



~WELCOME TO~

PENUMBRA CITY

Margaret Killjoy

A VISITOR'S GUIDE TO PENUMBRA CITY: PART ONE

**PRODUCED BY THE WELCOMING COMMITTEE
WORKING GROUP OF THE ERRENI FEDERATION**

Introduction

There's a black fog that hangs over the city, and it's not as metaphorical as you might hope. It's coal dust. Somewhere up through that smoke, there's a glorious silver city hovering in the sunshine—but don't concern yourself much with the floating quarter, because only the rich and holy will ever see it. Groundside, orphans dig through rubble and trash to scavenge the parts to fix their motorcycles, street poets sell fungus and brawl over territory, and bureaucrats ride black horses to midnight salons where they plot the death of the godking. The graveyard's been squatted by

immigrants now for longer than you've been alive, and there's a gang of nihilist ex-marines who seem intent on blowing up half of everything.

Welcome to Penumbra City. There's plenty to do, if you don't mind the dust. Or the smoke. Or the crime. Or the monsters.

We're the Erreni Federation, and we're the self-appointed welcoming committee, and we're happy to show you around.

The Country

Harrow is a big ole world, carved up into countries by nine godkings. Ours is named Athe. So, you know, our country is named Athe too. I guess, like, "the king is the kingdom" or whatever theological nonsense. I guess, technically, you'd even call the city "Athe" too but no one ever does.

Athe is a peninsula, albeit a big ole fat stubby one. Like the ugly big toe of the world. Separated from the rest of the foot by the Outside mountains. Most of Athe is what you'd call "subtropical

highlands.” Warm summers, mild winters. Some hail in spring but not much snow. Closer to the coasts there are some lowlands and plenty of swamps. Closer to the mountains you get... mountains, I guess.

Most of the countryside, for most of our history, is plantations with big manors growing cash crops for the city and for export and then scattered subsistence farms, some grouped around small towns. Only one city, though, the capital. Well, really, the capital is two cities. One on top of the other.

There’s the Silver, which floats overhead, where Athe lives. It’s held up by—if you believe the stories—enslaved angels. I’ve got no reason to doubt the stories, I just don’t trust anything the Church says.

Then there’s the rest of us on the ground, doing Athe’s dirty work—or, these days, mostly doing the dirty work of trying to fucking kill the bastard. We live on the edge of the shadow cast by

the Silver. We live in the penumbra. That's the fancy word for the edge of a shadow. We live in Penumbra City.

I knew a doggirl once—the doggirls are a biker gang full of singers obsessed with their own mortality, nice folks—I knew a doggirl once who got the word PENU MBRA tattooed across her knuckles. True story. Her friends made fun of her about it for a while, but she said she thought it was cool. About a year back, her and her friends got killed in a fight with some Angels—those are the press gangs, you'll want to avoid them.

[My editor says that I'm not supposed to tell stories in the personal voice in this pamphlet, that it's supposed to be the voice of the entire Welcoming Committee Working Group of the Erreni Federation. She says I don't have to cut that story out but that I shouldn't tell stories like that going forward and that I should avoid the "I" pronoun.

I say, if she wants it written different, she should have been the one who volunteered to write it.]

Anyway, Penumbra City. What the fuck went wrong in your life that you ended up in Penumbra City? We've always had a reputation as a place where you could start again, a reputation as one of the most multicultural cities in the world. Thing is though, Athe, he's at war, right? All those god kings, always at war, we're all just chess pieces in their eternal pissing match. And for the past fifty years that war has been with Hirn, right over the mountains. And for the past ten years, Athe has been losing. Bad.

Now, the thing is, we hate Athe too, right? But losing a war, it's just brutal. Our primary contribution to the world these days is dead soldiers and dead civilians. The countryside, all those farms, all those manors, they're overrun by the beasts from Hirn. That's not a weird slur by the way—Hirn mostly fights with human-animal hybrids, the same as Athe mostly fights with coal-powered machinery.

So Hirn is winning and the farms are burning and we're all eating mushrooms and fish and whatever we can garden in the smog-choked air. And Penumbra city is still welcoming to all comers,

but kind of in the same way that a mass grave is welcoming to all comers.

However and whyever you're here, though, you're here. Might as well make the most of it.

For our part, the way we've come up with to make the most of it is to overthrow the government, drive the theocracy back up to its sky castles, and take care of ourselves and each other. We're about... halfway through that work. Which means the old systems aren't reliable, and, well, the new systems aren't either.

No one knows who's in charge, and everyone keeps fighting about it, and half the gangs want a revolution, half the gangs just want to stay the fuck out of politics, and the third half of the gangs don't want to admit that they're gangs and still throw down for Athe and the Church. Battle lines are getting drawn and the three coalitions are the Revolutionists, the Reasonable, and the Establishment. Honestly, whichever team the Reasonable decides to pull for, that's the side that's likely going to win this thing.

It's a mess.

The Erreni Federation, we're on the side of revolution. And we don't mind a little anarchy. The food's gotten a bit more... creative... but so has the music, so has the theatre, so have the ways of relating to one another. We love it here.

The Plaza

Your home away from home. With worse food and worse lodgings.

First things first: The Plaza is the best part of the city. Yes, we're biased—our Federation is run out of there, and inasmuch as we aspire to be the ones running anything, we run The Plaza. We're biased, but that doesn't mean we're wrong.

You're fresh off the boat, or the airship—we used to say “or the train” but the army is the only one using what's left of the rail system at this point. You're fresh, and you're not sure where to go. Go to The Plaza.

There's a huge skeletal tower in the middle—used to be an airship mast. It's four hundred meters tall. You can't miss it. At least half the city, you can see Triumph Tower—which means you can always find your way home.

Why's it so important? Why's our modest five-sided park and the couple streets around it the best place in the city? Well, two reasons. To everyone else, it's the best place in the city because it's neutral ground. Well, almost-neutral ground. Bigots, cops, press gangers, they're not super welcome. Everyone else? If you don't start shit, there won't be shit, and everyone's welcome.

The other reason though, the reason why it's so important to you, a valued guest of the city, so particularly, is that... well... your silver, your gold, it doesn't mean shit here. In Penumbra, it's who you know, it's what people think of you, that gets you fed and housed and equipped. Which is a bit hard, right? Because you're not from here. No one knows you. No one has your back—you might think. If you're not an asshole, the Erreni Federation

has your back. We don't have to love you to take care of you, we don't even have to like you. "Not hated" is good enough for a bowl of mushroom soup if you stop by The Plaza. We serve food three times a day for (almost) all comers. The soup is tasty too. Protein and fat and vitamins galore. Your stomach might take a couple of days to adjust to it.

[My editor says I'm not supposed to lie in this pamphlet. I say, it's not a lie to say the soup is tasty. Okay, it's an acquired taste. Okay, we use wild bitter greens to cover up the taste of the mushrooms. And sure, some of the folks who volunteer to cook rely on raw enthusiasm to cover up their lack of culinary skill. But nothing beats a hot bowl of soup on an autumn evening, sitting with a thousand people tired from the hard work of carving out a better world amidst a collapsing one. Yes, it would be better if we hadn't lost last winter's crop of garlic—and its attendant urban farmers—to a swarm of carnivorous swamp cranes, displaced by the war. But I'm not lying. I like the soup. I've got enough reputation with the Erreni for some of our better food—with

actual vegetables or even some meat—but I still choose the soup as often as not.]

After you're full of soup, head on over to the Gray Market, see if anyone likes you enough to give you what you want or need. Hot tip: people like you more if you help them out, or help their friends out. Give volunteering a shot—pick up litter for a while, or go hunt down some of the dog-sized venomous centipedes that have been coming up more and more often from the undercity. Whatever suits your talents.

Then catch a performance at one of the theatres—and hey, it's worth noting that drugs and alcohol, they're less precious these days than food. Ask nice, someone will share. Then as the sun comes up and it's time to sleep, camp out on one of the shanty platforms on the tower itself, or crash out on a rooftop, or string a hammock between lamp posts... if an area is marked with a red perimeter, no one is going to give you much shit for setting up for the night.

Watch out for thieves, though. Maybe sleep with your bag in your arms. Better yet, crew up.

We'd love to keep this place safe, we even try. Stabbings are down 37% since we started our volunteer patrols. Problem is, we take just about anyone for the volunteer patrols, so... sometimes our volunteer patrols are the ones doing the stealing.

[My editor says we're supposed to be presenting the Erreni Federation in a positive light and that I shouldn't mention the problem we've had with our patrols stealing shit from people, but I told her that not bringing it up would go against our policy of not lying, and she said it's not a lie if we don't mention it, and I told her there's more than one way to tell a lie. And besides, we're working on the problem, and anyone caught stealing, their reputation goes down a lot. Caught twice, they're banned from the square and the feedings for a month. Caught three times... let's just say no one has had a chance to get caught four times.]

That's the Plaza, the best place in the city. Where you... probably?... won't have your shit stolen as soon as you get here.

I suppose the rest of the city is worth seeing too—and frankly, it's getting a little crowded around here anyway.

The Iron Quarter

I can't for the life of me figure out why you'd want to go to the Iron Quarter, unless you're either joining the army (unethical and unsafe) or joining the Royal Veterans Against Everything (perfectly ethical, but equally unsafe), the nihilist terrorists who, against the odds, seem to be headquartered in the middle of the most militarized section of the city.

The Iron Quarter is the industrial heart of the city, an underground metropolis of factories, the ground itself like an evil forest of smokestacks that chokes the city on fumes. Huge trains, twice as wide as the old commuter rails, bring raw materials in from the mines and bring the ephemera of death and war out to the

front. The barracks that ring the place are largely empty, as every soldier who can be spared is out at the front, doing the hard work of dying a meaningless and painful death.

The workers now live in those barracks, and in an ever-evolving scaffold of shanties strung between the smokestacks. They even have a union, a piece of shit pro-theocracy conservative reactionary asshole union for people who have no redeeming qualities, called the OE39.

[My editor says that I'm supposed to be neutral in tone whenever possible. I promised her this was the nicest way that occurred to me to describe the OE39.]

These unionized workers, they get paid in war-scrip, redeemable in Iron Quarterhouses for the necessities of life. I guess the nicest thing you could say is that they got a bum deal and made some bad choices about how to respond to that bum deal.

Well, that and some of them smuggle heavy artillery and tanks and shit to the revolutionists, like the Royal Veterans Against

Everything. I'm not going to tell you too much more about the IVAE though because they uh... aren't really doing something that is legal. And I don't want them to get caught.

The North Docks

The North Docks, alongside North Penumbra, is probably the closest you'll get to a sense of what Penumbra City was like in its heyday, forty years back. The North Docks is full of hardworking, harddrinking sailors and merchants and dockers and basically the kind of people who say things like "work is the curse of the drinking class" so often that you can't tell if they mean it ironically or not. Most of the domestic produce left, and about half of the international trade, comes through the North Docks.

You've got two gangs up there, only one of which would call itself a gang. The Esteemed, they're the rough and tumble poets who like to fight Kingsmen—those are the cops, the Kingsmen—and distribute fungus of various medicinal, nutritional, and intoxicating

sorts. They dress like dockers, in bowlers and suspenders, and most of them *were* dockers of one sort or another before they started running about half the trade in the North Docks. They almost joined us revolutionists, but they just couldn't get over their beef with the Industrial Workers of Harrow—we'll get to them. So instead they joined up with the merchants on Eventide Hill, the fancy place in the North Docks where all the fancy merchants live in fancy houses. These rough and tumble poets, they claim to run the district, but it's the merchants who run it through them. I haven't given up hope on them, though. They might come around.

The other gang—the don't-call-us-a-gang gang—they're an international union. The Industrial Workers of Harrow. I don't know that there's a single organization more hated by every single godking on Harrow than the IWH. I bet Athe and Hirn would like nothing more than to put aside their differences for a week to just hunt every single one of them down and rip them limb from limb. The IWH, they're no one's puppets. They're... kind of puppets

to their own ideology instead. Not a lot of fun, the IWH. The chapter here is even against the recreational use of drugs. They speak for the civilian industrial workers, but the thing is, there isn't much heavy industry in Penumbra that isn't part of the military these days.

They're not a lot of fun, but they're on the right side, most of the time, and they are absolutely not afraid of a fight.

The South Docks

The South Docks are awesome, second only to The Plaza. I'm judging awesomeness in this context by "successful multiculturalism." The South Docks is, essentially, the international quarter, and has been for hundreds of years at this point. Expatriates and refugees find their way to the South Docks, joining multigenerational immigrant communities, most of which are focused around fishing and/or importing goods from their home countries.

You've got three gangs in the South Docks, and an uneasy and often-broken peace.

Most powerful, you've got the Lampreymen. They're... they're interesting. And by that I mean terrifying. They're loyalists to Rothe, that godking far in the north, and since Rothe and Athe are buddies right now, their presence is tolerated. They run almost all the fisheries, and imports from Rothe are half of what feed the Establishment with the farms collapsing fast. The first Rothean migrants came over when Rothe and Athe declared peace, about 50 years back. At the time, they weren't popular, they got called "Lampreys" for siphoning off the wealth of the city. These days, they're the ones feeding half the city, and they're mostly known as the Lampreymen for their habit of taking people they don't like, throwing them in a barrel full of lampreys, and dumping them in the White Bay.

Then you've got the Corsori, the finest smugglers in the city. They're probably the closest friends the Erreni Federation has. See

us Erreni, we're anarchists, right? Believe in horizontal and bottom-up organizational structures, no more godking, from each according to ability to each according to need, fuck the law, all of that. The Corsori, they're who we got it from when they fled Sor about thirty years back. Our anarchism is a bit fast and loose, it's a culture we're in the middle of developing. The Corsori, it goes back hundreds of years, unbroken. For us it's a *break* with tradition, for them it *is* tradition. Their most terrifying warriors are the Corsorian Knights who make their own vows and keep them religiously and fight in a calm battle trance.

Then you've got the Demons, who are... they're the odd ones out. A generation back, they were a multi-ethnic an orphan gang, but now they're all grown up and boring and middle class, though they keep to their arcane customs. They run orphanages, take care of the needy, and currently they're with the Reasonable but we've seen them fight cops and I think we'll win them over soon enough if we can stop being such preachy bastards, stop trying to convert

them to our way of thinking, and start letting them do what they do best—fish and tell bad jokes and take care of kids.

[My editor says she gives up.]

Penumbra North

Penumbra North is the answer to the question that no one asked: what would the city look like if the Church of Athe was still in charge? This district is the last bastion of law and order. Not a lot of crime in Penumbra North... Just a prison full of torture and death and a whole lot of people too afraid to step out of line. In the rich parts of Penumbra North, the streets are wide and clean, the canals are suspiciously devoid of dead bodies. The pious line up to receive bread, produced by magic from the Hands of God to all comers. If that sounds suspiciously like what we do in Triumph Square, it's because they used to only give out food in church during the evening Mass, but they saw how successful we were over in The Plaza and decided to copy our methods.

The Kings Boy's and Girl's Club, aka the Kingsmen, aka the cops, they run Penumbra North. Even the Hands of God, the priests, are afraid of the Kingsmen.

There's not a lot to say about Penumbra North. I suppose if you want you could show up, repent your sins (like the sin of being born in another country), and live a pious life of strict constraints. They'd probably just conscript you and send you off to die though. You might want to steer clear of Penumbra North.

Penumbra South

Penumbra South, that's the ghost town. I mean that in two ways. Penumbra South used to be the even-richer mirror of Penumbra North, but now it's hotly contested and largely abandoned terrain. Probably half the territory disputes in the city happen in Penumbra South, and fewer and fewer people actually live there. Instead, more and more monsters have moved into the empty mansions and manors. Centipedes and gelatinous cubes, sure, but also hotjacks—

you've probably heard someone talk about hotjacks, and you probably assumed they were lying, telling you a myth. They're not a myth. Whatever you call them—Hopalong Harry, Springheeled Jack, the Iron Devil—they're animals. Bipedial animals. Carnivorous. Nocturnal. Easily mistaken in the dim light for human. Able to jump over small buildings. They hang from rafters like bats and they eat people.

Also there are vampires.

Anyway, Penumbra South, not for the faint of heart. A scavenger's paradise, as it used to be the richest quarter in the ground city. The Kingsmen control about a third of it, most days. The Erreni, we control about a quarter of it. Small gangs control another bit, sometimes, and there are a decent number of doggirls around—those squatter bikers I was telling you about—but the monsters control the rest.



Outroduction

[My editor says “outroduction isn’t a word.” I have reminded her that she said she’d given up.]

That’s it for this month’s edition of *A Visitor’s Guide to Penumbra City*. Join us next time to hear about all the people who squat in crypts in the graveyard—they’re really nice—and capitalists who sit atop step pyramids full of thinking machines, and the mushroom god who lives under the city that my editor says doesn’t exist but I think exists so I’m going to write about it, and the orphans who will tell you where to go and probably not steal anything from you, and the secret society in the suburbs, and the street surgeons who use mushrooms and magic and corpses to heal the living, and the people who can talk to the dead, and people who can conjure fire, and the floating city itself, and the ocean, and really there’s just so much more to know about our fair city! Assuming you live long enough to hear about it.



STRANGERS
IN A
TANGLED WILDERNESS

www.tangledwilderness.org
www.patreon.com/strangersinatangledwilderness