Rooted

Inside a festering hole

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# World introduction

Everything you've ever known about your surroundings fits within a few kilometres of merged underground cavities surrounded by the never-ending mass of rock, dirt and darkness.

The Heart of the city is a palace of shiny metal and smooth stone. You've never stepped one foot inside it. That privilege is reserved for those lucky enough to be born into a high class family. The Heart is a dome with a metal casing, hard steel net encompassing the palace and the upper class quarters. Below that is a hard rock bottom separating the lower slums by a few hundred feet from the paradise above. The further you go from the centre, the worse it gets.

The Heart itself is surrounded by walls towering over the highest buildings with guards stationed at every gate. Outside the walls, residential buildings don’t use much stone. Most are well crafted wooden houses but as one travels toward the edge of the city the homes become sloppier in both engineering and the living standards. Both drop rapidly in quality the further one gets from the centre. What residents at the very edge of the city is a perimeter of what one could describe as barely more than makeshift wooden shacks only a dozen feet across. Beyond all of that are only the endless tunnels.

# The city

The city itself takes a shape of a sphere squished along the vertical axis. Almost everything the people need to survive comes from within the city. Scattered throughout the residential quarters are meat farms, water plants, energy plants, wood farms and factories of all sorts. The water comes in through some of the tunnels, flows through the city and disappears in the tunnels beneath it. The very foundations of the city rise up from the lake that has formed at the bottom.

## The Heart

This is the upper class residential area. No one born outside the Heart is allowed passage inside. Exceptions are made for traders, engineers and manual labour personnel but they must all be authorized by officials residing within the Heart.

The Heart residents take up administrative jobs and military guard duty protecting their own district. There is little action here but they all are paid well and even the lowest of the Heart guard are regarded as higher status than the most recognized citizen born on the outside.

The Palace is the home to the most important figure in the city, the Governor. Its size alone takes up a fifth of the Heart and its beautiful architecture is lit by the always-on day-lamps that shine on the whole Heart. Any visitors to the Palace only ever get to see a select few rooms while the rest of it is reserved for the elite guard’s eyes and the eyes of the Governor and his family. Surrounding the Palace is the Silver Garden, a beautiful installation of grey-leafed trees, thorn labyrinths and bioluminescent small flora littering the ground. All of that is encircled in a manmade stream a few dozen feet wide with a single bridge leading from the high class residential area toward the palace grounds.

Most people growing up in the Heart will never see the shithole surrounding this small paradise…

## The Slums

The area outside the Heart is referred to as the Slums. This is where a vast majority of the citizens reside. The living conditions vary but nowhere do they rival those of the Heart. In addition to providing the manpower needed to run the city, the Slums also house the entire industry. Fear and poverty govern these parts and keep the people in check from uprisings.

## Upper levels

The upper levels of the city are where most of the industry is situated. They span the top of the Heart all the way to the ceiling of the cave. The wood farms, metal works and power generation is all here. All of that is maintained by the residents of the Slums. The most advanced industry is situated just next to the dome of the Heart and the supply line runs as close to its gates as possible while still remaining high enough not to bother the high class citizens.

## Middle levels

There’s not much to say about the middle levels. This is where most people reside, where the shops, educational and medical facilities are located and where meat and dairy farms and accompanying industry are situated.

## Lower levels

A gigantic lake floods the bottom of the city. This is where fishermen go… well, fishing duh. It’s also where the prison is and where waste is dumped so make of it what you will. Anyone who wants the shittiest existence in the shittiest place in the universe may find all their wishes fulfilled here. The people are poor, the living conditions are horrid, disease is on the loose, crime rates rival those near the Rim and to top all of it off is the constant smell of moisture, faeces and rotting flesh that permeates the air. Welcome to your shit stepmom’s asshole.

The lake itself seems relatively serene at a first glance but fishermen talk of beasts lurking beneath its greenish-brown surface that cause waves 30 feet in height. The water flowing into the lake however doesn’t seem to fill it though, suggesting that the underground tunnels provide the means for water to escape somewhere. No one sane is crazy enough to investigate such a claim and those that set out on such expeditions forever fade out of memory.

## The Rim

Like the shell of a tunnel worm, the Rim is what separates the flesh of the city from the cold uninviting earth surrounding it. It’s where those tiniest of shacks are. People who have nowhere else to go will often choose the option to settle here over braving the tunnels. Whether that truly is the better choice is often debated by the Rim’s denizens and tunnellers alike.

Going from the last building toward the tunnels and the dark one first goes through a field seeded with wooden spikes. These cover the ground leading from the middle levels to the outer walls. The walls themselves are two rows of heavy wooden trunks with gates in set places. The outer gate and the inner gate do not line up but are rather separated by a hundred feet along the wall. This is the first line of defence for the city. Beyond the outer gate is yet more open space leading directly into the tunnels. Spread out all along that space is scaffolding that reaches for the ceiling. These scaffolds are left behind whenever the city tries to expand outward, but the progress is halted for one reason or another.

# The tunnels

The tunnels surround the city. Some were dug by its residents while others predate anyone’s memory. They split, intertwine and reconnect, leading deeper inside the barely mapped network or back into the city. Lower tunnels are flooded while the upper ones are boarded up and barricaded. Only those starting at the middle level are actually being frequented by humans. Some tunnels intersect ore veins and are additionally secured so that miners can work relatively undisturbed.

## Deep tunnels

The tunnels run deep into the endless unknown. Where maps stop, the deep tunnels begin. These hold any number of unimaginable mysteries and horrors. This is where all those deadly creatures come from. As the city grows it seems to attract ever greater numbers of horrors from the depths. Just as it’s impossible to map the deep tunnels so it is to distinct rumours from real perils. Only those with a death wish will venture out there as almost no one returns.

# People introduction

It’s hard to imagine a happy story in this world and the society does its best to reflect that. While the high class enjoys a happy worry-free life safe within the Heart, the rest know nothing but hard life. Whether you’re a well-off farmer or a wealthy merchant, sooner or later danger comes to you. People in the Slums know that if you’re not killed by the bands, the creatures or disease you’ll probably starve to death, find yourself in a middle of a conspiracy or just get stabbed walking down the alley in your late days by a desperate thief. Those that go looking for trouble will surely live even shorter lives. The geo-social circumstances gave rise to faction wars, civilian militia, opportunists of all kinds, cults, scheming, superstition and more…

## Leadership

At the very top a single man holds all the strings in the city. The Governor is greedy and callous and shows no intent of hiding it. His right hand is the Chief Advisor with his own council members beneath him. Together, these men are the ruling elite of the whole city. They are the judges, they hold military jurisdiction and they govern the rules of commerce. It’s sad to say but as a citizen of the slums you can count yourself lucky they couldn’t care less about what’s going on outside the Heart, as long as their lives remain undisturbed.

## Guards

Those that don’t have the mental potential or luck to get an administrative job will find themselves forcefully enlisted in the city guard. It’s not as bad as it sounds though since the guard is well trained and equipped to deal with anything the slums or beyond can throw at them and their members live a good life outside their guard duty.

The guard is responsible for enforcing order within the city, guarding key positions, patrolling the streets and bringing criminals to justice. That said, they rarely venture out in the slums and only the least capable guards find themselves patrolling the prison, the factories and power plants or the streets in the immediate vicinity of the entrances to the Heart. Serve and protect, for what it’s worth.

Through their continued service these men and women come know the intricate dynamics of both the Heart and the Slums better than anyone. Because of this, almost without exception, they each grow into the strongest links of this society as many personas from both the inside and outside of the Heart count on their knowledge of both worlds in their dealings with the other side.

Do not mistake the guard for anything more than it is though. Bribery, laziness, arrogance and shady business is as prevalent here as it is in any other facet of this society.

## Factions

Not a day passes here that the city doesn’t tear itself apart and build itself up again. The people of the Slums have grouped together under numerous factions, all battling for control or survival. The most notable of these are:

### Blacksteel Gang

These mercenaries hold the arms industry by the balls. They control everything from the steelworks to the final product that the guard uses. They work closely with the city officials but are always open for under-the-table deals with the rest of the city for the right price. Sometimes a very - *very* - high price.

### Red Barons

Offering “protection” to the northern meet farms this is the biggest band of “civilized” bandits within the city. They control a big portion of the food industry and use it to their advantage in any way possible. Their leader is smart and ruthless.

### People’s Army

Less of a unified organization and more reminiscent of the gangs that roam the streets the People’s Army has no single leader but is rather a collection of representatives that operate under a shared pretence of serving the common people. Each individual district is autonomous and under the mercy of its leader. They receive militia funding from the Heart and take on the challenge of guarding the streets and protecting the Rim from outside attacks.

### Cult of the Void

The cult is a known secret. It is unclear whether it has a leader. It thrives on the fear of the unknown and worships a dangerous religion. The cultists themselves are often fanatic and unpredictable and while everyone knows of them and to a degree of their teachings, they have no territory and their meeting places are unknown to outsiders. However, they take a lot of interest in the ongoing affairs of all kinds and their eyes and ears are everywhere.

### Church of Man

Promoting the belief that not all men are equal and that each must find their place and preform to the best of their ability to keep humanity’s flame lit, they have great influence and even have a cathedral within the Heart. While they maintain their neutrality in all things on the outside, the church is as corrupt as it gets and even its representatives scheme among themselves in an endless struggle to accumulate an ever growing amount of power and wealth.

### The Hooks

The Hooks are a disorganized collection of cutthroats from the lower levels of the city. Their methods are as diverse as each individual group but their motives are clear: to rise up from all the shit and mud and grab whatever they can from anyone they can. They are as chaotic as they come and their power is often underestimated.

## Common folk

The people of the city make due as best they can. Those that aren’t explicit members of a faction, a part of the militia or born high class have to find jobs, research and explore or become criminals. It’s hard to believe that there’s room for common folk in such a chaotic society but for every other citizen there are at least 50 commoners. After all, there have to be enough backs for the rest to live off of.

Maybe unexpectedly given the initial impression, taking a look deeper into the society one will find an endless diversity of personalities and beliefs. You may fall out of your bed while sleeping starting your day early, get robbed by a petty street thug or run head first into an unmovable object that turns out to be a carriage of some wealthy pompous merchant thinking your day couldn’t possibly get any worse you may be offered a hot meal by the old lady down the street whose daughter has had her eyes on you for the longest time. Unfavourable circumstances gave rise to some of the best people here and it is on that glimmer of hope that the city continues to survive day in day out.

## Militia

While officially a part of the People’s Army, the militia is basically an independent body. These men and women do not sit behind desks doing resource management, negotiating deals and making all the important decisions. The militia is here to deal with the city guard’s dirty work patrolling the Slums, maintaining the Rim and fending off the dangers from the tunnels. Many members use the gear passed down through generations within their family. They work for minimum pay but remain a valid choice for anyone who needs no more than a stable existence. If you want to become a hero for the people, try starting here but beware the attention: the entry barrier to becoming a part of the militia is so low, there’s no telling what the people that serve beside or above you are like.

# Everyday life

To live is to continue not dying. And if you find this summarization of life and its purpose satisfying you will find the life in the city just as perfect as life anywhere else that covers your food, water and basic environmental requirements. Sentience however is assumed to bring about other needs. Socialization might be one but leisure and luxury options are assumed desirable as well. The city provides for most of these common needs but not all are equally accessible to everyone. Things the high class often take for granted many other people don’t ever even come into contact with. While life in the city may be bearable for the majority of its citizens, through the eyes of many it often seems like that’s as far as it goes.

## Food

The city offers a wide array of dishes one can prepare but all of their main components come from just a few general sources.

### Mushrooms

Mushrooms are the quick and easy option. Originally found growing covering the walls and floors of damp caves, they have been adopted into mushroom farms throughout the city. The conditions for their rapid growth are easily reproduced and naturally this has led to a small variety of mushrooms feeding the majority of the population today.

Aside from being used as the main ingredient in many dishes, mushrooms are also used as spices. Certain cultures have strong smells or tastes, and those are often enhanced by the process of drying them out. Some of the culinary bright spots around the city even grow rare cultures on their own and keep special procedures for extracting the strongest aroma out of them as well kept trade secrets.

### Meat and fish

Fishing in the lake beneath the city is common in the lower levels as it provides bulk meat in the part of the city that is devoid of luxury. A variety of marine animals swim beneath the lake’s surface and that includes predatory and openly aggressive species as well. This makes fishing considerably more dangerous from what most people might imagine as larger fish can easily capsize boats. Small 2 to 4 person boats are for this reason mostly useless on their own. Fishermen usually go out in groups of 3 to 5 boats. That way even if one of the boats is attacked by these animals the attacker will be hunted as prey by nearby fishermen. Larger groups as well as larger boats have proven to attract the unwanted attention of some gigantic creatures whose ferocity to this date remains unmatched.

Poultry and lean meats are considered a luxury. As keeping animals for slaughter is a complicated effort, this meat is often priced high. For the common folk most meat comes from the domesticated meat mass from grown in meat farms. The meat mass was originally found lining the cave walls rich in nutrients of any kind. It will grow as long as it is in contact with said nutrients, adapting to its surroundings, even reshaping it in certain cases.

As a life form the meat mass is aggressive toward any biological life as it will try to digest anything it comes into contact with. However, its mobility is limited to quietly and slowly sprawling over solid surfaces as it grows out. When starved, the meat mass will start to wither away piece by piece, leaving behind a solid residue.

Manipulating the conditions of the mass’ surroundings can lead to it adapting in predictable ways. This has been used extensively in the process of domesticating the mass to suit the required purposes, over time even giving rise to sub-species that excel at certain tasks.

Using the meat mass as a source of food is simple: simply cut out parts of it and thermally treat them to kill the organism before consumption. Eating the raw mass has a chance of resulting in parts of the mass attacking the person that ate it from within their body.

### Dairy

Milk and cheese are a special luxury. Some animals give milk but their milk is rarely found on the market. This is because the domestication and upkeep cost for them both in available space and resources often isn’t worth the selling price. Space within the city itself is limited, and luxury products of this tier aren’t sought after outside the Heart.

The majority of dairy products is the result of a lucky discovery in the long forgotten past. A single type of meat mass will try to heal its wound by secreting a type of liquid similar to milk that feeds its freely floating proto-cells while they attach themselves along the injured area in an attempt to close the wound. No other meat mass that exhibits this behavior has ever been found since and the only known examples of this particular type exist within the city. Should all of them ever be destroyed, the dairy market would surely crumble.

After collection the secreted liquid is treated by a type of fungi spores that will attack the proto-cells in the liquid but is easily rendered inert by the human digestive system. At this point, the nutrient rich liquid is considered safe for consumption. As far as cheese, butter and other derived products go, the liquid can be further processed to satisfy conditions for cultivating those.

## Industry

All of the primary industry is scattered around the Slums. The food industry is situated in the middle levels of the city, the energy industry is both in the upper levels and lower levels, the mining of raw materials happens outside the rim and in the tunnels, while the wood farms are scattered all over. Most of the secondary industry, the production and assembly of raw materials, is suspended above the city in the upper levels, with some exceptions like the production of more luxurious clothing that can be found within the Heart or the majority of food industry that spans the middle levels of the city.

Skipping the tertiary industry which is wide spread, the quaternary industry is what the city lacks the most. Highly skilled workers, primarily in the areas of research and development, are rare. Most people don’t have access to this kinds of knowledge or don’t have wealth necessary to sustain process. People who meet those requirements are all situated in the Heart and usually live too comfortable lives to fiddle around with such things. Those individuals that do end up in this branch of the industry live lives that often consist only of keeping the existing systems in working order. Little if any emphasis is put on research as the city isn’t inclined toward sustaining a prolonged effort in these areas, and those that pursue this path are often looked down upon as “wasting time and resources” and “living off the backs of others” even from within their own branch.

### Wood

The deceptively named wood farms are simply a specialized sort of meat farms. By continuously providing a small amount of nutrients to only the newly grown parts of the meat mass, the rest is left starved. This makes the older parts begin to solidify, changing their structure. The mass can be grown into any shape and the solidified result is easily additionally carved later.

By managing the amounts and variety of nutrients and the amount of water available to the mass, it is possible to influence its properties like elasticity, weight and how water tight the final result is. Growing the mass inside a piston-like setup by limiting the area in which the mass can expand and keeping it under constant pressure while slowly expanding in the direction of supplied nutrients will result in increased structural integrity with the downside of increased growth time.

While it’s faster to dig out rock than to grow material like this, the final wood-like product of these farms is immensely more versatile. Other benefits include lesser weight, greater elasticity and easier maintainability of structures over time.

### Ore

Most of the mine entrances are located at the edges of the city. While mines often stretch deep inside the tunnel network, only the most valuable materials are mined from within the deep tunnels. Materials like gold and silver are such examples and are considered a worthwhile effort by those that own those mines. Digging deep is a dangerous effort as dangers increase the further out one goes from the city. Miners concentrate on mining one branch at a time, closing up those with no mining activity for decades in some cases. This is done to lower the possibility of having their escape routes cut off by perils that dwell in the tunnels.

Mining is usually considered to be a dangerous occupation with people being pressed into servitude as punishment for their crimes. Mortality rates are high and one would be hard pressed to find a miner with more than a couple of years of experience, with the average career length of a miner lasting a few months.

Over time most of the ore near the city had been mined out already. This meant that the mines had to expand deeper into the tunnel network and new tactics had to be employed to minimize losses. To avoid unwanted attention and minimize miner deaths, mining expeditions are held at most once a week. In the case of the oldest of mines getting to a location can take days. Once there, the miners only get a few hours to mine out as much as they can since the increased activity attracts predatory creatures in the vicinity. Upon completion the miners return hauling the ore with them back to town. Sealing the way back is a time effort they can’t afford and a risk not worth taking on their way back so they stay in the city for a few days to let the air clear a bit before setting out on a new expedition again.

The miner groups sell their services to the highest bidder who then finances the expedition. Each group operates independently and buys their miners through public prisoner auctions. Miners bought this way are treated like slaves and expected to fend for themselves in case of trouble. Expeditions are usually heavily armed but bought miners don’t receive any combat gear themselves and often fall first when things go wrong. Career advancement is an extremely rare opportunity in this business.

## Entertainment