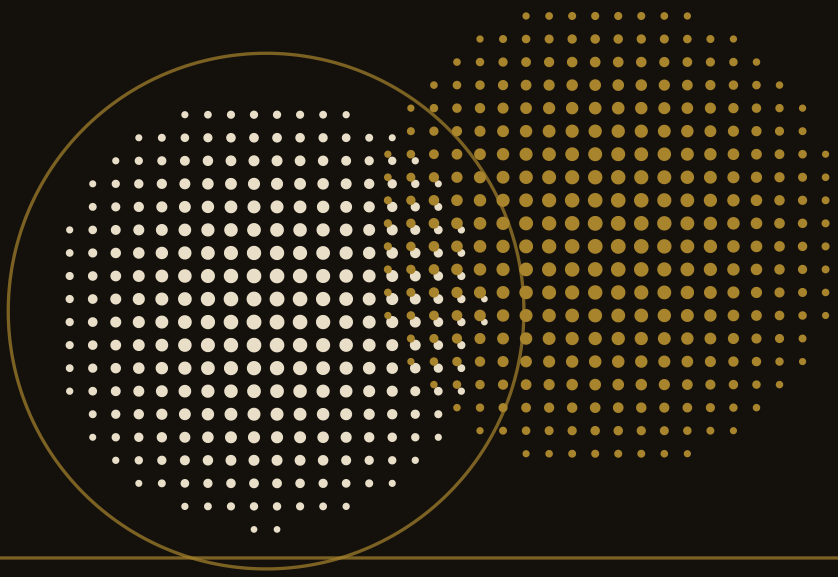


BINARY RPG

WORLD BOOK

Lore, mystery and intrigue across two worlds

BINARY 0.6 · PLAYTEST PRINT

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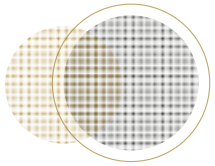
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INTRODUCTION

LOOK UP

Sooner or later, everyone on Tareth looks up.

Fishers do it before they push off from the pontoons. Farmers do it before they plant. Old women on balconies do it while they shell beans, and children do it the way children everywhere count stars. But Tareth's children aren't counting stars. They're measuring something bigger. How much has Veyr grown since last night? How long until the water comes home?

Veyr is the sister world. For half of every Great Cycle she hangs far off, a pale coin low in the sky, small enough to cover with a thumb. Then she comes back. Night by night she swells, until she fills the sky like a lamp held too close. When she is near, the seas rise to meet her and the Shallows drown in warm green water. When she draws away again, the sea follows her out, and the land breathes.

That is the Binary. Two worlds turn around each other, close and then far, close and then far, as they have since long before anyone was counting. Everything on Tareth lives inside that rhythm. Markets open and close by it. Boats are built for it. Houses are built twice as tall as they need to be because of it. Children learn the Cycle before they learn their letters. If you ask someone in the Shallows what season it is, they won't tell you about the weather. They'll tell you how far away the water is.

This is a book mostly about Tareth: its seas and shelves, its high country and frozen edges, its crowded cities and empty places, and the people who make a life among all of it. It is a world worth loving before it is a world that needs saving. Most people here aren't in danger most of the time. They are working, trading, arguing, courting, gossiping, mending nets and complaining about the price of lamp oil. The light is good. The food is better. The tram is usually on time.

But Tareth is old, far older than the people who live on it, and it is full of things they didn't build.

Someone raised the towers. These are immense, impossibly slender spires, and no living mason could cut stone to match them. Someone laid the Conduits, the roads between worlds, which nobody you know has ever travelled. Someone left doors in the reefs that only show when the water is gone, and they don't open for anybody.

People call those builders the **Vael**. Everyone knows the name, and nobody alive has seen one.

How to Use This Book

The World Book is for the Game Master, though curious players are welcome to wander in. It comes in four parts:

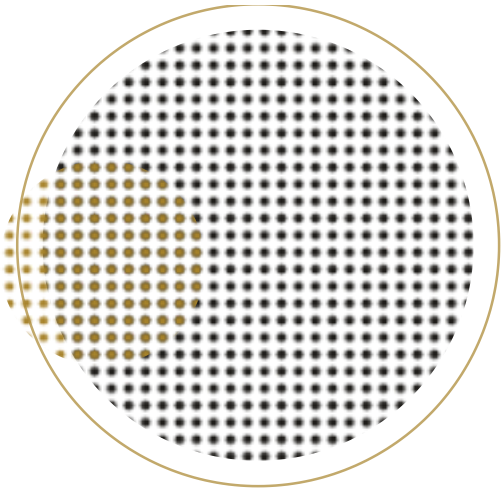
- **Part One: The Binary** is the big picture: the two worlds, the Great Cycle, Aevum, the Vael, the peoples of Tareth and the shape of the world.
- **Part Two: Port City and the Shallows** is where play begins.
- **Part Three: Beyond the Coast** reaches inland to the nearest Conduit, out to the far places of Tareth, and up to Veyr.
- **Part Four: Secrets for the GM** is a short list of the forces that run under the whole setting, and how to bring them in.

The World Book deals in lore and intrigue: what Tareth is like, what people believe, and what lies just under the surface. Rules for playing, and for running the game, live in the Adventure Book. Creatures live in the Creature Book.

Throughout these parts you'll find three kinds of text:

- **Lore** is what is true of the world, or as true as anyone on Tareth could tell you.

- **Rumours and legends** are what people say. Some are true, some are half-true, and some are wrong in interesting ways. They are never automatically facts.
- **[GM]** boxes hold threads for the Game Master to pull. They point toward secrets without spelling them out. A mystery in this book is an invitation, not a locked answer. Your table decides what's at the bottom of it.

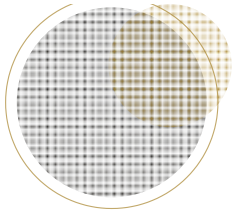


PART ONE

THE BINARY

The big picture: the two worlds, the Great Cycle, Aevum, the Vael, the peoples of Tareth and the shape of the world.





CHAPTER ONE

TWO WORLDS

There are two worlds in the Binary, and one is under your feet.

The other is Veyr. Every Tarethian grows up with her overhead, close and then far, close and then far, the way other people grow up with weather. She is the first thing a baby learns to point at. She's in every lullaby, half the prayers and most of the swearing. If you were born on Tareth, you have never once lived a day without knowing, roughly, where Veyr is.

This chapter is about the pair of them: what each world is, how they move, and what passes between them.

TARETH

Tareth is the larger world, and the living one.

It's a world of water first. Wide oceans cover most of it, warm in the middle and cold at the ends. They're fringed with broad shallow shelves, cut by trenches no light has reached, and scattered with long chains of islands. Where the land does rise, it rises generously: ragged coasts, green high country, river valleys terraced from top to bottom, and mountains with gardens on their shoulders. At the poles the world simply goes white.

It is a kind world, as worlds go. The shelves are thick with fish and shellfish. The high country grows grain, fruit, wine and flowers in quantities that would be ridiculous anywhere else. Rain comes when it's wanted, more or less. Winters are short and polite. People on Tareth complain about a great many things, but hunger is not usually one of them, and when it is, somebody is usually to blame.

The Table

Tarethians have an old word for their world. It doesn't translate neatly, but the closest anyone gets is *the table*.

It's a fond word. You set a table for family. You lay out the best of what you have. A good table is crowded, loud, and nobody leaves it hungry.

It's also a pointed word. Tables are set *for* someone. And Tareth's table feeds a great deal more than the people sitting at it. Every Cycle, grain and goods roll inland in long convoys towards the Conduit, and from there to Veyr. Ask a farmer whose table Tareth is, and you might get a proud answer, a bitter one or a shrug. Ask a bureaucrat and you'll get a speech.

A Natural World

Tareth wasn't made. Its mountains were pushed up by the ground itself, and its seas were filled by rain and time. Its creatures grew the way creatures grow, out of mud and sunlight and long patient ages. Whatever the Vael did here, and they did a great deal, they found Tareth already alive.

That matters to Tarethians more than they usually admit. The towers might be Vael and the Conduit might be Vael, but the sea is theirs. The soil is theirs. A grandmother in the Highlands will tell you, firmly, that the Vael may have planted the orchard, but they didn't invent the apple.

What a Tarethian knows about Tareth. It's big; nobody has seen all of it. It's mostly sea. The coasts are crowded and the edges are empty. The good land feeds the world and then some. The poles are white and best left alone. The old works are everywhere, and the further you go from the cities, the stranger they get.

VEYR

Veyr is the smaller world. Tarethians call her *she*, the way sailors call a ship *she*: with affection, a little respect and a sense that she might turn on you.

Her Face

At Far, Veyr is a pale coin low in the sky, small enough to cover with your thumb at arm's length. Her edge is sharp, sharper than a moon's has any right to be, and her light is clean and cool. On Far nights the stars come out properly, and Veyr is just one more light among them, a bright one, minding her own business.

Then she comes back. Over the turn, she swells night by night until, at Near, she fills a great slice of the sky like a lamp held too close. Her light is strong enough to read by, to fish by and to get caught by. Children at Near have shadows at midnight.

Close up, her face isn't blank. Across her surface runs a faint tracery: long fine lines, branching and joining, with broad pale patches between. On clear Near nights every rooftop in Port City has someone on it arguing about what they are.

- **Rivers**, say the naturalists. Veyr is a world like Tareth, with water that runs downhill.
- **Mountains**, say others. They're ridges and ranges, worn smooth by age.
- **Roads**, say the rest, and they lower their voices when they say it. The lines are too even, they argue, and they meet too neatly. Rivers don't run in straight lines for a thousand miles.

None of them has been close enough to settle it, and the argument has outlived several generations of the people having it.

The Measure of a Thumb

Nobody on Tareth needs an almanac to know the Cycle. They hold up a hand.

At deepest Far, Veyr hides behind a thumbnail. As she rises, she becomes *two fingers*, then *three fingers*, then *a palm*. At Near she is *a full hand*, and on the closest nights she overflows it. Fishers, farmers and smugglers all speak the same language of fingers. "We sail at three fingers" is a perfectly good appointment. "She's past the palm" means *the water's coming, get the cart in*.

The Filament

For a night or two at the very peak of Near, when Veyr is as close as she ever comes, something joins the two worlds. A vortex of plasmic light rises between them, a filament through the sky, thin and bright and never quite still. It wavers and loosens like a thread in a current, drifts, tightens, and drifts again. Then Near begins to fall away, and it's gone.

Everyone on Tareth has seen it. Nobody agrees on what it is. Temples call it the Cord, or the Sky Thread, and say the worlds are holding hands. Fishers say it's Veyr drinking. Aevists say a great many things, at length. In Conduit City, it seems to climb straight out of the Conduit, and nobody there needs telling what they think it means.

Who Lives There

Everyone knows that the Vael live on Veyr. That much is certain, and almost nothing else is.

Veyr is the advanced world, the wealthy world, the world that Tareth's harvests ultimately flow towards. She is where the Vael went when they left Tareth, and as far as anyone knows, they're still there. Whether anyone else lives on Veyr, and what it's like if they do, is a matter for tavern speculation. Common guesses include gardens, cities of glass, endless silent machinery, and nothing at all.

Getting There

Veyr is not forbidden. She's just very far away, very well guarded and very expensive.

The only known roads run through the Conduits, in great cities around the world. The nearest is far inland from Port City. Ordinary people don't go. They don't have the papers, the money, the connections or, frankly, the nerve. But everyone has heard of someone who did, or nearly did: a senior official summoned up and never quite the same afterwards; a merchant prince who bought his way through and came back rich; a clerk's cousin who swears she carried sealed cases up for the Trade Council. Whether any of these stories is true is another matter. The roads exist. Most people just never expect to walk one.

RUMOUR

On the darkest nights of Near, if you know where to look, there are lights on Veyr's shadowed side. They aren't stars. They don't twinkle. Sometimes they move. An old astronomer in Port City has kept a record of them for forty years. She says they've changed lately, but she won't say how to anyone who isn't buying the drinks.

GM IS VEYR A WORLD, OR A WORK?

Veyr is a real planet. Whether the Vael found her, reshaped her or built far more of her than anyone suspects is deliberately left open. The rivers-or-roads argument is the player-facing version of that question. Let them hear every side. Don't settle it until your campaign needs it settled.

GM VEYR AS A DESTINATION

Nothing in this book should make Veyr feel off-limits. She's the far end of a very long road, not a locked door. A high-level campaign can and should be able to reach her, through a Conduit, with the right proof, papers, allies or nerve. What the party finds there is yours to decide. Keep it thin, strange and memorable. The Vael are still not people you simply meet: players meeting the Vael isn't part of this book, and is for your own table to decide (Chapter Sixteen).

THE TURNING PAIR

Tareth and Veyr circle each other on a long, stretched path. For a while they drift apart and hang there. Then, quite quickly, they swing in close together, linger, and part again.

It isn't a tidy circle, and it doesn't behave quite the way a careful astronomer would expect. Most people don't care. The rhythm is reliable, and that's what matters. It's about ninety days from Far to Far: some forty far, some forty near, and about five days of turning each way. The next chapter covers what that does to the world.

Aevists have a saying: *the worlds don't circle, they breathe.* Whether that's poetry or physics depends on which Aevist you're drinking with. But it's true that the Binary feels less like two stones swinging on a string and more like something alive: a slow, steady breath in and out, so regular that you stop noticing it, until someday you notice it.

The Binary. To a Tarethian, the Binary is everything there is: two worlds bound to each other, neither one complete alone, and everything that lives on, around and between them. There are stars, of course, but stars are lights. Nobody on Tareth has ever had reason to think of them as places. Scholars, Aevists and almanac-makers use the word. Ordinary people mostly just say *the pair*, *the two*, or *up there*. Aevum, the power behind every tram and lantern on Tareth, comes from the Binary itself, from the pull and release of two worlds turning together. More on that in Chapter Three.

GM THE EDGE OF THE MAP

The Binary is also the scope of the game. Every adventure, mystery and secret in BINARY lies somewhere within these two worlds and the space between them. What, if anything, lies beyond is not part of the setting.

BETWEEN THE WORLDS

The two worlds aren't just neighbours. They're bound together by trade, by power and by an arrangement older than anyone's memory.

What goes up. Grain, mostly. Grain, fruit, wine, fish, timber, cloth and fine goods are gathered from every coast and valley, counted, sealed, taxed, counted again and sent inland in long convoys to the Conduit. The flow never stops. It is the great machine that Tarethian bureaucracy exists to run, and running it well makes people very rich.

What comes down. That's harder to say. Officially, the arrangement keeps the balance: the towers lit, the trams humming, the Cycle steady and the world in good order. Unofficially, nobody outside the highest offices has ever seen a manifest for the return trip. People assume *something* comes back. Sealed crates leave Conduit City under heavy guard. Officials come home with new titles and odd habits. Every so often an Aevic device turns up in a rich man's tower that nobody can explain.

Who stands between. Tarethians run every part of it. Clerks, harvest-masters, inspectors, customs officers and councils, up and up, layer on layer, all the way to offices whose names ordinary people don't know. At the very top, it is whispered, a few Tarethians speak with the Vael directly. Everyone below them takes it on trust that the system is fair.

Most of the time, it more or less is. When it isn't, the people at the top have every reason to keep that quiet: from the people below, and from the sky above.

RUMOUR

Port City's records show exactly how much grain leaves for the Conduit each Cycle. Conduit City's records show how much arrives. The two figures don't match, and they haven't for a long time. Somebody on the road is taking a share, or somebody past the end of it is.

GM THE WEIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

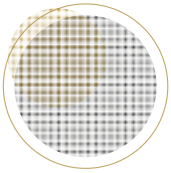
The real danger to Tareth's balance isn't the Vael. It's the Tarethian elite who manage the flow between the worlds, and the bureaucrats, merchants and councillors who've learned that a little skimmed here and a little hidden there adds up to a fortune. Corruption at the top is a major force in BINARY. It squeezes the people below, and if it grows large enough, it draws the attention of the farmer. A campaign that starts with a smuggler on the Dim Road can end with proof of rot in the Tarethian Trade Council, and the only place to find that proof may lie beyond the Conduit.

SAYINGS OF THE PAIR

Veyr is in the language as much as the sky. A few of the sayings you'll hear on the coast:

- *She's past the palm.* Hurry up; time's running out.
- *Under a full hand.* In plain sight; everyone could see it.
- *Thumbnail weather.* A quiet spell; nothing's happening, at Far or otherwise.
- *Waiting on Veyr.* Waiting for something that will certainly come, but not yet.
- *Ask her yourself.* Said to someone asking a question nobody can answer.
- *The worlds breathe.* Things change, and then they change back. Be patient.





CHAPTER TWO

THE GREAT CYCLE

The Great Cycle is the breath of the Binary.

Veyr draws away, and the sea goes with her. Veyr comes back, and the sea comes home. From Far to Far takes about ninety days, a season of its own: roughly forty with Veyr distant, five of rising water, roughly forty with her close, and five of falling water. Nobody on Tareth counts it to the hour. They don't need to. You can see Veyr, you can see the water, and the whole world tells you where you are.

The Cycle isn't a catastrophe. It's a season, the way winter is a season. People plan for it, build for it, celebrate it, grumble about it and set their debts by it. Children learn it before they learn their letters. Ask someone in the Shallows what season it is and they won't tell you about the weather. They'll tell you how far away the water is.

Once in a while, though, somebody forgets to respect it.

THE FOUR FACES

Tarethians speak of the Cycle in four parts. Two are long and two are short.

PHASE	VEYR	THE WATER	LASTS
Far	A thumbnail, low and pale	Drawn back, often for miles	About forty days
Rising	Swelling night by night	Coming home	About five days
Near	A full hand, filling the sky	High everywhere	About forty days
Falling	Shrinking again	Going out	About five days

FAR

Veyr is small and distant. The nights are dark and full of stars, and for once Veyr is just one light among many.

The sea pulls back from the shelves, sometimes for ten miles or more. It leaves behind sand flats and rock gardens, tidepools, kelp lying flat in long brown ribbons, and stilt-houses suddenly standing on legs as tall as trees. The canals of the inner Shallows run low and slow. Further out, whole neighbourhoods find themselves standing in mud with their boats propped up in the yard.

Far is the season of the land. Ground floors are swept out and opened up again. Carts roll down channels that were waterways a month ago. Harvest crews go out onto the bare shelf with baskets, poles and sledges to gather what the water left: shellfish, sea-grass, salt, wreckage and the occasional thing nobody can name. Along the Spines, the boats that didn't make it out sit high in their cradles like beached whales in a row, and their crews spend Far painting hulls, mending nets and getting under each other's feet.

The ocean doesn't vanish. It's still out there at the end of the Spines, and the docks at the far ends stay busy. Trams run back and forth along the Spines all day, carrying cargo and crews between the city and the sea.

In the high country, people say the soil is livelier at Far and the stone *hums*. Miners swear their picks bite easier. Masons prefer to lay foundations at Far, and Aevists who work with earth and stone do their best work now. Nobody can quite say why.

What the Water Leaves

Far is also when old things come up for air. Reefs that have been underwater all through Near show their caves and channels and, sometimes, worked stone far older than any city: a doorway half buried in sand, a channel too straight to be natural, a smooth shell-coloured surface that hums when you touch it.

Most of what the water reveals is just mud. Most of the old finds near the cities were picked clean generations ago. But the shelf is wide and the sea shifts the sand around every Cycle, and every Far someone comes back from the outer Shallows with a story. Every Far, a few people don't come back at all.

Dangers of Far

The bare shelf looks harmless. It isn't. Things that live in the Shallows don't all leave when the water does. Some dig in and wait. Some hunt across the flats at night. Sinking sand, sudden channels, rotting wrecks and the long walk home all claim their share. And the further out you go, the less anyone is watching.

RISING

The turn begins.

Veyr grows noticeably from one night to the next: *two fingers*, *three fingers*, *a palm*. Birds move inland in long, noisy streams. Animals on the shelf get restless and start moving towards deep water or high ground. Dogs bark at nothing. Old people say their knees know before their eyes do.

The water comes back over about five days. It doesn't arrive as a wave. It's a steady, patient fill, like a bath being run. On the first day the low channels gleam. By the second, the flats have darkened and the tidepools have joined hands. By the fifth evening, the Shallows are a sea again, and the boats are floating free of their cradles.

The Half-Water

Rising and Falling share a name of their own: *the half-water*. For five days each way, the shelf is neither land nor sea. It's too wet to walk and too shallow to sail. Carts bog down, keels scrape and nothing moves quite the way it should. Flat-bottomed punts, stilt-walkers, waders and very patient porters do a roaring trade. The half-water is when goods go missing, when people get stranded on the wrong side of a channel, and when anyone who wants to move unseen has the whole shelf to themselves.

Everyone knows it's coming. The sensible clear the shelf, bring the carts in, lock the ground floors, carry everything worth keeping upstairs and get the boats ready to float out of their cradles. The foolish stay out one more hour for one more basket. Each Rising, a few of them find out how fast a patient tide can be.

Rising is a busy, cheerful, anxious time. Debts are called in before the water makes collection difficult. Deals made at Far are settled. Crews who've spent forty days ashore can't wait to get back out.

NEAR

Veyr fills the sky.

The nights are bright enough to read by, and on the closest nights children have shadows at midnight. The seas run high everywhere. Coasts drown, rivers back up and flood their mouths, and the Shallows become a calm, warm, green sea a few fathoms deep.

Near is the season of the water. Boats tie up at second-storey landings. Children dive off balconies. Markets float. Barges nose up to the doors of lone merchant towers far out on the Shallows, where at Far you'd need a cart and a long walk. The fishing is extraordinary. Divers go down into drowned streets and courtyards for shellfish, salvage and secrets. Ferry crews make their money now, and so do smugglers, because at Near a boat can go almost anywhere and almost nobody can follow it.

Deep creatures come up onto the flooded shelf to hunt and breed. Some are beautiful. Some are the reason children are called in at dusk.

Aevists who work with water and current find it answers them more readily at Near, as if the sea were listening.

And at the very peak of Near, for a night or two, the filament hangs between the worlds: a wavering thread of plasmic light from Tareth's sky to Veyr's (Chapter One). Nobody on the coast sleeps much while it's up.

Dangers of Near

The calm green water is lovely and mostly safe near the city. Further out, the Shallows at Near are hunting grounds. Things come up from the Deep that don't belong in water this shallow, and they don't always know it. Storms are rarer but bigger. And a drowned ruin is much more dangerous to explore than an exposed one, because the way out is always up, and up is a long way when you're out of breath.

FALLING

Veyr shrinks again, and over about five days the water goes out slowly and politely, leaving everything wet and smelling of salt. It's the half-water again, this time with everything draining the other way.

Boats are guided back into their cradles along the Spines, or sent out to the end docks to wait out Far at sea. Stranded fish flap in the canals, and children run around catching them. Ground floors are bailed, scrubbed and aired. Doors that stayed sealed all through Near are opened, and everyone finds out whether their door-maker was any good.

Scavengers come in from everywhere to clean up the shelf. Gulls and crabs come first, then larger things. Some of them are much larger than anyone would like, and they come right up to the edge of the inner Shallows before the city guard persuades them otherwise.

Falling is when the shelf is at its richest and most dangerous: everything the sea brought in and left behind, all lying out on the sand, and everything that eats it, too.

LIVING BY THE BREATH

The Cycle runs through every part of life on Tareth.

Speech. People mark time in Cycles more than years. "Three Fars ago" is a perfectly good date. *How far is the water?* is a greeting in some places and a business question in others. Veyr's size is read off a raised hand, from *thumbnail* to *full hand*, and everyone from fishers to clerks speaks in fingers.

Building. Coastal houses are built tall, with lower floors that are meant to flood. Doors and shutters are made to seal. Stairs are wide, because everything comes up them twice a Cycle. Valuables live upstairs. Some families in the inner Shallows have two front doors, one at street level and one a floor up on the water side, and they use whichever one the Cycle gives them.

Boats. Shallows boats are built with flat keels and strong cradle-points so they can sit out a Far high and dry. Deep-water ships can't, so they either leave before Falling or wait out Far tied up at the end of the Spines.

Work. Some trades belong to Far: shelf-harvesters, salvagers, cart-haulers, masons, sledge-drivers. Others belong to Near: divers, deep-water fishers, ferry crews, bargemen. Many families do both and complain about both. Twice a Cycle, half the Shallows changes jobs.

Money and law. Rents, loans and contracts run by the Cycle. "Payable at Rising" is the usual term, because that's the last good moment to find someone before the water makes them hard to reach. The Council of Merchants sets its tolls and mooring fees by phase, and a mooring that's cheap at Far can be a small fortune at Near.

Celebration. Every ninety days, somebody on Tareth is throwing a party, and usually everybody else turns up. See *Two Feasts*, below.

Faith. Many households leave a little of the harvest out at Near, a thanks to the sky or to the Vael or to whoever's listening, and a little more if the Cycle has been kind. Nobody quite agrees on who takes it. The gulls have a theory.

TWO FEASTS

Every Cycle has two great celebrations, and almost nobody goes to both. At least, nobody admits to it.

Homewater

Homewater belongs to the seafarers. It's held as Near arrives, when the water has come all the way home and the boats are floating free again. Fishers, divers, ferry crews, bargemen and dockhands celebrate the end of forty days ashore and the start of forty days of good fishing, easy passage and money.

Homewater is loud, wet and long. Lanterns are floated out on the first night of high water, thousands of them, until the inner Shallows look like a second sky. Boats are dressed in ribbons and paraded under the High Road bridges. Children dive off balconies for coins. Old crews toast the ones the sea took last Cycle. Everyone ends up in the water at least once, willingly or not.

Open Ground

Open Ground belongs to the farmers and the land folk. It's held as Far arrives, when the shelf is bare, the soil is waking and the stone *hums*. In the Highlands, it's the planting feast. On the coast, it's the shelf-harvesters, salvagers, carters and masons who celebrate, with forty days of land ahead of them.

Open Ground is earthy, generous and long-tabled. Markets are held right out on the bare shelf, on sand that was seabed a week before. Fires are lit on the flats, and the first shelf-harvest is cooked in them. Highland villages bless the fields, dance in them and argue over whose grandfather planted the first row. There's a lot of bread, a lot of beer and a lot of mud.

Both, Please

Three kinds of people celebrate both feasts with equal enthusiasm: **merchants**, **barkeeps** and **criminals**. Merchants love Homewater for the boats and Open Ground for the carts, and they love a crowd with money in its pocket at either. Barkeeps love them both for obvious reasons. Ask a Shallows barkeep which feast is better, and she'll tell you whichever one is coming next.

Criminals love them both for the same reasons merchants do, only more so. A feast means crowds to work, purses to lift, guards looking the other way and a whole town too drunk to remember faces. Many a Dim Road crew plans its year around them. In the Shallows it's said that a feast isn't really over until something important has gone missing.

Sailors and farmers like to sneer at each other's feast. Sailors call Open Ground *the mud party*. Farmers call Homewater *the drowning*. Both still turn up, if the drinks are free.

Smaller customs. Between the two great feasts, every town has its own small ways of marking the turn. Some sing Veyr down at Falling. Some keep a quiet night on the first evening of the half-water. Some just get very drunk. The customs differ from town to town and are fiercely defended.

GM FEASTS IN PLAY

A feast is a crowd, a distraction, a deadline and an excuse all at once. Everyone important is out in public, the guard is stretched thin, the Dim Road is busy, and a lot of drunk people are making promises. Homewater and Open Ground are natural set-pieces for heists, meetings, chases, duels and very bad decisions.

THE CYCLE ACROSS TARETH

The Cycle reaches everywhere on Tareth, but it doesn't touch everywhere the same way.

- **The Shallows** feel it most. They are drowned and revealed twice in every Cycle, and their whole way of life is built around it.
- **The Deep Shallows** never dry out, but they rise and fall with it. At Near, the large hunters of the Deep Shallows spread out onto the flooded shelf. At Far, they pull back and crowd together.
- **The Deep** barely seems to notice, at least on the surface. Sailors say the big things down there rise closer at Near. Sailors say a lot of things.
- **The Archipelagos** see their islands grow and shrink. Island chains that are joined by sand and rock at Far become separate again at Near, and the walkways between them change from roads into piers.
- **The Highlands** are far from the sea, but their rivers back up at Near and run fast at Far. Highland farmers plant by Veyr just as fishers sail by her.
- **The Scour** groans. Ice-edge communities say the ice shifts and cracks with the Cycle, and that it is loudest at the turn.
- **Cities** answer it with stone, locks and Aevum. Pumps, sluices and sealed doors keep the worst of Near out of the places that matter, mostly.

THE STEADY BREATH

The Cycle is so regular that Tarethians trust it the way they trust sunrise. Almanac-makers print tables of it years in advance. Merchants sign contracts against it. Nobody alive remembers it ever being late.

That's what makes the old stories uncomfortable.

LEGEND

Old shelf families say the Cycle wasn't always this regular. In their great-grandparents' great-grandparents' time, they say, Veyr came closer some years and stayed farther others. Some Nears drowned the second storeys, and some Fars lasted twice as long as they should have. The Shallows weren't safe to live on at all. Then one year it settled, and it has been steady ever since. Ask them what settled it, and they'll look at the sky and say nothing.

RUMOUR

Some shelf families still keep their own tide-tables, handed down and copied out by hand, going back further than any almanac. The oldest pages record the irregular years. The newest pages, some say, are very slightly wrong again.

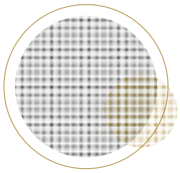
GM THE STEADY BREATH

Whether the Cycle has always been this regular is not established. If it hasn't, the obvious questions are who steadied it, how, and whether they could unsteady it. This is a thread for a long campaign, not an opening scene. A single day's delay in Rising would be the biggest news on Tareth in living memory.

SAYINGS OF THE BREATH

- *Out with the water.* Gone, lost, not coming back.
- *Wait for Rising.* Be patient; the situation will change by itself.
- *One more basket.* Greed that gets people killed. It's said as a warning, and at funerals.
- *A Near-weather friend.* Someone who's around only when things are good.
- *Dry-cradled.* Stuck, idle, waiting for things to come back to you.
- *The water always comes home.* Things come back around, good and bad.





CHAPTER THREE

AEVUM

Somewhere in Port City, right now, a pair of tram cars is gliding up a Spine, a hand's breadth above the stone, without a sound. A lantern is glowing in a window without a flame. A lift is carrying a clerk up the inside of a tower older than the city itself. Nobody involved is giving it a moment's thought.

That's Aevum. It's the power that runs Tareth's wonders, and most people take it about as seriously as running water.

THE BREATH MADE USEFUL

Aevum comes from the Binary itself, from the pull and release of two worlds turning around each other. When Veyr draws close and the seas rise to meet her, that's the Binary breathing in. Aevum is what's caught in the breath.

The Vael didn't create it. They found it, and they learned to use it as nobody has before or since. Everything Tarethians know about Aevum, they learned by studying what the Vael left behind.

What Aevum actually *is* depends on who's explaining. A tram driver will tell you it's what makes the tram go. A temple keeper might call it the breath between the worlds. A Highland farmer will tell you it's what makes the irrigation work, and that's all you need to know about it. An Aevist will give you a long, careful answer full of words like *tension*, *resonance* and *form*. If you push them hard enough, they'll admit that nobody really knows.

What everyone agrees on is that Aevum is not quite the same from one day to the next. It answers the Cycle. At Far, it runs strong through earth and stone, and at Near it runs strong through water. Aevists feel the difference the way sailors feel a change in the wind.

AEVUM IN DAILY LIFE

Ordinary Tarethians know exactly what Aevum is in the way they know what a well is: something useful that's always been there. They don't need to understand it any more than a peasant needs to understand rain. For most people, Aevum is a kind of everyday magic that they've stopped thinking of as magic.

In the cities and along the busy coasts, it's everywhere you look.

Trams. Trams glide silently a hand's breadth above the long Spines and the city streets, quiet and smokeless. They run in pairs or in longer trains, but the cars aren't coupled. Each one floats free, keeping its place in the line like a fish in a shoal, closing up on the bends and spreading out on the straights. Their cars are curved like polished shell, with brass fittings and long windows. The great tram paths are old work, laid by the Vael and patched by Tarethians ever since. In the city streets you can see them plainly: smooth, pale, unworn strips running through the cobbles, untouched by wheel or hoof, because nobody with any sense stands on a tram path. A Port City child can tell you the name of every route, and which one is always late.

Lanterns. They glow without flame or smoke. Their light is cool and steady and very slightly pearlescent, like the inside of a shell. A good lantern lasts a lifetime. A cheap one flickers at the turn of the Cycle, and everyone knows the sound of somebody smacking a lantern in the dark.

Lifts. These rise inside the great towers, so that nobody has to climb two hundred stairs to reach a counting room. The oldest lifts are Vael and silent. Newer ones are Tarethian, and they creak.

Pumps, locks and sluices. These keep canals clean, lower floors dry and fresh water flowing in the inner Shallows, mostly. When a district's pump fails at Near, the whole street knows within the hour.

Seals. An Aevic seal is a stamped mark that glows faintly when the right hand touches it and stays dark for anyone else. Seals close crates, certify cargo, authorise permits and warrant arrests. They're very hard to forge, which is the whole point. All of Tareth's paperwork runs on seals. A clerk without their seal is just someone with opinions.

Walkers. Great striding Aevic machines march beside the city guard in the larger towns. They're tall and heavy, with long jointed legs, a hunched armoured body and a slow, deliberate turn of the head that makes everyone nearby go quiet. They're slow, very hard to argue with and very hard to stop. Children love them. Smugglers don't.

None of this surprises anyone. It's also not cheap, not universal and not well understood. Out in the stilt villages

and the Wastelands, Aevum means one old lantern in the meeting house and a pump that works when it feels like it. In the Highlands, it means irrigation channels that run uphill, which everyone has stopped finding strange.

Fitters and Menders

Somebody has to keep it all running. Tarethian **fitters** are the tradespeople who repair, maintain and install Aevic devices. They are plumbers, electricians and clockmakers all at once. They're not Aevists. Most of them couldn't tell you how a lantern works. They know how to fix it, which is more useful.

A good fitter is worth their weight in salt. A bad one will take your money, swap your good lantern for a cheap one and be gone before Rising.

RUMOUR

The fitters' guild keeps a list of devices its members are forbidden to touch: old work, mostly, found in the walls of towers or dredged up from the shelf. Nobody outside the guild has seen the list. Some say it's long. Some say it's very short, and the reasons on it are very strange.

THE OLD WORKS AND THE NEW

There are two kinds of Aevic work on Tareth, and anyone can tell them apart at a glance.

New work is Tarethian. It's capable, often handsome, and frequently patched. It follows forms copied from older things, adapted and simplified until it can be built by people with ordinary tools. It is very good work, and it breaks.

Old work is Vael. It's refined beyond any modern craft, and it often seems to have been grown rather than made. It borrows the shapes of the sea: the ribbed curve of a shell, the spiral chambers of a nautilus, the oily rainbow sheen of the inside of an abalone, apertures that open like an eye, long spines and clean sweeping lines. It never looks like ornament. It looks like something that found the perfect shape and stopped.

Old work doesn't wear the way things should. It doesn't rust or rot. It's been running for longer than anyone can reckon, and almost none of it has stopped. When a piece of old work does stop, it's an event. People come to look at it, like a dead whale on the beach.

Tarethians live inside, beside and on top of the old works. They repair around them, build onto them and borrow their style. Nobody can make new ones.

The Style of the Binary

That borrowed style is everywhere. Centuries of copying the Vael have given Tarethian design its look: tall round towers with pointed roofs, arched walkways between buildings, curved shell-like tram cars, long elegant lines, brass and stone and pale glass. It's not all spires, though. Plenty of buildings are plain, square and practical, and most homes are just homes. But the grand ones, the ones that want to impress, all reach for the old shapes.

There's no smoke in this world, no soot and no belching chimneys. Tareth's cities hum. They don't roar.

THE TOWERS

The greatest of the old works are the towers.

These cylindrical spires are so tall and so slender that they shouldn't stand, and yet they have stood for longer than anyone can reckon. Many are topped with long pointed spires, and many are linked high up by arched bridges that cross from tower to tower without visible support. They're made from a pale, seamless material that isn't quite stone, isn't quite shell and doesn't chip. From a distance, a city of them looks like a forest of needles catching the light.

Lived-in towers. Most of the towers in the cities are occupied, and have been for generations. Governments, banks, merchant houses and the very rich fill them. Their lifts still run and their lanterns still glow. Tarethians have built onto them, around them and between them, until a great city is half Vael bones and half Tarethian flesh. Owning floor space in an old tower is the surest sign of wealth on Tareth.

Sealed towers. Some towers have no door anyone has found a way through. They stand among the inhabited ones, smooth and silent, and the city simply grows around them. Some have been sealed for as long as records go back. A few, according to the records, used to be open.

Lone towers. A few towers stand alone in odd places: out on the shelf, on an island crag, in a mountain pass with no road leading to it, half-buried in Scour ice. Some have been claimed by merchants, hermits or monasteries. Some have been left alone, and the locals have reasons.

RUMOUR

The sealed towers aren't empty. On still nights, if you put your ear against the stone, you can hear something moving in them. It's very slow, and very regular, like breathing.

The Sealed Doors

Sealed doors aren't just found in towers. They turn up all over Tareth, in the sides of reefs uncovered at Far, at the backs of caves, in the cellars of old buildings and deep in the foundations of cities. They are smooth, close-fitting and utterly immovable. Nobody has ever forced one. People have tried with picks, Aevum, black powder, prayer and in one famous case a walker. The walker lost.

Every sealed Vael door ever recorded shares one mark: a small spiral, set in the same place on every door. Nobody knows what it means. Some people collect rubbings of them, quietly.

RUMOUR

A Nymari was seen at a sealed Vael door, pressing all four palms flat against the stone. For a moment, people say, the door was warm.

GM THE SEALED DOORS

What's behind them, what opens them and why they're sealed are all deliberately open. They're ideal as long-term mysteries: a party can find one early, fail to open it, and come back many sessions later with something that changes the answer. Opening one should be a major event, with consequences.

AEVISTS

Aevists are those who've studied Aevum and learned to work it directly, rather than just switch it on.

Most learned from masters, through long apprenticeships in workshops, temples or academies. Some learned from books, the few good ones that exist and the many bad ones. Some learned from the long, patient business of breaking things and seeing what happens. Every Aevist carries Aevum with them, held in reservoirs and drawn out in shapes they call *forms*, and every Aevist works it a little differently.

A rare few seem to have been born with a feel for Aevum. They have an *attunement*, and they learn faster and reach further than study alone would explain. Nobody knows why. Attuned Aevists are prized, envied and watched.

Aevists are respected, sought after and a little distrusted. A good one can repair a pump the whole street depends on, light a dark tunnel, calm a rising flood or make stone give way. A great one can do things that make people step back. Merchant houses employ them. City governments license them. Criminal crews pay them very well. Every faction on Tareth wants a few.

And every Aevist knows the same uncomfortable truth: they're working with fragments. They are clever children playing with tools that grown-ups left behind.

Aevum and the Nymari. It's half-known, the way rumours are half-known, that the Nymari have a feel for Aevum. Some say they can hear it, and some say old works behave differently around them. Most Tarethians have never met a Nymari, so the stories grow in the telling. See Chapter Five.

THE DEEPER DEVICES

Trams, lanterns, seals and walkers are the Aevum that everyone sees. They are not all of it.

There are other devices: complex, old and terrible or wonderful. They are locked in the vaults of the very rich, held under seal by the bureaucracy, lost in sealed towers or lying in the deep places of the Shallows, waiting for a Far to uncover them. Some could change a city. Some could change the world, if anyone found the right one and learned how to use it.

RUMOUR

Every salvager has a story about the one that got away: a sphere that floated, a blade that cut light, a shell that showed the sea as it was a thousand years ago. Most salvagers don't believe the stories. All of them hope.

GM THE DEEPER DEVICES

The truly complex Aevic devices are unknown to ordinary people. They are meant to emerge over the course of a campaign, one discovery at a time. Keep them rare, strange and consequential. A single one should be worth an adventure, and owning one should make the party a target. The powerful already know some of these devices exist. That's part of why they're powerful.

AEVUM'S SHADOW

GM YTHRUM

Aevum has a dark side. Aevists who know of it, and very few do, call it **Ythrum**, or Black Aevum. Things touched by it are called *Ythric*.

Ordinary people don't have a name for it. What they have are stories: cold lights moving out on the shelf at Far; a stretch of reef where the fish won't go; a lantern that burns black for a moment and then is fine; a fitter who opened a device he shouldn't have and was never quite right afterwards.

What Ythrum is, where it comes from and what it wants are not established. It may be Aevum gone wrong, Aevum's opposite or something else entirely. Let it stay a shiver at the edge of the map for now. When it appears, it should feel wrong in a way the players can't quite name.

Ythrum belongs to the World Book and Creature Book only. It does not appear in the Adventure Book.

SAYINGS OF AEVUM

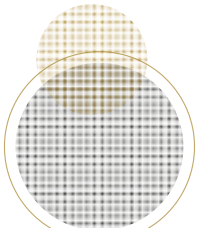
- *Smack the lantern.* Try the obvious fix first.

- *Old work.* Something solid, reliable, built to last. "That marriage is old work."
- *New work.* Something that will need fixing. Often said about a plan.
- *No seal on it.* Unofficial, deniable, off the books.
- *Ear to the tower.* Listening for something you probably don't want to hear.

PLATE TO COME

CHAPTER FOUR: THE VAEL

The watcher in the field



CHAPTER FOUR

THE VAEL

Everyone on Tareth lives in a house the Vael built, one way or another.

They ride the Vael's trams, read by the Vael's lanterns, work in the Vael's towers and send their harvests up the Vael's road to the sky. They swear by the Vael, pray to them, blame them, joke about them and name their children after the old words carved on Vael doors. Ask a Tarethian what the Vael are actually like, though, and the conversation goes very quiet.

Nobody alive has seen one.

WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS

The Vael built the towers. They found Aevum and harnessed it. They laid the Conduits. They live on Veyr.

That is very nearly all anyone knows for sure.

Everything else, from what they look like and what they want to whether they're still really up there, is guesswork, faith, rumour or politics. Usually it's some mix of all four.

THE LONG BEFORE

Scholars reckon Tareth's history in two great spans. There's *the Long Before*, when the Vael were here, and *the After*, which is everything since. The Long Before isn't history in any proper sense. There are no records, only the works themselves and what can be reasoned from them.

What can be reasoned is this. The Vael were on Tareth long before Tarethians were anything at all. They didn't make the world, but they found it, and over ages nobody can measure, they arranged it. They raised the towers. They laid the tram paths and the Spines, the locks and the sluices. They tamed the rivers of the high country and terraced the valleys. They turned Tareth into the abundant, orderly, endlessly productive place it is.

Then they built the Conduits, went up to Veyr and stayed there.

Nobody knows why they left. Nobody knows exactly when, or whether they left all at once or a few at a time. Nobody knows whether Tarethians were already here, watching them go. Tarethian memory begins in the After, in a world already full of works its people didn't make and couldn't explain. Some of the oldest stories begin with the line *when the builders had gone*, as if that were the beginning of the world.

GM THE LONG BEFORE

How long the Vael were on Tareth, what they were like then, and whether Tarethians and Vael ever lived side by side are all deliberately unestablished. Ruins revealed at Far, sealed doors and the oldest tower records are all places a campaign could find pieces of the answer. Keep the pieces small and contradictory.

THE VAEL TODAY

The Vael don't govern Tareth. They don't visit. They don't explain.

Every city, council, guild and court on Tareth is run by Tarethians. Tarethians make the laws, collect the taxes, settle the disputes, keep the peace and count the grain. As far as any ordinary person can tell, nobody tells them how. The great machinery of Tarethian bureaucracy exists to run the flow of goods across Tareth and up to Veyr, and it runs on the shared, unspoken understanding that this is how things are meant to be.

Officials have a phrase for it. Ask why a toll is set where it is, why a harvest must go inland, why a permit was refused, and sooner or later you'll hear it: *for the balance*. It's the closest thing Tareth has to a law above the law. It's also very hard to argue with, because nobody quite knows what it means.

GM ABOVE THE TOP

The Tarethian bureaucracy has layers, and the topmost of them do not stop at Tareth. A very few of the most senior Tarethians deal with a Vael High Council, a handful of Vael who are the only ones that deal with Tarethians at all. How, where, how often and on what terms are questions for the Conduit, and for much later in a campaign. Even these few have probably never seen a Vael face to face. Most of them would never admit how little they actually know.

WHAT PEOPLE SAY

Ask ten Tarethians about the Vael and you'll get eleven opinions.

They're gods. There are temples, shrines and quiet household customs that treat the Vael as distant divinities watching from the sky. Leave a little of the harvest out at Near, and a little more if the year's been good. Some temples keep long lists of Vael names, though no two temples' lists agree. Others hold that the Vael have no names, and that giving them one is rude.

They're landlords. Plenty of Tarethians, especially poor ones, see the Vael as absentee owners, and Tareth as the farm they don't visit. The harvest goes up, the rent is paid, and the landlord never comes to fix the roof. It's a joke in the taverns, and not a joke in the fields.

They're gone. Some scholars argue that the Vael are long dead or long departed. On this view, the Conduits, the towers and the lights on Veyr are machines still running for masters who left ages ago, and Tareth is sending its harvests to an empty house. It's a popular idea among clever young people. Older clever people tend to point out that somebody, somewhere, still seems to be paying attention.

They're a story. A few sceptics hold that the Vael are a convenient myth. "Built by the Vael" is just what you say about anything too old and too good to explain, and "for the balance" is just what you say when you don't want to explain yourself. This view is rarely popular with officials.

They're watching. Some people simply believe that the Vael are up there, paying attention, and that you'd better hope they never feel the need to come down.

RUMOUR · VAEL BREAD

Shallows folk whisper that the tithe isn't eaten as it is. Up on Veyr, they say, it's made into something else: Vael bread, food for the sky. Someone in every tavern claims to have tasted it, and to have been ruined for ordinary bread ever since. Fakes are sold everywhere on the Dim Road, at a price.

Who speaks for the Vael. Nobody, officially. That hasn't stopped plenty of people from trying. Temples claim to know the Vael's will. Officials claim to serve the balance. Fortune-tellers on the High Road claim to hear Vael voices in seashells. Every few Cycles, someone in the Shallows announces that they are a Vael, or have met one, or are carrying a message from one. They draw a crowd, and then they usually draw the city guard.

WHAT THEY LOOK LIKE

Nobody knows. That hasn't stopped anyone from saying.

Old carvings, children's stories and drunken eyewitness accounts all disagree.

- Some describe tall, impossibly thin figures in long robes, with too many arms and eyes like lamps.
- Some describe beings of shifting light, there and not there, like sun on water.
- Some describe something like a Tarethian, but subtly *wrong*: too still, too symmetrical, too patient.
- Some insist the Vael have no bodies at all, and live inside the old works themselves.

Very old Vael-style art almost never depicts a person. It shows shells, spirals, waves, the two worlds and long clean lines, and never a face. That tells you something, or it tells you nothing.

GM APPEARANCE

What the Vael look like is not established. The tall, many-armed description sits suspiciously close to some features of the Nymari, and players *will* notice. That's deliberate. Don't confirm or deny it.

THE FARMER'S EYE

There's one thing about the Vael that most Tarethians feel in their bones, even if they'd never put it in words: the Vael don't care about any one person, but they care very much that things *keep working*.

The Vael aren't cruel. They're not kind, either. They look at Tareth the way a farmer looks at a field: as something to be kept healthy, productive and in balance. A farmer doesn't mourn one stalk of wheat. A farmer doesn't notice a hungry family, or a flooded village, or a corrupt official taking a little off the top. But a farmer does notice blight.

Tareth has a saying for when things are going badly wrong: *keep it quiet, or the farmer will hear.*

It's said as a joke. It's also said, in certain offices high in certain towers, as advice.

GM THE TRUTH OF THE VAEL

None of this is common knowledge on Tareth. Use it to steer the Vael's behaviour, not as something the players learn early.

- **They call themselves Veyr.** "Vael" is the Tarethian name for them. The Vael have no names and no individuality in the Tarethian sense. *I am Veyr, you are Veyr, we are Veyr, the planet is Veyr.* To them the whole Binary is Veyr, and the balance of it all is *very Veyr*. (In this book, "Vael" still means the people and "Veyr" the planet.)
- **Fewer than they were, and long-lived.** There are not as many Vael as there once were, but each lives a very long time. They have adapted into a perfect balance of resources and population.
- **A good number, not a handful.** Only a handful of them form the High Council, the only Vael who deal with Tarethians. The rest live free of want: artists, scholars, musicians, Aevists and the like.
- **They need the farm.** The Vael can only survive on heavily processed foodstuffs. Their relatively small population takes a large share of everything Tareth grows. That is what the tithe is for.
- **The farm is the balance.** Tareth is a farm, and the Vael's whole world depends on it running right. Balance and equilibrium are everything to them. That's why they notice blight.
- **They all know.** Every Vael knows exactly what is going on, between the worlds and on Tareth. It's implicitly by design. They are highly intelligent, and nothing about the arrangement is an accident.

Players meeting the Vael is not part of this book. If your table goes there, that's yours to build.

LEGENDS OF THE FARMER'S HAND

Every region of Tareth has its stories of the times the Vael seemed to step in. These stories always involve something that had gone badly out of balance, and the intervention could never be proven. Three of the best known are below. Use them as they stand, change them, or ignore them.

The Withered Valley. Long ago a blight crept through the Highlands, killing crops and souring the soil. It grew for three Cycles. Highland farmers burned their fields, prayed, and burned them again. On the first night of the fourth Near, every farmer in the valley dreamed the same dream. They saw something tall standing in the fields, perfectly still. When they woke, the blight was gone. The soil was clean. The old shrine at the head of the valley was cracked clean through, and nobody has repaired it since. Nobody dares.

The Drowned Toll. A merchant prince once dammed and diverted a great river so that he alone could profit from the water. Downstream, farms failed and towns emptied. Within a single Cycle, his towers stopped working: lifts, lamps, pumps and all. The old works under his city went dark. Nobody touched him and nobody accused him. His servants left, his debts came due and his friends stopped calling. Within a year he had lost everything, and the river ran its old course again. His sealed towers are still sealed.

The Short Measure. Generations ago, the harvest-masters of a great trade council found a way to skim. They didn't take much: a sack in every hundred bound inland for the Conduit, quietly sold on, with the ledgers neatly balanced to match. It made them very rich. It also left the coast hungry in a lean Cycle while the council's warehouses sat full. Then one morning, every Aevic seal that council had ever stamped had gone blank. That meant every crate, permit and warrant. Nothing bearing their mark could pass anywhere. Within a Cycle the council had been torn apart, and not by the Vael. Its own clerks did it, scrambling to prove they'd had no part. Bureaucrats still call a dishonest ledger "a short measure", and they say it nervously.

GM USING THE LEGENDS

Each legend implies the Vael intervene when the balance tips, but it shows only consequences, never the hand that caused them. Keep it that way. Notice, too, that in every legend the Vael don't punish anyone directly. They change one thing, and Tarethians do the rest to each other. If your players start upsetting the balance in a big way, through great discoveries, great crimes or great changes, you have permission to let the world start behaving strangely around them. The first sign should be small and deniable.

THE ROT IN THE MIDDLE

The legends have taught Tarethian elites one lesson above all others: the farmer notices blight, so don't let it look like blight.

The great danger to Tareth's balance isn't the Vael. It's the Tarethians who run the flow between the worlds. These are the harvest-masters, trade councillors, customs officials and merchant princes, and many have learned that a little skimmed here and a little hidden there adds up to a fortune. Most of them aren't villains. They're ambitious, comfortable and very good at paperwork. They tell themselves that the Vael can't possibly miss a sack in a hundred, that everyone does it, and that the balance is a story for frightening clerks.

But it adds up. The coast goes hungry while warehouses sit full. Tolls rise in the Shallows to cover what went missing further up. People are squeezed, and they don't know who's squeezing them. And the higher the rot climbs, the more carefully it has to be hidden: from the people below, from rivals, from honest officials and from the sky.

GM THE TARETHIAN TRADE COUNCIL

The Tarethian Trade Council (working name) oversees everything that flows inland and up the Conduit. It is the greatest power on Tareth that ordinary people have heard of, and the place where the rot, if it exists, would do the most damage. A campaign that starts with a smuggler on the Dim Road can climb, rung by rung, to proof of corruption at the very top. And that proof may lie beyond the Conduit, where the party will have to go and fetch it. Whether the Vael ever notice, and what they do if they do, is up to you.

THREADS TO PULL

For the adventurous GM and the curious players, here are a handful of loose threads. None of them is an answer. All of them lead somewhere. Several of them also appear elsewhere in this part.

- **The cracked shrine.** Something happened at the head of the Withered Valley. The stone was split from the *inside*.
- **The dark towers.** The Drowned Toll prince's towers are still sealed. His heirs have spent generations trying to get back in. Recently, one of the lifts was heard moving.
- **The blank seals.** A collector in Port City owns a crate lid stamped with a Short Measure seal. It's blank, as the legend says. Under the right light, though, the outline of a different mark shows through.
- **The lights on Veyr.** An old astronomer in Port City has kept a record of the lights on Veyr's dark side for forty years. Lately she says they've changed. (Chapter One.)
- **The sealed doors.** Every sealed Vael door ever recorded shares one mark, the same small spiral set in the same place. (Chapter Three.)
- **The tithe.** The grain that leaves Port City for the Conduit doesn't match what arrives. (Chapter One.)
- **The steady breath.** The oldest shelf-family tide-tables record a time when the Cycle wasn't regular, and the newest pages are slightly wrong again. (Chapter Two.)
- **The watcher in the field.** In every legend of the farmer's hand, somebody claims to have seen a tall, still figure first. They're always seen from far away. Nobody has ever reported seeing one close up.

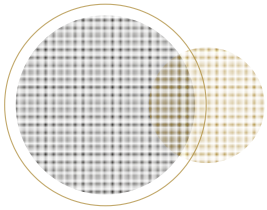
GM WHAT STAYS OPEN

Keep these questions open until your campaign needs them answered: what the Vael look like; why they left Tareth; whether Veyr is wholly natural; how the Conduits work and who passes through them; whether the Vael have ever walked Tareth in living memory. An open mystery is not a secret fact waiting to be read out. It's room for your table to make the world its own.

SAYINGS OF THE VAEL

- *For the balance.* Because I said so, and someone above me said so.
- *Keep it quiet, or the farmer will hear.* Don't push your luck.
- *A short measure.* A dishonest ledger, or a cheat of any kind.
- *Built by the Vael.* Too old, too good or too strange to explain.
- *When the builders had gone.* Once upon a time.
- *Leave one for the sky.* Share your luck. Said when someone has done well.





CHAPTER FIVE

THE PEOPLES OF TARETH

Stand on a High Road bridge at noon and watch the crowd go by. There'll be a fishwife with a basket on each hip, a clerk in a good coat holding his seal-case like a holy relic, two porters arguing about a cart, a Highland drover lost and pretending not to be, an island sailor with salt in her braids, and a child selling something that probably fell off a boat. They're all Tarethian, and every one of them would tell you they have nothing in common with the others.

Out past the edge of the city, a different crowd: small, hooded, big-eyed and carrying far more than they should be able to, all talking at once about what something's worth.

And once in a long while, the crowd goes quiet and parts around someone very tall and very slender, with four arms and eyes like a cat's, walking through the middle of it as if none of them were there.

TARETHIANS

Tarethians are the people of Tareth. They're numerous, adaptable, quarrelsome, inventive and fond of a good meal. They live everywhere on Tareth that can be lived on, and a few places that can't.

Where They Came From

Tarethians arose on Tareth as its other living things did, though no one knows quite how. Their own stories disagree cheerfully with one another.

- Some say Tarethians were shaped from shelf mud at the first Far, and that's why they can't stay away from the water.
- Some say they came down from the high country, and that the coast was settled by the ones who couldn't farm.
- Some say they were here before the Vael, hiding.
- Some say they were *put here*.

That last story is told quietly.

What's certain is that Tarethian memory starts in the After, in a world already full of works its people didn't make. Everything since, the cities, the trade, the bureaucracy and the long argument about who's in charge, Tarethians built themselves. They're proud of that, and they should be.

GM ORIGINS

Where Tarethians came from, and whether they were on Tareth during the Long Before, is not established. "Put here" is the dangerous version: it suggests Tarethians were part of the farm from the start. Let it stay a rumour.

The Shape of Tarethian Life

Tarethian life feels like a world at the height of a long renaissance. There's trade, art, scholarship, music, guilds, banking, fashion and argument, and all of it is moving a little faster than anyone can keep up with. Cities compete to build the tallest tower-copy, stage the grandest Rising festival and hire the most famous Aevist. Merchant houses bankroll painters, explorers and spies, sometimes all at once. New ideas arrive on every ship. Old ones are defended at the top of everyone's voice.

It's also unequal. The cities are rich and ordered, the edges are poor and lawless, and there's a great deal of grey in between. A tower family in Port City and a stilt family in the outer Shallows live a few miles apart and a whole world away. They eat different food, speak with different accents and keep different hours. They have very different ideas about what the city guard is for.

The Ladder

Tarethians think of their society as a ladder, and everyone knows roughly which rung they're on.

- **At the bottom** are shelf-harvesters, net-menders, porters, sledge-drivers, stilt villagers, and everyone in the Wastelands who has no rung at all.
- **In the middle** are fishers with their own boats, fitters, shopkeepers, ferry crews, guild journeymen, small traders and the city guard.
- **Above them** are clerks, inspectors, harvest-masters, guild masters, licensed Aevists and the merchants who own more boats than they can count.
- **Near the top** are merchant princes, council members, tower families and the senior officials of the regional bureaucracy.

- **At the top**, as far as anyone can see, is the Tarethian Trade Council.

Above that, the ladder disappears into cloud.

People do climb it. A clever fisher's daughter can become a clerk, and a lucky salvager can buy a tower floor. Climbing is the great Tarethian dream, and the great Tarethian business. People fall, too. A merchant who backs the wrong cargo or crosses the wrong council can be mending nets by next Far.

The Great Machine

The thing that holds Tarethian society together is the bureaucracy.

Its job, in principle, is simple: gather Tareth's bounty, count it, move it, and send the right share inland to the Conduit, in keeping with the balance. In practice, it is the largest, oldest, most complicated thing Tarethians have ever built. There are offices for everything. Grain, fish, timber, moorings, tolls, seals, permits, weights and measures, tram routes, harbour dues and the inspection of other offices all have their own clerks, ledgers and Aevic seals.

Ordinary people meet the bureaucracy as a queue, a fee and a clerk who doesn't look up. They grumble about it constantly. But most of them also believe, deep down, that it works, that the counting is honest, the share is fair and the balance is kept. It's that belief that makes corruption so dangerous, and so profitable.

Law. Each city keeps its own laws, courts and guard, and they differ wildly. Port City has magistrates, written codes and very long trials. The Shallows has the Council of Merchants, whose idea of justice tends to involve fines and moorings. Out in the stilt villages, law is whatever the oldest family says it is. Everywhere on Tareth, though, a few crimes are treated as unforgivable: forging a seal, damaging old work and stealing from the harvest bound for the Conduit. Those are crimes against the balance, and the punishments are old and harsh.

Tarethians Across Tareth

Tarethians look much like one another wherever you go, at least to outsiders. But they're shaped by where they live, and they'll tell you so.

Shallows folk are loud, quick, tough and superstitious. They read the water before the sky. They're good with boats and better with bargains, and they'll trust a stranger exactly as far as they can throw him off a pontoon. They think city folk are soft and Highlanders are slow.

City folk are polished, ambitious and very aware of what rung everyone's on. They wear their wealth: good coats, fine fabrics, Aevic trinkets and a seal on a chain if they've got one. They think Shallows folk are criminals and Highlanders are peasants, and they're right often enough to keep thinking it.

Highlanders are slower, steadier and more suspicious of Aevum than coast folk, though their irrigation runs on it. They grow the grain that feeds the world and are acutely aware that they don't get the credit. They're generous hosts, stubborn neighbours and dreadful enemies.

Islanders of the Archipelagos are proud, insular and superb sailors. Every chain has its own customs, grudges and dialect, and every islander assumes that their chain's ways are obviously correct. They often have the oldest families and the longest memories on Tareth.

Ice-edge folk live in the few hardy communities at the edge of the Scour. They are rare, quiet and practical. They fish through the ice and trade furs and oil, and they don't talk about what's under it.

Tarethians and Aevum

Tarethians live with Aevum the way they live with the Cycle: as an everyday fact. They know how to use it, they rarely know how it works, and they've stopped finding it strange. A small number study it properly and become Aevists. A few are born attuned. Most just smack the lantern when it flickers.

What Tarethians *can't* do is make old work. That limit sits under all their pride, a small, quiet humiliation: they live in a world of wonders and can only copy them. Some take it with good grace. Some find it intolerable, and spend their lives trying to break through. Those are the people who end up in sealed rooms, deep ruins and serious trouble.

THE NYMARI

The Nymari are a rare people of Tareth. Most Tarethians have never met one. Plenty have never seen one. Everyone has an opinion about them anyway.

What They Look Like

Nymari are about as tall as Tarethians, and very slender, almost delicate at a glance. They have four arms, all of them fully useful, and they use them with an easy, unthinking grace that Tarethians find either beautiful or unnerving. Their eyes are feline: large, slit-pupilled and bright in the dark, and they see well by starlight and better by Veyr's. Their skin and hair come in many shades, and most have faint, dappled markings across the shoulders and back, like a fawn's.

They are tougher than they look, and Tarethians who start fights based on how slender a Nymari looks rarely start a second one.

Where They Live

Most Nymari live far from the coastal cities, on and around a remote continent that few Tarethians visit and fewer map. Sailors who've traded along its shores describe deep forests, high rivers and old works standing in places with no roads leading to them. They say the Nymari there are courteous, watchful and not especially interested in visitors staying long.

How They Live

Nymari culture is rich, old and tribal. They live in close communities bound by kinship, custom and long memory, with their own crafts, songs, laws and ways of reckoning the world. Their tools, buildings and boats are made for four hands, and Tarethians who've seen Nymari work say they make things that would take two Tarethians to hold together. Their stories are long and are told rather than written. Their sense of time is slow: a Nymari elder speaks of events from many lifetimes ago as if they happened last Cycle.

Most of what Tarethians "know" about Nymari life comes from sailors, traders and the occasional city Nymari, who has every reason to keep it vague.

GM NYMARI CULTURE

Beyond rich, tribal and kin-bound, Nymari culture is deliberately undeveloped here. It will get a proper treatment with the Nymari homeland in Part Three. Until then, let players who choose a Nymari character invent their own clan, customs and history. Whatever they create becomes true for your table.

In the Cities

Nymari come into the Tarethian cities rarely, usually alone or in pairs. They come to trade, to learn, to look for something, or for reasons they don't share. A few stay for years. In Port City, a Nymari draws stares. In the Shallows, a Nymari draws a crowd.

Most Tarethians don't know what to make of them. Nymari aren't wild. They have their own homes, crafts, customs and opinions. But their world isn't the Tarethian world, and they don't seem much interested in joining it. City folk tend to treat them the way city folk treat anyone strange: with curiosity, suspicion, rudeness and the occasional unexpected kindness. Children follow them. Merchants overcharge them. Clerks don't know which form to give them.

The Attunement

It's half-known, the way rumours are half-known, that the Nymari have a feel for Aevum. Some say they can hear it. Some say old works behave differently around them: lanterns brighten, lifts wait, doors that shouldn't open do. Some Aevists would give a great deal to study a Nymari, and a few have tried, with unhappy results.

Ask a Nymari about this and you'll get a long look, and often a change of subject.

RUMOUR

A Nymari was seen at a sealed Vael door, pressing all four palms flat against the stone. For a moment, people say, the door was warm.

Why a Nymari Leaves Home

Every Nymari in a Tarethian city has a reason for being there. A few common ones:

- **Sent.** Their people needed something from the coast: knowledge, an object or a message delivered.
- **Seeking.** They're looking for something, or someone, that went missing a long time ago.
- **Curious.** They wanted to see the world beyond the forests, and haven't gone back yet.
- **Exiled.** They broke a law of their people, or were blamed for breaking one.
- **Called.** They felt something in the Aevum, and followed it here.

GM THE NYMARI QUESTION

The Nymari's origins, their attunement and their relationship to the old works are not established. Don't assert any ancestry or connection to the Vael. Let the players notice the coincidences, especially the four arms in the old Vael descriptions, and draw their own conclusions.

THE MUCKLINGS

Mucklings are small, amphibious inhabitants of Tareth's Shallows, perfectly at home in the muddy, half-flooded landscape where land and water are forever trading places. They are clever, curious, sociable little creatures, more inclined to bargain, scavenge or run away than stand and fight.

What They Look Like

A Muckling stands about waist-high to a Tarethian, and most of that is hood. Under the hood is a wide, damp, frog-like face with huge round eyes that catch the light like lamps. They wrap themselves in layers of rag, sailcloth and anything else that keeps the mud off, and hang themselves with tools, straps, chains and pouches. Goggles are a fashion. A good pack, piled twice as high as its owner, is a status symbol.

How They Live

Their settlements are ramshackle collections of shelters, platforms and salvaged materials, tucked into sheltered corners of the Shallows. What looks like a heap of driftwood and rubbish to a passing traveller may be a perfectly respectable Muckling village, complete with neighbours, arguments and someone trying to sell you something.

Mucklings know their territory intimately. They understand the changing waters, hidden passages, local wildlife and dangers that larger folk routinely overlook. Their knowledge makes them useful guides, although their priorities rarely align perfectly with those of adventurers.

They are salvagers and tinkerers by nature. Anything the Cycle uncovers, a Muckling has probably already looked at, taken apart and found a use for, or a buyer.

Muckling Trading Posts

Muckling trading posts are scattered throughout the Wastelands, often in places where few other inhabitants would consider settling. These rough-and-ready outposts serve as essential supply depots for adventurers, explorers and scavengers venturing beyond the safety of the inhabited Shallows. Travellers can purchase provisions, replace equipment, trade salvaged curiosities and gather information about the surrounding territory. Prices and availability vary considerably, and a Muckling's idea of a fair bargain may depend on how desperately you need what they're selling. (Chapter Eight.)

Neighbours, Not Monsters

Mucklings are not inherently hostile, nor are they simply comic relief. They have their own communities, concerns and small ambitions. They can be helpful, mischievous, suspicious or unexpectedly brave when something they care about is threatened.

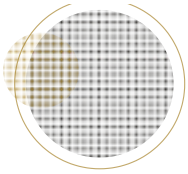
GM PLAYING MUCKLINGS

Mucklings should feel like genuine inhabitants of a living world rather than disposable low-level monsters. Their humour comes from their personalities, habits and interactions with larger folk, not from stupidity. They are survivors, opportunists, traders and neighbours in a landscape that changes beneath their feet. When a party fights Mucklings, there should be a reason: a claim jumped, a village threatened, a bargain gone badly wrong. And there should usually be a way to talk it down.

SAYINGS OF THE PEOPLE

- *Know your rung.* Don't get above yourself.
- *Climbing weather.* A time of opportunity.
- *Mud-born.* A Shallows native, said with pride or contempt depending on who's speaking.
- *A clerk's yes.* A promise that will take forever, if it comes at all.
- *Four hands on it.* A job done properly, by someone who knows what they're doing.
- *Cat-eyed.* Sharp, watchful, hard to fool. A compliment, mostly.
- *A Muckling's price.* Whatever you can least afford to pay.





CHAPTER SIX

THE FACE OF TARETH

No one has seen all of Tareth.

Its maps are a patchwork of good surveys, old guesses, sailors' sketches and confident lies. Coasts near the great cities are charted down to the last mooring. A few weeks' sail away, the charts start saying things like *reef (probably)* and *island reported*. Beyond that, the mapmakers stop drawing and start decorating.

What everyone agrees on is that Tareth falls into a handful of great kinds of place. There are six of them, and each has its own life, its own dangers and its own way of answering the Cycle. This chapter gives the broad picture of each. The places where adventures begin are described in Part Two. The far corners are in Part Three. And the creatures that live in all of them are described in full in the Creature Book, which uses these same six habitats.

> [GM] **The world map.** Tareth's continents, their names, the distances between them and the exact positions of its habitats are not yet fixed. That's deliberate. Start in Port City and the Shallows, and let the map grow outward from there as your campaign needs it. What's written here is true wherever you put it.

THE SHALLOWS

The shelves the Cycle drowns and reveals.

The Shallows are the broad coastal shelves of Tareth: sand, rock, reef, tidepool and kelp, often stretching ten miles or more out from the shore. At Near they're a calm, warm, green sea a few fathoms deep. At Far they're open ground, wet and glittering, and the sea is a line on the horizon.

Most of Tareth's coastal people live on, over or beside the Shallows. They build their towns on stilts, rock pillars, pontoons and the backs of older ruins. The Shallows give them food, trade and roads in return, and occasionally take something back.

Near the cities, the Shallows are lively and lovely. There are canals, bridges, domed markets and stilt-streets, all crowded with life in every phase.

Further out, they get rougher, lower and more makeshift. Brick gives way to timber, timber gives way to rope and pontoon, and the people get fewer and harder to impress.

At the edge, the Shallows become the **Wastelands**: wide, empty, dangerous country where hardly anyone lives and nobody keeps order. It's where things go missing, and where people go looking for them.

What lives here. The Shallows are home to creatures that have learned to live with the Cycle. Some burrow in at Far and wait. Some walk out onto the flats to hunt. Some swim in from the Deep at Near and leave again at Falling. Many are harmless. Some are the reason Shallows children learn to swim before they learn to walk, and to run before they learn to swim.

What's here. The Shallows are full of old works, half-buried and half-drowned. There are reefs with doors in them, channels too straight to be natural and pillars that were holding something up once. Every Far reveals a little more, and every Rising covers it again.

RUMOUR

Out in the Wastelands there's a stilt village that's still standing, still lit, and nobody lives in it. Every Far, salvagers swear they'll go and look. Every Rising, the ones who did come back very quiet.

THE DEEP

The open sea, and everything under it.

Beyond the Shallows, the shelf drops away, and Tareth becomes the Deep. It's vast, dark below the surface, cold and largely unknown. It covers most of the world. Trade crosses it on the surface, and sailors try not to think too much about what's under the keel.

The Deep Shallows

Between the Cycle's reach and the true Deep lie the **Deep Shallows**: permanent shelves of shallow sea that never dry out. They're warm, bright and crowded with life. Here are the kelp forests and the coral gardens, the great fishing grounds and the reefs where fleets work year round. The Deep Shallows rise and fall with the Cycle, but they never empty. At Near, their larger hunters spread out over the flooded Shallows. At Far they draw back and crowd together, and the fishing gets both better and more dangerous.

The Open Deep

Past the Deep Shallows, the sea floor falls away into darkness. Sailors cross it on trade routes known for generations, between islands and coasts. They follow the currents, read the birds and pay their respects at the shrines on the ships' prows. Storms here are rare and enormous. Calms are worse.

The Trenches

Somewhere in the Deep are trenches so deep that no light has ever reached their floors. Almost nobody has seen one. Sailors know them only by the colour of the water above, a black-blue that doesn't look like any other sea, and by what comes up from them. Leviathans live in the trenches, they say: things large enough to rise at Near and darken a whole bay.

What lives here. Great fish, great hunters and greater things. Most Deep creatures never come near a coast. A few rise at Near and visit the flooded Shallows, and those visits are remembered for generations.

RUMOUR

There's a trench out past the last charted reef where the water is warm, where it should be freezing. Something down there glows in time with the Cycle, brightest at Near.

THE ARCHIPELAGOS

The island chains of the warm seas.

Long chains of islands scatter across the warmer seas of Tareth. Some are high, green and wooded, with waterfalls and terraced hillsides. Some are barely rock and bird-droppings. Many are linked by shallow reefs that the Cycle reveals and drowns, so that at Far an island chain can become a single long, winding land, and at Near it's twenty separate places.

Island folk are proud, insular and superb sailors. Their crossings are a mix of raised walkways, stilt villages, rope bridges and boats, and each chain has its own customs, its own grudges and its own way of doing business. Island families keep long memories. A slight from twelve generations ago can still decide who sits where at a wedding.

What lives here. The Archipelagos have their own creatures, many found nowhere else, and each chain seems to have at least one that the locals consider sacred and visitors consider a menace. Seabirds nest in their millions.

What's here. Many islands carry old works on their heights: a lone tower on a crag, a circle of pillars, a flat stone platform too smooth to be natural. Islanders tend these places, avoid them or charge admission, depending on the island.

RUMOUR

One island in every chain is always missing from the charts. Islanders know which one. They don't say.

THE HIGHLANDS

The green high country of the interior.

Inland, the land rises into green high country: terraced hills, river valleys, upland meadows and mountain gardens. This is the breadbasket of Tareth. Grain, fruit, wine and flowers grow here in quantities that would seem ridiculous anywhere else, and much of it travels down to the coast, and inland again toward the Conduit.

The Highlands are where the Vael's long work shows most plainly. Rivers run where they're needed. Terraces climb mountainsides in perfect steps. Irrigation channels run uphill, which everyone has stopped finding strange. The whole landscape has the look of something tended for a very long time.

Highland folk are slower, steadier and more suspicious of Aevum than coast folk, though their irrigation runs on it. Their villages are old, their roads are good and their festivals are enormous. They plant by Veyr, just as fishers sail by her.

What lives here. The Highlands are beautiful, and some of the beautiful things in them are hungry. Highland gardens and meadows are home to predators that bloom among the flowers and wait. The mountains have their own creatures: grazers, climbers and the things that eat them.

What's here. Old works are thick in the Highlands, though they're quieter than on the coast: sluices, channels, cisterns, shrines and long stone roads that run straight for miles. Some of the oldest shrines are cracked, and nobody repairs them.

RUMOUR

There's a Highland valley where the harvest is always perfect, every Cycle, every year, without fail. The people who live there are very rich, and very nervous.

THE SCOUR

The endless white at the poles.

At the poles, Tareth goes white. The Scour is ice, wind and glare, a place of horizons and very little else. The light is strange there: long, low and endless. At Near, Veyr hangs huge over the ice, and the whole Scour glows with her reflected light.

Almost nobody lives in the Scour. A few hardy communities fish and hunt its edges, trading furs, oil and bone for grain. Expeditions go in, now and then, funded by scholars, merchant houses or people with something to prove. Some come back.

The Scour isn't silent. The ice groans and shifts with the Cycle, loudest at the turn, and ice-edge folk say you can hear it from a day's walk away.

What lives here. Fewer creatures than anywhere else on Tareth, and every one of them is built to survive. They are white, patient and hungry.

What's here. Expeditions come back with stories of shapes under the ice too regular to be natural: lines, curves, the tip of what might be a tower. Nobody has ever dug down to one. The ice is very thick, and nobody's sure they want to.

RUMOUR

At deepest Far, when the ice is quietest, ice-edge folk say you can sometimes feel the Scour humming through your boots, like a tower lift a long way down.

CITIES

Where the people are, and the power.

Tareth's cities are where the people gather, and where the old works are thickest. Most great cities grew up around Vael structures and are still shaped by them. Immense cylindrical towers rise with spires at their tips, linked high up by arched bridges. Tarethians have copied the style for centuries, and the result is that a Tarethian city can look, from a distance, like a forest of needles catching the light.

Cities are where Aevum is most common: trams, lanterns, lifts, pumps and walkers on patrol. They're where the money is, and the markets, the guilds, the councils, the merchant houses and the long, patient machinery of bureaucracy. All of it is Tarethian, top to bottom, or as far as anyone can see.

Cities are also where Tareth's inequality is sharpest. Tower families and gutter children live within shouting distance of each other. Every city has its high streets and its low streets, its High Road and its Dim Road, and the gap between them is where a great deal of business gets done.

What lives here. People, mostly. Also rats, gulls, canal-dwellers, things in the sewers and things in the sealed towers. Cities have their own creatures, the ones that have learned to live alongside Tarethians, and their own monsters, many of them Tarethian.

What's here. Everything. Old works and new, sealed towers, vaults, archives, black markets and the offices where the balance is kept, or quietly isn't.

RUMOUR

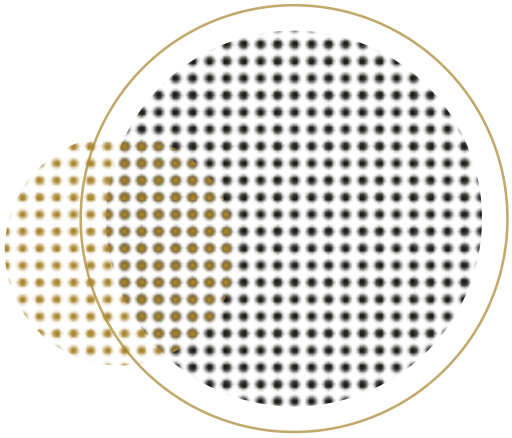
Every city has one tower whose top floors nobody admits to owning. The lift goes there. Nobody admits to riding it.

GETTING AROUND

Tareth is a big world, and most people never leave the place they were born. Those who do travel by a handful of familiar means.

- **By sea.** Ships and boats are how Tareth moves. Coastal traders, island ferries, deep-water merchantmen and fishing fleets carry most of the world's goods and most of its travellers.
- **By tram.** In and around the cities, trams glide along the Spines and streets, and a few old tram paths run far inland. They're fast, smooth and silent, and nobody quite knows where some of the oldest paths go.
- **By road.** Long stone roads, many of them Vael-built, run through the Highlands and inland. Convoys, drovers, pilgrims and travellers use them, and so do bandits.
- **By the Cycle.** In the Shallows and the Archipelagos, the route depends on the phase. You walk at Far and sail at Near. A good Shallows guide knows both, and charges accordingly.

How people travel locally, around Port City and its Shallows, is covered in Part Two.



PART TWO

PORT CITY AND THE SHALLOWS

Where play begins.

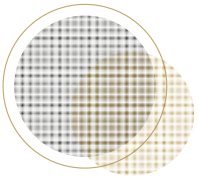
Part One painted Tareth in broad strokes. Part Two zooms in on one stretch of coast: a walled city on dry ground, the sprawling water-city wrapped around its feet, the long Spines reaching out to sea, and an island at the end of a bridge with a temple nobody can explain.

Most BINARY campaigns start here, in the Shallows. This part gives you the places, the people, the Powers and the trouble you need to run it.



CHAPTER SEVEN

PORT CITY



From the outer Shallows at Far, Port City looks like a crown someone has left on a rock.

It stands on high dry ground behind a pale stone wall, above the reach of any Near. Its towers rise in a tight cluster: Vael spires so tall and thin they seem to sway against the clouds, and around them a thicket of Tarethian copies, round and pointed and proud, linked by arched bridges high above the streets. At night every window glows the same cool, pearly white. Down in the Shallows, people point up at it the way they point at Veyr: something bright, close and not really for them.

Port City is the seat of government for the whole region. It's where the laws are made, the harvests are counted, the taxes are set and the seals are stamped. It's orderly, wealthy, clean, slow, polite and very, very interested in paperwork.

It is not where most adventures start. But sooner or later, most adventures end up here.

AT A GLANCE

- **What it is.** The regional capital: a walled city of towers on dry ground above the Shallows.
- **Who lives here.** Officials, clerks, magistrates, merchant families, licensed Aevists, guild masters, scholars, servants, and the people who keep all of them fed, dressed and comfortable.
- **Who runs it.** The regional bureaucracy, the great merchant houses, and above them, at a polite distance, the Tarethian Trade Council.
- **What it's like.** Quiet streets, clean canals, tall towers, long queues, good manners and sharp knives kept out of sight.
- **How it meets the Cycle.** Barely. The water never reaches the wall. Port City watches the Cycle the way a landlord watches the weather on someone else's farm.

THE WALL

Port City's wall is old, smooth and pale, and nobody is entirely sure who built it. The lower courses are Vael, seamless and unmarked. The upper courses are Tarethian, added later, with crenellations, walkways, guard towers and the city's crest carved over every gate.

The wall is where Port City ends and the Shallows begin. Inside, there are paved streets, dry cellars and lanterns on every corner. Outside, there are canals, bridges, stilts, noise and the smell of fish. The wall doesn't keep the water out. The water never comes this high. What it keeps out, everyone understands, is the Shallows.

The Gates

- **The Sea Gates** open onto the inner Shallows. They are a row of tall arched gateways at the bottom of the hill, where bridges from the water-city meet the wall. They're open from dawn to dusk, guarded, and busy every hour they're open. Every cart, porter and boatload of goods coming up from the Shallows passes through one, and through the Customs House just inside.
- **The Land Gate** faces inland. It's broad, heavy and guarded by walkers. Through it go the long grain convoys bound for the Conduit, the Highland drovers, the pilgrims and the post. It's the only gate the bureaucracy cares about more than the Sea Gates.
- **The Tram Arch** is where the tram paths run through the wall, out to the Shallows and onto the Spines. The trams don't stop for inspection. The people getting off them do.

At dusk the Sea Gates close. Anyone from the Shallows still inside needs a pass, a patron or a very good reason. Anyone from Port City still outside is assumed to be up to something.

THE CITY WITHIN

Port City climbs its hill in rings. The higher you go, the older the stone, the taller the towers, the quieter the streets and the more expensive the air.

The Lower Ring sits just inside the wall. It is warehouses, counting houses, inns for travellers with money, guild halls, workshops and the Customs House. It's the busiest, noisiest part of Port City, which isn't saying much. This is where the

city's working people live, and where Shallows folk with passes come to work.

The Middle Ring is offices, courts, academies, shops for fine goods, townhouses and the homes of the comfortable. Every second building is a government department. Every third person is carrying a seal-case. The streets are paved, swept twice a day and lit all night.

The Crown is the hilltop: the great Vael towers and the oldest, richest Tarethian ones clustered around them. This is where the merchant houses keep their counting floors, where the regional government sits, and where the most important people in the region live, high above everything. Arched bridges link the towers, so that a merchant prince can go from home to office to dinner without ever touching the street.

Trams glide through all three rings in paired cars, slipping between the towers on paths laid in the Long Before. The lifts in the Crown towers run all night.

What Port City looks like at Near. At Near, the water rises right up to the foot of the Sea Gates, and Port City suddenly has a waterfront. Boats tie up below the wall. Merchant barges come alongside the Lower Ring warehouses. The rich come down from the Crown to stroll the wall-top and look at the view. For forty days, the city pretends it's a port in more than name.

WHO HOLDS POWER

Port City runs on a hierarchy so well established that almost nobody thinks about it.

The regional government makes the laws, keeps the courts and commands the city guard. It is headed by a **Governor** and a council of senior officials. Nobody in the Shallows could name more than two of them. Its offices fill the Middle Ring, and its business is mostly conducted by clerks, who outnumber everyone else in the city.

The merchant houses are old families who own ships, warehouses, tower floors, Highland estates and a good share of everyone else's debt. They sit on councils, fund academies, marry each other and argue over everything except the fact that they should be in charge. Several of them also own a great deal of property down in the Shallows, which they've never visited.

The Customs House stands just inside the Sea Gates and counts everything that comes in from the sea and the Shallows. See below.

The Tarethian Trade Council keeps its regional seat in the tallest of the inhabited Crown towers. The Council oversees everything that flows inland and up the Conduits, from every region. It doesn't govern Port City. It doesn't need to. When the Council's regional master gives a dinner, the Governor attends.

The city guard keeps order inside the wall: uniformed, well-paid, polite to the right people and rough with the wrong ones. Walkers stride beside them at the gates and in the Crown. Outside the wall, the guard's authority gets thinner with every bridge.

GM ABOVE THE COUNCIL

The Trade Council's regional master is one of the very few Tarethians on this coast with any dealings beyond the Conduit. What those dealings are, and how far up they reach, belongs to Part Three. For now, the tallest tower in the Crown is simply the place where the ladder disappears into cloud.

THE CUSTOMS HOUSE

If Port City has a heart, it's a ledger, and the ledger lives in the Customs House.

It's a long, grand, slightly sagging building of Tarethian stone, set against the inside of the wall between two of the Sea Gates. Everything that comes up from the Shallows or in from the sea passes through it: fish, salt, salvage, timber, cloth, spices, passengers and paperwork. Everything is counted, weighed, assessed, taxed, sealed and recorded. Its clerks work in long, high-ceilinged halls under rows of pearly lanterns, and the sound of the place is the endless soft *tock* of seals being stamped.

The Customs House is where Port City and the Shallows meet, and they don't like each other. To Port City, it's the gate that keeps the Shallows honest. To the Shallows, it's a toll booth staffed by people who've never been wet.

- **What it does.** It levies duties on goods entering Port City; inspects cargo bound inland; issues trade permits and seals to Shallows merchants; keeps records of everything.
- **Why it matters.** A Customs House seal is the difference between legal cargo and contraband. A Customs House record is the difference between an honest merchant and a smuggler. And a Customs House clerk who can be persuaded to look the other way is worth more than a ship.

RUMOUR

There's a room in the Customs House basement where they keep the seized goods. Nobody knows who has the key. The inventory gets shorter every Cycle.

NOTABLE PLACES

The Counting Tower. The Trade Council's regional seat, tallest of the inhabited Vael towers in the Crown. Its lower floors are offices, open to petitioners who've waited long enough. Its upper floors are not open to anybody. Its lift doesn't stop at every floor, and nobody below a certain rank knows which ones it skips.

The Granaries. Long rows of stone storehouses inside the Land Gate, where the harvest is gathered, counted again and loaded into convoys bound inland. The Granaries are heavily guarded, minutely recorded and, according to every clerk who's worked there, impossible to steal from. The records disagree with the clerks.

The Hall of Magistrates. Port City's great courthouse in the Middle Ring. Its cases are long, its fees are higher and its verdicts can usually be predicted from the defendant's address.

The College. Port City's academy of Aevum, where licensed Aevists are trained and examined. Its graduates find work in merchant houses, the government and the guard. Its dropouts often find work in the Shallows. The College's library is one of the best on the coast, and its restricted shelves are among the most coveted.

The Blind Tower. A Vael tower at the very top of the Crown, taller than the Counting Tower, with no door anyone has ever found. The city has grown right up against it on every side. Arched bridges from neighbouring towers run straight into its walls and stop. Children dare each other to touch it. Officials pretend it isn't there.

The Roof Observatory. A cramped, cluttered dome on top of an unfashionable tower in the Middle Ring. An old astronomer has kept a record of the lights on Veyr's dark side here for forty years. She'll show anyone who brings wine. Lately, she says, the lights have changed. (Chapter One.)

The Wall-Walk. The broad walkway along the top of the wall, open to the public by day. It's the best view in the region: the whole Shallows spread out below, the Spines reaching to sea, and on a clear day, Temple Island on the horizon. Couples court here. Officials hold quiet meetings here. People watching the Shallows from the Wall-Walk always look a little like they're counting.

PORT CITY AND THE SHALLOWS

Port City needs the Shallows. The fish, salt, salvage and labour come from there, along with half the goods that pass through the Customs House and most of the people who clean, carry, cook and build inside the wall. Without the Shallows, Port City would be a very well-organised hilltop.

The Shallows needs Port City too. The permits, seals, courts and markets are there, along with the money and the Land Gate, and with it the whole inland trade.

Neither will admit it. Port City folk call the Shallows *the rim* or *down there*, and treat it as a necessary nuisance: noisy, lawless, smelly and useful. Shallows folk call Port City *the hill* or *up there*, and treat it as a rich, slow, nosy neighbour that charges for everything. The Council of Merchants, which runs the Shallows in its fashion, deals with Port City through gritted teeth and a great many forms.

And between them is the wall, the Customs House, and a great deal of business that never appears in either one's ledgers.

GM TROUBLE IN PORT CITY

Port City's locals, rumours and brewing trouble are with the rest of the region's GM material in Chapter Twelve, *Trouble on the Coast*.

WHY THE PARTY COMES HERE

Shallows adventurers rarely live in Port City, but they have plenty of reasons to climb the hill:

- A **patron** in the Middle Ring or the Crown has a job that can't be done by anyone respectable.
- A **seal, permit or pardon** is needed, and the only way to get it is through the Customs House, the courts or a well-placed clerk.
- **Something they found** in the Shallows is of interest to the College, a merchant house or the Trade Council, and someone has come to talk about it.
- **Proof** of something, a ledger, a record or a seal, is locked in a Port City vault, and they need it more than its owners do.
- They're **under arrest**.

GM RUNNING PORT CITY

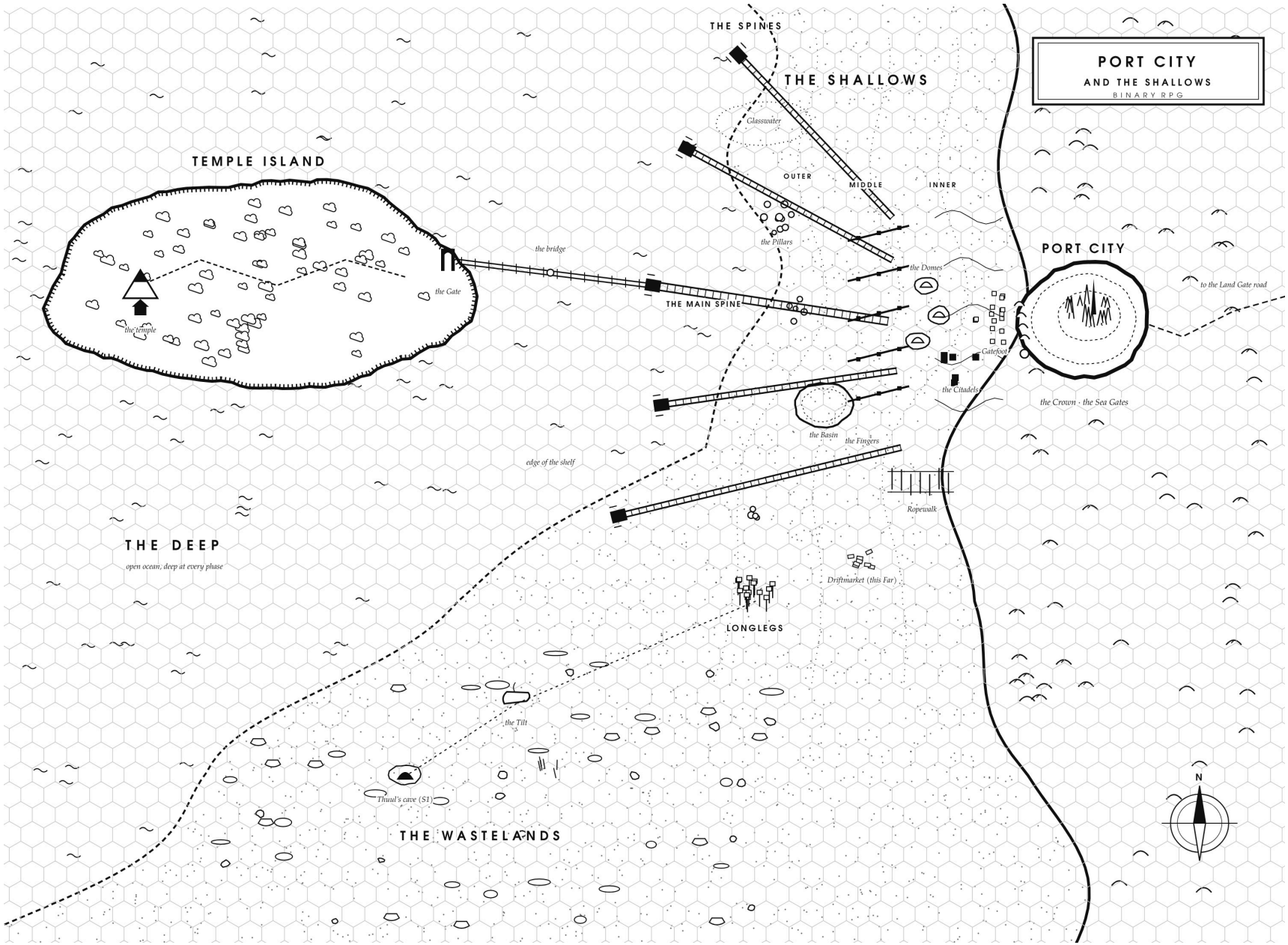
Port City works best as a contrast. After the noise and danger of the Shallows, it should feel quiet, clean and safe, and then slowly feel less safe the longer the party stays. Its dangers are rarely swords. They're paperwork, debts, polite threats and rooms you can't leave without permission. A good Port City scene is a negotiation where everyone smiles and the stakes are very high.

GM THE ROT AT THE TOP

Port City is where the corruption described in Chapter Four lives closest to the surface. The missing grain, the Customs House's sealed room and the Counting Tower's skipped floors are all threads that lead upward. Pull them gently at first. The people at the top didn't get there by being careless, and they'll notice a party asking the wrong questions long before the party notices them.

SAYINGS OF THE HILL

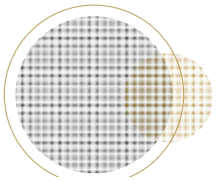
- *Up the hill.* To the authorities, or to the courts. "Take it up the hill" means make it official.
- *Past the gate by dusk.* Know when to leave.
- *A Crown promise.* Elegant, generous and never kept.
- *Stamped and sealed.* Done, final, nothing more to say.
- *Counted twice.* Watched closely, under suspicion.


PORT CITY
AND THE SHALLOWS
BINARY RPG
THE SPINES
THE SHALLOWS
Glasswater
OUTER
MIDDLE
INNER
TEMPLE ISLAND
the bridge
the Pillars
the Domes
PORT CITY
to the Land Gate road
the Gate
the temple
THE MAIN SPINE
Gatefoot
the Citadels
the Crown · the Sea Gates
the Basin
the Fingers
edge of the shelf
Ropewalk
THE DEEP
open ocean, deep at every phase
Driftmarket (this Far)
LONGLEGS
the Tilt
Thuul's cave (S1)
THE WASTELANDS
N



CHAPTER EIGHT

THE SHALLOWS



Port City sits on its hill like a whale on a rock. The Shallows is the limpet.

It clings to the foot of the wall and spreads out from there in every direction the shelf allows: brick and canal, then timber and bridge, then stilt and pontoon, then rock pillar and rope, then nothing much at all. Nobody planned it. Nobody runs it, exactly. It's a city in its own right, bigger than Port City by any count except money, and louder by any count at all.

Its proper name is the Port City Shallows. Nobody uses it. To the people who live there, it's *the Shallows*, and everywhere else is somewhere else.

This is where play begins.

AT A GLANCE

- **What it is.** A sprawling water-city on the shelf below Port City, stretching miles out from the wall towards the sea.
- **Who lives here.** Fishers, divers, porters, shelf-harvesters, salvagers, boatwrights, ferry crews, traders, barkeeps, fitters, smugglers, dreamers, runaways and everyone Port City doesn't want inside its wall.
- **Who runs it.** The Council of Merchants, loosely. Very loosely. See Chapter Eleven.
- **What it's like.** Loud, crowded, colourful, dangerous, generous, wet, and always changing, twice a Cycle.
- **How it meets the Cycle.** Head-on. At Far it's a town on legs standing in sand and mud. At Near it's a town on the water, all boats and balconies. In the half-water it's neither, and everyone's in a bad mood.

A CITY IN BANDS

The Shallows isn't laid out in districts so much as in bands, running outward from the wall like the rings in a tree. Each band is newer, lower, lighter and wilder than the one before.

1. **The Inner Shallows**: brick, stone, canals, domes and citadels, pressed against the wall.
2. **The Middle Shallows**: bridges reaching out across the shelf, with timber settlements strung along them.
3. **The Outer Shallows**: stilts, pontoons, floating markets and the old rock-pillar villages.
4. **The Wastelands**: the far edge of the shelf, where almost nobody lives.

And at Near, a handful of districts appear that don't exist at all for the rest of the Cycle. See *Highwater Districts*, below.

Cutting through all of these, the long **Spines** run out to the sea, and the **High Road** and **Dim Road** tie it all together. Those are described in Chapter Nine.

There's no docks district. There doesn't need to be. Almost all of the Shallows is waterfront, at least for half of every Cycle.

GM NEIGHBOURHOODS

The neighbourhood names in this chapter are suggestions. Rename them, add more, or let your players name the corners they make their own. A Shallows neighbourhood is whatever its people call it, and they rarely agree.

THE INNER SHALLOWS

Picture Venice, then picture it shoved up against a castle wall and crossed with a bazaar out of an old story.

The Inner Shallows is the oldest, densest and richest part of the water-city. Its buildings are brick and stone, three, four and five storeys high, with ground floors built to flood and upper floors built to impress. Canals run between them, crossed by arched bridges. Copies of Vael towers rise here and there, round and pointed, with arched walkways linking them high above the water. Between them stand the citadels: massive, sturdy, fortress-like buildings of old stone, broad-shouldered and thick-walled, built to shrug off a hundred Nears. And on the rock plateaus that break the shelf, great **domed markets** stand above the highest Near, their roofs glinting like upturned shells.

At Near, the canals brim, gondolas and barges crowd every waterway, and the whole quarter smells of salt, spice and frying fish. At Far, the canals drain to a trickle, the ground floors open up, and the streets fill with carts, stalls and mud.

The Inner Shallows is where Port City's money leaks out into the water-city, and where most Shallows money gets made. It's crowded, noisy, pickpocketed and gorgeous.

Gatefoot

The busiest few hundred yards in the region: the strip of the Inner Shallows right below the Sea Gates. Everything bound for Port City comes through here: carts at Far, boats at Near, porters always. There are warehouses, hiring-halls, cheap inns, expensive brokers and a permanent queue for the Customs House. Port City folk on errands in the Shallows rarely go further than Gatefoot, and Gatefoot charges them accordingly.

> HOOK *A porter crew has been hired to carry a sealed crate through the Sea Gates every night for a week. None of them has been told what's in it, and the crate is getting heavier.*

The Domes

A cluster of rock plateaus a short way out from the wall, each crowned with a great domed market hall. They hold the biggest, oldest and most crowded markets in the Shallows. Under the domes you can buy almost anything: fish, spice, cloth, salvage, lanterns, maps, pets, rumours, introductions and a hot meal. The Council of Merchants keeps its hall here, under the biggest dome of all. The Domes never flood. When Near comes, the markets simply become islands, and business carries on by boat.

> HOOK *A stallholder in the Domes is selling small shell-coloured stones that hum when you hold them. She has a lot of them, and she won't say where they come from.*

The Citadels

A tangle of narrow canals behind the Domes, lined with the biggest, heaviest buildings in the Shallows. The citadels are great stone strongholds with walls like cliffs, deep arched doorways and roofs you could land a boat on. Nobody quite remembers what most of them were built for. Today they're guildhalls, bathhouses, bonded warehouses, meeting halls, hiring halls, gambling dens and the town houses of Shallows families who've done very well. Some have been split into a hundred rooms and rented out by the floor. A few stand empty, locked up by owners nobody has seen in years.

The Citadels is where the Shallows does its serious business: deals too big for a market stall, meetings too private for a tavern and money too large to keep under a bed.

> HOOK *Someone has been leaving pieces of old work on the steps of the oldest citadel in the quarter at night. These are small Vael-style objects, perfectly made, and the citadel has been locked and empty for as long as anyone can remember.*

THE MIDDLE SHALLOWS

Beyond the Inner Shallows, the city starts reaching.

Brick bridges branch out from the inner quarter and stretch across the shelf, lined with shops and houses like streets in the air. Further out they turn to timber, lower and lighter, and the settlements strung along them grow sparser and simpler. Canals give way to open shelf. Stone gives way to wood. Where bridges meet their piers, towers stand guard, some of them actually guarded.

At Far, the Middle Shallows stands over wide flats of mud and sand, crossed by footpaths, cart-tracks and the occasional sledge. At Near, it's an archipelago of bridge-towns on open water, connected by the High Road above and boats below.

The Middle Shallows is working country. Fishers, harvesters, boatwrights, net-makers, carpenters and families live here, and so do people who can't afford the inner quarter and don't want the outer one. It's poorer than the inner quarter, friendlier than Port City and safer than the outer edge, mostly.

The Fingers

Five long bridge-settlements reaching out from the Inner Shallows like the fingers of a hand, each a mile or more long. Every Finger is a village in its own right, with its own families, feuds, shrines and taverns, and fierce rivalries with the Finger next door. Each one claims to be the oldest. All of them are wrong.

> HOOK *Two Fingers are in a feud over a fishing ground that only exists at Near. This Near, someone on one Finger has been found drowned on the other's side of the line.*

Ropewalk

A rambling quarter of workshops built over the shelf on heavy timber piles: ropewalks, net-lofts, sail-makers, boatyards and the great cradle-yards where boats are built and repaired. Ropewalk smells of tar and sawdust and works at all hours. Its people are proud, practical and very hard to cheat, and they don't much care for anyone who doesn't work with their hands.

> HOOK *A Ropewalk boatwright has been commissioned to build a vessel to a Vael-style design that no one has built in living memory. The client pays in old coins nobody recognises.*

THE OUTER SHALLOWS

Further out still, the city turns into something older and stranger.

The Outer Shallows is stilt houses and wooden pontoons, rope bridges and walkways that rise and sink with the water, floating markets that drift from place to place and moor wherever there's trade. It's poor, rough, lively and resourceful. Things get built out of whatever washed up last Far. Here and there, a lone merchant tower stands on its own out on the shelf: some rich trader's place of business, where

boats pull right up to the door at Near and carts struggle out across the mud at Far.

And scattered through the Outer Shallows are the **pillar villages**.

These are the oldest settlements on the shelf. Each is built on a cluster of natural rock pillars that rise from the seabed, with houses, sheds, stores, shrines and walkways built onto them, wooden and higgledy-piggledy, stacked and lashed and jutting at every angle. They've been added to for generations. Nobody knows how old the first ones are. They've been there forever, and they look it.

At Far, the pillar villages stand high above the sand on their stone legs, and their people climb down ladders to work the flats. At Near, the water laps at their lowest decks and their boats tie up at every level.

Outer Shallows folk are tough, close-knit and suspicious. They look after their own. They don't care much for the Council of Merchants, less for Port City, and not at all for anyone asking questions.

The Pillars

The largest of the pillar villages, and the unofficial capital of the Outer Shallows: dozens of rock pillars linked by rope and plank into a single tangled town. The Pillars has its own elders, its own customs and its own justice, and it settles its own disputes. The Council of Merchants collects tolls here only with permission, which it rarely gets.

> HOOK *The Pillars' elders have quietly asked for outside help. One of their pillars is sinking, very slowly, into the shelf, and something in the rock beneath it has started to hum.*

Driftmarket

A floating market of boats, rafts and pontoons lashed together, which moves around the Outer Shallows with the Cycle. At Near it drifts wherever the trade is. At Far it settles onto the sand wherever it happens to be and becomes a muddy fair. You can find almost anything at Driftmarket, including things that were stolen from the Domes a week before. Nobody asks where anything came from, and nobody gives a straight answer to anyone who does.

> HOOK *Driftmarket has settled at Far in a different place than anyone expected, right on top of a buried doorway in the sand. The market's bosses are pretending they haven't noticed.*

Longlegs

A sprawling stilt-town on the edge of the Outer Shallows, built on the tallest stilts anywhere on the shelf. Its houses stand so high at Far that their ladders are the length of ship's masts. Longlegs is the last real settlement before the Wastelands, where expeditions hire guides, buy supplies and say their goodbyes. It's also where people from the Wastelands come to trade, and the people of Longlegs are good at not asking what they're trading.

> HOOK *Every guide in Longlegs has turned down the same job this Cycle. The pay is extraordinary. None of them will say why.*

HIGHWATER DISTRICTS

Some parts of the Shallows only exist at Near.

When the water comes home, it brings whole neighbourhoods with it. They come in on the tide, or they float up out of the mud, or they open for business on water that was sand a week before. For forty days they're as busy, loud and real as anywhere else in the water-city. Then the half-water comes, and they drift away, settle into the mud or simply close. At Far, there's nothing there but sand, rock and a few mooring posts, and a stranger walking across the flats would never guess.

Shallows folk call them the **highwater districts**. Everyone knows where they'll be. Everyone has a favourite. And everyone has a story about something that happened there that would never have happened at Far.

The Flotilla

At Rising, the Flotilla comes in from the sea.

It's a floating town of ships, barges, rafts, houseboats and pontoons, lashed and chained together into one great sprawling raft-city. It spends Far out in the Deep Shallows, beyond the Spine-ends, fishing, trading with island ships and keeping to itself. When the water comes home, it sails in across the flooded shelf, all of it together, and moors in the open Middle Shallows between the Fingers and Ropewalk. It stays for forty days, and at Falling it unmoors and goes back out to sea before the water can strand it.

The Flotilla's people are seafarers to the bone. They're born afloat, married afloat and buried at sea. They have their own captains, their own customs, their own laws and a deep scorn for anyone who lives on stilts. While the Flotilla is in, it's the loudest place in the Shallows: deck-markets, deck-taverns, fights, songs, foreign goods, island traders and Homewater celebrations that go on for the whole of Near.

> HOOK *The Flotilla came in this Rising one ship short. Its captains won't say what happened to it, and a Flotilla family is quietly hiring people to find out.*

The Basin

Out in the Middle Shallows there's a great shallow bowl in the shelf, ringed by a low rim of old, worn stone. It might be natural. It might not. At Far, the Basin is an empty, muddy hollow with a few stone stumps sticking out of it, where the harvest crews don't bother to go.

At Near, it's a harbour.

The rim breaks the swell, the water inside lies flat and calm, and every boat that can't find a mooring anywhere else crowds into it. Within days of Rising, the Basin fills with moored barges, floating warehouses, boat-taverns, net-lofts on rafts, pontoon streets and hulks turned into boarding houses. It becomes a working harbour-town of thousands, packed gunwale to gunwale. It's cheap, cramped and rowdy, and it's the first place newcomers to the Shallows end up at Near, because nobody else has room for them.

At Falling, the Basin empties faster than it filled. Anything that doesn't get out in time ends up sitting in the mud for forty days, and the Basin's scavengers are very good at making sure the owners don't get it back.

> HOOK *At the bottom of the Basin, uncovered by this Falling's mud, a ring of carved stone has been found that matches the rim exactly, only much smaller. Its centre is a smooth, pale disc with a spiral in it.*

Glasswater

Far out on the shelf, in the clearest part of the Outer Shallows, the water at Near is so clean and shallow that you can see the bottom from a boat: reef gardens, sand ribbons, fish, old stone. This is **Glasswater**, and for forty days every Cycle it's where Port City's rich come down to play.

At Rising, the pleasure-barges arrive. They're great floating villas, pavilions, bathhouses and dining halls towed out from the inner Shallows and moored in long, elegant lines across the clear water. Merchant houses hold parties here. Officials take their families for the season. Lovers meet. Deals are made over dinner and dives. Glasswater is lantern-lit, music-filled, very expensive and, on the surface, very safe. The Council of Merchants charges a fortune for every mooring and the merchant houses pay for their own guards.

At Falling, the barges are towed back in, and Glasswater becomes a wide, lonely stretch of exposed reef where nothing happens and nobody goes.

> HOOK *A merchant house's barge at Glasswater has hosted the same party every night for a week. The guests arrive. Nobody sees them leave. Every morning, the barge is clean and empty.*

GM HIGHWATER DISTRICTS IN PLAY

Highwater districts make Near feel different from Far in a way the players can see. A neighbourhood they've come to know might not exist next Cycle, and one they've never heard of will suddenly be the busiest place in the Shallows. They're also natural deadlines: whatever the party needs from the Flotilla, the Basin or Glasswater, they have until Falling to get it.

THE WASTELANDS

At the edge of the Shallows, the city simply runs out.

The Wastelands is the outermost reach of the shelf: miles of sand, rock, reef and tidepool at Far, and lonely open water at Near. Almost nobody Tarethian lives here. There are old wrecks, broken stilt houses, abandoned pillar villages, half-buried ruins and tangles of rock and kelp. And there are the things that live where people don't.

It's dangerous. The Wastelands is where the larger creatures of the Shallows hunt, and where the Deep's visitors come at Near. The flats hide sinking sand, sudden channels and holes that go a long way down. There's no guard, no Council and no one to call for help. The tide-tables are only a rough guide out here, and getting caught in the half-water is how people die.

It's also where the old things are. Every Far reveals ruins out here that haven't been picked over, doors in reefs that have never been recorded and things in the sand that nobody can name. Salvagers come for fortunes. Scholars come for answers. A few people come because there's nowhere else that will have them.

Some of them come back.

Muckling Trading Posts

The Wastelands do have residents: the Mucklings (Chapter Five). Their trading posts are scattered across the flats and wrecks, often in places nobody else would consider settling: a hulk propped on its side, a ring of stilts round an old work, a platform lashed between two rocks. They're rough-and-ready, and they're the only supply depots beyond Longlegs. Travellers buy provisions, replace equipment, trade salvaged curiosities and pick up news of the way ahead. Prices and stock change with the Cycle, the season and how desperate you look.

GM RECURRING STOPS

Use trading posts as recurring points of contact in the Wastelands: places to restock, exchange rumours, meet familiar faces and occasionally stumble on an unexpected opportunity. Give each post a name, a keeper and one thing it's known for, and let the party build a relationship with it over many trips.



The Tilt

A Muckling trading post, a day's walk past Longlegs.

The Tilt is an old cargo barge that ran aground so long ago that nobody remembers it floating. It lies on its side on a bank of sand and shell, half buried, its hull patched with driftwood, sailcloth, tin and things that used to be other boats. Ladders, ramps, rope-bridges and platforms sprout from it in every direction. Smoke comes out of places smoke shouldn't. There's always someone on the roof, watching the horizon.

At Far, the Tilt sits high and dry on its bank, and the flats around it are busy with Mucklings coming and going with salvage. Its "front door" is a hole in the deck, reached by a long ramp.

At Near, the Tilt floats. Nobody quite knows how the Mucklings managed it, but at Rising the old barge lifts off the sand, swings round on its anchor-chains and rides the water all through Near, upright for the first time in generations. Its front door is now a landing on the far side. Boats tie up to it. Prices go up.

- **Who keeps it. Old Pell**, a Muckling with one goggle-lens cracked and a memory for every debt anyone has ever owed her. She runs the counter from a nest of cushions and ledgers, and she's never been seen to stand up. Her many grandchildren do the fetching, carrying, haggling and lookout, and most of the pickpocketing.
- **Who else is there.** Muckling salvage crews bringing in finds; a Tarethian or two who owe Pell money and are working it off; salvagers, scholars and lost travellers passing through; once in a while, someone the party really didn't expect to see.
- **What's for sale.** Water, food, rope, lamp oil, patched gear and repairs (good, fast, and slightly different from what you asked for). Salvage of every kind, most of it junk, some of it not. Maps of the surrounding flats, current to within a Cycle. News, for a price, and gossip, for free.
- **What it's known for.** Pell buys anything, and she remembers what she sold you. Bring back something interesting and the price of everything else comes down.
- **The house rule.** No fighting on the Tilt. Mucklings who break it are thrown off the roof. Larger folk who break it find that nothing is for sale to them, at any price, ever again, at any post in the Wastelands.

RUMOUR

Old Pell has a back room nobody's allowed into. Her grandchildren say it's where she keeps the things she won't sell. Some salvagers say she's bought pieces of old work in there that would make a Port City Aevist weep.

GM USING THE TILT

The Tilt is the party's first stop in the Wastelands and a place to come back to. Let them earn Pell's good opinion over several trips: a fair trade, a debt paid, a favour done for one of the grandchildren. Once they have it, she'll start telling them things she tells nobody else. Some things to bring the party back:

- **The commission.** Pell wants a particular piece of salvage from somewhere dangerous, and she'll pay well, in goods, gear or a map nobody else has.
- **The missing crew.** One of Pell's salvage crews hasn't come back from a ruin the Cycle just uncovered.
- **The rival post.** A new trading post has opened a few miles off, and its prices are suspiciously low.
- **The back room.** Something in Pell's back room has started to hum.

RUMOUR

Out in the Wastelands there's a stilt village that's still standing, still lit, and nobody lives in it. Every Far, salvagers swear they'll go and look. Every Rising, the ones who did come back very quiet. (*Chapter Six.*)

GM THE WASTELANDS

The Wastelands is the Shallows' dungeon country, the place for expeditions, ruins, creatures and discoveries. Keep it a long way from help. The Cycle is its clock: a party that goes out at Far has forty days to find what it's looking for and get home before the water does. The half-water is the deadline. Use it.

LIFE IN THE SHALLOWS

Home. Most Shallows homes are narrow, tall and crowded, with the ground floor given over to whatever the Cycle allows. It's a workshop at Far, a boathouse at Near, and full of mud in between. Families live upstairs. Roofs are for drying nets, keeping chickens and arguing with the neighbours.

Getting about. On foot at Far, by boat at Near, on the High Road always and on the Dim Road when you'd rather not be seen. Trams glide out along the Spines. See Chapter Nine.

Food. Fish, shellfish, sea-grass, salt, bread from up the hill, fruit from the Highlands and whatever the half-water brought in. Shallows food is spicy, cheap and fried, and eaten standing up. Every quarter claims the best fish stew in the Shallows. The Pillars actually has it.

Money. The Shallows runs on coin, credit, favours and barter, roughly in that order. Debts are payable at Rising.

Everyone owes somebody, and the Council of Merchants owns a share of most of it.

Law. There isn't much, and what there is depends on where you're standing. The city guard patrols Gatefoot and the busier parts of the Inner Shallows, and stops caring after that. The Council of Merchants sets tolls, market rules and moorings, and enforces them with fines, confiscations and hired muscle. In the Fingers, families settle things. In the Pillars, the elders do. In the Wastelands, nobody does. The Shallows is the Wild West with canals.

Faith. Everywhere. Shrines on every bridge, offerings on every windowsill, a blessing for every boat. Shallows folk are deeply superstitious about the sea and the sky, and not very interested in what any temple says about either.

What the Shallows thinks of Port City. Port City is *the hill*: rich, slow, nosy and bossy. The Shallows needs it and resents it, buys from it and steals from it, and sends its brightest children up there and is quietly furious when they don't come back. Most Shallows folk have been through the Sea Gates a handful of times in their lives. Some have never been, and are proud of it.

WHY PLAY STARTS HERE

The Shallows is the perfect place to start a BINARY campaign. It's crowded, lawless, close to power and close to danger. It changes twice a Cycle, so the same streets offer new problems at Near and Far. It sits between Port City's money and the Wastelands' secrets. And everyone in it needs something done.

A new party in the Shallows might be:

- **Locals,** born and raised in one neighbourhood and known to everyone in it, for better or worse.
- **Newcomers,** washed up from the Highlands, the Archipelagos, Port City or further afield, with nowhere else to go.
- **A crew,** working for a patron, a merchant or the Council, or for themselves on the Dim Road.
- **Salvagers,** looking for a fortune in the Wastelands and needing money, gear and guides to get there.
- **In trouble,** owing a debt, hiding from someone, or holding something somebody else wants.

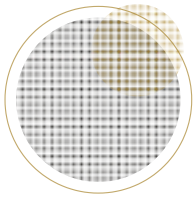
GM RUNNING THE SHALLOWS

The Shallows should feel alive: busy, noisy, full of people with problems and opinions. Give every neighbourhood a smell, a sound and a face the players will remember. Change it with the Cycle. A street the party walked at Far is a canal at Near, and the canal-side tavern they drank in has a new front door a floor up. Let the players build relationships, make enemies, owe favours and call them in. By the time they leave the Shallows, it should feel like home.

SAYINGS OF THE SHALLOWS

- *Down the Fingers.* Far away, out of the way, nobody will find you.
- *Pillar-built.* Old, stubborn, ramshackle and still standing.
- *Driftmarket price.* Cheap, and don't ask why.
- *Longlegs goodbye.* A farewell that might be the last.
- *Gone Wastelands.* Gone missing; gone mad; gone looking for something.
- *Wet either way.* There's no good option here.





CHAPTER NINE

GETTING AROUND

In the Shallows, the question is never just *where* you're going. It's *when*.

A trip that's a pleasant twenty-minute walk across the flats at Far is a boat ride at Near and a miserable, muddy, waist-deep slog in the half-water. A bridge that's a shortcut by day is a toll-trap by night. A tower you could stroll past last Cycle has guards on it this Cycle. Every Shallows native carries a map in their head that changes with the water, and most visitors find out the hard way that theirs doesn't.

This chapter covers the ways people move around Port City and its Shallows: the Spines and their trams, the High Road and the Dim Road, and the water and the flats in between.

THE SPINES

From the Wall-Walk on a clear day, you can see them: long, pale arms reaching out from the Shallows across the shelf, straight as rulers, all the way to the sea.

These are the **Spines**. Each one runs about ten miles from the inner Shallows out to the edge of the shelf, where the ocean stays deep even at Far. They stand on tall, close-set piers high above the highest Near, and their sides are ribbed in long, curving bands like the backbone of something enormous. From a distance, the name explains itself.

The Spines are old work. The Vael built them, along with the tram paths that run along their tops, and they've stood through more Cycles than anyone can count. Tarethians have added to them ever since: stairs, landings, warehouses, cranes, shelters, stalls and the odd illegal shack bolted onto a pier where nobody's looking.

What the Spines Are For

The Spines exist for one reason: at Far, the sea goes away, and trade can't.

When the water draws back, the Spines are how the Shallows reaches the ocean. Cargo, crews and passengers ride the trams out to the docks at the end, and ships come and go from there as if nothing had happened. At Near, the Spines are still the fastest way across the Shallows, but they're no longer the only way, and their docks share the trade with every pier and landing in the water-city.

The Spine-Ends

At the far end of each Spine is a dock: a broad platform of old stone and new timber, ringed with cranes, warehouses, chandlers and taverns, standing over water that never leaves. The Spine-ends are busy, salty and a little lawless, ten miles from the city guard and a long way from anywhere. Deep-water ships tie up here all Cycle. At Far, half the Shallows' trade passes through them.

The Cradles

Along the length of each Spine, between the piers, hang the **cradles**: great frames of timber and rope, shaped like the ribs of a hull, built to hold boats high and dry.

When the water falls, Shallows boats that can't or won't go out to sea are floated into the cradles at the end of Near, and they settle into them as the water goes out. For forty days of Far they sit there, high off the sand, in long rows like fish on a drying rack. Crews live aboard, paint, patch, mend and gossip. When Rising comes, the boats lift gently out of their cradles and float free.

A cradle is a valuable thing, and the Council of Merchants rents them by the Cycle. A good cradle near the inner end of a Spine costs a small fortune. A bad one way out on the shelf is cheap, lonely and a long walk from a drink.

The Main Spine

The **main Spine** is the oldest, broadest and busiest of them all. It's the best kept, the best guarded and the most expensive to cradle on. At its end, beyond the dock, a long bridge runs out across open water to **Temple Island**, which stands in the sea at every phase of the Cycle. Pilgrims, traders and the curious ride the main Spine tram all the way out, and then walk. See Chapter Ten.

GM HOW MANY SPINES?

The number of Spines isn't fixed. A handful works well: enough that each has its own character, few enough that the players can learn them. Give each one a name, a reputation and a problem. The main Spine is respectable. Another might be half-ruined. Another might be quietly owned by a smuggling crew.

TRAMS

Trams are how the region moves.

They glide silently a hand's breadth above their paths, through the streets of Port City, out through the Tram Arch in the wall, across the inner Shallows and along the tops of the Spines. They run in pairs or in longer trains, but the cars aren't coupled. Each one floats free, keeping its place in the line like a fish in a shoal, closing up on the bends and spreading out on the straights. Their cars are curved like polished shell, with brass fittings, long windows and benches worn smooth by generations.

Paths and routes. The *path* is the way itself: the old Vael line the trams glide over. In the streets it shows as a smooth, pale, unworn strip running through the cobbles, untouched by wheel or hoof, because nobody with any sense stands on a tram path. On the Spines, it runs along the top like a ridge on a spine. The *route* is the service: the named run, with its stops, its timetable and its reputation. Every Port City child knows the routes by heart, and which one is always late.

Who runs them. The tram paths are old work and nobody owns them. The trams themselves are run by Tarethian tram companies under licence from Port City. They're overseen by the bureaucracy, taxed by the Customs House and, out on the Spines, tolled by the Council of Merchants. Each car has a driver, who doesn't so much steer as persuade. Drivers are a proud, closed trade, and they hand their routes down in families.

Fares. Cheap within the city, dearer in the Shallows and dearest on the Spines, especially at Far, when there's no other way out to sea. Cargo travels in dedicated freight cars, sealed at the Customs House or the Spine-end, depending on which way it's going.

What happens on a tram. Everything. Deals get made. Pockets get picked. Lovers meet. Spies watch. Fights start. And every so often, something gets thrown off a Spine tram into the sand ten miles out, where nobody will find it until the next Far.

RUMOUR

There's a tram path on one of the Spines that runs off the end of the dock and straight out into the open sea. Nothing has ever glided down it. The drivers say it's for something that hasn't come yet.

THE HIGH ROAD

The **High Road** isn't one road. It's the whole network of raised ways that ties the Shallows together: bridges, causeways, walkways and pontoons, running above the water at Near and above the mud at Far, linking every neighbourhood from Gatefoot to Longlegs.

Near the city, the High Road is a road of brick bridges: broad, arched and solid, lined on both sides with shops at street level and houses stacked above them, like a medieval street lifted up into the air. Some stretches are so built-up that you can walk a mile and forget you're on a bridge at all, until a gap between buildings shows you the canal forty feet below.

Further out, the bridges turn to timber, lower and lighter, and the buildings thin out. Then come stilt bridges, rope walkways and long chains of wooden pontoons that rise and sink with the water. Out in the Outer Shallows, the High Road is sometimes just a line of planks with a rope to hold on to.

The Towers

Where a High Road bridge meets its pier, or one bridge meets another, there's often a **tower**: a round, solid gatehouse straddling the way, with a gate at road level and rooms above. Some are empty. Some are lived in, or turned into taverns. Some are guarded.

A guarded tower is a toll point. The Council of Merchants keeps most of them, and charges for passage by the phase, by the load, by the hour or by whatever the tower captain thinks you'll stand. Some belong to Port City, and their guards check papers. Some belong to whoever got there first and hired enough muscle to keep them. A traveller crossing the Shallows on the High Road can expect to pay at least twice, argue at least once, and be asked their business more often than they'd like.

Getting past a tower. There are four ways past a guarded tower. You can pay. You can show the right papers. You can know the right person. Or you can go underneath.

THE DIM ROAD

Under the High Road, wherever it's built up, there's another road.

The **Dim Road** is the lower level of the Shallows. It's the decks, walkways, service ladders and moorings strung beneath the inhabited stretches of the High Road, down where the light is poor, the air is damp and the water slaps at the piles. It's where the fishing boats come up to unload. It's where cargo comes and goes without passing a tower. It's where people live who can't afford a window, and where business gets done that can't afford a witness.

The Dim Road runs only under the built-up stretches. Under the empty spans between settlements, there's nothing below but open water or bare sand. So the Dim Road isn't continuous. It's a scatter of hidden lower towns, each tucked

under its own stretch of High Road. Getting from one to the next means coming up, or taking a boat, or knowing a way most people don't.

Getting Down

There are stairs, ladders, trapdoors, hoists and gaps in the boards, and almost all of them are watched by somebody. Most people get down to the Dim Road the same way they get past a tower: they pay. A coin to the right lad on the right ladder, and you're down. Go along underneath, come up on the far side of the tower, and you've saved yourself a toll and a question, and made someone on the Dim Road a little richer.

At Near, boats reach the Dim Road directly. They slide in under the bridges and tie up at the lower docks. At Far, the Dim Road's lower decks hang over the mud, and people climb down on ropes.

What's Down There

Fishing boats, smugglers, fences, pawnbrokers, dice games, cheap drink, cheaper rooms, back-room Aevists, unlicensed fitters, debt collectors, people hiding and people looking for them. It's not all crime. Plenty of honest Shallows folk live and work on the Dim Road because it's cheap, close to the water and minds its own business. But if you need something illegal, someone discreet or someone who'll do a job without asking, the Dim Road is where you start.

The Dim Road as an Idea

To Shallows folk, the Dim Road is a place and also a way of doing things. *Going down the Dim Road* means doing business off the books. *A Dim Road deal* is one that never happened. *I heard it on the Dim Road* means you heard it from someone you'll never name. A Port City merchant who's never been within a mile of the Shallows can still do a great deal of Dim Road business.

GM KEEPING IT DIM

The Dim Road should stay loosely defined. It's not a district with a map. It's wherever the players need it to be, under whatever stretch of the High Road they're on. Use it for shortcuts, contacts, black markets, hideouts, chases and ambushes. The deeper the players go into Dim Road business, the more Dim Road people know their faces.

ON THE WATER

At Near, the Shallows is a city of boats, and everyone who can afford one has one.

- **Canal boats** are long, narrow and poled or rowed. They carry passengers and small cargo through the canals of the inner Shallows. Every canal boat has a pilot who knows every shortcut, and charges for them.
- **Barges** are broad and slow, and haul goods between the Spines, the Domes, the Citadels and the Sea Gates.
- **Ferries** cross the open water between neighbourhoods on regular runs, crowded and cheap.
- **Fishing boats** are flat-keeled, sturdy and built to sit out Far in a cradle.
- **Punts** are flat-bottomed and shallow, and they come into their own in the half-water, when nothing else can move.
- **Private boats** belong to anyone with money, and to anyone who's borrowed one.

Deep-water ships stay out at the Spine-ends or in the deeper channels. They rarely come into the inner Shallows, even at Near. The water's too shallow for their keels and too crowded for their captains.

ON FOOT AT FAR

At Far, the Shallows walks.

The flats between the neighbourhoods become a maze of footpaths, cart-tracks, sledge-runs and shortcuts, all worn into the sand and mud anew each Cycle. Locals know which ones are safe. Visitors don't. There are sinking patches, tidal channels that never quite drain, sudden holes, wrecks, and things that burrow in the mud and wait.

Carts and sledges haul goods across the flats, pulled by porters or patient animals. Harvest crews head out at dawn with baskets and poles. Guides, for hire in every neighbourhood, lead travellers across the outer flats, and the further out you go, the more a guide is worth.

THE HALF-WATER

Twice a Cycle, for five days each time, getting around the Shallows becomes a misery.

In the half-water, the shelf is too wet to walk and too shallow to sail. Carts sink. Keels scrape. The flats turn to channels and the channels turn to mud. The High Road is crowded, the towers raise their tolls, the Dim Road does a roaring trade, and punts and waders charge whatever they like.

Smart travellers stay home. Smart smugglers don't. The half-water is when goods go missing, people go astray, and anyone who wants to move unseen across the shelf has the whole Shallows to themselves.

HOW FAR IS IT?

Distances in the Shallows are rough, and nobody measures them anyway. They measure in time, and the time depends on the water.

JOURNEY	AT FAR	AT NEAR	IN THE HALF-WATER
Gatefoot to the Domes	A short walk	A short boat ride	An unpleasant wade
Inner Shallows to the end of a Finger	An hour's walk	Under an hour by ferry	Most of a morning
Inner Shallows to Longlegs	Half a day's walk	A few hours by boat	A day, if you're lucky
Along a Spine, end to end	Under an hour by tram	Under an hour by tram	Under an hour by tram
Spine-end to Temple Island	A long walk over the bridge	The same	The same

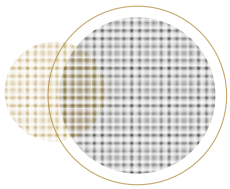
GM TRAVEL IN PLAY

Don't track travel to the minute. What matters is the choice: the quick way that costs money, the cheap way that costs time, or the hidden way that costs trust. Let the Cycle shape the options. A chase across the Shallows plays completely differently at Near, at Far and in the half-water, and the players should feel it.

SAYINGS OF THE ROAD

- *Take the High Road.* Do it properly, pay the toll, be seen.
- *Take the Dim Road.* Do it quietly, off the books, unseen.
- *Out on the Spine.* A long way from help.
- *Cradled.* Stuck, waiting, going nowhere until things change.
- *Don't stand on the path.* Get out of the way of something bigger than you.
- *Twice and an argument.* What a journey costs. Said of anything that's more trouble than it should be.





CHAPTER TEN

TEMPLE ISLAND

On a clear day, from the Wall-Walk in Port City, you can see it on the horizon: a long, dark green mass rising out of the sea beyond the end of the main Spine, too big to be called a hump and too far away to be called a coast. Mist clings to it most mornings. Above the forest, near its highest point, something pale catches the light a moment before anything else does at dawn.

Everyone on this coast knows Temple Island. Fishers steer by it, and steer well clear of it. Children dare each other to look at it too long. Pilgrims walk the whole length of the main Spine to stand at the end of the bridge and pray towards it.

Nobody lives there. Nobody goes there. The way in is shut.

AT A GLANCE

- **What it is.** A huge, forested island in the open sea beyond the main Spine. It's mostly unexplored and entirely uninhabited.
- **How you get there.** You don't. The long bridge from the end of the main Spine runs all the way to the island, and ends at a gate that has been closed for as long as anyone can remember.
- **Who lives here.** Nobody. Nobody Tarethian, at least.
- **What's there.** Deep forest, steep hills, old works, the temple on the heights, and things that hunt. Some of them are animals.
- **How it meets the Cycle.** Barely. Temple Island stands in deep water at every phase. The sea climbs its cliffs at Near and draws back to its rocks at Far, but it never lets go.

THE BRIDGE

At the end of the main Spine, past the dock, the cranes and the last tavern, there's a plain iron gate, Tarethian and padlocked at night. Beyond it is the bridge.

It runs out across open water for miles. It's narrow, pale and ribbed like the Spines, arching gently up and down between slender piers that drop straight into the sea. There's no tram path on it, and no buildings, except a small round shelter at about the halfway point where walkers rest and get their breath back. The bridge is old work, and it feels it. It's smooth underfoot and cool even at noon, and in a high wind it hums very faintly, a deep note you feel through your boots more than hear. In fog, you can lose sight of both ends at once.

And at the far end, where the bridge meets the island, is the Gate.

RUMOUR

Nobody has ever counted the same number of piers under the bridge twice.

THE GATE

The bridge runs straight into the island's cliffs, and there, filling a vast cleft in the rock, stands the **Gate**.

It's enormous. It's taller than the tallest tower in Port City's Crown, and broad enough that the bridge looks like a thread running up to it. It's made of the same pale, seamless material as the towers and the Spines, ribbed and curved like the closed shell of some unimaginable sea creature, and it fits the cleft so perfectly that there's no gap anywhere a knife blade could go. There's no handle, no hinge, no keyhole and no seam anyone can find. At its centre, at about the height of a person's hand, there's a small spiral mark, the same mark found on every sealed Vael door on Tareth. Here it is the size of a cartwheel.

The Gate is Aevic. Fitters who've stood near it say they can feel it working, the way you feel a great machine running in the next room. On still nights it hums. On some nights it doesn't, and those are worse.

The Gate has never been seen open. It bars the way into the island. Most people on this coast are quite certain, without ever having said so aloud, that it bars the way *out* as well.

What people think the Gate is for. Shallows folk will tell you the Gate keeps people out of something holy. Port City scholars will tell you it's an ancient defence, from a war nobody remembers. Fishers will tell you, if you buy them enough drink, that you don't build a door that size to keep people out. You build it to keep something in.

The Gate-Foot

Where the bridge meets the Gate, it widens into a broad platform of pale stone, the **Gate-Foot**, hanging over deep water against the cliff. It's as close to Temple Island as anyone is allowed to get.

Pilgrims come here. They walk the main Spine and the long bridge, and they kneel on the Gate-Foot and pray to the Vael, or the sky, or whatever they think is listening. They tie ribbons to the bridge rails, set candles and shells along the foot of the Gate, and press their palms against its surface for luck. Some come to ask for a safe voyage, a good harvest or a cure. Some come because their parents did. Some come just to stand in the Gate's shadow and feel very small.

Nobody stays after dark.

RUMOUR

If you press your ear to the Gate at the very peak of Near, you can hear the island on the other side: wind in the trees, water running, birdsong. Then, every so often, everything on the other side goes quiet at once, as if something were listening back.

THE KEEPERS

The **Keepers** are a small, old order, dressed in plain grey, who keep watch over the Gate.

They live in a narrow stone house built onto the last piers before the Gate-Foot, the only building on the whole bridge apart from the halfway shelter. They tend the Gate-Foot, clear away the offerings, welcome the pilgrims, light the lanterns on the last stretch of bridge, and send everyone back to the Spine before nightfall.

Nobody is quite sure where the Keepers came from or how long they've been here. They say they've always been here. They don't claim to know what's behind the Gate. Ask a Keeper what they're keeping, and they'll tell you, kindly, that they keep the Gate. Ask them whether they keep it shut, and the kindness gets thinner.

The Keepers answer to nobody on the mainland. They pay no tolls and take no side in Shallows politics. Port City has tried more than once to put officials on the bridge, and each attempt has quietly fallen apart. Nobody can quite say why.

RUMOUR

The Keepers don't age the way other people do. Or there are more of them than anyone has counted. Or they once opened the Gate, a very long time ago, and that's why they're still here.

THE ISLAND

What lies beyond the Gate is known only from a distance, from old charts, and from the very few people who have tried another way in.

From the sea, Temple Island is enormous. It's long and high-backed, rising from sheer cliffs into steep, forested hills, with a spine of higher ground running down its middle and a summit near its seaward end. Its coasts are almost all cliff, dropping straight into deep water, with a few narrow coves where the rock breaks. The forest is thick, old and dark, a canopy so dense that from a boat offshore you can't see the ground beneath it at all. Mist lies in its valleys most mornings and rises off it at dusk.

Above the forest, near the summit, something pale stands clear of the trees: the top of some great structure, ribbed and curved, catching the first and last of the light. That's the temple, and it gives the island its name. Nobody alive has stood at its foot. Nobody can say if it ever was a temple.

In the forest there are old works, glimpsed from the sea or described by the few who've landed: pale pillars standing among the trees, overgrown stairways climbing the cliffs, causeways vanishing into the canopy, towers wrapped in vines. Whoever built the Gate built a great deal more behind it.

And there are the nasties. The island is full of them. Some are natural, the island's own creatures, grown large and strange in a forest nobody has hunted for longer than anyone can reckon. Some are not natural at all. Fishers who've anchored too close at night tell of things moving on the cliffs that walk wrong, of lights in the trees that are the wrong colour, and of a sound like the Gate's hum, only darker, coming from deep inside the island.

The Ones Who Tried

Every generation, someone tries to get onto Temple Island another way. They're salvagers, scholars, treasure-hunters, madmen and the occasional rich young fool with a boat and a bet. They row into the coves or climb the cliffs.

Most don't come back.

Some come back with nothing, and won't say why they turned round. A very few come back with something: a piece of old work no one has ever seen, a map scratched on a scrap of hide, a story that no one believes. And a few of those who came back were never quite right again. Their families say they talked in their sleep, in words nobody knew. Their lanterns burned strangely. Their dogs wouldn't go near them.

RUMOUR

A salvager named in every version of this story, though never the same name, landed in a cove on the island's far side, walked inland for three days, and came back. She said there's a second gate, deep in the forest, and that it's open.

THE ISLAND AND THE CYCLE

Temple Island stands in deep water at every phase, and the Cycle passes around it like weather around a mountain.

At Near, the sea climbs the island's cliffs and fills its coves. Pilgrim numbers peak around Homewater. On the clearest nights, Veyr hangs huge and low over the summit, and the pale shape above the trees glows in her light.

At Far, the water draws back from the island's rocky skirt, and a few new coves, ledges and caves appear at the cliff-foot. Every Far, someone thinks it's the time to try. The island's nasties are hungriest at Far.

In the half-water, the bridge is crowded with people trying to reach the Gate-Foot and get home again before the turn, and the Keepers are busier than ever.

RUMOUR

On one night in every Cycle, at the very peak of Near, Veyr stands directly over the temple, and the Gate and the bridge hum together, so loudly the Spine-end dock can hear it. The Keepers close the bridge that night. They say it's for repairs.

SECRETS OF THE ISLAND

GM A SETTING, NOT A SCRIPT

Temple Island is a place, and it will outlast any one story told about it. This book is meant to serve many adventure paths, and each of them can use the island differently. Some will end there. Some will raid its coves, send the party to the Gate-Foot for a single scene, or never go near it at all. Take as much or as little as your story needs.

GM THE S AND T SERIES

The first adventure path starts with the introductory S series (*S1: A Cave Beneath the Shallows*, S2 and S3), which ends with the trail leading to Temple Island. The T series (T1 to T3) takes the party through the Gate, into the forest and on to the Ythric heart of the island. Those modules will settle some of the island's secrets for that story. Other paths are free to answer them differently.

GM KEEPING IT IN THE DISTANCE

Whatever path you're running, the island works best seen from far off for a long time. Let the players see it from the Wall-Walk, walk to the Gate-Foot, hear the stories and feel the pull. If a party ever does get through, or around, the Gate, it should feel like a turning point, not a stop on the way.

GM YTHRUM ON THE ISLAND

The island's unnatural nasties are Ythric. In this book, keep Ythrum to a hint: the wrong lights, the darker hum and the people who came back changed. The creatures themselves are in the Creature Book's Temple Island biome, and the finale is in the modules.

Ythrum belongs to the World Book, the Creature Book and the modules only. It does not appear in the Adventure Book.

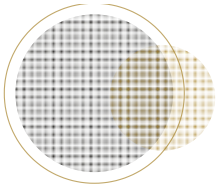
GM WHAT STAYS OPEN

The island's dark secrets are deliberately undecided in this book. An adventure path that goes there will need to answer some of them for itself: what the Gate is keeping in, and who closed it; what the temple really is; why Ythrum is strongest here; what the Keepers know, and whether they're guards, jailers or something else; and whether the second gate in the forest is real, and where it leads.

SAYINGS OF THE ISLAND

- *Gate-shut.* Closed for good; not open to argument.
- *Walk to the Gate.* Go as far as you're allowed, and no further.
- *Count the piers.* Something that never adds up.
- *Came back from the island.* Changed, strange, not to be trusted. Said of people, and of goods.
- *Island weather.* Calm on the surface, wrong underneath.





CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE POWERS

Nobody in the Shallows works alone for long.

Sooner or later, everyone ends up owing somebody. It might be a toll to the Council, a favour to a family on the Fingers, a debt to a Dim Road fence or a promise to a clerk up the hill. And the people they owe owe somebody else. The whole region is a tangle of debts, deals, grudges and alliances, running from the lowest Dim Road deck all the way up to the Counting Tower, and every thread in it is held by somebody.

Shallows folk have a word for the people who hold those threads. They call them **the Powers**: the councils, houses, guilds, gangs and offices that decide how things go. Everyone else just lives with it.

This chapter describes the Powers of Port City and its Shallows: who they are, what they want, what they hold, who they hate and what they might want from a party of capable people who need the work.

> [GM] **The Powers in play.** The party will work for the Powers, against them and between them. There's no score to keep. Just remember what the party has done and who it was done to, and let the Powers act on it the way real people would. Help one, and its rivals take note. Cross one, and it remembers. This chapter is the who and the why.

HOW TO READ AN ENTRY

Each Power is described the same way.

- **Reach**: where it operates, and how far its arm stretches.
- **Wants**: what it's really after, which isn't always what it says.
- **Holds**: what it controls: places, people, money and leverage.
- **Friends and foes**: who it works with, and who it's working against.
- **Trouble**: the problem it has right now.
- **Offers**: what it can give the party, and what it'll ask in return.

THE HIGH SEATS *The Powers at the top of the region, or who think they are.*

THE COUNCIL OF MERCHANTS

"Every bridge has a toll. Every toll has a ledger. Every ledger is ours."

The Council of Merchants is the nearest thing the Shallows has to a government, and it'd be insulted to be called one. It's an association of the biggest traders in the water-city: market owners, ship owners, warehouse barons, cradle-holders and money-lenders. They meet under the great central dome of the Domes, set the rules that keep trade moving, and take their cut from everything that does.

The Council has no laws, courts or guard, and it doesn't want them. It has tolls, fines, fees, licences, confiscations and hired muscle, which it finds work better. It sets the tolls on most High Road towers, rents out the cradles on the Spines, licenses the market stalls in the Domes, charges for moorings by the phase, and takes a share of most debts in the Shallows. What it can't control, it taxes. What it can't tax, it ignores, until it can.

The Council isn't a single will. Its members squabble constantly over seats, shares, tolls and territory. But against Port City, the Council speaks with one voice, and that voice is usually saying *no*.

- **Reach.** The whole Shallows, thinning towards the outer edge. Strongest in the Domes, the Citadels, Gatefoot and on the Spines.
- **Wants.** Trade flowing, tolls paid, Port City kept at arm's length, and its members a little richer every Cycle.
- **Holds.** The Domes markets, most High Road towers, the cradles, the Spine-end docks, the tram tolls on the Spines, and a great deal of everyone's debt.

- **Friends and foes.** Works with the merchant houses when it suits both. Fights a cold war with the Customs House. Tolerates the Dim Road gangs, because they pay, and some of the Council's own members run them. Can't get a foothold in the Pillars.
- **Trouble.** The Customs House has raised salvage duties twice in three Cycles, and Council members are losing money hand over fist. Some want to fight. Some want to deal. Someone has started leaking the Council's private ledgers to Port City.
- **Offers.** Work, money, licences, cradle space, a stall in the Domes, a quiet word at a tower. In return, it wants jobs done that its members can't be seen doing.

THE TARETHIAN TRADE COUNCIL

"For the balance."

The Tarethian Trade Council oversees everything that flows inland and up the Conduits, from every region on Tareth. Its regional seat is the Counting Tower, the tallest inhabited tower in Port City's Crown, and its regional master is one of the most powerful people on the coast. Most Shallows folk have never seen a Trade Council official. They see the Council's work every day: in the grain convoys, the seals, the tithes and the endless counting.

The Trade Council doesn't govern Port City. It doesn't need to. When it wants something, the Governor finds a way to provide it.

- **Reach.** The whole region and far beyond. Strongest in the Crown, the Granaries and along the inland road.
- **Wants.** Publicly, the balance kept and the harvest delivered. Privately, at least some of its senior officials want wealth, power and the very careful concealment of how they got it.
- **Holds.** The Counting Tower, the Granaries, the convoys, the Conduit tithe, the highest seals on the coast, and the ear of the Governor.
- **Friends and foes.** Commands the Customs House in practice. Courts the merchant houses. Barely notices the Council of Merchants, which infuriates it.
- **Trouble.** The grain figures don't match. A junior clerk noticed and was transferred to the Highlands. Somebody else will notice soon, and the officials responsible are getting nervous.
- **Offers.** Very little, directly. The Trade Council doesn't hire Shallows hands. Its officials do, quietly, through intermediaries, and they pay extremely well for jobs that must never be traced back to them.

GM THE ROT AT THE TOP

The Trade Council is where the campaign's corruption thread leads. Not every official is corrupt. Some are honest, and some of the honest ones are frightened. But somebody near the top is skimming the harvest, and the proof lies beyond the Conduit. The party may work for the Trade Council's officials long before they realise who they're really working for.

THE GOVERNOR AND THE HILL

"Take it up the hill."

The regional government of Port City is led by a **Governor** and a council of senior officials. It makes the laws, runs the courts and commands the city guard and the walkers. It's large, slow, proud and riddled with departments, and it's very conscious of its dignity. Inside the wall, its word is law. Outside the wall, its word is a suggestion, and the further out you go, the less anyone listens.

- **Reach.** All of Port City. Gatefoot and the busier inner Shallows, through the guard. Barely anywhere else.
- **Wants.** Order, revenue, respect, and the Shallows brought to heel at last, or at least taxed properly.
- **Holds.** The city guard, the walkers, the Hall of Magistrates, the gates, and the power to arrest, fine, pardon and hang.
- **Friends and foes.** Defers to the Trade Council. Relies on the merchant houses. Despises the Council of Merchants. Uneasy about the College.
- **Trouble.** The Governor has ordered more walkers for the Sea Gates, through the Trade Council and not the guard. The guard captains want to know why. So do the Council of Merchants.
- **Offers.** Pardons, passes, permits and the occasional discreet job too dirty for the guard. It pays slowly but reliably, and its favours carry weight.

THE CUSTOMS HOUSE

"Counted, weighed, sealed and recorded."

The Customs House is a department of Port City's government, but it acts like a Power in its own right. It counts, taxes and seals everything that comes up from the Shallows or in from the sea. Its clerks hold the power to make cargo legal, or not. Its records decide who's an honest merchant and who's a smuggler. And its officials know it.

- **Reach.** Gatefoot and the Sea Gates, the Spine-end docks, and any Shallows merchant who wants to trade with Port City.

- **Wants.** Every duty paid and every cargo recorded, and its own importance recognised. Some of its clerks also want to be bribed generously and often.
- **Holds.** Customs seals, trade permits, cargo records, the seized-goods room, and the power to ruin a merchant with a stroke of the pen.
- **Friends and foes.** Answers to the Governor and, increasingly, to the Trade Council. At war with the Council of Merchants over salvage duties. Hunted by every smuggler in the Shallows.
- **Trouble.** The seized-goods room in the basement is losing inventory every Cycle, and nobody knows who has the key.
- **Offers.** Seals, permits, records altered or lost, and seized goods quietly returned. All at a price, and all through the right clerk.

THE MERCHANT HOUSES

Old money, high towers, long memories.

The great merchant houses of Port City own ships, warehouses, tower floors, Highland estates and a good part of the Shallows. There are dozens of them, great and small, and they compete endlessly for contracts, marriages, seats and status. Two are worth knowing from the start.

House Merrow is one of the oldest houses on the coast. Its towers are among the tallest in the Crown, and it once controlled half the region's salvage trade. It's proud, careful and fading. It has quietly lost three floors of its Crown tower to an unknown creditor, and the lifts go up there at night.

House Sarne is newer, hungrier and rising fast. It made its fortune in Spine-end shipping and cradle rents, and it's buying its way into the Crown floor by floor. Sarne has very good friends in the Trade Council and very good friends on the Dim Road, and it would prefer nobody noticed both.

- **Reach.** Port City's Crown and Middle Ring, and property all over the Shallows.
- **Wants.** Wealth, standing, marriages, contracts and the downfall of rival houses.
- **Holds.** Ships, warehouses, tower floors, debts, patronage, private guards and the ears of officials.
- **Friends and foes.** Each other, until they aren't. The Council of Merchants, when it's useful.
- **Trouble.** Merrow is sinking and Sarne is rising, and the whole Crown is watching to see who gets Merrow's floors.
- **Offers.** Patronage. A merchant house makes the best patron in the region. It pays well, protects its people and opens doors in Port City. It also expects loyalty, and never forgets a betrayal.

THE SHALLOWS *The Powers that make the water-city what it is.*

THE PILLAR ELDERS

"We were here first. We'll be here last."

The elders of the Pillars are the oldest families of the oldest settlement on the shelf. They govern the Pillars and speak for much of the Outer Shallows. They keep their own laws, settle their own disputes and pay tolls to nobody without permission. They're patient, stubborn and deeply suspicious of outsiders. They have long memories and longer grudges.

- **Reach.** The Pillars, and the pillar villages and stilt-folk of the Outer Shallows who look to them.
- **Wants.** To be left alone, and for the Outer Shallows to stay theirs.
- **Holds.** The Pillars, the loyalty of the outer settlements, the best guides and pilots on the shelf, and old knowledge of the Wastelands that nobody else has.
- **Friends and foes.** Trade with Driftmarket. Tolerate Longlegs. Refuse the Council of Merchants. Ignore Port City completely.
- **Trouble.** One of their pillars is sinking into the shelf, and something beneath it has started to hum. The elders are frightened, and they don't frighten easily.
- **Offers.** Shelter, guides, safe passage across the Outer Shallows, and secrets about the Wastelands. They want help in return, but only from people they've learned to trust, which takes a long time.

THE FINGER FAMILIES

"Blood first, Finger second, everyone else nowhere."

Each of the five Fingers is run by a handful of old families. They're bound by marriage and rivalry, and their feuds with the next Finger along go back further than anyone can remember. The Finger families aren't one Power. They're five, at least, and they agree on nothing except that the other four are worse.

- **Reach.** Each family's own Finger, and its fishing grounds at Near.
- **Wants.** Pride, prosperity, fishing rights, and to beat the Finger next door.

- **Holds.** Their Fingers, their boats, their fishing grounds, and a lot of tough cousins.
- **Friends and foes.** Each other, in a constantly shifting web of feuds and marriages. They mostly ignore the Council, which tolls them anyway.
- **Trouble.** A drowned body on the wrong side of a disputed fishing line has two Fingers one bad night away from open war.
- **Offers.** Muscle, boats, hiding places and fierce loyalty to anyone who's done them a real service. Cross one family, and every cousin on that Finger knows your face.

THE COLLEGE

"Licensed, examined, approved."

Port City's academy of Aevum trains and licenses the region's Aevists. Its graduates work for the merchant houses, the government and the guard. Its library is one of the finest on the coast. Its restricted shelves are among the most coveted. And its masters are very interested in anything old, strange and Aevic that comes out of the Shallows.

- **Reach.** Port City's Middle Ring, and every licensed Aevist in the region.
- **Wants.** Knowledge, prestige, control of who works Aevum and how, and first claim on any significant old work found on the coast.
- **Holds.** The licences, the library, the workshops, the examinations, and a great many Aevists who owe it their careers.
- **Friends and foes.** Close to the government and the merchant houses. Wary of the Trade Council. Contemptuous of unlicensed Aevists on the Dim Road.
- **Trouble.** A senior Aevist has been dismissed for "unlicensed study" and is living in the Shallows, asking for help with something she won't describe in daylight. The College wants her watched. Some of its masters want her silenced.
- **Offers.** Training, access to the library, expert opinions and good money for old work. It asks a great deal of questions in return, and it doesn't like the answers to be "no".

THE TRAM DRIVERS

"Don't stand on the path."

The drivers who persuade the region's trams along their paths are a proud, closed, hereditary trade. They hand their routes down in families, keep their skills to themselves and look after their own. They're licensed by Port City and tolled by the Council, and they belong to neither.

- **Reach.** Every route in Port City, the Shallows and the Spines.
- **Wants.** Their routes, their pride and their families' futures, untouched.
- **Holds.** The trams themselves, and everything that travels on them. They know who rides where, when and with what.
- **Friends and foes.** Friendly with the fitters. Neutral with almost everyone else. They hold a long grudge against anyone who's ever hurt a driver.
- **Trouble.** A tram company backed by House Sarne wants to put its own drivers on the Spine routes. The old driving families are furious.
- **Offers.** Rides, routes, timetables, information and the occasional freight car that doesn't get inspected. Drivers see everything, and remember most of it.

THE FITTERS' GUILD

"Smack it first. Then call us."

The fitters who repair and maintain the region's Aevic devices are organised into a guild: practical, cautious and fiercely protective of its trade. Every lantern, lift, pump and tram in the region is kept running by a guild fitter, or by an unlicensed one the guild would very much like to find.

- **Reach.** Everywhere there's a device, which is everywhere.
- **Wants.** Steady work, fair pay, no unlicensed competition, and nobody touching what shouldn't be touched.
- **Holds.** The skills, the parts, the tools, and the forbidden list.
- **Friends and foes.** Friendly with the drivers. Wary of the College, which looks down on them. Hostile to unlicensed Dim Road fitters.
- **Trouble.** A fitter opened a device on the forbidden list last Cycle. He hasn't been right since. The guild is trying to find where the device came from before anyone else does.
- **Offers.** Repairs, devices, parts, expert eyes, and doors that can be made to open. The guild will also pay, very discreetly, for news of anything on its list.

THE KEEPERS OF THE GATE

"We keep the Gate."

The small, grey-clad order that watches Temple Island's Gate from its house on the last piers of the bridge. They take no part in Shallows politics, pay no tolls and answer to nobody. See Chapter Ten.

- **Reach.** The bridge and the Gate-Foot. Their influence beyond is hard to measure, and possibly much larger than it looks.

- **Wants.** The Gate kept. What exactly that means is the question.
- **Holds.** The bridge, the Gate-Foot, the pilgrims' respect, and whatever they know.
- **Friends and foes.** None they admit to. Port City's officials have never managed to get a foothold on the bridge, and nobody knows why.
- **Trouble.** The Gate has been humming on still nights, and the Keepers have been seen listening to it.
- **Offers.** Very rarely, a Keeper asks for help. When they do, it's never small.

THE DIM ROAD *The Powers that work underneath.*

THE UNDERTOW

"You never see it. You only feel the pull."

The Undertow is the biggest criminal syndicate in the Shallows: a loose network of smugglers, fences, money-lenders, gamblers, enforcers and fixers that runs through the Dim Road like a current under still water. It has no headquarters and no known leader, and it doesn't need either. Everyone on the Dim Road knows somebody who knows somebody in the Undertow.

- **Reach.** The whole Dim Road, and a long way up into the High Road and beyond.
- **Wants.** Money, territory, and everyone owing it something.
- **Holds.** Smuggling routes, fences, dice dens, loan books, enforcers, and blackmail on half the Council of Merchants.
- **Friends and foes.** Pays off the Council. Bribes the Customs House. Uses the Cradle Rats. Hates the Toll-Takers, who won't pay up.
- **Trouble.** Somebody high in the Undertow has been dealing with Port City, perhaps with House Sarne, perhaps with someone higher. The rest of the syndicate is starting to suspect.
- **Offers.** Anything illegal, at a price, with interest. The Undertow is the easiest patron in the Shallows to find and the hardest to leave.

THE CRADLE RATS

"High and dry, and nobody's looking."

A gang of smugglers who work the Spines. They hide cargo in the cradled boats at Far, slip it out at the Spine-ends and run it in under the High Road at Near. They know every cradle, every pier and every tram on the Spines. Some of them were born in a cradled boat and have never lived anywhere else.

- **Reach.** The Spines, the cradles and the Spine-end docks.
- **Wants.** Their cut, their freedom, and the Spines kept free of anyone else's smugglers.
- **Holds.** Hiding places in the cradles, friends among the Spine-end dockhands, and drivers who don't look too closely.
- **Friends and foes.** Work for the Undertow when it pays. Fight anyone else smuggling on the Spines. Constantly dodging the Council's cradle-wardens.
- **Trouble.** House Sarne has been buying up cradle rents along the Spines and putting its own wardens on them. The Rats are running out of places to hide things.
- **Offers.** Smuggling, hiding places, fast routes to the sea, and very good knowledge of what's moving along the Spines and who's moving it.

THE TOLL-TAKERS

"This bridge is ours now."

A gang that has seized a string of High Road towers in the Middle Shallows. They charge their own tolls, keep the Council out by force and pay nobody. Some say they're bandits. Some say they're the only people in the Middle Shallows who stood up to the Council. Both are true.

- **Reach.** A handful of towers along the High Road in the Middle Shallows.
- **Wants.** To hold their towers, and to grab more.
- **Holds.** Their towers, the tolls on that stretch of road, and the grudging support of locals who hate the Council more than they hate them.
- **Friends and foes.** At open war with the Council. Refuse to pay the Undertow. Have friends among some Finger families.
- **Trouble.** The Council has hired fighters to take the towers back. The Toll-Takers know it's coming, but not when.
- **Offers.** Free passage, a safe house on the High Road and an ally against the Council. In return, they need fighters.

DRIFTMARKET BOSSES

"No questions. No refunds."

Driftmarket has no owner, but it has bosses: a few traders, fences and boat-families who decide where it moors, who

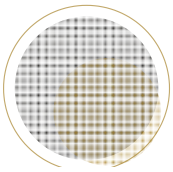
sells there and what happens to people who cause trouble. They keep the floating market moving, profitable and very hard to police.

- **Reach.** Driftmarket, wherever it is this Cycle.
- **Wants.** Trade flowing, questions unasked, and Driftmarket left alone.
- **Holds.** The market, its moorings, its rules, and a lot of goods that used to belong to someone else.
- **Friends and foes.** Trade with everyone. Friendly with the Pillar elders. Pay the Undertow just enough.
- **Trouble.** Driftmarket has settled at Far right on top of a buried doorway in the sand. The bosses are pretending they haven't noticed, and someone is digging at night.
- **Offers.** A place to sell anything, buy anything and disappear for a while.



CHAPTER TWELVE

TROUBLE ON THE COAST



Ask anyone in the Shallows what's going on, and they'll tell you. They'll tell you whether they know or not.

Trouble in the Shallows travels faster than a Spine tram and changes shape on the way. A drowned fisher becomes a murder, then a feud, then a curse. A missing crate becomes a smuggling war, then a Council plot, then a sign from the sky. Some of it's true. Most of it's half-true. All of it is somebody's business, and somebody will pay to have it handled.

This chapter is the Game Master's toolbox for the whole region, Port City and the Shallows together: rumours to drop, locals to meet, events to roll, adventure seeds to grow and a few deeper secrets to keep. None of it is a script. Use it for any adventure path set on this coast, change whatever you like, and throw away what you don't need.

RUMOURS

Rumours of the Shallows (d20)

Roll a d20, or pick one, whenever the party is in a tavern, on a tram, at a market or anywhere else people talk. Some of these are true. Some are wrong. Some are wrong in useful ways. You decide which, and you can decide later.

D20	RUMOUR
1	The Customs House is going to raise salvage duties again before Rising.
2	There's a Finger family that's been paying the Toll-Takers for protection, and the Council knows.
3	A Spine-end tavern keeper buys any old work, no questions, and pays double for anything that hums.
4	House Merrow is selling off its Highland estates. Or losing them. Nobody can say which.
5	The lit stilt village in the Wastelands has moved. It isn't where it was last Far.
6	A walker went missing from the Sea Gates last week. Not stolen. It walked off.
7	The Flotilla's captains won't let anyone aboard the outer ships this Near.
8	There's a tram on the main Spine route that stops at a platform nobody can find at Far.
9	The Undertow's boss is a Council member. Everyone has a different name for which one.
10	Someone is paying Shallows children to count the piers under the Temple Island bridge.
11	The College has expelled an Aevist for finding something, not for losing something.
12	The Pillars' elders have closed the Pillars to outsiders until next Rising.
13	A fisher pulled up a net full of fish from the Glasswater reefs. Every one was blind.
14	A Driftmarket fence is selling Customs House seals that work. Genuine ones.
15	The astronomer on the Middle Ring roof has stopped talking to anyone. Her shutters stay closed.
16	House Sarne is building cradles on a Spine that doesn't officially exist yet.
17	A Keeper was seen on the main Spine, buying passage on a fishing boat. Keepers never leave the bridge.
18	One of the High Road towers in the Middle Shallows has a door on its third floor that wasn't there last Cycle.
19	Grain carts left the Land Gate at night last Far, with no convoy guards and no lanterns.
20	Every lantern in Ropewalk flickered at the same moment last night, and every dog in the Fingers howled.

Rumours on the Hill (d6)

1. The Governor hasn't been seen at a dinner for two Cycles. His deputies say he's busy.
2. Someone has been buying up the debts of the smaller merchant houses, quietly, through three different names.
3. The College has a locked room it doesn't show the examiners.
4. A walker at the Land Gate stopped in the middle of a shift and stood still for an hour. Nobody knows why it started again.
5. The Counting Tower's top floor has been lit every night this Far. Nobody is supposed to be up there.

6. A Customs House seal was found on a crate in the Shallows that the Customs House swears it never stamped.

THIS CYCLE IN THE SHALLOWS

The Shallows never sits still. At the start of each phase, roll or pick one or two events to show the party that the water-city has moved on without them.

At Far (d6)

1. **Stranded.** A big foreign ship misjudged the Falling and is sitting on the sand in the Middle Shallows. Its crew is desperate, its cargo is valuable and the scavengers are circling.
2. **Uncovered.** A new doorway has appeared in a reef in the Outer Shallows. Three salvage crews are racing to it, and one of them has hired guards.
3. **Open Ground.** The feast fills the flats with fires and markets. Every pickpocket in the region is working, and someone important has gone missing in the crowd.
4. **The cradle wars.** Two cradle-holders on a Spine are fighting over a row of cradles, with boats still in them. The crews are caught in the middle.
5. **Burrowers.** Something has been taking harvest crews off the flats at night. The Council is offering a bounty, and nobody is collecting it.
6. **The dry tower.** A lone merchant tower in the Outer Shallows has gone silent. Its carts haven't come in for ten days. Its high door is out of reach until Near.

At Near (d6)

1. **The Flotilla is in.** Deck-markets, foreign goods and Flotilla brawls. A Flotilla captain wants to hire locals for a job her own people can't be seen doing.
2. **Homewater.** The feast fills the canals with lanterns and boats. Under cover of the crowds, a Dim Road gang is moving something big through the inner Shallows.
3. **Visitors from the Deep.** Something huge has come up onto the flooded shelf to hunt. Fishing has stopped in the Middle Shallows, and the Fingers are going hungry.
4. **The Glasswater season.** Port City's rich are at their barges. Their guards are bored, their parties are long, and their secrets are floating on open water.
5. **High doors.** At peak Near, a high door on an old tower in the Outer Shallows is within reach for the first time in anyone's memory. Everyone wants to be first through it.
6. **Toll war.** The Council has doubled mooring fees in the Basin. The Basin's boat-folk are refusing to pay, and the Council's muscle is on its way.

In the Half-Water (d6)

1. **Stuck.** A punt carrying something precious has gone aground halfway across the shelf, too far to wade and too shallow to row.
2. **Wrong side.** The party, or someone they care about, is stranded on the wrong side of a channel with no way back until the water decides.
3. **The rush.** Everyone is trying to get to the Spine-ends before the turn. Trams are packed, tolls are doubled and tempers are short.
4. **Gone missing.** Goods vanish in every half-water. This time it's a whole barge, and the owner is a merchant house.
5. **The quiet night.** On the first evening of the half-water, a neighbourhood keeps its old custom of silence and darkness. Someone uses it to do something terrible.
6. **Unseen.** The shelf is empty, the watchers are busy, and someone is crossing it with a cargo that must never be seen. Someone else has hired the party to see it.

LOCALS

Locals of the Shallows

When an encounter table in the Adventure Book (GM Reference) says **Encounter with a local → Region**, roll a d12 here. × hostile · – neutral · ✓ helpful. Creatures come from the Shallows biome in the Creature Book.

D12		LOCAL
1	✗	Toughs who've been following the party since the last tower decide now is the moment.
2	✗	A debt collector with a ledger, two large assistants and the wrong name. Or the right one.
3	✗	Mucklings defending a salvage claim the party is standing on, with tridents and a lot of shouting. They'd rather bargain, but they won't back down first.
4	✗	Rival salvagers who've decided the party's finds would look better in their baskets.
5	–	A Council mooring warden wants the fee for tying up here, at the Near rate.
6	–	A frantic stranger begs the party to hide a parcel for an hour.
7	–	A Flotilla crew hails the party: curious, rowdy and not taking no for an answer.
8	–	A Muckling is calmly unbuckling something the party isn't using. *"You weren't using it!"*
9	✓	A Muckling peddler with a pack twice her height, selling water and shade. The warning about the way ahead is free.
10	✓	A cookshop owner the party once helped sends over hot food and a rumour.

D12		LOCAL
11	✓	A Longlegs guide on her way back offers to walk with the party for a while.
12	✓	A Basin boat-family takes the party aboard for the night, no questions asked.

Mucklings don't come into Port City. Inside the walls, use *Locals of Port City* instead.

Locals of Port City

When an encounter table in the Adventure Book (GM Reference) says **Encounter with a local → Region** inside the wall, roll a d12 here. × hostile · – neutral · ✓ helpful. Mucklings don't come into Port City.

D12		LOCAL
1	✗	A guard patrol decides the party looks like Shallows trouble, and wants to see their papers. All of them.
2	✗	Council muscle in good coats, sent to have a quiet word about something the party said in the Shallows.
3	✗	A merchant house's agent, very polite, who knows exactly what the party found and would like it.
4	–	A Customs House inspector with a ledger, a question and all afternoon.
5	–	A clerk who has noticed something in the records, is frightened, and doesn't know who to tell.
6	–	A young noble, bored, rich and looking for something exciting to pay for.
7	–	A petitioner who's been queuing at the Counting Tower for three days and wants someone to hold their place.
8	–	A licensed Aevist from the College, curious about the party's gear, and not entirely discreet.
9	✓	A Granaries porter with a grudge against her bosses, and a story about night carts at the Land Gate.
10	✓	An archivist at the Hall of Magistrates who'll find any record, for a small fee and a good reason.
11	✓	The old astronomer from the Roof Observatory, who needs a favour and offers what she's seen in return.
12	✓	A guard captain who owes the party, or wants them to owe him.

GM SIGHTS OF THE SHALLOWS

No dice needed. Drop one in when a scene needs colour, or when a roll on the generic tables comes up quiet.

- A tram glides past a hand's breadth from someone's heel. Someone was standing on the path.
- A wandering priest of some sky-saint picks one of the party out of the crowd to bless, loudly.
- A walker strides past on patrol, stops, turns its head towards the party, then moves on.
- Bare, human-sized footprints cross the flats, walking straight out to sea.
- A Glasswater pleasure-barge drifts past, music playing, nobody visible aboard.
- A body floats by. It's somebody the party knows, or somebody they will.
- Scratched on a cave wall, a message from the last people who rested here. It's a warning.
- A sealed door with the spiral mark. It doesn't open, but behind it, faintly, something answers a knock.

GM USING THE TABLE

Treat each entry as a prompt, not a ruling. Hostile locals don't have to become fights: the party might talk, pay, run or bluff. Cross entries off once they've happened and write in your own.

BREWING IN PORT CITY

A few of the things going on behind the polished doors right now.

- **The missing grain.** The Granaries' outgoing records don't match what Conduit City reports receiving. A junior clerk noticed. The junior clerk has been transferred to a post in the Highlands, and nobody has heard from her since.
- **The toll war.** The Customs House has raised duties on salvage twice in three Cycles. The Council of Merchants is furious, and salvage smuggling through the Dim Road has never been more profitable.
- **The empty floors.** A merchant house has quietly lost three floors of its Crown tower to unpaid debts. Nobody knows who holds the debt. The new owners haven't moved in, but the lifts go up there at night.
- **The College scandal.** A senior Aevist at the College has been dismissed for "unlicensed study". She's living in the Shallows now, and asking for help with something she won't describe in daylight.
- **The new walkers.** The Governor has ordered more walkers for the Sea Gates. The order went through the

Trade Council, not the guard. Nobody in the guard knows why.

ADVENTURE SEEDS

Each seed is the start of an adventure, not the whole of one. They're described with the same headings so you can scan them quickly.

- **Situation:** what's going on.
- **Hook:** how the party gets pulled in.
- **Where and when:** the place, and the phase it suits best.
- **Who cares:** the Powers and people with a stake.
- **Danger:** what's visibly threatening.
- **Twist:** what isn't as it seems.
- **Discovery:** what the party might find.
- **Lasting change:** how the Shallows might be different afterwards.

The Sinking Pillar

- **Situation.** One of the rock pillars at the Pillars is sinking into the shelf, slowly. Something underneath it has begun to hum.
- **Hook.** The Pillar elders quietly send for outside help, which they never do.
- **Where and when.** The Pillars, the Outer Shallows. Best at Far, when you can get underneath.
- **Who cares.** The Pillar elders, the fitters' guild, the College, and the Council of Merchants, which would love to owe the Pillars a favour.
- **Danger.** Unstable rock, collapsing walkways, and things in the mud that don't like the hum.
- **Twist.** The pillar isn't sinking. Something below it is opening.
- **Discovery.** Old work under the pillar, much older and much bigger than anyone knew.
- **Lasting change.** The Pillars owe the party, or blame it. Either way, the Outer Shallows is now a different place to work.

The Short Count

- **Situation.** The grain leaving the Granaries doesn't match what reaches Conduit City. The junior clerk who noticed has been transferred to the Highlands, and now no one can find her.
- **Hook.** The clerk's brother, a Shallows porter, asks the party to find her.
- **Where and when.** Port City's Granaries and Customs House, and the inland road. Any phase.
- **Who cares.** The Trade Council, the Customs House, House Sarne and the Undertow.
- **Danger.** Officials with the power to arrest, ruin or quietly disappear people.
- **Twist.** She isn't missing. She's hiding, with a copy of the ledgers.
- **Discovery.** The first thread of corruption that leads up the hill and beyond.
- **Lasting change.** The party has powerful enemies who know their names. This seed can run for a whole campaign.

The Blind Fish

- **Situation.** Fish pulled from the Glasswater reefs are coming up blind. Then a diver comes up blind too.
- **Hook.** A Glasswater barge owner wants the problem solved quietly, before the season is ruined.
- **Where and when.** Glasswater. Near only, and it must be solved before Falling.
- **Who cares.** The merchant houses with barges, the Council of Merchants, and the College.
- **Danger.** Something in the clear water, and rich people who'd rather nobody found out.
- **Twist.** The reef isn't sick. Something under it is waking up, and the light is hurting it.
- **Discovery.** A buried old work in the reef, and the first hint that some of the Shallows' old works aren't asleep.
- **Lasting change.** Glasswater might never be safe again, or the party might be the reason it is.

The Ship That Didn't Come

- **Situation.** The Flotilla came in this Rising one ship short. Its captains won't talk about it.
- **Hook.** A Flotilla family hires the party to find their missing kin, quietly, without the captains knowing.
- **Where and when.** The Flotilla, then out to the Deep Shallows. Near.
- **Who cares.** The Flotilla's captains, the Flotilla family, the Cradle Rats and the Undertow.
- **Danger.** Open sea, Deep creatures, and Flotilla captains who don't like outsiders asking questions.
- **Twist.** The ship wasn't lost. It was traded, crew and all, to settle a debt the captains owed.
- **Discovery.** Where Flotilla debts go, and who holds them.
- **Lasting change.** The Flotilla splits, or the party earns a place among the people who never set foot on land.

The Toll-Takers' Last Stand

- **Situation.** The Council has hired fighters to retake the towers seized by the Toll-Takers.
- **Hook.** Either side hires the party, or both do.

- **Where and when.** The High Road in the Middle Shallows. Best in the half-water, when nobody can get help in time.
- **Who cares.** The Council of Merchants, the Toll-Takers, the Finger families and the Undertow.
- **Danger.** A siege on a bridge, with nowhere to run but down.
- **Twist.** The Undertow is selling information to both sides, and plans to take the towers for itself when the dust settles.
- **Discovery.** Who in the Council is really running the Undertow.
- **Lasting change.** The towers change hands, and the Middle Shallows' tolls and loyalties change with them.

The Open Door

- **Situation.** At peak Near, a pilot has found a channel that leads deep into the Wastelands, to a tower whose high door stands open.
- **Hook.** She'll take a party there for a price. She won't go in.
- **Where and when.** The Wastelands. Peak Near, a few days at most, with Falling as the deadline home.
- **Who cares.** The College, the fitters' guild, every salvage crew in Longlegs, and anyone who's ever wanted to see inside a Vael tower.
- **Danger.** The channel, the Deep's visitors, the tower and whatever opened the door.
- **Twist.** The door has opened before, once a lifetime, and the people who went in last time are still in there.
- **Discovery.** The inside of a Vael tower, its devices, and something that shouldn't still be working.
- **Lasting change.** A deeper device enters the region, and every Power wants it.

The Silent Walker

- **Situation.** A walker has gone missing from the Sea Gates. It wasn't stolen. It walked away, out across the flats, alone.
- **Hook.** The city guard wants it back without anyone finding out it's gone. They need people who aren't the guard.
- **Where and when.** From Gatefoot out across the Shallows. Best at Far, when its tracks show in the mud.
- **Who cares.** The Governor, the Trade Council, the College, the fitters' guild and the Undertow, which would love to own a walker.
- **Danger.** A walker, and everyone else hunting it.
- **Twist.** It isn't malfunctioning. It's going somewhere, the same direction every night.
- **Discovery.** Where it's going, and what called it.
- **Lasting change.** Port City starts asking hard questions about its own machines.

The Feast of Missing Things

- **Situation.** Every feast, something important goes missing in the Shallows. This feast, it's something everybody wants.
- **Hook.** Three different Powers hire the party to find the same thing.
- **Where and when.** Homewater or Open Ground, anywhere in the Shallows.
- **Who cares.** Pick three.
- **Danger.** Crowds, drink, rivals and a ticking clock: the feast ends at dawn.
- **Twist.** The thing was never stolen. Its owner hid it, and now needs everyone to believe it's gone.
- **Discovery.** Why.
- **Lasting change.** Whoever ends up with it owes the party, and the other two don't forgive.

SECRETS OF THE SHALLOWS

GM DEEPER SECRETS

These aren't facts. They're possibilities that sit under the Shallows' surface, for you to use, change or ignore. Pick one or two to run beneath a whole campaign. Leave the rest as rumours.

- **The shelf is built.** The Shallows' rock pillars, the Basin's rim and the reef gardens at Glasswater aren't all natural. Some, perhaps all, are the tops of something enormous buried in the shelf.
- **The Council has a silent partner.** Somebody outside the Council of Merchants has been steering its biggest decisions for generations, and the Council's members don't know it.
- **The Keepers have been inside.** The Keepers of the Gate know exactly what's behind it, because they came from there.
- **The pillar hum and the Gate hum are the same.** Whatever is waking under the Shallows answers to whatever is behind the Gate.
- **The Cycle is drifting.** The shelf-family tide-tables are right. The Cycle is very slightly off again, and the Shallows will feel it first.

RUNNING AN INTRODUCTORY CAMPAIGN

GM SHOWING OFF THE SHALLOWS

An introductory campaign, like the introductory series (S1 to S3, which ends with the trail to Temple Island), should give the players a taste of everything without running long. A good intro campaign in the Shallows:

- **Spans both phases.** Play some sessions at Far and some at Near, and at least one in the half-water, so the players see the same streets change.
- **Gives them a patron and a rival.** One Power that likes them, one that doesn't, and a web that grows from there.
- **Crosses the region.** From Gatefoot to the Wastelands, up the hill to Port City, out along a Spine and down onto the Dim Road.
- **Shows them old work.** At least one Vael ruin, sealed door or device they can touch, and one they can't.
- **Keeps the island in sight.** Let Temple Island sit on the horizon in every session, until they finally go.
- **Saves Ythrum for last.** In the S series it's only glimpsed, as an unnamed figure in S2, and it arrives in full on Temple Island in the T series. Before that, the worst things in the Shallows should be natural, political or human.



PART THREE

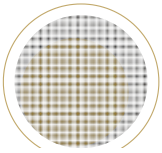
BEYOND THE COAST

Inland to the nearest Conduit, out to the far places of Tareth, and up to Veyr.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE ROAD INLAND



Stand on Port City's wall at dawn and look away from the sea, and you'll see it: a pale line running out of the Land Gate, through the market gardens, over the first green hills and on, and on, until it's lost in the haze where the Highlands begin.

That's the road inland. Everything Tareth grows that isn't eaten where it grows ends up on it sooner or later. At the far end, weeks away, stands the Conduit, and beyond the Conduit is the sky.

Most people on the coast will never walk more than a day along it. They don't need to. The road comes to them: in the drovers' dust, the convoy bells, the pilgrims going out with their eyes shining and the clerks coming back with their mouths shut.

TWO ROADS IN ONE

The road inland is really two roads, running side by side for most of their length.

The Stone Road is old, broad and straight, laid by the Vael long before anyone thought to ask who it was for. Its paving has worn smooth but never cracked. Drovers, carters, pilgrims, post riders, pedlars, soldiers and the occasional lost Shallows fisher all travel it. It has inns, shrines, wells, toll towers and bandits, in roughly that order of frequency.

The Long Path runs beside it, a hand's breadth above the ground. It's an old tram path, the longest anyone knows of, and it carries the tithe. Long trains of uncoupled freight cars glide along it, sealed, silent and guarded, keeping their formation over hill and river for weeks on end. Nobody rides the Long Path who isn't paid to. Nobody stands on it who wants to keep their legs.

The two roads are rarely more than a stone's throw apart. People on the Stone Road walk for days beside a fortune they're not allowed to touch. It does things to a person's thinking.

The tithe cars. Tithe cars are long, low and windowless, with doors that only open for the right seal. They travel in trains of twenty, forty, sometimes a hundred, each car floating free and keeping its place like a fish in a shoal. A train never stops between Tallies. Children along the road race them, and lose.

THE TITHE

Every Cycle, the harvest of the coast and the Highlands is gathered, counted, sealed and sent inland. Tarethians call it *the tithe*, though nobody remembers agreeing to it, and it's a good deal more than a tenth.

Sealed at source. Grain, fruit, wine, fish, timber, cloth and fine goods are packed into crates and stamped with Aevic seals at the Granaries in Port City, and at grange-houses in the Highland valleys. A seal is a small disc of old-work metal that takes an impression and holds it. It glows faintly when it's whole. A broken seal goes dark and stays dark.

Counted on the way. Along the road stand the **Tallies**, fortified counting-houses a few days apart where tithe trains slow, are checked against their manifests and sent on. Each Tally has a tally-master, a staff of clerks, a garrison and a great book. Each book should agree with the last one and the next.

Delivered. At the end of the road, in Conduit City, the tithe is received, counted one final time and taken up into the Conduit. What happens to it after that, nobody on the road can tell you.

The gap. It's an open secret among clerks that the books don't quite agree. Port City's figures say one thing. Conduit City's figures say another. Somewhere along the road, the tithe gets lighter. Officially, this is spoilage. Unofficially, a tally-master who retires to a house with a view of the sea never does so on a tally-master's pay.

GM WHERE THE GRAIN GOES

The gap between Port City and Conduit City is the campaign's first big clue to the rot at the top. Who's skimming is up to you, but the shape of it is meant to be this: the small thefts on the road are real, and noisy, and they hide something much bigger and much quieter higher up. A party that chases the noisy thieves will find bandits and bent tally-masters. A party that asks why the noisy thieves are tolerated will find the Trade Council.

ALONG THE WAY

The road inland takes weeks to walk and days by fast cart. What follows is a sketch of what a traveller passes, in order. Distances and names are left loose so you can fit the road to your map.

The Market Miles

Just outside the Land Gate, the road runs through a broad belt of market gardens, orchards, dairies and walled farms that feed Port City. It's busy, cheerful and crowded. Carts block the road, children sell fruit at the verges, and every inn claims to be the last good one before the Highlands. One of them is right.

The First Tally

A day or two out of Port City, the first Tally stands on a low hill where the Stone Road and the Long Path both bend. It's the busiest Tally on the road and the most carefully watched, because Port City's clerks can ride out to it. Its tally-master is honest, people say, which is why the trouble always seems to happen further on.

The Climb

The land rises into the Highlands. Terraces step up the hillsides in perfect lines. Irrigation channels run uphill. Grange-houses stand at the mouth of every valley, where Highland harvests are sealed and loaded onto side paths that join the Long Path like streams joining a river. The road is slower here, and friendlier. Highland folk feed travellers well and watch them carefully.

The Long Valleys

For many days the road follows a chain of broad river valleys, rich, green and much the same. There are Tallies every few days, villages every few hours and shrines at every bridge. This is where the road is most peaceful, and where most of the tithe goes missing. Nobody finds that funny.

The Dry Country

Far inland, the land changes. The rivers thin, the terraces stop, and the Vael's careful gardening gives way to open, rolling, empty country, grass and stone and wind. The Long Path runs straight across it like a ruled line. Here the Tallies are far apart and heavily garrisoned, the inns are few, and the road belongs to anyone strong enough to hold a stretch of it.

The First Sight

Somewhere in the Dry Country, on a clear day, a traveller looks up and sees it. It's a thin line on the horizon, rising, and rising, and not stopping. For the rest of the journey it never leaves the sky. Pilgrims weep when they see it. Drovers stop looking up after the first day. (Chapter Fourteen.)

THE CYCLE ON THE ROAD

Inland, the Cycle is felt but not seen. There's no sea to rise and fall, but the whole country breathes with it.

- **At Far,** the roads are dry and fast, the rivers run low, and the Highland harvest comes down to be sealed. Most of the tithe moves at Far. So do most bandits.
- **At Near,** the rivers swell, low fords close, and rain comes more often. Veyr hangs huge over the Dry Country, and the line of the Conduit seems, to some travellers, to lean towards her.
- **In the half-water,** the road is at its busiest, as the last of one phase's trade tries to get through before the next.

THE CONDUIT CITY

At the end of the road, far into the continent, a city stands at the foot of the Conduit. Coast folk just call it *Conduit City*, the way they'd say *the end of the road*.

It's large, rich, orderly and strangely quiet. It exists for one reason: to receive the tithe and send it up. Nearly everyone who lives there works for that purpose in some way, as a clerk, a porter, a warden, a fitter, a guard or a cook for any of the above. It has fewer markets than a city its size should have, and more archives.

It's also where the highest Tarethians live: the great officials, the oldest trade families and the Ascendant Offices (Chapter Fourteen). Even its poorest streets are very structured and very well kept. Nothing in Conduit City is left to chance.

From a distance it looks like any Tarethian city, a forest of needle towers linked by arched bridges. Up close, every tower faces the same way, towards the heart of the city. There, walled off from everything Tarethian, stands **the Fortress**, and inside it, the foot of the Conduit (Chapter Fourteen).

GM THE CITY'S NAME

"Conduit City" and "the Fortress" are placeholder names, used to tell the Tarethian city and the Vael fortress apart. The final names are still open. Coast folk may never use the real ones anyway.

Parts of the City

- **The Receiving Yards.** Where the Long Path ends. Vast stone yards in which tithe trains glide in, settle and are unloaded under the eyes of more clerks than anyone has ever seen in one place. The final count happens here.
- **The Ledgerhouse.** The city's great archive, where every count from every Tally on every road is kept. If the tithe's true story is written anywhere on Tareth, it's here. Getting in is very hard. Getting out again with anything is harder.

- **The Pilgrims' Quarter.** The one lively part of the city. It's full of inns, shrines, relic-sellers and people who've walked for weeks to stand at the Foot of the Conduit and look up. The city tolerates them. They're good for trade, and they're easy to watch.
- **The Warden's Hill.** The garrison and the homes of the Conduit Wardens, who guard the Conduit itself. (Chapter Fourteen.)
- **The Sealed Rows.** Streets of warehouses where things that came *down* the Conduit are stored before they leave under guard. Nobody who works there talks about what's in them.

RUMOUR

Every crate that leaves the Sealed Rows is heavier going out than it was coming in. Porters say so, anyway. Nobody's ever been allowed to check.

WHO'S ON THE ROAD

These are the Powers of the road inland. Like those in Chapter Eleven, they're sketched so you can use them as they are, or grow them as your campaign needs.

The tally-masters. Each Tally answers to the Tarethian Trade Council through a chain of offices that runs back to the Counting Tower in Port City. Some tally-masters are honest. Some are bent. Most are simply tired, underpaid and a very long way from anyone who might check their work.

The convoy wardens. Armed riders who escort tithe trains and the cart convoys that serve them. They're well paid, proud and loyal to whoever pays them. Most of the time, that's the Trade Council.

The granges. The Highland grange-houses, where valley harvests are sealed and sent on. Grange families are old, proud and quietly furious about how much leaves their valleys and how little comes back.

The drovers. Tough, sun-dark people who move herds and carts up and down the Stone Road. They know every inn, every shortcut and every Tally that will look the other way for a price. They're the road's best guides and its worst gossips.

The Dry Country riders. Bandits, raiders, local strongmen and a few honest herders, depending on the week. Some of them prey on the tithe. Some, the clever ones, are paid to be seen preying on it.

The pilgrims. People from every coast walking to see the Conduit, out of faith, curiosity, desperation or a promise made to someone dying. They're a useful crowd to hide in.

LOCALS OF THE ROAD

When an encounter table in the Adventure Book (GM Reference) says **Encounter with a local → Region** on the road inland, roll a d12 here. × hostile · – neutral · ✓ helpful. Creatures come from the Highlands biome in the Creature Book.

D12		LOCAL
1	✗	Dry Country riders, a dozen of them, who want the party's water before they want anything else.
2	✗	A bent tally-master's men, sent to make sure the party never reaches the next Tally.
3	✗	Convoy wardens who've decided the party look like the people who robbed the last train.
4	–	A drover offers a shortcut "that saves two days". It does. It also crosses somebody's land.
5	–	A pilgrim falls ill and begs the party to carry her offering the rest of the way.
6	–	A grange family invites the party to dinner, and wants to know exactly what they think of the tithe.
7	–	A post rider asks the party to swear they haven't seen a woman matching a very precise description.
8	–	Two Tallies' clerks meet on the road and argue about a figure. Each wants the party as a witness.
9	✓	A drover with a spare mule and no great attachment to it.
10	✓	A retired clerk who'll share what she knows about the Tallies, for a promise to keep her name out of it.
11	✓	A grange-house, warm, well-stocked and willing to forget the party were ever there.
12	✓	A pilgrim band heading the same way, glad of company, and a perfect crowd to vanish into.

GM SIGHTS OF THE ROAD

No dice needed. Several of these are clues to the skim; use them when the party needs a push.

- A tithe train glides past, and a car door that should be sealed swings open. Whoever's inside has seen the party.
- The Long Path hums, and a tithe train goes by in the wrong direction.
- A broken tithe car lies beside the Long Path, empty and dark. Its seal is still whole.
- A crate has fallen from a train, its seal broken and dark. The manifest inside doesn't match the stamp on the lid.
- A shrine at a bridge, freshly vandalised: the spiral mark chiselled off a stone that was never a door.

TROUBLE ON THE ROAD

Seeds for adventures on the road inland, in the same format as Chapter Twelve.

The Missing Clerk

- **Situation.** The junior clerk from Port City's Granaries, transferred to the Highlands after she noticed the gap in the tithe, has gone to ground somewhere along the road. (See *The Short Count*, Chapter Twelve.)
- **Hook.** Her trail leads out of the Land Gate. So does somebody else's.
- **Where and when.** The Market Miles to the Long Valleys. Any phase.
- **Who cares.** Her family, the Trade Council, a bent tally-master and House Sarne.
- **Danger.** Hired riders on her trail, and officials with the power to arrest the party on sight.
- **Twist.** She isn't running away from Conduit City. She's running towards it, to compare her ledgers with the Ledgerhouse.
- **Discovery.** Two sets of books that prove the tithe is being skimmed at more than one Tally, by people who know each other.
- **Lasting change.** The party now has a reason, and an enemy, at the far end of the road.

The Empty Train

- **Situation.** A tithe train has arrived at a Tally with every car sealed and every seal whole, and every car empty.
- **Hook.** The tally-master needs someone with no connection to the road to look into it, quietly, before word gets out.
- **Where and when.** A Tally in the Long Valleys. Best at Far, when the trains are heaviest.
- **Who cares.** The tally-master, the convoy wardens, the Trade Council, and every grange whose harvest was in those cars.
- **Danger.** Wardens desperate for someone to blame, and a scapegoat-shaped hole the party fits nicely.
- **Twist.** The cars weren't emptied on the road. They were never filled. Someone at the source has been sealing empty crates for a long time.
- **Discovery.** A grange-house with a second set of seals that shouldn't exist.
- **Lasting change.** The granges and the Trade Council are now openly suspicious of each other.

The Stretch

- **Situation.** A strongman in the Dry Country has taken a three-day stretch of the Stone Road and charges a toll to pass. The Trade Council hasn't moved against him.
- **Hook.** A pilgrim band, a drover family or a grange convoy can't pay, and needs to get through.
- **Where and when.** The Dry Country. Any phase, worst at Far.
- **Who cares.** The strongman, his riders, the nearest Tally and the convoy wardens, who are under orders not to act.
- **Danger.** Riders, open country and nowhere to hide.
- **Twist.** The strongman never touches the tithe trains. He's paid to keep everyone else's eyes on the Stone Road.
- **Discovery.** A loading point hidden in the Dry Country, where a tithe train slows down when it shouldn't.
- **Lasting change.** The Dry Country has a new power, for better or worse: maybe the party.

The Pilgrim Who Came Back

- **Situation.** A pilgrim has returned to the coast from Conduit City, years after she left. She says she went up.
- **Hook.** She asks the party to take her back.
- **Where and when.** Starts in the Shallows or Port City; ends at the far end of the road.
- **Who cares.** The temples, the Trade Council and the Conduit Wardens, who very much want to know how she got through.
- **Danger.** Everyone who wants her quiet.
- **Twist.** She did go up. She doesn't remember coming down.
- **Discovery.** A route through the Conduit that isn't on any warrant. (Chapter Fourteen.)
- **Lasting change.** The party has a way in, and someone who's already used it.

SECRETS OF THE ROAD

GM SECRETS OF THE ROAD

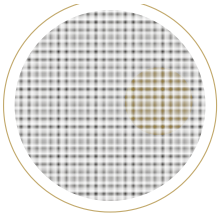
Use, change or ignore these.

- **Some of the gap is meant to be there.** A share of the tithe has always gone missing between the coast and the Conduit, by design, to pay the people who keep the road running. Nobody wrote that down. The rot started when somebody decided the share should be bigger.
- **The Long Path knows its loads.** Old Aevists say the Long Path itself can feel what each car carries. If anyone ever learned to read it, every Tally's book could be checked against the road.
- **The road goes on.** Past Conduit City, the Stone Road keeps going into country nobody on the coast has charted. Tithe trains have been seen coming *from* that direction.
- **The first sight isn't always the same.** Some travellers swear the line of the Conduit has stood in a slightly different place each time they've seen it.

SAYINGS OF THE ROAD INLAND

- *Light by the time it gets there.* Something that loses a bit at every step, like a story, a debt or a tithe.
- *Racing the cars.* A contest nobody wins. Also, a pointless argument with officials.
- *A Tally's honesty.* Honest, as far as anyone's checked.
- *Gone inland.* Disappeared, promoted or both.
- *Walk till you see it.* Keep going; it'll be worth it. Said to children, pilgrims and junior clerks.





CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE CONDUIT

For most of the Cycle, there's nothing to see. Just the Fortress, sitting in the heart of the continent behind its curving walls, silent and pale, with a city crowded round it like moths round a lamp.

Then Veyr comes near. Night by night she swells until she fills the sky. And at the very height of Near, when the two worlds are as close as they ever come, something leaps between them: a thread of light, like a spark jumping a gap, from the heart of the Fortress straight up into the sky until it touches Veyr.

That is the Conduit. It's the only road from Tareth to Veyr, and it's only there for a few nights a Cycle.

Every grain of the tithe ends up here. Every rumour about the Vael ends up here too. And sooner or later, if your campaign runs long enough, so will the party.

WHAT YOU SEE

At Far, there is no Conduit. The Fortress is quiet. Its stone is cool to the touch, and pilgrims at its gates pray to an empty sky.

As Near builds, the Fortress wakes. A faint light gathers behind its walls, brighter each night, steady as breathing. The air hums. Hair stands on end. Lamps in Conduit City burn a little brighter without anyone trimming them.

At the height of Near, the spark jumps. A filament of plasmic light rises from the Fortress's centre and joins the two worlds, a thread through the sky, wavering and loose, never quite still (Chapter One). It's thin from a distance and blinding up close. It doesn't light the city so much as make every shadow point away from it. Pilgrims gather in their thousands to watch. Nobody in the city sleeps much.

When Near begins to fade, the thread thins, flickers and is gone, sometimes all at once, sometimes over a long, anxious night. Whatever hasn't crossed by then waits for the next Cycle.

The Breath. Conduit City folk call the gathering light at Near *the Breath*: the Fortress breathing in before the spark. Most of them believe the Conduit carries the tithe up. Some believe it brings something else down. Children are told that if you hold your own breath as long as the Conduit holds its light, you'll live forever. Nobody ever manages it.

GM HOW IT WORKS

How the Conduit actually works is deliberately not established. What the people see is all that's fixed: at the height of Near a thread of light joins the worlds, its base inside the Fortress, and things and people can travel it while it holds. Whether travellers ride it, walk it, are carried up it or simply step in and arrive is yours to decide when your campaign gets there. Don't decide sooner than you need to.

THE FORTRESS

The Conduit doesn't touch the city. It rises out of **the Fortress**.

The Fortress is very old and perfectly pristine, and every stone of it is Vael work. Nothing Tarethian has been added, and nothing Tarethian could be. Its walls curve inward in a slow, tightening spiral, ribbed and chambered like the inside of a nautilus shell, so that every gate opens onto a narrower ring than the last. At its centre, at the heart of the spiral, is the base of the Conduit: the place where the spark comes down to Tareth.

Conduit City is everything outside those walls. The Fortress is everything inside them. The difference is obvious from the first step: the city is Tarethian, orderly and busy; the Fortress is silent, seamless and clean, as if it were finished this morning.

GM INSIDE THE FORTRESS

Who lives in the Fortress, what its inner rings hold and how many of them the Wardens have ever walked are not established. The Wardens hold its gates and its outer rings. Beyond that, decide when the party gets there. Whatever the base at the centre looks like, it should feel like the one place on Tareth built for something that isn't here most of the time. The Conduit must come down somewhere on Veyr too; whether that end has a Fortress of its own is yours to decide (Chapter Sixteen). "Conduit City" and "the Fortress" are placeholder names; the final names are still open.

THE FOOT

The great plaza before the Fortress's outer gate is called **the Foot**. It's as close to the Conduit as ordinary people can come.

It's paved, vast and worn smooth by pilgrims' feet. Shrines crowd its edges, and so do relic-sellers, fortune-tellers, beggars, pickpockets and the city guard. On its far side, the Fortress wall rises straight out of the paving with no visible join. At the height of Near, the thread of the Conduit climbs out from behind it, filling the sky. Pilgrims press their hands to the old stone of the wall, leave offerings at its foot and go home changed, or at least footsore.

The offerings are cleared away every evening by the Wardens. Nobody asks where they go.

RUMOUR

Every Near, when the Breath is at its strongest, a few of the hand-prints pilgrims leave on the Fortress wall stay glowing for a moment after the hand is gone. The temples say it means the Vael have noticed you. The Wardens write down the names.

THE LAYERS

The Conduit is guarded, managed and worked by layers of Tarethians, each knowing a little less about what goes on above it. From the bottom up:

The Yards

The tithe is received in the Receiving Yards of Conduit City (Chapter Thirteen) and stored there through Far and the half-water. As Near builds, it's carried along a broad covered way, through the Fortress gates and round its rings, towards the centre, ready for the few nights the Conduit holds. This is the work of porters, clerks and fitters by the thousand. They see the crates go in. They don't see where they go after that, and they're paid well not to wonder.

The Wardens

The Conduit Wardens guard the Fortress and the Conduit's base. They're Tarethian soldiers, clerks and Aevists in one, chosen young, trained hard and sworn for life. They wear pale, close-fitting armour that people say is cut from old work. They hold the Fortress gates, the rings and the inner ways, check every warrant and record every soul who passes. They're the best guards on Tareth and they know it.

Most Wardens never go up. A few do. They come back quiet.

The Ascendant Offices

Above the Wardens are the offices that decide who and what goes up. These are the highest reaches of Tarethian bureaucracy, the place where the Trade Council's ladder finally disappears into the sky. Their officials are few, rich, cautious and very old. They issue the **ascent warrants**, the only papers on Tareth that open the Fortress's inner rings when the Conduit holds.

An ascent warrant is a sliver of old-work metal, sealed in a way no ordinary seal can imitate. Fewer than a dozen are issued in a good year. Most go to officials summoned upward. A few are sold, very quietly, for very large sums.

Above the Top

At the very top of the Tarethian ladder, a handful of the most senior officials on Tareth deal with the **Vael High Council**.

GM THE HIGH COUNCIL

Who the Vael High Council is, where they meet these officials and on what terms, are not established. What is established is the shape: the Vael don't govern Tareth day to day, but they do care about balance, and the High Council is where the Tarethian elite's reports of that balance reach them. That makes it the perfect place for the rot to hide. If the reports going up are false, the farmer sees a healthy field. Even these few officials have probably never seen a Vael face to face. They deal through the Conduit itself: through doors that open, seals that change, voices without speakers or written answers in a hand nobody can match. Pick whichever unsettles your table most.

GOING UP

There are three ways through the Conduit. Two of them are legal. All three only work while the Conduit holds.

Summoned. Every so often, an official is called upward. They receive an ascent warrant they didn't ask for, travel to Conduit City before Near and go up. Most come back, a Cycle or more later. They're never quite the same, and they never say why.

Bought. A merchant prince, a great family or a desperate official can sometimes buy an ascent warrant, through the Ascendant Offices, at a price that would empty most cities. Those who come back tend to come back very rich. Those who don't are said to have *stayed for the view*.

Unlisted. Then there are the ways nobody admits to. Smugglers' stories, pilgrims' visions and Wardens' rumours all agree that there are ways onto the Conduit that aren't on any warrant. Sealed crates, forgotten rings, a gap in the Wardens' rota on the last night of the thread: all have been named. Nearly everyone who's tried has been caught. Nearly.

The pilgrim's crate. The best-known Conduit story in the Shallows tells of a fisher who nailed herself into a tithe crate in Port City, rode it all the way inland and up the Conduit,

and came back a year later with a pearl the size of a fist and no memory of how she'd earned it. Everyone in the Shallows knows someone who knew her. Nobody has ever found her.

SNEAKING THROUGH

The campaign's corruption thread leads here. Somebody near the top of the Trade Council is skimming the harvest and hiding it from the sky, and the proof lies beyond the Conduit. Sooner or later the party may have to go and get it.

GM RUNNING THE CONDUIT AS A HEIST

Treat getting through the Conduit as the biggest job of the campaign, built over several sessions. Some guidance:

- **Earn the way in.** Every piece of the job should come from something the party has already done: an ally in the Ledgerhouse, a forged warrant from a Dim Road master, a Warden who owes them, the pilgrim who came back (Chapter Thirteen), a crate route found on the road. If they arrive without help, they shouldn't get far.
- **Layer the Fortress.** Each layer (the Yards, the Wardens, the Ascendant Offices) is its own obstacle with its own people, rules and weaknesses, and the Fortress's rings make a natural sequence of gates. Use clocks: one for the alarm, one for the Conduit itself (the few nights it holds), one for whatever the party is trying to find.
- **Time it to the Cycle.** The Conduit only exists at the height of Near. A heist that misses it has a long, nervous wait for the next Cycle, with everything they've set up slowly coming apart.
- **Keep the top thin.** What lies at the far end of the thread, and whether the proof is found there or further on, on Veyr itself, is yours to decide. The trail can end in the Ascendant Offices, at the Conduit's base or across the gap (Chapter Sixteen). Wherever it ends, the farmer is watching.
- **Make it cost.** Whatever the party proves, somebody very powerful loses everything, and the balance shifts. The world should react, in small, deniable ways first.

WHAT COMES DOWN

Officially, the Conduit sends down the balance: the towers lit, the trams humming, the Cycle steady. Unofficially, things come down too.

Sealed crates arrive at the Conduit's base under Warden guard and are stored in the Sealed Rows before travelling on to the great cities, always to the highest offices. Nobody outside those offices has ever seen a manifest.

Officials come home from Veyr with new titles, new wealth and very little to say.

Seals and warrants are renewed, changed or revoked from above, without anyone below being told why. When a seal changes, every Tally on every road has to learn the new mark within a Cycle.

Silence. Most Cycles, nothing comes down that anyone can point to. People still feel that something has.

RUMOUR

Once in a lifetime, the Breath goes the other way. Instead of rising from the Fortress, the light pours down the thread from Veyr, and all of Conduit City wakes in the night to see it. The last time was before anyone now living was born. The old clerks in the Ledgerhouse still keep a page blank for the next one.

THE CONDUIT AND THE NYMARI

The Wardens have an old standing order, older than anyone now serving: *any Nymari seen at the Foot is to be recorded, and not hindered.*

Nobody knows why. The order is followed.

GM NOT HINDERED

The Nymari's feel for Aevum, the old works' response to them and this standing order are all threads that can lead somewhere, or nowhere. Nymari origins are not established. Don't let the Conduit answer that question unless your campaign really needs it to.

TROUBLE AT THE CONDUIT

The Forged Warrant

- **Situation.** A Dim Road master claims to have a perfect forged ascent warrant, and is selling it to the highest bidder.
- **Hook.** The party needs a way up. So do two of their enemies.
- **Where and when.** Starts in the Shallows' Dim Road, ends at Conduit City. Best leading up to Near.
- **Who cares.** The Undertow, House Sarne, the Ascendant Offices and the Wardens.
- **Danger.** Rivals, double-crosses and the Wardens, who already know a forgery is on the market.
- **Twist.** The warrant isn't forged. It's real, and it belonged to an official who went up and never came back.
- **Discovery.** Whoever holds the warrant can go up as somebody who's expected.
- **Lasting change.** The party has a way through, and someone on the other side is waiting for the person it was issued to.

The Warden's Debt

- **Situation.** A young Conduit Warden has fallen into debt with very bad people in the Pilgrims' Quarter.
- **Hook.** The party can pay the debt, or help her out of it, in return for a favour.
- **Where and when.** Conduit City. Any phase.
- **Who cares.** The Warden, her creditors, her commander and, eventually, the Ascendant Offices.
- **Danger.** The creditors, and the Wardens' famous dislike of anyone who compromises one of their own.
- **Twist.** Her creditors were paid to put her in debt. Someone else wanted her compromised first.
- **Discovery.** A Warden's-eye map of the Fortress's outer rings, and which gates aren't watched on the last night of the thread.
- **Lasting change.** An inside ally, or an inside enemy, depending on how the party treats her.

The Glowing Hand

- **Situation.** As Near builds, one of the party leaves a hand-print on the Fortress wall that glows long after they step away.
- **Hook.** The Wardens write down their name.
- **Where and when.** The Foot, at Near.
- **Who cares.** The Wardens, the temples and the Ascendant Offices.
- **Danger.** Being noticed by the people who decide who goes up.
- **Twist.** The Wardens don't want to arrest them. They've been told to watch for exactly this, and they don't know why.
- **Discovery.** A summons, a warrant or a very polite tail, depending on how you want to play it.
- **Lasting change.** Somebody high up the ladder knows the party exists.

SECRETS OF THE CONDUIT

GM SECRETS OF THE CONDUIT

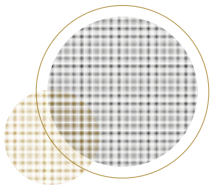
Use, change or ignore these.

- **The Wardens' records go both ways.** Every soul who goes up is recorded. So is every soul who comes down. The two lists don't match. Some people come down who never went up.
- **The Ascendant Offices are hollow.** Of the very old officials in the Ascendant Offices, some have held their posts for longer than any Tarethian should live. Nobody asks.
- **The base never fully sleeps.** At Far, when there's no thread to see, some Aevists swear the Fortress's centre still hums, faintly, as if the Conduit were reaching for somewhere else.
- **The skim goes up.** What's missing from the tithe isn't all being sold on Tareth. Some of it is going up the Conduit under false seals, to somewhere on Veyr that the Vael don't know about.

SAYINGS OF THE CONDUIT

- *Gone up.* Promoted beyond reach. Also, dead.
- *Stayed for the view.* Never came back, for reasons nobody will discuss.
- *Holding the Breath.* Waiting for something that only comes at a certain time.
- *Warrant or nothing.* No exceptions. Usually said just before an exception is made.
- *Hands on the stone.* Making a vow, in Conduit City's way.
- *Catch the spark.* Seize a chance that only comes once a Cycle.





CHAPTER FIFTEEN

FAR PLACES

Every Shallows child knows the edge of the world. It's wherever their grandmother stopped going.

For most people on the coast, that's not far: the end of the Spines, the last Tally on the road, the reef past which the fishing boats won't go. Beyond that is a world that exists mostly in stories, sailors' charts and the price of exotic things in the Driftmarket.

This chapter sketches the far places of Tareth: down the coast, across the sea, up into the high country, out to the white edges of the world and down into the dark. Each is described in the same way: what it is, who's there, why anyone goes and something to make them want to. Chapter Six describes the six great habitats in brief. This chapter takes the party there.

> **[GM] Filling in the map.** None of these places has a fixed position on Tareth's map. Put them where your campaign needs them. Each is written as a starting point for a region of its own, with room for its own Powers, seeds and breather table when your campaign goes there for real.

OTHER PORTS, OTHER CONDUITS

Round the coast, the long way.

Port City is one port on a great continent, and far from the only one. The continent is vast. Port City sits on its cold, polar edge, and the land runs on and on from there, a long way round the curve of the world, until it almost reaches the equator. There are many, many ports along its coasts, and they are not all the same. Some are walled seats of government like Port City. Some are a single quay and a tavern. Some have Shallows of their own, and some have no shelf at all.

The great trade ships tie them together. They circumnavigate the continent, stopping one Cycle at each port to trade, repair and resupply before moving on to the next. Sooner or later, a long way round, they come home again. A ship that leaves Port City this Near may not be seen in the Shallows for years, and everyone on the docks knows which ships are due back, and roughly when.

The further a ship sails from Port City, the stranger the world gets. The cold grey water of the polar coast gives way to temperate shores, then to warm seas, and at the far end of the route, the hot coasts near the equator, where Shallows folk say the sun stands straight overhead and Veyr rises in the wrong part of the sky. Sailors come home with sunburn, odd coins, odder words and cargo that sells for a fortune in the Driftmarket.

- **Who's there.** Every kind of Tarethian, under every kind of council, house and gang. Ship crews who know a dozen ports and belong to none.
- **Why go.** Trade, passage, exile, or a ship that leaves this Near and goes where the party needs to be.
- **Danger.** Whatever that port's own Powers make of strangers. The long voyage itself, too.

Other Conduits

The Conduit inland from Port City (Chapter Fourteen) isn't the only one. Sailors' tales and old charts speak of others, in great cities around the world, each with a Fortress of its own at its base and a city crowded round it. At the height of Near, people say, more than one thread of light can be seen rising from Tareth, if you know where to look and you're far enough out to sea.

Nobody in the Shallows has seen another Conduit for themselves. Everybody knows someone who has.

GM OTHER PORTS AND OTHER CONDUITS

These are for later development, after the first three books. This book only points to them. If your campaign needs one, invent it, and make it different from Port City. Some questions worth deciding when you do:

- **How does the Cycle feel there?** The Shallows' great tide is a polar coast's experience. Further round, on other shores, it may be gentler, harsher or simply different.
- **Who runs its Conduit?** A Fortress far from Port City needn't be run the way the Wardens and the Ascendant Offices run the nearest one. Its Tarethian elite may have their own skims, rivalries and secrets.
- **Do the Conduits talk to each other?** The old works are linked (see S1). What that means for keys, warrants and travel between Conduits is open.

THE STAIR COAST

Down the coast, where the land stands up out of the sea.

A few days' sail down the coast from Port City, the Shallows end and the land rises. The low, wide shelf gives way to cliffs, sheer and enormous, striped in red and gold and grey, with the sea breaking white at their feet. Further on, the cliffs break into towers of rock and whole mountains standing in the water like the legs of something vast.

At Far, the cliffs are at their most terrible. The sea draws back, and they stand hundreds of feet high above sand, rock and wreckage. Their tops are plateaus of grass and wind, cut off from the land and the sea alike.

At Near, the water climbs. It rises far up the cliffs, and for a few weeks the lowest plateaus can be reached from a boat, by a rope, a ladder or a daring climb. Then the water falls, and anyone still up there has a long wait.

Coast folk call it **the Stair Coast**, because the sea climbs it every Cycle, one step at a time.

- **Who's there.** Very few people. Clifftop hermits, egg-gatherers who climb at Far and fishers who sail the cliff-foot at Near. A few hardy villages in the clefts where the rock breaks. Seabirds in their millions.
- **What's there.** The plateaus are the prize. Some of them haven't been walked on in generations. Some have old works on them: a single tower, a circle of stones, a door in the rock face that only the Near tide reaches.
- **Why go.** Eggs, feathers and salt are worth good money in Port City. Old works on the plateaus are worth more. And every Near, someone sails out to try a plateau nobody's ever reached.
- **Danger.** Falls, storms, things that nest in the cliffs, and being stuck on a plateau when the water goes down.

The high doors of the coast. The Stair Coast has its own high doors, like the Shallows' (Chapter Eight), but on a giant's scale. Some cliff caves can only be reached at the height of Near. Some can only be reached at the depth of Far, from below. A few, the old egg-gatherers say, can only be reached in the half-water, and only from the inside.

The Sea Spires

Off the coast, tall spires of rock rise straight out of the ocean, thin and steep as needles, far higher than any tower in Port City. Their sides are pocked with caves, and every one of those caves is out of reach, except at Near, when the sea climbs high enough to float a boat to the mouth.

Nobody knows if the sea spires gave the Vael the idea for their towers. They look very like them. Most coast folk assume it's the other way round, and that the Vael built the spires too. Most coast folk are probably wrong, but nobody can prove it.

RUMOUR

There's a plateau on the Stair Coast where the grass is cut short and even, every Cycle, and nobody's ever been seen up there to cut it.

THE ARCHIPELAGOS

The island chains of the warm seas.

Weeks away across the sea, the island chains of the Archipelagos scatter across the warm water. At Far, the reefs between them rise and an island chain becomes one long, winding land. At Near, it falls apart again into twenty places, each with its own customs and grudges.

- **Who's there.** Island folk: proud, insular, superb sailors, with long memories and longer family trees. Each chain has its own powers: island councils, great sailing families, temple-keepers and the occasional pirate lord who calls himself a merchant.
- **What's there.** High green islands with waterfalls; bare rock islets white with birds; walkways and stilt villages along the reefs; old works on the heights. Spices, pearls, dyes, hardwoods and strange fruits that sell for a fortune on the coast.
- **Why go.** Trade, mostly. Then curiosity, exile, or a job that needs doing a very long way from Port City.
- **Danger.** The sea, the reefs at the half-water and island politics, which have killed more visitors than the creatures have. And the creatures are very bad.

The Far road and the Near road. Island chains have two maps: one for Far, when you can walk from island to island, and one for Near, when you can't. A traveller who trusts the

wrong map at the wrong phase drowns on a road that was there yesterday.

RUMOUR

One island in every chain is missing from the charts. On one chain, sailors say, the missing island moves.

THE HIGH COUNTRY

Beyond the road, where the Highlands climb into the mountains.

The road inland (Chapter Thirteen) runs through the Highland valleys, but the Highlands don't end at the road. Above the terraces and the granges, the land climbs into real mountains: high pastures, forests of dark pine, glaciers, waterfalls and passes that are open for only part of the Cycle.

- **Who's there.** Hill clans, herders, hermits, shrine-keepers and a few hard mountain towns. Up here the Trade Council's reach is thin, and people like it that way.
- **What's there.** The oldest Vael works in the Highlands are up here, at the heads of the rivers: great sluices, dams and cisterns that feed the whole breadbasket below. Most still work. A few don't. One or two are working when they shouldn't be.
- **Why go.** Rare herbs, furs, metals, and the source of every river that waters the Highlands. If anyone wanted to squeeze the breadbasket, they'd start up here.
- **Danger.** Cold, avalanche, mountain predators and hill clans who don't like lowlanders asking questions.

RUMOUR

At the head of the Withered Valley, above the cracked shrine (Chapter Four), there's a second shrine nobody talks about. It isn't cracked. It's open.

THE SCOUR

The endless white at the poles.

At the ends of the world, Tareth turns to ice. The Scour is wind, glare and a horizon that never gets any closer. At Near, Veyr hangs huge above it and the whole white world glows.

- **Who's there.** Ice-edge folk on the margins, fishing, hunting and trading oil, furs and bone for grain. Expeditions, now and then: scholars, merchant houses, Aevists and people with something to prove.
- **What's there.** Ice, mostly. And, deep below it, shapes too regular to be natural: lines, curves, the tip of what might be a tower.
- **Why go.** Because nobody has dug down to those shapes yet, and whoever does first will be very rich, very famous or very sorry.
- **Danger.** Cold, storms, crevasses, the white creatures that live there and the slow realisation that the ice is moving.

The humming. At deepest Far, ice-edge folk say the Scour hums through your boots, like a tower lift a long way down. At Near it goes silent. Expedition Aevists have tried to measure it. Their instruments agree with the ice-edge folk, and then stop working.

RUMOUR

An expedition that went out three Cycles ago has come back. All of them. They're perfectly well. They won't talk about what they found, and every one of them has bought a house as far from the sea as money can buy.

THE DEEP

The open sea, and everything under it.

Beyond the Deep Shallows, Tareth's sea falls away into the dark. Sailors cross it on the old trade routes and try not to think about what's under the keel.

- **Who's there.** Deep-water sailors, merchant crews, the great fishing fleets of the Deep Shallows and a few island waystations. Under the surface, nobody knows.
- **What's there.** The trade routes, the great currents, the kelp forests and coral gardens of the Deep Shallows, and the trenches: water so dark and deep it's black-blue, where leviathans are said to live.
- **Why go.** Every voyage across Tareth crosses the Deep. Some voyages are about it: hunting the great creatures, diving for the treasures of the Deep Shallows, or chasing the stories of the warm trench.
- **Danger.** Storms, calms, leviathans, and the things that rise at Near.

The warm trench. Out past the last charted reef there's a trench where the water is warm when it should be freezing. Something down there glows in time with the Cycle, brightest at Near. Sailors who've passed over it say the light makes a shape. They don't agree on what shape.

RUMOUR

At the height of Near, when Veyr is closest, a great creature from the trenches rises and swims towards the coast. It's done this for as long as anyone's been keeping records. This Cycle, it didn't turn back.

WHERE THE NYMARI COME FROM

The Nymari are rare on the coast. Most Tarethians have never seen one. Those who have tend to ask the same

question, and never get a straight answer: *where do they come from?*

The Nymari who come to the cities rarely say. When they do, the answers don't agree. Some say *the forest*. Some say *the green*. Some say *home*, and change the subject.

Tarethians have their own guesses:

- **The deep forests.** Far inland, beyond the Highlands, there are said to be forests so old and so tall that the light never reaches the floor. Traders on the edges swear they've seen four-armed figures moving through the canopy.
- **A hidden island.** Island folk say the Nymari come from the missing island in some far chain: the one that isn't on the charts.
- **Nowhere in particular.** Some scholars think the Nymari don't have a homeland at all, and live scattered in small bands in the wild places of Tareth, coming together only rarely.

GM THE NYMARI HOMELAND

Where the Nymari come from, and what their relationship to the old works and the Vael might be, are not established. Don't assert an answer. If your campaign needs a Nymari homeland, pick one of the guesses above or invent your own, keep it remote and strange, and remember that the Nymari have their own reasons for keeping quiet about it. If a Nymari PC wants to define their own people, that's a gift. Take it.

RUMOUR

There's a Nymari trader in the Driftmarket who'll sell you a map to the Nymari homeland for a very reasonable price. She's sold dozens of them. They're all different.

TROUBLE IN FAR PLACES

Far places make good destinations for a campaign that's outgrown the Shallows. A few ways to send the party there:

- **The Stair Coast.** A merchant house wants a plateau claimed before a rival gets there, and the window is the height of this Near.
- **The Archipelagos.** A chain's island council has seized a Port City ship. Someone has to go and talk them out of it, or take it back.
- **The High Country.** A river that waters a Highland valley has stopped flowing. The sluice at its head is closed, and the hill clans say they didn't close it.
- **The Scour.** The expedition that came back won't talk. Their backers want to know what they found, and are paying very well to send someone to find out.
- **The Deep.** The creature that didn't turn back is heading for Port City.
- **The Nymari.** A Nymari who has never left home arrives in the Shallows asking for the party by name.

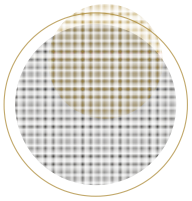
SAYINGS OF FAR PLACES

- *Past grandmother's reef.* Further than anyone sensible goes.
- *Caught on the stair.* Stuck somewhere until the Cycle turns. Also, stuck in a bad job.
- *A Far road.* A promise that'll be gone when things change.
- *Ask a Nymari where home is.* A question that won't get a straight answer.
- *The ice is listening.* Keep your voice down; something's paying attention.

PLATE TO COME

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: VEYR

Looking back from Veyr



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

VEYR

Every Tarethian has looked up at Veyr ten thousand times. Almost none of them has ever wondered, seriously, what it would be like to stand on her and look back.

This chapter is for the few who do.

It's short, and it's meant to be. Veyr is the far end of the longest road in the Binary. She's a place you can go, but this book won't tell you everything you'll find there, because your table should find it for themselves.

WHAT TARETH KNOWS

Very little, and most of it is in Chapter One.

Veyr is the smaller world, older, more advanced and wealthier. The Vael live there, and have since they left Tareth. Her surface is crossed by a fine tracery of lines that might be rivers, or mountains, or roads. On her dark side, lights move. The tithe goes up to her. Something comes down. Officials who've been there don't talk about it.

That's all. Everything else is guesswork.

WHAT TARETH SAYS

Every Tarethian has an opinion, and the opinions follow the old arguments about the Vael (Chapter Four).

The Garden. Veyr is a paradise: green, quiet, perfect, tended like the finest Highland valley, where the Vael live at their ease on Tareth's harvest. Temples tend to describe it this way. So do poor people, bitterly.

The Machine. Veyr is a world made over, or made entirely. Her rivers are roads, her mountains are towers and her lights are the windows of cities built so long ago that the cities themselves have forgotten who built them. Aevists tend to describe it this way, when they've had a drink.

The Empty House. Veyr is still running, perfectly, for masters who are long gone. The tithe goes up into silent store-rooms and nobody eats it. Clever young people love this idea. Officials who've been up never confirm it, and never quite deny it either.

The Watchtower. Veyr is where the farmer stands to look at the field. From up there, the Vael can see all of Tareth at once, every valley, every Tally and every short measure. Corrupt officials don't like this one at all.

GM PICK, MIX OR INVENT

These four pictures of Veyr are the ones Tarethians carry with them, and none of them is quite right. Let the party's expectations be part of the experience, whether they're confirmed, overturned or made strange.

GM WHAT VEYR IS REALLY LIKE

Some things are fixed (Chapter Four has the rest):

- **Veyr is completely developed.** There is no natural space left on her. Every river, plain and mountain has long since been made into something. The Machine picture is the closest; the Garden, if it exists, was built.
- **The Vael live there in numbers.** Not a handful: a good number, long-lived and in perfect balance with what Veyr can hold. Only a few, the High Council, ever deal with Tarethians. The rest live as artists, scholars, musicians and Aevists.
- **The tithe is eaten.** The Vael need heavily processed food, made from Tareth's harvest. The Empty House is wrong: someone is very much at home.
- **They know.** Every Vael knows what is going on, and the whole arrangement is by design.

How it looks, what the processing is and where it happens are yours to decide.

GETTING THERE

The only known roads to Veyr run up the Conduits. For this coast, that means the one inland from Port City (Chapter Fourteen). To use it, a traveller needs an ascent warrant, a great deal of money, a summons from above or a very good plan.

Veyr is not forbidden. Nothing in Tarethian law says no one may go. She's just very far away, very well guarded and very expensive, and those who could go mostly choose not to.

GM OTHER ROADS

The Conduits, in cities around the world, are the only roads Tarethians *know*. Whether there are others, such as old works in the Scour, the warm trench, the top of Temple Island or something no one has thought of, is yours to decide. A campaign that finds a road to Veyr that isn't a Conduit has found something the whole of Tareth would kill to know about.

ARRIVING

When the party first reaches Veyr, make it count. A few principles:

Look back. The first thing every traveller does on Veyr is look for Tareth. Let them find her: huge, blue and green and white, the Shallows a pale fringe on her coasts, the whole world they've ever known hanging in the sky. If it's Near, she fills half of it.

Thin and strange. Veyr should feel thin, the way a dream is thin. Too quiet, too clean, too still. Fewer people than there should be. Things that work without anyone working them. Light that doesn't come from anywhere in particular.

Familiar, then not. Veyr should echo Tareth: the same shell-curves and spires, the same Aevic hum. Then, slowly, it should stop making sense. Towers that face the wrong way. Doors with the spiral mark that open by themselves. A garden that's been tended this morning by someone the party never sees.

Memorable over complete. One extraordinary place on Veyr is worth more than a map of the whole world. Pick the one place the party needs to go, and make it unforgettable.

WHO'S THERE

The Vael live on Veyr. That much is certain.

GM THE VAEL ARE NOT MET (IN THIS BOOK)

In BINARY, the Vael are near-mythical. Players meeting the Vael is not part of this book; it's for later, and for now it's yours to home brew. By default, even on Veyr, the party shouldn't meet one face to face. They meet their works, their doors, their seals, their servants and their answers, but never the Vael themselves. A voice without a speaker. A tall, still figure seen from very far away, gone when they get closer. A room laid out for guests who haven't arrived. Keep the Vael at the edge of sight. The mystery is the point.

Who else might be on Veyr is for you to decide. Some possibilities:

- **Tarethians who stayed.** Officials who went up and never came back, living on Veyr in some kind of service, or comfort, or captivity.
- **Keepers.** Beings, constructs or people who tend Veyr for the Vael: servants, gardeners, guards. They may not be Tarethian. They may not be alive.
- **Nobody, here.** Long halls, lit and running, and the party alone in them, in a world full of Vael who simply aren't in this part of it.
- **Someone else.** Something from beyond the Binary, or from before it. Use with great care.

RUMOUR · THE LAST NATURAL PLACE

Somewhere on Veyr, the story goes, one patch of the world as it was still survives: real ground, real water, things growing that nobody planted. It's sealed and kept, and nobody knows by whom or for what. Aevists who've had a drink say it's the most valuable place in the Binary.

THE PROOF

If the party has come to Veyr on the campaign's corruption thread, they've come to find something: the proof that somebody at the top of the Trade Council has been skimming the harvest and hiding it from the sky.

GM WHERE THE TRAIL ENDS

Where the proof is found is up to you. It might be:

- **A store on Veyr** where skimmed goods have been quietly sent up under false seals, to someone who shouldn't have them.
- **The record itself.** Somewhere on Veyr, the Vael keep their own count. Put it beside the Trade Council's, and the lie is plain.
- **A person.** An official who went up and never came back, who knows everything, and who wants to go home.

Whatever the proof is, getting it back down the Conduit should be as hard as getting up. And once the farmer has seen it, the balance will shift. Decide what that looks like before the party gets home.

THE QUESTION THAT STAYS OPEN

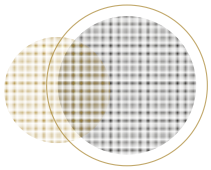
GM IS VEYR A WORLD, OR A WORK?

Veyr is a real planet. Whether the Vael found her, reshaped her or built far more of her than anyone suspects is deliberately left open, even here. A campaign that reaches Veyr can answer it, or find that the answer is stranger than the question. Don't settle it for anyone else's table.

SAYINGS OF VEYR

- *Looking back from Veyr.* Seeing something whole for the first time.
- *Up where she is.* Unreachable, out of your league.
- *A Veyr welcome.* Polite, perfect and empty.
- *Somebody's table.* Somebody else is eating what you grew.





PART FOUR

SECRETS FOR THE GM

For the Game Master's eyes.

How to run BINARY (rolls, difficulty, exploration, the Great Cycle, combat, clocks, rewards and building adventures) is in the Adventure Book, Part Two: Running the Game. Players can read that. This part is the short list of things they shouldn't: the forces that run under the whole setting, and how to bring them in.

THE FARMER'S EYE

The Vael don't appear in play. They live on Veyr, and nobody alive has seen one. What the table can see is their attention: the Farmer's Eye. (What the Vael really are is in the [GM] box *The truth of the Vael*, Chapter Four.)

The Vael care about balance. When something is badly out of balance (a corruption at the top, a harvest going wrong, someone reaching for things they shouldn't) consequences can follow that nobody on Tareth can explain. Use this rarely, and keep it ambiguous. It should always be possible that it was something else.

The legends in Chapter Four show the pattern: the Vael never punish anyone directly. They change one thing, and Tarethians do the rest to each other.

YTHRUM

GM YTHRUM

The Black Aevum, Aevum's dark side. Ythric things are wrong in a way ordinary danger isn't. Hint at it in the World Book, keep it out of the Adventure Book, and save its full arrival for late in a campaign. In the introductory S series it is only glimpsed, as an unnamed figure in S2; it arrives in full on Temple Island, in the T series. Before that, the worst things in the Shallows should be natural, political or human. Ythric creatures live in the Creature Book's Temple Island section.

THE BIG THREADS

A campaign is a string of adventures with something running underneath. Pick one or two of the deeper secrets from Parts Two and Three, and let them surface slowly through seeds that look unrelated. The biggest threads in BINARY:

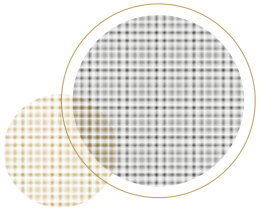
- **The rot at the top.** The Tarethian Trade Council's corruption, and the proof that lies beyond a Conduit (Chapters Four, Thirteen and Fourteen).
- **Temple Island's Gate.** What it holds in, and what the temple is (Chapter Ten).
- **Veyr.** Distant, guarded and costly, but a place you can go (Chapter Sixteen).

INTRODUCTORY CAMPAIGNS

See "Running an Introductory Campaign" in Chapter Twelve. In short: both phases, a patron and a rival, the whole region, at least one old work, the island always on the horizon, and Ythrum saved for last.

The S series (S1 A Cave Beneath the Shallows, S2, S3) is the published introductory series, released separately as a three-module adventure. It ends with the trail leading to Temple Island, where the T series (T1 to T3) takes over. The Adventure Book has its own, shorter introductory adventure at the back.





REFERENCE

APPENDICES

Quick reference for the table.

Everything in these appendices comes from the chapters. Nothing here is new, and if an appendix ever disagrees with a chapter, the chapter wins. Chapter numbers are in brackets so you can find the full version.

- **Appendix A: Glossary.** The words of the Binary, from *the After* to *Ythrum*.
- **Appendix B: The Great Cycle at a Glance.** One page for the most important clock in the game.
- **Appendix C: Roster of the Powers.** Everyone who holds a thread, on the coast and beyond.
- **Appendix D: Rumour Tables.** Every rumour in the book, gathered into two tables you can roll on.
- **Appendix E: Timeline.** What Tarethians think happened, and roughly when.

APPENDIX A: GLOSSARY

Terms marked **[GM]** are for the Game Master. Players' characters wouldn't know them, or wouldn't know what they really mean.

After, the. Everything since the Vael left Tareth. Tarethian history begins here. (4)

Aevic. Of or powered by Aevum: an Aevic seal, an Aevic device. (3)

Aevist. Someone who has studied Aevum and can work it directly, rather than just switch it on. Aevists carry Aevum in reservoirs and draw it out in shapes called *forms*. Licensed ones are trained by the College; unlicensed ones work on the Dim Road. (3)

Aevum. The power behind every tram, lantern, lift and seal on Tareth, caught from the breath of the two worlds turning together. It runs strong through earth and stone at Far, and through water at Near. The Vael found it; they didn't make it. (3)

Archipelagos, the. The island chains of the warm seas, weeks away across the Deep. At Far, a chain is one long, winding land; at Near, it falls apart into separate islands. (6, 15)

Ascendant Offices. The highest reaches of Tarethian bureaucracy, in Conduit City. They decide who and what goes up the Conduit, and they issue ascent warrants. (14)

Ascent warrant. A sliver of old-work metal, sealed in a way no ordinary seal can imitate. It's the only paper on Tareth that opens the Fortress's inner rings while the Conduit holds. Fewer than a dozen are issued in a good year. (14)

Attunement. A rare, inborn feel for Aevum. Attuned Aevists learn faster and reach further than study alone would explain. The Nymari are half-known to have it. (3, 5)

Basin, the. A highwater district: a shallow stone-rimmed bowl in the Middle Shallows that becomes a crowded, cheap harbour-town at Near. (8)

Binary, the. The two worlds, Tareth and Veyr, and everything on, around and between them. To a Tarethian it's everything there is, and it's also the whole scope of the game. Ordinary people say *the pair*, *the two* or *up there*. (1)

Blind Tower, the. A Vael tower at the very top of Port City's Crown, taller than the Counting Tower, with no door anyone has ever found. (7)

Breath, the. In Conduit City, the light that gathers inside the Fortress as Near builds, before the spark of the Conduit jumps. (14)

Citadels, the. A quarter of the Inner Shallows full of huge, old, fortress-like stone buildings, now guildhalls, bathhouses, warehouses and gambling dens. (8)

City guard. Port City's uniformed guard, backed by walkers. Its authority gets thinner with every bridge past Gatefoot. (7)

College, the. Port City's academy of Aevum, which trains, examines and licenses the region's Aevists. (7, 11)

Conduit. The road between the worlds. At the height of Near, a thread of plasmic light leaps from a Fortress up to Veyr, and it can be travelled for the few nights it holds. There's more than one, in great cities around the world. Say *a* Conduit, not *the* Conduit, unless you mean the one inland from Port City. (14, 15)

Conduit City. *Placeholder name.* The city at the foot of the Conduit inland from Port City, home of the highest Tarethians. It exists to receive the tithe and send it up. (13)

Conduit Wardens. The sworn guards of the Fortress and the Conduit's base: soldiers, clerks and Aevists in one, in pale armour said to be cut from old work. (14)

Council of Merchants. The association of the Shallows' biggest traders. It's the nearest thing the Shallows has to a government, and it runs on tolls, fees, fines and hired muscle. (11)

Counting Tower, the. The Tarethian Trade Council's regional seat: the tallest inhabited tower in Port City's Crown. (7)

Cradle. A timber-and-rope frame between the piers of a Spine, built to hold a boat high and dry through Far. The Council of Merchants rents them by the Cycle. (9)

Cradle Rats, the. Smugglers who work the Spines, hiding cargo in cradled boats. (11)

Crown, the. The hilltop ring of Port City: the great Vael towers, the oldest Tarethian ones and the richest people in the region. (7)

Customs House, the. The Port City department that counts, taxes and seals everything coming up from the Shallows or in from the sea. (7, 11)

Deep, the. The open ocean beyond the shelves, crossed by the trade routes. It holds the trenches, where leviathans are said to live. (6, 15)

Deep Shallows, the. Permanent shelves of shallow sea that never dry out: kelp forests, coral gardens and the great fishing grounds. (6)

Dim Road, the. The hidden lower level of the Shallows: decks, ladders and moorings under the built-up stretches of the High Road. It's also a way of doing business: *going down the Dim Road* means off the books. (9)

Domes, the. Rock plateaus near Port City's wall, each crowned by a great domed market hall. They never flood. The Council of Merchants meets under the biggest dome. (8)

Driftmarket. A floating market of lashed-together boats and rafts that moves around the Outer Shallows with the Cycle. (8)

Dry Country, the. The open, empty, lawless country far up the road inland, where the Tallies are few and heavily garrisoned. (13)

Falling. The five days when Veyr shrinks and the water goes out. Half of the half-water. (2)

Far. The forty-odd days when Veyr is small and distant and the sea draws back from the shelves. *The season of the land.* (2)

Farmer's Eye, the. The Vael's attention. They don't care about any one person, but they notice when the balance goes badly wrong, the way a farmer notices blight. *Keep it quiet, or the farmer will hear.* (4, Part Four)

Filament, the. The thread of plasmic light that joins Tareth and Veyr for a night or two at the very peak of Near. Temples call it *the Cord* or *the Sky Thread*. In Conduit City it rises straight out of the Fortress, because it *is* the Conduit. (1, 14)

Fingers, the. Five long bridge-settlements reaching out from the Inner Shallows, each a village with its own families and feuds. (8)

Fitter. A tradesperson who repairs, maintains and installs Aevic devices without understanding how they work. Organised into the fitters' guild. (3, 11)

Flotilla, the. A floating town of lashed-together ships that spends Far out at sea and moors in the Middle Shallows for the whole of Near. (8)

Foot, the. The great plaza before the Fortress's outer gate, as close to the Conduit as ordinary people can come. (14)

For the balance. Officials' catch-phrase, and the closest thing Tareth has to a law above the law. Nobody quite knows what it means. (4)

Fortress, the. *Placeholder name.* The pristine, wholly Vael-built spiral fortress at the heart of Conduit City. The Conduit rises from its centre. (13, 14)

Gate, the. The enormous, seamless Aevic gate at the end of the Temple Island bridge, marked with a spiral the size of a cartwheel. It has never been seen open. (10)

Gate-Foot, the. The stone platform before the Gate, where pilgrims pray. Nobody stays after dark. (10)

Gatefoot. The busy strip of the Inner Shallows just below Port City's Sea Gates. (8)

Glasswater. A highwater district: clear reef water far out on the shelf, where Port City's rich moor their pleasure-barges at Near. (8)

Governor, the. Head of Port City's regional government. (7, 11)

Grange-house. A Highland house at the mouth of a valley, where the harvest is sealed and sent on to the Long Path. (13)

Granaries, the. Port City's long stone storehouses inside the Land Gate, where the harvest is gathered and loaded for the road inland. (7)

Great Cycle, the. The roughly ninety-day rhythm of Far, Rising, Near and Falling as Veyr draws away and comes back. Tarethians count time in Cycles more than years. (2)

Half-water, the. The shared name for Rising and Falling, five days each way, when the shelf is too wet to walk and too shallow to sail. (2)

Hall of Magistrates, the. Port City's great courthouse in the Middle Ring. (7)

High Country, the. The real mountains above the Highland valleys, home of hill clans and the oldest Vael river-works. (15)

High Road, the. The whole network of raised bridges, causeways and pontoons tying the Shallows together. Its gatehouse **towers** are often toll points. (9)

High Seats, the. The Powers at the top of the region: the Council of Merchants, the Trade Council, the Governor, the Customs House and the merchant houses. (11)

Highlands, the. The green, terraced high country that grows the grain that feeds the world. (6)

Highwater districts. Neighbourhoods of the Shallows that exist only at Near: the Flotilla, the Basin and Glasswater. (8)

Homewater. The seafarers' feast, held as Near arrives. Farmers call it *the drowning*. (2)

Keepers, the. A small, grey-clad order that lives on the last piers of the Temple Island bridge and keeps the Gate. (10, 11)

Ladder, the. The Tarethian picture of society as rungs, from shelf-harvesters at the bottom to the Trade Council at the top. Above that, it disappears into cloud. *Know your rung.* (5)

Land Gate, the. Port City's inland gate, guarded by walkers. The grain convoys leave through it. (7)

Ledgerhouse, the. Conduit City's great archive, holding every count from every Tally. (13)

Long Before, the. The age when the Vael lived on Tareth. There are no records of it, only the works. (4)

Long Path, the. The old tram path beside the Stone Road, the longest anyone knows. Tithe trains glide along it to Conduit City. (13)

Longlegs. A stilt-town on the tallest stilts on the shelf: the last real settlement before the Wastelands. (8)

Main Spine, the. The oldest, broadest and busiest Spine. The Temple Island bridge runs from its end. (9)

Measure of a thumb. How Tarethians read the Cycle: Veyr held against an outstretched hand, from *thumbnail* at Far through *two fingers*, *three fingers* and *a palm* to *a full hand* at Near. (1)

Merchant houses. Port City's old trading families. **House Merrow** is old and fading; **House Sarne** is new and rising. (7, 11)

Mucklings. Small, amphibious natives of the Shallows: salvagers, tinkerers and bargainers who'd rather trade, scavenge or run than fight. They run the trading posts of the Wastelands, and they don't go into Port City. (5, 8)

Near. The forty-odd days when Veyr fills the sky and the sea runs high everywhere. *The season of the water.* (2)

New work. Tarethian Aevic work: capable, handsome, copied from older forms, and it breaks. Also slang for a plan that will need fixing. (3)

Nymari. A rare four-armed, cat-eyed people from a remote homeland nobody has mapped. They're half-known to have a feel for Aevum. (5, 15)

Old Pell. The Muckling who keeps the Tilt. She buys anything and remembers everything. (8)

Old work. Vael Aevic work: refined beyond any modern craft, shaped like shells and spirals, and it never wears out. Nobody can make new ones. Also slang for anything solid and built to last. (3)

Open Ground. The farmers' and land folk's feast, held as Far arrives. Sailors call it *the mud party*. (2)

Pillars, the. The largest pillar village in the Outer Shallows, governed by its own elders. (8, 11)

Pillar villages. The oldest settlements on the shelf, built on clusters of natural rock pillars. (8)

Port City. The walled regional capital on dry ground above the Shallows. Shallows folk call it *the hill*; it calls the Shallows *the rim*. (7)

Powers, the. The councils, houses, guilds, gangs and offices that hold the threads of a region. (11)

Receiving Yards, the. Where the Long Path ends in Conduit City and the tithe gets its final count. (13)

Rising. The five days when Veyr swells and the water comes home. Half of the half-water. Debts are *payable at Rising*. (2)

Roof Observatory, the. A cluttered dome in Port City's Middle Ring, where an old astronomer has charted the lights on Veyr for forty years. (7)

Ropewalk. A quarter of workshops and cradle-yards in the Middle Shallows. (8)

Scour, the. The ice at the poles of Tareth. Ice-edge folk live on its margins. (6, 15)

Sea Gates, the. Port City's row of gates onto the Inner Shallows, closed at dusk. (7)

Sea spires. Needle-thin rock spires off the Stair Coast, their caves reachable only at Near. (15)

Seal. A stamped Aevic mark, often on a small disc of old-work metal, that glows for the right hand and goes dark for good when broken. All of Tareth's paperwork runs on seals. Forging one is unforgivable. (3, 13)

Sealed doors. Smooth, immovable Vael doors found all over Tareth, each marked with the same small **spiral** in the same place. Nobody has ever forced one. (3)

Sealed Rows, the. Conduit City's warehouses for things that came *down* the Conduit. (13)

Shallows, the. The Port City Shallows: the sprawling water-city on the shelf below Port City, drowned and revealed twice every Cycle. In bands outward from the wall: the **Inner**, **Middle** and **Outer Shallows**, then the Wastelands. Also the name of the habitat. (6, 8)

Short measure, a. A dishonest ledger, or a cheat of any kind, from the legend of a skimming trade council. Bureaucrats say it nervously. (4)

Spine-end. The deep-water dock at the far end of a Spine. (9)

Spines, the. Long, ribbed Vael causeways on tall piers, running about ten miles from the Shallows to deep water, with tram paths along their tops. (9)

Stair Coast, the. Sheer cliffs and plateaus a few days' sail down the coast, which the sea climbs one step at a time each Cycle. (15)

Stone Road, the. The broad, straight Vael road inland, for walkers, carts and pilgrims. (13)

Table, the. An old Tarethian word for their world: a table set for family, and a table set *for* someone. (1)

Tally. A fortified counting-house on the road inland, run by a **tally-master**, where tithe trains are checked against their manifests. (13)

Tareth. The larger world, and the living one: mostly sea, generous, natural and not made by anyone. (1)

Tarethians. The people of Tareth: numerous, adaptable, quarrelsome and fond of a good meal. (5)

Tarethian Trade Council. The body that oversees everything flowing inland and up the Conduits, from every region. The greatest power on Tareth that ordinary people have heard of. (4, 11)

Temple Island. A huge, forested, uninhabited island at the end of a miles-long bridge from the main Spine, shut behind the Gate. The pale shape above its trees is the temple. (10)

Tilt, the. A Muckling trading post in the Wastelands: a beached barge that floats at Near. No fighting on the Tilt. (8)

Tithe, the. The share of the harvest sealed and sent inland to a Conduit every Cycle. It's a good deal more than a tenth. (13)

Toll-Takers, the. A gang that has seized a string of High Road towers in the Middle Shallows. (11)

Towers. The greatest old works: impossibly slender pale spires. **Lived-in towers** hold the rich and powerful; **sealed towers** have no door anyone can open; **lone towers** stand in odd, empty places. (3)

Tram. A shell-curved car that glides silently a hand's breadth above a tram **path** (the Vael line itself). Cars run in pairs or trains, uncoupled, like fish in a shoal. A **route** is the named service along a path. (3, 9)

Tram Arch, the. Where the tram paths run through Port City's wall. (7)

Undertow, the. The biggest criminal syndicate in the Shallows, with no known headquarters or leader. (11)

Vael. The builders who arranged Tareth, raised the towers, laid the Conduits and went up to Veyr. Nobody alive has seen one. **[GM]** They call themselves Veyr. (4)

Vael bread. Food for the sky: what the tithe is whispered to become on Veyr. Fakes are sold everywhere on the Dim Road. (4)

Vael High Council. [GM] The handful of Vael who deal with Tarethians at all, through the very top of the Tarethian ladder. (4, 14)

Veyr. The smaller world, older, advanced and wealthy, where the Vael live. Tarethians call her *she*. (1, 16)

Walker. A tall, slow, armoured Aevic machine that strides beside the city guard. Children love them. Smugglers don't. (3)

Wall-Walk, the. The public walkway along Port City's wall, with the best view in the region. (7)

Wastelands, the. The outermost reach of the shelf beyond Longlegs: the Shallows' dungeon country, where almost nobody but Mucklings lives. (8)

Ythrum. [GM] Black Aevum: Aevum's dark side. Things touched by it are **Ythric**. It belongs to the World Book, the Creature Book and the modules, never the Adventure Book. (3, Part Four)

APPENDIX B: THE GREAT CYCLE AT A GLANCE

About ninety days from Far to Far. Nobody counts it to the hour. (2)

	FAR	RISING	NEAR	FALLING
Lasts	About forty days	About five days	About forty days	About five days
Veyr	A thumbnail, low and pale	Two fingers, three fingers, a palm	A full hand, filling the sky	Shrinking again
The water	Drawn back, often ten miles or more	Coming home, like a bath being run	High everywhere	Going out, slowly and politely
The Shallows	A town on legs in sand and mud	Half-water: too wet to walk, too shallow to sail	A town on the water, all boats and balconies	Half-water, draining the other way
Season of	The land	The turn	The water	The turn
Feast	Open Ground, as Far arrives		Homewater, as Near arrives	

	FAR	RISING	NEAR	FALLING
Work	Shelf-harvesters, salvagers, carters, masons, sledge-drivers	Debts called in, deals settled, boats readied	Divers, deep-water fishers, ferry crews, bargemen, smugglers	Boats cradled, floors bailed, scavengers out
Aevum	Runs strong through earth and stone; *the stone hums*		Runs strong through water; *the sea listens*	
Danger	Bare-shelf hunters, sinking sand, the long walk home	Strandings, lost goods, *one more basket*	Deep visitors, bigger storms, drowned ruins	The richest, most crowded shelf, and everything that eats it

Only at Near. The highwater districts (the Flotilla, the Basin, Glasswater). The Tilt floats. Port City has a waterfront. Divers go down into drowned streets. (7, 8)

Only at the very peak of Near. The filament joins the worlds, and a Conduit can be travelled for a few nights. (1, 14)

Only at Far. Old ruins, reefs and doors come up for air. Boats sit in their cradles along the Spines. The Shallows walks. (2, 9)

Money and law. Rents, loans and contracts run by the Cycle: *payable at Rising*. The Council of Merchants prices tolls and moorings by phase, and a cheap mooring at Far can be a small fortune at Near. (2)

Getting around. (9)

JOURNEY	AT FAR	AT NEAR	IN THE HALF-WATER
Gatefoot to the Domes	A short walk	A short boat ride	An unpleasant wade
Inner Shallows to the end of a Finger	An hour's walk	Under an hour by ferry	Most of a morning
Inner Shallows to Longlegs	Half a day's walk	A few hours by boat	A day, if you're lucky
Along a Spine, end to end	Under an hour by tram	Under an hour by tram	Under an hour by tram
Spine-end to Temple Island	A long walk over the bridge	The same	The same

Across Tareth. (2, 13)

- **The Shallows** are drowned and revealed twice a Cycle.
- **The Deep Shallows** never dry out. Their hunters spread over the flooded shelf at Near and crowd together at Far.
- **The Deep** barely notices, on the surface.
- **The Archipelagos** join into long lands at Far and break apart into islands at Near.
- **The Highlands'** rivers back up at Near and run fast at Far. Farmers plant by Veyr.
- **The road inland** is dry and fast at Far, when most of the tithe moves. At Near the rivers swell and low fords close.
- **The Scour** groans at the turn, and hums at deepest Far.
- **Cities** answer with stone, locks, pumps and sealed doors.

GM THE STEADY BREATH

Nobody alive remembers the Cycle being late. A single day's delay in Rising would be the biggest news on Tareth in living memory. (2)

APPENDIX C: ROSTER OF THE POWERS

The Powers are listed where they sit. Full entries for the coast are in Chapter Eleven; the road and the Conduit are sketched in Chapters Thirteen and Fourteen. Mottos are in quotes.

Port City and the Shallows: The High Seats (11)

POWER	MOTTO	WANTS	HOLDS
Council of Merchants	"Every bridge has a toll. Every toll has a ledger. Every ledger is ours."	Trade flowing, tolls paid, Port City kept at arm's length	The Domes, most High Road towers, the cradles, the Spine-end docks, everyone's debt
Tarethian Trade Council	"For the balance."	The harvest delivered; privately, wealth and concealment	The Counting Tower, the Granaries, the convoys, the Conduit tithe, the Governor's ear
The Governor and the Hill	"Take it up the hill."	Order, revenue, respect, the Shallows taxed properly	The city guard, the walkers, the Hall of Magistrates, the gates
The Customs House	"Counted, weighed, sealed and recorded."	Every duty paid, every cargo recorded	Customs seals, permits, records, the seized-goods room
The merchant houses (House Merrow, House Sarne)	*Old money, high towers, long memories.*	Wealth, standing, the downfall of rivals	Ships, warehouses, tower floors, debts, patronage

Port City and the Shallows: The Shallows (11)

POWER	MOTTO	WANTS	HOLDS
The Pillar elders	"We were here first. We'll be here last."	To be left alone; the Outer Shallows kept theirs	The Pillars, the best guides on the shelf, Wastelands lore
The Finger families	"Blood first, Finger second, everyone else nowhere."	Pride, fishing rights, beating the Finger next door	Five Fingers, boats, a lot of tough cousins
The College	"Licensed, examined, approved."	Knowledge, control of Aevum, first claim on old work	Licences, the library, the examinations
The tram drivers	"Don't stand on the path."	Their routes and families untouched	The trams, and everything they see
The fitters' guild	"Smack it first. Then call us."	Steady work, no unlicensed rivals, nothing forbidden touched	The skills, the parts, the forbidden list
The Keepers of the Gate	"We keep the Gate."	The Gate kept, whatever that means	The bridge, the Gate-Foot, whatever they know

Port City and the Shallows: The Dim Road (11)

POWER	MOTTO	WANTS	HOLDS
The Undertow	"You never see it. You only feel the pull."	Money, territory, everyone owing it	Smuggling routes, fences, loan books, blackmail
The Cradle Rats	"High and dry, and nobody's looking."	Their cut, and the Spines kept free of rivals	Hiding places in the cradles
The Toll-Takers	"This bridge is ours now."	To hold their towers, and grab more	A string of Middle Shallows towers
Driftmarket bosses	"No questions. No refunds."	Trade flowing, questions unasked	The floating market and its rules

The Road Inland (13)

POWER	WHAT THEY ARE
The tally-masters	Keepers of the Tallies, answering up a chain of offices to the Counting Tower. Some honest, some bent, most tired.
The convoy wardens	Armed riders escorting tithe trains, loyal to whoever pays them. Mostly the Trade Council.
The granges	Old Highland families who seal the valley harvests, and resent how much leaves.
The drovers	The road's best guides and its worst gossips.
The Dry Country riders	Bandits, strongmen and honest herders, depending on the week.

POWER	WHAT THEY ARE
The pilgrims	Walkers from every coast, bound for the Conduit. A good crowd to hide in.

The Conduit (14)

POWER	WHAT THEY ARE
The Conduit Wardens	Sworn guards of the Fortress and the Conduit's base. The best guards on Tareth.
The Ascendant Offices	The highest Tarethian bureaucracy. They issue ascent warrants.
[GM] The Vael High Council	The handful of Vael who deal with Tarethians at all, through the very top of the ladder.

GM NO SCORE TO KEEP

There's no standing or allegiance track for the Powers. Remember what the party did and who it was done to, and let the Powers act on it the way real people would. (11)

APPENDIX D: RUMOUR TABLES

The Shallows and Port City already have their own rumour tables in Chapter Twelve (*Rumours of the Shallows*, d20, and *Rumours on the Hill*, d6). The two tables below gather up every other rumour and legend in the book, so you can roll for one anywhere people talk. Each one points back to the chapter that tells it in full.

As always, some are true, some are wrong and some are wrong in useful ways. You decide which, and you can decide later.

Rumours of Tareth (d20)

Heard anywhere on the coast.

D20	RUMOUR	
1	There are lights on Veyr's dark side that aren't stars. An old astronomer has charted them for forty years, and lately they've changed.	1
2	Port City's grain figures and Conduit City's don't match, and they haven't for a long time.	1
3	The Cycle wasn't always this regular. Old shelf families say it settled one year, and won't say what settled it.	2
4	The oldest shelf-family tide-tables record the irregular years, and the newest pages are slightly wrong again.	2
5	The fitters' guild keeps a list of devices its members must never touch. Nobody outside the guild has seen it.	3
6	Put your ear to a sealed tower on a still night and you'll hear something inside, slow and regular, like breathing.	3
7	A Nymari pressed all four palms to a sealed Vael door, and for a moment the door was warm.	3, 5
8	Every salvager knows a story about the one that got away: a sphere that floated, a blade that cut light.	3
9	Up on Veyr, the tithe is made into Vael bread. Someone in every tavern claims to have tasted it.	4
10	Out in the Wastelands there's a stilt village, still standing and still lit, where nobody lives.	6, 8
11	Every city has one tower whose top floors nobody admits to owning. The lift goes there anyway.	6
12	The seized-goods room in the Customs House basement gets emptier every Cycle, and nobody knows who has the key.	7
13	Old Pell has a back room at the Tilt full of old work that would make a Port City Aevist weep.	8
14	One Spine has a tram path that runs off the end of the dock and out into the open sea. It's for something that hasn't come yet.	9
15	Nobody has ever counted the same number of piers under the Temple Island bridge twice.	10
16	Put your ear to the Gate at peak Near and you'll hear the island beyond, until everything over there goes quiet at once.	10
17	The Keepers don't age. Or there are more of them than anyone's counted. Or they once opened the Gate.	10
18	A salvager walked three days into Temple Island and came back. There's a second gate in the forest, she said, and it's open.	10

D20	RUMOUR	
19	One night every Cycle, Veyr stands over the temple and the Gate and bridge hum together. The Keepers close the bridge "for repairs".	10
20	A Shallows fisher nailed herself into a tithe crate, rode it up the Conduit and came back with a pearl the size of a fist.	14

Rumours from Beyond the Coast (d12)

Heard from drovers, pilgrims, sailors and anyone back from far away.

D12	RUMOUR	
1	Every crate that leaves Conduit City's Sealed Rows is heavier going out than it was coming in.	13
2	At the Foot, a few pilgrims' hand-prints keep glowing after the hand is gone. The Wardens write down the names.	14
3	Once in a lifetime, the light pours *down* the Conduit from Veyr. The Ledgerhouse keeps a page blank for the next time.	14
4	There's a Highland valley where the harvest is perfect every Cycle. The people there are very rich and very nervous.	6
5	Above the cracked shrine of the Withered Valley there's a second shrine. It isn't cracked. It's open.	15
6	On the Stair Coast there's a plateau where the grass is mown short every Cycle, and nobody's ever seen who cuts it.	15
7	One island in every chain is missing from the charts. On one chain, the missing island moves.	6, 15
8	At deepest Far the Scour hums through your boots, like a tower lift a long way down.	6, 15
9	A Scour expedition came back, all of them, perfectly well. Every one has bought a house as far from the sea as money can buy.	15
10	Out past the last charted reef there's a warm trench, where something glows in time with the Cycle.	6, 15
11	A great creature rises from the trenches every Near and swims towards the coast. This Cycle, it didn't turn back.	15
12	Somewhere on Veyr, one patch of the world as it was still survives, sealed and kept. Some say it's the most valuable place in the Binary.	16

GM USING THE RUMOUR TABLES

Cross off what's been heard and write in your own. A rumour the party has already chased makes a fine twist when they hear it again from someone who shouldn't know it.

APPENDIX E: TIMELINE

Tarethians don't keep history the way scholars would like. There are no dates for the Long Before, and the old stories begin *when the builders had gone*. People count time in Cycles and generations, and the further back you go, the less anyone agrees. This timeline is what Tarethians believe, in the order they believe it happened.

Before memory

- **Tareth comes to life.** The mountains rise, the seas fill and living things grow out of mud and sunlight. Nobody makes it. (1)
- **The Long Before.** The Vael live on Tareth. They find Aevum and learn to use it. Over ages nobody can measure, they arrange the world: the towers, the Spines, the tram paths, the locks and sluices, the tamed rivers and terraced valleys. (4)
- **The Conduits.** The Vael build the Conduits, go up to Veyr and stay there. Nobody knows when, or why, or whether they left all at once. (4)

The After

- **When the builders had gone.** Tarethian memory begins, in a world already full of works its people didn't make. (4, 5)
- **The unsteady years.** In shelf families' great-grandparents' great-grandparents' time, the Cycle isn't regular. The Shallows aren't safe to live on. Then one year it settles. (2)

- **The Shallows are settled.** The pillar villages are the oldest settlements on the shelf. Nobody knows how old the first ones are. (8)
- **Long ago: the Withered Valley.** A blight in the Highlands ends in a single night. The shrine at the head of the valley is cracked clean through. (4)
- **Long ago: the Drowned Toll.** A merchant prince dams a river for profit and loses everything within a year. His towers are still sealed. (4)
- **Generations ago: the Short Measure.** A trade council skims the harvest, and every seal it ever stamped goes blank. Its own clerks tear it apart. (4)
- **Before anyone now living was born.** The last time the light poured *down* the Conduit from Veyr. (14)

Living memory

- **Every generation.** Someone tries to reach Temple Island another way. Most don't come back, and some who do are never right again. (10)
- **Forty years ago.** The old astronomer on the Middle Ring roof begins her record of the lights on Veyr. (1, 7)
- **Three Cycles ago.** A Scour expedition sets out. It has since come back. (15)
- **Recent Cycles.** The Customs House raises salvage duties twice in three Cycles. (11, 12)

Now

The Powers' current troubles (Chapter Eleven) and the brewing trouble in Port City (Chapter Twelve) are what's happening as play begins. Among them:

- A Granaries clerk notices the grain figures don't match, and is transferred to the Highlands. Nobody has heard from her since. (11, 12)
- House Merrow loses three Crown floors to an unknown creditor, and the lifts go up there at night. (11, 12)
- A senior Aevist is dismissed from the College for "unlicensed study". (11, 12)
- The Governor orders more walkers for the Sea Gates, through the Trade Council and not the guard. (11, 12)
- A pillar at the Pillars begins to sink, and something under it hums. (11, 12)
- The astronomer says the lights on Veyr have changed. (1, 7)

GM KEEP IT LOOSE

The timeline is belief, not record. How long the Long Before lasted, when exactly the Vael left and whether Tarethians were here to see it are all deliberately open (Chapter Four). Add your own campaign's events to the bottom as they happen.