 (Severe Threat):** A faction champion, a minor demon, or a collapsing masonry vault.
- **Rating 5 (Deadly/Legendary Threat):** A fae lord, a void anomaly, or a dragon’s sleeping gaze.

Whenever a contest is rolled against them, use their Threat Rating as their opposed dice pool.

Content Generators

Use these tables to generate elements of Situation Design on-the-fly:

The Unstable Engine Generator

Use this to roll symptoms and resource pressures when players explore decaying machinery or magical hubs.

d6	Local Symptom / Environmental Twist	Primary Pool Pressure
1	Toxic fallout; air turns sulfurous and heavy.	Vigor (physical endurance)
2	Gravity shifts unpredictably; walls become floors.	Vigor (physical stability)
3	Unearthly hum makes sleep impossible; shadows lengthen.	Instinct (stress and hyper-vigilance)
4	Temporal dilation; voices echo from minutes ago.	Instinct (sensory paranoia)
5	Holographic glyphs burn into the eyes; memories begin to fade.	Reason (mental focus)
6	The machinery demands logic; a lethal riddle gates safety.	Reason (willpower and intellect)

The Situation Generator

Use this to inject immediate dramatic choices that target player Beliefs.

d6	Active Faction	Immediate Need	Moral Complication
1	Starving villagers	Seizing a grain store.	The store belongs to a temple protecting refugees.
2	Ruthless mercenaries	Executing a captured scout.	The scout is a child who knows the path to safety.
3	Outcast heretics	Cleansing a corrupted spring.	The cleansing ritual will drain the life of a local forest guide.
4	Fae emissaries	Reclaiming a stolen magical relic.	The relic is keeping a village warm against a magical winter.
5	Desperate scavengers	Activating an ancient engine.	Doing so will flood the lower slums with lethal toxic sludge.
6	Imperial guards	Enforcing a curfew.	A family is trying to escape to save their sick infant.

Threshold Anomalies

Roll when magic fails, a void-leak occurs, or a roll succeeds at a severe cost.

d6	Metaphysical Complication	Mechanical & Narrative Effect
1	The Thinning: Skin turns translucent and cold.	-1 die to social interactions; gain +1 die to <i>Stealth</i> tests.
2	Gravity Bleed: Nearby objects begin to float upwards.	Standard physical tests suffer a -1 die penalty due to lack of traction.
3	Mind-Shatter: Thoughts loop audibly for others.	Cannot deceive or hide intents; anyone can read your thoughts.
4	Decay Field: Food rots and metal rusts in seconds.	Rations are lost; all mundane gear loses 1 tier of narrative quality.
5	Shadow Leash: Your shadow acts independently and hostilely.	The shadow actively sabotages tasks, giving -1 die ongoing to physical actions.
6	Threshold Rip: A tear in reality opens, pulling things in.	Immediate physical threat (TN 3 <i>Athletics</i> or <i>Strength</i> test to avoid being pulled).

Summary

Threshold is now a game where **History** (Lifepaths) sets the baseline, **Conviction** (Beliefs) provides the fuel, and **Attrition** (Conflict/Hazards) provides the cost. It is a system that treats character development and physical recovery as a finite budget, forcing players to make hard choices about who they are and what they are willing to lose.

Optional and Advanced Rules

Species-Specific Pools

To make the Stocks feel more distinct, GMs can introduce unique, specialized Pools that characters gain access to through specific Lifepaths:

- **Trolls: Matriarchal Memory**
 - Trolls can open a secondary Pool called **Memory** (max 3). Points are spent to recall forgotten historical details, speak dead tongues, or gain Edge when dealing with ancient machinery.
 - *Refresh*: Recovered by eating uncooked meat or sitting in dark, subterranean silence for a session.
- **Fae: Glamour**
 - Elves can open a secondary Pool called **Glamour** (max 3). Points are spent to alter how they are perceived (appearing as someone else), create temporary illusions, or forge items out of light.
 - *Refresh*: Recovered by creating a piece of objective beauty or experiencing an intense, dangerous emotion.
- **Dwarves: Runic Focus**
 - Dwarves can open a secondary Pool called **Runic Focus** (max 3). Points are spent to set permanent physical wards on doors, imbue crafted weapons with unbreaking traits, or resist poisons.
 - *Refresh*: Recovered by spending a Downtime action working at a forge or carving runes into stone.

Mythic or High-Power Play

If your campaign involves legendary figures, demi-gods, or characters commanding ancient world engines, use the following rules:

- **Unbound Pools**: Characters can increase their Vigor, Instinct, or Reason Pools beyond the standard maximum of 10, up to a maximum of 15.
- **Mythic Secrets**: Introduce legendary Secrets that cost **5 Karma** to learn (e.g., *Sunder the Earth*, *Command the Winds*, or *Reject Death*). These Secrets allow characters to alter local landscapes, command storms, or survive Fatal consequences without prior stakes negotiation.
- **Legendary Edge**: Characters can accumulate up to **+5 dice** from Edge (instead of the standard limit of +3) when utilizing mythic gear or ancient relics.

The Two-Lifepath Framework

The **Two-Lifepath Framework** is a simplified, high-velocity character creation method designed to emulate the instant, pick-and-play “playbook” feel of PbtA games. By framing character creation around a single, evocative sentence—“**I am a [Stock/Origin] [Career]**”—players can skip complex math and begin playing immediately.

Choosing two lifepaths corresponds directly to the standard **2-Lifepath starting package** from the main Character Creation rules. A starting character created this way receives: * **Pool Points: 8 points** to distribute among Vigor, Instinct, and Reason (each starts at base rating 1). * **Ability Customization Points: 4 points** to increase starting Ability ratings (+1 rating per point; maximum +2 on any single Ability). * **Focuses: 4 Focused Abilities** to select. * **Beliefs: 2 Beliefs** to define core drives. * **Secrets: 1 starting Secret** (from Stock or Generic lists). * **Karma: 2 starting Karma**.

How It Maps to the Sheet

When building a character using this framework, you divide your two lifepaths into **The Origin** (representing Stock and Culture) and **The Career** (representing training):

1. **Lifepath 1: The Origin** (Stock/Culture):
 - Determines Stock (Human, Troll, Dwarf, or Fae).

- Sets starting Pools array.
 - Grants two or three cultural abilities at **Rating 1**.
 - Grants one Stock Secret.
2. **Lifepath 2: The Career** (Training/Specialty):
- Sets your main specialty ability to **Rating 2**.
 - Grants two or three career-related abilities at **Rating 1**.
 - Grants one starting Secret or a starting Belief.

Concrete Example: “I am a Human Ranger”

If a player chooses: *“I am a Human Ranger (specifically from the Steppe Nomads)”*, their sheet is constructed instantly:

- **Stock:** Human
- **Starting Pools:** 8 points distributed among Vigor, Instinct, and Reason (which start at 1). For example: Vigor 4, Instinct 4, Reason 3.
- **Origin Abilities (Rating 1):** *Horsemanship 1, Survival 1*.
- **Career Specialty (Rating 2):** *Archery* (or *Marksmanship*) 2.
- **Career Abilities (Rating 1):** *Stealth 1, Tracking 1*.
- **Focuses:** The player chooses 4 of their starting abilities to be Focused (e.g., *Archery, Stealth, Tracking, Survival*).
- **Secrets:** The player gains 1 starting Secret: *Jack of All Trades* (Human stock capability) or *Whispers of Power* (wilderness survival Secret).
- **Beliefs:** 2 Beliefs. E.g., *“The open plains are honest; stone walls are a slow poison,”* and *“I will never let a companion fall behind in the wild.”*
- **Starting Karma:** 2.

Synergy with Postponed Choices

This framework pairs perfectly with the **Postponing Choices** rule. If a group wants to start playing immediately with zero prep:

1. Every player writes down their two-lifepath sentence (e.g., *“I am a Troll Blacksmith”*, *“I am an Elf Scholar”*, or *“I am a Dwarf Mercenary”*).
2. They distribute their 8 Pool points so they can track resource spending.
3. They leave the rest of their character sheet blank.
4. As they play through their first Sequence of Scenes, they write down their specific Abilities, select their 4 Focuses, choose their 1 Secret, and define their 2 Beliefs on-the-fly when the narrative demands it.

Competent Professionals (Higher Starting Baseline)

By default, *Threshold* is a gritty game where starting characters are considered unreliable novices in their primary field (Ability Rating 2) unless they spend scarce resource pools or utilize situational Edges.

If the table prefers a campaign where starting characters feel like established, competent professionals from day one, GMs can implement the **Competent Professionals** optional rule:

- **Primary Specialty Rating:** When opening an Ability that represents the primary focus, core trade, or central training of a chosen Lifepath, its baseline starting rating is **3** (instead of 2).
- **The Math:** This gives a starting specialist a **56.2% chance** of succeeding at a Moderate (TN 2) task natively. If their second Lifepath supports that same Ability, or if they spend a starting Customization Point, it stacks to **Rating 4**, yielding a **72.9% chance** of success on Moderate tasks.
- **Two-Lifepath Framework Synergy:** If playing with both the *Two-Lifepath Framework* and *Competent Professionals*, the character’s **Career Specialty** starts at **Rating 3** (instead of 2).

True Nature of the World

The World and Its Limits

The world is finite, structured, and incomplete. Its laws allow matter, causality, and time to persist, but they do not resolve into permanence. This incompleteness allows change, death, and creation to exist at all.

Existence is shaped by a boundary: the Threshold between Being and Not-Being. Most beings are shaped by it without awareness. Very few perceive it directly. Nothing in the world is entirely stable, though most things endure long enough to appear so.

The world has no corrective instinct. It does not heal, balance, or defend itself. When its limits are exceeded, consequences follow without intention or judgment.

The Rise of the First Men

The First Men were exceptional mortals, distinguished by their refusal to accept death as a final condition. Mortality was treated as a problem to be solved.

They built empires, but their true legacy lay elsewhere. They constructed world engines: vast, interlinked systems that reshaped reality. These engines stabilized regions, extended life, bound spirits, altered causality, and imposed continuity where none naturally existed.

The engines were not isolated artifacts. They were woven into landscapes, bloodlines, rituals, and institutions, forming an artificial order layered over the world's inherent instability.

For a time, the engines succeeded. The First Men approached a state that resembled immortality.

Trolls and the Early World

Trolls arose alongside the First Men. They are native to the world, bound by memory, instinct, and lineage rather than abstraction or belief. Identity among trolls is cumulative. Knowledge, emotion, and intent pass through generations, binding the clan into a continuous whole. Some matriarchs embody this continuity so completely that the clan itself functions as a single enduring presence.

Trolls watched the First Men closely. They witnessed ambition pursued without restraint and learned its consequences early. Distrust of humans took root during this age and has never faded. It persists in ritual, instinct, and custom. Trolls guard the deeper truths of their kind carefully; exposure would make them vulnerable in ways outsiders could exploit.

The Arrival of the Fey

Elves and dwarves are fey in origin, outsiders drawn into the world by different impulses.

Elves were drawn to intensity, experience, and transformation. They observed mortality, tested its limits, and in some cases embraced it. Their existence remains oriented toward the Threshold, never fully anchored in the material world.

Dwarves were drawn to structure and endurance. They bound themselves more deeply to the world, accepting aging, illness, and death on extended timescales. Their crafts and magic arise from careful understanding rather than illusion, shaped by a willingness to accept the world's weight.

Dragons and the Outside

Dragons are not native to the world. They originate beyond the Threshold, Outside existence as the world understands it. They are not subject to its tolerances, metaphysics, or proportional limits.

The world engines did not summon dragons. They made the world perceptible to them. By enforcing permanence, amplifying consequence, and concentrating meaning, the engines rendered the world significant enough to intrude upon.

Dragons enter as overwhelming presences rather than inhabitants. Their impact on land and history is incidental, a byproduct of existing where they do not belong.

The Fall of the First Men

The fall of the First Men unfolded over generations.

As the engines grew more complex, their interdependence increased. Localized failures began to propagate. Civil conflict, engine collapse, dragon incursions, and internal decay compounded until the imposed order could no longer sustain itself.

Most of the First Men died. Some endured, but endurance required alteration. Those who survived bound themselves to engines, rituals, or unnatural states of existence. Memory, knowledge, and ambition persisted, sustained by means no longer compatible with living flesh.

These survivors did not fade into myth. They remained present, hidden, and dangerous.

The Age of Enslavement

In the ruins of the old order, the survivors ruled.

They bred a second race of humans designed for utility. Mortal, short-lived, and constrained, these humans served as labor, sustenance, and infrastructure. Their cultures were shaped to support domination rather than continuity. All modern humanity descends from them.

Rule was uneven. Some survivors governed openly. Others withdrew and ruled through intermediaries. Many treated their territories as estates or experiments. Rivalry and conflict continued even as their dominion eroded.

The Second Cataclysm

The Second Cataclysm ended this age. Its causes were numerous: rebellion, sabotage of engines, divine intervention, dragon devastation, and the structural failure of systems already in decline.

The result was decisive. The dominance of the survivors collapsed. Many were destroyed. Others were bound, diminished, or driven into isolation. Numerous world engines were shattered or crippled, though few were completely eliminated.

Humanity was freed. The world that followed was not a restoration. It was narrower, harsher, and more fragile. Humanity emerged shaped by enslavement, collapse, and loss rather than inheritance.

Aftermath: The Undead Remnants and Vampires

Some of the First Men endured in altered forms. Bound to fragments of their world engines, rituals, or corrupted estates, these undead remnants survived the Cataclysm. They retained memory, will, and ambition, but no longer resembled living humans.

From these remnants, vampires arose. They are the deliberate offspring of the undead survivors, created to extend their existence. Vampires are fully dead; what moves in the world is a fragment of a remnant's identity, preserved through feeding. This preservation is not choice or sentiment—it is necessity.

Vampires retain only fragments of the mortals they descend from, enough to endure. Memory, cunning, and hunger are tools, not humanity. They are predators: deliberate, self-serving, and relentless, maintaining coherence by consuming the living and the world around them.

The World After

Humanity now exists fully within the world's limits. Humans age, die, forget, and rebuild. This volatility allows adaptation at a pace no other people can match.

Trolls persist as they always have, carrying memory forward through lineage and ritual, their suspicion of humans grounded in ancient observation rather than myth.

Faery remains adjacent to the world, oriented around the Threshold rather than place. It offers stasis and escape at the cost of consequence. Those who linger too long often lose the capacity to return unchanged, if at all.

Gods and demons exert influence through pressure rather than command. Their domains shape weather, fertility, magic, and fortune. Alignment is rewarded indirectly; refusal carries cost.

Magic reflects the world's instability. True Magicians are rare, distinguished by their ability to perceive the Threshold directly. Most interaction with magic remains partial and unexamined.

Dragons do not persist indefinitely. Continued presence eventually exceeds what the world can bear. Their departure, destruction, or transcendence leaves lasting scars.

The Present Condition

The world endures under accumulated strain. Broken engines remain embedded in its structure. Ancient ambitions persist in diminished forms. Long-lived beings act cautiously. Vampires feed to preserve what little remains of themselves.

Mortals continue to act, knowing that permanence is unattainable and that failure is inevitable. History advances not toward resolution, but through pressure, compromise, and collapse.

Threshold: Rules Reference

Threshold is a gritty roleplaying game of survival, consequence, and conviction [1.1]. Characters are defined by their backgrounds (Lifepaths) and pushed to their limits by an unforgiving world [1.1, 3].

1. Ability Tests (Core Resolution)

When you take action under pressure, roll a pool of six-sided dice (d6) equal to your **Ability** rating [1.1, 4].
 * **The Roll**: Each 4 or 5 yields one success. A 6 is a success and “explodes” (roll an extra die) [4]. * **Degrees of Success vs. Target Number (TN)**: * **Clean Success (DoS > TN)**: You achieve your goal cleanly [4]. * **Success at a Cost (DoS = TN)**: You succeed, but suffer a minor complication, resource drain, or harm [4]. * **Fail Forward (DoS < TN)**: You fail, but the situation changes, introducing a new complication instead of a dead stop [4]. * **Untrained (Rating 0)**: You automatically fail unless you spend a Pool point or have a situational advantage (**Edge**) to roll 1d6 [4].

2. Resource Pools & Beliefs

Characters manage a tight economy of physical, mental, and spiritual resources: * **Resource Pools (Vigor, Instinct, Reason)**: Spend 1 point from a pool to add +1 die to a relevant test, or to activate rule-bending abilities called **Secrets** [5]. Spent points do not automatically recover [2, 6]. Completely reducing a pool to 0 is the *only* way to earn an advancement mark to permanently increase its maximum cap [6]. * **Beliefs**: Written in a three-part structure: *Conviction* → *Directive* → *Friction* [22]. When you act on a Belief to your detriment, you earn **Karma** (used to buy Secrets, open Focuses, or buy rerolls) [9, 11]. You can only change a Belief by resolving or abandoning it in play (Buyoff, yielding +2 Karma) and spending 1 Karma to buy a new one.

3. Contests & Drawing the Line

When two active forces clash, they enter a **Contest** [6]. * **Standard Contests**: Both sides roll and compare successes [6]. The highest DoS wins; a tie results in a compromise [6]. Standard contests carry low stakes (e.g., losing gear, narrative setbacks, or minor injuries) [7, 8]. * **Drawing the Line**: If you lose a contest, you can refuse the outcome and escalate the conflict—but *only* if the stakes threaten your life or directly challenge one of your Beliefs [7]. Both sides declare severe, binding stakes (like death or permanent ruin) [7]. The conflict is then resolved in a tense, three-round evaluation sequence where the loser must accept the declared severe stakes [7].

4. Downtime

Downtime is an active phase of hard choices, not an automatic full recovery [2]. Players typically receive 2 **actions** to spend on the following: * **Recover**: Spend an action to restore spent Pool points or heal a narrative consequence [2]. * **Train & Build**: Spend an action to work on long-term Project Clocks (such as learning Secrets, casting ritual magic, or forging relationships) [2, 11].