

Sangfielle 01: The Curse of Eastern Folly Pt. 1

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Opening Narration

AUSTIN (*as narrator*): People will tell you that the Heartland got sick about two hundred years ago. When the dust came, reality left and the panic set in. But trust me. It was ailing long before that.

[*Sangfielle* theme begins playing]

AUSTIN (*as narrator*): Don't get me wrong. You could understand why someone would die for it in the old days. Greens and golds, bread and honey. But around the time those well-dressed devils of Aldomina swept in five, six hundred years ago, that's when things started to turn. They wanted to fence it in: rows of corn and cane, columns of people, nations reduced to gardens. Is it any wonder the

ground itself started to ache? No one noticed until about two hundred years ago, of course. See, the truth of the Heartland, the truth of the world, is: it cannot be fenced in. So, the storms came. And they brought a deep sickness to the plains and valleys. Soil turned barren, animals twisted in form and character, unkind spirits swept through the fields, farmhouses, and boroughs. Reality began to draw its own course: unpredictable, though never dishonest. And as if in response, a rigid mechanical malediction arrived, delivered by the cursed railway called The Shape. To be near places touched by such a fearsome structure was to hear a drum be played too on beat, to see a circle drawn so smoothly as to make you stumble from its perfect curve. Those who could, those who held the whips and the pocketbooks, fled. Those left behind tried to find stability, tried to make a home on this re-frontier of ash, metal, and ichor. Aldomina called this territory San Fiel, but there ain't nothing saintly about this place. Now we use the name that our ancestors, those forced to work this land, or forced from it, called it under their breath: Sangfielle, the Blood Fields.

And if you ask me, it's holier now than it ever was under Aldomina. For all the terror, for all the supposed unreality, there is something about this land. It is a quilt as much as it is a landscape, each destination unique, shaped by its history and touched by the Heartland's truth. Cities built into canyon walls, plantation houses turned into well-appointed crypts, temples revisited by their once-absent spirits, blessed by the cackling of ever-faithful adherents. And there, in a little alcove, in the northern half of a mountain range that cuts this place in two, there's an old mining town whose story is about to be written.

[*Sangfielle* theme ends]

Introduction

AUSTIN: Welcome to Friends at the Table, an actual play podcast focused on critical worldbuilding, smart characterization, and fun interactions between good friends. I am

your host, Austin Walker, and we are here to kick off the yet-unnamed Season 7. I am joined today by the whole cast; Keith Carberry —

KEITH: [Speaking rapidly] Hi you started so fast I didn't even get a chance to react to the music that was really good, I loved that.

[Laughter]

AUSTIN: It's good music, Jack did a good job.

JACK: Thank you!

AUSTIN: Keith?

[More laughter]

AUSTIN: Where can people find you?

KEITH: Oh yeah I guess I'll plug — uh, you can find me on Twitter [@keithjcarberry](https://twitter.com/keithjcarberry), you can find the Let's Plays that I do at youtube.com/runbutton.

AUSTIN: Sylvi Clare.

SYLVI: Hey, I'm Sylvi, you can find me on Twitter [@sylvisurfer](https://twitter.com/sylvisurfer) and my show Emojidrome wherever you get your podcasts.

AUSTIN: Art Martinez-Tebbel.

ART: You can find me on Twitter [@atebbel](https://twitter.com/atebbel), you can check out some of our show's merchandise at Fangamer, and if you really like Jack, you should really be following [@friends_table](https://twitter.com/friends_table).

ALI: [quizzically] Hmm...

DRE: Oh, gosh.

AUSTIN: [confused] Wh-what? That seemed —

[confused sounds from ALL, then nervous laughter]

AUSTIN: OK, Jack? De Quidt. Is here.

JACK: Hi, I'm Jack — I'm a little unsettled, um, you can find me on —

[more laughter]

AUSTIN: It's a horror season, so...

JACK: It's a horror season, we're making a horror season. You can find me on Twitter [@notquitereal](#) and you can buy any of the music featured on the show, including that theme you just heard, which is not what these people just heard, at [notquitereal.bandcamp.com](#).

AUSTIN: Ali Acampora.

ALI: Um, hi! You can find me over [@ali_west](#) on Twitter. If you enjoy Star Wars and are interested in mine and other people's opinions, you can go to [@more_civilized](#) on Twitter, and I would also appreciate if followed [@friends_table](#), thank you!

AUSTIN: Andrew Lee Swan.

DRE: Hey, you can find me on twitter [@swandre3000](#), but first you should just go to [@friends_table](#).

[ALI laughs]

JACK: [*confused*] What's happening?

AUSTIN: And Janine Hawkins.

JANINE: Hey, I'm [@bleatingheart](#) on twitter. [*pause*] That's it. That's my intro.

AUSTIN: That's it, that's — you can buy Hitman 3, uh, from any of the digital distribution services.

[ALI laughs]

[overlapping]

JANINE: From any of four stores.

AUSTIN: That's not true, actually. It's only on Epic on PC right now, right?

ART: And definitely not at @friends_table.

ALI: Should I start retweeting some Hitman... [laughter]

JACK: If you like Hitman, you should definitely follow...

JANINE: We have a merch store now, we — IO has a merch store if you want merch.

AUSTIN: There you go.

JANINE: Like some people in my comments, in my twitter, who ask for merch sometimes, and I'm like, "I don't know what to tell you..." [laughing] I just make them say the things...

[laughter, crosstalk]

AUSTIN: [sarcastic] Yeah, that's not the job I do...

KEITH: Can I buy uh — Can I buy a brand Agent 47 garrote?

[nervous laughter]

AUSTIN: I hope not, Jesus.

JACK: I don't think there are —

JANINE: I bet international shipping would be a horror on things like that. You can get those metal posters, there's like a limited edition metal poster, it's like, metal...

[overlapping]

AUSTIN: Agent 47 could kill someone with a metal poster, easy.

KEITH: There are legitimate uses for a garrote, you could use it to cut cheese.

SYLVI: There should be an Agent 47 brand head-shaving kit.

ALL: Hmm! [approvingly]

SYLVI: That should be a thing.

AUSTIN: That's a good idea. That's clever. Yeah.

SYLVI: Thank you.

ART: There's some nice stuff here.

[laugh]

AUSTIN: As always, you can —

JANINE: It's okay.

ART: Do you, do you get a piece of this?

JANINE: Of course not. I mean in that I still have a job, sure.

DRE: [laughs]

AUSTIN: As always you can support the show by going to friendsatthetable.cash or supporting us on Patreon, and because this is the first episode of a new season, I just want to give a quick run-down of what the show is, and then we'll talk about what the season is, and then we'll get into what we're playing today, um —

Friends at the Table is an Actual Play show, which is to say it's a show in which we play table-top roleplaying games in order to collaboratively tell a story. Um, we do our best to tell stories about interesting places that we come up with, that's the quote-unquote "critical worldbuilding" in the intro. We kind of do our best to tell, to create spaces,

histories, places, all that stuff, you know, factions. And that's like a key thing that we do here, which is why we often kick off our campaigns with some sort of world-building game. And we're doing that today with a game called *The Ground Itself* by Everest Pipkin, who is an excellent game designer and also just kind of like — God, how do I describe, Everest's total output, um... Creates — Is an artist in multiple formats who creates really interesting things, um, shout-outs to Everest. We are going to use *The Ground Itself* to create a Haven, one little corner of the world inside of what I introduced in the intro as, well I don't know what I'll call it in the intro in the final sense, but what we've been referring to abstractly as The Heartland, this territory in between a number of other places that was once the sort of agricultural center of a vast empire and has now kind of turned. We will be, in the future, playing the game *Heart* which is published by — why am I blanking on the name of the publisher?

JACK: Rowan, Rook, & Deckard?

AUSTIN: Yes, that's it. Rowan, Rook, & Deckard — and is by Grant Howitt and Christopher Taylor. That's a game that has a very in-built setting of its own that we have done a lot of work already and are going to continue to move away from in some ways, not because that stuff isn't cool, but because of our interest in building a world that is our own and filling in our own gaps. And so we've created a space here that we referenced in the intro, of these kind of different areas in the world, and The Heartland is in the middle of all of them, but I don't want to do a big lore dump because part of what makes this world so interesting is there is a lot of empty space in this weird Heartland, right?

The things that people really need to know is that there used to be a big empire that was here, things went really bad, things got so bad, in fact, that all of the surrounding powers-that-be built a big city around the place that is filled with like, magical wards and stuff meant to keep it locked in there and keep it from spreading to all of their land. Um, and, we're somewhere in the middle here, right? *Heart* as a game is built around the idea of, I mean, it's drawing on things like *Stalker*, the film and I guess the game, and *Roadside Picnic* the book, *Annihilation*, but also on things like *Bloodborne*, and *Weird*

West stuff, and a bunch of other things around this idea of delving deeper and deeper towards this kind of corrupt reality-bending Heart at the center of a vast, unexplored — maybe not unexplored but now desolate — under-city, basically. And we've changed that to be about these kind of big, almost frontier-like open areas, and we'll still have some cities and stuff like that, but we're using that to tell a story that I think touches a bunch of different genre-spaces.

When I first pitched this to everybody and sent around our worldbuilding doc, the kind of touchstones I included in terms of "what are the basics," was like: it is dark fantasy, a little bit of industrial fantasy, some gothic horror, some cosmic horror, some weird west stuff. This is Hellboy and Bloodborne and Witchhunter Robin and Dracula and Pyre, the Supergiant game, and a little bit of the Witcher and Full Metal Alchemist, a little bit of like, the Castelvania anime. We'll probably touch some, like Marielda stuff, a little bit, in terms of vibe, since we've touched on that a little bit before. It is witches and vampires and monster hunters with cool gadgets and techniques, um, and alchemists and some old gods and the world on its head. It is cosmic horror by way of Borges instead of Lovecraft, and I'm excited to get into it. So — are there any like big-picture questions before we start filling in some basics and playing this game?

I guess I should say we're not playing our characters today, no one's playing their character, we're not doing character creation today or anything like that, we're doing like our equivalent of what we did at the start of Marielda, or some of the Road to Partizan stuff, of playing a game to create one little corner of the world, and what we're going to create is what Heart calls a Haven, which is a location where, like, it is safe enough to live here. [laugh] Because down here, in the Heart, or I guess out here in the Heartland, there are lots of places that are deeply unsafe, that are, um, you know, the rules of nature do not apply any more, things have changed in ways that are unpredictable and strange, whether through magical means or otherwise. And so, yeah, that's the premise for us — we're going to create a little town, or a big town, we'll see how the game goes, that will be the kind of headquarters of the Heart game that we go on to play. So, let me open up The Ground Itself, um... and start reading! Does everyone have the ground itself in front of them?

ALI, DRE, JACK, JANINE: Mm-hmm, yup.

AUSTIN: We can like take turns, reading parts, if that makes sense. Okay! I'm going to read the introduction.

Reading from The Ground Itself [00:12:16]

AUSTIN (*reading from The Ground Itself*): "This is a game about places over time. Think about places that have been important to you: your childhood fort under the rose bush, your first apartment (the one with the view), the town where your grandmother spent her last few years. Or think about places that have been or will be important to others: a city-state in revolt, an ant colony, a generation ship four hundred centuries into its voyage towards another star. Although there may be times during the game when we are compelled to widen or narrow our focus, this is not possible for us. The story we are building is about this place, this field, this star, this city, this tree, this crossroads. No matter how we feel about our characters, if they leave our frame we may not follow. Our camera is anchored to our place, and may not pivot or stray. Remember that places have memory: that what has happened here is always, in some small or big way, written into the walls, the stones, or the future of the people who continue to live here. Fundamentally, this is a game about the echoes and traces we leave for others after we are gone."

AUSTIN: So we are playing with more people than is recommended, this is a game for two to five players —

ALL: [laughter]

AUSTIN: — as always, there are eight of us here, that is a lot, um, so we have done some changes to the basic rules. I think Art and I kind of hit the thing we want to do, more or less, but if we advance to Getting Started we can keep reading and, um, I'll talk about what our changes are as we hit them. I'm not gonna go through all of the "Getting Started" stuff, because it's like, "make sure everyone can look at the book," and, uh,

"clear the tabletop of extra clutter," "separate the cards into stacks." The long and short is: There are two decks of cards here, and I'll make those visible in a second. One of them is the face cards — and that is just the face cards, not including aces, aces are not considered a face card in this — and then the other deck is ones through tens. We need one die, but we're using Roll20, so we'll just roll a die with that. We have, uh, I guess we can use the scratch dock as our collective scratch dock as is recommended, I'm just gonna make more space at the very top for us to write stuff in. And then as always, we've already gone over Lines and Veils off-mic, well, not off-mic, we were on microphones with each other, before we start recording, we have our Lines and Veils, we have the things we don't wanna get too close to. And as always if anyone ever wants to stop a scene, you can just say so, or message me privately, and I will bring a scene to a stop and we can slow things down and talk about what's going on. Um, I'm trying to think if there's anything else on this page — no — let's keep on moving. So! Jack, would you like to read the "Our Setting" Section on page 6?

JACK: Sure!

JACK (*reading*): "The setting for our game should be decided collaboratively, around the table. This may be emergent: for example, one player may suggest a place that involves animals. Another player may amend this suggestion to mean a zoo. A third player may agree but suggest making it a zoo planet, established as a biodiversity reserve in the far future. You may feel out multiple options, but try not to say no to others' suggestions. Rather, build on top of existent ideas, or ask clarifying questions to create a place that is everyone's. Remember that everything we see happen over the course of our game occurs in this single location. We cannot move outside of our established frame or see any actions or events elsewhere. Be prepared to spend time in the place that you choose. This place does not need to be thoroughly mapped out. For now, the barest description that may be summed up in a few sentences may suffice. We will discover it together during play. Decide this now. The process should go around the table, and take no more than a few minutes. Everyone should contribute."

AUSTIN: So, just to get everyone on the same page, about a week ago, maybe two weeks, I sent everyone on the call a document with some very big-picture details about the world beyond the Heartland, and the timeline leading up to the Heartland being as strange as it is today. That document reflects my own worldbuilding work but also, uh, like a synthesis of a billion elements from conversations that I had with everyone here, both as a group, but also independently. I'll note that some of those conversations which were about your Heart characters and their backgrounds and the factions that they're connected to and their histories and all that stuff, those conversations will go up on the Patreon as a Drawing Maps tier thing in the coming weeks, but the listener doesn't have any of that stuff in front of them right now, so let me just try to quickly summarize the big five powers of the world outside of the Heartland, because they'll come up in conversation here and there, even though I don't think that they're that important, but let me just do my lore dump.

The Heartland, which I'm sure we'll have a real name for by the time this episode comes out, is more or less the center of what was once a vast empire called Aldomina, sometimes called The Dominion, and The Dominion was comprised by, at one point, five Cantons. (Thanks to Jack for the word canton, great fit.) The first of these Cantons is to the northeast, and it is Aldomina itself, AKA the Throne of Dominion. This was once a fledgling human empire, but like, 1800, 1900 years ago or something it was taken over by a bunch of devils who were desperate to escape from Hell, um, and they pushed what was already a spreading empire even further in that direction. We'll talk about them more in the future I'm sure, maybe, I dunno — but I think that they very much have that like, big medieval Europe, Catholicism vibe, they kept that, maybe because they were already in line with it, but maybe because like, "This is good PR."

The second Canton is to the north, to the direct north of the Heartland, and is called the Pale Magistratum. It is where the kind of goat-like people that, uh, I don't know if we've talked about them yet, are from, and — we'll get more descriptions of them eventually, I almost gave up a player character. It is a rocky and kind of ashen snow-covered place and as its name suggests, the defining social feature is its kind of Holy Magistrates. They serve a goddess called Fulmina, who is the Goddess of Immediate Justice, it was

a place in ancient times, kind of, you know not ancient but, previous times before becoming what they are now, of very limited resources, and the cultural response to that was to police resource use, basically, literally police it, in a really bad way, um, so they created this kind of judge-jury-and-executioner super-cops. These are like, our deeply unsympathetic US Marshalls dressed in black dusters carrying holy guns and chasing fugitives, so you know, be on the lookout — not that any of you are fugitives, but...

To the Northwest, and separate from the Magistratum, separated from it by a huge mountain, that mountain range that goes all the way down the map here (which, I'll put the map in the description too, it's an OK map, I did an alright job, I think, anyway). That is the Unschola Republica, which was once the Third Canton. It is a place where there are alchemists, and magic practitioners, and I've written here "crypto-theological scholars". It's primarily a human place, which is rare, humans are the only species to not have horns or spines or anything like that, which is fun, a thing I only just realized. They used a conflict from another one of the Cantons that I'm about to talk about as an opportunity to break away from Aldomina and get out from the kind of strict magical regulation that the devils had placed on their magical research, which, you know, the devils know, magic is powerful. Don't do it. Please. Don't do it the way you're doing it, you'll get more powerful than us.

To the West and Southwest are the Free Seas of Kay'va, which are a bunch of islands and some coastal territory, which was once the 4th Canton and was compromised part of, though not all of, the Heartland was probably the bulk of, the Seas, the Islands, etc. are all part of the Dominion's agricultural base, which is to say where it kept many of its plantations. Its sugar cane was grown there, a lot of tropical foods and fruits were kept there, a lot of fishing, etc. It was primarily done by the Kay'van who've been turned into slaves, both here in the Heartland and of course in the now-Free Seas. The Kay'van are sort of standing humanoid seahorse people with their skin pulled over like, armored plates and spines. Sometimes they're very colorful, sometimes they have horns, like unicorn-style horns, sometimes they have just the spines all over their bodies, you know, play with this, I don't know, I haven't decided like core details on this stuff yet, they're cool.

Also let me show you how cool they are, uh, the Slave Revolt was led by someone named Cecile Kartine, who was the founder of what is now called Kartinism, which is like a worker-collectivist philosophy, it is, listen, I made cool seahorse people proto-communists, it's the thing I did, they have a cool sigil, I'll describe it in the episode description in your podcast player or on the website, I'll put more stuff in the description about all these different places also. Anyway! When this group revolted about 300 years ago, that is when the Unschola Republica also bounced and used the opportunity to break away too.

Finally to the southeast is the Fifth Canton, because Aldomina still considers Kay'van and Unschola to be part of them, the Fifth Canton is called the Protectorate Kingdom of Ojantan. Ojantan was only conquered about 350 years ago, 50 years before the Kay'van revolution, and there's a lot of resentment there, to Aldomina and probably to their own leadership because the Ojantani, who are big buffalo and oxen people, big hairy furry bovine humanoids, I don't think there's just like bulls, they're furrier in mind. I saw a big buffalo picture and I was like what if that was a person, that looks cool. Um, anyway. [laugh] They were a long time ago I think they had something like a caste system, more complex than what we think of when we say a caste system. There's some flexibility to it, and more importantly there was a lot of like, dignity along every line.

You know, throughout history when I think about caste systems I've read about, I've read about caste systems from all over the world, you tend to have some sort of social stratification, and this was not that at first. Until, um, kind of seeing the more stratified Dominion stuff, the leadership inside of Ojantan was like, what if that, what if politicians and generals and bureaucrats and priests could be the ones who got the bulk of, you know, proceeds of the government. Got the bulk of control, got to move the levers of power, and etc. And then they just started kind of pushing things in that direction generationally, and then eventually folded. Just kind of bent to the whims of Aldomina, rolled over, and so there's a lot of internal strife there. There's a lot of like, the vast amount of people don't like that this happened but don't have the power to change

things in the way that they would like to, you know, have not been able to lead a successful revolution at this point.

So those are like, the Big Five Factions that we don't need to think about too much, because I'm like, I don't care about them fighting with each other. I don't care about them bickering or backstabbing each other, that's not the scale of this game. But those are the sort of groups around the Heartland, uh, who previously have squabbled and fought over all of this and been conquered and have been settled. And so as a group, hundreds of years after the last big historical break, where the Unschola Republica and the Free Seas of Kay'va broke away, the Heartland got hit with these wild storms. Reality turned on its head, and it seemed like it was going to slip outward, and so they built this place called Conventus which is this kind of ringed city meant to keep it all in, and we're somewhere inside of there.

So I think the first thing for me is like, and this is the like, we know it's a haven, we know it's a place that's safe. We don't know where in this big vast empty space on the map we are, and we don't know if there's like, a Thing. Is there a Hook in some way. You know, this says a zoo, right? Like, is there, are we built around a place that's tied to lots of animals? Are we built around an oil well? Are we built around a ranch? What is the thing that, if you looked at this town or said oh yeah, this is a town about blank, or oh yeah, I visited that town, they have good blank, what is that thing? Does anyone have any ideas? For either where on this map we wanna be, or what the hook is, in the broadest sense?

End Lore Dump [00:25:29]

ART: I'm — I'm sorry, I have a weird map question —

AUSTIN: Yeah!

ART: — just to like, immediately derail us, because I saw the Ringed City —

AUSTIN: Yeah

ART: And I thought the whole dotted line was like one weird city, is that not right?

AUSTIN: That's correct! The whole — do you see the city on the map? All the buildings?

ART: Austin, the whole thing's buildings. The whole thing is the city?

AUSTIN: Yeah. Yes.

ART: Okay.

AUSTIN: That's one city, it's the Ringed City, yeah.

ART: I thought that the buildings were representing the — say that word again? Say the non-English pronunciation of —

[overlapping]

AUSTIN: Conventus?

ART: No, no no —

SYLVI: Canton?

AUSTIN: Aldomina?

AUSTIN, ART [in unison]: Canton.

ART: I thought that those were the Canton, and the actual dashed line, was the city —

AUSTIN: Gotcha, no. This map — imagine you could zoom out this map as far as you want to, and there was a continent that continues, right?

ART: Great, okay.

AUSTIN: We're zoomed in on this map. There were other cities.

ART: So, it was a scale question, got it.

AUSTIN: Yes.

KEITH: This is if — the Principality Stels had their own Counterweight.

AUSTIN: Sort of, yeah.

ART: That didn't help.

[ALI laughs]

AUSTIN: This is if — Art —

ART: But Austin's thing did.

AUSTIN: This is like, what if the American Heartland — you know what it is? It's like what if — what's it called where Utah, and Colorado, and New Mexico —

ART: The Four Corners.

AUSTIN: What if we zoomed in on the Four Corners, right? And then also the rest of the continent existed beyond, right?

KEITH: And the reason why the city is here is because they're all were like, "We gotta work together to make this one city, even though —

AUSTIN: Right, no matter, even though — yes. Even though we're rivals and hate each other from generations of conflict, this thing is like — and in some ways it was like, I think it was probably some degree of everyone beating their chest and being like, "We could do this better than you. Our section is going to be the coolest part of Conventus." You know?

KEITH: Yeah.

AUSTIN: So any ideas about where we want to be on the map around any sort of major characteristic of what this place is? It can be as simple as just, "We are just a town in

the Heartland somewhere," and hope that we hit something coming up, but I do think having some basic thing to organize ourselves around would help.

JACK: Mines are always good because there's lots of things you can mine, and it's always exciting to think about that.

AUSTIN: Mm, true.

SYLVI: Yeah, I was kind of leaning towards that too, just because the mountain range is sort of one the bigger, like — actually, the only real trait of the Heartland on the map.

AUSTIN: As pre-established, yeah.

JACK: Running north-south.

AUSTIN: I should note, because Ali asked me this before we started, there are also rivers, and lakes, and probably a sea that stretches longer than is physically possible inside of the Heartland. I've just left it unmarked — outside of the mountains because the mountains are important for geographical and historical reasons — the rest of it's unmarked, but there's stuff there. So if someone did want to say, "I want to do a mine that's also near a lake," or something like, that is one hundred percent viable.

ALI: Yeah, this afternoon I was like, there needs to be rivers. I need to have a lake in there.

AUSTIN: Oh yeah, totally.

[scattered laughter]

KEITH: It's just not on the map, is what you're saying?

ALI: It's just not drawn, yeah. Mmhm.

AUSTIN: Because maybe — maybe we're not gonna draw it all today, right, but over the course of the series, we're gonna explore this space.

KEITH: So the way the map is drawn, like, it's hard to, um, it's hard to represent, but this doesn't just go inwards, it also goes... deeper? Right? It goes down?

AUSTIN: Mmm, no? We are not doing that.

KEITH: We're not doing that? Okay.

AUSTIN: We're not doing the thing from Heart. No.

KEITH: I wasn't sure.

AUSTIN: I mean, are there places that are deeper than other places? Yes, but it's not — there is not a single deep, like, the center of this is not lower than the rest of it.

KEITH: Okay, so —

AUSTIN: Nor, I should say this, one of the big changes we're doing from Heart is that there is not a single Heart here. The sickness is spread in such a way — someone might believe that, someone might believe that there is a core, one bad place, and if we get there we can fix all this, or something, um, but in terms of the rules of the game Heart, where there are tiers of "how cursed is this place," from one to four, there are multiple places where there are fours on the map. Versus in Heart, where there is only one, and that is the center of the space.

KEITH: And there's places that can be four, but there could be a one in between them.

AUSTIN: Right, we're not doing this sort of like concentric circle where it's a tier 4, then a tier 3, tier 2, tier 1. Those things tend to still progress in that way, but they are not — it is not as clear and simple as that. That sort of order has been removed from this place.

KEITH: Well I think my, my thing still works conceptually, I was thinking like, if you're going to climb a mountain, you've got like a base camp, right? You've got a place where it's the last stop that people who don't wanna go up the mountain go, but it's also the first stop for people who are about to go up the mountain.

AUSTIN: Mm.

KEITH: And this sort of like, place that people would go to start on some bigger thing, but also it's just a regular place.

AUSTIN: Totally.

JACK: Kind of like a staging post?

KEITH: Yeah, yeah.

AUSTIN: So then we get the thing of like, almost like when prospectors show up in a town to like, get their supplies before going up into the hills or out into the river to like, mine, or pan for gold, or whatever. We get that stuff. And then, is there also a, it sounds like there was some interest in having a mine, a direct mining operation at the kind of ground level, maybe digging down here, too?

JACK: What were you thinking of a mine, Sylvi?

SYLVI: Ah — I was thinking like something in the foot of the mountain, but like, I do like the idea of this being a like a town people stop by before going up there, and we could do more of like, an excavating the ground type thing, if we want to really lean into that?

AUSTIN: I guess here is the thing, is, we're going to be playing with time, and maybe this will be part of what gets decided long-term, because maybe the thing we know is "hey, we're near the mountains, we're in the shadow of this mountain." Jack, what was that place you were just telling me about that you visited, where like —

JACK: Oh, ah, Flagstaff.

AUSTIN: Was it Flagstaff? Okay.

JACK: In Arizona, I think.

AUSTIN: Yeah, do you wanna describe what you were describing to me about Flagstaff?

JACK: So my memory of Flagstaff, I was there a long time ago, is that it's, you know, you've just come out of the desert, but it is a town in the shadow of some low mountains, or tall hills, and I think because of the weird weather effects of those low mountains or tall hills, um, green stuff can grow more easily there. But it's this kind of like, there's lots of fir trees, or pine trees, I don't know, tall evergreen trees, and weird dark colors that I typically associate with like, the Pacific Northwest, that was really weird to find just, basically in the middle of a desert.

AUSTIN: Right.

JACK: In Arizona.

AUSTIN: It's like you look one direction — yeah, Arizona — and you're seeing vast plateaus, like, the traditional thought of what you think of the American West, but also you're seeing this very fertile place in comparison to the, kind of stretches of red clay, and stuff like that, right?

JACK: Yeah, like tall pine trees, buildings sheltering under tall pine trees.

AUSTIN: I kind of like that as a touchstone for what this place could look like. Maybe the green is a little more sicklier, here, or maybe it isn't. Maybe part of what makes this a haven is, "Hey, stuff is still growing here to some degree," and we get some shade, and we have enough space to like, garden a little bit, you know.

JACK: Can I make a pitch that, what if they're not pine trees, they're like, massive redwoods, and there's like six of them.

AUSTIN: Ooooh.

JACK: Just like, six huge trees.

AUSTIN: Love it.

[laughter]

AUSTIN: Writing that down.

JACK: Like, the town hall is under that tree. Or the inn is under that tree, or whatever.

AUSTIN: Mm-hm.

KEITH: Or, the, Austin you were mentioning, they either do or do not have to be like, it doesn't have to be a particularly green place, or it could be. I don't know if this is anything, but from growing up in a pine forest, one of the things you notice is like, there's just areas of the forest that are not doing well, and you just see the needles slowly become more brown in areas. It's like oh, here is an extremely green area, and a hundred yards away, this pine tree is like twenty percent weird brown needles. And then another hundred yards it's like, dead trees.

AUSTIN: Right, yeah. Totally! And again, I think this is the sort of thing I think will probably come out in play, as things grow and change over time.

KEITH: I don't know how you do that with six gigantic trees, but — depending on how big they are —

[ALI laughs]

AUSTIN: Yeah, we'll get — My guess is — are there probably also other trees, it's just like those six trees dominate?

JACK: Yeah, I think there are like, little low bushes, or whatever.

AUSTIN: Yeah, that makes sense. I think that's enough to start —

ART: Terrible idea to build all the important buildings right next to the trees, though, there's just, the root systems are gonna be brutal, it's —

AUSTIN: [laughs]

ART: You're asking for foundation problems.

End Tree Talk [00:34:47]

AUSTIN: Where do we wanna be on this line of mountains, then? Do you wanna be on the west side of it, the east side of it, how far north, how far south? Does anyone have just like, a thing that jumps out at them?

ALI: Um, do we wanna be like, let's say we're half of an L, above the L, in Heartland.

AUSTIN: Half of an L above the L, so like, here?

ALI: Yeah, like, yeah.

AUSTIN: Yeah where Art just did, even.

KEITH: That's deep.

AUSTIN: Yeah, I love that. That sounds good. Right in this little alcove, right?

ALI: Yeah, there's this little canyon.

AUSTIN: Yeah, did you wanna mark that?

KEITH: That's a great place to have a little town, get that runoff water.

ALI: Uh-huh.

AUSTIN: Yup.

KEITH: Get that mountain basin run-off, love that.

ART: No way a mine will mess that up.

SYLVI: [laughs]

JACK: Art is playing a geologist, this season.

AUSTIN: [laughs]

ALI: Maybe it should be a little more left, but...

ART: Thought a lot about lakes, recently.

AUSTIN: You know, make your work, your, the things you love to think about, Art. A little left Ali, like here?

ALI: Oh, yeah, I guess —

AUSTIN: Is that too — where were you thinking?

ALI: I was thinking the other left, closer to the L, but I think that [laughs] where it is now is fine.

AUSTIN: Wait, the other left? Right?

ALI: Yeah, I was saying that I said right wrong, yeah.

AUSTIN: Gotcha, I see.

ALI: I was saying like there, but I think closer —

AUSTIN: I do think we gotta be closer to the mountains, yeah. We gotta be at the foothills.

ALI: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Tuck it in. There we go.

ALI: [laughs]

AUSTIN: Alright, I think we've decided that process. Unless anyone — does anyone feel like they haven't had the chance to speak up, or contribute in the way they wanted to?

ART: Well no one seems to really be respecting my lake —

KEITH: [laughs]

AUSTIN: We can have a lake! Art, we can have a lake here, um, I like lakes.

KEITH: What's going on with your lake?

AUSTIN: Tell me about your lake.

ART: Nah, I'm — I'm just saying, the lake's in danger, the lake is imperiled. By the mines. Mines are bad for lakes.

ALI: [sarcastic] Are they?

AUSTIN: Yeah, totally.

KEITH: I agree.

ART: Yeah.

KEITH: Mines, mines are bad for everything.

AUSTIN: Yes.

ALI: Oh...

ART: Yeah, that is the short, yeah.

AUSTIN: Mm-hmm. Alright. Any other thoughts here before we move to the next step?

KEITH: Uh, my thought is that I like how the lake curves away from the mountains. Because it knows...

AUSTIN: Yeah, it's like, gotta get out of here.

[laughter]

AUSTIN: Alright. Next section. Janine, do you want to read "Our Timeline"? It's on page 7.

Our Timeline [00:37:04]

JANINE: Yeah.

JANINE (*reading*): "This game is played in four cycles, and each cycle is separated by a gap in time. One player rolls the six-sided die and records the results. This die will determine the unit of time this gap is measured in, and this metric stays for the remainder of the game. A "one" means days, which might lend itself to an intimate and close-textured story. A "six" means millennia, and you're playing a game over thousands of years. And what was here may not survive these jumps in recognizable ways."

JANINE: So —

AUSTIN: Um — so — I just wanna jump in here for a second, because one of the things we're changing is I don't think millennia work for us, it's just on the outside — we could theoretically go really broad, and do like, think about it as — it's just a lot of work for not a lot of detail in the final step for us, if that makes sense. I would rather stay closer and, um —

KEITH: Do we wanna roll d5? Or do we wanna double up one of these, like —

AUSTIN: Oh, that's interesting.

KEITH: Like three and four are both years.

AUSTIN: Hm.

KEITH: And then five is decades, six is centuries.

AUSTIN: I hadn't thought about doing it that way, I was just gonna cut millennia that way, but if we wanted to double-up, that's not bad. Is there an amount of time, I guess here's a question, is there an amount of time here that people are most interested in? I think that the thing worth saying is that, what centuries could potentially give us is a look at pre-.... um... pre-Aldomina, like, settlement, we could see what people were like here,

before? Because one thing to note is, as we tell the story, we can jump forward in time, we can also jump backwards in time if we want to. And so we could snap — we could do a whole cycle of this game played like, X hundred years before, if we wanted to do that. We can also just go forward the whole way if that feels more comfortable. Um, but centuries would give us that, in a way that days obviously won't, but I'm also happy to just start at, hey, things have gone bad, let's go forward from there. Or, hey — in some ways this will be determined by what we get, right, if we go by days, we should probably start within the basic year that we're playing the game Heart, you know? Whereas if we get centuries we're gonna be telling a longer story about stuff. Does anyone —

KEITH: We roll this four times, right?

AUSTIN: No, we roll this once, to set a metric, and then between cycles —

KEITH: Oh, I thought you were rolling each cycle —

AUSTIN: No, that sets the metric by which that second metric will be added. So like, in between cycle one and two, d6 blanks, d6 time units will advance, or we'll go backwards, and so, in that case, if you get decades, we could advance, or go back, up to 60 years, right? Per cycle. Likewise, if we got centuries, we could go forwards or backwards, up to 600 years. Which is a lot of time. And maybe given that, do we just wanna do d4, and do days, weeks, years, decades? Which could still end up covering a long period of time.

[pause]

AUSTIN: Does anyone have strong feelings?

ART: Yeah, maybe. Centuries is real long.

ALI: Yeah.

AUSTIN: It's interesting, but yeah.

KEITH: I definitely feel more interested in doing weeks, years, and decades, and I'm not opposed to days or centuries, so... like if we rolled a d5, or, a d6 with one of these doubled-up that we decided we like the best, I think that is fine? Unless anyone really doesn't like centuries. I'm definitely least excited about centuries and millennia.

ALI: Yeah.

KEITH: For this, specifically this.

J: I think also, the idea, I like the idea of showing stuff before, but also I don't know if I like that idea right out of the gate.

AUSTIN: Sure.

J: Like I feel like that's maybe a cooler thing to do later on in the season, when it means a little more.

AUSTIN: Mm-hm. That makes sense. Um, alright. So then, who wants to roll a d4?

Rolling [00:41:22]

AUSTIN: Who wants to take this in their hands?

ALI: I'm doing it.

AUSTIN: Okay.

ALI: This is a 2d4 or just a 1d4?

AUSTIN: 1d4.

ALI: 1d4, rolling... and that's a one. [laughs]

AUSTIN: That's days. So we are zooming in on a moment, in this town.

KEITH: Wow.

ALI: Hi.

JACK: Wow.

AUSTIN: Keith, do you wanna read from this unit of time?

KEITH: Yeah, sure. [clears throat]

KEITH: (*reading*) "This unit of time will affect the way this story is told. If you rolled days, your action should be quick-paced, happening in a "now" that may see a few hours pass. If you rolled centuries or millennia, your 'now' may be years or even decades. If the collective group feels that the given timeline is antagonistic to the story that you'd like to tell, you may reroll. However, try to think broadly — a story that was about a high school may be instead about the fields that were there before the place was abandoned in the future, and the stones that are underneath it all. Conversely, a story that was at first glance about the movements of empire may narrow, instead focusing on one late summer week in a golden city that knows things are changing soon."

AUSTIN: Boom.

KEITH (*reading*): "You will begin playing in the period of time that you establish during setup, you will not move around in time until the first gap, detailed later."

AUSTIN: All right. So we have that gap, we know what that distance is gonna be. And now, we are gonna move onto "Establishing our Place". Art, do you want to establish our place and read those rules?

ART (*reading*): "Each player is dealt cards from the face cards stack in a circle until no cards are left. Then going in the same circle, each player sets down one card at a time and answers the questions associated with that card, detailed below. They may read the questions first, or pick between their cards at random. Keep going until the world feels established, or each player is out of cards, whichever happens first. Try to keep the discussion under 25 minutes" —

[ALL laugh heartily]

ART: Good one.

AUSTIN: Uh-huh.

[More laughter]

AUSTIN: Thanks Everrest.

ART (*continuing to read*): "Keep your answers to each question very short. You may wish to make brief notes to jog your memory later."

ART: I'm just gonna set a stopwatch, right now. We're just gonna see what happens.

[Laughter continues]

KEITH: Just for fun, just to see.

ART: I guess I shouldn't yet, it's not time yet.

KEITH: Sometimes I wonder what — how other people are playing games. How is anyone doing anything in less than like, nine hours?

JANINE: With three people.

AUSTIN: Yeah. Uh-huh.

KEITH: Fair, yeah.

JANINE: And not on microphone, recording it, for other people.

AUSTIN: And not with the end of entertaining, and being very descriptive, and etc.

KEITH: But even in my small games at home when I was like, in high school, things went — we were like — it was like a five hour thing every time.

AUSTIN: Yeah, that's true for me too. We're just like that, maybe.

KEITH: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Alright, so, here's a question. So there's only twelve face cards. That's just the truth of it. And there's eight of us. How do we wanna go about some people not getting any cards? Or do we wanna leave those final four to be like, collaborative from the jump? Slowing us down even more?

JACK: Maybe we slow ourselves down even more and bookend them. We sent them aside and go once we've done the rest.

AUSTIN: Oh, you're saying — I didn't mean to flip it that way.

ART: Or, we could assign them to pairs. We could each have like a pair, and...

[ALI laughs]

ALL: No...

AUSTIN: We're not doing group activities outside of the whole group.

JACK: We go into a breakout room... [laughs]

ALI: Yeah...

AUSTIN: I like the idea of starting...

ART: It's a break-in room.

AUSTIN: I like the idea of starting with two collaborative ones, and then ending with two collaborative ones.

ALI: Oh, that's good.

AUSTIN: Which is what I thought Jack meant at first, but then they — they said something else-

JACK: I suppose when I said, yeah I said bookend not really thinking about the implications of it. But I do think you're right, that is a more interesting way of doing it. Um.... so do we just draw two at random?

AUSTIN: I already just drew one, so...

JACK: I got a queen of diamonds.

AUSTIN: We've got a queen of diamonds, which, there's this thing that says, "Establishing our Place" — Sylvi, do you wanna read what the queen of diamonds says?

SYLVI: Sure. *[reading]* "What is valued in this place? What is it known to have in excess?"

AUSTIN: Is it a particular mineral that we've talked about? I just want everyone to look at the worldbuilding doc real quick... The scratch dock... I just copied this from the document, where it says, "what is valued in this place, what is it known to have in excess"?

[Laughter]

AUSTIN: What it said was....

AUSTIN (*reading in strange, harsh fantasy language*) "Kidda walav dox secca glock sepha soda fae....

ALI: That's what we said.

AUSTIN (*still reading*): ... kidda wa levil la win qua sa kara have in excess."

[SYLVI laughs]

JACK: We are mining words, we are mining words from the mountain.

[laughter]

AUSTIN: Is that true? Is that what we're mining from the mountain?

JACK: I don't know if that's sustainable.

[more laughter, crosstalk]

AUSTIN: Not enough words?

ART: Most mining's not very sustainable.

AUSTIN: What if it is, though? What if part of the thing we're finding is not words but is stuff, in some way? Where it's like, yeah, I went up there and I came back down with a bag of hammers, and — I almost said nails but that's just 'cause the way the brain works — and picture frames, and yeah I got some iron, like iron ore, but I also got just, stuff.

[simultaneously]

DR: Is this like a dig site instead of a mine?

ART: Did you say iron ore...?

AUSTIN: Sorry, two thoughts.

JACK: Is it like archeology?

AUSTIN: Dre, what did you just say?

DRE: I just said, is this a dig site? As opposed to a mine.

AUSTIN: A dig site! Maybe. One of the things we've talked about is that there are parts of the Heartland that seem to be infected with the future, or a future? Um, part of what I want to hit at is this sense of modernity coming from the Heartland, what we think of us modernity, so for instance there's a train out here called the Shape, that Jack is kind of tied to, which we'll get to when Jack makes their character in the future, but — That doesn't exist beyond Aldomina. There aren't trains — er, sorry, beyond Conventus.

There are not trains outside of the Ringed City and the Heartland, and so like, that's an example of a thing that exists here that doesn't exist elsewhere. So the idea of there being like, a dig site, and what you're finding is things both from the past and a potential future could be really interesting.

KEITH: What if you find a bunch of plastic shit in a world where plastic hasn't been invented?

[Laughter]

AUSTIN: Yeah, what the fuck is it?

JACK: Well your first reaction is like, well, this is both fucking awful, and really durable. I don't like it, it gets dirty really quickly, but also I can just clean it?

AUSTIN: And it's light.

JACK: Aw, man, plastic sucks. What's this mine look like?

AUSTIN: Well now it does feel like a dig site, or like a...

JACK: Like a midden, or...

SYLVI: Almost like an archaeological thing, or something at this point.

KEITH: I'm gonna say, I love the idea of taking a pickaxe to a very normal-looking mine wall and pulling out like, tupperware, and also iron, and also like... wooden toys.

DRE: [laughs]

AUSTIN: I do wanna say — I wanna say plastic probably puts us too far forward. It skips the — well, you know — the outside world is early modern, and kind of like, the end of medieval history, and I would like the stuff we're finding to stay in that sort of period of gunpowder and steam power and coal, right? A plastic thing is like, you know if you were like rating our treasure on five stars, a plastic thing would be a five star fucking huge discovery, so I think most people are not coming down with tupperware.

KEITH: Okay. I'm not tied to plastic, it's just the only thing I can think of that would be weird to like, see, and immediately know that this is not a normal material.

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: It could be like the kind of plastic that will spontaneously explode after you've owned it for a few years.

AUSTIN: There we go. Early, early, yeah. Jack, you said a word I don't know.

JANINE: That like 1800s good plastic.

AUSTIN: [laughs] Early synthetic, yeah, right. Jack, you said a word I didn't know. You said it was like a mmm — a midden? What?

JACK: A midden, yeah. It's like a, traditionally like an old refuse heap, basically. Like you know when you're picturing Dwarf Fortress and you set that space where you're just like, put all your crap there, just put it there, and so you're putting stuff you're throwing away there, you're putting dead animals there maybe, you're putting all the kind of refuse of your society in that kind of a place.

JANINE: Oh...

JACK: Go on.

JANINE: This just reminded me of what's that word for people who go to London and just dig through the fucking river? And they like, make books about the shit they find?

JACK: Oh.... um, mudlarks?

JANINE: And ninety percent of it is pipes? Yeah, mudlarking!

AUSTIN: Huh.

ART: Fucking gross-os if you ask me, that's me.

JANINE: But it's fascinating —

[crosstalk]

KEITH: Mudlarking?

AUSTIN: Scavenges? [reading a definition] "They scavenge in the river mud for items of value, a term especially described those who scavenged this way in London during the 18th and late 19th centuries."

JANINE: Yeah, and like, the thing that's cool about it is —

KEITH: So it's like metal detectors but in the water.

JANINE: Well, you're not — most of the time it's not metal you're finding, like, sometimes you're finding coins and stuff. People will find like, Roman coins and shit, but also they'll find the equivalent of like, plastic packaging. Like the used to sell single-use clay pipes that people could smoke, so like the number one thing people seem to find is just these busted up old cheap ass disposable pipes.

AUSTIN: Shout-outs to the Romans I guess. Um. Yeah that's interesting.

KEITH: Tough to make a narrow stem like that, those were impressive.

Clay Pipe Craftsmanship [00:50:41]

AUSTIN: Mudlark is just a great name for a thing a person's doing, even though it's very clearly pejorative, right.

JACK: Sure, it's like...

KEITH: If you're playing in the mud, then it's — at some point it's just descriptive to say, they're the mud-players.

JANINE: They're having a lark.

AUSTIN: Yeah. And refusing — this is a thing I'm reading, one of the things that's interesting is they had this degree of independence, because the hours they worked

were their own discretion. They didn't have bosses, right. They just like, did this, and then flipped what they found, and that's interesting.

JACK: So on some level, right, is it like, um, a gold rush, but for... Like someone knocked through a hole in the mountain, and on the other side was fucking... like a dragon's treasure of just like, stuff. Just like. It's like a gold rush, but it's not for gold. But it's just for things. But I don't know why you would go for that. Why would I, you know?

JANINE: Can I introduce you to dumpster-diving youtube?

AUSTIN: Yeah, people do this now, right?

JACK: Sure, right.

AUSTIN: So the two things, one is. It's stuff that you can't get elsewhere. Is huge, and again — part of the thing that each of these Cantons has done is sent some people in to be like, "go get me good shit. Go get me an engine. Find me a way to hold power like a battery. That's an important and interesting thing that we don't have here. Find me stuff that works." And alternatively the other half of it is like, we know that this place was, before Aldomina was here, was filled with different cultures and nations and tribes, and those people definitely had shit that, like, was wiped out. Old knowledge, you know, old religious artifacts that have a great deal of power and meaning, all that stuff is still valuable. So that mix, this kind of melange of old and new and potentially future is interesting, right. And also the other thing, sometimes you just find like, yeah, it's a knife. I found a knife up there. I dunno when this was — I dunno if this is old, or new, or future, but it's a good knife. And that's fine. I can go flip this for some money or use it myself, you know? Um, you find a pickaxe with your pickaxe.

KEITH: Is there something specific that we can say about what is it known to have in excess or is it just the sort of general stuff?

AUSTIN: I think this general thing is probably safe enough. I think — I don't wanna be like, and also the thing we get the most is tires.

K and ART: [laughs]

AUSTIN: Or something. You know.

KEITH: [more laughing] No plastic. Lots of rubber.

AUSTIN: Lots of rubber. Rubber's old. Alright, so that is the Queen of Diamonds. Let's draw another card to decide collaboratively.

Card Number Two [00:53:54]

AUSTIN: The King of Diamonds. Um, let's go with Ali, can you read the King of Diamonds?

ALI: Um, sure.

AUSTIN: I swear I shuffled this, multiple times.

ALI [reading]: "King of Diamonds: Who or what is in power here? Is it a ruler? An apex predator? A series of laws that govern society? The weather?"

AUSTIN: Good question. Interesting one to have all gotten, for us to do collaboratively versus one person deciding. That's fun.

ALI: Yeah.

AUSTIN: What do we think? Is there government here? Is it more informal than that? I think a touchstone for me, especially now that we know we're kind of a prospecting town is definitely Deadwood, which has its own arcs of who is in charge in some ways? And I think that's true for a lot of that era of frontier town, where, you know, at the start of that show that town is basically run by the owner of the saloon, and, uh, you know, throughout the course a big part of that story is like, hey, a US Marshall shows up, who becomes the sheriff of the town. I guess he's not a Marshall, he's just — is he a Marshall who becomes a sheriff? I don't remember what's up with Bullock. Eventually a

big fucking industrialist shows up who buys all the fucking land and kind of — spoilers for Deadwood, and also American history —

[laughter]

AUSTIN: Uh, but, a rich guy shows up and fucks it all up. I guess it's already fucked up, that's part of the whole thing, right, it was already ailing, like I said in the intro, but uh... That guy shows up and makes everyone work for him and use company scrip and all that shit. For me my question ends up being how formal of a power structure is there in this town when we come in?

ALI: Um...

AUSTIN: Is there a mayor, is there a council?

ALI: It feels like if this is a place that people travel through, there should at least be like, a structure that's recognizable, right? Because there becomes a difference between like the people who are living there, and the people who are traveling there.

AUSTIN: Right.

KEITH: Unless one of the reasons why it's a good place for people to travel to is they picked it because it's informal.

ALI: Right. Well, yeah I'm not saying that there's like, laws and governments or w/e, but if there's like people using it as a home, there are probably people who have someone they look to.

AUSTIN: Those home people need to know who to go to to help solve problems, or something, right? Is what you're suggesting? Versus outside — not that outsiders don't also have that same situation, but like —

ALI: It becomes recognizable when you come to a town, and like you have to identify a structure, right? You know what I mean?

AUSTIN: I think so.

ART: Are we sure we didn't run past apex predator too quickly?

[ALI laughs]

ART: What if just a big wolf runs this place?

[More laughter]

ALI: I also really like the weather as part of this answer because like, if it is a digging/mining/travel situation, you come here and there's a hurricane, you're not going up that hill. That's off the — yeah.

AUSTIN: It's like, how clear is the day, and that determines as much as any individual. Maybe there's a mayor, maybe there's a council, but what really shapes the direction of a town, of this town, whether it's a nice day out or not.

KEITH: I like that.

AUSTIN: Or whether we're in a period of drought, of downpour, whatever.

ART: The storm.

AUSTIN: Yeah, which we've kind of already set up as being a potential thing. I'm interested in that.

JACK: Is it predictable?

AUSTIN: It can't be. That's like, the point of the game in some ways, right? It's like, very little is predictable any more. And especially the things that would ruin our day, right?

ALI laughs

JACK: Right. And I —

AUSTIN: God, also — go ahead.

JACK: I could probably spend too much of my own money to like, an augur or someone, who would tell me that the storm was coming on this day, but like who the fuck knows if that's gonna work. I just spent half my purse on...

AUSTIN: Totally, and maybe that person has hit a pattern that has been true for the last 30 years. But maybe on the 31st year that pattern changes for no foreseeable reason. That is the truth of this place.

JACK: And then it's time to kill the augur.

ALI: Hmm....

AUSTIN: Right, because the augur has clearly been a fraud the whole time. Right?

ART: More like a fraud-gur.

ALI: Give 'em the benefit of the doubt... they tried!

KEITH: Hopping across the river, like he does...

ALI: He has charts, I bet...

JACK: So it's like a loose, a town sort of holding itself together without a massive amount of structure, but the thing that governs everything is like, is the dig site about to get obliterated by — I can't remember, there were those stories when they were filming like, Apocalypse Now, where sets would just get destroyed. Like, didn't they build a load of sets that got instantly destroyed by a wave or something? Um, and they were like, "Oh, that's the end of that. Can't do that bit any more."

AUSTIN: Yeah, yeah. I also imagine when that stuff hits —

KEITH: Um, that wasn't the weather, that was Martin Sheen.

[laugh]

AUSTIN: [sound of disgust] I also imagine that fucks up the dig sites in this other way, which is like, oh, I have my claim, and on my claim I have been getting tools, and that's incredible. Screwdriver today, hammer tomorrow. And then it hits, and it's like, it all changed. The stuff in this area has gone from being you know useful stuff for me to dig up, to being, you know, piles of different types of dirt, and old animal carcasses. That's not what I need right now. I'd hit gold, you know? Um, so that's fun.

ART: [with drawl] "Mm, got a dirt pile, did ya"?

AUSTIN: [drawling] Yeah, got a dirt pile.

[laughter]

AUSTIN: Sells for pennies.

[overlapping speaking in minerly drawl]

ALI: Ol' Johnny's claim to the dirt...

KEITH: People have a different use for kinds of dirt...

AUSTIN: [end drawl] So there are, so there is like, whatever the local government is, the real weather is the — er, the real king is the weather. Is fair to say. And maybe part of that answer is, over the last 200 years, the local government has changed many times, right? Maybe the Aldominan, whoever ran this place, the mine back when it was just an iron mine, or a gold mine, like that person tried to stay in charge as the governor, or whatever, 200 years ago. And then they were overthrown and replaced, and then that group fell out, and then there was some sort of industrialist who came in, and then that person got ran out of town, but through it all the real overwhelming force that structured life here has been when the storms roll in.

Dealing Out Cards [1:00:40]

AUSTIN: I like it. Let's deal some cards to people here. I have one in my hand, which is gonna fuck it up...

KEITH: Are we now not, is this no longer —

AUSTIN: We're doing two up top that are collaborative, then we're gonna each do our one, and then we're gonna go back to collaborative for the last two. So, give me a second to deal cards — Alright, we should all have a card in our hands now, and we can all look at it and see what it is, and... Does anyone have a good idea off the jump when they look at their thing?

ART: [emphatically] Aw, fuck.

SYLVI: [laughs]

ART: I don't have an idea!

ALI: [laughs]

AUSTIN: Yeah? That bad?

ART: I got a bad one. I think I got the worst one.

ALI: Uh-oh.

AUSTIN: Damn.

KEITH: Oh, let's try and guess what the worst one is.

AUSTIN: Yeah, i don't know.

KEITH: Queen of Spades maybe.

SYLVI: [laughs]

ART: No, I could do that. If anyone has Queen of Spades and wants to trade.

ALI: [laughs]

KEITH: Wow, it's that bad, huh.

DRE: I bet you have the King of Hearts.

AUSTIN: That's a hard one.

ART: Nah, you, nah — nah, that's, no. I've the Jack of Diamonds.

DRE: Oh, yeah.

[overlapping]

ALL: [wincing sounds] Oh, yeah. Aww. That's a tough one.

AUSTIN: Art goes last.

JANINE: That's a shame. That's a — you hate to see it.

AUSTIN: Art, I'm gonna give you a — If you wanna hold that card — OK, Art, if you wanna trade that card for one of the other cards in the deck that's still there, we can do that for you.

SYLVI: [laughs]

ART: Why don't we do a couple turns and we'll see how it's going.

KEITH: That's a lot of power.

AUSTIN: That's a lot of power.

ALI: Yeah.

AUSTIN: For people who don't know —

JANINE: Duckberg's back, baby!

AUSTIN: [laughs] Jack of Diamonds is, "what is this place named or called, who named it and for what reason?"

KEITH: The answer to our — if this was a game, the answer to King of Diamonds, "who or what is in power here," is the person who holds the Jack of Diamonds.

AUSTIN: [laughter]

ALI: Oh, I have an optional one...

DRE: Oh, that's fun.

ALI: I didn't even realize.

AUSTIN: Um, who wants to go?

JANINE: Have we decided who rules the, who rules Aldomina, is it like a super-queen, or like a, you know?

AUSTIN: I think it's, I think that it is a super-queen, Aldomina is like a hierarchy of devils. The long and short on them for people who don't have access to the Official Private Only-for-Members-of-the-Cast Friends at the Table Discord, which is to say, everyone listening, the basic history of this is that Aldomina was a fledgling empire, and there were devils that were locked in a Hell somewhere, and could only get out via contracts with people that they made agreements with. Fae-style, devil-style, you summon a devil. And they decided, "I don't want to be in the fucking Hell any more," and this one who was this ambitious duke was like, "I bet we can just take over a place if we all just devote our attention there," instead of constantly just acting as individuals, and then they did that over the course of hundreds of years, slowly replacing the people of power in Aldomina and then overthrowing it. But doing so in style, and grace — these are devils that, um, wear nice suits, they're dressed to the nines, you know, very fine and traditionally beautiful outfits. And I think architecturally, it's also very like... it's very... I mean, the thing I'm gonna say is that it's very Catholic, I think it's probably very Vatican-y. They didn't change that, they didn't go like, "We're gonna make it all fucking fire and brimstone and evil and we're gonna put skulls on everything".

[K laughs]

AUSTIN: I mean, there's already skulls, because Catholicism does — does be known to fuck with skulls, sometimes. But they kept that shit because it is rhetorically powerful. They know that it looks cool to people in the conquered world because of all of the work that has gone into making that what cool looks like, instead of doubt, obviously. Uh, so I think there's probably a queen, or a king, or an emperor, empress or whatever we want to — whoever is sitting on throne of Dominion, you know.

KEITH: What's your favorite kind of Catholic skull? I like to have the jawbone of a saint in my basement.

[scattered laughter]

JACK: Mine's the same but it's gold-plated. No, mother of pearl.

AUSTIN: There we go.

JANINE: Mine is that blood, that apparently — the liquifying blood that doesn't liquify sometimes and people get nervous.

AUSTIN: That would make me nervous.

JACK: I mean speaking of I could go, I have the Jack of Clubs, which is "What was this place in the past? How long ago was that?" And I think this might have been like a low-key holy place. I'm thinking of it as being like an abbey, almost. Uh, or a monastery. And not a big one, not a sort of regional hub of faith, but uh, you know, maybe the monks and the nuns that were here, between thirty and sixty monks or nuns, and they worshipped the...

KEITH: How many or were the ages of them?

JACK: [confused] What were the ages?

AUSTIN: That was how many.

KEITH: That was how many there were?

JACK: That was how many.

AUSTIN: Yes.

JACK: Uh, the ages — you know, a whole range, from people —

AUSTIN: [making fun of] Keith: "How does anyone do a game short?" Also Keith: "How old were the nuns?"

ALL: [hearty laughter]

JACK: Okay, so nuns one to five were between fifteen and twenty, nuns five to ten were...

AUSTIN: Fucking...

[laughter dies out]

JACK: I think these nuns worshipped the — I'm looking for something exciting for them to worship here. Maybe the caves? Maybe they worshipped something in the caves? Uh —

AUSTIN: So maybe, what if even before — Sorry, I should not jump in, because you have authority here. But! Let me suggest —

JACK: Yeah, no, go for it.

AUSTIN: Did they know — Was this — One of the things I say in the intro is, "This place was sick in this way" long before the storms arrived. Was this one of those places where reality was already peeling away from itself, and there were parts of the caves where this thing that we now know is true about the place, about digging up old stuff, or future stuff, either way, was already true at the time of the abbey or — I like abbey, abbeys are fun, you know.

JACK: Yeah!

AUSTIN: Um, and they knew that, and worshipped it.

JACK: The answer to that is yes, but that's not what they're worshipping.

AUSTIN: Okay.

JACK: They are worshipping a beast in the caves.

AUSTIN: [sound of agreement]

JACK: There is a beast and its mother, like a young beast and an old beast that lived in the caves.

AUSTIN: Is this a Grendel situation?

JACK: Possibly? I don't know whether or not this beast — who are we to say what kind of worship the nuns did, but it was like a big warren of dark caves, and the nuns would go in with lanterns and torches to worship this beast. Also —

KEITH: In front of it? Or...?

JACK: What? Oh, would they worship the beast in front of the beast?

KEITH: So they go right up to it and the beast was like, yeah, worship me? Or were they just going near —

JACK: Possibly, I don't really know what form worship takes. They were probably painting things on the walls, they were probably trying to map the caverns. Maybe a nun would go missing and that would be sacred, that would be a martyrdom. Maybe sometimes they encounter the beast and that is a real, that is a holy experience. Um — but I think the beast, as far as — the beast is not there. We haven't encountered the beast and we feel safe enough to enter the caves, um, this was maybe — How long ago did things go bad, Austin?

AUSTIN: So, 200 years, give or take, right. I think that the moment that things go bad is a number of years where like, it starts with "hey, the land is barren, we should leave it

fallow for a few years to make it better," and it's like, it doesn't get better. It doesn't — the nutrients do not return to the soil. And then also, it's like "huh, there have been more floods recently," and then it's like "THE DEAD WALK", you know? Uh oh! Uh oh! You get home and your grandmother is there, and you haven't seen your grandmother in 30 years because that's when you put her in the ground.

JACK: Buried her.

AUSTIN: And she's there with soup for you, and you're like, "this is NOT right, something has happened here." So yeah, I think that it's a period of years and time over, you know, a decade or something, 200 years ago. And it was colonized and settled by Aldomina between 500 and 600 years ago. There were lots of groups here, lots of native groups who got pushed out or in, um, I know for instance Ali we know that a group of yours got pushed to the — the — actually a lot of little groups got pushed into the mountains in some places, for instance. We've talked about that off-mic, so, so yeah. Those are the two big time — and then again, Aldomina gets taken over itself by devils, 1800 or so years ago because I want to be able to have an 1800s-y year.

JACK: So I think the two things here are 150 years ago, so sort of 50 years after things started going bad, the nuns processed into the caves and were never seen again.

AUSTIN: Okay.

JACK: Um, like a torchlit procession of these nuns into the caves, and they went, and all that remains of the abbey now is the sort of bell tower and sacred entrance to the mine, which now just has pit ponies and carts outside it and everything and that's what the miners use as their primary entrance point.

AUSTIN: Okay. Love it. [writing notes] Never — didn't come back. So the bell tower —

JACK: And sacred entrance.

AUSTIN: — and sacred entrance to the mines is all that's left, or to the caves, and the ladder is used by miners as their entryway. [done writing] Okay. Great! Love it. Who's next? Who's got one?

End Cave Nuns [1:10:50]

DRE: Uh, I have a pitch, and I kinda — I wanna — It partly builds off of what Jack said just now. I have the Queen of Hearts, which is "Who or what (a person, landmark, society) has been in this place the longest? How did they come to be here?" Um, my pitch is that the thing that has been here the longest is the... giant skeleton of some large beast, and that is actually what the abbey is built around.

JACK: Yo...!

AUSTIN: Oh, I love that. Tell me more, say more.

JACK: Yeah!

DRE: [laughs] Um, I mean, gosh — So you said the only thing that's kind of left is the bell tower, um... you know, I could see that being like the bell tower being built around like a giant, curling neck leading up to the head, and maybe like the head had been knocked off, or something, at some point, so that makes it easier to put a bell up there. Or I don't know, maybe they made the bell out of the head! I don't know, um... And I'm also thinking of like, what if a cathedral, but instead of... There's a word for I think the type of arched ceiling that's in like a I'm probably thinking like a Catholic church type place... Isn't there a word for that?

AUSTIN: Like a... vault? Like a...

DRE: Yeah...? Maybe.

AUSTIN: Like vaulted ceilings? Or are you thinking of something else? There might be, uh — you're right, there's a name for everything in a church, and a cathedral, you know?

[minor laughter]

AUSTIN: I don't know them. 'Cause of being a fallen Catholic.

KEITH: If it is the fact that they are arched, those are vaulted ceilings. If it's the style that they are arched in, I think it has a different name.

DRE: Oh! Hey, it's actually called a ribbed vault. So perfect. [laughs]

AUSTIN: Woww! Love it. You love to hear it.

DRE: That's what I'm thinking of, yeah. Ribbed vault.

AUSTIN: So are the ribs of this —

ART: Hey what's a steeple? Does anyone know?

AUSTIN: A steeple is like a, like the top, like the whole fucking...

JACK: It's like a pointy tower.

AUSTIN: Yeah, like a pointy tower. A bell can be in there, it's a church tower.

JANINE: It's the part that you turn inside out and then there are all the people.

[laughter]

JACK: Oh, there are all the people in the thing! Yeah, with the wiggly fingers!

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: Is this skeleton related to the beast in some way, or did they — what's the relationship there?

DRE: I don't know if there's a direct relationship but maybe that is why they started to worship the beast they found in the cave.

KEITH: Oh yeah I mean if you find the skeleton of a big thing, first thought: there might be more of these nearby.

DRE: Yeah, and like, if we were able to find shelter in like a safe space, using the skeleton of this giant beast, maybe that also explains why they are so initially reverent of another creature.

AUSTIN: Right. Totally, I like this a lot. I love the image. And so like, the bones are still there! The abbey has fallen apart besides the bell tower, but like the big ribs of this beast still free stand. Cool, I like that a lot. That's a cool space to have that could be filled in with other stuff, do you know what I mean? Like, are there marketplaces underneath the bones now, is that where people sleep? That's fun, we can see if anything else fills that in. Um, does anyone else wanna go?

End Skeletons [1:14:25]

JANINE: Um, I could, uh... I have the Queen of Clubs, which is, "What was the greatest moment in this place's history? An innovation, a discovery, a revolution, a new sapling, the emergence of a cycle of cicadas?" So my...

AUSTIN: Laughing for reasons, don't worry about it.

JANINE: Uh huh... okay. Well. My idea is uh, the greatest moment — We have some great moments that are already framed, and I want a moment that could have contributed to them in a way that like, you know, everyone will have a different answer on what the greatest moment is, but if you trace the greatest moment back — Or if you trace the great moments back, they maybe stem from this moment. So like, all the scholars are like, well this was the greatest moment. So I think a — at least top contender for greatest moments — would be when...

AUSTIN: Top 10 anime greatest moments.

ALL: [laugh]

JANINE: Uh-huh. Um, so I think this moment is basically, at some point after shit started to go bad in the Heartland area, um, the Aldominian — I want — We need like a thing before empress. I feel like we need to go empress because it feels immediately devil-y.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: Honest.

JANINE: Cerulean.

AUSTIN: The honest empress... the cerulean empress is not bad.

JANINE: Well, the important thing is, I have a name for this — I'm talking about — there is a specific empress that I'm going to be talking about, and this is Adjective Empress Altapasqua.

AUSTIN: Can you spell that for me?

JANINE: Yeah!

JACK: Sick.

JANINE: It is a medieval Italian name that combines... one second... I'm gonna paste this... combines [*reading definition*] "the feminine form of the adjective alto, meaning high, deep, big, towering, elevated, and when used in a poetic context grand, sublime, noble," and pasqua, which is Easter.

AUSTIN: Oh, sure.

JANINE: So the Empress Grand Easter. Um.

ART: Easter like with the bunny?

JANINE: Yeah. Or, you know, religious things.

KEITH: I don't know if they did the bunny then.

[laughter]

JANINE: Think of it as like a, you know, a high celebration, it's, to me this is very much her being like "Look, I'm part of your whole thing, I'll even be in charge of it, and it'll be great." So, shit's going bad in the Heartland. Altapasqua, empress — Adjective Empress Altapasqua says, "Hello my people," you know, "I'll fix everything, it'll be fine." And forms a large — not a caravan, but like a procession, I guess basically.

AUSTIN: I'm sorry, is this before things go bad, or after things went bad?

JANINE: After.

AUSTIN: Okay, yeah.

JANINE: Like things have gone bad, and this is a response to that. And, so, she forms this procession and says look, I'm gonna show you, everything is cool, things are maybe bad, but, you know, we're strong and united and it'll all be fine. And she forms this procession to cross the Heartland. And they just fucking disappear. Every single one of them just is completely gone. No trace of them whatsoever.

AUSTIN: [laughing] Uh-huh.

JANINE: Like people try and follow their tracks and there's just nothing. And that is what I'm saying is the greatest moment of this place! [laughing] When an empress and her entire coterie vanished.

AUSTIN: So they, did they get here and then vanish?

JANINE: Yes — they vanished specifically in the Heartland.

AUSTIN: Sorry, but I mean — in the place we're in? Like closer than the Heartland, right, because we're talking about just this Haven, this little part of the world.

JANINE: Yes.

AUSTIN: So like — did they see the old abbey? Is there a record of them coming through the town, and this is the last place anyone ever saw them?

JANINE: Yeah, I think that makes sense. It makes sense that like people who are primarily in this area would be the ones who have, like, you know, the last whispers of seeing her, or being like, "yeah we saw a scout running ahead," and then, you know...

KEITH: And the evidence that they were even there at all.

AUSTIN: Right, like, old — Like they arrived and set up tables and a little mini-court or something — or did they not even get here, Janine?

JANINE: I don't think they even got there. Hang on, can we — are there like, other settlements like this?

AUSTIN: Tons! Absolutely. There are many Havens throughout the Heartland, we are one of them. Most of them are not connected to one another because part of what makes Heart work is that one of the goals you can have as a person is to like connect Havens to each other to help regular people get safely between them, and stuff like that. And so — today we're really zooming in on whatever this one Haven is called, or what the history of it is. So yes — maybe she stopped at other Havens, successfully, you know.

JANINE: Yeah, yeah — What I'm saying is that like, I think the thing that would have happened, then, is that she didn't arrive at this one, but they had word from the last one that she visited, like they sent someone ahead to be like "hey, she's coming," and then she just never fucking showed up.

AUSTIN: Great.

ART: Um, could I make my first pitch for a name for this place.

AUSTIN: Yes.

ART: Based on that story I just heard. From our friend Janine.

AUSTIN: Yes.

ART: Eastern Folly.

JACK: [laughs]

AUSTIN: Eastern Folly.

KEITH: Like Eastern like east but also like Easter.

ART: Yeah, it's like the way that words kind of just get mashed up over the years.

AUSTIN: Mm-hm. Uh, I will say we are pretty far to the west on the continent.

[overlapping]

JANINE: But we're east of the mountains —

AUSTIN: I guess we're on the eastern side of the mountains, though.

ART: Yeah we're on the east side of the mountains.

AUSTIN: Yeah, that's true.

ART: And again, it's not actually the direction.

KEITH: It's Easter.

ART: It's Easter.

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: Like at some point there was probably an 'E' between the 'R' and the 'N'.

AUSTIN: But Easter doesn't exist.

SYLVI: Yeah, wait.

AUSTIN: Just to be clear: Easter doesn't exist in this world. We are not in a world with Christianity. We are free from — there are Christian — we are pulling on the history of Christianity and the architecture of Christianity, but I don't know how close we can get to Easter without it being weird. Jesus didn't exist here.

ART: I mean, you can, you can, you can reject my name, but I'm, this is my first pitch.

AUSTIN: I like the direction, I like the idea of — I do like that, if we were in our world, if we had set up this map and it was an island showed up on the planet, I would love it. I think it would be a slam dunk. My only concern is the Easter thing.

JANINE: To be clear I don't think the word Easter actually has anything to do — like, we associate Easter with Christianity, but the word as it originated has some like really dubious — you know, like everything else — there's pagan stuff, it's , yeah...

AUSTIN: Yes! Ishtar, trust. Again, fallen Catholic here. I've had those arguments, you know.

JANINE: I'm saying it for the sake of saying. That like —

AUSTIN: I get it. But everyone who will hear it will — everyone who listens to the podcast will at this point — I mean, even those other meanings connect to other particular gods that are Earth gods, right? Old Norse gods and shit.

ART: Well hey everyone listening to this, be cool! Let us have this.

SYLVI: [laughs] Can we say that during every episode?

[more laughter]

AUSTIN: We do, but like, there's a difference — for me, there's a gap between what is evoked, and what is — do you know what I mean? Otherwise we would just use this shit all the time. Anyway.

JANINE: I mean I can also give her a different name, I have a B name.

AUSTIN: No, for me — the thing of pulling —

ART: Do you have a C name?

AUSTIN: For me, the thing of, her name it evokes without directly referencing, that works for me. Because it is — it is not just the name of the holiday everyone has to deal with two months from when they hear this because it'll be Easter time.

KEITH: I don't give a shit, we're in a pandemic still.

[laughs]

ART: Yeah don't go to Easter.

AUSTIN: People are gonna and it's gonna be bad. Again. Um. Anyway. I'm writing it down still, I don't hate it, I just want to make sure that we think about the gap.

JACK: Yeah.

ART: I'm just — when things come up I'm just gonna throw them out until I can get rid of this horrible card.

AUSTIN: I getcha.

ALI: Why not just make it Eastern? There's just the one more letter.

KEITH: It was!

AUSTIN: It is Eastern.

DRE: It was Eastern Folly.

AUSTIN: Which is why I've kept it, I've not thrown it out, but I just —

ALI: Oh, sure, okay.

AUSTIN: I just wanna — there's — yeah. That's all.

JACK: So we're getting a lot of mixed feedback.

AUSTIN: I wanna make sure we don't start naming things around Easter stuff going forward, do you know what I mean? That's all. I wanna make sure that we don't like —

KEITH: Is it a problem that my character's name was going to be Jesus Christ?

AUSTIN: Yes.

[ALL laugh heartily.]

AUSTIN: That's going to be an issue, Keith.

[more laughter]

AUSTIN: I can't even say "Jesus Christ" to that, because it just reinforces it. It just makes it better.

JACK: His name is Christmas Easter.

[laughter]

AUSTIN: That's a Bluff City name.

DRE: Yeah.

KEITH: Where Christianity does exist.

AUSTIN: Yes, correct. Um, alright. Who else has a card?

End of Easter Chat [01:24:15]

KEITH: Uh, I can do mine. I feel like mine is a relatively simple one compared to some of these, so we can just get it out of the way. If there's a way to complicate it then I'm willing to hear it, but uh, I have the King of Clubs, which says, "If there are inhabitants, what are the visions for the future that they hold? Is it a long view? A short one?" I think that we've talked about this a little bit already because there's, uh, you know, broadly

you can categorize the people here as two different kinds of people. The ones that live here and then the sort of miners who are here to do mining, and not to like, spend the rest of their lives, and I think that they have — they hold those two views separately. The miners have a short view of the future here and the inhabitants have a long view — people have been there for hundreds of years or whatever. Um, or whose families have. And, you know, —

AUSTIN: Do those things — do you think those things come in conflict? In terms of like, the people who live there talking about ten years from now, the people who are here for the season —

KEITH: Right.

AUSTIN: — have different interests.

KEITH: I think it's your classic slobs versus snobs, like, townies versus college kids —

AUSTIN: Say more again, give me more. Talk to me about what — what is that, what's that like? What's the thing that people who live there are looking for ten years from now?

ART: Did you say "slobs versus snobs"?

KEITH: Yeah.

DRE: Mm-hm. Freaks versus geeks, you know.

ART: Okay, just checking.

KEITH: Yeah.

AUSTIN: The classics. Right. Red versus blue, you know, all the classics.

[ALI laughs]

ART: Spy versus spy.

AUSTIN: Yeah —

[ALL laugh]

ART: Am I doing this right?

KEITH: Well —

AUSTIN: [laughing] Yeah, that's right, yes.

KEITH: I think you are but I think that the specific two of the "versus" trope is, the like, the townies and the college kids, versus — and also the slobs and snobs. 'Cause those are, those are complementary and competing archetypes, I think, but, uh. But — yeah so I think there's like a give and take right, you get, you have the people who live there that wanna, like, have a normal [chuckles] — If you live somewhere you wanna have a normal town. And I think the mining invites, um, it invites like a, sort of prosperity, or if not prosperity an excess, like we talked about with the Queen of Diamonds. It gives you something, but the thing that it takes is stability, which is a rough thing to trade for a town that is like, in the middle of nowhere, with, you know, with caves and monsters and skeleton churches.

AUSTIN: Right. And then the interesting complexity there is, the miners showing up is what gives the town long-term stability —

KEITH: Right.

AUSTIN: — because that's a big part of what brings like, people here who can be — who can pay locals to do stuff, but at the same time those activities introduce instability —

KEITH: Right, and so —

AUSTIN: — because they're digging in these haunted caves.

KEITH: So the long view of the long-term inhabitants is like, trying to keep this medium of, like, we need people to come, but we don't want them causing problems. Versus the miners who are there to get what they need and leave before it's over.

AUSTIN: Right.

KEITH: Like any mine, there's a boom and a bust, and you wanna get in at the height and leave before the crash. With no regard, I think, for the — broadly, for the town itself. Because they're, you know, what do you care about some town, you've been here for three months, you just need to get your gold pile before they turn to dirt piles —

AUSTIN: Get your shit, get paid, yeah.

KEITH: — and get paid and get out.

AUSTIN: Mm-hm. Um. Okay! I'm gonna play my card.

Austin's Card [1:28:16]

AUSTIN: I have my card now. It is the Jack of Spades. "What are the threats to this place? Are these threats to the materiality of the place or to the people that live in it?" We've already touched some of these things, right? We know that there are, um, there are wild storms which can completely transform the place, and that's everywhere in the Heartland. I think Janine, you suggested yesterday in our chat that these dust storms can have like variable dust, to where it's like, you described wet dust storms, which just made me —

JANINE: So, I mean that's the thing —

AUSTIN: fold in on myself.

JANINE: The thing that's important to me about that — I suggested clay dust storms and like —

AUSTIN: Right, yes.

JANINE: It would be more like a dry clay that gets rehydrated on your skin and like, could sort of suck out the moisture from the skin so it's very uncomfortable still, and... gets wet which is the problem.

AUSTIN: Yeah. But I also think there's world where it's like, sometimes it rolls through, and it's like strands of sand instead of particles. And sometimes it rolls through and it's slow, instead of being fast, like time has slowed on it.

JANINE: Is it a new kind of sand that makes its own mucus?

AUSTIN: Yes, it's a new kind of sand —

[ALL laugh]

AUSTIN: that makes its own mucus. It's the future of sand, honestly.

KEITH: Where is this on the, sand, silt, clay chart?

AUSTIN: All over, that's what we're saying.

KEITH: It's all over?

AUSTIN: I think sandstorms can be, they can come in — They're not even predictable enough to be like oh yeah, a sandstorm is coming, this is the thing that will protect us from it. Because that is —

KEITH: You're saying there's silty clay, there's silt loam, there's sandy loam...

AUSTIN: All over, Keith. The whole fucking triangle —

KEITH: Sandy clay...

AUSTIN: — is out here for us. Um, so yeah, but that's just like a Heartland-wide thing, right. We've already talked about the potential weird shit in the caves, the beasts, you know, parent and child, we've talked about the uh, conflicts between the miners and the locals. That's a big one here, obviously. But I think The Thing that I want to introduce is,

um, sometimes things and people walk out of the cave that didn't go in. Sometimes someone digs up a person, um, or a person digs themselves out. Sometimes they're like skeletal people, or monstrous beasts. Sometimes it's like, a company of old soldiers, and they'll dig themselves out and come into the town and like, occupy it for a week, and we have to deal with it.

ART: Old soldiers or new soldiers?

AUSTIN: Yup. [beat] Either, both, right? Sometimes you'll just hear the echo of fighting in the caves and it's like ah, shit, an old monster and an old monster hunter came through from some part of this place, and are fighting each other here. Please just end each other, don't leave the fucking mouth of the cave, I'm begging you. Um, we know that there are other exits to the cave higher up in the mountains, because sometimes people come down from there, but we haven't found those yet. But that's a part where like, sometimes things from these other timelines can kind of stumble out and they don't come through the abbey entrance, they come through one of these other exits of the caves up above us.

KEITH: Are they chill?

AUSTIN: Sometimes they're chill! Sometimes it's just like, a person, a knight shows up with a huge greatsword and asks to like, give us directions to the nearest chapel. Because she needs to — she needs to bless her equipment and say a few prayers. And then leaves, and like walks off into the sunset. Sometimes, that same thing happens, and then she sees that there's like the ribcage of the old abbey of the beast and is like, "this is a cursed and evil place," and begins to try to like, break things and kill people. Um, so. You know. Things come in from the past and future, uh. I think that is our very unique threat, here.

JACK: How often does this happen?

AUSTIN: Uh, at least yearly. Sometimes more often than that, but I think on average yearly.

JACK: Okay, so it's not like — because presumably if it was happening more often —

AUSTIN: Um, that's too — that's not — that's too rare.

JACK: It's too rare.

AUSTIN: 'Cause it'll happen a couple times in a season, right? In a season of the show Friends at the Table. So like, seasonally, right?

ALI: Oh, yeah.

ART: So twice a year.

JACK: Is it related to the weather, do we know? Maybe?

AUSTIN: I think people theorize that, yeah. Exactly, right? I think it has to be at least, when there are storms it seems like it happens more often. Things get shook loose, you know?

JACK: But how much of that is just people remember it more because they remember being frightened of the storm when the thing comes out of the ...

AUSTIN: Totally. Yeah.

JANINE: Is it that there's like a sort of equinox schedule, but the schedule itself is unknown, unlike the equinox and the solstice and stuff? It's just like there's some other, there's some other timetable.

AUSTIN: There might be.

JANINE: A pulse.

AUSTIN: I think the answer is, we could probably get close, but also it could change at any time. Because the truth of this place, the truth under it all this season, is nothing is permanent. Everything changes. There is no sense to make of it. ANd how do we make ourselves against that? How do we like, recognizing that the world is deeply

unpredictable and arbitrary, how do we — how do we then identify ourselves, and do so with confidence? And so I think there's a degree of like, yes, we can get close to that equinox — there are lots of people who want to discover that equinox, and maybe they get it for, again, some amount of time, but then there's some complication. It's sort of like the thing that like, physicists will say, which is like, we understand it until we don't. Right? We understand as much as we can — we're committed to understanding more but we admit there's a point at which like, the laws stop working right. And so until we discover that next law. And this Heartland is a world in which there is always a next law, there is always some exception we can't quite understand yet. Um, and so I think that that's the case, right. It basically works, and then every once in a while it doesn't work, and you're like, I don't, I don't fucking know! I don't fucking — I thought we had it solved! So, yeah.

Sylvi's Card [1:34:30]

SYLVI: That sorta helps me with my card. Um, at least sort of helps give me an idea for it. Because I got the Queen of Spades, which was the, "What is the greatest tragedy in this place's past? How is it remembered?" And like, I... My first idea was just like, a landslide, and that was way too boring. Um... And I...

[ALI laughs]

SYLVI: And I sort of, the idea of something coming out of the cave that did a lot of damage is what has sort of... drawn me in. And like, for some reason the first thing that I'm immediately picturing is just like, one day fire shot out of the cave for like, twelve hours straight, and it did not stop.

AUSTIN: Whoa. Jesus Christ.

DRE: Hell yeah.

SYLVI: And like, it changed everything about like, how they had to arrange the town. Because they couldn't like — they didn't know that that was a thing. They thought things could come out of there —

AUSTIN: Right.

SYLVI: Like people, or like animals, or other stuff like that. But this is like, an actual elemental force just being produced by this mountain, and just coming out and razing things to the ground.

AUSTIN: Right.

JACK: Did it like, kill people who were really important to the town at that time? Or like —

SYLVI: I think it — like — at least a couple, right? Like I think it had a very — this was probably early in the town's settling, is the way I'm picturing it, because it's specifically in the town's past, right. And one of the things, um, that I think comes with that is like, well, a lot of people were probably working in there, still. Like, a lot of people who were probably founding members, or like very early members of making this mining operation run, and it was a big setback for a few years. Or at least a few months, depending on like, how many more people came after to help rebuild.

AUSTIN: Totally. I mean, probably like, immediately, months in terms of direct damage, but then like, alright, we have to rethink how we do this, probably does take like, a year.

SYLVI: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Of getting all the safety precautions in place. Does that transform the feeling of entering the mine, to be almost like, we talked about *Annihilation* earlier but that like, alright, when you enter the zone of the abbey, it's actually like getting ready to — I said "zone" because I was thinking about *Annihilation* —

SYLVI: [laughter]

AUSTIN: When you enter the area around the remains of the abbey and the entryway to the caves, there's like, almost a neutral-ground, where you're like, this is the preparation point, I'm going in. And then there's some distance between that and the primary settlement, that's maybe on a lower hill or something.

SYLVI: Yeah, I like that.

AUSTIN: Looking up at the, you know — or the other way, looking down at — however we wanna do it.

SYLVI: I also — yeah — I really like the idea of this neutral ground still having like, visual signifiers of what happened so long ago.

AUSTIN: Yeah, the scorch makes.

SYLVI: Like stuff hasn't grown back properly, and probably won't in this area.

AUSTIN: Mm-hm.

SYLVI: Also, I don't think it needs to specifically be like, normal fire, I think that it could be magical in nature, it could be whatever, I don't know if we need to define it, but I think it's just like, it is easiest for people to describe it as fire, you know?

AUSTIN: Totally, totally. Um. The... God, I was so mad. I learned — I think it was — was it the word banefire? Which ends being like, used in some fantasy novel series, and I was like, "Fuck! That's such a good word, but we can't use it."

[overlapping]

SYLVI: It's a Magic: The Gathering card, apparently.

AUSTIN: Okay, there's another —

JANINE: Balefire, with an L?

AU and JACK: [in unison]: Balefire!

AUSTIN: It was balefire. Balefire. Is a word that —

KEITH: That's better than windfire, too.

AUSTIN: Yeah, balefire is like. A sick word that is like, a signal fire, but it's literally used — it's from *Wheel of Time*, it's like, well, we just can't use it, that's too big.

JACK: Oh, no. [chuckle]

AUSTIN: That's such a specific word.

KEITH: I don't know that —

AUSTIN: Anyway. But yeah. Some sort of fire — it can be more magical than, uh —

KEITH: Fantasy authors just sit around taking up all the cool words.

AUSTIN: Those motherfuckers. [sarcastic] Not like us.

SYLVI: [laughs]

AUSTIN: Um, who do we got left? I did not actually play my card, I should get rid of my card.

ALI: Um, I think it might just be me.

Ali's Card [1:38:51]

ALI: Um, I have the Jack of Hearts. Which is optional, it is, "Who lives here? What is the average person like in this place? What did they look like, what did they wear? Or, describe the flora and fauna. What is the landscape like? What animals and plants call it home?" And I was thinking about the first one, but like, [chuckles], as people were answering it was getting more complicated because it's not like, the nuns don't live here, and also like, mining families don't live here, um, so... It sort of narrows the focus...

AUSTIN: Is that true? Are there no — just go back to Keith's answer before, I think it was Keith's answer — are there no local miners? Who stay permanently? Or is that like uh — are there a few of those still in the mix?

KEITH: Uh, I was just being broad, yeah, I don't think there's no local miners.

AUSTIN: Okay.

ALI: Okay, it felt like such a distinction between like, people who were coming in and causing stress to the people who are living here, that like — you know — it was something you were setting up, so I didn't wanna just be like, "well mining families were here..." Um, because that's... that feels against spirit. Um...

AUSTIN: Yeah, that's just why I wanted to clarify.

ALI: Yeah. Um... The, um... The thing that I was thinking of with like what we've set up at least, there might've been a period of time between when the nuns go into the cave and when someone discovers like, oh people can mine here, we should like establish this as like, you know — people should know about this.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

ALI: That like, maybe there was a group of people who lived in the mountains, and because of a landslide or something like that, ended up going to the foot of the hills and settling into this town. That was since abandoned from the nuns, um... And that sort of keeps that dichotomy...

AUSTIN: Do you think that part of the community is what gets closer to this lake, that's sort of out on the flat land a little bit? Like is it a little community that runs up to the lake shore that is separate from that higher-up abbey tier?

ALI: Yeah, I think so. I guess especially if there's, like, you know, there are the workers and then there are the people who live here, there would also be like a separation of space in that way. Um, neighborhoods would — well, it's all one Haven, but —

structurally there would be a division in that way. There are the homes here, and there are the inns. And that is two separate groups of people.

AUSTIN: Right, right. Yeah, I like this. I have a — can we go back to Janine's thing? Because I was looking at the map like, oh, is this a thing? So Janine, we were talking about how like the Empress — whatever — the Adjective Empress — was on the way here, and this was the place she never got to. What if there was a community across the lake, where like, you could see her entourage and the like, lights and stuff, and she was going to cross the lake to get here, and that's the last we heard. A message came that said she's going to cross the lake, and then never heard from again. Because that could also give this lake a little extra juice, you know?

JANINE: Mm-hm.

AUSTIN: Is there a devil-empress who started to cross the lake and never finished? Is she at the bottom of the lake, who could say?

JANINE: I wanna like, expand on that image a little bit. You know how, uh...

AUSTIN: Please.

JANINE: How sometimes you — you see like, mostly in illustrations, I don't know what the cultural — what the broader historical context for these boats are — but like, you'll see when people are talking about like, the Ferryman of the Undead and whatever. But like, a rowboat, basically, that has that sort of long part on the front that curls up and has a lantern hanging on it. So you'll often get, you know in medieval period films and whatever the fuck, you'll get those images of like, little dots of light on the water through the fog and the mist or whatever. You get these sorta like, you know, ghostly light forms...

AUSTIN: Yeah...

JANINE: So I love the idea of like, that's the part that they see, right? It's like they see, oh, there's a bunch of those, that must be her. But then, you know, as the sun comes up they just disappear as the light spreads and the mist burns off.

AUSTIN: Yeah. Do we still see those lights from time to time? Is it one off hose like — or is the story told such that it's like, "And on certain nights, if you look east to the lake, people say you can still see the light of the Empress' boat."

ART: But it's like a friend of a friend saw it.

JANINE: [chuckles]

AUSTIN: Yeah yeah yeah, exactly.

JANINE: Yeah.

AUSTIN: People see lights on the water all the time for various reasons. Who could say what they actually are.

KEITH: Gotta have ghost stories.

AUSTIN: Gotta have ghost stories.

JANINE: Sometimes someone's just doing some night fishing but they get mistaken for Adjective Empress Altapasqua and her coterie.

AUSTIN: [chuckles] right, exactly.

ART: The Empress of Adjectives.

AUSTIN: That's why she was coming to the word mines.

SYLVI: [laughs]

KEITH: The thing that I've been thinking about a lot of this season is the one page in the Heart book where it like, just lists like forty different reasons people think — forty

different things that people think about the Heart, and like — these are just — everybody just has ideas that are, and you know. They're all wrong, does it matter?

AUSTIN: Is this the part that's like. People who are like, "the Heart is an engine powering an ignoble world-machine," or "the Heart is an artistic masterpiece of a secret society of thousands of elves," that section, Keith?

KEITH: Right. And I — yeah. I've been thinking — as we've been going through this, I've been thinking about the season, I've been thinking about that one page a lot, and like, you can scale it up or down to whatever.

AUSTIN: Yes, totally. Yes. And that is the heart, I think — [groans] — that is the core of what I —

[laughter]

AUSTIN: — wanna hit at here. That idea of like, well what the fuck is it? Oh, it — it's kind of unanswerable. I mean I have some ideas of what various answers might be. This is a place we play a lot, like, there is no one single answer to history, or whatever. Um, but I do really like that, the — the center of this being — Past seasons have dealt with things like, what if there is nothing underneath it all? How do we define ourselves? This seasons for me is like —

KEITH: Is the moon a star? Nobody knows.

AUSTIN: Nobody knows.

ALL: [laugh]

AUSTIN: Great clip. This season is like, what if everything is underneath it all? What if there is an un-ending chain of meaning, where nothing has permanent definition? Oh, fuck! What am I? What are we? How do we define our culture? Where do we draw lines? How do we still insist on subjective meanings in the face of there not being any objective ones? In a world in which meaning has been obliterated, how do we then re-insist on meaning-making? Um, in terms of what our goals and beliefs are. So, those

are the big questions. And that's why, sometimes you can tell a story about a fucking ghost-empress, and people be like, "Yeah, could be, I guess."

KEITH: Could be!

AUSTIN: Um, oh, we still have two more cards, that's the thing, right. We still have two in the deck to pull.

ALI: I — I didn't do "What did they look like? What did they wear?" [laughter]

AUSTIN: Oh! Sorry! Apologies!

ALI: [laughing] No, it's okay!

AUSTIN: I thought that — yeah, my bad.

ALI: No, yeah, yeah. Um, we have a lot of races to grab from, at this point?

AUSTIN: We do.

ALI: Um, but I think because this is like a mountain town — or it's like, close to the mountains, and also the like, people who live here-live here came from the mountains, I lean goat-people in that way? I bet it's a mix.

AUSTIN: Mm-hm.

ALI: But, um, I feel like — [chuckles]

AUSTIN: I guess to give a quick run-down of what the different peoples are, right, there are the goat-people from the Pale Magistratum up north, there are the devils who took over the Throne of Dominion to the East. We talked about there being — there's a group called the Drakkan, who are like seahorse-y people? Seahorse-ish people? Uh, who have like, you know, um, bright colors and dorsal fins on their faces, but also this kind of like rigid armor that skin is pulled across in a way that's kind of creepy and good? Um, and those people were like, a large part of the slave population throughout the Heartland. Um, we have some sort of animal people, Ali?

ALI: Mm-hm. Uh-huh.

AUSTIN: In the mix? I don't know yet if that is like a broad mammalian thing, or if that is like one particular group.

ALI: I think it's a little broad. I've been saying that they're just like, rodents. I'm mostly going for capybaras here. Um, but I wanted some like, racial distinction between like, you can have really short rounded ears, or you can have long rabbit ears that like hang down. Or you can have like, a really long face, or you can kind of have one that's a little shorter and like flatter.

AUSTIN: Yeah, so there's variation in that space. Um, and then there's humans, also, and we'll see if there's other shit that shows up. Also, I mean — There are people — There are spirit-people, immaterial people who make contracts with other people, for instance.

ALI: The skeletons.

KEITH: They sound like the devils.

AUSTIN: There are skeletons. Nope, not the devils. The devils don't make contracts any more, contracts are too dangerous to make. They know this, because they used contracts to take over the world.

JANINE: I have — I have some — I have some theories about the relationship — or the contracts people could make between a devil contract and Heritrixes contract, I've been thinking about that stuff. So that's a thing —

AUSTIN: You've been thinking about it, good. Love it, love it.

ALI: [laughs]

AUSTIN: So yeah, and I think there's a mix of people here, but I do like the idea of the goat-people from the north, who historically come from the mountains being tied here in a big way. Um, for sure.

ALI: Right.

AUSTIN: Good to know.

ALI: The idea that like, okay, there was this place and the nuns were here. And then, okay the nuns left, don't ask about it, and then the goat people came, and there's still a bunch of goat people here, but like, you know, it is what it is. And then the miners came and, you know, it just becomes like, harder to keep track of that stuff, because the population just gets more mixed over time.

AUSTIN: Yeah. What are they wearing? Tell me fashion? Fuck me up.

ALI: [laughs] Yeah! I, so — um, layers. Um... Like thin cottons. When you think of like, dust storms, you think of dusters, you think of coats. But I also think of big gloves that are covered in dirt that you wear over your like, simple button down, which is one of your three button downs, or whatever, you know?

AUSTIN: Yeah.

ALI: Uh, I keep — I'm thinking of this place as being a little humid, just because I feel like it's easy to think of fantasy places as like, "Oh it's cold and it's windy and there's winters," but like, humidity is such a thing that like, will fuck you up. [laughs]

AUSTIN: Right.

ALI: And like, it like, can change the structure of a place in terms of just making it hard to breathe, or making it more uncomfortable, or changing the sort of plants and stuff you can get, because there's water in the air.

AUSTIN: Totally.

ALI: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Alright, I love that. [writing notes] Miners come in... um... Okay! Uh... yes?

ALI: I was gonna say also really humid air will fuck with your clay storms in a way that's disgusting.

AUSTIN: Oh, fuck yeah.

JACK: Oh, no.

ALI: So, yeah. Good luck washing your windows.

JACK: Is there — is there like, seasonal — does the temperature change based on the seasons?

AUSTIN: Is it a wet season and a dry season, or is it all the seasons that we have in like, the east coast of North America?

ALI: It's tough because you wanna — you wanna have four seasons because four seasons are nice. But I feel like wet and dry is probably the thing that we want, right? Because then you evoke the feeling of a desert, and it's like super dry, and we haven't gotten any rain. You know, there's no — it's good to mine in, but the ground is hot, and it's just uncomfortable.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

ALI: And then you have the wet season where it's like, you literally can't do the job that you came here to do. For two weeks.

KEITH: The flipside is also that —

ALI: But you also can't leave, like you can't travel. [laughs]

KEITH: We've talked about the rain like, unearthing stuff.

AUSTIN: Mm-hm.

ALI: Yeah.

AUSTIN: So maybe it'll be a good haul if you go in after the rain and dusts all hit, who could say.

ALI & KEITH: Right.

AUSTIN: You just gotta hunker down for the next couple weeks.

ALI: Right. You get there before it rains.

KEITH: If there's — If there's these clay storms, are people — is there like a big pottery scene? Are they making a lot — like, is that, that could be —

AUSTIN: That sounds like a good place that could exist.

ALI: Yeah.

KEITH: That could be your — That could be your distinction between local miners and uh, the sort of traveling miners, is that you're more — If you're local you're more likely to be harvesting clay than looking for trinkets.

AUSTIN: Mm-hm. That — the clay stuff hits the whole Heartland, not just this one place.

KEITH: Oh, okay.

AUSTIN: Um, but, that's still — Clay is useful. So.

KEITH: Right, super useful.

AUSTIN: But also it's definitely cursed clay. So. There's probably — you probably have to do a thing to make it less cursed before you commit to using it. Or, be someone who doesn't give a fuck about curses, but boy, is that risky.

ART: So we're talking like —

KEITH: Just pass it under the rib-ceiling.

ART: Like a desert with a monsoon season, is that what we're kinda getting at?

AUSTIN: That's what it sounds like, that's kinda fun.

ALI: Yeah.

ART: Alright, that sounds great.

AUSTIN: Yeah. Miserable.

ALI: [laughs]

ART: Yeah, I don't wanna go there.

AUSTIN: Alright — [laughs] — we have two more cards to do collaboratively.

ART: Two Kings.

AUSTIN: The first one is King of Hearts. Someone wanna read this?

ALI: I got it, yeah. "What stories are told in or about this place? Does it have any legends or myths? Does it have religion?"

AUSTIN: I think we already touched on some legends and myths. I think this has to be a big — I think that the fucking, the um... the digging-stuff-up-church has to be here, right? There's a group called the Disciples of the Triadic Pyre. Um, where, I'll just read what I wrote in this book, which — now that I look at it is written in character. I entered a fugue state while writing this document for y'all. Which you can tell, because there's a point at which it just stops being encyclopedic and starts sounding like a thing a guy who's been stuck in the fucking terrible Heartland desert, uh, has started writing. Um. So I think this group has to be here, the Disciples of the Triadic Pyre.

AUSTIN (*reading*): "I'll say as little as I can, because there are few words one can write about them that won't guide them to you like a beacon, marking the ink page and the writer to be burnt as fuel. The Disciples worship a trio of gods that they call the Triadic Pyre, but it is hard to understand how these three beings—powerful though they may be—came first into alignment with each other.

From the Magistrates of the Second Canton, they took Fulmina, goddess of immediate justice, and appointed her as ruler of the Flame's Spark. From the terrible hierarchies of the locomotive Shape that runs across the heartland, they found a burning god among iron trains, whose names my lips dare not utter lest it lay its tracks towards you and I both, and aligned that beast with the Fire Alight. And finally, whether as cruel corruption or in a moment of lightness, they adopted the Ojantani" — which is the fifth Canton, the Southern Canton — "the Ojantani deity, the Smiling God of Death as their god of the Ashen Remains. Under it all is a simple belief: Even in the heartland, where things sometimes find second or third life, in the end, everything burns. Everything dies. Everything ceases to be. And for the disciples, the best place is to be the one holding the match. These are priests of ash with burning temples" — like, purposely, the temples just have parts of them that are on fire, or that are letting off smoke at all times, Jack came up with a lot of these little notes, which is the best — "people burning censors so thickly that they move in a cloud of scented smoke. A great beast died centuries ago and was buried underground. Priests draw its black blood up through the ground as sacred oil. Geologist-priests, surveyor-priests, holy theodolites and soil samples and plumb lines. Religious digging. Great Pits. Cellars. Three nuns rent a room at an inn and start digging beneath it."

AUSTIN: So I think they gotta be here. [chuckles]

[laughter]

ART: The mouth things, too?

AUSTIN: Hm? Oh yeah, I think the mouth-people have to be here too. But like, there was even a bit of this giant cave system that spat out fire, like. Between the digging and the elemental fire, this is — they have got to have built a church here. Um, Art, do you wanna talk about the mouth-people?

ART: I don't have my — I don't have the document up if that's what you're asking. Um,

AUSTIN: [mumbling] ... what I was asking.

ART: It's the —

AUSTIN: Do you want me to read this story? Jack, do you wanna read this story?

JACK: Sure! Uh... Let's find it. We're talking about the uh —

AUSTIN: The Caravan of the Coin, yeah.

JACK (*reading*): "It goes like this: Once, a pair of brothers wanted an ox, and so they did what they were told never to do. They made a deal with Ribbadon, the great Frog God of Wealth. 'Give us a silver coin,' they said, and he did, on the condition that they return the coin that year, or else owe it and its double the next year, and so on, forever. Well, they bought the ox, and with that ox they bought a pair more, and soon they appeared quite rich.

I write 'appeared' because, in fact, they were deeply indebted to old Ribbadon. As the two grew in age and worry, they sought to make good on their debt, but there was one problem: They had, of course, spent that silver coin many decades ago, so they were at a loss. Until, they realized, with all their wealth, they could forge a coin like the one they were given, and fool the old frog.

Wheelbarrows filled with silver and gold were led to Ribbadon's court, and in a single swipe of his tongue, he swallowed years of profit in an instant, and then bellowed his judgment. 'You have paid me back one more coin than you owe me, yet one less than you took.' The brothers knew instantly that their deception had been for naught, but before they could object, a curse descended. 'There is no fortune too rich in taste for my tongue, and until I have my coin, on your tongues will be the only way to hold your fortune.'

When the brothers, their kin, their descendants, and even their servants returned home, they found that anything they'd carried with them had been turned into

something else of the same weight. Gold coins turned lead. Prayer books transformed into straw. A rock to a diamond.

This is why you see those caravans now, hauling mysterious cargo across the grasslands and deserts of the heartland. They're trading whatever it is they can, forever, in doomed worship of Ribbadon. Paying down interest. And looking for that old coin. They'll tell you that the lesson is that you cannot stop change, and so you must lean in to the chaos. Let yourself and everything you have be changed by curse of the heartland. And they'll demonstrate their new mastery over magics alchemical, illusionary, and alterative as proof of their philosophy's power.

And yet... sometimes they'll tell you nothing at all, the hypocrites, because in their mouths they carry cargo they are desperate to keep. It is as old Ribbadon implied: Whatever they hold on their tongues is kept from the curse."

AUSTIN: Uh, so yeah! They are like, pilgrims who travel across the world selling things, and trying to find this one old coin. Um, living on the things they can hunt from the wild as they travel, because they anything they eat isn't gonna change, they believe, or seem to know. Um, galloping on horseback, blowing horns, surrounded by dogs. Great caravans of pilgrims, priests, and laypeople, like Chaucer's Canterbury Tales party. Sheer numbers make this one of the safest ways to travel, they travel only safe and secure routes. When they arrive, it is like a circus and bizarre all at once. This is where we get the tongue thing.

Jack, you wrote this great one:

AUSTIN, (*reading*) "Priests who can't speak. They are holding something in their mouths. A bug. A stone. A fish. Holy water. A small stake. A coin, perhaps. To keep a thing on your tongue is the only way to ensure it never changes." And then I've added here: "Yes, they found the coin before. And each time they've lost it. At least once, it was because uh, Chitin-Crow, who is another god, a crow god

covered in chitin, visited to tell a joke so funny that the priest carrying the coin in his mouth laughed so hard he lost it. Poor priest."

KEITH: What a jerk! What a jerk of a crow.

JACK: Ah!

AUSTIN: Yeah, you know, sometimes you got a crow god who tells jokes.

ALI: Yeah....

KEITH: I mean, he sounds hilarious, but he seems like a jerk.

AUSTIN: So yeah. I think both of those — there has to be like a caravan point here, right. Because like, what if the coin shows up in the mine. They're desperate. Every time they check in, they're like, maybe the coin — did anyone find any weird coins? In the caves?

ALI: [laughs]

JACK: Coin marked with a frog.

AUSTIN: And the answer is yes. Coin marked with frog — I think it's one of those little coins that has the little like, mechanical element, that like, opens a window, and inside the window on the coin is an etching of the frog god of wealth, Ribbadon. So I think both of them are here.

JACK: Austin — I think you just — you wrote in one of these documents, you just wrote "FROG GOD OF WEALTH." Absent of any other context, and I immediately messaged you, "I'm sorry, frog god of wealth?"

SYLVI and AUSTIN: [laugh]

AUSTIN: It's just, you know — the thing that's actually in mind — and this is not what it's in my mind at this point — but I was thinking about the Adjudicator, the boss from

Demon's Souls, which has been — has been really fucked up in the contemporary version.

JACK: I'm looking at a picture of this guy.

AUSTIN: Because they leaned into like, the, this is a gross fat body. And it was already that thing, to some degree, but — it — the big thing about it was it has this huge tongue emerging from like, a big — I don't want to call it a mouth — a mouth-shaped hole on its body. But then at the very top of it is a glowing bird that is the god of judgement, or something.

JACK: [laughs] Holy shit.

AUSTIN: Which is why it's the Adjudicator. And it's a wild fucking creature. And there's a greatshield with like, a drawing of it on it, that I think really sets it up. Covered in chains and, again, just a big glowing — and I was like, what if, what if this general vibe, but it's just a big frog that, I don't know, eats coins? And stuff. And can give them.

JACK: [laughs]

AUSTIN: So yeah I think both of those are there.

JACK: So they've got a staging post.

AUSTIN: Yeah, definitely.

JACK: Or like a — you know.

AUSTIN: And I think that the Triadic Pyre is more of like — there is absolutely a... they have not — maybe they — they haven't rebuilt the abbey, I'm respecting that, but somewhere in town is just this towering — I mean, I don't — they are a There Will Be Blood religion. [chuckle] So like, how do you make an oil well, an oil derrick, look like a fucking Cathedral? You know? We'll think on it. Um. And there's probably one of the chapels of the last big one — I mean the Chitin-Crow people are probably not in this town, they're probably up in the mountains and we'll get to them at some point, but there

is definitely another group who we don't need to read the whole thing of, but there's a place called the Boundless Conclave, that is like, um... Almost like — it's a vast pantheon of religions, that often gets criticized for being cynical, because it's just a collection of hundreds of small faiths. Some of which are contradictory to each other, but if you're a member of the Conclave, you can use the facilities of any associated Conclave place. Which means like, you will have a place to pray even in this little town that does not have a temple to your little — whatever your more particular god is, you know. The — the god of the Lady of the Lake or whatever — or sorry, the Lady of the Lake temple does not exist here, but you can go pray to her because the Church of the Lady of the Lake is associated with the Conclave. There's a degree to which the motivation is — or at some point the motivation was — cynical, of the like, "I don't know. The fucking Realm of Mortals and the Realm of Gods has gotten thinner, and everyone here believes some other wild shit. Who could say what is true and what's not? Let's just believe as much of it as possible and hope that it works out in our favor. There's almost a past calls wager element to it, here, that is fun. And this can also be our like, bureaucracy church, a little bit.

KEITH: A — A slight twist on being extremely religious.

AUSTIN: Yeah, definitely.

[ALI laughs]

AUSTIN: Absolutely. And they do, I mean — the priests of this place, like, as is noted here, run hospitals and alms-houses, but also some work houses. There's lots of like, weird interactions between these places. I think there are people who are — who are just kind of wandering priests who go and help at whatever chapel needs them. Because it's a holiday season for that particular chapel, and they're like, yeah I've read the books, I can help run services.

[chuckles]

AUSTIN: You can lead and I can be the backup, you know what I mean? Yeah I'll burn the — whatever the herb is you need me to burn today. Um, and then — so I suspect there's a small chapel to maybe, we'll find what what the local — Maybe it's that the abbey to the beast is part of the Conclave, you know, or something like that, and then there's still a small temple or a small chapel to that, that's Conclave-associated. But I don't, you know. I don't think that's as big of a landmark as the Triadic Pyre or the Caravan of the Coin outpost, I think those two are probably like more dominant.

Final Card [02:06:08]

AUSTIN: We got one more, then we're done with this section. King of Spades.

KEITH: Did we — did we set that twenty-five minute thing? Has that gone off yet?

AUSTIN: Yeah I think we crossed twenty-five, I think so Keith.

[chuckles]

AUSTIN: What I'll say is I think all of our individual turns were pretty tight, so.

ART: But we are at two and a half hours, yes Keith, good, uh...

AUSTIN: Yes, good catch.

AUSTIN: This is an either/or.

AUSTIN, (*reading*): "If there are multiple people who live here, what are they divided on, what are the points of contention, or that are fought over? Or, if there are not multiple people, what resources do the plants, animals and visitors to this place vie for?"

AUSTIN: I feel like we answered this question pretty good already... Unless we want...

ART: Yeah I feel like I know this one.

AU & ALI: Yeah...

KEITH: Um, which card was this?

[overlapping]

AUSTIN: King of Spades. I feel like your answer was tied with this.

KEITH: I feel like we covered this in like three different questions, yeah.

AUSTIN: Me too, yeah.

ART: A mining town has really clearly defined stakes in this way I think.

ALI: Yeah.

JACK: Yeah, I do wanna ask, I wanna ask real quickly about food? About where we get food from? And about how plentiful that is. Is there — Do we have like, a regular drop-off from a place further down? Or, are we growing our own food... How stable is that?

KEITH: Lake fish?

[overlapping]

JACK: Lake fish...

AUSTIN: I think fish...

ALI: Yeah I was thinking lake fish, tree fruit.

AUSTIN: But then to get like, greens? I bet we have to — I bet we have some sort of relationship — I mean, do some people have their little backyard gardens, maybe? But like —

KEITH: We also talked about their being a forest, there could be some foraging happening. Bugs, eating bugs from the forest.

AUSTIN: Yeah, eating bugs from the forest for protein, sure. I do like the idea though, Jack, that that can be a limit. Maybe part of that is that the city sort of — I said city just now, right? — that the town is bigger than can sustain in some ways. Because of the influx of miners, that there is the degree of like, well we can't really...

JACK: Yeah.

AUSTIN: This lake fed the people who lived here but the people who lived here times three or whatever is a little tougher.

JACK: And maybe they are spending that infrastructure up, but that's something that takes multiple seasons, especially if, you know — if sandstorms keep destroying things.

AUSTIN: Right.

JACK: Or it's like, you know, the vague people who are in charge in the town might be like, you know we really are trying to get this working better, but we need time that we don't necessarily have.

ALI: Is there like an expectation of bringing something with you if you're gonna stay here?

JACK: Oh, huh!

ALI: Like okay, you're gonna come and mine here, but you should bring a pound of tomatoes. Because we can't grow tomatoes.

AUSTIN: More than that, even.

ALI: But we need some.

AUSTIN: Definitely a pound of tomatoes, but maybe it's more than that, right?

ALI: Yeah.

KEITH: Salt...

AUSTIN: Yeah, I love that.

JACK: Bring! A! Pig!

ALI: [laughs]

AUSTIN: Bring a pig. Bring two pigs, and promise a third.

ALI: Mm-hm. One for the doctor, one for the butcher.

KEITH: Like, bags of flour.

AUSTIN: Also I think sometimes people come down from the mountains with like three heads of cabbage, and that's like, a big deal.

ALI: [laughs]

AUSTIN: Like yo, I found food up there! That's great.

JACK: Yeah, I was gonna say! Uh —

AUSTIN: Or seeds! What are these seeds? I found a bunch of seeds in the caves today, what are they gonna grow? Let's find out! Uh oh!

JACK: Well you just plant them and fucking nothing — or nothing happens, right? Like, nah, okay.

AUSTIN: Right.

KEITH: Maybe there's a — like, uh — the miner — all the seeds that you find, the miners have to keep this garden... full of all their seeds.

JACK: Weird cursed garden.

AUSTIN: Full of all their seeds, and the town gets a cut.

KEITH: Yeah.

JACK: Oh my god, or you break through a wall —

AUSTIN: And the injured miners work the garden — the miners who can't go into the caves any more at least, right? Like, okay, well I can try to tend to the garden, it's a little safer than going straight into these tunnels.

JACK: And sometimes you just strike lucky and hit a ham seam. You break through a wall...

ALI: No....

AUSTIN: Delicious.

JACK: ... and find a whole seam of cured ham.

JANINE: Do they call —

JACK: You don't wanna find that, Ali?

KEITH: Oh it's already cured, beautiful!

ALI: I don't want any — I don't want any wall ham.

JANINE: Okay, so you're saying —

AUSTIN: Okay.

[laughter, overlapping]

KEITH: The wall ham is the best ham I've ever had.

JANINE: So you're saying you don't want pink quartz being called "fool's ham," or anything like that?

[more laughter]

JANINE: "I was so sure it was ham, but it was a rock..."

KEITH: But it's MUD!

AUSTIN: It's not.... fuck.

KEITH: [cackling] Fool's ham...

AUSTIN: I got a new idea for the name of the town...

JANINE: Eastern Foolsham?

AUSTIN: Welcome to Fool's Ham, Eastern Foolsham.

[laughter continues]

JACK: Ham pyrites. Uh, god.

SYLVI: It's hogwash.

JACK: Oh, no...

AUSTIN: [groans] ... Not all that glitters is ham. That's what they say.

SYLVI: [laughs]

JANINE: [groans]

AUSTIN: Glistens. Not all that glistens is ham.

[ALL groan]

JACK: Awful!

[*Sangfuelle* theme begins]

AUSTIN: Alright, we're done. We're done. No ham walls.

SYLVI: [laughs]

JACK: And that's the end of Friends at the Table Season 7.

AUSTIN: Like cabbages.

ART: Titled: "No Ham Walls."

[*Sangfielle* theme continues]