

War of the Mountain King

A alternate-history RPG fantasy campaign setting

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Chapter 1: Overview and Campaign Style.

Overview: On the alternate Earth known as Pasales, the year is 1942 -- if you're an American. If you're not, it's been over three thousand years since the Fall of the last True Empire, and no realm on Pasales can truly compare itself to that glorious, terrifying, and ruthless magic kingdom. Certainly not the upstart and unwelcome intruder known as the United States of America, which is not so much a realm as it is the living embodiment of an apocalyptic curse. That country is here because: there was a now-dead empire that lost a war; that empire decided to call down doom upon the entire continent as their last act of defiance; and this 'USA' was the result. The Americans are utterly dead to magic, and comprised completely of madmen.

But they are *dangerous* madmen. The USA lost the first war they fought on Pasales, largely from having no standing army at the time and no magical might; and so it lost its province of 'California' for a generation. But then it took back California, and much of what the USA called 'Mexico' in the process, thanks to terrifying machines of the earth, air, and sky that shrugged off magic like it was immaterial. Worse, the Americans also allied themselves

with the Mountain King (ruler of a realm in what the Americans call 'Russia') in order to get access to the King's sorcerous power. The Americans should have realized that there may have been a *reason* that no realm had previously voluntarily allied itself to the Mountain King, but nobody was interested in telling them until it was too late.

And so it is, again, 1942. The bill from the Mountain King has become due, and so American troops have been dispatched to the King's realm in order to fight his enemies (i.e., everybody else). Some Americans are pleased with the idea of wrecking still more Pasalan realms and petty-empires, given the typically horrible regimes running those realms. Some Americans are becoming more revulsed with the one realm that they *are* allied with. Quite a few Americans would love to block the borders entirely and let the rest of Pasales get on with the Hell that it has created for itself. And a few Americans wonder if there's any way to reverse whatever this curse is...

Campaign style: this is fantasy, with a certain twist. If you're playing an American, you're almost certainly incapable of using magic, or having magic used on you. And if you're not playing an American, you have to describe to the GM just why you're a hated outcast from

your parent culture -- and just what horrible things that your own people will do to you if they ever safely catch you. To be fair, American PCs are also often theoretically subject to this kill-on-sight rule, but many realms are quietly terrified of infuriating the American government. Besides, people who are immune to magic can be useful.

This campaign tends towards the grim. By American standards, the rest of the world is a dark carnival of terror where mages will light a town on fire and bet on whether more people would burn, or suffocate. By Pasalan standards, the USA is a place of sheer madness where the laws of the universe simply don't function, and if you look too hard at that, you go mad yourself. Which side has the right of it?

Well, check with your GM.

Chapter 2: The World of Pasales

The world of Pasales fits any number of standard fantasy tropes: it is a place where magic functions, but is not ubiquitous enough to replace technology. The various nations of Pasales are largely absolute monarchies or oligarchies ruling over a largely agrarian, and almost universally poor, population. Before the Americans showed up: technology was barely up to Imperial Roman standards, except for medicine (which was largely nonexistent). There's plenty of slavery, war, pestilence, and other unpleasantness.

Oddly -- or not so oddly, actually -- the default nation-state on Pasales is rather large, because while magic is not *common* it is still capable of sustaining lives of relative comfort among the local elites. So said elites have access to healing spells, communications networks, fireballs; combine that with an ingrained ruthlessness that has gone past 'institutionalized' and is now considered 'traditional' and you end up with groups that are capable of keeping quite large sections of territory under heel.

What follows is a list of the largest states, listed by continent: note that most of them had their start as provinces of the now-vanished True Empire. Certainly

their rulers remember this. And equally certainly their rulers wish to bring back those days again.

One final note: the True Empire imposed one language on the entire world, and managed to more or less eradicate most of the others. Eradicating *cultures* was a bit harder, but the True Emperor made an excellent (and often literal) stab at it. As a result, while languages have of course drifted in the last three millennia, they are all from the same parent language (which, much to the shock of American linguists, was demonstrably what they called 'Indo-European').

Namo (Europe): the birthplace of the True Empire is a snakepit of disorganized and aggressive states that are constantly searching out each other for weakness. Berijos and Gal fight each other in the west while Lenkja and Achaja squabble over what the Americans call 'Italy;' the Siauric and Saksonijos petty-kingdoms of the north and the islands provide mercenaries for both. Sometimes those mercenaries are even reliable.

Pietu (Africa): the largest nation on Pietu is Giptas (Egypt, Levant). It sees itself as the most civilized and advanced of the True Empire's successor states, and not entirely without reason. It is perennially involved in at least a proxy

war with Bant (sub-Saharan Africa), which has been supplementing its armies with magic since the Only Emperor first conquered them with it four thousand years ago. The northwest part of Pietu is a notorious pirate's paradise; since the appearance of the Americans the concept of 'privateering' has caught on like wildfire. So has gunpowder.

Rytus (Asia): The Mountain King looms over this region both figuratively and literally; his realm of Strana (Russia, more or less) is openly opposed by the oligarchs of Dija (India, Southeast Asia) and military castes of Kinija (China, Japan, Siberia). The former province of Babil (Fertile Crescent, Anatolia) was the death-place of the True Emperor: most Pasalans believe that the land itself was cursed by him to never know peace, and history since then certainly seems to bear that out. And what Americans call 'Arabia' is home to the wandering tribes of Zydas, who manage to survive mostly because they have nothing that anybody else wants.

Sodas (Australia): Sodas is ruled by the Taryba Vergai, a group of mages that can trace its descent from the time of the True Emperor. Sodas is ruled **by** mages **for** mages; it is also noteworthy in Pasalan history as being one of the few places where the True Emperor simply destroyed the

indigenous population, instead of conquering it. Nobody ever dared ask why.

Vakarus (South America): the nations of Pasales used Vakarus to mean the entire super-continent, but now only use it to refer to the southern half. The major realms of this continent consist of the Muisca autocracy in the north, the Nazca and Chimu military states in the south - and the universal slave state Tupi in the middle, which was in the process of conquering all of Vakarus before the Americans arrived. And that is why there will probably be a war between Tupi and the USA in the very near future.

And then there is...

Pragaras (North America): Most of the continent is ruled by the Americans, of course. After the Second War the USA controlled all of its old territory, what little remained of the Irokezu realm that survived after the initial summoning of the Americans, and about half of the territories of the Olmekai Domination (southern Mexico and the rest of South America). Most of the rest of Pasales considers Pragaras to be more or less literally damned.

Chapter 3: Technology

Prior to the coming of the Americans, Pasales was locked in an Imperial Roman era level of technology -- and not a particularly advanced era, at that. The central problem for Pasalan innovators was that any technological problem that was *truly* difficult could usually be fixed with a spell. This degraded innovation, particularly since mages were and are extremely touchy about their prerogatives. Pasalan peasants quickly learned to make do and accept their circumstances until the problem was so large that a mage *had* to be brought in. The alternative was having fireballs ignite their fields.

This did little to spur technological growth. Forget gunpowder: steel weapons and armor did not start showing up in Pasales until at least 1500 AD or so. The printing press (even the Chinese kind) and distillation were both unknown prior to the Americans. The roads are typically dirt tracks, because the nobility flies. Medicine and dentistry were worse than useless, because the nobility can be healed by magic. The fastest way to send a message is usually just to know a noble who knows the right spell. Towns are not disease-hive warrens mostly because towns are heavily-regulated collections of specialists trained to provide nobles with goods and

services that cannot be replicated by magic. Generally assume crude, pre-gunpowder technology at best among the peasants, and the rough equivalent of early 20th century living among the nobility (which is yet one more reason why the ruling classes of Pasales are horrifiedly fascinated with the Americans).

In contrast, American technology is a good deal more comprehensible. It's at a fairly straightforward 1930s Industrial Age level: there's a bit more reliance on steam power because the oil industry is still gearing up, and it's unlikely that the USA will develop a nuclear bomb any time in the next twenty years, but generally the tech and vehicles look like something out of a Thirties movie. Note, by the way, that American military technology includes poisonous gasses, and that the USA does not have any compulsion against using them in wartime. In fact, the reclamation of California required exactly that.

And then there is the stuff that Pasalans have created in imitation of American technology. Turns out that while most Pasalans can't actually wrap their head around *why* American technology works, they can duplicate it via rote actions, or by coming up with a spell that does the same things. An example of the former: the pirates of northwest Pietu don't understand at all the chemical nature of

gunpowder, but they do know how to make both it and crude cannons. An example of the latter: a Taryba Vergai mage saw a light bulb and immediately realized that if you wired several mice together to form a grid powered by a cat, you could use the life force of the latter to stimulate the life force of the former until the mouse glowed strongly enough to light a room.

As that last example suggests, there is a basic ethical / moral mismatch between Pasalan and American views of technology and research. Torturing a small animal to death in order to power a room would revolt an American; to a Pasalan it's actually a humanitarian gesture, because some of the less socialized mages would probably use a human slave. On the other hand, the Americans are right now busily in the middle of their equivalent of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, and the Pasalans would be equally revolted at the sight. Not because it is using human subjects; but because the Americans chose their test subjects on the basis of ridiculous racist theories. A related example: in this Fascist-free America, 'eugenics' is still a popular scientific theory in 1942. The rest of Pasales thinks that the entire concept is absurd.

Technology transfers between America and the rest of the planet can best be described as "the Americans don't want

to sell, and the Pasalans don't want to buy, but it happens a lot anyway." Even if Pasalans don't understand how an item works, they can still use or abuse it. Handguns in particular are easy things to sell, at least to the nobility (and not excluding the mages). There's not really an equivalent trade back in magic items and hybrid technologies, although the very few American magic-users that exist are always ready to buy things that might help them understand their abilities.

Chapter 4: Magic

Magic

The existence of magic as a measurable, tangible force that is not accessible to the entire population has had any number of effects on Pasalan thinking, and the Americans would be the first to tell you that those effects were universally negative. The Pasalans naturally disagree, and can themselves point out any number of areas where Americans are guilty of fairly appalling behavior because of their *lack* of magical ability. On balance, the Americans are closer to being right -- but not by as much as they think.

Pasalan magic theory itself is straightforward: there is a constant Source of magical fuel that can be used to 'ignite' spells and 'warm' magical items. The Source is not in itself good, or evil, or anything except a Source; all questions of ethics and morality are tied into the magician's intent and, to a lesser degree, results. This particular attitude makes it easy for even 'good' mages to freely study spells and schools of magic that use disgusting spell components and / or horrific rituals; as long as the aforementioned 'good' mages are not the ones holding the knife, or just not *happy* about being the ones holding the knife, society will

overlook some of the nastier things done in the name of organized magical research.

Generally speaking, there are only two real restrictions on what types of spells can be expected to show up in a campaign: nobody knows how to resurrect the dead, and nobody can visit alternate planes of existence. Pasalan mages have been steadily studying how to do the former since the death of the True Emperor, who utterly suppressed life-extension sorceries. Serious research into dimensional travel is more recent -- and considerably more driven than even the search for immortality. The Americans cast a long shadow. A long, frightening shadow.

Spells are not the only things that incorporate Source; items, places, and sometimes unlucky creatures do, too. Pasalans have been creating permanent (enchantment) and temporary (alchemy) magical items for thousands of years; the techniques are not complex, but there is a critical manpower shortage that keeps them from being common. Some geographical locations have particularly potent Source; they are invariably taken over and used as locations for mundane and arcane places of power. As for creatures: if their ability to provide Source is inheritable,

they are kept as renewable resources; if not, they're killed the next time a mage needs a boost in power.

Magicians themselves are not rare, but powerful ones certainly are. While the dividing point in society is between those who can cast spells and those who cannot, the dividing point for the upper classes is between those who can cast spells, and those who can create magical items. Any recognized mage can expect to have a relatively comfortable life, but enchanters and alchemists will swiftly find themselves in positions of wealth and power.

One interesting thing about Pasalan magic is that it has no real clerical equivalent. Pasales has any number of religions, although they're almost invariably a mutated version of the original Indo-European pantheon worshiped by the True Emperor. But clergy do not become mages; more accurately, mages do not become clerics. It is considered... vaguely dangerous and taboo.

Magic and Americans

Simply put, many spells simply bounce off of Americans. Illusions and mind control automatically fail. Curses and blessings do not bite. Detection spells treat Americans as

transparent and intangible. Direct healing spells do nothing. You *can* use a spell to hurt an American, but also not directly. Example: a thrown fireball will still burn. A spell that simply causes a person's skin to combust will not. Pasalan mages are still trying to work out what does and does not work on Americans; it's slow going, especially since what passes for the Pasalan scientific method is woefully unsuited for the job.

The Americans have the opposite problem; they can probably come up with any number of useful spells that take advantage of having a working knowledge of physics and chemistry, only they can't actually run any experiments themselves. Not every American is immune to magic; but the USA has yet to find a potential mage who is also a trained scientist.

Chapter 5: Mindset

The Pasalans and the Americans absolutely do not like each other, at least on the geopolitical level. Individual Americans can like individual Pasalans, and vice versa, but the two cultures can be remarkably far apart on a lot of basic issues. And it's not always clear which culture is correct.

The great Pasalan societal flaw lies in its collective inability to generalize ethical principles. Pasalans, American stereotyping to the side, **are** capable of telling the difference between good and evil; they just generally do not expect anybody to take the difference seriously in a crisis situation. It's nice when somebody does, of course. But if a Pasalan in the desert sees a man dying of thirst, nobody he is with will say anything if that Pasalan simply keeps walking. Or if that Pasalan rescues the man. Or if that Pasalan kills the man and loots the body, for that matter. It's not a matter of respecting private moral decisions; it's a matter of indifference to them.

This is not absolutely universal, of course, or otherwise Pasalan society would not survive at all. On a practical level, Pasalans form attachments with family members, friends, small groups, and guilds: they also respect

authority figures, although 'fear' is a better term. So Pasalans are capable of producing kingdoms, and even large ones, but typically not very strong ones. And the kingdoms that are produced are not particularly stable, although that might also be due to the fact that everybody speaks more or less the same language. Harder to create unique nation-states that way, which is why the True Emperor set things up like that in the first place.

The Americans, of course, do not have this problem. They have a generally-accepted universal morality and a coherent ethical system -- which they then apparently ignore. 'Hypocrisy' is a strange, and extremely distasteful, concept to a Pasalan. For that matter, so is 'racism' and 'sexism,' but that may be for more pragmatic reasons: if you go around telling people that they're inferior to you because of their ancestry and/or sex, eventually you will run into a mage who will proceed to prove you wrong by turning you inside out.

At any rate, while a Pasalan understands lying about one's beliefs to score an advantage, he will not particularly understand why anybody would sincerely believe in an ethical system that he cannot actually live up to. Put another way: a Pasalan can comprehend the Golden Rule, and even think it admirable. He will not be upset if nobody

else follows it, and will not necessarily be upset if somebody lies about following it -- but he *will* become upset if somebody legitimately tries to follow it, and fails. Particularly if trying and failing involves *him* somehow.

As a result, the average Pasalan largely considers Americans to be a bunch of vicious bigots who will inexorably hurt people simply for not following a set of rules that no American can actually follow all the time. And the average American generally thinks that Pasalans are utterly callous barbarians who would march an army over a field of babies if it would save them a half hour. There is perhaps no small truth to either of these two stereotypes.

Chapter 6: Campaigns

It's easy enough to play a campaign from the Americans' point of view: your country has been dropped down in the middle of a world full of unpleasant magicians and kings, and now you have to figure out how to keep the rest of the planet from destroying you. Or how to conquer it. Or how to figure out how to learn all their magic, or at least use it. Or how to get the rest of the planet to have revolutions that will replace the nasty regimes with more palatable ones, or -- the *point* here is that the story-lines are fairly obvious.

But what if the focus of the campaign is on Pasalan characters? What is a profitable line of play there, then?

One strong possibility is to play a Pasalan-centric **War of the Mountain King** campaign from a *horror* perspective. And by 'horror' read 'Lovecraftian cosmic terror.' After all, consider how early 20th century Americans might look, from a Pasalan perspective:

- Americans are, first and foremost, literally from an alternate dimension. One where the laws of the universe are *different*.

- Americans are immune to magic. Not just unable to *manipulate* magic -- most people in Pasales cannot do that -- but magic does not catch on them. This not unlike a human seeing a species that gravity flatly ignores; such a thing violates what the Pasalans thought of as being universal laws.
- Americans have, instead of clean and sensible magic, **technology**. They have taken astrology and alchemy and smithery far beyond what Pasalans would have thought possible, or even wise; and the Americans have mostly used it for horrible weapons of war. With 'horrible' not being an euphemism, as anyone who had suffered through a mustard gas attack could attest. And there's never any doubt as to where the Americans have their dark, demonic mills. The very air, water, and ground are typically permanently scarred by the fumes and ichors cast off by American 'industry.'
- Americans themselves have barbaric beliefs. Many will openly belittle Pasalans over things like physical characteristics like skin color and facial features. Rather more have difficulty taking mages or other nobles seriously, if that mage is a woman. And they're all so incomprehensibly **inconsistent** about it.
- Worse yet, even 'nice' Americans have *disquieting* beliefs. They openly mock and deride the basic

principles of Pasalan society and government. Some Americans will happily connive in destroying Pasalan society, in order to replace it with some mad system involving, as one of their more wild-eyed political radicals put it, 'all men shouting and voting and reveling in joy.' And the Americans who are **not** happily conniving will still typically turn a blind eye towards advocates of such anarchy and implied bloodshed.

- And then there are the books. Books mostly written in the Americans' strange and barely understandable language. Which is good, because the books talk about strange sciences and blasphemous paths to enlightenment. Learn the American tongue, learn their alphabet -- their seductive, dangerous alphabet -- and then run the risk of understanding their forbidden tomes. And then... **acting** on that knowledge.

This is not the only lens for a Pasalan-centric campaign, of course. Nor is it even the best one. But the central theme of ***War of the Mountain King*** is what happens when two wildly disparate cultures smack into each other. That's an easy excuse for breaking out the Deep Madness.