

SLAY THE SCALES

A Traveler's Guide to the Concord of Five Banners

Recorded by Pell of Hearthhold · Annotated by Magda of Wherever She Happens to Be Today

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FOREWORD

A Letter to New Travelers

Friend,

If you are reading this, then sooner or later you intend to leave a gate.

Perhaps you stand in Hearthhold already.

Perhaps you are reading this in a village tavern while rain taps against the shutters.

Perhaps someone placed this guide into your hands and said, "Read this before you do something foolish."

If so, listen to them.

The Concord of Five Banners is a larger place than it first appears.

Maps help.

Road signs help.

Experienced guides help.

But sooner or later every traveler discovers the same truth:

The world cannot be understood from a map.

It must be walked.

The forests must be entered.

The rivers crossed.

The mountains climbed.

The roads followed until they become stories.

This guide cannot replace experience.

Nothing can.

What it can do is help you survive long enough to gain some.

Within these pages you will find descriptions of the Five Banners, the roads that bind them together, the dragons whose names echo through every corner of the realm, and the people who have shaped the age in which we live.

You will also find warnings.

Pay attention to those.

The realm has a way of educating travelers who ignore warnings.

Some lessons are expensive.

Others are fatal.

If fortune favors you, this guide will spare you a few mistakes.

If fortune truly favors you, it will encourage you to make the right ones.

Because mistakes, surprisingly enough, are not the enemy.

A traveler who never errs rarely learns.

A traveler who learns nothing rarely changes.

And the purpose of a journey is not merely to arrive somewhere else.

It is to become someone else.

When your travels finally bring you back to Hearthhold - and most meaningful journeys eventually do - I hope you return wiser than when you left.

If you do, then this guide has served its purpose.

Travel well.

— *Pell* *Whispering Stacks, Hearthhold*

MAGDA'S NOTE

Pell spent three days writing that.

Three days.

He used words like purpose and meaningful and fortune.

So let me save you some time.

Here's what you actually need to know.

Bring extra socks.

Carry more water than you think you'll need.

Never trust a horse trader who compliments your intelligence.

Never insult a cook.

Never ignore a librarian.

Never eat mushrooms unless someone who already ate them is still alive.

And if a dragon gives you advice, write it down.

You don't have to follow it.

But write it down.

Dragons rarely waste words.

Most people do.

— **Magda**

PART I

THE WORLD AND THE PLACE

CHAPTER ONE

What Kind of Place Is This?

The first mistake many travelers make is believing they understand the world before they enter it.

This mistake is understandable.

Stories have trained us poorly.

Many tales suggest that the world exists to provide adventures.

That dragons exist to be defeated.

That mysteries exist to be solved.

That heroes exist to save everyone.

Reality is considerably less organized.

The Concord of Five Banners is not a stage built for travelers.

It is a living place.

People are born here.

Work here.

Fall in love here.

Raise families here.

Grow old here.

Long before a traveler arrives and long after one departs.

The baker in Three Springs Village does not wake each morning wondering whether an adventurer will appear.

The ferryman near Merrowford has concerns more immediate than destiny.

The glassworkers of Emberhold worry about heat, supply, and craftsmanship.

The librarians of Hearthhold worry about preservation.

The farmers worry about weather.

The merchants worry about trade.

The dragons worry about matters that travelers rarely understand.

The world continues whether you are watching it or not.

That is what makes it real.

And that is what makes it worth exploring.

The Chronicle

There is another misunderstanding worth correcting.

Many newcomers believe Slay the Scales is a story about dragons.

It is not.

At least not entirely.

Dragons are important.

Some are dangerous.

Some are wise.

Some are both.

Yet dragons alone do not create a chronicle.

People do.

The chronicle records choices.

Not victories.

Not treasures.

Not battles.

Choices.

Who did you help?

Who did you ignore?

What promise did you keep?

What promise did you break?

What truth did you discover?

What truth did you refuse to see?

The chronicle remembers these things.

Often longer than it remembers dragon slayers.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Good.

Because dragon slayers are usually exhausting.

Ask any innkeeper.

Half of them arrive expecting songs.

The other half arrive expecting discounts.

Neither group tips well.

The Traveler's Life

Most travelers begin in remarkably ordinary ways.

They need work.

They need coin.

They need a place to sleep.

They need directions.

Many arrive imagining themselves heroes.

A week later they are delighted to have dry boots.

This is normal.

The road has a way of teaching proportion.

A traveler learns quickly that survival matters.

Preparation matters.

Reputation matters.

Relationships matter.

The world is not conquered.

It is navigated.

And navigation requires humility.

The traveler who listens often goes farther than the traveler who boasts.

The traveler who asks questions often survives longer than the traveler who claims to know everything.

The traveler who keeps a journal almost always becomes more interesting.

Why People Leave Hearthhold

This question appears often enough that it deserves answering.

Why leave at all?

The answers vary.

Some seek knowledge.

Some seek fortune.

Some seek redemption.

Some seek escape.

Some seek dragons.

A few simply wish to know what lies beyond the next hill.

None of these reasons are wrong.

The road welcomes all of them.

The road changes all of them.

MAGDA'S NOTE

One fellow told me he left Hearthhold because he wanted to discover himself.

Three months later he came back married.

Life is funny that way.

What Success Looks Like

Many travelers imagine success incorrectly.

They picture piles of treasure.

Famous victories.

Songs sung in crowded halls.

Those things happen.

Occasionally.

More often success looks different.

Success is returning home.

Success is learning something true.

Success is keeping a promise.

Success is becoming someone your younger self would admire.

Success is building a life worth remembering.

The dragons understand this better than most people.

Which is one reason they remain interesting.

CHAPTER TWO

The Concord of Five Banners

If Hearthhold is the heart of the realm, the Concord of Five Banners is its body.

Five peoples.

Five traditions.

Five histories.

Bound together not because they are identical, but because they learned long ago that surviving together was preferable to dying separately.

The arrangement is imperfect.

Most worthwhile arrangements are.

Yet it has endured.

That alone deserves respect.

Hearthhold

Every road eventually reaches Hearthhold.

Some roads simply take longer than others.

The city stands near the center of the Concord and serves as meeting place, marketplace, crossroads, archive, and refuge.

Within its walls can be found scholars and smiths, merchants and wanderers, healers and hunters.

A traveler can spend a lifetime in Hearthhold and still discover something new.

Many have tried.

Most are still trying.

At the center stands the Market Cross, where news travels almost as quickly as rumors.

Nearby stand the Whispering Stacks, whose shelves contain enough knowledge to improve a life - or complicate one.

The Hall of the Order serves as a place of oath and service.

The Hospital offers care.

The Golden Kettle offers food.

The Smoldering Flask offers solutions of a more experimental nature.

Companion Hall offers what its name promises.

And beneath everything lies the awareness that every road begins here.

Or ends here.

Sometimes both.

MAGDA'S NOTE

The soup at the Golden Kettle is better than the soup at Companion Hall.

This statement has started arguments.

It remains true.

The Wild Clans

North of Hearthhold lie the forests of the Wild Clans.

The outsiders call them wild.

The clans themselves generally consider that assessment evidence that outsiders have not been paying attention.

The Wild Clans possess no king.

No capital.

No single authority.

Instead they maintain a network of kinship, obligation, tradition, and memory older than many written histories.

Their stories stretch back centuries.

Their forests farther still.

Visitors often focus on the trees.

The wise visitor focuses on the people who know the trees.

The Iron Kingdoms

To the northeast stand the Iron Kingdoms.

Roads of limestone connect duchy to duchy.

Treaties bind noble houses together.

Records are maintained.

Boundaries are measured.

Laws are written.

The Iron Kingdoms believe that civilization functions best when organized.

They have devoted centuries to proving it.

Results remain mixed.

Still, travelers benefit from the roads.

And the roads are undeniably excellent.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Never tell an Iron Kingdom tax collector that taxes are boring.

They become alarmingly enthusiastic.

The Free Cities

East and southeast lie the Free Cities.

Nineteen republics.

Ships.

Markets.

Coin.

Arguments.

Astonishing wealth.

The Free Cities can turn almost anything into commerce.

Including stories.

The Ashen Peaks

To the west rise the Ashen Peaks.

Forge-holds.

Volcanoes.

Stone.

Heat.

Metal.

Patience.

Nothing here was built quickly.

Nothing here was built weak.
The mountains reward patience.
Fortunately the people possess plenty of it.
Travelers often arrive seeking weapons.
Many leave having learned something far more valuable.
How things are made.

MAGDA'S NOTE

*If someone from Emberhold says something will take three days, expect four.
Not because they're dishonest.
Because they refuse to do anything poorly.*

Karth Veyl

And beneath all of it lies Karth Veyl.
Unsigned on many maps.
Misunderstood on most.
Feared by some.
Revered by others.
Karth Veyl is not merely a cave system.
Nor merely an underground realm.
It is something stranger.
A place where memory lingers.
Where old records survive.
Where silence carries weight.
Where answers sometimes create larger questions.
Travelers who descend into Karth Veyl often emerge changed.
Not always visibly.
But changed nonetheless.

MAGDA'S NOTE

That's Pell's way of saying:

"Things get weird underground."

He's trying to sound scholarly.

The Meaning of the Concord

The Five Banners do not agree on everything.

Far from it.

They disagree on law.

Trade.

Governance.

History.

Proper cooking techniques.

The ownership of at least three roads and one particularly stubborn bridge.

Yet despite all this, the Concord endures.

Because the people of the realm eventually learned a difficult truth.

Difference is not the same thing as division.

And cooperation does not require sameness.

The Concord survives because its people continue choosing it.

Generation after generation.

Year after year.

Road after road.

For now, that choice continues.

And because it continues, so does the realm.

MAGDA'S FINAL NOTE FOR THIS CHAPTER

If you're eager to leave Hearthhold after reading this chapter, good.

That's the correct feeling.

A guidebook should make you curious.

The road can handle the rest.

CHAPTER THREE

A Brief History of the Realm

One of the first questions travelers ask is:

"How old is all of this?"

The answer depends entirely upon what you mean by *this*.

The mountains are older than memory.

The rivers are older than kingdoms.

The forests are older than most stories.

The dragons are older than many of the people who claim to understand them.

The Concord itself is comparatively young.

Civilizations often imagine themselves ancient.

Stone tends to disagree.

The realm we know today emerged from countless generations of settlement, migration, alliance, trade, conflict, rebuilding, and compromise.

Roads were not laid all at once.

Cities were not founded according to a master plan.

History rarely works that way.

Most ages are built by ordinary people solving immediate problems.

Only later do historians arrive and declare those solutions inevitable.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Historians are wonderful.

But if you ask three historians what happened, you'll get five answers.

If you ask six historians what happened, you'll get a war.

Before the Concord

Long before the Five Banners existed, the region consisted of scattered settlements separated by wilderness.

Travel was dangerous.

Communication was slow.

Knowledge traveled unevenly.

Entire communities could spend years without hearing news from beyond their nearest neighbors.

The forests were larger.

The roads fewer.

The dragons less understood.

Many communities survived through cooperation.

Others survived through stubbornness.

The distinction remains important.

Archaeologists continue uncovering traces of forgotten villages, abandoned roads, collapsed watchtowers, and ruined halls.

Every generation rediscovers evidence that people lived, loved, traded, argued, and dreamed in places modern maps no longer record.

The land remembers more than the chronicles.

The Age of Expansion

As trade increased, settlements grew.

Villages became towns.

Towns became cities.

Routes that began as hunting paths evolved into roads.

Merchants traveled farther.

Scholars exchanged ideas.

Craftsmen carried techniques from region to region.

The foundations of modern society emerged gradually.

No proclamation announced the beginning of civilization.

People simply kept building.

A bridge here.

A market there.

A road connecting two places that had grown tired of being isolated.

Progress often appears dramatic when viewed from a distance.

Up close it usually resembles maintenance.

MAGDA'S NOTE

If civilization has a secret, it's this:

Somebody has to fix the roof.

Nobody writes songs about roof repairs.

Everybody notices when nobody does them.

The Rise of the Great Hunt

Eventually the realm entered the period now known as the Great Hunt.

This era remains among the most studied and most disputed chapters in recorded history.

What is certain is that dragons occupied a far more central place in political and cultural life than they do today.

What remains uncertain is almost everything else.

Records disagree.

Witnesses contradicted one another.

Entire archives disappeared.

Several kingdoms rewrote portions of their own histories.

Others lost theirs.

Even now, scholars continue debating fundamental questions.

What began the Great Hunt?

What sustained it?

What ended it?

And perhaps most importantly:

Why do the surviving accounts differ so dramatically?

The answers remain elusive.

Aldorath

No discussion of the Great Hunt can avoid Aldorath.

Once a center of influence and authority, Aldorath occupied a position of considerable importance during that age.

Today only ruins remain.

Broken walls.

Weathered stones.

Fragments of a story.

Travelers who visit often report an unusual feeling.

Not fear.

Not sorrow.

Something more difficult to describe.

A sense that important decisions were once made there.

Decisions whose consequences continue to echo long after the people who made them have vanished.

History occasionally leaves scars upon the landscape.

Aldorath may be one of them.

MAGDA'S NOTE

I've been there.

The place feels like a conversation that ended badly.

What We Actually Know

A responsible historian must occasionally admit uncertainty.

Accordingly:

We do not know everything.

We do not know precisely how many dragons existed during the Great Hunt.

We do not know exactly who benefited.

We do not know why some records vanished while others survived.

We do not know why certain dragons remain when others do not.

We do not know why so many contradictory stories point toward the same unanswered questions.

We do not know enough.

Fortunately, unanswered questions are not failures.

They are invitations.

The realm still contains mysteries because the realm is still alive.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Pell likes mysteries.

I like answers.

Between us we achieve moderate frustration.

Why History Matters

Many travelers assume history belongs in libraries.

This is understandable.

Libraries contain a great deal of it.

Yet history lives elsewhere as well.

It lives in roads.

It lives in traditions.

It lives in old arguments no one fully remembers.

It lives in ruined watchtowers and family recipes and songs sung beside campfires.

The past is not gone.

It merely changes forms.

A traveler who learns to recognize those forms begins seeing the realm differently.

The world becomes deeper.

More complicated.

More human.

And occasionally more alarming.

Which, unfortunately, is also part of becoming educated.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Great Hunt

No event casts a longer shadow across the modern realm than the Great Hunt.

Even now its influence reaches into politics, trade, scholarship, religion, law, folklore, and the lives of travelers who have never studied it.

Mention the Great Hunt in a tavern and someone will have an opinion.

Mention it in a library and someone will have six.

Mention it to a dragon and you may receive silence.

Pay close attention to that silence.

The Story Everyone Knows

Most children first hear a simple version.

Long ago, dragons threatened the realm.

Brave hunters rose against them.

A great struggle followed.

Heroes triumphed.

Civilization survived.

The end.

Simple stories possess certain advantages.

They are easy to remember.

They fit comfortably into songs.

They require fewer footnotes.

Unfortunately, simple stories are not always accurate.

MAGDA'S NOTE

If history were that simple, Pell would need a much smaller library.

The Story Scholars Argue About

As travelers grow older, they discover that the Great Hunt becomes increasingly complicated.

Questions begin to appear.

Why did some dragons fight?

Why did others bargain?

Why do records disagree about major events?

Why do surviving accounts describe the same figures so differently?

Why do so many official narratives contain suspicious gaps?

The deeper one studies, the stranger the picture becomes.

Many scholars now believe the Great Hunt was not a single event.

Rather, it was a long and turbulent period consisting of many conflicts, alliances, betrayals, negotiations, discoveries, and political struggles.

The farther one investigates, the harder it becomes to separate certainty from interpretation.

The Sixteen

Among all surviving mysteries, none loom larger than the dragons known collectively as the Sixteen.

Every traveler learns their names.

Every scholar studies their histories.

Every cartographer marks their territories.

Yet no one possesses complete understanding.

The Sixteen occupy an unusual place within the realm.

They are not merely powerful creatures.

They are repositories of memory.

Witnesses to ages no human alive remembers.

Each possesses knowledge unavailable elsewhere.

Each guards something.

Sometimes intentionally.

Sometimes unknowingly.

The wise traveler approaches them as mysteries first and dragons second.

MAGDA'S NOTE

The foolish traveler usually reverses the order.

Briefly.

Why Dragons Remain

This question appears frequently.

If the Great Hunt happened, why are dragons still here?

Several explanations have been proposed.

Some suggest the surviving dragons were never enemies.

Others suggest the Hunt ended before its goals were achieved.

Still others argue that the surviving dragons represent something essential that neither side could afford to destroy.

There are libraries devoted to these theories.

Entire careers have been built upon them.

The dragons themselves rarely clarify matters.

This may be deliberate.

Or amusing.

With dragons it is often difficult to tell.

The Dangerous Question

Every age develops a question people are discouraged from asking.

The Great Hunt possesses several.

One in particular appears repeatedly throughout surviving records:

"Who benefited?"

The answer varies depending upon whom you ask.

Yet the persistence of the question suggests it matters.

Travelers are advised to approach such matters carefully.

History is not dangerous because it contains monsters.

History is dangerous because it contains motives.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Monsters usually tell you they're monsters.

Motives wear nicer clothes.

The Living Mystery

The Great Hunt is not merely a subject for scholars.

It is one of the central mysteries of the realm.

Its consequences continue unfolding.

Its secrets continue surfacing.

Its contradictions continue challenging accepted wisdom.

For many travelers, understanding the Great Hunt becomes a journey in itself.

One that stretches across roads, libraries, ruins, conversations, and encounters with dragons.

Do not expect easy answers.

The realm does not possess many.

Expect clues.

Expect fragments.

Expect contradictions.

Expect discoveries.

Most of all, expect to change your mind.

That is often how truth announces its arrival.

A Warning Before You Continue

As you travel, you will meet people who claim certainty.

Some will insist they know exactly what happened.

Some will insist all questions have been answered.

Some will insist there is nothing left to discover.

Treat such confidence cautiously.

The world remains unfinished.

The chronicle remains open.

And mysteries survive precisely because certainty arrived too early.

MAGDA'S FINAL NOTE FOR THIS CHAPTER

If you find a ruined tower, explore it.

If you find an old journal, read it.

If you find a dragon willing to talk, listen.

If all three happen on the same day —
cancel your other plans.

Those are usually the good stories.

CHAPTER FIVE

Why Dragons Still Exist

There are questions every traveler asks eventually.

Some ask them aloud.

Others ask them quietly while staring into campfires.

This is one of those questions.

If dragons are so dangerous, why are they still here?

The answer depends upon what you believe dragons are.

If dragons are merely beasts, the question becomes difficult.

If dragons are monsters, it becomes more difficult still.

But if dragons are something else entirely — something older, stranger, and more woven into the fabric of the realm — then the question begins to change.

Instead of asking:

"Why do dragons still exist?"

You begin asking:

"What would happen if they didn't?"

That is a much more interesting question.

And a much more dangerous one.

The First Mistake

Most people who know very little about dragons make the same mistake.

They assume all dragons are alike.

This is understandable.

From a distance, mountains can look alike as well.

Spend a week climbing them and the differences become obvious.

The same is true of dragons.

Some are patient.

Some are impulsive.

Some are curious.

Some are territorial.

Some enjoy conversation.

Some regard conversation as an unfortunate obstacle between silence and more silence.

Each dragon possesses its own history.

Its own habits.

Its own concerns.

Its own understanding of the world.

To speak of dragons as though they are one thing is like speaking of people as though they are one person.

Convenient.

Incorrect.

MAGDA'S NOTE

I've met travelers who claimed all dragons were the same.

They also believed all inns were the same.

Both opinions improved after experience.

Dragons and Memory

There is another difference.

People remember years.

Dragons remember ages.

A human may witness a kingdom rise.

A dragon may witness three.

A human remembers childhood.

A dragon remembers centuries.

This creates complications.

Imagine carrying memories older than every living person you meet.

Imagine watching generations arrive, flourish, and disappear.

Imagine surviving long enough for certainty to become suspicious.

Some scholars believe dragons guard treasures.

Others believe dragons guard knowledge.

Personally, I suspect many guard memories.

And memory may be the most valuable treasure of all.

The Territories

Every dragon maintains a territory.

Travelers often misunderstand this as ownership.

It is not.

A territory is better understood as a relationship.

A region shaped by the dragon's presence.

A place where stories accumulate.

A place where habits become traditions.

A place where local people know things outsiders do not.

The territory of Old Thornback feels different from the territory of Vauthana.

The territory of Aelthune feels different from the territory of Murex.

Not merely because the landscapes differ.

Because the dragons differ.

The land remembers them.

And they remember the land.

The Sixteen

The surviving dragons are often referred to collectively as the Sixteen.

This title sounds straightforward.

It is not.

No scholar fully agrees on why these sixteen matter.

No historian possesses a complete explanation.

No dragon has published a clarification.

Theories abound.

The Sixteen may be survivors.

Witnesses.

Guardians.

Prisoners.

Participants.

Or something stranger.

The truth likely contains pieces of all these possibilities.

Travelers seeking certainty should consider a different profession.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Baking.

Baking has recipes.

Dragons do not.

The Dragon You Meet

Perhaps the most important lesson in this guide is also the simplest.

You will never meet dragons.

You will meet a dragon.

One dragon.

One personality.

One history.

One set of choices.

One point of view.

Treating every dragon as identical is as foolish as treating every traveler as identical.

Approach each encounter with curiosity.

Curiosity survives longer than assumptions.

A Story

A young traveler once asked a librarian:

"What's the safest thing to do when meeting a dragon?"

The librarian thought for a moment.

Then replied:

"Listen."

The traveler looked disappointed.

The librarian looked unsurprised.

The advice remains excellent.

MAGDA'S NOTE

The second safest thing is standing somewhere you can run from.

Wisdom and preparation work beautifully together.

What the Dragons Teach

Whether intentionally or not, dragons teach lessons.

Some teach patience.

Some teach caution.

Some teach courage.

Some teach humility.

Several specialize in teaching consequences.

A few teach things for which no proper word exists.

Travelers who survive long enough often discover that their most important encounters with dragons involved conversation rather than conflict.

This surprises many people.

It should not.

The realm contains enough swords already.

Wisdom remains comparatively rare.

One Final Thought

The question is not whether dragons deserve your respect.

The question is whether you deserve theirs.

Think carefully before deciding that distinction does not matter.

It matters a great deal.

MAGDA'S FINAL NOTE FOR THIS CHAPTER

If a dragon asks you a question, answer honestly.

If a dragon answers one of yours, pay attention.

And if a dragon starts laughing?

You have either done something very clever or something very stupid.
Try to figure out which before you continue.

CHAPTER SIX

Hearthhold: The City at the Center

Every traveler remembers their first sight of Hearthhold.

Some arrive from the forests.

Some descend from the mountains.

Some follow rivers.

Some follow roads.

A few arrive accidentally.

Regardless of the route, the experience tends to be similar.

At first you see the walls.

Then the towers.

Then the gates.

Then the realization that nearly every road you have ever heard of eventually leads here.

Hearthhold is not the largest city in the Concord.

It is not the wealthiest.

It is not the oldest.

Yet no other place occupies quite the same position.

The city sits at the meeting point of roads, peoples, ideas, histories, and possibilities.

It is where journeys begin.

Where journeys pause.

And where many journeys end.

Why Hearthhold Matters

Imagine standing in the center of a wheel.

Roads spread outward in every direction.

Each one leads somewhere different.

Each one carries different people.

Each one brings different stories back.

That is Hearthhold.

A city built not upon conquest, but connection.

The city thrives because travelers arrive.

Merchants arrive.

Scholars arrive.

Pilgrims arrive.

Messengers arrive.

Trouble arrives.

Opportunity arrives shortly afterward.

Usually.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Not always.

Sometimes trouble brings friends.

The Market Cross

If Hearthhold has a heart, it is the Market Cross.

Every city possesses a place where information gathers.

This is ours.

Announcements are made here.

Rumors are exchanged here.

Arguments begin here.

Occasionally they end here.

Farmers, traders, travelers, adventurers, scholars, and citizens pass through daily.

A traveler willing to spend an afternoon listening can learn more than a week spent asking questions.

The difficulty lies in determining which information is true.

This skill improves with practice.

The Golden Kettle

No guidebook should pretend food is unimportant.

The Golden Kettle sits near the Market Square and serves meals, conversation, gossip, advice, and occasionally wisdom.

Not necessarily in that order.

Many travelers believe their adventures begin on roads.

Experienced travelers know adventures often begin over soup.

Partnerships form here.

Rumors originate here.

Journeys are planned here.

Mistakes are discussed here.

The soup helps.

MAGDA'S NOTE

The soup helps a lot.

The Whispering Stacks

Libraries are often misunderstood.

Many people imagine them as places where books go to become dusty.

This is inaccurate.

Libraries are places where questions live.

The Whispering Stacks contain histories, maps, journals, records, theories, letters, field notes, and more arguments than most battlefields.

Knowledge accumulates here.

So do mysteries.

Some travelers visit seeking answers.

The wiser ones visit seeking better questions.

Helonor

If you spend enough time in the library, you will eventually encounter Helonor.

This is unavoidable.

Helonor knows where things are.

Not merely books.

Information.

Connections.

References.

Clues.

Entire lines of inquiry.

Some people believe Helonor remembers the contents of every shelf.

Others insist this is impossible.

The debate continues.

Helonor remains unbothered.

MAGDA'S NOTE

The shelves move when Helonor isn't looking.

I refuse to believe otherwise.

The Hall of the Order

The Hall of the Order serves many purposes.

It is a place of service.

A place of duty.

A place where promises are taken seriously.

The Oath Binders maintain traditions older than many governments.

Travelers often underestimate promises.

The Hall exists partly to remind them not to.

Within its walls stands the Inner Hall, where some of the most important commitments in the realm are witnessed and recorded.

Words matter here.

Choose them carefully.

The Hospital

Every city reveals its character through how it treats people in need.

The Hospital reveals Hearthhold well.

Healers, caretakers, herbalists, and physicians work here daily.

Travelers often arrive injured.

Some physically.

Some otherwise.

The Hospital concerns itself with both.

Not every wound leaves a scar.

Not every scar comes from a wound.

The Smoldering Flask

Officially, the Smoldering Flask is an alchemical establishment.

Unofficially, it is where curious people go when ordinary solutions become insufficient.

Potions.

Experiments.

Discoveries.

Accidents.

The ratio varies from week to week.

Visitors are advised to read labels.

Twice.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Three times.

Trust me.

Companion Hall

Loneliness is among the oldest challenges faced by travelers.

Companion Hall exists partly because someone eventually realized this.

Stories are shared here.

Meals are shared here.

Journeys are planned here.

People find companions for roads, expeditions, and adventures.

Many lifelong friendships begin beneath its roof.

A surprising number of marriages do as well.

The management insists these facts are unrelated.

The Concordance Flame

Along the western wall burns a smaller but no less important landmark.

The Concordance Flame.

Travelers often pause there before departure.

Some leave offerings.

Some make promises.

Some simply stand quietly.

The flame asks nothing.

Yet people frequently leave having decided something.

Certain places possess that effect.

Magda's Camp

Outside the southwestern wall, if fortune favors you and the weather cooperates, you may occasionally find Magda's camp.

Three tents.

A kettle.

A fire.

Several opinions.

And a person who somehow knows more than seems reasonable.

The camp moves.

The stories do not.

MAGDA'S NOTE

I know exactly as much as seems reasonable.

The world is simply unreasonable.

The Gates

Eventually every traveler reaches a gate.

West Gate.

South Bridge.

Iron Veil.

The moment arrives.

The pack is adjusted.

The road stretches ahead.

The city remains behind.

A choice becomes a journey.

A possibility becomes a story.

And a traveler takes the first step.

No guidebook can do that part for you.

Nor should it.

The first step belongs to you.

MAGDA'S FINAL NOTE FOR THIS CHAPTER

Don't rush.

Hearthhold isn't a place you pass through.

It's a place you carry with you.

Now finish your soup.

The road will still be there tomorrow.

PART II

THE ROADS

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Roads

Every traveler remembers a destination.

The road remembers the traveler.

Most people spend their first days planning where they want to go.

This is understandable.

Destinations are exciting.

Maps encourage this behavior.

Roads, however, have different priorities.

The road concerns itself with weather.

Mud.

Bridges.

Conversations.

Blisters.

Unexpected discoveries.

Lost wagons.

Broken wheels.

Interesting strangers.

Terrible decisions.

And occasionally dragons.

The destination is important.

The road is what happens before you get there.

The road is where most stories actually occur.

Distances Are Measured in Days

The Concord measures travel differently than many realms.

Not by miles.

Not by leagues.

Not by ideal conditions.

By days.

This is sensible.

A mountain does not care how many miles you intended to walk.

A storm does not care how carefully you measured distance.

A road cares only how long it takes to travel.

Thus a destination might be three days away.

Or six.

Or twelve.

Those numbers contain more truth than miles ever could.

Because they account for reality.

Reality enjoys interfering with plans.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Reality is one of the most reliable things in the world.

It interferes with everyone's plans equally.

The First Day

The first day outside a gate is dangerous.

Not because of monsters.

Because of confidence.

New travelers leave Hearthhold energized.

Prepared.

Excited.

Certain they have remembered everything.

By midday they realize they forgot something.

By evening they discover what it was.

Usually socks.

Occasionally food.

Sometimes common sense.

The first day teaches humility.

Humility is an excellent traveling companion.

Walking

Walking appears simple.

Most people have done it before.

Travel walking is different.

Travel walking means carrying weight.

Watching weather.

Managing energy.

Monitoring supplies.

Paying attention to terrain.

Making decisions repeatedly.

A traveler who manages their strength carefully will reach destinations others never see.

Many adventures have been lost to exhaustion.

Far fewer have been lost to caution.

Weather

The weather is among the most powerful forces in the realm.

It receives surprisingly little respect.

Travelers fear dragons.

They should.

Travelers fear bandits.

Reasonable.

Travelers often ignore weather.

A mistake.

Rain changes roads.

Wind changes rivers.

Fog changes visibility.

Snow changes everything.

Weather is not your enemy.

But it is never entirely your friend.

Pay attention to it.

MAGDA'S NOTE

If three old farmers tell you a storm is coming, believe them.

If one old farmer tells you a storm is coming, probably believe them.

If a dragon tells you a storm is coming, start running.

Camps

Eventually the road ends for the day.

When that happens, travelers make camp.

A good camp provides:

Shelter.

Warmth.

Food.

Rest.

Safety.

A bad camp provides stories.

Choose wisely.

Experienced travelers learn that comfort and safety often overlap.

Dry socks improve morale.

Good fires improve judgment.

Adequate sleep improves survival.

Civilization was built by people who understood this.

Campfires

Campfires deserve special mention.

A surprising amount of civilization occurs around them.

Stories are told there.

Plans are made there.

Arguments happen there.

Friendships begin there.

Songs survive there.

The oldest classroom in the world may well be a campfire.

Many travelers discover truths beside flames they would never have found in libraries.

The libraries usually write them down later.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Never volunteer for first watch until you know who snores.

Trust me.

Encounters

The road is populated.

This surprises newcomers.

Many imagine wilderness as empty.

It rarely is.

Travelers share roads with:

Merchants.

Pilgrims.

Messengers.

Farmers.

Hunters.

Wagon trains.

Scholars.

Performers.

Refugees.

Guides.

And people who absolutely refuse to explain where they're going.

Every encounter is a possibility.

Not every possibility is beneficial.

Discernment remains important.

Rumors

Roads carry rumors more efficiently than wagons.

A traveler who listens carefully can learn remarkable things.

Unfortunately, rumors possess a weakness.

They enjoy changing shape.

A rumor may begin as a fact.

Acquire assumptions.

Gather exaggeration.

Collect embellishment.

And arrive at your campfire completely transformed.

Treat rumors respectfully.

Not because they are always true.

Because they are rarely meaningless.

Signs

The realm communicates constantly.

Trail markers.

Road stones.

Boundary markers.

Bridge warnings.

Cairns.

Shrines.

Milestones.

Notice boards.

The world is always speaking.

Travelers who learn to read its signs travel farther.

Those who ignore them often become signs themselves.

MAGDA'S NOTE

The difference between an experienced traveler and a beginner is simple.

The experienced traveler notices things.

The beginner notices them later.

Wayhouses

Wayhouses are among the greatest inventions ever devised.

A roof.

A meal.

A bed.

A stable.

Information.

Civilization distilled into its most useful form.

Every traveler develops favorite wayhouses.

Every traveler also develops stories about terrible wayhouses.

Both experiences are important.

The Road's Secret

Most travelers believe roads connect places.

This is true.

But incomplete.

Roads also connect people.

Ideas.

Cultures.

Histories.

Roads are how knowledge moves.

How trade moves.

How stories move.

How change moves.

Remove the roads and the realm becomes smaller.

Travel them and the realm becomes larger.

The roads are the veins of the Concord.

Everything else depends upon them.

MAGDA'S FINAL NOTE FOR THIS CHAPTER

Walk often.

Walk carefully.

Walk curiously.

And remember:

A traveler who only looks at their destination misses half the journey.

PART III

THE THRESHOLD

CHAPTER EIGHT

Leaving the Gate

There is a moment every traveler remembers.

The moment before departure.

The pack is packed.

The supplies counted.

The route chosen.

The decision made.

One foot remains in the familiar.

The other is already reaching toward the unknown.

This moment matters.

Not because it changes the world.

Because it changes you.

West Gate

Most adventurers leave through West Gate first.

The routes are famous.

The possibilities numerous.

The stories plentiful.

West Gate leads toward forests, mountains, hidden valleys, forgotten shrines, old roads, and several dragons.

It also leads toward blisters.

Do not underestimate blisters.

MAGDA'S NOTE

People laugh when guidebooks mention foot care.

Then they get blisters.

Then they stop laughing.

South Bridge

South Bridge feels different.

The river flows beneath.

Trade moves constantly.

Wagons come and go.

The smell of distant salt occasionally rides the wind.

Roads from South Bridge eventually reach fishing villages, marshlands, coastal settlements, and the great sea itself.

Many travelers see the ocean for the first time by following South Bridge roads.

Few forget it.

Iron Veil

The eastern gate carries a different mood.

Travelers become quieter there.

Conversations soften.

Preparations become more deliberate.

Beyond Iron Veil lies one of the strangest frontiers in the Concord.

Not west.

Not east.

Not north.

Not south.

Down.

The gate reminds travelers that unexplored places still exist.

Even beneath their feet.

The Feeling

There is a feeling that accompanies departure.

No map records it.

No chronicle measures it.

Yet nearly every traveler experiences it.

Part excitement.

Part fear.

Part anticipation.

Part uncertainty.

A recognition that life may be different when you return.

The feeling never completely disappears.

Even veteran travelers experience it.

Perhaps especially veteran travelers.

They understand what is possible.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Fear is normal.

Only fools feel nothing.

And the road already has enough fools.

What to Carry

New travelers always ask what equipment matters most.

The answer disappoints them.

Because it is rarely the exciting equipment.

Carry:

A waterskin.

A blanket.

A journal.

A knife.

Extra socks.

Food.

A small length of rope.

Patience.

The first seven items are easy.

The last one requires practice.

The Journal

Many experienced travelers recommend keeping a journal.

Not because you will become famous.

Because memory is unreliable.

Roads blur together.

Days blend.

Details fade.

Write things down.

Names.

Places.

Questions.

Dreams.

Observations.

One day you will reread those entries and discover a second journey hidden inside the first.

The Unknown

Every gate opens toward uncertainty.

That is not a flaw.

That is the point.

If every outcome were known, adventure would be unnecessary.

The unknown gives value to courage.

Meaning to exploration.

Purpose to discovery.

The traveler walks toward uncertainty willingly.

That choice deserves respect.

MAGDA'S NOTE

It also deserves decent boots.

Why We Leave

After many years of observation, I have concluded that people leave Hearthhold for hundreds of reasons.

Yet eventually most journeys become about one thing.

The traveler wants to know who they are.

Not who they were told to be.

Not who they hoped to be.

Who they actually are.

Roads have a remarkable talent for answering that question.

Sometimes gently.

Sometimes not.

The First Step

Many chapters in this guide contain practical advice.

Warnings.

History.

Descriptions.

Observations.

This chapter contains something simpler.

Permission.

You do not need to know everything before you begin.

No traveler ever has.

You do not need perfect certainty.

No traveler ever has that either.

You need preparation.

Curiosity.

Courage.

And the willingness to take a first step.

The rest follows.

One road.

One day.

One choice at a time.

MAGDA'S FINAL NOTE FOR THIS CHAPTER

Everybody thinks the hard part is the journey.

Usually the hard part is opening the gate and starting.

After that, momentum helps.

Now stop reading for a moment.

Imagine the road ahead.

Hear the gate opening.

Feel the pack on your shoulders.

Smell the morning air.

Good.

You're ready.

Let's see where the road takes you.

PART IV

LIVING IN THE CONCORD

CHAPTER NINE

Coin, Work, and Honest Living

Many travelers begin their journey believing adventure is primarily about dragons.

This belief rarely survives the first week.

The first week is usually about coin.

Coin buys meals.

Coin buys beds.

Coin buys supplies.

Coin repairs mistakes.

A traveler may dream of destiny.

The innkeeper generally prefers payment.

This arrangement has proven remarkably stable throughout history.

The Three Metals

The Concord conducts most ordinary trade using three familiar coins.

Copper.

Silver.

Gold.

A copper buys necessities.

A silver buys opportunities.

A gold buys responsibilities.

New travelers tend to focus on gold.

Experienced travelers focus on maintaining enough silver.

The difference is subtle.

The consequences are not.

MAGDA'S NOTE

The richest traveler I ever met spent money like water.

The happiest traveler I ever met spent money like soup.

Slowly.

Carefully.

And only when hungry.

The Cost of a Day

Every traveler should know the cost of an ordinary day.

Not because life should be measured in coin.

Because survival occasionally is.

A bed.

A meal.

A bath.

A stable.

A ferry crossing.

A replacement bootlace.

A whetstone.

A candle.

A traveler who understands small expenses rarely suffers large surprises.

The opposite is also true.

Work

Work receives less respect than it deserves.

Stories celebrate dragon hunters.

Songs celebrate heroes.

Yet the Concord survives because people work.

Builders build.

Farmers farm.

Carters haul.

Brewers brew.

Healers heal.

Smiths forge.

Librarians catalog.

Cooks feed.

The world is held together by useful people doing necessary things.

A traveler who learns this lesson early gains an advantage.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Never mock someone's profession.

Sooner or later you'll need it.

Especially plumbers.

Trust me.

Temporary Work

Most travelers accept temporary jobs.

This is not failure.

It is wisdom.

A week helping repair a bridge teaches things.

A season assisting a merchant teaches things.

Working at a stable teaches things.

Most importantly, work introduces people.

People create opportunities.

Opportunities create stories.

Stories create adventures.

Everything is connected.

The First Coin You Earn

Most travelers remember their first earned coin.

Not their first found coin.

Not their first inherited coin.

Their first earned coin.

The amount is usually small.

The memory rarely is.

A coin earned honestly weighs more than one acquired accidentally.

Not physically.

Morally.

The distinction matters.

CHAPTER TEN

Inns, Taverns, and Other Important Institutions

Many travelers assume roads are the heart of civilization.

This is incorrect.

The heart of civilization is shelter.

Roads merely connect it.

Inns

An inn is one of humanity's greatest inventions.

A roof.

A meal.

A bed.

Warmth.

Conversation.

Security.

Information.

Hope.

All gathered beneath a single structure.

The first person who looked at a storm and said,

"Perhaps we should build a place where travelers don't die in that,"

deserves far more recognition than history provides.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Possibly the greatest genius who ever lived.

Greta's Three Springs House

If your travels carry you north, you may find Three Springs Village.

There stands Greta's Three Springs House.

Like many good inns, it provides more than food and lodging.

It provides orientation.

New travelers often discover that what they truly needed was advice.

Good inns understand this.

Great inns provide it before being asked.

The Salt-Wind Inn

Briarquay's Salt-Wind Inn carries the sea inside its walls.

The smell of salt.

The sound of sailors.

The rumors of distant coasts.

Every harbor inn serves as a doorway to places beyond the horizon.

Some travelers never recover from this realization.

They spend the rest of their lives exploring.

The Hot Stone Inn

In Emberhold, the Hot Stone Inn reminds visitors that comfort can exist even among volcanic peaks.

Heat radiates through stone floors.

Conversations linger late into the evening.

And travelers discover that mountain people possess a unique sense of hospitality.

One forged slowly.

Like everything else in the Ashen Peaks.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Mountain hospitality usually sounds like:

"Sit down. Eat something. You're clearly making bad decisions."

Which is often correct.

Taverns

Not every establishment offers rooms.

Some offer stories.

Taverns serve a different purpose.

They gather information.

Rumors.

Opinions.

Exaggerations.

Boasts.

Regrets.

The challenge lies in distinguishing one from another.

The Golden Rule

Every experienced traveler eventually learns the same rule.

Respect the innkeeper.

The innkeeper knows:

Who arrived.

Who left.

Who paid.

Who didn't.

Who is trustworthy.

Who is dangerous.

Who is pretending to be one when they're actually the other.

The innkeeper is often the most informed person in the building.

Occasionally in the town.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Apprenticeships, Trades, and Becoming Useful

The Concord does not divide people into heroes and commoners.

The Concord divides people into useful and not yet useful.

Fortunately, usefulness can be learned.

Apprenticeships

Many professions train through apprenticeship.

A student learns from a master.

Knowledge passes directly.

Mistakes are corrected.

Skills accumulate.

The process is ancient.

It remains effective.

Most expertise travels from person to person.

Not book to person.

Books help.

People teach.

Why Skills Matter

Adventure rewards competence.

The traveler who can cook survives.

The traveler who can mend gear survives.

The traveler who can read maps survives.

The traveler who understands people survives.

The traveler who possesses all four becomes extremely difficult to get rid of.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Which is fortunate.

Because the world occasionally tries.

Builders

Builders create permanence.

A traveler sees a bridge.

A builder sees ten thousand decisions.

A traveler sees a wall.

A builder sees weather.

Foundations.

Drainage.

Materials.

Time.

The Concord exists because builders repeatedly chose competence over shortcuts.

Smiths

Few professions earn more universal respect.

Smiths transform raw possibility into practical reality.

A plow.

A horseshoe.

A cooking pot.

A nail.

A gate hinge.

A sword.

The glamorous items receive attention.

The ordinary items build civilizations.

Most smiths understand this perfectly.

Apothecaries

Apothecaries occupy an unusual position.

Part healer.

Part botanist.

Part chemist.

Part mystery.

They understand roots.

Leaves.

Flowers.

Mushrooms.

Resins.

Extracts.

Tinctures.

The realm's forests are not merely scenery.

They are medicine cabinets.

Dangerous medicine cabinets.

But medicine cabinets nonetheless.

MAGDA'S NOTE

If the apothecary says:

"Take two drops."

Take two drops.

Not four.

Not six.

Not "a little extra."

Two.

Brewers

Some travelers underestimate brewers.

This is a mistake.

Brewers understand:

Water.

Yeast.

Storage.

Preservation.

Trade.

Agriculture.

Chemistry.

Community.

History.

Many villages were built around water.

Many communities were built around brewers.

The overlap is not accidental.

Inventors

Every generation produces a handful of people who look at a perfectly functional system and decide it should be improved.

These individuals become inventors.

Sometimes they improve things.

Sometimes they explode things.

Occasionally both.

Progress depends upon them.

So do several warning labels.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Never stand directly in front of an inventor's demonstration.

Stand slightly to the side.

Experience speaking.

Cartographers

Mapmakers occupy a strange profession.

They create certainty from uncertainty.

Or attempt to.

The best maps reveal roads.

The greatest maps reveal possibilities.

The realm continues changing.

Thus maps continue changing.

Which means cartographers remain employed.

A mutually beneficial arrangement.

Becoming Useful

Young travelers often ask:

"What profession should I choose?"

The wrong question.

A better question is:

"How can I become useful?"

The answer varies.

Learn something.

Practice it.

Help people.

Repeat.

Usefulness accumulates.

Eventually expertise appears.

Most masters began exactly that way.

MAGDA'S FINAL NOTE FOR THIS CHAPTER

Learn at least one thing well.

Two things if possible.

Three if you're ambitious.

Because someday you'll find yourself on a road, far from home, facing a problem nobody expected.

And the solution will come from a skill you almost didn't bother learning.

That's how life works.

And honestly?

It's one of my favorite parts.

PART V

THE THINGS THAT MATTER MOST

CHAPTER TWELVE

Reputation

Every traveler carries two packs.

The first contains supplies.

The second contains reputation.

The second is heavier.

And far more difficult to replace.

Most people understand coin.

Coin can be counted.

Measured.

Stored.

Spent.

Reputation works differently.

Reputation accumulates one decision at a time.

A promise kept.

A debt paid.

A kindness remembered.

A betrayal witnessed.

A lie discovered.

A truth spoken when it would have been easier not to.

The realm remembers these things.

So do the people who inhabit it.

The Story About You

Wherever travelers gather, stories circulate.

Not merely stories about dragons.

Stories about people.

Stories about other travelers.

Stories about you.

Perhaps you helped repair a bridge.
Perhaps you rescued a merchant.
Perhaps you cheated at cards.
Perhaps you abandoned a companion.
Perhaps you showed unexpected courage.
Perhaps unexpected cowardice.
Whatever happened, people talk.
The story travels.
And eventually it arrives before you do.

MAGDA'S NOTE

*If people are talking about you, don't panic.
If nobody is talking about you, you're probably still new.*

The Slow Currency

Coin moves quickly.
Reputation moves slowly.
This is fortunate.
Otherwise every foolish decision would ruin a life.
Instead reputation behaves more like a garden.
It grows gradually.
Requires attention.
Rewards patience.
And occasionally survives mistakes.
A traveler who consistently behaves well develops a reputation for reliability.
A traveler who consistently behaves poorly develops a reputation for something else.
Neither outcome is mysterious.

What People Actually Remember

Travelers often worry about the wrong things.
They imagine people remember dramatic accomplishments.

Sometimes they do.

More often they remember smaller moments.

Did you show up?

Did you help?

Did you pay fairly?

Did you listen?

Did you keep your word?

These details build trust.

Trust builds reputation.

Reputation builds opportunity.

Opportunity builds stories.

The entire system is remarkably interconnected.

The Dangerous Reputation

Some travelers pursue notoriety.

This occasionally succeeds.

Being famous and being trusted are not the same thing.

Many people discover this too late.

The realm contains famous fools.

Famous liars.

Famous disasters.

Fame is not automatically desirable.

Trust usually is.

MAGDA'S NOTE

A famous fool is still a fool.

Just louder.

Dragons and Reputation

An interesting observation.

Dragons pay attention to reputation.

Not always openly.

Not always immediately.

But they notice.

A dragon that has watched centuries of travelers becomes skilled at recognizing patterns.

Many travelers spend enormous effort attempting to impress dragons.

Most would achieve better results by behaving honorably when nobody is watching.

Dragons often hear about it anyway.

How remains unclear.

The Reputation You Keep

Eventually every traveler discovers a difficult truth.

Your reputation is not what you say about yourself.

It is what others believe after watching you.

Fortunately, this means reputation can be earned.

Unfortunately, it also means it cannot be demanded.

The process takes time.

The result is worth it.

MAGDA'S FINAL NOTE FOR THIS CHAPTER

When given the choice between looking impressive and being useful —
be useful.

The impressive part usually follows later.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Trust

Trust is one of the rarest resources in the Concord.

Not because people are dishonest.

Because trust takes time.

And time remains precious.

How Trust Begins

Trust rarely arrives dramatically.

Most stories describe trust incorrectly.

They imagine grand speeches.

Heroic moments.

Dramatic declarations.

Reality is quieter.

Trust begins when someone does what they said they would do.

Then does it again.

And again.

Eventually consistency becomes confidence.

Confidence becomes trust.

Trust becomes relationship.

The process appears simple.

Because it is.

Simple does not mean easy.

Borrowing Confidence

Many young travelers survive their first adventures because someone trusted them before they fully deserved it.

A mentor.

A companion.

An innkeeper.

A teacher.

A friend.

Someone looked at an uncertain traveler and decided to believe in them.

This is among the greatest gifts one person can give another.

It is also among the most powerful responsibilities.

MAGDA'S NOTE

If someone believes in you, take that seriously.

They're investing.

Try to give them a return.

Trusting Others

The opposite challenge also exists.

Learning whom to trust.

No guidebook can answer this perfectly.

If it could, several professions would disappear overnight.

Still, certain signs help.

Trust people whose actions and words agree.

Trust people who behave consistently.

Trust people who admit mistakes.

Trust people who treat others well when there is nothing to gain.

Be cautious around those who do the opposite.

The Library Test

An old librarian once offered the following advice:

"If you wish to know someone's character, watch how they treat information."

Do they seek truth?

Do they distort it?

Do they share it responsibly?

Do they weaponize it?

The same principle applies to many things.

Character reveals itself through habits.

Pay attention to habits.

Trust and Risk

Every meaningful relationship involves risk.

Friendship does.

Partnership does.

Love certainly does.

Trust requires vulnerability.

The possibility of disappointment exists.

So does the possibility of something wonderful.

Travelers unwilling to risk trust often discover they have protected themselves from many dangers.

And many joys.

MAGDA'S NOTE

The trick isn't avoiding heartbreak.

The trick is making sure the good parts were worth it.

Most of the time they are.

Communities

Entire communities operate on trust.

Markets.

Villages.

Guilds.

Libraries.

Road networks.

The Concord itself.

The realm functions because people continue choosing cooperation.

The alternative exists.

History provides examples.

Most are unpleasant.

Why Dragons Matter Here

Trust becomes particularly important when dealing with dragons.

Not because dragons are inherently trustworthy.

Because they are powerful.

Power magnifies consequences.

A trustworthy dragon matters.

An untrustworthy dragon matters.

A traveler capable of recognizing the difference survives longer.

The Long View

Trust accumulates.

Slowly.

Quietly.

Almost invisibly.

Then one day you realize a door opened.

An opportunity appeared.

A friendship deepened.

A community welcomed you.

A dragon answered a question.

And you understand that trust created the possibility.

Long before you noticed.

MAGDA'S FINAL NOTE FOR THIS CHAPTER

Trust people carefully.

But trust someone.

The road is far too long to walk alone.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Promises, Oaths, and the Weight of Words

The Hall of the Order teaches a simple lesson.

Words matter.

Not because words are magical.

Because people are.

And words shape people.

Promises

Every traveler makes promises.

Some are spoken aloud.

Some remain private.

Some are made to others.

Some are made to oneself.

The size of the promise matters less than the sincerity behind it.

A small promise kept consistently outweighs a grand promise abandoned.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Anybody can promise the moon.

Try promising to arrive on time.

Far fewer people manage that one.

Oaths

An oath differs from a promise.

An oath is a declaration that part of your identity now stands behind your words.

You are not merely saying something.

You are becoming responsible for it.

This distinction matters.

The Hall of the Order exists because certain promises deserve witnesses.

Certain commitments deserve memory.

And certain responsibilities deserve recognition.

The Oath Binders

The Oath Binders preserve these traditions.

Not because they enjoy paperwork.

Though some undeniably do.

They understand that civilization depends upon trust.

Trust depends upon promises.

Promises depend upon memory.

The chain is stronger than it first appears.

Broken Promises

No discussion of promises is complete without discussing failure.

People fail.

Travelers fail.

Good people fail.

The question is rarely whether failure occurs.

The question is what happens next.

Do you acknowledge it?

Repair it?

Learn from it?

Or pretend it never happened?

Character reveals itself most clearly after mistakes.

Not before them.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Anybody can look honorable when everything is easy.

Pay attention when things become difficult.

That's when the real person appears.

The Promise to Yourself

Perhaps the most overlooked promises are personal ones.

The commitments nobody else hears.

The goals.

The standards.

The quiet decisions made beside campfires.

Many travelers discover that keeping promises to themselves is surprisingly difficult.

Yet surprisingly important.

Self-respect grows from those moments.

One choice at a time.

Why This Matters

Some readers may wonder why a travel guide includes a chapter on promises.

The answer is simple.

Because roads are made of choices.

Choices become habits.

Habits become character.

Character determines where roads ultimately lead.

The destination is never the whole journey.

The person arriving matters too.

MAGDA'S FINAL NOTE FOR THIS CHAPTER

Say what you mean.

Mean what you say.

Apologize when necessary.

And if you give your word —

treat it like treasure.

It's worth more.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Companions, Friendship, and Why Nobody Survives Alone

A common myth claims great adventurers stand alone.

This myth was probably invented by someone who had never traveled.

The Truth

The truth is simpler.

Nobody accomplishes anything alone.

Not really.

Every traveler depends upon others.

The farmer who grew food.

The smith who forged tools.

The builder who constructed bridges.

The innkeeper who offered shelter.

The companion who stood watch.

Independence is valuable.

Interdependence is reality.

Traveling Companions

A good companion improves every journey.

A great companion improves difficult journeys.

Neither should be taken for granted.

The best companions contribute different strengths.

Different perspectives.

Different skills.

Differences create resilience.

A group of identical travelers shares identical weaknesses.

The road notices.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Travel with someone who can cook.

This advice alone is worth the price of the book.

Friendship

Friendship rarely follows plans.

People meet unexpectedly.

Help one another unexpectedly.

Care about one another unexpectedly.

And suddenly discover they have become important to each other.

The road specializes in this phenomenon.

It brings strangers together.

Then gives them reasons to remain.

Loneliness

Not every traveler finds companionship immediately.

Loneliness deserves acknowledgment.

Roads can be beautiful.

Roads can also be isolating.

Companion Hall exists because people recognized this truth.

Connection is not a luxury.

It is a need.

Fortunately, the Concord contains many opportunities to find it.

The Friends Who Change You

Most travelers meet many people.

A few become unforgettable.

The mentor.

The rival.

The partner.

The friend who tells difficult truths.

The friend who believes in you before you deserve it.

The friend who helps you become who you were meant to be.

These relationships shape lives.

Treasure them.

MAGDA'S NOTE

And tell your friends you appreciate them.

Don't wait until a dragon is involved.

Communities

Eventually many travelers stop asking:

"Where am I going?"

And begin asking:

"Who am I going there with?"

This marks an important transition.

The journey becomes less about movement.

More about belonging.

The greatest treasure in the Concord may not be gold.

It may be community.

Returning Home

One day, if fortune allows, you will return to Hearthhold.

Perhaps older.

Perhaps wiser.

Hopefully both.

You will recognize familiar faces.

Familiar streets.

Familiar voices.

And realize that home was never merely a location.

It was people.

It always was.

MAGDA'S FINAL NOTE FOR THIS CHAPTER

If you're lucky enough to find good friends —
keep them.

Dragons are rare.

Good friends are rarer.

PART VI

THE FIVE BANNERS

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Wild Clans

There are places in the world where roads feel permanent.

The Wild Clans are not among them.

The forests change.

The seasons change.

The trails change.

The people adapt.

And somehow, through all that change, they remain remarkably consistent.

Outsiders often call them the Wild Clans.

The clans themselves generally consider this evidence that outsiders enjoy naming things they do not understand.

The Long Walk

Every people possess an origin story.

The Wild Clans possess a journey.

Known simply as the Long Walk, it remains one of the foundational events in clan memory.

Generations ago, the ancestors of the clans traveled south through wilderness, hardship, and uncertainty.

The route survives even now.

Not as a road.

As a memory written upon the land.

Certain stones are remembered.

Certain rivers.

Certain camps.

Certain choices.

The journey ended.

The story did not.

MAGDA'S NOTE

The clans remember things differently than cities.

Cities build statues.

The clans tell stories.

Honestly, both methods work.

No King

Travelers from the Iron Kingdoms often ask:

"Who is in charge?"

The answer disappoints them.

No one.

And everyone.

The Wild Clans possess elders, leaders, guides, hunters, speakers, and respected voices.

What they do not possess is a king.

Or a capital.

Or a central authority issuing commands.

The system confuses outsiders.

The clans remain largely unconcerned.

The Standing Stones of Aen

North among the forests stands one of the most important gathering places in the realm.

The Standing Stones of Aen.

There, during the Great Meet, clans gather to exchange news, settle disputes, arrange marriages, tell stories, and remember who they are.

Visitors often expect a political event.

What they discover is something older.

Community.

Three Springs Village

Many travelers first encounter clan life through Three Springs Village.

Three cold springs emerge from the earth there.

The village formed around them generations ago.

Greta's Three Springs House serves travelers and locals alike.

The leatherworker Hild remains among the finest craftsmen in the region.

Visitors often arrive expecting wilderness.

They discover civilization instead.

Just a different kind.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Three Springs has the best smoked trout north of Hearthhold.

I am willing to defend this opinion.

What Outsiders Get Wrong

The most common misunderstanding is that the clans resist change.

They do not.

They simply evaluate change carefully.

There is a difference.

A society that survives centuries in a forest learns patience.

The clans ask:

Will this improve life?

Will it endure?

Will it cost something worth preserving?

These are excellent questions.

More places should ask them.

Dragons of the North

Several dragons maintain territories near clan lands.

The clans generally treat this as a fact rather than a crisis.

A dragon is part of the landscape.

Like a mountain.

Or a river.

Or a particularly opinionated thunderstorm.

Respect matters.

Knowledge matters.

Panic rarely helps.

What Travelers Should Know

Listen more than you speak.

Learn names.

Respect traditions.

Accept hospitality graciously.

Offer hospitality generously.

Do these things and your visit will likely go well.

Ignore them and the forest may become a lonely place.

MAGDA'S FINAL NOTE FOR THIS CHAPTER

The clans know things books don't.

Pay attention.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Iron Kingdoms

If the Wild Clans are a forest, the Iron Kingdoms are a ledger.

Everything has a place.

Everything has a purpose.

Everything has a record.

Somewhere.

Filed carefully.

Probably in triplicate.

The Roads

The first thing most travelers notice is the roads.

Broad limestone highways connect duchies across the realm.

Trade flows efficiently.

Messengers travel quickly.

Armies move effectively.

Merchants are delighted.

Cartographers become emotional.

The roads are among the greatest engineering achievements in the Concord.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Never compliment an Iron Kingdom road engineer unless you have several hours available.

The Nine Duchies

The Kingdoms consist of nine duchies bound by treaty, obligation, politics, and occasional mutual frustration.

Each possesses its own identity.

Its own traditions.

Its own ambitions.

Yet together they form one of the most stable political entities in the realm.

Stability may not sound exciting.

It becomes increasingly attractive with age.

Aldric's Keep

The capital rises upon a bluff overlooking the surrounding countryside.

Aldric's Keep serves as administrative center, political crossroads, and symbol of royal authority.

Travelers expecting endless grandeur may be surprised.

The city feels practical.

Like a place designed to function.

Which, in fairness, it was.

Aldorath

No discussion of the Kingdoms is complete without mentioning Aldorath.

The ruins remain.

The questions remain.

The debates remain.

Every generation returns to Aldorath seeking answers.

Every generation leaves with more questions.

History occasionally behaves that way.

The Border Cairns

Along the northern frontier stand the treaty cairns.

Simple stone markers.

Yet they represent generations of negotiation, compromise, and restraint.

Many travelers walk past them without notice.

This is unfortunate.

Peace often appears ordinary.

That does not make it insignificant.

MAGDA'S NOTE

A treaty is just a promise written down by people who don't entirely trust each other.

Still useful.

The Kingdom Temperament

The Iron Kingdoms value reliability.

Competence.

Duty.

Planning.

Preparation.

They admire those who fulfill responsibilities.

This occasionally causes them to appear serious.

They are.

But not humorless.

The distinction matters.

What Travelers Should Know

Keep your papers.

Pay your fees.

Respect local laws.

Arrive when you said you would.

The Kingdoms reward predictability.

Fortunately, predictability is easier than heroics.

Most days.

MAGDA'S FINAL NOTE FOR THIS CHAPTER

The roads are excellent.

The paperwork is undefeated.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Free Cities

The Free Cities begin where roads meet water.

And where water meets opportunity.

And where opportunity immediately starts negotiating.

Nineteen Cities

The Confederation consists of nineteen republics.

Each independent.

Each proud.

Each convinced it has discovered the correct way to govern.

The ongoing discussions remain spirited.

Merrowford

Currently serving as the seat of the Confederation, Merrowford stands at the mouth of trade routes reaching far beyond the Concord.

Ships arrive daily.

Goods arrive hourly.

Rumors arrive constantly.

A traveler can hear six languages before breakfast.

Sometimes from the same merchant.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Never ask a merchant what something costs.

Ask what it cost yesterday.

That's where the interesting conversation begins.

Briarquay

Three days southeast of Hearthhold stands Briarquay.

Part port.

Part wayhouse.

Part gathering point.

The Salt-Wind Inn welcomes travelers.

The Tideless provides strong drink and stronger opinions.

Verla's supply shop has rescued countless expeditions.

Most travelers stop for a night.

Many remain longer.

The sea has a persuasive personality.

Coin and Trade

The Free Cities transformed commerce into an art form.

Every harbor contains opportunity.

Every marketplace contains possibility.

Every negotiation contains at least three negotiations hidden inside it.

Visitors quickly learn that value depends upon perspective.

The same cargo may be ordinary in one city and priceless in another.

Knowledge travels alongside goods.

Often faster.

The Drowned Marshes

South of Briarquay the landscape changes.

Solid ground becomes uncertain.

Water and land negotiate constantly.

The Drowned Marshes are beautiful.

Mysterious.

And occasionally dangerous.

Travelers are advised to follow local guidance.

The marshes have very little interest in outsider confidence.

MAGDA'S NOTE

If a local says, "Don't step there."

Don't.

The Drowned Isles

Farther offshore lie the Drowned Isles.

A place sailors discuss carefully.

Maps become less certain there.

Stories become more certain.

Which should concern you.

What Travelers Should Know

Everything is connected to trade.

Everything.

If you understand what people need, what they fear, and what they value, you understand the Free Cities remarkably well.

MAGDA'S FINAL NOTE FOR THIS CHAPTER

The sea teaches humility.

So do merchants.

The sea is usually kinder about it.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Ashen Peaks

Every region teaches a lesson.

The Wild Clans teach patience.

The Iron Kingdoms teach structure.

The Free Cities teach opportunity.

The Ashen Peaks teach endurance.

The mountains do not care whether you are brave.

The volcanoes do not care whether you are important.

The stone does not care whether you are right.

The Peaks respect persistence.

Nothing else earns consideration.

The Mountains of Fire

Visitors often imagine volcanoes as disasters waiting to happen.

This is understandable.

Volcanoes occasionally encourage that impression.

The people of the Peaks view them differently.

The mountains are not merely hazards.

They are neighbors.

Difficult neighbors.

Powerful neighbors.

But neighbors nonetheless.

Entire communities have learned to live beside heat, smoke, ash, and stone.

The result is a culture unlike any other in the Concord.

MAGDA'S NOTE

The mountains are alive.

Not literally.

Probably.

But spend enough time there and you'll understand why people talk about them that way.

The Seven Ranges

The Ashen Peaks consist of seven major volcanic ranges stretching across the western frontier.

Each possesses its own character.

Its own passes.

Its own dangers.

Its own opportunities.

Travelers quickly learn that mountains have personalities.

The Peaks possess several.

Some are welcoming.

Some are not.

Vr■k-thor

Among the most respected forge-holds stands Vr■k-thor.

Stone halls descend into the mountain.

Forges burn day and night.

Generations of smiths have worked there.

Visitors expecting noise are often surprised.

The work is intense.

But rarely rushed.

Mastery requires concentration.

The mountains reward patience.

The smiths learned from the mountains.

Smoking Spire

No landmark defines the region more completely than Smoking Spire.

Visible from astonishing distances, it dominates the western skyline.

Travelers often measure progress by its position.

If the mountain is growing larger, they are moving west.

If it begins speaking to them, they should consider more sleep.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Or less mushroom tea.

Emberhold

Many journeys into the Peaks eventually pass through Emberhold.

Part village.

Part wayhouse.

Part stubborn declaration that people can build homes almost anywhere if they are determined enough.

The Hot Stone Inn provides shelter.

Inara's workshop provides heat-glass, crafted from volcanic materials unique to the region.

Visitors often arrive expecting hardship.

They discover comfort.

Hard-earned comfort.

The best kind.

Caldera Notch

Every mountain range possesses gateways.

Caldera Notch is among the most important.

The pass threads through ancient volcanic terrain, connecting regions that might otherwise remain isolated.

Merchants use it.

Travelers use it.

Stories use it.

Everything passes through eventually.

The Smiths

No discussion of the Peaks can ignore the smiths.

Their reputation extends across the Concord.

Yet visitors often misunderstand what makes them exceptional.

It is not talent.

Though they possess plenty.

It is discipline.

A master smith may spend decades refining techniques.

Perfecting alloys.

Studying heat.

Understanding failure.

The finest work emerges from thousands of small improvements.

Not miracles.

Metals

Most travelers think metal is metal.

Smiths become deeply offended by this statement.

And correctly so.

Iron behaves differently from steel.

Bronze behaves differently from iron.

Silver behaves differently from all of them.

Add trace minerals.

Adjust temperatures.

Change cooling methods.

Everything changes.

The mountains teach that details matter.

The smiths agree.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Never tell a master smith:

"It looks good enough."

If you value your dignity.

Builders of Stone

The Peaks produce exceptional builders.

This is hardly surprising.

Living among mountains encourages understanding them.

Retaining walls.

Bridges.

Foundations.

Tunnels.

Aqueducts.

The region contains structures older than some kingdoms.

Still standing.

Still useful.

The builders consider this the highest compliment possible.

Inventors

Something about volcanic landscapes seems to encourage experimentation.

Perhaps it is the abundance of minerals.

Perhaps it is the proximity to enormous natural forces.

Whatever the cause, the Peaks produce a remarkable number of inventors.

Some improve mining.

Some improve transportation.

Some improve metallurgy.

A few improve explosions.

Results vary.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Stand behind the inventor.

Never in front.

I've mentioned this before because it remains important.

Dragons of Fire and Stone

Several dragons claim territories within the Peaks.

Travelers often assume fire dragons belong there naturally.

This assumption is not entirely wrong.

Yet even here, dragons are defined more by personality than environment.

Volcanoes explain where they live.

Not who they are.

Remember the distinction.

What Travelers Should Know

Bring warm clothing.

Yes, warm clothing.

Volcanoes confuse people.

The mountains remain mountains.

Weather remains weather.

Altitude remains altitude.

Prepare accordingly.

Listen to locals.

Respect the stone.

And remember:

The mountain will still be there tomorrow.

No need to challenge it today.

MAGDA'S FINAL NOTE FOR THIS CHAPTER

The Peaks teach patience.

Anyone who refuses the lesson usually learns it anyway.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Karth Veyl

There are maps that show Karth Veyl.

This does not mean Karth Veyl can be mapped.

The distinction matters.

The Realm Below

Beneath Hearthhold.

Beneath roads.

Beneath forests.

Beneath mountains.

The underground realm stretches through darkness older than memory.

Most travelers think of Karth Veyl as caves.

This is inaccurate.

Caves exist within Karth Veyl.

Just as rooms exist within cities.

Neither description captures the whole.

Karth Veyl is a place.

A culture.

A mystery.

A world beneath the world.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Things get strange underground.

That's the simple version.

The Iron Veil

Most journeys begin at the Iron Veil.

The descent marker on Hearthhold's eastern side marks a threshold more than an entrance.

Above lies the familiar world.

Below lies uncertainty.

Travelers often pause before beginning the descent.

This is wise.

Crossing thresholds deserves respect.

The Lower Archive

Not far below the entrance stands the Lower Archive.

Many travelers expect treasure.

Some find it.

What they usually discover instead is knowledge.

Records.

Fragments.

Memories.

Questions.

The Archive serves as a reminder that information can be every bit as valuable as gold.

Occasionally more.

Silence

One of the first things newcomers notice is the silence.

Not complete silence.

Something stranger.

The absence of expected sounds.

Wind behaves differently.

Distance behaves differently.

Echoes behave differently.

Even conversations feel altered.

Karth Veyl changes perception.

Visitors should expect this.

MAGDA'S NOTE

And don't panic if the dark feels different.

It is different.

That's why it has its own chapter.

Light

Above ground, light feels ordinary.

Below ground, light becomes precious.

Candles.

Lanterns.

Glowmoss.

Heat-glass.

Reflected illumination.

Travelers quickly develop a new appreciation for visibility.

The dark is not hostile.

But it is vast.

The distinction becomes important.

The People Below

Karth Veyl is not empty.

Communities exist.

Families exist.

Traditions exist.

Entire lives unfold beneath the surface.

Visitors sometimes arrive expecting isolation.

Instead they discover culture.

A different culture.

But culture nonetheless.

One should never mistake unfamiliarity for absence.

The Lan-Ekai Vale

Among the many communities below, few are discussed more often than the families of the Vale.

Reserved.

Private.

Thoughtful.

Their traditions emphasize memory, responsibility, and continuity.

Visitors who earn trust may learn much.

Visitors who demand trust learn considerably less.

Mushrooms

No chapter about Karth Veyl would be complete without acknowledging fungi.

The underground world possesses entire ecosystems built around them.

Food.

Medicine.

Dyes.

Fibers.

Light.

The surface world often underestimates mushrooms.

The underground world cannot afford to.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Never eat an unfamiliar mushroom because it "looks friendly."

Nothing looks friendly underground.

The Arcane Order

Far from Karth Veyl, beyond the southern seas, rise the Seven Spires of the Arcane Order.

Yet their influence reaches even here.

Knowledge travels.

Questions travel.

Curiosity travels.

The Order and the Archives occasionally seem engaged in a conversation centuries long.

No one entirely understands it.

The participants appear unconcerned.

Memory

More than anything else, Karth Veyl feels connected to memory.

Stories linger.

Records endure.

Questions survive.

Some travelers claim the realm remembers things.

Scholars disagree about the literal interpretation.

Fewer disagree about the feeling.

Why People Return

Many travelers visit Karth Veyl once.

Some return repeatedly.

The reason is difficult to explain.

The underground realm offers something increasingly rare.

Perspective.

The surface world feels different after emerging.

Larger in some ways.

Smaller in others.

The change is subtle.

Yet persistent.

MAGDA'S NOTE

A week underground teaches you how wonderful sunlight is.

What Travelers Should Know

Carry extra light.

Move deliberately.

Respect local customs.

Ask questions.

Listen carefully.

Write things down.

And understand that not every mystery is meant to be solved immediately.

Some are meant to be lived with for a while.

Leaving Karth Veyl

Every descent eventually becomes an ascent.

The traveler returns.

The sky reappears.

The wind feels strange.

The horizon feels enormous.

And for a brief moment, the familiar world seems new again.

That may be Karth Veyl's greatest gift.

Not answers.

Perspective.

MAGDA'S FINAL NOTE FOR THIS CHAPTER

The underground changes people.

Not because it's dangerous.

Because it reminds them how much they don't know.

Which, honestly, is useful for everyone.

Especially scholars.

Don't tell Pell I said that.

PART VII

THE SIXTEEN

A Note Before We Begin

There are travelers who collect coins.

There are travelers who collect stories.

There are travelers who collect dragon names.

The last group tends to be the most interesting.

And occasionally the most alarming.

The Sixteen are not merely powerful creatures.

They are landmarks.

Mysteries.

Witnesses.

Questions wearing scales.

Entire libraries have been written about them.

Entire careers devoted to them.

Entire mistakes made because of them.

The entries that follow represent the best available knowledge.

This does not guarantee correctness.

Indeed, several dragons would likely object to portions of these descriptions.

A few would object to all of them.

Such disagreements are unavoidable.

The alternative would require interviewing dragons for editorial approval.

I declined.

— *Pell*

MAGDA'S NOTE

Coward.

DRAGON I

Iselith

Keeper of the Cold Spire

Territory: The Glacier of the Cold Spire, far to the northwest. **Known Territory Radius:** 12 days

Pell's Observations

If winter possessed a memory, it might resemble Iselith.

Travelers consistently describe the dragon as patient, observant, and profoundly difficult to surprise.

The glacier itself appears shaped by centuries of presence.

Silence dominates the region.

Movement slows.

Thoughts seem louder.

Many visitors report the sensation of being examined long before they ever glimpse the dragon.

Whether this is imagination remains debated.

The glacier declines to comment.

Things Travelers Say

"Cold listens."

"Don't rush your answers."

"The dragon notices what you leave unsaid."

"Snow remembers."

Known For

Patience.

Observation.

Ancient memory.

Uncomfortable questions.

What Not To Do

Do not boast.

Do not exaggerate.

Do not assume silence means agreement.

Questions Still Unanswered

How old is Iselith?

Why does the glacier contain features absent from older maps?

What exactly does the dragon remember?

MAGDA'S WARNING

Bring two blankets.

Not because of the dragon.

Because glaciers are glaciers.

DRAGON II

Vellucent

The Storm-Keeper

Territory: Highest peak of the Wyrms Vales **Known Territory Radius:** 10 days

Pell's Observations

Where Iselith embodies stillness, Vellucent embodies motion.

Storms gather around the high peaks.

Clouds move strangely.

Lightning behaves with suspicious enthusiasm.

Travelers describe Vellucent as possessing an unusual interest in distant events.

The dragon appears fascinated by connections.

Patterns.

Possibilities.

Things not yet fully visible.

Many who seek guidance journey to the Hollow Notch.

Few return with the answers they expected.

Things Travelers Say

"The mountain sees farther than I do."

"The storm already knew I was coming."

"Bring questions."

Known For

Perspective.

Foresight.

Weather.

Watching.

What Not To Do

Do not assume seeing the future and understanding the future are the same thing.

Vellucent certainly doesn't.

Questions Still Unanswered

Why do travelers often leave with different interpretations of the same conversation?

Why do local weather records contain unexplained anomalies?

MAGDA'S WARNING

If lightning strikes the same rock three times while you're standing there —

leave.

The mountain is trying to tell you something.

DRAGON III

Old Thornback

Keeper of the Yew Glade

Territory: The Quiet Marches **Known Territory Radius:** 9 days

Pell's Observations

Many dragons feel ancient.

Old Thornback feels old.

The distinction becomes obvious upon meeting him.

The Yew Glade is among the quietest places in the Concord.

Birdsong exists.

Wind exists.

Life exists.

Yet everything seems softened.

Gentler.

As though the forest itself is speaking in a lower voice.

Travelers frequently report losing track of time.

Not dangerously.

Peacefully.

Things Travelers Say

"The glade feels older than history."

"I forgot what I was worried about."

"The dragon listens better than most people."

Known For

Wisdom.

Patience.

Reflection.

Stories.

What Not To Do

Do not rush.

The forest dislikes rushing.

Old Thornback appears to agree.

Questions Still Unanswered

Why do some visitors remember additional details weeks later?

Why are so many old stories connected to the Glade?

MAGDA'S WARNING

Bring a notebook.

You'll think you'll remember everything.

You won't.

DRAGON IV

Auresor

The Hidden Vale Dragon

Territory: Hidden Vale **Known Territory Radius:** 5 days

Pell's Observations

The Hidden Vale appears almost impossible.

Autumn colors persist beyond their proper season.

Light behaves beautifully.

Visitors often become distracted.

This may not be accidental.

Auresor is associated with beauty, memory, and perception.

The dragon's territory inspires artists.

Poets.

Painters.

And occasionally very confused cartographers.

Things Travelers Say

"It looked different when I left."

"I can't describe it correctly."

"The colors aren't normal."

Known For

Beauty.

Perception.

Inspiration.

Mystery.

What Not To Do

Do not assume appearance equals truth.

The Vale enjoys complexity.

Questions Still Unanswered

Why do paintings of the Vale rarely agree?

Why do visitors describe colors that do not exist elsewhere?

MAGDA'S WARNING

If you fall in love while visiting the Vale, wait a week before making important decisions.

DRAGON V

Nethirae

The Dragon of Old Halt

Territory: Ruined Chapel **Known Territory Radius:** 4 days

Pell's Observations

Old Halt sits among ruins.

Yet travelers often describe it as comforting.

Nethirae's presence transforms abandonment into reflection.

The ruined chapel remains a destination for pilgrims, historians, and those carrying unanswered questions.

The dragon's association with memory and loss appears well established.

Things Travelers Say

"The place feels unfinished."

"I found something I wasn't looking for."

"The silence helped."

Known For

Reflection.

Memory.

Acceptance.

What Not To Do

Do not mistake sadness for hopelessness.

Nethirae certainly doesn't.

Questions Still Unanswered

Why do so many travelers leave feeling lighter?

What exactly happened at Old Halt?

MAGDA'S WARNING

Sometimes healing and happiness are different things.

Remember that.

DRAGON VI

Fennick

Apprentice of the Waterfall Cave

Territory: Behind Brennanford Falls

Known Territory Radius: 3 days

Pell's Observations

Among the youngest of the Sixteen, Fennick remains a favorite subject of speculation.

Youth, however, should not be confused with weakness.

The cave behind the waterfall attracts curious travelers.

Curious travelers attract interesting situations.

The dragon appears to enjoy both.

Things Travelers Say

"Everything felt possible."

"The dragon seemed interested in everything."

"I left with more questions."

Known For

Curiosity.

Potential.

Learning.

What Not To Do

Never underestimate someone because they're young.

History repeatedly punishes this mistake.

Questions Still Unanswered

Many.

Possibly including questions Fennick hasn't asked yet.

MAGDA'S WARNING

Young dragons are still dragons.

Remember that.

DRAGON VII

Vorthul

Keeper of the Obsidian Spire

Territory: The Burning Hall beneath the Obsidian Spire **Known Territory Radius:** 6 days

Pell's Observations

Travelers often describe Vorthul as intimidating.

This assessment is accurate.

Yet incomplete.

The Obsidian Spire rises from volcanic lands shaped by heat, pressure, and time.

The dragon appears to embody similar forces.

Direct.

Uncompromising.

Difficult to deceive.

Many visitors arrive prepared to defend themselves.

They discover that Vorthul is often more interested in whether a traveler can defend their reasoning.

The distinction matters.

Things Travelers Say

"The dragon looked through me."

"I left feeling examined."

"Every answer led to another question."

Known For

Strength.

Conviction.

Truth.

Accountability.

What Not To Do

Do not claim certainty unless you possess it.

Vorthul has little patience for borrowed confidence.

Questions Still Unanswered

Why do so many visitors describe conversations as challenges?

What exactly does Vorthul consider worthy?

MAGDA'S WARNING

Don't lie.

You'll only embarrass yourself.

DRAGON VIII

Pip

The Ash Hatchling

Territory: Warm Flowers Above Dry **Known Territory Radius:** 3 days

Pell's Observations

Few dragons inspire more affection than Pip.

This fact should not be interpreted as weakness.

Pip's territory lies among warm fissures and volcanic soils where unexpected life flourishes.

Flowers bloom.

Pollinators gather.

Color thrives in unlikely places.

Visitors often leave smiling.

This should not distract from the fact that Pip remains a dragon.

An unusually charming dragon.

But a dragon nonetheless.

Things Travelers Say

"The flowers shouldn't grow there."

"Everything felt alive."

"I forgot to be nervous."

Known For

Joy.

Curiosity.

Unexpected beauty.

Hope.

What Not To Do

Do not confuse kindness with harmlessness.

The distinction exists.

Questions Still Unanswered

Why do unusual plants thrive throughout the territory?

Why do visitors often return?

MAGDA'S WARNING

If a dragon makes you smile, that's wonderful.

Still keep your wits about you.

DRAGON IX

Vraezir

Keeper of the Third Burned Hilltop

Territory: The Briarquay Coast **Known Territory Radius:** 8 days

Pell's Observations

History lingers heavily around Vraezir.

The burned hilltops remain visible reminders of events long past.

Travelers often arrive seeking answers.

Most discover perspective instead.

The dragon's territory feels marked by consequence.

Actions matter here.

Choices matter.

History feels unusually close.

Things Travelers Say

"The hills remember."

"I understood more when I left."

"The coast feels haunted by decisions."

Known For

Consequences.

History.

Responsibility.

Memory.

What Not To Do

Do not ask questions unless prepared to hear answers.

Questions Still Unanswered

What truly happened upon the burned hills?

Why do so many conflicting stories survive?

MAGDA'S WARNING

Some truths are heavy.

Lift carefully.

DRAGON X

Vauthana

Keeper of the Mirror-Hall

Territory: The Western Salt Flats **Known Territory Radius:** 7 days

Pell's Observations

The Salt Flats appear empty.

Appearances deceive.

Reflection dominates Vauthana's territory.

Sky mirrors earth.

Earth mirrors sky.

Distances become uncertain.

Perspective becomes unreliable.

Travelers frequently report leaving with greater understanding of themselves.

Whether this was intentional remains unclear.

Things Travelers Say

"I saw myself differently."

"The horizon never ended."

"The silence felt reflective."

Known For

Self-knowledge.

Perspective.

Reflection.

Truth.

What Not To Do

Do not enter the Mirror-Hall seeking validation.

Seek understanding instead.

Questions Still Unanswered

What exactly is reflected there?

Why do different travelers report different experiences?

MAGDA'S WARNING

The hardest truths are usually the ones wearing your face.

DRAGON XI

Murex

Keeper of the Bay-Throne

Territory: The Deep Fens **Known Territory Radius:** 6 days

Pell's Observations

Marshlands possess long memories.

Water records history differently than stone.

Murex appears to understand this intimately.

The Bay-Throne lies among wetlands where ancient things sink slowly rather than disappear.

Visitors often speak of forgotten stories resurfacing.

The dragon seems comfortable with patience.

The marshes certainly are.

Things Travelers Say

"The water knows things."

"I found pieces of old stories."

"Nothing truly vanished."

Known For

Memory.

Patience.

Recovery.

Depth.

What Not To Do

Do not rush.

The marsh never does.

Questions Still Unanswered

What lies beneath the oldest waters?

How many stories remain hidden there?

MAGDA'S WARNING

Marshes don't care how expensive your boots were.

DRAGON XII

Thossar

Keeper of the Drowned Marshes

Territory: The Three-Mouth Marsh **Known Territory Radius:** 5 days

Pell's Observations

Movement defines Thossar's territory.

Water shifts.

Channels change.

Boundaries migrate.

Travelers quickly learn that permanence is an illusion.

The dragon appears unusually comfortable with change.

Possibly because resisting it would be exhausting.

Things Travelers Say

"The map was already wrong."

"The marsh changed overnight."

"I stopped expecting certainty."

Known For

Adaptation.

Change.

Flexibility.

Survival.

What Not To Do

Do not insist reality match your expectations.

Reality rarely agrees.

Questions Still Unanswered

How old are the drowned channels?

What settlements once stood there?

MAGDA'S WARNING

The marsh wins every argument eventually.

DRAGON XIII

Pellurion

Keeper of the Tideback Caves

Territory: The Pelt Coast **Known Territory Radius:** 4 days

Pell's Observations

Certain places exist between worlds.

Low tide and high tide.

Land and sea.

Arrival and departure.

The Tideback Caves occupy such a place.

Pellurion's territory rewards timing.

Visitors quickly learn that patience and observation matter more than speed.

The sea decides many things.

Things Travelers Say

"I had to wait."

"The caves changed completely."

"The tide knew something I didn't."

Known For

Timing.

Patience.

Observation.

Cycles.

What Not To Do

Never argue with tides.

Questions Still Unanswered

How many chambers remain undiscovered?

Why do visitors report recurring symbols?

MAGDA'S WARNING

Bring a watch.

Or a friend who owns one.

DRAGON XIV

Aelthune

Keeper of the Drowned Isles

Territory: The Deep Waters Beyond the Isles **Known Territory Radius:** 8 days

Pell's Observations

Maps become uncertain around Aelthune.

Sailors become careful.

Stories become numerous.

The dragon occupies a place where knowledge thins and possibility expands.

Many captains leave offerings.

Most deny doing so.

This contradiction appears traditional.

Things Travelers Say

"The sea felt larger."

"The horizon looked different."

"I understood why sailors tell stories."

Known For

Mystery.

Distance.

Depth.

Exploration.

What Not To Do

Do not assume the edge of the map is the edge of the world.

Questions Still Unanswered

What lies beyond the Drowned Isles?

How much does Aelthune know?

MAGDA'S WARNING

The ocean is bigger than your confidence.

DRAGON XV

The Pale Wood Unnamed

****Territory:**** An Unmapped Clearing within the Pale Wood ****Known Territory Radius:**** 8 days

Pell's Observations

Some mysteries possess names.

This one does not.

Or perhaps it does and refuses to share it.

The Pale Wood itself feels separate from surrounding forests.

Older.

Quieter.

More observant.

The unnamed dragon remains among the least understood of the Sixteen.

Scholars dislike this.

The dragon appears unconcerned.

Things Travelers Say

"The forest was watching."

"I never found the same path twice."

"The clearing felt impossible."

Known For

Mystery.

Absence.

Silence.

Possibility.

What Not To Do

Do not assume every question requires an answer.

Questions Still Unanswered

Most of them.

MAGDA'S WARNING

If the dragon wanted a name in the guide, we'd probably know it.

DRAGON XVI

Vraxis the Unwritten

****Territory:**** Unknown ****Known Territory Radius:**** Unknown

Pell's Observations

There are entries one writes carefully.

This is one.

Unlike the other dragons, Vraxis occupies an unusual position within the chronicle.

Evidence exists.

References exist.

Fragments exist.

Certainty does not.

Accounts disagree.

Maps hesitate.

Stories trail off unexpectedly.

Some travelers insist Vraxis exists.

Others insist Vraxis is a misunderstanding.

The evidence suggests otherwise.

Yet the evidence remains incomplete.

This entry is presented because omission would be dishonest.

Confidence would be equally dishonest.

Things Travelers Say

"I found references."

"The trail ended."

"The story wasn't finished."

Known For

Unknown.

What Not To Do

Assume absence.

Questions Still Unanswered

Nearly all of them.

MAGDA'S WARNING

If you ever discover the complete story, bring it to the library.

Pell will faint.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

What Dragons and Travelers Have in Common

Most people would say:

Very little.

This answer is understandable.

It is also wrong.

Dragons and travelers share a surprising number of traits.

Both leave territories.

Both carry memories.

Both change over time.

Both make choices.

Both leave stories behind.

Both influence places they pass through.

Both struggle to understand worlds larger than themselves.

The differences are obvious.

The similarities require attention.

Yet they exist.

A traveler begins with questions.

Many dragons seem to have begun there as well.

A traveler gathers experience.

Dragons certainly do.

A traveler carries regrets.

One suspects dragons do too.

The older I become, the less interested I am in what separates people from dragons.

And the more interested I become in what connects them.

Perhaps that is one reason the chronicle remains unfinished.

The realm is not a story about monsters.

Nor a story about heroes.

It is a story about choices.

The forms making those choices matter less than the choices themselves.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Pell spent a week writing that.

Here's the short version.

Everybody's trying to figure things out.

Some of them are larger.

The dragons endure because they remain part of the world.

The travelers matter because they continue changing it.

Neither role is complete without the other.

Which means the future belongs to conversations not yet had.

Roads not yet walked.

Questions not yet asked.

And stories not yet written.

The chronicle remains open.

That is not a flaw.

That is the point.

Pell's Final Note on the Sixteen

Do not seek dragons merely because they are dragons.

Seek understanding.

Seek perspective.

Seek wisdom.

Seek truth.

The dragons are simply one road toward those destinations.

There are others.

Magda's Final Note on the Sixteen

If you happen to save the world, that's nice.

But don't forget to enjoy the journey.

You'll spend a lot more time traveling than saving the world.

Trust me.

I've checked.

PART VIII

THE CHRONICLE

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Chronicle and Why It Remembers

Most people imagine a chronicle is a book.

This is understandable.

Many chronicles are books.

The Chronicle is not.

Or at least not entirely.

The Chronicle is the collected memory of the realm.

The stories people tell.

The choices people make.

The consequences that follow.

The lessons that survive.

The mistakes repeated.

The wisdom earned.

The Chronicle exists partly in libraries.

Partly in journals.

Partly in stories.

Partly in memory.

And partly in places.

Some roads remember.

Some buildings remember.

Some dragons remember.

Some people do too.

The Chronicle is simply what remains after enough years have passed and the important parts refuse to disappear.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Pell says this every year.

What he means is:

Your choices matter.

Recorded and Remembered

Not every event enters the Chronicle.

A traveler cannot record everything.

Nor should they.

The Chronicle concerns itself with meaning.

Moments that change people.

Moments that reveal character.

Moments that alter futures.

A traveler may walk a thousand roads.

The Chronicle remembers the crossroads.

Why Stories Matter

Facts are important.

Stories are how facts survive.

A list of names may be forgotten.

A story about those names endures.

People are not built to remember information.

People are built to remember meaning.

The Chronicle understands this.

Becoming Part of the Chronicle

Every traveler eventually contributes.

Sometimes intentionally.

Sometimes not.

A kind act.

A difficult choice.

A promise kept.

A sacrifice made.

A truth discovered.

A mystery solved.

Or a mystery preserved.

One day another traveler may hear your story.

And continue it.

That is how the Chronicle grows.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Try to contribute something worth repeating.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Foreign Words and the Five Travelers

Among the most treasured stories preserved by the Concord are those of the Five Travelers.

Their journeys crossed oceans.

Continents.

Languages.

Worlds of experience.

They brought more than goods.

They brought perspective.

The Gift of New Words

A new word is not merely a sound.

A new word is a new way of seeing.

Sometimes another language notices something your own language overlooks.

Sometimes another culture solves a problem differently.

Sometimes a single word contains an entire philosophy.

The Five Travelers understood this.

They collected words.

Shared words.

Preserved words.

And in doing so expanded the realm.

Why Words Matter

When you learn a new word, you gain more than vocabulary.

You gain a new tool.

A new lens.

A new way of understanding people.

Travelers who learn only roads travel far.

Travelers who learn languages travel farther.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Also, people appreciate it when you learn how to say hello.

Tadesse

Somewhere beyond the southern seas lies a village few travelers will ever visit.

Yet its memory survives here.

Not because of conquest.

Not because of wealth.

Because someone carried a story home.

The Chronicle values such things.

Solomon

Some travelers come for the markets. Some for the songs. Some for the dragons.

Solomon came for the archives.

He sat in the lower halls of Karth Veyl for thirty years and read until the pages forgot his hands had ever touched them.

He did not boast.

He did not write home.

He did not, in any year of those thirty, ask the chronicle for thanks.

What he carried back was less than a sheaf of notes and more than any sheaf of notes the realm had ever held.

He named what he had read. He explained what he had read. He admitted what he had not understood.

The chronicle keeps Solomon's work near the heart of the library, where the lamp is brightest, because the chronicle understands that some scholars give their lives to be useful to scholars not yet born.

Mei Zhen

A stone can become a monument.

A monument can become memory.

A memory can become history.

Some travelers leave roads behind.

Others leave markers.

The realm contains both.

Arjun

The rivers do not know they are crossing borders.

Arjun knew this before he came, and the knowing was what he came to share.

He drew the river-charts the Free Cities had stopped drawing because the rivers had moved.

He named the crossings the old wagoners had stopped naming because the old wagoners had grown old.

He sat with fishermen and ferrymen and the women who run the river-shrines, and he listened more than he spoke.

The chronicle remembers him as the traveler who taught the realm that **running water is also a road**.

Some lessons sound obvious after the lesson has been given.

The river-pilots of Briarquay still drink to Arjun's name on the night of the first thaw.

Tariq

Not every journey ends where it began.

Not every road leads home.

Yet some memories continue drawing maps long after the traveler has stopped walking them.

Tariq's remembered road remains one of the most poignant reminders that home is sometimes a place and sometimes a longing.

MAGDA'S NOTE

If you're lucky, they're the same thing.

The chronicler took longer to write about Solomon and Arjun because they took longer to introduce themselves to him. Some travelers arrive with their stories ready. Others arrive and let the chronicle wait.

Why The Five Matter

The Five Travelers remind us of a truth the Concord occasionally forgets.

The world is larger than our maps.

Larger than our assumptions.

Larger than our traditions.

The unfamiliar is not the enemy.

Sometimes it is the teacher.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Character Creation, According to Pell

A surprising number of travelers ask:

"What kind of person should I become?"

This question cannot be answered.

Fortunately.

A life with only one correct answer would be unbearably dull.

Start With Curiosity

Every memorable traveler begins the same way.

With curiosity.

Questions create journeys.

Journeys create experience.

Experience creates wisdom.

The process is slower than people prefer.

Yet remarkably reliable.

Choose What Matters

Some travelers value knowledge.

Others value courage.

Others loyalty.

Justice.

Exploration.

Creativity.

Service.

There is no perfect choice.

Only meaningful ones.

The road will test whichever values you select.

This is unavoidable.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Good.

Otherwise everybody would claim courage.

Strengths

Your strengths matter.

Use them.

Develop them.

Share them.

But do not become trapped by them.

Many travelers become so proud of their strengths that they neglect everything else.

The road eventually notices.

Weaknesses

Weaknesses are not flaws in the story.

They are opportunities within it.

Every traveler possesses limitations.

Fear.

Pride.

Impatience.

Doubt.

Loneliness.

The road often teaches through these.

Occasionally harshly.

But effectively.

Becoming

The most important thing to understand is this:

Character creation never ends.

You begin the journey as one person.

You end it as another.

The road creates both.

MAGDA'S NOTE

That's why it's called a journey.

If you stayed the same, it would just be exercise.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

A Traveler's Almanac

Things Worth Knowing

Best Places to Watch a Sunrise

The eastern walls of Hearthhold.

The cliffs above Briarquay.

The upper trails of the Wyrn Vales.

Anywhere after surviving a difficult night.

Best Places to Watch a Sunset

The Western Salt Flats.

The Yew Glade.

The road home.

Best Places to Think

The Whispering Stacks.

The Concordance Flame.

The Tideback Caves at low tide.

Anywhere without interruptions.

Best Places Not to Think

The edge of a cliff.

The middle of a negotiation.

A dragon's territory when the dragon is speaking.

MAGDA'S NOTE

Particularly the last one.

Things Travelers Always Forget

Extra socks.

Twine.

A second waterskin.

The name of that person who was definitely important.

The reason they entered the room.

Things Travelers Think They Need

Fancier weapons.

Bigger packs.

More confidence.

Things Travelers Actually Need

Patience.

Friends.

Questions.

Good boots.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Magda's Emergency Advice

In no particular order:

Don't eat unidentified mushrooms.

Don't insult cooks.

Don't challenge dragons because you're angry.

Don't marry somebody you met yesterday.

Don't loan money you can't afford to lose.

Don't follow mysterious glowing lights into swamps.

Don't ignore librarians.

Don't panic.

Don't assume everybody older than you is wiser.

Don't assume everybody younger than you isn't.

Don't travel without snacks.

Don't trust maps completely.

Don't trust rumors completely.

Don't trust certainty completely.

Don't forget why you started.

Additional Emergency Advice

If a bridge looks unsafe:

Find another bridge.

If a horse dislikes someone:

Pay attention.

If an innkeeper lowers their voice:

Listen.

If a dragon asks a question:

Answer honestly.

If Pell says:

"That's interesting."

Prepare for several hours.

MAGDA'S FINAL EMERGENCY ADVICE

Most disasters begin with somebody saying:

"What could possibly go wrong?"

Don't be that person.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

When You Return

Most guides concern themselves with departure.

Far fewer discuss return.

This is unfortunate.

Because return is where many journeys finally make sense.

The traveler who returns is never the same traveler who left.

The roads see to that.

The mountains see to that.

The dragons see to that.

The people encountered along the way see to that.

Experience changes people.

That is its purpose.

One day you will walk through a familiar gate.

Past familiar walls.

Along familiar streets.

You will hear familiar voices.

Smell familiar meals.

See familiar faces.

And suddenly realize something unexpected.

Home changed.

And so did you.

The remarkable thing is that both can be true.

The city remains.

The traveler grows.

The road connects them.

Always.

Perhaps you discovered answers.

Perhaps you discovered better questions.
Perhaps you found treasure.
Perhaps you found purpose.
Perhaps you found friendship.
Perhaps you found yourself.
Most likely, you found a little of everything.
That is how good journeys work.

MAGDA'S NOTE

And hopefully you found better socks.
One day another traveler will sit where you once sat.
Packing a bag.
Studying a map.
Feeling uncertain.
Wondering whether they are ready.
You may be the one giving advice.
If so, be kind.
Every traveler begins somewhere.
The Chronicle remains open.
The roads remain waiting.
The dragons remain watching.
The realm remains alive.
And your story remains unfinished.
That is not a flaw.
That is a gift.

Pell's Final Words

May your roads be interesting.
May your companions be loyal.
May your questions remain larger than your fears.
And may you always find your way home.

Magda's Final Words

Bring extra socks.

I wasn't joking.

THE END

Or more accurately:

Until the Next Journey.