

# Iron Tithe

## The World, and the Debt It Keeps

*A background for players — what your character half-remembers, half-believes, and never fully knows.*



### Before You

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No one made the world. It *settled* — the way frost finds its pattern on cold glass, the way a shaken vessel finally goes still and its sediment lies down in layers. Where the underlying order pulled tight, there was substance: stone, water, air, the slow machinery of seasons. Where it stayed loose, there was the open dark between the stars, where pattern is thin and hungry things drift. Scholars call that order the **Weave**, and the wisest of them stop short of calling it a god. It did not decide anything. It is simply the reason things hold together rather than fly apart — the reason a stone keeps its shape, a river runs downhill, and a soul stays inside the body it was poured into.

The world is just a knot of unusual tightness and warmth in an immense, indifferent cloth. Remember that. It will matter when the world asks you to pay for the warmth.

### The Sleepers Who Became the Land

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The **Titans** came after — not the world's makers, but the first things vast enough to *notice* it. Whether they woke within the Weave or wandered in from some thinner-woven place, no two records agree. What the fragments do agree on is that they were early, they were enormous, and they were already ancient when everything that now calls itself old was young.

They ruled, in their slow way. Some Titans feuded across ages so long the feuds wore valleys into the earth. Some kept a wary friendship; some were so vast they never noticed one another at all. And one by one, across spans no mortal mind can hold, they lay down in the world and did not rise.

They did not vanish. They were *absorbed* — taken back into the living earth they had laid upon. The mountains wear their shoulders. The rivers run their old veins. The great forests root in their slow-rotting hearts. When the Dwarves of Birn Uluhm dug their first hall, they did not build it *near* a Titan; they built it *inside* one — in the ribcage of a thing dead before the first Elf drew breath, whose heart still keeps a rhythm the Weave has not yet let go of. To call the Titans the world's *makers* is the vanity of small things standing on a giant's grave, mistaking the corpse for a cathedral. But the world is made *of* them. Every living thing that walks it is, in some buried sense, walking on the bodies of gods.

### The Hollow Ones

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Then came the **Vraxxal**.

They were not born of the dark between the stars, though the dark is where they ended. Once, they were a living civilization of staggering artistry and ambition — and they asked a question no one should ask. They wanted to *never be unmade*. Never cut, never frayed, never returned to the pattern that lends all things their shape and then, inevitably, takes them back. They wanted permanence.

And they achieved it. That is the horror of them. They *succeeded* — and in succeeding, they cut their own thread from the Weave entirely. Now they persist *outside* the pattern, deathless and dead at once, and their stolen permanence is not free. To keep their hollow machinery running, they unwind the living: they pull the warm thread out of a breathing thing and spool it into themselves. They do not hate you. You are simply still *attached* to the loom, still woven into the warm world — and they need what that attachment is worth.

When the Vraxxal came into the world, they came as a sickness. Some Titans they *corrupted* — turning the slow gods to rot from the inside, bending their absorbed bodies into wrongness. Others they simply *killed*, draining the vast sleepers for the thread still humming in them. The races that came later have no word for what that was like. They only know the slang their grandmothers used: **the Hollow Ones**. They named them for the one thing a living creature can feel about them without understanding it — that there is *nothing inside*. No warmth. No thread. Only the cold appetite of a thing that refused to be part of anything.

## What the World Made to Defend Itself

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The earth did not have a will. But it had *the dead*. As the Vraxxal slaughtered the Titans and spilled their hollowing blood into the soil, the living world took all of it in — the Titan-death, the Vraxxal taint, the grief compressed into geology — and from that terrible compost it began to *spawn*.

This is the part the peoples tell as faith, not fact. They call her the **Earth Mother**, though the scholars who study the Weave wince at the name. There is no goddess; there is the pattern drawing itself tight around so much death that it produced something new — defenders, grown from the bodies of murdered gods to stand against the things that murdered them. **Dwarf, Elf, Halfling, Human**. Four peoples, woven of grief and iron and the last warmth of the Titans, born for a single purpose the world could not voice: *stop the unmaking*.

They did. It cost everything, and it took an alliance none of them would have chosen in easier times — but the four peoples banded together and, against a foe that could not truly die, they did the only thing that could be done. They could not kill the Hollow Ones. So they **entombed** them. Bound them, sealed them, buried them beneath the world they had tried to drain — and for more than four thousand years, the seals have held.

## The Long Peace, and the Slow Forgetting

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Four thousand years is long enough to forget why you were made — long enough that even the Elves, who live the longest of any people, hold only records of it, not memory.

The peoples grew. They spread across the Titan-shaped land — some drawing closer together, some drifting into isolation and strangeness, all of them slowly mistaking *survival* for *history*. The Ancient Alliance became a story told badly. The Vraxxal became a children's tale. And in the quiet, the world filled with new dangers that have nothing to do with old peace.

For not everything the Vraxxal touched was killed or sealed. The Titans they *corrupted* did not all stay buried. Their tainted blood seeped into living things and twisted them — and worse, the corruption does something crueler than mere monstrosity: **it severs a thing from what it truly is**. The orc raiding the borderlands, the lizardman cult in the drowned south, the lich raising its silent armies in some forgotten

vault — these are not simply *evil*. Many of them are *severed* — broken pieces of old Titan-spirit, hollowed of their origin, fighting a war for centuries without the faintest idea that they were once part of the same dying gods that made their enemies. The corruption took their *selves*, not just their shape. They do not know what they are. They only know the hunger the Vraxxal left in the blood.

And so the world is at war with its own forgotten relatives. Some grew evil slowly, of their own choosing — wizards who reached too far, priests who curdled, the proud who experimented with magics best left alone until the magic remade them. Others were simply born into the severing and never had a choice at all. The Blight does not announce which is which.

## The Iron Tithe

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Here, at last, is the law you will live and die by.

The world that took in all that death — the Titans, the Vraxxal, the grief — did not take it for free. **The Weave does not give; it lends.** From every mortal thing it collects in three columns — Mind, Body, and Soul — and the price is not a *tenth*, as a village priest tallies grain, but a *third*. It is paid in iron, because a mortal carries iron in only one vault: the **blood**.

This is why the world bleeds those it collects from. This is why every wound is, in the end, a *collection*. The Church of the Radiant Compact calls the law the **TrineTithe** and dresses it in comfort — a radiant hand, a kind weaver, a reason. The soldiers who actually bleed for it call it by its truer name: the **IronTithe**. Both keep ledgers. Neither has seen the ledger that matters.

When you take up the dice, you take up the debt. Spill blood — theirs or yours — and the world takes its due. It is always counting. A bad enough stroke of fortune, and the world collects *from you*, straight through armor and ward, because the Tithe was never something steel could stop. You are not a hero standing above the world. You are thirty pounds of bone and a few pints of borrowed warmth, walking on the graves of gods, in a world that lent you everything and will, eventually, ask for all of it back.

So make the loan count.

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*No one holds the whole truth. Each people kept only the shard they could see from where they stood — and the Elves, who hold the oldest fragments in Isseth Korrund's sealed archives, know the most and say the least, because what they know flatters no one, themselves included. What you have just read is a shard. A good one. But only a shard.*