
THRESHOLD
A FANTASY ROLEPLAYING GAME

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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: Specialized traits, training, or supernatural abilities that break standard rules or grant unique narrative authority. Secrets are purchased with Karma and often cost Pool points to activate.
- Focus: A flag marked next to a specific Ability on your sheet. Only Abilities with an open Focus can accumulate experience marks and improve over time, representing dedicated practice.
- Karma: The meta-currency of the game, used to reroll checks, unlock new Secrets/Beliefs, and open a Focus on an Ability.
- Circles: Domain-specific Abilities representing your social connections and faction networks.

Identity & Belief (Who You Are)

Your character in *Threshold* is not a static collection of mathematical variables. They are a fragile, resilient entity defined by three simple questions: What have you survived? What do you believe? And what are you willing to lose to get through the night? On your sheet, this identity is built through your open-ended Abilities, your Beliefs, and your Secrets.

Your Abilities are your lived experience—things like *Sailing*, *Swordplay*, or *History*. Instead of rolling against physical stats like Strength or Dexterity, you roll dice directly from these Abilities. If your character is untrained in a task, your rating in that Ability is 0. In this game, being untrained means you do not even get to roll the dice; the task is simply too difficult, and you automatically fail. To even attempt a task you do not know how to do, you must buy your way into the roll, either by spending your own vital energy from a Resource Pool or by finding a distinct, narrative advantage in your environment.

To make your character uniquely yours, you choose Secrets. Secrets are qualitative traits that break the standard rules of the game, granting you strange advantages, specialized techniques, or occult knowledge. Some are passive, while others must be fueled by spending points from your active pools.

Your character's emotional and moral core is defined by your Beliefs. You write these Beliefs using a three-part template designed to create dramatic tension. First, you declare a Conviction, which is the core truth you hold. Second, you write a Directive, which is the action you must take to uphold that truth. Finally, you define your Friction—the personal flaw, temptation, or external cost that makes following your Directive painful. When your Friction is triggered during play, and you accept a hard compromise or a painful consequence to stay true to yourself, you earn Karma. Karma is the currency of the soul, and you will spend it to focus your mind and grow.

You do not need to have any of this figured out to start playing. The game actively encourages you to postpone your choices. You can sit down at the table with a blank sheet, write down your starting pool ratings, and start the story. When your back is against the wall in the middle of a tense scene, you can decide right then and there to allocate your starting points into *Stealth*, choose a Secret, or define a Belief that fits the crisis. You discover who your character is by watching how they react to pressure.

Strain & Growth (What You Suffer)

The physical and mental limits of your character are tracked through three active Resource Pools: Vigor, Instinct, and Reason. Vigor is your muscle and physical stamina; Instinct is your gut reactions and social drive; Reason is your focus and mental clarity. These pools are not hit points. They are your active energy. When you need to push past your limits, you spend points from these pools to buy extra dice for your rolls or to trigger your active Secrets.

Spent pool points do not recover automatically. To fill your pools back up, you must spend your limited Downtime Actions to rest, utilizing a recovery process called the Three Crossings. To recover spent points in one pool, you must perform a resting activity associated with a *different* domain. If you want to rest your broken, exhausted body to recover your Vigor, you must engage in a quiet, mental activity like reading or contemplation to soothe your mind.

Instead of tracking numeric damage, physical and mental trauma is recorded as narrative Consequences across five severity tiers: Minor, Moderate, Serious, Lasting, and Fatal. A Minor Consequence like being *Flustered* or *Bruised* imposes a minus one die penalty to one specific relevant test and fades at the end of the scene. A Moderate Consequence like a *Sprained Ankle* imposes a penalty of minus one die to all relevant rolls and requires a Downtime Action to heal. A Serious Consequence like a *Concussion* or *Broken Arm* imposes a penalty of minus two dice and requires specialized medical attention and a Downtime action to stabilize (reducing it to Moderate). Beyond these lie Lasting Consequences (permanent scars, maiming, or ruined standing only healed via major narrative quests) and Fatal Consequences (death, absolute madness, or permanent removal from play).

Your character only grows through personal drive and struggle. This is governed by two complementary engines: Karma and the Focus Lock.

Karma fuels structural growth. By following your Beliefs into danger, compromise, and conflict, you earn Karma. You spend this universal currency to permanently expand your Resource Pool maximums during Downtime (costing your current maximum plus one: Current Maximum + 1), learn powerful Secrets, and open new Focuses.

The Focus Lock dictates how your skills improve. Your character cannot learn from everything they do; they must focus their attention. You can roll any Ability on your sheet, but you cannot record successes or failures to improve it unless you have checked the Focus box next to its name. To open a Focus on an Ability, you must spend one Karma—which you earned by putting your Beliefs under pressure.

Once an Ability is Focused, success and failure will shape your mastery. To learn an untrained skill and raise it from 0 to 1, you must record two marks (at least one success and up to one failure). To raise a trained skill to higher levels, you must accumulate a number of total marks equal to your target rating ($N + 1$). Up to half of those marks may come from learning through failure, while the rest must be demonstrated successes. You clear the marks, the skill rating increases by one, and your character steps forward, permanently changed by what they have endured.

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, inspiring our conversational flow and fail-forward philosophy.
- Dogs in the Vineyard again by D. Vincent Baker: Our "Draw the Line" mechanic was directly inspired by this game's escalation rules.
- HeroQuest / QuestWorlds by Robin D. Laws: The inspiration for our open-ended, player-named Abilities, where character competence is defined by evocative descriptors rather than rigid attribute lists.
- Hot Circle RPG (Casper Dudarec) & The Gold Hack (Martín Van Houtte) — fellow travelers in the art of distilling, abstracting, and modernizing the core machinery of *The Burning Wheel*.

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

The World

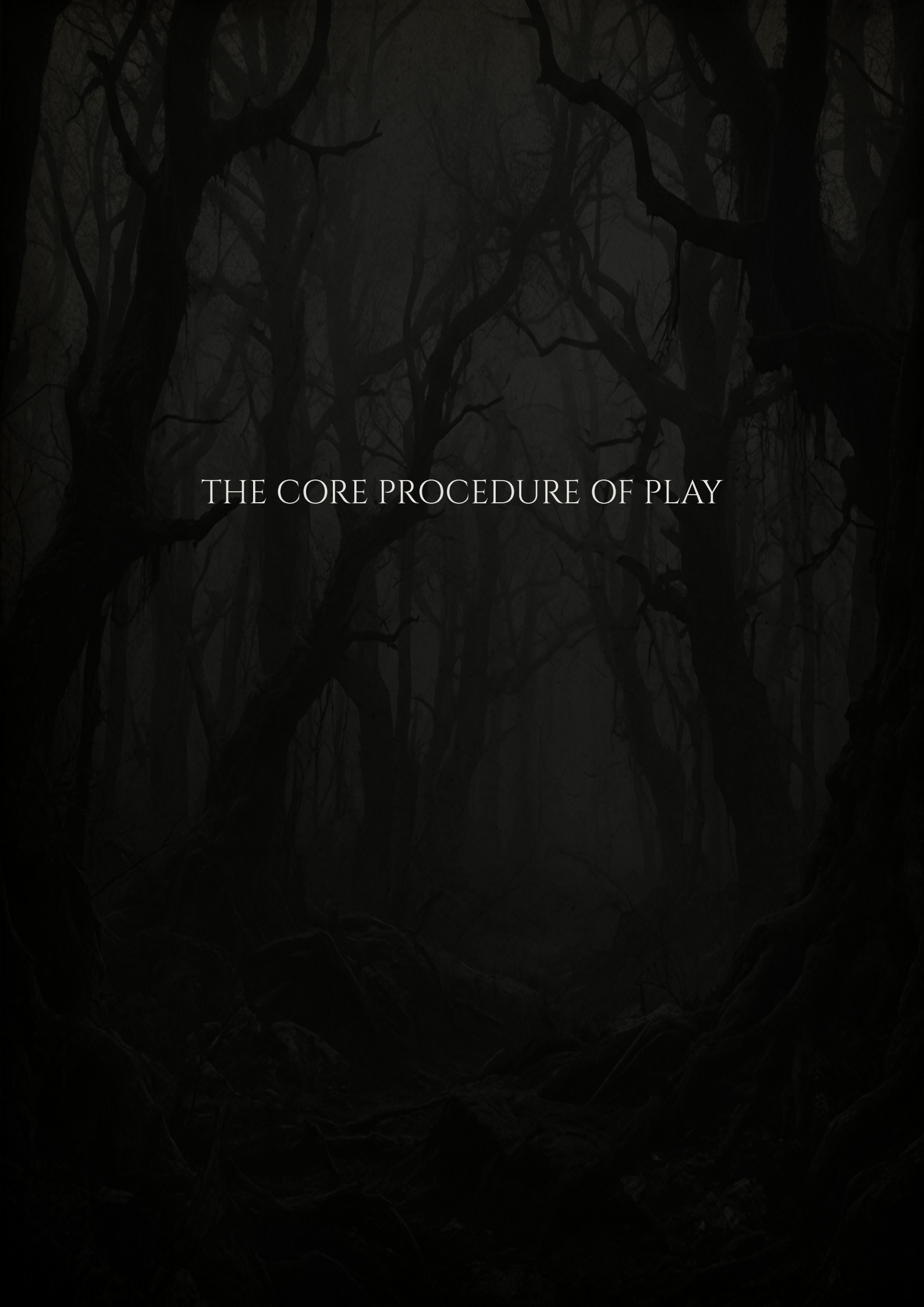
The dark, mythic atmosphere of *Threshold* and the fragile borderlands of its setting draw inspiration from legendary mythologies and classic fantasy works:

- 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.

Art

- Front Cover Photo: By A Chosen Soul on Unsplash (available at Unsplash).



THE CORE PROCEDURE OF PLAY

Game Cycle: Scene, Sequence, and Downtime

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

$$\text{Sequence} \longrightarrow \text{Scene 1} \longrightarrow \text{Scene 2} \cdots \longrightarrow \text{Sequence Ends} \longrightarrow \text{Downtime}$$

Within a sequence:

$$\text{Frame scene} \longrightarrow \text{Introduce conflict} \longrightarrow \text{Resolve conflict} \longrightarrow \text{Minor Consequences clear} \longrightarrow \text{Next scene}$$

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 the lock of 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 the game's pace—every decision carries real weight, and characters cannot farm advancement through low-stakes play. Skill advancement is restricted to Focused Abilities tested under pressure, while Pool increases and Secrets require Karma earned through genuine Belief friction and narrative drama. Growth is always earned, never manufactured.

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: Resource Pools represent finite reserves of energy. A character cannot simply "sit and do nothing" to regain their edge; recovery is dynamic and relational. In Threshold, recovering a depleted Pool (restoring it fully to its maximum capacity) requires spending 1 Downtime action and engaging in an activity rooted in a different Pool—a principle known as The Three Crossings.

Crucially, Three Crossings activities do not cost pool points or require test rolls; they are narrative outlets of respite and contrast. Even if a character has multiple pools at 0, they are never deadlocked. Any pool can be refreshed by leaning into either of the other two domains:

- Recovering Vigor (Physical Exhaustion ← Reason or Instinct): A physically battered or exhausted character (0 Vigor) recovers through rest complemented by mental or emotional engagement: sitting quietly deciphering lore, sketching, or playing chess (Reason-adjacent), or sharing warm food, song, and camaraderie around the campfire (Instinct-adjacent).
- Recovering Reason (Mental Burnout ← Instinct or Vigor): A character suffering mental fatigue or shattered focus (0 Reason) recovers through emotional grounding or physical release: losing themselves in hearthside music, laughter, and tavern warmth (Instinct-adjacent), or gentle, rhythmic physical movement such as walking, firewood chopping, or swimming (Vigor-adjacent—without requiring strenuous exertion or pool spending).
- Recovering Instinct (Emotional/Social Burnout ← Vigor or Reason): A character who is emotionally or socially hollowed out (0 Instinct) from lying, manipulating, or suffering trauma recovers by seeking calm solitude or structured discipline: meticulous, repetitive physical craftwork like leatherworking, whittling, or mending gear (Vigor-adjacent), or quiet solitary study, stargazing, and organizing maps (Reason-adjacent).

> No Recovery Deadlocks: Because recovery activities are purely narrative contrasts rather than strenuous challenges, a character with multiple pools at 0 is never trapped. For example, a character at 0 Vigor and 0 Reason can easily restore Reason first by resting quietly among companions (Instinct), or restore Vigor first through peaceful meditation and reading (Reason), subsequently opening up all other recovery paths.

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. Tending to Harm (Recovering Consequences)

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). Automatic (no roll required).
- Communal Recovery: Another character with a relevant caretaking Ability at Rating 1+ (*First Aid/Medicine* for physical harm, *Religion/Occult Lore/Counseling* for mental strain, or *Etiquette/Circles* for social strain) spends 1 Downtime action to tend to you. This is an automatic action (no roll required); it clears a Moderate consequence or reduces a Serious consequence to Moderate across any domain.
- Serious Consequences: Require specialized aid/resources and 1 Downtime action to reduce down to Moderate (or two Downtime actions spent over separate Downtime phases of pure bed rest without aid).
- 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. Dedicated practice, theory, and drilling awards 1 advancement mark (failure/practice) toward that Ability's target rating, counting against its permitted failure allowance (see Advancement).

4. Forge Relationship (1 Action)

Spend 1 Downtime action to roll a specific *Circles* Ability against a baseline Moderate TN (2) to seek out a contact. Clean Success ($DoS > TN$) establishes a reliable named NPC contact (granting Edge [+1 die] when called upon). Success at a Cost ($DoS = TN$) establishes the contact, but with strings attached (e.g., an outstanding debt or rival faction entanglement). Failure ($DoS < TN$) fails to find an ally and creates an awkward complication or rival. Win or lose, this test records an advancement mark for that ability if it is Focused (player's choice of success or failure on $DoS = TN$).

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 against a baseline Moderate TN (2) (representing standard, undisturbed workspace conditions; the GM may assign a higher TN of 3+ for complex, exotic, or hazardous projects):

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).

Advancement Marks on Projects: Routine project rolls (TN 2 under safe conditions) do not award advancement marks; unhurried work in safety does not generate sufficient pressure to learn from error. However, if a project is undertaken under high difficulty (TN 3+) or inherent peril, the roll counts as a high-stakes test and awards an advancement mark (success or failure) if the rolled Ability is Focused.

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—specialized training or supernatural traits that grant unique capabilities. (See Advancement and Secrets).

Structural Growth During Downtime (Karma)

In addition to spending your two Downtime actions, Downtime is when characters spend accumulated Karma to purchase permanent structural advancements (which do not consume a Downtime Action slot):

- Increasing Pool Maximums: Spend Karma equal to Current Maximum + 1 to permanently increase a Resource Pool's maximum rating by +1, accompanied by narrative conditioning, recovery, or spiritual transformation (see Advancement).
- Adopting or Replacing Beliefs: Defining an unfilled starting Belief slot or refilling a slot cleared by a Buyoff costs 0 Karma during Downtime. Players can spend 1 Karma during Downtime or play to adopt an additional Belief ahead of time (up to the maximum of 3; see Beliefs).

RESOLUTION

Open-Ended Abilities Design

There is no fixed list of core attributes (such as Strength, Intellect, or Dexterity) or rigid skill lists in this game. Instead, Abilities are open-ended, player-named traits representing specific training, experience, or backgrounds (e.g., *Farming*, *Stealth*, *Etiquette*, *Claymore Duelist*, *Religion*, *Appraisal*).

While the rulebook and Lifepaths suggest standard skill titles for clarity, players are encouraged to name and describe their Abilities to fit their character concept. 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 Resource Pool points (up to 2 points for +1 or +2 dice) 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), earning no advancement marks.
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). On a Focused Ability, this test yields a failure mark.
   - 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. On a Focused Ability, the player chooses whether to log a success mark or a failure mark (see Advancement).
   - DoS > TN (Clean Success): You achieve your intent perfectly with no strings attached. On a Focused Ability, this test yields a success mark.

> 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).
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.
	THRESHOLD	
Formidable	5	Near peak human limits; requires exceptional luck or skill.

Difficulty	Target Number (successes)	Guidelines
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. *(For campaigns focusing on survival, tactical preparation, or gear wear-and-tear, see the Optional Module: Assets, Gear & Tags.)*
- 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.

Under standard rules, each Resource Pool has a maximum capacity cap of 10.

Spending Pools

Resource Pools represent your reserves of stamina, mental focus, and drive. During any Ability Test or Contest, you may spend points from a relevant Pool to push beyond your limits:

- Raw Push (+1 or +2 Dice): Before rolling, you may spend up to 2 points from a relevant Pool. Each point spent adds +1 die to your pool for that roll (maximum +2 dice per test).
- Activating Secrets: You may spend Pool points to activate Secrets as dictated by the Secret's text. Pool points spent to activate Secrets do not count toward the 2-point raw push limit.

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. Any action or Secret requiring a point from an empty pool cannot be used.
2. Vulnerability: You have no buffer left to absorb strain or push rolls in that domain until you recover points during Downtime. Depleted pools are restored to their maximum capacity via The Three Crossings (1 Downtime action per pool; see Core Procedure). Even if multiple pools are at 0, characters are never locked out of recovery—rejuvenating activities are narrative contrasts that never require spending pool points.
3. Advancement: Emptying a pool does not directly advance it. To permanently increase a Pool's maximum capacity, you spend Karma during Downtime through focused conditioning and growth (see Advancement).

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 corresponding to the winner's intent. If the winner's intent was offensive or damaging, the loser takes direct Harm in the relevant physical, mental, or social domain scaled by the Margin of Victory (Winner's DoS − Loser's DoS, capped at Serious unless pre-roll stakes establish otherwise): 1 = Minor, 2 = Moderate, 3+ = Serious. If the winner's intent was defensive, evasive, or positional (e.g., parrying a strike, ducking behind cover, or escaping a grapple), the winner achieves that safety cleanly, and the loser suffers a situational or positional consequence (such as losing their footing, sacrificing an Edge, or being left overextended) rather than direct Harm.
  - If both parties roll the same DoS (Margin 0), the result is a Compromise. Both parties achieve a version of their intent (Success at a Cost), and both suffer a Minor Consequence (or equivalent situational fallout).

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 catastrophic, binding stakes for losing the overall conflict (e.g., a Lasting or Fatal physical consequence, permanent captivity, total destruction of a faction or key relic, or permanent ruin of status). Because Draw the Line is reserved for decisive turning points, these stakes must exceed routine consequences; this ensures that choosing to Yield (which inflicts an immediate Moderate Consequence) remains a meaningful, rational escape from catastrophic ruin. The GM and players must agree on these stakes before rolling, and once resolved, catastrophic stakes cannot be undone or bypassed with meta-currency (such as *Escape a Tight Spot*).

Declaration Order: The Escalator Rule. Because escalating a conflict forces higher stakes onto the scene, information priority is asymmetric: whoever demands more from the scene must show their commitment first.

- Exchange 1 (The Initial Escalation): The participant who lost the initial Contest (or whoever triggered Draw the Line if escalating from a Compromise) is the Escalator. They must declare their Pool Push (+0, +1, or +2 dice) first. The opposing party sees this commitment and chooses to either Yield (taking a Moderate Consequence and ending the conflict immediately) or Commit (declaring their own Pool Push and rolling against them).
- Subsequent Exchanges: In subsequent exchanges, whichever participant lost the previous exchange becomes the Escalator and must declare their Pool Push first. If an exchange ends in a tie, the declaration priority remains with whoever was the Escalator in that tied exchange (or the initial instigator if the score is level).
- Yielding: Before declaring commitments in any exchange, either participant may choose to Yield (taking an immediate Moderate Consequence—or the initial Contest's unaccepted Consequence, if higher—such as *Battered*, *Sprained Wrist*, or *Losing Face*) to safely bow out and concede their intent rather than continuing to risk Serious harm or the severe declared stakes.

3. Procedure (The Crucible): The escalation is resolved in a sequence of exchanges (the first side to secure two exchange victories wins the overall conflict). If the initial Contest was won by one side, that winner starts with 1 win (the escalation usually concludes in 1 or 2 exchanges, unless extended by deadlocks). If the initial Contest was a Compromise (same DoS), both sides start with 0 wins (requiring 2 to 3 exchanges).
4. Preparation & Rolling: In each exchange, after the Escalator and opponent make their declarations (following the Escalator Rule above), both committing sides roll their pools (including any Ability, applied Edges, Secrets, and declared Pool Push).
5. Score-Based Resolution: Resolve each exchange as a standard Contest. The participant with the higher DoS wins the exchange and earns 1 Victory Point.
   - Tied Exchanges (Uneven Score): If one participant leads (1–0) and the exchange ties, no Victory Points are awarded to either side; the clash remains deadlocked, and participants must fight another exchange to achieve a decisive breakthrough (the leader cannot coast to victory on a tie).
   - Tied Exchanges (Level Score): If participants are level when the exchange ties:
     - *At 0–0 (Exchange 1 after a Compromise):* Both participants earn 1 Victory Point (moving to 1–1).
     - *At 1–1:* Both participants earn 1 Victory Point (moving to 2–2), immediately triggering the Simultaneous Victory Impasse.
   - 2–0 Victory: A clean win. The victor achieves their intent cleanly and completely avoids the severe stakes with no immediate complications. The non-yielding loser suffers the full declared catastrophic stakes (such as death, maiming, or ruin).
   - 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 from the grueling exertion. The non-yielding loser suffers the full declared catastrophic stakes.
   - Simultaneous Victory Impasse (Shared Pyrrhic Outcome): If both participants reach 2 Victory Points on the same exchange (from tying at 1–1), the clash ends in a pyrrhic stalemate. Both sides achieve a compromised version of their Intent, but both suffer a Serious Consequence from the brutal exchange, avoiding the ultimate declared stakes.

Draw the Line: Multiple Participants (The Standoff)

When a conflict involves three or more characters with mutually exclusive Intents, and a participant refuses to Accept Defeat, it triggers a multi-way Draw the Line.

Resolving The Standoff

A Standoff is played in a series of Exchanges. The first participant to earn 2 Victory Points wins the Standoff and achieves their declared Intent. If a single participant won the initial contest that provoked the Standoff, that character begins with 1 Victory Point, while all challengers start at 0 VP. If the Standoff erupts from a Compromise or a fresh multi-party crisis, all participants start at 0 VP.

Step 1: Declaration & Commitment (The Escalator Rule) Action in a Standoff is driven by narrative positioning and open information. There are no secret reveals or hidden dice allocations.

- Exchange 1 (The Aggressor Shows First): The participant who initiated or forced the Standoff is the Aggressor. They must declare their intent and their Pool Push (+0, +1, or +2 dice) first. *(If a participant began with 1 VP from an initial contest, they always declare last in Exchange 1; any other challengers declare in between in narrative order).*
- Subsequent Exchanges (Ascending DoS): In Exchange 2 and beyond, declaration priority is determined by performance in the preceding exchange. The participant who rolled the lowest Degrees of Success (DoS) is reeling and must declare first. Commitments then proceed in ascending DoS order, ending with the previous exchange's victor, who declares last.
  (Tie-breaker: If two participants rolled identical DoS, whoever currently holds fewer total Victory Points declares first; if still tied, follow clockwise or narrative order).
- Sequential Reactions: When the spotlight falls on your turn to declare, you see all preceding commitments and choose:
  - Yield: Suffer an immediate Moderate Consequence (or the initial Contest's unaccepted Consequence, if higher—e.g., *Disarmed*, *Bruised and Shaken*, *Losing Face*) and exit the Standoff cleanly. You are permanently safe from Ultimate Stakes.
  - Commit: Declare your intent, state your Pool Push (+0, +1, or +2 dice), and prepare to roll.

(Pruning the Field: If yields leave only one participant standing at any point, the Standoff ends immediately; that remaining character wins outright without needing to roll).

Step 2: Roll & Resolve Exchange. Once all active participants have declared whether they are Yielding or Committing:

- Every committing participant rolls their pool (Ability + Edges + declared Pool Push). After rolling, participants may spend Karma to reroll their pool as normal.
- The participant with the highest total successes wins the Exchange and earns 1 Victory Point.
  - *Tied Exchanges (Leader Involved):* If a participant who currently holds the lead (1 VP) is among those tied for the highest DoS, the exchange awards no VP to anyone on that exchange (preventing a score leader from coasting to victory on an indecisive clash and forcing a decisive breakthrough).
  - *Tied Exchanges (Trailing or Level):* If trailing participants tie each other for the highest DoS while the score leader rolls lower, or if all tied participants are level (all at 0 VP, or all at 1 VP), all tied participants earn 1 Victory Point. Reaching 2 Victory Points simultaneously triggers the Shared Pyrrhic Outcome (or *Mutually Assured Destruction*).

Step 3: Climax & Ultimate Stakes Repeat Steps 1 and 2 in subsequent Exchanges until a participant reaches 2 Victory Points or is left as the sole standing participant via Pruning the Field.

- The Winner: Achieves their overarching Intent for the scene.
- Non-Yielding Losers: Any participant who remained in the Standoff and did not Yield suffers Ultimate Stakes (death, execution, total destruction of their faction, or permanent downfall).
- Standard Tie-Breaker (Shared Pyrrhic Outcome): If two or more participants reach 2 Victory Points on the same exchange, the conflict ends in a pyrrhic impasse. Both participants achieve a compromised version of their Intent, but both suffer a Serious Consequence from the brutal clash. Non-yielding participants who failed to reach 2 Victory Points still suffer Ultimate Stakes as normal.

Optional Rule: Mutually Assured Destruction
For groups that want a truly ruthless endgame, use this optional rule for ties during a Standoff.
If two or more participants are tied at 1 Victory Point each, and they tie *again* on the final exchange (meaning they all secure their 2nd Victory Point simultaneously), the standard tie-breaker (Shared Pyrrhic Outcome) is ignored. None of the tied combatants yield. Their clash reaches a catastrophic breaking point. All tied participants suffer the Ultimate Stakes, and their Intents collide in a pyrrhic, twisted outcome. The MacGuffin shatters, the vault collapses, and all involved combatants are broken or killed in the fallout.

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 1 Downtime action with professional aid, or 2 actions across separate phases of bed rest.
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 (Escape a Tight Spot), or pre-negotiated stakes.

> Mitigation Ceilings & Lasting Harm: Domain-specific consequence mitigation Secrets (such as *Iron Body*, *Iron Will*, *Unshakable Poise*, *Stoneflesh*, or *Hold Fast*) may downgrade a Lasting consequence to a Serious consequence within their domain at the moment it is suffered (e.g., taking a severe broken bone instead of permanent maiming). However, this step-down can only occur once—stacked mitigation cannot cascade a Lasting consequence down to Moderate or Minor. Furthermore, standard Secrets cannot mitigate a Fatal consequence, which can strictly be avoided only via pre-negotiated stakes, Karma (Escape a Tight Spot), or Mythic Secrets (*Reject Death*).

Consequence Slots & The Cascade (Overflow Rule)

Consequences are tracked across three distinct domains: Physical Harm (Vigor), Mental Strain (Reason), and Social Strain (Instinct).

Each domain provides dedicated consequence slots: 1 Minor, 1 Moderate, 1 Serious, and 1 Lasting.

- The Cascade: If an incoming consequence would occupy a slot that is already filled within that domain, the trauma compounds and automatically cascades up to the next higher available tier:
  - A second Minor consequence rolls up to Moderate.
  - A second Moderate consequence rolls up to Serious.
  - A second Serious consequence rolls up to Lasting.
- Mitigation and Occupied Slots: If a mitigation Secret (such as *Iron Body*, *Iron Will*, *Unshakable Poise*, *Stoneflesh*, or *Hold Fast*) steps an incoming consequence down into an already occupied slot within that domain, The Cascade does not roll it back up. Instead, the mitigated trauma safely settles into the next lower open slot (e.g., if stepping down from Lasting to Serious, but Serious is already full, it settles as Moderate). If all lower slots are already occupied, the mitigated trauma cushions the blow and overwrites the existing Minor consequence, ensuring that defensive resource expenditure always provides meaningful protection even under total attrition.
- Incapacitation / Crisis: If an incoming consequence cascades beyond Lasting (or if both Serious and Lasting slots are occupied when severe harm strikes), the character suffers immediate Incapacitation / Crisis: physical collapse into unconsciousness, a catastrophic psychological break, or utter social ruin, immediately removing them from active participation in the scene.

Physical Harm

Physical harm tracks bodily injuries, blood loss, and fatigue (tied to Vigor).

- 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.

Mental Strain

Mental strain tracks psychic trauma, madness, and cognitive shock (tied to Reason).

- Minor (Rattled/Dazed): Brief confusion, fluster, or ringing ears following an arcane surge or harrowing shock.
- Moderate (Nightmares/Fractured Focus): Lingering dread or mental exhaustion; concentration slips during intricate study or delicate tasks.
- Serious (Psychic Trauma/Paranoia): Severe cognitive impairment, debilitating fear, or recurring hallucinations of the Threshold.
- Lasting (Shattered Psyche/Permanent Madness): An irreversible psychological break or permanent shift in cognitive limits.

Social Strain

Social strain tracks public humiliation, loss of reputation, and factional fallout (tied to Instinct).

- Minor (Embarrassed/Snubbed): A minor social slip-up, slight, or awkward blunder in polite company.
- Moderate (Shaken/Ostracized): Neighbors refuse to trade with you, or you owe a humiliating 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, mental, or social consequence. The player must describe how they recover (e.g., visiting a healer, resting in a sanctuary, or paying off a debt). This is an automatic action (no roll required).

Communal Recovery: If another character who possesses a relevant caretaking Ability at Rating 1+ (such as *First Aid* or *Medicine* for physical harm; *Religion*, *Occult Lore*, or *Counseling* for mental strain; or *Etiquette*, *Circles*, or *Oratory* for social strain) spends 1 Downtime action to tend to you, this is an automatic action (no test roll required). Committing their scarce Downtime action guarantees support: it either clears a Moderate consequence or reduces a Serious consequence by one tier (Serious → Moderate), fulfilling the specialized aid requirement across any domain.

Serious Consequences: To reduce a Serious consequence by one tier (Serious → Moderate) on your own, you must spend 1 Downtime action and appropriate resources to secure professional aid (such as a skilled NPC doctor, temple sanctuary, or specialized apothecary). Alternatively, without specialized aid, it requires two Downtime actions spent over separate Downtime phases of complete bed rest to reduce to Moderate.

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 (+3 Karma). The Belief is then removed from your sheet, leaving an empty slot to adopt a new conviction during Downtime for free (0 Karma).
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 all dice from a single test pool. You must accept the new result.
- Buy a new Belief (1 Karma): Add an additional drive to your sheet if you currently hold fewer than 3 Beliefs (up to the maximum of 3 active Beliefs). Defining an unfilled starting slot carried over from character creation, or refilling a slot cleared by a Buyoff during Downtime, costs 0 Karma.
- Buy a new Secret (2 Karma): Learn a special technique or ability (requires spending 1 Downtime action and establishing an in-fiction justification, such as study or finding a mentor; see Advancement).
- Increase a Resource Pool Maximum (Current Maximum + 1 Karma): Permanently raise your maximum Vigor, Instinct, or Reason by +1 during Downtime, reflecting conditioning, physical resilience, or mental expansion (see Advancement).
- Open a Focus (1 Karma): Focus an Ability during play or Downtime (up to a maximum of 5 active Focuses simultaneously), marking it for prioritized advancement. If you already hold 5 active Focuses, spending 1 Karma allows you to shift an active Focus from one Ability to another (see 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."*
- Escape a Tight Spot (1+ Karma): When cornered, captured, or overwhelmed in a standard scene or routine hazard, spend Karma (cost set by the GM based on severity) to engineer a credible exit from immediate danger without being removed from play. The escape must be narratively plausible—it removes you from peril but does not erase consequences already established. *(Crucial Restriction: Karma cannot be spent on Escape a Tight Spot to avert or soften catastrophic stakes agreed upon and lost in a Draw the Line confrontation—climactic escalation stakes are absolute and binding).*
  - ▷ *Example:* Spending 1 Karma to slip through a closing trap door just before it seals, or 2 Karma to survive a collapsing structure with a desperate, barely-believable scramble.

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. The duel is tied 1–1 going into the deciding final exchange, and Sora's declared stakes are *Death or Maiming*. She rolls her *Swordsmanship* (3 dice) but

only gets 1 success (`4, 2, 1`)—not enough to beat the sentinel's 2 successes. If this result stands, the sentinel secures his 2nd win and inflicts fatal stakes.

- Escalation: Sora has the Belief of the Relentless (*"You pursue your goal despite personal cost"*). The player spends 1 Karma to reroll her entire pool (all 3 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 all 3 dice, getting `4, 5, 5` (3 successes). She beats the sentinel's 2 successes by a margin of 1, securing her 2nd win and turning what would have been a fatal overall defeat into a 2–1 Draw the Line victory (a victory at a cost: achieving her intent and avoiding the fatal stakes, but suffering a Moderate wound).

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, your base pool is 0 dice. To attempt the task and roll any dice at all, you must spend points from a relevant Resource Pool (Vigor, Instinct, or Reason) to gain +1 or +2 dice (up to the 2-point Raw Push limit) or leverage situational Edge (granting +1 to +3 dice). If you cannot or choose not to push your pool or find Edge, your final pool is 0 dice: you cannot roll, the action automatically fails in the fiction, and no advancement marks are earned.
  - *Advancing to 1:* To raise an untrained Ability from $0 \rightarrow 1$, you must record two marks (at least one success and up to one failure) before you can increase it. Demonstrating basic proficiency requires real pressure: the success mark must be earned through an active test under pressure (in live play or a high-stakes Downtime roll) by rolling an assembled pool of 1+ dice (via Pool Push or Edge). If that roll succeeds—either cleanly ($DoS > TN$) or as a Success at a Cost ($DoS = TN$) where the player chooses a success mark—it yields the required success mark. The failure mark may be earned either through a failed test or by spending 1 Downtime action to Train (learning through theory and controlled error). The sequence does not matter, but a character cannot reach Rating 1 without demonstrating at least one genuine rolled success under stakes. (You cannot learn from a task you did not put resources or risk into; 0-die automatic failures never grant advancement marks).

Improving Abilities

The Focus Lock & The Active Cap: 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. A character may maintain up to a maximum of 5 active Focuses simultaneously. An untrained Ability (Rating 0) can be Focused—either by assigning one of your free starting Focuses during character creation or by spending 1 Karma during play. Focusing an untrained Ability is required before it can log the marks needed to advance to Rating 1. If a character already holds 5 active Focuses, spending 1 Karma during play or Downtime allows them to shift an active Focus from one Ability to another, reflecting a change in dedicated discipline (any marks already recorded on the retired Ability are preserved and frozen until re-focused).

To raise a Focused Ability from rating $N \rightarrow N+1$, you must accumulate X total Advancement Marks (where $X = N+1$, the target rating).

The Progression Rule: Total Marks & The 50% Failure Cap

Advancement marks are earned by rolling the Focused Ability in high-stakes tests during play:

- Total Marks Required (X): The total number of marks needed equals the target rating ($X = N + 1$).
- The 50% Failure Cap ($\lfloor X/2 \rfloor$): Learning from failure is an essential part of growth, but competence must also be demonstrated. Up to half (round down) of your total required marks may be failures. The remaining marks must be successes.

- ▷ *All-Success Allowed:* A player is always allowed to advance using only successes if they wish—the failure allowance is an upper limit ($\leq \lfloor X/2 \rfloor$), not a mandatory penalty.

- Live Pressure Requirement: All required success marks must be earned through active tests under pressure—either in live play or via high-stakes Downtime rolls with active stakes (*Forge Relationship*, or perilous TN 3+ *Long-Term Projects* and *Repairs*). Safe practice during Downtime (*Train Abilities* or routine TN 2 projects) cannot replace demonstrated success.
- Ternary Outcomes and Marking (DoS vs. TN):
  - ▷ Clean Success ($DoS > TN$): Always yields a success mark.
  - ▷ Failure ($DoS < TN$): Always yields a failure mark.
  - ▷ Success at a Cost ($DoS = TN$): Because your character achieved their intent but paid a real price, the experience offers lessons in both perseverance and error. The player chooses whether to record this test as a success mark or a failure mark on their Focused Ability tracker (subject to the standard 50% failure cap).

Advancement Requirements by Rating

Progression Step	Target Rating (X)	Total Marks Needed (X)	Max Failures Allowed ($\lfloor X/2 \rfloor$)	Min Successes Required
Untrained $\rightarrow$ 1	1	2 (Baseline)	1	1
Rating 1 $\rightarrow$ 2	2	2	1	1
Rating 2 $\rightarrow$ 3	3	3	1	2
Rating 3 $\rightarrow$ 4	4	4	2	2
Rating 4 $\rightarrow$ 5	5	5	2	3
Rating 5 $\rightarrow$ 6	6	6	3	3

> Baseline Exception (Untrained $\rightarrow$ 1): Opening an untrained skill ($0 \rightarrow 1$) requires a baseline of 2 marks (at least 1 success and at most 1 failure). This ensures that a character demonstrates at least one practical success alongside learning from errors before reaching basic proficiency.

Training During Downtime

In addition to testing skills in high-stakes situations during active play, characters can hone their technique through disciplined study, drilling, and practice during respite.

Spending 1 Downtime action to train a Focused Ability (e.g., sparring with a veteran, studying ancient manuscripts, or practicing tool work) grants 1 advancement mark (failure/practice) toward that Ability's target rating. These training marks represent learning from controlled errors and theory; they count against the failure allowance permitted for that tier ($\leq \lfloor X/2 \rfloor$). Because safe training yields practice/failure marks rather than demonstrated successes, characters cannot advance an Ability purely through safe Downtime training—every rating increase requires proving competence through rolled successes under real stakes (in live play or high-stakes Downtime rolls).

Reset

Once you accumulate the required marks, your Ability rating increases by +1 during the next Downtime. Clear all marks for that Ability; marks do not carry over to the next level.

Improving Pools (Karma Pool-Buy)

Resource Pools represent your character's foundational physical, instinctive, and mental capacity. Expanding these limits requires deep, focused effort fueled by your core drives (Karma).

- Cost: Increasing any Resource Pool maximum (Vigor, Instinct, or Reason) by +1 costs Karma equal to Current Maximum + 1.
  - ▷ *Example:* Raising a Pool from 3 to 4 costs 4 Karma ($3 + 1$). Raising it from 4 to 5 costs 5 Karma ($4 + 1$). Raising it from 5 to 6 costs 6 Karma ($5 + 1$).
- Maximum Cap: Under standard rules, a Resource Pool cannot exceed a maximum capacity of 10 through advancement. (For campaigns utilizing mythic limits beyond 10, see Mythic or High-Power Play).
- Downtime & Training: Pool increases are purchased during Downtime. While it does not consume a dedicated Downtime action budget slot, it requires in-fiction justification—such as grueling physical conditioning, spiritual transformation, intense meditation, or internalizing the hard-won lessons of an ordeal.
- Capacity Increase: When a Pool's maximum increases, its current value also increases by +1 immediately.

Focuses

Focuses flag Abilities for prioritized advancement and special options.

- Acquisition & Cap: You choose starting Focuses at character creation (2 to 5 Focuses, determined by your Lifepaths). A character may maintain at most 5 active Focuses simultaneously. To open a new Focus: Spend 1 Karma. If you have already reached the cap of 5 active Focuses, spending 1 Karma during play or Downtime allows you to shift an active Focus from one Ability to another.

> 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 and Adding Beliefs

Your character's Beliefs are not static; they shift as the character grows, faces trauma, or adopts new convictions. A character may hold up to 3 Beliefs simultaneously:

- Belief Buyoffs: When you satisfy or permanently abandon a drive through actions and choices in play, you receive a Karma Burst (+3 Karma), and that Belief is removed from your sheet, leaving an open slot.
- Adopting or Replacing a Belief: Unfilled starting Belief slots (carried over from character creation under *Postponing Choices*) or empty slots cleared by a Buyoff cost 0 Karma to define during Downtime or between sequences. Whenever you wish to adopt an additional Belief beyond your starting allotment ahead of time (up to the maximum of 3), you spend 1 Karma at any time (instantly during play or during Downtime) to write a new Belief that reflects your character's evolving motivation.

Advancement Summary Table

What to Advance	Requirement to Raise	Notes / Downtime Actions
Ability (N → N+1)	X marks ($X = N + 1$). Up to half ($\leq \lfloor X/2 \rfloor$) may be failures; remainder must be successes.	Unfocused Abilities cannot accumulate marks or advance. Required successes must be earned through rolled tests under pressure (live play or high-stakes Downtime rolls). Spending 1 Downtime action to Train grants 1 failure/practice mark (counts toward failure allowance).
Pool (N → N+1)	Current Maximum + 1 Karma + in-fiction justification	Purchased during Downtime (does not consume a Downtime Action).
Focus	1 Karma	Free at character creation (2–5 Focuses; max 5 active Focuses). 1 Karma opens a new Focus or shifts an active Focus to a new Ability.
Secret	2 Karma + in-fiction justification	Requires a Downtime action to learn.
Belief	Open slot (Buyoff or additional slot)	Defining an unfilled starting slot or refilling a slot cleared by a Buyoff is free (0 Karma during Downtime). Adopting an additional Belief beyond your starting count costs 1 Karma (up to the maximum of 3).

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	Karma
1	2	1	5	3
2	2	1	4	2
3	2	2	3	1
4	1	2	2	1
5	1	3	2	0

   Note: All characters start with a baseline of 1 in Vigor, Instinct, and Reason, and distribute 8 additional Pool Points freely among them (for a total pool sum of 11 across all three pools), plus 4 Customization Points (to increase starting Ability ratings), regardless of the number of Lifepaths chosen.

   Design Note (Lifepath Progression & Focus Saturation): Younger characters (1–2 Lifepaths) possess high narrative agility, reflected in higher starting Karma and more open Focuses. A 1-Lifepath specialist begins play at the hard ceiling of 5 active Focuses, representing acute, narrow dedication; to develop new skills during their journey, they must spend Karma to shift an active Focus to a new discipline rather than expanding outward. Conversely, seasoned veterans (4–5 Lifepaths) trade narrative flexibility for broader established skills and starting Secrets. The progression intentionally plateaus to preserve functional baselines: veterans retain a minimum threshold of 2 Focuses so they can continue to deliberately hone core skills, and 4-Lifepath characters retain 1 starting Karma to reflect enduring narrative grit before reaching the absolute rigidity of a 5-Lifepath master.

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 your 8 additional starting Pool points freely among Vigor, Instinct, and Reason (each starts at base rating 1, for a total pool sum of 11).
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., *Mining* 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 Rural Child, or *Trade Knowledge* for a Noble 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 *Combat Trainee* (basis) which features *Swordsmanship*, Swordsmanship starts at rating 2 because it is a core training of that path. If you also have a childhood path that lists or supports *Swordsmanship*, you add +1. If you also have *Captain / Militia Leader*, you add +1. Your total starting rating is 4.
  4. No Ability rating may exceed 6 at the end of character creation.
- Freeform Ability Naming & Stacking: *Threshold* uses open-ended, narrative Abilities. While Lifepaths suggest standard skill titles for clarity, players are encouraged to name and flavor their Abilities to match their character concept (e.g., *Claymore Fencing*, *Highland Survival*, or *Market Haggling*). When calculating starting ratings, any chosen Lifepath that supports the same underlying competency—whether named identically or as broad/narrow equivalents (e.g., *Combat* and *Swordsmanship*, *Healing* and *First Aid*, or *Appraisal* and *Valuation*)—triggers the +1 Lifepath stacking rule.
- Ability Customization Points: You gain 4 customization points. 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 attempt the roll, you must spend Pool points or have situational Edge (+1 to +3 dice); rolling 0 dice is an automatic failure that earns no marks. To raise an untrained Ability from 0 → 1, you must record two marks (at least one success and up to one failure), with the required success mark earned by rolling 1+ dice under pressure (in live play or a high-stakes Downtime roll; the Ability must be Focused to advance, and the failure mark may be earned either through a failed test or via Downtime Training).

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. You may assign a starting Focus to an untrained Ability (Rating 0) if you wish to target it for growth from the outset.

Step 5: Distribute Pool Points

- Base Pools: Every character starts with rating 1 in Vigor, Instinct, and Reason automatically.
- Bonus Points: Distribute the 8 additional Pool Points granted to all characters freely among your Vigor, Instinct, and Reason pools (for a total pool sum of 11; pools have a standard maximum cap of 10).

Step 6: Choose Beliefs

Select the starting number of Beliefs shown in your Lifepath row (2 Beliefs for 1–3 Lifepaths, or 1 Belief for 4–5 Lifepaths). A character may hold up to 3 Beliefs total at any time. Defining unfilled starting Belief slots on-the-fly under *Postponing Choices*, or establishing a new Belief after one has been resolved via a Buyoff, costs 0 Karma during Downtime. Players can spend 1 Karma during play or Downtime to adopt an additional Belief up to the maximum of 3 ahead of time. 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: If your starting package provides at least 2 Karma (1 or 2 Lifepaths), you may optionally spend starting Karma to purchase additional Secrets (costing 2 Karma each) as detailed in Advancement.

Step 8: Establish Circles

- Characters use domain-specific Circles Abilities rather than a generic rating (e.g., *Underworld Circles* for an Urban Street Urchin, *Noble Circles* for a Noble Child, *Rural Circles* for a Rural Child, *Clan Circles* for Dwarven/Troll paths, or *Sylvan Circles* for Fae). 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” and record your starting Beliefs there.
  - Secrets Box: Label your features box as “Secrets” and record your starting Secrets.
  - Resource Pools: Record your starting and maximum values for Vigor, Instinct, and Reason.

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 customization points 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 Starting Package Table. These flag specific Abilities for prioritized advancement.
- Pool Points: Distribute your 8 additional starting Pool points freely among Vigor, Instinct, and Reason (each starts at baseline rating 1, for a total pool sum of 11 across all three pools, up to the standard cap of 10).
- Beliefs & Secrets: Choose your starting package of Beliefs (1 or 2, with the capacity to hold up to 3 active Beliefs total) and Secrets as determined by your Lifepath count. Beliefs are chosen from your Stock or general themes (see Beliefs), and Secrets are chosen from your Stock or the Generic Secrets list (see Secrets).
- Characters with 4 or 5 Lifepaths: Characters who select 4 or 5 Lifepaths represent seasoned veterans, polymaths, or figures of widespread authority. Human characters may select an additional Apprentice path (representing an adult change of trade, secondary military service, or monastic study) or a second Advanced path (representing broad leadership, court influence, or mastery across multiple disciplines). Non-human characters (Trolls, Dwarves, Fae) may similarly choose multiple Apprentice or Advanced paths within their culture, or select appropriate Human Lifepaths re-flavored to their stock's holdings, clans, or enclaves (with GM agreement).

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, Rural Circles
  - ▷ 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, Faith Circles
  - ▷ 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, Street Circles
  - ▷ Gear: Tattered clothing, small keepsake, improvised tools

Apprentice / Adolescent Paths

- Apprentice Artisan / Artist *(Prerequisite: Rural, Noble Child, or Urban Street Urchin)*: Learns craftsmanship, painting, music, or other arts.
  - ▷ Abilities: Crafting, Artistic Skill, Tool Use, Observation, Guild Circles
  - ▷ 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, Military Circles
  - ▷ Gear: Training sword, shield, padded armor
- Religious Acolyte *(Prerequisite: Rural/Urban Foundling)*: Learns clerical duties, rituals, and minor healing.
  - ▷ Abilities: Religion, Persuasion, Observation, Healing, Temple Circles
  - ▷ Gear: Religious texts, staff, simple robes
- Street Fighter / Thief *(Prerequisite: Urban Street Urchin)*: Learns stealth, pickpocketing, and survival.
  - ▷ Abilities: Stealth, Improvised Weapons, Dodge, Observation, Underworld Circles
  - ▷ Gear: Hidden blade, lockpicks, hooded cloak
- Merchant's Apprentice *(Prerequisite: Rural, Noble Child, or Urban Street Urchin)*: 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 Artisan / Artist)*: Leads a guild or workshop; skilled in craft and management.
  - ▷ Abilities: Crafting, Leadership, Appraisal, Trade Knowledge, Guild Circles
  - ▷ Gear: Masterwork tools, workshop key
- Captain / Militia Leader *(Prerequisite: Combat Trainee)*: Commands city or village defense; expert in strategy.
  - ▷ Abilities: Leadership, Tactics, Swordsmanship, Endurance, Military Circles
  - ▷ Gear: Ceremonial sword, polished armor, logbook
- Cleric / Temple Overseer *(Prerequisite: Religious Acolyte)*: Leads religious community; performs rites and guidance.
  - ▷ Abilities: Religion, Leadership, Persuasion, Healing, Temple Circles
  - ▷ 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, Persuasion, 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, Sylvan Circles
  - ▷ 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, Sylvan Circles
  - ▷ Gear: Bow, cloak, forest charms
- Court Apprentice *(Prerequisite: Court Fae Child)*: Learns intrigue, diplomacy, minor ritual magic.
  - ▷ Abilities: Persuasion, Observation, Rituals, Etiquette, Fae Circles
  - ▷ Gear: Dagger, fine robes, magical trinkets
- Rogue Wanderer *(Prerequisite: Wanderer's Kin)*: Trains in stealth, trickery, and survival.
  - ▷ Abilities: Stealth, Dodge, Observation, Trickery, Survival
  - ▷ 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, Sylvan Circles
  - ▷ 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, Wanderer Circles
  - ▷ 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, Clan Circles
  - ▷ 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, Clan Circles
  - ▷ 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, Subterranean Circles
  - ▷ Gear: Lantern, ropes, climbing hooks
- Herd Guardian *(Prerequisite: Tundra Born)*: Protects livestock from wolves and raiders.
  - ▷ Abilities: Observation, Combat, Intimidation, Endurance, Clan Circles
  - ▷ 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, Spirit Circles
  - ▷ 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, Clan Circles
  - ▷ Gear: Greatsword, trophies of victory, clan banner

Dwarven Lifepaths

Born Paths

- Deep-Mine Child: Born in deep holds; assists with sorting ore and carrying tools.
  - ▷ Abilities: Metallurgy, Observation, Endurance, Mining, Clan Circles
  - ▷ 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, Appraisal, Tool Use, Guild Circles
  - ▷ Gear: Smithing hammer, bellows, iron tongs
- Shield Sentry *(Prerequisite: Hold-Outpost Child)*: Guarding tunnel gates against beasts and raiders.
  - ▷ Abilities: Shield, Combat, Tactics, Endurance, Military Circles
  - ▷ 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, Appraisal, Guild Circles
  - ▷ 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; I will seek the most glorious and dangerous paths, even if it leads to an early grave."*
  - *"Change is the only constant; 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; 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 (does not consume a Downtime Action) 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.

> Cultural Traits & Background Edges: The traits listed under specific human cultures and troll clans below are thematic narrative descriptors. Players can invoke these traits during play to claim situational Edge (+1 die) on relevant tests when their cultural upbringing directly aids them. Alternatively, with GM agreement, a starting character may adopt one of these traits as a bespoke passive Secret, or choose from the standardized Generic and Stock Secrets.

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; I will protect our vessel from thieves and rapids, even if I must risk my own life to save it."*
  - *"The water demands respect; I will make my offerings at every crossing, even if it delays a high-paying delivery."*
- Cultural Traits / Edges:
  - 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; I will obey the chieftain's commands, even if they order me to exile my closest friend."*
  - *"The paths of the ancestors are sacred; I will never deviate from our migratory route, even if a shortcut promises quick fortune."*
- Cultural Traits / Edges:
  - 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; 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; I will let the fields rest and fallow, even if the bailiff beats me for failing to meet the lord's harvest quota."*
- Cultural Traits / Edges:
  - Steady Hands: Accustomed to repetitive, precise labor.
  - Community-Minded: Skilled at cooperative work and understanding local dynamics.

Townsfolk 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; I will honor my trade agreements to the letter, even if fulfilling them leaves me penniless."*
  - *"The guild's laws protect us all; I will report any illegal trade to the masters, even if the smuggler is my own kin."*
- Cultural Traits / Edges:
  - Urban Instinct: Early familiarity with local politics, rumors, back-alleys, and city 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; 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; I will court the favors of the high council, even when I despise their corruption."*
- Cultural Traits / Edges:
  - 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; I will defend our borders from outlaws, even if I must fight them alone."*
  - *"The peasantry relies on my protection; I will feed the village through the winter, even if I must defy the Duke's tax collectors."*
- Cultural Traits / Edges:
  - 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; I will protect our ancestral sacred sites, even when human settlements try to expand over them."*

- ▷ *"Patience is stronger than iron; I will wait for my enemy to make the first move, even when my allies accuse me of cowardice."*
- ▷ *"Blood preserves the lineage; 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.
  - ▷ Stoneflesh: Once per session, when you suffer a physical Consequence, you may downgrade its severity by one step (Lasting → Serious, Serious → Moderate, Moderate → Minor, or Minor → negated; cannot mitigate Fatal harm).

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; 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; I will walk them in silence and reverence, even if human settlements block our way."*
- Cultural Traits / Edges:
  - ▷ 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; I will copy the ancestral runes precisely, even if the younger smiths demand new techniques."*
  - ▷ *"Our ancestors mended the world; I will restore their ruined architecture, even when the toxic Ley lines boil my skin."*
- Cultural Traits / Edges:
  - ▷ 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; 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; 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; I will hide my wounds and failures from my allies, even if it leads to my physical collapse."*
- Common Secrets:
  - ▷ Forge Bond: Spend 1 Vigor point to gain +2 dice on any test involving crafting, smithing, masonry, repairing, or resisting extreme physical strain and heat.

- Unyielding Hold: Gain +1 Edge on all tests to defend your homestead, family members, or to resist being physically moved or forced to yield.

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; 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; I will seek the most dangerous sensations, even if it costs me my sanity."*
  - *"We are visitors dancing on the ruins of mortal time; 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 exchange (or brief scene).
  - 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; I will share my food with anyone in need, even if it leaves my own family's pantry empty,"* or *"The First Men's engines are a plague that must be dismantled; I will destroy any device we encounter, even when my companions plead to use them for safety"*).

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.

Refining Friction: The Four Fires

A common trap when writing Beliefs is defaulting to pure martyrdom: *"I will do X, even if it gets me killed."*

Real dramatic tension is richer than simply taking damage. Friction is any force—internal or external—that makes pursuing your Directive messy, painful, or morally compromised. When defining your Friction, do not feel bound solely to the words *"even if."*

Choose which fire burns your character:

- The Cost (Personal Sacrifice): What you are personally willing to lose or surrender.
  Connectors: "...even if it costs me," "...at the price of my own."
  Example: "The Guild's secrets must stay buried; I will burn the archives, even if it costs me my livelihood and title."
- The Spill (Collateral Damage): The innocents, companions, or institutions harmed by your single-minded crusade.
  Connectors: "...even if [X] pays the price," "...regardless of who burns."
  Example: "The Unmade scourge must be halted; I will seal the catacomb gates, even if the miners are still trapped inside."
- The Stain (Moral Compromise): The laws, taboos, or personal values you are forced to break to see your task done.
  Connectors: "...though it forces me to," "...whatever lines I must cross."
  Example: "The hearth-fires of my village must not die; I will secure fuel, though it forces me to deal with the corpse-binders."
- The Snare (Flaw & Temptation): The internal vice, cowardice, greed, or pride that threatens to derail your noble intentions.
  Connectors: "...unless," "...until my [vice] gets the better of me."
  Example: "Justice demands the Usurper stand trial; I will deliver him alive, unless his insults provoke my uncontrollable rage."

Testing a Belief Before Play When a player finishes writing a Belief, ask two questions: 1. Can the GM put an obstacle directly in front of this Directive right now? (If the Directive is too broad or safe, anchor it to an immediate target or situation). 2. Does the Friction genuinely hurt? (If triggering the Friction wouldn't make the character hesitate, sweat, or cause a scene, sharpen the stakes).

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 rots the soul; I will spend extra coin to support struggling local artisans, even when cheaper imports are readily available."*

- *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; I will shield my packmates from human authorities, even if doing so makes me a hunted outlaw."*
- *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 (+3 Karma), and the Belief is removed from the sheet, leaving an open slot.
- Acquiring a New Belief: A character may hold up to 3 Beliefs simultaneously. Unfilled starting Belief slots (postponed from character creation under *Postponing Choices*) or empty slots cleared by a Buyoff cost 0 Karma to define during Downtime or between sequences. Players can spend 1 Karma during play or Downtime only if they wish to adopt an additional Belief beyond their starting count ahead of time (up to the 3-Belief maximum).

Sample Beliefs

To help kickstart character creation, here is a list of sample Beliefs categorized by their core themes:

Duty, Law, & Authority

- The Incorruptible Sentinel: *"True justice does not favor the rich or powerful; I will enforce the law equally upon peasant and noble alike, even if it means arresting my own employer or the local magistrate."*
- The Unchained Rebel: *"No master has the right to chain another soul; I will free any captive, slave, or thrall I encounter, even if it breaks local laws and brings the wrath of the slave-lords upon my head."*

Compassion & Mercy

- The Merciful Healer: *"Every life is sacred, regardless of which side of a conflict they stand on; I will treat the wounds of any injured soul I cross, even if they are a sworn enemy who tried to kill me moments before."*
- The Devoted Protector: *"No comrade is left behind to face the dark alone; I will throw myself into danger to rescue a fallen ally, even when saving them risks dragging the rest of the party into ruin."*

Knowledge & Secrets

- The Obsessive Antiquarian: *"Knowledge of the First Men is the key to our future, not a taboo to be feared; I will retrieve and study any ancient tablet or artifact we find, even when the local church threatens me with excommunication or execution for heresy."*

Pride & Reputation

- The Unyielding Champion: *"My reputation is my shield and my legacy; I will accept every challenge to my skill or honor, even when the odds are suicide and my companions beg me to walk away."*

Survival & Nature

- The Wild's Kin: *"The natural world provides everything we need, and stone cities are slow poisons; I will sleep under the open sky and avoid entering cities, even when a warm bed and hot meal are offered in a comfortable inn."*

Faith & Occultism

- The Zealot of the Old Gods: *"The modern temples are false idols and the ancient powers in the earth demand sacrifice; I will offer blood to the sacred stones at every new moon, even if it horrifies my allies and brands me a witch in civilized lands."*

Wealth & Greed

- The Drifting Opportunist: *"Silver is the only thing you can truly rely on in this harsh world; I will negotiate a price for my services before lifting a finger, even when a desperate village is begging for my aid against immediate slaughter."*

Vengeance & Justice

- The Avenging Ghost: *"A blood debt must be paid in full; I will hunt down the family that destroyed my household, even if I must burn down their innocent village to ensure none of them escape."*

Stock-Specific Beliefs

- The Ancestral Vessel (Troll): *"The voices of the dead in my blood know better than any living mind; I will carry out the ancestral mandates whispered to me, even when their ancient feuds contradict the path of peace my companions seek."*
- The Stone Oath (Dwarf): *"An oath is not a mere promise, but a contract written in stone that defines my worth; I will fulfill every term of my agreement to the letter, even when the client has betrayed me and doing so means my certain doom."*

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.

Limits of Consequence Mitigation

Several Secrets provide passive or active ways to mitigate incoming consequences (e.g., *Iron Body*, *Iron Will*, *Unshakable Poise*, *Stoneflesh*, and *Hold Fast*). Mitigation is bound by strict mechanical ceilings:

- Lasting Harm Step-Down: A mitigation Secret may step a Lasting consequence down to a Serious consequence within its domain at the moment it is suffered (e.g., suffering a severe fracture requiring splints and bed rest instead of permanently losing an arm; or enduring acute temporary shame instead of permanent exile/loss of waer). This step-down can only happen once—stacked Secrets cannot cascade a Lasting consequence further down into Moderate or Minor in the same exchange.
- Fatal Harm Immunity: Standard once-per-session step-down Secrets cannot mitigate a Fatal consequence. Death or permanent character removal can strictly be avoided only through pre-negotiated stakes, Karma expenditure (Escape a Tight Spot), or designated powers like the Mythic Secret *Reject Death*.

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
  - ▷ Activation Cost: Passive
  - ▷ Effect: When an opponent initiates a physical melee Contest against you and you declare a defensive or evasive intent, achieving a higher Degree of Success (clean win) achieves your defensive intent cleanly and *also* inflicts an immediate Minor physical consequence on the attacker, turning their overextension into a swift counter-strike.
- Iron Body
  - ▷ Activation Cost: Passive
  - ▷ Effect: Once per session, reduce the severity of a physical consequence by one step (Lasting → Serious, Serious → Moderate, Moderate → Minor, or Minor → negated; cannot mitigate Fatal harm).
- Iron Will
  - ▷ Activation Cost: Passive
  - ▷ Effect: Once per session, reduce the severity of a mental consequence by one step (Lasting → Serious, Serious → Moderate, Moderate → Minor, or Minor → negated; cannot mitigate Fatal harm).
- Unshakable Poise
  - ▷ Activation Cost: Passive
  - ▷ Effect: Once per session, reduce the severity of a social consequence by one step (Lasting → Serious, Serious → Moderate, Moderate → Minor, or Minor → negated; cannot mitigate Fatal harm).
- 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: Passive
  - ▷ Effect: You brace against the storm. Once per session, downgrade a physical consequence you are about to suffer by one step (Lasting → Serious, Serious → Moderate, Moderate → Minor, or Minor → negated; cannot mitigate Fatal harm).
- Silver Tongue
  - ▷ Effect: Gain +1 die to social rolls when persuading or deceiving.
- Resourceful
  - ▷ Effect: Once per session, find or improvise a useful item.
- Jack of All Trades

- ▷ Activation Cost: 1 Instinct (during Downtime; does not consume a Downtime Action)
- ▷ Effect: Immediately open any untrained Ability (setting its rating to 1) without needing to record a prior success or failure.

- ♦ Human Grit
  - ▷ Activation Cost: 1 Vigor
  - ▷ Effect: Completely ignore the negative modifiers of a physical consequence for the duration of a scene.

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
  - ▷ Activation Cost: Passive
  - ▷ Effect: Once per session, when you suffer a physical Consequence, you may downgrade its severity by one step (Lasting → Serious, Serious → Moderate, Moderate → Minor, or Minor → negated; cannot mitigate Fatal harm).
- ♦ Memory of Ages
  - ▷ Activation Cost: Passive
  - ▷ Effect: Recall ancient lore or gain insight from ancestral memories.
- ♦ Ancestral Taste
  - ▷ Activation Cost: 1 Instinct
  - ▷ Effect: 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
  - ▷ Activation Cost: Passive
  - ▷ Effect: You ignore the mechanical penalties of Minor physical consequences (bruises, scrapes) automatically.

Dwarves

- ♦ Forge Bond
  - ▷ Activation Cost: 1 Vigor
  - ▷ Effect: Draw strength from stone and forge. Gain +2 dice on any test involving crafting, smithing, masonry, repairing, or resisting extreme physical strain and heat.
- ♦ 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.
- Unyielding Hold
  - ▷ Effect: Gain +1 Edge on all tests to defend your homestead, family members, or to resist being physically moved or forced to yield.

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 poise 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 physical duel or combat Contest, you can use your *Persuasion* or *Oratory* Ability rating instead of a physical combat skill.
- 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.
- Glimmerstep
  - ▷ Activation Cost: 1 Instinct
  - ▷ Effect: Slip past a minor physical barrier or vanish from sight into shadows for a single exchange (or brief scene).
- Ethereal Calm
  - ▷ Activation Cost: 1 Reason
  - ▷ Effect: Become completely immune to fear, mental stress, or intimidation for the duration of a scene.

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

Magical arts and supernatural capabilities are unlocked through Secrets and channeled through your Abilities:

- Automatic Magical Secrets: Discrete, focused magical Secrets (such as the Fae's *Glimmerstep* or the general *Whispers of Power*) function on narrative authority. When you pay the listed Resource Pool activation cost, the effect manifests automatically without requiring an Ability roll.
- Rolled Magical Workings: When a character attempts improvisational magic, dispels an active ward, or casts grand workings beyond their discrete Secrets, they make an Ability test against a Target Number (TN) set by the GM based on how drastically the working alters reality.
- Magical Abilities & Casting Access: Formal magic is commonly channeled through Abilities such as *Rituals*, *Occult Lore*, or *Nature Lore*. However, characters without dedicated arcane Lifepaths can channel supernatural power through their own devotional or cultural competencies—such as human clergy using *Religion* for prayers and rites, or a wilderness scout using *Nature Lore*—or open *Rituals* or *Occult Lore* as an Ability on their sheet when narrative study justifies it.

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 all dice on 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.

HISTORY OF THE WORLD

As recorded in the fragments of the Chroniclers of the High Holds and the oral songs of the Steppe (The Mortal Chronicle).

"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

- First Men and Trolls arose as children of the world itself; modern Men descend from the Second Race shaped by the Undying Remnants, now free and mortal.
- Elves and Dwarves are fae who chose material form and vulnerability to death in the world (Dwarves accepting slow aging, while Elves remain unaging).
- 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.

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 Non-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 Non-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.

- Ke-Vana (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.

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.
The Resting	Thallos-Ka	The Father	The Brine: Homecoming, Death, and Silence.
The Rising	Ke-Vana	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-Rider 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.

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.

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 Non-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.

TRUE NATURE OF THE WORLD

GM Reference: The underlying metaphysical reality, cosmic tolerances, and mechanical truths that govern the setting beneath in-world mythologies.

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 Non-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.

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 as a primary focus or core trade, the character has it at Rating 2 (or Rating 1 if it is a secondary, auxiliary, or childhood skill).
- The Stack: If a second Lifepath reinforces that same domain (e.g., *Street Fighter / Thief*), the Rating increases by +1 (*Street Urchin + Street Fighter / Thief = 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. Enforcing "Say Yes" for safe or trivial actions ensures that every roll the players make carries genuine dramatic weight. Furthermore, because advancement is tied directly to the drama economy—Abilities require focused high-stakes tests, while Pool maximums and Secrets require Karma earned through Belief friction—characters cannot advance through routine or low-stakes play. Every moment of growth must be fought for under real, binding pressure.

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]; 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: *Conviction + Directive + Friction*.
- Example (Internal): *"I will prove my bravery (Conviction); I will lead every charge (Directive), even when my Instinct tells me to flee (Friction)."*
- Example (External): *"I will reclaim my stolen birthright (Conviction); I will hunt the usurper (Directive), regardless of the laws I must break (Friction)."*

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 (violating 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 +3 Karma Burst.

Optional Rule: The Party Belief (The Narrative North Star)
The group can choose to share 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 Moderate or Serious 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. A 4-segment clock keeps the stakes incredibly tight: every failed roll or costly compromise ticks the danger forward, forcing players to make calculated gambles—burning scarce Pool points or spending Karma on rerolls to avert catastrophe before time runs out.

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. Meta-currency like *Escape a Tight Spot* cannot be spent to undo or soften a lost Draw the Line climax—escalated stakes are binding.
- 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, creatures, and active adversaries do not need fully detailed sheets. Instead, they are defined by a single Threat Rating (1 to 7) that serves directly as their base dice pool in opposed Contests:

- Rating 1 (Minor Threat — 1d6): A common thug or a wild dog.
- Rating 2 (Moderate Threat — 2d6): A trained town guard or a minor spirit.

- Rating 3 (Significant Threat — 3d6): A veteran warrior or a skilled mercenary.
- Rating 4 (Severe Threat — 4d6): A faction champion or a minor demon.
- Rating 5 (Formidable Threat — 5d6): A master duelist or a lesser void horror.
- Rating 6 (Mythic Threat — 6d6): A fae noble or a primeval elder beast.
- Rating 7 (Legendary Threat — 7d6): A lesser dragon or a primordial titan.

Whenever an active adversary opposes a player character in a contest, roll their Threat Rating as their opposed dice pool. Static obstacles, locks, barriers, and passive environmental hazards do not use Threat Ratings—instead, assign them a Target Number (TN) directly from the standard Difficulty & Target Numbers table.

Threat Rating Dice & Escalation in Play

- Exploding Sixes for NPCs: When rolling an NPC or creature's Threat Rating in an opposed Contest, every 6 rolled counts as 1 success and explodes, prompting an additional bonus die roll (and continuing to explode on subsequent 6s). This rule applies universally to PCs and NPCs alike.
- Standard NPCs in Draw the Line: Routine adversaries roll their flat Threat Rating pool on each exchange without pushing. They do not possess separate Resource Pools.
- Boss Adversaries & Escalation Reserves: For climactic confrontations against major solo antagonists (Threat Rating 5–7), give the adversary a temporary Escalation Reserve of 2–4 points. During *Draw the Line*, the boss can spend 1 or 2 points from this reserve per exchange to declare a Pool Push (+1 or +2 dice), matching the dramatic stakes of player escalation.

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	Luminescent phantasmal 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 *Stealth* 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 *Athletics* or *Strength* test to avoid being pulled).

Summary

Threshold is 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

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).
   - Grants two or three cultural abilities—including your cultural *Circles* ability—at Rating 1.
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 (or +1 if overlapping with an Origin ability).
3. Unified Resources (from the standard 2-Lifepath starting package):
   - 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.

Concrete Example: "I am a Human Ranger"

If a player chooses: *"I am a Human Ranger (specifically from the Steppe Nomads)"*, their concept naturally bridges their Origin culture (Nomads / Rural Child background) with a wilderness scout Career path (Combat Trainee or Scout equivalent). Their sheet is constructed instantly:

- Stock: Human

- Starting Pools: Baseline of 1 in Vigor, Instinct, and Reason automatically, plus 8 additional Pool Points distributed freely among them (for a total pool sum of 11 across all three pools). For example: Vigor 4, Instinct 4, Reason 3.
- Origin Abilities (Rating 1): *Horsemanship* 1, *Nomad Circles* 1.
- Career Specialty (Rating 2): *Archery* (or *Marksmanship*) 3 (raised from 2 by spending 1 Customization Point).
- Career & Shared Abilities: *Stealth* 1, *Tracking* 2 (starts at Rating 2 due to Lifepath overlap: 1 from Nomad Origin + 1 from Ranger Career), *Survival* 2 (starts at Rating 2 due to Lifepath overlap: 1 from Nomad Origin + 1 from Ranger Career).
- Customization Points: 1 spent at creation (*Archery*); the remaining 3 points are banked to spend on-the-fly during play.
- 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), *Human Grit* (Human resilience), or the mystical intuition of *Whispers of Power*.
- Beliefs: 2 Beliefs. E.g., *"The open plains are honest and stone walls are a slow poison; I will sleep under the sky, even when a warm inn room is offered,"* and *"I will never let a companion fall behind in the wild; I will return to save anyone lost in a blizzard, even if it risks my own survival."*
- 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 rolling 3 dice a 56.2% chance of achieving their intent natively on a Moderate (TN 2) task. In *Threshold*'s resolution system, this breaks down into a 26.4% chance of Clean Success (DoS $>$ TN) and a 29.8% chance of Success at a Cost (DoS $=$ TN). 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% overall chance of achieving their intent (and a 48.2% chance of Clean Success).
- 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).

Optional Module: Assets, Gear & Tags

> Design Note: By default, *Threshold* abstracts routine gear into a character's background and abilities. This optional module introduces Assets—mechanically distinct weapons, armor, relics, and specialized tools. Use this system if your campaign focuses on survival, tactical preparation, or high-stakes material scarcity.

1. The Anatomy of an Asset

An Asset is any piece of equipment important enough to influence the fiction or alter dice pools. Every Asset is defined by four components: Domain, Tags, Passive Edge, and Exhaustion Effect.

- Domain: The narrow fictional context in which the Asset functions (e.g., *Long-Range Skirmishes & Archery Duels*, *Ancient Inscriptions*, *Urban Infiltration*, *Heavy Demolition*).
- Tags: Fictional descriptors establishing what the item can do, its range, and its narrative risks (see *Asset Tags* below).

- Passive Edge (+1 Edge): When performing an action within the Asset's Domain and under appropriate Tag conditions, the player gains +1 Edge (+1 die) to their pool.
- Exhaustion Effect: Once per Sequence, a player may Exhaust a Ready Asset to trigger a powerful, immediate effect.

2. Exhausting Gear

Assets act as an external buffer for your character's body and mind. During a Sequence, when an Asset is Ready, the player may declare they are Exhausting the item before rolling or when taking Harm.

When you Exhaust an Asset, choose ONE of the following standard options (unless the Asset's profile defines a bespoke custom effect):

1. Power Surge: Add +2 bonus dice to a test within the Asset's Domain.
2. Ablative Buffer: When your character would suffer a *Minor* or *Moderate Consequence* (Harm, Physical Strain, or Mechanical Complication), the Asset absorbs the impact instead.

> Custom Relic Overrides: Rare relics, masterwork tools, or bespoke magical artifacts may define a unique, tailored Exhaustion Effect in their profile (such as converting a die result or shattering to absorb a Serious Consequence, as demonstrated in the examples below). In all other cases, standard Assets follow the Power Surge or Ablative Buffer baseline.

State Change: An Exhausted Asset is spent, jammed, depleted, or damaged. It loses its Passive Edge and cannot be routinely used for an edge or surge until restored during Downtime.

Desperate Sacrifice (Shattering & Loss): In dire circumstances, a player may choose to push an already Exhausted Asset past its breaking point for one final, desperate exertion—either triggering a final Power Surge (+2 dice) OR acting as a sacrificial Ablative Buffer to absorb a Minor or Moderate Consequence.

Doing so shatters or structurally ruins the item: the Asset becomes Broken (completely inoperable, and Destroyed permanently if `Consumable` or if its remnants cannot be recovered). Additionally, any Asset directly subjected to a Serious Consequence automatically becomes Broken (or Destroyed if already Broken).

3. Load & Inventory Capacity

To prevent players from carrying an endless arsenal that bypasses Pool depletion, characters are subject to Load Limits during a Sequence:

- Primary Asset (1): Large or complex gear (e.g., Longbow, Heavy Crossbow or Alchemical Arquebus, Plate Armor, Chirurgeon Kit).
- Secondary Assets (2): Compact or specialized gear (e.g., Dagger, Lockpicks, Spyglass, Relic Amulet).
- Mundane Supplies & Routine Gear: Torches, rope, basic rations, and everyday travel clothes do not take Asset slots and grant no Edge unless explicitly framed as an environmental advantage. (Mechanical Assets bearing the `Consumable` tag still count against your Secondary Asset load limits).

4. Asset Tags

Tags establish fictional permission, constraints, and automatic narrative triggers.

Fictional Positioning Tags

- `Close` / `Reach` / `Far`: Defines the physical range required to initiate a test. Without the appropriate range tag, an action may lack fictional permission, preventing a roll entirely.
- `Concealable`: Can be hidden on your person; grants +1 Edge to bypass inspections or launch surprise actions.
- `Heavy` / `Two-Handed`: Requires both hands and physical leverage. Cannot be used while climbing, mounted, or grappled without an Opposing Edge (-1 die).
- `Subtle`: Produces no obvious mundane or supernatural signature when active; cannot be detected by casual inspection or standard wards without dedicated scrutiny or occult secrets.

Risk & Consequence Tags

- `Loud`: On any failure, partial outcome, or GM complication, the noise automatically alerts nearby scenes, marks a Complication Clock, or grants enemies an Opposing Edge.

- **`Messy`**: Causes brutal, collateral structural or physical damage. Consequences inflicted with this tool leave catastrophic physical evidence.
- **`Fragile`**: If a test using this item results in a complete failure (0 successes), the Asset automatically becomes Exhausted (or Broken if already Exhausted).
- **`Consumable`**: When Exhausted for its power surge, the Asset is completely consumed and Destroyed rather than becoming recoverable gear.

5. Downtime Integration: Maintenance & Resupply

Exhausted Assets do not automatically repair themselves between Sequences. Restoring spent gear requires active effort during Downtime.

- Downtime Action: Repair / Resupply
  Spend 1 Downtime Action and state your approach (e.g., *Forging new plates, compounding alchemical salts, recalibrating lenses*). Make a relevant test (e.g., *Craft, Lore, Streetwise*) against a baseline Moderate TN (2) (or TN 3+ for fragile masterworks, volatile alchemical gear, or exotic relics; high-difficulty TN 3+ repairs award an advancement mark if the Ability is Focused):
  - Clean Success (DoS > TN): Up to two Exhausted Assets return to Ready status cleanly.
  - Success at a Cost (DoS = TN): You restore both Assets, but one gains the **`Fragile`** tag until it receives a successful Repair action during a future Downtime phase; alternatively, you may choose to restore only one Asset cleanly.
  - Fail Forward (DoS < TN): Only one Asset is restored, and it gains the **`Fragile`** tag (or the GM introduces an environmental complication or material expense).
- Reforging Broken Assets: Routine *Repair / Resupply* only restores Exhausted gear. Fixing a Broken item (such as reforging a shattered blade or reconstructing snapped tools) requires recovering its pieces and completing a Long-Term Project Clock during Downtime (see Long-Term Projects). Items that are Destroyed (such as `Consumable` relics shattered into dust) are permanently lost and removed from the sheet.

6. Example Assets

- Alchemical Arquebus
  - Domain: Ranged skirmishes & long-distance combat.
  - Tags: `far`, `loud`, `two-handed`
  - Passive Edge: +1 die when shooting at targets at distance.
  - Exhaust (1/Sequence): *Overcharge Shot* — Gain +2 dice on an attack roll, or absorb a Moderate physical Consequence (the stock breaks or barrel warps from heat).
- Grandfather's Lockpicks
  - Domain: Bypassing locks, delicate mechanical tinkering.
  - Tags: `concealable`, `fragile`
  - Passive Edge: +1 die on fine dexterity picking tests.
  - Exhaust (1/Sequence): *Force the Tumbler* — Automatically convert 1 failure into 1 success on a picking roll. If the roll still fails overall, the picks become Broken.
- Runic Warding Amulet
  - Domain: Resisting eldritch pressure or magical phenomena.
  - Tags: `consumable`, `subtle`
  - Passive Edge: +1 die to Reason or Instinct tests made to resist supernatural forces.
  - Exhaust (1/Sequence): *Shatter Ward* — Absorb a Serious mental or supernatural Consequence. The amulet shatters into dust (Destroyed).

THRESHOLD: RULES REFERENCE

This reference sheet serves as a quick-guide summary of the core systems, resolution procedures, resource pools, and down-time actions for players and the Game Master (GM).

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1. Core Resolution (Ability Tests)

When a character takes action under pressure, roll a pool of six-sided dice (d6) equal to the rating of the relevant Ability (default pool is 0 if untrained).

- Success Criteria: Each die showing a 4 or 5 yields one success.
- Exploding Sixes: Each die showing a 6 counts as one success AND explodes (roll an extra die; explosions continue as long as sixes are rolled).
- Untrained (Rating 0): You automatically fail unless you spend Resource Pool points (up to 2 points for +1 or +2 dice) or leverage a situational advantage (Edge, up to +3 dice) to roll. Automatic 0-die failures grant no advancement marks.

Difficulty Levels & Target Numbers (TN)

To achieve your intent, the total successes rolled (Degree of Success, or DoS) must meet or exceed the Target Number (TN) set by the GM. Meeting the TN exactly (DoS = TN) results in Success at a Cost, while exceeding the TN (DoS > TN) yields a Clean Success.

Difficulty	Target Number (TN)	Guidelines / Example
Easy	0	No roll needed under normal conditions.
Simple	1	Standard task under mild pressure (e.g., climbing a ladder in rain).
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.

Degrees of Success

Outcome	Condition	Resolution
Clean Success	DoS > TN	You achieve your intent cleanly without negative consequences or complications. Focused roll yields a success mark.
Success at a Cost	DoS = TN	You achieve your intent, but the GM introduces a minor complication, resource drain, or harm. Focused roll allows player to choose a success mark or failure mark.

Outcome	Condition	Resolution
Fail Forward	DoS < TN	You fail to achieve your intent, but the situation changes, introducing new complications rather than a dead stop. Focused roll yields a failure mark.

2. Resource Pools

Characters manage a tight, non-refreshing economy of physical, mental, and spiritual reserves:

- Vigor: Spent for physical exertion, survival, and weapon-based combat.
- Instinct: Spent for gut reactions, reflexes, empathy, and social/stealth maneuvers.
- Reason: Spent for logic, focus, willpower, intellect, and memory.
- Spending Pools: Spend up to 2 points from a relevant pool to add +1 or +2 dice (Raw Push) to an Ability Test or Contest. Points spent to activate Secrets do not count toward this 2-point limit.
- Exhaustion & Advancement: Spent Pool points do not automatically recover. To permanently increase a Pool's maximum cap by +1 (up to the standard cap of 10), you spend Karma during Downtime equal to Current Maximum + 1 (requiring in-fiction conditioning or transformation).

3. Beliefs & Karma

- Belief Structure: Written in a three-part structure to create narrative friction: *Conviction → Directive → Friction* (e.g., *"The open plains are honest; I will never travel by road, even if it delays a high-paying delivery."*).
- Beliefs & Karma: Karma is the meta-currency used to change character capabilities and resist outcomes.

Earn Karma By...	Reward	Spend Karma To...	Cost
Acting on a Belief to your detriment	+1 Karma	Reroll a check (reroll all dice; keep new result)	1 Karma
Resolving or abandoning a Belief (Buyoff)	+3 Karma	Buy a new Belief (up to 3 Beliefs max; free during Downtime for unfilled starting slots or Buyoff replacements)	1 Karma (adopting an additional Belief beyond starting count)
Surviving Draw the Line or major Story Milestones	+1 Karma	Open an Ability Focus (max 5 active; or shift Focus)	1 Karma
		Buy a new Secret	2 Karma
		Increase Pool Maximum (+1)	Current Max + 1 Karma
		Lucky Break (discover a plausible environmental advantage)	1 Karma
		Flashback (declare an off-screen preparation)	1 Karma
		Escape a Tight Spot (credible exit from hazard; cannot bypass lost Draw the Line stakes)	1+ Karma

4. Contests & Drawing the Line

When two active forces clash, they roll their pools and compare successes (Degree of Success, or DoS).

- Standard Contests: Both sides roll. Highest DoS wins and achieves their intent cleanly; loser suffers a consequence matching the winner's intent (if offensive, Harm scales by DoS margin: 1 = Minor, 2 = Moderate, 3+ = Serious cap; if defensive, situational/lost Edge). A tie (Compromise) grants partial intent and a Minor Consequence to both sides.
- Escalation Triggers: Only allowed if the situation is immediate Life or Death, or directly challenges/supports one of your Beliefs.
- The Stakes Contract: Both sides must declare a severe, binding consequence (e.g., death, capture, permanent ruin, or loss of a key asset) before rolling. Once lost, catastrophic stakes cannot be undone or bypassed with meta-currency (*Escape a Tight Spot*).

Conflict & Escalation Reference

Mechanics	Procedure / Trigger
Draw the Line (DtL)	1-on-1 Escalation (Asymmetric Escalation: First to 2 wins; initial winner leads 1–0). Escalator declares Pool Push (+0 to +2) first. Loser of previous exchange (or current Escalator after tie) declares first. Either side can Yield (take Moderate Consequence, or initial Contest harm if higher) before any exchange to safely bow out. Tied exchanges: 0 VP if uneven (1–0); +1 VP to both if level (0–0 or 1–1). Ties at 2 VP trigger Shared Pyrrhic Outcome (both suffer Serious Consequence + compromised intent).
The Standoff	Multi-party Escalation (First to 2 Victories).• Declaration Order: – *Exchange 1:* Instigator/Aggressor declares first; other challengers follow; initial 1-VP leader declares last. – *Exchange 2+:* Ascending order of prior exchange DoS (lowest DoS declares first; previous exchange winner declares last; tie broken by lower total VP). – *Yielding:* Can yield on your turn to declare (suffer Moderate Consequence—or initial Contest harm if higher—and avoid Ultimate Stakes). If only 1 stands, they win instantly.• Resolution: Highest DoS wins exchange (+1 VP). Non-yielding losers suffer Ultimate Stakes. Tied exchanges: 0 VP if leader involved; +1 VP to all tied if level or trailing. Ties at 2 VP trigger Shared Pyrrhic Outcome (or Mutually Assured Destruction).

5. Downtime Actions

Downtime occurs strictly between Sequences. Characters receive a budget of 2 actions to spend on recovery, development, or long-term projects:

Downtime Action	Action Cost	Description & Resolution
Pool Recovery	1 Action	Restore Vigor, Instinct, or Reason back to maximum using *The Three Crossings* (requires engaging in recovery behaviors associated with other pools).
Tending to Harm	1 Action	Clear Moderate (1 action, automatic), or reduce Serious to Moderate (requires professional aid + 1 action, or 2 actions across separate Downtime phases of bed rest). Communal Recovery: An ally with a caretaking Ability at Rating 1+ spends 1 action to tend to you (automatic; clears Moderate or reduces Serious → Moderate across Physical, Mental, or Social domains).
Train Abilities	1 Action	Train a Focused Ability (adds 1 failure/practice mark counting toward the failure allowance; required successes must be earned through rolled tests under pressure in live play or high-stakes Downtime rolls).
Long-Term Projects	1 Action	Work on a Project Clock (Default Moderate TN 2; clean = tick 2, cost = tick 1, fail = 0; marks earned only on perilous/TN 3+ projects).
Forge Relationship	1 Action	Roll your Circles Ability against baseline Moderate TN 2 to seek a contact. Clean: reliable (+1 Edge); Cost: contact with strings/debt; Fail: complication/rival. Records an advancement mark if Focused.
Learn Secrets	1 Action	Spend 2 Karma to learn a new Secret (requires in-fiction justification).
Repair / Resupply *(Optional)*	1 Action	Roll Craft, Lore, or Streetwise (Default Moderate TN 2; marks earned if TN 3+) for Exhausted Assets. Clean: restore 2 cleanly; Cost: restore 2 (1 gains `Fragile`) or 1 cleanly; Fail: restore 1 with `Fragile`. (*Broken* Assets require a Long-Term Project Clock to reforge; *Destroyed* items are permanently lost).

6. Consequences & The Cascade

Characters track Consequences across three domains: Physical Harm (Vigor), Mental Strain (Reason), and Social Strain (Instinct). Each domain has 1 Minor, 1 Moderate, 1 Serious, and 1 Lasting slot.

- The Cascade (Overflow): If an incoming consequence targets an already occupied slot within that domain, it cascades to the next higher unfilled tier (Minor → Moderate → Serious → Lasting).
- Mitigation and Occupied Slots: Mitigation Secrets downgrade incoming trauma into the next lower open slot if the target tier is already full (or overwrite an existing Minor consequence if all lower slots are occupied); they never bounce back up.
- Incapacitation / Crisis: If an incoming consequence overflows beyond Lasting, the character suffers immediate Incapacitation / Crisis and is removed from the scene.


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