

PENANCE

World Lore & History

Absolution Through Steel

Generated world-overview

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Penance: Absolution Through Steel

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The Cataclysm: The Sundering

Before You Read: Understanding the World

For a complete explanation of **why fantasy creatures exist**, **how this relates to our reality**, and **the true nature of the three-layered cosmos (Material World, Feywild, and Void)**, see:

Cosmology & Origins - The definitive guide to Penance's alternate-Earth setting.

Short version: Penance takes place on an alternate Earth where magic and non-human species (elves, dwarves, fae) existed in hiding for millennia. Nikolas Theslar was a human scientist who unknowingly destroyed the world by tearing open the dimensional barriers between all three layers of reality.

What Happened (Historical Truth)

Year 0 - The Sundering Event

In the height of the **Old World's Golden Age**, the great artificer-mage **Nikolas Theslar** believed he had discovered the secret to infinite energy—a method to harness the planet's own magnetic field and broadcast power wirelessly across the entire world. No more hunger, no more war over resources, no more darkness.

His grand experiment was conducted at the **Sibarian Wastes Research Station**, a massive tower complex built at the convergence of ley lines. The theory was sound. The calculations were perfect.

But the world itself was not empty.

When Theslar activated **The Engine** (then called the “Theslar Engine” by scientists), it didn’t just tap the magnetic field—it **ripped open the boundary between the material world and the Void**, the dimension where raw magic festers like cosmic radiation. The Engine became a tear in reality itself.

The Immediate Effects

Hour 0-6: The Pulse - Electromagnetic shockwave radiates from Siberia at the speed of light - All active technology—arcane or mechanical—**instantly fails** - Skyships plummet from the heavens - Artifice engines explode - Communication crystals shatter - Millions die in the first six hours

Day 1-30: The Scream - Magical energy floods the world like radiation - Mages and sensitive individuals go mad, burning from the inside - Reality “soft spots” appear—places where the Void bleeds through - Creatures from the Void (later called **Abominations**) begin manifesting - The **Taint** enters the world—corrupting magic twisting living tissue

Year 0-10: The Collapse - Civilization crumbles without infrastructure - Kingdoms fragment into city-states - Warlords, cults, and survivor enclaves emerge - Knowledge is lost as libraries burn, scholars die - The **New Dark Age** begins

Year 10-50: The Adaptation - Survivors discover **Soulstones**—crystalline formations that appear near Void rifts - These stones can store and regulate Tainted magic safely (mostly) - Early attempts to weaponize them fail catastrophically - The Church of Absolution forms (Year 12), declaring the Cataclysm divine punishment - Verdant Covenant unifies (Year 34) after Elven enclaves sign the Rootmarch Accord - Nomad Collective emerges (Year 47) from displaced refugee caravans

Year 50-150: The Casket Era Dawn - First primitive Caskets built—armored suits powered by Soulstones - Knights and warriors can now channel magic through mechanical intermediaries - Caskets become the ultimate weapon: mobile, powerful, terrifying - New arms race begins between surviving factions

Year 150-250: The Factional Wars - Major power blocs emerge and consolidate - Church of Absolution consolidates doctrine after internal reforms (Year 134) - The Exchange formalizes (Year 156) as neutral trade network between warring factions - Dwarven forge-cities become industrial powerhouses - The Ossuarium establishes permanent necropolis territories (Year 78)

Year 250-350: The Mutation Age - Vestige Bloodlines emerge as distinct faction after Exodus (Year 352) - Emergent Syndicate appears from Sibarian ground zero (Year 381) - Reality fractures increase in frequency and severity - Fae incursions become more frequent and unpredictable - Nomad Collective masters survival in the most hostile regions

Year 350-437: The Long War - No faction can achieve decisive victory - Casket technology reaches plateau of sophistication - Asymmetric warfare becomes standard (each faction uses unique Casket designs) - Generations of Remnants have known nothing but war - Hope for peace or restoration becomes distant memory

Year 437 (Present Day): - World has been fractured for over four centuries - Nine major factions locked in endless cycles of conflict - Casket technology is mature, sophisticated, and deadly - Void rifts still appear daily, spawning monsters - The Engine in Sibaria still pulses after 437 years, still tears reality - Some seek to destroy it; others want to control it; most just try to survive it

Competing Theories (In-Universe Beliefs)

Different factions have different interpretations of the Cataclysm:

The Church of Absolution (Human Dominant)

“The Sundering was Divine Punishment”

- The Old World grew arrogant, playing god with forces beyond mortal ken
- The Cataclysm was the Creator’s wrath, cleansing the world of hubris
- **Soulstones are fragments of fallen angels**, cursed remnants of celestial beings cast down

- Only through **Penance**—endless atonement via suffering and sacrifice—can humanity earn forgiveness
- Casket pilots are **Penitent Knights**, bearing the weight of sin in iron shells
- Using Soulstones is spiritually dangerous but necessary evil
- **Goal:** Destroy the Sibarian Engine, seal the Void, restore divine favor

Cultural Impact: Humans build gothic Caskets covered in prayer scrolls, chains, and religious iconography. They call their pilots “Penitents” and treat Casket combat as sacred ritual.

The Verdant Covenant (Elven Philosophy)

“The Sundering was Ecological Murder”

- The Old World **violated the natural order**, forcing technology where nature should flow
- Theslar’s Engine didn’t “tear reality”—it **poisoned the World Tree’s roots**
- The planet itself is alive (the **Worldheart**), and ley lines are its veins
- **Soulstones are crystallized Worldheart blood**, the planet’s attempt to heal itself
- The Void isn’t another dimension—it’s the **death-dream of a dying world**
- Abominations are the planet’s immune system attacking the infection (us)

Cultural Impact: Elves build Caskets from living wood, integrate nature into machinery, and view combat as “pruning the diseased.” They seek to **harmonize** with the wounded world, not dominate it.

Goal: Stabilize the Worldheart, heal ley line corruption, achieve symbiosis with Soulstone energy

The Forge-Guilds (Dwarven Pragmatism)

“The Sundering was an Engineering Failure”

- Theslar was a **brilliant idiot**—right theory, catastrophic execution
- The Engine is still running, still bleeding energy
- **Soulstones are solidified exotic radiation**, byproduct of dimensional bleed
- The Void is real but not mystical—it’s a **parallel dimension of pure energy**
- Abominations are just exotic lifeforms adapted to high-energy environments
- **This is a solvable problem** if you have enough runecraft and stubbornness

Cultural Impact: Dwarves treat the Cataclysm as the worst industrial accident in history. Their Caskets are overengineered, covered in fail-safes, redundancies, and safety runes. They’re here to **fix what Theslar broke**, even if it takes a thousand years.

Goal: Reverse-engineer The Engine, stabilize or shut it down properly, master Soulstone physics

The Scrap-Clans (Orcish Realism)

“Who Cares? World’s Always Been Broken”

- Orcs don’t have ancient libraries or scholar traditions to mourn
- To them, the Cataclysm is **just another apocalypse**
- Strong survive, weak die, that’s how it’s always been
- **Soulstones are power-rocks**—if it makes you stronger, you use it
- Taint is just another scar; Abominations are just tougher prey
- No interest in “fixing” the world—this is the world now, adapt or perish

Cultural Impact: Orcish Caskets are brutal, improvised, aggressive. Scrap-Clans view Casket combat as the ultimate test—if you can survive piloting a ticking bomb of corrupted magic wrapped in scrap metal, you deserve to lead.

Goal: No unified goal. Get stronger, claim territory, fight worthy opponents, die gloriously.

The Ossuary (Undead Perspective)

“Death is No Longer the End—We Are Proof”

- The Cataclysm **shattered the boundary between life and death**
- Necromantic energy is easier to channel post-Sundering
- **Soulstones are crystallized life-force**, stolen from the living by Void exposure
- The Undead are the **logical next step** in evolution—no need for flesh, no fear, no corruption (already dead)
- Abominations are failed resurrections, crude Void-spawn mockeries of true undeath

Cultural Impact: Undead view Caskets as **Bonecage Sentinels**, their chance to continue existing with purpose. They’re patient, methodical, and utterly without fear of Taint (they’re already corrupted).

Goal: Achieve true immortality, perfect the undead Casket pilot (no degradation, infinite operation), outlast all living factions.

The Wyrd Conclave (Fae Interpretation)

“The Sundering Opened the Door, and We Walked Through”

- Fae existed in the **Feywild**, a parallel realm of dream-logic and bargains
- Theslar’s Engine **merged dimensions**, creating overlap zones
- **Soulstones are condensed possibility**, crystallized “what-if” energy
- Reality is now **negotiable** in ways it wasn’t before
- Abominations are beings who failed to adapt to multi-dimensional existence
- The Fae adapted instantly—they’ve always lived between worlds

Cultural Impact: Fae Caskets are works of art and terror—mirrored surfaces, impossible geometries, beautiful and wrong. They view the Cataclysm as **opportunity**, a chance to expand influence into the material world.

Goal: Expand Feywild influence, maintain dimensional overlap, ensure the Void never fully seals (it's useful to them).

The Draconid Remembrance (Ancient Knowledge)

“We Saw This Coming”

- Dragons are **ancient**, predating human civilization
- Draconids (dragonborn descendants) remember the **old warnings**
- Dragons hoarded Soulstones **before the Cataclysm**—they knew what they were
- **Soulstones are dragon hearts**, fossilized remains of dead dragons exposed to Void energy during previous Cataclysms (yes, this happened before)
- Theslar didn't cause the first Sundering—he caused the **latest one**
- History is cyclical: rise, hubris, cataclysm, dark age, rise again

Cultural Impact: Draconids are fatalistic but proud. Their Caskets incorporate ancient dragon relics—real fossilized scales, claws, horns. They view this era as just another cycle, and their goal is to **survive long enough to rebuild properly this time**.

Goal: Preserve knowledge, prevent the next Cataclysm, reclaim dragon legacy.

Vestige Bloodlines (Chimeric Survivors)

“We Didn't Choose This. The Void Did”

- The Sundering didn't just kill humans—it **mutated** them
- Early exposure to Void radiation caused **genetic corruption**: human-animal hybrids
- Not shapeshifters or voluntary transformations—this is **forced evolution**
- **Soulstones are stabilizers**, the only thing preventing further mutation
- Without Soulstones, Blighted continue degenerating until they become Abominations
- They didn't ask to become monsters, but they've learned to weaponize what they've become

Cultural Impact: Vestige Bloodlines are nomadic, hunted by every “pure” faction. Their Caskets are **adaptive bio-mechanical hybrids**—part machine, part living tissue that shifts and mutates. They’re survivors in the truest sense: rejected by their former species, feared by others, forced to become predators to stay alive.

Traits: Enhanced senses, animal instincts, physical mutations (claws, enhanced strength, night vision), constant risk of further degradation. Every generation births fewer stable offspring. They know they’re dying out.

Goal: Find a cure for the Blight, gain recognition as people (not monsters), survive long enough to stabilize their genome.

Emergent Syndicate (Arthropod Collective)

“Evolution Demanded Sacrifice. We Answered”

- Pre-Sundering, they were **human researchers** at Sibarica, exposed to the Engine at ground zero
- Void energy fused them with **arthropod genetic templates** stored in bio-labs
- Not mutation—**metamorphosis**. They are post-human, multi-limbed, chitinous, hive-minded
- **Soulstones are neural bridges**, allowing individual consciousness within the collective
- They remember being human, but those memories feel distant, irrelevant
- Abominations are failures; the Syndicate are **successes**—they adapted perfectly

Cultural Impact: Syndicate view their transformation as **inevitable evolution**. Their Caskets are insectoid walkers—multi-legged, armored in carapace plating, bristling with sensory antennae. They communicate through pheromone signals and clicking mandibles. Other factions find them deeply unsettling—too organized, too alien, too willing to sacrifice individuals for hive efficiency.

Traits: Hive communication, regenerative chitin, compound vision, limb redundancy, complete lack of individual self-preservation instinct. A single Syndicate member will sacrifice itself without hesitation if it benefits the hive.

Goal: Perfect the transformation, expand the hive, prove that post-human evolution is the only path to survival in a Void-tainted world.

Geography: The Shattered Realms

The Sibarian Wastes (The Wound)

Status: Uninhabitable Exclusion Zone

- Ground zero of the Cataclysm
- **The Engine** still stands, a miles-high tower pulsing with reality-distorting energy
- Void rifts appear constantly; Abominations spawn by the thousands
- Reality is “soft”—physics don’t work consistently
- Expeditions into the Wastes rarely return
- **Soulstones grow like crystals** near the Engine; scavengers risk death for them

Factions Present: - Desperate scavengers - Suicidal Church crusades (trying to destroy the Engine) - Undead expeditions (don’t need to breathe the toxic air) - Fae observers (studying dimensional collapse for fun)

The Penitent Kingdoms (Human Heartlands)

Status: Fragmented Theocracy

- Cluster of city-states unified by the Church of Absolution
- Gothic architecture, oppressive religious law, constant guilt culture
- Casket pilots are **Penitent Knights**, treated as holy warriors
- Inquisition hunts Taint-corrupted individuals
- Workshop-forges controlled by Church, strict equipment regulations
- **Capital:** Absolon, the Iron Cathedral-City

Culture: Medieval crusader aesthetic, sin-obsessed, rigid hierarchy, distrustful of non-humans.

The Verdant Enclaves (Elven Territories)

Status: Isolationist Eco-States

- Scattered forest realms, some mobile (giant walking trees)
- Druids and rangers maintain ley line sanctuaries
- Caskets are **sacred guardians**, not weapons of conquest
- Hostile to industrialization, trade only for necessities
- **Capital:** The Grove of First Light (location shifts seasonally)

Culture: Nature-integrated technology, slow and deliberate, long-term thinking, contempt for “quick solutions.”

The Forge-Holds (Dwarven Mountain Kingdoms)

Status: Industrial Powerhouses

- Mountain fortress-cities, deep underground workshops
- Most advanced Soulstone research and runecraft
- Caskets are **mass-produced** (relatively), standardized
- Sell equipment to other factions (for hefty prices)
- **Capital:** Ironhearth, the Eternal Forge

Culture: Engineering excellence, profit-driven, grudge-keepers, suspicious of magic but pragmatic about using it.

The Ashland Clans (Orcish Badlands)

Status: Tribal Confederacy

- Volcanic wastes, resource-poor, constant tribal warfare
- Scrap-Caskets built from salvaged Old World ruins
- Might-makes-right culture; strongest Casket pilot leads
- Raid other factions for supplies and glory
- **Capital:** None (largest mobile warcamp is “the Krush”)

Culture: Brutal meritocracy, oral tradition, honor through combat, surprisingly egalitarian (anyone who can pilot a Casket can lead).

The Bone-Marches (Undead Frontier)

Status: Necropolis Territories

- Mist-shrouded borderlands, graveyards the size of cities
- Necromancers of the Ossuarium rule with undead enforcers
- Living visitors are... tolerated (barely)
- Caskets are crewed by skeletal or ghostly pilots
- **Capital:** The Ossuary Throne (castle built from bones)

Culture: Quiet, patient, utterly alien to the living. No need for food/sleep means constant productivity. Creepy but efficient.

The Shimmerlands (Fae Territory)

Status: Reality-Optional Zones

- Overlap regions where Feywild bleeds into material world
- Geography shifts; time flows inconsistently
- Beautiful and dangerous—flowers that sing, forests that hunt

- Fae treat mortals as curiosities or bargaining chips
- **Capital:** The Wyrd Conclave's Endless Dusk (exists in multiple places at once)

Culture: Deals and bargains, nothing is free, everything has a price. Beautiful, capricious, utterly inhuman.

The Dragon Peaks (Draconid Isolates)

Status: Ancient Mountain Territories

- High-altitude fortress-cities built into ancient dragon lairs
- Isolationist but will trade knowledge for resources
- Caskets incorporate fossilized dragon parts (scales, bones, hearts)
- Repository of pre-Cataclysm knowledge
- **Capital:** Skyhold, the Last Roost

Culture: Scholarly, proud, fatalistic. View other races as children playing with forces they don't understand.

The Soulstone Mystery: What Are They Really?

The Truth (Game Master knowledge, not known to players):

Soulstones are **all of the above theories at once**: - Fragments of destroyed celestial beings (Church is right) - Crystallized Worldheart blood (Elves are right) - Exotic radiation byproduct (Dwarves are right) - Fossilized dragon hearts exposed to Void energy (Draconids are right) - Condensed life-force (Undead are right) - Crystallized possibility (Fae are right)

Why? Because the Void doesn't follow singular rules. It's a dimension of **pure chaos and potential**. Soulstones form when material reality tries to "heal" Void exposure—but the result reflects the beliefs and expectations of nearby sapient beings.

Near human settlements? They crystallize as “divine fragments.” Near elven groves? They grow like roots. Near dragon lairs? They incorporate fossilized dragon essence.

This is intentionally never revealed in-game. The mystery is better than the answer.

Current Era: The Casket Wars (Year 437)

The Political Situation

Fragile Peace Through Mutually Assured Destruction

- No faction can conquer the others (Caskets make total war too costly)
- **Arena Combat** becomes proxy warfare—disputes settled by champion duels
- **Monster Raids** from the Sibarian Wastes unite factions temporarily
- **Soulstone scarcity** drives conflict—everyone needs them, supply is limited
- **The Engine** still pulses; some want it destroyed, others want it controlled

The Three Great Questions

1. **Can the Cataclysm be reversed?** (Church says yes via penance; Dwarves say yes via engineering; Elves say yes via harmony; Fae say “why would we?”)
2. **Should Soulstones be used at all?** (Necessary evil? Corrupting poison? Sacred tools? Just rocks?)
3. **What happens if The Engine is destroyed vs. controlled?** (End the Taint? Collapse all magic? Kill the world? Unlock godhood?)

Your campaign can explore any or all of these.

Storytelling Hooks for Campaigns

Campaign Arc 1: “The Scavenger’s Crusade”

- Players are scavengers raiding the Sibarian Wastes for Soulstones
- Each mission pushes deeper toward The Engine
- Corruption increases; moral choices about using forbidden power
- Climax: Reach the Engine, decide its fate

Campaign Arc 2: “The Arena Champions”

- Players are Arena pilots fighting for their faction
- Political intrigue, rivalries, honor duels
- Discover conspiracy—someone is sabotaging matches
- Climax: Uncover plot to assassinate faction leaders, prevent war

Campaign Arc 3: “The Monster Hunters”

- Players defend settlements from Abomination raids
- Each monster has unique AI deck (Kingdom Death-style)
- Track settlement growth/decline based on success
- Climax: Discover Abominations are organized, intelligent, and have a leader

Campaign Arc 4: “The Heretics”

- Players are exiled/heretics piloting illegal Caskets
- On the run from Inquisition, hunted by bounty hunters
- Must uncover evidence of Church corruption to clear names
- Climax: Expose conspiracy, choose redemption or revenge

World-Building Complete!

All major world-building systems have been designed:

- [x] **Iconic NPC Pilots** (one per faction) — [iconic-npcs.md](#)
- 5 deeply flawed, memorable characters with unique mechanics
- Sister Vex (Church), Kess (Elves), Durr (Dwarves), Thresh (Undead), Mockingbird (Fae)
- [x] **Settlement Mechanics** (campaign base-building) — [settlement-mechanics.md](#)
- 14 buildings across 3 tiers + 6 faction-specific buildings
- Resource management (Credits, Scrap, Population, Morale)
- Settlement events, disasters, and growth paths
- [x] **Theslar Engine Mechanics** (interactive world threat) — [theslar-engine-mechanics.md](#)
- Instability Track (doomsday clock from 0-20)
- 5 different endgames (Destroy, Stabilize, Control, Redirect, Exploit)
- Environmental hazards and timed The Pulses
- [x] **Faction Relationship Tracker** (political web) — [faction-relationships.md](#)
- 7-tier relationship scale (-3 War to +3 Allied)
- Detailed relationship matrix with historical grudges
- Player influence system and faction victory conditions
- [x] **Historical Chronicle Entries** (world flavor) — [chronicle-entries.md](#)
- 10 non-generic historical fragments
- Reveals consequences, raises questions, establishes tone

Additional Campaign Systems

- [x] **Pilot Scars & Traits** (permanent character development) — [**pilot-scars-traits.md**](#)
- 80+ unique Scars across 4 categories (Physical, Corruption, Trauma, Combat)
- Kingdom Death-inspired permanent character progression
- Faction-specific Scar tables
- [x] **Loot Tables** (rewards & scavenging) — [**loot-tables.md**](#)
- 4 rarity tiers (Common, Uncommon, Rare, Legendary)
- Specialized tables (Abominations, NPC Pilots, Sibarian Wastes)
- Faction trade goods and crafting system

“The world died screaming. We built tombs of iron to survive it. Now we pilot those tombs into battle, seeking absolution one kill at a time.”