

The Crag of Ashen Ruin

Introduction

It is theorized that the Crag of Ashen Ruin was once a world of lush forests, vast plains, and meandering rivers. What remains of the world is a ruinous wasteland ringed by volcanic mountains and bordering a crimson sea. A looming red sun hangs over the Crag as a reminder of past failings and an ill omen for the days to come.

No one is quite sure what happened to the world of old. Many have attempted to divine on the matter, but to little effect. What is known of the past is that there was once a great civilization of crystal and marble that dominated the landscape. Fragments of this past world still exist, but only in the form of windswept ruins.

Modern history starts at an event known as The Great Sundering: a cataclysm that radiated from the greatest cities and razed almost the entire world. The blast was sudden and devastating and those within the cities were annihilated instantly. The few who have visited these ruins, and lived to tell the tale, have spoken of the shadows of the doomed that have been burned into the stone. The cause of the blast is well known to all who remain: Sorcery.

Sorcery is a force of great primordial evil. It draws upon the Dark Powers to sow destruction and chaos. Practitioners of the Art, called Shapers, somehow survived the Sundering and continue to plot from atop towers of volcanic glass. Their ultimate goals and societal structure remain a mystery.

When the rubble had finally settled the souls of the damned returned to wreak havoc upon the world that consumed them. Thus the Ashen Children were born, horrific beings made of ash whose only known purpose is vengeance. These cursed creatures haunt the ruins of the old world, but frequently wander the wastes and mountains in search of victims.

While the Sundering was violent and sudden it did not completely eradicate humanity. The outlanders who lived in the vast wilderness were safe from the worst of the blast. When the Ashen Children came for the survivors the humans fought them back with desperate strength. These battle-hardened warriors came to be known as the Keepers.

The Keepers value strength in all its forms and are renowned for their talents of healing and combat. They blame the Shapers' dark magics for the destruction of the world. The

Keepers have survived in the harsh desolation in part due to the spirits with whom they've formed pacts. The Keepers offer their bodies to shelter the spirits from the dying world and in exchange the spirits use the life force of the Keepers to bring fertility back to the land. Because of their ancient pacts, Keepers may purchase the first levels of Survival and Healing for 5 CP and the second level of the Strong OR Tough Trait for 10 CP.

An Important Note for Players: Characters from the Crag of Ashen Ruin come into play with a spirit "tether" and therefore cannot accept Scionships from other spirits. Players must work with staff when creating a spirit. All spirits should represent a feature of the landscape from the Pre-Sundering Era of the Crag. Upon entry to the Forest, a character's spirit will become dormant. All other interactions with your spirit are FOIP.

History

Pre-Sundering Era

A time of prosperity and wealth that saw the construction of massive marble and crystal cities. Little is known of this era, though some knowledge has been gleaned from the ruins of the cities and what little text remains. The Pre-Sundering was an age of aristocracy and sorcery. It is theorized that a caste system dominated the cities and only those of noble birth were permitted to use magic. Further details are lost to the ages.

The Great Sundering

A terrible force that tore through the very foundations of the world leaving behind only the ruins of old and a desolate landscape. It was immediately after the Great Sundering that the Ashen Children were born. These vengeful beings slaughtered the survivors and brought humanity to the brink of destruction. While the humans fought against a seemingly endless tide of accursed souls the spirits of the land that survived attempted to reassert control, but to no avail. The land from which they drew their power was now corrupt and barren.

The Rekindling

When all seemed lost the spirits came to the humans and sought an alliance. The Spirits had become weak and ephemeral, distant from the material world as the land withered, and knew that if they were to survive in any capacity that a fundamental change would be necessary. The spirits offered to be consumed by the humans in order to share their lifeforce; an arrangement in which two beings would occupy one physical form. The humans would offer their bodies as a home for the spirits, and the spirits would give the remains of their power to the humans to repel the Ashen Children. With little choice left the humans accepted the spirits' offer, and thus became Keepers of the Spirits, or Keepers for short.

With the aid of the spirits the Keepers fought back the damned and formed small pockets of civilization in a dying world. Where the Keepers gathered the land began to reform, creating havens of fertile ground and small streams out of seemingly nothing. With the Keepers to power their workings the spirits were able to once again touch the material world, and meager but sustainable life began to sprout once more. The land now lives on in its people.

The World Now

Several generations have passed since the Great Sundering but the Craggs remain in constant turmoil. Despite the terrors of the world around them the Keepers have survived, and even thrived, in the harsh landscape. The spirits have done their fair share in both shaping the landscape and the culture of the Keepers. Upon the birth of a Keeper a dormant spirit of the old world reawakens and tethers itself to the infant.

A great reverence is placed on the preservation and expansion of havens, two ideals which frequently come at odds with each other. Since the Keepers numbers have been steadily growing with each passing generation more land is needed to sustain them and the spirits which they harbor. It is for this reason that the Keepers have set their eyes towards conquest.

Despite the Keepers' efforts a vast majority of the Craggs remains desolate. Smaller havens tend to be quickly overrun by Shapers, Ashen Children, or predatory beasts. Three large havens have managed to flourish and, in the current climate of the Craggs, the creation of new Havens is widely regarded as a fool's errand.

The Havens

The Havens are closed biomes where even the imposing red sun shines less harshly. Created by the collective effort of hundreds of Spirits, these Havens provide respite for the peoples of the Craggs of Ashen Ruin.

The first and most established settlement of the Keepers is the Amberwood, which is located in the center of the continent between the Pale Mountains and Crimson Sea. The Amberwood is a vast forest that was entirely petrified by the Great Sundering. Though the Keepers have reclaimed this area the foliage still maintains its golden hue. The Amberwood is known for its megaf flora including massive trees. The Keepers carve their homes into the trees and rocks of the Amberwood, not daring to cut down anything that has grown so large. Due to the Amberwood's natural defenses it is widely regarded as the most defensible and secure of the three havens.

The other two Havens are known as Greyhill and the Amaranthine Coast.

Greyhill is located in the foothills of the Pale Mountains, West of the Amberwood, and gets its name from the near constant rain of volcanic ash. Denizens of Greyhill are the most warlike and brutal of the Keepers. Built on ruins from the old times, Greyhill has become the first line of defense against the mad Shapers and their demonic workings. While the land still bears fruit resources are scarce and due to the constant conflict the Keepers of Greyhill fortify their homes from the remains of the Shapers' constructs and

bones.

The Amaranthine Coast is an expanse of violet sand and coral reefs that border the Crimson Sea to the East. The Keepers here have built their homes in the massive tidepools between the reefs and the area has come to colloquially be known as the "Floating City." The Amaranthine Coast has become home to many healers due to the vast array of medicinal plants and corals that grow in the surrounding area. Of the three Havens the Amaranthine Coast is seen as the most peaceful since it is the furthest away from the conflict with the Shapers, but that is not to say that the Coast is without danger. Settlements within the Haven are harried frequently by amphibious predators known as Reef Singers, who have been known to lure children into their waters with entrancing melodies. It is for this reason that singing is frowned upon in the Amaranthine Coast.

The Desolation

The Havens only make up a small part of the Craggs of Ashen Ruin. The vast majority is a desolate, blasted wasteland of black sand. Cutting winds rip through this area constantly and even the most seasoned pathfinders proceed with caution. It is within the Desolation that the ruins of the old world are found. To many, these ruins provide shelter during a crossing between Havens, but are often overrun by Ashen Children. Here the forces of Sorcery reign supreme and, to those unfortunate enough to be born uncanny, the air has a palpable weight to it. The Desolation is where the Keepers most often encounter the Shapers and their fell workings.

The Pale Mountains

A ring of craggy peaks and volcanoes that encircle the landlocked parts of the continent. The obsidian towers of the Shapers can be found within this range. The Pale Mountains remain an enigma to the Keepers, and those who tread in these lands are rarely heard from again. The few who have returned are gripped by madness and tell tales of unspeakable horrors and endless starscapes of harrowing lights. In the worst cases some have returned without their spirits, driven insane by grief. The Keepers of Greyhill put these victims of fell magic to the sword rather than let them suffer.

The Keepers

A naturalistic people who have become hardened by the environment and bolstered by the spirits they shelter. Despite their primitive appearance the Keepers are far from savages. Modern tools and weapons have become commonplace, and giant weapons have become the preferred choice of those strong enough to wield them. Typically the

Keepers subsist on diets of root vegetables, tree nuts, trapped game, and domesticated beasts.

The Keepers realize that with constant war going on around them they are not afforded the luxury of infighting. It is for this reason the political structure of the Havens is virtually nonexistent and conflict from within is exceedingly rare. The Keepers do recognize a Chieftain within each of the Havens, but this position is determined by seniority. It is, for the most part, only a position of reverence, but in times of dire need the Keepers do turn to them for leadership. The three eldest as of now are Kalion the Sheltering Leaf of Amberwood, Amielle the Roiling Tide of Amaranth, and Grent the Black Mist of Greyhill. Each of them among the Named: those recognized by the spirits as worthy of title.

The Named are a group of Keepers who have dedicated themselves to their spirits with deeds of worship and toil. Earning a spirit name is exceedingly difficult, as the spirits are hard to impress, but once a name is earned it can never be taken from a Keeper. Each name is unique and carries a metaphysical weight with it.

The Shapers

Though their intentions remain a mystery to the Keepers their methods have become well known to all who have faced them. All manner of terrible spells that enfeeble, confound, or even outright obliterate have been used as tools of war against the Keepers. It is a truly vile school of magic which is derived from the Dark Powers that lurk below the surface of the Crag.

The Shapers, who by all indication are humans, have debased themselves before the creatures known as Va'al (pronounced Vahl). Va'al are devils in every sense of the word, dark spirits of pain and madness. Very seldom does a Va'al touch the material plane, but on the rare occasion one does cataclysm is short behind it. It is theorized that a Va'al was responsible for the Great Sundering. The magic the Shapers employ is an extension of these patrons.

Monsters and Foes

Ashen Children

Souls of the damned given form. White faced moaning ghouls made entirely of ash that disintegrate upon destruction. It is said that familiar faces can sometimes be seen within these monsters.

The Forsaken

Arguably the worst fate that could befall a Keeper. These maddened mortals have been separated from their spirits by the vile workings of the Shapers. Their grief and envy has turned to vengeance and the Forsaken turn their gaze towards their former brethren. The Forsaken have often been seen fighting alongside the Ashen Children against the Keepers.

Desolation Spirits

The seperated spirits of the Forsaken. These creatures vary greatly from confused to outright hostile. Veiled Executioners hunt these spirits to put them to final rest.

The Shapers

Insane Mages that have offered their servitude to the Dark Powers known as Va'al. Their magics are dire, but incredibly powerful. The Shapers' intent remains shrouded in mystery, but it is clear the Keepers come at odds with their designs.

Constructs

Manifested shock troops of the Shapers. Constructs seem to be made from whatever material is available including stone, metal, glass, and even flesh and bone. These creatures are not intelligent and serve only to kill.

Reef Singers

These sirens entrance children and those weak of will into their deep waters where they feed. When their songs fail, these amphibious predators have been known to take their prey by surprise with teeth and claws.

Corpse Moles

Large burrowing pests that feed on the decomposing bodies of the Keepers who are buried in the Havens. Fiercely territorial. Corpse moles are recognizable by their jagged claws and thick hides. Their meat is notoriously vile.

Life, Death, and Culture

Birth

The concept of life is sacred to the Keepers and each birth heralds the reawakening of a spirit. Upon the birth of a child a ritual is performed by the Chieftain to ensure a smooth passage for the spirit into its new host. The ritual is known as the Rite of Sowing and consists of a brief ceremony of blessing followed by celebration.

Death

When a Keeper is slain or passes of old age they are buried in the bare earth of the nearest Haven. Death is considered to be a final act of service for a Keeper as their remains feed the land. To disturb a grave is seen as the greatest of insults and is punished by branding. Since there is no soil in the Amaranthine Coast, the bodies of Keepers are tied to the coral reefs to feed the wildlife. In all cases, sentinels are placed to watch over the graves to ensure that Corpse Moles and Reef Singers do not disturb the process.

Crime and Punishment

The Keepers do not have a strict set of laws or a governing body and therefore “crime” as it would be traditionally defined does not exist. Conflict among the Keepers, though rare, does occur. In such instances a challenge is brought by the slighted party and the Chieftain adjudicates the result. All rulings are final. Should a Keeper be found to be particularly dishonorable or acting directly against the interest of the spirits they are branded with a hot iron. Capital punishment also does occur, but it is reserved only for the worst traitors.

Holidays

The only holiday celebrated universally throughout the Havens is the Day of Dawning: the first day of the Keeper’s year which marks the anniversary of the pact with the spirits. It is a festival of growth and remembrance for those who passed in the previous year. Though traditions vary, each Haven will light a large bonfire to symbolize the Rekindling. Other holidays take place around events rather than dates. In Amberwood it is the harvest time. For the Amaranthine Coast it is the changing of the seasons long tides. Greyhill celebrates only bloody victories over the Shapers.

Clothing, Weapons, and Armor

The Keepers favor simple, functional wear. Their clothes are typically made of woven materials and tend to be light. Many Keepers wear war trophies or simple jewelry to honor the spirit they shelter.

Leather armor is the most common and readily available. Scrap metal, bones, scales, and other robust materials are used to reinforce these suits. Armor made primarily of metal is all but unheard of as most of the metal found goes towards creating weapons and tools.

Weapons of all kinds are used in the Craggs of Ashen Ruin. Steel is, of course, the favored material for such craft, but bone weapons suffice when necessary. Some of the most skilled warriors are instructed in the Veiled Executioner fighting style, which employs a Monster Axe, to hunt down Desolation Spirits and the Ashen. It is a dire art that allows a practitioner to strike at the very spirit of a creature and as such its secrets are jealously guarded. Masters of the style live almost exclusively in Greyhill.

Naming

Names are both given and earned by the Keepers. The Chieftain that performs the Rite of Sowing on a newborn enters a trance and divines upon the name of the child. Names consist of the harsh syllables of an ancient, forgotten tongue and will always incorporate the name of the spirit within the child. For a child given the name Harkon would have a spirit named "Kon" of "Har." Spirit names within the Craggs of Ashen Ruin are always 1 syllable.

Male Examples: Targen, Dalmir, Fenthik, Gimber, Lohgen, Gondrosi, Hermut, Jatiso, Elnon, Vogner

Female Examples: Thassalda, Hurstel, Haekara, Norabryn, Mevaad, Oleif, Brighen, Amynta, Ismat, Coretha

Every Keeper knows that...

...the Havens must be defended at all costs.

...respect must be shown to the spirits for everything exists only by their will.

...the Shapers and their devils are responsible for the destruction of the world.

...mercy is weakness when shown to one's enemies. Strike fast and sure.

...trust in one's kin is essential for survival. Stand together or die alone.

Inspiration

Jack Vance (*The Dying Earth*)

Joe Abercrombie (*The First Law Series*)

Robert E. Howard (*Conan the Barbarian*)

The Dark Crystal

Dungeons and Dragons: Dark Sun

Eurasian Shamanism