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arcane cultures :

Cailleath

Arcane Cultures: Cailleath

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Cailleath

“The Feyveiled City”

I was walking down the street, just like we are right now. It was a pretty sunset, not beautiful, but worth looking at, especially the way the shadows from all the towers played over the crystals set into the cobblestones.

Then I noticed that everyone had started acting odd, bracing themselves against the nearest sturdy thing, or taking out talismans and suchlike. I had scarce started to wonder at it, when there was a jolt, and the ground shook beneath my feet. I fell to my knees, and when I looked up again, the sunset wasn't just pretty – it was glorious. Such a sight as I had never before seen, all painted in crimson and gold and vermilion. And the stars above it – burning beacons of pure silver in a cobalt sky! And the shadows on the ground weren't vague and grey like they had been before, but sharp, and it almost seemed that there was somewhat in them.

I'd not even finished gaping, but all the other people on the street were already about their business once again. Truly, you never forget your first Cailleath shift.

Cailleath is a city like no other. Shifting constantly between the world and Faerie, its inhabitants have aspects of the creatures of both. Nearly every being that lives in Cailleath possesses some form of arcane power, either from inclination or in self-defense. The sudden shifts to Faerie can be hard on those who are not attuned to the flow of arcane energy, and so very few non-magical natives remain in the city for long.

Just how the city came to be this way is a matter of debate. Some claim that it was a city of Faerie pulled into the world by a vortex of arcane energy, while others argue that it was originally a mortal city, transported halfway to Faerie by a spell gone wrong, and stuck forever in limbo because of it.

The residents of Cailleath constantly struggle to keep the city in balance. Some make pacts with creatures of Faerie, drawing the city closer to that plane, while others bind themselves to far-off, even darker powers, trying to keep the city anchored in the world. Many of the rest tirelessly study spells, hoping to one day uncover an enchantment that will lock the city in place, or at very least, give its residents control over the endless shifting.

Cailleath's shifts go through phases, almost like tides. Some years, the city will shift back and forth between planes on an almost daily basis, while at other times, the city will remain in one plane for months. The tides usually change slowly, so that residents have time to prepare for a long sojourn in the world or in Faerie. But every now and again, the tide will switch suddenly, jolting the city from one plane to the other and back again rapidly, or pulling it between planes and then leaving it there.

Most residents have learned to sense when a shift is coming, but the amount of

Cailleath PCs

Characters who grew up in Cailleath have a few unique benefits. They've a bit of a knack for the arcane arts, even if they don't devote their lives to magic. They can eat Faerie food without being bound to the place, but they can also suffer the touch of cold iron with no ill effects.

Whether they are truly mortal or fae is an open question, and of a surety some lean more one way than the other.

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warning varies depending on the tide. A longer shift is easier to sense in advance, whereas a shorter shift might give no more than a few minutes warning before the city is suddenly elsewhere.



Appearance

Because of the magic that saturates Cailleath, many of the residents prefer looks that are not possible elsewhere. Elaborate glamours are woven into even the poorest of garments, and colors found nowhere else in creation adorn the city's foremost citizens.

Hair is usually worn long among both genders, the better to ornament it with crystals, gems, and anything else known to catch both the light and arcane power. Some residents enchant their skin with eternally shifting tattoos, while others change their skin color to whatever is fashionable that season.

Hair and eye color are even more changeable, often enchanted to one thing or another to match the day's outfit. One especially popular spell shifts its object's eye color depending on the time of day, from pale yellow to match the

sunrise, though the piercing blue of the sky at noon, to a dusky grey-blue at twilight. Of course, this requires the elaborate facial paints and powders that both genders wear to shift as well, but this is seldom a problem – most such products are sold with enchantments which cause them to automatically match the wearer's coloring. Natives of Cailleath who attend court functions far from home are often at a loss to prepare their appearance adequately, puzzled by face powders that remain a single color and garments that never change shade.

Accessories are even more elaborate. A popular style of boots makes the wearer appear to have the paws of a wolf or the talons of a hawk, and an increasingly common style of gloves are enchanted to match. Hats can appear to be on fire, or give the wearer horns, a halo, fashionably pointed or rounded ears, or anything else imaginable – often at the same time.

Carrying weapons openly is seen as rude in Cailleath, not to mention foolish – most residents are more dangerous with a wand or a gem. This doesn't stop most people, of course. A dagger can appear to be a belt pouch, a sword to be a fancy cane, a bow and quiver to be folds of a billowing cloak. Generally, the more ornate a person's costume, the more perilous it is to risk their wrath.

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Government

Keeping the peace in a city full of eccentric, powerful arcanists is not an enviable job. That's why it isn't a voluntary one. All citizens of Cailleath must spend one year out of every five as an official peace-keeper. Peace-keepers wear special amulets that identify them as such, and allow them to temporarily suppress all magic in the area. This is usually enough to sort out most disturbances, as magical duels and spells gone awry are the two most common causes of injury in Cailleath. Anything larger requires more than one peace-keeper, and so the amulets also function as a communications network.

Citizens must obey a peace-keeper immediately in matters of safety or face magical imprisonment, and a matter of safety is whatever a peace-keeper declares it to be. This might seem like a system ripe for abuse, but all the peace-keepers know that next year, they will be an ordinary citizen, and the irate wizard whom they are currently accosting might well be the one wearing the amulet when they themselves get into a scrape. Foreigners have no such recourse, and so they are all advised upon entering the city to be very careful of their manners.

Aside from this, there is little formal structure to the city's governance. Schools of magic, temples, and the like all have their own organizational bodies, and the leaders of these cooperate whenever a major decision regarding the city needs to be made. Since every citizen of Cailleath is a member of at least one school, guild, temple, or other such group, everyone has a voice in important decisions.

Sometimes loose coalitions will form between the groups, and alliances are ever-shifting as schools of thought and public opinion sway this way and that. A brilliant magical discovery might propel one academy into the political spotlight, only for it to fall from grace within a few weeks' time as corruption among the staff is revealed.

Each organization has its own individual hierarchy, often based on arcane talents, seniority, or some combination of the two. Members in good standing of the most prestigious institutions are accorded some extra measure of respect by most citizens, but there is no formal distinction in rank.

The Wonders of Cailleath

A city full of powerful arcanists is not going to have mere cobblestone streets and scraggly trees. Artificial, magically-created rivers flow throughout the city, bearing boats of every shape and kind. Fanciful bridges arc above both rivers and streets, connecting walkways inset with gems and crystals.

When is Cailleath?

The city as detailed here is described with a medieval setting in mind, but there's no particular reason that has to be so. Cailleath could fit just fine in an urban fantasy setting, in steampunk, or even in science fiction.

Modern civilizations are less forgiving of cities that periodically vanish off the map. So what happens in the world when Cailleath is in Faerie?

Perhaps another city takes its place. Perhaps the buildings remain, but are empty of inhabitants. Or perhaps whenever it vanishes it is forgotten entirely until it returns again – whether that be in a few minutes or a few decades.

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Verdant gardens with plants from all across the planes flourish next to spaces of arid desert and parks that are eternally snowbound. Some areas of the city are magically protected from extreme weather, while other areas are spelled to attract just that.

Teleportation circles dot the city, connecting the most popular schools, temples and markets. Gondolas offer yet another transportation option, kept aloft as much by magic as by the silken cables strung between the city's many towers.

Having this much enchantment in one place means that new castings must be carefully regulated, and so the practice of magic is limited to private residences, schools, guilds, and dueling arenas. These arenas are wonders themselves, with arcane safeguards and magical terrain.

Spirituality and Rituals

Spirituality in Cailleath is a divided thing. Some residents are deeply religious, regularly visiting the city's ornate temples to leave offerings to gods and goddesses of magic, travel, luck and learning, while other residents eschew religion entirely.

Many opulent temples surround the center of the city, and few of them are ever empty. Those who pray in such places often see it as a natural extension of their studies: trying to stabilize their city in any way they can. And of course there are always the legends – some based in truth, some not – that the power of pure faith can turn aside even the grandest of fae.

There are also those who believe that the gods have turned their face from Cailleath, and there is no help to be found in that quarter. Others argue that such a city can not or should not merit divine attention, or that the city's problems must be solved by mortals alone.

For all the city's abundance of magical rituals, there are very few personal rites. The natives of Cailleath will leap at any chance to throw lavish parties, and so births, birthdays, marriages, and even funerals are celebrated in extravagant style. Nevertheless, there is no tradition, no deeper meaning, behind such festivities. Sometimes fads will sweep the city, where one is expected to hold an especially sumptuous gala for one's fifteen birthday, or twentieth, or every birthday that is a multiple of three or seven or nine. Likewise, it is sometimes lucky for weddings to be held on the full moon, or the new moon, or during a thunderstorm – resulting in somewhat absurd scheduling problems for those who lack the magic to summon such weather themselves.

The Infernal Cabal

There are many reasons for a person to make a pact with the underworld, and the people of Cailleath have even more reasons than most. But while some forge their infernal bargains to gain the power they need to keep the city from drifting too far into Faerie, others have a more sinister goal.

The Infernal Cabal is a group of arcanists within Cailleath who seek to use their powers to pull the city into Hell. They believe that Cailleath's shifting nature can be altered to send it to the realm of their choosing, and that the most profitable such realm is the one where their masters dwell.

How close they are to achieving their goal is anyone's guess. While the existence of the cabal is something of an open secret, the specifics of its membership and activities are kept closely guarded. As for just what will happen if the city does enter the abyss – that, not even the cabal's leaders can agree on.

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Funerals are often similarly held up, as relatives wait for the shift that will bring Cailleath into the plane on which the deceased wished to be laid to rest. Some believe that this can make a difference in the soul's journey onwards, while others dismiss such ideas as preposterous superstition.

Example Adventurers

Carrigan, a feybound wanderer, always felt more at home in Faerie than in the world. Her tempestuous nature fit better in a place of brilliant lights and sinister shadows. Then one of her many magical duels went dangerously awry, and she found herself facing down half a dozen angry peace-keepers. Unwilling to submit to a term of imprisonment that she found unreasonable, in a fit of stubbornness she agreed to accept an equal term of exile instead. Banished from her beloved city at a time when it was aligned with the mortal plane, she was thrust into the world she hates with no more than a few minutes to pack. She's come to accept the world more and more in her travels, but her dreams are still filled with mirages of Faerie. Now she roams far and wide seeking people and places of arcane intensity, hoping to recapture the feeling of being at home in Cailleath, if only for a few moments.



Dolan, an adept, was never content spending days buried in his books. He'd rather sit in a tree than a library, even if he did bring a few dusty tomes along for the climb. After one too many falls into a river while carrying a priceless scroll, his teachers banned him from leaving the premises with anything valuable. Frustrated at having to choose between his studies and his ramblings, Dolan decided to combine the two, embarking on a journey to broaden his magical horizons as well as his physical ones. He hopes to return to Cailleath one day to take his place as a scholar, with waterproofed scrolls of his own, but until then he is content to travel wherever his whims take him.

Eithne, a wizard, has spent all her life searching for an answer to Cailleath's ceaseless shifting. After decades of research, she's become convinced that the answer will not be found within the city's walls. She's not entirely certain that an answer exists anywhere. But, like a true scholar, she refuses to leave any avenue unexplored. Rather than give up the fruitless quest and retire to her tower to perfect fire spells – her true passion – she is determined to make one last effort to uncover the secret to her city's curse. If this journey fails, then she will be able to settle down once and for all, her conscience clear. So for now she's left her tower behind, wandering the world to find any scrap of knowledge missing from Cailleath's vast libraries.

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Fionnan, a warlock, never felt quite right in Cailleath. At a young age he bound himself to powers that he hoped would take him away from the odd city, but no such luck. Life continued much as it had, save that he had new powers, and was ever alert to the whisperings of the Infernal Cabal. At long last, he gave up on being whisked away from the city by fate or magic, and decided to take matters into his own hands. He set out with little more than a few supplies, and an ardent belief that other places must be different, better. He's not yet sure what to make of what he's seen of the world so far, but he has decided that he won't survive to see much more of it without companions who know its ways.

Leanne, a bard, grew up with no magical talent and no desire to have any. All she ever wanted was to play – it didn't matter what instrument, so long as it made music. She joined a band of traveling musicians, learning their ways and their songs. One member of the group let her borrow his lyre, and something strange happened when she touched its strings. Her notes were infused with power, a power she recognized from her childhood. She wants to return to Cailleath, and find out what its scholars know about this strange form of spellcasting, but many savage lands lie between her and the fabled city, and she knows she will not reach its walls alone.

Cailleath Magic

While Cailleath is an incomparable city that leaves an indelible imprint on the character of its inhabitants, this is not always enough of a reason to include it in the setting for a roleplaying game. Consider letting characters from Cailleath swap out some of their class features, abilities, talents, edges, knacks, or whatever your system uses for things that are uniquely Cailleath.

Spells to beguile and charm are an obvious choice for a city that spends half its time in Faerie. Those from Cailleath are adept not only at casting such enchantments, but at detecting their use on others, and resisting them themselves.

This talent also lends itself to seeing through glammers, and illusions of all types. While natives of Cailleath are fond of casting illusions as a matter of fashion, dispelling them is more often a matter of self-defense. Even non-arcanists have tricks for seeing through glammers, or at least knowing when they are present.

Teleportation is also a natural knack for those whose home shifts from place to place. Again, resisting such spells is at least as important as casting them. Indeed, it is the search for an enchantment to eternally resist teleportation that fuels much of Cailleath's magical research.

Magical Gemstones

Myth and folklore are full of the magical properties of gemstones, and arcanists from Cailleath often use gems in their spells. Here are some that match up with common categories of magic.

Binding: Onyx, obsidian, lapis lazuli

Creation: Citrine, hematite, topaz

Divination: Jade, jasper, fire opal

Exploration: Carnelian, diamond, tourmaline

Healing: Alexandrite, sapphire, quartz

Illusion: Garnet, tigerseye, black opal

Protection: Agate, amethyst, malachite

Scrying: Emerald, moonstone, opal

Travel: Ruby, rose quartz, turquoise

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About the Author

Hannah Lipsky has been writing since she first picked up a pencil, and gaming since the summer before high school. Her first character was a 1st edition D&D mage who didn't know magic missile. She's come a long way since then, and wreaked havoc across multiple systems.

She got her start writing and editing for the Roleplaying Tips e-zine, and has a few scribblings in Goodman Games' Book of Rituals. She's always dreamed about making a living doing what she loves, and while she isn't going to retire on the money from these books any time soon, it does help pay for dice.

Currently she's working as a software developer in the Bay Area, alternating between games of Mage: the Ascension, Seventh Sea, tri-stat dX and D&D 4e.

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