

KARA'S VALE

Kara's Vale is a small area in the south-central part of the great island of Ethra, in the middle of the vast Arching Sea in southwestern Dorient. It lies within Nibirum's southern tropics, at a latitude of about 23 degrees South. An outlying southern arm of the huge Ashen Forest jungle lies across it, although most of that Forest lies to the north and northwest of the Vale, beyond the major river of Harmony Brook, part of whose southern banks lie along the northern edge of this map.

Rather than a simple river valley, Kara's Vale is a minor geological rift valley, a place where underlying tensions in the rocks have pulled them apart somewhat, allowing the land between to drop relative to the areas on either side. The Vale itself is defined by two long, curving lines of cliffs, Quarry Cliffs to the west, and Worm Cliffs to the east, which form loosely semi-circular regions of raised land on the respective map edges here. Both cliff-lines continue for some distance beyond this map's borders, gradually descending in height. They are at their highest in the mapped part of the Vale here, ranging from roughly 100 to 130 feet at most in places (30 to 40 metres) between Clay Crossing and Dancing Blade Fountain in the south, north to approximately Windy Tower and the village of Ascension. The streams running off the higher lands form pleasingly impressive waterfalls where they cross the cliff-lines.

The eastern uplands have several settlements and similar features, and are considered loosely still part of the Vale by the folk hereabouts, as being relatively civilised and "safe". The western upland though enjoys the euphemistic name of the Quiet Land, precisely because it is a far wilder and more dangerous place to traverse, with denser, unpeopled jungle that extends far to the west from here, towards the vast volcanic barrens surrounding Ever Reaching Mountain nearly 60 miles (100 kilometres) to the northwest of the western map edge.

As for the Vale, it has long been seen as an area of independent folks, and a hidden region, beyond the concerns of the various provinces that make up the nominal kingdom of Ethra (at least as the Vale-dwellers view matters). Over the centuries, it has attracted many strange and unusual folk and creatures, who come here to be safe from societal prejudices and pressures in their homelands, a place where few ask questions of newcomers so long as they pose no threat to others of the Vale.

Descriptions of labelled places on the map follow. Many of the ideas involved were generated directly or indirectly by drawing and interpreting cards from various prompt decks produced by The Story Engine, including their "Deck of Worlds" and "Loremaster's Deck" main sets, the "Worlds of Myth & Magic", "Loremastery" and "World & Lore Bridge" expansion sets.

LABELLED FEATURES

Ascension: At the foot of Worm Cliffs, in the angle between the eastern river out of Healing Lake on the upland plateau and Blue Stream, not far from where the Stream flows into the swamps of the Bog of Caves, is this jungle-concealed village, lying within an oval ring of standing stones that once formed an ancient druidic site. A few here can still invoke something of the stones' power, enabling the village to become completely hidden and unfindable, should the need arise. The village folk greatly value creativity, and welcome those bringing new ideas and abilities that promote this. Currently, there is an urgent need to find a fresh assistant to learn the vast store of lore and tales preserved by Amlach, the last keeper of an ancient storytelling tradition, who is now dying. He is an aquiline, scholarly figure, with a magical prosthetic left hand, who also possesses a lodge in the village that would be bequeathed to his successor, could one be found in time. One trail from here passes east in a largely natural gully in Worm Cliffs by the river to and around Healing Lake and on to Crooked Town, while another heads south over Blue Stream, past Elven Gate and the Obelisk of Dragons, to the Pond at the Crossroads, and beyond.

Blue Stream: One of the main rivers flowing through the Vale, this lies on its eastern edge, rising in the higher land above Worm Cliffs, off-map northeast from the Spire of Chimes, passing beneath Glittering Bridge, then descending the Cliffs near Dancing Blade Fountain and continuing north to Ascension, before losing itself in the Bog of Caves. Whether its name still applies to the river flowing north from the Bog to Harmony Brook past Vine Outpost, or whether that honour belongs to Iron River instead (which also flows into the south end of the Bog) is something that rarely troubles the Vale-folk. It is said that in ages past Blue Stream was once thoroughly weed-choked throughout its length, and little more than a lengthy extension of the Bog towards the foot of Worm Cliffs. At some point though, it gained its current blue-mineralised stream-bed, and its weed-choked nature cleared. Some believe this was a result of the mining activity at the Spire of Chimes, as the mineralisation does not seem to extend far upstream of that area, so far as anyone has claimed. The river is notable for the water-vole-like creatures called Spring Mice that live in its banksides, creating extensive city-like colonies in places. Meanwhile, somewhere up on the plateau northwest of Golden (where the "Blue Stream" label is there), rumours say a recent earthquake has uncovered a long-lost tomb.

The Bog of Caves: An extensive area of low, rounded hills, surrounded by often deadly marshes, in the north-central part of the lowland Vale jungles. Frequent mists cling to the valleys and lower hillsides, making the watery surface even harder to safely negotiate, and there are indeed numerous, commonly quite small, Caves set into the hills. Blue Stream and Rogue Brook both run into the Bog's southern end, although just one stream flows out northwards towards Harmony Brook. The state of the ground shows the Bog was once much more extensive, having shrunk since. The low hill markers indicate much of its former extent, which once ran from the Stone That Laughs north to Vine Outpost, and west as far as the Monument of Gems.

The Castle That Watches: A large, apparently unoccupied, old Castle on a cliff-ringed hill by the northeastern bank of the River Rush, barely a mile and a half (2.5 km) from the settlement of Unseen to the northeast, this place has a very bad reputation in the vicinity. It is made from an unknown, stone-like material, of translucent black or very dark grey colouring, shot through with scarlet flecks resembling drops of blood. The Castle is linked in folktales hereabouts with tales of death and the afterlife, and while nobody is known to own or inhabit it, mysterious singing has been heard coming from it sometimes at night. Despite the trail from Unseen running right past it, and then down a handy declivity in the Worm Cliffs to the lower Vale, which links with the valley settlements across the south and east of the Vale, many locals from Unseen prefer the far longer route north to Ascension to reach the lowland Vale, just to avoid passing the Castle. The trail nearby has become largely unused and overgrown in parts as a result.

The Cave of Despair: In the lower cliff-line that lies closer to Harmony Brook than Worm Cliffs in the map's northeast corner, under a mile east of Singing Cliff (around 1.3 km), is the opening to this cavern. The cliffs here are around 30 ft in height (9 m), typical for much of the cliff-line, although they are higher in places, rising towards Singing Cliff from here, for instance. The Cave contains the fossil remains of an extinct species of dragon, the Wood Drake, partly or wholly buried in an unusual type of soil, quite different to any found elsewhere in the vicinity.

Clay Crossing: The trail west from Prayer Village passes over the Rogue Brook here, in the map's southwest corner, continuing off-map over the southern Quiet Land plateau. A tributary stream runs in a small valley down Quarry Cliffs to join the Brook just above the Crossing itself. This small valley was created by a huge lightning strike in the past, which freed many of the rocks used for the Crossing as well. It is not clear if they simply tumbled down to form the shallows of the Crossing, or were deliberately moved into position somehow. Many seem too large to have been easily moved by physical means, certainly. The area is surrounded by jungle trees, which seem to grow in greater numbers here than elsewhere nearby.

Crooked Town: Located at the foot of the low secondary cliff-line north of Worm Cliffs in the northeastern map corner, this is the largest northerly Vale settlement, right on the northeastern edge of what most folks here consider the lowland Vale. It is noted throughout the region for its pastries, and equally for providing a safe have during and after an historically-disastrous storm that swept through the Vale area generations ago. Prospecting among the cliff caves nearby has recently uncovered deposits of Wandering Metal, a type of magical material found in meteoritic stones, which stones must have fallen from the skies aeons ago, so the sages reckon. The Worm River flows north from Healing Lake above Worm Cliffs, dropping down them in a spectacular waterfall, while the trail by the River detours from the watercourse there to find a more suitable, if still steep, route safely down the Cliffs, a trail that leads to Ascension and Unseen beyond the Lake. The cliff-line near the settlement is much lower, at around 30 ft or so (9 m), so the trail down those is less of a challenge, in a partly natural, partly cut, hollow. The Rainbow Monastery lies a few miles further north, where the Worm River flows into Harmony Brook. Farmed fields are above and below this lower cliff-line, where the jungle has been cleared to make way for them, around the trail.

Dancing Blade Fountain: A little southwest of where Blue Stream descends Worm Cliffs near the map's southeast corner, in the angle where the Stream meets another flowing north from off-map, this is a highly magical water-fountain, in whose waters are frequently seen flashing bladed weapons of all kinds. How much of this is real is highly uncertain, as it is a site of great magical power, and the entire Fountain is wrought from unending illusion. It seems the site's power may be spreading, as some have recently claimed the land nearby has started to come alive, speaking in cryptically-prophetic remarks.

Elven Gate: In the jungle alongside the trail between the Pond at the Crossroads and Ascension, north of the Obelisk of Dragons, is this large, ornate, very ancient gateway. While weather-worn, the square-topped archway is still complete, made from a pale stone, carved with relief foliate designs that are of a distinctly Elven character. A single, closed, great, green stone gate fills the archway still, and proves unopenable. It too is carved in relief with similar foliate designs to the archway. While local tales hold that this is the final trace of a long-lost Elven kingdom, others seem to contradict this, by suggesting the Gate appeared overnight at some less-distant time. The area nearby is home to Spectral Foxes, skittish, small-dog-sized creatures with fuzzy pelts and back-ridge spines, that feed on undead spirits. Quite why they linger near the Gate is unclear.

Glass Plain: The floodplain on the south bank of Harmony Brook in the northwestern map corner features this large, open area of exposed rock, which shows clear evidence of having been glaciated in the past, with distinctive striations carved into the rock surfaces, showing where smaller rocks and boulders were once dragged in contact with it by the moving ice. There are other carvings as well, suggestive of a more figurative kind in a few places, either of now very worn pictographs or some kind of runic writing, albeit these seem to be of an identical age to the ice-carved markings.

Glittering Bridge: On the eastern plateau, south of the Spire of Chimes, this is the crossing-point for the trail between the settlements of Golden and Unseen over the Blue Stream. The crossing-place has been shaped by past floods, probably during the time in ages past when Blue Stream was perpetually weed-choked and boggy. The area nearby sees an annual profusion of blooms on the Briar-Eater, a plant that apparently thrives in this spot. Its numbers though have been dwindling in more recent times, judging by the tales of regular travellers through the area.

God-Touched Tree: Also known as The Shepherd of the Vale, it was once covered in skeins of hanging moss that long-ago vanished from it, when it was still considered to mark the northwestern border of the inhabited Vale. In effect though, and somewhat loosely, it still does, as all the inhabited Vale settlements lie in a line to the southeast of one running southwest-northeast through it. There is said to be a long-lost, possibly mythical, ancient burial site somewhere in its vicinity. The Tree is near the west bank of Iron River. While there are jungle patches all around it, the Tree is quite unmistakably huge, beautifully-formed and obvious to anyone passing through. Quivering Temple is barely a mile (1.5 km) to the southwest from here.

Golden: A village-sized settlement in the map's southeastern corner, atop the Worm Cliffs plateau. A trail runs through it from off-map northwards to Glittering Bridge, along with an east-west-flowing river, also called simply, if confusingly, "Golden". The houses are very rustic in appearance, commonly made from woven, sometimes still-living, branches and trees, all quite small by Human norms, as the place is inhabited almost exclusively by Tranquil Bears, intelligent, small, striped-fur, bipedal, bear-like, mischievous creatures, with long limbs for their size, and long facial whiskers. Nearby, a fresh commune of larger humanoid artists has recently set-up without permission, and which has been subject to repeated problems and pranks from the Tranquil Bears as a result.

Healing Lake: A large body of freshwater close to the northwestern corner of the plateau above Worm Cliffs. Curiously, no streams flow into it, but two run out, one to the east towards Ascension, the other north towards Crooked Town. The trail between these two settlements follows the southern and eastern shores of the Lake. The Lake's size seems to be gradually increasing, presumably from a subterranean source. The jungle surrounding it is well-known for its fragrant, fleetingly-seasonal blossoms, which cover large tracts of the Lake's surface when they fall, turning it pale pink.

Iron River: This River runs from off-map from the south, then passes-by Prayer Village, Wandering Tavern and the God-Touched Tree to its confluence with Rogue Brook, continuing on as Iron Stream into the southern end of the Bog of Caves, where its course is lost. No one hereabouts seems to know, or care, whether the stream that resumes out of the northern end of the Bog and flows on into Harmony Brook should be called Iron River, Blue Stream (after the other river that reaches the Bog's southern part) or something else entirely. Along much of the stretch between Wandering Tavern and God-Touched Tree, the River's banks rise, becoming almost tunnel-like, especially with the jungle arching overhead across it.

Jade Garden: The trail northwest from the Pond at the Crossroads has largely open ground along its northeast side, and mostly jungle to its southwest. It leads first to Jade Garden, and then on to the Stone That Laughs, continuing on until it peters-out, disused, without reaching the southern extent of the Bog of Caves. Jade Garden itself is a settlement that tends the Garden area, known for its great variety of wild flowers. The Garden is surrounded by a low jade wall, and the old stone buildings here are decorated with jade too. It was originally created as a memorial, although no one now knows quite what it memorialised. Extensive market gardens surround the Garden, helping feed the folks here, with surplus produce regularly transported along the trail to other parts of the Vale. A mysterious secret society, The Sleeping League, is said to be planning a grand ritual gathering in the vicinity shortly.

Monk's Mill: West of Wandering Tavern in the map's southwest, this is a well-maintained, windmill-centred settlement, with the Mill set on a low, jungle-free rise. The whole is surrounded by grain-field farms, as it is a major supplier of flour across the Vale. It began as the centre for a holy order, and is still run by it. Their current leader claims to be the descendant of a legendary local folk-hero, and while well-respected, the truth of this is a matter for debate nearby. The Mill area has become a haven for what many consider mythical creatures over the years, some of which may be encountered from time to time.

The Monument of Gems: On one of the outlying low, domed hills, now beyond the northwestern fringes of the Bog of Caves in the north-central part of the map, stands this small, shrine-like, stone building. The Bog has retreated southeast from here, allowing the jungle to encroach towards it. Old texts refer to the Monument as either containing, or otherwise being associated with, lore regarding an ancient cycle, albeit these are typically vague as to exactly what this means. Anyone investigating the site will discover a key part of the carvings that would explain more has been deliberately removed, apparently not long ago.

The Obelisk of Dragons: A little west of the trail between Ascension and the Pond at the Crossroads, about midway between the Pond and Elven Gate (roughly a mile and a half from either, 2.5 km), is this great, pale-green, stone Obelisk, decorated on the outside with spiralling bas-relief dragon sculptures, and seemingly magically-created, as no one knows who built it, when or why. It has long defied attempts to determine its physical size or height, beyond “unusually large”. There is a double doorway on one side at the base (it never seems to be in the same place twice, however), and it is said a spiral stairway rises to its summit inside. The reality is the Obelisk was shaped by the Fae, who have dwelt here since time immemorial, and only those they allow can pass its doors to find out about its interior. Curious runes have appeared in its vicinity recently, made from local small stones set into the ground, although no one has seen them being made.

The Pond at the Crossroads: What might be an otherwise unremarkable jungle trail crossing, where routes between The Castle That Watches and Jade Garden, Ascension and the Wandering Tavern meet, is significant thanks to its Pond, an important druidic site, marked by several ancient, carved stones. It is an area known too for its rare wildlife, and the druidic festivals that are held here on special occasions.

Prayer Village: Near the central-southern end of the Vale, where routes from the Wandering Tavern and Clay Crossing meet, and a further trail leads south off-map to the road between Blackfall and Claywater far beyond the Vale, is this once-secret settlement, a place where folks from many lands first learnt of the Vale and the sanctuary it offered. The people here are commonly multilingual, and the place is now better-known for its talking birds than its former secrecy. A rare creature, the Rock Glider, long thought to be either mythical or extinct, has recently begun to be seen nearby. Rock Gliders are a type of hairless lemur, sharp-eyed and very perceptive, with specialised skin-covered gliding wings that let them fly considerable distances sometimes. They like to line their nests with shiny objects, commonly coins when they can find them.

Quarry Cliffs: This name is applied to the whole western cliff-line fringing the lowland Vale, despite the fact the rocks here have been much less used for quarrying than Worm Cliffs to the east. Oddly, most of the more obvious quarries lie in the indented arc closest to Windy Tower on the northeastern edge of the cliff-line, where Summer River and its tributary now flow, for all there are no significant settlements nearby there now, and the Tower itself is made of quite different stone to that of the Cliffs. Cliff Wolves are often encountered along this cliff-line, mostly on the upper side in Quiet Land. These many-toothed canines have piercingly attentive eyes, and radiate an aura of fear that affects most living creatures they encounter. Luckily, they rarely stray east of the line of Rogue Brook and Summer River.

Quivering Temple: On the east bank of Rogue Brook, not far southwest of God-Touched Tree, stand the overgrown ruins of this once-famous Temple, best-known as the place where the Quivering Codex was written and illuminated in past times. Long abandoned, the area has become adopted as part of the home range of Serpentine Tigers from Quiet Land, jungle ambush predators that have a very strong, clamping jaw. They are also known disease-carriers.

Rainbow Monastery: Up in the top right corner of the map, on bluffs overlooking the south bank of Harmony Brook, is this famous Monastery, birthplace of the, probably mythical, prophet, Dai-Rhee, now more notable for its high-quality musical instrument makers. Of late, it has become plagued by swarms of Marble Hornets, brightly-coloured, acid-spitting, flying insects, also known as Traitor, Sulphur or Horned Bees. A trail runs south alongside the Worm River from here to Crooked Town.

Rogue Brook: Flowing from off-map in the southwest corner, and following the line of Quarry Cliffs in the map's west to its confluence with Iron River near the map's centre, this river is largely free from nearby jungle, which seems to have allowed many beautiful, tall grasses and reeds to grow up all along its banks. These make good building and writing materials, when properly harvested (the writing materials including both pens and manufactured papers).

Shattered Grove: The solitary notable location atop the Quiet Land plateau in the map's west, is this hidden, though extensive, jungle area where can be found the remains of the extinct Round Duck, a solitary, nocturnal creature with a very long breeding cycle (possibly the source of its extinction), said to have been the size of a dragon. Investigation here may suggest the animal is not yet fully extinct, however. The Grove, or perhaps just

the name, is also featured in some bardic songs as the meeting place of two famed lovers from ancient times. Two rivers, including Summer River, have their sources on the northern and eastern fringes of the Grove.

Singing Cliff: At the northeastern end of the Vale, north of Worm Cliffs, is a second, lower, cliff-line, much closer to the south bank of Harmony Brook. Little along this cliff-line exceeds 30 ft in height (9 m), although several significant places are located on or near it. Singing Cliff is the more westerly of these, and also one of the highest parts, at almost 50 ft (15 m), although this height can be quite variable, because this section of the cliffs is volcanically active, in a fairly minor way, and prone to landslides. The “singing” results from gases and fumes escaping under pressure through small fissures in the rocks, with mists and smokes identifying and plaguing the region around it. Some old texts suggest this behaviour of the Cliff is significant in omen-lore.

The Spire of Chimes: Set on the eastern uplands, in the jungle alongside the upper reaches of Blue Stream, this small area was once shaped by mining activity, for all many of the old, high, rubble and spoil heaps remain, still bare of vegetation. Sliding fragments and small rocks on their steep slopes have inspired the name, with their almost musical clinking and chiming. The Spire is also home to the Sleek Sugar Frog, actually a type of unusually smooth-skinned toad, that communicates by scent rather than calling, and which has a voracious appetite for the many pestilential insects of the jungle. They have a mildly poisonous, stinging bite (as it affects most humanoids), and are kept as pets across the Vale, to help keep the insects at bay.

The Stone That Laughs: The trail northwest from Jade Garden passes by the Stone, petering-out before it reaches the southern limit of the Bog of Caves. It remains a site of occasional nature worship, not solely by druids, for all the local wildlife often behaves in an oddly aggressive manner. The Stone itself is a large, obvious, natural local rock outcrop, but one which has been shaped either by a major collision or an explosion at some past time. Old tales suggest it once marked the southern limit of the Bog of Caves, which now lies more than a mile (about 2 km) to its north.

Summer River: Rising on the eastern side of Shattered Grove on the Quiet Land plateau west of the lowland Vale, this River flows northeast down Quarry Cliffs in a series of cascading falls, then past Windy Tower northwards, eventually joining Harmony Brook just off the map’s northern edge. The river is remarkable for the Shore Lizards that live by its banks, small, well-camouflaged reptiles with delicious flesh, considered a local delicacy, despite the difficulties in reaching the River from the more inhabited sections of the Vale. Persistent rumours by Lizard-hunters suggest somewhere near Glass Plain is a secret tunnel under the River.

Tuppenny Cairn: Close to the southwestern edge of the Vale, in the clearer land mostly free from the jungle there, this Cairn forms a notable landmark, easily visible for miles around. Said to be the last known location for a legendary gemstone, Balor’s Eye, it is equally notable for the jewel-like butterflies that swarm in profusion in its vicinity. However, in recent years, invasive Glistening Dragonflies have started encroaching on the area, threatening the butterflies with extinction.

Unseen: Also known as Cat’s Town or Rushtown, this is a town-sized settlement on the plateau above Worm Cliffs in the east of the map. While surrounded by the jungle, cleared areas for farming lie closer to it, and along the nearby parts of the trails between Golden and Ascension, and southwest to The Castle That Watches. Its name seems to relate to that problematic Castle, and the locals’ desire not to be noticed by it or whatever may dwell there. Its other names come from the large number of cats in the place, and the river by it, the Rush. A memorial tomb in town commemorates a local folk-hero, while a less salubrious scandal persists regarding a prominent, popular, religious leader who turned out to be a fraud.

Vine Outpost: Set on the northernmost of the low, domed hills that were once in the Bog of Caves, before those marshlands retreated southwards to their present extent, this is a fairly substantial shrine-like structure, built in a similar style to that of the Monument of Gems, some miles to the southwest. The Outpost was constructed to house an important relic, the Sovereign Sceptre, an intricately-made rod, covered in magical wards that give it restorative powers, and which was once part of a group of royal regalia from the distant past. The other items have been lost and forgotten since. Like many of these low hills, there is a cave here, accessible only from inside the Outpost, said to hold the gateway to another world. Strange cloud formations have been seen lately, apparently in the Outpost’s vicinity.

Wandering Tavern: Sited at a junction in a jungle clearing by the Iron River in the map’s southwest, where routes from Monk’s Mill, Prayer Village and the Pond at the Crossroads meet, this is a small settlement around the eponymous, substantial, wayside Tavern, with farmed fields and fruiting trees nearby. The Tavern seems firmly-fixed, despite its name, but it was once the portal to another world (or possibly more than one, and it is conceivable it still could be), which may explain its title. It is now rather more famed in the Vale for its cider, which is made in the settlement close-by.

Windy Tower: Sited near the east bank of Summer River in the map's northwest, northeast of the line of Quarry Cliffs, and surrounded by jungle, is this fabulously ancient Tower, said to be a Wonder of the Ancient World. Notable for its unusual red stone, the Tower is detailed by a separate Atlas map.

Worm Cliffs: While parts of both long cliff-lines that edge the Vale have been, and sometimes still are, quarried for building stone, Worm Cliffs have been used more extensively than Quarry Cliffs on the western side, despite their names. Whether their "Worm" epithet has some meaning beyond suggesting the Cliffs on the east side look more worm-eaten because of this patchy quarrying, nobody seems to know. These Cliffs are though the favoured haunt of the regional wildcats, the Vale Cats. These often playful felines have wild manes, making them look somewhat like miniature lions, with long snouts.