

The Land and Its Creatures

The land is massive and rugged, a place of extremes. Forests older than some gods tower over wide rivers that cut through the land like knives, fed by mountain snowmelt and lakes as large as small seas. Where the plains haven't been turned to rich farmland by the First Peoples or the invaders, the bone-white grass stretches on beyond sight obscured only by the lumbering herds of plains beasts or the great shadow of a hunting wyvern.

Even near the mound-cities or adobe cliff-towns of the First Peoples and the frontier towns of the invaders, the countryside is only lightly touched by human hands. Wolves and bears are common sights, and in many places to the west deer and their ilk do not flee at the sight of man. Where the colonizers have walked, wildlife is more wary and sparse, but there is still enough meat on the hoof to feed anyone with a bow or a gun, and enough birds to black out the sun when they gather.

So too, for the monsters who lurk in the dark beyond the wards of the First People's conjurers and the torchlight of invader's towns. Ghuls, shapeshifting beasts with the voices of men and the heads of jackals haunt graveyards and forsaken buildings, hungering for living meat. Wyverns soar over the great plains like great vultures, riding the thermals before dropping like a stone from the sky to carry away their prey. These creatures are men and beasts warped by the transgression of ancient taboos, or born under a bad sign which cursed them to monstrosity, and who pass on their curse to their offspring. Worse still, are those monsters who were never mortal men or beasts. The woe-weavers, spiders the size of horses who infest the great forests, and who drink happiness from their prey. The night ghastrs who fly amongst the crypts and caves of the sea coasts, calling hauntingly into the night for something that dwells beneath the sea. The skin-takers, who flay the sleeping and wear their forms to walk the streets among us.

Primary amongst the reasons why the first peoples and the agents of the powers across the sea are not at open war with one another is the presence of such fiends. No matter the status of their relationship, or past sins it is understood by most that humanity must stand unified against the creatures of the dark.

Monsters

Before the first humans mastered fire, inhuman horrors claimed the world as their own. Some of these beings, such as the Serpent Folk built monstrous empires of incalculable power and cruelty, whose ruins lie covered in the dust of ages. Others, such as wyverns and cliff ghastrs were no more enlightened than cunning beasts, but for their strange half-magics and bizarre hungers: wyverns do not prey on flesh, but on their prey's fear.

Cliff ghaists, kin to the ghul of barren deserts consume the memories of the dead. In time the stars turned against these creatures and their bloodlines began to falter. Now the remnants of monsterkind cling to life in places where people fear to tread: ancient ruins, the deepest woods, and the shadows of the most wretched slums preying on the weak, the foolhardy, and the curious.

Being possessed strange appetites and terrible power, even monsters capable of speech and thought do not see the world as people do. A giant hawk, born with talons sharp enough to shred iron, and eyes which can see through to one's soul cannot understand humanity, and has no reason to want to. Ghuls might rely on humankind's flesh and memories for sustenance, but their knowledge of us is born of second-hand thoughts and borrowed emotions, not true understanding. Alliances sometimes pop up between desperate humans who seek power or understanding of occult forces; or are engineered by crafty monsters who set themselves up as Gods or the true power behind a governor or chieftain. But these alliances and involvements are built on shifting ground, and on fundamental misunderstandings on both sides about the others intentions and perspectives. Even a monster who intends to be kind to a human and believes they understand what kindness is all too often ends up like a child who captures some poor woodland creature and bombards it with unwanted gifts and affections until it ends up dead.

The first peoples have lived alongside these fiends for millenia, keeping them to their holes with fire and sword and marking the most dangerous haunts of such creatures as taboo. Elite warriors learned in the occult sciences guard their camps and villages, and even children know which herbs and stones will ward against beings of the dark. The same cannot be said for the invaders who came from lands which held very different sorts of monsters, and who by ignorance or outright malice have stirred long-forgotten horrors from their slumber.

Spirits

Monsters, for all the danger that they present to mortals and all the power that they possess are creatures of flesh and bone. Spirits then, are creatures of will and temper, metaphors given ephemeral bodies.

Some spirits are simple, creatures of flame or love or vice. Others, like the souls of the dead bound to the earth are every bit as complex as living

The Inhabitants

The folk who came over from across the sea would tell you this land doesn't have a name. It would be far more accurate to say that it has hundreds. The land was far from uninhabited when the first conquerors came. The first peoples of the land had been

there long before, and had already established compacts, federations, and nations long before the people of the old continent arrived. What unifies them now is the name they use for themselves. The First People, to differentiate themselves from the invaders.

The easternmost peoples and tribes were the first to receive the folk from the old continent, and welcomed them with open arms. When the second wave of settlers came, they bore the brunt of the disease, the lash, the steel, and the strange magics that they brought over, decimating their populations and driving many of them west. Those that remained were those who had established strong alliances with the colonizers, or those tribes so well-armed and fierce that the invaders had no choice but to respect the bounds of their lands.

To the west, the tribal federations hold firm, bolstered by refugees fleeing from the east. They are made up of hundreds of peoples, bound by sacred alliances and ancient ties of kinship. Some are nomads, following the course of herds and the movement of the spheres

Most settlers who come to the territories don't think of themselves as invaders. Some come as the loyal servants of far-off crowns, looking to broker trade or alliance. A few come as scholars, seeking the lore of strange stars and the ruined mound-cities of the folk who came before even the First Peoples. Most however, are the desperate, the ambitious, and the scorned of the old world powers. Common folk looking for a new start, and not thinking who they'll have to steal it from to get one. For every hundred such settlers, there are a few men and women who paid their way, who own their contracts, or who furnished the ships to cross the trackless sea. These form the upper class of the old powers in their various territories, and are the governors of these rough colonies.

Towns, Cities, and Territories

The towns and cities of the First People who are non-nomadic are built around important cultural touchstones, which are also typically the tribe's primary source of food or shelter. In the arid south, this is typically an oasis or land with soil that will bear the burden of crops. Unlike the invaders, they are typically not built out of a mandate by outside forces. While raids and wars between different federations of tribes do occur, these battles are typically driven by personal slights or the monopolization of resources, rather than territory or coin, which is largely foreign to them. This is in the process of changing however, as partnerships (with various degrees of coercion involved) between these tribal federations and old-country powers have introduced economic motivators that have exacerbated old hatreds and rivalries.

This has forced tribal federations to become keen political players, leveraging the economic rivalries of settler states against one another and strictly limiting the sale of their lands so as to keep their ways of life intact. The riches of federation lands are made available only to those who make alliance with them against their rivals, and only then at designated **Trade Cities** built by the federations to serve as a buffer against colonial occupation. Nomadic tribes in federated lands serve as messengers, traders, and (some whisper) spies for the countries they're allied to, with a few opportunistic tribes selling secrets to the settlers as well.

While the federations have no standing army, it's leaders inspire great numbers of warriors to join their cause when enemies attack, and it's borders are heavily patrolled. Those who come to federation lands, come as guests and are expected to behave as such, and any few outsiders who are allowed to live there do so only by assimilating with them.

In the East, most settler towns are built as part as **Proprietary Colonies**, whose rulers bought their influence and position from a crown, and whose citizens paid their way aboard ships under the knowledge that they'd be subject to these governors rules and whims. Such towns are typically based around the production and trade of a single commodity, like mink pelts or lotus powder. Many such settlers join such colonies under contract, and are granted land purchased or taken from the First People under the agreement that they will work the land or practice a trade in the colony for 7 years before being free to move on. Most also provide restrictions on what Gods might be worshipped within their bounds, who is entitled to redress under the law, and who the settlers may trade with. Violations are punished harshly.

Royal Colonies are somewhat rarer, given the amount of fine control necessitated by the rulers who found them. These towns and cities are owned by the king or queen of the nation who funded them, and operated under strict control by a court official appointed directly by the monarch.

Charter Colonies are the rarest, given a broad mission by the crown such as the redemption of criminals or to serve as a buffer against foreign interests, and settled by colonists who each have a financial stake in the future of the town. These places are sometimes called **Free Colonies** and left to govern themselves. The results range from pluralistic communes to vicious dictatorships every bit as barbaric as the feudalism of the old country.

As colonies swell almost to bursting, the desperate, the ambitious, and the scorned go west, having purchased the rights to land that might very well be cursed, barren, or

occupied. These frontier villages start out as rough conglomerations of a few families, and if they don't fall prey to starvation or monsters soon develop into small towns free from the strictures of colonial rule. This freedom, coupled with the desperate desire for a new life that drives them means that these **Frontier Towns** are all too often wild and violent places, built upon cursed soil, under the shadows of monsters, or upon ill-gotten land taken from First Peoples by guile or by force. It is for these towns that the institution of Wanderers was first formed.

Wanderers

No matter the parent company or country, every colony has its malcontents. It's heretics and criminals, falsely accused or otherwise. Rather than being condemned to death or exile, these individuals are given a choice. Submit to their lawful punishment, or be branded and go west as Wanderers, rootless outcasts prohibited from owning land and whose only approved profession is that of hired sword, gun, or wand.

The First Peoples have their own legal codes and traditions, and don't create wanderers. But occasionally, exiles from the tribes, particularly warriors charged with murder and those accused (rightly or wrongly) of black magic take up the Wanderers mantle of their own free will as a way of guaranteeing themselves a means of support.

Wanderers are only supposed to take jobs relating to monsters, wild beasts, and condemned criminals, but enforcement of these laws, at least in the west is sparse and intermittent at best. In practice, Wanderers enjoy a good measure of freedom in the jobs that they take, which can range from simple errands to serving as bodyguards and enforcers for local leaders or rich merchants.

No matter how free they are to pursue their craft, no Wanderer is trusted by settled folk. They are not welcome in their homeland, and the ties they have to the towns they work for are tenuous and easily broken. Wise Wanderers try their hardest to keep out of the weeds of local affairs and politics, and resist getting emotionally involved with the people they serve. There are few wise wanderers.

Magic

Humanity is frail and mundane, and lacks even the primitive half-magics of beasts and monsters. What power human sorcerers have is that which they have taken from objects and events that bear occult significance by virtue of their association with transcendent principles and energies.

The first peoples have practiced their own magics for millenia, and it is their mastery of such that has ensured their continued freedom from the invaders. Federation lands are warded by powerful spells, as are the ruins of the precursor peoples whose shadowed recesses are taboo to all but the most respected elders of the tribes. Magic is honored and respected when it's used for the good of the community, and a robust system of mentorship and instruction exists to raise up new mages in tribal traditions to ensure they use their gifts responsibly. Witches, which is a borrowed settler term are those who use the arts of sorcery for selfish gain, who have bartered away their humanity to steal from and kill their fellows. Such fiends are typically put to death, but some few manage to escape tribal lands. Visiting sorcerers from settler society are typically viewed with caution and pity, as half-made mages who do not have the moral grounding to use their magic properly.

Settler society relies on magic to some degree. A sorcerer with a scrying pool can send messages far faster than the swiftest horse, and summoned creatures can be slaughtered for meat or bound into service to labor on a colony's behalf. But bereft of old traditions of mentorship and initiation, the sorcery of settled communities is typically far more insular and selfish. Sorcerers are those with the coin, the ambition, or the utter lack of scruples to acquire occult knowledge and the bravery or foolishness to use it. Many children are set straight by horror stories of wicked sorcerers that gain their power from child-bone wands, and rumors swirl of far-off towns which lie beneath a wicked mage's iron grasp. Even polite and reputable sorcerers are often treated as someone carrying a lit grenade, and are often kept at arms length until their services are needed.

Distance, Travel, and Communication

This a world without the automobile, airplane, train, or even reliable sea travel. While most small towns are generally no more than a few days travel from one another, and the most prosperous of those are no more than a few days from a larger city, on the frontier travel distances easily stretch into weeks or months between pockets of civilization amongst the wilderness. This holds true for both tribal lands and the frontier towns of the settlers; the sheer scale of the land, the severity of the climate, and the presence of inhuman monsters makes expansion fraught and dangerous. Towns lie huddled together days apart around natural resources like rivers or rich soil, but there might be weeks of travel time by horse or donkey between them.

Speaking of pack animals, horses aren't robots. A well-trained, conditioned horse can travel about 30-35 miles a day on a solid trail, provided it's not carrying much more than a rider and a few supplies. On rough terrain, or while bearing significant weight that number can easily be cut in half. In winter or the hottest days of summer, that pace is cut down by half again, unless you want to ride the poor animal into an early grave.

What established trading routes and messenger services there are make use of rapid changes of mounts, enabling them to cover over 100 miles in a single day. But this is an exception to the rule. Most folk can't afford a horse, or if they can they're too dear to risk on lengthy journeys outside of town.

Technology

This is a world poised on the brink of an industrial revolution. In the largest cities, the rhythmic ringing of a blacksmith's hammer and the thunk of a carpenter's chisel mingles with the scream of escaping steam from gurgling engines and the staccato clicking of clockwork looms. Despite this, most everything is still done by hand, by muscle. Even the primitive steam engines and clockwork automatons like the ornithopter rely on the sweat of a coalman or the straining of a mule to feed their furnace or turn their key. Most everything is handcrafted, and the residents of any given town can likely name the artisan who made the tools of their trade, the stool they sit upon, the barrels where they store up supplies for winter, and plates and bowls they eat upon. Even on the frontier where what essentials you can't make yourself must be ordered from a catalogue, they are largely handmade by cottage industries employing dozens or even hundreds of artisans.

This is not a consumer culture characterized by disposability. If you break a hammer, particularly if you're in a small town with only a single blacksmith it'll no doubt be a day or two before you're able to purchase a new one. You could travel two or three days to a larger town nearby and buy it at market, or wait for a peddler or tinker to come by offering repairs. Or you could put in an order with a supply catalogue and wait weeks for it to arrive. More likely, in the interim you'll fit the old head with a new handle and make use of the damaged hammer as best you can. The same thrift is applied to clothing and other material goods. Unless you're particularly rich, your clothing is no doubt patched until it can't be anymore, and then cut up for rags to be sold to a ragpicker, used as stuffing, or burnt as tinder.

Most everything being handmade has its upsides. If you aren't satisfied with the quality of something you've bought, odds are you know the person who made it. Or else, you know the person whose apprentice made it. Skilled artisans make their fortune based largely on a reputation for quality and skill, and one gun whose barrel fractures during a hunt or loaf of bread cut with sawdust is enough to ruin most. But that same lack of uniformity means that you cannot be assured that any given tool, any given weapon won't fail you. Particularly if you don't know the person who made it. Buying things in a strange city or town can be fraught, not only because you don't understand the local

dynamics, but because you have no easy way of determining who's trustworthy and who's out to take you for all they can get.

Law, Law Enforcement, and Punishment

First thing's first, let's make this clear: there are no cops. Not amongst the first peoples, and not in a single settler colony. There's no centralized system of enforcing laws, tracking down thieves, or brutalizing workers. Those things still happen, but there's no single organization that's in charge of doing it.

In lands occupied by the First Peoples, there is a central body of law agreed upon by the member tribes and enforced by each community. How the law is enforced in say nomadic societies which follow herds of elk, bison, or reindeer is considerably different from how settled tribes of fisherfolk and farmers do, but the oral and written traditions of tribal law are universal within a given confederation. Generally, these laws are also primarily put into place to determine the duties, rules, and laws of the constituents of these federations and their member tribes. Outsiders, when they're allowed onto tribal lands, are subject to an entirely different (and generally far more strict) set of laws that govern what they are allowed to do upon tribal land.

It is hard to generalize punishments amongst the First Peoples, but generally lawbreakers are punished through shunning, exile, the destruction of property, restitution for what was damaged, or (in serious cases) maiming. Death is reserved for those who are deemed most vile: those who practice black magic or ally themselves with wicked spirits, cannibals, and those who kill their own kin.

Trade Cities on Federation Lands, built to facilitate trade with outsiders function entirely under laws meant to guard against ill action by the invaders. Visitors must leave aside all weapons and sorcerous implements when they enter, and sorcerers must declare their status when they enter the city and undergo investigation to ensure they are not host to a possessing spirit or sworn to dark powers.

Those who are known (or suspected) to have harmed allied tribes or peoples, are refused entry at the barrel of a rifle and the point of a spear. Those that conduct themselves respectfully, and who honor the customs of their hosts can conduct business here, but it is business done with a considerable (and understandable) amount of caution.

Proprietary Colonies have rules based on the ruler who the land has been colonized on behalf of. Gods and Goddesses that are not part of the royal cult are typically prohibited and speech (written or otherwise) is tightly regulated. This is shaped further

by the oligarch(s) who run the colony who often ignore the laws and customs of their motherland which don't benefit them and set themselves up as little lords in this new land. The one law that is universal in Proprietary Colonies is the law of trade: being set up to enrich the colonial powers, they cannot ship their goods (or buy goods) from anyone else. This law might be undermined or ignored by those in power, but it is rigorously enforced upon the common farmer or artisan.

Royal Colonies are much the same, save that generally the officials who run them are royal or imperial functionaries, and so are much more directly beholden to the nations from which they came than the rich folk who buy the rights to colonize stolen land. As a result, they're less often openly corrupt but also less likely to ignore or temper the enforcement of colonial law. Soldiers from that country's professional military typically enforce the law here, and enforce it harshly.

Charter Colonies are the most wide ranging in the shape and application of the law. Colonies built by persecuted religious sects run themselves by divine law, the shape of society influenced by the whims of strange gods. Charter Colonies founded by corporations and trading companies coldly prioritize the riches of the company over the wellbeing of its citizens. It is often whispered that in some such colonies that it is more serious to burn down a house than to slaughter a man. The only way to know a Charter Colonies rules and mores (beyond the most obvious) is to know it's people. Outsiders without ties to such a place should step carefully.

Arms and Armor

Knights and men-at-arms are within living memory for village elders, and the invaders brought their traditions of chivalry and swordsmanship with them when they crossed the sea. These old traditions have been diminished, broken apart by the roar of cannon and the retort of flintlock muskets but they are very much still present to this day. To the east, the established states of foreign powers still field armor-clad cuirassiers amongst their armies, and the first people have not put down the bow, lance, axe, spear, or sling simply because they've adopted the weapons of the invaders.

Speaking of which, the guns of the era are muzzle-loaders, predominantly smooth bore. If you've got experience, a ram rod, cotton, paper, powder, and shot you might be able to fire 3 shots a minute. These are musket balls, not modern bullets, over half an inch in diameter that don't shoot straight past 100 yards. But when they do hit you, they tear out big fucking chunks of your body and pass through the other end, or ricochet around in the body cavity and wedge there like a lead tumor. There isn't much in the way of armor that can stop a pistol at close range, though a well-made breastplate is proof

against them at a distance. Metal armor or a thick padded jacket might slow a musket bullet at long distances, but at anything closer than 100 yards armor is more or less useless against long guns.

Armor, in particular metal armor, is still in use because while it doesn't do much against gunfire it's damn helpful against swords, claws, and teeth. There are plenty of each, particularly out in the frontier lands where colonial military forces don't hold a monopoly on violence. Monsters and large beasts can often weather a musket ball or two, and lay their would-be slayer low even if they expire in the process. A stout longcoat, brigandine, or breastplate is thus handy for would-be hunters.

The usefulness of arms and armor notwithstanding, how comfortable society is with them is a different matter entirely. Most folk wear a knife or small dagger on their person as a tool, eating utensil, and weapon of self-defense. This isn't remarkable or unusual the way it might be today, and only the most formal situations such as a royal audience or diplomatic mission will require all participants to divest themselves of a knife. Proper weapons are a different matter; swords, axes, spears, bows, pistols, and muskets are specialized tools expected to be used for specific tasks. If you're a hunter of beasts out in the wild, a member of a town's militia, or a lord's bodyguard it's expected that you'll use weapons and wear armor as necessary in the commission of your job. It's folk that wear armor and wield weapons without obvious cause that make the citizens of most towns and cities, and the people of the First Tribes nervous. Even in the most lawless frontier towns, wearing weapons and armor openly is a clear message that you are ready for trouble and not afraid to start it.

There's an element of class there too. As with most things, people with property and power have more freedom to arm themselves and to carry those arms wherever they wish. In some towns and cities there are outright laws restricting which people can own weapons, and even which weapons they can keep based on categories of birthright, citizenship, or wealth and property. In the most tolerant communities, such as colony towns with an independent charter or certain First Peoples lands anyone can own and carry weapons, but who is trusted enough to carry them without distrust and observation is another matter entirely.

