

Magic System

Imagine a very generic, average person. They're of average height, dark hair, brown eyes, vaguely-mixed-race features, average build. They're androgynous, take "they" as a pronoun, average intellect, average patience and drive and strength. They're reasonably competent at normal day-to-day skills, enjoy the most popular TV shows but don't have a particular passion for any of them, like walks on the beach and bowling and burgers and fries but don't particularly prefer those over picnics in the woods and golf and spaghetti. They get along fine with nice people and are annoyed by obnoxious people, like going to parties with friends but want some time to themselves sometimes, think impressionist paintings are pretty and modern art is kind of incomprehensible.

The magic system in Bland works off of people's distinctive characteristics. Blue eyes, a talent for juggling, intense ambition, a short temper, an obsession with grapefruit. In particular, by going through a complex series of meditations (determined by the particular characteristic, takes about an hour), you can sacrifice that characteristic, rewriting yourself with averageness in that respect, in order to imbue magical properties into an object of your choice. These are vaguely correlated to the characteristic you sacrifice; sacrificing your temper to enchant a shirt might give it an enchantment that burns anyone who touches it but the wearer. Multiple powers can be stacked on the same object, and usually combine in some semi-logical fashion -- if you then enchanted the shirt to sparkle, it might start shooting out sparkling jets of flame when someone touched it.

The magic in Bland wasn't discovered until around 2300, and it was promptly treated as a military secret. Politicians made sketchy decisions, people did things that seemed like a good idea, there was a worldwide war that combined magic and technology, and then fast forward a couple of hundred years until no one remembers how magic works anymore...

Underworld

The Underworld is, literally, under the surface of the Earth. It's immense, hollowed-out, manmade caves, filled with fancy robotic equipment that maintains the infrastructure. It gets power from immense solar arrays and wind turbines in abandoned areas on the surface, and its nutrients from vast algae farms in the middle of the ocean, and automated robots take the algae to cows in neat pens and feed them, or use it to fertilize soil. and automatically process the products into tasty human-accessible food. There's gigantic automated factories making all the goods to provide comfortably for humans and automatically distributing them to the recipients. It's all mechanical and immense and self-repairing and patrolled by robots to make sure no stray rats get into the workings.

The humans in the Underworld live in boxlike apartment units which lock together into complexes of a hundred or so, together with multipurpose entertainment facilities -- an auditorium that can accommodate movies or concerts, a gymnasium for soccer or dancing, a workroom for sewing or woodworking, and so forth. There's also various communal facilities for everyday life, shared by the complex -- a laundromat, cafeterias and restaurants, and so forth. Each apartment is occupied by a family unit, and features a couple of bedrooms, a bathroom, a couple of common rooms, and so on. Robots move through the hallways, cleaning up and bringing supplies and switching facilities between their modes.

Because robots do basically all the labor, there's not a lot of work for humans to do; everyone's employed, but they work reasonably short hours at decent jobs that require humans -- customer service or therapy or teaching or producing art, that sort of thing. Children attend school in their complex, where they get basic lessons in math and writing and such but also lots of stuff like learning pottery or painting or archery or whatnot. The rest of the time you can hang out in your room and read or draw or watch TV, or go out into the complex common rooms and hang out with people, or go to entertainment facilities and play football or learn to ice cakes or watch plays or square dance.

Okay, now we get to the dystopian part. Everything in the Underworld is assigned randomly, and shuffled on a regular basis. Every day you get a ticket to one random leisure activity -- a breadmaking class or an opera or a soccer game. Check your TV and there's a set of three random movies available, different from what you had yesterday. Once a week, robots come in, take all your stuff, and bring you your new randomly-assigned personal goods: random bed, random blankets, random bookshelf full of random books, random art on the walls, so on. Once a month, you're assigned to a new random job you have the capabilities for, and your apartment is moved to a new random complex. Once a year, a new random SO is moved in with you. You can request children -- up to two at a time -- and in that case each year you're assigned to a random SO who's requested the same number of children, and given random children of the appropriate ages, each year until the children are eighteen and get their own apartments.

If you like something you get randomly assigned and want to keep it -- well, mostly, you're out of luck. You can try to trade with people or borrow or so on, but you're not supposed to and if the robot monitors catch you or someone reports you you'll be penalized. For a first offense you might get fewer books or have one day a week you don't get an entertainment ticket; if you have to be penalized repeatedly, for trading or for other behavior like attacking people or deliberately ruining common facilities and so on, you'll eventually be sent to prison for a term.

However, there's one way you can keep a random assignment. You can trade a personal characteristic for it. You go to a special room in the complex and tell the computer you'd like to trade your stubbornness in, and it guides you through a set of meditations. You don't know it, but there's some random robot-manufactured object in a compartment nearby, and the meditations are generated to enchant that particular object. After an hour or so, you're now the

exact average amount of stubbornness, and the object is enchanted and gets silently wooshed off through pneumatic tubes. What you have to sacrifice depends on how big a deal the thing you want to keep is -- trading in blue eyes for brown might let you keep that one perfect pillow, but if you want to keep your job permanently you might need to trade in a major personality trait, and keeping your SO permanently is *really* going to cost you -- maybe your intellect, or multiple traits.

Escape from the system is nearly impossible. If you try to just break out, you're not going to be able to get through doors that lock against you, and robots are perfectly capable of noticing and restraining you. It's just possible you could figure out the magic thing, but that takes *exceptional* observational abilities and intellect -- it's *really* hard to rederive how to generate the meditations just from observing a few of them, and of course you'd have to sacrifice traits to do that. And you'd have to guess the thing about the magic items, and then hope that you managed to make one that could help you escape.

Now, this whole system was of course set up to generate magic items for the normal people, way back when. Some parts are designed to do that more efficiently, some are trying to do it more humanely or without inducing rebellion, and some are just the result of politics and bureaucracy. Samples of DNA are taken from everyone as babies before they're delivered to their first parents, and those are recombined by the robots to create the next generation of babies, aiming for producing offspring that are unusual across a few axes so that they have good traits to trade in for powerful magic. The items are delivered to warehouses on the surface, where they would have been retrieved by the military, tested, and delivered to soldiers.

Of course, at this point the system has been running autonomously without human interference for a few hundred years, and no one in the Underworld knows about its origins. They have a vague history about people designing it as a utopia, think they're the only people who exist, and have no idea that they're underground. None of them have even seen the outside of the complexes, the big caves full of exposed machinery.

Overworld

Did you think things up here were going to be better? Nooope.

Humanity destroyed itself in the great war, with weapons of mass destruction and super-powerful magic objects. Almost everyone died, and the earth became nearly unlivable, with intense radiation, and magical effects like never-dying fires rampaging through the plains, and killer robots roaming around because they haven't gotten the memo that the war is over, and entire continents seeded with high-tech landmines. Everyone who knew how magic worked, and about the underground cities, died. All that knowledge was lost.

A few people managed to survive and eke out a living. They vary in how much knowledge they managed to preserve, and whether they're living in a huge ruined city or in empty, fertile plains, and obviously their lifestyles vary the same way. They're basically all in small, self-sufficient communities, or individuals or small groups who roam around. Almost all of them are centered around the warehouses where the robots continue to deliver magic items. They don't know where the objects come from, just that robots come out of doors and drop them off and then go back, and guard robots and airlock door systems keep anyone from getting in to see where the robots come from. But having a source of magic objects is basically the only way to survive the various environmental hazards, so that's where the surviving people mostly are.

Warehouses vary in how many objects and of what quality they get, depending on the strategic value of that location the last time someone was alive to update the supply orders. Some places might only get an item every few months; others have huge heaps because no one can keep up with the speed at which they're delivered. Items were intended for soldiers, so they're usually meant to be practical, but it's impossible to guess exactly what the enchantment might be even if you know how the magic works, so people have to experiment to figure it out. Usually activation is pretty intuitive -- intention, or waving, or pointing, or someone attacking you -- but sometimes no one will be able to guess it. And sometimes you or someone else gets exploded before you figure it out, of course.

Some things are enchanted with negative qualities -- someone with a harmful medical condition is likely to sacrifice that -- but the robots usually pick grenades or something to enchant with those, so they could actually be useful. (But of course sometimes a facility was producing trap items to deliver to the enemy in disguise, bullet-proof vests with harmful enchantments and such.)

How exactly the magic items get distributed of course varies by community. One place might be a perfectly nice little village, where the elderly volunteer to test out objects and babies get given watches of radiation-proofing, while another is ruled by a warlord who collects all the most powerful objects for himself and rules with an iron fist. And plenty of people from nasty communities will manage to sneak one or two powerful objects and then run off to do the lone wolf thing.