

Language & Linguistics

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1. Penumbran Language — Three-Layer Architecture

Penumbran language is a **hybrid**: it has both a spoken/vocal dimension and a resonant/acoustic dimension, and these do different communicative work.

Layer	Register	Survival	Notes
Spoken	Intimate, immediate, situational — face-to-face communication	Almost entirely lost . No direct physical record; reconstructable only indirectly (acoustic residue, depictions, structural inference about probable phonemes)	The layer closest in structure to human language, and the layer that Wren can never fully recover. She may be able to prove spoken Penumbran <i>had</i> certain phonemic properties without ever knowing what was actually said in any given utterance. Real, permanent, scholarly loss.
Resonant / Architectural	Formal, ritual, possibly legal/binding — built into the Installations themselves	Preserved — physically intact, baked into surviving structures	Governed by <i>relational grammar</i> (Section 2) — fully consistent and internally rigorous, but requires a non-human relational framework to parse. The wall here is not missing data; it's a missing cognitive/perceptual organ. The installation's geometry and acoustics are not separate from its grammar — they ARE the syntax.
Written (Latensite)	A deliberate, personal, portable act of inscription — message to a specific other person or across time	Modest surviving corpus (Section 3)	Likely uses different script/notation logic than the resonant layer — this asymmetry is intentional. Gives Wren their cruellest research problem: written and architectural corpora appear related (shared root-glyphs, evolutionary connection), but the written sample is too small ever to crack the architectural layer via cross-reference. Grounded in real-world decipherment failure (insufficient parallel corpus), not movie-logic, "almost cracked it."

The asymmetry as deliberate horror beat

The most *formal* register (resonant/architectural) survived perfectly intact. The most *intimate* register (spoken) is gone completely. This inverts the usual archaeological pattern and is specifically devastating for an archivist: the Penumbrans' most preserved record is their most impersonal one. There is no recovered record of how they actually spoke to one another.

2. Relational Grammar — The Core Conceit (resonant/architectural layer)

Status: conceptual foundation agreed, not yet built out into actual grammar rules.

Key design decision: Latensite, the script, and the grammar should constitute a **genuinely complete, internally consistent conlang** — necessary for series-length consistency, and to reward readers who go looking for depth — while the **in-world barrier Wren hits is structural, not a data problem**.

The mechanism: Penumbran meaning in the resonant/architectural layer is not fixed to words but fixed to **relationship**. The same glyph-string can carry different meaning depending on (non-exhaustive, to be formalized):

- Who is reading/speaking it — their relationship to the subject matter, not merely their identity
- What it is physically adjacent to or oriented toward — architecture is not separate from grammar; the Installation is part of the sentence
- Possibly: a form of "tense" that is not past/present/future but something like proximity-to-the-Convergence-event — a category with no human equivalent and no possible substitution-based workaround

This means **lexicon and morphology can be fully documented** by Wren (and fully designed by the author) as a real, rigorous system. The **syntax-via-relationship** layer is what resists human parsing — not because the key is lost, but because the lock does not take a key. It takes a relationship to the door, and humans do not have the right kind of hands.

Series-length flexibility this creates

Later books could reveal that certain non-human configurations — Aetheris/the Hum itself, or a transformed human post-Act Three — can read Penumbran fluently, not because they cracked the cipher, but because they possess the relational capacity humans lack. This stays fully consistent with "the wall is permanent for Wren specifically, in this book" while leaving the door open for series-level payoff.

3. Latensite — The Light-Fixed Writing Material

Concept

Text is not inscribed on the surface of Latensite — it exists as a structural property *within* the material's internal lattice, comparable to how real minerals like opal or labradorite produce structural colour rather than surface pigment. The text is invisible under ordinary conditions and becomes legible only when specific conditions are met.

This material occupies the **written layer** of the architecture in Section 1, filling the gap between spoken language (almost entirely lost) and the resonant/architectural record (preserved but unparseable):

- More durable than spoken language
- More fragile and rarer than the resonant/architectural record
- Represents a deliberate, personal act of inscription — something written by one Penumbran for another to read, possibly across time — distinct from both architecture-as-record and speech-as-ephemeral-utterance

Corpus size

Modest — dozens of confirmed pieces exist across known Installations and private collections, not a handful and not a flood. Rare enough that each piece is precious; common enough that Wren can have built real expertise and a real career around them before the book begins.

Three Behavioural Tiers

Tier 1 — Common pieces. Triggered by mundane physical conditions: angle, polarisation, and simple light exposure. Repeatable and nondestructive — once the triggering angle/condition is known, the text can be re-revealed indefinitely. These make up the bulk of the modest corpus and

are the kind of find a careful conservator stumbles into by accident, rotating a specimen under a lamp. Wren herself may have personally identified the triggering mechanism for several of these — meaning her expertise is real and earned before the book introduces the tiers that defeat skill entirely.

Tier 2 — Rare pieces. Require more specific or extreme conditions (UV exposure, thermal cycling, etc.) to reveal text. Reveal is **costly or degrading** — repeated exposure causes the internal lattice to relax, and the text fades for good after a finite number of readings (exact number varies by piece/material quality — not a fixed rule). This tier is the natural home for institutional scarcity politics: who gets to "spend" a reading on a precious, finite-use artifact, and who decides. Strong potential source of friction between Wren and Tabularium/Council authority.

Tier 3 — Hum-tied pieces. The rarest and most dangerous tier. Legible only under light or conditions adjacent to Aetheris/the Hum itself. Reading one requires exposing the artifact — and the reader — to Hum-adjacent conditions. Strong implication that the Penumbrans deliberately encoded their most dangerous or most sacred material this way, so that only conditions resembling the Convergence/Aetheris event itself could unlock it — meaning some content was never meant for casual readers, Penumbran or human. Consistent with the established ambiguity that the Penumbrans' transformation may have been deliberately pursued via their own installations.

Recommended pacing: Tier 3 pieces should be rare and **late** — Wren likely shouldn't encounter a confirmed Hum-tied piece until well into Act Two, so her exposure escalates rather than being available from the start. This also sets up a possible engine for her arc: her growing proximity to danger could become diegetically tied to her growing ability to read the Penumbran record, rather than her research progress happening on a separate, safe track from her personal horror arc. (Flagged as a major structural choice, not yet committed — revisit when Act Two gets its chapter-level breakdown.)

4. Naming Reference

Sempiterni consistently uses **dual naming** across major unknowns in the world: a formal/scholarly register (cold, taxonomic, used in Council and institutional contexts) paired with a vernacular register (worn smooth by use, born of lived experience rather than classification). This pattern now spans three separate concepts, which makes it a structural feature of the world rather than a one-off device — readers who notice it should read it as intentional.

Concept	Formal / Scholarly	Vernacular	Notes
The dead native civilisation	Penumbrans	The First-Walked (Wayfarer oral tradition)	"The First-Walked" deliberately echoes "being walked" (Obsidian Branch public detention) — implies the Wayfarer cosmology frames the Penumbrans' fate as the <i>original instance</i> of something Arbour still does to its own people. Not necessarily a connection any character consciously draws.

Concept	Formal / Scholarly	Vernacular	Notes
Their sites/structures	Installation (category term)	—	No vernacular counterpart yet identified — "Installation" functions as the universal term across all communities (Arbour, Wayfarer, Badlands). Specific subtypes are identified once a site's purpose is understood: reliquary (memorial/ritual sites), observatory, habitation site, wellspring (energy generation/storage — see Penumbrans, Section 3), and others as needed. Not every installation is a reliquary; every reliquary is an installation.
The antagonist entity	Aetheris	The Hum (Sprawl)	Aetheris is what the Council writes in a report after the fact — classification from a safe distance. The Hum is what the Sprawl says because they felt it before anyone official arrived to name it. The gap between the two terms mirrors the book's Council/Twelve political duality.
Light-fixed Penumbra n writing material	Latensite	— <i>open, parked</i>	See Section 3. Vernacular counterpart deliberately left unresolved rather than forced; revisit later.

Naming notes for continuity

- Vernacular terms in this world tend to be **short, plain, and worn down by repetition** — compare "the shed" (load-shedding), "being walked," "the Gloaming." Multi-word compounds (e.g. "Pocket-glass," "Stillglass") have been tried and rejected for the Latensite counterpart specifically — whatever fills that gap should likely be one word, ideally one syllable, in keeping with "the Hum."
- Formal terms favor real-language roots, slightly defamiliarised (Aetheris ← aether; Penumbrans ← penumbra; Latensite ← latent + mineralogical "-ite" suffix), rather than invented-from-nothing fantasy coinage.

5. The Penumbrans — Cosmological Framing

Cross-reference: this section also informs World & Lore → The Convergence & Cosmology; at minimum, it should link back here rather than duplicate it.

The Wayfarers' oral tradition (Sage Yahari's "Unknowable God" stories) already frames Aetheris theologically. **The First-Walked** sits inside that same cosmology rather than as an unrelated legend: the Penumbrans are understood, in Wayfarer tradition, as the people who first encountered the Unknowable God, and the installations are the wreckage of that meeting.

This gives the Wayfarers one continuous mythology rather than two disconnected legends, and lets the book's central ambiguity (ascension vs. erasure) live *inside* the religion as an unresolved theological argument. Different Wayfarer elders can disagree — in dialogue, not narration — about whether the Penumbrans were saved or devoured. The ambiguity should never be fully resolved, for the reader or for any character, including Cassan.

6. Open Items / Next Steps

- [] Vernacular counterpart for **Latensite** — parked, revisit later
- [] Full phonology design for the **spoken layer** (what phonemes are inferred to have existed, and by what method Wren infers them)
- [] Script/notation design for the **resonant/architectural layer** — visual logic, how it reads as "notation" rather than alphabet
- [] Script/notation design for the **written/Latensite layer** — confirm it is visually/structurally distinct from the architectural script, with only partial, ambiguous points of connection
- [] Formal grammar rules for **relational grammar** — define the actual categories (relationship-to-speaker, relationship-to-place, proximity-to-Convergence "tense," others TBD)
- [] Decide and document how much of this Wren can prove vs. merely infer, scene by scene, for Act One through Three pacing purposes
- [] Human sociolects layer (Sprawl / Council / Wayfarer speech patterns) — not yet started, separate work item from Penumbran language proper