THE YEAR OF THE BLACK REGALIA · 1498 DR

THE COBBLECREST REGIONAL GUIDE

Being the Personal Observations and Hard-Won Conclusions of Eddred, Village Elder, Historian, and Occasional Wizard

For adventurers, travelers, and anyone who wishes to understand the valley before trying to save it

COBBLECREST CHRONICLES, LLC

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A Note from the Bookbinder

This book was copied and bound at Featherfoot's Tales, on the market square in Cobblecrest.

Eddred the Elder wrote every word of it, except this page and the boxes marked **At a Glance**. Those are mine. Eddred writes the way he talks. He will tell you why a thing is so, and where it came from, and what he thinks of it. He will not always tell you how far it is or what it costs. Readers asked for both, so I added the boxes.

The boxes give plain facts: distances, dates, prices and names. Distances are in miles from the market square. Prices are what was asked in the village this winter, and they will not hold forever. When the boxes and Eddred disagree, the boxes are right about numbers and Eddred is right about everything else. He has asked me to print that sentence exactly as he dictated it.

Eryndor Featherfoot, Featherfoot's Tales, Cobblecrest

Preface

In Which the Author Introduces Himself, and Admits Why This Took So Long

You are holding a book I have meant to write for thirty years. The delay was not my fault. The valley would not hold still long enough to be written down. In my lifetime it has seen a blight, a cult, a cosmic sundering and more arguments over fence lines than I could count. Every time I sat down to begin, something new happened that I felt obliged to understand first.

There is already a guide to our village. It is a good guide. It will tell you where to buy a sword and which inn to choose if you value your sleep. It will not tell you why the place is the way it is. It will not tell you why Alturiak feels like a personal insult. It will not tell you why our harvest festival makes grown farmers weep, or why old men still lower their voices when someone mentions the ruins to the northeast. That is the work of this book.

Let me tell you who I am, so you can judge how far to trust me.

I am eighty-two years old. I was born in the long, unsteady century after the Spellplague, when magic could not be relied on and the world was still deciding what shape it would take. I was a wizard for hire in my youth. I came home to Cobblecrest, and I stayed. I have been the village historian for most of my life and its elder for more than thirty years. I survived the Silent Blight. I watched this place grow from a muddy trading post into something close to a proper town. It is still argumentative, but it is less muddy.

I know nearly every family's history in this valley. I have read most of what was ever written about it, and I wrote a good part of the rest. I have opinions about nearly all of it. You will meet many of them.

I should also warn you of my one known fault. I am happiest in the past. Ask me the way to the mill and I may tell you who built it, why it was built there, and what the builder's wife thought of the matter. My friends have learned to interrupt me. You may do the same. The book cannot be interrupted, so I have tried to keep it shorter than I would like.

Finally, you will find a few places where I decline to write something down. That is deliberate. Some things are not mine to tell. Some are dangerous to put in ink. Some are worth more to you if you find them yourself. If you want them badly enough, come and ask me in person. I may still say no, but the tea will be hot.

Eddred, Midwinter, 1498 DR

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Chapter One: The Turning Year

On the Calendar of Harptos, the Festivals of Cobblecrest, and Why Alturiak Should Be Abolished

> *"A traveler who does not know the month will arrive at the wrong time. A traveler who does not know the weather will arrive wet, lost or dead. Both are cured the same way. Ask someone who learned the hard way."*
>
> — Eddred the Elder

The Shape of the Year

Faerûn keeps the Calendar of Harptos, named for the wizard who set it down. There are twelve months of thirty days. Each month splits into three tendays, which are what we call our weeks. That makes three hundred and sixty days.

The other five days are festival days. They fall between certain months and belong to none of them. Every fourth year a sixth festival day, Shieldmeet, follows Midsummer. The last Shieldmeet was in 1496. The next will come in 1500, so this year has none.

Each year also carries a name. This one is the Year of the Black Regalia. I have more to say about that name in the next chapter.

Here are the months, with the names the common folk use for them.

Month	Common name	Season
Hammer	Deepwinter	Midwinter
Alturiak	The Claw of Winter	Late winter
Ches	The Claw of Sunsets	Early spring
Tarsakh	The Claw of Storms	Spring
Mirtul	The Melting	Late spring
Kythorn	The Time of Flowers	Early summer
Flamerule	Summertide	High summer
Eleasis	Highsun	Late summer
Eleint	The Fading	Early autumn
Marpenoth	Leaffall	Autumn
Uktar	The Rotting	Late autumn
Nightal	The Drawing Down	Early winter

You will see that three months in a row are called "the Claw" of something. Whoever named them had clearly spent a winter in this valley. I have spent eighty-two. I do not blame them.

The Five Festival Days

These are the days that belong to no month. Learn them. If you arrive in Cobblecrest on one without knowing what it is, you will be swept into a ceremony you never meant to join. I speak from experience, both mine and other people's.

Midwinter falls between Hammer and Alturiak, at the cold heart of the year. In the courts of the great cities, nobles spend it feasting and signing treaties. We are not a court. Here the common folk call it **Deadwinter Day**. Families light candles for those they lost in the past year and keep the hearth burning through the long night. The faithful of Bahamut call the same day **Bahamut's Breath**. They mark it with gifts, alms and shelter for anyone who needs it. Dragon's Peak Sanctuary holds solemn rites. This is the day the new year's name becomes widely known, and the day I am finishing this book.

Greengrass falls between Tarsakh and Mirtul and announces that spring is real. Farmers and herbalists carry their first flowers and seed to the Shrine of the Harvest Moon. Brother Cedric leads the Blessing of the Fields. The faithful of Chauntea, Silvanus and Mielikki each claim a

share of the day, and nobody argues about it very hard. There are flower crowns and dancing, and everyone plants something. It rains more often than not. The rain is welcome to join.

Midsummer falls between Flamerule and Eleasis, at the height of the summer heat. Cobblecrest lights bonfires and plays music until the small hours. The Wandering Minstrel and the Rusty Cauldron hold storytelling contests. The bards stage a play of the village's founding, with more swordplay than the founders ever saw. There is also the **Fool's Gauntlet**, an obstacle course of rising indignity. It has grown a great deal since the modest version I first paid for some thirty years ago. When my knees and my temper allow, I add fireworks. Sensible people do foolish things on Midsummer night and are generally forgiven by morning.

Highharvestide falls between Eleint and Marpenoth. The crops are in and the granaries are full. It is the largest festival in the valley. The market fills with crafters and cooks, and the day is crowned by the **Great Cobblecrest Cook-Off**. The village children lead the **Golden Sheaf Parade**, walking carts piled with wheat through the streets. At the shrine, the faithful offer grain, fruit and wine at the Blessing of the Harvest. Do not underestimate what this day means to a farming people. The year the Silent Blight ended, we held Highharvestide with full fields and healthy herds for the first time in two seasons. Half the village wept. I was among them, and I am not ashamed of it.

The Feast of the Moon falls between Uktar and Nightal. It is the night for honoring the dead. At the Gilded Lily, townsfolk and adventurers sit at the same tables for the **Tales of the Departed**. Each speaker tells the story of someone who has gone. Local wizards send lanterns and skyfire runes up into the dark. It is solemn and beautiful. I intend to be the subject of a tale there one day, though I am in no hurry to qualify.

Cobblecrest's Own Calendar

Beyond the five great days, the valley keeps traditions of its own.

The Festival of the Silver Oak, Ches 15. Druids, elves and the nature-minded gather at the Silvered Oak on the edge of the village. Its leaves catch the moonlight in a way that silver cannot explain. There are candlelit walks, stories of the fey and rites for the spirits of the Chondalwood. Some people rest beneath the tree and report prophetic dreams. I have tested this. I have twice dreamed of a tax dispute and once of a very large fish. Make of that what you will.

The Spring Cider Festival, in Fairmeadow. This runs for a tenday in spring. It is famous for spiced carrot cider, which sounds like a mistake and is not. There are contests of every kind, and the competitors take them more seriously than they admit.

The Swiftarrow Tournament, Eleasis 15. Archers gather at the Enchanted Quiver to compete for a golden bowstring with a small enchantment on it. There is a long-distance shot, a trick-shot duel and a hunt for an enchanted straw beast that runs better than straw has any right to.

The Trial of Champions, Eleint 1, every third year. Haldor Ironbeard hosts it at the Stout Hammer. Fighters, monks and spell-blades compete for the title of Cobblecrest Champion. Haldor tells the story of his own fighting days at the opening. Plan for it to take a while.

The Apple Harvest Festival, in Suncrest. This falls in the apple season, and it draws visitors from Cobblecrest and well beyond. Bring an appetite and do not tell anyone in Suncrest that you prefer Goldgrove's mead.

The Whispering Stones Vigil, Marpenoth 13. Villagers gather at the stones by Misty Pond. Legend says that on this night the stones whisper the names of those who will not live to see the next one. Sister Eliza and a few fortune-tellers offer readings. Lanterns are floated on the pond for the lost. I have attended every vigil for sixty years, and the stones have never said my name. I choose to take that as encouragement. The lanterns are lovely, whatever you believe about the stones.

The Masquerade of Midnight, Marpenoth 25. Everyone wears a mask, and masked revelers move freely between the great houses and the market square. It is great fun on the surface. It is also the night when certain conversations happen that could not happen in daylight. I deal with it properly in the last chapter.

The Frostwake Festival, Nightal 15. This marks the long nights and the slow return of the light. People trade small handmade gifts, drink hot cider and build snow golems at the Village Well. I started the snow golem contest as a joke in 1448, and I have never been able to stop it. There is also the **Midnight Hunt**, a dangerous monster hunt up into the Maerthwatch. I have never joined the hunt. I have excellent judgment.

At a Glance: The Festival Year

Date	Festival	Where
Between Hammer 30 and Alturiak 1	Midwinter (Deadwinter Day; Bahamut's Breath)	Everywhere
Ches 15	Festival of the Silver Oak	The Silvered Oak
Spring, one tenday	Spring Cider Festival	Fairmeadow
Between Tarsakh 30 and Mirtul 1	Greengrass; Blessing of the Fields	Shrine of the Harvest Moon
Between Flamerule 30 and Eleasis 1	Midsummer Revelry; Fool's Gauntlet	Market square, inns
Eleasis 15	Swiftarrow Tournament	The Enchanted Quiver
Eleint 1, every third year	Trial of Champions	The Stout Hammer
Apple season	Apple Harvest Festival	Suncrest
Between Eleint 30 and Marpenoth 1	Highharvestide; Great Cook-Off; Golden Sheaf Parade	Market square, shrine
Marpenoth 13	Whispering Stones Vigil	Misty Pond
Marpenoth 25	Masquerade of Midnight	The great houses, market square
Between Uktar 30 and Nightal 1	Feast of the Moon; Tales of the Departed	The Gilded Lily
Nightal 15	Frostwake Festival; Midnight Hunt	Village Well; the Maerthwatch

The Seasons of Cobblecrest

First, a warning I give every visitor. The weather in this valley is not quite ordinary.

Cobblecrest sits with the Maerthwatch Mountains to the northwest and the Adder Peaks to the south. The great Chondalwood lies fifty miles to the west. The winds come mostly from the west and carry rain, softened somewhat by the forest. The mountains make weather of their own, including storms that arrive faster than seems fair.

There is also the ash. Mount Thulbane is a great volcano far beyond our hills, and it has been restless for longer than I have been alive. When it stirs, a gray-brown haze spreads across our sky and dims the sun. The Adder Peaks are volcanic too, and they add their own haze in autumn. In winter the ash mixes with the snow. We call the result **ash-snow**. It is gritty and gray, and it gets into your tea no matter what you do.

When the ash comes, cover your water barrels and wear something over your face on the road. It is a nuisance, not a disaster. If the mountain ever does something worse than grumble, someone will tell you before I have time to write about it.

Here is the year as the valley lives it.

Winter: Hammer and Alturiak

Hammer is cold. That will surprise no one. The valley sits a little either side of freezing, with light snow on the fields and heavy snow on the heights. When the ash canopy is up, the daylight looks like late afternoon by mid-morning. The mountain passes close in Hammer and rarely open before Ches.

The Winding River does not freeze through in the valley, but it slows and thins. The ferries become nervous. Travel is possible and unwise. Any merchant who has not finished his business by the end of Nightal is either wintering here, at a price, or regretting it on an icy road.

Alturiak is, on eighty-two years of evidence, the worst month the gods allow. The fun of winter is long gone. Spring is still weeks away. Freezing rain falls as though it has a grudge. The river ices over in stretches, and fog creeps in from the hills on the worst mornings and refuses to leave. Tempers in the taverns run short.

I spend Alturiak by the fire with a book. I recommend it without reservation.

Spring: Ches, Tarsakh and Mirtul

Ches brings the thaw, and the thaw brings trouble before it brings anything good. Snowmelt pours down from the Maerthwatch and the river runs high. The roads turn to mud of remarkable depth. Bridges that looked sound in autumn develop opinions. Some years the road south to Crystalglen closes for two or three tendays while the foothills drain.

But the green comes back in Ches. The mornings are foggy and the fields smell of wet earth. The Festival of the Silver Oak falls on the 15th, and the spring equinox on the 19th. After that the worst of winter is truly behind you, however cold it feels.

Tarsakh earns its name. The storms that cross the valley this month are proper thunderstorms with real ambition. When Thulbane is restless they carry ash, and they leave a fine grit on every sill and well cover. The lower river can flood. Anyone planning a trip into the mountains should wait until the second tenday at least. Then, at the month's end, Greengrass arrives to remind everyone why they put up with it.

Mirtul is the best month of the year for travel and trade. It is warm without being heavy. The rain has softened to the occasional shower. The rivers run full and clear. The roads have dried enough that you will not need a bath at the end of the day. The passes are open, and the caravans that have been waiting since Ches finally move. If you have a long journey to make and any choice in the matter, make it in Mirtul. I have given this advice for sixty years and never had to take it back.

Summer: Kythorn, Flamerule and Eleasis

Kythorn is the Time of Flowers, and the name is honest. The mornings are humid and often foggy. Thunderstorms are common, and the river runs strong. On still days the Chondalwood breathes a faint magical mist out over the western fields. It does no harm. It is simply lovely if you have time to stop and look. The summer solstice falls on the 20th.

Flamerule is the hottest month. The afternoons bring the fiercest storms of the year. It is also the month when the wyverns of the Adder Peaks fly most. The volcanic rock throws up warm air, and the wyverns ride it for hours. If you travel the southern routes, watch the skyline the way you would watch for rain. Do not cross the high paths of the Adder Peaks without a guide, or at least a plan for when a wyvern takes an interest in you. Midsummer falls at the month's end, and the heat suits the bonfires.

Eleasis cools slowly. The storms come less often, though the air stays damp, and the odd dry heat wave still rolls through. The Swiftarrow Tournament falls on the 15th. By the month's end you can feel autumn thinking about arriving.

Autumn: Eleint, Marpenoth and Uktar

I am fond of autumn and have never managed to hide it. The air turns crisp. The leaves turn colors that seem, for a few weeks, too beautiful to be reasonable. The harvest comes in. Eleint in particular has a feeling of the year having made something of itself.

Eleint is the second-best month to travel. The weather is cool and steady, and the roads are firm. Highharvestide falls at its end. If you can choose when to arrive in Cobblecrest, arrive in Eleint. The village is at its most cheerful and the weather at its most cooperative.

Marpenoth begins the turn. The first frosts come at night. On still evenings the volcanic haze settles into the valley and makes the sunsets spectacular. The Whispering Stones Vigil falls on the 13th and the Masquerade on the 25th.

Uktar is chilly and wet, with frosty mornings and the first chance of early snow or ash-snow. The great caravans have gone by now, racing the passes before they close. The Feast of the Moon falls at the month's end. It suits a month that makes everyone think about time passing.

Early Winter: Nightal

Nightal is short days and long nights. The cold arrives in earnest. Rain turns to sleet and sleet to snow. The river slows, and most travel stops except by sled or by magic. The Frostwake Festival on the 15th is a welcome distraction. The longest night of the year comes five days later, on the 20th. Then the year draws itself down, and Hammer waits to begin it all again.

At a Glance: Weather by Month in the Valley

Month	Usual temperature	What to expect
Hammer	30 to 40°F	Rain, light snow, ash-snow when Thulbane stirs; passes closed
Alturiak	28 to 42°F	Frost, cold rain, river partly frozen, fog
Ches	35 to 50°F	Thaw, mud, floods; south road may close
Tarsakh	40 to 60°F	Thunderstorms, sometimes with ash; minor flooding
Mirtul	50 to 70°F	Mild and dry; the best month for travel
Kythorn	60 to 80°F	Humid, storms, morning fog, strong river
Flamerule	65 to 85°F	Hottest; fierce afternoon storms; wyverns active
Eleasis	60 to 83°F	Cooling, still humid, fewer storms
Eleint	55 to 75°F	Crisp and steady; second-best for travel
Marpenoth	45 to 65°F	First frosts; evening haze
Uktar	35 to 55°F	Chilly and wet; early snow possible
Nightal	28 to 45°F	Cold rain and snow; river travel ends

Keeping Comfortable Through All of It

Some practical advice, now that I have described a year of weather.

Keep an ash mask from late autumn to early spring, and any time Thulbane is visibly at work. Cover your water during ash. In Ches, do not trust a river crossing unless someone has checked the bridge within the past tenday. Do not try the mountain routes in Hammer or Alturiak unless you have a very good reason and a second plan. In Flamerule, glance at the southern sky for wyverns as often as you would glance at it for rain.

And in Alturiak, stay inside if you can. The month does not improve if you go out to meet it.

In the next chapter I go back further than the founding of the village. A place makes no sense until you know what stood there before it.

E.

Chapter Two: Roots of the Region

A History Worth Knowing

> *"People who do not know their history are living in someone else's version of it. They will not notice when that version is used against them."*
>
> — Eddred the Elder

Before the Town Was a Town

Cobblecrest is young. Two centuries is a respectable age for a frontier village, but the great cities of Faerûn count their years in thousands. The land under us is far older than we are, and it had people, quarrels and customs long before our founders came to claim it.

Before Cobblecrest, the valley belonged to several peoples at once. Human tribes lived along the river. Dwarven clans kept to the foothills of the Maerthwatch. Elves lived on the fringes of the Chondalwood. None of them built town squares or guild halls. Each had its own customs, its own borders and its own way of living with the land.

There were also the druids. Fifteen miles west of here, on the road toward Greenveil, stand the **Standing Stones of Aelindor**. Twelve weathered monoliths ring a larger flat stone with a mossy bowl in its top. They stand at the edge of a small, nameless wood of oak and hawthorn, a few miles across. Visitors often take that wood for the Chondalwood. It is not. The great forest lies thirty-five miles farther on.

The stones belonged to the **Verdant Circle**, an order of druids who met there for centuries. They honored Silvanus and Chauntea, and the moon carvings on the stones suggest Selûne as well. By every account they kept the peace between the river tribes and the fey of the forest. Then they faded. Whether they scattered or died out, the records do not say. The stones stayed behind. Wildflowers bloom around them even in winter, and a soft wind always seems to circle the ring. It is hallowed ground, and sensible people leave it alone.

There were goblinoids here too. I will come to them shortly, because the polite histories leave them out, and that is exactly why I will not.

The Founding and Early Years

Cobblecrest was founded roughly two centuries ago. I cannot give you the exact year. The records disagree, and I have made my peace with it. The founders were a mix of human

settlers, halfling traders and dwarven craftsfolk. They wanted a defensible trading post on the Winding River, and they chose this spot with care.

The river gave water, fish and a road for trade. The valley floor gave good soil. The Maerthwatch held iron and silver. The Adder Peaks held crystal. The western forests held timber, if you were careful about whose trees you cut. All of it could be reached from one place. Whoever first chose this ground was either very clever or very lucky. The records do not say which.

The early years were hard. The settlers were building on land that already had people on it. Goblinoid tribes had wintered in this valley for generations. Their camp stood beside the small pond northeast of the present market square. We call it the Old Millpond now. As the fields spread, the tribes were pushed out, and there was fighting. Beasts driven from their grounds made it worse.

The settlers' records say very little about that fighting. A people who keep careful accounts of every bushel of grain and every boundary dispute do not forget a war by accident. Either they thought it unimportant or they preferred not to dwell on it. Both possibilities should trouble us.

The goblinoids did not vanish. Their descendants withdrew into the high Maerthwatch, and the mountain folk say a hobgoblin clan called the **Cinder Fang** still holds to the old claim. In the strict telling, it is not a false claim. I say that knowing some readers will not like it. History is not obliged to flatter us.

The person who did most to make the young settlement safe was a druid. **Elder Rowan Meadowlight** was a human of great wisdom who made peace with the less hostile fey of the Chondalwood. The fey of that forest are old, proud and slow to forgive an insult. Meadowlight's patience bought the settlement a safety that swords alone could not. He also taught the settlers a respect for the land that has never quite left them. We owe him more than most people here know.

The other turning point was a forge. The ancestors of **Balin Ironhand** set up **Ironhand's Anvil** and began making tools, weapons and armor that the settlement could not otherwise get. A village can live without many things. It cannot live long without someone who can mend a plow and forge a spearhead. The Ironhand forge gave Cobblecrest a backbone.

The Century That Shaped Me

The Spellplague struck Faerûn in 1385 DR, thirty years before I was born. I did not see it begin. I grew up in the world it left behind.

The histories of the wider Realms cover that time better than I can. What matters here is what it meant for a small valley. For about a hundred years magic could not be trusted. A spell that worked on Tuesday might go wrong on Wednesday. Travel was harder and news was slower. The great powers of the world were busy with their own troubles, so the threats that reached places like ours had to be faced by people like us.

I learned my craft in that century. Every young wizard of my generation learned to check twice and cast once. Some of my teachers did not live to see the end of it. Groups that thrive on disorder found the times very much to their liking. The Cult of the Dragon was one of them.

Then came the **Second Sundering**, which unfolded over several years and ended around 1487. Mystra returned to her proper place, and the Weave steadied. Magic became predictable again for the first time in a century.

I was in my late sixties when its effects reached our valley. I had been elder for twenty years by then, and I thought I was hard to alarm. The Sundering alarmed me. Locally it did less damage than the Spellplague had. What alarmed me was the fact that the world had needed mending at all. The gods do not remake the world for minor reasons. A repair on that scale tells you how badly things had broken.

The magic works now. The gods are present. Those are real goods, and I do not make light of them. But a hundred years of disorder raised up groups and arrangements that did not dissolve when order returned. They simply adjusted, as durable things do.

The Silent Blight

I was fifty-two when the Silent Blight came. I had been collecting the valley's history for twenty years by then, and I believed I knew what it had survived. The Blight corrected me.

It began as a change of color in the grain fields south of the village. The green went dull, then gray, and the stalks lay down when they should have stood tall for harvest. The farmers thought it was an ordinary blight from a wet summer. They were wrong. Within a tenday it reached the next fields. Within a month it had crossed to the hamlets. Then the livestock sickened. There were no wounds and no fever. The animals simply grew listless. Their eyes went dull, and they wasted.

Nobody knew what it was. The herb-lore that should have named it found nothing. The magic that should have revealed it gave only confusion. I searched every source I had and found nothing that matched. I still do not know for certain what caused it. I have theories, and I have shared them with people who might act on them. I will not set them down here.

What I can tell you is how it ended.

Sister Eliza was a young priestess of Chauntea at the Shrine of the Harvest Moon, respected but not yet prominent. In the second month of the Blight she began rites that went far beyond the usual blessings. She held long vigils and offered more than she could afford, and the village quietly made up the difference because we did not know what else to do. Perhaps Chauntea answered her directly. Perhaps it was the faith of a frightened town gathered in one place. Perhaps it was one young woman's refusal to stop praying. I cannot tell you which. I can tell you that the Blight drew back. The gray grain recovered. The animals regained their weight and their eyes. By the next spring the valley was whole.

The Blight changed us in ways that remain. It is the reason Highharvestide is a statement of survival rather than just a feast. It is the reason the shrine stands at the center of village life. It is the reason the town built the Seedhouse beside the shrine afterward, so there would always be a dry place to keep next year's seed. And it is the reason Sister Eliza, now in her fifties, is treated with a respect that goes beyond her office. She was there, and she did not stop.

The Shadow to the Northeast: Methvale

Northeast of Cobblecrest, east of the river and near the Methwood Forest, lie the ruins of Methvale. I want you to understand one thing about them before anything else.

Methvale was a town.

It had farmers, traders, crafters and children. Its people built homes and planted fields and argued with their neighbors about fences. They celebrated their harvests and buried their dead properly. They did what frontier people do. They made something in a hard place.

The **Cult of the Dragon** decided that whatever Methvale's land and wealth could give the cult was worth more than the lives of the people who had built it. The raids were not one night of fire. They came again and again, each worse than the last. In the end the town lost its spirit and its means, and the survivors left. There may have been a chromatic dragon involved. The survivors' accounts are incomplete, because the raids were designed to leave few survivors.

I will not give you a year for Methvale's end. The raids went on for years, and no two accounts agree on which one finished it. Some survivors came here. Some went north over the mountains to Mirath's Landing. Some vanished from every record I can find.

What remains is ruin. There are foundations sinking under weeds and charred timbers that should have rotted long ago and have not. There is a silence that does not belong in a valley full of river noise and birdsong. People who have camped near Methvale speak of crying on

moonless nights. I believe them. Scavengers say there may be cult caches and old treasures under the rubble. That may be true too.

I know more about Methvale than I have written here. Some of it is not mine to tell. Some of it is not safe to put in ink. If you find yourself standing in those ruins, go by daylight, and come and see me afterward.

I will say this much plainly. The Cult of the Dragon did not appear from nowhere to destroy Methvale, and it did not disappear afterward. Its name and its chapters change. Its belief does not. Its followers hold that dragons are the rightful masters of the world and that anything may be destroyed to serve them. Ignoring that belief does not make it go away. Methvale is what happens when a community decides the cult is someone else's problem.

The Mountain Watch: Dragon's Peak Sanctuary

Sixty miles northwest of us, high in the Maerthwatch, stands **Dragon's Peak Sanctuary**. It is the fortress-monastery of the **Platinum Sentinels**, an order of dragonborn paladins and clerics who serve Bahamut, the Platinum Dragon. It is two and a half days on foot and a day and a half on horseback, more in bad weather.

The Sanctuary is built into the face of a snow-capped mountain called **Celestine's Ascent**. Legend says that good dragons of the ancient world met there to speak with Bahamut himself. Its towers are plated in silver and platinum, and on a clear day you can see them catch the sun from the high road.

The Sentinels have watched the Maerthwatch passes for generations. That watch is a large part of why Cobblecrest never became a second Methvale. Do not mistake them for a wall, however. There are fewer of them than people suppose, and their attention is spread over a great deal of mountain. And a paladin is not always the best judge of a smiling stranger. They are best at meeting danger head-on and least suited to the quiet business of a trading town, where danger may wear a merchant's coat.

The Sanctuary is led by **Thakaar**, a gold dragonborn whose title is High Sentinel. Pilgrims and outsiders still call him the High Cleric, and he answers to either. We have kept up a correspondence for many years. He does not say what he does not mean, and he does not mean what he does not say. That is rarer than it should be.

The Year of the Black Regalia

Every year in the Harptos reckoning carries a name, and the name is meant as a prophecy. The sages who choose them have been right often enough to be taken seriously and wrong often enough to be argued with. I hold them in the same respect I give any forecast. I listen, and I keep an umbrella handy.

This year is the Year of the Black Regalia.

Regalia are the things a ruler wears so that others will know them as a ruler. They include the crown, the robe, the chain and the ring. They do not make anyone wise or just. They make people recognize authority, which is a different thing. A great deal of history consists of people bowing to the regalia and never looking closely at whoever is wearing it.

Black regalia might mean mourning. A ruler in black is grieving someone. It might mean a crown that has been stained. It might mean authority worn by someone who should not have it, or authority that is dressed for a funeral it has not yet attended. I have heard all of these readings in the taverns already, and a few that are less polite.

I do not know which reading is right. I am not sure the sages know either. My own advice is simple and will serve you whatever the name turns out to mean. This year, look past the regalia to the person wearing it. Ask who gave it to them and what they had to do to get it. The answer is often more interesting than the crown.

E.

Chapter Three: A Walk Through the Village

In Which the Author Takes You Around Cobblecrest, Stopping More Often Than Strictly Necessary

> *"You can learn a town's laws from its records. You learn its people at its well."*
>
> — Eddred the Elder

An Open Town with Gated Roads

The first thing visitors notice about Cobblecrest is the thing that is missing. We have no wall. We never have. The village grew outward from the river, and its farms, workshops and cottages simply thin out into the fields and orchards. There is no line where the town stops and the country begins.

Our defense has always been the river, the guard, the militia and the watchful hamlets around us. Our founders could have built a wall. They decided that a trading post ringed in stone is less welcoming to traders. I have read their arguments, and I think they were right, though I have had cold nights when I wondered.

What we do have are gate-arches. Where each main road reaches the village, it passes under a broad freestanding arch of stone and old timber, tall enough for a loaded wagon. Each is carved with harvest knots and the sign of Cobblecrest. Two or three of the guard stand watch at each one. They check caravans, collect a small road toll, wave through familiar faces and turn back obvious trouble.

There are three.

- **The River Gate**, on the east side, is the busiest. It carries the trade road that follows the river downstream toward Silverbrook and Shadowfen. Its watchmen also collect the wharf tolls.
- **The North Gate** carries the mountain road up through Fairmeadow, Duskfield and Stonemill. Ore wagons, quarried stone and dwarven traders come through here, along with the news from the high country.
- **The Forest Gate**, on the west side, is where the road bends toward the Standing Stones, Whispering Pines and Greenveil. It is the quietest of the three and the most carefully watched. Some of the oldest stonework in the village survives in its gatehouse.

Because there is no wall, the arches guard the roads and not the town. Anyone who leaves the road can cross a field, ford a stream or walk down an orchard lane and arrive unseen. Most folk

come in by the front door. I mention the other doors so you are not surprised by who uses them.

The Market Square

Every walk in Cobblecrest begins and ends at the market square. On a market day it is loud, crowded and the best entertainment in the valley.

Henrik the Steward keeps order among the dozens of stalls. He is firm, fair and quick to step in when rules are broken. You will hear him before you see him. If you have a complaint about a merchant, take it to Henrik. If you are the merchant, hope that nobody does.

At the edge of the square, **Briar Thistlenook** keeps her produce stall, which everyone calls Briar's Bounty. Briar is a cheerful halfling with patience as long as a growing season, unless you mistreat her plants. She claims some of her grandmother's seeds are older than the village. I have not been able to prove her wrong.

Over the square rises the **Clocktower House**, the tallest building in Cobblecrest and the home of the merchants' guild. Its bell rings at dawn to open the trading day, and the lanterns around the square are lit in answer. The bell then marks every hour until dark. You will not need a timepiece here. You may come to wish you could stop hearing one.

Across the square stands the **Town Hall**, two stories of stone, with the council chamber, the public records and the notice board. The board is worth reading every day. Official notices go up there, and so do bounties.

Somewhere near the square at any hour you will find **Doran Fleetfoot**, our town crier and fastest courier. Doran knows nearly everyone by name and nearly everything by rumor. He is honest, cheerful and occasionally repeats things he should not. Treat his news the way you treat Ches weather. It is usually right and seldom complete.

The Village Well

Just off the square stands the **Village Well**, stone-lined and roofed. Everyone draws water there sooner or later, so everyone talks there. If you want to know what the village is worried about, stand by the well for an hour with an empty bucket. I learned more of Cobblecrest's history at that well than in any archive. The snow golems of Frostwake are built here every Nightal. I apologize for nothing.

Where to Sleep and Eat

Cobblecrest has three inns, and they are three different kinds of place.

The Gilded Lily is the comfortable choice. **Miranda Fairweather** keeps it clean and well run. The common room is full of quiet talk and good music, and the guests tend to be merchants and adventurers who can afford a proper bed. Miranda is a bard herself and knows more about the village's business than her pleasant manner suggests. The Tales of the Departed are told at the Lily each Feast of the Moon. Her kitchen is the best in town.

The Rusty Cauldron is the lively choice. **Tobias Grumblefoot**, a halfling brewmaster with a laugh you can hear across the street, serves hearty food and strong drink to locals and rough-edged adventurers. He brews a honey mead he claims is the best in the region. Suncrest and Goldgrove both disagree, loudly. Taste all three and keep your verdict to yourself. The Cauldron is where gossip is traded in Cobblecrest, and where you go to hire a guard or a guide.

The Wandering Minstrel is the quiet choice. **Selene**, its keeper, is a soft-spoken woman who has traveled farther than most people in this valley will ever go. Her guests are scholars, artists, messengers and others whose business wants a calm room. In the evenings there is soft music and sometimes poetry. The bard **Garrick the Wanderer**, brother to the captain of the guard, plays there often when he is in town. Do not believe every word of his songs. Do enjoy them.

For bread, go to the **Golden Roll Bakery**. **Nella Greenbriar** bakes there, and her honey-rose scones are famous for good reason. Her brother Samuel keeps the general store.

At a Glance: Lodging and Meals

Inn	Room per night	Meals per day
The Gilded Lily	5 sp shared; 8 sp private; 2 gp suite	3 sp to 8 sp; fine dining up to 2 gp
The Rusty Cauldron	7 cp common-room pallet; 1 sp shared; 5 sp small private room	3 cp to 3 sp
The Wandering Minstrel	5 sp quiet room; 8 sp room with writing desk	3 sp to 5 sp

A mug of ale costs 4 cp at any of the three. A mug of the Cauldron's honey mead costs 1 sp. A loaf at the Golden Roll costs 2 cp to 1 sp, and a week of journeybread and dried goods costs 3 gp.

The Smiths and the Makers

Follow the sound of hammers east from the square toward the river.

Ironhand's Anvil is the oldest forge in the valley, and **Balin Ironhand** is its master. Balin is a dwarf with a sharp temper and a deep loyalty. Once you have earned his trust, you are family. Until then you are a customer, and he will tell you exactly what is wrong with your sword. His apprentice **Emeric** is young, strong and determined to forge a legendary blade one day. Balin also leads the Crafters' Hall, which I describe in a later chapter.

A smaller arms shop, **the Stout Hammer**, belongs to **Haldor Ironbeard**, a retired dwarven soldier. Haldor makes plain weapons that last. He values a good edge over a pretty hilt and will tell you so, along with a story from his fighting days. Every third year the Trial of Champions is held at his shop.

The Tanned Hide is the workshop of **Kellan Wryhide**, a half-orc leatherworker with a warm smile and very skilled hands. His armor, packs and saddlebags are better than anything at the general store and cost a little more.

The Enchanted Quiver belongs to **Eleanor Swiftarrow**, a half-elf and retired ranger who makes bows and arrows. The shop smells of wood, feathers and wax. The Swiftarrow Tournament is held there every Eleasis.

Silverstream Tailors is run by **Marnie Goldweaver**, who sells fine cloth and embroidered clothing and can weave a small enchantment into a garment for a price. Marnie also leads the merchants' guild. When she smiles at you across a counter, count your coins afterward. She is fair, but she is never careless.

The Crystal Caverns is a jeweler's shop, named for the real caverns in the Adder Peaks that supply its stones. **Gemma Stonecutter**, a dwarf gemcutter, keeps it. She judges stones better than anyone I know and occasionally sets a small enchantment in her work.

Greenbriar's Goods is the general store. **Samuel Greenbriar** stocks everything from rope to rations. His haggling is legendary, and I have never once got the better of him.

The **mill** stands on the river itself. **Jonas and Bethany Miller** grind the valley's grain there, and the sound of their millstones is part of the village's music. Their harvest gatherings are well loved.

The Healers, Brewers and Sellers of Curious Things

Eldertree Apothecary is the shop of **Loriel Sunshadow**, a wood elf herbalist and druid. The shop is hung with drying herbs and lined with labeled jars. Loriel is calm, courteous and patient. People say she has ties to the fey of the Chondalwood. She does not deny it. She is also the person to ask when you want to know where the druids stand on some question of land or water. I return to that in the last chapter.

Thistlebrew's Potions and Elixirs is a very different shop. **Elendra Thistlebrew** is a young half-elf alchemist with wild hair and herb-stained fingers. Her brews are strong and occasionally surprising. Read the label. Then ask her what the label leaves out.

Ivakhar's Tonics & Teas is kept by **Ivakhar**, a cheerful merchant from far Durpar who wears bright, layered robes. His shop smells of spiced tea and something sharper underneath. He sells imported tea, curios and a few useful alchemical goods. His tea is excellent, and his conversation is worth the price of a second cup.

Featherfoot's Tales is the bookshop, and the place where this book was copied and bound. **Eryndor Featherfoot** is a high elf of great learning, and his shop is crammed with books, scrolls, maps and comfortable chairs. He sells spellbooks, inks and scrolls as well as ordinary books. I have spent more of my life in those chairs than I should admit, and he has never once asked me to buy something before I leave.

The Shrine of the Harvest Moon

On the village's edge, among fruit trees and gardens, stands the **Shrine of the Harvest Moon**. It is an open-air shrine to Chauntea, a stone altar carved with wheat and corn. The altar has never stood under a roof and never will. Chauntea is worshiped here under the open sky.

Beside the altar stands the **Seedhouse**, a low, plain building the town raised after the Silent Blight. It holds next season's seed, the shrine's salves and holy water, and two cots for anyone too ill to be carried home. Some people call it the chapel. Both names are accepted.

Sister Eliza keeps the shrine. **Brother Cedric**, a gentle and steady priest who rarely raises his voice, serves beside her and leads the Blessing of the Fields at Greengrass. If you are hurt, go to them. They ask for a donation, not a price, and they will not turn you away for lack of one. Blessings for seed and tools are expected to cost a few silver.

Aurum House

Aurum House is the village bank. Its impressive stone halls are guarded by both locks and magic, and it is the safest place in Cobblecrest to leave valuables. It lends money, exchanges currency, appraises goods and rents strong-boxes.

Aurum Valtheris runs it. He is an elf, impeccably dressed, unfailingly courteous and the most capable person in the village's trade. He also keeps the merchants' guild's accounts and advises the mayor. I have dealt with him many times over many years. I find him a little unsettling, and I have never been able to say why. He has never given me a reason. Perhaps that is the reason.

> **At a Glance: Aurum House**
>
> A small strong-box costs 5 gp per month and a large one 25 gp. Currency exchange carries a fee of 1 to 5 percent. Appraisals cost 5 to 10 percent of the item's value. Loans run at about 10 to 20 percent interest per month. Read the terms twice.

The Stables and the Fisheries

Arthur Windham keeps the stables at the River Gate, where the eastern trade road enters town. He is a retired scout who knows every trail in the valley and most of the hazards on them. Ask him about a road before you take it. He will tell you more than the map will. A riding horse costs about 75 gp. Stabling with feed costs 5 sp a day.

Down at Misty Pond, **Bart Johnson** runs the fisheries and the smokehouse. Bart is a weathered old fisherman with a twinkle in his eye and a story about every bend in the river. Some of the stories are even true. He rents rowboats and sells fresh and smoked fish. The local ferry costs about 1 sp per mile.

The Places Just Outside

Misty Pond lies just outside the village. It is a calm pool usually wrapped in mist, and people say gentle spirits of nature bless it. People fish there, think there and court there. Its water is said to clear the mind. I have drunk a good deal of it over the years, so you may judge the claim by this book.

The **Whispering Stones** rise from the shallows at the pond's edge. They are carved with runes that no one has ever read, and faint whispers seem to come from them, louder under the full

moon. I have studied those runes for sixty years. I have theories. I have no translation. If you crack them, come and tell me first.

The Silvered Oak stands in a grove at the village's edge. It is an ancient tree whose leaves glint like silver. The old legends say it shields Cobblecrest from darkness. People who rest beneath it report deep calm or prophetic dreams. Treat it with respect. The druids certainly do.

The Silverstream Rapids are a wild stretch of the Winding River upstream from the village. Young people test their nerve there on rafts, and warriors sometimes undertake trials in the white water. There are stories of caves behind the falls and old treasure in the pools. Most people who go looking come back wet. A few do not come back.

The Old Millpond lies northeast of the square. To most people it is a small pond that feeds a stream into the river. To a historian it is the place I described in the last chapter. It was the goblinoid winter camp, long before there was a Cobblecrest.

The Cemetery is kept by **Branna Stillwater**, a plain-spoken stonemason in her late fifties. She has kept a careful ledger of every burial and every odd visitor for twenty years. If something disturbs the dead, she will be the first to know and the last to be frightened. She believes the living owe the dead their peace. So do I.

E.

Chapter Four: Tongues, Faiths and Manners

On What the People of the Valley Speak, Believe and Expect of You

> *"Every village has rules it never writes down. Those are the ones that matter. The written ones only say what happens after you break the unwritten ones."*
>
> — Eddred the Elder

Where in the World Are We?

Visitors ask this more often than you might think, and the honest answer has two parts.

If you ask a mapmaker, Cobblecrest lies in the southwestern corner of the Chessentan hinterlands. If you ask the people who live here, it lies in Cobblecrest. No king or council in Chessenta governs us. The valley has always looked after itself, with the village at its center and the hamlets around it in a loose and argumentative partnership.

Our trade looks west, to the Vilhon Reach and its cities, and the trade roads carry more than goods. The speech, customs and habits of the Reach have come up the roads with the merchants and settled here. So we live in Chessenta's corner, but we sound and behave a good deal like the Reach. It confuses travelers from both places. We find that useful.

The People

Most of the valley is human. There are large, respected communities of dwarves and halflings, and a smaller number of elves and half-elves. You will also meet the odd gnome, half-orc and dragonborn, and nobody will remark on it.

The **dwarves** came with the founders and never left. They work the forges, the stone and the mines, and many keep businesses in the village. They are stubborn in the face of trouble, which is the best kind of stubborn.

The **halflings** farm, trade and keep inns. Their farms are models of good sense, and their inns are the reason travelers come back. They bring cheer and common sense to a place that sometimes runs short of both.

The **elves and half-elves** are mostly connected to the Chondalwood. They are respected for their long memories and their skill. Some villagers treat them with a little awe. A few treat them with a little suspicion. Most of the elves seem to find both reactions equally amusing.

What holds all of these people together is the frontier. Out here you depend on your neighbor, whether you like him or not. The result is a practical, hardworking and generally tolerant people. They value doing for yourself, and they value helping the next farm when it cannot.

The Tongues of the Reach

Four languages from the Reach are heard in our valley, and which one a person grew up with tells you something about where they come from.

Chondathan is the common speech of the river country and of Cobblecrest itself. Almost everyone born here speaks it.

Turmic belongs to Turmish and the northwest of the Reach. It is common enough in our market that no one remarks on it.

Sespech takes its name from the realm that speaks it, south along the Reach's coast. You will hear it from coastal traders.

Shaaran belongs to the grasslands at the far end of the Reach. It is rare here. If someone in Cobblecrest speaks Shaaran as their first tongue, people will wonder how they came so far, and they will probably ask.

The Spellmark, and Why the Reach Distrusts Wizards

I am a wizard, so I have a personal interest in this section. Read it carefully if you are one too.

The Vilhon Reach distrusts arcane magic, and it has good reason. Nearly six hundred years ago, a civil war tore through Chondath. It ended when archmages of two rival cities, Arrabar and Hlath, released a necromantic plague on each other. The plague killed people on every side. It spread far beyond anything its makers intended. The people of the Reach still call it the **Rotting War**, and the month of Uktar carries the name "the Rotting" partly in its memory. The Reach has been wary of wizards ever since. That wariness is not superstition. The wizards really did it.

Two customs grew out of that war, and both reached Cobblecrest.

The spellmark. In the villages of the southern Reach, a spellcaster is asked to draw a rune on their forehead in ink or chalk, so that others know what they are. In Cobblecrest the spellmark is asked for and not enforced. Older residents still chalk their foreheads on market day without thinking about it. Most of the young do not bother, and nobody is fined. A visiting caster who wears the mark will be thought courteous. One who does not will be noticed but not stopped. Some villagers care about the difference a great deal and some not at all. That disagreement is part of the village too.

I wear the mark on market days. It costs me a pinch of chalk, and it tells my neighbors that I remember why they ask. I think that is a small price for their trust.

The law about hostile magic. In Sespech, using magic to charm or harm another person is punished by death. Cobblecrest keeps the principle without the penalty. Here, using magic to charm or injure a person is a serious crime, and it is judged by whatever local justice can be brought to bear. Being a spellcaster is not a crime. Nothing restricts what you may study or carry. What is restricted is what you may do to a person.

This has practical consequences. If you cast a spell in a fight inside the village, you have done something the law will look at, as well as something tactical. And any stranger who charms, spies on or takes control of a villager by magic has broken a law that this village takes seriously. Keep that in mind if you ever meet someone who seems to have changed their mind a little too completely.

The Faiths of the Valley

Chauntea, the Earthmother and goddess of the harvest, holds the first place in most hearts here. That has been true since the founding and it became more true after the Silent Blight. Her open-air shrine in the village is the center of our festival year. Greenbriar Hollow keeps a shrine to her woven from living branches. Duskfield keeps a plain fieldstone one, where offerings are left at dusk.

Eldath, the goddess of peace and quiet waters, is loved along the river. Silverbrook has a small chapel to her built of river stone and driftwood. Fairmeadow has a barn that is half barn and half temple, shared between Eldath and Chauntea, with a pool fed by a little waterfall. Both goddesses seem content with the arrangement. So do the cows.

Bahamut, the Platinum Dragon, is honored by the Sentinels of Dragon's Peak and by many in the village who have seen what the Cult of the Dragon does. His faithful are the ones checking on lonely neighbors on Midwinter night.

Silvanus and **Mielikki** are honored by the druids, the woodcutters and the rangers, and share in the Greengrass rites. **Selûne** has her quiet followers too. Merchants, unsurprisingly, keep a soft spot for **Waukeen**, the goddess of trade.

People here are practical about faith. Most honor several gods for several purposes, and few ask what you worship before they ask whether you can mend a fence.

Superstitions Worth Respecting

The valley lives between an ancient forest and two mountain ranges, and its stories show it.

People tell of fey in the Chondalwood who keep their bargains to the letter and punish those who do not. They tell of spirits in the high Maerthwatch, and of the beasts of the Adder Peaks. Children are raised on these stories. Adults heed them more often than they admit.

I would not dismiss any of them too quickly. In my experience, the stories that last in a frontier valley are the ones that kept someone alive. Some of the details have drifted. The warnings usually have not.

Stories and Storytellers

Storytelling is the valley's favorite pastime. On any evening you will find old-timers and bards in the taverns telling tales of local heroes, ancient legends, warnings about the wilds and jokes at their neighbors' expense. These stories are how the valley remembers. More of this book came from tavern benches than from libraries.

If you want the valley's stories told well, find **Hollis Amberleaf**. She is a bard and tutor who teaches half the children of the village and turns every lesson into a song. She and Loriel Sunshadow often teach together. Between them they have raised a generation that knows more history than its parents. I approve.

How You Will Be Received

The people of Cobblecrest respect adventurers. You are the ones who face the dangers sensible folk avoid, and the children want to grow up to be you. That respect comes with caution, however. Adventurers bring trouble with them the way travelers bring mud, and the village has learned to expect both.

You will be welcomed more warmly if you remember a few things.

- Pay what you owe, promptly, and do not haggle with anyone who is plainly poorer than you.
- Respect the fields. A trampled crop is remembered longer than a slain monster.
- Do not cut live wood near the Silvered Oak or the Standing Stones, and never in the elves' forest without leave.
- Mind the spellmark if you cast spells, even though no one will make you.
- Never use magic on a villager without their consent. See above.

- When the shrine helps you, leave something, even if it is small.
- Learn people's names. Out here a name matters more than a title.

E.

Chapter Five: How Cobblecrest Makes Its Living

On Trade, Resources, and Where the Money Actually Comes From

> *"Most villages think their economy is what the market sells. It is really what the market depends on. That is a different list, and a more fragile one."*
>
> — Eddred the Elder

The River Does the Heavy Work

Before guilds, contracts and dwarven mining, there is the Winding River. Without it, none of the rest would exist.

The river rises in the Maerthwatch foothills, runs through our valley and goes on toward the Methmere, the great lake far off to the east. It waters the fields. It feeds us fish in years when the harvest fails. It turns the Millers' great stones. It carries goods more cheaply than any road can. Take the river away and Cobblecrest is just a nice view.

The river is also why merchants come here. A waterway joined to good roads makes a corridor, and goods move along it in both directions. Cobblecrest sits in the middle of that corridor and takes a fair share of what passes. That is the foundation of our trade. Everything else is built on top of it.

What the Land Provides

The valley produces far more than a visitor would guess from the size of the village.

The fields along the river grow grain, root crops, fruit and livestock, more than we can eat. The surplus goes to market and down the river. Several hamlets are famous for one thing in particular, and they will tell you so at length. **Fairmeadow** is known for spiced carrot cider and goat cheese. **Goldgrove** makes a spiced honey mead called Sunfire Nectar that fetches high prices well beyond the valley. **Suncrest** grows apples and makes cider and mead to rival it. **Greenbriar Hollow** keeps bees too, and its honey is fiercely guarded. **Duskfield** grows hardy wheat and nightroot, a tuber used in sleeping draughts.

The mountains give the rest. **Stonemill**, sixty miles north, quarries granite and limestone. **Crystalglen**, sixteen miles south in the foothills of the Adder Peaks, mines and cuts crystal and gems that jewelers and spellcasters both want. The Maerthwatch yields iron and silver. **Whispering Pines**, on the edge of the great forest, cuts timber under terms the druids watch

closely. I admire their care, and I have cursed it whenever a building project needed more lumber than the druids thought proper.

Fish come from **Silverbrook** on the river and from **Misty Pond** near the village. Fresh and smoked fish are less glamorous than ore and gems. They are more important to everyday life. People who have only ever bought food rather than grown it tend to forget that.

The Crafters' Mark

Raw goods become finished goods in the workshops of the village, and the **Crafters' Hall** holds those workshops to a standard.

Every member of the Hall registers a personal mark, a rune or sign that is stamped on everything they make. The marks are recorded in the Hall's archives, so a buyer can trace any piece back to its maker. A Crafters' Hall mark is now recognized across the region as a sign of good work. That reputation took generations to build and could be lost in a few careless years. The Hall knows this, which is why its inspectors are so unpleasant to bad workmanship.

The Stone-Oath of Tarsakh

The largest change in the valley's trade during my lifetime happened only three springs ago. Most residents still do not understand it. I will explain it as plainly as I can.

Heartvein Delve is a dwarven mining hold in the eastern foothills of the Maerthwatch. About five hundred souls live there, nearly all of them dwarves. They mine iron in quantities our village smiths could never match. Heartvein sorts its ore into two grades. **Red Grade** is ordinary smelting ore, and much of it is smelted into pig-iron on site. **Black Grade** is unusually pure, and it is valuable for one purpose in particular.

That purpose lies far beneath the Maerthwatch, about six days' travel west, at **Nhalvyr En'Zorai**. It is an ancient buried city from the days of Netheril. A small community of earth genasi has resettled it, about eighty of them. At its heart is an old arcane engine the genasi call the Core. With it they can fuse iron with charged crystal to make **glassteel**, a material no ordinary forge can produce. Glassteel goods do not appear in the ordinary market. They are made in small amounts, for particular purposes, under careful terms.

On the third of Tarsakh, 1495, the three communities signed a compact. It is called the **Stone-Oath of Tarsakh**. Heartvein promises steady ore and fair tolls. The three promise each other mutual defense. Black Grade ore goes first to Nhalvyr's glassteel. Cobblecrest supplies what a mining hold and an underground city cannot easily make for themselves. We send grain,

timber, lamp oil, tar, rope, draft animals and wheels. Heartvein sends back pig-iron, nails, tools and coin. Nhalvyr sends precision goods, repairs and, now and then, a special commission.

The two halves of glassteel reach Nhalvyr by different roads. The iron travels the **Veinway**, a guarded ore road down from Heartvein. That ore never passes through Cobblecrest. The crystal is cut at Crystalglen and travels north along the road called the **Shardway**. It does pass through Cobblecrest before it turns west, and our militia stamps every load as it goes. Cut either road, and the glassteel stops.

Here is what that means in practice. Cobblecrest is now part of a chain of supply that matters to the defense of the whole region. If someone disrupts our grain or timber, they disrupt more than our village. It also means, as I have said to the mayor more than once, that we are a great deal more interesting to certain people than we used to be. Whether that is good for us has yet to be shown.

At a Glance: The Stone-Oath

Partner	Where	Sends	Receives
Heartvein Delve (about 510, nearly all dwarves)	Eastern Maerthwatch foothills	Ore, pig-iron, nails, tools, coin; mutual defense	Grain, timber, lamp oil, tar, rope, draft animals, wheels
Nhalvyr En'Zorai (earth genasi, about 80)	Beneath the Maerthwatch, about 140 miles west, six days by road	Precision goods, repairs, selective commissions	Black Grade ore, cut crystal, grain, timber, oils, tools
Cobblecrest	The valley	Supplies, and the Shardway escort and stamp	Iron goods, tools, repairs, protection

Signed Tarsakh 3, 1495 DR. Heartvein can field forty armored dwarves within an hour, and its bells and beacon fires relay warnings along the Veinway to Cobblecrest.

The Other Economy

I will mention this briefly, because leaving it out would give you a false picture.

There is a trade in Cobblecrest that pays no stall fee. Stolen goods find buyers. Smuggled goods pass through on their way somewhere else. Information is bought and sold. Some shopkeepers pay a regular sum to a person whose name they pretend not to know, and in return their windows stay whole.

Most folk will tell you this is the work of a thieves' guild called **the Winding Shadow**, and most folk will tell you so in a lowered voice, as if it were a story for frightening children. It is not a story. Its sign, a shadow winding around a dagger, is scratched into certain alleys if you know where to look. I will say more about it in the chapter on the guilds.

There are also whispers of a larger and less patient organization from outside the valley, the **Blackthorn Syndicate**. I take those whispers up in the last chapter, where they belong.

What an Adventurer Is Worth

Since many of my readers earn their bread by adventuring, let me speak to your trade directly.

In plain terms, you are a specialist service. You offer things the village cannot keep on hand all year but needs badly from time to time. You can fight. You can find your way in the wild. You know magic. You can walk into places where a merchant or a soldier would be turned away. When the need comes, it comes urgently, and the pay reflects it.

The **Scarred Oak Fellowship**, our adventurers' guild, handles the formal side of this work through its quest board and its ranks. The informal side runs on reputation, word of mouth, and the plain fact that people who can solve hard problems will always find work in a valley like this one.

Your longer-term worth depends on the roads. The Stone-Oath only holds while the Veinway is open, the Shardway is safe, the forest roads are passable and the river is navigable. Each of those has weak points, and each weak point will need defending sooner or later. The people who depend on those roads have every reason to pay for that defense. That is the honest economic picture for adventuring work in this region.

Our village is more valuable than its size suggests, and it grows more so every year. Whether that is a fortune or a danger depends on what you intend to do about it.

E.

Chapter Six: The Four Guilds

On the Fellowship, the Exchange, the Hall, and the One That Does Not Admit It Exists

> *"A guild is a promise that strangers will treat each other fairly because someone is watching. Ask who is doing the watching, and you will understand the guild."*
>
> — Eddred the Elder

Cobblecrest has four guilds. Three of them have halls, signs and mottoes over the door. The fourth has a sign scratched into the alleys and no door at all. I describe each one as it actually works, rather than as its charter says it works. You will find the first more useful.

The Scarred Oak Fellowship

This is the adventurers' guild, and if you are reading this book, it is probably the guild you came for.

The Fellowship's hall stands on the main road into the market square. It is a sturdy two-story building of Adder Peak stone and Chondalwood timber. Over the door hangs a sign with a crossed sword and lantern circled by a serpent, which stands for guidance through darkness. On either side hangs an iron lantern enchanted never to go out. In thirty years I have never seen either one dark.

Inside is the guild's heart, a long, battered oak table. By tradition every member carves a name or a mark into it on joining. The guild says the table was carried up out of the depths of the Maerthwatch. I have asked how and by whom. Nobody has ever given me the same answer twice. The greatest members, the ones who reach the highest rank, inlay their names in silver or gold. The village children dream of carving their names there someday.

The Fellowship does five things.

- It brokers work. Townsfolk, merchants and the council post jobs on the quest board, and the guild screens them and matches them to members.
- It trains newcomers, pairing them with experienced members.
- It supplies its members with maps, local lore and discounted gear, including work from Balin Ironhand's forge.
- It keeps a register of members and ranks, and settles disputes between adventurers and the people who hire them.

- It gives its members a refuge, with an infirmary run by a retired cleric and safe beds upstairs.

The ranks run by metal. **Copper** is for new members, who are sent on simpler work. **Silver** is for proven adventurers who may take more dangerous contracts. **Gold** is for veterans trusted to lead others. **Platinum** is for the legends. Members rise by finishing contracts, earning recommendations from their peers and sometimes passing a test or a dangerous quest. New recruits face a small initiation trial before they are admitted. It is more symbolic than dangerous. Usually.

The guild's values are simple, and it enforces them. Cowardice and desertion bring public shame and possible expulsion. Betraying a guildmate is the worst offense of all. Members do not hurt the innocent without need and do not steal from one another. They are expected to protect the town even when no one is paying. They choose their own work and their own companions.

The Guildmaster is **Roderic Brightshield**, a paladin who earned the post when he led the defense of the market square against a wyvern attack. He leads by serving, and his members would follow him a long way. The Questmaster, **Ferren Dawnbreaker**, is a half-elf ranger who knows the Chondalwood better than anyone outside it. **Hester Vancroft** runs the armory and gear, and does not suffer excuses. **Durgan Flinthelm**, a dwarven paladin and an old comrade of Balin's, runs the training yard. He is a living legend, and he will make you wish he were a slightly less energetic one. **Miriel Silverfrond** keeps the books and leads the weekly Bonding Brew with her lyre.

The guild's motto is *"In shadowed woods and mountain's hold, our courage forges legends bold."* Before grave danger, its members recite this oath together:

> *"Through forest dark and mountain cold,*
> *With shield and steel, our bond we hold.*
> *For honor's sake, we stand as one,*
> *Until the setting of the sun."*

I will be honest about the Fellowship's reputation too. Most folk see it as their shield against the wild. They also see it as noisy and sometimes reckless, and they are not wrong. Carouse if you must. Do it where Henrik cannot hear you.

The Cobblecrest Exchange

This is the merchants' guild. It meets in the **Clocktower House** on the market square, the tallest building in town. Its flags show a balanced scale against a stylized river. Inside are an auction hall, a council chamber, the market records, a lounge for members and a treasury guarded by locks and quieter things.

The Exchange regulates the market. It licenses stalls and caravans, negotiates safe passage for caravans, holds auctions of valuable or bulk goods every other week, speaks for the merchants before the town council and lends money to members. It also pays for festivals, charity and road and bridge repairs. Its motto is *"Through trade, prosperity. Through unity, strength."* It means both halves, in that order.

The Exchange is governed by a **Council of Elders**, five senior merchants elected every four years by the whole membership. The Guildmaster chairs the council but cannot overrule a majority. The current Guildmaster is **Marnie Goldweaver** of Silverstream Tailors, a sharp negotiator with a reputation for fairness. Among the elders are **Gregor Daleson**, a spice merchant whose caravan brings both goods and gossip, and **Tobias Grumblefoot** of the Rusty Cauldron. Henrik the Steward serves as Market Warden. Aurum Valtheris keeps the treasury. Eryndor Featherfoot keeps the ledger. Miranda Fairweather of the Gilded Lily speaks for the guild to the wider town.

Members rise from Associate to Full Member, then to Senior Member and, if elected, to the Council. The guild forbids false weights, price gouging and sabotage, and it fines, suspends or expels those who break the rules.

Most villagers think of the Exchange as the backbone of the town's prosperity, and broadly they are right. Some find it aloof. They grumble about deals made behind closed doors, especially when prices climb after a poor harvest. Both views contain truth. The Exchange is very good at knowing what is good for trade. Trade is good for Cobblecrest. But trade is not the only thing that is good for Cobblecrest, and now and then the difference matters.

The Crafters' Hall

This is the guild of the makers. It is the guild I like best, because it makes things rather than moving them about.

The Hall stands near the eastern edge of the market square, close to the river and the forges. Its sign is a hammer crossed with a quill. Inside is a great workshop with open forges, benches, looms and potter's wheels, and a common room warmed by a great hearth.

The Hall inspects goods before they go to market. It trains apprentices. It shares out ore, timber and dyes so that every trade gets a fair portion. It takes in large commissions and divides the work. It speaks for its members in disputes over pay and contracts. Its motto is *"From raw to refined, we shape the town's future."*

Each trade elects a master to sit on the **Council of Masters**. The council chooses a **Guildmaster Artisan** from among themselves every five years. That office is now held by **Balin Ironhand**. Among the other masters are **Callen Wreave** the weaver, **Rowan Stonewright** the builder and **Gemma Stonecutter** the jeweler. **Greta Ironfist**, a dwarven ore trader, manages the Hall's materials. **Eleanor Swiftarrow** oversees the apprentices. **Thalia Softwhisper** keeps the record of every maker's mark.

A crafter rises from Apprentice to Journeyman, which earns the right to work under one's own mark. A Journeyman becomes a Master by producing a masterpiece that the council accepts. The Hall rings the Master's Bell at dawn and dusk. On **Marking Day**, at every new moon, the apprentices who have earned it strike their first personal mark before the council while the whole guild watches. It is one of the most moving small ceremonies I know. The Hall also holds a feast at Greengrass and another at Highharvestide.

There is an old legend in the Hall of a lost master's mark that carried the secret of a blade that could not break. Every apprentice hears it. Some spend years looking. I have looked myself, in the archives. I will say only that the mark vanished decades ago, and that the archives are less helpful about it than they ought to be.

The Winding Shadow

The fourth guild has no hall, no sign over a door and no public members. If you ask about it in polite company, people will tell you it is a story for frightening children. It is not.

The **Winding Shadow** is Cobblecrest's thieves' guild. It deals in the trade that the Exchange will not touch. It sells stolen goods and smuggled goods. It sells information. It offers protection to shopkeepers who find that cheaper than the alternative. Its sign is a shadow winding around a dagger, and you will find it scratched into a few alleys and on a few tavern doors if you look. Its motto is said to be *"In darkness, all coins gleam alike."*

It is led by someone called the Shadowmaster. Very few people know who that is. I will not pretend to be one of them, and if I were, I would not write it here.

I will not pretend the Winding Shadow is harmless. I will not call it simply villainous either. An organization that has worked in a small village for decades without bringing ruin on it is doing

something to keep the peace with its neighbors. It is said to keep a code. Its members do not harm children. They avoid violence without purpose. They avoid any chaos that would hurt the town's prosperity, because the town's prosperity is their living. Many caravan masters would rather pay one predictable guild than fight off every thief on the road.

The Shadow also has a rival, the Blackthorn Syndicate, which I mentioned in the last chapter. The difference between them is simple to state. The Winding Shadow wants a share of the town. The Syndicate, if the whispers are true, would rather own it. Neither has started that fight. Both are watching.

At a Glance: The Four Guilds

Guild	Purpose	Where	Leader
Scarred Oak Fellowship	Adventurers' guild: quest board, training, gear, ranks Copper to Platinum	On the main road into the market square	Guildmaster Roderic Brightshield
The Cobblecrest Exchange	Merchants' guild: stalls, caravans, auctions, loans	The Clocktower House, market square	Guildmaster Marnie Goldweaver, with a Council of five Elders
The Crafters' Hall	Makers' guild: quality marks, apprenticeships, materials	East edge of the market square, by the river	Guildmaster Artisan Balin Ironhand
The Winding Shadow	Thieves' guild: fencing, smuggling, information, protection	No hall	The Shadowmaster, identity unknown

E.

Chapter Seven: The Twelve Hamlets

On the Neighbors, Who Would Like You to Know They Are Not Suburbs

> *"Cobblecrest likes to think of itself as the heart of the valley. The hamlets think of it as the place they go to sell things. Both are right, and neither will thank you for saying so."*
>
> — Eddred the Elder

The land around Cobblecrest is not empty wilderness. Twelve hamlets lie within a few days' travel, in the valleys, along the river and up in the foothills. Each has its own trade, its own pride and its own opinion of the village. They come to Cobblecrest for the market, for the guard and for the council when a dispute needs settling. They go home again with their own identities firmly intact.

I have visited every one of them, most more than once. Here they are, nearest first.

Suncrest

Sixteen miles northwest, on the road to Dragon's Peak Sanctuary. About five and a half hours on foot.

Suncrest is orchard country, home to seventy to ninety humans and halflings who are known across the valley for their good cheer. They grow apples and keep bees. Their cider and mead are famous. The **Golden Apple Inn** serves both. Its sign is a carved and gilded apple that seems to glow at dusk, and its keeper, the rosy-cheeked halfling **Anabelle Pippin**, is said to have the best apple recipes in the region. Try the Sunfire Cider. Be careful with the Queen Bee Mead.

Suncrest holds an **Apple Harvest Festival** every year that draws crowds from Cobblecrest and beyond. The rivalry between Suncrest and Goldgrove over whose mead is better has outlived several of the people who started it. I have been asked to judge it three times. I have declined three times. I would like to live.

Suncrest chooses a Harvest Reeve each spring to keep the orchard boundaries and run the festival. At present it is **Rosamund Ellery**, who can tell you the price of a barrel before you have finished asking. The Golden Apple has rooms at five or eight silver a night and a yard for your horse. Suncrest is also the last place to buy food before the road climbs toward the Sanctuary, so buy it there. The cottages all have red doors. Nobody in Suncrest can tell you why, and I have asked most of them.

Crystalglen

Sixteen miles south, in the northern foothills of the Adder Peaks, at the end of the Shardway.

Crystalglen is a mountain hamlet of forty to sixty miners and crafters, mostly humans and dwarves, with a few gnomes who are fine gemcutters. They mine crystal and a little precious metal, and they cut and enchant it. Every load of crystal bound for Nhalvyr is cut and consigned here before it starts north.

The **Glimmering Forge** is built into the mountainside, and its chimney gives off a faintly sparkling smoke from the minerals worked there. The **Shimmerstone Inn** is named for its hearthstone, a huge polished geode that gives off a soft light and gentle warmth. Miners, crafters and crystal buyers meet there. The folk of Crystalglen are proud, hardworking and somewhat isolated. There is also an edge of ambition in them, because they know exactly what their crystals are worth.

Crystalglen is the gateway to the **Crystal Caverns**, which I describe in the next chapter. Hire a local guide before you go up. They know the way. You do not.

The hamlet answers to **Brannoch Brightseam**, the dwarf who is Forge Master of the Glimmering Forge. He decides who works the mines and whose stamp goes on the crystal, and he sets its price. The Shimmerstone Inn is kept by **Hilde Graymantle**, and its rooms go quickly when the crystal buyers are in. You can buy a crystal focus or a common gem for what Gemma Stonecutter charges in Cobblecrest. Guides to the Caverns are hired at a stone hut at the trailhead, for two gold a day.

Fairmeadow

Twenty miles north, on the main line of the north road.

Fairmeadow is the friendliest hamlet in the valley, and it knows it. About ninety humans, halflings and a few gnomes farm there. They grow prized spiced carrots and keep goats whose milk makes a famous cheese. They also make cider. Yes, from carrots. It is better than it sounds.

The hamlet holds an open-air market twice a week. In spring it holds the **Spring Cider Festival**, a tenday of drinking and contests that its people take very seriously while pretending not to. Its most curious building is the **Shared Barn-Temple of Eldath and Chauntea**. One end is a working barn. The other is a shrine to both goddesses, with a waterfall-fed pool that is said to have a little healing in it.

Fairmeadow welcomes strangers who respect its ways. It does not welcome anyone who mocks the carrot cider.

Fairmeadow elects a Chair of the Green each spring at the festival, by a show of hands. The current Chair is a cheerful halfling named **Merrit Applewhite**, who seems to be enjoying himself. The inn is the Goat and Barrel on the east side of the green. Its keeper, a gnome named **Bodo Tumbleford**, brews his own cider and will tell you it is better than the hamlet's. He is right, and you should not repeat that in Fairmeadow. The goat cheese ages in cool caves behind the green. Buy a wheel. It keeps.

Greenbriar Hollow

Twenty-eight miles southeast.

Greenbriar Hollow is a farming hamlet of sixty to eighty humans and halflings. They grow root crops and grain and cultivate herbs. Their honey is acclaimed, and they guard it fiercely.

The Hollow's pride is its **living shrine to Chauntea**, woven from growing branches and surrounded by flower beds and herb gardens. Prayers there are said to bless seed with unusual strength. The shrine's herbalist grows hybrid herbs found nowhere else. Sister Eliza visits from time to time, but a local elder usually tends it. The people are close-knit and traditional. They are welcoming to anyone who respects the land and Chauntea's ways, and less so to anyone who does not.

The Hollow is run by its Elders' Bench, the five oldest landholders, who meet at the shrine each tenday. The chair belongs to **Tansy Furrowfield**, a halfling grandmother who has never been heard to raise her voice. There is no inn. A traveler sleeps in the Furrowfield hay loft or in someone's spare room, and is fed better than at most inns I know. The honey sells for two silver a jar. Buy two, because you will eat the first on the road home.

Goldgrove

Twenty-eight miles northeast, on the eastern branch of the north road.

Goldgrove is the valley's beekeeping hamlet, home to fifty to seventy people, mostly humans with a strong halfling community. They grow pears, plums and cherries, and they keep bees and brew mead. Their spiced honey mead, especially the vintage called **Sunfire Nectar**, sells for high prices well beyond the valley. The recipe is a closely guarded secret. Each year the hamlet celebrates the migration of the **Sunfire Bees** to ancient flowering trees in the nearby hills.

Goldgrove folk are proud, hardworking and competitive about their brews, between families as much as against Suncrest. They are friendly to visitors. Do not ask about the spices.

Goldgrove's beekeeping families choose a Keeper of the Hives every three years. The present Keeper is a halfling named **Marigold Underbough**, who won the post by two votes and has not let anyone forget it. Each family paints its hives its own color, so the orchards look like a quilt left out to dry. There is no inn, but the mead hall rents bunks in its loft. Sunfire Nectar costs two gold a bottle there, which is the cheapest you will ever see it.

Duskfield

Forty miles north, on the main line of the north road.

Duskfield is a farming hamlet of about seventy people, mostly quiet humans. They grow a hardy strain of wheat and a tuber called **nightroot**, which is used in sleeping draughts and in some potions I would rather not discuss. Their great stone grain silos can be seen for miles. The windmill called **the Whisperblade** makes a soft sighing sound as it turns. The locals say they are used to it. I have stayed a night there, and I am not.

There is a plain fieldstone shrine to Chauntea at the edge of the fields, called the Harvester at Twilight, where grain and nightroot are left as offerings at dusk. There is also **Morwen**, a reclusive herbalist who deals mostly in nightroot and claims to speak with "earthbound spirits." The people of Duskfield are stoic, practical and quietly superstitious. They keep their distance from Morwen and her spirits. I recommend you do the same, at least until you have been introduced.

Duskfield's real authority is the Silo Warden, who measures every family's grain into the silos and decides when it is sold. The post has belonged to the Wainwright family for four generations, and **Joss Wainwright** holds it now. There is no inn. The miller lets travelers sleep on the ground floor of the Whisperblade, which is how I came to spend that night listening to it. Bring your own blanket and, if you can, a lighter sleeper's temperament than mine.

Greenveil

Fifty miles west, at the end of the forest road, where the Chondalwood begins.

Greenveil is the trading post at the edge of the great forest. Fifty to seventy humans and half-elves live there, along with a small family of elven envoys who reside there permanently. It trades with travelers on the forest road and with the elf clans of the deep Chondalwood. Herbal

goods, rare woods and elven crafts come out of the forest through Greenveil, and salt, oil, needles and thread go back in.

Trade happens at the **Emerald Pavilion**, an open market hall of polished greenwood whose roof rests on living trees. Nearby is the **Whisperwood Shrine**, a quiet grove with old mossy standing stones and soft wind chimes, sacred to both peoples. The elven liaison is **Loriniel Swiftbrook**. Greenveil depends on a careful balance between human enterprise and elven tradition. Be courteous, be neutral and keep your voice down. If you hope to go deeper into the forest, this is where you ask permission. I say more about that in the next chapter.

Two people run Greenveil, and both must agree. **Calder Wynne**, the Pavilion Master, speaks for the human households, and Loriniel Swiftbrook speaks for the elves. Calder would like a bigger market. Loriniel would like it to stay the size it is. So far the Pavilion is the size it is. The Mossgate House is the inn, small and clean. If you plan to go deeper into the forest, buy salt, needles and good thread here. They make better gifts than gold.

Whispering Pines

Fifty-six miles southwest, on the edge of the Chondalwood.

Whispering Pines is a woodcutters' hamlet of thirty to fifty people. Most are humans, with some half-elves drawn by the forest. They fell timber, hunt and forage for herbs and mushrooms.

Everything happens at **Cedar Hearth Lodge**, a large rustic lodge that serves as meeting hall, trading post and simple inn. Its great cedar hearth is never allowed to go out. The lodge master, **Maren Birchall**, is a retired ranger who knows those woods as well as anyone living and brokers deals between the woodcutters and the traders from Cobblecrest. The people here are independent, wary and respectful of the forest. They know exactly how much it gives and how much it can take back.

Because the lodge is the only hall in Whispering Pines, its keeper leads the hamlet, and they call her the Hearthkeeper. That is Maren Birchall. Cedar Hearth Lodge has bunks and a few small rooms, and the supper is almost always venison. A hunter will guide you to the forest's edge for two gold a day, and no farther. Do not ask them to cross the felling line. The druids set it, and the woodcutters respect it, mostly.

Stonemill

Sixty miles north, at the far end of the north road's main line.

Stonemill is a quarry hamlet of fifty to seventy miners and their families, humans and dwarves together. They cut granite and limestone, and much of the stone in Cobblecrest came from there.

The heart of Stonemill is the **Hardy Pick Inn**. Its walls are hung with odd geodes, mining trophies and faded maps of old tunnels. It is where crews are hired and where news comes up from the deep workings. The innkeeper, a retired dwarven miner named **Borin Stonebeard**, knows everything worth knowing about the place. Stonemill folk are rough, plainspoken and used to danger. In the evenings the Hardy Pick fills with loud boasting, louder arguments and, to the surprise of every visitor, very good singing.

The quarry crews choose a Head Foreman each spring by a show of picks, and lately it is always **Griselda Stonefist**, a dwarf. The Hardy Pick has a bunk room and a few private rooms, and the ale is cheap for a reason. No two walls in Stonemill match, because the houses are built from the stone the masons turned down. If you need to get home, the teamsters will let you ride the stone wagons south for a silver. You will be asked to push on the hills.

Shadowfen

Sixty-four miles east, off the river road.

Shadowfen is a swamp hamlet of thirty or forty hardy, reclusive people. The whole place stands on stilts. Its homes are joined by a maze of raised wooden walkways above the murky water. The locals cross them without looking down. Visitors fall in.

The people of Shadowfen gather rare swamp ingredients for alchemy, along with fen-berries and marsh roots, and they dig the mud for whatever it gives up. Their alchemist is a secretive woman named **Lyra Blackwater**. They are deeply suspicious of outsiders and share their knowledge of the swamp with no one. I spent two days there once trying to buy a single root. I came home with the root and no idea what I had paid for it.

Shadowfen follows whoever keeps the walkways mended, which at present is the Fen-Warden, **Wenna Reedmoor**. She or one of hers meets every stranger at the landing. There is no inn, only a roofed platform with hammocks. A local guide costs five silver a day, and I recommend one, because the alternative is falling in. Every third day the mudlarkers trade what they have dug from the bog on a wide platform called the Mud Market. Some of it is very old.

Silverbrook

Ninety-two miles east, down the river road. Allow four days.

Silverbrook is a fishing hamlet of forty to sixty people, mostly humans and a few dwarves who prefer rivers to mountains. They catch trout and silverfin, smoke what they catch and run small barges on the river.

Its center is the **Chapel of the Quiet Pool**, a small, peaceful building of river stone and driftwood dedicated to Eldath. The water of its spring-fed font is said to calm troubled minds and grant restful sleep. Because of the chapel, Silverbrook is accepted as neutral ground for settling small disputes. Its people are quiet, patient and reserved. They are slow to anger and prefer to talk a problem through by the pool. I have found it a very good place to think.

Silverbrook has no headman. When it must decide something, everyone gathers by the chapel pool and speaks once, and Elder Rowan speaks last. The Harkens take in travelers, since there is no inn. If you are in no hurry, the cargo barges carry passengers upriver to Cobblecrest about once a tenday, for about a silver a mile. It is slower than walking, and much more pleasant.

Briarshade

One hundred miles west.

Briarshade is the farthest of the twelve and the most private. Forty to sixty humans and half-elves live there under a reclusive elven elder. They grow rare medicinal plants and practice herbal alchemy.

At its center is the **Sacred Greenhouse**, an ancient building of cloudy enchanted glass and silver-veined wood. It holds plants that grow nowhere else in the region, and some of them glow faintly. Beside it is a **healing spring** of naturally warm water that eases minor ailments. The elder herbalist, a wise and stern elf named **Lyraeth Moonwhisper**, leads the hamlet and controls who may enter either place.

Briarshade is insular and wary of the curious. Trust there is earned slowly, by showing respect for nature and for the hamlet's traditions. Do not go there to ask about the plants. Go there to be useful, and perhaps after a while someone will tell you about them.

Lyraeth Moonwhisper's word is final in Briarshade, on who enters and who buys and who stays. Outsiders enter through a single gate in the briar hedge, leave their weapons there and stay at the Waiting House until she agrees to see them. I waited four days. The stillroom sells healer's kits and simple remedies, in small amounts, to those she approves. The greenhouse plants are not for sale. Do not offer.

At a Glance: The Twelve Hamlets

Hamlet	Distance and road	People	Known for
Suncrest	16 miles NW, Dragon's Peak road	70 to 90	Apples, cider, mead; Golden Apple Inn; Apple Harvest Festival
Crystalglen	16 miles S, the Shardway	40 to 60	Crystal mining and cutting; Shimmerstone Inn; way to the Crystal Caverns
Fairmeadow	20 miles N, north road	About 90	Spiced carrots, goat cheese, cider; Spring Cider Festival
Greenbriar Hollow	28 miles SE	60 to 80	Root crops, herbs, honey; living shrine to Chauntea
Goldgrove	28 miles NE, eastern branch of north road	50 to 70	Sunfire Nectar mead; orchards; Sunfire Bees
Duskfield	40 miles N, north road	About 70	Hardy wheat, nightroot; stone silos; the Whisperblade windmill
Greenveil	50 miles W, forest road	50 to 70	Trade with the elves; Emerald Pavilion
Whispering Pines	56 miles SW	30 to 50	Timber, hunting; Cedar Hearth Lodge
Stonemill	60 miles N, north road	50 to 70	Granite and limestone; Hardy Pick Inn
Shadowfen	64 miles E, river road	30 to 40	Swamp alchemy; stilt walkways
Silverbrook	92 miles E, river road	40 to 60	Fishing, smoked fish; Chapel of the Quiet Pool
Briarshade	100 miles W	40 to 60	Rare medicinal plants; Sacred Greenhouse and healing spring

On a road at a normal pace, a traveler covers about 24 miles a day.

E.

Chapter Eight: Landmarks and Neighbors

On the Places Worth Visiting, the Places Worth Avoiding, and How to Tell Them Apart

> *"Every map has blank places. The blank places are not empty. They are simply where the mapmaker lost his nerve."*
>
> — Eddred the Elder

The Standing Stones of Aelindor

Fifteen miles west, on the forest road. Half a day on foot.

I described the stones and the druids who raised them in the second chapter. Here is what a visitor should know.

The ring stands at the edge of a small wood of old oak and hawthorn, beside the road to Greenveil. It is easy to reach and hard to forget. The moss is greener than it should be and the flowers bloom out of season. A breeze always seems to circle the ring, carrying something close to music.

The old stories say that at the solstices and equinoxes the sun or moon lines up with certain gaps between the stones and casts shadows that point toward hidden paths. Some say the stones hold a magic waiting to be woken. Others whisper that the boundary between our world and the Feywild is thin there. I have stood in the ring at every solstice for many years. I will tell you that the shadows do fall where the stories say. I will not tell you where they point.

The site is hallowed. Do not dig, do not cut and do not carve your name on anything. The folk who farm nearby will notice, and so, I suspect, will others.

Dragon's Peak Sanctuary

Sixty miles northwest, in the Maerthwatch. Two and a half days on foot, a day and a half mounted.

The road runs northwest out of town past Suncrest and climbs into the mountains. The last stretch is hard going. There are switchback paths along sheer cliffs, rope bridges over deep chasms and long stretches of mist. The Sentinels watch the approach. Only those with honest business are meant to reach the gate.

The **Grand Gate** is made of adamantine and mithral, inscribed with Bahamut's tenets of justice and scenes of his victory over Tiamat. Two great statues of platinum dragons flank it. People say

their eyes glow when someone with evil intent comes near. The captain of the gate, a bronze dragonborn named **Varkaan**, will ask your purpose, and he prefers to hear it in Draconic. If you have no Draconic, you will not be turned away. You will wait at the arch until someone who can speak for you comes down. Bring a book.

Within the walls stands the **Platinum Spire**, the great temple, crowned with a platinum dragon that is said to glow at dawn and dusk. The **Hall of Judgment** is where the order hears those who seek justice, guidance or atonement. The **Celestial Forge** burns with holy flame and makes blessed arms for Bahamut's champions. The **Trials of the Wing** are the order's training grounds, cut into the mountainside.

Every Sentinel belongs to one of four inner orders. **The Order of the Aegis** guards pilgrims and relic caravans. **The Order of the Wing** rides griffons and sometimes metallic dragons. The Sanctuary keeps the dragon harness, but the dragons who wear it do not live there. **The Order of the Forge** makes and keeps the order's arms. **The Order of the Scale** keeps the order's learning, its history of dragons and its prophecy.

If you hope for the forge's help, know the custom. The forge is not a shop and charges no fee. The order asks instead for a tithe to its forge stores, such as refined silver, holy components or good steel. A promised tithe against future spoils is accepted. Petitions go to the Platinum High Marshal, **Vaerthrax Silverclaw**, who will want a full account of your conduct before he grants forge time. Going straight to the High Sentinel with a forge request is thought presumptuous. And if the work is armor, the person who will wear it must be there for the fitting.

The Sanctuary also offers healing, blessings and shelter to the just. Righteous travelers may find powerful friends there. Those who are not righteous should not make the trip.

There are legends about the place as well. A sacred text called the **Platinum Prophecy** is kept in the most secure chamber of the Hall of Judgment, and it is said to foretell a time when Bahamut's champions must rise. Deep beneath the Sanctuary, in vaults guarded by ancient wards, lie relics of Bahamut's first war with Tiamat. There is also a sealed stair below the vaults that no living Sentinel has opened. And there are stories of an ancient platinum dragon asleep somewhere deep in the mountain, who will wake only at the time of greatest need. I have asked Thakaar about that last one. He changed the subject with great skill.

Heartvein Delve

In the eastern foothills of the Maerthwatch, reached by the Veinway.

Heartvein is the dwarven iron hold I described in the chapter on trade. It is a working mine, honest and loud, and it has just enough gold and silver in its seams to keep the miners cheerful. Do not go there expecting mithral. They do not mine it, and asking will mark you as a fool or a thief.

The upper hold, called the **Stonecrown**, sits on a ridge behind carved ramparts, with a gatehouse, granary, infirmary, barracks and a small market. Contracts are witnessed in the **Hall of Nine Hammers**. Below are the shafts, the ore lifts, the roaring stamp floor and the wash troughs. Below those are the old, quiet tunnels where the dwarves keep shrines to Dumathoin, the god of hidden things.

The **Veinway** is a two-wagon road with a place to pull aside every half mile, small shrines along the way and stone mileposts. Heartvein's wardens patrol it.

The hold is ruled by **Thane Broldan Heartvein**, a calm and steady judge of disputes. You will hear the **Ringing of the Nine Hammers** at every change of shift. If a new seam proves true while you are there, you may be invited to the **First Bloom Feast** of pork, stone-baked bread and dark ale. Once a month the dwarves walk in silence through Dumathoin's tunnels with their lamps shuttered, to remember the dead and "hear the rock." If you are invited to walk with them, go quietly.

Dwarves respect plain speech, fair weights and signed ledgers. Charm will get you somewhere with them. Flattery will get you shown the gate.

Nhalvyr En'Zorai

Deep beneath the Maerthwatch, about 140 miles west. Six days by road, then a long way down.

I have not been to Nhalvyr myself. My knees refuse the descent, and the genasi do not hurry their invitations. What I know comes from people who have been, and from the records of the old empire it once belonged to.

Nhalvyr is a buried city of ancient Netheril. A single known shaft leads down to it. Inside, the city's crossing over a great chasm is a fallen gate from the old empire, laid on its side as a narrow bridge. About eighty earth genasi live there now, restoring what they can and guarding what they cannot. At the city's heart hangs the **Core**, a great silver-white sphere ringed by two slowly turning bands of runes. It hums in your bones. Near it there are places where the pull of the earth grows weak and loose gear floats away.

The city is governed by a **Stone Council** of three chairs. The Forge-Chair, **Vara Basaltborn**, oversees the making of glassteel. The Ward-Chair, **Ruk Stonewatch**, commands the patrols and

the wards. The Way-Chair, **Nedi Gravelark**, maps the routes and deals with the surface. An order of keepers watches over the Core itself and has a voice in anything that touches it.

The rules are strict, and visitors must learn them.

- Entry is by token, with an escort. A **Bronze** token opens the market. An **Iron** token opens the arcane wards. A **Silver** token opens the keepers' sanctum and is rarely given. Lending someone a higher token than their own is a crime.
- No unapproved ritual may be worked anywhere near the Core.
- Salvage needs a registrar's mark. Breaking a ward is a crime.
- Goods change hands at the bridge only with three witnesses.
- Do not bring aurorite. The genasi ban it outright, and they exile anyone found with the refined metal.

Nhalvyr is not a market town, a school or a place for idle curiosity. Its people measure every risk and record every question. Impatient visitors are shown the lift.

The Crystal Caverns

About 25 miles south by road and trail. Two days' travel: the Shardway to Crystalglen, a night there, then about nine miles of mountain trail.

The village jeweler's shop takes its name from these caverns, and many of her stones come from them. They lie in the Adder Peaks above Crystalglen. Their entrances are narrow cracks in the volcanic rock, easy to miss without a guide. Inside, huge crystals line the chambers and catch every scrap of light. It is the most beautiful place I have ever been afraid in.

The caverns go down in stages, and miners describe them by how long it takes to reach each one.

- **The Mouths**, at the entrances, give ordinary gems.
- **The Lantern Halls**, about an hour below, hold veins of the nine crystal families, and they are guarded by strange creatures that glow.
- **The Still Pockets**, about four hours below that, hold stones that the rock has set in place on its own over a very long time. A naturally set stone cannot be bought at any price, because no smith can make one.
- **Deeper still**, below the Still Pockets, the miners say there is another seam. They call it sickstone. They will not go down to it, and they say that touching it makes a person ill. I have heard more than that. I will not write it here.

There are unstable ledges, hidden drops and pockets of wild magic all the way down. The wyverns of the Adder Peaks nest above. Go with a guide, go with gloves and tell someone in Crystalglen when you expect to be back.

The Methvale Ruins

Northeast of Cobblecrest, east of the river, near the Methwood Forest.

I told Methvale's story in the second chapter, and I will not repeat it. If you go, go by day. Do not camp there. Bring something to leave for the dead. And come and see me afterward.

Greenveil, the Chondalwood and Thalanthir

The **Chondalwood** begins fifty miles west, at Greenveil. It is vast and very old. Its canopy shelters fey, ancient secrets and real danger. Its edges give timber to careful woodcutters. Its depths are no place for the careless.

Somewhere deep in the forest, two days southwest of Greenveil by paths you will not find on your own, lies **Thalanthir**, a hidden settlement of about two hundred and twenty elves. They live in the canopy of great oaks and keep the forest in balance through song, craft and careful hunting. Thalanthir is not a market town, and it is not a place to log, dig or hunt for relics. The elves trade only through Greenveil's Emerald Pavilion, under an old agreement called the **Whisperwood Compact**. They send out herbs, bark-spices, bowstaves, moth-silk and salves. They take in salt, lamp oil, needles, dyes and fine thread.

Outsiders visit only by invitation, with an escort and usually by daylight. If you are ever invited, here are the elves' own rules for guests, as they were given to me.

- Arrive by day, with an escort from Greenveil.
- Keep your voice low after sunset.
- Light no open flame beyond the guest pavilion.
- Cut no live wood. Do not put steel to a living tree.
- Ask before you touch the waystones.

Good gifts are things that travel well: salt, needles, dyes, clean lamp oil and fine thread. Good questions are humble ones. "What needs mending?" "Which path is safest tonight?" "Who keeps the oldest story of this tree?" Breaking the forest's peace, poaching or tampering with the wards earns banishment and a thorn-mark that elven wardens across the whole forest will recognize.

The Mountains

The **Maerthwatch** rises in the north and northwest. The ground begins to climb ten or fifteen miles out of town, and the true mountains start about fifty miles away. They hold iron, silver and rarer ores, and they also hold trolls that heal from almost anything, giants of several kinds and territorial beasts that do not care for visitors. The weather there can isolate a mining camp for tendays. Prospectors go anyway. The wise ones go in groups.

The **Adder Peaks** rise about fifteen miles to the south. They are sharp, volcanic and steep, full of hidden caves, and named for the wyverns that nest on their heights. If you must cross them, take a guide. If you can go around, go around. The road is longer and the travel is faster.

Mirath's Landing

Beyond the Maerthwatch, reached by the long road north over the mountains.

Mirath's Landing is a lively trading town of about nine hundred people on the southwestern shore of the great Akanamere lake. It lies on the far side of the Maerthwatch from us, so the mountains shelter it as they shelter us, from the other direction. It is a waypoint for merchants traveling between our valley, the edge of the Chondalwood and the trade routes of the lake.

A council of merchants governs it, chaired by **Guildmaster Elysora Mirn**, a shrewd half-elf who values peace and profit in about equal measure. A retired dwarven adventurer named **Brak Stonefist** runs its small, well-trained militia. Visit the **Glittering Plaza** by the docks for the market. Eat the fish stew at the **Golden Dock**, a tavern on stilts. Rest at the **Shrine of the Still Waters**, a quiet shrine to Eldath around a natural spring. The town is known for lake fish, mountain gems, fine cloth and the occasional piece of magical work.

E.

Chapter Nine: Roads and Travel

On Getting Where You Are Going, and Getting Back

> *"The shortest road is the one you can walk. Every mountain in this valley has been crossed by someone who thought otherwise. Ask them how long it took."*
>
> — Eddred the Elder

The Roads Out of Cobblecrest

Every journey from the village starts on one of a handful of roads. Learn them, and the rest of the valley will make sense.

The river road leaves by the River Gate on the east side of town. It follows the Winding River downstream toward Shadowfen, Silverbrook and the barge landings of the lower river. It is the busiest road in the valley and the best kept.

The north road leaves by the North Gate, and it forks soon after. Treat the fork as your first decision on any northern journey.

- The **main line** runs straight north to Fairmeadow at 20 miles, Duskfield at 40 and Stonemill at 60. Ore wagons and stone carts use it, so expect company and ruts.
- The **Dragon's Peak road** bends northwest. It passes Suncrest at 16 miles and climbs into the Maerthwatch to the Sanctuary at 60.
- The **eastern branch** runs northeast to Goldgrove at 28 miles.

Suncrest and Goldgrove are both orchard country, and newcomers mix them up constantly. They are on different roads. If someone gives you directions to "the orchards," ask which ones.

The forest road leaves by the Forest Gate on the west side. It runs west past the Standing Stones at 15 miles and on to Greenveil at 50, where the Chondalwood begins. The same road serves Whispering Pines, 56 miles to the southwest. Briarshade lies 100 miles west, the farthest of the hamlets.

The Shardway runs south to Crystalglen, 16 miles away in the foothills of the Adder Peaks. Cut crystal comes north along it on its way to Nhalvyr, and our militia escorts and stamps it.

The Veinway does not touch Cobblecrest at all. It is Heartvein's ore road, running down from the eastern Maerthwatch toward Nhalvyr. I mention it so you do not go looking for it here.

The long road south to Torsh deserves a warning of its own. Torsh is a small, hardy settlement about 135 miles south-southwest of us. The straight line runs through the middle of the Adder Peaks. Do not take it. The road goes west out of the Forest Gate past the Standing Stones, forks south-southwest around the western end of the Adder Peaks, then runs south along the eastern edge of the Chondalwood. That is about 168 miles and seven or eight days each way. The straight line over the mountains is shorter on the map. In mountains you move at half pace, so it takes nine to thirteen days. The longer road is faster and safer. That is why it exists.

How Far You Can Go in a Day

A traveler on foot on a decent road covers about 24 miles a day at a steady pace. You can push to about 30 if you hurry, but you will notice less around you, and around here that matters. If you need to move carefully and quietly, plan on 18.

Forest, swamp and broken ground slow you down. Mountains slow you to half pace or worse. A forced march will get you farther, at the price of exhaustion, and exhaustion on a mountain trail is how people stop being travelers and become stories.

A horse helps on a good road. Dragon's Peak, for example, is two and a half days on foot and about a day and a half mounted. On the high trails the horse is mostly a way to carry your baggage.

At a Glance: Distances from Cobblecrest

Place	Distance	Road	Time on foot
Standing Stones of Aelindor	15 miles W	Forest road	Half a day
Adder Peaks, northern edge	15 miles S	Shardway	About 5 hours
Suncrest	16 miles NW	Dragon's Peak road	About 5½ hours
Crystalglen	16 miles S	Shardway	About 5½ hours
Fairmeadow	20 miles N	North road	About 1 day
Crystal Caverns	About 25 miles S	Shardway, then trail	2 days
Greenbriar Hollow	28 miles SE	—	About 1¼ days
Goldgrove	28 miles NE	Eastern branch	About 1¼ days
Duskfield	40 miles N	North road	About 2 days
Greenveil and the Chondalwood edge	50 miles W	Forest road	About 2 days
Whispering Pines	56 miles SW	Forest road	About 2½ days
Dragon's Peak Sanctuary	60 miles NW	Dragon's Peak road	2½ days (1½ mounted)
Stonemill	60 miles N	North road	2½ days
Shadowfen	64 miles E	River road	About 3 days
Silverbrook	92 miles E	River road	About 4 days
Briarshade	100 miles W	West	About 4 days
Torsh	135 miles SSW (168 by road)	Forest road, then south	7 to 8 days
Nhalvyr En'Zorai	About 140 miles W	Ask the Way-Chair	About 6 days, then the descent

Times assume a normal pace of about 24 miles a day on a road. Mountain trails are at half pace.

When to Travel

I said most of this in the first chapter. Here it is in short.

- **Mirtul** is the best month for a long journey, and **Eleint** is second.
- **Hammer** and **Alturiak** close the mountain passes. Stay off the high roads unless you must.
- **Ches** and **Tarsakh** bring mud, floods and washed-out bridges. Check every crossing.
- **Flamerule** brings the wyverns out over the Adder Peaks and the fiercest storms of the year.
- **Nightal** ends most river travel. After that, it is sleds, magic or staying home.

Hiring Help

You will travel more safely with someone who knows the way.

The **Scarred Oak Fellowship** can find you an escort, and its Questmaster knows the Chondalwood better than anyone. **Tobias Grumblefoot** at the Rusty Cauldron knows every guide and caravan guard who drinks in the valley, which is all of them. **Arthur Windham** at the stables will tell you what a road is really like this season, and sell or rent you a mount. In the hamlets, ask at the inn. In Crystalglen, never go up into the mountains without a local guide.

The valley also has rangers who watch its edges and know its hidden paths. If you are lucky enough to meet one on the road, listen to what they tell you. They do not waste words.

At a Glance: Getting About

What	Where	Cost
Riding horse	Windham's stables	75 gp
Pony	Windham's stables	30 gp
Donkey or mule	Windham's stables	8 gp
Stabling with feed	Windham's stables	5 sp per day
Cart	Market	15 gp
Wagon	Market	35 gp
Rowboat	Misty Pond Fisheries	5 sp per day to rent, 50 gp to buy
Ferry passage	The river	About 1 sp per mile
Messenger	Town Hall	2 cp per mile
Porter or untrained laborer	Market	2 sp per day

Sending Word

If you need to get a message somewhere quickly, the Town Hall will send it for a small fee per mile. If you need it there faster than that, find **Doran Fleetfoot**. He is the fastest courier in the valley and the most reliable, in every respect but one. Seal your letter.

E.

Chapter Ten: Beyond the Valley

A Few Opinions About Faraway Places, Offered by a Man Who Has Seen Some of Them

> *"Travel teaches you that every town believes it is the center of the world. Cobblecrest is no exception. The difference is that I have checked."*
>
> — Eddred the Elder

This is not a gazetteer of Faerûn. Better books than mine have been written about the great cities, and Eryndor sells several of them. This chapter is only what an old man who once traveled for a living would tell a young one leaving the valley for the first time. I have kept it short. Eryndor made me.

Close Enough to Matter

Mirath's Landing, over the Maerthwatch on the Akanamere lake, is the nearest real town and our best door to the wider trade of the lake. I described it in the chapter on landmarks. Go there when you want news from the outside world. It arrives there a tenday before it reaches us, slightly more accurate.

Torsh lies about 135 miles south-southwest, on the far side of the Adder Peaks, along the eastern edge of the Chondalwood. It is small, insular and tough, and it has built a hard life on a dangerous frontier. Its traders come to our market and our auctions. Take the long road around the mountains to get there, as I explained in the last chapter. The people of Torsh are not unfriendly. They simply wait to see whether you will last before deciding whether to like you.

Chessenta

We sit in Chessenta's southwestern corner, as I said earlier. Chessenta's great cities lie far to the north of us, across a good deal of difficult country and, for some routes, across water.

Luthcheq lies about 280 miles north, roughly twelve days' travel. It is a Chessentan port on Akana Bay, and travelers call it the City of Madness. Its rulers change often and rarely for the better, and its streets reward boldness more than wisdom. If you go, go with a reason and leave when the reason is finished.

Cimbar lies about 350 miles north, roughly fifteen days away. It is the City of Bronze, the traditional capital of Chessenta, with a great harbor full of merchant galleys and bronze-prowed warships. Cimbar admires martial glory above almost everything. It is usually ruled by

whichever general has most recently proven he deserves it. It is a fine place to be a soldier and a tiring place to be anything else.

The Old Empire to the East

Unthalass lies about 430 miles east, eighteen days or more, on the shore of the Alamber Sea. It was once the capital of Unther, an empire ruled by god-kings, and their great stepped temples still stand over the city. Now it is a sprawling, crumbling port, governed uneasily. Travelers who have seen it say they never saw so much grandeur in such poor repair. Go there if you want to understand what time does to empires. Do not go there for a rest.

The Vilhon Reach

The Reach lies far to the west, and it has shaped us more than any other foreign land. Its languages are spoken in our market, and its customs about magic govern how our wizards behave.

Arrabar, about 560 miles west, is Chondath's chief city on the southern shore of the Reach. It is a powerful trading city and very proud of it. It is also one of the two cities whose archmages loosed the plague of the Rotting War, and the Reach has never quite let it forget. If you are a wizard, wear your spellmark there and mind your manners.

Sapra, on the isle of Ilighôn at the mouth of the Reach, about 450 miles away, is a crowded port watched over by a powerful circle of druids. It is known as a refuge for people fleeing cruel mages. The druids strictly limit how far the town may grow. It is an odd place, full of people who all have a story about why they left somewhere else.

Very Far Away

People sometimes ask me about **Waterdeep**, the City of Splendors. It lies about 2,200 miles to the northwest, three months on horseback. It is everything the songs say, and louder. I have been there. I came home. Draw your own conclusions.

At a Glance: Distant Places

Place	Distance from Cobblecrest	Travel time
Torsh	135 miles SSW (168 by road)	7 to 8 days
Luthcheq	280 miles N	About 12 days
Cimbar	350 miles N	About 15 days
Unthalass	430 miles E	About 18 days
Sapra	450 miles NW	Almost two tendays
Arrabar	560 miles W	Just over two tendays
Waterdeep	2,200 miles NW	About three months by horse

E.

Chapter Eleven: Power, Politics and Uneasy Truces

On Who Decides Things, Who Would Like To, and What Polite People Pretend Not to Notice

> *"Every settlement has two governments. One has an office, a seal and a schedule of meetings. The other decides what actually happens. Learn to read both, and do not be surprised when they disagree."*
>
> — Eddred the Elder

A Word About My Own Place in This

I am not a neutral witness to the politics of Cobblecrest. I am the village elder. That gives me a kind of authority with no office attached, and it shapes what people tell me and what they keep from me. I know the mayor, the guild leaders, the captain of the guard and most of the other people in this chapter. I have opinions about all of them, and some of them are friends. Keep that in mind as you read. A historian who claims to have no stake in his own town is either lying or not paying attention.

The Official Arrangement

Cobblecrest is governed by a mayor, a town council and the guard, roughly in that order. In practice the order shifts with the question, which is normal and not always a bad thing.

Mayor Thomas Greenfield is a man in his early fifties whose family has led this village for generations. He has a particular kind of calm. It does not come from indifference. It comes from keeping his worries firmly in hand, which I recognize because I do the same. He is fiercely protective of Cobblecrest and patient by nature. He prefers to take counsel privately before he commits to anything publicly. That makes his decisions careful. It also makes him look secretive at times, and his critics make the most of it. He has a habit of carrying the weight of his office alone and asking for help later than he should. I believe his intentions toward this village are good.

The **town council** speaks for the village's main interests: merchants, crafters, farmers and property holders. It meets regularly and argues productively most of the time. Like every council, it is moved most by whoever has the most at stake, and its members without strong opinions tend to follow those who have strong opinions about everything. I attend when matters of history or civic importance come before it. I am heard with respect, and I try to use that carefully.

Captain Elara Dawntracker commands the Cobblecrest Guard, and I respect her without reservation. The Dawntracker family has protected this village for generations. She is disciplined without being rigid and calm under pressure, and she changes her mind when the evidence demands it. That last quality grows rarer the longer anyone holds power. She can be overprotective, and she does not like handing dangerous work to others. Independent adventurers sometimes chafe at that. They should remember that she is the one who answers for the village if they get it wrong.

Under the captain, **Sergeant Bram Stoneheart**, a hill dwarf and veteran fighter, serves as deputy constable and trains the militia. He has turned a great many farmers into steady watchmen. He respects competence, hard work and order, in that order, and he has no patience at all for anyone who has none of the three.

The guard is not large enough for every danger the valley faces, and the captain knows it. She works with the Scarred Oak Fellowship on the larger threats and handles the everyday keeping of the peace herself. The result is a guard that is neither careless nor stretched to breaking.

What the Guilds Actually Control

I described the guilds in their own chapter. Here is how they reach into government.

The **Exchange** knows it is indispensable, and it is. That leads it to prefer arrangements that keep it at the center, and to describe its own interests as the village's interests so smoothly that you can hardly see the seam. Its arguments about what is good for trade are nearly always right. They are simply not the only arguments.

The **Crafters' Hall** controls the marks that tell buyers a thing is well made, and so it controls the terms on which artisans can earn a full price. It tends to be cautious about growth and careful with resources. Some merchants find that frustrating. I find it mostly healthy.

The **Scarred Oak Fellowship** has the least formal standing of the three and the most practical weight. When the Fellowship decides something matters, it has the means to make it matter. It has never used that power to bully the town, to my knowledge. But anyone who studies a town's politics and ignores the people carrying swords will eventually be surprised.

The Long Arm from the Mountains

Dragon's Peak Sanctuary does not govern Cobblecrest. It holds no seat on our council and judges none of our disputes. Its role is regional. It watches the passes, keeps ties with

settlements across the Maerthwatch and stands openly against evil dragons and those who serve them.

That role still matters here. The Sanctuary's presence shapes which dangers move openly in this valley and which must hide. It is a place to appeal to when a threat is too large for a village. And the High Sentinel's opinion carries weight across the region, not through any office but through a long record of being right and being present.

On most questions of local government the Sanctuary is restrained, and properly so. Where it is not restrained is on questions it considers matters of faith. That includes anything touching dragons, dragon relics or places of draconic importance. A community whose plans cross the Sanctuary on those questions will find that its restraint ends where its faith begins. There has been friction over this before. There will be again. That is not a reason to value the Sanctuary less. It is simply an honest description of the relationship.

Roots and Claims

The druids of the Chondalwood edge hold no seats on the council, and they rarely attend its meetings. Their power is over the land itself. They have a say in where timber may be cut, how certain streams and their banks may be used, and how close anyone may come to the places they hold sacred.

Elder Selyndra, a moon elf more than four hundred years old, leads the most respected of the circles. She speaks slowly, as though each word weighs something, and she is very reluctant to act in haste. Over decades her circle has gained what amounts to a veto over anything that would seriously change the forest's border. No law gives her that veto. It works because logging camps and building projects that displease the druids tend to go badly, in ways that are hard to describe and impossible to ignore.

I say this without complaint. The druids kept the valley's land healthy long before Cobblecrest existed, and our harvests depend on it. If you want to know where the circles stand on some question, ask **Loriel Sunshadow** at Eldertree Apothecary. She is patient with the question, more patient than many deserve, because a great many people come to her believing that nature's protections can be bargained away for a good enough price.

They cannot, in my experience.

There is also the older claim I described in the second chapter, that of the goblinoid clans driven from this valley at its founding. Their descendants have never given it up. Whether that claim is

ever settled by talk or by something worse is a question for the future, and I would rather it were talk.

What Grows in the Shadows

I described the Winding Shadow in the chapter on guilds. It is a known quantity. The village has lived beside it for decades and has learned roughly where the line runs.

The **Blackthorn Syndicate** is another matter. It is a criminal organization from outside the valley, with roots in many frontier towns. It deals in smuggling, extortion, illegal trade and, where it can, the bending of officials. The rumors say it has been reaching into Cobblecrest. The Winding Shadow, by every account, resents it and keeps out of its way.

Now I must be careful. I hear a great many rumors, and in a town this size every rumor has a name attached to it. I have heard the Syndicate tied to merchants, guards, clerks, councilors and officials of every rank. I have heard my own name once, which tells you how much weight to put on the rest. I will not repeat any of them here. A rumor written in a book becomes a fact to the next reader, and I have watched that ruin innocent people.

What I will say is this. When things in a town stop making sense in the way they used to make sense, I take it seriously. When a proposal meets resistance from an unexpected quarter, or a dispute is settled in an unexpected direction, I write it down. I suggest you do the same, and that you judge by what people do rather than by what is said about them.

The **Cult of the Dragon** is the other shadow, and I have already told you what it did to Methvale. One more thing is worth knowing. The cult is split in two, and the halves hate each other. One half worships Tiamat, the Queen of Chromatic Dragons, and serves living dragons. It has begun to call itself the **Cult of Tiamat**, and it is the half most active in our region. The other half rejects Tiamat. It holds to an old prophecy that dead dragons will one day rule the world, and so it makes dracoliches, the undead remains of dragons. If you meet a cultist, it is worth knowing which kind. They want different things, and neither wants you alive.

The Night of the Masquerade

On the twenty-fifth of Marpenoth, Cobblecrest holds the **Masquerade of Midnight**.

Everyone wears a mask. Most masks are made by the village costumers, and the competition among them is fierce. The night is fun on its surface, full of music, dancing and the freedom that comes from everyone pretending not to know everyone else. Masked revelers wander between

the great houses and the market square, often through a fog that nobody seems to have ordered.

Underneath, the Masquerade is the night when conversations happen that cannot happen in daylight. People who must not be seen talking together can talk. Arrangements can be acknowledged. Positions can be tested. Information changes hands. Everyone with any standing in the valley knows this, and to attend at all is to accept it.

I have attended for fifty years. I go as myself. That is, I wear a mask and assume no one is fooled, and no one is, which is a kind of disguise of its own. I have had conversations there that I could have had nowhere else, and some of them mattered to the village. I recommend that you attend. I recommend that you attend carefully, and that you remember who you spoke to, even if you do not know their name.

Things I Will Not Write Down

I promised in the preface that there would be places where I decline to put things in ink. Here are some of them, so that you know they exist. Each is a door. I am not going to open them for you.

- What the Whispering Stones are saying, and in what tongue.
- Where the shadows at the Standing Stones point on the longest day.
- What I believe caused the Silent Blight, and why I believe it.
- Which of the scavengers' stories about Methvale are true.
- What lies at the bottom of the Crystal Caverns, and what the miners will not go near.
- Who the Shadowmaster is.
- Whose lost master's mark the apprentices of the Crafters' Hall keep searching for.
- Where the scarred oak table of the Fellowship really came from.
- What the Platinum Prophecy says, and what the Sentinels think it means.
- Whether there is a dragon asleep under Dragon's Peak.

Some of these I know. Some I only suspect. One or two I would give a great deal to learn. I will not tell you which are which.

What This Old Man Wants You to Understand

I began this book by admitting my fault. I am happiest in the past, and I have spent most of these pages there. My friends will tell you that is exactly what they expected.

So let me end in the present, as an exercise in self-improvement.

Cobblecrest is not a backdrop. It is not a place to rest between adventures elsewhere. It is a community of real people who have built something over two centuries in a hard place. They survived a blight that nearly ended them. They watched Methvale burn, and they learned, or should have learned, what happens when a town decides that the danger on its borders belongs to someone else.

The people here are not helpless. They have the guard, the Fellowship, the guilds and the shrine, and for whatever my years are worth, they have me. What they are always short of is people who can move between the official way things are done and the way things actually happen, and who are willing to act in the space between. The guard can deal with what is visible and illegal. The council can deal with what is visible and lawful. Neither reaches everything.

If you have read this far, you understand this valley better than most people who live in it. I hope you will use that well. I hope you will look past the regalia to the people wearing it. And I hope that some evening, years from now, you will come back to my door with a story I have not heard. I will make the tea.

The lamp is burning low. I have said what I came to say.

Eddred, Midwinter, 1498 DR

End of Volume